

Media release

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## Cao Fei

### Testimonies to the Near Future

May 30–October 11, 2026, Kunstmuseum Basel | Gegenwart

Curators: Stephanie Seidel, Philipp Selzer, Alice Wilke

The Chinese artist Cao Fei (b. 1978, Guangzhou, lives in Beijing) is one of the defining voices of her generation, working across video, digital media, photography, installation, and sculpture. The artist's works capture the rapid changes that have shaped China, and the Pearl River Delta in particular, since the country's 1978 policy of Reform and Opening up.

For *Cao Fei: Testimonies to the Near Future*, her first solo exhibition in Switzerland and largest survey exhibition in Europe to date, the artist transforms the Kunstmuseum Basel | Gegenwart into a total work of art that takes the form of a city blending immersive installations and video universes from her oeuvre of the past thirty years. Cao Fei's achievement as a pioneering creator of digital worlds is uncontested. Her early works have influenced an entire generation of artists from Asia and beyond. For over two decades, she has made art—from video installations and digital simulations to virtual-reality settings—grappling with the impact on human life of wrenching societal and technological transformations, establishing her renown as a leading thinker about art, media, technology, and the future.

Her videos and partly game-based environments are situated in factories, dreamscapes, and visions of a future. Exploring aspects of work, change, and the peculiar beauty of a globalized world, they address questions of identity, embodiment, and recollection. Cao Fei examines how economic growth, technological development, and globalization influence our society, without ever descending into pessimism about the future. Among the centerpieces of the exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Basel | Gegenwart are seminal works like *Whose Utopia* (2006), *RMB City* (2007–), *Asia One* (2018), *Nova* (2019–), *Oz* (2022), and the *Hip Hop* series (2003–).

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of Cao Fei's art is her gift for integrating speculative and surreal elements into works that are often almost documentary. This

aspect is underscored by elaborate installations that materialize elements from the videos in the exhibition space, further blurring the boundary between the physical and virtual realms.

The exhibition, which extends across all four floors of the Gegenwart building, invites viewers to delve deep into Cao Fei's extensive oeuvre and makes for a singular experience in three dimensions in which the video works are not just on display but become an immersive reality. The exhibition is designed by Cao Fei in collaboration with Small Production, Beijing.

### **Artist's book**

An artist's book is published on occasion of the exhibition. The publication includes a newly commissioned text by the award-winning Chinese science fiction author Regina Kanyu Wang as well as a series of new illustrations by the Chinese artist YuFei.

Wang's contribution unfolds as a fictional narrative developed in response to selected works on view in the exhibition *Testimonies to the Near Future*, with China Tracy, Cao Fei's avatar, as its protagonist. Works featured in the text function as both stage and backdrop to the story: from *RMB City in Second Life* to the cinematic spaces of Cao Fei's film installations, China Tracy traverses multiple worlds.

Wang's text is complemented by drawings by Yu Fei that respond directly to the narrative. The illustrations draw on motifs from Chinese comic culture, in particular Ye Yonglie's post-Mao science fiction comic *Little Smarty Pants Travels to the Future* from 1978. While employing a narrative visual language, the drawings also address traditional modes of viewing associated with Chinese painting.

The dialogue between text and drawings is further enriched by a selection of film stills and photographs by Cao Fei. The artist's book comprises 96 pages and is designed by Basel-based Studio Moono. Regina Kanyu Wang's story is published in German, English, and Chinese. The publication will be available at the opening of the exhibition and serve as a point of departure for a series of accompanying public programs.

### **About the artist**

Born in 1978, Cao Fei was raised in the southern Chinese megacity of Guangzhou, nicknamed the "Factory of the World." She studied at the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts and now lives and works in Beijing, China.

Cao Fei is the winner of the SCAD deFINE ART (2024) and Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize (2021). She was nominated for the Hugo Boss Prize and the Future Generation Art Prize in 2010 and was awarded Best Young Artist and Best Artist at the China Contemporary Art Award (CCAA) in 2006 and 2016 respectively.

Cao Fei has already had numerous international solo exhibitions, including at the following institutions: Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney (2024/2025), Museum of Art Pudong, Shanghai (2024), the Lenbachhaus, Munich (2024), Pinacoteca de São Paulo (2023), MAXXI, Rome (2021), UCCA Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing (2021), Espace Louis Vuitton, Munich (2021), Serpentine Gallery, London (2020), Centre Pompidou, Paris (2019), Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf (2018), Tai Kwun Contemporary, Hong Kong (2018), and MoMA PS1, New York (2016).

Her most recent group exhibition participations include *Paraventi*, Fondazione Prada, Milan (2023), *A Gateway to Possible Worlds*, Centre Pompidou-Metz, Metz (2022), *Post-Capital*, Kunsthal Charlottenborg, Copenhagen (2022), *Is This Tomorrow?*, Whitechapel Gallery, London (2019), *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2019), *Extreme. Nomads*, MMK Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt a.M. (2018), and *One Hand Clapping*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2018). Cao Fei has taken part in many biennials and triennials, including the Shanghai Biennale (2004), the Moscow Biennale (2005), the Taipei Biennial (2006), the Biennale of Sydney (2006 and 2010), the Istanbul Biennial (2007), the Yokohama Triennale (2008), and the Venice Biennale (2003, 2007, and 2015).

Fondazione Prada will present *Dash*, a new multimedia project devised by Cao Fei for its Milan headquarters, from April 9 to September 28, 2026.

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## The exhibition

Across four floors, the exhibition *Cao Fei: Testimonies to the Near Future* presents ten immersive installations and environments featuring a selection of works by the artist from her beginnings in the 1990s to 2025.

### Ground floor

Entering Kunstmuseum Basel | Gegenwart at ground level, visitors step into a town square-like setting: skate ramps occupy the floor, and graffiti extends across the walls. A large orientation map introduces the exhibition parcours, framing the museum itself as a city. Throughout the building, a color-coded wayfinding system, recalling the signage of airports and other semi-public infrastructures, provides orientation and creates an atmosphere of the exhibition as a self-contained reality.

Fabric roofs, common for market stalls, fill the expansive atrium. Here, however, instead of sheltering goods, they house Cao Fei's *Hip Hop* series (2003–), a series of short, dynamic videos shaped by the artist's early pop-cultural influences: MTV, pirated music and video tapes, Cantopop, and her passion for rap music and hip-hop culture. The videos show everyday people, filmed by the artist, dancing to hip hop music in public spaces, turning sidewalks, shop windows, and parking lots into impromptu stages.

Shot across Fukuoka, Guangzhou, New York, Shanghai, and Sydney, the videos trace how culture is exported globally and reinterpreted in different urban contexts across the world. Their lo-fi aesthetic and rhythmic editing echo the concept of musical sampling, a common practice in hip hop that combines disparate fragments into unexpected, energizing connections. In these videos, the cityscapes become playful sites of self-invention while foregrounding the hybrid, improvised character of contemporary global culture. In *Hip Hop: New York* (2006) and *Hip Hop: Sydney* (2024), Cao Fei deliberately focuses on the cities' Chinese diaspora enclaves capturing their idiosyncratic, subversive energy, and rebellious spirit.

Continuing the metaphor of the city, another section of the space features *Cosplayers* (2004), a video showing young cosplay enthusiasts – one of China's earliest subcultures – outside of Guangzhou. Embodying characters from popular Japanese anime and manga series, the protagonists pose amid construction ruins and half-finished mansions on the edges of the city. *Cosplayers* captures the playful seriousness of a generation of Chinese youth who grew up with and through the internet. Creating images of a surreal quality, Cao Fei explores how networked media such as online video games manifest themselves in physical space as the cosplayers simultaneously imagine and claim their urban surroundings.

## First floor

On the first floor, the exhibition moves from the city's public and outdoor spaces and their inhabitants to the industries that drive China's rapid economic growth: accelerated production of various goods and their distribution through far-reaching supply chains. The installations translate these economic systems into an architectural environment featuring "last mile" delivery vehicles common in Chinese cities, alongside warehouse fixtures and rows of bunk beds that reference the infrastructures and living conditions built around industrial labor.

*Asia One* (2018) centers around the world's first fully automated distribution center in Kunshan (Jiangsu Province, near Shanghai). Through video, photography, and installation Cao Fei traces China's transformation from a low-tech manufacturing site into a global leader in "smart" logistics and AI. *Whose Utopia* (2006), made during the artist's residency in the Siemens Art Program at the Osram factory, returns to the human scale of manufacturing. Displayed within a newly commissioned installation, the film follows workers who step out of their routines to perform private aspirations, briefly claiming a personal space within the environment of assembly-line work.

Installations like *Hongxia* (2019–2023) and *MatryoshkaVerse* (2022) read China's present through its historical and geographical conditions, which continue to have an impact today, but also offer room for speculations on the future. The long-term *Hongxia* project is rooted in the abandoned Hongxia (Red Dawn) Theater in Beijing's Jiuxianqiao district, once a cinema and cultural hub for workers in an early electronics-industry center—a proto-Silicon Valley active from the 1950s through the 1960s, tasked with developing China's first computer. After the factories shut down and the theater closed, the site remained largely untouched for years. Between 2015 and 2020, Cao Fei transformed it into a hybrid studio and research laboratory. The works produced through *Hongxia* draw on utopian dreams from China's technological past to develop speculative visions of the future.

In *MatryoshkaVerse*, Cao Fei builds a part speculative, metaverse-inflected world that collapses place and time into a layered fictional environment. The project takes cues from Manzhouli, a border city marked by Russian/Soviet replicas and "matryoshka" iconography, mixing these references with surreal imagery.

## Second floor

Moving from the economic and industrial realities of contemporary China into a more speculative realm of digital worlds, this floor features large environments and

installations like *Duotopia Vol. 1* (2022) and *Duotopia Vol. 2* (2024) along with *Oz* (2022) and a larger-than-life inflatable octopus sculpture.

As the avatar Oz, Cao Fei inhabits DUOTOPIA—her first digital architectural construction in the metaverse. She created her most recent avatar within Yuanbang Mega City, a metaverse platform developed by the Chinese tech companies Meta Media and Baidu. In Mandarin, “duo” means “many.” The *Duotopia* films and *Oz* present designs for worlds set in an indeterminate future. Oz appears as a hybrid creature that dissolves the boundaries between organic and technological form, between the natural and the artificial. In contrast to China Tracy, Oz is an androgynous being whose non-human features and mechanical augmentations mirror our technologized and digitized world. As an enigmatic human-machine entity, Oz stands at a turning point in technological development. The advancing integration of artificial intelligence into our digitalized society makes it imperative for humans to navigate the complexity of a technology-driven world—and to actively shape the possibilities of digitalization.

The *RMB City* project dates from a period of pervasive techno-optimism. Between 2007 and 2011, Cao Fei and a team of coders and programmers in Beijing constructed RMB City, a virtual Chinese metropolis on the then-popular online platform *Second Life*, where users could interact within shared digital environments. Cao Fei’s city featured a functioning economy, a manifesto, and even a mayor. *RMB City* is now regarded as a milestone of early internet art. Cao Fei did not shy away from exposing the entanglements of (digital) art with the neoliberal global economic system and making visible the opportunism of the international art industry. The literal translation of the title—derived from the abbreviation of the Chinese currency, the Renminbi— means “City of Money.”

For Cao Fei, *Second Life* represented the digital incarnation of the urban development she was witnessing at the time. With *RMB City*, she conceived a digital, condensed vision of the excessive Chinese real estate boom, with all its surges and downturns.

Alongside the city, Cao Fei created her first avatar, China Tracy—a cyber-mother and cyber-CEO—who appeared in talk shows, conducted Feng Shui sessions, and auctioned digital building plots to buyers from the real world. Once conceived as a vibrant, playable environment, the work now exists as a digital ruin—accessible through an archived flight through the original city as well as a series of videos.

### **Third floor**

On the third floor, *Isle of Instability* (2020) shows Cao Fei’s daughter as she attempts to escape the monotony and boredom of isolation during the pandemic and the officially

imposed contact restrictions through imaginative play. In front of a television displaying a white beach and a blue sea, beneath a houseplant and beside a fan simulating an ocean breeze, the girl immerses herself in her own world. On her “island,” using only a few toys and everyday objects—such as balls, disinfectants, and cleaning supplies—she constructs her own reality within a fleeting world of imagination. *Isle of Instability* was commissioned by Audemars Piguet Contemporary in 2020.

Visitors on this floor are invited to explore Cao Fei’s artistic practice from a different perspective. The Artist’s Room presents a selection of the artist’s early video works alongside interviews and archival footage from previous projects, offering deeper insight into the development of her work.