

A FILM IN TWO PARTS, THE SECOND of WHICH NEVER ENDS Jiajia Zhang

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Art, Exhibition

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Jiajia Zhang

Jiajia Zhang is a multifaceted artist whose work delves into the complexities of identity, language, and urban environments. In her solo exhibition *A FILM IN TWO PARTS, THE SECOND of WHICH NEVER ENDS* (she borrowed the title from the collective Shanzhai Lyric), visitors immediately encounter her installation *L'invitation au voyage (There all is order and beauty, luxury, peace, and pleasure)*. Here, city stone bollards are arranged on a soft carpet, blurring the line between public and private space. Central to Jiajia's work is the exploration of how public spaces intersect with personal narratives, questioning the structures and norms that shape our lives. Through her background in architecture at ETH Zurich and her experiences in cities like Milan and Rome, she developed an interest in how urban landscapes are often designed to control movement and behavior, particularly at the expense of marginalized groups.

Her commissioned series of eLen drawings to street artists, sourced from diverse visual stimuli such as Instagram screenshots, fashion advertisements, or the artist's selfies, shed light on how intimate acts of care can become part of public display. Language is a recurring theme in Jiajia's work, with an interest in understanding the power dynamics inherent in communication. For example, in her video *If I Can Make It There...*, she draws on her father's experience of learning German after emigrating from China to Switzerland in the 1980s, examining how language shapes identity through the process of learning. The two video works in the second exhibition room delve into these themes too: *Untitled (After Love)* blends found footage with self-shot material, with editing that explores emotions and intimate relationships in both private and public spaces. Meanwhile, *EOD* takes viewers back to the beginning, depicting a toddler's early language acquisition journey, reflecting on the progression from babbling sounds to coherent words within predetermined structures and norms. By juxtaposing familiar imagery with public elements, Jiajia Zhang's exhibition invites viewers to confront preconceived notions in a journey of exploration and questioning.

A FILM IN TWO PARTS, THE SECOND of WHICH NEVER ENDS

Jiajia Zhang

Gioia Dal Molin, March 2024

Entering the exhibition space from the courtyard with its mosaic floor, I unexpectedly find myself standing on a soft carpet. Behind me, gigantic advertising posters partly mask the facades of the buildings on Piazza Cavour—a place emblematic of Milan's 'modern' post-war architectural and ideological reconstruction. In front of me is Jiajia Zhang's installation, *L'invitation au voyage (There all is order and beauty, luxury, peace and pleasure)*. Stone bollards, commonly used in public spaces to regulate movement (of vehicles, pedestrians), take on a new context in the exhibition, arranged on the carpet like readymades. There is an intriguing intermingling here between the exterior urban space and an interior private space. The exhibition title, *A FILM IN TWO PARTS, THE SECOND of WHICH NEVER ENDS*, is derived from the collective Shanzhai Lyric, who since 2015 have been compiling a poetic archive of broken English and mistranslated phrases (such as those found on "shanzai" t-shirts from China, sold worldwide). Through their archive, the collective explores the language of forgery, mimicry, and hybridity as a commentary on the artificiality inherent in global hierarchies. Jiajia's exhibition title, as she explains to me in an email, juxtaposes a finite moment (regulated, perhaps defined by the bollards) with an infinite moment (a small child's endlessly curious gaze). But more on that later. Jiajia's interest lies in the visible and invisible structures and norms that shape us: our movements, actions, language, thoughts, our appropriation of the world, and indeed our very existence. These forces operate not only in public spaces but also in presumably private, intimate interiors. For Jiajia, who studied architecture at ETH Zurich before completing her Master's degree in visual arts, such considerations often start in the urban space. In many cities today, public squares and streets are rigidly designed: benches are made so we can't lie on them, while wall protrusions are fitted with sharp spikes so we can't sit on them. Barriers direct us, and video cameras monitor our activity. This type of defensive architecture is closely linked to the capitalist use of public space. It creates inhospitable environments for those who are unwelcome (like teenagers with skateboards or individuals experiencing homelessness) while disciplining those who are

welcome, encouraging the use of public spaces primarily for consumption. In his book, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (a theoretical reference for Jiajia), French philosopher Michel de Certeau describes walking through the city as a daily practice where pedestrians navigate urban landscapes, forging unique paths, including shortcuts and detours. Through this act, they etch their memories, stories, and aspirations onto the cityscape. For de Certeau, this constitutes a form of resistance through appropriation, as individuals construct social space and challenge conventional norms with alternative uses. Could this concept describe the "invitation to a journey" formulated in the artwork's title (which Jiajia took from a line in Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*)? Gazing at the eight stone bollards (which the artist borrowed from the Milan city council), I continue to contemplate the extent to which these reflections apply to all bodies—after all, movement in public spaces is always also linked to sexual and ethnic attributions: the body of someone identified as a woman of colour must move through the city differently compared to a white man. Standardising measures—on both a tangible architectural level and an intangible ideological level—are highly present, especially in cities like Milan or Rome. Over the past year, Jiajia has lived and worked in both these cities, traversing their urban landscapes on foot (often accompanied by her daughter Fibi in a baby carriage), by streetcar, bus, or subway. From the bustling city centres with their pedestrian zones and luxury boutiques to the meticulously regulated Cathedral Square (Milan) and the even more tightly controlled St. Peter's Square (Rome), or their car-centric peripheries, their urban spaces dictate and manage the movements of bodies in many ways. And yet, Jiajia's installation offers a promise of freedom—a playful journey across the carpet and between the bollards. The invitation to travel.

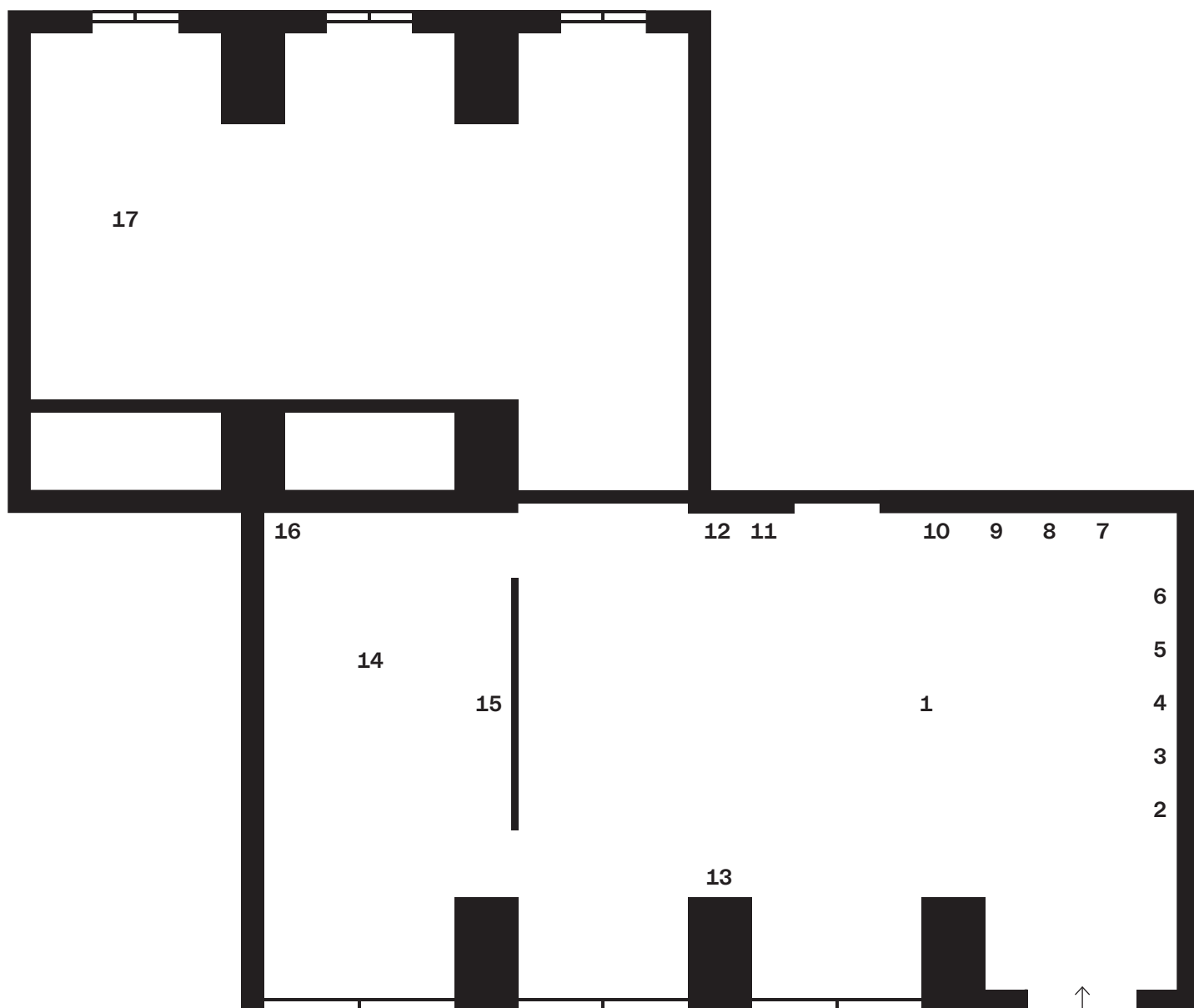
In her video work *If I Can Make It There...* Jiajia explores another dimension of standardisation that shapes our identity formation and our 'being in the world': language, specifically the process of language acquisition. The spatial arrangement depicted in the video mirrors her childhood living situation when her parents moved the family to Switzerland for work, where a partition wall divided her children's room from her parents' bedroom. In the audio track accompanying the video, we hear a male voice learning German. Hesitantly, almost in a fragile manner, the speaker attempts to construct German

sentences such as “Wie geht es Ihnen?” (“How are you?”) and “Was machen Sie hier?” (“What are you doing here?”). It is a language learning process that takes place within rigid boundaries—with questions about work, about where from and where to. Questions about wellbeing, to which the only learned answer is “I’m fine.” Sentences that trail off in emptiness, like “Ich bin...” (“I am...”) or “Ich komme aus...” (“I come from...”). It is a language that presses people into a standardised system of thought according to the customs of a particular culture (in this case, the working world of 1980s Western Europe. The voice we hear belongs to the artist’s father, who emigrated from China to Switzerland during that period). Because yes, learning a language is much more than just learning words. And since Foucault at the latest, we know that language determines the limits of our thinking, indeed, that language is our thinking, and that language is power. Jiajia filmed the footage for her video work on the streets of Rome and Milan. We see neon signs, advertising screens and shop windows and people circulating within the urban space. Jiajia is particularly interested in the many personas of the urban space — the businessman, the police officer, and even fantastical figures like a cowboy or Aladdin—and intertwines this with reflections on the performative nature of identities. The movements guided by implicit and explicit architecture and rules are similar to the standardised process of language acquisition. Every now and then, there are disruptions: a split-second cut to a flying plastic bird or a pink inflatable dolphin. And there are also the curious eyes of a toddler (Jiajia’s daughter Fibi), reminding us of the more intuitive language learning process, where hearing (sounds, syllables, and words) and seeing (as objects are assigned to words) play pivotal roles. Simultaneously, there is a recognition that Fibi will soon navigate this regulated society herself. During her time in Milan, Jiajia delved deeply into research on the postwar urban boom. A significant reference for her is Ermanno Olmi’s 1961 film *Il posto*, which employs neorealist imagery to tell the story of Domenico, a young man who applies for a job in a large company, and the bizarre examinations and tests he undergoes—an allegory for confronting and assimilating into the norms of a capitalist work environment. Endless curiosity and regulation. In the same room, a series of drawings revisits themes around the blurring of private and public domains. Jiajia had commissioned the drawings by artists normally portraying tourists around Milan Cathedral.

The diverse sources are Instagram screenshots, fashion advertisements or photographs Jiajia took on the streets of Milan, or selfies of the artist herself. These private scenes capture intimate acts of care—for oneself (applying make-up) or for others (braiding a child’s hair, feeding a baby with a bottle). In other words, these activities encompass care work, transcending the confines of the private sphere on multiple levels. On the one hand, they intersect with feminist discourse on the remuneration of domestic and reproductive labour (largely spearheaded by Italian feminist Silvia Federici in the 1970s), which elevates this supposedly private work into a political issue. Moreover, social media is increasingly blurring the lines between private and public spheres. It is not uncommon for intimate acts of care to become part of public display, with the outside world often appearing on our smartphone screens, even within the intimate confines of the bedroom. By paying artists to produce drawings from the collages Jiajia assembled from visual materials, she also acknowledges the networks, infrastructures, and expenses associated with various types of (artistic, reproductive, caregiving) labour. In the same room, the wall sculpture *Safe Crash* comprises a found piece of glass covered with yellow safety foil (typically used for glass enclosures housing fire extinguishers). Jiajia mounts the piece of glass against a mirrored background and adds the phrase: “You left something behind”. What initially sounds like a caring reminder echoes a typical response from online retailers, prompting customers about items lingering (and waiting to be purchased!) in their digital shopping carts. Much like how bollards guide our movements in public spaces and how urban planning and architecture subtly control our behaviour, our movements and needs are similarly monitored and nurtured in digital space. The two video works on display in the second exhibition room tie in with these themes. *Untitled (After Love)* consists of found footage (from Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, as well as from the artist’s family archive) and self-shot video material. The montage features scenes from a Japanese TV show (where Taiwanese pop singer Teresa Teng is resurrected as a hologram paired with Queen’s *Bohemian Rhapsody*: “Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy?”), karaoke lyrics and voiceovers about children’s passage into adulthood. These visuals are interspersed with footage of video calls between the artist and her mother (frequently disrupted by a poor internet connection) and clips from the 1980s

showing Jiajia dancing and singing as a child. Emotions and intimate relationships (in the family, between influencers and their followers) manifest through shiny smartphone surfaces and the confluence of private and public spaces. The second video work, *EOD*, takes us back to the beginning, so to speak. Back to the toddler forming first sounds and syllables. Filmed by Jiajia from a streetcar in Milan, the video captures fleeting advertising posters, billboards, and shop windows passing by. Meanwhile, the text reflects on how infants learn language, tracing the progression from babbling sounds to coherent words as infants make the world their own—an appropriation of the world, occurring within predetermined structures and norms. A ‘being in language’ that unfolds within intimate as well as public spaces, shaped by both real and digitally mediated emotional relationships. And yet, where moments of escape are always possible. The invitation to a journey. To break free from the rigid rhythm. Do not reply ASAP (as soon as possible), but only at the end of the day—End of Day (EOD).

Jiajia Zhang works across different digital (moving-) image media, video, and photography, which she presents in spatial installations. She rearranges the partly self-produced and partly found visual material in an exact process by relating the fragments to each other in unexpected ways. This way, social phenomena, and mass-produced products meet minor matters like private YouTube videos or Instagram posts. The artist thus opens up a tension-filled borderland that blends the personal and the generic, challenging our entrenched definitions and notions of private and public. On the one hand, Jiajia Zhang’s work is a pictorial stocktaking of reality; on the other hand, it confronts us with the speculative element reality’s perception entails. Jiajia Zhang studied architecture at ETH Zurich from 2001 to 2007 and photography at the International Center of Photography, NY, from 2007 to 2008. In 2020, she completed her Master of Fine Arts at the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK). Her work has been part of various exhibitions and screenings, including Alte Fabrik, Rapperswil (2024), Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham (2024), Giorno Poetry Systems, New York (2024), All Stars, Lausanne (2023), Kunstmuseum St. Gallen (2023), Kunstraum Riehen, Basel (2023), Fluentum, Berlin (2022), Swiss Art Awards, Basel (2022); Werkstipendium Zürich (2022); FriArt, Fribourg (2022); Coalmine Gallery, Winterthur (2021); Kunsthaus Glarus (2021); Fondation d’entreprise Pernod Ricard, Paris (2021); Haus Wien (2020); Kunsthalle Zürich (2020); Kunsthalle St. Gallen (2019).



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|--|--|---|--|---|
| <p>1
<i>L'invitation au voyage (There all is order and beauty, luxury, peace and pleasure), 2024</i>
Bollards from the Comune of Milano, Carpet</p> | <p>5
<i>What's In Your Bag?, 2023</i>
Pencil on paper
50 × 35 cm</p> | <p>9
<i>Nets, 2023</i>
Pencil on paper
50 × 35 cm</p> | <p>14
<i>Best Wishes For You, 2024</i>
Wall, 3D soft bricks, bed, plastic cover, candies, slippers</p> | <p>17
<i>Untitled (After Love), 2021,</i>
HD video, 16:9, 16'26", color, sound</p> |
| <p>2
<i>What Utopia Do You Strive For?, 2023</i>
Pencil on paper
50 × 35 cm</p> | <p>6
<i>Watch House, 2023</i>
Pencil on paper
50 × 35 cm</p> | <p>10
<i>Toys'r'Us, 2023</i>
Pencil on paper
50 × 35 cm</p> | <p>15
<i>If I Can Make It There..., 2024</i>
HD video, 16:9, 12'47", color, sound</p> | <p><i>EOD, 2023,</i>
HD video, 16:9, 3'19", color, sound</p> |
| <p>3
<i>Once is an Accident, Twice is a Coincidence, Three Times is a Pattern, 2023</i>
Pencil on paper
50 × 35 cm</p> | <p>7
<i>Turning My 97 Year Old Grandma Into Me, 2023</i>
Pencil on paper
50 × 35 cm</p> | <p>11
<i>Best Haul, 2023</i>
Pencil on paper
50 × 35 cm</p> | <p>16
<i>Cassetta Pubblicità (Amicizia Irl / New Mentality), 2024</i>
Stickers, top with tag, plastic eggs, ribbon with magnets, found mailbox
32 × 31 cm</p> | |
| <p>4
<i>Without You I'm Nothing, 2023</i>
Pencil on paper
50 × 35 cm</p> | <p>8
<i>Maybe She's Born With It (No Dress, No Phone, No Money, No Work), 2023</i>
Pencil on paper
50 × 35 cm</p> | <p>12
<i>Pr Pr, 2023</i>
Pencil on paper
50 × 35 cm</p> | | |
| | | <p>13
<i>Safe Crash, 2023</i>
Found glass, lacquered wooden frame, mirror, vinyl, fabric
25 × 51.5 × 5.5cm</p> | | |