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Synthetic Times, Media Art Exhibition: Synthetic Art for Synthetic Times

Synthetic Times, media art exhibition organized by NAMOC, China's National Museum of Art in Beijing. June 10 — July 3, 2008

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Synthetic Art for Synthetic Times

Synthetic Times, media art exhibition organized by NAMOC, China's National Museum of Art in Beijing, June 10 – July 3, 2008

The organizers could hardly have found a more suitable title for the large international media art exhibition *Synthetic Times* on display last summer in Beijing. Sure enough, it refers to the 'synthetic art' of zeros and ones produced with the computer – plentiful examples of which were on display.

It also implies the merging of media, techniques and aesthetic strategies into varieties of 'multimedia art' looking for its identity between immaterial digital realms and the physical spaces of art institutions.

However, the title could also be read as an echo of the truly 'synthetic times' currently experienced by the Chinese society. As everyone knows, the emerging 'New China' is an unpredictable synthesis powered by the unlikely interplay of rigid communist rule and unscrupulous capitalist enterprise.

As could be expected, art making explicit political interventions had been carefully filtered out from the selection. What was offered was a flashy, techno-heavy and often rather loud array of artworks. On the surface level at least, the exhibition seemed more about effect and gesture than about concentration, meditation and silent listening.

Synthetic Times was organized by NAMOC, China's National Museum of Art. It was part of Beijing's "Cultural Olympics," a series of events that prepared the ground for the great culmination, the Olympic Games themselves. It seems to have been conceived to stress the openness, international spirit and progressiveness of China's present cultural policy; goals that media art proved to be perfectly apt to serve.

There is no doubt about the organizers' ambition. Everything had been meticulously planned with the help of a long list of internationally known media art festivals and cultural institutes. The exhibition design was by Lars Spuybroek/NOX, and organizational support had been provided by New York's Parsons the New School for Design. The catalogue was co-published with the MIT Press.

The exhibition, curated by the New York-based curator and educator Zhang Ga, covered the entire first exhibition floor. It probably wasn't a coincidence that the other floors were occupied by an exhibition of Gerhard Richter's paintings and an impressive historical retrospective of German landscape painting, which further enhanced the internationalist context.

Synthetic Times had been classified under four themes: Beyond Body, Emotive Digital, Recombinant Reality, and Here, There, and Everywhere. However, cross-overs were clearly more important than boundaries. The exhibition was above all a massive overview of heterogeneous artistic responses to the technological challenges contemporary societies and lifestyles are currently facing.

Zhang Ga summed this up well in his introduction to the catalogue: "This exhibition was conceived with a sense of urgency to grapple with the new materiality and a new reality that is unfolding relentlessly before us."

This urgency is felt particularly strongly in China, where a big leap into a modern high-tech society is taking place at breathtaking speed. How can millions of people, who until recently knew little about the world outside China, adapt themselves to international lifestyles, where the Internet, mobile phones and interactive interfaces are not just daily necessities, but also tools for artists?

The exhibition consisted of some 40 installations representing a wide variety of media and artistic approaches. There were robotic works, interactive installations, kinetic sculptures, design-related environments and even some biotech art. Beside works that appealed to sight and sound, other sensory registers, in particular smell and touch, were also stimulated.

Many of the household names of the new media art scene were

represented: David Rokeby, Stelarc, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, etoy, Knowbotic Research, Luc Courchesne, Chico MacMurtrie, etc. However, opportunities had also been given to emerging talent from around the world from Brazil to Norway. While all this was laudable, the imbalance between male and female artists was striking – as if women barely contributed anything to the field.

Picking out highlights from such superabundance is not easy. In the poetic end, Chico MacMurtrie's pneumatic installation *Sixteen Birds* (2006) was truly impressive. It featured sixteen flexible robotic structures that simulated the flight patterns of a bird, harking back to Etienne-Jules Marey's late-19th century chronophotographic studies.

Another fine work with poetics of its own was *Fortellerorkesteret* (The Telling Orchestra, 2005), a mechanical-automatic theatre by the Norwegian group Verdenstheatret. Its rather Tinguelian play of light, shadow and mechanical motion had a touch of nostalgia. At first glance at least it formed a striking contrast with etoy's hyper-cool *Mission Eternity Sarcophagus* (2006).

Entering etoy's orange container was like stepping into a science fiction movie. Encapsulated by flickering walls of lead matrixes, one was carried to a synthetic 'zone,' where biological life (in this case Timothy Leary's) is extended digitally. Etoy's 'necro-futuristic' container is superbly designed, but the idea is hardly new. It is really another manifestation of the 'time capsule,' a well-known age-old topos. Realizing this adds another dimension to etoy's digital-existential 'graveyard'.

It is interesting to note a shift in etoy's work from the corporate identity games that led to the notorious 'toy wars' in real economic and legal arenas to a more subdued interest in 'eternal' issues. A certain shift can perhaps also be detected in the work of Knowbotic Research, whose projects have explored massive data streams in real time, raising issues from urbanism to the discovery of a virtual 'new continent'.

In *Naked Bandit* (2005) the global data-streams have been reduced to the perceptual relationships between automatons and humans within a cluttered gallery space standing for an imaginary prison cell. The installation features an autonomous miniature airship stalking floating balloon-like targets (as well as visitors). Obviously the work talks about the ambiguities of power, surveillance and sense of (ir)reality in the era of Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. Whether anybody grasped the disconcerting political undercurrent remained unclear to me. Quite a few visitors seemed to view the work as an opportunity to play an exhilarating session of hide and seek among the drifting balloons, giving them a good poke from time to time.

The Chinese representation in the show was relatively slight and somewhat disappointing. Some of the 'local' works felt dry and pretentious, with rather heavy-handed art-historical references. The contrast between these and a piece like *Sound Drawing* (2001–2008) by Korean artist, Kichul Kim was clear. Kim lets the users create collaborative soundscapes by drawing on paper with special styluses. The response to this seemingly simple, but elegant and engaging work was immediate.

I found it interesting to observe the audience's reactions. Most of the time there were plenty of visitors, both old and young, many of whom obviously hadn't encountered this type of art before. I saw very few signs of prejudice and rejection. Enthusiasm and amazement seemed the most common reactions.

Interactive works in particular were eagerly tried out. *Touch Me* (2004) by the Dutch Blendid Collective seemed one of the favourites. People queued to have their bodies pictured in weird ways by a wall-mounted scanner. The results were snapped, over and over again, by mobile phone cameras to be brought home or e-mailed to a friend.

If this can be read as a symptom of wider trends, it seems that the Chinese living through these 'synthetic times' really want to shake themselves loose from the ghosts of the past. Media art can play a role in this process.

ERKKI HUHTAMO





Etoy, *Mission Eternity Sarcophagus*, 2006 – ongoing. Standard 20ft shipping container, human mortal remains, concrete, led matrix, linux software.