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Exhibition Review: *Miao Ying: A Field Guide to Ideology*

By Karen Wang

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Miao Ying, a netizen shuttling between the World Wide Web and the internet world guarded by the “Great Firewall of China”, has fabricated real walls made from a mixture of plasters, rebars, and videos to animate virtual segregation and connectivity with a physical experience. In *A Field Guide to Ideology*, the artist mobilizes satire and empathy to illuminate the complexity of the Firewall, and the worlds inside and outside of it. While the works presented in the exhibition are not newly produced, the response and dialogue engendered from their presence and juxtaposition in a physical space in the post-Covid era is worth pondering. The show comprises *Chinternet Plus* (2016) and *Hardcore Digital Detox* (2018), two installations derived from homonymous browser-based works by Miao. The acrylic virus protection shields appear obtrusive in the Gothic-revival building in which the works are exhibited. Rounds of mandatory health screenings resemble “censorship”, foreshadowing a central theme of the exhibition in retrospect.

The space housing *Chinternet Plus* is teeming with uplifting and rhythmic background music. Standing against the rear wall is a large-scale, robust installation akin to a shipping cargo with no entrance. Audiences can only peek into the container through various holes on its body. A handful of concrete debris is

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scattered on the ground beneath the holes. They seem to be traces and evidence of alternating push-pull forces stemming from an ever-encroaching inside and curious outside. Videos mounted on the interior walls of the container featuring astute censorship resistance and subcultures controversial in China spotlight phenomena that are often dismissed in mainstream culture.

Chinternet Plus promotes a counterfeit ideology in a satiric manner. The five thematic components— “Our Story,” “Our Mystery,” “Our Goal,” “Our Vision,” and “Our Experience”— advertised on the work’s web page are ceremoniously imprinted on the interior walls, in an attempt to add significance to the messages through formality. The online content that had been made easily visible by scrolling a mouse has become more difficult to access after being transformed into the physical space. To see the texts and supplementing digital materials, a viewer’s body needs to change to different poses—on tiptoes, head up, squatting, or with the help of a camera’s “eye”. The audience is forced to become a voyeur. The wrapping wallpaper shows graphics such as golden bows, gaudy ribbons, and (fake) logos. The overall design of the installation is reminiscent of an expo booth—when looking around, the seemingly ubiquitous, standard branding paradigm ironically erases any unique brand features. The tri-fold brochures leafleted onsite are made with overly thick cardboard paper, a small detail indicating a sufficient marketing budget while, at the same time, revealing meaningless waste. Miao is a master of representing how an ideology is constructed and branded, a *modus operandi* that often appears authoritative and convincing on the surface yet

essentially hollow and vacuous at the core. Her counterfeit ideology is more “authentic” than the genuine one.

In comparison with the encased *Chinternet Plus*, the arrangement of *Hardcore Digital Detox* (2018) in the adjacent space is welcoming and immersive, where the audience can try various “detox” methods to get rid of Internet addiction. A number of medium-density fiberboards are erected, showing humorous detox advice written in a manuscript font. In addition to online “regimen”, including setting up an IP location in China (where Facebook and Google alike are banned) with VPN, so netizens can no longer visit popular social media sites, the installation also offers oil paintings, drawings, and sculptures for “addicts” to play with, encouraging them to try hands-on-craft and embrace analog art. The range of mediums and props makes this relatively small space a bit crowded. As a result, the strategically open structure of *Hardcore Digital Detox* ends up creating a sense of confinement, as if it locked itself in a white cube. That said, this spatial experience coincidentally parallels a state of intellectual isolation under Internet filter bubbles. As the artist’s first solo exhibition in Canada, it is a pity that the “detox video” (*Happily Contained*, 2018) that should be presented in virtual reality has been substituted with a three-channel video. The intended strong contrast between digital and analog media has been weakened.

It is well-established that there is a different world inside and outside the Firewall, yet this difference is not the whole of it. As the exhibition reveals, behind the seemingly democratic Internet culture outside the Firewall is a naked (like the pectoral

muscles of Internet giants) commercial reality of manipulation. While the stereotyped “impregnable” Firewall is in fact porous, multi-layered, and full of contradictions. The cultural expressions and individual ingenuity emanating from the holes in the Firewall demand attention and a more nuanced approach.