

CURA.

SHUANG LI

By Lina Martin-Chan / Issue 41 Fall Winter 2023-24



Art has always been preoccupied with depicting the inexpressible, the metaphysical. Shaung Li's multi-disciplinary practice takes on the task of corralling images, narratives and feelings to illustrate the experience of living with digital technology (which is to say, the experience of living right now). Her work explores the technologies that are very often not understandable to us, obscured as black boxes and proprietary knowledge, that are seemingly ephemeral and yet a gravitational force for many. The shape and weight of the iPhone immeasurably heavy in our lives.

Technologies shape the flow of resources and capital, where infrastructure like roads and dams are built and the earth is dug up, where jobs are and thus where population gathers. They also condition our conceptions of the self—our desires, how we love and communicate with one another, how we have sex, how we calm the nervous system or pump our-selves up. Li's work looks for the loopholes in these technical systems, examining the processes through which they work and relating them back to the human body in order to create, as she describes, "short circuits" in those systems.

Her works often begin from an observation of her own day-to-day life. *ÆTHER (Poor Objects)* (2021) was written during the first lockdown. While she lived alone in Berlin, watching YouTube videos for company, Li found herself in a Mukbang and cam-girl livestream algorithm loop, fascinated by these formats, and

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was drawn further into this world. The film, which was shown at the Venice Biennale, explores these emerging genres. It features two main actors—one is a young girl surrounded by fried chicken, and the other is a woman filming herself from a selfie-stick with an exaggerated fisheye lens effect. The affect skews towards the dark, channeling the structures of feeling enabled by the platform’s algorithms—based on provocation, it’s a space that collects desire, consumption and repulsion. These images, like the food, so spicy and greasy that it’s as if you can eat with your eyes, are heavy with association and affect. The work is a fragmented montage of photographs, animation and live-action footage which are tuned and pulled through the narration which emphasizes leakage and the experience of looking at yourself through the lens of a webcam, representing yourself as an assemblage of pixels. The film begins by listing a mix of technological tools and infrastructure with bodily expressions that one hopes “will make you immortal” — demonstrating that Li is less interested in the shiny corporate internet of influencers and marketing than the more complicated, difficult side of the self becoming increasingly entangled in this dense rhizomatic network.



Li’s work deals with the material of the internet both in the sense of content and physical infrastructure. Her work looks at how narratives accrue and gather through mes-sage boards, sub-communities, memes, genres, authored by the many people on the internet. She is also equally interested in the resources and structures that enable that content to emerge—from commodity objects and supply chains to data centers and undersea cables.

Her films are led by fictional narratives and written texts that appear as voice over script to most of her works. *I Want to Sleep More but by Your Side* (2019) tells the story of an online romance between a mother living in France at the time of the *gilets jaunes* movement and a young man in China working at a safety vest factory. Her work explores how mass-produced objects take on meaning and become containers for emotion and memory. With a lens critical of consumerism, the work is interested in how value and emotion are produced and how the production and supply chains are maintained by real people and real infrastructure. Overlaying upside-down footage of a safety vest factory, the male character describes a day living in the factory compound and working at the sewing machine. Li demonstrates how entire lives are structured around our seemingly banal desires, where entire cities are organized to accommodate, respond to, and manufacture these needs.

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The work also continues Li's exploration of the screen as a threshold and how intimacy is now often facilitated by screens. In *T* (2017/2018), the perspective of this free associative narration shifts throughout the piece, which is sometimes read by multiple voices. One strand that emerges is from the perspective of a male character working in customer service at a Taobao online sock shop. The question of avatars and our visual selves is raised, as he describes customers asking him to send them photographs wearing the socks, and getting in trouble with his manager for not being "cute enough" in his interactions with them. The narrative reads "You never know who you're talking to online, just like they don't know themselves." This dialogue is layered over animation of feet dangling from a chair, kicking and floating over a milky floor. The feet begin to transform, the toes becoming disfigured and the arch of the foot crumpled, the narrator begins to speak about his grandmother's tiny feet, wondering if she had experienced foot binding. Through this imagery and the exploration of avatars, the film also engages with questions of power and embodiment.



Li also explores experiences of transference as the intimacy between the body and the screen itself deepens. She is interested in the relationship between technology and our bodies, and the way our offline bodies no longer exist without their on-screen counterparts. *Lord of the Flies* (2022) is a performance work that debuted in Shanghai at the opening of a group show that Li took part in. For the piece, she worked with twenty performers, who were each given letters from the artist to read out to her friends and loved ones who were in attendance. The costumes were identical and meant to resemble the artist's own style, and the performers were also equipped with sunglasses that recorded video so that the reactions to the letters were captured. The artist left China during the first lock-down and was not able to return—this work explores that experience of absence. She describes how at the time she had been "watching too much TikTok," which made her wonder about how the experience of these choreographed sequences would shift if you took the screen away, or were only able to see the reverse—people's reactions to that performance.

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Her work is a low-fi hack of physicality—exploring how to leak between screens and find subjectivity, how to find the loopholes within experiences mediated by technologies. Larger socio-political questions of migration and containment, the nation-state and the power of big tech are implicated through the artist's work, which is expressed through a desire to find home.



The popular tools of an era shape how that generation thinks about consciousness. Across Li's work, the question of mediation reappears—how digital technologies rewire the way we communicate with one another, experience sensuousness or solitude. She also considers the infrastructure that enables these shifts and poses questions about whose interests control these new modes of being. Her practice falls within the category of artists who see something in the world and attempt to understand it, to redistribute the perceptible—creating cracks in the smooth surfaces of technological interfaces.