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A Beijing Exhibition on Art for the 'Post-Human Era'

By SHEILA MELVIN

BEIJING — The National Art Museum of China, the country's flagship art museum, marked the 90th anniversary of the Communist Party of China this summer with a major retrospective of socialist artwork intended to “make the public strengthen its faith” in the slogan “Without the Communist Party, there would be no new China.”

Then, when the retrospective ended, it closed the museum, emptied the galleries and prepared to mount “Translife,” a cutting-edge International Triennial of New Media Art that purports to ring the death knell for “representational” art, questions the very notion of life as we know it, and posits our collective entry into a “post-human era.”

“This is very typical of what we do,” said Fan Di'an, NAMOC's director, with a laugh. “We need to balance many interests. But our society is in a period of transformation, and art is changing, too.”

“Translife,” which opened on July 26 and runs through Wednesday, is a deliberately provocative exhibition that includes 53 works by more than 80 artists from around the world. It was assembled by Zhang Ga, a media art curator who teaches at Parsons The New School for Design in New York and Tsinghua University in Beijing.

The diverse works on display are connected by their use of digital technology, boundary-crossing nature, collective creation process and the implicit assumption that our world has fundamentally transformed — in ways we are barely beginning to grasp.

“The time-space relationship is changed, or our perception of it,” Mr. Zhang said. “When we talk about time, it is multiple times now. Distance has disappeared because of the network.”

This point is made at the outset by the “Weather Tunnel” installation that stands in the museum's courtyard. Designed by the architect Ma Yansong, the shimmering white tunnel contains weather-themed works by young artists from universities in China, the United States, Europe and Australia

that draw on the same, real-time climatic data from around the globe. (Data is transmitted by custom-made sensors based on those created by Joe Saavedra, an adjunct professor at Parsons, for a project called Citizen Sensor.)

Inside the tunnel, which was uncomfortably hot in Beijing's blistering summer, a visitor can look through a "Solar Wind Periscope" (Jonas Hansen and Lasse Scherffig) at a visualization of extraterrestrial weather conditions based on information conveyed by radio signals; press a button on the "Weather Inflections" suitcase (Joel Louie, Jan L. Andruszkiewicz, Bryan J. Mather, Kevin Raxworthy, Julian Staddon and Paul Thomas) to hear a sensory-crossing sonification of weather conditions in various global cities; and even listen to an "Electromechanical Solenoid Orchestra & Weather Ensemble" (Benjamin Bacon and Joe Saavedra) that plays surprisingly music composed in real time based on data from the sensors.

Humanity's evolving relationship with the virtual world is explored in depth.

"New Media Art concerns itself with life in its many different manifestations — not only human, but a shared symbiosis," Mr. Zhang said. "How do you define life? Is a computer alive? The ultimate goal is to question the anthropocentric, human-centered world view."

"Performative Ecologies" (Ruari Glynn) consists of two illuminated robotic sculptures in a darkened room that begin to perform when a visitor enters. Through the use of facial recognition software, the robots learn to choreograph routines that human visitors find most attractive; the viewer is left with the eerie experience of having a robot aim to please him. "The Fish-Bird Series" includes two robotic wheelchairs that "communicate" through movement and written notes, which are generated by embedded printers. Visitors can pick up the notes and read the intimate correspondence of the two empty chairs, and may even find themselves followed by one.

In some instances, human interaction with technology is required for the artwork to come into being. "Evolving Sparks Network" (Edwin van der Heide) is a stunning installation that looks like a dark empty gallery until a visitor enters it — and unknowingly triggers motion detectors that send electric sparks cascading across an overhead grid. If more people enter, the sparks fly faster and crackle louder; the overwhelming, just bearable sensation is that of being inside a firecracker.

"(Lights) Contacts" (Gregory Lasserre and Anaïs met den Ancxt, working as Scenocosme) consists of a small ball that is touched by a visitor — and nothing happens. But if a second visitor touches the first, the installation produces an array of changing lights and sounds. "Nemo Observatorium" (Lawrence Malstaf) requires a visitor to enter a large plastic cylinder, sit on a chair and press a

button — which unleashes a roaring blizzard-like maelstrom of tiny Styrofoam particles. Seated at the eye of the storm, the visitor is untouched by the particles, but mesmerized by the spectacular patterns they form on the plastic walls.

Nature, in multiple manifestations ranging from animal to algae, is also thrown into the digital mix.

“New media is sliding into the biological world,” said Chris Chafe, a Stanford University composer whose work “Tomato Quintet” (with Greg Niemeyer) consists of a playful, five-armed tent in which tomatoes are set to ripen. As they ripen — or if visitors breathe on them — the tomatoes trigger CO₂-sensitive sensors that cause salsa music to play and colored lights to flash.

“Scale” (localStyle in collaboration with Malcolm MacIver) is an “interspecies art project” consisting of 12 different species of nocturnal electric fish. The fish are grouped in tanks around a podium and their electric fields are sonified; visitors can “conduct” through switches on the podium, allowing the fish to be heard solo, in chorus, or with digital effects.

Environmental issues are referenced by many works, including the sublime “Knight of Infinite Resignation” (Diane Landry), an installation of 12 windmills and 237 empty water bottles filled with sand. As the windmills spin, cold lights glow and the sand pours drily, evoking an apocalyptic future brought about by our own criminal fecklessness, but against which even the bravest of efforts seems for naught.

“Humanity objectifies nature as a source of income, as a pure utilitarian relationship,” said Mr. Zhang. “This is the essential root of our current crisis. How do we deal with it?”

If “Translife” poses numerous tough, even uncomfortable, questions, its biggest challenge is perhaps to the notion of art itself.

Mr. Fan, the NAMOC director, acknowledges that some see the show as a science and technology popularization effort rather than an art exhibition, but he disagrees with this view.

“I think New Media as art is not really understood by the public,” he said. “This is scientific art and it is also artistic science.”

Mr. Zhang, the curator, goes further.

“Art is at a crossroads,” he said. “It has exhausted its possibilities and needs to expand.

“Representational art is past,” he added. “Even the most avant-garde art is past. New media art is real-time art — it is not signifying something. The media itself is the content.”

Mr. Fan, however, is more sanguine about the future of all kinds of art, old and new. Right after “Translife” opened, he traveled to the seaside to give lectures on the state of Chinese contemporary art to the nation’s top leaders.

He is also in the middle of planning for NAMOC’s new building, a structure to be built on the Olympic Green, by the Bird’s Nest Stadium. Five of the world’s top architects are competing to design it.

“‘Trans’ is a very interesting word,” Mr. Fan said, referring to the triennale. “Translife, transtime — these are especially relevant in China because it is changing so fast.”