



LuYang: *Delusional Mandala*, 2015, 3D animation, 16 minutes, 27 seconds.

has been more widely deployed for such a diverse range of purposes, from recitation to ritual copying to incorporation into exorcism rites (its most common use in Tibet). It is probably the extraordinary doctrinal depth of the text that proves so irresistible: a reflection on “emptiness” (*kong* in Chinese, *śūnyatā* in Sanskrit), it is often misrepresented as a sort of Buddhist Absolute to be approached through a *via negativa*, when it is in fact nothing of the sort. The textual and ritual practices evoked by Tsai’s work open up a world of multiple and simultaneous meanings.

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Chinese Buddhist sculptures as part of a long history of artifacts and infrastructures that, by imaginatively positing nonhuman agents, have extended human capacities. Today, many religious teachers and students avidly embrace a global techno-Buddhism. Some specialists, as evidenced by Heidi Campbell and Ruth Tsuria’s multiauthored compilation *Digital Religion* (2013), contend that Buddhism, AI, digital media, and electronics technology occupy the same ontological sphere of knowledge and experience. Masahiro Mori even famously claimed in his manifesto-like book *The Buddha in the Robot: A Robot Engineer’s Thoughts on Science and Religion* (1981) that robots have Buddha nature – the potential for attaining Buddhahood – and therefore deserve respect and compassion in their engagement with humans.

For Chinese new media artist LuYang, who disdains conventional gender categories, Buddhism is a way to probe the relationship between body and mind, and question the nature of reality and the self, while hopefully exploring the possibility of rebirth in the

digital world. Growing up with a Buddhist grandmother, the artist developed a keen interest in Buddhist imagery, various notions of salvation, and cutting-edge technology. In a 2020 interview in *Radii*, LuYang expounded on a recent avatar, Doku: “In the virtual world, I was able to do things such as choosing my own gender-neutral body and creating an appearance that reflects my own sense of beauty, which are not possible in real life. I consider Doku as my digital reincarnation.... He is me but someone else at the same time. Just like the Buddhist concept of *ālaya-vijñāna* [storehouse consciousness], he represents a stream of consciousness which lingers in different worlds and different selves.” LuYang’s installations – filled with video projections, flashing signs, and interactive arcade stations – interlace anime and otaku cultures, religious iconography and computer gaming, neuroscience and biotechnology.

In *LuYang Delusional Mandala* (2015), a hectic and darkly ironic meditation on medicine and technology, viewers witness the misadventures of a CGI character with LuYang’s face. In one uncanny scene, the character is skinless and boneless, with lungs, heart, stomach, kidneys, and intestines exposed. The image was inspired by a classic Buddhist meditation practice: intense contemplation of the impurity of the body. Previously seen only as the CGI protagonist of the videos, LuYang’s avatar is here both the supreme being in the artist’s personal cosmology and a tortured creature reminiscent of the patchwork corpse brought to life in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

Lu’s video-game installation *The Great Adventure of Material World* (2017) features themes of post-human life that have long been explored in cyberpunk circles.





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LuYang: *The Great Adventure of Material World—Game Film*, 2020, video, 26 minutes, 22 seconds.

Works in the “LuYang Delusion” series, saturated with Buddhist iconography and doctrine, take their cues from the artist’s research into neuroscience. Reflecting especially the influence of behavioral psychologist B.F. Skinner, they speak to LuYang’s simultaneous refusal of and fascination with social control. In one, *LuYang Delusional Crime and Punishment*, the artist’s avatar is born from a 3D printer and goes on to suffer various hellish torments. Indeed, most of LuYang’s digital productions have involved manipulating humanoid characters, while more recent works, such as *Doku: Digital Alaya* (2021), with its androgynous figure dancing on multiple screens against multiple environmental backdrops, employ other forms of choreographic manipulation such as live motion capture.

The Material World Knight is the main character in several of LuYang’s artworks, most recently *The Great Adventure of Material World—Game Film* (2020). Based on the eponymous video-game artwork *The Great Adventure of Material World—Game* (2019), the 26-minute film replicates a video game’s structure and visual themes in several ways. It is divided into nine episodes that function like game levels but also suggest a Buddhist primer of sorts. (Predicated on the ascension of awareness toward greater and greater spiritual purity—although every being is vulnerable to repeated setbacks—Buddhism posits six realms of reincarnation, seven stages of enlightenment, and 31 levels of existence.)

At the end of each episode, the Knight enters a portal to reach the next episode, where he meets new enemies and NPCs (non-playable characters) who provide him with new knowledge and help him acquire new

weapons. The film also includes scenes from the video game in which characters have conversations or deliver monologues, as well as scenes based on fighting game play. In one scene, the boy-hero is poised in a face-off against a skull-headed villain among the ruins of a retro-futurist city.

LuYang was born in Shanghai in 1984, the same year that Nam June Paik broadcast his telethon-like work *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* from a series of satellite-linked television studios in several locations worldwide. Unlike Orwell, Paik saw television as a progressive platform enabling geographically and culturally distant viewers—as well as participants such as John Cage, Laurie Anderson, Charlotte Moorman, and Allen Ginsberg—to gather together productively. Despite their many differences, LuYang appears to be driven by similar yearnings. Paik, who experimented with TV monitors, broadcasting, synthesizers, and robots, was one of the first artists to use video as an art form. Today, LuYang professes to “live on the Internet,” a genderless space of boundless freedom and possibility. Both artists, while engrossed in Buddhist practices and ideas and infused with a longing for a transhumanist realm, also serve as keen witnesses to our thoroughly mediated lives. ●

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