SOCIALISM, GLOBALISM, AND PLAYFUL SABOTAGE:
THEIR REPRESENTATION AND PURPOSES
IN THE WORKS OF FOUR CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ARTISTS:
XU BING, ZHANG PEILI, YANG ZHENZHONG, AND XU ZHEN

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This dissertation examines four contemporary Chinese artists’ selected installations, performances, and video works created from 1993 to 2003. The artists who are the subjects of this dissertation are Xu Bing, Zhang Peili, Yang Zhenzhong, and Xu Zhen. Particular attention is given to several political and cultural phenomena of the time that dramatically show the tension between socialist forces and the emerging capitalist and globalist forces in China. At this moment of great change and socialist appropriation of capitalist and globalist vehicles, a great energy was provided, which inspired a creative dynamism in art. It also shaped the artists’ visions in the media used. A common strategy used by these artists was one of playful sabotage, a strategy by which these artists tried to deal with the opposing forces of socialism and consumerism and then attempted to affirm the self in their new world in art.
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, I interviewed many artists during my 2002 field trip to Mainland China to conduct research for this dissertation. During our discussions, most told me that their works were created for fun, as a kind of “play.” What immediately came to mind during these conversations was the following: What does the concept of “fun” mean in their works? Is it a sense of humor, as in comic art? Is it playful, as in Dada? Does “fun” equal “non-seriousness” in art? Or should we look beyond the artists’ words to understand what their “fun” means and to divine the truth of their “game”?

In this study I discuss selected works of four Chinese artists—Xu Bing (b. 1955), Zhang Peili (b. 1957), Yang Zhenzhong (b. 1968), and Xu Zhen (b. 1977). Although the artists do not form a school or style, each uses parody. Parody in their works can only be understood after an examination of their backgrounds. The artists lived in different locations and created their works based on different concerns. Each faced China’s process of modernization in the 1980s; however, each took a different path in his art career. Xu Bing and Zhang Peili experienced the Cultural Revolution (1967–1976) during their teens and absorbed Marxist notion of art promulgated during that period. Xu has worked with printmaking, the medium most celebrated in Marxist art. He studied at the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing a few years after the Cultural Revolution (1978–1982), and then taught there. Influenced by Robert Rauschenberg, he created his masterpiece, Book from the Sky (1987–1991), an installation work incorporating printmaking.¹ Zhang had experienced the Western influence of Avant-Garde art (Andy Warhol, etc.) during the mid-1980s. He organized

exhibitions and activities with local artists to promote the idea of conceptual art in China. In the late 1980s, he began to create video art, which has remained his primary medium. The 1989 Tiananmen incident, in which a pro-democracy student protest was violently suppressed by the government, changed the lives of Xu Bing and Zhang Peili. After the incident, Xu moved to America. Zhang remained in Hangzhou and focused on his video art. TV news has been his long-term theme. Today, he is known not only for his art works but also for establishing the first art academy for new media art in China.

Compared with Xu and Zhang, Yang Zhenzhong and Xu Zhen are relatively young; they established their careers during China’s move toward capitalism in the 1990s. Both live in Shanghai, and they have a close relationship. Together, they organize exhibitions and activities to promote contemporary art for the community of young artists in Shanghai. Their aim has been to help local artists achieve independence from the rise of both commodity and official dominance in art. Yang has been working primarily with video art and photography. Xu Zhen has been intentionally working with no particular defined style.2

This dissertation addresses the concept of art as a kind of parodic play—or what I call “playful sabotage.” The idea of “just for fun” should not be understood as rendering the work devoid of serious intent. On the contrary, these artists deal with critical issues of cultural politics. But there is a paradox here, because for these Chinese artists non-seriousness implies seriousness. Can art solve such a paradox and

2 Art critic Hal Foster characterizes this as pluralism and regards pluralism as a problem. His discussion of pluralism is most remarkable. He writes: “Art exists today in a state of pluralism: no style or even mode of art is dominant and no critical position is orthodox. Yet this state is also a position, and this position is also an alibi. As a general condition pluralism tends to absorb argument—which is not to say that it does not promote antagonism of all sorts. One can only begin out of a discontent with this status quo: for in a pluralist state art and criticism tend to be dispersed and so rendered impotent. Minor deviation is allowed only in order to resist radical change, and it is this subtle conformism that one must challenge.” In Hal Foster. Recordings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics. (Washington: Bay Press, 1985). 13. In Chapter Five, however, I discuss this pluralism as a positive dynamism in Xu Zhen’s works.
provide an aesthetic experience that is both non-serious and serious, that is double-coded? In this dissertation I try to provide an interpretation of art through this consideration.

In Chinese, the word “wan” (“play”) is vague: it suggests various meanings and is used to describe both serious skill and non-serious game. The double-coded quality in contemporary Chinese may thus in part reflect the Chinese meaning of “play” in art and may also inform these artists’ linguistic expressions of their art. While the linguistic interpretation of the artists’ concept of “wan” provides us with some help in understanding this “doubleness,” we must examine the art itself to understand this concept more fully.

**Art as Play Activity or Game**

Beyond this linguistic context, two scholars have addressed the connections between art and play based primarily on the Western tradition. The German scholar Johan Huizinga discussed the arts in relation to the notion of play in a philosophical and historical context. Writing in the 1930s, Huizinga was the first to observe the role of play in relation to culture. In “Play-Forms in Art,” (a chapter of *Homo Ludens*) he explores the relationship between the arts and play. He approaches the idea of play first from a linguistic perspective: “Not without hesitation I venture to suggest to classical scholars that a semantic link between ritual, art and play may possibly be hidden in the Greek word “αγαλμα”.” He further discusses the role of play in the plastic arts:

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4 Huizinga. 158–172.
5 Ibid., 167.
Of course, when we contemplate certain examples from the teeming treasury of plastic form, we find it hard indeed to suppress the idea of a play of fancy, the playful creativity of mind or hand. The grotesque wildness of the dancing-masks among savage peoples, the monstrous intertwining of figures on totem-poles, the magical mazes of ornamental motifs, the caricature-like distortions of human and animal forms—all these are bound to suggest play as the growing-point of art. But they should do no more than suggest it.\(^6\)

He continues, approaching the role of play in art from the perspective of public reception:

\[. . .\] the picture immediately changes when we turn from the making of works of art to the manner in which they are received in the social milieu. Here we can see at once that, as a subject of competition, plastic skill ranks as high as almost any other human faculty. The agonistic impulse, which we found to be powerfully operative over so many fields of culture, also comes to fruition in art. The desire to challenge a rival to perform some difficult, seemingly impossible feat of artistic skill lies deep in the origins of civilization.\(^7\)

His discovery of play as the origin of art is remarkable and significant, but it fails to ask an important question: what is the role of art, if its intention is not for high quality, or if it is even pitted against high quality, as contemporary art forms sometimes are? Furthermore, his historical perspective focuses on the Western tradition rather than on the globalist context in which contemporary art is situated and formed.

In his detailed study on play and man, the French philosopher and critic Roger Caillois expands on Huizinga’s discussion of play in relation to society.\(^8\) Caillois uses play and game to interpret certain patterns of civilization such as capitalism and socialism:

\[\text{It is not absurd to try diagnosing a civilization in terms of the games that are especially popular there. In fact, if games are cultural factors}\]

\(^6\) Ibid., 168–9.
\(^7\) Ibid., 169.
\(^8\) Caillois.
and images, it follows that to a certain degree a civilization and its content may be characterized by its games. They necessarily reflect its culture pattern and provide useful indications as to the preferences, weakness, and strengths of a given society at a particular stage of its evolution.\textsuperscript{9}

His study on play significantly characterizes the various patterns of play as “free,” “separate,” “uncertain,” “unproductive,” “governed by rules,” and “make-believe”:

But for the present, the preceding analysis permits play to be defined as an activity which is essentially: 1. Free: in which playing is not obligatory; if it were, it would at once lose its attractive and joyous quality as diversion; 2. Separate: circumscribed within limits of space and time, defined and fixed in advance; 3. Uncertain: the course of which cannot be determined, nor the result attained beforehand, and some latitude for innovations being left to the player’s initiative; 4. Unproductive: creating neither goods, nor wealth, nor new elements of any kind; and, except for the exchange of property among the players, ending in a situation identical to that prevailing at the beginning of the game; 5. Governed by rules: under conventions that suspend ordinary laws, and for the moment establish new legislation, which alone counts; 6. Make-believe: accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life.\textsuperscript{10}

Although his theory depicts the cultural features of play and relies heavily on his studies of children’s games, it provides less insight into art as play.

My discussion of play departs from both scholars’ perspectives and aims to explore the role of play in contemporary art in the context of globalization. I address the works of selected contemporary Chinese artists, yet place these works in the context of Western art tradition. I do not aim to provide a comparative study of art in relation to play, but rather to explore the role of these works in the context of world art. I argue that each of the works creates a situation and then directs the performers to play with that situation. These situations are generally concerned with the official line

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 83.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 9–10.
or authority, but each has a different focus—cultural kinship (Xu Bing), mass media (Zhang Peili), free speech (Yang Zhenzhong), and the cultural system and values of exhibition and spectatorship (Xu Zhen). These artist-created situations can be regarded as planned activities or games. Defining and interpreting play or game in this way distinguishes my study from Huizinga’s and Caillois’s theories of play, and renders my discussion of play more relevant to art.

But why do we need this new definition of play as playful sabotage, and why do we need this critical reading of art? How can my analysis of the works of four contemporary Chinese artists inform us of something new or critical about art itself and/or art’s place within a larger context? In Western tradition, several art movements have been characterized as playful or non-serious in that they make use of irony or parody: Dada and Pop art are two famous and notorious instances. When Robert Rauschenberg exhibited his “combine,” which feature a goat doll wearing a car tire, standing on multi-panels, viewers may have asked: isn’t it a joke?

Art historians and critics have analyzed and discovered the intent and purpose of non-seriousness or playfulness in Dada and Pop art. Other critics interpreted Rauschenberg’s “joke” as a kind of parodic play of Abstract Expressionism and a parodic quotation of Marcel Duchamp’s ready-made. What makes Rauschenberg’s work both serious and non-serious is the element of parody. And this parody, as Frederic Jameson rightly argues, needs to be read as a cultural production of late capitalism. If parody involves both seriousness and non-seriousness, is what Chinese artists call “fun” actually associated with parody? And if parody is the key to understanding the concept of “fun” in the works of both Western and contemporary Chinese artists, is the Chinese concept of “wan” still new and critical in the world context?
In my analysis of the four artists’ works, I suggest that this concept is related to parodic play as shown in the Western tradition, in which the concept of parody is understood as a double-coded device in art. The literary critic Linda Hutcheon, who has written a number of books on parody, writes that parodic play can make present and past co-exist in the same space.\textsuperscript{11}

like irony, parody is a form of indirect as well as double-voiced discourse, but it is not parasitic in any way. In transmuting or remodeling previous texts, it points to the differential but mutual dependence of parody and parodied texts. Its two voices neither merge nor cancel each other out; they work together, while remaining distinct in their defining difference. In this sense parody might be said to be, at heart, less an aggressive than a conciliatory rhetorical strategy, building upon more than attacking its other, while still retaining its critical distance.\textsuperscript{12}

For Hutcheon, parody as a double-coded device appears playful, yet creates a critical reflection of the past in the present. In this sense, parody is not intended merely for fun but can be seriously read and interpreted. Parody seems to explain the Chinese artists’ concept of “fun” and “wan.” But I argue, further, that the parody these Chinese artists present in their works is also heuristic and therapeutic. Parody, as a double-coded device, in fact reveals these two components. Does the parody that emerged in contemporary Chinese art differ from that which emerged in Western art? If so, what is the difference, and can it help us to expand on the notion of parody? Or are these two concepts of parody the same? If so, how can two different cultural and social environments give rise to a similar concept?


\textsuperscript{12} Hutcheon. \textit{A Theory of Parody}. XIV.
Each of the artists’ works, as I will argue, indicate that art is “for fun.” As Hutcheon implies, parody, which has appeared often in Western literature, can serve as “a formal and historical linkage” to “unite the art of the twentieth century.” In my analysis of the four artists’ works, I find that parody similarly links artworks created in different periods of time, from different cultures. At the same time, my discussion of parody in their works establishes an “historical linkage” that serves as a history of contemporary Chinese art. Thus, this dissertation starts from a biographical and formal interpretation of the four artists’ works to arrive at historical associations with China’s globalization.

The history of contemporary Chinese art associated with parody is different from some conventional historical frameworks of contemporary Chinese art. The Chinese critic Lu Peng places contemporary Chinese art in the period between 1990 and 1999 and shows which and how art works reflect cultural and social events during this period, when China became capitalistic in the global context.13 The well-known critic and curator Wu Hung focuses on contemporary Chinese art in the 1990s in the framework of the period from 1990–2000.14 In this framework, he demonstrates how artists created in response to rapid changes in China in the wake of globalization. Unlike Lu, whose discussion of contemporary art ends with the year 1999, Wu chooses the year 2000 as an endpoint because to him the Shanghai Biennial (2000) signified an historical turning point. Both critics see contemporary Chinese art of the 1990s as disconnected from that of the 1980s. Wu uses the term “experimental art” to

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express the idea that artists working in the 1990s incorporated new strategies and media immediate to their lives.\textsuperscript{15}

However, I propose the years 1993 to 2003 as a timeframe for contemporary Chinese art, to reflect the cultural politics in China that resulted from globalization. Through my analysis of parody, I suggest a different historical view of contemporary Chinese art. Literary critic Simon Dentith, in \textit{Parody}, argues that

we can therefore return to the question of the historicity of parody, recognizing that if parody is a general feature of discursive situations, the manner in which one can give a particularised historical account of it will have to be recast. It is not that parody, as a discursive mode, has only had one predominant function in the history of cultural forms; rather, we have to describe the ways in which it works at particular historical moments, and to consider the functions it performs in differing social situations.\textsuperscript{16}

Parody reveals the historical situation of art’s production. Through the analysis of artists’ particular uses of parody, we can understand how culture emerges as a particular production posed in aesthetics. As I mentioned previously, Jameson also observes the significant role of parody in his discussion of the cultural logic of postmodernism. He characterizes this parody as “blank parody” and calls it “pastiche”.\textsuperscript{17} Parody thus is significant as a cultural product at historical turning points such as the movement from modernism to postmodernism, according to Jameson. Even though some critics argue that Jameson’s understanding of parody is

\textsuperscript{15} He earlier addressed this issue in his \textit{Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century.} (catalogue) (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, 1999). Wu. \textit{Exhibiting Experimental Art in China.} (catalogue) (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, 2000).


\textsuperscript{17} He writes: “one of the most significant features or practices in postmodernism today is pastiche. I must first explain this term, which people generally tend to confuse with or assimilate to that related verbal phenomenon called parody. Both pastiche and parody involve the imitation or, better still, the mimicry of other styles and particularly of the mannerisms and stylistic twitches of other styles.” In Hal Foster ed. \textit{The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture.} (Washington: Bay Press, 1983). 113.
problematic, the relationship between parody and culture remains crucial. For German aesthetician Friedrich Schiller, plastic art was originally playful, suggesting the innate or native. When we interpret contemporary Chinese art as playful sabotage, we not only understand globalism as a dynamic force for the artists, but we also explore the origins of contemporary Chinese art.

Chapter One introduces the concept of playful sabotage, a type of parody I found in the works of the four artists. Chapter Two discusses the works of Xu Bing and suggests that utterance is the expression of linguistic grammar and syntax which mimics cultural kinship ties and the official global totem. Chapter Three analyzes the works of Zhang Peili and explores utterance as a speech, statement, and/or declaration which mimics the expression of the official line. Chapter Four addresses the works of Yang Zhenzhong and proposes utterance as a statement, declaration, and/or affirmation which reveals an individual’s testimony in the context of official surveillance. Last, Chapter Five focuses on the works of Xu Zhen and suggests that utterance is word and sound which represent an individual’s verification, authenticity, and certification of the impact of capital commodity and the official line.

My analysis of the artists’ works takes into account China’s globalist situation. Artists in general during the period from 1993 to 2003 were concerned with capitalism and globalization as they related to consumerist culture in advertisements and TV programs; the global network of information outflow; the appealing and even dizzying spectacles of advertisement and postmodern architecture in the public sphere in Shanghai; and the global panic about SARS and the world’s ensuing temporary withdrawal from China. These events, as I will demonstrate, influenced the four

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artists’ unique notions of time and perceptions of space. Their works address the
feeling of being overwhelmed and the sense of virtual reality as these related to
China’s process of adapting to capitalism and globalization. In this dissertation I plan
to examine and discuss the following questions: How is the state of play presented in
each of the artists’ works? What does this state of art signify? What is each artist’s
motivation or inspiration for creating this particular type of art? Is this strategy
conscious or unconscious? What is the significance, if any, of this common artistic
strategy?
CHAPTER ONE: PLAYFUL SABOTAGE

A sense of play or “wan” is a common element in the strategy and aesthetics of contemporary Chinese art. An example of this is found in Zhao Bandi’s (b. 1966) series of photographic works with a stuffed panda. (illus. C.1) The content of his conversations with the panda are often displayed on the photographs. The notion of fun in his work can be seen as an expression of absurdity. In a wider context, in his series on fireworks, Cai Gaoqiang (b. 1957) creates a visual spectacle in the sky. (illus. C.2) Fun here is related to celebration and the masses’ participation through viewing the fireworks. His works reveal the ritual meaning of the fireworks as well as the excitement associated with a festive event.

Two Traditions of Parody

The Chinese art critic Li Xianting’s interpretation of “Political Pop” and “Cynical Realism” can illuminate some Chinese painters’ strategy of “fun.” He describes “Political Pop” as “the nucleus of the Political Pop movement, which consists of artists from the ‘85 New Wave movement’ who have given up the serious metaphysical concerns of their earlier work and have instead adopted a deconstructionist approach matched to a Pop technique to execute works of comic satire which illustrate their view of influential political figures, particularly Mao, and major political events (emphasis added).”20 Li explains “Cynical Realism”: “the Chinese term bopi, rendered here as ‘cynical,’ can also be translated as ‘rogue’—ED. The term I have chosen to describe one style of anti-idealist art, employs an expression that the Chinese use to describe a certain way of dealing with the world, which also

20 In China’s New Art, Post-1989. XX.
generally carries the connotations of dissipated, jaded, scoundrelly, resigned, indifferent and mocking.”

Li points out that the works of Chinese painters parallel the development of Pop art in America after World War II, when capitalist culture became a dominant force in terms of mass culture. Appropriation and parody emerged in pop artists’ works and illustrated the dominance of mass culture over high culture. According to Li’s view, for instance, in the oil paintings of Wang Guangyi, we see numerous globalist signs, such as Marlboro ads, imposed on representations of the socialist vanguard, such as peasants and workers, who typically appeared in propaganda posters during the Cultural Revolution (illus. C.3). These paintings exhibit the cultural conflict revealed in China’s mass culture. The artist Wang Jingsong depicts in his paintings the pervasive phenomena of Western popular culture transforming China’s traditional mass culture into something new (illus. C.4). Both painters’ works are characterized by non-seriousness and an ironic reflection of the moment when China revitalized its economic reform in 1992, after the Tiananmen incident.

Responding to Li’s interpretation, art writer Geremie Barmé discusses Wang Jingsong’s works with respect to his use of irony and humor. She notes: “The artists include Wang Jingsong, Song Yonghong, Yu Hong, Shen Xiaotong, et al., many of whom are provincials now active in Beijing. It is a cynicism, however, that is often tempered by a large measure of irony and humour.”

Thus, according to Li and Barmé, the labels “Political Pop” and “Cynical Realism” need to be understood not only as the paintings that reflect the stylistic and

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21 Ibid.
23 Ibid., XLVII.
thematic quality of these artists’ works but also those that reveal China’s cultural
influence of consumer culture. Barmé articulates this point:

The local intelligentsia and the commentators have seen cynicism in the
arts as symptomatic of the unsettling “post-ideological” age of
reformist China; overseas observers and buyers have often interpreted it
in the formulaic language of Soviet and Eastern European dissent; and
all the while artists and writers have been engaged in the unsentimental
project of adorning themselves and their works with it. But the
cynicism—one that can be both positive when irony-laden and self-
reflective as well as destructive of the creative impulse as we have
observed in the above—that runs as a thread through so much of the
most interesting literature, music and art from China today should not
simply be seen as a product of a post-Mao ideological malaise.²⁴

Following this interpretation, Barmé does not relate “Cynicism” to parody
specifically, but rather to irony and humor. But I argue that her description of the
creative impulse as self-reflective as well as destructive in fact is identical to the
characteristic of parody that Hutcheon mentions. She seems unaware of this.

Hutcheon defines parody as not only a double-voice device, but also as an
expression of “self-reflexivity.” She notes: “Parody is one of the major forms of
modern self-reflexivity; it is a form of inter-art discourse.”²⁵ Barmé and other critics of
“Political Pop” and “Cynical Realism” recognize that irony and self-reflection appear
not only in visual art but also in novels. They link this self-reflective quality not to
parody, however, but to irony and humor, thus failing to recognize the “subversive
function” of parody that renders art a tool of social action and antagonism in cultural
politics.²⁶ This function is what I aim to explore in the artists’ works and in their use
of parody. Thus I find the use of irony by these artists to be not merely artistic as Li

²⁴ Ibid., XXLVIII.
²⁵ Hutcheon, 2.
²⁶ Dentith argues that this function is often undermined or ignored in the discussion of parody.
suggests, but also cultural, and a result of China’s rapid adoption of capitalism after 1989.

For Barmé, Chinese artists’ concept of “fun” is evidenced in style and subject matter. Their ironic and parodic play reveals art as a cultural commodity. Thus, the features of irony and parody reflect the cultural process of commodity in contemporary Chinese society, and art reveals this process as a “discursive situation,” occurring in a specific historical moment. These artists use thematic appropriation or stylistic imitation of Western avant-gardist practices such as Pop art. In their works, they appropriate the socialist past to fit into the cultural commodity of the present moment that emerged from the reform. In the works of these painters, we find the coexistence of past and present.

Li regards several of Zhang Peili’s paintings as ironic: “Zhang deals with the commonly seen or experienced ‘illnesses’ of the individual psyche, especially when these illnesses arise as a consequence of abuse—whether self abuse, abuse inflicted on others, or abuse inflicted by others. In Zhang’s art, elements of this sado-masochistic condition are enlarged, exaggerated, even made more insidious, transforming his works into a mocking indictment of those who would seek only to find beauty or entertainment in art.”  

But as I argue in Chapter Three, Zhang quickly turned this “mocking approach” to a primary concern with cultural politics, rather than to the cultural commodity that is associated with “Political Pop.” He focused primarily on the use of video. Li does not note how this turning—Zhang’s change of cultural concerns and a new medium—might change our understanding of how irony or parody functions in his work.

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27 Ibid., XVII.
Both Li and Barmé suggest that the works of these painters reveal the critical condition of China’s move toward capitalism in late 1992 and early 1993, when it accelerated along its path to westernization. Through the discovery of irony and mockery in the works, these critics trace the historical development of the 1990s in relation to the 1980s. They associate artists involved in “Political Pop” and “Cynical Realism” with the avant-garde movement of the 1980s.

In his description of “Political Pop” art, Li emphasizes the pervasiveness of the Mao icon in contemporary artists’ works and, more important, the co-existence of this icon with contemporary signs of capitalism, summoning the tension between two contradictory ideologies. For Li, these artists use mockery and irony to express the contradictions rampant in their lives. In this sense, through their analyses of irony and mockery, Li and Barmé each discover that contemporary art in the 1990s is still historically and conceptually connected to that of the 1980s. This perspective argues against Wu’s interpretation of a disconnect between the 1990s and the 1980s and between what he calls experimental art and avant-garde art.

My view argues against Wu’s view of that disconnect and also differs from that of Li and Barmé. If irony and mockery reveal the nature of contemporary Chinese art in the early 1990s, this nature, as Li pointed out, is similar to the Western avant-garde style and strategy in terms of Pop art. These artists’ concept of “fun,” then, is not new on the contemporary Chinese and international art scene. It appeared in avant-garde art in the 1980s in China and also in the Western art tradition.

At least two traditions of parody exist in contemporary Chinese art. Dentith argues that “parody itself is socially and politically multivalent; its particular uses are never neutral, but they cannot be deduced in advance. We can nevertheless recognize that there are particular social and historical situations in which parody is especially likely to flourish, or at least to become the medium of important cultural statement.
What are the contours of these situations?\textsuperscript{28} I argue that there are in fact two histories of irony, mockery, and even parody in contemporary Chinese art. Li and Barmé’s interpretation is one of them. The discussion of Zhao and Cai’s use of play can be understood in this framework. My analysis of parody, on the other hand, finds its source in the framework of cultural politics and aims to respond to Dentith’s question.

The avant-garde movement is generally used as a reference in tracing the development of contemporary Chinese art in the 1980s and 1990s. This development not only reveals the impact of mass culture on society and art but also illustrates how art departed from its socialist function of serving the people, the essence of art in socialist China between 1949 and 1978. After the role of art changed in the 1980s, the strategy of parody was used in the 1990s to connect art to its past. Li and Barmé ignore this turning point. Instead, their discussions of parody and irony focus on theme and style in present society and ignore the “subversive function” of parody to reunite past and present in the representation of contemporary Chinese life.

My analysis of parody does not emerge from this cultural history of art as commodity but rather focuses on the framework of the cultural politics the artists confronted during China’s movement toward capitalism. In this sense, we cannot ignore that there are two notions of parody in contemporary Chinese art and that each notion emphasizes specific cultural concerns: cultural commodity in the avant-garde movement, and cultural politics in the works I discuss. As Dentith discovered, there are two histories of parody in the Western literary tradition:

One the one hand, it has been seen as conservative in the way that it is used to mock literary and social innovation, policing the boundaries of the sayable in the interests of those who wish to continue to say what has always been said. On the other hand, there is another tradition which celebrates the subversive possibilities of parody as its essential

\textsuperscript{28} Dentith. 28.
characteristic; parody in this view typically attacks the official word, mocks the pretensions of authoritative discourse, and undermines the seriousness with which subordinates should approach the justifications of their betters.  

I suggest that contemporary Chinese art, at least, develops two traditions of parody as well. The parody or irony and mockery in “Political Pop” and “Cynical Realism” are related to the former tradition. My analysis of parody is close to Dentith’s view of parody as having subversive possibilities.

My perspective is related to the cultural politics which Li and Barmé ignore. The discussion of cultural politics in relation to contemporary Chinese art has been undermined by critics and historians. As China became westernized, there apparently emerged a new type of mass culture in terms of capitalist consumer culture, and Chinese avant-garde artists often dealt with this new culture in their works. However, there also emerged a mixed culture which included both socialist and capitalist forces. This type of mass culture, largely ignored by art historians and critics in discussing contemporary Chinese art, reflects China’s cultural politics in art and shapes an alternative tradition of parody. In this dissertation I explore this cultural production and its relation to the four artists I studied. I will argue that this type of culture, featuring globalist forces acting upon China, prompts artists to use parody in their works. Thus, this use of parody is not a matter of style or theme, as in “Political Pop” and “Cynical Realism,” but is instead a cultural production of politics and cultural identity. The parodic play in their works does not result from stylistic imitation or thematic quotation as Chinese avant-garde artists use, but rather reveals how artists act in the presence of globalist forces.

29 Ibid., 20.
Chinese literary critic Ken Liu argues that a new type of socialist mass culture emerged in the wake of globalization:

Here I am referring not only to the popularity of Mao as a new folk icon in today’s popular myths and superstitions among Chinese rural populations (and middle-aged or older lower-class urban residents.) Insofar as popular culture is predominantly an urban youth cultural phenomenon, it is more instructive to see how, in the contemporary cultural scene, creativity and imagination emanate from the old collective forms and structure.31

Liu notes the force of the revolutionary impulse in shaping contemporary mass culture. This impulse is an alternative force, totally different from the capitalist or globalist force. He offers karaoke as an example, arguing that its “collectivity has quickly assumed the social function of crossing the boundaries of official (guanfang)/unofficial (minjian), and public/private. Not only do teenagers, young lovers, and business partners entertain themselves at karaoke bars; it is also customary nowadays for local party committees (which are still the most important power brokers in China’s social organizations), trade unions, woman’s unions, Communist Youth League groups, etc cetera, to organize official or semi-official karaoke contests and concerts as holidays celebrations or special occasions.”32 In Wang Jingshong’s painting, we see that this collective form of karaoke appears as an example of contemporary life. Unlike Liu, the critics Li and Barmé do not highlight the role of the socialist tradition in the present.

However, when Liu points out the relationship between past and present, he does not have parody in mind. He fails to recognize what he observes as being parody in relation to mass culture. Critic Craig Owens explores this relationship in the

32 Ibid.
contemporary art field and characterizes it as the “allegorical impulse,” which he uses to explain why the present culture is haunted by the past.  

Nevertheless, Liu’s perspective is important, because most critics, like Li, Barmé, and Wu, often discuss the wake of globalization in China in terms of consumer culture. As Liu observes, in socialist China mass culture shapes collective unconsciousness and even generates nationalism. Liu uncovers a new feature of the collective identity of politics. In the wake of globalization, he notes:

But it would be a gross overstatement to say that China has now fully merged with the world-system and thus that its cultural arena has become predominantly postmodern. What is left out in such sweepingly global and globalizing accounts is nothing less than China’s own traditions and legacies. In the realm of popular culture, the revolutionary practice and theory of the “culture of the masses” have by no means disappeared. This indigenous tradition has been the cultural dominant, to borrow Raymond Williams’s distinction of cultural layers, for nearly half a century. It is still alive and flourishing in terms of its forms, structures, and functions, not to mention its institutions, which remain largely in place. It is true that, on the one hand, the ideological core of revolution has ineluctably lost its grip on the Chinese population and become inexorably “residual.” But, on the other hand, deeply embedded in the Chinese political unconscious, revolutionary hegemony still plays a significant role in the overdetermined structural relationships, particularly at discursive and symbolic levels, by which the advocates and opponents of the revolutionary tradition have wrestled to articulate their positions vis-à-vis the revolutionary hegemony. Yet the crucial question remains: How do we interpret these complex layers and modes of cultural production and reproduction that are filled with tension and contradictions?

Liu’s question is important because it helps us understand how the globalist force that is seemingly dominant in China’s contemporary culture does not in fact completely inform the culture. As Liu points out, while this globalist force is hegemonic, it does

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34 Dirlik and Zhang. 130.
strangely invigorate China’s socialist past. What makes Liu’s remarkable discovery even more important is the question it raises—does a socialist type of mass culture emerging in contemporary China imply China’s opposition to this hegemonic force? Put another way, what is the role of this mass culture in the globalist context?

It is unfortunate that Liu does not provide answers in his essay. He writes that “(capitalist) globalization is now an accepted reality, as the new world-space of cultural production and representation inhabited by images and goods pertaining to the everyday life of the world population, that is, by images and goods that are manufactured by multinational corporations and circulated in a global market.” Liu’s definition of globalization is too broad; China’s reality of globalization as he describes it seems very general and could be found in other countries. In an essay addressing globalization through the analysis of Latin American art and culture, Frederic Jameson discovers a “collective form” that might be similar to that of China:

Yet, one can also identify national situations—and I use this clumsy circumlocution deliberately, to forestall the usual endless debates about whether there still are such things as “nations” and what their relationship to that other mysterious thing called “nationalism” might be—in which the defense of national autonomy takes the form of what may seem a more traditional modernism: the defense of the powers of art and high culture, the deeper kinship between such artistic modernism and the political power of the collectivity itself, is now however conceived as a unified political power or collective project rather than a dispersal into democratic multiplicities and identity positions.

Following Jameson’s argument, one may conclude that Liu’s perspective of socialist collective culture and nationalism requires further discussion in light of globalization. Jameson and other critics point out that globalization may generate nationalism in

35 Ibid. 123.
some countries: globalization is not a force that overpowers locality into a general standard because the locality would oppose this force. Jameson notes that “this position presupposes that it is only by way of such a possibility that the encroachments of the world market, of transnational capitalism along with the great capital-lending power centers of the so-called first world, can be opposed.”

Jameson’s argument reminds us that globalization does not necessarily impose globalist standards or general values on local arenas, but rather in some cases generates a collective consciousness that acts against the globalist force. The impact of the latter may give rise to nationalism in local arenas. Liu’s argument on socialist mass culture can be explained as a socialist alternative response to globalist power.

Liu’s interpretation emphasizes national identity and ignores the potentiality of the newly emerging self shaped within this collective consciousness. He does not ask whether this force could lose sight of the socialist tradition and subvert the collective for the sake of the individual as China is globalized. My analysis aims to explore this potential for individuality. Jameson, unlike Liu, notes this possibility:

Beyond that, beyond the draining celebration of cultural difference, and often very closely linked to it, is a celebration of the emergence of a whole immense range of groups, races, genders, ethnicities, into the speech of the public sphere; a falling away of those structures that condemned whole segments of the population to silence and to subalternity; a worldwide growth of popular democratization—why not?—which seems to have some relationship to the evolution of the media, but which is immediately expressed by a new richness and variety of cultures in the new world space.

Unlike Jameson, Liu fails to evaluate the possibilities of this “new world space.” Liu does not address the potentiality of re-making the self within the collective

37 Ibid.
38 This kind of point has been addressed by some scholars. For instance, Giovanni Arrighi. The Long Twentieth Century. (London: Verso, 1994).
39 Jameson and Masao Miyoshi ed. 57.
consciousness. My analysis of the artists, however, aims to explore this space by addressing the notion of the self in terms of individuality and by asking whether or not the self is truly compliant to the collective. The notion of self or individuality here is confirmed as resistance against the collective, yet this notion is collective. This notion seems subtle, but from my analysis of the four artists in this study, I argue that the globalist force in China actually serves as a dynamism that gives rise to a sense of self. My argument is also opposed to Liu’s insistence on the collective form emerging from the globalist force. I am concerned with how artists as individuals reflect the globalist dynamism.

Globalist Dynamism as Game

From the moment China rapidly opened up to embrace the Western forces of commodity and consumer culture, the forces of the socialist system have been put into a position from which they have had to act immediately and dramatically. Two realities have collided to create a new universe in this process. One is the traditional socialist power of China’s political system, and the other is the capitalist, globalist force acting as the agent of consumption and commodity in mass media culture. Scholar Arjun Appadurai might call this collision a “tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization” and regards it as “the central problem of today’s global interactions.”

40 Some scholars, such as Friedrich Schiller, have pointed out the potentiality of globalization as a force to generate political freedom and democracy. See more about this discussion in Jameson and Masao Miyoshi ed. 71
Scholars have discussed how globalist forces influence local culture. One view is that globalist culture transforms local culture so that it displays globally standard and general features. The other view is that globalist culture collides with local culture and thus generates a wholly altered new culture. Roland Robertson suggests that “we may best consider contemporary globalization in its most general sense as a form of institutionalization of the two-fold process involving universalization of particularism and particularization of universalism.” As Liu argues, China’s globalization process should be related to the latter. Liu characterizes the new culture emerging from this collision as a mass culture with a socialist form. However, some scholars see this new type of culture as not necessarily a mere result of the transformation of traditional culture. In fact, it could be formed by globalist forces, rather than by local forces, as Liu argues. Global force makes local culture apparent and thus prompts the creation of local identity or what Robertson would call “global callings.” He writes that such global callings might create “individualism and self-consciousness”:

Present concern with globality and globalization cannot be comprehensively considered simply as an aspect of outcome of the Western “project” of modernity or, except in very broad terms, enlightenment. In an increasingly globalized world, there is a heightening of civilizational, societal, regional and indeed [...] individual, self-consciousness. There are constraints on social entities to locate themselves within world history and the global future. Yet globalization in and of itself also involves the diffusion of the expectation of such identity declarations.

As I mentioned previously, globalization in China followed Western modernization. Robertson’s observation of the relationship between modernization and globalization

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fits China’s situation. He argues that individuality and self-consciousness might emerge from this global process. More significant, he argues that global culture should not necessarily be regarded as a constraint to individualism and self-consciousness, but rather as an affirmation of them. The artists in this study respond to this “expectation”.

My discussion of the globalist force and its impact upon China’s local specificity is related to this view. According to Robertson, China’s globalization “in fact resulted in its acquiring paradigmatic, global significance with respect to the handling of the universalism-particularism issue.” China became Westernized in the early 1980s; the process reached its height in the mid-1980s around the time when Robertson noted this phenomenon of “global calling.” The Tiananmen incident of 1989 interrupted China’s process of Westernization in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Thus, even though Robertson noted this awareness of self-consciousness in 1987, the situation remained the same in late 1992 and early 1993. I argue that the playful sabotage practiced by the artists in this study is historically specific and related to this incident. Through my discussion of the artists’ responses to the cultural collision of the 1990s, I show China’s process of globalization shaping the worldview in China as a global universe. This made the artists aware of their local identity and shaped their notions of individualism, rather than of collective identity and nationalism. Writing in 1987, Robertson already sees this individualism as one of the components of globalization:

Thus I have in my own works insisted that individuals are as much a part of the globalization process as any other basic category of social-theoretical discourse. To be more specific, I have argued that there are, analytically speaking, four elemental points of reference for any discussion of contemporary globalization—namely, national societies, national communities, global networks, and global individuals.

46 King. 76.
individuals, the world system of societies (international relations) and humankind.47

He then discusses John Meyer’s account of the self in global culture:48

Returning directly to the individual, my primary claim is that globalization has involved and continues to involve the institutionalized construction of the individual. Even more specifically, we must recognize that world-political culture has led to a globewide institutionalization of ‘the life course’—which has, John Meyer maintains, two dimensions: ‘aspects of the person that enter into rationalized social organization’ and ‘the public celebration of…the ‘private’ or subjective individual.’49

In this discussion of the self, I will address China’s global culture as media-supported culture and then highlight the roles of mass media and mass culture in relation to globalization. Marshall McLuhan, in The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century, proposed that with the pervasiveness of instant technology, the news world becomes image-dominated and mediated.50 Technology substitutes this image world for old traditions. McLuhan was the first thinker to use the term “global village” in the context of media. His concept of the “global village” was formed during the time when the Web [the World Wide Web] was just coming into being. The Web influenced and even dominated people’s lives. McLuhan believed that media created standardized styles and established boundaries for people’s lives. Thus, his view of the global village suggests that new media radically altered both the relationship between the individual and society and the relationships among individuals. I will show McLuhan’s relevance to a discussion of Zhang Peili’s works that address international TV news broadcast

47 Ibid., 79.
49 King, 80.
In addition to McLuhan’s view of the global world, I will also discuss another view, which focuses on cultural identity. In his analysis of the issues surrounding African identity such as class and ethnicity in globalization, Stuart Hall suggests:

So I think of the global as something having more to do with the hegemonic sweep at which a certain configuration of local particularities try to dominate the whole scene, to mobilize the technology and to incorporate, in subaltern position, a variety of more localized identities to construct the next historical project.51

In this dissertation, I address this issue in terms of Chinese contemporary culture. In the art works, as I demonstrate, socialist culture is identical to the notion of surveillance and censorship. Video has been used historically as a vehicle for surveillance and censorship and therefore intersects with Chinese artists’ perceptions of the nature of video art. In a broad sense, their daily life is controlled by this constraint. The domain of mass media transcends a purely political function, yet it remains associated with a lack of individual privacy and free speech. Television news reporters, as the representatives of authority, still adhere to the official line when they present “fact” and “truth” to the public. This is the reality of China as part of socialist mass society. As contemporary artists, these four work under a political constraint; their works are not recognized by “officials” and so are illegitimate in terms of a socialist art created for the masses. The problem is: how do these artists avoid being governed by this system, yet remain rooted in China’s specific identity?

The forces of capitalism and globalization pervaded China in the 1990s. Capitalism provided contemporary Chinese artists with greater opportunities to exhibit their works in international biennials and museums. It also established a new system for artists themselves; art became an independent career through which one could

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51 Ibid., 67.
make a living without government support. In addition, globalization redefines the meaning of “Chinese” artists who live outside China, offering them a chance to embrace a broader range of media and innovative concepts. At the same time, however, there is a long, very specific tradition in Western art, so this overpowers artists’ independence in terms of the establishment of local associations. In a broad sense, this force has intervened in Chinese artists’ daily lives through digital media such as commercials. International messages and information are broadcast through a variety of mass media. In China, the average person is now beginning to use digital media to create his or her own images and messages, which can be easily exchanged with others through personal channels. The artists in this study work within this reality and embrace the richness of possibilities found there. Yet, they also face problems: are they restricted to adopting the new set of “Western” media and concepts? Must their works necessarily become a kind of commodity for the capitalist market and globalist system?

The cultural collision makes the artists aware of both uses of media—one associated with socialism and the other with globalization. Anthony Tambiah notes the role of media in disclosing ethnic identity: “the awareness that collective ethnic identity can be used and manipulated in political action is of course related to the increasing possibilities of contact through the improvement of transport, of the quick adoption and deployment of modern media.”52 I argue that this awareness leads these artists to find their own unique relationship with media, one that might be different from that found in the Western tradition. Globalization could thus be a dynamic, positive force in their creative processes.

Scholar Frederick Buell, in his analysis of the impact of globalization on Latin America, finds that the globalist force creates a kind of “vigor.” He demonstrates that in peripheral countries, this vigor “has hinted at their culture’s increasing centrality to the contemporary world.”\(^{53}\) He concludes that “still, the exploration of global interactiveness provides cultural workers with a viable, even urgent, ethical project for our altered world, however limited it may be. And such exploration is a fascinating, and occasionally a startling, means of revising our picture of the past—our received pictures of things as they supposedly were, but decidedly were not.”\(^{54}\) In his interpretation of Robertson’s view on globalization, Buell reminds of us that “like Wallerstein, Robertson rewrites history dramatically, revealing global interactions in what were previously thought to be local circumstances, finding globality where few had suspected it, and seeing consciousness of the world as a whole as a constraining and creative force in the construction of local cultures and social forms.”\(^{55}\) The works I address in this dissertation were created during China’s period of globalization, when China held a “peripheral” position, as Buell notes. Buell’s analysis is based on Latin America’s colonial history in relationship to the globalist force that drove colonialist countries. China’s history of colonialism is totally different from the situation Buell analyzes. Would China’s peripheral status in the globalization process still be driven by this vigor? Are Chinese local cultures driven by the “creative force” reflecting Chinese consciousness of the world?

These artists’ works, I argue, convey feelings of vertigo and chance that inform this vigor. Vertigo here creates feelings of excitement, amusement, disorder, and shock, feelings associated with fantasy and pleasure in simulation. Chance is found in

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 343.
\(^{55}\) Ibid., 305.
the performers’ unexpected, unconventional acts and utterances. The linguistic vagueness in Xu Bing’s language and the state of ambiguity in Zhang’s TV news reporters present uncertainty as a kind of chance. The incongruity between acts and utterances by Yang’s performers, and the process of searching for parental figures by Xu Zhen’s two primitive creatures, reveal prospect, improvisation, and surprise as chance.

Caillouls, in his significant study on game and play, characterizes capitalism as a game of vertigo, and socialism as a game of chance. More important, he argues that game itself is derived from the cultural world and political institutions. In the Chinese artists’ works, this interpretation of game reveals the new Chinese world at play in the wake of globalization. Caillouls’ theory of game demonstrates that the vision of the game reveals the nature of the world. We see that the nature of these Chinese artists’ “games” informs their present and contemporary realities. Applying this theory of game to culture, Jean Baudrillard notes:

There is in effect a state of fascination and vertigo linked to this obscene delirium of communication. A singular form of pleasure perhaps, but aleatory and dizzying. If we follow Roger Caillouls in his classification of games (it’s as good as any other)—games of expression (mimicry), games of competition (agon), games of chance (alea), games of vertigo (liyynx)—the whole tendency of our contemporary “culture” would lead us from a relative disappearance of forms of expression and competition (as we have remarked at the level of objects) to the advantages of forms of risk and vertigo. The latter no longer involve games of scene, mirror, challenge and duality; they are, rather, ecstatic, solitary and narcissistic. The pleasure is no longer one of manifestation, scenic and aesthetic, but rather one of pure fascination, aleatory and psychotropic.

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56 Caillouls. 36.
57 Foster. The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture. 132.
The culture that Baudrillard refers to is related to the pervasiveness of mass media in
daily life. In China, as I mentioned earlier, the globalist force also creates this reality.
Baudrillard’s statement leads us to associate China’s reality, as ushered in by
globalization, with feelings of fascination, which are associated with vertigo and
chance.

**Artist Games as Vertigo and Chance**

I argue that in these works vertigo reveals the forces of capitalism and the
phenomenon of globalization in all its excitement. Chance depicts the power of the
socialist system because it involves an uncertainty that mirrors the political system,
with its very tenuous position in terms of power and cultural values. In mimicry,
vertigo and chance collide because they move the audience’s feelings between
amusement and shock, prospect and uncertainty, back and forth continually in this
“playing” of the game. In this sense, the world is composed of the two forces of
socialism and globalism, and because of this composition it becomes a kind of enigma.
Thus, it is a mistake to understand these artists’ games simply as a reflection of the
constraints they face. Rather, their games are informed by amusement, shock, prospect,
and uncertainty. In the domain of this game, the audience struggles with the enigma.
The vertiginous universe of exposure to capitalism and globalization expresses the
new power of reality as make-believe, so the old power, associated with the socialist
universe, is suspended by this amusement. This vertiginous universe shows the
audience a way to bypass this new power and to transform the old power into
something unexpected and open.58

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58 Ulf Hannerz already discovered an open structure in his analysis of peripheral cultures in Nigeria: “It
would suggest that as the translational cultural influences, of whatever sort but in large part certainly
market organized, and operating in a continuously open structure, unendingly pound on the sensibilities
of the people of the periphery, peripheral culture will step by step assimilate more and more of the
imported meanings and forms, becoming gradually indistinguishable from the center.” In King, 122.
In the artists’ works, these games take on different guises—mimicry in the context of language learning (Xu Bing), mimicry and parodic play of official voice or the norm in TV news (Zhang Peili), role-playing of an individual’s response in the context of surveillance in mass media (Yang Zhenzhong), and masquerade and role-playing as a commodity in the context of production/consumption (Xu Zhen). In these performances, games thus are defined not by rules, but rather by the nature of the game in question. They reveal the cultural institutions and political norms in the artists’ daily lives. My notion of games thus excludes Chinese artists who design games as a kind of art form. Feng Mengbo, for instance, has created shooting games presented on the Internet. My vision of games here does not involve actual gaming forms in art, but instead concerns the artistic strategies and activities of artists.

These games, I argue, are associated with simulation in terms of mimicry (Xu Bing, and Zhang Peili) and role-playing (Yang Zhenzhong and Xu Zhen). My analysis of mimicry and role playing will highlight the fact that the artists’ games have moved toward travesty, a notion of parody. The notion of simulation in their works does not refer to any particular person; these artists do not intend to make fun of the authorities or the official line. We must analyze these artists’ games of simulation in light of creativity and wit; the artists create costumes, props, and institutions for their games, which appear as a kind of simulation, with elements of vertigo and chance. More important, in these games, the performers do not simply alter their own appearances in


the sense that the figures wear masks or camouflage. Rather, they act out the specific
to roles that concern the artists in terms of daily problems. The performers are
constructed by the new identity. The game thus creates a new subjectivity for them in
their performance, even while they are still struggling to find their original identities.

Generally speaking, we know that the notion of mimicry is derived from an
insect or animal’s natural capacity to change its appearance in order to blend into its
surroundings. This capacity helps the insect or animal protect itself from potential
danger. In these works, we see human beings involved in acts of mimicry. (Xu Bing
has elsewhere created mimicry in relation to insects and animals, but this exception is
not part of my discussion here.)

More specifically, the works of Xu Bing and Zhang Peili employ mimicry, and
the works of Yang Zhenzhong and Xu Zhen use role-playing. Xu Bing creates a
peculiar language, a kind of cultural amalgamation resembling both Chinese and
English. Zhang Peili directs his performers to mimic a TV news reporter’s norm of the
official line, and his figures’ acts and utterances become a reenactment of the official
voice. Yang Zhenzhong’s performers act in the role of individuals under the
constraints of conventional norm and surveillance. The artist himself plays the role of
the authority who provides the norm and controls the surveillance. Xu Zhen asks his
performers to play a singer and two primitive creatures. This role-playing also
involves the audience in the exhibition; the audience is called upon by the figures’
performance to become the audience for the singer and to play the parental power in
the case of the performance by the primitive creatures.

Their simulation uses costumes, props, and institutions to determine the
appearance of the performers and to define their new roles. In their works, the four
artists utilize their costumes, props, and institutions in various ways. In his mimicry,
Xu Bing designs a classroom environment with props for a group of audience
members so that they might learn his language. In the mimicry of Zhang Peili, the performers’ acts and utterances render their identities ambiguous and uncertain. The audience does not expect the performers’ new roles as authentic Chinese TV news reporters. In Yang Zhenzhong’s role-playing, the incongruity between the act and utterance of each performer yields an individual and diversified expression. This incongruity also creates the audience’s unexpected experiences. In his role-playing, Xu Zhen designates costumes and props for his performers, who act as two primitive creatures and a singer. This role-playing occurs at particular institutions—at a satellite exhibition in Beijing and at his solo exhibition in Shanghai. As part of the experience, Xu Zhen also invites a group of audience members to join the game.

From this analysis of their works, we can see that these artists’ simulations express either a collective and spectacular phenomenon (Xu Bing and Xu Zhen) or solitude and visual pleasure (Zhang Peili and Yang Zhenzhong). On one hand, Xu Bing’s and Xu Zhen’s works create new fantasies that express the notions of cultural amalgamation and of art as commodity. In these games, audience members play an important role in the mimicry and role-playing because they must serve as game players. In other words, these games emphasize the players’ participation in a collective and collaborative event. The audience becomes a part of the game and forms the visual spectacle of the works. On the other hand, the works of Zhang Peili and Yang Zhenzhong focus on a new pleasure that is revealed in global mass communication and the mass media in daily life. In their games, the audience is engaged in an immediate and intimate relationship with the works. The audience, individual and independent, is watching and playing the games.

The artist’s game is a kind of simulation, yet it includes vertigo and chance. Here, simulation is not merely imitation or quotation, but is a double-coded device of
parodic play which shows that the globalist force is not simply a reflection of a hegemonic power, but is also exciting and risky.

The Heuristic Function of the Playful Act

Let us turn now to my earlier discussion of parodic play in the artists’ works. Through my analysis of the globalist force that they reveal, we see how different their concerns are from those of practitioners of “Political Pop” and “Cynical Realism.” Parody is double-coded in the artists’ works. But this concept of parody is different from that usually defined by scholars; thus I call this concept “playful sabotage,” implying the heuristic and therapeutic functions of parody.

The notion of play is shown in the role of the audience (us) and the role played by artists, each of whom invites us, in different ways, to join and play his games. In his installation pieces, Xu Bing creates a classroom or event-based environment in which the audience is invited to learn his language and to watch a particular event. His invitation is friendly and leads to immediate interaction. In the video works of Zhang Peili, the artist highlights the context of TV news and TV news reporters’ acts and utterances, thereby directing the audience of the works to become the audience of these news broadcasts. We experience the norms of TV news within different environments. One of the most extreme examples is Zhang Peili’s Water Standard Version from the Dictionary Ci Hai (1992), in which the female reporter broadcasts in a droll manner and in an absurd environment. She is not reporting TV news, but she appears to be.

In Yang Zhenzhong’s video-based works, his performers’ acts and utterances seem incongruous, but as it turns out, they are consistent. This twist plays with our expectations. In one of two masquerade-based works, Xu Zhen physically invites the audience to join the game that his performers play. In the other, he figuratively invites
the audience in his exhibition to watch a singer performing. We as viewers are turned into the audience for this singing on stage, rather than remaining merely an audience for an art piece. We are surprised and bewildered by the effect that his performers create.

The notion of invitation these works evoke is somehow active and aggressive, leading the audience to think about these games they are invited to play. In Xu Bing’s works, the audience needs to clarify the vagueness of Xu’s language, which resembles both Chinese and English. We are instructed to question the legitimate totem of language as a cultural totem or a particular mask of a civilization. The problem here is that his language does not belong to any one culture, but is part of an amalgamated culture. His works raise issues of authenticity and authorship in the context of a global culture represented by the Chinese and English languages. In viewing Zhang Peili’s works, we must distinguish between what the TV reporter says and how she reports it. We are directed to question the norm of TV news and how this norm presents or misrepresents fact and truth. That is to say, the audience must question whether China’s TV news continues to be a device for official censorship. In addition, we are led to ask about the state of China’s TV news within the global transmission of international news. Zhang Peili’s works lead us to question the notion of truth and the function of authority within censorship. In Yang Zhenzhong’s works, incongruity leads to a questioning of the conventional response within the context of surveillance. We are encouraged to think about this obstacle to authentic individual response, which emanates from either the very essence of surveillance for the sake of official propaganda or from something else. In Xu Zhen’s works, we evaluate the role of the audience and question a necessary and unavoidable relationship between the audience and the artist.
Each of these works involve the audience in an active way (the invitation) and even more important, invites discovery of the nature of the play in which the performers are engaged. The audience is involved in a heuristic attempt to understand the artists’ concerns these. This heuristic play puts us, the audience, in a position of introspection concerning these realities as if we ourselves face these problems and must find solutions to them. This heuristic function is similar to the “polemical” function of parody, as Dentith notes:

Parody includes any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice. In order to capture the evaluative aspect of parody, I include the word “polemical” in the definition; this word is used to allude to the contentious or “attacking” mode in which parody can be written, though it is “relatively” polemical because the ferocity of the attack can vary widely between different forms of parody.62

The heuristic function can be seen as being in the “attacking mode” rather than in “rhetorical mode” as Hutcheon sees it in parody. Unlike Hutcheon’s view, Dentith’s view of parody highlights the polemical imitation, rather than the playful one. It is this polemical imitation that is found in the work of the four artists. However, I characterize their use of parody as “heuristic” rather than “polemical” because political reality makes this art seem concealed and its intent indirect. Thus the adjective “heuristic” is more appropriate than polemic or subversive to discussion of contemporary Chinese art.63

This heuristic function can be understood as the artists’ way of toying with the authorities and the official line, yet avoiding political problems. The artists can perform by claiming that this is non-serious play, therefore what they do in their art has no connection to reality. In this sense, this function reveals the political reality that

62 Dentith. 9.
63 Dentith also uses subversive to describe parody’s attack on parodied texts.
determines the creative strategies and nature of these works. Yet we need to take this non-serious play seriously. This art is a cunning act within the political reality of these artists’ world. Their works have serious and even critical functions within the political reality in which they are created and exhibited. Their response to this reality is antagonistic. In the discussion of globalist forces, some scholars have discovered the emergence of activism.64 This heuristic function, as I argue, can be tied to this idea of activism. Fred W. Householder, Jr., defines parody as “a narrative poem of moderate length, in epic meter, using epic vocabulary, and treating a light, satirical, or mock-heroic subject.”65 In her discussion of the etymology of parody, Margaret Rose argues that even though Householder is correct, he “does not comment on the fact, the insertion of an unchanged non-comic passage into the comic may itself create an incongruous contrast with the new context to produce a comic effect.”66

Even more critical, in these works, the artists place themselves in the role of the authorities. They appear to question themselves: if I am the authority or representative of the official line, what is my norm, and how do I use my power? In these works, they direct performers to act and speak. One of the most extreme examples is Yang Zhenzhong’s I Will Die (1998). The artist plays the role of the authority figure, under the surveillance of his camcorder, controlling his performers’ acts and utterances. Dentith points out that the significance of parody is to question authorship, because in parodic quotation and imitation, the role of the author is undermined; instead the parodic texts or the world attacked is highlighted.67 Yang Zhenzhong himself becomes the parodic text in his role as authority figure to his performing figures.

64 Buell. 292 and 310.
66 Rose. 21.
67 Dentith.
The heuristic function of these artists’ playful acts has an effect on both the audience and the artist. The real audience members (us), who do not actually face the reality of subjection to the power of the authorities, have their own understanding of this notion. We can also view how a group of artists’ works formed in this reality responds to it. Thus, we recognize these artists’ intent, wit, and creativity as shown in their playing with the authorities. The artists survive the power of the authorities and even find their power (art) within this reality. They are thus successful at exposing the vulnerability of the authorities.

Thus, this function makes the works transcend “just for fun,” since they have a heuristic function for us, the audience. It is important to point out here that this play is made to seem playful and even non-serious because in this way, the audience is likely to willingly join and play the games. Cailliois writes that the nature of the game is voluntary, and thus this activity makes the players willing to play.68

**The Therapeutic Function of the Playful Act**

Parody is also revealed in the role of the performers. In these works, performers toy with authority and the official line. These figures are not merely props in the artists’ works, but may serve as the artists’ compensation for their constrained reality.

In Xu Bing’s works, the figures are the global “citizens” who must learn to handle the emerging new world, the global reality of cultural kinship. In Zhang Peili’s works, the figures reveal China’s TV reporters’ particular professional identity in terms of their differences from and similarities to international TV reporters. In Yang Zhenzhong’s works, the figures reveal the rise of the new individual who must express

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68 Cailliois.
his or her will and desire under the context of surveillance. Their expressions, linguistic and gestural, transcend the conventional norm. In Xu Zhen’s works, the figures demonstrate the performers’ independence while facing a tense relationship with institutional systems of art exhibition and spectatorship. The performers, through their independent stances, also suggest the possibility of the establishment of local associations within the reality of art as commodity according to the capitalist values of consumption.

The performers in these works show their pleasure in playing. After learning Xu Bing’s language, some audience members (in this case serving as performers) wrote letters using Xu’s characters and expressing their joyfulness in using their newly learned language. In Zhang Peili’s TV reporter, we see a representation of pleasure in terms of narcissism. She loves her public role and fame as a well-known official voice. In Yang Zhenzhong’s work, the figures reveal their erotic pleasure with orality, and we also see here the pleasure of rebirth. In Xu Zhen’s works, the singer performs, enjoying his narcissistic and/or autoerotic pleasure. The two primitive creatures willingly seek out their “parents,” played by audience members at the exhibition.

There is also a negative side to the performers’ experiences. In Xu Bing’s works, at the start, the performers face linguistic vagueness. In Zhang Peili’s Water Standard Version from the Dictionary Ci Hai, the female performer seems addicted to the role of TV news reporter and the conventional norm that she represents, even though she is actually not a reporter in this context. In Yang Zhenzhong’s works, the figures’ acts and utterances are incongruous and thus create a sense of confusion as to the truth that their language presents. In I Will Die, the figures struggle to be reborn. In Xu Zhen’s works, the singer and two primitive creatures remain dependent upon the exhibition system and the participation of the audience. They also cannot reject being watched and joined by others since they need to be consumed as a commodity on stage.
The artists create these figures’ activities in order to toy with the authorities, as the performers alternate between expressions of satisfaction and hostility. These artists artistically create the performers in order to play with this notion of the expression of satisfaction and hostility toward the reality that they themselves experience. These artists, to a certain extent, toy with both expressions through the performers.

They compensate themselves for their hurt by turning to satisfaction through art. This compensation may also satisfy an impulse of these artists to seek revenge for their vulnerability. Their playful or teasing sabotage creates an artistic universe for themselves and at the same time is a hostile act toward their daily universe. Thus, these artists invent their own toys and games to reject the unsatisfactory reality because they need to compensate themselves and to be fulfilled by playing these games. This demonstrates that they are, in a sense, independent because they are capable of handling their constrained reality in a creative way.

These artists succeed in freeing themselves from this constrained reality by taking the path of parody—a specific type of parody I call “playful sabotage,” unique for its strong therapeutic element. Both heuristic and therapeutic intent informs the parodic work of each of these four artists, and this is what we will explore in the following chapters.
CHAPTER TWO: META-FICTION WITH THE COMIC IN XU BING’S WORKS

Parody often involves ridiculous features, but the features are not non-sense, nor do they merely convey a sense of humor. We see this in the works of Xu Bing. The most radical instance of parody occurs in his *Book from the Sky* (1987–1991) (illus. C.5), often attacked or criticized for its ridiculous features. Xu’s critics often ridicule his use of language in his art, and he has been accused of lacking intellect. Most critics or historians interpret his use of language based on its ridiculous appearance.

Although viewers, critics, and historians are right about the visual effect of Xu’s language, they fail to perceive the serious significance of its ridiculous appearance. The artist meticulously deploys language to fulfill his purpose: he both creates a ridiculous effect and conveys a serious intent. In this sense, Xu’s works are double-coded and might be regarded as a parodic play of language.

Xu’s parodic play, as I demonstrate in this chapter, is simple and immediate in both its use of language and the audience’s perception of it. First, his use of language can be interpreted as the imitation and/or repetition of a language (Chinese or English). Yet, this imitation and/or repetition is amplified by his re-organization of the language, with its essence remaining. Second, the viewer’s perception of the work is not merely visual but is also psychological, and the psychological feeling prompts the viewer to interpret the language that he or she sees, reads, and/or writes.

Reading Xu’s use of language in this way, I identify this work as a kind of parodic play of language, more specifically related to meta-fiction with the comic. His works create a specific situation that calls for the audience to engage in “interpretative play” with the language. In some of Xu’s works, the audience is invited to physically “learn” in the sense of imitating or repeating his language. The ridiculous effect of his
works calls for the audience’s immediate response to and interaction with them. The comic in his works must be understood as the pleasure and enjoyment that emerges when viewers join or play the game. It is a mistake to regard the ridiculous effect of the works as comic. Thus, his language is not intended to serve a pedagogical purpose, nor is it associated with Marxist values of art. Rather, the language informs the essence of writing through the approach of imitation and repetition, a process of language-learning shared by different cultural backgrounds. In this sense, Xu’s language is not mere a linguistic game. Rather, it reflects a world to which people react through the use of language and reveals ideas of cultural kinship and ethnicity related to Xu’s condition as a Chinese immigrant in America.

Xu’s use of languages is often interpreted by both critics and historians as non-sense, and meaninglessness.69 The artist himself, according to historian Stanley K. Abe, defined Book from the Sky as a form of teasing or joke in a paper he presented at Duke University in 1995.70 Abe attempts to underpin the meaning of this teasing or joke in Xu’s works:

The tension produced through the repeated frustration of the desire to read meaning into text, however, is a strategy that is limited to those who are literate in Chinese. For the Beijing audience who experienced A Book from the Sky in 1989 and 1999, there was much force to his non-sense characters. A non-Chinese reading audience, however, cannot be seduced into the game of searching the text for readable forms, and therefore there is no impulse to read and no shock of illegibility. Rather, there is a doubled alienation from the written forms that makes the joke irrelevant, at least in Xu’s original terms. What, then, could be the point to Xu’s joke for the non-Chinese reader?71

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71 Ibid.
Then he answers, “the non-Chinese-reading viewer is free of necessity of moving through unintelligibility; he or she is the privileged viewer who can most unproblematically absorb the beauty of A Book from the Sky. A lack—the inability to read Chinese—is transformed into a site from which the Western audience can generate singular enjoyment and aesthetic pleasure.”

Following Wu, Abe describes Xu’s works in Book from the Sky as “non-sense” characters, focusing on the visual appearance of the language. But, unlike Wu, he interprets it as the teasing or joke that Xu himself described. Abe’s interpretation relates the concept of non-sense to that of teasing or a joke and focuses on the audience’s reception of the non-sense characters. However, he fails to question the function of the non-sense in art or the purpose of the artist in creating it. Although neither is necessary to the audience’s understanding, both are necessary for the artist himself and to the concept of art, as I shall demonstrate. More specifically, I will argue that the non-sense can be interpreted as parody, a concept beyond teasing or joke, which conveys a more subversive function and serious intent.

Xu Bing’s Deployment of Language in Art

Book from the Sky (1987–1991) was the artist’s first treatment of language in art. A room-sized piece, this work developed in three steps, from 1987 to 1991. It was first displayed at the China Art Gallery, Beijing, in 1988, and consisted of three elements: long scrolls, bound books, and wall posters. In this exhibition, these elements are deftly integrated within the display space. Suspended across the ceiling are three long scrolls inscribed with written characters; below that numerous books are

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72 Ibid.
73 This work was known by various names, but for consistency’s sake, I use Book from the Sky. See a short review of the titles in Britta Erickson. Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words. (Washington D.C.: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 2001.) 37–9.
74 Erickson describes it as a wall panel.
arranged row by row on the floor, and posters with inscribed letters are attached to the entire wall and columns. To prepare for this work, Xu worked for one year (1987) to develop the system of characters he used on the inscriptions of books and the wall posters. He claimed that all of the characters were his “innovation,” and that they had no reference to any existing languages. Because the forms of these words are self-invented, they are illegible to the viewer; thus, he created a new type of “language.” After moving to America in 1990, Xu expanded his 1989 version, finishing in 1991. This later version is the work I discuss here.

By late 1986 in Beijing, Xu Bing started using a handwritten process. In 1987, he began to carve out characters and then to inscribe those characters on scrolls, wall posters, and books that he had made. After this attempt, he “created” five hundred and ten words, in both large and small formats. After the 1988 display, he expanded the size of his work. In 1989, he showed an expanded version in a group show at the China Art Gallery, the same venue in which he exhibited previously. Compared to the earlier version, this work contained more characters and book volumes, and the sizes of scrolls and wall posters were expanded. For this work, he customized books, rather than made them.

The innovative language Xu created for Book from the Sky is associated with the printmaking process he learned during his training at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. There he adopted elementary carving skills, which he used to produce the characters for the work. Beyond the level of technique, Xu’s training was beneficial in helping him to understand the nature, system, and aesthetics of the Chinese language,

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75 Charles Stone argues against the artist’s claim. He shows that actually few words are similar to ancient Chinese characters. See his argument in “Xu Bing and the Printed Word”. Public Culture 6 (Winter 1994). 407. Wu Hung pointed out that these works are not popularly used today in “A Ghost Rebellion’: Notes on Xu Bing’s Nonsense Writing’s and Other Works”. Public Culture 6 (Winter 1994). 411. There are ten English letters which are legible in Xu Bing’s work. See Erickson, 12.
76 For a detailed discussion on this topic, see Erickson p. 37.
particularly as it relates to the Chinese history of printmaking. The forms and shapes of his invented characters are based on the Song font, invented in the Song Dynasty in China for the express purpose of printmaking, which fulfilled the need for a particular face whose legibility and efficiency would be appropriate to the printmaking process. In terms of aesthetic quality, this font appears plain, almost banal. Xu arranged for the characters to be hand-printed in black for wall posters and books. For both, the tactile quality of the carved characters is erased by the plain quality of the font; Xu’s characters have a machine-made quality. I suggest that in this work, his use of language first reveals a kind of creation that is purely material and mechanical, and which hides rather than reveals the artist’s identity. The meaning of this erased tactility can be understood as the artist’s dismissal of authenticity and authorship in art.

This work provides a key to understanding Xu’s other language-related works, as I will demonstrate through a critical review of the use of language in his works in the 1990s. My analysis is based on my argument of language as a game, rather than on a detailed formal analysis of single works in chronological order. Through the series of language-related works, Xu creates his own languages, which show the mixed features of words. Several critics and historians have tried to interpret this linguistic amalgamation and to explore its larger meanings. However, before addressing their criticisms, I will describe this peculiar characteristic of Xu’s languages.

A, B, C… (1991–94) (illus. C.6) was Xu’s first attempt to create a “language” based on both an English alphabet sound structure and the structure of Chinese characters. This work consists of a series of 26 English letters phonetically converted into Chinese characters that signify each sound. For example, the English letter “X” is

77 I put those works that come after the 1990s in the footnotes for interested readers who wish to understand the development and influence of Xu’s works during this period of time.
translated into three Chinese characters, according to its similarity to the pronunciation of those characters in Chinese—we might render its spoken name “e.k.s.” The artist executed this concept by employing the woodcut technique in ceramic materials: carving words by hand, similar to the technique used in making each word of Book from the Sky. Then he installed carved objects on the wall in an exhibition.

Based on A, B, C…, Xu Bing created a new type of language called New English Calligraphy (1994–96), in which each English word is rendered similar to a Chinese character, except that “ideas” are replaced by a phonetic rendering of English letters analyzed in clusters similar to Chinese letters (so that “see” might become 

Like the earlier A, B, C…, New English Calligraphy addresses the transformation of images between English and Chinese. Unlike the earlier work, however, the later work is motivated by the formal expression of calligraphy and the Chinese ideogram. The compositional designs of Xu Bing’s English characters resemble Chinese characters. In New English Calligraphy, the arrangement of the letters in an English word is based on the principle of Chinese script. Here, Chinese calligraphy and ideogram seemingly became fundamental sources for the invention of Xu Bing’s new language. (Generally speaking, calligraphy evolves from the Chinese ideogram.) In the following years, he developed the concept of fusing English and Chinese in several works through his integration of the practice of calligraphic writing.

An Introduction to New English Calligraphy (1994–96) (illus. C.7), for instance, incorporates the idea of learning Xu’s type of language into the concept of translation. He designed “textbooks” which were displayed in exhibitions; these “textbooks” encouraged viewers to practice writing calligraphy. Also called Square Word Calligraphy, this type of word recalls the practice of calligraphic writing in each square in the textbooks. In 1995, this work was displayed at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, in a classroom situation in which viewers could sit and
learn New English Calligraphy. This work, Classroom Calligraphy (1995) (illus. C.8), emphasizes the viewer’s participation through the format of the work. This emphasis had been the core of Xu’s series of calligraphy works. The artist incorporated this work into Your Surname Please (1998) (illus. C.9), in which viewers type their surnames into a computer and receive its rendition in his new English alphabet. Using this type of language, Xu Bing takes on the signifying practice of cultural representation as the notion of art. For the artist, art is not only a system of communication between work and viewer, but is also a module of cultural codes. Through the exploration of language’s cultural implications, Xu Bing illuminates what art is about and why the characters can direct people’s reception of their cultural identity, no matter how different the cultural origins of the West and China are.

In a 1999 project in the Himalayas, Xu created a type of landscape that maps natural scenes onto the visual features and formal qualities of the Chinese language. For example, in a work that depicts a group of stones (illus. C.10), he used the Chinese words for “stone” to render the scene. In this work, we see that the artist skillfully used the quality of ink in calligraphy as he inscribed Chinese words on paper to create the volume of the heavy stone in the center of the picture. He also used similar techniques to create a contrast between darkness and brightness, which conveys the depth of distance. Xu’s concept in this work is reminiscent of the nature of the Chinese word as an ideogram evolving from the formal resemblance to a real object or thing.

Based on the same concept and technique, Xu Bing created Landscript (2000) (illus. C.11) for the Biennale of Sydney 2000. In this work, he expressed his interest in the relationship between the Chinese linguistic concepts of calligraphy and ideogram. Here he wrote calligraphy on the surface of a huge plate glass window (measuring 20 x 4 meters) on the ground floor of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. The characters
Xu Bing wrote were fairly legible, as in Book from the Sky and in New English Calligraphy. He composed these pictorial characters to portray the outline of buildings in the background and vegetation behind the window. Here this landscape rendered by pictorial signs appears extremely abstract and expresses a visual phenomenon because it is transparent, in black and white ink upon the glass. This landscape skillfully illuminates the nature of Chinese language—a sign that identifies the idea of a thing with an image resembling the thing.78

Returning to our discussion of critical analysis of Xu Bing’s works, both Wu and Abe fail to question the function of Xu’s language-related, “non-sense” works. These works are serious in the sense that they, and their language, are meticulously created by the artist. To regard them as merely non-sense or as a joke over-simplifies the meaning of their language; it is then difficult to reveal the significance of the works beyond the visual features that Wu and Abe describe as “non-sense writing.”

It is clear that Xu’s language appears to be associated with calligraphy, Chinese ideograms, and printmaking, all of which he uses as metaphors to express the concepts of his works. More specifically, I suggest that its technique is related to printmaking; its meticulous quality is related to Chinese ideogram; and its aesthetic effect is related to Chinese calligraphy. Abe sees this and notes: “indeed, Xu’s careful re-creation of traditional forms, on the one hand, and the denial of legibility, on the

78 Xu Bing’s very recent work entitled Living Word I, 2001, is the most evident practice that fuses the characters of calligraphy and the Chinese ideogram. In this work, Xu retains his concern with representation, which is revealed by the dual-language play of word and image we see in his early works. This work consists of several hundred plastic hieroglyphs of “bird,” based on the word in classic Chinese as well as in Xu’s script. They are at once words and images, arranged into a picture of a flying bird. White captions, written in Xu’s script, taken from the word’s dictionary meaning in English, lay near the word. This text reference explains how Xu’s installation translates “bird” into the interplay of images and words, rather than simply into words themselves. On the floor near the work are the written captions of a dictionary definition for “niao,” the Chinese word for bird. The captions include all kinds of explanations relevant to bird which the spectator would find in a dictionary. Xu’s descriptions of the bird suggest how meaning exists within the new system of reading and seeing to be gleaned from Xu’s written system in New English Calligraphy. Besides the character of bird, Xu Bing also worked with the characters of monkey based on a similar consideration.
other, produced a powerful work that refuses any singular reading.” Art historian and critic Britta Erickson also suggests the cultural association of Xu’s Book from the Sky with Chinese traditional culture. She writes:

> With A Book from the Sky, he subverts a primary purpose of printing. The spread of knowledge through the printed word; he subverts language itself, thereby undermining the value of culture; and he may be interpreted as making an audaciously subversive political statement, implying that all pronouncements of the Chinese government, except for the unforthcoming call for a changeover to democracy, are totally devoid of meaning.  

Both Abe and Erickson address the application of Xu’s work to these Chinese linguistic objects, the focus of their discussion. This interpretation relies upon the observation of Xu’s use of language as a kind of avant-gardist practice of using Chinese cultural objects in the 1980s and even of antagonistic political action. They attempt to explore the artist’s serious intent beyond the creation of new languages.

Like Abe, I will argue that Xu did re-create language based on traditional forms. However, Abe did not explore further the function and purpose of this re-creation which, as I will demonstrate, must be understood as a composition or re-arrangement of the elements of Chinese and/or English words. From this process, Xu’s language conveys the similarities and differences between words. Abe fails to explore this deeper meaning of Xu’s language and instead claims that the language “produced a powerful work that refuses any singular reading.” Chinese critic Gao Minglu made this claim earlier, a claim which I find problematic. He writes: “when he establishes a space without meaning in his work, Xu believes, viewers will fill it with their own readings of the confrontations that occur between different culture and eras.”

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79 Abe. 231.  
80 Erickson. 2.  
believes that the meaning of Xu’s works depends upon the viewer’s interpretation. I will argue that Gao’s interpretation is problematic because he implies that the meaning is arbitrary and subjective to culture and to the viewer’s preference. He fails to question why this work is open to this multi-cultural reading of languages. This reading, as I shall demonstrate, is related to Xu’s interest in cultural amalgamation and kinship as a way to address the globalization that he faces.

Like Erickson, I will argue that Xu’s works involve subversive strategy. However, unlike her, I will demonstrate that this strategy attacks language and the viewer’s use of language, rather than knowledge and culture. Similar to Erickson, I will argue that Xu’s subversive strategy is related to cultural politics, rather than to an attempt to oppose the government or to a proposal for the political system in China. Cultural politics here, as I will demonstrate, is associated with the artist’s identity and with the notion of subjectivity.

The Effect of Language as the Effect of Signifier

Before an interpretation of Xu’s use of language can be articulated, it is important to discuss why Xu’s works confuse the viewer and prompt him or her to characterize it as non-sense writing. I suggest that the use of language in Xu’s works is intended to bring forth a sign which engenders more the effect of signifier than of signified. (In semiotics, a sign contains a signifier and a signified. The signifier [an object] points to the signified [the concept of the object].) In this sense, the sign presents primarily the relation relevant to its signifier, but does not elicit the concept that the signified stands for. The notion of this signifier can be understood as an

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activity that is able to generate the viewer’s action, rather than being a meaningful carrier in the semiotic sense. This activity is shown in Xu’s works in different concepts according to its special purpose for the viewer. These concepts include a situation (in Book from the Sky), an event (in A, B, C), a situation (in New English Calligraphy), and an environment (in the drawing from the Himalaya Journal).

In my analysis, I emphasize the art works’ relationship to the concept of situations, rather than view them merely as artworks. I emphasize in particular the relationship between the art works and the audience. Since the late 1950s, American artists have addressed this relationship in their works. In her account of the development of contemporary art since the late 1950s, Julie Reiss provides a conceptual and historical interpretation of this relationship. She traces the development of concept from environments through situations, from space to installations:

To refine the definition further, therefore, one might add that in creating an installation, the artist treats an entire indoor space (large enough for people to enter) as a single situation, rather than as a gallery for displaying separate works. The spectator is in some way regarded as integral to the completion of the work . . . The essence of Installation art is spectator participation, but the definition of participation varies greatly from one artist to another, and even from one work to another by the same artist.83

Reiss reminds us of the difference between art works and the environments and situations that Xu created. According to her, Allan Kaprow was among the pioneers of exploring art as environment. In his work Words (1963), Kaprow invited the audience to write words on his works; other audience members could add to them and read them. For Kaprow, this work can be regarded as environment. He writes: “Words is an

‘environment,’ the name given to an art that one enters, submits to, and is—in turn—influenced by. If it is different from most art in its impermanence and changeableness, it is like much contemporary work in being fashioned from the real and everyday world.”

According to Reiss, the exhibition of *Primary Structures: Work by Younger British and American Sculptures* held at the Jewish Museum in 1966 aimed to explore the concept of situation in terms of “the role of the spectator and the importance of the relationship between the work and the surrounding space.”

In a similar fashion, Xu’s installations are not merely “static objects” in the sense of sculpture, but are “events” connected with the viewer’s mental state or physical involvement in responding to the works. In *Book from the Sky*, for instance, the artist constructs an installation of objects associated with printmaking. By arranging these objects, including wall posters, books, and scrolls, to fill the entire space, the artist emphasizes the large size of the installation. As Xu himself has pointed out, New English Calligraphy highlights the relationship between the format of the work and the reader. For a Chinese viewer, New English Calligraphy looks deceptively familiar, whereas for a Westerner, it appears unfamiliar but is in fact decipherable.

“New English Calligraphy” is a new letter system designed by myself. At a glance, the letters appear like Chinese characters; however, the characters are composed from the alphabet, i.e. English letters. A strange marriage between two complete different language systems makes this new calligraphy a challenge to comprehend as either merely Chinese or English. This legibility challenge is particularly strong for educated viewers. Some critics mention that my new calligraphy aims to confront the educated audience because it makes highly literate viewers particularly uncomfortable to appreciate his work. An illiterate

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viewer would not be bothered by this new calligraphy. Only the literate
viewer would find this work disturbing because it is not easy to read
something that seems legible but actually is not at all.

Some schools include “New English Calligraphy” in their curriculum.
In the class, students learn how to write this new calligraphy, or learn
about this new kind of culture. I am not interested in creating art that
merely gets displaced at an exhibition. My intention is to create the
kind of art that can inspire people to think and can become a cultural
phenomenon over time. Another reason that this new calligraphy is
becoming a cultural phenomenon in Western countries is that it
facilitates a direct experience with Chinese culture, which many people
are fond of. To either children or senior citizens, learning the New
English Calligraphy is a unique approach to experiencing Chinese
calligraphy. When writing, they seem to follow the traditional Chinese
calligraphy rules; yet, they are actually writing the letters from their
own culture. It allows them to focus on enjoying the writing process
instead of merely focusing on mimicking the form of the characters.

Here Xu also emphasizes that the role of the audience is imposed on art works, in the
sense that the audience interacts with them. This awareness of the spatial effect of art
was explored by several Western artists in the 1950s and 1960s, as mentioned earlier.
Stanley Abe notes that the formality of Xu’s work is reminiscent of the works of
Western artists; he writes that “at first glance, its formal qualities might appear
familiar to viewers acquainted with conceptual installation of the late 1960s and 1970s
in Europe and the United States.” However, Abe does not mention that Xu was
directly influenced and inspired by Robert Rauschenberg. The formal quality Abe
writes of can be traced back even earlier, to some of Rauschenberg’s works in the
1950s. Furthermore, and more important, Rauschenberg also conceptually inspired Xu, and Abe ignores this influence in his essay.

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87 Abe. 231–232.
Robert Rauschenberg’s 1985 solo exhibition in Beijing inspired Chinese artists to use cultural materials. This exhibition included various types of art such as collage, painting, photography, performance, and video art, and propelled art critics to discuss the differences between the ideal and practical functions of art. During the R.O.C.I. (Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange) project, Rauschenberg included China as one of his eleven stops and displayed his 1980s works there at that time, making his first trip to China in 1982. Rauschenberg’s Beijing exhibition can be regarded as nurturing Chinese globalization in art. This exhibition provided Xu his first experience witnessing the spatial effects of works we now characterize as installation. Xu’s method for addressing the relationship between the work and the viewer was inspired by Rauschenberg’s works in this exhibition.

Even though some Chinese critics such as Li Xiantin regard this influence as stylistic and conceptual, the spatial concept of Xu’s works has been undermined, which I shall focus on. Based on this, I suggest that Xu’s uses of language can be understood as a kind of language game between the works and the audience, rather than as a metaphor for game as Abe describes. More specifically, the audience’s perception of the language’s amalgamated qualities is associated with both the effect of the visual features of his works and the relationship between a theory of language and Xu’s specific concept of art as game. Unlike Erickson, I suggest that the subversive function of Xu’s work might be associated with Rauschenberg and even, surprisingly, with Jasper Johns’s use of characters.

Rauschenberg’s works have been regarded as an early attempt at the exploration of what we now call installation. As Reiss points out, Rauschenberg’s

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89 R.O.C.I includes China, Cuba, the U.S.S.R., Mexico, Malaysia, Japan and others.
90 I interviewed the artist at his studio and discussed this inspiration.
91 See Li.
installation *Soundings*, at the Museum of Modern Art in 1968, was the first full-scale environment shown at a museum.\(^9\) It called for the collaboration of the audience, which is involved in creating the work—by making sounds, whose amalgamated components include glass, sounds, and so on.\(^3\) Critic Leo Steinberg notes that the amalgamated components in Rauschenberg’s works make the audience feel disorientated. In his analysis of the artist’s earlier works, he writes: “Perhaps Rauschenberg’s profoundest symbolic gesture came in 1955 when he seized his own bed, smeared paint on its pillow and quilt coverlet, and uprighted it against the wall. There, in the vertical posture of ‘art,’ it continues to work in the imagination as the eternal companion of our other resource, our horizontality, the flat bedding in which we do our begetting, conceiving, and dreaming. The horizontality of the bed related to ‘making’ as the vertical of the Renaissance picture plan related to seeing.”\(^9\)

For Rosalind Krauss, this amalgamation is related to the issue of reading: Rauschenberg’s art follows a discursive model by compelling a part-by-part, image-by-image reading that is temporal in character.\(^5\) Craig Owens points out that Rauschenberg’s works are concerned with the issues of “reading” in painting: “it remains impossible to read a Rauschenberg, if by reading we mean the extraction from a text of a coherent, monological message. All attempts to decipher his works testify only to their own failure, for the fragmentary, piecemeal combination of images that initially impels reading is also what blocks it, erects an impenetrable barrier to its

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\(^9\) Reiss. 80.


course. Rauschenberg thus confounds the attitude towards reading as an unproblematic activity.\textsuperscript{96}

If Xu was influenced by Rauschenberg, then how do the characteristics of “amalgamation” and “reading” appear in Xu’s works? In his installations, conceptually speaking, he places a sign\textsuperscript{97} that refers to printmaking. This sign relies upon two interlocking elements: the objects of printmaking (namely books and wall posters), and the thought or the mental effects of printmaking. The former are evident references to the materials of printmaking. Here, Xu’s arrangement of his components is reminiscent of Rauschenberg’s. The latter are what the work generates in the viewer’s mind. Its presentation of a situation is informed by the strong and immediate intimation of perception, so that Xu’s installation provides a strong, immediate intimation of printmaking upon the viewer’s first viewing. Here, Xu’s concept of installation departs from Rauschenberg’s because Xu’s works impose a greater immediate force on the audience, beyond “reorientation” and being “hard to read.”

In Xu’s works, the situation is a given thought or mental effect of an image that points to the meaning of the objects in the installation. This “given thought” corresponds to a strong indication of what the work means (the signified) by the observable elements of the work (the signifiers). The large size of the work and the overwhelming phenomenon of the repetitive appearance of books and wall posters make the thought of the image in the viewer’s mind palpable, and the “given thought” in fact becomes an actual meaning of the work.


\textsuperscript{97} My concept of the sign is informed by C. S. Peirce’s theory of language. He writes: “A sign […] is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort idea, which I have sometimes called the ground.” This quotation is in C. S. Peirce. \textit{The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce}. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss ed. (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1931). Vol. II. 135.
Second, the phenomenon of the inscribed “words” on the installation all over the space surrounds the viewer and invites him or her into a new situation. The previous situation that the sign evokes reveals the relationship between the viewer and the work. The viewer is positioned in a dual circumstance at a given time as he both perceives the objects and generates the thought of the objects. However, he must determine what the work means by looking at inscribed words. The viewer then is in a condition or position of significatory enigma as he reads the inscribed words, with their vague features and undetermined meaning. Here the viewer encounters a second given situation related to the mental identification in relation to resemblance with known Chinese characters. This second given situation is a signifier because the meaning of the words is not determined, but is in fact connected with a group of Chinese characters similar to it. It is important to keep in mind that the second situation happens only for a viewer who knows Chinese.

Most art critics and historians writing on Xu Bing emphasize the artist’s motif and see his invented characters as a critique of Chinese characters and culture, rather than as “reading.” They fail to explore the interaction between the works and the audience or the effect of perceiving the works upon the audience. For instance, critics Lu Ping and Yi Dan, in their Art China: 1990–1999, articulate this critique by showing both the visual ambiguity and expression of humor in the works of other two important artists, Gu Wenda (b. 1995) (illus. C.12) and Wu Shanzhuan (b. 1963) (illus. C.13). For the critics, the (mis)uses of Chinese characters in art are related to a critical issue—the anti-Chinese tradition. Around 1985, this hostile treatment of language presented in the works of Xu, Gu, and Wu. For the critics, Xu is associated with Gu and Wu, as the cultural implications of Chinese characters in terms of motif and style

are of primary concern in some of his works. These artists’ stylistic strategies challenge the nature of Chinese culture conveyed by language.

My articulation of the concept of the “situation” in Xu’s works argues against both critics’ points. Unlike Gu and Wu, he was not solely interested in investigating the visual appearance of Chinese characters, but was instead interested in the visual process as it conveys its cultural identity in art. His use of characters signals a striking pictorial method which involves representation of the tension between figuration and abstraction, where figuration remains both elusive and yet distinct. I refer to this quality as the “vagueness” in his language, and this quality renders his works totally different from those of Gu and Wu and captures the audience’s confusion and wonder. We will become clear about this “vagueness” later. Nevertheless, I think that, as with Gu and Wu, Xu’s critique of “language” implies a sense of humor. However, Xu’s critique results from a specific concept of parody as a parodic play of languages.

**Logic of Xu’s Use of Languages**

If Xu’s works are not merely non-sense, non-serious, or humorous, what kind of concept do they convey? His use of language, I argue, can be revealed through an inner logic among the words in his languages. Furthermore, this logic that characterizes his works is related to a kind of language game.

I randomly selected one word from *Book from the Sky* (“A,” illus. C.14). “A” itself does not convey any linguistic meaning, simply because it does not exist in Chinese. For a viewer who knows Chinese, however, “A” reads as being similar to a legible or an identified “word.”

Since it resembles the other Chinese words labeled “B” and “C” (among others) in Chinese, it inevitably prompts the viewer to try to

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99 This “word” might not be recognized as an enigma since it resembles a normal Chinese word to a great degree.
identify “A,” through a series of reasonable associations with a series of meaningful words in Chinese such as “B” or “C.” This identification in the viewer’s mind results from a very observable formal resemblance among these words and from a desire to fully clarify “A.” One of the primary reasons for the occurrence of this clarification is that “A,” “B,” and “C” resemble one another. Because of this visual likeness and the words’ similar properties, the viewer naturally grasps a pair in his or her mind. However, the viewer cannot hold on to this association permanently because the mental identification cannot be completely justified, simply because “A” does not exactly match “B” or “C.” Therefore, eventually the viewer realizes that “A” is not a meaningful word in Chinese, and feels surprised and bewildered. In this sense, this mental identification suggests that resemblance does not equal fact.

Now, we are in a position to understand why the words in the installation, which create the second situation, have such power to contain the viewer within his or her state of mind; the viewer is compelled and directed to this universe of comparison between “A” and “B” and “C.” Clearly, when he or she is reading “A,” he or she is not actually reading “B” and “C.” There are no real words “B” and “C” shown near the physical location of “A.” But for the viewer, “A” naturally calls for “B” or “C” to clarify the significance of “A.” This clarification includes two steps: reference and identification. First, reference occurs as “A” prompts the comparison with “B” or “C.” Second, immediately “A” identifies with “B” or “C;” that is, the viewer is “checking” to see if “A” is a known character to either “B” or “C.” The clarification of “A” thus functions in these two interlocked steps. In this context, the clarification of “A” occurs as a loop as the viewer “triggers” the process. Eventually, “A” represents itself as an unidentified word within this process of identification. The viewer realizes that in fact

100 The conceptual meanings of words would be significant in this kind of identification if the viewer were confronted with more than a single word.
“A” does not refer to “B” or “C,” simply because they do not match. My point in this analysis is to illustrate the viewer’s desire to find a resemblance which can be associated with the mental occurrence as clarifying the vague features of the word in terms of the similarity and difference between “A” and “B” and “A” and “C.” This mental act of attempted full clarification is curious, what Peirce would call an “infinite series in representation.”\textsuperscript{101} The clarification of “A” creates an effect upon the viewer within a wide collection of possible signifiers (“B” and “C”).

Here, it is important to bear in mind that in an actual situation in Xu’s installation, this clarification is not as mechanical as articulated above, nor does it occur slowly. Rather, it occurs immediately, in the sense that the viewer conceives of this given (passive) situation as the viewer finds himself or herself becoming active in the process of clarification. I continue to address the concept of immediacy and to interpret it as the viewer’s activities of clarification in the section on the interface of synthetic reality in this chapter. But now I want to discuss a situation followed by the first one.

The second situation involves a kind of repression for the viewer, in the sense that the process of clarification dominates the viewer’s mental energy upon further viewing the vague features of the words in the work; however, it also prevents the viewer from actually clarifying the vague features.\textsuperscript{102} The repression occurring in the

\textsuperscript{101} When explaining the function of a sign, Peirce writes: “The meaning of a representation can be nothing but a representation. In fact, it is nothing but the representation itself conceived as stripped of irrelevant clothing. But this clothing never can be completely stripped off; it is only changed for something more diaphanous. So there is an infinite repression here. Finally, the interpretant (mental effect) is nothing but another representation, it has its interpretant again. Lo, another infinite series.” From Peirce, Vol. I. 171.

\textsuperscript{102} The second situation here would provide an access to reality and unreality, namely the process of the clarification of the reference. Peirce would explain this issue of reality. He writes: “The real […] is that which, sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in, and which is therefore independent of the vagaries of me and you. Thus, the very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY, without definite limits and capable of a definite increase of knowledge. And so those two series of real and the unreal—consist of those,
second situation is also contingent upon the first situation—the mental effect or thought about the objects of the printmaking, which is more obvious for the viewer. The state of the second situation precludes clarifying the actual meaning of the objects that the viewer had in mind as the mental effect or thought. At the same time, this “incompletion” of the clarification in the first situation brings forth a state in the viewer’s mind that is eagerly dependent upon the objects for clarification. In this sense, we could say that the space of Book from the Sky is filled with inscribed “words” all over, surrounding the viewer. The viewer’s thought or the mental effects of the object of the printmaking were brought forth in this spatial effect. The viewer is repressed by the meaning of the work that requires further clarification. Once this happens, the viewer falls into a “repressed” mental state in which the meaning of the printmaking (the books and wall posters) is hard to grasp.

Second, A, B, C… is an event of transliteration from English to Chinese. Xu Bing carved thirty-eight ceramic cubes featuring Chinese characters to represent twenty-six letters of the English alphabet. The corresponding Chinese characters were selected by the artist based on the similarity of their sounds to those of the English letters. For example, the English letter A is rendered by the Chinese “ai,” which means “sadness.” The English letter X is rendered by three Chinese sounds: “ai” meaning “sadness,” “ke” meaning “to be able to,” and “si” meaning “miss.” The artist carved the Chinese features on the upper face of each ceramic cube in the form of a printer’s stamp, and the corresponding English letter was printed on the side of each cube. In an exhibition, the cubes are lined up on the wall in English alphabetical order, resembling a kind of installation. Thus, the cubes denote the artist’s logic for this linguistic conversion.

which, at the same time, sufficiently future, the community will always continue to reaffirmed; and of those which, under the same conditions, will ever after be denied.” From Peirce, V. 186–87.
The visual features of the carved Chinese seem to reflect Xu Bing’s unconventional logical in transliterating Chinese letters that correspond to the English alphabet. Since the transliteration is based on this unconventional rule, the meanings of selected Chinese words are vague and even disassociated. But in fact the viewer is informed of both the transliterated alphabet and the transliterated letter(s) on the cube, so that the manner of conversion in the transliteration is conceptually recorded and visually displayed to the viewer. The viewer thus is given an exact reference that constructs the process of the transliteration. The identities of the Chinese letters are associated with the corresponding part of the English letters on the flank of the cube, rather than just suggesting what they convey in the Chinese context. Like the characters in Book from the Sky, the transliterated Chinese letters possess a double identity.

Cultural diversity appears early in Xu Bing’s work Cultural Negotiation, 1992–93 (illus. C.15), an installation for which the artist designed an environment for studying cultural diversity through language. A huge desk is located in the center of the exhibition space. Spectators are invited to sit in chairs surrounding the desk and to read books open on it. The books include 300 volumes of Book from the Sky and 300 volumes of Post Testament, 1992–93, a work using Chinese characters and English alphabetic pronunciations. Unlike in this early work, in Case Study of Transference (illus. C.16) Xu Bing addresses the cultural hegemony of Western dominance. In the early work, the artist is concerned with world history and books as cultural symbols of China as well as with the cultural exchange between China and the West.

What I find interesting in A, B, C… is that this transliteration is less an insignificant rewriting of letters than a meaningful “performance” of an informal way of learning the English language for a native Chinese speaker. Since Xu’s transliteration is not defined by a well-known convention, it is obvious that he does
not intend to require a high precision of transliteration from English to Chinese. But
transliteration usually has an ordinary function that satisfies some non-English
speakers as being easier and more practical, rather than as an authentic and a correct
way of recording English sounds by looking at native forms of language. At the time
Xu created this work, he was a new arrival in America and had no formal training in
English. The concept of transliteration in this work might be associated with his
experiences or his reflection upon new Chinese immigrants who were taken aback by
the formal, traditional way of language learning. They would prefer to use their native
language to learn English. In this sense, A, B, C... is a sign that Xu Bing creates for
recording and displaying the practical experiences of learning language.

Xu created this work in 1991 during his artist’s residency at San Francisco
University—a very early stage of his life in America. Later, he traveled to New York
and tried to stabilize his life here. In 1994 he exhibited the work in the Bronx Museum
of Art. The concept of transliteration in relation to immigrants echoed his own
experiences as he tried to anchor his life while being tossed between cities and
languages. In this context, A, B, C... suggests his own personal situation—he needed
to learn the American language in very basic and fundamental ways as well as
transform his language background to something immediate and present to his current
situation.

In addition to the first two types of languages, we find a third type of language.
New English Calligraphy is a “language” that evolved from the concept of
transliteration as seen in A, B, C…. Unlike A, B, C…, however, New English
Calligraphy transliterates twenty-six letters into twenty-six patterns, similar to both the
original shapes of the letters and to the Chinese scripts. Again, here we see Xu’s new
language, which possesses a double identity. By following the structure of a Chinese
character, an English word can be transliterated according to a new order in which its
visual features resemble the Chinese. Thus, each word in New English Calligraphy is organized by two principles, both of them based on Chinese.

Not surprisingly, in this sense, Xu created a type of illegible language that looks similar to Chinese, but actually is not. Unlike the banal font of the characters in Book from the Sky, New English Calligraphy is written by hand and appears more expressive and decorative. Here, because of the dramatic difference between the visual features of these two types of illegible words, New English Calligraphy does not evoke the second situation that the viewer experiences in Book from the Sky. The viewer of New English Calligraphy is caught by the attraction of its features, rather than by an attempt to clarify the illegible features in the viewer’s mind.

Like Book from the Sky, An Introduction to New English Calligraphy is displayed in a given situation concerning language—an obvious representation of a classroom. In an exhibition of this work, the artist arranges desks, chairs, blackboards, and a video that set the instructional atmosphere for learning this language through calligraphy writing. Each desk includes small containers of ink, a brush, and a “textbook.” The viewer is invited to learn the language, rather than given a test of deciphering the meaning of the illegible words. What the viewer learns in the “textbook” are two principles that form a word in New English Calligraphy. In the process of learning, the viewer experiences alienation from an empirically normal way of writing English and the conceptually familiar feeling of regular English writing. However, gradually the viewer may become familiar with this new writing of English words and to this particular expression of writing, which is similar to the Chinese way.

In his 1994 work A Case Study of Transference, Xu created a different situation and environment for using language. He used mating Chinese pigs to illustrate cultural communication between China and America through language. In the work, a pair of pigs is put in a pen strewn with open books in many languages and
scraps of paper. Both pigs are printed with the characters Xu Bing created for his *Book from the Sky*: the male with English characters, and the female with Chinese characters. This work is his first to include live animals and was presented in the Han Mo Arts Center in Beijing on January 22, 1994. The exhibition was open only to invited viewers because of the political censorship surrounding contemporary art in Beijing. In preparation for this exhibition, he needed to find his performers—a pair of pigs. He went to several pig breeding centers to select the appropriate ones. He needed pigs with good shape and skin color, as well as—most important—sexual allure. During the exhibition, the pigs mated repeatedly, symbolizing cultural connection. The performance of the pigs’ mating reflects natural sexual desire, since these animals act in front of crowds without caring at all, as compared to the more inhibited behaviors of human beings. After this work, Xu created numerous other works that incorporate animals into the elements of his languages. This kind of work demonstrates the artist’s exploration in language of the cultural differences between animals and humans.

Last, the drawing from the Himalayas Journal can be understood as an environment. It not only portrays a scene through a painstaking arrangement of inscribed words on the picture, but also depicts the conceptual meaning of the scene that inscribed words explicitly bring to the viewer’s mind. In this sense, this picture presents the visual object of the scene and the mental effect or thought that represents the image of the object in the viewer’s mind. Thus, this picture is not simply a beautiful design but is also the totality of surrounding conditions that invoke the experience of seeing the scene. The words in the picture therefore cannot be interpreted simply by their linguistic function; they must also be interpreted by the visualization of the mental image they evoke in the viewer’s mind.

Thus, from my analysis of the four types of language in Xu’s work, I demonstrate that Xu intended to alter languages (Chinese and English) and to make
them a kind of sign for a specific purpose in which he creates an activity between the works and the audience. His use of language is a kind of play related to the concept of game as Wittgenstein defines it. Xu’s uses of languages suggest two levels of meanings which are related respectively to (1) significatory vagueness, and (2) his signature style. In the latter, the features and nature of Xu’s language recreate the styles of calligraphy, printmaking, and Chinese ideograms. In the former, Xu’s works employ an intended vagueness whose exact significance needs to be more fully clarified but cannot be “completed.” This vagueness reflects a cognitive grasp of linguistic “mis-use” on the artist’s part and makes the viewer feel disoriented and discomfited by exposure to the indeterminacy of the meaning of both words and work—an indeterminacy that argues against a non-sense or non-serious reading of Xu’s works. At the same time, this vagueness explains why Xu’s works seem non-serious or even meaningless. The purpose of Xu’s alteration of regular language—its amalgamated features—is to introduce vagueness into his works, which in turn induces the viewer to consciously clarify them. This clarification comes as the viewer “gets” the given situation of the work. Finally, the viewer’s process of seeing and reading Xu’s works becomes an element of his or her behavior connected with the ordinary experience of the use of language, which informs the role of the viewer in relation to the work.

Now we interpret the role of language in Xu’s works. Through language, the viewer confronts the situation and interacts with it. One might ask: why does the artist use language to create this situation or interaction with the viewer? The experience and reality that the sign elicits in the viewer’s mind connects him or her to the artist’s experience of using languages (Chinese and English) because the experience and reality spring from the artist’s own experience and the reality of his daily life. In this sense, the viewer experiences the artist’s rendition of ordinary language. Ordinary
language is valuable for recording and representing commonplace customs and culture. Xu Bing recognized and cherished the value of Chinese ordinary language during his early experiences and life working and living with the peasants in suburban areas in China. Therefore, it is fair to claim that the concept of language that Xu’s works depicts may be strongly associated with ordinary language. The significance of this ordinary language in Xu’s understanding is conditioned socially and culturally by his Chinese experiences and by the reality of the language being used in a particular situation. In his works, he transforms language accordingly, first to the viewer’s activity of perceiving the work, and second, to the surrounding conditions of an exhibition space.

Parodic Play as Imitation in Language

We now turn to the original concern with Xu’s use of languages. There is a grammar or structure in Xu’s languages; however, Xu did not create this grammar but imitated or repeated Chinese words and/or English alphabets. More specifically, he imitated other word forms: Each of Xu’s language types generally conveys a pictorial resemblance to (1) the Song font of printmaking, (2) the form of calligraphy, and (3) the Chinese ideogram. Some are even reminiscent of the textural quality of printmaking. The structures of Xu’s languages are observable because of the pictorial nature of Chinese ideograms and calligraphy, and they are based on the principle of strokes in the Chinese language. According to this principle, each part of a word must follow the rules of symmetry and equality of size. Generally speaking, Xu’s innovation with words is not arbitrary but rather is related to considerations of at least three elements in his language: (1) word form, (2) word feature, and (3) word structure. To interpret Xu’s languages in this way, we must understand that the concept of illegibility has two levels of meaning. First, each word is not necessarily meaningful in
its new context in Xu’s works: it is not used as a publicly accepted communication tool. The artist himself claimed that he didn’t use his language for public communication. Rather, he used it as an activity connected to the viewer. Second, Xu’s languages share an obscure boundary with other linguistic creations such as calligraphy, Chinese ideograms, and printmaking. Xu’s languages are eclectic in that they combine linguistic forms and features.

Xu’s imitation does not simply copy words, but rather re-organizes and re-composes them to form new orders or features. Yet, the essence of his new words remains the same as that of the old (Chinese or English words). Thus, I suggest that languages in his works reveal the notions of imitation and repetition. Dentith writes that this notion is a basic form of parody and that the parodic imitation or repetition suggests a deep understanding of language:

There is a further, and fundamental, way in which the apparently specialized use of language that we call parody can be related to more general characteristics of language. At some level—later this will be specified more exactly—parody involves the imitation, and transformation of another’s words. That might also pass as an account of language use more generally, for language is not one’s own, but always comes to each speaker from another, to be imitated and transformed as that speaker in turn sends it onwards. All utterances are part of a chain, and as they pass through that chain they acquire particular valuations and intonations on each occasion of their use.

Language in Xu’s works is used according to this parodic notion of imitation and, more important, transformation among viewers. Xu creates a situation such as a classroom where the audience not only learns how to write this language, but also to transform this language with “particular valuations and intonations” in written forms. The viewer transforms the language that Xu imitates from the Chinese characters

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103 After learning Xu’s language, the viewers used it to write letters to Xu.
104 Dentith. 3.
and/or English alphabets. Thus, Xu’s works aim to reveal the parodic play of language that occurs when the audience transforms the languages Xu imitated. The significance of this play, as Dentith suggests, shows that “language is not one’s own, but always comes to each speaker from another.”

Xu creates forms or formats of art in a given situation, event, and environment for the viewer to confront in a parodic play of language. The viewer’s involvement with the works is driven by his or her own desire and activity in response to mental thought or physical action, stemming from the works’ effect upon him or her. In the activity of perceiving the work, the viewer embraces direct experience and immediate knowledge of the reality that the sign connotes. This involvement is a voluntary activity, as I suggested earlier, one of the significant states of game.

By processing what the action of perceiving calls for, the viewer might find himself or herself in the state of being in conjunction with the experience and reality in art through the sign; the experience and reality may gradually become part of him or her. In other words, the viewer’s mental and physical participation is no longer contingent on a representation that the sign creates, but can be understood as an act by which the viewer finds himself or herself in the state of this experience and reality that connects one to the wider world of daily life. Here, language informs the viewer’s role as “interlocutor” in understanding reality. Dentith notes: “parody, be it of the interlocutor’s speech, or of the speech of some third party, or even of oneself, is one of the ways in which these inevitable evaluations occur.”

Here the interlocutor occurs in a written rather than spoken form, which I will address in Chapter Four. Addressing the written form, Dentith, inspired by V.N. Vološinov’s theory, notes that: “for speech as the ‘chain of utterances’ is intertextuality. This can be characterized initially as the

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105 Dentith. 3.
interrelatedness of writing, the fact that all written utterances—texts—situate themselves in relation to texts that precede them, and are in turn alluded to or repudiated by texts that follow.”  

Thus, I intend to emphasize the intertextuality that informs the audience’s activity in learning language and the situations that Xu creates to reflect the context of that language learning. This can be characterized as the parodic play of language, as Dentith regards parody, as “one of the many forms of intertextual allusion out of which texts are produced. In this sense, parody forms part of a range of cultural practices, which alludes, with deliberate evaluative intonation, to precursor texts.”

The amalgamated features of Xu’s languages show his own “deliberate evaluative intonation to precursor texts.” His works, thus, are not non-sense writing, but are related to a parodic form that shows the “intertextual allusion” of the new texts (Xu’s words) to the old (Chinese and/or English words.)

If Xu’s language is a parody, what is the purpose of this parody? His works aim to create humor. Beyond this comic effect, however, do his works have other intents or convey other effects? It is clear that his use of language suggests the notion of game. There are two significant concepts underlying Xu’s works—signature style and significatory vagueness—which characterize Xu’s works as aesthetic practices. Yet, as I shall demonstrate later, these two concepts help us to understand his use of language as a kind of play in re-organizing or composing languages and as a game in light of Wittgenstein’s notion of vagueness in language. The interpretation of Xu’s works according to the philosophical account thus helps us to understand how the artist systematically creates his languages and how these linguistic systems work as

106 Ibid. 5.
107 Ibid. 6.
activities, physically and psychologically, for the audience. Thus, we will understand the purpose of Xu’s parodic play of language as a game.

Wittgenstein’s Language Game and Xu’s Parodic Play of Language

Ludwig Wittgenstein explains language as a game: “It is not everywhere circumscribed by rules; but no more are there any rules for how high one throws the ball in tennis, or how hard; yet tennis is a game for all that and has rules too”.108 The philosopher regards the essence of language as a relationship in this notion of a language game: “Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all, —but that they are related to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship or these relationships, that we call them all “language.”109 After the philosopher sketches this “rule” as the linguistic relationship, he continues: “[Y]ou will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don’t think, but look.”110 Wittgenstein characterizes these similarities as “family resemblances”111: language is the constitution of a series of similarities overlapping, so that it is difficult to draw a clear line between them. In this sense, while we use a language, we play the “rule” of that particular language. According to S. Hilmy, in the first section of TS 213 (“The Big Typescript”), Wittgenstein explains what he means by this:

110 Ibid. 66.
“Language must speak for itself. One can also put it this way: if one always expresses oneself in a system of language and thus what a sentence means is only explained through sentences of this system, then after all meaning [Meinung] falls remains the only thing we can consider. An exposition [Erklärung] tells what a sentence means.”112

Wittgenstein’s insistence on two significant arguments of the language game and vagueness differs from other theories of language. Wittgenstein scholar Marie MaGinn notes: “Wittgenstein introduces the concept of a language game in order to bring into prominence the fact that language functions within the active, practical lives of speakers, that its use is inextricably bound up with the non-linguistic behavior which constitutes its natural environment.”113 In understanding language in this way, we should regard the use of language as the speaker’s employment of purposive activity. In this sense, Wittgenstein urges us to consider the fact that language is in situ—embedded in the lives of those who speak it. The “lives” of language can be found in the ordinary context of the speaker’s life. As we use language, we are linked to a temporary and spatial occasion in which the context of our ordinary lives fully displays or replays the context of language.

Thus, for us, here, the use of language is similar to the employment of an activity. The view of language-activity argues against the idea of language as a system of meaningful signs, in which the use of language is an abstraction of its inextricable link to its ordinary context in speaker’s lives. Furthermore, since we apply the context of ordinary lives to the context of the use of language, we grasp a vague connection of language to lives. The connection is vague because it is based on our experiences, rather than on logic. In this sense, I suggest that the notion of a language game and vagueness can be used to interpret Xu Bing’s signature style and significatory

vagueness. In terms of the artist’s signature style, his “mis-use” of language is related to the empirical employment of words. In terms of its significatory vagueness, Xu’s language is inextricably bound with multi-identity, which reflects upon the viewer’s seeing and reading it as a given activity, situated in the ordinary occasion. The nature of Xu’s language can be understood as vagueness, which the philosopher regards as the nature of ordinary language.

It is important to point out that Robert Rauschenberg’s peer Jasper Johns was influenced by Wittgenstein’s philosophy. Rauschenberg was very close to Johns and was influenced by his works. Art historians have noted that several of Johns’s works deal with linguistic signs associated with this influence.¹¹⁴ In a series of 1950s and 1960s works featuring numbers and texts on canvas, the numbers and texts occupy the entire surface. These works are formally similar to Xu’s works. This formal similarity is interesting—perhaps through Rauschenberg’s works Xu came to realize Wittgenstein’s theory.

Furthermore, my interpretation also reveals Wittgenstein’s conceptual influence on Xu’s generation in the 1980s in China. Wittgenstein’s philosophical concept of language was introduced into the art and cultural fields in China in the mid-1980s, when Xu Bing started to work on language in art. The philosopher’s understanding of language influenced three other artists who were of the same generation as Xu Bing: Wang Luyan, Cheng Shaoping, and Gu Dexin, who formed an art group, New Analysis Group, in 1989. Their manifesto shows artistic concern with the logical and rational processes of intellectual thought in relation to the artistic production of daily objects. They began to work on the concept of “analysis,” which reduces everything to its most basic elements. Between 1989 and 1990, their early

works addressed this issue by analyzing the elements of language and texts. In 1995, they expanded their analysis to linguistic texts that included cultural texts from daily life. Inspired by this concern with the cultural production of significance, in 1995, Wang Luyan created The Revision of a Bicycle. (illus. C.17) For this, he purchased a bicycle in Beijing and altered its mechanical structure by adding two wheels to its rear wheel. As a result, when a viewer at the exhibition was invited to ride the bicycle around, it moved backwards.\textsuperscript{115} Wang’s aim in relating the revised bicycles to cultures was to demonstrate that the revision of a daily object in various cultures is universally treated as illogical and irrational, and to highlight the logic of the common sense that a daily object implies in culture.

**Parodic play and Vagueness in Language**

When Xu creates language as a game as per Wittgenstein, this linguistic game is intended to convey a feeling of vertigo and chance to his audience. Wittgenstein’s discussion of vagueness in language relies upon a heuristic strategy—and is an inquiry into the essence of language—rather than upon a purely playful one. Wittgenstein argues that vagueness is a legitimate and essential feature of ordinary language. Because vagueness is unavoidably intrinsic to language, it lies within the scope of rules that govern language.\textsuperscript{116} Vagueness radicalizes the condition of language like a game since there are no clear boundaries in the ordinary use of words in language. The philosopher Christopher Hookway notes that while Wittgenstein accepts that vague concepts have meaning, he employs two different strategies, rather than responding directly to the challenge of finding precise logical laws. First, he examines the ways

\textsuperscript{115} At other exhibitions, the artist continued to work on this daily object and related it to the cultural environment to which it belonged. He created a bicycle in Japan and Australia based on the principle and concept of revision of a bicycle.

\textsuperscript{116} McGuinness. 100.
we actually use concepts and the needs they meet, and reminds us that vague concepts can often meet these needs far better than precise ones. Second, he attempts to diagnose what has gone wrong in our understanding of language. Third, it is important to note that Wittgenstein’s emphasis on vagueness in language is a heuristic strategy. In other words, he intends to urge us to use language carefully and to avoid vagueness. He is concerned with a normative way of exploring clarity, instead of revealing a factual or actual means of understanding vagueness in language.

Examining vagueness in language in this particular way prompts us to consider that “[t]he more narrowly we examine actual language, the sharper becomes the conflict between it and our requirement.” That language-games have “blurred edges” is not a plea to clear up these blurs. After all, the indistinct picture is “often exactly what we need.” To accept that vagueness is unavoidable leads us to examine how words are actually used, rather than to postulate how things are or ought to be. As Wittgenstein puts it: “Bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.” Wittgenstein uses a heuristic inquiry into the essence of language by imposing vagueness on reality itself. To claim language has an element of vagueness is not to posit that the reality language reflects is logical nonsense. Instead, it is the referential relationship that reveals reality through the structure of language that is vague.

To illuminate Wittgenstein’s concept of vagueness in Xu’s works is simple, because Xu’s four types of languages possess multiple identities. Each appears to be illegible upon first view but later becomes legible in an unusual way, except for the language in Book from the Sky. It is not an exaggeration to claim that Xu Bing

118 McGuinness. 107.
119 Ibid. 171.
120 Ibid. 116.
intentionally “mis-uses” words. His words contain vague features, and this becomes his signature style, as I pointed out, as the parodic play of language.

This heuristic strategy in Xu’s works creates parody. Simple quotation or imitation can not be regarded as parody: there must an incongruity or discrepancy between parodic and original texts. The heuristic function here serves to evoke the incongruity between Xu’s languages and original languages. Vagueness appears as Xu re-composes and re-organizes the original languages and his languages suggest, but are not identical to, the original. Theoretician Margaret A. Rose, writing on parody, notes that “parodic quotations are also unlike the authoritative quotation in that they usually do not relate contingent texts to reinforce or support the authority of an author, but to connect humorously unlike subjects in order to make ironic or startling comments on them which may be of a humorous and/or critical nature. This has the effect of [both] making the quoted text appear ‘strange’…” She also explains the heuristic function of this parodic quotation:

the use of quotation to establish comic discrepancy or incongruity as well as contingency between texts distinguishes parodic quotation from most other forms of quotation and literary imitation and often suggests the presence of a more critical attitude on the part of the parodist to the native imitation or reception of the other texts.

Following this observation, it becomes clear that the heuristic function can be seen as the artist’s “critical attitude to the reception of the other texts.” Reception here apparently is related to the Chinese and English languages from which Xu quoted. The purpose of composing his language as a game, as I demonstrate thus, is to invite its

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123 Ibid. 79.
audience to decode these strange quotations and to interpret them. The audience is put into a position of being able to recognize the artist’s parodic quotation. In this sense, this notion of game reveals a heuristic way to make the audience aware of the artist’s parodic strategy and the status of the languages themselves as “parodic quotations.”

My analysis of parody in relation to self-reflection can be thought of as identical to the parodic nature of meta-fiction. Rose, in her discussion of meta-fiction as parody, suggests:

While the term meta-fiction when used by itself may describe a reflection by an author on their activity as author, or on that of others, or on the structure or composition of another text, or on its audience, the parody of a literary work, as suggested previously, can be attended not only by such meta-fiction reflections, but by other characteristics of parody such as its comic refunctioning of the work’s preformed material.124

According to Rose, parody in Xu’s works might be specifically associated to meta-fiction. The question is whether this parody conveys “comic refunctioning of the work’s preformed material.” From my interpretation of Xu’s language as game, we see that he indeed refunctions his languages. The question remains whether this refunctioning conveys a comic effect.

The Vertiginous Effect in the Play and the Psychological Concept in Language

Upon being given situations in Xu’s Book from the Sky, a viewer who knows Chinese first plays a kind of mental logic game to avoid failing to notice something within X’s language, because its features are vague.125 This logic game helps the

124 Ibid. 92.
125 The viewer’s outcome resulting from a logic practice in her mind might be seen as a critique on logocentrism. Logocentrism is understood as a postmodernist’s critique on what is perceived as an excessive faith in the stability of meanings, an excessive concern with distinction, or with the validity of inferences, the careful use of reason, other traditional aids to sifting truth from falsity, or indeed an excessive faith in the notions of truth and falsity themselves.
viewer determine the specific identities of vague features through a serial analysis of their known associations. The viewer may eventually come to a valid conclusion about the features—they are not unknown characters. He or she also may make a reasonable judgment about Xu’s words—that this “language” strongly resembles an actual language, but that they are not identical. Here the viewer is in the “logic state” in which he or she tests the true value of the unknown characters.

According to Erickson, when Chinese audiences first viewed Book from the Sky, they felt:

as if they were in a prison, completely hemmed in by unintelligible words. In particular, the scrolls draped from the ceiling seemed to press down on them. For other visitors, the exhibition evoked sensations similar to those felt in a temple or in a hall of mourning. Some people felt breathless or frightened. Still others found themselves overwhelmed with a more positive experience, as the installation inspired them to marvel at the length and wonder of Chinese civilization.”

For Erickson, the psychological effect of the work upon the audience and the viewer’s reception varied based on his/her receptions. Through my previous analysis, I provide a formal and conceptual interpretation of the process of reception. This reception, more important to me, reveals the spatial relationship between the viewer of the work and the process of his or her reading activity of the languages. This relationship creates a vertiginous feeling in the viewer.

In Xu’s Book from the Sky, illegibility occurs as a condition in which the viewer finds these languages being inapplicable to a fixed form of linguistic creation. Therefore, illegibility is not a reflection of a specific intellectual concept in Xu’s characters in their original Chinese context, but is a borderline case of actual clarification upon the viewer’s viewing. Xu’s characters are illegible because they

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126 Erickson. 39.
function in new contexts that do not validate their linguistic meanings in Chinese, so
the viewer must decipher their meanings in the new contexts. Here he or she enters
Xu’s language-game, and attempts to find an in situ rule that functions through the
languages based on the similarities and relationships among their elements. After all,
the viewer realizes that Xu’s characters are specific. Also, they must be understood
within the context of their reality in Xu’s works and how Xu uses them to lead the
viewer to experience the process of clarification.

I suggest that the viewer is directed to a “psychological state” in which he or
she clarifies the multiple identifications of the vague features while satisfying the
desire for fuller clarification of the meaning of the words and works. Wittgenstein’s
heuristic strategy of vagueness aims to reveal the intimations implicit in the structure
of language. According to the philosopher Stephen Hilmy, in the context of TS 213,
Wittgenstein explicitly discusses the intimations in language:

Thought is no secret [geheimer]—and vague—process of which we
only see intimations in language, as if the negation were a blow and the
thought of it were like a nondescript [unbestimmter] pain brought about
by this blow but completely distinct from it.

One does not have thoughts, and alongside [daneben] language.—It
isn’t like this: that one has signs for others, but for oneself one has a
mute thought. As it were, a gaseous or ethereal thought in contrast to
visible and audible symbol.

Hilmy suggests that “it is quite evident that here again Wittgenstein is repudiating the
same sort of view as we found him repudiating when rejecting the notion that other
‘psychological’ concepts such as ‘understanding’ and ‘meaning’ are metalogical.”127
He continues, noting that:

127 Hilmy, 40–66.
one finds that when Wittgenstein repudiates metalogical it is almost invariably with reference to and in the context of a discussion of what one might call “psychological concept”: that is, concepts which on the surface of it seem in our language to serve the function of denoting mental (psychic) processes or states. And just as invariably, along with a repudiation of the view that such concepts are metalogical, one finds Wittgenstein repudiating the view that the meaning of such concepts solely consists in or rests on psychic phenomena that they might seem to denote.  

The rule of language is not grounded in a clarity that transcends thoughts and language; therefore the use of language is conditioned by what is “beyond language and before us.”

Hilmy suggests that what is “beyond language and before us” is not psychological phenomena, but rather “psychological” concepts. He explains that he defines the term “metalogic” differently from contemporary logicians: namely, the second-order logical concerns with such matters as the soundness and completeness of a system of logical rules. Rather, he defines “metalogic” as “something outside or beyond logic.” But the expression “something outside logic” (even if one wishes to deny that there is anything outside logic) can only make sense if one specifies the domain of logic. Wittgenstein has claimed that “understanding” and “meaning” are not metalogical, but rather are words like any others. Following Hilmy’s observation, Wittgenstein’s notion of vagueness reveals the problem of metalogic in terms of the a priori, the principle that serves as an absolute ground for other statements. To inquire into the a priori is to bring up the real. It is a “must” for “ideal.” Speaking of a priori, Wittgenstein tells us that they are “neither true nor false; they are neither knowable nor unknowable. They can only seem to be true;—but what can only seem to be true can also only seem to be false.” In this sense, vagueness indicates the lack of a

128 Ibid. 43.
129 Ibid. 49.
130 Wittgenstein. #258.
criteria principle that transcends one’s thought and language. Language cannot clearly reflect reality since it does not warrant the clear condition of a criterion like “the state of affairs” in Wittgenstein’s words.

Thus, following Wittgenstein, the psychological state in Xu’s works describes what happens when the viewer switches from one to another association within his or her own selected possibilities. What concerns me is this “psychological state,” which I suggest is related to Wittgenstein’s notion of “what is before us.” The viewer’s attempts at clarification rely upon the structures of Xu’s languages, which work on the basis of similarities and relationships. By identifying each word’s resemblance to other possibly similar known words, the viewer tries to obtain an intimation of what Xu’s language means. The clarification occurring during the process of association involves the activities connected with the viewer’s memory involving a known and this new association, interpretation, and remembrance of the aggregation of comparisons made during the entire process. This clarification thus reveals some psychological concepts, and through these, the viewer “pulls” the meaning of Xu’s language into reality upon the indeterminacy. This reality is related to logic as unreality because it is not tied to any specific context we know.

I show that the presentation of situation in Xu’s works is related to Wittgenstein’s notion of language because the viewer visualizes the vague words in aesthetic formats. The viewer relates specifically to (1) vagueness as the inevitable nature of ordinary language, (2) a word’s free associations within its resemblances, and (3) the meaning of language used in the activities of learning language. What makes Xu’s works remarkable is his use of illegibility in languages informed by the vague features of language and significatory vagueness. In his works, vagueness occurs as the viewer conceives of resemblance. Illegibility can be understood in a context that highlights the vague value of visual imitation.
In his works, Xu remarks upon the fact that resemblance itself inevitably implies vagueness. Western artists who address visual imitation—such as Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, and Robert Morris—also attend to this notion of vagueness, whereas Xu’s language is eclectic and possesses multiple identities. A good example of this is Classroom Calligraphy. In this work, English words are transformed into a new order and shape created by Xu. Their shape and order resemble that of a normal Chinese word, yet they have no significance in Chinese. The English words seem like mis-fit Chinese. In cases of mis-fit, the artist often includes an environment or a situation in which a viewer may feel compelled to clarify the vagueness within resemblance. The nature of Xu’s language reflects upon the notion of vagueness within resemblance and can be understood as the exegesis of vagueness within the viewer’s clarification of resemblances within his language game. Vagueness reveals itself as the viewer attempts to avoid a logical contradiction; thus he or she enters into the “psychological state” in which it is possible to obtain a clearer value of vagueness. Vagueness also finds expression in the viewer’s attempts to remember, memorize, or interpret known associations with the vague features and significatory vagueness in Xu’s works. The activities of these attempts coincide with the psychological concepts in Wittgenstein’s sense.

My analysis of Xu’s language according to the concept of a language game thus provides an alternative interpretation to explain the audience’s reception of the “non-sense and ridiculous writings.” Xu is not consciously aware of the influence of this philosopher’s thoughts on his work; instead, Xu has emphasized the influence

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131 For Plato, visual imitation is seen as the mimesis of the visual appearance of an object. It is the lowest stage of knowledge, which Plato calls Eikasia. In art history and theory, vagueness might be related to the issues of shadow in imitation. In Xu’s work, the notion of imitation is seen in the viewer’s imagination working on the resemblances between Chinese characters.

132 I interviewed the artist at his studio.
of Zen Buddhism. He explains that his works create cognitive stimuli for the spectator to experience a kind of Zen training of the mind.

No matter what outer form my works take, they are all linked by a common thread, which is to construct some kind of obstacle to people’s habitual ways of thinking—what I call the “cognitive structures” of the mind. These obstacles derive from intentionally mixing up different received concepts to create a sense of estrangement and unfamiliarity. People construct concepts based on their familiarity with particular phenomena: thus concepts are really just the product of cognitive habits. It’s convenient to use fixed symbols to communicate and to act according to certain concepts. You could say that so-called intellectuals are just composites of a multitude of symbols and concepts. It is just those people with the strongest cultural concepts who have been most discomfited by my work, and as a result the most affected by it. This discomfiture and inability to grasp the situation force you to reorganize and readjust your preconceived notions. Habitual ways of thinking are disrupted in the process of seeking a new basis for interpretation and understanding. The laziness of habitual thinking is challenged, and the result is the opening up of a wider, untapped cognitive space in which to rediscover long-forgotten, primary sources of cognition and understanding.133

Xu Bing’s approach is related to a kind of Zen training, whose aim is enlightenment. The Zen term for it is koan [in Chinese gong’an, meditation theme], namely a dialogue in which an answer that defies logic is given. In one famous koan a student asks, “What is Buddha?” The Zen master replies, “Three bushels of hemp.” In pondering on how the Buddha can possibly be “three bushels of hemp,” the student finds that his thought processes fall into a great empty space, without any support or foundation. One day he breaks through to enlightenment with the realization that the essence of Buddha exists in every moment and in every aspect of life. This Zen approach to enlightenment forces one to open up one’s mind in the midst of something that completely flies against logic and common sense—in this way one achieves wisdom.

Xu notes that the visual ambiguity of resemblance explicit in his languages often shocks intellectuals’ understanding of cultural symbol and identity. I call this the heuristic function in the works. Departing from the artist’s own account, my interpretation of Xu’s use of languages in light of Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language suggests that the nature of Xu’s art is vagueness. I provide a different lens through which to understand Xu’s use of languages and their structure. My analysis of his use of illegibility leads us to understand the purpose of vagueness in his works. Xu Bing’s use of language relies upon a heuristic strategy; that is, his language places the viewer in a state of indeterminacy. This state is both logical and spatial because it works in the viewer’s mind and occurs in an exhibition space. In this sense, the artist’s use of language signals an artwork that involves a sign within the tension between figuration (visual feature) and abstraction (conceptual meaning), where figuration remains both elusive and distinct—what we can here call the condition of vagueness. Languages in Xu’s works are related respectively to either an abstract or figurative essence, but cannot be applicable to both simultaneously. This can be seen, for example, when the viewer participates in the activities in Xu’s works, such as reading illegible words and either walking around the spatial arrangement of objects in space, or sitting in and practicing Xu’s languages. It becomes clear why Xu places the viewer in this condition of vagueness: it is Xu’s heuristic strategy for the viewer to explore the activities connected to the function and meaning of language in physical time, space, and the mental state related to vertigo and chance.

In other works, this vertigo is related to feelings of pleasure and enjoyment. In Classroom, the audience is invited to sit in a classroom-like situation and learn Xu’s language. Unlike Book from the Sky, Classroom involves a more comfortable and friendly situation. After learning the new language, some audience members have
even written letters to Xu using his languages. They appear to feel pleasure and
enjoyment in participating in his language-learning situation.

The above analysis of the psychological state upon the viewer reveals the
vertiginous effect in Xu’s works. More important, this analysis of vagueness
emphasizes that his parodic use of language is linked to an event that conveys vertigo
and to the creation of the vertigo effect through the parodic appropriation of languages.
In her definition of parody, Rose writes of the comic effect created by parodic
incongruity:

This approach also allows for the classical understating of parody as a
device for comic quotation with a change to the original, without
obscuring the changing historical nature of both the subject-matter of
the parody changes to other texts, the controlled discrepancy or
incongruity between the parodied text and its new context is also one of
the chief source of the comic effect which distinguishes the parody
from other types of literary criticism as well as from forgery and
plagiarism. 134

According to Rose, vagueness that conveys incongruity or discrepancy creates a comic
effect. In Xu’s works, this effect is related not to humor, but rather to pleasure or
playfulness. If we accept that Xu’s works convey comic effects, then Xu’s parodic
play of language can be regarded as meta-fiction with the comic. Reading Xu’s use of
language helps us reveal this particular nature of his works.

Simulation and Language Learning

From my analysis of the resemblance in Xu’s languages, I suggest that Xu’s
four types of language describe Wittgenstein’s “canonical form of the language” that
informs simulation and repetition as a process of language learning. This simulation, I

134 Rose. 32.
argue, is associated with Xu’s creation of situations in his works. In other words, I suggest that simulation is the language-learning process in Xu’s works.

Wittgenstein introduces the concept of the language game in connection with three different sorts of activity: (1) One party calls out words; the other acts on them, (2) the pupil utters a word when the teacher points to a stone, and (3) the pupil repeats the word after the teacher. The latter two often occur as the pupil is instructed in language. For Wittgenstein, these three activities “resemble” language in that they employ the use of words and link this employment with the activities of pointing at a particular stone that stands for the word. What concerns Wittgenstein in these activities is that the employment of words inextricably involves linguistic context (the employment of words) with non-linguistic context (the activities of pointing at something). In the second activity, Wittgenstein notes that the activities of pointing at something already describe the signification of the word, and these activities require us to identify the meaning of the word with the idea of pointing out the object that stands for the word (stone). These activities reveal how language functions as it signifies what the object means. Wittgenstein calls the activities a canonical form of the language.

Xu’s works can be understood as the activities of a situation, an event, and an environment. If we understand Xu’s works in this context, Book from the Sky is similar to Wittgenstein’s first activity; A, B, C..., and the drawing from the Himalayas Journal to the second; and New English Calligraphy to the third. In addition, Xu’s languages function within a rule similar to Wittgenstein’s rule of the language game.

We can illuminate the first activity through an analysis of Book from the Sky. In this work, Xu creates two situations. The first is to display observable objects

135 See more about this in MaGinn, 43–52.
associated with printmaking and to inform the viewer what this work actually means. The second is to show his words, which possess multiple identities similar to known Chinese words. These two situations are interlocked. The second situation can be used to explain Wittgenstein’s first activity. In illustration C.14, Xu’s word does not represent the meaning of any single known Chinese word, but calls for the viewer’s attempted reference and clarification with known Chinese words that resemble it. In this sense, as Xu’s work hurls an unknown word to the viewer, the viewer acts on it and is then conceptually “trapped” in trying to clarify the indeterminacy.

Furthermore, the pictorial forms of Xu’s language resemble each other as a family because the principle of creating these words is based on similarities among the casual, simple, and ordinary forms of the language, which are Chinese ideograms. Here we can understand the rule of Xu’s language as Wittgenstein’s notion of family resemblance and a language game. The rule of Xu’s language is flexible and optional, and exists in the relationship between two or more levels of similarity. This rule informs the relationship between the words in a given work.

I describe the function of the language-game and illuminate the second activity by analyzing A, B, C… and the drawing from the Himalayas Journal. For A, B, C…, the artist created 38 objects that feature a phonetic translation of 26 English letters into Chinese characters. An English word is literally translated into Chinese, and this transliteration from English to Chinese is based on an unconventional logic. However, the letter A is mapped to its transliterated Chinese characters as are the remaining 25 English letters. When displaying this work, the artist arranges the work alphabetically from A to Z. Therefore, the objects are related to one another sequentially. In the drawing from the Himalayas Journal, the artist uses Chinese characters to depict a scene. The selected Chinese characters represent objects in the scene and are arranged in specific ways to visually represent the scene. In this work, these characters are
related to each other according to their forms and visual features within the entire arrangement of the characters.

In the display of A, B, C…, the viewer sees the letter A printed on the cube of its transliterated Chinese word on the top face of the cube. The cube as an object represents the activity of pointing A to its transliterated Chinese character, in Wittgenstein’s sense. This activity describes the significance of A in the form of Chinese. The meaning of A is not simply what the Chinese character means in Chinese, but is related to the context of the activity which functions within corresponding relations of Chinese characters (“Sadness” in Chinese) and English letter (A). In the picture from the Himalayas Journal, the objects presented by the visual features represent what they mean conceptually (the word “stone” in Chinese) when the viewer utters these Chinese characters, and the characters are also linked to the objects that their visual features represent. In this sense, the reading of the picture involves a linguistic context (the linguistic concept of the characters as words) and, at the same time, a non-linguistic context (the reading and seeing of the visual features of the characters as an image).

I illuminate the third activity by analyzing An Introduction to New English Calligraphy and Your Surname Please. In An Introduction to New English Calligraphy, the viewer sits in a classroom environment in order to learn a type of new language. The viewer practices according to Xu’s teaching principle, by which he or she must copy or imitate words in “textbooks” in order to learn the language. In this context, the viewer writes New English Calligraphy under Xu’s instruction, even though Xu is not physically present. This instruction through the activity of calligraphy writing transforms the viewer into pupil, whose activity in this work involves learning new words by this instruction, rather than by seeing and reading New English Calligraphy as an artwork.
Furthermore, like the previous work, *Your Surname Please* instructs the viewer—albeit through the use of a computer. This work was originally created for an exhibition on the island of Las Palmas, Spain. Xu displayed this work in two forms: one on a wall, and the other in a database on a computer located on a desk for the viewer’s use. All of the island inhabitants participated in the work: their surnames were written by the artist in New English Calligraphy and displayed in both locations. In this work, the viewer is invited to sit down and use the computer to find his or her surname in a database, after which he or she can print it out and keep it. As with the previous work, the viewer is invited to perform the activity of “learning” a new language in that the work emphasizes the visual identification of the new language with the letters of the viewer’s surname. After matching his or her name with Xu’s words on the panel on the front wall, the viewer then repeats this identification during the computer search. In this sense, Xu designs an instruction in language as the form of the work, and the viewer is the pupil of that instruction. Xu’s new language consists of certain basic principles informed by both calligraphy and English, and is, at first view, illegible. But the viewer can gradually grasp it and eventually knows how to use it through step-by-step practice.

In both works, the theme of instruction emphasizes that the use of language is inseparable from the act of the viewer’s physical employment of the new words. In additional, the viewer’s employment is linked to the activities of pointing to what the new words actually mean, which is informed by the objects in the works: the writing principle in the textbook *New English Calligraphy*, and the inscribed panel in *Your Surname Please*. Here “pointing to” means “demonstration” in Wittgenstein’s second activity, rather than “indication,” and emphasizes the activities of repetition. In both works, the viewers use their “bodily languages,” in terms of writing and searching, which are involved with their employment of the words. These “bodily languages”
suggest that the use of language is related to the speaker’s habituated behavior and is associated with the context of pedagogy.

In both works, each English word is rendered according to Xu’s language principle. On the one hand, it resembles Chinese as Xu intended, but in the Chinese context, it is illegible. On the other hand, within the entire display of transliterated English words, the viewer should perceive observable similarities among them as a rule that functions in these English words, since their letters are all rendered in the same form, even though they might be illegible to the viewer. Behind the conceptual level of any individual word, the words together comprise a new order that is informed by the similarities of their letters in Wittgenstein’s sense of language game.

Erickson suggests that a socialist association is revealed, in the concept of art serving people, by the form of pedagogy in some of Xu’s works:

Rediscovering the value of serving the people provides an extra challenge, one that arguably bumps his work to an even higher level of sophistication. His art must satisfy the hypercritical art world elite before he can gain the platform of international exhibitions from which he is then able to reach the public. To serve the general public, he must create art that connects with that world in a meaningful way, drawing viewers in and fostering a desire to learn more about art or culture or the experiences of others. Language-based pieces such as Classroom Calligraphy and Landscript, and animal pieces (Net and Leash) have delighted and educated diverse audiences while they draw critical acclaim. Their immediacy and playfulness appeal to jaded as well as untried palates.136

The “immediacy and playfulness” Erickson finds here is related to the viewer’s desire—driven by the works—to explore and to learn other cultures. This interpretation is inclined toward the reception of the viewers. She furthermore regards this reception as a new discovery of the socialist value of art.

136 Erickson. 75.
Unlike Erickson, I relate the immediacy and playfulness in Xu’s works to the psychological state and parodic nature of his languages. My analysis of his pedagogy provides a different emphasis of this form that informs the simulation as a language-learning process. This interpretation of language in fact is related to parody. Rose points out that simulation often includes parody\(^{137}\) and explains the purpose of simulation as deception, rather than imitation. She discusses the idea of ironic simulation as a hoax:

The literary hoax is also more concerned to conceal its intentions than is the parody, and may be described as an ironic simulation of another work where there is an intention to deceive another into thinking that which they are reading is something other than what it is. (Y is intentionally made to look like X in order to trick the reader into thinking that they are reading X.)… The literary hoax may, however, also involve the imitation of another’s work, when Y is being made to look like X, in a way which is similar to the imitation made of work X in a parody prior to its unexpected and comic transformation into something else, and may even conceal some parody proper within itself.\(^{138}\)

In this sense simulation can be read as hoax, a parodic strategy that deceives the viewer about the heuristic function of the parody. Reading the concept of situations in this way helps us explore the role of parody in the form of Xu’s works. This argues against the socialist influence upon the form in Xu’s works.

**The Purpose of Parodic Play**

Today Xu Bing is hailed as one of the most important contemporary Chinese artists because his thematic works on language raise critical issues of aesthetics and practice in the relationship between language and art. Xu’s use of language in art

\(^{137}\) Rose. 49.

\(^{138}\) Ibid. 70.
throughout his oeuvre (1986–2004) appears in various media and formats, with specific purposes. He has applied language to two- and three-dimensional forms, including Chinese ink scrolls, books, low-reliefs, window glass, and room-size installations. In addition, he has incorporated written characters on living animals and worked painstakingly on Chinese pigs in Beijing and Anglo goats in England as culturally specific works. Furthermore, he has created characters using silkworms and dust—languages with a transient character. Xu Bing has continually explored the aesthetic of written characters and examined artistic articulation with the practices of putting two-dimensional letters on three-dimensional formats. Some critics and historians, as I will show, relate his works to his experience of specific social and politic events in China. But they do not use parody to interpret this relationship; I argue that this relationship leads us to understand what it is that Xu’s works parody.

Xu Bing came to the United States in 1991 as a visiting scholar. He has made New York his work place and home since 1993. Meanwhile, when China normalized political and economic relations imposed after the 1989 Tiananmen incident, Xu showed his work in a commercial gallery in Beijing. Information concerning the exhibition was circulated within just one group of people, however, and the show was by invitation only. During this time, several commercial galleries opened in Beijing, and contemporary Chinese art began to flourish. Since 1993, the artist has traveled between China and the United States, and his works have been shown in exhibitions related to contemporary Chinese art

Xu’s first solo exhibition, Three Installations by Xu Bing, was held at the Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin-Madison, from November 20, 1991, to January 19, 1992. In this exhibition, the visual features of Xu’s works were identified with traditional Chinese culture, a classification which ignored the fact that during his production of the works, the trend in Chinese cultural circles was to dismiss
tradition. In this context, Xu’s works were misidentified because of the immediate and direct reference of Xu’s visual features to a cultural context associated with the past.

During this period, the ideological understanding of “communist China” in the context of the Cold War may not have faded completely in America, and the connection to Cold War ideology may have been associated with the Tiananmen incident. This ideology saw “China” and “Communist China” as one, which may have engendered a “blind spot.” This led American viewers to miss the positive elements of the “Communist” value of printmaking and to turn to impose the negative elements on Xu’s works and thus to look even further back to the older China, adapting ancient China’s Confucian and historical symbols. In my view, however, Xu Bing is not really looking back to an older China or dismissing “Communist China,” but is instead standing in the present and facing the reality of China today.

In his first solo exhibition, Xu displayed three works which he had made in China: *Book from the Sky*, *Five Series of Repetitions* (1985–1986) (illus. C.18), and *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* (1990–1991) (illus. C.19). The exhibition was curated by Russell Panczenko, the director of the museum, and Erickson wrote a catalogue essay. In addition to Xu’s use of language in *Book from the Sky*, the other two works also explicitly revealed Xu’s understanding of printmaking. For instance, *Ghosts Pounding the Wall* assembled three sections of rubbing papers in sequence to form a visual trace of the Great Wall. One section representing the walkway of the Great Wall was displayed in the center of the installation. The other sections, representing two sides of a tower, were hung on the side of the exhibition space. For the production of this work, in 1990, the artist, together with his students and hired peasants, rubbed a full-size portion of the walkway on top of the wall and two sides of a tower. In *Ghosts Pounding the Wall*, he employed a traditional Chinese method of gravestone rubbing used exclusively to reproduce historical images and exemplary writings in stones.
By showing these three installations, the exhibition created an explicit atmosphere of Chinese cultural symbols including printmaking, manuscripts, and the image of the Great Wall. Viewers then naturally associated the meaning or signification of Xu’s works with the meanings of these Chinese symbols. The viewers’ misidentification was enhanced at least by at least three contexts: (1) the catalogue essay, (2) their unfamiliarity with Xu’s works, and (3) the presumption of Xu’s relation to the Tiananmen incident. In other words, the meaning of Xu’s works was involved in a large external context that was defined by the time and location (in a broader sense, the context) as the viewer perceived the works.

First, the essay author states that “the effectiveness of A Book from the Sky is due to its visual impact, its fineness of execution, and, most of all, its reliance on traditional forms to express profound contemporary ideas.”\textsuperscript{139} The author emphasizes the formal quality of the work but ignores the relationship between the viewer and the work—the viewer’s confrontation of the vagueness in X’s works. As I argued earlier, the point of Xu’s Book from the Sky is not its formal quality per se, but the effect of the formal quality that prompts the viewer to discover the meaning of the work. The viewer who lacks any knowledge of Chinese may still understand and feel compelled to identify the vague features of Xu’s works if he or she is informed by captions or inscriptions about the particular nature of Xu’s work in the exhibition. However, in the context of this display, these important links were not given. The viewer still feels, however, a desire to clarify the objects that he or she sees upon immediate viewing.

The viewer’s misidentification inevitably occurs, prompted by the powerful visual quality of the work and his or her own understanding of China’s culture, history, and so on. When discussing the concept of the viewer of Xu’s Book, the author of the

essay allows only two possibilities: the viewer knows Chinese, or the viewer does not know Chinese:

The viewer who does not read Chinese is free to absorb the work’s beauty without having to confront its unintelligibility. The frustration experienced by the Chinese audience can be appreciated, however, by turning to the small portion of the installation comprising a book of works made up from jumbled letters from the Roman alphabet—the letters are real, but the words are not.\(^{140}\)

The author’s interpretation of Xu’s works in relation to the concept of the viewer is totally problematic. First, the viewer in Xu’s works is not “free” at all, but “gets” arrested by his or her desire for clarification. Second, Xu’s use of the Roman alphabet does not aim to create “frustration experienced by the Chinese audience.” The illegibility is due not to the individual character itself, but rather to its relationship to other characters in the works. Furthermore, I argue that the meaning of the illegibility in Xu’s work is an overwhelming phenomenon created by the vague features of the works in total surrounding the viewer, rather than a small and detailed portion of the English letters within this phenomenon.

Second, this exhibition was Xu’s first solo exhibition in America; his name and works were not very familiar to the general viewer, however well-known he was in China at that time. When exhibited in a new context, then, Xu’s works required a process of articulation and reconstruction of their meaning. This new meaning of his works is defined by the “American” viewer’s in situ activity of perceiving them in his exhibitions.

Third, this exhibition was held in November 1991, roughly a year after the Tiananmen incident in China, when the American government suspended its official relationship with China. In other words, this exhibition was on display for the

\(^{140}\) Ibid. 12.
American viewer who was probably informed through the mass media or other mass channels about the “after-effect” of the Tiananmen incident. This awareness of the “after-effect” was amplified by Xu’s current status as an honorary fellow at the university where the exhibition was held, a position he accepted after his Book from the Sky was mistakenly characterized as a conceptual reference to the incident. Many people may have assumed he made this move to “escape” from the post-Tiananmen political climate in China.

In the catalogue essay, Erickson describes Xu’s works as corresponding to political developments in China in the 1980s, thereby dismissing his works in the context of culture and art. The author ignores the significance of printmaking in the context of the deconstruction of Marxist values in the 1980s—since printmaking was the art form most closely associated with Marxist art, we cannot ignore this fact when looking at Xu’s output during this period. Xu was deeply involved with Marxist art during the Cultural Revolution. His Five Series of Repetitions in the exhibition represents his memories and impressions of life in suburban China. Erickson notices this inspiration: “In Five Series of Repetitions, Xu depicted subjects reminiscent of his youth on the farms of Hebei. Despite his being sent there during the Cultural Revolution to labor in the fields, Xu thought of the countryside fondly and depicted ponds of tadpoles and fields of vegetables and grains in his prints.” However, Erickson does not mention the vital fact that Xu started to work on printmaking during this period. Thus, the particular and specific meaning of Xu’s printmaking in a socialist context was ignored here.

Therefore, we can understand why Xu’s works would be misidentified, and this misidentification in fact reveals both the nature and the meaning of his works as

141 Ibid. 4.
defined in the context of an exhibition. Due to the nature of his language (floating signifiers and free association), Xu’s work can easily be misidentified conceptually as an icon of Chinese traditional culture in the sense that it resembles calligraphy, Chinese ideograms, and printmaking. The context of the display at this university brings forth a new context for clarifying the meaning of Xu’s works—new because it is located in America, rather than in China, and was the first display of his works. In other words, when he displays his works in America, they are defined by a new context. The misidentification in this exhibition misses the critical role of the chosen display site, the viewer’s cultural identity and social background, and emphasizes the purely formal quality of his works instead. This misidentification might account for the political deficit between the meaning of the display and the meaning of Xu’s works as it has been seen by many critics.

From my analysis of Xu’s works as a parodic play of language, we can find a “political” function in his works. As I argued, parody is a double-voiced device that includes both a subversive or heuristic and a therapeutic function.

Cultural Amalgamation and Kinship in Xu’s Parodic Play of Language

Xu’s languages cannot clearly reflect reality since their nature is associated with vagueness. Vagueness does not refer us to a transparent window upon the world, outside the window there being the “reality” of the world. However, if vagueness does not connect the viewer of Xu’s works with reality, what can Xu’s language represent? My view is that Xu’s language requires the notion of *immediacy*, that is, the correlation of the forms of language with something in the world.

In 1977, the Chinese president proclaimed that socialist China was now in the “primary stage of socialism,” the moment of socialist modernization. In 1987, when Xu began work on Book for the Sky, China struggled between adopting a capitalist
system of economics and cultural values and resisting a democratic system of politics. China had made rapid progress toward modernization and an open economic system. Since 1978, after the Cultural Revolution, China had embraced Western modernization and accordingly adjusted its orthodox notion of socialism. For instance, Coca Cola made an agreement with the Chinese government to open a factory in Shanghai. Eight years later, in early 1986, China joined the Asian Development Bank. A few months later, the Shanghai stock market, which had been closed since 1949, reopened. Individuals could invest in stocks, with certain restrictions.

China’s economic and technological transformation also prompted a transformation in the arena of politics. In late 1986, student demonstrations for political freedom occurred in several cities in China. In Beijing, students even demonstrated for the end of authoritarianism. Soon after, the Chinese government banned demonstrations and identified them as part of bourgeois liberalization. In 1987, a demonstration in favor of Tibetan independence was held in Lhasa, Tibet, resulting in numerous casualties.

These conflicts might be seen as a prelude to the 1989 Tiananmen incident, which resulted from the government’s suppression of student protest in Tiananmen Square, a central government area. After the incident, the government’s diplomatic relations with several countries were suspended and economic sanctions were put in place. Censorship and socialist propaganda were pervasive throughout the country.

In Xu’s Book from the Sky, the viewer’s activity seems bound up with the indeterminacy of the works that are associated with China’s move toward Westernization. Consequently, during the process of clarification, the viewer finds him- or herself emerging from the effect (significatory vagueness) of the signifier (the vague features of his characters), and is connected with the reality of the activities in the non-linguistic domain. This activity is significant since the viewer here usually
“uses” language for him- or herself, but the correlation to the non-linguistic domain brings the use of language into the reality of the world. The viewer’s use of language signifies the meaning of language. The rule of this language can be changed according to different viewers and how they use language. Therefore, the viewer’s use of language brings the form of “life” to language, which can be understood in the context of its ordinary uses in the reality of the world, but not necessary through logical elements. This describes exactly how Wittgenstein’s language game offers an alternative view for us to understand language; that is, he links the use of language to its context within the speaker’s ordinary life.

When Xu created Book from the Sky in China in 1987, his viewers were supposedly familiar with Chinese context. At the time, the Chinese embraced socialist modernization and a pervasive and popular consumer culture. This was such a powerful cultural phenomenon that many artists started to actively criticize what they saw as an excessive degree of Westernization. This artistic rejection of Westernization is known as the 85 Movement. Gao Minglu, one of the leading critics of the time, writes about the trend of the art movement:

The “85 Movement” aims to recount the Western influences resulting from the liberation, to reconsider the traditions, and to examine the achievement of the previous art movement. It claims to facilitate the modernization of Chinese art. This movement demonstrates the typical characteristics of a cultural movement that are: a hard battle between two cultures at a theoretical level and the complete dominance of one against the other cultures at a practical level…. In the “85 Movement,” practically within a year, foreign culture dominated the mainstream cultural community completely. Lots of Western modern art (including partially post-modern art) came to China and affected Chinese artists.142

It is interesting and important that the 85 Movement also expressed rejection of Chinese traditions. Some critics and historians writing on Xu regard the literal meaning of the title of his work as expressing a negative attitude toward what China was dealing with. Book from the Sky was originally entitled An Analyzed Reflection of the World—The Final Volume of the Century (Xi shi jian—shiji mo juan). The original title implies that the “book” in the title of the work serves as a significant reflection for historical lessons. In an interview, Xu Bing explains that the initial inspiration for this work came from historical lessons:

Actually this is associated with the strongly growing interest in traditional Chinese culture at that time. People had been hungry spiritually for a long time since the Cultural Revolution. Therefore, the desire for knowledge was exceptionally strong. Besides fulfilling this desire by reading all kinds of books, I also attended various discussion groups which were interested in cultural issues. However, I found myself less and less satisfied and even felt annoyed about attending such talks. It is like the situation where one would feel disoriented when eating lots of food right after a long period of starvation.

In my view, the idea of making a book to challenge this kind of uncomfortable feeling started to grow gradually. I was determined to create a delicate but fake book that would look like a fine book. In order to achieve this goal, I needed to take the creation of this book seriously and professionally. The ambiguous line between real and fake was the trigger for the powerful potential of this work. This book could not merely display random text. It needed a strong logic; however, the logic should be ridiculous and not make sense to its readers. This is a book that looks professionally designed, but contains the great surprise of not being legible.

Most critics and historians regard Xu’s concept of language to be directly associated with the 85 Movement. Britta Erickson has suggested that Xu’s selection of the title of Book from the Sky provokes cultural implications to express Chinese

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143 Xu Bing explained the title of Tianshu in various versions at his public lecture in Princeton University in 2003.
144 Yang.
cultural turmoil resulting from the 85 Movement. She interprets this inspiration as the artist’s pessimistic attitude toward Chinese culture:

Bound up in these titles is a sense of general pessimism regarding Chinese culture coming to a cataclysmic head as the end of the century—or of the world—approached. The installation seemed to suggest that the weight of millennia of Chinese culture oppressed those living at the end of the twentieth century who were searching desperately for answers but finding few.\footnote{Erickson. Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words. 38–39.}

However, her view seems to undermine the impact of another important cultural phenomenon at the time driven by a prevailing cultural slogan—“Pace across 21st century”—that expressed a positive attitude toward a hopeful future. I argue that the influence of the 85 Movement may be less than it appears; by the time Xu began work on \textit{Book from the Sky} in 1987, the movement had been over for two years. However, the popular cultural slogan “Pace across 21st century,” initiated by a humanities and social sciences publication series, emerged and remained dominant for intellectuals and artists, including Xu. The slogan was inspired by philosophical thoughts, and a well-known magazine carried the same title.

In my view, the title is positive because it expresses a creative dynamic generated by political and economic struggles around 1987. The artist may have unconsciously created \textit{Book from the Sky} to respond to the cultural phenomenon triggered by the new slogan, striking because it indicated that Chinese intellectuals could not wait to embrace the next century—even though it was still the mid-1980s.

Xu Bing was a college teacher in 1987 and certainly must have noticed the impact of this slogan and been aware of the philosophical implications behind it. There is evidence of Xu’s involvement with artistic events directly associated with this slogan. Wu Pulin organized an event called \textit{Big Earthquake} in 1988 dedicated to this
slogan. This event consisted of art work, dramas, rock ‘n’ roll, and other types of art. Xu’s “language,” created for Book from the Sky, appeared in his performance. Thus, Final Volume of the Century, the original title of the work, can be understood as the reflection of mid 1980s cultural enthusiasm for the coming of the 21st century and interpreted as an optimistic expression of Xu Bing’s activist take on the cultural heritage implied by language. The interpretation of Xu Bing’s title selections in this context doesn’t imply “a sense of general pessimism,” as Erickson interprets it, but rather a sense of optimism for the future. As a young artist inspired by this cultural spirit of the time, he would have intended to express a radical view on the traditional foundation of Chinese culture with Book from the Sky by creating his own language.

From 1986 to 1997, there were many student demonstrations for political development and demonstrations for Tibet’s independence. I suggest that this might be related to the implications of the title of the work, which reveals China’s struggle as well as hope for its future.

Xu’s language may be interpreted as a kind of perception or even political illusion; his language creates a false illusion of language’s true meaning in the viewer’s mind. This occurs as the viewer first encounters a new language (Xu’s language), which is similar to one (Chinese) he or she already knows. From the point of view of a Marxist notion of art, Xu’s use of language might correspond to Marxist views on language as ideology. This first experience reveals the fact that language is “the immediate actuality of thought.”146 In this sense, Xu’s language calls for the viewer’s thought in his or her mind (stemming from the Chinese language) to be connected with the world (what Xu’s language means or stands for). But, this is not what happens in Xu’s works when we follow Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein urges us to

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consider that the linkage of the structure of language to the structure of mind is
derived not from a cognitive state, but rather from a psychological one. Language is
not attached to the logical space that involves a determined and clear situation. Instead,
language exists in a psychological state which is associated not with sensational and
physical data (i.e. vision, lighting, and so forth), but with psychological concepts, such
as “expecting,” “interpreting,” “intending,” “imagining,” and “remembering.”147 Now,
language is evidently situated in these concepts and constructs the world through the
vehicle of these concepts. These concepts are discovered through experiences rather
than fixed by conventions. We learn them from doing them and teach them to
someone who has not experienced them. They are cues for being in the present and
registering references to established correlations.148

My view is that this correlation informs us that the signification of Xu’s works
lies in the unpredictable, immediate quality (or contingency) at the heart of the
viewer’s activity of perceiving them. This quality is slightly different from the
unpredictable, moment quality (or enlightenment). Different viewers may have various
ways of perceiving the works in which their meanings are partially constructed by
what the works mean to them. This construction is dependent upon a viewer’s in situ
experiences in the activity and his or her present encounter with the work. In this sense,
the concept of the viewer in Xu’s works emphasizes the plurality of possible responses.
The outcomes of the viewers’ activities vary according to each person’s familiarity
with Chinese characters, his or her thoughts about the objects in Xu’s works, and his
or her desire for clarification.

147 Hilmy. 46.
148 In Wittgenstein’s observation, they can be seen as symptoms. The introduction of symptoms as
remarkable validation bridges the habitual uses of language and psychological facts upon which the
habit is.
Thus, in Xu’s works, the concept of the viewer is related less to his or her intellect or to his or her facility with Chinese, which would reduce the viewer according to a relative standard—Chinese viewer/non-Chinese viewer. I think this reduction overemphasizes the importance of the viewer’s ability to understand Xu’s characters. Rather, I argue that the viewer is the collective of his or her class, ethnicity, gender, and age. This concept considers more strongly a collection of factors which includes the viewer’s knowledge of and impression of the Chinese language and the cultural symbols that inform Xu’s works. It also includes the viewer’s body language as it is directed by Xu’s works and the notion of what the exhibition means as it is informed by a given situation. To a certain extent, Xu’s works are not simply about seeing, but are about reading, doing, and participating.

This collective viewing is shown in the forms of some of Xu’s works, for example, in the classroom situation. The display of the work is organized into a row of tables and desks and other elements by which the work is created for a collective viewer to physically participate in. This particularity strongly suggests the visual and conceptual meaning of the collective nature of his works, even if the viewer does not participate in the work. Xu wants the viewer to “learn” his work in a group. This example illustrates Xu’s works as a collective experience in a particular classroom situation that is displayed in a collective format and expresses the concept of pedagogy.

The form of his installations and the pictorial composition of his characters also combine to emphasize the pedagogical function of art. Having been trained in the socialist techniques of printmaking during the Cultural Revolution, Xu was certainly familiar with the notion of art serving the people. In the art works mentioned above, the artist created his installations as classroom environments in which the viewer can learn his characters. Xu Bing talks about his notion of art in relation to the people:
[Chinese] artists may all feel a sense of responsibility. Definitely, you can see it in the work. But if you are asking if I feel my work is one to reform or change society, then I do not think so. As least not directly. I feel I am finding a way to take what is valuable in Chinese culture and bring those things into contemporary society. I think the real meaning of what I do is that aspect of my work....Of course when I am working I consider how it will be received by society and how the work may impact society, whether or not it will have any meaning or benefit to society. I consider whether or not it will be meaningful or beneficial to people. I hope my work will reach the broadest spectrum of people possible, everybody from the art expert to the average person. I do not feel my work has a limited audience at all. I think that if people have any feeling at all they can appreciate my work.149

It is clear from Xu Bing’s statement that he thought the value of art to lie in its social significance. This socialist notion of art reflects the importance of pedagogy explicit in the practice of art, in terms of how his works communicate with the spectator. However, Xu’s languages expand the notion of the masses to a broader context which takes into account the viewer’s class, ethnicity, gender, and age, rather than the orthodoxical notion of peasant masses—the foundation of a socialist society.

His pedagogy is concerned with the notion that each viewer is different and that each will have a different viewing of the work and reach a unique interpretation of its meaning. It is vital to note here that each interpretation is important. Previously, I mentioned that some viewers of The English Calligraphy were prompted to write letters to the artist. It is significant that these viewers were Japanese. Because of the language and cultural similarities between Chinese and Japanese, feelings of kinship and the desire to communicate were engendered. Others from a different culture may have experienced alienation or other feelings.

If Xu’s works reveal this wide possibility of interpretation, how does this inform the meaning of the works? My view is that his works have no ONE determined

meaning; they serve as “interfaces” of multiple significations that cannot be reduced to a single answer but that indicate the irreducible plural standpoint of the viewers’ identities in meeting the use of Xu’s language. These interfaces represent the reality of how their identities are measured by their knowledge and impressions of the Chinese language, as well as other factors. In understanding Xu’s use of language in this way, we can conceive of the language game in Xu’s works as an “articulation” in which the meaning of the work is flexible and dynamic.

Ernesto Laclau explained the Wittgenstein language game by this “articulation”:

If not Wittgenstein every instance of a rule’s use modifies the rule as such, it cannot be said that a rule is being applied [in the sense of communal repetition], but that it is being constantly constructed and reconstructed, between an abstract rule and the instance of its use in a particular context, it is not a relationship of application that occurs, but a relationship of articulation. And accordingly, if the different instances of an articulated structure have merely differential identities, it can only mean that in the two separate instances that the rule is in fact a different one, in spite of its “family resemblance.”

Both the vague features of Xu’s characters and the significatory vagueness of what his works mean create all possibilities for understanding his use of language upon actual viewing. Each viewer’s “new meaning” may be different and provides a different articulation of the clarification of vagueness. Thus, the viewer’s process of clarification in Xu’s works is not determined by literacy or by facility with the Chinese language. Rather, the meaning of an artwork must be “constantly constructed and reconstructed, between an abstract rule and the instance of its use in a particular context.” Thus, Xu’s works subvert the internal and closed definition of linguistic rules and require an external and open one.

It is within this framework that we can understand the meaning of the display of Xu’s works or Xu’s exhibitions. If the meaning of his works occurs in a space that suggests the relationship between the internal (linguistic) and the external (non-linguistic), and the closed (the concept of Xu’s objects) and the open (the viewer’s activity of perceiving Xu’s works), the signification of Xu’s works requires that the works be grounded in a defined context, otherwise we would have “an infinite dispersion within which no signification would be possible,” in Laclau’s analysis of language. This defined context is the means by which the display or exhibition space of Xu’s works represents the meaning of the works. In the context of the display or exhibition, a full clarification of what the works mean seems possible only through the “representation” of the work.

Representation, as I understand it, consists of at least three related items—sign, image, and object. We can define the verbal sign “bird” in standard lexical ways as “a creature covered with feathers…,” and for Xu Bing, this provides an interesting opportunity to explore the interplay of image and textual meaning. In his works, each character resembles a normal character, yet reads differently from a normal character with a specific meaning. He tries to capture the ambiguity of vision in transferring the meaning of a sign from the domain of the textual to the perceptual. In other words, in one particular sign, what we can see as its meaning does not necessary match what we read as its meaning. The artist creates an interplay of visibility and legibility in the spectator’s process of seeing and reading his works. Therefore, this inevitably brings forth a misidentified representation, for the works do not correspond to what the objects of the works signify.

For instance, when we perceive Book from the Sky, we try to interpret its meaning as something necessarily associated with printmaking. In this instance, we misidentify the association between the objects of the work and the signification of the
work. Xu Bing’s works represent the pictorial characteristics of Chinese characters and bring into the configuration a figurative (visual) unity, composed of books and wall posters, which expresses almost the sense of abstraction. Here his invention of characters is meant to display visual vagueness in an unfixed reference provoked by the vague figuration of characters. The inevitable misidentification occurring in his works results from the fact that the desire for fuller clarification is always so present, yet unachievable. Clarification can exist only in the context of articulation of the particular meanings that temporarily incarnate in the viewer’s activity of perceiving the works.

A full clarification of the works’ meanings is unreachable through their representation; however, this clarification is present in the form of the collective viewing and interpretation when we look at them. Xu creates his language-based works to be seen or used by a group of people in a display space, as if the group formed a cultural community. In learning Xu’s language, the activity of the viewer is “defined” as the use of language in this particular community. Language represents the viewer’s cultural kinship to a new amalgamated culture. This cultural view redefines the artist’s identity in the context of cultural politics as China becomes globalized and, at the same time, its citizens become globalized as well. As Xu’s works reveal, this identity is an amalgamation consisting of socialist and capitalist values and, more important, is therapeutic. It is therapeutic because the globalist culture may bring a better life to Chinese citizens; however, it is ironic that they continue to struggle with their socialist traditions.
CHAPTER THREE: MOCK SOCIALIST EPIC OF THE TRUE MACHINE IN ZHANG PEILI’S VIDEO INSTALLATIONS

The previous chapter dealt with Xu Bing’s use of parody, which features the decomposition of the Chinese and English languages and, as well as, the psychological response of the viewer to Xu’s works. It is interesting to explore whether parody is shown in this individual and subtle way in the works of other artists who, like Xu, had previously been associated with the socialist values of art during the Cultural Revolution and who were confronted with Western stylistic influences during the 1980s. In this chapter, I will examine the parodic quotation of national TV news footage in Zhang Peili’s video installations. We will see that the heuristic function of his parody targets the TV news broadcast, a forum conventionally associated with a scripted model speaking on behalf of the government to the Chinese public. Since such broadcasts represent Chinese government policies, they are identical to “the truth-machine.” In his videos, Zhang places footage conventionally and politically associated with news broadcasts into unconventional contexts. His parody reveals how authority is reformulated through the broadcaster’s act and the content of her/his utterances and how mass media strengthens the audience’s perception of the broadcaster’s authority.

Zhang’s parodic quotation of broadcast news footage also creates an incongruous experience for the viewer—one in which he or she perceives both the broadcaster’s historical, conventional identity and his or her contemporary identity. With the proliferation of mass media during the 1990s, historical, conventional identities no longer held, becoming confused with other identities. Zhang’s quotation evokes the practice of broadcasters reporting significant events and thus aims to highlight the transformation of the TV news broadcast into a new form of authority. Thus, we shall see that the parody in Zhang’s video works, unlike that of Xu Bing’s
installations, has collective, iconographic, and ideological features. Parody here both reveals an artistic attraction to cultural and political reality and serves as a cultural weapon. Parody in Zhang’s works, as I will argue, is related to anti-heroism in the context of mass media.

However, Zhang’s use of anti-heroism does not merely question the cultural and political reality of TV news but also shows the playful effect of incongruity. This playful effect, as I will argue, is not merely comic or humorous but, more important, is heuristic in its representation of the scripted power of mass media. This representation results from the narration of specific political events and the technological development of the television broadcast system in China, particularly during the period when China confronted globalization, after 1992. These political events include the Tiananmen incident in 1989, the reunion of Hong Kong and mainland China in 1997, and China’s response to global fears of millennium-related instability at the turn of 2000. The rapid development of satellite technology has changed the nature of the national TV news broadcast because real-time interfaces appearing in news broadcasts make reporters seem unscripted. Zhang’s parodic play of the broadcast aims to question the nature of truth-telling in TV news as well as the notion of heroism imposed by political authority.

However, I will demonstrate that Zhang’s use of parody reveals his artistic intentions as well. Through his exploration of the ideological nature of mass media, Zhang captures the technique, capacity, and presentation of the video image, the central components of video art that have greatly influenced the audience’s reception to the meaning of the video image. The artist reminds viewers of the impact of TV news in mass media as they view footage in his video works similar to that of the reporting of real events. In this sense, his videos create a new identity for a
broadcast—rather than the mere duplication of footage—constructed of components related to the specific characteristics of the video medium.

**Television Footage of CCTV**

*Water Standard Version from the Dictionary Ci Hai, by Zhang Peili* (1992) (illus. C.20) is a single-track color video installation approximately ten minutes long. It features a female figure sitting at a TV broadcast desk against a blue background, holding a book/dictionary. She wears a yellow formal suit, a meticulous hairdo, and makeup. From behind her microphone, she reads the lexicon definition of the word “water” in Chinese.

The entire video is taped in a straightforward manner: the figure is captured by camcorder from one angle, without any cutting or special effects, giving the appearance of the still image of a narrative. We see, framed in a TV monitor, a middle view of the top half of her body above the desk that she sits behind. Because she wears a suit, she appears masculine rather than feminine; her attire adds a crisp, business-like style to her image. In addition, she appears calm and comfortable in front of the camcorder—a point which might be interesting to explore. (By 1992, the camcorder was regarded as a tool for mass media professionals and could be purchased in an electronics shop. But because camcorders were expensive, not many people could afford them. Thus, even though camcorders were widely seen, they were not accessible to the public.) The woman’s facial expression and body language appear sober and “professional.” She seems sincere and serious. She is comfortable delivering her definition in a broadcast setting, in front of a camcorder. This “professional” expression is unique to TV news readers.

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151 The number of camcorders owned per household has been considered an index of modernization in terms of telecommunications.
The TV monitor shows the female performer holding what is supposedly a dictionary and reading a definition from it. However, for the duration of the video, she does not look at the dictionary or even turn a page. She looks at the audience as if she is speaking to us. She seems to read the definition of the word based on her memories or from a teleprompter. The particular page she has turned to is clearly not the correct page for “water,” which is found near the end of the Chinese dictionary, rather than at the beginning, which is shown on the monitor. Thus she reveals that the dictionary is not the actual source of her utterance—the whole thing seems scripted, as if she would inevitably give us that definition. Her mouth is almost in the center of the screen. It is also diagonally linked to the top left corner of the monitor and to the microphone at the bottom right of the monitor. This visual effect enhances the movement of her mouth and keeps the audience’s attention on her utterances.

The scene that Zhang carefully creates in this work is clearly not actual footage of a TV news program in which a reporter reads the definition of “water.” Her lexical utterance conveys the idea of the physical element of water, the collective sense of water (that is, a river), water as one of the five elements in ancient Chinese philosophy, the Chinese last name, and so on. I suggest that the selection of the word “water” is important here, for she could not read any other word and make the viewer feel the same way. It is a simple, elemental word—it is a particularly “pure” word with no other connotations, so the focus is on the performance itself. Through the utterance of the word “water,” with its suggestion of purity and simplicity, we are made to focus on how she reads it. Thus, the selection of this particular word, “water,” might be understood as the artist’s intention to show the tension between what the figure reads and how she performs, because “water” itself evokes a sense of transparency and fluidity. The artist thus highlights the linguistic meaning of the word itself and its simple, pure connotations for the audience.
Water has also appeared in the works of several other Chinese video artists. Unlike Zhang’s work, the video works of Wong Fen (b. 1965) and Chen Wenbo (b. 1969) address the notion of water in a metaphorical way. In his Water-Now-Water (1997), Wong uses the sounds of water to express the flow of traffic. In Water (1996), Chen documents the process of pouring water among various containers of various sizes and shapes. At the end of the process, the water becomes darker and is of greater volume than it was originally.

However, in Zhang’s work, since the word “water” is taken from a dictionary, the news reader determines the authenticity of this standard use of the word and also offers a standard norm for understanding it. By reading the word’s definition from a dictionary, she offers an “instructive definition” of water. A dictionary contains fixed definitions. It is a legitimate source for definition: no one seems to question the contents of a dictionary. When we hear this definition, we do not question its legitimacy. This suggests the situation of the TV news reader in traditional China, and in this sense the news reader also appears to be a kind of “truth machine”; she does not have to think about what she is reading or question its source.

The title of the work—Water Standard Version from the Dictionary Ci Hai—implies the “standard” nature of the news reader because what she reads is a standard definition of the word in the authorized dictionary. She intends to provide her viewer with the model explanation of the word in the lexicon. At the same time, the title reflects the figure’s formal act in reading the word. Since she is giving us the “standard version” of the word, we accordingly see her in the standard way, too.

Because the news reader’s use of the word “water” is associated with its public, collective, and empirical usages, and her act is regarded as a standard, this work can be understood as a heuristic inquiry into what determines a standard view and how the news reader acts in reading and performing the TV news. She attempts to represent the
standard norm that conveys “the truth” (the constative utterance). The language itself leads the viewer to be aware of how the “standard norm” occurs and what the performer’s context is dependent on in relation to authority and the standard norm. The figure’s delivery of the word leads to our conscious recognition of the fact that her act must be understood in the context of the broadcast environment, rather than only through our hearing the definition itself. What this figure says is generally regarded by the public as the only “truth.” Thus, in the work, ”standard” in the title not only clearly reflects the reliable source of the character’s delivery, but also implies the model nature of the TV news person as bearer of the official line. In the work, the figure utters the “absolute truth” because she delivers the word based on a standard dictionary. She also acts “true” to her well-established professional identity and public media image.

The TV News Reader’s Standard Line and Instructive Force

In creating this work, the artist seems to have deliberately invoked the performer’s identity as a well-known Central China Television [CCTV] news broadcaster, Xing Zhibin. In other words, he tries to create an appropriation of TV news broadcast footage. In Water Standard Version from the Dictionary Ci Hai, the news reader’s performance and reading material are determined by the artist. In this performance, the news reader Xing Zhibin reads the word’s definition exactly as if she were reading a news story. I suggest that her formal delivery of the definition mimics the news reading style unique to actual CCTV news reports. CCTV news readers are specially trained in a broadcasting tone and pronunciation that has a stylistic association with Chinese opera. The CCTV news readers’ official way of speaking, thus, is associated with the older communist generation, although not necessarily by the younger generation of viewers. On Zhang’s monitor, the performer reads and acts
properly, accordingly to the context of the broadcast setting in her background and TV news tradition. First, she reads the word’s definition with this professional and formal expression, just as she always does on TV. Second, her body language and facial expressions convey her customary formal expression. In other words, she seems to be reading the news because she performs exactly as she does in her usual public broadcasting role.

In Zhang’s work, the news reader performs according to “the standard line” that characterizes the identity of a TV news reader. In addition to being seen on the TV monitor, “this standard line” also conveys her identity as a TV news reader. Xing Zhibin represents the socialist tradition per se: she became the most well-known TV news reader during the 1989 Tiananmen incident because she was the only one who represented the government view of the incident on every TV monitor. Her image is associated with the official voice, rather than with the new, fused voice of politics and economy. In her role as official news reader, she actually “instructed” the audience about what to think about the Tiananmen incident.

The performance of the customary news reader is linked to mimicry. Roger Caillois gives a remarkable discussion of mimicry in insects. He notes that “mimicry would thus be accurately defined as an incantation fixed at the culminating point and having caught the sorcerer in his own trap.”152 He continues to explain that “prestigious magic and fascination can be called the phenomena that have been unanimously classified precisely under the name of mimicry.”153 I apply the notion of mimicry to this performance to emphasize the effect of transfiguration and this performer’s guise of reading a dictionary definition in reaction to the flux and openness of consumerism. This guise can be seen as the fundamental function of

153 Ibid.
mimicry, as the performer’s self-protection. I would also characterize the technology (video) employed by the artist as a kind of magic that transfigures the performer.¹⁵⁴

TV news in China is the only nation-wide channel. The setting in this state medium has been precisely established and maintained: the news must be broadcast at seven o’clock in the evening on every TV monitor in China. Under such circumstances, this public channel has inevitably developed into a specific entity, with a specific identity for its viewers that also determines the role and the actions of the news reader. Thus, in Zhang’s work, even though the utterance of the female figure in the official setting does not actually belong to a news broadcast, the viewer’s association of the setting with a TV broadcast identifies her as a news reader rather than a normal figure. I suggest that in Zhang’s work, her identity can be seen as presenting a “machine of truth-telling” in the masses’ consciousness and day-to-day life.

In a historical context, the “body” of the female is seen in the context of propaganda and instruction for the masses, not only in television reporting, but also even earlier in propaganda posters of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). “I am Haiyan” or “Iron girl” (as she is commonly known) is one of most typical female types presented. (illus. C.21) Xiao Wuliao summarizes this role of the female: “A female is the product of propaganda. Whether for revolution or commodity, the female is always used as a model.”¹⁵⁵ Since the female is seen as a vanguard and model role for the socialist masses, her appearance is often, in a sense, gender-neutral, or even sometimes masculine, demonstrating her capacity for accomplishing the socialist mission. Her femininity is reflected primarily in the context of motherhood.

¹⁵⁴ I am also aware of Homi Bhabha’s notion of mimicry “stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal.” Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse”. October. (Spring 1984). 126.
In the case of both “Iron Girl” and the woman in the yellow suit, the figures’ facial gestures and body acts are scripted in a certain way to create the effect of instruction and seriousness about the political statements they are making. In propaganda images, artists must work within strict standards to represent scripted figures. In TV news broadcasts, news readers are scripted as well. Not until 1997 did the CCTV news broadcast become a live broadcast. Before then, TV news was pre-recorded and rehearsed according to a screenplay. In this respect, the representation of the TV news reader is associated with a ritual and scripted behavior as a kind of performative act.

The discussion of this as performative act emphasizes the “body” of the news reader rather than the contents of the TV news. We must be attentive to the specific convention and context which function to construct the representation of this kind of figure’s “body” in the mass media.

Therefore, I argue that in Zhang’s video, the female CCTV news reader embodies this propagandistic notion of the female. She wears a suit to appear professional, and she looks rather masculine. Unlike the earlier, poster representation of “Iron Girl,” this masculine mien now confirms her “official voice” as the authority in the masses’ mentality. Since her female gender is not obvious and she appears even robot-like, she becomes a machine of “truth-telling.” This reporter’s appearance, unlike that of the long-haired female in Hu’s work, is a representation of the socialist Chinese mentality. (Perhaps the artist is suggesting this by dressing her in a yellow suit, rather than in the official dark gray news readers’ attire. Chinese ethnicity is conventionally associated with yellow.) From the traditional icon of “Iron Girl” to this sole news reader, it is the female (although paradoxically looking “masculine”), who is chosen to convince us of the truth according to the official line of the “motherland.”
In Zhang’s video, the artist places this female news reader in a carefully conceived setting, including the background and microphone that frame the news reader’s identity on the monitor. The use of lighting in outlining the contour of the figure is reminiscent of that used in TV news. Both the figure’s utterance and action conform to the news broadcast context. Her mimicry is defined by the ideological construction of the news scenario—the standard line. This standard line is not merely a formal delivery of news, but is manipulated by the governmental legal norm informed by the CCTV news broadcast.

The CCTV news broadcast is a simultaneous broadcast that gives “one story” to all local TV stations in China to be broadcast each night at seven o’clock; in this way “one story” is broadcast to every single TV news monitor in China. For this video, Zhang meticulously places the TV news reader, Xing, in a TV news setting, and directs her to perform in a news reader’s formal style while reading the definition of a word. Thus the artist uses the video medium to extend the space of the performance; he is free to show this performance throughout the world on various occasions. He also composes her image on a particular television monitor in a style typical of a CCTV news broadcast. Here the representation of the performer gives the impression that she is actually reporting news in the present, simultaneously to the TV audience and to the viewer of the artist’s monitor. Thus, the artist implies her role as news reader, rather than as Xing Zhibin, a real person.

The performer on Zhang’s monitor is recognized as the “evening news reader” of CCTV news because of her frequent presence before a nation-wide evening news audience since the 1980s. Even at the time of this writing, she still reports for CCTV. By convention, TV news readers—especially CCTV news readers in China—are called “faces of the nation.” These news readers represent the national image politically. Selection criteria for CCTV news readers are accordingly restrictive: they
must have typical oriental facial features and a medium body size, use elegant and appropriate body language, and speak with a soft and clear Mandarin pronunciation. Most people recognize Xing Zhibin specifically as the CCTV news reader who broadcast the news of the Tiananmen incident in 1989. She had replaced two TV news readers who had failed to remain expressionless while reporting the Tiananmen fatalities; she read the news in a suitable bureaucratic tone and with appropriate official jargon. Three years later, in 1992 (when the work was made), when she appeared on Zhang’s video monitor, her identification as the expressionless, “official voice” could still be made throughout China.

It is clear that the standard line of TV news comes from Central China Television, which represents the governmental authorities’ voice and expresses news according to socialist values. CCTV news is actually controlled by China’s Publicity Department. TV news represents the absolute truth in socialist China. It has been associated with a political function and represents the governmental voice to the masses through one channel. Thus, in China, TV news is mainly produced by CCTV. Even today, local provinces are allowed to broadcast only local news, rather than national and international news, which remain a function of CCTV news. In China today, CCTV news has the largest audiences partly because of its historical role as provider of the only available official line. Government-controlled TV news today still celebrates the success of significant events. For example, billions of Chinese watched the process of the Olympic vote for China to host the Olympics in 2008. TV news is an overwhelming force in Chinese daily life in the sense of its ideological function. Before China’s television became westernized, there were no commercial

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156 Some of the masses might be suspicious about this truth. Yet, in general, CCTV news, politically and symbolically, remains synonymous with “truth-telling” in China.
157 According to the census of the TV survey conducted in 2001, TV news makes up 12.3 % of TV programs in China. The audience for this programming is the second largest among TV watchers, coming just after TV dramas.
activities allowed on television. Television had solely political purposes and served the Chinese Communist Party. TV news readers continue to serve this state medium and represent the statements of the nation through this institution.

Global TV News Footage

In Zhang’s *Water Standard Version*, the news reader’s utterance and action can be understood in terms of the concepts of a standard model and the artist’s appropriation of the heroic figure. In his works after 1997, Zhang continued to explore this relationship between CCTV news and the appropriation of the heroic figure.

Zhang’s later video works, in color and of varying lengths, are composed of pieces of TV news footage displayed on multiple monitors. In these works, he used multiple TV monitors, sometimes placed on the ground and sometimes placed on statues, to display TV news footage. Unlike in *Water*, he became concerned with the interrelationships among the images in the multiple monitors and the perceptual corresponsiveness between the audience and the images on the multiple monitors. Also unlike *Water*, these later works do not give the audience a straight format or a one-channel, single-image viewing mode. Thus, when the audience views the works in the exhibition space, they view the images occurring in sequence over a period of time; sometimes simultaneously and sometimes sequentially. In a video work in 2002, the artist features TV news footage on a large screen consisting of sixty-four small screens.

In *Water*, the news reader reads a definition; therefore the work offers a sense of narrative. But in the later works, the footage which shows news broadcasts’ opening greetings is simple and short, emphasizing the similarities and differences between the various pieces of footage, rather than the news story. Its presentation includes various interfaces for conveying information, giving the feeling of something busy and crowded. In these works, the frame of the TV monitors used in *Water* has a different
function. Because in the later works Zhang directly appropriates TV news footage, he presents a clear and obvious image of TV news to his audience. Furthermore, his use of a multiple-frame format imposes the notion of time and space on the audience’s perception of the pieces of footage accordingly. Since these selections of footage come from the global network (satellite telecommunications), the artist’s later works demonstrate that his concerns with TV news as a symbol of the official, standard line are valid not only on the domestic level, but also on the international level. In Let’s Watch Global TV, in 1997, he illuminates the reunion of Hong Kong and China in a way that suggests the new information flow. In Good Evening, in 2000 and 2002, the artist reveals the idea of information overload in the international TV news arena. Unlike Water, the later works use multiple monitors on which TV news fades in and out, forming a sequential relationship among the monitors. As in Water, here the artist explores TV news in several video works; however, he appropriates TV news footage rather than working with a live news reader.

Zhang’s presentation of the footage expresses a sense of multiplicity. Liu Yi, a video artist who is also interested in the TV monitor and TV’s impact upon the individual, uses another strategy to express the notion of multiplicity. In his 1997 work, Coexistence (illus. C.22), he shows a frame placed inside a larger frame (TV monitor). The content of the TV program in each little frame has no particular relationship to that of the larger monitor. While the program in the smaller frame shows the negative of the image of a family’s life, the larger frame continuously switches among TV programs randomly.

Zhang’s appropriation of this footage is associated with technology. For this later series of works, he copied his footage from TV to tapes and used a computer to edit the material for length without altering it further. Computer technology allowed him to cut each piece of footage to the exact length he wanted; this represents a
dramatic technological change from the creation of Water, for which he used simple
equipment. For the later work, he also used sensors to synchronize the pieces of
footage so that they would appear simultaneously on the monitors. In addition, he
began to incorporate special effects such as speeding and fade-in and -out. By using
sensors and employing multiple monitors, he created a visual tension and the feeling
of vertigo in these works. In a larger context, his interest in satellite communication is
aligned with the Western video tradition. For instance, Nam June Paik’s Good
Morning, Mr. Orwell (1983) deals with the mass media’s impact on real-time and
interactive art as the audience experiences an event. But Zhang’s video works are also
related to the political function of TV news in the world of satellite TV and
information networks.

A Fixed Standard in a Vertiginous World of Mass Media

Once we understand the iconographic significance of the figures in Zhang’s
videos and the socialist heroism they represent, we become even more curious and
confused about the mis-fit or misplacement of the news readers in relation to both the
utterance of the lexical reading in Water and to the global flow of TV news in his later
works.

In Zhang’s “broadcast,” Xing Zhibin reads a lexical definition, rather than a
news story. When the viewer watches her image in a single-track format, he will
readily acknowledge the fact that she is reading a dictionary definition and not the
news. But her standard line is confirmed because of her “standard” identity and the
context of reading from a dictionary. Thus, we become even more interested in
exploring the power and authority of this heroism present in the lexical reading, as
opposed to a news reading. In the video, the news reader acts as a public figure who
has come to represent “the standard line” of TV news. She sounds serious and acts
serious as well. This highlights the context in which the audience perceives her performance as a TV news reader. Her performance has been interpreted by other critics as irony or parody, a kind of black humor. Since she is actually reading the definition, her credibility is absurd in a sense. Nicholas José notes the impact of having TV news shown in people’s homes:

Zhang Peili’s *Anchor* (a nice conversion into English) updates the totalitarian construction of the world with images of the China Central Television news reader who brought the good news of the ‘peaceful suppression of counter revolutionary turmoil’ in Tiananmen Square in 1989—again a context-dependent image that elicits laughter at home, pathos abroad.¹⁵⁸

My view of this work rather departs from this interpretation of laughter and aims to explore the deeper meaning revealed by Zhang’s appropriation of the news reader to the contemporary audience who had different experiences of the reader from those associated with the socialist model or the truth-telling machine. This deeper meaning actually is associated with the mis-fit and misplacement of the TV reader into a lexical reading. Therefore, the artist creates an incongruity in the reader’s context of reading. Even though this incongruity exists, the reader still presents a model identity in the sense of reading a standard definition from a dictionary.

I suggest that in *Water Standard Version from the Dictionary Ci Hai* (1992), by using Xing Zhibin as the performer shown on a TV monitor, Zhang intends to evoke an experience associated with the socialist values in TV news represented by her voice, which suggests the governmental line in the contemporary reality of the growing consumer culture in 1992. But this familiar experience soon becomes incongruous when it becomes clear that she is in fact reading the lexical definition of water. Her audience, now in the position of being directed by a dictionary definition, seems

instructed by a fundamental and collective, rather than a political, standard. However, she still offers instruction in “the truth,” even though nobody really needs to learn this basic word in such a context. In her role as news reader she represented the official line as the only truth; now this official line is replaced by the dictionary—the linguistic law.

The standard is also confirmed by the content of her utterance. Since the word the news reader utters is the lexical definition of water, she is giving us a very detailed, essential utterance—what is, after all, more basic than “water”? Her utterance here thus presents us with a kind of fixed point—an utterance without any ambiguity. On one level, her utterance of “water” denotes the emergence of a new world. Water is generally associated with the very early stages of life. This word evokes the evolution of the world and the birth of new being. In Zhang’s work, this new world might be related to the new reality that the proliferation of mass media generates. In a sense, we are here led to re-define—to re-understand—the entire socialist world.

In 1992, the most severe drought in the history of socialist China occurred, causing catastrophic damage, a year after another severe drought. Drought has been a major natural, national problem in China. There is a well-known folk tale about a hydraulic engineer who solves this problem and becomes a legend; the drought itself becomes a metaphor for Chinese wisdom and determination to solve any problem. Reading “water” in this context adds connotations to this simple word; the association of water with the natural disaster of drought indicates a kind of uncertainty that China has often faced. The artist may have used the word “water” to imply the uncertainty that the new world of mass media may also bring to the Chinese. The drought here might be an ironic use of water; it signifies the proliferation of mass media as a deluge.

For Water’s news reader, the dictionary is her guide; she reads it without questioning it. Her role is still attached to a kind of standard. She tries to instruct her audience to learn the basic, fundamental definition of things. Here the dictionary is a “bible” for her and for her audience: her utterance enlightens her audience through the presentation of an absolute standard—the final word on every single word. The news reader is thus iconic, a kind of God-like figure because she is a “truth teller” in this new world. She can give us, in a sense, guidance on this water problem, and perhaps she can give us direction on any other problem as well. The traditional icon of the news reader becomes a reference point in searching for a fixed point to which the contemporary TV audience can turn. This representation evolved from the representation of propaganda, as previously mentioned.

In China, the official machine functions to anchor and stabilize the masses’ sense of living in a dizzying world. This recalls the Tiananmen incident in 1989, which marked the beginning of the return of consumer mass media to its traditional socialist functions. Zhang Song, “the father” of the system of CCTV news readers, observes the open flow of information which directly influenced people’s perception of that information. He writes:

Competition of new information channels forces the traditional media to become more proactive in reporting news ahead of other alternative media. This is the only way to ensure that the public is informed the way the traditional media would like them to be informed. It is too risky if the public receives information incorrectly. Again, media have responsibilities to filter information and to provide interpretation guidance (my translation).160

Zhang’s understanding of the proactive function of new media is in accordance with the official line. His writing insists on the necessity for official control of the

information outflow in this new world. This understanding leads us to consider the historical and political significance of TV.

Historically, televisual media had revealed social and political events only according to government standards. In the 1980s, the media atmosphere began to liberalize. In the short period before the incident, the televisual media broadcast several live debates on the future of the Communist Party, and students intensely attacked the vice-chair of the party during these debates. This live broadcast brought the liberal view of the mass medium to the socialist masses; however, the later reporting of the Tiananmen incident reminded them of TV’s customary function as a vehicle for the official line.

After the incident, mass media was used by the government to monitor dissent and to disseminate propaganda. Meanwhile, a significant proportion of the population, with their own views on what happened on June 4th, 1989, developed a complex relationship to media representations of the fallacy of the actual events. They saw the media as a welcome instrument of entertainment, on the one hand, and as a suspicious vehicle for political disinformation on the other. Prior to 1989, those involved with the mass media in China regarded it as a seamlessly interwoven fabric of socialist public policy. But modernist transparency had given way to a sense of suspicion, combined with a cacophonous multiplicity of marketing images and messages—all rather incongruously couched in the language of revolutionary socialism! In the early 1990s, mass advertising for the growing consumer market fit somewhere in between these two contrasting views of TV as either representing the truth or not.

Zhang Song’s account can be seen as a reaction to the rampant consumerism of the mass media in the post-Tiananmen world. Concerning the impact of TV upon an individual, media theoretician Marshall McLuhan writes that “the medium is the message.”
The human’s use of any communications medium has an impact that is of more relevance than the content of any medium or what that medium may convey. The process of being in a virtual environment, for example, has a greater effect on our existence than the program in which we are immersed. The act of watching television has had a greater impact than what is shown on the television.\footnote{Christopher Horrocks. \textit{Marshall McLuhan and Virtuality}. (London: Icon Books, 2000). 77.}

If we understand the artist’s motif of TV news in the context of a vertiginous world, we see that Zhang’s works reveal the historical meaning of TV news in contemporary everyday life—TV news today still, in a sense, mimics the official line, but also serves strangely to fuse Western influence and the TV news tradition. Zhang’s CCTV news reader is an extreme example of a turning point in this consumerist reality —taking us back to the socialist tradition of mass media—because her identity is associated with the official machine of truth-telling.

Like the fixed point in \textit{Water}, in the later works, the Chinese news reader’s language is presented as a fixed, still point for the Chinese audience. Recently, many English TV programs have been broadcast; the result is that TV audiences are becoming more familiar with English. Thus there is a growing association of westernization with television. But in \textit{Good Evening}, among the various languages heard on TV, Chinese remains native and familiar to the Chinese audience. The languages presented such as English, Korean, and so forth reveal the news readers’ cultural identities. The Chinese news readers’ opening greetings in Mandarin highlight the particular cultural association familiar to the Chinese TV audience when they encounter this multi-linguistic world.

The way the Chinese news readers (one male and one female) deliver the TV news seems textbook example of “news reader” when compared with the others, who have a more casual stance. The Chinese news readers’ action and utterance are
extremely formal. This “text book formality” is particularly important in light of the concept of information overload revealed through the global network. The artist uses frequencies and varieties of TV news snippets to highlight the feeling of anxiety resulting from the reception of excessive information from the global network. The fluidity of time and space in TV news enables Chinese people to be informed about international news at the moment that it happens. Messages appear in real-time. But, the Chinese “model” here marks the need for a fixed point in this information overload. The fixed point here thus can be seen as the struggles of Chinese TV news to claim its own localities and to find reliable sources of information in the global network.

In Good Evening, in the beginning of the video, we see that at the bottom right of the Chinese couples depiction, there is a caption indicating “1999, 12, 31.” And in the footage of the Korean TV news, we see a large sign saying “Millennium” in the background of the broadcasting room. Hence, this entire work can be understood as a metonymy of the fable of the millennium. At the end of 1999, the global world experienced the terror of the rumor anticipating some great tragedy and crisis associated with the millennium. The TV news here in Zhang’s work is a metaphor for this global phenomenon. The repeated footage (whose content might thus be concerned with this Millennium) seems to reduce the expression of the anxiety, even though the multiplicity of screens might conversely make us dizzy. The TV audience is given a supposedly more thoughtful, balanced view of this event, since the news is presented in a multiplicity of views.

A global map appears in the background of the broadcast featuring the Chinese couple. At the bottom of the ticker, a moving information band (news crawl) appears, reporting what is happening at the moment. This provides the TV audience with an extra interface accessible to it. The broadcast is transmitted by a satellite network. This
Chinese “textbook” thus is saturated with informational features and supported by advanced technology.

TV news is not merely related to information; it also instructs the TV audience and reduces the psychological feeling of vertigo associated with a possibly catastrophic event. The repetition of global TV footage might be related to the artist’s intention of showing TV news readers’ responsibility for instructing people on how to properly deal with this millennium. TV reporting thus functions as a kind of instructive act. In this way, too, it serves as a guiding force, a fixed point of reference. With the various interfaces for information and the technological support for simultaneous broadcast, CCTV new readers seems to become more like reporters in the general sense of conveying information. The political significance of the news broadcast seems loose and less scripted in this context. The technology thus makes them appear more like TV news “reporters” rather than traditional Chinese news readers. They instruct the audience in a seemingly “open” and “interactive” manner.

In these works, the Chinese TV news readers always appear at the beginning of the sequence, followed by the others. The entire footage is shown, one piece after the other, creating the effect of cut-in and cut-out without any transition. In this 2002 work, the artist took footage from major TV news networks representing the global news networks, but the video begins with footage from CCTV, and in this footage, a pair of Chinese news readers greets us, and the captions tell us we are at a transition point, the last day of 1999/the coming of 2000. The various TV news utterances are repeated in sequence. The Chinese news readers create a sense of particularity within the larger sameness of the other TV news readers. One then becomes more aware of Chinese TV news’ similarity to and difference from other global TV news, and this tension becomes an underlying focus in this work. Since the Chinese news readers appear as the first snippet, everyone after them appears to be mimicking them. In this
sense, the Chinese snippet is the standard line for the other news readers and provides the fixed point for the audience to unpack each news reader’s diversified expression.

A point to ponder here is why Zhang felt the need to reveal the CCTV TV news readers as this fixed point and bring us back to the traditional language and stance of the two Chinese “reporters” who really “begin this discussion” in his 1992 work. Is he suggesting that the Chinese people need to look to their own still points to avoid possible absorption into the global news village? One must ask, however, whether the posing of the specifically Chinese TV readers couple as a still point, in conjunction with the force of technology, will just succeed in empowering the government to make a skillful transmission of the Chinese view.

After my analysis of TV news footage in relation to contemporary reality, the problem is whether or not reality revealed by the mass media was to be compatible with socialist values. Zhang Song suggests that this notion of mass media is dangerous to people:

It is an impractical fantasy to claim that the public has the right to be informed comprehensively and to receive information from all different perspectives. Without censorship, guidance, and control, this fantasy would become merely a dream of a media utopia. The media naturally has the right to filter and select information to be distributed. Dreaming of a media utopia is not practical, not only because it is impossible to provide “all” perspectives to “all” audiences via “all” channels but also because media then would lose its ability to “safeguard” information. It is true that currently the media does not distribute comprehensive information. It surely needs to be improved right away. However, it does not mean that the function of media needs to be transformed. Media needs to remain in synch with the government’s policy and vision as it always has done (my translation).162

162 Zhang.
In contrast to this idea of the new world introducing a dangerous influx of information, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe relate this open flow of mass media to an opening up of possibilities:

In the postwar period, new processes of commodification, bureaucratization, and homogenization create a growing politicization of social relations and dissolution of old solidarities and forms of community [...] They create new forms of resistance and antagonism which are expressed in the new social movements (including feminist, gay and lesbian liberation, peace and ecological, and other groups). 163

Now we have two possibilities related to the proliferation of mass media—the political anchor of the information outflow (in Zhang Song’s sense) and the potential opportunity (in Laclau and Mouffe). But which reality does Zhang depict in his video?

A Vertiginous Proliferation of Mass Media

In Water, Zhang places his performer in a relationship alienated from her official image because her original role as a TV news broadcaster is incongruous to the act of the dictionary reading in the video. The news reader reads the definition of the word “water” in a broadcast setting, giving the appearance of uttering the truth. She is isolated from her traditional news reader’s utterance. Here the news reader is in a state of alienation as she is cast in the role of one who reads the dictionary. The ideological associations of the TV monitor and political truth-telling thus become disjointed here; we are not getting what we expect. The CCTV news reader here is not directly a vehicle for representing the official line, for propagandizing and instructing. I suggest that this creates a situation of alienation, or as Paul de Man might call it, “an

Is this alienation revealed in Zhang’s video a reaction to either a symptom of the reproductive process of capitalist consumerism (Laclau and Mouffe’s notion) or the media’s transmission of the official line (Zhang’s implication)? I suggest that it is the latter.

In Zhang’s work, the reader’s original identity does not actually fit into the Western-influenced reality of TV consumerism. In the contemporary reality of TV news, her performance as the agent of mimicry seems to stubbornly adhere to the old socialist reality of TV news and is incongruous with the contemporary reality of TV news. The artist uses video technology to create her image as the “machine” of truth-telling seen in the flux of consumerism, yet, still tied to her traditional roots. In this context, it becomes very interesting to ask: Why did Zhang become so interested in the theme of TV news as perpetrator of the official line in 1992? What is its position in the new cultural amalgamation?165

When China embraced the Western notion of mass media, the communication of the standard line represented in TV news appeared to remain unchanged, yet became complicated. In the 1990s, TV programs transformed themselves, moving away somewhat from the sole standard line. Consumer culture was responsible for this. Within this reality, the production of TV programs started to take into account the audience’s needs without violating governmental regulations outright. For instance, financial news appeared increasingly on TV, coinciding with the financial transformation of Chinese society. People were concerned with their own financial


165 In general, theoreticians use the word “hybrid” to suggest the cross-cultural features that result from the intersection of capitalist culture and local culture. For instance, Néstor Carcésa Canclini discusses the similar case in Latin America through the words “hybrid cultures.” In this dissertation, I use, however, the word “amalgamation” because I want to emphasize the action and process of this intersection and call up the economic sense of the term. I also use “amalgamation” to refer to the notion of mimicry I discussed previously.
condition and living status. In this sense, TV news was the source of knowledge and information relevant to people’s everyday lives, rather than merely political agendas. For example, in addition to financial information, the Chinese audience also wanted entertainment news. The ideological functions of the TV medium were fused with the consumer-oriented features of TV news. People could choose TV news based on their individual needs in relation to the entire society. The audience now became consumers who selected and exploited the significance of the medium, and the medium itself became the communicative instrument between them and society. Thus, TV news reflected the liberal will and freedom of each audience, with its special interests.166

The strict, scripted style of the CCTV news readers’ delivery became looser, more spontaneous.

In the reality of consumer culture, it is crucial to understand that the TV medium represents the fusion of political and economic forces. Today, even if the country has been paying much more attention to the development of economics rather than politics, the significance of the TV news readers’ political representation remains the same. However, these two roles sometimes conflict on certain levels. Thus, the problem becomes how socialist tradition responds to the new reality of TV.

Zhang’s work was created when TV began to be largely an entertainment platform, rather than merely a public channel for political propaganda. Zhang Peili is a native of Hangzhou, the first city to receive national programming in China; hence he experienced this overwhelming transformation in the early 1990s. He had seen the

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166 Wu Ersan’s video work is related to this notion in a larger context. I think that Wu presents TV as a window for a female’s feeling of love and provides an unexpected journal of her finding her destiny. In We Got to Know Each Other Tonight (ca. 1996), he creates a story narrative linked to a TV scene in his video. He describes the narrative: “before she leaves her house for a date, a girl accidentally notices someone on TV that she thus seems to have met before. They together recall the first time they met. Each of their subjective recollections inevitably stirs up the old cliché of a love story. Their breakup scene is shown on one of the channels. The monitor is in the bar where the girl first made her date. The man she will meet is indifferently watching the TV. The girl is on her way. Their encounter has not yet occurred. ” See Wu and Qiu. 5.
emergence of mass media as a feature of the cultural amalgamation brought on by globalization. TV became a sign of capitalist consumer culture in China, particularly in terms of international news and entertainment programs. TV touched his individual life, as we see later in Song Dong’s work. In Song’s work, TV media now became intertwined with the notions of privacy and individuality, a change from its traditional role representing the official line.

The Global Village Imposed by the Satellite Television Broadcast

In my discussion of Zhang’s 1992 video work, I showed that CCTV news revealed a new world emerging in China right after the Tiananmen incident. After this point, he continued to emphasize the role of TV news even more deeply. From 1992 to 1997, CCTV news had remained roughly the same in terms of its methods of production and news reading. However, one new element was the addition of a digital ticker above the news readers’ heads, conveying ongoing news information. The presence of the ticker implied that the news was being reported purely, as it was happening. This was not actually the case, however, since it was still scripted and pre-recorded.

After 1997, information seemed to change dramatically, and thus the Chinese audience supposedly experienced the new style of broadcasting. CCTV news began broadcasting simultaneously, appearing to loosen the pre-set and purely scripted tradition previously mentioned. At the same time, Chinese satellite telecommunications technology emerged as the primary broadcast transmitter in the late 1990s. (In 1990, China launched Asia’s first regional communications satellite. In 1995, China launched a commercial satellite. In 2000, China sent a telecommunications satellite into orbit, using it for ground-based
telecommunication.)\textsuperscript{167} CCTV news and other programs were transmitted to international regions outside China. In a wider context, satellite transmission made possible China’s regional pay-TV service and expanded both the available varieties of programs and the numbers of TV channels.\textsuperscript{168} Even though foreign-oriented satellite TV and news programs were restricted in China, satellite telecommunications transmitted national and global views to the Chinese public. The TV culture triggered by this information network is associated with consumer culture as it relates to both the consumption of TV news and programs and to capital investment in the satellite industry. In this sense, we see that China’s satellite telecommunications carried capitalist, transnational, and even military associations.

In addition to the satellite network, the pervasiveness of the Internet and cell phones in China in the late 1990s provided an even greater number of open channels for the flow of information than satellite transmission had. These two types of media offered greater immediate, simultaneous, and open access to news. (For instance, in 1999, when NATO bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, this news first appeared on the Internet news Web site in China, rather than on TV news channels.)

These multiple facets of mass media were already established when Zhang began creating a series of video works after 1997. For this series, the artist took CCTV news and other international footage from satellite TV in China.\textsuperscript{169} The significant difference between his 1992 piece and the later pieces is his appropriation of actual TV footage for them. He selected his motifs from several historical events in both China and the larger world. For the purposes of this study, I will primarily address

\textsuperscript{167} Macherras.

\textsuperscript{168} The most well-known example is Star TV. They carry the program of MTV and channel V. John V. Langdale. “East Asian Broadcasting Industries: Global, Regional, and National Perspective”. Economic Geography 3. (July 1997). 305–321.

\textsuperscript{169} In China, only some hotels are allowed, with restriction, to receive international TV news directly and to provide international channels.
three works. In 1997, Zhang created a multiple channel video installation entitled Let’s Watch Global TV (illus. C.23). This work is based on the CCTV news footage of Hong Kong’s reunion with China. In his 2000 video installation, Broadcasting at the Same Time (illus. C.24), Zhang was concerned with global fear of the coming millennium. The footage that he used for both works was taken from various TV news reports. In 2002, he used the same pieces of footage he used in Broadcasting at the Same Time to create a new work, Good Evening. (illus. C.25)

Zhang’s several works reflect the stylistic transformation of TV broadcast from a politically socialistic to a globally capitalist model. Examining the 1989 incident, Nicholas José explains how TV eased the flow of information:

> Just as radical changes in communications in China have contributed to the inflow of information, even more important has been the knowledge that information about China can flow out, to be instantaneously presented to the citizens of the world. The display of energy, idealism, passion and violence in Tiananmen Square in 1989, in which all sides found themselves exhibited to an engrossed world, confirmed the awareness that the boundaries of the Middle Kingdom were newly transparent.170

The TV medium is now associated with the immediacy of transmission of the news, particularly in reporting significant events (such as the incident in Tiananmen Square). In this context, the TV medium gives many Chinese people their worldview and engages them in the global community. It attracts numerous Chinese viewers and others in the world.

Zhang’s later works thus can be associated with the attributes of the global community in terms of the geographical boundaries imposed by the mass media that I pointed out above. In Broadcasting at the Same Time (2002), for instance, the artist selected fifty-one pieces of footage of TV news readers greeting various audiences.

170 Doran. xxxvii.
These news readers say “good morning” in various languages. Interestingly, the sequence of the footage conveys a sense of the conceptual commonality of international TV news broadcasts in various languages. In this sense, TV news symbolizes a universal platform of international communication across cultural boundaries as revealed in a multiplicity of languages. For the artist, the TV medium provides an international informational interface and entertainment navigation. The title of the work also reflects the immediacy and simultaneity of this global network.

In Broadcasting at the Same Time, the TV footage was broadcast outside China, but, with some restrictions, displayed on monitors in China. This indicates the dissolution of the geographical boundary in favor of the virtual one and suggests a variety of time zones. Satellite technology renders global communications available and accessible to the Chinese audience. Particularly on the occasion of significant events, this global network for simultaneous news broadcast and reception is obvious. Satellite telecommunications provide a new space and time in which the actual news is “here and now,” virtually present on the screen. In a detailed discussion of virtualization, Pierre Lévy writes that virtualization in telecommunication is a process of “deterritorialization, detachment, sharing.”171 Thus the global community here is a virtual one. As Lévy points out, a virtual community “can, for example, be organized on the basis of its affinities through the intermediary of a telematic communications system.”172

Zhang’s works are particularly concerned with this virtual community, as revealed in the simultaneous broadcast through the satellite network. In this sense, Zhang is not concerned with the TV news per se, but uses this footage to reveal the

172 Ibid., 29.
global network. But what is his view about TV news in this information global flow? How does globalization act upon China’s TV news reality?

In Zhang’s series of works, the identity of the TV audience represented by the international news readers is apparently different from that of the 1992 work. When the phenomenon of global reality was initially shown in 1992, TV news, as I pointed out earlier, had just started becoming liberal. The notion of the audience that the 1992 work implies is singular, rather than plural; the notion of the audience here indicates the situation of China’s political TV news. TV news is a “truth-telling” instruction wherein we perceive the truth through only one monitor.

In his later works, Zhang employs various monitors and languages. He intentionally associates these works with a group of audiences, including those in China as well as those in other countries. The languages are presented on multi-monitors on which TV news readers echo each other. The continuous appearance of ethnically different news readers shows how the various TV news snippets function in the global notion of time and space simultaneously, since geographical and physical restrictions can now be overcome by technology. These various snippets fuse time and space in the global news network. This is how a Chinese audience experiences TV news daily, now that the world has become so small and homogeneous. In this sense, various languages do not merely convey linguistic meaning (“Good Evening”), but more importantly, serve as the various markers pointing to significant links in the global network. The repetition of the news readers’ utterances of greetings in various languages expresses the fluidity of time and space that TV news illuminates.

Hence we could say that Zhang’s use of language signifies multi-cultural awareness and the crossing of geographic regions. The various languages used in Zhang’s works suggest the globalization involved in TV news. According to Fredric Jameson, globalization is more than an issue of national identities. The concept of
globalization is significant in exploring a particular nation’s own reality in the context of the larger global community. He views globalization as:

An untotalizable totality which intensifies binary relations between its parts—mostly nations, but also regions and groups, which, however, continue to articulate themselves on the model of “national identities” (rather than in terms of social classes, for example). But what we now need to add to the other qualifications implicit in the formulation—binary or point-to-point relations already being rather different from some plural constellation of localities and particulars—is that such relations are first and foremost ones of tension or antagonism, when not outright exclusion: in them each term struggles to define itself against the binary order.¹⁷³

According to Jameson’s writings, we see that in Zhang’s works the news readers’ utterances would not be seen as merely representing their national identities in terms of their different languages. In this sense, the various utterances in TV news might be understood as China’s struggle to define the subject of localities in themselves against other particulars (other ethnicities).

China’s march into globalization through the development of satellite communication and information networks is directed by this struggle. On one hand, China has been developing this new technology since the 1980s. When China became capitalistic and, later, globalized in the 1990s, this technology became more accessible. TV broadcasts benefited, and broadcasts were received throughout mainland China. The technology overcame the lack of sufficient TV network infrastructure and enhanced the quality of broadcasting in certain areas in which the geographic environment was still an obstacle for receiving broadcasts. Thus, technology constructed a virtual network world divorced from the material and geographical arena. The technology empowered TV’s capacity to sustain and unify all of China.

In addition to unifying China, technology linked China to the global world—on a large scale, instantly. Through the new global network, even though restriction and censorship still existed, the Chinese audience was aware of what was happening in the world. Technology connected individuals’ private arenas to the larger community. At the same time, this technology enhanced the power of capitalization and globalization. It transmitted capitalist and globalist values, which the Chinese audience in turn consumed.

This global technology has been significant in helping China construct a state virtually supported by information flow; yet it has also worked to dissolve China’s particularities in favor of the consumer culture of TV, affecting both individual privacy and the lifestyle of the masses. Since TV news in China represents the authorities’ voice, the discussion of TV news within this reality leads us to unpack Zhang’s works through a political and cultural perspective.

As with *Water* (1992), Zhang’s later works are related to the political function of TV news. In China, this medium traditionally conveyed information about major national ceremonies and significant social events. From the Tiananmen incident of 1989 to the reporting of Hong Kong’s reunion with China in 1997, the cultural significance of TV news remained the same. Even in the wake of capitalist influences, TV news still strongly represented the nation’s official identity: it continued to gather the masses and convey political propaganda. Thus, in his later works in the late 1990s, Zhang was still interested in TV news as it confirmed national identity at the moment when China was encountering mass media culture. His interest in the political function of TV news seemed to highlight the transition from TV as a vehicle of propaganda transmission to a more-open entertainment vehicle after 1997. But the settings of the broadcast environment were extremely different, particular after CCTV news was transfigured through the coming of simultaneous broadcasts. The presentation of TV
news included digital tickers, man-on-the-street reports, and other technological advances. Therefore, in Zhang’s video works, the socialist tradition of the TV news reader transforms its features, yet its nature remains unchanged.

In his 2002 work, Zhang seems to highlight the sameness among news readers. In fact, the work reveals a number of similarities in the news, clearly recognized in the setting of the broadcast: the broadcast desk; the global map as the background; the news readers’ utterances and bodily and facial expressions; and the news readers’ style of dress, makeup, and hairdo (male news readers in formal dress, and female news readers in formal makeup and hairdo). The composition of the news readers in each snippet is similar to that in the other snippets. In the work, the news readers greet the audience in various languages, but as the video progresses, toward the middle, the snippets are shown so rapidly that this linguistic difference becomes obscure. The length of each piece becomes shortened, and the news readers’ greetings start to sound vague. The apparent difference in the languages becomes subtle. Each news reader’s identity, not as an individual but as a broadcasting entity, becomes even clearer. Hence, this global collection of TV news comes to look like the repetition of one “standard” expression. Here we need to ask: does this “standard sameness” imply the force of the proliferation of the network of media? How does Zhang’s global TV footage reveal this nature?

For this work, Zhang edited the footage of the news readers to highlight their resemblances. Each piece of footage specifically shows only a few seconds of the news readers’ greetings; the actual contents of their reporting are neglected. We are made to perceive the formal similarity among the international news readers; the actual differences between Chinese and other news readers are concealed by the absence of reporting content.
This similarity implies the standard flow and sequence of international TV news footage. Like his concern with the standard line in his 1992 work, Zhang here uses the idea of resemblances and repetition to reveal the standardization of TV news across the spectrum of global news networks. The concept of mimicry here is defined by the seemingly standard way that these news readers act and speak, even though they speak different languages. My interpretation of mimicry here emphasizes the technological capacity of transfiguring, rather than creating the resemblance appropriation in Bhabah’s sense. Here, inspired by Caillois’s view of mimicry, which discussed above. I will demonstrate that telecommunication is a kind of “magic” that transfigures the appearance of each piece of footage to create a feeling of similarity. This standardization leads to the concept of the uniform authority and standard expression that all these international news readers convey in the broadcasting context. This standardization determines the actions of these performers. Each figure mimics the other because no matter what these figures say or in what language they speak, their actions are determined by the reality of how the “standard news readers” must speak to present the “global line.” This mimicry transfigures each piece of footage into one global flow. Does this standard sameness imply that China is embracing a global village in a unified sense?

Each snippet can be seen as an event that shows the reporter in a different style of dress and body language. For instance, we see that one reporter wears traditional Islamic drapery, and a pair of Thai news readers s pray to the audience before they greet them. Thus, the entire video depicts a broad cultural and religious background. Each snippet represents a cultural identity. This collection of news snippets thus

174 Bhabah’s notion of mimicry emphasizes the attributes of an appropriation. He notes that “mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power.” See footnote 17.
presents a global world built on the process of “networks.” This information world is a virtual one because the processes of the information “far from being exclusively attached to a specific substrate, can be moved around.”\textsuperscript{175} In the work, this virtual world represents time (the simultaneousness of the snippets) rather than space (the geographical sources of the snippets). The world is constructed through the diffusion of information and even the standardization imposed by the global network.

This virtual world consists of the diversified and fragmented elements of the particular as shown in the video of the numerous snippets. Compared to the real world, this world is accelerated in time; snippets appear in rapid succession, one after another. This sequence dissolves the traditional notion of a world defined by geographic boundaries. But this sequence also breaks the actual reality of time zones. In the video, the snippets appear according to a random order rather than an established norm of time. The flow now is “a kind of flux, a component in a series of efficient operations, and itself an operation.”\textsuperscript{176} Thus, I suggest that the artist’s strategy of appropriation of TV news footage reveals the technological nature and phenomena of the virtual world. Technology makes it possible to create a new reality. With the global TV news network, we have access to what is happening around the world. In Zhang’s work, the appropriation highlights the standard within this global TV news network. The use of multiple monitors focuses the audience’s attention on the footage and the perception of time and space that the footage implies; the audience believes that the appearance of this “instant,” simultaneous network is real. The similarities revealed here facilitate “the efficiency” in the flow of information, creating the feeling of “instant” transmission.

\textsuperscript{175} Ibid.
In Zhang’s global TV news footage, satellite TV functions like the Web or the Internet, providing the instant, simultaneous flow of images Marshall McLuhan refers to in his discussion of the global village. (See Chapter One above). New technology makes old traditions obsolete; each individual’s particularity dissolves and is replaced by the standard sameness that global technology brings to this global village. In *Broadcast at the Same Time*, for instance, Zhang addresses the repetition of the global line. Like his other works dealing with global TV news, in this work the repetition of TV news snippets seems to represent the seamless transparency of TV news in the context of the global village. One of the most surprising similarities among these TV news snippets is that, for the most part, the settings are in either blue or red colors. Perhaps this suggests the pervasiveness of the American “red, white, and blue” mentality. America is the driving force of the establishment of this global village.

The discussion of Zhang’s works focuses on three years—1992, 1997, and 2000—turning moments when China was just starting to embrace the larger arena of capitalization and globalization that emerged in the post-Tiananmen world. In 1992, China re-initiated its economic reforms, which had been stalled in 1989 when the country suffered economic sanctions after the Tiananmen incident. In 1992, Deng Xiaoping visited several cities and declared the continuation of economic reform in socialist China, transforming China into a “capitalist market in the socialist character.” Soon several cities in south China were designated as “special economic zones” where international and transnational corporations, such as Nike, established factories for goods. Since these special areas were geographically close to Hong Kong, China tried to link these districts to this international port, incorporating a larger web of transportation, personnel, and information flow. At the same time, the economic sanctions imposed on China were lifted.
In 1997, Hong Kong was returned to China and became a special district in the sovereignty of socialist China; it remains a capitalist city at the time of this writing. In 1999, Macao was returned to China and also remains a capitalist city. Thus, by 1999, the two areas of China colonized by foreign powers—Hong Kong (Great Britain) and Macao (Portugal) were returned to China. Its colonial history came to an end after almost one hundred years. China is now “a state in two systems”—socialism in mainland China, and capitalism in the special districts. In 2000, China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) after trying to do so for many years. China then legally became a global member in terms of economic issues. China needed to open its socialist market so that other global members could sell their goods there according to China’s local laws and global trade regulations.

Zhang’s creations during this time were influenced by several key political events, and he used the parodic play of TV news footage to link his intended audience to the socialist epic in TV news recurring in the reporting of these events in TV news.

The Playful Effect and Heuristic Purpose of the Fixed Point

It is clear that Zhang’s particular strategy of appropriating of CCTV news footage is reminiscent of Xu Bing’s. Both artists appropriate cultural symbols—languages in Xu’s works and TV news in Zhang’s works. It is even more interesting that they both involve language or, more specially, the utterance of the performer in their appropriation. In Xu’s works, viewers are invited to understand recomposed and reorganized languages. In Zhang’s works, the news reader’s utterance is a major focus.

Unlike Xu, Zhang retains the apparent symbolic meaning of his appropriated material without alternating it in a dramatic way, we see in Xu’s amalgamated languages. Zhang’s use of appropriation thus does not aim to alter or recreate a new identity for the appropriated images, but rather to inform their apparent and symbol(ic...
association. For the audience, this association leads to the images’ iconographic identification with the political function of CCTV news. In the case of Water, the audience recognizes the reader’s original identity as truth-telling machine even though she is not reading the news. If Xu’s appropriation can be seen in terms of quotation or repetition of languages, and if we also accept appropriation as a basic form of parody, might Zhang’s appropriation of TV news footage also be regarded as a kind of parodic play—particular the play of customary and conventional images of CCTV news to the public?

Unlike Xu, Zhang places his appropriated images in another context and changes the meaning of their original context. This use of appropriation recalls the past significance of the images in the contemporary moment. Here, we see that Zhang deliberately and painstakingly presents the identifiable characteristics of the news reader’s original role but implies a mis-fit—an incongruity—of these characteristics in the contemporary moment. In his later works, a tension and incongruity is expressed in this fusion of particulars and the whole, unique identities and standardized sameness. In other words, I suggest that his parodic play creates an effect that informs the readers’ misfit and incongruity to the traditional model of the TV news. The audience during this period of time in fact experienced consumer culture and globalist use of the satellite broadcast of TV, both of which are more open than the traditionally socialist model.

I argue that Zhang’s use of appropriation can be regarded as a parodic play of TV news footage. More specifically, this parodic play is related to anti-heroism, a strategy used to question the model or authority. If we understand parody through both Householder and Rose’s interpretations (see Chapter One above), we see that Zhang’s appropriation of footage is parodic. In other words, his insertion of TV news footage into the contexts of lexical reading and global TV news broadcasts precisely creates
the contrast between the original meaning of the footage and the new meaning associated with the new contexts. This incongruous linkage or contrast relationship may create a comic effect. Here parody is not merely the imitation of form or repetition but is used to create effects informed by the imitation or repetition. Rose notes the imitation or repetition in parody:

Not only, that is, may “exact quotation” set up a comic discrepancy or incongruity between the quoted work and its new context, but such quotation may not ultimately be aimed at the complete replication of a work, but a comic dislocation, through its contrast with the new and foreign context, of both, or either, its original form and meaning.177

If Zhang’s appropriation can be interpreted as a parodic quotation of TV news footage, then we must ask how this parodic quotation conveys a comic effect. Rose argues that the comic here is revealed as humor and/or a funny and critical attitude.178 She then suggests:

whatever our attitude to comedy, the complicated structure of the more sophisticated parody—in which the target text may not only be satirized but also “refunctioned”—nonetheless demonstrates a more subtle (though still comic) use of other literary works than is implied by the term burlesque, or even by the term “mock-epic” when the word “mock” is used in the sense of “mockery,” “ridicule,” or “spoof.”179

In Zhang’s works, incongruity or mis-fit seems to reveal TV news footage as the “target text” to be both satirized and refunctioned, thereby creating the effect of parody. If Zhang’s works can be seen through the parodic play of the TV news reader, what is the purpose of using this play? What kind of effect does this play create? And what is its aim? The parodic play in Zhang’s works, as I will demonstrate later, creates a heuristic function to disclose the representation of authority on TV to the public. The

177 Rose. 21.
178 See more discussion on this issue in Rose. 20–9.
179 Rose. 28–9.
reader’s mis-fit and incongruity can be understood not only as satire but also, more important, as a refunctioning.

In Zhang’s 1992 video, the performer’s act is purported to take place in a media context but is in fact unrelated to an actual news broadcast. Her performance is scripted by the standard line according to the contexts of both TV news and the dictionary, but unscripted according to the context of the TV news broadcast. In this context, we might see her act in light of J. L. Austin’s notion of “misfire of utterance”; the act that accomplishes her utterance has no effect. Austin explains it thus:

When the utterance is a misfire, the procedure which we purport to invoke is disallowed or is botched: and our act (marrying, &c.) is void or without effect, &c. We speak of our act as a purported act or perhaps an attempt—or we use such an expression as “went through a form of marriage” by contrast with “married.”

This, in a sense, makes the “official line” news broadcast seem flimsy. Instead of giving us significant news about the world, the news reader might just as well be reading from the dictionary.

Austin’s performative act or purported art suggests that convention is significant in determining language as a kind of legal act. I suggest that in light of this thought, we can reveal the female news reader’s “body” (body language) as a social and legal construction of mass media. Her “body” is invested with power and influence in the collective masses’ consciousness. Thus, the representation of the “body” is a collective and conventional construction. Gender is important here. An actual TV news broadcast typically features a pair of male and female news readers. But Zhang’s broadcast presents a sole female figure sitting on the left; his arrangement gives the power to state the truth to her, rather than to a male news reader or a pair of

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news readers. Furthermore, the three TV news readers who could not conceal their personal sympathy for the victims of Tiananmen were disqualified from being news readers. Xing was regarded, in a sense, as the first TV news reader to accomplish the “mission” regardless of her feelings about the incident—the “machine” won out here. However, since her authority is flimsy in terms of reading a dictionary in the video, her “victory” seems a parodic and playful reference to the public’s experiences of her standard identity.

If we can interpret Zhang’s appropriation as parodic play, I suggest that in Water Standard Version from the Dictionary Ci Hai the artist expresses the government’s anxiety about the potential growth of power of the mass media through a representation of propaganda and instruction. He uses the parodic play of the CCTV news reader to indicate the emerging power of this representational construction that stems from the socialist tradition, rather than from the force of consumer culture. She is not in synch with the actual tone of emerging consumerism. One would expect her to be more casual, relaxed expressing her individuality, as is more common in TV in the new global world. Instead, she is still robot-like, delivering only the official line. This incongruity creates a parodic effect and targets the power of the news in contemporary life.

This work leads us to consider that the proliferation of mass media in 1992 held potential to benefit not only burgeoning liberation movements—it asks whether this proliferation actually worked to the advantage of the traditional socialist propaganda machine. Thus, I suggest that the artist’s parodic appropriation of news footage shows the potential to re-construct the conventional representation of ideology through mass media. As I demonstrated, during this process, the old tradition was, in part, dissolving and being woven into a new one. The Marxist notion of the world that is the result of economic production in society became suspect. Since the proliferation
of mass media calls for the reproduction of information and messages, it shapes society through the immaterial structure of information outflow. At the same time, as we witnessed in the case of CCTV news, for the government the proliferation of mass media might empower—rather than weaken—the function of propaganda and instruction which could be broadcast via the news through a more immediate and simultaneous coverage across China. Zhang’s videos make us notice this problem. The heuristic function of his parody prompts us to question the nature of this “standard line.” His work also leads us to explore whether the globalist force, in terms of consumerism, has had an impact on this socialist tradition.

The parody in Zhang’s work is heuristic in its suggestion that TV news is supposed to deliver news stories, to simply convey information. However, in China, the news has more often been used to persuade the audience and even prescribe the audience’s perception of reported events. TV news readers thus were instructed by the governmental line when delivering the news and pursuing their professions. Their acts and utterances were manipulated by governmental censorship. Some acts and certain utterances were prohibited. Dissenters would be disqualified and punished.\textsuperscript{181} The news readers’ solidity and integrity was thus built on their adherence to a prescriptive scenario. At the same time, their personal and family political background or history had to be politically “clean.” Any flaw in their family political history would disqualify them. TV news readers all major in the field Radio and Television News Reader, which seems to be a field of academic training unique to China. Even in the contemporary world of globalist mass media, this tradition remains and potentially strengthens greatly, empowered by technology.

\textsuperscript{181} Three TV news readers were suspended and transferred to other departments due to so-called misbehavior in reporting the Tiananmen incident.
Zhang’s appropriation of TV news footage in his 1992 work can be regarded as a parodic play of the authority informed by the TV news broadcast; as such it aims to convey a heuristic attitude of suspicion toward the representation of the truth-machine as the political model in TV to the public. Thus, the purpose of the parody in Zhang’s works is associated with the concept of the mock epic as Hutcheon describes it:

Epic traditions, however, provided the ground for many parodies in the eighteenth century, parodies that are very close to some kinds of modern satirized form of parody. The mock epic did not mock the epic: it satirized the pretensions of the contemporary as set against the ideal norms implied by the parodied text or set of conventions.182

The sense of parodic play with regard to heroism also appears in Zhang’s later works based on TV news. In Broadcast at the Same Time, for instance, the artist combines fifty-one pieces of TV news footage of different languages. Each clip shows the news readers greeting the audience at the start of the news. Sometimes the readers are shown singly, sometimes in pairs or grouped in threes; sometimes they are male and sometimes they are female. The footage runs as a loop, and the total length of the work is about fifteen minutes. During this period of time, the fifty-one pieces of footage are shown on various screens located within a large screen. These pieces randomly appear on certain monitors. They are shown at a fast pace. Since there are various languages, styles of reporting, broadcast settings, and formal addresses and hairdos involved, the video gives a dizzying feeling to the audience.

Like Zhang, Hu Jieming dealt with TV news coverage of the possible millennium crisis in a mixed media installation entitled The Fiction between 1999 & 2000 (2000) (illus. C.26). Hu took footage (related to the crisis) from the Web and network television in China during the twenty-four hour period from midnight of

182 Hutcheon. 44.
December 31, 1999, to midnight of January 1, 2000. He printed the footage in black-and-white on transparencies and presented various pieces of the transparencies on a labyrinth-like structure. This work obviously is concerned with information appearing on an information network that compels the audience to physically encounter it.

In Zhang’s work, the appearance of various pieces of footage on multiple monitors creates a mosaic-like quality and montage-like effect that conveys the interactive notion of new media to the audience. The work also conveys the sense of tactility in the visual. McLuhan points out that virtual technology is “an acoustic medium.” He describes this technology as having “a high degree of tactility, immediacy and ‘all-aroundness’.” Global TV in general involves a sense of tactility because the audience uses a remote control unit to select programs. Our viewing can thus consist of a number of images from which we select what will be presented to us.

This mosaic-like quality appears in Zhang’s 1992 work and is found in the nature of the images themselves, in terms of pixels. In the 2002 work, the multiple monitors of the global network give this feeling of a mosaic. In the 2002 video, the news readers’ greetings, in various languages indicating particular cultural associations, also give a linguistic mosaic effect. At the beginning, the greetings emphasize the differences among the news readers. After the sped-up section of the scenes in the middle of the work, however, language’s role changes; the languages meld to become one indistinguishable blur. They become just noises. The performers who utter these greetings one by one act as if they are not content to echo each other—their utterances cannot be mimicable and reproducible in a harmonic voice. The global TV news here is transformed into a barrage of dizzying sounds, rather than a

183 McLuhan. 78.
184 Ibid.
communication of information. This “noise” reminds the audience of these news readers’ linguistic differences and even diversified cultural expressions.

Perhaps this noise can also be understood as the “sounds” generated by the transmission of information and messages to different geographical regions and time zones within the global network. TV news footage is distributed through and appears in this circuit. The presence of any particular footage involves both visual as well as acoustic effects. When this information overload is presented on the video, the sounds become rapid and tense, transforming into noise. Although it arrives at the same destination, the footage comes from different locations and sources. Qiu Zhijie’s (b. 1969) video installation, Object being Measured: Voyeur (illus. C.27), also features the TV program as a source of sound. Qiu placed a TV monitor on the body of a guitar, and through an antenna, the sounds of the programs make the strings of the guitar vibrate. Like Zhang, Qiu highlights the quality of “sound” in TV and visualizes its transmission. Unlike Zhang, Qiu does not emphasize the type of TV program or the context of TV itself. Thus, Qiu’s work captures the transmission of TV signals but departs from the discussion of the TV network itself as shown in Zhang’s works.

The discussion of the noise generated by the network circuit brings us to a consideration of the news readers’ sequential utterance of “Good Evening” in Zhang’s video. The sequential snippets of greetings bring the audience’s attention to the international context of the TV broadcast, rather than solely to the Chinese one. The news readers’ citation of each other (the various greetings of “Good Evening”) can be seen as a flow of information. MacLuhan refers to virtual technology as “a medium of the ‘ear’. “185 The flow of information indicates the nature of acoustic environments as it is shown in the virtual communication of the global network.

185 Horrocks. 78.
The news readers’ citation of opening greetings can be interpreted in light of Jacques Derrida’s notion of iterability, which he defines as the repeatability of a message in a different context. Christina Howells points out:

For it is the notion of ‘iterability’ that underlines these [performative utterances excluded], ‘hollow’ performatives: they involve a kind of citation, and a non-presence of the intention of the speaking subject, whether this be in jest, on stage or in fiction. But this is exactly what they share with all other performatives in Derrida’s account: he insists on the fact that marrying, promising, opening meetings, and naming boats all highlight ritualized operations which depend not on the spontaneity or intention of the speaker, but on citation and context.

Derrida’s notion of iterability helps us to see that in Zhang’s work the news reader’s opening greeting is not necessarily associated with any specific reporting context. Rather, the greeting highlights the transmission of information.

On one level, the news readers’ citation of “Good Evening” in the context of the broadcasting settings creates an overwhelming feeling of dizziness—even of discomfort—in the audience. The audience confronts a controlling force that manipulates its consciousness. This controlling force might also be in play in the case of TV news flow in the global circuit. On another level, Derrida’s notion of iterability here reveals the nature of reality in Zhang’s works. The presentation of footage highlights the transmission of the information, a process in which the reality actually is absent of content. Then each piece of footage seems mimicable in this context suggests that each is like a code. Each snippet could be composed in a standard way and decoded in some final terminal that received it (such as China, Thailand, and so forth) This transmission of codes can be seen here as part of the essence of “a nomadic

culture.” Lévy suggests that “virtualization reinvents a nomadic culture,[…] but by creating a medium of social interaction in which relations reconfigure themselves with a minimum of inertia.188

Zhang used a real person in Water. In Broadcasting, he edits the TV news footage in a specific way—in terms of both the length of the news readers’ greetings and the speed and tempo of the greetings throughout the entire video. The artist uses appropriation in creating his own televisual flow. This suggests that TV programs are likewise pre-determined by TV stations; the audience finds a pre-set time frame and viewing content. Televisions commercials break up the flow into a rhythm of unified fragments: they are inserted into the flow. When the 15 pieces of footage appear randomly on the monitors, they create the rhetoric of insertion. The flow becomes disorientating, and the audience has no idea what the sequence of the entire footage might be. Zhang’s televisual flow thus evokes the insertion of the commercial in the entire sequence. The interaction among the footage snippets depicts this.

The standardization of each snippet lends uniformity to the whole video and, at the same time, evokes the audience’s awareness of the unfinished content—the performers say only “Good Evening” and nothing else. Zhang keeps the opening of each clip and omits the rest—the actual content of the news reports. As each piece appears on the monitor and interacts with the other pieces, a feeling of dislocation, unsteadiness, and uncertainty results. The audience must ask what else would have been said by each news reader, thus focusing on each news reader’s unique identity and what is sacrificed by the imposition of standardization. The absence of actual news content here isolates each piece of footage from its references. The audience,

188 Lévy. 29.
thus, is placed in “the knot of tendencies or forces that accompanies a situation, event, object, or entity.”

It is clear that Zhang’s works address the notion of time in global TV footage, which is associated with one important aspect of satellite telecommunication. In the work, this notion of time reflects the relationship between the satellite broadcast and reception. The flow of messages and information indicates this notion of time. However, this does not reflect the reality of China’s satellite telecommunications system.

The flow of information in China is still restricted because of political considerations. (In 1993, China’s President signed legislation banning individuals and businesses from using or setting up satellite dishes.) The Chinese government, however, began to focus on its own use of satellite technology—the transmission of information, rather than a port for the flow of information. This government use of satellite is more associated with space (crossing boundaries) than time (immediate and simultaneous flow). The government’s attitude to the non-restrictive, time-based context of satellite telecommunication is one of hostility. In 1996, Chinese representatives denounced Western countries, especially the United States, for practicing power politics in the mass media on the pretext of “freedom of information.”

Zhang’s parodic play presents TV news footage as a fixed point within the larger context of global TV news footage. What does this fixed point lead us to think, as it is revealed as a parody? Zhang’s works seemingly and strongly convey a sense of similarity as discussed earlier, and this similarity is the target of his parody. Through a heuristic way of presenting the TV news broadcast, the similarity in fact makes us

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189 Ibid., 24.
aware of a feeling of difference. McLuhan claims that “the global-village conditions being forged by the electronic technology stimulate more discontinuity and diversity and division than the old mechanical, standardized society; in fact, the global village makes maximum disagreement and creative dialog inevitable.”\textsuperscript{190} Thus, the apparent sameness and transparency of the global village is problematic: it cannot be understood solely as a unified and standardized community. Lévy also reminds us of the “conflict” in the virtual community. He writes: “Its members are reunited by the same centers of interest and the same problems: geography, being contingent, is no longer a starting point or constraint. Although it is strictly speaking ‘not-there,’ this community is guided by passions and projects, conflicts and friendships. It exists without a stable point of reference: wherever its mobile members happen to be…or nowhere at all.”\textsuperscript{191}

From 1992 to 2002, Zhang Peili was obsessed with TV news footage. He used TV news greetings from both Chinese and international channels in his works. These TV news pieces reveal China’s march into the global community and the virtual world of network. The motif of TV news reader illustrates the political and cultural roles of mass media that TV news validates because the media or the socialist epic presents the governmental norm, particularly in TV news. I suggest that his parodic play of TV news asks whether the news still serves as a fixed point to anchor and stabilize China’s particular traditional roots in the context of encountering a vertiginous reality in the wider world.

\textsuperscript{191} Lévy. 29.
The TV Monitor as Frame

Now we turn to the parodic effect of Zhang’s video works and explore the artistic purpose of his use of parody. His parodic play of TV news footage is also related to the difference between the TV monitor and the camcorder. A few documentary filmmakers\(^1\) first used a camcorder for artistic purposes after the mid 1980s. More specifically, they used the camcorder to report/document the hidden, dark side of marginalized communities. These filmmakers exploited both the camcorder’s capacity to document subject matter in real-time and its portability. I suggest that Zhang’s work and use of the camcorder in 1992, however, was not associated with this documentary film context. Instead he explored the video medium itself and its relation to television.

In his 1992 video installation, Zhang specifically chose a TV monitor to display his news reader’s performance; that is, the performance was the construction of a video image and the scenario of the television monitor. Zhang was a pioneer in video art in China.\(^2\) Water Standard Version from the Dictionary Ci Hai, the artist’s fourth video work, shows that the artist had at this point embraced the video medium per se; this had not happened in his early video pieces in the 1980s. Previously, we witnessed several aspects of the artist’s interest in and use of video. We saw the spatial dimensions and the representation of the video image, as well as the element of spectatorship in video art. His earlier pieces, however, are related to conceptual art and performance art works. For instance, Zhang’s first video work, entitled 30 x 30 (illus.

\(^1\) According to interviews, the earliest Chinese documentary filmmakers did not recognize their uses of the camcorder as documentary films. Now, in general, the term of “documentary filmmaker” is well received.

\(^2\) In 1990, a German art professor, Mijka, showed a few video works in the art school where Zhang had studied. Later on these works were collected in the school library. This video screening was the first time Zhang viewed Western video art on such a scale. But, in 1988, Zhang had started to use video for his 30 x 30, a work concerned with performance and conceptual art. See a brief introduction of this history in Wu Hung ed. The First Guangzhou Triennial Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art (1990–2000). (Guangdong, China: Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002). 52.
Familiar with conceptual art, Zhang here shows an interest in exploring the duration of
time in the performing process and the consequence of that process. The artist
interprets the video medium as the documentary of an action. One of the most
significant differences between the earlier and later works lies in the motifs presented.
Unlike motifs of the early video works, Water Standard Version from the Dictionary
Ci Hai is not an action or a movement, but a scene that is associated with TV news. In
this work, the artist creates a scene that resembles the TV news broadcast, using a
well-known female news reader.

When we analyze the display mode of this video work in comparison to that of
other works, we see that Zhang deliberately emphasizes the TV monitor in the 1992
work. In Uncertain Pleasure (1996), for instance, he uses multiple monitors to show
the fragmented, close-up images of a male who is scratching several parts of his body.
In one instance, when Zhang displayed this work on multiple monitors, he removed
the cases surrounding the TV monitors, and in another instance, he made a dark
background so that the images, rather than the TV monitors, would be the focal points
for the viewer (illus. C.29 and C.30). Unlike the 1996 work, in the 1992 work the TV
monitor frames the performer in the particular identity of the TV news reader even
though she is not reading the news. The artist also displays this work on a TV monitor
that, in a sense, “frames” her role as a TV news reader. Hence, when she appears on
the TV monitor, her image is particularly attached to her integrity and solidity as a TV
news personality.

Zhang’s depiction of a popular figure during this period of time is generally
interpreted as a response to the general phenomenon of consumer culture in art in

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194 See a brief introduction of Zhang’s earlier video works in Zhang Peili, “From 30 x 30,” Qiu Zhijie
China. For instance, in Wang Guangyi’s oil paintings, we see that there are numerous
globalist signs such as Marlboro ads imposed on representations of the typical socialist
vanguards such as peasants and workers, who usually appeared in propaganda posters
during the Cultural Revolution. This painting exhibits the cultural conflict as shown in
China’s mass culture. Similarly, the paintings of Wang Jingsong depict the reality of
the pervasive phenomena of Western popular culture transforming China’s traditional
mass culture into a new one. Both painters’ works have been characterized as
“Political Pop” and “Cynic Realism,”195 terms associated with the historical moment
when China revitalized its economic reform in 1992.196 Zhang’s paintings and earlier
video works had been shown in the exhibition called China’s New Art, Post-1989, a
gallery exhibition promoting this style.

In 1991, Zhang had done an oil painting with the same motif in which the news
reader is framed by the canvas, a still viewing mode. Zhang divides the surface of this
frame shows the same TV news reader in a broadcast context. We see the Chinese
captions of CCTV on the bottom of each frame and a monitor showing a map of China
in the background. Zhang’s composition is based on the layout of a CCTV news
screen.197 In both frames, the artist paints black lines around the boundaries and
creates black, round outlines, making the frames resemble TV monitors. He obviously
had been concerned with the vehicle of TV in consumer culture as demonstrated by
his use of the TV news reader in both the painting and the video.

195 See more about the definition of these terms in an exhibition catalogue, see Doran.
196 Ibid.
197 The layout of a TV news screen in China has a very specific template. The screen is divided into two
parts. Three quarters of the screen is for the image and one quarter of the screen is for text. Text could
be either news headers or subtitles of people’s dialogues. The TV network’s (e.g. CCTV) logo usually
appears at the right hand bottom corner.
However, I argue that, unlike his contemporaries, in his 1991 painting, Zhang transcends the pictorial resemblance of the actual TV news broadcast and highlights the time and motion that CCTV news conveys. In the top frame, on the top right corner, we see a digital clock showing the time of reporting. The artist represents the news reader within the context of TV broadcast and also adds to this representation a sense of time. Each image is presented as a negative, which signifies the broadcast as a past event. Furthermore, by showing two frames on a single canvas, he gives a sense of motion. The image in the bottom frame is cut by the top part of the frame, and this adds a visual effect of instability which enhances the feeling of motion. In his video works, he showed even more immediate effects of the CCTV news broadcast. The video work shows this motif of a “face of the nation” performing “live,” and allows his audience to perceive this reality simultaneously. Zhang’s works during this period depart from those of his contemporaries in terms of both concerns and strategies.

It is clear that Zhang’s video work was created during this social and cultural time of transformation in art. The difference between Zhang and his contemporaries lies in the medium used at this time. The video medium reveals how Zhang responds with a great immediacy to this consumer culture emerging in 1992. Video and new media art, which are time-based, can express the encroaching force of consumerism most dramatically and critically. I suggest that Zhang’s video art is associated with the features of consumer culture—pervasiveness, a sense of being overwhelmed, presentness, simultaneity, and a visual-acoustic reality. These qualities associated with video art best reveal his feelings and reactions to the growth of the consumerist impulse in China.

In addition to the Western influence of consumer culture in 1992 China, the emergence of the global force of institutions (the exhibition and gallery systems) promoting during the time of Zhang’s creation can be seen as an early stage of the
commodification of art in China. In 1993, the Hanart T Z Gallery, based in Hong Kong, organized an exhibition called *China’s New Art, Post-1989*. In addition, between 1992 and 1993, numerous museum exhibitions exhibited the group of artists whose work was labeled “Political Pop” and “Cynical Realism”.\(^{198}\) Several artists—including Zhang—participating in this exhibition were featured in the 1993 Venice Biennale, which was the first time that contemporary Chinese artists were exclusively shown in this largest international biennial.\(^{199}\) The year of 1993 thus is a touchstone for the process of institutionalization in contemporary Chinese art. (Since 1993, contemporary Chinese art largely has appeared in the form of group shows in international biennials and blockbuster museum exhibitions. This process directly affected the way that artists selected their motifs, the medium that they worked with, and the notion of spectatorship in their representation.)

Earlier than the gallery exhibitions in 1993, in fact, the capitalist commercialization of art already occurred in China. In 1992, the art critic Lu Peng, among others, organized *The First 1990’s Biennial Art Fair Guangzhou and China’s New Art, Post-1989*: the exhibition aimed to bring a capitalist context to Chinese art.\(^{200}\) For instance, the exhibition was sponsored by a Chinese corporation based in Sichuan and held in a hotel conference room. Art works displayed in the exhibition were later purchased by a few corporations as a kind of investment. (Before this kind of artistic investment, only real estate and stock had been available for capitalist investment in China.) This exhibition thus departed from China’s traditional, socialist norm of art and offered a bridge to the art market.

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\(^{199}\) See the 45th Venice Biennial catalogue.

\(^{200}\) See more about the background of this exhibition in Lu Peng. *China Art 90s*. (Hunan, China: Hunan Art Publisher, 2000). 124–133.
Zhang’s particular interests in video, which distinguish him from many of his contemporaries, even depart from art as commodity in the context of an exhibition and a gallery. The exhibition provides a chance for him to display his video works, but in general, video art has not been highly valued in the art market. Within the context of the earliest stage of art as commodity, in 1993, Zhang’s extensive use of video was considered peculiar and prompts us to examine another aspect of Western forces revealed in his works. Through the vehicle of TV, one can see just how China responded/did not respond to its encounter with the larger world opened up by capitalism and consumer culture. TV in China, as I previously explained, is a state medium that serves a pedagogical function for the masses. In the flux of the consumer culture which was growing at a dizzying speed, this state TV serves as a kind of fixed point to bring the people back to the “truth of the state.”

Zhang’s work itself can now be seen as an attempt to distinguish the very difference between video installation and television. By employing a famous TV news reader on a TV monitor, he leads the audience to identify her specifically with the TV context in his presentation of this piece of video art. In this video installation, she is reading not the news, but the definition of a word. However, we still think of her as “the news reader.” This highlights the impact of the TV monitor upon the audience’s perception of a figure’s identity as “the face of the nation.” The artist even attempts to de-construct her identity in actual television by creating a new identity that is reminiscent of her national identity. Doing this, he reveals the perceptual and psychological effects of video that are capable of evoking her political identity in “live” form. The audience’s recognition of her as a news reader is not purely a matter

201 Zhang also exhibited his works largely in foreign embassies in Shanghai where he could avoid China’s censorship. China’s traditional system did not support contemporary art. The entire system of art in China was centrally controlled by the government. This system covered the whole structure of art, including the displaying institutions, the art schools, etc. This might have encouraged him to work with video medium. See Wu. 86–7.
of iconography, but is magnified by the presentation of the video installation itself and the representation of this figure in particular ways on the TV monitor. It is important to think of her presentation on TV with all that this media implies.

In the Western tradition of video art, several artists have explored the boundaries between the video medium and television.\textsuperscript{202} There are roughly two strategies for doing this. One strategy is to show the TV monitor displaying special effects; it thus becomes more than merely a monitor. The artists employing this strategy were interested in exploring the perceptual properties of television. The other strategy is to appropriate television for showing one’s videos. Artists following this latter strategy would appropriate television footage, both commercial and political. Zhang’s video installation is conceptually aligned with the latter strategy. By employing a television monitor as a viewing mode, he created a video installation. At the same time, this television frames the performer’s identity in the context of her well-known image as a TV news reader. The artist does not appropriate the materials of TV news footage here. Instead, he creates his own TV news footage.

Zhang’s concern with the boundaries between the video medium and TV is very different, however, from what is usually found in this tradition. His concern reveals the specific nature of TV news in socialist China. His work reveals the instructive nature of “the face of the nation,” which characterizes the political function of TV. Thus, Zhang’s concern with the boundaries between the video medium and TV might generate different issues from those found in the Western tradition.

1957), a Shanghai-based video artist, recorded the footage of a TV news reader in the Shanghai station. He manipulated the footage by creating a close-up view of the news reader without the broadcast context surrounding her. The artist made this figure utter certain words he took from foreign academic books, but her new utterance has the exact same number of words. Both Zhang and Hu were interested in the news readers’ official ways of pronunciation. Unlike Hu, Zhang highlights the context of her identity within a certain necessary setting that sets her firmly into the broadcast context. Thus, in this work, her performance is identical to that of a TV news reader; she seems oblivious to the context of her present “reporting.” In the video, although reading a simple definition, she must display her professional capacity as part of the TV news tradition. In both Zhang’s and Hu’s video installations, the news readers’ act of reading in fact reveals “the standard line” in this tradition. In Hu’s work, the news reader’s “standard line” is identified solely by the way she pronounces the words, a signature of her official identity. This TV news reader seems to inform her TV audience of the coming of the globalist era in Shanghai in 1996. She assumes the linguistic guise of a news reader of foreign words, but still remains true to the socialist tradition.

Song Dong (b. 1966), a video artist based in Beijing, has made a few works regarding TV’s impact upon his daily life. One of them is Clone (ca. 1996) (illus. C.33) in which the artist himself describes the production of the work: “[I] shot myself having dinner and watch[ing] TV, and projected the video image [of the body] on [this place] …. and the body was trying to copy the movement of the video image; [then I shot] shot this again.”203 Within this context of Chinese video art, I show that Zhang’s

203 See Wu and Qiu. 10.
work deals with TV in relation to the political function of CCTV news and the
national identity of the CCTV new reader.

McLuhan proposes an interesting thought concerning the past within the
media-saturated and -mediated society. He refers to our seeing in a kind of “rear-view
mirror”:

When society and the individual are confronted with a new situation,
they will attach themselves to objects of the recent past. We therefore
perceive the present through a rear-view mirror. New media, including
the car and the computer, are initially looked at in terms of previous
technologies, such as the horse-drawn carriage and the typewriter.204

The concept of this “rear-view mirror” helps us interpret the traditional roots of the
official line as revealed in the contemporary reality of Chinese consumerism. China is
marching toward a wider and more open world and to a full-scale acceptance of
Western media culture, but it is also hesitant about losing its old anchors politically.
Zhang’s news reader can be seen as a nervous glance into the rear view mirror, a point
of reference back to the socialist tradition.

Zhang is alarmed about the power of this fixed point in the new, pervasive
global reality. He was born in 1957 and so went through puberty during the Cultural
Revolution (1967–1976). He was influenced by the Marxist notion of an artist in
China, defined there as part of a kind of “vanguard” with the capacity to anticipate the
future and to depict it for the masses in his art. In the 1980s, Zhang had worked with
conceptual art, performance art and other forms regarded as the newest Western
tendencies in China. In the 1990s, he became obsessed with video art. This obsession
led to his exploration of the role of television in the global reality experienced by
China. If the role of television was to help China march into a new world, Zhang’s

204 McLuhan.
video art in fact depicts this and proposes the situation of a fixed point co-existing with this sometimes-frightening new world to his audience. His news reader, with her official image and her harkening back to a pre-global reality, serves as this fixed point for people who feel anxious about the contemporary, global reality.

Zhang is regarded as a pioneer of video art in China; he is among the earliest artists who worked primarily with video art. He is also a pioneer in understanding video art’s unique role in China. Video art explores the boundaries between mass media and art. Since art in socialist China had strong roots in Marxism, it was intimately related to a kind of media for the masses. For instance, printmaking was regarded as a revolutionary tool for the Communist Party, rather than simply as a type of art. When China embraced the Western art style, video art came to play a complex role. Video art is, of course, on one level, an art form. At the same time, from the political and cultural perspective, this artist’s video art and television remain closely associated.
CHAPTER FOUR: INCONGRUITY IN YANG ZHENZHONG’S FOUR VIDEO WORKS

In the previous chapter I addressed the importance of the use of parody in Chinese video art. In particular, Zhang Peili’s parodic appropriation of TV news footage criticizes the scripted nature of TV news broadcasting. His work leads the audience to question the conventional role of TV news as a truth-telling machine as it became influenced by consumer culture and the spontaneity of global broadcasting. Furthermore, Zhang uses parody to demonstrate the differences between video art and mass media products such as TV news. In this chapter, we will see that parody is also central to the works of Yang Zhenzhong, a young Shanghai-based artist, who had been very close to Zhang in Hanzhou and thus was familiar with his earlier video works, including Water. Later, Yang moved to Shanghai and continued his video art work there.

Parody in Yang’s works is not an artist’s appropriation of ready-made material, such as that found in Zhang’s works. Rather, parody is found in Yang’s use of a group of performers to act out certain utterances in front of a camcorder. For instance, in We Are Not Fish, we see three images of mouths on TV monitors speaking the words “We are not fish.” In I Will Die, Yang’s performers utter the words “I will die,” while he records their expressions as they speak. Parody here is found in the use of or repetition of certain utterances among the group of performers. In these works, we see incongruity between the performers’ utterances and their acts: when one performer says “I will die,” he actually smiles. Yang did not direct the performers’ acts themselves, but simply asked his performers to speak the words while he tape-recorded their acts. I suggest that here the artist reveals the subversive function of this incongruity and asks us to note the impossibility of absolute imitation. The performers appear to repeat the same utterance, one after another. However, I will argue that the
incongruity shows the differences within a range of similarity because the performers repeat the same utterance but their actions do not reflect what they say. Thus, I suggest that parody in Yang’s works is identical to the incongruity of parodied context: namely social and cultural convention and repetition of the difference. The artist captures the performers’ incongruity in order to challenge the viewers’ expectations of how each performer should act as he says “I will die.”

Yang’s parodic play of incongruity is different from the intentional misplacement of TV footage that Zhang employs. Unlike Zhang, Yang does not directly incorporate incongruity (namely the subversive function of the parody) into his art, but instead uses the performers’ improvisatory acts to demonstrate this incongruity. Nevertheless, Yang’s parodic play is similar to Zhang’s in a very general sense; both artists use parody to attack convention or custom. However, they express different concerns—surveillance and group opinions in Yang’s case, and censorship and propaganda in Zhang’s. Yang’s video works incorporate performance art and conceptual art within video art: he uses parody to explore the nature of video art itself.

The parody that results from the participation of Yang’s performers is also, to a certain extent, similar to that found in the works of Xu Bing, who invites the viewer to play through the learning of a language as Yang directed his performers to act out according to “his” utterance. Both artists employ the use of language to show the culturally and socially coded act as the conventional norm for that language. However, unlike Xu, Yang attempts to reveal the performers’ acts under the surveillance and watchfulness of the monitor and camcorder. Yang shows us incongruity and directs us to notice that the performers’ acts, in fact, are the result of the forceful intrusion by his camcorder. These acts are not fully conscious and voluntary but rather are scripted and conventional.
In this chapter, I will demonstrate that Yang’s use of parody is associated with specific social and political events that took place at the time he created his works. The incongruity—which confuses and even provokes the audience and creates a rupture in logic and representation—can be interpreted as a sense of danger in terms of survival of the self within the new media culture that Yang experienced. Yang’s parodic play thus can be interpreted as a way for the artist to explore the self of the performer within the proliferation of media culture. In Zhang’s works, the influence of this mass media culture is expressed through the domain of TV news. Yang’s works, however, express the other domain in the reality of mass media proliferation: the consumer culture in Shanghai during the 1990s in which the artist lived and created.

Incongruity Between Performers’ Speeches and Acts

Yang Zhenzhong has worked primarily with video and photographic media. His several video works examine the dissociation between performers’ utterances and their acts. This incongruity, as I demonstrate, creates for the viewer a rupture in logic and representation and leads us to examine the psychological effect of his video art. It also leads us to consider the psychological feeling associated with the incongruous image in the context of monitor and camera.

Fish Bowl (1996) (illus. C.34) is the first work in which Yang addresses contradiction between performers’ acts and utterances. In this video installation, three TV monitors are stacked vertically, and the bottom one is placed inside a fish tank with a couple of small water pumps. On each monitor, a close-up image of a mouth (the artist’s) utters the words “We are not fish” in Chinese. At first glance, the shape and color of the mouths suggest that of goldfish, so that the act performed resembles the act of a fish. This visual resemblance reflects and extends the installation context of water tank and bubbling sounds. Not only does the mouth resemble a fish, the
exhibited environment also suggests water and sea life. On the other hand, the utterance (“we are not fish”) of the “mOUTHS” belies what these mouths appear to express.

Yang Zhenzhong was born in Hangzhou, a suburb near Shanghai. He moved to Shanghai in 1997 after he had created Fish Bowl. After living in the city for three years, he created I Will Die (illus. C.35). For this later piece, Yang asked his performers to say, “I will die” to a video camera while he taped them. First he selected performers from a group of his friends, and then he randomly selected strangers in the street. He unexpectedly and suddenly intruded into these strangers’ lives and asked for their cooperation. In his work, we see that numerous figures of both genders and different ages act within this context. Each figure utters the words in a different way, with a different expression. But virtually all of them smile as they say the words. Here the accompanying facial expression is out of sync with the utterance, suggesting its opposite (“I will not die”).

Two years after I Will Die, in a video installation entitled Do Not Move (2002) (illus. C.36), Yang again explored the notion of contradiction—in this case, in the dissociation of a performer’s speech from his acts. In this work, a male figure’s movements appear in 12 different orientations on 12 monitors. An orientation includes movement in a direction such as up, down, or diagonal. In some of the images, this movement is defined by the blurring of light and the play of shadow on the moving figure. The notion of contradiction occurs here between the figure’s speech and action—each figure moves and, at the same time, utters, “Don’t move.” The figure’s utterance is in opposition to his movement; “don’t move” appears incongruous to what he acts out, which is “I am moving.”

205 Whereas in English we say “I will die,” in Chinese there is no future tense suggested, so the figures are really saying “I die.” This adds a greater sense of immediacy to the performances.
For a recent proposed project, Yang continues to explore the main concept in *I Will Die*, but with a different focus. Here he asks another artist to utter “I will die” in front of a mirror in a bathroom in his apartment every morning when he gets up (illus. C.37). The performer is looking at his mirrored image and engaging in dialogue with “this mirrored I”—the performer’s self-reflection.

Why has Yang been working with this particular thematic concept and these concerns? Upon first viewing, we might understand these two video works in the context of artistic practice and concepts grounded in the Western tradition of art of the 1970s. During that period, artists such as Bruce Newman, Joan Jonas, and others explored ways to incorporate video into their performances. Their video works show the artists as performers who act within the video space. Yang’s works may be associated with this tradition. However, I argue that the purpose of his creation is to capture a contradiction—the performers’ acts and utterances are obviously not in sync; they create a rupture in the represented objects. Thus, this notion of contradiction can be understood as a kind of rupture in logic and representation.

In *Fish Bowl*, the mouth appears sticky, masquerading as the skin of a fish. Yang intentionally creates a visual effect to suggest the similarity between a fish and a mouth: the mouth itself resembles a fish. Furthermore, the enunciation of the utterance “We are not fish” is deliberately slow, so that each physical movement of the speaking mouth resembles that of a fish. This resemblance seems both deliberate and natural. The artist has selected the mouth as a specific vehicle for mimicry and intentionally suggests this similarity to the viewer. This object is primordial and plainly serves its role as an agent of this fish-like image.
Influenced by Rene Magritte’s *This is Not a Pipe* (1928), Yang Zhenzhong added to the conversation by creating “This is Not a Fish” in a video installation.\footnote{After I pointed out this connection, the artist realized this influence. He had been interested in Magritte’s paintings during his college period four years before he created *Fish Bowl*.} Michel Foucault, in his analysis of Magritte’s paintings, suggests that if one takes the claim of the title ‘*This is Not a Pipe*’ seriously, three things emerge: (1) this particular painting of a pipe does not stand for or represent any of that class of objects found in the world, that are called pipes; (2) this sentence itself (“this is not a pipe”) could not represent a pipe; (3) this mixed element of discourse and image, written pipe and drawn text, is not a pipe.\footnote{Michael Foucault. *This Is Not a Pipe*. (Los Angeles: U of California P, 1982). 26–27.}

In the case of this particular resemblance, the mouth looks like a fish but is the organ of a human, not a fish. The sense of hearing is also involved: in this work we hear “we are not fish,” but we see that it is the mouth that says this. A mouth is a mouth, and it cannot possibly become a fish in any sense. Like Magritte, Yang deliberately and meticulously employs a contradiction in his video installation. For Foucault, this contradiction means that visual resemblance and linguistic discourse are in a state of dissociation, creating a rupture in representation. Of Magritte’s painting, Foucault argues that in this rupture we see similitude as a mode of representation rather than of resemblance. Foucault’s notion of dissociation and rupture can be applied to Yang’s works in terms of the performers’ acts and utterances. However, here audio and motion are the agents of dissociation and rupture.

Just as *Fish Bowl* employs multiple monitors, *I Will Die* features 12 monitors displayed in a row. The 12 monitors show the figures simultaneously, and their 12 utterances (at different speeds) echo each other so that, combined, they become almost a kind of chanting. Here, unlike the phonetic units of the utterance in *Fish Bowl*, the
utterances emphasize the phonetic element. The chanting is not in sync with what the figures are acting out (“we are moving”).

Unlike Fish Bowl, presented as a three-channel video installation, I Will Die is a one-channel video work whose 45 snippets comprise a sequence, played as a loop. In it we see 45 male and female persons of different ages, covering roughly each generation: elders, the middle-aged, teens, children, and even an unborn infant in the frame of a pregnant woman. The video begins with the shot of a man in his 30s, shows that of the pregnant woman in the middle and ends with that of a man. When the camera lens zooms in on the first figure, the man faces us and utters, “I will die.” It might be important to note here some details about the production of this work. In 2000, Yang was working with a digital camera and video-editing software on his computer. Here he employs more video technique (zoom-in and -out) than in earlier pieces. In addition, he edited the 45 clips on his computer. The high quality of a digital camera may have enabled him to capture each figure’s facial expression in greater detail in this work.

Each figure in the sequence is filmed against a different background that identifies the place and time of filming. Some of the figures wear their work uniforms such as those of doctor, nurse, police officer, or soldier. The figures’ speech and actions are similar; most of them appear cheerful or playful. Each speaks the same utterance, “I will die,” and acts similar to the others. In this work, each figure utters “I will die” in Chinese. The expressions of the figures in this work are not sad and even appear cheerful. Here we see the contradiction between each figure’s acts and utterance—a contradiction similar to that found in Fish Bowl and Do Not Move. In

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discussing those works, I argued that this contradiction generates a creative dynamism and is an affirmation of the self. But what does the notion of contradiction mean in *I Will Die*?

Yang’s figures utter, “I will die” in different tones; some are playful, cheerful, even theatrical. Even the three elder figures, who might have immediate feelings about the significance of their words, sound somehow playful. Each figure’s act of the utterance matches his facial and body language. For instance, a male figure acts theatrical when he is speaking. He also curls up the fingers of each hand tightly, as though he is aggressively responding to the fear of death. In this sense, each figure’s “I will die” might be understood as an attempt to make death matter-of-fact. Hence, while they say “I will die,” most of the figures look playful and not serious enough. Their utterances seem to describe the truth of “I will die” as fact, in the sense in which Austin might call “I will die” a constative utterance. If this is the case, what is puzzling here is that their cheerful acts are not appropriate to the meaning of the words spoken, and hence do not satisfy the definition of a constative utterance.

Yang explains his inspiration for this work and the role of the camera:

> Every religion talks about the same problem: how to face death calmly. When I ask people to say the line “I will die” in front of my video camera, they all know they are being recorded. Most of the people who perform care about how they look. People always lie to the camera, but “I will die” is the truth. I was interested in the expressions on people’s faces before and after they said “I will die.” None of us are ready to die. We are afraid of death. But life is ephemeral, and death is inevitable. Sometimes, we think of our image as eternal. Maybe this is the reason we invented the camera.209

Here the artist highlights the role of the camera in exploring this universal spiritual and philosophical problem. Unlike the formal influence of Magritte in *Fish Bowl*,

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209 The artist’s statement.
there seems a strong religious or philosophical implication in the utterance of “I will die.” On a different level, this phrase may have religious implications. Between 1992 and 1996, Yang became interested in exploring the notion of death. During that time, having just graduated from college, he stayed alone in a mountain and studied Buddhism and existentialism, both of which are concerned with this notion. In 1994, he did performance work related to the concept of death for the exhibition The Agreement of Regarding November 26, 1994 as a Reason. In this exhibition, each artist needed to create a work related to the particular day of November 26. For his part, Yang Zhenzhong prayed in a public cemetery at the tomb of a person who had died on that date.

Unlike the context in 1996, numerous catastrophic events occurred in China between 1999 and 2000 which caused nationwide feelings of anxiety, paranoia, and dislocation. In 1999, a national tragedy was caused by the U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. The coming of the millennium also amplified national feelings of potential catastrophe. In 2000, the murder of a female college student in Beijing became the focus of mass media attention and generated a great deal of discussion on safety issues. Followers of Falungong, a quasi-religion rampant in China, were violently suppressed by the government. In addition to these domestic events, the Internet boom and China’s entry into the WTO in 2000 generated much anxiety about the influence of capitalist and globalist forces. During that time, the Hollywood movie Independence Day depicted the end of the world. This idea questioned the sovereignty of the socialist state and caused a great sense of instability and fearfulness in China. The momentum generated by these events may have contributed to his preoccupation with death in I Will Die.

210 In the West, this phrase could be aligned with the philosophical tradition, that is, Montaigne: “to philosophize is to learn how to die.”
Furthermore, unlike Yang’s earlier performance piece, I Will Die is a video work. The phrase used reveals the artist’s interest in exploring the concept of death. His discussion seems to acknowledge the seriousness of this issue. However, the performers’ playful, non-serious acts are not what we would expect when we talk about the serious fact of death. In this sense, their expression might be seen as making fun of this convention, expressing a kind of mockery or irony. But this is not the case here. The artist’s statement emphasizes the role of the video camera and people’s speech in front of the video camera; this is turn highlights the role of video in telling the truth in front of the inhibiting camera. This argues against his use of contradiction as an expression of mockery. It also argues against an assumption that each figure could not express his/her truthful feelings about the fear of death because speaking about death is a religious taboo, an unspeakable thing. Instead, Yang wants us to recognize that each performer is filmed in the context of the ever-present camcorder.

Therefore, it is important to explore this appearance of dissociation in light of the camcorder and monitor. In I Will Die, the performers in fact are video taped images; they are conscious that they are speaking in front of the camcorder. It is hence important to elucidate the role of the camcorder for each figure. The figures are involved with the language itself (the utterance “I will die”) in terms of its significance in relation to the whole performance. Does this presence of an inhibiting media explain the notion of the contradiction between speech and facial expression and tone in I Will Die? We also encounter this issue in Fish Bowl. In this work, as per Foucault’s thought, there is a sense of rupture that reflects upon the performers’ out-of-sync acts and utterances. But what is this rupture appearing on the monitors in Yang’s video installations? Since painting is fundamentally different from video, I cannot use Foucault’s notion of similitude without modifying it somewhat. In Yang’s works, dissociation occurs when performers act in a manner not in sync with the
significance of their words. This dissociation creates a sense of incongruity between their speech and actions.

Incongruity and the Condition of Monitor and Camcorder

The video installation *Fish Bowl* presents a fish-like image in the visual-sound context of a fish tank. As a time-based medium, the video shows that the act of the mouth which occurs on the monitor takes place in the present, as if a mouth is swimming in the tank. Thus, the fish-like image on the monitor is intended to be viewed by an audience, and the audience’s perception and interaction are part of the experience. The video monitor metaphorically serves as a frame and is itself suggestive of a fish tank.

With the focus imposed by the monitor, the rupture of the fish-like image creates in the viewer a strong and strange feeling about the mouth itself and its resemblance to a fish. There is a tradition in video art of videotaping mouths up close, starting with Vito Acconci’s *Walk-Over* (a.k.a. *Indirect Approaches*) (1973) (illus. C.38), and continuing with Marina Abramovic’s performance/video work *Breathing In/Breathing Out* (1977). Both artists are associated with the 1970s Western art movement that fused video and performance art. In *Walk-Over*, Acconci speaks while walking around a room, gradually moving closer and closer to the camera, until finally he is so close to it that his mouth is attached to the lens surface. He describes his movements and thoughts as he moves through the room; his utterance is in sync

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211 Yang says: “A long narrow corridor, leading to the camera—at one side, a window—sun streams in, splotches of light and dark, the corridor shimmers. I’m at the far end—walking back and forth, humming, biding my time. Then I talk to the viewer—rather, to a specific viewer: ‘So you’re finally there—I’ve waited for you—you had to be there first.’ I walk around the camera, still humming, talking now and then, but waiting till I’m close before I come down hard. I’m close up—only my lips on screen—too close, blurred: ‘You want to hear about her—her hair is blonde, your hair could never be like hers—she has her own life, I’m interested in what she’s thinking, we could never have had a relationship like this.’ I back off, leave ‘you’ hanging, go back to the other end—but I come back, I don’t leave ‘you’ alone.”
with his act. A close-up view of his mouth appears on the monitor. Since the mouth speaks, this close-up view emphasizes its function as a speaking organ. This work also reveals the tactility of this image, because the monitor renders the function of the mouth immediate and palpable to the audience. Therefore, Acconci’s use of a mouth in close-up demonstrates the power of the monitor or screen as an agent of the “propulsion” of video art, a propulsion aided by both visual and sound elements and by the action in this work.

Yang was certainly aware of Acconci’s explorations around 1996, when Yang was creating his own version of the mouth in close-up. Although Yang was trained in interior design and oil painting at the college at Hangzhou, he quickly abandoned painting after graduating from college and embraced video art. During that period (1992), video was rarely used in art. It was, however, being explored by Zhang Peili, who lived near and was close to Yang. In 1996 and 1997, two video exhibitions were displayed in Hangzhou; Yang’s Fish Bowl was included in the latter. Both exhibitions were curated by Wu Weichung, with the assistance of Qiu Zhijie. Along with curating the exhibitions, Wu and Qiu translated into Chinese several articles on the Western tradition of video art. Yang probably became aware of this tradition on the occasion of the second exhibition. Yet, as he reported in an interview with the author, even before 1996 he had read and learned about video art from Chinese art magazines available to him.

At the 1997 video exhibition, Yan Yinghong showed He Says, She Says, It Says, They Say: Forget it, Don’t Say More (illus. C.39) (1997), a work that explores the mouth and speech. He exhibited five close-up images of a mouth in five monitors stacked in two rows, two on top of three. The mouths speak different words and have no relation to each other. Because they appear in the centers of their respective monitors, the mouth images become the focal point for the viewer. Each pair of lips is
painted in an exaggerated fashion, so that as each mouth speaks the action of its movements is enhanced. Thus, these images appear theatrical and even create a feeling of dizziness and fright for the viewer. The content of the utterances is less important than the material reality of the mouths, an effect which seems to negate the speech function of the mouth, as reflected by the video title.

As in Yang’s work, psychological effects—even sexuality—are implied here, and the purely speaking function of the mouth is minimized. Compared with other Chinese video artists such as Yan, Yang would find the image of the mouth to be particularly attractive during this period. At this time, the book Why Can China Say No first appeared. Its argument was primarily anti-American in terms of exhorting people to resist China’s march into globalization, a process which had already begun, and the book quickly raised nationalist sentiment. Fish Bowl invites us to see either a fish or something else. Its fish-like image appears to provide a feeling of confusion, surprise, and disorientation in the gap between perception and consciousness. The negative expression in the performer’s utterance, “we are not fish,” can perhaps be linked to the 1996 “Say No” movement. Thus, the pervasiveness of nationalism might be an essential association to Yang’s interest in incongruity, an expression of “saying no.” However, the sense of opposition in Yang’s works, as I will demonstrate, is not simply a rejection of Westernization in 1996, but is also a desire to affirm the self.

While producing his video piece during the emergence of Chinese video art, Yang found his own way to create. He borrowed an analog camcorder from a friend. Although camcorders were available for sale at certain electronic goods shops, they were regarded as luxury items. In addition, because professional video editing equipment was available only at a TV station—under governmental control—the artist decided that he would not edit the tape. He performed in front of the camera for as long as the tape lasted—30 minutes. He used a VCR to record a master tape of the
work and to make a three-hour-length tape for exhibition. It is important to note that Yang himself is the performer in this piece; therefore whatever comes out of his mouth, with all of its associations, is particularly relevant. He is the speaking self.

Fish Bowl’s fish-like image commands the viewer’s psychological response to both the object (the mouth) and its act. The analogy to a mouth here is not merely a visual trick, first played by the artist and then recognized by the viewer. It is clear that the utterance “we are not fish” is simple, and we are not in any linguistic bewilderment as to its meaning. The resemblance between fish and mouth determines the artist’s action, which in turn builds a relationship between mouth and fish, an action which Freud would call an “analogous action.” This action does not merely suggest a visual, formal resemblance between a mouth and a fish; it also commands the viewer’s desire to listen to what it is trying to say. The close-up view and the slow speed of its enunciation bring the viewer’s full attention to the mouth; only then does he become aware of the context of the fish tank. The image of the mouth is superimposed on the image of the tank, which conveys the idea of a fish.

Here the rupture between the image on the monitor and the surrounding environment of the fish tank has a strong psychological effect upon the viewer because of the distinction between that which is obvious and apparent, and that which is concealed and metaphorical. There are two levels of meaning in this analogy:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Object:</th>
<th>Action:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manifest—the mouth</td>
<td>Manifest—speaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latent—the fish</td>
<td>Latent—acting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When this analogy appears again and again in its continuous loop, the viewer is solicited to discover the meaning of this latent reference to the swimming fish. The
resemblance between mouth and fish becomes less important than the fact of the mouth (which speaks to us), bringing this analogy into action for the viewer’s desire. At the same time, the viewer’s struggle between manifest and latent thought suppresses his desire to clarify the difference that is confirmed by what he is listening to: “we are not fish,” especially in light of the environment of the fish tank. This rupture orders the viewer’s conscious cognition of this analogy. The ambiguity of the mouth as an ordinary vehicle of speech and as a kind of magnet drawing one’s attention to it is highlighted in this psychological analogy. The action of the mouth and act of the utterance make the speech visible in terms of exposing hidden meanings the viewer is not yet conscious of.

Yang uses the image of the mouth to create a feeling of uncanniness. This strategy is straightforward, employing both the movement of the mouth (directly suggesting the appearance of a fish) and the installation environment (the fish tank). In Li Yongbin’s (b. 1963) series of video works, uncanniness finds its source in the use of the morphing technique. In Face (illus. C.40) (1997), Li videotaped the image of his own face in the mirror and manipulated it by creating the effect of morphing the face. Li’s mirrored image is more active and ever-changing than Zhang’s image.

In Yang’s Fish Bowl, the uttering mouth creates the actions of sucking and blowing—actions strongly suggestive of sexual behavior; the mouth’s movements thus suggest the visual experience of sexual pleasure. The shape of the mouth is exaggerated unnaturally. The mouth itself appears moist and sticky, and its texture is tender, thin, and sensitive, creating the visual impression of a sexual organ. The resemblance of the mouth seems here to be latently tied to that of a sexual organ—a vulva (illus. C.41).

However, the psychological reaction for the viewer cannot be seen only as a result of the visual implication of sexuality, but must also be the feeling of fright that
Sigmund Freud characterizes as “the uncanny”—that which “arouses dread and horror…certain things which lie within the class of what is frightening.” The act that plays on the monitors in time and repeats this uncanny image evokes a strong feeling of fright in the viewer. The close-up mouth on the monitor conveys this feeling immediately. However, the rupture in Yang’s works comes from the feeling of fright evoked by the monitor—revealed not in the image itself, but in the contradiction between the mouth’s acts and utterances. This tension or fright is so intense that the mouth (with lips thrust out) looks as if it might propel itself out of the range of the monitor. In opposition to this “monitoring,” it declares that we are not fish; we are not what we seem to be or what the viewer would have us be.

This notion of the monitor and how we are viewed can, of course, be extended to the camera eye. Although the camera is a recording vehicle, it is also a constraining agent, a “watcher.” The artist is regulated, in a sense, by two eyes: the camcorder and the monitor. Here the notion of watcher is not related to surveillance, covert monitoring, or voyeurism. Rather, the watcher makes the performer self-conscious. Self-consciousness is a result of Yang’s performers being regulated by the watcher.

By 1997, several Chinese video artists were exploring the relationship between camcorder and monitor—the notion of the “two eyes.” Song Dong, in Watching-Monitor (illus. C.42) (1997), reveals this relationship in a very direct way. He uses a surveillance camera to monitor a person’s daily life. Once the person becomes aware of the watching camera, it begins to record, and his self-consciousness begins. Song is concerned with whether the camcorder regulates the actions of its subject by making him self-conscious or whether it merely records events. In Observation (illus. C.43) (1997), Zhang Peili explores the concept of camcorder as mirror. Here a performer

watches his image reflected in the camcorder lens, which serves as both a mirror and a watcher that records the performer’s act of watching himself. The video monitor also functions as a mirror, displaying what the camcorder reflects. Since the monitor shows a close-up view of the performer’s eyes, we experience a strong sensation of gazing or watching. In this sense, the monitor itself functions as a watcher, rather than a mere device to display images from the camcorder. The relationship between camcorder and monitor becomes more complicated. Both Song and Zhang explored the notion of visibility in terms of the acts of watching, recording, and reflecting. This notion focuses on the vehicles themselves, rather than on their influence on the performer, as in Yang’s works. In other words, Song’s and Zhang’s watchers highlight the performance rather than the sense of self-consciousness felt by Yang’s watched performer.

In addition to visibility, Chen Xiaoxiong (b. 1962) explores action and tactility in the relationship between camcorder and monitor. His work *Who Is the Performer?* (illus. C.44) (1996) consists of two parts. In the first, the monitor reveals a hand touching the lens of a camcorder for fifty seconds. In the second, the action pauses, and sounds emerge which, according to the artist, simulate the pulse of the camcorder. Chen suggests the action first by showing a hand and later turning to the camcorder by creating “the simulated pulse.” When the hand moves, the camcorder is still, and vice versa. This work asks: does the hand perform in front of the camcorder or does the camcorder guide the performance? Chen, like Yang, uses this question to explore performance in terms of the relationship between monitor and camcorder.

In *Do Not Move*, the incongruity between the performers’ movements and speech has a strong theatrical and spatial effect in relation to where and when the work was shown—at a public park in the evening. Yang’s use of video here seems to be associated with the tradition of Fluxus and performance art, rather than with video art.
The multiplicity of monitors expands the physical sense of space. What is interesting about this dissociation is that each figure, with eyes closed, appears to speak to himself rather than to the viewer; his utterance resembles self-talk. Together, the figures’ acts seem almost schizophrenic. They compulsively repeat themselves and act in a manner inconsistent with their speech; hence the dissociation between their speech and their actions can be understood psychologically as behavior unmediated by consciousness. Thus, each performance viewed on a monitor creates a psychological feeling in the viewer. When the 12 monitors show the close-up views of the performer’ heads moving in different orientations, each image against its dark background resembles a ghostly spectacle. The result is a strong, theatrical feeling of uncanniness engendered in the viewer.

Two video techniques used in Fish Bowl elicit the feeling of fright: play-back and the use of the monitor, both unique to Yang’s works within the group of Chinese artists discussed here. In this work, the fish-like image rolls on three monitors simultaneously. We see that this sequenced image is made of a snippet (the fish-like image) repeated over time. As each snippet appears on each monitor, it evokes the immediate feeling of play-back. In the snippet, the mouth resembles a fish, yet says, “I am not a fish.” This incongruity becomes immediate as we see it repeated again and again. We are surprised and bewildered, and we feel compelled to clarify what we see and hear on the monitors.

However, this incongruity creates a rupture of this fish-image in the present, because what we see and hear cannot be affirmed—we haven’t made sense of it yet. Our perception and consciousness of the reality of the fish-like image is suspended as we “look back to” clarify the previous snippet. In this context, when the fish-like image plays forward through time, rolling on the monitors, we feel a strong urge to revisit and ascertain exactly what was taking place earlier on the monitor. Three
monitors playing this image simultaneously make this urge very compelling to the audience. The multiple images create a feeling of vertigo that hurls us into a state of bewilderment. Therefore, the rupture can be seen as an agent of “resistance”; we are not yet willing to move forward.

In her seminal essay on video art, Rosalind Krauss argues that “time is understood as a propulsion towards an end.” Writing about Joan Jonas’ Vertical Roll (1972), she notes that “in this work access to a sense of time has come from fouling the stability of the projected image by de-synchronizing the frequencies of the signals on camera and monitor.” In contrast to Krauss’s reading of time as an agent of propulsion, I interpret time in Yang’s works as resistance. If we understand this notion of resistance, we can then clarify the notion of monitor here.

The fish-like images in Fish Bowl are visually in sync with their physical environment (that is, the fish tank), yet they are out of sync with the environment in an auditory sense. Contradiction exists—in each fish-like image itself (the incongruity) and in the images within the environment. The fish-like images on the monitors, by their own pronouncement (“we are not fish”), do not belong in their environment. Thus, the monitors do not assist us in merging this physical environment of the fish tank with the fish identity on the monitor. The “talking fish,” with their denial of fishhood, do not match the fish tank environment. This contradiction between the talking fish and the surrounding environment of the fish tank renders the monitor not a mirror but rather the projection of an ambiguous, unsettled performance.

If the monitor here does not serve as a mirror of the image and its environment, then what is its role in Fish Bowl? The monitor serves as the projector of an act recorded on tape and then displayed. Krauss rightly points out that “unlike the visual

214 Ibid.
arts, video is capable of recording and transmitting at the same time—producing instant feedback. The body [the human body] is therefore, as it were, centered between two machines that are the opening and closing of a parenthesis. The first of these is the camera; the second is the monitor, which re-projects the performer’s image with the immediacy of a mirror.”\textsuperscript{215} This notion of monitor as mirror finds expression in the work of Chinese artists Zhang, Song, Chen, and Li. However, Yang alters this notion. In his works, this feeling of the performer (here the performing fish/artist) bracketed, fixed and absolutely caught between camera and its projected image or the monitor, adds to the feeling of fright. We are tossed back and forth between the two arms of these watchers—camera and monitor.

Thus, we see that Yang presents video installation as a way of revealing the monitor through media (that is, video and monitor) which is reminiscent of his viewer’s experiences of fearfulness associated with the several events mentioned. I interpret the performers’ contradiction appearing on the monitors in light of J. L. Austin’s theory of performative act. This performative utterance suggests that language can be used like an act or an action. I introduce this notion of performative utterance into the video image here to show that the performer’s act is not merely a mirror image of the performance. Rather, it is an affirmative act of the performer’s act through language. Yang’s exploration of video is different from that of Zhang as discussed in Chapter Three. Whereas Zhang explores video in connection with the television image, Yang utilizes video to capture incongruity. His works emphasize the representation of the performers’ subjectivity through the use of video media and monitors. The rupture in Yang’s works produces a feeling of fright in his audience,

\textsuperscript{215} Ibid., 52.
rather than the comic effect which often results from incongruity as employed by Zhang.

**Parodic Repetition**

Yang’s video installations explore the contradiction exhibited by a group of performers whose acts and utterances are out of sync with each other as revealed by the video monitor. This incongruity leads us to explore further the performers’ repetition of the same utterance and expressions on the monitor.

Yang instructed each of his figures to say “I will die” in front of the camcorder while he taped them. He did not direct their facial expressions or their manner of speech, but merely offered them the phrase and placed them into the context of being videotaped. Each performed on the spot, without rehearsal, in a different setting—for instance, one figure sat in her car, and another was videotaped at his job in a police office. There is no implication of artifice or manipulation here in the performers’ manners or dress. Each figure appears unstaged and un-theatrical, without formal dress or makeup; the effect is that of a snapshot or an interview for a documentary about daily life.

Other Chinese video artists have explored the documentary format in the context of the camcorder. In *Expression* (illus. C.45) (1997), Zhao Liang (b. 1971) documents ten performers of different occupations; each was selected to act according to a particular emotion (such as sadness or happiness) suggested by the artist. Zhao recorded each performer facing the camcorder at a fixed angle and certain distance. Watching the video, we see a close-up of each performer’s face and emotional expression. Tong Biao’s *Twelve Sleepers* (illus. C.46) (1993) are unaware of the artist recording them and unconscious of the ongoing situation of interference by Tong. He used a long lens to document each performer sleeping for fifteen minutes. According
to him, the condition of sleep is visually similar to the state of death. Both artists selected a particular group of performers and recorded their expressions and behaviors. Unlike Zhao and Tong, Yang randomly selected his performers from public spaces and asked for their immediate response to the utterance “I will die” in the context of the camcorder placed in front of them. Yang’s notion of the documentary is related to the monitor and observation, and his exploration here reveals the camcorder’s availability for personal use, portability, and potential for yielding unscripted responses.

Although the documentary-like format of Yang’s piece suggests otherwise, each figure’s utterance and act is not a matter of free expression, but is rather part of the process of the formation of group opinion. Arranged and taken as a group, the figures utter the same phrase in sequence. The process seems democratic, in the sense that each individual brings his or her own shadings of expression to the same utterance. However, true, radical differences cannot be seen here. Thus, each figure’s act contributes to a consensus on the utterance “I will die.” During production, the figures had no contact with each other, nor were they aware of each others’ contributions to the piece. Each figure spoke alone in front of the camcorder and the artist. But to the viewer of the monitor showing the work, each figure’s act is taken into consideration and given the weight of a “vote” in this collective “voice.” As a consequence, even though the dominant voice is not socially conventional, and even seems odd, it appears as shared opinion. The performers speak the same utterance; repetitively using or quoting each other’s utterances. Dentith regards this kind of use of language as a parodic imitation:

Imitation is the way in which we learn to speak, taking in, as we do so, not merely a grammar and a vocabulary, but a whole repertoire of manners, attitudes, and ways of speaking. Parodic imitation of another’s words is merely one possibility among the whole range of
rejoinders that make up human discourse, and parodic imitation can itself take many forms...The slang of one generation becomes the target of parody in the next: “hip” and “ace” are long since as comic as “ripping” and “jolly good”, and to use them would be to make yourself subject in this way to mocking laughter.216

According to Dentith, speaking is not merely related to the use of language among a group of people; it also involves the speaker’s selection of an appropriate or conventional attitude in the expression of speaking. In this sense, speaking a language is a kind of parodic imitation of both what to speak and how to speak it. This concept of parodic imitation might apply to our understanding of the performers’ utterance and acts in Yang’s video works: the performers do not merely utter “We are not fish” or “I will die,” but actually perform a parodic imitation of how to speak within the context of camcorder and monitor. Their imitation is the parodic target the artist intentionally creates.

Parodic imitation in I Will Die appears in the repetition of the shared utterance and the similarity of the acts performed. Each figure in front of the video camera seems to perform differently from the others; each act is individual, even though as a group the figures appear playful and non-serious. A very few figures in this work seem passive, but not sad or truly pained. However, the notion of “diversification” among these figures compels us to ask why, as a group, they act so similarly. They seem to share a playful act in relation to the notion of collective self; they even appear to mimic each other.

The performers’ use of utterance illuminates the parodic imitation that Dentith describes as a repetitive process:

It is in discourse, understood in this way as a never-ending to-and-fro of rejoinders, that our understanding of the practice of parody should initially be situated. In this context, parody is but one of the ways in

216 Dentith. 2.
which the normal process of linguistic interaction proceeds. For to speak a language is much more than merely to have a command of its grammar and vocabulary. It entails using these resources to adopt an evaluative attitude—both to the person to whom one speaks, and to the topic of discussion. Thus in addressing those to whom we speak, we take up, willy-nilly, attitudes which, in many different ways, reinforce or contradict our addressees.\textsuperscript{217}

In viewing \textit{I Will Die}, we become aware of this mimicry or parodic imitation among the group of performers. We may now interpret their incongruity as testimony to the media portrayal of events that convey the feeling of fearfulness.

In this social context, such incongruity can be understood as the performers’ critical attitude toward the expected and conventional act of fearfulness under the monitor when they utter the words “I will die.” In the work, performers express themselves cheerfully or, at least, less than fearfully. Since they express themselves in attitudes incongruous to those one might consider appropriate, they adopt a parodic imitation. Dentith furthermore articulates the parodic imitation:

So as we speak we necessarily indicate our attitude to that about which we speak, and towards those to whom we speak: by tone of voice, by the adoption or otherwise of the appropriate politeness conventions, by register and diction, by fitting or unfitting adaptation of speech to occasion. These means permit a remarkable array of attitudes to become apparent in our speech—of complaint or reluctant consent, of eager or truculent agreement, of celebration, of irony, of private reservation, or indeed of any of a hundred such attitudes. Parody, be it of the interlocutor’s speech, or of the speech of some third party, or even of oneself, is one of the ways in which these inevitable evaluations occurs.\textsuperscript{218}

Dentith’s observation is significant for us as we explore Yang’s performers’ adaptation of utterance within the specific context of surveillance and watchfulness.

The incongruity between speech and act reveals their disagreement with obeying what

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{217} Ibid. 2.
\textsuperscript{218} Ibid. 2–3.
\end{footnotesize}
they suppose is expected of them as they speak the words Yang has assigned. He skillfully creates a situation for the performer’s role of watched figure. It is important to understand both the performers’ acts and the artist’s purpose in capturing incongruity; this incongruity is not arbitrary but rather is a result of the artist’s painstaking, conscious representation of his performers under the condition of surveillance or watchfulness. In this sense, I argue that Yang’s works are not concerned with performance art, but can be regarded as a parodic quotation by his performers of the socialist reality of the media. Therefore, we see a contradictory act in a complicated way: each figure’s act is not unique, but is strangely ruled by a standard line associated with parodic imitation. This video reveals that the figures must act in a certain way as they utter the artist’s line before the camcorder. That is, each figure’s act is manipulated by the repetition of the same utterance and the imitation of the supposed act in front of the camcorder.

**The Parodic Context: The Constrained “I” Coming into Being**

My analysis of parodic imitation distinguishes incongruity from comic effect. It also shows the function of incongruity as a way to attack the appropriate attitude of speaking in front of the camcorder. But why is the artist so concerned with the impact of the camcorder? And which aspects of its impact are problematic? We know that Yang’s performers are taped by camcorder, a context in which both the performers’ reception of the utterance and the means by which the figures act out this utterance are determined.

Some theoreticians argue that the camcorder itself imposes self-consciousness. They suggest that the media are not only a distributor of group opinion but also become, through the vehicle of the camcorder, a vehicle of surveillance. Yang’s figures confront the camcorder as the eye of the artist recording them, a surveillance
vehicle of authority. Joan Copjec expands on Sigmund Freud’s view of the camera as a surveillance vehicle:

For all the mirrors, cameras, telephones, microphones, plans, passenger lists, and statistics can be seen as so much social paraphernalia of surveillance by which alone the subject is made visible—even to itself. If we cannot judge immediately what measure of pain or pleasure belonged to a historical individual, this is not because we cannot project ourselves into her subjective position, her private mental sphere, but rather because we cannot so easily project ourselves into her objective social sphere in order to discern the categories of thought that constructed her expectations, narcotized her against disappointment, made her obtuse to her own suffering.219

According to Copjec, the camera—more specifically, the camcorder as used in Yang’s work—can be seen as social equipment for surveillance, making the performers visible. In this context, the camcorder functions to support the visibility of the figures’ public opinion in the social sphere. Here the camcorder is understood in its social role, which empowers the distribution of group opinion, rendering the figures’ opinions visible, publicly and physically. For instance, in 2000, the Chinese government’s regulation of consumerist media was intended to maintain and strengthen socialist values and the “standard line” and to compete with the growing sense of individuality and diversified behavior associated with consumerism. The visibility of public opinion is bestowed by society, not personally determined. Each performer is made visible through the media. It is important to note that Yang’s choice of the camcorder here added a specific sense of “I” to the acts of his performers.

Furthermore, applying Michael Foucault’s observation on the similarity between Panopticon and the fact of being an “I” (when seen by an “eye”), feminist

theoreticians argue that the visibility of femininity, for instance, is bound up with the reality of being watched by an authority:

The dissociation of the self/being seen dyad (which the panoptic arrangement of the central tower an annular arrangement ensures) and the sense of permanent visibility seem perfectly to describe the condition not only of the inmate in Bentham’s prison but of the woman as well. For defined in terms of her visibility, she carries her own Panopticon with her wherever she goes… 220

In line with this feminist view of women as marginal figures representing themselves under the eye of authority, in Yang’s work, the performer’s subjectivity can be made visible precisely in the context of self-consciousness so that the subject becomes prey to the camcorder as “eye” or mode of surveillance. She watches herself being watched by males. The camcorder is an important agent of this performance. Here, the notion of surveillance is bound up with self-regulation, control, and analysis; hence this act of being watched negates the individual’s actual will and the potential occurrence of desire. The point for the discussion of surveillance here is that the figure constructs her own image, an image of “I” in this context. This “I” is associated with authority-sanctioned performance. What is important to note in the construction of this “I” is that the performer is prey—the marginal “I” watched by surveillance. In the context of my discussion of surveillance, we see there is a self (albeit a paired, constrained self) added to each figure’s performance.

The notion of “surveillance” here might be related to Western new media culture in Guy Debord’s sense of a kind of “spectacle society” and in Jean Baudrillard’s sense of simulacra. Yang moved to Shanghai in 1997, a year after he created Fish Bowl. At the same time, China’s traditional power of surveillance entered

into the arena of the visual spectacle of new media. These notions of “surveillance” co-exist in the daily reality of China’s people; they are contradictory and incongruous. Shanghai is a major location for the promotion and distribution of both political propaganda and consumerist values of diversification within the context of new media culture. Billboards are one example of this. The visual impact of billboards everywhere helps to regulate the citizen to ensure that he “buys” these consumerist values. Inspired by his experiences living in Shanghai, Yang deals with the concept of the self as it reflects upon the city—itself a kind of surveillance machine.

Living in Shanghai, the most advanced, globalist city in China, the artist reported that the self there is isolated and disoriented. The solidity of the socialist collective self naturally and necessarily becomes loosened, and the notion of a new, individual “self” emerges. In this context, in *I Will Die*, the artist asks each performer to act individually and utter “I will die;” he emphasizes each “self” within the group of people. However, the three mouths of *Fish Bowl* (1996) represent the notion of the collective as they utter the words “We are not fish.”

Yang’s awareness of surveillance is unique to Chinese video artists, who have addressed the notion of surveillance in three major ways. Some have used the camcorder in the conventional and strict sense of surveillance; they covertly record their subject matters’ private moments and individual behavior. In *Bathroom* (illus. C.47) (2000), the artist Cui Xiuwen (b. 1968) shows the behavior of women in front of a water sink and mirror in a restroom. Cui hid in the restroom of a nightclub in order to secretly record the women working there. His use of surveillance helped him capture the women’s natural manner. The artist uses a peephole—a voyeur’s lens—to show the females’ behavior on the monitor.

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221 I interviewed the artist on the Internet and telephone.
Some artists inform the subject that they are being videotaped, although they conceal the location of the camcorders to make their subject unaware of them. Xu Tan (b. 1957), for instance, in *Making in China* (illus. C.48) (2000), recorded the daily life of a mistress. He captured her exercising and gossiping with her friends about her feelings on becoming a mistress. Xu also recorded a gay man’s sexual behavior in the man’s bedroom. The artist presented these narratives on an interactive CD-ROM. Viewers were able to browse and discover various pieces of narratives that the artist recorded through the covert camcorder. Each narrative is presented through the lens of a peephole, and the viewer experiences a voyeuristic pleasure.

Still other artists make the audience aware of the surveillance camera. In *Comparative Safety* (illus. C.49) (1997), for instance, Hu Jieming installed a surveillance camcorder in the hallway of the exhibition and a monitor inside the exhibition space. When the audience entered the space, they were invited to view images currently being captured by the surveillance camera on the monitor.

Unlike the works of these artists, Yang’s depiction of performers is not covert. I suggest that the notion of surveillance in Yang’s video can be interpreted as both open monitor on a monitor and observation, a broad notion of surveillance which does not involve a sense of covertiness. He uses the effects of zoom-in and out on the performer to direct the viewer’s attention to the performer himself and to the camcorder’s presentation. He intentionally reveals conscious and unconscious reactions to the camcorder. Utterance here is not for communication’s sake, but is like an act, a ritual—ceremonial behavior in the context of the camcorder.

The 1997 video installation *Objects* (illus. C.50), by Qiu Zhijie (b. 1969), conveys the notion of observation but departs from Yang’s concerns and strategy. Qiu placed five monitors around an extremely dark gallery space. The monitors were designed to show images in a sequence. From the first monitor, the sounds of striking
a match are heard, and a figure’s partial face, with a close-up view of his right eye, simultaneously appears in the dark background. Then the four images on the remaining monitors are followed by four other images: a toy, a boot, a letter, and old revolutionary artifacts illuminated by the lighted matches. After the flames die out, the images are overtaken by the dark. The artist related this work to his memories of the older generation’s socialist past. Qiu uses eyes in the first monitor as a metaphor for the rediscovery of socialist artifacts, seen temporarily illuminated on the other four monitors. The close-up of the eyes and the lit match in the dark background strongly suggest the examination of these objects’ symbolic associations. Qiu’s presentation thus differs from Yang’s direct concern with “eyes” as metaphor for the camcorder itself.

In I Will Die, Yang uses video to watch his performers to see whether they reveal video’s traditional role in society. The meaning of surveillance here is similar to the official line in the name of authority. Each subject reflects upon the exterior object (the camera) under the condition determined by authority (having to say certain words). The performer’s subjectivity is conditioned to mimic a supposed act that reflects the institutional function of the camcorder rather than the performer’s desire or free will to accomplish what and how to say and act. The subjectivity of each performer is formulated by the given context (that is, the regulations and demands of authority), which suppresses the performer’s voluntary intentions (that is, I do what I want to do and say what I want to say). In this sense, the performer’s subjectivity is lost in the context of surveillance because surveillance represses the figure’s free will and requires him to perform according to the conditions of authority. Thus it becomes clear how the contradiction between the liberation that it promises and the constraints

it imposes is responsible for the loss of subjectivity. This loss of subjectivity is the target of the parodic imitation in Yang’s works and symbolically implies the performer’s presence as the constrained, sanctioned “I,” which usurps the role of a more authentic “I” to free being.

Then how does this loss of subjectivity become the artist’s focus? To answer this question, we must explore the social reality of mass media at the time Yang created his pieces. In 1996, video art was just emerging. This emergence was conditioned by a complicated cultural reality. Later on, China became even more open to globalization in terms of its connection with the international system of trade and the virtual world of the Internet. China joined the WTO and thus was responsible for carrying out the liberation of international trade. In 2000, the Internet was booming in China. IBM and Intel, transnational, advanced technology corporations, prompted a new consumerist world in China. (In Chapter Three, I discussed the international flow of information as it was reflected on CCTV news broadcasts. There I examined its impact, as revealed in Zhang Peili’s works.) Even though the presence of new media in China has been regarded as a sign of the nation’s democratic and liberal progression from socialism, the media have also traditionally been used as a vehicle of surveillance, capable of negating each individual’s actual freedom of speech and act. The new media hence expose each individual to a new model of regulation and observation by the controlling authority. Therefore, the issue of self or subjectivity appearing on the monitor in China becomes very compelling.

Within this new media reality, the transformation in the 1990s of the government from an authoritarian to a more-open system changed how people spoke and acted. Although speech and act in daily life were unregulated by the government, a great deal of social regulation existed. Thus the idea that there was in fact absolute free speech may be false. The Chinese still may have lived in a bracketed reality.
However, there was a rupture in this newly opened world. In 1996, during Yang’s creation of Fish Bowl, radical nationalism revived the pure, powerful notion of the collective consciousness fighting against consumerist individualism. Why Can China Say No reveals the national sentiment which pervaded all of China at that time. This promotion of national identity was reflected in a number of best-selling books—advertisements for domestic products—which followed the publication of Why Can China Say No, a book which exhorted people to resist China’s marching into globalization, a newly emerging cultural universe which had already been shaped.\(^{223}\)

The intellectual community was also worried about the growing impact of this national sentiment because of its potential to return China to the autonomous view of the socialist world.

The increase in radical nationalism and the feelings of impending catastrophe associated with the year 2000 contributed to a surge in socialist propaganda which, of course, regulated the diversity of responses. In 1999, the national tragedy of the embassy bombing created a strong sense of nationalism pitted against global imperialism, with the goal of forming a unified “voice” against global forces. Between 1999 and 2000, the violent suppression of the Falungong brought about the socialist regulation and suppression of dissidents. (The secret police used digital equipment to document their activities.) If we understand China as a police state, we inevitably think of surveillance throughout the land, through the use of spy cameras or hidden cameras and monitors. In some cases, surveillance is not obvious but may still cause people to fear being monitored by the authorities. In other cases, surveillance methods become visible, with the result that people become cautious in what they do and say. When China became capitalistic and globalized, surveillance may have increased even

\(^{223}\) See more about the cultural responses to this nationalist sentiment in Dai. 166.
further, with the result that the Chinese had to deal with both government monitoring and the regulation of thought and values imposed by the Western media.

The rise of nationalist sentiment was in part a reaction to the rapid, widespread embrace of capitalism and globalization both domestically, in the cultural arena, and internationally, in the political arena. In an analysis of an advertisement related to socialist national identity, Dai Jinhua noted: “while the advertisements display a type of national sentiment, they also conceal a more truthful political-cultural conflict within the domain of economics, the oppositional (or even life-and-death) struggle between the transnational corporations and national industries and the welfare of laborers.”

The forces of nationalism transfigured even consumerist media such as advertisements in order to promote nationalist sentiment. The political function of mass media as propaganda was brought to the fore in the public sphere, where appealing representations of nationalism were made: thus the public habit and attitude of saying “no” to almost everything—except the government. I suggest that Yang’s parodied target is associated with the reality of nationalism and other specific events, rather than with art itself.

**Incongruity and the Audience’s Expectation**

The performers’ parodic imitation of the scripted act results in incongruity. For Margaret Rose, this parodic incongruity functions as the artist’s strategy for questioning imitation:

> A history of parody will show [...] that some parody has been used to bring the concept of imitation itself into question, and that it is the structural use of comic incongruity which distinguishes the parody

224 Ibid.
from other forms of quotation and literary imitation, and shows its function to be more than imitation alone.225

The incongruity in Yang’s works conveys not the comic effect Rose suggests, but rather a heuristic effect. This heuristic effect of the incongruity subverts the audience’s expectation of seeing performers’ utterance and act as congruous to the scripted one. This incongruity emphasizes the problematic nature of the imitation or scripted act.

Furthermore, in her analysis of incongruity in parody, Rose observes that incongruity involves the awareness of the role played by the audience. She notes:

[…] parody does not just let the parodied text “glimmer” through its own text or “level” […], but first sets up the text to be parodied (by imitation or partial quotation, or by way of other such devices) so that the reader will expect it, and then produces another version of it which the reader does not expect and which sets up some incongruous contrast or comparison with the original work.226

Rose’s observation is based upon Hans Robert Jauss’s analysis of the use of parody in Don Quixote. In his analysis, Jauss highlights the awareness of the role played by the raising of audience expectations and the function of parody in making the audience aware of this role. Furthermore, Rose reminds us that a text may help establish and then subvert the expectation of its readers.227 In Yang’s works, incongruity may have this subversive function for the viewer of the performers’ utterances and acts. I suggest that he sets up the text of group opinion to be parodied and then to be questioned by the audience.

In Yang’s video works, the performers’ repetition of the same utterance suggests that they form a group opinion. Jacques Ellul, in Propaganda, discusses the

225 Rose. 31.
226 Ibid. 171.
227 Ibid. 171.
notion of the majority and the standard line in group opinion. For him, the formation of group opinion is a \textit{democratic} but not a \textit{liberal} process:

\begin{quote}
\ldots such primary groups are spontaneously democratic. In fact, opinion is formed directly, for the individuals are directly in contact with the events that demand their participation. Once formed, this opinion is expressed directly and known to everybody. The leaders of the group know what the group opinion is and take it into consideration; they have contributed amply to its formation. But these groups are by no means liberal; minorities within them appear as foreign bodies—for in a relationship such as this, opposition weakens inter-group communication.\textsuperscript{228}
\end{quote}

Applying Ellul’s argument, we may see the snippets of individual utterance and act as a kind of democratic formation of group opinion. It is democratic because each figure’s act is slightly “diversified” compared to the others but remains within the larger context of similarity. It is important to note, however, that this diversification is not at all liberal. These figures’ “diversified” acts are inclined toward the dominant attitude of the majority. Thus, very few of the acts presented express the more toned-down, uncheerful attitude of the minority. The notion of the minority/majority is extremely important here: the act of the minority would be relatively close to that usually associated with the conventional attitude toward death, but in this context it appears unconventional and atypical. This twist of the conventional to the atypical emphasizes the problem of the formation of group opinion and uncovers the power of the majority in that formation.

The notion of self within the context of group opinion is associated with a plural rather than singular sense in terms of Yang’s group of performers. This self seemingly is associated with “us” as shown as the figures’ collective self, which is revealed in the formation of their group opinion. An example of this is the cloning

\begin{footnotesize}
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technique used as a way to duplicate an individual self in a collective way. In 2000, Chinese scientists successfully cloned a panda embryo after many years of experimentation. A great debate ensued in the political and religious arenas about the potential danger of this technique. The application of cloning techniques could strengthen the government’s power to regulate privacy and individuality. The reality of cloning challenged preconceived notions of life—and the after-life—and anticipated the concept of human being as the sum of its biological parts or as machine. The “I” was technologically duplicable, and the notion of “us” carried different implications.

Since group opinion can serve as a primary vehicle for socialist propaganda, it is associated with video media and its long-standing political tradition. To understand Yang’s work in the context of group opinion, we must first consider the role of propaganda in socialist China and its association with publicly accepted opinion in mass society. In I Will Die, the snippets of the figures with their similar acts seem to convey the acceptable opinion in the community formed by their joint utterance. Each figure repeats the same utterance in a different voice and tone, offering a base for the group opinion. Most figures cheerfully and playfully act out this utterance, identifying themselves with the dominant attitude, whose formation is based on a total of 45 individuals (the performers). Forty-five people is a number sufficient to convey a sense of the mass collective. In this group, each individual member’s expression is, to a certain extent, similar to the others, reducing the appearance of actual diversity. Even though each figure seems to act “diverse” in the sense of being a part of a democratic grouping, each act can be understood to reveal the opposite of a truly liberal spirit. However, in I Will Die the performers face authority in two ways: (1) the artist is the authority for whom the figures perform, and (2) the performers are watched by the camcorder while they act as they were invited to. Understanding each
figure’s act in the context of authority, we see that each is performed partially according to authority, not absolutely according to individual will. Thus, an individual’s self is minimized to match that of the collective, and thus is negated in terms of expressing his or her free will within that collective.

Yang establishes a parodic text here related to the mass media tradition of the street interview. Each subject is captured in the context of his or her everyday environment, and the direct contact with the camcorder evokes the experience of a TV interview. Chinese TV programs have been the primary mode for revealing the relationship between media and the propaganda machine. In the late 1990s, with the advent of new technologies and policies for television, several programs began to present street interviews, inviting the audience to talk about the problems of the interviewees. This problem-solving or sharing resulted in a new type of group opinion formation. Through the national broadcast of such programs, such formation became immediate and simultaneous—geographic boundaries ceased to exist.

Technical boundaries were also eliminated as a result of the easy duplication of the video image, which contributed to the increased role of mass media as a vital tool for the distribution of so-called group opinion to the masses. The relationship between mass media and propaganda used to be primarily evident, for instance, in the broadcasting of free movies in public spaces in the 1970s, and through TV after the 1980s. The evolution and expansion of mass media is significant here because it is an institutional support for propaganda. (See my discussion of this with regard to CCTV news in Chapter Two.) In addition, the explosive growth of the Internet in China in 2000 broadened the platform for information outflow, by which the Chinese world could potentially open up and become dramatically diversified. The influence of the Internet pervaded many aspect of an individual’s life and extended the domestic notion of time and space to a simultaneous and interactive global reality. As a result,
the government grew cautious: censorship and surveillance became “balancing forces” for the so-called overwhelming and misleading flow of information. Hence, video in this work represents the institutional support for group opinion in this community of collective users and exchangers of information. In this context, the audience would expect to see the performers’ similarity and their scripted acts as parodic imitation.

But the viewer comes to realize that the incongruity in the performers’ acts and utterances reveals the constraints imposed by the occasion of those utterances. Each figure’s act is “diversified,” but taken as a whole the acts are actually quite uniform and scripted. This group consensus, in a way, is determined by the controlling eye of the artist. On one level, Yang controls the consensus by having selected these forty-five snippets from a larger group (some of whose performers might not have appeared so unbothered by the prospect of their own mortality). On another level, he controls by arranging the snippets for the final work. As Ellul points out about groups, “there is no equality; the members accept leadership, and of course small groups also recognize instituted authorities…” In this case, the “instituted authority” is the artist. Dissociation in the group is related to a collective notion of “the truth,” ruled and dominated by the group leadership (the artist, in this case). The artist’s “command” regarding the figures’ utterances and acts determines each figure’s individual utterance and act. The performers must meet with the artist’s request, so their acts would be expected by the context of the work to follow the artist’s “command” or “script” and respond to the audience’s expectations. Hence, each figure is forced to play out the mimicry scripted by the “authority.” This uniform mimicry evokes the traditional context of the video device as a mechanism of surveillance.

229 Ibid.
Since the opinion expressed here is based on the dominance of the majority within the group of performers, it automatically imposes itself on this group as its “voice.” This notion of majority is readily apparent to the viewer as the mimicry expressed by these figures’ similar performances. Here Yang’s figures—of different ages, genders, and professions—together represent a comprehensive collection of people whose opinion is publicly acceptable and applicable as a standard line. The utterance “I will die” plays a vital role in the formation of this group opinion; the significance of this utterance is both a convention and an experience common to all. No figure has any difficulty understanding its meaning or conveying his opinion through his act. Thus the group opinion contradicts the notion of the media as a purely democratic device for free expression or a documentary tool for recording people’s honest, unrehearsed expressions.

In this context, I argue that the dissociation between speech and act can be understood as a heuristic strategy for inquiry into the fact of inequality in the formation of group opinion. On one level, the contradiction reveals the nature of the media itself. The camera in China functions not only to register but also to manipulate in some cases. The contradiction between the figure’s acts and utterances transcends mockery and humor. The figures seem truthful in saying “I will die,” even though they seem non-truthful; in front of the camcorder/authority, they are giving the only possible response. In reality, they subvert this truthful fallacy.

The Purpose of Parodic Incongruity: The Affirmative “I” within a Bracketed Reality

Parody in Yang’s works involves the heuristic function for the audience, as previously demonstrated. I suggest that, furthermore, parody also involves a therapeutic function associated with the constrained reality of government control and
watchfulness. Is the self denied or affirmed in this bracketed reality? I argue that in Yang’s works, it is affirmed. The rupture in the performer’s acts and utterances creates a sense that the artist is playing within the constraints. We see that the performers’ incongruity implies saying “no” and thus demonstrates their self-determination against the constraint for the audience. The artist may have slowly begun to flex his own “no” muscles at the time when China opened up its media culture. The affirmation of the self as a result of the incongruity in parody is therapeutic, rather than actual, because this affirmation occurs in art and invokes the awareness of the audience’s will in art, rather than in real life. But how is the performer’s act affirmative?

In Fish Bowl, the figure utters, “We are not fish.” This utterance explicitly expresses his will not to be associated with the fish tank and the visual resemblance to fish. The figure’s acts and utterances are not in sync. Thus the figure declares that he is human, not fish. His act is speaking, rather than imitating a fish swimming. This ambiguity creates dynamism within the constraint.

For J. L. Austin, this type of utterance (the incongruity) is not constative because it does not express the truth. Rather, Austin would consider this both an “unhappy act” and an “unsuccessful act.” In his book on the theory of performative act, Austin first explains a “happy act” as the following: “besides the uttering of the words of the so-called performative, a good many other things have as a general rule to be right and to go right if we are to be said to have happily brought off our action.”230 Then he describes an “unhappy act:”

What these are we may hope to discover by looking at and classifying types of cases in which something goes wrong and the act—marrying, betting, bequeathing, christening, or what not—is therefore at least to some extent a failure: the utterance is then, we may say, not indeed false but in general unhappy. And for this reason we call the doctrine of

230 Austin. 14.
the things that can be and go wrong on the occasion of such utterances, the doctrine of the Infelicities.231

The speaking mouth exhibits the conventional function of a mouth in both speech and act. The artist skillfully plays with this ambiguity and incorporates this play into the physical environment of the fish tank. Thus, when the tape rolls, the “speaking mouth” on the monitor in the environment of a fish tank creates a rupture of perception and consciousness in the viewer because the act of speaking is not absolutely associated with the concept of a fish. The performance of the mouth becomes an inappropriate action in the environment with which it is visually associated. The rupture thus becomes an agent of unsettling dynamism added to this work. A creative energy awakens us, prompts us to take note, in this dynamism of the incongruous.

On another level, affirmation also occurs in stating “we are not fish.” Emile Benveniste argues that language constructs the subjectivity of a person both in the context of his/her use of language and in the condition and reception of the language he or she uses:

…. It is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a subject, because language alone establishes the concept of “ego” in reality which is that of the being.

The “subjectivity” we are discussing here is the capacity of the speaker to posit himself as “subject.” It is defined not by the feeling which everyone experiences of being himself….but as the psychic unity that transcends the totality of the actual experiences it assembles and that makes the permanence of the consciousness. Now we hold that “subjectivity,” whether it is laced in phenomenology or in psychology, as one may wish, is only the emergence in the being of a fundamental property of language. “Ego” is he who says “ego.” This is where we see the foundation of “subjectivity,” which is determined by the linguistic status of “person.”

231 Ibid., 14.
Applying Benveniste’s thought, we can understand the performer’s use of language as the constitution of the performer’s subjectivity. In this context, the artist is asserting that there is another subjectivity—we—that refuses to be part of the surrounding environment.

The artist is, in a sense, refusing to play the role of “fish,” refusing to spout the party line. In addition, the fish image, with its very slowly moving lips, suggests an undeveloped, unlively state, which the artist refuses to identify with. In this case, refusal is affirmation, and in saying “we,” the artist includes the audience in this act of affirmation.

Although Yang’s fish imagery suggests an undeveloped state that the artist is moving away from, it also has more positive associations. One can say that in totality, the fish imagery and environment also suggest our first stage of life as humans. The purpose of saying “no” as revealed in the performers’ utterances “We Are Not Fish,” and “Do Not Move,” is to exercise the power of “no” and to say “no” also to the government. It thus becomes a “yes” to the influence of the global culture which the artist has experienced during China’s move toward globalization in the 1990s. The camcorder has a double identity in China (its use is free for individual enjoyment but it is a tool for regulating dissidents.) The artist uses this power to say “no” to being regulated and to say “yes” to his own free, open functioning. This power perhaps symbolizes the first stages of life of a potentially free being in the wider world opened up through globalization.

As in I Will Die, in Fish Bowl the speaking mouth can be seen as a metaphor for rebirth. The action of the mouth creates sounds that resemble phonetically structured utterances, which are similar to glossolalia: the water in the fish tank also creates some babbling sounds that are superimposed on the utterances. The earlier discussion of the association between the image of the mouth and the vulva perhaps
imply a primordial association; this “fish like” image swimming in water naturally evokes the image of the foetus swimming in amniotic fluid. We are at the very first stage of something—pre-birth. The mouth suggests both the baby itself and the gateway (vulva) through which the baby will enter the outside world. We have not only the image of the gateway and the infant itself—this image also suggests a “baby mouth” first learning to talk. Through its connection with the sexual organ, the mouth actually symbolizes an infant.

Julia Kristeva argues that an infant is not entirely devoid of the uses of language. The language that an infant deploys is associated with raw units or elements of which a language will be made—for example, an infant might make the sounds of sucking and blowing to express himself. For Kristeva, this language needs to be understood as socially acceptable speech. These sounds, then, cannot be understood as mere noises, but as a “language” she calls the semiotic chora or the process of semiosis. What is important in these sounds is that the movement of this infant’s mouth in the use of this language is associated with that which creates pleasure for this infant sucking at the mother’s breast. The theory of language as it pertains to an infant helps explain Yang’s selection of fish and fish tank. These are not arbitrary elements in this work but significant symbols for understanding the phonetic role of language in this work. This work illuminates the phonetic units as a kind of infant language. Here, the mouth is not merely revealing sexual pleasure for the viewer, but is symbolic of an infant and his tongue utterances, his “baby talk.”

Focusing on the phonetic element of the utterance, one infers that the mouth, which looks like a vulva, symbolizes the infant. The bubbling sounds from the fish tank recalls, in this context, the infant’s manifest sounds of babbling. The dissociation

between the mouth’s utterance and the action producing that utterance suggests an infant’s first utterance (which might be similar in some ways to the schizophrenic’s). This utterance is repeated again and again, suggesting the figure as schizophrenic in a sense.

In *I Will Die*, the dissociation between the mouth’s speech and acting in fact becomes a kind of “language” of sounds and tones. This “language” is not associated with mimicry (the saying and acting are not in sync), but calls for the viewer to be conscious of the speaking body (the performer’s mouth) and the drive that directs him to say and act (the phonetic units of the utterance), as well as of a listener who hears (babbling sounds). The act in this dissociation reveals the performer’s capacity to speak for himself—(his “baby talk” perhaps reveals basic needs.) Therefore, Yang here, the “speaking mouth,” is not only himself, but also the collective masses. The utterances suggest “we” as a group, rather than single members of that group. In the post-Tiananmen world of 1996, when his work was created, the artist had to learn perhaps to speak his own truth from scratch. Just as a baby’s talk—unmanipulated by civilization and authority—is the most basic, truthful talk, so does the artist meet the challenge of truthfully expressing his needs and thoughts.

Yang’s video works imply the representation of the self within China’s political and cultural reality. Concern regarding the self also prompted other Chinese artists to work with the video medium through various perspectives. For instance, to make *Touch* (1995) (illus. C.51) Tong Biao (b. 1970) wore a camera on the back of his waist, creating an “eye.” He walked around Hanzhou, a suburban city near Shanghai, and recorded people’s contacts with him. In his work, we see that this contact is sometimes isolated, and sometimes intimate. His work depicts the relationships among people living in this city, which had recently become busy and crowded. More important, his video work addresses the notion of a self within this reality—an
alienated self or regulated self. Yang and Zhong did not use the camera, in a strict sense, as a monitor that scrutinizes the performance. Their works, however, do express an unsettled and constrained feeling.

Yang was alarmed about the resurgence of radical nationalism in 1996 because it revived the socialist tradition and advocated for its reinstatement regardless of whether it was compatible with the new world. Radical nationalism placed the artist and his generation in a bind between socialism and consumerism. He could not live without either one. Born in 1968, he had not deeply experienced the feverishness of nationalism during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). “Red China” was the so-called the center of the world. However, he was a teenager during the period of China’s open door to Western modernization in the 1980s, and the time of rapidly growing capitalist consumerism and globalist telecommunications in the 1990s. The “Say No” movement of 1996 prompted him to examine his cultural roots and to respond to them. He adopted the public habit of saying “no” and used it for self-affirmation in his own work.

I suggest that the incongruity in I Will Die can be interpreted as an affirmation of the self, a therapeutic awareness played by the audience. Yang’s performers face the camcorder directly as they say “I.” Speaking can construct an awareness of subjectivity (“I will die”). It is clear that there are two senses of “I” in this work: the figures’ use of language, and the self-regulation imposed by and watched by the eye of authority. But in his earlier statement about the individual facing the camera and uttering the phrase “I will die,” the artist fails to highlight one major point—each figure’s use of language per se. Thus we must return to the incongruity of the figure’s acts and utterances to examine another notion of contradiction in this work.

The acts and utterances here are out of sync with each other. When the figures speak the phrase “I will die,” they do not act sad. Their acts do not reflect the content
of their speech. More important, the use of language can construct the speaker’s self. Thus, the “I” directly refers to each performer himself. The discussion of this “I” in I Will Die must emphasize the figure’s use of language, including verbal and body language, which is an agent of his or her self-conduct. Benveniste notes:

There is no concept “I” that incorporates all the I’s that are uttered at every moment in the mouths of all speakers, in the sense that there is a concept “tree” to which all the individual uses of tree refer. The “I,” then, does not denote any lexical entity…. We are in the presence of a class of words, the “personal pronouns,” that escape the status of all the other signs of language. Then, what does I refer to? To something very peculiar which is exclusively linguistic: I refers to the act of individual discourse in which it is pronounced, and by this it designates the speaker. It is a term that cannot be identified except in what we have called elsewhere an instance of discourse and that has only a momentary reference. The reality to which it refers is the reality of the discourse... And so it is literally true that the basis of subjectivity is in the exercise of language.233

The utterance of “I will die” claims the capacity of the figure to posit himself as a subject. The performer becomes aware that he accrues some power as the “I” in “I will die.” In other words, when the performer utters “I will die,” it is not intended to describe the rightness or wrongness of the utterance as a fact. Nor does it serve as a joke played by the performer. It can be understood as an act of self-conduct by the performer, who says “I will die.” Contrary to the “I” in surveillance, each figure’s “I” in this context of language discovers the outlet of subjectivity through choosing how to perform within the context of authority. Each figure finds himself/herself through the context of using language.

Through their speech, the performers become aware of “I” and “die” in terms of the subjectivity of a speaking individual in the context of the use of language. By using language, the performers construct “I”—the powerful “I.” Yet, to “die” means to

233 Benveniste. 226.
In the work, the figures respond immediately to the camcorder. This brings an immediate, present feeling to the act. Here it is important to distinguish the expression from the act. While the expression reflects the figures’ appearances—looking cheerful or at least undisturbed, the word “die” does not function to carry the cheerful expressions alone. The “I” is not being built up but is instead dissolving here because the statement ends with the word “die.”

In I Will Die, we see Yang moving toward a greater focus on this loss of self. Here, subjectivity is lost in the context of video medium and the use of language; in Fish Bowl the artist was also concerned with the self. In I Will Die, he is more directly inclined toward the construction of self because each figure says “I will die”; the self is singular and personal. In Fish Bowl, the phrase is “We are not Fish”; the self there is plural and collective. Unlike the phrase “We are not fish,” the phrase “I will die” does not include a negative, even though both phrases convey a constrained reality. The statement in Fish Bowl is neutral, whereas the statement in I Will Die has religious, philosophical, and linguistic implications. Why at this point (2000) did this status of the self become a more pressing issue for Yang?

Between 1997 and 2000, Yang created several video installations based on the theme of the changing face of Shanghai. Each of these works conveys a strong sense of isolation—even schizophrenia—which reflects the artist’s disassociation with the city’s rapid transformation into a media-saturated metropolis. For instance, Do Not Move was exhibited in a public space in Shanghai. The performers’ “Do not move” might refer to Shanghai’s rapid, everlasting transformation over the short period of time between 1997 and 2000. The figures’ performance, which creates a strong sense of disorientation and schizophrenia, reflects the vertigo of this transformation. The
artist himself reported that he could not adapt to Shanghai. Even in 2000, after living in this city for three years, he still felt the same.

Now it becomes clear that the artist uses the phonetic nature of language to imply an infant’s use of language. This appears in the works I analyze in this chapter. The feeling of the schizophrenic in *Do Not Move* suggests the Yang’s resistance to the city’s rapid change. Unlike in *Do Not Move*, in other works, the schizophrenic is related to the babyhood, rather than city.

Yang’s disassociation with Shanghai parallels the city’s wide-ranging adoption of a capitalist landscape. Much post-modern architecture had sprung up there, and at the same time the city was saturated with new media signs (digital billboards, and so forth.). The new Shanghai was characterized by these capitalist and globalist signs, which constructed new realities of real-time culture. The latest TV programs, commodities, and architectural ideas were displayed and consumed in this city. But this new reality was dislocated within the larger socialist life style and cultural values of China; it distanced people from the old life and connected them to the global community. People living in this reality constrained, both consciously and unconsciously, by global hegemony were forced to move fast enough to live in this global community; otherwise they would be “expelled” from it. They had and continue to have no power to determine alternative ways of living. They are “watched” by the global apparatus which regulates their life style and cultural values. In this world, so full of manipulation and restraints, is it possible for the self to be affirmed rather than overwhelmed and subdued? Another look at *I Will Die* may provide some answers.

In the sequential arrangement of the clips in *I Will Die*, each figure seems to pass on the utterance “I will die” to the next figure. The first figure receives the utterance/command from the artist and passes it on to the next figure, who passes it on to the next, and so on. In this sense, the utterance is a “quotation” that each figure uses
in the activity: each figure cites it and addresses it in his way (acts). Referring to constative utterances, Austin excludes certain situations in which performatives do not operate normally, on the grounds that they are parasitic: fiction, play-acting, and quotation are all deemed extraneous to his analysis.  For Austin, this type of utterance is not constative because it does not express the truth. As was the case in Fish Bowl, he would consider this an “unhappy act.” In this work, each performer’s act and speech are out of sync: most of the figures smile when they say, “I will die.” Since this act and this utterance are not congruous, the act appears to be unsuccessful in describing the truth—“unsuccessful” because smiling is not a conventional response to the significance of these words.

In I Will Die, the sequence of the forty-five snippets creates a kind of graph of the “I.” Through the repetition of the utterance, we see that each figure’s act is out of sync with what “he” (the I) says. Each act helps us identify where the utterance ultimately leads and what its aim is. The sequence of the snippets functions as a journey—the act. When each figure says, “I will die,” he becomes aware of “I” as the subjectivity of the speaking figure within a scripted and ritual context; thus his act is performed by the agent of this subjectivity. Understood in this context, the act embodies each performer’s attitude toward the utterance and refers to the first-person singular “I” in the utterance “I will die.” In this sense, the act unpacks the construction of the “I”; the “I” is made visible through the performer’s use of language. The utterance has the power to determine the figure’s self—to say “I will die” and to act “cheerfully.”

In this context, what can be repeated is not performed through obedience to social convention. The dissociation shows that the figures do not repeat the convention

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of the socially acceptable act associated with “I will die.” Instead, this act breaks with
the convention to which the significance of the utterance belongs; thus the performing
“I” gains a certain power. The figures say “no” to the sad face conventionally
associated with their utterances. The act in the sequence can be understood as an
implicit form of self-conduct through the use of language; the performers’
consciousness of “I.” This is a rhetorical form of independence from the context of
surveillance and authority. The Internet and global consumerism ushered in the
notions of individuality and diversification. They opened up a wider view of the world
and equipped the Chinese people to determine their own views. In this sense, the act is
in fact “successful” because it causes the viewer to question the context of surveillance
and language in relation to the figures’ act. Thus, I argue that this act actually would
be seen as a “successful” act. The incongruity between convention and the individual
expression of these figures becomes a dynamism that makes us aware of the
performer’s self.

In addition to the dynamism created by this incongruity, there is also a
dynamism created by the juxtaposition of “I” and “die” in the same statement. Does
the significance of the word “die” indicate the death of the subject and the repression
of ego by the authority? No, it cannot be understood solely in that way. The death of
the subject here is positive in a sense because it is exhilarating for the subject. “Die”
can be understood as the release from surveillance. The performer can “die” to
surveillance and be “reborn” to the reality of being self-regulated, self-governed, and
even self-disciplined. The subjectivity of each performer is reborn after the loss of
subjectivity through being controlled. I suggest that the artist’s reaction to nationalism
and feelings of catastrophe in 2000 motivate him to balance these forces with a
contrary urge to discover the self.
As Sigmund Freud argues in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, we do not necessarily have to understand the concept of death as a biological death, but as a symbolic one. According to Freud, symbolic death may represent a simple attempt to overcome an unpleasant experience. In *I Will Die*, this symbolic death is the performer’s act of mourning. Paradoxically, this is liberating: because “I will die,” I will not always be under the surveillance of the camcorder or the authorities. Understood in an even more active sense, each performer seeks to die because this offers the possibility of rebirth. Here Yang again shows his concerns with the self in the constrained reality that reflects upon his urban identity in Shanghai. He is concerned with the notion of death, which Freud refers to as being “beyond the pleasure principle.” This death is the linguistic confirmation of self. This concern with the notion of “self” as the result of the death might also be associated with the socially pervasive fear of catastrophe at that time.

J. Laplanche and J.-B Pontalis point out in *The Language of Psycho-Analysis* that “the death instincts are to begin with directed inwards and tend towards self-destruction, but they are subsequently turned towards the outside world in the form of the aggressive or destructive instinct.” Self-destruction here might be seen as an attempt to overcome the unpleasant experience of surveillance. Each figure’s cheerful act is associated with an aggressive rebirth in the reality of surveillance, aggressive because it is antagonistic to the conventional response to death in terms of the loss of subjectivity under surveillance. In this work, death—“die”—in the utterance of “I will die” hence can be understood as the drive of the “I” in language. Here the sense of


236 J. Laplanche and J.-B Pontalis. 97.
death conveyed by the loop of forty-five utterances is repeated compulsively to reveal the figures’ desire for the “I” to be reborn after death.

The composition of the scenes for most of the figures in I Will Die emphasizes their utterance and facial expression; each mouth is roughly in the center of its snippet. This technique calls the viewer’s attention to the movements of the figures’ mouths. It is interesting that the only exception is the middle snippet, the center image that of a pregnant woman. Yang seems to intentionally remind us that she is pregnant—the focus of this snippet is not merely on her mouth, but also on her physical gesture and her belly. We are informed that she carries an unborn infant. This particular snippet naturally suggests hope for a future (“I will not die.”)

In one sense, the inclusion of the baby invites the questions of how he will use language (or not) and how he will survive. Judith Butler notes the infant’s relation to language and political life:

Moreover, as Lacan and Lacanians have argued, that entrance into language comes at a price: the norms that govern the inception of the speaking subject differentiate the subject from the unspeakable, that is, produce an unspeakability as the condition of subject formation.

Although psychoanalysis refers to this inception of the subject as taking place in infancy, this primary relation to speech, the subject’s entry into language by way of the originary “bar” is reinvoked in political life when the question of being able to speak is once again a condition of the subject’s survival. The question of the “cost” of this survival is not simply that an unconscious is produced that cannot be fully assimilated to the ego, or that a “real” is produced that can never be presented within language. The condition for the subject’s survival is precisely the foreclosure of what threatens the subject most fundamentally; thus, the “bar” produces the threat and defends against it at the same time. Such a primary foreclosure is approximated by those traumatic political occasions in which the subject who would speak is constrained.
The middle shot of the unborn infant compels us think about this infant in relation to the language world. He will enter into language and then bear the condition of unspeakability in terms of his subjectivity. The dissociation between speech and act illuminates the fact that language cannot present the real condition of the subjectivity’s needs because of fears about survival. The performance of this unborn infant’s mother reveals the condition of this unspeakability; in the context of surveillance and authority, she must deliver the scripted lines. Her act indicates the survival condition that this infant will confront, a survival condition shared by the other performers.

On another important level, however, this baby is the only free being in the entire sequence. The presence of the pregnant woman here suggests the fact that her baby is not yet controlled by social authority. Her baby is also not yet able to use language. We do not know what the future holds for this baby. In one sense, it does not have language and so cannot assert itself linguistically. On the other hand, because of its “baby” status, it cannot be forced to mimic the official line. In this way, its stance is life-affirming—it is a free being. This frame offers us the chance to question the language and authority that create the “I” in each figure. In this work, three “official figures,” who wear army or police uniforms, also appear. Their acts are proper, and their expressions are the most emotionally neutral. With their official stance and thus inability to “speak” anything but the official line, they stand in contrast to the unborn baby.

In the four video works by Yang Zhenzhong discussed in this chapter, the artist shows performers in relation to authority and the disconnection between their “saying” and “doing” in this context. In these works, the artist is concerned with the performers

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237 Ibid., 135–6.
themselves—their acts and body language. Yang’s performers become more liberal and diversified than what would usually be shown in an act of mimicry. These works reveal that this dissociation can be understood as the revelation of the performer’s self, rather than as the incongruity between utterance and act.

Group opinion is the new dominant model. In this sense, group opinion is similar to an utterance that describes a fact, or constative utterance, as discussed in Chapter Three. This group opinion is a reflection of an individual’s association with an institutional regulation or government through exposure to the new media. Under the influence of group opinion, an individual appears yet to be ruled by the official line that controls institutions. The way the figures speak and act in front of authority could be completely different from the model of mimicry in the past and therefore needs to be examined. Hence, I suggest that the works uncover the limits of the “truthfulness” of constative utterance; they reveal the difficulty inherent in determining whether this expression expresses a speaker’s real intention and desire or reflects his association with an institutional authority that governs the definition of the act.

**Victory of the Self within the Reality of New Media**

In this chapter, I indicate that each of Yang’s figures seems to act free and independent—as an individual. This act could be related to free speech in the sense that the cheerful act shows a figure’s independence and negation of the common experience associated with the utterance “I will die.” In the new media environment, China becomes open, so that an individual may feel free to talk about his opinion. The merit of this openness leads to a reconsideration of the old model of public or group opinion that is associated with the formation of socialist propaganda in China’s mass society and supported by mass media. I argue, however, that what each individual
does may still be prescribed by societal manipulation through mass media, particularly through TV. In this case, each figure’s act in fact could be understood as the standard opinion shared among group members. Since most of the figures seem to express a playful attitude, each of these playful acts becomes the majority attitude, a kind of group opinion. Finally, I focus on the discussion of the utterance itself, and examine the role of “I” and “die” in this utterance. I argue that a figure’s speaking of “I” and “die” reveals the reality both of each individual’s use of language in direct contact with media and of his use of language determined in part by his desire. Despite the constraints upon these figures, their acts can be seen as affirmations of the self.

Yang’s artistic strategy to explore the self in relation to language is perhaps reminiscent of that of some American artists who confronted the dramatic social and cultural turmoil of the 1970s. For instance, Robert Morris’s I-Box (1962) and other performance works are concerned with the affirmation of self. I-Box is an installation or an “object,” a box with a door in the shape of the letter “I.” The door conceals a photograph of the artist naked. This letter “I” implies the general “I,” an individual “I” (the artist himself as revealed in the photo), and the “eye” (the phonetic association with eye, perhaps suggesting the viewer’s eyes). Maurice Berger points out:

> The work recalls Beckett’s drained vision of the world, where “I” is often little more than a vacant word, a coffin that enshrouds its subject in claustrophobic isolation…From the dance pieces on, this self-referential, performatory word—the “I”—would continually resurface in Morris’s work: the political activist who campaigned against the Vietnam War and the institutional hierarchies of the museum in his Conceptual projects of the early 1970s…

As with Morris, the “I” is the focus of Yang’s works, whose dynamism is created by the individual’s struggle within the bracketed space of the monitor and the camcorder,

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twin mechanisms of watchfulness and surveillance. The formation of self is affirmed by acting against constraints and ends with a victory of the self, celebrated in this affirmation. The performer’s act reflects his decision-making and desire rather than his absolute obedience to the official line. Yang is interested in the issue of the “I” and “subject” and explores strategies for revealing this to the viewer through language. Language becomes an antagonistic act in the face of authority.
CHAPTER FIVE: THE TWOFOLD VOICE OF DEPENDENCE/INDEPENDENCE IN XU ZHEN’S ROAD SHOW AND BABAMAMA

The previous chapter addressed parodic imitation in several video installations by Yang Zhenzhong in which performers act out utterances assigned by the artist. Their acts in response to those utterances are not randomly and willingly determined, but rather show an incongruous attitude toward the conventional presentation of the scripted act as they are recorded by camcorder and shown on monitors. Thus, Yang uses the performers’ incongruity to play on the viewer’s expectations of congruity between the performers’ utterances and acts. He skillfully places the role of the viewer into his works and parodically encodes the performers’ acts as well, through the use of camcorders and monitors. In this chapter, I show that Xu uses similar parodic approaches. Like Yang, Xu is concerned with the viewer’s expectations and employs an encoded context which can be regarded as his parodic play. Unlike Yang’s works, here both expectation and context are determined by the artist’s intentionality, rather than by the appropriation of a conventional or customary context.

Since parody in Xu’s works is based on his intentionality, it becomes a complicated device. Xu incorporates an awareness of the viewer’s role into his pieces, establishing a relationship between viewer and work, and embeds hints to assist his viewers in decoding this relationship. Thus the viewer’s expectations are involved in viewing the works. After decoding the hints, the viewer departs from his expectations and is directed to disclose other contexts. Here, he faces incongruous experiences that convey a kind of comic effect which, as in the works of others, relates not merely to a sense of fun or humor, but also involves serious effects such as the subversive and the heuristic. In this sense, parody in Xu’s works is based on the artist’s intentionality, rather than directed toward the customary or convention as in Yang’s works. Xu thus
uses parody to lead the audience from one context to another. Here we see the nature of parody as a double-coded device in art.

Xu’s parody can be seen as identical to the twofold voice, or intertextuality. This intertextuality is related to incongruity in Yang’s works, in which one performer passes an utterance to another, and the utterance thus is like a quotation used collectively by a group of performers. In Yang’s works, this group is formed by the shared utterance as intersubjectivity. Incongruity reveals the parodic character of the performers’ utterances and acts. We see this parodic character again, played by the performers in Xu’s works. However, Xu’s works focus on a context that directs or instructs the audience’s reception of the performer and the works, rather than on the performers’ utterance and acts as the way to influence the audience’s reception. Xu uses the context of the child/parent relationship to represent the context of the exhibition system and the audience’s involvement. His parodic strategy aims to link the two contexts and emphasizes the artist’s relationship to the exhibition system. The performer’s parodic character involves the twofold voices of dependence upon/independence from the audience.

In these works, I demonstrate that Xu uses the role of the audience to reveal his dependence upon/independence from the exhibition system. Tension between dependence and independence occurs because art absolutely demands the audience’s participation, yet the artist also employs teasing of or even rejection of the audience as an experience incongruous to this necessity. I suggest that here the artist illuminates the reality of this dependence/independence and expresses his struggle against being confined by his audience. In Road Show (illus. C.52) (2001), the performer responds to his awareness of an unseen hypothetical audience and the actual viewing audience (us). The performer appears to act joyful without the audience’s participation. The performance in Babamama (illus. C.53) (2003), on the other hand, relies on the
participation of the real audience, a random and unsuspecting group of people in the
exhibition encountered by two performers masquerading as creatures there. I suggest
that Xu uses the role and function of the audience to emphasize the impact of the
exhibition and the exhibition system upon an artist. He uses role-playing to refer to
himself and/or a young artist like himself who encounters this parodic, double-edged
situation upon which he so depends.

Xu’s complex relationship of dependence with the audience is parodically
coded by the metaphor of child. In his works, Xu emphasizes the pre-verbal
experiences of childhood (Road Show) and of infancy (Babamama) to symbolize the
dependence of the child upon the parent. By alluding to the child/parent relationship,
the artist symbolically refers to the subjectivity of the artist in relation to his desire for
liberation as well as for protection. Road Show’s performance connotes autoeroticism.
This erotic act suggests a child’s need to separate his sexual desire from a mother
figure and thus to become an independent self. In Babamama, the performance recalls
on some level a child’s desire for a stable relationship. Xu’s use of the childhood
metaphor invokes the basic, natural, and primordial relationship between parents and
child. Natural and tensional, this relationship is an apt metaphor for that between artist
and audience—the audience is essential to art and at the same time constrains the
artist’s independence. Xu’s use of parodic play involves a therapeutic function for the
artist’s unrealized satisfaction.

I argue that Xu’s parodic use of intertextuality is not merely based on his
artistic experiences, but is also associated with political and social conditions in China
at the time he created these works, between 2001 and 2003. Several global events
forced China into the spotlight of the global community. Xu’s works, which mirror
China’s dependence upon/independence from the global network, represent the search
for his own artistic identity.
Road Show and Rock ‘n’ Roll

Road Show (2001) is a video work with three channels: one central screen, with a downward sloping screen attached to it on either side. Each screen is almost life-size. Together the three screens show three performers—in fact Xu in three different outfits mimicking a singer performing onstage. This performer masquerades as a kind of rock star, wearing make-up and a pair of sunglasses, both of which make him appear sophisticated. The performer in the center screen wears a white short-sleeve shirt. On the left screen, he wears a black jacket, and on the right a blue sport jacket. The performer does not obviously mimic any particular popular singer; he is a “generic” artist.

On the screens, we see only the performer onstage, against a dark background. At the beginning of the performance, he stands still, and loud clapping sounds emerge from an off-screen audience. He waves in response to these welcoming sounds and begins his performance. The three screens show him performing in different ways; his acts appear at times to be interrelated and at other times to be independent of each other. For example, while one screen displays a dramatic gesture, another screen simultaneously zooms in to highlight the dramatic effect. In addition, the performer makes sounds reminiscent of sexual climax. The sounds are accentuated and increase on another screen during the middle of the performance. At the end, almost as kind of post-coital resolution, the sounds become pale and inactive.

Throughout, the performer’s gestures are highlighted in close-up. At times he moves off-screen. His mouth, his facial expressions, and the microphone are also emphasized. At the end, clapping sounds and the sounds of climax emerge again, and the performer waves in response to the audience’s appreciation. The effect of these different angles and masquerades, which together create a feeling of action and moment, is that we perceive this performance as a kind of “singing” of a song, as the
title of the work indicates. The setting of the work in three screens, and the presence of a real audience in front of them, suggests a performance onstage at a road show.

In Xu Zhen’s *Road Show*, the performer’s gestures, make-up, the stage setting, and the microphone—signs associated with Westernization or popular culture imported from outside China—suggest that he is a musical performer. Key to our discussion is the fact that this genre of music in China has strong associations with social transformation and the cultural values of youth: it directly expresses the feelings of Chinese youth and argues against the government’s hegemonic object.239 Naturally, discussion of the use of this genre of music in Xu’s work leads us to consider the artist’s cultural background. Xu Zhen was born in 1977 and grew up in the 1990s. During the post-Tiananmen period, he was experiencing puberty. In the 1990s, China became extremely Westernized in terms of popular culture. Many signs of the presence of capitalism in China, such as Hollywood movies and popular music, illuminate the reality of this cultural transformation. Xu Zhen no doubt absorbed these capitalist signs. This cultural process continued and strengthened around 1997 in Shanghai, where the artist was born. In this work, we see that the capitalist signs of sunglasses, sport jacket, and so forth, are all part of the “Western” masquerade. Understood in the context of rock ‘n’ roll, *Road Show* (2001) represents the artist’s reception of these capitalist signs and his attitude toward them.

If we interpret Xu’s masquerade in the sense of the role playing of a popular singer, this work clearly is a metaphor for popular music in general, as the title of this work suggests. The performer makes sounds in a rapid tempo, at a high pitch. Thus, his song is not identifiable as a song, but rather as phonetic rhythms.240 Even though


240 It is important to elucidate the fact that the performer is not making a type of music called “noise.” This type of music has evolved from music that uses sound sources of industrial materials. Some
no audience appears on the stage, at the beginning and end of the performance we hear
the clapping sounds that signify both a performance and the participation of an
audience in this performance. The actual viewing audience appears to participate in his
performance and become his audience, as befits a road show. Xu seems to intend to
offer us a general conception of this musical performance associated with the audience,
whose presence identifies the performance as a mass-mediated event. He leads us to
relate this performance to rock and roll or popular music, rather than to classical music
or traditionally Chinese music, because the clapping and the audience response to the
performer suggest a big audience. Moreover, the sounds that the performer makes are
aggressive, have a rough melody, and a heavy, disturbing beat. During the middle of
the performance, the audience’s response is boisterous and intense. The “aesthetic” of
the sound is reminiscent of that of rock ‘n’ roll and also suggestive of the performance
being watched by the audience.

Not Merely a Happening

In his performance work Babamama (2003), Xu is again concerned with the
role of the audience. In this work, two performers—one male and one female—
masquerade as primitive creatures in an exhibition. They wear identical costumes that
obscure their gender differences. Yet, according to the artist, they represent a male and
female primitive. When the piece was performed in a museum in Beijing, the creatures
wandered throughout the entire exhibition space. They bent down before each male
audience member they encountered and said “baba.” Upon encountering a female
audience member, they knelt in the same way but said “mama.” They performed

musicians who specialize in “noise” often use purely vocal sounds, and their music has strong sexual
implications. Can the performer be identical to one of these musicians? I would argue not, because this
work is not like a documentary of the musical “noise” performance.
according to Xu’s rules. In this work, we see a performance determined solely by the performers’ acts and utterances to the audience. This performance, in fact, does not involve or require the immediate responses of audience members or any real-time interaction between them. Their act of kneeling and utterance of “baba” and “mama” result from their own decisions (selecting audience members to speak to), directed by the artist. The performers, whose own genders are indistinguishable here, do distinguish between genders in their audience: they speak differently to males and females.

This performance, loosely structured and without narrative details, is simple and straightforward. Xu places the performers in the exhibition space in order to emphasize the effects of randomness and chance, which are introduced by the manner in which the performers find their audience members. They walk around the exhibition, seeking to perform their act and utterances. Thus, the concept of performance here seems to exclude the need for the audience’s interactive participation. Instead, the audience passively engages in the performers’ utterance of “baba” or “mama” and their act of kneeling down. A theatrical effect is consciously created, however, because the primitive creatures’ act and utterances are, in a sense, unexpected by the audience, to whom their act and utterances may seem absurd. The audience members may even find it droll that these two primitive creatures identify them as parents.

Xu Zhen’s Babamama might be understood as a “happening”—an artistic strategy that first appeared as a kind of performance art from the mid-1950s through the mid-1960s, particularly active in the works of the Fluxus group and the Japanese Gutai group. A happening is usually performed in a common area, and its activity, intended to provoke the audience and their mental habits, depends upon various resources on site. The activity is playful and improvised. From my previous examination, it is clear that Xu Zhen’s work is reminiscent of the strategy and
aesthetics of a happening. But here we depart from the purely “happening”
phenomenon to focus on elements specific to this work and to Xu Zhen’s thoughts.
One key element is the use of masquerade to identify the performers. The other is the
highlighting of their act and utterances in relation to the performance context. I
suggest that Xu’s performance has a serious intent and offers a representation of
Chinese as “uncivilized creatures.” The performance does not simply emphasize the
randomness and interruption of the Fluxus performance that is usually associated with
performance art.

In this work, the performers mimic primitive creatures in two ways that are
more complicated than the random and simple way found in the Fluxus performance.
First, they wear outfits that change their appearance from that of a normal human
being; the outfits are black and have surfaces covered by artificial fur. Thus the
performers resemble primitive creatures similar to apes or gorillas, suggesting the very
early stages of development, but the resemblance is generic, not the mimicry of any
particular type of primitive creatures that the audience would immediately think of. In
this sense, the primitive creatures here might be understood either as the artist’s
creation or as apes in a broad sense.

Second, the performers reveal the concept of primitive creatures to us through
their act and utterances. When they encounter a male audience member, they bend
down and say “baba.” Encountering a female audience member, they bend down and
say “mama.” Their act and utterances might surprise these audience members because
the act (kneeling down) and utterances (“baba” and “mama”) are likely unexpected.
The audience members might be surprised by the act (kneeling down) because they
know the biological tie that the utterances imply does not in fact exist. In a comic
sense, Xu turns evolution on its biological head. My interpretation considers the act
and utterances to be, to a certain extent, enigmatic to the audience, rather than merely
comic. In a sense, they are primitive or alien to the audience because their act and utterances are unfamiliar and even may seem “uncivilized” to the general public.

The “primitive creatures” of Babamama create a comic and dramatic effect. Their outfits and their act reveal their state of being “primitive” or somewhat alien to the audience—strange and suspect. The study of the communication of primitive peoples has been key to understanding primitive societies. Kristeva writes about how we can identify primitive man through language:

While primitive man speaks, symbolizes, and communicates, that is to say, establishes a distance between himself (as subject) and the outside (the real) in order to signify it in a system of differences (languages), he does not know this act to be an act of idealization or of abstraction, but knows it instead as participation in the surrounding universe. While the practice of language really presupposes for primitive man a distance with respect to things, language is not conceived of as a mental elsewhere, or as an abstract thought process. It participates as a cosmic element of the body and nature, and is joined with the motor force of the body and nature. Its link with corporal and natural reality is not abstract or conventional, but real and material.241

According to Kristeva’s view, for primitive people to use language is to act—even to interact. This act is associated with material, cosmic considerations. Following this view, it becomes clear that in Xu’s work the primitive creatures’ act of kneeling is part of the meaning of their utterances: “baba” and “mama.” The utterance depends upon their material understanding of the physical characteristics of the audience members. The act of kneeling down is associated with the rite of worship. The utterances explain the ritual value of the act, the role of the primitive creatures, the classification of the genders, and the role of the audience members as parental figures. In this work, the performers’ use of language and act thus is similar to a kind of primitive language because it is real and material.

241 Kristeva. Language: The Unknown. 50.
Xu’s presentation of the primitive creatures in this specific way reminds us of how so-called primitive people may be viewed from the perspective of anthropologists. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss observes that the notion of “primitive” people is associated with the concept of the unknown or of the enigma to Western civilization:

…. it seems that primitive, in the absence of a better term, has definitely taken hold in the contemporary anthropological and sociological vocabulary. We thus study “primitive” societies. But what do we mean by this? Taken in its broad sense, the expression is clear enough. First, we know that “primitive” denotes a vast array of non-literate peoples, who are thus not accessible through the research methods of the conventional historian. Second, they have only recently been affected by the expansion of industrial civilization and, because of their social structure and world view, the concepts of economics and political philosophy regarded as basic to our own society are inapplicable to them.242

Lévi-Strauss was writing between 1944 and 1957, after the West began to explore and aggressively interact with the rest of the world, or what anthropologists call “primitive societies.” His particular view of primitive people lies in his argument against the conventional distinction between civilized and primitive peoples—the uncivilized people (in the position of being observed) are defined by the civilized anthropologist (the scientific observer). This distinction is problematic because this point fails to evaluate the fact that people of different cultural and social backgrounds have different standards and even definitions of “civilization.” Lévi-Strauss’s view on primitive people, thus, is based on the reality that they are unknown or alien to the Western system and must therefore be explored in a scientific way. He also argues that primitive people’s state of “civilization” is organized according to certain rules (that is, kinship and language) which are alien to the Western way of thinking.

The cultural notion of the Chinese as primitive might be related to the SARS crisis in 2003. The rapid outbreak of this lethal virus, whose source was enigmatic, created a racial vision of an “uncivilized” China, where the virus first appeared. The general assumption by the Chinese news was that the virus was associated with the Southern Chinese habit of eating wild animals. Some radical guesses made at the time included the theory that the virus resulted from the leak of China’s secret biological weapon, tested underground in areas near the initial outbreak. Such assumptions brought to mind strong associations of Chinese as “barbarians” playing with biological weapons.

In Babamama, the performers’ masquerade as primitive creatures suggests the stereotypical understanding of China as “culturally primitive” in the context of Western industrialization and capitalization. To Western eyes, the primitive creatures are, in fact, the Chinese and other cultures seen as “primitive” in the imperialistic context. This perspective is strongly associated with the Western forces of industrialization that seek to colonize and diminish other cultures. Xu Zhen’s work was associated with this context in the wake of the commercialization and institutionalization of art in the late 1990s, both of which are associated with unequal interaction between Western art professionals and Chinese artists. This inequality led contemporary Chinese artists to depend on Western discourse for commercial and institutional ties. Xu’s performance evokes the audience awareness of these social forces through the metaphor of masquerading creatures.

Whereas in Road Show the role of audience is implied by the performer’s performance, its role in Babamama is physically essential to the work. Thus, the awareness of the audience’s role shifts, as a result of the nature of the works. Road Show, a video work, allows the audience’s visual and audio involvement. Babamama, a performance work, may include the audience’s physical participation. Furthermore,
these two works address different subjects: the performer in Road Show and the exhibition system in Babamama. As the audience becomes involved in each of the works, it plays the role of audience created by the artist. But what kinds of roles are these?

**Parental Metaphor**

The audience of Road Show watches and hears the rock ‘n’ roll performer make rapid sounds that consist of a repeated fast tempo and rhythm. The male performer makes sounds recognizable as those of a female climax. The sounds appear to evoke a strong sexual appeal and feelings of seduction; the performer acts as if he were in a state of ecstasy. The notion of eroticism in this context is associated with the performer’s gestures and sounds and the climax-like sounds emanating from both the performer and audience. While making erotic sounds, the performer sometimes touches his body gently and sometimes gestures theatrically to the audience, asking for its response. The act here is congruous to the sounds, evoking sex. The performer’s performative act here precisely generates the effect and feeling of eroticism. Xu seems to intentionally summon the audience’s expectation in perceiving the sexual implication of the sounds and gestures and to illuminate the performance as autoeroticism.

When Xu showed this work in his solo exhibition, he also included other works that imply sexual allure. We Are Right Back (2001) (illus. C.54) is a single channel work in which a video projected on-screen shows a close-up view of the torsos of a male and female sitting side-by-side in a boat. The video is shot in black and white, from a high angle with respect to the couple. We see the man unzip his pants and take out a cigarette and, later, a cell phone. The female unzips her pants and takes out a small mirror. Baba (2001) (illus. C.55) is a video installation with three
monitors, two of which are placed in different locations on the floor of the exhibition space, and the third a large screen outside the space. Both interior monitors show the same image of two female performers lecturing their father, who is not shown. We see their performance as if they are talking to us. They speak in a Shanghai dialect. They appear fierce and impatient as they strongly, repetitively urge the father not to do “it.” (In the dialogue, the word “do” implies the sexual act.) Xu’s installation Untitled: Female Hygiene Cotton (2002) (illus. C.56) resembles a group of several enlarged tampons, white and soft, hanging from the ceiling like punching bags. The audience is invited to play with them. The four works share a strong association with private body parts (which the artist has often been concerned with in his art.) In general, he deals with issues of sex and gender; his materials include hair and body fluids. His works express the vague or ambiguous clarification of gender identity and the juxtaposition of contrasting sexual objects. The effect of his works emphasizes watching and spectatorship as they relate to the audience’s sexual desire, and the awareness of sexual implications here is expected by the audience and creates a comic and dramatic effect for them.

In Road Show, sexuality is also associated with oral objects—the performer’s mouth and the microphone, both of which may be regarded as sexual symbols in this context. The performer makes sounds with his mouth, which is highlighted to expose its symbolic role, implying both its sexual function and its natural function of producing sound. The performative act thus reveals the performer’s oral eroticism, and his erotic practice depends upon obtaining a certain response from his audience. Yet, it is clear at this point that the performer himself is absorbed in this erotic practice. Furthermore, the sounds he makes suggest the female climax. Employing the sounds in this context brings an effect of immediacy to the performer’s act; it becomes more palpable and recognizable, and the sexual references become more alluring and
sensational. This use of sounds corresponds to the effect that sounds in film provide: immediacy for the audience, as Siegfried Kracauer and Bela Balazs suggest in their discussion of narrative cinema.

However, I argue that this erotic practice implies the symbolic role played by the audience. In other words, the audience does not merely watch the performer’s autoerotism but becomes a symbolic parent figure for the performer. At the end of the work, the performer appears joyful and satisfied in opposition to the loneliness and alienation he exhibits standing on stage at the beginning. In terms of performative act theory, this might be understood as a happy performance, in which the act matches the locution on stage. Examining this “happy performance” in the context of psychoanalysis explains the drive responsible for the performer’s dramatic change: the act of engaging in dialogue with others (the audience or the other self) reveals his anaclitic relationship with them. In the context of psychoanalysis, his subjectivity is recognizable by this anaclisis, marked by his dependence on others for the fulfillment of his primitive needs such as hunger. The male performer’s joyfulness and satisfaction seem to substitute for dependence on a maternal figure. Xu thus defines the roles between the performer and the audience to play an anaclitic relationship. This act thus can be understood as his autoeroticism capped by his joyfulness and the satisfaction he derives from himself and the watchfulness of the audience.

Kristeva might suggest this effect of joyfulness and satisfaction as a child’s laughter:

The imprint of an archaic moment, the threshold of space, the “chora” as primitive stability absorbing anaclitic facilitation, produces laughter. There is not yet an outside, and the things that made the newborn laugh at about two and one-half months (after the satisfaction of immediate needs produced the hallucinatory laughter of the first weeks) are simply markers of something in the process of becoming stability. But neither external nor internal, neither outside nor inside, such markers are noticeable only because they slow down anaclisis: they do not stop it.
One might detect in them the inception of spatiality as well as sublimation.\textsuperscript{243} The pleasure of the ecstasy from the absent audience results in an act of sublimation: turning the sounds of the female climax from his imagination into symbols of sexual objects figuring in male autoeroticism. The performative act thus is performed for self-satisfaction, rather than with the goal of mimicking the female climax.

Kristeva notes that sublimation is associated with orality. Her theory explains the emphasis on orality that is found in the sounds, the mouth and the throat in this particular work.

Orality plays an essential role in this primary fixation-sublimation: appropriation of the breast, the so-called “paranoid” certainty of the nursing infant that he has been in possession of it, and his ability to lose it after having had his fill. What should not be obscured is the importance of the anal “instinctual drive” from this period on: the child has a secure anal discharge while, balancing that loss, it incorporates the breast. Anal loss, accompanied by considerable expenditure of muscular motility, combined with the satisfaction of incorporating the breast probably encourages projecting facilitation into this visible or audible point that gives the infant a glimpse of space and produces laughter.\textsuperscript{244}

Orality here is a metaphor for autoeroticism, which in this work does not aim to indicate the performer’s sexuality per se, but rather is a metaphor for his act of independence in satisfying a primitive need. This primitive need appears later as the kinship tie between performer and audience in Babamama. Although in Road Show the sexual implications of the performer’s sounds and gestures are obvious, they can be interpreted as representative of the child’s basic need as a metaphor for the child-parent relationship.

\textsuperscript{243} Ibid., 283.
\textsuperscript{244} Ibid., 284.
I suggest that this relationship is conducted heavily in the context of sounds as signifiers. Xu’s Road Show performance is roughly nine minutes long. This work is not a narrative of the performance of a male singer on stage; rather, it consists of the highlights of the performer’s sounds and physical actions. Through these, the performer appears to express his emotions. Sometimes his gestures, especially his hand gestures, point to a location off-screen. After his act, sounds of climax emerge from the audience. The act and the emergence of the sounds are totally directed by his gestures—they correspond to each other and are rhythmic.

In this context, the performer’s hand gesture serves to direct the act and sound from himself to the audience, which repeats his vocalizations. This gesture functions particularly as a language instruction in Wittgenstein’s sense, as previously discussed regarding the language game in Xu Bing’s works in Chapter One. The language game in Xu Zhen’s work is associated with variety of tonality. Here, the performer acts on his receptive organs, and thus produces short, repeated sounds. The audience responds to these sounds by repeating their tonality. By making sounds in this way, the performer reveals materiality—bodily organs and bodily gestures—which depicts the process and act of making sounds. This primitive sound-making method produces no spoken words, only vocalizations, which cannot be regarded as language in the sense of communication. These sounds, however, function as tonal “language.”

Kristeva reminds us of the basic difference between regular language and musical language:

This difference is only one consequence of a capital difference: while the fundamental function of language is the communicative function, and while it transmits a meaning, music is a departure from this principle of communication. It does transmit a “message” between a subject and an addressee, but it is hard to say that it communicates a precise meaning. It is a combinatory of differential elements, and evokes an algebraic system more than a discourse. If the addressee hears this combinatory as a sentimental, emotive, patriotic, etc.,
message, that is the result of a subjective interpretation given within the framework of a cultural system rather than the result of a “meaning” implicit in the “message.”

In Xu Zhen’s Road Show, the performer’s sounds are composed of a variety of tonalities presented in a musical environment. Thus, the performer’s utterance might be seen to “evoke an algebraic system” as a way of communicating to his audience. These notes aim neither to communicate nor to signify a specific meaning, but they express emotions and feelings associated with the message of sex. The performer’s particular hand gestures toward the audience suggest that he is a subject who transmits this message to his object (the audience).

Two types of body language and sources of sounds in this work are important to elucidate. First, the performer uses his gestures as language to express the emotion of the sounds he makes. These gestures convey his feeling about the sounds through physical actions. The function of this language is associated with the performer’s acts, which correspond to the rhythm of the sounds. His language is energetic and vigorous. The performer also uses another bodily gesture to communicate with his audience. When he makes sounds, he directs his gestures to the audience. The function of this type of language is to expect and anticipate the audience’s echoes in response to the performer, and its aim is primarily to enable the performer to interact and communicate with the audience. In the former, body language serves to express, and in the latter, body language serves to point, like a kind of index. The former may relate to the performer unconsciously and improvisationally, whereas the latter may relate to him consciously and intentionally. Second, in the performer’s “singing” performance, one type of sound is recognizable as the clapping of the audience at the start and end.

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245 Kristeva. Language: The Unknown, 309.
of the show. The other type, identical to sounds of climax, comes from both performer
and audience. The sounds of the audience correspond to those of the performer.

In this work, the performer uses dramatic, intense gestures that are immediately obvious to the viewer. Through these gestures, the performer demonstrates his total absorption in the performance itself. Yet, he also interacts with the “audience” in his imagination (invisible to us.) This interactivity is determined by the sound and some of the bodily gestures that he makes to suggest the role of the audience in this performance. That is to say, the sound conveys the meaning of the performer’s act; the act corresponds to the sound. The act here is not defined as a physical action, but conveys the action of the sound. The sound triggers the act and signifies its meaning. This act in relation to the sound might be understood as the phonetic act as Austin might call it.

In Chapter Three, in which I examined Zhang Peili’s work Broadcasting at the Same Time, I indicated that the repetition of the news reporters’ greetings makes a noise that Austin might call “the phatic act (pheme) and rhetic act (rheme).” Austin’s theory of act and utterance suggests that some noises are not meaningless, but are meaningful. I suggest that in Xu Zhen’s work we can identify the sounds that the performer makes as a rhetic act (rheme). According to Austin’s theory, a rhetic act is the performance of the act of using vocals with a certain sense of reference. In Xu Zhen’s work, the sounds strongly connote sex. The performer’s performance can be seen as congruous to the sounds. In this context of making sounds, the congruity of sounds and acts reveals that he is being watched and is performing for someone else. Thus, the performer’s sounds and act can be understood as a rhetic act, rather than merely a physical act. The significance of this rhetic act is to suggest the connotation of utterance (sounds) through the performer’s act.
If the performative act in this work reveals the performer’s pleasure in autoerotic practice, this act actually discloses the process of commodification of art through the metaphor of a popular singer performing on stage. In other words, his pleasure stems from being consumed and circulated as a commodity on stage. This consumption shapes the fame of the performer and creates the role of the audience, as well as defines the nature of this culture as a mass-mediated and circulated one. The culture itself can be regarded as a commodity, and the pleasure expressed by the performer can be illuminated as the fetishism in his awareness of the commodity. The metaphor of autoerotic practice here reveals that the context of the exhibition (the stage) produces the attraction (the sexual allure) of being successful for the artist. The performer’s autoerotic practice, which results from his seeking pleasure, acts not only to satisfy the supposed audience which is aware of its role in the performance, but also to satisfy the performer himself who is being watched and performing. My interpretation of the role of the audience in light of this sexual metaphor suggests that the artist attaches a symbolic meaning to the role of the audience which implies the complex relationship between audience and performer.

In Babamama, the symbolic meaning of the parental figure is directly shown in the performers’ utterance and act and in their relationship to the audience. The performers’ utter “baba” and “mama” to strangers in the exhibition according to the expected uses of language. This work was created for a specific exhibition and incorporates the role of the exhibition audience. The basic idea for the performance in Babamama originated in an earlier performance piece the artist made for his satellite exhibitions in Shanghai in 2002. Xu Zhen served as co-curator with Yang Zhenzhong.
and Tang Maohong for the exhibition Fan Mingzhen and Fan Mingzu (2002),\textsuperscript{246} which revealed their strategies and critical attitudes toward the political nature of the official biennials. The art-making in these exhibitions was based on the concept of the exhibition theme, the space of the site, the layout of the space, and the interactions among the participating artists. These considerations of exhibition reality influenced subsequent art created by these artists. In some cases, artists emphasized the role of the audience in the exhibition and the manner in which they would be attracted by the interaction or dialogue among the participating works. Satellite exhibitions might be seen as both art-workshops and actual art pieces made for the public. This kind of work highlights the creation and aesthetic of art in relation to exhibition audiences and also serves as an inquiry into the authority of official biennales. For Fan Mingzhen and Fan Mingzu, Xu created March 6th (2002) (illus. C.57), a performance that addresses the notion of monitoring. He asked one hundred performers to put on clothes typically worn by mental patients and then to wait for the entrance of the audience into the exhibition space. When individual audience members entered the show, the performers began to follow them around while they looked at the art works. In Babamama, as in March 6th, we see a similar absurd relationship between performers and audience.

In Xu’s Babamama, the primitive creatures’ act of kneeling down must be considered in relation to other acts in this performance, such as wandering, searching, identifying, and naming. The performance is a totality of these individual acts. The performers wander around the exhibition space, searching out audience members who meet their requirements for “parental figures.” When they encounter an acceptable

\textsuperscript{246} The exhibition was shown from November 23 to 24 in 2002. Participating artists included Xuzhen, Yang Zhengzhong, Tang Maohong, Yang Fudong, Shi Qing, Wang Wei, Xu Tan, Zheng Guogu, Lu Chunsheng, Kan Xuan, Liu Wei, Zhu Yu, and Liang Yue.
audience member, the primitive creatures say either “baba” or “mama,” according to
the audience member’s gender. The utterance strongly suggests a kinship tie between
the audience members as “parental figures” and the primitive creatures. The
performers’ use of language, in terms of tonality and frequency, does not evoke
feelings of emergency, anxiety, or anticipation in the audience as would be expected if
they were in the midst of a frantic search for parental figures. These performers
apparently have no strong intention of looking for their parental figures. Here, instead
of interpreting the utterances as a serious use or description of a fact, or what Austin
might call “constative utterance,” we may consider them as a non-serious use or what
Austin might call “illocutionary utterance.” The consideration of the use of language
in Austin’s theory of performance utterance leads us to a primary examination of the
relationship between the performers’ utterances and act as in Chapters Three and Four.

Gender is key to the particular role and sexual identity of these parental figures.
The primitive creatures evidently name their parental figures according to the audience
members’ respective gender appearances. The act thus is performed in a material sense,
that is, by evaluating bodily characteristics. The communication of these “primitive
performers” thus depends on a whole set of bodily actions. It is not only the “baba”
and “mama” speech component that is in play here.

In Babamama, the performers say “baba” and “mama.” These utterances are
the simple syllables “ba-ba” and “ma-ma.” In Chinese “Ba” means father, and “ma”
means mother; this is a kind of baby talk. The performers’ utterances here present the
reality of a child’s language. Linguistic theoreticians note that children’s capacity for
absorbing and acquiring language comes in four stages. The first stage is pre-speech,
which begins before birth. The child at that point becomes familiar with the
“soundscape” of language. The second stage is the babbling stage, shown in Yang
Zhenzhong’s Fish Bowl in Chapter Three. The third stage is the one-word or
holophrastic stage—the making and repeating of one-word sounds, demonstrated by
the performers’ utterances of “baba” and “mama.” The fourth stage is the combining
stage, in which the child learns to use syntax in language.

Kristeva explains the significance of one-word or holophrastic language and
illuminates this language in relation to the subjectivity of the child during this stage.

The child’s first so-called holophrastic enunciations include gesture, the
object, and vocal emission. Because they are perhaps not yet sentences
(NP-VP), generative grammar is not readily equipped to account for
them. Nevertheless, they are already thetic in the sense that they
separate an object from the subject, and attribute to it a semiotic
fragment, which thereby becomes a signifier. That this attribution is
either metaphoric or metonymic (“woof-woof” says the dog, and all
animals become “woof-woof”) is logically secondary to the fact that it
constitutes an attribution, which is to say, a position of identity or
difference, and that it represents the nucleus of judgment or
proposition.247

Kristeva’s theory of the child’s use of holophrastic language helps us elucidate the
function of the utterances in this work. First, the performers’ utterances, “baba” and
“mama,” seem neutral in terms of their cultural and racial implications because they
provide an immediate, universal association with parental figures. Audience members
could thus recognize themselves as parental figures based on this language. Following
Kristeva’s theory, the utterances, however, indicate the child’s capacity for
communicating to others and expressing his ideas through his use of language. Thus,
the utterances of “baba” and “mama” cannot be understood solely as the universal use
of language identifying parental figures. Rather, these utterances also show the desire
and will of the child himself.

Second, in using “baba” and “mama,” the performers separate themselves from
the audience, as subject and object. The subject can be understood as the speaker (the

247 Kristeva. Revolution in Poetic Language. 43.
child) and the object is the audience. By speaking the “baby words” “baba” and “mama” to the audience, the performers create the metaphor of parental figures who will hopefully respond to their language. This language also suggests the split between the performer and the audience and the child’s similarly conflicted relationship with his parental figures.

Thus, the work suggests both baby talk and the child’s relationship with his parental figures. Yet, in this work, the performers masquerade as primitive creatures rather than as two children. I argue that the artist intentionally suggests the role of primitive creatures rather than the role of children here. First, in the Freudian sense, the primitive man is synonymous with the child, because for Freud both are “non-civilized” or “non-socialized.” Second, by using the idea of primitive man, the artist creates a non-serious and theatrical effect for the audience members—they are startled by the absurd sight of these primitive creatures, with their baby talk, approaching them.

However, I argue that the bowing down of the two creatures before the audience may also be interpreted as an act of worship. In this sense, worship might be understood as a repository of the structural relationship between the primitive creatures and the audience as parental figures. In Babamama, the performers’ act of wandering, alienated, suggests their lack of a stable relationship with others and subsequent attempt to make a sign, which Kristeva calls the child’s anaclitic sign (that is, a baby’s cry). Their act and utterances suggest that they look for audience members who can serve as parental figures and who might fill their lack. Most important, their act and utterances reveal that they are expressing their anaclises because their desire is not yet fulfilled. The performers’ repetition of act and utterances precisely depicts their strong desire for a defining relationship with others in the exhibition and reveals the power and necessity of expressing their anaclises. Unlike Road Show, at the end of the performance in Babamama, the two performers still cannot fulfill their lack or
satisfy their desire. Yet, they demonstrate their need for parental figures. This demand is performed by the implied role-playing between the audience members as parental figures and the performers as son and daughter looking for “baba” and “mama.” Jean Laplanche points out that a child’s sexuality can be understood as the child’s need for attentive care—he calls it the “care provided by the mother.”

The drive properly speaking, in the only sense faithful to Freud’s discovery, is sexuality. Now sexuality, in its entirety, in the human infant, lies in a movement which deflects the instinct, metaphorizes its aim, displaces and internalizes its object, and concentrates it source on what is ultimately a minimal zone, the erotogenic zone... This zone of exchange is also a zone for care, namely the particular and attentive care provided by the mother....

This performance is associated with the child’s desire for a stable defining relationship and is anchored by the use of language. The performers use “baba” and “mama” to label the others, the audience members. This linguistic tie suggests that they are a boy and girl, expressing an implied anaclisis to the parental figures, the audience members. The Freudian theoretician Jacques Lacan explores the concept of complexes in relation to the function of language in the domain of desire. In explaining Lacanian observation, Joël Dor writes:

By means of primal repression and the paternal metaphor, the mediation of language is imposed on desire. More precisely, it is the paternal signifier that inaugurates the alienation of desire in language. In becoming speech, desire becomes a mere reflection of itself. When the child represses the desire to be in favor of the desire to have, he must from then on engage his desire in the realm of objects that are substitutes for the object he has lost. To accomplish this, desire must become speech in the form of a demand. But in becoming demand, desire gets more and more lost in the signifying chain of discourse. Indeed, we can say that desire moves from object to object, always

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referring to an indefinite series of substitutes and at the same time to an indefinite series of signifiers that symbolize these substitute objects.249

Applying the passage, there are two important points that explain the relationship between language and act in Babamama.

First, the passage indicates the function and value of language in relation to a child’s desire. The child’s use of language separates him from his desire and forms subjectivity in the reality of repression (that is, the lack of anaclises). The speech (the utterance of “baba” and “mama”) fulfills that lack by summoning the performers’ act of kneeling down to audience members. The form of the demand is similar to the act of worship because this particular act symbolizes the parental metaphor that fulfills the demand. The act of worship here functions as a metaphor for the substitution of the desire for the object (the audience) in the context of language (the utterance of “baba” and “mama”). The performers’ saying “baba” and “mama” to the audience members can now be understood as their act of attaching names to them so that these individuals can function as a metaphor for parental figures. As this function occurs, the audience members become identical with parents linguistically (bodily and verbally). Then the performers act according to their utterance (“baba” and “mama”), and the worship of the act substitutes the parental metaphors of the utterance with the objects (the audience members).

Second, the form of the demand occurs again and again as a series of substitutions between a child’s desire and the objects associated with the paternal metaphors. This demand is shown as the performers repeatedly seek parental figures among the audience members. This repeated act can be understood in this context as the performers’ compulsive repetition of their desire in the form of an act and

language. Through this, the performers move from one parental figure (the signifier of the parental metaphor) to another. When they find one, they substitute their desire through the form of speech and the demand of an act.

The performers and the audience members as their parental figures also establish an anaclitic relationship which represents the power of worship. The act of kneeling down may indicate their homage to parental power. Just as some recent feminist studies of phallic envy suggest that this envy is really a desire for the male’s power, so might this bowing down be suggestive of the artist’s/performer’s wish for the power wielded by the audience. The performers’ act to the audience presents their most dramatic needs. It might also be understood in light of the power that the audience carries.

In Babamama, the act of the primitive creatures’ worship reveals that the parental figures possess power. The primitive creatures kneel before their parental figures as if to revere them. Their act is likely determined by the power of the authority associated with these parental figures: they are attracted to their authoritarian power; however, they also resent this power. This dual relationship is suggested by the absurdity of these two primitive, furred creatures wandering around and bowing down before startled audience members.

In Road Show and Babamama, the audience is assigned the role of parental figure for the performers, implicitly and indirectly in Road Show and explicitly and directly in Babamama. The audience plays this role in a seemingly funny or exaggerated sense. However, my interpretation of this role in light of Kristeva’s theory suggests that the artist presents a psychological relationship between child and parents as a metaphor for that between performer and audience. But the metaphor of parental audience is not purely associated with the child’s relationship to his parental figures. It also implies the concept of “kinship” tie.
This “kinship tie” explains the child’s ego in a broader context than Freud’s theory. Here, the “kinship” tie is not a natural one, but an institutional and even social one, as we see the primitive creatures wander around the exhibition space among the audience members. The “kinship” tie thus suggests an alliance between two parties. Here the performers are in control because they recycle parental figures among the audience members approaching. In this context, the parental figures become replaceable and disposable, suggesting that the performers rule the parental figures. Yet, the performers bow down before the parental figures, and this act suggests the power of the audience members who symbolically play as these primitive creatures’ parental figures. My view is that this alliance or “kinship” tie in fact represents the power of the alliance or “kinship” tie itself. This power exists in the form of the exchange and is necessary because it represents the most primitive level of intimate relationship.

In this context, the discussion of the performers’ use of language in both works in relation to the child’s desire might be understood as the child’s process of socialization, communicating with others. The masquerade of the singer and primitive creatures thus has a serious intent and effect for the audience in both Road Show and Babamama.

**The Performers’ Parodic Voice and the Audience’s Awareness**

The performers’ utterance and act in both of these works is immediately related to the context of the show or of carnival events. The Road Show performer makes repetitive short sounds and dramatic gestures in playing the role of rock ‘n’ roll singer. The performers in Babamama utter the short sounds of “ba-ba” and “ma-ma” and use body language to play the role of primitive creatures. Thus, it is clear to us that the artist intentionally creates the performers’ roles in these shows. Furthermore, I
argue that these performances in fact can refer to the speech and act of a child—and may also be reminiscent of the stereotypical, ideological representation of “clumsy” Chinese in the early twenty century. The performers’ use of utterances and acts, as I showed earlier, can be interpreted as the child’s desire to form a socialized relationship with his parental figures through his utterance and act. My point here is to reveal that the performances are double-coded by Xu purposely. The first context is the more obvious context of the show: the rock ‘n’ roll performance in Road Show and an artist show in Babamama. The performers’ dramatic masquerades and unexpected interaction with the audience supposedly create the sense of fun and play. In each piece Xu seems to create the performance as a carnival event. The second context is the implicit one of the child’s social tie to the parent. The similarity of these two contexts is proposed by the artist himself as an artist creation. Xu’s uses of the two contexts might illuminate “artistic speech phenomena” and “two-ways directed,” as Mikhail Bakhtin discovered in his literary analysis:

All these phenomena, despite very real differences among them, share one common trait: discourse in them has a twofold direction—it is directed both toward the referential object of speech, as in ordinary discourse, and toward another’s discourse, toward someone else’s speech. If we do not recognize the existence of this second context of someone else’s speech and begin to perceive stylization or parody in the same way ordinary speech is perceived, that is, as speech directed only at its referential object, then we will not grasp these phenomena in their essence: stylization will be taken for style, parody simply for a poor work of art.

Bakhin’s observation of this twofold direction emphasizes the role of parody in containing a second voice or other direction. In Xu’s works, the two contexts I discussed reveal that the performers have “twofold direction.” The kinship tie thus

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251 Bakhtin. 185.
might result from the artist’s parodic play of this twofold direction in the performers and suggest the performers’ second voice in speaking for the child. My analysis of the performers’ utterance and acts in light of Kristeva’s theory of child speech suggests the context of this second voice and the second identity of the performers.

Xu’s intention in creating this twofold direction or parodic play of double context is to define the relationship between audience and performer in this work. The audience’s involvement is central to his works. When the performers speak as children, the audience members are invited to play the role of parent. Thus, the function of the second voice is hardly divorced from the audience’s participation or expectation in playing the role of parental figures for the performers. Bakhin notes the function of the second voice as “the directly opposed to the original one.” But in my previous analysis of both contexts or voices, we did not see this opposed attitude. In Xu’s works, the original context is made of the performers’ utterances and acts in the context of the show. The second context is made of the performers’ utterances and acts in the context of the child. These two contexts are not apparently in contrast or opposed to each other. Instead, the original text transforms the second.

Rose pointed out that Bakhin fails to recognize the comic coloring of the parody created by the second voice. We may perceive the performers’ utterances and acts not only as sudden or unexpected for the audience, but also as funny or playful. For instance, when an exhibition audience member encounters two primitive creatures bending down and identifying him or her as baba or mama, he or she may feel shocked and uncomfortable. Yet he or she may also feel absurd and comic. The performer’s acts and utterances thus are the result of a non-serious performance for the

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252 Ibid. 191.
253 Rose. 127.
audience. In this context, the artist’s parodic play of the second voice in the
performers and the involvement of the audience create a comic effect.

Hutcheon reminds of us the role of the audience in parody, in addition to the
text itself: “texts do not generate anything—until they are perceived and interpreted.
For instance, without the implied existence of a reader, written texts remain
collections of back marks on white pages.”254 Adapting Michael Riffaterre’s theory,
she develops the role of the audience in parody:

The experience of literature involves a text, a reader, and his or her
reactions, which take the form of systems of words that are grouped
associatively in the reader’s mind. But in the case of parody those
groupings are carefully controlled...What is more, as readers or
viewers or listeners who decode parodic structures, we also act as
decoders of encoded intent... we may know that addresser and its
intentions only in the form of inferences are not to be ignored.255

The audience’s role is central to parody, as revealed in the writer’s intention and in the
structure of the text. In Xu’s works, we may find the role of the audience and the
structure of the works identical to these concepts. I suggest that there are two
audiences in Road Show. One is the supposed, fictional audience, not seen yet making
echoing sounds in the work. This group of audience is the target of the performer’s
autoerotic practice. The other is the real audience, we who view the performer’s
performance. Our role is similar to that of the supposed audience. We as audience are
also unseen; however, our presence is real, actual even though we engage in no verbal
or physical interaction with the performance.

The performer acts out his erotic practice to satisfy his own pleasure, and at the
same, his act makes us aware of the existence of the unseen audience. He appears on
stage and expresses the pleasure of being watched and heard through his conduct of

254 Hutcheon. 23.
255 Ibid. 23.
oral eroticism. In this sense, the performer’s pleasure results from his desire to act for others. The notion of ecstasy and the way the performer acts and sounds bring immediate, clear associations to the viewer. In this context, the performer’s autoerotic practice is not only an expression of his desire for self-satisfaction, but also involves the audience’s perception and interpretation of his acts and utterances. Thus I argue that in fact this parodic play involves not mere comic effect, but also the awareness of the audience and the audience’s act of decoding the text. Hutcheon notes that the role of the audience in parody can be articulated as “the intertextual relationship between decoder and text”:

Parody would obviously be an even more extreme case of this, because its constraints are deliberate and, indeed, necessary to its comprehension. But, in addition to this extra restricting of the intertextual relationship between decoder and text, parody demands that the semiotic competence and intentionality of an inferred encoder be posited.256

In light of this intertextual relationship, we see that Xu purposely and skillfully defines the gender of the off-stage audience. Understanding the performer’s autoerotic act in this way returns us to the discussion of act and sounds, which imply subject and object. The performer’s act is hysterical, full of excitement; the sounds that this act is associated with are accordingly sexual. The subject here is the performer himself, and the object is the audience. The subject is male, and the object is female. The male subject is actual, and the female object is fictional. The addressee of the performative act thus is sexually different from the performer or other.

In this context, the male performer flaunts his masculine power to both the audience of the work and the audience of the performance. This audience’s sounds of climax, which echo the performer’s, identify and confirm this sense of masculinity.

256 Ibid. 37.
Their sounds imply the listener’s (the audience’s) gender, and the act implies the performer’s gender identity—male.

The male is actual, as we mentioned, and the female is fictional. The female is made subservient to the performer’s desire and sexuality because the sounds of climax represent a sexual response to the performer’s desire for satisfactory sexuality. The signifiers of sexuality include sounds and gestures which are perceptional, rather than factual. In this sense, there is no audience at all for this performance, except for the performer himself. The existence of this supposed audience results from his own imagination of others as his sexual objects. The tension between the performer and the audience is revealed to us in this factual and fictional antithesis. In some important scenes that suggest the existence of this off-stage audience, the performer’s gestures pointing toward them indicate his desire to see how they respond to his sounds and acts. The audience repeats the sounds the performer has made. Embracing this reality, the performer appears to enjoy his performance. However, sexual references to the performer here do not represent normal sexual intercourse, whose sounds are seemingly the combinations of male and female climax. I argue that the existence of the off-stage audience, including both the supposed audience and the real audience, identifies the encoded role of the audience as a symbol of the performer’s masculine and then mature status with respect to his primordial need for the mother’s protection and sustenance. Thus, I suggest that the performer’s parodic character involves a therapeutic function.

In this context, there is another type of audience that enhances the tension between the performance and the work. As I pointed out earlier, this work was created on the occasion of the young artist’s solo exhibition. Xu parodically represented his solo show through by the rock ‘n’ roll performance. A solo exhibition resembles, to a certain extent, a solo performance on a stage, because the artist himself and his works
are open to the public for consumption—he and his works are in the spotlight, staged for consumption. In this sense, this work addresses the commodification of art, the role of the audience in the process of commodification, and art’s function; it is a heuristic inquiry into these issues. The role of the audience is vague here, but its function is clear: the artist leads the audience (us) to question and explore how we participate in this work—how “we consume.”

In the work, in a broad sense, the three performers on their respective screens may suggest the reality faced by Chinese artists as they confront these issues. They may refer to a collective notion of Chinese young artists whose artistic realities include struggling with how to perceive and respond to their audience. I previously indicated that Xu Zhen has addressed the identity of Chinese artists in the context of the international art scene. His career has been built upon his struggle with this reality. The title of his solo exhibition is *A Young Man*. Xu deliberately de-personalized his own identity, the subject of the exhibition. This interpretation of his titling in the context of his works leads us back to the discussion of the heuristic strategy in relationship to the role of the audience in this work.

With regard to Xu Zhen’s parodic strategy, the role of the audience was a critical experience that he confronted prior to creating *Road Show*. A year before, Xu had first displayed his works in the Venice Biennial—the most prestigious stage of the international art scene. This debut no doubt established his fame as a newly emerging Chinese artist in that scene. The majority of the Venice Biennial audience was Western. However, when *Road Show* was displayed at Xu’s solo exhibition in Shanghai, the audience was predominantly local. This work, then, was forced to accommodate the local system of art.

The heuristic function of parody in *Road Show* invites us to notice that there are actually two types of audience: the “supposed audience” (similar to the off-stage,
female audience in *Road Show*) and the actual audience. The members of the unseen, supposed audience may be regarded as the Western audience because the performer/artist must “satisfy” them in order to continue “performing on the stage”—they are powerful and necessary. The Western audience supports him, but he has no dialogue with them; he feels they do not truly understand his works although he needs them to “consume” these works. His real audience, in a sense, can be seen as the local audience, with whom he has ties of ethnicity and understanding. In a sense, we the audience of the work (not inside like the females supposedly making sounds in intimate response to him) are more real. We definitely exist and truly see the performance.

Thus, *Road Show* is expressive of great struggle and opposition. The performer/artist is dependent upon evoking a response from his “invisible females.” His performance also needs “eyes” to watch him, even though he is, in a sense, satisfying himself by himself. On a broader level, he needs his audiences, both Western and local. To continue working as an artist, he must be “consumed.” On the other hand, he also strives for independence. He performs solo, almost as if he does not need the audience. The tension between dependence/independence expressed here lies at the very heart of this artist’s work and, I would suggest, informs the thinking and work of many of his contemporaries who are acutely aware of this tension and who try to balance the twin needs for autonomy and support.

**The Purpose of Parodic Play: The Artist’s Dependence on/Independence from the Global World**

From my analysis of the role of the audience, we begin to disclose the structure of this work decoded through the performer’s sounds and gestures. The performer’s sounds mirror what the gestures convey. The pitch of the sounds is high, and their
rhythm is rapid; they are irritating. In making such sounds, the performer must be straining his throat. He appears agonized and tense, looking almost as if he were in pain during the performance. It is ironic; that although this performance suggests the presence of an audience, we are also struck by a sense of aloneness. This feeling allows us as to recall the beginning of the performance, when the performer appears alone on the stage against a dark background. During the entire performance, he is shown separated from the audience and seems to be alienated from them. In this sense, his gestures can be perceived as expressing loneliness. I suggest that this structure might illuminate the anaclitic feeling of the performer. Kristeva writes of the voice as an infantile sign for an anaclitic relationship. This sign can be interpreted as the infant loose of its maternal dependence:

> Voice is the vehicle of that call for help, directed at a frustrated memory, in order to insure, first through breath and warmth, the survival of an ever premature human being; and this is undoubtedly significant for the acquisition of language, which will soon be articulated along the same vehicle. Every cry is, psychologically and projectively, described as a cry of distress, up to and including the first vocalizations, which seem to constitute distress calls, in short: anaclises. The newborn body experiences three months of such anaclitic “facilitations” without reaching a stable condition.257

In Xu Zhen’s work, the performer’s making of sounds might illuminate the significance of the sign, and the anaclitic relationship might be seen as the performer’s relationship to the off-stage audience, revealed as the performer’s erotic fantasy of the maternal role. The performer’s act is performed in a context of loneliness and alienation from the audience which is reminiscent of the performance’s dependence, and the status of the loss of independence. The reality of being watched and heard by the off-stage audience produces the feeling of distress. Making sounds and performing

certain gestures releases this stress and, at the same time, satisfies the invisible audience. In this sense, the voices of the clapping and climax come from a supposed audience. The performer is transmitting (making sounds) and receiving sounds. Both utilize the vehicle of hearing and speaking. The dramatic gestures of pointing are revealed as the function of sight in the performer’s act itself and his anaclisis with others. Kristeva writes:

Voice, hearing, and sight are the archaic dispositions where the earliest forms of discreteness emerge. The breast, given and withdrawn; lamp-light capturing the gaze; intermittent sounds of voice or music—all these meet with anaclisis (according to a temporal sequence probably programmed, too, by the particular aptitude of each child), hold it, and thus inhibit and absorb it in such a way that it is discharged and abated through them: early “defenses” against the aggressivity of a (pseudo-) drive (without goal). At that point, breast, light, and sound become a there: a place, a spot, a marker.258

In Xu’s work, we find that the performer’s sounds and bodily language are obvious and recognizable as infantile. They signal a message of “a there: a space, a spot, a marker” that circumscribes the performer’s sounds and acts. In this context, the performer’s act and sound become meaningful for the audience. The audience and the sources of sounds are the marker of a there. This there suggests also in turn the performer making sounds and performing acts in the position of a here. The antithesis of a there and a here discloses the performer and others—a subject who makes sounds and an object who respond to them. This antithesis suggests the notion of a subjectivity that is acting in order to be watched by others who fulfill the role of audience. In Road Show, the cure for the reality of distress in the performer’s anaclises is eroticism.

258 Kristeva. 283.
Thus, I argue that the parodic play of the double voice reveals the double identity of the creator of parody. The performer’s parodic character represents the artist’s condition. Thus the performers’ acts can be seen as ritualistic procedure for his defense against separation and object loss from the audience and the context in which he performs. In an essay, Robert C. Bak discusses infantile fetishes and childhood fetishism. He concludes that

in infancy the inanimate thing serves as “transitional object” and functions primarily to attenuate the trauma of weaning and separation… The intermediate object serves as a representative of the mother or mother substitute in a child who has progressed to a need-satisfying object relationship.259

In Xu’s performers, their ritual-like act for the audience now might be understood as the performer’s desire to become independent from spectatorship by demonstrating his separating relationship with it. This ritualistic and worship-like act can substitute for the need for independence. Bak argues that the infantile worship or fetishism is not eroticism in terms of sexual intercourse, but represents the infantile choice of object. He notes the role of “transitional objects as infantile fetishes disregarding their essential function and the phase specificity of the fetish in the phallic phase.”260 Thus, he defines “fetishism as an inanimate thing in the presence or absence of the sexual object… An obligate ritualistic procedure introducing or completing sexual intercourse (e.g., hair cutting).”261 The performance thus may represent a ritualistic act of the performer’s fetishism and a transitional object between the artist and the audience.

If this interpretation explains the role of the performers, we then need to explore the artist’s intentionality in representing himself and the performers in this

260 Ibid. 191.
261 Ibid. 193.
specific relationship. We now need to turn to explore the artist’s background in order to understand the intention of his parodic strategy and the purpose of his parodic play. In Road Show, we see a young, sophisticated” man who may represent the popular youth culture commonly established in major cities. Xu’s performance thus represents the social reality of this popular culture. The association with youth is confirmed by the context of this work. Road Show was created on the occasion of his 2002 solo exhibition, entitled A Young Man. Xu consciously uses the article “a” to convey a general notion of youth. In other words, this young man can be the universal type of Chinese young man. Also, of course, he may refer specifically to Xu Zhen, the artist himself. The presentation of the rock ‘n’ roll show can be seen as his—or any young man’s—exploration of self-identification in contemporary culture. Other works in this solo exhibition may be interpreted in the context of his awareness in discovering the self in art, rather than simply as sexual and comic experiences. I suggest the notion of the Chinese youth’s embracing of Western signs such as rock ‘n’ roll as a way to identify himself in the global culture.

This self-identification can be understood as the theme of his solo exhibition, exhibited from January 10–11 in 2002 in Bizart, a recently established art center founded primarily by Xu Zhen and Davide Quadrio, a native of Italy. This art center, a non-profit organization, aimed to promote the works of young Shanghai artists. It provided space and resources for artists and also served as a place for exchange among international artists who reside and work in Shanghai. (Yang Zhenzhong’s Don’t Move was displayed in an exhibition organized by this center.) Before this, Xu was associated with Art Cottage, an art community formed by several artists in Shanghai to encourage peer learning. Some of its core members began to hold exhibitions between 1998 and 2000. (These young artists included Xu Zhen, Yang Zhenzhong, Liang Yue, and later, Yang Fudong, among other major active Shanghai young artists during this
time.) After Art Cottage disbanded in 2000, the Bizart became a new community for some artists who had originally participated in Art Cottage, and for those who had recently joined. Xu and these artists planned a project called One By One—a series of solo exhibitions by each artist at the center.\textsuperscript{262} Xu’s solo exhibition in 2002 was the first of this series. (The entire project was not finished at the time of this writing.)

The group of artists who participated in Art Cottage were generally concerned with the following: (1) being consciously self-critical of their art, (2) questioning the visual concept of reality, (3) defining the role of an artist, and (4) having a resistant attitude toward institutions (for example, Chinese official exhibitions and international biennials). Xu was particularly concerned with these issues. Addressing these concerns, he saw himself as an individual and self-determining creator. These concerns still remained strong in Xu’s \textit{Road Show} and \textit{Babamama}.

In a large political and cultural context, Xu’s work in 2002 might be associated with China’s reality as a global spectacular of architecture and billboards. Shanghai APEC in 2001 was an excellent opportunity to exhibit the economic and cultural achievements of China’s globalization in Shanghai. This economic meeting placed Shanghai in the spotlight: Shanghai was the major location in which the world could watch China embracing capitalism after 1996. Recalling China’s economic boom from 1993 to 1996, we see that when it subsided in late 1996, Shanghai’s role in China’s emerging capitalism became unique and important. Many international companies went to Shanghai and began establishing their local branches after 1997. One could also see the launching of much post-modernist architecture there. Capitalist signs became real for the Chinese people, not only through the Internet or TV monitors, but in a tangible way in daily life.

\textsuperscript{262} I interviewed the artist and discussed this topic.
China applied to host APEC in 1997, when Shanghai was just becoming a global city. Four years later at Shanghai APEC, post-modern architecture was very “masculine,” which could be seen in the hard, cold standardization and rigid shape of its capitalist signs. This global reality in Shanghai qualified China as competitive and attractive to APEC. The driving force of China’s globalization in Shanghai, in part, was thus strongly associated with outside spectatorship—being attractive to APEC. Shanghai’s transformation featured large skyscrapers; the city came to resemble a miniature Western city. Two of the most famous examples of this architecture are the East Pearl (illus. C.58) and the Jim Mao Building (illus. C.59), which shaped Shanghai’s new identity as financial capital of contemporary China. Shanghai’s new status in the global world reminded people of its importance as the biggest seaport in Asia, as well its role as financial capital of Asia. In 2001, Shanghai became the showcase for China’s capitalist and globalist spectacle. On the local level, Shanghai’s living environment, driven by globalist forces and surrounded by this spectacle, did not meet the daily needs of its people and caused feelings of anxiety and dislocation.

Shanghai’s showcase status has inspired several Shanghai-based Chinese artists. For instance, in a Website-based work, The New Image of Shanghai Today (1997) (illus.C.60), Shi Yong (b. 1963) includes 12 photos of himself and offers statistical results from a poll on which image best represents the new Shanghai man. The artist wore 12 different hairstyles and various forms of makeup, and asked the public to vote. In this work, the artist offered the following: (1) The new image should reflect both his individuality and the contemporary spirit of China, and (2) the new image should be convincing for international communication. In addition, he asked voters to briefly answer the following question: in today’s China, what kind of new image do you think can play an important role on the stage of international communications? In this work, Shi Yong arrived at one image for his identity for the
image of the new Shanghai man, which he later used for his other two works. Like Shi, Xu is also concerned with the newly emerged identity of the new Chinese. But unlike Shi, Xu associates this identity with a young artist, rather than with a generic people. Xu uses this performer to identity either himself or a young artist exhibiting within the exhibition system under the awareness of the exhibition audience.

**Babamama** was created soon after the 2002 SARS virus outbreak, so it is possible that the artist’s creation of the primitive creatures is associated with that crisis. The outbreak generated negative impressions in the global community of an “untruthful” China unwilling to report the facts of the health crisis. The credibility of China’s new leadership, elected just months before, was challenged and questioned in the global community. China’s relationship with neighboring counties was particularly tense: China itself was, in a sense, forced to close its doors and to isolate itself from the rest of the world because of the perceived danger. Soon the outbreak of SARS across China created a catastrophic feeling throughout the country. The government returned to the old socialist system of heavy surveillance in its monitoring of people and traffic between cities.

The outbreak of the virus quickly became a global issue and generated a global fear of contamination from this “Chinese virus.” The World Health Organization sent medical experts to China in an attempt to understand the ongoing situation and to monitor the potential spread of the virus throughout China and to the rest of the world. (Taiwan and Hong Kong were two places that felt the effects of the contamination worries most dramatically.) Some countries proclaimed that Chinese travelers were not welcome or allowed. China’s openness in reporting the existence of the virus and the country’s credibility in terms of controlling the outbreak were questioned and even challenged by global community members. The virus became a global issue because of its potential spread to other countries through a variety of channels; it was lethal
and was carried invisibly by human beings, and there was no treatment yet available. A few months later, the virus was suppressed, and relations between China and the rest of the world returned to normal.

As a result of the SARS crisis, historical, problematic, purely racial representations of Chinese as an “uncivilized state” re-emerged. In early twentieth century United States, some posters and newspapers portrayed the Chinese in a racially stereotyped fashion. In San Francisco newspapers at the turn of the century, Chinese were often pictured surrounded by rats, suggesting that the Chinese were unhealthy, carriers of disease. In some newspapers, Chinese were portrayed as wild and dirty animals eating rats. (illus. C.61) The SARS virus and the possibility that wild animals were the source of the virus recalled these earlier historical representations of the Chinese.

The performance in Babamama can be seen as expressive of Xu’s strong critical and even subversive signals to the Western spectatorship on the meaning of the stereotype of the “uncivilized” Chinese recalled by the virus crisis. During the development of contemporary Chinese art in the 1990s, the Western audience played a vital role in introducing Chinese artists to art institutions and the press. Chinese artists kept these Western representations in mind as they created and displayed their works. The audience in the Beijing satellite exhibition of Xu Zhen’s Babamama included both a local audience and a Western one, composed of curators and critics. These art professionals came to China to see the official exhibition and, at the same time, to view the satellite exhibition. This fact had already become central to the artist’s awareness in the exhibition.

Xu Zhen has been known for his separate organization of exhibitions held during the same time as the government-sponsored Biennale exhibitions in Shanghai. In China, artists call these types of independent exhibitions satellite exhibitions. This
kind of exhibition provides artists whose works are not recognized by the authorities with opportunities to display their works. Contrary to the official Biennale exhibition, this type of exhibition is illegal and thus underground, providing a critical perspective on the official system of exhibition and spectatorship. Since the 2000 Shanghai Biennale, this type of exhibition has been pervasive during the exhibition term of the Biennale. Xu Zhen has curated and organized two satellite exhibitions—in 2002 and in 2004. In Babamama, he showed his work in a satellite exhibition during the 2003 Beijing Biennale, the official biennale, organized by the official association of art in China and devoted to the biennale system. Although he did not participate as a curator, Xu Zhen remained strong in his desire to challenge the official Beijing Biennale.

Performance has been a critical and radical medium used in defiance of authority in China, particularly in art exhibitions. Since the late 1980s, when performance art began to be acknowledged by artists for purely artistic purposes, this type of art has been strongly regarded as a tool that is antagonistic to authority. In China Avant-Garde (1989) an exhibition curated by a group of Chinese critics and writers and devoted to the presentation of Chinese avant-garde art in the 1980s, Zhang Nian’s (b. 1964) performance Laying Eggs (illus. C.62) (1989) demonstrates anxiety concerning the fate of the country. He performs as a chicken laying “eggs” during the term of the exhibition. According to the artist, this performance refers to the birth of China’s next generation. Particularly in the context of exhibitions, performance has provided a chance to show dissident “acts”; sometimes artists even show their performances without the exhibition curators’ permission. Sun Ping (1950) gave the performance Stock (illus. C.63) (1992) as a kind of solo satellite exhibition during the 1992 exhibition, which placed contemporary Chinese art in the arena of the capitalist system of commodity I discussed in Chapter Three. Sung was not invited by the exhibition curators, but performed just outside the exhibition space. He created fake
stock certificates and distributed them to audience members as they made their way into the exhibition. The performances of neither Zhang nor Sun focus on or criticize the exhibition system itself; rather they are dramatic theatrical events whose purpose is to startle and disturb—in general, a kind of performance that would be interrupted by the police.

Unlike those of Zhang and Sung, Xu’s performance targeted the official exhibition itself, the Beijing Biennale. Even though the exhibition he participated in was legal, he was aware of the performance as politically sensitive. The primitive creatures in Xu’s Babamama, however, could be seen as a disguise, a seemingly politically neutral one which would not cause trouble for him.

This performance might, however, have a subversive meaning in its “uncivilized” representation of the Chinese. This vision of Chinese as “uncivilized creatures” included seeing them as monkeys and as awkward, subhuman creatures. In the magazine Punch in the late 19th century, China was represented as a monkey wearing official headgear; this was an insult to the Chinese ambassador visiting the British. In New York, in a Broadway show originally based on a story by Mark Twain, the Chinese were described as foolish, clumsy-handed creatures. In Babamama, the performers’ acts look awkward in the context of the exhibition; they appear stupid—identical to the stereotypical image of Chinese in Western history. Thus I suggest that this performance is not necessarily related to racial issues, but is very critical of the representation of Chinese artists according to the Western vision.

In both Road Show and Babamama, the interpretation of the kinship tie defined by the performers and the audience may also be associated with the SARS outbreak, because it revived the socialist notion of the nation as family. Thus, the parodic play refers to the social condition at that time. In Chinese, the word “nation” combines two words: “country” and “family.” In Chinese history, individuals often had to sacrifice
their own desires for the country’s good. In Chinese socialism, the priority of the
nation over individuals is emphasized in the context of nationalism and patriotism. In
an extreme case, individuality and family were discarded and replaced by the
collective notion of “family” during the Cultural Revolution. The values of capitalism
and globalism, in part, uprooted this tradition and introduced something new.

In 2002, the government’s handling of the SARS outbreak created feelings of
anxiety in China about the notion of an unclear family and individual desires. In order
to quickly and efficiently control the outbreak, the Chinese government placed certain
cities under quarantine, controlling both traffic and personnel. Shanghai (the home of
Xu Zhen) was a particular target. According to the official report, this city was “clean”
and luckily immune from the threat of the virus. But the actual case was enigmatic.
The government used an aggressive approach to control the potential outbreak through
the use of military and police aid. Traffic in and out the city was monitored closely by
both forces. The government also revived the old system of monitoring in order to
observe people who were suspicious of having the virus and to prohibit “outsiders”
from entering certain communities. Everyone was “encouraged” to stay at home for
the sake of outbreak control. Individual rights and the primacy of the nuclear family
were suspended. The government’s propaganda on the outbreak of the virus called for
the sacrifice of privacy and individuality for the sake of collective safety. National
power thus became supreme once again, for the moment.

Four years ago, in 2001, the relationship between China and the United States
grew tense when a U.S. military detector plane was forced to land in China. One
Chinese pilot died in the incident. In late 2001, China for the first time hosted the
Asian Pacific Economic Council in Shanghai. The President of the United States,
George W. Bush, and leaders from Asian countries attended the meeting in Shanghai.
On the agenda for this meeting was the need for international cooperation to fight the
terrorism responsible for the September 11, 2001 attacks. Another urgent issue was how to use China’s economic power as a driving force in the global economy. A year after Shanghai APEC, the Bureau of International Expositions announced that Shanghai won the bid for Expo 2010.

**The Exhibition Audience and System**

After analyzing these two works as a parodic play of the twofold direction or intertextuality, I argue that the metaphor of the parental figure in fact implies his condition of dependence on/independence from the audience and the exhibition system. According to Hutcheon in her reading of intertextuality, Kristeva notes that:

> There were three elements involved besides the text under consideration: the author, the reader, and the other exterior texts. These elements were arranged along two axes: a horizontal one of the dialogue of the author with his or her potential reader, and a vertical one between the text itself and the other texts.\(^{263}\)

This schema might illuminate Xu’s parodic play of the twofold direction in both works. The horizontal is revealed as the relationship between the performer and the audience. The vertical is revealed as the relationship between the context of the shows and the context of the child. I have previously demonstrated both relationships. I furthermore suggest that this schema also remains truthful in interpreting the social and political contexts the artist confronts and that these became the intentionality of the parodic play. In other words, Xu’s parodic play aims to reveal the reality that he experienced.

This experience largely results from Shanghai’s globalization, which is associated with two kinds of spectatorship: the globalist and the domestic. While the former is often apparent and dominating, the latter is subtle and dominated. This

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\(^{263}\) Ibid. 87.
situation can be seen as a synonym for the development of contemporary Chinese art since the 1990s. In general, contemporary Chinese art in the 1990s transfigured itself with displays in biennials, museums, galleries, art fairs and expositions around the world. In this context, contemporary Chinese artists were consciously aware of being seen in these global arenas of display. The reality of this global display of contemporary Chinese art since 1993 through a number of European exhibitions began to strongly influence both the selection of motifs and the style of contemporary Chinese artists. These artists began to create art based on the demands of this global exposure. The international exhibition functioned symbolically as the driving force of their creations. At the same time, these artists faced a local reality in China—the censorship of contemporary Chinese art in the 1990s, by which contemporary Chinese art was displayed only through alternative channels (for example, underground space, foreign embassies, and TV programs on art). The international arena of display provided them a public—but dislocated—channel for their art.

With regard to capitalism, one must note that contemporary Chinese artists of the early 1990s created art as a way to make a living. In the early 1990s, some artists decided to become so-called “commercial artists,” a label which distinguished them from official or academic artists. These artists had no basic, stable financial support from the government and so became “entrepreneurs” in the arts. Previously, the government had sponsored artists. In China, generally speaking, an individual is tied to a working unit. This system is intended to guarantee benefits and stability for an individual. An entrepreneur artist escapes from this system at his or her own risk—a price paid in exchange for the freedom of artistic creation without political interference by his or her working unit. At the end of the 1990s, artists had to survive

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264 John Clark’s research on the Chinese history of exhibition provides us with a good example to understand how often and to what extent contemporary Chinese art was shown globally.
within a system of commercial galleries, private collectors, museum collections, and sponsorships. This was the price of commercialization, a process both intimately involved with the changing socialist situation during this time and also associated with the commercial system in art, primarily outside China.

Xu Zhen is a younger-generation artist compared to those who have been credited with first initiating this kind of development, such as Xu Bing and Zhang Peili. He graduated from college in 1996 and began to create in late 1997. He encountered the Chinese artists’ reality within the context of the commercialization of art in the late 1990s. He participated in the Venice Biennial in 2000 and witnessed the reality of the exhibition experience first-hand. A year later, he created Road Show and held his solo exhibition in a non-profit art center in Shanghai. (This exhibition was partially sponsored by a commercial gallery based in Shanghai.265) Thus, it is interesting for us to ask: what is his attitude toward this Chinese reality in art? And how does he respond in his works to the situation of contemporary Chinese artists who face the Western spectatorship and exhibition system, which becomes the reality of his art?

Modern society is dominated by the commodity exchange as its “primitive” mode of structure. A capitalist society is based on this structure on a global scale. The commodity is exchanged among global members. This exchange, however, to a certain extent depends upon an unequal relationship among the members. The so-called “third world countries” have developed in this context. China is a new member to this structure and builds an institutional tie by its primitive resources such as labor and lands. The contemporary Chinese artist is himself a kind of commodity: he has cultural ties with Western institutions which are absolutely necessary to his

265 I interviewed the artist and discussed this situation in his studio in Shanghai.
functioning. However, he also has a need for independence. The problem is how to balance these two needs.

In Road Show and Babamama, Xu uses the concept of masquerade and, in one piece, shows a music performance on a stage, and in the other, two primitive creatures. I have mentioned the concept of masquerade here in this discussion of the role of audience because the artist in essence must don a “mask” before he can address his audience. This mask grants him a new identity—one that he lacks in reality. In his masquerade, he balances this gap between his desire and the audience as the object of this desire. I suggest that the artist’s concerns with these issues of dependence/independence are drawn from his experiences as a young artist and his anxiety about the development of contemporary Chinese art, which has been strongly determined by the Western audience (that is, art critics, curators, and so forth). In the 1990s, contemporary Chinese art felt the radical impact of the processes of Westernization in style and the rise of the idea of art as commodity. In the early 21st century, contemporary Chinese art continues to be influenced by these processes. The issues of the exhibition system and the role of the audience have become even more critical. At the same time, the art field in China itself has opened up possibilities for the artist who seeks to exhibit his works in local associations. Within this reality, Xu Zhen, the young artist who works in Shanghai—one of the most Westernized cities in China—has emerged onto the international art scene but is very aware of this tension between Western influence and the desire for a more local, independent expression.

This expression is less apparent in Road Show than in Babamama. In Babamama, I previously noted the artist’s use of the strategy of non-seriousness and the concept of masquerade. The use of primitive creatures, with their baby talk, amplifies the effect of the non-seriousness and also reveals the nature of worship as an expression of the child’s sense of lack. Understanding the role of parody in this work,
I suggest that this worship can be understood in the broader sense of the artist’s dependence on/independence from the audience in the exhibition and the system of exhibition itself. I will elaborate on the reasons for the artist’s identification of himself in this particular role-play of primitive creature.

Xu’s concerns with institutions during this particular period can be seen as a resistance against the government’s power over institutions that at this time defined both conventional categories of art and aesthetics in art (as in the 2003 Beijing Biennial). I also suggest that he is concerned with art’s strong relationship with commercialization, a process which began in 1993. This process was governed by the capitalist system of art in terms of the International Biennials and blockbuster exhibitions outside China since 1993. The emergence of a new preoccupation (how to deal with old socialist constraints and the new forces of consumerism) thus came to define Xu Zhen and other young artists in the context of the current social and cultural value system, and caused them to look for substitutions to ensure that their works would be appreciated and to act upon art institutions (for example, museums, galleries and the like).

In Babamama, while the performers look for their parental figures, they are not limited to the Western audience in the exhibitions. The performers compulsively try to find their parents and worship their authority. As discussed earlier, the act of this worship represents the performers’ dependence on the power of the parental figures. In this sense, the aim of their compulsive act is to locate their own identity within the power structure and to find protection for their vulnerability. If we understand the context of this work in this way, the performers’ act reveals a symptom of anxiety and vulnerability in the context of the Western audience and the official Biennial exhibition.
The performers who speak “baba” and “mama” to the audience members are intentionally non-serious because the utterances are the artist’s heuristic strategy for questioning authoritarian power through the audience. It is important here to note that most audiences of Xu Zhen’s works are Chinese (local), not Western (global). Even so, the Western audience often possesses a vital power to determine the concept and exhibition of this work. Babamama precisely exposes the problem of this fact and depicts Chinese artists’ anxiety working within this reality. The performers’ compulsive act parallels, then, the artist’s waiting and wandering in search of a stable and appropriate relationship with that power. The performers’ utterances imply a desire for parental dependence, but their acts indicate an exchangeable, repeatable, and unstable condition as they wander from audience member to audience member. The dissociation between the performers’ utterances and acts reveals the reality of their dislocation.

Although the performers and their act and utterances are created by Xu, their role-play cannot be regarded as solely the representation of this artist’s relationship with the audience in this exhibition. It is contemporary Chinese artists in general who confront this reality. In this work, Xu uses two performers to signify artists in the collective sense. In the psychological sense, this relationship is similar to the complicated one of dependence and independence which exists between a child and its parental figures during the early stage of its development. Babamama depicts the connection between the artist and the audience, between the artwork and the exhibition. This intimacy reveals both convergence and separation. Dependence and independence here are specifically associated with historical and cultural events. The global chain-like reaction to the potential danger of a lethal virus revealed both the interdependence and the independence of global country members. The global network of air transportation was partially suspended in China, and the global force of
tourism was restrained in China. The power of the global mechanism of travel was this made dramatically apparent at this time. Xu’s use of parody aims to reveal not only art, but also social reality.

Therefore, I suggest that Xu’s concerns help us understand the relationship between art and social and cultural values in a Chinese context. It is also important to see how this relation acts as a framework for art in contemporary China. The aesthetic shaped by younger-generation artists is concerned with issues of looking and spectatorship; the idea of an artistic creation being a fetishistic object or pricey commodity for Westerners; and the meaning and role of the artist in such a context. This notion of fetishism is not related to man’s erotic or sexual fantasy, but refers to infantile fetishism in which the infantile needs an intermediate object as a substitute for the maternal role. As Xu’s works imply, the artist who has been fostered by the Western system of art receives rather than chooses this object. Xu’s dependence reveals a defense against the Western dominant forces. The German-born and New York-based artist Hans Haacke has been concerned with the impact of sponsorship, the museum system and so on upon art. His works have tried to disclose the economic system that sustains art. Like Haacke, Xu aims to address these issues. But unlike Haacke, Xu’s works employ more implicit symbols to reveal these impacts.

In the midst of these concerns, we find Xu as an activist artist in terms of his active and self-determined response to the social structure and cultural values that frame his art. Xu does not forget the historical past in art as presented by official forces but instead wishes to create his own connection to the forces of capitalism. He appears to comply with art collectors and the exhibition system, but at the same time

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he demonstrates the absurdity of the current art system. From Shanghai’s presentation as a showcase, the artist became aware of his condition as a showcase in the exhibition system and his dependence on the eyes of the audience to give meaning to his works.

Thus, from my analysis of Xu Zhen’s works, we see that even though the artist uses parodic play, his concern and intentionality departs from that of Xu Bing, who is associated with the experiences of the 1980s. Xu Zhen’s parodic play is also different from that of Zhang Peili, who has been associated with Post-1989 Art. Like Yang Zhenzhong, Xu Zhen has a vision full of dualities and contradictions. He connects with his past, yet does not want to be seen as a continuous part of it. But unlike Yang’s parodic play, which is inclined to the past in order to see if it has been lost, Xu’s aims at the present. This concern with the past is in contrast to the concerns Xu Bing and Zhang Peili, in which the past is given away. Xu Zhen is part of and yet sabotages the present consumerist art scene. This attitude toward the past, as well as toward the social and cultural values of the present, makes his artwork a new kind of discourse in the history of contemporary Chinese art. It signals a shift because it aggressively dismisses the two labels of art: that of the 1980s (the 85 New Art Wave which sought a cultural, national identity) and the political one of the 1990s (Post-1989 Art), which reached out to the West.
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

In the previous four chapters, I discussed four Chinese artists and their works, examining how they use parodic play. This dissertation began with two concerns: what does the notion of fun mean in the works of these artists, and what game do they play? Through my discussion, I argue that this notion of fun needs to be understood as a kind of play, or what I call playful sabotage. This sabotage is actually circumscribed by the audience’s awareness and the artists’ intentionality and occurs as a kind of game—a simulation involving mimicry and role-playing, with elements of vertigo and chance. I argue that their game-playing demonstrates the nature of their art as game, and the critical intent of their works as heuristic and therapeutic.

The artists’ playful sabotage reveals their intentionality in creating their art and in exploring newly emerging media in China—installation in the 1980s and video in the 1990s. Like artists whose work is labeled “Political Pop” and “Cynical Realism,” these four are concerned with art as commodity, a prevailing reality that has shaped—and continues to shape—the development of contemporary Chinese art. In the works of “Political Pop” and “Cynical Realism” artists, the powerful influence of capitalism on culture and art comes to light in many ways. Unlike such artists, however, the four artists I discuss do not choose to treat the capitalist influence as a motif on which to develop their iconography and style. Instead, they explore the reality of art as commodity and criticize the problems caused by this development. Although both “types” of artists employ parody, their concerns are different, and their strategies diverge. Thus, I argue that playful sabotage can be seen as a strategy common to these four artists, and perhaps generally, to the wider group of contemporary Chinese artists. At the very least, I demonstrate that this playful sabotage, divorced from established labels, can be seen as a genre of contemporary Chinese art.
Politics of Representation: Toying with Authority and Reality

Each of the four artists directs his performers to act and speak. They perform in a parodic way, in a sense, “playing” with the authorities of language, TV news broadcast, surveillance and watchfulness, and the Western system of art exhibition. The function of this performance, which the philosopher J. L. Austin might call a “performative act,” is to act through speech. The performers’ acts and utterances create an effect of playfulness and fun. Xu Bing’s performers (the audience participating in his works) must decipher his vague, invented language, which mimics features of both Chinese and English. Zhang’s TV news reporters’ acts are too ambiguous or vague for us to determine whether they are, in fact, reporting TV news. The acts and utterances of Yang’s figures are incongruous, contradicting each other. In the works of Xu Zhen, the figures’ acts and utterances leave us bewildered about the identity of the audience and whether it even exists. Thus, fun results not from the use of language or from the act itself, but rather from the performers’ artist-directed toying with ambiguity and surprise.

The parodic play of these works addresses China’s new media reality. In China, new media is associated with both the socialist traditions of propaganda and censorship and with the capitalist and globalist values of entertainment and free expression. After the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), when China opened up and experienced economic reform, consumerist culture and globalist values reformulated mass media to serve commercial purposes (such as advertisements, TV programs and so on.) Yet, mass media retained its socialist roots. These two uses of media appeared to co-exist in the two different arenas of culture and politics. The traditional political and socialist uses of media, however, were not aligned with the purposes of consumerism. In examining the artists’ works, I reveal how this misalignment in fact brought a creative dynamism to their art rather than merely constraining their efforts.
Events occurring during the period between 1993 and 2003 were turning points in China’s political and cultural evolution in terms of both nationalist sentiments and consumerist and globalist acceptance. During this critical time the artists seized the energy of this misalignment and applied it to their own uses.

**Double-coded Identity: The Supposed Audience and the Real Audience**

The artists’ parodic games create two notions of the audience as players. There are two types of players/audiences who watch the performers’ act of play but who do not themselves physically play the games: the supposed audience and the real audience. The artists create the role of the supposed audience, and the performers’ acts and/or utterances further shape it, but this audience is often unseen, even if it determines how the figures play their games. The other audience is the real audience (us)—real because we view the works in front of us. We not only watch the performers play their games but also remain aware of the supposed audience watching the figures’ play.

The supposed audience serves a particular function here: it suggests that the figures’ acts and utterances take place in a public—rather than a private—space, because someone views their acts. The role of the real audience, of course, is not to play the performers’ games, but rather to absorb them. Here the artists’ strategies for encouraging absorption are vagueness (Xu Bing), ambiguity (Zhang Peili), incongruity (Yang Zhenzhong), and suspension (Xu Zhen). These strategies are the effect of the act of play, which I previously mentioned. The real audience visually “plays” the games with the performers, and then “feels” the playful feeling of the games. We may have fun in “playing” these games despite their “serious” intent.

The notion of playful sabotage—positive and even at times exhilarating—revealed in the artists’ works is not merely related to humor but to heuristic and
therapeutic expression. This parodic strategy does not aim to demolish present reality but calls for the birth of the new self—a free being within constrained realities. The artists’ social positions—and their survival—were at stake in the face of capitalist and globalist forces. They were alarmed about the potential dangers of this mix of socialist and capitalist/globalist values in mass media. The possibility of socialists abusing mass media was of particular concern.

The Energy of Globalism

The playful sabotage of these works is informed by the reality of life inside post-Tiananmen China. Moving into the 21st century, China has engaged in the process of globalization in various ways, and thus has sought spaces for establishing its localization within the global reality. Globalization gave these artists opportunities to create and to exhibit their works at international biennials and museums. Each of them faced this cultural phenomenon, no matter where they lived or what kind of work they created. Globalization, in addition to presenting many challenges, also expanded the definition of the Chinese artist, particularly for Xu Bing. Although he is based in New York, his works have been labeled as contemporary Chinese art, rather than as Chinese American art.

My discussion of this art focuses on them in the context of several turning points in China’s post-Tiananmen world. Art historians and critics have addressed the notion of post-Tiananmen reality by examining the iconography of Tiananmen and Tiananmen Square and artists’ reactions to the political suppression of art after the incident in the early 1990s.267 I depart from these perspectives: I focus not on political

opposition to this event, but on evaluating how the artists’ world subtly influenced the creation of a special kind of playful work, a work performed as a kind of playful sabotage. I explore several turning points in China’s political, social, and cultural evolution and examine the tension between traditional socialist forces and the dizzying capitalist and globalist forces during this period. These turning points entailed both potential dangers and the creative opportunities that I discussed in the previous chapters.

Key turning points include China’s economic reformation after the Tiananmen incident in 1989 and initiation into the world of capitalist, transnational corporations around 1993; the dramatic surge in nationalism, Hong Kong’s reversion to China, and globalization in terms of satellite telecommunication from 1996 to 1997; the national tragedy of the Chinese embassy bombing in Belgrade, the Millennium, and China’s commitment to the liberation of trade through the World Trade Organization in 2000; and the outbreak of SARS and the congressional election of China’s president in 2003. (See the political chronology in Appendix A.)

Thus, when discussing the influence of the post-Tiananmen world upon the four artists, I refer to the period from 1993 to 2003. During this period, Western forces (capitalism and globalism) were apparent and immediate in contemporary Chinese art, yet socialist traditions were also pervasive—in motifs, styles, and prevailing institutional values.

In 1993, the Venice Biennial and other exhibitions devoted to contemporary Chinese art initiated the institutionalization of art production and the notion of Western spectatorship as it related to contemporary Chinese art. This process grew rapidly and globally through the major arenas of international biennials, galleries, patronage, and the system of Chinese independent curators. These forces fostered the growth of this emerging art and offered it the sustenance of the capitalist values of art
and globalist presentations. This, in part, caused the dislocation of contemporary Chinese art, which may have led to the creation of the Beijing Biennial in 2003, which was organized by China’s official association of art. This official exhibition, unlike the Shanghai Biennial, emphasizes the socialist tradition and national notion of art as a balance to the power of international contemporary art.268 (I offer an exhibition chronology in Appendix B.)

Chinese artists in general were concerned with and guided by the fact that their works would be shown in international exhibitions. But the four artists in this study, as I demonstrated, were also influenced by different political and cultural contexts unique to their art. Their works aim not only to reflect political events and cultural phenomena, but also to discover the notions and values of media that they used—printmaking (Xu Bing) and video (Zhang Peili, Yang Zhenzhong, and Xu Zhen). At times the artists faced the same cultural forces and at other times, they experienced different influences. As a result, they interpreted the dangers posed by mass media in various ways. This variety of interpretation and response thus demands that we explore each artist’s art and the particular moment when he created his works within the wider context of politics and culture. I suggest that their works all partake of the notion of playful sabotage, a concept which demonstrates their individual concerns in their art: What was the relationship between politics and culture and the artist? And finally, what do the media of printmaking and video mean to them in this context?

Before we delve further into this notion of playful sabotage and how it reveals itself in the works of the four artists, we must explore the significance of the Tiananmen incident. It was a marker for these artists as well as for the country as a

268 Less significant forces, such as Confucianism and folk art, also contributed to the development of contemporary Chinese art during this period. In this dissertation, however, I focus on the major forces—socialism, capitalism, and globalization.
whole: there was a pre-Tiananmen world and a post-Tiananmen world. The pre-
Tiananmen world was primarily driven by the force of Western modernity. In the early
1980s, China first opened itself to Western influences, regarded as being in conflict
with China’s socialist ideology. The Tiananmen incident of 1989 returned the forces
of socialism to their full strength. China retreated from Western influence and became
isolated once again. The trauma of the Tiananmen experience has haunted socialist
China’s adoption of Western capitalism since the 1980s and reveals the deep conflicts
between China’s socialist forces and those of Western democracy. Not until late 1992
and early 1993 did China reopen itself to the West. In the 1990s, Western influences
were seen in the increasing power of capitalism and globalization; the resumption of
Westernization can be viewed as a continuation of the process begun in the 1980s. The
difference between the experiences of the 1980s and the 1990s was that the latter
period was deeply informed by the traumatic memory of Tiananmen and the failure of
the socialist power to control that it brought to light.

The reality of Tiananmen shaped these artists—in their teens (Yang and Xu
Zhen) or older (Xu Bing and Zhang)—and informed their works. A new world was
formed and, as new beings tossed about in the birth throes of post-Tiananmen society,
the artists had to remake themselves. How they remade themselves in the media of
printmaking and video is the focus of my work.

Artists in Their Babyhood of New Being

Playful sabotage can also be seen as part of a “strategy of babyhood,” in which
these artists use games to respond to their surroundings and to achieve their
independence. The momentum of their play derives from the reality of globalization
and media culture and the psychological state of vulnerability and dependence. This
playful gaming constitutes the notion of subjectivity in their works and creates the root of their artistic origins in terms of intent, creativity and, most important, nature.

There are also two ways to explain what I mean in characterizing these artists as “babies” and how I find the notion of “baby” represented in their works. One is a broad sense that explicates the political and cultural background in relation to these artists and their works. The other is a strict sense that delineates the relationship of their works to a kind of “baby language.” The artists I discuss here use a kind of baby language, in spoken and/or written forms. Their varied methods for using language correspond to the four stages of baby language following. In Zhang Peili’s *Broadcasting at the Same Time* (1999–2000), the performers’ utterances are short, repetitive and thus create the effect of a soundscape (the first stage). In Yang’s *Fish Bowl* (1998), the performers’ make babbling sounds (the second stage). In Xu Zhen’s *Road Show* (2001) and Babamama (2003), the performers’ utterances are one-word repetitions (the third stage.) In Xu Bing’s *Classroom* (1996), the audience is invited to learn a basic linguistic syntax that Xu invented (the fourth stage).

I also point out that this particular use of language reveals the artists’ desire to learn to perceive and respond to the world. Baby language is not purely non-communicative, because it reveals the baby’s will to respond to its surroundings. In these works, such language is a way for the artists to remake themselves as new beings in their works. The pedagogical function of baby language returns us to the original discussion of these artists whose lives were shaped during the birth throes of a new, post-Tiananmen China. As these artists’ works suggest, their parentage is one of a world in which Marxist art served as a kind of pedagogy for the masses. In their works, created in the new reality of the post-Tiananmen world, art retains its pedagogical function but broadens to include the gaining of self-knowledge as well as issuing a warning of the dangers of surveillance and art as commodity.
In the contexts of politics and culture, these artists have recently emerged from a nation thrust into a new world. Their works reveal the new issues of global community (Xu Bing), censorship in mass media (Zhang), propaganda in mass media (Yang), and the problem of capitalist commodity (Xu Zhen), all critical issues for China during the post-Tiananmen period. Some of the artists are directly associated with the incident’s impact on the public, particularly with regard to issues of censorship and propaganda. Other issues are the global community and art as commodity, which also arose during this period. Both a general cultural concern and a private concern with their condition as artists preoccupy these four men. Xu Bing is concerned with the artist’s existence in a condition of cultural dislocation—between China and America (or the West). Zhang Peili examines the artistic medium of video and how it must cope with the “official line.” Yang Zhenzhong discovers artistic values through an individual’s free speech in the context of surveillance. Xu Zhen addresses the notion of art in tense relation to cultural institutions and its cultural value as a commodity. The primary concerns of these artists not only indicate the official line and the power of authority, but also, more important, reveal the desire to overcome this reality or at least to create a balance to ensure survival. This is all done as a kind of “play.”

Their works, then, are concerned with a liberated and self-determined subjectivity. By combining Chinese and English characters, Xu Bing creates a new type of “language” which implies a departure from both cultures to embrace something new. Zhang Peili seems to use video art to mimic the official voices and the norm in TV news. He actually reveals the problem of this norm, however; his works imply a desire to create a new “standard.” Yang Zhenzhong demonstrates that the individual self is created in the context of the mass media that serves as an entertainment vehicle for the masses. Even though this self is still institutionalized in
the sense of being under surveillance, it eventually overcomes institutional constraint and power, becoming liberated and independent in the process. Xu Zhen examines Chinese artists’ necessary dependence upon the Western institutional system and its artistic values. Yet, he points out that this dependence stands counter to the artist’s desire for independence and for more local associations.

These artists are “babies” in the sense that even the artistic media they use is new to them. The video medium has no purely artistic roots or context in the history of the People’s Republic of China. Since the medium, in part, are associated with consumerist and globalist values, the artists found their “patronage” resources in commercial associations. At the same time, since these media had particular political purposes and restrictions, they became very sensitive for public purposes. Within these constrained realties, the artistic use of the media was suppressed. (Not until about 2003 did government institutions begin to encourage the media.) During this period of time, video and related equipment was expensive, even luxurious, and was also regarded as a restricted item in telecommunication. TV stations controlled all media equipment, which was inaccessible for artistic purposes. Xu Bing started to work with installation art in the late 1980s when this art form first appeared in China. Zhang Peili was a pioneer of video art in China. Yang Zhennhong and Xu Zhen are younger artists who are familiar with installation and video art, but they have continued to work on various new art forms and media. Each of these self-taught artists began to learn how to use “the new media” from reading art magazines, viewing art works, and learning from peers. They did not have academic training with this media. Furthermore, each may also be viewed as having somewhat “innocent” and “primitive” visions which might seem alien to the Western world, which is more experienced in its traditional uses. Historically in China’s, digital media had specific roles, was solely for official use, and was controlled by the authorities. Artists working with new media need to
learn to how to use it anew for artistic purposes. In their works, video art is taken first as a kind of mass media and then is considered as a separate and new category, which I discussed in this dissertation.

**Alienation as Creative Dynamism**

Finally, it is crucial to note that these artists’ games derive from the dynamic resulting from the collision of two forces, rather than from the separate forces themselves. This dynamic opens a new universe of tension or struggle and, in these works, forms a space—isolated from daily life since it is a domain of art—in which the artists create and play their games. I characterize this state of struggle as alienation. In this context, I respond to the following questions: How are these artists inspired by this notion of alienation to create art? Why is their art necessarily a game of simulation? I argue that art finds its source in the creative dynamism of two worlds colliding. Simulation can generate the phenomenon of alienation for the players and for the audience of their play. Here artists, performers, and audience are all tugged around by the various sensibilities conflicting with each other, back and forth continually, as if they all exist in the state of being alienated at play.

These artists’ games reveal the power of make-believe. The players may fall into the danger of becoming alienated, turning away from their original identity and becoming overly attached to their new identity. They do not know who they are; they exist in a state of constantly remaking themselves. The simulation in these works conveys this power and this danger for the players. This alienation is also conveyed to the audience members, who watch the players, alienated in their game. The audience faces uncertainty and vagueness and becomes disoriented as to the players’ intent and perplexed by the game they watch. Thus, the power of simulation may cause players and audience to fall into the same alienated state.
It is important to clarify that this notion of alienation in the context of game stems from a different perspective from that of critics discussing alienation in the context of China’s Westernization process since the 1980s. In the context of that discussion, China is said to have become alienated through the journey of modernization, adoption of capitalism, and then globalization. In this context, alienation was a critical problem because this notion signified the rising power of commodity and the emergence of the bourgeoisie in socialist society, a result in conflict with China’s socialist driving force. However, the notion of alienation I examine now does not result from the power of Western forces as they played upon China’s socialist “games,” but is instead related to the nature of China’s new post-Tiananmen world as a universe struggling within a constrained reality. Yet, there is something positive, even exhilarating, going on here, too. These artists are inspired by China’s constraints, rather than merely being constrained by their problematic reality.

In the context of game, alienation reveals the magic power of make-believe in simulation; this notion might lead us to think about the sacred and ceremonial nature of the transformations involved. In the works, this notion of alienation is embodied by the performers’ acts and utterances. They seem to say the “right” things, yet they act in a droll manner. We, the audience, move back and forth often between the reality of incongruity and congruity in the figures’ acts and utterances. Their acts seem to represent the norm of institutions. Yet, they also seem independent of those institutions. Their utterances appear to convey truth and fact, or what Austin calls constative utterances. Yet, they somehow transcend the linguistic level and convey some action which Austin would call performative utterance. The figures remain in this uncertain state, remaking, between their original and new identities.

The game not only reveals dangerous alienation, but also protects the audience from this danger since the game involves a kind of freedom in terms of voluntary play
and the feeling of liberation in play. This protection is shown in the artists’ way of playing the game, or what I call playful sabotage. Alienation inspires the artists to create their game. They then use play to create a free and voluntary space for the audience, so that the audience becomes willing to play the game. This is voluntary play, so a liberating pedagogy is taking place. The aim of this play is not to win a competition, but to gain the compensation of enjoying the pleasure of play and/or fulfilling the basic instinct for survival in a state of independence, as a free being.

In his theory of game, Caillois rightly argues that mimicry may cause alienation for the players during their simulation. My analysis of the artists’ games confirms this argument. Even more important, Caillois notes Friedrich von Schiller’s discussion of art in relation to the player’s excitement and their freedom in their play:

> Schiller emphasizes the joyous exuberance of the player and his latitude of choice. Play and art are born of a surplus of vital energy, not needed by the adult or child for the satisfaction of his immediate needs, and therefore available for the free and pleasant transformation into dancing.\(^{269}\)

Following Schiller’s theory, we can argue that in these artists’ games, the amusement of the game and freedom of play in the game can be seen as a surplus of energy, derived from the dynamics of problematic cultures and the creative tension between them.

I believe that for these artists, art is derived from a surplus of energy. However, because it stems from the dynamics of a problematic reality, this art is also concerned with the satisfaction of some very primary, instinctual urges within the reality of their present constraints. Like children, they remake themselves as new beings, within the new post-Tiananmen world of China. This game is not then just part of a “latitude of

\(^{269}\) Ibid., 163.
choice.” While playful, it is indeed intended to satisfy “immediate needs.” The present condition of the creative Chinese artists is in fact a life-and-death matter.

The creative tension of these Chinese artists, caught as they are between two warring realities, is a lens through which we may look at other facets of the impact of globalization, a strong force in emerging areas. It no doubt remakes their traditions and daily lives within a state of tension. Art is often born within this tense state. This lens thus might be useful for looking at these emerging areas and examining how globalization creates challenges for them. Some African tribes, the Islamic world in the Middle East, North Korea’s communist system, and even the spiritual world in Tibet might be looked at through this lens. Folklore, religious and spiritual beliefs, and political ideology are all tightly woven into their traditions and history, and their art has been rooted in these traditions. When globalized, might they allow a new kind of art to be created? In what form will their art emerge from the world of the old realities overpowered by the agents of globalization?
APPENDIX A: POLITICAL CHRONOLOGY

1949  Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Part (CCP) assume power
1966  Outbreak of the Cultural Revolution
1976  End of the Cultural Revolution
1978  Political reform of socialist modernization
1979  Establishment of diplomatic relation with the United States
1989  The Tiananmen Incident
       The United States suspends its governmental relation with China
1990  The Group of Seven major industrialized countries sanctions imposed on China due to the Incident
1992  The revitalization of reform following the incident
1997  Hong Kong returns to China
1999  NATO bombs the Chinese embassy in Belgrade
       Macao returns to China
2000  China joins the World Trade Organization
2001  The U.S. military detecting flight forced to land in China
       Shanghai APEC
2002  The President of United States George W. Bush visits China
       Shanghai wins the bid for the 2010 World Expo
2003  The SARS outbreak in China
       The congress election of China’s new president
APPENDIX B: EXHIBITION CHRONOLOGY

1989  China/Avant-Garde Exhibition, Beijing
       Les Magicaiens de la terre, France
1990  Chine: Demain pour hier, Pourriere, France
1991  I Don’t Want to Play with Cézanne and Other Works, California, USA
1992  The First 1990’s Biennial Art Fair, Guangzhou
1993  China’s New Art, Post-1989, Hong Kong
       45th Venice Biennial (Xu Bing and Zhang Peili)
1995  46th Venice Biennial
1996  Image and Phenomena, Hangzhou
1997  Image and Phenomena, Hangzhou
1998  Inside Out: New Contemporary Chinese Art, USA
2000  Cai GuoQiang won the Golden Lion Prize in the 48th Venice Biennial
       3rd Shanghai Biennial
2002  4th Shanghai Biennial, 1st Guangzhou Triennial, Guangzhou
       1st China Triennial, Guangzhou
       Fan Mingzhen and Fan Mingzu, Shanghai
2003  50th Venice Biennial (Yang Zhenzhong and Zhang Peili)
       1st Beijing Biennial
APPENDIX C: ILLUSTRATIONS
Illustration C.1: Zhao Bandi, *Zhao Bandi & Panda (Love Each Other)*, 2001
Illustration C.2: Cai Guoqiang, APEC Cityscape Fireworks, Shanghai, China, 2001
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Illustration C.14: Detail of Book from the Sky
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Illustration C.27: Qiu Zhijie, Object being Measured: Voyeur, 1993
Illustration C.28: Zhang Peili, 30 x 30, 1998
Illustration C.33: Song Dong, *Clone*, 1996
Illustration C.34: Yang Zhenzhong, Fish Bowl, 1996
Illustration C.35: Yang Zhenzhong, I Will Die, 2000
Illustration C.39: Yan Yinghong, He Says, She Says, It Says, They Say: Forget it, Don’t Say More, 1997
Illustration C.40: Li Yongbin, *Face*, 1997
Illustration C.41: Yang Zhenzhong, Fish Bowl, 1996 (close-up view)
Illustration C.44: Chen Xiaoxiong, Who Is the Performer?, 1996
Illustration C.45: Zhao Liang, *Expression*, 1997
Illustration C.47: Cui Xiuwen, Bathroom, 2000
Illustration C.51: Tong Biao, Touch, 1995
Illustration C.52: Xu Zhen, Road Show, 2001
Illustration C.53: Xu Zhen, Babamama, 2003
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