

## DING SHIWEI: THE IMAGERY OF SCREEN ORGANOLOGY

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On a two-dimensional square, a drop of water falls into a black hole...

You are suddenly surrounded by fists raised in every direction. Some belong to real people, others to animated characters, and one is unmistakably the cartoon-like fist of the emoji “Raised Fist” (who still remembers that “emoji” itself originates from the Japanese emoji, meaning “pictorial symbols used for wireless communication” to convey emotions?). You approach the giant fist, its skin color shifting from light to dark. Your gaze is then drawn to a crystal ball, glowing yellow—not for fortune-telling, you think, perhaps just as a charm to ward off evil. Yet, suspended within the ball like a phantom, the emoji fist reappears, encircled by a palindrome that reads: *revolution without revolution*.

Nearby, a cluster of LCD screens glows. On one, shaped like Mickey Mouse’s head, you watch in sudden surprise as his carefully assembled facial features drop away, tumbling and bouncing at the bottom of the liquid crystal container. On another round screen, a smiley face collapses inward, precisely when you come within a meter of it.

You then seem to have entered a 21st-century natural history museum: inside a transparent cylindrical vessel floats a blue-screen OLED phone display. Behind its bare screen lie a naked motherboard, graphic card modules, and cables. Existential questions flash across the screen—sometimes as if muttered by this pile of components, sometimes as if addressed directly to “you.” Opposite stands another transparent cube, inside which five curved phone screens of varying arcs drift, together with their exposed circuits and lifelines. This time, words are etched into skin, the screens crawling over flesh like parasites of thought.

At last, you realize you have been watched all along. A pair of female eyes, shrouded in red shadow, stare at you—and suddenly tears begin to fall. You crouch down, peering into a miniature camera viewfinder, roaming across a naked body. From a fist-shaped hole at the corner of the wall, thick black data cables slither outward like serpents, joining a tangled heap of wires, where two Simpson-like cartoon eyes blink mischievously at you. On the wall, a triptych of flickering human faces—ambiguous, fabricated—also gaze back. Approaching another camera window, familiar yet alien faces flash before your eyes.

Any exhibition in the latter half of 2020 could hardly escape the shadow of that time, or the burden of reflection it imposed. Even today, the virus still raises its threatening fist toward our “everyday lives.” Hiding behind screens and playing hide-and-seek remains our most effective—yet helpless—response. But the pandemic was only an accelerator of the great screen logjam already underway. Ding Shiwei titled his exhibition *Enter the Void* (2020), hinting at the mechanism of such a game: no matter what values you input into the “black box,” the random oracle provides a random output; yet, once repeated, the output is always identical. Pure chance, in other words, is also necessity.

In this exhibition, the artist reveals the shift in his focus over the past two years. Beyond refining the language of video, he turns to the screen itself—the grammar and materiality of the medium through which images are produced and displayed. Today, screens are no longer accessories; they have supplanted our eyes, becoming the principal organs of perception and communication. The exhibition displayed a wide variety: from VR lenses and DSLR viewfinders to OLED phone screens and semicircular curved displays. Alongside these,

sensors, graphic cards, motherboards, data cables, even power cords and plugs—all sourced from Shenzhen and Dongguan, collected via Taobao—were disassembled and reassembled into works.

In *The Vanishing Prophecy* series, Ding extracted these technological organs from their familiar devices, remaking them with the aesthetics of 19th-century European natural history. Under his merciless scalpel, bare screens and their breathing circuits float in formaldehyde-like insulating oil, frozen as “organs without bodies”—anatomized relics of “Made in China.”

In *The Jokers' Revolution* series, he questions the logic of social media platforms. As mediators between humans and the world, screens abstract our perception of the concrete. Daily life collapses into a disaster of sensation: “everyone is an artist” is replaced by “everyone is a user”; public space becomes a two-dimensional square, public intellectuals become clowns, political fists are replaced by popular symbols. This is the reality of today’s “screen politics of the user.” The dissolution of revolutionary seriousness, the dismembered “products,” and the endlessly proliferating bare lives on screens echo one another. What Ding attempts to sketch is the organology of screens—the imagery of a regime ruled by screens.

“When the science-fiction lullaby begins to play...” The violent hands once sung by the last punks of the 1990s, hands that claimed they could kill the 20th century, ended up destroying only their “stolen barbarian child.” The 21st century began in this void of violence. Yet we must not forget: in those days of pain and closure, it was through screens that “you could hear... the singing,” piercing our tear ducts. On screens, who is singing? And in the political gaze cast upon the screen, who dares to stare into the abyss?

Perhaps, as Hölderlin wrote two centuries ago, it is “we” who have become signs, emptied of meaning, perishing in pain—mortals who would rather touch the edge of the abyss, and thus the abyss gazes back. What did Hölderlin see in that abyssal gaze? “Though time / be long, yet afterwards it creates / the real.” Why could he transform mortal dread into a pathos drawn from memory? Why could nothingness and despair generate affirmation? Horses can halt at the cliff’s edge; do we still have the capacity to brake at the brink of the screen? If the abyss is this game of chance, do we yet have the desire to refuse to play? For this, we may as well entrust our hope to the absent subject, and to Mnemosyne, goddess of memory.

Notes:

[1] Reference to *Introducing the Band*, first track on *Dog Man Star* (1994) by the British band Suede.

[2] From Hölderlin’s unfinished hymn *Mnemosyne*.