Ian Cheng
by Dylan Kerr

Ian Cheng on moral codes, the prescience of George Lucas and making an art world version of Angry Birds.

Ian Cheng. Abax Siluria, 2013. Installation view, MoMA PS1. Live mobile devices, animatronics, sand, silica, mineral oil. All images courtesy of the artist.

I first met Ian through our work at Badlands Unlimited, Paul Chan's art/ebook/whatever publishing company. There, we bonded over our shared love for Kanye West, sardines, and over-the-top summer blockbusters. I suppose it makes sense, then, that his latest works *Abax Siluria* and *Entropy Wrangler* seem to take place as action scenes in metaphorical fish tanks. Imbued with his wit and a particular brand of Californian irreverence, these pieces are comical and deeply uncomfortable, often at the same time. His background in cognitive science serves to activate his objects, both physical and digital, with an energy as visceral as it is conceptual. Ian and I recently met at Whole Foods to talk about his recent projects, the importance of what he calls "social realities," and Angry Birds: Rio.

Dylan Kerr I loved your swamp at PS1. Does it have a title?

+ Share

Ian Cheng *Abax Siluria*.

DK Do you mind if I ask what that means?

IC *Abax* is a sand table, which in ancient times was a format for simulating the topography of the battleground in miniature and using proxy objects to model complex military scenarios. *Siluria* refers to the Silurian era in Earth's history right before biological organisms got onto land, when they're all kind of stewing in the water. It's also the name of a petro-tech company catalyzing the mutation of actual shit, trash and decay into useful chemical products.

DK Were these the kinds of things you were thinking about while putting the piece together?

IC Not really, to be frank. There's no strategy inherent in the work, in the sense that these objects of culture-- the vibrating dildo, the robotic animatronic medical hand, the flatscreen, the smartphones— were left to their own devices, left to swim in that soup.

DK It's a bizarre work on multiple levels. I found the soup itself to be as compelling as the objects in it.

IC The swamp looks like water. But some people think it's like 20 gallons of lube.

DK It certainly fooled me. What is it actually?

IC It's mineral oil, which is a non-conductive fluid, allowing all the electronic objects to fully function while submerged in it. You would be hard pressed to find those objects in liquid environment. But it is nonetheless in the realm of material possibility, so what would that material collaboration produce? In a very naïve and stupid way, they develop their own emergent behavior and presence based on their inherent range of motions.

DK It seems to me that a lot of your work deals with the idea of the work coming into being autonomously from you. With *Entropy Wrangler*, and now hearing you talk about *Abax Siluria*, it seems like you have a similar strategy of putting the pieces in play to allow them to develop their own, as you say, emergent behavior.

Ian Cheng. Abax Siluria, 2013. Installation view, MoMA PS1. Live mobile devices, animatronics, sand, silica, mineral oil.

IC It explicitly started with *Entropy Wrangler*, but before that, I was thinking about emergence while working on a music video for the band Liars. I used motion capture data to animate the characters in the earlier parts of the video, but in the last scene I fed the motion capture data into a simulation engine that allowed each character's choreography to get in each other's way. The simulation treated the 3D characters as if they were physical material, crashing into each other, no longer characters with ascribed narrative motives or deterministic choreographic goals. After re-simulating the scene like 200 times and finding the best outcome, I recorded it and used it as the video's ending.

DK This sounds a lot like the Sol LeWitt's brand of Conceptual art—artists setting rules that then autonomously determine the outcome of the work.

IC Right, but those rules were more like algorithm design: give an input, get a logical fixed set of motifs. Today I think it's more like progressive parenting: composing the right initial conditions and rules, and seeing what breaks but also what unexpected behaviors emerge. The idea of emergence—that complex properties emerge from the assemblage of basic constituent parts, but are not found in the parts alone—is foundational to understanding dynamic change and producing resilient adaptations to change. We see this in current approaches to artificial intelligence, climate modeling, smart grid energy distribution, risk analysis, video games, and the study of the human mind itself. Fixed deterministic models no longer suffice to make sense of the complexity inside and around us. We're looking for models, tools, and

interfaces that can act as diplomats for our all too human brains to be able to viscerally relate to dynamic contingent change and non-human complexity. As an artist, I'm interested in this, and how to give it form, look, and feel.

DK Do you see these techniques of thinking through complexity as being applicable on an individual scale? Can one make use of this in their day-to-day, quotidian existence?

IC I think these ideas necessarily extend into the artist's life. I feel the most interesting artists were the ones who essentially created and mutated a set of laws to be responsible to, to guide the decision-making in their work beyond default aesthetic or critically endorsed criteria. And those set of laws would give them a model to independently and resiliently structure their lives, a kind of moral code. It is in part an escape from default codes, an escape from the social realities we unconsciously submit to or desire to tribally belong to. Contemporary art is its own collection of aging social realities. This is really a longer thread. . .

DK No, no, I'm interested, especially in the "moral" component. It seems to me that morality is a topic that the contemporary art world doesn't often deal with explicitly.

IC The potential of living by a moral code is that it gives you permission to hold at arm's length all the other intersecting and competing social realities around you. It gives permission to act indifferently and independently from other laws, and also collaborate with other laws where it makes sense. Duchamp lived it. He was obviously very intelligent but he wasn't trapped by his own ideas, living in an esoteric mental fantasy world. He was also social, or rather he was sociable, but likewise never trapped by his relationships, the emotional and social codes of others. He never became a permanent part of any group or scene or -ism, but floated in between as his interests led him. The moral code that allowed Duchamp to feel this calibrated distance from his own mind and from people, I think, has a lot to do with his freedom to make artistic gestures that were at the time inconceivable leaps and illegible to most.

Ian Cheng, ENTROPY WRANGLER ACAMAR, 2013. Installation view, Freak Out, Greene Naftali, New York, 2013. Live simulation, infinite duration, sound.

DK This conception of morality strikes me as a sort of social equivalent to Huxley's metaphor for the brain: a "reducing valve" to limit the amount of information received in order to allow the receiver to continue living in an unimaginably complex environment. The reduction is actually a sort of liberation, freedom from having to constantly, consciously decide what's relevant.

IC Thinking about this is liberating for an individual, but in reality it is ceaseless persevering work with lapsing urgency. Likewise, thinking about this is scary and fascistic sounding for the group, but in reality is mostly banal, naturalized and unconscious. Religion is a very clear example of a social reality with clear laws, but so is school, Facebook, your office, a gallery, and the American justice system. A human being occupies multiple social realities of course, adaptively switching. But it's more than just role playing or "performing" the codes, it's deeper and weirder. It means embodying the mental models that those codes encode in you, and believing in them at an almost neurological instinctual level. Online, it's as unconscious as clicking between browser windows into whatever social network realities you're concurrently immersed in.

DK So then how, in your estimation, does an artist navigate or utilize these conflicting realities?

IC In any of these cases, the moral code of the situation needs to be

maintained in order for the tribal quality of any human organization to function, for its values to be embodied and transmitted. And so there are behavioral selection pressures to naturalize a certain way when you're in front of your parents or your boss or inside the church of Instagram or whatever. So then, the test of an artist might be, is it possible to produce your own mutant moral code, your own start-up social reality amidst the traditions, mental models and behavioral protocols of existing social realities? And more importantly, what social realities are worth cannibalizing or appropriating from, and which ones lead humans down a dark short-term advantage road? Maybe this is simply the test of anyone who wants to find resilient freedom in his or her own era.

DK I can't help but think that much of what you're saying seems to come out of your background in cognitive science. Obviously, these ideas are influencing how you think about art right now, but, perhaps more biographically, how did these two fields coalesce for you?

IC I studied cognitive science at UC Berkeley, but I imagined the life of a cognitive scientist would involve living with a single research problem for 20 years under rigorous scrutiny, and my desire was—and still is—to always work towards a position where I have the freedom to choose my own problems. I think of art as a zone of permission, unlike anywhere else in culture or anywhere else professionally. Even though many artists don't take advantage of the permission that art offers, it is nonetheless the one zone in culture where you can explore the present and cannibalize the past with relatively little oversight. It is an ideal home base.

DK So then what criteria would you say we have, or perhaps should have, for judging or even talking about art?

IC Well, like I was saying earlier, some of my favorite artists are those who have been like start-ups to their own laws and moral codes, their own ecosystem of being. These artists were essentially dealing with, for better or worse, the creation of their own mini social realities. Not merely the critique or iconoclastic destruction of existing social realities, but the creation of their own. In a basic way, this becomes the most creative gesture, and the burden of aesthetic criteria in the work no longer becomes primary. I think we can judge creative human beings on what models they open up for how to exist in the world, and in the particular case of contemporary art, how effectively they animate those models through concrete materials, formats, and feelings.

DK Besides Duchamp, what artists do you see as having best accomplished this?

IC Smithson wanting to work at scale in the land, creating the model of site non-site, allowing him to cannibalize and mutate the existing gallery structure to bring back and exhibit incomplete things. Or Lars Von Trier and *Dogme 95*. Von Trier abandoned *Dogme*, but its spirit still serves as a potent template for indie films like *Paranormal Activity*, which by its laws escapes Hollywood production models but goes on to sweep the box office. I think that's where you get the most powerful, influential forms of art practice, interfacing between a collapsing older social reality and the creation of new ones that escape—but also adapt—the old. Now, of course you can go big like the sci-fi writer L. Ron Hubbard. I'm not suggesting artists become cult leaders, but I think Scientology is a fascinating creative project. What a start-up! If you think their beliefs are ridiculous, you have to then give Hubbard even more credit for making it all work. He was no doubt a cunning and emotionally intelligent being. Have you seen *The Master* by P.T. Anderson?

DK I haven't.

IC Though not explicitly about Scientology, film very clearly links the inception of Scientology with the void of existing social realities to accommodate psychically unraveling individuals like Joaquin Phoenix's character, a WWII veteran with shell shock. The birth of this social reality is a creative response to a real unmet psychic and social need. New tribes for the tribeless. It's not that I think Scientology is art. It's not. It's clearly much more influential than most art! Anyway artists aren't organizing at the scale, seriousness, or sociopathy of Hubbard. Artists aren't solving social needs, nor is that their cultural responsibility.

DK Turning back to your own work: I've now seen *Entropy Wrangler* in a few different contexts, on it's own at Greene Naftali and as a part of *Abax Siluria*. Are these the same simulation, or are there different iterations of the work?

IC Iterations. My original idea for *Entropy Wrangler* was to make an art world equivalent of Angry Birds.

DK . . . huh.

IC (*laughter*) Not literally remake Angry Birds, but to make something on the model of Angry Birds. It seems juvenile, but actually I think it's a very interesting model for exploring complexity over time and organizing that exploration episodically. So there's Angry Birds, and then there's Angry Birds Rio, Angry Birds Star Wars, et cetera. It's an entire family of sibling games with an evolving and growing set of gameplay dynamics. I was thinking about how it's very difficult to make a singular story now. Obviously we still have the novel, we have feature films, but if you look at the most enduring titles in the 21st century, the ones people are invested in despite being in a supposedly attention-deficit culture, are the ones that are enmeshed in a whole series of sequels, in a whole universe. *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, *Game of Thrones*, *Breaking Bad*, *CSI*, *Twilight*, *Harry Potter*, *The Wire*. It's not so much the singular novel or movie, but episodes in a larger universe. George Lucas presciently called his movies "episodes." At its best, the universe strategy allows for deep explorations of dynamic inter-relationships, generational changes, complex long-term causation, studies of human adaptations unfolding gradually. It's an interface for perceiving time and space and causation at scales beyond the scale of human perception. In light of these advantages, it's hard to make a case for just a singular story anymore, the one-off work.

DK A "finished" work.

IC Right. Of course people are making one-off orphan works all the time, but it is not so useful if you want to think about and compose complex dynamic change happening at inhuman time scales. Also known as. . . reality. So my initial idea in making *Entropy Wrangler* was conceiving of it as one episode within an evolving mini-universe of works. In and of itself, an individual *Entropy Wrangler* is essentially a group of virtual objects that each have their

own properties. When those properties are unleashed on each other, the results are unpredictable, emergent, sometimes exciting, sometimes boring.

Ian Cheng. Abax Siluria, 2013. Installation view, MoMA PS1. Live mobile devices, animatronics, sand, silica, mineral oil.

DK How did you determine the individual digital entities that would go into the piece?

IC The goal was to start from a collection of very disparate objects, but objects that have cultural baggage, objects that are imbued with their own inherent social realities. For example, the dolphin is modeled after the Baiji, a recently extinct dolphin that used to dwell in the Yangtze river before Chinese dam-building, fishing and industrialization ran wild. You might also think of *Echo the Dolphin* the videogame, *The Cove* documentary, *Seaquest*, Seaworld, *Flipper*. You have all these associations that cloud and give cultural baggage to that object. But in setting that object among all these other heterogeneous objects, each with their own respective baggage, the brutalizing effects of the simulation obliterate any and all signs. The simulation is insensitive to symbolic qualities or cultural reference. It only understands the material and behavioral properties of the dolphin's form. The result is emergent mutation. The objects bounce off of each other, affecting their energy and form. You get all this weird graphical stretching. Sometimes they combine to form strange assemblage sculptures that don't conform to any coherent plan, but nonetheless derived from a concrete process that you bore witness to. A kind of simulated evolution from dead cultural material.

DK So, what you've just described is the creation of a single *Entropy Wrangler*,

correct?

IC Right. The idea is to now have my Angry Birds: Rio version, where I would explore more specific social realities and expose them to conflicting sets of mechanical and behavioral laws that build on the mechanics of the first *Entropy Wrangler*. Right now I'm working on one version that seeks to adaptively garden and regulate the chaos, and another one that incessantly gives birth to new camera perspectives as objects and bodies hybridize, a kind of telescoping *Rashomon*. Each of the *Entropy Wrangler's* that I've made have been unique, in that the set of specific objects and set of laws will produce emergent results that are specific to that particular combination. It's like adding or subtracting ingredients in a soup. Or changing your kitchen ethics. You get a different kind of soup. Simulated over time, that difference magnifies irreversibly.
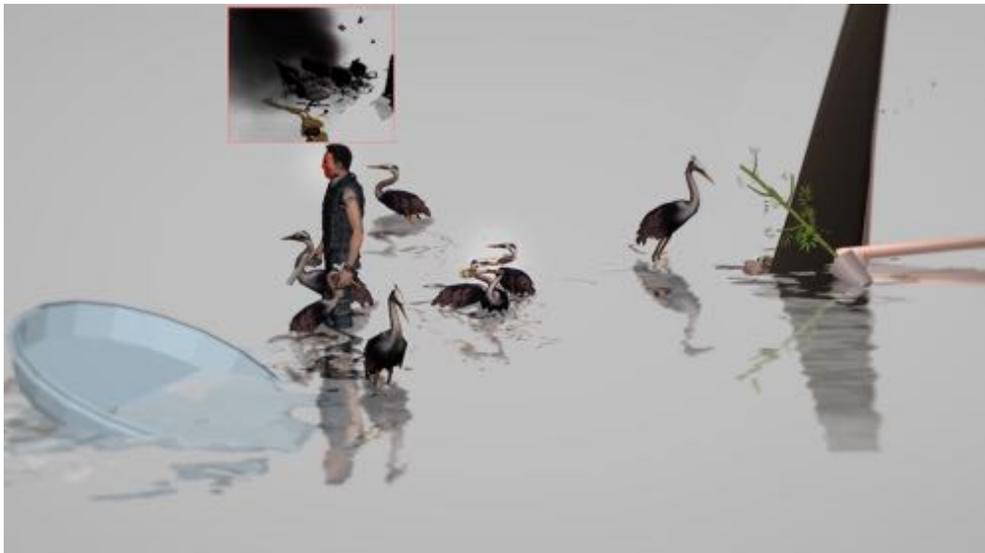
Ian Cheng. Thousand Islands Thousand Laws, 2013. Live simulation, infinite duration, sound screen capture still.

DK What are your thoughts on how your videos or simulation pieces are presented? I can theoretically have a full version of *Entropy Wrangler* on my laptop, or I can watch it in a gallery space projected onto a wall. How important is the means through which one views your work?

IC I think it's important today to feel free to occupy formats both in and outside of art. The work at Greene Naftali was projected on a panel at a height slighter taller than eye level, so the objects within *Entropy Wrangler* are deliberately at the scale of toddler toys. This scale unconsciously makes you feel you're dealing with a kind of sandbox. Scale can make a viewer feel—this might sound condescending, but it's true—like a child.

DK I don't think that's condescending at all.

IC When you're a child, you have a more raw emotional response to things. You do not perceive the world as coded yet, and so you can have a very immediate, visceral, sensorial reaction to what is presented in front of you. In a way, a child has a basic moral code and won't apologize for contradicting adult laws. So I kind of wanted to push the coefficient of that childlike feeling. When you're a child you often perceive things that are smaller than you as a little world you can govern over. Things that are way bigger than you make you feel the Alice in Wonderland effect of the world of adults. As adults, you can play with scale in order to reignite this feeling, but also open up a viewer's field of judgment. In future versions of *Entropy Wrangler*, I'll project it so the virtual objects feel at the scale of an adult human being, so you feel even more physically enmeshed within this very chaotic space. I'll do a version for 3D VR goggles, a very intimate experience. And also I'll do an iPhone app, where you can experience it like a Tamagotchi toy.

DK So you really are starting a franchise, huh? I wonder how the effect of the work will change between these media.

IC The feeling that I always wanted to achieve with *Entropy Wrangler* is that you feel like you're in a living action movie, where every moment is extremely visceral and unpredictable. It's not a game that you anxiously attend to and try to stabilize, but something that unfolds with or without you and finds its own stable logic, or fails to. As a viewer, you experience the story of an ecosystem that is aging as you age.

DK What about the differences between a digital video and simulation? Maybe it's a bit obvious, but I think the question begs asking as you've worked within both realms.

IC Videos have a fixed duration and eventually end. They are recordings. Simulations have an open duration. They are occurring live, irreversibly changing, never to be the same twice. They have no final ending, only optimal states that are subject to further contingent imbalance.

DK What I find so interesting about simulations like *Entropy Wrangler* is that it's timescale is "infinity." It doesn't actually end, in the same way that a painting or sculpture doesn't end. You can't say that a painting "loops" at any point.

IC Art is biased to valuing objects that have an inherent stability to them. Archival. I realized in making *Entropy Wrangler* that there are two sides to stability: it isn't just making a painting or sculpture, which is physically and classically stable. You can go the opposite side and make something infinite. In infinity you also achieve a certain stability. When you think of something infinite, you think of something as holistically stable in that there is absolute certainty of long-term change, which itself graduates into an entropic resting shape.

DK But on the other hand you have the ephemerality, the fleetingness, of certain kinds of performance, where the event only happens once and from then on you can only ever experience it secondhand. I think your work achieves a sort of happy medium between these extremes.

IC Perhaps the mental model to think generously about performance is not so much the performance itself, but the development of a script, the choreographic protocol, which can then be mutated infinitely like a meme. Like the Harlem Shake. A choreographer who invents the scripts or laws of how to behave within a lived reality of a performance work is establishing a basic moral code, but with the acceptance that that code is itself material for unforgiving and irreversible mutation and change.

For more on Ian Cheng, visit his <u>*website*</u>*.*

Dylan Kerr lives in Poughkeepsie, New York, where he enjoys talking to artists.

Tags: Technology, Scale, Sculpture, Video Art, Installation art