

Destination Unknown

D.Y.

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Sincerest thanks to Jocelyne, Sean and Rachel who accepted my late application, granting me the chance to explore and better understand who I am in these two years. And to Helen, the role model, my glass mother. I've only been increasingly thinking about the justice that she has persisted on even if I'm still a bit afraid to face her... or better put, to face my old shittier self when I was at UWM.

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Abstract

Since the end of my undergrad years, I've been noticing my increasing tendency to not want to talk much about my work. What is it that lingers inside of me behind such silence? What story could one possibly talk about his studio practice, when he has little to say? Well, this thesis documents the thoughts behind this silence, which, I have to admit, have fueled my works in the past two years. I investigate postmodern phenomena and literary analysis on pop culture in East Asia, including hikikomori and decisionism, to better understand myself and the world around me. Constantly faced with the existential question of why I blow glass, I gradually come to realize that the answer to this question relates to that which has been encouraging me to be quiet.

Preface

A professor at the Sichuan Fine Art Institute, Wang Pengjie, once proposed a question during a conference which literally translates as: “what should art do when art is no longer ‘higher’ than ‘life?’”¹ By higher, Wang was referring to the transcendental quality that has long been attributed to art in a general sense. Obviously, the dysfunction of this transcendence is taken for granted as the existing background of discussion.

When I went to my first art history class in college, I heard about a deconstructive statement of European portrait paintings which said that portraits hung atop the walls in wealthy people’s houses back in the old days functioned similarly as our social media avatars and postings today. However limited credibility this statement may hold, its cynical humor has since influenced me. What exacerbated such cynicism was an impressive discussion that happened during a glass class in my undergraduate years on the topic of failure.

¹ "Dang Yishu Diyu Xianshi Shi, Yishu He Wei 当艺术低于现实时，艺术何为" [*When Art Is Lower Than Reality, What Can Art Do*]. https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/cJJ07qNuiayT_TvQRhbjpQ. (accessed February 12, 2023)

In the very beginning, learning glassblowing was more for fun to me. Glassblowing was like video gaming to me, where the player/gaffer is constantly challenged by adversities which yield treasures after being conquered. The involvement of body movement makes it even more inviting than the quiet, still video gaming experience. But on the other hand, having spent three full semesters into glassblowing, I still could not make a decent beer tumbler. Then the discussion of failure took place in class. It was framed around the critique on humanism and the idea of humanity that had reigned people's paradigm ever since the Enlightenment. Later the class went out for dinner at a pub with a visiting artist. My first glassblowing coach Taylor Kurrle, who had more than ten years of experience in glass production, told us that glassblowing is "stupid". The sensation from my lips touching upon the smooth and even lip of the machine-blown, mass-produced beer glass that was way thinner than what I could achieve, convinced me that oh yes, human labor had lost its battle against mass-production. A helpless feeling struck me hard and the thoughts on "failure" have since been lingering about in my mind.

These thoughts, amplified by the recent development of artificial intelligence, have transformed into an existential crisis about art making. Information technology pushes the conversation of the relationship between art and life further: when so many non-art postings on the internet can attract no less attention without

physical limitation than those inside the White Cubes can, what is art good for? Information repeated online brings about exhaustion when later one receives similar information in the reality, as examined by Michael Newman in his essay on the idea and transformation of “boredom” in the modern art world, “along with the abstraction produced by repetition goes affectlessness”.² Andy Warhol was lucky when he brought the quotidian objects to the gallery, for that was a time when the future where “everyone will be famous for 15 minutes” was yet to come. Today those who would like to bring their lives into the art world will inevitably face the challenge that questions them what significance they can add to that which has already been widely available in real life. From the perspective of a craftsman — here more specifically, of a craft-based glassblower — who has learned his or her techniques by copying what has already existed, such questioning might be more obvious. As a practitioner of a technique that long holds historical and cultural significance, a glassblower is more or less an appropriator of his or her forefathers back in ancient Rome. Thinking about mass production and online media that have, in Newman’s words, “reduced the

² Michael Newman, “The Long and the Short of It: Boredom after the End of the Great Boredom,” in *On Boredom: Essays in Art and Writing*, ed. Susan Morris and Rye Dag Holmboe (London, UK: UCL Press, 2021), 122.

toleration for the stretched-out time of boredom”,³ machines and the internet that enable such revolution are essentially mechanisms or systems that copy-pastes, appropriates, or duplicates objects and ideas faster. Originality is an idea that has been constantly deconstructed and questioned. Why should people pay attention to a specific object, when thousands of its equivalent others exist?

The answer is beyond me. It seems that however cynical such thoughts may be, I still have not yet completely lost interest in other people's works, and that I somehow regret ceasing holding an interest in making. It has been a tremendous privilege to stay in an art school where I can have the freedom to investigate my own cynicism.

³ Newman, “The Long and the Short of It: Boredom after the End of the Great Boredom”, 127.

On Hikikomori

My studio practice in Fall 2021 was largely focused on the concepts of silence and isolation. I made a noise-proofing helmet that takes the shape of a square box and is covered by one-way-mirrors on the outside, which repel others' gazes back towards themselves while enabling me to gaze outward. The piece was presented as a performance where I put on the helmet and sat still quietly against the wall in my studio. I could not hear anything inside, and people who came to the critique could not tell if or where I was looking. They tried to see through the mirror but encountered only their own faces. Later my professor told me that people commented that my performance became a critique on or a subversion of the structure of critique in art schools.

Being inside the mirror helmet was both a pain and a relief. The pain was mainly caused by the sheer weight of the noise-proofing materials against my shoulders, and the relief came from the fact that I did not have to care about what was being discussed among the class. It was similar to having masks and sunglasses on. Physical agony was the price for the bliss of anonymity and isolation, and more precisely, for the bliss of regaining control over one's own freedom of gaze. With the helmet on, I was able to choose what to look at and what not to, without being influenced by the voices of others, free from distraction and outside influence.



Untitled, Fall 2021

Mirror, acrylic, one-way mirror film, wood, vinyl, acoustic foam panel

12"×12"×12"

While I wasn't consciously attempting to create a demonstrative model, this work and experience reminded me of hikikomori, a well-known social phenomenon for the past thirty years.

Hikikomori is a Japanese term that describes a severe self-isolating practice, during which the sufferers lock themselves inside their room, often only having minimal social connection. I have not experienced hikikomori syndrome, but the discussions on hikikomori and the cultural background behind it have been influential to me in that they can offer an insight on isolation from a social and psychological perspective. As described by Saitō Tamaki, a psychiatrist who studied psychoanalysis, hikikomori is a complex that can be triggered by multiple causes (such as family negligence or being bullied) and can lead to various symptoms (such as compulsive-obsessive disorder, depression, or excessive fear of others).⁴ Saitō emphasizes that hikikomori should be understood in a social context.⁵ He summarized the social cause behind hikikomori as an undulating “vicious circle” of mental struggle, where “one external trauma gives rise to another”, and the psychological mechanism leads to an “adolescence without end”, just as the subtitle of his book describes.⁶ The term

⁴ Tamaki Saitō, *Hikikomori: Adolescence without End*, trans. Jeffrey Angles (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 54-89.

⁵ Saitō, *Hikikomori: Adolescence without End*, 83-85.

⁶ Saitō, *Hikikomori: Adolescence without End*, 81.

“adolescence” here refers to a confrontational mindset that puts the subjects on the opposite side of the environment around them.⁷ Saitō points out that “skipping school” is a useful model for us to understand such confrontation: attending school is widely considered as an important part of teens’ social lives, thus “skipping school” means putting oneself against the norms that parents, teachers and classmates share. Additionally, by “adolescence without end”, Saitō is referring to a state where such confrontational mindset (and thus the state of hikikomori) can be maintained even into adulthood, which requires sufficient monetary resources and limited social activities.

So, when exactly does adolescence commonly end? Peter Jones, a psychiatry professor at the University of Cambridge points out that the line between adolescence and adulthood is vague as a summarizing note to his study on causes and mechanisms of major mental illnesses: “There isn’t a childhood and then an adulthood. People are on a pathway, they’re on a trajectory.”⁸ Perhaps Saitō’s argument around the confrontational mindset of adolescence can be considered more as a metaphor that carries a potential to be extended to wider application: “Skipping school”

⁷ Saitō, *Hikikomori: Adolescence without End*, 85-86.

⁸ “People Don’t Become ‘Adults’ until Their 30s, Say Scientists,” BBC News (BBC, March 19, 2019), <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-47622059>.

is just the teenagers' version of the failure to meet external expectations, and thus the confrontational mindset can be read as one that takes such failure so seriously that it backfires and causes further retreat.

The conflict between self and others is universal. Understanding of message from others is intrinsically different from their own intention. According to Paul Ricoeur, reading involves interpretations which “conjoin a new discourse to the discourse of the text”, that ““brings together,’ ‘equalizes,’ renders ‘contemporary and similar,’ thus genuinely making one’s *own* what was initially *alien*.”⁹ To learn is to actively acquire knowledge, to “appropriate”, in a situated way from one’s own perspective with its intrinsic limitations, as noted by Ricoeur, “the ‘actualized’ text finds a surrounding and an audience; it resumes the referential movement – intercepted and suspended – toward a world and toward subjects.”¹⁰ The limitations explain the stressful misinterpretation happening in information exchange during our daily social activities. We all have learned vocabulary

⁹ Paul Ricoeur, “What Is a Text? Explanation and Understanding,” in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 119.

¹⁰ Paul Ricoeur, “What Is a Text? Explanation and Understanding,” 119.

differently, but we also usually expect the texts we read or hear to bear the same meaning as how we would understand; such expectations, with the texts “actualized”, are not always met. This conflict is even more obvious when the conversation is non-linguistic but instead exists in other abstract forms. Concerning the confrontational mindset in the hikikomori syndrome against the school/others/the world, In this sense, hikikomori can be read in a broader aspect as an overactive rejection of real-world information exchange.

One famous reference in pop culture around hikikomori syndrome and the refusal of information exchange is the cartoon animation *Neon Genesis: Evangelion*, which was first on air in 1995. *Neon Genesis* depicts the battle between humanity and invading supernatural beings, the “Angel”, in a post-apocalypse world where both the “Angel” and humans have their own “Absolute Terror Fields” (in short as A. T. Fields) around them.¹¹ The A. T. Field is a formless solid barrier that can hardly be penetrated. It is the materialized manifestation of the intrinsic fear that human beings share against opening their hearts to others (thus nicknamed as the “wall of the heart”).¹² Wholeheartedness

¹¹ *Neon Genesis Evangelion: The Complete Series*, DVD, directed by Anno Hideaki 庵野秀明 (USA: Khara/Project Eva, Shout!Factory, 2021).

¹² *Neon Genesis Evangelion: The Complete Series*.

and sincerity are thus rejected while simultaneously becoming the key cause of this “absolute terror”. However, the animation also introduced us to this barrier in another way: that our minds cannot get fully synchronized with others distinguishes us from them. The A. T. Field is, in the end, the metaphysical definition of the domain of function, of an independent individual. Bringing this conversation forward, it implies the underlying sacrifice that necessitates a deep understanding between individuals. It costs us to communicate with others.

After the release of *Neon Genesis*, Azuma Hiroki, a Japanese critic and scholar, observed the change happening in both the Japanese animation industry and its consumers. He noticed that background world settings in stories have been gradually trivialized in the animation industry since the release of *Neon Genesis*, and that consumers or audiences have shown an increasing interest in Doujin productions (or in English, fandom art), most of which have very little reference to the original world settings in the animation, but largely focused on interactions of characters and their sexual attractiveness (the “chara-moe” consumption behavior).¹³ Thus, Azuma summarizes, borrowing the term “Grand Narrative” from Jean-Francois Lyotard, that

¹³ Hiroki Azuma, *Otaku Japan's Database Animals*, trans. Shion Kono and Jonathan E. Abel (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 35-36.

such changes have marked the end of consumption of Grand Narratives in fictions and the beginning of “database consumptions”.¹⁴ In Azuma’s argument on database consumption, the elements that widely appear in Dōjin productions are called “grand nonenarratives”, characterized by the “chara-moe” consumption model.¹⁵ These nonenarratives, which are not essential for the plot to take place, altogether form a “database” for authors and audiences to refer to.

Jean-Francois Lyotard noted that Grand Narratives—those totalizing “truths” pre-constructed to reign over humanity—have been losing their credibility in the postmodern era.¹⁶ One can hardly find any reference to existential questions, when all the answers that were given by our predecessors, all ideologies, can be deconstructed and challenged. Unsure about what to believe, one has to figure out on their own. Birds of a feather flock together; people tend to reunite under shared ideologies. However, obviously, inclusion exists with exclusion. Uno Tsunehiro, a scholar who revised and refreshed Azuma’s argument, points out that such an exclusive reality has led to the formation of “island

¹⁴ Hiroki Azuma, *Otaku Japan's Database Animals*, 34.

¹⁵ Hiroki Azuma, *Otaku Japan's Database Animals*, 36-38.

¹⁶ Lyotard Jean-François, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 23-25.

universe” societies,¹⁷ where the islands refer to vast varieties of ideologies. People on different islands hold their own points of view and can hardly travel between them freely. To Uno, it seems that the deterioration of the Grand Narrative has functioned as a catastrophic flood that submerges the flatlands, driving people to climb up mountains that ultimately become islands. With such a metaphor, Uno brings the difficulty of communication from the individual level to the whole postmodern society.

The way out? On the opposite side of Lyotard’s statement on the limitations and diminishment of Grand Narratives, the power of smaller narratives — localized, situated, embodied narratives, focusing on independent individuals and thus being case-sensitive — seems to manifest itself. This seems also to be what the editor of *Neon Genesis*, Anno Hideaki, would argue for: the ending of *Neon Genesis Evangelion* series landed on the fundamental destruction of the antagonist’s plan to merge all human beings

¹⁷Uno Tsunehiro 宇野常寛, “Dētabēsu no Umu Haijogata Shakai –Dō butsuka no Jidai to Komyunikēshon no Kaifuku Kanōsei” データベースの生む排除型社会——「動物化」の時代とコミュニケーションの回復可能性 [The Exclusive Society That Database Breeds: The Age of “Animalization” and the Possibility of the Recovery of Communication], in *Zero Nendai no Sōzōryoku* ゼロ年代の想像力 [The Imagination of the Millennial Generation] (Chiyoda, Tōkyō: Hayakawa Shobō, 2011), 39–61.

together by destroying the “A. T. Field” on each individual to attain the ultimate eradication of loneliness and isolation that had existed all through human history.¹⁸ It seems that for Anno, accepting and living together even with the difficulty of communication could be a sign to mark the end of adolescence. Acknowledging each other’s difference and embracing diversity seem to be discernible here.

Yet still, continuing with Uno’s model of the “island universe” society, another critique on such arguments can be made. When diversity is thought to be the go-to ideology, it forms its own version of the Grand Narrative by becoming politically correct, and thus it is ready to be deconstructed. How diversity can be defined and who has the right to define it need to be questioned. Looking back at the we can argue that the large continent named Diversity is largely likely going to have gigantic lakes with smaller islands in them, whose dwellers will still have problems traveling around, trapped like hikikomoris.

With this in mind, two months after I had made myself that noise-proof helmet mentioned above, I went one step further and made a small, claustrophobic chamber, about the size of an old telephone booth, that would invite visitors to experience isolation during the RISD Glass Department’s triennial show. I casted

¹⁸ *Neon Genesis Evangelion: The Complete Series.*

soundproof acoustic foam panels into cold, solid, hostile glass windows which I installed with the spikes facing outward in the chamber.



Untitled (Food N' Drinks Allowed Inside), 2021

*Sand-casted glass, wood, acoustic foam panel, hardware
6' x 2' x 2'*

The sound absorbing quality of acoustic foams was switched into the sound blocking quality of glass. These icy glass spike panels also became windows where light would enter the chamber, whose inner side was lined with fluffy acoustic foams that also turned the chamber dark. In the gallery setting, my chamber offensively defends whoever stands inside from “voices” from the rest of the exhibition. It would serve as a part of the diverse conversations happening around it, but in the meanwhile would also function as a cynical dissonance that showcases the vulnerability of such diversity. Getting inside this chamber would metaphorically put one in the place of temporary confrontational “hikikomori” in its abstract form.

Ahh, yes, communication remains a hard thing.

In Spring 2022 I fueled this stream of pessimistic thoughts into a video performance piece, which, though having been shown in a critique, has yet to reach a resolved state. I blew out thin glass bubbles in an almost free-form way, hoping to reference those speech bubbles seen in comics. The bubbles were knocked off the pipe from their jack-lines, which served as mouth pieces. A small hole was left on top of each bubble. In the performance, I documented the process of me holding onto a bubble with both my mouth and my hand, trying to drink water of the same volume as the inner space of the bubble I held onto, poured out from another bubble by my friend whose identity was left unclear.

Finishing all the water in such a large bubble was almost impossible for me in one single sitting. The video ended when I could drink no more and thus quit. To me, the process of blowing bubbles was a direct metaphor of me giving information. The water represented someone else's takeaway of that information: though water shared similarity with air that formed the bubble in transparency and volume, it is intrinsically different from air. Drinking the water then became a metaphor for me trying to take in and digest someone else's feedback.

During the critique of this piece, a reference to force feeding due to the difference in height of the actors was brought up. My friend was standing on a stool when we took the video in order that he could pour the water with more ease, thus elevating him over me. This made space for interpretations on hierarchy and power structure happening in the video: it seemed that I was force-fed by someone more powerful (even though I was holding onto the bubble I drank from with my own body). Force feeding was not in my mind when I proposed this piece. Still, I deeply appreciate this extra reference as it directly relates to the difficulty of communication I hope to explore. No conversation can be established if any one of the subjects does not listen carefully to what others say, and when one does listen, he or she would be naturally in a humble place, where such a "force-fed" gesture can be described as one that is voluntary.

Fun moments happened while filming this piece. During a rehearsal of our performance, the bubble broke in my mouth due to the thinness of its walls, which could not hold onto the weight of water inside. This would add a lot more to the metaphor, had it been recorded nicely. Unfortunately, we had not pressed the record button for the rehearsal. In future revisions of this piece, I would like to recreate similarly dramatic situations that could invite more discussions. Additionally, the shape and size of the bubbles I created were not ideal to me, which should also be resolved in future revisions.



“Feedback”, 2022

Glass, water

Duration: 11’30”

On (A Secularized) Decisionism

As a netizen who spends most of my spare time online, I have witnessed countless quarrels and failed communications on social networks: the internet erases the physical distance and time difference between the subjects in a dialogue, creating conditions for more conversations to take place than we ever could have imagined before. Unfortunately, different from what those before the internet era might have envisioned and thus advocated, the online utopia where people can freely, equally, and limitlessly acquire knowledge or share thoughts still remains in the imagination. People are still lacking the psychological openness that is needed for such a dream to be realized. Filter bubbles and echo chambers phenomena have become unavoidable and thus ubiquitous, affecting almost every user alike, thanks to algorithms and the “entities” behind them. Polarization has become the result of such occlusion, as observed by Wang Qin, an associate professor at the University of Tokyo.¹⁹ Wang cites Azuma Hiroki to argue that the postmodern internet as a public space is now

¹⁹ Wang Qin 王钦, “Xunqiu ‘Waibu’ Azuma Hiroki De Tetsugaku No Gohai 寻求‘外部’: 东浩纪的《哲学的误配》” [Seeking the ‘Outside’: On the Misdelivery of Philosophy by Azuma Hiroki], last modified May 31, 2020, <https://www.artforum.com.cn/books/12828>. (accessed February 12, 2023)

flooded with narrow and extremist political opinions, a phenomenon that has been influencing modern democracy.²⁰

Uno Tsunehiro also observes a similar tendency in his descriptions of the “island universe” society, in that the “islands” are rather isolated from each other. Based on Azuma’s arguments that database consumerism ultimately brings the qualities to postmodern lives, Uno points out that in an era when no Grand Narrative can be always effective, when Grand Narratives are also part of a meta database, people would seek certain “substitute” narratives inside this database.²¹ In his book, *The Imagination of the 2000’s*, Uno examines some of the most popular works of Japanese pop culture to unveil the ideology, or in Uno’s word, the “imagination”, behind them.

Uno noticed a boom in pop literature works under the “Battle Royale” genre and the “Sekai-kei” genre around 2000, after the

²⁰ Wang, “Xunqiu ‘Waibu’ Azuma Hiroki De Tetsugaku No Gohai”, 2020,

²¹ Uno Tsunehiro 宇野常寛, “‘Kyūjūgonen no Shisō’ wo Megutte: Hitei Shingakuteki Noraru no Atosaki” 「九五年の思想をめぐって」——否定神学的モラルのあとさき [Concerning the “Ideology in the 95’s”: Before and After the Apophatic-Theology-esque Morality], in *Zero Nendai no Sōzōryoku* ゼロ年代の想像力 [The Imagination of the Millennial Generation] (Chiyoda, Tōkyō: Hayakawa Shobō, 2011), 81–116.

publication of the movie *Battle Royale* in the same year. The “Battle Royale” genre stories depict absurd deadly gladiator battles between the main characters, where the protagonists would likely co-operate, but only the last survivor could win a prize. The “Sekai-kei” genre links the fate of the world directly to that of the protagonists, often by giving the female juvenile protagonist some sort of supernatural power that would usually be utilized by the male protagonist to counter a world crisis, and depiction of a romantic relationship that transcends the struggles is widely seen. The movie *Battle Royale* takes place amid the deterioration of the economy in Japan around the year 2000, and the “Sekai-kei” genre became popular in the late nineties after the hit of *Neon Genesis*, which could be seen as a semi-prototype of this genre. Uno points out that the “Battle Royale” genre caters to the infective anxiety in an increasingly competitive society where even the middle class would face starvation if they didn’t work hard.²² Uno also cites Yamagata Hiroo, a Japanese economist, to argue that the popularity of the “Sekai-kei” genre alludes to the growth of

²² Uno Tsunehiro 宇野常寛, “Tatakawanakereba ikinokorenai: Survive Kei no Keifu” 戦わなければ、生き残れないーサヴァイヴ系の系譜 [You Can’t Survive If You Don’t Fight: A Genealogy of the Survival Genre], in *Zero Nendai no Sōzōryoku* ゼロ年代の想像力 [The Imagination of the Millennial Generation] (Chiyoda, Tōkyō: Hayakawa Shobō, 2011), 119-120.

nihilism in modern society.²³ There are shared aspects between these works: the protagonists are similarly put on the opposite side of the fatal world; they would face major choices between self and other, or their friends and strangers. The “enemy” and “choice making” here have grounded Uno’s argument on decisionism. Uno describes a certain pattern of behavior — “acting after the thought that ‘given that Grand Narratives have lost effect, although one does not necessarily know what is correct and what is not, he or she urgently has to do something in order to survive’, even if he or she has no clear idea why or how that “something” could or should be done, and even if that action might hurt someone”²⁴ — as the original form of his “decisionism”.

The word decisionism, first made known by the political theorist Carl Schmitt, actually has a German origin: “Dezisionismus”. Schmitt claims that it is one’s “enemies” that define his or her identity, and thus the politics can be subtracted to the origin, the

²³ Uno Tsunehiro 宇野常寛, “Kaitaisha toshite no Yoshinaga Fumi: Nijūyōnengumi kara Tooku Hanarete” 解体者としてのよしながふみー二十四年組から遠く離れて [The Deconstructor Yoshinaga Fumi: Getting Far Away from the Year 24 Group], in *Zero Nendai no Sōzō ryoku* ゼロ年代の想像力 [The Imagination of the Millennial Generation] (Chiyoda, Tōkyō: Hayakawa Shobō, 2011), 219-220.

²⁴ Uno, “‘Kyūjūgonen no Shisō’ wo Megutte: Hitei Shingakuteki Noraru no Atosaki”, 109-110.

abstract form, of the fight against communal enemies. In order to prevent oligarchy that can result from modern European liberalism, according to Andreas Kalyvas, a scholar who taught at the University of Michigan,²⁵ Schmitt proposed an omnipotent sovereign who makes the ultimate decisions above the limitation of the law and prior to the transformation of social norms which will fuel the formation of new laws:

“It is not the command as command, but the authority or the sovereignty of an ultimate decision given in a command, which constitutes *the source of all law*, that is, of all the norms and all the orders that follow from it. . . . Consequently, the sovereign decision can be juridically explained neither from a [i.e. antecedent] norm nor by a concrete order because for decisionism it is the decision that *grounds* both the norm and the order. The sovereign decision is *an absolute beginning*, and *the beginning is nothing else than a sovereign*

²⁵ Andreas Kalyvas, “From the Act to the Decision: Hannah Arendt and the Question of Decisionism,” in *Political Theory* 32, no. 3 (2004): 320–46. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4148157>, 323-325

decision. It brings out of a normative nothingness and from a concrete disorder.”²⁶

Here, the validity of Schmitt’s “sovereign decision” is rooted in “nothingness”, or, in the fact that it is “pure”, free from the restraints of any existing norms or laws. Under the authoritative alteration or norms, people would blindly follow the lead of such “sovereign decision”.

Uno never blatantly named the connection between Schmitt’s decisionism and his in his book. However, by bringing Uno’s model of the “island universe” society to his overly vague description of decisionism, a link could be made between Uno’s decisionism and Schmitt’s. “Having to believe in something with no solid support” “feeling threatened by enemies or adversities” “being identified or credited not by action but by words” and “acting without consideration of others” might be something in common. Unlike Schmitt who was arguing for the Nazi Germany’s dictatorship that, according to the title of his book, *Political Theology*, describes the ideal dictator as a godly sovereign, Uno brings this terminology to a broader, more secularized or

²⁶ Kalyvas, “From the Act to the Decision: Hannah Arendt and the Question of Decisionism,” 323. Here Kalyvas directly quoted Carl Schmitt’s *OUber die drei Arten des rechtswissenschaftlichen Denkens* (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1993), 21, 23-24.

mundane application. As a summary to the history, I would conclude decisionism as “a loyal kitschy credulity happening in an actively exclusive manner when the Grand Narrative diminishes”.

Having named such a phenomenon (though quite ambiguously), Uno criticizes decisionism’s underlying violence. The violence of the Battle Royal genre is obvious: the lethal competition between characters for survival under the decision of a third-party entity. In order to deconstruct the Sekai-kei genre to expose its underlying violence, Uno summarized a paragraph in the manga *Hi Izuru Tokoro no Tenshi* by Yamagishi Ryouko which was published in the early 80’s as a direct criticism against decisionism and its violence.²⁷ The protagonist, Umayado no Miko (or Prince Shoutoku, borrowed from Japanese history of the 6th Century), was depicted as a talented genius with supernatural power who, being readily accessible to almost everything available in his time, lost his meaning for life and suffered from nihilism. Prince Shoutoku sought transcendence within a love affair with Suga no Emishi thinking that only Suga’s love can give meaning to his life, thus did all he could to pursue Suga without hesitation when he had to hurt or slaughter others for his purpose. This behavioral pattern, according to Uno, exemplifies the underlying violence of occlusion in the Sekai-Kei genre works: they create a desired object

²⁷ Uno, “Kaitaisha toshite no Yoshinaga Fumi: Nijuyonnengumi kara Tooku Hanarete”, 217-220.

(often the female protagonist) that is “unconditionally needed”, to whom the responsibility of whatever violence done by the subject (often the male protagonist) is casted upon while the subject remains oblivious about it.²⁸

So where is the way out? Or... is there even a way out?

According to Uno, in *Hi Izuru Tokoro no Tenshi*, the author Yamagishi successfully criticizes this behavior by having Suga no Emishi reject Prince Shoutoku’s pursuit and maintaining that Prince Shoutoku’s love, that exact same kind of love that would “transcend” the struggles in most other Sekai-kei genre works, is intrinsically but a kitschy selfishness.²⁹ To Uno, although Yamagishi has presented a pleasing criticism on decisionism, she was still not successful enough to bring readers a newer “imagination” that could be helpful enough to think outside of decisionism. The artist that Uno landed on whose works have shed some light on Uno’s search for a new “imagination” was Yoshinaga Fumi. Uno examined her work *Seiyou Kottou Yougashiten* (Antique Bakery) to argue how Yoshinaga has shifted

²⁸ Uno, “Kaitaisha toshite no Yoshinaga Fumi: Nijūyōnengumi kara Tooku Hanarete”, 213-215, 218-219.

²⁹ Uno, “Kaitaisha toshite no Yoshinaga Fumi: Nijūyōnengumi kara Tooku Hanarete”, 219

away from a loyal dedication to decisionism.³⁰ It seems that Uno is very fond the tranquil relationships between the main characters in *Seiyō Kottō Yōgashiten*, a mellow network that is rather loose so that the common Sekai-kei love story would not take place, but still tight enough to function as mental support to all its members. Obviously, the ensemble cast plot structure without a solo protagonist is a key aspect. Uno also notes that the ending of *Seiyō Kottō Yōgashiten* implies a destined tranquil farewell which has added on to the essential looseness of the relationships that he has been looking for outside of Sekai-kei genre.³¹ Instead of focusing on a single entity or a constrained “island” in the “island universe”, instead of noticing the stagnation of our lives, instead of being hostile to “islanders” from other “islands”, in fact, Uno advocates for an “imagination” that opens one’s sight to the vast “sea” of possibilities in the “island universe” while staying aware of the fragility of our lives.

This is made more obvious in the last chapter of Uno’s book, the *Imagination of the 2000’s*. Uno cited the famous Serenity Prayer

³⁰ Uno, “Kaitaisha toshite no Yoshinaga Fumi: Nijūyōnngumi kara Tooku Hanarete”, 224-230.

³¹ Uno, “Kaitaisha toshite no Yoshinaga Fumi: Nijūyōnngumi kara Tooku Hanarete”, 229-230.

by Reinhold Niebuhr to wrap up his fundamental argument against decisionism: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”³² While by no means Catholic, Uno points out that Niebuhr has also encountered an era where the old “Narratives” had been fundamentally challenged by social turbulence and new “Narratives” were yet to be coined, similar to our postmodern present. Though unaware of what the new “imagination” might be, needless to say the methodology to achieve it, Uno has still tried to point out where one should fumble towards, with a keen awareness of the violence that one’s own decisionism might cause. To Uno, the violence of rejecting other “islanders” on different “islands” is almost like an original sin; no one can get away from decisionism as long as he or she decides. Under this impossibility of eliminating decisionism, it is the gesture of (keeping) sailing away from a stagnant island so that one can look back and introspect that matters to Uno.

³² Uno Tsunehiro 宇野常寛, “Jidao wo Shukufuku/Sōsō suru tameni: ‘Ketsudan Shugi no Zero Nendai’ wo Koete” 時代を祝福／葬送するために——「決断主義のゼロ年代」を超えて [To Give Blessing/Bit Farewell to the Era: Going Beyond the “Millennial of Decisionism”], in *Zero Nendai no Sōzōryoku* ゼロ年代の想像力 [The Imagination of the Millennial Generation] (Chiyoda, Tōkyō: Hayakawa Shobō, 2011), 392-394.

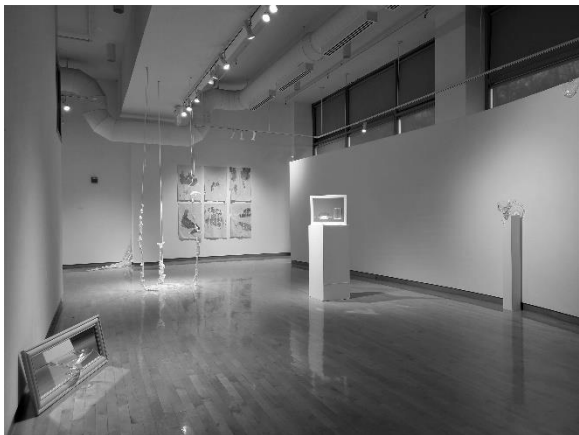
In some sense, this on-going fumbling gesture can be related to Hito Steyerl's metaphor of free fall. Steyerl examines the common assumption of a "ground" when we think about free fall or about a vertical perspective, pointing out that the idea of ground is but an illusion which extends from the relational perspective that we have accustomed to.³³ When everything around one falls at a relatively constant speed, he or she would not recognize the fact that he or she is falling. The word "fall" alludes to the existence of a starting position and ending position. That Steyerl still chooses to use "free fall" as a metaphor while noting the imaginary aspect of the "ground" pulls meaning away from the word "fall", so that "in free fall" can be flattened into "in constant motion". Indeed, Steyerl argues for mobility and uncertainty: "... the place we are falling toward is no longer grounded, nor is it stable. It promises no community, but a shifting formation."³⁴

To stay open and stay in motion still remains an abstract answer when it comes down to the individual level. I was lucky enough to peep into a carryout of such arguments in my own studio practice

³³ Hito Steyerl, "In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective," Journal #24, April 2011, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/24/67860/in-free-fall-a-thought-experiment-on-vertical-perspective/>.

³⁴ Steyerl, "In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective," 2011.

in fall 2022, when I worked towards a biennial show of the graduate students in the RISD glass department. I started from a position where I hoped to create tension in my works to tease the nerves of the audiences by placing my works in a dangerous manner where they might fall and shatter due to the vibration from people walking around them. In order to achieve such results, I explored a method of balancing the vessels I make on their pontil mark combined with some slumping technique that bends the glass to act as both support and to add a drooping effect. That funkiness of the drooping effect drove me to explore more semi-controlled slumping on my blown vessels. On the other hand, I was also interested in exploring the idea of the illusion of perfection in glassblowing with mirrors. Off-centeredness often happens in glassblowing, when the axis of the vessel that one blows fails to align with the axis of the rotation of the pipe. I realized that if I could locate a better half of a hand-blown glass vessel and saw the uncentered half off, I could glue the better half to a mirror, so that its own reflection would complete the full vessel, which would look better than the original piece. Obviously, my explorations were unfocused, and my thoughts scattered. I had all three of these ideas that I decided to play around with, but they lead me nowhere: I wasn't able to figure anything out before I landed anywhere. However, when I had to install what I had done for the exhibition, I was lucky to be granted the best space in the Sol Koffler gallery: the nicely lit entrance with a gallery wall.



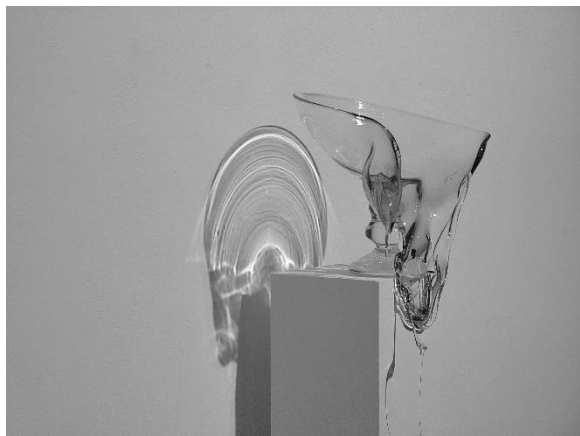
Sol Koffler Gallery installation shot.

The final installation was a mere hodgepodge of six iterations of my ideas that had yet reached their full potential. However, being held together organically in a defined space, with some sitting atop the wall, some on pedestals, and some resting casually against the wall on the floor, the messy hodgepodge manifested its own potential of inviting the viewers to make sense of it on their own. It became a whole set of surreal objects that deflects anticipations and preoccupations of quotidian glassware. Neither I nor the other viewers landed on a secure ground to name what this

installation actually was. I made the decisions to shape the glass in ways to form the funky vessels, but in a sense that my original plans were disturbed by me having to listen to the material, I was able to sail away from being didactic.

By listening to the material, I also mean the acceptance of mistakes happened due to my lack of control over the material. During these practices, mistakes and failure happened: unevenly blown vessels, uncontrolled slumping, thermal shocks that cracked the entire pieces, etc. Starting from my idea of making an off-centered vessel look better by using the reflection of the better half of it in a mirror after cutting it apart, I gradually learnt to accept these unpleasant moments and incorporated them into my works. These mistakes pointed towards the unplanned, undecided, and the unknown. They opened up possibilities, providing chances for my practice to fall from a stiffened working procedure that has little difference from that of product manufacturing, to a ground of uncertainty and unexpectedness. In one of these iterations shown at the gallery, I made a mistake when I tried to slump a large goblet, making the whole vessel body of the goblet go slanted at the stem. Originally hoping to cut it in half to play with the mirror and reflection like what I described above, I was discouraged by my mistake. However, when I brought it to the gallery and examined it on-site, Rachel Berwick, our department head, casually shined a spotlight towards it, which created a beautiful halo in its shadow. Such serendipities happened a lot in

the making of these iterations. While not being directly about anti-decisionism, they have offered me a model that enables me to think about what Uno Tsunehiro or Hito Steyerl has argued for.



Untitled, 2022

Glass

9" x 7" x 14"

Still, it is impossible for me to coin any new kind of “imagination” against decisionism. Uno Tsunehiro’s book ends with a naive cliché that encourages readers to find the meaning of everyday life in its mundaneness and its mortality. Decisionism and its inevitability has thus become a trap that prevents him from furthering his argument. Wang Pengjie provided his own tentative answer to the question I quoted in the first paragraph. He maintains that forgetting about the academic or the avant-garde but looking down and tending to the lives and spiritual needs of commoners is what art is still good for today.³⁵ Not that I do not agree with him, but his statement seems to be too broad and vague, just like the ending of Uno’s book. It seems that a new “imagination” is yet to be known to us. However, looking back at my own cynicism that I mentioned in the preface, I seem to feel that I’m no longer trapped in it after the RISD Glass grad students’ biennial show at Sol Koffler. After Roland Barthes’s famous *The Death of the Author*, artists have become nothing but the first privileged audiences of their works. The communication between artists and their audiences loses its confrontational dichotomy when the artist him or herself is lost or is getting lost.

Oh, and by the way, the title of the RISD Glass grad’s biennial this time was “Either / Or”. Though it sounds seemingly random, or even a bit casual, I appreciated it quite a lot. The

³⁵ “Dang Yishu Diyu Xianshi Shi, Yishu He Wei”, accessed 2023.

in-between-ness, the ambiguity, and the open-ended-ness that this title suggest all come together to form the vehicle for me to jump out of cynicism and nihilism. Rethinking about the experience I had with this show, my practice in spring 2023 when I'm finishing up this document has shifted a bit to embrace openness and ambiguity. Thinking about how we readily understand dishware, pedestals, and furniture as displaying mechanisms, I have started to explore with possible ways to subvert these expectations by placing and combining them in unconventional manners. To me, these weird installations that I have been developing would provide me with a chance to think of an alternative reality.

Afterword

When Doreen Garner came back to RISD as a visiting artist in Fall 2022, she did studio visits with us grad students. I was stuck in my studio practice trying to figure out a way to talk about appropriation by borrowing from Greek vessels and mythology. Garner's sharp instinct told her that I only wanted to hone my glassblowing skill, and that I was unhappy with such a practice that is nothing more than superimposition. "Why not just stop and start something new where you can blow glass?" she asked. I was thankful for her wise advice: I knew that I just needed someone smart enough to locate my struggle and permit my quitting.

My interest in the readings I do comes from my background as an otaku, which only has very limited indirect connections with my studio practice. I have long been aware of my tendency (my kitschy decisionism) of trying to play the "unknown craftsman" (borrowing the translation of Yanagi Soetsu's book title), keeping quiet, focusing on my hand skills. However, such a tendency was beyond my examination until I started to read all these Eastern analyses. I would like to see the crafted objects as the vehicle of communication between the craftsman and the user. Such an indirect relationship is destined to be loose and fragile in the free market. Not only does the appearance of a craft piece matter to its user, but the haptic quality of it also matters as well, with no lower

priority. How much strength the weight of a vessel asks the muscles of its user for in order to hold it, how the profile of a vessel shapes the skin of its user when he or she holds it, or how a vessel can be placed down upon the surface of a table – these are moments where the user may start to envision the process of the making of the vessel, where the consideration behind the shape, the material, or the function of a vessel hidden behind the craftsman’s thinking process and the material limitations that the craftsman has encountered may start to unveil. Examination of a craft piece is indeed a conversation across space and time. Uno Tsunehiro’s citation of the Serenity Prayer reminds me of the Japanese tea master Sen no Rikyuu’s word which is widely known today as “ichi-go ichi-e”, and the Chinese novelist from the Qing Dynasty Li Ruzhen’s word which has become a proverb in the Chinese society, “to do one’s best before leaving the rest to God”. Ichi-go ichi-e maintains the importance of treating the happening of a tea ceremony as once in a lifetime. All three quotes address the agency of individuals together with their limitations. Imperfections of handicrafts are also essential aspects of the conversation between the craftsman and the user: through prolonged terms of using a vessel, one’s body will learn to react to and work with the imperfections. By seeing handicraft as a means of communication, I am envisioning a non-violent relationship or language that Uno Tsunehiro might agree with.

I would like to end this paper with my own experience in the hot shop, which, to me, has been acting as a playground for me to understand the interpersonal relationship or the community that Uno Tsunehiro has suggested. My hot shop experience has shaped my manner. We form pairs when we work in the hotshop, assisting each other with dedication under a primitive presumption of “one good turn deserves another”. I work with three other people, sharing slots equally with everyone. We are not bound to each other, being free to pair up with others when we want to. We care about each other’s practices on the bench and stay respectful of each other’s private lives off the bench. Our relationship is not without an end in that it is subject to termination when we graduate. On a larger scale, concerning the other cohorts in the glass department whom I have not yet had a chance to pair up and blow glass with, our daily encounters, regular discussion on techniques, and weekly deep clean-ups also bonds us together in a very loose way. There is a hint of fellowship, but it has yet to become what fundamentally defines us. In this sense, this mortal, mellow, and supportive relationship in the hot shop is seemingly exactly what Uno advocates for, when he examines Yoshinaga Fumi’s *Seiyō Kottō Yougashiten*.³⁶ The hot shop and the descent distance between me and my peers when we work — the distance of roughly the length of the bench rails

³⁶ Uno, “Kaitaisha toshite no Yoshinaga Fumi: Nijūyōnengumi kara Tooku Hanarete”, 225-228.

— become a model for me to reflect upon my relationship with others.

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