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## Artist Shuang Li Embraces Digital Technology's 'Wrinkles' to Combat Corporeal Alienation

*By Alex Greenberger*

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Shuang Li: *Lord of the Flies*, 2022.  
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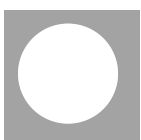
The phenomenon known as *mukbang*, one of the stranger internet trends to emerge in the past decade, was popular with Korean YouTubers before Shuang Li and many others became fascinated with it during the pandemic. The format is simple: a person eats a meal before a camera, letting their food slop and squish while describing how it tastes using the hushed tones of ASMR.

Feeling as though so much greasy food were oozing through the screen, Li began to think about leakage in various forms. She remembered a Buddhist legend about a female goddess who created the Earth and then covered its cracks with her body, as well as

filmmaker Hito Steyerl's writings on how "poor," low-quality images travel freely on the internet. Then she merged these two strands with *mukbang* for the 2021 video *ÆTHER (Poor Objects)*, which appeared in the 2022 Venice Biennale.

Shot and edited by Li, who works almost exclusively on a laptop, *ÆTHER* features footage of a person munching on fried food, and a woman ascending a staircase as a 360-degree camera follows her, causing the images to warp. With its poetic narration about pixels grafting onto people, *ÆTHER* is a typical work for Li, whose videos, sculptures, and performances exploring digital bodies in flux have been seen widely in the past few years, in venues ranging from Miu Miu's runways to Tate Modern's screening rooms.

Li said *ÆTHER* is emblematic of her interest in the "wrinkles" of technology. But rather than attempting to iron out those wrinkles, she embraces them, as she did in her 2017–18 video *T*. Based on a post Li saw on an online forum, the video follows a man working at Taobao, the popular Chinese e-commerce platform. He's told by his boss to act more like a woman, in an effort to better please customers. Midway through, there's a prolonged shot of a digital foot contracting, causing its toes to bend down and under. The image recalls the sleek avatars on porn websites, minus any of their typical glossiness or eroticism.





Shuang Li: *Will it fill our thoughts with endless night time sky*, 2022.  
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Works like *T* presage the corporeal alienation Li felt during Covid. “I wanted to escape not just my immediate surroundings but also my own body,” she said from Geneva, one of the two European cities she calls home. Behind her on Zoom bobbed a pink stuffed animal that recalled creatures seen in the anime she grew up watching.

Born in 1990 in China’s Wuyi Mountains, Li spent her childhood playing video games and listening to music by angsty American bands like My Chemical Romance, whose albums she encountered through *dakou*, black-market surplus and damaged CDs. This formative experience ultimately led her to the NYU graduate program in media studies, but she found herself too “illogical” for that discipline, and pivoted to art. She’s been based abroad ever since.

Li has not been back to China since 2020. That year, she installed a show at Peres Projects in Berlin, then got stuck as travel restrictions came into place. Unable to return, she created works such as the 2021 performance *Lord of the Flies*, staged at Shanghai’s Antenna Space gallery. Working remotely, she found performers to play

herself, wearing clothing similar to her own while reading letters to friends and family members. Her missives functioned as goodbyes to the people she had left behind. “My friends were like, ‘It’s such a mindfuck,’” Li recalled. ““They look like you and sound like you, but they aren’t you.’ That’s one thing I want to do in my work: find these cracks.”



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