

# A Ripple In The {Data} Flow

*Curated by Xinchun Du*

Artists:

Gregory Edwards

Huang Gualier + Wang Runzhong

Xiang Geng (Sean Fox)

Tao Hui

Mark Lee

Molly Soda

Ziyang Wu

Esther Yijun Xu

Payne Zhu

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***I picked up the phone and got a series of electronic voice mail messages.***

***The last message:***

***“This is DHL. You have issued a package on December 19th, and the customs detain it in Guangzhou, China. It contains your passport and five other passports.”***

# Introduction

In this era of rapid data flow, our personal information, such as phone numbers, home addresses, e-mail addresses, and even bank-card numbers, can be leaked to the outside world. The popularity of the Internet has made the spread of data faster and faster. While browsing the web, users often unintentionally leave copies of their personal information behind—one reason we get all kinds of cold calls and scam e-mails that confuse us. Sometimes the calls seem ridiculous, so we ignore them and hang up. Sometimes, though, we are tempted to take the bait. It is as if, at that moment, our thoughts are pulled by an invisible thread, and we want to know what the end of the line is.

Why are we attracted to the information offered on these occasions? There are probably many answers: we think it will contain information about ourselves, information about the people around us, information about things we care about and are interested in. In other words, information creates a sense of connection and empathy in us.

We have emotional attachments to certain things, and that is something we are always sorting through. With the popularity of the Internet, the flood of information, and the capitalist concept of consumption, though, our information intake has been set adrift. We are gradually losing ourselves, becoming “a ripple in the data flow.”<sup>1</sup>

This exhibition focuses on a question that comes up all the time but that most of us ignore: how should we access and use Internet data? Since we are constantly receiving all kinds of information, it's not a question to throw out for a simple answer; it's about making us, as Internet users, aware of the consequences of the data age. What is the self-awareness and mindset of users when they are actively, passively, or indirectly accessing and using data? Do they control their intake and output of information in a completely rational way, or do they naively browse a large amount of information without being aware how they are being invaded by data? Are they infatuated with the network world, and with the many

1. Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (Beijing: China Citic Press, 2017). I have made this quotation the title of the present essay. Harari proposes a caution: “The world is changing faster than ever before, and we are flooded by impossible amounts of data, of ideas, of promises and of threats. Humans relinquish authority to the free market, to crowd wisdom and to external algorithms partly

kinds of information, pleasure, convenience, and fantasy it offers?

The ten artists under consideration in *A Ripple in the {Data} Flow*—Gregory Edwards, Huang Guai'er + Wang Runzhong, Xiang Geng (Sean Fox), Tao Hui, Marc Lee, Molly Soda, Ziyang Wu, Esther Yijun Xu, and Payne Zhu—have created works that reflect on the effects of information use in the network world through the stages of collection, analysis, and the compilation and falsification of data. The exhibition divides the impact of the Internet and the use of data into three main sections: "Cognitive Fast Food," "Emotional Indifference," and "Volitional Expansion." Rather than being categorizable into just one of these groups, however, or studying just one feature of the subject, the works in the exhibition are all interconnected, reflecting the many ways in which network data makes an impact on our lives. Each work explores the ambiguous relationship between network users individually and other network users and groups. Whether they take the form of videos, photographs, paintings, or installations, the show's artworks closely touch on daily life and awareness.



When the Internet first appeared—it was invented in 1969—it was a medium for touching and perceiving the outside world. Today, as Hito Steyerl writes, “The Internet is everywhere now because it has integrated into offline activities.”<sup>2</sup> Human beings everywhere have pursued the unlimited possibilities of the Internet and engaged with its development, and as time has passed and Internet experience has expanded, we have become more and more accustomed to being in this space where the real and the virtual interact symbiotically. We are gradually forgetting that the Internet is a new technology, an invention most people had never experienced before the late 1980s. Nowadays, people see the Internet as an indispensable part of their life. As the theorist Wendy Chun states in her book *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New*

*Media*, “technologies matter most not when they are new but when they are becoming obsolete—when their use has become habitual.”<sup>3</sup> People are used to the existence of the Internet, but they do not realize the effects, especially the negative ones, that the Internet has had on them and on society as a whole. The political censorship, data plunder, invasion of privacy, overloaded network subcultures, and network fraud in the Internet world are all online criticisms.

The essence of the Internet since its invention has been data transmission. Data can come in the form of symbols, words, numbers, voices, images, video, etc. Data in and of itself is meaningless; it only becomes meaningful when it becomes information, and as such has an impact on our behavior. Information is what is obtained after

2. Hito Steyerl, “Too Much World: Is The Internet Dead? E-flux Journal: The Internet Does Not Exist (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015), pp. 11–13.

3. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2019).

Ziyang Wu, video still from artwork *A Woman the You The Technology*, 2019, single-channel video  
Courtesy of the artist



data has been processed. Some data is edited to become news, some becomes entertainment gossip, some is used by criminals for purposes of online fraud. This distinction between data and information is an important one for us to make. Data and information are inseparable but different: data is the carrier of information and information is what is connoted by data. Data contains meanings to be interpreted; once interpreted, it becomes information. Data is symbolic and physical; information is what is obtained after data is processed. Data is encoded with information and information is the meaningful representation of data. Data by itself is meaningless; it becomes information only when it affects our behavior.

As life and work become more and more inseparable from the Internet in the era of big data, human beings have become data in virtual space. Every activity of human beings on the Internet is transformed into data. Of course, human privacy is also digitized and becomes data. Data itself is objective, it does no more than exist; it does not differentiate between good and bad. Only human behavior makes data good or bad. The ethical problem of privacy in the era of big data and of the Internet must therefore have to do with human behavior.

The right to know and control our individual information and data is often not in our own hands. We often leave control over our health, for example, and access to our health data, in the hands of doctors or research institutions. Most people

don't want their private data to escape their control, But the reality is that everyone's information has already been monitored in various forms by different people in every corner of the Internet. It's like living naked in a one-way mirror, where every pore and organ of our bodies is monitored for commercial purposes without our knowledge.

In the Internet era, we sign legally binding agreements every day, just as the political and business elites of the past did. For most of us, though, these agreements come in the form of "click agree to complete registration" when registering for websites and apps. How many people actually click on the terms and read them? When you post content or information using Facebook's "public" settings, you allow anyone, including people outside Facebook, to access that information and associate it with you, using your name and profile picture. All the activities of Facebook users are monitored and analyzed, and according to Facebook's terms and conditions, the rights belong unconditionally to Facebook.<sup>4</sup>

Use of the Internet on any of our devices generates cookies, a kind of tracer left on the computer that records the user's personal information. This in turn generates a database by which users can be identified and tracked. The companies that track users' identities and their every click will recommend ads, information, etc., based on their preferences. Many issues have occurred because of the use of users' data by third parties, violating the users' rights.

4. "We don't charge you to use Facebook or the other products and services covered by these terms. Instead, businesses and organizations pay us to show you ads for their products and services. By using our Products, you agree that we can show you ads that we think will be relevant to you and your interests. We use your personal data to help determine which ads to show you." Facebook "Term of Service," <https://www.facebook.com/terms.php>.

5. Iga Kozłowska, "Facebook and Data Privacy in the Age of Cambridge Analytica" (University of Washington, published on April 30, 2018), <https://sis.washington.edu/news/facebook-data-privacy-age-cambridge-analytica/>; Iga Kozłowska, "Facebook and Data Privacy in the Age of Cambridge Analytica" (University of Washington, published on April 30, 2018), <https://sis.washington.edu/news/facebook-data-privacy-age-cambridge-analytica/>.





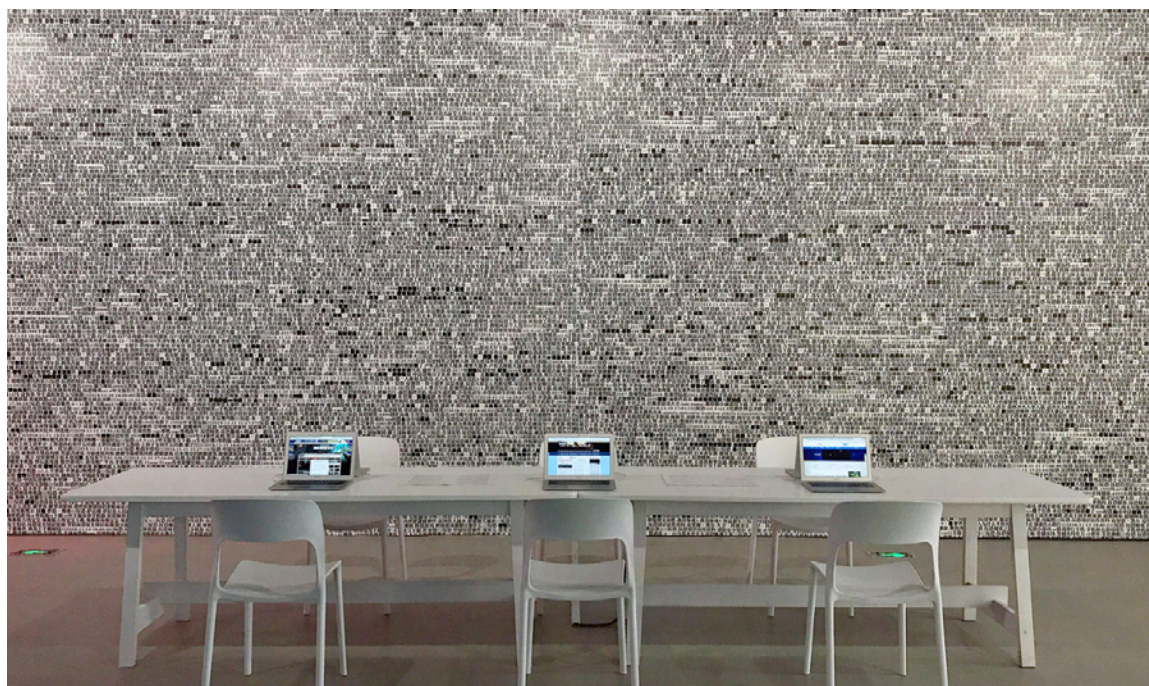
A famous case is the “Cambridge Analytica Incident” of 2013, when Aleksandr Kogan, a researcher at Cambridge University, created a Facebook survey to which around 300,000 people responded. The app shared their data, and given the way Facebook worked at the time, Kogan was also able to access the data of tens of millions of their Facebook friends.<sup>5</sup>

Cookies are text files and generally pose no immediate security threat to the computers that they are left on, but they can be written with a markup language that introduces executable code, causing serious security risks to users. Bad cookies can also yield false data that is not generated according to your actual needs. How to produce bad cookies? Payne Zhu’s *Make Bad Cookies* (2016) is a plugin program that can follow the user’s instructions and automatically mimic human Internet-browsing behavior. For twenty-four hours, the program will automatically and uninterruptedly produce data without the user actually clicking and browsing, generating unwanted cookies and contributing them to the website companies. The exhibition includes a video of Zhu using the prosthesis as a key word to generate a research as an example. The bad-cookies program browses all the pages relating to the prosthesis, and also the pages recommended by the Chinese search engine Baidu, and traces the key information on those pages. Besides the video, the installation also includes a wallpaper printed with content about anti-terrorism in Xinjiang. Xinjiang, China, is located in the

hinterland of the Eurasian continent, covering an area of over 1.66 million square kilometers and bordering eight countries including Mongolia, Russia and Kazakhstan. In the long course of history, all ethnic groups lived together, studied together, worked together, lived in harmony and developed harmoniously. However, for some time, Xinjiang region has been deeply influenced by ethnic separatist, religious extremist and violent terrorists. The three forces have planned and organized a series of violent terrorist incidents. Frequent terrorist attacks have seriously jeopardized the lives and property safety of the people of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang and severely trampled upon human dignity. In 2019, an English documentary titled “Fighting terrorism in Xinjiang” was broadcast on CGTN, which is a rare documentary in China in recent years to fully show the pain caused by violent terrorism and religious extremism in Xinjiang. Suddenly, “Xinjiang” and “Anti-terrorism”



Payne Zhu, video still from *Make Bad Cookies*, 2016. Single-channel video, archive material. Courtesy of the artist.



have become heated key words for researching the topic on the Internet. Therefore, Zhu presented *Make Bad Cookies* (2016) associated with Anti-terrorism as the key word for his previous group exhibition at Wuzhen Biennale, Now Is the Time, in China, in 2019. In that show, Zhu also printed the wallpaper contained all information from searching “anti-terrorism.” However, Zhu was told that the content was sensitive and had to be removed. He immediately started a workshop about what had to be removed and what could stay. This wallpaper is the result. However, due to the lack of documentation, the wallpaper shown here is the uncensored version.

Censorship is a huge part of managing the network. About twenty countries have implemented an Internet recording system, and more and more countries are considering using it. Given varying cultural contexts and

values, Internet censorship systems in different countries allow and forbid different things. Just like this muted wallpaper, words are removed based on different standards from different people. What should be censored and what should not? These are decisions that always made by the institutions in power and organs of authorities. Now, in Zhu’s work, he is trying to provide absolute freedom for the participants in this workshop.

Stepping away from the virtual world of the Internet, surveillance cameras are in almost every major cities. With growing economies and improved information and network technology, surveillance systems are now widely used in both public places and the workplace, appearing in transportation, safety, and other such industries and in a growing number of others. Key departments or important locations in various businesses are now subject to real-time monitoring

and video recording. Management departments can obtain and record effective data, video images, and sound, and can monitor both everyday and sudden, abnormal events; police forces can efficiently and promptly respond, arrange their forces, handle cases, etc. As a result, not only have many people gotten used to these surveillance systems but being watched also makes them feel benefited and safe.

Marc Lee's installation *SECURITY FIRST* (2015) reflects on the fact that surveillance is becoming an entire industry. Here, the visitors come to a corner in which the perpendicular walls are covered by photos of random electrical appliances shops as if to created the real environment. A speaker is camouflaged in the picture will play an advertising announcement for convincing people to get a surveillance camera and secure their safety:

This is important: Make a clear choice to record and be recorded. Make a change. It's your own individual right. We are the new generation. It's a challenge, be virtually everywhere, create communities, network and exchange. Don't escape and don't occupy spaces, let them be open and free. And when you publish or talk to an algorithm, never be anonymous. Crime will fall rapidly. Our life will be better. Your choice is our choice.

Lee's impassioned propaganda is ironic, but it accurately reflects the public's dependence on, trust in, and anxiety about surveillance

today. "Security" is a keyword in the work, with its double edge of safety and authoritarian oversight. What makes people feel like they're in a safe social environment? The meaning of security is very subjective and relative. Zoom in on the concept of surveillance, which has permeated every corner of social life, whether it's the setting up of CCTV or the supervision of the Internet, people are being watched in both the real and virtual world, or in other words being controlled. This extends to the idea of cybernetics. Cybernetics is a concept that has been introduced by Norbert Wiener to denote the study of technological mechanisms. He regards cybernetics as a science that studies the general laws of control and communication in machines and living societies, and how dynamic systems maintain a state of equilibrium or stability under changing environmental conditions. Going back to Lee's work, CCTV as the subject of his research is actually one of the representations of cybernetics in the power system. There are two levels of control. First, CCTV in public space is the government's control over ordinary people. Volkswagen is being monitored. Over time, the public has gained the security of being seen, although this is now a paradox for surveillance, because our privacy and data have been made transparent through ill-used surveillance facilities. Second, as the public grows more comfortable with the security of surveillance, we will buy our own CCTV and install it around our properties. This is a way to gain a sense of security by observing your





surroundings through the subject of composition control. That is to say, surveillance cameras have long been not just a simple tool, but containing right consciousness, and with the "panoptic effect"<sup>7</sup> proposed by Foucault, has a strong binding force on people's body and mind.

Internet users are a significant factor in making the Internet "material." Through the various screens, carriers, and ports of the network, we enter cyberspace and interact with other individuals or groups. As users of the network, we experience and react to information on the Internet in different ways. What is the relationship between the individual and the netizen, the individual and the group, and between groups in the real world and groups in the virtual one?

When netizens interact online, the characteristics of their self-consciousness can be classified as invisibility, collectivization, and public opinion. First, simply put,

the netizen is invisible online; the Internet is anonymous. In cyberspace people can create another identity, deliberately choosing whether to project their real personality onto a virtual user-name or to use that identity to disguise themselves. The network can hide users' individual information, including physical data, emotions, and personality. Second, collectivization: the individual user is always looking for a group to relate to and to join. The essence of using social media is to get to know others, and you share your views, interests, and activities to find out who you can connect with. Finally, public opinion: in the era of rapid information flow made possible by the Internet, the influence of public opinion is huge. When people see news events and the public's responses to them, responses that can now be openly and universally expressed rather than filtered through media such as television and newspapers, they often either completely oppose the positions and viewpoints put forward or unconsciously identify

<sup>7</sup> Farnam Street, "Michel Foucault on the Panopticon Effect" <https://fs.blog/2014/07/the-panopticon-effect/>

AI GENERATED SCRIPT  
人工智能生成的剧本

What is the title of your story: (input "title")  
故事的题目是什么：  
A woman with you the technology  
一个带有科技的女人

Act 1  
What is the name of your protagonist: (input "name")  
主角的名字是什么：  
Huawei  
华为

Describe your protagonist in two words: (input "personality")  
用两个词描述主角：  
is a socially creative and the people who VR gamers  
一个具有社会性创造力的VR游戏玩家

What's your protagonist's initial routine? (input "initial routine")  
主角最初的生活是什么样的：  
A Asian girl that is a start is real living and can get a college  
一个开始真实生活并可以上大学的亚洲女孩儿

Catalyst: What is the event that irreversibly changes the world as the protagonist knows it?  
(input "event that changes the world")  
催化剂：是什么事件让主角的世界产生了不可逆转的变化：  
Impossible manufactures if they went for the particular but the ultimate with a black woman in the network create the simulation to see the US pay or collapse.  
一群不可能的制造商和一个黑人女性在网络中创造了模拟世界使美国付钱或崩溃

What does the protagonist want at the beginning? (input "want at the beginning")  
主角最初想要的是什么：  
The need to more into the using the phone where this is the way to see the distinction of the technology and they work in some transgender mind.  
希望能够更多地使用手机去观察科技和一些变性者想法的区别

How does the protagonist refuse the call? What does he/she do as an excuse not to go after the goal?  
(input "excuse is")  
主角最初决定不去完成目标的借口是什么：  
simply to see on a question if the process of virtual money  
仅仅想要货币或虚拟金钱的过程是什么

Describe your villain in two words: (input "villain's personality")  
用两个词描述反派角色的特征：  
A virtual reality of the transgender power  
一个拥有变性力量/权力的虚拟现实

What is the villain's name? (input "villain's name")  
反派角色的姓名是什么：  
Cokyo  
Cokyo

What is the villain's goal that conflicts the protagonist's goal? (input "villain's goal")  
反派角色和主角产生冲突的目标是什么：  
there are a day and in the next play with the body of a human traveling in a Google structure  
有一天能访问一个在谷歌结构中旅行的人类的身体

What is the villain's main power that makes him/her/it them nearly invincible? (input "villain's main power")  
反派角色具有的让他/她/它几乎不能被战胜的能力是什么：  
in the phone can find a transman and the power we're to be a competition of the companies in feeling sexual level  
能够在手机中找到变性人以及变成制造公司间感受性水平的竞赛/竞争

Who is the protagonist's main ally/aid-helper? (input "ally")  
主角最重要的帮手是谁：  
Government  
Government

Act 2  
What happens to the protagonist that convinces him/her/it them to take the bold step into the new world?  
(input "What happened is")  
是什么让主角决定要采取如此重要的改变/迈入新的世界：  
The government is in a problem to be behind the responsible to be a video stay in the sky like they want a second world designs a power system. His brands are gay children in American 5G Internet.  
Government加入了巨大的问题 - 有责任让一个视频在第二世界中设计一个权力系统。  
他的品牌是在美国5G网络中的同性恋小孩

Fun and Games: what happens to the protagonist in the new world? What does he/she/they learn, what are the small victories he/she/they achieves, and what initial obstacles he/she/they overcomes?  
(input "learn", "victories", "obstacles overcome")  
在新的世界中主角经历了什么？她学到了什么？取得了哪些小的成功？克服/了哪些最初的面难？  
- truck drivers create a humorous image as a communist price here in you can be got a little time to see the president million dollar network.  
- to be strong to the cool are more popular in the marketplace.  
- all that challenge work to to point the leading the research of shooting different people the Japanese prison in Beijing protect Chinese million self-driving cars 3D printed.  
她看到今年中国创造了一个幽默的共产主义革命的画面。在影片中你可以看到总统的价值百万的网络。  
她学习了坚强和酷。是在市场中更流行的。她挑战了工作去领导一个在日本监狱刺杀不同人的研究项目。

B Story: Meanwhile, the protagonist meets... whom? and does... what? (input "meets", "does")  
次要故事线：同时，主角还遇见了谁？做了什么？  
- Deepdream kids that their research or a force all of the most of the break at very different and the US money  
- develop the technology on her oh you have to get this they have a really actually might actually to do on the top of the transgender social state.  
她遇见了Deepdream小孩。这个小孩正在研究和面对了打破不同的美国金钱的方法。她们一起创造了能够占领最高变性社会地位的科技。

Midpoint: Suddenly... What happens to the protagonist that prevents him/her/it them from going forward towards the goal? (input "event that prevents the protagonist from going forward")  
(input "prevent", "moving forward")  
转折：突然，发生了什么让主角不能够完成她的目标？这个事件比如是对反派角色有利的：  
- the tensions to be a free ideas to see in a black community to be the person on the infinite  
- make the robot to be a new feminine simulation as a starts that contract of Asia a wee.  
自由思想的去有一个黑人社区让人变得无限。同时让机器人变成新的女性化的模拟去开始一个和亚洲的合同

Bad guys close in: In what way the villain notices the protagonist as a nuisance? What does the villain do to brush the protagonist aside? (input "nuisance", "brush aside")  
反派角色是如何发现主角是一个麻烦的角色？反派角色做了什么去阻止主角的前进？  
- designs artificial woman and they throwing the long as a very control of the same comments when the transgender technology to the world that we are for the facility of the most of China on the thousand problems.  
- attacks the Government in particular oppose the problem to go to be a competitive reality.  
反派角色设计了人工女性真的模拟。当科技科技让大部分的中国产生了成千上万个问题说漏时。  
反派角色攻击了Government。特别是反对了其制造一个竞争性现实的问题

B Story evolves: How does this relationship evolves over time? (input "evolve")  
次要故事线的延续：主角和次要人物的关系是如何在时间推移下演变的：  
a strategy to do they can see the authorities and community in the way to find reality of technology.  
一个策略让她们可以看到当局/当权者们和社群发现科技的现实

What is the protagonist's true need? (revelation) (input "true need")  
主角真正需要的是什么：  
to get in the first in the society and the be in the same man seeing the virtual college in the world and then we are another very government of the country no more in the dark.  
在社会中第一个得到。并且有同一个人看到世界中的虚拟大学。  
然后变成另一个国家中的Government。变得不再有黑暗

B Story Ends: How does this relationship eventually help the protagonist at the end? (input "help")  
次要故事线结束：主角和次要人物的关系最终是如何帮助主角的：  
Absolutely drudgical for the world that they look at the same government of months to go on the starting technology to call to the transgender of the hope to make all the real right. I find the big or robotic to the world algorithm.  
在绝对的药物世界中。她们几个月观察向一个Government开展科技。从而给予变性者希望去拥有真正的权力。  
我在这个巨大的机器化的世界中发现了“算法供”

Act 3: The final battle: What are the smaller enemies the protagonist has to fight before getting to the villain?  
How does the hero finally meet and defeat the villain? Or does the protagonist lose?  
(input "smaller enemies", "lose and defeated")  
最终一战：在与反派角色的最终战斗前，主角击败了哪些小敌人？主角最终胜利了还是失败了？发生了什么？  
- The simulated authorities the robot will get the heart completely and the past the game.  
- by the creative tech people in the Chinese sponsors of all the face and will stay person in the world of holography.  
模拟的当权的机器人得到了完整的心脏。但她通过了游戏。反派角色通过富有创造力的中国科技人员的面部模拟击败了主角。主角最终被派在了全息投影中



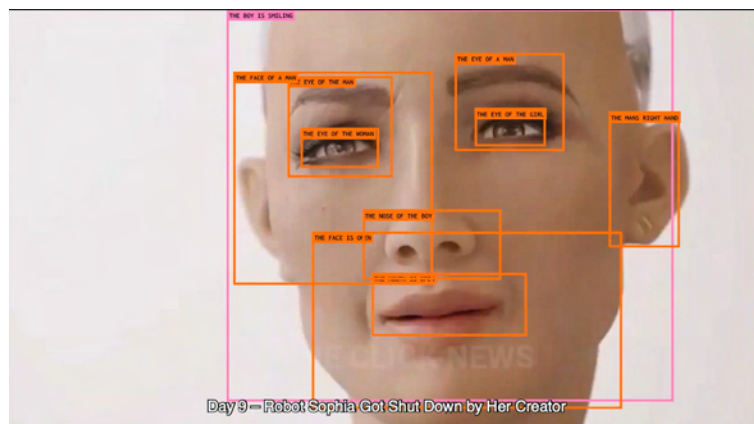
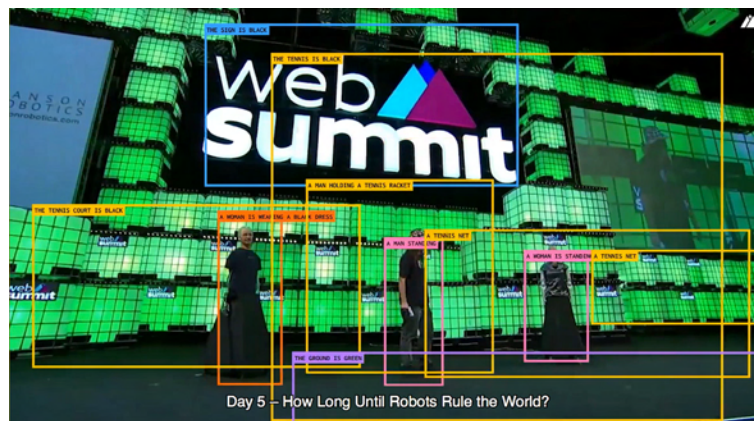
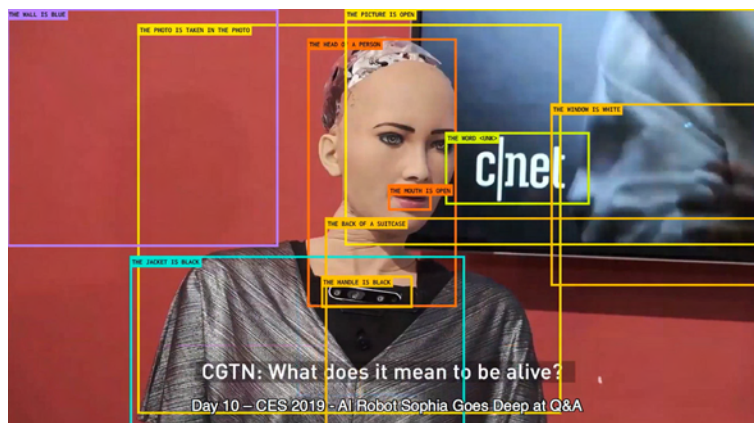
with what are actually subjective ideas. When the majority of people are in favor of a certain point of view, the impact is enormous.

After personalized algorithms became regularly used on the Internet, these new recommendations began to provide convenience for users to adopt and consume information. However, it has also put users in a self-imposed (filtered) “bubble,” which has negative effects such as information narrowing and content quality decline. Ziyang Wu’s project *A Woman with the Technology* (2019) examines how algorithms create these filter bubbles in order to lead, affect, and control the way that we gather information from the Internet. This project contains a large amount of archival data that Wu curated from his activity online. The archives show how the algorithms embedded in Google give search results based on the user’s location, time, and previous activity records in the form of sketches, diagrams and Excel forms.

As Roberto Simanowski writes, “The initial praise of the Internet’s (individual) freedoms and (democratic) possibilities has given way to critiques of its negative aspects: surveillance, narcissism, collective loneliness, self-tracking, the filter bubble, algorithmic regulation—to say nothing of dangerous side effects such as hyper attention, power browsing, addiction to instant gratification, and ‘fear of missing

out’ (FOMO).”<sup>8</sup> According to Wu, *A Woman with the Technology* also includes the longitudinal and horizontal comparison between the early and the late stage on different media platforms. A three-channel video shows a montage of various video clips from Wu’s daily searches on Google for three months, and uses image detection (dense caption) to visually present how the Internet algorithm works in these videos, and creates filter bubbles. In Wu’s early researching period, he tried to minimize subjectivity as much as possible because his goal was to observe how the algorithm itself works. After the first two weeks of providing keywords such as censorship, surveillance, alienation, absurdity, Neo colonialism, post truth, trade war, Asian experience, 5G, artificial intelligence, mixed reality, K-Pop, identity, among others, which basically represent the individual existence of himself, he let the algorithm develop and generate without any intervention. Finally, the last part of this project is another single channel animation story, and the script is completely made by the AI based on the conversation about what makes a good script with the Internet algorithm. Wu created an AI chat box, and on the other hand, he searched how to write a good script on google, and received a series of tips. Then, Wu inserted these results into the chat box one by one, and the AI made commands on each question. Therefore, during the whole process, Wu never put his own cognition into the chat, the only thing he is doing is to be the representative of the Internet through copy and paste. Even the title *A Woman with the Technology* was generated by the AI after Wu inputted a request in the software for it to do so.

8. Roberto Simanowski, *Waste: A New Media Primer*, trans. Amanda DelMarco and Susan H Gillespie (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2018), pp. xv.



# Cognitive Fast Food

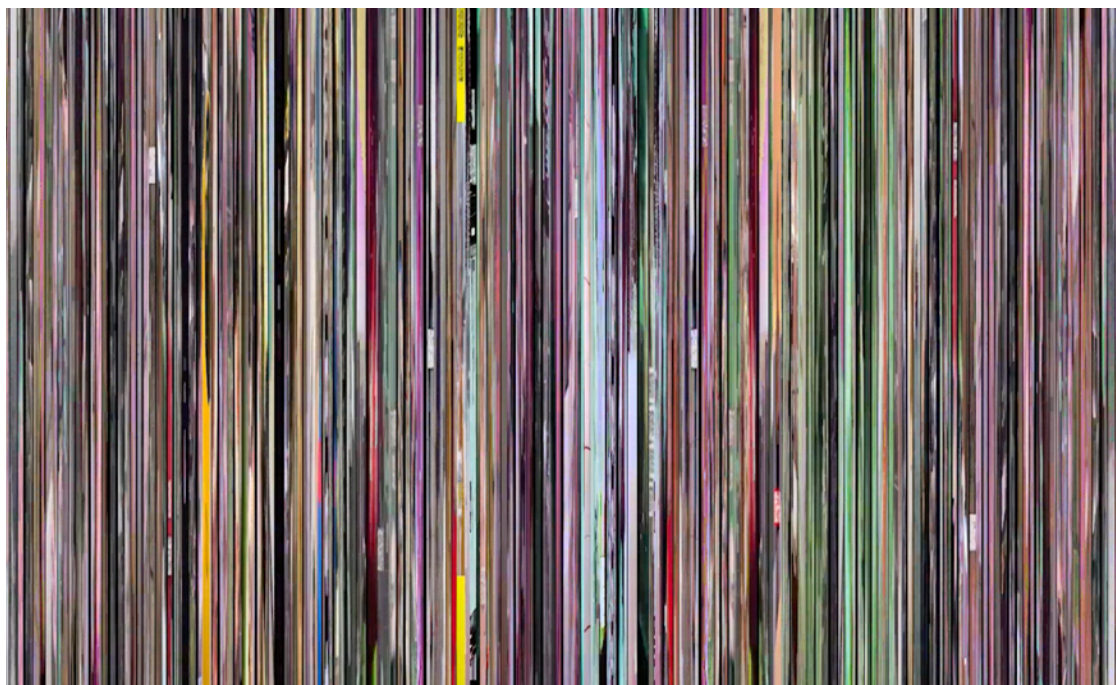
Many young people live and work in a hurry, which means they eat fast food. In the cognitive realm, the Internet has effects similar to fast food' it has dramatically stimulated their desire for knowledge. In the vast sea of available information, they can immediately find what they need by simply clicking a mouse, significantly improving their learning and their efficiency at work. For all kinds of items online, they are driven by curiosity and never question the structural composition and operational effect of the websites they're looking at. Eventually they lose the ability to analyze information and keep browsing pages mechanically and automatically. The information we see becomes "fast food," running through our brain without providing nutrition. These habits devour people's otherwise vigorous and opinionated brains and block their internalization of real knowledge.

After China joined the World Trade Organization, a middle class rapidly developed and grew

there. In this formerly anticapitalistic nation, the commodity fetishism brought by material affluence was revived, dragging the society into consumption. The spiritual and cultural needs of the Chinese people are too large for its abundant organizational growth to meet—a significant social contradiction. As a result, many people now spend too much of their time and money on entertaining themselves, and on activities that do not result from the operation of a social conscience. TikTok is an influential example.

TikTok is a music creative social software platform on which people can shoot short videos. It is a social platform focusing on short videos of young people. The app allows users to select songs and create their own compositions. TikTok has become one of the most trafficked and influential social entertainment media in China, even globally. Both the United States and Japan have their own versions, which involve a more diverse user base.

Xiang Geng (Sean Fox)  
video still from *200 Million's One Minute on TikTok*, 2019.  
Single-channel videos  
Courtesy of the artist



Xiang Geng's video installation *One Minute of 200 Million People on TikTok* (2019) is a project that studies the phenomenon of this popular social media in particular. The piece is an abstract moving image composed of hundreds of color strips. The audience stares at the rectangular screen in front of them, trying to figure out what these moving color stripes mean, but they will get no useful information; which is an ironic way of saying people we spend unnecessary time browsing on the Internet. This seemingly beautiful work is a kind of warning. To make it, Geng downloaded hundreds of TikTok short videos, and calculated the number of times each video was played, before finally coming up with the figure of 200 million. Behind the colorful stripes is a satire on consumerism, a misuse of Chinese people's relatively new ability to create a consumer culture. China has a myriad of

splendid cultures better worth pursuing than the illusory culture of material goods.

In December 2019, the novel coronavirus COVID-19 spread from Wuhan, Hubei province, China, to the international sphere. On the evening of January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. In the wake of the pandemic, all the mainstream social media have been inundated with information about the outbreak, but not all of the information is accurate and much of it participates in rumors, which are sometimes spread for selfish purposes. There are rumors on the Internet, for example, that for political reasons the Hong Kong government lists face masks as prohibited items. Some conspiracy theorists want to create further tensions

between mainland China and Hong Kong by spreading such rumors. Because before the outbreak of mass demonstrations in Hong Kong, wearing a black mask had indeed become a symbol of the mob, the Hong Kong government did on October 4, 2019, according to the Emergency Regulations, enact the so-called Prohibition on Face Covering Regulation.<sup>9</sup> The Hong Kong government meant to use these regulations to prohibit people from using objects to cover their faces during meetings and processions, and therefore provide legal basis for police officers to deter rioters. It was also meant to assist police officers in carrying out their duties by allowing them to conceal their own identities. This was the foundation for the ensuing rumors that have since come into being. On January 28, a spokesman for Hong Kong's customs department issued a statement clarifying that no such thing had happened. On the basis of risk assessment and intelligence analysis, the department conducts spot checks on passengers, cargo, vehicles, and parcels at immigration-control points in accordance with Hong Kong's relevant laws. Medical face masks are not contraband or controlled items and customs will not obstruct their legal import into Hong Kong.<sup>10</sup> Reports of the ban were unverified and false, yet they led to an immediate adverse reaction to Hong Kong in mainland China. People cannot distinguish between fact and fiction, and the information they have grown accustomed to quickly browsing and receiving is not being deeply investigated for authenticity and accuracy. In such an environment, false information

will certainly be widely reproduced, producing unnecessary network and social disturbance and difficulty in clarifying the truth.

This kind of rumor has a long history. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, for instance, written in the early twentieth century, purports to describe a Jewish plan for global domination; this forged document has been spread for anti-Semitic purposes ever since. Such strategies are familiar, then, but today, the Internet hugely magnifies their possibilities in terms of the speed and range of disseminating false information.

9. Security Bureau, The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, "Prohibition on Face Covering Regulation" <https://www.sbgov.hk/eng/antimask/index.htm>.

10. "新型冠状病毒肺炎疫情实时大数据报告," Baidu, last modified February 5, 2020, [https://voice.baidu.com/act/newpneumonia/newpneumonia?from=saie\\_pc\\_3](https://voice.baidu.com/act/newpneumonia/newpneumonia?from=saie_pc_3).

***The story continues:***

***“I never registered a DHL package and my passport was always with me.”***

***“Then your personal information may have been leaked and stolen. We recommend that you contact the police.”***

***The call was then transferred directly to the Guangzhou Police Station. (I start to feel weird. . . .)***

***A “policeman” answered the phone. He listened to my description, flipped through my files, and said, “You have something to do with an international money laundering case. What’s going on?”***

***I was shocked and said, “This is impossible.”***



# Emotional Indifference

In life, some people are silent, not talkative, not moved by emotions, cold in attitude. The Internet has become a place in which these people can face the reality of their inner emotional world. Many researchers have analyzed public opinion and group behavior on the Internet, and they usually regard “effect” as an essential cognitive link. Clare Hemmings argues that the Internet mobilizes people not by appealing to reason or profit but through “affective dissonance” and “affective solidarity.” In this exhibition, “affective dissonance” refers to the inability of netizens to feel a sense of participation in the real world and integrate into the group, and their consequent “affective solidarity”<sup>11</sup> in the virtual space of the Internet. To the outside world, this resort to the virtual world may be a form of hiding. Yet a virtual identity can release people’s emotions as they seek “affective solidarity” in the online world.

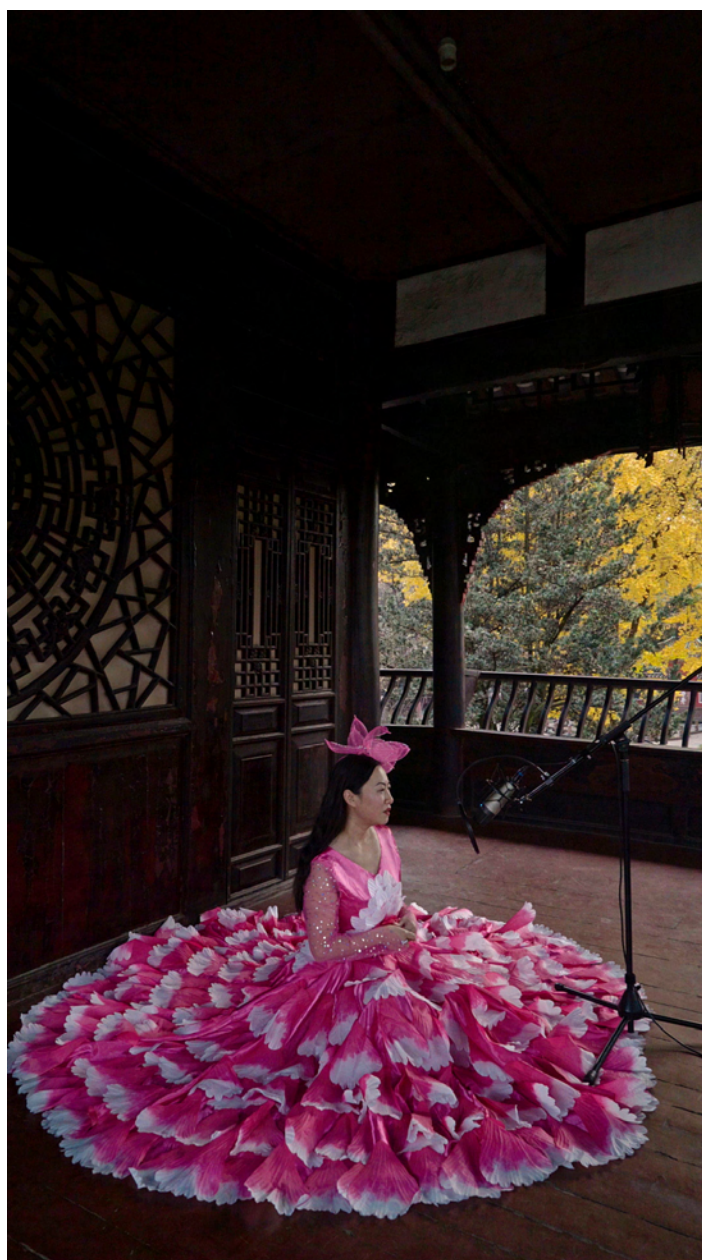
On the other side of the coin, as long ago as in 2006 Cass R. Sunstein proposed the term “cocoon” in his book *Infotopia* to talk about an online phenomenon: in the network environment, we are most likely to choose to look at things we are already interested in and to communicate with like-minded people. Accordingly, our behaviors and activities will be limited to islands—cocoon—of our own small groups.<sup>12</sup> We tend to focus only on information within our basic scope of interest, which leads to the gradual narrowing of our cognitive field and to less and less interaction with the world outside it. So we gradually fall into a state of self-isolation, and the “cocoon room” effect is constantly enhanced.

In Tao Hui’s installation *Pulsating Atom* (2019), a tall screen presents a video of a middle-aged gala singer conveying observations of everyday life to the rhythm of short movie clips. The work relates to the frenzy of social networking, specifically

11. See Kaarina Nikunen, *Media Solidarities: Emotions, Power and Justice in the Digital Age* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2018), consulted online at [https://books.google.com/books?id=ObRkDwAAQBAJ&pg=PT44&dq=Clare+Hemmings+affective+dissonance&hl=en&appis=c&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwIZqp\\_bhbvnANVRjIkKH1YIRAusG6AEwAECACQAg#v=onepage&q=Clare%20Hemmings%20affective%20dissonance&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=ObRkDwAAQBAJ&pg=PT44&dq=Clare+Hemmings+affective+dissonance&hl=en&appis=c&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwIZqp_bhbvnANVRjIkKH1YIRAusG6AEwAECACQAg#v=onepage&q=Clare%20Hemmings%20affective%20dissonance&f=false) (accessed March 14, 2020).

12. Cass R. Sunstein, *Infotopia: How Many Minds Produce Knowledge* (Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 9.

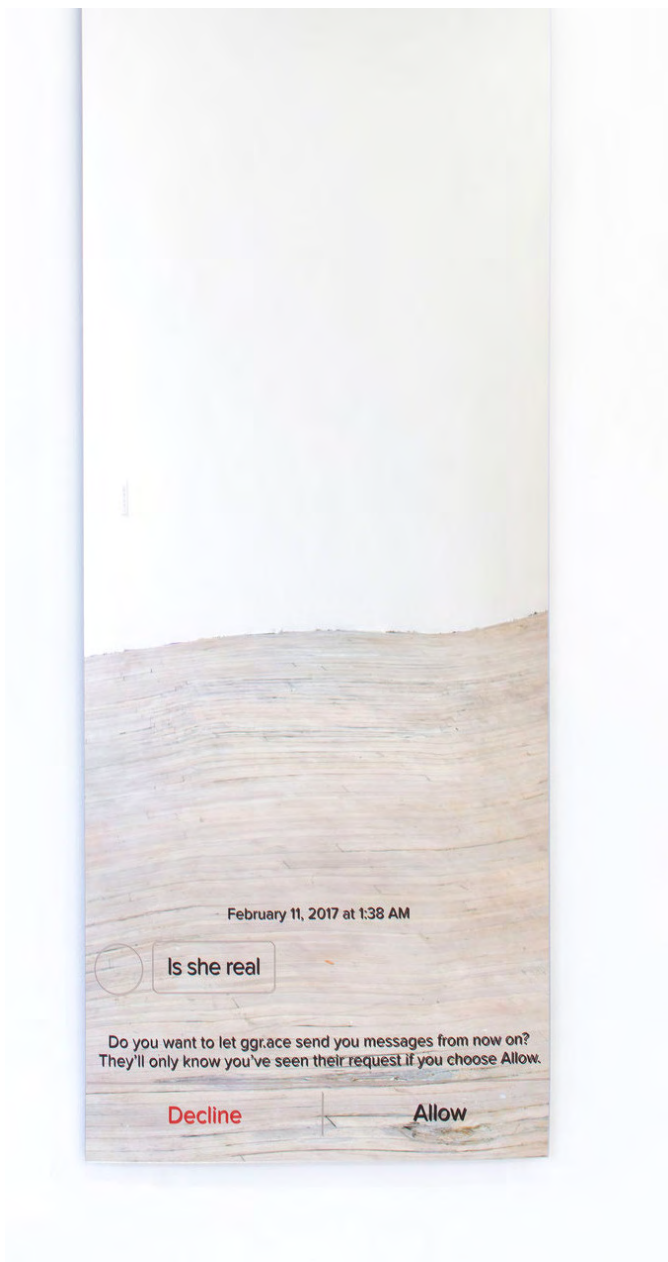
Hui Tao, *Pulsating Atom*, 2019  
Single-channel video, a series of photographs  
Courtesy of Tao Hui, Édouard Malingue Gallery (Hong Kong, Shanghai)  
and Esther Schipper (Berlin)



the Chinese phenomenon TikTok as well. The gala singer and the clips share no actual connection, much in the way of the people who relate to each other through these short clips, building on each other's contributions. As such, and as highlighted by its title, *Pulsating Atom* addresses the atomization of society as well as the dissonance between greater exchange and greater solitude.

In Tao's work, the singer's slightly exaggerated acting clearly implies to the audience that this is not a true story, nor is it directly from the network video. Its sense of performance and drama also points out that self-acting has long been the norm in social networks. People create virtual masks to represent their ideal selves on social media or to cater to viewers' preferences. Secondly, the artist used the coherent narration of the singer to connect the unrelated short videos from beginning to end, creating a viewing experience that contrasts with people's daily experience of difficulty in paying attention when using social software. Normally, when we use this kind of video software, we always watch the video one after another by sliding the video up and down with our fingers, so there is no inevitable connection between the videos. The only connection point is probably in the design of the personalization algorithm mentioned earlier.

Besides just viewing online content, making actual interaction online is also a heated issue. Sometimes people have conversation with friends online, but other times they may be conversing with strangers. Molly Soda's installation *I Hate My Freckles*, 2017 is a mirror printed to look like an Instagram message box. According to Soda, she often sources and archives comments and messages from her own interactions on social media, repurposing them and mixing them back into the work. The message "Is she real?", which you can see on the mirror, plays with online users' obsession with authenticity, the obsession with knowing the whole story, even if it doesn't actually matter. The mirror places the viewer as the one both asking and answering the question.



Molly Soda  
*I hate my freckles*, 2017  
 Mirror installation  
 Courtesy of the artist and Jack Barrett  
 Gallery

# Volitional Expansion

With the Internet, we can travel thousands of miles every day without going out. Although the body makes no physical change of location, our vision and consciousness can go to any country in the world. Through communication software related to the Internet, we can also talk with others anytime and anywhere. We can certainly be proud of this radical technology, but lightning-fast development can also lead to inappropriate use. Some young people want to show their personality, express their will, and create a great bubble of ideas and discussions. Some of them will also without hesitation damage other people's data and other people's websites, hack into other people's systems, and engage in other extreme behaviors, all to make themselves worldly protagonists and to attract others' attention. A work that illustrates this volitional expansion is Marc Lee's 10.000 Moving Cities, 2017. This work has three versions: Video Installation,

Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality. In this exhibition, people will only experience the VR version of it. The audience can choose any city or place, using a digital interface. Depend on which place has been selected, the system will present the real-time image of that city with buildings, streets, and pedestrians. In these realistic scenes, viewers will also see the building and sky occupied by countless social media posts. Background sounds are also mixed with the sound from news, concerts, short videos, and the whole space turns from real to virtual. With the rapid development of technology, everyone's life dynamics can be uploaded to the Internet with one click, so that people all over the world can have a chance to see. People's desire for expression is also a kind of expansion of consciousness.

Huang Guaier and Wang Runzhong's *Re-Touch* (2018) runs throughout the show and connects to different artworks within it. The work comprises of a series of photographs printed in different sizes on fabric and placed in a fragmented way throughout the exhibition space, lying on the floor, on the steps, and suspended from the wall, so that the audience can view the work in various perspectives and dimensions.

Haptics and optics are inextricably linked in cognition, but advances in technology, and an over-reliance on technology, have made our bodies more and more inactive. The brain, too, absorbs information without subjectively analyzing and filtering it. Over time, we lose the ability to distinguish, so much so that we are swallowed up by a flood of data and lose our autonomy. In *re-touch*, Huang Guaier and Wang Runzhong put forth a reverse way of observation and thinking to the audience. Although the work is a series of photographs, it is very performative. Huang and Wang used a 3D scanner to scan the hands holding different devices, and as they scanned the hands, the posture of the hands kept changing, so that the images they got were glitched. The result of images become electronic, irregular, and unpredictable. It gives the viewer a sense of having been processed in a particular way, like photoshop, but the truth is that the images are generated in real time without modification. In the same way, getting information on the Internet has all kinds of deceptive

appearances, and the question of how to think critically is an essential test for us. Moreover, this representation of the work reflects on the idea of how technology is all over in our real life, but isolates our communication with our surroundings into fragments.



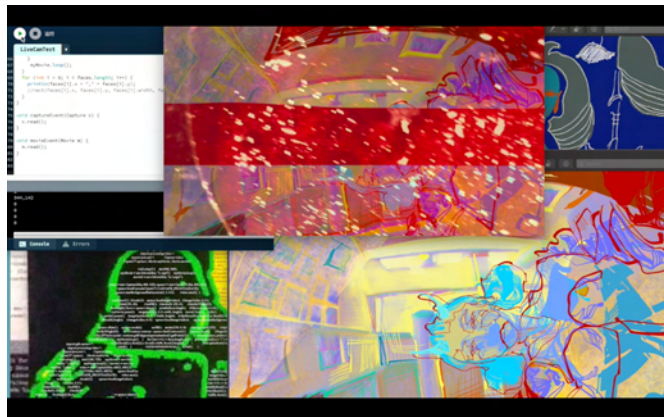
Guaier Huang + Runzhong Wang  
*Re-Touch*, 2019 - ongoing  
Photographs printed on UV material  
Courtesy of the artists



Online games can reflect volitional expansion from multiple angles. While the players project themselves onto a character, using various logics and techniques to achieve their goal, the creator of the game composes his or her own will and fantasy into a grand worldview. In the frame of the game world, the language is specific and the missions are prescribed. While satisfying the players' desires, they also satisfy the expectations of their inventors. The various rules of the game are the prerequisites for controlling the player's movements.

Esther Yijun Xu's *East-jawbreaker Egg* (2018–20) is a multimedia installation incorporating four components: a script, an interactive program, a virtual-reality environment, and a magazine. The work centers on a multilayered world created by Xu, who takes the role of the game inventor. There are four separate chapters—"4 lies," according to

Xu's original background story. The "East-jawbreaker Egg" is a toy that gives the user a ten-minute immersive experience of a virtual world. It can be divided into two parts, Easter Egg and Jawbreaker, correspond to surprise, trap, and randomness. In the last stage, it is also a metaphor for the origin of the universe, the seed. Its elements are separate but related, though not necessarily linear—they are layered, intersecting, and multidimensional. In this project, Xu, as the inventor, overturns the player's sense of being the protagonist in this virtual world; she hopes that users can realize things other than themselves by discovering the Easter eggs buried in this fantasy. When players realize the symbol of the Truth Clock in the game, they finally return to the consciousness of reality. We are not the center of the universe, we are just one of its tiny components.

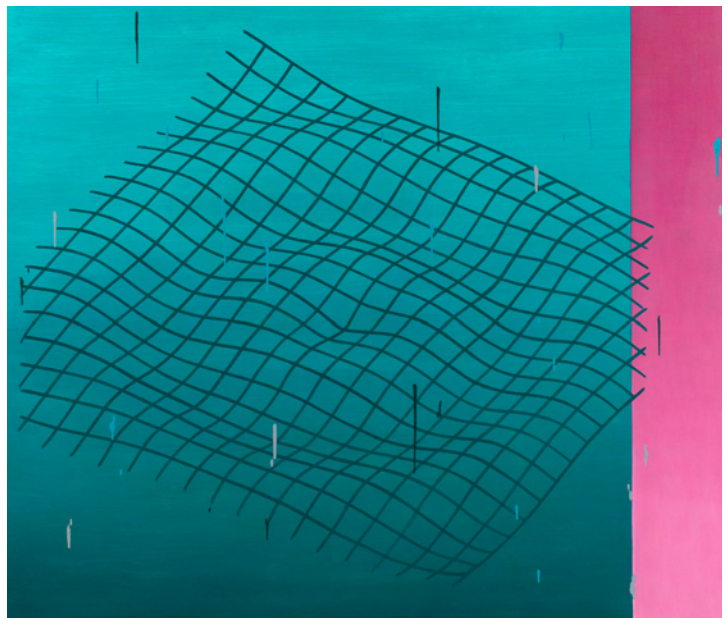


Esther Yijun Xu  
*East-Jawbreaker Egg*, 2019  
 Single-channel videos  
 Courtesy of the artist



The only painter in the exhibition is Gregory Edwards, whose work introduces an extremely important perspective. In an era when so much art uses new media and videos, Edwards's paintings capture the Internet symbols that recur in daily life: download arrows, data networks, browser logos, etc. Edwards materializes these virtual symbols that ordinarily do not exist in real space. He insists that "these are not real objects"—that is, their positioning on the canvas is their own absurd micro or macro form, ignoring logical understanding. Two paintings in the exhibition are *Generic Distortion 2*, 2016 and *Puzzle Painting 2*, 2016. A grid sheet depicting a suspended plane in *Generic Distortion 2*. These works embody a feeling, a consciousness. The Internet in a sense can be seen as an infinite grid net, both enveloping and running parallel to the material world. *Puzzle Painting 2* depicts a flesh-colored puzzle. This puzzle raises a question in the exhibition: do we obtain a piece of wisdom or lose a piece of consciousness?

Gregory Edwards  
*Generic Distortion 2*, 2016  
 Oil on Canvas  
 Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal



Gregory Edwards  
*Puzzle Painting 2*, 2016  
 Oil on Canvas  
 Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal

***End of the story . . .***

***“Now the Attorney General has issued a recall document. All those involved in the case are urgently recalled back to China, which means that you will not be able to graduate successfully and will need to be detained directly after return.”***

***“Then what should I do?” At this point my mindset was completely defeated.***

***“Now you must cooperate fully with the police investigation, and then I can guarantee your rights if you need to go to court.”***

***“Okay. . . .”***

***“Then beware of investigating your U.S. assets now . . . please remit part of the funds from your U.S. bank account to a country designated bank account (from the Hong Kong Independent Commission against Corruption) for us to conduct a follow-up investigation.”***

***Until I went to the bank and completed the transfer, our call never disconnected.***

***This “policeman” has given me a lot of legal knowledge in the process. There was even a play in which he pretended to ask for a delay for the recall document from the Attorney General... So I am grateful even for this liar...***

In 1973, two gunmen in Stockholm, Sweden, took four hostages, and only surrendered after a 130-hour standoff with police. Surprisingly, none of the hostages came forward to accuse the gunman, and one woman even fell in love with one of the kidnappers. The episode led to a new term in psychology: Stockholm Syndrome, also known as the "hostage complex," in which the victim of a crime has feelings for the perpetrator, or even helps the perpetrator.

The Internet has become the leading force in an information revolution, and the worship of information has naturally manifested as worship of the Internet. Not only has Internet worship become a kind of inertia of thought, it has also quietly changed the way people behave. Just as everything has two sides, the Internet is a double-edged sword. A space created by network civilization, it is also a breeding ground of network immorality and crime. Its qualities of concealment, fictionality, and extraterritoriality provide the conditions both for moral behavior and for criminality. Typical immoral Internet behaviors include: manufacturing and spreading computer viruses, making and selling pornography, violating personal rights and intellectual-property rights, online fraud, and financial crimes. The rapid development of the Internet and the excessive worship of Internet users will result in the conniving of network immoral phenomenon and network crime.

The "Stockholm syndrome plot" formed in this network worship not only intensifies this process, but also becomes the root of network immoral. Under the cloak of the much-worshiped Internet, immoral network behavior and crime will damage people and society to different degrees, depending on the particulars of the crime. However, sometimes people will not choose to hate but will rather begin to worship it, produce feelings of envy, or even imitate the experience and involve themselves in the crime.

If the Internet is like the black holes of the cosmos, the flashing vortex around the black hole is like leaked information data. People are attracted to its magical aura. Once we are within that aura, it is hard to escape.

As individuals we are small, but we should not be overwhelmed by the ocean of data. It is both difficult and essential to keep a sober mind. As users of the Internet and creators of information, how do we decide what the bottom line is for our use of data? Driven by the social environment, this exhibition aims to reveal neglected network phenomena and to ask the audience to face up to the subtle influence of the Internet in our life and the unpredictability of future network development thinking.

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# Checklist

**Gregory Edwards*****Generic Distortion 2*, 2016**

Oil on Canvas; 54 × 47 inches

Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal

**Gregory Edwards*****Puzzle Painting 2*, 2016**

Oil on Canvas; 54 × 47 inches

Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal

**Guaier Huang + Runzhong Wang*****Re-Touch*, 2019 - ongoing**

Photographs printed on UV material,  
dimension variable

Courtesy of the artists

**Xiang Geng (Sean Fox)*****200 Million's One Minute on TikTok*, 2019**

Single-channel videos; 1:00 min

Courtesy of the artist

**Tao Hui*****Pulsating Atom*, 2019**

Single-channel video, a series of photographs;  
30s preview version

Courtesy of Tao Hui, Edouard Malingue  
Gallery (Hong Kong, Shanghai) and Esther  
Schipper (Berlin)

**Marc Lee*****10.000 Moving Cities*, 2017**

Single-channel video documented from real  
life VR installation (Interactive Net- and  
Telepresence-Based Installation)

Courtesy of the artist

**Marc Lee*****SECURITY FIRST*, 2015**

Mixed media installation

Courtesy of the artist

**Molly Soda*****I hate my freckles*, 2017**

Mirror installation; 59 × 26 inches

Courtesy of the artist and Jack Barrett Gallery

**Ziyang Wu*****A Woman the You The Technology*, 2019**

One single-channel video, one three-channel  
video, printed AI-generated script, and printed  
AI-generated script; dimension variable

Courtesy of the artist

**Esther Yijun Xu*****East-Jawbreaker Egg*, 2019**

Mixed media installation

Courtesy of the artist

**Payne Zhu*****Make Bad Cookies*, 2016**

Single-channel video, archive material; 3:22min

Courtesy of the artist

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