

# MULTIPLAYER ONLINE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

## FENG MENGBO

Features BY Olivier Krischer from Jul/Aug 2009



**Q2006LII06**, 2006, acrylic paint and UV-curable ink on canvas, 150 × 200 cm. All images in this article, unless otherwise noted, are courtesy of the artist.



**FENG MENGBO** holding his robotic pet AIBO in his studio in Beijing, 2008.



**GAME OVER: LONG MARCH**, 1994, from a set of 42 paintings, acrylic on canvas, 100 × 88 cm each. Collection of Guy & Myriam Ullens.

To trace the trajectory of Feng Mengbo's artistic career from the early 1990s to the present is to describe the history of new-media art in China. Feng is not the only new-media artist, of course, but he is rightly considered the father of computer-based contemporary art in the People's Republic. "New media," like "modern" or "contemporary," is a term that semantically insists on art that is new to its time—its very utterance seems to jettison history. In practice, however, many generations of "new" media have already passed, and "new" is, of course, relative.

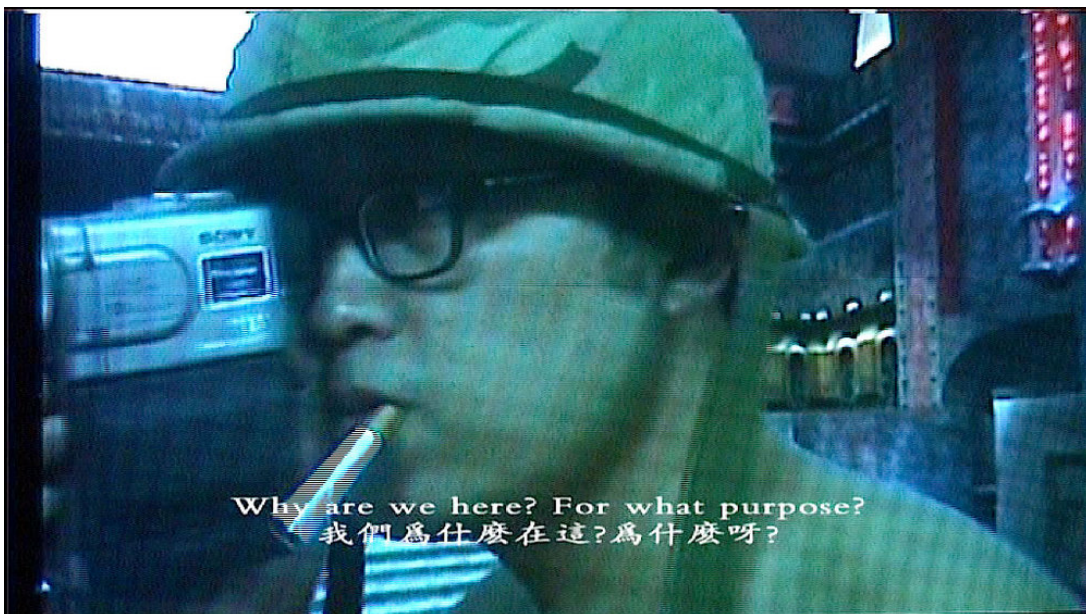
It is testament to the heady early days of the rising overseas demand for contemporary Chinese art that in 1993, two years after graduating from the printmaking department of Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts at age 27, Feng was invited by the director of the 45th Venice Biennale, Achille Bonito Oliva, to exhibit his paintings in the Biennale's "Aperto" exhibition of international emerging artists. His work had already been shown earlier that year in the first large global exhibition of Chinese contemporary art, "China's New Art, Post-1989"—organized by the ubiquitous Hong Kong curator, art critic and Hanart TZ gallery director, Johnson Chang Tsong-zung—which traveled from the Hong Kong Arts Centre to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney (retitled "Mao Goes Pop") before touring Canada and the United States until 1997. In his early acrylic-on-canvas works, collectively entitled "The Video Endgame Series," Feng drew on his childhood memories and he combined iconic imagery from the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) with the aesthetic of 8-bit video games, which by 1993 already had retro appeal. Feng's paintings were more whimsical and escapist than those of the Political Pop movement of the time—from Wang Guangyi's juxtapositions of Chinese revolutionary workers with Western brand labels to Yu Youhan's Andy Warhol-like renditions of Chairman Mao as Marilyn Monroe—but nevertheless they captured the attention of the same market of predominantly European and American buyers. Feng's paintings sold well, and these funds helped him purchase his first computer, an Apple LC II, one of the first affordable color home computers to appear on the



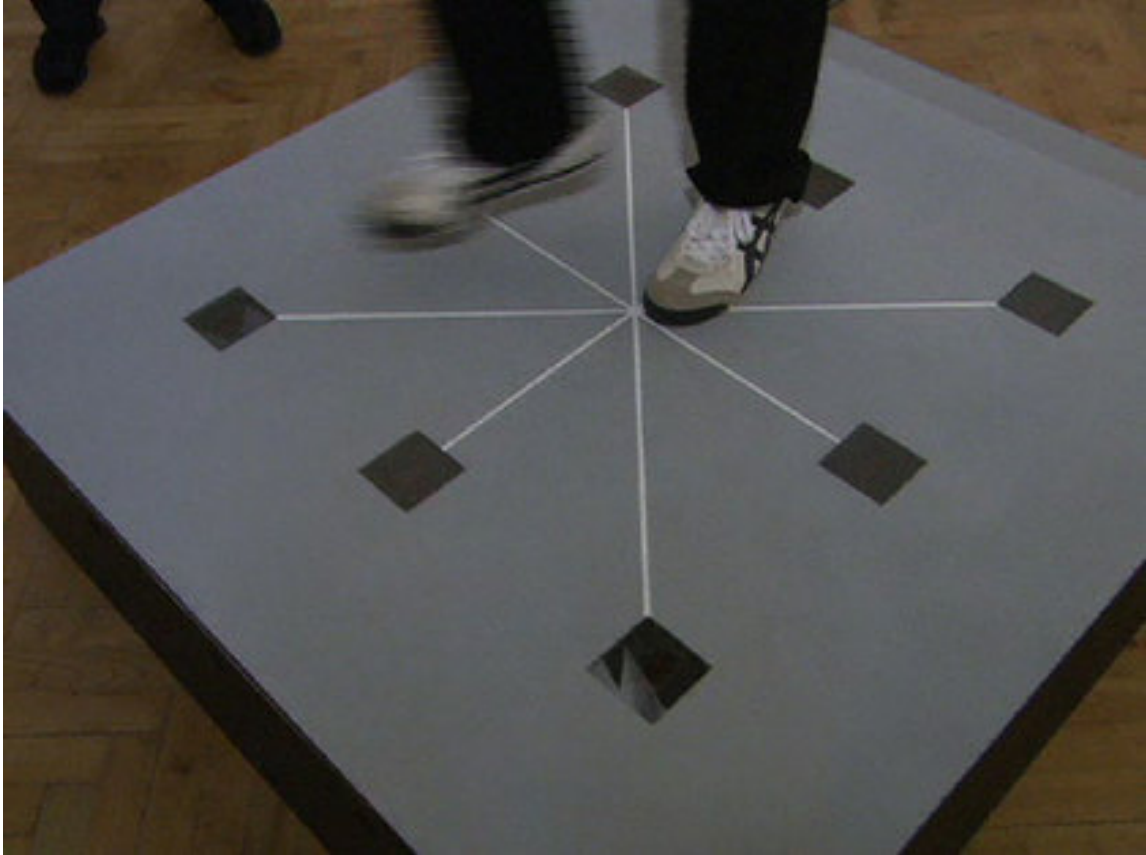
market. After initially experimenting with slideshow software to create composite digital images, in 1996 Feng completed his first interactive CD-ROM, *My Private Diary*.

The culmination of the artist's many attempts to situate his family in the context of late 20th-century Chinese history, *My Private Diary* was a straightforward point-and-click interactive, typical of a short-lived generation of CD-ROM art created during the late 1980s and early 1990s with software such as Macromedia's Director. Presented on a computer in the exhibition space, it allows viewers to click through sections of sepia-toned family photographs from three generations, layered with popular graphics from record covers, posters and advertisements captioned with anecdotes by Feng to create a personal, rather than strictly historical narrative. This seminal piece was soon shown in the United States, Europe and Israel, galvanizing Feng's reputation. In 1997, his work appeared at biennales in Lyon, Gwangju and Johannesburg, as well as at documenta 10 in Kassel. In *ArtAsiaPacific* 15, published that year, well-known China scholar and cultural critic Geremie Barmé noted that the appeal of such work overseas owed as much to the novelty of the medium as to the supposed exoticism of China itself, at least in Euro-American art circles. While Feng was obviously wired to the latest trends and at the forefront of international art, Barmé wrote, "all he needs now is to get connected to planet China." It was not until 2002 that Feng would exhibit in mainland China.

Instead, beginning in 1997, Feng spent five years making increasingly complex computer-based artworks—reflecting both advances in the internet and his increased grasp of programming languages and video-game architecture. By then an avid "gamer," Feng developed a series of works based on 3D first-person shooter games. His second CD-ROM, *Taking Mount Doom by Strategy* (1997), again combined computer games and Chinese revolutionary culture, juxtaposing the 1970 "model opera" *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* with elements of the popular shooter game *Doom*. Though such combinations appear humorous, as with his earlier paintings, the intent was not to ridicule revolutionary culture's mythical heroism so much as to revisit it in a more ambivalent layering of nostalgia and contemporary commentary.



Q3, 1999, video still from digital film installation.



*AH\_Q* (detail), 2002, dancing pad from interactive installation.

In a series of works based on the post-apocalyptic game *Quake*, Feng appears to have realized his childhood wish to be like the opera's central hero, Yang Zhirong, by inserting himself into the on-screen environment. By manipulating the game's software, he first created *Q3* (1999), a 32-minute computer-generated film in which a live-action Feng, camera in hand, roams the battlefield conducting news reporter-style interviews with robot soldiers. In *Q4U* (2002), Feng took this a step further, altering the open-source code of the game *Quake III Arena* (dubbed "*Q3A*" by gamers, a contraction that influenced Feng's choice of titles for his artworks), so that all the on-screen players bore his own bespectacled face. Bare-chested and dressed in army pants, the game's characters roam the battleground with plasma-rifles in one hand and video cameras in the other. For the work's exhibition at the Renaissance Society, the University of Chicago's contemporary art museum, in 2002, Feng played the game live on 10-by-13-foot screens, and continued to play against "viewers" online after he had returned to Beijing. Participants found themselves in the middle of a battle in which friends and foes were indistinguishable and everyone was engaged in the virtual killing of the artist-protagonist avatars. In a Skype interview with ArtAsiaPacific in March, Feng pointed out that *Q4U* does not have a hero; instead, people wander aimlessly through a space in which violence becomes the only form of interaction. But rather than simply making a didactic statement about violence in contemporary society, Feng highlights what he calls the "beauty" of virtual violence, which can be switched on or off at any moment. In *Ah\_Q* (2004), the artist's third modification of the game, he replaced the work's handset controls with an interactive dance-pad, which responds to the impact of players' feet as they dance—a hugely popular game format in Asia at the time—further blurring the gap between art and popular culture. This work was awarded a Distinction for Interactive Art at the 2004 Prix Ars Electronica, in Linz, Austria.

# MAKING NEW-MEDIA HISTORY

Recent new-media artworks often seem to take the entertainment role of their defining technologies as a given, encouraging viewer participation simply as a means to trigger some kind of sensory experience. This can amount to nothing more than the viewer discovering what the artwork was “programmed”—in the broadest sense—to do, raising the usual question of whether or not it can be defined as art. Such work finds a place in exhibition culture through festivals such as the Beijing International New Media Arts Exhibition and Symposium, which has been held annually since 2004. At the annual Shanghai eArts Festival in October 2008, Feng “performed” his work *Q2008* (2008), another game-based program from which the artist captures screenshots in real-time, although in this case, instead of Feng avatars, *Q2008* featured naked CG women armed with cell phones that shoot flowers instead of bullets. Whereas computer games usually “refresh” at a constant rate, preserving the fluidity of on-screen movement, Feng disabled this function, causing all people and objects on the screen to leave trails of multiple, superimposed iterations of themselves as they move. This coding trick rapidly formed a dense digital palimpsest, from which the artist captured screenshots to use in two-dimensional works.

The relationship between the value of such experiments as applications of new-media technologies and their quality as contemporary art remains ambiguous. In Feng’s case, the medium is not the only message, but it remains an unequivocal part of the artist’s contemporary practice, even his painting. His foray into new-media technologies was a first for contemporary Chinese art, but it emerged amid an increased use of new media in China throughout the 1990s. Other pioneer artists active throughout the decade, such as Zhang Peili, Wang Gongxin, Wang Jianwei and Song Dong, developed sophisticated video works as installations incorporating television monitors, live video-feeds or site-specific video projections, often underscored by a performance-based art practice. For many younger artists born in the 1970s, revolutionary references, if they appear at all, became part of a formal aesthetic concerned more with urbanized, personal narratives than with historical parody or kitsch. An early example is Yang Fudong, born in 1971, who affects a lyrical and almost aloof literati style in his film works. He is particularly well known for his pensive black-and-white films combining ostensibly classical Chinese references with young urban settings or actors. A far cry from the revolution, he has said that his influences include directors such as Federico Fellini, Akira Kurosawa and Takeshi Kitano—maestros of cinema, the 20th-century virtual reality par excellence.

Meanwhile, Chinese society itself was embracing media technologies, albeit in a top-down manner. In 1986, researchers from Beijing’s Institute of Computer Applications, working with colleagues from Universität Karlsruhe, Germany, formed the China Academic Network (CANET), creating the first of many public data networks. An institutional internet connection was opened the following year between Beijing’s Institute of High Energy Physics and CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research in Geneva, the first of many connections between the PRC and research institutes in the United States, Europe and Japan in the early 1990s. The head of CANET, Professor Qian Tianbai, sent China’s first email in September 1987, which, reminiscent of decades of political slogans, reportedly read: “Crossing the Great Wall; joining the world.” By 1990, Professor Qian had registered the “.cn” domain, and after a surge in institute-specific internet connections throughout 1994, the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications opened the first commercial nationwide internet, ChinaNet, in May 1995, through the US company Sprint International as part of a World Bank-sponsored project. Hundreds subscribed, but access remained prohibitively expensive. By the late 1990s, however, lower running costs led to a mushrooming of wangba, or internet bars, across the country, particularly in university neighborhoods. In 1999, urban Chinese

could play online games at a wangba from midnight to morning at an all-night price of around RMB 4 (USD 0.50). Planet China had caught up with Feng Mengbo.

Artists have been among the first Chinese civilians to access, acquire and manipulate new technologies. In this light, artworks such as Feng's may seem to be little more than witty reinventions of popular forms of entertainment, but they also subjectively meddle with the premise of such "development," injecting opinion or seemingly frivolous interludes into otherwise officially sanctioned culture.

In the realm of online games, the government's symbolic handle on official popular culture looms large. In mid-2007, the *Financial Times* reported that China's Ministry of Culture had singled out World of Warcraft, one of the world's most popular multiplayer online games, demanding that graphics in the local release be changed, allegedly to promote a healthy society. Specifically, roaming "undead skeletons" were to be changed into fleshy zombies while depictions of bare-boned corpses were to be replaced with tidy graves. Many European and American China-watchers believe that Western media outlets overstate the control of media censorship in China, pointing to the surprising levels of discussion allowed online—yet obviously in China, as elsewhere, the virtual world is no less contested than the real one.

## THE NEW MEDIA OF PAINTING

In his interview with AAP, Feng stated that he does not want to be categorized as a media artist; his practice, he points out, is broader than any specific medium. In around 2001, Feng began to show paintings and other two-dimensional works again, first at Hanart TZ gallery in Hong Kong, and eventually elsewhere, including Shanghai's ShanghART gallery, the artist's mainland dealer. These works consist of scenes captured from his computer game-play transferred onto canvas or rendered as prints made with cutting-edge reprographic technologies, such as Veejet printing, often in collaboration with specialist technicians in China or abroad. According to a statement on the Hanart website, for example, from his second Quake movie *Ah\_Q* (2002), Feng created a series of screen-captured photos ("Q4U," 2002–03) and two acrylic paintings (*Q4U\_200201.TGA* and *Q4U\_200301.TGA*, 2002–03) showing the Feng-avatar in various states of shoot-'em-up game-play. He adds: "The 3D virtual camera is, without a doubt, fundamental technology for movie-making of the future, and screen-captured photos will certainly become a classic photographic technique. At least I believe so."

Feng's approach may reflect what some writers, such as Thomas Berghuis in his book *Performance Art in China* (2007), have noted is the "cross-media" (kuameiti) nature of contemporary Chinese art. Then again, it could also be argued that the very success of Chinese painting, first with international collectors but increasingly with mainland buyers, has encouraged artists known for their work in other media to paint—performance artist Ma Liuming's switch to painting in the 2000s comes to mind. On this matter, Feng says he earnestly believes artists should not avoid discussing their relationship to the market, which, as he sees it, is integral to being a professional artist nowadays. He readily admits that not only did the early success of his paintings help him shift to newer and costlier media, but sales of his recent prints and paintings also support his media-art projects. In the years that he didn't exhibit paintings, he received financial support to develop some computer-based works from Hanart's Chang Tsong-zung, as well as the prominent Swiss collector Uli Sigg. Given that Feng has held a solo painting exhibition at Hanart nearly every year since 2001, coinciding with the boom in Chinese painting, one wonders if Chang simply, and shrewdly,

encouraged Feng to capitalize on the booming market. Pragmatically, Feng told *AAP*, “Half and half.”

As with Feng’s earlier interventions into the violent “fun” of video games, however, his conscious engagement with the art market is also conceptual. His project “History: Built to Order,” beginning in 2005, for example, is a series of portraits of Chairman Mao on canvas in which he is depicted floating in iconic poses against computer-generated backgrounds of skies, deserts or mountain ranges. First, Feng completes a 3D computer model of Mao, which he can adjust to assume different poses and light to different degrees. Projecting the image onto canvas, he traces it and applies a gel, which he laboriously carves to create brushstroke-like textures. Last, he adds color using state-of-the-art Veejet printing that allows the application of UV-curable inks onto uneven surfaces. Hand-finished with acrylics, the canvases have a sophisticated, textured quality with an air of contemporary computer-enhanced graphics.

Yet, rather than stopping at the production of the work, Feng conceptualizes the production and consumption of contemporary art, holding a mirror up to the market, as he explains in the following statement on the Hanart website: “In the process through which an artwork progresses from the workshop to the art market—that is, the chain of artist/gallery/museum/collector—there is one element that is always neglected: the audience. If we look closely at the spreading internet economy, however, we find a situation in which the customer is in control.” In the same statement Feng outlines a process, beginning with internet-based ordering, in which customers could select color options and lighting effects through to production and delivery—all of which emphasize the audience’s (customer’s and collector’s) control of their made-to-order painting following the logistics of online shopping. While Feng has made some contact with local gamers, particularly following the exhibition of the *Q4U* game in Chicago in 2002, the conflation of audience with customer-collector, which is only partially ironic, remains perplexing. Moreover, the project begs the question of how one can critique a system while tailoring artworks for it and reaping its benefits? While Feng has yet to realize the made-to-order aspect of his concept, several works from this series are already circulating on the secondary market, having appeared, for example, in Hong Kong last year at the Asian contemporary art sales at both Sotheby’s in April and Christie’s in December, where they fetched between USD 20,000–35,000 each.

In another recent series, “Wrong Code: Shanshui” (2007), presented at Hanart TZ in 2007, Feng probes his growing interest in Chinese art history, taking the literati tradition of “mountains and rivers” shanshui ink painting as his model. As with “Built to Order,” this series is another hybrid form of painting that employs Bryce software—used in the film industry to build 3D graphic landscapes—to recreate the virtual Chinese landscapes as idealized in literati painting since the Tang and Song dynasties. Feng’s painstaking manipulation of new technologies, overlaid with a specially developed tempera finish, were lauded by the critic Li Xianting in his review of the new work, appearing on the Chinese art archive Artda website ([www.artda.cn](http://www.artda.cn)), as “even more spectacular” than the historical paintings themselves. Moreover, wrote Li, Feng’s hybrid manipulation of new and organic media avoids the slavish repetition of brush-based homages to the classical canon, a critique that has especially dogged traditional Chinese painting since the late 19th century.

Feng is not about to unplug his computer—indeed his latest series “Long March Restart” (2009) is a return to his computer game-based approach. Yet his hybrid revisiting of the Chinese past can be read not only as part of a longer tradition of mature artists looking with renewed admiration to the legacy of their culture, but also against a surge in cultural confidence in China today. Artists such as Feng, who have exhibited, traveled, taught and sold worldwide, no longer need to imagine the wonderlands beyond their national borders;

they've been there, done that, and it's all online anyway. In this light, it appears that the virtual realities of tradition and history still offer an alluring escape, even for a so-called "new" media artist.