

# Did I See Cao Fei's Exhibition At Serpentine Gallery? : Etiolated art and life in the time of the virus and the virtual.

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Based on a review of: Cao Fei: *Blueprints*, at Serpentine Gallery London, 4 Aug - 13 Sep 2020, curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist (Artistic Director), and Joseph Constable (Associate Curator)

by Paul O'Kane

Did I see Cao Fei's exhibition at Serpentine Gallery in August 2020? For months the lockdown had resigned me to accepting that no exhibitions were accessible to me. I turned my aesthetic judgements in the direction of trees passed on daily walks, or trainers in virtual shop windows of online stores. Art was effectively suspended. This had tragic consequences for many who toil, strive and pin fragile hopes on the arts as their profession. My own landlady, dependent on theatre, saw her income go 'off a cliff' in a matter of days, as the pandemic ripped-up the schedules of every performing art and artist, along with those of all who depend on them. As a result, the apartment in which I write is up for sale. From my desk by the window I can see the sign outside the property. It causes turmoil, upsets my security, disturbs my routines and induces anxiety. Though relatively unscathed, I become one more victim of the virus as my concentration flits nervously between the task at hand and estate agents' websites.

Following the most *dreadful* (in the full sense of the word) weeks of the first lockdown, when we were visited by an invisible evil blighting and cursing the very air, some ease and respite

eventually arrived. We loosened our rigorous hygienic regimes and gingerly ventured out and about. Thus one sunny August afternoon I found myself perambulating the promenade of Hyde Park London's Serpentine lake wearing a new pair of trainers and dodging the goose-guano. The park, usually packed on a day like this, was enhanced by a drastic reduction in the number of fellow promenaders. If my gait was brisk it was because I had to arrive at The Serpentine Gallery in time for a 'slot', one of many new words and acts that have become ubiquitous in the time of Covid 19.

Checked-in by a masked assistant I covered my own face, sanitised, and entered the gallery. In the first space I met a historical reconstruction of a Chinese theatre foyer, replete with what might have been a cinema's ticket office and reception. Two small side rooms contained further architectural reconstructions. These called on me to use my phone to access their full content, but as my crude device is too archaic for apps and scans I took in what I could with my own seasoned sensory apparatus. The simulacral scenarios here were reminiscent of those once encountered in Mike Nelson's *Coral Reef* (2000), only, rather than a vaguely disturbing collective memory shaken-up by Nelson's eerie exactitude, Cao Fei appeared to invoke a more specific place and time, somewhere in not-too-distant Chinese cultural history. This artful use of history, while possibly tinged with nostalgia, also left an untimely aftertaste that brought unbidden to mind my personal passion for the movie *Platform*, directed by Jia Zhangke (2000). There, a Chinese theatre group quietly negotiates historic shifts in culture taking place during the 1980s; shifts that occur just beyond the frame of the movie and just over the horizon of the protagonists' perceptions. Cultural change creeps in to them nevertheless, in taste and style, evidenced by cigarettes, permed hair, flares and pop, along with newly emerging subjectivities.

The large, central space of the Serpentine Gallery was curtained-off, and an usher, dressed in livery contrived to match the simulated environments, guided me through into the blacked-out space where a video was running, to seat me a meter or two away from other members of the audience. An earlier intuition that this show might have been radically re-conceived for this post-lockdown period now seemed justified. In the dark, in our masks, in barely repressed existential fear of each other's presence and proximity, we watched a Cao Fei video titled *Nova* (2019). I imagined that in some original plan for this show the artist might have reconstructed more completely the old cinema or theatre referred to at the entrance, perhaps here using aged, tightly packed chairs for the screening. Now we had an unusually well-spaced audience, on modern seating, watching a Hi-Tec screen hung rakishly across the room.

The video itself was quite lavish in its production values. Its slightly esoteric narrative spanned long periods of time and generations of a family, now occupying some futural dystopia, then reaching back into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The tale, carried along by a father-and-son relationship, was hard to follow, but the orientating locus, regularly defaulted to, was the changing fortunes of that same theatre, cinema, sometime dance-hall or disco whose very own memories pervaded and underpinned the video, and much of the show, perhaps serving as a metaphor of modern China itself.

About 45 minutes after I had begun viewing, the video reached a happy conclusion in which characters were rescued from disparate times and places and united in a jubilant, dreamlike beach scene (many recent artist's videos, I have noted, despite being critical artworks, provide an elated ending with upbeat music). I prepared to endure the credits, wait for the media player to loop and then watch the first part of the video - which I found, on enquiring,

was 109 minutes long. However, having answered my enquiry the usher then urged me to leave, stating that, for reasons of health and hygiene my slot must be maintained as a strictly one-hour visit. I had used-up my time, despite only seeing half the movie and a third of the show. Feeling slightly crestfallen and disempowered I hurried through one remaining room, barely taking in some intriguing vitrines packed with playful dioramas, but was again moved quickly on to the final (given a strict one-way traffic regime) room of the show.

Here the artist had provided another retroactive gesture, showing several video works - including the popular *Whose Utopia?* (2006) - that have brought Cao Fei to the attention of an international audience in recent years. Bright daylight would normally flood this sumptuously fenestrated space but sophisticated filters added to the glass panes aimed to render the room crepuscular enough to suit video-viewing. Nevertheless, and again for reasons of health and hygiene, a smiling assistant held an exit door wide-open, allowing both fresh air and bright daylight to flood in, while politely, symbolically inviting me to leave as soon as possible.

Thus I left Cao Fei's exhibition wondering whether I had seen it. Meanwhile, it seemed important to evaluate, and if possible affirm, the changed values, routines and scenarios I had encountered. I began to consider what all this might promise or threaten for art, artists and galleries in years to come. In J.L. Austin's well-thumbed theory of performative language he refers to the concept of 'etiolation', meaning the draining of power from an act, subject, or object, an unhealthy reduction in vigour and status. As I retraced my steps through the park, admiring the lake and the trees, I felt as though the show, the gallery and the artist might have been etiolated by the impact of the virus on our gallery-going experience. Slotting and queuing, masking and sanitising, distancing, rushing and ushering, as well as several changes

possibly made to the original plans for the exhibition, may have stripped myself and the rest of the audience of a more sumptuous or 'full-blooded' experience.

Furthermore, we were denied a habitual sense of sovereignty according to which a member of an art audience tends to enjoy a certain 'freedom of movement' and corresponding sense of empowerment that implicitly encourages respect, and self-respect, for our own time and space, our own ways and means of viewing and judging art. When this is rendered subservient to the primary imperative to attend to hygiene and health, the usual roles and relationships involved in visiting an art exhibition are fundamentally transformed.

This, in turn, made clearer to me the ways in which etiolation has come to influence our lives, societies and economies more roundly, not just as an effect of the virus but as an inevitable ramification of the reign of the virtual, by means of which we have recently, despite the virus, maintained contacts and transactions, but in a diminished manner that might leave us feeling culturally etiolated and robbed of reality.

Did I see Cao Fei's exhibition at Serpentine Gallery? Not as, or as much as I had expected. Nevertheless, by the time I reached home I found myself mysteriously energised with a force that I realised could only be that of the art itself. Now it seemed to me that, even if we only get to see one show in a year, and even if that experience is etiolated by special circumstance, art can still succeed in promoting possibility, thereby providing an individual and a society with a welcome and necessary injection of hope and belief, to lead us through even the most disorienting of times.