Beyond Babel, China's Virtual Future

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BEIJING — As the Internet becomes the main theater in a freedom of expression tug-of-war between China's leadership and its citizens, it is also changing the ways some artists are conceiving their works — and even redefining Beijing's cityscape.

The Web has opened a vast new space for artists to produce and premiere their works, and China is no exception. In a country where artistic expression has long been under fire, a few artists find inspiration not only from the seemingly boundless canvas of the Internet, but also from history, language, spirituality, literature, science and their country's rich and violent history. They have tapped the creativity and imagery of the Web and are even helping to create a virtual and artistic language for the future.

Cao Fei, an artist based in Beijing, designed an entire virtual city in the three-dimensional online world of Second Life, a site that has 36 million users. Her metropolis, named "RMB City" after the renminbi, the Chinese currency, provides her and other artists with a platform on Second Life to develop a cultural paradise, or even to poke fun at the offline world. It combines imaginary buildings and characters with real landmarks, and a monumental sculpture of Mao Zedong that is sinking into the ocean.

"From some angles, there is no difference in creating art for Second Life or real life," Ms. Cao said. Avatars of the virtual world, she said, are animated by the human desires and emotions of the real world.

"RMB City" was part of the China Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2007, where Ms. Cao also designed an inflatable, cloud-shaped structure that mirrored her Virgin Garden pavilion in Second Life. The city is part paradise, part inferno, with a cast of characters that includes The Devil, who constantly carries a copy of "The Communist Manifesto." And while virtual worlds like Ms. Cao's can become "a pure, virtual utopia, they still face the constant threat of being destroyed by hackers," she said.

After that Biennale, Ms. Cao filmed two animations inside her cybercity. "Live in RMB City," she explained, "is a machinima that was shot inside of Second Life" and released in 2009. Using virtual cameras, Ms. Cao focused on avatars in the online world called China Tracy, representing herself, and China Sun, representing her newborn child, as they meandered through the fantastical city and talked about the meaning of life and death. Her son, she added, "started speaking in Second Life before he started speaking in real life."

When China Sun asks about the potential for avatars to live forever inside the virtual worlds of the Internet, his mother tells him eternal life might also extend to the off-line world: "If God is a mighty programmer, then death in the real world just means that our programming has in some way or form left the hardware that sustains it."

Another machinima, a surrealistic travel guide for Second Life titled "i.Mirror," was screened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in May, while a hybrid animation-online game, "Surf in RMB City," had its debut at the Museum of the Moving Image in New York in 2011.

Ms. Cao's most recent film, "Haze and Fog," a departure from computer animation and the cyberland of "RMB City," had its premiere on Sept. 20 at Birmingham's Eastside Projects, which co-commissioned the work with Vitamin Creative Space. It was screened at the Tate Modern in London two days later, and is set to be exhibited at Frieze Art Fair. "Haze and Fog" focuses on characters alienated by the hyper-fast resculpting of Chinese cities, a counterpoint to the utopian futures of her Web-based films.

Meanwhile, the increase at lightning speed of Internet usage is transforming the world, and that is a source of inspiration for the Chinese artist Xu Bing. Nearly 600 million Chinese citizens have access to the Web today, according to the official China Internet Network Information Center, and the Internet is now used by more than one third of the planet's seven billion residents, the Internet World Stats Web site says.

For Mr. Xu, this presents new opportunities. "With the Internet, the Tower of Babel is disappearing," the artist said. "Young people are using instant translation and even icons" to communicate across borders, he said.

To help bring the Internet age back to a pre-Babel state, when "the whole earth was of one language," as it is described in the Book of Genesis, Mr. Xu has compiled his most recent work, a book "written" with symbols gleaned from Web sites and social media. These images, which include well-known emoticons as well as symbols from atomic physics, music scores, geometry and astrology, are already gaining universal recognition online, and can form the foundation of a new worldwide visual language, he said. Mr. Xu's "Book From The Ground" is both a work of art and a novel — a day in the life of an online youth — that was published last month by MIT Press and MASS MoCA.

Mr. Xu has long focused his experimental art on freedom of speech and the painted word. After growing up during the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76, when book-burning was widespread, he came to view attacks on words and language as a threat to the very core of civilization.

In his first artistic tour de force, titled "Book From the Sky," he created thousands of imaginary Chinese characters, painted on scrolls and inscribed into wooden printing blocks, that are both beautiful and completely unintelligible, triggering in Chinese viewers a sense that they had lost the ability to read.

With his new work, the artist is doing the reverse, giving viewers the sense they have gained a new ability to read hieroglyphs produced for the Web and that transcend borders. "It looks like the world is evolving toward a common pictographic writing system," he said.

In the Chinese capital, Jennifer Wen Ma uses social media to take the emotional pulse of the country and transform it each evening into waves of color that illuminate the National Aquatics Center, built for the Beijing Olympics and best known as the Water Cube.

Ms. Ma, who is based in New York and Beijing, said "Rhapsody of Light" draws on a mix of emoticons collected from Sina Weibo, China's version of Twitter, which draws up to 100 million posts each day — and on ancient hexagram-based prescriptions offered by the classic "Book of Changes." The book, one of the oldest texts in China, sets out a philosophy of the universe and contains 64 hexagrams that oracles say can be used to portend the future.

With the Book of Changes and the emoticons, Ms. Ma said she "wants to collect the energy of the universe and of the people." "The microblogs," she added, "are one of the last places where people can be open about how they feel."

Emoticons from the Sina site are plugged — along with the prophecies of the "I Ching" — into visualization software to create each evening's lighting program. "The emotions collected daily not only affect color expressions, but also composition, speed, rhythm, brightness, saturation," she said.

The Water Cube project, she explained, reflects both the resurgence of interest in ancient philosophy and the expansion of the digital revolution across China. But these two trends alone do not portend a cultural revival fueled by the Internet, she said.

"For a cultural renaissance there needs to be a new period of creativity" she said, one that spreads out across Chinese society. "We still haven't achieved this critical mass."