

IAN CHENG

Fondazione Sandretto Re
Rebaudengo, Turin

In Ian Cheng's installation *Emissary in the Squat of Gods* (2015) – the first part of a planned trilogy – digitally animated, abstracted humanoid figures flitted across a pair of flat projection surfaces that leant against the far wall. They were either drawn by Cheng or culled from video games and websites inspired by the likes of *Angry Birds Rio* and animations by Japan's Studio Ghibli. From a set of accompanying speakers poured a bedlam of declarative staccato sound effects and jittering voices that cried out vowels and consonants, suggesting a preverbal language that begs to communicate yet is unable to form a single recognizable word. The work projected on the right-hand screen follows the personal journey of a petite, childlike emissary who guides the viewer through a rocky volcanic landscape, jumping between gravity-defying pixelated flames that rise from the ground. The larger screen on the left showed the ritual activity of the ancient community through which this figure moves. As day turns into night, the emissary navigates the treacherous terrain and social encounters on a perpetual search for the unknown.

Using calculated algorithmic manipulations of computer programs, Cheng visualizes and maps the cognitive dissonance and rupture of humans becoming self-aware and how that may have played out in group dynamics and ritual behaviours of early human societies. More specifically, the work in this exhibition references the ideas of American psychologist Julian Jaynes, which were first expressed in his controversial book *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (1976). Jaynes proposed that early humans did not live in a state of conscious self-awareness, and thus did not 'think' reflexively as we do today, but rather lived in a perpetual present. He also proposed that, until as recently as 3,000 years ago, the human mind ran on a 'bicameral' system. According to Jaynes,

the left hemisphere that drove action, responded without awareness to the rational commands 'heard' in the form of hallucinations from the right hemisphere of the brain. When reacting to moments of stress, these authoritarian voices, which might be interpreted as a god or a spirit of the dead, offered resolute commands for social behaviour.

Playing the role of a determinant god, Cheng programs each of the primitive humanoid characters in his live simulations with distinct behaviours. He then commands them to interact with each other in a multidimensional virtual space. As the figures continually morph, grow and replicate, evolutionary patterns seem to unfold in their ritualized actions: they dance, masturbate, run or rest, toil with tools, and die in the raw, chaotic world that they inhabit. The perspectival plane of the animation tilts, shifts and pans, moving from first person to third, from up in the skies to beneath the rocks, and inside and out of the coloured shapes that define the boundaries of this digitally drawn world.

As Cheng's figures and landscapes appear and disappear, guiding forms like white runic symbols float freely across the screen, while a rotund owl-come-spirit animal and pink gyrating serpents suggest mythological and biblical narratives. However, Cheng not only revels in mythologies, but rather explores the possibilities that digital technology offers for exploring complex thought systems and the effects they have on our material world.

Since Jaynes's hypothesis was first made public in the mid-1970s, advances in brain-imaging technology and neurobiology have proven true many of his ideas relating to hallucinations and to the early development of the human brain. In a book published last year, *Our Mathematical Universe*, theoretical physicist Max Tegmark proposed a concept that further complicates theories in this field: that consciousness – what he calls 'perceptonium' – is another form of matter just like a solid, liquid or gas, which can be described using mathematics. Similarly, in Cheng's work, algorithms and digital technology become artistic tools to help vividly visualize no less than the evolution of human consciousness itself.

ARIELLE BIER



XII BALTIC TRIENNIAL Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius

One of the characters in Valentinas Klimašauskas's *How to Clone a Mammoth* (2015) is an artificial intelligence that asks a human for tips on curating an exhibition. 'Make it less human!' the human answers. Klimašauskas read the text as part of a performance on the terrace of a tennis club in Vilnius on a rainy afternoon, marking the beginning of the XII Baltic Triennial, curated by Virginija Januškevičiūtė at the CAC. His character's suggestion seemed to have been taken seriously in the show, which programmatically lacked a title or statement, other than a loose set of keywords (among them: 'MURMUR', 'SHIPWRECK' and 'NOW'). The exhibition was instead framed by a text by Annick Kleizen on forests as a symbol for nonlinear thinking. Trees, apparently independent entities, are all invisibly connected, underground, as a single organism.

This resistance to explicit interpretation – taking the form of mockery or outright rejection – was at stake in the exhibition's most resonant works. Perrine Baillieux's performance *Be As It May* (2014/15) was a lecture on a retro-dated painting by Kazimir Malevich, delivered in song. Baillieux created a compelling analysis of the reasons that might have led Malevich to tackle a figurative subject after decades of abstraction, and then to lie about its date; but she did so while singing over a soft electro baseline. I had the impression that she was making a solid argument, while raising scepticism on whether arguments in general should be taken seriously.

A similar ambiguity was at play in Gerda Paliušytė's *The Road Movie* (2015), a partially scripted documentary that follows the members of rap duo ONYX on a day trip through Vilnius. Their 1993 hit *Slam* was among the first American rap songs to reach the country after its independence, and it became deeply rooted in local culture. The two African-American rappers walk around a city for which they are symbols of both pop stardom and social transformation – swaggering, amused and dramatically at odds with their surroundings. Paliušytė's film could be seen as a slapstick take on cultural history – both its

