Volume 22 Issue 53
Originally issued as A11



Global Journal of human-social science: A
Arts & Humanities - Psychology
Volume 22 Issue 11 Version 1.0 Year 2022
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

Battlegrounds. Net Art and Virtual Worlds in the Work of Chinese Artists

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Introduction- 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.

GJHSS-A Classification: DDC Code: 302.23 LCC Code: HM258



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Battlegrounds. Net Art and Virtual Worlds in the Work of Chinese Artists

Magdalena Furmanik-Kowalska

I. Introduction

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.

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

> "If the shift from the information society to the means-of-access-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-of-access-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"[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[4]".

While, in 2017, preparing for the fourth edition of a book *Themes of Contemporary Art: Visual Art after 1980*, art historians Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel decided that it is important to extend their publication to include the impact of digital technologies on contemporary art. They wrote: "The languages of digital media are bound to have a radical impact on visual art as the twenty-first century continues to unfold. Artists who are exploring this area are pioneers in helping us to confront what it means to live in world of accelerated information flow from multiple channels and to find ourselves entranced by manufactured virtual worlds[5] ".

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.

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[1] Cf. Wu Hung, *Transience. Chinese Experimental at the End of the Twentieth Century*, The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago Press, Hong Kong 2005, p. 15.
[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.
[4] Naomi Martin, *How Social Media Is Shaping Art - The Impact of an Instagram Obsessed Culture*, 'Artland Magazine', https://magazine.artland.com/how-social-media-is-shaping-art-the-impact-of-an-instagram-obsessed-culture/
[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.

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II. 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[6].

However, the most distinctive work for Feng is *Q4U* (2000-2002) presented in 2002 at Documenta 11 in Kassel[7]. 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.

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'[8]. 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 shēngyù 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.

III. 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[10] ". 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.

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 creations - paintings, 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[11]", 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).

[6] 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.

[10] Christina Penetsdorfer, *Bu Hua.* In *Stepping out! Female identities in Chinese Contemporary Art,* eds. Nils Ohlsen, Kunstforeningen GL STRAND 2022, p. 82.
[11] Luise Guest, *Half the Sky: Women Artists in China*, Piper Press 2016, p. 16.

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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'[12]. 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 fairy-tale"[13] 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.

IV. 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"[14] .

In 2006, Cao Fei made the video *Whose Utopia*[15], 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 long-term 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.

[12] 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
[14] 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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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. 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 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

[18] Official website of the project: https://rmbcity.com/

[19] Luise Guest, *Half the Sky: Women Artists in China*, Piper Press 2016, p. 28.

[20] Xhingyu Chen, *Chinese Artists. New Media, 1990-2010*, Schiffer Publishing Ltd., Atglen 2010, p. 165.

[21] For more see Magdalena Furmanik-Kowalska, Uwikłane w kulturę. Współczesna sztuka artystek Japońskich I Chińskich [Culture Trouble: The Contemporary Art of Japanese and Chinese Women], Kirin Publishing House, Bydgoszcz 2015; Magdalena Furmanik-Kowalska, Social media art and/or interactive art? Exhibitionist: PeeP Stream by Ye Funa and Bei Ou, "World Art.", Volume 12, 2022, Issue 1, pp. 49-66, doi: 10.1080/21500894.2021.1991464

[22] Cf. Yoshiko Shimada, *Afterword. Japanese Pop Culure and the Eradication of the History*. In *Consuming Bodies. Sex and Contemporary Japanese Art,* ed. by Frank Lloyd, Reaktion Books, London 2002, pp. 186-191.

[23] Hou Hanru, *Cao Fei. A Mini-Manifesto of New New Human Beings*, Flash Art, no. 242, May-June 2005, pp. 126-127.

[24] Harold Grieves, *Any World's an Abyss*, http://www.ima.org.au/pages/.exhibits/utopia150.php.

[25] Barbara Pollack, *Lu Yang: Delusional Mandala,* COBO SOCIAL, 27 Jun. 2022, https://www.cobosocial.com/dossiers/lu-yang-delusional-mandala/

[26] Barbara Pollack, *Lu Yang: Delusional Mandala,* COBO SOCIAL, 27 Jun. 2022, https://www.cobosocial.com/dossiers/lu-yang-delusional-mandala/

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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.

VI. 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"[30]. The website imitates the activity of the human brain, which emits different memories depending on various stimuli. They are not recalled chronologically, but non-linearly, 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.

VII. 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).

These three episodes of *Exhibitionist* with the common title of *The Book of Otaku* include: *The Book of Kichiku, The Book of Otome,* and *The Book of Fag hag*. They exhibited various forms of the *otaku* as well as homosexual subculture[32]. All the events had the same composition and camp aesthetic. The presenters' shows were interlaced with five different scenes- stories about violence in The *Book of Kichiku*, about sexuality in *The Book of Otome,* and about devotion in The Book of *Fag Hag*. At the same time the stories are reviewed on social media communicators.

[27] Sontag, Susan (1964), 'Notes on Camp', *Partisan Review*, 1964, p. 3; https://archive.org/details/SontagNotesOnCamp1964. Accessed 20 October 2017.
[28] http://silasfong.com/news/2008/04/06/poetry-of-colors/
[29] *Work in Spreading: Images of Circulation and Retranslation* (exhibition catalogue), eds. Zuo Jing, Dong Bingfeng, Sun Jianchun, Timezone 8 Limited 2010, p. 67.
[30] http://silasfong.com/news/2011/04/10/memory-disorder/
[31] Funa Ye, email to author, 24 September 2017.
[32] Funa Ye, '*Exhibitionist Series*', 2015, http://funaye.com/archives/245. Accessed 20 October 2017.

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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.

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 talked-about 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 political issues. In the works of all these artists, virtual spaces are both a place of escape from reality and a battleground.

[33] For more see Thomas J. Berghuis, *Perfomance Art in China*, Timezone 8, Hong Kong 2006, p. 90-91; Adele Tan, *Elusive Disclosures, Shooting Desire. Xiao Lu and the Missing Sex of Post-89 Performance Art in China* [in:] *Negotiating Difference. Contemporary Chinese Art in the Global Context*, ed. Birgit Hopfener, Franziska Koch, Jeong-hee Lee-Kalisch, Juliane Noth, VDG Weimar, Weimar 2012, p. 127-140.

[34] For more see Xu Hong, *Dialogue. The Awakening...,* p. 18; Xu Hong, *Chinese Art:* In *Art and Social Change. Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Caroline Turner, Pandanus Books, The Australian National University, Canberra 2005, pp. 333-335.

[35] Lenora Elkin, *Women's Work. The History of Women's Art in China.* In Micheal Cor, Lenora Elkin, Lawrence Ly, Veronica Krawcewicz, Kelsey Stephenson, Lu Qing, *Ma-China,* University of Alberta, Edmonton 2009-2010, p. 11.

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

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