

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Cao Fei

MOMA PS1

NEW YORK CITY

APRIL 3–AUGUST 30, 2016

It has been nearly a decade since Cao Fei, then twenty-nine years old, represented China as the youngest of the four women artists in its *Everyday Miracles* pavilion exhibition at the 2007 Venice Biennale. Her contribution was the now-legendary *China Tracy Pavilion*, a virtual biennial pavilion in RMB City (2007–11), the digital city Cao built in the online gaming platform Second Life. The physical manifestation of Cao's *Pavilion*, authored under the auspices of her online avatar China Tracy, was an inflatable domed structure at the actual Biennale modeled after its virtual form within *RMB City*. The "real-life" pavilion opened with a live stream of a virtual opening in Second Life, presided over by well-known curators, gallerists, collectors, and patrons controlling avatars of themselves from remote locations.

Cao's eponymous midcareer retrospective at PS1, curated by Klaus Biesenbach, was organized around large-scale projections of major works, usually accompanied by installations of related ephemera and art photograph-sized stills from the videos. This strategy treated Cao's often primarily moving image-based but multifaceted works as effectively "just" video art. One wonders: with the exception of the tableau-based *COSPlayers* (2004), which is formally best suited to the "mobile spectator" paradigm of looping video projection, might a series of theatrical screenings have been the more effective retrospective format? Simultaneously, the social nature of two of Cao's most important projects, *RMB City* and *What are you doing here?* (2006–07), the latter a social practice residency sponsored by the Siemens technology conglomerate, all but guarantees that something will be lost in their translation to museum retrospective.

The exhibition's decision to present Cao's videos alongside their props and physical supports often followed the artist's original exhibitions of these works. Accompanying several videos from *RMB City* were white, logo-branded promotional hard hats, shovels, and work boots from the project's "Investors World Premiere" at Art Basel Miami Beach in 2007, in which Cao's Chinese gallery Vitamin Creative Space sold virtual *RMB City* real estate. *Whose Utopia* (2006), the video that resulted from *What are you doing here?*, screened opposite an installation featuring a bunk bed nested in a corner walled by cardboard boxes marked "Utopia Factory." Unlike the staid living conditions in the Chinese factory town dorms depicted in the video, the installation's bunk bed was outfitted with sheets and pajamas emblazoned with East Asian cartoon characters and papered with pop star posters, with teen celebrity magazines strewn about the bunks, proposing an intimate fantasy world to compensate for the migrant worker's lack of traditional domesticity.

Predominantly absent in the exhibition, however, was what these supports and add-ons had originally contributed to the video works and their larger conceits. The residency project *What are you doing here?* featured workshops in which Cao helped factory workers in Foshan to develop their own creative activities, resulting in some of the dances that would be performed in *Whose Utopia*; the formation by several workers of the dream-pop band that soundtracked the video's third section; and the creation of a worker-produced newspaper called *Utopia Daily*, stacks of which



Bunny's World from the series *Un-Cosplayer* (2004) by Cao Fei; courtesy the artist and Vitamin Creative Space

were available at the retrospective. In the context of the exhibition, those newspapers seemed like yet more minor add-ons. Similarly, the "real" real estate office that sold virtual real estate at Art Basel Miami Beach was reduced to swag in one corner and a podium in the shape of *RMB City*'s logo on the opposite end of the gallery. The interactive nature of *RMB City*, not limited to the democratic gesture of inviting anyone with an internet connection to a Venice Biennale opening, was limited to one computer terminal running *RMB City* (taken offline in 2011) on a Second Life emulator. Here, the arc of *RMB City* was also absent. By itself, the building of a virtual city and selling space within it is a brilliant satire of China's rapid twenty-first century modernization, and especially the dramatic physical changes made to the Chinese landscape in the years leading up to the 2008 Olympic Games. However, a much richer trajectory could have been traced in *RMB City*'s development from art biennial, to real estate office, to eventually going dark in 2011 just as Cao debuted *Apocalypse Tomorrow: Surf in RMB City* (also not present), a video game that allowed users to navigate a post-apocalyptic simulation of the virtual city using a foot-controlled skimboard. It is difficult, for instance, not to read this arc as an allegory for millennial China's state of perpetual construction, and art's crucial supporting role to the country's real estate industrial complex.

Staging and omissions aside, the exhibition's selection of videos and projects reveals a prodigious body of work that may be as poignant a reflection on globalization as that of any artist in this century. Cao's early video works (created between 1995 and 2003), subordinated to small monitors arranged around a circular table, display a concern with localized communities that mostly disappeared from her work of the last decade. The most famous of these, 2003's *Hip Hop: Guangzhou*, documents normal people from all walks of life dancing to hip-hop music on the streets of Cao's hometown. Though it was given its own gallery space as one of Cao's "mature" works, *COSPlayers*, which portrays Guangzhou youths engaging in costumed live-action role-play in public space, should also count as an early work for its commingling of local subculture and everyday life.

Hip Hop: Guangzhou and *COSPlayers* mark a breakthrough for Cao, as both display a concern with urban topography that

continues to the present. That thread runs through *RMB City* to the two most recent videos included in the exhibition: *Haze and Fog* (2013) and *La Town* (2014). *RMB City*, however, introduces a larger thematic turn: toward the politics of urban development and real estate. *Haze and Fog* is an alternately slapstick and melodramatic zombie movie set in a new Beijing housing development. *La Town* appropriates Marguerite Duras's dialogue from *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) to narrate a video comprised of mostly panoramic panning shots of miniature tableaux made of figurines and toy models—including a toy fire engine "stolen" from the artist's son. Post-apocalyptic landscapes and disaster scenes give way by the end of *La Town* to dioramas in a museum. Mirroring this denouement, the exhibition paired the video with an entire gallery devoted to the tableaux that served as the film's sets, encased in vitrines. Following the *RMB City* adventure, which ended with its users digitally surfing among ruins, in *La Town* we encounter the perpetual construction of Chinese cities through the lens of apocalyptic science fiction. Throughout the video, a giant tortoise—comically out of scale with the other figures and models—reminds the viewer of a scale of time longer than the human lifespan, while the video's apocalyptic theme simultaneously intimates a future that will outlast the Anthropocene.

It has also been roughly a decade since the Chinese art boom hit North America. In hindsight, we can identify the prominence of some of the boom years' leading artists—Rong Rong, Zhang Huan, and Zhang Peili—along with the notoriety of Ai Weiwei during his 2011 detention, as symptoms of the global art world's

fetishization of the Chinese totalitarian and communist bodies. Not coincidentally, this overinvestment in the taxed (predominantly male) Chinese body came during the country's rapid modernization and economic liberalization, the enthusiastic consumption of this art by foreign audiences being part fearful demonization of the growing Chinese superpower, part celebration of triumphant global capitalism. By contrast, Cao's work could not be misread as the documentation of heroic resistance. Setting aside the exception of *Whose Utopia's* deterritorialized subjects, Cao's work of the last decade has responded to the body politics of that era's male art stars with avatars in *RMB City* (which only obliquely pointed to the displacement of millions of Chinese citizens for Olympic construction), zombies in *Haze and Fog*, toy figures in *La Town*, and robot vacuum cleaners in *Rumba II: Nomad* (2015), a wonderful new video not included in the exhibition but represented by a pair of the titular robot vacuum cleaners, each kaleidoscopically and unceasingly cleaning the surface of a white sculpture pedestal. Cao's work during the boom years thus held a mirror to the international success of her older male peers: in 2007, the same year Zhang Huan signed with the New York gallery PaceWildenstein, Cao debuted her project for the Venice Biennale in a literal bubble.

GODFRE LEUNG is a Minneapolis-based critic and assistant professor of art history at St. Cloud State University.



Constance Saltonstall
Foundation for the Arts
saltonstall.org

Saltonstall Arts Colony

Ithaca, NY

All-expenses-paid
residencies for New York
State artists and writers

2017 residency application
deadline: Jan. 2, 2017
(no application fee)