

Mounting the Horizon

THE COLLABORATIVE CENTER FOR STORM, SPACE & SEISMIC RESEARCH

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^ Still from *The Future: A Play in 5 Acts*, Kayla Anderson (2019)

“The sky moves, it is still unstable. Its center remains solid, but its edges are already heavily damaged and become fragile. It warps and sways with terrifying cracking sounds.”¹

—Davi Kopenawa

“Imagine you are falling. But there is no ground. Paradoxically, while you are falling, you will probably feel as if you are floating—or not even moving at all. This disorientation is partly due to the loss of a stable horizon. And with the loss of horizon also comes the departure of a stable paradigm of orientation, which has situated concepts of subject and object, of time and space, throughout modernity. In falling, the lines of the horizon shatter, twirl around, and superimpose.”²

— Hito Steyerl

Many of us might feel like we are in *free fall*, as Steyerl describes, when trying to grasp the circumstances of our present world(s). We sense that we are headed somewhere, but we are not sure towards what—Revolution? Extinction?

Those of us on the ground might find that the sky has grown increasingly heavy. For ages we have been working hard to hold it up, but it has already collapsed in some corners and its overall integrity has been compromised.

Sylvia Wynter describes how human communities large and small once mapped their governing codes onto the physical cosmos. This alliance with the heavens allowed respective truths to be experienced as objective facts: a supernatural, “indispensable condition” of each community's existence, “as such a society, as such people, as such a mode of being human.”³

Recently I became fascinated with a Q&A forum on a Chinese travel guide website which users had hijacked to seek personal zodiac-based advice. Within its columns, people all over the world were bearing the numeric details and emotional dramas of their lives in order to ask what their futures might hold. The recurring question was: *tell me, will it get better?*

Aerial images and metaphors still make up much of our contemporary visual culture — from the utopian promises of cloud computing and Google Earth to the dystopian realities of drone warfare. Our sky has become a place of ownership, omniscience, and stealth.



^ Aerial view of a construction site in Huangbian (before), provided by aondaoband

The mapping of space, most often from an aerial perspective, remains a method of control. Those of us who use Google Maps or other GPS systems for daily navigation don't often think about how our paths might be actively altered by the algorithms at hand. The maker of maps has the ability to modify our perception of reality by deciding what is and is not visible. Have you ever found yourself in a place that doesn't exist?



^ Aerial view of a construction site in Huangbian (after), provided by aoandaoband

Total capture is an attempt at mastery. In order to cover more ground, Google has created a feature for users in currently undocumented locales to upload their own panoramas to the map. While taking images for Google Panorama, the contributor is instructed to keep their head down while photographing, continually maneuvering their body out of the frame. As a result, the images are most often disembodied. We come to expect a seamless view, taken by a floating eye. These images are oddly ethnographic, feigning the same kind of false objectivity as the early tools of colonial exploitation. But sometimes, when you look down, you see the artifacts of the photographer: an accidental hand or foot, or a joyously stubborn selfie, the likes of which will soon be removed.

How can we have a relationship with our ever-changing surroundings if we only gaze down at a (seemingly) fixed representation?



Video converted still of 'Bald Balloon' aerial view capturing the bald spots of 王佳鑫 and 陈灵, Huangbian Kids Balloon Parade, 11/25/18.

Please click onto the photograph and have a scroll~

- 黄边小朋友的气球游行
- 11月12日 董舒琳和龙楚遥 (11+12岁)
 - 2月13日 方梓桐 (5岁)
 - 3月17日 龙楚遥和陈晋怡 (11+12岁)
 - 4月17日 董乐乐和李诗蕊 (12+13岁)
 - 5月18日 林琳和林家艺 (8+4岁)
 - 6月24日 孟建森和陈灵 (9+9岁)
 - 7月25日 李紫程和李文翰 (11+12岁)
 - 8月30日 原为小龙-李紫程 (11) 和参加生日聚会的小朋友
 - 9月30日 赵梓航 (5岁)

站瘦迷路了. Lost?

^ Bald Spot of An Eight-Year-Old Balloon [web archive], aoandaoband (Tongyu Zhao and Sam Yiyao Chao), 2018

During their residency at the Times Museum in Guangdong, aoandaoband (a collaborative duo formed by Tongyu Zhao and Sam Yiyao Chao) took daily walks to and from the gallery space, led by children between the ages of 8 and 10. The walks were recorded using low-cost aerial cameras mounted on balloons, carried by the child-guides. The captured images were stitched together into maps, forming an archive of the Huangbian community in a time of rapid change and regeneration.

The balloon-mounted cameras made by aoandaoband produce an embodied image, an aerial view bumpily tethered to the ground. Tongyu Zhao and Sam Yiyao Chao may not have known where they were going on their daily ventures, but they knew they were in good (read: eager, rebellious) hands. Like a balloon string, their guides might have a little more give and sway in their route making. Getting lost could be part of the game.



^ *Bald Spot of An Eight-Year-Old Balloon* [web archive], aoandaoband (Tongyu Zhao and Sam Yiyao Chao), 2018

Typically, the structure of a game has to be cemented at the point of creation: the rules can't change unexpectedly part way through. When playing video games as a kid, I used to get frustrated in instances where I found my movement blocked by an invisible wall. I could see where I wanted to go, but it remained out of my reach—barred by a heavenly force against all logic. I wanted my range of motion in digital space to be the same as in the physical world.

Pedestrian life is full of barricades, but when necessary, they can be circumnavigated. Children often climb over, under, and through fences. By crossing marked boundaries, their space becomes expansive. Theirs is a play of shifting limitations.

Contrary to how it sounds, the gamification of life is not about play, but about productivity. Our experience becomes regulated into measurable accomplishments, calendared space and tidy checkboxes. The plotting of time may be a way to prepare for the future, but it leaves little room for eschewing the system.

As Cloud Naj points out in *a letter to the future, from the end of the world*, despite their frequent appearance in advertising schemes, children prove surprisingly unsuccessful at motivating adults to change their behaviours. This discrepancy is made plainly visible by the lack of wholesale response to climate change. While I don't subscribe wholeheartedly to the notion of the proverbial future child, I am interested in what real children think about our present moment, and what they imagine on the horizon.



^ Still from *The Future: A Play in 5 Acts*, Kayla Anderson (2019)

Recently I decided to ask several children a few questions about the future, and their relationship to predictive technology. My curiosity was sparked in part by discovering that many children are forming relationships with their parents' virtual assistants. Alexa and Siri, two avatars tasked as being our all-knowing informants, are in fact only 4 and 8 years old.

Instead of asking Alexa or Siri about the future, I decided to poll children between the ages of 4 and 8. When I shared their answers with adults, I found that many were disturbed to learn that children were thinking about looming issues like climate change and technological acceleration, in addition to monkeys, waffles, and colors.

While recording a play composed of their answers, one 8 year old confessed to me in a whisper *you know, I've never told my parents this but...I can see the future.* You can? I asked. *Yes, she told me, when I was born, at just the right moment, a black hole opened in outerspace, and it gave me the ability into other realms of possibility.*

Really? I exclaimed. *Yes, she continued, it's really not that extraordinary. Mostly...how I do it is...I just pay attention to things. And if you pay attention to things long enough, you will notice patterns. And once you learn to notice patterns, you will have a pretty good sense of what is going to happen next!*

I didn't ask her what she planned to do with her powers, but I did ask her how she wanted our play about the future to end. First, she smashed my laptop with a mallet. Then, she swung around a chunk of gold and let it drop. She arranged miniature pine trees that were subsequently dwarfed by a cameo appearance of her cat, whose brushing tail cleared the universe's palate.

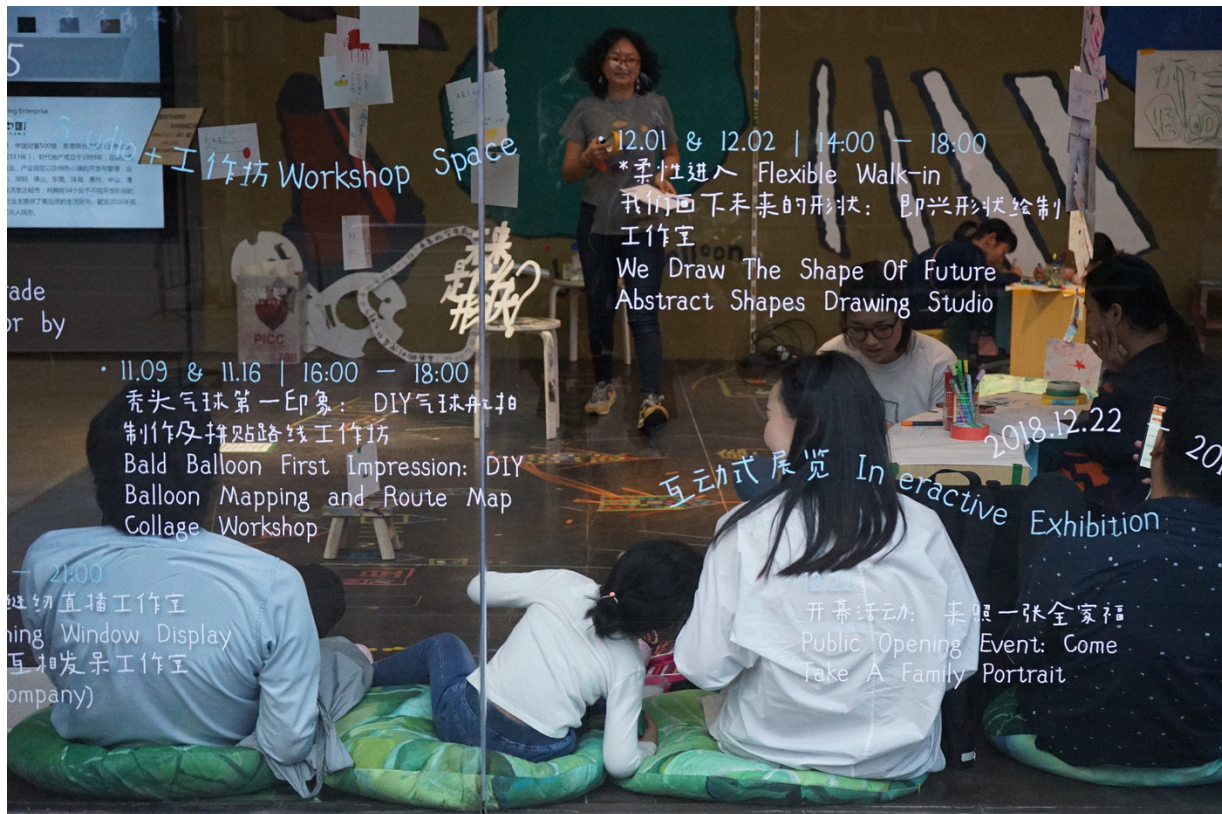
I asked my medium to hold an hourglass in front of the camera, but she told me that idleness was a pain.



^ Bald Spot of An Eight-Year-Old Balloon [drawings of the Future Calendar], aoandaoband (Tongyu Zhao and Sam Yiyao Chao), 2018

Under the rule of aoandaoband, the Times Museum became a repository for the future. A deliberation space filled with markers and glue, construction rubble and discarded furniture. Children made divining props from drawings and photo-montage.

In a game, not everything has give. Objects can be coded as non-actionable. But a stool—the form that aoandaoband’s Future Calendar takes—is actionable. A stool can be a perch, a platform, a hurtle. It is meant to be overcome. By mounting a stool, we extend ourselves a little into the space above our heads. It provides the *slightest* of aerial views, a tilted glance into the time just beyond our imagination.



^ Bald Spot of An Eight-Year-Old Balloon [gallery window], aoandaoband (Tongyu Zhao and Sam Yiyao Chao), 2018

1. Davi Kopenawa, *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013, p.132.
2. Hito Steyerl, "In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective," in *e-flux Journal*, 24 (2011).
3. Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," in *The New Centennial Review*, Vol. 3, No. 3: Coloniality's Persistence (Fall 2003), p.271.