Special Topic: Cao Shu | Chronicles of Sealing Lost Items

曹澍 Cao Shu

封印失物记
Lost and Found

Digital Archive 2023 31

[实验影像中心]
Centre for Experimental Film

专题 vol.
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封印失物记　　Lost and Found

Cao Shu seeks out things that have already disappeared and seals them away for viewing. In 2017, he created "Corner of the Park." In the voice over of the video, he reads from his childhood diary (from 1991 to 1996), telling a story about his painting being plagiarized. The painting was titled "A Corner of the Park," depicting a park, a cage, and a mountain demon. Like a winding snake, the long shot leads the audience on a tour of a modeled park. It might be a reimagining of yesterday in his painting, just more three-dimensional and realistic.

Ghostly off-screen voices also read from the diary of 2015. He discovers that the password he frequently uses is the student ID of the plagiarist, prompting him to revisit the school. Later, he revisits the People's Park and kindergarten. Whether it's the atmosphere of the footage, the tone of the narration, or the plot setup, "Corner of the Park" resembles a suspenseful short drama, accumulating heavy resentment. However, towards the end of the film, the narrator begins to doubt the authenticity of memory: "I can't distinguish who is real and who is an illusion, as if they have been processed by technology." Game engines can reconstruct scenes and dissolve the objects they point to—if we can realistically construct a scene, then the pains of the world that we cannot let go of, though intertwined with our consciousness, are also constructed layer by layer, rather than naturally existing.

How to render the visual effects created by a realistic game rendering engine close to the reality of consciousness was further questioned in "The One Who Lived Yesterday" (2019). Consciousness is not entirely visual; it includes feelings, emotions, thoughts, synesthesia, and even complex memories and stories. Sometimes, memories are not even personal but belong to the civilization as a whole. The various aspects beyond visualization guarantee its authenticity; however, they are not often conveyed through visual media. How to replicate a sense of exhilaration with a shape, or represent the taste of a spice with a color? Visualization is tangible, clear, and unobstructed, while art that boasts infinity must also overcome the limitations of materiality. In "The One Who Lived Yesterday", Cao Shu, focusing on depicting dreams, needs to address these issues. Following the characteristics of the game engine, Cao Shu used "clipping," that is, overlaying and penetrating objects. He made faces appear on tabletops, tree stumps, and building facades, and allowed the body of an elderly woman to permeate the entire room, achieving eerie, intimate, surrealist grafting effects. When a table becomes a "table with a reflected face," smooth interpretations are obstructed, tying into a hard-to-swallow knot.

During the creation of "Infinity and Infinity Plus One" (2020), Cao Shu, residing on Flower Bird Island, found the ideal location: a row of villas used for officials' meetings, now abandoned and long neglected. This vulgar, European-style luxury decorated ruins could satisfy the artist's nostalgia for past eras. Its immense body inherently possesses the conditions for expressing infinity. Cao Shu filmed the interior and exterior of the villa with a camera, and based on this material, created a model. During the wandering process, he often switched between recording and game rendering of the same scene. Constructed parts can take on spectacles that filming cannot achieve: rooms flooded with seawater, speaking teacups, or chairs floating in the sky. This time, Cao Shu did not narrate with his own voice but instead chose a man speaking in a dialect similar to that of Zhoushan. He said, "There are countless rooms in the guesthouse, enough to accommodate officials from the entire universe."

Cao Shu's portrayal of power illustrates that the world outside of personal thought is still conceptual—perhaps "ideology" would be more appropriate than "concept" here. In his graduation work "Encounter" (2015), he secretly tracked and filmed many passersby. When they, as subjects being stared at one by one, realized they had become objects of scrutiny, the subjectivity temporarily obscured in everyday life was activated. Similarly, when facing the oppressive symbols in front of "Infinite and Infinite Plus One," the audience is also involved in a tug-of-war of subjectivity between individuals. In his work, Cao Shu almost does not perform or create, but instead devotes a considerable amount of energy to the tedious replication of existing visual experiences. Holding one's breath until the moment suitable for "activation," subjective wonders rarely appear.

Parallel to Cao Shu's recent creations is the rapid evolution of game engine technology. Compared to the "Unreal Engine 4" used in previous works, "Phantom Sugar" (2023) uses "Unreal 5.2," presenting surprisingly realistic visuals. The transition between filming and gaming, or between captured images and constructed images, is so smooth that they can intensely intertwine. The video begins with a black background and white text introducing a story: at the end of the Chu-Han contention, Zhang Liang used sugar and ants to create an omen, breaking down the psychological defenses of the Chu's hegemon and leading to his suicide. Taking this as a starting point, ants and sugar become themes, gradually evolving into mature sugarcane, intensive labor, algorithms, the life purpose of humans (primates), the (active or passive) globalization process of China, and the complex relationship between individual and collective selves. These themes are introduced to the audience through the voiceover. Cao Shu is adept at finding linguistic loopholes, allowing one concept to smoothly drift to another. Unconsciously, from BC to the future, from insects to algorithms, "electronic data attempts to distort time." We've come a long way, but the near and far are mixed together.

The future will inevitably replace the present, this is a kind of historical determinism. Cao Shu seeks out things that have already disappeared and seals them away. When language, images, games, and stories cannot all fit into a single memory jar, the anxiety of historical determinism is alleviated. This is certainly a kind of bonus care. The reality that art can reach is never sentimental.

Yang Zi

Experimental Image Center

Cao Shu

曹澍《公园一角》，2017，10 分 16 秒

Cao Shu, Corner of The Park, 2017, 10'16"

曹澍《活在昨天的人》，2019，5 分 21 秒

Cao Shu, The One Who Lived Yesterday, 2019, 5'21"

曹澍《无限和无限加一》，2020，13 分 12 秒

Cao Shu, *Infinity and Infinity Plus One*, 2020, 13'12"
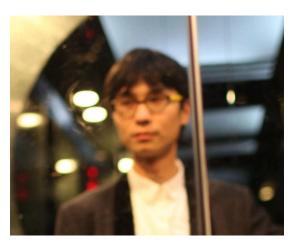

曹澍《相遇》，2015，10 分 16 秒

Cao Shu, *Meet-ing*, 2015, 10'16"

曹澍　《妖糖》，2023，15分10秒

Cao Shu, *Phantom Sugar*, 2023, 15'10"

Artist

Cao Shu

Cao Shu

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. Cao Shu often constructs narration in a restrained way, offering the audience a new perspective of things, and through his practice, a multi-branched network of meanings is formed. His works are often based on a specific place and ask open-ended questions. He hopes to reactivate

historical events or personal memory at the perceptual level through experiments with different materials and 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 Bazzaar 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 programs include, Smoke Hotel and Ash, Muffatwerk, Munich; GO TO ROME, B1OCK@Ooeli, Hangzhou; The Ocean of Solaris, Zhejiang Art Museum, Hangzhou; Flux, Shanghai Tech University, Shanghai; Monster outside the windows, Koganecho, Yokohama; His works has been exhibited in art Museums around the world, such as Kunsthausbaselland, By Art Matters, UCCA Dune, Macao Art Museum, Beijing Minsheng Art Museum, OCAT Shanghai and Shenzhen, Sleep Center New York, X Museum Beijing, Die Sammlung Falckenberg Hall Hamburg. Works are collected by Kadist Art Foundation, Australian White Rabbit Art Gellary, Blue Mountain Contemporary Art Foundation, Zhejiang Art Museum, etc.

Specially Invited Film Selection Contributor

Yang Zi

Yang Zi is an independent curator, graduated from Nanjing University with a degree in philosophy and religious study. He as a researcher was awarded of the first Sigg Fellowship and became the commentator of the Gallery Weekend Beijing in 2020. He was the primary judge of the Huayu Youth Award in 2019 and a finalist for the 2017 Hyundai Blue Prize.

Yang Zi has worked in art criticism and curation for nearly 10 years. He was an editor of "LEAP" and the Curator and Public Program Director of UCCA, with experiences of editing catalogues for Wang Yin, Liu Wei, Xu Zhen, and Zeng Fanzhi, and curating various exhibitions and public programs which challenges the established framework of collaboration in curatorial practices. His past curatorial projects include "The New Normal: China, Art, and 2017", "Pity Party", "Land of the Lustrous", "In Younger Days", "Golden Flow" and more solo exhibitions of Zhao Bandi, Xie Nanxing, Bu Di, Wu Wei, Wu Chen, Chang Yunhan, Yang Luzi, Ma Lingli, Wei Honglei, and Zhu Changquan.