

The Geometry of Binary Life

"We are only particles of change" Joni Mitchell, Hejira

When we walk into the gallery space of island6 we are struck by the variety of video game characters that many of us have grown up with. Paintings are pixelated as if they were censored. Manga girls try to get out of their frames, inviting us to share the world with them. Digital prints sarcastically mix analogue photography and popular cartoon characters. In these artworks two worlds are mixed: the physical one and a digital one that has been built over the past three decades. Yet, these worlds do not create parallel narratives in our lives, but appear as a single dimension in which the physical and the digital depend on and complete each other. This semi-virtual reality is not composed of unknown elements that scientists and artists have always researched, in an attempt to know what makes life- and what makes art. Instead, it is composed of computable pixels, which irrevocably makes art in the digital era something that derives from measure and construction, rather than abstract analysis. In order to search for new artistic possibilities of digitalism, Liu Dao's latest exhibition goes deep inside this new digital reality and recreates the fuzzy alternate dimension that we unwillingly but not so reluctantly extend our flesh and blood lives into.

Let's go back to the beginning. Computer scientists had designed simple computer games back in the 1950s and consequently games like PONG or Spacewar! were created with their simple but to the point graphics made out of lines and dots. Games soon migrated to arcades where racing and target shooting games replaced pool and pinball.† Along with the emergence of small-sized computers and 8-bit microprocessors, hundreds of different worlds moved into our homes. In spite of the simple graphics, the gameplay gave users something that was not possible before: an interactive and controllable alternative reality. Not only did Space Invaders – with its rows of funny-looking but vicious aliens – or Pac Man – with its cartoon-like, loveable characters – provide a storyline, but these games also gave users the possibility to execute tasks according to their skills. In order to get the best scores, you had to be the best version of Donkey Kong. You had to become Donkey Kong: another version of yourself.

This illusion of being who we are not has defined gaming ever since. This basic 8-bit world provided the logic for the future generations of game franchises, such as the role-playing games of The Legend of Zelda or Final Fantasy. On the other hand, not only did role-playing come about as a form of storytelling, but also as a consequence of technical development. 3D graphics entered the gaming market in the 1990s that let the users experience a digital fantasy world from the perspective of the characters, usually with a gun in the avatar's hand, thus creating the genre of first person shooter games such as Half Life or Counter Strike. From here, there really was only one step forward for games: that we experience them the same way as we perceive real life. VR headsets completely exclude our everyday world and leave little to the playful imagination: they tear us out of our present and throw us into a playground with different rules. And yes, this playground is mostly filled with those cheeky manga girls.

The emergence of video games opened a gateway to another world. From the 1950s and the invention of the first video games onward, human history has split. Along with increasingly advanced technology an alternative digital world was created that we would dive into for recreation or escape. Besides the linear history of the physical world, we recreate ourselves in the digital world over and over again, in new and more capable forms. In the era of social media we no longer have to play and become Link to be somebody else for a while, since we are already somebody else on our Facebook and Instagram profiles. People we once knew (and we are people that someone once knew) have become collections of profiles of versions of the selves that they want to present. We never meet them again after high school, but follow their nights out in college, their first jobs, their travels in Asia, their marriages and the lives of their children, yet we can hardly reconstruct their true identity ever again. If we never meet in person again, but only see each other's digital selves, how are we more to each other than digital?

These avatars, be they game characters or social media profiles, are created because of a need to escape from the difficult present and the negative aspects of our daily life that seem to be impossible or extremely difficult to control. Our appearance, our personality, success, power... if we escape into a digital universe, everything is capable of improvement without much effort. A digital avatar gives us the possibility of lucidly dreaming another life: to live the life of another or that of our own doppelganger creature.

Yet we escape into the digital world so frequently and immensely that it has become hard to tell digital from analogue, fictional from real. The two worlds have merged. Virtual realities have fused with our economies in previously unimaginable ways. Not only do we sell goods for digital currencies such as bitcoin that we can create on our computers without the control of any government, but also buy goods for real money within video games, while they are only necessary within those specific digital worlds.‡ Using smart phones' GPS systems, Pokémon Go places digital animals, Google's game Ingress puts different game elements at real coordinates. Mark Zuckerberg will use VR technology to display fictional objects and alter existing ones.§ Video game researchers predict that the number of gamers that have spent more than 10,000 hours in games will reach 1.5 billion over the next ten years. This means that one fifth of the world's population will spend much of their lifetime in digital worlds as their digital alter egos.** But we don't even have to enter a game anymore to be digital. We are already digital as our real lives hugely depend on the digital world.

In this exhibition, the Liu Dao Collective attempts to reveal some aspects of this digitalized semi-reality we all live in along with our cyborg selves. The artworks featuring photographs with pixelated characters show crystal clear prints of lands inhabited by videogame and cartoon characters in satirical situations. The characters taken from cartoons and video games are torn out of their original backgrounds and placed into the new context of seemingly real life. The world they used to inhabit is gone as well as their original meanings. On the other hand, although the photos are analogue, they were digitalized and retouched. How are we to distinguish real life from the world of fiction, then? Other artworks approach this contradiction in a conflicting juxtaposition of different media. A first person shooter was painted on a piece of Plexiglas as if our almighty avatar was frozen and incapacitated, while the landscape is unrealistically digital. A lascivious anime girl was painted in a similar way, only her hand is moving down there, pixelated. Yet this pixelization isn't only about the hilarious censorship in Japanese hentai, but also a way to show the viewer what this overly realistic digital world is made of. The artworks seen in the show go back to the golden age of video gaming and refer to the most recent trends of virtual reality to deconstruct our digitalized world and show what it really has become: grids of pixels.

This approach of trying to go deep down to the roots, to the most basic elements of reality, has been in a focal point of artists in the 20th century, but it has never seemed to be possible to accurately analyze reality with artistic approaches. As the world had never been made out of

† Wikipedia, *History of video games*. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_computer_and_video_games

‡ See the phenomenon of gold farming. URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gold_farming

§ Olivia Solon, *Facebook's key to building communities in divided times: augmented reality*. In: The Guardian, 18. 04. 2017. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/apr/18/facebook-mark-zuckerberg-f8-speech-augmented-reality>

** Damien Walter, *The great escape*. In: Aeon, 12. 07. 2013. URL: <https://aeon.co/essays/does-fantasy-offer-mere-escapism-or-real-escape>

measurable squares before the digital era, artists' reductionist attempts of going back to the "one", the most basic elements resulted in rather subjective abstractions, that is, pure art.

Vision's reduction to abstraction started with the scientific approaches of the impressionists analyzing vision and color. Rosalind Krauss writes that this kind of analytical approach that would define 20th century art originated in books that helped artists understand vision and optics. She argues that "treatises written on physiological optics [...] were illustrated with grids. Because it was a matter of demonstrating the interaction of specific particles throughout a continuous field, that was analyzed into the modular and repetitive structure of the grid. So for the artist who wished to enlarge his understating of vision in the direction of science, the grid was there as a matrix of knowledge."†† The post-impressionist pointillists such as Seurat or Signac, on the other hand, deliberately used the concept of grids "as an emblem of the infrastructure of vision" that would become and insistent feature of their art.††

Krauss implies that the analytical approach of the post-impressionists paved a path for artists that would go deeper into the research of the field of canvas and would try to see more details of the gridded picture. Krauss writes that such abstractions can only be read with a "centrifugal reading", which means reading outside of the frame, because what we can see within, "the given work of art is presented as a mere fragment, a tiny piece arbitrarily cropped from an infinitely larger fabric."§§

This tiny fragment is the smallest building block of vision, but what an artist chooses it to be is highly subjective. For Seurat, it was dots of colors that build up how we actually see the world. For the cubist Picasso, it was any kind of rectangular shape that would seem reasonable to depict different perspectives and angles of an object on a single representation of it. Abstract artists of the second half of the century would go even deeper. Otherwise neuroscientist Eric R. Kandel accurately describes Mark Rothko's paintings that "consist of strong formal elements such as color, shape, balance, depth, composition and scale" and "free color from objective contexts".*** He quotes Agnes Martin who admired Rothko for having "reached zero so that nothing could stand in the way of truth."††† Martin herself, after starting out painting self-portraits and landscapes, then experimented with biomorphic abstraction, during most of her artistic career focused on the basic elements of art such as "line, surface, tone, and proportion"†††, reflecting on natural patterns.§§§ It may not be a coincidence that at some point she shared a studio with Ellsworth Kelly who probably the most clearly talked about his method of reduction to and magnification of visible particles:

"Maybe I pushed the idea of nature in my work too hard at this time. I wanted to make it understood that it was perception I was interested in, not geometry or theories. [...] The point is, my paintings don't represent objects. They are objects themselves and fragmented perceptions of things."****

In the past century artists regardless of styles and schools were searching for the smallest elements of vision or art itself to find what makes art art. In the era of digital life and digital art, however, the smallest element is given: the pixel, the "picture element", the physical point that our new raster image world is built of. We are made out of them and we shape ourselves using them. Kelly was a visionary when he invented the pixel before its actual invention. On his 1951 painting called "Seine"†††† he painted the flow of the river out of black and white squares. He reduced the perceivable world into pixels, but probably hadn't imagined that some sixty years later half the world would in fact be built out of the same calculable and computable blocks.

The artistic consequence of these problems is that along with the split of analogue and digital worlds, representational art shifted from an analytic approach to a synthetic one. In the digital era, making images is not about researching what's out there, as it was discussed by Rosalind Krauss, but by constructing what is not yet existent, in the same way that we create installations. We may have to learn to live in harmony with our digital doppelgangers and it may take a while, but the fusion of digital and physical has given new opportunities for artists. In this exhibition, the Liu Dao Collective exploits the pixels seen in classic video games, and demonstrates that these ubiquitous motifs have become the building elements with which we both augment the real world and build new art with in the 21st century.

Dates: From September 28th to November 23rd, 2017

Vernissage: Thursday, September 28th 2017, from 7:00-10:00 pm

Curation: András Gál

Art Direction: Nick Hersey & Thomas Charvériat

Artistic Research: Jin Yun 金云, Ryan Nimmo, Tang Dashi 汤大师 & He Dashi 贺大师

Music: Mychaelangelo Norkus

Coordination: Yeung Sin Ching 杨倩菁

Venue: island6 Main, 50 Moganshan Road, building #6, 2/F, Shanghai

Artists: island6 art collective (Liu Dao 六岛), Ryan Nimmo, Nick Hersey

Link: http://island6.org/TheGeometryOfBinaryLife_info.html

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†† Rosalind Krauss, *Grids*. In: *October*, Vol. 9 (Summer, 1979), pp. 57. The MIT Press. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/778321>

†† Ibid. pp. 57-58.

§§ Ibid. pp. 60.

*** Eric R Kandel, *Reductionism in Art and Brain Science: Bridging the Two Cultures*. Columbia University, New York, 2016. pp. 130. URL:

https://books.google.hu/books?id=47-IDAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=hu&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false

††† Kandel quotes Martin. In: *ibid.*

††† Agnes Martin. Exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. 07.10.2016 – 11.01.2017. URL: <https://www.guggenheim.org/exhibition/agnes-martin>

§§§ Artnet, *Agnes Martin*. URL: <http://www.artnet.com/artists/agnes-martin/>

**** Holland Cotter, *A Giant of the New Surveys His Rich Past*. In: *The New York Times*. 13. 10. 1996. URL:

<http://www.nytimes.com/1996/10/13/arts/a-giant-of-the-new-surveys-his-rich-past.html>

†††† See the Philadelphia Museum of Art's permanent collection. URL: <http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/295031.html>