Birdhead: Yun Yun

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Location:

UCCA Dune

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From March 17 through June 30, 2024, UCCA Dune presents "Birdhead: Yun Yun." The exhibition premieres the artist duo Birdhead's ongoing project "Yun Yun" (2021 – present), including newly created photography, installation, and sculptural works. These works investigate the nature of communication, and reflect on ideas of individuality, collectivity, and subjectivity at a moment when self-presentation and social atomization coexist. Through this exhibition, Birdhead asks the vital question: "In an age of expanding technology, what sort of information do we actually seek?"

Beidaihe, CHINA — UCCA Dune presents "Birdhead: Yun Yun" from March 17 to June 30, 2024. A critical artist duo in the development of Chinese contemporary art since the early 2000s, Birdhead's practice is both unique and diverse. They record and deconstruct daily life and social reality through photography, installation, collage, and other image processing techniques. For their project "Yun Yun," initiated in 2021, they invite active online influencers to take part and jointly explore the relationship between online and real-life identities. This is the first public debut of "Yun Yun." The exhibition will also present a new series of site-specific sculptures and installations commissioned by UCCA, as an extension of "Yun Yun." "Birdhead: Yun Yun" represents a new direction for the artist duo, as well as an exploration of how we should regard ourselves and our subjectivities at a moment when self-presentation and social atomization coexist. "Birdhead: Yun Yun" is curated by Philip Tinari, Director, UCCA Center for Contemporary Art.

The artist duo Birdhead was established in 2004 by Song Tao (b. 1979, Shanghai) and Ji Weiyu (b. 1980, Shanghai). The name "Birdhead" came from a mistaken option from a pinyin

Input Method Editor. Over the 20 years of Birdhead's career, photography has been a primary medium. Their early photographic works captured everything their camera lens could encounter—from large-scale infrastructure and development projects to the unguarded expressions of their friends and acquaintances. Generally working with film, they embraced the increasingly anachronistic delay between shooting and developing inherent to the medium of film photography. As social media and then the mobile internet became integral to daily life, their commitment to analogue photography seemed to both channel and resist the torrents of images being created and transmitted daily by more and more people. Through their practice of image creation, Birdhead has been striving to establish new ways of viewing, and bring to the public richer visual experiences and multi-dimensional thinking.

"Yun Yun" represents an entirely new direction for Birdhead. Initiated in August 2021, the project takes its title from a character with several meanings. The artists have explained the name as follows:

> In classical Chinese, 'yun' means 'to say,' extended to mean 'express' or 'interpret.'
> In modern terms, 'yun' refers to the Internet, to cloud computing.
> 'Yun Yun' references the idiom 'yun yun zhong sheng,' or 'all the living souls,' meaning 'the masses.'
> Through its transient and variable valences and emotions, 'yun' reflects the infinite variety of life.

Inspired by these explanations, "Yun Yun" represents the artists' thoughts on the shift from traditional to contemporary communication styles. Birdhead hopes to highlight the importance of social and communicative behavior in the development of intelligent civilization, and discuss how technological advancements have challenged and influenced

traditional ways of communication. They want to guide the audience in thinking and reflecting on their self-identification, both on the Internet and in reality.

The "Yun Yun" project started with the "The Origin of Clouds" series. The artists modified a 135 mm camera, invited 19 Internet influencers from different fields of expertise (see the Appendix for the list of influencers), took their portraits, and superimposed the portraits randomly with photographs of actual clouds in the sky. They then distributed the superimposed photographs to the influencers, and asked them to mark or doodle on the images. As early as 2011, Birdhead presented a series of photographs showing intimate moments between friends and colleagues at the 54th Venice Biennale. They organized the photographs in grids, an approach they called "matrix," which they kept refining in the following decade. *Birdhead World – Yun Yun*, shown in the current exhibition, originates from this approach. Collaging over a hundred photographs that the artists took of the clouds, *Birdhead World – Yun Yun* joins points, lines, and planes cleverly, constituting a visual image that is simultaneously harmonious and dynamic. Printed on acrylic, the work invites the audience to use markers to doodle and leave comments directly on the photographs. These two sets of works are displayed in Gallery 4, the most traditional gallery space at UCCA Dune. Their interactive nature also embodies the fundamental belief of Birdhead— "From the agora of ancient Greek philosophical discussion to the dialogue between teacher and student in Chinese Confucian thought, exchange has always been at the core of cultural and political development."

The other galleries at UCCA Dune contain new installations which extend the "Yun Yun" project, varying from rolling LED text signs to a green-screen stage set that will be used for livestreaming during the exhibition. These multimedia installations originate from Birdhead's thinking on how digital and traditional communications can find peace and coexist. They hope to spark dialogue with the audience, creating an interactive space for communication

that hangs in between reality and the virtual world in the gallery. The installations explore how our behaviors and choices affect our self-perception in this world that advocates individualism while being full of social distances. The installation work *Yun Yun – 01* builds upon Plato's allegory of "The Cave" and explores the superimposition of reality and virtuality. Images of tigers leaping in the clouds and virtual shadows appear and disappear randomly, augmented with fragmented mirror reflections of the lights and shadows in the cave, representing the blurry boundary between the real and the fantastical in life. Located at the entrance of Gallery 2, *We Will Shoot You – 02* is composed of a set of balloon-shaped iron plates and a projector. Viewers may assume that the text "WE WILL SHOOT YOU" on the screen is cast by the shadow of the iron plates. However, upon closer inspection, they will realize that this is all an illusion—the expected text is sketched on the screen rather than projected. Located in the same gallery is *Yun Yun – 02*, the biography of a virtual artist "co-created" by Birdhead and ChatGPT. The imagined virtual artist is partially grounded in reality—Birdhead placed actual artworks from this artist in the galleries, inspired by and recreated from the doodles of the participants of "Yun Yun." Meanwhile, *Yun Yun – 05* in Gallery 5 is a real theater for virtual characters. While on one side of the installation presents a home setting "on stage," the other side consists of a green screen setup "behind the scenes." Birdhead hopes to evoke the viewer's imagination of the virtual and reconsider the real through this hybrid between reality the virtuality. In addition, inspired by the fan-shaped windows in the gallery, Birdhead created the "alien face" in *Yun Yun – 06*. The viewer can see either happiness or sadness from the "eyes" of the "alien" depending on where they stand. From the window of the home setup in *Yun Yun – 05*, visitors can see *Yun Yun – 08*, built with mechanical rails. The rolling texts such as "I'm not interested in this world" enhance the playfulness of the immersive viewing experience. The pixelated cloud installation, *Yun Yun – 10,* is placed on the second-floor platform of UCCA Dune—this is also the first time this space has been used to display artworks since the museum's opening.

Over half of the works on display at "Birdhead: Yun Yun" were specifically created to be displayed within the cave-like architecture of UCCA Dune, making it an immersive wonderland to visit. While evoking curiosity and an adventurous spirit in visitors, the interactive viewing experience again highlights the exhibition's focus on the nature of communication. By investigating the methods of interpersonal and collective communication, the exhibition aims to unveil the importance of everyday behaviors and choices in shaping self-identity, inspiring the audience to reconsider how individual expressions and interactive exchanges can profoundly affect subjectivity in this half-real, half-virtual life.

Support and Sponsorship

Exclusive wall solutions support is provided by Dulux. UCCA also thanks the members of its Foundation Council, International Circle, and Young Associates, as well as Lead Partner Aranya, Lead Art Book Partner DIOR, Presenting Partner Bloomberg, and Supporting Partners Barco, Dulux, Genelec, and Stey.

About the Artist

Birdhead was established by the artists Song Tao and Ji Weiyu in 2004. Song Tao was born in Shanghai in 1979, and Ji Weiyu was born in Shanghai in 1980. They both graduated from Shanghai Arts & Crafts College, and live and work in Shanghai. The name "Birdhead" came from a random keystroke for file naming. Birdhead's artistic practice is primarily based in, but not limited to, photography. Their camera lens captures all they encounter, gradually internalizing their thinking around their personal development into their evolving photographic context. With works that employ the photographic image through photographic matrix, collage, special mounting technique, installation, photobooks, and other

media, they realize their own multivalent and constantly evolving "Birdhead World" across a range of exhibition spaces and environments. Their work has been featured in the following exhibitions: "Feeling the Stones" (Diriyah Biennale, Saudi Arabia, 2021); "Wave" (Power Station of Art, Shanghai, 2020); "Living Cities" (Tate Modern, London, 2017); "How to Gather? Acting in a City in the Heart of the Island of Eurasia" (The 6th Moscow Biennale, Moscow, 2015); "New Photography 2012" (MoMA, New York, 2012); "Reactivation – The 9th Shanghai Biennale" (Power Station of Art, Shanghai, 2012); "Illuminations" (The 54th Venice Biennale, Venice, 2011); "Artist File 2011 – The NACT Annual Show of Contemporary Art" (National Art Center, Tokyo, 2011); and "China Power Station II" (Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, Oslo, 2007). Their work is in the collections of Tate Modern, the Museum of Modern Art, and Power Station of Art Shanghai, among others.

Public Programs

During the exhibition period of "Birdhead: Yun Yun," UCCA will invite participants of the interactive project "The Origin of Clouds" and curate a series of public programs based on their expertise and interests. The programs include a guided tour in the form of a freestyle rap on the opening day and a livestream conversation against a backdrop of special effects created with green-screen technology. Extending from the rich content of the exhibition, the public programs integrate multilayered perspectives from these participants and the audience, guiding the audience to enter a brand-new world of art by Birdhead.

Rapper J-FEVER is invited for the guided tour at the opening ceremony. He will freestyle rap inside and outside the gallery space. He will improvise, conveying his experience as a co-creator and viewer, and also pass the mic to audience members to let them voice their

thoughts. With the shift in discourse, capricious moods and appearances can be captured. The livestream conversation will first take place in front of a milky-way backdrop created with green-screen technology in Gallery 5, centered around "Surviving in the digital age." It will then move to a cozy home environment, discussing whether screen gazing can replace stargazing in our contemporary society. A striking contrast is created in the environment with the camera movement, leading the audience to perceive and consider the everchanging "reality" and "virtuality."

Appendix

Participants of "Yun Yun"

Carr (Contemporary Dancer)

Cbvivi (Vlogger)

J-FEVER (Rapper)

Kreuzzz (Designer)

Kyle (Traveler)

lei_yu (Pop Art Collector)

Menthae (Poet, Folk Musician)

nene (Imitate Makeup Lover)

Qiaomai (Writer, Blogger)

Ringo (Crime Writer, Podcast Host)

Ruidong (Neuroscientist)

Shanghai Rainbow Chamber Singers (Chamber Choir)

Speedsters (Producer of Car Programs)

stephanieye (Astrophotographer)

Wang Cuncun (Wang Cuncun)

Dawn Wang (Someone Who Makes People Laugh)

Xing Lida (Paleontologist)

Xiong Xiaomo (Short Video Creator)

Yu Mingfeng (Philosopher)

About UCCA Dune

UCCA Dune is an art museum buried under a sand dune by the Bohai Sea in Beidaihe, 300

kilometers east of Beijing. Designed by OPEN Architecture, its galleries unfold over a series

of cell-like spaces that evoke caves. Some are naturally lit from above, while others open out

onto the beach. As a branch of UCCA, China's leading independent institution of

contemporary art, it presents rotating exhibitions in dialogue with its particular site and

space. UCCA Dune is built and supported by UCCA strategic partner Aranya, and located

within the Aranya Gold Coast Community.

www.ucca.org.cn/en