

► Shanghai artist talks about an experimental life with sound

Changing the game plan

By Tom Mangione

Imagine 18 television screens in front of you playing the same movie. There's a barren tree on the front lawn of a house in the middle of winter. You notice an unexpected flicker and realize that the projections on each screen aren't just playing in a loop or some preset pattern. They are altering and changing randomly. Your eyes jump from screen to screen as the tree is made new again through juxtaposition. What seemed on the surface to be something straightforward and simple becomes a source of wonder and inspiration.

The creator of this work, *Self-Portrait, Dusk, At The Point of Departure*, Ben Houge, is much like the work itself. Approachable, unassuming and, at times, downright goofy, Houge doesn't immediately impress one as a unique voice in China's emerging art scene or an

off-beat favorite in Shanghai's underground music community. However, dig a little deeper and you'll find yourself in the presence of someone full of radical new ideas, constantly changing and experimenting.

From video to sound

A trained musician and composer with a master's degree in electronic music from the University of Washington, Houge originally came to Shanghai from Seattle in 2004 to work for the French video game developer Ubisoft, producing soundtracks for their video games. Although he was already well into his career, having at that time worked in the industry for eight years, Houge knew that he wanted something more. "I've always seen myself as, sort of, in-the-gaps. When I worked in Seattle, I was divided between two worlds – video game developers and more theoretical, high-art composers." Houge dreamed of a way that he could

incorporate the more technical systems of the algorithms for producing sound that he used in video games with his interest in theoretical and experimental music.

After leaving his job at Ubisoft, Houge finally got the chance he was looking for. At an Arctic-themed exhibition attached to the 2008 Shanghai Creative Industry Week, he was finally able to put his first sound experiment into action, with live synthesizer effects and 12 speakers, he used algorithms to create the sounds of wind rising and falling in the gallery.

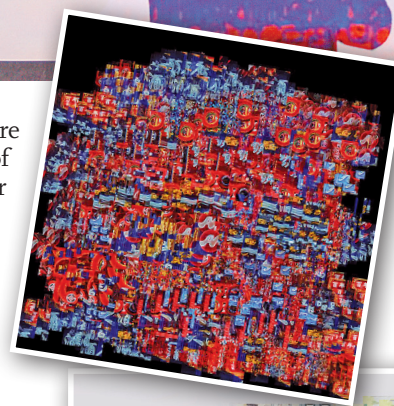
Despite an icy start, Houge continued to experiment, utilizing his knowledge of music to create new soundscapes with computer algorithms. He came up with ideas that utilized more audience participation, resulting in positive feedback: "In early 2009, I was finishing up a DJ set at an art show when I started playing around with an algorithm I developed that lets you take a radio station and mix up the sounds."

Drunken music

Another crowd-pleaser was Houge's "Zhujiujiao drinking game," named after its introduction at the Mini MIDI Festival in Zhujiujiao in 2009. Based on the concept of the video game, *Guitar Hero*, Houge's version requires five participants to drink, blow across the top of the bottles and slam their bottles down on cue to create drunken music. Houge remarked: "I'm still trying to find the right speed for the game. The demands of the software are merciless, requiring that you drink a lot of beer in a very short amount of time. I definitely got some cursing."

Despite his theoretical leanings, Houge maintains a keen interest in quirky pop music as well. Drawing on influences as disparate as Prince and Elvis Costello, he has authored and performed a set of synth pop songs in some of China's premier underground music venues, including a performance in June this year at Beijing's iconic D-22.

Recently Houge has begun to push his knowledge of algorithmic modification into the visual realm, using



(Above) Ben Houge at a design presentation event in Shanghai. Ben Houge's artwork titled *29 Giraffe* (left) and *Transportation Is Getting A New Look* (below). Photos: Courtesy of Ben Houge



computers to warp images into new and intriguing configurations. His series entitled *29 Giraffes* was his first experiment in this new medium.

Houge used the knowledge gained from this work to create *Transportation Is Getting A New Look*, which took a 1970s propaganda poster with the words "Safeguard the Orderliness of the Revolution: Transportation Is Getting A New Look," and rearranged it into a mishmash of shape and color.

Although, the work doesn't purport to be anything controversial, it played a key role during the shutdown of Shanghai's OV Gallery by authorities earlier this year, being the only piece that was confiscated in a police raid.

"The official reason for shutting down the gallery was that it didn't have a license to display works by foreigners and to sell books. There were other works by foreigners at the exhibition, but a lot of them were large sculptures, not something easy to just carry away," Houge told the Global Times. "I had a print of a still from my project right next to the door, and I think they took it just because it was the easiest thing to take."

In the end, Houge was ambivalent about the fact that his work was confiscated.

"It was a non-sequitur event, really," he said. The piece has since been returned.

Last Saturday, Houge launched an exhibition entitled *The Point of Departure* at the True Colors Museum in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, which will run until December 5.



Ben Houge, or "Stupid Monkey Brother" according to his Chinese nickname, in front of his studio.

Photo: Tom Mangione