

Michael Zheng

## Objectivity, Absurdity, and Social Critique: A Conversation with Hou Hanru

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Left: Zhang Peili, *WATER—Standard Version from the Dictionary Ci Hai*, 1991, single-channel colour video, 9 mins. 35 secs. Courtesy of the artist.

Middle: Zhang Peili, *30 x 30*, 1988, single-channel colour video, 9 mins. 32 secs. Courtesy of the artist.

Right: Zhang Peili, *Document on "Hygiene No. 3,"* 1991, single-channel colour video, 24 mins. 45 secs. Courtesy of the artist.

### I. Chinese Video Art in the 1980s

**Michael Zheng:** Shall we start with how video art began in China? There are quite a few video works in the exhibition imPOSSIBLE! In the West, video was first used by artists to record performances and events. In that way, at least in the West, video art developed hand in hand with performance art. Is the same true in China?

**Hou Hanru:** Yes, the case in China is really similar. In the 1980s, when video was introduced to China as an artistic medium, it began to be used by lots of performance artists. They didn't really have video—they had documentary, like photography, video documentaries, and very, very brief videotapes, because at that time such technology was not so popular. Only professionals had video cameras—mainly people working in television or with advertising companies. The equipment was very expensive, so few artists had access to it. One of the first artists to really use video both to document his performances and to make independent work was Zhang Peili. I think it was in 1988, with his work *30 x 30*. He documented a few performances where he was breaking mirrors on the floor and then gluing them back together and then breaking them again and gluing them back together again. It lasted for an hour or so. Following that, he produced several works that used video not only as a documentary tool, but also as a medium that possesses an independent kind of structure and narrative. These works include the famous *Document on "Hygiene No.3"* (1991), where he washed a chicken for hours. In another work, *WATER—Standard Version from the Dictionary Ci Hai* (1989), he had a famous television announcer reading the dictionary entry for "water" from the most popular Chinese dictionary.

Numerous video works emerged in the period to become the first wave of video art in China. Actually, I also did a video work in 1988 in the collaborative performance project *Speaking, Communication, and Humanity*, with Yang Jiechang, that was very much inspired by Nam June

Paik. We had a huge installation that extended through three different halls. It involved a camera recording a candle, which was broadcast on a screen, and then you had the actual candle outside. So it was really this typical kind of conceptual recycling of a real image, a representation, and an object. We were able to find a video camera because an artist friend also worked at a television station.

**Michael Zheng:** So back then you were an artist?

**Hou Hanru:** Yes. I was also writing. I was involved with curating, and I did some performance. Actually many of our friends were acting at once as artists, critics, curators, and so on.

**Michael Zheng:** When you mentioned that candle piece, it reminded me of Bruce Nauman's piece where he used a camera as a stand-in for his live performance. What people see is actually a monitor of him in the back. So I guess the thinking was quite similar.

**Hou Hanru:** It was really around 1985–86 that performance and other conceptual works were introduced to China. At that time, we were all involved in writing, translating, and trying to bring in different things. Several artists, including Huang Yong Ping, were very much influenced by Joseph Beuys and his idea of social sculpture. I translated some of his writings and introduced his art in various magazines and books. In his performance work, he had an idea of art as a kind of avant-garde education for social transformation, which was very influential at that time

**Michael Zheng:** When you mentioned the avant-garde movement . . .

**Hou Hanru:** I meant in general, globally, but also especially in China when the idea of the avant-garde was introduced, in the period when the whole of Chinese society started discovering the world.

**Michael Zheng:** In the 1980s?

**Hou Hanru:** Yes, in the 1980s especially you went through this kind of liberation—from a very closed, very limited situation during the time of the Cultural Revolution and pre-Cultural Revolution to a real discovery of freedom, discovery of the world, discovery of a lot of things. The art scene itself is automatically related to this kind of tendency, this wave of social transformation. Again, artists like Joseph Beuys had an important role in it because his work directly engaged social and political revolution. At that time, all kinds of information was brought into China, including the first information on modernism, from modern art to the more contemporary movements. The artists really tried to catch up.

**Michael Zheng:** With the so-called mainstream?

**Hou Hanru:** Well no, not the mainstream, but [the artists tried] to build up a scene of protest, rebellion, and maybe of claiming freedom beyond the official system. So if you know the whole situation from 1979's Stars Group to the 1985 New Wave Movement—and then in 1989 there was the China/Avant-Garde exhibition—these ten years were really hugely dramatic and radical.

**Michael Zheng:** The changes you describe seem to go along with the Chinese government's so-called Open Door Policy, which started at the beginning of the 1980s. I was still there at that time. It seemed to me that the policy brought in a whole slew of new ideas and opportunities, even for areas like science, etc.

**Hou Hanru:** That was a very interesting time in all fields, from science to culture, from economics to politics. Everyone was somehow willing to radically change, and on the other hand [everyone was] maybe politically naive as well. After the drama of the Cultural Revolution, at all levels, from individuals to the political system, people tried to embrace new things. I think, in fact, the first years of the political opening were much more experimental than today, but much more naive as well. During a very short period, you could actually talk about various issues—even challenge taboos.

**Michael Zheng:** How is this reflected in the artworks of the period? What were the artists rebelling against, and how?

**Hou Hanru:** Well, the first thing was for artists to question the propaganda art of the Cultural Revolution. Can reality or truth only be represented by the official image of the real, or can reality be something that is more directly connected to everyday experience?

**Michael Zheng:** So in a way it went from the Soviet style of socialist realism to art based more on daily phenomena, on people's daily activities.

**Hou Hanru:** There were even a lot of people rediscovering classical traditions from Renaissance art to pre-Soviet kinds of art. That became a very important part of the new academic education and a way to replace the Soviet model of socialist realism. What was essential was the gradual abandonment of the models of heroic representation to embrace the everyday.

**Michael Zheng:** Direct experience . . .

**Hou Hanru:** Direct experience, the more empirical kind of visual truth.

**Michael Zheng:** This helps me to think about the pieces by Zhang Peili that you mentioned. They really exemplify this phenomenon.

**Hou Hanru:** There is the question of objectivity—objectivity being the real meaning of the truth.

**Michael Zheng:** And not in the ideological sense.

**Hou Hanru:** Exactly. This actually corresponds to the very pragmatic, political attitude that has driven political change, marked by the day when Deng Xiaoping said that the criterion for measuring truth is practical results. It's not the ideological truth any more. It brought China to a very interesting kind of pragmatic change.

**Michael Zheng:** I still remember the political slogan he put forth: "It doesn't matter what colour the cat is; as long as it catches mice, it's a good cat."

**Hou Hanru:** This is still very influential, even today, and today there are a lot of artists who continue to exhibit this tendency. Artists are very interested in ideas about being open to the real, taking objectivity as the truth, etc. Actually, this influence is very visible in many of the early video works.

**Michael Zheng:** Even now.

**Hou Hanru:** Even now, in straightforward documentary video work, especially in the late 1980s to early 1990s. You have people from then, like Wu Wenguang and Wen Pulin, to younger filmmakers like Jia Zhangke, who were very concerned with objectivity, which has in fact been a long-standing concern in experimental films—starting with Ozu, the Japanese filmmaker, to the Italian realistic films in the 1940s and 1950s, down to a lot of French films. The influence of all these can be seen in how many Chinese artists engage themselves with video, using the camera as a way to witness from a distance.

**Michael Zheng:** That brings to my mind Zhu Jia's work *Forever* (1994), in which he attached his video camera to a tricycle wheel and let it "see" while he rode through the city.



Zhu Jia, *Forever* (installation view from Zooming into Focus: Contemporary Chinese Photography and Video from Haudenschild Collection, National Art Museum of China, Beijing), 1997, video, 28 mins. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.

**Hou Hanru:** Exactly. That really involved a physical intervention into the real and, at the same time, you can see a very interesting absence of this arty intention.

**Michael Zheng:** The artist's hand.

**Hou Hanru:** So that opens up a very important tendency in art making that you can connect to, say, Western conceptual art, which also looked into the idea of being objective, but, its engagement within the particular context in China in the 1990s makes it unique. At the same time, other artists were working in completely different directions. There were artists doing abstract paintings and looking into the autonomous status of art making. And next to it, also very important, was the tendency of Dada—avant-garde kinds of experiments fighting against the mainstream, creating a kind of alternative truth.

**Michael Zheng:** Who are some of the representative artists working that way?

**Hou Hanru:** You see, for example, Huang Yong Ping early in the 1980s. By the way, about documentary, he and his group Xiamen Dada produced a wonderful video documentary of the performance they conducted. The group did some of the most radical experiments, non-art, anti-art actions. They were trying to challenge how art is defined in history, both in the Chinese context and in general. In this particular performance, they collected trash and turned it into an exhibition in a local gallery. That provoked a lot of controversy and excitement.

**Michael Zheng:** And he also washed the art history books.



Top: Zhu Jia, stills from *Forever*, 1997, video, 28 mins. Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART, Shanghai.

Bottom: Huang Yong Ping, *The History of Chinese Painting and the History of Modern Western Art Washed in the Washing Machine for Two Minutes*, 1987–93, Chinese tea box, paper, pulp, glass. Collection of Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, T. B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 2001.

**Hou Hanru:** He used a kind of rotating system, a plate that indicated by chance what actions to perform. So washing those two books was determined by this device. He was very inspired by Duchamp's idea of using chance as a way to decide what to do in art. The machine indicated to him to pick up these two art history books, a history of Chinese painting and a history of modern Western painting, and to wash them in a washing machine for two hours. The idea was really to create, instead of making and answering the question in a clean way. He understood that the more we get into these kinds of questions, the more dirty and muddy things get. This is indeed the paradox of all kinds of human intellectual and artistic work: it always ends up to be something beyond our plans.

**Michael Zheng:** It's interesting that this second group of the avant-garde had some of the characteristics of the first group, in that by using chance they tried to relinquish the artist's hand in the work.

**Hou Hanru:** Especially when talking about video. All these artists started using video as a way to document.

**Michael Zheng:** So the piece you mentioned was a performance?

**Hou Hanru:** [It was] an event they did in 1986. They did different events. The first was an exhibition where they brought their paintings and, after the exhibition, they burned them outside the museum. They decided that art





should die. For the second, they rented a museum space and then moved all the trash from the courtyard of the museum into the museum as the exhibition. The next day, they moved everything back.

Xiamen Dada, burning of artwork after an exhibition on November 23, 1986. Courtesy of Huang Yong Ping.

**Michael Zheng:** It's like Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) but in a much more theatrical and extreme way.

**Hou Hanru:** Yeah, totally. It's also interesting to see that it happened in a provincial city. It didn't influence anybody. So it was a totally autonomous action by a small group of people.

**Michael Zheng:** Do you think they were able to do that because they were so remote from Beijing, in Xiamen?

**Hou Hanru:** Probably, but most importantly they were smart and opportunistic in a positive sense.

**Michael Zheng:** What were some other artists doing at that time?

**Hou Hanru:** You had Zhang Peili doing his first paintings, and also Wang Guangyi, Gu Wenda, Wu Shanzhuan, etc., as well as other artists doing more performance-based actions. You also had people experimenting with traditional materials such as ink paintings, doing something that goes beyond the tradition, and so on. I don't think we have enough time to talk about the whole 1980s.

## II. Subsequent Generations and the Continuing Project of Modernization

**Michael Zheng:** The exhibition *imPOSSIBLE! Eight Chinese Artists Engage Absurdity* includes some of the younger generation of artists who work with

different media, including video. How would you compare and contrast their practices to the first generation of video artists?

**Hou Hanru:** I think this generation is much more into using video as a medium with its own language.

**Michael Zheng:** As a genre by itself?

**Hou Hanru:** Yes. This generation is much more open to the diverse possibilities that video art can provide. In fact, it's difficult to simply divide the artists by generation because they all emerged as artists using video as a main medium in more or less the same period. The whole situation is highly diverse and rich. Artists like Zhang Peili, Wang Gongxing, Zhu Jia, Song Dong, etc. continue to produce video installations while others develop their works from documentary film backgrounds. Others like Yang Fudong, Lu Chunsheng, Chen Xiaoyun and Shi Qing, etc. are more into experimental fiction films. Wang Jianwei, Wu Ershan, Song Dong, and Yin Xiuzhen, among others, systematically connect their video work with multimedia theatre production. Yang Zhenzhong, Xu Zhen, Song Tao, Lin Yi Lin, Chen Shaoxiong, Liang Ju Hui, and Xu Tan relate their video works to urban developments, while others are working with electronic music and the performing arts. What is also very remarkable is that a number of women artists like Kan Xuan, Liang Yue, and Cao Fei are producing some of the most amazing video work about their everyday life experiences, from spiritual contemplation to festival-like youth culture events to some miraculous moving pictures. This is why I came up with the project *Everyday Miracles* for the Chinese Pavilion in the 2007 Venice Biennale featuring four women artists including Shen Yuan, Yin Xiuzhen, Kan Xuan, and Cao Fei. Now a new generation like Qiu Anxiong, Tang Maohong, and Sun Xun, along with older artists like Gu Dexin and Chen Shaoxiong, are focusing their work on animation. In the end, more attention should be paid to the fact that pop culture, commercial digital and electronic images, advertisements, and, especially, the Internet, are exerting increasing influence on the imagination and creation of artists today. It can certainly bring new challenges to their artistic integrity, position, and criticality, while a much more open environment and new communication strategies are being developed.

**Michael Zheng:** Kan Xuan's video works have a performative aspect to them.

**Hou Hanru:** In the early works, yes. Actually now her work has evolved into addressing how a camera looks at things.

**Michael Zheng:** Xu Zhen's work seems to have some similarity to that.

**Hou Hanru:** Exactly. Actually they are very close friends. They, along with Yang Zhenzhong, share a lot of similarities such as using the camera as a psychological tool to question social relationships.

**Michael Zheng:** Yes, it's funny you mentioned that they all know each other. In Yang Zhenzhong's piece *I Will Die* (2000–04), in which he videotaped various people saying the phrase "I will die," you can see many faces from that group of people.



**Hou Hanru:** Yes.

**Michael Zheng:** But it seems to me that the development of the new video technology, especially the digital technology, has had a major impact on the kind of works these artists are doing now. A good example is Yang Zhenzhong's work, which uses a lot of editing techniques.

*Xu Zhen, stills from **Shout**, 1998, single-channel video, 3 mins. 41 secs. Photo: Xu Zhen. Courtesy of ShanghART, Shanghai.*

**Hou Hanru:** The introduction of the video camera as an individual instrument, its changes from the analogue Hi8 camera to the high definition digital camera and the development of technology for editing video on personal computers have completely changed how artists work. This is why I titled the exhibition I curated in 1994 for the Spanish Foundation, Never Go Out Without My DV Cam. Introducing this tool at the individual level has really allowed everybody to become a video artist, which raises a very interesting question: How should we decide if something is a work of art or not? Technological advances allow lots of artists to develop potential talent into more advanced projects. This is why many younger generation artists like Kan Xuan, Xu Zhen, and Yang Zhenzhong produce a huge amount of video work.

**Michael Zheng:** In a short period of time.

**Hou Hanru:** And [they] also manage to get highly sophisticated production, editing, and acting. That was a very important revolution. It opened up a new place somewhere between the traditions of visual art and independent filmmaking and changed completely, even institutionally, how things can



*Yang Zhenzhong, **I Will Die**, 2000-04 (Nagoya, Japan version), single-channel video, 21 mins. 40 secs. Courtesy of ShanghART, Shanghai.*





Yang Zhenzhong, stills from *I Will Die*, 2000–04, single-channel video, 21 mins. 40 secs. Composite photo: Yang Zhenzhong. Courtesy of ShanghART, Shanghai.

be categorized. On the other hand, the introduction of video installations in museums and galleries presents a very interesting transition from the rejection of installation art in the official institutions to a full acceptance of any kind of new forms. And that happened in the last ten years—especially from 2000 onward, like at the 2000 Shanghai Biennale. The power of inserting the moving image into museums had something to do with this change, because it is always something that directly imposes a kind of presence that you cannot ignore.

**Michael Zheng:** In that way it's blurred—maybe it's video art, maybe it's a journalistic documentary of certain events. Nonetheless, its strong visual presence speaks to something.

**Hou Hanru:** The very direct presence of the moving image created fresh and new experiences. People loved it. It's interesting how video art has become a new mainstream art. This is why institutions now have new-genre departments and new media departments. Of course, this is also related to the boom of media entertainment industries in China. That has completely changed the cultural hierarchy of society. Twenty years ago, if you were a film star, that was great. Now it's better if you're a television and film star and are present in all kinds of advertisements. And then you can become a singer and whatever. And this kind of new cultural hierarchy is helping society accept the moving image, the electronic moving image.

**Michael Zheng:** I see examples of this in some of the exhibitions you have curated in San Francisco. They contain a lot of moving images, about which you cannot definitively say "this is video art" in the traditional sense. The works often speak to social realities somewhere else. Nevertheless, they have a very strong visual presence, and you cannot help but be engaged by it.

**Hou Hanru:** Yes, because of the power of the image and the facility of accessing this media creates the whole possibility of opening up another territory outside the established institutional framework. And this is why you can easily organize independent film festivals or video projection events and relate them to other activities completely outside the existing establishment. And this actually helps, in turn, to influence and change the establishment.

**Michael Zheng:** Is this type of work being done a lot in China nowadays?

**Hou Hanru:** I think so. Curiously, because video has become a mainstream instrument, even many painters, successful painters, have started to do video work. It presents new possibilities for them to be considered more "contemporary."

**Michael Zheng:** Do you think that could be a kind of a fluke, or is it genuinely exciting new territory?

**Hou Hanru:** Well, I think it's usually both. I mean, it's inevitable that you have some forced excitement, but you always have some very interesting products in the end. Sometimes those products are not necessarily the mainstream thing. Maybe they are even the side product of something else, yet they remain significant works.

**Michael Zheng:** How does that fit into the program you're developing at The San Francisco Art Institute? I remember back to when you first introduced the program, you wanted to do something related to the Pacific Rim.

**Hou Hanru:** From different angles, my work here has tried to address the relationship between an art program and a space in San Francisco, and how the focus of cultural production is now shifting in different geographic directions. Primarily, there is the influential emergence of the Asian Pacific cultural scene and art scene. I am showing works from China, Taiwan, and Japan. A large number are video works that reflect different aspects of this boom. On the other hand, what's also important is that I look into the political implications of this new situation, including alternative economic models. This is also how different cultures negotiate the project of

modernization and modernity, and how they come up with their own way of dealing with that as a resistance, or a kind of alternative to mainstream global capitalism. This is why we've been working on *World Factory* (2007), which introduces many different informal, alternative models of the economy, urbanization, migration, border crossing, etc. In this process, there is a huge amount of video work being produced, not only in China, but also in many similar contexts where video has played an important role as a direct tool documenting this process. It's also because video's flexibility and accessibility to every individual embodies possibilities for a new understanding of what cultural democracy could be.

**Michael Zheng:** That, in addition to the inherent capacity of video to construct narrative and fantasy, makes it a rich medium to do a lot of things.

**Hou Hanru:** I think the notion of fantasy is very important. In 2004, I curated a show in France called *Fabricated Paradise* with fifteen artists from China. The idea was to look into what position the artists were trying to construct in this society using multimedia languages from performance to installation to video. What they were doing was not only documenting or reproducing what they saw, but also trying to construct a personal individual fantasy or dreamland—a paradise in resistance to the imposition of the huge social production machine.

Lu Chunsheng, *History of Chemistry II, Excessively Restrained Mountaineering Enthusiasts*, 2006, single-channel video, 95 mins. Courtesy of ShanghART, Shanghai.



**Michael Zheng:** I think the extreme example of that paradigm is Lu Chunsheng's work. He took the form to such a mature and developed level, for example, in his *History of Chemistry* (2006).

**Hou Hanru:** Yes, he's inquiring into something that even he cannot understand. It's very interesting. Indeed, it is not only Lu Chunsheng, there are also a few other people who have been interested in this question. Maybe Lu Chunsheng's work is the most accomplished in that sense, though. Also, he has very deep thoughts on this, and he never uses plain language to explain it.

**Michael Zheng:** Maybe he couldn't explain it himself?

**Hou Hanru:** Actually, he could explain it, but he doesn't want to. That's what I understand. It's really important because he preserves the possibility of being mysterious.

**Michael Zheng:** A certain mystery is always palpable in his work.

### III. Absurdity, Theatricality, and Photography

**Michael Zheng:** We've talked a lot about video so far. ImPOSSIBLE! Eight Chinese Artists Engage Absurdity has a lot of video work in it, but it is not necessarily based on a specific medium. Its organizing principle is really based on the observation that many artists from China share a tendency toward theatricality and absurdity in their sensibility and their choice of artistic languages. I wonder, if put together in a certain way, they could be

read as the artists' responses to the social reality in China, which at times can be very extreme. How, from your involvement in these things, do you perceive this phenomenon?

**Hou Hanru:** The tradition of theater, of theatricality, has always been very important in Chinese culture. The ritual aspect of life has always been central to Chinese life, and also was very much enforced by propaganda culture in the last sixty years or so. This propaganda generates the need for anti-propaganda. To negotiate with the imposition of the mainstream ideological theatricality, artists might feel the need to create their own ritual systems.

**Michael Zheng:** An antidote to deal with the reality.

**Hou Hanru:** So they come up with something theatrical. On the one hand, the theatricality allows them to deal with critique—to amplify and radicalize some symbolic images and languages. Theater always includes some very uncanny things such as humour, irony, parody, mockery, etc. Also myth. In a place where straightforward critique is still very difficult, hiding behind this kind of twisted ritual can be very effective in expressing different thoughts. So somehow you can always decipher a certain social critique in this theatricality. I think this is something that can help us understand some of the works and why they appear so interestingly twisted.

**Michael Zheng:** Yeah, twisted and exaggerated. To me, it harkens back to much older generations, such as the Yangzhou Baguai in the Qing dynasty, whose works all have this very twisted kind of persona. Like Zheng Ban Qiao.

**Hou Hanru:** [It is a] distortion of the real. When you resort to theater, *mise en scène*, you can always create a second persona who says something even truer than the person is supposed to be saying in real life. In the end, this is maybe how art works in society.

**Michael Zheng:** It seems to be more pronounced in a lot of Chinese artists' works.

**Hou Hanru:** Yes. Fundamentally, today it is very much related to social critique. Even the most individual gesture is still related to that kind of dynamism. And this is something that might answer another plausible question: How do you distinguish Chinese art from Western art? It's difficult to draw a clear distinction, but, proportionally, most of the artworks from China are still highly political in that sense. But it would be a huge mistake if one ignored individual positions and languages simply for the sake of being political.

**Michael Zheng:** When I was in China, I actually sensed that. It seems to me that a lot of the desire to create comes from critiquing social reality. Maybe it's because China is still developing, so there are naturally many more social issues to deal with, as opposed to more developed countries where there are fewer problems. To shift gears, I'd like to touch upon photography, because there are several photographic works in this exhibition, including those of Lu Chunsheng and Xing Danwen. How do you see photography's role in the development of contemporary Chinese art?

**Hou Hanru:** Interestingly, photography also contributed to the discussion of truth versus reality, truth and objectivity. Many artists who are interested

in society are interested in photography, in making works that are like plain journalistic photographs that record reality as it is being discovered and introduced and used and propagated—as a very important alternative to the official propaganda. They are interested in using photography as a way to record and to show the truth, in the everyday sense, in the sense of a totally different philosophical direction. The current importance of photography also has to do with the important photographs that people continue to rediscover, recovering the historical memory that has been censored, erased, banned for the last fifty years. Today people are rediscovering huge photographic archives of historical events. So China is still going through a process of re-digesting its own history. On the other hand, the artists actually learned photography as a part of embracing conceptual art, in which photography is used very similarly to video as documentation of events, performances, happenings, etc. Also in the late 1980s, people like Zhu Jia, Wang Youshen, and others used photography as a kind of installation material to reflect on social events and deal with the notion of objectivity. Then, later on, more people were interested in exploring the artistic aspect of photography, the language itself, the process itself, and also using photography as a way to create another kind of *mise en scène*, another kind of theatrical narrative.



Lu Chunsheng, *Hey, Lana*, 2000, photograph, 72 x 108 cm. Courtesy of ShanghART, Shanghai.

Then there are artists like Yang Yong and Zheng Guogu, who use photography in a very down-to-earth, popular way, and, in the process, deconstruct photography's sublime aspects. They use compact cameras to produce low-quality prints and make them in different formats, larger or smaller, recycling them in the storytelling process. These stories are sometimes being told, organized, set up, written, and performed in extremely ironic ways. That way, photography is a kind of non-photography, a kind of counter photography. If you look at the work of these artists, they're not dealing with the quality of the photography itself. It's a Dadaist approach to deconstructing photography itself. That opens up a whole new space for artists to act.

Then you have another group of artists, who have been heavily influenced by the commercial use of photography such as advertisements, magazines, and other popular media, using photography as a means to propagate commercial values. Artists like Yang Yong , Cao Fei, He Yong, and others are engaged with a very interesting question today: How much is Chinese society turning into a radically consumer-oriented society? In this society, what kind of new images are being produced, and how much can contemporary art still have a role in it?

**Michael Zheng:** Xing Danwen's new work seems to be trying to address some of these issues.

**Hou Hanru:** I think the trajectory of Xing Danwen's work is very interesting. She started out making very straightforward documentary photographs. Some of her documentary photographs were of performances by Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, and others in the early 1990s, and of the underground music scenes—Cui Jian and those people. It was really something quite beautiful. And then she shifted into a new period where she used photography and digital manipulation, which allows her to do something totally different. Hers is a very typical case; it shows how an artist in such a period of technological and social transformation tries to adapt to the evolution of the situation. I think it's a highly pragmatic process. But the outcomes are not always relevant. . . .

#### IV. Animation and Artists from the Chinese “Diaspora”

**Michael Zheng:** What about the animation scene?

**Hou Hanru:** In the transition of Chinese society into a consumer-oriented society, the whole country is undergoing a structural shift that is very much influenced by television, electronic images, video games, music video, etc., which actually provides the younger generation of artists new, more playful tools that utilize the language of computer animation, which provides a lot of freedom for the imagination to construct fantastical narratives. You can see a whole group of artists, including some of the artists we have mentioned and some younger artists, producing a lot of animation. That also opens up possibilities for the art world to merge itself with a new booming scene consisting of design, communication, and the so-called culture of communication. This is potentially pushing China toward the production of a new pop culture, or a new youth culture in the Asia Pacific region, which has already been generating some of the most amazing pop culture—from Japanese manga to Hong Kong Cantonese songs to Hong Kongese, Korean, and Taiwanese films, and of course the Japanese cartoon films. All popular culture in this region is becoming more and more globally influential.



**Michael Zheng:** Before you completely tire out, maybe I can ask you one last question, because there are two artists in this show who are from the Chinese diaspora, including myself and Ni Haifeng. What is your observation about these works?

**Hou Hanru:** It's very interesting that they are somehow quite specific. You

Michael Zheng,  
*Groundbreaking*, 2003, single-  
channel video, 6 mins. 34 secs.  
Courtesy of the artist.



Left: Xing Danwen, *Urban Fiction, Image No.13* (detail), 2005, digital photograph, 219.4 x 170.1 cm. Courtesy the artist.

Right: Xing Danwen, *Urban Fiction, Image No.13*, 2005, digital photograph, 219.4 x 170.1 cm. Courtesy the artist.



Ni Haifeng, *The Face*, 2004, single-channel video, 14 mins. 50 secs. Courtesy of the artist.



are artists who came from the 1980s avant-garde and moved to the West at the end of 1980s or early 1990s. Now you find yourselves more involved with the questioning of identity by necessity somehow. Ni Haifeng, for example, made a digital image of himself in which he transformed the digital code behind the electronic photographic image into a painting. Also, his videos show him struggling with disappearance. All these show a particular moment of those people struggling to construct a position for themselves, which is kind of an in-between position. And this can allow them to look at both the global reality and Chinese reality from a very particular angle, from positions that are very unique.

**Michael Zheng:** We have a certain distance, and at the same time we have both identities.

**Hou Hanru:** Also, it's important to note that China is getting more global. Not just in the sense that more Chinese art looks more international or is

exhibited around the world. Many diaspora artists now go back to China to produce work, to do things, to exhibit. That makes China's art scene truly global because they bring with them a totally different experience. Alongside, of course, you have artists from other countries coming to do things, to make work, to exhibit in China. But again, this group of so-called diaspora artists have a very particular role, because not only do they bring their own experience, but they also act as a kind of translator because they can communicate directly with the local art communities.

**Michael Zheng:** [This is] partially what I'm trying to do with this exhibition, to bridge the two sides.

**Hou Hanru:** Yes. It's very interesting to consider how long this situation will last until really global communication becomes a routine for everybody. I guess we're still in a very complicated and uncertain transitional period, where all these elements and contradictions form a very powerful, dynamic situation that can continue to provide a lot of energy for people to do things.

**Michael Zheng:** Well, this has been a very illuminating conversation. Thank you very much.

**Hou Hanru:** You're very welcome, Michael.