

Vortex | Cao Shu: Contains it Like Lines of A Hand

Macalline Center of Art



· Editor's Note ·

On the day of the Vortex event, Cao Shu's impromptu speech was combined with his self-made electronic game. This game is based on the oral memories of the artist's mother about her grandmother, linking the post-earthquake life in Tangshan's quake-resistant shelters, memories of the qigong craze era, legends of earth veins, supernatural narratives, nightmares plagued by bodily pain, and the lingering presence of patriarchy within a 20th-century family. The clues in the game and the performance process are related to both terrain and the body. In the Sisyphean cycle, memories ultimately reach a reconciliation with time.

This retrospective will present live Q&A sessions, unveiling the artist Cao Shu's ingenious and profound creations hidden within the gaps, exploring what he "Contains it like Lines of a hand."

Q 1.

Will performances similar to this one become a more stable form of your performance? There is a mention of "state machines," is there any connection between them and the performance?

Cao: Initially, I was thinking about the question of repeatability versus non-repeatability—the inevitable repetitiveness of the digital world in electronic games and the non-repeatability of performances, and the contradiction between them. Electronic games are a completely repetitive performance, with various Sisyphean state machines distributed in 3D game scenes, such as a wolf's patrol, which remains exactly the same even after ten thousand repetitions. The characteristic of a performance is that it may not be the same next time as it is today; one cannot step into the same river twice. After this performance, it turned out to be different from what I expected. Initially, I imagined myself playing games on stage, moving around while playing, stopping to speak when something came to mind, maintaining spontaneity and liveliness. When playing electronic games myself, I often do the same thing. The first time I play, the second time, and the hundredth time, the experience is completely different, including the space of playing the game, which also determines the different moods. This is actually rehearsal. I also wonder, what is the relationship between theatrical performance and the repeatability of electronic game state machines? Regarding this matter of rehearsal, when I was in college, my physical performance teacher talked about "understanding the body." I haven't thought much about this for more than ten years after graduation, but I suddenly realized this problem in the past year or two—how the body ages, how times change, everything is non-repetitive. Later, I realized that when playing games as a child, I was actually understanding the body. The moment of death in the game triggers blood flow, accelerates heartbeat, the sensation of a scar on the body, or a set of habitual movements all signify the construction of a certain memory architecture.



"The Performance of "Contains it like Lines of a hand' is Presented by the Artist"

"The gunshot wound on his leg is indeed real, further confirming the authenticity of the story. Each story slowly pieces together some scent, texture, temperature, and color. In the snowy wilderness of Qiqihar, a person riding a bicycle passes through a huge pack of wolves. This wolf has green eyes, its head tilts 35 degrees to the left, and it swings every three seconds, just like Sisyphus in Greek mythology. Each time it seems different, but in essence, it is exactly the same. You see, this is the 16th time it has swung its head, the 17th time. Each time, it is better than the previous one, and its next perfect swing is precisely because of the existence of the previous one. Like the shaking leaves, rolling waves, or patrolling enemies in the game. A string of code representing a loop. This complete repetition exists only in the state machine of the game engine, and it is absolutely impossible in real life. Absolutely impossible in real life. Absolutely impossible in real life. Absolutely impossible in real life. Absolutely impossible in real life. Absolutely impossible in real life. Absolutely impossible in real life. Absolutely impossible in real life. Absolutely impossible in real life. Absolutely impossible in real life. Absolutely impossible in real life. Absolutely impossible in real life. Absolutely impossible in real life. Absolutely impossible in real life. Absolutely impossible in real life. Absolutely impossible in real life. Absolutely impossible in real life..."

—Excerpt from the performance "Contains it like Lines of a hand"

Q 2.

How was the decision made to combine the interaction between live performances and the way players walk in the game world, as well as showcasing the behind-the-scenes conception of the work?

Cao: The exposure of the operating system and game engine backstage during this performance also stems from my interest in the "operating backstage." The working backstage of a machine is analogous to the collective subconscious backstage of humanity. Traumatic experiences recalled by people in dreams and the traces left in the subconscious are closely related to that backstage, which is closely connected to the broader historical background. Rural novels in China in the last century, such as those written by Chen Zhongshi, which were the mainstream of Chinese literature for several decades, often contained plots related to excretion, desire, or the body. I often wonder if there is a connection between the various pains mentioned at the sensory level and the memories frequently mentioned by my grandmother's generation. The so-called geomancy and astronomical phenomena are also a huge body in ancient cosmology, connecting individual lives on the earth, allowing them to interact with each other. However, the histories of many individual lives are hidden like palm prints and are rarely mentioned.



The venue for the "Vortex" project is an old western-style building, with people performing on the second floor, echoing the first floor... I deliberately created a scene in the game engine that mirrors this place — allowing memories to enter the game space from the physical space. Several previous artist projects before "Vortex" also inspired me, each being relaxed and free, hovering between various possibilities, similar to the backstage of everyone's work.

Moreover, due to the popularity of game engines, game production has become very convenient, and a work can be rapidly produced at minimal cost. Similar to the authors' films in the New Wave era or the handheld DV era, those images that were quickly produced like punches. Ordinary people can use the language of film to write and express themselves at an extremely fast pace, striking reality. So, is it now the stage of what many left-wing game researchers have referred to as the Essay Game? When anyone can quickly complete a personal expression using a game engine in a short time, electronic games become a "social media".



"People fear earthquakes that could strike at any moment, so everyone lives outdoors on open ground. In their childhood summers, they slept in the courtyard, using shoes as pillows. Some slept on the streets, and accidents were frequent. People slept in the yard, with frequent comings and goings of neighbors. Sleeping with the head to the north and feet to the south was customary. It was believed that aligning the body's magnetic field with that of the Earth's larger magnetic field strengthened the body's electromagnetic field, which was beneficial for blood circulation... This belief originated from a lecture on the human magnetic field heard from my grandfather in 1995 in Jining, Shandong Province. The word 'magnetism' dates back to the 3rd century BCE in the Lüshi Chunqiu. In ancient times, the use of the character '慈' implied that the magnetic attraction of iron by magnets was akin to the affection of a mother calling her children..."

—Excerpt from the performance "Contains it like Lines of a hand"

Q.3

Your narrative sounds like a personal family history, yet it seems to encompass the history of the Republic of China in the previous decades. Were you deliberately writing this story with a historical consciousness? During the improvised performance, you revealed some intimate aspects of your family history. Do you feel like an observer or do you immerse yourself into it?

Cao: My grandfather was central to the family narrative. Whenever the past was discussed, it revolved around his stories of warfare and military achievements. The entire family narrative centered around him; he was the main thread, while my grandmother's role was almost overlooked. Once my mother mentioned many details about my grandmother's life. Through that conversation, I connected various family details—about my grandmother's generation and her children. It's about the history of the past 100 years, from the land revolution to today, with countless details forming a complex web and presenting a slice of family organization in that era. Some parts of it were particularly striking to me, like how my

mother still vividly remembers every step of making matchstick paste, the specific texture of each matchstick. I documented this conversation and used its contents as the structure for creating this electronic game, so its structure is more like a documentary. I also created the game map based on the places mentioned in the conversation—different spaces where memories occurred. Along the way, I added some more macroscopic, external historical perspectives, which interact with the speech and electronic game sections, resulting in what you see now, a form of simultaneous gaming and performance.



Similar to a documentary, in filming a documentary, the person behind the camera influences everything that happens on-site. The difference is that in a 3D scene of an electronic game, the night of making matchstick paste, the reed fields, and the Dongfanghong-1 satellite in the sky can all be present at the same time, without the chronological order of montage. This is also a characteristic of this technology, where various things are present, interacting with each other in space. Works like Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, which reached the limits of what literature could achieve long ago, and the way 3D electronic games handle spatial issues today, resonate with each other.

When I was a little over 4 years old, I often heard my grandfather talk about his experiences on the battlefield, which was quite cruel for a 4-year-old. The environment in which oral narratives occurred, such as the bed he sat on or under a tree in the yard, often connected countless times and spaces. For me personally, the space where oral narratives occurred is related to temperature and smell, that is, the porous spacetime of memory itself.

As for the question of observation versus immersion, electronic games give me a lot of unique feelings. For example, in the game *The Last of Us* by Naughty Dog, the first part scored as high as 9.5, but then the score for the second part dropped sharply to 2.5. In the first part of the game, the whole world is infected by zombies, and scientists want to extract serum from a girl to save humanity. The player, taking on the role of a "father" in the first-person perspective, becomes an enemy of that girl and all humanity to protect her. But in the second part, your first-person perspective shifts to someone else, and in the main storyline, you mercilessly kill the protagonist you played in the first part. This sparked intense social reactions at the time, with many people smashing game discs to express their anger. This reflects the strong immersive nature of the first-person perspective in electronic games. Electronic games are a form of embodied practice with profound life-political significance, and I even feel there's a kind of destructive "toxicity" to them, which I think is also related to memory issues.

On the wall of my grandmother's house hangs a full picture of the Grand View Garden from Dream of the Red Chamber. Since I can remember, this picture has always been on the wall, with its intricate corridors, rockeries, and woven waterways. Every courtyard can lead to another maze-like fork in the road. The print should be the work of an amateur painter, who recorded the structure of the Grand View Garden in a formulaic manner. Perhaps it's an imitation of a great "full view of the Grand View Garden"... When I was a child, I often used this painting as a basis for playing games in my mind, pretending to be a player, setting off from the pavilions and towers, overcoming the difficulties in the water, and arriving at the rockeries beyond dozens of courtyard walls...

—Excerpt from the performance *"Contains it like Lines of a hand"*

Q.4

Why Tangshan? This is an interesting point. The Tangshan earthquake of 1976, involving your family, also inserts quite explicitly a subplot related to mysticism (feng shui). Is this a clue you are particularly interested in?

Cao: (The Tangshan earthquake) inspired me a lot. Unlike our conventional understanding of "disasters," a disaster is not just an event; it affects countless aspects of a person's life experience. For example, habits formed by how people sleep, or how they engage in public life... After the Tangshan earthquake, because earthquakes could happen at any time, for the three years following, many people of my mother's generation in the north slept in makeshift earthquake shelters in open areas of residential complexes. This process led to many shared memories and techniques for community collaboration in a public environment.

Cao: (Tangshan Earthquake) It gave me great inspiration, unlike our conventional understanding of "disaster," disaster is not just an event, it affects countless details in various aspects of a person's life experience. Such as how people develop sleeping habits, how they conduct public life... After the Tangshan earthquake, because earthquakes could happen at any time, for the next three years, many people of my mother's generation in the north slept in makeshift earthquake shelters in the open space of the community. This process allowed everyone to engage in intimate exchanges in a public environment, giving rise to many memorable details and techniques for community cooperation.

Recently, I've been focusing on some clues related to memories of China in the 1990s. At that time, there was a lot of "pseudoscience" thinking in the most popular street literature, offering explanations for unsolved mysteries. It was also during the same period, when I was living at my grandmother's house, that I would see elderly people practicing qigong, attending lectures, and drinking energized water every day for a while. It was the most magical memory of my childhood. This memory not only happened in a single family but also shaped a certain collective subconscious of society. I tried to understand the origins and implications of this—Qian Xuesen's "On the Launch of Basic Human Science Research," and his earlier work "System Control Theory," discussing how to understand the universe, the relationship between the universe and the human body, the control relationships between material in the universe, etc., also related to the folk rumors I heard in childhood about breaking dragon veins and earthquakes. What shapes the landscape, and what is the relationship between the landscape and the life on it? Based on the bodily experiential narratives mentioned by my mother, I set up clues for memory scenes in the game. When looking back from a high altitude, you will find that the plains, mountains, and caves that passed through in the game are all part of the human body. They are also related to the ancient Eastern cosmology and the unique perspective of the Chinese people towards science and technology. Another source of interest is that several years ago, I was working on works related to Michel Boym (1612-1659)—he was a missionary who did journey from China to Rome. In the era before the decline of alchemy and the rise of science, how did people endow various phenomena with mystique? How were they gradually replaced by modern physics? Especially in a reality like China, I think it is a quite political issue. In social issues and personal memories, it affects your perspective on observing the world, and also slices and reassembles the world.

"He said that seismic side blasting is a survey method for earthquakes, or it can be imagined as a CT scan done for Mother Earth. It measures the sound after blasting using sound wave scanning, targeting Pleistocene and Holocene faults. Coincidentally, regarding my grandmother's CT scan before she passed away, she said she saw a pitch-black cave with concentric circles of white light, coming from afar and stopping nearby. Perhaps it was in the intestines full of ulcers, or it might be a stalagmite tumor formed by the accumulation of calcium carbonate in underground caves, uneven in texture..."

——Excerpt from the performance "Contains it like Lines of a hand"

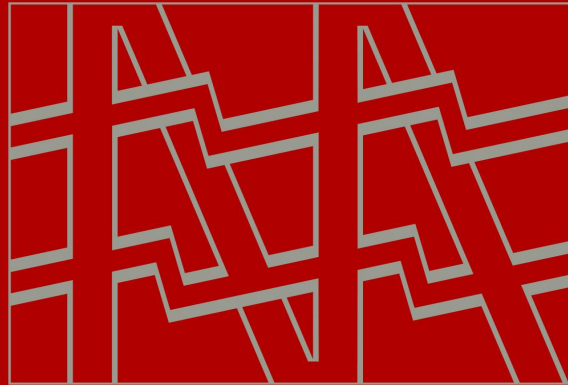
This retrospective content has been reviewed by the artist Cao Shu.

Editor: Mona

Video and image arrangement: Zheng Xiaoqian

Layout design: Jiao Xinyu

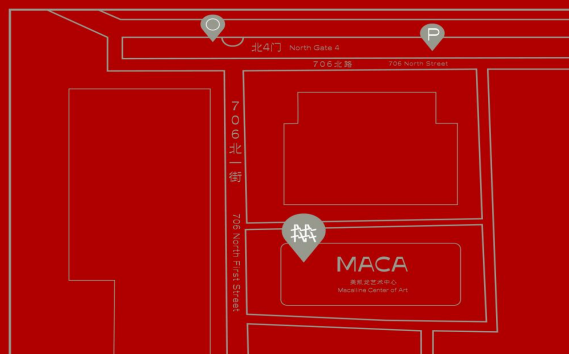
On-site execution: Zheng Xiaoqian, Li Kexin, Shi Yaqing



MACA

美凯龙艺术中心
Macalline Center of Art

非营利艺术机构美凯龙艺术中心是一个专注于视觉发明的实践场域，以事件和研究的方法建构实体和网络社区，重聚艺术家群体。



网站 www.macallineart.org
邮箱 macallineart@macallineart.org
媒体 media@macallineart.org

©2024 美凯龙艺术中心

美凯龙艺术中心
美凯龙艺术中心
Macallinearts
美凯龙艺术中心
美凯龙艺术中心
美凯龙艺术中心