

CULTURE DESK

WATCH THE ABSORBING AND TEDIOUS SIMULATIONS OF IAN CHENG

By Andrea Scott May 16, 2017

A scene from "Emissary in the Squat of Gods," the first in Ian Cheng's "Emissaries" trilogy of video simulations.

Ars longa, vita brevis. But some art is longer than others. In 1918, the great modernist Constantin Brancusi conceived of a modular sculpture that could rise from the ground to an infinite height. His first version of this "Endless Column," which was carved out of oak, is in the collection of MOMA; you can visit it on the fifth floor. Endless it's not, at six feet, eight inches, but in Târgu Jiu, in the artist's native Romania, there's a ninety-eight-foot-tall version, fabricated from metal and completed in 1938. Brancusi's iterative masterpiece appears in a new work of art that is also theoretically endless: Ian Cheng's digital trilogy "Emissaries," a waking dream of a show, now on view at MOMA PS1. Brancusi sculpture pops up in the second of the ten-foot-tall animations, which is titled "Emissary Forks at Perfection," bobbing in a lake with other flotsam and jetsam of anthropocentric modernity: laptops, lawn chairs, a push-button phone.

Cheng calls his works “live simulations” and describes them as “video games that play themselves.” Unlike conventional animations, whose story arcs are predetermined, Cheng’s digital worlds are driven by a technology in which narrative agents behave within coded parameters, but on their own terms. This means that the action is unpredictable and unfolds at a lifelike pace, which is to say it’s both absorbing and tedious. The best way to experience the durational aspect of Cheng’s project isn’t in his exhibition in Long Island City but, rather, online, where the three simulations are being live-streamed consecutively, in versions modified for social media, on the gaming platform Twitch, through the run of the show. You’ll have to wait until June 6th to see Cheng’s homage to Brancusi, but, until May 22nd, you can experience “Emissary in the Squat of the Gods” twenty-four hours a day. The landscape here is post-volcanic, its population shamanic, and the wildlife totemic, in the form of an owl and a snake. The scene teems with movement—as indecipherable and transfixing as if it were the work of a cyborgian Hieronymus Bosch.

Watch part of “Emissaries,” via MOMA’s stream, below:



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