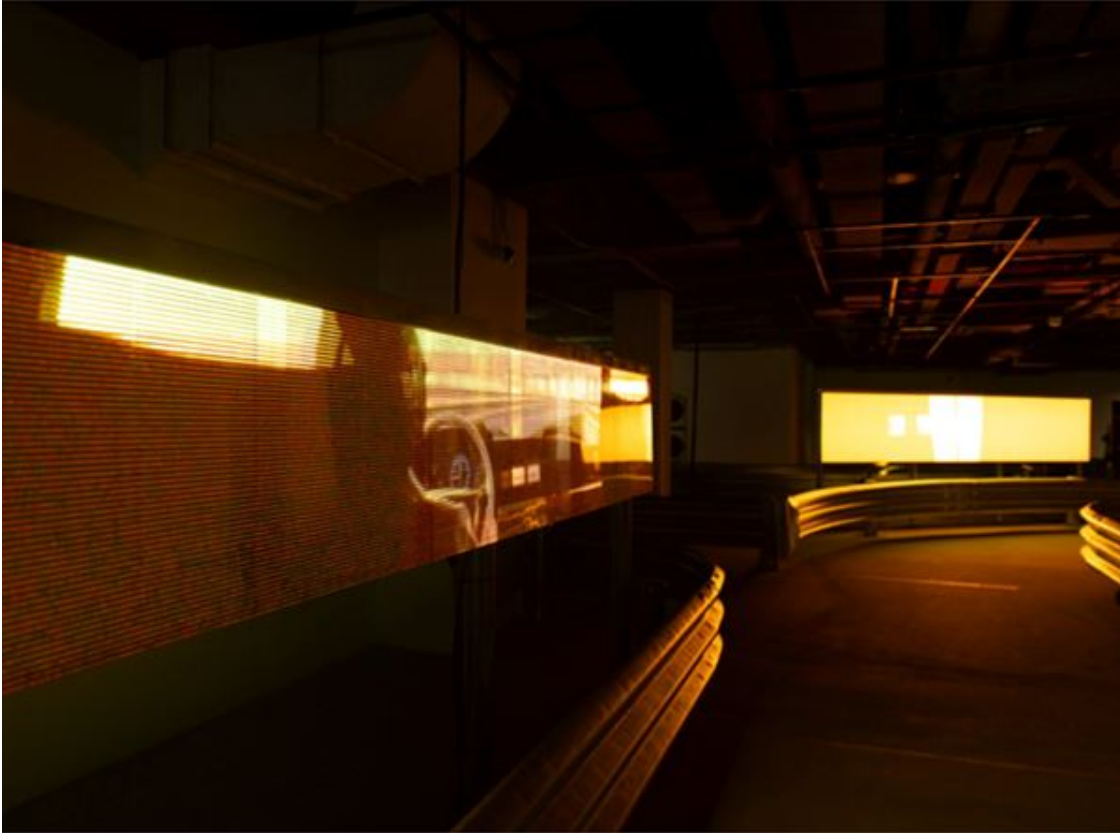


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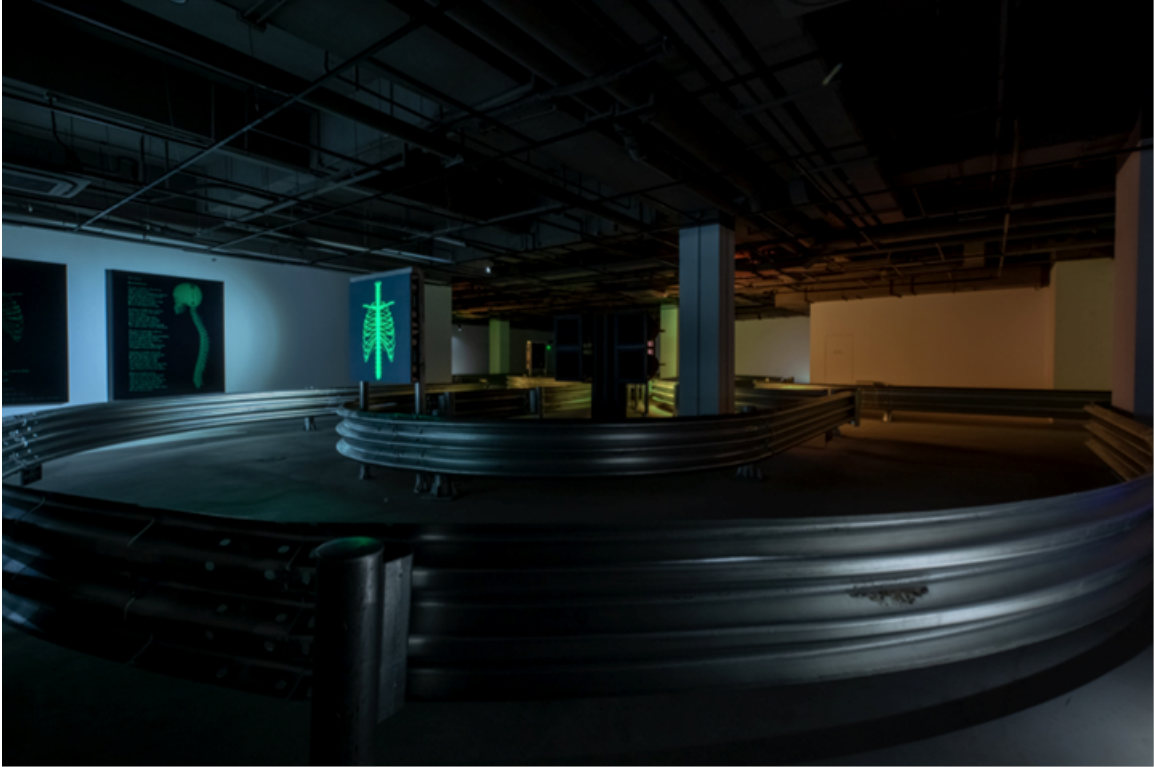
Zhang Ding's High-Speed Forms at OCAT Shanghai

Sam Gaskin Shanghai 22 November 2019



Exhibition view: Zhang Ding, *High-Speed Forms*, OCAT Shanghai (19 October 2019–8 March 2020). Courtesy the artist and OCAT Shanghai.

Modified mobility scooters steer viewers down a simulated highway in *High-Speed Forms*, Zhang Ding's solo show at the new OCAT Shanghai in Sunken Garden, a short walk from its previous location north of Suzhou Creek (19 October 2019–8 March 2020). Sat in self-driving chairs, which make turns by reading reflective stickers on the ground, visitors are slowly steered through the exhibition on a track that's lined on either side by highway guard rails. Synthesised road noise blasts through oversized speakers and 26 sets of high-speed strobe lights flash like speed cameras. LED signs, typically used to communicate directions and road rules, instead show computer-generated images of cars driving at night.



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The experience is both seductive and anxiety inducing. The nighttime driving mood is cinematic and photographs of gold-detailed Mercedes Benzes on the walls are as stylish as a vaporwave album cover; but bright lights and a loud soundtrack create a sense of unease. Ominous LED images of bright green skulls and spines, suggestive of road safety ads, are also scattered through the exhibition, which comes with its own warnings and risks: 'Do not look straight at the high speed strobe-light' for example, and 'Please put your feet on the pedal to avoid the wheels running over your feet'.

Zhang's use of infrastructure builds on his previous solo show, the equally anxious *Safe House*, which showed at KWM Art Center in Beijing last year. Works in that show included sculptures inspired by the multi-purpose pylons installed in Tiananmen Square—combining propaganda loud speakers, cameras and floodlights—that likewise use the pretext of safety, in this case preventing terrorism, to exert control over the population.



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The theme of surveillance also returns in *High-Speed Forms*. One of the LED signs depicts a driver wearing a visored helmet inside a regular passenger car, giving both a sense of him racing—against who or what is unclear—but also hiding, disguising his face in response to massive on-road surveillance and another shows a car being tracked from above, as if shot by a surveillance drone. A third LED sign, just a couple of turns down the exhibition track, briefly reveals that it's filming exhibition visitors ourselves as we proceed through the exhibition.

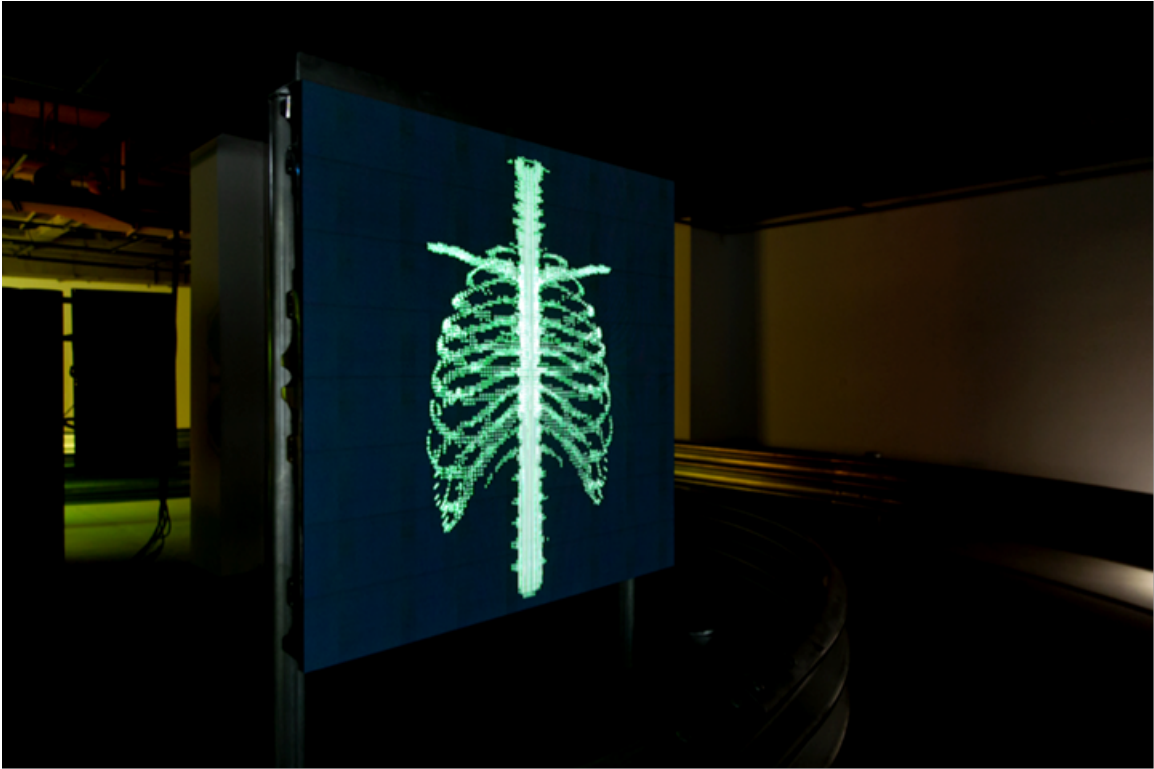
Zhang, who says he enjoys driving 'fast but safely' at night, is interested not just in the relentless creep of surveillance and social monitoring, but how we are propelled forward by broad economic, social, and political forces. Highways do not permit you to slow down, stop, or turn back—nor do exhibition viewers have these options as the chairs carry them through the exhibition at Zhang's prescribed pace.



Zhang Ding, *High-Speed Forms #5* (2019). Exhibition view: High-Speed Forms, OCAT Shanghai (19 October 2019–8 March 2020). Courtesy the artist and OCAT Shanghai.

Two gold rhinos copulating atop a bucket seat totem entitled *High-Speed Forms #5* (2019) hint at these themes of relentless inevitability. Exhibition materials relate the work to the term 'grey rhino' coined in 2016 in the wake of financial crises to describe a 'highly probable, high impact yet neglected threat', something known but ignored, as opposed to a Black Swan event, which comes out of nowhere. Today the urgent problems of the 21st century—mass extinctions, growing inequality, and climate change among them—are clear to see; but it's not clear when, if ever, an off ramp will be taken to avert them.

The feeling of being helplessly carried forward into the future is heightened by one of the green LED skeletons displayed alongside the track and accompanied by an English translation of the 1922 poem 'The Century' by Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, which asks: 'who will ever ... And with his own blood glue together ... The backbones of two centuries?' Mandelstam says the backbone of his own 'beautiful, pathetic age' is broken, and that 'cool indifference ... pours down' on its injuries. The same could be said of the present, some 100 years later.



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Efforts to grapple with the implications of the present have been a recurrent theme in Zhang's work. With an operatic visual style reminiscent of Fellini films, the video *Great Era* (2007) casts an eye on the unevenness of China's economic 'miracle', while *Buddha Jumps Over the Wall* was a baroque party staged at Top Contemporary Art Center in 2012. Complete with waltzing couples and an orchestra, the event was named after a dish containing a mix of meats and seafood that smelled so delicious even monks (whose religious commitment demands vegetarianism) escaped their temples to taste it. A satirisation of the triumph of luxury over values among China's nouveau riche, chefs prepared Zhang's own version of the dish for the audience as plaster casts of the animals used to prepare it gushed blood in a screened video.

High-Speed Forms is both more refined and more ambitious than *Buddha Jumps Over the Wall*. Through the everyday vernacular of highway infrastructure, the artist asks whether the structures that humans have engineered—as seductive as a nighttime drive in a gold-trimmed Benz—are now in the driver's seat. —[O]