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INSIDE

Breaking Ground:
Women and Non-binary Artists in
New Media Art



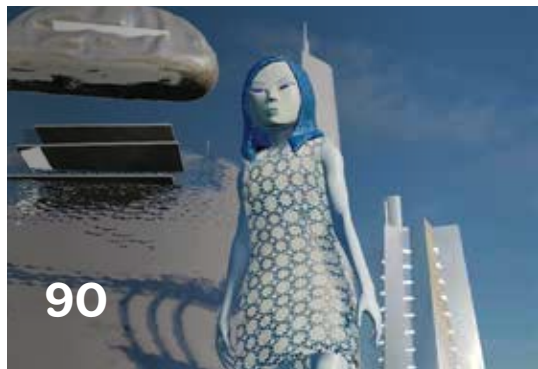
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MARKETING MANAGER	Joyce Lin
CIRCULATION EXECUTIVE	Perry Hsu
ADDRESS	6F. No. 85, Section 1, Chungshan N. Road, Taipei, Taiwan 104
PHONE	(886) 2.2560.2220
FAX	(886) 2.2542.0631
E-MAIL	coart@ms37.hinet.net
PRODUCER	Yishu Initiative of Contemporary Chinese Art Society
DIRECTOR	Zheng Shengtian
SECRETARY GENERAL	Yin Qing
ADDRESS	18008 68 Avenue Surrey, BC Canada V3S 8C3
PHONE	1.604.649.8187
E-MAIL	office@yishujournal.com

All subscription, advertising, and submission inquiries may be sent to the above address.

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ART DIRECTOR	Gavin Chow
DESIGNER	Philip Wong
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發行專員：	許銘文 謝宜蓉
地 址：	台灣台北市中山北路一段85號6樓
電 話：	(886) 2.2560.2220
傳 真：	(886) 2.2542.0631
電子信箱：	service@artouch.com
製 作：	加華當代藝術協會
會 長：	鄭勝天
秘書長：	陰晴
地 址：	18008 68 Avenue Surrey, BC, V3S 8C3 Canada
電 話：	1.604.649.8187
電子信箱：	office@yishujournal.com

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An Activist Attitude with New Media Art: From Early Video Art Curator Wu Meichun to *She. Home.*

From the perspective of art history, researchers and curators have often gravitated toward pioneers who push the boundaries of specific media—within the realm of new media, for example, there is Nam June Paik with video art, or more recently, Beeple with NFTs. These figures are celebrated as avant-garde, marking the origins of new artistic histories. Similarly, in mainland China, this tendency has been evident in the persistent emphasis on artists such as Zhang Peili as “the father of video art,” with retrospective exhibitions frequently constructed to affirm genealogies and generational legacies.¹

However, the idea of what constitutes new media art has evolved rapidly over the years. When the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou established its New Media Art department in 2003, video was the most popular form.² Yet the subsequent popularization of video cameras and smartphones diminished the aura surrounding video as a medium within visual art. In 2014, critic Bao Dong remarked that the moment “when new media becomes old” had arrived.³ Indeed, today, grasping what new media art entails often requires contextual specificity regarding time and place.

This persistent focus on media pioneers and the excitement of witnessing history-in-the-making tends to reinforce elite privileges while narrowing perspectives within the ontology of the medium. When *Yishu* invited me to consider “why have so many female and non-binary artists turned to new technologies,” my initial reaction was to question whether these practitioners would become the “mothers” of future media specific art histories. Interestingly, female forerunners in Chinese video art like Cao Fei and Kan Xuan are marginally celebrated as pioneers. Similarly, the female curator Wu Meichun, who co-initiated with Qiu Zhijie *Image and Phenomena—’96 Video Art Exhibition* in 1996, (“the first significant engagement with video art in China”)⁴ has never been fully recognized as one of the first curators to reveal the radical value of video art in China. But I still remember how surprised I was to find all participating artists in this groundbreaking exhibition were men. Was this because these artists shared friendships and access to video cameras and knowledge of video art?

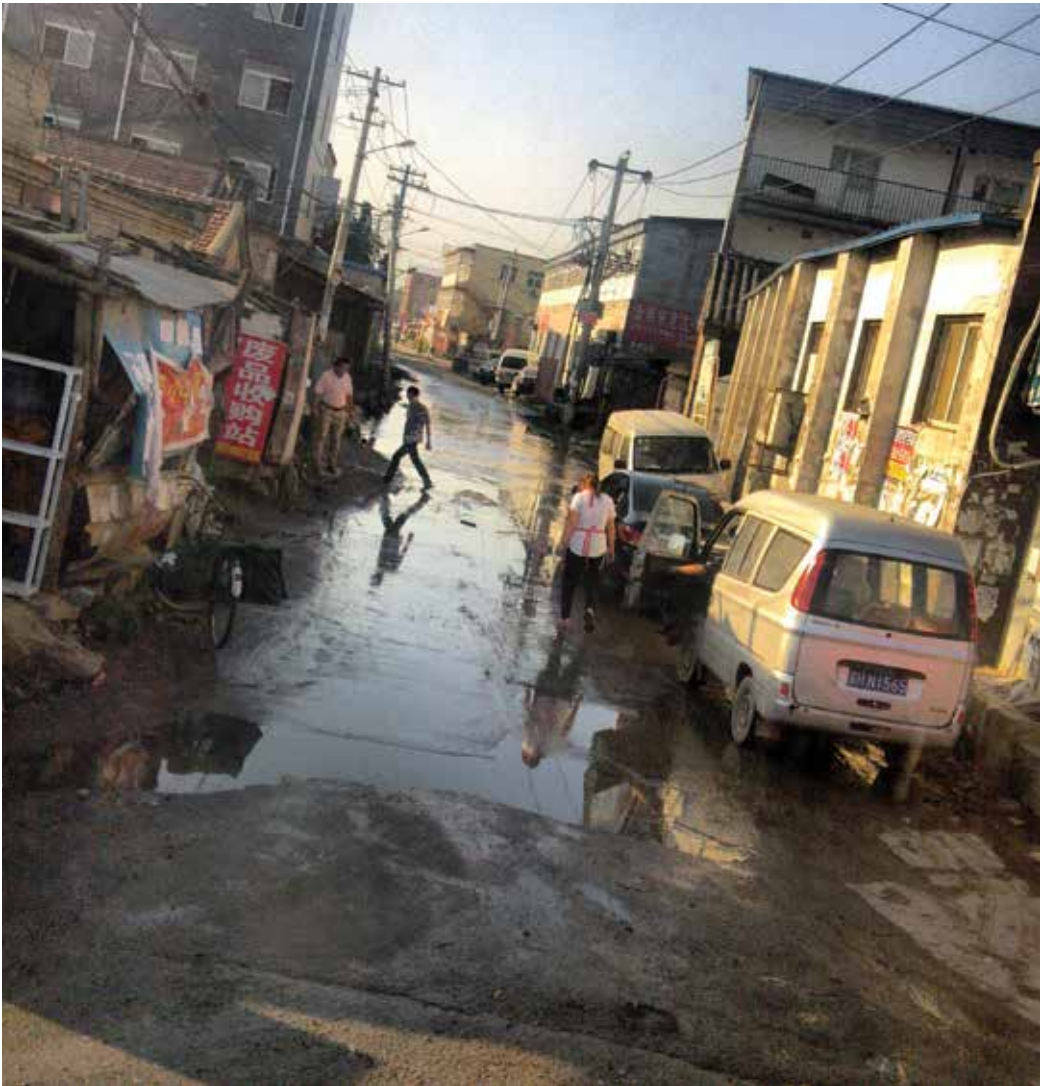
American scholar Rosalind Krauss defined medium within the context of visual art as a “layered, complex relationship” within a recursive structure—an interplay that creates its own rules and coherence.⁵ While she initially was referring to painting and sculpture, video ushered in what she called the “post-medium condition,” introducing a “discursive chaos” wherein activities could not be easily unified under a single framework. Digital technologies such as the internet, social media, NFTs, AI, and the Metaverse have only deepened this chaos. Their integration into capitalist and algorithmic systems blurs the boundaries between art and other societal domains; for example, NFTs are artworks in the art system as well as financial investments. From the very beginning, new technologies were not intended to be artistic tools but for everyday life. Artists respond to new technologies as they respond to the ever-changing world.

This condition resonates with the attitude Wu Meichun held toward contemporary art in 1996: “I would rather approach contemporary art phenomenologically as an ur-phenomenon, a present materiality continually brought into being and given form.” Therefore, instead of claiming to be the originator of curating video art in China, she adopted “an activist attitude,” proposing “our activities and the works as both reaction to and reflection of reality.”⁶ In this sense, although *Image and Phenomena—’96 Video Art Exhibition* was held within the China Academy of Art and provided an academic and artistic context for video art, Wu Meichun did not try to establish her authority in defining and promoting it, but recognized its emergence as a part of the fast-changing society.

Following Wu Meichun’s thoughts, I reinterpreted *Yishu*’s question to ask: How has new media enabled individuals to create and circulate art? How does this condition expand or disrupt the mechanisms of “art”? As new technologies are constantly reforming the perceptions and approaches of individuals to the reality of life, how does “art” operate as concept and mechanism for it? This reframing allows us to avoid the fetishization of the “first” and any obsession with “who is the father” of any given medium. It can also lead us to reconsider the definition of art. For example, could taking photos and posting them on Instagram be an “art project”? What I see as my possibly provincial and personal reflections on this issue start from here, focusing on a project called *She. Home.* dating back to over ten years ago.

She. Home.

In 2012, I assisted a grassroots photography project titled *She. Home.* involving around thirteen participants: Geng Haiying, Huang Ling, Qi Lixia, Yu Xiaomei, Xi Xilin, He Wenqiong, Zhang Chunfen, Bi



Beiqijia village, 2013. Courtesy of OFPiX and Mulan Community Service Center.

Yueqin, Jin Feng, Ya Ting, Yu Wei, and Qiu Xiaobi. These women lived in Beiqijia (北京昌平縣北七家), a village on the outskirts of Beijing that housed informal settlements for migrant workers. As either workers themselves or housewives of migrants, they were also part of the Mulan Community Service Centre (MCSC), a self-organized initiative offering mutual aid to women migrants. *She. Home.* was instigated by MCSC and the documentary photography lab OFPiX, which was led by photographer and researcher Ren Yue. Each participant received a Nokia smartphone and, over the course of a year, attended biweekly photography classes where they also learned to use social media platforms such as Weibo and Instagram (then accessible in China).

My role as an assistant at OFPiX involved everything from introducing the function of aperture—how it controls the volume of light entering the camera and affects the depth of field—to editing photographic portfolios. During one early session, I asked the women how they used their computers. One answered, “I only use QQ,” referring to Tencent’s popular instant messaging software. When I inquired further about which websites they usually visited, another



Left: Haiying in a photography class showing Ren Yue teaching Qi Lixia about how to transfer photos in the phone to a computer, 2013, screen shot from Geng Haiying's Instagram account. Courtesy of Geng Haiying, OFPiX, and Mulan Community Service Center.

Right: Screen shot of Xi Xilin's Instagram account, October, 2013. Courtesy of Xi Xilin, OFPiX, and Mulan Community Service Center.

replied, “What is a website?” For these women, the computer was synonymous with QQ, a tool most often used by them for staying connected with distant family and friends. As there was no previous facilitation, the potential of computers and the internet was never presented to these women, who also did not actively explore them on their own. Therefore, I could not use the computer as an equivalent to introduce them to smartphones (what we referred to as “the computer in your hand”), but started by introducing different apps: Camera, Instagram, Snapseed (for editing images), etc. Each app contains its own interface, logic, and index.

After helping set-up their accounts one by one, step by step, it still required time for one to understand the difference between “follow” and “follower” on Instagram, and to build up confidence in using Roman letters which were alien to some participants. Luckily, they were not alone in this adventure. When setting up their Instagram account, many of them added “Mulan” in front of their name as the handle; for example, “mulanhaiying,” “mulanxilin,” or “mulanhuangling.” They continued to share a strong bond in virtual space.

At the same time, in the classes the group was also exposed to iconic works from the history of photography. They learned about composition, lighting, tonal values, collage, and the editing of photobooks, and though the “grand names” in photography were not emphasized, there was a whole world within photography including histories, discourses, technologies, and mechanisms presented to the participants. With their smartphones, they began their exploration of photography. In every class, we would suggest a theme; for example, the village, their families, their routines. Each participant would

share their photographs in the next class and receive comments from other “sisters,” Ren Yue, and me.

Diverging from glamorous selfies or vacation pictures so often favoured within the Instagram algorithm, we encouraged the participants to capture their everyday life and surroundings. This might seem familiar with documentary photography and its often stereotypical depictions of poverty and suffering; however, this was not our intention. Taking photographs was an approach in which the local residents could comfortably craft their own narratives. Many in the group were not confident with writing,⁷ but everyone could take a photograph and talk about them as images. They would talk about the village of Beiqijia where they settled down, their friends forming supportive networks, or anything else that caught their attention. This project also set up a space to encourage them to explore ideas of artistic creation without any practical aim.

A sleeping child, 2013. Courtesy of OFPiX and Mulan Community Service Center.



The name of the project, *She. Home.*, came about after the participants would leave Beijing and go back to their hometowns for the Spring Festival. The photographic theme for that vacation was their journey back and forth, a journey they would repeat year after year. As migrant workers or wives of migrant workers, these participants were living in a very precarious state—Xi Xilin moved seven times in a year due to demolitions in suburban Beijing. They were constantly settling into a new home and searching for a sense of belonging. The project *She. Home.* could not help them end this journey, but it set up a framework



to encourage these participants to tell the stories on their own. In spite of this, the participants created some splendid photographs. While the aesthetic value of these images might not lie in pushing the boundaries of artistic practice in contemporary art, they definitely developed a distinct visual language.

Installation view of *She. Home.*, Lishui International Photography Festival, Zhejiang, China, 2013. Photo: Xionsan. Courtesy of OFPiX, Lishui International Photography Festival, and Mulan Community Service Center.



In 2013, OFPiX organized two exhibitions for *She. Home.* The first took place on the third floor of Destination, the most famous gay bar in Beijing, followed by a showing at the Lishui International Photography Festival in Zhejiang province. Initially, the exhibition was only intended to show the participants' photography, but I found that there might not be enough work to form a rich context in which to understand these images and who made them. I conducted interviews

Photo taken during the Spring Festival, 2013, showing Geng Haiying's child in a tricycle, screen shot from Geng Haiying's Instagram account. Courtesy of Geng Haiying, OFPiX, and Mulan Community Service Center.

with the participants and borrowed some of their personal items such as identity documents, family albums, and letters to weave their personal trajectories and narratives into the viewer's experience.

The credentials of Wenqiong in *She. Home.*, Lishui International Photography Festival, Zhejiang, China, 2013. Photo: Xionsan. Courtesy of OFPiX, Lishui International Photography Festival, and Mulan Community Service Center.



Installation view of *She. Home.*, Lishui International Photography Festival, Zhejiang, China, 2013. Photo: Xionsan. Courtesy of OFPiX, Lishui International Photography Festival, and Mulan Community Service Center.



Instagram remained an essential element in the physical exhibition. Some photographs were enlarged, hanging separately on the wall. But on a long wall, there were thirteen horizontal lines—each was composed by small 3 x 3 cm square prints—running parallel to each other accompanied by a time line. Each line imitated the “photo flow” of each participant’s profile page on Instagram, while the co-existence of all the images on the wall referred to their collective exploration.

These images straddled a line between personal documentation and artistic expression. This contrasted sharply with the solo exhibitions of professional artists at the photography festival. *She. Home.* won a curatorial award that year, and I questioned whether this recognition stemmed from its merit or simply its novelty: perhaps the fact that migrant women using smartphones to produce and share imagery was something strikingly different for art professionals. Could this exhibition be considered a strategical implementation of an alternative art practice, of what art can be? In retrospect, I am

thinking perhaps the exhibition should have been held first in MCSC as it would be a familiar space for the participants of *She. Home.* to discuss what these photographs and the project meant for them, and what their perception of photography and art might now be.

The question of what art can become, is especially relevant when considering projects like *She. Home.*, where the lines between artistic practice, social engagement, and everyday documentation are blurred. If art is traditionally defined by its institutional validation—through galleries, museums, and the discourse of art histories and criticism—then *She. Home.* operated in a space of ambiguity. Its participants did not set out to be “artists,” yet their images were exhibited and recognized within professional contexts; moreover, the participants were engaged in a process of recognizing what art is through their own creation.

This raises larger questions about authorship, legitimacy, and the role of intent in defining artistic value. In the specific case of *She. Home.*, “making art” for the participants meant that they created photographs transmit their perceptions about the content of the image, the medium of photography, and their own lives. As writer Leo Tolstoy put it, “Art is a human activity consisting in this: that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through.”⁸ From this perspective, the “art” in *She. Home.* was created when each participant actively “hands on to others,” either those within their own community or outside of it, expressions of themselves through photographic images they have experimented with.

Art is less about a fixed category and more about an ongoing negotiation—between the creator and their audience, between personal expression and collective activities, between the professionalized art system and grassroots initiatives. Amid these seemingly contradictory poles, art practices are not one or the other. Because OFPiX framed *She. Home.* as an “art project,” the participants of MSCS were able to have access to resources like smart phones and a photography festival. However, this was not the precondition of making art for these participants; it was their personal expression and experimenting with the medium of photography that mattered. What the artworkers of OFPiX offered, possibly more important than practical resources, might be a broad vision of what art can be through their experience with contemporary art, instead of a narrow and rigid understanding of what makes a good photograph.

In 2024, I interviewed Qi Lixia, the founder of MCSC, for a special issue of *ArtReview China* titled “Learning to Become an Artist.” Recounting

our collaboration in 2013, I asked whether she considers herself as an artist. Qi Lixia answered:

My sisters and I never thought about becoming a photographer, an actress, or a writer. The most important thing is that grassroots women discover that they can also do more than just household work; they can sing, take photographs, perform, and write! This “can also” is very important—it makes them more willing to express themselves. I believe art can enrich people, help them grow, provide more avenues of expression, and give their emotions more outlets.⁹

Indeed, none of the participants in *She. Home.* changed their lives to pursue a career in photography or art; their attitude toward what for them was new media remained both modest and fluid. They

Screen shot of Xi Xilin's Instagram account, September, 2013. Courtesy of Xi Xilin, OFPIX, and Mulan Community Service Center.



accepted the possibility of their works being called “art” within OFPiX’s framework while simply viewing photography as a tool for documenting their lives, untethered from formal labels.

In the case of *She. Home.*, new media art was not an applicable term for the participants or the project, as they were not consciously responding to art history. However, the smart phone, as a new medium, indeed made taking photographs much easier than ever before. This new medium not only expanded the margins for artists, but also made artistic creation accessible to those who might never have considered the idea of making art.

Therefore, what I am thinking about is not artworks made with a new medium within the realm of art, but new creators, new spaces, and new mechanisms become “art” because of the new medium. Rather than positioning *She. Home.* strictly within the history of new media art, I see it as an instance of art emerging from lived reality—similar to Wu Meichun’s efforts to situate video art within its social context. *She. Home.* can be seen as another approach to the professionalizing of new media art, and could be identified as “activism”: to democratize creative production, to experiment in the interconnected zone between art and society, and to challenge the entrenched hierarchies within the art world that distinguish amateurs from professionals. Meanwhile, in this process, the women of MCSC navigated and redefined art as a space for interaction and self-expression. It also underscores for me the empowerment to claim, reject, or redefine the label of “art” on one’s own terms.

NOTES

1. Zhang Peili, “The Past of New Media Art Department,” *Artshard*, December 24, 2019, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/4ORtyXa048XKjDJmsUh2aw>, accessed on December 14, 2024.
2. Zhang Peili worked in the New Media Art department and later as professor until 2010 when the department was integrated into the new College of Intermedia Art.
3. Bao Dong, “When New Media Becomes Old,” *LEAP*, November 9, 2014, <https://www.leapleapleap.com/2014/11/in-ke-when-new-media-becomes-old/>, accessed on December 14, 2014.
4. Katherine Grube, “Image and Phenomena: The Development of Video Art in China, 1988 to 1998,” Asia Art Archive, January 1, 2013, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/grants/the-robert-h-n-ho-family-foundation-greater-china-research-grant-papers/image-and-phenomena-the-development-of-video-art-in-china-1988-to-1998>, accessed on January 7, 2025.
5. Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000).
6. Wu Meichun, “Image and Phenomena: A Curatorial Perspective,” eds. Wu Meichun and Qiu Zhijie, *Xianxiang yingxiang zhanlan jihua* [Image and Phenomena Exhibition Plan], trans. Katherine Grube, pamphlet, 1996.
7. I once designed a questionnaire and printed it out, asking the participants if they could fill it in. However, despite the fact that the participants were willing to help, it was very difficult for some to write down sentences. I later conducted audio interviews instead.
8. Leo Tolstoy, *What Is Art?*, trans. Aylmer Maude (New York: Funk and Wagnails Company, 1904), 50, <https://ia800205.us.archive.org/25/items/whatisart00tolsuoft/whatisart00tolsuoft.pdf>.
9. Qi Lixia, “Learning to Become an Artist,” *ArtReview China*, no. 3 (2023), 118. Translated by the author.