

Lu Yang: *Delusional World*—A Live Virtual Motion Capture Performance in the Global Pandemic

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Abstract

The global pandemic of 2020 proved to be a challenging year, particularly for those working in the performing arts and cultural sectors relying on live audiences. However, the situation opened possibilities for experimenting with online programmes and international collaborations to create new cultural experiences. This presentation will discuss the development of a live motion capture performance by the Shanghai-based artist, Lu Yang, which was adapted into an online performance with teams in Shanghai, Melbourne, and Hong Kong. This project presents a case study into how artists and institutions have responded to the pandemic and how online performances could have the potential to create meaningful shared cultural experiences. As part of the production team, the Hong Kong studio MetaObjects played a role in bridging links between institutional partners and supporting the technical development of the project. This talk explores some of the challenges and opportunities of presenting work online. Operating as a mediator, the process reveals the limitations of geographically situated institutions, where regionalized funding structures and audiences could be reconsidered. Through the process of “thinking through the middle” *par le milieu* (Stengers 2005, 187), the research approach is to draw knowledge through the immanent process of thinking-doing. The intention is to open ways for intervening in the field of art and technology by operating within contemporary conditions, while recognizing the contingent and situated possibilities emerging in every moment. The knowledge gained provides

a means for re-thinking cultural programming within and beyond established institutional frameworks.

Background: Iterative Development

Lu Yang first presented her live motion capture performance at the Hong Kong Visual Arts Centre in January 2018. The performance is an evolution of her on-going interest in neurology, deep brain stimulation and the manipulation of the virtual body. Her work engages with themes drawn from Chinese medicine and Buddhism while employing the contemporary aesthetics of games and Japanese manga. Lu Yang’s work does not begin with the technology, but rather uses it to further expand the possibilities of her work, concepts, and ideas as a post-media (Weibel 2012) contemporary artist in which her work can take different forms while engaging a diverse range of media.



Fig. 1. *Electromagnetic Brainology Live*, 2018, Lu Yang, Live motion capture performance, Powerlong Art Centre, Hangzhou, Courtesy of the artist.

MetaObjects was brought into the project to help the artist develop the live performance using motion capture technology, where a dancer’s

movements are mapped to her 3D animated avatars displayed on a large screen behind the dancer. MetaObjects helped develop the proof-of-concept on a limited budget using widely available consumer hardware, HTC Vive Trackers, and IKinema animation software. A midi controller was programmed to allow the artist to control the camera movements, visual effects, character, and background changes live.

Following this initial performance, the artist was invited to further develop the performance for the opening of the Powerlong Arts Centre in Hangzhou in May 2018. Working with the China Academy of Art and the virREAL Centre for Art and Technology led by Yao Dajun, the performance was upgraded using the center's OptiTrack motion capture system with additional visual effects and camera movements. The project is developed iteratively, where each event is taken as an opportunity to expand the project further. Following this performance, Lu Yang was invited to present three performances at the Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai in October 2018. Partnering with Chronus Art Center to use their OptiTrack motion capture system, the performance was enhanced with new characters, visual effects, and additional dancers on stage.

Crisis Response: Adapting to Online

In March 2020, Lu Yang was invited to present the live motion capture performance in Federation Square as part of Asia TOPA Festival in Melbourne, Australia, curated by Mat Spisbah. Lu Yang was unable to travel due to the emerging pandemic in China. As the crisis escalated around the world, the performance was reworked into an online performance live streamed from Shanghai. It was presented as part of the re-opening of ACMI (Australian Centre for the Moving Image) together with Asia TOPA, Arts Centre Melbourne and The Exhibitionist. MetaObjects was unable to travel to Shanghai to assist with the production; as a result, a local producer was hired to help set up the performance on-site. Chronus Art Center was brought on as a venue partner having worked with the artist before. The performance scheduled for 11 November 2020 also lined up with the Shanghai Art Week where a physical performance was planned for November 13th as

Shanghai was no longer under lockdowns. The project developed over months of uncertainty of the situation and fluctuating travel and social distancing permissions.



Fig. 2. *Delusional World*, 2020, Lu Yang, Live virtual motion capture performance, screen capture of live stream.

Challenges and concerns included the streaming quality from behind China's firewall, time zones and finding the ideal time for different partners, and having live interaction with audiences. The stream was promoted through ACMI and their audiences in Australia. However, with an online performance, it presented the possibility to engage international audiences and to reconsider cross-institutional funding and collaboration. In the end, the event created a dynamic and interactive online experience with a live chat and artist Q&A with over 530 unique streams from around the world. Through these projects, MetaObjects plays a role in enabling possibilities by developing collaborations, leveraging networks and resources to support artistic projects, and in supporting an ethics of co-learning as an iterative process. A full recording is available at: <https://luyang.acmi.net.au/>.

References

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Biography

Ashley Lee Wong is Co-Founder and Artistic Director of MetaObjects, a studio facilitating digital production with artists and cultural institutions. She completed a PhD at the School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong and is former Head of Programmes and Operations of Seditio, an online platform for distributing digital limited editions in London.