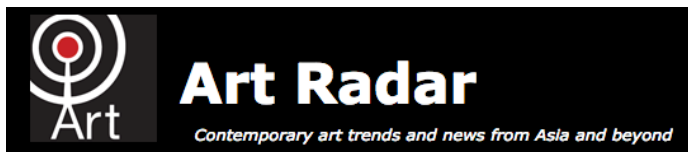


Art Radar, "Remnants of an Electronic Past": Chinese new media artist aaajiao – in conversation, Text/ Marianna Tsionki, September 16th 2016.



"Remnants of an Electronic Past": Chinese new media artist aaajiao – in conversation

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★★★★★ 5 Votes

Art Radar chats with Chinese new media artist aaajiao on the occasion of his solo exhibition at CFCCA Manchester.

aaajiao explores the fate of obsolete computer technology in the face of its relentless development, as part of a programme aimed at stimulating debate around the relationship between art and technology, as well as e-waste and its relation to climate change and the environment. *Art Radar* speaks with the artist about his work.



aaajiao, 'Windows Gravestone', 2016, installation view. Photo: Constantin Brosteanu. Image courtesy CFCCA, Manchester.

LEO XU PROJECTS

As the City of Manchester celebrates its position as European City of Science 2016, the **Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art** (CFCCA) in Manchester recently launched a programme of events that explore the boundaries between art and science. The first exhibition is Shanghai-based new media artist aaajiao's **"Remnants of an Electronic Past"**, running until 9 October 2016, which delves into what happens to obsolete computer software as technology moves forward at a fast pace. aaajiao reproduces sculptural elements referencing computers to represent a "digital graveyard", and prompts an unusual yet poignant question of our times:

where does software go to die?



aaajiao, 'Typeface', 2016, installation view. Photo: Constantin Brosteanu. Image courtesy CFCCA, Manchester.

aaajiao is the online handle of Xu Wenkai (b. 1984, Xi'an). He is one of China's foremost media artists, bloggers and free culture developers, now based in Shanghai. He has exhibited internationally including in **"Global Control & Censorship"** at ZKM, Karlsruhe, Germany (2015); **"Observer- Creator"**, CAFA Art Museum, Beijing (2015); 21st Century, Minsheng Art Museum, Shanghai (2014) and **Transmediale** in Berlin (2010). The exhibition at CFCCA is his first solo in the United Kingdom.

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Tsionki spoke with aaajiao for *Art Radar* about art, technology and his work.



LEO XU PROJECTS

Technology is becoming a popular theme in the cultural world. I have come across an increasing number of artists working with technology and a vast proliferation of exhibitions and events dealing with hybrid multi-disciplinary practices related to art and new media technologies. Why do you think this coalescence is experiencing a global popularity?

Advances in technology and in particular information technology, over the last 20 years, have played a major role as driving forces in the process of globalisation. Expectedly there is an increased popularity of multidisciplinary practices related to art and new media. To some extent, technology creates a platform of shared "collective memory" that can serve as a common point of reference for different creators. For sure, it also sets the stage for hard competition and can result in high quality work.



aaajiao, "Remnants of an Electronic Past" (2016), exhibition view at CFCCA, Manchester. Photo: Constantin Brosteanu. Image courtesy CFCCA, Manchester.

The title of your exhibition at Manchester's Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art "Remnants of an Electronic Past" echoes melancholy. In your works, you have often focused on forms of technological media in an attempt to feature the inextricable interdependence between humans and technology. Do you see the works themselves producing a new imaginary of future living thus operating in some way like a prophetic warning?

My recent works signalled a warning that we may have entered in an unprecedented era of high productivity. However, productivity does not directly promote the creativity for us. It only zooms in our overwhelming desire without limitation. For me, the reason why human beings have been able to establish civilisation is not the driving force of unrestricted desire but on the contrary, the ability to control it. It is time to rethink our viewpoints about productivity.

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aaajiao, 'Windows Gravestone', 2016, installation view. Photo: Constantin Brosteanu. Image courtesy CFCCA, Manchester.

The central installation in the exhibition, *Windows Gravestone*, materialises a digital graveyard, manifesting a preoccupation with the idea of the obsolete. What happens with the digital devices after they have lost their functional status is generally unknown. Most of them are not recycled, they simply pile up in graveyards and their status when they become obsolete is something that we tend to repress so we can continue consuming. Do you see your work serving as critique to consumerism?

In one hand, this work resists the consumerism. On the other hand, *Windows Gravestone* studies all user interfaces parts from the 1984 beta version to the 2000 Windows operating system, and highlights the fundamental aesthetic and fun components of user interfaces. I even think that now all the aesthetic value of the digital is derived from these operating systems.

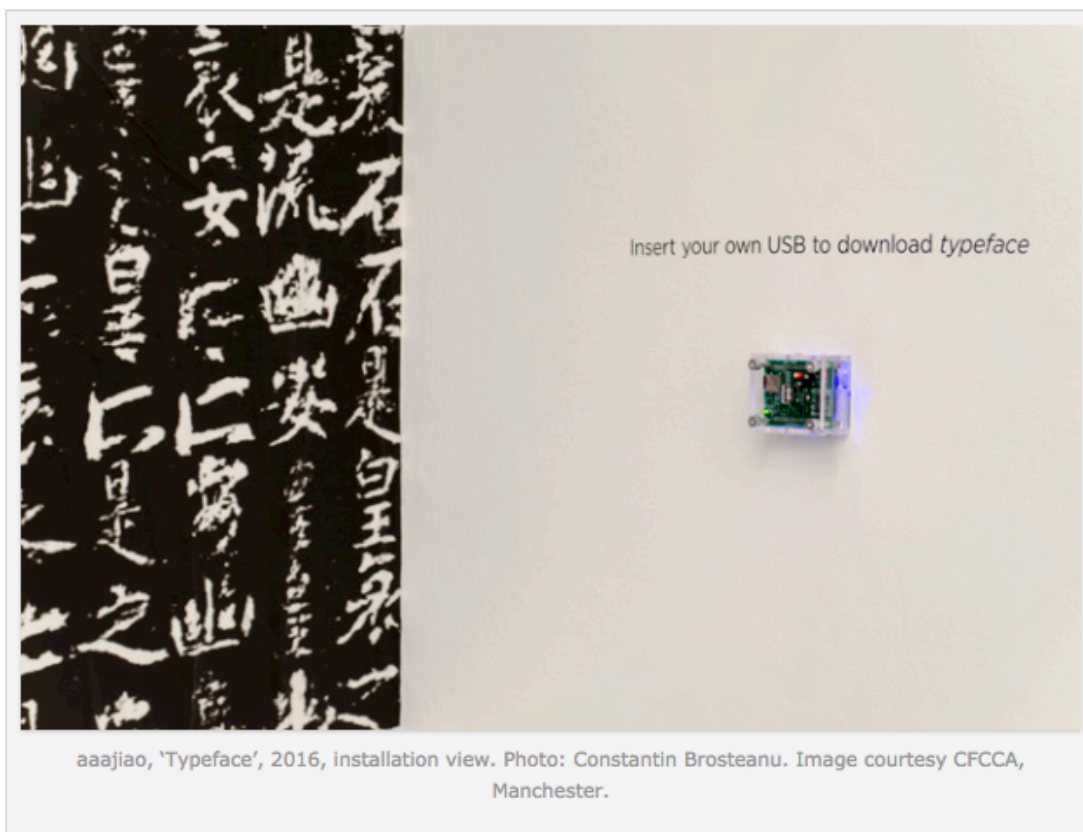


aaajiao, 'Tennis for None', 2016, installation view. Photo: Constantin Brosteanu. Image courtesy CFCCA, Manchester.

LEO XU PROJECTS

Your work *Tennis for none* is a new version of the first video game *Tennis for Two* (1958) that was the first computer application to be developed for entertainment purposes only. As indicated from the title, the original game was designed for two players. In your work, instead of a *Tennis for One* where the computer application could simply eliminate the need for another person, the user is eliminated from the game. Does this represent a simple shift to passivity based on the desire to watch the game as we watch a Wimbledon tennis game for example? Or does it signify a deeper form of ultimate passivity and complete digital takeover, where even the notion that the game is played by humans is wiped out from the screen leaving a ball bouncing alone across the screen?

Yes, games always give people a sense of participation, but for me, there may also exist games that are played by machines. *Tennis for None* is not operated by a person, it is the game between machines. How can we understand the game without people involved, or what does this existence portend? I think we can only surely understand it when it really happens.



How do you see the notion of artificial intelligence software influencing modern societies in general and contemporary art in particular? Has your recent work *Typeface* made you reconsider your view on software applications?

The emergence of artificial intelligence has triggered discussions in the conceptual level, which has been influencing contemporary art, gradually. *Typeface* wants to tell that our understanding of the notion of artificial intelligence is based on humans' romantic fantasy. For humans, the fonts affect our understanding all the time through the visual forms as well as the meaning underneath. On the other hand, for the machines, at this stage, we just project our romantic and naive thinking, but it has no meaning for the machines. It is time to challenge the common perception of artificial intelligence.

Marianna Tsionki

Translation of the interview from Chinese into English was done by Syuan-yu Chen.

LEO XU PROJECTS



Some of your installations are also accessible online – do you feel that there is any difference in the perception and interpretation of the work between physical and virtual space?

For me, physical and virtual spaces have already been merged, so these works have both "online" and "offline" characteristics. On the other hand, we live in reality and we also have a virtual presence in the real world. This kind of mixed blend is the reality we live in.

<http://artradarjournal.com/2016/09/16/remnants-of-an-electronic-past-chinese-new-media-artist-aaajiao-in-conversation/>