

Haw Par Villa: An Eidetic Prosthesis

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Haw Par Villa opened in 1937, the creation of Tiger Balm brother magnates Aw Boon Haw and Aw Boon Par. Our project, at the crossroad of art and philosophy, explores and re-imagines the sculptures, tableaux, and dioramas of the park through virtual/physical installations and reflection on memory, place, and objects. We employ the metaphor of an eidetic prosthesis to consider individual and collective memory through the park and to conjure up the park's dematerialization through memory and virtual reality. It is an exploration of and meditation on continuities and discontinuities between e.g. physical and virtual environments; oral, written, sculptural, pictorial, and digital narrations; the epic and the mundane; biological, biographical and collective memory; and, through this, storytelling.

Visionary Environments

Haw Par Villa is an example of what historians have called a "visionary environment." What these places have in common, in the main, is that they are some combination of a singular obsessive creator; often increasing in size and intensity over time; surviving in tandem with their creator; demolished on their death by government authorities or hostile neighbours; fusing religious, political, and moral messages; syncretic and idiosyncratic; often the product of local craftsmen or amateur enthusiasts. They can sometimes appear gaudy, kitsch, and ostentatious as well as moralistic, pious, and political. They have antecedents in the follies, grottos, and hermitages in the 17th century, and so are, in a sense, modern structures.

Being dependent on one person, the destruction of these visionary environments – and the potential elimination of their memory – is always a real threat. Often they are destroyed by hostile or embarrassed neighbours as in the case of Clarence

Schmidt's House of Mirrors – a vast home constructed of hundreds of old window frames in Woodstock, New York state – or Armand Schulthess's Casa Reggino in Ticino, Switzerland – a garden of several acres of signs and messages. A long battle existed between authorities, enthusiasts, and Nek Chand, a transport official in the northern Indian city of Chandigarh who, in 1958, began an illegal construction in a jungle clearing which gradually expanded into 25 acres of sculptures, buildings, arcades, gorges and waterfalls.

Haw Par Villa

Like their Tiger Balm product, the Haw Par Villa garden soothes and shocks in equal proportions. It follows in the tradition of the "learning garden," a park whose purpose is to educate and inculcate a moral and social ethic. It has been described as "a sculptural sketchbook," a corporeal form of storytelling through objects. It is at once a materialization of collective memory and product of an individual vision and imagination. The scenes of the park look like studio scenery temporarily frozen. The statues (there are about a thousand) have an unsettling expressiveness, paused part-way through an action. When you lift your camera to take a picture, you realize that each perspective modifies the expression of the statues and transforms the scene. Rather than prescribing one interpretation, the scenes submit themselves to the eye of the viewer, by offering the possibility of a new writing within the original writing, that of the brothers Haw and Par.

Aw Boon Haw is said to have begun and ended each day with folklore. He would walk around the gardens with his craftsmen, recounting myths and legends that he wanted to be added to the park. Each evening, he listened to Li Da Sha's Guangdong stories on the radio. In an interview with a

biographer he described himself as “a transmitter of knowledge, someone whose task it was to clarify and pass on that which came before.”

Eidetic Prostheses

The idea of the eidetic prosthesis is an extension of phenomenological understandings of the relationship between technology and the self, as well as more recent conjectures such as the hypothesis of an extended mind. Some people have the ability to remember a lot of details in pictures and to remember them, as if they were lighting an interior projector and can contemplate them again internally, at will. This is what is called an "eidetic memory". At the same time, we all have experienced how stories present in objects, things, smells, tastes, and sensations can prompt memories to surface. Perhaps virtual environments too can be eidetic.

If the stories portrayed in the park are the expression of a collective memory, it is also possible to establish certain formal analogies, on the individual level, between the way the park is organized and psychological memory. The park has undergone several transformations since its creation in the 1930s. Some parts have been destroyed; others have been consolidated or have undergone modifications. Like the memory of an individual, it is a heterogeneous patchwork of myths, a sedimentation of ambivalent stories, archetypal figures belonging to different eras.

Haw Par Villa is a place where cultural transmission takes on a sculptural form. The scenes of the park are visual and tactile, the absence of text preserves their polysemy, calling in the first place the imagination of those who look at them. If the objects – in which we include the scenes and the sculptures – have the capacity to bring out memories, as Proust eloquently demonstrated with his madeleine, they can also extend memorial capacities by externalizing them.

By its distributed nature, the internet has become a kind of monster that escapes any possibility of total representation or control. It appears to be moved and driven by inscrutable, hidden forces, as geological phenomena or living beings are. But these are animated forms of a disembodied kind. Our project then might be regarded as a reflection on how to involve bodily functions (vision, memory,

perception of the surrounding environment) in the virtuality currently at work on the internet. The project is, analogous to memory, a dematerialization of the park.

Rather than present a rupture when moving to a virtual environment, what we see are continuities. Our project looks as much toward the future as much as we dig things out from the past, trying to bridge older stories with contemporary ones, considering the villa as alive, rather than a dying thing from the past that needs to be rescued from abandonment.

Olivier Perriquet is an artist and a research scientist. He is interested in the materiality of images and their relation with thoughts and body, through its most mysterious manifestations as in memory or during dreams. He has been experimenting with live cinema and in installation for over ten years, with systems of capture and projection machines diverted or built from scratch, and is invested in various fields at the crossroads of the arts and sciences, bearing a particular interest at the crossing of disciplines and imaginary. Olivier Perriquet has a PhD in computational biology and graduated from Le Fresnoy-Studio National. He has been conducting research at the Center for Artificial Intelligence of the University of Lisbon and at the Department of Mathematical Linguistics of the University of Tarragona from 2006 to 2012, then guest artist At Duke University, Department of Art and Art History (Fulbright fellow). He is currently responsible for research at Le Fresnoy and teaches at the media/art school of Chalon-sur-Saône in France.

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