



## Mirage

Daniel Birnbaum

It should not come as much of a surprise that UCCA, known for its experimental approach to new possibilities in art, becomes the first major institution to stage an exhibition exclusively devoted to projects utilizing augmented reality. “Mirage: Contemporary Art in Augmented Reality” presents works by six significant artists: Nina Chanel Abney, Darren Bader, Olafur Eliasson, Cao Fei, KAWS, and Alicja Kwade. The show, a collaboration with Acute Art, represents a new chapter in the conversation between art and technology, concurrently explored in the large UCCA survey “Immaterial/Re-material: A Brief History of Computing Art.”

If John Cage was right, art can be an early warning system, the function of which is to prepare us for the world of tomorrow. These AR projects represent a leap into the future, exploring entirely new possibilities for art to reach audiences without anything being shipped or anyone having to travel. Clearly, the works display phantom-like qualities. They are present in ways hard to describe.

Cao Fei’s little boy has escaped a retro-futuristic narrative about early computing, time travel, and a romance involving a Russian and a Chinese scientist as told in her film *Nova*. Here he approaches you with a question. You can hear his voice and sense his anguish: “Have you seen my dad?” Nina Chanel Abney’s *Imaginary Friend* hovers mysteriously mid-air and seems to be blessing the grounds. Darren Bader’s giant girl carrying a crucifix (and accompanied by a lively little dog) seems to have broken out of some religious allegory. KAWS’ easily recognizable figures appear both inside and outside of the museum walls. The large *COMPANION* floats in the air as if weightless. So does Olafur Eliasson’s luminous sun and Alicja Kwade’s eternally rotating figures. How best to describe their way of existing in their world, their ontology? Are they virtual hallucinations, digital mirages?

Walter Benjamin’s essay on the work of art in the era of mechanical reproduction opens with a quote from the poet Paul Valéry: “We must expect great innovations to transform entire techniques of the arts, thereby affecting artistic innovation itself and perhaps even bringing about amazing change in our very notion of art.”<sup>1</sup> Now we seem to be witnessing yet another transformation. These pioneering works do not belong to the era of mechanical reproduction. We are beyond that, entering a new chapter.

The works in this show are no doubt real, but not in the sense of tangible objects. Invisible to the naked eye, they come to life in your phone when you arrive at the right spot. Once caught on camera they appear as real as the environment

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in *Illuminations*, trans. H. Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 237.



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around them. They can easily be documented and shared with friends and will no doubt have a life of their own on social media. Through the juxtaposition of physical and virtual worlds, they convey a sense of surprise and wonder. Some of them may appear as mischievous tricks, others as awe-inspiring materializations of other worlds.

With AR, new forms of public art will emerge and new exhibition models will evolve outside of the traditional institutions. In recent years, works including a virtual reality component have regularly been displayed in exhibitions in ways that obey old institutional structures. Could one instead imagine immersive experiences distributed across geographies in novel ways, connecting local experiential nodes in ways that create entirely new exhibition formats? In other words, will immersive technologies change the structure of the art world and make possible new forms of exchange for a potential future in which audiences will be less keen to travel and the transport of massive crates will appear increasingly problematic? With “Mirage: Contemporary Art in Augmented Reality” the UCCA breaks new ground, charting territories that other institutions no doubt will want to explore too.

+86 10 5780 0200  
[www.ucca.org.cn](http://www.ucca.org.cn)

北京市朝阳区酒仙桥路 4 号 798 艺术区  
邮编 100015

798 Art District, No. 4 Jiuxianqiao Lu  
Chaoyang District, Beijing, China 100015