CUSTODIAN OF EUROPE'S PAST: RE-CREATION, CONSERVATION, AND DESTRUCTION IN MIAO XIAOCHUN'S 3D ART WORLDS

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ABSTRACT: Miao Xiaochun 缪晓春 (born in 1964 in Wuxi, China) is an internationally acclaimed new media artist who has been using a 3D visualization program to re-create famous paintings from European art history which he subsequently enters, migrates through and inhabits in the form of a 3D avatar. In this paper, I aim to elucidate the complex meanings of art, virtuality, and heritage in Miao Xiaochun's multi-media-based artworks where art history, contemporary art making, as well as the preservation and destruction of the art object become one. I argue that Miao's 3D art worlds are relevant to the discussion surrounding digital heritage as they challenge the authority of museums and cultural institutions in the interpretation, representation, and preservation of cultural heritage. I propose that Miao's non-Western perspective on European art constitutes a reversal of the traditional conception of heritage discourse, underscoring the role of 3D technology in a culturally diverse and institutionally independent creation of digital legacy

1. MIAO XIAOCHUN'S 3D ENVIRONMENTS

Since 2005 Miao Xiaochun has been re-creating iconic paintings from European art history by means of a high-end imaging software — 3DS Max — whose main feature is the ability to construct complex virtual objects that can subsequently be edited and animated in a virtual time-space continuum. After first building the original painting's overall scene, Miao designs a three-dimensional shape modeled on his own body for each of the characters in the original work, and places them into their respective positions, thereby substituting all the figures in the original painting and their individual viewpoints with his identical-looking male avatars. The newly staged masterpiece is then digitally "photographed" and "filmed" by virtual cameras situated within the software's interface.

Miao first implemented his innovative method in The Last Judgment in Cyberspace (Xuni zuihou shenpan 虚拟最后审判, 2005-2006), which is a virtual replica of Michelangelo's late Renaissance fresco *The Last Judgment* [1]. Subsequently, he produced the series $H_2O − A$ *Study of Art History* (Yishushi yanjiu 艺术史 研究, 2007), including the works $H_2O −$ *Landscape with Diogenes (F)* (Lin xi tu 临溪 图, 2007), a virtual replica of Nicolas Poussin's painting *Landscape with Diogenes* (1647), and $H_2O −$ *Fountain of Youth (F)* (Fanlaohuantong tu 返老还童图, 2007), a complex re-staging of Lucas Cranach the Elder's painting *Fountain of Youth* (1546). This series was followed by another cycle of works, entitled *Microcosm* (Zuo tian guan jing 坐天观井, 2008), which is based on Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1503-1504) [2].

Miao Xiaochun's virtual art worlds are notoriously difficult to describe as they operate between the contrasting narratives of originality and reproduction, creativity and mechanization, uniqueness and mass production. Since all the avatars are inserted into the same scene in the form of discrete objects, they are able to move independently through its space, so that the overall effect is one of enhanced physicality, adding aesthetic value to interactions and sceneries. At the same time, the avatars deny the viewer's desire for identification and community by inscribing foreign aesthetic and social codes on Western cultural cognates, thus corroding, if not

destroying, the icons as objects of aesthetic consumption. As such, the ontological status of Miao's technological images remains uncertain: their operations consist simultaneously of art historical analysis, scientific experiment, and multi-cultural postcolonial experience.

Fig. 1: *Miao Xiaochun, H_2O – Fountain of Youth (F), 2007, (C-Print). ©Miao Xiaochun*

2. THE RECEPTION OF MIAO XIAOCHUN'S 3D WORKS

At the most general level, assessments of Miao Xiaochun's 3D environments depend on whether his critics regard concepts of virtuality as extensions of actual art traditions, including immersive images such as cave or fresco paintings, or whether they understand new media art as producing new cultural forms that are distinct from any precursors in literary and art history.

For example, art historian Wu Hung has commented that Miao's works follow the logic of the "conservatism" of virtuality as a medium. He is referring to the fact that advanced visual technology has begun to play a major role in "discovering" the past, and in understanding past art forms through computer-assisted manipulations and transformations. Based on this line of argument, Wu rationalizes Miao's electronic rendering of a European masterpiece as an act of translation, in other words a clarification and enhancement of visual processes and symbols that are meaningfully achieved by transposing Chinese cultural knowledges and techniques onto digital technology, i.e. as Chinese new media art [3].

By contrast, media theorist Siegfried Zielinski notes that attitudes in art historical disciplines are dismissive of contemporary visual techniques as extensions of earlier, supposedly more accomplished art forms. This problematic tradition-oriented art historical

stance, Zielinski argues, is compounded by newer academic approaches that are similarly unwilling to theorize a machine-based visuality such as Miao's, which generates its objects and scenes independently from external imagery. Zielinski concludes that Miao's work is to be commended for furthering the perception of subject and image as temporary phenomena that enhance themselves by appearing and disappearing in unlimited spatial environments [4].

Curator Huang Du, in turn, discusses Miao Xiaochun's work at the intersection of divergent academic disciplines, and identifies in Miao's approach creative and destructive impulses as a means to re-write history. Noting the processual character of Miao's method, Huang attaches particular importance to the unrelated coexistence of concepts, materials, and experiences, and to the condition of parallel developments in Miao's 3D environments [5].

As the above reactions indicate, it is far from clear whether Miao's method should be seen primarily as imitating classical approaches to image construction, as a utopian medium with the ability to liberate mental imaginings and formal language, or as a topography external to the physical world that is subject neither to the physical laws of nature nor to the construction of linear time.

Fig. 2: *Miao Xiaochun, H_2O – Landscape with Diogenes (F), 2007, (C-Print). ©Miao Xiaochun*

2.1 THE QUESTION OF "IMITATION"

It is noteworthy that while Miao Xiaochun's 3D works are referred to in the above reviews as "translation," "machine-based visuality," and "history", the more obvious terms "copy," "imitation," or "replica" have been entirely avoided by all three authors. The term "copy"

seems to have been circumvented because it is at odds with conventional notions of innovative and privileged forms of knowledge production which focus on creativity, discovery, and authorship, i.e., a European media history of "original creation" and "scientific progress."

This circumstance seems to be predicated on the assumption that Miao's encounter and exchange with European masters and their works, in particular his imitative method, follow the traditional antithetical paradigm of the West and the Asian "Other," i.e., the submerged narrative of European superiority and Asian inferiority. In this context, imitation is viewed as a strategy for those who consider their own scientific or technological development as backward, a position that was historically adopted by Asian cultures in receiving and importing knowledge and skills from the West.
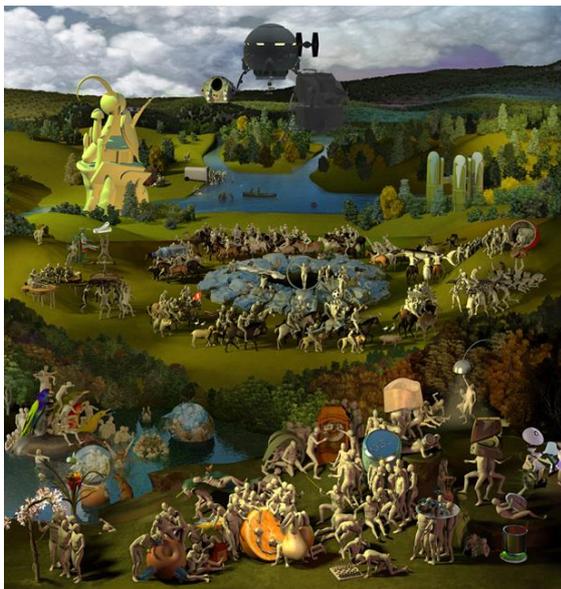
Fig. 3: Miao Xiaochun, Microcosm, 2008,

(C-Print). ©Miao Xiaochun

However, when argued from the viewpoint of traditional Chinese aesthetics, imitation can also constitute a means for artistic self-cultivation, where an artist's acquisition of skills is premised on the recognition of a great master and the copying of his art. Here, imitation is valued as the foundation of creativity, and, ultimately, as the continuation of the master's lineage through which his art is handed down for posterity. Read in this manner, Miao's fashioning of an electronic copy of a European icon can also be read as an homage to, if not an act of preservation of, the original masterpiece.

This further means that the perception of digital arts as a product of European technology and science no longer holds, since from a Chinese perspective, the question of new media art is tightly linked to the rise of China's economy over recent decades and China's emergence as one of the major players in the contemporary art system. The important question to ask, then, is about the meaning of the culturally specific concept of "copy" with respect to "preservation" and virtuality, and how their respective dynamics intersect in Miao's works.

2.2 MIAO XIAOCHUN'S 3D WORLDS AS "HERITAGE"

Digital cultural heritage as a theme and a practice – broadly speaking – is concerned with the meaning and role of museums, culture, and heritage in relation to digital technologies and the advance of the information society. As a still emerging field, it is situated between art history, archaeology, cultural studies, conservation studies, museum studies, communication sciences, and social research, as well as related areas and academic disciplines [6]. As a general characteristic, digital heritage discourse engages the concept of heritage in binary terms, i.e., in terms of the relationship between the physical art work and the digital object, as well as the display of material objects alongside digital media in exhibitions. Accordingly, cultural heritage is no longer conceived of in terms of geographical spaces or physical objects such as archaeological sites, historic monuments, or artifacts, but is being transferred to the digital realm, where cultural achievement becomes safeguarded, enhanced and preserved for future generations.

Miao's approach fits into this overall scheme, since he meticulously rebuilds selected masterpieces after studying them in their respective museum settings in Europe, as well as from books and photographs, generating high-quality virtual copies that can be viewed materially and digitally. Miao appears to re-create what he deems culturally important, conveying admiration and interest for Europe in his capacity as both an artist and an art historian. However, rather than affirming the Western monopoly of images of the world at large, Miao seems to assess its values and meanings at a time when a non-European, global audience has increasingly gained access

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to the world's cultural heritage through international education, travel, and the internet.

However, there are also aspects that do not immediately resonate with traditional notions of preservation, such as the fact that heritage was originally a European concept intended to protect endangered or otherwise damaged monuments, sites, or artifacts in Europe, and, later, in the non-Western world. In the case of Miao's project, one observes a reversal of this constellation, and the focus shifts to how new actors and strategies of conservation emerge, and how meanings and values change in an increasingly globalized world. Here, Western concepts of culture, heritage, and the discipline of art history are no longer binding, just as the choice between adapting or rejecting the objects and ideals of Western art and art history has been superseded by Asia's reconfiguration of global image production and, at the same time, attitudes toward Europe. By this I mean that "Asia" is no longer linked to submerged narratives of Euro-American superiority and Asian inferiority, but that it operates independently of the colonial, economic and political interests of so-called first world countries.

At this critical juncture, it is no longer useful to discuss Miao Xiaochun's works in terms of "original" and "copy", since the visual is no longer based in the world of goods and ownership, but more and more in the activities of collective operatives and hybrid spaces that focus on interactivity, virtuality, participation, and research.

3. CONCLUSION

In his 3D environments Miao Xiaochun disrupts visual borders, concepts, and objects and instead emphasizes encounter and exchange where "East" and "West" become destabilized in a simultaneous, interactive desire for difference, destruction, and preservation. Miao's virtual replicas may thus be interpreted as the re-viewing and re-writing of key Western painterly icons, and the de-centering of their grand narratives of culture, history, and the subject, resulting in the emergence of new concepts of image and art under global conditions. By interweaving European and Chinese aesthetics and values, Miao effectively ends the binary opposition of "East" and "West," and instead creates alternative social communities and visual orders where the question of the origins,

precedents, roots, or webs of pictorial elements can be productively reformulated. Perhaps fueled by a fear of loss of parts of European culture at a time of global crisis, or by a creative impulse to adjust the original icons to a new reality, heritage becomes a living and fluid tradition.

Based on the above analysis, we might conclude that the reconceptualization and reconfiguration of "heritage" is particularly visible in Miao Xiaochun's virtual spaces of representation, underscoring the role of 3D technology in the creation of a digital legacy. Here, digital heritage is no longer subject to institutionalized care or discussions on conference circuits or in specialized journals, but is thematized and realized by an individual artist, linking creative practice to the creation of global consciousness, transcultural participation, democratic influence, and the creation of trust.

4. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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VIRTUELLES RE-ENACTMENT „DAHEIM: EINSICHTEN IN FLÜCHTIGE LEBEN"

Gerd Carl (Virtual Room)

Abb. 1.„daHeim": Einsichten in flüchtige Leben. Museum Europäischer Kulturen, Berlin, 2017