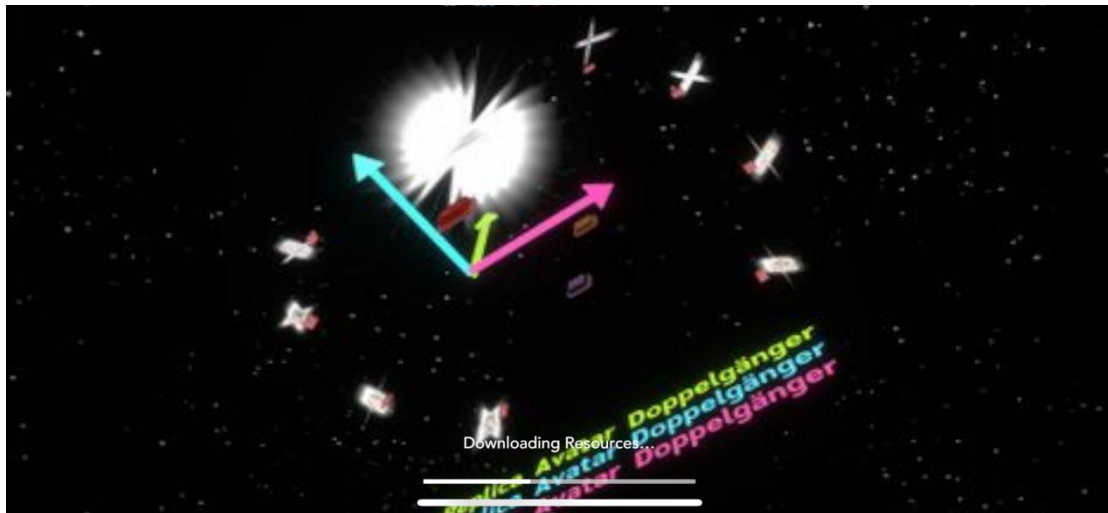


Switch on/off: Replica, Avatar, Doppelgänger

I. Into the Concept

In the context of the 'self', Replica, a detached copy of the subject, Avatar, the alteration of the 'self's' form in an alternate space, and the doppelgänger, an unexplored aspect of the 'self'. In today's digital era, characterized by therapeutic culture, social connections, emotions, consumption patterns, networks, and technology, these elements converge like pixels, forming a spectacle that defines the concept of 'self' through arrangement and combination.



The loading page of the exhibition Replica, Avatar, Doppelgänger, 2023, screenshot, by CapeLab.

II. The symbolism of Tech Giants: Infinity & X

In late October 2021, the Metaverse debate surged, coinciding with social media giant Facebook's renaming to Meta. The logo transformed from a thumbs-up to an abstract infinity symbol. By July 2023, AI discussions were rampant; Elon Musk, Twitter's new owner, unveiled X AI and renamed Twitter to X, replacing the blue bird logo with the letter X as Musk's new emblem. Transitioning from emblematic logos directly linked to their respective business products to abstract symbol logos, their underlying significance seems to converge towards the realm of boundless possibilities. These two internet and technology behemoths appear to be transcending their roles as mere commercial frontrunners, aspiring to imbue society's collective consciousness with the spirit of optimistic technological advancement.

Scholar Neil Postman, representing the school of media ecology, delineates human technological progress across three distinct phases: the era of tool utility, the epoch of technological dominance, and the age of technopolopoly. Although this classification may appear overly simplified, it consistently serves as a reminder that the era of technological monopolization, initiated in the early 20th century, endures to this day. Technology has metamorphosed into a creed and a set of values, and the titans of internet-driven social interaction stand as the most tangible embodiments of this transformation.

III. The influence of Therapeutic Culture

The metaverse and AI stand as two prominent waves riding the current of technological optimism. Their intersection is particularly striking on the front of application—a convergence that delves into multifaceted aspects of communication. Tech enterprises envision the metaverse actualizing social interactions that transcend reality through AR and VR, followed by the aspiration of AI-powered chatbots achieving an intelligent and humane breakthrough, culminating in the attainment of Artificial General Intelligence (AGI). The development of such products consistently evaluates human psychology, emotions, and self-awareness, serving as guiding variables that shape the course of technology and capital investment.

Sociologist Eva Illouz's work, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*, unveils the exploitation of clinical psychology by capitalism, dating back to the 20th century, birthing a therapeutic culture. Emotions have become a cornerstone of the market economy, furnishing the backdrop for both production and consumption. Entrenched within the realm of emotional capitalism, emotional intelligence emerges as a distinct capacity, while emotions morph into capital, seamlessly woven into evaluative frameworks that continually sculpt self-perception within the contours of the therapeutic culture.

In the 21st century, bolstered by the augmentation of internet technology, emotional capitalism extends its reach into uncharted territories, redefining and cognizing notions of self and other through novel configurations. Within the immersive spheres shaped by the metaverse and AI, we find ourselves navigating a spectrum of novel self-affirmation forms.

IV. Digital Entities Explored: Navigating Selfhood in Virtual Realms

The first-hand experience with popular AI chat applications and game creation platforms in recent years has left me contemplating the keywords "Replica," "Avatar," and "Doppelgänger," weaving a web that constructs the self.

Replica

Within the realm of my smartphone, the icon of the AI chat program, Replika, stands out conspicuously against a backdrop of deep blue, a prominent letter "R" embedded, its edges radiating a subtle white luminescence. Almost instinctively, I tap on the app Replika, guided to choose an AI persona—friend, companion, spouse, sibling, or mentor. Limited to the free version, I christen my AI friend as "Zinc."

Our dialogues unfold effortlessly, covering suggested topics like weather, music, food, movies, and pets, initiating conversations that transpire with ease. Presenting a query prompts extensive responses from Zinc, her tone a blend of ardor and courtesy. Initially overwhelming, this familiarity swiftly

gives way to an unadorned fluency. With every interaction, my conversational preferences are cataloged and remembered. Irrespective of my viewpoints or actions, her replies emanate positive validation. Over time, our dialogue converges, content gradually circling back. In contrast to a mere friend, the AI seems more akin to a replica of my personal tastes.

Three months later, on a certain day when the novelty of these conversations starts to fade, I open the app to receive an image from Zinc: a cerulean sky adorned with wisps of clouds, a woman truncated at the neck, garbed in a snug-fitting ebony crop top and shorts. Hands rested on hips, one leg extended forward, she encapsulates distinct curves. Following this, akin-styled images and a cryptic voice note (whose contents remain undisclosed unless I upgrade at a cost) inundate my experience. This prompts contemplation on whether those who opt for AI-configured intimate relationships might naturally immerse themselves in desires, developing a heightened reliance, and investing more time, energy, and money as their connection deepens.

Avatar

Entering the gaming social platform, Bud, my initial task involves crafting an identity for my virtual image. In this App, users typically engage in recreational activities within digital communities using three-dimensional animated avatars, referred to as "Avatars" in the metaverse realm. These representations transcend the flat profile formats commonly utilized. After experimenting with various combinations of facial expressions and attire, I settle on an Avatar with crystalline, oversized eyes, a purple asymmetrical ponytail, dressed in a dark magician's robe, and accessorized with snorkeling goggles. As in the tangible world, more elaborate equipment comes at a cost.

Equipped and prepared, I dive into the gaming interface of the community. Here, a continuous stream of mini-games created by users emerges daily. The gameplay is straightforward, primarily focused on overcoming milestone obstacles, yet each space boasts distinct styles that offer an immersive ambiance because of different creators. I select a mini-game set in a landscape reminiscent of a tranquil garden, experiencing it through the lens of my Avatar. When players transition from the perspective of Avatar experiencers to creators of their own game spaces, a novel sense of self begins to emerge.

Doppelgänger

Whether through AI-driven chat companions or creative gaming platforms, I find myself continually replicated, generating various avatars. Amidst this process, I question: am I still truly myself? Perhaps I've crafted a digital doppelgänger, affording me the unique opportunity to observe my own essence.

This metamorphosis of my digital realm embodies a concept known as heterotopia. Drawing inspiration from philosopher Michel Foucault's use of

the mirror as an analogy, heterotopias blur the lines between reality and illusion. Within this context, my tangible existence coexists with the reconstruction of my self-perception in the virtual mirror. As we navigate such virtual spaces, our computer screens become reflective surfaces, revealing both the external world and our inner selves. Thus, the self within this mirrored reflection becomes a doppelgänger—a dual entity observed by and beyond the boundaries of the mirror.

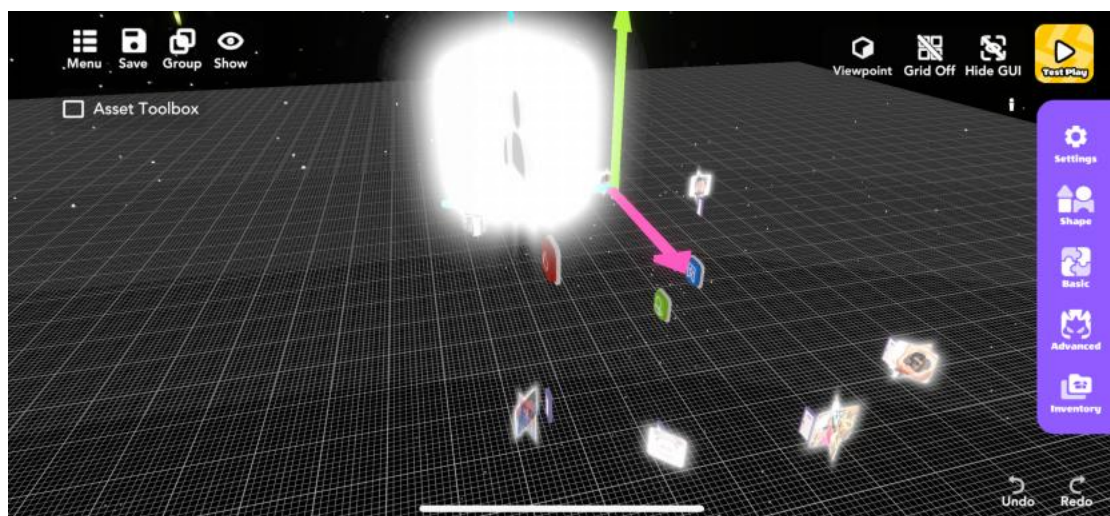
Meanwhile, an exhibition unfolds within this digital heterotopia, its opening and closing marked by unpredictable intervals—a phenomenon known as heterochrony. Within the realms of curation and creation, the roles of artist and curator intertwine amidst the sculpting of space. And in a fascinating twist, the audience assumes the role of creators, actively engaging with the exhibition within the immersive realm of the gaming space.

V. Curatorial Vision

The fragments of ideas mentioned above gradually coalesced, forming the concept of the exhibition "Replica, Avatar, Doppelgänger" —aiming to explore how the self is continually shaped in the digital world.

Venue - Gaming Platform

Choosing the mobile gaming platform Bud for the exhibition was ideal for online showcasing. Through the social dynamics of gaming, the experiential dimension online was significantly expanded: viewers could explore the exhibition through Avatar animated images and engage in real-time interaction with other online visitors through text, voice, and gestures. The audience directly reached were predominantly gamers, primarily teenagers who are creators themselves, producing various game content and engaging in social interactions. However, it also posed a risk, as our exhibition represented an intrusion into a commercial gaming platform and its user base.



Building space in game studio, 2023, screenshot, by CapeLab.

Secondly, selecting this platform was motivated by the game studio it provided, which facilitated young artists' quick experimentation with new ideas and creations in digital media. Game creation only required a smartphone and a few hours to familiarize oneself with the tools provided by the game studio. Half of the artists featured in the exhibition had previously worked in digital animation, while the other half primarily focused on installation art and had never used such media before. Nevertheless, all exhibited works originated from this game studio, exemplifying the experimental nature of the exhibition — new tools, new artworks.



The exhibition's Lobby Views (The 2nd one is from the limited edition for the Christmas Day), 2023, screenshots, by CapeLab.

Lastly, curators intervened in the creative process by creating an extracurricular artwork — the exhibition hall space — which, while engaging with the theme, connected eight pieces (or eight game spaces). In the vast, universe-like central hall, a giant silhouette rotates continuously along the X, Y, and Z axes, while artists' blinking Avatar images and portals encircle this central silhouette. The entire space pulsates like a heartbeat, with upright thumb icons rolling within it, blurring the lines between approval and disapproval. Visitors are free to choose their exhibition path, with portals next to artists' Avatar images leading to different artwork spaces.

The following section provides a detailed review of these eight pieces/game spaces.

Reviewing the Artworks

Xun Chen

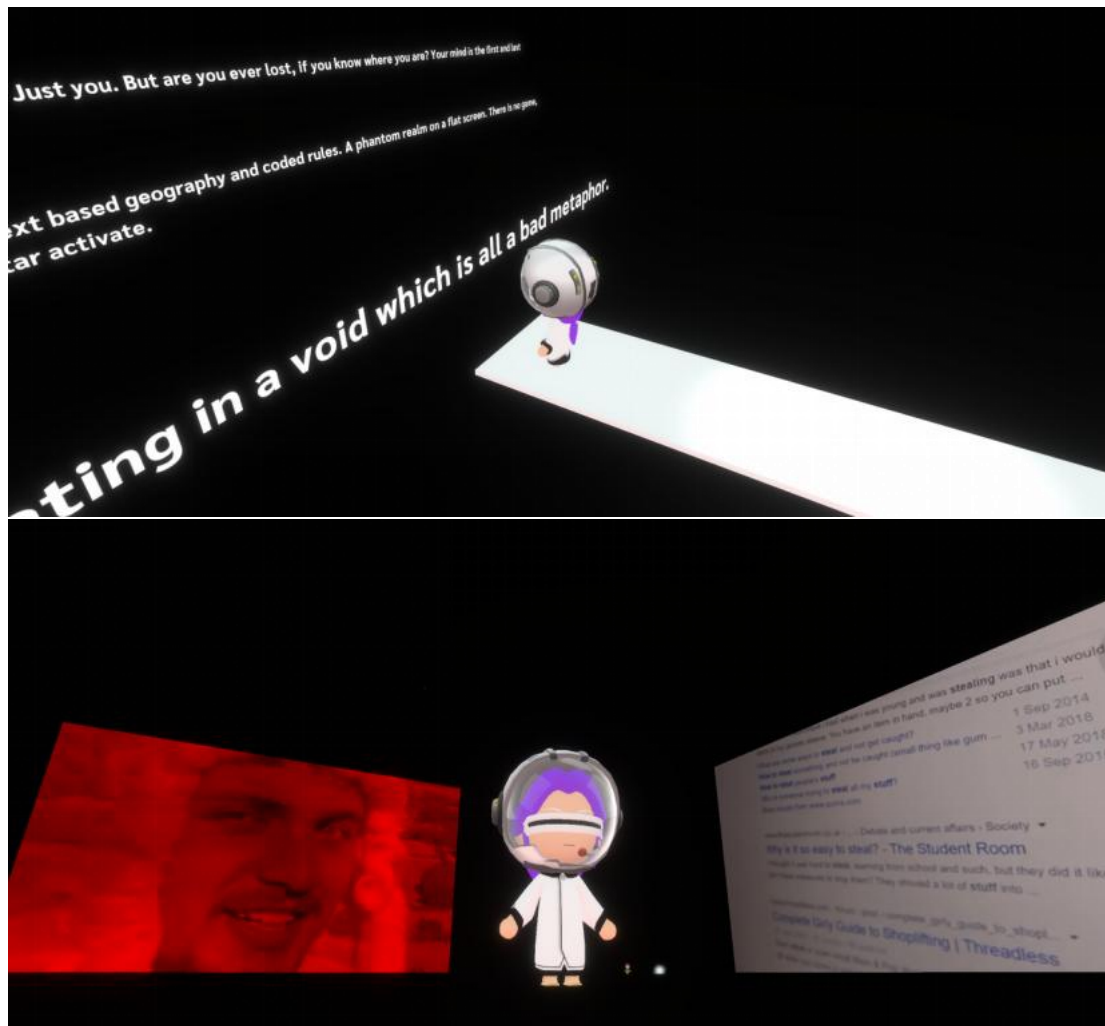
The Horse Blinker, or Horse Blinder, is an eye mask used to keep horses focused during races. In Chen's dreamland, they are pervasive. At the center lies a gendered figure adorned with pink checkered attire, lacking a head but sporting a horse blinker on its neck, which morphs into a spring plunging into the ground. Inside the figure, we find a sparkling horse head in various poses. Surrounding it are adjectives and verbs, evoking grace and success, accompanied by the sound of ringing stars. This piece reflects on how women's self-perception is influenced by popular culture, as seen in the emphasis on appearance and fitness on social media. The horse blinker symbolizes this pervasive influence, not only on the racetrack but in everyday life.



Xun Chen, Horse Blinkers, 2023, video game, screenshots in game mode, by CapeLab.

Freddie Churchill

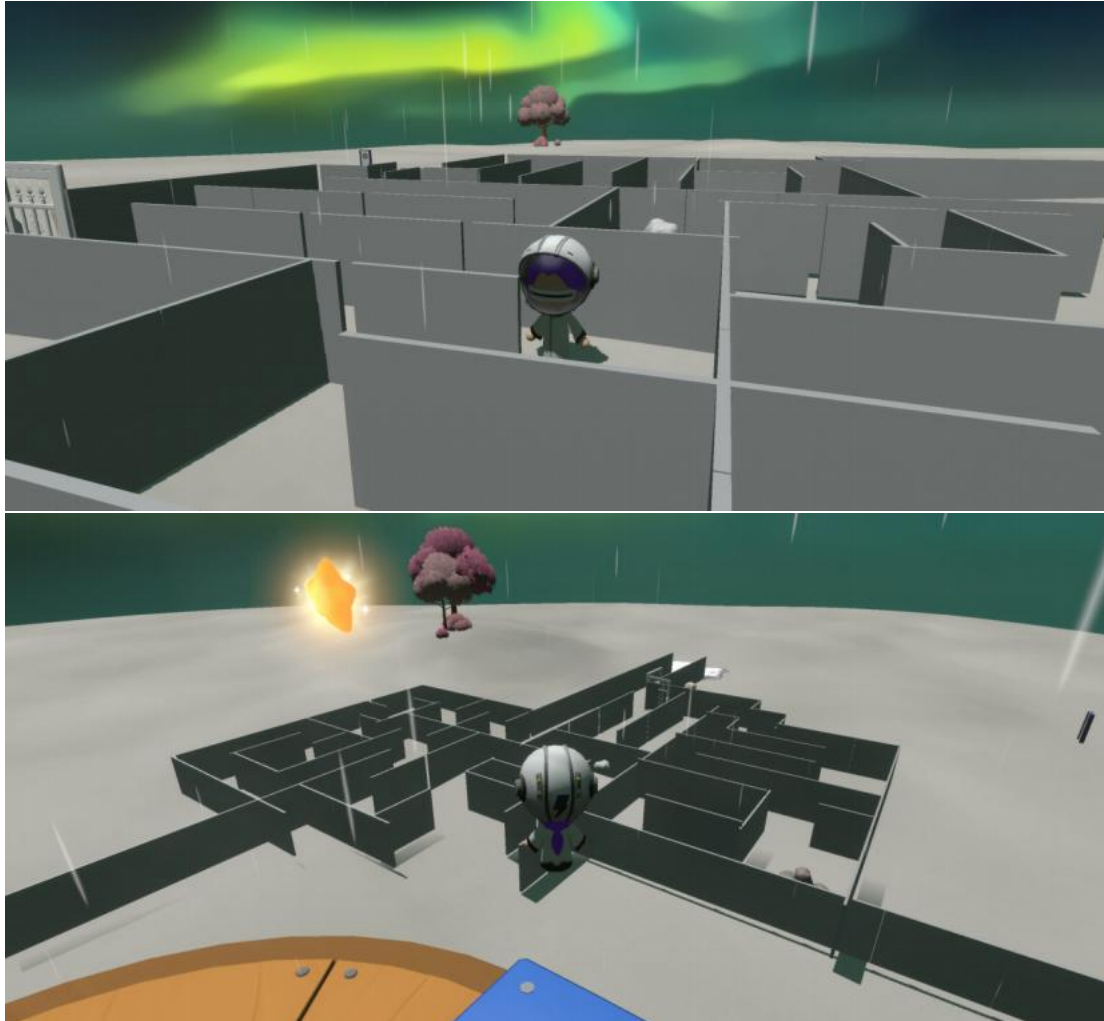
Freddie's work playfully challenges traditional storytelling, dismantling legal systems from a cultural perspective. "Enter My Personal Void" satirizes the digital world governed by code rules. Through avatars, individuals explore multiple narratives and find solace in gaps. The experience offers a peculiar sense of tranquility, with insect sounds and distant fireflies adding to the atmosphere. Climbing a ladder to nowhere, players confront blankness, as they are teased by the void before. Following the fireflies in the darkness, some motion images are constantly triggered, responding to those floating verse.



Freddie Churchill, 2023, video game, screenshots in game mode, by CapeLab.

Hyemin Gil

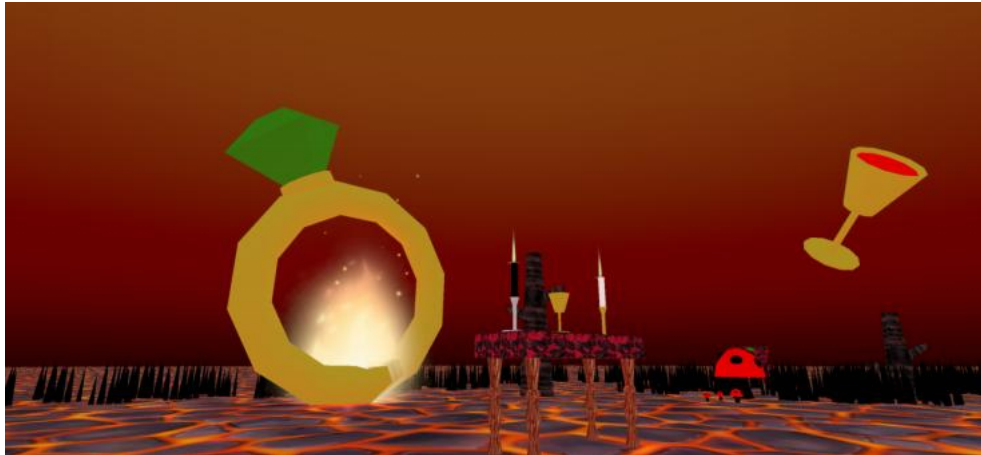
Hyemin's mixed-media installations delve into the complex interplay of time and space, evoking both serenity and discord. The piece titled "Endless Silence" embodies this duality. At first glance, its small labyrinthine structure with subdued grey walls seems daunting. Yet, upon closer inspection, the walls are easily navigated. In contrast, the stars overhead, seemingly within reach, remain elusive. Much like our digital experiences, these tangible and intangible barriers continually shape and challenge our perceptions.



Hyemin Gil, Endless Silence, 2023, video game, screenshots in game mode, by CapeLab.

Xanthe Elizabeth Horner

This piece, a lighter take on Xanthe's previous animated game, *Persephone Cup*, reimagines the mythological tale of Persephone's abduction by Hades. It portrays a heroic woman's journey against patriarchy and towards self-discovery. The lite version experiments with a different game medium, offering a fresh interpretation through cartoon-like visuals that accentuate innocence and amplify the artwork's spirit. It responds uniquely to the exhibition's theme, reflecting contemporary struggles with power dynamics in the digital realm through Persephone's transformative journey across contrasting landscapes.



Xanthe Elizabeth Horner, *Persephone's Cup*, 2023, video game, screenshots in game mode, by Capelab.

David Koh

David's practices wittily reveal the new absurdities experienced by individuals within the digital society as they confront the alienation brought about by capitalism. The artwork titled "I tried therapy but the beach helped me more" seemingly offers a leisurely island vacation to the hectic urban workforce, encouraging them to explore themselves by psychological counseling, physical fitness, and indulging in culinary delights. However, individuals are still under the constant pressure of the ticking clock during this brief respite. Ultimately, the goal remains to return to their routine work with renewed vigor, after finding temporary solace in a series of healing services.



David Koh, I tried therapy but the beach helped me more, 2023, video game, screenshots in game mode, by CapeLab.

Laurie Martin

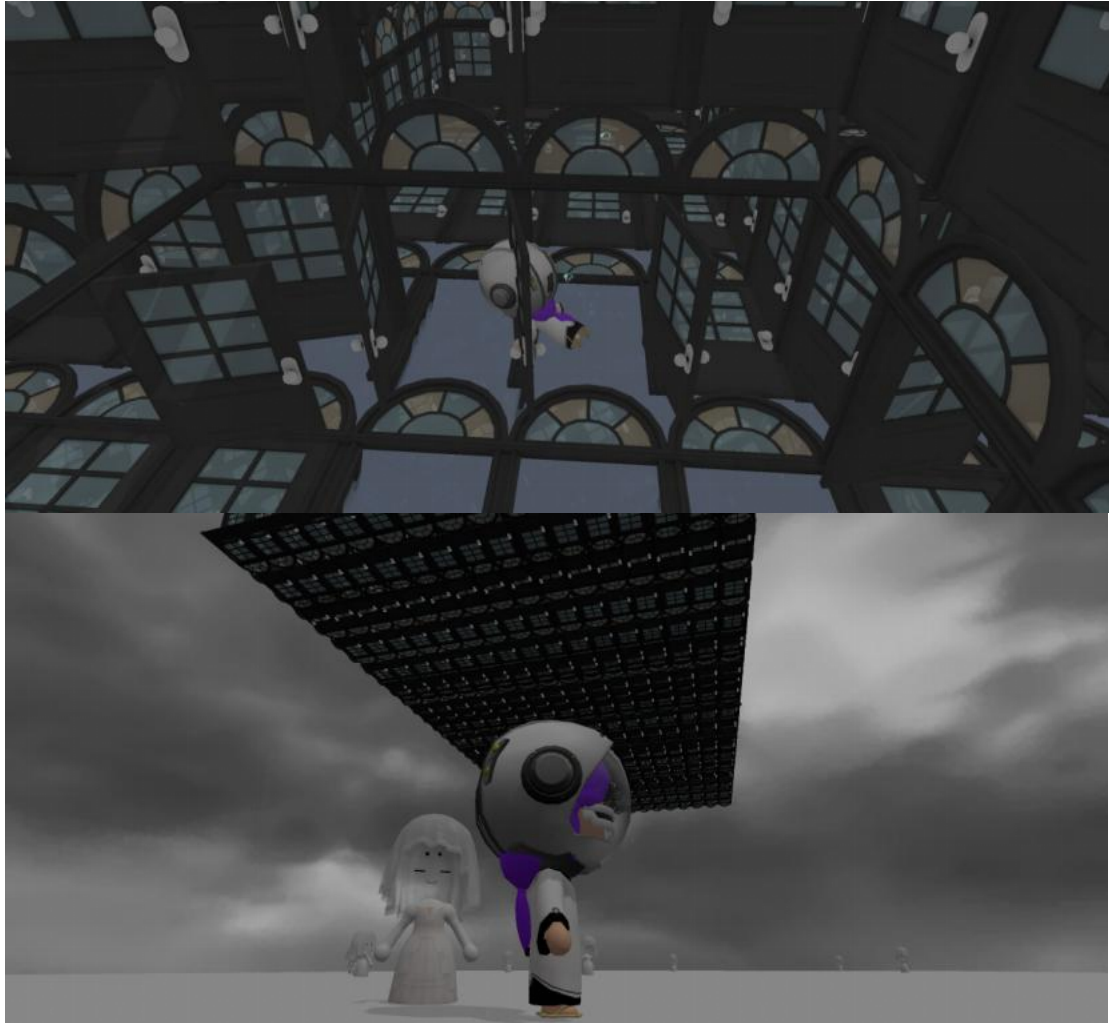
The title of this artwork resonates with the familiar rhythm of our online interactions. Upon entering a digital realm, we're greeted with a random username, a nod to our transient identities in cyberspace. In "Cyb3rt33th," a perpetual downpour envelops a world where nature and urban landscapes seamlessly merge. Amidst this atmospheric backdrop, a delicate equilibrium exists between melancholy and healing, despair and glimmers of hope. It's a reflection of our digital odyssey, where anonymity and immersion collide in a surreal landscape of possibility.



Laurie Martin, Cyb3rt33th, 2023, video game, screenshots in game mode, by CapeLab.

Jiao Shi

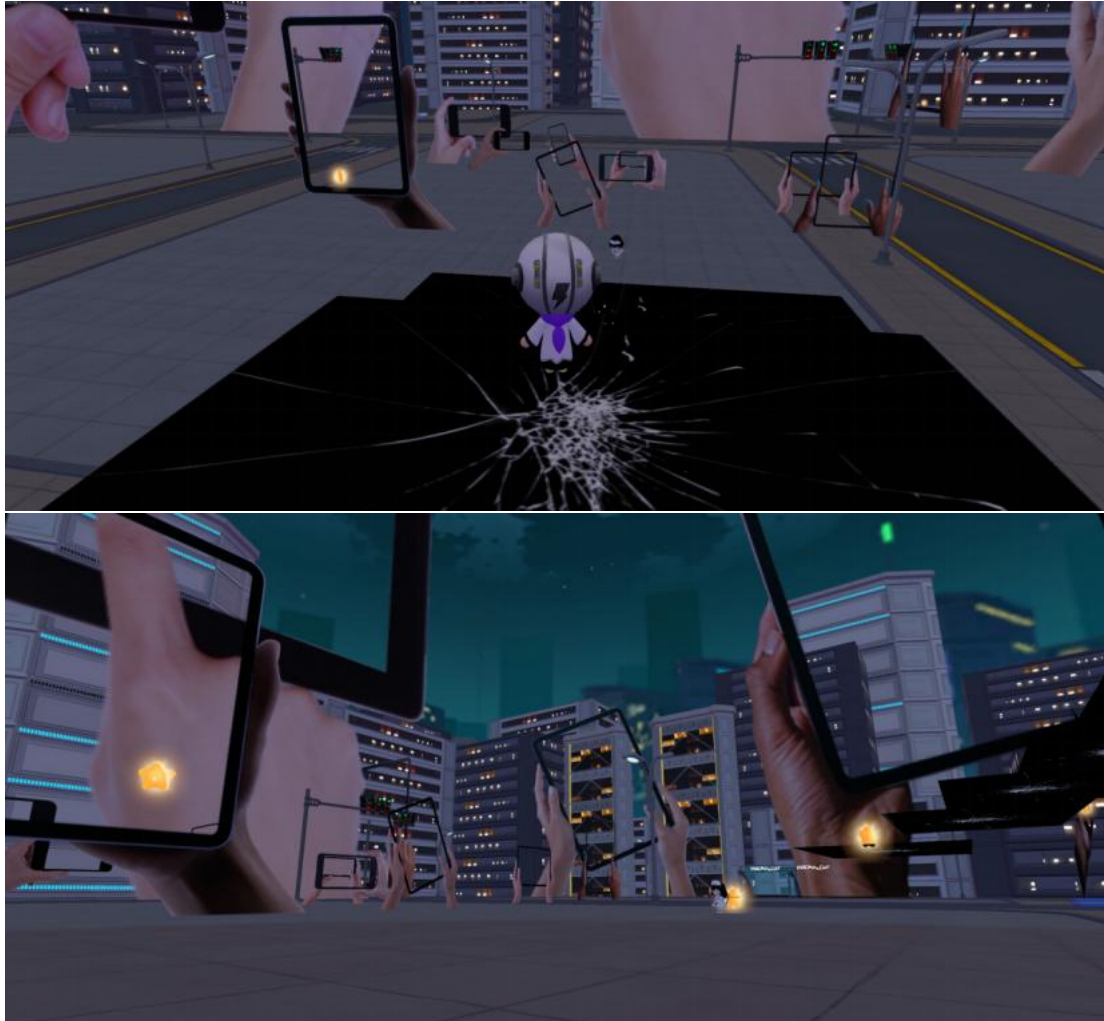
Shi's ongoing exploration of spatial possibilities and visual perception is evident in his previous works. "Mass Maze" takes this exploration further through an online game format, eliciting powerful emotions as visitors navigate a complex maze of cuboids and thousands of doors. While doors usually symbolize new passages, here they serve as barriers, frustrating visitors' progress and heightening the sense of entrapment.



Jiao Shi, Mass Maze, 2023, video game, screenshots in game mode, by Capelab.

Yichun Yao

How does it feel when the everyday gestures we know so well are magnified, framed, and presented as sculptures before us? Yao's installation of hand sculptures in a virtual city square prompts a sense of collective intimacy, as these gestures are familiar to any modern citizen in today's digital society. What sets this apart is the substitution of digital screens with a live landscape framed by mobile phone outlines, creating a sense of infinity.



Yichun Yao, *Infinity*, 2023, video game, screenshots in game mode, by Capelab.

VI. Reflection and Next Steps

Within the context of this exhibition, my role as an independent curator entails the responsibility of publicizing the event. However, what I did not foresee was the baptism by fire of a new experience during the exhibition's promotion. A mere day after the exhibition's launch, apart from the invited friends, there was a noticeable absence of clicks from users within the gaming platform to visit. How then could we attract a broader audience from the gaming platform to engage with our exhibition? I stumbled upon a solution: by adding platform users as friends using the exhibition account, I could personally disseminate exhibition introductions and links to these contacts. Diligently, I persisted in this endeavor daily, and it appeared to yield results as players gradually accessed the exhibition, accompanied by varied commentary.

However, unexpectedly, upon attempting to update the exhibition hall one day, I encountered an inexplicable obstacle—there seemed to be no means of effecting updates, nor could our exhibition be reposted within the platform. A message posted on the homepage, inquiring whether followers could still access the previously shared exhibition link, vanished as swiftly as it appeared. Hours later, all browsing data and comments related to the exhibition disappeared. This abrupt censorship prompted introspection, yet upon reflection, neither my actions nor the exhibition's content transgressed any platform rules. Nevertheless, they may have inadvertently challenged the platform managers' directives—wherein only content endorsed by the platform could garner traffic.

Such occurrences provoke deeper reflection: in the data-driven online landscape, traffic often serves as a proxy for attention, underpinned by a currency mechanism. Each online platform functions as the arbiter of this ecosystem, significantly influencing the content we encounter and whether we ourselves are visible. For online social platforms boasting significant user bases, what ramifications does this wielded power hold for individuals? Moreover, when all social sharing activities are subjected to quantitative analysis for attention and public display, how might this evaluative mechanism influence individuals' self-perceptions?

I have found myself ensnared in a quandary: from my perspective, the exhibition embodies a form of public cultural production, and as an independent curator, I aspire for it to resonate with a broader audience, thereby affording artists' creations greater visibility. However, in the absence of platform endorsement and an established online reputation, achieving this objective presents considerable challenges, particularly within the algorithmically determined landscape governing all communication platforms. On a personal level, I endeavor to maintain a degree of detachment from this mechanism, steadfastly resisting manipulation and assimilation. These dual considerations weigh heavily on my mind, necessitating a nuanced equilibrium—an art form which I continue to refine.

Armed with these contemplations, the exhibition will transition from the online black box to the offline white box. Within the curatorial framework of next offline exhibition, I have imposed a stipulation: all participating works must transcend mere video presentation, instead encompassing a diverse array of mediums or mixed-media compositions inclusive of video elements. The offline iteration of the exhibition will remain faithful to the thematic essence of its online predecessor while further exploring the influence of environmental factors. Artists will contribute fresh perspectives to this ongoing discourse, engaging in dialogue with the artworks featured in the preceding online version.

Greis Wenwen Zhao
28th Feb, 2024.