A world of machines that think and watch

THINGWORLD IN BEIJING

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One thing especially Chinese about Thingworld was the title. A love of philosophy and a love of things going hand in hand. Entering the National Art Museum of China (NAMOC) from the wide street grid of smog-hidden Beijing, one notices the many surveillance cameras at every junction transforming a taxi ride into a video game tracking the moving car through a palimpsest of squares and lines, to find oneself in a total environment of electronic systems, mostly glowing faintly in darkened rooms, providing a particular sense of 21st Century embeddedness.

High tech around the world tends to be apotopical in the sense that it embraces universal principles and does this mostly in symbolic ways. Overt reference to humanity is rare and this was borne out in Thingworld: the third iteration of a triennial of new media art conceived and curated by Zhang Ga, of the new media lab at Tsinghua University. A few works such as Speak by Reijne Combrinck give us the blurry side of infuriating customer service voice recognition systems in a forest of smart phones try to have a conversation with you, and in the interactive A World’s Under Construction by Hu Zhenwei, photos of my teddy bear sent in by visitors pop up on a vast Google Earth localised Moonscape while a machine that tries to lie two shower coexists has no prospect of succeeding. (Adi Anjila Sulanan)

Central to the complex structure and thinking behind Thingworld are the future dynamics of society and so inevitably there are excursions into the incredible world of informatics, like Perpetual Storytelling Apparatus of 2009 by Julius von Blumkin and Benjammin Mauz. This was an endless scrolling drawing machine reproducing texts and diagrams from the US Government Patent Office data base of 7 million patent applications, using a vocabulary of 20 million keywords algorithmically matched with words from a bestselling novel so that diagrams from the patents enter into new strangely lyrical or surreal relationships and open up alternate landscapes of invention knotted together from the vast invisible data bases.

The extreme edge of art practice using technological systems and biology is just beginning to emerge and find an audience in China. Out of the 68 artists nine were Chinese, four were Australian (coordinated by MAAP) and the rest were from other parts of Asia, and the world. The opening statement of this extensive show which occupied the ground floor and two more large Flors of NAMOC, was an antique coach teetering on the point of just one curved foot and swaying while some invisible internal device held it in a delicate balance. Overstuffed with the ‘impossible’ as we are with online images and advertising gimmicks, this old lady of the droning room seemed quaint rather than mind boggling, but it was a clever opener.

With the title and subtitles of Thingworld, Zhang Ga tries to convey layers of philosophy to an audience which must be kept motivated to work at it. The visitor room sheet-plan divided the pieces into three groups: ‘Monologue: Ding an Sich,’ ‘Dialogue: Ding to Thing;’ and ‘Ensemble: Parliament of Things,’ with a lengthy syllable by Zhang Ga in the weighty catalogue, but the actual works were not exhibited grouped by category, adding to the puzzle of the artists’ names not being matched on the room sheet with their work. So as one tangles with a physical incarnation of a ‘Twitter feed in the form of a flood of thermal paper rolls, (Insomnus Study, by Christopher Bate) or Night and Day by Wei Wei by Kaolin Sobocha, comprising one large rock that the viewer is challenged to lift (the reward is that the sun will rise), the intellectual cudgelling goes on predominantly with the help of well-written wall texts.

The complexity of the chemistry, physics, electronics, nanotechnology, or biology work in works is beyond the understanding of most of us, and the artists take us with them as far as they can, such as in the piece Farewell for the Sublimation of Sports [form] by Silvio Vivacca, in which the chemical drug commonly known as caffeine is combined with dead skin cells and a heat source to continuously grow a whitish material in a bell jar into a simple phylloxeran flower or the new life forms deriving from plastic waste growing.

In big glass tubes which seem attractive until you realize that this is a future reality for the Pacific Ocean and its Great Garbage Patch (Pinat Yoldas, An Ecosystem of Debris).

Ronald van der Meer: Time Capsule of Life is a room-size white housing structure based on the hexagonal pockets of the wind-dispersed Balloon Seed which here translate into plastic shopping bags which inflate or deflate in response to visitor interaction.

Keith Armstrong and Lawrence English in Light of Ectactoning explore how a simple varying point can carry different sense data to the interpreting brain, from chaos to elegant ordering of layers of apparent objects in space.

Themes emerged such as obscure communications systems: a manikin head that smiles and closes its eyes but sometimes replies quite seriously to your questions (lambent by Kenneth Leopold), and Rat by Jean Pierre Guuster, a crazy tangle of wires and objects like pig plates all acting as sound devices to confuse and confound our sense apparatus, all accurately reflecting the layered world of things which is our fate and our element.

THINGWORLD was at the National Art Museum of China from 11 June to 1 July 2009. http://www.namoc.org

Stephanie Britton, founder editor of Antipode, lead an Indigenous delegation to China funded by the Australia-China Council to be the conference of Australia in China in July 2009.