



Fremantle Arts Centre:
The Knife's Edge:
video recently seen
in Beijing





cover:
Zhao Yao, 2009
I Love Beijing 999
(series of video stills)

far left:
Li Ming, 2010
Pond
(production still)

left:
Jin Shan, 2010
Not a Dream 3
from the series *One Man's Island*
(video still)

The Knife's Edge: video recently seen in Beijing

Their form of paradise is a heterotopic imaginary zone, composed of obsessions, hallucinations and quotidian situations that need to be survived. HOU HANRU¹

Commenting on certain drives within recent Chinese art, curator Hou Hanru writes that today's generation of artists no longer create consistent projections of an ideal reality. The world that they draw upon and give image to is strange, fragmented, disturbing and wondrous. They source indiscriminately from both the real and imagined, reflecting diverse ideas and resisting homogenizing processes.

Strongly resonant of Hanru's description, the seven artists featured in *The Knife's Edge* each use video to articulate strikingly individual ways of perceiving and being in the world. Displacing simple acts and daily rituals from familiar contexts, these artists' videos suspend the everyday and rupture the quotidian flow of time. They draw us into moments that are intensely subjective and ultimately celebratory in their assertion of the individual over the general.

By no means is this exhibition intended to represent a survey or overview of contemporary Chinese video practice. In bringing together the seven artists in *The Knife's Edge*, who all actively exhibit in Beijing and range from recent fine arts graduates to senior art world figures, I have focused on particular sensibilities that I perceive in these artists' use of video. Unencumbered by the political baggage that is historically attached to painting and sculpture in China, and using video in a way that clearly distinguishes it from film, the works in this exhibition are

distinctly non-narrative and non-documentary. They do not try to illustrate aspects of reality, but rather modify and expand our possible understandings of it. In doing so, these videos manipulate the time-based qualities of the medium and present us with a different awareness of temporality.

Suturing thousands of singular moments together into a frenetic vision of Beijing, Zhao Yao's *I Love Beijing 999*, creates a hypnotic and seemingly eternal journey through the city. Every second in the video is made of nine separate photographic stills, and in each the sun hangs in the centre of the frame; never setting and always throwing the foreground into shadowy silhouettes. Zhao made this work over a year-long period, travelling on buses that transected the city on a shifting axis throughout the seasons. His video's singular focus creates an almost obsessive viewing experience, as we endlessly chase the sun from the centre to the fringes of the city and back again. Referencing this eternal quest, the number '999' in Zhao's title can also mean 'forever' in Mandarin. Despite the near total absence of human figures in Zhao's video and the soundless, mechanical flashing of the images, there is an embodied perspective in this work. The frame of the bus window threads in and out of view, and we almost feel the sun burning our retinas, as the camera/eye compulsively watches it.

The durational qualities in Zhao's work are further emphasised in Li Yongbin's *Face* series, which typically last 62 minutes – the full length of a mini DV tape. Li has been creating this series for the past decade and works with the criteria that each video is made in a single take, focusing only on his face as it is projected, reflected or illuminated against a black

background. For *Face 11* we see Li's face gradually appear over an hour period, as drips of water accumulate on a dark surface to form his reflected image. And in *Face 17* the black-on-black silhouette of Li's head is occasionally made visible by him exhaling smoke from a cigarette. As the wisps of smoke escape we see the brief, dissipating image of a skull hover to the left, and to the right the image of Li's face. Surrounded by a black void and disconnected from all else, the beat of the water dripping and the slow rhythm of cigarette smoke being exhaled are the only markers of time. Li's minimal videos make us acutely aware of time, as it is slowly measured against his body.

Duration, repetition and endurance are consistent elements of Li's videos, and they imply a Buddhist acceptance of the passing of time and of human mortality. In contrast, Morgan Wong Wing-fat's video *Plus-Minus-Zero* almost comically resists time in its efforts to eliminate the time-zone gap between countries. In this work we see Morgan stalwartly walking forward around a circular track on a snow field, as the other skiers cruise backwards and snow falls upwards. There is an endearing stubbornness to the character in Morgan's video, as he struggles to bridge the hour difference between Hong Kong and Japan. His one-man crusade is both witnessed and actualised by his digital camera; the camera captures five minutes of what was an hour-long performance, and the act of flipping the footage backwards completes the performance. Playing with ideas of time, travel and the rising internationalism of Chinese artists, Morgan's video subtly intervenes in the flow of things, and underscores the power of digital technology – deployed so simply here – to influence our apprehension of reality.



The videos in *The Knife's Edge* exude a degree of self-sufficiency – these artists are actively developing their own video languages and utilizing forms that relate to their personal encounters with the world. Discussing tendencies in recent Chinese contemporary art, writer Carol Yinghua Lu observes that artists are "...looking more from a specific and microscopic perspective, and place their own experience and personal relationship to society ahead of collective consciousness"². In Jin Shan's series of videos *One Man's Island* the studio becomes an island and the artist's voluntary isolation allows new behaviours and micro-events to occur. Stepping between three small stools until he loses balance, facing a corner as firecrackers explode beneath him, using the flash of a camera to light the room as he photographs the back of his head; Jin's video recordings of his daily experiments show an intense curiosity turned inwards, using himself as a test-subject. His constricted environment forces him to be resourceful with the objects around him, as he seeks the continual confluence of art with life.

In more elaborate videos, Li Ming amplifies his imaginative inner world to generate strange and marvellous scenes. In *Fireworks* an elderly woman sits on her bed and combs her hair. She remains calm and dignified, even as fireworks begin exploding around her and the light from the sparks reveals that from the bedroom floor dense tropical foliage grows. Li's videos seem to offer various metaphorical and allegorical readings, yet ultimately these works defy decoding and act on us to create a counterpoint to the rationality that structures much of our daily lives. Atmospheric and full of surreal possibility, Li's videos are imbued with wonder and disquiet. Equally sensitive,



Comb presents an intense and absurd scene as the comb of a giant mechanical digger reaches through the rubble of a building and gently strokes the hair of a seated figure. There is a feeling of real physical danger, as the mechanical hand lurches awkwardly towards the figure's head. This work is symptomatic of body-oriented performance in China since the 1980s, in its accentuation of corporeal presence and vulnerability³.

Also foregrounding the performative role of the body in art, Kan Xuan's video *Looking Looking Looking for ...*, shows the naked bodies of a couple as a spider crawls and skittles across their skin. The shots are tightly cropped and the bodies fill the frame, creating a landscape of bodily crevices, curves and hair. In the soundtrack the couple sing a Chinese lullaby in the voices of small children, adding a naïve and melancholic tone to the video. As repulsive and unsettling as the footage may be (for arachnophobes at least) the frantic movements of the spider express a sense of loneliness and sadness. Kan shot the footage for this video over thirteen hours and then edited it down to just three minutes, producing a potent and claustrophobic work.

Also distilling durational performance into direct and concentrated moving image, Wang Qingsong's *Chops 123456* uses time lapse recording and dissolve edits to show a dead goat being chopped up and dissipated into a field of red. The video begins with a figure (Wang's chef brother) throwing an animal carcass down onto a giant, spot lit chopping board. He crouches down with two large meat cleavers and starts systematically cutting the animal into ever smaller pieces, his assiduous efforts rapidly dispersing the meat and bones into pure colour. Instilling the daily act of food preparation with theatrical intensity,

Wang's video uses human labour as the agent of (violent) physical transformation.

The artists in *The Knife's Edge* reflect the dynamicism of video practice in China today and the diverse approaches that artists are applying to this medium. While viewers may read the works in this show in relation to the broader context of China and the maelstrom of change taking place there, these artists' methods of working are much more generative than reactive. Watching these videos, we are not just shown the world we see and know is there, we are taken to a precarious zone formed in the artists' imaginations; a place that balances on the knife's edge.

Erin Coates, Exhibition Curator

far left:
Wang Qingsong, 2008
Chops 123456
(video still)

left:
Morgan Wong Wing-fat, 2010
Plus-Minus-Zero
(video still)

right:
Li Yongbin, 2009
Face 17
(video still)

over page:
Kan Xuan, 2001
Looking, Looking, Looking for ...
(video still)

¹ Taken from Hou Hanru's essay 'Longing for Paradise, Negotiating with the Real, Looking at the Chinese art scene today' in *Totalstadt. Beijing Case*, editor: Gregor Jansen, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Köln, 2008.

² From the essay 'Fragmented Energy' in *Touching the Stones: China Art Now*, editors: Waling Boers and Pi Li, Timezone 8, Beijing, 2008.

³ Thomas J. Berghuis provides an extensive account of this history in *Performance Art in China*, Timezone 8 Limited, Hong Kong, 2007.



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Fremantle Arts Centre
curated by Erin Coates

Kan Xuan was born in An'hui Province in 1972 and lives and works between Beijing and Amsterdam. She studied oil painting at the China Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou from 1993 to 1997 and then worked in advertising and media. Since then she has focused her art practice solely on creating works in video. Kan undertook a residency at the renowned Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam in 2002 and 2003. She has exhibited extensively in China, Europe and the US, and participated in the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007. In China Kan is represented by Galleria Continua, Beijing.

Jin Shan was born in 1976 in Zhejiang Province and currently lives and works in Hanzhou. In 2010 Jin showed his project *One Man's Island* at the Frieze Art Fair in London. He has held a number of solo and group exhibitions in Beijing and has also shown in galleries in Hangzhou and Shanghai. In 2006 Jin participated in the 4th Seoul International Media Art Biennale. Jin is represented by Platform China, Beijing.

Li Ming was born in 1986 in Hunan Province and works and lives in Hangzhou city. Li completed studies in New Media Arts at the China Academy of Fine Arts in 2008 and the following year held two solo shows in Beijing; *XX* at Platform China and *There Is No Reason For You To See* at Closed Gallery. Li has also participated in exhibitions in Hangzhou and Shanghai. He is represented by Platform China, Beijing.

Li Yongbin was born in Beijing in 1963 and has continued to live and work in this city. Self-taught and originally practicing as a painter, Li began working predominantly with video in the late 1990s. He has shown extensively in China and abroad, including in the exhibitions; *New Contemporary Chinese art Revolution*, Cuba Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana, 2009; *The real thing: contemporary art from China*, Tate Liverpool, 2007; *Multiplex: Directions in Art 1970 to Now*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2007 and *Alors, la Chine?*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2004. Recent exhibitions include *Paralinear* at Pékin Fine Arts and *Jungle* at Platform China, both held in Beijing in 2010.

Morgan Wong Wing-fat was born in Hong Kong in 1982 and lives and works between Beijing and Hong Kong. Morgan studied Creative Media at the City University of Hong Kong from 2004 until 2007. He participated in the ICC + S-AIR Residence Program at OYOYO Art Center in Sapporo in 2010, and later the same year was included in *No Soul For Sale* at Tate Modern, London. Other group shows include; *Imagination Paradise*, Gallery Hyundai, Seoul, Korea 2010; *Around the World in 80 Hours*, Suwon Art Centre, Korea, 2010; *Move On Asia 2010*, Para/site Art Space, Hong Kong and *I'm on the Road to...*, Mizuma & One Gallery, Beijing.

Wang Qingsong was born in Heilongjiang Province in 1966. He studied at the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts and since 1993 has lived and worked in Beijing. In 2010 Wang participated in the 17th Biennale of Sydney and also in 21st Century: Art in the First Decade at GOMA, Brisbane. Wang's numerous exhibitions abroad include; *Wang Qingsong*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2009; *China: Past, Present & Future*, Kunsthalle Memmingen, Memmingen, Germany, 2007, and *Between Nostalgia and Cynicism*, Espaço Cultural Contemporâneo, Brasilia, 2007. In China Wang is represented by Pékin Fine Arts, Beijing.

Zhao Yao was born in 1981 in Luzhou, Sichuan Province. He graduated from the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in 2004 and currently lives in Beijing. In 2009 Zhao held the solo exhibition *51M² 3# Zhao Yao* at Taikang Space, Beijing. Other exhibitions include; *Bourgeoisified Proletariat*, Shanghai Songjiang Creative Space, 2009; *Work in Progress: how do artists work*, Iberia Centre for Contemporary Art Beijing, 2009 and *Six Photos and a Small Room*, The Long March Space, Beijing, 2006.

Erin Coates is an artist and emerging curator based in Perth, Western Australia. She holds a Master of Fine Arts from the University of British Columbia, Vancouver and is Exhibitions Coordinator at Fremantle Arts Centre. In 2010 she spent six months in Beijing undertaking an artist's residency and researching Chinese video practice.



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