15 INVITATIONS
15 YEARS
NONNY DE LA PEÑA
MAR 17

ASIA ART ARCHIVE
NONNY DE LA PEÑA

PASSAGE: THE LIFE OF A WALL ON THE ROAD
Recognised for her work in ‘immersive journalism’, Nonny de la Peña drew from the Asia Art Archive collection to create a new iteration of an earlier performance by Lin Yilin that pushes the boundaries of virtual reality and digital technology.

Nonny de la Peña
Passage: The Life of a Wall on Lin He Road
March 2017
WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO HAVE AGENCY IN A STORY?
“Finally the hardware is catching up in a way that we can begin to use it as a tool to really tell more stories. That’s the goal. How do we tell important stories? I think that this platform allows people an understanding of their world in a way that’s kind of amazing and unique.”

—Nonny de la Peña
“I can never put my audience out there. I have to put
them here in the story with me.” —Nonny de la Peña
When Nonny de la Peña envisions the future of journalism, it isn’t simply print or video or infographics that she envisions. The future that de la Peña imagines, and refers to as ‘a pretty amazing type of future’ is one in which video, audio, good old fashioned research, and gaming platforms merge to create an immersive experience [...] Under this new model, the public becomes an active participant, engaging
with the news in a manner unimaginable just a short time ago. The future is immersive. It’s interactive. And it’s here. “The same way you would watch a movie, or have a different kind of experience than reading a book, I think that virtual reality is going to be in that exact same sort of living room choice. You’re going to want to try your VR experience as much as you might want to read your book.”

—Nonny de la Peña in conversation with The Future of News
“By offering these kind of experiences we begin to leapfrog boundaries, walls, cultural differences,
and take people into stories that they didn’t have access to before.” —Nonny de la Peña
“AS HUMAN BEINGS WE HAVE THIS NEED TO CREATE.”

“EVERYBODY FELT VERY COMFORTABLE WITH 360-DEGREE VIDEO, BECAUSE YOU’RE FILMING REALISM.”
"IT WON'T BE THAT LONG BEFORE THE TOOLS OF THIS TRADE ARE GOING TO BE AVAILABLE TO MANY, MANY PEOPLE."

—Nonny de la Peña in conversation with Adi Robertson

The Verge
Nonny De La Peña in conversation with Lin Yilin

The following e-conversation between Nonny de la Peña, known for her work as ‘The Godmother of Virtual Reality,’ and New York and Beijing-based artist Lin Yilin explores their collaboration on The Life of a Wall on Lin He Road, a VR project that drew from Asia Art Archive’s collection to form a new iteration of Lin’s seminal 1995 performance, Safely Manoeuvring Across Lin He Road. Inaugurated at Art Basel in Hong Kong in 2017, The Life of a Wall on Lin He Road represents the final commission for 15 Invitations, AAA’s 15-year anniversary programme.
Nonny de la Peña: How did the VR re-enactment differ from any personal memories of your initial mid-90s performance when you built a wall of bricks in the middle of a busy roadway in Guangzhou, and where you were living at the time? Can you describe the sensation of being in the VR experience compared to your initial engagement at the Guangzhou location?

Lin Yilin: First let me say it was a pleasure to collaborate with you through Asia Art Archive, and how impressed and very excited I was when I saw the VR trial run at Emblematic, your ‘next generation media company’ in New York. But it’s quite hard to re-enact the scene I created in Guangzhou.

In fact, it’s impossible. As the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus said: ‘No man ever steps in the same river twice.’ Moreover, a physical road and a scene in virtual reality represent two different ‘streams’ as two spaces with distinctive characteristics. To me, spaces have physical differences that concern the irreconcilability between memories, consciousness, and rediscovery.

So for me, the biggest difference in terms of physicality between the two is that the Guangzhou performance required immense manual effort, while one must follow set rules to control the VR experience. Both, however, have the same goal: to move a wall across the road. Interestingly, since I did not complete this process myself while using the VR this makes me appear as a person who finds it difficult to play by the rules.

NDLP: Not only was the performance virtual but the participants did not experience the work outside at all. Instead, this took place at an art fair inside of a convention centre. Normally the environments I create for people to experience are hosted anywhere from film festivals to museums, but the aim is always the same: to bring subjectivity into play as well as a sense of ‘real’ empathy within the virtual content. How much does this crossover into the objectives for your work? What are the best conditions for people to get a real sense of their own bodies?

LYL: On the one hand, having the VR work at an art fair allowed
news about it to circulate widely. On the other hand, there were large crowds that restricted the number of participants. As my roadway performance only involved a small audience of friends, passersby, and nearby site workers, its circulation took time. While my artistic practice does not focus on the audience – I simply want to let particular things happen in certain places, then observe whether it continues to attract feedback in the future – my later performance art pieces did involve audience participation that allowed people to experience something unconventional. This is similar to the qualities of VR.

NDLP: When we first discussed the project, I wondered whether your original piece was a protest against unbridled development. Instead you spoke about being inspired by the idea that a wall ‘possesses life.’ Can you talk more about this? Do you think the same idea was achieved this time around through a virtual representation and experience of your original concept?

LYL: I am usually critical of social reality, but enjoy delving into the potential and various possibilities of performance art in my work. During the 90s, I repeatedly used bricks to build different forms of walls that were metaphors for certain ideas such as social structure, natural beings, or the subjective-objective world. But I am unsure whether a virtualised interpretation can express the original meaning behind the work. Audience participation is a key element of this VR piece, yet their movements are regulated. While I don’t think this VR piece can transform the audience into artists, it is a deep virtual experience. Almost like a dream, it opens another door for viewers to understand the original work.

NDLP: In describing your source work, Safely Manoeuvring Across Lin He Road, you have spoken about the impulse to build a ‘moving wall.’ In the VR re-enactment, this is put to the test, just like when you performed it the first time, the key word here being ‘safely’ since both versions are about moving the bricks (and oneself) across a busy roadway without being hit by oncoming traffic. This is why I chose to recreate your piece specifically, because it offered audiences the potential to viscerally yet safely engage with their virtual embodied presence.
LYL: The title was chosen only after I completed the work but traffic safety was a significant problem in China during the 90s. You had to take Lin He Road to get to the nearby train station so it was very busy on that road, and I worried about whether I could finish the work or not. That said, ‘safety’ had different connotations then as nobody, including the police, interrupted my act. The VR experience was quite different in that way. Sometimes the vehicles would hit the wall or the audience directly – and when the wall fell, they would get frightened.

NDLP: In researching your work through the Asia Art Archive collection, I learned that you were based in Guangzhou, China, when you made Safely Manoeuvring Across Lin He Road. Also, how many changes were taking place at the time that affected where you lived and worked. Does the VR piece speak to what was happening then, as well as how things are now in China and other parts of Asia?

LYL: Regardless of whether it be VR or other mediums, artistically I would definitely not be satisfied by simply simulating the scene or features of foreign countries – these aren’t difficult to achieve. You create good artworks by first gaining a thorough understanding of the external world, and then expressing your observations by utilising your own unique forms and languages.

NDLP: Besides the wall serving as a sculptural component of your work, the body—a real one—connects both pieces. After experiencing The Life of a Wall on Lin He Road yourself, you also commented on the beauty of witnessing people performing your work. I definitely consider this a collaborative project with you, but how much has this experience changed your approach to audiences as potential collaborators?

LYL: Most people learn about the original performance through video recordings. They’re all absent from this space of the past, but it’s the same for me afterwards. I also possess a consciousness rooted in memories, whereas the re-enactment by VR creates another space. For those who have watched the video recording of the initial performance, their participation in the VR piece is an equally authentic experience – like in a dream. I think dreams
are also authentic. When I see people losing themselves in the VR experience by shaking their hands and legs, it’s as if I’m observing a sleepwalker. It’s very poetic.

**NDLP:** Why did you allow me to do this in the first place? What did you think VR could add to your already seminal artwork?

**LYL:** At first I wasn’t sure if it was appropriate to recreate this work with VR. Upon speaking to you about how my physical image would not appear, it was apparent that audience participation would differentiate this from the original video recording. Looking for ways to enrich my work through VR was outside of my line of thinking but likewise when making a book-to-film adaptation or a remake; you’d have to come up with a reason. Mine was how I thought this would enrich the ideas behind the original work, serve as a conceptual update, or inject new elements.

**NDLP:** I am often described as being a ‘pioneer’ of virtual reality, but as the medium and technology implies, the world of VR is constantly changing. In working with an existing artwork like yours, and as one that is already ‘archived’ in terms of being important to the history of 1990s art in China, I became aware of time and space in a different way. How do you feel about technology’s place in art and did your view change after this experience?

**LYL:** I hope I’ll have the chance to learn even more about VR from you soon but technology and art is a vast topic, and many books have been written on it.

My physical performances are very simple – technical training isn’t necessary, let alone technology. However, I am extremely curious about new technology. Art has a symbiotic relationship with technology – they just use a different language to interpret the same world. Ordinarily, I would never consider utilising technology as a medium for artistic creation. But when these mediums are capable of becoming a way of thinking, I could then possibly be involved with them, and as my passion to create art would also arise spontaneously.
NDLP: How would you like to see the VR re-enactment develop further, if at all?

LYL: I wish more audience members could experience this VR piece. It’s not only a game, but also a time machine that lets people ‘return’ to a certain roadway in Guangzhou during the 90s and actively participate in something that continues to be art.

NDLP: Would you work in this medium again and do you see it as a viable option for artists to work with in the future?

LYL: I hope that I will have the opportunity and prerequisites to do a VR piece soon. On the premise that it becomes more accessible, VR would definitely be the medium of choice for certain artists. Artistic creation requires one to break free from different constraints, and using technology to do so is one of them.
Nonny de la Peña 與林一林對談

Nonny de la Peña: 回顧90年代中期，您當時居於廣州，並在一條繁忙的街道上建了一堵磚牆，然後逐塊移動它。能否請您描述一下，本次虛擬現實的體驗與初次演出的感受有何不同？

林一林: 這次有幸通過AAA和你合作，非常難得。我記得在紐約的Emblematic公司看這個VR試版，感覺非常新鮮，印象深刻。但它很難和我當時在廣州的情景重合，其實也不可能，正如古希臘的哲學家赫拉克利特所說：「你不能兩次踏進同一條河流」。況且現實中的一條馬路和虛擬現實的情景是兩條「河流」，亦即是兩種性質不同的空間。空間的物理性差異對我而言涉及到回憶、意識和再認識的不可調和。對於身體，兩者的差異是當時行為的實現要付出巨大的體力和現在操縱VR要遵循設定的規則。但兩者的目標是一致的，就是要把那堵牆搬過馬路。有意思的是在VR中我沒完成這個過程，這一點說明我是一個難以遵循規則的人。

NDLP: 這個演出只不虛擬，參與者也並非室外體驗本作品。相反地，本次項目在會議中心裡的藝術博覽會內進行。普遍來說，我為人們所創造的體驗環境可以是由電影節至博物館等任何地方，但目標不離帶入主觀感受，並在虛擬的環境下引發「真實的」的同理心。這個目標如何和您作品的宗旨交集?有什麼理想條件能讓觀眾真正感受到自己的身體?

林: 在藝術博覽會展示這個VR作品，一方面，有關這個作品的資訊得到大量的傳播；另一方面，博覽會裡龐大的觀眾人流與VR參與式的人數限制形成很大的衝突。就如我當初在大街上的行為，觀眾也是少量的朋友、路人和旁邊工地的工人，作品的傳播靠時間推移。我的藝術實踐沒太考慮眾的層面，我只是想讓某些事情在某些地方發生，然後看看這件事情在後來是否繼續得到反饋。我後來的一些行為也帶有觀眾參與的成份，讓觀眾經歷一些非常規的事情，這和VR的特性是相似的。

NDLP: 我們第一次討論這個項目時，我猜想您原先創作的目的在於抗議無節制的城市發展。但您回應指其實是受「壁壘擁有生命」這個想法啟發。您可以就這個想法多講一些嗎?您覺得這次虛擬化的演繹和體驗能否表達原先的藝術概念?

林: 平時我對社會現實有批判情緒，但在作品中更喜歡挖掘行為的潛能和各種可能性。90年代我反覆使用磚構成的多小形態，這些形也是某種隱喻——社會結構、生物或主客體的世界。我不確定虛擬化演繹是否能表達原先的藝術概念，在這件VR作品中，觀眾的參與成了第一要素，但他們的操作被規範了。關於觀眾成為藝術家，我認為並不是這件VR作品能完成的任務，但這種虛擬的體驗很深刻，也是一種夢，它能打開觀眾理解原作的另一扇門。
NDLP：在描述《安全渡過林和路》時，你談及建立一堵「移動的牆」的衝動。在虛擬現實重演中，如首次出演般，這個概念被付諸試驗，關鍵詞同樣是「安全」，因為兩個版本都是把礁（和自己）在避開交通的情況下安全地移動過繁忙的道路。這就是為何我選擇重新創作您的作品，因為它有潛質讓觀眾在安全的情況下和虛擬現實中的自身互動。

林：安全是90年代中國馬路上交通很大的問題，當然這個作品的題目也是我做完以後才取的。林和路是通往附近火車站的必經之路，通過的汽車非常多，是否能順利完成這個作品是我那時最擔心的問題。這裡的安全還有另外的指向，當時沒有任何人或警察來中斷我的行為。在VR中的體驗很有趣，有時汽車直接往牆和觀眾身上撞，倒了，人也會嚇一跳。

NDLP：在透過亞洲藝術文獻庫的館藏搜索您的作品時，我了解到您當時常駐中國廣州，並創作了《安全渡過林和路》。當時你居住和工作的地方都深受很多轉變的影響。您認為虛擬現實的演繹有否回應當時的情況，以及中國和亞洲各地的現況？

林：不論VR還是別的門類，從藝術方面，我肯定不會滿足於簡單模擬當時的情景或異國的風貌，因這些都不難達到。任何好的創作，都是對外部世界深入了解後運用獨特形式或語言表達的結果。

NDLP：作為您作品中的雕塑元素，除了牆外，身體——一個真正的身體——連接了兩件作品。您曾在親身體驗《林和路上一堵牆的命運》後觀察別人的體驗，並評論目睹別人演出您的作品是一件美事。我當然把是次項目視為與你的合作，但這種經驗如何改變你對觀眾在作品中成為潛在合作者的觀念？

林：大多觀眾通過錄像記錄看到我的這個行為，他們都是在這個過去的時空以外。當然後來的我也是一樣，僅僅多了記憶的意識。VR的再現，提供了另外一個時空，對於看過錄像的觀眾，參與VR的行為是另一種真實的經歷，我認為夢是真實的。當然看別人忘情地動手動腳在體驗VR時，我猶如在看一個夢遊者，非常富有詩意。

NDLP：您為什麼一開始會允許我使用虛擬現實重現您的作品？你認為虛擬現實可以如何豐富這件本已意義重大的藝術作品？

林：開始時我不確定用VR重做這個作品是否合適，通過和你交談後確知我的身體形象不會出現時，明明的觀眾參與這會區別於原來的錄像記錄。如何用VR豐富原作，這可能不是我的思路，就像小說改編的電影或將老電影翻拍的新電影，都要找到新版本存在的理由。可能這樣豐富原作的思路會有更大的價值，也可作概念的更新和添加新的元素。
NDLP: 我常被形容為虛擬現實的「先鋒」，但隨著媒介與科技的發展，虛擬現實的世界正不斷變化。當我通過虛擬現實的科技演繹這件已存在、並被「終存」為90年代中國藝術史上重要的作品時，我開始以不同的方式認識時間和空間。能談談您怎麼看待科技在藝術裡的定位嗎？又，經過是次體驗後，您的觀點有沒有任何改變？

林：在這方面，希望日後還有機會向你討教。科技與藝術，這個題目很大，已存在很多的專著。我用身體做的行為都很簡單，不要說科技了，連技巧的訓練都不需要。但我對新的科技抱有很大的好奇心，藝術和科技是一個共生的關係，只是用不同的語言解釋同一個世界。平時我從不會想到要利用科技的手段進行藝術創作，當這些手段能化作思維方式時，我就會有可能涉獵這方面了，創作的激情也悠然而生。

NDLP: 您希望是次虛擬現實的項目如何進一步發展？

林：我希望更多的觀眾能體驗這件VR作品，它不僅僅是個遊戲，同時也是一個時空機器，讓人們「回到」90年代廣州的某條馬路，動手做一件稱為藝術的事情。

NDLP: 你會再次利用虛擬現實這個媒介創作嗎？您認為這是未來藝術家在創作上一個可行的選擇嗎？

林：我希望很快有機會和條件做一件VR作品。VR肯定是某些藝術家的選擇，前題是這類技術變得更容易獲得。藝術創作是要掙脫各種的束縛，技術也是一種束縛。
VISIT AAA.ORG.HK FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE WORK OF BEIJING- AND NEW YORK-BASED ARTIST LIN YILIN AND ADDITIONAL MATERIAL FROM THIS PROJECT
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Asia Art Archive marks its 15th year by extending *15 Invitations* to creative practitioners to look within and beyond the organisation as an archive, a collection of material, a digital platform, and a node in a wider collective network. *15 Invitations* take various sizes, forms, and creative directions—literary, polemic, political, sonic, physical, and digital—and function as a series of ‘drop pins’ to alternatively navigate where AAA originated and where it may be going. AAA’s e-journal *Field Notes* traces the 15 participants as they contribute notes and entries to document the process.

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Asia Art Archive is an independent non-profit organisation initiated in 2000 in response to the urgent need to document and make accessible the multiple recent histories of art in the region. With one of the most valuable collections of material on art freely available from its website and on-site library, AAA builds tools and communities to collectively expand knowledge through research, residency, and educational programmes.

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