

KADIST China: Cao Shu

"Memory, Dream, and the Space-Time of Video Games"

[Clara Peh](#)

KADIST

In 2022, the award-winning artist of the OCAT × KADIST Emerging Media Artist Residency Program, Cao Shu, will travel to KADIST in San Francisco for a research residency later this month. Clara Peh, the Asian Collections Researcher at KADIST, recently interviewed Cao Shu.

[Clara:](#) Could you please briefly introduce your artistic practice?

[Cao:](#) My current artistic direction includes video games, 3D digital simulated images, installations, and also involves the complex production mechanisms behind computer graphics technology. The entry points of the works are all related to historical events, especially intertwined with the history of production technology and ruling technology in China and around the world. Over the past five years, I have gained some new insights into the relationship between the medium of electronic games and our society. I bring these insights into local research and then associate them with encounters in life during this process.

[Clara:](#) Memory plays an important role in your work. You seem to focus more on the 'sensory' understanding of memory rather than 'objective' memory or history. Could you explain in detail what sensory memory is in your work?

[Cao:](#) About 7 or 8 years ago, I used a camera to shoot in real life. Later, I started using 3D digital simulation, and the change was that there was a lot of subjectivity in the creative process. Computer graphics, compared to video, are not so "real," they can directly realize the imagery inside the brain or deep in memory, without following the logic of reproduction. It creates a distance between the scene of memory and the so-called objective reality. But I think this distance is very important. When we are too close, what we see is not vivid. The power of this distance comes from the medium. Of course, on another level, as Harun Farocki mentioned in *Parallel*, "the creators of computer images do not want to attract flocks of Greek birds, their paradise should be inhabited by creatures designed by themselves." Computer graphics provide a completely different set of methods for interpreting and constructing the world, which can also allow us to leap out of the quagmire of realism and see the different aspects of memory.

[Clara:](#) In works like *Sisyphus* (2017) and *Roam Simulator* (2020), you delve into the impossibility of memory and its intricate dynamic relationship with visual images. Can you tell us about this relationship?

The completion process of *Sisyphus* (2017) is a bit like writing a diary. At that time, I was quite concerned about Jung's *Red Book*, in which he recorded and analyzed images in dreams. Similarly, for about a decade, I also made similar dream records. At that time, I used 3D simulation software to generate dream scenes—some looping GIF images. As these dreams accumulated slowly, I also discovered, from their mutual juxtaposition, a subconscious world that I usually did not perceive. These images gradually connected some hidden clues, the vague collective subconscious world lingering above the collective historical pains, partially manifested. *Roam Simulator* (2020) is actually a concatenation of these GIFs since 2017. Its presentation is a video game based on the accumulation of dreams over many years. In the process, I found that the images we dream of and those we record are quite different; memory subjectively alters them, which is also why I focus on collective pains and personal history later on. This is one of the reasons why I use 3D simulation software. It is different from photography or film recording; it is from scratch, and there is a distance from the so-called image archive, with its own independent boundaries between its internal media space and the real world.





Cao Shu, *Roam Simulator*, 2020, live electronic game and video installation; 4K screen, Raspberry Pi, capacitive screen, metal bracket, controller, computer. Image credit: UCCA Dune Museum

Your work spans across various domains including 3D digital imaging, captured footage, interactive games, installations, and more. How do you navigate seamlessly between these different dimensions?

Each decision is possibly based on specific circumstances. Indeed, over the past 7 to 8 years, I have often been on residencies and research trips to different places. I found that despite the diversity of locations, the issues of concern gradually converged into a mesh-like structure with a core focus, and there seemed to be vague connections between them. The issues in different places led me to adopt different expressions when digesting and responding to the experiential materials provided locally. This is different from using a personally preferred technology in the studio. I also often draw inspiration from the feedback given by different locations. This mobile working state helped me dispel some obsessions. Utilizing local resources, or adapting randomly based on specific objects. Of course, I also bring back a lot of things from different places, piling them up in the studio. Patching and mixing, then removing noise from them, extracting clues, but there is no fixed pattern each time.

Clara: [What do you think is the relationship between simulation and reality? For example, in works like *Phantom Sugar* \(2023\), you switch between shots of sugar factories and surreal simulations of the same location.](#)

Cao: It all started with experiences from electronic games. In games, the time experienced by players is synchronized with the game's progress. There is no concept of "long takes" in electronic games because players are not aware of montage issues when playing. This led me to re-examine the meaning of "long takes" in film and the contradiction it presents with montage. How are events connected across different

times and spaces? The temporal continuity of long takes gave me a sense of compulsion. For example, before planning the project "Phantom Sugar" (2023), I conducted on-site interviews with many people, some of whom were four generations of families working and living in the same factory. This factory involves issues spanning agriculture, industry, finance, and more. How do the different details of multiple generations form a synchronicity in the artwork? Many details seem unrelated to the main narrative but can be scattered throughout the timeline, serving as background and occasionally hiding behind some "screens." I wanted to create a synchronicity between the audience's perception of time and the details of the factory's hundred-year history. The factory space simulated in 3D digital form compared to the ruins in reality appears half-real and half-fake, not entirely true, with some strangeness, creating a leap between truth and falsehood.







Cao Shu, *Phantom Sugar*, 2023, 3D digital simulation dynamic image, 3 channels, 4k, Image credit: X Museum

This piece itself employs digital simulation, while also addressing the issue of "simulation" itself. The cultivation and industrialization of sugar, as well as global futures trading, are referred to as "phantom sugar" by the futures market due to their unpredictability. In ancient China, including Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian*, there are many records of using sugar to guide the walking patterns of ants to predict the future; there are also classic ant algorithms in AI neural networks used to simulate future blueprints. The "Laplace's demon" under extreme thought experiments may be the shape of the ant, futilely and tirelessly trying to speculate on the future using the form of super-individual life. The first half of the work is about the history of a sugar factory destroyed by dataism, and the second half turns to vertical agriculture—a biological practice that can almost simulate everything in the future at the biological level.

Clara: [Previously, we talked about the subjectivity and perceptual aspects of memory, which also bring different ways of viewing and experiencing time. Could you further explain?](#)

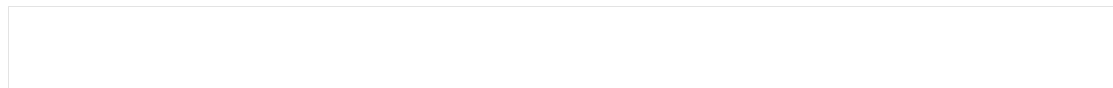
Cao: Our understanding of the so-called objective world is closely related to technology. While humans invent various technologies to understand the world, these technologies are also shaping humans themselves. For example, the emergence of photography, or more precisely, the emergence of portable cameras, has made us accustomed to selecting the world as a series of slices, that is, fragments of the world. With the advent of cinema, we began to view the world as a series of continuous slices, such as the running horse in *The Horse in Motion*. Electronic games have been closely related to world-building since their inception, and as we create these media, the concept of time is quietly changing. Along with it, historical views, including epistemology and linguistics, have become more complex structures. In general, the media does provide new philosophy to the world and opens up new politics.

Clara: Some of your works employ a spatial narrative approach, where the audience/perspective unfolds the narrative as they move through the entire space or different spaces. How do you utilize this narrative method?

Cao: Many authors have adopted this narrative approach. For example, James Joyce employed this method in his writing of "Ulysses." Although words can only be arranged into a book in a certain order, he filled the entire city space of Dublin with sound and visual elements, creating an infinite time and space of sensory details. I had a similar feeling while playing the video game "Assassin's Creed: Unity": running through the streets of Paris, the murmurs of passersby mixed with the smell of fish before the revolution, all rushing in. The structural design of the Grand View Garden in "Dream of the Red Chamber" also resembles a map in a video game. Fragmented narratives are not new in open-world video games either. Fragments of various events are embedded in props and scenes. As players traverse the game, they collect these fragments and piece them together into a complete story. This method of constructing a whole from fragments has been adopted by many people in different historical periods, with many techniques derived from drama. The way films capture the world in frames may just be a historical phase. I believe that humans are more inclined to return to ancient times, like our primate ancestors, to have a comprehensive perception of the world and to experience it through the five senses in an open space. Therefore, I think open-world video games actually stem from a desire to return to the past. Humans have had this drive for a long time, thus inventing these things, including virtual reality (VR) technology.

In your video installation works, you also use sculpture and physical objects. Can you talk about their relationship with video works?

I will have many small breaks in my long-term plans. In addition to making long-term films, I will also create some small installations or sculptures, taking this opportunity to change my perspective. For example, with this small sculpture "One," which scans an apple, I initially considered that the bite marks left by each person on an apple are unique. I scanned the apple cores that had been bitten and made them into a long apple core sculpture. It's actually related to my experience in making videos. During the years of studying video, I was also influenced by many installation artists. It's just a different perspective; instead of using dialects, sentences, and graphics as elements of the installation, they are placed into the timeline. When a word meets a certain image, they can generate unique meanings, just like installations.





Cao Shu, "One," 2022, painting on the surface of 3D scanned and printed objects, 50cm × 7cm × 7cm.

Clara: As we enter an increasingly digitized era where reality is manipulated and simulated, how do you foresee the dynamic relationship between reality and simulation further complicating?

Cao: "Post-truth" and various examples of "simulation" occur every day. Personally, I tend not to categorize things as either simulated or real; I lean towards an intermediary state where we merely use screens as mediators, everything blending together. Each thing may exist in a flexible zone between truth and falsehood, good and bad. For instance, when we observe the universe or the microcosm, we are not only using technology to observe them but also using these technologies to reflect on ourselves. When observing non-living things under the auspices of certain technologies, we may gradually discover signs of life in them, which subverts some concepts. For me, these are particularly important moments that

constantly make me question my cognition. I simultaneously believe and deny, and I am aware that various definitions that have existed in history may become loose at any time.

Can you share with us what you will focus on during your residency research at KADIST in San Francisco?

Firstly, it's about the threshold between virtual reality and reality. My interest in San Francisco comes from the game "Watch Dogs 2," which meticulously recreates the San Francisco Bay Area. Although I have never been to San Francisco in reality, in the video game, I have traversed every street in this city. This made me think about the personal sense of time I would experience when I visited places in virtual space and then experienced them firsthand in real life. For example, in 2019, I lived in Yokohama for three months. In 2020, when I returned, I found a game called "Yakuza 7" was launched, which perfectly recreated the neighborhood where I lived in Yokohama. In the game, I found my former residence, and even some social events I experienced in Japan in 2019 appeared in the game. This overlap of reality and virtuality left a deep impression on me. This time, the order of experience was reversed.

Another focus is on deep time and control technology. I am interested in how individuals understand time when they are in a special environment isolated from the outside world, such as writers like the Marquis de Sade or philosophers like Stiegler when they write in prison, how isolated authors become liberated authors. The reversal of the relationship between isolation and liberation is something we can all perceive from many events we have experienced in recent years... The history of Alcatraz Island in San Francisco serves as a kind of sample. How do incarcerated individuals understand and utilize time, especially cases like the "Birdman," who became a canary expert in prison and underwent a transformation in his understanding of biology and human society through observing canaries? At the same time, I am also interested in architectural structures that serve as isolation spaces, such as the structure of Alcatraz Island prison. This interest also influences the game I want to design, which will be based on the structure of Alcatraz Island and the stories related to deep time that occur within it.



曹澍
Cao Shu

1987年出生于山东济宁
现工作生活于杭州

CAO Shu (b. 1987, Shandong Province, China) lives and works in Hangzhou, China, teaching at China Academy of Arts. His working interfaces include but are not limited to, 3D digital moving image and interactive games. He focuses on the complex production mechanisms behind computer graphics technology, searching and perceiving memories trapped in historical time and space through fictional writing targeting a specific location and interweaving between different media. In addition, he is also interested in the notions misreading and dislocation based on different cultural

and technological environments in history. In recent years, Cao Shu has been residency artist at Atelier Mondial in Basel(2017), Yokohama Koganecho Bazaar Art Festival (2019),Goethe Institutes(2020). His works have won such awards as 2022 OCAT x KADIST Emerging Media Artist Award, 2021 Exposure Award of PHOTOFAIRS Shanghai, 2015 New Narrative Award from the Long Week of Short Films, and 2017 BISFF Award for Outstanding Artistic Achievement. Recent solo exhibitions include Hotel Smoke and Ash, Muffatwerk, Munich, Germany, 2023 ; Cao Shu Solo Exhibition-GO TO ROME, B1OCK@Ooeli, Hangzhou, China; The Ocean of Solaris, Zhejiang Art Museum, Hangzhou, China, 2019; Solo Program-Monster outside the windows, Koganecho, Yokohama, Japan, 2019; His works has been exhibited in art Museums around the world,such as Kunsthausbaselland, Matadero Contemporary Art and Culture Center,UCCA Dune,White Rabbit Gallery Sydney,X Museum Beijing, BY ART MATTERS Hangzhou, Macao Art Museum, Beijing Minsheng Art Museum, OCAT Shanghai and Shenzhen , Sleep Center New York, Die Sammlung Falckenberg Hall Hamburg. Works are collected by KADIST Art Collection, Australian White Rabbit Art Gellary, Blue Mountain Contemporary Art Foundation, Zhejiang Art Museum, etc.



白其薇
Clara Peh

新加坡独立策展人
卡蒂斯亚洲收藏研究员

Clara is an independent curator and art writer in Singapore. Her practice centres around emerging technologies, experimental practices and interdisciplinary ways of working. She was recently a member of Shanghai Curators Lab 2023, the Curator for Art Dubai 2023 Digital section, and the Art Lead and Curator at Appetite 2021 - 2023. She is also the Founder of NFT Asia, the largest digital-native artist collective in the Web 3.0 ecosystem. She has been an Adjunct Lecturer at LASALLE College of the Arts and a guest lecturer at NTU Centre for Contemporary Art, Yale-NUS College, and others. Her works are published on The Brooklyn Rail, Hyperallergic, Yishu Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art, Art and Market, and more. Clara holds a BA in Economics from Yale-NUS College and MA in History of Art at the Courtauld Institute of Art.