

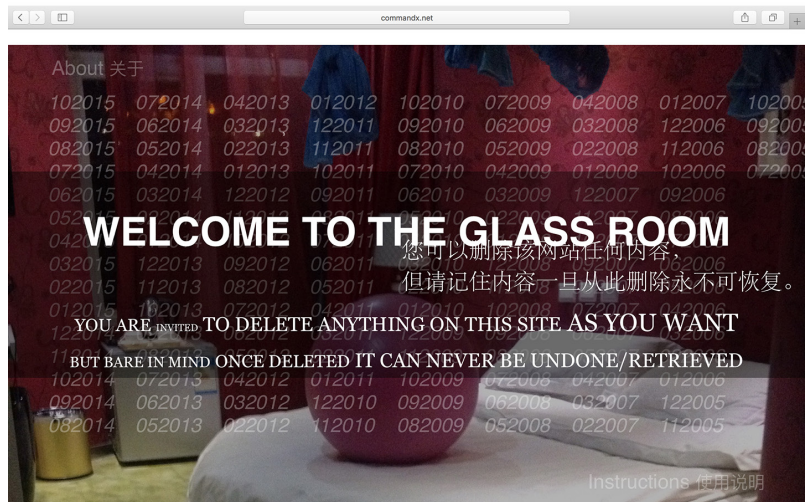
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ESSAYS TIDBITS

Hacked by Cloudbursts: Shuang Li

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by Alvin Li



Shuang Li grew up with a host of “underground” media, from knockoff Nintendo to dakou CDs.¹ She was practically raised by the Myspace and YouTube culture of the pre-Great Firewall Chinese internet in the early 2000s, learning English through My Chemical Romance songs, geography through *Uncharted Waters*,² and gender from *Star Dream*.³ This digital life led her to pursue an MA in media studies in New York, where she developed a unique perspective on these technologies through the lens of shifting transnational processes, observing how intersecting vectors of identity—from gender to race to citizenship—are mobilized and managed in the service of a new world economy.

On Valentine’s Day 2015, Li ventured into the streets of New York wearing a makeshift sign reading “Marry Me for Chinese Citizenship” and roamed Times Square for a good six hours. It was controversial, no doubt, but hilarious to those who got the full extent of the joke: both a reversal of a stereotype (Asian woman seeks U.S. citizenship!) and a comment on the red tape involved in becoming a naturalized Chinese citizen by way of marrying a mainlander, making it practically unattainable. The performance was certainly not in the style of the detached flaneur. Charged with provocation and apparent frivolousness, it aligned itself more closely with the labor of a migrant sex worker who thrusts her body into the public and offers sex—a slice of subjectivity, just like citizenship—qua work. (Halfway through the video documentation of the performance, we hear a middle-aged lady lashing out at Li: “Are you that desperate? Your self-worth is so low,” a line of moral critique that succinctly captures the predominant view on female sex work today). In her deadpan yet witty performance, public responses became a mirror of the variegated ways in which sexual, gender, racial, and geopolitical prejudices encroach on a subject’s range of motion today.

The last few decades have witnessed what philosopher Paul B. Preciado characterizes as an intensive “pornification of labor,” or the capture of sex and sexuality by economy.⁴ This transformation owes much to the proliferation of digital media, which penetrates consumption and labor in both material and audiovisual forms.

Li became fascinated by Taobao, the world’s largest e-commerce service, which generates billions of RMB in revenue and countless jobs. She is particularly struck by the fact that customer service representatives across Taobao retailers unanimously speak in a feminine tone. Putting a wild spin on this vexing status quo, her latest video, *T* (2017-2018), is a hypermodern biopic about a cynical, sexist straight dude required by his new job—customer service representative for a Taobao women’s socks retailer—to perform femininity in his daily contact with customers.

Four screens on a wall are closely aligned to form a rectangle. A flux of images combining CGI and live action unravel on each, occasionally synchronizing to zoom in on a pair of animated feet. Through the clumsy, unrehearsed-sounding delivery of a female narrator speaking in the first person, we hear about the male protagonist’s routine at work, which often involves dealing with customer requests for pictures of “her” own feet wearing the products. In a range of close-up shots, the feet wobble, toes wagging, teasing the camera as in hentai porn.

Just when you begin to get hooked (or hard) on the toes, they begin to contract into an abject form, pointing to the bloodstained history of foot binding. From an ancient technology for the biopolitical management of the female sex



(aimed to, for one, prohibit them from working) to the contemporary irony of a cis-male being forced into cyberdrag for work, T leaves the more somber ethical questions to others, opting instead for a liberating rush of Schadenfreude. At the end of the video, when another employee complains about the unfair requirement—“But I’m a man!”—the boss replies, “Well, now you have no gender.”

In 2018 Li uploaded all her electronic photographs and text messages from 2005 to 2015 to commandx.net, then erased her backup storage. Accessible during her future exhibitions, the website allows visitors to freely browse and delete any content. For her upcoming project, Li relocated from Shanghai to Yiwu, a small town known as the world’s largest wholesale market, supplying the globe with everything from Christmas decorations to the neon-yellow vests that recently fueled the Gilet Jaunes movement in France. She is conceiving a video work about an internet relationship between a pubescent boy working in a yellow vest factory and a visiting French woman, whom he finds via social media geo-tags. Such is a glimpse of Li’s radical, decidedly inappropriate world, where she delves into the perverse traps of a cyberextended reality to unpick its ironies, all the while scavenging moments of empowerment.

- [1] Surplus albums produced mostly in the United States and damaged by punching a hole in the corner, before being transported to and illegally sold in Asia.
- [2] A Japanese RPG (Role-Playing Game) themed around the Age of Discovery.
- [3] A Taiwanese RPG in which the player is required to operate a celebrity management company.
- [4] See “Pornpower” in Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (New York: Feminist Press at CUNY, 2013).

Shuang Li is an artist based in Shanghai. She received an MA in media studies from New York University in 2014. She has exhibited at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, in collaboration with Mao Jihong Arts Foundation (2018); SLEEP-CENTER, New York (2018); Taikang Space, Beijing (2018); Flux Factory, New York (2017); N3 Gallery, Beijing (2017); No. 235 Guang Fu Road, Shanghai (2016); k11 chi art museum, Shanghai (2016); Lab 47, Beijing (2016); Oberlin College, Ohio (2015); and Gu Cang Contemporary Center of Image, Lanzhou, China (2014), among others. Her next solo show will be at Open Forum, Berlin, in 2019.