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寂静火山

NO MAN A VOLCANO

张鼎/ZHANG DING

郑曦然/IAN CHENG

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郑曦然：熵牧人

Ian Cheng: Entropy Wrangler

白慧怡
Stephanie Bailey

2013年郑曦然在杜塞尔多夫的旺多姆域外画廊举办的展览“熵牧人”，清楚地说明了艺术家那些通过编程实现的作品逻辑关系，其中非常重要的一件就是在画廊地下室展出的大型投影视频作品《关于永久变化、演变的实时计算机模拟》。郑曦然使用动作捕捉技术记录了表演者的物理运动，然后，将之转换成数字模型。他所有的计算机模拟作品都是这样实现的，这次也不例外。这些数字对象们在一个受到定律约束、符合逻辑的虚拟世界里，作为实体而共同存在：篮球运动员和榔头等人物和日常物品，被转换为基本的三维图形。它们在数字屏幕上，就好像处于零重力的环境之中，它们进入彼此的轨迹，互相作用，产生了可怕的猛烈动作和突发的故障：豹皮不断颤动，似乎陷入了一张无形的网；蓝色球体在屏幕上不断扩张。

郑曦然指出，重要的是要记住，他所做的计算机模拟不是视频作品：它们被设计成，随着时间的推移而自行发生变异和变化，正如我们自己一样。这就是为什么他在杜塞尔多夫展出了很多真空袋，其中一个装了婴儿油和一部正在充电的手机。手机的电话号码被公布在画廊网站上，人们可以给这部手机发短信或者打电话，从而阐明了真实和虚拟空间之间的动态关系——郑曦然把虚拟空间形容为“‘全球化’世界之中一个最基础广泛的网络”，“根据通过物质架构影响数字世界的规则，甚至可以认为它能够进行自身的链式反应，它有着无法遏制的扩张。”换句话说，互联网把我们连接在了一起——说到底，它就是一个有生命的、符合逻辑的世界，与自然界无二。2015年8月，郑曦然在高清电影和视频的网络发布平台Vdrome上发布了一件作品《一些想起你的东西》，进一步发展了他的理念。郑曦然形容说，这件作品由“为你准备的一只动物、一棵蔬菜、一只电子宠物鸡和一只宠物”组成，可以看作是持续一个月的在线“困境”的实时模拟。

《一些想起你的东西》
2015年
动画拟像、循环播放
独版

Something Thinking of You
2015
Live simulation, infinite duration
Unique

这倒是符合郑曦然所具有的认知科学背景——他从加州大学伯克利分校毕业，2009年在哥伦比亚大学获得艺术硕士学位。他的技术逻辑当中蕴含着一种人道主义情怀：目的是干预感知，但是不让观众觉得被疏远。然而，这种连接也会被破坏，特别是当处理元素是如何互动的时候。2011年在洛杉矶形式主义人行道诗歌俱乐部举办的首次个展上，郑曦然展出了作品《木瓜尝起来很完美》（2011年）。空白的屏幕先是出现一辆车，然后又出现了三个人物，而这三个人物好像出自维特鲁威人那样的同一个身体。这件作品源自于郑曦然在华尔街目睹的一次街头斗殴：一辆车差点儿撞着了一对喝多了的夫妇，夫妇二人要砸车，开车的人和他们扭打成一团。郑曦然把他的作品看作是一种杂化电影，他从斗殴事件中发现了一种特别的美。他对卡利·里顿巴奇说：“基于我所目睹的街头斗殴事件，我想实现一种对破坏性动作的捕捉和编排，通过残酷而真实的东西扰乱这种优雅的技术——因为它总是被用于呈现优雅的动作。”从而，人类的行为被简化——或者说被抽象——成为一个强烈的反光点。

从这一角度看，你可能会说郑曦然的模拟只是举着镜子反映世界而已，其实它的架构利用了它自己看到的技术——一种非常热衷于社交的现实主义（或者抽象主义）形式，认为人们的经验就是相互关联的总和。2013年郑曦然为“骗子合唱团”制作音乐电视视频《鬼崽子》的时候，他雇了几位杂技演员根据动画“兔八哥”系列里的兔八哥和小猪艾默的角色，重新编排了情节。他对卡利·里顿巴奇解释说：“兔八哥的故事情节设置和结局都很清晰，小猪艾默总是失败，兔八哥总是胜利。这好比是在下棋：你可以练习所有不同的可能性；愉悦感就是来自于各种变化。叙事还没有结束。”郑曦然所有的模拟作品实际上是无穷尽的，“更像是一种合成”。

但是郑曦然并不觉得合成被看作是一个社会概念有什么不对：两种东西合成在一起，这里面蕴含着暴力的色彩。毕竟，在一个同样设置、同样逻辑的世界里，两个虚拟的对象彼此接触会出现什么谁也说不清，正像在现实生活中一样。（例如，考虑一下“合成”与殖民主义的关系。）这一点在音乐电视视频《鬼崽子》里表达得很清楚：视频大约三分钟长，开始是一个兔子脑袋的小孩（也出现在《熵牧人》里）蹲在一堆现金和其他物品的前面，背对着观众，随着音乐的抽动。一位猎人和他的狗出现了，把女孩推向另一处，这段时间完全留给了浮现出来的岩石和树叶的淡淡的阴影。动作很快变得相当暴力：猎人把一支枪插进兔子女孩的嘴里，然后用它把兔子女孩那灰色、让人不舒服的裸体扔到一边。打斗和追逐接连发生，扭曲、高亢的警笛一般的声音更增加了紧张感。在结尾部分，进行对决的猎人和兔子女孩与乐队成员们相遇，他们的身体内爆成

一团。人类是有机体的集合，正如程序是网络化进程的总和一样。

为此目的，艺术家对合成的兴趣在于观察自然法则以及与之相似的技术规则。这种观察的核心其实是一个基本的哲学问题。郑曦然在为《慕斯》写的一篇叫做“寻求真相”的文字里就探索了理想和真相之间的关系：理想是一种“在野的真相”，一旦被赋予一个名字和清晰的人类价值——一个他称之为“真相到理想的转换”的过程，它就成了一种理念。但是，当一个理念“被人类实现或复制到物质现实世界里”时，它“就立刻把自己暴露于太大、太小、太快、太慢、太多的各种影响之中，或者因为太过矛盾而遭到竭力反对。透过这些不受控制的缝隙，真相就为人所知了。”这就是郑曦然所说的一种“变异”——合成的结果。

正如郑曦然在《慕斯》上所写，“如果没有被理想——名字、职位、形式、天堂、地狱、仪式、状态、道德、神话、时代、脚本、模特、超模、对象、法则、行话——来定义、组织和稳定的话，人类的存在就什么也不是。”郑曦然把理想看作是“粗糙的晴雨表，有了它，我们就可以给杂乱的现实赋予不同的状态：真的、假的、模仿、奇迹、不完美、贵重、自然。”当一个社区不再相信理想，它就会变成“毫无意义的噪音”，尽管现实还存在。这种看法把超然存在当作了一个漏洞。正如郑曦然对卡利·里顿巴奇所说的那样：“当你试图应用一项技术完成一项工作，但是该项技术本来并不是针对那项工作而设计的，你就会痛苦地认识到该项技术实际上是多么愚蠢。”换句话说，当我们把现实看作是它本来应该的那个样子，我们就能改变它，或者至少能够从一个更加基础的层面理解它。然而，理解我们这个世界——包括塑造这个世界的技术——的第一步是完全有机的。

从这个意义上来说，我们所有人都是熵的牧人，遵循那些在我们建造的环境中呈现出来的自然法则。无论从微观还是宏观的层面，郑曦然的最新项目都体现了这一点。这个名为“神占位之处的使者”的项目首先出现在2015年一个新作品展上。小汉斯策划了这个探索认知进化历史的展览。展出的作品之一是一个由六位程序员制作的，并由两个相互联系的计算机模拟组成的双频作品，探索了微观和宏观的现实。在其中一频里，我们看到的是一个面临生存威胁的古老、前意识社会，而在另一频里，我们跟随这个社会的使者，寻求意识的开发。

郑曦然对珍妮·富尔顿说，“神占位之处的使者”介于“视频游戏和智能玩具之间”。艺术家应用了非常基本的人工智能，打算看看他创造的角色会如何反应，尽管设定了情节，但是并不稳定——正如我们在现实世界中经历的过程一样。再一次，我们发现自己被真实和虚拟、真相和理念所连接，正是观看者实现了两者的连接。正如郑杨所指出的那样，该作品会“延迟给出结论”，如果你看得足够久，“一种突如其来的情感可能从你心里滋生，不需要你做什么。”换句话说，甚至艺术家也不知道事情会怎样结束，因为每一个模拟都依赖于其演进过程中的每一位参与者，观看者也包含在内。（翻译：盛夏）



2015年展览“真人”场景

Exhibition view, "Real Humans,"
Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, 2015

《一些想起你的东西》

2015年

动画拟像、循环播放

Something Thinking of You

2015

Live simulation, infinite duration



《一些想起你的东西》

2015年

动画拟像、循环播放

Something Thinking of You

2015

Live simulation, infinite duration

“Entropy Wrangler,” Ian Cheng’s 2013 exhibition at Off Vendome in Dusseldorf, was an excellent introduction to the logic behind this artist’s practice. The centerpiece was a large projection in the gallery’s basement described as “a live computer simulation that changes and evolves, forever.” Like all of Cheng’s simulations, it was programmed with motion capture techniques that register the physical movements of performers that are then translated onto digital bodies. These bodies coexist as individual entities subject to the laws and dynamics of a causal, virtual world: avatars of people and common objects, like hammers and basketball players, rendered in basic three-dimensional form and caught in the zero gravity of the digital screen. As they come into each other’s orbit, they react to one another in unpredictable ways: encounters produce frightening jerks and sudden glitches. Leopard skin convulses as if caught in an invisible web, as a blue sphere stretches out across the screen.

As Cheng notes, it is important to remember that his simulations are not video works: they are worlds designed to mutate and change over time like our own. This is why his Dusseldorf show included a series of vacuum bags, one of which was hanging on a wall, filled with baby oil in which a working mobile phone connected to a charger was suspended. The phone’s number was posted on Off Vendome’s website so that people could text or call

the device, articulating the dynamic relationship Cheng unveils between real and virtual spaces. For him, the internet is “one of the most rhizomatic networks of the ‘globalized’ world”—“an unstoppable and expanding telecommunicative web prone to its own chain reactions, predicated on the laws that affect the digital world via material construction.” To this end, the internet is a live, causal space much like the natural world, something Cheng expanded on in 2015 with an online simulation of a swamp streamed on Vdrome during August. Titled *Something Thinking of You*, the artist described it as “an animal, a vegetable, a tamagotchi, a pet, for you.”

It is fitting that Cheng’s original training was in cognitive science—he studied at the University of California at Berkeley before receiving an MFA from Columbia University in 2009. Indeed, though there is humanism to his techno-logic, there is a menacing quality to the way he composes the interacting elements within the programmes he produces. In his first solo show, at the Formalist Sidewalk Poetry Club in Los Angeles in 2011, for instance, he presented, among other works, *Papaya Tastes Perfect*. It begins with a car on a blank screen and three figures that emerge seemingly from one body, as if from a Vitruvian Man. The starting point for the work was a street fight the artist witnessed after a near-accident on Wall Street between a driver and a drunk, aggressive couple, who proceeded to attack the car. Cheng, who sees his work as a kind of hybrid cinema, found a certain beauty in the brawl. As he told Kari Rittenbach: “I wanted to make a corrupted motion-capture choreography based on a street fight that I witnessed, to disrupt this elegant technology—typically used to render graceful action—with something brutal and real.” Thus, human behavior is reduced—or abstracted—to a point of hard reflection.

In this light, you might say Cheng’s simulations are all about holding up mirrors to the world and its structures using its own technologies of seeing—a form of hyper-social realism (or abstraction) that considers the human experience as one of total interconnectedness. On the *Brats* video he produced for the band Liars in 2013, in which Cheng hired acrobats to reenact a narrative based on Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd from *Looney Toons*, he explained to Rittenbach: “In *Looney Tunes* there’s a clear set-up and a clear ending: Fudd loses, Bugs always wins. It’s like chess: you can exercise all the different possibilities; the pleasure is in seeing the variations. The narrative isn’t over.” Given that the duration of any of Cheng’s programs is essentially infinite, what’s left is “something more like a synthesis.”

But Cheng is unsentimental when it comes to thinking about synthesis as a social concept. After all, there is no telling what might occur when two programmed objects come into contact within an equally programmed, causal world, as is the case in real life. (Consider “synthesis” in relation to colonialism, for example.) In the end, survival is the goal in both human and technological endeavors, which is why the violence is always there, lurking in the ulterior. This was articulated in the *Brats* music video: a roughly three-minute piece that begins with a rabbit-headed child (also featured in *Entropy Wrangler*) crouched in front of piles of cash and other items, back to the viewer, jerking to the sound of the music. A hunter and his dog emerge out of the scene and push the rabbit-child into another terrain, bare save for faint shades

of rocks and foliage that emerge out of the environment. The action becomes violent quickly—at the outset, the hunter has a gun in the rabbit-girl’s mouth before he uses it to fling her grey, uncomfortably naked body to the side. A battle and a chase ensue, driven by a warped and raised alarm-like urgency. When the duelling pair encounter the Liars band members at the end, bodies implode into a heap, which makes sense. For Cheng, the goal is to look at a computer program as a series of calculations, but as an organism in its own right, just as human civilization is the sum of bodies joined within a collective frame, or leviathan.

To this end, the artist’s interest in synthesis is to observe natural and technological laws alike so as to disrupt perception without alienating his audience. At the core there emerges the fundamental philosophical question Cheng poses in “Forking for the Truth,” a text written for *Mousse* in which he thinks of the notion of the ideal as “a truth in the wild” that becomes an idea once it has been given a name and legible human value, an event he calls “truth-to-ideal conversion.” As Cheng writes, “human existence is nothing if not defined, organized, and stabilized by ideals—names, titles, forms, heavens, hells, rituals, statuses, morals, myths, eras, scripts, models, supermodels, objects, laws, lingo.” Yet, ideals are nothing more than “crude barometers from which we give status to every piece of reality’s mess: authentic, real, fake, imitation, miracle, imperfect, precious, natural.” And when an idea becomes “actualized or replicated by humans into material reality,” it “immediately opens itself to encounters with influences too big, too small, too fast, too slow, too numerous, or too contradictory for humans to preserve against. From this uncontrollable porosity, truths transpire.” For example, when a community stops believing in an ideal, it becomes “worthless noise,” leaving only reality in its wake, from which truths emerge.

This is what Cheng calls a “mutation”—the loophole out of a closed system.

As Cheng told Rittenbach: “When you push a technology to do what it’s not supposed to, you realize how painfully dumb that technology actually is.” In other words, when we see reality for what it is, we are capable of changing it, or at least understanding it on a more fundamental level. The first step, however, is to understand that our world—including the technology that shapes it—is completely organic. By this logic, we are all entropy wranglers mediating the laws made manifest in our natural and constructed environments, a truth Cheng illustrates on micro- and macro-levels in his latest project, “Emissary in the Squat of the Gods”, first presented in 2015 as an exhibition of new works dedicated to the history of cognitive evolution curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist at Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo. One part of this exhibition was a two-channel work made up of two interconnected live simulations made by six programmers, a division of micro- and macro-realities. On one channel, we watch an ancient, pre-conscious society facing a threat to their existence, and, on the other, we follow an emissary of this society who seeks to develop consciousness. Together, the works constitute a foundation myth—a story of a society seeking out its own structures and identities.

As Cheng told Jeni Fulton, “Emissary in the Squat of the Gods” lies somewhere “between a video game and a smart story.” The artist uses very basic artificial intelligence to see what his

characters might do in a narrative that, though defined, remains unstable—open to the same processes we find in the real world. Once more, we find ourselves connected between the real and the virtual, the truth and the idea, and it is the viewer who links the two. As Cheng notes, the work “procrastinates its conclusion” and, if you watch it long enough, “a sudden pattern of feelings may grow inside you and without you.” In other words, even the artist doesn’t know how things will end.



《木瓜尝起来很完美》

2011年

动画拟像、循环播放

This Papaya Tastes Perfect

2011

Live simulation, infinite duration



《神踞之下的使者》

2015年

有声动画拟像、循环播放

Emissary in the Squat of Gods

2015

Live simulation and story, sound, infinite duration