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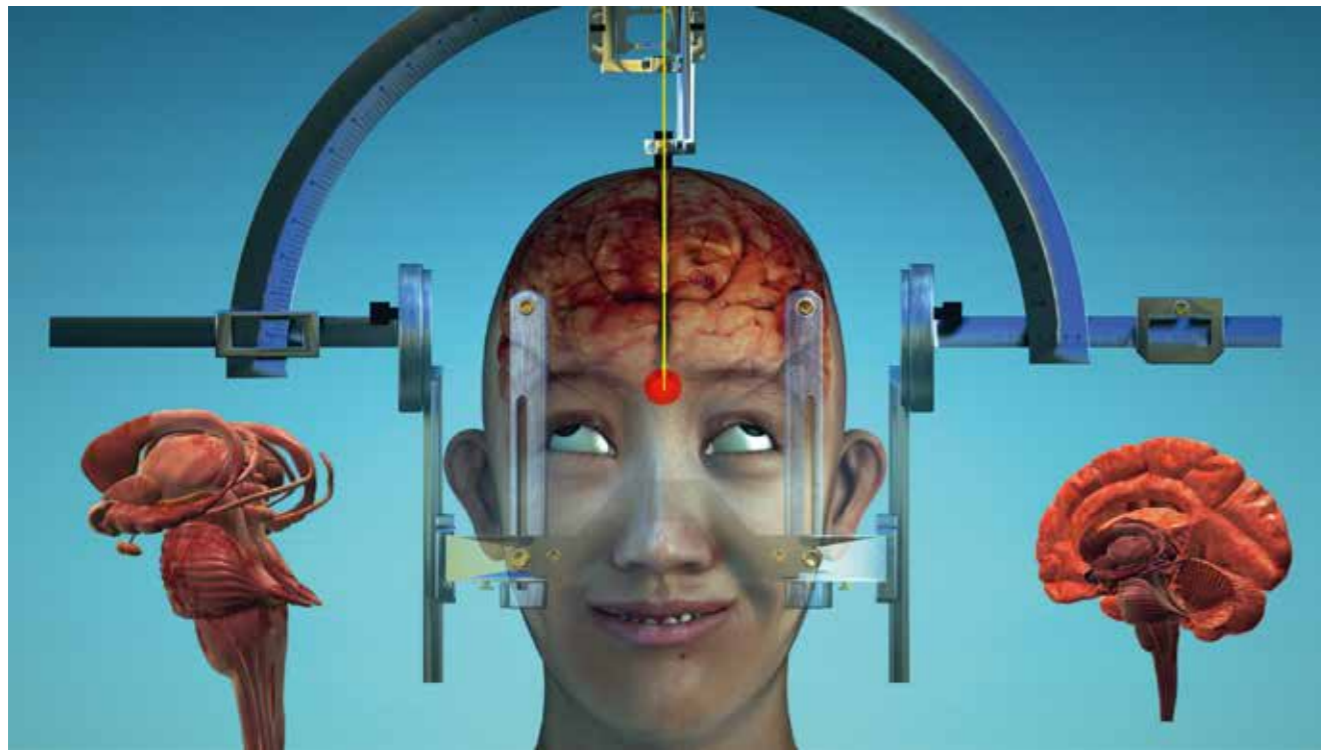
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LU YANG

The Universe Is on Fire

Lu Yang fuses virtual with actual architectures, luring the viewer into syncretic hells of augmented realities. With high-energy soundtracks and by tapping into the realms of ancient Buddhism, cyberfeminism, and technoreligions, her installations and videos conjure spiritual stimulants, curious deities, death, and posthuman life forms.

By Harry Burke



Still from *LuYang Delusional Mandala*, 2015
Video, sound, 16:27

Courtesy the artist and Société, Berlin

The video *LuYang Delusional Mandala* (2015) opens with footage of the artist Lu Yang scanning her skull. A digital three-dimensional model with a sexless body is composed; steel-faced, the newly born avatar dances Lu's trademark LikuLiku Dance, a twist on the routines associated with MikuMiku Dance, a popular freeware program that lets users choreograph Hatsune Miku, the turquoise-haired virtual pop star developed for the Vocaloid voice synthesiser. Floating in a purplish, cloudy outer space, Lu's avatar undergoes stereotaxy, a high-tech form of minimally incise brain surgery, which gives her the consciousness and form of a god. But as the body's audacious mutability is revealed, so is its fragility: the artist succumbs to death, and is whisked to the afterlife in an ornate, dust-churning hearse. A cartwheeling, distorted sound track by DJ Cavia666 escorts the video to its end.

LuYang Delusional Mandala is the first in a series of adrenaline-injected, fantastical works referred to by Lu as "LuYang Delusion" (2015–). The "delusion" in these videos is that Lu believes she can gain immortality through digital technology, but merely destroys her own body and work. Capricious and addictive, the Shanghai-born artist's videos and installations crystallise influences from neuroscience and religion, which she filters through an impressively wide-ranging formula of Japanese subcultural references, effervescent sound tracks, and wickedly inventive 3D rendering.

Free to view on her Vimeo channel, Lu's digital animations somersault into exhibition spaces as immersive, all-devouring experiences. In her biggest survey to date – "Encephalon Heaven", which took place at Beijing's M WOODS museum in 2017 – intricate wallpapers, with Sistine compositions incorporating video stills and intertitles, covered the walls. (The impact of Lu's floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall installations is often impressive and humbling.) Screens hustled for attention with sculptures, banners, lanterns, and carpets, while neons and LEDs washed the exhibition in hues of pink, green, and blue. The effect, as critic Alvin Li observed, was part arcade, part temple, fusing different architectures that provide, to different generations, public spaces for private contemplation.

Electromagnetic Brainology (2017), one of the exhibition's three new commissions, revolved around four deities, each symbolising one of Buddhism's four primary material elements: solidity

(earth), fluidity (water), temperature (fire), and mobility (air). Profiled like characters in a video game, each of these gods corresponds to and addresses a different type of pain received in the brain via the nervous system. They wear deep brain stimulation (DBS) crowns and brandish transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS) wands with which they stab Lu's digitally decapitated head to the accompaniment of a bright sound track by J-pop producers Invisible Manners. A subtitled voiceover explains that DBS involves a neurostimulator shooting electrical impulses to parts of the brain through implanted electrodes, while TMS stimulates cranial nerve cells. (Both are existing procedures used to treat movement disorders such as Parkinson's disease, or to alleviate symptoms of depression.) Wielding these tools, and dancing like synchronised teens, the densely visual gods appear as otherworldly tranquilisers for those who hurt or are stressed. As if summoned by the at once daring and banal act of the artist mapping her own facial features, the deities zoom through the stars on gigantic limbic glands. The universe is on fire, pockmarked with planets, and the gods dance, but their presence in itself is also a refutation of the belief that humans could transcend organic limitations with the advantages of science alone.

Lu's work riffs on the theories and aesthetics of posthumanism, a strain of thought that combines insights from the humanities with those from science and technology studies to destabilise the Enlightenment ideal of the autonomous human subject. The artist is punished for believing she could transcend her body: she is driven to a baroque hell in which her cloned skull provides jewellery for an air god who shoots an "amygdala electromagnetic gun". Is this god taunting her, or is this an unexpected form of transcendence? Bringing Buddhist belief systems into dialogue with fantasies of technology-enabled immortality, the "LuYang Delusion" series affirms that posthuman questions long predate the apparatus of technoscientific knowledge. The future itself is more grounded in ancient spiritual systems than is often assumed. As the video closes, the gods have multiplied, and still they don't stop dancing.

Buddhist thought emphasises not only that things are interconnected but also that personal identity is a delusion. Interviewed in the *New York Times*, Lu brought to mind the optimism of early 90s cyberfeminists by asserting that "living on the

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internet, you can abandon your identity, nationality, gender, even your existence as a human being." Her rejection of these categories might seem less than liberating to critics who have learnt, often the hard way, that technology, the internet included, typically magnifies rather than erodes existing injustices. But at the same time, in its laser-wielding interstellar campness, Lu's work fabulates evocative lenses into anxieties around such loaded subjects, perhaps most strikingly in how she takes on gender and subjectivity in the breathtaking thought experiment *Uterus Man* (2013).

In 2012, Lu got in touch with Mao Sugiyama, a Japanese artist who identifies as asexual, who had his genitals and nipples surgically removed to promote gender equality, later serving

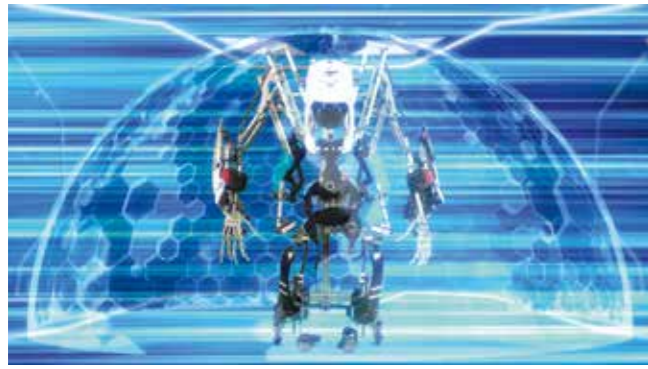
them to diners in a carefully choreographed public performance. The conversation between the two artists resulted in Lu's *Uterus Man*, a video (and arcade-style game) in which a genderless superhero navigates the universe fighting gender essentialisms with the help of tools such as a sanitary pad skateboard, a pelvis chariot, and a baby meteor hammer. Blasting out of the underbellies of manga and science fiction, *Uterus Man* problematises the gender binary by weaponising the female reproductive system. The absurdity of the work's premise deftly mirrors the absurdity of gender essentialism, while playfully merging the droll, idiosyncratic humour of the weirder corners of the internet with the conceptual ambitions of contemporary art.

Courtesy the artist and Société



Left: *LuYang Gong Tau Kite*, 2016
Video, 3:25

Right: *LuYang Power of Will – final shooting*, 2016
Balloon head, strobe LED 4-colour lighting system, dimensions variable
Installation view, Société, Berlin, 2017



Courtesy the artist and Soci t , Berlin



Still from *Electromagnetic Brainology*, 2017
Video



Stills from *Material World Knight*, 2018

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Electromagnetic Brainology Live, 2017
Video with motion tracking performance

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Stills from *God of the Brain*, 2017
Video, 8:03



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Courtesy the artist and M WOODS



Poster for *Electromagnetic Brainology*, 2017

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Courtesy the artist and Société, Berlin

Material World Knight, 2018
Installation view, 12th Shanghai Biennale, 2018

Lu's work was included in the 12th Shanghai Biennale, which opened last November. The exhibition was titled "Progress" in English, suggesting a subdued meditation on the economic conditions of progressivism and stagnation, while in Chinese it was titled "禹步" (Yubu), after the mystic dance step of Daoist ritual in ancient China. To some extent, an embrace of the friction sparked by competing signals is also what makes Lu's work so powerful. Encountering her boisterous *Material World Knight* (2018) in a biennial otherwise tuned to the grumbling air conditioning of the state-run Power Station of Art, I felt like I had been transported into something closer to the hooting, breezy atmosphere of the streets outside. The installation featured a series of arcade games – including a modified, hyped-up Dance Dance Revolution machine – that encircled islands of collapsing sculptural cityscapes. In these, office and apartment towers were disrupted by larger-than-life-size figures immortalised in combat – a human, for lack of a better term, lurching towards

a brain-bulging-from-skull villain. Looming in the background were three screens on which animations looped and leaped like advertisements.

Whether in China or elsewhere, technological spectacle remains hauntingly tied to a capitalist ethics of extraction and accumulation. In Lu's work, spiritual, technological, and material stimulations collapse contested worlds into ambivalent hells populated by wrathful yet endlessly fascinating deities. It is daunting and thrilling that it is no longer images that artists wrestle with, but immersive and augmented realities that manipulate human emotions, as allegorised in Lu's work by processes such as transcranial magnetic stimulation. Amid this whirling postmodern soup, her unhinged imagination and technical dexterity represent a furious attempt to locate an exit, or even perhaps the senseless ecstasy of having been thrown, rudderless, through this exit already.

HARRY BURKE is a poet, critic, and curator. He lives in New York.

Spiritual, technological, and material stimulations collapse contested worlds into ambivalent hells populated by wrathful yet endlessly fascinating deities.

LU YANG lives in Shanghai, where she was born in 1984.

Recent solo exhibitions include "Lu Yang Asia Character Setting Show", Special Special, New York; "Lu Yang: Encephalon Heaven", M WOODS, Beijing; "Welcome to LuYang Hell", Société, Berlin; "Delusional Mandala", MOCA Cleveland and Space Gallery, Portland; "LuYang Delusional Crime and Punishment", NSU Shanghai Art Gallery. In 2018 her work was featured in the 12th Shanghai Biennale, and it has been featured in group exhibitions such as "Mapping the Body", Galerie im Taxispalais, Innsbruck, "We: A Community of Chinese Contemporary Artists", K 11 Art Museum, Shanghai; and, in 2015, in the shows "Breaking Joints", ICA, London and "Inhuman", Museum Fridericianum, Kassel, as well as in the China Pavilion of the Venice Biennial.

Lu Yang is represented by Société (Berlin) and Beijing Commune (Beijing).