

Cao Fei, *i. Mirror*, 2007

Slow, shoegaze-inspired drums shimmer across the dream-like, pixelated Second Life universe designed by artist Cao Fei in her three-part documentary film *i.Mirror* (2007). The metaverse that is home to Fei's online persona, China Tracy, is a vision of urban design echoing the dystopian cityscapes of *Blade Runner*. It inhabits a fantasy of the post-millennium — in this strange landscape, China Tracy navigates a simultaneously glum and fantastic realm that she maintains complete dominion over through this new medium of online world building.

Artist Cao Fei was born in Guangzhou, China, in 1978, during a key moment in China's modern history. Economic and urban development informs her time-based artwork, exploring her control over what might be seen as the last frontier of (digital) space. China Tracy teleports, socializes, falls in love, is eventually heartbroken, all the while maintaining a level of vulnerability that invites the audience into her inner and outer world as she constructs it. Fei bares her humanity to the audience, inviting us to witness her emotional reckoning with an ever-expanding culture of globalization. Yet, the illusion is never hidden — her disjointed movements, glitchy design, and the use of surreal cinematography reminds us of her existence between worlds both human and digital, cultures both Eastern and Western.

In 1985, Donna Haraway released *A Cyborg Manifesto*, an essay that, informed by feminism, sociology, and economics, ironically explored the ever-narrowing distinction between the human and the machine in a society increasingly reliant on digital technologies. China Tracy, one might argue, embodies one major step in this exploration of cyborghood — a moment post-internet and pre-social media — that is somewhere in limbo between person and persona, the material and immaterial. As an online profile and the digital extension of an artist, *i.Mirror* reflects this distorted vision of the self and (in)tangible reality as if through a looking glass, perhaps predictive of a lifestyle where the material world reflects the digital, akin to that of the 2020's.

While some artists lamented the rise of the internet (think LCD Soundsystem and their aching croon, "I'm losing my edge, to the internet seekers...") Cao Fei adopted its language to augment her self-expression. The spirit of expansion is present within her exploration of the self in a newly interconnected world, compounded by the internet's interaction with real life partying, fashion, and art. Cao Fei, from her formative experiences witnessing the economic and spatial boom of Guangzhou, to her engagement with the optimism of the early internet, exemplifies a post-structuralist window into a shapeshifting state of being that is in tune with the present moment and looks forward to an even grander future.