

# 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-ridden Beijing where the night time flashes from surveillance cameras at every junction transform a taxi ride into a video game tracking the moving car through a palpable mesh of squares and lines, to find oneself in a total environment of electronic systems, mostly glowing faintly in darkened rooms, provides a particular sense of 21st Century embeddedness.

High tech artwork around the world tends to be apolitical 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* 2011 by Rejane Contoni give us the funny side of infuriating customer service voice recognition systems in which a forest of smart phones try to have a conversation with you; and in the interactive *A World Is Under Construction* 2013 by Hu Jieming, photos of 'my teddy bear' sent in by visitors pop up on a vast Google Earth lookalike Moonscape while a *Machine that tries to tie two Shoelaces together* has no prospect of succeeding. (Adriana Salazar).

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* 2009 by Julius von Bismark and Benjamin Maus. This was an endlessly scrolling drawing machine reproducing texts and diagrams from the US Government Patents Office data base of 7 million patent applications, using a vocabulary of 22 million keywords algorithmically matched with word sets 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 knitted together from the vast invisible data bases.

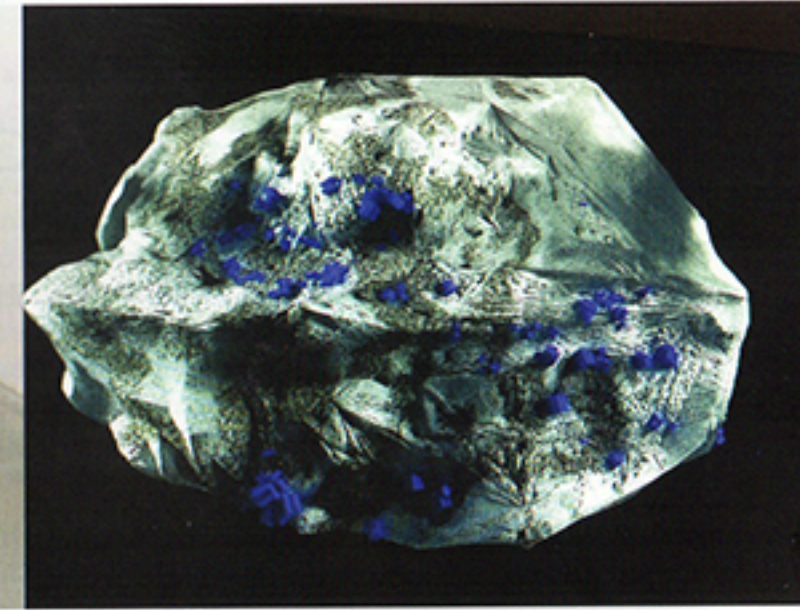
The extreme edge of art practice using technological systems and biology is just beginning to emerge and find an audience in China. Out of the 68 artists nine were Chinese, four were Australian (coordinated by MAAP) and the rest were from other parts of Asia, and the world. The opening statement of this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



Yang Zhenzhong *V Installation* 2013, comprehensive materials. This barrier constantly opens and closes. Photo: S. Britton



Kenneth Feingold *Lantern* 2005, silicone, wood, steel, electronics, computer software. Courtesy NAMOC.



Aaajiao with Mog OBJ.1 2014, LCD screen, wood, metal insert. Courtesy NAMOC.

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 rationale 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, (*Murmur Study* by Christopher Baker) or *Night and Day: Wu Wei* by Karolina Sobecka, 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 used 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 *Furnace for the Sublimation of Spirits* (2011) by Silvio Vujčić, 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 phallus form; or the new life forms deriving from plastic waste growing

in big glass tubes which seem attractive until you realise that this is a future reality for the Pacific Ocean and its Great Garbage Patch (Pinar Yoldas, *An Ecosystem of Excess*). Ronald van der Meijs' *Time Capsule of Life* is a room-size white hovering 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 Extinction* explore how a simple viewing point can carry such 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 sensibly to your questions (*Lantern* by Kenneth Feingold), and *Rut* by Jean-Pierre Gautier, a crazy tangle of wires and objects like pie 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 – 7 July 2014. <http://mediartchina.org>

Stephanie Britton, founder editor of Artlink, lead an Indigenous delegation to China funded by the Australia-China Council to the conference of Australian Studies in China in July 2014.



Adriana Salazar *Machine that tries to tie two Shoelaces together* 2006, motors, aluminium, shoe. Courtesy NAMOC.



Keith Armstrong and Lawrence English *Light of Extinction* 2014, wood, electronics, computation, sound, optics, robotics. Courtesy NAMOC.



Karolina Sobecka *Night and Day: Wu Wei* 2012, found rock, video, custom hardware and software.



Yang Jian *Want to leave* 2010, LED light, chair. Photo: S. Britton.



Christopher Baker *Murmur Study* 2009, thermal receipt printers and custom hardware and software. Photo: S. Britton.