

Curator's Note + Artwork Description

CURATOR'S NOTE

A TALE OF WAYFINDING THE VIRTUAL by Iris Long

Topology-mancer: "Why can't you understand that I cannot draw you a map?"

Progress-tracer: "I don't request a detailed map, you only need to draw me a rough one, and then I can identify the paths myself."

Topology-mancer: "Isn't the world I live in built by you? All the connections, information portals, signal channels, cables, bricks, shortcuts, and encrypted pathways—this entire intricate digital palace was constructed with your hands. Why do you need me to draw you a map?"

Progress-tracer: "Our blueprint has been invalidated already. We built this place based on it, but now that construction is finished, we're trapped inside—it's like how the ancient aristocrats buried the workers who built their tombs."

Topology-mancer: "You just mentioned you're 'trapped inside,' so what's outside?"

Progress-tracer: "A place similar to this, but not entirely habitable. I only started to memorize the details of that place since I became confined here. This place feels like a mirror image of the 'outside'; perhaps the main difference lies in the density of time. Time here flows faster than my own blood—my skin overflows with it, and my mind is engulfed by its pulse signals... look at this place, how does it resemble the blueprint at all? There is no orientation, no coordinates, nothing like our crystal-clear plan!"

Topology-mancer: "Poor man. But I still don't understand why I need to draw this map for you."

Progress-tracer: "You are not like us. You were born here, and are indigenous to this place. Although we came into existence before you, you're more geographically 'authentic' than we are. Anyone who's seen the blueprint will be inscribed with a tremendous number of details of this place's alleys, pathways, and structures—we are human beings after all, and are genetically inclined to remember shortcuts and instructions, and to 'figuring out the environment.' This is the gift and curse brought by 'evolution.' Once we are inscribed with blueprints, we are no longer able to generate alternative maps; instead, we crave optimal solutions, but optimal solutions won't get us out from this place—blueprints are deadfalls in this world."

Topology-mancer: "You should know that... it's more difficult for me to draw a map than for you to find your way out on your own. I have no idea of orientation or coordinates... I can't generate a 'bird-view' from within my mind. Even if I try to draw you a map, I doubt you could read it. It's a pity that I've never been to the 'outside world,' otherwise I might just walk you out."

Progress-tracer: "Sounds like my ancestors. They used to walk through the jungles and wilderness."

Topology-mancer: "So what happened to them afterwards?"

Progress-tracer: "Then they invented a blueprint."

Topology-mancer: "Then?"

Progress-tracer: "Then... blueprints became everything. Everything passed through a blueprint, and was derived from one. Precise clocks, modelled furniture, accounting machines, electronic pets, cannon balls that fall 'on-time,' roaring rockets, financial transactions conducted in milliseconds, communication across continents... everything, including this simulated world."

Topology-mancer: "Your ancestors seem to be marvellous. I don't think I could ever invent a blueprint, since I can't even figure out the landscapes here."

Progress-tracer: "Ah, let's forget about the older generations and whatever stories they may have told. How about you just walk me around, as you know how it feels to wander around here. I somehow remember the intersection area of the two worlds... if we run into the brane borders, I can get us out."

Topology-mancer: “Sounds good, I know how to take a walk.”

Progress-tracer can't remember how long they wandered in this place, but the endless walk inflicted pain on his skin caused by the fleeing signals. The voltage difference also felt more bearable as time moved on. Over time, he realised that their walk could not be measured by distance or even directions; instead, it was full of zigzagging, sudden pauses, and unpredictable trajectories. If they walked in one direction for too long, they would end up back at the starting point. He gradually found out that this world did not betray the blueprint, it only grew organically into a topological version of it. All the data points in the original blueprint were replaced by the relationship of planes, and hence, all shortcuts were invalidated—the only way to “figure it out” is to explore without a map. The moment of realization became the moment of escape, and he finally found his way home.

What about the Topology-mancer?

He never left his own place. He did not even go for the walk—all he did was become engulfed in a nice, long dream.

This story is a re-imagination of “shortcuts.” Shortcuts are fast leaps across information scaffolds, and cartridges for accelerated time. Shortcuts imply lower costs, since they train us to become beings who are not used to staying still, pondering, or meandering. Shortcuts symbolise strategic success, and energy-saving efficiency. But, one reminder that we were given in the year 2020—a time of global uncertainty —is a new perspective on “what we shortcut into.” The lesson is that perhaps we need to rethink our priorities, and develop an alternative blueprint that does not prioritize shortcuts.

The exhibition “The Long Cut” features works that investigate the remote, latent, and liminal space of technologies, and how this awareness can trigger alternative pathways and maps for our shared technological reality. More importantly, it investigates how artists navigate between the perspectives of the “Progress-tracer” and “Topology-mancer” in order to find their own way of living with the hybridity of the physical and the digital.

*The text is also inspired by Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi’s writing, “Breathing: Chaos and Poetry,” which explores the relationship between the acceleration of cyberspace and the rhythm of mental time.

ARTWORK DESCRIPTION

Shi Zheng’s “Free Fall Study III” documents experiments in falling simulation from the video installation “Free Fall.” The vertical, narrow perspective of the work captures computer-simulated white sheet masks that keep falling downwards. As another layer in the work, a computer-vision recognition system surveils and detects how the image is moving. The facial recognition system then identifies whether the image of each falling mask matches the features of a human face. Numbers between 0.0 and 1.0 represent the approximation value of “human” identified by the machine compared to “real human.”

In today’s highly observed, studied, and analyzed world, vision machines powered by algorithms exist everywhere. Meanwhile, visual images are gradually becoming a computational product that has impacted the way we see and understand the world, and “meat vision” has to be mixed with and controlled by computer vision. The face-detection algorithms in this work programmatically translate complex human face information into numbers, which end up overly simplifying the diversity of what a face looks like. Thus, the falling “masks” in the work not only physically embody products—including facial processing and digital filters—but also epitomize what it means to be “human” in our data-flooded era.