

Meet the artist-explorer Liu Chuang

Alvin Li

He tackles bitcoin mining and engineered nature in his ambitious installations

Nestled in the Shanghai suburb of Songjiang, **Liu Chuang**'s studio is piled to the rafters with neatly organized books. Maps of various scales hang on the wall. Among the many charts and diagrams stuck to the shelves, I also spot a periodic table of elements. This scholarly setting recalls the office of a historian or a geographer more than an artist's studio – and yet, over the past few years, Liu's work has impressed the Chinese art milieu with an ever more interdisciplinary speculative practice that spans video, sculpture, and installation. Employing an expansive web of references that continuously stretches the discursive framework of his own work, the artist has also challenged the limits of Chinese contemporary art as a whole.

Standing in front of one of his maps during my visit, Liu guides me through his professional (and geographical) trajectory. After graduating from Hubei Institute of Fine Arts in the late 1990s, he moved to Shenzhen, China's first special economic zone – a city that transformed from being a desolate fishing village into an IT hub of more than 10 million inhabitants in just three decades. There, he dabbled in advertising and attempted to run a screen-print production company for a while. Neither led to much commercial success, but these efforts had a distinct impact on Liu's earlier practice, shaping his interest in the material, affective, and epistemological dimensions of China's urbanization projects. The dearth of support from galleries, institutions, and private benefactors trained the artist to develop a personal methodology independent of the ebbs and flows of the artworld. At the end of 2007, determined to become a professional full-time artist, Liu moved to Beijing.





Liu Chuang, *Buying Everything on You* (Liu Ailan), 2013. Courtesy of the artist and Antenna Space, Shanghai.

Liu's early work is underscored by a kind of romantic quality and a latent archeological interest. In *Buying Everything on You* (2005–) – the first work that earned the artist international attention, and secured his participation in the New Museum's first triennial, 'Younger than Jesus' (2009) – Liu approached migrants job-hunting in a Shenzhen labor market and asked them if he could buy their belongings. The artist then exhibited the purchased objects in the museum as stand-ins for the people he had met, a searing commentary on the implementation of capitalist ideology and the distribution of resources in post-socialist China. *Love Story* (2008–2014) consists of thousands of bootleg romance novels from the 1980s and 1990s that the artist purchased from a rundown bookshop in Dongguan, a city close to Shenzhen, home to countless migrant workers. Most valuable to Liu was not the nostalgic value of these vintage copies, but the way the migrant workers had used them as communication tools by scrawling notes in the margins, years before the dawn of mass digital media.

In his more recent works, Liu has looked beyond the ostensible urban-rural demarcation to investigate the subtler processes of China's modernization project. The 2015 video *BBR1 (No.1 of Blossom Bud Restrainer)* is named after a plant hormone developed by Chinese scientists in the hope of eliminating the environmental hazard caused by the seeds of genetically modified trees. Consisting entirely of footage culled from the internet, the video tracks poplar catkins floating through Beijing's environs as an off-screen phone conversation discloses the root of the problem: a state-led reforestation project, launched across northern China in the 1960s, and the ensuing cultivation of this artificially bred species of poplar in Beijing in the 1990s. While this large-scale geo-engineering initiative has, according to data from Nasa satellites, made a visible greening impact on the planet, it has also resulted in complications including respiratory diseases and wildfire risk. BBR1, the proposed remedy, prevents trees from budding throughout the season – but it also leads to faster growth of trunks and leaves the following year, resulting in an even greater profusion of catkins. 'This is a quintessential symptom of modernity,' Liu observes, before revealing that he is working on a sequel to the series, *No.2 of Blossom Bud Restrainer*, which will debut at a biennial in Asia later this year.

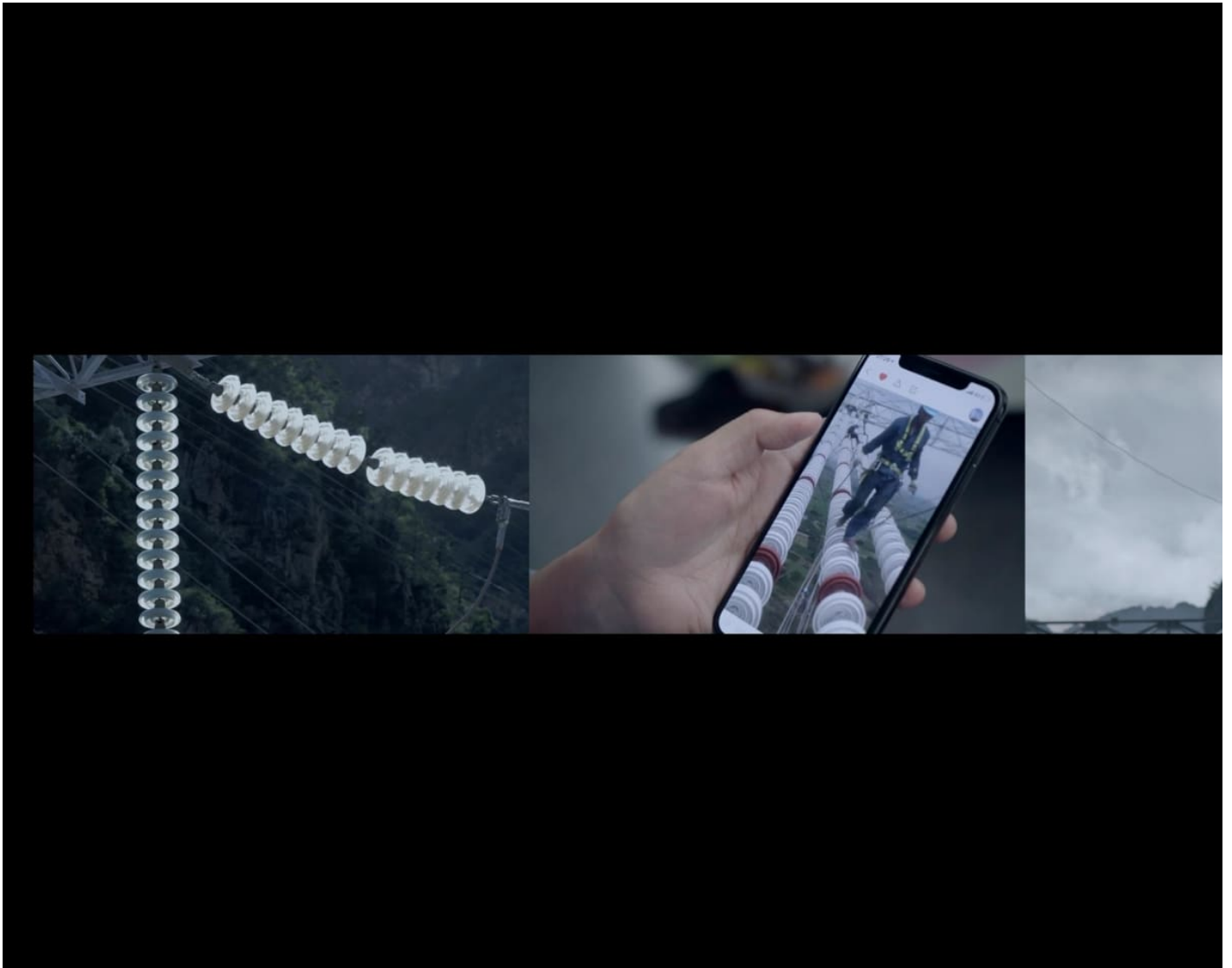


Liu Chuang, BBR1 (No.1 of Blossom Bud Restrainer), 2015. Courtesy of the artist and Magician Space,

The decision to migrate is always based on the tension between individual agency and socioeconomic flows. Liu's relocation to Shanghai in 2017 was his own proactive response to an increasingly precarious condition in Beijing. (Since 2017, an urban planning campaign aimed at 'removing Beijing's non-capital functions and features' has resulted in the forced demolition of many artist studios). The three-channel video *Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities* (2018) – shown at this year's Dhaka Art Summit – is Liu's most ambitious project to date, one in which he weaves seemingly disparate research findings into a grand speculative thesis on the underlying patterns of human civilization.

In 2017, upon the recommendation of media scholar Yang Beichen (who became his collaborator on this project), Liu came across a news article about the energy-chasing migratory routes of Bitcoin miners in China. According to the article, these miners would bring their machines to dams in Sichuan for cheap hydropower during rainy seasons, to Xinjiang for wind power in times of drought, to coal-fired power stations in Inner Mongolia in spring, and finally back to Sichuan. After many field trips to southwest China and extensive research, Liu noticed a parallel between the location of Bitcoin mines and what

the historian Willem van Schendel has designated as Zomia – a vast area of Southeast and East Asia spanning parts of Myanmar, Thailand, and four provinces of southwest China. These were historically characterized by highland populations largely outside the control of nation-states but have become increasingly threatened by the onslaught of modern infrastructure projects. Besides this geographical affinity, Liu observed a complex dialectical relationship between the miners – of a decentralized currency and centralized power systems – in some ways analogous to the way Zomians connect to their neighboring nation-states.



Liu Chuang, *Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities*, 2018. Commissioned for 'Cosmos Intelligence', with the support of the Mao Jihong Arts Foundation. Installation view at National Taiwan Museum. Courtesy of the artist and Antenna Space, Shanghai.

Liu incorporates these affinities – together with a dizzying array of references to political and sociotechnical systems throughout history – into a wild trip in media ecology. Among the many threads in this 40-minute video is a montage of infrastructure projects, from the introduction of telegraphs in China during the late Qing Dynasty and the proliferation of dams in the mid-20th century to contemporary railway, digital, and Bitcoin networks. The second half of the work grows increasingly speculative, as the marketing of an all-in-one

entertainment system (named EVD) to Zomian peoples in the early 21st century is compared to the human-alien communication carried out via light and sound in Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977). The video ends with a montage of women in traditional ethnic dress morphing into the Star Wars character Padmé Amidala wearing a similar costume on the central channel, while Planet Solaris (a nod to Andrei Tarkovsky) rotates on the other two.

In *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* – one of the texts that fueled Liu's recent work – the anthropologist James C. Scott writes: 'The creative aspect [of my research into the Zomian region], if there was any, was to make out this *gestalt* and to connect the dots.' One can grasp a related ethos in Liu's recent practice, which aims not at novelty but at the kind of density that can withstand history. Moving forward, Liu will apply a similar method of interwoven storytelling to develop a new work titled *Lithium Lake and the Lonely Island of Polyphony*, based on his research into salt lakes across northwestern China. Amid rising interest in the role of China and its technical activities in our ecological predicament, Liu's speculative poetics demonstrate truly original thinking on the subject in the East.



Liu Chuang, *Buying everything on you* (Liu Haifa), 2013. Courtesy of the artist and Antenna Space, Shanghai.

Liu Chuang is represented by **Antenna Space**, Shanghai and **Magician Space**, Beijing.

Chuang will be participating in 'INFORMATION (Today)', a group exhibition scheduled to open on May 29, 2020 at Kunsthalle Basel.

Alvin Li is an author and curator based in Shanghai.