



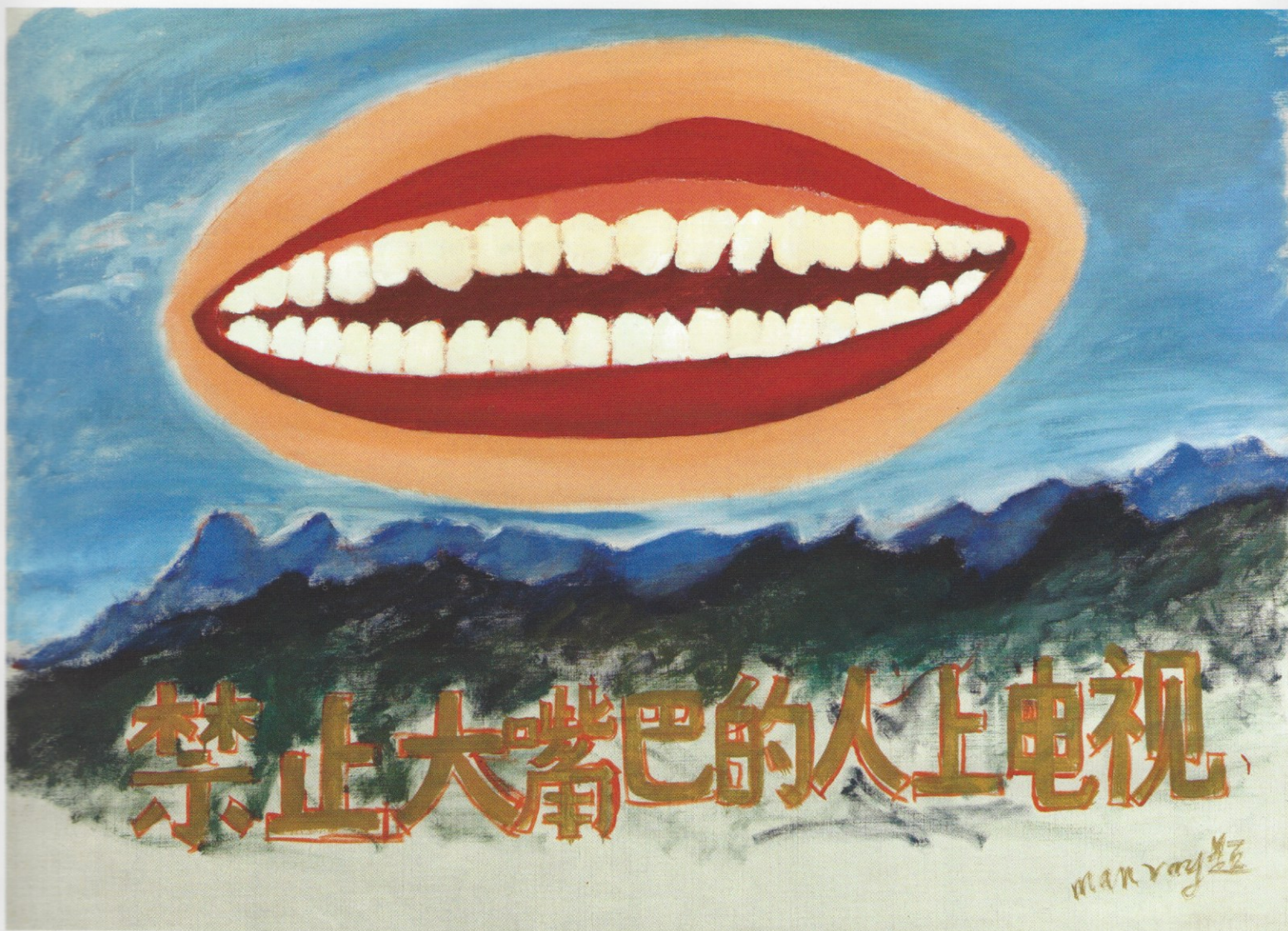
# COMPUTER LEADERS

*Chinese artists defy stereotype to assimilate technology  
in diversely creative ways.*

*By Xin Wang*



**aaajiao: Water Measure-Petroleum, 2017.**  
Antipodes glass bottles, BLK water, peristaltic pump, metal, and acrylic, 19¾ by 7¾ by 4¾ inches.



**IMAGINE THAT DYSTOPIA BEARS LITTLE** resemblance to the Hollywood prototype of an Asian metropolis dense with skyscrapers and dingy alleys adorned with neon signs, but instead involves a real-life mandatory app that requires Chinese government and public-sector workers to check in daily for “lessons” in state ideology. Imagine that the world’s fastest growing archive of contemporary art is run by the Chinese Ministry of Culture and Tourism, which officially vets most of the country’s exhibitions and art fairs and conducts overviews of artists’

entire oeuvres. Imagine that sociologists find the latest frontier for research in the geo-tagged uploads to personal video platforms like Kuaishou, which grants unprecedented access to the lives, vernaculars, and communities of interest. How might these strange new realities alter mass sensibilities and inform the work of artists – both those who use new technology directly and those who work otherwise? And how might such ever-shifting parameters alter criticality in regard to cultural specificity and globalism?

Liu Xiaodong’s *Computer Leader* (1996), which addresses mundane complexities rather than Techno-Orientalist fantasies, is an oil portrait of a pale young man standing in slight contrapposto in front of a workstation. His prominent head, raised chin, and confident expression suggest a subtle, laid-back arrogance, despite his slightly hunched posture and visibly unexercised physique. Liu, a long-revered painter who transformed the Socialist Realist idiom to trenchantly capture scenes of contemporary China, has said he wanted to show “how computers transform mankind, including the bodily changes – how the head gradually becomes larger as people spend more time in front of their monitors” because they have “stopped using their bodies.”<sup>11</sup>

The unflinching realism of *Computer Leader* lies not just in Liu's skill in rendering flesh and objects, but also in his pinpointing a now familiar character, one that stands behind the rise of technology in turn-of-the-millennium China. The image, based on a real digital engineer sought out and photographed by Liu, is essentially a typecast performance. The man's glasses and mock turtle-neck mark him as representative of the tech professionals whose taste, sensibility, and politics currently inform the design of platforms and interfaces that support everything from online banking to multiplayer gaming worldwide. His ethos facilitates unprecedented levels of economic efficiency as well as pervasive systems of administration, control, surveillance. The work's playful title signals Liu's sensitivity to China's massive socioeconomic shift over the past forty years, which, while volatile and exciting, also perpetuates older hierarchies, as business and government "leaders" continue to carry ideological connotations.

Liu couldn't have anticipated China's present-day "social credit" system, which keeps tabs on individuals' civic virtue and public conduct through data mining

**Opposite, Liao Guohe:**  
*No Person with A Big Mouth Shall Appear on TV*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 59 by 78¾ inches.

**Below, Liu Xiaodong:**  
*Computer Leader*, 1996, oil on canvas, 90½ by 71 inches.



and surveillance, but he captured the essence of the technocrats who built it. The subject is as generic as he is precise. This painted figure, distanced from its referent by an intermediary photograph, eschews moral didacticism, suspending judgment in favor of ambiguity and itchy curiosity.

Curiously, works like *Computer Leader* remain unlikely candidates for inclusion whenever "China," "technology," and "the internet" are evoked in curatorial endeavors of late. For example, the exhibition ".com/.cn" – co-organized at the K11 Foundation in Hong Kong in 2017 by Klaus Biesenbach and Peter Eleey, then director and chief curator, respectively, of MoMA PS1, New York – aimed to "create new dialogue around ways in which art is changing in the digital era, both in China and the West."<sup>2</sup> But the result was anything but new. The lineup featured an unsurprising mix of fifteen Chinese and non-Chinese artists who have been regulars in countless other institutional shows and commercial gallery exhibitions of the "post-internet" variety.<sup>3</sup>

What's more, the Hong Kong exhibition perpetuated a tired and false dichotomy in which the "/" in the title conveniently conjures up the Great Firewall and other forms of division that neatly – and tritely – portray Chinese cyberspace as a realm dominated by governmental limitations and tracking, when in fact concepts such as openness, censorship, and connectedness manifest in much more complicated and erratic dynamics across its multiple spheres. Digital restrictions and oversight are real enough, as noted above. But they are far from the only story, or the most interesting story, about the Chinese internet. These nuances seem lost on the show's two Western curators, who, despite their prominence and other achievements, have no extensive knowledge of Chinese language and popular culture, or of the everyday experience of internet users in China. Nevertheless, exhibitions like ".com/.cn," endowed with exceptional resources and visibility, have a lasting impact, with very real implications for artistic practice, curatorial selection, funding, and collecting, as well as the critical frameworks for these still evolving issues.

Another familiar form of intellectual inertia is the assumption that only new media arts – or, in some cases, the emulation of digital aesthetics in traditional mediums – can adequately convey the issues raised by technology. A telling counterexample is Liao Guohe, one of the most celebrated conceptual painters now working in China, who mines the absurdist humor embedded in state media and its highly regimented rhetoric. The eight years that Liao spent working at a state-owned media outlet – as the showrunner of a series of interview-based TV programs – gave him unparalleled insight into the nation's cultural policies and approved communication strategies. *No Person with A Big Mouth Shall Appear on TV* (2008), for instance, juxtaposes a whimsical verbal imperative typical of officialdom with the over-zealous full smile characteristic of state television hosts – a contradiction of the sort common in daily media practice. The elusiveness and parodic nature of Liao's work often recall Sigmar Polke and his satirizing Capitalist Realism, particularly *The Higher Powers Command: Paint the Upper Right Corner Black!* (1969), an abstract painting that at

once fulfills and mocks its titular directive.

Many other Chinese artists, when they do employ new media and technological platforms to create and publicize their works, eschew performing any ostensible “Chineseness” in either form or content. For example, aaajiao’s *Avatar* (2017) is a GIF of a buoyant blonde character reminiscent of Princess Peach from the *Super Mario Brothers* franchise. Appearing on a palm-size screen and rendered in nostalgic, pixelated 8-bit animation, the image balances collective memory and personalized projection. Its maker, the Shanghai- and Berlin-based artist aaajiao (virtual persona of Xu Wenkai), has blogged, programmed, and engaged in online art-making and activism since the early 2000s. His solo exhibition this past summer at Shanghai’s HOW Art Museum served simultaneously as an introduction to his work and as an excavation of Chinese cyberspace during this period, visualizing otherwise ungraspable systems. *Blog Archaeology* (2010), for example, evokes the weight of electrons in all the content published each year on robotwisdom.com (one of the earliest weblogs). The total posts from 1999 to 2008 were saved on ten memory cards, displayed on top of digital scales in a minimalist vitrine. The scales, registering the weight of the cards loaded with data, imitate a scientific measurement of electronic content. The installation *Water Measure–Petroleum* (2017) consists of two bottles connected mouth-to-mouth to resemble an hourglass. Wires twisted around them transmit high-frequency stock-trading data that is translated into binary code, which the installation then visualizes in slow, archaic form: 1 = a drop of pitch-black water, simulating oil; 0 = a pause.

The artist, who graduated from Wuhan University



Above, aaajiao: *Avatar*, 2017, animated GIF on 3½ by 2½ inch screen.

Below, Lu Yang: *The Great Adventure of Material World*, 2019, video game.

with a computer science degree and worked at several tech companies, is bent on dispelling utopian myths about “the digital”: that it is ethereal, evenly distributed, and democratic. He achieves this through scientific-looking but ultimately absurdist constructions. Aaajiao’s measurements are as futile as they are transparent. Weight is useless in describing a decade’s worth of thought and communication; drops tell us nothing about the crucial social effects of stock trading. This futility highlights the increasing opacity of the metrics that at once monitor and direct modern life.

That overpowering, disorientating sense of opacity finds resonance in the ambitious series of civilizational allegories produced by artist Qiu Anxiong. Combining ink and moving images, classical references and futuristic cityscapes, Qiu has imagined the myriad creations of contemporary culture as an uncanny bestiary viewed by a time traveler from the fourth century BC, who, in grappling with the brave new world (say, through relating likeness of machines to that of strange beasts), offers unconventional insight for its modern habitats. In the third installment of his animation trilogy “New Classic of Mountains and Seas” (2006–17), surveillance cameras take the form of cyclopean owls. The birds’ associations with wisdom and their diligent scrutiny merge into a chillingly believable vision. There’s romanticism in Qiu’s collapse of distant past into distant future as an allegory for the present day. The animation work – created with 3D modeling that synthesizes hand-painted fragments of architecture, infrastructure, and natural landscapes – entails laborious world-building of the kind usually done in professional film studios.

The entertainment industry has in recent years





introduced both aesthetic possibilities and modes of production that are readily picked up by artists. Video games and VR experiences give rise to new perceptions and mobilize empathy in ways distinct from those of prior mediums, thus providing fertile ground for artistic exploration. The indie game *Beholder* (2016) – developed by the Siberia-based Warm Lamp Studios and now enjoying a niche following in China – addresses moral dilemmas pertinent to navigating livelihood in a fictional authoritarian state, while never resorting to lazy moralization. Inside the game’s quaintly cartoonish layout, the player assumes the role of a state-appointed landlord who must administer a property while making choices calculated to ensure the livelihood of his/her own family. The decisions, which include installing a surveillance camera without the knowledge of a tenant and filing a secret report on someone’s questionable possessions (e.g., a banned book), become more and more ethically fraught as the game proceeds. Each task is rewarded with tuition payments for the children, money for essential medicine, or even the opportunity to secretly move the whole family abroad. There is no way to “win.” Balancing one’s conscience with one’s need to survive invariably leads to doom.

Shanghai-based Lu Yang’s *The Great Adventure of Material World* (2019) is an expertly produced video game in which players can explore different realms that correspond not only to Buddhist cosmology but also to the artist’s previous series of multimedia works. It features, for instance, details of hell from her *Lu Yang Delusional Mandala* (2015), which traces the biological deterioration (and potential digital immortality) of a genderless humanoid, and a chapter based on *Uterus Man* (2013), which features a genderless superhero whose powers are nonetheless grounded in the female reproductive system. *Great Adventure*, with its ambition for a wider audience and its spinoff-and-sequel generative logic, has a stronger affinity to contemporary entertainment franchises like the Marvel Cinematic Universe than to the “series” and “periods” of earlier

***Zhao Yao observes that the market for artistic innovation increasingly parallels that of the shopping websites Taobao, where “one can procure anything imaginable and get it instantly.”***

**Qiu Anxiong: *New Classic of Mountains and Seas III*, 2013–17, video animation, 30 minutes.**

models of art practice. Lu never considered the narrowly defined art world her primary audience; her cult following on computer-graphics sites and other online subculture forums testifies to the dissolving boundaries between art and mass culture.

Scientific research, too, opens vistas for both artistic exploration and cultural self-examination. For a project titled *Living Distance* (2019), artist and engineer Xin Liu, who also curates for the MIT Media Lab Space Exploration Initiative, worked with a group of scientists to send one of her wisdom teeth into space. The mission exponentially dramatized an act commonly urged upon Chinese children – to throw their lost baby teeth as far as possible, so as to ensure a full set of healthy teeth in adulthood. In an accompanying two-channel video, Liu speculates on the potential use of bio-avatars for extraterrestrial travel and explores the visual resonance between a design for a Mars colony and the layout of an



oil-drilling compound in the deserts of her home province, Xinjiang.

Art's current entanglement with technology has numerous historical precedents, of course, such as the fifteenth-century development of linear perspective or, later, the advent of photography. In each case, there was a lag before the truly radical implications of an emergent process were recognized and the technique altered the established aesthetic criteria for what is good, experimental, or simply new. Contemporary technology and its accelerated transformations make that lag all the more jarring.

Beijing-based artist Zhao Yao co-manages the online forum Art-Ba-Ba, known for its candid, albeit sometimes tabloid-like, critical discussions and its speedy introductions of overseas artists, exhibitions, and ideas. Today's media-savvy young Chinese creatives, with their omnivorous appetite for information and instantaneous synchronization, operate with a model drastically different from the "reading fever" of the '85 New Wave, which nurtured artists coming of age in the 1980s and '90s through a sudden influx of translated materials on modern art, theory, and literature. Zhao observes that the global market for artistic innovation increasingly parallels that of the shopping website Taobao, where "one can procure anything imaginable and get it instantly."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the "omnipotent" platform (as it is jokingly characterized by loyal users

Two photographs from Samuel Fosso's series "Emperor of Africa," 2013, C-print, 65½ by 49 inches.

worldwide) has long held up a peculiar mirror to the shifting landscapes of cultural production. Hours after a 1986 rabbit sculpture by Jeff Koons fetched the record price of \$91 million at Christie's New York this past May, vendors on Taobao started offering knockoffs in various sizes, with a price range of 3,000–8,000 yuan (roughly \$336 to \$1,116). It was a truly magical moment, when the e-commerce platform trolled the high-end art market by highlighting its farcical aspects with utter precision: reducing art to a pure manifestation of wealth, power, and novelty. Such instantaneous pirating reflects pure, earnest opportunism, done without a single shred of irony yet functioning like an incisive piece of art criticism.

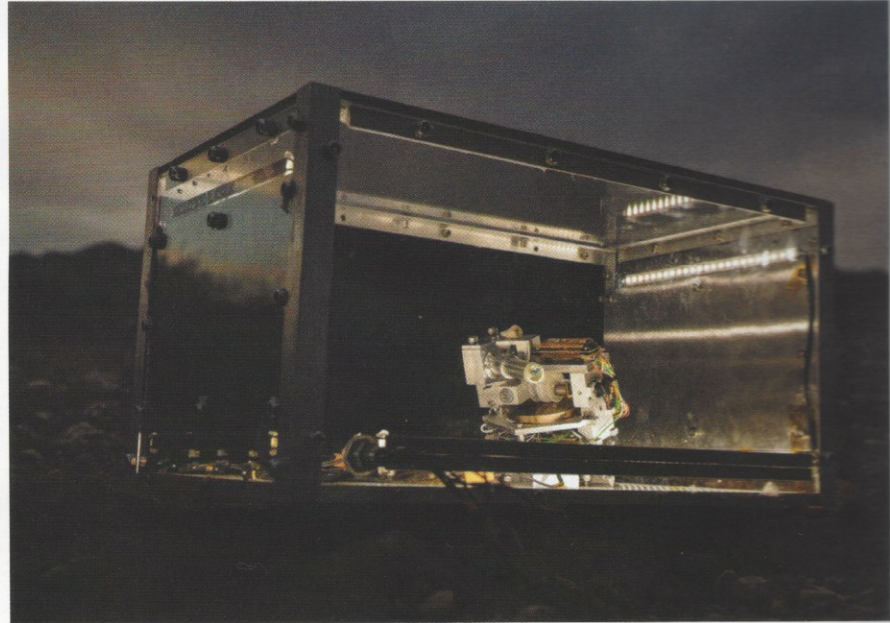
One of the more disturbing and outlandish services provided on Taobao is the opportunity to hire groups of generic-looking "African children" (so labeled on the platform) who will chant a customized message in Chinese while holding up a blackboard with the same text. Messages range from birthday wishes to marriage proposals to comic profanity commissioned by Taobao's vast clientele – a bargain at about \$22. This practice, often wildly amusing to both senders and recipients, provides a striking example of China's evolving encounters with – or projections of – non-Western others; it also complicates the existing analysis of racially fraught cultural phenomena.

The cooperation between China and various African

countries over the past decade, characterized in a recent *New York Times* article as “the largest global trade-and-investment spree in history,”<sup>5</sup> has created an alternative to Western configurations of identity and geopolitics through waves of cross-continental exchange and immigration. In 2008, artist Hu Xiangqian created the time-lapse performance video *Sun*, in which he tans himself over the course of six months to a mild shade of blackness. Inspired by unprecedented presence of African immigrants in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou, where Hu trained for many years, the work suggests a constellation of attitudes: fascination, bewilderment, transracial solidarity, naivete.

Hu’s video offers various points of contrast and reflection to the series of performed portraits titled “Emperor of Africa” (2013) by Cameroonian artist Samuel Fosso. In these images, Fosso re-creates several iconic portraits of Mao Zedong, casting himself in the role of the “Great Leader.” The artist’s features, though lightened by makeup, remain distinctly non-Chinese. Other dissonant elements are deployed more subtly: Mao prepares to sign a document while poised before a red flag whose Chinese stars have been replaced by a map of continental Africa; a uniformed Mao stands on a balcony, making his signature raised-right-hand gesture with the characters for “Africa” inscribed on his left armband. The images conjure up two disparate visions: the living Mao as an inspiration for liberation movements of the 1960s and ’70s especially in the Global South, marking a moment of historical solidarity, and the late Mao (thanks to Fosso’s impersonations) as an icon of China’s new, quasi-colonial ambitions.

The cross-cultural coincidence of works like Fosso’s and Hu’s speaks to a broader attempt to disrupt the tired Euro-American narrative in which the rest of the world struggles to catch up to the white avant-garde, and non-Western communities must relate to one another through Western mediation. These works trouble the conventional understanding of art history and geopolitics alike. Chinese statecraft, infrastructure, and communications capability have been steadily exported over the past decades, while Chinese citizens have for the first time adjusted to a massive influx of foreign



**A robotic sculpture Xin Liu built as part of her project *Living Distance*, 2019.**

**Liu preparing one of her wisdom teeth for a round-trip space flight.**



persons and cultural influences that still awaits an adequate, updated discourse.

As the blandly international technology and fashion of Liu Xiaodong’s *Computer Leader* predicted more than twenty years ago, today there is no clear “.com”-versus-“.cn” divide, nor is Chinese cyber-experience fully conditioned by the Great Firewall. Subcultures (gaming, anime, speculative fiction, etc.) often bind more powerfully than national and linguistic identities, cutting through superannuated categories that sadly still condition many curatorial activities. Works tracing China’s participation in global information networks demand a conscious reckoning with the systems that shape our shared reality. ●

<sup>1</sup> Lucy Liu Xiaodong, *The Richness of Life: The Personal Photographs of Contemporary Chinese Artist Liu Xiaodong; 1984–2006*, Beijing, Timezone 8, 2007, p. 202.

<sup>2</sup> Klaus Biesenbach in the “co./cn.” exhibition press release, K11 Art Foundation, March 2017.

<sup>3</sup> The participants were: Darren Bader, Cao Fei, DIS, Aleksandra Domanović, Gregory Edwards, Li Ming, Liang Wei, Lin Ke, Liu Shiyuan, Miao Ying, Laura Owens, Oliver Payne, Sondra Perry, Xin Wang, and Anicka Yi. Other recent shows taking a basically similar approach include “Open Codes, Connected Bots” (works by twenty international artists and teams), Chronus Art Center, Shanghai, July 2–Oct. 7, 2019; the Asian Digital Art Exhibition (thirty artists from twelve countries and regions), Beijing, May 16–June 15, 2019; and “Peer to Peer” (seven Chinese and Western artists), Surplus Space, Shanghai, Oct. 13, 2018–Jan. 12, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Zhao Yao via WeChat, June 2019; translated by the author.

<sup>5</sup> Brook Larmer, “Is China the World’s New Colonial Power?” *New York Times Magazine*, May 2, 2017, nytimes.com.

XIN WANG is a New York-based curator and art historian who manages an Asian futurism site on Tumblr. See Contributors, page 10.

## CURRENTLY ON VIEW

“Micro Era: Media Art from China,” at the Kulturforum, Berlin, through Jan. 26, 2020.