Art Review Asia, *Untitled*, Edward Sanderson, Vol 4 No 2, 2016, P99

aaajiao   *Untitled*

Gallery Yang, Beijing   12 December – 29 February

Aaajiao is the nom de plume of Shanghai-based Xu Wenkai, an artist who is heavily influenced by technology and frequently works at the intersection of computer programming, visualisations and life in relation to these. Often exhibited under the umbrella term of 'new media' art, his work tends to suffer from its associations with this label. New media, as a genre, has developed an autonomous space of operations that sometimes lapses into a fetishisation of technology. While aaajiao is certainly an accomplished programmer and technologist, and his works have not always avoided the pitfalls of 'technology for technology's sake', over the years he has worked with aspects of computer and Internet culture, and its attendant systems, to reveal a deeper awareness of the human subject and its relationship with technology. The current show displays sophistication in both ideas and execution that develops his ongoing preoccupation with existences across the boundaries of flesh, the mechanical and electronic media.

In previous exhibitions, the artist has proposed the term 'Screen Generation' to refer to a contemporary community so embedded in technology mediated by the screen that we must recognise them as new subjects in an expanded world that exists across this threshold of the real and the virtual. On the one hand, aaajiao posits the screen as fundamentally representational, like a mirror – it relates more or less directly to the world we feel we exist within – but on the other hand, he suggests other modes of existence behind these screens.

These new ways of being are explored in three computer-generated animations (*Untitled*, *Untitled 0* and *2*, all works 2015) that represent various human body parts that seem to have evolved into uncanny forms within their digital environments. On the nape of a pale figure a developing tessellated structure appears as an animated tattoo emerging from its skin; the fingers of an attenuated handlike form twitch intermittently; and a stylised skull floats in midair, with wavering black-tipped stalks protruding from its empty eye-sockets.

In the second room, aaajiao translates these digital figures to the other side of the screen and into physical reality. On one side of the room he has made use of the ubiquitous 3D printing process to translate the electronic data of the animated skull into an object, eyestalks and all (*Existence*). Alongside this, four thin figures hang from the ceiling, revealing the full body shapes from the other animations (*Totem*). Applied to the far wall is a large composition of latticed forms made from flat copper strips, representing what appears to be a mountainous landscape made up of these blocky facets (*Bits of Information*).

The spectre of fetishism surfaces in this exhibition in aaajiao's use of an anachronistic wireframe style of rendering in the animations and the copper lattice work, a style akin to old-school computer animations. It might be said that the artist uses this form of rendering to prevent the images from being mistaken for reality. This might be the case, but the artist has suggested that these lattices embody self-generative traits, to produce complex forms from such simple shapes, and there seems to be a further suggestion that this process is inherent in the shapes as a life force. Unfortunately, both for the lattices and the figures themselves, their translation into reality strip them of the uncanny vitality of the animations. The skull, however, is a potentially inspired element in the exhibition, as a rude reminder of existence and a fascinating development of the artist's propositions regarding the nature of the screen and our relation to it as human beings.

Although the hints of a fetishisation of technology in some of these works can appear to place a limit on a deep understanding of them, it might be countered that fetishism's focus on the object qua object, and its positing of technology's distance from humanity, in fact reveals an awareness of other forms of being beyond humanity. In particular the skull provides a clue to this – as a digital memento mori, the skull holds a cultural as well as a visceral significance that adjusts and deepens the other works in the show. In this exhibition the meaning of aaajiao's Screen Generation expands through this representation of life and death, to reinforce understanding of technology and biology as being parallel spaces of existence.

Edward Sanderson

Untitled, 2015 (installation view).
Courtesy Gallery Yang, Beijing