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Transkription des Gespräches zwischen Cao Fei und Christian Ganzenberg
Das Gespräch fand am 15. September 2015 in Berlin statt und wurde in englischer Sprache geführt.

Renate Wiehager

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to this opening of our two-day symposium on the developments of Chinese contemporary art since 2000 until today. First of all I would like to introduce my team and myself briefly. My name is Renate Wiehager and I'm the Head of the Daimler Art Collection as well as the exhibition space Daimler Contemporary Berlin.

Together with Andreas Schmid and Christian Ganzenberg I have elaborated on the content of this symposium. The symposium is the key event of the related events which accompany our exhibition "From a poem to the sunset". It is the first exhibition of a series and in this first part we are mainly showing conceptual art from China from the late 1980s together with international art. The second part of this series will open in November and it is focused on Chinese photography, installation art and sculpture in dialogue with international art from our collection.

I would like to welcome warmly Cao Fei. Thank you very much for being with us on the occasion of your book presentation. This publication is part of a series, which we call the Daimler Art Collection Artist book series and we have been working since 2010 with artist as Philippe Parreno, Luca Trevisani, Natalia Stachon, Carmelo Tedeschi and Nic Hess. And we are very happy that we have been able to collaborate with you on Artist Book No. 7 in this series.

Now I would like to hand over to Christian Ganzenberg and Cao Fei.

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Introduction Cao Fei

It's my great pleasure to briefly introduce Cao Fei tonight, even though I think everybody in the audience knows her personally or about her work. Cao Fei was born in 1978 in Guangzhou and lives since 2011 in Beijing. Some of you might have seen her latest works in Venice, where Okwui Enwezor selected *La Town* as a part of his curated exhibition. Others might have seen her solo exhibition at Secession in Vienna in this year's summer, where she presented some new sculptural pieces and a new video installation. And others might have been to Hong Kong in the March this year and saw her sky rising installation at the ICC building – Same Old, Brand new. This gives you an allusive hint, that Cao Fei is all around currently and that is why we are very proud to be able to present this artist book, on which we have worked with Cao Fei in the last couple of months.

Cao Fei's multifaceted artistic work is based on close observation and a critical, inquisitive attitude to her immediate surroundings. She begins with the common and mundane, the personal and the supposedly intimate. Her artworks describe the "politics of intimacy" (Hou Hanru) of the Generation Y. One of her reoccurring themes is the city and the living together in urban environments: From 2007 to 2010 she has created a complex, virtual city – *RMB City* – in the realms of Second Life and in 2013 Cao Fei conceived *Haze and Fog*, a new type of Zombie film set in modern China, and only last year she finished another film about a mythical post-apocalyptic metropolis, called *La Town*. These projects are related not only to Cao Fei's principal examination of basic human conditions, but also to a conceptual shift of perspective – a zoom from virtuality to a close-up of 21st century Beijing and back to an imaginary Sci-Fi view. This publication has aimed to document these manifold projects in depth and summarize their critical discourse.

It's my great pleasure to present this book together with Cao Fei, who will – alongside this publication – also speak about some principal characteristics of her artistic work. In order to make it also visually appealing, we will use the pdf of the publication to give you some ideas on the look and feel of the book, and furthermore we will also show some snippets of Cao Fei's films.

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Christian Ganzenberg (CG)

Let's begin our conversation with this publication.

It is not the first book you have done, but as a multimedia artist, working with all kinds of technology and having a personal fascination for the latest developments, how did you approach this invitation to conceive an "old school" artist book? Where did you see the opportunities to present your different projects in a book form? Is it rather documentary or another work of art in itself?

Cao Fei (CF)

I think that this book is for me a new experience. It is a little bit also like a film a new score. For instance, when I used music in my films, and I like to use music, there is always a different interaction and relationship between different forms of art. In our book there is also the context of text and pictures that has a special sort of interaction so therefore I feel that this book is more the book of an artist and not only a collection of images as in the traditional sense of a regular catalog.

CG

The publication brings together three very distinct, but inter-related projects. *RMB City* is a very complex interactive virtual project, with various real-life manifestations, e.g. in the forms of photos, films, but also an opera and many more. The other two projects are films, *Haze & Fog* and *La Town*, realized in the last two years, have each a very distinct language and character and dealing with different topics. In the process of conceiving the book we discussed to mingle all three projects – and maybe even more – in this publication. Now we have found a rather clearly structured and logical sequence for the three selected projects. In general, where do you see the link between these projects? Why did you decide to bring them together in this book? And how did it come about that the book starts with the latest project?

CF

Well this book is a little bit taking the chronological order apart of course, how this all got into existence. So let me first start why we put these three projects into this book: The earliest was *RMB city*. This started in 2007 I was rather complicated to do this concept. It was meant to be a long-term project so at the time when I finished this I wanted to put it into book form but I didn't have any good way of putting it into a book and getting it publicized. So therefore there has not yet been any book on *RMB city* which was completed in 2011. And

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then *Haze and Fog* and *LA town*, those two films when I had completed them I suddenly realized that there would be a way how to integrate these projects with the *RMB city*, only after I completed those two films. Why? Because we talked about this quiet a lot. The book is like a logbook or a compass, a city map for a city like RMB city and the world around us. If we understand this book now like a map for three different films, the reader can go through this map with this compass than this would be an idea that works for me. And apart from that there is of course virtual life and real life and there is a relationship between the two of them. And talking about *Haze and Fog*, which is talking more about these underworld and darker side of life and their relationship to real life. *La town* is a virtual city and there is this is a different relationship between reality and that virtual life. So basically I am speaking in this book about these different relations and I'm zooming in and zooming out from one from the first life and run to the second life environment from real to virtual and so and so forth. This book is like a special camera on my films and it will focus on something and so sometimes I zoom in and sometimes zoom out. So the city I zoom out from is no longer RMB City, even though this is my starting page, but in turn it changes into something else and they these city morph into the next.

>> Film/Images of *La town*

CG

This was a short sequence from *La Town*, a mysterious city which has been struck by an unknown disaster. There is no more sunlight, the city seems to be frozen in time. Maybe you could describe how you realized *La Town*, since it is quite remarkably in its scale. How did you come about this idea to have another model city build – this time in real?

CF

In 2012 in London I used a website that is called TAOBAO??. TAOBAO?? is something where you can buy something used like eBay. And I saw a small model there, which was basically a toy for children in Germany, with which you build a landscape for trains. And you have a small town with people and trees and everything to build up I saw this product and there will be the train that comes into motion. Even many grownups love to play with this kind of toy, but people are even more interested and something that interests me even more is the spirit of the people, the attitude of people who will go to play with this and then also build up their own small toy worlds and the relationship between different spaces. I also then started buying different pieces and I saw more and more stuff on the Internet, where I could buy this

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toy world pieces and then I started to build up a city and this became the model for La Town. Slowly I built it up bit by bit. I used a table of maybe two square meters in size and it took me half a year to work there every morning from the 10 am to the afternoon I filmed different angles and filmed the sequences of La town.

CG

Another remarkable feature of this film is its dialogue, which has its own independent level of meaning and which gives the visuals a very ambivalent feel as they are almost a linguistic and emotional counterpoint to the stream of images. The dialogues, written by Cao Fei, are inspired by the film “Hiroshima mon amour” by Alain Resnais, based on a screenplay by Marguerite Duras. This dialogue is almost no conversation, since it has no clear direction and the protagonist are rather talking past each other, even though they are having a love affair. I wonder how much this film is also about the impossibility of communication, or how much our understanding is influenced by the surrounding society.

CF

First of all, in *La Town* the dialog and the soundtrack was not done during the filming but I added it later on. I very much love that film *Hiroshima mon amour* and when I had done the filming I suddenly was reminded of this. As many directors use also some works from other directors, I thought I could make some references here too. So language and images are interacting and they form another kind of space, which is a very concrete space and that film or that space that I describe in *La town* is a little bit like the apocalyptic situation in *Hiroshima, mon amour*, after the explosion of the atomic bomb, because you don't see many people, but what you see is waste or grey or Ashes or some angles and spaces of town that is empty. That said, of course, they are lovers but they are in an empty space and they talk about this city and they speak about their memories and what they remember as a story about what they remember, what was there before the disaster struck them.

CG

The next project – *Haze and Fog* – is again an almost 46min long film. Here is almost no language directly involved. But there are several stories by Cao Fei around it, in which she is describing her immediate surrounding in Beijing. Before we see the excerpt, I would like to hear more about your motivation and personal experiences which triggered this film?

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After the Olympics in Beijing in the years 2011 and 2012 there was very severe pollution of the air in Beijing and many people were suffering from that. At the same time, I also saw a new series from America that's called "Walking Dead" that was taking place in Atlanta and you could see zombies walking around. And this living dead situation in that film reminded of the tough situation and the living environment in Beijing. Therefore, I asked myself, how could I show this kind of zombie culture and and speak about this emergency situation that the pollution is forcing on us. And also in the south, where I have lived many years in Canton, one would not have been thinking of such a project, but living in Beijing I saw how people had to struggle with that. For example people who walked on the streets could not distinguish to the distance between buildings or they could not see well because of that haze and fog because of the pollution that made everything grey and foggy. And so therefore this idea come to my mind.

CG

Haze and Fog, is maybe the first Zombie movie based and produced in China. It shows us that Cao Fei has many non-Chinese influences. In this case one major inspiration is coming from the American TV series "The Walking Dead", but there are also other visual and stylistic references, among other to the Swedish film maker Roy Andersson, to some Hollywood productions as "Silent Hill" or filmic adaption of Stephen Kings "The mist", besides early Chinese independent film makers like Jia Zhangke. Could you please talk a bit about this obviously very important influence of cinema and movies on your artistic work? What has shaped your world of cinematography and how do you handle these influences in your own films?

CF

Yes, I did receive many influences from different foreign films and before I made Haze and Fog I also have written a novel about a similar theme. This novel describes certain places and quarters of Beijing city, which I'm also describing in my text. So this was a realistic description of Beijing environments and so what you just now mentioned different foreign films and video games, like Silent Hill, did influence me. So the videogame culture and foreign films they are all on the basis of different realistic interpretations of life. Roy Anderson had quite an early influence on me and Silent Hill. It is about a little hamlet where there is an evil mist and many people have to flee from that humidity and there is something they cannot see properly but it is evil and it is threatening them.

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CG

I would like to pick another aspect of your films, which is striking to me and which is obviously a continuing obsession for you: music. The filmic language of *Haze and Fog* is clear, simple and straight forward, with some tasty kicks and poetic moments. The camera is not moving, your images are shiny with a greyish filter, they feel icy and cool. Despite this distinct visual level, the film has some passages, in which the music takes the lead. You didn't select something subtle or a slow, but a deeply emotional tango. This makes me wonder, if you could speak about the importance of music and how you would describe – maybe on this example – the interplay between image and sound in your films?

CF

I have to speak about my early years: When I was young I watched many music videos on MTV and on stage, which was a great influence on me. This has always influenced me greatly and my sense for rhythm and everything comes from back then. And in my early films music and the soundtrack was always very important. Sometimes it was there instead of any text. In *Haze and Fog* I made an experiment and try to use less music than normally so the are parts in which you have are a lot of tango music that sounds in in other parts of the films are not using meet music only the environment sounds. I also had different influences from different arts sectors so I also derived some help from those different art forms that had to do with music ...

CG

Our final film excerpt is from Cao Fei's complex RMB City project. It is called "City planning" and it is dating from 2007.

RMB City can be regarded as an utopia, but it is actually a built utopia in the realm of Second Life. In this sense RMB City is a virtual platform built by Cao Fei in order to invite others to engage with this online environment. There are many (unforeseeable) interactions with a variety of participants, RMB city presented the full scope of cultural urban life, including selecting a mayor, its own community, there were exhibitions, fashion shows, talks & discussions, even virtual love, and SL also functioned as commercial space. All of this also has produced real social relations in the First lives of the avatars. You have dealt with this project over so many years, I'm wondering what have been your findings in regards to the differences in human communication and their interaction between the First and the Second Life?

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CF

I can hardly talk about the whole project since this is a very complex structure. Second Life has been designed by a small high-tech company. In 2007 I formed a small team that in the Second Life realm started to build a city. And after the city was built up, I wondered, how should we make it go alive and how should we expand this is how should we handle and manipulate all the resources of the city. So this became an ongoing project and of course the mechanistic means helped a lot in doing this. Of course I looked at the relationship between utopia and the realistic life and well this realism is rather flat of course. So I after I did this RMB city in the virtual realms I started doing Haze and Fog and it developed into a different direction.

RMB City was done in the very bad economic crisis of 2008/2009 so we also had very many problems. As creators of this project we had to do work that had nothing to do with the artistic part because it was an economic depression. This project was extremely difficult to realize and several videos within it also show that I believe.

CG

With my last question, I would like to connect our two talks tonight and ask you about the conditions of being an artist living and working in China today. Your films, be recognized as very critical comments on China's society today. Have you ever experienced any negative effects on your artistic work through cultural censorship?

CF

This question is very often asked in interviews in the Western it hard to avoid this type of question. In my creation in the years up to now of course there was also a cultural friction between my work and life. I worked in Guangzhou, in a little village within Guangzhou and there were many social problems. So when I did a film on these problems, then of course somebody would come and look into it, but they would not hinder me publishing this or showing that film. I mean, of course, if I show the Tiananmen square with a panda instead of Mao Zedong as the main portrait, this would probably be in certain circumstances quite problematic in several cities like in Shanghai, which is the politically conservative city, and I may not be allowed to show it. But on the whole the overall situation there is not a large conflict between my work and the state. I think most of Chinese artists don't draw a very distinct line between their life and their work and politics. This line is very clear to all of us from early on in our lives, so we don't need to draw the line specifically so many artists will

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express themselves freely. The censorship is maybe not like the way you measure us in the West. But there are also some artists that are facing that kind of challenge.

CG

Thank you for your insights and the wonderful collaboration on the book.

CF

Thank you.

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