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Unlimited-Limited: Hybridized Identity and Censorship In Chinese Post-Internet Art

Abstract

The Internet has revolutionized young Chinese citizens, drawing them out of national isolation and enabling them to cross all sorts of cultural boundaries. However, they are coming of age with an internet that is distinctively different from the rest of the World Wide Web because of the government's censorship of information. It is clear that, under this situation, the internet has affected the careers of many Chinese artists especially the younger generation. "It's so unlimited but also limited. It's really rich material," said Chinese net artist Miao Ying. By noticing the opportunities for creativity that lie in indigenous idiosyncrasies and localized concerns, the young Chinese artists are creating a visual style that blurs between the network and reality, and cycle images in these two spaces. Chinese artists working in this manner are considered "post-internet artists" who are working closer with the world and fueling their aspirations to exhibit internationally and participate in a global dialogue. Among them, Guan Xiao, Lu Yang, Xu Wenkai, Miao Ying, Lin Ke and Chen Zhou represent post-internet art practices. Using these six Chinese artists' works, this article is trying to give a general glance of the creativity under the 'unlimited-limited' internet situation in China.

Key words: Chinese post-internet art, Cultural hybridity, Identity, Censorship, Aesthetic, Ideology

There was a moment in the mid-2000s, when the floodgates really opened and suddenly all information was available and a great number of Chinese people were expected to engage with it. The Internet has revolutionized a generation of young Chinese citizens, drawing them out of isolation and enabling them to cross all sorts of cultural boundaries. However, they are coming of age with an internet that is distinctively different from the rest of the web. The differences in internet culture are not only between the USA and China, but between China and other Asian countries. Over the past decade, China has blocked Google, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, as well as thousands of other foreign websites, including The New York Times and Chinese Wikipedia. A plethora of Chinese websites emerged to serve the same functions — though they came with a heavy dose of censorship.¹ Under this unlimited but also limited situation, Chinese artists already noticed the opportunities for creativity that lie in indigenous idiosyncrasies and localized concerns. They have learned to process the particular obstacles of their own online experience to achieve their desired goals. Among them, there are some artists who were interested in how network thinking had influenced production, circulation of art and culture while using the same techniques in the works. Chinese artists working in this manner are often grouped together under the banner of “post-internet² artists.” Insofar it has brought the world closer to them, fueling their aspirations to exhibit internationally and participate in a global dialogue.

Unlimited: Hybridized Identity in Chinese Post-Internet Art

When looking at contemporary art, identity is considered not fixed. The forces that influence the construction of identity are not stable, and thus identity itself is always in flux. Because identity is largely determined by outside influences, it is fluid and transformable as the context changes.³ Many

¹ Li Yuan, *A Generation Grows Up in China Without Google, Facebook or Twitter*, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/06/technology/china-generation-blocked-internet.html>

² The term ‘Post-Internet’ emerged from discussions about Internet Art by Artie Vierkant, Gene McHugh, and Marisa Olson, which denotes criticism that refers to the Internet’s effects on aesthetics, culture and society. Reflecting our new relationships to images and objects, Post-Internet Art does not necessarily be produced on the Internet, it also uses offline formats.

³ Jean Robertson, *Themes of Contemporary Art: Visual Art after 1980*, (New York: Oxford UP, 2005) 114.

contemporary Chinese artist have become world travelers in the past decade. The majority of these artists never officially emigrate, but it is not unusual for them to spend several months a year outside China. The channels opened up brought fluidity and flexibility to their creation in the current era.⁴ The younger generation of Chinese artist do not deny that growing up in China has given them a particular outlook, but for the most part, these young artists acknowledged their hybridized identity that is distinctively influenced by international pop culture and unlimited information provided by the internet. Also, with the introduction of avatars and user profiles, the internet has offered access to alternative personae and diverse presentations of identity.

Born in 1983, Guan Xiao has been working in Beijing since 2006, when she finished a BA in film directing at the Communication University in China. She is a sculptor and installation artist who uses the internet as artists from earlier times perused museum archives. In her last solo show at Kunsthalle Winterthur in Switzerland, Guan Xiao's Swiss invention introduces itself by a long narrativizing title—*Individuality has completely vanished, only traces become memories that linger in the recesses of consciousness*. Moving between two large rooms of the museum, visitors are flashed by disorienting flickering; a disquieting theatrical effect in tune with the work's concern around technologically induced social disorders of perception. Her practice detects how our self-awareness is relevant to living matters beside us.⁵ Guan is skeptical of the term “post-internet”, or of any label that reduces art to a technological innovation. Her work feels more like a cross sections, where particles and fragments of any number of clouds are hallucinated, fabricated and recomposed into new forms. Transformation, not fixity, is the key concept, not just the way materials are transformed by her zany juxtapositions, but how ideas and concepts are transformed through the experience of engaging with her work. Having exhibited widely abroad, she is also skeptical of any other labels, such as “Chinese artist.” “I never think about identity. I don't care about it at all,” she said, “Everyone's identity is transformed all the

⁴ Wu Hung, *A Case of being “contemporary”: Conditions, spheres, and narratives of contemporary Chinese art*, (2008)106.

⁵ Ginevra Bria, *Guan Xiao. Memory and consciousness in the internet era*, 2018, <https://www.domusweb.it/en/art/2018/09/13/guan-xiao-recesses-of-consciousness.html>

time. You can be a bus driver, or a nurse. Or you can change your nationality. Basically you are growing up and getting old every day, and your identity is always changing.”⁶



Guan Xiao, *Individuality has completely vanished, only traces become memories that linger in the recesses of consciousness*, 2018. Kunsthalle Winterthur.

This conception of identity as expressed by Guan Xiao is shared by many young artists in China, who proclaim a preference for terms like human or universal to any of the more geographically determined notions of self. “I don’t live in Shanghai or Beijing, I live on the Internet,” says Lu Yang, an artist born in 1984 in Shanghai and resists any easy categorization. “I am not a new media artist, I am many things,” she adds.⁷ In *Uterus Man*, her ongoing project, a grotesque superhero is fueled on blood and estrogen, clothed in a bright pink jumpsuit. *Uterus Man* is the protagonist of a 3D

⁶ Barbara Pollack, *Brand new art from China: a generation on the rise*, (New York: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2018)146.

⁷ Marianna Cerini, *Pleasure principle: Meet the Chinese artist breaking taboos for fun, not politics*, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/style/article/lu-yang-art-basel-hong-kong/index.html>

animation and a fully operational video game, which has attracted thousands of online players as well as support from curators worldwide. While ostensibly appearing to be male, the character derives superpowers from various aspects of the female reproductive organs, including the cervix, the vagina, the placenta, and an umbilical cord. In this and many other projects, Lu likewise plays with the intersection between technology and identity: Her quirky digital avatars evade the categorization of

national, racial or gender boundaries, and provide us glimpses of a digital, post-human future.⁸ What she has gained from interactions with the internet is a notion that her identity can be altered to match the needs and demands of a particular website or social network. For many, this is tantamount to freedom, a utopian belief in the possibility of escape from societal limitations through transformative experiences that appear to boundary-less.



Lu Yang, the “Uterus Man” arcade console, 2015

⁸ Josh Feola, *China’s tech boom has inspired a wave of internet-related art*, 2018, <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/612604/chinas-tech-boom-has-inspired-a-wave-of-internet-related-art/>

Limited: Censorship in Chinese Post-Internet Art

Unlimited, perhaps is an optimistic outlook for internet users around the world, who regularly escape into fantasy realms or post alternative user profiles on dating sites, guided by a belief in the unregulated nature of the web. This belief, undeniably, has been challenged poignantly by an online environment so heavily controlled by the government. In China, since there is pretty much only one rule, and it is simple: Don't undermine the state, the Chinese government goes to great lengths to surveil and curtail these online users' activities through outright censorship, often referred to as the Great Firewall. While Facebook, Twitter, Google, and YouTube are censored and unavailable in China, there are smartphone apps, like WeChat, online communities, like Weibo, and online search engine, such as Baidu. These are providing a great way for the authorities to police what people say and do.⁹ Rejecting the digital ecosystems of the "global Internet," Chinese netizens and mobile users are offered sufficient—and sufficiently mature—choices by local companies to ensure that they rarely venture beyond China's digital frontiers, a situation that enables the Chinese government to effectively herd its Internet users toward methods of communication that it can more reliably monitor. This has resulted in an Internet "that has global features yet has assumed distinctly Chinese characteristics."¹⁰ But, through proxy servers, known as VPNs, many young Chinese circumvent government restrictions and access the widest range of websites. Reacting to these situations, there are a few young artists who are now questioning the internationalized promise of the web and are examining the specifics of the Chinese online experience.

In a work titled *Gfwlist* and created by Xi An artist Xu Wenkai (aaajiao) who has computer science background, a tiny printer that spits out roll of papers carrying the decoded domain names.

⁹ Raymond Zhong, *How China wall off the internet*, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/11/18/world/asia/china-internet.html>

¹⁰ Ros Holmes, *Meanwhile In China...Miao Ying and the Rise of Chinternet Ugly*, (UK: Oxford, 2018)32.



Those domains belong to a list of websites that have been blocked by China's Great Firewall.¹¹ In this installation, Xu hints at what might be the physical length of China's "Great Firewall"—a sophisticated infrastructure for blocking websites and search terms—by printing out the URLs it restricts. The monotonous, serial repetition echoes the manual labor required to constantly monitor and block sensitive material, the never-ending work of the government's internet watchdogs.

Xu Wenkai, *Gfwlist*, 2016, ZKM

Of far greater relevance to a discussion of Chinese internet censorship is an artist who has no interest in only focusing on the limitations of the Chinese internet, believing there are much more fascinating things underway. Born in 1985 in China, earning an MFA degree in Electronic Integrated Arts from Alfred University in 2009, Miao Ying relished the seemingly unlimited access to the web that she had in USA, but upon graduating, she immediately relocated back to her hometown-Shanghai. By then, Google, Facebook, and other social networking sites were permanently shut down in China. But, she also found everyone in China started to contribute to the local internet. People began inventing new words and images to circumvent the Chinese censors, spawning a unique vocabulary and form of self-expression.¹² By feeling the power of these attempts, she began to take a neutral position on government censorship and documenting the enormous creativity that internet users in China demonstrate to navigate around the obstacles of censorship. Her series created in 2014, *LAN Love Poem.gifs*, which variously pair screenshots of 'website unavailable' notices with floating or revolving texts in kitsch, colourful fonts that act like abstract slogans haunting the broken links. The gif format of this work, is one of few forms of communication that cannot be easily monitored or censored online in

¹¹ Ros Holmes, *Getting around the Great Firewall of China*, 2017, <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/getting-round-the-great-firewall-of-china/>

¹² Pollack, 149.

China. The blocked web pages that appeared in every piece of this series are a fact – they have been barred by the government in an overt bid to curb viewers' use of the web. 'Flowers all fallen, Birds far gone', reads one; another, 'When cigarettes fall in love with matches the cigarette gets burned'; or 'Holding a kitchen knife cut internet cable, A road with lightning sparks', the particularities of the overlaid gif text accompanied with 8-bit landscape background — catchy humor, poetic, simple imagery, remixed found material — made it an accessible vehicle for political critique and expressing the psychological effects of censorship.¹³ Her numerous works, including *LAN Love Poem.gifs*, compares the compulsion and disappointment of dealing with the Great Firewall to relationships: breakups, jealousy, obsession. "You develop this bond with the person. You fall in love with them,"¹⁴ she said. Miao is prone to hyperbolic talk about the internet in total and quirky metaphors to describe bond with the Chinese internet, which she often describes in interviews as a kind of Stockholm syndrome.



Miao Ying, *Lan Love Poem.gifs – Flowers all fallen, Birds far gone*, 2015

¹³ Iona Whittaker, *Miao Ying: .gif Island*, 2014, https://artreview.com/reviews/jan_feb_2015_review_miao_ying/

¹⁴ Alexandra Pechman, *Meet Miao Ying, the Young Internet Artist Breaking Through China's Firewall*, 2017, <https://www.wmagazine.com/story/miao-ying-internet-artist-china>

Unlimited-Limited: Unique Aesthetics and Ideology in Chinese Post-Internet Art

“It’s so unlimited but also limited. It’s really rich material,” Miao Ying said. Combining GIFs, appropriated advertisements, online videos, and Internet poetry in a torrent of synthesized imagery and text, Miao’s works bring together the specter of online censorship, meanwhile, her practice revels in eschewing technical mastery in favor of lo-fi visual form and *Shanzhai* [fake or pirated] aesthetics with a deliberate disavowal of the commodity fetishization and online self-posturing that have come to characterize China’s digital realm in the early 21st century.¹⁵ To explain her intention, Miao wrote, “A large number of images were produced quickly and in a hurry. Image producers disregarded the taste and quality in the traditional sense, only to satisfy all kinds of immediate needs. Photoshop is going to look at your photo, and it’s going to decide what it thinks should be in the area that you’re filling. In nowadays image making, aesthetic quality is gradually ignored and stylized.”¹⁶ This claim appeared in the Introduction booklet of her solo show in 2016 — *Content-Aware*. In this exhibition, the first thing to see was the five advertising racks placed on the marble base. The content of them were filled with cheesy images of butterflies, books and strawberries flying above the green grass. There were three scrolling LED boxes display advertising screens on the right side. The videos that describe the good life and the photos with the company’s brand aesthetics were simply categorized with random combination of editing. On the right side, on a blue advertising board, the lightning flashes, the wild wolf howls, Ma Yun (The CEO of Alibaba Network Technology co. LTD) posted a contemplative gesture, Mona Lisa hidden in the background and smiled. The pictures printed on the metal plates hung on the back wall shown the contrast before and after using the MeituPic photo editing app. At the end of the exhibition hall, in a video installation consisting of seven TV monitors, numerous applause WeChat stickers surrounded an image that cannot be opened. Looking around the gallery,

¹⁵ Ben Valentine, *The Untapped Creativity of the Chinese Internet*, 2014, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/vdpjj3/chinas-first-net-art-exhibition-113

¹⁶ *After embracing the network art, I feel that I will not love again*, 2016, <http://thecreatorsproject.vice.cn/read/miao-ying-content-aware>

under the white wall and the spot lights, these stereoscopic images, which may seem to be bought from Taobao, perhaps restored the fast experience and the consumption of meaningless picture world by our eyes when we face the screen every day. "It is better to think of it as an emerging aesthetic theory that is evolving, instead of turning a blind eye to this phenomenon," Miao said. In respond to the current situation in which social media pervades many aspects of daily life, and the technical skill required for image production and distribution are lowered, she uses the term "Practical Aesthetics" to describe an extreme internet pragmatism in which functionality is the sole decisive forces, as well as to identify ways in which this lack of aesthetics is becoming an aesthetics of its own.



Miao Ying, *Content-Aware*, 2016, MadeIn Gallery

Miao Ying's experiments tell us more about the impact of networked technologies on contemporary Chinese society on the creative process than the omnipresence of screens and software's domination of the imagination. Another artist — Lin Ke, who was graduated from the same department in China Academy of Art as Miao Ying, represents the other end of the spectrum, creating screenshots and short videos that documents his various ramblings online. Lin never really planned to become a digital artist. When he enrolled in the new media department, he did so with the objective of becoming a painter. However, he soon found himself amidst what he describes as a “technological revolution”, whereby students were often taught in computer rooms rather than studios. Unable to afford a working space of his own, he naturally decided to make his



computer interface to become his canvas. To justify this attitude, in his work — *Screen Shot 2016-04-17 at 11.46.20*, he took a screenshot of his desktop, which used an image of a studio space as the desktop background and placed lots of on processed work files on it. According to the exhibition space, the materials and size of this piece was carefully arranged by Lin. It seemed to open a page in the room. The techniques Lin used in his works are common - anyone who uses laptop will be very familiar with these operations, but they are unlikely to see these graphic effects themselves as artistic languages and an aesthetic on the rise but barely can be noticed.¹⁷

Lin ke, *Screen Shot 2016-04-17 at 11.46.20*,

2016, Art Basel in Hong Kong

In the group exhibition in Shanghai, 2017 - *After Us*, another Chinese digital artist Chen Zhou presented his first non-fiction film, *Life Imitation*, 2016, which combines real life with a virtual computer game. According to the film description, “In a virtual game, a female killer roamed in Los Angeles at night, and the sirens screamed around the city. People has fallen on the street

¹⁷ Bao Dong, “Lin Ke: When New Media Becomes Old”, 2014, <http://www.leapleapleap.com/2014/11/lin-ke-when-new-media-becomes-old/>

continuously, and they didn't know if they were sleeping or dead. In the real world, through WeChat, a woman told a friend the various depressions in her emotional and tend to be mentally disordered for playing different roles in life." If Lin Ke's desktop screenshot tends to be an intimate portrait, then Chen's *Life Imitation* also presents a vivid image of Chinese urban youth's group portrait on this basis. From seeing different episodes of young people's lives in Shanghai, this film uses its own rhythm to take audiences closer to Chinese urban youth's life and dreams fragment; you will see the way they carry out their social roles in this metropolis and how they deal with ubiquitous screens and new technology. In the end, it swirls you into your inner space, finds a release, gets some comfort, or inspires new confusion: how expansive is their loneliness and what kind of ideology will be shaped by this hyper-mediated world?



Chen Zhou, video screenshot of *Life Imitation*, 2017

By exploring the unlimited but also limited internet environment, Chinese post-internet artists acknowledge their hybridized identity and are already at the cutting edge recognizing the opportunities for creativity and having learned to process the particular obstacles of their own online experience and circulation of their artworks on the internet to achieve their desired goals. In this case, their creations are well equipped to navigate a global art world better than any generation that has come before them. Many of their projects are full-fledged introductions to the quirky aspects of China's online culture, which may prove popular enough to attract a following in the West. In one of Miao Ying's interviews, she said, "I think there is a bright future for Chinese internet art." Whether that appreciation comes or not, the young wave of post-Internet Chinese artists is off to an amazing start and I for one will definitely keep my eyes open for their next move.

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