



LuYang: DOKU Experience Center

Born in Shanghai, LuYang is one of the most important contemporary Asian artists and this year's Deutsche Bank "Artist of the Year." LuYang belongs to a young art scene in China inspired by science fiction, manga, gaming, and techno culture that works with hypermodern technologies and deals with the ideas of posthumanism or transhumanism. These schools of thought explore how to extend the limits of human possibilities through the use of high-tech. What is extraordinary about LuYang's work is that the posthuman is put in the context of Buddhist and Hindu cosmologies.

The exhibition *DOKU Experience Center* focuses entirely on a virtual reincarnation called Dokusho Dokushi, or DOKU for short. The gender-neutral avatar is a hyperrealistic figure whose countenance is modeled on LuYang's face. All facial expressions and movement patterns are performed by dancers and then recorded using motion capture technology, a process that generates 3D models on this basis for video games, for example.

As in a futuristic research laboratory, all six digital versions of DOKU can be experienced in the exhibition. In addition to the first narrative video *DOKU the Self*, LuYang's music video *DOKU the Matrix*, conceived expressly for the show, and the new series *Bardo #1*, which shows the avatar with its respective attributes in round mandala compositions, are presented.

LuYang studied at the China Academy of Arts in Hangzhou and lives and works in Shanghai. Since 2015, LuYang has been involved in numerous group exhibitions worldwide, currently at *The Milk of Dreams*, 59th Venice Biennale. The artist has had solo exhibitions in Beijing, Moscow, and most recently Aarhus and Erlangen, and as of end of September at the Zabudowicz Collection. 2019 awardee of the BMW Art Journey.



LuYang's cosmos

In LuYang's cosmos, identities are not fixed but fluid and mediated by new technologies. Concepts such as cultural identity, body, and gender are radically called into question. LuYang places current scientific thought and an engagement with global pop and consumer culture in the context of Buddhist and Hindu cosmologies. LuYang contrasts the notion of an identity anchored in the body and chronological time with multiple realities that know no unchanging self but only permanent change. LuYang experiments with the notion that the Internet cannot only expand physical existence, but also replace it. But digital existence, which knows no temporal or spatial limitations, is not a dream world. On the contrary, it illustrates the equally dreamlike and illusionistic nature of the physical existence that we perceive as "real." LuYang's avatars allow us to witness these liberating and uncanny experiences.

Six reincarnations: the DOKU avatars

Each of LuYang's incarnations embodies the energies or emotions of a respective rebirth realm of samsara and is characterized by certain colors, sounds, dance movements. In this process, the DOKU avatars function like containers or shells into which LuYang breathes spirit, imbuing them with personal experiences, religion, and spirituality, and influences from global pop culture in order to reach as many people as possible. They resemble the stars of K-pop and boy bands in their gestures and looks, can appear in different media formats or constellations, and even have their own Instagram account as DOKU Asia.

DOKU Human embodies the human realm of existence. Of all the avatars, this one probably resembles LuYang the most. But already in this incarnation LuYang questions our binary ideas. For the avatar resembles a cyborg. It is wearing a technoid suit, whereby it is not clear whether he is artificial skin or the body itself. In fact a Japanese master of the art of tribal tattoo, was asked to design tattoos for a digital human, after which the avatar's body pattern was realized. DOKU Human seems to be a kind of blueprint for all of



the other incarnations and is surrounded by a hypermodern urban world. In Buddhism, it is most desirable to be reborn in the human realm. Although in the human world suffering is inevitably experienced through birth, aging, illness, and death, and there is violence, separation, fears, human beings have the opportunity to learn to overcome themselves and their destructive behavior.

DOKU Heaven embodies the illusion of a completely carefree, bliss-filled existence in the realm of the gods or devas, a Garden of Eden, a conception of paradise. The avatar, clad in playful clothing, dances on the stream of a river adorned with fluorescent crystals, surrounded by a paradisiacal tropical forest full of spherical sounds and light phenomena. Here, one can also see the influence of various traditional Balinese and Indonesian dance styles, such as Legong, which LuYang recorded with dancers in Bali using motion capture and then digitally reproduced in the movements and facial expressions of her avatars. But the halo of DOKU Heaven seems like a deceptive aura. In the realm of Heaven there are also the temptations of luxury and idleness, the propensity for ignorance price, which prevent the pursuit of simplicity and awakening.

DOKU Asura represents the reincarnation realm of the asuras, the fighters, warlike titans or demons who are also celestial beings. In Hindu mythology, they were supplanted by the devas. In Sanskrit, Sura means "light being." The prefix "A" indicates the opposite. Asuras are therefore "opponents of the light beings." They quarrel with the gods and try to take their place, but they do not succeed despite constant struggle. The dance of DOKU Asura is inspired by the Indonesian Warrior or Baris dance. The design of DOKU Asura's armor and the temple architecture interspersed with futuristic towers combine various global historical, mythical and religious elements with high-tech. Samsara, the wheel of life, is also integrated here in an ambience that is clearly reminiscent of the aesthetics of fantasy games.



DOKU Animal is at once naive and complex. This incarnation of LuYang, with its ear cap and boots made of fake fur, is less reminiscent of a deity or a superhero than of a cos player. Or the “Harajuku style” influenced by manga, goth, techno and Lolita fashion, which originated in the boutique district of the same name in Tokyo and conquered the world in the 1990s and early 2000s. But DOKU Animal does not dance in a teen show or at a techno rave or sporting event. Rather, the avatar appears in a kind of medical laboratory, which is simultaneously an abattoir, a gym for animals, and Noah’s Ark. It also refers to our ambivalent relationship to animals, to our compulsion to optimize and market not only ourselves, but everything around us. Of course, it also alludes to the suffering of animals, which continues to increase in unimaginable proportions in the ever more highly industrialized world. In Samsara, rebirth as an animal stands for instinct, ignorance, the blind drive for self-preservation. Animals, like humans, also have a Buddha nature. But they are incapable of recognizing it. They always remain hunter or prey and thus cannot escape the cycle of eating and being eaten.

DOKU Hell dances with a severed head in his hand—the head of DOKU Human or LuYang? This archetypal motif alludes to Eastern and Western religions and art history. It can be seen as a reference to Kali, the Hindu goddess of death and destruction, and at the same time the composition is reminiscent of Caravaggio’s famous painting *David with the Head of Goliath* (1600/01). Perhaps it also hints at the symbolic death of the artist, who is decapitated by his avatar. DOKU Hell’s dance is inspired by the demon queen Rangda, who fights against Barong, the leader of the good spirits. The battle between the two is embodied in the Balinese Barong dance.

In Samsara, hell is the lowest realm, and those reborn here must endure torment until their bad karma is repaid. With LuYang, a medialized, globally recognizable version of hell can be seen, reminiscent of the architecture of science fiction and mystery films or even the series *Stranger Things*. But as with the higher realms of Samsara or Dante’s *Inferno*, Hell is only a product of the human imagination.



DOKU Bardo #1, 2022

The Tibetan term “Bardo” is understood as an intermediate state between death and rebirth. The mandalas, each flooded by different-colored light, show the six DOKU avatars with the attributes for the Buddhist rebirth realms that they embody. Human is presented in front of a technoid server architecture, Animal is accompanied by different animals, while Hell is surrounded by skeletons during a furious dance. Each avatar is set in a classical, round mandala composition. In these works, LuYang combines the profane aspect of mandalas, which can be found as a decorative symbol in global pop culture on T-shirts, mugs, coloring books, and light shows at raves, and their magical and religious significance as a visual aid with which complex religious and spiritual contexts can be internalized.

DOKU the Matrix, 2022

In the dance videos that LuYang produces expressly for the different avatars, the multilayered relationships to global pop and youth culture become clear. LuYang collaborates with the music, fashion, and entertainment industries: At Paris Fashion Week, DOKU appeared in a virtual performance for the Chinese sports label Li Ying, and starred in a music video by the British band THE 1975. This involves an expansion of the artist’s role, as LuYang continually develops new product lines for the virtual worlds, games, and avatars, and promotes the DOKU avatars like “real” people. Performances like Miku Hatsune’s serve as a point of reference. This Japanese virtual pop singer has advertised as a live hologram for international corporations, performed with Pharrell Williams, and sang as an opening act for Lady Gaga on her ARTPOP tour in front of sold-out stadiums with a computer-generated voice. For LuYang’s music video *DOKU the Matrix*, Chinese musician liiii composed dance music in K-pop style, after contributing music to LuYang’s film *DOKU the Self*. Thus the DOKU avatars do not appear as figures from the realms of Samsara, but in their respective roles as a perfectly choreographed present-day boy band.



DOKU the Self, 2022

As the first narrative film, *DOKU the Self*, which premiered at this year's Venice Biennale, introduces six virtual reincarnations of LuYang. Reminiscent of super-heroes, gaming and anime characters, as well as deities and demons, these avatars embody different aspects of LuYang's self. At the same time, each represents one of the six realms of samsara—the karmic wheel of life—and refers to the eternal cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. In LuYang's work, Samsara takes on different forms: virtual landscapes that resemble worlds of experience in video games, or a kind of gigantic reincarnation roulette that can be controlled by the player with a video game console.

However, the film is inspired by a dramatic real experience LuYang had in 2020 while flying through a severe thunderstorm that nearly caused the plane to crash. In stunning images and dance scenes, it depicts how LuYang's DOKU reincarnations go through stages of ecstasy and joy, suffering and death. DOKU is the short form of the Japanese "Dokusho Dokushi," a Buddhist wisdom that can be translated as "We will die alone, and we are born alone." LuYang shows different illusory worlds that are created by clinging to the ego and persisting in dualistic thinking—a conception of the self that is defined only by opposites: me/you, good/bad, natural/artificial, male/female. The way out of this self-constructed limitation is the complete dissolution of the body and the self, which lets go and accepts that nothing is permanent, as *DOKU the Self* drastically demonstrates.

At the end of the film, DOKU Human, Lu Yang's most human incarnation, is eaten by vultures, rises like a rocket into the stratosphere, and shatters into countless crystalline particles. With these diamond splinters LuYang refers to the Diamond Sutra of Mahayana Buddhism, at the center of which is the non-dualistic thinking freed from the ego. Also the brain of the avatar, which stands both physically and symbolically for thinking and finally drifts alone in the blackness of the universe, must decompose, so that the illusion of the self is destroyed.



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