

LAWRENCE LEK



Portrait of Lawrence Lek. Photo by Ysabelle Cheung for ArtAsiaPacific.

LAWRENCE LEK, *Geomancer* [poster], 2017, still image from HD video with color and sound: 48 min 15 sec. Copyright the artist. Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London.

Architect of Virtuality

BY YSABELLE CHEUNG

The corridor is rich in symbolism. In art and literature, it often appears as a shadowed area in which the uncanny—doppelgängers, phantoms, ghostly doubles—disturbs a sense of security. In video-game designs, architectural spaces like corridors create a tightly controlled sense of exploration—they are also, in the context of mapping real-world situations onto digital interfaces, the most realistic metaphor for life: interstitial, full of mysteries and closed doors.

In Lawrence Lek's video-game works, he bases his closed- and open-plan designs on real-world architecture, and evokes what cultural critic Mark Fisher described in his 2016 book *The Weird and Eerie* as “the feeling that either something is there that does not belong, which is weird, or that the world is strange because something is absent, which is eerie.” His cinematic video-essays, created using computer software, explore sci-fi narratives that dissect the basic desires and perceptions of contemporary society.

Based in London, Lek originally studied architecture at Trinity College in Cambridge, followed by a diploma at the Architectural Association in London. He then worked various jobs, in design fabrication and architecture and also as a musician—he still composes music today—before receiving a full scholarship to attend the Cooper Union, New York, graduating with a Master's degree in architecture in 2014. It was at Cooper Union that Lek made a conscious pivot to fine art, driven by skepticism toward the hypothetical narratives that power conventional architectural practices, whether in Europe or in Asia, two regions deeply familiar to him. (He was born in Frankfurt in 1982 and spent his childhood in Bangkok, Singapore, Hong Kong and Osaka.) An example is the common developer's skyscraper, which is mocked up, publicized and used as a tool to inflate market prices, but never actually built. “When you study architecture in school, you think there's a direct line between designing and realizing a project,” Lek said. “But I started thinking: what if you took the rendering—the virtual, speculative aspects of architecture—and just considered that as the project, as opposed to the built realization of the work itself?”

This idea of the virtual being more real even than built-reality itself is one that weaves throughout Lek's work. For example, in the video-essay *Unreal Estate* (*The Royal Academy Is Yours*) (2015), Lek reimagines the London arts institution as a private mansion and simulates a 3D tour of it. You,

the viewer, are purportedly a billionaire and have recently purchased the property as well as its holdings of flashy cars, Kusamas and Kapoors. Initially, the idea seems preposterous, like a fictional parody of the upper class, with lines drolly recited in Chinese such as “there is the salon-house, a place to hide your anxieties and misfortunes.” Yet, upon reading the credits, one discovers that the text is actually a translation from an article published in the Russian edition of the lifestyle magazine *Tatler*. With these virtual renderings, Lek indulges a deeply disturbing capitalist desire, offering us access to an exclusive heritage site and a real, momentary taste of extreme privilege.

In Lek's best-known work to date, the hour-long video-essay *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)* (2016), China is described in terms beyond realism. Lek portrays the country as an artificial intelligence (AI) superpower driven by developments in social, political and cultural areas. *Sinofuturism*, Lek theorizes, is a contemporaneous movement. To communicate this, Lek touches upon seven stereotypes of Chinese society—computing, copying, video gaming, studying, addiction, labor and gambling—by collaging his virtual creations with real-life, hyperbolic media. For example, to explore ludology in Chinese society, he excerpts a *New York Times* report on internet addiction in China, interspersed with screen captures of an online gaming site, videos of mass calisthenics as alternative forms of entertainment, and a clip of a lecture given by an addiction specialist. In this way, he suggests that our views on AI and technology—that which we consider so otherworldly, inhuman and incomprehensible—mirrors early Western views and contemporary international media perspectives on the “oriental.” The future isn't some abstruse fiction, Lek seems to stress; rather, it is China today.

Lek created *Sinofuturism*, along with parts of virtual-reality game *Playstation* and video-essay *Geomancer* (both 2017)—funded by the bursary he received for the Jerwood/FVU Awards 2017—while on residency at Wysing Arts Centre in Cambridge, England, where he dived into research on the human-AI relationship. These works convey a future in which humans are rendered useless in an über-efficient, AI-run world. This is captured through Lek's invention of the Farsight Corporation, a fictitious enterprise that placates idle humans by engaging them in virtual online games disguised as

“careers”—an ancient Roman bread-and-circus situation for the post-labor economy.

*Geomancer* looks at this world from the point of view of its namesake, a sentient robot. We follow the story of an AI-controlled weather satellite on its journey to Earth, and as it ponders its newfound desire to become an artist. “If I had hands, I would be a sculptor,” it says longingly. “If I had a voice, I would sing.” *Geomancer*'s thoughts turn increasingly Daoist once it lands on Earth and encounters its first existential challenges—at one point, when observing entrances to a Marina Bay Sands casino in Singapore marked “Drone,” “Foreigner,” “Local” and “AI,” it calls upon the Chinese goddess of mercy to solve its identity crisis: “Do I really belong here? Help me, Guanyin. I was born to embrace chance, but am I just a war game trapped in the firewall of my own body?”

*Geomancer* indicates our—and all sentient beings'—fidelity to certain belief structures and ways of living, even in a postapocalyptic world. Lek offered his analysis on this: “Science fiction tends to involve dystopian power, environmental and biological scenarios. But day-to-day life does not actually change that much. Conscious beings' experience of reality revolves around a limited number of existential things: how we move through space, how we go from one place to another, what we hope for, what we are fearful of. There's a line in *The Adventures of Augie March* by Saul Bellow that has always stuck with me, something like: ‘The days don't change, but the times do.’”

In Lek's most recent solo show at K11 Foundation's Chi Art Space in Hong Kong, he returned to the idea of physical actualization and the language of architecture. A playable game, *2065* (2018), displayed on several screens, envisions that a group of AIs in a Farsight Corporation-run world has watched Lek's *Sinofuturism*, and, interpreting it as a manifesto, created five virtual portals, including a Farsight Corporation club and a simulacrum of the exhibition space itself. The real gallery was designed to look like the one on the screen and vice versa, with two red LED-lit corridors; near the entrance, a Farsight Logo simulation appeared on a monitor, followed by its real-life double mounted in the same passageway, making one question whether they traveled backward, forward or not at all. Here, Lek underscores how real-life perceptions can be swayed by the virtual, like the feeling of journeying down a corridor in a video game—when in fact, you never left your chair.