

Mollusk, secretary, anonymous, and dune go to Rome

Art-Ba-Ba



Author: Iris Long

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"GO TO ROME" is the latest solo exhibition by the artist Cao Shu at the Imaginative Lab, presenting twelve works created by Cao Shu from 2020 to 2021, including sound installations and videos. Using the historical event of Jesuit missionary Michel Boym's journey to Rome as a "clue" and "pretext," he explores the sensory relationships between light and sound, sound and image, forming a series of artworks in the exhibition hall with emotional connections.

In 1651, Catholic Jesuit missionary Michel Boym (1612–1659) was sent as an envoy by the Southern Ming Emperor. Traveling through Macau, Goa, Malwa, Persia, Anatolia, and Smyrna, he journeyed to Rome to request military assistance from Pope Innocent X, the nominal spiritual leader of Europe. During this eight-year-long journey, his identity fluctuated between Ming Dynasty diplomatic envoy, missionary, naturalist, geographer, botanist, and non-believer. Ultimately, he was rejected by people holding different ideological beliefs and died on the border of Vietnam.

Cao Shu took me through his recent solo exhibition "GO TO ROME" in Hangzhou's B1ock of BYARTMATTER in both clockwise and counterclockwise directions. From my perspective,

the exhibition is filled with ineffable "traces," not woven from distinct works but rather randomly emerging from the overall network constructed from fragments of information that seep or sprout from the works.

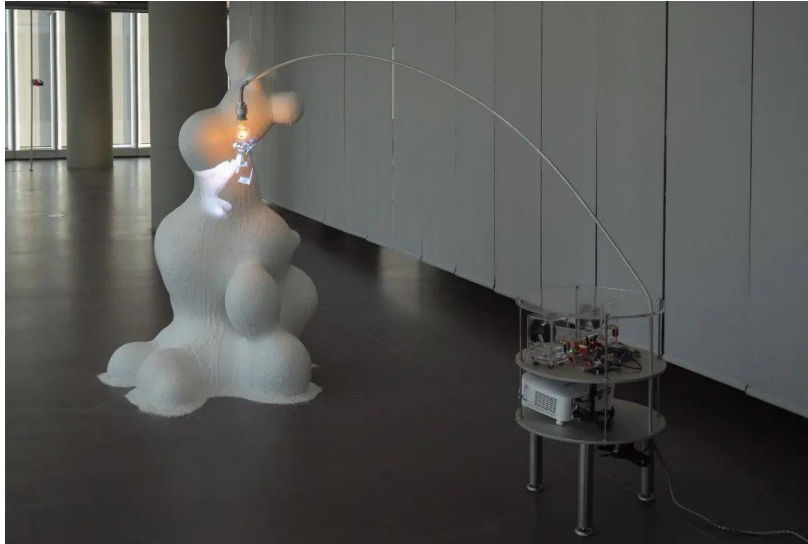


Cao Shu, "GO TO ROME" exhibition venue

I've recently started using Roam Research, a knowledge management tool that inherits the "index card" approach from Niklas Luhmann's Zettelkasten method. The name Roam, coincidentally, sounds like Rome, hinting at the possibility of unraveling mysteries between various interconnected nodes—where the puzzle itself is our own memory.

For the ongoing two-year project "GO TO ROME," the surface puzzle includes Michel Boym, Pope Innocent X, the Emperor of the Southern Ming, the inhabitants of Shengsi Islands, dunes, and the ocean. The underlying puzzle consists of the symbols and clues formed by the encounters between the artist and material substances during this period, as well as memories guided by vague and secretive hints. In Cao Shu's own words, he

hopes that viewers can branch out their own perspectives on the exhibition from any angle. In my attempt to do so, I use the actual images appearing in the works—mollusks, secretaries, remote prisons, and dunes—to "roam" their respective stories of "Go to Rome."



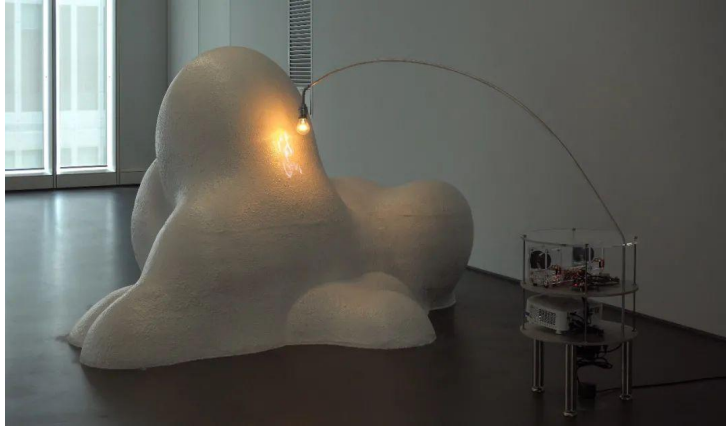
Cao Shu, "Light vs. Light", foam cutting, aluminum, acrylic, wires, speakers, homemade circuit boards, projector Technical support: Shi Hongfa, Liu Xining

Mollusks Go to Rome

Mollusks don't know how to get to Rome. In its viscous dreams, the Laurentia continent has just been separated from the Gondwana and Baltica continents by the vast Panthalassic Ocean. Protected by its mantle, it believes that going with the flow is the best mode of transportation. Nothing is safer than the oceanic currents; for mollusks, the currents represent time, and the ever-changing water temperature serves as the unit of time. With only tentacles, it cannot visualize the shape of its body. Or rather, it prefers to learn about itself through contact with its mantle and the water—it lazily contemplates.

Having endured the most unstable climates, where storms perpetually rage over the ocean and sediment on the seafloor threatens to bury everything, it finds itself buried during those moments. Minerals continuously fill its body until it can no longer sense the sea. From the mollusk's perspective, violent eddies hurl it abruptly into a seamless void, as if the sea itself made the sea disappear, or perhaps, motion makes motion disappear. The mollusk has long lost the perception of its body; even a ghost can drift to Rome, but at this moment, the mollusk isn't even a ghost—it is a negative form. To human researchers, it is akin to other traces of ancient life, a trace fossil without substance.

How can a trace go to Rome? This is the question the mollusk, embedded in the negative spacetime, is contemplating. It knows that from the Cambrian period to today, many humans, like itself, have become trace fossils—insignificant entities, leaving behind sighs of negative forms.



The Vanishing Pope | interactive sound & video installation | hard sponge, aluminum, acrylic, light bulb, speaker, projector, self-made circuit board | 2021 | Image source, Cao Shu solo exhibition Go To Rome, Imagokinetics

In the installation *"The Vanishing Pope"* the voice of Pope Innocent X controls the brightness of a light bulb, with the light becoming brighter as the pitch of his voice rises. When the Pope's voice reaches its loudest point, his projection is obscured by the light from the brightest bulb until it disappears. The white sculptural elements in the installation represent Cambrian mollusks. To Cao Shu, the presence of mollusks in the geological record as a "coincidence" is akin to his discovery process of Michel Boym and the Pope, where history is revealed through surrounding materials or negative forms. For the Pope in the artwork, light makes light disappear, while for mollusks, the sea makes the sea disappear.

The Secretary Go to Rome

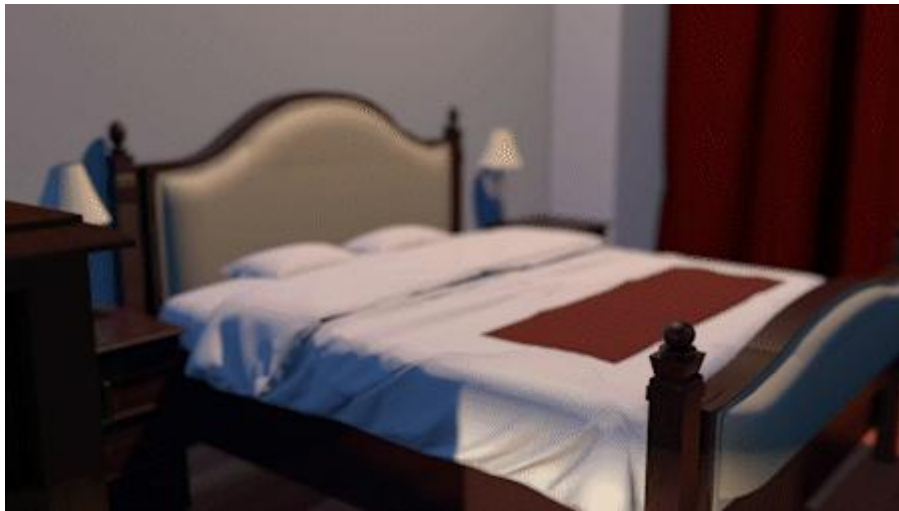
The workplace of the secretary is at the center of the universe, a place known as Cantor's Paradise, a guesthouse with an infinite number of rooms hidden within endless Romanesque corridors. Whenever a new official arrives, a new room automatically appears. The officials speak in the dialect of the Shengsi Islands, and their favorite food is Roman cauliflower, where each bud looks exactly like the others, and within the large spiral of leaves, countless identical micro-spirals exist.



Cao Shu, *"Infinity and Infinity Plus One"* (Animated Work), Installation, combining 3D digital simulation imagery with 4K live-action footage

On the first day the secretary came to work, they stayed in the Nth room at the end of the Nth corridor. All the rooms had a view of the sea when their windows were opened, "Looking out from the Nth room, it's the Nth sea," faithfully recorded the secretary in their notebook. All the work here was quantified by the magnitude of N, even though N itself couldn't be calculated. If someone accidentally stumbled in, they would see everything

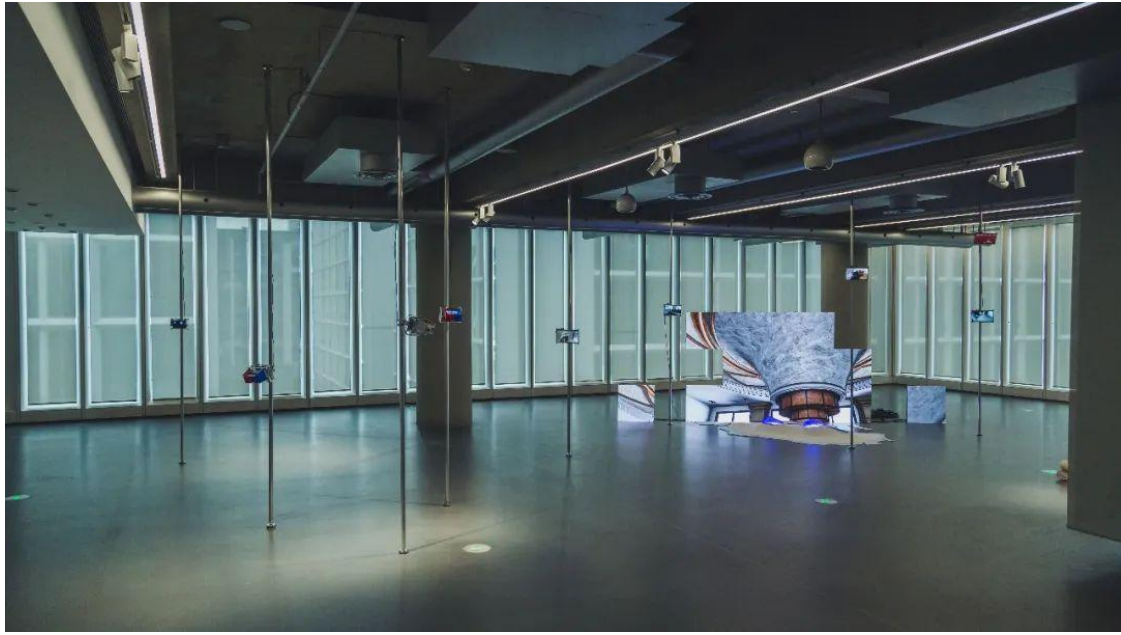
splitting into thorns in vibration—where one enamel cup was an infinite number of enamel cups, and a set of bedsheets was also an infinite number of sets. The truth of quantity was more important than the truth of appearance, thus, one secretary was also an infinite number of secretaries. In the earthly realm, this endless self-similar splitting might plunge people into delirium in an instant, but at the center of the universe, it was rather commonplace. The secretary sighed at this, as the stack of invoices in front of them increased by another meter.



Cao Shu, "Infinity and Infinity Plus One" (Animated Work), Installation, combining 3D digital simulation imagery with 4K live-action footage

Every full moon, the secretary would ride on his desk, flying over the sea towards Rome. In the moment when his sight pierced through the horizon, he watched as the countless and continuously self-replicating pillars, arches, corridors, and stained glass below solidified suddenly into definite shapes, where countless Romes became one Rome. He leaped off the desk, diving into the hidden shops of Mercato Monti to purchase the anti-aging herbs he needed before the next full moon.

Upon returning to the center of the universe, the secretary pushed open the door and saw his aged self lying in bed, the horizon of the sea resembling a wire, tightening as the dawn outside began to split into countless dawns.



Cao Shu, *"Infinity and Infinity Plus One"* / Installation, combining 3D digital simulation imagery with 4K live-action footage

"Infinity and Infinity Plus One" was filmed at a guesthouse on Shengsi Islands in Zhoushan, where demolition was imminent. During his residency on the island, Cao Shu used 3D digital simulation imagery and 4K live-action footage to tell a tale of an official contemplating Hilbert's Hotel problem, narrated in the dialect of Shengsi Islands, reminiscent of Italo Calvino's seaside fables.

The Anonymous Goes to Rome

The anonymous individual opened their eyes in the game, knowing that the transcranial magnetic stimulation device was still secretly delivering a weak electrical current to their peripheral nerves and muscles. The rules of this game were exceptionally simple—they needed to rely on "motion aftereffects" to keep their in-game body moving forward. Motion aftereffect occurs when one looks at a moving object for a period of time and then shifts their gaze to a stationary object, causing an illusion where the stationary object appears to move in the opposite direction of the previously observed moving object. The anonymous individual had to find everything in the game environment that could induce motion aftereffects and use this method to make the absolutely static background map move, traveling through Macau, Goa, Malwa, Persia, Anatolia, and Smyrna, ultimately reaching Rome.

The setup of the game was that they ultimately needed to meet the nominal spiritual leader of Europe—the Pope Innocent X, deliver a message to him, and change the historical course of the game world. As the protagonist who could only move through "motion," the anonymous individual had to immerse themselves in the infinite details of the game. They started with the waves; leaving the coastline, they began tracking falling betel nuts. On the island, people chewed betel nuts and shells together. Their gaze scanned the houses and boats swaying with the river currents in Latong City, the shadows of musk hunters in the moonlight, the reflections of silk clothes flowing under the scorching sun in rich families, the impurities sieved from the white clay during the casting of porcelain in Raozhou Prefecture, constantly bumping, pushing, occasionally stumbling. They moved like this, with a scattered curiosity, recording everything they saw and heard.

As the journey progressed, the anonymous individual found that the apparent physical motion could bring about decreasing aftereffects, replaced by psychological or consciousness-related "motion." They needed to grasp and observe the transmission of viewpoints and beliefs in the crowd to achieve the same advancement effect as watching a coconut fall. They increasingly found themselves caught between starkly opposite hidden movements, becoming more and more difficult to move forward. In the world of apparent motion, they were geographers and naturalists. In the hidden motion levels, they found themselves becoming heretics in all belief systems, escaping and evading in the invisible currents of opposition and cancellation, driving their body towards Rome with the only remaining attention.

This unconquered game is called "Remote Prison Structure," and to this day, there have been hundreds of anonymous individuals, wearing transcranial magnetic stimulation devices, progressing on the road to Rome.



Cao Shu, "Ideology", 3D cameras, graphics data conversion program, 4K television, splitter, data cables Technical support: Xin Chen

In the artwork "ideology", as viewers move within the exhibition space, their positions are captured by 3D cameras and converted into actual distance values. These steps accumulate along the actual walking distance of the missionary Michel Boym from Yunnan all the way to Rome. Ideology's Chinese pronunciation is "Remote Prison Structure" is adapted from the phonetic translation of the word "ideology" a century ago: "Yi Di Lao Jie" (意底牢结).

Dune Goes to Rome

Dune still remembers the warm period of Rome. Back then, people planted palm trees in Greece, vineyards flourished on the British Isles, and Hannibal's army even crossed the Alps with elephants. The fascinating aspect of the human geographical system lies in its nested dual description: the "egocentric" directions of front, back, left, and right, and the "geocentric" directions of east, south, west, and north. Yet dunes seem to naturally resist these systems; it's hard to discern "front" or "east" in the desert until the guiding stars appear in the night sky.

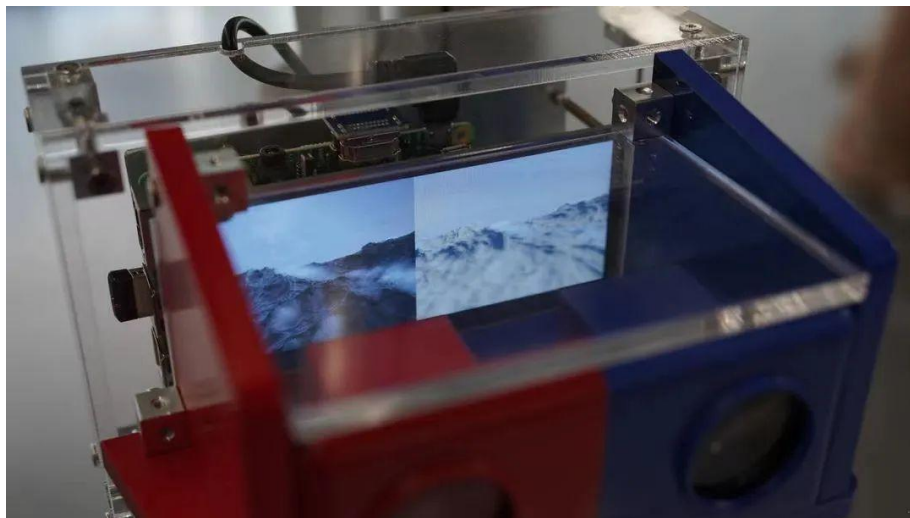
Dune is going to Rome to find the sea. Four hundred million years ago, Dune was the sea, but since the Great Rift, everything that belonged to a continuous entity has been cut apart, like a magnet suddenly severed and truly losing its polarity. Hearing that the sea is now located in what was once called Rome, Dune sets out on the journey. Dunes have their own way of migrating. During long-distance migrations, they signal each other like flocks of birds, avoiding collisions or engulfments. Dunes inform the wind of their location, and the wind then passes this coordinate to the surrounding dunes.



Cao Shu, "400 Million Years Ago Was the Ocean, 400 Million Years Later Is the Desert" (Animated Work), celestial pole, model paint, acrylic, wires, Raspberry Pi 3B resistor screen, special clamp

In fact, different forms of dunes exist on Earth, Mars, Venus, Saturn's moon Titan, and the comet Churyumov-Gerasimenko. In ancient times, Mars was also covered by vast, unidentified bodies of water, and there was also an ocean on the planet Solaris. Both dunes and oceans belong to interstellar species, and dunes hope that the ocean still remembers this. After all, as time passes on Earth, the memories of interstellar species begin to gather dust. Unlike the two human geographical systems mentioned above, dunes and oceans both rely on a "memory-centric" system for existence and navigation. Therefore, when dunes go to Rome to find the ocean, they don't need to have a clear sense of "front, back, left, right" or "east, south, west, north"; they only need to continuously recall while moving.

As for whether the dunes can reach Rome, it depends on whether the ocean remembers. After all, it used to be a dune.



Cao Shu, "400 Million Years Ago Was the Ocean, 400 Million Years Later Is the Desert" (Animated Work), celestial pole, model paint, acrylic, wires, Raspberry Pi 3B resistor screen, special clamp

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I am particularly obsessed with the artwork "400 Million Years Ago Was the Ocean, 400 Million Years Later Is the Desert." It is a homemade device based on stereo cameras mimicking the interocular distance of human eyes for recording, "allowing one to see both the past and the future simultaneously."

[1] For more information on how dunes communicate, see:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/science/2020/02/05/sand-dunes-dont-just-move-they-communicate-when-they-do-researchers-say/>