

## **Winter Solstice**

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## **Contents**

Abstract

Fragments

On Melancholy

Anti-language

The Self

The Death of the Artist

Who Has the Power?

Bibliography

*All Images in this paper are taken by Jingwen Cao*

“An artist’s words are always to be taken cautiously. The finished work is often a stranger to, and sometimes very much at odds with what the artist felt, or wished to express when he began. At best the artist does what he can rather than what he wants to do. After the battle is over and the damage faced up to, the result may be surprisingly dull—but sometimes it is surprisingly interesting. The mountain brought forth a mouse, but the bee will create a miracle of beauty and order. Asked to enlighten us on their creative process, both would be embarrassed, and probably uninterested. The artist who discusses the so-called meaning of his work is usually describing a literary side-issue. The core of his original impulse is to be found, if at all, in the work itself.”

—Louise Bourgeois<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father, Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews 1923-1997*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 66. Originally published in *Design Quarterly*, no. 30 (1954), 8.

## **Abstract**

For a long time, I have been thinking about what contemporary photography is, what its position is, and what the relationship is between artists and audiences. At the same time, I am developing my concepts and photographic directions and trying to make my work and my perspective on photography relevant. Winter Solstice includes a series of essays that locate my thinking and my work. Its title references the longest night of the year.

The position of photography has changed significantly over the past few decades. The way people read photos is also changing. Perhaps because of reverence for art and the artist's authority, or perhaps because of habits, the reading of artworks often relies on the artist's explanation. I have great doubts about all of this, as I will discuss in the following pages.

I believe that photography has a unique position that cannot be replaced. In my work, I use color, symmetry, structure, and abstraction to create a metaphorical space for the human need for melancholy, distance, and introspection. I hope viewers will read and feel these images through their own experience.



*Grey Wall, 42x56in, 2023*

I

Because of the pandemic, I hadn't been home in four years. Eighteen hours of flight and five hours of waiting in transit, and there I was, home again. Everything in front of me was embedded with the pictures I had long held in my mind, and a strange and distant feeling quickly took over my body. Standing on this land that has not belonged to me for a long time and may no longer belong to me in the future, I felt like a child who had just woken up from an absurd dream. I was overwhelmed.

Walking out of the airport, after the first beam of light that hit my eyes dissipated, I found that the street had been widened but was extremely crowded with many people and cars. The same language as mine filled my ears. Returning home, I confirmed the disappearance of the damaged sofa I'd heard about over the phone with my own eyes and finally realized that I was back. This summer had appeared in my mind countless times in the past four years. The first day at home felt short. Only a week later, I started my day with a cup of coffee in the morning, then made a large pot of tea as I did in the summer four years ago, and finished it with my mother before dinner as a routine. Two weeks later, I started working out after dinner, walking on the Olympic Center track with my mum and sister among the crowd. The weather was hot and humid, and my skin felt sticky. In the following days, I visited my father, grandma, and everyone I missed for so long.

In 2016, I left home and went to Canada to learn art. During undergraduate school, I returned to China for two months every summer. If the pandemic hadn't started in 2020, I

wouldn't have known what it felt like to be homesick. I also would never have deeply understood the feeling of home.

## II

In an art history class in 2017, the professor introduced de Chirico's paintings to us. The dark yellow tone of Piazza d'Italia fascinated me, along with the distant, red barrel-shaped architecture, two buildings with small windows and large arches, a statue lying in the open square, two figures seemingly engaged in conversation at the corner, and the long shadows of every object.

In the class "Twentieth-Century Ideas," I learned about thinkers such as Carl Jung, Foucault, and Husserl. At that time, I was still adapting to the language and culture. I could understand about 60% of the course content, but this 60% opened the door for me. In every class, I constructed a blank page from God's perspective in my mind and repeatedly wrote these words on it: Message! Unnecessary! Uncertainty! Message! A prophet sent one message after another from afar. Nothing in life must exist, nothing is destined. The questions I had asked myself thousands of times resurfaced again: Why am I alive? What is the meaning of my life? How did I become the person I am?

By the end of that semester, I knew I had woken up.

## III

I was well aware that what had troubled me the most over the past year and a half was language—not our daily language, but finding accurate words to describe the feelings and thoughts in my mind. In the first semester, I continued to use terms I used in my undergraduate

studies, such as “nothingness,” “the void of life,” and “neutrality.” I soon discovered that people had different interpretations of these words, especially of “neutrality.” This word has a negative connotation nowadays, mainly because it represents a person who doesn’t take sides, has no independent thinking, is timid even. In the second semester, as my concepts developed, I shifted to the terms “dual strength” and “emotionless” to convey my sensibilities. New problems came up. Most people interpreted dual strength as opposing forces that conflict with each other. But for me, the term represents the equal coexistence or juxtaposition of two forces. Emotionless here does not mean ruthless, but rather that complex emotions are under control and treated equally. Dual strength is the core act, and emotionlessness is the result.

The same problem appeared again in the third semester. I introduced a new word to my class: “anti-intimacy.” However, I withdrew it right after because it is so distinctive that it leaves little room for imagination. What I want to express may or may not include physical, emotional, and mental distance. It’s not about childhood or teenage trauma, and it’s certainly not about my upbringing. It is the inherent distance between oneself and everything else in the world. The distance creates a shell that allows people to understand themselves better and become a better version of themselves.

For a couple of months, I sometimes looked out the window of my apartment, staring blankly at the brown-red apartment building across the road, looking for the proper term to describe the space under that shell. What if I do think everything starts and ends with myself? One day in October, I suddenly realized this sense of distance has been my way of life for a long time, the feeling, of course, was solitary. And the huge space built around solitude, isn’t it just “melancholy”? The English word was now solved; the next step would be finding the Chinese word. My own language made the feeling even more difficult to pinpoint. I didn’t mean sadness,



or depression, and definitely not pain. Finally, I found the Chinese word that comes closest—惆怅.” If sadness is a kind of psychological state, 惆怅 emphasizes a feeling of confusion and overwhelm. This feeling is softer but more resilient, like the air surrounding the body.

It turns out that my awakening in 2017 led me to a vast sea of melancholy with no edge or exit. But this space did not feel negative, not sad. I have simply had so much solitude and alone time. In these seemingly wasted days and nights, I recalled past regrets, mistakes I had made, and countless “not too positive” thoughts, and then thought about how to live with these regrets, how not to make the same mistakes, and how to face those thoughts. I used to think a lot about the meaning of existence, and this year, I finally discovered that the questions and answers are all in this shell of myself. The 35-year-old me could finally tell the 25-year-old me that the meaning of life is to seek the meaning.

#### IV

Ever since I was a child, I have been bad at expressing my emotions and thoughts. On the one hand, it could be the so-called emotional suppression in traditional Eastern culture. On the other hand, my oral language logic ability has always been relatively poor. I sometimes describe something that can be said in one sentence with multiple attempts, and I will usually get lost during a conversation while talking, forgetting what I wanted to say initially. Over time, I became introverted and had low self-esteem. (This may sound a bit negative; today I’m able to see myself and these characteristics differently.) This situation improved after I turned 25. Job was one thing that changed me. Another was that I finally learned to vent the uncontrollable turmoil inside of me. At first, I vented by writing poetry, and later, with photography.

I am not particularly eager to express my emotions and thoughts directly, and that's okay. With anything, the more difficult it is to understand, the better, and the more subtle it is, the better. Things that everyone can understand make me bored, and emotions that everyone can understand make me feel frightened. This is why poetry has become an ideal medium. With just a few lines, I can play in my mind, use all kinds of images, and express my innermost emotions and thoughts roundaboutly. I would caution others not to turn to me and tell me they know me after reading one of my poems; humans are not easily read books. In poetry, I use dreams or the weather to represent reality, to express my mental state, and I use seemingly ruthless descriptions to portray the most urgent emotions in my heart. Photography gives me a hard time but also brings me deep satisfaction. What a common and easily misunderstood medium it is! I am tortured because when I make it, it is a battle only between us, and after it is displayed publicly, it is out of my control and causes me countless misunderstandings. I am satisfied because it is so ordinary that it relieves the burden and defense of those who look at it, and I can quietly add a second and third layer to it behind the surface, just like I do with poetry.

## V

When I was a child, I was an extremely introverted and shy person, and my family was busy with their own lives and careers, so reading was a large part of my life. I started with Chinese children's literature and gradually engaged with foreign literature after high school. While my reading volume declined because of the Internet, I still read several books every year during my twenties, mostly poetry and novels. Back then, floating in my mind were the countless helpless endings in Raymond Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, the entanglement and random thoughts about being unable to love in Roland Barthes's *A Lover's*

*Discourse: Fragments*, the ordinary and troubled life in Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the absurd yet extremely real numbness and death of Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, the suffering and transcendence in Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*. To me, what these books have in common is a faint but bottomless melancholy. Hesse's short poem "In the Fog" touched my heart the most.

Strange, to wander in the fog.

Each bush and stone stands alone,

No tree sees the next one,

Each is alone.

My world was full of friends

When my life was filled with light,

Now as the fog descends

None is still to be seen.

Truly there is no wise man

Who does not know the dark

Which quietly and inescapably

Separates him from everything else.

Strange, to wander in the fog,

To live is to be alone.

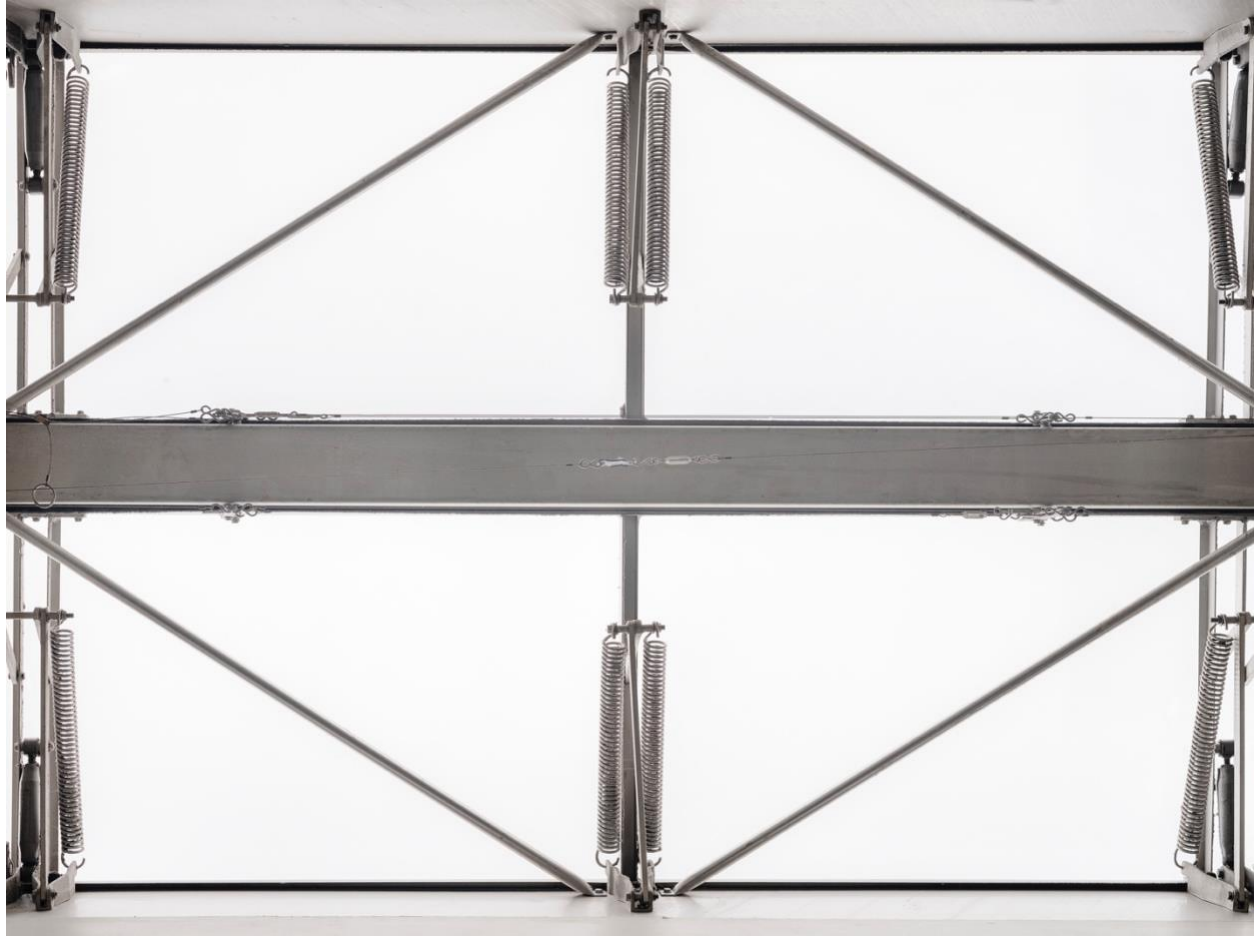
No man knows the next man,

Each is alone.<sup>2</sup>

In Chinese we say that “distance creates beauty.” With a shorter distance, it will be difficult to see the overall beauty of things; if the distance is too far, it will be easy to overlook the details. Through the suitable distance of space or time, the world in my eyes and what the world sees in me become hazy and beautiful. Seeing the world in the fog and from a distance is such a philosophical idea of life! Humans should live just like this.

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<sup>2</sup> Hesse, Hermann. "Im Nebel." In *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5, p. 517. Translated by S.H. Accessed on Harper's Magazine, 2007. Available at: <https://harpers.org/2007/09/hesses-in-the-fog/>.



*Window Frame, 42x56 in, 2024.*

I roughly divide melancholy into three types.

Generally speaking, melancholy is an emotion or mental state. In Lars von Trier's movie *Melancholia*, the protagonist Justine has wealth, career, and love. However, she feels uneasy about everything, beset by an uncontrollable panic inside of her. Driven by this inexplicable panic as well as sadness, Justine loses her job, messes up her wedding, is bored with everything in front of her, and is regarded as a freak by everyone. At the end of the film, when the end of the world comes, some people choose to commit suicide, and some suffer mental breakdowns, but she sits on the grass, calmly and even indifferently, quietly waiting for death. In this film, not only Justine, but everything, is melancholy: the two planets about to collide are melancholy, the garden under the weird light is melancholy, the 19-hole golf course is melancholy, and the hail hitting the skin is melancholy. The viewer can truly feel the distortion and passage of time in slow motion. This emotion is grand, romantic, mysterious, and nostalgic. The sadness is much higher than sentiment and depression. It shines on the body like sunshine and permeates the pores like air.

Melancholy can also be emotionless, a reprieve. In Giorgio Agamben's *The Open: Man and Animal*, he writes on boredom at length and quotes Martin Heidegger's train narrative to illustrate its particular feeling: We are waiting for a train at a mediocre train station, and the next train will take four hours to arrive. With nothing to do, the waiting time became extremely long. During this long wait, we can feel the passage of every second.<sup>3</sup> When we are bored, our bodies and minds are completely occupied by the feeling of time. The body becomes sluggish, but the

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<sup>3</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 63.

brain becomes awake. We are enveloped in an ambiguous atmosphere. The harder we exert ourselves, the more suffocated we feel. Only by relaxing can we roam freely. This dense atmosphere in the air, suppressing the nerves, with a hint of despair, is the second type of melancholy.

In Quentin Tarantino's movie *Pulp Fiction*, Vincent is on a mission to accompany his boss's wife, Mia, for one night. This task is assigned by the gang boss, so he will definitely die if he makes any mistakes. Vincent just wants to complete the task and go home, but he underestimates Mia's charm. After dinner and a dance, the relationship between the two became somewhat ambiguous. While Vincent is torn between saving his own life and a romantic night, Mia is in shock from a drug overdose. After Mia is finally rescued from a big mess, the romantic night has already turned into a chaotic night. In the night garden, with evident embarrassment and shock, the two said goodbye softly, "I'll see you around." Despite the effects of alcohol and drugs, the two people who had just escaped death were exceptionally sober at the moment. This is the third type of melancholy, one that's perhaps more rare than the others: to be wrapped in "sobriety" simultaneously with and alongside tumultuous events.

Since ancient times, most people have pursued a happy life. If anyone dares to claim that he desires pain, he will be seen as mentally ill. Who does not like to be happy? Whether it is the satisfaction that wealth and success bring, the warmth of the morning sun on the quilt, the lavish revelry of a wedding party, or the security of a lover's embrace—happiness is addictive. When we are happy, our brains stop logical thought. Under the paralysis of adrenaline, we will not question the authenticity of happiness, investigate the reasons for happiness, question how long happiness will last, or wonder what happens after happiness.

In real life, we work hard to build our communities and look for peer encouragement and praise. In the virtual world, we aimlessly browse funny reels and count the newly gained likes and followers. A group of similar people gather together, discuss similar topics, do similar things, and strive to pursue a happy life. We no longer care about Werther's troubles, we no longer ask whether Samsa really turned into a beetle, and we no longer worry about where Dasa's ship went.<sup>4</sup> Not to mention, we forget to dissect even our own hearts and look at our true selves. However, we must ultimately know who we are, our motives behind every move, word and deed, our inner chaos and reason, when our emotions appear, and how often our egos arise. We need to understand ourselves first, master the known, and explore the unknown. We need to treat ourselves as a subject, start from the individual, to influence our environment and build our society from the inside out.

So what should we do? The answer, to me, is distance, an appropriate distance between self and everything else, physically and mentally. Just imagine that our life is actually a grand, immersive experience. The entire society is a large-scale image with countless picture frames stacked repeatedly, and we live in this space. Our moods and thoughts are controlled and affected by the images. We will be happy because of the beautiful sunshine in front of us and feel overwhelmed by the sudden thunder and lightning. Only by keeping a sober distance from even these relatively benign kinds of chaos can we reduce the interference and temptation from the outside world, examine our own hearts calmly and relatively objectively, and listen to our own voices. After the distance comes a sense of solitude. Solitude here is not negative, nor does it mean being far away from society and regular life, but rather it is a gap in the mind for experience and introspection. This gap leads us to a space where we can temporarily forget about

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<sup>4</sup> See Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*; Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*; Gabriel García Márquez, *Love in the Time of Cholera*.



social life and social rules, to stimulate self-awareness, awakens, and enlightenment. If this space needs a name, again, I would call it melancholy.

Pulp Fiction combines deep, unanswerable topics and meaningless material. The story's plot has been eliminated, the narrative sequence is out of order, and no one is the absolute protagonist, or, in other words, everyone is their own protagonist. Its structure is like glass shards, but each person has his causal cycle. In a background of gangs and drugs, they restrain each other, their destinies are linked together, and no one can escape easily. Vincent and Jules work as killers daily, often together. Before each gun shot, Jules reads a Bible quotation. Finally, after an accident in which he is shot at randomly but not hit, Jules looks at the bullet holes all over the wall and imagines he's witnessed a miracle from God. Then, he comes to his senses and decides to retire and drift alone on Earth, thereby avoiding likely death in the next mission. The bullet holes in the wall that Jules sees as a miracle is the gap that provides an entrance to "melancholy."

Again in *The Open*, Agamben (drawing on Heidegger) writes, "From the beginning, being is traversed by the nothing; ... the world has become open for man only through the interruption and nihilation of the living being's relationship with its disinhibitor."<sup>5</sup> The environment in which we live shapes our cognition and determines our values. At the same time, our environment blinds us to everything except ourselves. Only by cutting off the connection with the familiar, and looking beyond our explicit existence without restraint can we fully open ourselves. On the one hand, we need a space that is not obscured by the environment in which the body is located, where we can be temporary outsiders and explore the unknown. On the other hand, we need to start by thinking about ourselves, who we really are. This action (introspection)

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<sup>5</sup> Agamben, *The Open, Man and Animal*, 70.

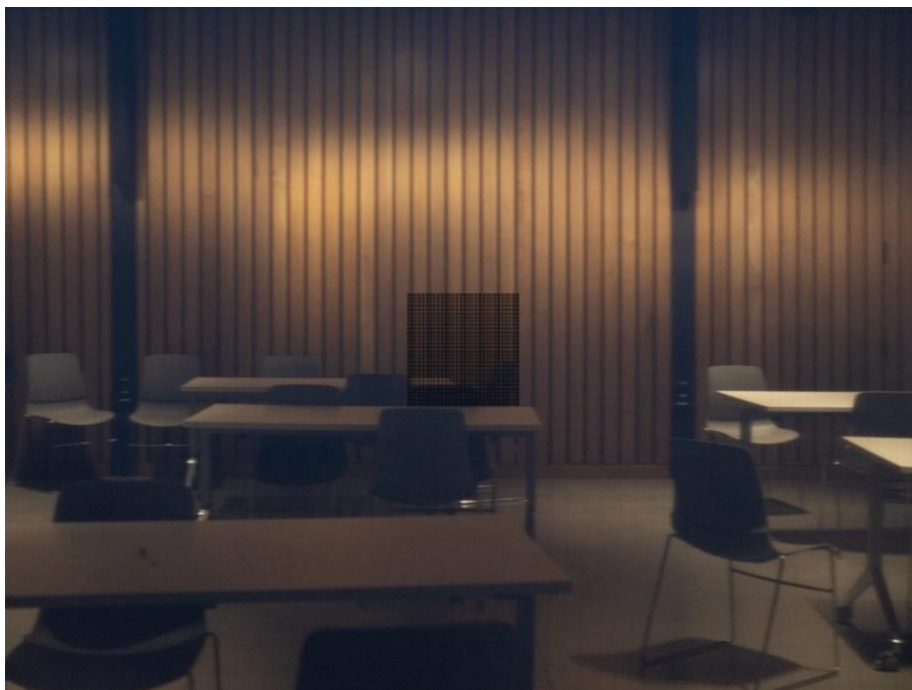
itself is rare and essential. It is destined to bring solitude and even loneliness no matter what.

Openness—to all living things, to the unknown—starts then with melancholy.

Therefore, melancholy should become the norm of human existence.



From *Melancholy/惆怅* series, 31x42 in, 2024.



From *Melancholy/惆怅* series, 42x56 in, 2024.

People normally think that:

Emotions must be released

Sadness is bad

Suicidal thoughts are pathological

Death is scary

Right and wrong are opposites

Love and sex are separate and love will transform into family affection

Sex is linked to fertility

Babies are innocent

Life needs goals and belief

Goals should be positive and hopeful

The sacred must be remote

These presumptions often echo in my head. I would disagree, but I'm not certain, which gets me into trouble. I get distressed in searching for answers. I get distressed in thinking about the meaning of these questions in daily life. I get distressed in wondering why I make myself distressed over topics with no practical significance.

Humans have five senses and four limbs and can move freely and perceive the world. So can animals, but animals don't know how to think openly. Humans, however, can think openly not only about humans but about other forms of life. Our relational thinking is not limited by our

own ecological circle.<sup>6</sup> This expansive perspective has stimulated the development of disciplines such as science, medicine, literature, and philosophy, as well as innovations, such as discovering that cocoa beans need to be processed into chocolate so they taste better, and common sense realizations, such as locking the door to ensure safety. Human existence is inseparable from open thinking.

But is our capacity to think really so advantageous? In *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Werther is born into a middle-class family, has a good education, and can live freely without working.<sup>7</sup> He is talented, upright and kind-hearted, but he falls in love with Charlotte, who is already engaged to someone else. The experience of thwarted love makes Werther crazy in the way that people in love often are—he thinks about gains and losses, right and wrong, the integrity of the soul and the liberation of the body. After all of this deep thinking, he realizes that only death can solve his problem, so he ends his life with a gunshot. If this story were not from Goethe's novel, but something in real life, it's possible a young lover might make a different choice, but one thing is certain: thinking does not guarantee happiness. So what is the point of thinking? Simply put, if Newton had chosen to eat the apple directly after it hit his head instead of thinking about why it fell downwards, then the world might not know the law of universal gravitation many years later. Every recipe in the kitchen, the music on the playlist, what clothes to wear when the weather changes, how many seats should be put in a public park, and other life questions like this are all solved through thinking.

Is everything that comes from thinking true? The answer is no. Absolutely true thoughts do not exist. However, we try to create them because they are so addictive. Absolute truth means freedom from outside interference, separate from society, education, and family influences. But

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<sup>6</sup> In Agamben's *The Open*, Heidegger calls the openness *das Entthemmende*, or *the disinhibitor*.

<sup>7</sup> Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, originally published September 29, 1774.

we cannot avoid the influence of our social environment. If we did, we would live like animals, losing our thinking ability and the ability to think openly. So instead, all we can do is pursue relative truth, what we know in the time, with the information we have. In today's society, however, this is extremely difficult because there are so many relative truths.

So-called truths abound in science and in religion. But even outside of these systems, we are bound to preconceived truths, simply by being part of any community. Community satisfies the psychological needs of human beings. Groups of people with the same values and pursuits gather together to form exclusive communities for social activities. Whenever and wherever we need a sense of identity and belonging, we give and receive generous support from the communities to which we belong, and build better lives together. More and more people cannot stand loneliness. They also cannot face criticism and questioning. To avoid these discomforts, people embrace community. Today, we not only have real-life communities, but virtual communities. We follow accounts we like on the Internet, like posts we are interested in, block messages that are offending, and delete feeds that are boring. Big data infers our preferences based on our behavior and helps us filter information, which promotes the formation of virtual communities. All in all, we create communities, and communities define who we are. Gradually, the scope of our thinking is limited, and the reality we pursue becomes unreal.

There is a fable in ancient China. A frog has lived at the bottom of a dry well since he was born. One day, a sea turtle passes by the wellhead. The little frog invites the turtle to the bottom of the well, telling it how beautiful the scenery above the wellhead is, and how comfortable life is down the well. The sea turtle tells the frog that for the frog, the dry well is its whole world, which in fact is just a very tiny existence. The turtle's home is the sea, which is vast and boundless, but it is also only a part of the earth. When the frog hears all this, he not only

can't understand it, but becomes angry. We humans are like the frog. The community we create is this well, in which everything we see is what we can see and what we want to see. We think life in this well is the best. We have no way of knowing what life is like in other wells, let alone what the world outside the well is like. It is obvious we need to tear down our wells, feel and explore in wider places, break out of inertial thinking, and embrace the unknown. How can this be achieved? I believe we should break away from social life, not a long-term or short-term breakaway, not a physical break away, but a spiritual break away—one that is flexible and not limited by time and space. Only by being a temporary outsider can we achieve freedom from being constrained by the environment and not sinking into the known. Ultimately, each of us is a solitary and imperfect individual in the vast universe. A homogenous society is dangerous. Only unique individuals and independent thinking can help us achieve openness.

In order to open wider, the first thing we, as independent individuals, must do is face our own existence and understand who we are. Who am I? I am more than a name, a gender, an emotion, a label. I am a complex human being with a heart full of restlessness and turmoil, with a brain that's calm and rational, with good and evil coexisting. My behaviors are often affected by emotional fluctuations. My emotions are restrained and suppressed by my reason again and again. And my reason is constantly swinging between pure good and ego. The true identities of good and ego are also constantly switching because of my behaviors. Everything is like two sides of a coin—no, they are more than two sides, they are multiple and intricate and closely connected to one another. This human machine that never stops running even while sleeping needs to be carefully dismantled, studied, and controlled to understand every part and function of it—when it needs to be released, when it needs to be suppressed, and how to maximize its functions.

If a person blindly pursues happiness and a positive life and denies the value of sadness and the existence of burnout, or foolishly separates love and sex or only pursues what they think is positive, he will eventually become that angry frog at the bottom of the well. Introspection will inevitably bring about conflicts, but conflicts can be rationalized and controlled. This is the only way to harmony.





*Icicles*, 56x42 in, 2024

### I. From the author's perspective

For a long time, I've noticed that people don't like obscurity and abstraction. They like things that are simple and clear, things that can be understood without putting in too much effort. In part this is due to social media's brevity. It's also a way to limit input in a very high-paced life. However, no matter how much we might try to make language simple, language is a very tricky thing. Humans created language to define existence and communicate with each other. But because everyone is different, even if they use the same language to communicate, there are often gaps in understanding. This gap has nothing to do with education level or expressive ability. It simply exists.

The term "anti-language" was first proposed by linguist Michael Halliday in the 1970s. Halliday believes that the establishment of anti-language builds an independent society within the framework of the existing society. It is usually used among criminals and subcultures to act as a kind of code. Halliday writes that "An anti-language is not only parallel to an anti-society; it is in fact generated by it ... in the most general terms, an anti-language stands to an anti-society in much the same relation as does a language to a society."<sup>8</sup> In other words, it is equally valid.

I try to understand anti-language not as an alternative to language, but as the potential openness of language, that is, to multiple ways of understanding existing sentence structures. Of all literary forms, poetry is my favorite. Poetry is open for various reasons. It is short, unlike a novel where one clue follows another and you need to read the entire book to find out what's going on. It is accessible, unlike an academic paper, which uses difficult vocabulary, a

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<sup>8</sup> M. A. K. Halliday, "Anti-Languages." *American Anthropologist*, vol. 78, no. 3 (1976), 570-573. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/674418>. Accessed 8 Apr. 2024.

roundabout style, and the most overwrought sentences to describe often simple truths. Its structure is relatively abstract. In poetry, language becomes encrypted. Just a few lines can include a philosophical problem, paint magnificent scenery, and even mobilize the reader's past experiences and memory. Despite or because poetry is so open, it is also the most difficult to translate.

This is a Chinese poem I wrote in 2014 called “坚果” (in English, “Nuts”):

大概四月

雨不停拍手

树不停拍手

门檐不停

窗帘不停

不停拍

手

轻轻剥时间的壳

轻轻

风轻轻

拍你的手

拍

手

Here, I have attempted to translate it into English:

About April

The rain keeps clapping

The tree keeps clapping

The eaves of the door do not stop

The curtains do not stop

Keep clapping

Hand

Gently peel the shell of time

Gently

The wind is gentle

Clapping your hands

Clapping

Hand

This English translation is meaningless and even ridiculous. The original poem was created based on Chinese logic, using a very abstract method to play with words in relation to

structure. That logic disappears in English. In Chinese, the content expresses the longing for a lover and light sorrow about the passage of time. In English it seems to be about clapping.

Translating poetry is a very difficult task. It not only requires translating the text, but also the artistic conception. The artistic conception often integrates the author's personal experience and an overall atmosphere of something like spirituality. The directly translated English version of this poem is accurate, but completely misses the artistic conception of the original text—the space for reverie. This translation gap cannot be eliminated, but there is an alternative form of translation, which I call reproduction. or writing an English poem with completely different content but similar artistic conception.

Here's my 2023 reproduction of “Nuts,” which I call “Lattice”:

Picture talk

Leaf talk

Dusts unfurling gently on the ground

A piece of wood

A gleam of light

A fleeting sound

Snow unfurling gently on the ground

Let me put you together

Pry your lips up to have the tongue talk

Skin talk

Vessel talk

Raindrops unfurling gently on the ground

This poem also describes the ambiguity, fantasy, and inability to be together when people are in love. If the temperature of the Chinese poem is the warmth of spring with a hint of coolness, this English poem is the chill of autumn with a slight warmth. Although this method may seem difficult to accept from the reader's perspective, from the writer's perspective, for the purposes of creation and expression, there is no difference in the result. So to me, the two poems are essentially the same poem.

In addition to the second creation, another method is to temporarily replace words with images, taking a step back to provide a platform for imagination. In fact many authors prefer a form of expression that combines pictures and text. An image needs to be added next to a paragraph of text, or a caption will be added under a picture. Due to the differences between people, language communication is ineffective in some situations. For this, we need to use another more abstract medium to replace language, so as to avoid direct conflicts and to interpret in a gentler, freer, and slower way. However, accompanying words with images serves to aid the reader's imagination, while accompanying images with words limits and defines the concept. Because of the different ranges of directivity, language ultimately lost to images. In other words, it's unfair to pair images and text together.

## II. From the Reader's Perspective

The most important reason I like poetry is the freedom of reading. As a reader, poetry allows me not to think about the author's background, motivation, and intention. Instead, I read with my own way of understanding. In other words, when it comes to poetry, the author's identity and authority all but disappear when he writes the last word. I am currently reading Paul Celan's poetry collection *Memory Rose into Threshold Speech*. This book contains Celan's first

four collections, poems written in German between 1952 and 1963. Celan is one of the most important German-speaking Jewish poets since the second half of the twentieth century. Most of his works are related to war and exile, revealing the darkness and pain of the Nazi era. Here is a part of the poem “La Contrescarpe”:

Via Kraków

you came, at the Anhalter

railways station

smoke flowed towards your gaze,

it already belonged to tomorrow. Under

paulownias

you saw the knives stand, again,

sharpened by distance. There was

dancing. (Quatorze

juillets. Et plus de neuf autres.)

Überdwarf, averse, slant mouth

mimed life stuff. The lord,

wrapped in a banner, stepped

among the assembled. He snapped

a little

souvenir. The self-

timer, that was

you.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Excerpt from Paul Celan’s “La Contrescarpe,” *Memory Rose into Threshold Speech*, trans. Pierre Joris (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2022).

The poem chronicles a journey from Czernowitz to Paris via Krakow and Berlin. The November pogrom happened during this period, the week of the Holocaust in which hundreds of Jews were murdered and countless homes, schools, hospitals, shops, and synagogues were destroyed. The smoke mentioned in the excerpt is the smoke that remains after the church was burned. Celan looked at the destroyed city, at the death that was occurring and the death that would happen tomorrow; the future was predictable and dark. It seems unethical to interpret the work without understanding the author's personal experience and the background of the work, especially when dealing with a grave historical event. But the fact is that once a work is published, the author is no longer the sole author. As someone from an Asian country with little in-depth knowledge of Nazi history and no knowledge of the poet's identity, when I first read this poem, the smoke symbolized for me ambiguous events and the passage of time, as if our words and deeds at the moment are trying to point to tomorrow, even though tomorrow will never come. The picture that came to my mind at the time in fact was of Heidegger's train station.<sup>10</sup> The smoke floating in the neutral air slowly devoured everything on the ground, and then extended infinitely into the distance.

Once I understand the background of the poem, the primary interpretation as a reader can coexist with the original meaning from the author. If my first reading had been based on an understanding of the poem's intention, then its original structure would fix the scope of my understanding, and my personal interpretation would likely not have emerged. Then this poem would not be able to inspire my perception of time, and I would not have later created a video installation, *Rain, Smoke and Time*, inspired by it.

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<sup>10</sup> In his book *Being and Time*, Heidegger divides boredom into at least three varieties, one of them is train station.



If a poem is read centered around the author, it is in a closed state. But if the reader is the center, it seems to be a kind of blasphemy to the author's authority. Just like poetry translation, there is an indelible gap between the creation and reading of poetry. And this gap is precisely the link between reality and imaginary space. We cannot anticipate the troubles of reading otherness, nor can we imagine what poetry would be like if it did not allow imagination. Every certain word written by the author is full of uncertainty. We might say that poetry is a "conscienceless" literary form. It's neutral and doesn't take sides. It exists as it is, in an open state, without concern for the writer's (or reader's) intention.

### III. Existence and Nothingness

Language is a concrete process of input and output. This process itself is to eliminate contradictions and affirm existence; but at the same time it also creates contradictions and denies existence. Ignoring its uncertainty and contradiction is actually a mental drain on the writer or speaker, and even more so for the reader or listener. It is an extremely selfish and self-centered wrong behavior. Only by stepping out of the established language system and completely dissolving existence (known) into nothingness (unknown) can the possibilities of language itself be expanded into anti-language. I would like to end this chapter with the poem "Three Oddest Words," by Wisława Szymborska:

When I pronounce the word Future,  
the first syllable already belongs to the past.

When I pronounce the word Silence,  
I destroy it.

When I pronounce the word Nothing,  
I make something no non-being can hold.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Szymborska, Wisława. "Trzy słowa najdziwniejsze" ("Three Oddest Words"). Translated by S. Baranczak & C. Cavanagh. The Nobel Prize Organization, 1996.



*Working Zone, 42x109in, 2023*

## The Death of the Artist

### I. The Death of the Artist

Inspired by Roland Barthes's essay *The Death of the Author*, I propose that the identity of the artist as a creator also disappears the moment the work is displayed in public.

In my opinion, artists should not expect or encourage audiences to understand them. The relationship between artist and viewer should not be a simple one-line relationship between output and input. Such a relationship is blunt and sad. From ancient Greece to the present, rationalism has always occupied the mainstream position in Western thought. More and more visual artists are accustomed to using words to rationally explain their concepts and place their works of art as accessories to assist in the expression of their concepts. People tend to ignore irrationality, deny illogic, and refuse to rely on the senses. We need to return to the senses and face true emotions from deep down. When an artist imposes their personal interpretation on others, it stifles the uniqueness of others and eliminates the work's potential. The audiences should not nor need to be responsible for the artist's concepts.

### II. Deskillling Photography

The artist is dead not only in influence as discussed above. The artist is also dead for lack of the virtuosity and slow aesthetics of the past. The status of photography has been constantly changing for more than a hundred years. It has been a scientific device, a recording device, a template for painting, and eventually an independent art medium. Now, it has become a tool for everything from self-promotion to expressing concepts. Before the advent of digital technology, a photo would take several hours to complete and would finally appear on film through a series

of manual operations. Therefore, photographic works had an aura, in Walter Benjamin's terms: "What is aura actually? A peculiar weave of space and time: the singular appearance only of distance, however close it may be."<sup>12</sup> This aura can be understood as the long exposure on the film, as the status of photography as a newly emerging technology, and as the unique temperament of a photograph.

When I first started studying photography, Irving Penn made a huge impression. Penn had superb photography and darkroom skills. Having been a painting major, he constructed his images incrementally, paying attention to light, shadow, and composition, and broke through the traditional photography rules and boundaries between art and fashion photography. Penn used both large-format cameras and 35mm cameras, and worked with darkroom processes to achieve particular visual effects. He was a master in the technique of platinum printing and gelatin silver printing, using these techniques to maximally challenge conventional ideas and aesthetics. In his 1948 series *Portraits in a Corner*, Penn invited celebrities to stand in a corner of less than 90 degrees in his home and took their portraits. The cramped visual effect allowed viewers to intuitively feel the compression of space. In his iconic *Cigarettes* series, the artist transformed trash into beautiful works of art. In his *Nude* series, he blurred details and flattened light and shadow, showing the softness and fleshiness of the body. For a long time, I was obsessed with Penn and other photographers of this era, with the grainy texture of film and the visual impact of wide-angle lenses, and felt that no one would ever surpass this aesthetic.

Today, traditional darkroom processes are barely taught and practiced. Small-size cameras replaced large-format cameras, and with the development of digital technology, it has become extremely easy for anyone to take a photo. Everyone is a photographer; even

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<sup>12</sup> Walter Benjamin proposed this term in his book *A Small History of Photography*.

kindergarten children take clear photos anytime with their mobile phones. As a result, the standards of photography have disappeared, the aura has also disappeared, and the aesthetics of photography have gradually been distorted and its iterations accelerated.

Strangely, artists don't seem to be defending photographic skill. In my experience, few are willing to comment on the quality of a picture. What artists dislike hearing most are often technical comments. In class, people are more likely to say "I don't get your concept in your work" than "This is not a good picture." Photography as a medium with long-held values seems to be becoming more and more insignificant. To me, skills are precisely the foundation of photography as an art. Whether the expression is conceptual or aesthetic, if an artist wants to achieve a purpose, skills must be mastered, just as any Olympic athlete must master their own body. Skills make concepts possible.

### III. Visual Language

I initially chose photography as my medium for its accessibility. Taking a photo has become a very simple matter. We can even take dozens of photos by pressing the shutter once. Everyone can be a photographer, or, maybe photographers no longer exist at all. Meanwhile, the power of the photo itself is becoming more and more apparent. A photograph can access history at any time and easily record or tamper with reality. People tend to believe that what they see is real; it is difficult for viewers to tell whether what is in front of them is natural or man-made. Through museum archives or old family albums, people can learn about events they could not experience. I am also drawn to the continuity of photography. The human imagination can take the moment fixed on a piece of paper and extend it to any story before or after the event. The main function of photography since its invention is recording. All in all, photography is based on

the fact that the object being photographed already exists. That means—and it is destined—that the photographer's freedom is limited by the subject, and even by the environment in which he and the subject are located. Photography cannot be purely subjective. Semi-objectivity is photography's inherent advantage.

Another characteristic of photography is its flatness. No one can physically walk into a photograph, and no object can emerge from it. For a long time, flatness has been used as a derogatory comment about photography, with artists striving to create a three-dimensional feel to their works in order to escape monotony and ordinariness. In my opinion, flatness is precisely the advantage of photography. Flatness is best achieved with the absence of the photographer after production, and the minimum interference of their own concepts in the potential of the work. Photographing three-dimensional reality on two-dimensional paper essentially expresses a sense of sensory, emotional, and temporal compression. This compression spreads from the surface to the inside of the photo. It prevents the lateral extension of the viewer's imagination to a certain extent and replaces it with a straight-on extrusion from the outside to the inside. Transmitting depth through the plane, this feature plays a key role in the output of emotions. It is a kind of visual conveyance to psychological feeling that is more direct, more concrete, and more tangible than language.

Miriam Bäckström was the first artist I about in a book when I first entered my graduate program. From this point on, I paid attention to the psychological interaction between the environment and humans. Her *Museums, Collections and Reconstructions* series features portraits of domestic interiors where the family members are not present. Some were taken in the IKEA museum, and some were taken in the homes of people who had recently died. This series explores the relationship between people and home, reality and representation. The homes

we build and design are like our self-portraits and reflections, and the living environment provided by our homes affects us at the same time. In other words, our living circumstances are alternative portraits of us. I am very lucky to have encountered this artist at the right time. She made me realize that the relationship between people and the environment is not one-way, but interactive. This also reminds me of the relationship between photography and artists. People create works through their own experience, and the works once again affect people's experience through their own visual power. In a sense, a good work can be compared with people (whether creators or viewers) as they are integrated into one. It can also exist as an independent entity without the intervention of the photographer.

In this way, photography and poetry are very similar. A photo, whether there are people in it or not, is like a self-portrait of the creator, portraying what technology was used to take the photo, what was taken, and the emotions conveyed by the picture. To understand a work more comprehensively, the audience needs to know the author's life, creative background, and the concept he is trying to express. But in order to maximize the function of the image, we must first erase the identity of the camera and the creator, and blur out all information, including the function and location of the scene, to ensure an equal position between the artist and the viewer.

#### IV. Melancholy in Art

Most of the time, depression is seen as weak, pathological, and undesirable. Acknowledging its positivity and necessity is almost impossible. In order to prove the positivity and necessity of melancholy, we need to figure out where melancholy comes from when viewing a work. We cannot look at a photograph without experience, nor can we see a photograph beyond our personal experience, just as we cannot predict our future. The meaning of a work

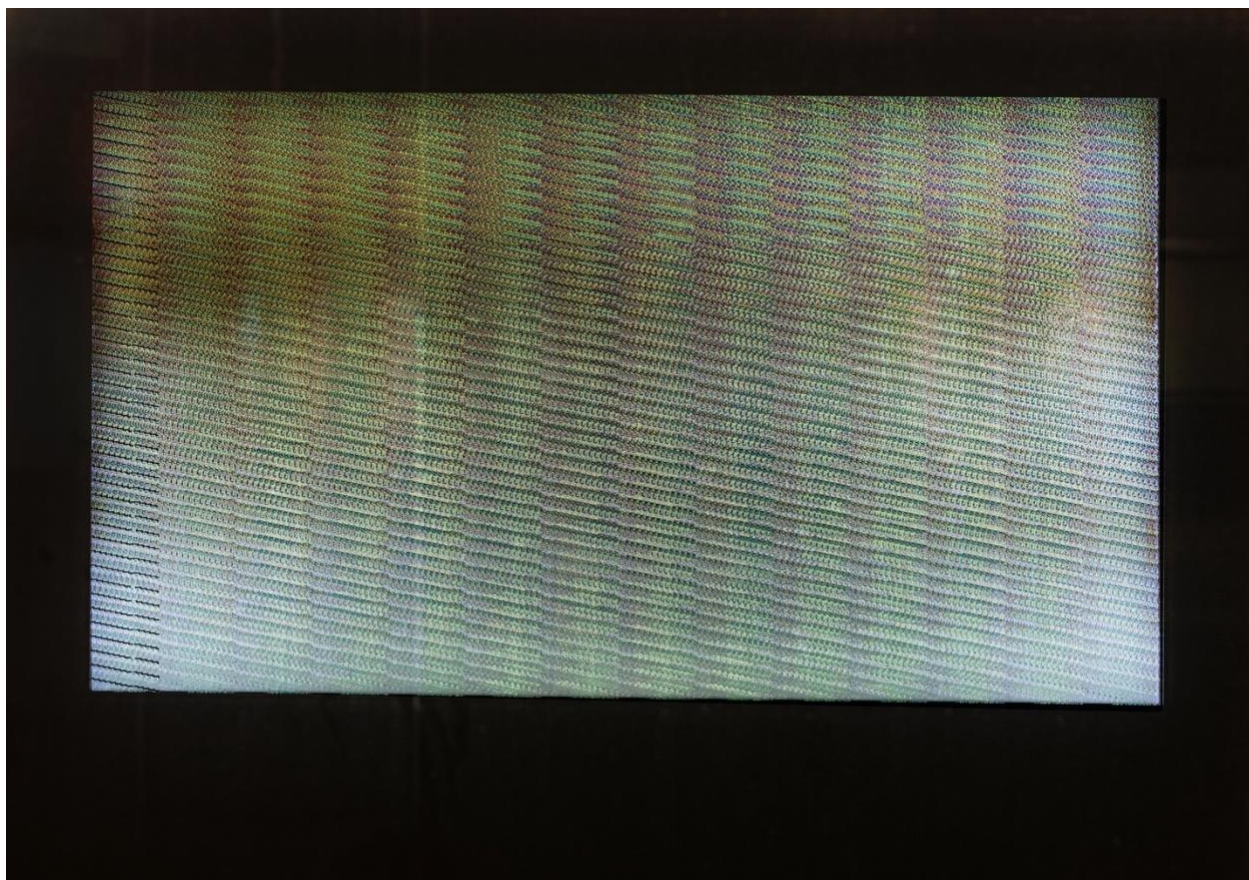


must be related to personal experience, which may be the author's or the audience's. This idea is echoed in Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, where he mentions the Winter Garden photograph of the author's mother when she was young—an insignificant photo itself, but when Barthes's mother died, this photo evoked deep emotions in his heart and brought him endless sadness.

French artist Pierre Huyghe's work *Untitled (Human Mask)* is a 19-minute video inspired by the nuclear accident that occurred at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant in Japan on March 11, 2011. In the work, a monkey wearing a human mask shuttle through an abandoned restaurant, performing its work alone, sometimes walking and sometimes standing still. When I first saw the work, I was fascinated by the lonely atmosphere conveyed by the picture. I did not realize that the protagonist of the film was not a human being. Later, I realized that it was a monkey disguised as a girl, and I immediately felt uneasy. The scenes in the film are real, with real dishes, real rooms, and real walls; and the characters are indeed fictional—fictionalized through another real object. In the empty restaurant, she strokes her face or plays with her hair. Her disguise creates sadness. The monkey may have known it was acting like a human, and may have been aware of the camera. Perhaps it had no idea what it was like to be human. We can never know the inner mind of a monkey. However, I am still sad, its movement makes me feel uneasy, its stillness makes me feel ashamed, and its decoration makes me scared. ... So far, all my experiences seem to have nothing to do with the artist himself. What makes me sad is beyond the work itself, because it triggers my emotions, my private memories—not of a specific event, but the sum of experiences accumulated from countless events. And my sadness just brought me introspection. This is something that other single emotions, such as happiness, and other single states, such as relaxation, cannot achieve. Huyghe's works re-measure the agency of the artwork.

Every encounter between the viewer and the work will randomly produce different results, and these results will be returned to the artwork. This is a process of mutual penetration.

In order to completely get rid of the interference of the creator on the artwork and the audience, we need to redefine the direction of “you,” “me” and “it.” They are fluid, and the relationship between them is also fluid, just like crossed lattice.



*Broken Screen*, 42x56 in, 2024

## Who Has the Agency?

Who has the agency to control the concept of the artwork? No one, not even the artist.

I've already noted that images can stand on their own without the help of words. But still, I try. I can feel that audiences expect me to explain my concepts clearly and accurately so that they can understand the work. Nonetheless, every word can be misunderstood, from neutrality to anti-intimacy to melancholy. And that's okay. Their reading of the picture should be open, and everyone's depth of understanding will be different.

The artist does not need to rack their brain to explain concepts, or convince the audience to buy what they said, and audiences don't need to work hard to hypnotize themselves into believing things that may not make sense to them at all. Our inner emotions are the only factor that balance the position of artists and audiences. We should face the most fundamental emotions in our hearts and feel rather than read an artwork's "messages."

The word "agency" is overused in the art world. We often ask in response to the triangular relationship between artist, work, and audience, who has the agency? This is the wrong question. There are always gaps between the artist and the image, between the image and the audience, the artist and the audience. These gaps are irreparable. What should really be asked is, who should be the responsible party? There is no doubt that artists need to be responsible for their own concepts and works and audiences need to be responsible for their own understanding (how they receive messages). The image is always neutral, it stands in a middle ground, neither favoring the artist nor the audience.

Let me try a metaphor here. Bagels have many flavors, but to me the best one is the plain bagel. Some people like sesame, rosemary, and even everything bagels. Some people want to

smear their bagel with jam, butter, or cream cheese. Some will compare Montreal style and New York style. But when you come down to it, the plain bagel is the essence, the source. Every bagel is a plain bagel underneath the surface.

Artworks should be like a plain bagel—unadorned. Although sometimes, people want to dress them up.

My first goal in graduate school was to be able to show something by using a single photograph rather than a series. I had three reasons for this goal: first, to allow each photo to have its own position; second, to eliminate the redundancy in a large number of pictures; third, because I am tired of the “desire for expression” in art.

I spent the first semester exploring the combination of photography and sculpture in installations, studying the possibilities of materials including metal, cement, and wax. These experiments made me even more certain about photography as a medium. I appreciate that at least half of it is not created by me. I am seeking neutrality. Realizing this, I finally moved from film photography to digital photography. Film’s graininess, which once fascinated me, conveyed too many emotions. Late in the semester, I made an image titled Security Booth. In order to reduce the perspective distortion as much as possible, this image was composed of three photos, and most of the glass reflections and readable texts were removed during production except the word “Security.” I used the relationship between watching and being watched to discuss the lack of difference between truth and falsehood, interior space and exterior space.

The work of Thomas Demand has had a great influence on my photographic aesthetic. I am drawn to the rationality and absence of figures in his work, as well as his multiple styles of post-production display and massive scale. Vajiko Chachkhiani’s *Flies Bite, It’s Going to Rain*, a large-scale installation, was the first work that really taught me the importance of scale. By

contrast, when viewers are faced with a photo of 8.5 x 11 inches, they will unconsciously move closer to facilitate observation. This close distance increases the presence of the camera, and by extension, the presence of the photographer. This very much hinders the freedom of the viewer, who will stop imagining from their perspectives and bow to the authority of the author. Grand scenes can also provide an immersive experience to the audience. In Chachkhiani's works, dry wood and broken statues invite people in. Without knowing the artist's intent, they can naturally think of death and separation. This kind of experience cannot be achieved by a single, small object.

I made *Construction Site* at the end of the second semester. This picture was also composed from three photos to reduce the depth of field effect and create a cinema-like proportion. The camera's high ISO adds a subtle graininess to the photos, with the dual effects of indoor ambient lighting and reflective film glass providing a tone close to neutral gray. Again, I erased all readable text and only left the handwritten numbers on the pillars in order to avoid distraction and increase the sense of strangeness.

Noémie Goudal's *Les Amants (Cascade)* appeared in front of me. At first glance, this is a photo of a waterfall in a forest, and then the audience suddenly realizes that the waterfall is actually a piece of white plastic sheet. I am amazed by this landscape that combines reality and fiction. As in her other works, Goudal blends the artificial and the natural, making the two interdependent and at the same time extending the possibilities of imagery through installation. Her work not only explores the power of photography, but also touches on the relationship between humans and the environment.

In the third semester, I made images about flatness and man-made landscapes. *Airport* was taken at Hong Kong International Airport. It was around 6 o'clock in the morning. The

extremely spacious terminal was almost empty, but the screen at the check-in counter was still running, evoking a strong sense of alienation. During the editing process, I changed the perspective and proportions of the picture, and used color and contrast to give the whole image an unreal feeling, as if the entire space was compressed and CGI-generated. This sense of unreality might make the audience feel alienated, attracted and rejected at the same time. I shot *Green Leaf Window* at a subway station in Toronto. One side of the window is the waiting area, and the other side is the highway. The green leaves grow in a place where no one can reach; they are visible but cannot be approached. During the editing process I also changed the proportions and increased the appearance of green on the windows to make it more hazy, close enough yet out of reach. This photo also expresses a sense of alienation and compression. Both images lack clear direction for the audience, but they provide very direct emotions. I hope viewers will be so affected they will feel the artist does not exist. In front of the images, they are alone.

My thesis book includes pictures from the two series *PVD's Wind Comes from Everywhere* and *Lattice*. The first of these two series I completed at the end of the first year, using mediums including images, sculptures, and poetry. Through this series I express the theme of emotionlessness, where emotionlessness points to the totality and the juxtaposition of all emotions. The image series consists of indoor spaces and natural landscapes. Nine pictures, five sculptures, and a poem express rationality and uneasiness respectively. *Lattice* includes ten pictures, two sculptures, and a poem. Through the use of color, symmetry, and structure, I constructed a space called melancholy.

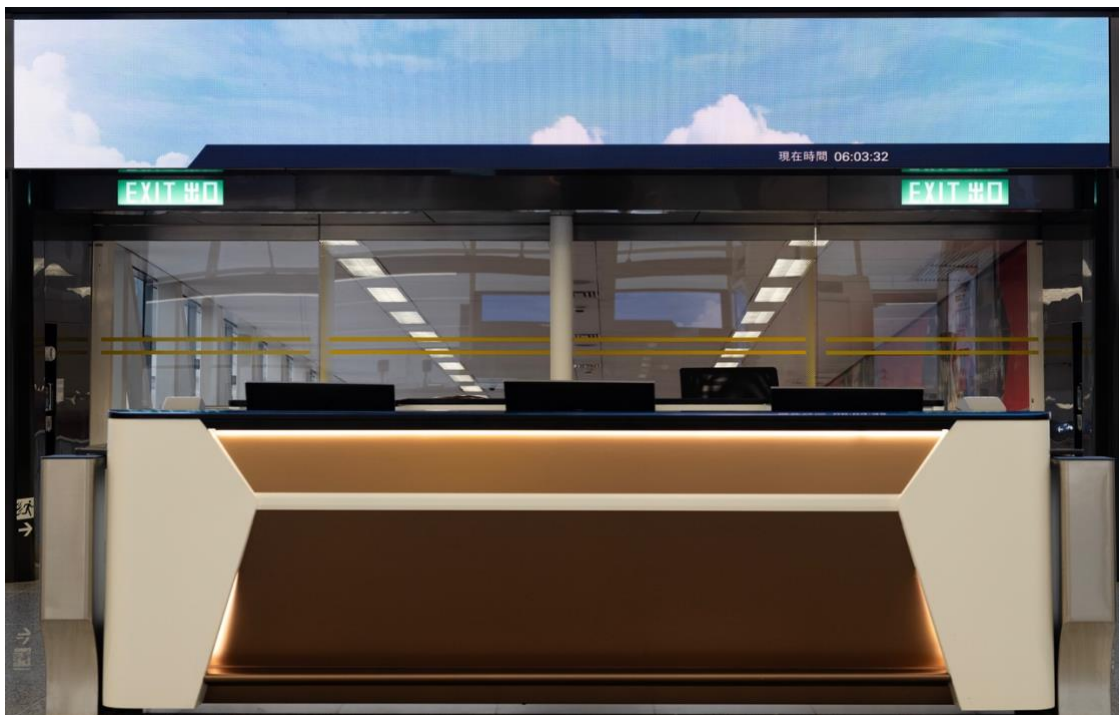
Art is a process of self-awareness for myself. On the one hand, I hope to continue to explore the theme of emotionlessness and introspection, and express the duality of control and chaos, distance and intimacy. On the other hand, I strive to achieve my own absence and make

each photo exist independently of me to ensure the audience's autonomy. I am constantly changing, and this change is also reflected intuitively in my works. The past two years have passed very quickly, they have come to an end with a crisp finger snap. And this learning process allowed me to evolve from a chaotic state to a relatively honest state, like a lake that is constantly being purified. I feel sober and calm like never before.





*Construction Site, 42x73in, 2023*



*Airport, 42x66in, 2023*



*Green Leaves Window*, 42x63in, 2023

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