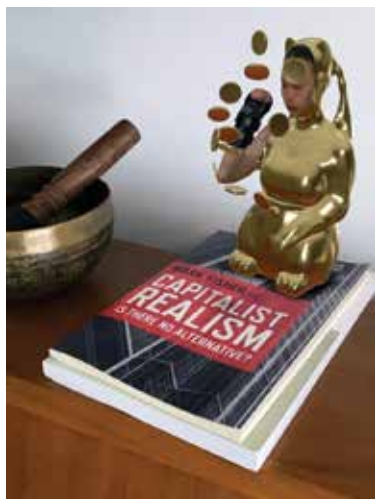


Charlene K. Lau

Codebreak in the Waves: The Prismatic Practice of Xuan Ye

“Could I learn to reorient myself to THE NOISE?”

Jackie Wang¹



Xuan Ye, *Maneki-X*, 2021, AR sculpture, installation view at a quarantine hotel, Guangzhou. Courtesy of the artist.

I met Xuan Ye after moving to New York City in 2016. We attended a concert at the Noguchi Museum with some of their friends on a blistering summer day. But it was not until the pandemic, the long weeks, months, and years of COVID-19, that I began working with Xuan Ye on a collaborative augmented reality (AR) project entitled *YOUar: Hot Vax Summer Collection* developed with Famous

New Media Artist Jeremy Bailey. For this, Xuan Ye designed an AR sculpture, which assumed the form of a Maneki-neko cat, complete with a wrist brace for tendinitis and something they might describe in the artist’s own words as “more-than-human.”²

An artist, technologist, musician living their life in the multiverse, Xuan Ye was born and raised in Fujian province, received schooling in Gulangyu, Shanghai, New York City and finally Toronto, where they are currently based. During their formative years they lived and studied on Gulangyu Island, a short ferry ride from Xiamen, and known colloquially as “Piano Island.” At only two kilometres square, the pedestrian island historically consists of thirteen foreign concessions, and is home to over two hundred pianos. The remnants of colonialism have been preserved on this tiny floating land—known as Kulangsu in Dutch, with the United Kingdom, France, and Japan among its other concessions—and are evident by the presence of this most famed Western instrument, the piano, itself a hybrid as part-stringed, part-percussive. In a place where Western and Eastern cultures mix easily, it is no wonder the piano survived the Cultural Revolution.

Digested here, Xuan Ye’s personal history reads as an accumulation, a book divided into chapters of place and experience spanning wide and distant lands. These diasporic waves of migration connect the

pins on their life map and have become deeply inscribed upon their critical modes of inquiry. Mushed together like Huang Yong Ping's seminal artwork *The History of Chinese Painting and the History of Modern Western Art Washed in the Washing Machine for Two Minutes* (1987/1993), in which the artist washed the aforementioned art history books together, reducing them to pulp. If the pulp were laid to dry back in codex form, edges would turn ragged, indiscriminate, deckled like handmade paper. Huang Yong Ping, a founding member of the radical group Xiamen Dada, could have been a spectral grandparent to Xuan Ye's movements between form and ways of seeing, being, believing.



Portrait of XVK, ໒໘໘໘ ♡, 2018. Courtesy of the artists (Xuan Ye, Véronique Sunatori, Sara Kay Maston).

Xuan Ye's interests have ranged widely over time, never limited to the experimental and esoteric, but always considering the interplay of language, text, sound, and the visual. In blips, they have also carved detours into pop music, including with the self-proclaimed "Asian-pop-girl-band-artist-trio" known as XVK (now disbanded), which included bandmates Véronique Sunatori and Sara Kay Maston. Starting with a question of how does one "make" Asian pop, in 2018 this "girlband" made a karaoke-style music video without music entitled ໒໘໘໘ ♡. All three are lined up, primed and primed in such a way as to capture the spirit and aesthetics of idol culture. With wind blowing through their hair as they look seductively at the camera, they mouth words but no sound comes out. Though this video is silent—the

group could not figure out how to write the music and left it open for viewers to sing their own tunes—the visuals tell all and push back on stereotypes of East Asian women as submissive and oppressed. While falling under the umbrella of a type of experimentalism, the struggle to negotiate between the binaries of avant-garde and pop is real, and perhaps an impossible task.



Xuan Ye, *Deep Aware Triads—orishormonoskina*, 2019, digital paintings, installation view at *Long-Distance: 4th Kamias Triennial*, Gallery TPW, Toronto, curated by Patrick Cruz, Su-Ying Lee, and Karie Liao, 2024. Photo: Darren Rigo. Courtesy of the artist.



Xuan Ye, *Deep Aware Triads—orishormonoskina* (detail), 2019, digital painting. Courtesy of the artist.

This flow, and this messiness, is visually contained in the aesthetics of Xuan Ye's work, which is poreless, pristine, and machine-made. The glassy ocular visions of *Deep Aware Triads—orishormonoskina* (2019), a triptych of circular digital collages that mash together all manner of colours, digital renderings, and bot-rendered language, are garbled to my prose-oriented eyes. Arising from Xuan Ye's attempt to make sense of artificial neural networks generated to mimic paths within the brains of animals, the painterly depictions produced by the "content aware" functions of Photoshop and Illustrator are manipulated by them to read as "otherworlds" smoothed over like a planetarium projection gone berserk or a NASA space image of the World Wide Web. Through this intensely beautiful work—itself a weird kind of eye candy—I readily access the interiors of Xuan Ye's brain.

Garrulous Guts (2019), produced for their exhibition *Oral Logic* at Pari Nadimi Gallery in Toronto, is a two-channel three-dimensional audio-visual piece that consists of a projection showing a digestive

tract pumping out an algorithmic composition from two subwoofers. Alliterative and evocative in name, *Garrulous Guts* expounds a heady mix of machine-made sound with a side of primal, gross-out humour. It is dizzying stuff and the aural equivalent to a gastrointestinal illness that is so true to form it might incite queasiness in the viewer. Aptly, the phrases “verbal diarrhea” and “word vomit” come to represent text generated by AI bots, and in Xuan Ye’s work the scrolls of generated text read strangely as ancient scrolls: snaking, printed from a roll of paper, shuttling through the so-called information highway. As with a human body, what goes into AI must also come out.



Xuan Ye in collaboration with Jason Doell, *Garrulous Guts*, 2019, two-channel animation, subwoofers, clear gelatin capsules, antibiotics, anti-estrogen hormone, air ducts, generative algorithmic composition. Courtesy of the artist.

Xuan Ye has delved deeper into the bowels of AI and digital poetics, an entirely natural progression into computation in these cyborgian times; long gone are the days when human bodies could be fully divorced from the machine. Extensions of our bodies can be found anywhere in assistive programs and devices. Computers have never been separate devices from ourselves where the translation of “computer” is 電腦 (Traditional Chinese) or 电脑 (Simplified Chinese) meaning “electrical brain.” Neither denies the connection of machines to the human body, but, rather, signifies a close affinity with them. Robotics and computation were developed by humans, so how can we be separated from their selves? Though already a dying viewpoint, this is no place for Cartesian dualism.

In the anthology *Imagining AI: How the World Sees Intelligent Machines*, Bing Song’s chapter “How Chinese Philosophy Impacts AI Narratives and Imagined AI Futures” theorizes that principles in Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism do not view humans as fundamentally

separate entities, and as such do not fear robotics and AI.³ While some twenty and twenty-first century Western theorists such as Bruno Latour have taken on similar ideas that humans are no different from the cultures they create, they also highlight how “we have never been modern.”⁴ Asian philosophies alongside many global Indigenous ontologies understand the vicissitudes of aliveness in the inanimate. After all, how can machines destroy humans? In the end, we are them and they are us. If machines do eradicate humans, humans would live on in the machines as the natural process of evolution.

In all of this, it is rare that the role of language is strictly limited to words in Xuan Ye’s work—code, theory, music, noise, or sound serve as foodstuffs to feed their imagination. Produced, ingested and digested, language nourishes their practice, their digital digestion. Is not the easy integration of the electronic-technologic into everyday contemporary life, an embodied practice whereby the body’s internal organs process stimuli, fragmenting inside before reconstituting in a new form on the outside, a digital scatological output of sorts? And what happens when we experience indigestion? Examples of these might be buggy apps, error codes, sonic blips, stutters, or corrupted files. It is precisely these glitches that interest Xuan Ye—the feedback from malfunctioning systems, the result of too much information being processed much too quickly.



For Xuan Ye, Legacy Russell’s concept of the glitch is helpful here, seeing it as distinctly feminist, queer, and away from heteronormative and linear ideas of unbroken code.⁵ Unfettered code is a lie, there are always bugs in life both online and away from the keyboard, so why not embrace error? What hits home for me with the work of Xuan Ye is the idea of illegibility, the untranslatable, the refusal to be

Exhibition catalogue for /
OWNED, A TONGUE (Guelph:
Ed Video Media Arts Centre,
2024).

read. Every day, humans exist in relation to and between translations, be they language, culture, or the self. Yet Xuan Ye makes sense of it all by not making sense, by letting electronic brains do some of the work, living with the mistakes and being okay with it in the end.

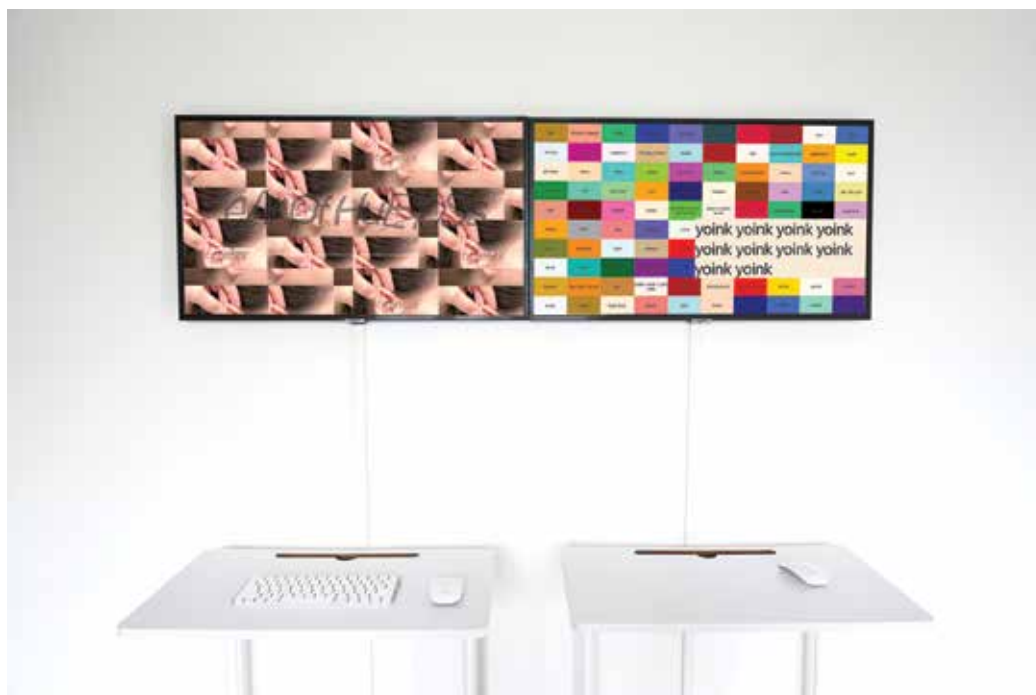
The synthesis of worlds and words continue in their 2024 exhibition *I OWNED, A TONGUE* at Ed Video Media Arts Centre, Guelph, Ontario, in which their experimental writing practices as code, text, composition also coalesced in a tidy booklet of the same name. I was away when

Xuan Ye delivered the publication for this exhibition through my sister's mail slot and I expected to come home to a hardbacked exhibition catalogue. I was mistaken: while slim and pamphlet-like, its profile deceives and brims with all the stuff of Xuan Ye's cosmology distilled into a digestible entity. Artist books are nothing new, but what do they look like now with the incursion of digital practices? The book comes alive with QR codes for apps the artist has developed including *IN BETWEEN () WE OSCILLATE* (2018) and *(‘ve) said a mouthful v1* (2020–21). I scan the former with my phone, which deposits me immediately into the intimate world of a piercing yet oddly pleasing sound that Xuan Ye tells me “is the sonification of the waveform as one image” and a white scrolling text illuminated like neon lights on a black background. Displayed in alphabetical order, the words read as binaries like the code that writes them: attractive repulsive, horizontal vertical, join separate. I do the same with the latter, and it brings me to a visually noisy webpage filled with a rainbow of gridded rectangles that contain words like “shuush shuush” in violet, “quacked” in magenta, “pant” in neon green. Built in response to the work of the artist Shaheer Zazai, who, using Microsoft Word, creates colourful digital images, prints, and rugs resembling Afghan carpet patterns, the piece might be Xuan Ye's most delightful. Like child's play in its level of interactivity, a computer voice booms out of my laptop speakers as I mouse over various words, like a virtual toy piano that spews word sounds instead of notes.



Xuan Ye, screenshot of *IN BETWEEN () WE OSCILLATE*, 2018, phone app. Courtesy of the artist.

These days, Xuan Ye has begun to pioneer “wave philosophy,” a long-term project in which they can fit their work within a self-generated theoretical framework. When we chatted in November 2024, they showed me a complex, work-in-progress diagram, a web of connections not currently available for public consumption. Using the architecture of waves (sound, water, heat), quantum physics, cybernetics, and Chinese philosophy and knowledge systems including Daoism and



traditional Chinese medicine, Xuan Ye develops a theory that is as prismatic as their practice. The sovereignty of this act demonstrates that there is only one universe in which Xuan Ye can be in, and they must build that themselves.

Xuan Ye, installation view of / *OWNED, A TONGUE*, 2024. Left: *FIN*, 2018, phone app, right: *(ve) said a mouthful v1*, 2021–2022, phone app. Courtesy of the artist.

And just like that, their works come back in waves. Xuan Ye's first artwork *unlearning etudes: cornered scream butterfly kiss* (2016) became a foundation in their concerted shift from musician to artist. Reenacted at Gallery TPW in Toronto on the occasion of the 4th Kamias Triennial in 2024, the live work involved performers silently moving about the opening reception following various instructional scores: brushing their eyelashes over the backs of their hands or silently screaming from a staircase into the gallery space. It is interesting that not long before the writing of this article that Xuan Ye would return to this early work while they consider the shape of things to come.

At one point during our friendship, I remember asking "Why don't you make art as 'apureapparatus'?", their former music moniker, to which they flatly replied that it was not going to happen. Now, it seems things have changed. Their divorce from sound studies has taken some time. The privileging of noise—as avant-garde and experimental music equates noise with high art—has foregrounded Xuan Ye's sonic practices for years; after that it was computational thinking and systems. Today, the prodigal daughter returns to their early interests to incorporate and integrate the aural and visual in a new way. But



Xuan Ye, *unlearning études: cornered scream butterfly kiss*, 2016, installation view at *Long-Distance*: 4th Kamias Triennial, Gallery TPW, Toronto, curated by Patrick Cruz, Su-Ying Lee, and Karie Liao, 2024. Performer: Julian A.M.P. Photo: Henry Chan. Courtesy of the artist.

maybe this is a symbolic move toward and acceptance of sloppiness, of their own garrulous guts that they cannot keep quiet.⁶ Guts are noisy, controlling our daily lives, they speak for us even when we wish they would keep it down.

Amalgamating methods and modes through entanglement, Xuan Ye's works have been eaten, processed, and digested by their hybrid biological-electronic internal organs. Pushing against binaries, they wrote to me one day: "there is a desire in me or my works that we MUST mush these binaries—into a bowl of hyperlinked congee." One thing I understood when I started to write this essay was that I could do no justice to even a fraction of their practice; so, by beginning with failure, I eked out a start. Just as I grasp their resolutely esoteric (internal, neural, gastrointestinal) practice, it mushes, morphs. It eludes me, just as ourselves always do.

NOTES

1. Jackie Wang, *Alien Daughters Walk into the Sun: an almanac of extreme girlhood* (South Pasadena CA: Semiotext(e), 2023), 373.
2. 4th Kamias Triennial, "Contributors," Xuan Ye, <https://www.kamiaspecialprojects.com/kt4contributors>.
3. Bing Song, "How Chinese Philosophy Impacts AI Narratives and Imagined AI Futures," in *Imagining AI: How the World Sees Intelligent Machines*, eds. Stephen Cave and Kanta Dihal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).
4. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
5. Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (Booklyn, NY: Verso Books, 2020).
6. Xuan Ye, "Smaller, Slower, Sloppier," *Digital Review*, <https://thedigitalreview.com/issue04/xuanye/index.html>.