Nonstop Digital Flickerings;

Sam Wagter,

Supervisor: Sneppova, Daniela, *The University of Western Ontario*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Visual Arts

© Sam Wagter 2023

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd

**Recommended Citation**


This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact wlswadmin@uwo.ca.
Abstract

This dossier is composed of an extended artist statement, documentation of artwork, an artist case study, and a curriculum vitae. These sections, in combination, contextualize my research and inspirations behind the digital art I create. The extended artist statement and practice documentation outlines my theory of ‘void’ and explores the intersection between queerness, video games, and ‘void’, which creates the theoretical base of my Master’s thesis project, *Non-Stop Digital Flickerings*. The case study of Lu Yang’s practice surveys significant artworks and explores their work within the context of ‘void,’ to further understand their approach to art-making.

Keywords

Animation, computers, cyborg, digital art, glitch, feminism, Lu Wang, queer art, video art, video games, void.
Summary for Lay Audience

This dossier is composed of an extended artist statement, documentation of artwork, an artist case study, and a curriculum vitae. These sections, in combination, contextualize my research and inspirations behind the digital art I create. The extended artist statement and practice documentation outlines my theory of ‘void’ and explores the intersection between queerness, video games, and ‘void’, which creates the theoretical base of my Master's thesis project, Non-Stop Digital Flickerings; The case study of Lu Yang’s practice surveys significant artworks and explores their work within the context of ‘void,’ to further understand their approach to art-making.
Acknowledgements

I wish a heartfelt thank you to the following individuals who have supported me:

To my advisor, Professor Sneppova, for all of your assistance throughout my last 4 years here at Western. My work would not be where it is today without your support.

To Christof Migone, Soheila Esfahani, Tricia Johnson, Geordie Sheppard, Liza Eurich, and Jennifer Martin, for the opportunities to work with you all on various projects and internships. I have learned an incredible amount from each of you.

To Dickson Bou and Liza Eurich for the assistance in installing, coordinating, and organizing my thesis exhibition in the Artlab Gallery – I am beyond appreciative of everything you’ve done for me, and for the students here at Western.

To the Western Visual Arts staff and faculty, and especially Anna Madelska, for supporting me. Each one of you are wonderful educators and workers, and I would not be here today without your support, lessons, assignments, and engagement.

To my peers from my 6 years at Western and my ITRC coworkers - thank you endlessly.

To all my dearest friends, thank you for all your love, patience, and support.

To Kyle Petersen for your support, love, and for being my number one fan.

To my parents Mark and Michelle, my sister Danielle, for your love and for supporting me throughout my career.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ii  
Keywords ii  
Summary for Lay Audience iii  
Acknowledgements iv  
Table of Contents v  
Introduction 1  
Chapter 1: Extended Artist Statement 2  
Chapter 2: Practice Documentation 17  
Chapter 3: Case Study of Artist Lu Yang 28  
Bibliography 40  
Curriculum Vitae 42
Introduction

This dossier is a culmination of the artwork and research titled *Non-Stop Digital Flickerings*, all which was completed during my two years as an MFA student at Western University. *Non-Stop Digital Flickerings* investigates the intersections of queerness, identity, computer technologies, and digital existence through the metaphor of ‘void’. The dossier is made of three chapters. Chapter 1 is an extended artist statement outlining in detail the theories and themes behind the artwork I’ve created. This section will provide context for the exhibition held at the Artlab Gallery, located on Western University’s campus. Chapter 2 is a series of documentation imagery of my artwork, including video stills, digital imagery, and exhibition documentation. Included with each image is a brief artist statement, outlining the artworks' creation and conceptual intentions, in relation to ‘glitch’ and ‘void’. Chapter 3 is a case study on the artist Lu Yang and surveys their practice while highlighting significant bodies of work which reside in or create ‘void’. Loosely rooted in Legacy Russell’s *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*, the first two chapters of the dossier are written in a manifesto-like style and are intended to document my research in a concrete way, setting the foundation for future artwork and writing in my career.
Chapter 1: Extended Artist Statement

“Gnash the mesh that binds her. Quench the icy iron. Her mind is a matrix of non-stop digital flickerings.”¹

In this extended artist statement, I will provide a window into my practice and introduce my theory of ‘void,’ which has developed alongside it. Through the use of ‘void’, metaphorical ‘glitches’, computer-glitches (comp-glitches), and video game theory, this first chapter will delve into the thought processes, reasoning, and research behind my practice. This chapter is meant as a tool to parallel the artwork I create, becoming a source of context when needed. In the first section, I will begin by outlining my practice and my process of creation. The following two sections will define and give examples of the theories of ‘void’ and ‘glitch’. In the final section, I will explore ‘void’ within my artwork through the lenses of queer, feminist, and video games theory. This section demonstrates how my theory of ‘void’ functions beyond the artwork I create and highlights the intersections of these themes as the groundwork for my future as an artist.

MY PRACTICE

The artwork I create is exclusively made using digital technology. Primarily working within software and digital mediums which possess a ‘void’ space, I utilize my computer’s full rendering capabilities and push the computer’s processing power to its limits as a method to access the ‘void’. An example of this would be within Adobe’s Premiere Pro video editing software. When creating a video animation, I will suffocate the clips with effects, to the point at which Premiere will be unable to process them and I will need to then remove some, in order to allow it to work again. The overwhelming use of these layers overload my computer’s random-access memory (RAM), resulting in various types of error messages, from a red or yellow premier preview screen to my computer itself lagging or freezing completely. My computer’s fans, central processing unit (CPU) and graphics processing unit roar as I work, and the heat the computer’s body puts off is extreme. Walking this line, pushing the extremes of my computer’s capabilities, is what I aim for when creating my artwork. I see the computer’s body as an extension of my own and the act of creating is almost a performance. I do this because, through my artwork, I hope to create opportunities for mistakes, comp-glitches, and errors to occur. Rather than mimicking or falsely manufacturing the glitches themselves, I look to create environments and spaces where the unexpected can occur. All of my videos, digitally rendered images, and animations are not complete unless at some point within the process, there has been an unexpected occurrence. These moments are not always visually represented, and may not be available for the viewer, but it is important to my process that they be there in some form.
“Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”

Primarily, my artwork is made using the open-source 3D modeling / animation software Blender. I then take the assets or animations created with Blender and construct the final piece within multiple post-production Adobe software, such as Premiere Pro, Photoshop, Audition, and so on. The project passes through multiple programs because no single program is capable of producing what is needed. I see this transfer as food traveling through the digestive system, slowly converting into energy for other bodily systems to use to maintain life. The food passes through various organs and processes to break down and give our body what it needs, and my artwork follows this same structure, within the computer body instead.

I see my computer not as a tool for creation but rather, as an extension of myself. Born in the age of computers and raised by parents who owned a computer store, I have never been separated from computer technology and the internet; I am, thus, part of the first generation of digital natives.

The computer’s body is a separate body from my own flesh, with its own capabilities and restrictions, different from my human one. This body is mechanical and electronic but is modelled on our human anatomy. The computer case is the skin, the monitor is its face, the keyboard and mouse are its hands. The webcam is its eyes, and its microphone is its ears. The computer speaks through its speakers, and its motherboard is its brain. These similarities allow

---

me to interact with this machine and form a connection or relationship with it. Not in an anthropomorphic way, however. By spending thousands upon thousands of hours staring into its face and holding its hands, the computer I built from scratch becomes an extension of myself.

“Under an electronic skin one can adopt virtually any persona and experience a written world of images and symbols as if it were immediate experience. Indeed, it is as if the body were immersed in unframed symbols themselves, without need for distance or reference.”

My computer houses my many digital identities and personas; facilitates new spaces for me to express myself, form connections with others, and explore new spaces and environments which do not exist in our physical world. As Anne Balsamo states, “The phenomenological experience of cyberspace depends upon and in fact requires the willful repression of the material body.” In many ways, my digital self has become an equal to my physical being by allowing me to become fully immersed in my virtual self.

This is not to say that I ignore or neglect my physical self – in Technologies of the Gendered Body, Balsamo theorizes, when exploring the concept of our future as cyborgs, and our physical connection to technology, that: “As a consequence, the body, as a sense apparatus, is nothing more than excess baggage for the cyberspace traveler.” I do not see my body as baggage, rather, I see it as a bridge to my digital body; it is the connection point which

---


5 Balsamo, Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women, 125.
comes in contact with the computer body. Without my physical self, my digital self cannot exist. Simultaneously, I would not be who I am now without my digital self.

Due to the closeness of this relationship, I have found, within my practice, the possible evidence of the computer’s influence on my own brain’s own programming - in the form of my approach to art making. My practice utilizes a similar structure to that in which one would write a body of code. For a computer to execute a body of code successfully, it goes through each line, letter, number, and space in order, top to bottom, following the instructions of the previous line to inform the next. Within programming, there are ‘functions’, and there are ‘loops’. ‘Functions’ are defined as an isolated module or body of code that executes a specific, defined job or task. Functions take data into them, process said data, and spit out a separate data outcome. Almost as a body intakes nutrients and releases waste, in a seemingly endless cycle, a body of code can do the same. A function is capable of processing data over and over again, and functions can be stacked within each other, creating a possibly infinite, self-sufficient being, looping within itself forever.6 A ‘loop’ is a repeated sequence which will continue to repeat until a specific goal or condition is reached. The code will check, after each loop, if said condition has been reached, returning to the very first instruction of the sequence if it has not. A loop can be used within a function, resulting in the ability to have many loops within many repeated functions.

I view my artistic practice as a body of code, each piece of art or writing is a function I’ve added, indicated by the semicolon after each title of the artworks and pieces of writing I create.

---

6 My ongoing artwork wag[t]her; is an example of this. More information can be found in Chapter 2 of this dossier.
When a semicolon is used, it indicates to the computer that the line is done, and it should continue to the next. The themes and ideas within these artwork ‘functions’ are the loops, repeating until the parameters have been reached. These parameters may never even be defined, leading to an infinite multi-loop; my ongoing practice as an artist. I am not searching for the defined but, rather, I am welcoming infinity, endlessness, or ‘void’.

Using computer technologies and video games as tools of metaphor, I am interested in creating and exploring the theory of ‘void’ and applying it to gender and feminist issues and concepts to create an alternative, digitally based way to approach problems of inequality. I am interested in using my obsession with computers as a way to explore concerns related to my own identity and to contextualize the intersections between humans and computers within this theoretical and metaphorical framework, to be implemented in my practice in the future. I am interested in drawing connections and comparisons between the human and the computer.

‘VOID’

“There is no centre of operations, no organizing core; there are no defining causes, overriding reasons, fundamental bases, no starting points or prime movers; no easy explanations, straightforward narratives, simples accounts, or balanced books.”

The ‘void’ is a space which is both physical and metaphorical. It is the metaphorical space of thinking and conversation. It is the physical space between two people talking, and it is

---

the headspace which the two conversationalists are in. It is the space between binaries of
gender and sexuality, and it is between the 1s and 0s of a computer. ‘Void’ is the birthplace of
‘glitch’ and it nurtures them to grow and thrive. It is a space lacking in the concrete and
defined, and it embraces so-called errors and ‘glitches’ in the ‘codes’ of society. This code I
speak of is the (already implemented) structures of gender, patriarchy, institutions, race, and
queerness. It refers, more specifically, to all structures put in place to suppress, hide, and erase
all that are defined as, or considered to be, ‘other’ ‘unideal’, ‘ugly’, ‘wrong’ and ‘strange’.

‘Void’ is the space found within the gaps of these coded structures. It is the in-between
space. This space embraces those who fall into multiple labels or identities - those who are not
white, those who are not cisgender, those who are not straight, those who are not men, those
who feel restricted or suppressed by the social standards implemented long before their time,
those who want to free themselves from a binary way of thinking, and those who seek to live
within the in-between.

“Maps of the network cannot be stolen, not because they are closely guarded, but because
there is no definitive terrain. Any map adds to the network and is always already obsolete.”

‘Void’ space cannot be defined or mapped. Just as the internet is a conglomerate of
intertwining networks with no specific or guaranteed terrain, ‘void’ is an ever-growing matrix-
like space, made for ‘glitches’, errors and those who do not conform. It is undefined terrain - an
un-mappable space which provides a platform or a salutary haven between binaries for the

---

8 Plant, Zeros + Ones: Digital Women + the New Technoculture, 49.
glitches to thrive. ‘Void’ is for those who require it, it is inaccessible to and against those who seek to colonize and exploit.

“The future is queerness’s domain...The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*...we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds.”

‘Void’ is outer space. This space is limited to us. It is a space in which alien life floats freely and navigates without worry. These life forms are different from humans – they don’t conform to humanity’s social rules and regulations. They see our world differently. Galaxies fly through this space, occasionally colliding with one another, merging, and forming a new cluster of stars and planets. Within ‘void’, these galaxies condense together in a singularity and expand into a new system, far bigger than either one was before. These systems continue to expand and grow, using the ‘void’ space as a vessel for this expansion. With new systems comes new forms of life, new beings, new concepts, and new populations; aliens which do not follow the regulations of our planet. ‘Void’ lacks definitive borders, and may only be accessed by those who refuse, or do not conform to the rules, definitions, labels, and regulations assigned to their identity and self.

‘Void’ is the space inside the gallery. It is the air and the floor. It is the physical space between the art and the wall. It is the space between the binary pairs of speakers, projectors, screens, paintings, photographs, and sculptures. ‘Void’ is not an empty space – it is an open

---

space for exploration and development. It is a blank canvas, an empty Microsoft Word
document, a blank Adobe Premiere timeline, a brand-new notebook, an empty petri dish, and a
quiet room.

‘GLITCHES’

“...[We] work toward dissolving ourselves, making the boundaries that delineate where we
begin and end, and the points where we touch and come into contact with the world, disappear
completely.”10

‘Glitches’ in the system are the fuel which allows for ‘void’ space to expand. These ‘glitches’
reside in and occupy ‘void’. They are the oil paint and brushes to the canvas, the text in the
Word document, the video files in the timeline, the pen and ink in a new notebook, the bacteria
growing in a petri dish, and the music that fills a room. ‘Glitches’ are the planets and stars in
outer space. They are the malfunctions in technology’s hardware, they are the mistakes and
errors in computer code. They are the moment when a system crashes. They are the queer
people, the people of colour, the women, the people with disabilities or impairments, and all
those who do not fit within the box of white, male, straight, able, and cisgender. ‘Glitches’, the
ones who approach life from a different perspective, bring with them a new understanding of
the world and the systems around us.

“[Glitch is for] . . . those who continue to play, experiment, and build via the Internet as a means of strengthening the loop between online and AFK.”¹¹

“Within glitch feminism, glitch is celebrated as a vehicle of refusal, a strategy of nonperformance. This glitch aims to make abstract again that which has been forced into an uncomfortable and ill-defined material: the body.” ¹²

Rooted in Legacy Russell’s theory and definition, when I am referring to ‘glitches’, they are not computer glitches (comp-glitches). Comp-glitches can be examples of this theory’s framework, within the software of the computer or machine itself, but that is in a literal sense rather than a metaphorical one. A comp-glitch is the literal malfunctioning technology, the corruption of files, and the misbehaving code. It is the unintended visual bug made by computer software. It is the mistakes of the computer which to any standard user, would be considered inconvenient and troublesome. All versions of glitch, the literal comp-glitches and the theoretical ‘glitches,’ are significant in the context of this paper and the artwork I create. All are incorporated when possible. Generally speaking, where a comp-glitch is used within my artwork, it is a visual or functional substitute or stand-in for theoretical ‘glitches’. The comp-glitches and ‘glitches’ are parallel to each other, and metaphors for each other. They represent the computer body and the human body. They are bodies which reside in their own versions of ‘void’ space and cannot be separated in my art, just as my body cannot be separated from my computer’s body, and my artwork cannot be separated from the digital medium. The possibility

¹¹ Ibid., 13. AFK means ‘away from keyboard.’
¹² Ibid., 8.
for confusion, and the inseparable nature of the metaphor, is intentional. In my artwork, they are one in the same.

VIDEO GAMES

“The pixeled windows caught her eye. She had never been able to accept the boundaries between media, the borders between senses, the blueprints of authenticity to which her work was supposed to live up.”

Video games allow me to expand on the theories above, as the primary examples of ‘void’. ‘Void’ is the space outside of a video game’s borders. The empty, seemingly endless area, ready and waiting to be filled and explored. This space is one which game developers seek to hide, and so they curate an experience which (mostly) prevents the player from accessing this space.

“But one man’s mistake might well be a most intelligent move for a machine. And how would their masters tell the difference between failures to carry out instructions and refusals to be bound by them?”

Video games are nothing more than pixels, coded in a way which allows the player to control their digital body through a curated and structured experience. In most cases, when we are looking at the commercial gaming industry, even the games which present a fully ‘self-directed’ or ‘open world’ adventure or experience, such as Minecraft or Legend of Zelda: Breath

---

of the Wild are, in actuality, fully systematized in one way or another and never truly provide the player freedom beyond invisible walls.

Video games in themselves are manufactured worlds, full of non-player characters with scripts, enclosed in walls which contain the gameplay and the player. Video games are built societies with set rules and regulations which players must follow and fit within to progress through the experience outlined for them by the developers of the game. This is an appealing concept for those who are privileged enough to have access to the required gaming consoles, the ability to play them, and prior knowledge of video game mechanics. To them, this sort of thing is second nature; they were born for this. But what of those who do not, or have not, had access to such media? What about the players who do not seek a conventional gaming experience, and those who are physically unable to operate the required technology in order to play? What happens to those gamers who are unable to experience the video games original state, in the ways in which the developers made it? These exact questions serve as the direct metaphor, between the structures of North American society, and the structure of video games, which I am seeking to create. Those who do not fit within the structured box of white, cisgender male, and able-bodied are often unable to access the experience assumed, by those with privilege, to be generated by the game’s structure.

“Queer game design is the practice of deliberately using game mechanics and other design elements to challenge normative expectations around gender, sexuality, and the established logics of digital gameplay.”

---

Individuals can still play the game depending on their individual privilege, and their access to the content may change depending on where they are in their gaming journey. Some may have access to the newest gaming consoles and computers, where others may only be able to access the content through others’ purchases, or not at all. Some people may get harassed by others for their choices or taste in games, where others may be accepted fully in their social circles. Some players may not be able to experience their chosen games fully, because they do not contain subtitles or accessible controller settings, while others access games which have the accessibility tools and settings they need. The players who cannot play such games in the intended way – they are glitches in the code of gaming.

Galloway’s writing in *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, introduces the concept of “counter gaming”. He explores ‘modding’ as a phenomenon in gaming where players hack or access a game’s code, modify or ‘mod’ the game itself, and re-release it as an alternative experience to the original game.16 This direct modification to the code is an example of ‘glitch’, where the hacker, artist, or coder enter the ‘void’ within a space which may not have been made for them, and create their own space. This, along with another form of counter gaming, called speed running, approach the curated structure and experience of the video game and completely go against, or removes altogether, the predetermined, coded rules. Speed running is a subtype of gaming, which branches across all platforms and games, in which the speed runner will utilize comp-glitches and bugs within the game’s original code to reach a pre-determined goal of their own, as fast as possible. These gamers use game-breaking techniques.

---

and completely ignore the original goals and structures of the game. Such forms of counter
gaming have become so popularized, that “… games continue to be released with level editors
and other mod tools included. Modifying games is almost as natural as playing them.” 17

Beyond the world one sees within a video game lies a seemingly endless space where, if the
player manages to access this space, they might fall or fly endlessly through it. This space is the
video game ‘void’. It is the space in which the game itself has been created, which is then
restricted to those who play it. ‘Glitches’ however, know how to access this space. This digital
‘void’ is where my artwork resides; my artwork and I are ‘glitches’ within the ‘void’. It is also the
space I aim to create through my art. We do not fit within the space which we spawned in, and
we choose to embrace the errors which our existence causes.

I utilize the processes of my practice to create works which explore the connection between
myself and the machine. In gaming, ‘void’ is only truly accessible to those who counter game
and those who are ‘glitches’ in the system’s code. It is an unfinished space and always will be. It
is a space which is increasingly more accepted, celebrated, and it is continuing to expand. It is
an unfinished experience, full of supposed errors, and it embraces these bugs rather than trying
to repair them. ‘Void’ is a virus which continues to deconstruct the system’s structure and finds
its way around the updates and patches which the current developers create to contain it.

“…mainstream games almost never reveal the guts of the apparatus, while artist-made
game mods do so quite often.”18

---

18 Ibid., 114.
To enter the ‘out of bounds’ space in a video game is to enter a queer space – a ‘void’ space. “Once we move beyond the traditional limits of representation...queerness can also be a way of designing a game, interpreting it, or playing it.”¹⁹ If video games are the digital equivalent of life, and our avatars are our extensions of our physical bodies, then to enter the out of bounds areas is to be queer, to be a ‘glitch’, and to enter ‘void’. It is a space in which our computers and technologies reside—between the physical world and the digital one. Computers and video games blur both the binaries of gender and of the digital and physical worlds by creating access to personas, experiences and lives which are solely inaccessible in the real-life world. The blurred space of ‘void’ is one which can only be accessed when errors are present, and when binaries are being defied. Our bodies and our minds are moulded by how we are raised to think – but how we choose to identify and where we choose to grow, is what makes us ‘glitches’. The future of ‘void’ is one which we ‘glitches’ spill our guts into the endless ‘void’ and allow our alternative algorithms to expand into a galaxy of glitches.

¹⁹ Ruberg, Video Games Have Always Been Queer, 15.
This video is my attempt at a direct translation of ‘void’ theory into a visual form. This piece acts as the foundation of my research, as it is the best visualization of what ‘void’ might look like manifested as a visual abstraction. Just as the line ‘void setup ();’ within a body of code acts as first function, allowing for the following code to run, this piece sets up the base of all discussions of ‘void’ and ‘glitches’ within my practice. In an attempt to test the limits of my computer’s processing power and cause it to glitch, this piece is the result of many hours of layering effects, exporting, applying more effects, and exporting once again. Through the repetitive process, I invited more opportunities for errors and computer glitches to occur. Rather than mimicking or manufacturing the glitches themselves, I look to create or foster environments and spaces where the unexpected can occur. Using a image-to-sound AI site, the audio was created using AI generated sound, and from six video stills, taken in ten-minute increments from this video. The audio was then imported into the video timeline and was layered with effects – just as was done to the video layers it accompanies.
Cyborg Series

*the king;* (Cyborg Series), 2022. Digital image print. 3840px x 2160px.

The Cyborg Series is an ongoing project centered around the self-portrait cyborg personas, or characters, which repeatedly appear within my practice. Each cyborg character represents an experience, a fear, or an emotion. The themes range from death, gender, queerness, and romance, to specific subsections of identity. Each cyborg resides within, and appears as, characters in the video animations I make, standing in as metaphors or symbols of their respective concepts or ideas. The cyborgs may not always be recognizable within the art I create. They may be distorted beyond recognition or may be present deep within the project files where they are only accessible to those who possess said file. These ‘void’ images are printed, rather than projected, in order to give these digital beings some form of physical body away from the computer body they normally possess, just as a digital photograph of oneself translates our bodies into a digital form, away from our physical one.
the roach; (Cyborg Series), 2023. Digital image print. 3840px x 2160px.
the lick; (Cyborg Series), 2023. Digital image print. 3840px x 2160px.
*the choke*; (Cyborg Series), 2023. Digital image print. 3840px x 2160px.
*Cyborg Series*

**the hole;** (Cyborg Series), 2023. Digital image print. 3840px x 2160px.
"the kiss; (Cyborg Series), 2022. Digital image print. 3840px x 2160px."
the gl[e]tch;, 2022. Double-channel video/animation. 00:03:50.

This two-channel video work situates viewers in between its two parallel projections, turning the in-between space of both videos into ‘void’. As the cyborg heads pass from one video to the other, the viewer is put within the imaginary grid travelling across the gallery. If the viewer was in the same physical plane as the projected heads, they would disrupt the movement of said heads, causing the very specific movement of the heads to error. This video was made by randomly and sporadically cutting, copying, and pasting the assets and videos within the video timeline to create disorder and repetition. In doing so, the result was unpredictable and unknown until the final export. The videos play in reverse of each other, simulating the movement of a lid twisting from a jar – the lid rotates one direction, and the jar turns the opposite, eventually releasing to reveal access to the contents inside. The contents in this case, being the ‘void’ between them.
**Configuration = ‘Debug’;**, 2022. Double-channel Projection/animation. 00:06:41 loop, 18’6”x 15’11” x 16’.

This piece is a two-channel video projection created to be a larger than life digital body, roaming the walls of the gallery. Littered with cockroaches, this piece represents a deconstructed cyborg body, climbing and crawling through our space. To ‘debug’ a code or computer is to identity and remove glitches from the system. But what if we left the bugs in the system? What would happen if we allowed the computer to malfunction, what would the configuration of the body look like then?
the garden; , 2023. Interactive virtual installation. [https://newart.city/show/thegarden](https://newart.city/show/thegarden)

the garden; is an interactive web-based installation artwork which is inspired by the alleged tale of DARPA (Defence Advanced Research Project Agency), where a simulation of two AI’s named Adam and Eve ended in them both eating a third AI, introduced to them with no differentiation between him and the simulated apples.\(^{20}\) This tale of AI cannibalism, along with the rise in concern resulting from the now popular AI system ChatGPT, inspired this interactive garden which questions our connections to computer, the digital spaces, and the digital bodies we control. What does digital cannibalism look like? What does the cyborg body look like?

---


This artwork is an ongoing, infinitely running representation of my practice as an artist. Written using python, this code has no end and infinitely loops onto itself. The currently popular AI system, ChatGPT, compiled the given variables and instructions, and spit out the base code.

Then, my human intervention modified the code to rearrange the variables in the correct order, and to loop it into itself. This piece will never end and will continue to grow as my practice continues.
Chapter 3: Lu Yang Case Study

“Plunging the viewer into digital disarray, Yang reminds us that the mind exists beyond matter; it extends beyond the body, spreading through computerised networks and towards infinity.”

Lu Yang is a digital media artist whose work explores themes of identity, gender, video games, and religion. Creating work using various digital tools and mediums, Lu Yang investigates the intersections between medical science and technology, and how this intertwines with concepts of identity and gender. Through playing video games, the player or viewer becomes a cyborg. Our body controls the digital through our inputs into the game, and the game controls our bodies by commanding our presence in front of the screen. The line between human and virtual persona shifts. With a prominent focus in the body, the digital, and a genderless existence, Lu Yang’s practice blurs boundaries and challenges binaries of all types.

Born and based in Shanghai, Lu Yang graduated in 2010 with their MA from the China Art Academy in Hangzhou. Since graduation, they have had numerous successful solo and group exhibitions, received many grants and residency opportunities, and most recently have been awarded the Deutschmark Bank’s “Artist of the Year for 2022” Award for their innovative

---


22 “The digital” used in this paper is referring to all things interactive within a computer’s digital environment, such as video games, videos, websites, blogs, software, etc. It is intentionally broad, as the term “real world” is when referring to that which is outside of the digital realm.
work combining ancient traditions with the latest sciences and technology research. In an interview with Amy Qin from The New York Times, Yang discussed how they have had an interest in being an artist since a young age. “When I was a child, I spent a lot of time in hospital emergency rooms because I had asthma. So naturally I became interested in the idea of medical treatment and the body. The body is fascinating to me because it is totally objective.”

Lu Yang’s early practice is heavily inspired by and invested in bio art, and in medical sciences and technologies. An example of this is Yang’s *Revived Zombie Frogs Underwater Ballet*, where dead frog bodies, used in medical dissections, were repurposed and connected to a Midi controller. Using electric currents, the frog legs ‘danced’ underwater to inputs from a button pad. This experiment was a result of the question: what sort of control do we as humans have over life and death, and what are the limitations? This work seems controversial – where is the line drawn when controlling life or death? Should human’s test our limits of control and, if we do, how can this be done in a morally clear and ethical way? Is the reanimation of corpses something we, as humans, have the right to do? Stepping away from bio art and into digitally based mediums, Yang’s current work explores ideas of digital reincarnation. By highlighting some of Lu Yang’s significant works, this case study will examine the important conceptual ideas their artwork presents and will apply the theory of ‘void’ to some of their important artworks, such as *Uterus Man, The Great Adventure of Material World*, and *DOKU the self*.

---


Lu Yang’s practice is complex and folds in on itself conceptually. Like the World Wide Web or a neural network, their practice is intricate, and often requires prerequisite knowledge of previous projects in order to fully access the art they are creating. Their work operates almost like a function or loop used in coding, where the constant looping of ideas and themes repeat back onto themselves, infinitely. Often reusing characters, avatars and symbols from their previous works, Yang has created a fascinating database with a unique vocabulary, which allows for a satisfying and rewarding experience, should the audience have the opportunity to access it. In other words, one cannot successfully execute the end section of code without the preliminary set up at the start. The avatars Yang creates are that of alternative personas – digitally based life forms which act as vessels for specific, complex ideas or theories which can only be translated through digital bodies, due to the restrictions of our human bodies and the physical world. These digital personas allow Yang to access ideas, spaces, and movements which are impossible to access outside of the digital. Yang mentions that, in the digital world and through DOKU, they are free from forced identifying, societal standards, and identities: “It is part of my recent series ‘Digital Reincarnations,’ which projected a lot of my dissatisfactions with my body and allowed me to create a perfect self-image.”

UTERUS MAN

_Uterus Man_ is a project which consists of multiple types of media, including a video game, digital comic illustrations, and an animated video. The video game itself is made in

---

Unreal Engine, which is a popular video game creation software. Commonly found in the commercial video game market, Unreal Engine has been used to create popular games such as *Fortnite, Stray, Rocket League, and Final Fantasy 7 Remake*. By using Unreal Engine to create *Uterus Man*, Lu Yang is creating the foundational possibility of widespread distribution and accessibility, due to Unreal Engine's ability to port video games across multiple computer and console platforms.

The animated video is visually exciting,\(^26\) combining action packed game footage of *Uterus Man* with real life medical scans and microscope videos which demonstrate all of the medical procedures associated with the character Uterus Man’s powers, which take their origin from the ‘powers’ or abilities of a human uterus. The digital animations and visuals are created in a Japanese anime style, and the editing and effects are reminiscent of the pacing and over-the-top visuals which are found in an anime tv show. By using this style of art, Yang invites popular culture into the piece. It is possible Yang uses this style to disguise the game, to invite players in, only to combat their expectations. By using an aesthetic found commonly in geek and video game circles, Yang inserts *Uterus Man* into this world. A world which is commonly considered to be a male-centered world.

The character, Uterus Man, is an androgynous, asexual superhero, and when standing in a T-pose, mimics the anatomy of a uterus.\(^27\) Their hair is short and white, and their armor appears to be fleshy organs or muscle, the same material a real uterus would be made of.

---


Uterus Man has the same anatomy as a uterus: with ovaries at their arm pits, fallopian tubes down their arms, a cervix at their groin, and the vagina made up of their legs all the way down to the arches on the bottom of their feet. Their special vehicle is a pelvis bone chariot, with a scorpion tail spine and skull protruding from the back. When inside, Uterus Man sits perfectly within the pelvis, just as a real uterus would within the body. The pelvis chariot moves using its skeletal arms and legs, which have the ability to crawl, climb, and convert into wheels for faster movement. Uterus Man’s abilities and superpowers are impressive and jarring at times. Taking inspiration from a real uterus’ abilities and powers, Uterus Man has the ability to create period blood jet streams from the vagina at their feet, allowing them to fly and propel themselves forward. They are also able to give birth to a baby, capable of fighting for them. The gameplay itself is quite simple – players must move left and right in order to avoid cancer cells which cause damage, and to collect red blood cells, which gain you points. The world environment is set on a runway, which looks like a sci-fi bowling alley, floating in space. To defeat bosses, you continue to collect points to acquire upgraded weapons and abilities. To win the game, you must successfully clear all the stages.

_Uterus Man_ is an artwork which bends perceptions of sex, sexuality, and gender. Through the use of the uterus as the conceptual catalyst, Uterus Man draws attention to the power a uterus possesses, through his abilities, as well as that those who possess a uterus are not strictly bound to the female gender. With this all said, Lu Yang has discussed many times in interviews, that the work is _not_ about feminism and that people are projecting what they are
already thinking onto the piece.\textsuperscript{28} \emph{Uterus Man} demonstrates the fluidity of gender in a way that is non-binary, rather than demonstrating equality for two genders through the unexpected combination of the female reproductive system and masculine gender. This artwork does not attempt to erase the experiences of women and people of the female sex. Instead, \emph{Uterus Man} expands the conversation through inclusions of those outside of the labels of women or female, and by exceeding and challenging stereotypes of gender. Yang advocates for a complete removal of gender and binaries, and in doing so, encourages others to become ‘glitches’ through gender identity.

Heavily rooted in conceptions of cyborg identity, \emph{Uterus Man} goes beyond gender. As Donna Haraway says, “The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world... No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological polis...Nature and culture are reworked.”\textsuperscript{29} In Yang’s practice, particularly within \emph{Uterus Man}, they demonstrate a cyborg way of thinking. They have a connection with their computer and their digital personas beyond a surface level interest. Their interest is at a spiritual level, in which their identity blends between human and computer. Günseli Yalcinkaya states: “Slipping in and out of these digital skins becomes a way to experience multiple embodied lives, both IRL and URL, breaking away from western, binary ideas surrounding life and death.”\textsuperscript{30} Through combined technology, superpowers, and human form, Uterus Man is a cyborg. They are also a cyborg through their creation, in which their body is an extension of Yang’s – a reincarnation. As an extension of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[28] Qin, “Uterus Man”, 2015.
IRL meaning “In Real Life”.
\end{footnotes}
Yang’s own identity in digital form, Uterus Man and Lu Yang become part human, part machine. It could be argued that, through the act of playing a video game and controlling a digital body or character, both the player becomes a cyborg alongside the game’s character, become cyborgs in their own way. However, in order to access ‘void’ and become a ‘glitch,’ one must exceed the rules and barriers implemented by those who created the game – in all video games, and in all of our lives within the real world. If, like Yang, the player sees the computer or persona as an extension of themself and of their identity, then the lines between human and computer blend, creating a blurred space they exist within: ‘void’.

THE GREAT ADVENTURE OF MATERIAL WORLD

“To end suffering, one must eradicate its cause, the attachment to the self, the false belief in the existence of the material world, like a dream, an illusion, a bubble, a phantom, a drop of dew, a flash of lightning.”31 – Material World Knight

*The Great Adventure of Material World* is a visually captivating video game film, consisting of 8 phases where the energetic protagonist Material World Knight embarks on a transformative adventure. Throughout the adventure, Material World Knight explores multiple versions of their identity, politics, religious understandings, and the universe itself. Throughout this process, he grapple with internal struggles of desire; emotions; the concepts of life, death

and rebirth; and eternity. The artwork is currently in video form, with a playable game in development.

Visually, *The Great Adventure of Material World*, is a dream-like and trippy experience, composed of digital assets and environments which overwhelm, confuse, and entice the viewer to remain engaged. The spaces and characters themselves are sickeningly bright and force the viewer into a fight or flight response; either prompting the viewer to pause, slow down, and absorb every little detail they can, or, forcing the viewer into a dissociative-like state, where they become overwhelmed to the point that they must either consciously or unconsciously ignore the details they are viewing to consume the content they’re watching. The film acts as a time capsule of Lu Yang’s previous works – throughout their journey, Material World Knight encounters Uterus Man along with many other Easter-eggs referencing previous artworks. The characters encountered are diverse in size and shape, are extravagantly dressed and styled, and move stiffly – none of the characters look fully human or real, causing the viewer to become instantly and painfully aware of the digital nature of this work. They are not human.

*The Great Adventure of Material World* follows Material World Knight through eight episodes of self-discovery: Episode One explores birth, identity, and body. Episode Two explores what is normal, opinions, time, and the afterlife. Episode three explores concepts of heaven, one’s perspective, and pain versus pleasure. Episode four explores Hell, its existence, its impermanence, and its location. Episode five explores the question of ‘what would you do with a weapon that could destroy everything?’ Episode six explores the definition of monster and the

---

pursuit of power. Episode seven explores space, material, wealth, and human selfishness. The final episode explores self, body and existence again, and how if we are to rid ourselves of the material world, we must be rid our physical selves as well. Throughout Material World Knight’s journey, he learns that he must rid himself and the world of its materiality in order to find peace.

*The Great Adventure of Material World* borders on an un-mappable web of ideas. Lu Yang’s practice thrives in this complicated, knotted, conglomerate of theories, ideas, myths, personas, and narratives. To work through the multitude of complex ideas, Yang strings together eight scenarios, weaving in previous characters from other artworks as symbols, such as Uterus Man in episode one, where Material World Knight grapples with the idea of identity, self, birth, and gender. Yang’s seemingly endless web resides in ‘void’ – their theories and ideas inform each other, just as a loop or function does in a body of code. They loop infinitely on themselves, and create a repetitive feedback entity, layering endlessly and, in turn, inviting ‘glitches’ to occur. As the viewer, we must be okay with not knowing the answers to the questions Material World Knight is asking – these questions have no correct answers. We must accept this looping function and allow ourselves to navigate the ‘void’ space *The Great Adventure of Material World* creates.

**DOKU THE SELF**

Lu Yang’s most recent artworks utilize facial and body motion capture to create the persona DOKU, Yang’s digital body. DOKU is a perfect facial scan of Yang, allowing the scanned face to be animated and paste onto anything they wish to create in the digital world. A model’s
body movements are tracked using a motion capture suit and Yang’s face is then placed onto the digital body that was captured. In a way, they have uploaded their identity or a part of themselves into the digital space. This allows for Yang to create, with their body, what would not be possible within the real world. Utilizing DOKU as an extension of themself, Yang creates many personas of DOKU, exploring many of the same themes in *Uterus Man* and *The Great Adventure of Material World* through dance performance, music, and sound. They explain, “When I look at Doku, I sense my soul coming out of my body, like a near-death experience: looking at the body that is my own, but that which has nothing to do with me.” Combining the various DOKU personas or ‘digital reincarnations’ in *DOKU the self*, Yang demonstrates the incredible animation quality the motion capture equipment offers.

*DOKU the self*, like *The Great Adventure of Material World*, follows the main character, DOKU, through a philosophical journey of self-exploration, death, rebirth, and reincarnation. Through his travels between various dream states, DOKU meets 6 ‘digital reincarnations’ Lu Yang has created, named: Heaven, Hell, Human, Animal, Hungry Ghost and Asura. Switching between versions of time, space, and reality where DOKU is on a plane flying through a thunderstorm, the video ends in DOKU breaking apart, deconstructing his body down to brain and nervous system, evaporating into space and the world. DOKU questions, after all of this, why they still feel sad for others’ suffering, and contemplates the interconnectivity of humankind and earth.

The production value of this film is above anything else Yang has created. The textures, shading, lighting, and environments are created with incredible detail and realism, and utilizes

---

video game development technology. Despite the still obvious computer-generated medium, viewers may get lost in the visuals, and feel as though the film may not be just exclusively computer made imagery. Incorporating dialogue, music, and sound effects, Doku the self blends dramatic story telling with music video formats. Lu Yang’s childhood interest in television music video channels has inspired this type of formatting. As a result, the film is dynamic and exciting, and communicates ideas, themes, and narratives through dance, song, and speech. The film feels like an in-between of real life and the digital, due to the 3D realness of Yang’s facial scan and motion captured body movements. Through the uncanny, Yang blurs the line between computers and real life, and puts themself and their art into ‘void’. By merging their real-life identity and spirit with that of a digital version – an extension of themself, rather than a copy or clone, Lu Yang no longer resides within a single human realm, but in a possibly infinite number of digital realms. Through the project DOKU the self, Yang straddles the lines of gender and existence, becoming a ‘glitch’, and entering ‘void’. In the piece, the character, DOKU, suggests we need to break from the binaries of life, break ourselves apart into particles, and become one with the void. This void is the same as in my theory of ‘void’, where we break from our binaries and become something new, something different, and reside within it.

Whether it be through the subject matter they are discussing or through their approach to art creation, Yang creates artwork that considers their themes and concepts through a nonbinary lens. By working within the varied digital mediums, Yang works outside of the supposed gender binaries found in the real world, and ultimately becomes a ‘glitch’ through

As Haraway tells us, “The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence. No longer structured by the polarity of public or private...” Yang’s use of video game technology accesses a space, where the viewer or the player becomes a cyborg. By inserting a portion of themselves into their main characters, Yang creates digital cyborgs, with human parts implemented, rather than a human cyborg where technology is attached to a physical being. These digital cyborgs are then flipped into human cyborgs when we, the human players, interact with the game which they are in. This cyborg loop lives in ‘void’, creating an existence that defies the oppositional binary of real life and the digital. Lu Yang themself even resides within this in-between spaces of binaries, through their gender, identity, and their personas. Within their artwork, they construct many versions of ‘void’ and insert themselves as ‘glitches’ within it.

---

36 Haraway, 151.
Bibliography


Curriculum Vitae

SAM WAGTER

Education History
2023  University of Western Ontario, Master of Fine Art
2021  University of Western Ontario, Bachelor of Fine Art

Exhibitions (solo)
2023  “Non-Stop Digital Flickerings;” Artlab Gallery, London, Ontario
2022  “(Unexpected Occurrence;” Satellite Gallery, London, Ontario

Exhibitions (group)
2022  “Thresholds & Inventories” Artlab Gallery, London Ontario
2021  “No Thanks, Just The Cheque” Artlab Gallery, London, Ontario
2020  “We Were, and Then We Weren’t.” Artlab Gallery, London, Ontario
2018  “NTBD: not to be determined” Artlab Gallery, London, Ontario
2018  “lost and found” Forest City Gallery, London, Ontario
2017  “Annual Juried Exhibition” Artlab, London, Ontario
2017  “LINE THRU” Satellite Gallery, London, Ontario

Digital Publications
2021  “The Value in Opportunities: Wielding Student Experiences” Artlab Gallery, 2 pages.
2020  “We Were, an Then We Weren’t: Developing an Art Exhibition During a Global Pandemic” ArtLab Gallery, 8 pages.

Curatorial Projects
2021  “In Fact, It wasn’t on my mind at all.” for the Artlab Gallery BFA Vitrine Exhibition Series. Featuring works by Tia Bates.
2021  “息抜き / ikinuki: to relax, to take a breather” for the Artlab Gallery BFA Vitrine Exhibition Series. Featuring works by Holly Granken.
2021  “Formful” for the Artlab Gallery BFA Vitrine Exhibition Series. Featuring works by Tyler Jafelice.

Awards
2021  Annual Juried Exhibition 19: FCG Feature Award Winner

Commissions
2021  Kings College for 3 Public Murals for the International Centre for English Academic Preparation (ICEAP) Building.
2019  Western University Arts & Humanities Student Council for “Garbage Mouth” for the 2019 Arts & Humanities Formal