

Huidi Xiang

we've decided to grow oranges together

December 1 - 23, 2023

"This past summer, my mom and I decided to grow oranges together—not from a real tree, but from a digital tree in a mobile game called *Baba Farm* on the online shopping platform, Taobao.

Launched in 2018 by Alibaba, the company that owns Taobao, *Baba Farm* is a key element of an online sales campaign dedicated to agricultural produce in China. The campaign's core goals include promoting regional food brands and enabling farmers to connect with a wider consumer audience through Alibaba's expansive platform. Incorporating gamification, Alibaba introduced *Baba Farm*, offering Taobao users the opportunity to virtually cultivate crops and exchange their digital harvest for real food at discounted prices or even for free.

The part of *Baba Farm* my mom and I are playing together involves growing a fruit tree from the seed to harvest. To nurture, or more precisely, level up the tree, the player needs to "fertilize" it, and acquiring virtual fertilizer involves completing various tasks, such as browsing recommended products, downloading specific plug-ins, or purchasing certain items from the recommendation page. The digital tree is ready for harvest at level 15, allowing players to receive real free fruits of their choice.

My mom began playing the game earlier this year, and she introduced me to it when I returned to China for the first time since the start of Covid. Initially playing independently, we were unaware that we could grow a "couple tree" together until we discovered that my aunt and my cousin had been cultivating trees together for a long time, progressing much faster than us. Despite the additional fertilizing required, growing a tree as a couple accelerates the leveling-up process and rewards both players with a box of fruits at the end.

So on August 29th, 2023, we decided to grow a tree together. Even after my return to the US in early September, our dedication to nurturing the tree persisted. After more than 3600 rounds of "fertilization," our first virtual couple tree reached level 15 on October 7th, 2023. This milestone allowed each of us to select a box of oranges. A few days later, the fruits of our digital labor—12 oranges in total—arrived at our home. Unfortunately, I had already returned to the US, and my mom was on an extended trip away from home at that time. Seizing the opportunity, my dad, who contributed nothing to the tree's growth, indulged in all 12 oranges.

This exhibition starts with this gameplay experience. And as the exhibition unfolds, my mom and I are currently nurturing a new tree. In a way, this game has evolved into a caring mechanism between my mom and me. Concerned about her only child living far away, my mom used to insist on daily texts from me to ensure my well-being. This requirement was set aside when we embarked on this joint digital farming journey, as now she can witness my digital footprint from our virtual farming each day. The joy of receiving free fruits, a result of the ongoing collaborative efforts of taking care of something as well as each other, has also temporarily soothed my ever-present concerns and skepticism towards precarious digital environments like Taobao.

I extend my special thanks to my mom, Shuhua Huang, for not only growing the trees with me but also fertilizing them far more frequently than I do. Thank her for "carrying" me in the game and in all aspects of my life. Shuhua also painted the orange whose silhouette was used to create the central component of the installation—the orange tree. This same orange painting is featured in the exhibition's promotional images. It is also her who painted Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck in a pond landscape on the wall of the bedroom of our old apartment during her pregnancy with me. I've always believed that my artistic practice sprouted from that very mural." - Huidi Xiang

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For Immediate Release

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Lydian Stater is pleased to present a new mixed-media sculptural installation by artist Huidi Xiang.

we've decided to grow oranges together originates from the artist's experience of "growing" digital trees with her mother in a mobile game on an online shopping platform. With a playful yet crude sculptural narrative, Huidi contemplates her interactions with her mother as well as the digital platform throughout this gaming process. This exhibition explores the possibilities of cultivating a caring system within a precarious digital environment, interrogating the invisible labor, the hidden violence, and the unarticulated desire associated with fostering methods of mutual care in today's late capitalist society.

Huidi Xiang is a sculptor based in Brooklyn, New York, USA. Huidi creates objects and installations that reimagine, remix, and recontextualize pop cultural products and phenomena. With a playful yet crude sculptural gesture, Huidi's work cultivates alternative narratives to rupture the singular storytelling of late capitalism.

Huidi holds an MFA in Art from Carnegie Mellon University and a BA in Architecture and Studio Art from Rice University. Her works have been exhibited internationally by X Museum Triennial (Beijing, China), SPRING/BREAK Art Show (New York, NY, USA), OCAT Biennale (Shenzhen, China), KAJE (Brooklyn, NY, USA), Contemporary Calgary (Calgary, Canada), and more. Huidi has also participated in many artist residencies, including the Bronx Museum of the Arts AIM fellowship, NARS Foundation International Residency Program, ACRE Residency Program, and the Millay Colony for the Arts.

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