



Main Space



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Soft Refractions Curated by Mary Chen and Theresa Wang

DeBugReBoot, Jessy Kitchen, HaeAhn Kwon,
IvanovStoeva, Carson Teal, and Xuan Ye
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The rapid expansion of digital, cyber, and net worlds has created innovative ways of engaging with reality. And yet more often than not, these worlds produce misapprehensions against the basic virtues of how we should function, disseminate information, and generate truths. The works of *Soft Refractions* question the insistence for such absolute value systems in a world that has already detracted visuality, authenticity, and perception into new media. How can we issue a detourn from our existing frameworks of thinking and mine for new capacities?

Used to characterize an optical phenomenon that traces the speed of light as it traverses material barriers, refraction inherently speaks to rendering the non-material visible through an Other way of seeing. Refraction implies rupture, diving into the ravine, and a new angle of experience. It is premised to reside on a slant, the jarred edges of bending lines, but equally refraction functions to blur the boundary as much as to distort. To perceive refraction as soft is to invoke the tenderness within shards askew and to find the spaces of intersection. *Soft Refractions* stages encounters within the interval and opens the potential for the boundary as a place of emergence.

Artist duo IvanovStoeva fixates on the surface as a means to revel in the back-end. *Surface encounters* is a pair of light boxes containing light gels that produce an abstract light drawing on rear-projection screen. For IvanovStoeva (Dimo Ivanov and Sonia Stoeva), the surface is the boundary at which “interrelation between giver and receiver” occurs.¹ Like dialogue, this “mirroring effect of question and answer, or give and take” can produce more expansive truths than were present before.² The construction and display of the work physically contains the refractive capacity of light as a way to visualize the invisible. It uses the trapping of physical structure to read the screen as a system composed of multiple layers. The result is a sculptural object whose own depth evinces the illusionary body of the screen.

Further entangling bodies of viewers and screen, DeBugReBoot’s installation *jāpeg* creates unique composite faces by mediating users into perceivable images and performing algorithms until secondary data is seamlessly patched in. When DeBugReBoot (Nikole Hidalgo McGregor and Carlos McGregor) extracts the user from a webcam and interprets them against the Google reverse image search database, they display how one might read active bodily intervention within technological infrastructure. Through processes of accretion and willful error, so as in N. Katherine Hayles’ words, “data is humanized and subjectivity computerized”.³ The data is made flesh by generating information from the user, and in the process it preserves the eyes to keep the user in this transaction. *jāpeg* views the face as a mask through which to conceive a new entity yet it cannot retrieve without the face as query. To interface is to meet at the border and reach mutual recognition.

Similarly, Xuan Ye’s *IN BETWEEN () WE OSCILLATE* uses programming language to digitally visualize the boundaries of front and back-end infrastructure. The parenthetical () denotes the self-contained space where function and information can operate dialectically. But this is only conditionally expressed on the stipulation that the

¹ Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red* (New York: Routledge, 1991): 25.

²Martin Jay, “The Rise of Hermeneutics and the Crisis of Ocularcentrism”, *Poetics Today* 9, no. 2 (1988): 321

³N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999): 39.

brackets are balanced properly. Her web installation presents pairs of English antonyms scrolling across the screen in the form of a spectrogram: good/bad, absence/presence, bend/straight. Each word semantically corrects the imbalance of the other, hoping to equalize polarities to eliminate interference. Language, unfortunately, does not succeed: its impossible desire for absolute polarity vocalizes itself in a piercing metallic hum. Language, no matter verbal or programming, measures importance in the meaning it encodes. In Ye's continuum, one which determines the other can formulate meaning irrelevant even while encoding a valid message. Oscillating between contradictory potentials requires a mediated articulation of the world, holding the "straight" and seeing it "bent".

In his practice, Carson Teal employs the same base elements of language, image, sound, and light as Ye but isolates them to separate planes. They are reunited in a meticulously built installation conjoining sculptural terrain with projection that physically actualizes each abstract component into perceptual object.

In *The First Object*, rotoscoped animation circulates the expanse of the wall and folds against an array of grounded objects. A recurring thematic in Teal's multimedia work is the use of pictographic symbols, characters that are at once archaeological and contemporary. By synthesizing this imagery with computer-generated images, Teal opens a circuit: in presenting the languages of yesterday, he seeks to create the histories of tomorrow. If Ye's work sheds doubt to the power dynamics embedded in language, Teal's embeds language in artifacts and images and situates them within narrative. In doing so, *The First Object* stages narrative as a myth awaiting rupture, and truth as simply marginalized fiction. Teal's work is a product of inwardness that excavates the surface of narrative, asking viewers where they fit in this hybrid space.

Refraction emerges in HaeAhn Kwon's practice in the form of the makeshift. Responding to a given situation by assembling recombinant fragile pieces, the makeshift redirects attention from the absolute and fumbles towards a state of non-closure. This absurdist strategy is overtly perceptible in *Anti-loneliness*, where a Samsung flat-screen TV is re-assembled into a table top. Upon the table, a phone docking bowl known as the Anti-Loneliness Ramen Bowl props up an iPhone that displays scenes of monkeys

drinking beer. *Anti-loneliness* is divined by a missing presence: she who holds the phone, he who consumes the meal, they who consume the image. If Teal's work requires presence, Kwon asks of absence as a "much anticipated presence".⁴ As Kwon's work defers the body awaiting a transaction, suspending proprietorship in equal pose, Jessy Kitchen's industrial by-products are the aftermath. Situated amongst screen-centric works, *while bodies become callouses* is a jarring contrast. Kitchen's work is a series of steel sheets and hand-cast concrete keychains, some strewn on the floor, others creeping on a column. Their forging hearkens to Fordist commodity making as well as the prevailing industrial economy. In these systems, each element is cast to render unseen human labour seen. Displaced in the form of an informational trace, Kitchen's work reveals the tenderness of disposable bodies and addresses the ways in which embodiment can be complicit in and dependant on acts of transgression. Her work grounds in the face of the uncertain.

In the move toward abstracted digital systems, all still depend on questions of language and representation. The artists in *Soft Refractions* perceive these concerns as a negotiation within an expansive, embodied space whereby the surface can be a chasm, language can be futile, or absence can become a presence. *Soft Refractions* is a manifestation of multiplicity calling for a trajectory of variation, learning from the in-between to gesture past the surface.

- Mary Chen and Theresa Wang

⁴Trinh T. Minh-ha, "The Image and the Void", *Journal of Visual Culture* 15, no. 1 (2016): 136.