

Heritage, Materiality and Media (report from a Chinese Village)

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Good morning, thank you for inviting my presentation.

Today I'm going to talk about mobilizing technology and folklore to make an artwork that is both a creative take on my surroundings in China – I'm an academic at ICI, an art and design partnership institution with XMU in Xiamen, Fujian – and in dialogue with tangible and intangible heritage practice.

I will speak to three topics in this paper. The first topic is mimesis – the bringing into representation of 3D data. The project plays with the acquisition and manipulation of data – I will call it a Dirty Scan. This embodied process speaks to the process of data collection – with the proposition that intervening in the scanning process can address context. This is the 'resonance' aspect of heritage scanning.

The second topic is to address the practice of organizing the materials into a time based and experiential medium. It is of course a tangible environment, yet there are practices that serve to make sense of this environment – in terms of a reflection on the media and for audiences in reception. In its exploration of a site of tangible heritage - the project manifests folklore – thus intangible heritage - specific to Fujian.

The third and final topic looks at how point cloud mimesis visualizes Daoist ideas about the world – and how then this representation of data may also seek out resonances with context. All topics address the observation by Ray that a 'tangible past cannot be

separated from intangible beliefs and resonances.’ (Ray 2019 pp13) This project is an essay in integrating this observation into the process and form of the work.

In preservation of tangible environments, LIDAR scanning of objects and spaces selected as cultural heritage is widespread. The ISPRS 2023 conference featured over 200 practical case studies of heritage media acquisition - focusing on the quantificative features of the process. Important is the virtual verisimilitude in the creation of digital twins of heritage objects and environments.

This project takes a different path to verisimilitude. This is not to deny the value of scanning as a techné – the practices of using tools. Rather, Dirty Scanning takes a different path to data acquisition and post-processing to locate shared territory with approaches to material real, the particular and the local. These practices have a long provenance in the work of the Situationist International, Henri Lefebvre, and the call by Tim Ingold to attend to the experience of the researcher and the real in the acquisition of data. In terms of process, a further analogy could be drawn to the tradition of *Shanzhai* -

Here is one of the main throughfares of Dajing Village. We can see at once that this is messy and contingent space – an informal site that has layers of everyday human use and constant mutation and change. The mobile device used for this shot is a drone – the point cloud representation achieved by photogrammetry. This is a corridor or line scan by drone, referencing how the space is experienced by inhabitants and visitors to the village – it evokes a trajectory for a goal. This experiential choice I’d argue is qualitatively other than the Parallel, Grid and Crosshatched scanning patterns classically applied to scanning terrain.

Instead, DIRTY SCANNING is a mobile and contingent practice of capturing these spaces. A smart phone to scan the places where people mingle, socialise, work and play - as they do so. It’s an informal media acquisition strategy, negotiated and agreed

with participants and owners of these spaces. As outlined by the spatial theorist Henri Lefebvre, these are spaces of social practice, places of everyday habit and routine. To build on these ideas, we can invoke Pierre Bourdieu's definition of place arising from the "habitus" – loosely - how a place is negotiated in social practice within dispositions, learned ways of perceiving, moving judging and acting that people acquire through social experience. These ideas have entered the realm of archaeology with the perspective that the discipline interprets 'actions' as a critical component of human material remains – as explored in the work of Tilly and Hodder.

Staying with process; in this case the mimesis in this work remains with the raw data – XYZ points in space as reflected from objects, and RGB colour values approximating to object light reflectance. The processing of spatial data has been arrested before tessellation - the creation surfaces in 3D virtual space by the addition of polygons optionally with textures. As an example - we can see the processing of point cloud media in this work by Kai Xu – *Until the Concrete Turns to Mud* (2024). The work explores a ruined space in Guangzhou that is being cleared for redevelopment – the acquisition and data are like the project under discussion.

This limitation to showing raw data as mimesis is consequential. A further iteration of this project uses a small algorithm to interrogate the point-cloud and interpret it: to intuit, on the fly, which data points can be assigned as ground; which as "wall". From this analysis, software determines how the scene should be positioned, rendered and navigated on screen. To maintain a semblance of cinematics, the selection and sequencing of the spatial information is predetermined. This conceptual iteration of the work is in progress – in collaboration with my colleague William Sawyerr. As data, we need a moment to combine in our cognition that these points form what we take to be a feature of built environment – and this small pause is I think allowing an audience to work at the representation – to assemble it in our minds as a form of sculpture.

Remaining with the data as video output, I am interested in creative spatial narratives. Spatial narrative require a animating force to their trajectory – and the impetuous behind this work is in the title - 7th month Return - 第 7 个月的回报 - Dì 7 qì gè yuè de huí bào. In Fujian Province, during the 7th lunar month (usually July), ancestor spirits called Hungry Ghosts return to their villages in search of sustenance. Villagers are advised not to leave food or money in the open or untended as the famished spirits will take them. My understanding is the ghosts are invisible to most people; shamans or priests and pre-school children can see and vocalise these spirits; others, by cognisance unknown, can sense their presence. If they are sensed, people are advised to freeze and feign inertness – to pretend to be an object or material – thus voiding the attention of the spirit.

In this rendering of the space by organisation of spatial narrative, the village is presented as if seen by a ghost. A visit by a 7th Month ghost is then the basis for an exploration of this village. The spatial trajectory must observe the demarcation of the place - there are foci and excluded spaces – ghosts as hungry beings target street food selling and preparation places and dining areas of cafes and restaurants. In the ghost lens, villagers are captured by the scan immobile and frozen, arrested in mid-action in their work. Excluded spaces are family shrines; to my understanding, the offerings of food there are intended for benign sprits and deities, not to be interfered by malign spirits. Coincidentally, the sites in the village that overtly signify ‘heritage’ are avoided.

Let us move on to the second topic. How can we describe the point-cloud image? I asked Chat GTP – to interpret this frame-grab –

This image appears to depict a street scene filled with hundreds of balloons, with a dreamlike, almost pointillist quality. The perspective is abstract - objects are made of floating dots or clusters, dissolving the boundaries between forms.

Asked to interpret the image through Daoism - Chat goes on to say –

The visual effect of discrete forms breaking down into particles or dots echoes a Daoist principle: nothing has fixed essence, and all things are impermanent and interdependent. What appears solid is just a temporary gathering of the Dao, and what seems fragmented is simply a different mode of being.

Of course I have led the LLM with my prompt. Yet in Daoism, the states of the real and dreams are dissolved - these boundaries are illusions. For Daoists – the real around us is a shifting, interconnected field. What is apprehended as the surfaces of objects are merely a provisional manifestation of materials. The objects captured as obstructions to the laser are particles –a basis for impermanence and interdependency. This visualises a temporary gathering of the Dao – the tangible environment rendered as insubstantial with differences in surfaces only marked by the application of colour, thus mutable and not suggestive of a material. As the Dao De Jing summarises -

All things emerge from the Dao and return to it.

Dao De Jing

According to Jullien, a French interpreter of Chinese thought, Chinese thinkers have refrained from constructing a world of ideal forms or archetypes evident in western thought since Plato. In the words of Jullien, reality is regarded, rather, as a 'regulated and continuous process that stems purely from the interaction of the factors in play' (Jullien 2004b: 15). 'Order', in Chinese thought, is not perceived as coming from a model or strict plan, but is an immanent process, a provisional and contingent arrangement whose configuration is favourable to the task at hand. Chinese thought is 'a thought of processivity' (Jullien 2004b: 121).

For Jullien, a central concept in Chinese thought is Shi (势) - the potential energy of any situation. Shi (势), so important to Julien's analysis of the ideas that animate Chinese culture, is a state of ambiguity between the static and the dynamic – a movement towards the propensity of things/sets of circumstances. If the mimesis of the 7th *Month Return* project is framed in this way – we can posit this trajectory through the village as a visualisation of Shi (势) - a visualisation of a world in the process of transformation.

There are alignments with Deleuze's processual thinking here; much favoured by academia, Deleuze was inspired by Daoism in his notions of - "Becoming" – as outlined in *Mille Plateaux / A Thousand Plateaus* – a 'continuous transformation without a final state.' But I will leave the interface between Deleuze and the Dao to more theoretically inclined academics to explore.

Conclusion –

I'd like to bring a final point as a conclusion. The designation of heritage does bring issues of selection; which environments are deemed worthy of the designation of heritage and by who – this is discussed in the edited volume by (Ray, 2019). China is well represented in the UN Registers of intangible and tangible cultural heritage; and the provenance and continuity of the thousands of years of history of China and its peoples is often amplified.

It should be clear the village where this project takes place would not feature on a heritage list. However, underlying this determination are questions that can be left open. Are there temporal scopes to heritage? If we project heritage into the future – is our present not also important? Can we not capture and celebrate the environments of our present – as manifestations of material abundance, complexity and interest – and in a Chinese context, layered with the recent past of substantial change?

This project by reflexively presenting the spatial data of a fluid, contingent space of the everyday in a sequential form and narrative, and with resonances to the context in process and form - aims to look at these questions anew.

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Thank you.