Interviews

Cao Fei

Cao Fei on the limits of truth and virtuality

Cao Fei, Nova, 2019, video, color, sound, 109 minutes.

For millions of lives, the novel coronavirus currently rocking the globe has induced a secession from "real" to virtual space, where ubiquitous "social distancing" mandates are simultaneously heeded and safely transgressed. Who better to speak to this moment—gravid with apocalyptic and utopian frisson—than Cao Fei? The Beijing-based artist has devoted her practice to addressing social upheavals and breakneck urbanization through virtual, augmented, and mixed realities that chart new capacities for alienation and love. Here, she discusses "Blueprints," a multimedia exhibition at Serpentine Galleries in London, on through May 17, 2020.

MY WORLD IS AUTONOMOUS. It functions as a counterpoint to reality, and can be entered and exited freely. It's a place for a walk, a trance, a look around or a weep. It is capricious, far away from our hardcore world, which is always about institutions, flaunting, declaration, confrontation, and resistance. Perhaps I am a pessimistic romanticist simply good at fantasizing. In ancient China, literati who were exiled turned to nature, meticulously representing the details of their landscape. Wasn't that also a counterpoint to reality, in a way?

For "Blueprints," I revisited several major threads of my "HX" exhibition last year at the Centre Pompidou: Sino-Soviet relations, computation in modern China, urbanization in Beijing, as well as connected histories like Chinese sci-fi and the legacy of collective-owned workers' cinemas. While departing from these earlier inquiries, my film Nova, 2019, and the related virtual reality piece The Eternal Wave, 2020, have more complex and open structures. I don't see my works as being about depersonalization. They tend to follow the same character arcs under different circumstances; I let these characters' bonding take center stage. Think of the workers in Whose Utopia, 2006, the lovers in Asia One, 2018, the couple conversing fondly in La Town, 2014, the contemporary female architect and the formerly incarcerated person in Prison Architect, 2018, and China Tracy's curious expedition of the virtual world in i.Mirror, 2007. Nova is about a father-son relationship that spans history and spacetime.

The immersiveness of virtual reality has been greatly exaggerated. In fact, the obstruction of immersion is VR's greatest drawback. Its cumbersome headset, dizzying eyepieces, the lag between intent and control, distractive scene transitions, and popup notifications are constant reminders of its distance from "reality." It hardly reaches the empathy effect provided by cinema. I'm interested in expanding VR's boundary, to look beyond beauty, shock, and interactivity. I'm interested in virtual reality as agitprop, or whether or not it can disrupt experience as we know it. How will VR change our memories, our dreams?

At the end of the day, it doesn't matter that we'll never get to know the truth, including the historical truth. We can only look for its traces. My recent work considers China's first computers. Where are the workers today who built them alongside Russian industrial advisers? What technologies and ideologies did those Russian industrial advisers leave behind exactly? In the Serpentine Galleries, we've reconstructed the foyer and kitchen of Beijing's Hongxia Cinema, built in the 1950s. Its name means "red dawn." My studio is now housed in this old theater, whose audiences mostly consisted of computer workers from a nearby factory. The building will soon be bulldozed to make way for high-rises. We spent a lot of time retrieving the original film projector and old tickets, realia that became part of the reconstruction effort.

But my work is neither about ordering and archiving things nor about revealing forgotten histories. Those are jobs for museums. I just built a circus on top of the ruins, raised the curtain, and did some magic tricks. Blew sand from the ground, the sand turned into rain. We are sandwiched between the "real" world and cyberspace, and through acceleration and diffusion of attention, we accept such changes rapidly. Before doubts are even formed, our thoughts are interrupted by funny videos sent by friends, or by our ecstasy for the hundreds of "likes" that a selfie earns in ten minutes. More is less. Everything is a datum and everything performs for data. We critique and dance at the same time. By the time we are about to leave this world, we might feel like we have never lived.