Introduction

Lu Yang: An Artist in Transformation

Ari Heinrich, Livia Monnet, and Gabriel Remy-Handfield

Lu Yang (陆扬, 1984) is a critically acclaimed new media artist and rising star based in Shanghai, China, who works across film, games, performance, and installation. His work has been exhibited at numerous biennales and exhibitions in China and around the world, including the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022. He has collaborated on videos with high-profile rock bands like The 1975, and one of his videos featured in a 2020 fashion show of the Chinese sportswear company Li-Ning. Lu Yang has also won prestigious awards, including the BMW Art Journey Culture award in 2019, and Deutsche Bank’s Artist of the Year award in 2022, and the artist was anthologized in Barbara London’s critical history of video and the digital arts, Video Art: The First Fifty Years (2020), as well as in Dominique Moulon’s Chefs d’œuvre du 21e siècle : l’art à l’ère digitale (Master-works of the 21st Century: Art in the Digital Era, 2021). In contemporary art and popular culture, Lu Yang is clearly a force to be reckoned with.

Lu Yang studied at the prestigious China Academy of Art in Hangzhou at the School of Intermedia under Zhang Peili, a pioneer in video art in China. Here he began to forge his own unique artistic identity. Indeed, as Lu Yang remarks, it was at the China Academy that he “started [to] explore…comprehensively all the subjects I work with today” (Li 2018).

In Brand New Art from China: A Generation on the Rise (2018), Barbara Pollack situates Lu Yang as a member of a new generation of contemporary Chinese artists including Cao Fei, Miao Ying, Tian Xiaolei, Chen Tianzhuo, aaajiao, Guan Xiao, and others who draw heavily on the internet and digital technologies to create artworks at the intersection of experimental and popular art. In China, the internet’s 731 million users—in addition to complex issues of censorship and surveillance—contribute to creating the conditions for emerging work, often in unexpected or unpredictable ways. Using digital animation, VR, augmented reality, AI, installations, and performance, artists explore how the emergence of new technologies creates new affects, new perceptions, new forms of corporeality and sexuality and how they contribute to new speculative and futuristic worlds and world-building. Some even use their work to address...
social and political issues related to the status of the internet in China and the impact of globalization.

At thirty-seven, Lu Yang is part of a generation that grew up with the internet while witnessing the radical transformations that were ushered in by the economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping at the end of the 1980s. Notes Pollack, “[This generation] grew up in a China populated by skyscrapers and super-highways with a post-internet culture in which an encyclopedic range of influences collide at the speed of light” (Pollack 2018: 6). Yet even as new technologies and economic reforms directly inform much of their work, references to traditional Chinese culture are often absent in work by this generation of artists:
“There are no more depictions of Mao, no more references to imperial China or acknowledgments of Cultural Revolution” (Ibid.: 6). Lu Yang’s work is no exception, with his films, installation works, and performances consistently blurring established categories. How then do we situate an artist like Lu Yang? (Or as Pollack wonders provocatively, “How could this possibly be Chinese art?” (Ibid.: 2). Lu Yang’s self-characterization only adds to the provocation. He has stated repeatedly: “I don’t live in Beijing or Shanghai. I live on the Internet” (Ibid.: 138).

Within this broad remit, common themes nonetheless emerge in the artist’s growing body of work. For example, Lu Yang creates sophisticated and vibrant live-action films, video game installations, 3D animation, VR, and augmented reality works. He has also invited scientists, dancers, musicians, DJs, pop artists, and video game creators to collaborate with him: such collaborations have involved Japanese dancer KenKen, manga artist Shintaro Kago, Japanese music idol Chanmomo, photographer Ren Hang, filmmaker Yuen Hsieh, musician Yao Dajuin, noise producer Wang Changcun, Japanese producers Invisible Manners, artist Mao Sugiyama, and many more. Despite this variety, however, the artist’s works share an aesthetic characterized by psychedelic, vivid colors, fast-paced rhythms, loud electronic music, and grotesque figures who inhabit worlds that are colorful and kitschy but also bizarre, unconventional, and even nightmarish (see, for example, works like Uterus Man, Lu Yang Delusional Mandala, The Great Adventure of Material World Knight Game Film, and the live motion-capture performance Delusional World). In creating these universes, Lu Yang frequently cites as inspiration the influence of Japanese popular cultures of anime, manga, video games, and pop music, including Neon Genesis Evangelion, GANTZ, Inuyashiki, and Sword Art Online, to name a few. And like these manga and anime, Lu Yang often conceptualizes his works on the model of seriality such that characters from previous works often reappear in later works, contributing to the invention of a distinctive universe with its own frames of reference.

Besides the anime/manga aesthetic influence, another recurring theme in Lu Yang’s work is the incorporation in his films of different scientific discourses, mostly derived from neuroscience and biotechnology. Many of his works feature lengthy science-themed engagements with the human brain and its dysfunctionalities ( Wrathful King Kong Core, Lu Yang Delusional Mandala, and Electromagnetic Brainology, for example). As the artist has observed on multiple occasions, science nourishes his creative ideas: “As a matter of fact, it’s very difficult to find a source of inspiration in so-called contemporary art. To tell the truth, psychology offers more” (Pollack 2018: 253). As a child, Lu Yang was admitted frequently to hospital; could this early familiarity with hospital environments have provided a source for the artist as an adult, contributing to his fascination with sciences such as biotechnology, experimental psychology, medical science, and neurology?
Not unrelatedly, the artist’s work also features a recurring engagement with the body. Individual pieces often feature Lu Yang’s own face and body, as exemplified by the creation of multiple avatars in films like Delusional Mandala or the ongoing Doku series, as well as corporeal themes around sex and gender and science/medicine, as explored in films like Uterus Man. Virtual worlds, for example, constitute a space where notions associated with gender don’t matter anymore; they offer a space where, as the artist notes, people don’t pay close attention to his identity. “I like playing with gender,” notes the artist, “especially with Western audiences. They watch my Uterus Man and think it’s feminist, but actually, I am just having fun with how gender is labelled” (Wu 2017). Another series of works that plays with the notion of gender is the recent series Doku, which features an asexual, post-gender avatar. Reflecting on this specific artwork, Lu Yang comments: “In the virtual world, I was able to do such things as choosing my own gender-neutral body and creating an appearance that reflects my own sense of beauty, which are not possible in real life. I consider Doku as my digital reincarnation” (Gaskin 2020).

Regarding the question of digital reincarnation, another significant influence on the artist’s work is religious iconography and cosmology derived from Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism, Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, and Hinduism. Lu Yang first encountered Buddhism through his grandmother:

Religion came first because my grandmother was a Buddhist. I think religion is something that can easily plant a seed in someone’s heart if the person is young. Once you learn too much and become suspicious, it’ll be difficult to get into any belief systems. So, my family provided me
with this background, which left an impact on me very early on, but during those early years I always thought of it as a mere superstition. I did read a lot of books about Buddhism, but only the extremely accessible ones. Then in high school I started reading more intermediate level scriptures, and that’s when I became genuinely interested in Buddhist ideas. (Li 2018)

For Lu Yang, Buddhism is helpful to understand the relationship between the body and the mind, the illusory nature of reality and of the self, while questioning the idea of reincarnation in the digital world, all themes that the artist explores in various films like Wrathful King Kong Core, Delusional Mandala, and more recently, Material World Knight Game Film.

This complex juxtaposition of pop-cultural references, scientific discourses and experimentation, Buddhist thought and iconography, and corporeality, materializes in Lu Yang’s work as a heterogeneous and distinctive aesthetic where otherwise stable and fixed boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, the real and the illusory, and the body and mind become mercurial — constantly reconfigured and dismantled, in flux.
Biographically speaking, Lu Yang resists labels of all kinds, whether such labels are related to gender, nationality, or even the “IRL” status of the artist. Recently, for instance, the artist stated his preference to be referred to as either “he” or “they” in English: “Lu Yang is referred to as ‘he’ in Material World Knight, and a recent Artnews profile used the same pronoun, but in most previous interview Lu Yang has been referred to as ‘she’” (Gaskin 2020). Indeed, readers will note that we (editors) have aimed to render all references to the artist within this text consistently as he/him/his. Yet one might also consider that “Lu Yang” has “at least three different but interrelated referents when it comes to gender, namely, the individual, the artist’s public persona, and the artist-inspired avatars that appear in Lu Yang’s works.” The gender of each of these different “Lu Yangs” arguably diverges “insofar as the avatars often appear to be nonbinary or genderless.” Thus readers will note that on Lu Yang’s website, the artist uses masculine pronouns, “even as Lu Yang the individual is female (‘a lot of people do not know that I am female,’ remarks [Lu Yang] in an interview published in late 2020).” So in this volume’s articles, it merits considering that references to Lu Yang may indicate the artist’s public persona (e.g., Doku, etc.), but there could also be cases where “the referent appears to be the individual”—and that this individual, despite cultural heritage or gender assigned at birth, may resist being defined “in any binary category because his artistic identity seems to prioritize fluidity and is thus better defined ‘through a complex network void of geographical borders or set genders and sexualities’” (Whitworth 2017: 17).

One might also observe a kind of parallel resistance to being defined when it comes to the issue of nationality: “For this generation, the label ‘Chinese artist’ is an uncomfortable burden, imposed by curators, both foreign and Chinese, who are sorely behind the times” (Pollack 2018: 6). Lu Yang perceives himself as a global artist, and he has actively resisted being categorized under the rubric of the “Chinese” artist. He also seems to chafe at the designation of artist itself, even stating that he doesn’t consider himself an artist at all: “I’ve never seen myself as any particular kind of artist. Defining people is something only certain critics and media like doing. I myself get classified under all kinds of names without rhyme or reason, the most unaccountable being ‘feminist artist’” (Lu 2013: 247). On multiple occasions—and not without a sense of humor—the artist even emphasizes that his films and performances should not be taken too seriously, and that his goal is to entertain: “I don’t like being called an artist—I’m more like an entertainer” (Feola 2017).

This special issue aims not to pin the artist down but to offer a space to reflect on the complexity and diversity of Lu Yang’s expanding body of work. It constitutes the first major academic study exclusively dedicated to the artist. Recent scholarship on Lu Yang has focused on the following topics: post-internet/post-digital art (Kim 2017, 2019), feminism and posthumanism (Braidotti 2022; Guo 2020), queer Sinofuturism (Remy-Handfield 2020), and
posthuman identity in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Gao 2021). More recently, Rosi Braidotti places Lu Yang’s work in dialogue with posthuman feminism and sexuality in Post-Human Feminism (2022). Braidotti argues that virtual sexes “are important to posthuman feminist practices of sexuality” (Braidotti 2022: 192). In her discussion of Uterus Man, Braidotti writes the following:

_We simply do not know what sexed bodies can do. For instance, Shanghai-born new media artist Lu Yang specializes in experimental multimedia works in the tradition of Cyberfeminism. She explores post-human technoscience, especially neuroscience and sexuality, raising issues of mortality and ethical values. “Uterus Man” (2013), a manga-like musical project, features an anime-style character who rides a “pelvis chariot” and skateboards on a winged sanitary pad. (Ibid.: 192)._ 

This special issue provides space for a broad range of inquiry through close readings and more general reflections by a group of scholars and researchers from around the world. It also includes the perspectives of some of the artist’s close collaborators as well as contributions by curators who have supervised solo shows of Lu Yang’s work.

“Lu Yang: An Artist in Transformation” is divided into five sections. The articles in Part 1 discuss two relatively early works of the artist, The Beast (2012) and Cancer Baby (2014). Situating The Beast within Chinese youth’s massive consumption and active reconfiguring of Japanese ACG (anime, comics, and gaming), Fred Shan argues that it is this film’s deviant recreation of a scene from the feature-length anime Evangelion: You Can (Not) Advance (2009) that best illustrates its “Chinese” identity. While The Beast’s subversive reimagining of the original anime simultaneously reveal Lu Yang’s powerful imagination as self-identified otaku artist and the expansive creative possibilities of fan fictions, the film also contributes, Shan contends, to two tendencies in the contemporary art world: the reterritorialization of contemporary “Chinese” art within state-sponsored discourses on globalized technocratic Sinofuturism, on the one hand, and the renewed exoticization of the Asian other through the replacement of the latter’s situatedness by noncommittal descriptions such as “global art,” on the other.

Jennifer Lee’s contribution identifies three aspects in Lu Yang’s little studied digital animation, Cancer Baby, that hinge on the concept of the scientized image: the artist’s use of technoscientific discourse and imagery; Cancer Baby’s relation to the long, fraught intellectual history of the image (xingxiang 形象) in Chinese culture; and finally, this animation’s reappropriation and subverting of the latter genealogy. Like other works by Lu Yang, such as Uterus Man (2013) and Delusional Mandala (2015), Cancer Baby demonstrates that the putatively rational, affectless discourse and imaginary of science—especially that of bio-
technology, experimental psychology, and neuroscience—not only informs but becomes the specific medium through which the artist’s creativity expresses itself. Cancer Baby’s specific conceptualization of the scientized image both relies on, and re-envisions, several aspects of the philosophical and aesthetic genealogy of xingxiang, in particular the politicized, utilitarian mobilization of this concept in China’s socialist modernity. The animation’s subversion of the latter conception of the image is instructive: Notwithstanding its cutesified 1980s game aesthetic, Cancer Baby deftly manipulates the modern imagistic archive’s inherent tensions and transformative potential to implicate the viewer in its implicit contestation of modern biopolitical regimes.

The two articles in Part 2 of the present issue propose various readings of Lu Yang’s animated short, The Great Adventure of the Material World—Game Film (also called Material World Knight Game Film, MWKGF) (2020). Livia Monnet argues that Lu Yang’s game film stages a series of bold, ironic thought experiments. The Buddhist-inspired thought experiment, which plays a central role in the film, questions canonical Buddhist concepts such as the Four Noble Truths and the emptiness and illusoriness of reality and the self from the perspective of neuroscience, psychotherapy, and even quantum mechanics. This thought experiment also proposes that our conception of the phenomenal world is rooted in our consciousness, that reality itself is a product of the alaya (storehouse) consciousness. Another thought experiment in MWKGF asserts that Buddhist philosophy can be seen, played, and navigated as a video game. The film’s video game aesthetic also enables it to envision, contends Monnet in the conclusion of her article, an “ecological dharma eye” experiment that seems to call for an epistemic-technoscientific-spiritual revolution.

Jori Snerl’s article, “Challenging Binaries in Posthuman Worlds,” contends that MWKGF is best understood as a work that simultaneously reads Mahayana Buddhism through a posthumanist or transhumanist lens and reinterprets posthumanism from a Buddhist perspective. A posthuman(ist)-Buddhist approach coupled with a critical engagement with the SF mecha (robot) anime series that have influenced Lu Yang’s work enables viewers not only to see the film’s protagonist, the Material World Knight, as a post-gender cyborg endowed with a relational, non-dualist, posthuman subjectivity but also to interpret his enlightenment in the film’s final sequence as a climactic moment of becoming fully posthuman. This approach also calls attention to the complexity, ambiguity, and open-endedness of Lu Yang’s game film—aspects that considerably complicate and tend to subvert a reading based on posthumanist thinkers such as Rosi Braidotti.

The third section of this special issue offers a wealth of perspectives on questions of the body, embodiment, and the human in Lu Yang’s art. Grounding its argument in the thought of philosophers such as Bernard Stiegler, Catherine Malabou, Yuk Hui, and Judith Butler, Hai Ren’s article argues that the recon-
ceptualization of the human in Lu Yang’s art is not Buddhist-oriented, purely scientific, or technophile. Rather, the artist’s practice offers a new aesthetics of the organological form of the human that assembles living, artificial, and social organisms. This aesthetic also questions the characteristic traits of humanness as defined in recent philosophical thought—traits such as the corporeal body, human mentality, and human uniqueness. Lu Yang’s futuristic, organological aesthetic also envisions, maintains Ren, a regime of the future based both on a nonreproductive kinship between the human and the nonhuman (including the machine) and on the habitability of the human as a more-than-human geo-historical agent in the planetary age.

Remy-Handfield’s article, meanwhile, examines the aesthetic of the grotesque in two works by Lu Yang, the video _Delusional Mandala_ (2015) and the live motion-capture performance _Delusional World_ (2020). Building on a Deleuzo-Guattarian framework, he argues that this aesthetic is both inventive and destructive. It simultaneously creates new forms of corporeality while contributing to the dismantling of dominant human(ist) and social norms.

The articles in Part 4 of our special issue highlight the role of high-end technology and software in Lu Yang’s work, the non-instrumental relation between such technology and the artist’s conception of their own practice, and the nuanced, complex curatorial approach that is needed in mounting a solo exhibition of the artist in a specific national or local context (such as that of Germany). Ashley Lee Wong’s contribution focuses on Lu Yang’s live motion-capture performances. As co-founder and artistic director of MetaObjects, a Hong Kong-based studio specializing in the digital production of projects proposed by artists and cultural institutions, Wong has collaborated with Lu Yang since 2018. She argues that the artist’s projects are characterized by repetition, ambiguity, seriality, a constant quest for the meaning of life and death, and the transcendence of binary categories. Lu Yang’s constantly evolving and expanding universe, which involves more conceptual, technological, and aesthetic complexity with each new iteration, may be seen as a learning journey through cyclical existence as envisioned in Buddhism. Prefigured by earlier works in which neuroscience, Chinese medicine, and experiments with the body in virtual environments were framed by Buddhist concepts such as samsara and the suffering produced by living in the phenomenal world, Lu Yang’s live motion-capture performances realize a view of art as a collaborative, transdisciplinary process. Straddling art, technology, dance, games, and local and global youth cultures, the artist’s live motion-capture performances question dominant notions of identity, nation-state, gender, and even art itself. The maximalist aesthetic of these performances (which during the COVID-19 pandemic were livestreamed for a global audience) expresses both a life-affirming, energetic creativity, and a striving for detachment from our hyper-materialist, consumerist contemporary world.
Nora Gandert and Malte Lin-Kroger, the curators of Lu Yang’s solo show, *False Awakening* at the Kunsthalle in Erlangen, Germany (February 11 to June 19, 2022), argue that the work of this category-defying artist can be seen as global art, and that the artist’s practice can be situated in the broad, shifting field of the “Global Contemporary.” An exhibition presenting Lu Yang’s work in a European context must also pay attention to local conditions. These conditions include both the techno-cultural and media contexts in which the artist’s works were created and the sociopolitical, cultural, and economic contexts shaping the curating and exhibiting of a particular art show as well as the production of knowledge generated by the latter. The complexity and broad spectrum of cultural and scientific references of Lu Yang’s art, contend Gandert and Lin-Kroger, require a collaborative, interdisciplinary curatorial approach. This approach must be sensitive not only to transcultural dynamics and to the artist’s reliance on the internet and on various advanced technologies to produce the work but also of curatorial hospitality: a contact zone allowing for a reevaluation of the familiar and even for potential radical changes in the roles of both host and guest.

The articles in Part 5 of our special issue focus on the ambiguous figure of Doku, the asexual avatar featured in a series of videos and live motion-capture performances created by Lu Yang over the past three years. In “Solitude in Pixels” Pao-cheng Tang argues that Doku, despite its constitution through advanced facial recognition software, motion-capture data, and CGI, maintains an ambiguous relationship to humanness and human corporeality. This ambiguous “posthuman humanism” stems from Lu Yang’s recent, radical rethinking of the potential and limitations of digital media as well as of the neoliberal fantasy of boundless freedom and infinite connectivity provided by the internet. While Doku still seems to embody, to a certain extent, an aspiration for a techno-utopian future or an alternative world, it also makes visible digital creations’ precarity, trauma, and inescapable entropy. Rejecting the legacy of the Enlightenment ideal of the perfect human simulacrum, Doku’s subjectivity is precariously situated between material human corporeality and digital virtual reality. While it compels us to rethink our relation to digital media, Doku also actualizes the temporality of the past conditional—the condition of the could have—inherent in the global digital network and its mediations. Pointing to the unfulfilled promise of full digital emancipation and transcendence as well as to a haunting ontological condition that was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, Doku also embodies, writes Tang, the entrapment of the alaya-vijnana consciousness in which it is grounded. As a storehouse for the seeds and traces of past experiences, attachments, and defilements, the alaya consciousness can only produce further karmic consequences, leading to repeated rebirths. Doku may thus be expected to continue enacting what could have been, but never was, a full-fledged digital liberation.
Finally, Barbara Pollack’s article argues that Doku embodies the artist’s ideal of a perfect avatar. In Digital Ayala (May 7 to June 19, 2022,) the solo show curated by Pollack for the Jane Lombard Gallery in New York, Doku could be seen dancing, and being reborn again in the six realms of samsara (the Buddhist cycle of birth, death, and rebirth). While this transcultural, nonbinary, seductive avatar may also enact the artist’s—any artist’s—reach for immortality, it has already acquired the status of a global star, appearing in live and online performances and exhibitions around the world.

Christophe Thouny has generously provided an afterword to this volume—a work of (written) art in its own right, and perhaps indicative of the kinds of power that Lu Yang wields to inspire the creative in all of us.

Notes
1 Here is a non-exhaustive list of several exhibitions and biennales that featured Lu Yang around the world: Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, 2022; Digital Alaya at Jane Lombard Gallery, New York, 2021; Asia Society Triennial 2021, New York; ARoS Aarhus Art Museum, Aarhus, Denmark, 2021; 5th International Digital Art Biennial, Montreal, 2021; Delusional Mandala, Fotografiska, Stockholm, 2019; The Game World of Material World Knight, CC Foundation & Art Center, Shanghai, 2019; Cyber Altar, Art Basel Hong Kong, with Société, Berlin, 2019; Electromagnetic Brainology, Spiral, Tokyo, Japan; Lu Yang: Encephalon Heaven, M WOODS, Beijing, 2017; and Delusional Mandala, MOCA Cleveland, Cleveland, 2017. Recent works in major group exhibitions at the Kulturforum, Berlin; UCCA, Beijing; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne; 56th Venice Biennale 2015 China Pavilion and 59th Venice Biennale 2022; Liverpool Biennial 2016; Shanghai Biennale 2018 and 2012; and Montreal International Digital Art Biennial 2016.
2 “I don’t know if it’s because I spent a large part of my childhood in hospitals, that I really like hospital environments and feel quite at home there. When I was a child, I was afflicted with asthma and other illnesses for a long time. When I was taken to hospital after an attack in the middle of the night, the smell of antiseptics there immediately made me feel well again” (Lu Yang 2013: 246).
3 https://asianartnewspaper.com/lu-yang/

References


