

PERES PROJECTS

# ARTFORUM

## OPENINGS: SHUANG LI

Travis Jeppesen on Shuang Li



“I’M STUCK in these perpetual waves of unrest,” writes artist Shuang Li in a recent essay about her current situation of placelessness. In 2020, Li traveled from China to Berlin for a solo exhibition of her work at Peres Projects. Then the Covid-19 pandemic hit. She has been quartered in Europe ever since, giving up on the possibility of returning to her native China anytime soon.

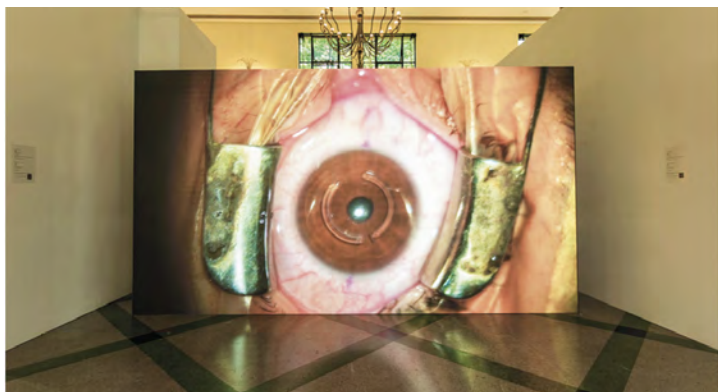
Li’s state of stasis has lent greater urgency to her already intense reflection on the nature of spectral and digitized forms of presence and on the more generalized status of the body in both virtual and physical space. Even before the pandemic, these themes had served as a central point of departure for her oeuvre, which encompasses performance, sculpture, and the ficto-critical videos for which she is best known.

The first major work to bring Li attention was *Marry Me for Chinese Citizenship*, a performance she executed shortly after graduating from the media studies department at New York University. For six hours on Valentine’s Day in 2015, she wore a sign inscribed with the work’s titular phrase as she stood in and walked through New York’s Times Square while passersby reacted with friendly laughter at what was, after all, an ironic provocation. What impressed Li were the few who misread the sign as a Chinese immigrant’s sincere plea for a green card. “They would come up to me and tell me without any conversation beforehand, ‘Give me \$10,000 and I will marry you.’ ”

The themes underlying this intervention—the ways in which abstract geopolitical, economic, and legal systems exert pressure on the physical body—have been intensively heightened in Li’s

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subsequent forays into the moving image. Such works sit squarely in the domain of fiction: Li speaks often of the primacy of writing in her work, which features winding dialogues and monologues, often spoken by unseen protagonists, and evokes narratives as multilayered and complex as those of any Russian novel.



In the twenty-five-minute *I Want to Sleep More but by Your Side*, 2018–19, Li exploits the disjunction between sound and image—a hallmark of the cinematic essays of Chris Marker and Jean-Luc Godard—to maximal poetic effect. In the opening sequence, viewers confront the close-up of an eyeball, its lids wrenched open by surgical pliers, recalling both *Un chien andalou* and *A Clockwork Orange*. Cut to the camera spiraling its way around a parking garage as a female voice relays, in French, a story about a boat drifting from port to port, its passengers in search of some unknown destination, until it finally meets a storm at sea and sinks—the tale is an Ahabian metaphor, perhaps, for the journeying forth into global disaster that the present portends. Cut to a close-up of yet another eye, this one blue, its lashes being mascaraed; a masculine voice, in Mandarin, says, “You don’t know how it all started, but you know exactly how everything will end.”

## **Li’s works sit squarely in the domain of fiction.**

And so it carries on. The two speakers’ narration is abstract, disconnected. The Chinese man discourses on the spiritual sensations, the psychogeography of the unnamed city in which he dwells; the French woman speaks about a man on the other side of the world, remarking that his apartment looks like it came straight from an IKEA catalogue. Eventually,

we discover that the man is working in a factory in Yiwu, manufacturing the yellow vests used in the eponymous French movement for economic justice and workers’ rights. (Li simultaneously produced a collage series, “Skylines and Turnstiles,” 2019, for which she transforms the yellow vest material from the same factory in Yiwu into a stretched canvas.)

The political irony is rich enough—workers, without any real political or economic power, in an ostensibly Communist country manufacturing vests for a workers’ rights movement in an ostensible democracy halfway around the world—but what ultimately propels the work is the sense of long-distance love between this man and woman. Likely never to meet in person, and further distanced by their inability to speak the same language, they nevertheless partake in a strange communion, brought together via abstract and disembodied flows of global capitalism.

Disempowerment and disembodiment are the twin processes Li tracks across the technosphere—while at the same time acknowledging that these processes are historical. The video *T*, 2017–18, explores the malleability of identity in the virtual via a focus on a heterosexual cis man who works as a customer-service representative for a Taobao shop vending women’s socks. His employer says he is not being “cute enough” when interacting with customers online; the situation later grows more confusing when, for instance, he must contend with the sexual advances of male customers asking to see photos of “her” modeling the socks. The imagery on the screen largely consists of digital animations of bare feet depicted from different angles, like a parody of a foot-fetish video. Suddenly, about six minutes in, the feet mutate into clawlike deformations, evoking the misogynist ancient Chinese practice of foot-binding. In the 2019 installation *Intro to Civil War*, Li crafts a dialogue between an AI sex doll and an ancient concubine to explore the biopolitics of sex as well as the sexual objectification of women. The dialogue is but one of many layers in the installation. It is scored with the stilted, throbbing synths of the composer-musician Osheyack, one of Li’s frequent collaborators; meanwhile, holographic projections, of floating sperm and other ephemeral detritus of the absent body’s processes, pulse against five transparent orbs.

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Again, the “dialogue”—perhaps clashing monologues would be a more apt description—evokes a sense of disconnection across time and space between the two speakers: “I lived in a time when life wasn’t so carefully evaded,” intones the ancient concubine. “Maybe none of it is real,” says the AI sex doll. “Maybe humans are just like me.”

Pondering the role that social media played in the immediate aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic in China, as well as in the Black Lives Matter movement, led Li to create her latest work, *ÆTHER*, 2021, an early version of which was shown at Para Site in Hong Kong this past summer. This kaleidoscopic video collage is inspired in part by the ancient Chinese myth “Nv Wa Patches Up the Sky,” about a goddess who made the entire universe out of clay and, when it began to crack, used her own body to repair it in an act of self-sacrifice. In *ÆTHER*, Li uses this incident of bodily sublimation as a starting point to explore the concept of leakage, which recurs as a theme both in the speech of the two female vlogger protagonists and in the on-screen visuals. The imagery is in many ways Li’s most abstract yet, a free-associative collage that mirrors the dialogue spoken by one of the narrators earlier in the piece: “You feel confident this volatile mix of metal, pre-cum, mobile phone browser windows, information highway, heat, industrial cooling system, vibrators, fuel, fantasies of proximity, immobility, water, silicone, undersea cables, hydropower plants, green lights will make you immortal.”



Such confidence is, of course, an illusion. Try as we might to patch up the sky, to project what we regard as the substance of ourselves across time and virtual



space, we are in fact bounded by physical bodies. Indeed, what is most jolting and unnerving about Li’s art (visceral sounds and images aside) is its staging of vulnerability. For her work *If Only the Cloud Knows*, 2005–18, she uploaded all of the text messages and digital photographs she produced between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five to a website, then erased all backups of this data. Access to the website is freely given whenever she has an exhibition, and visitors are able to delete any files they wish after leaving a comment on the site. Recalling earlier acts of staged vulnerability and self-sacrifice, such as Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece*, 1964, Li’s work suggests that this archival manifestation in cyberspace is not merely all that remains of that decade of her youth, but a materialization of her core self, over which she no longer has control—a leakage in search of a container.

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