

Teaching

Cao Fei

ARTIST

CAO Fei

(tsow fay)

曹斐



Cao Fei

BORN

1978, Guangzhou

LIVES & WORKS

Beijing

THEMES

**Place
Symbols**

“You can peek into the digital world. Everything is much more intense than the real world. It’s much more unbridled and wild.”¹

ART MEDIUMS

**Video
Internet Art**

ABOUT THE ARTIST AND WORK

Cao Fei was born in 1978 in Guangzhou, the heart of China’s Pearl River Delta and an international commercial hub. Cao witnessed the birth of Internet culture in China, and in her words, “learned a great deal through TV.”² In contrast to older generations of artists, Cao and her technology-savvy peers did not feel bound to nationalistic ideals or restricted by politics. Instead, they embraced a global culture fueled by access to new forms of communication. As a young artist, Cao immersed herself in the flows of global pop—Cantonese pop, Japanese anime, and American hip-hop—and became fascinated by local youth subcultures. Since then she has used photography, video, and digital mediums to expose the dramatic changes to her everyday environment due to China’s rapid growth that began in the 1990s.

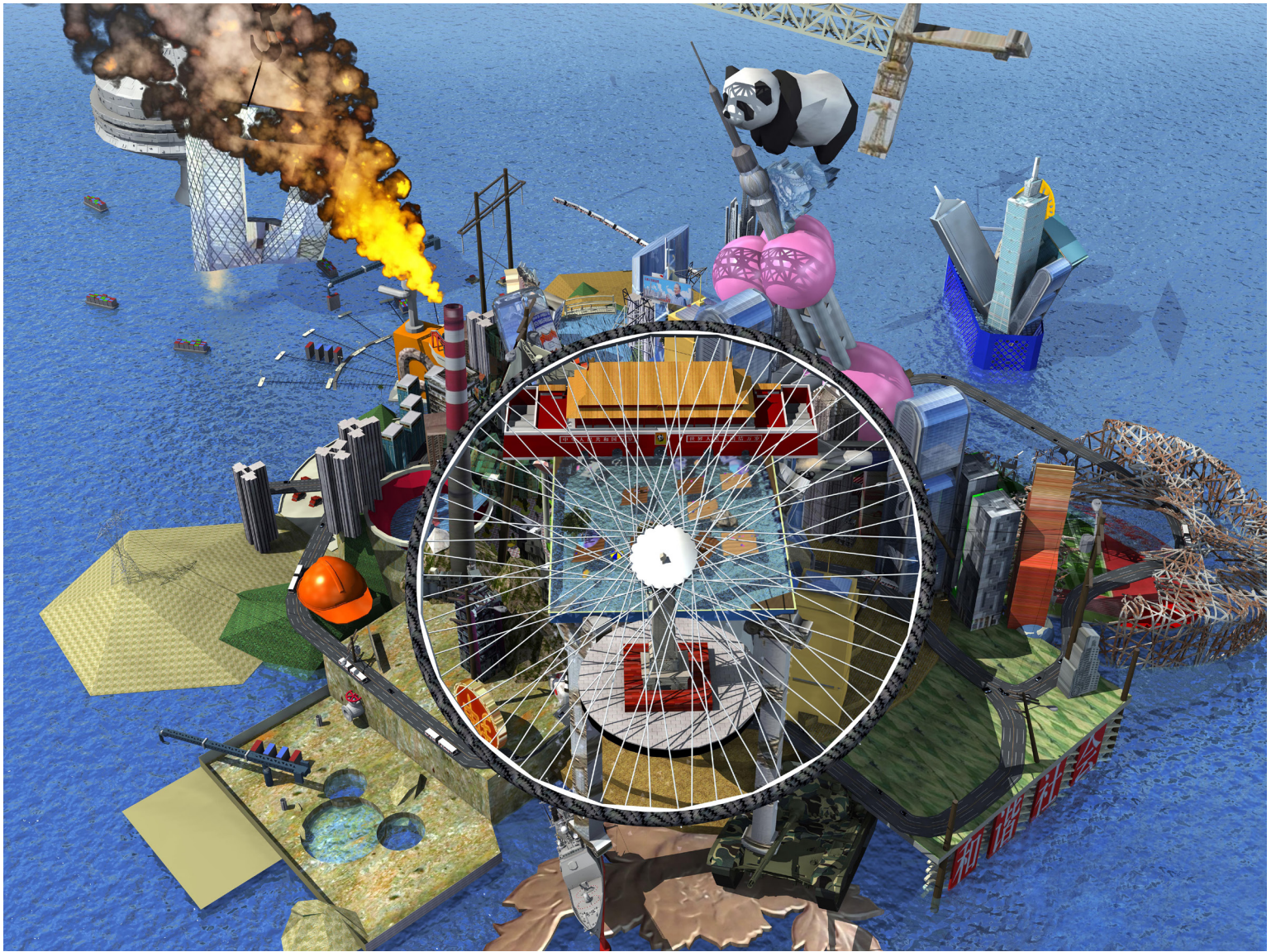
In 2006 Cao discovered Second Life, an online game where users can build, create, and participate in a free-market economy. *RMB City: A Second Life City Planning by China Tracy (aka: Cao Fei)* (2007) is a city of Cao’s invention that exists only in Second Life. To fund the construction of RMB City in Second Life, however, Cao sold imaginary plots of land to stakeholders in the art world, thus appropriating the buying power of the contemporary art market to purchase virtual real estate. In process and in name, RMB City (named after China’s national currency, the renminbi, or “the people’s money”) exemplifies the blend of capitalism, socialism, and communism that drives

China’s modern economy. RMB City exists only in the virtual world, but following its construction in Second Life in 2007, the project has taken on a variety of other mediums and forms.

RMB City includes many recognizable monuments from China’s urban skyline. Cao produced a prominent recreation of Tiananmen Square, an important and historic public plaza in Beijing, turning it into a swimming pool that functions in Second Life as a city hall and a meeting place for the citizens of RMB City. A replica of the Beijing National Stadium, designed for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, became the “People’s Park,” and the Oriental Pearl TV Tower of Shanghai was transformed into the “People’s Tower.” In redesigning reality, Cao repurposed historic cultural sites and replaced past symbols with charged new meanings.

1 *Art in the Twenty-First Century*, season 5, “Cao Fei in ‘Fantasy,’” October 14, 2009, <https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s5/cao-fei-in-fantasy-segment/>.

2 Cao Fei, “Your Utopia Is Ours,” interview by Jordan Strom, *Fillip 4* (Fall 2006), <https://fillip.ca/content/your-utopia-is-ours>.



Cao Fei, *RMB City: A Second Life City Planning by China Tracy* (aka: Cao Fei), 2007. Color video, with sound, 6 min. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Purchased with funds contributed by the Young Collectors Council with additional funds contributed by Shanghai Tang 2008.30

View and Discuss

→ Go to [youtube.com/watch?v=OLzd43139AU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OLzd43139AU) to watch a six-minute video of a city constructed in virtual reality: *RMB City: A Second Life City Planning by China Tracy (aka: Cao Fei) (2007)*.

What do you see in RMB City? What elements of RMB City mimic the real world? What elements look imagined?

→ RMB City is “full of different samples and different symbols of China all mixed together.”³ Look for the following symbols from modern China and compare them to the versions in RMB City.



Oriental Pearl Tower, Shanghai, the tallest structure in China from 1994 to 2007



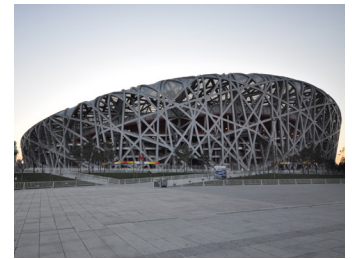
TOP: Tiananmen Square, Beijing
BOTTOM: CCTV Headquarters, Beijing, built from 2004 to 2008



Statue of Mao Zedong, Chengdu



TOP: Flag of the People's Republic of China, adopted in 1949. BOTTOM: Beijing National Stadium, designed for the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics and nicknamed the “Bird's Nest”



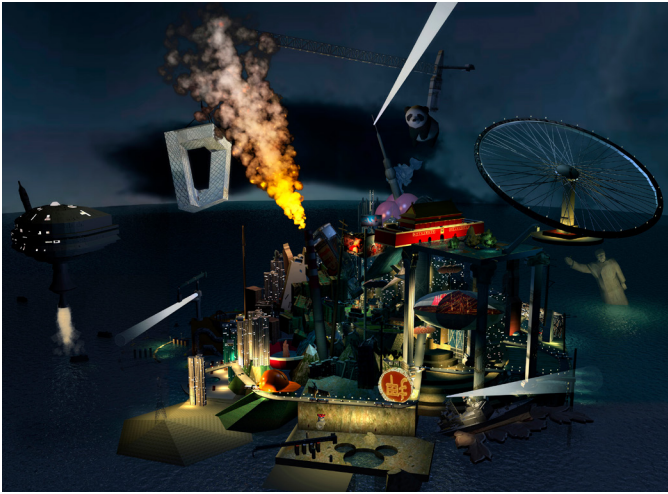
What looks the same and what looks different? Why do you think Cao might have wanted to use these symbols in RMB City?

³ Cao Fei, “Interview with Cao Fei,” interview by Izabella Scott, *White Review*, June 2016, <http://www.thewhiterreview.org/feature/interview-with-cao-fei>.

Classroom Activities

Design a Utopian City

Cao described RMB City as a “utopia in the making.”⁴ What is a utopia? Research the definition and other examples of utopias in art, architecture, film, literature, and online gaming. Draw your own version of a utopia based on the examples you find.



Cao Fei, *RMB City: A Second Life City Planning by China Tracy (aka: Cao Fei)*, 2007

What would your ideal city look like?

Experiment with designing your city in various 2-D and 3-D art mediums: pen and paper, paper or cardboard models, or on computer modeling programs, such as Google Sketchup.

Design a Virtual Avatar

China Tracy is Cao’s avatar in Second Life. China Tracy is an active participant in RMB City, organizing events, coordinating photo shoots, and collaborating with other members to host exhibitions at virtual art galleries. Invite students to design, draw, and name their own avatar. What would your avatar in virtual reality be like? What part of your personality would it reflect?

⁴ Cao Fei, “Coming Up Hip-Hop and Questioning Utopia,” interview by Philip Tinari, *Art 21*, December 2013, <https://art21.org/read/cao-fei-coming-up-hip-hop-and-questioning-utopia/>.

Classroom Activities

Explore RMB City

To learn more about how this online city was made, watch this video: art21.org/watch/extended-play/cao-fei-building-rmb-city-short/. In the video, Cao describes the process of creating an urban plan for RMB City as combining different images into a digital collage. Ask students to experiment with creating a digital collage using only images from the Internet, social media, and other found sources.

What are the challenges of using online mediums and appropriated images to create art?

Popular Icon

In RMB City, an image of Guanyin—a female bodhisattva traditionally known as a goddess of mercy and compassion in East Asian culture—appears inside a shopping cart, right next to the “People’s Shopping Center.” By including a religious icon in this context, Cao critiques our contemporary consumer culture. Ask your students to research a popular icon in American history.

What are the icons that represent our current popular culture? How do these compare with icons of the past?

Resources

Websites

- Cao's Website. <http://www.caofei.com>.
- Net Art Anthology, RMB City. <https://anthology.rhizome.org/rmb-city>.
- RMB City's Website. <http://www.rmbcity.com>.
- RMB City's Vimeo. <https://vimeo.com/user889612>.

Videos

- *Art in the Twenty-First Century*. Season 5, "Cao Fei in 'Fantasy.'" October 14, 2009. <https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s5/cao-fei-in-fantasy-segment/>.

Articles

- Cao Fei. "Cao Fei: A Bridge between Art and Pop Culture: That's What I Want to Be." Interview by Oyama Hitomi, 2007. <http://www.caofei.com/texts.aspx?id=13&year=2007&aitid=1>.
- Cao Fei. Interview by Izabella Scott. *White Review*, June 2016. <http://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-cao-fei>.
- Cao Fei. "Q. and A.: Cao Fei on Art, Motherhood and Walking the Political 'Red Line.'" Interview by Amy Qin. *Sinosphere* (blog). *New York Times*, April 7, 2015. <https://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/04/07/q-and-a-cao-fei-on-art-motherhood-and-walking-the-political-red-line/?mtrref=undefined>.
- Cao Fei. "What's Next?" Interview by Hans Ulrich Obrist, 2007. <http://www.caofei.com/texts.aspx?id=19&year=2007&aitid=1>.
- Chang, Charlotte. "Art Basel Hong Kong 2015: Conversations with Cao Fei." *Art Radar*, March 20, 2015. <http://artradarjournal.com/2015/03/20/art-basel-hong-kong-2015-conversations-with-cao-fei/>.
- McDonough, Tom. "The Chinese City between Dream World and Catastrophe." *Parkett* 99 (2017), pp. 18–35.
- Pollack, Barbara. "As China Evolves, the Artist Cao Fei Is Watching." *New York Times*, April 1 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/02/arts/design/as-china-evolves-the-artist-cao-fei-is-watching.html>.

Visit guggenheim.org/teachingmaterials for high-resolution images, audio, and video, as well as additional historical and contextual information about this artist and others featured in *Teaching Modern and Contemporary Asian Art*.

Note: On page 2, the artist's surname is capitalized to differentiate it from her given name. Colloquial phonetic pronunciations are included, rather than versions in the standard International Phonetic Alphabet, to help teachers pronounce names that may be unfamiliar.

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