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Abstract

Art historian Wu Hunga, one of the first to describe contemporary Chinese art, suggested that in the Chinese context it should rather be called experimental (shiyan yishu) 1 then postmodern, as it diverges chronologically from the development of Western art. In 2005, he wrote that he saw the following stages: 1979-1984, the time of the formation of unofficial art; 1985-1989, known as the 'New Wave of Art '85' and the 'China/Avant-garde' exhibition in Beijing as a result of this period; then 1990-1993, when Chinese experimental art entered the world market; and finally, from 1994 to the present, art as a critique of the socio-cultural situation in China 2 . Now, after more than fifteen years, it would be appropriate to add further stages, including certainly the extremely intense development after 2004 of art using new information technologies and social media.

Index terms—

1 Introduction

rt historian Wu Hunga, one of the first to describe contemporary Chinese art, suggested that in the Chinese context it should rather be called experimental (shiyan yishu) **??** then postmodern, as it diverges chronologically from the development of Western art. In 2005, he wrote that he saw the following stages: 1979-1984, the time of the formation of unofficial art; 1985-1989, known as the 'New Wave of Art '85' and the 'China/Avant-garde' exhibition in Beijing as a result of this period; then 1990-1993, when Chinese experimental art entered the world market; and finally, from 1994 to the present, art as a critique of the socio-cultural situation in China 2 "If the shift from the information society to the means-ofaccess-to-information society had been particularly fruitful for the development of multiple lines of media art, then the changes that were bringing about a personal-means-ofaccess-to-and-broadcasting-of information society were proving to be even more promising. Before long, blogs, microblogging platforms, metaverse, social networks and the emerging collective archives for photography and video had all become new contexts for artists to carry out critical action and exploration. This was the beginning of social media art, the range of artistic practices that would use the emerging participative platform of Web 2.0 as their own particular filed of the action" . Now, after more than fifteen years, it would be appropriate to add further stages, including certainly the extremely intense development after 2004 of art using new information technologies and social media.

This change is aptly described by Juan Martín Prada, a researcher into the influence of network culture on art:

3

The strong impact of social media in particular on artistic creativity is also highlighted by US journalist Naomi Martin, stating: "Almost every aspect of our lives is now being dictated by social media. We look to the omnipresent, all-seeing forces of Instagram, Facebook and Twitter to communicate, keep up with the world, . **??** schedule our events, satisfy our most materialistic needs or even quench ourthirst for activism, the list goes on. It is therefore only natural for art, in its ceaseless ability to both reflect and influence its host cultures, to be entwined in the ever-growing web of social media **??** While, in 2017, preparing for the fourth edition of a book Themes of Contemporary Art: Visual Art after

2 ".

It is not surprising, then, that in the age of networked globalisation, Chinese artists have been keen to embrace the new possibilities offered by the webs, virtual spaces and social media as well. However, studying their work raises many questions. Is creation in the virtual world becoming for them an escape from the surrounding reality? A zone of relaxation? Or perhaps a place where it is safe, beyond censorship, to describe reality? Outside surveillance to point out social problems? To talk about their inadequacies, but also to create a safe space for the exchange of experiences? Let us therefore take a look at selected works by Feng Mengbo (b. 1966, Beijing), Bu Hua (b. 1973, Beijing), Cao Fei (b. 1978, Guangzhou), Lu Yang (1984, Shanghai), Silas Fong (b. 1985, Hong Kong) and Funa Ye (b. 1986, Kunming), among others, to try to find answers to these questions. The artists identified belong to several different generations, having been brought up in different realities that have significantly influenced their inspirations and the subjects they take up. This selection makes it possible to see the broad spectrum of their different attitudes and artistic strategies employed.

3 II.

4 Fighting as Entertainment

One of the first Chinese artists to use computer software and networking capabilities as part of his art was Feng Mengbo (b. 1966, Beijing). In the early 1990s, he painted oil paintings combining the style of frames from popular RPG computer games with the iconography of the Cultural Revolution period (Game Over: Long March, 1993). Inspiration from youth pop culture would become a hallmark of his subsequent work. His first interactive work available online was the game My Private Album, which was based on family photographs and memorabilia. By following the fate of the artist's ancestors, we learn a micro-history that becomes a universal story about the past of the Chinese people in the past century. It depicts changes in customs and culture, which we read, among other things, from the transformations in clothing or the way the characters in the photographs self-present themselves **??** However, the most distinctive work for Feng is Q4U (2000-2002) presented in 2002 at Documenta 11 in Kassel .

5 7

In China, the amount of time children and young people spend playing consoles and computers has increased significantly since the 1990s, so it wasn't long before the media started talking about video game addiction, calling it 'digital heroin'

. It was a personalised version of the game Quake III Arena, a typical first-person shooter. It featured a 3D likeness of the artist holding a video camera in one hand and a plasma rifle in the other. During the presentation in Germany, three gaming stations and three large-format monitors were set up to follow the gameplay. The artist, on the other hand, was in China engaging in a game with players from all over the world via the Internet during the event. Participation in this bloody game during Documenta was banned for minors and therefore paradoxically censored. **??** . It was considered particularly worrying that video games were meant to distract students from learning. For them, they provided a platform for communication and the building of small communities, which they had been deprived of due to the 'one-child' (jìhuà shÄ?"ngyù zhèngcè) policy introduced in 1977. In June 2000, due to concerns about video game addiction, the State Council passed a bill containing regulations on their content and regulations on the operation of internet cafes and arcades 9

, which was one of the first censures imposed on this type of entertainment. In context, Feng Mengbo's creation of a work that is a personalised version of one of the most popular multiplayer games becomes an expression of rebellion against top-down leisure regulations. The choice of bloody entertainment in the face of this also seems to be no accident. Participation in a game taking place in an alternative reality was a form of safe discharge of emotions and frustrations acquired in the real world. For the artist, it was also a reckoning and, for others, a reminder of the historical events that took place during the Red Revolution. As a work of art, it drew attention to the issue of the restriction of freedom.

6 III.

7 A Collision of Realities

Christina Penetsdorfer, author of the biography Bu Hua (b. 1973, Beijing) in the catalogue 'Stepping out! Female identities in Chinese Contemporary Art' states that the artist: '(...) is considered an early representative and pioneer of so-called flash animation. One of her first animated works, Cat, was released online in 2002 and went viral before digital platforms like YouYube even existed **??**0 The hallmark of the artist's work, however, is above all the figure of the Young Pioneer Woman with a red kerchief around her neck. She is the artist's alter ego, the perfect embodiment of the sa mi, or fearless and swaggering girl, according to Beijing dialect. This character appears in almost all of Bu's creationspaintings, prints and animated films. They are distinguished by the style developed by the artist, which combines inspirations from both Eastern tradition, particularly Chinese woodcut, and Western tradition. "Eclectic influences from sources as diverse as Surrealism, Japanese 1920s modernity, contemporary anime and manga, and Art Deco design are evident here. Bu Hua loves Astro Boy and Salvador

Dali equally ". For this animation, Bu Hua received the Best New Director Award at the 2003 China Qingdao International Animation Week. It tells the story of the love between a female cat and her kitten, who, in order to bring her back to life, follows her mother into the underworld. It foreshadows Bu Hua's later works, in which wandering between different worlds is a defining element. ", aptly observes Luise Guest, author of Half the Sky: Women Artists in China. One can also find influences of German Expressionism or references to the horror vacui typical of Baroque art. In her works, the iconography of Chinese art is intertwined with motifs characteristic of Western still lifes or modern ornamentation (the result of continuing art studies in Amsterdam between 1996 and 1998).

Volume XXII Issue XI Version I 12 ( ) Seemingly frivolous and free-form, the artist's animations address important issues in contemporary China, such as the social transformation, comsumptionism, and ecological destruction. Savage Growth (2008), for example, tells the story of a Pioneer woman struggling against urbanisation. We move with her from an idealistic world full of friendly and beautiful creatures to a 'nightmarish world of cities that never stop growing, like mutating cancerous cells' **??**2 . Resistance becomes impossible. The consequences of this imbalance between civilisational development and nature, in turn, are illustrated by the flash animation LV Forest (2010). Being "more nightmare than fairytale" **??**3 shows a world of excess, inequality and intolerance. In the film, we follow the figure of a naked girl dancing amidst accumulated possessions, riding triumphantly on skeletal monsters, and during a violent fight with other women on the streets of a phantasmagorical city.

Quintessential to both the style and content of the artist's message is a monumental silk wall carpet, measuring 200 x 300 cm, under the title Brave Diligent (2014). It depicts the Young Pioneer Woman standing at the top of a mountain, in the rays of the setting sun, taking up arms against an approaching plane symbolising industrialisation. Her image is framed by chrysanthemums, signifying longevity in Chinese tradition, as well as cranes, magpies, phoenixes and other mystical birds. The artist's alter ego attempts to save the world she has created (read: desired) from annihilation. By accompanying her, we want it to succeed.

8 IV.

9 Utopia as a New Reality

Not much younger than Bu Hua, Cao Fei (b. 1978, Guangzhou) grapples with similar issues in her work. In order to address issues such as identity or ecology safely and beyond censorship, they both create alternative universes. According to art historian Luise Guise, who researched and interviewed dozens of Chinese women artists for five years, she states that: "These are artists [Bu Hua and Cao Fei] who have little or no first-hand experience of the tragedy and bitterness of the Cultural Revolution, growing up during a period in which an isolationist Cold War mentality gradually collapsed. They are generally not making work about democratic freedoms, despite what some western commentators might wish and expect Chinese artists to do. They do, however, make reference in their work to the issues that concern them: from materialism and urbanisation to environmental degradation; from sexuality and motherhood to the impact of biotechnologies on the human body. Many are deeply interested in a revival of spirituality, in particular the traditions of Buddhism and Taoism" **??**4 .

In 2006, Cao Fei made the video Whose Utopia **??**5 , showing workers at the Osram light bulb factory in Guangzhou. We see them not at their traditional workplaces, but playing out their dream life roles/occupations. Most of them are so-called 'itinerant workers' who have lost their citizenship rights after leaving their home village in search of income opportunities. Often working beyond the norm, without health care or other labour privileges. It is difficult, therefore, not to read this work as a critical commentary on China's overly rapid urbanisation and the legal changes that did not follow in parallel. It certainly became the impetus for the artist's subsequent longterm and intertwined projects Second Life and RMB City, created in collaboration with Vitamin Creative Space since 2007. In both, she creates virtual worlds, imitating a contemporary Chinese city with its advantages and disadvantages.

Within the former, she creates an avatar -an idealised version of herself named China Tracy. Her adventures in an alternative, parallel universe (on the virtual platform Second Life) were documented using technology specific to computer gaming. Their course was then publicly traceable for the first time by viewing the work i.MIRROR -A Second Life Documentary Film by China Tracy in the China Pavilion at the 2007 Venice Biennale. The work was presented, inside a cloud-like tent in the garden of the pavilion, which was further intended to introduce the audience to a space different from the everyday. The aim of this procedure, but also of the entire installation, was to blur the boundary between fiction and reality, between documentary and fantasy, between the virtual and the material dawn. This was to further emphasise the illusion of the utopia of the created worlds, for as Luise Guest aptly commented on this work, "Despite the apparent freedom of the artist's avatar there is a sense of isolation and detachment 16 ". Ironically, although we create ideal virtual realities, we also make the same human mistakes in their spaces. "(...) Perhaps no longer important to draw the line between the virtual and the Real as the border between the two Has been blurred. In the virtual land, we are not what we originally are, and yet we remain unchanged 17 ", commented the artist herself.

In the concurrently emerging RMB City 18 -a virtual world accessible online -the artist focuses on the issue of consumerism and materialism, as Bu Hua does in her works. "Her imaginary city, surrounded by water, is a hybrid of communism, capitalism and socialism, a construction which appropriates the architectural icons of

Chinese cities, such as Beijing's 'Bird's Nest' stadium, all condensed into one, indistinguishable megalopolis. She satirises the Chinese obsession with real estate 19 ". Indeed, the titular metropolis is inspired by the urban planning of Beijing, but also Shanghai and other Chinese cities. It features the Gate of Heavenly Calm with a portrait of a panda in place of Mao Zendong's portrait, the CCTV building or the Oriental Pearl Tower. The artist, through her avatar China Tracy, sold virtual real estate to the willing, thus revealing the mechanisms behind the rapid redevelopment of Chinese cities. In addition, the digital world has become a platform for free discussion of art, urbanisation and other thorny issues affecting Chinese citizens 20 .

V.

10 Virtual Mandala

Lu Yang (1984, Shanghai) is another artist creating virtual worlds as part of her artistic work. Like Bu Hua and Cao Fei, she will create her avatar; moreover, like the pioneer in this field, Feng Mengbo, she uses the specificity of video games to address issues such as contemporary spirituality, identity, gender, discrimination and personal freedom. A strong fascination with Japanese pop culture is also discernible in her work.

Since the late twentieth century, the Chinese, but also Koreans and other Asian nations, have imitated selected creations of contemporary Japanese culture, such as manga and anime, cosplay and the related otaku subculture and kawaii aesthetic 21 . Called Cool Japan for short, this phenomenon also extends to America and Europe. Yoshiko Shimada, an artist and writer, in her essay 'Afterword. Japanese Pop Culure and the Eradication of the History', states that the creation of an image of Japan in Asia through the use of pop culture aims to erase the tragic events of 20th century history perpetrated by the Japanese people, such as mass murder and slave prostitution. In this way, new generations of Asians see Japan only through the prism **??**8 Official website of the project: https://rmbcity.com/ **??**9 of 'cool' comics, films and fashion 22 . It sees them as a reflection of freedom, liberty and tolerance. This is especially true of the generation born around 1980, looking for new social role models, a generation which, according to Harold Grieves: "(...) is not only marked by conflicts between traditional values and the furtive promise of an anticipated future, but also by an outright 'fear of plunging into the brutal nightmare of a society based on a combination of totalitarian politics and materialist values' 23 " 24 .

Lu constructs virtual worlds that follow the rules typical of RPGs, combining indigenous beliefs, inspiration from Japanese aesthetics and the effects of contemporary neuroscience research. This is perfectly evident in her projects such as UterusMan (2013), Wrathful King Kong Core (2014), and Lu Yang Delusional Mandala (2015). The superhero of the first is an androgynous figure whose body mimics the shape of a womb, "rides in a pelvis-shaped chariot, conquers enemies by altering their DNA, even unleashes streams of blood that set off atomic explosions 25 ". The second a Tibetan Buddhist deity, Yamantaka, guardian of the gateway to hell, in the third is a genderless avatar based on a 3D scan of her face. They all traverse virtual worlds like typical video game characters. This artist's work is perfectly summed up by the art critic Barbara Pollack: "In the psychedelic world of Lu Yang, consciousness is the product of a 3-D printer, manufactured from a blend of neuroscience, androgynous genitalia, digital circuitry, and Tibetan Buddhism. At one moment, an angry deity is eviscerated by a team of scientists; in another, disabled patients twitch to the beat of techno music. Her work is always intriguing and often disturbing, as she foregrounds her research into scientific phenomena and religious experience without allowing this sheer mass of information to overwhelm her keen sense of style 26 .

Communing with Lu Yuan's works is difficult but also absorbing. They are reminiscent of dreamlike images or even nightmares. They affect all the senses, often evoking a feeling of revulsion, while at the same time focusing attention on difficult existential dilemmas. They raise sensitive issues of sexuality and creative freedom. They pose questions about the consequences of modern technology and genetic modification. Their aesthetics, verging on kitsch, are part of the Camp Year 2022 A Battlegrounds. Net Art and Virtual Worlds in the Work of Chinese Artists aesthetic described by Susan Sonntag in her essay titled Notes on 'Camp' in 1964: "For Camp art is often decorative art, emphasizing texture, sensuous surface, and style at the expense of content. (...) It offers no opportunity, (...) for a contrast between silly or extravagant content and rich form" 27 . Camp art is artificial, theatrical, affected, ironic, based on exaggeration and stylisation. We can easily find all these characteristics in Lu Yang's works, in which the protagonists have to face stereotypes, intolerance, prejudices, fears... and the viewers follow them with their own as well.

11 VI.

12 Talking to a Stranger

Although he does not build his own virtual realities, Silas Fong (b. 1985, Hong Kong) nevertheless creates typical pieces of web art using networked tools. In 2008, this led to the work Surveil the stranger, which was presented as a computer installation with a weblog displayed on a monitor containing material submitted by his readers of the title observations made. The artist encouraged this act of voyeurism by writing on the website: "Because you are curious, because you feel excited. Around you, there are people that you don't even know, that you have never seen, that you are not familiar with, that you are curious of, that you have watched for some time. Surveil them, forget your sense of guilty, follow your curiosity, share what you know about them like everyone does" 28 . This was not the artist's only work addressing the issue of watching others without their awareness. In the same year, he produced When the door opens, a video recording behaviour on the underground, and a year later

Waiting, of people sitting on benches at Times Square in Hong Kong. And in 2013, he invited stalkers to give him interviews, from which he edited Interview Service Provider.

The reactions and feelings associated with contact with a stranger are the centre of his interest, which he explores in his work using online tools. He explores the boundaries between private and public, intimacy and ostentation. The web is also a way for the artist to disseminate his art. In an interview in the catalogue of the exhibition Work in Spreading: Images of Circulation and Retranslation, he stated that: "In my opinion, in the contemporary art, two space [the artwork in the exhibition hall or in the media] is the same important, but most people are still more accustomed to finding the exhibition methods is more serious, more attractive; in other media, especially networks, can break through geographical restrictions, immediately display works to the world 29 ".

Another interesting work by Fong is Memory Disorder (2011). This time the artist explores the mechanisms involved in memory. To this end, he placed footage ranges from telecined super 8 film, web cam, photographs and digital video cameras at different qualities, which 'was displayed in a web browsing environment in multi-channels. With different internet connection speed, system of the computer and the dimension of monitor, the work can be viewed differently in the sequential arrangement and content narrated" **??**0 . The website imitates the activity of the human brain, which emits different memories depending on various stimuli. They are not recalled chronologically, but nonlinearly, which is how internet networks work. By creating virtual worlds, in order to escape reality, we build them by mimicking our human experiences in the real world.

13 VII.

14 Cute and Queer

Networked technological possibilities are also used by Ye Funa (b. 1986, Kunming), who, like Lu Yang, creates under the significant influence of Japanese pop culture. She was initiator with involvement of Bei Ou of three artistic events from Exhibitionist: PeeP Stream Series, called The Book of Otaku in December 2015, in which several unprofessional performers took part. It was shown live on line. At the same time, previously invited viewers were able to post their comments about it in a specially created chat room-thus becoming active participants in the events. Their statements, including gift icons and emojis, were included as a part of the artistic project. As Ye Funa commented in correspondence with the author of this article: "Live streaming culture has become very popular in China over these two years. More than 500 different apps [applications] have been in developed. We work with some of most popular apps such as yi zhibo, Re Bo Jian, Douyu etc" 31 . (Ye 2017). Exhibitionist: Peep Stream Series was an innovative art project, which on the cover on funny entourage, raised a question about contemporary consumerism, violence and admiration, the boundaries between what is public and domestic, sexual identity, and a lot of other significant social-political issues. Through the use of new technologies, it circumvents the prevailing censorship and allows networking to help in the silent struggle against discrimination and restrictions on personal freedom.

15 These three episodes of

16 VIII. Better Reality or Battlespace ?

A symbolic, 'bang on' (figuratively and in fact) entry of women into the Chinese contemporary art scene was the performance Pistol Shot Event 33 by Lu Xiao (b. 1962, Hangzhou) in 1989 during the exhibition 'China Avant-Garde', presented at the National Art Gallery in Beijing. The exhibition was a summary of the avant-garde movement '85 New Wave Art' ('85 meishu xinchao) 34 , which, despite its innovative approach to art, was still male-dominated. Lu Xiao's action was an expression of rebellion against the patriarchality of Chinese society and art circles at the same time. Leonora Elkin comments on the performance, and on the situation of female artists in China at the time, as follows: "While this act may have signaled women's independence and strength in making art, the furor and world attention that subsequently caused a commercial rush of acquisition of post Tienanmen art was directed to work produced by men. Regardless of state directed gender equality reform, China remains largely a patriarchal society and women were not supported by galleries and the cultural establishment 35 . Lu Xiao's performance was an extremely talkedabout event and made a lasting mark in the history of contemporary Chinese art, as it became, among other things, the pretext for the censorship and consequent closure of the China Avant-Garde exhibition by the authorities. However, it became an important signpost for subsequent generations of female artists such as Bu Hua, Cao Fei, Lu Yang and Ye Funa. Unlike Lu Xiao, however, they moved their battles to virtual realities and into cyberspace. Furthermore, according to Luise Guest, their work was guided by the following goal: "They have a restless desire to blur boundaries -between fine art and design, between the artworld and the commercial marketplace, between genres and conventions of artistic practice, and between eastern and western modes of expression 36 ". Similarly, male artists (Feng Mengbo and Fong Silas), for whom pop culture and new technologies have become an effective artistic medium for sharing reflections on social and

[Note: 2 Ibid, p. 16. 3 Martín Prada, Juan. (2019). 'Towards a Theory of Social Media Art'. In Juan Martín Prada (Ed.) Art, Images and Network Culture, Aula Magna-McGraw Hill, 2021. pp. 17-34.]

Figure 1:

[Note: 5 Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel, Themes of Contemporary Art. Visual Art after 1980, 4th ed., New York: Oxford University Press 2017, p. 28-29.]

Figure 2:

278 political issues. In the works of all these artists, virtual spaces are both a place of escape from reality and a
279 battleground. [1] [2] [3] [4] [5] [6]

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[2]Birgit Hopfener, Feng Mengbo. In China. Artbook, eds. Uta Grosenick, Caspar H. Schübbe, Dumont, Köln 2007, p. 88-95. 7 Documentation of this project: https://youtu.be/CWAHmjnBqQ8 8 Sara X. T. Liao, Japanese Console Games Popularization in China: Governance, Copycats, and Gamers, 'Games and Culture' 2016, Vol. 11(3), 275-297. doi: 10.1177/1555412015583574. 9 Ibid.

[3]Luise Guest, Half the Sky: Women Artists in China, Piper Press 2016, p. 15. 13 White Rabbit. Contemporary Chinese Art Collection, https://explore. dangrove.org/objects/470

[4]Luise Guest, Half the Sky: Women Artists in China, Piper Press 2016, p. 15. 15 For more on this work Whose Utopia see Monica Merlin, Cao Fei: Rethinking the global/local discipleship, Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art Vol. 5, No. 1, 2018, pp. 41-60. 16 Luise Guest, Half the Sky: Women Artists in China, Piper Press 2016, p. 28. 17 Christina Penetsdorfer, Cao Fei. In Stepping out! Female identities in Chinese Contemporary Art, eds. Nils Ohlsen, Kunstforeningen GL STRAND 2022, p. 102.

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[6]Luise Guest, Half the Sky: Women Artists in China, Piper Press 2016, p. 11.

Figure 3:

Figure 4:

[Pollack and Yang] , Barbara Pollack , Lu Yang . COBO SOCIAL. p. 27.

[Pollack and Yang] , Barbara Pollack , Lu Yang . COBO SOCIAL. p. 27.

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