

“Prophecies”

Participating Artists: The **Liu Dao** 六岛 Art Collective
Curator: Thomas Charvériat & Pete Bradt
Exhibition: From October 16th 2010 to January 1st 2011
Venue: island6 Arts Center, 50 Moganshan Rd, bldg #6, 2F, Shanghai 200060, PRC

“Prophecies”, island6’s fifth exhibition of 2010, considers the human ability to perceive, evaluate and craft the future. The interactive art is made with the view that we are all prophets of varying degrees and mindsets, able to distinguish events ahead of us from personal angles and to certain depths. Like an artwork, the future is something we imagine, design and create.

The exhibition takes place in a moment ripe with speculation of economic unfolding, shifting powers and technological rebirths. While some warn of environmental apocalypses and burning borders, others confidently look forward to new opportunities for peace in an era of unparalleled progress. Shanghai is an intersection with awestruck visitors and dynamic residents offering the brightest glimpses and clearest views from entrepreneurs, engineers, diplomats, professors, transit authorities, urban planners and artists sharing their perspectives—everyone in Shanghai has a background, but the real stories are the sound bites they provide on their futures.

“Prophecies” speaks of the inspiration guiding mankind throughout his civilizations. Whether their source is supernatural or physiological, epiphanies appear in forms ranging from mathematical equations to paintings to political movements. There is something that displays the future for those in the present, a map made of thoughts which provides words before they’re said. Under the curation of Thomas Charvériat and Pete Bradt, the artists of Liu Dao dissect the concepts of foresight and prediction in relation to overall serendipity. Time-lapse video and narrative LED works question the qualities of linear time, while interactive productions highlight the individual’s constant influence on the possibilities in the world around him.

Artworks

Wang Dongma’s “Shifting Visions” is a series of antique cameras from multiple purposes and time periods that are reconfigured to show anachronistic images. Brands like the Kodak Duaflex IV with a Kodak lens are on display next to Kodalite Flashholders, an Argus seventy-five and a folding camera from Seagull, the oldest camera-making company in China. Miniature LCD screens are inserted into the camera models to forcibly connect two phases of the device’s development, multiple decades apart, and complete a loop between the past and what was once yet to be. Peering into the viewfinder will provide the last shot the photographer took, as a reminder that to watch an event is to look at something that has already happened. Like most of Wang Dongma’s artworks, where the innards of a bureau or mirror may be gutted, enhanced and returned in a new configuration, the cameras serve as a reverse-bastardization of technology that plays with the general trend of progression. Eventually the works point to the exponential input of the consumer, how our personal infrastructures in homes or offices are morphing organically and mechanically in the 21st Century from within, and how predictions are giving way to observations thanks to the sheer pace of development. “Instead of manufacturers shaping products to fit bottleneck discretions of the market, they embrace the fact that no product is ever complete or untouchable,” writes Wang, “especially in the computer industry where the consumer is as savvy as the inventor. To the benefit of everyone and harm of no one, Firefox add-ons are designed and shared by users with the blessing of Firefox itself, as are iPhone applications with the help of Apple, just as tens of thousands of music tracks are being remixed and mutated at any moment. There is no longer such a thing as a finished product, even when it’s put on sale.” Wang applies this condition of communal development to these camera products, where the solidity of brand names and patented designs are exposed as irrelevant in the larger scheme of our lives. Meanwhile, older photographers familiar with the models and brands will be receptive to a nostalgia for the pioneering era of video artists, when Nam June Paik supposedly employed his Sony Portapak in the 1960s, or any of the stages through which Bruce Nauman moved during his career. And when standing among Liu Dao’s beaming LED pieces that take any viewer back to a Jenny Holzer exhibit, it becomes clear how any artistic generation is always a child of the one before.

Using video art to give its respects to cinema, Liu Dao builds an LED replica of the most famous film experiment, the Kuleshov Effect. In the 1920s, separate observers were shown an identical headshot of a forlorn-looking actor but coupled with different shots afterward (a bowl of soup, a little girl, and a coffin). As obvious as it seems now, it was a revelation to see such a clear example of how each shot changed the entire conveyance. In “Kú Lí Xá Fà Effect”, Liu Dao places an LED portrait of a man next to three separate LED displays in a row next to him. Depending on which sensors are activated by the viewer, the narrative shows the actor either longing after a bowl of noodles, jealously watching the girl of his dreams with another man, or mourning the loss of his dog. Both the original and 21st Century replica illustrate that, when experiencing events and preparing for the future, the sequence of reception is fundamental to the interpretation, even so more than an event’s individual contents.

It is for this reason Matt Carols finds absurdity in sibylline antics and created “Pyramid of Cheops”, a computer program designed to evaluate the digits in a caller’s cell phone number to decipher his

immediate future or cause of death. Using numerology and what Umberto Eco calls “the legend of Open Sesame”, Matt offers his opinion on the tired pun between prophets and profits. “On a daily basis, palm readers, cult leader scammers and stock market speculators spread temptations to customers through incentives despite mathematical odds,” writes Matt Carols on his website, “drawing connections that don’t exist, bending the words, restructuring sentences, using arbitrary dates, times, imagery, even Equidistant Letter Sequencing¹ to depict themselves as saviors and others as the enemy or anti-patriots or heretics or any threat that should be squashed or sided against. You can always find a length x weight x address x beers you drank ÷ number of people you kissed and it equals 78, the fine on your parking ticket.

“It’s a system preying on the human mental reflex that tries to make sense of the world around him. As discussed in ‘Absolute 0:00’, there is no brain large enough to compute all the trajectories and kinetic forces of matter in the universe and therefore deduce and project perfect visions of the past or future. Yet throughout our daily lives, we can’t turn off our limited version of the same cognitive ability.”

Such calculations are perfectly demonstrated in the straightforward world of a chess match. With no random elements, it is a battle of who can look further into the future, a simple competition of eyesight across a two-dimensional plane of available possibilities. “Qi Pao Says” is an interactive piece immersing viewers into this game of sequential planning and second-guessing. A model stands in a mirror wearing a Qi Pao 旗袍, inviting viewers to ask her to perform actions by sending requests through text messages. The model will, for example, run her fingers through her hair if she is asked to, or make funny faces, or blow kisses at the viewer, depending on what is asked. The work goes deeper than to just mimic 1-800 number relationships or credit card chat rooms, instead bringing the viewer face-to-face with a program one will try to outguess. After a few commands are answered, the viewer will inevitably ask, How far did the artists think ahead? At what point does the model cease to answer commands and will the limits of the artwork be revealed? Liu Dao highlights our inner mechanisms of predicting reactions and eliciting responses with other, unseen people in the world through different places or times: During the making of “Qi Pao Says”, Liu Dao contemplated what the viewer would be thinking. A month later, the viewer contemplates what Liu Dao had been thinking back when they had been making the artwork. The guessing game stands alongside questions of impersonality within social networking sites, online peep shows and virtual reality human connections, in an age when online representation can outweigh any other form of identity.

Liu Dao’s collective nature invites influence and inspiration to come from all spheres of the arts, as members have backgrounds ranging from theater and film to music and literature, and the power of language plays its important role. Captioned artworks like those made by Barbara Kruger are found in slogans pasted across the walls, in names of the artworks and most notably in LED lettering that levitates in mirrors. Electronic, pixilated texts float between the viewer and her reflection, transferring attention to themselves and back again to the image, leading the viewer to incorporate the messages with the sights and ponder what relevance the words have for her specifically. “If you stand here long enough, you can watch your cheeks sagging. See them sag? Here. And here. Or there, just a little bit. Yep, gross. Hag.”

Liu Dao develops their own focus for *Prophecies*, not to condemn the illogicality of supernatural prognostics but to highlight the beauty of foresight, and remind us that civilization is built on prediction, vision, objectives, carefulness, belief and a ceaseless collective force on the study of the future.

About island6

island6 Arts Center is an artist-founded, artist-run, "art first" not-for-profit organization founded in Shanghai in 2006. The center is dedicated to identifying emerging artists and encouraging them through risk-taking programs that explore new curatorial models and innovative projects. island6's mission is to provide a forum and support for contemporary artists whose works examine timely and timeless social, aesthetic, and philosophical issues. Since 2006, island6 Arts Center has exhibited 248 artists from 23 different countries, sponsored 129 resident artists, organized 43 exhibitions, and initiated over 2000 art projects. In 2007, under the artistic direction of Thomas Charvériat & Zane Mellepe, island6 Arts Center established Liu Dao-- a research group including artists, curators, engineers, and technicians devoted to developing technological platforms for the Arts. Liu Dao explores the cultural ramifications of the convergence of art, technology, and science and strives to influence the aesthetic trajectory of the global artist community. Every "art forward" island6 exhibition is the product of multi-disciplined, collaborative in-house workshops.

¹ Equidistant Letter Sequencing is a technique of reading every other letter in a text, or every third or fourth letter and so on, in order to find hidden words and “divine” messages. Michael Drosnin had a huge bestseller with *The Bible Code* where he used a computer program to find accurate predictions about our time written in ancient Torah texts. It has since been demonstrated that as long as one uses a large enough text (*Moby Dick* was a control study) there are enough statistical possibilities to find anything one wants.