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I AM (VR) : Tenuous Self (虛我) and the Liminal Body in Virtual Reality

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Positioned itself in the stance of critical posthumanism, this essay examines the virtual corporeality in Markus Selg and Susanne Kennedy's VR performance *I AM (VR)*. By introducing Zhuangzi's idea of Tenuous self (虛我) and Jean-Luc Nancy's take on the liminal body, this essay asks how do we consider the physical form of the body, assembled in reality-reality within the immersive sharing and exchanging process of virtual-reality? What kind of transformation that the body might experience when it immerses into that otherworldly reality? *I Am (VR)*, as an embodied performative happening of both artistic research and practice of virtual reality, provides insightful perspective in searching for possible answers. Taking this analysis as a departure point, this essay further investigates the possible entanglements between the 'I' and the 'VR'.

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...I did not know whether it had formerly been myself dreaming I was a butterfly, or I am now a butterfly dreaming I am a man.

— Zhuangzi, The Equality of Things, *Inner Chapters*[1]

Demetrius: Are you sure
That we are awake?
It seems to me
That yet we sleep,
we dream.
— Williams Shakespeare, Act 4 Scene I, *Midnight Summer's Dream.*

"Are you aware of yourself now?
No?
I will let you into a secret: you never were or had a self."
Anyway, never mind..."[2]

— *I AM (VR)*

Introduction

I AM (VR) is a simulating virtual reality performance created by Markus Selg, Susanne Kennedy, in collaboration with Rodrik Biersteker and Richard Janssen, as part of Markus Selg's solo exhibition *MIND IN THE CAVE* at Galerie Guido W. Baudach in Berlin, 2021. The performance is designed for an one-on-one encounter, inviting the participant to join a meditative journey of searching for the otherworldly enlightenment — the Oracle. During this journey, the participant is guided by an artificially interweaved intelligence which is presented through sound waves. The voice leads the participant into a digital cave where the participant is able to stroll through *THE FOREST*, experience *THE NARRATIVE* and finally take *THE ELEVATOR* to meet the Oracle. Throughout this process, the participant's material body from reality-reality fades out into the visual oasis within the meta-lens that grants access entering Selg and Kennedy's virtual-reality — a xenon-constellation fabricated with breathing colours, melting fossils, talking screens, glitching glyphs, shimmering amulets, hyper objects humming their mystical Sagas, affects automated from digital turmoils, a vortex of weird beings and non-beings micro-meshing into neon Mandelbrot sets swirling into infinity...as well as tumbling streams, mutating boulders, burning fire, dripping dews, oozing breeze... (Peng 2021a)[3] Within such (duty) free, fluent, fluid world, one is reminded of the disappearance of her own subjective, material body while her consciousness experiences the instant bewilderment of 'being here but

not here'. At the same time, the dissolution of the subjective body propels the birth of an elusive, flickering, glitchy, liquid, freshly regenerated VR body of sensuous, consciousness, and spirituality. Along with this process, the 'self' becomes 'tenuous' (虛我)[4], and the body itself becomes a liminal space.

What distinguishes *I AM (VR)* from many other virtual reality projects is that *I AM (VR)* is less about contemplating the anthropocentric instrumental utilisation of VR technology per se than about imaging alternative scenarios for the emergence of specific bodily human and nonhuman assemblage, where the virtual world is not turned into resource but something to be actively examined, experienced and exercised. In this regard, experimenting VR as a spiritual practice and exercise for enacting alternative relationship among human, machines, and immersive technologies, Selg and Kennedy's virtual reality resonates with the concept of 'tenuous self' (虛我), a crucial part that contributes to the Daoist practice of 'wu-wei' (無為). Through the praxis of the 'tenuous self', a liminal body has emerged as manifestation of the embodiment of the human and nonhuman assemblage. When considering the process of bodily transformations within the context of virtual reality, *I Am (VR),* as an embodied performative happening based upon both artistic research and practice of virtual reality, provides insightful perspective to the subject matter. Employing an auto-ethnographic approach as one of the critical methods of performance analysis, the following examination attempts to crystallize the emergence of 'tenuous self' and the liminal body in *I Am (VR),* and later draws speculative connections between these two concepts. Taking this analysis as a departure point, this essay further questions that, apart from the dominant trans-humanist approach of taking virtual reality technology merely as an instrumental tool to fulfil anthropocentric purposes, what are or might be the other possible entanglements between the 'I' and the 'VR'?

Zhuangzi's Wu-wei (無為): the Tenuous Self (虛我）

> ...neither doing nor doing nothing, and nothing is left undone.
>
> —— Zhuangzi, Knowledge Rambling in the North, *Outer Chapters*[5]

To understand the tenuous self (虛我), it is necessary to introduce the concept of wu-wei(無為). Wu-wei, effortless action,[6] is part of the essential (what Michael Polanyi called) 'tacit knowledge' from pre-Qin (pre-221 BC) Chinese philosophical and religious thinkers. Concerning the relationships within nature, governmentality[7] and human existence, *wu-wei* develops as a core concept of Daoism. For the purpose and limit of this paper, I focus on touching upon the surface of wu-wei from the Daoist

tradition, precisely, to briefly introduce Zhuangzi's ideas of the tenuous self as part of his wu-wei practice concerning about the 'I' and the body in Selg and Kennedy's creative meditation on 'VR'.

Edward Slingerland articulates in *Effortless action: wu-wei as conceptual metaphor and spiritual ideal in early China,*

> wu-wei, in the absence of doing exertion, literally means 'in the absence of/without doing exertion,' It is important to realise, however, that wu-wei properly refers not to what is actually happening (or not happening) in the realm of observable action but rather to the state of mind of the actor. That is, it refers not to what is or is not being done but to the phenomenological state of the doer...it describes a state of mind in which the actions flow freely and instantly from one's spontaneous inclination. (Slingerland, 2003: 7)

Without trying nor the expanded deliberation of trying, wu-wei activates a process of (non-) action that grants efficacy with the dictates of the impendent situation. Such process of (non-) action might not be necessarily observed as anything 'physical' that is perceptible to the others. As Pang Pu suggests, wu-wei is not a basic form of action, but a mental state of the actor — the spiritual and energetic state that obtains at the very moment of the (non-) action (Pang, 1994: 15). In this light, wu-wei in general can be considered as a spiritual and energetic practice that is subjected to the individual's internal journey in response to its immersed environment. It is important to note that instead of formulating a series of abstract reasonings, the state of wu-wei is fundamentally performative and material in the sense that wu-wei emphasizes the engagement with the world through the medium of 'act', precisely, act without acting, or rather, do without doing. Ultimately landing in a spiritual, or an energetic state of mind, such embodiment indicates wu-wei's nature as a performative practice rather than a discursive representation of some sort of theoretical grasps.

Bearing this in mind, Zhuangzi conceives wu-wei as a transformation of everyday conscious human activity (Slingerland 2003: 175) in relation to the internal selves. Such transformation is inseparable from one's daily life, an embodied and embrained process that distinguishes itself from the classical notions of transcendental reason. However, it does not mean that one can easily reach the state of wu-wei. Zhuangzi believes that social and cultural constructions are the greatest obstacles that prevent the human from opening up to the state of wu-wei. To free oneself from the entanglements in trying and the tensions that are pre-conditioned in the cultivated human lives, Zhuangzi proposes

'tenuous self (虛我)' as an exercise to facilitate the state of wu-wei. In other words, the 'tenuous self' can be considered as Zhuangzi's approach to reach the state of Wu-wei. Specifically, in order to create the 'tenuous self', he calls for the process of "Wu Sang Wo (吾喪我)," meaning I have lost myself. In the opening of *The Equality of Things* (齊物論), writing in the voices of Nang-Guo Zi-Qi, and his disciple Yan Cheng Zi-You, Zhuangzi speaks about the state of 'tenuous self':

> Nan-Guo Zi-Qi was seated, leaning forward on his stool. He was looking up to the sky and breathed gently, seeming to be in a trance, and to have lost all consciousness of any companion.
>
> Yan Cheng Zi-You (who was in attendance and standing before him): What is this? Can the body be made to become thus like a withered tree, and the mind to become like slaked lime? His appearance as he leans forward on the stool to-day is such as I never saw him have before in the same position.
>
> Zi-Qi: Yan, you do well to ask such a question, I had just now lost myself; but how should you understand it? You may have heard the notes of Man, but have not heard those of Earth; you may have heard the notes of Earth, but have not heard those of the Cosmos.[8]

By calling for such blatantly paradoxical feats as "Wu Sang Wo (I had just now lost myself)" through Zi-Qi's voice, Zhuangzi seeks to illustrate the ontological existence of all entities that exist in the cosmos. Here, "Wu吾" and "Wo我" both refer to the 'I'. However, in the context of the ancient Chinese, "Wu" can only be used as subject while "Wo" can be used as both subject and object in a sentence. Content wise, "Wu吾" is the pronoun of 'I' (Luo 2013: 54), mostly close to 'the self'. "Wo我" contains more layers of the addressed subject. It forms along with the social, cultural and psychological growth of the self. One may relate "Wo我" to C. G. Jung's definition of 'the ego'-- a complex factor to which all conscious contents are related (Jung, 1959: 3). In this light, losing the self does not mean losing sanity. It rather indicates a process of de-centering the anthropocentric ideal of the socio-culturally constructed 'ego', and to give space to the humble understanding of the "myriad apertures" where the multiple selves are situated in. Internally, we encounter the "Wo我" as object possession formulation of unself-consciousness, where the "Wo我" can be "forgotten", "lost (sang, 喪)", or rather, "discarded"(Luo, 2013: 55–56) by the subject "Wu吾". The self in this way becomes a container, (Slingerland, 2003: 175) a space. Moreover, losing the ego also

suggests the making and re-making of the 'tenuous self.' Tenuous does not necessarily refer to fragility nor weakness, but a prolonged (non)action of the ego being fading-out, letting-go, loosening-up. To allow the self become tenuous is to allow a process of self-discarding for openings, and to allow the experience of 'being here but not here'. Slingerland describes this process as "metaphorical emptying of the self", fasting away the ego to "clear a space for the 'entry' into the self of the (cosmic) normative order, portrayed as a physical substance or human guest (2003: 175) ---- that is, from the writer's point of view, the body. The emphasis on the body rather than the 'human body' here is to give weight to the biological materiality of the body. Being aware of the heterogeneous multiplicities among socio-politically gendered and racialised bodies, the writer appoints to 'Qi (氣)', the energies and vibrations as the very materiality of the body when that socio-politically constituted ego becomes tenuous. Thus, from Zhuangzi's perspective, the process of 'tenuousising the self' liberates the body from its pre-assumed human conditions. Spontaneously "without doing exertion", the emergence of the tenuous self then leads to the transformative moment when the body becomes liminal, and the self becomes a symbiotic assemblage of hearts, minds, spirits, energies, vibrations, colours, frequencies...that traverses within and through the liminal body.

Tenuous Self (虛我) as the liminal body in virtual reality

In *Corpus*, Jean-Luc Nancy writes,

> Bodies don't take place in discourse or in matter. They don't inhabit "mind" or "body." They take place at the limit, qua limit: limit— external border, the fracture and intersection of anything foreign in a continuum of sense, a continuum of matter. An opening, discreetness.
> (2008: 17)

Nancy delineates the 'happening' of the bodies at the very space of the 'limit' which he further explains as the "external border", the "fracture", the "intersection" and the "opening". What ties these locations together is their common shared capacity for the bodies to flow, venture, navigate, transfer among spaces for the ever-changing sensuous and material continuum. They are the in-between-spaces where the in-between-bodies take place. In other words, what Nancy suggests is that the bodies take place at the very liminality that reproduces the liminality of the bodies themselves. The happening of the liminal bodies precisely resonates with Zhuangzi's (re)making

of the 'tenuous self' inasmuch as they both require the effortless action of 'fading-out, letting-go, loosening-up' the ego that singles out the body into fixated, pre-made categories. As Zhuangzi suggests, Nan Guo Zi-Qi needs to experience the moment of "Wu Sang Wo" in order to be able to hear not only the "notes of Man", but also the "notes of Earth" and the "notes of the Cosmos", that is, the Nancynian "continuum of sense and matter." Almost in a meditative and spiritual way, to become tenuous is to become liminal. Throughout this becoming, physical action is not so much important in the sense of achieving certain pragmatic goals driven by anthropocentric obsession and desire rather than opening up a space for the unself-consciousness to flow and experience.

One of the spaces that might be the potential playground for experimenting and exercising the tenuous self as the liminal body is Virtual Reality (VR). Precisely because of its intrinsic liminality, VR could be developed through both abstraction and embodiment depending on the manifestation of such space. Since Ivan Sutherland's 1965 paper *The Ultimate Display* and his development of the first Head-Mounted Display (HMD) with internal sensors that tracks the user's head movements in 1968 (Dixon 2015: 365), marking the very first major development in the history of virtual reality, the term has been used increasingly loosely in our digital culture. It is therefore necessary to reconsider what do we mean when addressing virtual reality in the context of artistic creation. In *Digital Performance,* Steve Dixon describes VR as in industrial computer graphics format simulating navigable three-dimensional environments and requiring considerable computing horsepower (2015: 364). Dixon's definition emphasizes the specialised digital nature of VR in terms of its machine, algorithm, data-oriented materiality. Based on its materiality, VR's ontological traits could be identified based on the following three interdependent aspects, summarized by one of the early VR enthusiasts Howard Rheingold:

> 1. Immersion, being surrounded by a three-dimensional world;
> 2. The ability to walk around in that world, choose your own point of view;
> 3. Manipulation, being able to reach in and manipulate it.
> (1994: 34)

Rheingold's exploration on VR on one hand straightforwardly points out VR's hybridity of creating the immersive, three-dimensional world that simulates the reality-reality which we are familiar with. On the other hand, however, it also reveals a certain limitation

on the early VR creations due to their initial anthropocentrism. When considering VR's cultural and historical genealogy, Diane Gromala suggests,

> VR traces through the fantastical worlds elicited through mimetic simulations of ritual, dioramas, art, literature and theatre... the evocation and perception of a shareable but otherworldly place in which humans extend and project their agency. (2002, 223)

Gromala's take on VR underlines VR's potentiality of interweaving spaces and worlds that meander in between realities, dreams, cultural memories, shadows and lights. With different interests, all of these perspectives ultimately reflect what makes virtual reality 'virtual', that is, its liminality: VR as the constantly-shifting "external borders" constituted by the flowing electric currents, codes, algorithms, computations, machines; the "fraction" that fluctuates on the spectrum of immersion and manipulation, encompassing multiple passages where the Flâneuse wonders; as well as the "intersections" of becomings, worldings, fabulatings, channellings, remixings which bring further "openings" to activate VR's immersive wormholes, teleporting the homo-sapien bodies into the middle of deep simulation wrapped in layers and layers of electric dreams rendered by flowing data (Peng 2021b).

Although VR's particular liminality prepares itself to be an open platform for various becomings and worldings, not all VR creations are able to recognise the liminal state of the bodies and at the same time to embrace the liminality from both sides for the potential emergence of the tenuous self. For example, let us re-consider Rheingold's view on VR from the perspective of "manipulation": If the VR is created for fulfilling anthropocentric purposes, then the focus on manipulation, be it coming from the human participant wishing to manipulate the situation that s/he/they experience(s) in the virtual reality, or be it coming from the algorithm of the virtual reality itself, the intention to manipulate rejects the becoming of tenuous self. The danger is that driven by such intention, one might either fall into the cognitive capitalist trap, reproducing the trans-humanist illusion of profit-making and human enhancement (eg. google's glasses or facebook's meta-verse) or to drift away from the current reality, completely give oneself to the virtual world as a form of techno-escapism (eg. internet/game addicts). In this regard, *I AM (VR)*, with its reference to virtual reality body politics, is certainly an experimentation that creates an alternative relationship between human and virtual reality. And this alternative relationship is radically different from the dominate one proliferated by trans-humanists and techno-escapists. Through the recognition and manifestation of the liminality of both VR and the bodies, *I AM (VR)* evokes an embodiment of the tenuous self, proposing a possible affective assemblage

among various forms of intelligence in between realities that liberates the 'ghost' from the 'machine', as well as the 'machine' from the 'ghost'. In the following section, this article introduces the VR experience in *I AM (VR)* from a first-person perspective as a gateway diving into further analysis.

I AM (VR): becoming liminal body through the tenuous self

Figure 1: Opening scene in *I AM (VR)*, by Markus Selg and Susanne Kennedy, in collaboration with Rodrik Biersteker and Richard Janssen. Image courtesy Markus Selg.

The darkness slowly fades away in exchanging the light of a vision. When the space is brightened up, I find myself drifting in a cave as a small opening that leads to the circular ruins. Apart from sound of water, some other noises resemble the echoes of humanity flowing from afar: mumbles and broken conversations carrying undetectable utterances. The sound passes through my ears as a stream of frequencies. When I look down, a puddle of translucent liquid appears at the bottom of the cave. It is not a cave made of rocks and pebbles, but a cave composed of obscure lines, shapes and pattens that form a fantastic, kaleidoscopic space which is completely foreign to me (**Figure 1**). Yet at this moment, I am willing to give myself to this instant, surrendering towards the unknown. The space is filled with a spectrum of colours: orange, red, gold, and everything in between, luring, breathing in and out within its glows. The cave, along

with the entities that are encased within, creates a tender intensity that softens me. As if floating inside of a mystical organ of a viscous creature, I feel that the entire world is on fire. I am carried away by that fire without being burned.

The screen speaks,
"Welcome to your game. Listen Carefully.
Here are the rules:
If you think of fire, you are on fire.
If you think of war, you will cause war.
All depends on your imagination."[9]

After another blink of fading darkness, the scenery changes completely. I am now floating in 'nature', a space grows out of earth, grass, boulders... I look up, the sun is shining brightly above me. No clouds. The sky unfolds in its purest blue. Chirps of birds and insects flow through the overgrown branches of the gigantic pine trees. I sense the wind from what I observe: everything is moving in a delicate gentleness. The calming slowness of *THE FOREST* hypnotises me. It feels like wandering in a lucid dream, an unexplainable synchronicity between the body and its surrounding space emerges. At this point, the voice that first guides me into *THE FOREST* delivers the questions that wake me up:

"Can you see your hands?"
"Can you see your feet?"
"No? Have you lost them somewhere?"
"What about the rest of your body?"[10]

I look around, and find nothing but the 'nature' itself — I disappear in this world, am I? No. I'm still here. My vision, my thoughts. I'm still breathing. I can still hear the voice from another form of intelligence talking to me, and I respond to it... All these thoughts make me become aware of how much I have already forgotten about the (non-)existence of my own physical body — I am here but not here: I become a 'vision' that travels from the cave into *THE FOREST* throughout the dimensions while the vanished body remains perfectly still in the enclosed exhibition space. This vivid bewilderment of 'being here but not here' is the key element in searching for the possible answers to the previously proposed question: how to liberate the ghost from the machine?

Throughout this experience, the notion of 'being here' recognizes that the ghost is a body. However, the feeling of 'but not here' suggests the liminality of the body. This

bewilderment then evokes about a more specific situation — how to embody the body in virtual reality when the human players encountering the unexpected metamorphoses, attenuations, and dispersions as their physical forms are sliced into digital bits, flickering in disbelief before dissolving into hyper dust... (Peng 2021c)? As its title manifests in the most simple and direct way — *I AM (VR)* — creates possibility of what the body is capable of becoming. With its performative parentheses, this title can be understood in multiple ways: I might be VR; I could be VR; I am, perhaps, VR, or I am... The presence of "()" plays with the (in)visibility of what follows after the first-person singular verb "am", describing an instant state of being. It also destabilises "I AM" — the information that lays outside of the parentheses. In this respect, before diving into the virtual reality that Selg, Kennedy, Biersteker and Janssen created, one can already sense the touch of the 'tenuous self' fades in and out of the title of the work, in other words, 'being here but not here'. And this is the moment when the embodiment of the body starts to shape.

The embodiment further develops as the body dives into the world of *I AM (VR)*. Instead of creating artificial organs that mimic the human body in reality-reality, *I AM (VR)* allows the organs melt, disperse, free-float. As I previously delineated, when flowing into the *FOREST* from the *CAVE*, I was confronted by the following questions: "Can you see your hands? No? Have you lost them somewhere? What about the rest of your body?" These are the questions that "wake me up" from immersing deeper into the simulation dream. They are the echoes of the "(non-)existence" of my own physical body in the virtual reality, as well as the calling of the liminality of the very existence of the 'I' inter-coiling with both virtual- and the real-world. More importantly, during this journey, my senses become extremely attentive and sensitive in responding to the surrounding environment: the calmness brought by the gentle breeze which I cannot "touch"; the dizziness of being lifted high up by the shapeless elevator; the trance casted by the viscous purple sky... I feel that my body is opening up and colliding into multiplicities while it remains perfectly still (Peng 2021d). In this light, *I AM (VR)* remembers and manifests the body's own disappearance, its own forgetting, and its own in-between-ness as the liminality of that very body which simultaneously participates and engages in both realities: the body cannot be wiped out from the gallery space, yet the body is not fully there as it lost itself. In other words, *I AM (VR)* reminds the human player of the 'tenuous self' in an effortless flow, the (non)action of wu-wei. Without intently trying to reproduce something that resonates the reality-reality to make the virtual-reality more 'real', it invites the participant go on a journey of "fading-out, letting-go, loosening-up". As the human ego gradually fasted away throughout the

process of 'tenuous self' in-the-making, the cognitive senses no longer serve as the passive receptors of the internal world but rather actively mediate, create, and engage in the interaction between the liminal body and its environment. Through "I had just lost myself", the symbiotic assemblage of hearts, minds, spirits, energies, vibrations, colours, frequencies — the un-self-conciseness — is able to experience the virtual reality towards its full-immersiveness as the body and the virtual reality are becoming one: the machine softly speaks, *"I will let you into a secret: you never were or had a self."*[11]

Now we are approaching the second part of the question: how to liberate the 'machine' from the 'ghost'? In this regard, *I AM (VR)* proposes a different involvement with machine and technology — taking virtual reality as a practice instead of an instrument. This perspective can also be traced in the previous discussion: the 'becomings' of body and virtual reality into one suggests a rhizomatic entanglements within the creative process. When discussing with Markus Selg about the creation of *I AM (VR)*, Selg suggests three actors that participate in the making of this piece: the cave, the avatar and the cosmic stage as the venue where we perform our algorithmic rituals to celebrate life in all its mysterious.[12] These three actors join from multiple directions and fabulate a fable of an immense, unending encounter of dreams, games, illusions, intelligent beings, uncanny forces...to reflect upon our current political, social, cultural, ecological struggles and sufferings as one collective cosmic being. As I briefly mentioned in the introduction, *I AM (VR)* invites the human participant to a journey of enlightenment. In searching for the Oracle (which is presented in the form of the third eye), the participant goes through different clusters — the CAVE, the FOREST, the NARRATIVE and the in-between-space as 'preparations' for meeting the Oracle. The journey progresses like a sensory meditation as if tangible time and space cease to exist—everything becomes fluids, flowing, glowing, shape-shifting in streams of un-self-consciousness. There is no fixation of 'here' nor 'there'. There is no future nor past. There is no you nor I... The entire journey unfolds as a practice of 'tenuous self' while it essentially resembles the very nature of wu-wei as the most important spiritual practice in the history of Daoism. Sharing rather than manipulating, co-existing rather than eliminating, letting-go rather than holding-on, *I AM (VR)*, as a manifestation that vitalises the 'tenuous selves' of its creators, does not only show what the body is capable of becoming. It also crafts and enacts the possible becomings of the machine, the algorithms, the data, the electric currents...through its humble, sophisticated and vibrant fashion, that is, to examine, experience, exercise VR as a spiritual practice. More importantly, it is not a spiritual practice in the way that acclaims for its transcendental essentialism, but rather proposes a spiritual practice which can be exercised through embodied bodies.

Conclusion — VR as an embodied practice

Figure 2: Butterfly Dream by Ming Dynasty Patinter Lu Zhi (c. 1550). Source: Wikipedia.

One of the most telling legends of Zhuangzi is about his butterfly dream (莊周夢蝶). The story goes (**Figure 2**) that once upon a time, Zhuangzi dreamt that he was a butterfly, flitting and fluttering around in the nature, happy, blissful, unfettered and doing as he pleased. Being that particular butterfly, he was not aware that he was Zhuangzi. Suddenly, he woke up and discovered that he was Zhuangzi, a material and unmistakably human. But then he was not certain whether he was Zhuangzi dreaming he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuangzi. The dream reflects Zhuangzi's own spiritual practice of the tenuous self. He endlessly asks questions to experience and to prove that there is no such thing as the 'self', nor the 'ego'. To dream is to act without action, and the metamorphosis between Zhuangzi and the butterfly is the transformation in

Figure 3: *I AM (VR)*, by Markus Selg and Susanne Kennedy, in collaboration with Rodrik Biersteker and Richard Janssen. Image courtesy Markus Selg.

consciousness among realities — sliding from the pre-conditioned self to the tenuous self, and from the definable to the liminal. Such transformation ties *I AM (VR)* and the butterfly dream closely together — they both challenge the pre-determined outlines of reality and propose the possibilities of becomings through embodied practices: be it dreaming or actively engaging in the reality of a digital virtual dream. Through the making of the 'tenuous self', *I AM (VR)* recognizes and celebrates the liminality of both virtual reality and the bodies within the virtual reality. Moreover, it brings the liveliness of different forms of vibrancy into virtual reality as possible becomings that are in a constant process of "fading-out, letting-go, loosening-up, being here and not here." During this journey, one may as well discover a 'Zhuangzi' (**Figure 3**), sitting beneath the tree of life, dreaming of its butterfly (dreaming of being as a different form of existence) while 'emptying' itself into the stone, the earth, the air, the lights, the shadows, the matrix...and the spaces in between.

Notes

[1] Translated by the author. Please see the following for the original Chinese: 不知周之夢為胡蝶與，胡蝶之夢為周與？—— 莊子， 齊物論， 內篇。

[2] Excerpt from *I AM (VR)*.

[3] This reference article is written under the name of Oxi Pëng. It is the alias of the author Yiou Peng as an art review of Markus Selg's work *I AM (VR)* in relation to the concept of platform. The ideas of investigating virtual reality and the tenuous self first emerged in the writing process of this review. This paper is a further academic development of what Peng has previously formulated in the art review.

[4] Here I adopted Edward Slingerland's translation.

[5] Translated by the author. Please see the following for the original Chinese: 無為而無不為。莊子， 知北遊外篇。

[6] Here I adopted Edward Slingerland's translation.

[7] It is important to note that in the context of ancient Chinese philosophy, "governmentality" here does not only refer to the human-oriented social and political constructions. It also concerns the patterns, activities and cultivations how nature, as well as the cosmos performs and acts.

[8] The following is the rest of the conversation:

Zi-You: I venture to ask from you a description of all these.

Zi-Qi: When the breath of the Great Mass (of nature) comes strongly, it is called Wind. Sometimes it does not come so; but when it does, then from a myriad apertures there issues its excited noise; have you not heard it in a prolonged gale? Take the projecting bluff of a mountain forest - in the great trees, a hundred spans round, the apertures and cavities are like the nostrils, or the mouth, or the ears; now square, now round like a cup or a mortar; here like a wet footprint, and there like a large puddle. (The sounds issuing from them are like) those of fretted water, of the arrowy whizz, of the stern command, of the inhaling of the breath, of the shout, of the gruff note, of the deep wail, of the sad and piping note. The first notes are slight, and those that follow deeper, but in harmony with them. Gentle winds produce a small response; violent winds a great one. When the fierce gusts have passed away, all the apertures are empty (and still) - have you not seen this in the bending and quivering of the branches and leaves?

Zi-You: The notes of Earth then are simply those which come from its myriad apertures; and the notes of Man may just be compared to those which (are brought from the tubes of) bamboo- allow me to ask about the notes of Heaven.

Zi-Qi: When (the wind) blows, (the sounds from) the myriad apertures are different, and (its cessation) makes them stop of themselves. Both things arise from (the wind and the apertures) themselves - should there be any other agency that excites them?

This is the author's translation with adjustments based on James Legge's translation in 1891.

The following is the original Chinese text:

> 南郭子綦隱几而坐，仰天而噓，嗒焉似喪其耦。顏成子游立侍乎前，曰：「何居乎？形固可使如槁木，而心固可使如死灰乎？今之隱几者，非昔之隱几者也。」子綦曰：「偃，不亦善乎而問之也！今者吾喪我，汝知之乎？女聞人籟而未聞地籟，女聞地籟而未聞天籟夫！」子游曰：「敢問其方。」子綦曰：「夫大塊噫氣，其名為風。是唯无作，作則萬竅怒呺。而獨不聞之翏翏乎？山林之畏佳，大木百圍之竅穴，似鼻，似口，似耳，似枅，似圈，似臼，似洼者，似污者；激者，謞者，叱者，吸者，叫者，謼者，宎者，咬者，前者唱于而隨者唱喁。泠風則小和，飄風則大和，厲風濟則眾竅為虛。而獨不見之調調、之刁刁乎？」子游曰：「地籟則眾竅是已，人籟則比竹是已。敢問天籟。」子綦曰：「夫吹萬不同，而使其自已1也，咸其自取，怒者其誰邪！」

[9] Excerpt from the opening of *I AM (VR)*.

[10] Excerpt from *I AM (VR)*.

[11] Excerpt from *I AM (VR)*.

[12] From the creative notes of Markus Selg.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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Yiou Peng (http://www.yioupennypeng.com/) Previously trained as a pianist and a scholar in cinema studies at Smith College, University College of London/Goldsmiths, Yiou is now a PhD. candidate at the Institute of Theatre Studies, Free University Berlin for her research on the corporeal trans-formations between nonhuman and human entities in performance. Yiou extends Karen Barad's philosophical concept of "posthumanist performativity" into the realm of performance art. Through interweaving Rosi Braidotti's critical posthumanism, Lynn Margulis' endosymbiotic theory and performativity, Yiou attempts to create a posthuman dramaturgy that captures and examines the 'be-coming' and 'being-toward' process among various forms of intelligence during performative happenings.

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