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CAO FEI'S 曹斐 *I, MIRROR*

BODIES IN SURVEILLANCE CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE EXPANDED MEDIA ART

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With the advancement of digital technologies, surveillance in the People's Republic of China (PRC) has evolved from state and corporate modes towards everyday domains. This integration occurs through the growing reliance of individuals on digital infrastructure in their ordinary interactions, which embodies the concept of 'surveillance culture'. These novel surveillance methods and control mechanisms have given rise to new forms of institutional power imbalances This paper focuses on multimedia artist Cao Fei's曹斐 (b. 1978) artwork i, mirror (2007) to explore the artistic strategies employed with updated media to reflect on the PRC's developing surveillance culture critically. Through a thorough analysis of i, mirror, the research investigates how the artist represents the virtual body to complicate the notion of post-panoptical surveillance culture as a mechanism of control beyond the real realm. The paper examines how the body's shifting identities, as both the object and the subject of the subtler surveillance collectively undertaken by the PRC's authorities and civilians in their everyday lives, leads contemporary artists to explore the potential for new subjectivities in the new age of 'digital China'. The overarching aim is to explore how contemporary Chinese artists can strategically utilise surveillance technologies as a way of political counter-surveillance to challenge systemic power asymmetries.

INTRODUCTION

With the advancement of digital technologies, surveillance in the People's Republic of China (PRC) has increased from state and corporate modes toward

integration within mundane life through information infrastructure and individuals' increasing reliance on the digital in ordinary relationships. The new surveillance methods and control mechanisms lead to the creation of new forms of institutional power asymmetries. The paper will focus on Cao Fei's (b. 1978) artwork *i, mirror* (2007) to investigate the artistic strategies of utilising novel media to reflect on the developing surveillance culture critically. With a close analysis of *i, mirror*, this paper intends to complicate the ideas of the post-panoptical surveillance culture as a way of control beyond the real world. The paper will examine ways in which the artist represents the virtual body to shed light on the evolving panoptic monitoring, instituting the panoptic control systems and power imbalances. This research aims to rethink the interrelated identities of artists and the audience to explore an alternative subjectivity in digital surveillance expanded into the everyday domain in the digital PRC. The ultimate goal is to explore how contemporary Chinese artists can create a political counter-surveillance by tactically using or disrupting surveillance technologies to challenge institutional power asymmetries.[1]

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

From its very foundation, the PRC could be considered a surveillance state, with the severity waxing and waning depending on leadership and political atmosphere.[2] Each ensuing regime has increased the levels of oversight culminating in today's surveillance state under Xi Jinping. Xi has expanded control over every aspect of daily life; art and culture are no exception. Beyond the political sphere, the use of surveillance has extended to commercial purposes with giant corporations, such as Alibaba Group and Tencent, constantly collecting, analysing, censoring, and controlling individual activities driven by advances in data science and the use of big data in commercial practices. These combined aspects of surveillance have stimulated a wave of contemporary Chinese artistic creation that critically responds to the growing surveillance in various forms with representatives like Ai Weiwei艾未未

1 Beyond the previous scholarship on discourses on art practices with creative media, I propose Chinese *expanded* media art as artistic experiments that incorporate, alter, and address emerging forms of media technologies since the 1980s. It extends from film (video and moving images) to digital, informatics and computer-based technologies, robotics, genetics and biotechnology and others. It includes various art forms such as digital art, interactive art, bio-art, Internet art, and virtual art explored by Chinese artists and diasporic ones in a globalised art world. The term emphasises the 'expanded' to highlight the organic and active quality of contemporary Chinese art incorporating updated media. See more in Shiyu Gao, *Beyond the Binary Body: Reconstructing Subjectivity and Identity in Chinese Expanded Media Art, 1988 to the Present*, PhD diss., The University of Edinburgh, 2023.

2 David Lyon, *The Culture of Surveillance: Watching as a Way of Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

(b. 1957), Zhang Peili张培力 (b. 1957), Song Dong宋东 (b. 1966), Cui Xiuwen 崔岫闻 (b. 1970–2018), and many more.

In addition to traditional surveillance forms, the rapid development of social media has offered citizens' phones and smartwatches opportunities to collect personal data, activities, and medical information, especially with the impacts of COVID-19, which generated new surveillance methods as a control mechanism in all spheres of life.[3] To better understand surveillance catalysed by the rapid development of social media nowadays, David Lyon develops the term 'surveillance culture', which goes beyond the boundaries of main theories such as 'surveillance state' and 'surveillance society' to emphasise surveillance conducted by ordinary people.[4] The PRC is constructing an unprecedented 'surveillance culture', as David Lyon identifies, through "organisational dependence, political-economic power, security linkages, and social media engagement".[5] In Lyon's point of view, the culture of surveillance received attention at the beginning of the twenty-first century, particularly after the 11 September attacks (also known as '9/11') on the United States. It became less visible with the advent of social media, especially after Edward Snowden (b.1983) copied and disclosed classified information from the US National Security Agency (NSA) in 2013. During the post-Cold War period, surveillance states focused on capturing significant aspects of surveillance such as the activities of intelligence agencies, primarily governmental and corporate forces. According to Lyon, the concept of a surveillance society is applied initially to show the ways in which surveillance has extended beyond its initial space, such as government departments, police agencies, and workplaces to change ways of everyday life, including the 'mass surveillance' engaged in by the NSA and its 'Five Eyes', which refers to the partnered foreign intelligence agencies of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States, and the 'big five': Apple, Google, Microsoft, Amazon, and Facebook.[6] Despite the emphasis on how certain agencies manipulate surveillance to affect the routines of social life, the notion of 'surveillance society'

3 Kazuhiko Shibuya, *The Rise of Artificial Intelligence and Big Data in Pandemic Society: Crises, Risk and Sacrifice in a New World Order* (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2022).

4 David Lyon, *The Culture of Surveillance: Watching as a Way of Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

5 David Lyon, "Digital Citizenship and Surveillance| Surveillance Culture: Engagement, Exposure, and Ethics in Digital Modernity," *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 826.

6 Ibid.

is insufficient to examine the ways in which ordinary people engage with surveillance in their daily lives.

In the PRC, a surveillance culture, facilitated by advanced new technologies and grounded in previous corporate and state modes, has been developing toward integration within mundane life through information infrastructure and individuals' increasing reliance on the digital in ordinary relationships. This rapidly rising surveillance culture in the PRC, calls for a different approach to artistic practice. Multimedia artist Cao Fei's series of art pieces based on the virtual platform Second Life (SL) would be a good instance to expose the increasingly invisible surveillance of ordinary people in their everyday lives generated by social media and digital supervision. There are various typical features of today's surveillance, including data being effortlessly quantified, highly traceable, easily monetised, and collectible at a distance. This development shows that surveillance in the digital era is 'deterritorialized'.[7] Surveillance culture today relates to social, economic, and political conditions and is constructed by "organisational dependence, political-economic power, security linkages, and social media engagement".[8] Individuals living in the context of a surveillance culture are not only being watched but also monitoring others as well, as surveillance itself has become a way of life.

Expanding surveillance culture is constructing a subtler form of control and power that is 'post-panoptical'.[9] The concept of the Panopticon is derived from the eighteenth-century design of the modern prison created by Jeremy Bentham. It features a circular architecture with a central control tower for the guards to watch inmates at the periphery so that the prisoners in the cells cannot tell when they are being observed or detect the presence of the inspector hidden in the tower. Although it is uncertain when 'watching' actually takes place, prisoners and their inspectors are constantly aware of their interrelationships. Michel Foucault built on Bentham's panopticon to develop the concept of the disciplinary society. The idea of a panopticon became one model

7 Lyon, *The Culture of Surveillance: Watching as a Way of Life*, 11.

8 Lyon, "Digital Citizenship and Surveillance| Surveillance Culture," 826.

9 Lyon, *The Culture of Surveillance*, 33.

of surveillance and a vital way of maintaining control in modern times through facilitating movements among watchers while prohibiting them among prisoners. By that, the Panopticon induces "a sense of permanent and unverifiable visibility that ensures the authority of control and surveillance".[10] The central tower's privileged position, all-seeing without being seen, produces "a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad", according to Foucault—the invisible reach of power is ever-present.[11] In David Lyon's opinion, the current surveillance culture is 'post-panoptical' as the inspectors can "slip away, escaping to unreachable realms" through advanced digital technologies.[12] The remainder of the paper focuses on Cao Fei's *i, mirror* to complicate the idea of post-panoptical surveillance culture expanded into the daily life of the digital era.

10 Justin Clemens, "Virtually Anywhere Real-time New-old Avatar-human Entertainment art: Cao Fei Online," *Journal of Art* 11 (2011), 113.

11 Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 195-228.

12 Lyon, *The Culture of Surveillance*, 33.

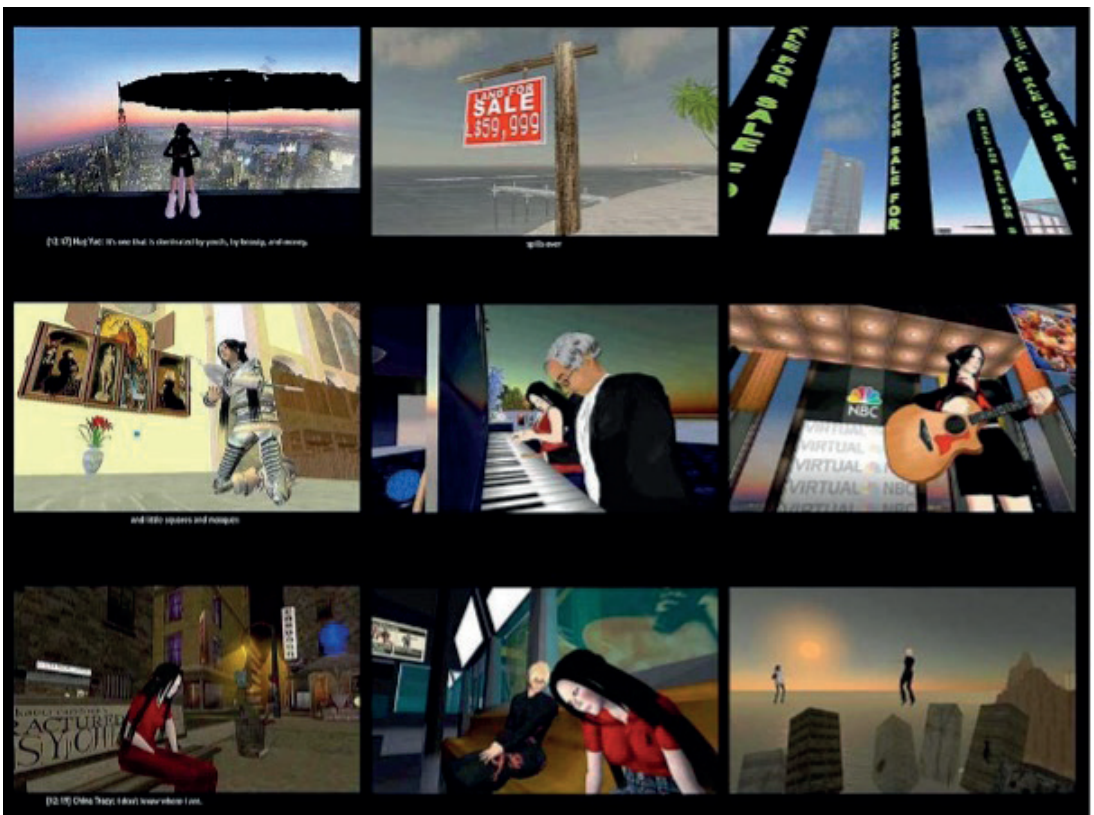

Fig. 1. Cao Fei曹斐, *i, mirror*. 2007, Machinima, 28 minutes, video still.

VIRTUAL BODIES UNDER SURVEILLANCE

Cao's well-known machinima *i, Mirror* (2007), based on SL, sheds light on the subtler, less detectable and potentially repressive forms of social control embedded in digital surveillance, which is emerging as a "part of a whole way of life" (Fig. 1).[13] SL is an online platform that offers its users a three-dimensional virtual world. People can enter SL by setting up their self-customised avatar.[14] With SL's slogan, "Your world. Your imagination", the new virtual world stimulates a new artistic system beyond established boundaries, including art creation, online exhibitions, art education, and communication through a virtual environment.[15] There are artworks directly created for SL by figures such as Eva and Franco Mattes and Garrett Lynch.[16] Cao started exploring the SL world with the virtual incarnation, China Tracy, in 2006 (Fig. 2). Since then, Cao has developed various art pieces in different forms involving SL, such as the online virtual urban construction *RMB City* (2007-2011), the performance *People's Limbo in RMB City* (2009), *Live in RMB City* (2009), and *RMB City Opera* (2009).[17]

Fig. 2. Cao Fei曹斐, *i, mirror*. 2007, Machinima, 28 minutes, video still.

13 Machinima, combining 'machine' and 'cinema', is a type of filmmaking related to a virtual environment. Machinima is entirely reliant on interactive three-dimensional computer-graphics engines to provide computer-generated imagery (CGI) in real time. See Lyon, "Digital Citizenship and Surveillance| Surveillance Culture," 825. Also, Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1958).

14 Second Life was launched by Linden Lab in 2003. "Second Life," accessed 28 January 2020, https://secondlife.com/. More information about the platform of Second Life can be found in Michael Rymaszewski, Wagner James Au, Mark Wallace, Catherine Winters, Cory Ondrejka, and Benjamin Batstone-Cunningham, *Second life: The official guide* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2007). Second Life has inspired research from multiple disciplinary perspectives, including Axel Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008); Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An anthropologist explores the virtually human* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Christine L. Liao, "Avatars, Second Life, and New Media Art: The Challenge for Contemporary Art Education," *Art Education* 61.2 (2008), 87-91.

i, mirror is a three-part machinima documenting and tele-presenting the life of Cao Fei's avatar, China Tracy, in the virtual realm of SL over six months.[18] *i, mirror* contains three chapters. In the first part, *i, mirror* begins with a quote from W.J.T. Mitchell: "I construct, and I am constructed, in a mutually recursive process that continually changes my fluid, permeable boundaries and my endlessly ramifying networks. I am a spatially-extended cyborg".[19] Cao quotes Mitchell to indicate the significance of creating China Tracy as a cyborg. The opening scene of this section shows a yellow cube inscribed 'Land for Sale' spinning in the air on a barren desert landscape. The cracked land extends to the horizon. The next shot presents a gigantic billboard sign that is rotating with glowing red capitals 'For Sale' in front of an empty skyscraper. Accompanied by slowly rising music, the image shows empty buildings, with a huge spinning gold dollar sign in the foreground of the screen. There are a number of large black columns reaching into the sky with 'For Sale' signs. The camera looks up at the tall buildings from below and moves through the city, accompanied by a background monologue of Octavio Paz's poem "The Balcony":

> Stillness
> in the middle of the night
> not adrift with centuries.
> not spreading out
> nailed
> like a fixed idea
> to the center of incandescence
> Delhi
> Two tall syllables.[20]

Then the artist shows her avatar, China Tracy, standing on a balcony surrounded by high-rise buildings. Afterwards, China Tracy leads the viewers to go through the virtual world of SL, such as residential areas, beaches for sale, buildings with two rows of different national flags, churches, and cemeteries.

15 "Second Life," accessed 28 January 2023, https://secondlife.com/.

16 Eva and Franco Mattes, "I know that it's all a state of mind," accessed 20 May 2023, https://0100101110101101.org/i-know-that-its-all-a-state-of-mind/; Garrett Lynch, "Between Saying and Doing," accessed 20 May 2023, https://www.asquare.org/between-saying-and-doing/.

17 *RMB City* opened to the public in 2009. It is still located on the Creative Commons' Kula Island in SL after being powered down in January 2011. "RMB City," accessed 26 April 2023, http://rmbcity.com/.

18 Cao Fei subtitles *i, mirror* with *A Second Life Documentary Film*. Justin Clements argues that the piece could not be treated as a film precisely as there is "no camera, no external world or lighting source, no film to speak of". It could be more reasonable to call it a machinima, a combination of 'machine' and 'cinema', as it is created entirely by three-dimensional digital graphics. Clemens, "Virtually Anywhere Real-time New-old Avatar-human Entertainment art,"121.

19 *i, mirror,* accessed 27 January 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zB-ILJlnWEE.

The final scene of the first part ends with China Tracy standing naked in the sea facing the sunset, as the background voice says, "You naked. Remember. Your body was ready. Your covered with poems. Remember…".

The second part of *i, mirror* narrates how China Tracy and Hug Yue, a young Asian-looking male avatar, meet and develop a close engagement with each other (Fig. 3). The part starts with Hug Yue wearing a tuxedo and playing the piano. It attracts China Tracy, and then she joins him with her guitar in front of the place with the NBC logo. Then the subtitles appear and show their messages indicating that China Tracy is from China and Hug Yue is from San Francisco. Subsequently, they begin to travel together around SL to urban city centres and tropical landscapes, taking a tram past skyscrapers, hot air ballooning at sea, and in bars while exchanging non-sequiturs. While they are holding hands and walking along the street with different shops, Hug Yue says, "We all do that. We do not act. We simply be who we are". China Tracy responds, "Everybody is an actor in parallel world". Then Hug Yue says, "All the world is a stage". After a series of scenes with a decaying urban landscape, smoke rising from unknown machinery, and the moon over flaming fires, China Tracy and

20 Octavio Paz, *A Tale of Two Gardens: Poems from India, 1952-1995*, trans. Eliot Weinberger (New York: A New Direction, 1997), 3.

Fig. 3. Cao Fei曹斐, *i, mirror*. 2007, Machinima, 28 minutes, video still.

Hug Yue sit at a table in the fine dining restaurant facing the floor-to-ceiling windows with expansive views of the lighted city beyond. China Tracy asks, "What do you think it about the digital world?" Hug Yue replies, "It's one that is dominated by youth, by beauty and money… And it's all an illusion". At the end of part two, China Tracy and Hug Yue play a piano duet and dance waltzes. Then Hug Yue puts on old avatars and reveals his age in real life. Their correspondence in SL ends with them as friends instead of in a potential romantic relationship. The second part ends with the sea in sunrise and subtitles their poetic dialogue. Hug Yue: "That was a beautiful song. 'When the prison doors are opened, the real dragon will fly out'".

The third chapter of the machinima presents various kinds of avatars in SL. For instance, a young man wearing a red hat with a yellow star and a black T-shirt with a portrait of Ernesto Che Guevara is smoking in the park while there are red symbols of the hammer and sickle floating into the air; a hedgehog-like human being; a man in a green top with a tattoo of Chinese characters *wushi* 武士 (warrior) on his neck; a rabbit with long hair with a black top; a dog with spiky purple hair wearing a bra. It shows commercial and entertainment places as well, such as the shops of avatars where users can purchase faces, bodies, and other accessories. The artist used to buy "real skin" (to look better) and a "fake pussy" (to have sex in SL's virtual-sex clubs):

> I always imagine human beings behind hollow digits, all those lonely souls. We are not what we originally are, and yet we remain unchanged. Hopefully there's new possibility of combination in our electronic second life, a new force which transcends this mortal coil. On the reality's end of this combined ultra-space, there are still love for simplicity and the pursuit of freedom. We are thrown into this world hollow. Every world is an abyss. God loves people, but we are also each other's salvation. To go virtual is the only way to forget about the real darkness.[21]

21 See more in Cao Fei, *i, mirror*, 2007, http://www.caofei.com/works.aspx?year=2007&wtid=3, accessed 30 Oct 2023.

With the subtitles, China Tracy, with a fluffy tail, enters the darkness, where the sunlight slowly fades.

i, mirror reflects the panoptic surveillance in two important but different respects. First, the Panopticon could be a reflection of Hug Yue, a random avatar China Tracy meets in the SL, genuine identity in real life. The second chapter of *i, mirror* based on the encounter between China Tracy and Hug Yue is explicit about the work's focus on surveillance and the relationship between real life and SL. At one point, China Tracy, behind a barbed-wire fence, says to Hug Yue, "Some eyes watching us, we all in the film". Then it shifts to a different scene where China Tracy is looking at her own reflection in a toilet mirror and asks, "Is my avatar my mirror?" Hug Yue answers, "Others it is reflection of things… Like aspirations". With a spinning "crane shot", China Tracy is sitting alone on a bench at night, "Sometimes I'm confusing the RL and SL. I don't know where I am". Hug Yue responds, "We all in the Panopticon".

Hug Yue, a young, handsome, Asian-look man in SL, turns out to be a sixty-five-year-old American at that time named Ed Mead, an ardent Communist who was sentenced to prison for eighteen years for robbing a bank to get his hands on 'revolutionary capital' in the 1970s.[22] Not until Cao tries to meet him in reality does she learn his true identity. Due to his long-term imprisonment, Ed Mead has not been socialised or experienced changes outside prison while being rehabilitated. After his release, it was not easy for him to engage with current society, which had dramatically changed from before he went to jail. When Ed Mead found SL, he quickly became obsessed with SL and his avatar, a young person who enjoyed discussing freedom. The name of Ed Mead's avatar, Hug Yue, shows his longing for intimacy and understanding. The virtual body he created represents the youthful years that this man, who has been monitored for years, craves and wishes to return to. Therefore, avatars are the connecting point between the user and cyberspace and the link between personal and virtual identity. The interaction between Hug Yue and China Tracy

22 Shuqin Cui, *Gendered Bodies: Toward a Women's Visual Art in Contemporary China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016), 174.

creates multiple layers of connections between the virtual and real world. In that respect, Hug Yue could be treated as Ed Mead's reflection of an ideal identity. As for Cao Fei, Ed Mead's experience in prison as a political inmate is a representative case for presenting the idea of imprisonment in real life and the virtual world. In addition, the conversation between China Tracy and Hug Yue could represent an idealist of the last generation engaging with the current world. The artistic ways to connect different individuals beyond a temporal and spatial dimension have been applied in Cao Fei's various works.

Second, the 'mirror' included in the name of the art piece indicates Cao's intention to reflect the invisible panoptic surveillance in the digital world. The Panopticon produced in SL is a reflection of the increasing surveillance culture in the PRC. SL, populated by user-created content, disguises how it is still a computer-mediated programme run on a server, monitoring every possible experience of its virtual citizens. Any activities on SL are "always-already recordable, replayable, surveyable, and able to be reconstituted and represented in any number of forms—whether as still-life digital prints or video".[23] Therefore, the digital programme code operates as the central control tower of the Panopticon, which can be invisible in virtual space.

CYBORG

i, mirror not only embodies the Panopticon metaphor as a way of control, but more importantly, the art piece throws the idea of post-panoptical surveillance into question through producing virtual bodies' changing multi-identities. In the virtual realm like SL, users have the chance to create their virtual bodies which can release them from the restraints of their real life, such as how Ed Mead invents Hug Yue. As Howard Rheingold states, "we cannot see one another in cyberspace, gender, age, national origin, and physical appearance are not apparent unless a person wants to make such characteristics public".[24] Such anonymity frees users from both real-life identity and their physical and

23 Clemens, "Virtually Anywhere Real-time New-old Avatar-human Entertainment Art," 122.

24 Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Eletronic Frontier* (Cambridge, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1993), 26.

social conventions, opening up an alternative way of individual interaction. However, people in the virtual world cannot entirely detached from the real world because any creations in cyberspace could be a suggestion of a projection of individuals' 'selves' with their true imagination and desires. China Tracy, Cao Fei'savatar, is linked with her national and gender identities in real life not only from the name but also from the avatar's body, including her dress code and preferences.

Avatars—the body images users create for themselves in the virtual realm—are not just a reflection of the user's physical body but also an accumulation of expectations and aspirations. More importantly, avatars "carry information about personal desires and cultural experiences, avatars do not represent the dream of cyberspace as a space without stereotype of human and discrimination".[25] China Tracy exemplifies Cao's intention to reorient a new identity in this fresh virtual world, free from the constraints and repressions of real life in various aspects. In terms of the visual representation of the body's name, 'Tracy', an un-Chinese name undoubtedly might be understood as presenting constant local and global negotiation and compromise within China, conveyed by the cultural politics of the language (name) used between the margins (Chinese) and centre (English). 'China', on the one hand, where the artist is from in reality, indicates the avatar's cultural heritage. On the other hand, in SL, China is represented as *RMB City*, an imaginary urban landscape that goes beyond established social systems and the orthodox identity of China's reality.

RMB City was created by Cao in 2007 as there was no place familiar to Chinese people in SL, and "collective identity and memory will be lost if no one ever logs onto globalised cyberspace and virtual world" (Fig. 4).[26] The topography of RMB City combines distinguishable landmarks of both historical and contemporary Chinese reality with architectural imaginings. Examples include the National Stadium (also known as Bird's Nest), where the 2008 Beijing Olympic opening ceremony took place, Beijing CCTV Headquarters designed by Rem

25 Liao, "Avatars, Second Life, and New Media Art," 89.

26 Lin Yihua, "Xüni shijiezhongde zhoongguo yishu cheng" (虚拟世界中的中国艺术城 Chinese art city of virtual world), quote from Cui Shuqin, *Gendered Bodies*, 177.

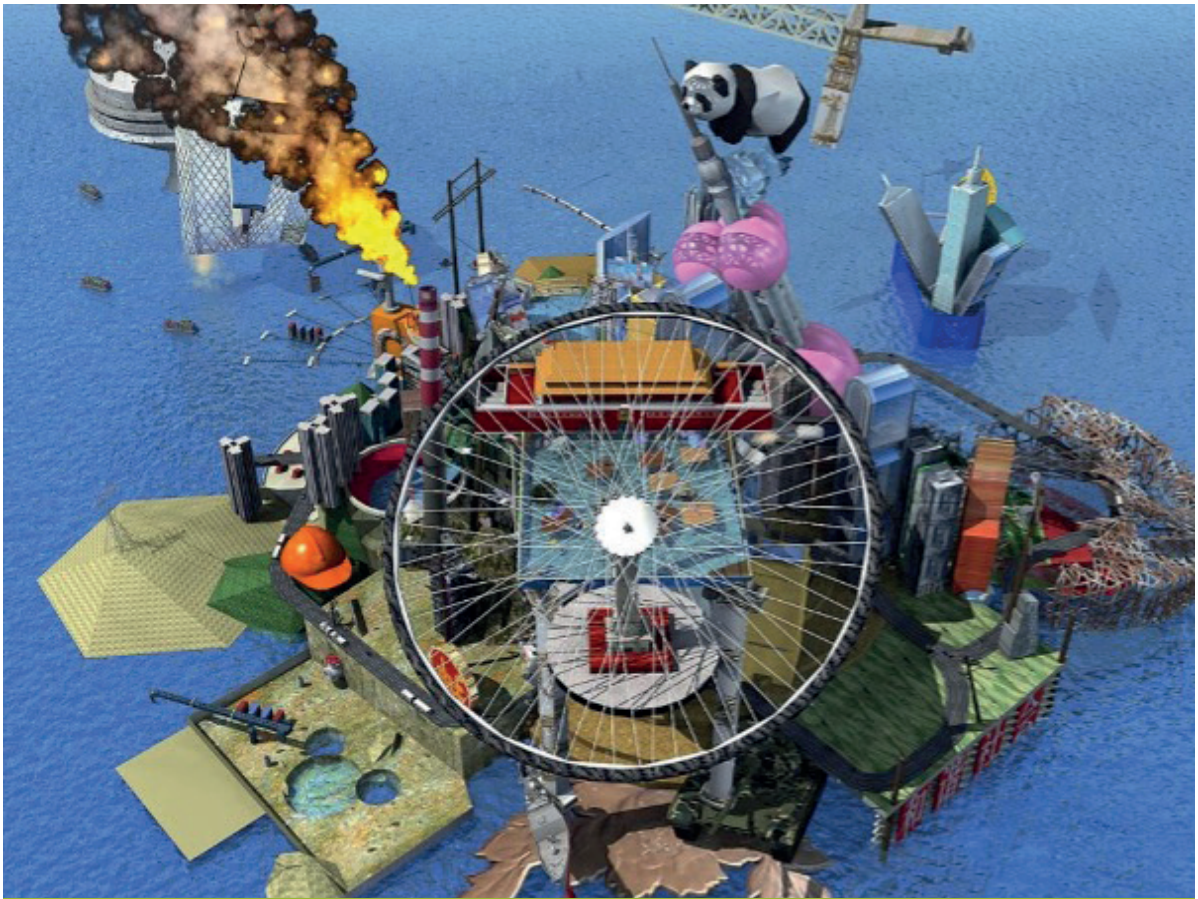

Fig. 4. Cao Fei曹斐, *RMB City: A Second Life City Planning,* 2007, colour video with sound, 5 minutes 57 seconds, video still.

Koolhaas (b. 1944) and Ole Scheeren (b. 1971), Shanghai's Oriental Pearl TV Tower by Jiang Huan Cheng 江欢成 (b. 1938), and Hong Kong Bank of China Tower by I.M. Pei 贝聿铭 (1917–2019). Cao demystifies the social-historical identification of Chinese cities and creates a parody of the Chinese urban landscape. For example, she transforms Tiananmen 天安门, a historical imperial palace where the Founding Ceremony of the People's Republic of China took place in 1949 and the student-led pro-democracy protests were held in 1989,

into the People's Palace, which is the gateway of RMB City and provides information services for visitors. Tiananmen Square 天安门广场 in the real world has become the People's Waterpark, which is the multifunctional entertainment centre of RMB City. *Renmin yingxiong jinian bei* 人民英雄纪念碑 (The Monument to the People's Heroes) at Tiananmen Square holds the rotating giant Ferris wheel. Wu Hung explains that the concept of 'political space' refers to the architectonic embodiment of political ideology and is an architectural site activating political action and expression. The space can be conceived either as a conceptual sphere of public discourse or as a physical place where public events take place.[27] Therefore, the rebuilding of the 'political space' like Tiananmen Square in *RMB City* subverts the established identification of Chinese society. Moreover, the giant statue of Chairman Mao is drifting away in the sea, and a box containing a Buddha statue is floating in the ocean. This could be seen as an analogy to the fact that political ideology and religious beliefs which used to govern in Chinese history are declining. The national flag filled with five-pointed stars has become People's Music Plaza, where people produce loud sounds in the sky. Cao shifts the national and political symbols into the virtual world as a way to undermine China's authorised identity and social structure. More importantly, the way of governing in RMB City critiques the authoritarian power in China's current reality.[28] For example, *RMB City* has mayors who are elected to govern the city with a three-month term of office.[29] Consequently, China Tracy, who is regarded as the hostess and guardian of RMB City, shows the artist's exploration of an alternative identity in the cybernetic sphere relating to reality while transcending it.

The visual representation of China Tracy's body indicates Cao's ideas of reconstructing identity and relocating individuals in virtual space. China Tracy's main appearance is that of a young, slim Chinese-look woman. She has a smiling face, "being a bit sweet and shy" with a traditional Chinese hairstyle.[30] More importantly, the representation of China Tracy's body is versatile, presenting various characters and styles depending on the different circumstances. For

27 Wu Hung, *Remaking Beijing: Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space* (London: Reaktion, 2005), 9.

28 For more in-depth analysis of how Cao Fei's *RMB City* reinvents individual and national identity in the virtual world as a critique of China's authorised identity and social structure in the context of rampant urbanisation and industrialisation, see Gao, "Beyond the Binary Body."

29 Mayors include Ulli Sigg (SL: UliSigg Cisse) from 10 January to 17 April 2009, a famous Swiss collector of Chinese contemporary art; Alan Lau (SL: AlanLau Nirvana) from 17 April to 2 August 2009; Jerome San (SL: Super Concierge Cristole) from 2 August to November 2009, the former director of the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA), and Erica Dubach (SL: E3A Digital) from 10 January 2010. Cao Fei, "RMB City Mayors," accessed 28 April 2023, http://rmbcity.com/city-hall/mayor/

30 Kanon, "China Tracy, 'Einstein on the Beach — Chasing the Moon/沙滩上的爱因斯坦-追月,' 2021," *Medium*, 6 September 2021, https://medium.com/kanon-log/china-tracy-einstein-on-the-beach-chasing-the-moon-沙滩上的爱因斯坦-追月-2021-573c8c18bb, accessed 29 May 2023.

instance, China Tracy is an elegant lady wearing an evening gown when she played the piano with Hug Yue but she is a girl in student uniform while talking to him on the bench. China Tracy's body is a mixture of Chinese heritage and contemporary pop culture. For that, the bodily interpretation of China Tracy embodies Donna Jeanne Haraway's prominent concept of Cyborg, "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction", as a way to articulate a fundamental subversion of the politics rooted in the nature of class, race and gender.[31] Haraway states, "Cyborgs are not reverent; they do not re-member the cosmos. They are wary of holism, but needy for connection—they seem to have a natural feel for united-front politics, but without the vanguard party".[32] Therefore, the emerging Cyborgs provide an alternative digital subjectivity in the transitioning society from "an organic, industrial society to a polymorphous, information system".[33] Through creating the mercurial, and malleable body, Cao's cyborg China Tracy in SL embodies the aspiration of a new subject or subjectivity for subverting the established social forms and material practices.

The ways of representing China Tracy as a documentary highlight the paradox of the method which is composed of the presentation of the creation itself. In *i, mirror*, the creator is China Tracy herself, the actor and subject of a creative work that is both an animation and a documentary, as well as the producer, director and editor of it at the same time. As Cao explains:

> I was directly recording myself as I moved through Second Life, but as I'm watching myself, I'm also controlling myself; I'm simultaneously a director and actor. But I enjoy exploring everything and not knowing what will happen in the next step. A lot of the process is waiting for something to happen, and I didn't try to make something fake.[34]

As the piece is made of China Tracy's immersive experience in SL, it empowers the audience to intrude on the artist's private life in virtual life. For that,

31 Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149.

32 Ibid., 151.

33 Ibid., 161.

34 *i, mirror* premiered at the fifty-second Venice Biennale as part of the Chinese Pavilion exhibition, curated by Hou Hanru. Alice Ming Wai Jim, "The Different Worlds of Cao Fei," *Yishu* 11.3 (2012), 83.

the viewer becomes the inspector of the work and another individual's virtual world. China Tracy acknowledges she is being watched directly through her conversation with others like Hug Yue. However, the avatars created by ordinary users were also documented and became the objects of being watched by the artist and the unseen software.

The interchanging identities of the viewer and the viewed illustrate how individuals participate and even engage with digital surveillance. Daily activities in everyday life, such as sending messages to friends, sharing images, listening to music, watching online videos, and posting anything with tags or locations on social media, create user-generated content that produces enormous quantities of data that could be used to follow and monitor daily behaviour. In this respect, the contribution of ordinary people to surveillance is unprecedented.[35] David Lyon states, "What people perceive, by and large, is the amazing power of the internet to keep them connected, amused, entertained, supplied, updated, reassured and informed. As they engage with the online world, however, they not only improvise responses to the subtle ways that they are watched but also use those surveillance technologies for their own ends".[36] *i, mirror* reflects Lyon's opinion of the increasing surveillance in the virtual space as both the artist and the audience have multiple identities. Creating shifting identities shows the efforts to counter surveillance, which seems impossible as the inspector is the invisible control system created by digital programmes.

CONCLUSION

The advancement of digital technologies has played a vital role in producing more unvisible surveillance, expanding from monitoring by the authorities to mutual vigilance among ordinary people in every respect of daily life. The PRC's rapidly emerging 'surveillance culture' has constituted a more flexible, mutable and mobile form of control and power, generating new asymmetries. Even though the surveillance and control system in mainland China has reached an

35 Lyon, *The Culture of Surveillance*, 1.

36 Ibid., 10.

extreme with the rapid developments of technologies, new ways of resistance have been emerging, such as the PRC's pro-democracy protests in 2022. What can art do for the current world? Despite *i, mirror*'s creation in 2007, before the emergence of a more pervasive surveillance culture under the rule of Xi Jinping since 2012, the work manages to respond to this question as it allows us to re-think how the PRC and the world came to be in the current surveillance culture.

With the analysis of the body with creative media in Cao Fei's *i, mirror*, this essay shows how the artist utilises the representation of the virtual incarnation, China Tracy, to allude to Haraway's 'Cyborg' for a renewal of subjectivity. The virtual bodies' awareness of the more invisible and panoptic surveillance in the cybernetic realm could represent a method of individual empowerment, which challenges the control mechanism in the PRC. Creating virtual bodies' multiple identities in *i, mirror*, Cao alludes to the mutual engagement of the audience and the overseer in the cybernetic space and explores the possibility of countering the surveillance and control system in the digital PRC. The artistic reflection on the PRC's subtler surveillance can offer a new opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the human condition and explore the possibilities of what the future holds for humanity.

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