

## Interview

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**L: What was the opportunity that started your exploration of the virtual and the world of screens? What has been your consistent thinking in your recent artistic creations?**

D: We are in an era filled with screens of all sizes. At home, everyone is immersed in these small black rectangles of their phones; In the office, almost all professions rely on computers and electronic screens; Outdoor, countless advertising screens and neon lights oppress the public's visual nerves... The appearance of these screens not only provides convenience but also makes us anxious. This experience of facing multiple screens and constantly being divided in energy even reminds me of the early times when human beings hunted outdoors—they not only hunted and killed prey but also kept an eye on the environment behind and around them to prevent attacks from wild animals. One screen after another is trying to compete for all our attention, and our energy is simply unable to concentrate.

As philosopher Byung-Chul Han wrote in his latest book *Undinge: Umbrüche der Lebenswelt*, the era of things has ended. “Non-things” refers to information. Today we are on the way to transition from the age of objects to the non-objects age. The intermediary of this transformation is the “screen” .

In recent years, my work has mainly deployed around observing life from screens, exploring the relationship between screens and their users, as well as the relationship between screens and the future, politics, physical bodies, beliefs, media, society, and squares. I hope to provide some special perspectives and give the audience more space for reflection.

**L: What specific topics have you discussed around the screen?**

D: My artistic creations from 2019 to 2021 have led to two exhibitions: *Enter the Void and Faith on Tap*. The former exhibition presents *The Jokers' Revolution* series where users engage in revolution and rebellion in a dimensionality reduction, characterization, and performance-based manner; The series of *Aesthetic Distance* which saw changes in safe social distance after the COVID-19; *The Abyss Watchers* series of screens as abyss; *The Vanishing Prophecy* series of the human form and thinking are eternal in the “formalin” in screen and virtual form. The exhibition *Faith on Tap* continues the near future intense of *The*

*Vanishing Prophecy* series, which is discussing the contradictory relationship between future humans and screens: the worship and blind belief in the “datasexual” style of screens, as well as the overthrow and resistance to the “violent revolution” style of screens. Of course, this exhibition also leaves a lot of space for the audience to think about specific issues. For example, *The Abyss Steganography series* (No.1 & No.2) discusses the gaze desire controlled by algorithms, while the *Cursor, Path, Body* series (No.1, No.2 & No.3) presents the cursor as an extension of the body, as well as the cursor, path, and body become cross-temporal connectors of ghosts. In addition, the installation *Spinning Wheel of Death* is a broken column that I fabricated in the gallery, with a “rotating wait cursor” suspended in the middle to express the ongoing silent struggle between reality and the virtual. The artistic creations from 2022 to 2023 have led to a brand-new solo exhibition *The Window*. The main theme of this exhibition is the *Borderman* series of videos. I used the binocular display screen in VR glasses as a creative medium to discuss the impact of the screen era on the influence of the reverse of the traditional discipline power mechanism. There is also a novel in dialogue with ChatGPT in the exhibition, which uses human-machine interaction to complete a new narrative dimension and imagination of the exhibition.

**L: Where does the name of the exhibition *Enter the Void* come from?**

D: The title of this exhibition is derived from the concept of cryptography, which is a function that randomly maps all possible of inputs and outputs. In other words, a Random Oracle is an oracle machine that returns a truly uniform random output for any input. Its output may seem random, but it is also inevitable. It reminds me of the relationship between artistic creations and reality, that is, the reality is a kind of nourishment for artistic creation, which is representing an input, however, artistic creation itself is more like an output result. Artists become Random Oracle and a transformation medium. The exhibition was also influenced by many realities at that time, such as “Black Lives Matter”, the COVID-19 that spread across the world, etc. I would like to observe and discuss the contradiction between such a turbulent and uncertain reality, the artistic creation as an output result, and the exhibition.

**L: How do you use double appropriation to cite the classics and explore completely different dimensions of reality in your work *The Jokers' Revolution No. 1?***

D: I used 30 cartoon characters with raising fists in my work, including characters such as Mickey Mouse and The Simpsons. These characters are referred to as social media users



Annette Lemieux *Left Right Left Right*, 1995  
Ding Shiwei *The Jokers' Revolution No.1*, 2020

hiding behind screens. The reason for this setting is that I have observed that users in our era are generally dimensionality-reducing, and those who hide behind the screen to express opinions and even participate in politics are highly performative. Every user is striving to create a perfect, enviable, and highly recognizable character setting. I further extended this dimensionality-reducing, flattening, and performance-based approach to Polis participation—today's users are no longer able to take to the streets to participate in politics, and social media has become a new type of polis. Countless users engage in political participation through disguised appearances on social media, and an absurd drama kicks off. In my work, I misappropriated Annette Lemieux's classic street politics work *Left Right Left Right* and completely copied the form of its protest board. However, the arms on the protest board were replaced with highly recognizable cartoon arms in a flattened art style and the background became a blue screen color symbolizing the Internet era. This work in 2020 echoes the work of Annette Lemieux's work in 1995 which is epoch-making significance, and we can see the impact of the screen as a medium on human participation in political life over the past 20 to 30 years.

**L: How do you understand the relationship between symbols, screens, and politics as you constantly use various classic or well-known characters and symbols in your works?**

D: The relationship among these three has always been the object of my observation in recent years. Nowadays, screens have become an indispensable tool for people to participate in daily life and work, and when facing social issues, they also use the role of online users to express their opinions on social media and other platforms on the Internet. Due to the nature of the screen as a medium, these opinions are often expressed through emojis. These emoticons are designed to neutralize some of the tangible forces of the political entity, to express the meanings that words cannot reach, while also extending different meanings in different contexts.

For example, the emoticon 🖐️ (raised fist) has the meaning of "Black Power" in the black power movement, while in the eyes of Chinese online users, it has multiple meanings such as cheering, support, revolution, and rebellion. Emoji also has a classification of skin colours, and in my opinion, the deliberate practice of distinguishing skin colours on social media platforms also has strong political overtones. In the very background that this distinction seems to emphasize race and political identity. So those three emoticons of raised fist 🖐️🖐️🖐️ in five different skin tones were assembled on a grating board to make the work

*The Jokers' Revolution No.5*. The audience can see a constantly moving and changing skin colour in front of the work 🖐️. I am trying to use this work to reorganize the political attributes of these symbols in the screen interface, giving new thinking space to the most common emoticons we use in daily life.

**L: What were the intentions behind the *Aesthetic Distance* series at that time?**

D: This series of works originated from the official warning of a "one-meter safe distance" in COVID-19 in 2020. Due to the characteristics of this respiratory disease, the sense of distance between people has suddenly been seriously raised and valued. In real life, everyone is at risk. They were afraid that strangers or even loved ones may enter their safe distance. The impact of this change in interpersonal relationships and distance has inspired me to complete the series of works titled *Aesthetic Distance*. These works are mainly equipped with ultrasonic sensors that can measure distance, circular screen components, and a Raspberry Pi host, with classic emoji or symbolic smiley faces as video elements. When the audience enters the "one-meter safe distance" of the device, the ultrasonic sensor will be triggered and the signal will be transmitted to the Raspberry Pi host, which will then complete the changes in the screen. In this change, the smiling face and facial features in the circular screen immediately collapsed and scattered among them.

**L: Your work also seems to place great emphasis on the application of technology. How does technology intervene in your specific artistic creations?**

D: As an artist of inter-media, I always consider the relationship between media, materials, technology, and conceptual expression while I create. I usually use some low-tech to implement my work. Because technology is not my specialty, I hope to use some relatively easy-to-implement technical ideas to transform them into easily perceivable contexts, or to create micro theatres to complete the narrative with the participation of the audience. At the same time, I also pursue the tension of the material itself to stimulate the audience: a large number of material experiments have provided me with a lot of imagination and possibilities to shape the context or theatre. For example, around the topic of "privacy" for users on the internet, I would imagine the situation of "peephole". In *The Abyss Watchers No.3*, I selected a "peephole" style "mini screen" from numerous screen media and invited the audience to observe the "privacy" in a peeping manner. For example, the "metaverse" style virtual space is a hot topic in recent times. Users use immersive



*The Abyss Watchers No.1,*  
exhibition view



*The Vanishing Prophecy No.2,* exhibition view  
*Screen Belief No.6,* exhibition view

experience devices such as VR and AR to participate in social life in the virtual space. I would imagine a reverse gaze: is our current physical reality also a kind of “virtual reality” ? So, in the works of *The Abyss Watchers No.1* and *Borderman* series, I chose the screen in the eyes of a VR device as an immersive viewing medium for physical reality to be viewed in reverse.

**L:** *The Vanishing Prophecy* series has stripped the screen of defamiliarization. What does it mean to have the screen of “taxidermy” and a series of programs behind it?

**D:** I regard *The Vanishing Prophecy* series as an artistic creation for the future, and “post-human” can look over humanity through this series of works. Up to now, three works have been completed in *The Vanishing Prophecy* series, each of which has a relatively similar medium but different aesthetic and content settings.

In *The Vanishing Prophecy No.1*, I put a screening machine into a “formalin” like insulating liquid that repeatedly asks the question of “existentialism” for engaging in a dialogue with the physical audience by using these questions. In *The Vanishing Prophecy No.2*, the body becomes the carrier of these existential questions. I present these tattooed bodies on five curled screens, as if at this moment the perspective of humans and machines is swapped, and humans become the “specimens” being stared at. In *The Vanishing Prophecy No.3*, I displayed 5 pieces of screening skin in 5 curved acrylic pipeline containers, which resemble both the path of a cursor and the human intestine. The text depicted on the body was taken from the smartphone startup slogan (*Hello*), social media company slogan (*Dive Into Anything*), revolution squared slogan (*Join or Die*), religious terms (*One Finger One God*) and technical criticism monograph (*We Are Data*). These concise slogans are all about how a screen society and those social media intervene in our lives, our reality, and even our bodies, and to the extent that in the future, humans will even be replaced as visible and disappearing creatures in specimen containers. This is the ultimate prophecy about the fate of human beings.

**L:** In the exhibition *Faith on Tap*, “Screen Belief” became the keyword to connect the entire works in the exhibition. What is “Screen Belief” ?

**D:** In the exhibition *Faith on Tap*, I simulated two possible roles that screens may play in the future: “Belief Synthesizer” and “Violent Rendering Room” . Human beings will either find new beliefs on the screen or use violent revolutions to overthrow the screen itself in the future. In my works, the screen is both a medium and an object of my thoughts. The “Screen

Belief” originated from my reading. In Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), he described the relationship between people and belief carriers: before the Middle Ages, parchment became the writing tool of the Bible. After the invention of papermaking, paper became a new carrier. The author proposes in that book that at the beginning of media changes, people are also unable to adapt. But as the media gradually becomes a “common thing” in our lives, that means, when it quietly invades people’s lives, people will adapt to it as a carrier of belief. I was thinking at the time that the “screen” has now become such a “common thing” , so I made the work *Screen Belief*. I used a quarter piece of the screen as the medium. The physical gaps between the four pieces of the screen formed a universal symbol of belief — the cross, where the supernatural red rays silently radiated and diffused like a state of meditation. And then it is related to the “datasexual” state of the people mentioned earlier. When a person’s infatuation reaches a certain dimension, it becomes a spiritual belief, and smartphones are already captivating in this era.

The emergence of ChatGPT has given me new thinking about “Screen Belief” . Nowadays, I believe that these AI tools have evolved into a new type of “deity” . Thousands of users around the world inquire or pour out various confusions to ChatGPT in front of their computer screens. Each user’s physical field and screen have become a miniature “prayer room” , while ChatGPT has become a “deity” that guides confusion and helps all beings.

**L:** You also connected the screen with flags and slogans. How did you consider the specific details and spatial display in the work at that time?

**D:** In *Screen Flag No.1*, I used the latest flexible curved screen as the material, which is very lightweight and only 0.1 millimetres thick. Behind the screen, I also installed a miniature fan and gently blew the screen up, making it look like a fluttering flag. Regarding screen content, I used 3D animation technology to create an emoji 🗿, which is laced with the blue screen flag symbolizing the PC. The flag flutters in the wind, organically combining the video of the 3D flag with the physical fluttering of the flexible screen. This work reminds us of George Orwell’s famous quote “Big Brother is watching you” . I think the prophecy he described the human has been realized but with more subtle and disguised images. In *Screen Flag No.2*, I used a flexible LED splice screen and removed the bulky iron frame, replacing it with bent and shaped corrugated iron plates. Therefore, when the LED was attached to the iron plates, the screen was like a collapsed flag. I made the exhibition hall into a legacy of a violent revolution. The text on the flag comes from social media advertising slogans “We Present

You” , revolutionary slogans “Join or Die” , technology reflective movies or monograph titles “The Truman Show” , which is constantly updating and overlapping. I hope that these words with strong desire or criticism, combined with the form of collapsed flags, can provide the audience with imagination about this revolution. Perhaps the object of the revolution is not anything else, but it is the screen itself.

**L: *Spinning Wheel of Death* expresses your appropriating of the space. What does space mean to you?**

D: In recent years, I have been using “space as a method” for my practice. Space can even become the object of my artistic creation. There are many specific installations for space, such as *Spinning Wheel of Death*, which are also based on the original structure of space as the starting point for thinking. In the exhibition at that time, the original load-bearing columns in the gallery space were not conducive to the exhibition, however, I recreated a broken column with identical size and structure according to the height of the space and used magnetic levitation components to float a waiting cursor in the MAC system in the middle of the broken column. It created a strong spatial tension with a destructive aesthetic. This waiting cursor appears among the ruins of the broken pillar, presenting a system halted as a long time to wait. At this moment, the battle between reality and virtual seems to be quietly unfolding in its silent rotation.

**L: In the works *Cursor, Path, Body* series, what is the relationship between the cute shape appearing in the interface and politics?**

D: This series of works is my first attempt to use sculpture as a medium for artistic creation. The work consists of several parts, one of which is a sculpture base with a pixel-blue screen and the blue colour comes from the classic screen colour of the Windows system. The second part is a flatten art-style cartoon hand that represents the dimensionality reduction state of virtual users. Sometimes it is an extended index finger to present a sliding screen interface operation action, sometimes it is a protest fist, and sometimes it is a mouse-operated palm. The third part is a randomly shaped, heat-bent black pipeline, with one end serving as part of the virtual user's arm and the other end linked to the fourth part—a cursor symbol. The cursor symbol shape sometimes appears pixel-like, and sometimes it maintains a sharp blade-like state. The three parts of the sculpture body correspond to the title “Cursor, Path, Body” . This series of works respond to the alienated state of users in

today's screen interfaces, where the body and cursor are tightly glued together through the operating path. The screen even becomes the “organ” of the body. At the same time, the body of users in virtual seems to have been dimensionally reduced or even become cute in the interface, as if users are constantly completing a role or an image self-shaping by using social media: each social media has become a self IP oriented “project” throughout its life. Meanwhile, the cute symbols in the interface or the cute image of the user have become the lubricant to resolve the conflicts in the lives on the interface. Now, in the face of the political issues in the “dimensionally reduced square” of the screen, when users all use “forwarding” as a means of cyberspace parade, the emoji symbol they use also appears in the protest queue forwarded by the moment of Wechat with a lovely visual appearance. The ghostly relationship between cuteness and politics is constantly emerging and unfolding on screens and social media.

**L: What is the deep connection between watching and gazing that runs through your works?**

D: In the relationship with the screen in regarding to the interface, the action of “watching” itself has multiple angles and meanings. When we browse information on the interface, the “watching” action presents a sense of neutrality. When our screen-using behaviour involves the user's privacy, the action of “watching” creates a sense of voyeurism. When our interface-using behaviour is limited, the experience of “watching” becomes political. When our user's image is speculated by algorithms, the action of “watching” itself becomes “being watched” . I hope to magnify the significance of different dimensions when we face screen interfaces through my artistic creation. So, the size, the method of watching, the imaging principle, and the working mechanism of the screen as a medium can all become research objects. Different types of screens and display methods can be used in different works, which is allowing the audience to complete these significant feelings in a tangible experience with the work.

**L: The biggest difference between *The Window* and other previous exhibitions is that you have incorporated the exhibition hall into the work for implementing a more heuristic plan outside of your works.**

D: The entire exhibition hall is primarily based on spatial thinking. Because the exhibition is in a shophouse downstairs of a residential building in the old urban area of city Hangzhou, with a glass-like window structure that allows visitors to come in. Many small commercial



*The Window*, exhibition view

buildings are nearby, such as cafes, flower shops, shoe shops, etc. with many local residents back and forth every day. The art space in this area is like a “Space Oddity” , trying to integrate into these residential areas while also making those residents feel curious. My recent work has been further extended due to the introduction of virtual space concepts such as the “metaverse” . I have been imagining how users can participate in the use of screen power through a disguised dimensionality-reduced image. In the initial concept of the “metaverse” , users would wear VR glasses to participate in the interaction that breaks the boundary between reality and virtual reality. In the ultimate vision of the “metaverse” , digital avatars and digital life of different times and spaces can be “immortalized” to subvert the meaning of life itself. So, at the level of my artistic creation logic, I envisioned 8 digital avatars. Through the intermediary of the screen in VR glasses, I make a reverse view and gaze at the real world.

In terms of the exhibition concept, I also misappropriated the metaphor of the Panopticon first advocated by Jeremy Bentham. It treats the entire exhibition hall as a space with a sense of discipline with power cables scattered all over the ground. The 8 pieces of installations stared at each other and also stared at the audience entering the exhibition hall. This kind of work creates a strong contrast with the old residential buildings while also emphasizing the multiple and complex relationships between watching and power.

**L: In the latest creation, a novel co-created with ChatGPT has been added. What is the significance of this work for you?**

D: In this exhibition, I created a science fiction novel with the *Borderman* series as the writing object for the first time, as well as conversations with artificial intelligence as the writing method, and the metaverse virtual world as the writing background, jointly created by the artist and ChatGPT.

This novel uses 8 pieces of installations as the object of imagination and narrative subject for expanding the reason and transition of the exhibition. I think it has expanded the imaginative space of the work as well as expanded the narrative logic of the exhibition. Finally, it explored many topics that I have focused on and extended from my work. Just as the exhibition space is a “Space Oddity” in old residential buildings and the objects of the exhibition come from the “metaverse” , this novel is essentially a cumulative progression of “space” . These layers of “space” progress one by one, becoming an infinite channel like *Mobius*.