

Signal to Code

If the exhibition Signal to Code is compared to a physical site, it is both a “non-place”, the “tabulae- rasae” place of imagination and expectations, and a magical multifaceted space just like Borge’s Aleph. Like an airport, futuristic ideas reside in the waiting area, imagining the airplane that hasn’t arrived yet. They are located in the place that is physically amorphous and geographically undetectable, a site of “non-belonging”, just like the internet where the digital art exhibition itself is located. To enter the exhibition, is to abandon pre-conceived concepts and embrace new ones. The “non-place” is always dominated by indeterminacies that brings freedom of construction and the leniency of assembling unexpected pieces together.

On the other hand, Signal to Code is also a place like Borge’s Aleph. It is a small iridescent sphere of almost unbearable brilliance, a dizzying world where all space was there, actual and undiminished. Each thing was infinite things, since the I-narrator distinctly saw it from every angle of the universe. “O God! I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a King of Infinite space”, “ But they will teach us that Eternity is the Standing still of the Present Time, a Nunc-stans; which neither they, nor any else understand, no more than they would a Hic-stans for an Infinite greatness of Place.” The visual art, when curated into a collectivity, possess the quality of transcending language. It is not tethered to the strict rules of successiveness, but rather embraces the simultaneous existence of a single gigantic instant.

The show encompasses the following thematic areas, such as Techno Performance, Digital Books, Digital Asia and Global Media Heritage. When viewed independently, each section itself is a “non-place”, yet when the individual pieces are curated into an Aleph-like

collectivity moving across great geographic and temporal breadth, the “non-place” is no longer dislocated nor isolated.

Digital Asia

Just like how Wen Pulin describes, Asian art is especially connected with dislocation and the “non-place”. How to be recognized by the Western art world and be selected in exhibition? This is an essential question that haunts Asian artists. How to avoid political censorship when creativity should have been something free of all restraints? How does the Western art critics perceive the Asian art? Do they spontaneously project their pre-conceived conceptions upon the Asian artists and thus see what they wish to see? Are Asian artists catering to their taste for success?

Jacques Derrida has argued that “no translation would be possible” without “difference”: In the limits to which it is possible, or at least appears possible, translation practices the difference between signified and signifier. But if this difference is never pure, no more so is translation, and for the notion of translation we would have to substitute a notion of transformation : a regulated transformation of one language by another, of one text by another. We will never have, and in fact have never had, to do with some “transport” of pure signifieds from one language to another, or within one and the same language, that the signifying instrument would leave virgin and untouched. (Derrida 1981, 20. Derrida’s emphasis) Pierre Bourdieu has argued that “The literary or artistic field is a field of forces, but it is also a field of struggles tending to transform or converse this field of forces” (Bourdieu 1993, 30. Bourdieu’s emphasis). According to Bourdieu, in the field of cultural production, the struggle for power and dominance in the space of positions and position- takings is characterized by a displacement of the structure of the field of existent positions by new or advanced positions, which leads to a

displacement of the structure of tastes (58, 107–8). Just as how Bertolt Brecht has used Mei Lan Fang's Peking Opera performance as a proof for his own Alienation Effect, sometimes the Asian art could be used as a support for a Western theory or concept even though that might only be true under a certain context. In Brecht's case, when he was seeing Mei Lanfang's performance, Brecht was already armed with a formulated theory and synthesizing concept; his resultant interpretation of Chinese acting is actually a subjective concretization and elaboration of his own theory: a displacement of Mei Lanfang's art and Chinese acting in terms of his own theory.

Wen Pu Lin has talked about such a phenomenon in his interview. In his other interview, he has also sharply pointed out that in China the nineties is an era of consumption and diminishment for many Chinese artists and that there are a lot of “showing”---a performance of being avant-garde and being underground. The artists thought they could dominate the media, yet they were consumed first. Wen also thought criticized Chinese artists who intentionally demonstrate that their work is “made in China” for the Western collectors. He calls himself a vagrant, quoting the Water Margin reference in Chinese folklore. The Water Margin, set in the Song Dynasty, tells of how a group of 108 outlaws gather at Mount Liang to form a sizable army before they are eventually granted amnesty by the government and sent on campaigns to resist foreign invaders and suppress rebel forces. The attitude of displacement, of constantly on the road, of not having a home is the major concept of Wen Pulin's artwork, especially his documentary about Tibet. Bensmaïa is very insightful with his quote, “Kafka knew that to find justice — the justice that he was seeking, that traversed him — it was necessary to move, to go from one room to another, from office to office, from language to language, and from country to country, always following his desire.” This is exactly what Wen did with his artistic pursuits. Less interested in theories and concepts, he is more interested in the living lives of actual people.

He has a very controversial quote on the Met museum, since the juxtaposed artworks feel like dead corpses to him. He is more passionate about transcending the frameworks, the collections, the curations.

Video art is a powerful medium for him to document the flowing force of life and creativity. Video art is a dynamic expression which produced a sensation rather different from that possible in easel painting. This sensation lies in the stimulus which the remembering eye receives by carrying its attention from one detail, phase or sequence, to another that can be continued indefinitely. With this mechanism, Wen Pulin is able to record and capture the life forces of people living in Tibet, purified by their religious piety; juxtaposed with the chaotic and mundane lifestyle of Beijing Hutongers (People living in narrow alleys) with his video art, orchestrated with a essentialist rhythm.

Another fascinating artist in the Chinese Avant-garde Art Archive is Chen Lingyang. Her works usually explore the beauty of female bodies and their intrinsic meanings. In one of her major photography works, "Twelve Flower Months", what audience see through the traditional Chinese mirrors are no longer the "beautiful" faces and bodies we are accustomed to, but the female sex organs in menstruation. The traditional poetic Chinese concept of twelve flower months provides a metaphor for the female physiological truth of menstruation through the twelve months of the year. With the traditional Chinese forms of ancient mirrors and garden windows, gentle and sober disposal of light and color around the sexual organs, directness of menstrual blood and stimulation, Chen Lingyang breaks the tradition in a seemingly traditional way and destroys the "femininity" with a seemingly "feminine" approach. In the Tambllyn article, the author mentions the narcissistic video that Rosalind Krauss identified in her influential 1976 article, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism". In narcissistic video,

video's real medium is a psychological situation, the very terms of which are to withdraw attention from an external object---an Other---and invest it in the Self. The performer can use the video monitor as a mirror. The video camera and the monitor form a "parenthesis" that surrounds the body of the performer, who is thereby "self-encapsulated" in a continually renewed feedback loop. The privatized space made these tapes intrinsically narcissistic. Here Chen Ling Yang uses three types of interior space, the convention of the interior space in Chinese culture (Gui Fang, also known as Girl's room), the mirror and the video. It is interesting how geometrically, the body parts are dismembered by the edges of the mirror, creating a self-disruption. In conceptualizing heterotopia, Foucault suggests, the reflection associated with looking into the mirror is one of self-gazing. Chen Lingyang is gazing at her self through multiple lenses: her eye, the mirror, the camera, the photograph and finally the reproduction of that photograph. There is thus a reversibility as the body is both the perceiving subject and the object of perception; the artist is subjective and objective during the act of looking and being looked at by the self. A fascinating detail is that the first piece of the collection is January Narcissus, implying the Greek myth of Narcissus. Thus, the artist is conscious of the reflected act of self-gazing and self-critique. She is looking in to look out, utilizing visual art to reflect on the world. Tamblyn has also pointed out that the personal is political for feminist artists during that era. Women's inferior social and economic status had been linked by feminist theories to their linguistic inequality; women were not afforded the same opportunities to attain a mastery of language as were men. Lupton has indicated, "the bleeding vagina generates its own elaborate system of metaphors" which is "a widespread emblem in mythology, and a symbol in dreams and poetry." Chen Lingyang's cultivates a 'language of flowers' by incorporating the poetic Chinese concept of 'twelve flower months' therefore providing a metaphor for the female

biological actuality of menstruation over the cycle of one year, a visual language that is both tender and powerful.

Techno Performance

When talking about techno performance, it is impossible not to mention Heidegger. Heidegger has warned us of the danger of technology by stating that the threat is the essence because “the rule of enframing threatens man with the possibility that it could be denied to him to enter into a more original revealing and hence to experience the call of a more primal truth.” In Martin Heidegger’s fundamental text, *The Question Concerning Technology (Die Frage nach der Technik)*, he started with the essential question of considering the relationship with technology. Heidegger invites us to “prepare a free relationship to it”, as the relationship will only be free if it opens the human existence (Dasein) to the essence of technology.” “Technology is a means to an end and a human activity and to posit ends and procure and utilize the means to them is a human activity.” According to Heidegger, if technology is a means to a human end, the conception can therefore be called the instrumental and anthropological definition of technology. The reigning of means and ends leads the question further to causality: the four causes of the *causa materialis*, the *causa formalis*, the *causa finalis* and the *causa efficiens*. When these four elements work together to create something into appearance, it’s called bringing-forth, “brings out of concealment into unconcealment”. Modern technology, rather than the traditional sense of “unconcealment”, has its essence in Gestell or enframing. In defining the essence of technology as Gestell, Heidegger indicated that “all that has come to presence in the world has been enframed. Such enframing pertains to the manner reality appears or unveils itself in the period of modern technology and people born into this mode of ordering are always embedded into the

Gestell (the enframing).” Enframing is a way for the Dasein to exist in the world, “zu sein”, to be seen, heard, perceived and understood in the world.

It is also important to take into account, that Heidegger has also talked about the reflection on technology. Since the essence of technology is nothing technological, essential reflection upon technology and decisive confrontation with it must happen in a realm that is, on the one hand, akin to the essence of technology, and on the other, fundamentally different from it. Such a realm is art. The essential ideology of the show Techno Performance coincides with this point from Heidegger. The art world offers a mirror of essential reflection on the nontechnological essence of technology. The Techno Performance is about incorporating and challenging leading developments in engineering, information science, robotics and corollary scientific experimentations. It is a project made available by technology, while offering a meta-analysis on the essence of technology. Bringing together live media performance and the delights of technological development into the body/machine interface is extraordinarily fascinating as shown in the projects by Toni Dove and Ken Feingold that have celebrated the wonders of robotics and interactive technology, Eduardo Kac’s fluorescent genomic rabbits, Stelarc’s extra ear grown into his arm, to talk back to passersby via Bluetooth technology as well as the series of performances called 9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering that includes a blend of avant0garde theatre, dance and new technologies. There are three major vectors in posthumanism theories: the body, the animal, and the machine. The 9 Evenings art project manifests how the body is so tightly intertwined in a posthumanism age. A unique kind of reproduction is made possible by software---the post-mechanical reproduction, or a so-called “generative reproduction”. The prototype for this kind of post-mechanical reproduction is undoubtedly sexual and biological reproduction.

According to Malina, the limit and the challenge of digital generativity is “compassion”. Malina acknowledges that male dominance has affected the development of the computer, pushing development toward war games and toward mind-body dualism. Thus, the author Malina calls for a redirection of computer art toward “a technology of compassion” --- it could mean both the creation of a technology is directed by compassion, or that the end is determined by compassion. In relation to artificial intelligence, it might also mean that technology itself might be compassion, and that computer programs might be written that would emulate human compassion. Here is a quote by Haraway, “Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that would apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert.” In the very creative science fiction *Limbo*, citizens in society willingly amputate themselves in order to have advanced mechanical limbs. Of course, this is the most extreme case scenario. Human have subdued the machine by making himself into the machine. Peculiar sort of victory, won by incorporating the enemy into oneself. If imitation was the sincerest form of flattery, the overwhelmed machine had won the fight hands down: the master had become the mirror image of the slave.

Yet it is interesting to think about the body-machine relationship and the power distribution in this relationship, which are fully explored in the section *Techno Performance*. An interesting artwork in the *Techno Performance* section is Ken Feingold’s *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral*. Human beings may be able to transcend the boundaries of anthropocentrism, but it is impossible to escape the situation of anthropomorphism. Thus it is important to keep in mind issues such as the ethics of care, the philosophy of animal rights when viewing these artworks.

Digital Books

Artists such as Carrion, bpNichol and McCaffery all question the notion of the book as a neutral container of language or images, and they elaborate on the ways in which the material form of the text----including, in most cases, the form of the book itself---can and should be consciously engaged and explicitly considered as an integral part of the overall work of art. Thus they have coined the term *Materialzärtlichkeit* (material tenderness) to include the conscious orchestration and use of material, structural and social elements, within the process of producing multiple books. Since digital publishing also involve its own unique structural elements, one could say that in the realm of digital publishing there exists also the *Materialzärtlichkeit*. What exactly is this unique structure? The context would undoubtedly be the paradigm shift of “the linguistic turn” that led to the formation of conceptual art. Walter Benjamin has declared that “to an ever-increasing degree the work reproduced becomes the work designed for reproducibility”. If mechanical reproduction destabilizes the hierarchy between original and reproduction, then digital reproduction destabilizes the hierarchy between a physical copy (what Benjamin calls “reproduction”) and a data file. Digital---and of course not only digital--- reproducibility eludes the whole sphere of limitation. With the medium of digitality, one can keep the files, watch them again, even reedit and improve them if it’s necessary. The results circulate.

In the show *Signal to Code*, the book arts expanded into virtual form with digital graphics and interactive software. It is particularly interesting that “the middle shelf exhibits diverse approaches to blending traditional book art forms with digital and interactive systems. On the bottom shelf are books integrating print and media, surrounded by artistic case covers of some

CD-ROM art titles available on the adjacent iMacs and featured initially in the exhibition, *Contact Zones: The Art of CD-ROM*, hosted by the Cornell Library in 1999.”

The juxtaposition of traditional books with digital ones is a great manifestation of intersemiotic transformation. Diagrams, images and metaphors collectively form the three types of iconic signs. Pierce describes the creation of a diagram “as a process which involves construction of ‘hypothetical state of things’”, the forming “a plan of investigation”, the selection of “the features which it will be pertinent to pay attention to” and finally the repeated return to some of these features. Such a cognitive process can also explain the transformation from traditional books to digital ones. This transformation is in some ways, a deconstruction of the boundaries between verbal and visual culture. Sometimes when creating digital books, there is a pre-text or a canonical text as the first-order creation, with the visually constructed digital book as the second-order creation. Yet, there are other cases when what matters is no longer the narrative, but the medium and the conditions of production, a more hermeneutic concept of language. The other important point of books is that there has always been the mystical authority of the book, which is similar to the aura of the original artwork talked about by Benjamin, in contrast to the hybridizing act of reading and writing. The work *Fog* by Fujiko Nakaya is an interesting artist’s book on her own work. It breaks free from the “aura” or the tradition of books. Nakaya explains in the book that she doesn’t directly create images with her fog sculptures, instead the fog is a kind of transducer that reacts to the local meteorological conditions. The landscape can appear to be largely static until fog is introduced. With the introduction of fog, nature’s stories and information are made more accessible to the observer. This type of self-publishing is taking over the means of production for the artists to create their own meanings... The other fascinating artwork in this section is undoubtedly *Ghost City* by Jody Zelle. It is a

network of art production. Rather than emphasizing sophisticated uses of new technologies, it is directly engaging and effective, characterized by references to film and concrete poetry and by the scale and rapid pace at which the text appears. The texts and images change just quickly enough that sometimes it's impossible to read an entire frame before the next frame appears. These different readings require different cognitive modes, which, according to N. Katherine Hayles (2007, 2012), mirrors our contemporary reading habits. Not being in control of the reading process also leads to a scattered sense of unity, one of postmodernism's essential traits.

Global Media Heritage

It's important to talk about the past when the discourse is about modern/postmodern art. A model of philosophizing on the relationship between the past and present is Walter Benjamin's Angel of History. "His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. The storm is what we call progress." Heritage is so important since the present and the past in art history are like the head and tail of a Möbiusband. The avant-garde is constantly learning from the historical. Sometimes, it's fascinating when there are contradicting art ideologies in an archive or collection. In strong contradiction lies the beauty. I believe in both and leave them unresolved and placed in parallel relation. It is the spirit reflected in Walt Whitman's Song to the Self: Do I contradict myself? When I contradict myself, I am large, contain multitudes. It is extremely important that the

Goldsen has been invited to serve as the Western mirror archive of the annual Taishin Arts Award, the most prestigious award Taiwan. There are two other fascinating shows subRosa Biotech Sex & Gender Ed Workbook & Selected Projects that emphasizes the impact of new technologies on women's sexuality, reproductive choices, and subjective, the collective stages performative interventions that question practices of surveillance, medical intervention, and the conditions of the surveilled female subject. The other fascinating one is called Laboratorio Arte Alameda---a unique collection documenting public new media programming with adolescents and adults at Mexico City's premier art center for new media. The Goldsen Archive has maintained an active dialogue with the new media arts in Mexico, initially in collaboration with Priamo Lozada of the Laboratorio Arte Alameda, who lost his life in a tragic accident while curating the Venice Biennale in 2007.

So welcome to Signal to Code, our digital art Aleph, a mystical site weaving together the past and present, the traditional and the avant-garde!

Works Cited

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