

ZHANG PEILI - ADDITIONAL MATERIAL

In 1999, Zhang Peili was invited to create a work for the 48th Venice Biennale. He chose the Mandarin version of Happy Birthday as the featured karaoke tune for a people's chorus in video work he sardonically titled "Just for You". The work was assigned to a space on the ground floor of the Italian Pavilion, and comprised ten monitors on ten white, chest-high plinths arranged in a semicircle facing the audience. A format not dissimilar to Juan Munoz' circles of diminutive cast figures, and provoking a similar dynamic between the viewer and the figures being viewed. Flanked by works from Mario Schifano and Louis Bourgeois "Just for You" was in good company. In the piece, representative members of all the social classifications that make up the population-worker, teacher, student, male, female, young and old-come together individually to form a group. As the work commences, on one monitor a single face fades gently up from black. After an anxious look into the camera and a split second of nervous hesitation, without audible accompaniment, the individual starts to sing. The voices, some pitch perfect, some flat and tuneless, accentuate the unvarnished human element in Zhang Peili's egalitarian choice of participants. In the sequence of the work, each person completes one verse before the screen fades to black and another monitor becomes illuminated, a new face but with the same quizzical gaze and aura. The various individuals appear in random sequence until the last segment of the work, when all resurface within their separate "frames" to join in unison for a final chorus, unaware that they now have the support of the group. Thus unaware, none is able to draw comfort from the cliché of safety in numbers or the anonymity of the crowd. The majority of the singers' expression is marked by the nervous quiver of what suggests a first performance before a camera. The unquiet hesitation is odd, and the expressions jar because by nature the Chinese people are surprisingly natural performers with little sense of inhibition and a great talent for song. Perhaps in this instance, their anxiety can be ascribed to an uncomfortable awareness of participating in a work of "modern" art-with all the negative connotations of the word in China-or the daunting idea that the

recordings of them doing this would be replayed publicly in a foreign country. And where for a foreign audience self-consciousness tallied equally with notions of Asian shyness, as if the singer was physically present in the space, performing a turn, viewers were moved to heartfelt empathy. As visitors waited for the sequence to go full circle, a group of Italian children ran from one screen to the next, their delight in this impromptu karaoke ever greater with each new and unfamiliar face. How amusing to hear Happy Birthday sung in Chinese, and by people who clearly had no idea that they were performing on one of the world's leading art stages. Moreover, contrary to the words they sing, the individual demeanours of the twelve guest stars in Just for You largely refute the celebratory nature of the Lyrics. Interviewed by an Italian television crew, Zhang Peili said: "I wanted to find something that would touch base with an international audience, something simple and universal in image and sound that everyone could relate to, no matter where they came from." Then, as a seemingly jocular aside, he added: "China is celebrating a fiftieth birthday this year"

It was: October 1, 1999, marked the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic. It was also the tenth anniversary of June 4. For many residents of Beijing the extraordinary level of pomp and circumstance deployed to celebrate the milestone anniversary of the PRC—a loud and proud reminder of the achievements, benefits and ethos of a nation incontrovertibly moving forward—was a means of diverting attention away from recollections of the sobering dawn of June 4. Seen in terms of either anniversary, or both, such inference certainly expands the reach of "Just for You", and accounts for several visual peculiarities about the figures. The dour expressions they bring to the singing of what is a joyful song rather negate the essential nature of celebration. The pronounced absence of red, with the exception of the red neckerchief worn by one school student—a lingering symbol of the young pioneer—or any hint of the intense jollity that dominated domestic media images in the run-up to the celebrations in Beijing, further suggested a link; implying that the people were going through the motions of celebrating, defiantly remembering a

graver anniversary that still gave them pause for thought. The biennale neatly straddled the two historic dates, opening in June and wrapping up in October. As we shall see, given the nature of Zhang Peili's earlier works, "Just for You" encapsulated a political comment in a succinct, almost self-effacing manner. In speaking at greater length to interviewers, Zhang Peili skillfully deflected the more penetrating questions that his mention of anniversaries prompted. On the one hand, he was clearly being guarded, but his was a practiced astuteness. Undisguised provocation has never been Zhang Peili's style: "I was there to extend the profile of my art in an international arena and not to win fame [notoriety] for myself at home." Though pedantic, the distinction is important. Zhang Peili had learned that circumlocutory means made it possible for an individual to be far more effective as an avant-garde artist, at home and abroad, although he preferred to steer the discussion towards his practice rather than opting for an ambiguous "no comment". Mild circumlocution is possibly the only "Chinese characteristic" of which he can be accused of manipulating. Against the potential readings of political insurgence, Zhang Peili permits the work to offer manifold interpretations, thus allowing himself a plausible escape route out of even the toughest interview.

The pointed lack of dynamic action in favour of an intense focus on a slight gesture that is common to all the works, opens Zhang Peili's video art to myriad levels of understanding because simplicity is always more complex than it appears. In a contemporary world saturated with visual metaphors, with film and media images laden with cultural and socio-political inference, the scenes in his video works have all the sophistication of advertising campaigns: like stories reduced to a visual shorthand that everyone gets immediately. In advertising, this visual shorthand has to tell a story in the briefest of moments. Zhang Peili's sequences eliminate all conventional elements of storytelling from the works and pare this type of visual shorthand down to an absolute minimum. The story to be discerned in his work relies upon the viewers' capacity for mental association and lateral thinking, often after the

viewer has walked away from the work. The absence of a self-explanatory narrative is unusual in the art of China's avant-garde artists because narrative of one kind or another is a dominating component of painting, photography and even video, from 1985 through to the early 2000s. Whether or not, in the absence of a broader context, one uncovers the underlying meaning of Zhang Peili's minimalist play lets never detracts from the pleasure of watching them. Confronted with *Just for You* numerous visitors to Venice did pick up on the subtle juxtaposing of two pivotal events in the history of the PRC- its founding and June 4. This made it possible to align one era with another, and nudge thoughts towards the nature of China's ongoing transformation; a connection that unveils a powerfully orchestrated comment, which at that moment, appeared to speak out against history, thus winning its author a quiet respect. Taking a leaf out of GU Dexin's book, Zhang Peili remained non-committal, which drew a knowing sympathy from the media. His reticence was read as a necessary means of protecting himself. But was he? The answer is yes and no: an equivocation, true, but a strategy typical of a large number of avant-garde artists, and of the art produced from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, during which time China's totalitarian regime was intractable. To some extent, China's avant-garde artists laid the foundations of their careers upon equivocation. It enabled them to navigate the turbid waters at home and to build credibility abroad, encourage foreign audiences to believe the art to be more political than it actually was at times, and thereby to delight in its illegality.

Zhang Peili's foreign debut occurred in the early 1990s, at a moment of dramatic economic and political adjustment, not just within China, but in terms of China's relationship to the outside world. Given the tone of general public perceptions during that time, foreign interpretations were inevitably allied to the fraught political problems that scarred the end of Deng Xiaoping's reign. These interpretations were not entirely misplaced: as has been seen here in the paintings of Wang Guangyi and Li Shan, for example, the motifs employed were blatant-Mao, Pop, and an accentuated infusion of cynicism. Against a

fragmented vision of China's cultural environment abroad, it was unavoidable that critical discourse would be honed to a political sleight by western people educated to read art that way-one of those "western cultural habits" that so amuses Gu Dexin. And like Gu Dexin in not being one to follow general trends-Zhang Peili deliberately endeavoured to buck them. Yet, by the late 1990s China had changed, and to such a degree that self-protection was less and less necessary to any aspect of an individual career, a fact to which Zhang Peili's appointment to the CNA ultimately attests.

"Just for You" intelligently illustrated a moment in Contemporary China. The cloak of dubiety that hangs over Zhang Peili's performers reflects the awkwardness of fostering non-native notions and practices onto a people before either have been suitably adapted to meet the cultural needs of the new environment. The people's urge to become modern is as arbitrary in its choices as its momentum is irrepressible. It is the clash between domestic and external ideologies, and the shifting sands of contemporary Chinese experience, which Zhang Peili perceptively observes. And in a format that, like the video's content, demonstrates how western influences have been assimilated into China's new art, yet adapted to individual expression. 50, in "Just for You" Zhang Peili succeeded in succinctly lining a superficially innocuous work with a poignant political nuance. Whilst many members of the audience at Venice might not have registered the significance of the PRC's anniversary, they were touched by the piece. Every now and then, throughout the Giardini, the hummed strains of Happy Birthday stirred the air. Viewers might not remember the artist's name, nor have registered his Chinese origins-discussions held by Europeans standing before the work revealed the confusion caused by Asian faces: Japanese? Korean? Vietnamese?-but perhaps on October 1, when the grand parades in Tiananmen Square made the news, then by contrast, they might have recalled, the strikingly non-committal expressions of Zhang Peili's singers. In Venice, Just for You also demonstrated the ability of a contemporary Chinese artist to conquer new-western-technology and make it his own. To complete a trilogy of anniversaries, "Just for You" also neatly

marked a decade since Zhang Peili began his own
exploration of video art...."

(Tex by Karen Smith)