



INTERNATIONAL • REVIEW

Art in America

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FEBRUARY'11 \$9.00

FENG MENGBO

MOMA P.S.1

ON VIEW THROUGH APR. 4

With his 80-foot-long digital wall installation *The Long March: Restart*, Feng Mengbo amends Karl Marx's famous dictum: here history repeats itself not as farce but as kitsch. Feng disavows the label Political Pop, bestowed on those members of China's post-Mao avant-garde who commingle the motifs of Communist propaganda and consumer capitalism. Instead, he insists on his website, he is a video game artist, less concerned with history and politics than with interactive technologies. Nevertheless, he shares with compatriots like Wang Guangyi and the Luo Brothers an insouciant attitude toward the icons of China's recent past. But instead of simply transforming Mao into the equivalent of a corporate trademark, Feng takes on the 1934-35 Long March. This epic 5,000-mile trek by the battered Red Army under the command of Mao Zedong in the depths of the Chinese civil war is enshrined in Party lore as compelling evidence of Mao's genius as a leader, this despite the fact that the march was a protracted retreat, during which roughly 80 percent of Mao's troops were lost.

In Feng's hands, the Long March becomes an elaborate video game for a single player positioned between two massive projections sprawling over opposite sides of a gallery. At P.S.1, you pass through several blind corridors to enter the darkened gallery containing the work. Appearing on the walls between play sessions is an anachronistic montage of grainy images from the Cultural Revolution era (1966-76), when the propaganda machine of the Communist government was in high gear. To the accompaniment of blaring Chinese music, the stills flash by: beaming young men and women in the uniforms of the Red Guard, mountain scenes and maps, presumably of the area traversed during the Long March, and framed portraits of a handsome young Mao.

This sequence is followed by the game's logo—a Red Army soldier astride a crushed can of Coca-Cola. The game commences with a screen on which the soldier stands poised within a giant red star in a landscape dominated by the Great Wall. The object is to move him across the horizontal stretch of the scene and on to the next scenario. He can jump, move forward and fire his weapon, loaded with exploding Coke can projectiles, at the various obstacles that come his way. There are eight such screens in all, appearing consecutively as players achieve higher levels, each with its own settings and opponents, and each requiring a successively greater degree of dexterity.



Above, view of Feng Mengbo's installation *Long March: Restart*, 2008, interactive digital video, 80 feet long; at MoMA P.S.1.

Below, a still from *Long March: Restart*.

A single controller provides the invitation to engage. Being unskilled at video games, I was quickly dispatched. Others who took up the challenge while I watched were more successful. The best, a young man in his 20s, was able to take the avatar through five screens. Following the Great Wall, these consisted of a traditional Chinese house, presumably the abode of one of the aristocrats being deposed, a swamp full of mutant creatures who might have drifted in from an Alexis Rockman painting, a winter scene with frozen hillocks and more creatures, and finally a suspension bridge under attack by tanks and airplanes. In another time-period mash-up, all but the first screens were also overrun with hostile soldiers in contemporary-looking gear. Surfing the Web later to see what I had missed, I deduced that the later screens included tableaux of a Chinese village, Russia's Red Square and a lunar landscape.

Undeniably entertaining, the work is rife with references familiar to video game aficionados, among them the occasional appearances of Super Mario and the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. The technology is deliberately old-fashioned, eschewing more recent 3-D verisimilitude for the flat "side scrolling" action that was cutting-edge back in the 1980s. The highly stylized imagery is equally flat, though engagingly decorative. The great innovation here is the scale. The immense projections engulf player and onlookers in a vast theatrical space.

What does it all mean? One could easily spin a meditation on the collapse of war into entertainment or the transformation of history into myth, but all that seems very beside the point. Video game technology has been used by other artists, among them Mel Chin and Langlands & Bell, to plunge the viewer into alternative political scenarios. Feng has no such ambitions. Nor, despite the allusions to the Long March and American capitalism, does the work proselytize for any particular system. Instead, it seems to achieve the weightless ahistoricity that is common to most video games and has proved, one suspects, the safest ideological position in contemporary China. —Eleanor Heartney

