To a non-existent island

DESCRIBE THE CITY YOU LIVE IN
DIVING INTO THE FIELDS

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in Digital + Media in the Department of Digital + Media of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

by

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Chapter 0:
Describe the city you live in

Chapter 1:
The vibration lifts a bridge from one city to another

Chapter 2:
The silent song of the Interstate 95 highway

Chapter 3:
The shape (conversation)

Chapter 4:
Days in, Days out

Notes

Acknowledgement
I dive into the fields: frequency (sound), wavelengths (light), shapes (conversation): they build connections. What is action without reflection? Now I'm a city drifter. Through artmaking and dialogue I try to drop the anchor into the futuristic turbulent ocean (of society, speed, and the status quo). Did I drop it? Not sure. I grew up in the most fast-paced city in China, Shenzhen. I feel pressured there. Do I feel that pressure here: of a precarious, unpredictable future? These questions push me out of the turbulent ocean to grab the present.

There are three stages of time: past, present, and future. But these are always bouncing around like the flow of water; a fading point of flow, the infinite approach, and an eternal past. Hand me the trees that come along, hand me a history book, out and about death suffers the cold, conveying the power inscribed in the heart. Through artmaking and dialogue, this is what I do to live in the present.

Like frequencies, wavelengths, and shapes, I am influenced by the quickly changing cityscape. Within this change, how do I live in the present and also make connections with the city I live in? I explore this question by resonating the Providence River with my hometown (Chapter 1), digging into the history of the Fox Point neighborhood through making an instrument about Interstate 95 (Chapter 2), and shaping conversations about the tension between being present and making progress (Chapter 3).

How do I find my own way to live without the promise of stability and belonging? How to keep up with the irony of art and fight against capitalism but still operate within it? My work is my present. When they are standing, they also bring me experience back to the "present."

"The smell evokes sadness in the loss of summer's easy riches, but it also calls up the sharp intensity and heightened sensibility of autumn." Summer is in the past and autumn is in the future. I am 23 and I will not be 23 again.
I walk

walk

I walk on the same path

I walk until the path doth fade

And nothingness doth it pervades
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND

FROM 41°49'33" N 71°25'26" W
TO 41°49'07" N 71°23'19" W
I walk...

SHENZHEN, GUANGDONG

FROM 22°31'27" N 113°54'58" E
TO 22°32'58" N 114°05'38" E
I walk...
CHAPTER 0

DESCRIPT THE CITY YOU LIVE IN

I was walking alongside from Highway 195 to Interstate 95...
I was walking alongside Hongli Road...

A phone call between Providence and Shenzhen

F: Hello
S: 嗨
F: Where are you?
S: 我不知道，我现在地铁上，可能有点吵，你在哪?
F: I am underneath the Providence River Bridge. Next to the pier.
Where are you going?
S: 我回家，你要去哪?
F: Nowhere, just walking alongside the town. From Highway 195 to Interstate 95.
S: 那是什么?
F: It feels like a subway system to me, communicating in different parts of the city.
S: 明白了。我到站出来，可能有点吵。
F: It used to be quiet.
S: 现在就不曾安静过。路以前没有这么宽，车以前没有这么多。
F: Say that again? I can't hear you.
S: 等下我上桥，现在没办法直接穿马路回家了。
F: What? It changed a lot. I remembered people used to sleep in the grass when it's summer.
S: 这边的地铁站修了又停用，修了又停用。
F: The city just never stops.
S: 我快到路的尽头了。
F: How's it?
S: 要走好一会儿。突然有回音。
F: I am walking across the bridge, heading to the town. Where are you right now?
S: 我在小巷子里，这样走比较快。
F: It sounds like you have already arrived.
S: 要走好一会儿。现在好容易迷路。
F: It sounds like you have already arrived.

S: 你什么时候回来看看？估计你已经认不出了。
F: I don't know. When are you gonna leave?
S: 我不知道，这边租金涨了太多，我不知道。别怪我了，你那边怎么样?
F: Yeah, people still sleep in the grass when it's summer.
S: 听起来像小时候。
F: Not really. There used to be factories here. Those chimneys went straight up into the sky. They disappeared before the highway descended.
S: 想起这里曾经有好多木棉树，直冲云霄。它们在地铁向下延伸之前就消失了。你走到哪了？突然有回音。
F: I am walking alongside Interstate 95. Where are you right now?
S: 我快到路的尽头了。
F: I am walking alongside Interstate 95.
S: 要去哪儿?
F: Heading back home. Just like you.
S: 别被城市杀死了。
F: Don't get killed by the city.
S: 你什么时候回来看看？估计你已经认不出了。
F: I don't know. When are you gonna leave?
S: 我不知道。这边租金涨了太多，我不知道。别怪我了，你那边怎么样?
F: Yeah, people still sleep in the grass when it's summer.
S: 听起来像小时候。
F: Not really. There used to be factories here. Those chimneys went straight up into the sky. They disappeared before the highway descended.
On test day, you have a chance to test the microphone for the computer you’re taking the TOEFL on. This allows the system to automatically adjust the microphone’s input volume. To do so, you are given a “familiar topic” prompt to answer. It is always the same for every test: “Describe the city you live in.”

The construction of the Shenzhen Metro began a few years ago, and I can only speculate on its progress by observing the changing frequency of the red light at the entrance, which has gradually transitioned from once every 20 seconds to once every 120 seconds. This alteration resulted in my daily commute to school extending from 15 minutes to 30 minutes, ultimately prompting me to relocate. As the number of moves increased, my perception of home became blurred, and memories of multiple residences would occasionally intertwine, making it difficult to determine the direction from my room to the kitchen.

In a jesting manner, I refer to myself as a “city drifter,” someone who floats between the various roads within a city, drifting between different cities, and even between different hemispheres. Even when residing in Shenzhen, I am frequently asked the question, “Since you’re from Shenzhen, where are you originally from?” These seemingly absurd inquiries have created a logical closed loop within this city.

Individuals like myself can not settle in Providence, RI for two years of temporary “anchored” living. Instead, we approach life with a mindset that constantly seeks to start anew, allowing us to cultivate a deep desire to engrave every corner of the city in our minds. It is only then that we begin to truly understand the city’s streets, forming associations that are born out of our lived experiences.
I meticulously employed silicone to capture the contours of the routes I traversed countless times in the city. The intricate writings on the manhole covers and the cracks embellishing the walls, all these elements constitute an integral part of the city’s essence.

Each mold required a painstaking process of five hours to gradually manifest. As these molds reemerged within my memories, I pondered over what fragments remained and what aspects were left unfinished.

In an attempt to retrace a street, a path, I embarked on a journey using conversations from my recollection as a guide.

I戏称自己是“city drifter”，城市
漂浮者，漂浮在城市的各条路之间，漂
浮在各个城市之间，漂浮在各个半球之
间。就算在深圳生活，被问过最多的问题：“你是深圳人，那你哪儿人？”
看似荒谬的问题却在这个城市形成了逻
辑的闭环。
The light green steel frame is a bridge between these two places; in a hurry, and only the boat remembers the endless reverberation under the bridge.

In Providence, wandering in the chilling autumn night, I remembered the first time I walked underneath the Fox Point Hurricane Barrier. High-speed tires rattle the steel frame; the ground vibrates. I suddenly think of my hometown, Shenzhen, the city of highways. When I put my hands gently on the bridge, I wish I could feel the heartbeat of the city. Looking at the pale green bridge, the reflection of the water appears as shadow shapes. The waves of the ocean are growing with it. The sound of the bridge, car, ocean, they compose the city sonata.

How can I remember this moment?

When the natural resonant frequency of an object is excited by an external force, matches in a moment, a higher amplitude is reached. The Providence River Bridge at that moment was vibrating with me.

If I am the boat, what is my ocean? Sitting next to the Providence River, have you ever perceived yourself as the bridge? How do you see the obstacles of distance as friends? Every object has its own natural frequency and the vibrating is the heart-beat of connection. When the spoons spin at the same speed, they are trying to flow into the heartbeat of the Providence River.

The repetitive movement is a space left to be filled; a possibility for communication. A conversation between data and poetic abstract motion.

CHAPTER 1
THE VIBRATION LIFTS A BRIDGE FROM ONE CITY TO ANOTHER

Jingfei, Hu, Resonance, kinetic installation, 2021
CHAPTER 2

THE SILENT SONG OF THE INTERSTATE 95 HIGHWAY

Across the hustle and bustle of Providence Bridge, the tranquil Point Park seems like it doesn’t belong to the city. Everything about Providence is isolated from the highway except for the salty scent blowing in from the ocean. Before winter, the park is where I often take a break. People in the park gazed silently at the windmills in the distance, as if they had grown up with the park.

“It didn’t use to be this noisy,” Lang said, “It used to be a place where people came out to cool off in the summer evenings, but now it’s a highway.” “It didn’t used to be this quiet,” I said, “This used to be the dock where the fishermen used to live.” “So all this has disappeared?” asked Lang. “Yes. Because of city gentrification, most of the factories and residents were forced to leave their homes.”

“Sounds the same in Shenzhen.”

“I know.”

“India Point Park”穿越喧嚣的普罗维登斯桥, 点点的宁静仿佛不属于这个城市。除了海边吹来的微咸气息, 所有普罗维登斯的一切都被隔离在了高速公路外。在还未入冬的秋季, 这里经常是我歇脚的地方。公园里的人们寂静地凝望着远处的风车, 好仿与这个公园拼凑在了一体。
After moving to the United States, I always wonder what are the similarities and differences between people's relationships with cities in different countries. "Gentrification can be subtler than ramming a highway through a neighborhood, but effects and its intentions are often similar. Its exchange value is that it’s worth much more without the residents in it." Based on the knowledge of gentrification and my personal gentrified experience, wrestling with the governance of space became my journey. Space can be regarded as a site in which forms of identification and alienation are performed and where the production of social and power relations are revealed, reproduced, and maintained.

By research question and my personal context drove me to dig into the history the 195 and the 95-195 interchange. My process in exploring and connecting in Providence involves using a scanner to copy the old photo archives, including a lot of dilapidated houses and streets that are not able to be found. Then comparing the old maps with the current Google map made me understand more about the layout of the city.
CHAPTER 3
THE SHAPE (CONVERSATION)

We stared at each other, talking to each other, dancing with each other. Creating art and design is about having a conversation. Through art and design I can connect with an audience, with my family and friends, and with myself. Recently I had a serious conversation with my family. My mom asked me if I was going to be able to find a job after graduation. I said I wasn't sure, but that I will try my best. Meanwhile, I was staring at the documentation of my art and design on my computer screen. At that moment I thought, "how can this art help me find a job?" At that moment I held anxiety about connecting my art and design to the corporate jobs I was applying to in installation design, product design, and creative technology. After applying to these corporate jobs, I realized that it didn't matter if my artwork was poetic or conceptual. My creative imagination didn't seem to map. I realized that my artwork was not able to support me to financially stand in this world.

My friend said: "Business companies only care how professional you are, and how much value you can bring to the company. Not how poetic you are."

A company HR said: "Can you please show us some of your practical design principles? Your works are amazing and should be placed in a museum. But I am afraid our clients are not able to appreciate your art concept."
I realized that my multidisciplinary skills couldn't support my efforts in finding a job. Why did this HR person express that my art and design can only exist in the museum and gallery? I personally think that my art and design should not only exist in museums or galleries. The extreme anxiety and fear of not being able to find a job crushed me down for two months. At that time, my therapist gave me an advice, "You should take a break, Jingfei."

But how? How can I take a break from these systems geared to work?

A conflict between my reality and my wish: I contacted the International Student Office at the Rhode Island School of Design. I asked them if I could take a leave of absence from school for the remainder of the semester. I was told that as an international student, I shouldn't take a break from school because my visa would be suspended immediately. This meant if I took a break, I would be forced to leave the city. This is a conflict between being present (to take a break) and making progress (within capitalism's giant web). I have no place to hide.

"How much money is enough for you? Have you ever considered that?" my graphic design professor Ramon Tejeda asked me. I replied, "I don't know. The amount of money that is enough right now, will change tomorrow."

After having many conversations with different people, I decided to use my conversation with other people to create a series of works to express my tangled feelings toward the audience. Inspired by Yoko Ono's book "Grapefruit", I also tried to "burn this book after you've read it."
Like my therapist, my friend Liang mentioned that she wanted me to take a break. Why is it so hard to reach out to the present? What is the tension between being present and making progress? If I am not able to stay in the present, what should I do to free my mind?

"I look for disturbance-based ecologies in which many species sometimes live together without either harmony or conquest."5

I gradually tested out my ecologies in shapes and light. My shapes are my words and light is my new ecology. "Mixing blue and yellow light yields white light, but the light reflected from a mixture of blue and yellow pigments is green. In additive mixing the reflectances add; in subtractive mixing the absorbances add."6 Instead of using the words to describe my tangled feelings, I extracted different color channels and recombined them together. The two way mirror and polarizing film I applied to the shapes reflected lights on different surfaces, creating a space with touchable feelings.

The name of this work, "Plumcot," is inspired by the fact that hybridization is not simply combining two species together. I see myself not living in the present or living in progress, I live in the tension in between. It comes with anxiety and fear, but also the chance to grow my new branch. Like Plumcot, like Matsutake.

The reflection on the wall.

Jingfei, Hu, Plumcot, kinetic video installation, 2022
I am heading to Lausanne, Swiss.

11.20.2022

I finally have the time to visit Beavertail. It was almost 5 PM. I and Lilan Yang were sitting straight forward to the sun. The infinitely hot sun kissed the sea surface before night falls, dragging me back to the old time.
The light skips into your eyes.

I almost wanted to cry when I saw her. She stared at me, I stared at her.

The efficiency, the sound, the obedience. It is like the unstoppable river flows into my dream ocean.

I am struggling and trying to find the resonance as the anchor. It is a lively season, brimming with vitality, and romance.

The so-called "fat cities" have established a comprehensive system for managing these unwelcome intruders. They distribute a traditional technique for suppressing panic to those who are most resistant to change, presenting scarcity as an exchange for liberation: "Give up your weapons, your turbulence, and your autonomy in return for sustenance. Betrayal will grant you your freedom." Meanwhile, for those who are more vulnerable, they simply "eliminate those who refuse to conform."

I am a stranger in my hometown. "Buried as a stranger in the soil of Khorasan." Accept the coldness of the city. No place to be back. Transparency. The helpers of all the One from Shijiazhuang.

10.15.2022

I am writing in the bathroom. If growing up means the unwillingness to show your deep heart, then I refuse to do so. Heating the flow to the ground and burning up the night. I was standing in the tide of my breath. By words are

It's the love in my heart. How seduced these words are. The lighthouse.

Drive me back to my hometown.

Kim

My mom is not like a spider. Heavy, Pressing, Viscous.

That's the way I describe my feelings about her. She is as strong as steel, or ceramics. She is able to handle the fire of burden and the entire family. But still not a spider.

She didn't connect the whole family, actually she is the one who cut them off. She is able to handle the fire of burden and the entire family.

How to embrace the brand new exterior environment and stick closely to your natural habitat, is the question I am working on. Then how do you perceive your own works?

Audiences are asking, friends are asking, family are asking. While in my eagerness to drop anchor in a turbulent ocean.

I am struggling and trying to find the resonance as the anchor. It is a lively season, brimming with vitality, and romance.

10.22.2022

I started to drive to a lot of places after I get my license.

Warwick, Cranston, New Port, Plymouth, Cape Cod.... I didn't feel free at all.

I still think I am forced to travel, forced to enjoy the world.

I can't stop feeling this way when I am searching for jobs.

All the things I want to do on the weekends are getting away from work but I still can't escape from it.

Since the eagerness to travel to different places is the result of unstoppable working.

The loneliness, the unbearable hard work(I don't know if I am hard enough or not). Why, why, why?

If there is no place where he wrote the main fond makes me feel extremely anxious then what will he feel?

I realized I am afraid of having eye contact with cows when they are being milked.

The efficiency, the sound, the obedience. She stared at me, I stared at her.

I almost wanted to cry when I saw her just standing there.

I don't even know how to describe the emotion I am feeling right now.

It is sanctimonious to think in a way that they are pathetic because I directly headed to the milk shop and enjoyed all the cakes and milk.

The feeling of inescapable and not able to realize you can escape drives me crazy.

They work so hard.

They work really hard.

They work suspiciously hard.

They are forced to work so hard.

Probably because I think I am a cow when I am working.

How to stop thinking that I might actually be a cow?

Or I just be a cow.
Falling down into the shimmer of farewell
Witnessing the silence escaping from purification
All the records are flowing into the river
May I favor part of my soul to this land?
Let the roaring solemn stroking on my body
The wind is breathing
These light, swift fires, running into the midnight
Windmills Standing stiffly and watching the city
The light dots jumping into the turquoise sky
Left the chill menace floating into my lungs
how to perceive the tangible departure?
Arrived to a place that you can leave without kissing the ground
Ask whether you are looking for the destination or not
I didn't leave anything
I didn't take anything
Perhaps receive the gently caress from the bridge and the waves
When they meet each other in the moment
I stepped by a huge truck for a while
The words I tried to spell were always blew back to my throat
I didn't say take care
I said wind covered my mouth
Otherwise I don't have anyone to blame on
Joculye is dull
Sometimes even the water evaporate from the words
Even tears have to postponed during this season
Dryly scorching
I can't give you anything
but greedily trying to leave some traces
Take it as the friction from feet to feet
You don't have to lament and detain
Just send me a burst of raining

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I can't give you anything
but greedily trying to leave some traces
Take it as the friction from feet to feet
You don't have to lament and detain
Just send me a burst of raining
This is not a text worth reading,
but thank you for making it this far.
I wrote this in a city where I am temporarily unable to connect,
perhaps the connection itself doesn't matter,
but people always have some paranoia.

A week ago, I returned to Milan,
it still sits there with its history piled up,
just like before.
Seven years ago, I thought I could have a few years in Italy,
but time has passed and I am still on the path I chose back then,
but even when I chance upon a sunset, I am less obsessed.

I am not a rigorous person,
The writing style is as scattered as my works.
After communicating with many people, I found that
I am not different from ordinary people,
I am a normal person,
And it's a bit disappointing to say that.

Many people say that if there are many thoughts that cannot be expressed in words,
then create works.
but now, creating works also requires words to express,
And I found that I actually dislike talking,
And I hate expressing my opinions,
So even after creating works, I will only stare at them.

When will I feel that my works are established?
Perhaps when I feel that they have returned home,
becoming a support for a washbasin, rather than
a steel frame in an art museum.

Instead of saying that I have been wandering to different places since I was 15,
it's more like I have been taken in by different places.
I have a weak concept of "home,"
I call any place I can rest my head "home."
Perhaps it's just my selfish desire to own a corner of a city,
just like appreciating pedestrians filling the gaps on the streets in New York,
They may also be consuming the city.

Thank you to those who have connected with me.
NOTES

"Have you ever taken a deep look at the city you live in?"

When I was 10 years old, my mom asked me this question that stayed with me. I brought it to Providence, and after 2 years, I can finally answer, 'Yes, I have.' Unlike bustling Shenzhen, Providence is a small city, bisected by the Providence River, and inhabited by both those who stay and those who leave, all with their own memories.

Thank you for my families, professors, faculties, and friends, your love and support have never faltered, and for that, I am truly grateful.

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I am appreciative for all the support in my life.

Acknowledgments

The Providence River Bridge on my arm
The city we love.
The roads we love.
The people we love.