

## Automata: Group Exhibition

**Participating Artists:** Manuel Bandelli, Bing Bing 兵冰, Cai Duobao 蔡多宝, Thomas Charveriat, Chen Xiongwei 陈雄伟, Manels Favre, Sheng Jie 盛洁, He Long 何龙, Nick Hersey, Tom Lee Pettersen, Lei Lei 雷雷, Li Lingxi 李翎溪, Liu Dao 六岛, Liu Yannan 刘亚囡, Felix Luque, Zane Melleupe, Alberto Raviglione, Rose Tang 罗丝唐, Wang Dongma 王东马, Wu Yandan 吴艳丹, Xiao Longhua 小龙花, Xu Yiping 徐义平, Yan Wenjiang 阎文江, Yang Longhai 杨龙海, Zhang Deli 张德丽, Zou Susu 邹苏苏

**Curators:** Zane Melleupe (with the collaboration of Marie Terrieux and Leo de Boisgisson)

**Art Director:** Thomas Charvériat

**Organiser:** island6 with the participation of ifa gallery

**Coordinator:** Cai Zhenxing 蔡振兴

**Writer:** Rajath Suri

**Exhibition:** December 7<sup>th</sup> 2008 to January 7<sup>th</sup> 2009

**Venue:** ifa-island6, 50 Moganshan Road, building #6, 2F, Shanghai 200060, PRC

**Information:** <http://www.island6.org> | <http://www.ifa-gallery.com>

*"By believing passionately in something that still does not exist, we create it. The nonexistent is whatever we have not sufficiently desired."*

*Nikos Kazantzakis*

**Automata**, literally, functional or mechanical device or entity, is the title for the forthcoming exhibition in concert between **island6** and **ifa Gallery**.

Central to the curatorial stance, the examination of a society which has evolved in parallel to the futuristic horizons once envisioned by political and scientific thinkers active at the advent of technological growth and industrialization. The man and machine, the cyborg, the irreal of virtual media and hyper-attenuation of the senses are intuited and given impetus in the creations of over 20 artists.

The earliest traces of mechanism and motion are found in the automata of the turn of the century, comically, the miniatures of animals mass manufactured and thrown into an emergent consumerist market, the mechanical figurines wound with a simple spring device and turnkey. Turning in circles, hopping or winding along vested with the energy of a few rotations of the key, these figures, reminiscent of children at play, were to herald infinitely more complex application between the human imagination and rampant technological advent. In an era of virtual media, interactive computer generated creations and holographic inventions, to make reference to the earliest and relatively crude devices, which once stunned audiences in amazement acts as a humorous point in our fascination and co-evolution with the machine. The same co-evolution, dependency or perhaps, synthesis, to be more explicit, is at the core of the examination that has become the exhibition itself.

On reflection of our current societal situation, the theme of the exhibition is lent further credibility. Not only do machines and new technology play an irreplaceable and predominant role, we ourselves have come to mimic them in our routine existence. Laborers, office staff, military personnel...mankind seems to have evolved as functioning units within a societal construct in parallel to the advent of technology since the turn of the century. Across the expanse of any identifiable metropolis or great city, we appear as none other than automated denizens whom set about daily affairs in a thoughtless and reactionary manner, neither questioning the cellular components in which we reside, work and continue in accordance to the definitions of societal dictates.

Of the multiple facets by which we now identify and have come to incorporate in our routine existence and which are enacted on our senses, the signifier is best expressed in the voice of eight of the predominant artists, while by no means to discredit any others of this striking artistic collective.

The most in depth exploration is found in the artwork of Felix Luque entitled "*A Machine Dreams of White Noise*", a sound installation about the limits between the man and the machine, between the human and the artificial. The awakening of the human conscience, when memory is reactivated after a phase where "modulatory neurons" are inactive, is here questioned in application with the machine, which may dream. The act of dreaming epitomizes the complexity of human condition in comparison with artificial simulations unable of conscience. It represents the beginning of technological savagery in which technological others have appropriated themselves the essence of humanity, the awake of conscience. By making a radical statement about the future of human society, it is an expression of our fear of the other, the machine, the robot, the automata or the barbarian. Technology is a vector of development and wellbeing but also one of domination and control.

*White Noise* is a random and unpredictable signal; it's a source of chaos. By definition, it is a sound or light signal that contains all frequencies of the spectrum with equal power. "*A Machine Dreams of White Noise*" formulates the hypothesis that if computers could dream, they will create them by modulating this rough source of data. By shaping this chaotic energy, the artificial intelligence of the machine will put order and create hallucinations, dreams. By applying this idea to sound creation, the work would become sculptural. The chisels of the computer automata are then equalizers, filters, envelopes, and any signal processing that shapes sound. The creation is exceptional as the algorithmic, self-designed software allows for original interface in its' application, housed within an acrylic white cube suspended from the ground, the individual audience "enters" a sensorial experience from beneath, the interaction between the human and the technological exemplified.

In a radically different interpretation of the theme of humanity and machination(s), the Shanghai based conceptual artist Rose Tang has completed a single work in a photographic installation which challenges the degree by which militarized society divests the humane from the individual. An arsenal of soldiers are documented and captured upon individual and bi-planar print images upon paravent surfaces depicting the "violence" of the mechanical in societal form, the individual reduced to an approximate anonymity and submitted to a process of identification beneath the natural condition. The uniform and orientation towards societal service becomes a composite moment reflecting the stratification of mankind in an industrialized netherworld of the artist's own conscious invention.

Another examination translates the unequivocal spheres of sound and visual dimensions in a joint collaboration between Manels Favre, Nick Hersey and Liu Dao with the creation of an interdisciplinary installation. An extended interactive sound panel engineered by Liu Dao lends a stimulating multi-sensorial experience for the audience. A printed ink drawing (Hersey), the hyper-exaggeration of a vertical skyscraper, reacts to light and shadows. Each independent floor of this endless tower hides a unique sample of domestic noise and, by simply pointing a flashlight to it, the virtual inhabitants are awakened and the corresponding sound file (Favre) is then triggered. The effect is that of a large human chorus conducted by the action of a flashlight. The emission of sound is orchestrated in unison to the spatial movement of the beam of light. The question of the fluidity of brush and ink is replaced by that of sequential movement generated by a unique sequencing wherein the individual may actually initiate software of their own creation.

The interaction between the composition and intermittent reflexes of the individual manifest as an automaton itself, one which relies on the active interference, and participation of the audience and born of an artistic synthesis. In response to bridging the spheres of sight, sound, space, Favre, Hersey and Liu Dao have brought to effect a synchronous experiment which surpasses itself, where the sensorial is suggestive of subconscious machinations and impulses as much as cognitive states of intrusion.

Thomas Charvériat and Manuel Bandelli further the collaborative spirit in their interpretation of the theme in the creation of a self-automated vacuum cleaner. A humorous aside from the more serious investigations, addiction weighs against addiction as the mirror image of an artist inhaling matter from a concrete floor is affixed to the top surface of the machine, we

rely on one of the oldest household appliances to achieve the simplest cleaning tasks and equally, often prefer to numb or hyper-atrophy our physical senses by way of consuming addictive and volatile narcotic substances. Itself a robot, the vacuum is self-charging, a mechanism which supports itself without human interference while parodying our frailties and our domestic dependency on the machine at its most basic function.

Nick Hersey's conceptual strength delivers an interesting message in the creation of three dimensional stainless steel sculptures, the product of an open collaboration with Zhu Huawei and the **island6** direction, which are nothing other than the words and slogans found in popular graffiti art in the cosmopolitan centers internationally. An art most closely tied to the angst and alienation of urban youth culture and later popularized as an art form viable in itself, his transformation from the individualistic and sporadic subversion, which are its' origins, to that of an engineered process and manufactured structure of three dimensions cast in stainless steel weights the themes of ephemerality and permanence, of isolation and subversion with that of the machinations of the art industry and of form which may supersede content in a relative manner of re-interpretation of street culture.

Cai Duobao is part of the collective Liu Dao (**island6 Lab**), and hence, an artist accustomed to a process orientation in a collective spirit. For Automata, we have two original works nonetheless, each remarkably different. With "*Long Live the Crane*" the artist has given a stainless steel replica of traditional paper art, similar to Origami, a semi-abstract crane stands in a rigid posture with harsh geometrical planes delineating its form. Immobile and placid, we are able to observe a textual finish that has occurred due to the circular polishing of the sculpture's surface. Another work, "*Revenge at the Hairdressers*" in collaboration with Dai Enfu offers a unique piece, one exclaiming death and questioning time and survival. A taxidermist by trade, here, the latter artist reveals a cat mounting a dog in an attempt, however absurd and grotesque, to copulate. The static object affixed to a simple lightbox may not appear to deliver much in the way of an extrapolation of the theme of Automata, until one is able to hear the diffused sounds echoing of the two animals' effort and simultaneous protest. Both the cat and dog are "real", once alive with flowing blood and cell tissue, now immortalized and static, dead, yet with the appearance of life. It is a poignant and consummate statement, and one of our oldest sciences, of however obscure an origin, is transformed as a medium of artistic expression. The lightbox emits an alternating spectrum of RGB colors, which serves to animate and highlight the otherwise "deadlife".

The collective of Liu Dao is more centered on the questions of the dynamics of life within the intimidating, futuristic horizons of the metropolis of China. A recurrent theme in the mainland, New Urbanization and social alienation or humanitarian sacrifices rebound in his work, LED installations relay video passages of minute figures scrambling quickly to ascend or descend the exteriors of colossal skyscrapers and metallic towers. The visual experience of repetition and thoughtless scaling recalls the orderly yet apparently chaotic movement of termites, a species that reacts to the signals of superiors similar to cadres of a political bureaucracy. Digital apparatchiks are juxtaposed by one sole visual reference besides from the architectural landscape, a video cycle which mirrors scenes from the classic Alfred Hitchcock psycho-thriller, "*A Room with a View*". Psychedelic, re-iterant and at once suggestive of the loss of the conscious mind in an urban deluge, Liu Dao's reflection seems Orwellian, with perhaps a lighter sense of humor when reflecting on the human condition.

Yan Wenjiang reaches back to one of the epic films and images which first captured the imaginations of audiences of science fiction. At a time when the literary genre reached its' zenith, the release of Fritz Lang's masterpiece, "*Metropolis*", broke the frontiers of both animation and film. The concept of an alluring, sensual even sexual female robot was to re-merge in popular culture in America until today, yet few creators were able to achieve the original synthesis of desire and mechanical representation. Objectivization of the female form in popular or mass media being predominant during that era, the female robot which was able to surpass human strength, intelligence and yet arouse male desire has today become an archetype in the collective unconsciousness of male (youth) culture. The artist's rendering

of a similar entity by way of digital composition and paint, reminds us of as to how we now "live" the once futuristic, and are yet prey to the same fascinations beyond the "real".

The artists Bing Bing and Zane Mellupe have merged their creative forces with Liu Dao in the invention of elaborate photomontage which comprise multiple layering of original photographs of factory sites, abandoned lots and former industrial "palaces" (reminiscent of those of the Renaissance) of China at it's zenith of industrial growth. Standard film used in panoramic architectural and landscape studies, digital re-mastering and questions of iconography and portraiture combine in a mesmerizing series which avoids simple classification of any kind.

Xu Yiping delivers new interpretations of his works that used transparent fiberglass molds of robotic females in acts of seduction with normal men with a bolder use of white fiberglass sculptures. Highly detailed and realistic, the work's artificiality is encapsulated in the materials, and the figures that couple on the ground are surrounded by figures, which deride and mock their unison, voyeuristic figures which represent the sensational tendency of the masses in the P.R.C. and the practice of public condemnation. If not for the futuristic reference of the liaison of robot and man, the creation might be misinterpreted as an allegorical invention which would recall the era of the Cultural Revolution, yet anaesthetized by the use of new materials and the prominence of sexual themes which lie beyond our nature, the work distinguishes itself as a boldly curious extenuation of the theme of that which might precipitate a "cyborg" or later generation of flesh and technological fusion. Here, the spectators laugh and ridicule: questions of "advance" and the "old" are given life to and we come to re-doubt our own immediate interpretations.

He Long offers an interesting schemata by adapting commonplace urinals and toilets as the ground for audio/visual installations. The speakers are housed within the confines of the toilets and urinals are suspended above with an independent monitor dividing the two porcelain pieces cemented to the floor. The transformation of the mundane as art is not necessarily immediately identifiable with the theme of man/machine or the reverse, yet the static signals emitted from the sole monitor and the transparent tubes which reach from the basin of the toilets upwards to join the suspended urinals suggest an unnatural flow of things: the sounds emitted from within the confines of the toilets (at first not clearly visible) suggest the artist is at play with organic necessities and non-interactive theories: a correlation which evokes memories of "R. Mutt" by Marcel Duchamp (1917) and a simple merger with technology.

Chen Xiongwei's neo-phosphorescent digital creations create for a multi-layered conceptual work: pixelization and super-imposition using silk screen on paper allow for striking images wherein complex patterning and color schemes interweave over images of insects, masked visage and cartoonish figures which are subject to the artists' hyper-digital imagery in effect. The central figures of each composition seem immobilized and in relative states of examination, as if topological screens and filters fragment their entirety and reduce them to nothing more than objects to be rendered neutral within a scientific mechanical grid. One work, in particular, "Joyful Toy", offers a clearer visual impact, yet one that starkly depicts militaristic monstrosities in Technicolor, creations that resound with the threat of a futuristic violence.

Jie Sheng (a.k.a. Gogo) has chosen to work with a complex concept in the digital video creation "Push". As an artist whom pursued an academic education abroad in France and whom has exhibited in numerous projects specializing in new media and video creations of an experimental nature, Gogo' reflections on the current Automata of the PRC are acute and insightful. The question of the rampant copyism within the artistic milieu having often either surpassed or obscured the role of a more authentic, sheer creativity is brought to the fore. She cites, "...through technology man has become inundated with multiple copies but such a blind acceptance may lead us into an era of sheer compliance." "Push" is a series of repetition wherein one figure pushes another, another yet another ad infinitum towards a final end where the figures shall fall one by one off of the visual field of the digital panel. At first, the visual tedium and cyclic sequence leads one to boredom, yet the sense of the

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concept reminds one of the drone-like aspect of our collective experience, and after the "fall", what shall become of us? "Push" is an intelligent and sublimated message that plays on our senses and calls into question the sheepish mind of modern mankind in our technologically driven society.

*Automata* is an attempt to address some of the most inexhaustible questions of our time. Man, machine, machination, sensorial experience, the real and the imagined converge and manifest in diverse interpretations by artists of different origins and stature. What was once signaled now controls, what we were once greatly proud of has now brought a sense of shame. Subterfuge and innovation are enacted as artistic means of individual catharsis, yet, in a society given to mass consumption and a mindless autocracy at will, the questions remain: Where shall it lead? Shall there be an end? Is mankind able to master its' inventions? The exhibition is not a conclusion, it is a sample drawn from the instance of the "now", a collective experiment housed in an instance in one space at one time amidst the immediacy and rampancy of our technologically inundated society.

***R A Suri, November 26<sup>th</sup> 2008, Shanghai***