

OUT OF SPACE 1: CAO FEI- WHOSE UTOPIA

Gloriahalle, Düsseldorf

April 25, 2009 – June 27, 2009

The Julia Stoschek Collection is to present a new series of exhibition projects entitled *Out of Space*. These projects will take place at irregular intervals and, as the name suggests, will not be staged at the collection's home at Schanzenstrasse 54. The first exhibition in the series puts the spotlight on Beijing-based multimedia artist Cao Fei and will open on 24 April 2009 as part of this year's Art Cologne - the 43rd international art market – in Düsseldorf's Gloriahalle at Belsenstrasse 20.

Cao Fei is one of the most important Chinese artists of her generation. Born in Guangzhou in 1978, she grew up in a world of advertising and electronic entertainment. Fascinated by the vibrant nature of consumer society, she developed an idiosyncratic visual language that playfully, ironically and humorously juxtaposes how we imagine, desire, criticise and enjoy reality, thus blurring the boundaries between reality and fantasy. In her diverse work, which ranges from photo series, films, performances and installations to prose and plays, Cao Fei seeks above all to investigate the rapid social and cultural changes revolutionising China as well as the new generation of Chinese teenagers.

WHOSE UTOPIA (2006)

The exhibition's main feature, the extensive installation *Whose Utopia*, fathoms the lives of migrant workers in the Pearl River Delta in southern China. Produced as part of the Siemens Art Program, Cao Fei's project entitled *What are you doing here?* actively involved employees at the "Osram" lightbulb factory in Foshan in the project's realisation. Workers were interviewed individually about their secret dreams, career ambitions, goals and personal beliefs.

My Future is Not a Dream is set within the context of the factory and the "Osram" brand. Here Cao Fei exposes the underbelly of globalisation, which is changing both the Pearl River Delta and China as a whole, and investigates the implications for individuals and their role in society. In the interviews for *What are you doing here?* the employees also talk about the negative aspects of their lives as migrant workers. Additional to the video the photographs show their cramped, shabby apartments where there is almost no personal space as each worker is only allocated a space in a multi-tiered bunk bed.

I. MIRROR BY CHINA TRACEY (AKA: CAO FEI) (2007)

In her works *I. Mirror* and *RMB City*, Cao Fei explores the online phenomenon Second Life (www.secondlife.com).

Over 15 million users have signed up for this 3-D internet-based world since 2003 and each user has an avatar, a computer-animated digital alter ego that they can style and control, enabling them to visit existing environments in Second Life, talk with other users, earn virtual money and even start up a virtual business.

Represented by her avatar, which she named China Tracy, Cao Fei spent one year in Second Life researching all the possibilities offered by the role-playing game.

She documented her adventures in Second Life by creating machinima films – animation films which convert the online game’s 3-D graphics into digital video animations.

I. Mirror is divided into three parts that portray both the beauty and excess of this virtual world. It traces the love story that develops between avatars “China Tracy” and “Hug Yue.” Despite the unlimited possibilities offered by Second Life, there is an air of loneliness and all-pervasive yearning about the video piece, due largely to the melancholy background music. The fantasy world ultimately seems a cold and lonely place.

The *I. Mirror* project came to an end in 2007 when the video trilogy was presented at the 52nd Venice Biennale in the Chinese pavilion.

RMB CITY (2007)

Whereas her first project was an investigative study of Second Life, Cao Fei’s second Second Life project involves the creation of *RMB City* – a beautiful, dreamlike metropolis within the virtual world.

RMB City (RMB is the abbreviation for the Chinese currency Renminbi) reflects the current wave of urbanisation sweeping China as well as the rapid social and cultural changes taking place there. *RMB City*’s architecture comprises a variety of communist, capitalist and socialist symbols, which are brought to mind using historical and contemporary Chinese icons as well as exponents of Chinese culture. China’s national symbol, the panda bear, appears alongside the new national stadium in Beijing as well as ironic and subversive objects like a sunken statue from Mao. The virtual construction of the city was completed in late 2008 and the buildings in *RMB City* (www.rmbcity.com) can be bought and occupied by cultural institutions for two years.

HIP HOP GUANGZHOU (2003)

Cao Fei’s earlier hip-hop project, on the other hand, does not focus solely on China. The project was mostly set in Chinese cities, but also included Berlin and New York. In each city she transformed people from different national, social and cultural backgrounds into hip-hop dancers in an attempt to break down the rigid barriers between the media-dominated world of the younger generation and the everyday lives of the older generation. In *Hip Hop Guangzhou* Cao Fei plays hip-hop tracks to grocers and builders and introduces them to the basic dance steps, which are in fact reminiscent of the traditional formation dances performed by Chinese workforces.

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