

WINNIE SOON

Born 1979, Hong Kong

Live and works in Hong Kong,
Denmark and London

Winnie Soon is an artistic coder, researcher and educator who is interested in the materiality and political ramifications of the computational processes that underpin our experiences within the digital realm. Alert to the growing importance of software in shaping our daily lives and identities, Soon's work probes the technological and cultural imaginaries of programming.

Soon is premiering the complete *Unerasable characters* series at ACCA, with the final work in the trilogy presented for the first time in *Data Relations*. This body of work addresses the chilling scale and effect of state-enacted censorship, enforced through digital infrastructures. The three works presented act as lyrical repositories for suppressed voices, with each technically scrutinising and poetically portraying tweets censored from Weibo, one of the biggest social media platforms in China.

In picturing this real-world data, the series exposes the precarity of individual expression and the politics of erasure within the context of contemporary digital authoritarianism. The works utilise Weiboscope, a data collection and visualisation project lead by Dr Fu King-wa from The University of Hong Kong. Weiboscope regularly samples timelines of a set of selected Chinese microbloggers who have more than 1,000 followers or whose posts are frequently censored.



Scan to learn more about the artist and artwork

***Unerasable characters I* 2022**

book: 2,652 pages of A4 paper and hand-made book binder

paper stack: 6,564 pages of A4 paper

dimensions variable

Technical production: Python, HTML, CSS, Paged.js

Acknowledgements: Dr Fu King-wa, Weiboscope research project; Greg Surma, Text_Predictor; Olle Essvik and Joel Nordqvist from rojal.se for the production of the book binder tool

Courtesy the artist

Unerasable characters I is a new work composed in two parts that, combined, gestures to the centrality of datasets within machine learning processes. The looming paper stack in *Unerasable characters I* is compiled of printouts of input data that was collected between 30 June 2021 and 30 June 2022, containing a sample of 54,064 censored posts presented in a mound consisting of more than 6,000 pages. The accompanying tome gathers predictive data from each iteration of the machine learning training.

The messages on display have been redacted and abstracted into meaninglessness but, through the assemblage of these empty signifiers, Soon invites us to rethink erasure beyond deletion. By using free and open-source software and libraries, do-it-yourself book binding tools and computational publishing (web/html to print), the project explores 'the commons': mediating on how the material residue of this mass of censored communiqués might be salvaged and repurposed into something new and generative.

***Unerasable characters III* 2021**

web art, electronic literature

Technical production: Python, HTML, CSS

Acknowledgements: Dr King-wa FU, Weiboscope research project; Polly Poon; Joel Kwong, Florence Wai and Jason Lam from the Microwave commissioned project

Connecting the Dots

Courtesy the artist

Unerasable characters III is an archive of censored voices, presented in the form of a continually scrolling web page. The work utilises data sourced between 1 December 2019 and 27 February 2020, a period when the COVID-19 outbreak first emerged in China. According to Dr Fu King-wa and Yun'er Zhu from the University of Hong Kong, there were 11,362,502 posts on Weibo during the period, with 1,230,353 containing at least one outbreak-related keyword, and 2,104 (1.7 per 1,000) of these posts were censored.

The tweets marshalled in *Unerasable characters III* have been rendered unreadable, their content either obscured or redacted. What remains are the pauses, blurry timestamps, emojis and special characters, suggesting the affective and expressive nature of the erased messages, while registering the few temporal and spatial details that remain. Users are invited to interact with the amassed data by clicking on and pausing specific entries as they glide across the screen. The frustrating obliqueness of these prohibited missives makes visible the use of digital infrastructure by the state to curb free expression and dissent.

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***Unerasable Characters II* 2020**

real-time digital software installation

Technical production: Python, p5.js

Acknowledgements: Dr Fu King-wa, Weiboscope research project

Courtesy the artist

For *Unerasable Characters II* Soon designed custom software that collates and visualises tweets that have been erased from Weibo on a daily basis, presenting this living archive in a graphic grid format. Each censored text is denoted as an individual character within the grid, flashing on the screen for a limited period. The duration that each character is visible for is computed from the actual time the post was live on Weibo before being removed. New real-world data endlessly populates the work, which cycles from a busy cacophony of voices into an increasingly silent and empty space as characters incrementally disappear.



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