
"Absolute 0:00"

Participating Artists: The Art Collective Liu Dao 六岛:
Bing Bing 兵冰, Cai Duobao 蔡多宝, Matt Carols, Thomas Charvériat, Roland Darjes, Li Lingxi 李翎溪, Nick Hersey, Zane Melleupe, Rose Tang 罗丝唐, Wang Dongma 王东马, Zhang Deli 张德丽

Curation: Pete Bradt & Thomas Charvériat
Coordination: Zhang Leihua 张雷华, Jean Le Guyader
Exhibition: From June 27th 2010 to August 15th 2010
Venue: island6 Arts Center, 50 Moganshan Rd, bldg #6, 2F, Shanghai 200060, P.R.C.

Absolute 0:00 is the final exhibition of an eight-month series exploring innate cognition processes and the carvings of extraneous influence upon the human mind, and how their endless feud erupts through the subconscious and into the artworks of island6's in-house art collective, Liu Dao. This particular exhibit focuses on mankind's willingness to invest emotion and thought into the questions surrounding the human perception of time.

In the same way the earliest forms of eyes were born in the Cambrian Explosion half a billion years ago as only simple proteins that could sense light, our sense of time is certain to be proven primitive compared to perceptions which will come from future neurological abilities, be they acquired through further evolution, or by contemporarily feasible physiological or technological adjustment to the human mind. Our moments of déjà vu where two distinct places—the past and the present—merge could be the first instances of a new mental capability in development that will allow us to experience the past, present and future in ways currently incomprehensible. These themes are especially relevant to the art of Liu Dao because of the group's use of time-lapse video, narrative LED work, motifs of change, odes to the eternal and always-evolving quest for contemporary artistic approaches that are simply new. *Absolute 0:00* features the artists of Liu Dao at the island6 Arts Center as they consider the musings and breakthroughs of time's questioners such as St. Augustine of the 5th Century, and modern theoretical physicist Michio Kaku.

Background

Pierre-Simon Laplace derived from Newton's laws of absolute time¹ an idea that all causes and effects could be deduced from each other, as if watching falling dominoes, and that knowing the vector and positioning of all atoms would result in the concrete calculation of the future and a perfect picture of the past. Regardless of the principle being contradicted and essentially disproven by special relativity², even many of those who agree with Laplace's notion think the computational skills required to find, label and list the coordinates of every piece of matter in the universe are far beyond mankind's capabilities...and are maybe wrong. Acclaimed theoretical physicist Michio Kaku writes in his 1998 book, *Visions: How Science Will Revolutionize the 21st Century and Beyond*:

Since the 1950s, the power of our computers has advanced by a factor of roughly ten billion. In fact, because both computer power and DNA sequencing double roughly every two years, one can compute the rough time frame over which many scientific breakthroughs will take place...

Technology has taken the mammalian brain to a place where thoughts travel to other continents at the speed of light through telephones, satellites and Internet. In a new century where nanosensors inundate our consumer products, industrial landscapes and biochemical entities, and will only continue to serve greater and more advanced purposes beyond our imagination, and where computer systems have ever-growing powers of calculation, and where we've witnessed the advent of the earliest successful experimentations with the creation of synthetic life, the time machine many are hoping for could simply be an apparatus born from the amalgamation of these monumental developments.

"Scientists also expect the Internet will wire up the transfer of not just a few but even hundreds of genes," writes Kaku, about what he calls the "Third Phase" of computing, or "ubiquitous" computing, in which all computers in the world are connected to each other and, inversely to the ratio we have now, there will be one hundred computers for every person rather than the opposite.

In this same book, Kaku refers to Nathaniel Hawthorne's perspective of electricity essentially uniting all of Earth's life into one great organism, an opinion the author doesn't exactly dispute. So what exactly is happening to this "vast head, a brain, instinct with intelligence"?

¹ A clock for the universe that exists independently of the nature of events taking place, with fixed time that

"flows equably without regard to anything external" - Isaac Newton.

² A theory which states, among other things, that time slows down as velocity increases.

In 1996, one could access about 70 million pages on the Internet. It is believed that by 2020 the Internet will access the sum total of the human experience on this planet, the collective knowledge and wisdom of the past 5,000 years of recorded history.³

-Michio Kaku

A computer that big and organic could provide savant-like memory, calculation and prediction to facilitate the revelation of vast portions of energy flowing through spacetime as a whole, perhaps offering glimpses of eternity or even much more, thus destroying any sense or meaning of the words "the present" and ushering an apocalyptic arrival of an all-knowing, all-seeing nirvana-like mindset, where not only is a person liberated from the identity of himself, but also from the identity of the moment.

This brings the discussion from absolute time to relative time, and to Einstein and "the problem of the Now", an illogical concept that weighed down on him until his passing. Einstein and other physicists agreed that the existence of the "Now" has no mathematical explanation or written proof for even existing, and cannot be considered something separate from what we call the past or future. But no matter who we are, we cannot rid ourselves of the conviction of living within the moment we believe we are experiencing, except in the rarest and oddest of circumstances. No matter what the equations say, at any given moment we know how much time we have until the meeting starts, and we have lived for a known number of years, and no more or less.

But if the idea of being in the Now is so illusionary, perhaps there's a more simple way to experience eternity or something like it than to rework the synapses of the human mind using wildly modern technology as proposed above, and that would be to shed this "problem" cognitively. While the daily routine and schemata of every human being as well as probably all mammals are too oppressed by the innate tendency to concentrate on extensive survival and reproduction rituals from migrations and stalking prey to earning money and raising children, there is a place where almost anything is possible, even the suspension of one's predisposition to believe in and concentrate on the present. That place is in dreams.

The number of research participants needed to provide enough accounts of warped or morphing senses of time within dreams as to turn the study into a successful gathering of relevant information rather than a collection of the varied and cryptic would be impractical. But, an execution method that would bring an enormous boost of efficiency to the study of the sleeping man's perspective on time would be to investigate the extent to which a human can alter normal rules of time using one of psychology's most interesting phenomena: the lucid dream.⁴ Today, there is a growing number of people actively exercising their minds and modifying their wakeful behavioral patterns in order to maximize the probability and consistency of finding themselves lucid dreaming on any night. [A common training technique is to leave reminders for yourself throughout the day to ask yourself if you are dreaming. The desired result is that it becomes enough of a habit that the action repeats itself in your dreams and puts you in a position where the answer would be yes.] Few would deny that the most strange and downright impossible instances could become possible and perfectly normal when one is in the thick of a deep sleep and a vivid dream. Founder and director of island6 Arts Center Thomas Charvériat has done extensive research on the consciousness and has curated and contributed works to many exhibitions on the theme. He writes

"Those who find themselves in a lucid dream can choose to walk, run or fly. By doing such a thing they are also able to determine the time span for these activities, as they can control how long it takes to get from one "place" to the next. Through neurons, thought travels at the speed of light, so dreams can occur in this timeframe also. A lucid dreamer could experience the sensation of living in an endless imaginative vacation while their 'real' body only ages a few seconds. Lucid dreamers can bend time to a state close to infinite time, or can even break it into a quasi-frozen eternity."

- Thomas Charvériat

Those who can master their own experiences in a lucid dream may have the opportunity to literally craft a moment of eternal length within their head. (There is a potential to make, prove and disprove so

³ While the number of "pages" on the Internet is incalculable due to the dispute over what actually constitutes a page, and the fact that many pages are inaccessible to the general public, an article by the expert-driven technology news site Gizmodo (*How Big is the Internet on a typical day – Visualized by Gizmodo*) puts the number of emails sent per day at over 200 billion and the number of blog posts and articles at around 900,000. The latter "is enough to fill the New York Times for 19 years.

⁴ A lucid dream is when "the reintegration of the psychic functions is so complete that the sleeper remembers day-life and his own condition, reaches a state of perfect awareness, and is able to direct his attention, and to attempt different acts of free volition." – Frederik van Eaden, coiner of the term "lucid dream".

many hypotheses using fully mastered lucid dreams that it may well become a field of science all on its own. Considering Liu Dao concentrates on identifying urges and influences from the subconscious in their artwork, the artists are particularly excited about the idea of simultaneously living in the wakeful and sleeping states—in the conscious state and subconscious state—if at all achievable for them. A very interesting question comes from the discussion of these dual existences, and that is, how effected or aware is the subconscious of time at all?)

But as we continue living in the present, our mantra of the Theory of Evolution and history of the universe says that there were firsts. And which creature was it, a man, a bird, a fish that first felt time go by? And *déjà vu*, a state of mind where the commonly accepted sequence of events through time is suddenly and inexplicably cast aside, could be the first rays of the dawn of a new stage in development that has been coming gradually through all of our invisibly mutating generations from right back to the very beginning. But the arising and survival of a genetic trait does not make it superior to others or more complex, merely more appropriate. A constant state of *déjà vu* might just as well be something we've evolved *from*. Either way, *déjà vu* is proof that time's most consistent trait in our perception—its direction forward—is not unbreakable, and purely on that shared human experience we should entertain that its other perceived traits are also not to be taken as absolute truths. Perhaps in another of the eleven dimensions Michio Kaku and other theoretical physicists use in their mathematics, time is a solid, while all objects and matter in our dimension remain completely intangible.

It may also prove worthwhile to put our system of quantifying time through some more instinctive upheaval. If you were to live to fifty years old, you would have consciously or unknowingly been the bearer of stimuli for a significant portion of around eighteen thousand days. But in the single second of time it takes you to read this clause, the global human population experiences more than two hundred years worth of time as a whole. If there is a central receiver of our thoughts that no one can feel as an individual [does your hand feel your ankle's pain?], or a central database of stimuli to be built, perhaps we would be aware of a width of time, not just its length, or various other attributes we would never associate with the concept we call time as of now.

WORKS

"What then is time? If no one asks me, I know what it is. If I wish to explain it to him who asks, I do not know." – St. Augustine

What is time? Several artists in this exhibition focus on liberating themselves from the answer's unattainability, instead paying respect to life's very mysteriousness, the content of the present and the pleasure of memories. Other artists in the *Absolute 0:00* exhibition draw on themes from island6's previous exhibit, *Psychic Apparatus*, to also examine the gifts of time's productions and creations but largely to consider the laws of aging, destruction, transience and death, and the ultimate imposition of finiteness. In response and defiance to the inescapable nature of time, artists from Liu Dao will include their reliable sense of humor, offering commentary on the restraints time convinces us to impose on ourselves, such as the rigidity of the 24 hour clock, the lunacy of punctuality, financial quantifications of time, and the obsession in and of youth culture. Meanwhile, other pieces will appeal to those who believe in technology to take our minds into new kinds of existences.

For *Absolute 0:00*, Rose Tang 罗丝唐 creates another series of photographs which blend time periods to change reality into fantasy, in order to question her place as an artist among Chinese tradition and history. Her works are literally timeless as they meld anachronisms to create new worlds, and stand as some of the more pertinent works for the exhibition as they remove the specificity of one's present situation versus the generational emotions recurring through China's 20th Century development. In *Thanks Again*, Rose takes one of the world's most iconic photographs and removes the people, leaving only the objects and clothing behind. She reveals our ghostly nature by showing our fragility and transience compared to the durability of the simple objects around us. Sometimes we may feel in control of our existences and believe time is going by slowly enough for us manage it, but Rose puts our brevity in perspective and confesses our supernatural truth. The world is filled with ghosts, but the ghosts are we.

"Some things, like technologies, come and go," says Zhang Deli 张德丽, whose *Feast of the Nanking Cherry* and *Northern Song* will be on display. "But so much always stays the same: inevitability of the seasons, for example. Despite all the mathematical programming and digital clocks and nanoseconds the great physicists of the world refer to, the natural sign of the harvest moon works as well for a timepiece as any other. Spring comes after winter. Always has, always will." Zhang's paper cut series is a steadfast allusion to the paper cutting traditions that date back at least as far as the 6th Century in Chinese art, and hold imagery drawn from ancient Chinese landscape pieces throughout the dynasties. Yet with Liu Dao, he adds the presence of LED birds shining through the paperwork. "Despite the changes in the world that make paper more and more obsolete, there is something about the concreteness of the material that we won't let go of. The LEDs are just another form of the timeless nature of the Chinese landscape pieces. They are about man coming to grips with nature around him."

Cai Duobao 蔡多宝 executes his taxidermist's skills in *Cranky Little Fellas*, where fifty adorable chicks stand on a tree branch, waiting to be observed and appreciated up close by the viewer. For Cai, taxidermy is the ultimate debunking of time. "People measure too many things against the effects of aging," says the artist, whose works rail against life in an ageist society. "We all want to know who has the youngest wife, who has longer to live. But your life exists outside of your body as well." The display

of the dormant life form is important for the artist, who values the opportunity to take one pose and facial expression and compare it to the idea of an identity that extends over a lifespan. One's effect on the world continues after his or her death, and for this reason it must be considered, in what ways is that person still alive? To counter the moroseness of the concept, but also to illustrate his point that in many ways life continues after death, Cai includes a sensor-driven reflex for the birds that makes them threaten, insult and swear at people walking by.

Rose Tang and Matt Carols work together to create the fun but somewhat melancholic *Wall of Fame*, which allows viewers to be one of the world's most loved celebrities for fifteen seconds. Rose Tang stands dressed as a paparazzo in a handful of poses, each one with a real Kodak or Polaroid from the 1960s. The cameras actually flash and people cheer as you approach. You are the center of their world. But when the moment ends and you become normal again, you're left pondering the moments you wait your lifetime for. What are they? Why are they special? And what if they never come? Matt offers his opinion after a career of misleading countless French people into doing his twisted bidding with the promise he would make them famous, a prospect he has witnessed people lust for. Rose understands the pleasure and satisfaction that can come with being the subject in an artwork and created the piece as a way of linking the people on either side of the camera, with the idea of growing interconnectivity through technology in mind.

Ghost of Your Inner Artist by Wang Dongma 王东马 and Liu Dao is inspired by the extensive work of George Gescheider on psychophysics, persistence of vision and thresholds of perception. He writes that there are two kinds of thresholds: absolute and difference. The absolute threshold is the level of intensity required before a stimulus can be perceived, while the difference threshold is the minimum difference between two levels of intensities that can be perceived. In the example of LED lights, a combination of primary colors can be used to recreate almost any color, but when the lights are moving, the continuous blur perceived from the light source is broken down into its individual frequencies and the separate colors are revealed, as well as additional shapes they may form on their own. The speed at which the LEDs are moving determines what your brain can process, or see. This is the basic premise and method of *Ghost of your Inner Artist*. When the viewer stands in front of the piece, the lights appear to form a straight line. But when he shakes his head, his vision is synchronized with the rhythm of the strobe effect and a new image appears. "Everyone can agree that time seems to go slower or faster depending on the events we're encountering," says Wang. "It can take one person a lot longer to go from 9am-5pm in the office than another to go from 9am-5pm at an amusement park. There is something about the way time moves or the way we move through time that influences whether we see tightly packed events individually or large lengths of time blended into one."

Wang Dongma creates a new series of vanity mirrors that identify but push out of mind the inevitability of aging, instead putting the biological clock as something to conquer by ignoring it. His other contributions are wordless reverences of time's physical and mathematical nature. Matt Carols' main piece—a man who either laughs or cries depending on whether the French GDP rose or fell on any given day—is obviously an infusion of his anti-French humor but is significant as it displays how an economy on one side of the globe can directly affect the society of another in instantaneous bursts, as signals and statistics can be sent and received at the speed of light, and speaks of the modern-day reality of worldwide interconnection that Michio Kaku and others believe holds the key to higher conscious and therefore a deeper understanding of space and time.

Pete Bradt, Shanghai, June 20th 2010

About island6

island6 Arts Center is an artist-founded, artist-run, "art first" not-for-profit organization founded in Shanghai in 2006. The center is dedicated to identifying emerging artists and encouraging them through risk-taking programs that explore new curatorial models and innovative projects. island6's mission is to provide a forum and support for contemporary artists whose works examine timely and timeless social, aesthetic, and philosophical issues. Since 2006, island6 Arts Center has exhibited 248 artists from 23 different countries, sponsored 129 resident artists, organized 43 exhibitions, and initiated over 2000 art projects. In 2007, under the artistic direction of Thomas Charvériat & Zane Mellepe, island6 Arts Center established Liu Dao-- a research group including artists, curators, engineers, and technicians devoted to developing technological platforms for the Arts. Liu Dao explores the cultural ramifications of the convergence of art, technology, and science and strives to influence the aesthetic trajectory of the global artist community. Every "art forward" island6 exhibition is the product of multi-disciplined, collaborative in-house workshops.