
Liu Dao Art Collective

With an open door policy that recalls the ethos of Warhol's Factory, island6's studio-gallery buzzes with a similar atmosphere of experimentation and collaboration. At any given time, artists create in-situ pieces that dialogue with a concept cooked up by a resident curator. Communication replaces hierarchy. Artworks morph and evolve from casual conversation. The clash of cultures arising from the artists' diverse backgrounds brews originality. The result: finished pieces that have never been displayed anywhere else. The works that are lifted just a few meters from the atelier to the gallery are born from the show's theme and created specifically for that exhibition. They have a freshness that can only be the result of avoiding all previous contexts and connotations. There is one important difference from Andy's silk screens, which were made for mass production and popular consumption—the Liu Dao collective's artwork is, by default, one of a kind.

Liu Dao's artwork thrives in ambiguous space, absorbed in Heidegger's declaration that "the possible ranks higher than the actual." The technology incorporated into Liu Dao's pieces—sensors, controlled videos, sonar range fingers and microcontrollers—create a powerful atmosphere of ostensible, but not definite, surveillance. Viewers feel like they are being watched, but are never sure how or when. In one piece entitled **Mademoiselle Mao**, an antique mirror straight out of a 1920s boudoir has an LCD screen embedded in its wooden frame. As viewers approach to examine its ornate carvings, an IR sensor is triggered, and instead of their own reflections, a ghostly image of a coquettish young woman preening suddenly appears. The effect is overwhelmingly uncanny, as if this residue of the past has been lying in wait for passing presences, springing into resurrection only once the gaze of another is detected.

The invisible omniscience created by surveillance technology is not the same as the unyielding oppression of Bentham's Panopticon or Foucault's dialectics on discipline and punishment. Liu Dao's artwork is decidedly more lighthearted, sometimes functioning even as sophisticated pranks. Spontaneity is merely an illusion—a form of visual trickery. These pieces predict the reaction of the viewers and the responses are preemptively constructed by the artists. In the interactive video installation **Waiting For Godot**, a screen shows a business professional who could have been plucked from a Shanghai street in a Beckettian nondescript alleyway. He blinks at the sky as a

series of digits flashes above. When the viewer calls the number, the man attempts to answer his phone—only to disappear into it entirely. “I’m here,” or “Can’t find me?” blinks a text message sent to the viewer’s phone. After a few seconds, a different figure slinks into his place, inheriting the same absurd existence. “There’s nothing wrong in letting art be visually entertaining,” comments Thomas Charvériat, founding director of island6. Liu Dao’s flippant sense of amusement shares the Dada artists’ anti-bourgeois tendencies; both skirt around meaninglessness by not taking their art too seriously.

Anthropomorphic presence, closed-circuit monitoring and high-tech interactive pranks—all these are integral elements of the Liu Dao collective’s oeuvre. They force viewers to become more aware of both their corporeality and the process of perception. In other words, as viewers reach a heightened sense of their bodies functioning in space, they also experience a phenomenological turning inwards, and, in the words of philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, cannot “grasp the unity of the object without the mediation of bodily experience.” As the spectacle is filtered through physical senses, viewers also become more attuned to how their consciousness is processing the artwork. Liu Dao’s art objects turn into a meditation on the nature of sentience itself.

Liu Dao makes new media art, but rejects the cold calculation of technology by merging it with the calidity of corporeality. LED displays replicate the currents in our own electric makeup—a set of informational computerized code activates one LED after another, similar to the sensory system within a living body. Even the construction process has organic roots: a person’s filmed movements serve as the springboard for further technological manipulation. After choreographed actions are filmed and turned into a video, homemade software matches colors to create an animated sequence of bitmaps. Step by step, a cyborgian amalgamation of human and machine is realized. The effect of this peculiar *mélange*, described by art critic Chris Moore in his essay **The Electronistas**, mixes “sublime gigantisms with atomic detail, rational liberality with robotic violence, godlike biology with religious romance.” In this, the artwork speaks with an electronic parlance, but with a heavy accent on the natural world.

Many Liu Dao pieces take this emphasis on physicality to another level by becoming anthropomorphic presences in themselves. Like Robert Morris’ *L-Beams*, a founding work of 1960s Minimalism, Liu

Dao's **Impulse Momentum** requires the viewer's ambulation, or even direct touch, for activation. As movement is detected by visible motion sensors, red dots of light flash like constellations while making mechanical clicking noises across a red strip of PVC mounted on a wall. The smooth surface encourages physical contact; a flick of the hand creates an effect as if one is brushing the stars. Once awakened, the lights flicker and click with their own life. Impulse Momentum thus seems to straddle the line between being a Thing or an Other—without renouncing its objecthood and machinery, it springs to life at the human touch as if it were another being.

The cooperative process of an emerging piece comes from a strain of the collective mind that Hume describes as "a kind of theatre where perceptions, like performers, successively make their appearance; pass, repass, glide away and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations." In the Liu Dao collective, these interactions humanize the electronic medium. Technology is reinterpreted as more than docile devices that facilitate our existences with daily hits of gratification. It is itself a member of the collective, inverting its role to become a switchboard operator who knows exactly how to push our buttons and turn us on.

Michelle Ong, July 14, 2010, Shanghai