

The Time Phenomenon of Chinese Zen and Video Art in China: 1988-1998

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Abstract. As a response to the problems of language in Chinese modern and avant-garde art from 1988 to 1998, early video art reclaimed the independence of language from social reality and political influence and established it on the basis of the time phenomenon. By comparing the category of time in the Western philosophical tradition and in Chinese traditional thought, we find that the “immediacy” of Zen provides a hermeneutical approach to the nature of language as a reflective medium, closely related to the silent experience. In line with the three basic principles of transcendental Zen, video media purifies body language into the immaterial language in three ways – through disembodied video movement, the de-objectified video image, and discontinuous video narrative.

Key words: Atemporal Present, Chinese Video Art, Zen

INTRODUCTION

Inspired by the reflections on the problems of language in Chinese modern and avant-garde art from 1988 to 1998, early video art was originally established by reclaiming the independence of art language from the realm of social reform and political influence (Wen Pulin, 2012). At the end of 1980, there were two milestone events in the history of Chinese modern art. The first was the “Grand Earthquake” organized by Wen Pulin in 1988, described as a farewell party to the 20th century. The second was the “China Avant-Garde Art Exhibition” in Beijing in February 1989, the only time avant-garde artists appeared at the National Art Gallery. Both of these large-scale art events heralded the end of the revolutionary and pioneering role of modern and avant-garde art in China, and they aggressively argued for a cynical backlash against idealism-associated art practices based on social reality and ideology.

These events formed the backdrop from which early video art emerged, as the pioneering video artist Zhang Peili proclaimed that the purification of art language arises from contemplations on the interrelation between the nature of language and the “immediacy” of consciousness, which exists as the time phenomenon.

As consciousness moves in time, it has been supposed that the nature of language, as the trace of movements of consciousness, would be traced to the intuitive time phenomenon that gains visibility from the self-evident consciousness. By comparing the category of time in the Western philosophical tradition and in Chinese traditional thought, we find that the intuitive “immediacy” of the transcendental experience evoked by the sudden awakening of Chinese Zen contradicts the finite duration of motion or successive progression of the spirit in the Western tradition. From the perspective of Chinese Zen, the transcendental experience defines the passing moment as the atemporal present, which is characterized as repetitive, occasional, and ahistorical. According to fundamental principles for realizing the “immediacy” of transcendental experience, this experience provides a hermeneutic approach to understanding the nature of language in the presence of an atemporal present in which embodied language and abstract concepts are prevented. Furthermore, this experience provides an intuitive approach to video media, and as an independent language, it is dematerialized as the pure and sensible form of the atemporal present through the following: 1) the disembodied video movement, which is as homogeneous as the mechanical movement of objects and is achieved by eliminating sensations and perception from body language. The meaningless boredom of disembodied video movement directly demonstrates the repetition of the atemporal present; 2) the de-objectified video images, which are derived from the instability of the interplays between individual behavior and images. The alogic of the de-objectified video images reveals that consciousness is unconsciously reflected in the occasionality of the atemporal present; and 3) the discontinuous video narrative, which is derived from the rhetorical means of the linguistic re-arrangement of dialog and discourse. Although the dialog and discourse preserve certain distinctions in terms of perception, social community, and traditional cultures, their re-arrangement liberates the sense and meanings from the restraints of history and narrative logic, noting the ahistorical and nonlinear framework of the atemporal present.

THE TIME PHENOMENON: ABSOLUTE TIME VS. ATEMPORAL PRESENT

The first Chinese video artwork “30x30” was exhibited publically in 1988. However, experimentation with video media did not capture the attention of other artists until the mid-1990s. Zhang Peili, the father of Chinese video art, provided a unique perspective for understanding the nature of video art, arguing that the understanding of time made Chinese video art different from the visual works and documentaries in the West. Thus, the ontological question of the time phenomenon became a crucial element from which pioneering Chinese artists could explore the configuration and language issues of video art. Moreover, an attempt should be made to compare the time phenomenon in the Western philosophical tradition to that of Chinese Zen, prior to interpretation of the interrelation between the atemporal present and the dematerialization of Chinese video art.

In ancient Greece, “time” initially involved the paradox between nature and human beings (Lorenz, 2003: 68). To solve the paradox of Parmenides, Plato split existence into two realms, arguing that time is the closest approximation to the unchanging and transcendent Form (Lavine, 1984, Ch. 2). In Aristotle’s *Physics* (217b30-224a17), time, as a straight line, explains the motion of the sphere in terms of actuality and potentiality. However, St. Augustine’s Confessions prompted the concept of theological time, which conflicts with Aristotle’s view that the essence of time is a kind of everlasting duration independent of the existence of motion. Because of the contributions of the scientific revolution in the 16th century, Aristotle’s concept of time was radically replaced by mathematics, in which time is used as the common denominator to measure other variables of physical substance. In other words, absolute time cannot be recognized through physical motion; instead, it is a transcendently ideal and infinite presence, a priori, which is dependent upon the subjective constitution of the mind.

Thus, Kant argued in the “Critique of Pure Reason” that “phenomena can be annihilated in thought, but as a universal condition, time cannot” (Kant, 1781: A36). The study indicates that it is futile to use reason to resolve the antinomy that transcendental time, as the successive movement of the mind, is contradictory to world time, which is finite. Moreover, Hegel extends successive time to the finite world in his

philosophy of history: “history is the process whereby the spirit discovers itself and its own concept” (Hegel, 1975: 62). In other words, world history is internal to human will, by which it commits to its infinite energy of the universe to work finite human actions. Additionally, Martin Heidegger emphasizes Kant and Hegel’s finite but absolute time from a humanistic perspective. In *Being and Time*, he elaborated that time is essentially temporal because it can be intuited from the mortal vantage point (Heidegger, 1962). Here, Heidegger not only argues that the meaning of time does not derive from eternity but that the concept of eternity and, indeed, presence itself is a derivative of temporality (Heidegger, 1992: 107).¹ Time is meaningful solely for a being that lives with an understanding of the finite. Thus, absolute time is one of the forms of the Absolute Idea and is a finite idea that will not pass and will not be surpassed (Blanchot, 1989: 103).

In contrast to the finite but absolute time derived from either “Nature” or “Spirit” in the Western philosophical tradition, Chinese Zen approaches the nature of time through the presentation of “Prajñāpāramitā”, that is, the highest wisdom inherent in humans. According to Buddhist history, Chinese Zen was initially developed by the 6th Patriarch Hui-neng (638-713), whose proclamation of ‘Sudden Awakening’ had a deeply influential effect on all later Zen schools and lineages (Dumoulin, 2007). Based on the doctrine of “From the first not a thing is” (*ben-lai wu-i-wu*) of Hui-neng, Prajñā or Wisdom means that the mind should cling to nothingness when it acts. In Hui-neng’s thought, nothingness, similarly to the emptiness (*sunyata*) of the Wisdom Sutras, is uncovered in the immediacy of transcendental experience, which is evoked by enlightened wisdom and beyond all categories, concepts, and finite objects. In the “Platform Sutra”, Hui-neng delivered his belief that “our Essence of Mind (self-nature), which is the seed or kernel of enlightenment (Bodhi), is pure by nature, and by making use of this mind alone, we can reach Buddhahood directly” (quoted in Caoxi, Price and Wong, 1990: 1). Herein, like a mirror, self-nature reflects the presence of the immediacy of the transcendental experience. He goes on to add “how amazing that self-nature is originally pure! How amazing that self-nature is unborn and undying! How amazing that self-nature is inherently complete...” (Caoxi, Price and Wong, 1990: 22). This describes a vivid feeling that observing self-nature that is suddenly unconscious. As Suzuki noted, “it is evident that in Zen Buddhism the unconscious is

not a psychological term either in a narrow or in a broader sense.” (Suzuki, 1953: 25). Unconsciousness exists in the moment of observing self-nature, implying that the present is always absent, whereas enlightenment emerges by breaking the successive movement of consciousness.

In terms of the opposition between history addressing the past and the living experience concerned with the absent present, the transcendental Zen experience tells little about the relation to other things and to the subjective mind. As Suzuki states, shunning all life in the world, the present is unknown to historians and scientists. The present is not only the living experience in which humans exist but also reflects an absent present, which returns all objects, words, and concepts to an alogical consciousness. From the perspective of the Zen school, Hu Shih comments that Chinese Zen is, to an extent, iconoclastic and revolutionary because Zen thought is irrational, illogical, and anti-philosophical. This belief explains the alogical characteristics of the absent present in the Zen experience. Based on this belief, the alogical consciousness presents itself in the atemporal present, which compromises the paradox between absolute time and the temporality of living experience. This is, the atemporal present can only be envisioned in the immediacy of crystal-clear and enlightened wisdom in which objects, concepts, mental states, and progressive history are clarified to trace the path of the living experience. Thus, the atemporal present is unavoidably involved with the passing present, which is derived from the living experience, instead of being a representation of the formless consciousness. In contrast to the category of time in the Western tradition, the atemporal present in Chinese Zen accesses the temporal interval of living experience and prompts the suspicion of a successive and finite duration of consciousness. Instead of being concerned with either the motion of objects or the embodiment of a holistic human history, the atemporal present merely evinces the immediacy of observing the self-nature, indicating that there is nothing--no death, no birth, no sense--except for the presentation of the unconscious consciousness in emptiness.

According to Hui-neng’s textual interpretation, the three basic principles of the sudden awakening, include a “no mind” as basis a “no object” as substance, and a “no stay” as the fundamental principle, providing an intuitive approach to the realizations of the immediacy of

transcendental experience. First, the atemporal present is characterized as being as repetitive as the passing moment, eliminating the perceptual and sensational contents of the present from the living experience. Second, the atemporal present is intuited as the occasional passing moment because it is evoked by the reflection on the unconscious consciousness in a disruptive pattern. Third, the atemporal present is both ahistorical and un-narrative because the passing moment is always free of rationality and logic as well as the limits of linear history and logical narrative. Based on the three principles of sudden awakening of Zen, the atemporal present exists in the immediacy of the transcendental experience, which dissolves the absolute and finite time in sight, providing a hermeneutic approach to the nature of language within the territory of time.

LANGUAGE, ATEMPORAL PRESENT AND VIDEO MEDIA

Because of the paradoxical time phenomenon noted above, it is inferred that the nature of language should also be elaborated on the ontological level in such a comparative manner. In the Western tradition, language is not only used as a natural basis in man's bodily organs and psychological power but is used as one of the natural means to express philosophical meaning. Alternatively, departing from the immediacy of sudden awakening, language refuses to be materialized and associated with the functions of communication or expression but directly points to the atemporal present through the presentation of the reflective consciousness. Thus, video media would be preoccupied with the realization of a transformative dematerialization of language, overcoming the dominance of historical and narrative rationality.

Indeed, language has long been viewed as both an instrument and a problem in the formation of these sciences and in the development and acquisition of virtues, politics, and arts (McKeon, 1946). As Stoics and Christians found the basis for the order of nature in the *λοδος*, language is extended as the regulative principle that guides man's behaviors. Although the universe was becoming ever more accessible through the steadily increasing growth of knowledge and understanding in the 16th century, the nature of language oscillated between the dualistic realms of body and mind. (Searly, 1999). Hegel's system assumes a normative dimension over representational language, arguing that the nature of

language is the immanent development of the spirit and accompanies the varying functionality of meanings in an open context (McCumber, 1993: 322). Ontologically, Heidegger introduces poetic language as his theme for the first time, insisting that the structure of Dasein is in becoming open to the 'house of Being'. Within the temporal horizon, language is reserved as speech and discourse representing the vicissitude of the Being of Dasein. This finding indicates that poetic language extends beyond understanding and presumes the knowledge that is concealed is the most primordial kind of knowing. It is obvious that most Western philosophers intend to use both literal language and figurative language as a moderately metaphorical language whose expression of consciousness or the compositional form finds itself in the *λοδος* or arguments (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I ii. 2, 996b5-8; viii. 4. 1044b12-13; On the Soul i. 1. 403a24-25, 403b1-2; ii. 2. 414a4-14; cited in Ross, 2015 n/p); see also Smith, 2015 n/p). Moreover, this behavior provides the destructive means to re-construct the history in which non-historical text is transformed into a metaphor of truth, of meaning or of sense.

To an extent, the discussion on language originating from ancient times is not to subvert the clear-cut distinction between metaphorical and representative language but to show that the self-evidence of literal language is in a philosophically misleading position. The texts of Chinese Zen involve language with the specific silent experience of sudden awakening, releasing language far from the conventions of instrumental language for its purposes. In contrast to early Zen and other Zen schools, which use language as interpretation, the focal point of Hui-neng's thought is not the mediating and conditioning effect of language but its evocation and emergence that is accompanied by a power pointing to an "immediate, undistorted grasp of reality" (Fromm, Suzuki, De Martino, 1970: 110). This observation means that Zen discourse is precisely in the search for the presence of the absent present that transgresses the ephemeral temporality of the past present. The irony emerges when language evokes the reflective awareness that there is no *dharma* that can be spoken, which can be found in the narratives throughout Zen literature, from the Buddha's silent transmission of *dharma* to *Mahakasyapa*, through Vimalakirti's "thunderous silence" to Bodhidharma's nine years of silent and "wall-gazing" meditation (Kasulis, 1981: 138). In terms of atemporal present, intuitive silence can be in the vision solely if language is circumvented from the suitable conditions and

transforms a linear progression into a nonlinear passing moment. Although language is exclusively eradicated from sensorial perception, social identity or cultural context in the disruptive pattern, it would directly point to the central practice of meditation and contemplative silence.

In accordance with the immediacy of the flowing consciousness as visible and clear in reflective meditation, the interrelation between language and the atemporal present in Chinese Zen can be reconstructed. In terms of the intuition of the atemporal present, which is characterized as repetitive, occasional, and ahistorical, it can be deduced that independent language should overcome its dependence on reality in order to free language from the reproduction of the object and perception, the successive progression of the subjective consciousness, and the logic of history and narrative. It is assumed that Chinese video art, configured as conceptual art, is to redeem language from the functionalities of communication and expression by directly noting the un-timeless intuition of the atemporal present based on the reflective thought of the language problems in Chinese modern art and in avant-garde art. Such an argument was initially posited in Zhang Peili's statement for the foundation of the Pond Society (Chi-She, 1986-1987): "we desire for an appropriate purification. Our thought keeps flowing without certainty... did anyone feel the impulsion of logic? The immediacy of 'invasion' is so ecstatic. The immediacy of revival comes with a great enlightenment." (Zhang Peili, 1986: 1) This statement indicates that Chinese early video media is primarily concerned that immediacy arises with uncertain and flowing thoughts. In Chinese early video art, the purification of language is to free the video media from objects and perception, logical certainty, and the limitations of history. In addition, this purification makes humans feel ecstatic, whereas the purification of language in video media reveals the existence of atemporal present to be as intuitive as the immediacy of a great wisdom that can be observed directly.

Theoretically, the interrelation between language and atemporal present provides video artists an intuitive means to explore the dematerialized transformation of un-interpreted language and to unconceal the characteristics of atemporal present in three main aspects. First, because indifferent video recordings deprive perceptual functions from body language, the meaningless boredom generated in disembodied

movement reflects the repetition of the atemporal present. Second, the objectified relations between the subject and the object are removed by the instable interplays between the video clips and individual behaviors, revealing the occasionality of the atemporal present, which is contradictory to procedural duration as a successive motion. Third, discontinuous video narrative transforms linear history into the discourse and dialog rooted in cultural differences, simultaneously liberating language from the restriction of history and logical narrative and thus generating the ahistorical and un-narrative atemporal present. Next, upon contemplation of the language issues in modern and avant-garde art in China, early Chinese video artists and their video works from 1988 to 1998, as well as certain comments on the selected video works, it would be appropriate to further demonstrate how the understanding of the time phenomenon propelled video media to resolve specific language problems in the context of modern art and contemporary art in China.

REPETITION AND DISEMBODIED VIDEO MOVEMENT

During the development of Chinese modern art in the 1980s, a few artists brazenly criticized the modern art-social reform model as evincing excessive misuse and materialization of language. To purify the complex applications of language, these artists made use of video media to transform sensorial perceptions into disembodied bodily movement, presenting the atemporal present in an iterative and indiscriminating repetition. However, the reproduction of perception and behavior through video media, such as the mechanical motion of the object, was criticized for increasing the indifference to the sensation and leading spectators to indulge in the realm of meaningless nihilism (Wu Meichun, Qiu Zhijie, 2013: 40; see also Su Wenting, 2012). From a meta-ontological perspective, two questions should be proffered here: first, whether video media is to reproduce the interrelations between perception and objects or convert them into immaterial and disembodied movement. Second, if the latter is true, is it possible that the boredom generated by disembodied movement can extend beyond the living experience to access the immediacy of transcendental experience?

In 1988, Zhang Peili stated in an interview, “Currently, I am thinking of the trace of time... try to make the perception and materials float on the surface of time, by adding some more concrete and objective

contents to the abstract time.” (Su Wenting, 2012: 35) Perception and materials were literally viewed as the concrete contents of the trace of time. In other words, time, as an abstract form, can be represented in both perception and sensible content. Apparently, abstract time is very similar to absolute time, which has been defined in the Western tradition to measure the movement of the object. The difference is that the former holds the opinion that the objective contents or materials do not refer to the motion of physical objects but rather involves disembodiment of bodily perception. Recall the early paintings of Zhang Peili; it was evident that the concrete and objective contents, such as the rubber medical gloves and sharp scalpel, garnered his art work labels such as indifference or low-vitality. In addition, this indifference immediately degraded perception as the objective contents of abstract time. However, in contrast to the finite time derived from physical studies, the trace of time is very sensible and vital; the indifference to the perception extends beyond the gap between the subject and the object.

”In my mind, in case of the symbol detached from narrative time, it can gain the maximum freedom (of interpretation). Especially, the movies in the 1970s’ provide me the most typical examples which were featured with immaterial tendency, romantic scenes, and impersonal temperament beyond any individual’s emotion. It also evoked a strong contrast with temporal living life.” (Zhao Jianxiong, 2011: 82)

Complementary to the indifference, sensation and perception, immateriality and impersonality can retrieve the freedom of interpretative language or symbols from the realistic restriction of temporal experience. Thus, it can be deduced that, for Zhang Peili, such an ideal is not only achieved through the indifference of disembodied movement but also accesses the atemporal experience derived from the living experience. In other words, the disembodied video movement, as an independent language, reveals that the atemporal present contrasts with temporal experience and is a self-evident presence without realistic substance.

Because there is no beginning or ending in the closed circuit of disembodied movement, the indifferent video language evinces nothing but the endless boredom of a homogeneous, repetitive present. An example is Zhang Peili’s video work “Hygiene No. 3” (1991), which depicts a tedious process lasting approximately 25 minutes; it records a man wearing a striped coat and rubber medical gloves, repeatedly washing a chicken in a lavabo (see Fig. 1). Without doubt, this work

incurred criticism from many scholars and spectators for the endless and meaningless boredom. Zhang Peili replied, “You not being a fish, how could you possibly know what makes fish happy?” (Bo Wang Zhuangzi, 2014: 34)² This proverbial expression that originates from the ancient Sage Zhuangzi implies that, at least for himself, boredom is not equal to meaningless nothing, and it does not refer to any boring event or person encountered in daily life. In a proprioceptive sense, boredom indicates intuitive repetition of the passing now, making the atemporal present visible in the immaterial language. By removing corporeal perceptions, disembodied movement radically eliminates all of the objects except for the sensible intuition of the boredom of the reflection on nothingness. As a product of disembodied movement, boredom is an indicator of the repetition of the atemporal present, which is a series of indistinctive passing moments derived from the ordinary living present. To an extent, it appears that disembodied video movement as an independent language was further explored in eliminating the individual emotion that is rooted in perception and sensation. For example, Yan Lei’s video-work “Detergent” (1993) recorded the process of pulling one’s armpit hair with tweezers. The removal of corporeal materials not only inhibited psychological perception; in a striking contrast, the painfulness, pleasure, or horror caused by self-destruction was also eliminated through the endless boredom aroused by the indifferent, disembodied movement. Thus, the disembodied video movement is the concrete trace of the repetitive present that extends beyond the realistic limits of the living experience.



Figure 1. "Hygiene No. 3", length of video: 24 minutes and 45 seconds, Zhang Peili, 1991

Returning to the dysfunctional issues of language, these early video artists refused to accept the given idea that art language should be materialized to represent social reality, or express exaggerated emotion and illusive self-configuration. Instead, with low-tech video media, dematerialization of video language, such as disembodied movement, generated the apperception of boredom, which is used as the pure contents of the repetition of the atemporal present, rather than as an exchange agent between the internal perceptual system and external objects. In the endless boredom, the repetitive present is intuited by retrieving the passing now from the living experience. In conclusion, because dematerialized video language couched its primary concerns regarding apperception in a humanistic approach and because it represented the concrete contents of a repetitive present, it contributed to establishing a completely new paradigm of untimeless-based video art aesthetics.

OCCASIONALITY AND THE DE-OBJECTIED VIDEO IMAGE

In the middle of the 1990s, influenced by process-oriented Western video art, Chinese video artists started to diverge into two schools based on the considerations of the issues of narrative and un-narrative; one began to use time-based video work as a procedural duration. Within the domain of narrative, such video works were closely tied to the specificity of the site and the intervention of the audience (Duguet, Klotz and Weibel, 1997: 39). Conversely, time is not used in successive progression, but instead, the occasional present arises in an interruptive manner extended from the instable interplays between individual behaviors and the images. More significantly, interruption of the passing now decentralizes the technological power over the procedural duration of video works and de-objectifies the individual images by breaking up the successive video animation.

Until the 45th International Venice Biennale held in 1993, Chinese video artists did not get in contact touch with the narrative video works, virtual reality, Fluxus and performance art. Under the influence of Bill Viola's video work "Buried Secrets", Qiu Zhijie made a decision to conceive a video art exhibition on the theme of "Phenomenon and Image", which demonstrated that the main interests of video art had transformed from immaterialization of language to the subject-centered

experience. In contrast to early video art, Gao Mingshi remarked, “Two generations held opposite opinions on their aesthetic interests. For Zhang Peili and his colleagues, their main interests focused on the objectification of video media.” (Gao Fei, Qiu Zhijie, Gao Shiming et.al., 2010: 70) Departing from such a perspective, the second generation of video artists declined to view video images as an objectified production. With the narrative approach, these artists proposed that the video image should be arranged to configure “a sensible space”, that is, “to transform the temporality into the spatiality, and to transform the spatiality into dynamic relationships” (Gao Fei, Qiu Zhijie, Gao Shiming, et.al., 2010: 72). Thus, the video image is not only unfolded in a successive process but also in a cybernetic mode to make the individual images subject to the narrative logic. Obviously, such an understanding of video media went excessively far from their initial intentions, and they can barely be conscious of the reflective thought underlying the dematerialized language.

Furthermore, another group of video artists continued to conduct meta-ontological studies on time by reflecting the language issues of contemporary large-scale performance art. Prof. Yin Ji’nan, an art historian, called for focus on the potential impact of behavior art on the lifestyle of the public. Between 1988 and 1995, certain avant-garde artists and pioneering groups, such as the “New Measurement Group”, the “Tactile Sensation Group”, and the “Analyst Group”, endeavored to conceive large-scale performance art by using bodily behavior as a medium to approach important social events, international relations, and religious cults. Upon reflection on the instable relations between bodily behavior and imagery, certain video artists retreated from the public and dedicated themselves to the contemplation of the alogic of video images. In terms of an alogic narrative, bodily behavior is not a means of communication and expression but is a generator of the individual images that frees language from the restrictions of a specific context or experiential condition. Thus, in contrast to the narrative of visual forms, the alogic of video images is primarily concerned with the individual image, revealing the uncertainty of the nature of language. In the video installation “Un-covering” by Song Dong (1994), the artist placed the fascination of the projected images in an ambivalent relation to bodily behavior. Prof. Wu Hung commented that this straightforward

methodology and his obsession with mandalic images, consisting of tiny details, came close to being Zen (Wu Hung, 2010: 235). Similarly, his one-hour video work of “Stamping the water” (1996) provided a gentle subversion to the dominant narrative of visual art.³ Free from narrative, the alogical video image indicates that the uncertainty of language, attributed to the nothingness, can be intuited in the occasional present in a disruptive manner.

In contrast, from the perspective of ontology and epistemology in the West, video media has been understood as a metaphorical space or epistemological space, unfolding in the process duration of video images. “It’s a kind of telescopic time that makes viewers aware of the process of seeing-of beholding the world through sight that exists in the folds of time” (Hill, 1993: 152, *apud* Cooke, 1994: 82). It is difficult to see the individual images when the metaphorical or the epistemological space is set upon the flickering images with a very rapid sequencing computation. The risk of video media is the erasure of body language as the generator of individual images, substituted by video images structured in a linear sequencing. Dominated by technological logic or the narrative of visual forms, the generation of the subject’s consciousness must be in accordance with impersonal power. Conversely, because the alogic of video images provides a reflective approach to self-nature, consciousness emerges in the individual images unconsciously and can be solely intuited in the passing now, which is suspended from the successive process.

Based upon the discussions above, it can be primarily concluded that, departing from the skeptical attitude towards language issues of the public performance art, the independence of video language is re-established in the alogical video images; this reveals that the uncertain of language is derived from the instable interplays between individual images and bodily behaviors. In contrast to the dematerialized video movement established at the very beginning of video art, such conceptual video art spearheaded consciousness as a controlled outcome of objectified rational logic and the narrative of visual form. In a much deeper sense, time is evinced in the suspension of a process. By suspending the duration of past present, the occasional present and reflective consciousness simultaneously emerges in vision with the ceasing of the passing now.

AHISTORICAL SERIALITY AND VIDEO NARRATIVE

Because the enchantment of political awareness gradually started to fade after 1989, experimental art and conceptual art, with its motivation to break with the past, has involved the cultural values underlying national traditions. Certain critics and theorists have argued that epistemological thought and the methodologies rooted in traditional artifacts remain valid in contemporary art practice. In addition, increasingly more contemporary artists tend to have a moderate view of the cultural differences between the West and the East. Given these propositions of eclecticism, the second generation of video artists further explored the freedom of dialog and discourse that preserves cultural differences but releases the meanings and concepts from the bond of history, directly converting meaningless speeches into an ahistorical and paralleled time phenomenon in the discontinuous pattern of a video narrative.

Although many modern and avant-garde artists held the opinion that the artistic conception not only has its nationality but also has its universal character in the globalized context, this idea implied that the significance of Chinese modern art should be re-anchored within the framework of art history. According to linear art history, the arguments inevitably enter into a theoretical morass: once Chinese modern art is viewed as the counterpart of Western modern art and estimated by the Western cultural standard, it may lose its legitimized foundation in China and other non-Western areas. From this perspective, a few modern artists predicted that Chinese immaterial culture and traditional art would die in modern society. For example, Xu Bing illustrated the reason why his large-scale installation is named “Sealed Book” (calligraphy): “The work has been named as ‘the final volume of a new era’, the subtitle of which is the commiseration of one century. However, it was finally removed for its obvious aggressiveness.” (Xu Bing, 2015: 36) Certain contemporary artists further argued that, from a macroscopically historical perspective, modernity of modern art can be considered as an ongoing progression consisted of a series of social changes instead of a ready-made object. “Conceptual art primarily refers to a new method of making artworks. We cannot say that conceptual art is ‘the west’ or ‘the east’” (See “Zhu Qingsheng’s Interview” in Rose Goldsen Archive, 1990). In addition, Ian remarked that “Good conceptual art is concerned with just the concept... Visual language is made transparent by

abstraction” (Wilson, 1994: 60). Therefore, the abstraction of visual form in conceptual art is generally associated with the abstract concept, leading visual language into the area of the absolute present and the development of consciousness under the domination of linear history.

The kernel conception of conceptual art, which is concerned with a connection between consciousness and formless reality, succeeds. Nevertheless, certain second-generation video artists argue against this approach, stating that the absolute present cannot be achieved through the compulsive identity between a reduced reality and an abstract concept. It appears that there are insufficient arguments on the paradoxical dimensions between the abstract visual form and metaphorical images because both of the visual systems seek to represent the absolute present. However, in contrast to the abstract visual form, metaphorical images cannot truly free reality from the constraints of history’s linear sequence. From that perspective, Qiu Zhijie highly evaluated the humanistic value of the video installations of Korean video artist Paiking Zhun: “He was enthusiastic in making installations by compiling televisions into various religious symbols, composing from television crucifixes, television pyramids, television steles to television Buddhas. Afterwards, the religious metaphor of television entered into the mundane, such as the television-built American map, brassiere, house and the contemplator” (Qiu Zhijie, 2013: 65).

Moreover, by absorbing the artistic spirit of Chinese traditional literati paintings (*wenrenhua*), these artists developed a special style of video art with a Chinese humanistic temperament, which later was termed the *Hang Zhou School*. Herein, video media, as a vacuum, becomes a free space for rhetorical language rather than an interpretation or understanding of the living experience, breaking the immanent relation between meanings and objects that is determined by cultural reality. In other words, rhetorical language places the sensible form of language in the meta-ontological position. Thus, Gao Mingshi proposed that video art, as a “sub-narrative”, does not depict the temporal changes of social reality or charges images related to the functions within a social circuit with meaning, but instead it rearranges a series of video images or movements in accordance with the rhetorical means derived from the specific language context. For example, the installation “Shears, Shears” of Chen Xiaoyun (2002) simulated the bodily movement of blinking to extract individual images from segments of everyday life, which were

projected on three screens. The intermittent flashing of the images corresponded to the intensive sexual tension commonly found between females and males, represented by a sewing machine and a man standing in the corner of a living room within this social context.

Obviously, the distinctions between metaphorical images rooted in cultural circumstances and abstract forms associated with the formless consciousness are compromised in the rhetoric of video narrative, the discontinuity of which directly uncovered the presence of the ahistorical present. With the development of the portable video device and the extensive application of post-editing software, the intermitted video narrative is further explored in the rhetoric form of video narrative to realize the ambivalent oneness by juxtaposing the imaginary animation and the realistic video segments detached from the living condition. The performance installation “Oh, my sun” by Zhang Hui (2002), exhibited both of the back stage and the front screen simultaneously for the viewers. The discontinuous video narrative displayed on the screen was interrupted by the actors’ actual performance in the background. Such contrastive rhetoric was deployed to realize the indistinctive oneness of spatial differences between the physical space and imaginary space, freeing language from the limits of history and narrative logic.

By re-evaluating the significance of Chinese modern art and avant-garde art in art history, the second-generation video artists in China attempted to transform cultural differences into ahistorical time phenomenon. From the perspective of meta-ontology, the rhetoric of video narrative is the realization of the ambivalent oneness, which compromises the paradoxical dimensions between narrative and un-narrative, metaphorical images, and abstract images. Freeing rhetorical language from the restrictions of linear history and narrative logic, the co-ordination of realistic video segments with imaginary video is re-arranged in a discontinuous manner, revealing that the transcendental experience is derived from the actual life lived, far more than the absolute present moving through history.

CONCLUSIONS

By reflecting on the language issues in Chinese modern art and avant-garde art, early video art focused on the purification of language, as language had been primarily directed to reflect social context and

political influence during the 1980s. To free language from the representation of reality and ideology, an attempt was made to reconstruct the mutual connection between language and the time phenomenon, pursuing the nature of language within a comparative framework of Western traditional philosophy and Chinese Zen. In contrast, the atemporal present, existing in the “immediacy” of the “sudden awakening” of Chinese Zen, provides a hermeneutic approach to the nature of language. According to three fundamental principles of Chinese Zen, the language of video media can be dematerialized to reveal the intuitive vision of the atemporal present in the following three ways.

In accordance with the first principle of “no mind”, video media is released from functionality by degrading sensation and perception into disembodied movement. In the context of the Platform Sutra, “no mind”, which is the same as “true suchness” or “no strain with perception”, is to place one in a state outside of thought. This idea contrasts with the concept of “to give rise to thought”, which derives from the “six sense-organs”: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind (Caoxi, Price and Wong, 1990: 30). According to the meaning of “no mind”, there is nothing but the boredom generated in the repetition of disembodied video movement, cleaning the excessive functions and massive significations of the visual forms. The boredom makes the atemporal present visible in the repetition of a constant passing now. Based on the fundamental principle of “no object” in transcendental Zen, video media refuses to be objectified as the concrete materials and contents of abstract time. “no object” means to be free from attachment to all outer objects. The mind is intrinsically pure, and the reason why all the objects show in the mind is that we allow ourselves to be influenced by circumstances. Instead of regulating public consciousness or social identification, the objective relation is transformed into the instable interplay between individual behaviors and images. A de-objectified video image is determined by the inter-subjective relation, indicating that consciousness is unconsciously mirrored in the occasionality of the atemporal present. Finally, because of the basic principle of “no stay”, video media is interwoven with the conflicts between a narrative and an ahistorical coexistence, freeing rhetorical language from the constraints of history and narrative logic. “No stay” means to free the mind

from the attachment to objectivity. If we allow our mind to be attached to an idea, it will link the past, present, and future in seriality. Only if language opens a free space can the dialog and discourse be re-arranged by rhetorical means. Furthermore, because language provides an ear to the absent passing present, the discontinuity of a video narrative compromises the paradoxical dimension of realistic images and imaginary images into the ambivalent coexistence of an ahistorical narrative.

In conclusion, the objective of initiation of Chinese early video art not only reclaimed the independence of language based on philosophical foundations, but more significantly, the ontological perspective of the atemporal present of Chinese Zen provided a new approach to reveal the underlying humanistic value of Chinese early video media, which had been marginalized from the mainstream of contemporary art until the end of 1990's. Dematerialized video media, as an independent language, has been extensively explored to access the self-evident atemporal present through disembodied video movement, de-objectified video images, and discontinuous forms of video narrative through an intuitive means. This theoretical deduction can be partially demonstrated through video artworks and certain video practices that reflect the contemplative time phenomenon. Nevertheless, the specific historical conditions charged this early video art with revolutionary meaning; in future research, the spectators' reaction should be further explored from the microcosmic perspective to complement the assumptions of early video art.

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Notes

¹ It is important to note that Heidegger primarily concerns the temporal being of human, but concedes to the theological concerns with time: "The philosopher does not believe. If the philosopher asks about time, then he has resolved to understand time in terms of time or in terms of the *ἀεί*, which looks like eternity but proves to be a mere derivative of being temporal". (Heidegger, 1992:107)

² Also see a story in *Zhuangzi, Chapter of Autumn Water*. Huizi were strolling on a bridge over the River Hao, when the former observed, "See how the minnows dart between the rocks! Such is the happiness of fishes." "You not being a fish," said Huizi, "how can you possibly know what makes fish happy?" "And you not being I," said Zhuangzi, "how can you know that I don't know what makes fish happy?"

³ From an interview with artist Song Dong by Binghui Huangfu, Director of the Earl Lu Gallery, Lasalle SIA College of the Arts, Singapore, for the catalogue of the exhibition "Shot in the Face", December 2001, unpaginated.

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