ArtReview Asia

Ming Wong

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vol 3 no 1

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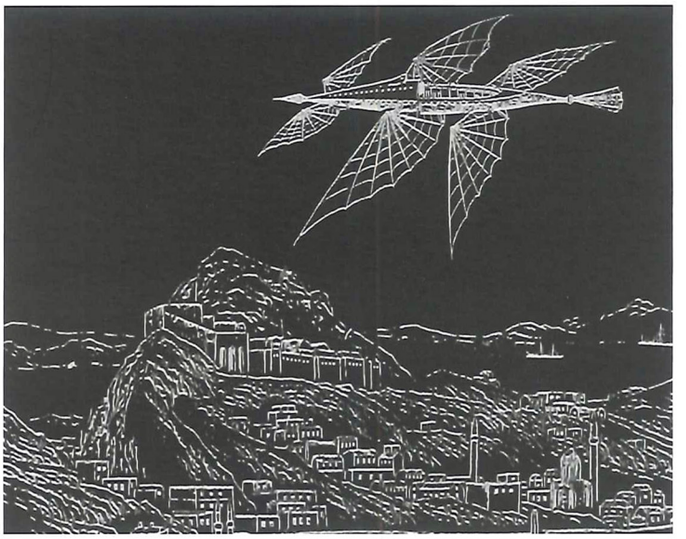
Mixing research into the history of science fiction in China and the preservation and adaptation of the traditions of Cantonese opera in Hong Kong, the Singaporean artist's latest body of work offers an intriguing study of cultural exchange, past futurology and the political and social realities of the present

by Sara Arrhenius

Ming Wong at Nadim Abbas's *Apocalypse Postponed*, Absolut Art Bar at Art Basel in Hong Kong, May 2014. Photo: Roberto Chamorro. Courtesy Absolut

Windows on the World (Part 1), 2014, production still.
Photo: Glenn Eugen Ellingsen. Courtesy the artist

'The future has arrived: the sci-fi inventions that have become reality', boasted the headline on *The Guardian*'s science page recently. It is undoubtedly fascinating to think that Marty McFly's hoverboard from *Back to the Future II* (1989) may soon be an everyday commuter vehicle. Nevertheless, when browsing through the article's list of already realised or soon-to-appear sci-fi inventions, it is the power of literature and film to imagine our future that strikes you most. Recognising that the dated technological fantasies of a 1980s movie are still inspiring and influencing the work of scientists and engineers ensnares you in a time trap more complicated than the disjointed chronology of the cult movie itself.



Unlike film or literary fiction, science fiction has never exactly been a steady current in contemporary art. But sci-fi does appear to fascinate artists at certain moments, when its rhetoric and imagery seem acutely relevant for various reasons. One obvious example is, of course, the work of Matthew Barney, who throughout his career has systematically constructed a phantasmagorical future universe that speaks of a new subjectivity beyond the limits of the human body. This universe grew up in parallel to new developments in biotechnology and computer science during the 1990s. Developments that, at the end of the millennium, were picked up by art and cultural theory, which, inspired in turn by the increased interaction between humans and advanced computing, as well as biotechnology, began theorising a posthuman subjectivity marked by the technophilia of science fiction. The writings of the science historian Donna Haraway were influential in constructing this discourse, which was echoed in the art shown in exhibitions such as the Jeffrey Deitch-curated *Post Human* (1992), featuring Barney, Sylvie Fleury, Kodai Nakahara and others.

Haraway's science-fiction-inspired thinking about a future development of fusions between man, technology and other forms of life made a decisive return to contemporary art some two decades later as an important influence for the curatorial concept of Documenta 13 (2012), which also honoured her with an archive made by the Danish artist Tue Greenfort. It was noticeable how the techno-utopia of the previous millennium had now turned into a dystopia echoing the current and coming ecological disaster. Pierre Huyghe's uncanny tableau *Untilled* (2011–12), with its cyberpunkish pink-legged dog, weeds and psychotropic plants, suggested an apocalyptic time after our biotope. The future seemed much closer, but also messier and more apocalyptic, than the shiny, monumental world that Barney laid out before us. The speculative ecology of Huyghe's piece could be read as a renewed interest within contemporary art in formulating the future in a language inspired by science fiction. The landscape that these time-travellers pass through is reinventing the boundaries between nature and manmade in order to enable survival on a planet where the conditions for life have been radically altered by the human hand. The current Taipei Biennial, *The Great Acceleration, Art in the Anthropocene*, curated by Nicolas Bourriaud, investigates how art interacts with this new situation and imagines a very near future in which we have renegotiated our relationship with machines and with other living beings so as to create new forms of life. In Norwegian artist Ann Lislegaard's installations, the rich literary tradition of science fiction, in the shape of writers such as Ursula K. Le Guin, J.G. Ballard and Samuel R. Delany, becomes an imaginative and permissive space in which it is possible to imagine new ways of being in the world that transgress the boundaries between life forms and time zones. In *Crystal World (After J.G. Ballard)* (2006), the viewer moves through a 3D animation of a universe that slowly crystallises. The sound piece *Science Fiction_3112 (After 2001: A Space Odyssey by Stanley Kubrick)* (2007) manipulates the listener's sense of time and space by compressing the film's soundtrack to eight minutes.

Lislegaard's use of literature and film recurs in Singaporean Ming Wong's work. In his ongoing project *Windows on the World* (2014–), he thinks about the future with the aid of science fiction from the past. The work will develop in several stages, each one elaborating on connecting themes and source materials. The various parts will also be linked to and comment on their specific social and political context. The first stage was a film installation commissioned for *Islands off the Shore of Asia*, a group exhibition jointly presented in September 2014 by Para Site and Spring Workshop in Hong Kong that addressed the geopolitics of the remote and often uninhabited islands off the coast of East Asia, some of which have recently become the flashpoints for growing territorial-conflict-fuelled nationalism within the region. Wong responded to the theme with a

Stills from *Windows on the World (Part 2)*,
2014, video installation.
Courtesy the artist and Vitamin Creative Space, Beijing and Guangzhou

work evoking the ambiguous territory of outer space and comprising a tunnel built out of wood and fabric that resembles a sci-fi film set, at the end of which is a film projected onto a circular screen showing the artist (in a silvery space suit) moving around in zero gravity amid futuristic architecture to the sound of Cantonese opera. *Solaris* – both the 1961 novel by Stanisław Lem and the 1972 film adaptation by Andrei Tarkovsky – is an important reference here. The setting of this seminal sci-fi work, a planet covered by an ocean whose secrets the space-travelling scientists are trying to discover, links into the exhibition's archipelago theme. Added to that, another important theme of *Solaris* is the inability of the space travellers to communicate with nonhuman species because of humanity's limited perceptual capabilities (it turns out that the ocean is, in fact, probing the humans who think they are probing it).

The choice of *Solaris* as a starting point takes us to the tradition of science fiction developed east of the Iron Curtain. For Wong, turning to science fiction as source material was motivated by an interest in seeing how science fiction thinks about the future, and how that thinking is imprinted with the social and political developments of its time. In the next part of *Windows on the World*, made for the Shanghai Biennial, Wong shifts the focus to the science-fiction tradition in China. The installation looks like a sci-fi movie mission control, with its panels of television monitors. The screens show clips from the *Solaris*-inspired film, but also excerpts from Chinese science-fiction films, as well as documentary material about the Chinese space programme.

In contrast to its strong position in the Soviet Union, science fiction didn't achieve great popularity in China during the twentieth century. After it was introduced there in the early 1900s, through translations of writers such as Jules Verne, Chinese science-fiction writers gained some influence, but in the wake of the Cultural Revolution, the genre came to be regarded as marginal or as children's literature. The social and political changes of the late 1990s, and access to digital technology, allowed new writers to emerge, who also gained widespread public recognition. The new generation is influenced by the Western cyberpunk movement, as well as traditional Chinese literature. It was this crossbreed nature that made it interesting to Wong.

Stills from *Windows on the World (Part 2)*, 2014, video installation.
Courtesy the artist and Vitamin Creative Space, Beijing & Guangzhou

The hybrid, mutable character of cultural tradition is a recurring motif in Wong's art. It is often linked to a discussion about the complex construction of identity, and about ways that tradition can be stretched and challenged. Another strand in *Windows on the World* is the tradition of Cantonese opera, and how it survived and flourished outside mainland China. When doing his research, Wong noticed that, in Hong Kong, Cantonese opera kept its traditional ritualistic roots, at the same time as managing to renew itself by incorporating elements from the Chinese film industry, as well as influences from Western music. In this malleable identity, and in its openness to including novelty, while at the same time keeping the tradition alive out of ritual necessity, the artist found an interesting correspondence with the history of Chinese science fiction. Both artforms combined strands from contemporary and ancient Chinese culture with outside influences. The third and final part of *Windows on the World* will thus be a science-fiction inspired Cantonese opera performance commissioned by M+. As part of the work, Wong is also filming interviews with the young actors, students at the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts, in which he asks them to talk about the future at this pivotal moment in the island's history. By giving the voice of the future to the singers of this ancient operatic form, Wong is bringing the future and the past together in a dynamic and politically urgent here and now. The introduction of the futuristic language of science fiction to the age-old format of Cantonese opera makes the tradition grow and gain cultural relevance by absorbing contemporary cultural expressions. The key to this cultural relevance – and this is a recurring motif in Wong's work – is an openness in traditional artforms, such as opera, to the influence of contemporary popular culture. Energised with the vital language of contemporary Chinese science fiction, the Cantonese opera can speak not only of the past but also of the future. **ara**

The second part of Ming Wong's Windows on the World *(2014–) can be seen at the 10th Shanghai Biennial, titled* Social Factory, *through 31 March; his first solo show in Beijing will be on view at UCCA next summer, from 12 June through 9 August*

Windows on the World (Part 1), 2014, production still.
Photo: Glenn Eugen Ellingsen. Courtesy the artist