

# RMB City: Between Real and Fictional Urban Spaces

## Abstract

Cao Fei's *RMB City* is an online art community that serves as both an ongoing exploration of the creative relationship between real and virtual space and a reflection of China's current obsession with land development and its overzealous industrialization. This project was launched in the virtual world of *Second Life* in 2007 and is laden with Chinese cultural artifacts and characteristics of contemporary Chinese cities — referencing<sup>1</sup> Central Business Districts and desolate state-owned factories amidst deteriorating architectural icons such as the rusted Bird's Nest Olympic Stadium and Rem Koolhaas' CCTV Tower hanging on a construction crane. These references<sup>2</sup> are in dialogue with Cao Fei's personal experiences of growing up in Guangzhou at the forefront of China's globalization and urbanization in the eighties and nineties. The symbols in the island city's backdrop are a product of the artist's extensive research into major cities and Special Economic Zones<sup>3</sup> around the country. At the same time, *RMB City* is a fictional world<sup>4</sup> that exists beyond the confines of physics and has opened its membership to a global audience as a transnational urban space. In this way, this piece provides the possibility of another world and poses hypothetical questions about transformations within a virtual world. This paper explores the virtual ecosystem of *RMB City* on several levels: its conception as a reaction and critique of the current socio-political landscape in China, its role as an insight into the social efficacy of fictional utopias, and the effects of the blurred boundary between physical and virtual geography.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Formal analysis of RMB City.

<sup>2</sup> Research into China's *Xin Xin Ren Lei* (New New Human Beings) generation and written interviews with Cao Fei.

<sup>3</sup> Research into the emergence of SEZs in China.

<sup>4</sup> "The potential of Second Life also exists in the metaspace design of 'something created out of nothing' and its self-organizing pattern". (Jun 218).

<sup>5</sup> Main themes and objectives.