The politics of aesthetics, space and community: An analysis of Same Old, Brand New by Cao Fei

Snels, J.

JORI SNELS
University of Amsterdam

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the site-specific video artwork Same Old, Brand New *by Chinese artist Cao Fei, which was exhibited in Hong Kong during Art Basel 2015. Set in the context of the Umbrella Revolution, it is argued that although the work by Chinese artists who became known in the 2000s may seem apolitical, artists such as Cao Fei have found subtle ways to create political art, to engage the public with politics, to disrupt political hegemony, to go beyond the boundaries of art institutions and to produce ungovernable communities that may evade identity politics. In its intervention in public space and its reworking of popular culture* Same Old, Brand New *has helped to temporarily constitute a politically engaged public. Using theories by Jacques Rancière, Henri Lefebvre and Jean-Luc Nancy, this study shows how* Same Old, Brand New *disrupts the distribution of the sensible and the hegemonic production of space and produces a sense of 'being-in-common'.*

Criticizing society, that's the aesthetics of the last generation. […] When I started making art, I didn't want to do political things. I was more interested in subcultures, in pop culture. […] [Ideology in art has] all been expressed.

(Cao Fei, cited in Beam 2015)

Same Old, Brand New

Beijing-based artist Cao Fei (b. 1978) expressed this disinterest in overtly political art in a conversation with Christopher Beam (2015) for the *New Yorker* at Art Basel in Hong Kong, where she showed her video artwork *Same Old, Brand New* (2015).[1] Beam argues that the prevailing western idea that contemporary Chinese art is politically dissident and rebellious is based on the Chinese art practice of the 1980s and the 1990s. Framing contemporary art in this way disregards the complex diversity of present-day art in China. Although some artists of the older generation, such as for example Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), still openly criticize the authorities in their art, the generations of artists who came after the '85 Movement and the cynical realism and political pop of the 1990s, such as Cao Fei, create art that is less overtly politicized. But does this mean that Cao Fei's *Same Old, Brand New* is not political?

Beam's observation that a de-ideologicalization has taken place in the contemporary art practice of China resonates with several other critics and scholars. Beijing-based art historian Karen Smith (2007: 43), for example, described Cao Fei as a member of the 'new generation'. In contrast to the first generation of avant-garde artists, who started creating art just after the end of the Cultural Revolution, Cao Fei's generation consists of artists born in the 1970s, who never fully experienced the repressive system of Mao Zedong (1893–1976). Therefore, they are more interested, Smith argues, in the phenomena that developed during their own youth, such as the growing consumer culture, globalization, urbanization and industrialization.

However, in his analysis of *Same Old, Brand New*, Beam (2015) shows that this work does actually take a critical stance towards China's modernization. The artwork was commissioned by Art Basel and the International Commerce Centre (ICC) in Hong Kong in 2014. The integrated LED lights of the ICC tower façade were used to screen Cao Fei's video every day from 13 to 17 March (Art Basel 2015: 1, 3; Sun Hung Kai Properties Limited n.d.).

The film referenced video games and arcade games from the 1980s that 'have become an integral part of popular and youth culture' (Cao Fei 2015a: 239). The simple, low-resolution shapes of figures that resemble famous games such as *Pac-Man*, the *Super Mario* series and *Space Invaders* move up and down the façade. The short scenes follow each other in rapid succession. Sometimes the figures are battling as if it were a real game, but in other scenes they merely float around. Viewers could watch the video from several recommended locations while listening to accompanying chiptune music created by Hong Kong sound artist Dickson Dee through speakers or a smartphone app. According to the press release, Cao Fei aimed to 'turn collective memories into a current reality' (Art Basel 2015: 1). Christopher Beam (2015), however, interpreted the work as follows: 'Even if you work hard and play by the rules, […] the result [i.e. being 'Game Over'] is the same'.

With Beam as an exception, *Same Old, Brand New* has received little attention by art critics compared to Cao Fei's more famous works such as *Cosplayers* (2004), *Live in RMB City* (2009) and *Haze and Fog* (2013). Even the artist book

Cao Fei: I Watch that Worlds Pass by only shows one image of *Same Old, Brand New* and includes very little additional information about the work (Cao Fei 2015b). In the interview with Cao Fei (2015a: 239–40) by Hans Ulrich Obrist at Art Basel Hong Kong 2014 the work was only discussed briefly. Most art journals and websites merely paraphrased the press release that accompanied the work.

Besides Beam's article, two other exceptions should be mentioned. Kriston Capps (2015) argued on the urban development news website *Citylab* that the skyscraper movie was a spectacle motivated by 'immense market pressures'. 'This Blade Runner tower is a tourist trap masquerading as new media. Cities are free to choose to build Ferris wheels or light-up towers if they like, but artists of Cao Fei's stature ought to steer clear', Capps wrote. Katherine Volk (2015), in her review for the magazine *ArtAsiaSpecific,* noted that Cao Fei uses her references to arcade games to show that the rapid technological developments in China have placed Chinese citizens under a lot of pressure to achieve the 'Chinese Dream' of this constantly transforming society. She argues that games can function as a way to escape that pressure.

Contrary to Capps' claim of escapism and commercialism, I will argue that in *Same Old, Brand New*, Cao Fei has appropriated symbols from popular culture to comment critically on contemporary Chinese society. In my view, this film also encourages critical engagement and conversation amongst its viewers. Cao Fei's artistic presentation of Chinese society becomes particularly relevant when considering that the work was shown in Hong Kong less than three months after the last sit-in protest of the city's pro-democracy Umbrella Movement was cleared by Hong Kong police (Hui and Lau 2015: 349). In this article I argue that *Same Old, Brand New* is political, using Rancière's (2004) definition of the word. The content of the video disrupts the distribution of the sensible, showing a different side of contemporary society than the one constructed by what Rancière (2011: 3) coins as the police (order): 'the configuration of the political community as a collective body with its places and functions allotted according to the competences specific to groups and individuals'. But there is more. The way in which *Same Old, Brand New* influences the reproduction of space is also crucial for its political significance. *Same Old, Brand New* alters spatial practice, which causes a representational space to be produced that is political instead of consumerist and therefore does not fit with the hegemonic representations of the used space (cf. Lefebvre 1991).

The generation of Chinese artists to whom Cao Fei belongs, whose work started to gain traction in the 2000s, has often been criticized for being apolitical. However, as I will show, there are more ways to be politically engaged than being openly dissident. Although *Same Old, Brand New* may seem blatantly apolitical, in its intervention in public space and its reworking of popular culture it helps constitute – albeit temporarily – a politically engaged public.

THE ART OF CAO FEI AND HER GENERATION

Born in the megacity Guangzhou in 1978, the film artist Cao Fei grew up in the Pearl River Delta region, which is located close to Hong Kong (Pollack 2016). As a child, she would watch the music videos broadcasted on MTV, which Cao's sister would make copies of when she was in Hong Kong. In the 1990s Cao Fei was able to visit Hong Kong because her father, an established sculptor of statues, would sometimes take her with him on his

business trips to Hong Kong. Cao Fei was thus in the unique position of having access to cultural products that were inaccessible to most Mainland Chinese at the time. The foreign music videos, talk shows, movies, soap operas and other forms of popular culture that she became familiar with during her youth would greatly influence her art practice, in which she also very often draws on popular culture (Cao Fei 2015a: 227–28; Pollack 2016).[2]

In 2006, Jaap Guldemond (2006: 52–53) argued that the new generation of artists who were rising to fame in the early 2000s, to which Cao Fei belonged, were distinguishing themselves from the previous generation of Chinese artists. The Political Pop art of the 1990s, with works from, for example, Wang Guangyi (b. 1957) combined communist and western capitalist symbols, arguably to critique both communism and capitalism, whereas Cynical Realist artists such as Fang Lijun (b. 1963) showed what they perceived as China's pessimistic reality. They made ample references to the Cultural Revolution, a period that the younger generation has no personal memories of. The political pop generation proved tremendously successful, triggering the quite expected critique from the generation after them that they became too commercial (Dal Lago 2008: 25–26, 29–30; Gao Minglu 1998: 21, 29–31; Hou Hanru [1996] 2002: 25–26). As Karen Smith (2007: 43) has noted, that generation, to which Cao Fei belongs, started creating work about their environment and the contemporary social, economic and political developments, steering away from communist iconography.

During the 1980s and the 1990s, China rapidly globalized, industrialized and urbanized as a result of economic reforms and started becoming more market-driven. The Pearl River Delta region in which Cao Fei grew up was home to many factories and was thus especially influenced by these developments (Smith 2007: 43; Princenthal 2013: 85, 87). However, not only Cao Fei, but her entire generation can be described as children of, in Guldemond's (2006: 54) words, the 'rapidly changing social, geographic and demographic reality of the urban environment'.

This influence of globalization, urbanization and industrialization on the lives of Chinese people can be observed in the art of many of Cao Fei's contemporaries. The photographers Song Tao (b. 1979) and Ji Weiyu (b. 1980), also known as the art collective *Birdhead*, for example create photo series about their lives in Shanghai, where they both grew up. Their black-and-white analogue photographs are gritty documentations of the rapidly transforming city shown from a subjective perspective (Zhang Li 2006: 320; Respini 2012). Another example is Chi Lei (b. 1981), who created the photographic series *Red Star Motel* (2009). These staged photos of a party in a small, dirty hostel room portray the reality of poor art students and migrant workers who live in such shared spaces. 'This shared experience and cohabitation was a miniature of the Chinese reality', Chi Lei (2016: 159–60) explained.

Both Ganzenberg (2015: 243, 250) and curator and long-time supporter of Cao Fei Hou Hanru (2015: 225) have noted that during her entire career Cao has focused on the influence of political, economic and technological developments on the lives of Chinese citizens. In the docudrama *Cosplayers*, for example, she showed young cosplayers (people who dress up as the characters from video games, comics and television series) who live in the Pearl River Delta. They roam around a large city pretending to be characters from popular culture and so create their own reality within the 'real' world to escape the high expectations of modern society. Without making a straight-forward argument, Cao Fei shows the conflicting impact of China's social

and economic changes on the country's younger generation (Cao Fei n.d.a; Ganzenberg 2015: 243).

From 2007 up until 2012 Cao Fei further studied how alternative realities can create different social relations in projects centered around her custom-built metropolis called RMB City, built in the virtual world of *Second Life*. Using avatars, people can visit this city, use it for online social interaction and contribute towards its development (Cao Fei 2015a: 230–31; Ganzenberg 2015: 244). According to Hou Hanru (2015: 225), *RMB City* enables people to overcome individual subjectivity using new technology and popular culture. In this city, people can have multiple identities and escape the real world. They become bodily immersed in this virtual reality and its distinct temporality (Braester 2013: 71–72). In the city's manifesto, China Tracy – Cao Fei's *Second Life* avatar – wrote:

> Flee from the twilight of the real world; try reversing all the discussions about realness by shifting them into the virtual light year. Be vertical against or parallel to the virtual, stab through the protection of reality with the sword of virtuality. This time, the once-invincible real is the defeated one.
>
> (China Tracy 2015: 199)

Many of the works Cao Fei made up until 2011 study how people deal with the social pressures of contemporary China. The works that she has made in the period from 2013 till 2015, including *Same Old, Brand New*, still play with alternative realities, but show a more pessimistic view of the world.[3] *Haze and Fog* (2013), a movie set in a luxurious apartment building in Guangzhou, shows a post-apocalyptic setting in which fog and zombies slowly take over the world of the complex's residents and staff, referencing both China's severe air pollution in 2011 and the television series *Walking Dead*, and also highlighting the wealth gap in Chinese society (Berry 2015: 215–16; Cao Fei 2015a: 234). In a chapter on *Haze and Fog* in Cao Fei's artist book *Cao Fei: I Watch that Worlds Pass by*, the fictional zombie A. Zombie (2015: 97) explains that humans are often thought to have become zombified because of consumerism, which means that people become 'desensitized, over materialized [*sic*] nonentities, beaten into emotional submission by a lust for microwave ovens and smartphones', although he adds that zombies are 'so much more than [that]'.

The movie thus addresses the negative impact of consumer culture on Chinese citizens and their lack of freedom. In a conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Cao Fei said the following about *Haze and Fog* and the later work *La Town* (2014):

> We worry about what will happen in the future, or what unseen horrors are in the fog. I think this is somewhat like the feelings that people have when they come up against the unseen powers and systems of China. I say this based on the context I live in as an artist in China.
>
> (Cao Fei 2015a: 239)

Although the content of these works is dark and shows a critical view on Chinese society, Cao Fei leaves it to the viewer to decide who is to blame. She explained that she does not 'see the impact of globalization in black-and-white terms'. On the contrary: 'I more observe from different angles' (Pollack 2016). Moreover, since she lives and works in a country where expressing

3. Cao Fei's most recent works, however, have been more opportunistic. In 2017 she worked on two projects, which both experimented with the new artistic opportunities offered by VR technology. *Derivation* is a video produced in collaboration with Google and Art Basel in which she used Google's VR 3D drawing software *Tilt Brush* to represent a 'utopian future where walls and societal restrictions are broken and new conversations and new possibilities emerge' (Cao Fei n.d.b). *Unmanned* is a short film in which a monk walks from the past to the technologically advanced future, where he enters Cao Fei's *BMW Art Car #18*. The movie accompanies the actual art car that she was commissioned to design for BMW. The matt black car can be viewed through a smartphone app that projects strokes of light onto it using AR technology. 'We are entering a new age, where the mind directly controls objects and where thoughts can be transferred, such as unmanned operations and artificial intelligence', Cao Fei said about this experience (Banks 2017; Cao Fei n.d.c).

social criticism can be a politically sensitive endeavour, she goes about it in a strategical manner. In her conversation with Obrist, Cao Fei (2015a: 241) said the following about Chinese artists: 'Everyone understands the circumstances and does their best to find ways to communicate, to express change as much as possible within existing limits. This is a reality outside cultural censorship'. Cao Fei is an engaged artist who, despite her words quoted at the opening of this article, straddles constantly the grey area of what can and what cannot be said and shown in China. In a playful and ambivalent way, she uses aesthetics and emotional tropes to prompt people to discuss and be critical of contemporary developments in society (Ganzenberg 2015: 244). Cao Fei is not only a producer but also an 'agent of change' (Hou Hanru 2015: 225). In the context of Hong Kong, her work intervened in the temporal and spatial aspects of the city.

HONG KONG

Same Old, Brand New was broadcast in Hong Kong from 13 March to 17 March 2015 (Art Basel 2015: 3). This was almost exactly three months after the Hong Kong police cleared the last stronghold of the Umbrella Movement, on 15 December 2014. The Umbrella Movement took place in Hong Kong during the last quarter of 2014. It was a pro-democracy movement based on peaceful protest and civil disobedience (Hui and Lau 2015: 348–49).

Two governmental decisions led to the rise of this movement. First, in June 2014 the PRC government expressed its intention to increase its power over Hong Kong, which many Hong Kong residents regarded as a violation of the 'one country, two systems' construction in which Hong Kong was supposed to be relatively autonomous (Tsang 2004: 238; Hui and Lau 2015: 348; Ng 2016). Second, the Chinese government decided on 31 August 2014 that all candidates for Chief Executive of Hong Kong at the 2017 elections would have to be supported by at least half of the members of the Nominating Committee, which in practice meant that Hong Kong politicians who did not support Beijing authorities would have a very slim chance of getting elected and that thus again the influence of the PRC on Hong Kong politics would increase. The Umbrella Movement regarded this as an undemocratic move and demanded 'universal suffrage' (Hui and Lau 2015: 348).

It should furthermore be mentioned that the movement was rooted in more fundamental problems that started when Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the PRC in 1997. First of all, political and economic power went to Hong Kong politicians who supported the CCP and magnates from the mainland, which strengthened and increased finance and class polarization among Hong Kong citizens. Financial disparity has increased significantly in Hong Kong since the early 1980s and many citizens blamed the mainland politicians for this (Hui and Lau 2015: 350–51; Ng 2016).

When the 'one country, two systems' deal was made, most people expected that the capitalist Hong Kong society would control socio-economic flows between Hong Kong and socialist mainland China. However, around 2010 it became clear that the opposite was happening as many rich mainland consumers started pouring into Hong Kong. Not only did the people of Hong Kong not expect or prepare for this, but it also stimulated nativist sentiments as many activists worried about the erasure of Hong Kong identity (Lui 2015). 'They are worried about the "death" of Hong Kong, a place as well as a form of collective life overwhelmed by the fear of "China", a menace not only

politico-economic but also biopolitical in nature', Iam-Chong Ip (2015: 415) explains. What Cao Fei (2015a: 239) described as 'the [worrisome] feelings that people have when they come up against the unseen powers and systems of China' are in the case of many Hong Kong citizens worries about financial, cultural and social disparity and the lack of freedom and autonomy in the face of an increasingly capitalist and urbanizing mainland China closing its grip on this SAR.

According to Cao Fei (2015a: 239), the decision to use 1980s game aesthetics for *Same Old, Brand New* was also inspired by the people of Hong Kong. She explained that in Hong Kong many people love games and that using gaming symbols would thus enable her to create an artwork that would speak to the locals, many of whom would be familiar with the games of the 1980s era. The arcade games referenced, such as *Super Mario*, *Pacman* and *Space Invaders,* are so famous that they will surely also appeal to a global audience.

It seems that when Cao Fei (2015a: 241) said that every Chinese artist 'does their best to find ways to communicate, to express change as much as possible within existing limits', she found her 'way to communicate' in arcade games. The work is not intended to address the issues that were central to the Umbrella Movement, as the socio-economic problems that Cao Fei shows are related to Xi Jinping's 'Chinese Dream'. However, displayed in the context of Hong Kong, the meaning of the work changes and also resonates with the fear of Hong Kong to be 'sinicized'. *Same Old, Brand New*'s criticality is thus closely tied to the context of its presentation, but, as I will show now, also to its aesthetics.

AESTHETICS AND POLITICS

What exactly are the symbols and narratives shown in *Same Old, Brand New?* The video starts with the message 'Are you ready?'. After that a waiting sign turns into a fish-shaped Pacman that eats a skull wearing a hair bow, which, according to Cao Fei, should be interpreted as a piranha 'devouring the object of fear'. In the subsequent scene, a fist is seen pounding up against a block that has a face. The block is a reference to the '? blocks' of the *Super Mario* video game series, from which rewards jump out when Mario punches it with its fist, but Cao (2015a: 239) has enlarged the fist so much that Mario himself is no longer visible. However, instead of power-ups, the objects that jump out of the blocks are what Beam (2015) accurately described as 'symbols of middle-class aspiration': a man going to work, skyscrapers, a 'round the clock' symbol, a recycling symbol, a plant, a diamond, a symbol for increasing prices and a happy couple. Every time the block is hit, a new symbol comes out and the face starts looking even happier. In the end, though, the whole block comes crashing down and together with the block China's market-driven authoritarian ideology explodes. Beam rightly interpreted this scene as follows: 'Even if you work hard and play by the rules, […] the result is the same'. This is also, and perhaps even more so, the case for those people in Hong Kong who lack the access to the resources needed to bridge Hong Kong's wealth gap.

Same Old, Brand New shows that society's fetish for urbanization, consumerism and economic growth should not go unquestioned as the reality is not as bright as it may seem. Authorities govern citizen's way of living through what Jacques Rancière (2004: 12–13) calls the 'distribution of the sensible'. This is the social system that controls the distribution of social roles in a community by controlling what can be said, heard, shown and seen. Xi Jinping's

'Chinese Dream' is an ideology based on the idea of progress and although it may remain rather ambiguous what the result of this progress should look like and how exactly it should be achieved, it does define people's position in society and what they can do and say in that social position. Using imagery from 1980s video games and arcade games Cao Fei disrupts the distribution of the sensible as she shows that the way of living propagated by the Chinese government may lead to disparity rather than prosperity. This artwork is political because it enables people to disrupt the social system by engaging with this alternative political narrative.

The harmful effects of China's ideology on society are made explicit in another scene. This part of the video resembles the video game *Space Invaders*, except that the ship tries to evade the aliens, rather than shooting them. Thereupon the aliens transform into various warning signs for the alleged dangerous products of capitalism, consumerism and industrialization: a stop sign, an ionizing radiation sign, a shopping cart, a caution sign, a raised fist, a money rotation sign, a factory and an electrical hazard sign. After flying through all these signs, the ship transforms into a giant, dangerous-looking bug, followed by countless baby insects. In this part of the video, Cao Fei thus shows that these alleged dangerous products corrupt and infect individuals, and that people also reproduce those side-effects.

Another important critique can be found in a scene that shows the 'network error dinosaur'. Unlike most of the other figures in the video, the dinosaur does not originate from a 1980s game, but is a so-called 'Easter egg' of Google Chrome. When Google Chrome cannot connect to the Internet, it displays a dinosaur and the page then turns into an 'endless running game' when the user hits the space bar. The aim of the game is to endlessly run and jump over obstacles without tripping. In *Same Old, Brand New*, however, the dinosaur hovers over a fire and gets killed by urbanization: steel building frames fall on top of it and catch fire. The dinosaur probably symbolizes a critique on the Internet censorship carried out by the Chinese government. Although the Chinese firewall does not extend to Hong Kong, Internet censorship does indirectly also inflict Hong Kong society. Chinese authorities for example disabled certain photos posted to the popular social media app WeChat with phones from Hong Kong to be visible to users in mainland China during the Umbrella Movement (Chin and Dou 2014). Although Chinese netizens can and sometimes do use services such as VPNs to bypass Internet censorship, it nonetheless shows how the Chinese government tries to control the distribution of the sensible by governing what people can observe and express on the Internet in an endeavour to construct the future that the authorities have imagined for China. It also further explains why Hong Kong protesters are worried about a future in which this limiting of freedom to support state ideology might be increasingly extended to the SAR.

When Beam (2015) asked Cao Fei who was to blame for the social and economic problems that she addresses in her art practice, she answered: 'I want to create a space for people to talk about it, rather than directly saying it myself'. With *Same Old, Brand New* she opened up a politically sensitive conversation and presents the topics that the Umbrella Movement protestors have also addressed but that the authorities tried to hide. Art here thus resonates with a social movement that occupied the streets just a few months earlier. She engages and continues a debate that was so powerfully articulated by the Umbrella Movement and thus interpellates both Hong Kong citizens and international visitors, encouraging them to continue to debate.

To do so, not only the content of the video but also the role of space is imperative. The aspect of space in *Same Old, Brand New* is quite unique to this work when compared to Cao Fei's other work. Most of her other artworks are not site-specific. They can be watched anywhere, whereas the projection and viewing locations of *Same Old, Brand New* are pre-determined and significant.

PRODUCTION OF SPACE

According to Lefebvre (1991: 8), 'society as a whole continues in subjection to political practice – that is to state power'. This implicates that space is a tool that is used by what Rancière would call the police order. To connect both thinkers: spatial arrangements are part of the distribution of the sensible. However, Lefebvre (1991: 8, 11, 32, 59–60) adds that space is not only a hegemonic tool but also a social product. Therefore, society always produces its own corresponding space. This means that society can only be changed if space is changed, which, as I will show, is what happens during the screening of *Same Old, Brand New*.

To understand the experience of watching Cao Fei's video, we should first pay attention to the viewing locations of the work. In the press release that guides the artwork, viewers are advised to watch the video from the terraces of Hong Kong's second-tallest building, the International Finance Center (IFC) (Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat n.d.). The ICC, the skyscraper on which the video is displayed, and the IFC are located on opposite sides of the Victoria Harbour. Other viewing spots that the press release recommends are Tamar Park and Sun Yat Sen Memorial Park, which lie on opposite sides of the IFC (Art Basel 2015: 1).

What does it mean that these specific locations were chosen? Lefebvre argues that every space consists of three layers. The production of the physical space of IFC building and the parks is what Lefebvre calls the 'spatial practice'. More important is how the spaces were intended to be used. In the IFC tower offices of various financial institutions are located, but the building also accommodates a hotel and a large mall (International Finance Centre n.d.). IFC is thus intended as a space to work, shop and for leisure and the parks are probably meant for leisure and physical exercise. This second layer is the representation of space, the conceptualized, mental space used by hegemonic powers to enforce how space should be used. However, during the screening of *Same Old, Brand New* these spaces were not used for work, shopping, leisure or exercise, but to watch and discuss a political artwork. The representational space, which is how a space is actually used, thus differed from the representation of space. When this happens, Lefebvre argues, political practice can be subverted. (Lefebvre 1991: 11, 33, 38–39, 41; Schmidt 2012: 4–5; Stanek 2008: 63).

Cao Fei enabled the production of a different representational space by creating a new spatial practice in the IFC building and the two parks. All three designated viewing spots are located in Central District, which is produced for financial, administrative, political and commercial practices. The hegemonic representation of the three observation locations of Cao Fei's artwork thus took place in a spatial practice that was constructed by a hegemony propagating capitalism, consumerism and urbanization. Users were supposed to reproduce the representation of that space by using it to make money, to spend money, to exercise and for leisure. Instead, viewers of Cao Fei's movie watch an artwork and discuss its political message.

During the screening of the film, the social system that is produced thus disrupts the system constructed by the authorities. This is why *Same Old, Brand New* enables the production of a political space. When the viewing locations are changed from spaces for consumerism into spaces for politics and criticism, the people using this space also change from being consumers to political citizens.

This process is further reinforced by the use of social media. Cao Fei explained that people photographed the work from many different locations in Hong Kong. She mentioned not only Central District but also the northwestern area Sheung Wan, the western commercial area Wan Chai, and the beach and a mountain top. People could subsequently share the pictures of their different views of the work with others on the Internet and start an online conversation. 'This is an example of how online communities are gradually becoming a part of public dialog', Cao Fei (2015a: 240) said.

Thus, *Same Old, Brand New* can alter representational spaces not only in the official viewing locations, but in many other locations from which the ICC building is visible. Not only Art Basel visitors can engage with this work but the entire Hong Kong population. Moreover, when the artwork is shared on the Internet, its political message can be discussed anywhere in the world, creating, in theory, an infinite number of political spaces. This means that who belongs to the audience of this artwork or to the community of people engaging with its topics is unclear, but as Holly Arden (2014: 104, 112–13) has rightly argued, this ambiguity gives public art a political capacity as it is no longer knowable or controllable who engages with this work. It enables an artwork to reach beyond its audience of art lovers and professionals, in this case the visitors of Art Basel, and 'engages the unknowable potential that "the public" suggests' (Arden 2014: 114).

BEING-IN-COMMON

One question remains and this is why it is significant that Cao Fei used 1980s arcade game and video game aesthetics in lieu of another artistic style. For the artist it might have been a straightforward decision since popular culture has been an important inspiration for Cao throughout her career. Moreover, the low-resolution shapes from 1980s games transfer well to a skyscraper LED-screen, which, like 1980s consoles, has much fewer 'pixels' than a modern video or computer screen. However, the nostalgia that these old games evoke also creates what Jean-Luc Nancy has called a sense of 'being-in-common' (1991). Nancy argues that in modern society being part of a community no longer automatically means experiencing a sense of 'being-in-common'. People experience a nostalgic longing for a mythical past in which such a harmonious feeling was still natural and self-evident (Devisch n.d.; Nancy 1991: X; Berghuis 2014: 8).

Perhaps this feeling of 'being-in-common' is what the press release refers to when it explains that Cao Fei's aim with *Same Old, Brand New* was to 'turn collective memories into a current reality' (Art Basel 2015: 1). The title of this artwork also seems to say that the 'same old', the remembered 1980s games, are now used to critique current society, and so they are appropriated in a sense that is 'brand new'.

Same Old, Brand New breaks down the boundaries between who does and does not belong to the audience of this work by creating what Arden (2014: 110–13) has called the 'impossible public'. It does so first of all through space.

By creating a public artwork that can be viewed from designated viewing spots but also from many other locations in the city, and on online platforms, neither the spaces used to watch the work nor the audience in those spaces are knowable or controllable. Thus, this work disrupts the endeavour of the police order to define who has the ability to engage in politics and who does not (Rancière 2004: 13). Nostalgia functions in a very similar way in this artwork.

Beam (2015) explains that on his first viewing of the video he 'registered only the familiar symbols: Pac-Man, a mountain of Tetris blocks'.[4] He only understood the political meaning after a second viewing. But the fact that he instantly recognized the games with which he probably grew up is significant. Viewers who recognized the figures from their childhood might have felt a feeling of nostalgia and this shared nostalgia can create a sense of 'being-in-common', which creates an opportunity for members of the 'impossible public' to connect. The game aesthetics in *Same Old, Brand New* thus enable the temporary deconstruction of social hierarchy and a disruption of governmental authority.

TO CONCLUDE

Although Cao Fei argues that her video installation *Same Old, Brand New* was not ideological, I have shown that this artwork *is* political. First of all, it disrupts the distribution of the sensible by depicting the disparities produced by the capitalist, urbanized hegemony that the police order strives for and thus it shows what cannot be shown within the social system produced by the political authorities. Second, it disrupts the hegemonic production of space by facilitating a spatial practice to be produced that does not conform to the representation of space. Finally, it creates an uncontrollable public by facilitating the viewing of her public artwork far beyond the boundaries of Art Basel and it uses the nostalgic sentiments that 1980s video games and arcade games evoke with many of its viewers to produce a sense of 'being-in-common'.

Although art of the generation of Chinese artists who became famous in the 2000s is not necessarily ideological or rebellious, it is not a-political either. Artists such as Cao Fei find more subtle ways to create political art, to engage the public with politics, to disrupt political hegemony, to go beyond the boundaries of art institutions and to produce ungovernable communities that may evade identity politics. I have shown that *Same Old, Brand New* has a strong political power and that art criticism that defines such contemporary Chinese artworks as 'tourist trap[s]' motivated by 'immense market pressures' (Capps 2015) relies on superficial analysis and a lack of awareness for the contexts in which art is produced and displayed. Tourists were not trapped; nor was the work driven by the market. Instead, the work created a public, a temporal being-in-common, with people that were confronted – for a moment, on a specific place – with the flip side of urbanization and with the growing disparity that the China Dream tries to cover up. The work may not be overtly political, but in its intervention in the city of Hong Kong and the art extravaganza called Art Basel, the work did unsettle both the city and the art world.

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4. This quote also shows one weakness of Rancière's theory: aesthetics can only disrupt the distribution of the sensible and be political if the observer understands the meaning of what is being said or shown.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Jori Snels is a graduate of the art studies research master (M.Phil.) at the University of Amsterdam and a research assistant at Amsterdam Center for Globalisation Studies (ACGS) at the University of Amsterdam. She wrote a master's thesis about digital art in China and is currently working on a research project about the imagination and construction of the future in Chinese science fiction films and digital art. In the past, she has published on alternative art practices in the GDR.

Contact: University of Amsterdam, Turfdraagsterpad 9, 1012 XT Amsterdam, the Netherlands.
E-mail: jorisnels@live.nl