

The Different Worlds of Cao Fei



Cao Fei/China Tracy, *RMB CITY: A Second Life City Planning*, 2007, video, 6 mins. Courtesy of the artist and Vitamin Creative Space, Guangzhou.

There is an advantage to having visited *RMB City* (2007-2011), the online fantasy world created in Second Life (SL) by Beijing-based artist Cao Fei, when appreciating her “slightly different version” of it as a one-person game art installation grimly titled *Apocalypse Tomorrow: Surf in RMB City* (2011). The title screen invites audiences to step on a bright orange skimboard (a surfboard without fins) to guide the on-screen avatar, “an intrepid meditating monk,” through a post-disaster floodscape filled with obstacles that turn out to be the remnants of the submerged once-famous RMB City sometime in the future. Marking the culmination of the RMB City project, *Apocalypse Tomorrow* premiered in the group exhibition *Real Virtuality* at New York’s Museum of the Moving Image in January 2011, about the same time Cao Fei announced intentions to power down *RMB City*’s operations. While both are stand alone works, experiencing *RMB City* and *Apocalypse Tomorrow* in the same time-space cosmos of a gallery fortuitously exults both as perfect bookends for the numerous artworks, interactive exhibitions, and events Cao Fei’s art in Second Life has spawned over the last three years. From platform to surfing game, the incredible scope of the project has brought critical attention to an expanding cultural brokerage between the art world, the Internet and its virtual economies, and the role gaming and social media can play in questioning these developments as well as its own.

Over the last decade, Cao Fei has gained a prominent place at the forefront of a generation of artists interested in combining game modding with

the latest display, social networking, and Web 2.0-enabled technologies to create online participatory media projects. Second Life, launched in 2003 by Linden Lab, is the three-dimensional virtual universe of different user-created worlds, with its own money exchange (the Lindex) and currency, inhabited by over twenty million self-customized user-avatars called “residents” who communicate through instant messaging. Membership is free to the public common spaces, but with Linden dollars converted from real US dollars, residents can purchase land and the goods and services to build up and privatize their virtual homes and businesses. Opened to the public in 2009, Cao Fei’s whimsical *RMB City* is arguably the most widely acclaimed SLart (art in Second Life) project in both SL and RL (Real Life) art worlds.

RMB City is an online art community, platform, and concept piece designed as “an experiment exploring the creative relationship between real and virtual space, and is a reflection of China’s urban and cultural explosion.”¹ Seen from a bird’s eye view (as all avatars in SL have the ability to fly and teleport), RMB City is a chaotic themeparkization of overabundant socialist, communist, and capitalist icons and architectural landmarks associated with Chinese cities then and now, along with every fathomable aspect of material culture extolling the excesses of capitalism that, according to Cao Fei, “made China, my country, such a syncretic experimental place.”² Indeed, a literal translation of its title, drawing from the abbreviation of the Chinese unit of currency, *Renminbi* (“people’s money”), could read simply as “money town.” Now deserted by the online art community that used to inhabit and maintain it, *RMB City* still exists on the Creative Commons’ Kula Island in SL.

Cao Fei’s first explorations of the SL community began in 2006, when she, as her avatar, China Tracy, then an armour-clad platinum-blond cyberpunk approaching Barbie-Doll proportions, directed a three-part machinima about her in-world experiences over a period of six months. Machinima is filmmaking in a virtual environment using interactive three-dimensional video-game engines to render computer-generated imagery (CGI) in real time. Interactive screen spaces of the virtual worlds in SL act as portals enabling one to become a part of the media image rather than just its watchers. Yet the desire to control the generative outcomes of platforms is a constant factor when producing machinima in synthetic worlds. As Cao Fei put it, “I was directly recording myself as I moved through Second Life, but as I’m watching myself, I’m also controlling myself; I’m simultaneously director and actor. But I enjoy exploring everything and not knowing what will happen in the next step. A lot of the process is waiting for something to happen, and I didn’t try to make something fake.” Edited down to twenty-eight minutes, the resulting cyber epic, *i-Mirror* (2007), premiered at the 52nd Venice Biennale as part of the Chinese Pavilion exhibition but in its own temporary China Tracy Pavilion on-site and in SL.³ The virtual documentary chronicles Cao Fei’s encounters (“part real, part role playing”) with SL’s surreal terrains, subcultures, and players, including her love affair with a young blond Chinese avatar that she later discovers is actually a sixty-five year old American in real life.



Role-playing (or taking on a pretend persona), urban youth culture, and dreamscapes are subjects that Cao Fei, as part of a new younger generation the media has coined “New New Human Beings (*Xin Xin Ren Lei*),” has long explored through her own exposure to not only the rapid urbanization of Guangzhou where she was born and raised, but also pop culture from manga and anime to American rap and breakdancing, Chinese TV dramas, and digital entertainment downloads.⁴ Illustrious examples include *Hip Hop* (2003), an upbeat video of regular city people, such as a clerk, a construction worker, and a police officer in Guangzhou, Fukuoka, and New York performing hip hop scenes, and *COSPlayers* (2004) a video and photographic series starring real-life Chinese “costume players,” fantasy realm-obsessed youth who dress up as their favourite manga, anime, or game characters. With signs of Guangzhou’s high-speed urbanism and the socio-economic upheavals associated with post-planning as their backdrop,

Top: Cao Fei/China Tracy, *i-Mirror: A Second Life Machinima*, 2007, Internet project, 28 mins. Courtesy of the artist and Vitamin Creative Space, Guangzhou.

Bottom: Cao Fei, *Whose Utopia?*, 2006, DVD, 20 mins. Courtesy of the artist and Vitamin Creative Space, Guangzhou.

the teenagers theatrically roam the city by day as urban superheroes but by night, at home in small working-class living quarters and with their aging parents, they brood under a heavy cloud of depression, self-alienation, and ennui. Less morose, *Whose Utopia* (2006–07), produced during the Sieman's Art Program, where she conducted a six-month residency called *What are you doing here?* is a surreal three-part video of employees at the Osram light bulb factory in Foshan, Guangdong province, acting out their hopes and aspirations in their workplace as ballet dancers and rock stars.

In the virtual realm, however, the body images that users create for their avatars, Christine Liao writes, “usually do not mirror their physical body but are accumulations of imagination and desires. . . . Because avatars carry information about personal desires and cultural experiences, avatars do not represent the dream of cyberspace as a space without stereotype of human and discrimination.”⁵ While SL as a cultural interface offers abundant possibilities for identity play, “the visual culture of avatars has certain limitations and adheres to particular aesthetics, especially Western aesthetics.”⁶ Cao Fei also notes a further distinction: “For cosplayers, they put on different costumes in their real life, but they're conscious of playing a game. When you're online in a totally new world, your physical self is more invisible, and it's your inner self that's revealed.”⁷

The initial melancholic urban drifting of China Tracy during the making of *i-Mirror* in the great number of Western-style contexts that tend to dominate in SL (HiPiHi, the Chinese version of SL was not released until 2008) led Cao Fei to create RMB City as her “own city utopia” which would virtually reflect her cultural gaze back at herself and to which she could feel a sense of belonging. RMB City, Cao Fei states, “is a Chinese city, but it mixes the different elements of China. I'm very interested in the city as an organism and have done a lot of research on cities in the Pearl River Delta, and I'm hoping I can use my knowledge to build a *Second Life* version of my vision of the Chinese city today.”⁸ The resulting monuments and signature high-rises in Cao Fei's new “virtopia” (Virtual Utopia) clearly call up the major cities of Beijing, Shanghai (especially Pudong New Area, a designated Special Economic Zone), and Hong Kong, one of China's two Special Administrative Regions.⁹

With Cao Fei's “Slebrity” avatar China Tracy (now with long black hair twisted into small Princess Leia buns) as participant-observer, resident-tourist, and philosopher-guide, *RMB City* has hosted over a dozen in-world activities, in all seriousness to the absurd, that have ranged from the 2009 opening live performance piece, *Master Q's Guide to Virtual Feng Shui*, by Guangzhou-based artist Huang He to the machinima *Live in RMB City* (2009) on the first steps and existential questions in SL of China Tracy's newborn son China Sun (as in real life), and the unveiling of the Guggenheim Museum in RMB City to a Naked Idol in RMB City beauty contest in 2010 for SL avatars and five mayoral inauguration ceremonies inducting well-known figures in the art world such as long-time collector and patron of contemporary Chinese art, Uli Sigg (SL: UliSigg Cisse), Jerome Sans (SL: SuperConcierge Cristole), Director of the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA) in Beijing from 2008¹¹; and the



Guggenheim Museum's Senior Curator of Asian Art, Alexandra Munroe (SL: Supernova Sibilant). As a laboratory, RMB City has also experimented with hybrid productions that combine SL and RL performances, such as the post-Hurricane Katrina project *NO Lab in RMB City*

Cao Fei/China Tracy, *Live in RMB City*, 2009, single-channel video, 24 mins., 49 secs Courtesy of the artist and Vitamin Creative Space, Guangzhou.

(2008), in collaboration with Hong Kong-based MAP OFFICE (Gutierrez + Portefaix), which premiered at *Prospect.1 New Orleans*. In the live mixed reality performance *RMB City Opera* (2009) for *Artissima 16* in Turin, Italy, virtual and real performers interact with each other in real time inspired by the revolutionary propaganda model operas, or *Yang Ban Xi*, developed during China's Cultural Revolution (traditional operas were banned by Mao Zedong's wife Jiang Qing).

Developed by Cao Fei and Vitamin Creative Space in Guangzhou, *RMB City* is not just an Asian island city in SL, it is also a product of the international art world network that sees a primary investment in contemporary Chinese art. The virtual realm had been under construction for almost two years between 2006 and 2008 before it found an institutional partner in the Serpentine Gallery. From its *City Planning* stage to the involvement of investors and institutions as collaborators to purchase usage of the buildings in SL and programme events and activities in them, RMB City mimicked the structures of real-world real estate, urban planning, and art ecologies. Indeed its "advanced preview and sale" at Lombard-Fried Projects in New York in 2007 emphatically corroborated the art world's interest and readiness in staking out virtual real-estate developments in a most spectacular way: basically by the buying and selling of virtual gallery space in *RMB City*, payable in real-world cash. The Chelsea gallery had provided China Tracy, as "Chief Developer," with real-life retail space for a RMB City leasing office and showroom complete with neon signs, futuristic scale models, and a billing slogan: "My City is Yours, Your City is Mine." According to the press release, the public was "invited to view an RMB City model, preview videos, promotional materials, and detailed RMB City photographs and go online via laptops providing real-time links to the city under construction in Second Life." RMB City, packaged as a real-estate agency, was restaged for the 10th Istanbul Biennial in 2007. At its "Investors' World Premiere" at Art Basel Miami Beach, earlier in 2007, available for purchase in addition to the promotional aerial survey video *RMB City: A Second Life City Planning* (2007), were RMB City hardhats and booklets explaining that special "units of RMB City will be sold to collectors and investors, and all sales profits will contribute to the RMB City Foundation for further construction, operation and development of the City in the coming two years." The marketing campaign obviously worked. For an artwork that's nowhere, this cyber art island allegedly fetched USD 100,000 from an unidentified collector at the art fair for one particularly pricey virtual plot.¹⁰

Envisioned from the onset as a two-year residency in virtual space for the artist and her peers and collaborators, what became clear over time was that

Cao Fei/China Tracy, *RMB CITY: A Second Life City Planning*, 2007, video, 6 mins. Courtesy of the artist and Vitamin Creative Space, Guangzhou.



Cao Fei/China Tracy, *RMB CITY: A Second Life City Planning*, 2007, video, 6 mins. Courtesy of the artist and Vitamin Creative Space, Guangzhou.



what began as an fictional witnessing of China’s feverish rate of urbanization became a contradictory site of political contestation regarding the city’s futurities. Writing in reference to RMB City, Ceren Erdem observes: “Living in a Chinese city today, it is impossible to escape and become isolated from the forceful production of urban fiction. The best way to negotiate a space of personal freedom within it is perhaps to appropriate this as a given condition and exaggeratedly utilize it to an excessive degree, exposing its overabundance and even absurdity to the public gaze.”¹¹ RMB City’s virtual skyline is crowded with the cantilevered prow and perforated metal skin of Bernard Tschumi’s West Diaoyutai Tower and Rem Koolhaas and Ole Scheeren’s CCTV building, both from Beijing, suspended in mid-air from construction cranes that compete for vertical footprints. On the end of one of them, a giant floating panda (the city’s “love centre”) is dangerously close to getting spiked by Jiang Huan Cheng’s Oriental Pearl TV Tower from Shanghai that shoots up from the central business district and amongst dream factory chimneys spouting fiery, black smoke. None of this seems however to deter the airy meanderings of the national flag held up, if not led, by its stars. Lower down, rotating a gigantic Ferris wheel like a parasol,

the Monument to the People's Heroes overlooks Tian'anmen Square which has become one of the many infinity pools in Shanghai hotels but is public here and possibly filled by the water from the Three Gorges reservoir, which gushes into huge toilets on the container piers of the Pearl River Delta below only to be flushed as sewage into an ocean of floating Red Army soldiers and Mao statues. Low-flying planes glide over super malls as well as dilapidated houses and street markets, a marooned Feilan Temple, the Grand National Theatre in Beijing, and the rusted steel structure of Beijing's Olympic Stadium, a.k.a. Bird's Nest. The slick animation of this 3D world is "very colourful and very perfect" but beyond that, already signs of the dystopic underbelly of a future China in late capitalist development seep up through the stand-in world and in real life.¹²



Cao Fei, *Apocalypse Tomorrow*, 2011, Flash game installation, 26 scenes, 10 mins. Courtesy of RMB City© 2011. RMB City Project is developed by Cao Fei and Vitamin Creative Space, Guangzhou.

In fact it is precisely the luxury goods and properties of RMB City alongside the relics of its hubristic downfall bobbing up and down between ocean swells that the avatar monk in *Apocalypse Tomorrow* has to circumnavigate. Surfing free-style, the monk in fact seems to glide just as easily through giant designer handbags by Louis Vuitton and Mark Jacobs playfully occupied by marine life, pseudo trademark logos of multinationals, a menacing Mecha super robot, seated Buddha sculptures, and the Statue of Liberty, as he does passing motley survivors waiting it out on raft-sized Mac Books and iPads (Panda has hitched a bicycle ride) and a boat full of dynastic characters brandishing a "Fair Pay for Deity!!!" sign. The monk dodges falling RMB factories, shopping carts and UFOs only to be taken by a swirling maelstrom to the bottom of the ocean where I.M. Pei's Bank of China from Hong Kong lies next to KTV among the ruins. A wheel-propelled net, a gravity-defying upward flowing water slide, and the national flag cum magic carpet gently pulled along by cranes come to the rescue at highly auspicious moments.

Compared to the bright, colour-saturated qualities of the RMB City virtual utopia, the animated game world of *Apocalypse Tomorrow: Surf in RMB City*, despite its title, is relatively restrained and decidedly low-tech and retro in feel with its pastel palette combination of free-hand drawings and Flash

animation. In contrast to the former's light-hearted yet punchy electronic music, the latter's surf "journey of self-cultivation" is to two serene fifteen century compositions (*Chunxiao Yin*, "Spring Dawn" and *He Wu Dongtian*, "Cranes Dance", both "in a Grotto-Heaven") performed by a Chinese silk string zither (*guqin*), interrupted only by coin sound effects each time the monk successfully avoids collision which is almost always. The technological downsizing, however, is only on the surface.

Designed in Flash Surf, *Apocalypse Tomorrow* is a video game projected onto a curved screen with a custom body board Wii remote interface. If machinima is an example of not only emergent gameplay but also game art modding, this specially-designed Flash Surf game operates more like a mind-surf simulator that induces a state of meditation to free the mind of worldly desires rather than to improve reflexes and reaction time in riding the waves. Typical video surfing games demand a lot more physical athleticism. In billowing white robes and a topknot, the practically armless monk, who is seen only from the back, doesn't attempt any sort of fancy maneuvers or ever wipes out even when caught in a maelstrom, rather he just seems to drift. Although there is a point counter, as with most artist-made video game mods, gameplay isn't really the point: the avatar at no time perishes, there are no levels, and the game never really ends. As the game description indicates, "the monk-avatar, his heart at ease, constantly overcomes the obstacles but never reaches anything resembling a final destination." In effect, the monk, much like a white chess bishop, and by extension *Surf in RMB City*, is intended to guide the player through "a fully conscious drama where each player picks her own paths," revealing more about the player than the game. Unlike China Tracy's excursion through Second Life, the solitary monk is not interested in staking out territory and picks up neither company nor things, perhaps adding credence to how one that is divested of desire and expectancy, (technically) never dies.

Cao Fei's SL art emphasized the roles played by various stakeholders—as art collectors, art institutions, and land developers, as not only observers but denizen-participants in the formation of RMB City as a new transnational urban space. It is, however, only a microcosmic portion of the possibilities as well as the ironies of the introduction of virtual worlds to real-life populations where the economic disparity is so great that concepts such as soft capital and virtual goods, marketed brands, and property traded by only those with excess income are simply irrational to citizens save for the most imaginative. Yet this wide-ranging new media artwork has crucially enabled the possibility of a counter-worlding to China's ostensibly over-zealous and unsustainable industrialization in real-life, precisely by playing up and ultimately washing away cumulative consumerist practices. Considering the efficacious advances in technology-enabled media art to inculcate new publics into patterns and practices of its own consumption, this endeavour seems all the more pressing in the present as well as the future. "Contemporary consumer society created people who live for consumer products, who spend money on consumer products, or those who are the products," Cao Fei states, "whereas contemporary art focuses more on overlooking, epitomising, reflecting, and judging consumerism, making us reflect on questions like where we come from and where we will go."¹³



In the wake of natural disasters from tsunamis to earthquakes and ongoing worldwide conflicts and wars, *Apocalypse Tomorrow* seems a critically apt ending for *RMB City*, sunk under the

Cao Fei, *Apocalypse Tomorrow*, 2011, Flash game installation, 26 scenes, 10 mins. Courtesy of RMB City© 2011. RMB City Project is developed by Cao Fei and Vitamin Creative Space, Guangzhou.

weight of its own excess. It can be understood to emerge out of the broader contradictions of gaming, user-created content and social media that would parody relationships between China's state capitalism and free market economies, global capitalism and media democracy, civic politics and human rights, and the art market's relationship to the virtual economies of an art world online. One of the most poignant yet disturbing animated sequences in *Apocalypse Tomorrow* is of line drawings of the WTC twin towers cut in half by a plane-shaped bird to topple over in such a way as to resemble Beijing's CCTV tower. If there is a further haunting to account for, it is the trauma of reactive world wars of counterterrorism, terror, and extreme fundamentalisms in late global capitalism.

From beginning to end, Cao Fei's *RMB City* has been both "a process of continuous 'remaking' to allow constant inventions and participations of other people" and a site of "collective sharing and creation," according to curator Hou Hanru.¹⁴ The city platform prompted if not compelled audiences to play a role (or as many and in as many different ways as possible) in the characterization and production of "virtual" 'world spaces' (from online gaming to social media) as generative resources for political engagement in real life and vice-versa. The endgame is not the point. Rather the revelation is, like the post-apocalyptic monk, as virtual avatars and in real life: either steer in the direction you want to go, or end up adrift in the current.

Cao Fei is presented by the Surrey Art Gallery

Notes

- ¹ RMB City Web site, <http://rmbcity.com>.
- ² Davide Quadrio, "A Dramatic 'Second Life' for Cao Fei," *Flash Art* 63, no. 270 (January/February 2010), 38.
- ³ Cao Fei exhibited with Shen Yuan, Yin Xiuzhen, and Kan Xuan in "Everyday Miracles: Four Woman Artists in the Chinese Pavilion" (2007), curated by Hou Hanru, as the youngest member of the group.
- ⁴ Hou Hanru, "Cao Fei: A Cosplayer Recounts Alternative Histories," *Art iT* 15 (Spring/Summer 2007), 59–62.
- ⁵ Christine L. Liao, "Avatars, Second Life, and New Media Art: The Challenge for Contemporary Art Education," *Art Education* 61, no. 2 (March 2008), 89.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Samantha Culp, "Interview with Cao Fei," *Artkrush* (February 2008), <http://artkrush.com/160442> (now defunct); <http://samanthaculp.com/2008/02/interview-cao-fei-artkrush-feb-2008/> (March 12, 2012).
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Zhang An Ding (SL: Zafka), "Here Comes Metaverse: A New Existential Manifesto," *RMB City: Cao Fei/SL Avatar: China Tracy*, ed. Hu Fang and Cao Fei (Guangzhou: Vitamin Creative Space, 2008).
- ¹⁰ Chin-Chin Yap, "The Virtual Muse and Her Taxman," *Art Asia Pacific* 58 (March/April 2008), 87.
- ¹¹ Ceren Erdem, "RMB City: Spectatorship on the Boundaries of the Virtual and the Real," *Interventions Journal* 2 (January 2012), <http://interventionsjournal.net/2012/01/26/rmb-city-spectatorship-on-the-boundaries-of-the-virtual-and-the-real/> (March 12, 2012).
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Christina Ko, "Patron Taint," *Prestige* 29 (May 2011), 261.
- ¹⁴ Hou Hanru, "Notes on Cao Fei's RMB City," February 27, 2011, <http://www.caofei.com/texts.aspx> (March 12, 2012); Hou Hanru, "Politics of Intimacy: On Cao Fei's Work," in *Cao Fei: Journey* (Frac Ile-de-France: Le Plateau & Vitamin Creative Space, 2008), 50.