

Asian Futurism and the Non-Other



Iowa-class battleship personified as a young girl in the style of the *kantai* subculture, as found on the cover of *Modern Weaponry* magazine, an official government-funded Chinese publication.

In the Chinese version of *Star Trek*, Liu awakes from prolonged cryogenic sleep and discovers a note: “Welcome, Law! [Cantonese version of Liu]. In the next five years you’ll be in charge of the spaceship alone, and the long dark nights will be lonely. Hopefully the delicacies will console your soul. Go check the fridge! — Captain Li Da Mao.” Law opens the fridge only to find endless arrays of dumplings; the Cantonese food he had packed is long

gone. Law: a lonely Cantonese dude in the Universe.

—Daguguguji (a popular Weibo user who generates incisively absurdist, trolling, yet provocatively relevant memes), November 11, 2015

We meet again for the first time at Tahrir Square, we meet again for the first time at Zuccotti Park, we meet again for the first time at Taksim Square.

—overheard and perhaps incorrectly transcribed from Raqs Media Collective’s performance *The Last International*, 2013

1. Spoiler Alert

In February 1989, the year the World Wide Web was born, Liu Cixin—author of the widely celebrated space opera *Three Body Trilogy* (2006–10)—published his debut sci-fi novel, *China 2185*. The story fast-forwards to a future Chinese society burdened by an aging population largely kept alive mechanically. A new president—a twenty-nine-year-old woman who was recently divorced and lost custody of her child—has just been inaugurated and is immediately challenged by a curious series of events that quickly snowball into a national crisis: Mao and five other deceased Chinese citizens are accidentally “revived” as digital immortals, and soon begin to haunt and

compromise the nation's cyberspace—one of the territories most crucial to its sovereignty.

In the story, the “revival” is presented as an inevitable outcome of achieving a technological singularity, made possible by combining advanced 3-D scanning in molecular holography with supercomputer programming competent enough to simulate human intelligence. While most daily affairs and responsibilities of citizenship are exercised primarily in cyberspace, humans have nevertheless retained their analog attributes. The revived, on the other hand, possess both full consciousness and autonomous human agency despite their complete virtual existence; their superhuman capacities for processing mass information instantaneously become crucial in enabling them to intervene and manipulate the digitally calibrated public sphere. Disembodied, they have become truly immortal—an ontologically different kind of human. In a remarkably sophisticated yet eerily prescient manner, Liu Cixin explores how this posthuman moment rapidly engulfs social and political life. By 2185, China has become a fully democratic society thanks to, among other things, the sophistication of its virtual infrastructure, which allows the entire population to chime in on important domestic and international affairs. Liu meticulously details

the technological parameters of this infrastructure, which is similar—especially in the mechanisms for processing and prioritizing input—to what we now understand as the semantic web. He imagines that color-coded visualizations of individual attitudes will provide instantaneous indications of consensus, not unlike the angry face emojis flying over the Facebook live-stream of a Sean Spicer press conference. At the emergency meeting called to address the revival, Chinese citizens engage in a heated debate about the “human” rights of the revived, who were initially contained in isolated digital storage, and vote to grant them full access to Chinese cyberspace, where they soon wreak major havoc. As it turns out, the troublemaker is not Mao, but one of the more obscure men among the revived. During his long lifetime he was deeply resentful of the progressive ways of younger generations. Having woken up with newfound superpowers, he retaliates by generating enough autonomous derivatives—a kind of human called a “pulsate”—to form a conservative republic within Chinese cyberspace, ready to overthrow the “outside” government.

Yet Liu Cixin eschews portraying a teleological evil, or even a technological one, which has long been a staple in the mainstream rhetoric of science fiction and techno-

orientalism. After the pulsates and their republic are terminated by a costly nationwide power cut, the young president receives a letter from the republic with extensive documentation of its history and aspirations, revealing a particularly poignant aspect of its demise: since the pulsates communicate and process information at a speed incomprehensible to humans, they are able to form a full-fledged state and a unique civilization within two hours—roughly equivalent to six hundred years in human time. *China 2185* resists the long-standing dichotomy between hard and soft sci-fi to speculate freely on science and ideology as mutually mediating agents that shape social discourse. Written at a particularly fraught moment in China's recent history, Liu's reflections on humanity, democracy, and nationalism are as trenchant as they are romantic. Significantly, his speculations are grounded in the technological and material realities of the infrastructure of that fictional yet not unlikely future: the computing power required to process of huge amounts of data; the postmortem encoding of cerebral structures; a national ID system and the way it screens citizens for democratic voting; the experience of information as epistemologically and materially burdensome; the coexistence of radically different temporalities. Many of

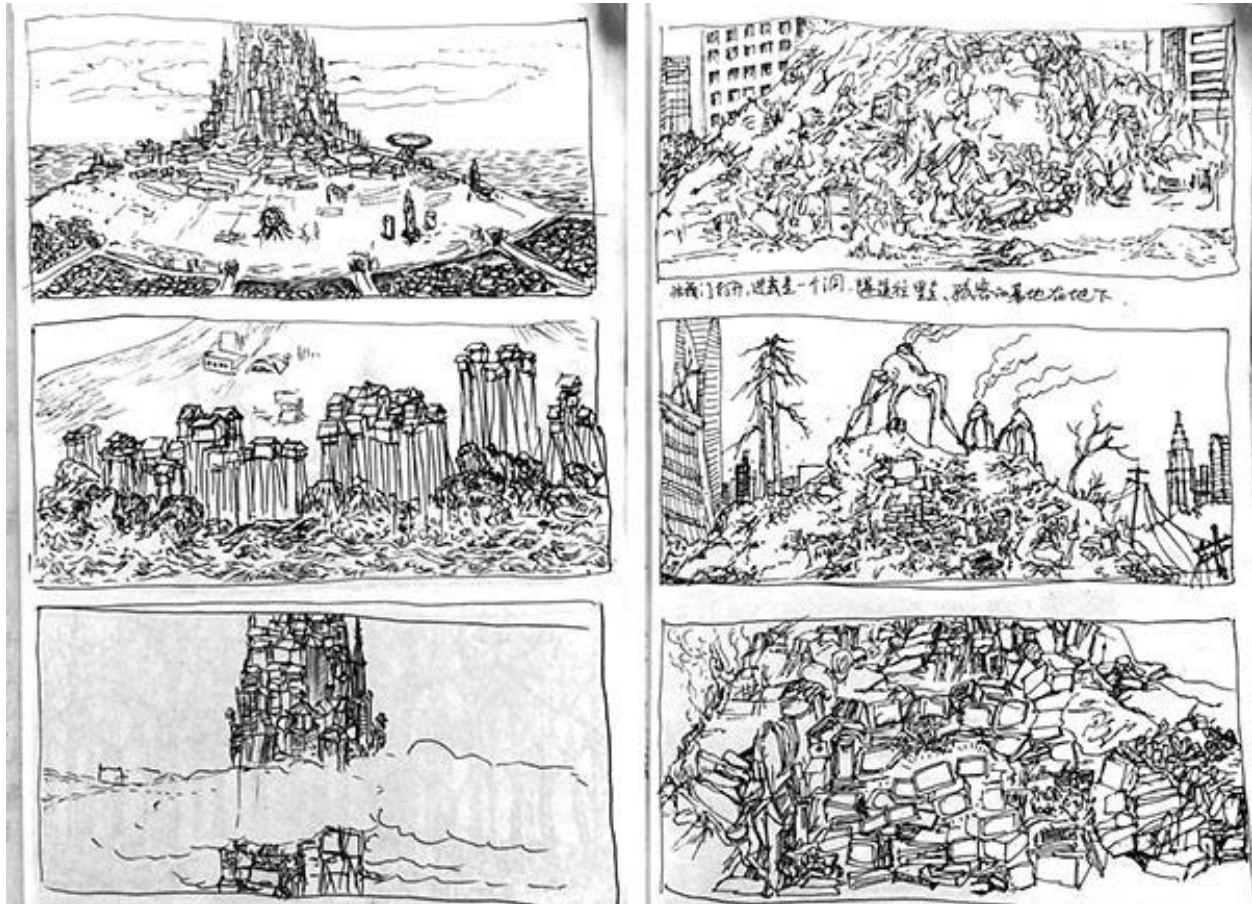
these elements that resonate with contemporary life are explored poetically, as the foundation for new kind of sublime: an entire population represented as a holographic constellation in the Great Hall of People; forms of connectivity—akin to those found in the sci-fi TV series *Sense8*—which create the deep empathy characterizing the nation’s young.

The story does not concern itself with abstract or symbolic representations of power; rather, it offers a totalizing speculation on technological and (hence necessarily) civilizational futures from a Chinese perspective. In a recent issue of *e-flux journal*, philosopher of technology Yuk Hui advocated for “turning technology into a support for culture” rather than merely studying it.¹ Heidegger invokes the ancient Greek term *techne*, reminding us that technology “belongs to the bringing forth, to poiesis: it is something poietic.”² In its capacity to reveal, technology unveils ontological truth and discloses the circumstances in which humanity finds itself—just as Liu Cixin has demonstrated, in novel after novel, that any singularity event in the realm of technology is necessarily a singularity event for humanity, with profound ramifications.

Thinking about speculative futures like *China 2185* primarily in terms of racially oriented identity politics can

be a hindrance, if not an insult, to the genre and its conceptual magnetism. The identitarian bias at the heart of Western political thought is too anthropocentric a scope for such critical inquiries. The question that is repeatedly posed these days seems to be: How can we imagine a future with this or that received identity as a dominant cultural and political force? While these speculations often rightly reinforce or complement organized efforts of resistance, they are also limiting and susceptible to *BuzzFeed*-style ideological consumerism and curatorial topicality. What we lack are culturally specific and intellectually rigorous speculations in which identity politics may or may not play a significant role. The rage over Hollywood's casting of Scarlett Johansson in the new iteration of *Ghost in the Shell* is certainly justified. But wouldn't it be a more effective strategy to render Hollywood and its regressive politics obsolete by diverting critical attention elsewhere and expanding the scope of references with which we accumulate momentum for real paradigmatic change? A Hollywood adaptation of *Ghost in the Shell* should just be a *regional* homage to the Japanese classic, and faux multiculturalism rightly taken at (cheap) face value. To think that Hollywood (or any other highly visible, immensely powerful American, European, or—dare

I say—Chinese institution) is anything but provincial, or that it is any real benchmark of cosmopolitanism—assumptions that continue to underlie debates on representation and identity—is delusional and unproductive.



Qiu Anxiong's storyboard for *New Classic of Mountains and Seas III* (2016-2017), the last installment in the eponymous trilogy that projects a prehistoric perspective on the phenomena and plight of modernity. Image courtesy of the artist.

It would be absurd to understand the radical premises of a story like *China 2185* solely through the fact that the protagonists are non-white, that Esperanto replaces English as the international language, or that the president

and the majority of the government's cyber-army are women. Feminism as a discourse with too specific a (Western) history of struggle is often incompatible with an effective reckoning with cultural contexts elsewhere. Meanwhile, the "othering" gaze will never admit that it only likes to see what it wants to see. This is why embarrassing, bikini-waxed exhibitions claiming to present and represent creative endeavors from broad swaths of culturally and geopolitically volatile regions still take place in established cultural institutions. Efforts to further tighten control over narrative and framing reflect an institutional anxiety about faltering credibility and a diminishing influence over the dominant discourse. The most resonant part of *China 2185* concerns the very real challenges humanity will experience on multiple fronts in the coming decades: ethical, legal, biological, even teleological. But that future also has a long history, from Freud's anticipation of humanity's transformation via technology into a "prosthetic God" to *Ghost in the Shell*. In *China 2185*, the "pulsates" are a clear example of a threshold separating the human from the post-human condition: technology doesn't simply augment their traditionally-defined human agency, but fundamentally changes their experience of time—the very material of

existential history. In its closing chapter, the young female leader has an exchange regarding the calamities with Mao, who offers some illuminating, Marxist views on the immortality of the pulsates, arguing that their eternal life is equivalent to eternal death:

To live is to change, to live forever is to change forever. Within a hundred years, the phenomenal world may still revolve around the same set of underlying principals, but given eternity, those principles are bound to change. In fact, it doesn't take eternity; ten thousand years will be more than enough to completely transform what was once considered fundamental. Those foundations will have in effect ceased to exist, and what is alive will be something brand new...Whatever remains unchanged is essentially already dead. 3



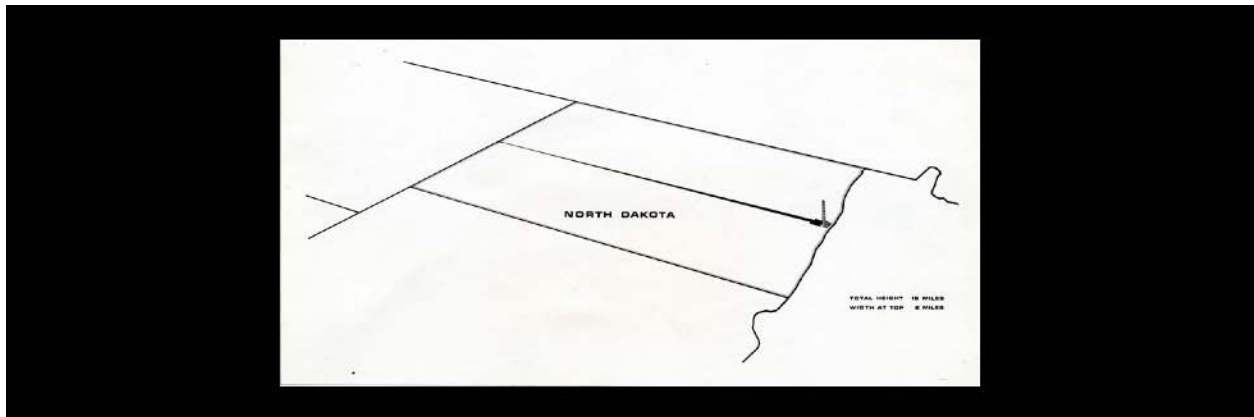
Qiu Anxiong's 3-D rendering for *New Classic of Mountains and Seas III* (2016-2017), the last installment in the eponymous trilogy that projects a prehistoric perspective on the phenomena and plight of modernity. Image courtesy of the artist.

That time is an unstable, or rather destabilized, agent in both historical reckoning and speculative thinking is already part of a wider consensus. Tropes of quasi-primitive societies and religious symbolism have persistent visibility in the post-apocalyptic genre and other aspects of contemporary cultural imagination (music videos and music-video-like video art); artist Qiu Anxiong considers *the Matrix* as a sci-fi expression of the Buddhist experience in the phenomenal world.⁴ But the truth is we have never been secular. By which I don't simply mean the resurgence of religious extremism, or panspiritualism and mindfulness promoted by "California Zen"; I am also referencing the open display of prayers and acts of passionate devotion from a variety of religious practices on the soccer pitch and the e-commerce of instant salvation on Weibo, where hordes of "verified" users self-identified as spiritual leaders of esoteric sects of Buddhism routinely offer "enlightened" prayer beads and other devotional or talismanic objects. Religious thought, which used to guide human behavior and perception of the world, remains an important source that mediates our connection to the unknown. Artist Lu Yang routinely taps into neuroscience to reinterpret how idol-making and worship might still operate in today's public life, visual culture, and our

evolving relationship—collective and personal—with the gods, as human beings push towards new transformative thresholds. For her latest project *Delusional Crime and Punishment* (2016), the artist wonders “whether the sensations and sufferings described in naraka, or Buddhist purgatory, can be known from our own physiological experiences and empirical knowledge.”⁵ Other projects have considered halos in religious iconography through prosthesis, post-gender super heroes, and Sahasra cosmology’s prescient model of constellations of worlds, which now constitutes foundational scientific understanding of the universe.

Consider also the essay “Representation in the Real” by art historian Zainab Bahrani.⁶ It features an elaborate philosophical and semiotic exploration of *salmu*, the Assyro-Babylonian concept of image or likeness—except *salmu* has a much more complex and potent meaning than “image” in English. Bahrani defines it as a “configuration that enables presence through reproduction”—as an ontological category rather than an aesthetic concept.⁷ To fully capture the distinct parameters that define *salmu*, Bahrani resorts to Baudrillard’s four stages of the image, along with other critiques of representation from the European philosophical canon. The curious phenomenon

here is the strong pull that the dominant discourse of philosophy has on critical thinking, even as it continues to specialize in recuperative acts of putative self-deconstruction, thereby ironically perpetuating its power. Must we always resort to this canon, however brilliant or seemingly reliable it is, to approximate something different and *outside*? Perhaps only when we have sufficiently expanded our references—when terms like *salmu* are thrown around as casually as Saussure is in intellectual discourse—will we truly begin to inhabit not only a different world but many worlds simultaneously.



Siah Armajani, *North Dakota Tower*, 1968. The work considers a hypothetical monument, sited at the eastern edge of North Dakota, capable of casting a shadow that covers the entire width of the state. According to the artist's calculation, the monument will measure 18 miles tall. Collection of MAMCO Museum of Contemporary Art Geneva, image courtesy of the artist.

2. The Non-Other and Its Discontents

In 2014, when the art world embroiled itself in year-round celebrations of the internet's quarter centennial, there were ample and thoughtful reflections on its multifaceted legacy, tracing the trajectory from early net art to "post-internet." Yet the fact that the World Wide Web has never been worldwide—a fundamental reality for anyone living outside Europe or North America—was scarcely acknowledged or explored. Not that being late to the game has proven to be disadvantageous; on the contrary, the later a nation arrives at mass internet culture, the more nimble and innovative its adaptation tends to be, as the tech world has long acknowledged.⁸ (In contrast, the rhetoric of "belatedness" still permeates—and is still resisted—in the global discourse on modernism.) If a fact as germane as the uneven global distribution of the Web can be lost in the thicket of glaringly familiar, entrenched, and uncontested assumptions, one can only imagine the precarious trajectories faced by other intellectual and artistic inquiries in the long postmodern, postmedium, postcolonial moment we still find ourselves in.

More awkwardly, as curators and scholars working on modernism have come to treat their subjects with greater care and thoughtfulness—studying the languages, problematizing the historical frameworks, charting multiple temporalities and forms of ownership—many otherwise intelligent people working with contemporary, and particularly digital, materials seem to operate with the astounding illusion that the interconnected world is indeed flat and flattening. Entirely too much evidence testifies to the alarming assumption that somehow art practices as volatile as quicksand can be captured by retaining vast networks of advisors and translators on safari-like research trips. The search for the next exotic frontier has already exhausted the earth’s surface—in every sense of the word—and we are reduced to waiting for the inevitable Antarctic Biennale. Naturally, attention has shifted to the speculative realms of cyberspace and science fiction.

And this is where things start to get tricky. Just as it has been more or less established that there are multiple modernities, the temporalities of the post-internet condition are, by nature, even more erratically stacked. The illusions of instant accessibility and simultaneity mask the elementary reality that time functions differently—

radically so—across the web. The Chinese language alone, for instance, exhibits a remarkable range of temporalities in cyberspace. Antiquarian usages are still broadly employed—both earnestly and sarcastically—while new semiotic spaces and topic-specific discourses—evident in digital subcultures and nimble censorship-circumventing strategies—are being generated with exhilarating speed. Korean, Japanese, and English terms are swiftly and pragmatically borrowed without translation, absorbed, and put into wide circulation, mutating through lifecycles that span a matter of hours. This crucial significance of linguistic structure as an exogenous influence on internet discourse explains why even the most vigilant proponents of the “post-internet” discourse on art fail to grapple with any area of cyberspace mediated by languages other than major Western ones.

Consider the simultaneous and accumulating commentaries floating across online videos. These “bullet screens” enable real-time production of languages and syntax. The distortion of time-space that, according to the theory of relativity, occurs at very high speeds—a popular sci-fi trope seen in films such as *Interstellar*—may not be too far-fetched an analogy for the experience of different linguistically- and culturally-specific cyberspaces. The

post-internet condition only accelerates relativity and differentiation. It is a fundamentally linguistic condition—not simply in the sense of language, but also because it concerns what is in circulation and how specific forms of circulation mediate meaning, including that of visual materials (especially those not conspicuously characterized by internet fashionableness).

This is why, when dealing with cultural production informed by these new temporal and semantic algorithms, translation has never been less effective. It can't keep up. There is guaranteed semiotic breakage at every interpretive turn. Speaking the language isn't enough; one has to speak the meme in order to meaningfully participate, even as a spectator. The Englishness (English in the linguistic sense) and Britishness (British in the cultural and ideological sense) of Boaty McBoatface, for instance, can never be meaningfully translated.⁹ Fluency is no guarantee of comprehension when memes become ever more culturally, politically, and linguistically specific. Such an intricate set of specificities creates different kinds of representational politics which are too often reduced to postcolonial thought and American racial dynamics, both widely mistaken as universal. Curatorial or academic efforts to find digestible, local manifestations of the

dominant “post-internet” rhetoric usually end up finding no more than preconceived spectacles. Of course, anyone can try to understand Chinese cyberspace without speaking the language, but it would be nearly impossible to fathom its quirks and glitches to say nothing of its heart of darkness.

The obligation towards translation is sinister. The “other” has gained a voice, but only to continuously explain, qualify, and make sense of itself. The dense hermeneutics of context-explaining takes up much of the space necessary for the real dialogue required by any ambitiously speculative and interdisciplinary artistic practices operating outside the Euro-American epistemological comfort zone. More insidious is the continued prevalence of self-exoticizing art practices with built-in, bite-size, self-explanatory mechanisms. From the perspective of contemporary China, many have begun to realize the absurdity of a patronizing, well-intentioned, supposedly self-critical postcolonial gaze cast upon a cultural entity that never had an internalized colonial history (not to mention the colonial legacy *of* China); that gaze in turn attracts artistic and curatorial practices that cater and subscribe—consciously or otherwise—to the seductive charm of a fake intellectual consensus, albeit one with very

real power at its disposal. The international curatorial circuit is permeated by such smug moral grandstanding. Experimental capacity within new forms of knowledge and aesthetic production is crippled or foreclosed in advance by the handsome rewards awaiting superficial engagements that turn a blind eye to the full, uncomfortable potency of their subjects.¹⁰

When asked about his choice of embodying a female astronaut figure for a project encompassing video installation and performance, artist Ming Wong responded: “A male figure is too obvious... a female space explorer is a place for people to project their own desires.” What's more baffling, however, is the accompanying research-based pastiche of (mostly) female Chinese astronauts mined for speculative source material. What of the unique agency of these variegated characters? Some, as sci-fi classics such as the *Three Body Trilogy* handily show, are convincing as both savior and sociopath rather than cute, projection-ready meta tropes; their complex characteristics are thoughtfully developed and ideologically congruent with the distinct and distinctly problematic Maoist feminist legacy, which deserves more inspired reflection than being subsumed into trendy forms of identity performance and collaged fantasia.¹¹ The art-

star-studded *Ann Lee* franchise, which invites collaborative meditation on a manga character—a purple-haired Asian girl, no less—licensed from a Japanese agency, exhibits a mind-blowing obliviousness towards the cultural logic of that character in its original context of circulation. In contrast to the world of manga and other fandoms in which copyright, ownership, and authorship are transacted loosely, the *Ann Lee* project—which recently received generous exposure at the Whitney’s “Dreamlands” exhibition—divides and distributes absolute ownership. In Tino Sehgal’s iteration, young actresses are hired to “reanimate” *Ann Lee*. Sehgal asserts his authorship through scripts recited by the actresses, exposing an anachronistic desire for ownership in the face of digital cultures and subcultures defined, in some sense, by their opposition to this sort of personal branding. The post-internet condition has also transformed the game of self-reflexivity in art and its medium. Art practitioners can no longer monopolize or even excel at this form of introspection, which is being overtaken by the most inspired TV shows, video games, and even memes. The eclipse extends to other familiar strategies of research-based art-making. For instance, in the video game *Resident Evil 6*, for instance, an entirely useless hallway

appears on a dragon boat in post-apocalyptic Hong Kong; no storyline nor supplies to scavenge, just pure virtual world-building. At the end of the hallway is an elaborate painting of Mao reading to young children under a flowering tree. The level of contextual awareness and attentiveness to ideological nuance in an utterly trivial embellishment is uncanny, reflecting the critical capacity of the game makers.

The Islamic State's use of social media is another phenomenon of the globalized internet that exposes epistemological cracks and misalignments. In a shrewd propaganda move, the Islamic State employs social media to promote its destruction of treasured world heritage sites, tapping into the West's long standing misperception of Islam's historical iconophobia to doubly reinforce its legitimacy through self-essentialization. Art historian Finbarr Barry Flood has eloquently examined the political and ideological nuances of this phenomenon by contextualizing it within historical discourses on Islamic art's "image problem."¹² He cites Ömür Harmanşah's admonition that "we must responsibly consider the possibility that what we treat on our Facebook profiles, tweets, and blogs as documentation of violence is in fact the *raison d'être* of ISIS's biopolitics."¹³ Far from being

superficially antagonistic and sensationalized images of destruction, ISIS's viral social media propaganda references a deep history, recalibrated through new technological temporalities.



Morehshin Allahyari, *Material Speculation: ISIS*, 2015. 3D-printed Lamasu with a flash drive; the side details showcase flash drives and memory cards inside other 3D-printed objects.

Speaking of strange times and temporalities, it seems that late capitalism and soft-power warfare have laid the groundwork for the arrival of films like *The Great Wall* (2016). A Chinese blockbuster intended for wide release in both China and the US, the film features Matt Damon as a foreign mercenary in ancient China who ends up playing a prominent role in defending the country against violent beasts trying to breach “the wall.” Widely panned for its cultural tone-deafness, the film nevertheless holds up an ironic mirror to Hollywood’s own twisted and hypocritical

identity politics. The art world, with its similarly problematic politics of otherness, seems more inclined to celebrate new art industries rather than cultivating genuine possibilities for new art discourses. As long as the patronizing “othering” gaze operates from the comfortable position of pre-framing, post-translating power—however mindful it is (or appears to be) of its problematic position—the “radically Other” of Foucault, that “something that doesn’t yet exist and about which we cannot know and what it will be,” will be forever elusive, unrecognized in plain sight, even foreclosed.¹⁴



Lu Yang, *Delusional Mandala—Crystal*, 2015. Image courtesy of the artist.

3. A-Futurism

Dawn Chan begins her essay on Asian Futurism in the summer 2016 issue of *Artforum* with a provocative question: “Is it possible to be othered across time?”¹⁵ In contrast to the widely perceived notion of otherness as something lodged in geographical narratives, Chan is interested in its discursive and dynamic tensions over time, finding registers in the Asian American experience, cultural appropriation, and representation—or the lack there of—in the art world and at large. There is, however, a danger in accepting the implication that *otherness* necessarily operates from a place of deficiency, which threatens to essentialize what is in fact radically heterogeneous.

In their illuminating introductory essay for a collection of texts on “Techno-Orientalism,” David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu examine this essentializing of otherness as a product of the uneasy, continuous encounter between a technologically advanced/dominant Asia, and a West that saw it as both aspiration and threat.¹⁶ Techno-orientalism, as they observe, has often been perpetuated through science fiction, due to the genre’s propensity for projecting and amplifying contemporary

racial and imperialist attitudes. They argue that “if SF and its variants in historiography, cinema, and new media provide the content of techno-orientalist expressions, we believe that Asian American studies equips us with the best critical and theoretical toolboxes for documentation and interrogation.”¹⁷ This approach may be productive for interrogating sci-fi materials with problematic representations of Asian subjects (histories of struggle should be given due attention.) But this approach might also risk giving these materials more attention than they deserve, unwittingly confining critical reflections on speculative art and literature to the narrow arena of representational identity politics, which contributes to the continuing confusion in political, cultural, and curatorial understanding of *Asian-American* agency versus Asian agency and vice versa. I am not advocating a divisive rhetoric, however, but a rigorous approach to specificity. To paraphrase Judith Butler’s cautionary argument in her essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution”: in an understandable desire to forge bonds of solidarity, we have often assumed that “the other” has or is a universal experience. But this is a problematic ontological ground for political solidarity.¹⁸

This essay aims to smudge discourses that are suspiciously clean and to undermine certain homogenous methodological apparatuses. The goal is to further interesting chaos. Asian Futurism, a still new and undefined discourse, may have legitimate ideological roots in techno-orientalism, but it is ultimately unhelpful if it remains temporally or regionally defined, or if it limits itself to an established, uncontested system of critique. It should instead propagate different avenues of inquiry that facilitate radical speculation forwards and backwards, anthropocentric or otherwise. It may very well engender new tools for political action but needs not serve any utilitarian end besides producing “strange, new wisdom.”¹⁹

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