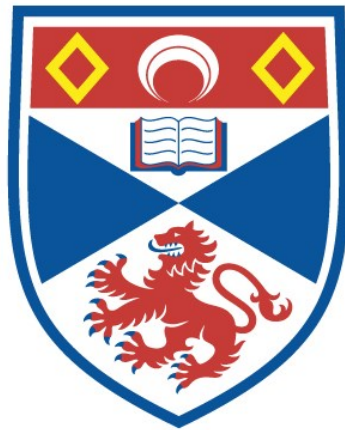


**Little Being in the Great Art Worlds: an anthropological
study on self, creativity, aspiration and escape among young
Chinese artists in London**

Bai Lin (Chang Liu)

A thesis submitted for the degree of PhD
at the
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My parents' influence is reflected in many corners of this research. Over four years, I couldn't go home and visit my family, which brought much sadness and regret. Despite being far from them in the spatial sense, I had come to understand them and myself more, the reality we all lived in, and our ways of hope. I want to translate my gratitude into actions.

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Abstract

This thesis delves into the life and art-practice experiences of young Chinese artists (also Chinese-speaking and Sino-phone artists) navigating the art scenes of London. Drawing from a year-long fieldwork study, it explores the nuanced interplay between being in and out, belonging and exclusion within the perceived art worlds. By examining the challenges faced by these artists in reconciling their cultural identities with the expectations of emerging in the art world, the research aims to elucidate the intricate dynamics of being creative and perceiving authenticity. In particular, it interrogates the notion that Chineseness cannot seamlessly merge with diasporic experiences in the realm of artistic perception and practice, uncovering the role and limitations of identity politics in shaping and sometimes constraining artistic expression. Through ethnographic participation and experimental narratives, for example, in forms of play and short fiction, this study engages in conversations on anthropology and literature, creative ethnographies, and the transformative power of artistic expression in transcending cultural boundaries.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1 Some background noise of the research

From the inception of an idea to the decision to craft it into a research plan, this process began with delving into James Joyce's short story collection *Dubliners*. At the time, I believed it would be a starting point, a literary lens through which to perceive the art world; the stories where the characters' searching for their true selves serve as a guiding metaphor for me to reach the other side of our realities. I referenced the protagonists' longing for London at the beginning of my research in 2020, analyzing the intertextual relationship between Steven, a core character or portrait in James Joyce's literary universe, and this anthropological project - a narrative set in a distant background, resonating with me across a century and several thousand miles. Four years later, as I look back on this study, the clarity of a starting point before that starting point gradually emerges. Then I realize that a might-be-true genesis of the questions I posed, tentatively taking Dublin - London - *Ulysses* as light towers, lies beyond literature, much like stories hidden within each other.

Back in 2016, I met several friends in Beijing. We were all engaged in but disliked our similar full-time jobs in the cultural industry, where creativity and authenticity were stifled and suppressed¹. I believe the reason we always wanted to hang out together was twofold: firstly, we shared an impulse to be close to literature and art, and secondly, we had all undergone similar screenings to arrive in the capital. Those screenings, which could have been translated into "selectivity mechanisms" (Cebolla-Boado and Soyal, 2023)², had geographically filtered and distanced us from our hometowns, non-reading and non-art families, friends, and neighbours - people who stayed behind. At that time, we hadn't yet realized that striving to leave our origins wasn't something to celebrate, until then we actively fed ourselves with sociological knowledge and armed ourselves with radical thought weapons - becoming a statistical anomaly was just one manifestation of our sense of injustice. That's

¹ We were shadow journalists, data recorders, and art gallery handymen.

² In Cebolla-Boado and Soyal's study, this term is used concerning the group of Chinese migrant students who study across borders, and I cite it here to show that educational migration also exists within national borders.

also when literature and art happened to us, when we realized we were in a place where to run away from it seemed to mean freedom. Down there I knew, how literature and art were not easily accessible - for many more people simply didn't have the opportunity to participate in any kind of education to see these worlds, let alone to experience and to practice in these worlds. The art we witnessed, through our geographical mobility, did not exist in the eyes of people we were familiar with. It was on very rare occasions, which I have engaged in fictionalizing in the last chapter, that my friends and I started to discover that new thing called contemporary art.

Looking back now, our youthful attraction to art may have been limited to the significant works recognized within the art world in advance, namely those we **had access to**. These works often exhibited attitudes that seemed "opposite" to our familiar social norms, yet due to our lack of knowledge about a bigger world, we never questioned the criteria by which the art world judged good art. Moreover, lacking an understanding of complex post-colonial historical contexts and post-modern cultural criticism, we naively believed that the standards by which the art world sifted through works were purely a wonderland, with a clear division from our lived realities. When we were younger, we persistently and mistakenly believed that art was pure idealism and our world was pure reality (clearly, we hadn't yet heard of surrealism). With the spread of the "local" internet, classic contemporary artworks reached us in sound and image forms. Despite the difficulties of accessing the Internet³, we were excited to witness these remarkable works. Simply being able to see them was satisfying enough; who would question that artistic world? At that time, we aspired but could not comprehend complex matters beyond our world and were not able to equip ourselves with theoretical tools. We couldn't distinguish between reality and truth and thought that using illegal software to access information beyond the internet's confines was one critical form of righteous civic duty.

³ China's internet firewall, commonly known as the "Great Firewall", was initiated in 1998 with the aim of controlling and monitoring internet traffic, preventing citizens from accessing blocked websites. Regarding the law that prohibits citizens from using VPN software, in January 2017, China's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology issued a notice titled *Notice on Cleaning Up and Regulating the Internet Access Service Market*, which clearly stated that VPNs and other private networks cannot be established or rented without approval (see <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-38714639>).

I can hardly remember the exact year or day when my friends decided to become artists and started practicing art. I was intrigued and invigorated by the idea of this wanting to become a professional artist. I wondered what reasons or conditions could lead someone to start practicing and producing art, wanting to be part of that world, without any knowledge of how contemporary art operates (to some extent, not knowing was a good pressure-less thing). The challenge with this idea lies in the fact that for young people living in deprived environments, art as a product and commodity is difficult to access on both political and economic levels. We came from places with no galleries, cinemas, concert halls; we had never travelled by train or visited big cities before adulthoods, and our families hadn't either; they never attended university, or even high school, and didn't know what contemporary art was. We didn't have internet and personal computers either. From the 1990s, when we were growing up, until then in Beijing, we had almost no opportunity to see uncensored art.

How could someone, existing amongst the basic low-income half-billion⁴, ever harbour aspirations of becoming an artist? At the time, I speculated that my friends were stirred by the pioneering⁵ and transcendent qualities found in certain classic works of art, which had ignited a newfound awareness of their own abilities: "I" can also become an artist, because "I" am a creative individual, capable of transcending my surroundings through perceiving and reacting to the everyday life. Their decision reignited within me the same awe I felt when first encountering Nietzsche⁶: the emergence of "I" signifies the awakening of artistic impulses within another life, a drive that transcends mere survival in an environment of scarcity, an uncommon psychological awareness in our society. Perhaps the confidence of these young people isn't particularly unique, but with the conviction that "I too can create art", a sense of **fearlessness** arises. Even for the majority obscured by the rapid development of the nation, belonging to the impoverished, the seemingly hopeless, it doesn't matter, because in art, everyone is equal.

⁴ According to the *China Income Distribution Annual Report 2021* (compiled by the National Development and Reform Commission and Beijing Normal University, released on December 26, 2023), the data indicates that 39.1% of China's population has a monthly income below 1000 yuan (approximately 100 pounds), equivalent to 547 million people, and with the number of people earning less than 2000 yuan (approximately 200 pounds) per month reaching 964 million.

⁵ Similarly, at that time, we lacked the capacity to contemplate the circumstances under which artworks are defined as "avant-garde" and the process by which they attain classic status. Subsequently, I will delve into the meaning of "avant-garde".

⁶ Nietzsche, F. (1992). *Ecco Homo: How One Becomes What One Is* (W. Kaufmann, Trans.). Vintage Books.

At that time, we viewed ourselves and art in such a manner until irreversible changes began to occur in 2020, loss of loved ones and employment. My friends left Beijing one after another, while I delved into Joyce's novels. The young characters in the book, amidst adversity, still yearn to witness firsthand how art is created in distant worlds. I found myself posing similar questions to the academic world and luckily, passed the selection process, earning the opportunity to study at the University of St. Andrews. Then London transformed from a distant and vague imaginary object into a close tangible possibility, and I eagerly anticipated immersing myself in it soon: What is London like? What is its art world like? What does artistic practice entail in London? Are there communities accessible through the Chinese languages? How does someone, having left the Chinese-speaking (or, Sino-phone) environment, perceive and engage in life and in the art world in London specifically? What experiences do young people, who have undergone ten years or even longer of Chinese socialist education and collective living, bring to their understanding of London's art world? Between the foundational structures of their lives and reflections on art, cultures, and politics, what processes of self-understanding and artistic creation have they undergone, or will they undergo?

For me now, London has become a landmark back in the mobile phone album, and notebooks with field sketches on how I witnessed the arrival and departure of young artists, and how they lived there with all the senses. With complex emotions, I am about to confront those questions of that young person who lived and wondered in me four years ago. I might disappoint her though I must be honest and reveal how the illusions about the art world were shattered; the lessons learned from people's failed attempts to connect with that world; the encounters with people - their different living experiences and the intricate processes of building friendships among us.

In this thesis, I try to dissect the various themes and tensions inherent in the London art worlds, including individuals, events, and situations, especially the emerging meanings of things that are invisible, fluid, and intertwined. Sometimes they are contextually contingent within a global simultaneity, such as the long impact of Covid-19, wars and displacements of people. I will try to answer with ethnographic fractions, whether it was possible for me to

observe and present the internal and external experiences of artists as they place themselves within the art worlds. This contains three main dimensions of concern, firstly, what might happen to the people, mostly young art students or artists, who settle in different parts of London with different financial conditions, while sharing linguistic, socio-cultural and cultural-psychological experiences simplified as Chineseness, or Chinese diasporic identities? And in what way they are responding to their lived experiences by making artworks. In another way to ask these questions: What kinds of entities are the contemporary art worlds for young people who speak in Mandarin, Cantonese, Taiwanese, etc? Are there certain characteristics that can encapsulate its appeal to this group of young artists, and which traits influence the process of their immersion into the art worlds when they decide to commit themselves to it?

Secondly, when an individual's self is "thrown" into the art worlds, how do their internal and external experiences perceive it? Moreover, is it the self-being-thrown into the worlds, or is it the worlds entering the self, and are these mutual processes interchangeable?

Thirdly and practically, how do I present all these? The impulse of artistic creation, as an elusive sensation, has always resisted conceptualization and theorization, despite researchers' relentless efforts to accommodate this extraordinary existence within the language of interpretation. Will ethnographic fiction be a way to get closer to some true sides?

Between anthropological and philosophical perspectives and the realities in the London art world, the key themes of this thesis will be based on the processual framework of **self-world**, that is, a process of one's "self" being thrown into and departing from their worlds, and a process of one's thinking **through** the worlds and others (Jackson, 2016). There, art is not only a materially worlding element, but also ideas, concepts and beliefs politically and culturally touched, arranged, or wrenched. In terms of the meaning of **being**, which I picked as a word in the title, this is no longer an ontological description of a fact, but rather a question of how everything is encountered in the process of being thrown into a world. The ambivalent relation to, or against the contemporary art world (Schneider and Wright, 2010),

includes facing inequalities and complexities - a process initiated by individuals and shaped by ways of not-knowing, knowing, and altering ways of understanding.

The co-existing presences indicate one of the basics of existential philosophy, and philosophical anthropology as well – that “I” is a plural. But how can one “I” yield interpretations for the other “I”, when the subjects and contexts of these presences can always be dismantled and reconfigured within the changing world? Echoing Merleau-Ponty’s view in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012), I realize that all this research can do is present experiences from a perspective of getting in and out of the art worlds in London, finding forms of writing to capture transitivity, and the process of questioning. Without necessarily arriving at any closed conclusion, it reminds me again that, as a young passenger, I could have overlooked so many difficult details of being in the world, and how ambiguous and complex the contexts can be.

Now the noise is over. I will start with the key questions I aim to find answers to, and how I have found voices attuning to these notes, hopefully in the end, reaching some place solid and lasting, although we’d better take a first step into the fog.⁷

2 Self in the art worlds: perception of the art worlds - getting in and out - on escape and becoming

2.1 A magnetic pull: London as a world contemporary art city

A clarification will be made here on London as an art destination for generations of international art practitioners, especially Chinese art students.⁸ In seeking to understand the relationship between the city and its art stories, some context information is needed, such as

⁷ This is derived from Merleau-Ponty. He was talking about Cézanne’s paintings in his lectures *The World of Perception* (2004).

⁸ According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), there were 151,690 Chinese students at UK universities in the 2021/22 academic year, of which 62,935 were undergraduates and 88,755 were postgraduates. Among them, the University of the Arts London (UAL) has 6,245 Chinese students in the 2021/22 academic year, ranking among the UK universities with the highest number of Chinese students. (Information on: <https://www.arts.ac.uk/study-at-ual/international/your-country/east-asia>)

the histories of the art schools and specific art movements and their roles of reconstructing the geography of London art scenes (While 2003; Hudson-Miles and Broadey, 2022). In the sense of historical accumulation of cultural capital, prestigious institutions like the British Museum, the Tate galleries, and the Royal Academy of Arts have long championed art and culture, serving as both guardians of tradition and platforms for modern dialogue. For Chinese art students, the allure lies in London's unique blend of artistic history, institutional richness, and its role as a dynamic international stage. Also importantly, London has a legacy of artistic innovation, particularly following the emergence of the Young British Artists (YBAs) in the 1990s. Compared to New York, which thrived as the world contemporary art exchange center earlier in the 1980s (While, 2003; Burke & McManus, 2009), London offers a distinctive environment for Chinese overseas students shaped by its Europe-neighboring landscape, language commonality, and visa policies – considering the developed tensions between U.S. and China since the trade war in 2018⁹.

In the economic sense, London's position as a global financial center amplifies its appeal as an art city. It creates spaces where emerging artists can connect with influential and established collectors, curators, dealers and gallery owners. The city boasts a thriving art market, home to auction giants Sotheby's and Christie's (Thornton, 2008), alongside a growing network of galleries. Although I did not spend much time being in such spaces where artworks are displayed for trade. I once managed to locate the entrance to some auction house building with the help by Google map, and to my relief, the doors were locked due to Covid-19 restrictions - a situation that, oddly enough, affirms my reluctance to enter such activity spaces. This mood recurs throughout the later chapters, such as when I describe working in the ticket booth at Frieze London or in a restaurant kitchen near King's Cross Station. The appearance of the mood makes me wonder, is there truly an insurmountable threshold that told me not to enter and led me to other places? I want to understand why such feelings were there - the "castle" metaphor I borrow in the next chapter is not only a Kafkaian

⁹ Since the onset of the trade war in 2018, tensions between the U.S. and China have intensified, leading to stricter visa policies for Chinese students. The U.S. government has implemented measures to restrict visas for Chinese graduate students, particularly in high-tech fields such as aviation and robotics. The actions were driven by concerns over intellectual property theft and national security. As a result, obtaining student visas has become more challenging for Chinese nationals pursuing studies in specific disciplines, leading to a decline in enrollments and prompting some students to consider alternative study destinations, such as the U.K. and Canada.

expression, but also emerges from observations of the unique synergy between finance and art.

While London's art market thrives in exclusive spaces - auction houses, blue-chip galleries, and private collections - my research does not center on these established domains. Instead, I focus on art students, whose practices have not yet entered such high-end circuits. Their works, still in formative stages, exist within studios, classrooms, and temporary exhibition spaces rather than commercial galleries. This distinction shapes my fieldwork approach: rather than navigating the polished interiors of the art market, I found myself in ticket booths at art fairs, in back kitchens of restaurants, and in the everyday settings where young artists negotiate their creative aspirations. Strategically, I made my first contacts during the 2021 graduation shows, where students often stood beside their works, ready to discuss their ideas. These spaces provided an entry point, an alternative to the high gates of the market where conversations could unfold organically.

I visited over ten London-based art schools: Camberwell College of Art, Central Saint Martins, Chelsea College of Art, London College of Fashion, London College of Communication, Wimbledon College of Art, which are part of the University of the Arts London (UAL); Royal College of Art, Kingston school of art, Goldsmiths College, Slade School of Fine Art, and Royal academy of art (RA). These schools are celebrated internationally for nurturing creative talent, attracting students from across the globe who aspire to immerse themselves in the creative energy. It's often reflected by my interlocutors that international students' school selection criteria are influenced not only by professional rankings but also by the promise of high-quality, personalized teaching, however, RA is an exception. It is an iconic institution in contemporary art education. Admitting only 17 students per year and offering no student visa sponsorship, the RA's historical lack of Chinese graduates has elevated its status to a mythical level among Chinese art students.

The Royal College of Art, founded in 1768, was one of the earliest and most influential art schools in London, and by 1959 there were 181 art education institutions, 68 of which were independent colleges of art and design (Warren-Piper, 1973: 30). In *Scenes from the*

History of the Art School by Richard Hudson-Miles and Andy Broadey (2022), the history of fine art as a discipline in modern art schools since its creation is reviewed. From the seventeenth to the twenty-first centuries, art institutions in Britain have expanded in scope and taken on a special role in socio-political change. Despite the persistent myth of creative genius and freedom in art schools, however, the original function of mass art education in Britain was the reproduction of semi-skilled labour for industry, which makes contemporary educators' difficulty in confronting the role of the art school as a national economic ideology. In the context of the development of the modern art school, the authors emphasise that this process is historical, monumental yet unnatural. Hooek (2003, 10) notes that, the benchmark set by the Royal Academy of Arts (RA) is conflictual, oscillating back and forth between opposing audiences and discourses. These audiences include the public who view, criticise and consume art, as well as the art professionals who produce and sell artworks, and who fight for legitimacy and prestige and attempt to forge a British artistic tradition.

In the 1990s, the tradition of British art was once again questioned, famous artists like Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin and Sarah Lucas revolutionized contemporary art by bridging local identity with global visibility, and their outstanding abilities of bringing global attention boost their career towards the success. Known for their provocative and unconventional works, they challenged traditional artistic norms. Hirst, famous for his animal preservations and explorations of death, gained international recognition (but now critics). Emin is best known for her deeply personal and confessional art, such as *My Bed* (1998), which transformed an unmade bed into a powerful statement on vulnerability. Lucas employs found objects and humor to explore gender and sexuality, often using crude imagery to subvert societal expectations¹⁰. Together, they helped define contemporary British art with their bold and conceptual approaches. Supported by institutions such as the Saatchi Gallery¹¹, the YBAs spurred a wave of institutional growth, with galleries, art fairs, and alternative spaces flourishing across the city. This legacy of institutional expansion continues to resonate,

¹⁰ Their works' description on: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/y/young-british-artists-ybas>

¹¹ Mr Saatchi has made a name in the art world for himself by buying young artists in bulk, and since two decades ago has looked to China, the Middle East, India and beyond. The stage for the play in Chapter 4 takes place in the space of the Saatchi Gallery, which at the time had successfully transformed itself into a non-profit gallery to provide an exhibition space for London art students who were not be able to take part in their graduation show due to covid-19.

providing emerging artists, including Chinese students, with diverse opportunities to showcase their work and collaborate on experimental projects. It was also amplified by international media, carved out a distinctive narrative within British art history and reshaped the spatial identity of the London art scene. This era witnessed a redefinition of how exhibitions were organized, the modes in which works were displayed, and the geographical dynamics of London's artistic spaces. Notably, the East End, previously synonymous with deprivation, began to attract attention as a burgeoning hub for alternative art scenes. This transformation was driven by artist-run exhibitions, experimental warehouse shows, and an increasing fascination with mass media, which collectively challenged conventional artistic norms.

The YBA phenomenon continues to influence the trajectories of young creatives who see London as a space of infinite possibilities for artistic exploration and expression. For international and Chinese art students, the YBA movement showcased London as a site of artistic rebellion and innovation. Many of my interlocutors called it the best time for contemporary art and they aspire to promote their artworks and reputation like they did. For them, London represents an ideal blend of cultural and educational opportunities. All the art schools are renowned for their rigorous training and emphasis on creative freedom, encouraging students to push boundaries and expand their artistic horizons. The rise of alternative spaces and unconventional platforms inspired art people to explore interdisciplinary and experimental practices, while London's emergent status as a global art capital positioned it as a pivotal destination for aspiring artists. The dense network of galleries, museums, and cultural institutions provides unparalleled opportunities for networking and career development. Participating in major events like Frieze London and the Venice Biennale offers students a chance to engage with global audiences and contribute to the evolving discourse of contemporary art.

Art schools in London are currently including many international students to expand their operations, for example UAL also has admissions offices in Beijing and Shanghai. This has attracted a large number of Chinese students to look at them at the stage of preparing

their applications. According to UAL statistics¹², around 40 per cent of students come from outside the UK. Of these, the number of students from China is increasing year on year. In several Master of Fine Art (MFA) programs, the proportion of Chinese students in a class may reach 30-50%. Their tuition fees vary by college. At Central Saint Martins, for example, tuition fees for international students range from around £18,000 to £22,000 per annum for undergraduate programs and £25,000 to £30,000 per annum for postgraduate programs. Tuition fees at other colleges may vary slightly, but in general, international students generally pay higher tuition fees than local students.

In terms of pedagogy, many art schools emphasize a combination of practice and theory, with courses often including workshops, projects, lectures and exhibitions, and students are encouraged to collaborate with industry professionals. However, in real cases during 2021-2022, some schools were so short of space resources that many students could not be allocated a seat in a shared studio. There were also classes that were cancelled offline due to the overwhelming number of Chinese students. Together with the impact of covid-19, online discussions between students and professors became the alternative. In Scarsbrook's (2021) research on fine art education in London and their professional pedagogies, it reveals that art schooling causes deep and lasting emotionally embedded tensions, conflicts, and contradictions in the artists' identities, freedoms, and professionalization. The hierarchy within art practice - whether between fine art, design, or commercial work - remains a subtle yet persistent force shaping students' aspirations and anxieties. Certain forms of artistic expression, particularly those aligned with conceptual or avant-garde traditions, are often imbued with a higher cultural prestige, while others, perceived as too commercial or craft-oriented, struggle for institutional validation. Yet, paradoxically, the very institutions that assign value to these practices are also constrained by financial and logistical limitations, leaving students to navigate an uncertain terrain between creative autonomy and professional survival. This complexity will be further reflected in how students internalize and respond to these structural conditions.

¹² See UAL annual report on: <https://www.arts.ac.uk/?a=389423>

London's art schools, with their long histories and international reputations, offer a compelling site to explore these tensions. As hubs where global aspirations intersect with localized pedagogical realities, they become microcosms of broader socio-economic and cultural dynamics. My choice to focus on this scene stems from the fact that these institutions not only shape the trajectories of emerging artists but also reveal the contradictions embedded in the very systems that claim to nurture creativity. The paradox of art education, where students are trained within a structured environment yet expected to transcend its boundaries upon graduation, raises fundamental anthropological questions about how artistic value, legitimacy, and identity are constructed and negotiated.

All the information I obtained is based on chats with the art students who I knew for a long time, but there was hardly any criticism or derision of these phenomena in the graduation exhibitions or in their day-to-day work. Indeed, the gap between the feedback given to art students by the programs and exhibition opportunities set up in art schools and the feedback given to them in the real art world, and in London's popular culture, is so wide that the question of how to devise modes of teaching and learning, or the lack of modes, within this gap, and how to assess creativity within the contradictory systems, remains a perennial issue in the art education/education relationship. What confuses me is that since art schools, as institutions and communities, participate in the construction of 'the interpretive network' (Rancière, 2013:ix), which gives the artworks certain meanings, what these meanings are in relation to the art students' subjectivity, and why are these associations so surreally detached from the individual day-to-day lives.

2.2 Portraits of young Chinese art students

In the past decade, research on Chinese students studying overseas has grown significantly and undergone substantial changes. The focus of such studies primarily revolved around cultural exchanges, career prospects and the role of family support in facilitating international education. In the context of Chinese diaspora studies, many explored the construction of root cultures among immigrants in west European and north American cities,

identifying family, national, and religious cultures as pivotal in maintaining connections with their homeland (Kuah, Davidson and Kuhn, 2008). In recent time, however, there has been a noticeable shift as more Chinese students choose to pursue humanities and social sciences abroad - fields often characterized by less predictable career outcomes. This trend reflects evolving aspirations among Chinese youth, who increasingly value personal development, intellectual exploration, and cultural engagement over purely career-driven goals. In Xu's (2021) studies, Chinese students from higher-status parental families value greater benefits from the eco-cultural capital in industrialized countries. It shows that, the choices of the education destinations are based on the pre-evaluation of their future income and the investment in personalized education, which reidentified higher education as human capital ready to exchange in the labor market. While in Wang and Hu's (2024) article, it explores further the enthusiasm of Chinese middle-class families for their children's international higher education, and proposes the concept of normative biography, i.e., a life trajectory that is taken for granted in a particular socio-cultural context. These studies explore the reasons why young migrants migrate to London through the school and university channel, as well as their understanding of migration. Young and highly skilled migrants often utilize family resources to seek opportunities in London in response to uncertainty within China.

Based on my interviews from summer 2021 to fall 2022, art schools have implemented significant structural changes to accommodate the growing number of international students, particularly from China. Due to limited resources and increased student enrollment, these institutions have adopted more flexible studio allocations and redefined student-professor one-on-one interactions. While such reforms were initially designed to promote interdisciplinary and cross-cultural collaboration, they have inadvertently intensified competition and heightened identity-related anxieties among students. However, the gap between the theoretical emphasis on inclusive, intercultural education and the reality of competitive academic environments has become more pronounced, creating tensions that challenge the effectiveness of these pedagogical models. Interestingly, schools with a lower proportion of Chinese students are often perceived as more prestigious within Chinese student communities, suggesting a nuanced interplay between institutional reputation and

demographic representation.

Unlike earlier studies that focused on cultural exchange challenges, current observations highlight issues of knowledge production, creative identity, and social belonging within competitive contexts. The exhibition-oriented evaluation systems prevalent in art schools exacerbate these anxieties, sometimes leading to a sense of alienation even among Chinese peers. Some students express a preference for institutions with fewer Chinese classmates, perceiving this as advantageous for academic distinction and personal growth. This phenomenon underscores the evolving dynamics of international student experiences, where cultural adaptation no longer guarantees a sense of belonging or reduced psychological stress. For most of the time, Chinese students in the London art schools demonstrate significantly stronger cultural adaptation, comparing overseas students in other cities or who came here a decade ago. This reflects not only their enhanced language proficiency and familiarity with cosmopolitan environments but also their alignment with the values of globalism and neoliberal university education. Nevertheless, comprehensive research on Chinese students in specific contexts, such as London art schools remains limited. It should be noted that while London attracts a significant number of Chinese art students, their unique academic and cultural experiences are often overlooked in scholarly discussions. Addressing this gap is crucial for a more nuanced understanding of how Chinese art students navigate the intersection of cultural identity, artistic innovation, and global mobility.

As I mentioned in the first section, the starting point for this study came from a desire I saw in my friend for creativity, the desire of young individuals to have the freedom to practice art. I am familiar with this passion, but on another level, it also stems from our resistance to the lack of material resources in our formative years. This desire and passion for the reality of the art world, which is not yet objectively recognised, prompted me to want to come to London. I thought it would be possible to read and write with ease, to visit artistic talents, to understand how an artist weaves the fragments of his mind into a work, and to enter the art world through that work. But once I arrived in London, that imagination was immediately shattered, and most of my energy went into surviving. In the end, I didn't enter the noble places of the art world, instead I got to know people who, like me, wandering

outside the art world, such as in part-time workplaces and outside of art schools. There I met young people who were more accessible for me to reach out to at that time.

I have interviewed over 30 art students at graduation shows organized by over 10 art schools in London. They were between the ages of 22-30 and were in the study stages of undergraduate graduates, MFA students, and MFA graduates. Over 25 of them are from China's first-tier cities, and the occupations of the interviewees' parents are mostly businessmen, corporate executives, civil servants, professionals, and high-net-worth investors, like Waters (2012: 128) has generated that most of them have financially stable family support or have been raised in an environment that places great value on formal education and credentials; have highly educated parents; and have experienced overseas travel as a child. However, these studies have not restored the full reality of the differences in the lives and beings of overseas Chinese in London, as I have also stated in Chapter Five. Studies on the economic background of Chinese overseas students are still limited and tend to focus on the overall situation, and there are relatively few studies specific to the art students in London.

I will now detail the portraits of five young people, the characters who act as the main interlocutors in each of the subsequent chapters. They are **Ting** (pseudonym) the choreographer; three young men, **Bear**, **Goat**, and **Zebra** (pseudonym), who aspire to work as professional artist; and **an anonymous female curator** who is planning to leave the art world.

I encountered Ting while working at Frieze London. We both worked at the ticket counter, both on short-term, part-time shifts. Perhaps our connection was inevitable, given our similar, stubborn appearance. Neither of us wore makeup or dyed our hair; both of us donned thick yet light coats and running shoes, a practical choice for comfort and minimal luggage. Yet none of that mattered. What mattered was that our eyes met.

— Do you speak Chinese?

(I felt that the question came from a place of wanting connection, not just an assessment of appearance or identity.)

— Yes. That’s great...

Ting had just completed her master’s degree at the Laban Dance Institute in London that summer. We were the same age. She grew up in Taiwan, and I in China, PRC. A week later, we met again in the kitchen of a restaurant at King’s Cross. It was she who introduced me to a trial dance class. As we prepared ingredients, she shared her story—how she only decided to study choreography later in life. Before, dance had been a hobby, something she thought could only be done by those with the right body and background. It wasn’t until she watched Pina Bausch’s performance tapes that she dared to make a different decision. After graduation, she struggled to join prestigious European performance companies, realizing that lacking formal dance training was a significant barrier. Instead, she started small, even learning clowning and acrobatics. I joined a workshop she organized—open to anyone, regardless of background. By day we practiced dance, and by night, worked in restaurants and theaters. These small experiences slowly wove together the foundation for her dance career in London.

In early winter 2021, I met two young men studying at Chelsea College of Arts. (The other young man, my husband, had come to the UK with me in 2020.) The three of us crossed paths in the winter of 2021 at Saatchi Gallery in London. At that time, the gallery had transitioned into a non-profit organization and hosted a delayed exhibition for students whose graduation shows had been canceled due to the pandemic. The exhibition brought together student works from several art schools in London. Some schools selected works through competitive submissions, while others were voluntary. The two Chelsea students participated because their works were deemed representative of the school’s curriculum. My husband, an art practitioner himself, was self-taught until 2024, when he enrolled at Städelschule in Germany, to formalize his art education.

The three young men quickly bonded over shared experiences and contrasting perspectives on the art world. I was fortunate enough to be included in their candid discussions about the professionalization of art. They each brought a unique viewpoint, shaped by their diverse backgrounds. **Bear** had arrived in London right after high school,

transitioning from an architecture student to contemporary art practice. He adapted swiftly to the art school system but found himself anxious about stepping out of the “safety” of academic structures. This tension between what art schools taught and what was happening in the art world became a key point in our discussions. **Goat** had spent years practicing independently in Beijing but struggled to find exhibition opportunities, which led him to London for a more formal international education. He wasn’t comfortable with elite educational structures and had little interest in building a career in the London art world. He planned to return to Beijing after completing his master’s degree. **Zebra**, at the time, was a self-taught artist with no formal education in art, nor had he lived abroad. His perspective on the professionalism within London’s art scene was often alienating, but because he lacked the constraints of formal education, he felt more confident in the sustainability of his own creative practice.

This group of young men represents the tension between **various professional paths** within the art world—those forged by formal education versus those formed by self-taught resilience, and the nuanced impact of international experience on career development. In Chapter Four, I recreate parts of our conversations as a play, as they often spanned hours, diving deep into personal experiences, spiritual encounters, and all the unspoken aspects of their struggles. How do they cope with and continue to exist in this complex, sometimes alienating world? Though I hold my own opinions on many of their points, I believe these conversations are rare and valuable, shedding light on the ways art, professionalism, and personal expression intersect. This is why I aim to capture them through first-person narration and dramatize the spatial environments of these discussions.

The final figure in my fieldwork is an unnamed woman—an individual studying curating in London, yet deeply yearning to practice art herself. I think I understand her longing, as I live with an artist, just as she collaborates with artists, we both get attracted by the freedom with which they express themselves. At the same time, we feel unable to bear the weight of the “war of attention” that comes with such freedom. After her graduation, she left London, feeling disillusioned.

The use of anonymity was a mutual decision, one that reflects our shared understandings. Our experiences in London intersected - while she grew increasingly critical of the art world, I grappled with the disillusionment that comes from comparing oneself to others. She came from a well-off family, but our different class backgrounds did not hinder our connection. I had once been sensitive, believing that arriving in London meant I was moving upward in the world - placing what I lacked against what others had. In hindsight, I see this as a narrow, forced understanding of my fieldwork and theories on inequality - one that could not answer the question, if the world is like this, how can one live better? Her disillusionment with the art world reflected a critical stance I was also starting to take, and yet, we both understood the immense value of creative practice despite these challenges.

I long for the freedom to practice thought, a freedom I believe is fundamental to human existence - one that requires extraordinary patience and the ability to go beyond common sense. This is why I documented our shared experiences in the same anonymous woman's diary, capturing the overlooked fragments of London life. Through slow, fragmented writing, I offer a strong declaration of stepping outside the competition for attention that so often dominates the art world. I feel reluctant to use the word representative to describe the protagonists of my story; we are simply friends, encountering with no plan, existing together not just in London, but in a more real, shared world.

2.3 An encounter of two words: Xiān Fēng and avant-garde

The young Chinese artist practitioners arriving in London do so against the backdrop of rapid globalization and the diversification of artistic expression. At the same time, as successors to the rise of contemporary Chinese art in the 1980s, their creative endeavors are shaped not only by the influence of avant-garde ideas but also by the deep imprint of a history - particularly the profound impact left by the emergence of contemporary art in China. In the 1980s, when contemporary art in China began to emerge, engage in external exchanges and attract attention, my father gave up his painting dream. He didn't get into college so

ended up working at an enamel factory, where he drew patterns on enamel kitchenware and bathware. These figure designs were typically transformed images of flowers, birds, fish, and insects from traditional Chinese painting into simple, repetitive lines. He and his peers experienced China's economic transition, including extensive privatization reforms that affected many "low efficiency" industries. After the factory broke down, he stopped painting altogether. In our home, he once displayed his oil paintings, but none of them survived, according to my mother, they were discarded as they were in awful conditions - rainwater leakage and rats running around caused them to decay.

People often say that the 1980s was the most politically relaxed and intellectually creative era in China's history. This sentiment is frequently found in the memoirs of business elites, cultural figures or in the 80s' folk songs. But there is a sightless interplay among people who all lived this decade. On the one hand, it marked a time when contemporary art burst forth with exhilarating, diverse, angry, and playful voices, starkly contrasting with the reserved, introverted, serene, and highly abstract qualities of traditional aristocratic art, and the driving force was the economic boom after the revolutionary year of 1978¹³. All kinds of artistic expressions emerged, with fresh faces, and had never been confronted by the global markets. It was during this period that Chinese contemporary art, literature, film, and broader cultural arts began to receive more attention. On the other hand, when all the exciting events were celebrated in big cities in the PRC, they were still very far from the fundamental population. My mother and father, as a young couple, were aware of the gap between their daily life and the "new art wave"¹⁴. They had perceived them in their own way, being outside of the art world.

When contemporary art first impacted China in the 1980s, it was accompanied by the term Xiān Fēng (先锋), a word meaning pioneering and which was ubiquitous at the time of revolutionary wars in China's 20th century. This term not only appeared on the propaganda

¹³ The 1978 Chinese economic revolution, led by Deng Xiaoping, transitioned China from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented one. Key reforms included decollectivization of agriculture, establishment of Special Economic Zones to attract foreign investment, and restructuring of state-owned enterprises. These policies spurred rapid economic growth and industrialization, transforming China into a global economic power, though they also introduced challenges such as income inequality and environmental degradation.

¹⁴ The Chinese New Art Wave of 1985, also known as the 85 New Wave, was a significant movement in Chinese contemporary art. It marked a break from traditional forms and embraced avant-garde, experimental approaches.

posters of the revolutionary militarism of China but also permeated every piece exhibited in contemporary art shows of the 1980s, which embodied a confluence of universality and specificity. In Simplified Chinese, Xiān Fēng directly corresponds to “avant-garde”, at first, the two words reach a **consensus**: avant-garde art holds significant meanings in the art worlds, where it drives innovation in art forms, provoked social reflection, and challenges established cultural and power structures. Scholarly research on avant-garde art history is very helpful for understanding the pioneering aspects of Chinese contemporary art. This is particularly evident in the commonalities and communicability between these two art worlds.

In another layer, the avant-garde/Xiān Fēng art also faces limitations, as it can be absorbed and commodified by mainstream culture, potentially diluting its original rebellious spirit. Understanding these dynamics and complexities helps to grasp more comprehensively the importance of the avant-garde in the art world, as well as its diversity and limitations in different cultural contexts. In other words, avant-garde art is both a driver of innovation and a crucial tool for social and cultural change, but its effectiveness and longevity depend on its ability to continually challenge and reflect critically on mainstream culture. The concept of the avant-garde has evolved with different meanings in the global art worlds, each with distinct developmental trajectories and cultural contexts.

Here I will briefly look at the relationship between Xiān Fēng/avant-garde art and the social environments idealized by the past decades, and the change of characteristics or meanings of it in contemporary art worlds in Beijing and London. Applying cultural criticism theories, such as Stuart Hall’s works on linguistic meaning and representation (1997), we can delve into understanding the development and limitations of this concept in the art worlds of developed societies. As in the system of representation, also a tribute to Saussure’s legacy, it is always arbitrary between the signifier and the signified (Hall, 1997: 32). The avant-garde art, from this point of view, originated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a challenge to traditional art forms and social norms, representing artists’ pursuit of creativity, innovation, experimentation, and social change. Then, avant-garde art attempts to challenge mainstream culture and power structures through new artistic forms and content, but it

reminds us that any cultural phenomenon, including the most “avant-garde” art, can be absorbed and commodified by mainstream culture, thereby losing its original rebellious spirit.

Other thinkers like Peter Bürger, in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984), explore the historical role and social function of avant-garde art, arguing that its revolutionary nature lies in its attempt to merge art with life. However, this attempt often becomes institutionalized, losing its subversive potential. Hal Foster, in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (1983), discusses postmodernism’s reflection on and critique of the avant-garde concept. He notes that postmodern art responds to the avant-garde of modernism through deconstruction and collage, questioning its historical limitations and commercialization. Additionally, Bourdieu’s theory of distinction, Alfred Gell’s theory of agency, and Rancière’s aesthetic theory provide interwoven frameworks for understanding the avant-garde. Bourdieu (1984) points out that artistic taste and cultural production are often used to distinguish social classes. In this sense, avant-garde art, within this social stratification, plays both a rebellious role and can become new cultural capital. Gell (1998) proposes that artworks themselves can be viewed as social agents, whose influence and meaning are realized through interaction with viewers, aligning with the avant-garde’s role in breaking conventions and stimulating social reflection. And Rancière in *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004), explores how art reconfigures sensory experiences and alters viewers’ perceptions of reality. By integrating these theories, we can more comprehensively understand the complex roles and impacts of avant-garde art in cultural production, social interaction, and perceptual change. It seems that the creativity generated or intrigued by avant-garde art, by challenging established modes of perception, seeks to create new political and aesthetic spaces.

China’s Xiān Fēng art emerged in the 1980s, although influenced by the concepts and critics of modernism and postmodernism, also attempted to respond to China’s social and political changes. As the art communities in the PRC have been more directly affected by national politics and ideology, their resistance and innovation are often accompanied by political risks. In the context of Simplified Chinese, avant-gardism is imbued with an expectation to critically reflect on the diversity and complexity of Chineseness within a globalized framework. In Welland’s (2018) work, she elucidates the power relations and

hierarchical structures within the small circles of Chinese contemporary art, capturing Beijing's ineffable allure for Chinese artists: it is the epicentre of Chinese contemporary art as well as national cultural management. It boasts numerous burgeoning art galleries, museums, and foreign galleries, supported by real estate developers, while the work of artists is continually influenced by the direction of capital and market demands. By integrating the theories of Danto (1964, 1986) and Becker (1982) regarding the art world/plural art worlds, along with Bourdieu's (1993) work on the field of cultural production, one can comprehend Welland's discussion of when and how Chinese contemporary avant-garde art occurred and how it stimulated the establishment of new cultural frameworks.

Welland also employs postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak's (1985) concept of "worlding" to understand that this process of worlding not only takes place in colonized lands but also within the Chinese art world. Spivak originally aimed to explore how colonialism shapes worldviews through language and cultural production, and "worlding" means constructing and presenting worldviews through specific cultural, linguistic, and social practices. "Worlding" acts as a latent, everyday script that permeates the literature of colonial cultures, forming a narrative about the world that includes the concept of the "Third World". Spivak applies this concept to critique colonialism, arguing that colonialism is not just a form of political and economic control but also solidifies its dominion over the colonized by manipulating cultural symbols and language. Welland (2018) points this concept out in her study of the contemporary art world in Beijing, by applying a post-colonial analysis in line with Spivak, she examines how the colonialist mode of thinking about public culture establishes power through the manipulation of culture.

It is undeniable that over the past 40 years of China's reform and opening up, information technology has had an irreversible impact on the lives of young people, gradually levelling the discourse power between professional artists and new media artists in contemporary art. Lily Chumley (2016) describes the socioeconomic reforms in China and the consequent changes in the artistic landscape. Through observations and interviews related to the art entrance exams, art schools, and individual artists, she portrays the quasi-ecology of the Chinese art world: how artists grow up under the influence of conventional socialist

education and how they escape ideology through their creations, only to enter another form of ideology. Extending this to a judgment on the nature of contemporary Chinese society, Welland argues that China, in many senses, does not fully belong to the “Third World”, instead, there exist at least three narratives constructing China’s worlds: semi-colonial, anti-colonial, and post-socialist (2018: 31). The art world within this context has been created, interacted, opposed, and even replaced, existing between the geopolitics of China and the world, between Eastern and Western values, and between historical and contemporary lineages. It is the continuous process of creation and recreation in Chinese contemporary art that leads to its abstractness and elusiveness, impacting both Chinese and global contemporary art.

In other words, when delving into the concepts and principles of avant-gardism, we probably should not only examine its development and impact within the realm of art but also place it within a broader socio-cultural care context. Avant-gardism is not merely an artistic expression; it is a response to and challenge against social and cultural realities. Through the frameworks on this term, I have gained a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between avant-gardism in the art world and socio-cultural studies. Avant-gardism is not only a subversion of artistic forms and aesthetic notions but also a challenge and reflection on social realities and power structures. However, at the same time, avant-garde art faces the risk of being absorbed, commodified, or worse, forgotten by the mainstream art world, potentially diluting its original rebellious spirit. This raises another question: if we still need the spirit of avant-gardism, what actually do we need? And should it in contemporary art only occur within the sophisticated, beautiful world of big cities? In Plattner’s (2018) study on contemporary art in Florence, he concludes that a European city sustained by historical tourism might not need contemporary art. I think that “where is contemporary art needed” is also a critical question, although it seems in London, contemporary art has tamed its courage to challenge its environment. While this observation may not be entirely accurate, from the experiences shared by the art practitioners I have encountered, I sense that courage and fearlessness are no longer the most highly valued qualities in that art world. This is not to say that they are ignored; I believe they are still

emerging in new forms. What truly matters is the purpose of this fearlessness — the urgent need to foster, nurture, and care for creativity, vitality, and diversity. This stimulates further contemplation on the issue of contemporality and avant-gardism: does an ideal society for living truly require avant-garde art, or, for ambitious artists, where exactly is the frontier of the world - London or elsewhere?

Four decades later, many of the first-generation pioneers in Chinese contemporary art have become successful, and young artists who have been educated both by their favourite artists and by traditional ideological schools in the PRC have arrived in London. I am concerned with how they will cope with the new educational system and to what extent they understand today's political and cultural conflicts as significant motivations for their creations. I also want to know how the boundaries of creative activities and aesthetic values exist in a cross-linguistic living environment. Does a scrutinized and introspective “neoliberal” environment help artists form a clear self-awareness? What will happen during their interaction with, entry into, and even departure from such an art world?

2.4 Being in and out: on the real art worlds and young artists' worries

In the research proposal, I quoted Fran Lebowitz, who talked in Scorsese's show (2021) about what it is like in the art world, in New York: “That's all we hear about, the prices. If you go to an auction, out comes a Picasso, dead silence. Once the hammer comes down, and the price, applause. Okay? So, we live in a world where we applaud the price, but not Picasso. I rest my case.” It's undeniable that Fran depicted this phenomenon with disdainful exaggeration, rather than accepting it calmly. As a reader and an outsider, I imagine she hoped for a reversal of this phenomenon, perhaps returning to a more ideal state, or moving towards a future where the world applauds art rather than something else. Sarah Thornton (2008) similarly depicted the auction scenes in the opening chapter of *Seven Days in the Art World*, scenes I hadn't encountered in over a year spent in the London art worlds. For readers like me, who haven't experienced auctions at Christie's or Sotheby's, Thornton's vibrant portrayal of the hotter, trendier, pricier art world piqued interest while also deflating morale.

In her work, which led me to London as a travel guidebook, Thornton visited auction houses, art schools, international art fairs and exhibitions, as well as studios, art magazine offices, and art award committees. This “seven-day world” encompasses art production, circulation, and consumption. Thornton, through her depiction of the behaviour of art world insiders and commentary on it, suggests that the collaborators in the art world have expanded it, even integrating it with the real world, much as the Venice Biennale has opened up the market for Bellini cocktails.

If to trace how this world came to be, we could go back to the 1970s when art historians like Brian O’Doherty (1976) began discussing the context of art, raising a series of questions such as what art space occupies, the relationship between galleries and audiences, and how context consumes the subject and ultimately becomes art’s secondary subject. We find ourselves no longer focusing on art itself, but rather on the things it brings with it. For instance, the white cube-style display conveys the principles and purposes of spatial construction to viewers, emphasizing that artworks in space can transcend time, and exist for future generations. The longer-lasting works are deemed more worthy of investment in time and market. However, galleries are essentially closed value systems that need societal recognition as their context (O’Doherty, 1999: 34). When postmodern aesthetics become an accessory of the social elite, gallery spaces must present seemingly precious and rare items in spaces isolated from mainstream society. Thus, aesthetics turns into commerce, with gallery rents skyrocketing, and the items they exhibit needing further interpretation.

O’Doherty’s assessment of gallery space shares remarkable similarities with Bourdieu’s. Firstly, they both regard viewing as a capacity. Bourdieu writes in *Distinction* (1984: 2) that the capacity to view (voir) is knowledge (savoir), the ability to name visible things, akin to programming or decoding perception. Artworks only acquire meaning and interest to viewers when they possess the cultural competence to decode them. What Bourdieu said about “pure gaze” is a historical invention closely related to the emergence of art as a production chain. O’Doherty argues that gallery environments are not responsible for highlighting the beauty of art but rather for highlighting the aesthetics of suspension (1999: 24), merely superficially accentuating the eternity of art while fundamentally representing, endorsing, and

disseminating a certain threshold of appreciation. Unlike O'Doherty's tendency to juxtapose art with its literal context, Bourdieu (1984) seeks to explore not only the viewer's cognitive abilities and how they manifest in their respective domains but also, from this point of view, how these cognitive abilities are embedded in society, whether in the form of ethnology, social stratification, or the origin of cultural psychology.

Bourdieu's advocacy for reflexivity is a caution against overlooking people's lived experiences when depicting society through structures, a significant departure from the art historian's proposition of the opposition between context and art. Echoing these thoughts, Becker (1982: xi) argued that the art world is a network that needs artists to collaborate with others to continue its production and existence. Viewing art through the lens of sociology implies that making art is no different from any other job, and artists are no different from other professionals. The label of art sociology could easily be replaced with professional sociology. Previous studies often treated art as something special, particularly enchanted by the genius of creativity, while the true characteristics of society were hidden beneath the surface. Becker proposed that artistic activities include manufacturing, appreciation, support, creation, maintenance, and circulation, adopting a materialistic stance where the idea of art must be carried in material form, requiring time and labour for its production. Moreover, art must be viewed, appreciated, and connected with others after production. He also argued that the ability to create art and to value this ability originated from the West. In this context, the relationship between artists, collectors, and audiences is clear, where the unique talents of artists are judged and selected only by professional institutions and trained talents.

If Becker emphasizes the role of the organization in the transformation of the art world, then Gell (1998), centered around the concept of "agency", extends a unique theoretical system he calls the "art nexus". Gell views art itself as a technical system and elaborates on his perspective on art in his paper *The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology* (1999), presenting a socio-anthropological understanding of art. He advocates for dismantling linguistic paradigms' dominance over the humanities, especially the analysis of visual expression, presenting art as an integral part of a social ecology. Comparing Becker and Gell's two explanatory models, while Becker questions whether society can express itself

through various channels rather than through the material production of the art world, Gell asks whether art can become a world of its own while helping society express its own characteristics. In fact, contemporary art practitioners experience more in other dimensions than researchers of the entanglement between “what the art world should be” and “what the art world actually is”. However, I had to reconsider Becker and Gell’s thoughts while I was working with young Chinese artists in London, conducting ethnographic search on art making and sustaining. Their struggles made me confront the ongoing questions between **resistance and existence**: What daily, overlooked differences have young Chinese artists experienced when entering the contemporary art world as a pre-existing entity? What significance do the processes of differentiation hold in various dimensions?

In the fourth chapter of my thesis, I apply the medium of a play script to present the journeys and dialogues of several young artists who completed their MFA programs in London, detailing the processes of failed entering the London art world. Their conversations revolve around the art education they received in London and what happened when they struggled to sustain a living, before pursuing careers in the art world. In the beginning, they generally view the MFA program as a preparatory stage for their art careers, allowing them to focus on making artwork for 1-2 years, gain exhibition experience, and establish connections with art institutions outside the school. Through the process of creating and applying for exhibition opportunities, these young artists realize that the conditions for gaining attention and recognition in the art world are relatively more complex. Not all MFA graduates get the opportunity to be noticed. The portfolios they submitted when initially applying for the MFA program were merely judged on the school’s selection criteria, which differ greatly from the criteria used by the art world to select professional artists. Young artists or art students often consider what the specific conditions are for gaining attention in the art world, and what subjective and objective bases are used to judge whether an artist’s work is “good.”

Understanding success/failure in the art world as the ability to gain resources for continued creation is very limiting. Nevertheless, either the logic of entry/exit or success/failure still troubles young artists. I have not encountered many artists who have truly succeeded in gaining resources, instead, I focus on how young artists navigate their confusion

and how they act in the face of the unique autonomy of art, as also described by Adorno (1997) in his defence for the authenticity of aesthetics, losing its effectiveness in the rules of competing for social resources. There are two particularly distinctive approaches in their actions, or rather, they are more passionate about two paradigms of artistic practices. One approach involves using value judgments that oppose success and centrality, emphasizing the value of failure and marginalization. The other involves observing their own history and memory to express a sense of existence in the art world, often involving the representation of “Chineseness” through language, culture, and political differences, reflecting on the complexity of overseas Chineseness as flexible citizenship (Ong, 1999) and instrumental citizenship (Wu and Inglis, 1998). They often unconsciously link these two paradigms together or sometimes feel compelled to renounce using their identities, when everything they express through art seems to be put on the level of performativeness.

There I have experienced, during my field trip in the art schools, that academic and art communities predominantly composed of Chinese individuals have long been discussing how the discourse of “Chineseness” occurs, is understood, and is misunderstood in the art world. Chumley (2016) argues that the modernity concept in contemporary Chinese art has never been indigenous, with its form acquired post-social reform, gaining global favour due to its rapid market growth. It reflects that creativity practices in China are framed by three transnational discourses concerning the economic and political powers of creative individuals. First, there is the ethno-national discourse of economic and cultural competition between Asia and the West, particularly between China and the United States. Second, there is the liberal discourse pertaining to China’s economic development. Third, at the level of individual political life, artistic creation and the pursuit of a different, freer lifestyle are often conducted within a high-pressure social environment. Therefore, the discourses on Chineseness taking root in the art world are not limited to the integration of different cultural traditions but also convey the confusion of contemporary Chinese art about future development directions: Who are we and where will we be?

The young art practitioners’ worries and response are understandable given the facts of the global disruptions that occurred during my fieldwork, leading young Chinese artists to

doubt their own ability, which is to perceive and respond positively to others' understandings towards Chineseness. In other words, they believe with guilt that they no longer belong to a group worth the art world's attention, and being through the post-pandemic violent crimes has exacerbated the trust crisis, causing young artists to lose heart. Therefore, one of my main arguments is, not to mix up the diaspora realities and Chineseness without a second thought, no matter whether in artistic practices or in everyday life. Because it will close the narratives of plural humanistic conditions again, which have been waiting to be read and written. Competing for recognition in the art world can feel like a continuous siege, as it will not become a sustainable way to communicate with others in the world or generate creativity. In the fifth chapter, I will argue that diaspora and Chineseness should be understood separately rather than conflated into the same dimension of living strategies. But it is very difficult to go beyond decentering Chineseness. Undoubtedly, the task of understanding and explaining Chineseness is receiving increasing attention among young artists overseas who use Chinese as a communication language. As for artistic practices in this world, what is worth honestly confronting and telling? I will indicate the questions of "whose Chineseness", or, what kind of agency they embody when performativity and authenticity of identity politics are being challenged.

2.5 On escape: the aesthetics of perceiving lower realities and weighty being

Among the London art practitioners I have encountered, there is a particular group whose behaviour merits deep contemplation. These young individuals, choosing to forgo competition and instead strive to explore new meanings, exist outside the traditional success/failure paradigm of the art worlds. After encountering the conflicting phenomena and hierarchical structures within the art world, they experience difficulty in navigating these complexities. They hesitate to subject themselves and their work to the competitive dynamics of meaning-making. This hesitance carries significant pressure, especially in a zero-sum environment where non-participation is often equated with failure. I aim to discuss the

dialectical nature of this attitude, which is not merely a sensitive retreat but also embodies courage and proactive qualities.

Many young art practitioners express a desire to avoid the competitive pursuit of meaning. Therefore, in the final chapter, I apply the fictional story of an anonymous individual who chooses to withdraw from her journey towards the art world. My focus is not on the act of withdrawal itself but rather on the practitioners' perception of daily conflicts - each hesitation in the myriad to-be-or-not-to-be moments, and the underlying reasons for their sensitivity. German scholar Svenja Flaßpöhler (2017) incorporates the study of individual sensitivity into cultural research, which can help us understand the social conditions prompting an encapsulated urban individual to either engage with or withdraw from societal orders. She notes that individual sensitivity evolves through cultural history, transforming into behavioural norms due to its powerful capabilities, which Norbert Elias describes as the abilities for "affect regulation" (Affektregulierung) and "instinctual inhibition" (Dämpfung der Triebe).

Here I argue that, as a system that embraces and protects sensitivity, also characterized by prioritizing sensitivity, the art world's approach to accepting individual expression is also evolving. Individuals within this system are often sensitive to complex, interwoven issues, which does not only mean they express themselves through what they care about most, but also indicates they'll have to consider others' feelings. Consequently, the identities of the artworks may not be the only measurable condition within the art world. This implies that, ethically, subjectivity in artistic expression needs to have a strong relationship with the work itself. There is also a trend towards courtization in how the art world manages sensitivity. This term of courtization comes from Norbert Elias (2000), who, in *The Civilizing Process*, describes the sensitivity of nobility as stemming from the pressure to distinguish themselves from commoners. I've seen that the art world is also experiencing a similar trend; some sensitivities surpass others, creating a divide akin to that between nobility and commoners. The art world uses selective presentation mechanisms to ensure that both individual expression and the individual are seen and taken good care of. Does an individual leave the

art world because they feel unwilling to cooperate with this courtization and competition mechanism? Where does the fearlessness manifest?

A few years ago, I struggled to fully grasp the thoughts of phenomenological philosophers, perhaps because I found it challenging to comprehend things I couldn't perceive. It wasn't until the arrival of the global pandemic, followed by countries entering militarized states, with military personnel stationed on city thoroughfares, and hospital beds lined up like exam desks in newly constructed facilities – that the world presented itself again in an emergency. I believe in the importance and uniqueness of understanding and documenting everyday experiences, particularly evident in the years of intertwining pandemics and wars, where people live in decline and decay – the lower realities and weighty being. I began revisiting the thinkers of a century ago and suddenly realized that I could slowly grasp the sensations they attempted to convey through language. One incidental discovery was learning that Merleau-Ponty lost his father in World War I, a fate he shared with Camus and Sartre. They experienced the anguish of loss in their youth, and what had previously been incomprehensible phenomenological questions suddenly became approachable and imaginable to me.

In my thesis, I have integrated my experiences from part-time work in restaurant kitchens and grocery stores, describing sensations such as “a gaze fixed at infinity” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964) experienced during relentless 10-hour shifts (some took 14-hour shifts). In London, it seems like a flashback to my original world: everyday life filled with apprehension due to scarcity, the pursuit and performance of power relations among people, and the normalization of loss. It's only when I'm physically and mentally exhausted that I truly appreciate the indispensability of the metaphysical, the uniqueness of phenomenology in the world. The perception and appreciation of lower realities, and making sense of them, correspond to what Rancière (2009) describes as the political potential of aesthetics. This involves moving beyond a singular focus on hierarchical relationships to address and reconcile the opposition between the elite and the democratic classes. Previously, I didn't fully understand what Merleau-Ponty (2004) meant when he said, “*the painters... their aim is never to evoke the object itself, but to create on the canvas a spectacle which is sufficient*”

unto itself... but Mallarmé wrote notoriously little... between sufficient and little...” If one cannot truly delve into the process of the lower realities and the weighty being, I believe no one can genuinely explain the coherence of modernity, how every young heart struggling with the meaning of existence attempts self-understanding but ends up empty-handed.

Although the weighty being is not limited to the material side, it is also a political calling for one to become a graceful citizen. In the contemporary social context of the People’s Republic China, the demands that social development places on individuals are perceived in resistant ways by young individuals. The young generation wants to “run-away” after they fail to enter a cosmopolitan adulthood in a fixed political background. This perception is closely related to the values of education they received during their upbringing. For a young person who has been educated under Maoism ideology, the extreme critique of capitalistic alienation has penetrated deeply into the school curriculum and publication censorship. If a young person has not experienced the most immediate oppression of their right to speak, they will not yearn to transcend such an environment, yearning for the **utopia** of art.

As Sansi (2018: 204) put it, the aesthetic institution of art emerges as a relationship utopia, directly confronting the alienation, separation, reification, and commodification unique to modern capitalism. Art, as a form of resistance to social exclusion, ultimately aims to enable everyone to self-manage, not rely on social welfare, and become active and effective consumers in a privatized society. Sansi believes that relationship-oriented artistic practices ultimately degenerate into tools of neoliberal governmentality, advocating for the dismantling of actual social services by guiding concepts of empowerment, creativity, and cooperation. This also explains why public art fails to serve a public purpose. Rafael Schacter (2014) studied the relationship between street art and the creative city, revealing the failure of “publicness” (2014: 169) when making street art in the creative city. In this exchange, publicness is no longer seen as a sign of criticism or progress; instead, street art has become theme-driven rather than community-driven, satisfying institutions rather than everyday life. Therefore, the situation encountered by young Chinese artists is that they doubt if they have

truly escaped an ideology, at the entrance to the art world of London, only to find that a different kind of competitive pressure still exists.

And there, I wondered, what do philosophers say? According to Lévinas, escape is “world-weariness, the disorder of our time”. From his mid-1930s to our century, has the urgent requirement of understanding escape, being, or to be changed on the level of the relationship between semantics and reality? In the text *On Escape*, Lévinas analyzed the self-sufficiency of the self as a bourgeois concept’s irony. He believed that the conservatism of the bourgeoisie led to its failure to acknowledge the inner split of the self. Lévinas used “He” to refer to capitalism, and what HE possesses becomes capital, carrying endless interests and the insurance of resisting risks. HE confidently enters his own future, taming himself with everything he owns, and his history is the taming of the self. In this sense, self-sufficiency can always be obscured by “internal peace” their pursuit and possession of certainty, and their antagonism against the world (2003: 50). Although the relationship between self-sufficiency and the spirit of the bourgeoisie in this century requires new arguments, the desire to create within a young individual indeed confirms a certain desire for lack of freedom to be chosen and attended to, and this lack of freedom has truly been inherited by everyone from the last century.

In revisiting Lévinas’s text, I am not merely reiterating his words a century later to draw a comparison between the despairing nature of the world and the London art scene. Rather, I aim to understand, through his perspective on escape, how existence itself transcends certainty and uncertainty, completeness and incompleteness, and the incomprehensibility of world order. The world’s incomprehensibility lies in the fact that the individual can neither be fully subsumed into the collective nor remain entirely individual. An autonomous person is one who has conquered their position, yet even then, they feel liable, and compelled to migrate. They feel constantly mobilized. It is their responsibility to complete the game of life. They suffer within it, essentially because no one can interrupt this game. Precisely because they cannot escape the game, they do not wish to relinquish the toys and props in their hands—their uselessness.

Artists are not merely creators; they are also observers and recorders of society. Their works are not solely aesthetic expressions but also reflections and critiques of current social realities. In Merleau-Ponty's *The World of Perception* (2004), he expressed that his empiricism differs entirely from the empiricism of natural science. Following Husserl's thoughts (Merleau-Ponty, 2012), between perception and all kinds of or modes of thoughts, there exist connections that we find difficult to express in logical language. However, these connections have a foundation that we can attempt to understand; it is the courage and ability to not reject a broader and deeper understanding of the world and to express experiences based on that understanding through various languages.

How can we understand their action of escape and the drive to exceed oneself? Why does Lévinas regard this as the core of philosophy? Lévinas argues that the promise of escaping oneself creates a pleasure that needs to be fulfilled. Pleasure is a process of separating from existence. "Pleasure is affectivity, not a form of being" (Lévinas, 2003: 62). It seems that what is rarely discussed in the art world is the notion of getting out of oneself in a direction that has nothing to do with gaining position, resources, or fame. Between the basic structures of human life and reflections on art and literature lies the discussion of the true meaning of self-realization. In the next section, I will explore how the critical role of anthropology (if not its ultimate responsibility) is reflected in the study of these issues.

2.6 Being and becoming: affirmative anthropology and care

In the previous section, I outlined the possible journey of a self with artistic ideals entering and then escaping the art world, and how these processes shape discussions within the field of anthropology. Here, I seek a focal point for these discussions: how should we proceed? For young individuals who have experienced ignorance, aspiration, and escape, how can they understand their place in life and determine what kind of life is truly worth living? To what extent can we detach ourselves from environments driven by the inertia of survival logic? And where, indeed, lies the utopia that art points to, or what Bloch (1986) called "the nearest nearness"?

In Lévinas and his friend and editor Jacques Rolland's (2003) writings, they agreed upon something perfectly, that is, it's not only a matter of getting out, but also of going somewhere... a search for refuge. I think to search means a way to be, a way of becoming. As they said, to elucidate the demand for escape that arises from this way of understanding the verb to-be, and then to clarify the program of philosophical investigation that it announces.

What will the contemporary art worlds become within the global value system? And what answers can anthropology provide? In *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*, David Graeber (2001) redirects anthropology's focus to the globalized market as perceived by neoliberals. Graeber challenges the notion that the global market is a utopia, portraying it instead as the greatest and most singular measuring system in history, placing all worldly matters under a single value standard. Moreover, postmodernism largely emerges as a consequence of this universal market system, leaving all other systems in doubt and confusion. Graeber (2001: 20) argues that anthropology has long recognized that studies of small-scale societies are embedded within a larger value system, suggesting a fundamental rupture between the societies most anthropologists inhabit and those they study.

Immersing myself in London, befriending some artists, and engaging in their lives and creations there served as both a method and perhaps an attempt to comprehend Heidegger's assertion in *Being and Time* that the world precedes one's own existence. Simultaneously, I observe fellow artists of my generation, who throw themselves from one world into another pre-existing one. Particularly, Heidegger's response to the question of pre-existing existence includes a discussion of Kierkegaard's analysis of **fear**: fear unveils the actuality of being in the world but is lost in its ambiguity. In *Concluding unscientific postscript to philosophical fragments*, Kierkegaard¹⁵ makes a statement about return to the subject, referring to the highest task of human existence. He seems to contrast the objective with this subjectivity, asserting that subjectivity is the real issue. For him, the problem lies in **decision-making**, whereas objective issues are created by the subject to avoid the pain of making decisions. He questions, why only a few people become heroes and care about who they are. And how can

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, S. (1992). *Concluding unscientific postscript to philosophical fragments* (H. V. Hong & E. H. Hong, Eds. & Trans.). Princeton University Press. (Original work published 1846.)

we all have access to thinking questions on self and world, in the face of the reality that, we have not established a truly equal world on the physical level? Kierkegaard observed that people were increasingly concerned with incidental matters rather than everyday ones, with significant historical events rather than inner qualities. Heidegger, from an ontological perspective, understands the emotion of dread, facing the unknown threats and real voids of the world, leading to the proposition of “care” as being-in-the-world. How does anthropology understand care? And how do I understand care? For whom do I write? These are the answers I seek throughout my research and writing process.

In the quest for answers, anthropology actively produces its own streams of thought. For instance, the core idea of affirmative anthropology challenges the critical stance in traditional anthropology, shifting towards a more constructive, positive research approach. Anna Tsing (2015) explores survival and creative solutions in the adversity of minor beings, a true humanistic mycology. Tim Ingold (2007) emphasizes creativity in practice and process, advocating for a positive understanding of human interactions with the world. Marilyn Strathern (1991) focuses on the complexity of society and culture, exploring positive ways to understand and describe social phenomena. John Law (2004) advocates for more flexible and inclusive research methods, embracing the complexity and uncertainty of research.

The theoretical frameworks involving cross-identities coexistence and care extend the philosophical reflections. Through different perspectives and methods, they explore themes related to the concepts of care, and introduce the value of care from different parts of the world. Osanloo and Robinson (2024) especially point out that, the philosophies of care should not serve to construct migrants as subjects of compassion and aid. It enriches our understanding of human interactions with the world, although my research scope remains rooted in the logical necessity of Heidegger’s text; he correlates **dread** with **care**, rather than anything else, which provides a crucial annotation for understanding Lévinas’ notion of being in youth (1998) and on escape (2003). The differences among anthropologists’ and sociologists’ views on the art world are no longer the focus. What I pay attention to is their shared unfinished task: if artists disagree with the being in the current art world, how can they make their own ways to conduct work of repair and reshape in the time of care?

3 Methodology overview

3.1 On literary anthropology and migrant writing

If a text is an intervention in an existing dialogue (Skinner, 2002), then what is the writing process itself? What does the act of writing, rather than the process of producing the text, mean for each individual carrying their own history while drifting to another? In Reed-Danahay and Wulff's (2023) recently edited work on migrant writing, anthropologists from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds delve into the social and cultural turbulence triggered by immigration to new environments, as well as the emotional fluctuations experienced by migrants due to geographical and social transitions. This upheaval not only affects the societies and cultural milieus migrants enter but also generates emotional unease and adaptation pressures within the migrants themselves. Moreover, while the original intent of the research was to contribute new perspectives to the anthropology of migration, the focus on textual narratives also explores how writing and literature can deconstruct and reconstruct anthropological research methods.

Primarily, on the socio-cultural level, immigration to new environments may disrupt local social and cultural landscapes, altering existing social structures and cultural customs. At the emotional experiential level, migrants often undergo feelings of unease and maladjustment during geographical and social transitions, constituting a crucial aspect of the migrant experience. Here, the pivotal role of migrant subject narratives in ethnographic texts comes into play. By placing migrant textual narratives at the core of ethnographic writing, and rearranging sentences and paragraphs in a literary manner, individual and collective migrant experiences can be reimagined in a manner that challenges and expands traditional anthropological approaches.

Migrant writing is not merely a thematic focus within anthropology; it also represents an experimental form of ethnographic practice. Writers with lived experiences of migration

often blur the boundaries between autobiography, fiction, and ethnography. This blending creates *hybrid texts* that challenge the conventions of academic writing and invite readers into intimate, affective engagements with the subject matter (Bammer, 1994: 23). Michael Jackson (2013), in *The Wherewithal of Life*, explores how narratives of displacement are central to understanding human existence. Jackson argues that the existential condition of migrants—marked by loss, adaptation, and transformation—mirrors the anthropologist’s quest to interpret the unfamiliar. This parallel has led to a surge in experimental ethnographic texts that adopt literary devices such as fragmented storytelling, polyphonic voices, and non-linear narratives to reflect the disjunctures of migrant life (Jackson, 2013: 102). Furthermore, Fischer (2018) asserts that experimental ethnography benefits from incorporating migrant perspectives, as these voices disrupt hegemonic narratives and offer fresh epistemological insights. Migrant writers, through their positionality, bring forward marginalized stories that challenge dominant academic discourses (Fischer, 2018: 76).

Anthropologists who are themselves migrants occupy a unique vantage point. Their work often reflects a *reflexive turn*, where the ethnographer's personal migration story becomes part of the analytical framework. This reflexivity complicates traditional notions of objectivity and distance in fieldwork. For instance, Aihwa Ong’s (1999) work on transnationalism and neoliberal subjectivities reflects her own experiences navigating multiple cultural contexts. Ong’s scholarship interrogates how power, identity, and citizenship are reconfigured in globalized spaces, drawing from both her academic expertise and personal insights as a transnational scholar. Stoller (2023) in *Wisdom from the Edge* emphasizes that ethnographic wisdom often emerges from marginal or peripheral experiences. Migrant anthropologists, positioned at the edges of dominant cultural narratives, offer critical perspectives that challenge ethnocentric biases and enrich anthropological theory (Stoller, 2023: 145).

For young art practitioners who have left their hometowns and come to London, what constitutes their everyday? Can this everydayness be considered the daily life of migrants? What references or frameworks define such an experience? In the context of living in a foreign land, the everyday is no longer just a series of repetitive tasks but is imbued with new

meanings, becoming key clues to understanding identity and a sense of belonging. Writing while living in a foreign environment is infused with extraordinary significance. At the same time, this kind of writing carries the same impulse shared by all practitioners - the desire to record and express everything. Ultimately, writing about the everyday does not conflict with writing about the accidental. The small details within daily life often contain profound cultural and emotional layers, while accidental events provide tension and shifts that enrich the narrative.

I regard ethnographic writing as a creative process akin to that of artists. I believe that my writing and their artistic creations are both parallel and intersecting. This is profoundly meaningful to me because I have positioned myself within this research from the very beginning – I position myself a single drop among them. This self-insertion not only deepens the research but also turns ethnography into a process of self-exploration and reflection. The possibility of cross-linguistic writing is also an important topic in ethnographic composition. Language is not just a tool for communication; it is a vessel for thought and culture. In multilingual environments, the ability to switch and express ideas across different languages becomes key to understanding cross-cultural experiences. Cross-linguistic writing challenges the boundaries of language and expands the expressive and perceptual dimensions of ethnography. As Goodall (2008, 34) suggests, ethnographic writing should “place the real-life story within a larger social, political, or institutional issue or research question.” This approach not only focuses on individual experiences but also emphasizes the structural factors behind these experiences, revealing the complex connections between personal stories and grand narratives.

Then the question should be asked again, what is evocative storytelling (Goodall, 2008; Hart, 2011; Gullion, 2016). It emphasizes elements such as sensory details and central conflicts to evoke emotional resonance and deep understanding in readers. Sensory details concretize abstract concepts, making readers feel as if they are present within the narrative, while central conflicts drive the story forward, exposing the tensions and dynamic changes within cultural practices. In ethnographic writing, positionality is not just a tool for the researcher’s self-reflection but also a way of understanding and constructing knowledge. By

acknowledging and examining one's own position, researchers can more sensitively capture the complexities of the field, thus creating ethnographic works that are both academically valuable and emotionally compelling.

During the process of rereading and revising the texts, I realized that I lacked an insider's perspective of the city of London, despite having lived there for a year and worked steadily in a restaurant for six months, I never felt that my stay in London was stable, comfortable, or free from self-doubt. Beyond my identity as a research student, I believe this sense of unease also stemmed from some inherent qualities of Chineseness, which has been injected into my perceptions but sometimes I find it difficult to talk about it. Writing, or faithfully recording my perceptions, especially the uneasy part, allows the inherent qualities to be magnified in detail. In this regard, meticulous documentation contributes to the effectiveness of migrant writing, as it enables individuals infused with diverse experiences and influences to communicate through translatable written symbols.

In my research, writing has also been shown to transform into migrant artmaking. Similar to the approach of "read what they write" (Brettell, 2023; Gottlieb, 2024; Beth Rottmann, Reed-Danahay, and Wulff, 2024), the medium I am reading is not confined to text, and their modes of expression are not limited to sensory reception touching upon vision and hearing. Unlike "reading what they write", there is no clear linguistic and experiential barrier between "me" and "them"; I am also one of them. Hence, I can directly experience the migrant creator's immersion in another linguistic culture through a first-person perspective. This experience not only needs to be translated into another text, whether it is a record posted on social media or an interpretation of works submitted to the London art world but also undergoes a process of transformation concerning affection—how to convey one's empathy experiences in a particular location and how to cope with situations where they are not received.

Among the individuals I encounter, young artists often encounter obstacles in transforming experiences. They have to resort to a semantic generalization that is not inherently intended, such as the term "diaspora". On the one hand, this term provides a convenient label for the London art world to categorize artist groups into different communal

factions, enabling some artists to gain attention and exemptions quickly. However, they also have to face a kind of attenuation, namely, the real disparities in individual creative situations. I discuss the drawbacks of this distortion in detail in Chapter Five.

3.2 Artful ethnography and experiments of representation

Anthropology has always had a close relationship with literariness and fictional creation. From Malinowski's diaries (1967; 2004) to Le Guin's science fiction novels (1990; 2016) and Victor Turner's (1982; 2012) comparative symbology thesis on play and theatre, literature emerged even before their field experiences. Ethnographic fiction, as an important literary genre, has long been presented. Some of the works have not only been welcomed by the anthropological community but also attracted a wide readership. The most notable, Le Guin, although not an anthropologist herself, grew up with an anthropological sensitivity. Her works, often classified as science fiction or fantasy, demonstrate the profound influence of anthropological thought on fictional literature. By introducing anthropological perspectives and the concept of another world, these works further blur the boundaries between anthropology and fictional creation, aiding people in imagining and understanding the complexity of the world.

Not only fiction - to my understanding, anthropologists write all forms of texts. Happily, writing remains a topic beyond language barriers, and the discussion on the materiality of writing also leads us to an understanding of ethnography, as a way of participating in the activity of the world (Padian, 2017). It is worth noting a context that, when the discussions from the *Writing Culture* conference were compiled into a book manuscript, anthropology in China was still a young discipline. Twenty years after the Chinese translation and the publication of *Writing Culture* in the PRC, George Marcus went to the country and gave lectures at several universities that had established anthropology departments¹⁶. Discussions

¹⁶ More details about this meeting are recorded in Chinese on:
<https://chinafolklore.org/web/index.php?Page=1&NewsID=5557>

about how anthropology should be written continued to stir up fervent debate, even though it was two decades after, and the word “culture” had undergone a pluralization. This fervour also implicitly raises questions about how we use our native language (including local languages other than Chinese) in a cosmopolitan discipline. In the summer semester of 2015, I audited an anthropology course at a university in southern China, where a senior lecturer not proficient in English confessed that he could not read the original texts and had to rely on translations. He suggested that we should read the originals or one day venture beyond our native language to catch up with the outside world. I was compelled to think then, about what the writing pursuit is for me, and how can I do it with anthropology.

Following *Writing Culture*, new discussions further explored the intersections and synchronizations between anthropology and literature. Michael Herzfeld (1998) delved into literary genres and contexts; Kirin Narayan (2012) explored precision and expressiveness; Wulff (2017) observed writing as a profession in Irish fieldwork; Adam Reed (2011) conducted concrete studies on reading as actions; Michael Taussig (2011) drew the literary aspect out of anthropology on a broader level, and Anand Padian (2017) imagined about writing without boundaries. The convergence of these unique perspectives prompted me to contemplate the roles of literature and anthropology in my own research.

Based on my reading experiences, I believe that the companionship between literature and anthropology should extend to deeper histories and broader territories. Several texts merit comparison and exploration, for instance, the confluence of anthropology and literature finds eloquent expression in Chinese classic literature such as *Great Tang Records on the Western Regions* and the contemporary cinematic oeuvre of Jia Zhangke¹⁷. These works not only serve as intricate canvases reflecting societal and cultural diversity through varied modalities and perspectives but also embody nuanced insights and novel paradigms in contemporary

¹⁷ To unfold a little, *Great Tang Records on the Western Regions* intricately interweaves religious, geographical, and ethnographic elements, endowing it with invaluable resources for fostering cross-cultural exchange while accentuating the fusion of subjective experiential narratives and objective observation characteristic of traversing voyagers. Jia Zhangke’s cinematic repertoire employs a naturalistic narrative style to delineate China’s sociocultural metamorphoses, employing literary devices to facilitate audience comprehension of broader societal phenomena through individuated narratives, thereby resonating with contemporary ethnographic emphasis on narrative stratagems and emotive poignancy.

ethnographic discourse. Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984) dialogic theorization also underscores the harmonious coexistence and mutual engagement of divergent voices, consonant with contemporary ethnography's celebration of cultural multiplicity and dialogical engagement. Svetlana Alexievich's *Second-Hand Time* (2016), an exemplar of oral historiography, meticulously chronicles the quotidian lives and existential musings of ordinary denizens post the dissolution of the Soviet Union, effectively illustrating the symbiotic entwinement of personal memory and collective historiography, thus furnishing a plethora of rich materials and methodological approaches for ethnographic inquiry.

Contemporary anthropological scholarship espouses the kaleidoscopic spectrum of narrative diversity, the visceral authenticity of emotional tenor, and the labyrinthine intricacies of cultural dynamics. Renowned luminaries such as Paul Stoller (1997; 2023) and Ruth Behar (1996) advocate for the artistry inherent in ethnographic inscription, deftly capturing the intricate emotional tapestries and socio-cultural milieus of research subjects through literary narrative devices. These theoretical underpinnings are palpably manifested in the cinematic oeuvre of Jia Zhangke and the literary canvas of Alexievich, efficaciously facilitating audience and reader immersion in divergent cultural and sociopolitical terrains through nuanced narrative tapestries and emotive empathetic resonances. Bakhtin's (1984) dialogic theoretical praxis further amplifies ethnographic representation, heralding a chorus of polyphonic narrative configurations emblematic of cultural multiplicities and complexities, thereby furnishing novel vistas and methodological approaches for anthropological praxis. This interdisciplinary synergistic discourse not only expands the horizons of anthropological inquiry but also furnishes fertile ground for literary innovation, thereby offering a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the variegated tapestry of human experiences and complexities.

The new discussions on writing culture should focus on the practice of writing itself, which holds profound significance in anthropology and the broader humanities. It captures the essence of human experience, connecting diverse cultural narratives and academic discourses. The evolution of discussions on writing culture has covered new perspectives on displacement, identity, and rhythms of life. Narayan (1993), Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and

Larkin (2002) explored the concept of displacement and its impact on new cultural narratives. In particular, Narayan (1993) emphasized how displacement influences the telling and retelling of stories, shaping the structure of cultural memory. In an ever-changing world, writing becomes a means to anchor the self, reclaiming identity, and heritage. In *Rhythms of Writing* (2017), attention to the Irish narrative tradition reveals the profound significance of storytelling in Irish culture. Despite having a rich oral tradition, Irish literature was at the time often published in London, highlighting the transnational journey of the narratives. In this context, writing is both an art and a profession deeply embedded in social and cultural frameworks. Wulff's (2017) examination of the literary world encompasses not only authors but also literary agents, editors, translators, and other professionals who connect Irish literature with global audiences. This network of literary professionals emphasizes the collaborative nature of cultural production and narrative dissemination across borders.

Chinese writer Wang Xiaobo (1997) emphasized writing as a form of resistance and reflection in *The Silent Majority*. It seems just that writing provides a space for expression for those often overlooked, becoming a site for intellectual freedom and critical thinking. But I think writing is also taking. It greedily captures the complexity of human existence, exploring the depths of the human condition through narrative. Writers like Viet Thanh Nguyen, who is thought to practice auto-ethnographical fiction (2018), combine refugee experiences with a fathom of new post-war life. To my understanding, writing feeds a soul which is never at ease even if it's dwelling somewhere safe. Although highlighting the subjectivity and materiality of writing means its potential to reveal broader truths. Writing becomes an intimate act of self-exploration and a powerful tool for social commentary, blending the personal with the worldly.

For me, writing is a step towards understanding the smallest being/existence, akin to a plumber's wrench or a rock star's guitar picks, demanding one to imagine the thoughts of a mortician as they prepare the deceased, to carefully listen to the rhythms of words and weave them into sentences, paragraphs, and chapters that evoke profound resonance. Writing connects sensation with experience, transcending mere storytelling and emotion, creating a

rich tapestry of human life. In anthropology, writing culture is not just about recording ethnographic data. It captures people's lived experiences, their stories, and voices. This practice advocates for more nuanced and empathetic cultural recording methods. Literature, as a bridge between cultures, offers insights into different ways of life and thinking. Whether through auto-ethnography, narrative traditions, or literary criticism, writing culture facilitates deeper interactions with the world. It challenges us to look beyond the surface, explore connections between experiences, and articulate the ineffable aspects of life, enriching our understanding of ourselves and others, and fostering a more nuanced and empathetic perspective on the human condition.

In the fourth chapter of this dissertation, I adopt the form of a play as an ethnographic writing method. This approach aims to recreate the original state of dialogues, preserving the spontaneity, rhythm, and emotional undertones that are often diluted in traditional ethnographic forms. The play format functions like a spotlight, highlighting the essential features of characters and environments, thereby intensifying the focus on their first-person storytelling, key interactions and emotional dynamics. The advantage of this method lies in its ability to present not only the dialogues of three young art students but also the underlying anxieties embedded within their words. The structure of a play—its use of direct speech, staged settings, and dramatic tension—brings forth the rawness of lived experiences, making visible the emotional subtexts that might otherwise remain implicit.

Also in the final chapter, I intertwine the experiences of a curatorial practitioner and myself, merging non-fictional material to create an anonymous character who is about to leave London. The narrative of a young woman's dairy dairies blurs the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, aiming to transcend the limits of autoethnography. By weaving together my own story with those of my interviewees and friends, I immerse all these voices into the life writing of a single individual. This approach not only challenges conventional ethnographic practices but also highlights the interconnectedness of personal and collective narratives, reflecting the fluid and hybrid nature of identity and memory in transnational contexts. By blurring the boundaries between art and science, fiction and reality, personal and

collective narratives, ethnography can continue to offer profound insights into the human condition. This dynamic interplay of form, method, and reflexivity not only enriches anthropological scholarship but also reaffirms the transformative power of storytelling in making sense of our complex world.

Overall, the dramatization experiments in this dissertation might align with the principles of evocative storytelling (Goodall, 2008; Hart, 2011; Gullion, 2016), which emphasize sensory details, central conflicts, and the evocative power of narrative to engage readers on an affective level. The evolution of ethnographic writing reflects broader intellectual and methodological shifts within anthropology. The emergence of artful and creative ethnography, the embrace of slow research, and the deepening of descriptive practices all point to a discipline that is continuously reimagining its modes of representation. Moreover, writing ethnography either in the form of a play or an autobiography allows for a parallelism between my creative process and the artistic practices of the subjects I study. This method holds significant meaning for me because, from the very beginning, I have positioned myself one of my interlocutors within this research. Again, I am one drop within the collective experiences, both distinct and interconnected.

3.3 Reflecting on the ethical questions

Before setting off to London, I thought I was going to “study up”, interviewing art students living in a flat in central London bought by their parents. I did meet several young persons who own properties and never cook a meal, but empirically I don’t think that’s my approach.

As a practice stemming from cultural criticism gained traction among North American anthropologists, “studying-up” was to balance the practice of “studying-down” - examining marginalized communities. It did involve conducting research on middle-class groups or decision-makers. Nader (1972) contended that focusing solely on the powerless was insufficient because the lower strata’s conditions are shaped not only by their subculture but also by the value systems of the upper class. She presented several cases to support her

argument that anthropologists must study-up. Firstly, limiting research to the powerless due to moral outrage is inadequate; secondly, studying up provides a broader perspective on the dynamics of wealth inequality; and lastly, as scholars and engaged citizens, there is a duty to ensure their research connects meaningfully with society.

Twenty-five years later, in 1997, Gusterson revisited Nader's call for anthropologists to return their focus to the cultures of bureaucratic elites. Drawing from his background in atomic science, he supplemented Nader's arguments with his own studies on military institutions, such as a nuclear weapons laboratory in California. He highlighted the discipline's neglect in uncovering the cultural invisibility of dominant groups. Recognizing the challenges posed by participant observation, Gusterson suggested that anthropologists should focus on "global systems and epochal movements" (1997: 116). This approach could develop into polymorphous engagement, where researchers interact with informants across multiple, dispersed sites, including virtual spaces. This method is practical and relevant, especially in discussions about the Anthropocene and contemporary issues like the pandemic, though Gusterson's framework lacks consideration of the researcher's own role.

The literature on studying up highlights several methodological and ethical challenges, such as gaining access to elite subjects, potential biases due to the researcher's social position, and navigating power dynamics. Scholars like Shore and Nugent (2002) argue that studying-up provides critical insights into the opaque workings of institutions that have significant societal impact. Additionally, it addresses imbalances in anthropological research by focusing on those who are often overlooked yet hold considerable power, while "Studying-sideways" extends the scope of anthropological inquiry to include the study of peer groups or individuals within the same social strata as the researcher. This concept emphasizes horizontal rather than vertical power dynamics and is valuable for exploring subcultures, professional groups, and collaborative networks. "Studying-sideways" emerged as a response to the recognition that social relations are not only hierarchical but also networked in complex ways. The literature on studying-sideways underscores the importance of reflexivity, as researchers must critically examine their positionality relative to their subjects. This approach can reveal nuanced understandings of shared cultural practices,

values, and knowledge systems. For example, Holmes and Marcus (2005) discuss the importance of studying contemporary knowledge producers, such as scientists and engineers, to understand how they contribute to societal knowledge and technological advancements.

The integration of these methods underscores the discipline's commitment to a more inclusive and critical perspective, capable of addressing contemporary global complexities. They also stress the importance of adapting research methodologies to suit different contexts and subjects, ensuring that anthropological insights remain relevant and impactful. However, polymorphous engagement maintains the anthropologist's amateur spirit but still limits self-reflection. In the tradition of anthropological fieldwork, a clear temporal and spatial dichotomy emerges from the distinction between "field" and "home". This dichotomy separates the environment where data is collected from the place where it is analyzed. Field notes, taken on-site, are closer to lived experiences and tend to be fragmented, whereas writing done at home is reflective and theoretical. Importantly, as paraphrased by Gupta and Ferguson (1997), these activities are sequential, marking the end of a researcher's journey into the space of the "other" and inevitably raising the question of whether there exists a hierarchy of purity regarding field sites (1997: 113).

It took me some time to come around: must field sites be sufficiently distant or heterogeneous to validate the depth and value of the researcher's journey (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997: 116)? What do I mean by putting myself in a fixed position, do I need a specific voice for the low? How, then, should I understand Chinese artists living in London, particularly those from affluent backgrounds who do not face financial uncertainties regarding their art careers? It seems that questioning the hierarchy of field purity and heterogeneity highlights the significance of the researcher's presence and intersectionality in the field. Narayan (1993) also rejects the polarization of "native" and "non-native" anthropologists. Instead of emphasizing an outsider/insider or observer/observed dichotomy, she proposes viewing anthropologists through the lens of shifting identities within interpenetrating communities and power relations. I identify as Chinese but also benefit from a first-world education system. When I engage with my interlocutors in London, there may not be vast differences in our educational backgrounds, yet other factors may still render me

an outsider. The distinctions separating me as a researcher from my interlocutors are numerous and constantly shifting, influenced by relentless globalization and evolving interpretations of “Chineseness”, particularly in the art world. As Narayan suggests, enacting hybridity in the process of knowing (1993: 680), though her article does not specify the ultimate goal of this “knowing”. In my research, I reconsider my own identification to illustrate the complexity of flexible identities in the field and to create more space for discussing the challenges and unattainable knowledge that “native” anthropologists must confront.

As is discussed in the previous section, ethnographic fiction, a literary technique that blends ethnographic research with narrative storytelling, can vividly illustrate the limitations of both approaches while delving deeper into the complexities of anthropological research. Posing the question “How do we know”, marks the beginning of a long journey. It takes years, even decades, to distill the essence of “whatness” (quiddity) from the “what”—the purpose of the inquiry. Only at this level can we allow the question itself to merge and, in depicting the surface boundaries of that world, uncover the textures of its inner reality as it presents itself externally. In other words, moving in and out of the London art world for a month versus six months offers vastly different experiences. Time is the soul of field research. I must constantly shift perspectives to understand the identity of the artist. How do young people, who have left their native language environments, build their daily lives in London? These everyday experiences are intimately connected to their sensory experiences and creative activities.

The discussion about the identity and intersectionality of field researchers is closely intertwined with considerations of field ethics, authenticity, and the complexities of the anthropological research and writing process. Researchers should not only focus on the cultures and social structures of their research subjects but also reflect on their own identities and their impact on the research process. In anthropological training, we seldom establish, maintain, or even explore friendships that cross social backgrounds, especially economic and intellectual positions. In Chapter Four, I mentioned the limitations of the “study-up” or “study-sideways” approaches in various factual contexts, as I realized that the pursuit of

authenticity and critical reflection on one's own position is not the final goal, instead, what is more important is to genuinely care for each individual life throughout the process of searching for forms of elucidating research ethics. This involves not only a commitment to understanding and respecting the cultural and social contexts of our subjects but also an empathetic engagement that recognizes their humanity. By fostering genuine connections and maintaining a reflective stance on our own positionality, we can ensure that our research contributes meaningfully to the lives of those we study, moving beyond mere critique to a practice of care and solidarity.

3.4 Stages of field research: gathering moment materials and being with people

Overall, I carried a naturalist inclination, adopting a slow research approach as I navigated life and artistic spaces in London, meeting and conversing with my interlocutors along the way. During my first month in the city, I familiarized myself with the cost of living and transportation. Given my financial situation, with a stipend covered my rent, I decided to support my year-long fieldwork in London by working part-time as a kitchen assistant in a restaurant. This decision was driven by three reasons. First, considering the restrictions of my visa, restaurant jobs offered the shortest hiring process and relatively flexible shifts. Second, as our head chef often said, "No one ever starves in a kitchen", which meant that daily meals were taken care of though it's on us to figure out when... Third, and most importantly, I met Ting, an artist who also works as a kitchen assistant.

Perhaps it is only through my naturalist tendencies that I can explain why, so often, I rely on intuition to determine whether to approach someone - or, more often, I simply sit and wait for others to speak to me. This process is mysterious, though not entirely inexplicable. I have already introduced several individuals in the previous sections, and I believe that, in some ways, they all share certain similarities with me. It is remarkably easy for a Chinese student to connect with another Chinese student. This ease, too, can be explained. On one hand, young people studying abroad, having come from a country with a highly centralized education system and a government-regulated internet, almost all use the same social

networking apps that bind each individual to a data system, even to certain financial transactions. No one opts out, because living in the city without them is nearly impossible. On the other, all can be subsumed under the collective identity of “compatriots”, a designation shaped by nationality and ethnicity. This manifests in the implicit access to certain shared information - an unspoken permission to inquire or to assume familiarity. In most cases, the usual barriers to deeper acquaintance are simply bypassed. If I were to peel back my naturalist approach, I would likely find these very patterns beneath it - patterns shaped by the constructed image of the nation-state and the weight of that image in the conversations between the young individuals overseas.

After becoming familiar with a circle of art students, I structured my weeks accordingly. Beyond working three days a week in the kitchen, I met with them almost weekly, each gathering lasting between three and six hours. Our meeting places varied—exhibition spaces, art school classrooms, artist studios, cafés, bars, parks (my favorite), or their homes. I never designed interview questions, but I did envision the activities we might share. Often, we planned something - a visit to a gallery, a film screening, or a home-cooked meal. The inheritance of food culture, after all, is a fortunate thing. In retrospect, the kitchen, the act of preparing and sharing food, became an unintentional yet recurring motif in my fieldwork. It was neither a deliberate choice nor a structured design, but rather a thread woven through our lives, a quiet inscription of care, of the innate human longing to share.

The writing process follows the same rhythm as my fieldwork, rooted in slow research and the quiet accumulation of moments. I often think of it as watching snowfall – the soft and vague snow does not arrive all at once; it descends in scattered flakes, each distinct yet fleeting, dissolving into the landscape as it lands. To capture it, one cannot grasp at the air but must instead stand still, observe, and let the scene unfold. The writings, too, emerges from patience. Rather than constructing interview frameworks, I allow the details of everyday life to settle naturally – kitchen hustles, overheard conversations, street light filters through a bus window, a shared glance across a crowded room... All these fragments, impermanent on their own, begin to take shape over time, forming a quiet yet intricate terrain of lived experience. In this sense, my research is less about extracting definitive answers and more about

witnessing in such a world - allowing moments to gather, accumulate, and eventually crystallize into meaning.

4 A summary of each chapter

In the preceding sections, I have succinctly outlined several key areas of my research, each with relatively clear explanatory contours and theoretical foundations. Naturally, I must also address aspects that extend beyond these established boundaries, encompassing not only the anthropological understanding of facts, but also the broader experience of writing as a process of accruing anthropological knowledge.

In the second chapter, I draw upon my experience working at the Frieze Art Fair to depict the London art world through the lens of an art exhibition. This chapter tackles two main questions: first, before whose eyes does this world unfold; and second, how does this world reveal its inherent differences and *Luò Chā*. The differences refer to the disparity between the art world as a reality and the utopia it gestures towards; *Luò Chā* refers to the subject's perception of these differences within the art world, the awareness of participation in its interactions, and the recognition of its boundaries. Over the past two decades, anthropological observation and writing about the art world have often objectified it as a bounded field of resource exchange. These works have inspired me to use the shifting positions of the writer to restore the shape of these boundaries. As an emerging artist, an ordinary viewer, or someone without the means for resource exchange, what kind of information and people do they encounter as they navigate various scenes within the art world? I aim to capture their gazes and looks as they view this world.

In the third chapter, I set the scene in the restaurant kitchen where my artist friend Ting and I work part-time as commis chef, illustrating how the choreographer Ting balances her day job with her artistic creation. At night, she gains insights into life on the edge through the intense environment of the kitchen, though she must temporarily set aside all thoughts. After work, she transforms her perceptions into dance movements. In her workshops, she guides us

to sense space with our bodies, using them as instruments to explore the world and as means to cleanse and heal the stress-laden mind. Through the interplay of tension and relaxation, I explore what fundamental impulses drive an artist like Ting to live in London and what fuels her continuous journey in the artistic universe. How does she strategically spend her time to become a true subject?

In the fourth chapter, I explore the art world as perceived by Mandarin-speaking artists living and working in London, using the form of a play. These artists, who gather outside art schools, engage in daily conversations about their realities. Using three artists working in different media as examples, I discuss the relationship between the art world and the artists' envisioned art world. How do they immerse themselves in it, and why do they leave it? The script format allows me to capture the dialogue between subjects more directly, giving each character ample space to express their views on the art world, the real bottlenecks in their creations, and their confusion about identity politics.

For someone coming from outside London, the conditions required for being in London, while complex, reveal a certain consistency. Thus, in the fifth chapter, I will demonstrate some of the shared traits of the subjects as being overseas Chinese in London. The challenge in this chapter lies in presenting the complexity of these commonalities, where I aim to discover when and how the understandings among persons disconnect. Facing this intricate complexity, I discuss the inaccuracy and inadequacy of using “diaspora” to summarize the creative works of bilingual Chinese-English artists and their living situations in London. The uncritical use of terms like “diaspora” in the art world can exert pressure and cause harm to the creative subjects and others.

In the sixth chapter, I continue delving into fictional writing to explore the experiences of those who wish to become artists but cannot. Some serve in the art world, for artists; and audiences as curators; some have little knowledge of art and are merely curious about distant realms, while others briefly step into London and then leave. All are fictionalized into a nameless “she”, as my entire study is for them. In this final chapter, I revisit my pre-London life, finding narratives to bridge the gap between people like myself and people I met in

London. Through fictional writing, I hope to touch upon what it means to be creative and truthful as a human being in this shared world.

Chapter 2 The London Artworlds: Luò Chā, differences and repetition

Introduction

This chapter aims to depict the metaphysics of the art scenes frequented by nearly everyone in London's art world and to explore how these scenes are perceived. It seeks to outline the fundamental characteristics of resource circulation within London's art sphere and the gap between these practices and the transcendence that art aspires to achieve. My research began with the many contradictory impressions that the art world left on me. My first part-time job in London involved handing out entry bracelets outside the Frieze Art Fair, considered the most influential art event of the year. Outside the prominent art tents, I met students from art colleges, while inside, I learned that surrealism was making a comeback, whether as a trend in collections or an academic term. Through participating in art school courses, I discovered how educational institutions play a crucial role in resource exchange, mediating between professional art training and supplying a limited labour force to the art world. I also engaged with a non-professional audience, discussing the essence of art and what it means to envision timeless creations.

1 A/B/C

I was obliviously playing a video game when I received the Frieze interview email. I checked the mailbox and learned that the interviewer's name was T. There was also a link to the online interview. On the day of the appointment, I clicked on the little purple icon of the meeting software, brushed my hair, and fudged the background into a white mist in order to hide the drying rack full of socks hanging behind me. Waiting for T to appear on my screen.

Here she was, with short hair, behind her was a wooden wall-mounted bookshelf, the spines of books tilted casually, creating a harmonious asymmetry with her serious features. She had deep blue eyes, fine lip lines, and blonde hair that clung to her scalp like a stable mohair hat. "Why did you apply for this job?" was her first question.

I applied for a position as a sculpture security guard, and my first strategy was to be truthful, but I put on an attitude of modesty: “I’m a student doing a research about the art worlds in London, so wanted to be involved in Frieze, the most influential art market, to see how people work here.” - to which she had no response. Seeing this, I started to vary my words deftly and tried to impress her with a sly stance, grinning to an exaggerated level: “The public sculpture area is a great place to reach out, as it’s open to the public, and it’s great for non-art audience who just want to see art.” Finally, to prove that I was physically qualified, I put in one last effort, “I’ve worked in security teams at a couple of exhibitions before, and I’ll have no difficulty standing outside for ten hours or so.” I laughed dryly.

The interview lasted less than five minutes and resulted in a no-go. I even wondered if I’d had too much gum revealed while smiling.

After almost a month, on a Sunday morning, I got another email from T. It turned out that Frieze had urgently added a new Covid-checker position and asked if I would like to work there for two days. Of course I would. For £11.50 per hour and a free ticket to the art fair. And so, it was that one Tuesday morning I got on the bus through the morning mist, got off at Baker Street and walked into Regent’s Park from Chester Road to get my name tag.

It had a “B” on it.

Almost heartily, and naturally, at that moment I developed a category sense of role: who are A and who are C?

There on the lawn, I saw the actual sculpture security guards. Two strong guys in visibility vests. The squirrels didn’t go near the sculptures, instead, they looked away from the thing titled *Quantum Transfer*, as if it were a silicon-based plant that had been hit by cosmic rays. I understood through the squirrels’ reaction that the function of the security guard is to deter visitors from climbing (actually, the sign on the lawn has already been written), and that my strategies in the interview were useless by no means. Standing was also a hard errand, and you could do a little stretching if the weather was nice, if it was raining, there were no umbrellas.

Daylight precipitated faintly from between the clouds, and the morning dew, guided by gravity, dragged a trail of light shade of marks across the surface of the sculpture. Regent’s

Park looked dark and grey at that moment. The most conspicuous was a collection of giant white tents, varying in lengths and width, which were densely clustered rather than arranged horizontally and vertically. The pages of the roof of the large tents were in high standard water-proof quality, and the facades were white, square steel panels, put together piece by piece in a sturdy and beautiful way. These roofed containers had hardly a window. I took a long look around outside without catching a glimpse of what an art bazaar might look like - only the rumble of generators, pumps, and pumping machines at work. Vehicles carrying those machines were parked early at the corners of the bazaar. Pipes protruded from them, connected to the tents to provide heat and drain wastes for the art tents.

As I walked around the tent, a tall guy with a large head of silvery curly hair came up to me, the face all but buried in his hair, unreadable. He gave me a cold look at my name tag and asked me how to get to the bank (I missed the word which I later found out was Deutsche Bank), and I said that I had just gotten here too, so why don't I ask the guy over there in the bright vest - we walked over and asked him, and he didn't know. His name tag said C.

The guy finally stuck his face out, a little exasperated, maybe towards the C guy or towards me, "Are you kidding me? It's VIP day, do you know how long I've been looking? My god, how can you hold me up? I can't believe this. The entrance to this bank is important, it's not the same thing as the regular access to Frieze!" Me as B and that guy with the C tag looked at each other and bristled, unable to do anything. Later, the VIP guy made a huffy phone call and left us, heading for the main entrance to the tent.

Then I found out C is a construction worker who looks after the construction outside the tent, including the portable toilets.

2 One thousand hands

My task was simple, ask visitors for a COVID-19 negative test result, or proof of two vaccinations, and then put a bracelet on them. Over the course of the morning, I touched and laced hundreds of hands, hundreds of wrists, some hairy, some slippery, some incredibly thin, some who couldn't wear the bracelets at all, some who had cuts and wounds, some who

didn't want to be touched at all, some who preferred to be strangled a bit, and some who take off their jewellery first and requested that the bracelets should be put closer to their elbow and covered by the sleeve. Most of the hands reeked of similar scents.

Repeated light work is fun, although after performing hundreds of touches, I became hungry. Finally it was time for a break so I could take a small red ticket to collect my lunch, a ticket I was familiar with, as a child this was the paper ticket used to take a shower in the public bathrooms, in my hometown they were called "Fei" (with traditional literal meaning: windows or casements). I guess it also has a metaphoric meaning of a doorway, something to be surrendered at an entrance. We all dined alone not only because we didn't know each other yet but also because we only had a 20-minute break. When I arrived at a small tented restaurant, my stomach growled when I saw hot food and French fries inside, so I took out my lunch ticket, and the person who was preparing our food turned around and went to the back kitchen to take out a paper bag. I was a B, so I had a B lunch, which is a sandwich, a bag of chips, a chocolate bar, and a diet Coke. Classic British lunch. The sandwich was a loaf of bread cut in half with a slice of cold cheese in it, a bit of tomato if you were a vegetarian, and a thin slice of lunch meat if you were a meat eater. Not bad, I thought to myself. Finished eating and went to the section of portable toilets that C was looking after. He hadn't had his lunch yet. I opened the boltless door of one of the toilets – a strong smell of overnight beer.

It was much less crowded in the afternoon, so I chatted with a few of my coworkers and found out that they were all art school students who came to work part-time because they couldn't afford tickets to Frieze, and some thought working here would make their resumes look better. Emma said, "Can you recognize any of the celebrities who are here today?" I didn't recognize any of them, I said. Kaka came over and spat out: "Actually, what's the point of having us check their covid tests, the people who come to Frieze are GOOD PEOPLE, the ones who get vaccinated are GOOD PEOPLE." Her curly hair was bouncing sarcastically on her forehead before inclining herself to the cashier and whispering in amazement: "See, that guy's pink jacket is sooooo nice!"

I didn't have time to go in the tent on the first day, there were too many people so I couldn't leave my job. Kaka is right too, but what exactly is our job? Is it really just to act as

a temporary doorway to filter some of the people out? Do we really have to keep out people who haven't been vaccinated? We're the messengers, the ones who stamp the passes, that's our supreme power - like Barnabas in Kafka's Castle.

3 Autumn

The art tents are not inaccessible. The difference of the accessibilities is not that **A** can go inside the tent to use the restroom while **B** and **C** can only use the portable toilets, in fact, we **could** go in there only if we had the time. But we don't have the time.

The fallen leaves on the walkway, layer by layer, are being rolled up by the cleaning trucks, making reluctant noises, joggers wearing headphones run past the cleaning trucks. My vision is no longer coherent, while my sense of hearing is active again, and my nostrils are filled with the scent of the little bugs that sing in the nighttime - what a great morning, isn't that how an artist looks at the world? If we can use similar perceptions and receive the hints of autumn on the same morning, why can't we be equidistant from art?

At night, walking out of Regent's Park, I passed the rehearsal rooms of the Royal College of Music, the classrooms lit so brightly that I felt the night turns darker. People playing inside the building couldn't see or hear outside – they had no idea someone was watching them. The partition between me and them is translucent, and if sight is only a marker, then I am nonexistent to them, emptiness. In the room, a man was playing the violin, and I moved forward, and in another adjoining room, a man was also playing the violin, against a thin wall, and one room further on, a man practicing his singing, and they couldn't see each other. I saw them all, the five strings and little tadpoles on their notebooks.

It turned darker in the night. I realized the distance I felt was invisible. If receptivity and possibilities for practicing the core of human arts are not the core of human arts, what are..... I recalled Paul Celan, and he said; "I see no difference, between a handshake and a poem. How should the word *Luò Chā* (落差) be translated into English? The single-syllable words *Luo* (meaning fallout) and *Cha* (meaning difference) are not synonymous lexemes, but rather a movement and a stillness, a cause and an effect, forming a vocabulary of the nature

of a noun - the gap of constant ageing, the uncontrollable fall. No one wants to face the falling gap, if one wants to move from chaos to clarity and lucidity, it cannot. If one says they feel *Luò Chā*, there might also be a dual tone of self-pity and unfairness. *Luò Chā* is a waterfall, or cascade, and those who are undergoing it are swimming in where the waterfall rushes into a pool of water.

4 Trips to art schools

I spent a year 2021-2022 touring and asking young art students questions about the art worlds in London, who consider themselves unmerged, art practitioners. I tried to understand what it is about this world that draws people in and what pushes them away. What makes things the way they are?

Based on my experiences at Frieze art market, I perceived some sides of the resource-based qualities of the art world, which are, the circulations of material and human resources under certain rules. Almost like the “mobilizing resources” depicted by Becker in the 1980s, the trading and circulation of material and human resources in the London art world reproduce the rules of bureaucratic capital, with increasing disparities and institutionalized duplications. Start from art schools’ tuition fees - students receive technical training - some students become artists, some become support staff for art-related work - artists and professionals receive resources and promotion in art institutions - more capital is invested in the art market - until the tail of this greedy snake is bitten by its head - capital serves the surviving institutions and artists in the next stage of resource transformation.

At College C, a fine art student who had just graduated about six months before took me with her to a textile workshop to “steal” cotton threads discarded by the artist students. She said that the price of these materials is almost triple outside her school. She picked up three rolls and said that it was a pity to throw away so many balls of thread, with those, she could make many works. In the same building, the machines in the woodwork workshop, the welding workshop, and the printing and dyeing workshop, are beyond expensive - for example, the large industrial textile machine DUBIED, which looks like a particle collider

model (and clearly needs special instruction to operate), of which there are no more than ten in England. The workshops all require swipe cards to enter in order to block access to the resource base by uninitiated people from outside the school.

On the same day, an MFA art student on campus invited me to join one of their curatorial classes. It happened to be the day of the undergraduate exhibition, most of the works were already in place. Young students came in and out of the exhibition hall with coffee cups and Apple computers, unkempt and busy like interns in a big company. The substitute teacher, S, with grey hair, stood between us in her sky-blue romper.

“Okay, what do you guys see wrong with the set-up here?” She looked around the room and then gave us the question, her tone simple and direct. We looked at each other with no idea. One of the students broke the silence: “The sand on the floor... it can easily be stepped on by the viewer’s feet and carried over into the middle of the other pieces.”

“Very good”, said S. “That’s the most obvious. You need to give the work a boundary, to stand out where it should stand out, not that it has to be a stand or flat on the wall and floor, but to stand out while reflecting a reason. So look at this installation next to it, the water in the container, what do you guys think is wrong with that?”

“It’s an energized device, connected to a plug, and the rows of wires would be a visual problem”, said one of the students.

“No”, S shook her head, “The most important, and fundamental, aspect of fabrication is safety - water conducts electricity. You have to provide an insulated environment to design the placement of the installation. We’re not here today to evaluate the work, we’re looking at it purely from a viewer and curatorial standpoint.” Her seriousness at once reduces this art gallery to an architectural space, a place where the artist creates the space within it and ultimately requires the arrival and acceptance of the audience.

Using the MFA program at Collage C as an example, the aforementioned issues remind us that the training artists receive in London encompasses not only the creation of a piece of work but also how it is presented, including the arrangement of the exhibition space, and the importance of the exhibition’s communication with the public. Art students in the MFA program must meet a quantified objective: each student is required to complete at least one

piece of work and present it in the graduation exhibition. The graduation exhibition typically uses school spaces as media resources, providing art students with an opportunity to showcase their work to the public. Fine arts and curatorial programs within the school often collaborate, or at least offer joint courses, where students from both disciplines practice embedding a piece of work into an exhibition environment within the collaborative setting provided by the school. They must reach a consensus on conceptual levels and meet certain industry standards on practical levels. As S emphasizes in class, the priority is safety standards, followed by the expression of the work. This order reflects the teaching structure and objectives of the academic institution, with the ultimate goal of supplying as many professionals as possible to the art industry.

While these measures seem reasonable, the fact that the number of enrolled students greatly exceeds the number of professional opportunities available in the art industry after graduation necessitates a certain openness in the professional training provided by the school. This openness is designed to reduce the probability of failure due to professional limitations that could prevent students from securing career opportunities. For instance, College C offers priority internship opportunities in the exhibition departments of certain public institutions in London during the second year of the MFA program, available to both fine arts and curatorial students. When art school graduates get an internship in art institutions, they are first given a calendar with a charter of the annual work for the next two years. They are then assigned to a team, for example, the curatorial research department, and the role is to assist the curators in communicating with artists, funders and institutions, including but not limited to collecting works, commissioning artists, and collaborating on exhibitions. In addition to this, an intern is required to maintain the organization's own repository of resources - a database of website entries, information about the collection of works, and incoming and outgoing mail, to name a few. According to the friend who passed the internship interview over the other 30 interviewees, all the work he did was "meaningless". They certainly can have anyone including artificial intelligence doing them, so they keep him for two months just because they have a connection with the school, not because they need another person sharing their limited positions. Then the graduate student left the institution when their contract expires.

It makes me wonder, in the institution which assigned the intern to do the non-creative job, where originality seems to be replaced by organizational collaboration, how is the institutionalization any different from that elsewhere? Or, if we think in another way, why creativity should be a different kind of labour?

Becker (1976; 1982) was influenced by Blumer's (1969) symbolic idea of "joint action", and it reveals that it was only after writing art worlds that he became a sociologist. In his discussion of the division of labour, Becker uses the example of calligraphers and poets in Japan. The distinction between poets and calligraphers is less obvious at the level of the professional than it is in the U.S. Talent and giftedness, traditionally identified as having special rights, have been defined and categorized as core activities of the arts as ideas have changed and the nature of the agreements between the parties has evolved. This defining relationship itself provokes an exploration of the existential value of authorship and authenticity. Of course, the fame of the work/author directly accomplishes a series of transactions and reciprocal relationships, which have many connections to the equilibrium of the division of social capital¹⁸.

From Becker's re-emphasis on convention (1982), it is almost difficult to see the London art world today, 40 years later, as a different world; they are very much the same. Or rather, there is not much innovation. At the level of the study of the mobilization of human resources, Becker accurately judges that the ability of art world participants to replace each other and also accomplish tasks defines the boundaries of an art world. However, in discussing the need for artists to work through some sort of day job in order to feed their artistic ideals, my research goes beyond Becker's case with new particularities, and new dilemmas i.e., what does the daily life of the new immigrant generation look like? What new facts of life do they possess as part of the London art world? The cases Becker cites take place in economic environments where incomes are relatively able to cover living expenses, as well as in non-immigrant groups. I will delve more into this gap in the next chapter, on

¹⁸ In my field research, the high tuition fees at the London art schools were almost unaffordable for artists from low income backgrounds, and 'affordability' became a threshold for admission, so that many Chinese artists screened possessed objective (and sizable) family capital, at the expense of a certain diversity of backgrounds.

how migrant people as Londoners in this post-pandemic timeframe, through repetitive and physically demanding low-paid work, find gaps between the long days to create.

5 What is so surreal about surrealism?

Back to the time I got to work at Frieze, the tickets had been sold out the other day. There was a girl who hadn't been vaccinated, nor been tested, and didn't even understand what Frieze was. She just wanted to go in and buy a painting book, but now she had to go through me first. I asked her: Why would you want to go in and buy something like that, the publication could be expensive, and people usually get them free. She answered with puzzlement, she loves paintings.

I asked her, do you like painting? I thought she did paintings herself.

No, she said, I like paintings, but I don't paint.

Just paintings, not the act of painting, made her like it and come here alone. She just wanted a book, published by an artist, and sincerely wanted to support her favourite paintings. "I'll go in and buy it for you!" I inexplicably got excited and ventured to say but then with a little regret. What if I don't have enough time to get inside and back within the 20-minute break? What if the publication is too expensive and I don't have enough money? But she needed me, I had to help her. So I took off my fluorescent name tag, handed it to her, and wriggled into the tent, no longer a Barnabas, but a person with a mission. Like a fireman, soaring with adrenaline, I rush into the bathhouse-like heat.

The scattered crowd was looking and walking around, their eyes were busy, not only looking at the artworks but also peering at each other's shoes or bags. All I knew was that I'm a B with my name tag off, and there was one place I needed to go, a showroom that sells the publication - and not only did I need to find it quickly, but I also needed to make it back in time for my shift, or else my leader, a man with an A-tag, will search for me, and that gaze scares me.

A gallery between the tents, with many people wedged in, surrounded the artist. I saw the artist - a fairy in a green dress. Champagne bobbed around in people's hands, and I

burrowed in and found the stack of books. A very thick book with mint green undertones, and thankfully a large stack. Gotta hurry.

How much, I asked, and the green-skirted fairy smiled and said, I don't know. Shocked. I realized that the fairy's face was so good-looking as if had used some kind of loose powder that to make it glow. Later I couldn't remember that good-looking face, after all, there were too many such faces in the tent, and I just wanted to know how much the album cost. A black-clad waiter approached at some point, smiling but not intending to meet my eyes. He held up a black flipchart: £63 a copy, what's your card number?

I took out the Monzo card from my pocket, which, in the champagne-colored light, kind of looked like a pizza discount ad, and she took it kindly, scribbling down the account code.

Okay? Okay.

I clipped the book and dashed out the door, skimming from gallery to gallery at a breakneck pace, words like floating dust passing through my ears, "surrealism", "revival", "email you", "35,000".

But that girl, is she still waiting for me outside? Will she not be able to wait and just leave?

She was still there, with my name tag on her hand. That sceptical-hearted little citizen was relieved to be no longer possessed. I handed her the book, which I never opened, solemnly convinced that it contained the best works she would love.

That girl I met at Frieze and I became friends, and we started to go to exhibitions together after I finished the job. I learned that she had just graduated with a master's degree and was working as a data clerk at a financial firm. We exchanged basic information at a ramen restaurant, including age, study experience, and place of birth in China. She was born in a neighbouring province to my hometown, and we are only a year apart. One weekend we went back to the Whitechapel Art Gallery. An exhibition of documents had as its promotional cover a photograph of a woman in a white dress and among pigeons in Trafalgar Square, with no face, no hair or features, instead a bouquet of flowers. Images like this captivated us, the girl and me. We stood for a long time. Until I questioned surrealism, what kind of reality is

this that two female artists who created their work a hundred years ago are suddenly cared for and then labelled surreal and pricey at frieze shows?

Why? She wondered.

Why what?

Why are Whitechapel and Frieze reintroducing “surrealism”?

Perhaps it’s the irony of the art world itself, which doesn’t know how it differs from the *wordly* world, I say with a bit of mockery. However, if we really want to pursue the origins of this coincidence, we can once again be reminded of some of the attributes and characteristics of the contemporary art world. Institutions like Whitechapel have been working on exhibitions for mid-2021 at least since before the outbreak (which I infer from the annual work plans of friends working in the curatorial teams of public art institutions in London), perhaps even earlier, and there must be something to be said for the frieze’s exhibition and buyer-collecting ethos - the world’s collaborative model. In this established and relatively stable system of collaboration, according to Becker (1982), a subset of more experienced people work together on a form of representation. A group of more knowledgeable people communicates ideas and information about a manifestation, and those in the community take note of these ideas and thus begin to pay attention to the corresponding phenomena and manifestations.

But what does it take to know who first struck that first ringing finger, that first proclamation, and what was the original purpose - a hundred years ago, we thought it was Breton, and their allies and or rival elites (Breton and Bataille were said to have been embarrassed for decades about surreal camps), the they were always able to make enough noise that it was transcribed and printed on paper and made its way into the hands of practitioners and more advanced students. Becker doesn’t give a clear answer as to who was the first to eat tomatoes, and how judgments of style and form began to propagate (perhaps meritocracy was one of the contributing factors), but rather attributes the basis of the collaborative model, and the shaping of the boundaries of the art world, to convention. The standardization of simple forms, according to David K Lewis (2001), is something that

everyone does without question. But what is the relationship between conventions and institutions in the art world? Do people really expect conventions to be broken?

We stared at a flyer marked “3” in the literature room. A senior approached us and explained that the unit was similar to a penny. Only the currency symbol has evolved. I realized that the evolution of conventions was still going on, and that London, where I was, and New York, where Becker was, were just different parts of the same world. So are the events experienced in this art world also the fulfillment of the interpretations summarized by previous generations? As observers of social organization and facts, readers and viewers of many works, what do we hope to break through? To make any new moves in the network of events?

The only thresholds to enter this art world seem to be tuition, visa fees, transportation and rent. I guess some guard this world and don't seem to care at all about the content of the art, as long as they keep their place, swimming as hard as they can to stay still. I've been to several artist studios funded by the Art Council, some open once a year, with spaces that look like pristine white prisons, each equipped with electronic access cards and rented for no less than £300 a month. An immigrant artist goes to insiders for references to get a GLOBAL TALENT VISA that allows him to stay in the UK for five years, he attends openings all over the place, and there are secret birthday parties for gallery owners. Art classes are equally uninspiring, with everyone holding a Deleuze and reading it as if to memorize the standard answers for an exam. The class I attended taught us how to write CVs and artist statements. Four out of ten people quoted Deleuze, two Roland Barthes, one Bruno Latour, and theories of *affect*. A crash course in contemporary metaphysics, except the tuition is over £ 30,000 a year. When artwork becomes something they do through unquestioned regular behaviour, the art world becomes a socially organized fact that no longer has an air of mystery. The results driven by those facts tend to present themselves more nakedly - the artist's anxiety over continued access to resources.

Is this how we have been led by art in this world? Should we trust people who come to tell us about the art worlds? Should we understand them first? Did art, when it came down to

the world, ask us to understand itself? Why, then, should the path to the art, whose meaning we are uncertain of, be certain?

6 Differences and repetition

It was winter in London. The lime trees hadn't leafed out yet and it was 8 degrees. That day we took the 328 bus to Chelsea. "To Chelsea - the end of the world." It says so on the bus. In the end of the world, the temperature still exists, scientists say. Does change still exist?

The Bacon Show is at the Royal Academy, RA for short, Green Park Station, near Buckingham Palace. Buckingham, the crunchy sound of garlic being grilled, is actually the name of a palace. The ground is full of people coming out for lunch, holding all kinds of sandwiches. To get to the RA Palace, you have to walk through these people, it is quite hot inside the RA Palace, the people wearing down jackets walked through the subway station and went in huffing and puffing, the title of this exhibition is *Man and Beast*, we walked from the cold air into the hot air, couldn't help blowing our noses.

The lights were quite dim, and the ceiling was so high that one could not reach it by jumping on the shoulders of another. So dark, yet you could see the gold frames sticking out. The lighting was telling. The symbols in the paintings were blurred, Bacon's creations: little monkeys, a few white teeth, and a dark, complex silence. Socks a little wet after walking through this exhibit, the girl said, seeing *the Pope* make her hair stand on end. Thousands of viewers make up the coalition of living people who judge and consume art, and some of them decide what Bacon leaves us.

"But art is still precious to me." The girl said suddenly.

"My job, almost always, is to service bankers, big companies, even art galleries, feeding AI with data. I still choose to do such work, after all, it pays well, seeing as I live near the best parks in London and beautiful buildings. I seek such a material life. And I don't want to go back to my home country, not only the materials can't satisfy me, but those social norms ... frustrating enough ... But it's not much better here. Coworkers are hard to get close

to. The AI tools we use, they're so omnipotent, and they scare me! And my tedious job has been fueling this trend. They're sucking up a lot of images now, like visual tracking, which is spying on what people are looking at and then making decisions for us, and in the future they'll be replacing the eyes of designers, architects, and even painters. I can't believe this day is coming so soon. Maybe it's out of guilt, or maybe it's compensation, so whenever I'm off work, I want to go to an art museum, hike in the woods, or go to a concert. Trying to absorb some more of the art in its most original form before my work destroys it. I went to buy picture books because I wanted to provide even a tiny bit of help to the people who actually create art." At that, she smiled a little embarrassed.

I understood her: where we grew up, art was not a necessity, and no one gave art the legitimacy to be a necessity; where no one encouraged autonomy, art symbolized absolute freedom or nothing; where scholars called the pre-individualistic society (Fromm, 1941). In other words, it remains supremely sublime in the hearts of a segment of the population, mainly because no one takes it seriously in a social context. The girl in the long black dress has bright eyes between the black fringe of hair with bangs and the mask.

In the essay, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, Danto describes the art he saw at the Whitney Biennial in New York in six words: "immerse, bombastic, puerile, portentous, shallow and brash" (1986: xxviii). Then he thought to himself, this must be a fragment of history gone wrong. Art can't be like this! Then what was the normal track he was looking forward to? Is there really a just and unbiased history of art? Why must art need its own history? In Danto's ideal, the key to art's own history is the end of the freedom that defines art. Let art be free. He has been trying to answer the question of what kind of internal connection exists between the realism of traditional art history and the self-consciousness of modern art history, leading art to itself. Danto believes that historical location is an important dimension in effectively categorizing and judging the homogeneity of artworks, and that an understanding of the limits of historical possibilities is therefore the key to discerning and perpetuating a true art history. What are the limits of true history, however, Danto does not say. He leaves a decent gap in the history of the art world, which has since broken free from various "isms".

In what seems to be a political context, art is widely believed to have the quality of **perceiving danger** (again, art seems to signify receptivity). It is also because of politics that art is expected to act. However, after “Auschwitz”, the role of poetry, of art, has been re-examined, and Danto says that Auden’s poems give us a reflexive warning that “poetry makes nothing happen”, and that, in a political context of oppression that is both specific and universal, nothing can happen. and universally oppressive political environment, where nothing happens can be seen as dangerous. And it is precisely because of this quality of **inaction**, but the ability to perceive and warn of danger, that art relates to politics. But what about now? Art emphasizes danger, warns loudly about it, calls for change, but its gestures of resistance seem docile. What is really happening in the world? What is true understanding? Is there a trust that transgresses understanding? And why do we care? Danto argues that deep interpreters always look past the work of art to something else (1986: 45). What the something else of understanding art consists of, he does not answer. But we can at least infer that it must include the artist’s life in the world, and the people around them, everyone.

We walked out of the gallery and down to the river. In the afterglow of the setting sun, ducks and seagulls were shaking their shiny feathers, unconcerned with our conversation as they continued to lick the water as brightly as the skin of a waxed apple. I told the girl that I was not only bored with the resource-based art worlds, but at the same time, I’m angered and saddened by the fact that art people were no longer happy.

From one world to another, the search for the piece of truth, although hidden at the bottom of each lie, and ideals in art is accompanied by a departure from certain social realities that are both loved and hated, familiarized and unfamiliarized, and gradually, the art we are pursuing becomes blurred. Many people have left art, or art has left us. What does it mean that artists, who once suffered from marginalization, have achieved such belated recognition today? The disappearance of the borders of the art world (seemingly) and its overwhelming move to actively collect the marginalized does not mean that the war of the individual is over, the war of the individual has become lonelier, an endless battle, but what exactly to resist, what to fight for, and whether or not one is qualified. Questioning and a sense of futility often gripped them.

The girl looked at the kids playing stone skipping by the river and asked me, doesn't fighting make people tired?

Of course. Fighting means discord. The ideal is beautiful, says Hegel, because of the unity of the subject. The tragic protagonist's kind of demeanour remains conciliatory even when he's on the guillotine. To fight is to divide, though, and since the art world, like the rest of the world, continues to provide unsettling and even destructive circumstances, the division of the self becomes inevitable.

The girl said, I too long for harmony. At the office, a coworker never talks to me and I don't even know what I had done. I get into the habit of going to classical music on Friday nights. There are old people around and they are all very peaceful.

You like classical music?

She hesitated. Not always. Like when we listen to music and read books and people ask us what you like to listen to or what books we like, we're always quick to name a second favourite genre. Always a safe second favourite. Often the truest things are unwilling, or afraid, to show. One of my favourite rock bands in Japan, the main act committed suicide a few years ago. Is the art world like that? It doesn't really have a first favourite. So it says what everyone else says. The people who work in it have lost the urge to express their first favourite. It has no reality, just repetition.

Summary

A non-art-working audience member says that such an art world makes her feel unreal, and very repetitive. Since I work outside the art fair but have had similar perceptions, I tentatively consider this feeling to be understandable.

In this chapter, I have presented how this art world creates a sense of "unreal" for the ordinary viewer and how it fails to break the cycle of "repetition", offering neither joy nor solace. Take the Frieze Art Fair in London as an example. As a commercial environment, its relationship with the general audience has the characteristics of a service-consumer relationship. Both viewers and professionals are able to purchase artworks there. From my

position at the ticket checkpoint, I observed that when someone steps into the art fair, they immediately encounter various roles and their respective gatekeepers. As an operational system, it caters only to a select few participants. I failed the interview for the position of guarding sculptures because the role did not expect someone like me. It had its own standards, which were not disclosed, and could only be inferred from failure. The requirements for guarding outdoor sculptures involve a certain physical presence that conveys authority, reminding viewers that sculptures, as objects, have a subordinate nature in public spaces: you can watch, but you cannot climb.

We can infer that the sense of “unreal” described by the girl partly stems from this ambiguous nature that is both public and non-public, open and exclusionary. Such ambiguity refuses direct understanding, failing to fully accept human perception as a unique pathway, thus setting limitations for its services to the public. In art environments outside the fair, such as large public galleries that rotate exhibitions quarterly, similar dynamics are at play. These institutions offer access to art perception through terms like “surrealism” or “postcolonialism”, which are intended to educate or host the public but often result in biased and late interpretations from specific perspectives.

Another part of the sense of “unreal” described by the girl can be captured by the Chinese word “Luò Chā” (落差). In Chinese, it includes two meanings: disparity and the feeling of facing that disparity. “Real” as a quality of art is hard to define, and so is “unreal”. However, the “unreal” sides the viewer feels are specific – she has perceived a gap and used “unreal” to describe her feelings when facing it. She means that it was not what she expected the world to be like, indicating she is a viewer with a keen sense of reality. So, what kind of reality does this girl expect then? She briefly mentioned that she came to work at a tech-finance company in London from a city in southeastern China. She didn’t find fulfilment in her job and felt uncomfortable in interpersonal relationships. She hoped the art world would bring her harmony and solace.

Ironically, it is common sense that the “real” world is far from a harmonious world. Does the “unreality” the viewer felt mean that the art world is further from harmony and solace, or closer? In other words, the viewer thought she had found a path to truth, goodness,

and harmony but felt disappointed. This art world exists within the real world and does not transcend it in any meaningful way, yet it always evokes certain expectations. The word Luò Chā includes the feeling of facing disparity. In this chapter, I present and explain the gap between the expectations that the art world gives people and the perceptions they get when stepping into it. This gap causes a sense of disappointment, not only because it fails to fulfill its transcendent promises but also because it betrays the origins of the artworks it celebrates and owns. These artworks are born from those who fundamentally feel out of place in this world, and such individuals are seekers of truth.

Chapter 3 The artist's night job

Introduction

My second part-time job during fieldwork was working as a commis chef in a busy restaurant in central London, and there I met Ting, a Taiwanese artist living in London who was studying choreography and had a body-movement workshop open to all. I will discuss how experiences of labour under high pressure and daily life in London are perceived as significant sources of embodied consciousness, through descriptions of daily work in the restaurant kitchen and Ting's guidance for participants in a performance workshop exploring physical movements. These experiences give rise to complex issues in the process of individual perception and understanding of art. These issues include trends towards diversity in the Chinese educational immigrant background, the political and cultural shaping of actions and choices in the London art world with Mandarin Chinese as a lingual connection, and how to break through specific perspectives on the Chinese community to reconsider the flow of experiences, the embodied perception, and what they can ultimately transcend. By describing my own feelings in spaces such as the kitchen where we work together, in dance studios and theatres, I will gradually unfold our shared co-existence in London.

1 The little hour at a train station

Mr. Leopold Bloom comes out eating the inner organs of beasts and fowls. He is going to a funeral with Stephen's dad. Before that, he has to make breakfast for his wife, go out to buy loin, come home to read his daughter's letter and finish his breakfast by going to the outhouse to take a dump.

I close up Chapter Four of *Ulysses*, the smoky Dublin world of a hundred years ago switches to that of a modern station out of nowhere at the moment the doors open. "Mind the gap", says the British-accented train. Bright incandescent lights, modern passengers with cell phones in their trouser pockets, suitcases and backpacks, wardens in fluorescent vests. One

floor up from the escalator, I arrive at St Pancras station in the heart of London. Many people look at the clock on the wall of the station café and the dozens of electronic screens. 3.30 pm, another half hour early. Most of the time, it's like this, I leave half an hour early so that delays to the train have the least impact. Facing the clock there is a row of alloy seats with holes on them. The winter wind rubs against my butt. I take out the thick book again (the book guy wished me good luck at the checkout) and an e-reader - a Chinese version of *Yóu lì xī sī* (尤利西斯), translated by Jin Ti, who had spent 16 years working on translation and research, to make its first Chinese version published in 1993, 71 years after its appearance in Paris. In short, I have two Ulysses.

Even though I have the book in hand, and am attracted by its creative expressions, a buzzing digital spirit propels me to glance at my cell phone at that moment - I am immediately distracted by a piece of news released in November 2021, the story of Chen Zhi, a migrant worker reading and translating Heidegger was spreading all over Chinese social media¹⁹, with comments following from different perspectives. In the first place, many people spread the word in a way of favouring his act, and then, someone questioned why migrant workers could not think about Heidegger. A Toiler who relies on his physical strength for a living and a practitioner of thought who does daily reading and thinks about philosophical issues: it is this weaving in the same individual that becomes the subject of a discussion of normal/abnormal in the context of contemporary society.

There are three or even more dimensions of identity derived from the stories of this protagonist: a migrant worker who rents a modest room in Shenzhen and reads, thinks and translates philosophy alongside his repetitive work; a young man who once dropped out of a university (his major was Maths) and chose to study philosophy on his own in the hope of recruiting himself into the university system again through independent study; and a married man who lives a intellectual life different from that of his wife, who watches short videos and reads free digital fictions on her phone after work. The discussion also becomes progressively more complex, including transcendence in everyday life, cultural capital, and feminism.

¹⁹ There is a piece of journal written in English, by Li Xiaofang, *Thinker, Toiler, Scholar on the Fly: Hegel and the Factory Worker*. Web source: <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1009567>

Being aware of that, the initial image of a migrant worker who, instead of submitting to the obvious logic of appropriate non-philosophical reading, has the energy to read and think about the language of ideas set by a thinker of the last century, after 10 to 12 hours shift, no longer seems to be enough to invigorate the readers. But other than those, the voices that initially cheered the proletarian intellectual are constantly confronted with the fact that, there are different understandings of the meaning of this transcendence, or even whether it can be considered transcendence at all in other cultures.

This confrontation comes from an understanding and reflection on the contexts we live in, a defence of the equality of the human intellectual quest often due to poverty and hindrance. This voice cares about why our society forces workers to struggle with the practice of reading Heidegger, their long workloads being too great coupled with the high costs of knowing who Heidegger is and that his thoughts are important. Perhaps it can be understood that part of the population innocently wonders, what drives people who carry out manual labour and domestic life in traditional contexts, to go on to engage in the practice of philosophical reading and thinking; and part of the population wonders why a person with the desire and practice of philosophical thinking cannot be a Toiler. The two groups of people are pointing at the same point: the disconnection between intellectual life and overloaded dailiness.

I feel compelled to ponder on this piece of news for a reason. As it happens in China, my home country, and I am in London off to do my night work, while Mr. Bloom walks into Dublin, on his way to a funeral, and feels awkward meeting an acquaintance, M'Coy. He enters the church to watch the priest's service and then goes out to buy soap for the bath, smelling of Spanish orange blossom – all the senses of the worlds blending together. I take a glance at the clock screen wall, which shows it is turning four o'clock.

I lift my cold stiff butt and join the stream of people weaving through the station, leaving and entering, with a fleeting purpose. The world in front of me starts to gesture some kind of plan being completed and checked off, one by one, on its massive hand: renovated glass buildings, widened pedestrian streets, perfumes and chocolates in multinational brand

shops, aerial cranes with flashing red lights, another Google giant building, black fountains next to the still very young saplings - a brand new King's Cross.

“There's sleeping sickness in the air”, said James Joyce. I wave goodbye to the little hour and enter the night.

2 Performance artist on the shift

Ting enters the restaurant at four o'clock, passing through the dining hall decorated with artist Noguchi's famous paper lamps and the spiral staircase where the fashion magazine interviewed the restaurant's founder, into the semi-open kitchen and then the dressing room around the corner at the end. We meet in the dressing room. Washing hands, changing into a plain white T-shirt, the waist string of the apron wrapped twice around, a live knot tied in front of us and a clean towel hanging from a tie around the waist.

Opening the fridge to check the stock of ingredients - not much sauce left; shredding vegetables, cubing tofu and defrosting beef patties - Ting grabs a frying basket in each hand, slaps it up and down and drizzles the hot oil out. We need to pre-fry two pots of chicken nuggets and two pots of aubergines by five o'clock.

The aubergines get salted, washed, drained, coated in rice flour, dipped in the batter and put into the frying pan. The four 200-degree frying pans are so deep that Ting's hands must grab the battered aubergines and slide them one by one into the frying pan, no more than two centimetres from the boiling hot oil. The aubergines look like trained divers fall into the golden liquid, with low-tunetic bubbles coming out. Otherwise, it's not water that splashes. It takes about two weeks of training to master the fingering part, and listening to bubbles to fry a basket of fully cooked, golden brown, crispy aubergines. Then, chicken, fish, sweet potato balls, beef patties, etc.

Ting accelerates sedately. Hands sometimes in front of her chest, sometimes above her head, sometimes sideways, arms flipping rapidly around her body, in a trance like Saturn and the ring. The first wave of guests arrives. Just before six o'clock. The order starts popping up on the screen in front of us. Table 4, one fried chicken, one Gua Bao (pork bun), one fries,

fish bun, fried sweet potato balls. We shout towards the other end of the kitchen. While putting the ingredients, which have been pre-fried for two minutes, into the frying pan. Press the timer. At the same time go to the steamed bun area and take out a bun filled with water vapour. Watch out! The heat from the steamer can burn one's skin. The timer goes off, now the food in the frying pan must come out. Meanwhile the buns are baking. The buns, grilled golden brown on one side, are placed in the middle of the plate and successively topped with the filling of the guest's choice. Her fingers gently open and she begins to arrange the plates, handing them over to the receptionist.

Ding, service.

Between the second and third wave of guests, there can be a shortage of food. One mistake at one point and the kitchen is finished. Her upper body explores new speeds in an intensifying rhythm, one leg bending and coming around the back of the other in front of her, her body twisting to a degree that is difficult to see clearly. Her eyes don't fall anywhere but are drawn to something we can't see.

The £1,000 blender is too expensive and not all ingredient preparations are appropriate for it. As the lowliest rank of cooks, neither are we, so the frying section made the batter by mixing clockwise with one hand while turning the stainless-steel bowl in the opposite direction with the other to ensure there are no lumps in the batter. Even though we take such good care of the mixer, it breaks down. Everything slows down, all the food is jammed in the line and the timer is buzzing. Great, finally a chance to slow down. In the end, the time you save using machines will ultimately be wasted on fixing them.

“Go home, you Google people”, one of the cooks pretends to shout outside, and then makes faces at us. A chef who has just left a French fine dining restaurant boasts to us how easy it was at his previous place of work. I am a bit suspicious though.

Ting's performance comes to an end. Her eyes droop and her limbs slowly return to their slumbering slackness. I sense a silent force building up at the end, not yet released. The last wave of guests left. We begin to clean up the mess, scrubbing the spice bottles and lying on the greasy floor reaching for a pile of food waste sticking in the corner of the freezer. Hot oil rushes out of the pipes, wrapped in the carbonised ashes of food scraps - we are only able to

catch it in a smaller metal bucket, moving it twice. The fishy smell of waste oil is soaked into our hair and nails as we hop on the 12.30 pm train, with the last strength. On one occasion there is no station announcement, and we ride all the way to the airport outside London, and it costs half a day's wages to get back to the city sharing a Uber with two travellers from Budapest.

3 Kitchen, Chineseness, Katharsis

Ting is a performance artist who started her practices at Laban College. We met at a part-time greeters' meeting at Frieze 2021 and she introduced me to this restaurant. The process of applying for a job here is uncomplicated, the staff turnover is fast in a high-pressure environment, and you can get a three-hour trial shift by sending an email or through a staff recommendation. Before I went for the trial shift, I texted Ting asking what I should prepare for, as I had never worked in a restaurant before, and Ting said, "It's okay, don't worry, it will be fine~~~"

The symbol ~ is used a lot between us. The wave-shaped linguistic endings are meant to indicate a state of soft, happy and Kawaii. Kawaii in Japanese is a quality that has always been popular among East Asian young people, and when I think of images of that Kawaii to be externalized in Manga, it tends to be maids with big eyes, displaying voluptuous and shy postures, a morbid air of youth adoration combined with feminine submissiveness.

OK ~~~~~ I replied.

Three hours of trial shifts later I got the job, without burning myself or breaking anything halfway through (sure enough working in a restaurant and being able to cook are two different things). For the next five months I work in the frying area and Ting in the steamed bun area. Three night shifts a week. This job, plus another part-time job selling tickets at the theatre Sadler's Wells, is just enough for Ting and her boyfriend to live in a shared flat in South London.

It is inevitable to talk about the trajectory of such a life, or the presentation of a way of being: artists working in the kitchen and developing their own creative work alongside it, or

like the manual labourer who reads and translates Heidegger. I want to explore what kind of passion they have for getting closer to some kind of thoughts, art or creativity. Certainly, it is in relation to the conditions in which we are born and raised, but what kind is it?

One day, in a month before Chinese New Year, all the chefs have to learn new dishes in the restaurant. We start with a small meeting in the upstairs office where the manager and the cuisine designer give us a PowerPoint presentation on the history of the growth of this restaurant, one of the owners was a former student of an art college in London and was born into a family of caterers from Taiwan. They started out in London's street food festivals until one day they were given a chance to make a name for themselves in the restaurant world, inviting judges and restaurant managers to come and sample dishes in a makeshift stall. The young family's dreams were all riding on that one dinner. But then the gas tank leaked that day and almost set the stall on fire. Still, it was all right. Their first restaurant in London opened without a hitch. It went on to open branches in Soho, Borough market and Kings Cross. As a restaurant in one of London's busiest areas, the best way to maximise revenue was to do fast food with a type of Taiwanese zest which did not exist in the London streetfood market.

"Thawed and cut pieces of fish, that's not called cooking, is it?" writes Japanese Chinese-speaking writer Shinobu Yoshii in a report on food culture. When it comes to handling raw fish, I doubt if there are people in this restaurant who can cook it. Of course, the ethics of fish-eating in a fancy restaurant is another issue in this world, one that is beyond the comprehension of my maternal family who have been fishmongers for generations - my grandma and her parents, who could not read or write and did not even have intact fingernails to flip through paperwork. Anyway, grandma would have marvelled at how bright and alight this kitchen is.

The design is modern, with the giant frying pan and a row of fridges tucked underneath. The wok has been abandoned as it requires an open fire. A steamer is used for the buns, which are of course factory-made and simply heated here. The German-style iron plate and fast-food fryer. More importantly, there are the screens. Each display has only a few buttons: to be served, serving, served, and each order comes to the chef's screen with a yellow caption

that says it must be ready in six minutes or it turns red. When our screen was full of red, the chef would come screaming and shouting obscenities out of his office at the end of the barn - leading a team of four of us back to “understanding cooking” - amidst the flames, splashes of oil, and the heat, and if anyone broke into the kitchen at this point, they were likely to be mistakenly injured like a misguided entry into a battlefield (the front desk at this point being Pavlov’s puppy who crumbles at the sound of a small bell). Watch out for the heat! Watch your back! The knife, always pointing down. If we have our period that day, make sure to take two painkillers at one time.

Back in the kitchen from the office decorated with Taiwanese art crafts, we are about to experiment with new dishes. The recipe designer introduces us to the Chinese New Year specials - as a happy communal ritual (or so at least the emotions reflected in our facial expressions suggest). We take out our little spoons and pout at the counter, learning the final plating. A second later, everything is cajoled and eaten. The kitchen counter with its colourful chopping boards is meant to handle different types of ingredients, red for meat, green for vegetables and blue for aquatic products. The stainless-steel tubs contained fresh onions, ginger and garlic, as well as fruit for mixing drinks. Fresh vats of cooking oil and the best rice from Chi Shang, Taiwan. New sauces are being developed in iron pots, a deep entanglement of unseen and material substances. The smell of lemon and coriander opens up the space in our nostrils, a deep breath, a neat regularity of security and a memory firmly embedded in our taste buds. Old sayings go like: “to sweeten, put salt first”; “dumplings on the train and noodles off the train”; “the spicy taste of Tainan, the briny taste of Taipei”; “the warmth of the hands that wrap the dumplings”. Memories of an ethic of “being together” emerge, emotions and flavours coming together, infecting us gently. The head chef is happy, calm and relaxed too - yesterday he had just scolded a Chinese girl for her stealing buns (she was only eating a broken one as she was starved), and today they are all reconciled.

We are jolly people, eventually. It suddenly comes to my mind that this is how we, most people behave through the long historical trips. We get things over quickly. We forget and we live on. We were born and choose to die with, at least, a bit of relish. Happy under control. This jolly role has been played for over 2500 years, even without specific knowledge of how

our civilization developed from old Greek tragedy to modern science (not introduced to the Chinese people until the early 1900s). We know that happiness is practically good. Happy is a success. Happy is ability. Happy is as tiktok as time flies. Happy is repeated every new year on the TV Gala. People travel overseas with the goal of a happier life - smiling mouth, and upper gums exposed to the air. We smile at greetings, jokes, and misunderstandings. Smiling always gets you out of awkward scenes. We slide away~~~ with smiles. “The smiling girl never has bad luck”, although disagreeable, but that’s what many people believe or how they comfort themselves - happy is safe. Not to stand out, lower the voice, be water. Happy weddings: with big red Xi (囍, meaning double happy) papercut on the repainted white wall and surrounded by weirdly symmetrical embellishment. Happy funerals: if one is dead old, happy crying, happy feast, happy condolence from friends and relatives: to their years done and lived. Happy is a community ritual, and a moral symbol. Everything should end up happy. This happy narration of course has its sides, which can involve pain punishment, distortion, indifference - and happy could be exaggerated when migration and exile are embedded in this narrative.

To understand the happiness embedded in Chineseness through reading both Chinese and Greek ancient tragedy I came across the term, Katharsis. Aristotle’s belief that tragedy (art) had such an effect: cleansing the mind, cleansing and unblocking, ennobling our spirit. It was not until the Republican period that the ideas of ancient Greece were introduced into the turbulent Chinese society and literary scholars translated the *Poetics* into Chinese (Lo, 2004). At the time of the May Fourth Movement, ancient Greek literature had just entered China, and modern literatures were later. In the 1930s, as war raged in mainland China, scholars who translated Aristotle exclaimed that ancient Greece was too far away. We still feel that now - too far away. In those days Russia launched an attack on Ukraine, and a Taiwanese co-worker told me she was very worried about her grandmother. When they chatted online, her grandmother told her not to go back, fearing that one day Taiwan would be attacked from across the border, just like Ukraine.

Then what does the concept of katharsis have to do with happiness and Chineseness? Aristotle argues that it is not good to be too strong or too weak in fear or pity, but rather to

seek moderation, katharsis. This is in the version of *Poetics* translated by Lo Nien Seng (2004): katharsis, to wash, to potter, has many possible translations, or as Aristotle says in the *Politics*, a kind of medical treatment. This ancient Greek phrase is the most accurate way to describe the effect this period had on the artists. Often, it was also the half hour of the day when I felt I did not deserve this sublime healing. However much the body-mind was discovered in the ancient sense of duality and reflected upon in the modern discipline, this impenetrable structure is now only deeper. In Svensson's (2020) *The Journey of the Eel* (another book I enjoyed during the little hour), the author recalls that Aristotle discovered the miraculous birth of the eel wriggling out of the mud, without the need to spawn and mate. As one of the pioneers in the observation and description of nature, he could not know exactly how to understand a certain mystery. I think the empiricism contained in katharsis is exactly what the philosopher who left home at the age of eighteen to study with Plato learned throughout his life - that all knowledge comes from experience. By applying this understanding of the relationship between observation feeling and existence to the meaning of the word katharsis, it can be deduced that the meaning of the word in the Chinese context tends to be more ambiguous and diffused than precise.

When Zhou Zuoren started translating *Greek Anthology*²⁰ in the 1930s, he lamented in his preface that our culture had fundamentally failed to develop a “sea-like calmness” (1999: 5). This Katharsis is not so much a quest as a state of contemplating “what kind of life is worth living” - whatever the food, cooking or kitchen culture embraces, it is a practical joy, not about the idea of things, but about things themselves. But it is a joy that sometimes manifests itself in excessive anxiety, in mediocrity, in conformity, in nothingness and in evilness. Whether it is the question of eels or the question of Chineseness, they both reflect on where the differences in life, culture and forms of perceptions come from. When the artist

²⁰ This version is directly translated from ancient Greek literature from 1934. However, due to the relocation of the Translation Association to Hong Kong during WWII, the translation process was interrupted, and the completed manuscript was taken by the association, leaving its whereabouts unknown. In 1944, Zhou intended to continue his previous translation and thus serialized the already translated text along with partial annotations under the title *Greek Mythology* in *Yiwen Magazine*. He also wrote an introduction for it. Between 1950 and 1951, after completing his translation of *Aesop's Fables*, Zhou revisited his translation of *Greek Mythology*, completing both the original text and annotations. However, details regarding its publication remain unclear. Ultimately, this book was never published during Zhou's lifetime. In the late 1990s, China Foreign Translation and Publishing Corporation launched the *Ku Yu Zhai Translation Series*, which included Zhou Zuoren's translation of *Greek Mythology*. (More information on: <https://www.translators.com.cn/archives/2015/11/11026>.)

is in such a working environment, the process of self-knowledge begins to fluctuate - constantly wavering between the foundations of psychological reality and the mundane reality.

Will creativity be lost when waking up from the dream of utopia? And what is that dream like? I choose to understand this way of being as an existence that lasts as long as the daytime, and rarely goes into a proper time for dreams. We are the onion-thin blank pages, and we don't know what really filled our life. It is more difficult to gain an understanding of those beings that have spent the nights like the days, being the greatest probability, because it is practiced for a longer history and it is the same as not really being practised at all. It is just done. There is no chance of getting close to them at all. It acquires a more permanent presence (that Kierkegaard says, *bestaaen*), holding the long daylight on which we amble and we forget.

4 Four instructions in the workshop

One evening in April, it was snowing in London. We sat in the corner of a ground floor in the London performance studio. The snow fell gently and slowly, melting as soon as it reached the ground in South London. Next to the garage, the tyre factory and a granite recycling site, the road had been cratered by laden motor vehicles, the dark shadows were more subdued in the snow, the smell of gravel and chemical gums condensing in the air. South London - I can't tell from any of the buildings, this is London too, hardly different from a developing Chinese industrial city. Ting tunes her music in the midst of us sitting in a circle.

There are seven bodies represented in the large mirror of the performance studio. It was a bit difficult to stretch out and move, for someone with little performance experience, who has never had the opportunity to get so close to one's own.

Ting's first instruction: walk in a different way.

"Try using your belly button to guide yourself", she says. Belly button, spine, knees, ankles, pubic area, everything. I knew that her intention, perhaps the intention of this

performance education, was first to make us aware of the existence of bondage, the rules, the limitations, and again to stimulate our own potential - to discover our body, to know it exists. But I still felt quite awkward. I sensed my own deep constraint. In the tiny dance studio, no more than twenty square metres, flowed seven human bodies. Looking into the mirror for the 36th time, people, characters falling east and west, fragile little things with a sense of novelty or shame.

Ting's second instruction: find a line in space with your eyes and follow it in the direction it extends.

Interesting. I couldn't wait to take on the task and to impose the difficulty on myself. I had to find a hidden thread, to observe lines that I don't normally observe, to stop looking at the mirror, to forget all those rambling thoughts about myself, my object was a thread and nothing else, what could I find in the world of this thread? What phenomenon does this thread produce in my eyes?

I found it. A line intersecting the prismatic alloyed face of a ventilation duct. What colour is this line? I can't really describe it. It is the transition between a smoky blue and a silvery colour for the aluminium plate. A void between the actions of light. Catching it in the south-west corner of the classroom, my eyes become thumb and forefinger as I squeeze the thread and slowly move towards it, it goes straight at first and then only thirty centimetres before turning into an island of hinges where I need to tilt my head, following it delicately, not daring to let go, there are too many threads in the hinges to lose the one I have. There it circled the hinges several times, in some places even though it was no longer straight, I was quite sure that it turned into a curve, into a point, before it came out of there, and then, straight across the ceiling again, around several hinges, descending vertically in the direction of the doorway. The line was about to pierce the wall and fly out towards the outdoors. I lost it for a moment.

Ting said that it was the focus exercise of the day. Alas, it turned out to be all about focus. The world of a thread is so complex. Everything outside the body's narrowness disappears as we follow the thread the moment it bursts through the room. The expanse of a thread.

The presence of a thread makes us think that the eight million years humans have existed is a history of evolution, an unstoppable evolution. I didn't think of it that way at the workshop at the time, and it was only six months away from London, Christmas 2022, with mouths turned downwards in supermarkets, shoppers wondering how to pick items that seemed like bargains with everything had gone up over 150%, that I started to think about it. We are inevitably first in a pattern of development. The beginning of the line, the path, the person, our bodies, the source of our consciousness.

Third instruction. Take out the fruit that you have prepared beforehand and dance with it.

I brought a plum with me, the size of a baby's purple fist. Other participants brought apples, lemons, pears, cherries, whatever was available in the supermarkets, and Ting invited us to express physically, without touching the fruit, the whole process of eating a fruit. I looked at the plum in my hand and began to remember. I took out the plums and rinsed them under the tap. No, it should be traced before when the box in which the plums were packed was bought from the supermarket. On the shelf in the fresh produce section of Sainsbury's, my hand goes through the many plastic boxes, picking out the one that looks the freshest on average with my eyes, and fiddling with those boxes to find the one that best suits my day. (The supermarket holds them in larger plastic boxes with holes in them. Some artists might notice at this point that the material was an everyday and unfamiliar container that we often overlook in our daily lives.) A box of plums is scanned and paid for and then put into a shopping bag.

Washing plums is an action I take before eating them, which not only contains a notion of cleanliness but also implies a habit. In fact, many people don't wash them, and I rationally see no harm in it. It's just that in my hometown there were always horrific stories of small businesses competing viciously to wax and even fill their fruit, so from a young age my mother admonished me to wash them first.

The next step was to squeeze the plum between my fingers, open my mouth and take a bite, tentatively savouring the taste of this one fruit. As far as I can remember, plums are not always sweet. Then came the second and third bite, until I hit the core. Sometimes I would

put the whole plum in my mouth. With my teeth and tongue I would shave the flesh off the core and spit it out. Sometimes I pinch the ends of the plum with my middle finger and thumb and, little by little, I shave the flesh off with my incisors. The second act tends to be more time-consuming.

My mind conceives the task that Ting has given us and then physically imitates my memory. Those everyday movements suddenly become a blur, and what was a naturally flowing act now becomes a task that is difficult to recover from. My teeth and tongue didn't know how to function when there wasn't any food in my mouth.

Just as I was getting very frustrated, Ting gave us another task. The fourth instruction. That is, suppose your fruit is now 10,000 times bigger. How are you going to eat it?

I was stunned. How am I going to break open a plum the size of a room? I would probably need an axe, or a ladder, but an axe is smaller than I am and probably wouldn't even hurt the thick skin of a huge plum. Thinking that its skin would be 10,000 times thicker, then probably wider than the palm of my hand. Would I really want to consume a plum when it is bigger than us and we standing in its shadow? It's too late to be afraid. We looked awkwardly at our limbs, some posing in slashing motions, others climbing, others trying to break free from the fruit, looking around this studio, all in a state of escape or conquest. Is this our physical world? Is it possible that for eight million years the boundaries of the imagination have been confined to the limits of "hunting and gathering"? The frightening thing is that we have not had the opportunity to become so small, and we remain ignorant. We have conquered too many species to become the least endangered in the world.

My own benefits from the workshop might reflect things that Ting got from her experience studying at Laban: on the one hand, I was given the opportunity to observe and describe, to satisfy the desire to engage in observation accomplished through my own limitations as a human being rather than through human-centred ignorance. On the other hand, I marvelled that the language of contemporary art could be transmitted in a teachable mode, from Ting's teacher at the Laban to the eyes of a non-art practitioner - more worthy of discussion than the teachable/unteachable dichotomy of the creative method is the fresh and

vibrant sheen of contemporary art language as a globalised backdrop to the span of a century, and how it connects with the artist's life experience/life trajectory.

5 The glass bead game

In a performance that takes on the name of *Home*, Ting emerges from a silvery, plastic, symbolic giant faded snake skin. Her body had been rehearsed countless times to twist and turn in the darkened theatre, her painted black scales reflecting dull brightness in the chasing light. I was sitting silently in the darkened auditorium, most likely reaching an understanding of what that body had gone through during the days and nights - the artist's body was weaving and unweaving, waiting for the shadow to lift.

We used to talk about the artists' artists, she often pointed me to an image, the starting point of the art world unfolding in front of her. The first time I saw a Pina Bausch performance was with Ting, and all contemporary choreographers love Pina. Ting works part-time at the theatre ticket booth. When we get off the underground at Angel station and walk along the road for ten minutes, we see the neon sign of the theatre's name printed vertically hanging on the building like on the spine of a book. I've heard that historically this theatre has had tough economic times. The scene at the moment is almost the opposite of it. Ting says Pina is such a sell-out that if you hadn't booked staff tickets two months ago, you wouldn't be able to get them now.

It wasn't Pina's choreography that attracted me the most, it was the performers. They are stars around the moon. The men and women characters interacted on stage with details that even a first-time theatregoer could pick up on. The actors are on stage and about to interpret the work. Training night after night, pulling themselves up, that one muscle in the hip bone that is always hard to stretch. Studying toad again, lying on the floor, the unspoken, hidden pain nearly shattered the confidence in performance that had been built up over the years - the desire for recognition and acknowledgement. Pina often asks dancers this question: "what do you do, in order to be loved?"²¹

²¹ Homans, J. (2023). 'The afterlife of Pina Bausch', *The New Yorker*, 27 March. Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/03/27/the-afterlife-of-pina-bausch>

On the stage, male and female figures sometimes dance in pairs, sometimes duel with each other, the women in beaded dress dresses and high heels, the men in one-piece suits and leather shoes. An Asian actress thumped and fell on the stage. Previously in a standing position on a chair, she screamed and then fell to one side to the ground. It was a real fall but she was skillful. I “phewed” having just found out it was not an accident. In *Kontakthof* she portrays a hysterical female figure, a mad woman. Screaming, falling down, screaming, falling down, repeated many times. It is said that in Pina’s team, each actor plays a role that they also have a hand in designing, and even when the role is substituted, the movements are different. I looked at her, lying still on the stage like a freshly changed nightgown, and guessed that there must be no substitute for this cringing scream as well as the falling off. How she came into this role is not for anyone other than her to imagine. Yet I, at this point, watched with a sense of defiance of anthropological obligation, locked onto this individual - the one who walked onto the stage and then collapsed.

She is not in the spotlight but in the shadows. She unfolds her spiritual space in her dance, Supporting her palace with the truest of ideas. The life on stage, the bodies shaking to the drums and music, all at the command of an order that - however gentle she might normally be - is not the real conductor. The stable and everyday order serves as a compromise position to escape being lost in our quest for completeness and abundance. From the naïve phase to the critical phase, the art worlds keep unfolding in front of us.

What is creativity and where does it lie? The potential for creative activity as part of belief, the possibility of a departure from the pure? Is it harmful to the individual? What could the wider creative environment be like? What changes have taken place in this “glass bead game”?

Here we encounter transience. If the transience of the encounter has anything in common, it is that we are both sinking notes asking questions of the self in the London art world context. We are heirs to the reform of the spiritual life of the 20th century. It is at least the pursuit of a reforming experience, an ongoing experience, an intervention in the world and an escape from London, a process that goes beyond success/failure.

During the interval, Pina's professional audience gathers. I asked Ting what it was like to learn choreography. What was her course like in British education? Her answer was that curriculum-wise, their courses are not purpose-oriented. In the old days, she thought that the learning process might be quantified as trying to create choreography as a single person, then as a duo, a multi-person, or a team like Pina's, which might be the mature form of choreography. But in their courses at Laban, they focused more on learning the creative choreography as a process, rather than dosage to separate the creative stages. In a sense, solo work is as challenging as group performance. Of course, being able to pull off a choreography with multiple participants is relatively more complex to consider on a practical level. When two dozen actors line up for a curtain call, it means that it is remarkable work.

After the wave of Omicron, work got busier and both Ting and I were hesitant to ask to leave the restaurant. It was only when the manager wouldn't allow us to take time off and even switch shifts to attend an opening that we decided to leave. After saying goodbye to this job, we saw a show at the Tate Modern in London. The artist Li Mingwei was sitting at the edge of the venue and the performers, dressed in special monk costumes and carrying brooms, slowly plucked the millet that had been spread on the floor in advance in the Turbine Hall, as he had requested.

We have for the moment put behind us the feeling of the day-to-day toil of each shin tendon, leaving behind a real depth of awareness of the mundane, asking ourselves questions at the limits of our bodies, doubting, confirming, doubting, delving into the circular infinity of time. The race of despair. But I will continue to question who will burden us with the distance from the art world - the impermanence of it all.

For a long time, the creativity I observe and describe through writing has been stagnant in a consequentialist and teleological framework - through art, people escape from everydayness, or through art people refuse to be victims of the injustice of a state of exception (Agamben, 2005) that has become normalised. As I looked directly into the snarling face, not of the angry chef, but of Bacon's *Pope*, the dark shadows of memory transformed into a new understanding - I realised that to see creativity as a single confrontational protesting act was to lazily exploit the negative rather than to actually

confront the worlds - it has no enemies in the end. All human beings are to some extent subordinated to something more fascinating than themselves. Why did we go to the kitchen? (Francis Bacon used to work as a cook in London in his teens.) Maybe because we actively seek out that one experience and use it - mechanical toil, repetitive writing on dozens of four-litre containers, aubergine, aubergine, aubergine... and More importantly, putting aside other desires as we toil, a more fundamental existential impulse emerges: to burn life strategically - to become a true subject, not a self.

Our eyes follow the performers who were putting greater force to control the slowness. Ting senses that one of the dancers is still moving too fast. Some members of the audience came up to the artist and spoke to him.

I asked Ting, aren't you going to talk to him? I'm not going, she said, usually I renounce opportunities like this.

Summary

In this chapter, I review several scenes of co-existence with the performance artist Ting - commuting for work, serving in the kitchen, attending performance workshops and watching the masterpieces in London art scenes. Although the living experiences of Chineseness in the contemporary art worlds are extremely diverse, we can still identify recurring themes, such as Chineseness as an amorphous and constantly permeated state of the self, and the need to seek allusion and confirmation through creation.

Writing about the experience of working in the kitchen is a way of explaining how we are constantly shaped by the way we see and choose to live, by describing the struggle to try to answer the question "what makes life worth living", and thus more concretely addressing what the term Chineseness might entail. In relation to the ancient Greek term katharsis, new possibilities for understanding collide between the revolutionary 20th century in China, and the restaurant kitchen in London.

On one hand, I want to explore the meaning of being creative with lived experiences of the lower realities. Learning from Ting's workshop, re-perceiving everything around us, I

propose contemporary art as a teachable resource is a tool for non-artists, people exist as the dayness to turn a blank page into one with meanings. On the other, dance is both an awareness of the body and an escape from its imprisonment. This yearning to transcend physical confines also reflects a desire to truly understand the outside world.

In Ting's performance workshop, I experienced this sense of escape, shadowed by our shared experience of working late nights in an understaffed, busy restaurant deepened my respect for Ting's physical expression in her art. This body, subjected to various forms of repression and exploitation in everyday life, is both a unique individual entity and part of a collective. Ting embodies her art dreams through food, kitchenware, and choreography, but when seemingly easier opportunities arise, she prefers to remain not action. I don't see this as an inherent personal or collective trait; rather, it is a choice made through mature judgment and deliberate action. In fact, I will further explore the concept of active passivity of escape in the final chapter.

In *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch (1985) discusses the concealed self with the well-known myth of children leaving home, enchanted by a flute player, and following him into an unknown world. If the flute player represents a fleeting spirit, then art, like the sound of the flute, attracts those who long for such a spirit. Using this allegory, one might describe young aspiring artists as being in a similar state, drawn by an intangible spirit and feeling the urge to escape their current circumstances. However, a rare few who believe in art still want to know why they dance before how they dance. They understand their position and, when they feel the urgent need to escape their reality, they do not follow others but dance for themselves.

Chapter 4 Three artists at my table: a play and a critic

By
Bai Lin

Characters and Scenes

Artist Bear, 25 years old

Artist Goat, 33 years old

Artist Zebra, 30 years old

Monkey, 27 years old

Autumn 2021. Three young Chinese artists end up in London for different reasons. Bear and Goat are MFA cohorts at art college C in central London, both making artworks genred as “Moving Image”, but they differ greatly in ideas and methods. Zebra is a self-taught artist who came with his wife Monkey to the UK in 2020. Monkey is a young female who writes this play. This play shows conversations among the four, from talking about their aspirations of being involved in the art world, to their opinions and reflections on confronting the art world. There is a critic attached to this play in the end, which extends to Monkey’s understanding of her friends’ being art practitioners in London.

ACT 1
SCENE 1

[Gallery S. The centre of the stage goes up and deeper through several terrazzo steps, and the hall on the first floor is illuminated by movable white lamps, evenly lit, known as the “white box”. White on white: walls are repainted over and over again.

Stage left: the exhibition space of College C, with not many works, appropriately and proportionally displayed on the floor and walls.

Stage right: the exhibition space of College G, with many more works, arranged beyond the norm on all sides of the space and at the junction, with the ceiling - the fish lines (a common material for contemporary artworks to be presented in the art spaces, usually hung from the ceilings, in order make the installing process unseen), and a giant scaffolding in the showroom make the works appear more “experimental” in the air.

On the second and third floors are several other similar exhibition spaces. The silhouettes of the audience move slowly through the space, lingering around the works in long and short intervals. On a winter afternoon, the silent shadows of the Victorian buildings pass through the curtains. Four people sit on the concrete platform of a floating window in the middle of the ground-floor lobby, immersed in an ambient sound and smell unique to this gallery, the steady wavelength of white noise, the emptiness of formaldehyde as it dissipates.

Bear and Goat look stage right. As exhibiting artists, MFA students, Bear’s work hangs on the wall they’re leaning against at the edge of the stage, a 14-inch screen playing a video juxtaposing an animated film made and broadcast in 1980s China mainland with edited home videos, and Goat’s work is displayed on the opposite wall, the fourth wall. An entire image cut-off from Goat’s video work has been printed on silk and sent to London from a textile studio in southeast China. The image is of a female sports champion wearing sports fabrics.]

Bear: (tall actor in a black duck-feather jacket, a pair of glasses, looking a little older than his actual age) Now what you’ve seen the best **ad** for fine art schools in London this year.

Monkey: (sits still, politely covering her mouth and yawning since she works in the restaurant until midnight) Nice.

Goat: (long-haired actor in a beanie, moving to his left to make room for Bear, looking to the right of the stage) Still a nice space for our college C, and the first space into the exhibition.

Bear: (examining with satisfaction) Not a lot of work, not that crowded.

Zebra: (male actor in a pair of canvas shoes worn out, looking back and forth) The light is so good here, you don’t even need a fill-in light when you come to document your work.

Monkey: (looking at the sculpture on the floor to the right of the stage) Whose work is that?

Bear: That’s N’s. She’s in our class and won the New Contemporaries award this year.

Goat: (showing interest) What is this?

Zebra: (leans forward, pokes his head out, looks at Bear) I've heard of them, it's for art students in the UK, but unfortunately I can't apply for it.

Bear: It is. It's open to all art students who have been in UK art schools or newly graduated within two years.

Monkey: (looking to the left of the stage) The space at G College is a bit more experimental Why are they able to exhibit so many works?

Bear: (spreads fingers and pushes his glasses) See, that's the difference between the schools. If anyone is thinking of applying to an art school in London this year, come to this exhibition and you can visualize the difference in school styles.

Goat: (pushes down his sports-style beanie and looks up at the high ceiling of the hall, pondering) It's true that our school is more traditional than that. But to be chosen represents a kind of recognition. Not all works have the integrity to be displayed.

Zebra: (jokingly) I prefer the feeling on the left. The display is more challenging.

Bear: (smiling, looking at Goat) For us, these two years of tuition have been well spent.

Goat: How so?

Bear: At the beginning, I thought that because of the pandemic, all the exhibitions would be cancelled and turned into online graduation exhibitions, which was the case last year. I didn't realize that Gallery S was going to organize this joint exhibition with the students who will graduate this year and next year.

Monkey: It's really good.

Bear: (Proudly) We were selected by our teachers, and one of our teachers was previously a curator at Gallery S. She understands what kind of work is needed for this space.

Goat: She is very experienced indeed.

Zebra: It shows that your work exceeds that of many of your classmates. How many people want to come to a place like this to show their work, even if it's just archival.

Monkey: (looks to Bear) You were in architecture before?

Bear: Yes. This is my second year of switching to fine art.

Zebra: It's great to be showing at S in your second year!

Goat: Were you in Beijing before?

Zebra: Yes. I came to Beijing after graduation and had several full-time weekday jobs.

Goat: Me too, graduated a little while before. Also went to Beijing after graduation. Stayed in one place all the time, with not much opportunity to exhibit.

Zebra: (Bashful) That's the way it is in China, without a good educational background, starting from scratch, no one gives you a chance.

Goat: (looking down and thinking) I know what it's like.

[A flashback to a dusty day, five years ago, in Cao Chang Di village, on the outskirts of Beijing. Goat stepped out of a rented house and took the subway from the outskirts of the city to the main art district. On his way to the district, some art areas were demolished, or rather, rezoned. Galleries were moving out of Beijing. The remaining galleries are concentrated in 798, the converted factory business park. The artworks by the glass windows were also changing. A new generation of artists' names is slowly appearing on posters for the openings,

along with borrowed masterpieces by Andy Warhol, David Hockney, and other expensive ones. The colours had brightened the grey dusty weather. Young, well-dressed, perfumed young artists gather in front of the recently built foreign galleries, speaking English with a mixture of familiarity and possessive confidence in what they see in front of them.]

Goat: (prolonging the memories) So I decided to come to London. I thought it might be different when I went back.

Zebra: You did it.

Monkey: Goat, what did you study before?

Goat: Animation.

Monkey: When did you first want to make fine art images?

Goat: (solemnly) I liked Matthew Barney. That's the kind of artist I want to be. I think the ultimate form of contemporary art is the movie.

Monkey: Oh?

Zebra: (seemingly and not necessarily agreeing) Interesting. The ultimate form.

Bear: (as if revealing a long-held secret) Our teacher loves your work, you know?

Goat: (Expectedly, wanting to hear affirmation, the more the merrier) Why?

Bear: (Knowing Goat's desire for affirmation) Your work, with its several coordinates, is very clear.

Goat: Ha, wow, I see, you've analyzed my work, and care so much about me.

Bear: (shyly) Which is not I'm just going through your website for nothing. In fact (respectfully) I'm actually curious about how you work I couldn't sleep a bit last night looking at your work.

Goat: I was conceptualizing this image before I came to the UK. At the time it felt like I needed a boost to get started

Bear: How did you find the actors?

Goat: Right here, online. Amateur actors. Paid them over a hundred bucks a day, one meal included.

Bear: What about the photographer?

Goat: I reached out to a friend at Collage L. Watching the documentary he made felt like he has a pretty good skill set. I mainly worked on the organization and editing.

Monkey: Why is this work called *Stadium*?

Goat: I referenced the coming-of-age ceremony of girls in the Braulonian region of Ancient Greece. I wanted to present that kind of chasing behaviour in the form of sports.

Monkey: Who is the main character on the canvas?

Goat: Eternis.

Monkey: Did you say, boost? What's that?

Zebra: Yeah what is it? It must be expensive to make images like this without any funding.

Goat: Before I came to school. I had to decide: art or movie. Those are the **two directions**. It's definitely harder to get money from making art images.

Bear: I asked my teacher how I was going to make money to support myself and make art after graduation. She was very direct – it's impossible.

Goat: Good point. That's what someone should say to us at this stage. But teachers can do more than just tell the truth, they need to give students opportunities.

Monkey: If opportunity can be imparted, what about people outside of art education?

Zebra: (chuckling) Yeah, what about me.

Goat: I once applied for the Q's class in Beijing. He rejected me and pointed out to me that video just isn't as appealing as installation..... I don't think artists should go to art school to get this bullshit experience.

Monkey: Then what should it be like?

Bear: It's about research and transformation. Gathering materials and sources, then transforming them to support your expression.

Goat: It's practice. Artists have to practice. I feel like coming to school is an opportunity to practice, otherwise, this image wouldn't have been realized at all.

A viewer pauses in front of the fourth wall. The image on that weave and the medium itself containing the image are projected into their eyes. The tall goddess of the hunt, Eltanis, overlaps the viewer's body in the light. The forest in the background, and the trees, create a dissociation from the real in the texture of the gauze and in the visual activity of our prolonged gazing. The static branches of the trees in the forest outside London open and close slowly as the material dominates an illusion, as if something alive is about to emerge from behind the trees at any moment. On the other side of it, the work of Bear, a 14-inch screen flashes a cutaway of an animated character cutting his own neck with a sword, and as blood spurts out of his neck, the image switches to a snowman running towards the fire. A sense of tragedy rises with the music.

ACT 1
SCENE 2

[Lights on sides of the road. A walk from Camden to Kings Cross road.]

Bear: Whenever I feel anxious I think to myself that it's only my second year in the art world.

Goat: Bear, what year were you born?

Bear: 1996.

Goat: We're eight years apart. I envy you.

Zebra: (picking up a branch on the ground and playing with it, carefree) I envy you.

Bear: I wasn't happy at school for a while, and I was always disappointed that I couldn't go to a better school.

Goat: How much better could it be? It's all one echelon. In our study group, you showed talent and seriousness.

Monkey: That's rare. Do you realize what you're good at, somewhere you don't have to work hard to achieve?

Bear: But I can't do what Goat does, not scripting much and keeping everything well organized.

Goat: I'm sensitive to a question and have been thinking about this a lot. **What exactly is required of an artist?** I've never had the chance to exhibit in Beijing before, and when I submitted my work and didn't hear back, I wondered where I fell short. Bear, you're very smart and can do research.

Bear: I seem to be a little bit better than others since I was a kid. I didn't get good grades in high school back in China, but I adapted very well to the British environment, and no one could present better than me in undergraduate school. I didn't just want to get an A, I wanted to get firsts. It was also stimulated by the time I was in the language class. What was your grade in Unit 1, and Unit 2?

Goat: B.

Bear: (not proudly) I got an A Plus.

Monkey: Does it matter to you, grades?

Bear: Why not get an A if you can get an A? It's funny, none of your works has that research-based feel to it.

Goat: I don't want to make an essay film, or a documentary.

[Silence.]

The four walk through a square still under construction. A northerly wind whips up dust from the construction site. Red aviation lights flash high up in the sky. A TV in a bar is showing a women's soccer game.

A few young people in extraordinary costumes walk by on the road, brightly coloured and not of the usual texture of fibres, with no trace of sleeves or collars to be found on the clothes. They were said to be students of the fashion design at College S. They wear their artworks on their bodies every day.]

Bear: Do you guys remember L?

Zebra: (remembers something) That guy is having a show at the Gallery T. (Truly) I couldn't look at that work of his at all.

Bear: Guess how much is the work that Gallery T exhibited?

Goat and Zebra: ?

Bear: Take a guess. Sterling.

Goat: How many editions?

Bear: Three editions. Images.

Goat: What's the format? A hard disk?

Bear: I'm not sure.

Goat: Is it sold separately like 1/3, 2/3, 3/3? I'm guessing £1500 an edition.

Bear: That's high. Too much. You wouldn't believe it.

Zebra: 500?

Bear: 250.

Goat: 250? That's low.

Bear: Because L just graduated. There are expensive images in there too. The expensive one is 10,000, and that artist is already a minor celebrity. I don't really like his work either. Didn't watch the whole work. Every one of his images is a precise theoretical footnote.

Goat: Is he from Hong Kong or Taiwan?

Zebra: I feel like his images are about writing a thesis first. Then find images to go with it.

Bear: It's a lot of work.

Goat: But I feel that this gallery cannot be underestimated. One in China, one abroad. It represents artists of Chinese ethnicity, and the works they show in London are catering to Western tastes, which is not the case with the one at home. The model is very clever and practical. The professionalism of the owner or whatever doesn't matter at all. It's very similar to the model I know of when Beijing's M Gallery was growing. They started out with very similar energy.

Zebra: Damn. It's a commercial operation. But they don't know anything about art.

Goat: (shaking his head) Some galleries get curators to take care of the academics. There are also a lot of artists who are starting to curate on the side themselves. Theory doesn't need to be present in my opinion. I'm not willing to dig into theory. It's really awkward if the work doesn't match the text.

Monkey: Digging?

Bear: (thoughtfully) Theory. Images. Digging.

Monkey: Bear? What are you digging for?

[From King's Cross to their favourite Chinese takeaway, it's about a fifteen-minute walk. Staggered roads surrounded by flashing traffic lights form several islands, and pedestrians arrive from one bank to the other. This kind of crossing has to be repeated seven or eight times. From the brightly lit Station Square, it turned into King's Cross road. The lights at the end of that road always seem to be out. X Architects (one of their studios) is just down the road, and from the window you can see all kinds of paper and wood models, a bleak reminder that we live right here in the fragile city of architecture - the world in which everything comes from nothing.]

Bear: (lanky body stops again) I'm reminded of when I was in architecture school. I used to just wonder **how I could match that kind of education**. I read books like Francesca Fuse's *The Architecture of Error*, zooming in on a line and realizing it's the superposition of countless errors. The invention of CAD, the computer-automated drawing acronym, was invented in the MIT labs, the drawing pad. What if we zoom in on these lines?

Monkey: Order and disorder.

Goat: We need to bring our works together now.

Monkey: What do you mean, 'bringing together'?

Bear: To establish a frame of reference. To **locate** ourselves.

Goat: No. For me, it's most important to figure out why I'm here. (Taking out a cigarette) I remembered what P said again, that making art is very demanding.

Zebra: What does it mean?

Monkey: What are the specific requirements?

Goat: She didn't say. But we can all relate, right?

Bear: I'm envious of the kind, where everything you do seems effortless. But there are people who make art like swinging a sledgehammer, it's a lot of effort, and they can't push anything over.

Goat: People like P, who works as an art teacher, they've seen too many artists so they come to that conclusion after all these years. I understand that requirement to be an overachiever, to be seen.

Monkey: Can it really be, seen.....?

Bear: P also said that if it was about making money, there were so many things to do.

Goat: But our compatriots are the ones who talk and turn in other directions.... Either turning their backs on art or using it as a fancy tool.....

Zebra: So that means we'll get to be seen. We're different.

Bear: Zebra, you can apply for one of those short-term education programs, not a regular school, but to get a certificate and apply for the new con prize.

Zebra: Thanks, I'll go back and look.

Monkey: (emotionally) There are very few people who really want to make art.

Zebra: Some just want to stay here in the name of art.

Goat: You can't get an identity by staying here doing art, right?

Bear: Of course you can, study here, apply for a PSW visa and then apply for a global talent visa. There's always a way to stay if you want to.

Goat: Stay here legally for ten years. Then you can get permanent residence, right?

Bear: You can only work and study. You can't leave the country for more than a certain period of time.

Monkey: I still can't accept that. Some no longer care about the lower world. Since so many people don't create art 100% for the sake of art, how does the art world recognize purer other motives?

Bear: (finally speaking up) This is where I was robbed.

All: (stop) What?!

Bear: The robber. Holding a knife on me.

Monkey: When?

Bear: A few years ago. When I first came to London for matriculation.

Goat: What he looked like?

Monkey: Was he scary?

Bear: (smiling) The funny thing is he wasn't as tall as me, looked not as big as me, not intimidating at all. I still dutifully gave him my wallet. I didn't fight.

Zebra: Geez. You don't know if he had a gun.

Goat: Yes.

Zebra: They'll do anything.

Bear: Get a gun, get a knife, it's all the same. I just gave him all I had. I often feel like I have no passion. I didn't fight. Not even thought about it.

ACT 1
SCENE 3

[November 2021. In Monkey's room. An Ikea-white table made of pressed composite material with its long side next to the owner's bed, which had no headboard and clung to an electric heater with blackened vents on the wall. Two plastic Ikea chairs, and two wooden balcony chairs were retrieved from the garbage dumps of two streets, respectively.

Deep down the back wall is the electric double oven kitchen range and a shower. Because of a miscalculation in the renovation, there was only room for one frying pan on the stove, making it too big for the second stove to be used at the same time. To the left of the cooktop was a rice cooker, and to the right were greasy, red-labelled bottles and cans, and there was always a red oil on the tabletop when you picked one up. The two cupboards with no partitions are filled with 10kg of rice, large packages of spicy instant noodles, bundles of noodles, dried mushrooms, seaweeds, dried chilli peppers, peppercorns, star anise, and other dried ingredients. There are no unwashed dishes in the sink, a sponge, a bottle of fruit-flavoured dishwashing liquid, a mixed plastic cutting board, four or five Ikea white plain porcelain bowls stacked neatly according to size, five pairs of chopsticks, four teams of knives and forks, four spoons, a pair of scissors, and a rice cooker's included plastic rice scoop in the drawer.

The four enter the room in turn through the longitudinal doorway. No shoes are changed. A drying rack full of clothes. There is air conditioning on the wall - not uncommon in the UK. They turn on the air conditioning as the electric heater has been broken for a while.]

Bear: (taking off his dark indigo waterproof jacket, pulls out a chair and sits down directly in front of the air conditioner, looks at his tablet)

Goat: (sitting against the door, re-wears his beanie) It's cold, what are we going to eat later?

Monkey: (clears items off the desk, organizes plugboard to charge the phone) How about dumplings. We can buy frozen ones online and cook them at my place when they're delivered.

Bear: (pulls out his cell phone and scrolls through the pages) Sure. I'll do it.

Zebra: (Tweaking) We have some stew at home. I'll heat it. I'll get some beer later.

Bear: Are four packs of dumplings enough?

Goat: Pretty good.

Bear: (puts away cell phone) Bought and delivered between 7.30 and 9. What were we talking about outside?

Monkey: New Contemporaries Prize... Steps up the ladder in the art world...

Bear: (pulls out his tablet) Let's see which artists have been chosen for this year's new contemporaries. Look at this. Our classmate N and her work.

[On the screen is a side view of a woman leaning back. The camera is close to her. She is smoking. She is wearing a headscarf.]

Monkey: (admiringly and excitedly) It's very striking, and the angle of the over-the-shoulder shot is great.

Goat: You've seen her before, she was also in Gallery S. Already a mom of four.

Bear: (Doesn't say anything but gazes at the screen. Goes back to the home page of the awards. Click on the next picture) Look at this one.

Zebra: (turns his head forty-five degrees to try to get a better look) It's a black piece of bread.

Bear: It's a human-shaped piece of toasted bread.

Goat: Is it a work of a black artist?

Bear: (continues clicking on the next picture) Yes. Now look at this. It's the work of a Chinese artist.

Goat: What is this?

Bear: She picks her dates on Tinder, all white men, and documents the breakfasts she makes for them.

[The doorbell rings in an old tone - as if some rusty iron latch were jerked.]

Monkey: The dumplings are here!

Zebra: I'll get them.

[Zebra takes a two-ply white plastic bag with Chinese characters from the doorway. The seal is tied in a dead knot. He cuts open the pack with scissors and pulls out four packages of frozen dumplings, one pack of peanuts, and two dozen boxes of Vita Lemon Tea.]

Zebra: Let's start boiling three packages of dumplings, I'm afraid they won't fit in the pot.

Bear: That's okay.

Goat: How many entries were selected last year?

Bear: Over a thousand applications, shortlisted over 70 artists, used to be half that. Look at this painting, goofy and stupid.

Goat: Some called them bad paintings.

Zebra: (Facing Bear) Have you got any clues from analyzing their work this way?

Bear: (seriously) Look at their templates and keywords. For example, this one, domestic images + religion, and this one, moving images + earth art, and N's, feminism and the Middle East complexity. The three of us need to know what no one else has done if we're applying this year.

Goat: (leaning back, provocatively) What hasn't anyone else done?

[Zebra takes out a saucepan and fills it with tap water on the electric stove. Opens the refrigerator and pulls out the stew he made yesterday and serves it to the table. Goat takes his cigarettes out, the packet a close-up of a greyish-yellow toenail, and opens the window behind.]

Zebra: (carefully placing dumplings in boiling water and turning on the hood) What do you guys say, do I have a shot at applying for this award?

Bear: (turns his body toward the kitchen, loudly) Sure! But you'll need to have a substitute art education certificate.

Zebra: (turns off the hood) What do you mean?

Bear: There are quite a few organizations like this in the UK where you can pay a small fee to take some art classes. For example, New Contemporaries recognizes several alternative arts education, check out the official website.

Zebra: (dries her hands and takes out her cell phone) Let me see.

Goat: When casting an image, how long can you upload a video?

Bear: Two minutes. It has to be cut to two minutes.

Goat: Look at our straight-A students. You already knew!

Zebra: (swiping the phone screen with his left hand, fluctuating the dumplings in the boiling water with a colander in his right) Ah, that's terrible. There's editing to be done.

Bear: For the efficiency of the judges.

Monkey: Goat, will you be uploading the *Stadium* piece?

Goat: (puts the cigarette out) Yes. It's my graduation piece and I've been here all year to finish it.

Zebra: I've been working on a proposal to apply for an open call for my previous work. It feels like programs like Landscape Society are too old a concept.

Goat: What are the popular, trendy topics? Gender, environment, emotions. Rethinking neoliberalism. Urgency and crisis.

Monkey: Very good.

Bear: (turns his body toward Goat, solemnly) The point is, *I-love-my-home*. (note: it is a TV show broadcast in 1990s China)

Goat: Haha!

Zebra: I don't practice like that. I avoid using identities.

Bear: Not exactly identity. Rather, it's your coordinate system. Look at this, it's an overlay of horror elements and stupid drawings. You need to take up a pit.

Goat: My feeling is that the awards given in the UK are really the same as the selection criteria of the galleries at home. Bear's analysis makes sense, but that's their work. We haven't been able to get into that system, that's the thing.

Bear: (tapping the table passionately) So you know why P liked your previous work!

Goat: Scared me.

Bear: That work of yours, a previous piece, it took up two big pits! One Asian, one horror, plus, Chinese urban development. How about this! Three big coordinates!

Goat: (worriedly) Why do you care so much about these?

Bear: I can't sleep at night. The more I read, the more I can't sleep. By the way, Zebra, your performance work is all about the moment. Moment versus eternity.

Zebra: Wait a minute. The dumplings are ready.

All: Great!

[Zebra serves the dumplings. Four plates of dumplings, a stew, fried peanuts, vinegar, and chilli oil. The table is set.]

Goat: There are two kinds of people in the art world, those who follow the rules, or those who don't care at all. I wanted to get into the world like that before, disregarding everything. But in China, Gallery M Gallery, Gallery G, and Institution X, all these places I have observed their choice of artists, all of whom are overseas art graduates. They are very smart and know where the boundaries of the mechanism are.

Monkey: If the rules make it difficult, how can one continue to practice? What is the motivation?

Goat: That's what's very demanding for artists. How do you sustain within the limitations. I've been thinking lately about going home after graduation and doing some filming in my hometown. That once-industrial town is in disrepair, and a lot of the people who used to work there suffer from cerebral thrombosis, and the old man walks with a tremor. But I didn't want to make it into a documentary, besides, it's hard to pass the investigation for such realism. When I exhibited in China before, there were times when my works could not be shown.

Bear: (thinking and taking a bite of dumpling) Why do I want to make fine art and video..... It doesn't seem to be something that excites me, it's something that makes me comfortable. I learned a lot of things when I was a kid, and drawing was the only thing that stuck. I entered a national drawing competition in elementary school, and I won first prize. The school called my parents and they finally took my art thing seriously. Then teachers from other schools recommended me for competitions as well. In junior high school, my mom bought me a camera and I started making videos. That video also won an award. In high school, my mom asked me if I wanted to go abroad. I went to the S College office in Shanghai. The teacher at the office said my paintings were not quite up to standard, so I asked what kind of paintings were up to standard. I saw it and went back to imitate it. I also went to the office's promotions. I was very active in several activities. I passed the interview and went to S College's preparatory program. Bachelor's degree in architecture, that was my mom's suggestion, a lot of people in my family are architects, and I thought I should be able to support myself a living in the future.

Goat: Did your family object when you later switched to art?

Bear: No. Mom was very supportive. I think she was the only one who supported me.

Goat: (picks up a dumpling and eats it in one bite) Are we getting off track here?

Bear: Of course not.

Goat: I've been there. Kept thinking about things other than art. I recognize the necessity but.....

Monkey: It's really hard to know the methodology of winning the art world, isn't it?

Bear: There are works like this every year. You take a look and you know they've got the same methodology. Architectural plans, portraits, catalogues, plus image research, I've seen a lot of that done. Inverted moulds. Layout information. Display information methodology, plus the dimension of "strangeness". The teacher passes on his methodology to his students. This is what that teacher has been doing for decades.

Goat: A lot indeed.

Zebra: But it's not art. (picks up the spoon in the dip) You see, the light refracts on this spoon and then into my eyes. I feel touched in a trance. Such a subtle feeling. ART.

Monkey: Have you ever doubted yourselves the most?

Zebra: Seeing my own work and having the feeling of "Why do I have to do this work? Why does it have to be me?" That kind of feeling.

Bear: (picks up chopsticks, but doesn't have an appetite) It's confusing. I can't see anything other than the New Contemporaries as a chance to get a chance in this soil.

Zebra: What about looking a little farther? What if we don't win this selection?

Bear: I'm in a bottleneck, Valborg. Running out of images of the Other and starting to use my own. I think it's either technology or content that's looking for a breakthrough.

Technically, let's say I want to do an effect, realize an image, a picture presented on canvas, the canvas is indoors and the light is shining on it. I don't have a way to get it out right now, so I'm working on the effect. My whole MA is about the screen. Kind of want to paint now.

Goat: Painting? You don't make videos anymore?

Bear: I don't know what else I could have done. Look at the artists who made the cut. Asian. They can do Hong Kong, they can do Taiwan, they can do Wuhan, what am I going to do, my hometown?

Goat: What's wrong with your hometown? You don't know your hometown.

Monkey: What happens when the enthusiasm for art fades?

Bear: I don't need to be passionate.

Zebra: How can that be?

Goat: When I first came to London and walked into the Tate collection, I was so excited to see Bacon's paintings, and the installations. I just immediately recalled what it was. I saw the artwork on the back cover of the pirated book I bought in high school, *American Impressionism*. Two girls carrying lanterns. It was that correspondence. It's the feeling of a young dream coming true.

Zebra: Me too. Maybe we sanctify art too much?

Monkey: Maybe we've sanctified passion.

[Silence]

Monkey's Ikea table - the cheap table pressed out of composite material and covered by a piece of plastic before the agent threw it next to the garbage can – it was in the last week of the contract, and the agent sent someone to paint the interior walls so that when the next tenant came to look at the room, they would smell the latex paint smell a little less. Where is this table in the table world? High up: a modern design office where engineers have created a

design system that no one can veto. In the middle: a factory labour shop where workers breathe in particles that don't belong in their bodies every day. Below: tall, sturdy and airtight containers, transported for loading and unloading to docks around the world - this £17 Ikea item is highly reimagined in every way with the Paradise Lost triptych.

At 1am, Bear and Goat get up to leave. They wait for their respective Ubers in front of the cemetery across the road from Monkey's studio room. There are graves of all kinds of bodies which used to belong to all kinds of ethnicities, and one or two of them were Chinese. In the 1930s, a family from Vienna named Freud moved to some next road. On a knoll an hour's walk from Monkey's is now the Freud museum. The great psychologist spent just his dying year there and his daughter, fellow psychologist Anna Freud's room held talking couches for visitors. They often walk to Hampstead Green, for their health, or subconsciously seek the silence of hiding in the woods, even when war and homeland are no longer around.

A Critic / Summary

In this play, three artists mediate between the self and the art world, but I didn't show much journeying or anything conclusive to the audience: there is no end yet. Through a series of words and actions, the artists identify their places in an art world map, and they wonder, whether or not it makes sense to exist as a mark on it, in other words, why the art world they encountered is not all about making art but more about presenting something worth presenting.

Rather than a highly abstract theatrical construction, I hope to reproduce the situation of the individuals who gave voice to the artists, highlighting the psychological process of the artists' interpretation and positioning of themselves in the London art world under a trailing light that functions as a theatre. Before entering the field, I tried to understand the artists as individuals who react to their environment with self-expression, but in reality, their self-revealing mental processes are not necessarily reflected in the adaptation of the work to the environment. This is largely due to the fact that the art world as a variety of environments and conditions (as well as their own crises) have a great impact on the artists' ability to present a self-role of manoeuvring and expression.

Here I would like to borrow the lens of psychoanalysis, which has experienced some split or disengagement with anthropology at the level of observation and practice. Within the paradigms of systematized cognitive and developmental psychology and even clinical psychology²², every situation we face in life can be explained by our internal representative models of the world and the self. The research methodology I adopted was flexible in that I was able to gain a direct sense of and a realistic assessment of various conflictual situations that transcend creative and public-political expression through non-studio visits, non-interviews, and non-readings of the work, i.e., through the experience of working with, being

²² I refer to the third volume in Bowlby's (1980) series on attachment and loss, where he explores the psychological impact of sadness, from an attachment theory perspective.

friends with, and even living with the artists. (A documentary filmmaker friend said that you need to spend a long enough time providing security for them. Of course, similar to documentary filmmaking, the ethical position in which ethnographic writing finds itself is worth revisiting and critiquing.)

In cognitive/developmental psychology, there is no shortage of cases where “a father emphasizes that he loves his child, but the child senses the opposite fact” (Bowlby, 1980). By comparing the situations, we probably can translate the art world into some organic system that constantly conveys a critique of justice and a picture of love and peace, but what the artist feels is pressure and abandonment. In this situation, artists might confront the similar Oedipus complex when they face the father-like-art-world. Could it be that both love and art leave behind the most mysterious and unmeasurable qualities at the conceptual and cognitive level? Should the artists accept their own point of view, or should they accept the facts emphasized by their father art world? I would like to use the analytical framework of “self/world-ideal model” to present some possible cognitive processes that artists go through, including how they react when they encounter information that is difficult to deal with, incompatible with the ideal model, yet persistent.

Firstly, what does art education in London mean to Chinese artists. This question can be subdivided into, what are the learnable and teachable parts of art education for the artists? What is the interaction between the ideal educational model and the ideal artist model? What is the trial of the image for the visual artist? By answering these questions, artists show me how they sort themselves out and reveal how it is possible to fit themselves into the two ideal models.

For Bear, the ideal era for art education in London was 20 to 30 years ago. According to him: the school of architecture was full of masters; Essay film was the most popular form of experimental image, or at least no one thought it was outdated. The art world’s self-contained art education remained stable with him, so he thought and created around “matching himself to that education”, developing an adaptive wit - becoming a straight-A student, a student praised and awarded. However, he does not reveal whether he holds a model of the ideal self. Architecture-video-painting-architecture, he experimented with different mediums, different

artistic languages in two years. It is easy to form a judgment about such a self-construction based on meritocratic critique, that is, the loss of the not-yet-explicit self.

Goat is sceptical of the art education he had experienced in London (as a B student), but his experience of not having the opportunity to exhibit in Beijing prompted him to change his cognitive model - the art world recognizes systematic art education. He stands between “following the rules” and “going wild”, and the high cost of video practice has left him torn between following the rules, going wild, and making a living.

Zebra believes that art cannot be taught, and he maintains his own rhythm within art making and life. Thanks to the internet, many small art organizations in the UK have opened up opportunities for public submissions, and Zebra did get a chance to exhibit by submitting a proposal. But like Goat, such access was almost non-existent when it came to surviving in Beijing. For Zebra, therefore, the ideal model of the art world is relatively stable, characterized by openness, but there is also an element of flux in this model, i.e., trials based on certain real-life conditions.

Among other things, the gradual replacement of the trial of the image by a synthesis of text and the experience of exposure is seen by all three artists as evidence of the art world’s gradual abandonment of certain aesthetic standards and consequent decline. “You need more and more words to annotate your images”, they all lament. As visual artists, when the rotation of the art world gradually deviates from the exploration of the visual itself and gives more access to public issues, they feel that they have lost certain freedom - at least until they think about how the rotation/operation of their own creative selves can be synchronized with that of the public rotation/operation - and naturally they have to experience the mourning of the missed opportunities.

There is also the question of how the relationship between London’s art education system and the contemporary art market is perceived by artists as having an impact on their creativity, or whether the theme of pan-Asian political creativity implies a model of representation. They all wonder, what else artists need to do to have a place in the circulation of the industry to resist the complexity of interpersonal relationships, systemic decay, and de-

egoization of the process, as well as the psychological defense processes that come with the mis/failure to position the self in the world.

Throughout Bear's long experience of schooling, the "match" with art education in London became a goal he actively pursued. He actively contacted teachers at his school, especially those with many years of experience in the arts as a valuable resource. Before each meeting, he planned his questions to make sure he was presentable and received suggestions for changes to his work and information about the art world. But the world is not a calm rice mill, or even a well-run factory, but a place where crises are projected by the larger world. At an artist's youth, perhaps not so much with age as with the life cycle of such moratorium (Erikson, 1968), they don't know what to do to escape the crisis or what it means to succumb to it, and the artist's nerves become taut at a time when it is difficult to ensure their own safety, let alone resist the pressure of forced choices with a kind of inner originality that is apt to resist them with aplomb. Rather than employing some kind of adaptive resourcefulness at school, Bear is forced to make inspired by a certain state of stress.

Earlier in the life cycle than Goat and Zebra, Bear moves out of the ideological and cultural environment of his birth into a distinct other. Here, the relationship between ideology and identity becomes a very crucial influence.

First of all, I would like to introduce here the birth of certain ideal models of the art world, which are categorized into short-term and long-term ones. The young history of Chinese contemporary art is precisely involved in the construction of the artists' ideal model, mainly, how the qualitative differences between Chinese contemporary art and the larger art world, as well as their interaction, intervene in the artist's judgment and choice of the ideal models. It is the avant-gardism position of the Chinese contemporary art that still has a sturdy long-term impact on the young Chinese artists who grow up in the society where the abuse of civil rights is a common phenomenon in their daily life.

As a short-term ideal model, the artist emphasizes creative freedom, i.e., a value orientation that is not vague, but a very specific demand to break free from every audit and control. For artists growing up in the Republic of China in the 1990s, freedom did not only mean basic but rare ideological values, but also the power to support their judgment and face

the symbols in front of them in every moment of trying to get through. Yet this yearning for freedom often constitutes only a model for a fleeting ideal. I think a more fundamental reason is human's powerlessness to be free (Fromm, 1941), no matter what ideological value system we are in, not to mention the art world where complex and pluralistic values merge.

To merge the long-term and short-term ideal models, on the other hand, has to balance freedom and sustainability, because symbiotic with the long-term ideal model is the prolonged crisis in the human world that is hard to shake no matter how much individuals pray for peace. However, the dilemma is that the artist is faced that whether or not to carry on a certain ideological legacy as their artistic theme throughout their art practicing. Art for the past or for the future? Art for themselves or for all? Here the artist is called upon to engage in the imagination of a community of human destiny and to give feedback on the longstanding humanistic and moral responsibility of the arts, an ideal type of heterodox revolution.

Last and the least, this seems a question not very in tune with others: what does "mother" mean to the artists, and indeed to all people, as intrusive discourses in the "Oedipus complex" art world? Bear and Goat's teacher said (and they relayed it to me with great approval) that the world expects a lot from artists. This might imply that the artists have to figure out how to think beyond and get out of their predicament. For example, I think, they don't need to pay attention to anyone's judgment in the world, except their mothers'. Mother as a metaphor is the protector of the smallest accomplishments, so small that they wouldn't be cared for by the art world where only a few get attention. So is being small a way out? This is a question I will ponder on and respond to in the next chapters.

Postscripts

2022 and 2023. Another round of forced quarantine is enforced in China's major cities, led by Shanghai, and unnatural death statistics are blocked from spreading on social media. Meanwhile, the real estate-funded art galleries close down, and employment of fresh graduates reaches an all-time low. Goat returns home after 21 days of hotel quarantine. Bear prepares to leave art to pursue architecture again. Zebra decides to apply to a non-tuition-

based art college in Europe. Their mailboxes all sit still with emails beginning with “we are sorry to inform you.....”, from institutions large and small in the UK, Europe, and even around the world, and of course the New Contemporaries Award they have engaged like an exam revision session in this play.

Chapter 5 Searching and Leaving Chinese “diaspora”: avidities, insights and the unfinished imaginations

Introduction

In this chapter I will continue to explore what kinds of issues and dilemmas unfold in the individual’s search for and departure from a process of perceiving the identities of being overseas Chinese. I will demonstrate, through a sequence of encounters, how individuals cope with their underdeveloped relationships with art. From the perspective of art practitioners as well as my own experiences of sojourning and migrating in and out of London, I will discuss what Chinese identity means for the reality of “diasporic” life in London. The questions I seek to raise and explain are: Chineseness in the language of daily life and the language of art, how they are acquired, thought about, transformed and displayed amongst the Chinese migrants in London, their indeterminate and imbalanced qualities, whether economic and political factors are the most important differentiators, and their limitations.

In addition to this, I will show how political and cultural conflicts that have continued since the twentieth century have generated discussions among Chinese immigrant groups, and how they have engaged in dialogues with the ever-changing currents of thought in their creations. Drawing on historical studies of contemporary Chinese migrant communities and the migrant narratives I encountered in the field, I will discuss what role art plays in the contemporary diasporic situations, and what realities the researcher can pursue in their position, with the years of pandemic as the spatial and temporal coordinates of lives.

1 The absence of art and the math problem

Don’t put the scissors on the glass of the chest freezer. If the bad teenagers take it, you’ll be dead. Says Lee, in a familiar grammatical way that places conditional clauses in the front of a sentence and puts the triggered result at the back.

If it was said in English, we should have heard “You’ll be dead, if...” The conditional clause, which is the antecedent in Mandarin grammar, is moved to follow the consequent as a sort of complement, which emphasizes the effect of the consequence.

This is not a performance of “Chinglish” (a linguistic art dying out) though, this is a little grocery store in east London. Lee is the queen of her terrain, the “economist” and the “general officer”. I’m a part-time helper. She is instructing me on how to display the frozen dumplings and near-expiring stuff in the chest freezer. Always put the near dates at the top, a very important thing to remember, says the “economist”. And don’t forget the scissors, there appears the “general officer”. I deduce the reason for her constant warnings from the large rippling pattern on the glass of the store’s entryway, which has been hit by hard rocks or something.

The name of this little palace is Lee’s Asian Grocery. It opened in 2021. She tells me in Cantonese-accented Mandarin to be vigilant at all times, especially when opening and closing. It’s been a bit of a mess around here lately, she says as she stands behind the cash register, in front of a monitor with the prices of some of the items in bulk, such as the small chilli peppers that are difficult to barcode with price tags. At her feet, is a removable heater; the store is not equipped with heating ducts.

At the corner of the cashier, where she can see out and it’s hard to see in, the glass is posted with promotional products and student discounts, and it’s there that she sometimes sees teenagers in sweatshirts and hoodies pouring juice or some sticky liquid on the heads of dark-haired women, and those young men kicking them in the waist and buttocks as they ride by on their bicycles and then laughing as they ride away.

Her eyes occasionally look out of the window as she talks to me. The cargo will be here any minute today. She knows this cargo team very well, they sometimes help her with a little bit of unpacking, and she gives them some snacks. She and her husband used to run a small family café here, which closed and was replaced with this shop. She asks if I work out or do any sports in my free time as a PhD student - I guess she asks this because she sees my legs shaking the whole time I climb the ladder putting boxes on the shelves – No, I don’t, I try to explain to her that my previous part-time job was frying chips in a restaurant, although I

mean to confess, I have no experience getting heavy boxes onto the shelves one-handed - that's usually the kitchen porter's work. Instead, I say let me try. I carry the box and then climb the ladder, but the cargo box is so heavy and the ladder so high that it is an impossible task. She laughs when she sees my clumsiness and tells me to get off the ladder. She holds the half-man-high box under one arm, climbs up the ladder (without handholds), and the box is tossed gently onto the shelf like a magic cube. In three minutes she moves ten boxes.

On the walls are pictures of her ceramic work done in Hong Kong more than ten years ago. Dark blue, classically shaped flower vessels. She fancies travelling, and ceramics. She believes in the calming effects of making art. She knows contemporary art, the conceptual, and the social intervening actions led by famous figures. She learned all that in Hong Kong. But they all turn very distant after she leaves the art college and lives for a working life. She can't find a time slot to tuck in art. She worries her time, like a sponge, is so full that can no longer absorb anything. That's what she tells me when tossing boxes onto the shelves one after another.

Now the cargo team is here, no time for chit-chat. It's like we are immersed in a fascinating sliding block game, the Klotski. Our goal is to figure out how to create larger spaces with the fewest moves or in the shortest time possible. This involves dragging the near-dated items out and pushing the newly arrived ones inside. Next, we disassemble the cubic cardboard boxes into flat sheets and bind them tightly with very sturdy plastic straps. At the end of each day, normally after 10 pm, we check which goods have decreased by 30% and which ones have remained unsold. Based on the inventory, we order new stock and discount the near-expiry items. Lee has become very adept at this game, efficiently moving boxes in and out with minimal time, ensuring there is not a single gap in the small warehouse. This maintains a balance between the storage space and the flow of goods, maximizing retail revenue, and getting permanent legal citizenship.

Once this game starts, however, there is no way to turn back. It has taken ten years of her life since she last touched her ceramic works. It will take more. I look up at her, my hands trembling holding the ladder stable on its feet. I feel the weight. I suddenly think of someone I know, who also got trapped in some math problem and stopped her art.

The first time I went to H's flat, I had just arrived in London with no knowledge of where the "posh" and "trendy" areas are, although I thought that her flat belonged in a convenient area, with the tube station just downstairs, and tall glass office buildings in a stone's throw. She unlocks the electronic lock next to the glass door with a code, then we enter the hotel-style lobby. There she greets the young man in reception, signaling that I am a guest.

We enter the carpeted elevator shaft to the floor she is staying on. This floor has similar decorative paintings to the downstairs lobby, and the carpet echoed that of the elevator room. She opens one of the same wide doors and hands me a bottle of pressed disinfectant alcohol to spray the soles of my shoes before I enter her apartment. She has a room for me to put my coat in, where there's also a large totem bag of household items already packed away. And in a blue Ikea plastic bag, the almost brand new milk foam maker, and a projector.

They are all for you, she says, you should need them since you've just moved here. She walks to the other side of the living room and inserts the yellow bouquet into a glass vase. A projector is too much, I ask her, don't you need one? She says she already has a new one. The projector for me was used during her last exhibition at school. What kind of work, I ask. She says nothing. I enter her living room and pass my survey around: the walls are smooth and abstract paintings are hanging; the cabinets gleam as if they are never used. Her living room has two coffee tables, both decorated with elegant sculptures in shiny metal and wood. I follow her and sit at the higher coffee table. She first came to London from Beijing a few years ago to attend a secondary school in London and is now about to enter the MFA program at an art college, where Chinese students make up a third of their class.

Her parents bought her this two-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment in London, and now she rents out one half to another student who is also coming from China. She sighs that her parents want her to immigrate to Canada with them when she graduates, but she loves London and has a great passion for London life - not including dealing with their apartments. When buying an apartment she was required to read the contracts for her parents who don't speak English. They have to make sure that when they sell it, the price is 180% higher than what it was before, so they won't get deceived by the estate agent to take away their profit in

the soaring market. “It will be definitely higher than 180%”, with a certain tone, she says, “It’s **only a math problem**”, that more and more Chinese students are arriving in London and jacking up the rents, and that it is better to buy than to let, and make money when you sell at a good point. To let me understand how much it means, she says she pays her own tuition fee with her apartment’s profit.

When we meet again, it’s one winter morning at a second-hand market on the outskirts of London. She has bought a lot of not-so-everyday domestic objects such as antique pendulums, silverware and table ceramics, and excitedly takes long looks at them on our way back to London. I guess that her works revolve around objects, or perhaps artists who leave home are sometimes keen on little moveable objects, so I ask her if she practices art in such ways. She tells me her school hasn’t built up new studios for ceramics yet, and there aren’t enough studios for the expanded numbers of students. Does she make no art? Is it the math thing or sustaining a certain routine of life preventing her from her artmaking? I wonder and cannot relate. She doesn’t talk much on the way back, especially about artmaking, and even deliberately avoids questions about it.

Despite the vastly different living circumstances of Lee and H in London, both have, to varying degrees (either voluntarily or involuntarily), relegated their time for artistic creation to the margins of their daily lives, or even sacrificed it entirely. Lee’s economic livelihood depends more on her physical labour, while H’s economic activities hinge on capital for purchasing property and the dynamics of the real estate market. By juxtaposing their diverse experiences, my aim is not to highlight the economic disparities or any ethical implications among Chinese residents in London, but rather to explore how, in such different circumstances, they both have come to leave their art away from life.

The premise of exploring this question is whether the artistic practices of individuals with vastly different dimensions of daily economic activities can be compared, and whether it is valid to use their identity as part of the Chinese community in London as a condition for comparison. As someone who shares the same ethnic identity, my task is to record and understand the relationship between their art and their daily lives. If follow the anthropological theory of practice as explained by Ortner (1994), it is respective social

positions and reciprocal relationships that largely accomplish and prevent us from further developing our understanding of each other. In fact, Lee who has found it difficult to establish the business pays me every penny of my wages for my trial shifts in which I put in no effective physical labour; H never shows contempt for my dining ignorance and is even willing to share her material life with me. Both Lee and H are generous to me in our encounters.

My sense of shame comes from my strange academic position in both situations. In the face of the low-income migrant, I seem to belong to the intellectual groups funded and protected by the institutions and laws. When Lee asks me why I'm still working such a part-time job, why I don't have an office job, she'll think I'm mocking her if I refer to Graeber's words that many well-paid jobs are bullshit jobs with no constructive meaning in the demolishing economies – of course, I won't say that, the truth is it's easier for me to get a physical job immediately during the fieldwork year in London.

While confronting the art students with high-net-worth family assets, I am someone from a “peasant-working class” family making a living in London, occupying a moral high ground, voicing a critique of neo-Darwinian social distribution and indicting the injustices of social exclusion. I find myself doubting if I can be an honest recorder of our co-living in such a city, and if, “we” remain a certain “we”, whose minor feelings (Hong, 2020) deserve a representative description and care

When I was confronted with the actual segregation of the overseas Chinese by the political-economy grid, the self-doubt functions as a warning. It reminds me again of the unassailable being of the other (Wardle & Rapport, 2024: 2) and the gulf between ideological ideals into practice. I recognize that I have to arrive at an understanding of and trust in multifaceted encounters of people living in various situations. The core of understanding, I think, may lie in how I write about their attitudes and actions toward maintaining diverse ways of London life. Although their daily decisions exhibit a utilitarian mindset, which immerses them in the “math problems” and strategies, giving their art time in, I realize my stance will never be to criticize such mindset but to question what living conditions have prompted such thinking. I believe and imagine, that there remains a cosmopolitan

commonality that transcends economic status differences, regardless of the income level. But what could it be?

With the confusion brought about by the unspecified form of the above two relationships (which I unilaterally feel is friendship), I will continue to think about what it means to be overseas Chinese today in this chapter. It can be generalized at the stage of the initial impression, under the unbalanced presentation of the economic behaviours or rationalities, but is also the continuation of the twentieth-century political revolutions in daily life: complex interactions, intertwined and implicated. Beyond the quadrant of economic behaviour, how do political preferences, historical perspectives, and cultural affinities shape the specific meaning of being overseas Chinese? How is it appropriate to describe Chineseness as a creative subject and the subjectivity of the Chinese immigrant community, and how does it reveal itself amid differences and interactions? What is the new meaning of discussing Chinese identity today? And is it fair to other groups who are also seeking a place to live in a foreign land (those who lost their homes to war in these years)?

2 Overseas Chinese, meaning and feeling?

Here I might not be able to start all over from several centuries ago, although if the geographical discoveries and the Enlightenment of human society were significant points in human history, such a large human settlement as China was of course also under the historical influence. It keeps flowing with the meeting of religions and the internationalization of trade in Southeast Asia being manifested at an early stage, however, they seem all too brief, and such movements seem to be covered under the macro narratives: from the 16th to the mid-19th centuries, migration and trade were constrained by centralized policies, and it was not until the late imperial period, in the second half of the 19th century, that coastal explorers, labourers, and exiles in this part of the world began the gradual revolution phase of their migrations (Kuhn, 2008). And together they participated in the linkages of world trade and established themselves in all corners of the globe, wherever the ocean waves touch.

From the founding of the Republic to the present day, the study of the diaspora of Chinese immigrants, as a group is large in number, complex in its economic activities, and diverse in its cultural identities, has centred around the interpretation of a certain complexity of attributes. According to Tu Weiming (1994), diaspora is about the experience of the marginalized, especially the deep interaction between the mode of survival of overseas Chinese and the local development, which is beyond the displacement of a single ethnic group. With hundreds of years of cultural interaction, the term “diaspora”, from being a historical and traumatic narrative exclusive to certain peoples, has gradually been used by all expatriates within the realm of identity politics, including the Chinese who rationally and strategically engage with everything around them, and whose “strategies for structuring their relationships with the international business community, family, society and state” (Chan and Chiang, 1994: 356). In a way, the reticence and not engaging (Joyce, 2021) that characterizes the feature of silence still applies to contemporary uprooted people who are at a loss to find protection against danger, anxiety and loneliness, and to find the hope that sustains them in the midst of the uneasiness or conflict between immigration and citizenship, and in the midst of the turbulence of the world’s trends.

In terms of the population, historical patterns, and new economic policies, in the 1990s, according to Poston, Mao and Yu (1994), excluding Macau, and Hong Kong, there were about 30 million Chinese abroad. More than 85% of them were living in Asian countries, i.e. at least 3 million were living outside Asia. By 2011, there were 40.3 million Chinese scattered in 148 countries (Poston and Wong, 2016). In particular, the change in the political regimes of Hong Kong and Macau in the late 1990s meant that the definition of “China” changed, and as a result, there was a numerical decline in Chinese migrants (i.e. the Chinese in Hong Kong and Macau were no longer part of the Chinese diaspora). Between 2001 and 2011, overseas migration grew again and expanded to more countries at the destination level, with the largest increase in the Chinese overseas population occurring in Africa, up 6.1% from 2001, and the total value of China-Africa trade growing from \$1 billion to \$11.4 billion over the decade (Poston and Wong, 2016: 366). This is just one of the multiple statistics that

have put China in the spotlight as an expanding economy, with over 139,000 Chinese students coming to the UK by 2020 (Wang, 2021).

In the midst of this vast landscape with its big numbers, what confuses me is the small but numerous, faceless people who are obscured by the arrows on the migration charts and by economic rationality and political tendency. In *Minor Feelings* (2020), Korean American author Cathy Park Hong discusses one of the most uncomfortable remarks she has encountered, such as, Asians are the closest race to white U.S. citizens, and she often finds herself mistaken for being Chinese, as many people assumed that Chinese was representative of all Asian ethnicities. Hong clearly articulates that the vast numbers of Asians living abroad sometimes obscure the internal complexities of the group and the suffocating pressure of being lumped together as “similar”. Some of the silent faces emerge again in my head: they wish to be a citizen, no longer a “silent traveller” in a more “civilized” metropolis. They aim to acquire an artistic career or just an opportunity or free time to practice art in a new homeland, longing to prove they are individuals of equal quality of being close to art.

One hundred years ago, Chinese writer Chiang Yee and his fellow intellectuals came to London and were confronted with a very different kind of civic life, wondering why the British were so politically engaged while the Chinese didn't talk about politics, why such a sense of democratic community never been nursed within Chineseness. He wondered why his peers had no understanding of the mechanisms of the modern state and citizenship, why they were called the “dull people”, and why the place where they lived was called the land of “barbarians”. Ironically, “dull” and “barbarians” form a sort of complex paradox, and also seem to be the explanation for itself: how is it that a people who never questioned the rites of Confucianism, the harmony between nation and family, or the laws of the universe (also “dao” in Taoism), a docile people who regarded the literati politicians and the knowledgeable as the most honourable, and who even despised any forms of collision, were able to inflict the most brutal violence on the individuals. In the studies of the overseas Chinese diaspora, although many of the authors have engaged their lifelong lived experiences to validate the inescapability of the identity tags in various fields, unfortunately, the effort itself has confirmed the weightlessness of Chinese migrant culture itself. Do the cultures and memories

of struggle matter in the new homeland? Maybe not too much, in many aspects. And in a lot of situations, Chinese migrants need to deal with the not-too-muchness in their new flexible citizenships (Ong, 1999), which constitutes another level of cultural significance.

Such unspeakable feelings exist among skilful people with a detached past working in restaurants, at food stalls, and in grocery stores. They know, for migrant art practitioners, skill matters, language ability matters and a common comprehension of the rules for surviving matters, but not one's own past and their wishes for a future, only if some pasts matter more than others – then they can speak about it, their aspiration to reach an art dream. Otherwise, they will have to figure out not only the living “math problem”, the best applicable optimal solutions, but also, in terms of art expression, how to pick a representing voice.

It is implicitly agreed that it is not the common experiences that remain in a good story, but those experiences recognize a life that allows complexity to occur, an individual's dilemma and conundrum moments, make good stories for reading. Could we suggest that, Chinese culture especially Mandarin Chinese culture, lacks a certain complexity that is truly pioneering, namely the quest for an ideal life that begins with a sense of independent individuality and the free expression of that quest? This critical judgement may seem outdated and insensitive. But for those who left home while continuing to face their repressing pasts, it is not over yet – their identities, although not a river flowing between fixed banks, still find it hard to be concluded into other waters, or to be cut for their own future edge. It is the pain it generates, which people have perpetuated over dozens of decades, and among the pain, it is the avidity and impedivity to save oneself from the fundamental inability to see who one really is – they know art helps. However, they've been cleaning the stains, untying the bondage, still feeling that have no time left to be what they really are. Through travel and emigration, what they keep doing is, to save oneself from an unescapable process of **explaining who they are not**.

3 Weightlessness and avidities

One artist told me, they are not expected by the art world to exhibit chill, light-hearted or identity-less artworks. They can, of course, but no one will pay real attention. “Why would they? Why immigrant artists should look like that, like she is a cosmopolitanist? She must be at the very top to be so careless. She would call out if she had suffered from discrimination.” The artist says. Their words seem to imply that, that’s how the art world sorts out their works, therefore playing with the pain of weightlessness has been accepted, unless there’s something weightier than their identities, a zero-sum game of weighing the meanings. One will lose if they do not apply their identities, and the loss will be even read as one’s privilege that no one cares about. There seems no other way of understanding the weirdness of undertaking the weight of identities yet not making compensation out of it. Because in the art world, such weirdness does not exist. It appears that no one makes such a move - the silent sounds in the woods.

I saw many young artists make artworks around food. And for myself in London, there’s no other part-time I can get more easily and quickly than frying aubergines in a restaurant. The identities of overseas Sino-phone communities as a whole entity through centuries mask the monolithic nature of other aspects of culture with the richness of its food, or, alternatively, all of our political culture has been squeezed into the food culture. Like in London’s Chinatown, there seems to be no street more densely populated with Chinese restaurants, food stalls, Chinese supermarkets, Chinese medicine clinics, employment and legal counselling firms for the Chinese. Of these stores, only the restaurant operates on a daily basis. One of the most popular spot is the Sizhou Supermarket, where crates of cold-chained or raw seafood, dried seafood and spices, as well as steamers, frying pans and other kitchen utensils that are hard to find in British supermarket chains, are parked at all times. Signs in traditional Chinese characters hang around the store. People of all sorts come to buy ingredients. Spicy and savoury dishes are so popular that even the least-spicy-consuming Chinese from the southeast coast are embracing Sichuan cuisine, and the prevalence of spice is increasing people’s tolerance of this specific sensation of pain.

Sadly, according to my interlocutors, food in Chinatown has become “no longer good”. A new generation of immigrants has rejected their flavours as “too old and too boring”. Most

tourists move through the streets with plastic cups stuffed with the new desserts, gulping down the solid-liquid mixture of tea water, buttermilk, pearl fruit made mostly of gluten, crème brûlée, red beans, and so on. “It’s so satisfying,” smiles the tourist, enjoying (and grateful for) the consumer experience that immigration and globalization have brought. Unfortunately, I visited Chinatown only a couple of times during my fieldwork year in London, because my artist friends don’t go there much. They go to East and South London and say, there are “cooler vibes”- the vibes in Chinatown are becoming progressively more outdated and deliberate, the big red lanterns that hang over the streets all year round no longer give a sense of festivity, and the occasional person takes a photo underneath the pagodas without lingering much. The duck carcasses hanging in the windows of roast duck restaurants have become very dry and thin, and the Chinese buffet has become very quiet. I heard a Chinese student making a documentary movie say that some of those behind the windows have been working here for more than ten years without an identity, sending money to their children back home, waiting for their families to come to London one day to reunite with them. Some never waited for one to appear in their whole lives.

There I am, in a cemetery in East London, seeing many tombstones without words, and there is a “Memorial to Chinese Friends” without bodies underneath - to unify the memory of the Chinese who died in England at the beginning of the 20th century without families to recognize them. During the Ching Ming Festival, when traditional Chinese families worship their ancestors at the beginning of April, I come to this cemetery in East London with the China Exchange volunteer organization to commemorate the Chinese buried there. At a concrete table in the playground next to the thin and muddy cemetery path, Fay, the head of the organization, spreads out a tablecloth and takes out two large plastic boxes containing cakes she made at home. She carries two large kettles of hot water and tea bags as well. There is another lady, who retired to volunteer with the organization. She says she doesn’t remember how to write her name in Chinese anymore. A couple standing across the table have been with the organization for 10 years, working as tour guides in Chinatown. They also develop souvenirs with Chinese cultural symbols, such as cutlery and napkins, to raise money for the organization.

Fay, who is British with no Chinese ancestry and for whom Chinese is an acquired language, says she is a Sino-philia. I ask how she feels about the not-muchness of Chineseness compared to the muchness of other groups of diaspora. She gets this question immediately as she is also facing the “math problem” for her own job, getting funding for the non-profit community in Chinatown. She assumes that the Sino-phone art practitioners are going through an identity crisis in the London art world. It is now easier to get more attention for exploring postcoloniality as one’s own identity, while it is harder to get feedback if one does not make this kind of art, and they are not sure if they are really “not quite there” as they were told. She then recalls, that in recent years, many art organizations have changed their names from Chinese to ESEA (East and South East Asia). After thinking for a while, Fay says, this is the new normal of running such organization. The nine small streets in Chinatown have witnessed the history of Chinese immigrants of all backgrounds, from the year of 1500 to the present day, from all over the world, and expanding the scope of the name is a way of re-examining history. To save the history of these nine streets is to save the memories of tens of thousands of families. Whether Chinatown, her organization ChinaExchange, or the new generation of Chinese immigrants to the UK, each individual and community is facing new challenges, how to seek the future of a new community. She says with a shrug of her shoulders and a show of her teeth with jam on, she believes in time.

Her words make me realize that the gradual weightlessness of Chineseness not only reflects the fact that, on the one hand, the complex political and socio-cultural interactions of ethnic Chinese cannot be summed up as “Chinese” or “Sino” (there exists a moral democratic tendency of **de**-Chineseness). Yet on the other hand, the application of Chineseness does contribute to the formation of a tolerant and pluralistic community, a scope that seems to be more inclusive and to carry more weight. At the level of psychological challenge, people I met find it less painful to adapt to the dominance of neo-liberal capitalism in displacement cultures by strategically re-positioning themselves. It also mirrors the agreement of immigrants to a pluralistic future, only if they have a right to make their own choices. While some reflect on their leaving Chineseness as an openness to the future, some warn themselves

not to forget that this nation's political culture has long since been diagnosed with collective amnesia.

In the winter of 2022, hundreds of millions of people lit candles, wore masks, and held up blank A4 paper on streets in various countries. The blank page is a metaphor for the forced silence of public political expressions. Portraits of Dr Li Wenliang, who reported the coronavirus in late 2019 but was detained by the police, contracted the virus while treating the injured and died on 7 February, 2020; the journalists who travelled alone to Wuhan to report on the story and then disappeared; the trip codes for customs clearance that were tied to their ID cards; the disease prevention officers who manned the entrances and exits of neighborhoods like warriors; the people who were treated like junkies and pet dogs and cats that were eliminated; asymptomatic families forcibly dragged into hospitals consisting of makeshift marching beds; white-collar workers in Shanghai with no food in their fridges; desperate old people leaping from windows; supplies that were consumed on highways that could not be delivered because of the rules of the trip code; HIV-infected people and patients with acute heart conditions who were off their medication; and my family anxiously waiting for a casket held on the road to be transported to place my grandpa's body.

Young people stand together in the squares, holding up white cloths with blood-coloured Chinese characters. Thirty years ago, our parents' generation experienced the same thing, the most promising college students and young people in all of China, defying their families and traveling several nights by train to a square where tanks were ambushed. Thirty years later, black crowds, in bursts of darkness, shouted for freedom - for democracy, for fairness - some for this, some for that. A man from southern China sits on the ground and can't stop crying like a newborn baby; he says he wants to go home, but he doesn't have a home anymore. A girl passed tissues by his side, picking up candles that had been blown over by the wind.

4 A note out of tune

“Oh please, don't call ourselves diaspora”, Says Wong. A fellow alumni alumni from back in China. We meet at a hotpot restaurant near Gare du Nord in Paris. He just ended his

service at the French Foreign Legion. I remember he used to apply to join the Chinese People's Liberation Army but failed because the ranking of our university was too low.

He disregards people who attended the anti-lock-down movements, especially people holding a tier-4 student visa, benefiting from the UK's medical service and higher education. He means, I think, don't use diaspora call out for something we think we deserve, no matter in the past, or in the future. This intense criticism at the hotpot restaurant occurred after we saw an exhibition called *Century* at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, where contemporary video works under pink lights, summarized by him as some art that he does not understand, except for one painting - of a crashed helicopter, marked at the bottom, 2019, Mali.

"I was there, Operation Barkhane" - he says to me with an indistinguishable sadness that I first take to be performative. I thought he was going to show off again the glory he enjoyed in a culture where many still worship the military glories.

He got depressed after that operation and has been hospitalized. His comrades died, twenty-three years old, vehicles touched down, helicopters crashed during the operation, and the artillery made him almost lose his hearing. He points his back to the small painting marked "2019 Mali", it indeed draws a helicopter crashed on the ground.

Suddenly all artworks look cartoonish.

There at the hotpot restaurant, he accuses me of being in no position to claim freedom for others. He says I wouldn't know the price of freedom. He looks sure that I don't know what it was like to live in Shanghai or other cities in China during the blockade, and that I couldn't know that there was a reason for forcing someone to obey - that a strong order would end it all as quickly as possible. I argue something but I can't remember what now. He says that our longed-for freedom is visas in passports - those applications are conditional, and that it's a real contest for order at the national level. He talks and drinks, in a sad mood, and sometimes he asks me questions like, do you think NATO countries can let us in and out freely? The conversation is jumbled. I don't think it is a question for discussion between us as he keeps talking about his experiences travelling in Europe - governments keep a record the fingerprints of the "enemies" on the weapons - they always wear gloves to shoot to avoid trouble.

He suddenly gets excited: “you know, the Chinese in the French Foreign Legion are all cooks, but I’m not! I am a soldier, and I have the best grades in camp.” He goes from anger to pride and back to anger again in a flash: “Someone secretly changed my boots to a smaller size. I ran twenty-five kilometres in those boots. Do you know how to deal with a blood blister quickly? Thread a needle with a piece of cotton and poke the blood blister, let the thread stay in the blister overnight, and the next day the pus and blood will be sucked dry. Someone stole my cookies, and my cigarettes, and none of them thought I’d make it. But I did. I traded my fists, my blood, for a pair of shoes that fit. Even those Eastern Europeans admired me and said I really don’t look like a Chinese - those fat cooks who lick others to stay in this shit system.”

I was deadly silent, and never said anything about my work as a cook in London.

Then he is calm again. I go to see art when I’m on vacation in Paris, he says. Those artists are really happy, and in an emphatic tone, he says “**FINE art**”, the Chinese equivalent of “**pure art**”, also the kind of art he called “not understandable”, “highly abstract”. There he asks me, what do these people have? What’s so interesting about them? he adds. His sincere questioning seems to suggest that I am one of them, art fools.

I lost track of my thoughts there, or failed arguing anything with such little common ground. Among the people I interviewed, Wang was the least interested in art, and the most sensitive to the fact that he is a “non-typical” Chinese overseas, and his traumatic experiences in the war had resulted in his inability to serve the French Foreign Legion any longer, and a change in his original plans to take French citizenship by completing his service there. I don’t think my discussion with him was entirely off-topic or belonged to another subject altogether - he did share his ideas on contemporary art, although in a defensive way.

What I regret is that I didn’t have another chance to further understand what he was defending, and expressing - clearly, this was a young soldier who had been wounded in battle and did not want to be involved in another war. Still, a young man like him is also willing to spend a weekend in a Parisian art museum. To me, he lost his heart in many things. He doesn’t like me to introduce him to the word “diaspora” maybe because he feels this academic term is not easy to get close to, or maybe since we were from the same low-rank

uni, he wonders how I am in such a position with a pair of dry feet, talking art and diaspora to him while he has no idea of how to get involved. Or maybe he just doesn't believe in being involved. Does he? That one can feel another; one can say something for another; one can seek freedom for another.

I should stop guessing or making things up here. I don't know what he meant in the end. In the art space, we perceive a certain awkward reality - such as a painting about the war that he was in - a reality that is not at all on the same channel as the brutality he experienced, and all he has shown is his unease.

5 The Pacific Ocean turns into a lake of water

In the summer of 2022, with the pandemic engraved into all the survivors' past, London is regaining its economic vigour. At the beginning of summer on campus, the Picket line crowd is dispersing, and I follow a group of them into a tearoom near College G. The west-sloping sunlight shines into the room, and people find it too blinding, so they half-draw the curtains down. Someone is skillfully making hand-brewed coffee, and she asks me what kind of beans I usually drink. I can't quite name the origins of the beans, and I can't tell the "good" from the "not good", but I learned recently from the news that the number of coffee shops in China has already surpassed the number of cafes in many European countries. Socioeconomics informs us that the popularity of coffee culture is a facet of a long economic structural transformation and a reflection of centuries of imperialism and global capitalist aggression and intervention in the plantation countries. I ask for a cup of the hand brew she recommends, which tastes sour. She says I'll get more comfortable with it. Her manicured hand cranks the handle of the bean grinder. The sound of the propeller of a helicopter suddenly comes to my mind.

The tearoom has been rented for four days by a group of graduate students studying fine art at the school as a meeting place for their alternative studies. The owner of the tearoom rents it out to students all year round, though the longest rental period is no more than a week, so that different groups of students can meet up here. As I look around, I see the tables in the

tearoom are put together with a sign from the morning's strike, a recyclable horizontal board with a grippable roll of paper that reads ON STRIKE FOR FAIR PAY in simplified Chinese, traditional Chinese, and English, and a lot of books on the table, titled with feminism, postcolonialism, cruel optimism. Chinese crackers bought from the local shops are half open on the table. Plus handmade coffee, cookies and Mexican-style takeaways. I can't help noticing that the room smells good, probably because of the books and students.

Not long ago I attended another cultural discussion about the diaspora artists community organized by students from the School of Visual Culture. Two of the students there I met are Catherine and Kun. Catherine's parents moved to Singapore because they were dissatisfied with the Thatcher government in Britain. Her source of the art material is her family video records, and travelling between England and Singapore makes her realize that what already seems to us to be a well-functioning democracy can also be questioned by its citizens: citizens can and should choose their own government. Catherine is a bilingual artist, and English is chosen by herself - not as an adopted language, but as a language that she voluntarily claims, nevertheless, she questions "assimilation" at the linguistic level, a word that masks geo-political injustice and their feelings of isolation.

Kun, who is studying abroad for the first time, says that going abroad has given him a new sense of the panorama of human society and a new understanding of the deprivations of the places where he has lived. When people were discussing a particular government in developed economies, he often felt anxious about not having sufficient stock of modern historical knowledge to be as politically integrated with the place as his peers. He tends to nod his head in scenes trying to assimilate everything, and he would look up phrases he hadn't heard clearly on his way back to the dormitory, training himself to memorize those words-- software, brands, movies, books, and authors -- replacing words that are cognate with English, which only have Chinese names in his mind, one by one in his book of vocabulary. He says this is a process that cures his self-doubt, and he decides for himself to build new memories in his adulthood. For Kun, engaging with the politics of globalization represents an entry into true adulthood, and Kun believes that, to a large extent, the first step in becoming a cosmopolitan is to acquire the language of a cosmopolitan. But when Kun creates his works,

it is always difficult for him to avoid using his own experiences of militarized education and his indictment of the ideological distortion of culture, until he realizes that there are too many Chinese students in the academy, and from time to time he does similar things to others. How does it feel being on such a blade point between, an invincible world citizen who never shatters the cosmopolitan idea, and one who cannot help feeling guilty not to look back at their past?

It's shattering listening to the honest feelings we all once had, maybe still forced to have, that we are competing in a living space no matter in an art class, or in any booming city in the world. It's self-hatred, says Catherine, we objectify ourselves and feel we must compete for resources. It's too much brain work but less to do with the old warm heart. How can we escape this game? Picket-lines? Handmade coffee? What is between a co-lived traumatic self-flagellation and a reflection on our shared future: to become a cosmopolitan and how? This was also the ongoing discussion of the most sensitive intellectual class in China during the last century. Liang Qichao wrote in his *Twentieth Century Song of the Pacific Ocean*²³ that the Pacific Ocean had turned into a lake of water. The words were both a horror in the arms of imperialism and a judgment of the next hundred years. Young people a hundred years apart, in this tearroom, continue to wonder, if the ideal cosmopolitanism has some direction of development in the realm of cultural transformation. If it does, what kind of change will it look like, and whether it will show some kind of "not yet become" (Bloch, Zipes and Mecklenburg, 1988)? We didn't reach any point close to a conclusion, of how cosmopolitanism as an intellect, and a new memory of the future, include inescapabilities and particularities (Ong, 1999).

All of a sudden, every piece of object in this room appears in my perception like still wind-bells waiting for a breeze. At this moment, I wish Lee were there, and H, Fay, and my old acquaintance Wang. I fantasize about all of them showing up, sitting around and having coffee together: an imagined community in a room. I have no answer to a cosmopolitan future yet because it seems impossible for these people to get together in one time-space. The

²³ The song was written in 1900, according to Liang, Q. (1955). *Yin bing shi wen ji* [饮冰室文集]. Taipei: Xin xing publishing house.

only possibility is my imagination. Imagination is a lovely art, a restorative power of art - as the poet Louise Glück (2021) puts it, and I imagine myself sitting among them, I imagine a creative tension between each of us, each imagining the trials and tribulations of each; I imagine history be retold, and time running backwards. I imagine that helicopter flying from the ground back into the sky.

Summary

By depicting my encounters with overseas Chinese immigrants in different situations, I hope to bring out their multiple insights and narrative representations: the grocery store owner with loaded work has no spare time for her art practice; an art student from a wealthy family finds no motivation to proceed with her artmaking; the cultural organization in Chinatown is struggling to find funding; the young Chinese man serving in the Foreign Legion in France lost his direction in life; the graduate student studying art theory in London has few chances to face other lives of the Chinese overseas. I stayed among them but could not make them understand each other.

In addition to the economic and educational backgrounds that determined the fundamental difference of that lack of ease, the individual's perception of their Chinese identity intervened in whether or not they were happy in their new lives. Among them, acquiescence or uneasiness about the weightlessness of Chineseness became an invisible psychological factor. Among the people I met, who had left the country, they were reluctant to go back to their original life, yet they struggled to establish a commitment to their new life, especially what they longed for in their new lives, and what prevented those longings from being fulfilled.

I think there is a difference between one missed call and another missed call: the caller might have only dialled for five seconds, or they might have waited until the voicemail prompt ended. Art, I think, discovers that kind of difference, and the facts of life between the concrete and the abstract. "Writing is the last resort of the betrayer," is a quote from Jean Genet, which Annie Ernaux (1992) excerpts and displays on the first page of *A Man's Place*.

The attribute of “betrayal” seems to be more relevant to the reality of my fieldwork. Overseas Chinese, am I one of them? This question can be linked to Clifford’s (1997) exploration of the rhetoric of ethnography and travel literature in the twentieth century, in which he asks how the real boundaries between ethnographic writing and travel writing are shifting: Are we part of the changes? And if the historian defines the period in terms of details, events, and logic, how do the ethnographers define the year they experienced? What are the relationships and encounters that bring the writer into the past and history of the writings?

In particular, beyond the rules of economics, politics, law, and culture, what else can connect myself with others? In our shared reality of London (among coworkers, neighbourhood residents, and immigrant artist communities), we often find that individual kindness and a more robust social system can provide a sense of security in settling down. That’s the bright side. On the other side, the choice of emigration means facing hostility or even punishment, or perhaps they are intrinsically linked. For individuals considering economic survival strategies, the potential danger of such punishment is particularly oppressive, and this pressure varies with one’s sense of identity. Some find positive meaning in their ethnic identity, while others do not. Talal Asad (2024) identifies inheriting suffering as a special kind of power in a recent article, that our love for others always contains the real possibility of self-betrayal, allowing oneself to be seduced by power. This special power is the anxiety of powerlessness we inherit as victims, along with the need and ability to communicate our suffering to others. The dominion of this power inevitably limits our love and friendship for others.

Doing art & being a migrant. When I draw the & in-between, they become questions to which I still do not have full answers. What I’ve perceived is, that all the people I met kept waiting for an echo in the sacred tree hole of art, or an answer to a possible way of living. I walk to the tree hole and ask there: to what extent can artistic practice undertake or replace the feeling of displacement? When one has inherited all minor senses of powerlessness, without knowing how to let it go, what should one do? Then I hear something. Iris Murdoch might have answered there – to me, she did not write 26 novels, instead, she wrote one novel,

but 26 times - in *The Unicorn* (1964), she warns, never to use this kind of power, never pass the suffering on. To be a good non-powerful, she said. Does it mean, to give it all up?

Chapter 6 Reading journals of an anonymous non-artist (fictional)

Introduction

Once upon a time there was a person, who was not an artist and never became one. She is not this year, nor will she be for another fifty years. The forms of death change, but the fact that she is not an artist will not change until the day when consciousness ceases to appear. This is not the vehement denial of a believer in the miracle of non-existence, but the enjoyable, almost deadening recognition and acceptance that the vocation is not hers. Alas, she says, bye-bye art dream.

In fact, she never stops walking towards the Holy Mountain of art, across the plains, the desert, the sea, King's Cross. All the nebulous places. She carries herself without changing direction. Until the gradual acceptance of the doomed result that, this place did not belong to her. Not one of the stone steps leading to the Holy Mountain was open to her. She freezes, laughs, and then feels oxygen-deprived. When she comes out of her daze, time takes her aback. The way to do this was by flipping through her reading journals framed in time. She does not think memories are reliable; they resisted her search for truth. The notes are perhaps more reliable, her honest record of when she started to leave her place and go down a wrong path. Little by little, all of her time is injected into the existence of a non-artist.

Year of giving up

She has to follow the advice of a very famous predecessor, to travel as much as possible when she is new to the art industry, to memorize the names of important art institutions (the importance of which was reflected in the ease with which they could obtain financial sponsorship), as well as the names of their directors and curators, the recurring names, the cultural and geographic knowledge drawn by their surnames, and the stories lurking in those surnames about human moving from place to place.

She also has to memorize people's looks and styles of conversation, telling herself that she should never, under any circumstances, display an expression of ignorance. Her predecessors taught her that social grace is a necessary lesson so that when it comes time to carry out her own independent curatorial project, and some of them show up at the opening, she can recognize them decently and find an appropriate topic to talk to them about. Ultimately there will always be people who can help her to realize her social aspirations as a young person, in a way that gains her an appearance in the art world.

Slowly, all the things begin to become difficult for her, and she doesn't appreciate the key steps involved, the inevitable correlation between one thing and another. She realizes that she is not at all a graceful person. She always wears an expression of ignorance. She does not have what it takes to be a good curator. She feels in many instances that she is imitating others, or only perfunctorily, and there is another thing that is hard to say; she has forgotten what was to be her social aspiration, what she wants for herself. She doesn't understand why she is the way she is.

She thinks she needs to understand a lot of things before she can act, and she needs enough reasons. Like getting out of her native language environment and into a new world. She can't stay out of the pack like a feral animal. Not to mention that London, or at least the world of art, doesn't habitat any real animals like that. It's the knowledge of what she has experienced on her way here, what she's got close to and what she's got away from, that makes her more cautious. Yet realising what she has got close to and what she's away from, makes her think of giving up.

Giving up is a less comfortable process, for her, it is to separate what has been glued together, and she watches the smartest people, the busiest people in London, how they learn to survive in the world, and gain passes at critical intersections. She watches how they speak, how they cry out and how they keep silent. They gain new territories of practice in beautiful edifices and in untamed open communities, not leaving a single one behind. Good curators need good energy, and the ability to allocate time, she thinks. What she does is dawdling in her seat at the train station, looking into the void, thinking that if London holds a dawdling

contest, she might win. She gives up associating with art as the sound of a train slowing down to enter the station comes to her ears.

Note

I read slow. I am to read Emily Dickinson again. She lived in awe. To describe what is seen is to see that which is not seen. We don't know what "seeing" really is, or what vision really is. When "being seen" is a human need, what is it that cannot be fully satisfied even by being seen? I think that there is something in human beings that can be scared away by the light of a close-up. So is the "anonymity" that the world is chasing an area that is not seen, or is it a light that cannot be fully penetrated even when it is seen?

She's got a collection of Miss Dickinson's letters at a bookstore called Shakespeare. She likes Miss Dickinson's poems therefore she wants to know what kind of person she was and what kind of people she was friends with. The bookstore clerk sat in an embroidered upholstered chair and charged her seven bucks.

She reads Dickinson's biography, another one. In it, it says that Amherst welcomed its train in the 1850s, and that Edward Dickinson, among others, prompted the train to come into their town. Miss Dickinson, the daughter of the train hero, she saw the train! She repeatedly confirmed that it is a train, not a horse, and then maintained a dazed expression at it. Then some 155 years later, her town opens to the train. A huge crowd of children and teenagers, wearing red scarves and carrying flowers, greeted the great leader who had come from the capital to mark the completion of the train station. Her dazed face drowned in hundreds of dazed faces.

Miss Dickinson, she feels like to call her Emily. Emily and she, are passengers from different times and places, each keeping a similar action in their seats: looking out, never ceasing to be in awe. Amazement is their compartment number. The astonished girl, who would rather shove all her poetry into a crack in the wall than submit it again. She wrote until she died. She was very young when she died. These are the necessities attached to Dickinson's name as it spreads out of her own country.

Emily chose to give up, to give up writing by name. By actively choosing to conceal her name, she is not abandoning the action. By hiding her name, the existence of the action is

recorded in an unusual form. Emily's escape from the unusual process of naming her writing, means that the occurrence and outcome of the writing action are no longer directly related to public life, if there is one. Emily escapes the possessive nature of that action. Possession of material things, possession of relationships, possession of time, possession is so addictive and tyrannical. But what, she wonders, is being hidden?

She doesn't think it was just the name. That is the key thing. The different parts are hidden so that the remaining image takes on a different appearance. If authorship is a complete sculpture, the authors who embrace it are like busts emerging from the wood, and the anonymous ones are the extra sawdust on the side. She cares where the sawdust goes. Anonymous sawdust. It is neither street graffiti, nor a democratic vote, nor the ethical dimension of a learned person's concern with the specific care of the individual. The anonymity represented by the sawdust is the active creation that begins after hiding and escaping from the authorship promoted by the present world. She asks about absence as presence, life as seclusion, and the art of non-art This may seem like a paradox of verbal silence. This is not the case; the anonymity to which she returns is a not-so-distant, never-ending thought. That thought traces the universal lowliness, something that we have always cherished and ignored that has awakened us anew. The lowly nature of the general solidity, just like the days of lives.

Why does she give up art, and how does she give it up then? What has been thrown away before her coming to London, i.e., on the way to aspiring to authorship as an artist? Just when she thinks that the figurine of herself as a part of the art world is about to take shape, the dust that falls to the ground reminds her once again of her real existence.

She entertains an idea of looking backward, and wishes to find something. But when does she have this thought of looking back? Is it when she finds herself longing for authorship, and at the same time afraid to face the fact that she has not expressed herself well enough, or when she suddenly realizes that years of determination to cut herself off from her native environment, to leave a certain cultural tradition, no longer works?

In order to complete the process of renunciation, she needs to find the values and ideas that underpin it. Except from Miss Dickinson, some ideas and real examples of human

societies are needed to demonstrate the persuasive power of becoming the smallest, the lowest, through giving up. In other words, what are the benefits of giving up, and what does it mean to renounce art, leave art, get out of art, especially for a young person contemplating what art really is?

In her native world, there is a saying, get famous before it's too late, probably from one of her very favourite writers, Eileen Chang. But she doesn't think that's what she really meant to say, it's just been plucked out because the promoters themselves value fame over truth. Eileen Chang, like other women, was first underestimated and then violently subjected to famous quotes. And so, the phrase was popular for a hundred years. No one wants to hear the flip side of the saying: give up before it's too late. Most people don't realize that giving up can be very good for a young person. Here's another of her notes, from reading Emmanuel Lévinas's and his friend Jacques Rolland's (2003) correspondence.

Note

What is youth exactly? To be young is to be in the midst of youth, a youthful heart waiting to receive a truth deeper than itself, an impression of what the self and the ideal should be. The young heart does not arrive at true thought; the young heart desperately tries to absorb profundity without producing it. Being young means a way of thinking about the world, shaped by one's own limited experience of contact with it. Seeing the world through the eyes of the young tends to obscure the limitedness of one's own experience, wanting to escape from one's trajectory while doubting that one can really escape, for youth also means an experience of being-in-time that is still in the disagreement of either/or: being-in-youth is the whole of life, and life is the whole of BEING, the whole as opposed to the all, and thus therefore, young people cannot find the gap between life and themselves, and cannot produce a relaxed "glimpse" of life, the kind of thing one sees with the rest of one's eyes in poems and novels.

Giving up art is not giving up being creative, it is actually getting out of being artist, and she needs to continue to prove that this process is perfect for her at a young age, and for those who are still exploring ways of practising various forms of art. Continue to look back, back to before she came to the conclusion that "giving up is good for me".

Year of studio visit

There have been years when she paints on paper intermittently with acrylics and watercolors, which are so small that they can be tucked away in a drawer after being painted on the dining table. On several occasions she wants to put them on the wall, even signs her initials and then erases them, thoughts and gestures that make her realize that this is nothing more than a poor imitation of an imagined artistic life, that she is not an artist, that her job is that of a curator, and that she knows that the work of a curator is essentially serving, although she wishes there's a meaning of curing attached.

Making an exhibition is no different from doing any other project; for this art world, after defining the theme, it's all about trying to make the artwork respectable and comfortable for everyone in the process of bringing the exhibition to life. In an anthropological journal, she read an account written by a copyright agent and illustrator about the publication of an ethnographic project²⁴. The copyright agent and editor, who's about her age, says that she works like an engineer, and that the editor's main job, when working with the author as well as the visual artist, is to construct the narrative mechanism for the entire project. The editor also says that it was too strange to see her name on the book cover, and that she wasn't quite used to her name running where the author appeared, even though she had been instrumental in getting the project published, and did the translation and proofreading between Italian, English and Thai.

In the world of expression familiar to all, the opportunity to express is always given more to the one who expresses better. If curating an exhibition is also the narrative mechanism, then the typesetting and printing work of the work's interpretation is a soundtrack without a voice. In addition to choosing from dozens of press releases the one that satisfies all participants, is the most viewer-friendly, and has the lowest threshold for reading, she also needs to consider the meticulous label fonts and formatting, determine a visually

²⁴ Sopranzetti, C., Fabbri, S. and Natalucci, C. (2022) 'Dialogues: The King of Bangkok: a collaborative graphic novel', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 28(3), pp. 1012–1052. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.13784>.

friendly pattern, and ensure that translations of texts containing bilingual or two or more languages are accurate, including non-English accent marks, punctuation, and so on. As for how the labels actually relate to the white walls, she may have to compare prices in South London, East London, Amazon, and contact factories in China online to have them made and shipped, just to find an aesthetically pleasing labelling medium and a glue that will not harm the walls nor detract from the artwork. Sometimes after a lot of unsatisfactory attempts, the artist says, please do not put any labels on.

As for on-site construction, there are even more complicated and trivial issues to consider, including accessibility, lighting and electrical circuits, all of which she has to learn from scratch. During an exhibition, if an audience says to her that the artist's creation is incredible, she will feel that curating is a very valuable job. Sometimes the way she displays the work received compliments from the artist and even from the audience during the exhibition. She thought they all knew that the idea was hers, but the truth was that the artist wouldn't admit it and denied it at the first opportunity. For a moment she wanted to take out the sketches she had in her drawer and show them, wanting to prove that, what they had done, she could have done it too, only if she had been given one more hour.

She recalls the street performances, graveyard exhibitions she collaborated with her friends in art school, or the screenings of her fellow students' films right there in the shared kitchen of a few square meters. They were so cheerful and didn't think much, although now, some become property managers, others continue to travel, and many no longer have the opportunity to care, the question of being an artist or a curator is something that only a true young person would struggle with. There is no doubt that authorship is the best choice, and if that doesn't work, choose what is good for you first. But for her, choosing authorship isn't that easy. When she's not doing the service job, she'd pick up watercolours and paper, record acts in her room, or melodies that suddenly happen in her head. She never stops the act of creating in private. She wouldn't have failed to think about the possibility of becoming an artist herself, of becoming the type of person who expresses better.

Curatorial work is her career choice because she recognizes that what she is truly good at is serving others. She is explicitly aware that her creative work is as usual as the private

writing of editors. Some artists have told her that their creations begin with a self-perception of marginalities and differences, so where she feels slightly differently from the artists is that her private artmaking, as a servant enabling the artists' expression, means something not related to the centre/margin divide; she creates to fill that part of her time. She wants a time well spent.

Her private and ordinary practice gives her an empirical perspective, such as the physical sensation of holding a brush, a knife, or a video camera in her hand, which seems to be unique because it is confined to her body, and even independent of her sensory system when she is working with art people. But this uniqueness is one billionth of the ordinary, and it exists in a kind of rebellious mentality of those who are too sensitive to market value. That is to say, when she stands in front of someone else's work, the only way for her unique and mundane creation to be safe is to cut it off from her daily work, from the desire to achieve public communication. This is very difficult, especially since her role is all communicative: the person between the viewer vs. the work, between the artist vs. the viewer, the viewer vs. the art world, and so on. When she is in several positions at the same time, the impetus for private creation becomes less and less, it seems to be afraid of other thoughts, or it is discouraged by its independence from desire.

In order to maintain the enthusiasm for private art making, she takes the approach of minimizing her contribution to curatorial work and increasing the time she spends alone with her own life, without allowing herself to become an artist. She does not forget that she is a young person, and as such she has not yet had the experience of establishing a routine in her career life. Outside of her art practice, what she desires most is to be a person with a healthy routine; she wants to be able to independently pay for rent with heat, drink coffee with milk, decently pay to watch a movie or theater, and walk for an hour every day. It seems that in order to live such a life with clear goals, she chose service as a profession rather than making art in a studio, because what the latter requires would break her daily schedule time and time again, make life unmanageable. She knows that it is inevitable to exchange experiences of chaos and conflict with a gentle night peace, and that there seem to be countless reasons to

inspire herself, but, given the journey she had taken, having control over her day life had never been easier, and seemed more challenging.

She makes an internal choice to withdraw from her desires, and she invests the question if her expression was good or enough into a vision of time - she trusts that her life will change, that she will no longer worry about not having a place in the world, because she would be steadily catching herself each and every day.

Note

On the curvy downhill road in Willesden, it occurs to me that I just left the toothpaste, body wash and toilet rolls on the bus, route 31, in a plastic bag. I get off the bus senseless, both hands empty, feeling comfortable and unburdened. It is indeed a comfortable day, the sun is hiding behind the clouds, glowing obliquely, and there is a crisp, sharp sound, like a beer bottle, smashing on the ground, someone drunk. No, it's a little girl, breaking the coffee cup in her dad's hand. Why are they standing on the curb drinking coffee, when there are no tables left in the store or outside? The cup breaks and the dad picks up his pink daughter and sweeps the broken pieces of the white china with his black shoes. The milky coffee collects in the cracks of the road tiles, clogs with dust and also small stones for a while before it swims toward other cracks. I'm a little distressed about the toothpaste I left on the bus. Artists held Borges in high esteem, I don't like Borges that much but couldn't resist the library he envisioned, yes, if only the world were a library, where everyone's conversations are whispers and all the difficulties about life are on paper that doesn't run amok. Writers write about nothing more than their own reading experiences. All I have to do is flip through the author's epiphanies and no harm will come to me.

The question that artists with studios consider from time to time is whether a certain artistic tradition chooses the artist or whether the artist chooses their own tradition. Some of them will, like Borges, study many fields and sort out the veins of thought in a particular project that a scholar can engage in commenting on, including sociology, history, psychology and artificial intelligence. Not being a curator very familiar with high theories, she agrees that the resources of thought are well worth tapping for young people who wish to become artists. For herself, however, the idea of not becoming an artist may simply stem from an observation

of the being here and now, and she prefers to live each day to the fullest, something that is so difficult wherever she is.

She doesn't know if the artists look forward to her visits, but they did say that they were relaxed with her. She sometimes speculated, unkindly, whether that relaxation was because she gave as much as they expected when working together, putting each piece in its proper place because she understood the work, or whether she bought the wine early on opening day and introduced the artist decently to a wider audience. Or maybe it's more than that. They didn't just say, it was easy working with her at the end, but at the beginning, when they made contact. She suspects that the artists believe that she was born to relax people, it was her untutored personality, and some calls such a personality, a psychic masseuse. She sees it as her vocation to serve, to make the artists trust and relax. But they didn't realize that she wasn't relaxed, there were many things occupying her mind.

Year of pedestrian

During her year of part-time study, she goes to the school library during the day and works at the restaurant in the afternoons until the early hours of the morning; she lives far away from the school, shares a room with a coworker, and has the restaurant's leftovers from the previous day together at noon. She is completely immersed in the hustle and bustle (which she didn't realize was a blessing at that point in her life), that she is refreshed enough to get up early the next day, even after standing in front of a frying pan twelve hours in a row, to change the bedspreads and coverlets, to wipe off the recurring mildew stains on the blades of the blinds, to wash and spread the rags on the radiators, to change into the same restaurant coveralls that she'd already dried yesterday, to put on her same coat, and to head out to take the train to the city.

In the afternoons and evenings, she gets meals in the kitchen, meals that depend on the chef's mood and the restaurant's surplus or deficit of ingredients. She uses her salary to pay rent and electricity, then saves the money for travelling. Her tuition fees were waived by her institution, and her mother had set aside two thousand pounds for her to use for her visa,

plane ticket and the first month's living expenses, which was her mother's salary for a whole year. During the cooking year she saves some money and proposes to ask her mother to come to London for a trip, which she refuses on the grounds that she can't read English and is afraid of getting lost on a connecting flight. The mother encourages her daughter to travel where she wants to, as educated people do, and in the next breath, she reminds her not to waste money on restaurants or cafes. Counting the cost of applying for a visa, she could have spent four or five days each in Paris, Copenhagen, and Berlin. Finally, she has been to Europe, the cities the art teacher always talks about, she'd finally seen with her own eyes.

Note

The little pedestrian is walking down the streets of Copenhagen when she suddenly becomes particularly hungry, she carries the smell of a lone traveller's hunger with her, it could have been the stomach acid, or the nerves from the vertigo, anyway, the smell seeps out. So she turns into a street store to try to cram a little something random into her body so she can keep walking. There happen to be one left in the basket that day, a small, already-cooled piece of bread. She pays a euro coin and swallows it quickly. A humble bread becomes part of the pedestrian who keeps on walking. She thinks of something, the little mermaid jumps into the sea, not for the love she planted, but to become the master of that love.

The wayfarer experiencing hunger has been overcome by the will to bake that little bread, even if it might be an unpleasant job for the baker, with the boss scolding him and the little dog on the road barking at him. The little bread comes out of the oven anyway, becomes part of the little pedestrian's body, and travels to a distant location where it may be ignored, wasted, and honestly accepts the result, seemingly hiding its longing. The little mermaid gives her voice to the witch, and for the wise and futile, love is more recognizable as silence than anything else. A fruit to be picked, waiting for action to be taken.

Love is more than frosting on a cinnamon roll, she wonders if there is such a proverb in Copenhagen. Here, people are so addicted to design that bejeweled-like embellishments no longer satisfy them. Everything is too well designed. The little pedestrian can only endeavour to make a piece of charred pastry, and she loves pastry. As a piece of pastry,

fulfilling the obligation of baking, actively approaching the blazing baking heat, changing herself but not changing all. She hopes people can understand, for those things that hold the greatest probability, to be understood is harder. Because they're being practised more, equivalent to not truly being practised at all. They are just being done. There is no chance of getting close to the things done at all. Those things gain a more enduring presence (bestaan), like the long day, a broad base on which one amble. Yet people still serpently think the night is what really suits them, with each descent of the night, there is one less chance to know the day.

The novelty of her first long-distance trip slowly fades as she adjusts to life in London. The city still gives her the feeling of a false dream though, except for some parts of London that refuse to be London, the corners that inexplicably remind her of her own countryside, and other than that, everything is kept at a distance from the reality of what she had experienced. One only feels that one's experience is real. London is also Dongguan. The highway is just as busy, so many big cars to shift, a batch of goods to be in and out, a store waiting for goods, shopkeepers with rent pressing down on them, drivers with varicose veins in their calves due to years of sitting and driving, and what little money they have saved to pay for hospitals and children's schools. Maintaining income and expenses is a unifying battle that many families fight woefully. The money that is earned will flow out again, for the family to continue to settle in the city, and there is no certainty as to what kind of life will be lived, living is surviving, or at least getting through the days. In time, the roads are warped by the lives of the trucks and the people who drive them, the wheels splitting a crack in the tarmac, bursting in nebulae, one ragged pothole after another, rainwater filling them up with a series of cesspools, and even the most expensive cars drives by, with the asses of the people in them lurching and swear words coming out of their mouths.

Walking down Liverpool Street, she feels like she is trespassing in the middle of someone else's territory. Sunlight and wind are caught in the sharp glass buildings of Liverpool Street, where weak plants have inexplicably been planted, where they have no right to decide where to grow. Most of the people on the street walk briskly, except for travellers with large bags, and there are no expressions of sadness or joy, replaced by seriousness,

unease, or the satisfaction of being in one's own territory. The city is privatized. What were once plebeian buildings became new landscapes, underneath the grey apartment buildings of the Barbican Center are, brand-new cafes with what seems to be a small garden on top of the concrete retreat buildings, or maybe those are just the balconies, with all their bright flowers, blossom in the winter.

She is more than happy to walk into the little windowless stores, the places where the stuff of the migrants are on display, the slabs of raw meat being slaughtered, the entrails of the animals being processed, the alcohol and tobacco hidden away in the stockroom, the places where usefulness and instrumentalism are taken to the extreme.

She goes to the immigrant store to buy meat to host a childhood friend. This friend is visiting her from a big city in south China. They talk about everything, just as they did when they were children; her friend sleeps in the same bed with her, experiencing jet lag for the first time, and summer without mosquitoes.

Her friend wakes up at three o'clock every day to sit in the living room and helps her organize the kitchen, opens and closes her cupboards, and studies how the coffee pot and stovetop work. At the grocery store, the friend delves into the prices of fruits and vegetables, choosing cost-effective foods to eat. It is her first time out of the country, and it costs her years of savings, so she didn't get Wi-Fi, download Google Maps, or adjust her schedule to local; she goes wherever she goes. During this time, the unfamiliarity of it all sometimes made her friend feel unsettled, but their friendship refrains it from showing it out.

They go to the galleries of contemporary art during the day, where there is an installation exhibition. Her friend walks around the large bright space, sometimes getting too close to the works, and a man in a suit reminds her gravely to stand farther away. She sees from the side that her friend's face reddened instantly. Her friend is very quiet until she gets home in the evening, she seems to work up the courage to ask the question she has been keeping for a day: What is installation?

Uh an installation is

What should she say? Should she really answer seriously? Does her friend not understand the term installation or installation as an art medium? Should it be explained in

terms of art history? She had never even heard of Duchamp. Or take her to see more installations, but are the existing exhibitions enough to generalize what an installation is?

Her industrious friend wipes food crumbs off the table onto the plate with her hand, and goes ahead of her to do the dishes, pretending she doesn't care about the answer for fear of being disliked for the stupidity of the question. Her friend finds a steel wool ball and scrubs away the black charcoal formed by the food debris that has accumulated over the years on the stovetop.

Her friend then uses her fingernails to erase the black charcoal that has formed a dark ring, her smooth black hair hanging down behind her ear, her eyes fix on the irregular charcoal stains, and with her thumb, she pushes and scrapes the bumpy, flat surface into just a thin layer of rusty stains, her motions being both light and smooth, the charcoal powder coming off the edges of the brownish-red electric stovetop little by little.

Great erasure project, and why wasn't her dear friend a sculptor? How is the act of carving that her friend has just done, different from the act of a sculptor in every second of the time? In a smaller unit of time, her friend puts down her tools and cleans the stove with her fingernails, there is really no need to do that, to sacrifice her fingernails for nothing. She can't tell what is more shocking to her, the Benjaminian question of "what is an installation" or the pioneering practice of cleaning.

Note

I look at her as if I see my mother, the one who scrubs in the kitchen every day, burying her head into her broad shoulders. That body in front of me comes from a very distant world, and the arrival of my friend connects the two worlds.

Her friend's labour in the kitchen, in addition to allowing her to translate what an installation is, also pushes her to confront what creativity or art-making really is for people like her. Why does creation not exist as a habit, as a living human being who strives to construct the laws of the everyday? Writing, painting, is nothing more than experiencing one's own existence in a conventional way, whereas her friend lives every second of their life as they did in the past, anciently and pioneeringly: scrubbing stove stains

with fingernails. They spend every moment in action. She can't help but think installation, or words like that, are in the end, means to separate her from her past world.

That summer, when the floods hit their hometown again and take away some lives, the last drops of water are sucked dry by the parched heat of London parks' lawns. Before leaving for the airport, her friend once again marvelled at how bad the water tastes in London, to say it makes her feel a little balanced. She wonders, isn't all the water on the earth connected? It is the best wish in the world, but it seems not like that, no matter how much they wish it was.

Year of imprudence

Her friend predicted that they would go somewhere far away from their desperate home. After high school, her friend went to a foreign trade factory in a coastal city, and she went to a college that didn't have a page that Google could retrieve. It is surrounded by desert and military bases and slaughterhouses. At night, drill sirens and the dying howls of hogs could be heard in the dorms.

When they returned home for the holidays, her friend showed her that she had learned to negotiate with buyers and how to check order details letter by letter, and she was transferred from the small merchandise department to the clothing department, taking free salvage t-shirts to her family. She exchanged her achievements as she could read an English book in its entirety. They praised each other, encouraged each other, that they finally went out into a world that was once out of reach, that they had become the furthest travelled among people around them, but sadly such an honour was witnessed only by themselves.

Before leaving, they experienced a family and social life that was not very different from that of the rest of the people. In those years, the reform of the enterprise system²⁵ impacted their daily lives, and the fluctuations in the cities then affected the towns and villages. As she remembers it, it seemed that overnight everyone became a thief, and factories were stolen before they closed down. Her parents were laid off from the factory, and her

²⁵ Large numbers of workers being "laid off" during the reform and restructuring in the 1990s PRC.

mother brought home hundreds of bundles of thread knobs from the factory, which she made into rags and said she could use them for cleaning for the rest of her life. Her father left them, but occasionally raided their home like military searches, taking what he could, and sometimes her mother would voluntarily turn it in. Father reminded them in this way that he still existed and no one should forget him.

In both elementary and middle school, those who ignored or broke discipline were expelled from the group, and everyone respectfully said, Good day, teacher. They split into tribes, some from families who had gained opportunities in the market economy, where parents gave money to teachers to spend time with their children. Some come from families where parents have been laid off and can't make ends meet, and their time is spent using their children as emotion buckets. Innocent children are looked after by unjust and disturbed teachers. She observed some of her classmates displaying a striking state of being, but the teacher couldn't see them as if they were blind: the girl who dreaded exams got sweaty palms as soon as she gets the paper, and in a second the paper was all wet. A child who was sleepy in Math class suddenly took out a compass and stabbed himself in the arm; the blood would wake him up. A kid who put a plastic bag over his head to shut out the noise until he exhaled white mist suffocated him. Then there are the children who didn't wear shoes all year round, whose feet grew so thick that they made a sound like horse hooves when they walked. Then there are the girls who inexplicably disappeared in their teens. Such children are not pitied but scornfully mocked. Even so, some children would rather stay in a cold school than return to their hysterical families.

The adult returned home from his labours in the factory and the fields, transformed from a submissive servant to a tyrant, and the child learned the same technique after experiencing one shock after another. A child learned too early that imprudence is not permitted. They experienced early on which one makes the skin break out faster, the wooden stick or the horsehair brush. In that town, young people had been baptized with a similar education for generations. The town next door to this one does the same. As long as the world remains endlessly disputed, education about survival will not cease.

This is how many children grow up in the cracks of the stone, and even though they cannot grow straight and without fear of the sun, they grow up after all, they grow nevertheless. Violence and cowardice are inherited by their parents from their own families, and none of them went to college or a bigger city. The painful feeling of powerlessness was passed on from generation to generation, it is the only power her parents had – to pass the powerlessness, and there's no one left such power unused. They gave her their entire experience, one's entire understanding of a society in which they lived.

Her middle school was later closed due to frequent security incidents, and at the same time, her mother's factory closed down. Her mother changed jobs every few years, optimistic that at least she wouldn't have to inhale the lint from the cotton factories anymore. Her mother sold shoes and knitted sweaters for other people, earning as little as she had before, yet she was happy with her life. She had more insights, and she saved her money to enroll her daughter in English classes after hearing from her employer that learning English would be useful in the future. After she changed schools, she was excessively frightened from time to time, and she found herself always dreaming of the same dark playground with no grass, only black gravel that kept flying at her. Her mother decided to take her to the public library every weekend. It was there that she made real friends, real living people.

Note

I felt lightning bright. Emily Brontë is the most passionate person. While we focus on Lady Catherine, Emily quietly becomes a maid. From her position as a servant, she observes the people walking around the domestic space, she finds everyone's secrets under the porch carpet, and she is the only one in the house with a sober soul. I think it's the servant's perspective that makes Catherine and Heathcliff timeless stars, their feelings and ghosts still so personalized two hundred years later, precisely because of that servant's eye. Her gaze captures the tiny physicality, and it is the servant's footsteps that connect the seasons and the manor, the innocence of childhood and the cruelty of maturity, as little Catherine at the dinner table goes from grace to meltdown. A servant who knows right from wrong, who observes and records human nature, a peacemaker, who takes pity on everyone.

And this Emily. Language does not exist anymore. You see through eyes - not the ones on the face – but easily forgotten ones, “like the sherry in the glass that the guest leaves” (I take it from miss Dickinson’s letters), and you keep seeing what you saw, and you remember until you don’t remember anything. With that, you see yourself, you wonder, and you are always in awe. And you think, you fear, there will be a day you won’t see them anymore. Then there will be silence for a long time. “Mr. Higginson, are you too deeply occupied to say if my verse is alive?” Emily asked.

The public library could only check out two books a week, including magazines. There she met Emily Brontë, Emily Dickinson, and became a spiritual confidante with them. She learned to see things she couldn’t yet understand but could empathize with as these older friends did. She began to learn the English language, **read, read, read - the archetypal verbs of reading, the past tense, the perfect tense.** What an amazing language.

She felt the amazing time and space of the language worlds, allowing her to grow an inner vision unlike anything she had ever seen before. She used to think that her environment existed in opposition to her, that she was an alien in it, and that she and her childhood friend called it a desperate place, a non-place, but it was in the midst of what seemed like an absolute environment that her mother took her to the library, and she discovered that there were other worlds out there.

It is her mother who brings her and Emily together. Two Emilys. It is not a list of books to read for English class, it is not a warm study room with classic literature, it is her mother who rode her on a bicycle for half a day from the township to the city. They got a library card at the recently established public library. Her mother sat on a library bench knitting a sweater, and she walked into the narrow reading room in a pair of plastic shoe covers.

Year of namelessness

She walked out with a Chinese translation of *Wuthering Heights*, which had a blue sacred mountain on the cover. Her mother’s bicycle (which was stolen some days after) turned around and drove through the city’s new-paved roads, past the hills and meadows,

back to the tiny world they had come from, the world of imprudent people. As a reader born many years after the two Emilys, she connects with them, not by some English literary tradition, but by a woman who, at a young age, had no books, no home, who used to sleep in a changing room. That was all she could do for her.

Then she enrolled in a college that no one had ever heard of and had an empty library. Reading became the only skill she had to explore outwardly, and she learned in magazines and on the internet that people who went to good schools discussed contemporary art, film, sociology, and a lot of disciplines that weren't available at their school. And in ten years she went on to major in curating for no specific reason, except that at that point she had a vague sense that those disciplines were a whole. That all the great works were born in them. Painting is a novel, music is a movie, they have no boundaries, and when ideas are still an insignificant seed, they are not trampled on, but there is a special department to nurture them. In such a place, people are less likely to get sick or turn into thieves.

That whole mysteriously awaited her, and she didn't question it, who would? She only wanted to join those people quickly. It was probably in one of the magazines that she read the insight of the sociologists that people were displaced, not at a time, but in little pieces, so that in the end they found themselves in places they had thought they would never go. This seems to be the case with her, arriving at her new location in a completely different, but original piece of herself.

Step by step she executes the strategy of leaving. Her mother and friend watch her in silence as she packs less and less. They don't say a word each time they part, probably because they don't know what to do, and the person they care about the most has things she cares about more, and little by little she leaves behind the world they had once coexisted in.

Upon arriving in London, she realizes that many people, like her, quietly hide a world in case they regret leaving. Those distant moments in time are preserved or shared in a variety of ways, from grand festivals to pickles in the fridge, and memory is the art of making time co-exist. When she is alone, she hears voices coming from the holes in the ground, voices that echo persistently and far away, the laughter of a neighbour fetching water from a well, the muffled sound of a cave bursting, the sound of floodwaters roaming over a highway. All

were hidden underground, just below her room, or far away on the surface of the moon, and they'll make sure she sees them, hears them, they work so hard to impress her. Only her mother puts down the phone and says to herself, you have won, you are free.

At first she didn't want to admit that London was not her reality. The art becomes something else, not what she had first read in the library, that spiritual world as a whole seems gone, the part of reality above is gone. The conjured whole unity that brought her the strength to escape has so many shocking cracks in it as well. Her heart is at once empty. She realizes that the departure and arrival of any pedestrian intensifies the turmoil of the world, and that there is no limit or end to the departure. She wonders what the point of choosing path at the intersection is, since the roads no longer lead to the same place. All these give her the idea of giving up.

She observes the authorship she longs for and reflects on why she wants to be someone who expresses herself like an artist. She longs to be the centre of all swords, she longs to be misunderstood, she longs for her thoughts to move from her body to a public square, she longs for real discourses. Did she do it? She did. She drew in a drawer, afraid to leave her name, afraid to show it to a real artist. It's not that she didn't give it, she gave it and regretted it, why should the artist be happy with a servant's work? You have to watch more art, and do more art, they said. She was scared all of a sudden. The artist helped her with a psychology tool, telling her to deal with her feelings of unworthiness first, that it was a deep narcissism, and to understand those before she came back to make art. She said thanks, she was just drawing casually to pass the time. The artist was relieved that she wouldn't show up again asking for their opinion. She longs to be like the artist, who gives opinions and doesn't care if one is misunderstood, as long as she can walk onto that battlefield of expression. She longs to live that way, to be a master, of herself at least.

Year after year, she still prefers being a servant. She is not an artist, and she will never be, she fears the title. She fears to speak of the authorship she longed for. She can't be a master, and morally, she thinks it is safer to be a servant, or rather, she wants to be back to the lowest. She has seen many people go mad on their way to being masters. In her resistance to being like them, resentment and even grudges arise in her heart, and there the darkness

overshadows the light. She doesn't like being in the dark. She wants to be small but willingly. She doesn't want to be part of this game anymore, of being a master or a servant, she wants to escape it, even if she has to escape all of them and stay alone. Is this really what she wants? Could anyone bear that detachment?

Year after year her young mind receives the physical body's view of the outside world, she doesn't need to know what will happen, with the belief that the soul is with the body, following the ancient cycle, the déjà vu is stirred up again. She can't stay, she has to leave. She'll figure out how to be serving and attachable. Since this is how most people live, most people fall into the world and disappear without a sound, a process that no one can intervene in, she then lets herself go, putting her life in a position unattended, unscheduled, and unknown. She carries herself namelessly, walking on a path that she no longer chooses.

Summary

In this chapter, I fictionalize a young person's spiritual journey from a small place to the London art world according to a time flashback, and these notes comprise a record of her perceptions of herself in relation to the world. The notes begin with a young woman studying curating in the London art world who decides to give up the profession. The middle part of the notes describes her experience of observing and working in the art world and how, step by step, she gained her own understanding of the art world before finally making the decision to give it up. The end of the parts reveals that she was born in a corner of the world where access to literature and art was difficult, and that she gained the idea of wanting to see the larger world through reading literature and art in a home life and schooling with few resources.

In these notes, I have incorporated the experiences of young curatorial women, young people who saved themselves from "domestic hell" through reading in the margins of Chinese society, and my own experiences, which all converge in the same individual. And I believe that individuals can be evoked to share the same perceptions of each other, including an ambiguous perception of their own place in the world; a stimulated longing for

understanding; and the expression of art as a stimulus for power; the unspoken confusion of life; and the uncertainty of the young generation's future...

Despite the very negative attitude with which this anonymous person confronts her profession and her longing for subjectivity, we can see through her inner confessions and her reading notes that the authors with whom she really feels empathy tend to be of a similar type, the ones who give their full attention to the everyday details, to the lovely low existence. We can also interpret this as her heroism; she gave up her curatorial career, which was too much of a sacrifice for her, but she never gave up getting closer to the persistent and easily overlooked existence of the dayness. Rather than giving up, she has always recognized that she belongs somewhere, to that category of people, her childhood friend, and her mother. I think that in this chapter, the protagonist has shown a clear attitude towards the castle of the art world, and that she will always stay with those who can't get in.

Conclusion

“The ship, this ship, our ship, this ship we serve, is the moral symbol of our life.”

Joseph Conrad, *The Shadow-line*

“That is enough. Now we have to begin. Life has been put in our hands. For itself it became empty already long ago. It pitches senselessly back and forth, but we stand firm, and so we want to be its initiative and we want to be its ends.”

Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*

“How very soon it will be now – why, when I really think of it, how near and how happy it is!”

Emily Dickinson, a letter to her family, March 24, 1852

Here, please allow me to clarify once again: the purpose of this journey is not merely to analyze and summarize my trip destination - what the London art world is, or what characteristics it possesses by describing its appearance. What I am doing is not treating the London art world as an object, although, yes, it can be viewed as an object with relatively clear boundaries, but describing its boundaries and characteristics is not my intention. Firstly, analysis does not equate to understanding, and finding a good way to explain something does not equate to understanding it either. This might be because reasoning does not equate to truth, and ideals do not equate to truth. Therefore, perhaps the aim is to approach reality and understanding in a certain way, even if reality and understanding are fundamentally unattainable. What I aim to do is to describe individual perceptions - how individuals perceive the art world as it unfolds before them, or how they interact with various perceptions generated with this world.

Why, in a general sense of life, within long-established social cultures, being at the bottoms and sides to the societies, do many people feel they are not worthy of art? Why art world is like that, so above and so hard to reach? When the London art world unfolds like any other world, how do people accept this unfolding, in their actions but not in their perceptions? Does leaving the art world make people feel freer and closer to art, and where should people go then?

I understand these questions in this way: the perception that art is above oneself comes from an individual's evaluation of their everyday environment as being inferior to art. Art signifies a certain spiritual realm or standard - this is a problematic misconception - while their everyday life is perceived as being below a certain standard. Even if they switch from one daily routine to another, this perception that art represents a higher standard does not change, because their original daily life has left deep imprints on them. These imprints are collective and difficult to erase, so much so that the distance from their life to art, in their perception, signifies a significant upward climb away from their daily routine to achieve contact with it. However, this imagined upward climb is too difficult or undignified for many people. Specifically, powerless groups living in mainland China lead such marked lives. Experiencing family and school education shaped by the pain of being powerless leads a young person to have a very profound perception of the nature of life's pain. When faced with scenes of conflict and contradiction in life, they often feel a flashback to childhood fears, leading them to retreat and not resist.

In the fourth chapter of this thesis, I use a play script format to recreate dialogues of young people from such environments. They project very high standards onto the London art world, standards that stem from their understanding of the place art should occupy in their lives. Perhaps describing this as a misunderstanding is biased, but can art, as a standard of idealism, allow a young person to live and create more freely? I do not think so. Especially for young people who still perceive their own life as "inferior to art", the answer is a definite no.

The reason is that placing art above life, this hierarchical standard, negates the plurality of art's place within life and the diverse relationships between art and the individual. Art can happen anywhere; in Rilkean verses, it is the hazy desire for everything to exist in the world. Only when such inclusive perception occurs can we gain a change in our perception of our own lives - change does not necessarily mean better, but it does mean more space for becoming. In the fifth chapter, I mention the diversity of life experienced by those who have migrated from China to London, or Europe, and how this diversity reflects a plurality of understandings when perceiving art. In this chapter, I encountered the greatest challenge:

describing how people perceive life and art under different circumstances. Although I cannot truly get close to their lives, I somehow gained a unique sense from the fact that our respective situations are incommunicable and untranslatable, giving rise to hope. Hope emerges when we feel we can't understand each other, while we want to.

In the sixth chapter, similarly, when an individual moves from an environment where they could not access art to London, and then perceives within the art world that art's position is not above their original life, they find the world's incomprehensibility everywhere. Hence, they choose to leave. Their departure is no longer a retreat from a dead-end, but a resistance against the dominant forces that obstruct genuine expression and mutual understanding by choosing not to participate: art should not dominate people's lives. When an individual is willing to care about existence from the smallest and weakest position, they place themselves within a larger world system, no longer a lonely exile moving from one place to another, but a constantly connected individual with others. At this moment, they gain a new perception of art, which is a revolutionary breakthrough, because they have made a shift - they now fully believe they are worthy of art.

Except for describing the ways of being I perceived, and people's perceptions towards the art world and themselves, I guess there's no more I can do, although I believe this method transcends the limitations of fiction and non-fiction. I did not come to the castle of the art world from the beginning, but rather, when I saw it or when I had left it for a long time, all the paths I took gradually blended into my perception. These perceptions are neither diluted nor disturbed but emerge at uncontrollable moments. This is why I believe fiction and non-fiction are difficult to truly separate - we cannot control what kind of imagination and perception we gain at any moment.

This thesis has its limitations in overly descriptive aspects and insufficient analysis and explanation, largely due to my own limited understanding of how perception and meaning are recognized. I hope to gradually make up for this in the future. I attempt to record for myself, and for my companions trapped in the perception that "our life is inferior to art", and I am willing to keep recording the daily notes in life until one day we are set free from this perception.

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Appendix: Glossary of Chinese and English Terms

Introduction

This glossary contains key Chinese terms used in this dissertation along with their English translations. It aims to assist readers in understanding the terminology specific to this research.

Glossary

Chinese Term	Pinyin	English Translation	Definition/Description
草场地	Cǎochǎngdì	Caochangdi	An art district in Beijing known for its contemporary art galleries and studios.
大唐西域记	Dà Táng Xīyù Jì	Great Tang Records on the Western Regions	A historical text by the Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang, documenting his travels to India and Central Asia in the 7th century.
贾樟柯	Jiǎ Zhāngkē	Jia Zhangke	A contemporary Chinese film director known for his work in the Sixth Generation movement of Chinese cinema.
简体中文	jiǎntǐ zhōngwén	Simplified Chinese	A standardized set of Chinese characters used in Mainland China, Malaysia, and Singapore, characterized by simplified strokes.
卡哇伊	kǎwāyī	Kawaii	A Japanese term that means "cute" and is widely used in Chinese and other East Asian cultures to describe the culture of cuteness.
落差	luòchā	Drop/Height Difference	The vertical distance between two points, often used in the context of waterfalls or elevation changes.
罗念生	Luó Niànshēng	Luo Niansheng	A prominent Chinese scholar and translator, known for his translations of ancient Greek literature into Chinese.
鲁迅	Lǚ Xùn	Lu Xun	A leading figure of modern Chinese literature known for his sharp critiques of Chinese society.
唐玄奘	Táng Xuánzàng	Tang Xuanzang	A Chinese Buddhist monk, scholar, and translator who traveled to India to obtain Buddhist texts and wrote the Great Tang Records on the Western Regions.

Chinese Term	Pinyin	English Translation	Definition/Description
先锋(艺术)	xiānfēng (yìshù)	Avant-Garde (Art)	Art that is innovative, experimental, and ahead of its time, often challenging traditional boundaries.
王小波	Wáng Xiǎobō	Wang Xiaobo	A Chinese writer and essayist known for his unconventional narratives and satirical style.
囍	xǐ	Double Happiness	A Chinese character composed of two instances of the character "喜" (happiness), commonly used in Chinese weddings to symbolize joy and happiness.
张爱玲	Zhāng Àilíng	Eileen Chang	A Chinese-American writer known for her novels, essays, and screenplays, particularly in the context of 20th-century Chinese literature.
798	qī jiǔ bā	798 Art District	A contemporary art district in Beijing located in former military factory buildings, known for its galleries, exhibitions, and artistic atmosphere.

Notes

- **Pinyin:** The Romanization of Chinese characters based on their pronunciation.
- **Definitions/Descriptions:** Provided to give context to the terms within the scope of this research.