

Institute of Contemporary Arts

PRESS RELEASE

Present.Perfect.
A film by Shengze Zhu

UK & Ireland Release: 24 January 2020



ICA CINEMA is pleased to announce its newest release, *Present.Perfect.* (*Wan Mei Xian Zai Shi*), directed by Chinese filmmaker Shengze Zhu.

Featuring intimate footage shared by twelve Chinese online streamers, *Present.Perfect.* explores the explosion of live-streaming platforms and the ensuing government crackdown in China. These broadcasters – of various classes, sexualities and physical abilities – open themselves to an anonymous audience in search of connection. Through a collage of videos, *Present.Perfect.* prompts a consideration of the ways in which people expose themselves online in pursuit of affirmation, confronting the complexities encountered when identities and relationships become entangled with network technologies.

Present.Perfect. premiered at the 2019 International Film Festival Rotterdam, winning the festival's main prize, the Tiger Award. The film also received the Grand Prize at the RIDM Montreal International Documentary Festival, Canada. The film's UK premiere closed the ICA's annual film festival, FRAMES of REPRESENTATION in 2019.

Present.Perfect. continues Zhu's long-standing interest in seeing the world through the eyes of others. Zhu's two previous works – both filmed in her hometown of Wuhan in central China – similarly take an observational approach to present a series of scenes of people's everyday experiences. Both focusing on marginalised people, these films are conceived as constructed representations of reality. *Out of Focus* (2014) incorporates photos taken by a group of children which Zhu provided with cameras, while *Another Year* (2016) features a series of dinners shared by a migrant worker's family over the course of a year.

Present.Perfect. is the latest release from the ICA's in-house distribution agency, ICA CINEMA, which brings groundbreaking films from underrepresented and emerging filmmakers to UK audiences. Since its relaunch in 2016, ICA CINEMA has distributed over 20 releases, supporting innovative, boundary-pushing work from international filmmakers.

Details

Present.Perfect., dir. Shengze Zhu

USA | Hong Kong 2019, 124 min.

Mandarin with English subtitles

[Trailer](#)

KEY FESTIVALS AND AWARDS

International Film Festival Rotterdam (Netherlands), 2019 – Tiger Award

FICUNAM (Mexico), 2019

Thessaloniki Documentary Festival (Greece), 2019

Cinéma du Réel (France), 2019

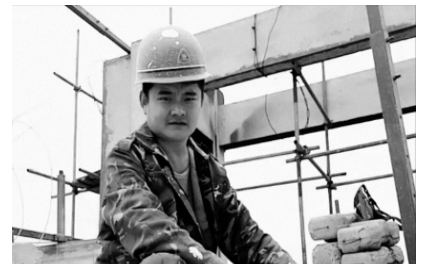
New Directors/ New Films (USA), 2019

Frames of Representation (FoR), ICA (UK), 2019

Jeonju International Film Festival (South Korea), 2019

Viennale International Film Festival (Austria), 2019

RIDM Montreal International Documentary Festival (Canada), 2019 – Grand Prize



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

'I've been attentively following a vast array of Chinese live-streaming anchors for almost a year. More than 800 hours of footage has been collected. At first, I was astounded and intrigued by certain absurd, bizarre activities [...] [accompanied by] insane streams of live comments (also called 'bullets') and virtual gifts like planes and rockets [which] often swept across my computer screen when I was watching these shows. I know that hundreds or even thousands of people were watching it at the same time. We watch the show simultaneously, regardless of where we are and what time it is, and more crucially, we instantaneously experience what others are experiencing. [...]

Live-streaming is essentially a social experience. Through the 'bullet screen' function, the audience can interact with the anchor as well as each other simultaneously in real-time. The 'bullets' sometimes can become so dense that they basically obscure the entire screen. In this case, the point is often not to watch the show, but simply to gather together. Such instant interaction reinforces the sense of companionship in the streaming community. Although the showrooms don't exist physically, the shared emotions and feelings generated in such virtual space are real.

Although anchors use fake Internet names, most of them don't mask their real identities online. Instead, they want to share with others their stories, or even the most personal moments of their lives. This is particularly true when it comes to those who are less socially active in real life. Some live in remote areas, some are stuck in menial [...] jobs, some have disabilities. These are people who [can sometimes struggle



to] find their own place in the real world, thus finding themselves lonely, isolated and alienated. It's only in this virtual society that they can really be themselves or even go beyond their identity, regardless of gender, sexuality, education and social-economic status. [...]

As live-streaming gains prominence in the lives of many anchors, it's no longer separable from their real life, but an integral part of it. Many turn the camera on for eight hours or more every day, persistently showing every aspect of their lives and enthusiastically interacting with people they would never meet offline. For them, communication in cyberspace seems more real than the actual world around them. [...]

Last but not least, I want to point out a fact that, as an explosive industry that grows at an astounding speed – in 2017, China's live-streaming industry produced revenue of more than 4 billion USD with more than 400 million netizens actively involved, but back to 2010, it barely existed in China –its rapid growth and the spread of anonymous, unregulated and user-generated content has already caught the attention of the authorities. Thousands of showrooms were shut down, and a formal set of regulations and laws have taken effect since 2016, aiming at cleaning up cyberspace as well as maintaining cybersecurity. Although streaming anchors can determine their online persona, they must now register the account with their real name and citizen ID number, and their online behaviors are strictly regulated.

DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Shengze Zhu is a documentary filmmaker and producer and co-founder of BURN THE FILM with Zhengfan Yang. *Out of Focus* (2014) is Zhu's directorial feature debut, which premiered at the Cinéma du Réel (France), and screened at the DMZ International Documentary Film Festival (South Korea), FRONTEIRA International Documentary & Experimental Film Festival (Brazil), among others. Her second feature documentary *Another Year* (2016) premiered at the Visions du Réel in Switzerland and received the Sesterce d'or (Best Film Award). It also received the Grand Prize at the RIDM Montreal International Documentary Festival, the Critic's Award at the Olhar de Cinema (Brazil), and was honored as one of the 'Top 10 Films of the Year' in 2016 by *24 Images* (Canada). *Present.Perfect.* (2019) is her third feature. Zhu has also served as producer for Yang's films, including *DOWN THERE* (2018), *WHERE ARE YOU GOING* (2016), and *DISTANT* (2013).

ESSAY BY BECCA VOELCKER

Stitching industriously in a garment factory, a young woman streams herself on a smartphone. I only do this when the boss is away, she says. This is reality. A pig farmer puts down her selfiestick. Streaming anchor earns billions by going to the toilet, she jokes, but you'd better not watch it, just stay outside. These women are working two jobs, bridging two economies; live-streaming is a big industry in China. 'Anchors' perform strange stunts or record everyday life like the protagonists in the factory and farm. Viewers post on-screen comments and virtual gifts that can be redeemed for money. In 2017, the number of live-stream users in China reached 422 million. Shengze Zhu's third film, *Present.Perfect.* creates a collective portrait of contemporary China composed entirely of footage from live-streaming sites.

Zhu followed a dozen streams over the course of a year; their seemingly mundane content intrigued her for what it revealed. Condensed from eight-hundred hours of footage to two, *Present. Perfect.* exposes the extent to which live-streaming offers an alternative form of sociability for those whose identity, disability or socioeconomic status might make some interpersonal interactions difficult. As much as it portrays present-day China, the film is also a study of emergent virtual communities and the support and visibility they provide their users.

Recalling the documentary form's historical claims to truth, the film title's grammatical tense plays with the function of cinema to record the past and the function of live-streaming to broadcast the present. It suggests that what we have seen affects the present, and what has been might not be this way forever. An anchor walks us through the demolition rubble that will soon engulf his home. Xi Jinping's dream of gentrification unravels as a shakily-framed ruin in reverse. As China's built landscapes change, so do its virtual ones. Censorship has curtailed live-streaming with regulations and fines. Since its making, several streams featured in *Present. Perfect.* have been taken offline, with all points of contact to their anchors lost.

The long take is a feature of live-streaming, but also characterises Zhu's observational approach, which affords people time to express themselves. We can deduce the content of viewers' typed comments – even if they are out of frame – from the way anchors respond, telling and re-telling their life stories for minutes on end. Anchors hold their cameras differently, walk with particular gaits, and speak with various accents – we might say *Present. Perfect.* is the work of a dozen directors. Zhu's decisive cuts and the conversion of all footage to black and white reinserts her editorial presence and reflects her background in photography and journalism. The division of the film into chapters recalls the chronological and titled vignettes of Zhu's previous works, filmed in her hometown of Wuhan in central China. In those films, like this one, reality meets its constructed representation, and real-time becomes a time capsule.

Becca Voelcker is a writer, researcher and film programmer.

Notes to Editors

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ICA CINEMA

The ICA opened its first dedicated cinema when it relocated to The Mall in 1968. Since then, the ICA's film programme has presented the most challenging and underrepresented aspects of international narrative cinema, documentary practices and experimental moving image works that test the boundaries of film and video media,

and often of the cinema auditorium itself.

The ICA's in-house distribution agency, ICA CINEMA, was relaunched in 2016, bringing groundbreaking films from underrepresented and emerging filmmakers to UK audiences. Since 2016 it has distributed over 20 releases, supporting innovative, boundary-pushing work from international filmmakers. Recent releases include RaMell Ross' Oscar-nominated *Hale County, This Morning, This Evening*, Wang Bing's *Dead Souls* and Mariano Llinás' 14-hour-long *La Flor*.

INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ARTS

Founded in 1946 by a collective of artists, poets and their supporters, the Institute of Contemporary Arts is an independent organisation and registered charity which supports the most pressing debates in contemporary culture. The ICA stages groundbreaking exhibitions, performances and keynote lectures by many of the world's leading thinkers. Previously home to the Independent Group, the ICA played a pivotal role in the development of pop art and charted the course of punk, performance art and independent cinema. The ICA staged the first institutional exhibitions by Francis Bacon, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Tacita Dean, Damien Hirst, Mike Kelley, Mary Kelly, Barbara Kruger, Gerhard Richter, Dieter Roth, Cindy Sherman, Nancy Spero, and Cosey Fanni Tutti and early exhibitions by Bernadette Corporation, Robert Mapplethorpe, Steve McQueen and Tino Sehgal; many historic performances including those by Laurie Anderson, Einstürzende Neubauten and Yoko Ono; legendary concerts by The Clash, Throbbing Gristle, The Smiths, David Bowie and The Beastie Boys; and critical discussions by the likes of Kathy Acker, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Stuart Hall and Homi K. Bhabha. The ICA Cinema and its dedicated artist's film programme continue to showcase independent film and support pioneering filmmakers including Chantal Akerman, Kenneth Anger, Matthew Barney, Derek Jarman, Ken Loach and Laura Poitras. From its home on The Mall – the geographic heart of the UK establishment – the ICA is an organisation in which different modes of cultural production thrive on the mutual engagement with one another, and a programme that speaks to the challenges of the 21st century. www.ica.art

VISITOR INFORMATION

Institute of Contemporary Arts, The Mall, London, SW1Y 5AH

Opening times: Tuesday – Sunday, 12–9pm

Admission:

Cinema + exhibition ticket: peak £13 / off-peak £8

(Concessions for under-18s and over-65s, disabled people, job seekers allowance claimants, Westminster residents and education groups)

Free for Red Members, discounts for Green and Blue Members

For information about tickets and membership, please contact:

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