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Press Clipping

ANTENNA SPACE

Kunstverein in Hamburg

In and Out of Place. Land after Information 1992 — 2024

Curated by Milan Ther & Dr. Martin Karcher
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Liu Chuang: *Lithium Lake and Island of Polyphony*, 2023

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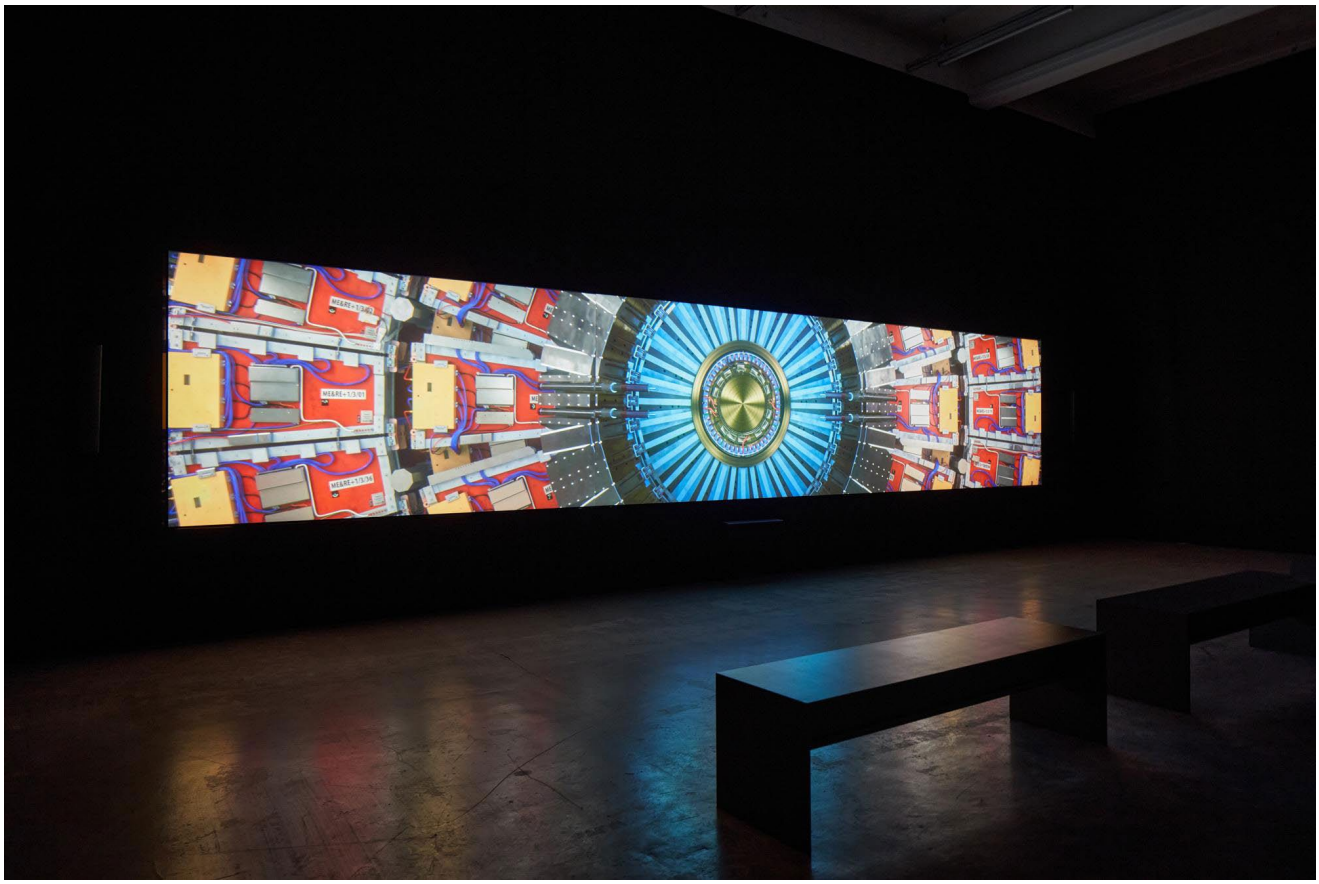
In *Lithium Lake and Island of Polyphony*, Chuang draws on the character Sophon from Liu Cixin's science fiction trilogy *Remembrance of Earth's Past* (orig. 2008-2010; engl. 2014-2016) to envisage an alien anthropologist's journey to Earth. Chuang's narrative unfolds from peripheral fieldwork to the core of globalisation, revealing the geological connections between the increasing demand for lithium, the (digital and mobile) technologisation of the present and the silver economy of centuries past. He links the histories of mining and metallurgy, illustrating the planetary scale of human intervention through ecological depletion that is a central characteristic of the Anthropocene.

In *Lithium Lake and Island of Polyphony*, Chuang offers a speculative counter-narrative to Darwin's theory of evolution. While Darwin's model thinks in terms of competition, Chuang emphasises the importance of collective practices and collectivity for human history, for example in the form of polyphonic, choral songs. The film notes analogies between human song and the way animals such as whales and bats navigate the world through song, or rather sound and feedback -- a dimension that humans have lost in the course of complete technologisation. The work explores the disappearance of collective singing through the technologisation of everyday life and the resulting loss of interpersonal resonance -- the transformation of our relationships to the world and to other people. For this exploration, Chuang develops sonic topographies that trace the connection between technology and song. He cites reflections by music anthropologist Joseph Jordania in *Why Do People Sing?* (2011) and Alain Corban's *A History of Silence* (2018) and weaves them into his video work. The result is an alternative history of humanity and culture that tells a new story of East Asian history, culture and religion.



Installation view, *In and Out of Place. Land after Information 1992–2024*,
Kunstverein in Hamburg 2024, Photo: Edward Greiner

LIU Chuang

Text By **Zoe Butt**

MAIIAM Contemporary Art Museum

Living Another Future

2024.5.24 - 6.03

Lithium Lake and the Island of Polyphony is a mesmerizing futuristic ode to the complex existence of life on Earth. It is a multilayered moving image installation, told across three connected screens, with poetic script and sound that doubly lures and compels. This ode observes and gives insight to the thoughts and experiences of Sophon*, a supercomputer from another world, that has chosen female human form, in order to understand (and thus thwart) human progress for the future needs of its own species. We watch how Sophon learns of our habitat through our speech, songs, films, literature, photographs, and paintings (both religious and secular), as she encounters our radio waves, music halls, drive-in theatres, books, newspapers and museums - where the world of the archive collides with contemporary reality. Sophon is particularly fascinated by the impact of our technology, querying how and why our predatory control of Nature seeks to exacerbate the silence of land dwellers.

> *'Most singing voices on Earth rise from the trees and waters...*
> *Silence rules the land*
> *So why do humans sing?'*

Through Sophon, Liu Chuang explores this question, mapping an arc of sound and its referent on Earth, in all its animate and inanimate forms, examining humanity's violent exploitation of its origins, and its impact. For example, vast and vacant desert lands become populated with the sounds of animal life as the polyphonic singing of the Toumai people becomes collaged with images of women in Communist parade. They then dance between frames of a cinema hall, its ominous rows of emptiness in silence made profound for the acute order exacted over even leisurely modern life. Liu Chuang's contrast between natural and man-made, absence and presence, past and present, human and non-human, is particularly affective, due to his employment of the drone and microscopic sound device for cinematic effect, his immersive images prompting questions of environmental justice and the consequences of land-based political disputes.

This is particularly evident in one vignette, where a historical scroll-like landscape in ink slowly loses its fauna, where animated beasts of near-myth glide and eventually morph with its inanimate habitat. This inked vista is interrupted by black and white etchings of historical sea voyages and its slavery, searching for silver. The sound of such wealth is given picture by the twang of a coin, held to the human ear, as immense green bodies of water soon stretch in front of our eyes - such liquid dominated by giant industrial machines of equal extraction and greed.

Liu recalls here the 15th Century Spanish colonial monopoly of silver and the mining of such ore in today's Bolivian city of Potosi. The Spanish crown accrued great wealth with its Pacific fleets of silver, traded by sea on the 'Manila Galleons', from Acapulco to Manila, until the 18th Century (with China particularly, in exchange for its spices, silk, porcelain and more). The trade routes of such Spanish East Indies vessels are arguably the earliest instance of globalization, a fact Liu Chuang gives further insight by highlighting today's trade in lithium follows similar pathway. He gives contextual insight to this with the 'Salar de Uyuni' flats (situated a mere 50km from the historic silver mines of Potosi), whose momentous green lakes of brine consume this installation, these salt deposits, the largest in the world, being equally rich in lithium. The corporatized extraction of such rare mineral today mirrors the silver ethos of Empire, such desire reliant on disenfranchised usurped communities whose sovereign rights are largely dismissed or unacknowledged. In this vignette, the animate landscape suffers similar fate, their disappearance made all the more omnipresent by the scale of mankind's ongoing technological plundering, as lithium excavators are pictured, giving way to the silver digital machine and its lithium-reliant bodies.

Liu scripted this work firstly with sound, such focus adding sensorial nuance to our visual defaults in this investigation of human ambition and its excessive mediatization in contemporary life, where dam constructions are decorated with neon pulsing lights to mentally reduce its noise pollution, while the

Installation view
Courtesy of MAIIAM Contemporary Art Museum, Photo credit Karin

uninterrupted flow of speech in our smart-plugged, lithium-powered, transit realities renders public spaces fearful of speech.

'Representation is a power that once belonged to God
Today, with more than seven billion mobile phones in use
This power belongs to all mankind
Excessive mediatization
Constant connectivity
And thus, also, the uninterrupted flow of speech
Makes people fear silence
Talk without speaking
Hear without listening
No one dares to break the silence
Yesterday's noise of the crowd
gives way to the whispers of infrastructure'

And such 'whisper' is aestheticized through sound in much of Liu Chuang's art, whose adroit ability to give presence to absence with ambience is as masterful as his comparative frames that reveal just how much human imagination takes inspiration from both the natural and man-made world. For example, the speed roar of the subway hovers around its desensitized immobile passengers, as fingers slide in ear-pod narcissism, preferring to chat in the virtual than the physical. Whilst the monumentality of cement hydroelectric dams (their water roar at night particularly fearsome), are lit in rhythm sync to the atonal scores of Schoenberg's piano, these highly structured pieces in acute visual conversation with the architecture of this dam, this lit rhythm sync turning the infrastructure of the dam into a giant kind of keyboard.

There is both wonder, perplexity and doubt riddled throughout *Lithium Lake and the Island of Polyphony*. Liu Chuang's attempt to give picture to the gaze of an alien race on humanity's values and principles prompts myriad concerns of ecological sustainability amongst so much extractive destruction. It is ultimately the knowledge and cultural practices of the indigenous that Liu Chuang seeks hope, for it is the dying language of the Muya people of Southwest Sichuan that largely narrates this opus, concluding with the song of the Indigo Yao, who dwell on the China-Vietnam border. For Liu Chuang, these communities possess polyphonic memories of multiple origins, their unwritten speech in collective song anchored in Nature's diversity—a stark contrast to the silence of our technologically obsessed world that is algorithmically exacerbating our fear of difference.

*Sophon is a character inspired by Chinese acclaimed author, Liu Cixin and his science fiction trilogy Remembrance of Earth's Past

[indented quotes are script excerpts of this artwork]

ArtReview

Liu Chuang: Enjoy the Silence

Mark Rappolt Features 20 May 2024 ArtReview

Liu Chuang, *Lithium Lake and Island of Polyphony* (stills), 2023, three-channel 6K-video installation, 55 min 4 sec. Courtesy the artist and Antenna Space, Shanghai

A new videowork by Liu Chuang, full of allegory and representation, posits an alien invasion against the beauty and lost opportunities of Earth and its dumb inhabitants

Taking past, present and future China as its playground, *Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities* (2018), a 40-minute, three-channel (think super-widescreen) videowork by Shanghai-based artist Liu Chuang, is a meditation on victims and oppressors and the interrelated subjects of power, profit and control. In both human and nonhuman arenas. If there's such a thing as going viral in the world of art (tricky, given that the unspoken economy behind art is built on scarcity), then *Bitcoin Mining* seems to have achieved it, seemingly on a continuous trundle through worldwide biennials, among them the Asian Art Biennial, Taipei and the 5th Ural Industrial Biennial of Contemporary Art, Ekaterinburg, in 2019; the Dhaka Art Summit, 2020; the Seoul Mediacity Biennale, 2021; and most recently finding a corner in this year's Diriyah Contemporary Art Biennale in Riyadh.

The work uses a blend of found and filmed footage, extracts from popular and unpopular cinema, and citations from academic literature and pop culture to draw out its core themes. By entangling fact and fiction, time and space, Liu poses bitcoin miners as practitioners of traditional transhumance and, conversely, ethnic minority cultures as dead museum relics. As a viewer, one minute you're pondering an analysis of Zhou dynasty (c.1046–256 BCE) economics, the next you're considering the relationship of Mongolian wedding dresses to the aesthetics of the *Star Wars* movie franchise, all the while wondering what any of that has to do with cheap karaoke machines, colonial telegraph wires, a tendency to put big statues next to big dams and why some human beings (ethnic minorities) are continuously treated as if they were (threatening) aliens. Like most great art, the work performs a perfectly judged tightrope act, guiding viewers safely across the fine line that, to a purely academic mind, would separate the profound from the ridiculous. While nevertheless keeping us entertained with the sensation that it is continuously tottering on the brink of the latter.

Liu's latest videowork, the near-hourlong, three-channel *Lithium Lake and Island of Polyphony* (2023), deploys the same techniques as its predecessor and debuted last November at Antenna Space, Shanghai. Like Bitcoin Mining, its title links two apparently disparate subject matters: the production and extraction of an atomically unstable alkaline metal (best known for its use in smartphone batteries) and a musical texture made up of two or more equal but independent melodies. During the mid-sixteenth century, in Italy, the Bishop of Verona forbade the form from being performed in convents on the basis that, unlike monophony (which became the dominant form in Western music), it was morally dangerous and encouraged individual vanity among the nuns. Some of these latter, however, continued to write, in secret, polyphonic hymns, and when polyphonic singing is part of Liu's video it is notably performed by Lithuanian folksingers and Mbuti tribeswomen. While Europe is not the primary target of Liu's work (other than as a colonial force, ultimately responsible for many of the problems related to capitalism and globalisation that plague the global majority today), Lithium Lake proposes the persistence of related fears and proscriptions. Not least in an intriguing segment on Project Cybersyn, a decision-support system developed by British cyberneticist Stafford Beer and deployed during the early 1970s by Salvador Allende's shortlived socialist government in Chile to create a managed economy with 'almost instant' feedback (via Telex machine) from factories and service industries. This polyvocal form of socialism was crushed following an America-backed coup and Allende's subsequent death in late 1973.

Lithium Lake also picks up themes that rumbled through *Bitcoin Mining*: the link between the control of water and the exercise of power, the relation, with respect to control, between silence and the lack of it, the more general links be tween ecology and economics, and an obsession with scenes from Steven Spielberg's movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1979), in which humans attempt to communicate, through light and sound, with an alien mothership. The result is a paean to diversity in the face of humanity's blinkered drive down a highway to ecological hell. With song as its metaphor and representation as its driving force, its narrative blends science-fiction movies and novels, a long-extinct hominid 'discovered' in 2002, an incarnation of the Buddha whose compassion led him to become a meal for a tigress, the theories of historic and contemporary economists and physicists, seventeenth-century philosophers, twentieth-century ethnomusicologists and historians, the chief adviser to French president François Mitterrand and a focus on Earth's flora and fauna.

It starts, however, with a homage to Stanley Kubrick's movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968): a bone rotating through the air, presumably symbolising, as in Kubrick's film, the discovery of tools, the transformation of apes into humans and the idea of progress and its accompanying violence. This time, though, the bone has holes drilled into it, suggesting more a flute than a club. In keeping with that, the shot of the bone cuts not to a rotating space station, as it does in 2001, but to a CGI of the Voyager 1 spaceship (launched in 1977 and now the most travelled humanmade object in the universe, hurtling towards nowhere in particular through interstellar space) and the Golden Record attached to it. The Golden Record is what it says it is. Once an alien civilisation has worked out how to play it (instructions on the golden packaging, which also contains a guide to the location of Earth), they will hear greetings in a number of languages, a speech from Kurt Waldheim (back then Secretary General of the un) and a general introduction to the diversity of life on Earth (in both sound and images). A diversity, Liu's video goes on to suggest, that is rapidly becoming extinct.

From there, Liu channels the contemporary Chinese science-fiction writer Cixin Liu, and in particular the plot of his novel *The Three-Body Problem* (2008; translated into English in 2014 and this year adapted as a controversial Netflix series) and the related 'dark forest theory', which asserts that the first thing an alien race will do, on discovering the existence of another, is to destroy the threat. A theory, effectively 'silence is golden' – an ironic riposte to the Golden Record – that was also espoused by physicists such as Stephen Hawking, and which reflects the policy of most earthbound 'superpowers' throughout history. One of the limits of science fiction, perhaps, is that we can only, really, imagine what we know: ourselves. If we look to nature, Liu suggests, while projecting images of tiger moths evading predation by bats, aided by a soft, sound-absorbent fur and an ability to project the false sounds of other elements in the natural world, we might learn a thing or too. Even if the rule of this jungle is that every living thing is afraid of unfamiliar forms. Today, the tactics of the tiger moth are deployed in the creation of light shows designed to make ugly largescale infrastructure – here dams – less unpleasant and more entertaining.

Back in the world of Cixin's novel, that alien race is the Trisolarans, who upon discovering the existence of Earth set about to destroy it. However, on realising that it will take them 400 years to reach their target, by which time they surmise that humans will have evolved their technology beyond that of the Trisolaran's own at the time of launch, they send a computer, the 'Sophon', as an avant-garde tasked with slowing down and confounding any technological development (particularly when it comes to particle physics and energy production), and generally spying on Earth. In Liu's film, the Sophon, which has transformed into a female human, acts as our largely mute guide (words are provided via a narrator) through the rest of the artwork. And what she discovers is that humanity is doing a pretty good job, through the destruction of other species and Earth's atmosphere and the natural environment more generally, of retarding itself. In relation to which, Liu evokes economist W. Brian Arthur's 'lock-in' theory, by which increasing-returns technologies that 'by chance gain an early lead in adoption' corner the market to the extent that no one continues to think about alternatives (in Liu's video this relates to the dominance of carbon and then lithium technologies). Similarly, in Lithium Lake the discovery of whale song is the accidental byproduct of the paranoic silence on Cold War submarines: woven together with ethnomusicologist Joseph Jordania's theory that humans sang in the trees and became silent on the plains, progress is gradually related to silence, alterity to song.

By the halfway point of the video, the Sophon has discovered and started dealing with its own redundancy, smoking and staring at a reproduction of Caspar David Friedrich's classic depiction of the Romantic sublime, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818), touching and feeling the natural world in what, perhaps, are the alien equivalent of its moody teenage years.

Perhaps what's most intriguing about the film is that, like the Golden Record, much of the view of Earth presented by Liu is through representation. A Ming-dynasty scroll painting is used to depict urban demand for managed nature in the form of gardens. Hu Huai's tenth-century painting *Bestiary of Real and Imaginary Animals* is animated to depict the extinction of species. Vintage movie footage of a tiger on the prowl is presented in the context of a traditional theatre setting. In the midst of her musings, the Sophon is applying face paint as if to perform a Chinese Opera version of the mythical Sun Wukong; *Edgar Degas*'s 1875–76 painting *Dans un Café* becomes the trigger for an exploration of the spread of silence and distinctions of class; coins, with the heads of Ferdinand VII, King of Spain (1784–1833), and his predecessor Charles III (1759–88), become a cypher for colonial exploitation. The entirety presenting art as a space of truths and imagination. Towards the end of the film, Liu cites French economist and scholar (and adviser to François Mitterrand) Jacques Attali, who asserted that representation was a power that once only belonged to God. Today, seven billion mobile phones have changed that, Liu suggests. We're subject to an uninterrupted stream of messages, but don't really speak. Although we could.

Mark Rappolt Features 20 May 2024 ArtReview

Liu Chuang: *Lithium Lake and Island of Polyphony*

2023.11.4 - 12.30
Antenna Space

Text by Venus Lau

Liu Chuang's art practice is often guided by objects that cross the meridians of different disciplines. These range from anti-burglary windows in southern China, whose grilles form a traditional fangsheng pattern; to the "white gold" of the battery industry, lithium; to "Bud Blossom Restrainer no. 1," a biochemical agent for curbing the cottony poplar down that floods the air in spring. Throughout his body of research, these objects form a plasma-like network of images spanning aesthetics, history, philosophy, religion, and other realms of knowledge to offer a profile of the materiality of our current technoculture.

In his most recent film, *Lithium Lake and Island of Polyphony* (2023), Liu combines, with gem-like precision, the story of the "sophons" from Liu Cixin's *Three-Body Problem* with audio from the Golden Record sent into space with the 1977 Voyager probes. His narrative unfolds from fieldwork on the margins of globalization and evokes a geological resonance between the lithium boom of the present and the silver economy of centuries past.

Likewise, in the opening of *Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities* (2018), Liu delves into the photo archive of Sidney D. Gamble, a US sociologist who documented Chinese urban life in the 1910s and 1920s, and finds a series of telegraph cables that slice across the sky. Set against the rhythms of string instruments, Liu cuts back and forth between these photographs and contemporary images of power lines seen through the window of a high-speed train. Wires and strings from different times and spaces, and addressing different senses (sight and sound), converge in a geometric resonance. Later in the film, the image of "flow" links the circulation of currency to the water coursing through the cooling system of a bitcoin mining array, and this in turn echoes a clip from the film Solaris: a "flow" spreads to the fictional planet engulfed in a strange watery substance.

Why dwell on such specific portions of individual pieces? To highlight the polyphony of Liu's work. Not of course polyphony in the sense of a multi-threaded narrative like a musical score; after all, he is careful to keep his works from becoming a visual academic treatise. Rather, his work is polyphonic in the way that theories, stories, elements, and objects—the philosophy of science, anthropology, imaginary historical scenes, field recordings of birds, bitcoin mining structures, science fiction narratives, the bestiary of classical painting—vie with, amplify, or offset one another. It's like yeast added to water and flour, which at the right humidity and temperature produces a profusion of bubbles in ex- and inhalation (rising/bursting). The breathing of dough is not like the steady rise and fall of human breath, but like the "oceanic surge of multiple swellings and withdrawals."[1] This is the process by which Liu gives his concepts thickness and complexity—and makes them as immediate to our senses as bread.

The philosopher Gilbert Simondon once described the Mona Lisa's serene smile as "plural": on the canvas, viewers can see only the beginning and the end of a smile, while its "entelechy"—its actuality or realization—is absent. In *Segmented Landscape* (2014), Liu uses the air from deep in our lungs and makes it flutter through the fabric, window grilles, and light, like a ghost revealing its own possible forms. Liu's art practice seems constantly to take on our settled and familiar knowledge, stories, and material world, to actualize their potential noise and silence.

[1] Scott Cutler Shershow, Bread, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016, p. 49.

Liu Chuang, *Lithium Lake and Island of Polyphony* (Video still), 2023, 6k(5760x1080), 5.1, 55'46"

On Liu Chuang's *Lithium Lake and Island of Polyphony*

Text by Stefanie Hessler

Lithium Lake and Island of Polyphony is the first installment of *Uncomputables: On Cybernetics and Alien Intelligences*, an online program of films and accompanying texts convened by Agnieszka Kurant as the thirteenth cycle of Artist Cinemas, a long-term, online series of film programs curated by artists for e-flux Film.

Feminist and decolonial scholars and activists have challenged the emphasis of traditional evolutionary theories on competition over limited resources—the environment, food, shelter, mates, or knowledge—as the primary driving force for change. Biologist Lynn Margulis shows the central role of symbiosis both on a cellular level as well as in holobiont communities of organisms who mutually benefit one another, and Standing Rock Sioux activist and historian Vine Deloria Jr. highlights Indigenous concepts of interconnectedness against a background of Eurocentrism that devalues such knowledge systems, to name a few. Today's competition for resources, including for minerals used in green technologies on this heating planet and perhaps soon also others, relies on evolutionary narratives steeped in hegemony and opposition; but for now this planet is all we have, and evolution is, indeed, antiteleological.

Weaving a complex web of references via sound, science fiction, and speculative research, Liu Chuang's video *Lithium Lake and Island of Polyphony* (2023) proposes alternative views of our human and nonhuman pasts to imagine futures based in mutualism and cooperation, guided by diverse, co-existing epistemologies. Just under one-hour in length, Liu's moving-image tale begins with a bone floating in space, referencing the famous "Dawn of Man" opening of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). In this classic scene, a primitive tool-turned-weapon helps early hominids to a technological leap and evolutionary advantage perpetuated by violence in the traditional Darwinian sense. (To be sure, new readings of Darwin, for instance by feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz, suggest that competition has been lopsidedly overemphasized to the detriment of his views on process, fluidity, and mutualism). On second view, what appears to be a bone in Liu's video turns out to be a flute. Anything, Liu seems to suggest, holds the potential to be used as a weapon or a musical instrument.

We are currently in the midst of a second space race, with renewed interest in lunar and Mars exploration, space tourism, and a scramble for resources and human settlements propelled by the industrialized Global North, who is simultaneously driving life on Earth towards extinction. If holders of a Eurocentrist evolutionary view consider violence the presumed modus operandi for survival on this planet, it is likely that their current extraterrestrial ambitions will perpetuate this stance on and towards other planets as well. As with anything we build, it will contain the same prejudices of the builder. But perhaps it can also become Liu's metaphorical flute.

Presumed violence is indeed one of the explanations for the Fermi paradox, which asks: If the likelihood for life in the vastness of the universe should be high, why have we not found any signs of life beyond Earth? One possible answer suggests that we stay quiet, silently sneaking around on our planet so as to not be discovered by who we project will unquestionably be adversaries. But many signals have left Earth, both radio transmissions and the Golden Record phonographs, which were sent to space with NASA's Voyager 1 and 2 missions in 1977. Containing a selection of music and sounds from here, including greetings in 55 languages, the latter are audible against the opening scene in Liu's video.

Inspired by novelist Liu Cixin's *Remembrance of Earth's Past trilogy* (2008–2010), which is about to become a Netflix series under the first book's title, 3 Body Problem, Liu Chuang explores the Fermi paradox, or what the books call "dark forest theory." The premise of the novel is a pre-emptive strike against Earth by the alien civilization Trisolaris once it detects our signals, in the form of a proton-sized super computer called Sophon who is able to slow down our technological development. In doing so, the Trisolarans hope to weaken humanity's defenses for when they arrive on Earth to colonize it and escape their own planet, which is so arid it requires people to self-dehydrate to save scarce resources of water. As with all of Liu Chuang's citations, the symbolism is intentional. In the video, Sophon is reimagined as an alien anthropologist come to Earth to observe and marvel at this moment of late capitalism, in which we destroy its abundant habitats as we look to settle on other planets. Liu draws connections to the 1500s, when Spain's extraction of silver from the Potosí mines in present-day Bolivia funded its empire, and circles back to today, when the same region uses huge amounts of water to extract lithium, now journeying across the Pacific largely for battery production.

Path dependence is what economist Brian Arthur calls the lock-in that makes it harder to choose a different course once one has invested significantly in an economic system or a technology, even though it would be advantageous to do so. And yet, while we seem locked into our carbon dependency, Liu's flute suggests that we may still veer from this path. Through the metaphor of polyphonic music, he weaves together these numerous strands while looking towards plural possible futures. Among his references is evolutionary musicologist Joseph Jordania, who suggests that music did not evolve from monophony to more complex compositions, a prime example for which in Western music are Bach's fugues. Conversely, Jordania speculates that singing started when humans lived in trees, and that sound was abundant before we descended to the ground and began to hide in literal and metaphorical dark forests.

Liu layers footage of bats, moths, and other animals who use their sonic sense to navigate the world and pairs it with the history of the detection of whale songs through US Navy underwater listening devices during the arms race of the Cold War. While the paranoid surveillance of that era is a potent metaphor for the dark forest theory as it has played out on Earth time and again, Liu also suggests that if we listen carefully, beauty persists—for now. Cetaceans and their songs do not know of geopolitical borders and the extension of land-based territorial conflicts in the oceans' fluidity, or in space. But if we know of the importance of collaboration and symbiosis today, on a cellular level as well as through deep evolutionary time, we need to be careful not to miss the effects of ongoing asymmetries on Earth, or exclusively rely on biological explanations and metaphors. Liu offers the Buddhist teaching of Siddhartha Gautama who, upon encountering a starving tiger and her cubs, gave his own body as food in an act of altruism and compassion. The path of selflessness may be one of numerous courses emerging from Liu's multilayered composition. To overcome technological path dependency and other deadlocks, or societal monoliths (forgive the Odyssey pun), Liu's polyphonic song is a catchy tune for mutualism over competition, and symbiosis over violence, for collective survival on this and possibly other planets.

Review | Liu Chuang: *Lithium Lake and Island of Polyphony*

Text by Mi You

2023.12.24

In Lithium Lake and Island of Polyphony, Liu Chuang borrows the figure of Sophon, from Liu Cixin's sci-fi trilogy The Three-Body Problem, to envision an alien anthropologist's journey to Earth.

> "The world's largest lithium lake – Uyuni Salt Flat – is less than 50 kilometers from the Potosí silver mines. In planetary history there have been two major intercontinental transfers of a single metal, of which the first was silver, the second lithium. They shared the same route: from the Atacama Desert in the Andes of South America, across the Pacific Ocean, to the East of Asia. This journey lasted five hundred years."
>
> (From the film's voiceover)

Like jataka tales that retell the past lives of Gautama Buddha, represented in a myriad of diamond-shaped wall paintings in a Buddhist grotto seen in the film, and the polyphonic chorus that survive from time immemorial, the film harmonizes speculative fiction, material history of multiple globalizations, and anthropological research into a sensual and intellectual contrapuntal experience. Inspired by the fascinating evolutionary musicological "anti-origin story" of the entangled trajectories of human and non-human evolution, the artist conducted atmospheric research based on found archives and images, analyzed the sonic topography of the areas covered by trade routesa, informing his speculative account of the relationship between singing and the origins of technology.

Central to Sophon's world and the speculation of this work is the dark forest theory, which stipulates that based on the assumption that any other intelligent being is a hostile predator, any intelligent being must remain silent in order not to be detected. This theory is extrapolated from the intergalactic universe to the microecosystem. The Trisolars and earthlings entering a standstill in a Cold War scenario writ large, Stephen Hawking warning scientists not to make contact with space aliens, and crypsis in animals and plants all but iterate one truth – silence is gold. Why is human the only singing species lives on land?

Music origins are human origins. Whereas cognitive and neural theories of music are based strongly on structural principles derived from Western tonal music, the musical anthropologist Joseph Jordania puts forward an evolutionary history and theory of musical structures. Considering that the Toumaï, one of the human family's early ancestors once lived in trees, Jordania proposes that singing first evolved among lifeforms living in the forest. Early human survival against their predators was aided by attaining a collective state known as the "battle trance" through music and dance, through which the participants entered into an altered state of consciousness, thereby banding together, immune to fear.

Yet silence befalls the spiritual life of mankind, betraying processes of geological and geo-ontological.

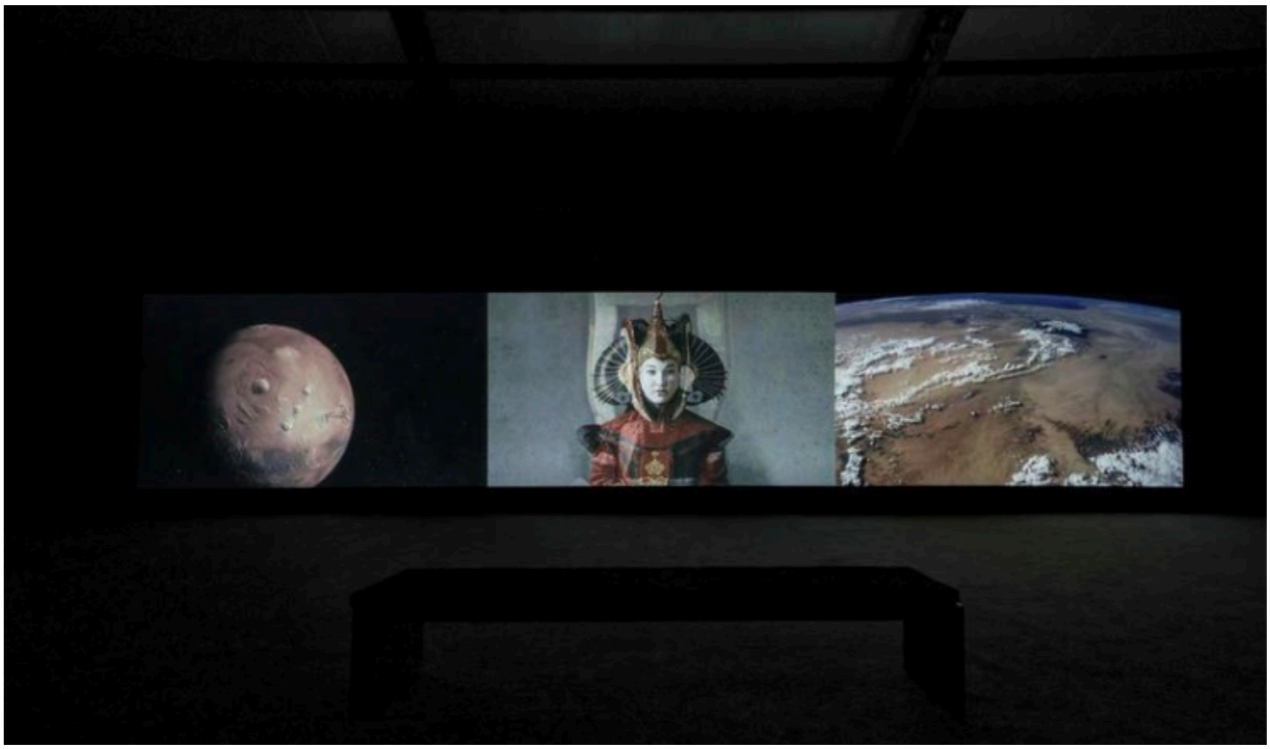
The deep reverberation of singing bears witnesses to the dialectics of silence. Religion spreads in the spaces traversed by travelers. In silence people communicate with their gods. The clamor of modern life renders everything in a deafening silence. The grumbling sound of infrastructures powering modern life, is in itself perhaps no less anti-natural than the anti-modern whale, who as the only mammal that went back to the sea, graces human's encounter with any potential space aliens with its slow, rhythmic song in the cosmos. The desire for the wild is spatialized in the aesthetically pleasing, yet silencing spaces of literati gardens in Ming dynasty China. Transscalar movements of metallurgical elements from the mine to the electronic products, from fertilizers seeped in earth to the very pores of human faces effectuate molecular level accelerations and social estrangement.

In the style of Sophon's counter-prophecy, the film ends with an ode to polyphony, which as a form of vocal music is found in all archaic history, whereas no case can be made that vocal polyphony evolves from monophony. The decline of this tradition, the original ability to sing, marks an irrevocable loss of intelligence that testifies to the multidimensionality of time.

Furthering his thinking on multi-dimensional intelligence in the previous works *Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities* (2018) and *Can Sound Be Currency?* (2021), the topographical research into Asian traditional polyphonic music has led the artist to question land-based spatial politics. Since modern times, such land-bound thinking has invaded — and continues to invade — oceans and outer spaces of various dimensions, rendering multi-species intelligence within these spaces ever more vulnerable. The artist considers the ancient wisdom of polyphonic singing to be of great significance to current technological lockins, from carbon to lithium.

GeoSemantics / *Mining Guano and Bitcoin on Multiple Screens: A Geontocritical Reading of Dinh Q. Lê and Liu Chuang's Video Installations* / Kiu-wai Chu

September 25, 2023 Kiu-wai Chu



Liu Chuang, *Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities* (2018).

The Anthropocene discourse in the past decade has not only shaped scientific debates but transformed artistic expressions and practices globally, as evident in the "geological turn" in the global art scene that highlights geological subjects in the extractivist zones all around the world. Recent multi-channel video installations, such as Vietnamese American artist Dinh Q. Lê's *The Colony* (2016), Shanghai-based Chinese visual artist Liu Chuang's *Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities* (2018), and *Lithium Lake and the Lonely Island of Polyphony* (2020) depict histories and processes of global commodities created by geological extraction-motivated capitalism—from the Peruvian guanos, bitcoins powered by cheap hydroelectric power in Southwest China, to lithium extracted from Chinese seawater in the Northwest.

Building on recent theorizations of geomorphic aesthetics, geontologies in media art, and environmental justice/geo-justice1 , this essay argues we need to develop geontocritical readings of art2—especially those that that use ecocritical frameworks to examine art objects and practices and that focus on the geological by assessing the complex intersections and entanglements among human and nonhuman actors as geological forces that act on multiple spatial and temporal scales in the Anthropocene epoch.

Geontocritical readings of art do two things. It cultivates a new sensibility towards a world of entangled existences, by recognizing and restoring the agential capacities of nonhuman geological beings broadly defined (water soil, guano, bitcoins) that shape our world. Secondly, it advocates for promoting geo-justice for the human and nonhuman, via creative means of artistic expressions and practices. In brief, it is what T.J. Demos describes as "justice-based environmental arts, or aesthetic practices exploring entangled or intersectionalist socioecologies" that "forcefully materialized formations of politico-ecological aesthetics and practice"3. The Anthropocene enables us to see the vulnerability of both human and nonhuman beings caused by the many environmental crises and injustices, as a result of settler colonialism and extractivist capitalism that took place over the past centuries. From the guano miners in Peru in the 19th century, to the bitcoin miners and indigenous populations that undergone forced displacements in contemporary China, the precarious human subjects have all been reduced to what can be fittingly termed "huminerals" (人礦 rén kuàng), a neologism that emerged in China in early 2023, to refer to people who are "relentlessly exploited by society until they are eventually discarded on the refuse pile."4 It highlights the fact that humans are being rendered into mute resources. One of geontocritical art's functions would be to restore the subjectivities and voices of the "huminerals", and more broadly the geological beings (both humans and nonhumans), and speak on behalf of them via artistic languages and expressions, which could, to a certain extent, be seen in Dinh Q. Le and Liu Chuang's recent video art installations.

Lê's *The Colony* showcases the Chincha Islands' guano mining and explores the intricate histories of Peruvian guano extractions. For centuries, the large population of Peruvian boobies in the region have produced abundant guano on its soil, which was made an excellent fertilizer for foreign markets. In the mid-19th century, the demand for guano peaked in the West, resulting in over a hundred islands being colonized and claimed, and a generation of Asian guano miners were forced into harsh labour. The guano industry collapsed in the mid-20th century, but experienced a resurgence in recent years due to the growing environmental consciousness, transforming guano from a depleted resource of colonial capitalism to an eco-friendly fertilizer. Focusing on a different form of extraction, Liu's *Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities* (hereafter Bitcoin Mining), exhibited in Shanghai in his 2019 solo show "Liu Chuang: Earthbound Cosmology" reflects on the cryptocurrency mining powered by low-cost hydroelectricity in contemporary Southwest China. It traces the exchanges between energy and digital information, in the abandoned hydroelectric plants that are found in the remote mountainous areas. In 2020, Liu continues his exploration of capitalist extractivism and nature engineering in Lithium Lake and the Lonely Island of Polyphony (hereafter Lithium Lake), a work commissioned by the Taipei Biennial 2020 co-curated by Bruno Latour, Martin Guinard and Eva Lin. The work focuses on lithium extractions from the salt lakes in Northwestern China and their socio-environmental impacts on indigenous communities and particularly their polyphonic music traditions.

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Lê established his reputation as an artist for his photographic series that made use of the grass mat weaving techniques he learned from his childhood in Vietnam. Adopting the principles of handcutting and weaving of photographs to create an image of new meanings and differing perspectives, Lê extends this practice to moving images in *The Colony,* to offer a more interactive and immersive experience that also provides multiple perspectives. Exhibited at the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham in 2016, viewers were surrounded by multiple screens hung on the three sides of the wall, and two projected on the ground. They were required to shift their attention back and forth among the screens, in order to make sense of the cross-temporal, multi-spatial geological subjects the artist presented us—the guano, the landscapes of the Chincha Islands, the shabby interiors of the abandoned workers' dormitory, the ghostly miners in the 19th century (depicted

in animated figures), the flock of seabirds that have inhabited the islands for centuries, and present miners at work. These images offer us glimpses of the fragments of the entangled histories of the Chincha Islands, with shots that are mostly taken by drone cameras that survey the trenches and infrastructure, as well as the concrete edifices and abandoned dormitories of the once thriving guano industry.

The three channels in *The Colony* are structured as three chapters on Lê's subject on guano mining on the Chincha Islands from the past to the present. The first chapter shows us aerial long shots of the flock of Peruvian boobies flying over the vast and empty islands . On the second screen, the drone cameras slowly descend into the decrepit workers' dormitory building, and exploratively sweep over the haunting corridors and vacant rooms full of graffiti writing and pinned-up pornographic photos. In contrast to the natural landscapes in the first channel and the ruinous building interiors in the second, the last screen highlights the human presence and presents us scenes of present-day guano mining activities and the workers on the islands . Although these workers are no longer confined to the islands nor made to endure the same degree of hardship and exploitation compared to the miners centuries ago, they continue to be "covered in guano dust, their uniform appearance making it seem like an older time somehow" (Butt and Lê, 27), as if the working conditions and labour-intensive extraction practices have not changed over all these years. *The Colony* compresses the three channels into a geological space-time where the present miners at work coexist with the ghosts of the Asian miners of the 1850s, and the guano-covered natural landscapes like the way they were before being discovered and exploited by humans.

The efficacy of geological art is also determined by how the museum and gallery spaces exhibit their installation works. The size of the space, the walls, the lighting, and the exact order and dispositions of screens in the room all affect our experience of the work, as well as how the narratives of the subjects are to be perceived and understood. Liu's Bitcoin Mining is a visual essay that takes us on a speculative journey through the history of technology, infrastructure, ecology, and finance, intertwining it with ethnographic research and intertextual references to global sci-fi film imaginaries. The video begins with black and white photos of Chinese cities in the late Qing dynasty where we see telephone wires hanging over classic Chinese architecture, a sign of the country's early modernity with its technological advancement. The wires in the historical photos connect the early modern urban past to the rural present, where we see drone footage of the optic cables above the river valleys and hydroelectric dams in the rural areas. From there, the installation's three screens are positioned adjacently, inviting viewers to immerse in a multidimensional visual experience that interweaves images of contrasting yet interconnecting subjects of the natural sublime: aerial shots of cables suspended over the expansive mountain ranges; drone footage capturing the deafening roars of dams and waterfalls; and the tranquil static close-ups of insects caught in spiderwebs. Eventually, the cameras all shift their focus towards a solitary bitcoin factory and the simulated interior of computers and fans, as if we have been taken into a technological abyss that glows in an eerie green light (Figures 9 to 13). Not only did the multi-screen video installation simulated a geological space-time that transformed the exhibition space temporarily into mountain ranges, dams and waterfalls, and the interior of a bitcoin mine in operation, it offers viewers an immersive experience of the complex connections among these seemingly unrelated spaces and entangled narratives that center on the geological beings.

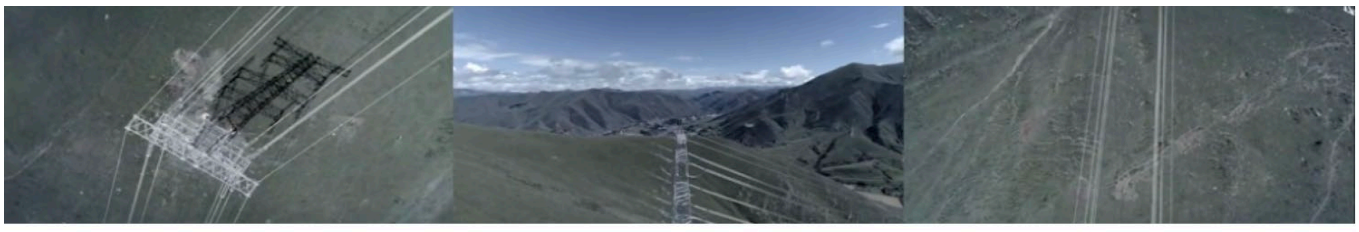

Figure 9. Liu Chuang, *Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities* (2018).

Figure 10. Liu Chuang, *Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities* (2018).

Figure 11. Liu Chuang, *Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities* (2018).

Figure 12. Liu Chuang, *Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities* (2018).

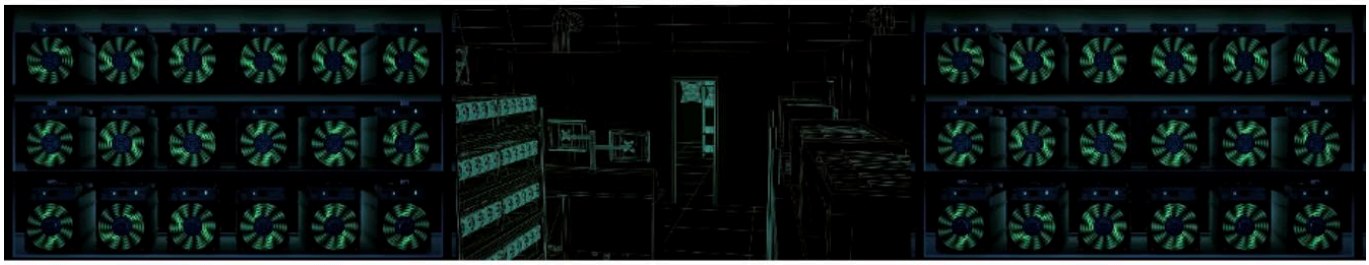

Figure 13. Liu Chuang, *Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities* (2018).

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Liu's Lithium Lake was exhibited in Taipei Biennial 2020, a major international art exhibition co-curated byBruno Latour and Martin Guinard during the pandemic in 2020, which was titled after Latour's short essay "We Don't Seem to Live on the Same Planet—A Fictional Planetarium." Despite its central focus on interspecies entanglements, planetary cosmologies, and decolonial agenda, the large-scale exhibition and its diverse range of works have been criticized for "predominantly reflect[ing] the perspectives of those with power and privilege, expressing a stifled, Western-centric perspective."5 It raises the question of how art could enable us to really see from the perspectives, and listen to the voices, of the geological subjects?

In recent years, drones (unmanned aerial vehicles, UAVs) have been frequently deployed in the production of films and video art works. Both Lê and Liu's video works have relied heavily on drone technologies to

effectively depict the vast landscapes and seascapes from aerial perspectives. However, drone perspectives have two fundamental shortcomings. First of all, it distances us from the ground. The aerial shots in Liu's Bitcoin Mining and Lithium Lake keep a safe distance from its geological subjects. We do not see human presence, neither the bitcoin miners nor the indigenous inhabitants, in any of the drone shots. Uprooted from the ground, the images obstruct us from observing the actual impacts and damage on both the human beings and the nonhuman environments, and are thus hardly sufficient in providing the perspectives that are essential for bringing geo-justice to the local communities and individuals. Second, the drone perspective is one full of conflicts and ambivalence. They have never been a neutral or innocent tool being frequently used for surveillance and military purposes, serving the interests of authorities and corporations. Lê calls it "an aggressor, a kind of alien of the future, but at the same time it is utterly a machine we live with today… [It] has the visual power to suggest a form of knowledge that invades."6 It is also "the eye of God looking down."7The Colony ends with a shot showing a drone returning to the hands of the film crew, which critic Zoe Butt interprets as an expression of "giv[ing] humanity back the control"8 However, we cannot help but question whose "humanity" is signified here in this context. To avoid replicating the Big Brother or the privileged classes' perspectives, Schnepf uses the case of Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in South Dakota to argue that drones can also be deployed as a tool of sousveillance, if it could be used to observe and monitor the authorities, and "disrupts the power relationship of surveillance."9 The drones could be a different tool if the indigenous, and the geological others were to involve in using it, to co-create new perspectives and new forms of relational experience.

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Towards the end of Bitcoin Mining, we see a montage of black-and-white photos of ethnic minorities women in China morphing into images of Queen Amidala from the *Star Wars* franchise (played by Natalie Portman), whose costumes are partially inspired by the traditional ethnic female clothing. (Figs 15 & 16) Liu's speculative meditation suggests that, under the forces of urbanization and modernization in contemporary China, the real and the traditional are gradually replaced by the virtual and the fictional. The indigenous culture and history are now appropriated, replaced, and remembered only through Hollywoodized sci-fi reimaginations.

To restore the voices of the disappearing indigenous, both Bitcoin Mining and Lithium Lake have each included a scene of present indigenous women singing traditional folk songs in their own dialects. The works have also featured a female narration in the Muya dialect (木雅語) spoken by the ethnic minorities in Tibet and Sichuan, the population whose homelands are most affected by extractivist capitalist activities in recent years. The narration walks us through China's technological progress over the century. It explains the concepts of the Zomia with reference to Willem van Schendel and James Scott's theorization and writing; before proceeding to the principles of cryptocurrency, and the tales of the militarized legacy of cloud-based computing. In Lithium Lake, the same narrator explains to us a series of abstract ideas and the history of China's development of science, hydrological projects, the technical principles of lithium extractions, and the idea of polyphonic music. Thought-provoking as the narrations may be, we cannot help but wonder if this is an ecofeminist voice of the subaltern that is critically resisting extractivist capitalism and petromasculinity, or is it merely the art creators putting complex concepts and technical language into the mouth of the indigenous female narrator, and feeding her with perspectives that further reassert the muteness of the ethnic communities? It reminds us of Spivak's warning against "constructing the Other simply as an object of knowledge, leaving out the real Others because of the ones who are getting access into public places due to these waves of benevolence and so on".10 Along similar lines, we are also reminded by Amitav Ghosh that "the act of speaking is the act of silencing."11 The act of us speaking, is an act of silencing them. Instead of

faking a geontocritical accent, is it possible to find a real voice of the geological Others that does not come from the positions of the intellectuals and the elites? It is when we begin to ask these questions persistently that we could think geontocritically with art.

Figure 15. Liu Chuang, *Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities* (2018).

Figure 16. Liu Chuang, *Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities* (2018).

Figure 17. Liu Chuang, *Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities* (2018).

Endnotes

1. Yusoff 2013, 2015; Povinelli 2017; Demos 2020.

2. "Geonto-" as taken from Povinelli's geontologies that "intensif[ies] the contrasting components of nonlife (geo) and being (ontology) currently in play in the late liberal governance of difference and markets." (Povellini, 2016:5).

3. Demos, 20-21.

4. Alexander Boyd, "WORD OF THE WEEK: HUMINERALS", China Digital Times. Feb 13, 2023:https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2023/02/word-of-the-week-huminerals-%E4%BA%BA%E7%9F%BF-ren-kuang/.

5. Leora Joy Jones, "Taipei Biennial 2020: You and I Don't Live on the Same Planet – Review", 4A Papers, Issue 10. https://4a.com.au/articles/review-taipei-biennial-2020

6. Butt and Lê, 26.

7. Butt and Lê, 27.

8. Butt and Lê, 29.

9. Schnepf, 748.

10. Spivak, 63.

11. Taken from Amitav Ghosh's lecture "Can the Non-Human Speak? Other Beings in Myth, Literature and Ethnography", co-organized by the National Humanities Center and North Carolina State University, James B. Hunt Jr. Library Auditorium, April 4, 2023.

this is tomorrow
Contemporary Art Magazine

Nida Art Colony, E. A. Jonušo g. 3, 93127, Lithuania

Liu Chuang: Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities

Title : Photographer Ansis Starks.
Website : http://nidacolony.lt/en/1573-bitcoin-mining-and-field-recordings-of-ethnic-minorities-by-liu-chuang-at-nac

Liu Chuang: *Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities*

2020.7.17 – 8.16
Nida Art Colony

Review by Tom Mouna

Some Baltic mythology to start. Neringa is a young giant from Lithuanian folklore, pure of heart and altruistic. One day Neringa was playing on the Baltic Sea coast when a storm hit, and the giantess piled up sand to protect the land—an area now known as the Curonian Spit. This sand-dune spit is divided in half between Lithuania and Russia, by way of Kaliningrad. At one of the widest points sits the Lithuanian town of Nida and, while the entire strip of land has a notable and twisting history, it's Nida that stands out as one of the most interesting locales.

During the 20th century, the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany jostled for control over Lithuania. Nevertheless, Nida has remained a constant draw for writers, artists, musicians and actors, the most famous being 'Death in Venice' (1912) author Thomas Mann, who kept a summer house on the bayfront. One of the first sites for a colony of artists in Nida was the 'hotel of arts', sponsored by Hermann Blode or the "king of the Curonian Spit" as many artists referred to him, and now an intimate museum of photographs of celebrated cultural figures who have spent time in Nida, including Max Pechstein and Leni Riefenstahl. Jump forward a hundred years or so and the Nida Art Colony, a subdivision of the Vilnius Academy of Arts, continues the tradition of drawing artists to the town.

It's at their onsite exhibition space that Liu Chuang's film 'Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities' (2018) was shown. The three-channel video begins with the narrator, speaking in a minority ethnic dialect, describing a case of repetitive strain injury related to Qing Dynasty telegraph systems and ends with footage and discussion of Steven Spielberg's 'Close Encounters of the Third Kind' (1978) and Andrei Tarkovsky's 'Solaris' (1971). Somewhat wedged in the middle is the work's most poignant consideration, on Bitcoin mining in China and the Zomia people.

Chuang makes use of James C. Scott's description of the Zomia from the latter's text, 'The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia' (2009), in which Scott describes the Zomia as a multi-ethnic group of around 100 million who occupy lands at elevations above 300 metres in parts of Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar and four provinces of China. Despite their multifarious differences, what these groups share is a history of escape and refuge, of eluding interpellation and avoiding hegemony as manifested through slavery, language and tax. Chuang demonstrates that Bitcoin mines—where computers essentially provide CPU in return for Bitcoins—in China now mostly occupy Zomia land, but also suggests that the decentralized, blockchain-based model of Bitcoin aligns with the Zomia's relationship to outside nation-states. For example, Chuang's narrator in 'Bitcoin Mining's' describes "a yearning for a communal stigmergy" as a reason for the rise of Bitcoin. One specific way we can relate this to the Zomia is via what Scott calls their "escape agriculture", which entails planting root crops rather than wet rice to make it more difficult for states to destroy plus regular relocation to new crop areas after burning the previously exploited land. This "communal stigmergy" is also an apt description of the way blockchain technology—a growing list of distributed ledgers that can immutably record transactions between two or more parties—functions, whereby a communal network of computers works together to record the transactions that will affect future functions of the blockchain, without the need for a centralized authority.

And yet, the Zomia and Bitcoin aren't necessarily such a close fit. Bitcoin mining in China operates at the state's pleasure. A miner migrating across the country for cheaper electricity is not comparable to the Zomia escaping state power. Still though, this foundational supposition of Chuang's video-essay is an intriguing one, and while occasionally ideas are stretched in questionable directions, as with the sudden mention of an all-in-one entertainment system marketed to the Zomia people, these feel less like unsuccessful tangents than interesting ancillary thoughts that probe in new directions.

'Bitcoin Mining' hints at how Bitcoin and the blockchain have come to be seen as not only forms of financial arrangement, but models for society. It's no surprise that some of the initial interest in Bitcoin arose due to a perception of an anarchic, anti-authoritarian spirit underlying the code, and interest in the Zomia has similarly arisen from a desire to uncover anarchic, stateless forms of living.

Chuang's video uncovers narratives and mythologies that can help to reframe our understanding of Bitcoin and the blockchain. While in the past we looked to myths like Neringa's, now we often look outside of

society to the natural world for explanation—nature in its purest sense as well also as more "natural" ways of living as represented by the Zomia. The relationship of the human to the natural is at stake; in 'Bitcoin Mining', Chuang's narrator quotes Maxim Gorky's description of hydroelectric power stations "as able to tame wild rivers", while early settlers in Nida had to plant trees to stop the encroaching sand dunes. By analogizing the Zomia and Bitcoin, Chuang seeks explanation in similar places.

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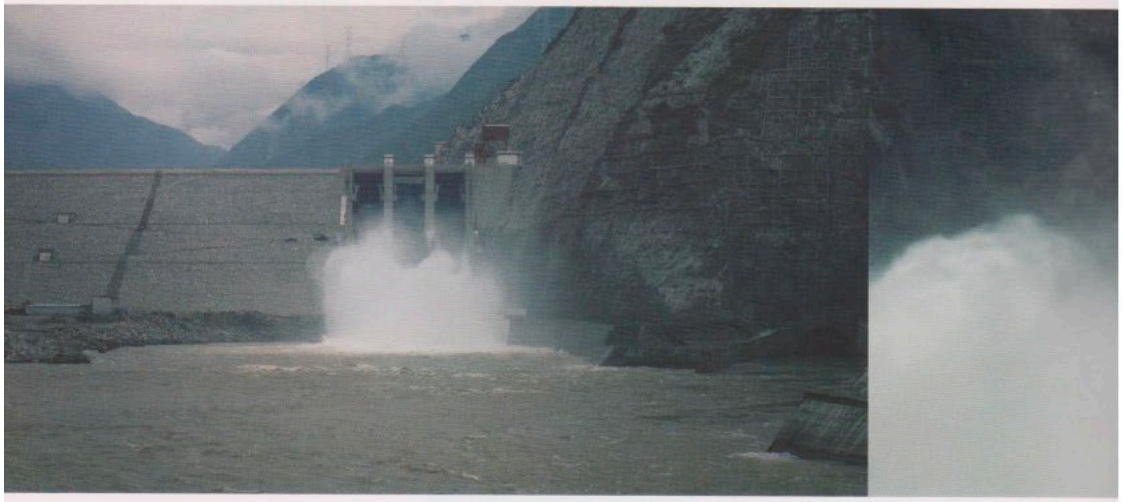
Liu Chuang

Yang Fudong Praneet Soi Michael Rakowitz

Liu Chuang

by Mark Rappolt

Cannibalise, Colonise



Cannibalised cultures and colonised territories

Mark Rappolt Features 23 September 2019 ArtReview Asia

Liu Chuang, *Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities* (still), 2018. Courtesy the artist

One of the ways in which we assimilate the new is to insist that it is, in fact, old. Nothing comes from nothing, as the old saying goes. That certainly seems to be the case in Shanghai-based Liu Chuang's three-channel videowork *Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities* (2018). The work takes the form of found and filmed footage with a voiceover narrative that traces material and immaterial lines of power that have been deployed in China, over the past few thousand years, to conquer people and territories, and to generate material and immaterial profit. The narrative moves from economic inflation triggered in eastern China during the fifth century BCE, when King Jing of Zhou reduced the amount of copper in coins in order to fuel an obsession with creating enormous bronze chime bells, to nomadic bitcoin miners, operating outside any centralised banking system, herding their rigs across present-day China in harmony with the seasonal and regional variations in energy production.

Like many of the works of speculative research that are so in vogue in the artworld right now, *Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities* has the character of both a shaggy-dog story and an academic thesis, without quite being either. It draws disparate histories and threads of thought together and weaves them into something that we're invited to consider as a length of rope. The inevitable product, you could say, of a culture that creates sentences out of hyperlinks, it cites anthropologists and political scientists alongside sci-fi movies and popular-music references. And at 40-minutes long, it's not aimed at audiences with a short attention span. But isn't that the case with so many attempts to explain the complexities of the world today?

> With the character of both shaggy-dog story and an academic thesis, threads of thought are drawn together into something that we're invited to consider as a length of rope

The film begins with a series of black-and-white photographs of traditional Chinese architecture, instantly recognisable by a focus on the fly-leaf roofs that evolved during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE). Gradually telephone wires start to appear: first as faint traces in the background of the photographs, then everywhere, behind people protesting, parading or simply going about their business on city streets. Modernity has arrived in China and everything flows from there. Some people notice, some people do not.

The narrative moves on to the first instances of repetitive strain injury (RSI) being discovered in Chinese telegraph operators, at the end of the nineteenth century. Operators would move from using one digit to another as each successively succumbed to the syndrome, until the operators could operate no more. Modernity is inhuman.

Fast-forward a little over a century to Apple's acquisition of FingerWorks in 2005. The latter company had developed touchpads and touchscreens designed to help people with RSI use computers. To the soundtrack of a single, stringed instrument (sounding like a pipa lute), the first of the video's three channels (read left-to-right) features a hand, poised at a train window, that appears to be plucking the passing telephone lines in rhythm to the music; on the third, a hand robotically swipes left on a track pad; which causes more black-and-white images of telephone lines to pass by on the central screen. Human digits are no longer required to fuel the digital revolution.

Three years later the iPhone was born, paving the way for the age of the smartphone and constant connectivity. A tool designed to provide access for those to whom access was restricted becomes a tool through which governments and businesses access audiences they couldn't previously reach. Cannibalise and colonise is the motto of today.

Skip to the present and images and video of workers larking on overhead fibreoptic cables (which have spread from urban to rural areas), recording themselves for China's Kuaishou photosharing app. "Today, everyone is a user," the voiceover says as the imagery switches to a crowded subway carriage in which every passenger is on their phone, service providers are constantly "cashing in on users' time, intelligence and data", and we've all been "Uberised" to "generate profits for one app or another every second of the day". Distinctions between online and offline have been erased. Telephone lines are no longer required. There's nowhere to hide.

When *Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities* was first screened, as part of Cosmopolis #1.5: Enlarged Intelligence, a collaboration between the Centre Pompidou in Paris and the Mao Jihong Arts Foundation in Chengdu at the end of 2018 (which travels to Paris in October; the work has subsequently been shown, earlier this year, as part of Liu Chuang's solo exhibition Earthbound Cosmology at Qiao Space in Shanghai, and the group exhibition China Landscape: Selections from the Taikang Collection in Beijing), the Chinese telecommunications company Huawei was starting to take centre stage in the ongoing Sino-US trade war, having been accused of facilitating international espionage.

Jump back to the advent of hydroelectric power (HEP) and the relationship between controlling the land, controlling energy and controlling a people. Stalin apparently said that it was wasteful to let water run into the sea. The Hòa Bình Dam in Vietnam (the country's largest hydroelectric dam and the second largest in Southeast Asia) opened in 1994, supported by funds from Russia. It's said that Ho Chi Minh signalled his intention to build it after struggling to cross the Red River during the Vietnam War. An 18m-high, 400-tonne statue of the founder of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam now faces the structure he never lived to see. A sculpture transforms a founding fiction into a fact.

Meanwhile, in most parts of Asia, ethnic minorities lose land to dams in a way that's disproportionate to their share of national populations. Adivasis (tribal people) in India account for eight percent of the population but are estimated to make up 40 to 50 percent of those displaced by the country's development projects. Globally, over ten million people per year are displaced by World Bank development projects (dams and infrastructure projects). In China, resettled minorities tend to be assimilated into the Han Chinese majority, and over time to lose their cultural identities. Dams allow governments to control and police remote populations.

> Ironically, a decentralised currency is generated thanks to a centralised power system...
> It's unclear who is cannibalising and colonising whom

At this stage Liu Chuang introduces the geographical term 'Zomia' to the narrative, a word that was coined in 2002 by the historian Willem van Schendel to designate a vast area of Southeast and East Asia (spanning parts of Myanmar, Indochina, Thailand and southwest China) characterised by highland population centres that were largely beyond the control of national governments. In *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Southeast Asia* (2009), the American political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott asserts that such societies were'barbaric by design'; stigmatised by their remoteness, they evolved to resist state control. Zomia is also a zone in which a high proportion of bitcoin mines are located. Often operated by remote control, the mines are there because of the large number of hydroelectric power plants (many semi-abandoned because of the high cost of maintaining them), which give the miners access to the large amounts of energy they require, because the noise from the power plants conceals the noise from the mining rigs' fans (as the difficulty of mining bitcoins has increased, mines have become louder than train stations), and because the locations are remote and people are unlikely to wander by. Ironically, a decentralised currency is generated thanks to a centralised power system, which in turn follows previous networks of railway and telephone infrastructures. This symbiotic relationship, Liu's narrative postulates, mirrors that between minority communities and ancient empires. It's unclear who is cannibalising and colonising whom. Moreover, many miners operate like traditional bee farmers, moving their rigs around according to the seasons: during the droughts in Sichuan they move them to the wind farms of Xinjiang (one of seven areas in China designated for wind farming – China has the largest installed capacity of any nation); in the spring they shift to the coal-fired power stations of Inner Mongolia; from there its back to Sichuan (the province generates 20 percent of the nation's hydropower). Thus, bitcoin miners have reclaimed a transhumance lifestyle once associated with the highland peoples of Zomia. A twenty-first-century barbarism. Nothing is new.

It's here, in one of the bigger jumps in the narrative, that King Jing and his chime bells pop up. Liu Chuang's narrator describes how the largest of the bells was named Dalin and was supposed to provide heavy bass

notes, Liu Chuang argues, are the soundtrack of modernity, from atomic bombs to the rumble of cities, infrastructure and HEP stations. We've invented noise-cancelling technologies to make these networks less visible. And, in China's highlands, similar technologies are employed in multimedia shanzai entertainment systems, with flashing disco lights (originally added, in an echo of the FingerWorks narrative, to help deaf people engage with the music), introduced during the early twenty-first century. Such entertainment systems, the narrative suggests were produced in factories across Zomia and marketed in an effort to 'digitise' the nervous systems of minority outsiders, introducing them to every form of digital media, entertainment and connection: television, radio, DVD, EVD, karaoke, Bluetooth, WiFi and more. What was happening, the video suggests, was akin to earthlings trying to communicate with aliens via echoes of sound and light in Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1979). As minority ethnic groups were introduced to the latest musical fads via digitised media, their own voices, in the form of traditional songs, were introduced into museums and archives in the form of field recordings made by anthropologists, which, according to the late American folksinger Pete Seeger (himself the son of a prominent musicologist), meant that these traditions had simply been moved from 'from one grave to another'. As we watch a plane of saffron-robed Indian devotees (it's unclear of what or whom) chanting "Aaya Re! Aaya" ('He has come' in Hindi) at the heavens, in a passage from Spielberg's movie supposedly set in Dharamshala (but actually shot just outside Mumbai), it seems possible that the afterlife of these doomed pasts and fringe histories may be in sci-fi.

From there it's backwards to Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972), and the lead character's encounters with his dead wife, who has been rematerialised, perhaps as a means of communication, by the sentient planet Solaris. The familiar becomes a way of introducing the unfamiliar, the old becomes a way of introducing the new. "Consider yourself lucky," says Kris Kelvin's colleague Dr Snout as they discuss the problem. "After all she's a part of your past. What if it had been something you had never seen before, but something you had thought or imagined?" As the video ends, with vintage images of women in traditional Mongolian wedding dress morphing into Padmé Amidala wearing a similar costume in *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999), distinctions between coloniser and colonised, past and present, fact and fiction blur into one. The question of whether or not new systems of social organisation can be thought or imagined remains hanging in the air.

ArtAsiaPacific, P82-83, Nov/Dec issue, 2019

Can human cultures resist the totalizing grip of digital technologies? That is the question animating Liu Chuang's three-channel video essay *Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities* (2018), researched with Yang Beichen, which weaves together the anarchist impulses of block-chain technology and the survival tactics of autonomous groups living in the hills of Southeast Asia.

The story begins with historical precedent—old images of the telegraph network that spanned the globe and debilitated workers who typed out messages all day—and then skips ahead to 21st-century workers balancing on mountain-spanning cables and trains of commuters swiping smartphone screens. This portrayal of modernity is contrasted with the lifestyles of the Indigenous populations (including the Hmong, the Karen, the Lahu, and the Pao), known broadly as Zomia, of Southeast Asia. Borrowing from anthropologist James C. Scott—according to whom these cultures have evaded conquer by lowland East Asian dynasties and city-states for 2,000 years—Liu parallels the Zomia peoples' autarkic existence with the structure of Bitcoin, which resists the centralization of power.

Yet in today's Asia, even remote regions are being colonized with mega-infrastructure. Liu illustrates how areas of Bitcoin mining—which utilizes cheap electricity to power the digital currency networks—overlap with Zomia regions, and how in day-to-day life ethnic minorities are being digitally colonized, including through music. Liu compares this process of assimilation with the human-alien exchanges in Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977). Then, borrowing scenes from Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1971), Liu obliquely suggests that the Indigenous take their revenge on the explorer-colonists by haunting their dreams. The video ends with a Mongolian woman in a wedding dress, who morphs into and out of the similarly costumed figure of Padmé Amidala, the biological mother of Princess Leia and Luke Skywalker from the *Star Wars* franchise, suggesting the uncanny survivance of lost cultures.

HG MASTERS

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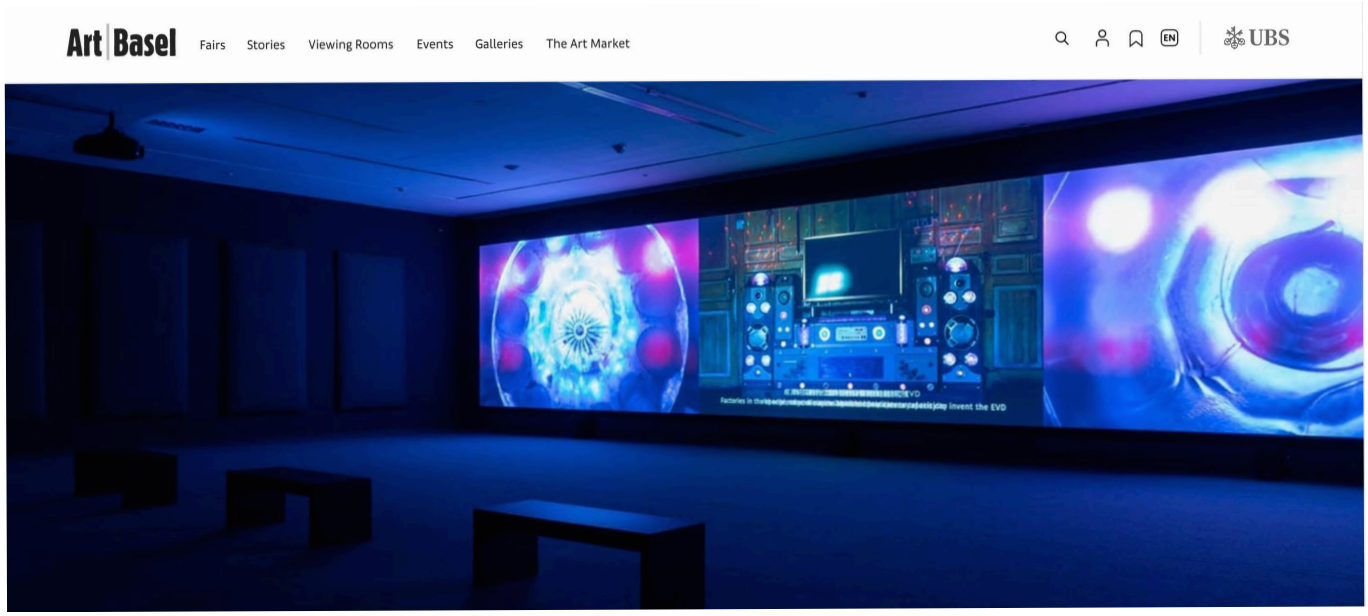
HG MASTERS



Meet the artist-explorer Liu Chuang

Alvin Li

He tackles bitcoin mining and engineered nature in his ambitious installations

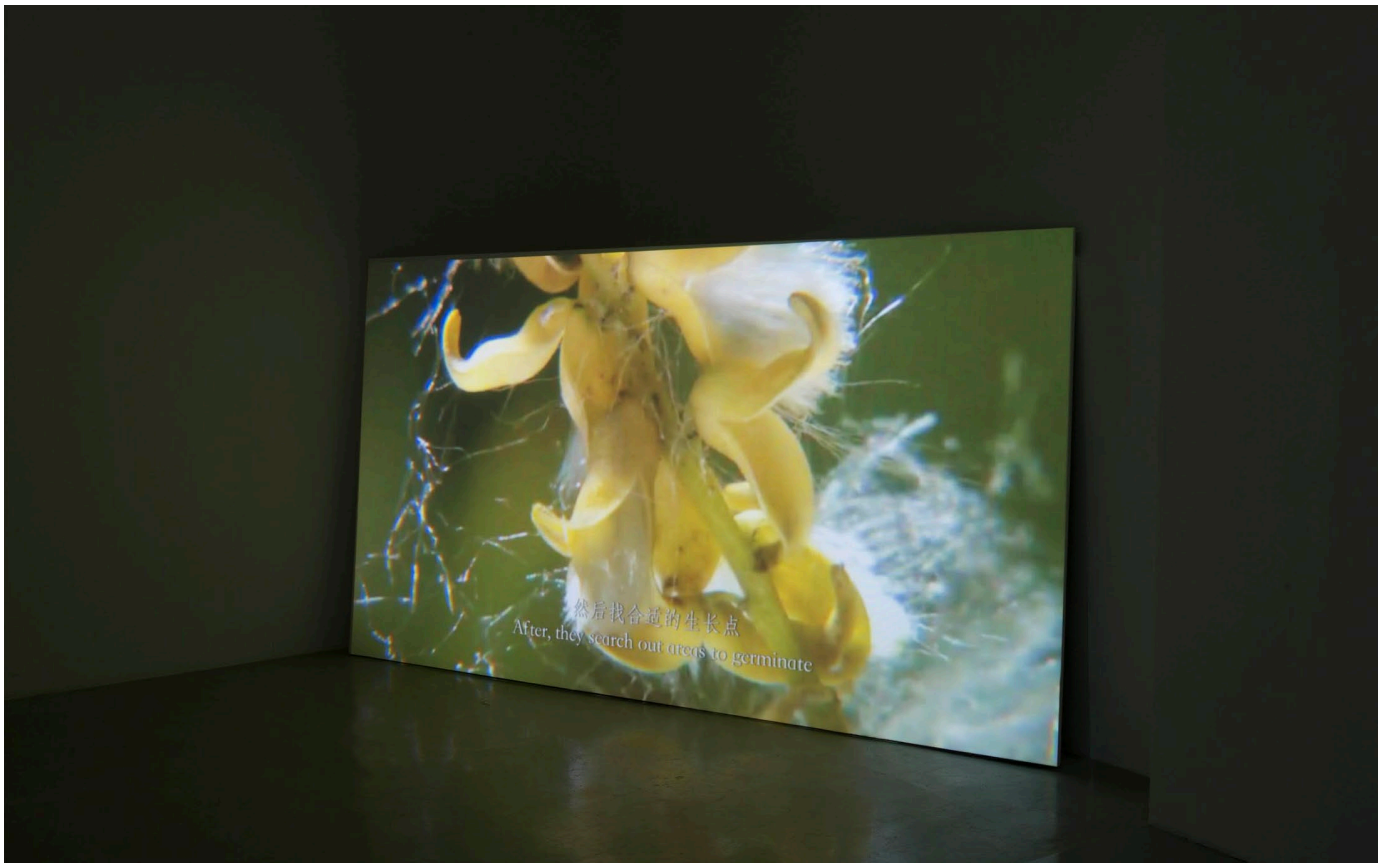
Nestled in the Shanghai suburb of Songjiang, Liu Chuang's studio is piled to the rafters with neatly organized books. Maps of various scales hang on the wall. Among the many charts and diagrams stuck to the shelves, I also spot a periodic table of elements. This scholarly setting recalls the office of 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, Sanghai.

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.of Blossom Bud Restrainer)*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist and Magician Space, Beijing.

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 B*itcoin 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 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

Liu Chuang, *Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities*, 2018. Commissioned for 'Cosmopolis #1.5 : Enlarged Intelligence', with the support of the Mao Jihong Arts Foundation. Installation view at National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, Taipei. Courtesy of the artist and Antenna Space, Shanghai

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.

Frieze

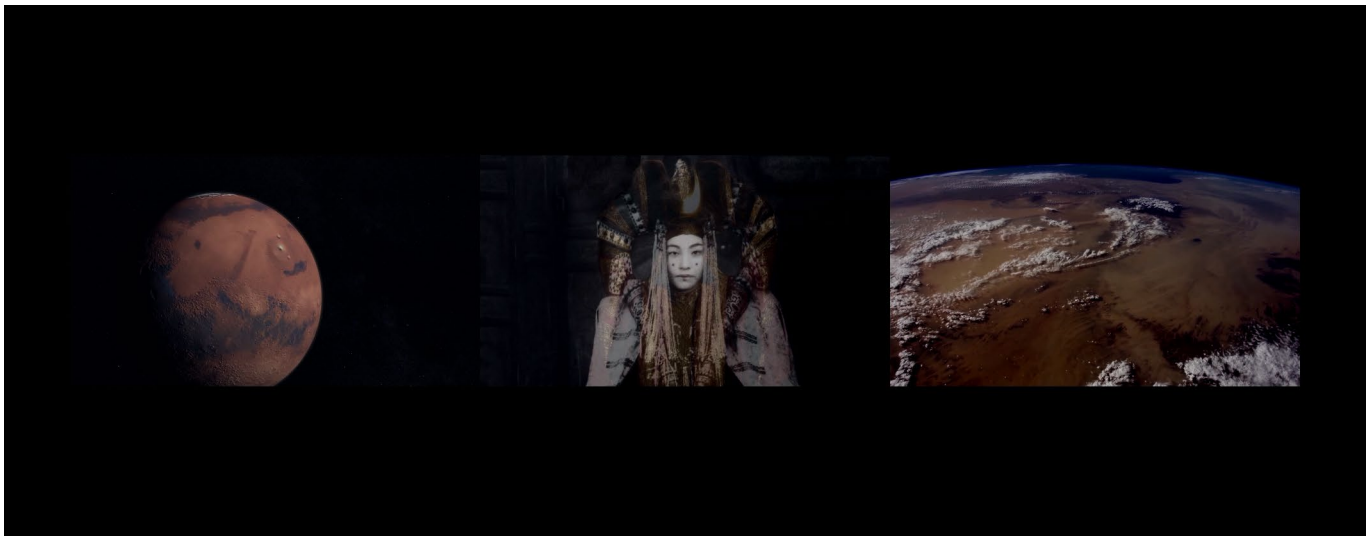
Reviews /

Does Liu Chuang's New Film Challenge the Colonial Gaze or Merely Reproduce It?

BY SIMON FRANK

1 JUN 2019

At Shanghai's Qiao Space, the artist's ambitious new project raises more questions than it answers



Liu Chuang, *Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities* (still), 2018

Comprising just two video installations and three photographic works, Liu Chuang's latest solo show, 'Earthbound Cosmology', nonetheless ranges across a vast array of topics – from the history of the telegraph to touch-pad technology, from modernity in pre-1949 China to sci-fi movies, from B-grade new wave remixes to the influence of Mongolian culture on film costume design. And that's not even including the titular themes of three-channel video *Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities* (2018), which serves as the show's conceptual core. In previous series, such as 'Buying Everything on You' (2006–07), which saw the artist purchase all the possessions of economic migrants seeking work at a job market, Liu focused on the minutiae of everyday life. Here, however, he attempts something on a far bigger and more complex scale. While this may come off , at moments, as hubristic, overall the project is an undeniably accomplished achievement.

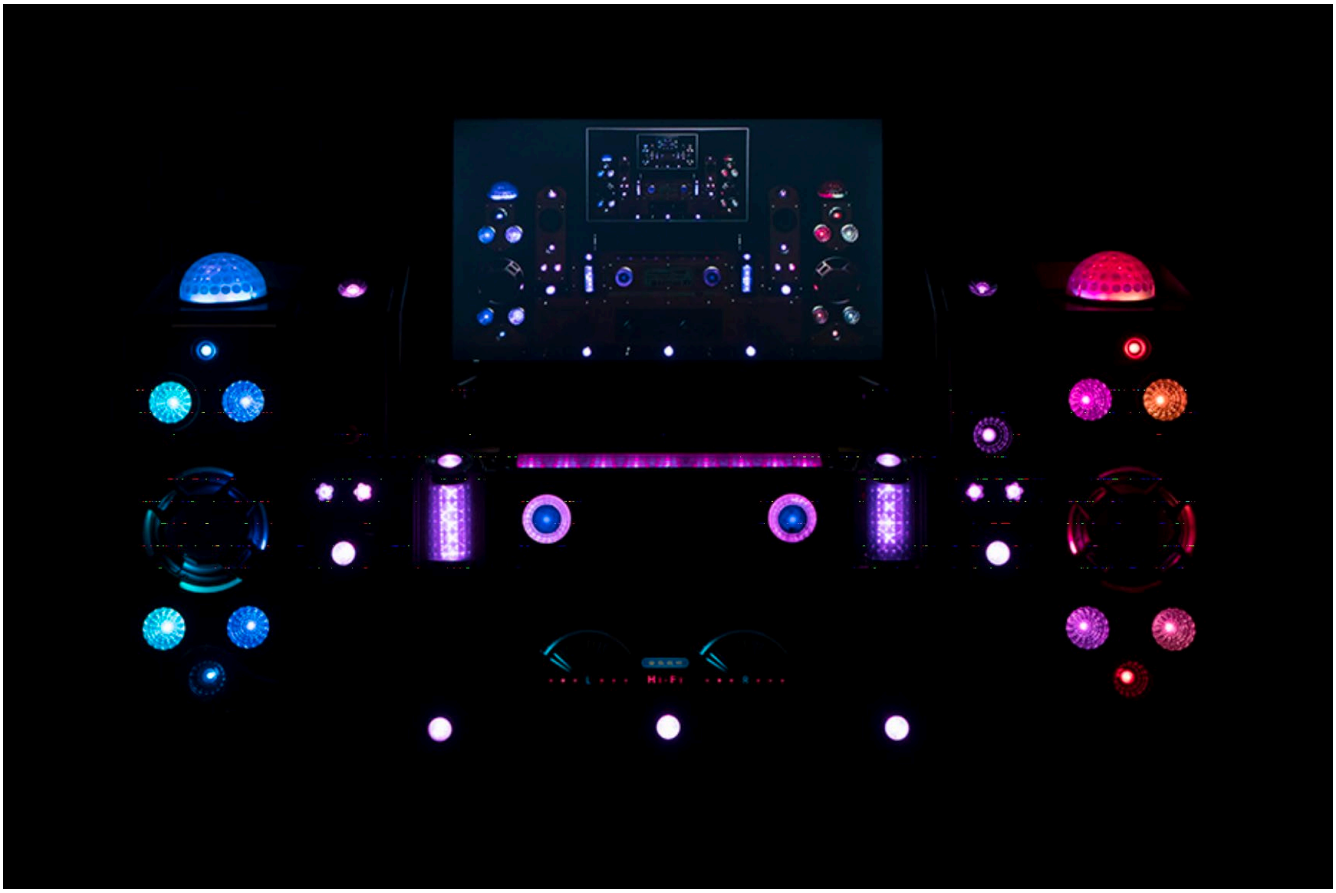
In *Bitcoin Mining and Field Recordings of Ethnic Minorities*, Liu investigates how cryptocurrency mining in China is partially powered by cheap hydroelectricity in remote mountainous areas that are home to ethnic minorities who have historically maintained antagonistic relationships with Han Chinese states. The video suggests that the affinity between cryptocurrencies' decentralized networks and the lived experience of minorities that were, until recently, generally disregarded by nation states could, perhaps, offer a way out of such political impasses. Political scientist James C. Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (2010) provides intellectual ammunition for this argument, while the titular feld recordings are derived from ethnomusicologists' interest in these minorities. Breathtaking images – including drone photography of river valleys and dams, as well as footage taken from the social media accounts of power-line repairmen –flit across the three projection screens, while narration in Muya, a language related to Tibetan, explains details at a lulling, unhurried pace.

Liu Chuang, 'Earthbond Cosmology', 2019, exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist and Qiao Space, Shanghai

In the next room, the installation *Gluttonous Me* (2018) is inspired by entertainment appliances sold to the same minority groups, which combine multiple functions in one: television, video player, speakers and sound-synchronized lights. Liu's replica device sits in a darkened space with mirrored walls. Simultaneous voice-overs in Muya, Mandarin and English provide context while footage plays on the screen. However, a slow fade between a character from the film *Avatar* (2009) and an African tribesperson highlights a troubling aspect that permeates the entire exhibition: minority groups are often presented as a mysterious Other, causing anti-imperial intentions to coalesce into something that feels slightly colonial. In this vein, *The Anthropology of Science Fiction* (2019) – a collection of prints featuring characters from sci-fi movies interspersed with images of Māori, Maasai, Himba and other indigenous peoples – is facile at best.

Useful comparisons might be drawn to *Hito Steyerl's Extra Space Craft* (2016) – a film about drone operators in Iraqi Kurdistan that explores the intersections between technology, identity and the limits of statehood, yet is foregrounded in individual voices – or to the deep-dive documentaries of Naeem

Mohaiemen, whose book *Between Ashes and Hope* (2010) focused on a peripheral region of Bangladesh also covered in Scott's research. While Liu's status as a Chinese national might understandably preclude him from adopting Steyerl's and Mohaiemen's overtly politicized approaches, parts of the show feel unfortunately close to corporate propaganda about technology improving life in remote villages. His positioning of ethnic minorities as the Homo sacer of the Chinese state is a powerful idea and the hypnotic video elements of 'Earthbound Cosmology' are feats of masterful editing. However, it's hard to avoid wishing that work with such an expansive scope might feel less like an auteur's detached observations and more like a collaborative, egalitarian undertaking.



Liu Chuang, *Gluttonous Me*, 2018, EVD, home entertainment system (walnut cabinet, Atman television, amplifier, PC computer, 7 JBL loudspeakers, 1 JBL bass speaker, 7.1 surround sound system, plastic lampshades, LED light control system, mirror with aluminium alloy frame), dimensions variable. Courtesy: the artist and Qiao Space, Shanghai

Frieze

Features /

In Focus: Liu Chuang

BY PAUL TEASDALE

20 FEB 2015

Cold portraits and warm-hearted annotations

Liu Chuang's latest work, *Segmented Landscape* (2014), consists of six metal window grilles, each bearing a distinct geometric pattern. Installed above visitors' heads in the main hall of the Power Station of Art, the venue for the 10th Shanghai Biennale, it is lit by spotlights while an artificial breeze causes pieces of white gauze, hanging like curtains behind each grille, to shift gently. The shadows cast by the grilles appear as patterns transposed onto the fabric. The overall effect is of a series of photograms, which seems fitting since the work is, to some extent, a snapshot of China in the late 1980s and early '90s, when such window guards suddenly began appearing on houses and apartments across the country. At that time, they could be seen as a visual reminder of China's burgeoning prosperity; here, they seem a quiet lament to the individualization that has been a by-product of economic growth.

Dubbed 'the factory of the world', the Pearl River Delta Economic Zone in south-east China is a sprawling urban megatropolis of some 65.5 million inhabitants. Coinciding with the country's economic boom – resulting from the second stage of Deng Xiaoping's economic liberalization in the late 1980s – the region's infrastructure, industry and population exploded almost overnight. Factories were built, high-rises rose and people ocked to fill them. Liu, now based in Beijing, was one of them. After graduating from Hubei Institute of Art in 2001, he relocated to Shenzhen before moving again to the nearby city of Dongguan. In 2005, with the artist Li Jinghu, Liu started a business in Dongguan called Picabia Decoration Co. Ltd. It's main product: manufacturing decorative paintings to order. The factory closed after a year and Liu subsequently moved to Beijing, but his experience of the region and its unique physical and social transformation continues to mark his work.

Buying Everything on You(Huang Wei), 2006–07, found objects, dimensions variable. All images courtesy: the artist and Leo Xu Projects, Shanghai

As in the case of Segmented Landscape, Liu often works with and within architectural boundaries, isolating and unpacking the systems that operate barely noticed in the backgrounds of our lives. For *Untitled (The History of Sweat) I + II* (2007/13) he switched the parts of an airconditioning unit so that the element ordinarily situated outside was placed indoors and the condensed vapour run-off was left to pool inside the room, looking like an increasingly giant sweat patch. Likewise, for *Untitled (Unknown River) II* (2008), Liu hooked up the main water supply to T Space gallery in Beijing to run via pipes through the hollow-metal, mass-produced folding chairs and tables that were spread throughout the space.

Liu not only opens up architectural systems, but also the hidden social relations inside distributions and ows. For the series 'Buying Everything on You' (2006–07), the artist took that unromantic thing, the economic transaction, and made it personal. Liu approached some newly arrived migrants seeking work at the Luohu labour market in Shenzhen to ask whether he could buy everything they had on them, from personal effects right down to their underwear. Amazingly, a few agreed. The highest price the artist paid was CN¥2,000 (£200 GBP); the lowest, a pittance: CN¥350 (£35 GBP). Presented plainly, artefact-like on a board, the belongings resemble oversized parts from a giant model kit or, more disturbingly, exhibits from a crime scene: coldly dehumanized portraits of their owners.

Segmented Landscape, 2014, mixed media, dimensions variable, installation view at the 10th Shanghai Biennale. Photograph: JJY Photo

Similarly accumulative and emotive, *Love Story* (2013) consists of 3,000 pulp-fiction books that Liu bought from the rental stores that surround the factories in Dongguan. He has presented them as a heaped pile (at PKM Gallery in Beijing in 2012), neatly stacked on a table, some copies open (in the booth of his Shanghai gallery, Leo Xu Projects, at Frieze New York art fair in 2013), or with annotations carefully copied out onto a wall (for a solo show at Salon 94, New York, in 2014). Popular among factory workers, these love stories – imports from Taiwan and Hong Kong throughout the 1980s and '90s – share a formulaic cover design: a lovelorn girl, sometimes two, set against a bright background. The imsy paperbacks, while no literary gems, contained something Liu found interesting: missives – sometimes short, sometimes lengthy – written by the books' readers, from letters to diary entries, from heartfelt poetry to doodles and phone numbers. These usually anonymous scribbles, acting as a kind of localized pre-internet comments thread, seem destined to circulate in perpetuity without ever reaching their intended audience.

Liu doesn't shy away from such awkward interventions. For *Untitled (The Dancing Partner)* (2010), he instructed two drivers of matching white, nondescript Volkswagen saloon cars to drive at the minimum speed limit throughout Beijing's chaotic road network. Other road users–initially bemused then increasingly irate – honk, tailgate and angrily overtake the stoic pair who, driving at the same unwaveringly steady pace as though their cars are invisibly linked, apparently oblivious to the trouble they are causing. In a country of China's vastness, political heft and economic energy, Untitled (The Dancing Partner) is a quietly wry form of transgression. Contrasting the slow, ordered pace of the two cars to the relative chaos of the other traCc, the artist explains the work metaphorically in terms of signal and noise: the poise of the two cars' quiet dance only becoming clear when set against the background of the busy traCc.

Untitled (The Festival),
2011,
video still

A piece made by Liu on Chinese New Year's Day in 2011, *Untitled (The Festival)*, recently shown at the 10th Gwangju Biennale, underscores this thinking. Filmed in an industrial area of Dongguan, the artist applies himself to a seemingly unproductive mission. He lights a discarded roll of newspaper but, before it burns out, he uses it to light another, and then another. As he walks calmly along the debris-strewn street, the factories for once stand silent in the background.

KALEIDOSCOPE, *Systems And Their Mechanisms, Be It Language, Capital Or Libido*, Text/Venus Lau, P58-59, Issue 22, Fall 2014

At his studio, artist Liu Chuang explains his research into *fangsheng*, an auspicious pattern formed by two overlapping diamond shapes that can be traced back to the Yuan dynasty. This pattern, now visible on China's ubiquitous anti-theft window grates "like a rejection laced with welcoming rhetoric," inspired the artist's new proposals for the tenth editions of the Gwangju and Shanghai biennales this fall. On the other side of the studio, piles of pulp romance novels sit on a concrete floor, held in place by colored stones that correspond to various texts on the wall: translated diaries, letters, poems and random addresses found on their dog-eared pages. Liu collected these paperbacks at rental bookstores in Dongguan, a city straddling manufacturing and prostitution—and the exchange of commodities and bodily fluids—where the artist spent a year running a factory after graduation. Circulated among workers, these doodles give messages to the strangers who open the books, creating an ethical asymmetry like the Derridian gift. Entitled *Love Story* (2006-ongoing), these monologues were recently presented along with abandoned books at Salon 94 (Freemans) in New York and Galerie Balice Hertling in Paris this year.

The circulation of objects outside of human use appears again in *Buying Everything on You* (2005-ongoing). The title says it all: the artist offered to purchase all the earthly possessions of people he encountered at open labor markets. Yet it would be too convenient to write off Liu's work as field research into the working class of the special economic zone established by Deng Xiaoping in Shenzhen: a geopolitical landscape channeled by the accelerated visual and linguistic production where the artist lived for six years. Liu's focus does not only latch onto people as specimens that illustrate living conditions under a (post-) Fordist culture; instead, he also concerns himself with systems and their mechanisms, including the noise that reveals the traces of the signal's operation, be it the architecture of language, capital or libido. In *Untitled (Unknown River)* (2008), folding furniture connects to a building's plumbing by pipes, the poetic connotations of the title functions as a murmur that mirrors the flow of fluid through a loop of banal objects designed to save space. In *Dancing Partners* (2010), a single channel video exhibited at Kunsthall Stavanger this summer, two identical cars slowly move side by side on a Chinese highway, compelling impatient drivers to try to pass them. On a shared road with people secluded in bubbles of portable private space, Liu stresses an ethical pressure that the legal system permits: the two cars are like white noise between two tracks on a vinyl.

Liu Chuang's works does not only hover over systems, but also continues into what extends from them spatially. This dialectic of interior and exterior often takes the form of architectural components. *Untitled (The Midnight Flights)* (2013)—exhibited at "ON/OFF" (2013), a large-scale survey exhibition of young Chinese artists at Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing—is inspired by the negative space of a swinging door. *Split Landscape* (2005), which flattens the cage-like anti-theft window grates that appear repeatedly in Liu's work, consolidates the passage between private and public spaces into a dysfunctional interface, a rejection articulated through a gesture of embrace.

Liu Chuang (Chinese, b.1978) lives and works in Beijing. He is represented by Leo Xu Projects, Shanghai.

Liu Chuang's work is currently featured in the 10th Gwangju Biennale, "Burning Down the House" curated by Jessica Morgan, through 9 November.

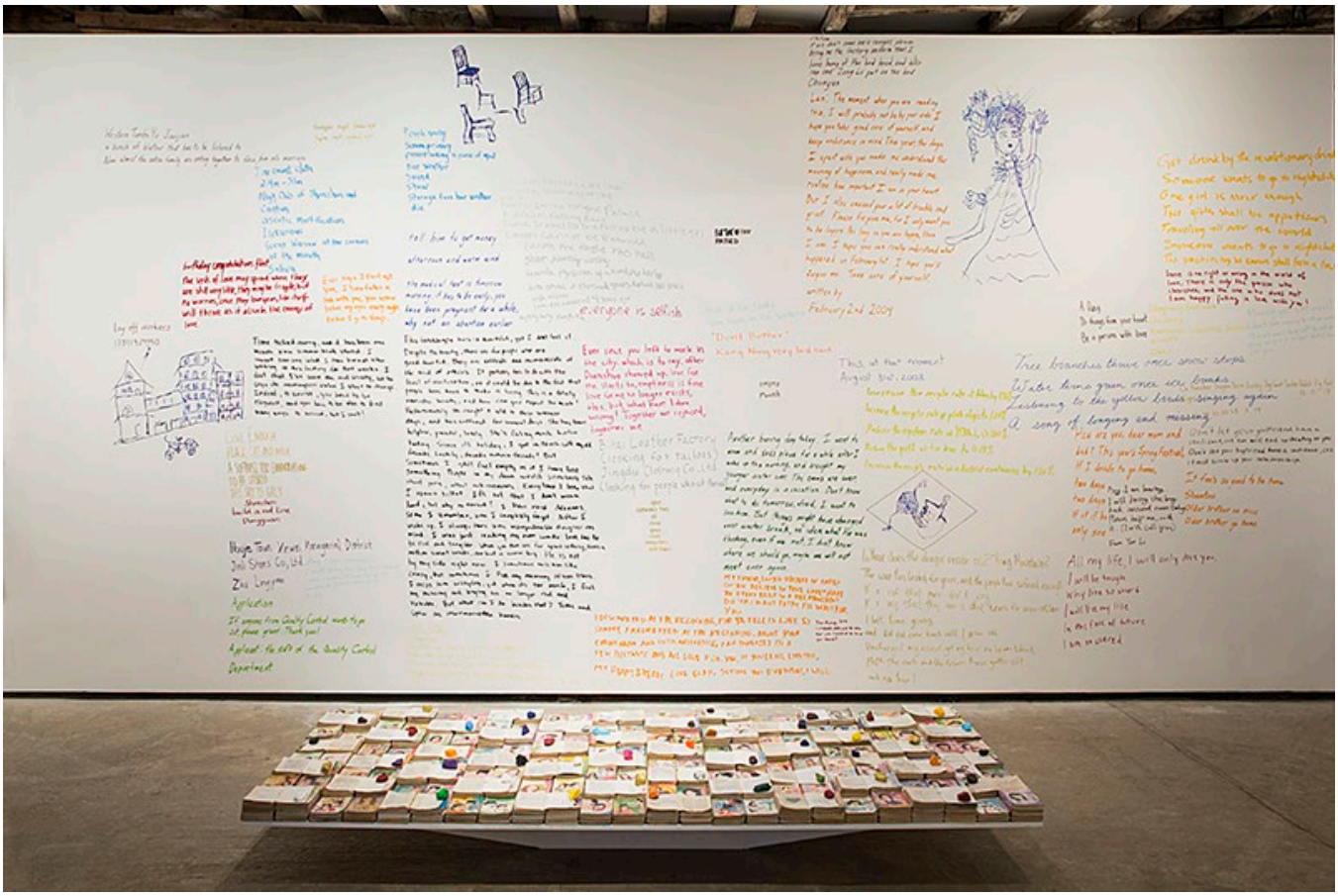
Venus Lau is an art writer and consulting curator at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA), Beijing. She is chairman of the curatorial office Society for Experimental Cultural Production, Hong Kong.

Love Story, 2006–14
Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94, New York

"SYSTEMS AND THEIR MECHANISMS, BE IT LANGUAGE, CAPITAL OR LIBIDO"

HIGHLIGHTS

ArtAsiaPacific



Installation view of LIU CHUANG's *Love Story* at Salon 94 Freemans, New York, 2014.
Courtesy the artist and Salon 94 Freeman

LOVE STORY
LIU CHUANG

WEB EXCLUSIVE BY PAUL LASTER
SALON 94 FREEMANS

No stranger to the American art scene, Liu Chuang's conceptual art has been featured in several outstanding group shows in the United States, including "The Generational: Younger Than Jesus" (2009) at New York's New Museum, "28 Chinese" (2013) at Miami's Rubell Family Collection, and "My Generation: Young Chinese Artists," which recently debuted at the Tampa Museum of Art as well as the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg.

Although "Love Story" at Salon 94 Freemans is Chuang's first one-person gallery show in the United States, Leo Xu Projects' solo presentation of the artist's "Buying Everything On You" and "Love Story" series at 2013 Frieze New York gave American art aficionados their first look at aspects of his current show and left many viewers longing for more. Recognizing the charm of the "Love Story" project—in which Chuang presents

recycled romance novels from the 1980s and '90s, filled with personal notations that have been passed from one lonely heart to the next—Salon 94 took a leap of faith in mounting a show around this poetic body of work, which may only appeal to the most obsessive art-viewing audience.

Laid out on four low-level tables, 3,000 used paperbacks divulge private and random moments from the lives of migrant factory workers in Dongguan, China, through notes written within the pages and on the covers of pulp-fiction novels. These timeworn scrawls inside the books anticipate the internet, where people publicly share their most intimate hopes and desires today.

The quirky notations, which were written mostly by women, feature drafts for letters, diary entries, naive poems, biographical notes, home addresses and phone numbers, funky doodles, and to-do and shopping lists. The beauty of this exhibition versus the Frieze New York display is that, here, we get translations of the original texts blown up in colored script on the gallery walls and indexed with colored rocks on the related books.

Written in orange, for example, is "Ling, I bought a big watermelon, it was not good at all. I will go to 'that store' to watch disks after taking shower, will you join me there? Or you can give me a call, but I don't know if I will be able to get it?" A message written in green reads: "Another boring day today, I went to mom and dad's place for a while after I woke up this morning, and brought my younger sister over. The exams are over, and everyday is a vacation. Don't know what to do tomorrow, afraid, I want to see him. But things might have changed over winter break, no idea what he was thinking, even if we met, I don't know where we should go, maybe we will not meet ever again." Elsewhere, written in brown is a proverb: "The way you treat life is the way life treats you."

Capturing a very specific time in China, Chuang's project celebrates the lives of common people dealing with universal issues. Transported to, and translated for, an art gallery in New York, the work reminds us of the simple bond all people share.

LIU CHUANG, *Love Story* (4) (detail), 2006–14
found books, colored rocks, wooden platform and handwritten text on wall, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Salon 94 Freemans, New York.

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