

A PHANTOM: THE VENTRILOQUIST BEHIND THE VENTRILOQUIST

Text / Black Box

Translation / ChatGPT

Ventriloquism is not silence, but a kind of hidden voice, or the surge of some hidden force, like an undercurrent. Yet it is not a kind of unconscious natural white noise, but rather a “language” with intentional purpose. Ventriloquism, in its earliest form, was born for disguise: it must conceal the true subject of speech. And the best concealment is not to vanish entirely, but to masquerade as another conscious subject, speaking in its stead, because it requires this hidden “language” to manipulate towards a desired outcome. As recorded in ancient literature, the Greek priestess Pythia would employ secret drugs and ventriloquism to disguise and transmit the Delphic oracles of the sun god Apollo. The old name of Delphi, however, was “Pytho,” associated with the serpent or dragon “Python” said to dwell there, and derived from the meaning of “decay.”

In artist Ding Shiwei’s work, “ventriloquism” has become a keyword in his recent creations. Here, he hints at the presence of a hidden speaker in the world. When the artist hears the murmurs concealed within history and reality, the figure of a shadowy whisperer begins to emerge. It may exist in the form of an invisible specter—or is it an idea? An ideology? A deep power structure? Whatever it is, one sees that this ventriloquist has never left humanity; it continues to project its “language” into the world with a clear purpose, like the “decay” behind Pythia, drawing ever closer to “death.”

Undoubtedly, this represents a grave crisis for humanity—yet most people remain almost entirely unaware of it. The artist draws a parallel to the fractured and divided colonies before the American Revolutionary War, confronted with Britain’s overwhelming war machine. Ding appropriates Benjamin Franklin’s 1754 political propaganda cartoon “Join, or Die” to issue his own resounding declaration and warning. In Ding’s work *Manifesto Steganography*, the snake body cut into eight segments is retained from Franklin’s cartoon, but now overlaid with hidden phrases such as “Occupy-Secrete” and “Click-Ventriloquize,” signaling Ding’s insight into contemporary technological realities and their entanglement with political realities.

Closely related is Ding’s *Flag Ventriloquism*. Here, the artist again employs “Join, or Die,” merging it with the image of a collapsing flag. This suggests that “Join, or Die” is not merely a phrase but a structural mode: a binary trap that offers no third option, confining choice within narrow boundaries. It is akin to the closed-ended question in a courtroom, designed so that the respondent can only answer “Yes” or “No.” While seemingly neutral in logic, such structures conceal themselves behind the leading framing of the questioner, who retains a free space to predesign a particular interpretation of events, of the world.

So, where does the ventriloquist hide? Ding brings together *Ventriloquism of the Flag*, *Echo of the Specter*, and *Anatomy of the Monument* in one shared field, where they engage in dialogue. Here, *Echo of the Specter* transforms *Flag Ventriloquism*, hinting that across diverse and even conflicting ideological contexts, there remains a hidden sameness—perhaps a common modality of social mechanism or power structure. Yet this “sameness” more likely suggests an iterative ventriloquism, constantly resurfacing. In *Echo of the Specter*, Ding breaks the fourth wall, drawing viewers into interaction, making them part of this iterative process. This cyclical unfolding underscores the artist’s sense of futility in ever truly grasping the labyrinthine truth of ventriloquism.

This despair is further revealed in *Anatomy of the Monument*: a severed arm, a mouse that can only perceive a fragment of the world. Even in our global age of information overload, we cannot truly comprehend another human being. Like *The Visible Human Project*, we dissect the body slice by slice, yet fail to synthesize a

complete picture. Thus, every “monument” we build in this world is destined to collapse. The artist here declares: the world is a wasteland.

This declaration of wasteland reflects Ding’s entrapment in a labyrinth built of endless ventriloquism. This state is marked in his work by paradox and suspension. Is “Join, or Die” ventriloquism? Is “Yes, or No” ventriloquism? Is logic itself ventriloquism? No. These are disguises. The true ventriloquism lies hidden in the framed, pre-constructed interpretations behind them. Ventriloquism iterates within these prefabricated structures, producing false world explanations that nullify judgmental logic in practice. For ventriloquism is born of lies—and thus lies are ventriloquism in essence.

This extends to OpenAI’s ChatGPT: a neutral natural language AI technology, yet through selective curation of databases, it can be trained under specific ideological moral frameworks. In this way, a non-conscious machine, masquerading as neutral, can transmit the “language” of particular human ideologies to its users, influencing them unknowingly. In Ding’s work *The Trial*, ventriloquism becomes a lens through which to scrutinize the technological sphere. The image centers on the eye of Sam Altman, founder of OpenAI—but who, then, is the ventriloquist behind the ventriloquist? Just as Pythia’s voice was shadowed by Python, the great serpent.

Human history is wrapped in a vast ventriloquism, containing countless ideologies and powers. This implies the existence of a deeply hidden, cunning ventriloquist—no specific person, but a spectral presence, a subject of lies. Yet where there are lies, there must be truth. Ding invokes the biblical concept of Judgment Day in his *The Trial*. In the Bible, the first ventriloquist is the liar disguised as a serpent in Eden, condemned to crawl on its belly and eat dust, destined for ultimate defeat. In Revelation, Satan—the final liar—is cast into the hellfire on the day of judgment. Ding’s cross in *The Trial* bears this duality: judgment and redemption. Yet as an instrument, the cross is only judgment. What matters is not the cross itself, but who is the Lamb of Passover.