

# [-empyre-] Missive 7: Cao Fei, Virtual Flaneur

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"For the Venice Biennale, Fei has developed a new project, an Igloo-like inflated nine-chamber house in which several video projections take place featuring a work protagonized by her Second Life avatar, 'China Tracy.' After discovering Second Life, Fei embarked on a six-month journey through the wonders of the digital realm, as China Tracy, and many came across her through a YouTube stream in which she introduced herself in machinima footage with Chinese subtitles. According to Fei's declaration to Second Life's sponsored New World Notes, all sorts of typical activities occurred during that period: 'Fly, chat, build, teleport, buy, sex, add friends, snapshot...' These experiences were documented and generated the three-part, thirty-minute epic, 'i.Mirror' that Fei is now exhibiting at Venice's Arsenale back garden as well as on YouTube. A melancholic allegory of consumerism, love, and humanity as seen through the eyes of a late-twenties female Chinese anime character..."

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/charaoh/sets/72157600233930568/>

<http://www.alternativearchive.com/chinatray/>

CAO FEI: ANIME NO NINGYOU

The Intersection between high art and Second Life has been quite interesting, and the i.Mirror work of Cao Fei is a prime example of the complex dialogue between virtual worlds and the contemporary artist. In many ways, many contemporary artists have taken on the role of object, flaneur, tourist, and reporter. For example, the i.Mirror China Pavilion at the Venice Biennale represents the travels of avatar China Tracy as anime character prosthesis of Cao Fei as she travels the expanses of Second Life. During her travels, she reflects upon the complex interactions between her identity as Chinese woman, in a milieu that is grappling with the recent adoption of capitalism under a communist system in contrast with the Western technocapitalist oligarchy that is Second Life.

I wish that I was able to see a bit more than just the documentation, as I could have gotten a fuller understanding of the 7-screen "igloo" at the Biennale. Regardless, it appears that Cao Fei explored SL-native activities/spaces, and took part in the usual activities, 'Fly, chat, build, teleport, buy, sex, add friends, snapshot...' However, what is more interesting is her explorations of Virtual Kowloon and the Chinese

subtitles of her machinima on YouTube.

#### CONTEMPORARY ARTIST AS CYBORG

Following from Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto", as well as Turkle's "Life on the Screen", Cao Fei's China Tracy represents the fractured pastiche culture/identity of the 21st Century art scene. China Tracy, and Anime character (which actually does not resemble one as much as a modified SL avatar), references contemporary Asian art memes such as Mariko Mori's seminal work in CosPlay (Costume Roleplay, a part of anime otaku culture), and Murakami's NeoPop/Superflat references to anime and Western dominance.

However, Cao Fei also injects a wonderfully ironic narrative through China Tracy in that China Tracy embodies NeoPop and current artworld obsessions with young artists, the influence of Japanese memes such as anime and "Cosupurayu" on the West, as well as the equally complex relationship between Asian and Western economies.

Cao Fei is a Japanese anime character operated by a Chinese woman that is a tourist in a faux China constructed in an American simulator, showing in an Italian Biennale. She deftly accesses dominant modes of desire; virtual utopia in a world in panic, the hope of eternal childhood for an aging hegemony (on demographic and geopolitical scales), and the complexities of identity in an era of radical change.

Another work that comes to mind is that of Huyghe et al's "No Ghost, Just a Shell" in which a purchased anime character, Anli, is explored by several artists and then given autonomy through the creation of a legal entity and then a proper burial. However Mori differs in that she seems to BE the cartoon character, and Cao Fei is a fractured cyborged amalgam of flesh and avatar working in mixed realities. Mori remains abstracted as image-fetish, Anli is set free, but never realized in flesh, but Cao Fei is more problematic. She graffiti's walls in Dubrovnik with China Tracy's tag, plays in concurrent worlds with her corpus well in sight, and makes no pretensions about the multivalent nature of cybrid identity, subtitling in Chinese in a largely Anglophone network as well as adopting claims to Japanese aesthetics while using an American avatar form.

#### ARTIST AS FLANEUR'S TRAVELOGUE

One aspect of a number of artist's works that emerges in recent projects is that of the artist project as scrapbook of their travels. Outside of Second Life, one can reference Mori again as the artist-object as provocateur-observer in her public situations. In "Tea Ceremony III", she is the alien attendant offering salarymen complimentary refreshments in front of a corporate building. She is alien, but nevertheless, a mirror of the contradicting tensions between her heritage, her practice, and contemporary culture. However, in each of Mori's "Cosplay" pieces, she takes us on a journey, much like a tourist showing off her photo album after a long vacation. Also, needless to say, Cao Fei may also be referencing the scopophilic stereotype of the Asian tourist, wandering through the foreign land, snapping endless pictures.

On the other hand, Cao Fei is not alone in her role as virtual flaneur. Eva and Franco Mattes' "13 Most Beautiful Avatars" (After Warhol) is also a travelogue of sorts in which they describe a year in SL, from which they collected the images of the exhibit's subject. What is most striking in contrast are the subjects and references that the Mattes engage. For example, their engagement of Warhol instead of Mori, the centrality of the Other in terms of resident avatars rather than the

artist-object itself. Perhaps there is another aspect to this narrative regarding Western consumerism in that through the Mattes' engagement with Warhol's tropes, they also reference Warhol's critique of mass production and the consumer society, as well as mirroring the "Collector" in acquiring these identities as fetishes in order to hopefully reiterate the gesture in the gallery as commodities.

One thing that I am not quite sure of is the role of flaneur in terms of remediated work. For example, "13 Most Beautiful Avatars" has a fairly straightforward narrative, but placed in context with Kildall's "Paradise Ahead" series, The Mattes' remediations, and others, is the artist also a cultural tourist as well, putting their face in the tourist spot's painted scene with face-holes, and put themselves in the place of the subject. But in exploring one concept or another, aren't most artists often in the role of the tourist?

What I think is most interesting about works like Cao Fei and the Mattes is their location within contemporary art and their gesture as cultural "visitor", much like numerous artists mentioned here coopting popular culture as media for their work. This is an accepted strategy for a number of years, but it calls into question the effect that the artist has on the milieu itself from which they draw material. For example, what "image" does Cao Fei create vis-à-vis Second Life? This is a backgrounded narrative, but in regards to the artist having high profile works, the derivative effects are also important.

Therefore, much like the MoMA's Automatic Update show offers a view of New Media through a specific lens of contemporary art practice, similarly does Cao Fei create a mise en scene that reflects a similar sensibility. Her Gift from China Tracy draws heavily from the constructed/abstracted image of the artist as object, from identity as defined by media culture, but also the difficulties of global culture through the engagement via virtual worlds.

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• **References:**

- [Re: \[-empyre-\] Prototyping](#)
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