

SPECTER, ORGANS WITHOUT A BODY

Text / Qiao Hongkai

Translation / ChatGPT

When visitors pass through Gallery 3, at the end of the cornered corridor they find themselves stared at by a pair of eyes shrouded in red shadows. To proceed to the next gallery, they are compelled to walk toward the end of the corridor — ever closer to those eyes. And when they finally arrive before them, the discomfort of being watched gradually shifts into a certain perplexity. These are not eyes of refinement: rather, a 2.9-inch dual-display square screen, display-driving modules, a mini host, and acrylic components jointly constitute this “organ without a body.” The eyes seem to hover in space, detached from organic existence, strangely recalling Man Ray’s *Indestructible Object*, in which a solitary eye swings rhythmically upon a metronome.

The logic of the gaze is a key function in Ding Shiwei’s practice. The gaze is not only a fundamental act of capturing the object, reflecting the subject’s complex relational condition, but also (in the Foucauldian sense) relates to the corporeal force of power discourse and carries a distinctly political charge.

Years ago, Ding Shiwei presented a solo exhibition titled *What Do We Talk About When We Gaze at the Sea Horizon and the Moon?* Among the works, *Immortal Gazing* featured two eyes mounted on 3.5-inch programmable Raspberry Pi devices. *Immortal Gazing* seems to serve as the prototype or “meta-image” of Ding’s subsequent series of “screen-eyes.”

For the artist, the gaze is a primal psychological activity: it provides a foundational horizon of vision and initiates the preliminary partitioning and conceptual construction of the world. As Ding asks: “When the earliest *Homo sapiens* in East Africa constructed a rudimentary raft and set sail toward the infinite horizon, what motivated him?” The first gaze at the world already meant the first questioning of existence itself. From the outset, the act of gazing and the realm of ideas have been entangled in a universal knot. Even today, we can find traces of this ancient visuo-logocentric entanglement in the intertextual root shared by *voir* (to see) and *savoir* (to know) in French.

At the end of the corridor, *The Borderman No.3* casts upon viewers the same gaze — violent or non-violent — they encounter daily. With a cold and avant-garde posture, the work seems to announce the universal reign of the interface in our world today: electronic eyes, screen-eyes, machine-eyes replacing the organic eyes of the body, forming in truth an organ without a body, the silent flesh of an Other.

In this sense, the juxtaposed eyes and screens in the work seem to be essential elements of the “age of the world as picture.” The screen has already become incarnate existence in the present: today our interactions with the world are reduced to the sliding of fingers on all manner of touchscreens. The subject, trapped within the screen, becomes a “body without organs,” where all bureaucratic codings of power dissolve within this open, non-fixed subjectivity. Meanwhile, the screen and the interface themselves constitute a kind of “organ without a body,” extending and perpetuating the modern human body.

In another related sculpture-installation, *The Abyss Watchers*, the “Borderman” is transformed into a “man at the edge of the abyss.” Here, the interface itself is the abyss (*Abgrund*) of meaning. In one of Hölderlin’s poems, much cherished by Heidegger, the poet wrote: “From the high heavens down into the dark abyss.” In Heidegger’s poetic pilgrimage, the abyss becomes an essential preservation, a sacredness pointing toward the destiny of humankind.

As Nietzsche warned in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “Man is a rope tied between beast and overman — a rope stretched over an abyss.” Yet for contemporary humanity, already dwelling “beyond good and evil,” what seems urgently needed is a “gay science.”

At the exhibition site, visitors also encounter two intriguing sculptures from Ding Shiwei’s *Cursor, Path, Body* series. The high-saturation blue base and gridded form recall the dreaded “blue screen” of computers. The sharp cursor (as the extension of the modern human hand) and the kawaii-fied imagery of hands (appropriating both Mickey and emoji) suspend any stable subjectivity, turning instead into a sign-language of posture within cybernetic communities. Postures embody desire directly, as well as its bodily and political transformations — once again, an organ without a body, a ghost of organs.

As Aby Warburg once discerned in the gesture-language of contemporary images, the ghostly survival of ancient pathosformeln resurfaces: “In the *Cursor, Path, Body* series, the user’s body (the arm), the cursor’s path (the pipe), and the cursor (the blade) are joined in a spectral union,” as Ding once remarked in an interview.

In his *The Vanishing Prophecy* series, diverse electronic components are “cruelly” submerged in formalin, transformed into specimens of organs. At a certain level, the making of specimens has always carried connotations of curiosity and veneration. In the contemporary context, nothing seems more worthy of veneration than the screen itself — as we drift from one webpage to another, we lose ourselves in domains that both deceive and satisfy us with false promises. The screen becomes the utopian prophecy of our social ecology — a utopia already realized, yet paradoxically one we must live as if it had never been realized.

Ding’s *Screen Belief* series directly responds to the meditative aura screens create in a disenchanted world. Four screens form a negative cross, flickering with an unnatural halo. The sacred is embedded in the splitting and rejoining of screens. Yet for the distressed contemporary subject, the screen seems to have become both disciplinarian and savior — “omniscient and omnipotent,” scripting the entirety of our reality. “What haunts us,” Ding suggests, “is the anticipation of every outcome, the availability of every sign, every form, every desire. Because everything has already been liberated, what else is left to do? It is precisely this simulacral condition that enables us to replay every scenario, for they have already occurred — whether in reality or virtually.” Nothing seems more trustworthy than the ghostly world of screens. As Zygmunt Bauman once wrote: All that is solid melts into air — and what remains is only the ghost.