

DENNIS
OPPENHEIM

FEEDBACK:
PARENT-CHILD
PROJECTS
FROM THE 70s

ZHIYUAN
YANG

A FAMILY OF
THREE

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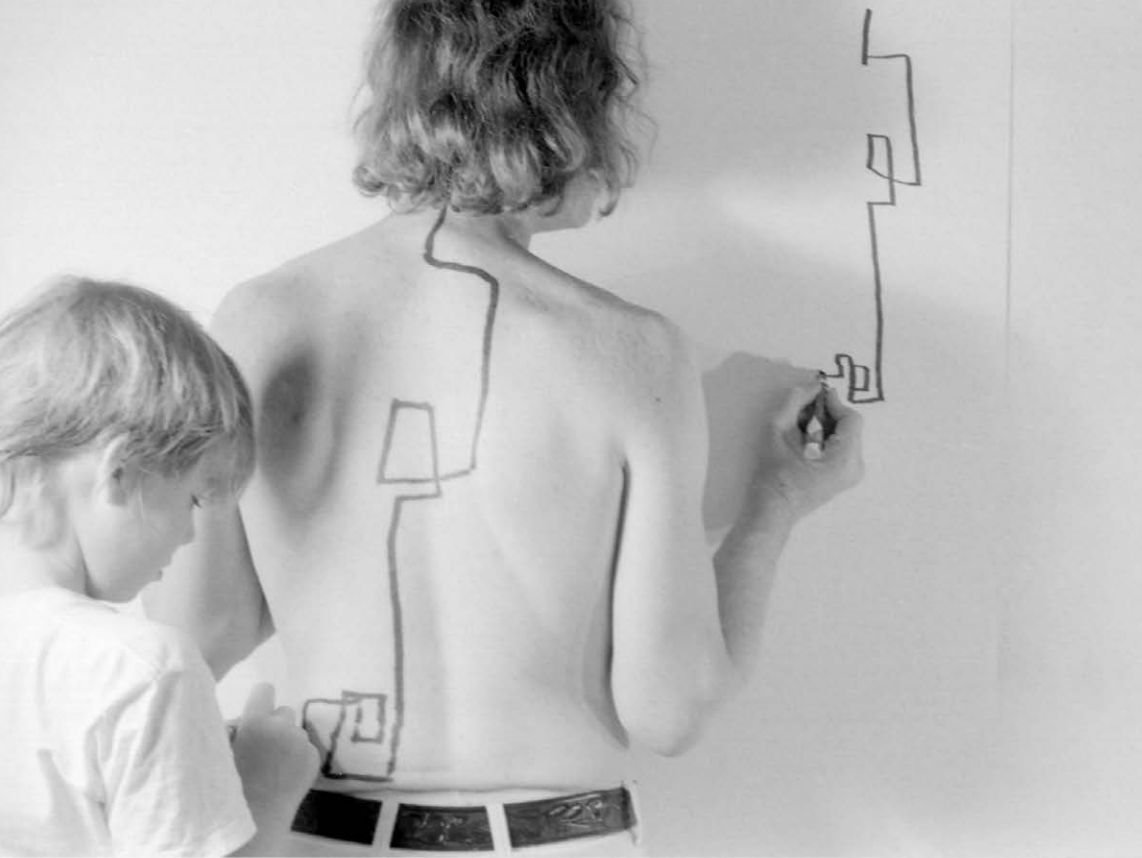
FEEDBACK:
PARENT-CHILD
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ZHIYUAN
YANG

A FAMILY OF
THREE

SHIRLEY FITERMAN ART CENTER

BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE, CUNY



IN HIS PIONEERING WORK OF THE LATE 1960s AND EARLY 70s, Dennis Oppenheim (1938-2011) went beyond the strictures of Minimalism to investigate and act in the actual world through explorations that engage both the landscape and the body. Perhaps best known for his Land Art works that transcended the confines of traditional sculpture, as well as the limits of the gallery context, Oppenheim's performance works also pushed multiple boundaries.¹ His artistic experimentation unfolded against a tumultuous historical backdrop that was branded by social and political unrest. The United States was enmeshed in a deeply unpopular war in Vietnam, one that provoked massive anti-war demonstrations through the early 70s. Concurrently, a widespread counterculture movement, led by the country's youth, swept the nation. The turmoil continued with the Watergate scandal, which resulted in a vote by the House of Representatives to impeach then-President Richard Nixon, who resigned in summer 1974. The period was also defined by high unemployment, gas shortages, and rampant inflation.

This same moment is marked artistically by a shift away from the strict tenets of Minimalism toward Post-Minimalism, which encompassed a more expansive approach to artmaking and a broad range of visual experimentation, including Process, Conceptual, and Performance Art. Leaving behind the specificity of the object, these practices presented art as encounters subject to physical and temporal conditions. Theatricality in particular invited an engagement with real time and space implicating the participation of the viewer.² During this period, the body (in place of the landscape) increasingly became the site of Oppenheim's focus, as he gradually moved away from his Earthworks and began creating performative conceptual works that considered aspects of identity and corporeality. In a series of performances, videos, and related photography, done in collaboration with his family, Oppenheim interwove themes of family dynamics, the acquisition of information, and emerging technologies.

Oppenheim envisioned the family as a system of interactions and related it to the developing technology of video. Scholar Anna Lovatt has highlighted the ways in which he aligned video with family relationships through the concept of feedback, in which the outputs of a system are routed back as inputs—creating a chain of cause and effect.³ In works such as *2-Stage Transfer Drawing. (Advancing to a Future State) ... (Returning to a Past State)*, (1971), Oppenheim parsed this circuit of exchange. This two-channel video of a performance investigates the notion of time and defines the body as both a subject and an object; a place and a surface. Oppenheim and his son Erik face away from the camera.



(previous page)

Dennis Oppenheim

2-Stage Transfer Drawing. (Advancing to a Future State).

2-Stage Transfer Drawing. (Returning to a Past State)., 1971

Two black-and-white video projections, silent
12:00 mins. and 07:00 mins.

Dennis Oppenheim

Go-Between, 1972

Black-and-white video, silent

20:00 mins.



Using a marker, Erik draws on his father's bare back (which has become the artistic surface), while an also shirtless Oppenheim tries to picture the same drawing as he feels it being mapped out on his skin. Then the two switch places. The subtitles "*Advancing to a Future State*" and "*Returning to a Past State*," refer to the swing backward and forward in time. Oppenheim's accompanying text affirms, "Because Erik is my offspring, and we share similar biological ingredients, his back (as surface) can be seen as an immature version of my own ... in a sense, I make contact with a past state."

In *Extended Expressions* (1971), Oppenheim and Erik each make faces that the other then attempts to imitate. This process of mimicry creates a slight delay as the one essays to recreate the expression of the other, which introduces an actual time lag that Lovatt relates to a defining characteristic of the emerging medium of video.⁴ The lag also refers to the different ages and, thus, positions in time, of both father and son. Oppenheim described: "my expression, if passed to my son ... enters my past." Similarly, in *A Feedback Situation* (1971), Oppenheim's son becomes an extension of the artist, which the artist made clear in his accompanying text, "I originate a movement which Erik translates and returns to me. What I get in return is my movement fed through his sensory system." Within these "feedback" situations, Oppenheim transcended his own temporality through his genetic, younger "self."⁵ In playing with issues of transmission and reception Oppenheim also explored the acquisition of information. Learning and cognition—how information is communicated and received, and particularly how aesthetic information (such as color recognition and mark making) is learned by children—is central to these commentaries about the creation of art.

In works such as *Go-Between* (1972), traditional family dynamics are also explored. The video portrays Oppenheim, who sits facing his wife Phyllis. Erik sits behind Phyllis (his stepmother) and his daughter Kristin sits behind him. Both children control the arms of their parents. Kristin endeavors to hit Phyllis, but her punches are routed through her father. Instead, Erik tries to hit his father, but through Phyllis. The parents become protective barriers, as well as weapons, intermediaries through whom these acts of hostility take place, in a confusion of roles and power displacement. Paralleling changes to family units that were evolving in the early 70s, *Go-Between* points to societal reconfigurations of conventional familial bonds.

Oppenheim's artistic strategies to upset orthodox family dynamics, and through which he frequently displaced or decentered himself, form important precursors for artists such as



Dennis Oppenheim
2-Stage Transfer Drawing. (Advancing to a Future State).
2-Stage Transfer Drawing. (Returning to a Past State)., 1971
 Two black-and-white video projections, silent. Installation view
 12:00 mins. and 07:00 mins.

Zhiyuan Yang (b. 1992), who also employs a collaborative process and experiments with performance and video as a means of exploring larger issues of identity. For Yang, who was born and raised in Beijing, China, the evolution of the nuclear family and the profound effect that government and social policy has on family dynamics are central elements in her oeuvre. In the three series presented here, Yang examines not only relationships between political legislation and family, but also the tensions between emerging feminist politics and patriarchal traditions. In works created with her parents, Yang challenges definitions of gender, ethnicity, and expected social behavior. Through masquerade, humorous role play, staging, and costumes, her photographs express the closeness and the complexities of family relationships.

In her 2015 series, *A Family of Three*, Yang first began examining the complicated consequences governmental legislation had for family dynamics. In these photographed performances, her mother and father each played their counterparts and Yang played the opposite parent in these otherwise mundane scenes. China's first Marriage Law of 1950 defined marriage as between a single husband and a single wife. The law forbade bigamy, child brides, and arranged marriages, but also codified a one-husband/one-wife system. Additional policies, most infamously the Family Planning Policy of 1979 (often referred to as the one-child policy) further ingrained stringent conventions, fundamentally prohibiting any non-conformist individual ideas or desires regarding family structure. Yang's work probes these enforced constructions of family, as well as the assumptions that people would be happy in or naturally inhabit those roles. Her subsequent series, *Yangs' Fantasies*



Zhiyuan Yang
A Family of Three (#1), 2015
 Inkjet print
 24 x 36 inches

(2016), pictures the ways in which patriarchal traditions combine with emerging feminist politics within the context of her family. Her parents' unhappy heterosexual marriage, coupled with questions of femininity and individualism, are investigated through their performances of stereotypical Chinese women.

Only MAMA Knows (2017), again involves works made in partnership with her parents. After coming out to her mother, Yang invited her to dress up like the artist, who identifies as a butch lesbian, and direct Yang's father in a series of invented scenarios. Despite her parents' unsuccessful marriage, the two never divorced. Yang states, "As the only child, I become an emotional bridge between them. We are entangled with each other." Playing out sequences of fictional family scenes, Yang's works reveal the awkward familial intimacy elicited by the pressure of those roles.

Aspects of alienation and belonging—to a family, to a country, to a gender, to a self—are also intrinsic to Yang's works and point to an inextricable intersection between gender and socio-political context. This complex connection is described in Judith Butler's canonical text *Gender Trouble*:

If one 'is' a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered 'person' transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively



Zhiyuan Yang
Only MAMA Knows (#5), 2017
 Inkjet print
 21 x 14 inches

constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained.⁶

The complexity of subject positions is highlighted by Yang's alliance with her parents, which allows them the power to step outside of the confines of their roles. Yang grants them the opportunity to try on different personas, blurring the lines not only of gender identity, but of the entire make-up of the family. In this sense Yang's works are transgressions of gender normative ideas and conceptions of how "family" constitutes itself.

Oppenheim's disruptions of family and the boundaries of self can also be understood as transgressive. In thinking of his children as extensions of himself, they become vehicles without agency through which Oppenheim operates. In the performance work *Method for Applying Color. (Child Development Series.)* (1971), Oppenheim projects various colors that he teaches his 2-1/2 year old daughter Chandra to recognize and name. Through a repetitive process, she learns the names of multiple colors. In *Color Application for Chandra* (1971)—a related installation work that followed—the artist played an audio loop of Chandra's voice repeating the colors to a parrot. The parrot eventually learns to repeat the words, but without the associated colors; the words are empty of meaning. Oppenheim characterized this work as, "... dealing with language structure, the idea of throwing my voice, getting information inside my daughter and then transferring it to the parrot—teaching the parrot to talk by means of her voice."⁷ By using Chandra he transmitted a detached part of himself.



Dennis Oppenheim
Color Application for Chandra, 1971
 Color photography, black-and-white photographic text on rag board
 80 x 130 inches overall

In contrast to Oppenheim's approach to agency and the dynamics within his family collaborations (embedded in his patriarchal position as father), Yang's parents are able to participate in a way in which Oppenheim's young children could not. In the theatrically staged photographs in *A Family of Three* (2015), Yang gave full directorial control to her parents during the creative process, resulting in images that resemble family snapshots, but offer alternative imagined depictions of family. Oppenheim's revolutionary investigations of family and art-making and Yang's imagined vignettes propose alternate modes in which traditional definitions of family and of self are destabilized and reconfigured.

Lisa Panzera
 Director, Shirley Fiterman Art Center

¹ Nick Kaye, "The body as material of thought: energy, time and performance in Dennis Oppenheim's Conceptual Art" in *Dennis Oppenheim: Body to Performance, 1969-73* (Milan: Skira, 2016), p. 13.

² Ibid, p. 21.

³ Anna Lovatt, "A Feedback Situation: Dennis Oppenheim's Cybernetics of the Family," unpublished article, 2019.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Thomas McEvelly, *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt* (New York: Allworth Press, 1999), pp. 93-94.

⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999 [orig. ed. 1990]), p. 6.

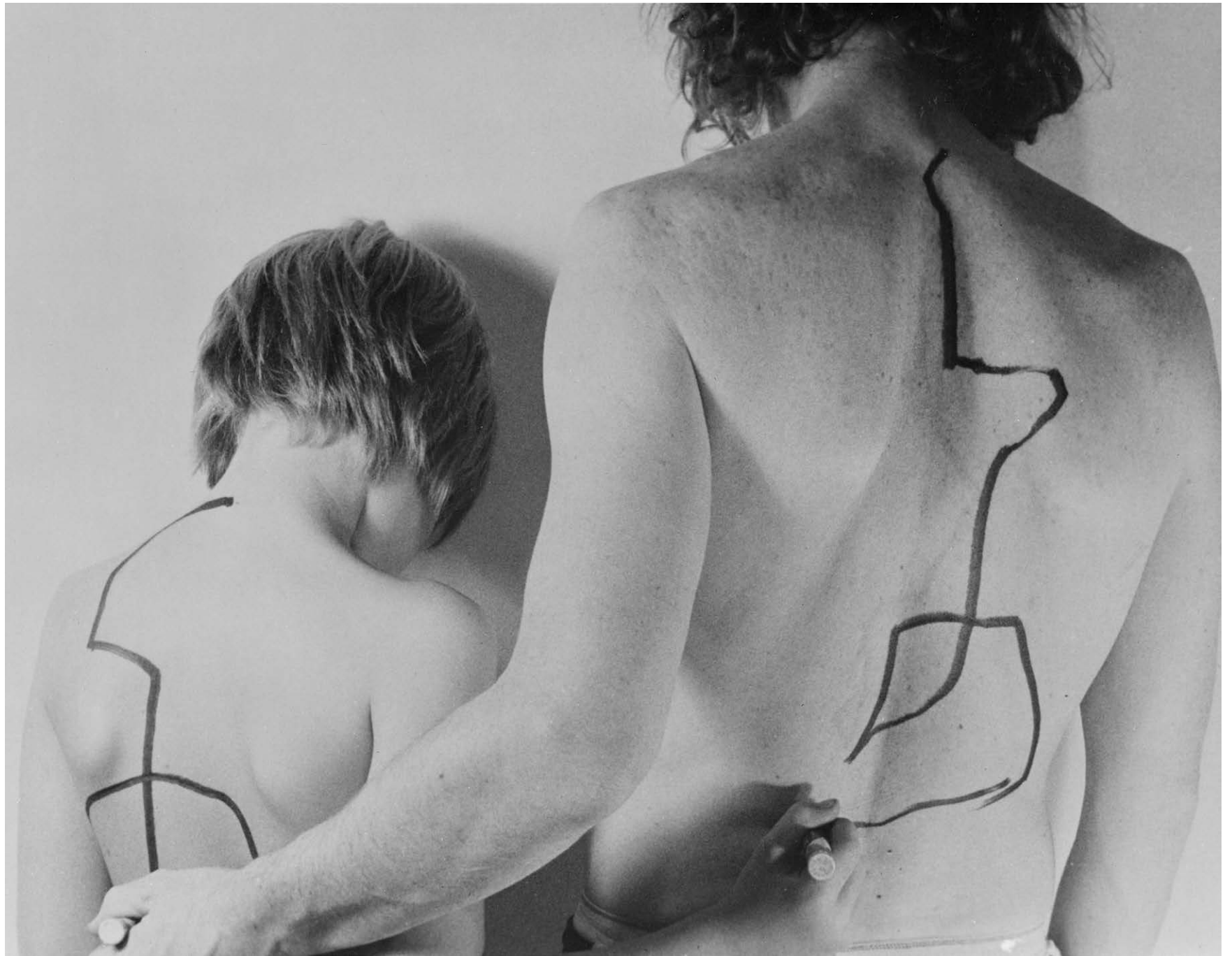
⁷ Willoughby Sharp, "Interview with Dennis Oppenheim," reprinted in *Dennis Oppenheim: Explorations*, ed. Germano Celant (Milan: Charta, 2001), p. 121.2 Ibid, p. 21.



Dennis Oppenheim
Extended Expressions, 1971
Black-and-white video, silent
12:00 mins.



Zhiyuan Yang
A Family of Three (#4), 2015
Inkjet print
30 x 45 inches



Dennis Oppenheim
A Feed-back Situation, 1971
Black-and-white video, silent
03:00 mins



Zhiyuan Yang
Only MAMA Knows (#3), 2017
Inkjet print
30 x 45 inches



Zhiyuan Yang
Yangs' Fantasies (#3), 2016
Inkjet print
36 x 24 inches

DENNIS OPPENHEIM (1938-2011) was born in Electric City, Washington. He attended the California College of the Arts in Oakland, and Stanford University, from which he received an M.F.A. He moved to New York in 1967, settling in Tribeca where he would remain. Oppenheim pushed the boundaries of traditional art forms and created monumental Earthworks, performance and video work, installation, and sculpture that pushed the confines of the gallery space. Oppenheim's interest in working on a large scale and outside the gallery system led him to his engagement with public art projects, on which he focused from the 90s onward.

He was included in numerous gallery and museum exhibitions in 1969, including the renowned show *When Attitude Becomes Form* at the Bern Kunsthalle and *Earth Art* at Cornell University, Ithaca. His work has been featured in solo exhibitions regularly since then at international institutions that include, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA (1973, 1984); Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam, the Netherlands (1975); Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY (1983, 2003); Tel Aviv Museum, Israel (1984); Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA (1997); Storm King Center, New York (2016); and the Art Institute of Chicago, IL (2016). Oppenheim's work is held in public collections throughout the world, including: the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA; Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, France; Tel Aviv Museum, Israel; Tate Modern, London, U.K.; and Samsung Foundation of Art and Culture, Seoul, Korea.

ZHIYUAN YANG (b. 1992) is based in Brooklyn and was born in Beijing, China. She attended Southwest University of Political Science and Law, Chongqing, China, and in 2017, received an M.F.A. in photography from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her work explores the boundaries between alienation and belonging within family dynamics. Yang's photographic work challenges and constructs alternative definitions of gender, ethnicity, performance, and intimacy through masquerade and humor.

Her recent exhibitions include *The Way It Is*, A.I.R. Gallery, Brooklyn, NY; *SPRING/BREAK Art Show*, New York, 2018; *UPROOT*, Smack Mellon, Brooklyn, NY, 2017; and *Biennial 29* (Juror's Award), South Bend Museum of Art, South Bend, IN, 2017. Yang's artworks are in the institutional collection of The Art Institute of Chicago, and published by AINT-BAD Magazine: Issue No.12: Curator's Choice, 2017. She has been a participant at numerous residencies, including Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, ME, 2017; The Studios at MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA, 2018; Vermont Studio Center, Johnson, VT, 2018; and LMCC Workspace Program, New York, NY, 2018-2019.



Dennis Oppenheim
Forming Sounds, 1971
 Black-and-white video, sound
 22:00 mins.

DENNIS OPPENHEIM

2-Stage Transfer Drawing. (Advancing to a Future State).

2-Stage Transfer Drawing. (Returning to a Past State)., 1971

Two black-and-white video projections, silent
 12:00 mins. and 07:00 mins.

3-Stage Transfer Drawing, 1971

Black-and-white photography, pencil text on board
 29 x 24 inches

A Feed-back Situation, 1971

Color photography and black-and-white photographic text on rag board
 34 x 25 inches overall

A Feed-back Situation, 1971

Black-and-white video, silent
 03:00 mins.

A Method of Applying Color, 1971

Color video and digital audio
 Continuous play video and 57:00 min. audio

Color Application for Chandra, 1971

Color photography, black-and-white photographic text on rag board
 80 x 130 inches overall

Extended Expressions, 1971

Black-and-white video, silent
 12:00 mins.

Forming Sounds, 1971

Color photography, collage text on rag board
 70 x 80 inches overall

Forming Sounds, 1971

Black-and-white video, sound
 22:00 mins.

Go-Between, 1972

Black-and-white video, silent
 20:00 mins.



Zhiyuan Yang
A Family of Three (#3), 2015
 Inkjet print
 24 x 36 inches

ZHIYUAN YANG

A Family of Three (#1), 2015
 Inkjet print
 24 x 36 inches

A Family of Three (#2), 2015
 Inkjet print
 24 x 36 inches

A Family of Three (#3), 2015
 Inkjet print
 24 x 36 inches

A Family of Three (#4), 2015
 Inkjet print
 30 x 45 inches

A Family of Three (#5), 2015
 Inkjet print
 24 x 36 inches

A Family of Three (#6), 2015
 Inkjet print
 24 x 36 inches

A Family of Three (#7), 2015
 Inkjet print
 24 x 36 inches

A Family of Three (#8), 2015
 Inkjet print
 21 x 14 inches

A Family of Three (#9), 2015
 Inkjet print
 21 x 14 inches

A Family of Three (#12), 2015
 Inkjet print
 21 x 14 inches

A Family of Three (#13), 2015
 Inkjet print
 21 x 14 inches

Only MAMA Knows (#1), 2017
 Inkjet print
 21 x 14 inches

Only MAMA Knows (#2), 2017
 Inkjet print
 21 x 14 inches

Only MAMA Knows (#3), 2017
 Inkjet print
 30 x 45 inches

Only MAMA Knows (#4), 2017
 Inkjet print
 21 x 14 inches

Only MAMA Knows (#5), 2017
 Inkjet print
 21 x 14 inches

Only MAMA Knows (#6), 2017
 Inkjet print
 21 x 14 inches

Yang's Fantasies (#3), 2016
 Inkjet print
 36 x 24 inches

Mr. Yang's Cat Family, 2015
 Video
 05:42 mins.

Yigong Yang
Mr. Yang's Cat Family (#1), 2015
 Oil painting
 10 x 10 inches

These parallel exhibitions would not be possible without the innovative work of Dennis Oppenheim and Zhiyuan Yang, whose insightful probes into collaborative approaches and family dynamics sparked this artistic pairing. I would like to acknowledge the dedication of Amy Oppenheim and the Dennis Oppenheim Estate. Her generous partnership has been critical in bringing the project to fruition. Similarly, the open exchange and cooperative spirit of artist Zhiyuan Yang allowed for a successful and dynamic exhibition plan. I am also grateful to our staff, in particular Elsy Benitez, as well as the Shirley Fiterman Art Center Advisory Board.

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