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In Retrospect

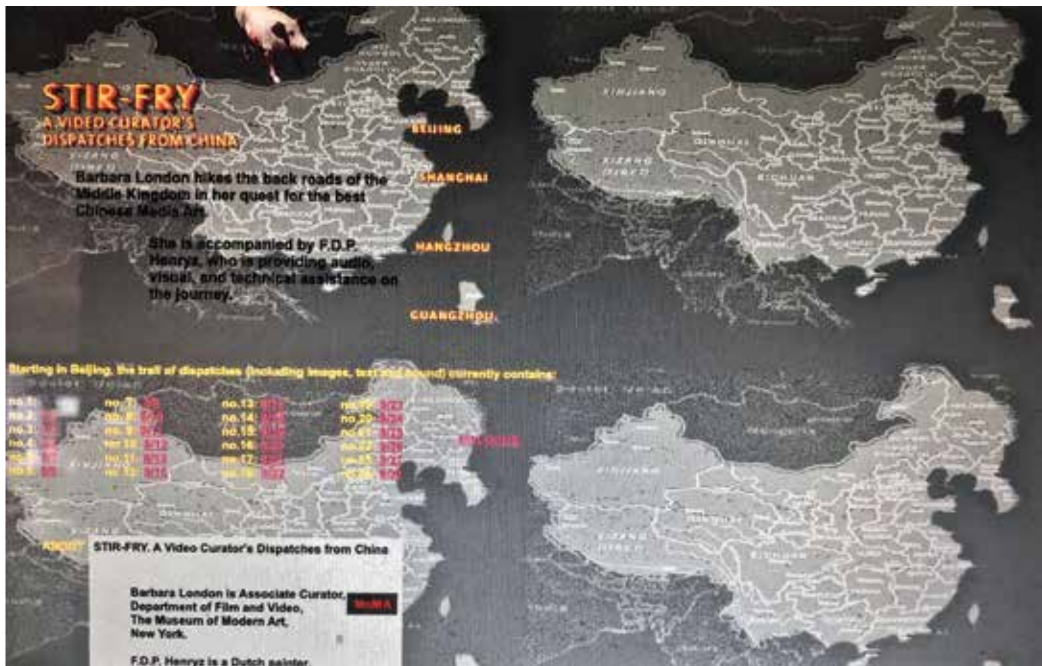
Set in Motion

My career began as a young curator at Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, in 1973, when a bankrupt, racially torn Manhattan became the perfect environment for free-spirited innovators. I traipsed through the city's garbage-strewn streets and tracked down spirited, declamatory intermedia events in rundown buildings and vacant lots. I climbed dank stairs to catch ad hoc exhibitions and events and met artists in apartments and lofts with low rents. I was sometimes baffled but always exhilarated by these challenging firsthand experiences that ignited a lifelong interest in how art that's up-to-the-minute is or is not deemed part of the big art historical picture. For more than forty years, I've pursued how emerging artists see the world and interrogated electronic new media's perpetually evolving artistic forms.

My fascination with contemporary art in China began in the 1980s, an era when information on the subject was difficult to come by. What got me hooked was a two-day excursion to Guangzhou after a lecture I gave in Hong Kong. Contemporary art in Guangzhou proved difficult to track down in the years before groups such as Big Tail Elephant had formed. I searched and wandered through the city and ended up at a sprawling market where busy vendors were hawking all forms of edible living creatures and dry medicinal herbs. Stopped short by mysterious men selling bloody, aphrodisiacal tiger paws, I knew I was far from home.

A few years later, European colleagues began telling me about a budding media art scene in China. Eager to go beyond hearsay, I secured a travel grant from the Asian Cultural Council. In 1997, I spent three weeks with my documentary filmmaker husband, F. D. P. Henryz, travelling by train and bus between Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Guangzhou. I managed to ferret out thirty-five media pioneers active in the Middle Kingdom.

Every day of the trip, I met with artists in their homes or in a teahouse, and our conversations were translated on the spot by budding local young linguists. Afterward, my husband and I spent evenings in our hotel rooms working long into the night refining notes and the photographs of artwork I had just encountered in meetings with artists. Hours later, using dialup from the hotel business centre, we labouriously uploaded and sent back to New York that day's information, which a MoMA team posted as an entry



Screenshot of STIR-FRY website.

to my curatorial dispatches, which we called STIR-FRY. Readers were able to follow me day by day as each new entry went up as a section of MoMA's recently launched website. Still online (http://www.adaweb.com/context/stir-fry/), my pre-blog adventure STIR-FRY is a testament to the early history of media art in China.

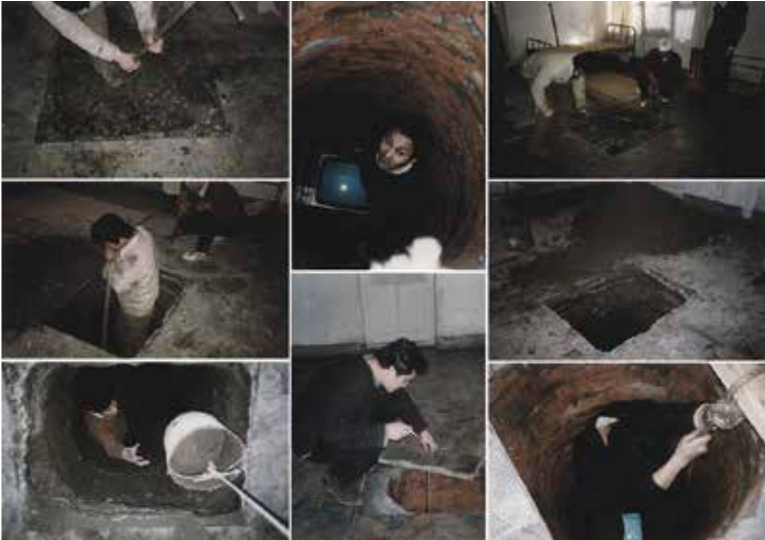
In 1997 China, artists owned bicycles rather than cars; taxis and contemporary galleries were nonexistent. Private collectors were pursuing antiques, calligraphy, and socialist realist painting. Modern art museums and art biennials were off in the future.

The few artists who had obtained visas to travel abroad had returned home with anecdotal news, exhibition catalogues, and issues of *ArtForum* that they shared with friends. Becoming well informed by reading any available literature, most knew something about the work of Andy Warhol, Joseph Beuys, and Nam June Paik, having read between the lines of governmental sanctioned art periodicals that disparaged the work of foreign instigators.

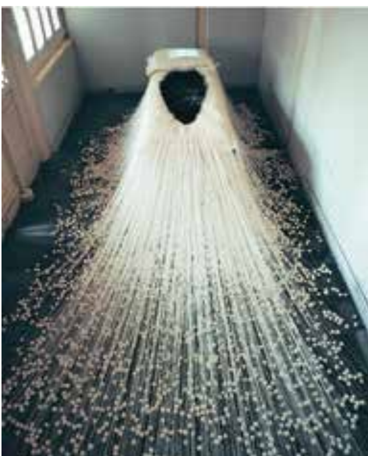
Artists had simple flip-phones; only one possessed a personal computer. The Internet was alien, limited at the time to commercial and governmental use. The only students with access to computer hardware and software were ones pursuing degrees in commercial design and business.

The rare university library with books and magazines covering the twentieth century art history of Japan, Korea, and the distant West was at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, which was open mainly to faculty. In a top-down society, art criticism barely existed.

STIR-FRY goes into how Zhang Peili, Wang Gongxin, and Song Dong began their careers as top-notch young Chinese painters who pluckily



Wang Gongxin, *The Sky of Brooklyn—Digging a Hole in Beijing*, 1995, single-channel video installation (TV set and audiotapes, colour, stereo). © Wang Gongxin.

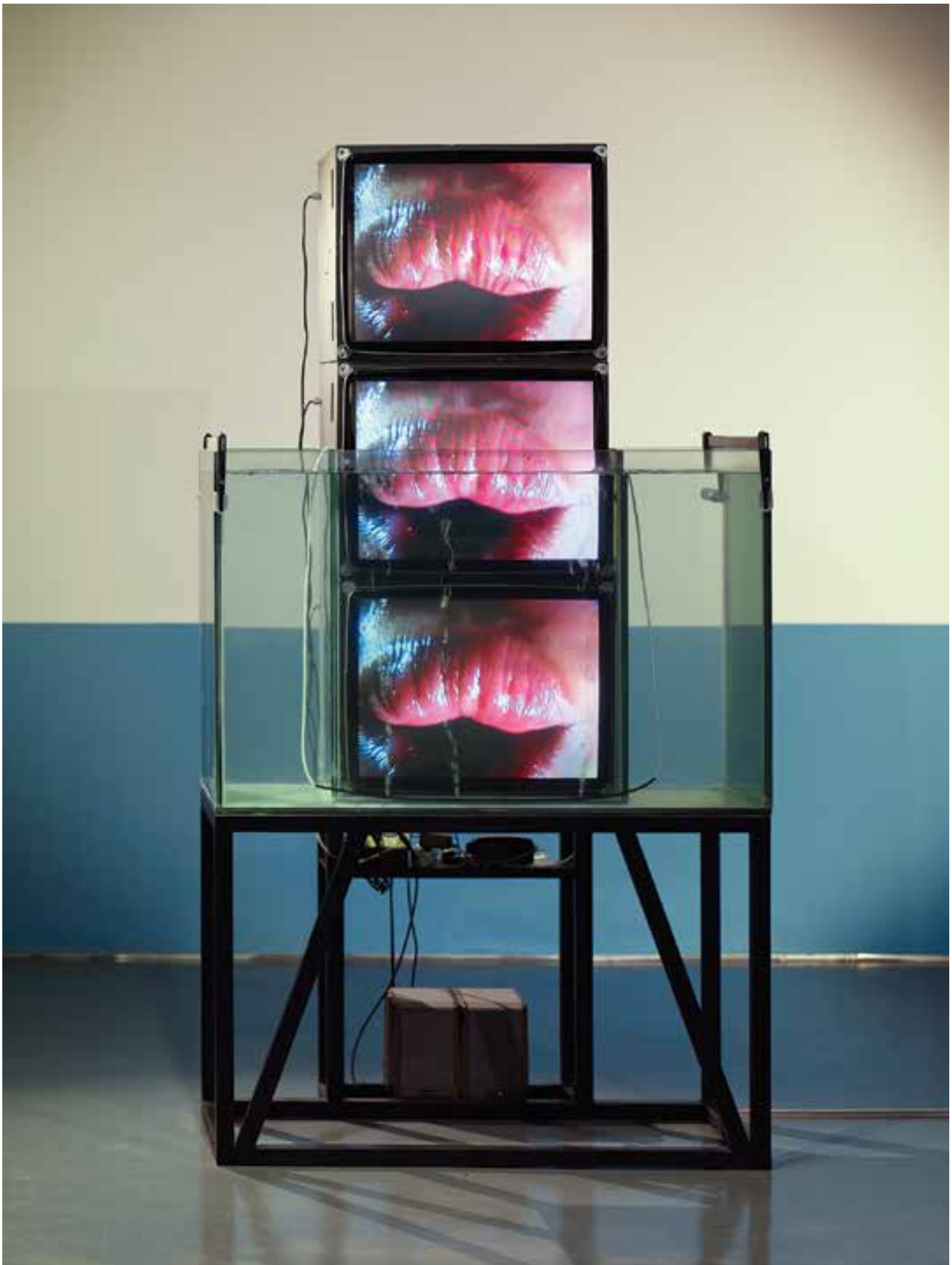


Lin Tianmiao, *Proliferation of Thread Winding*, 1995, video installation. Courtesy of the artist.

pursued video as a conceptual tool that they coupled with actions performed in front of the camera. Sculptor Lin Tianmiao surprised me with her bold feminist statement, *Proliferation of Thread Winding* (1995), a video displayed on a monitor embedded in the pillow of her bed-like installation and sharp pins protruding from the reclining figure's pudenda. The former journalist Wu Wenguang was known for compelling documentaries that he made with handheld camerawork and unscripted interviews, managing to capture authentic and unrehearsed moments of life in China without pushing any political agendas.

I visited China's few contemporary art dealers in their miniscule spaces—Swiss-born Lorenz Helbling at his ShanghART gallery, located in an alcove on the second floor of the Portman Hotel, and Dutch-born Hans van Dijk at his office-like China Art Archives and Warehouse (there was also Brian Wallace's Red Gate Gallery in Beijing but I didn't get to visit it). They set high professional standards for what was to become a serious art market in China.

During the1997 STIR-FRY trip, I met the second generation of video explorers, students of Zhang Peili at Hangzhou's China Academy of Art. Xu Zhen, Yang Zhenzhong, and Qiu Zhijie discovered their idiom, often instilled with healthy doses of irony. Yang Fudong focused on experimental film and narrative and shaped his media art practice with film noir leanings. Qiu Anxiong and Sun Xun were excellent draftsmen and were just turning to animation.



Yang Zhengzhong, *Fish Bowl*, 1996, video installation, 30 mins. Courtesy of the artist.

The artist Cao Fei grew up with MTV and entered video and media through another route. First in Guangzhou, and then in Beijing, she made investigative, activist documentaries, giving voice and clout to citizens being thrown out of their homes by government-sanctioned real estate developers. She went on to pursue video installations and make similarly critical social commentaries through a narrative methodology. She turned to Second Life, the online user-developed 3D universe in which someone builds their dream reality. In the work *RMB CITY: A Second Life City Planning* (2007), Cao Fei's clone (alter ego), China Tracy, socialized online where she enjoyed the wealth and glamorous lifestyle of Chinese businessmen, buying and selling real estate, frequenting fancy restaurants, dressing beautifully, and amassing bibelots.

Cao Fei (SL avatar: China Tracy), *RMB CITY: A Second Life City Planning*, 2007, Machinima, single-channel video, 5 mins., 57 secs. © Courtesy of the artist, Vitamin Creative Space, Guangzhou, and Sprüth Magers.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, as the contemporary art market in China heated up, gallerists abroad took on the media work of Cao Fei, Yang Fudong, Zhang Peili, and a few others. Beijing's former factory complex, 798, exuded the same energy as Manhattan's early 1970s Soho, where galleries and restaurants in a formerly rundown and deserted area quickly became a high rent shopping mall. Similarly, Shanghai's grand old buildings on the Bund, originally built for banks and corporate headquarters in the former German concession area, began to host elegant galleries adjacent to fashionable boutiques.

As technology was becoming more user friendly, several prominent gallerists in Paris, Lucerne, and New York were figuring out how to edition and market the video installation. A few like Chantal Crousel, Urs Meile, Holly Solomon, and Jack Tilton picked up the work of Chinese media artists. Then, biennials and media festivals in Europe started to invite artists from China to showcase their work. Eventually the global playing field for video installation leveled as artists from everywhere saw how others were doing it. Expansive contemporary Chinese survey exhibitions emerged in the West, as foreign trade flowed. Well-heeled, well-traveled art collectors from China quietly began circumnavigating global art fairs, where a few collectors, like Ingvild Goetz in Munich and Pamela and Richard Kramlich in San Francisco, acquired video art. Later on, several of these affluent collectors formed private museums with professional staff trained in art history and conservation at educational institutions such as the Courtauld Institute and NYU.

Jump Cut to the Present

Today feels light years away from 2019, when the art world rode the tidal wave of a strong global economy. Contemporary art flourished as a dynamic transnational arena, where media art surged ahead. Small galleries in low rent areas captured the attention of contemporary art enthusiasts with shows featuring the work of young multinational innovators. Big box dealers had outposts in cities around the world and showcased masterpieces by established artists, along with work from the estates of older figures. Inexpensive airfares made it affordable for many to drop in on shows and art fairs in foreign cities. Smart phones in hand, art world denizens communicated among large networks of acquaintances and accessed information nonstop as museums and private collectors purchased art that ranged from sacrosanct to experimental.

With so much cash flowing and research and sales happening internationally, the art world seemed interconnected. At times I wondered why debates continued about what was Chinese and what wasn't—for whom now did it matter? When COVID-19 suddenly struck, everyone was forced to stay in place as strong political lines between the East and West were drawn in the sand.

The virus has caused much hardship and scrambling, as citizens tried to stay healthy indoors. I used my laptop to continue doing research and stay in touch with colleagues around the world. With several commissioned articles lined up to write and no personal tragedies, I toiled away at home. The countless hours I spent staring at my computer screen every day were no substitute for the pleasure that comes from direct encounters with fellow human beings. Throughout the lockdown, I took advantage of how museums and galleries dug into their archives and liberally added treasures from their collection to websites. They uploaded still and moving image artwork, along with sound art and music and lecture series with specialists' conversations. Their impromptu exhibitions were open to all for free. This offered comfort during a trying moment, when everyone was confined to home. But truth be told, seeing conventional art on the laptop or smartphone screen is second best to the real thing, and, after a while, becomes tedious.

Now, as we grapple with how to maintain some form of normalcy and deal with a changed world, media artists are in the catbird seat. They understand the potential of digital tools and have been quietly developing ideas and appear prepared for this moment of release. We are about to experience their surprising new work.

I know that artists such as Zhang Peili, Song Dong, Wang Gongxin, Lin Tianmiao, Cao Fei, and others have been productive over the last few months. As their audience, we will reap the benefits of their focus on research and rehearsal of new ideas. Perhaps their new work will be more inspiring than ever before.

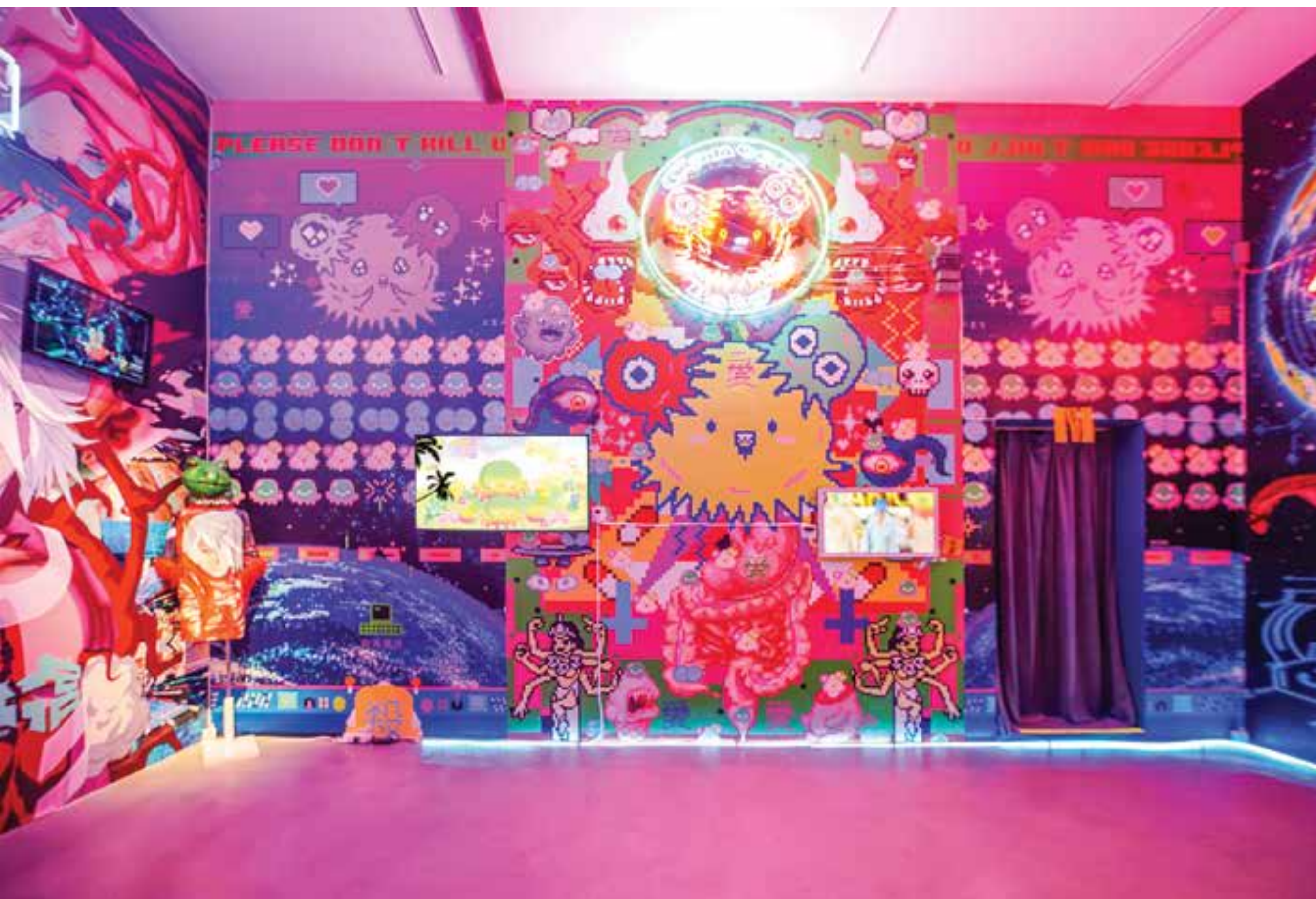
An optimist by nature, I believe that the youngest generation of media artists from China will succeed. Their do-it-yourself spirit is strong and gives me hope for the future. The cultural nomads Xu Wang and Cici Wu call New York home. Several years ago, they turned their tiny Chinatown studio into an ad hoc alternative art space and an off-the-record residency program called Practice. Operating on a minuscule budget of monies earned from part-time jobs, they discreetly invited young artists coming to New York from Asia and made it possible for them to create and present new work. They have encouraged the youngest generation of media artists to carry on and have great faith in them.

Xu Wang, *Summer Wind Before Rain*, 2017, digital HD video, 25 mins., 24 secs. Courtesy of the artist.

Left: Cici Wu, *Unfinished Return*, 2019, video installation (16mm film transferred to digital video), film prop (paper, bamboo, wire, glue). Courtesy of the artist.

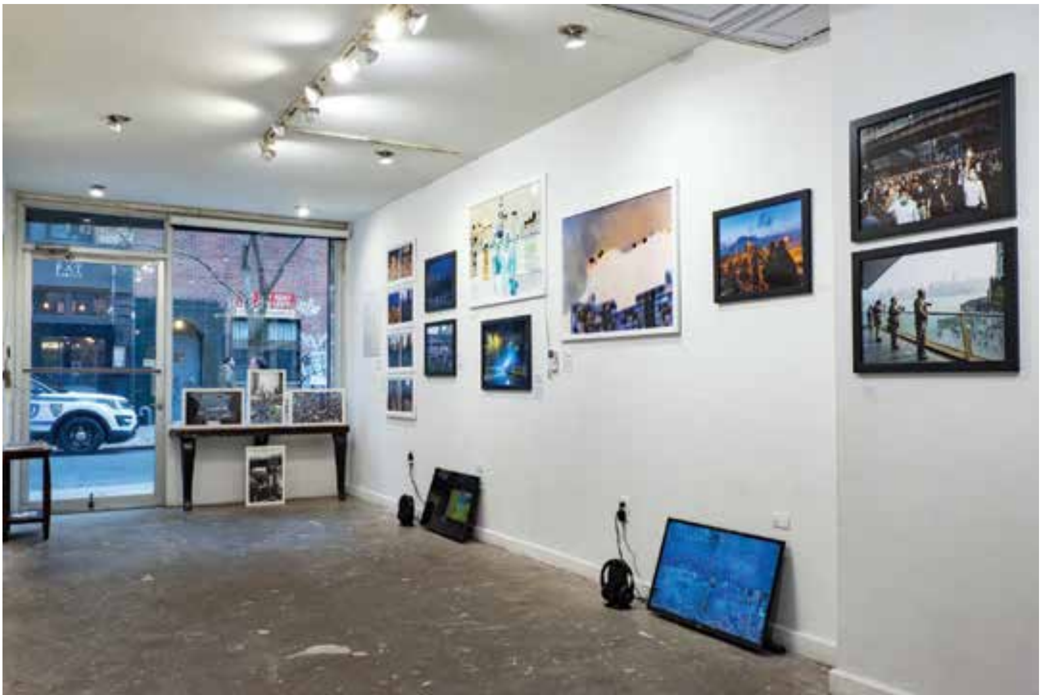
The artist Lu Yang will, as she always does, complete new work and upload it on her pulsating, bright website, making it downloadable and streamable for her avid followers through Vimeo. She finds labels and definitions to be limiting; for example, she dislikes being called a "Chinese artist." When asked about her nationality, she explains that she lives on the Internet where nobody knows who you really are. She believes that what her online audience cares about is whether an artwork is any good; they're not thinking about who the person is behind it. She connects with her musician-collaborators through websites such as SoundCloud. The Internet is expedient for her, as someone who works at home alone and doesn't have many face-to-face interactions with people.

The young artist Wang Mowen recently completed a video, *Trinity* (2019), an innovative tale told as a hybrid of reality. She masterfully combines the techniques of documentary-style realism and of fiction through the use of special effects. The enigmatic video describes the split between the worlds



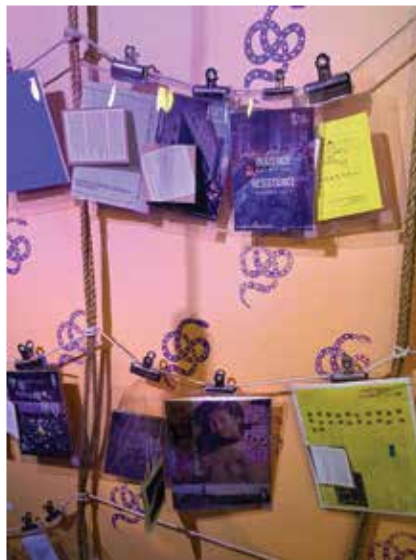
Lu Yang, *Neurocore*, 2017, video for Vimeo project. Courtesy of the artist.

Wang Mowen, *Trinity*, 2019, single-channel video, 16 mins., 9 secs.



Installation view of *afterbefore: images and sounds from Hong Kong* at Chinatown Soup, New York, January 29–February 9, 2020. Organized by Cedric Maridet, Fiona Lee, Angela Su, Valerie C. Doran, and Ming Chong.

of the mental and the physical, how the living regard death and the dead, and how the physical world is ephemeral, nearly as illusory as our mental processes. She asks her viewers to consider how social media is contributing to the reshaping of such ideas.



Installation view of *afterbefore: images and sounds from Hong Kong* at Chinatown Soup, New York, January 29–February 9, 2020. Courtesy of Asia Art Archive Collections of Anti-ELAB Zines, Hong Kong, and Chinatown Soup, New York.

From history we know that the pendulum always shifts, as one side rises with power and the other falls, and sometimes xenophobia gets spat out, despite purported conviviality. Call me a hopeless romantic, but we have a lot to gain by sticking together and by seeing beyond propaganda. For example, earlier this year in 2020 in a small Chinatown venue, Chinatown Soup, I saw the exhibition *afterbefore: images and sounds from Hong Kong*, featuring photography, video, sound, and text-based artwork. This was initiated by a collaborative group of Hong Kong artists (photographers, videographers, sound artists, writers, and arts practitioners) as a platform for Hong Kong artists to be seen and heard at this critical time. The work was fresh and poignant.

A lot hangs now in the balance, and life will quickly change. The DIY spirit is strong, which gives me hope for the future as artists find their way. Now we just have to wait to see what is coming around the corner.