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Watermelon Self Portrait: Consumption, 2023
24 × 24 in, watercolor paint and gel medium on paper with die cut shapes
Courtesy of the artist

Aftertaste

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MODA Critical Review
Issue VII

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Editors
Susan Zheng | Editor-in-Chief
Summer Jimin Park | Editor-in-Chief
James Xue | Editor-in-Chief
Nabhiraks (Jade) Bhakdibhumi | Editor
Ruby Guralnik Dawes | Editor

Contributors
Anna Filonenko
Dylan Sherman
Elisa Argüello
Francisco Javier Ramirez
Justin Huwe
Katherine Duxiaole Zhang
Lara Rosa
Lucie Ai
Noah Kupper

Designer
SeoJin Ahn

Cover Art
Christine Miller
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Editors' Letter

The *MODA Critical Review* is dedicated to exploring and presenting artistic research, forms of criticism, and creative work beyond the academic format. Edited by current M.A. in Modern and Contemporary Art: Critical and Curatorial Studies (MODA) students at Columbia University, each annual issue is organized around a keyword that serves as an origin point for a diverse body of contributions.

An embodied yet slippery concept, *aftertaste* describes what resists erasure—a flavor that lingers stubbornly, a sensation that conjures memory, an impression that can't be passed over. Bitter or sweet, corrosive or nourishing, aftertaste insists on duration in an age of instantaneity, privileging experiences that accumulate rather than exhaust meaning. It suggests both the presence of what was consumed and evidence that such consumption occurred, penetrated deeply enough to alter the composition of consciousness itself. These layered temporalities form the framework for Issue VII of the *MODA Critical Review*.

This year's contributions move through the theme of aftertaste from many directions. Foregrounding the keyword's sensorial charge is the cover image, *Watermelon Self Portrait: Consumption* (2023), by **Christine Miller**. By confronting the racist trope of the watermelon motif, Miller invokes the literal aftertaste of consumption, bringing into view the troubling commodification of Black bodies and culture within American capitalism. What remains after consumption likewise becomes the focus of **Lara Rosa**'s essay, which sifts through the latent and generative potential within discarded industrial materials in the sculptural practices of Daniel Stroh and Rex Morris.

What happens when aftertaste moves beyond the sensorial and into the existential? Cutting across time and space, several contributors interrogate how art deals with the enduring aftereffects of violence, trauma, and historical rupture. **Lucie Ai** situates the question in 1980s China, in which body-wrapping performances staged in the wake of the Cultural Revolution paradoxically mourned and reproduced the very collective traumas that artists sought to leave behind. With the same unresolvability, **Justin Huwe** brings us to Mexico City through the oeuvre of Teresa Margolles, whose minimalist sculptures embed unconventional materials from human remains to border water within everyday industrial objects, forcing us to encounter death long after violence has vanished from sight. **Anna Filonenko** extends this inquiry to present-day Russia, mapping how artists displaced by the Russia-Ukraine War continue to work through loss and uprooting as an active condition.

Other contributors consider how archives and narratives are assembled retrospectively. **Francisco Javier Ramirez** sees potential in blurry records, using them to reconstruct and complicate overlooked lineages. **Summer Jimin Park** looks at how artist Jeannie Rhyu draws uninhibited and fantastical meaning from a sparse historical source to fill gaps in the archive of diaspora.

Noah Kupper reflects on how listeners retroactively construct meaning through the dissonant soundscape of deathcore music. **Katherine Duxiaole Zhang**, through her reading of Yshao Lin's work, considers how the infinitesimally personal and intimate often complement, and at times complete, the broader sweep of collective history.

Elsewhere, contributions turn aftertaste toward the acts of knowledge production and critical reconsideration. **Nabhiraks (Jade) Bhakdibhumi** revisits postcolonial theory's colonizer-colonized binary through a case study of royal photography strategically deployed in the uncolonized kingdoms of Siam and Japan. **Ruby Guralnik Dawes** returns to modernist aesthetics through Greenberg's Kantianism, critically interrogating formalist dogmatism vis-à-vis the restoration of feeling.

Aftertaste, ultimately, drifts through the folds and flows of time, renewing a textured presence in accumulated layers of moments, intervals, and suspensions. **James Xue** traces how the suspension of time during the pandemic lockdowns transformed Michael Cherney's photographic landscape handscroll from a literary pilgrimage into a meditation on survival. Too a "landscape," Helen Frankenthaler's *Mornings* pulls **Elisa Argüello** in between a Florence palazzo and the haze of waking up in her college dorm room, drawing her into a somatic reflection on starting anew. With a similar self-reflexivity, **Dylan Sherman** moves between exhibition reviews and confessions of subway rides and mobile games, asking us to reconsider waiting as moments when the rational clock time gives way to something more sensuous.

We are deeply appreciative of all of our contributors and readers of this year's issue. We would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to MODA Director Dr. Janet Kraynak, GSAS student group advisor Lucia Espiniera, Department Manager of Graduate Programs Catherine Warden, and Financial Coordinators Faith Batidzirai and Sonia Sorrentini for their continued support of the MODA Critical Review. We would also like to thank our graphic designer, SeoJin Ahn, for working with us to bring this year's publication to life. Lastly, we want to recognize the generous grants from the Department of Art History and Archaeology and the Arts and Sciences Graduate Council, which were instrumental in making *Aftertaste* a reality.

Editors' Bios

Summer Jimin Park

Editor-in-Chief

Summer is a curator, writer, and editor from Cheonan, Korea, currently based in New York. As the 2026 MODA Curates Fellow, she curated *Skins, Not Our Own* at the Wallach Art Gallery (Spring 2026), featuring works by Heidi Bucher, Rebecca Horn, and Kimsooja. Her writing on art has been featured in publications including *W Korea, Marie Claire Korea*, and *Maison Korea*. Before joining Columbia, she served as Associate Director of Public Relations at Kukje Gallery in Seoul.

Summer holds a B.A. in Art History from Georgetown University and is currently a second-year MODA student at Columbia University.

James Xue

Editor-in-Chief

James is a curator, writer, and researcher from Beijing, China, currently based in New York. Engaging with postmodern and decolonial theories, his research investigates the essence of visibility, accessibility, and individuality in contemporary Chinese and Chinese diasporic art. He has worked for Beijing Fine Art Academy and Fu Qiumeng Fine Arts, where he contributed to the exhibitions and community building of contemporary ink art.

James holds a B.A. in Art History from UC San Diego and is currently a second-year MODA student and Kathryn Wasserman Davis Fellow at Columbia University.

Susan Zheng

Editor-in-Chief

Susan is an art historian, writer, and editor currently based in New York. With a particular interest in transnational feminist theory and the politics of time, her research investigates the relationship between time-based art and its afterlife, from its documentation to global circulation. Her studies have been supported by Barnard College and Columbia University. She has held positions at Marian Goodman Gallery, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, and Sotheby's New York.

Susan holds a B.A. in Art History from Barnard College and is currently a second-year MODA student at Columbia University.

Nabhiraks (Jade) Bhakdibhumi

Editor

Jade is an art historian, writer, and editor from Bangkok, Thailand, currently based in New York. Her research interests engage with postcolonial visual studies and global modernisms, with a focus on Thai modern and contemporary art. She has held positions at Christie's auction house in Thailand and served as a curatorial consultant with Thailand's Office of Knowledge Management and Development under the Prime Minister's Office.

Jade holds a B.A. in History and Art History from UCLA and is currently a first-year MODA student at Columbia University.

Ruby Guralnik Dawes

Editor

Ruby is a curator, writer, and editor based in Brooklyn. She is currently a graduate curatorial intern at the Jewish Museum, fact-checker for *Now Voyager Magazine*, and contributor to *Sotheby's Magazine*. In recent years, Ruby was the editorial assistant to novelist Michael Cunningham, head of projects and research at EAMS Creative Studio, assistant at Sarah Sze Studio, and editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Art Criticism* (JAC).

Ruby holds a B.A. in Art History and History from Barnard College and is currently a first-year MODA student at Columbia University. She was given the Eugene H. Byrne History Award for superior work in history and her thesis was awarded distinction.

Contributors' Bios

Anna Filonenko

Anna is a filmmaker and curator from St. Petersburg, Russia, currently based in New York. She has worked at various art institutions and organizations, including the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and The Armory Show. During her time in Russia, she established the StandArt Foundation with the aim of promoting contemporary Russian art. Her curatorial practice gradually evolved into documentary filmmaking and later into short-form directing. She holds a B.A. (hons) in Art History from New York University and is currently splitting time between her role as a Creative Partner for FLORA AI as well as research work and studies at Columbia University.

Dylan Sherman

Dylan Sherman is a first-year MODA student studying time-based art and queer culture. He has held curatorial and production positions at Performa (New York), Slash (San Francisco), McEvoy Foundation for the Arts (San Francisco), and several other interdisciplinary arts organizations. Dylan's writing has appeared in publications including *The Brooklyn Rail, Document Journal*, and *Platform: Journal of Theatre and Performing Arts*, and he served as research assistant for the Performance Talks podcast. Dylan received his B.A. with Honors from Stanford University, where he studied Art History and Dance and received the Christopher Meyer Prize in Art History and the Department of Theater and Performance Studies Award for Contribution to Dance.

Elisa Argüello

Elisa is a writer and student from Austin, Texas. Her past work regards the positioning of soft sculpture in the American museum space. Her current studies focus on sculpture, performance, and collective work from the 1960s and 1970s. Elisa earned her B.A. with Honors in Art History from Stanford University. She is currently in her first year of Columbia's M.A. program in Modern and Contemporary Art: Critical and Curatorial Studies.

Francisco Javier Ramirez

Francisco Javier Ramirez is a Mexico City–born, New York–based interdisciplinary visual artist. He is currently a second-year MFA candidate in Visual Arts at Columbia University. His work draws from personal experience, using myth, history, and popular media to explore reality and artifice. He approaches transformation through fragmentation, ambiguity, and multiplicity as both method and political-aesthetic strategy. He has exhibited internationally, including at Print Center New York, the Wallach Art Gallery, and the Museo de la Ciudad de Querétaro. He was a finalist for the Best Latin American Publication Award at the FELIFA Festival. His zines and photobooks have been featured at Printed Matter's LA Art Book Fair, Brooklyn Art Book Fair, ZONA MACO, among others.

Justin Huwe

Justin Huwe is a second-year PhD student in Columbia's Department of English and Comparative Literature. His research explores contemporary art and literature, with a focus on gender and sexuality, disability, and performance. Justin holds BAs in English and Education from UCLA, as well as an MA in English and Comparative Literature from Columbia. He has worked for five years as an art museum educator in Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Katherine Duxiaole Zhang

Katherine Duxiaole Zhang is a 2026 MODA Curates fellow and a writer/curator residing in Columbia's art history department. Her current thinking revolves around the political efficacy of sensorial objects, particularly their mediatory function upon consciousness.

Lara Rosa

Lara Rosa is a philosopher and artist from Tijuana, B.C., Mexico. Before coming to Columbia, Lara was a scientist, listed as an author for research on neonatal meningitis at only age 16. In 2020, she founded a non-profit in Seattle, WA, that provided free meals and resources to the homeless. Her research interests include Marxism, aesthetics, and Francophone philosophy. Lara publishes essays and short fiction, and her oil paintings were recently exhibited as a solo show at Stump Gallery in Brooklyn, NY. Lara holds a B.S. in Biochemistry and Cell Biology from the University of California, San Diego and is a first-year Master's student in philosophy at Columbia University.

Lucie Ai

Lucie Ai is a writer from Beijing, China, currently based in New York. She holds a B.A. in Art History from Vassar College and is currently a second-year MA student in MODA at Columbia University. Building on her earlier studies of global modern and contemporary art, her current research focuses on Chinese art of the 1980s and 1990s, with particular interests in performance and feminist art.

Noah Kupper

Noah's work attempts a movement through philosophy and decolonial feminist theory. Their work traces how sound, language, and institutions organize worlds of sense in order to unsettle fantasies of stable categories.

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“Mornings”

Elisa Argüello

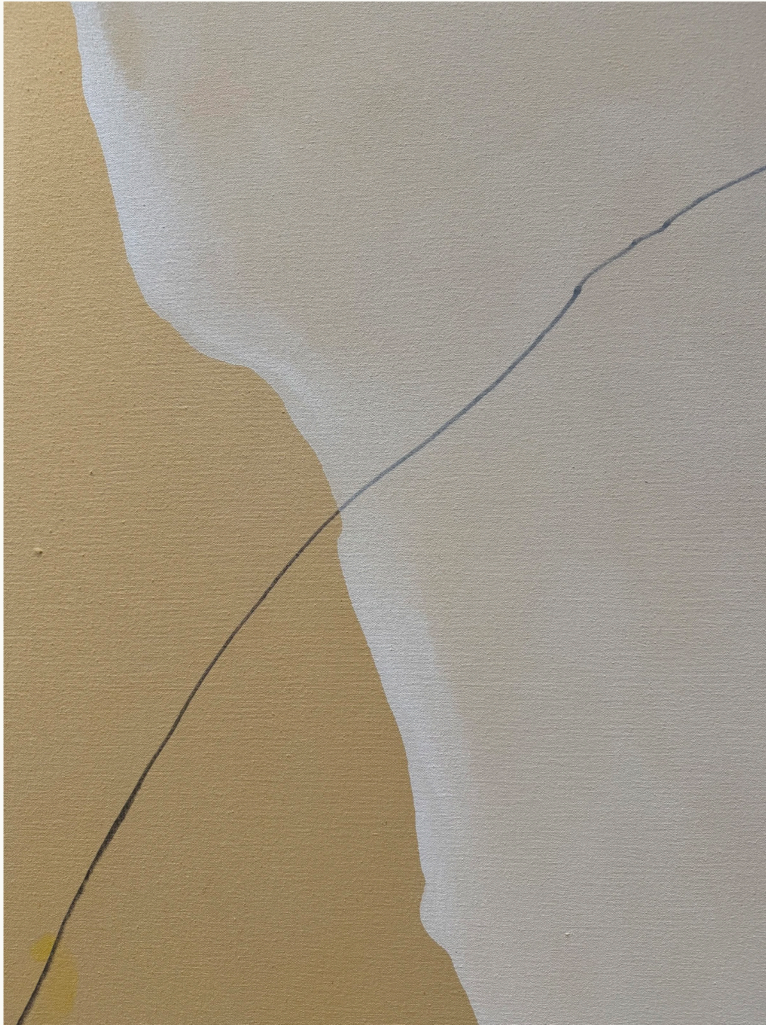


Figure 1.
Helen Frankenthaler, *Mornings*, 1971 (Detail). Acrylic and marker on canvas, 116 × 73 inches. On view at *Helen Frankenthaler: Painting Without Rules,* Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, September 27, 2024–January 26, 2025.

Photo by Elisa Argüello.

The morning comes unwillingly. It hides, like a child peeking behind the legs of their mother. It swells, like the angst of a teen, tugged through church pews. Then, it appears between moments, without a trace of its previous disappearance. The morning is in constant return, though always surprised by its own apparition. *Mornings* (1971) by Helen Frankenthaler is collateral.

In the 1971 painting, sunlight crashes onto Frankenthaler’s beach, while thin lines trek across the landforms. Tearing into her shore, they evoke more violence than tranquility, as their paths march past the subtle delineations (fig. 1). The landscape is clear, yet such an interpretation merely grasps at the straws of Frankenthaler’s abstraction.

Organized by the Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi, in collaboration with the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, *Helen Frankenthaler: Painting Without Rules* (September 27, 2024–January 26, 2025) surveyed the work of the artist and created a cohesive picture of the friends, collaborators, and places that influenced her career. I had saved my visit to the retrospective for a day off while studying abroad in Florence. Moving through the city alone, I anticipated a slow-paced visit to the uncrowded Palazzo Strozzi. With the *Birth of Venus*, Dante Alighieri’s home, and Galileo’s preserved middle finger less than half a mile away, tourists were not concerned with the modern American color field.

I climbed the stairs of the centuries-old Palazzo. When I approached *Mornings*, I was—much like Frankenthaler’s canvases—unprimed. Nearly 10 feet tall, the painting engulfed me in its somatic wash, transporting me back to my Stanford dorm room.

I’m tucked into bed, in the corner of my two-room double, flush against the wall with the window. The legs of my bedframe are balanced on four equally thick library books. Waking, I am immediately greeted by the redwoods and the makeshift, cinder block bench that sits below their branches. I face out, toward a field of ant piles, coyote tracks, and crushed Coors Light cans. In my tower, in the moments before my glasses meet my face, there is a still haze.

These moments are the most vulnerable of the day, and arguably, the most hopeful. There is no dread of what’s to come or what ensued the day before. It is uninhabited, calm. But Frankenthaler does not picture waking. Rather, she paints *Mornings*: the time of realization and acceptance that time churns on, that another day has started without anyone’s permission.

Honing in on the scrawled black lines, *Mornings* is not so much a dawn on the shore as it is stretch marks, scars, and imprints on a creased body, corporeal time stamps. Limbs untangle and find their autonomy, at times complicated by the limbs of a partner, competing for the cool parts of the bed. Like a dull pencil, dragged along a legal pad, these bedfellows leave their marks, too—inconsequential, easily erased, unsettling nonetheless. The traces of nighttime linger, and the morning confronts what is left. Removed from the innocence of incapacitation, the morning is accusatory—stained, sticky, sprawling, searching for a complete picture. The morning is an unparsable scribble.

The residue rises, ready to be skimmed off the top, but plain truths peek out from under, represented by Frankenthaler with a subdued, red line. This is to say, not everything is up for scrutiny. The most glaring truths can be obscured by waking moments.They are inconsequential to the mind that is, rather, concerned with half-baked revelations, those that are far more threatening to the body. What is inexplicable is germane to the mornings. Truth is neither here nor there. Time must pass through an echo chamber of previous occurrences on its way forward (fig. 2). The morning requires further color and further character to transition into day, shaping the haze into a more distinct future.

The pungent yellow of *Mornings* encroaches upon my navel-gazing, pries me away from the ant trails, and recalls the knock of my roommate. She walks through my room to get to breakfast, and returns, handing me a smoothie in a dining hall glass as I sit up in bed. I watch the squirrels run around and around the tree trunks until my smoothie melts, its condensation soaking through my comforter. She knocks and her pet rabbit runs out, gnawing at the wires under my desk and forcing me out from under my sheets. She knocks and we put on our hoodies and walk to the dried-up lake bed. The morning doesn't end. It swivels and turns, around and back, and our daily rituals opt into its revolutions.

We embody each morning as a shared, yet deeply personal, ritual of epiphany. Though I stress the morning as a bedridden point in time—an incapacitating shock—it is the catalyst of our daily sequence. The morning takes inventory, keen to its place in the loop. The morning is a gift of hindsight without the guarantee of clarity.

Mornings offers an intimate glimpse into Frankenthaler's own reckoning with time and its physical manifestation. Walking onwards through the Palazzo's galleries, the exhibition ends with a video of Frankenthaler explaining her process. She shares her creative mantra, "I would rather think and move and make than halt." To continuously "move and make" is a choice to fall in line with the habit of time, ever moving forward. Once moments of waking pass, and reality sets in, memories conjure a concurrent grief. There is mourning for yesterday and anticipatory anxiety for what is to come.

Mornings stresses this daily jolt. No matter how many times we wake from sleeping, these ephemeral moments of remembering, and of returning to our physical body, are damning reality checks. It is the realization that there is no such thing as starting anew, and every day has its consequences that carry over to the next. Helen Frankenthaler highlights the misguided optimism of the promised morning: after every rise, the sun already begins to set. With growing pains in the day, we are left to wake up sore. Bruises take days to gain color, and hair still grows overnight.

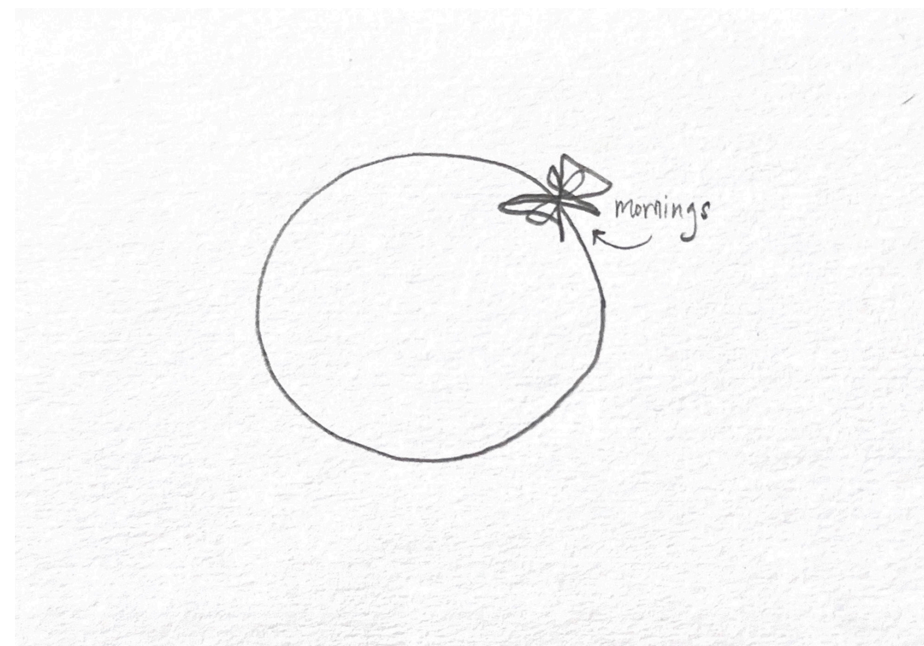


Figure 2.
The unparsable scribble of the morning, drawn by the author.

"A Critical Garbology"

Lara Rosa

Daniel Stroh, *arms extended horizontally, feet perforated,* 2025
Aluminum, photopolymer resin, epoxy resin, ABS plastic, ASA plastic, stainless steel, lacquer
14 ½ x 16 × 8 inches

Courtesy of Kaleidoscope

Entering Daniel Stroh's studio, he directs me to a work in progress: a rock he found on the floor, with two holes somehow already bored in it—the perfect size for a screw. Sitting on the table is an LED strip threaded through a cardboard carton. He proceeds to fashion the rock into a makeshift cover to hide the wiring, with the carton serving as its base.

Stroh reconfigures objects of utility, born of structural necessity, into lamps. Materials meant to protect, stabilize, or deliver—such as foam inserts, die-cut cardboards, molded shells, and rigid casings—are refashioned into decorative objects, retaining only their formal qualities. In the process, Stroh interrupts each object's material lifecycle. Stroh is a soft, deliberate collector of trash; he patiently waits for the right pieces to present themselves, then fits them together as though they were a puzzle. In this sense, it's not the franken-creation we might imagine an inventor of yore to envision. He makes no claim to authorship *ex nihilo*—he builds *in medias res*. Overall, Stroh's pieces are at their most compelling when they are least legible as lamps.

Rex Morris makes sculptural work that similarly undermines the logic of utility. While Stroh plays with light, Morris experiments with electromagnetism. Both call attention to the nonspatial. Morris' machines perform pure function with no clear fulfillable telos. *Bleeder Valve*, via several contact mics hooked up to floor speakers, and *Slab Vent (Rebreather)*, via a plywood box that acoustically echoes a DC motor connected by bicycle inner tubes, amplify the noise of their repetitive internal motion. Borrowing the design language of recycled industrial tools, they resist a Heideggerian disappearance and insist on their existence through a network of spindles, motors, and magnets.[1]

Stroh and Morris both work in the tradition of the Duchampian ready-made. Marcel Duchamp indicted individual style (*la patte*) in painting as it stood in obstinate opposition to industrialization—specifically, the invention of

1 In regards to Heidegger's discussion of the hammer in *Being and Time*, he understands the mode of being of tools (of those things we instrumentalize) as things that disappear from our experience when they are working as they should. In the hands of a craftsman, the hammer ceases to exist and melds into the world, or becomes an extension of the hand. It is only when something goes wrong, such as accidentally hitting our thumb instead of the nail, that suddenly the hammer rises out of immersion and is brought to our attention.

the tube of paint in the 1830s. Previous to this American invention, recipes for pigments were verbally passed down as a pact between master and apprentice. With store-bought paint, painters began to relate to color as consumers. The ready-made signalled a new way of understanding the conditions of the impossibility of choosing.[2] In short, ready-mades foregrounded contingency and context over a personal, individualized will-power. Stroh and Morris take up Duchamp's mantle vis-à-vis the socially necessary illusion of choice that we stumble into: trash, recycling, or compost.[3]

The process by which an object becomes trash is a relatively modern and distinctly capitalist invention. Trash only functions as such when opposed to the closed loop of nature's waste.

The lifecycle of a tree, from seed to maturation, doesn't involve "waste," strictly speaking. Each by-product of the process is positively reappropriated in service of the larger ecosystem rather than interpreted as separable or unnecessary to its functioning. In our interview, Morris noted the effect of his process taking place "in the imperial core," which colors his daily experience with the useless excess of capitalist bounty.

In art as in life, who and what we deem worthy of sacrifice and who and what we deem disposable is the work of a critical garbology. The symbolic register of trash was questioned in 1988, when the case of *California v. Greenwood* considered whether it should be illegal to go through another person's trash.[4] Notably, the Supreme Court ruled that trash was not "private property" under law, meaning that in becoming trash, it entered into the public domain and forewent protected status. Trash highlights a desire to discard or avoid. We throw away things we do not care about or can no longer use. But trash has a curious adhesivity, a way of constantly returning and resurfacing, lingering in our oceans and landfills for generations.

Daniel Stroh, *Pylon*, 2025
Molded pulp, grout, resin, coroplast, peg board, acrylic rod, paracord, found plastic and metal, steel hardware, latex tubing
30 × 19 × 3 ½ inches

Courtesy of Kaleidoscope

Trash has been taken up within subaltern studies as a metaphor for oppressed people, those who express being "disposable," are rendered "disappearable" and "invisible," or are understood only in terms of their utility to the privileged class. In a recent press meeting on global immigration, President Trump stated, "They stink... We are going to go the wrong way if we keep taking in garbage into our country," ostensibly a comment in reference to Black and Brown immigrants.[5] As the historical record attests, only people from certain communities have been consistently regarded as expendable and unnecessary within the larger socio-political framework.

In Nahua philosophy, the goddess *Tlazolteotl* (*tlazolli*, filth; *teotl*, a pantheist energy representing totality) is described as the eater of dirt or the God of Filth. In statues, Tlazolteotl is often represented with her mouth open, covered in "divine excrement" and dirt, forming a closed loop from consumption to excretion.[6] In Nahua metaphysics, *teotl* is considered the basic energetic unit of the universe. In all things, even excrement, there is *teotl*, divinity.[7] The contemporary logic of trash fits neatly into colonial narratives surrounding the purity of self-containment. The loop of Tlazolteotl embraces impurity—through her, waste and sin are internalized and transformed into life's generativity. For critical garbology, trash is not a problem per se, but a source of information.

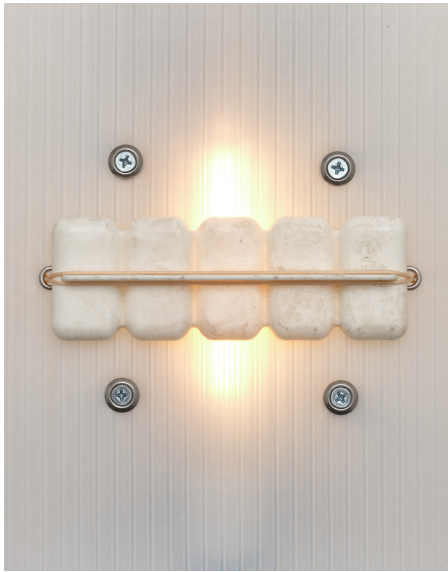
2 Thierry de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp* (MIT Press, 1996), 172.

3 "Socially necessary illusion" is a term employed by Theodor Adorno to define how the term *ideology* functions in the Marxist tradition. For more on this, see Arash Abazari, *Hegel's Ontology of Power* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 17–21.

4 Elizabeth Spellman, *Trash Talks* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 265.

5 Zolan Kanno-Youngs and Shawn McCreesh, "Trump Calls Somalis 'Garbage' He Doesn't Want in the Country," *The New York Times*, Dec. 2, 2025. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/02/us/politics/trump-somalia.html.

6 Patrisia Gonzales, *Red Medicine: Traditional Indigenous Rites of Birthing and Healing* (AU Press, 2012), 98–99.



Daniel Stroh, *Pylon*, 2025 (details)
Molded pulp, grout, resin, coroplast, peg board, acrylic rod, paracord, found plastic and metal, steel hardware, latex tubing
30 × 19 × 3 ½ inches

Courtesy of Kaleidoscope

In "Sacrifices and Wars of the Aztecs," Georges Bataille, the so-called "excremental philosopher," refashions the indigenous philosophies of Mexico in service of his philosophical project.[8] Bataille introduces the idea of *necessary waste*. Waste is the unavoidable excess, which is "itself an object of acquisition."[9] When surplus value is not appropriated in a useful way, the aim is rather spectacular squandering of this waste.[10] The transgression of use-value is employed by the sovereign—that is, those with the ability to spend and rule unproductively.[11]

Necessary waste performs an oxymoron. Typically, waste is considered unnecessary by definition. The copula (the pre-definitive act: "what is…") has traditionally served as the lynchpin of Western metaphysics. It follows that Bataille would draw from Nahuatl as an alternative, being a paradigmatic omnipredicative language that lacks a copular term altogether.[12] The very structure of Nahua syntax presents part of the challenge of Bataille's project, and its attempt to draw together Nahua and Western metaphysics.

Stroh and Morris' treatment of waste doesn't attempt to reassert the primacy of use-value. Their pieces scrape by on the edges of obsolescence and marginality. Crucially, Stroh and Morris intervene with a sharp and increasingly rare curiosity. If the logic of trash begins and ends at its dismissal, it allows us to persist in the illusion of a perpetual present. Stroh and Morris' intervention invokes a strategic and political present, one which understands that the past is never to be abandoned, but addressed, redressed, and reinvented. In reinventing the past, they signal the impossibility of the present, in such a way that expands the horizon of possible futures. This intervention—which faces our collective past—is redemptive, not punitive. Both artists invite us to consider an object's "second life," that is, what remains after an object's use-value has diminished and engages the possibility of rescuing forms back from obsolescence.

The exhibition "Floor Model" was on display at Kaleidoscope Studios in Brooklyn, NY from October 10th to November 9th, 2025.

7 Sebastian Purcell, *Discourse of the Elders* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2023), xvii.

8 Bataille, *Visions of Excess* (University of Minnesota Press, 1985), xi.

9 Bataille, *The Accursed Share* (Zone Books, 1991), 72.

10 Bataille peddles certain colonial narratives about blood-sacrifice, which have been recently reframed by Nahua scholars as largely exaggerated. For more on this, see Matthew Restall (2018, ch.3). Bataille writes, "The Spanish chroniclers left precise information concerning the "merchants" of Mexico and the customs they followed…" (*The Accursed Share*, 64) This framing is misleading. Spanish *conquistadores* did not leave "precise" or scientific evidence of indigenous Mexican societies, but merely one *interpretation*, filtered through an ideological or religious lens. Their archives are invaluable but should be read with a critical eye.

11 Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 64.

12 Sebastian Purcell, *Discourse of the Elders* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2023), xvi.

“On Blurry Images”

Francisco Javier Ramirez

Francisco Javier Ramirez, *Ed at Age 34*, 2025.
Book, hard cover, 90 pages. Edition of 10, published by frannie.

Courtesy of the artist.

Last summer, I made a book using Edward Schwartz’s archive. Playing with memory and time, I revisited and photographed the same locations as Schwartz did over fifty years earlier, using a disposable lens that rendered the images grainy and out of focus. Since then, I have been thinking about blurry photographs. How they might function as a visual strategy for capturing the layered histories we carry with us. How the soft edges can be expansive, resisting definition, and remaining ambiguous.

In his 1931 essay “A Short History of Photography,” Walter Benjamin opens with Louis Daguerre and Nicéphore Niépce, two parallel inventors who fixed the camera obscura’s image onto a silver substrate—a story repeated in every photography class I have taken. The narrative often starts with Niépce’s *View from the Window at Le Gras* (1826). A grainy image made of black dots on grayed paper, closer to a stencil than to what we might think of as a photograph. Yet, since its emergence in the nineteenth century, photography has been primarily regarded as a technical feat, a tool to capture reality as it was.

One of the earliest attempts at changing photography’s social perception from a tool of reproduction into an art form came from the Photo-Secession group. Founded by Alfred Stieglitz in 1902 and lasting a little over a decade, the group championed pictorialism to deepen the artist’s hand in photographic making, chasing the aura that Walter Benjamin later described and attempting to present photographic prints as unique objects. But their efforts went beyond technique and form, focusing on themes of mythology and emotion, things that cannot simply be taken from the world.

Those emotions and relations have been my main interest since I began consciously making art. One of my earliest visual influences, and one that continues to serve as a marker, is the group of photographers known as the Boston School. Through them, specifically David Armstrong and Mark Morrisroe, I began to trace a lineage of queer artists who have used blurriness as a trigger for emotion and a mode of resistance.

For many years, David Armstrong photographed out-of-focus landscapes of the places he lived: New York, Boston, Berlin, and Vienna. The blurry places, void of people but full of life, hold the impossibility of binaries, as they move while static, appear and disappear, quietly existing. With a similar subtle voice, Mark Morrisroe’s sandwiched prints find serenity in chaos. Morrisroe lived his life to the fullest, photographing private moments and making images through camera-less processes that rendered everything opaque and ethereal, revealing while hiding. He passed away in 1989 at thirty years old. That same year, Bill Jacobson began his *Interim Portraits* series. Jacobson’s portraits attempt to visualize the loss of his friends who were dying from AIDS. In them, blurriness becomes a visual representation of the qualities of queerness: expansiveness, resistance, diffusion, nonlinearity, and ambiguity.

These same qualities are visible in Luca Guadagnino’s film *Queer* (2024). In its culminating scene, after the two main characters travel to Ecuador for an ayahuasca ceremony, one tells the other, “I’m not queer… I’m disembodied.”

This moment is rendered onscreen through their bodies separating and embracing, coming undone and reincorporating, moving into each other's bodies, out and back into their own, being both one and two, separate and in unison. The visual representation of the two characters' disembodiment, like Jacobson's and Armstrong's blurry portraits, speaks of an expansiveness and interconnectedness between everyone and the world, away from the rigid binaries society has created.

In a similar way, Hito Steyerl writes in "In Defense of the Poor Image" (2009) that focus and sharpness are imposed hierarchies functioning as markers of value, ease, and privilege. In opposition, the poor image, or the blurry image, resists definition and becomes a site of the limitless: a visual vocabulary for the interpenetration of bodies, histories, and perception.

Such is the case with Pacifico Silano's work. His images, created through the rephotography of erotica magazines produced between the gay sexual liberation of the late 1960s and the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, hold the tension between promise and demise. As his career has advanced, works that once revealed the edges of the magazines—reminding us that these were physical objects being photographed—have become images in their own right. What remains in Silano's images is no longer the indexicality of what is represented but what remains unseen and undefined. Bodies begin to disappear, sometimes emerging only as shadows or fragments, and at other times adrift as part of the landscape. The halftone dots persist as particles, a reminder that what we see once existed, carrying ideas, desires, promises, and their opposites.

Then I think back to blurriness in photography and to Niépce's window. The image I was shown, I later learned, is a fabrication. What Niépce first fixed was in fact a sharply defined positive on a metal plate. The most widely circulated image was produced by the Kodak Company more than a century later, and the pointillistic effect was added to approximate how the owner and conservators believed the original should appear.

Accepting the unreality of everything allows me to move beyond representation, past what things should look or be, to unbecome, to resist, and to expand beyond physicality. Like Silano, Jacobson, Morrisroe, or Armstrong, the artificiality of the blur, the noise, and the undefined feels closer to how the world is perceived: fragmented, mediated, and unstable.

Over the past few years, I have been taking the world—a world made of images and their remains—and transforming it by scanning moving images, placing myself into archives, or collapsing multiples into one. I began [*broken heart*] around the same time as *Ed at Age 34*, focusing on the movies I watched the summer I came out and on how they shaped the image I have of myself. In both works, I see the continuation of a queer lineage of resistance and softness through blur. Bodies and places persist as particle dots. Yet I question what other forms my work may inhabit as it moves, expanding, disembodied, multiple, nonlinear, and diffused.

Francisco Javier Ramirez, *Summer Storm*, from the series *[broken heart]*, 2025. Photograph.

Courtesy of the artist.

"Dreams to Hatch: On Jeannie Rhyu's *102 American Dreams*"

Summer Jimin Park

Jeannie Rhyu, *102 American Dreams,* 2025, glazed porcelain and stoneware, sand, dimensions variable.

Courtesy of the artist.

In 1905, plantation managers at the Hawai'i Sugar Company on Kaua'i wrote of their newly arrived Korean laborers: "[T]hey are not nearly as bright or smart as the Japanese; are industrious enough, but have no initiative."[1] The assessment came roughly two years after the RMS Gaelic slipped into Honolulu Harbor on January 13, 1903. The 102 Koreans aboard were the first organized group to arrive through a recruitment campaign carefully brokered between Hawaiian planters and U.S. officials.[2]

On the day the ship docked, *The Hawaiian Star* welcomed the passengers as a promising "solution" to the problem of plantation labor.[3] The optimism was short-lived. Language barriers certainly played a role, but the more pressing issue was that the vast majority of the migrants had no experience in agricultural labor. Back in their homeland, they had been soldiers, clerks, policemen, miners, fishermen, students, and monks, caught in the tightening cul-de-sac of poverty and political decline in late Joseon Korea (1392–1910).[4] With little choice, they crossed the ocean knowing almost nothing of the work ahead yet determined to endure whatever it required. One can only imagine the weight of being measured and found wanting, of being evaluated against a role inscribed onto one's body. The strain of words that falter in an unfamiliar tongue.

Jeannie Rhyu's ceramic installation *102 American Dreams* (2025) stems from two sparse, interrelated sources: a newspaper article that reduced the passengers to a collective labor fix and a black-and-white photograph of the vessel. For Rhyu, who has herself moved between borders from Seoul to Vancouver, Toronto, and now New York City, these fragments are all the more precious. They are the only available entry points into the lives of 56 men, 21 women, and 25 children whose stories remain largely unrecorded beyond the numbers and the bare fact of their crossing. Sensing this hollowness in the archive, she responds by rendering

1 Wayne Patterson, *The Korean Frontier in America: Immigration to Hawaii, 1896–1910* (University of Hawai'i Press, 1988), 119.

2 Patterson, *The Korean Frontier in America*, 12–82.

3 "Koreans Arriving," *The Hawaiian Star* (Honolulu, HI), January 13, 1903, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/sn82015415/1903-01-13/ed-1/.

4 Wayne Patterson, *The Ilse: First-Generation Korean Immigrants in Hawaii, 1903–1973* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), 6.

each as a ceramic egg. The eggs vary in size and glaze, some painted with ships, navigational stars, giant hermit crabs, and washes of blue, yellow-green, and earthen reds and browns. Scattered across mounds of sand, they precariously hold their ground, some half-buried, others tilted at odd angles. To see them properly, you must crouch and lean in close, careful not to lose your footing in the sand as you read their painted surfaces. The sand's labyrinthine terrain loosely draws on the Gaelic's passage across the Pacific, derived from bathymetric maps and reimagined to encompass a broader North Pacific seascape. The depths are inverted so that the ocean floor rises into peaks of sand; she has always had something for fathoming the fathomless, for making visible the submerged.

The unfulfilled dreams buried in these mounds are inseparable from the commodity these migrants were recruited to produce. In *Sweetness and Power*, anthropologist Sidney Mintz traces how sugar became an everyday pleasure by structurally separating production from consumption, allowing its violence to remain out of view. Cane was cut in Caribbean and Pacific plantation zones while its sweetness flourished through distant cities.[5] For sugar to remain sweet, suffering had to take place elsewhere. *102 American Dreams* dwells in that aftertaste, in what remains after sweetness has dissolved. Small and fragile yet obstinately specific, Rhyu's eggs scatter across their inverted ocean to refuse that displacement.

Where the archive falls silent, Rhyu turns to the cosmos. Across her interdisciplinary practice of paintings, prints, ceramic sculptures, and installations, she returns persistently to images of migration and oceanic life—flying fish in mid-glide, beacons of light, birds, whales, deep blue oceans, and expansive night skies. In installations such as *Banked Wishes* (2025), where sand dollars are arranged in reference to celestial navigation charts, and in paintings like *Weedy Seadragon* (2025), inspired by the fragile sea creatures she watched weaving through seagrasses, Rhyu situates movement within a larger cosmology of orientation and becoming. This iconographic world recalls the visionary universes of Leonora Carrington or the luminous cyanotypes of Kiki Smith—artists who, like Rhyu, refuse to treat nature as passive. She speaks of the quantum forces that guide migratory birds across continents, of migration as something embedded in the fabric of living systems long before it is regulated by borders.

Susan Sontag once wrote that in the face of historical catastrophe, what remains is the imperfect act of remembering: "Often, it may not do any good to remember. But we may feel that it is *right*, or fitting, or proper."[6] And so Rhyu remembers. However fragmentary the archive and narrow the surviving record, she insists on the presence within it of lives that held unhatched dreams before they were ever evaluated as labor. When they were soldiers, clerks, policemen, miners, fishermen, students, and monks.

5 Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (Penguin Books, 1986).

6 Susan Sontag, "Reflections on *The Deputy*," in *Against Interpretation* (Picador, 2025), 125; originally published 1964.

Left:
Jeannie Rhyu, *Banked Wishes*, 2025, glazed porcelain and sand, dimensions variable.

Courtesy of the artist.

Right:
Jeannie Rhyu, *Weedy Seadragon*, 2025, oil on linen, 14 × 11 in.

Courtesy of the artist.

Jeannie Rhyu, detail view of *102 American Dreams*, 2025, glazed porcelain and stoneware, sand, dimensions variable.

Courtesy of the artist.

Ceramic sculptures in Jeannie Rhyu's studio.

Courtesy of the artist.

“A Home Is...”

Katherine Duxiaole Zhang

Figure 1. Yshao Lin 林意逍, *As I Wonder, As I Dream Of It*, film still.

Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.[1]

Such is the well-known line from American poet and playwright Gertrude Stein’s 1931 poem *Sacred Emily*. The author later explained: “When I said. ‘A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.’ And then later made that into a ring I made poetry, and what did I do? I caressed, completely caressed and addressed a noun.”[2]

The caressing was achieved through repetition, through going back to the same word, uttering the same sound—each time with a different tone perhaps—hearing its sound, its echo, making it at once the most familiar and the most strange. Stein gave Rose (the first Rose is a name and a person) full attention, with each repeated *rose*, the word refers to an earlier iteration of itself in a marvelous act of *mise en abyme*.

With each utterance of rose, the reader’s voice cannot help but soften, as if encountered with the author’s tender gaze. This act of repetition—the constant moving back, recalling and revisiting—finds itself in the works of many others, among which is Yshao Lin, a young artist who is now writing his story in the very city Stein, too, lived in.

Lin comes from an island called Hujiang (壶江), located in the province of Fujian, adjacent to the southern border of Mainland China. The artist grew up in this town, historically a fishing community, surrounded by seafaring tales brought home by adults who departed and returned. In Lin’s film *As I Wonder, As I Dream of It*, Lin, as someone who grew into an artist and now holds the skill of constructing visuality, finally materialized the countless tales that composed his childhood.[3] (Fig. 1) With its mesmerizing sonic texture that synthesizes the unlikely pairing of both birdsong and sounds from the bottom of the sea, *As I Wonder*’s dream-like seascape invites its viewers into the most intimate of Lin’s memories—a fantasy the artist constructed, once for himself alone.

1 Gertrude Stein, “Sacred Emily,” first published 1913; repr. in *Geography and Plays* (Four Seas Co., 1922), 178–88; repr. in *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein* (Vintage Books, 1990); repr. in *Writings: 1903–1932*, ed. Catharine R. Stimpson and Harriet Chessman (Library of America, 1998), 387–96.

2 Gertrude Stein, “Poetry and Grammar,” in *Lectures in America* (Beacon Press, 1985), 231.

3 Yshao Lin 林意逍, “As I Wonder, As I Dream of It,” *Yshao Lin 林意逍*, n.d., accessed February 2, 2026, https://yshaolin.com/as-i-wonder-as-i-dream-of-it/.

He tailors the scene with an openness for collective viewing, for Lin's story was his, but also that of many others. As Yshao Lin recounted, those from his hometown, Hujiang, shared strikingly similar migration trajectories, or as he put it, "My story is no different from the others from my hometown."[4] Migration from coastal rural China, of which Fujian is exemplary, to the United States since the latter half of the twentieth century is by no means a new area of research.[5] As sociologists Zai Liang and Miao David Chunyu have noted, the dramatic increase in international migration from Fujian to the USA and Europe, particularly after the late 1970s, has commanded critical attention for quite some time.[6] By employing the network theory of migration, Liang and Chunyu uncover the communitarian dynamism within the international migration of Fujian. Such migration tends to work as a chain reaction depending on the link between those who settled into their destination and those who are potential migrants from the migrant-sending communities.[7] In the words of our artist, "It all started with one family member, then another, and eventually the entire village emigrated to other countries and left babies and the elders behind."[8]

Figure 2. Yshao Lin 林意逍, *The Abandoned School Where My Mother Taught*, in documentary photographic series *When They Ring Those Golden Bells*, 2019 – ongoing.

Indeed, as Yshao Lin reminds us, "babies and the elders" have often been excluded from this network, at least at its initial stage, and instead tasked with the job of staying behind.[9] For Lin, in his own lucid recounting, "My parents left me to my grandparents when I was five years old, and followed every other young person's footsteps to the United States to seek better lives. I reunited with my parents when I was fourteen."[10] Repeatedly, Lin emphasizes that his story is not unique. In a Master's thesis titled "From the Lucky Land to the Beautiful Country," the author Miao Lin included the words of a child, who, similar to the artist, watched his father compose part of the Fujianese migratory network: "When my father left, I was twelve. I felt sad for his leaving because he was such a good father. I did not know exactly where he was going. I was told he would travel far away from home to make money. After he earned money, we could live a better life."[11]

When They Ring Those Golden Bells is an early series within Yshao Lin's body of work. (Fig. 2) When speaking of the series, even the maker's own memory took time to be activated. The faded colors of the photographic series mirror the artist's effort in excavating this memory of a place and time that now feels quite distant. As the artist ventures into new areas of inquiry concerning gender, sexuality, and masculinity, home no longer features explicitly in the artist's more recent works, although it arguably never faded away. Perhaps under the sweeping romanticizing force that sometimes comes with time, traces of the past—of a once-intimate place and a childhood spent in waiting—now seem tender yet blurry. These memories excavated from fringe consciousness—the aftertaste from a once all-too-clear time—are revisited, recalled, and reassured.

I am not interested in victimizing the artist, or the countless others who waited as their caretakers left home in search of a better life, nor do I wish to vilify the parents who left

4 Yshao Lin 林意逍, "When They Ring Those Golden Bells," *Yshao Lin* 林意逍, n.d., accessed February 2, 2026, https://yshaolin.com/when-they-ring-those-golden-bells/.

5 Zai Liang and Miao David Chunyu, "Migration within China and from China to the USA: The Effects of Migration Networks, Selectivity, and the Rural Political Economy in Fujian Province," *Population Studies* 67, no. 2 (2013): 209–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/00324728.2012.756116.

6 Liang and Chunyu, "Migration within China and from China to the USA."

7 Liang and Chunyu, "Migration within China and from China to the USA." See also Douglas S. Massey, Luin Goldring, and Jorge Durand, "Continuities in Transnational Migration: An Analysis of Nineteen Mexican Communities," *American Journal of Sociology* 99, no. 6 (1994): 1492–1533.

8 Lin, "When They Ring Those Golden Bells."

9 Lin, "When They Ring Those Golden Bells."

10 Lin, "When They Ring Those Golden Bells."

their families in search of a better life—such is a noble pursuit. Time, I would argue, is the unnamed protagonist in *When They Ring Those Golden Bells*. (Fig. 3) Burning incense, drying shrimps, gathering dust, time was (and is) flowing and passing, eternally present. In the words of T. S. Eliot, “Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future, / And time future contained in time past.”[12] Time’s eternal presence, perhaps, can be found in its aftertaste.

Lin’s photographic series complements broader, largely quantitative research in migration studies with a piece of personal archive. Amidst ongoing conversations questioning the truth scheme of “History” with a capital H—that is, a narrative (often consciously) mediated by uneven discursive, political, economic, and social power structures yet misleadingly presented as a neutral *mainstream*—a micro-historical approach that takes seriously previously overlooked pieces of evidence has gained significantly more traction in the past few decades.[13] Following the methodological shift, the practice of history writing has indeed seen its decolonial reflection, and increasingly recognizes forms of documentation, such as oral history traditions, that have been established and valued beyond the post-Enlightenment Global North. However, it is worth noting that such a shift towards Historically dismissible—and indeed dismissed—micro-narratives should not be understood as a blind endorsement of a multiplicity of what are often called *personal truths*. While the turn toward personal truths disrupts History’s fixation on macro narratives, it risks losing itself in the other extreme: absolute relativism, which could potentially negate attempts at a narrative that hopes to account for more than one individual.

The story animating Yshao Lin’s *When They Ring Those Golden Bells* belongs to him, yet accommodates many more. Lin’s story resonates beyond his island, his country, his language, his generation... Revisiting the story today, amidst renewed discussions of the (il)legality and criminalization of migration, it will matter for many more years to come.

A home is a home is a home.

11 Miao Lin, “From the Lucky Land to the Beautiful Country: Illegal Immigration of Fujianese to the United States” (master’s thesis, Eastern Michigan University, 2005), https://commons.emich.edu/theses/25.

12 T.S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” in *Four Quartets* (Faber and Faber, 1943), 13.

13 Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Szijártó, “Introduction: Against Simple Truths,” in *What Is Microhistory? Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2013), 1–18.

Figure 3. Yshao Lin 林意逍, *Praying For Good Fortunes*, in documentary photographic series *When They Ring Those Golden Bells*, 2019 – ongoing.

“Любить нельзя ненавидеть [*Love. Can’t. Hate.*]”

Anna Filonenko

Asya Marakulina, *UPROOTED*, 2024, fabric, faux fur, and polyester, 110 × 70 × 70 in.

Courtesy of the artist.

February 2026. It’s hard to believe that four years have passed. Will it ever be over?

February 2022. I am based in Moscow. When the impossible happened, everyone knew that our lives had been divided into before and after.

February 2023. I am based in London and working hard to capture the change as perceived by artists. I am shooting a documentary about four female artists who used to be based in St. Petersburg. The city, where I was born and raised, is the film’s fifth character. I record memories of thoughts and feelings artists had at the breaking points of their lives. They show me the art they are interested in making now.

February 2024. I am almost done editing the movie. Every time I watch it to make edits, I cry. Is it some form of therapy, or just pure torture?

February 2025. I want to forget I made the movie. I want to forget where I am from. I don’t want my roots to define me anymore.

February 2026. I sit down to write about themes Russian artists are exploring in the aftermath of that one day that changed it all. When we read about wars in history books, they seem like single, monumental events during which only battles happen and all other life stops. But when you find yourself living inside a history book, you realize that war is not a single event, but the beginning of it is. The war itself is life in the aftertaste of that moment.

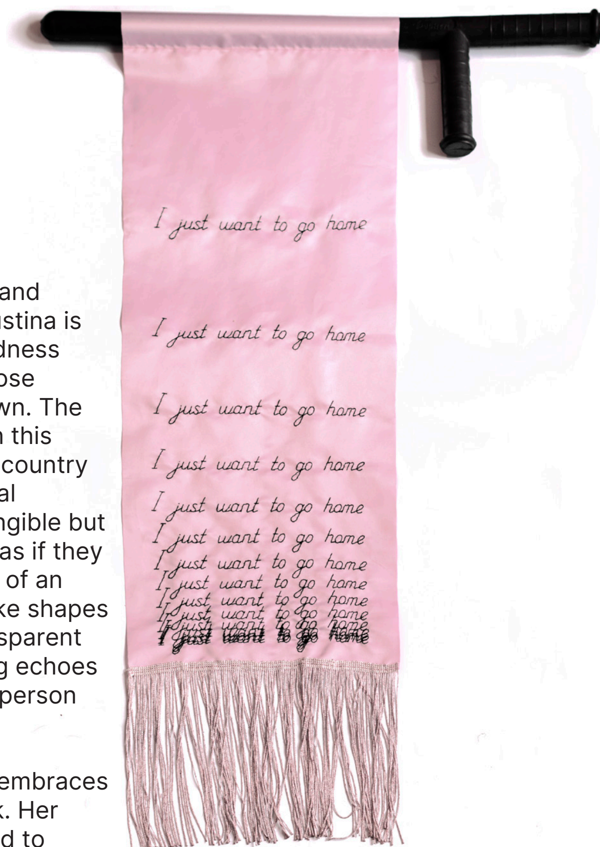
What has this life in the bitter aftertaste produced in art? While editing my documentary, I identified some shared motifs that united artists who left and those who stayed in Russia. Those motifs continued well past the completion of the film. Years later, those works still speak about the loss of home and the search for a new safe space.

About a year ago, I curated a solo show by artist Asya Marakulina at the Smallest Gallery in Soho, London. The show, *Uprooted*, displayed a plush installation showing soil with plants and worms being lifted during excavation. It revealed her personal experience of being “pulled out” of her culture, having to reinvent herself in a new country. Asya’s most recent series, *There Was a Home*, started with her fascination with traces of dismantled apartment buildings left on the walls of neighboring structures. Her miniature ceramic portraits of demolished homes evoke bittersweet feelings of nostalgia, sadness for worlds lost, and the possibility of new worlds yet to be created.

Another artist from the documentary, Yustina Komissarova, recently messaged me about her upcoming show *где бы я ни была, моих следов не останется* [*wherever I go, no traces of my steps will be left*]. Her practice has completely transformed in recent years. From explorations of femininity and the female body in large-scale acrylic paintings, she moved toward themes of fear, loss, and invisibility on transparent net fabrics and paper. Yustina is the only artist from my film who remained in Russia. She continues to exhibit in both large

Lada Uchaeva, *I Just Want to Go Home*, 2026, fabric with embroidery, police baton, 21 ¾ x 37 ½ in.

Courtesy of the artist.



state-censored exhibitions and underground art spaces. Yustina is in desperate search of goodness in people and of people whose “tribe” would feel like her own. The uncertainty that comes with this search and the state of the country she lives in shapes her visual language. Her works are tangible but have an ephemeral quality, as if they could disappear in the blink of an eye. She leaves light, net-like shapes of humans on paper or transparent net with a 3D pen, capturing echoes of a person rather than the person themselves.

In contrast, Polina Osipova embraces defined imagery in her work. Her practice is deeply connected to her identity as part of the Chuvash ethnic minority in Russia, and even in emigration she continues to deepen ties to her roots through her family photo archive. In her first New York solo show, *A Living Inheritance*, she presented a range of objects made using traditional Chuvash embroidery techniques and imagery tied to her ancestral past. These connections protect her, helping to create a sense of safety that is hard to come by.

While Polina’s works remain grounded as she assimilates into a new cultural environment, works by Lada Uchaeva reveal a different story of immigration.

Lada’s primary interests have been Russian folklore traditions and, most recently, economic inequality. However, since her forced relocation, many of her artworks reflect her anger and pain from this displacement. Her most recent work is accompanied by a poem that ends with:

“Now
I just want to go home
But there’s no home for me
anymore”

A soft pink color juxtaposed with the concealed shape of a police baton—the symbol of force and brutality against the unprotected and fragile. The stitched phrase “I just want to go home” creates a rhythm that resembles an increasing panic or a cry of helplessness. It also blends both tender love and raging hate toward what that “home” is, or how it remains in the artist’s memory.

It’s February 2026, and the documentary remains unseen. I believe this is for the best. It will make for a fine watch when we are back in our new home, having learned how to love yet again.

Polina Osipova, *Crystallized Memories*, 2025, canvas, retouched archival family photos printed on textile, felt, agate chips, labradorite chips, quartz chips, 32 ¼ x 18 ½ in.

Courtesy of the artist.

Yustina Komissarova, *Тот, кого я люблю, находится повсюду [Everyone I Love Is Everywhere]*, 2025, canvas, acrylic, plastic, 39 ½ x 39 ½ in.

Courtesy of the artist.

"Teresa Margolles and Life After Death"

Justin Huwe

Figure 1. Teresa Margolles, *El agua del Río Bravo*, 2021. *Witch Hunt*, installation view, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, October 10, 2021–January 9, 2022. Photo: Jeff McClane.

Two scenes, nearly two decades apart…

Frankfurt, 2004: A rectangular concrete slab lies in a gallery. Quiet, bland, and innocuous. Looking down upon the block, its six grey sides appear smooth, with only the smallest imperfections—chipped corners and dark blotches—dotting the surface. One cannot think of a more perfect emblem of human industry, a more potent symbol of modern urban life, grey and austere.

Los Angeles, 2021: 32 glistening air conditioners stand stacked in a museum lobby, blowing cold air on visitors as they arrive (fig. 1). Another industrial emblem, but this time the singularity of the concrete block is replaced by a multiplicity of metal cubes. At over eight feet high, and twice as wide, the wall of AC units towers over observers. The silence of concrete has been exchanged for the roar of wind, stillness for movement.

—

These two sculptures, standing decades apart, typify the enduring minimalist aesthetic of Mexico City-based artist Teresa Margolles. At first glance, her works often appear as simple objects from everyday urban life. In cities across the globe, countless concrete blocks stack together to construct buildings, bridges, and roads. AC units, too, are scattered everywhere, making life bearable on this ever-warming planet. One might ask, how are these mundane items "art"? Why do these quotidian, infinitely reproducible building blocks of modernity deserve to be preserved and exhibited in a museum?

Behind Margolles' minimalism, however, lies a profound exploration of human existence—of life and death, and what life comes after death. Digging deeper, beyond the surface, reveals an entirely different story.

Take *Entierro* (1999), for example, the opening concrete slab whose name means "burial" in Spanish. Contained within the block, far from observers' prying eyes, lies a stillborn fetus. Suddenly, the innocuous block holds new meaning: no longer is the concrete a spectral remnant of human industry, but instead a human burial site. With this information, *Entierro* instantly transforms from a symbol of industrial waste into a tomb. Buried beneath the matte gray surface lies a corpse, the horrors of stillbirth just out of sight but looming large over the artwork.

Trained as a mortician, Margolles has made a name for herself by using human remains in her artwork to spotlight the oft-unnamed victims of organized crime and drug-trafficking in Latin America. For example, she gained notoriety for her "sculptures"—if we dare call them that—that consist solely of severed body parts, such as a human tongue. Other daring artworks involve materials like splattered blood and water used to clean corpses, confronting the realities of migration and gendered violence. As with many of her other sculptures, *Entierro* gives narrative life to the dead. Margolles meditates on how societies reckon with violence, and how life continues on after death. Her art asks: What stories can the dead tell?

Intervening in vexed questions of temporality, *Entierro* creates a perpetual corpse unable to decay. Not only has the fetus's linear growth in the womb been disrupted by stillbirth, but its linear decay has also been disrupted as the corpse is preserved in its new concrete tomb (strikingly, only one letter different from "womb"). She brings the dead directly into the museum, forcing visitors to confront the consequences of violence presented before them, even if human industry obscures the violence. Much like how the concrete preserves the body within, the museum as an institution preserves the concrete block as an artwork, forming another kind of tomb (to which this article in your hands forms another one). Margolles, in essence, lays bare the violences of modernity, mobilizing visceral materials others would shy away from—the realities of flesh and blood—to ponder the human understanding of death. Instead of moving past violent moments swiftly or looking past them entirely, Margolles' artworks ask: how do we live with death? Aesthetically? Culturally? Spiritually? How do we sit with the aftertaste of death—bitter, sour, melancholic, and more?

For Margolles, taste is an animating question of her sculptures. Her unique marrying of minimalism with the materiality and narrativity of death pushes the boundaries of taste. She explicitly rejects the conventions of taste through her artwork—from her shocking use of human remains, to the striking minimalism of everyday objects like concrete blocks and AC units. Her work lingers in a realm that comes after taste, for when is death ever tasteful? And yet the museum, an arbiter of artistic taste, submits objects and materials across histories to the test of time and consecrates what endures—that is, a timeless (*and time-less*) taste. Margolles taps into this tension. If aesthetic taste is often temporally bounded by whatever is trendy and current, then death, as an inevitable and everlasting human phenomenon, will always exceed these temporal bounds, stuck in a sense of timelessness despite the fact that it marks the very passage of time. By exhibiting death inside the institution that makes taste for the modern beholder, Margolles reveals that what lies beyond taste's limits may be the very thing the museum has always been circling around—the question of what persists. Margolles' art impels us to consider what we gain from rejecting the bounds of taste, from probing the other side of these limits and confronting death head-on.

Literary scholar Mark Seltzer's notion of a contemporary "wound culture" offers a helpful counterpoint for thinking through Margolles' sculptures. Seltzer writes poignantly: "The convening of the public around scenes of violence—the rushing to the scene of the accident, the milling around the point of impact—has come to make up a *wound culture*: the public fascination with torn and opened bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound."[1] He describes, more specifically, the fraught—and often violent—relationship between bodies and technology in modern society, the tension between a private, corporeal interior and a public sphere that can't help but gawk at the gore when that interior

becomes exposed.

Much of Margolles' art, though, takes an opposite approach. While the violence of *Entierro* remains out of sight—the wound seemingly invisible—the narrative of violence tied to the object becomes enlivened in viewers' minds. Despite not being visually confronted with the reality of death—of the horrors of a stillborn baby, or the pain of a grieving mother—viewers are forced to imagine such trauma, the wound itself being placed into their minds.

Similarly, *El agua del Río Bravo* (2021) tells of the oft-invisible horrors of migration at the US Southern border—the horrors that many Americans often choose to look away from. The 32 hand-crafted AC units from the opening scene are purchased from a market in the La Chaveña neighborhood of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico (fig. 2). Like *Entierro*, the fans appear mundane at first glance—a cool breeze flowing into a sterile museum space. But in reality, death fills the air. As the title suggests, the ACs are filled with water from the Río Bravo, the river that creates the natural border between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso, Texas. But the border is also a grave. Often, migrants who have made the harrowing journey to the US in search of a better life do not cross the river successfully, drowning tragically in the river.

In using the river water to power the air conditioners, Margolles is bringing the death and violence associated with the US-Mexico border across the geographic boundary and into the museum space. Even if she does not make this violence visible, she goes a step further: she makes it fill the very air being breathed. The violence no longer remains confined to our Southern border, out of sight; instead, she reminds American visitors that the violent—and ongoing—histories of migration that define this country are as fundamental and consequential as the air we breathe.

1 Mark Seltzer, "Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere," *October* 80 (1997): 3–26.

The turn to air, here, 20 years later, does not feel incidental. *El Agua del Río Bravo* was exhibited in a world recently ravaged by the horrific COVID-19 pandemic, which transformed the very air being breathed into a vector of mass death. In essence, the life source we need to survive as humans also becomes a site of immense loss. The singular death of *Entierro*—in all of its looming, invisible horror—has evolved: one gray block has exploded into 32, and death not only looms now but can also be ingested. Margolles positions the violence that has long occupied her artwork—that of migration, of drug and human trafficking—as a virus that haunts the air, inescapable.

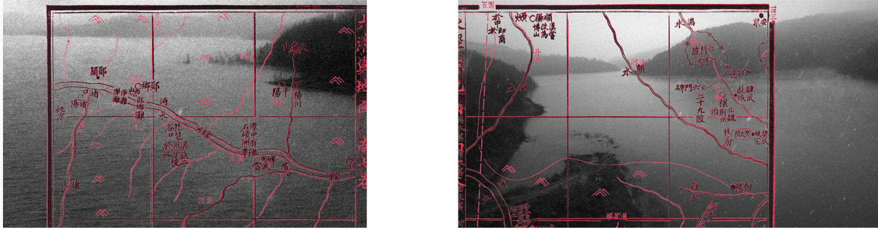
Death lives on, lingering…

Figure 2. Air Conditioners in the open-air market Los Herrajeros, La Chaveña neighborhood, Ciudad Juárez, Mexico.

Courtesy of the artist.
Photo: Citlali Cruz.

“The After-flow”

James Xue



渔父莞尔一笑，鼓枻而去，乃歌曰：
The fisherman smiled ever so slightly. Tapping his paddle
he began to leave. As he did so he sang the following song:

“沧浪之水清兮，可以濯吾缨；
“When the Canglang waters are clean,
I can wash my hat strings;

沧浪之水浊兮，可以濯吾足。”
When the Canglang waters are muddy,
I can wash my feet.”

遂去不复与言。
And so he departed and never conversed
with Qu Yuan again.

Qu Yuan, “The Fisherman” in *The Song of Chu*[1]

The poet meets the fisherman at his most frustrated and desperate moment. He stands on the riverbank, already suicidal and imagining his burial in the fish’s belly. Yet the fisherman, who witnessed such a scene and talked, found the poet’s upright dignity laughable. If the water is muddy, why not wash your feet with it instead of insisting on it being clean enough? Why do you have to make it like the end of the world? Their short exchange ends in silence. The fisherman leaves without a word, paddling the water and disappearing on the river. The poet’s language fails; he neither agrees nor disagrees, lost in a long pause for thought by the fisherman’s final words. What is a *junzi*?[2] Someone who is ambitious to make the world a better place? Or someone with the wit to accommodate?

Michael Cherney, like most people in the world, did not know what he was going to experience by the time he took the photographs for *Canglang Waters*. It was mid-January 2020. Cherney had been living in Beijing, China for almost thirty years. Once in a while, he and his family paid a short visit back to New York. He was beginning to be “rooted” in Chinese culture, reading the classics in classical Chinese, practicing calligraphy, and reading critics’ commentaries on how he imbues photographs with the true spirit of Chinese landscape. He recently took an interest in Qu Yuan and the *Commentary on the Water Classic* (水经注) by Li Daoyuan (郦道元), and decided to travel to Hubei Province, where Qu was said to have lived and died.

On January 23, 2020, the day Cherney was scheduled to leave Hubei for Beijing, Wuhan, Hubei’s capital city, entered into the first COVID-19 lockdown. A couple of months into this global pandemic, the *Canglang Waters* would no longer be just a metaphor for how to live like a *junzi*, but how to survive, especially mentally, during the pandemic.

The pandemic soon became a massive

1 Qu Yuan 屈原, “The Fisherman,” *The Song of Chu: An Anthology of Ancient Chinese Poetry by Qu Yuan and Others*, ed. and trans. Gopal Sukhu (Columbia University Press, 2017), 184. Chinese names in this article will appear in surname-given name format.

2 “Junzi 君子” represents traditional Chinese culture’s highest regard for a person (usually male). A *junzi* is well-educated and behaves with dignity, purity, and uprightness.

Figure 1–4. Excerpts from Michael Cherney, *Canglang Waters* in *Tracing the Water Classic*, 2020, photography, printing, and calligraphy on mitsumata washi paper, handscroll, 26.4 × 1365 cm.

Courtesy of the artist.

freeze on mobility. Following the outbreak in February 2020, Cherney, like many Chinese residents, found himself quarantined in a lockdown city. The stationary status marked the artist's transition from a photojournalist who constantly travels and captures grandiose landscapes to a photo editor and a calligrapher who sits in the studio every day and thinks about creative and transmedia approaches to photography. While the *Eight Views of the Xiao Xiang* (潇湘八景, 2009) and *Ten Thousand Li of the Yangtze River* (长江万里图, 2010–2015) series showcase consecutive and panoramic landscapes across the handscroll format, the Canglang Waters, the first of the *Tracing the Water Classic* (水经迹) series, includes ten images of the Han River with three short pieces of calligraphy in the middle and the end.

Reading the handscroll from the right following the traditional viewership, we see a snowy riverscape with a transparent map on top of it [fig. 1]. The map is an illustration of the *Water Classic* drawn by Qing Dynasty scholars Yang Shoujing (杨守敬) and Xiong Huizhen (熊会贞) in 1905, after Wang Shiduo (汪士铎)'s 1861 version, and expresses an aftertaste of the ancient classic.[3] The locations referenced in Li Daoyuan's original text are in dark color which were illustrated by Wang, and new cities are in red, giving the readers a timely reference and historical context as they learn from and use the map. Attaching a map on top of his photographs, Cherney therefore regards his landscapes as another layer of the red-colored labels, a second aftertaste of the classic. Nevertheless, the two images behind the map do not showcase a contemporary scene of engine-powered fishboats or construction sites, but pure landscapes that reject a timely reference. Cherney's gesture is not just an after-work of the classic, but tells the viewers that this is the exact landscape the ancients saw.

Figure 2.

Figure 3.

However, such a nostalgic tone is quickly the classic, but tells the viewers that this is the exact landscape the ancients saw. interrupted by the white mini van parked at the lower left corner of the third image [fig. 2]. This mini van, which Cherney rented for the journey, serves as the presence of the artist's hand not only on the end-product of the handscroll but also on the originals, emphasizing the artwork's entanglement with the pandemic by reminding the viewers that the artwork is a travelogue rather than a montage born out of readymades.

Contemporary elements are therefore ubiquitous in the following images, especially in the fifth one [fig. 3]. A huge bridge rising in the middle of the river occupies the entire left half of the picture and invades the grainy and curvy landscape with sharp edges, wires in the shape of straight lines, and concrete and steel textures. The heavy and dark tone of the construction site expands in shape toward the viewer, emitting an overwhelming effect on the eyes.

3 The maps are titled 《水经注图》 (Maps/Illustrations of the *Commentary on the Water Classic*). The character/word 图 (tú) in premodern Chinese can mean a diagram, an image, an illustration, or a map, and right here both map and illustration are plausible translations.

This construction site brings us to the essence of Cherney's allusion: the past, here symbolized by the classics, flows along and changes with time. As Li's original text is complemented by Wang's map and then by Yang and Xiong's editions, the riverscape that Qu sank himself more than 2,500 years ago changes through both the river's changing routes and the human activities that surround it. Water flows ceaselessly, as does the past. No matter how hard you try to resurrect the classics, through cartography or through photography, you can only encounter and produce an aftertaste.

To express this lament for time, Cherney focuses every image on moving objects: the snow, the boat, the unfinished bridge, and the ripples of the water. These objects are the Barthesian photographic message that unearths Cherney's understanding of time.[4] The "words which, structurally, are parasitic on the image" naturally illustrate the images not because they are intentionally added, but because they are unavoidable for a contemporary person and a contemporary river in the year of 2020.[5]

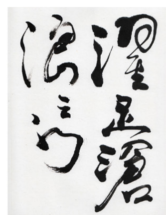


Figure 4.

This variability of the past is maximized in the afterlife of Cherney's trip, which turns an allusion through history into a gesture that is actually valuable to the time of its production. After the eighth image is a calligraphy of Cherney's modified quote from Qu's poem, which reads "濯足沧浪之水 (wash my feet in the Canglang waters)." [fig. 4] Since the fisherman has the premise of "when the Canglang waters are muddy" for the gesture of washing feet, the artist's calligraphy already suggests a positionality in the mud, which, considering its context, refers to the pandemic. The period from the moment the photograph is taken until it is seen thus brackets an aftertaste of the photographing process that forever changes the meaning of both the trip and the artwork.

In quoting the muddy water part of the poem, Cherney already stands on the side of the fisherman. The *junzi* way to live through the pandemic is to accept it and then make use of it. Without the viral air, which echoes the metaphor of the muddy water, the artist would not have been quarantined at home and initiated his post-pandemic works such as the *Tracing the Water Classic* series and the more recent and ongoing *Within the Gate* (其间) series, both of which combine his pre-pandemic photography with post-pandemic calligraphic and literary practices. It is natural to be troubled by the muddy water, but it is wise to make it productive.

4 Deciphering the mode of presentation for photography in mass media, Roland Barthes argues that a textual information automatically accompanies the image while seen by readers.

5 Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, (Hill and Wang, 1977), 25.

"Calculated (Mis) Representation: Exposures of Sovereignty in Siam and Japan"

Nabhiraks (Jade) Bhakdibhumi

Figure 1. Daguerreotype of King Mongkut and Queen Thepsirin, circa 1856. 15.3 × 12.9 × 0.9 cm. Presented to U.S. President Franklin Pierce, 1856. Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C

Addressing the colonized-colonizer binary is postcolonial theory's critical achievement and its constitutive blindspot. The aftertaste this leaves in the discipline is a structural indigestion—an unresolved residue that reveals postcolonial methodology's deepest assumption: that the non-West exists only in relation to the West, never outside it. For when the binary is the frame through which everything is composed, Siam and Japan remain at the edge where the emulsion holds no trace.[1] Both nations navigated the era of new imperialism (1870–1914) as uncolonized states that deployed photography not as a tool of colonial inscription, but as an instrument of diplomacy. For Siam and Japan, photography did not reflect sovereignty. It produced it.

In Western tradition, portraiture assumes that the body is available for representation. However, in Siam and Japan, the monarch's body was traditionally withdrawn from sight, and sovereign power was constructed through invisibility. In Siam, commoners were forbidden to cast eyes upon His Majesty at public ceremonies; those who gazed upon the monarch would be "shot in the eye" under lése-majesté law predating King Mongkut's reign (1851–1868).[2] The sovereign body appeared only in Buddhist temple murals, where it was subsumed into a cosmological narrative. In Japan, royal portraiture took the form of nishiki-e woodblock prints during the Edo Period, which only revealed the lower halves of the emperor's body.[3] Otherwise, the emperor's presence was indicated iconographically through the chrysanthemum crest or the phoenix cart.[4]

Yet this regime of sacred invisibility came to an end as both regimes entered the global colonial order that was rapidly consuming their neighbors. By the mid-nineteenth century, Siam became the fulcrum of Anglo-French rivalry, while Japan was forced open by Commodore Perry in 1853.[5] Both kingdoms responded by formulating distinct programs of modernity—not to be accepted on the

1 Siam was renamed "Thailand" in 1939 after the transition from absolute to constitutional monarchy.

2 Zhuang Wubin, *Photography in Southeast Asia: A Survey* (NUS Press, 2017), 140.

3 Julia Adeney Thomas, "The Unreciprocated Gaze: Emperors and Photography," in *The Emperors of Modern Japan*, ed. Ben-Ami Shillony, *Handbook of Oriental Studies,* Section 5: Japan, vol. 14 (Brill, 2008), 215–16.

4 Yuki Morishima, "Political and Ritual Usages of Portraits of Japanese Emperors in 18th and 19th Centuries" (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2009), 105.

5 Morishima, "Political and Ritual Usages," 107.

Figure 2. Hand-colored portrait of King Mongkut (Rama IV), c. 1861. Attributed to Luang Wisut Yothamat (Mot Amatyakun). Presented to Napoleon III, June 27, 1861. Salons Chinois de l'Impératrice Eugénie, Palace of Fontainebleau. Courtesy of the French Embassy.

world stage by means of Westernization, but to preserve sovereignty and strengthen the nation on their own terms: Siam's *siwilai* preserved indigenous epistemologies while acquiring Western technologies, and Japan's *bunmei kaika*, 'civilization and enlightenment,' was underwritten by *wakon yōsai*, 'Japanese spirit, Western achievements.' Photography arrived in both kingdoms within a year of each other, into a diplomatic culture in which the exchange of royal portraits between heads of state was already a convention of statecraft.

In the daguerreotype presented to the U.S. President Franklin Pierce (c. 1856) [Fig.1] and the portrait presented to Napoleon III (c. 1861) [Fig.2], each photograph was intentionally calibrated to its specific diplomatic recipient. Before Pierce, King Mongkut appears with Queen Thepsirin alone, tactically evoking monogamy and constructing a domesticity legible within American moral frameworks while obscuring the actual structure of the Siamese royal household.[6] As Rosalind Krauss theorized, photography functions as an index, a physical trace of the real that bears a direct relation to its referent, like a footprint or a death mask.[7] A painting could be dismissed as flattery. A photograph, it was widely believed, could not. The photograph stages a fiction that the camera indexes as fact. Before Napoleon III, His Majesty fashioned a French military dress adorned with the Legion d'honneur personally bestowed by the emperor, materializing the Franco-Siamese alliance within the portrait.[8] The photograph signaled to British observers that Siam possessed alternative great-power patronage. The sartorial was not ornament but argument, and photography was its courier.

This photographic diplomacy reached its apex in the photographs of King Chulalongkorn during his 1897 European tour. The photograph of His Majesty seated beside Tsar Nicholas II at the Alexander Palace carries substantial diplomatic weight [Fig.3]. The two monarchs, presented at equal height, fashioning European military dress, were circulated in the French weekly newspaper *L'Illustration*, where it reached the French colonial administrators who had imposed concessions on Siam following the Paknam Incident of 1893.[9] By documenting Siam's relations with Russia, the index became a diplomatic constraint within the imperial game. His Majesty was visible everywhere and untouchable precisely because he belonged everywhere. The protection that invisibility once afforded was now transferred to visibility by the camera. Dependency is a feature of imperialism, colonized or not. However, what distinguished Siam was its refusal to anchor itself to any single imperial power by playing the Western powers against each other as a sovereign equal.

Japan's *bunmei kaika* produced the opposite: a singular, institutionalized, totalizing image. Emperor Meiji's 1873 portrait in Western military dress aligned with the European tradition of swagger portraiture, in which authority was projected through bearing, dress, and the gaze [Fig.4]. Yet, the photograph was far from becoming a symbol of modernized Japan. The emperor slouched, and his crossed legs diminished his authority.[10] The image communicated aspiration more than command. It was the *goshin'ei* of 1888 that revealed the full audacity of Japan's visual sovereignty [Fig.5]. Unable to persuade the emperor to sit again for the camera, the Imperial household Minister commissioned Edoardo Chiossone, an Italian artist at the Japanese Mint Bureau, to produce a conté drawing of the emperor's likeness in military attire.[11] The emperor approved it and commissioned Maruki Riyo to photograph the drawing. The resulting image was designated the official *goshin'ei*, "honorable true shadow," and was carefully distributed throughout Japan and to Western embassies.[12] Where Siam's photographs were calibrated outward as a tool for international diplomacy, the *goshin'ei* was specifically crafted to unify the Japanese citizenry under a single commanding image of the emperor in the face of Western imperial threat.

In the *goshin'ei*, the material chain grounding the indexical function of photography had been secretly severed. It was not apparent

6 Siripant Sakda, *Kasat & Klong: Wiwatthanakan kanthaiphap nai Prathet Thai, Pho. So. 2388–2535 [King and Camera: Evolution of Photography in Thailand, 1845–1992]* (Darnsutha Press, 1992), 45.

7 Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Part 1," (1977), in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (MIT Press, 1986), 70.

8 Maurizio Peleggi, *Lords of Things: The Fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy's Modern Image* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 48.

9 Natanaree Posrithong, "The Russo-Siamese Relations: The Reign of King Chulalongkorn," *Silpakorn University International Journal* 9–10 (2009–2010): 87–115.

10 Morris Low, *Japan on Display: Photography and the Emperor* (Routledge, 2006), 417.

11 Morishima, "Political and Ritual Usages," 174.

12 Morishima, "Political and Ritual Usages," 176.

that the true encounter was not of the emperor's body, but the residue of representation. Distribution of the *goshin'ei* was also scarce, as the bureaucracy believed that abundant reproduction would diminish the "aura" of the photograph by turning it into something popular and mundane.[13] Thus, the power that had once resided in the invisible body was transferred into the power created by scarcity itself. The comparison between Siam's and Japan's photographic strategies reflects a deeper argument about the nature of sovereign agency under Western imperial pressure. Postcolonial scholars, such as Kuan-Hsing Chen and Partha Chatterjee, have identified Western colonialism's reach as extending beyond formal occupation, infecting the conditions of modernity across Asia and demanding decolonization as a process of recovering indigenous epistemologies and asserting civilizational autonomy. Siam and Japan demonstrate that this process was already underway in kingdoms that were never colonized, serving as a preventative strategy in the face of imperial expansion. If Western colonialism operated through a gendered logic in which imperial power was coded as masculine, assertive, and militarized, and resistance was correspondingly coded as feminine, passive, and nonviolent,[14] photography offered Siam and Japan a more corrosive instrument.

Both monarchies exercised masculine authority that colonial logic demanded through the sartorially militarized uniform and the commanding gaze. Yet, the actual work of sovereignty was performed through the gift economy of the circulated portrait and the fabricated index, instruments of (mis)representation rather than force. The photograph was a weapon that left no wound—only the aftertaste of a sanctified presence that deceives, adapts, and endures.

Figure 3. King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) and Tsar Nicholas II at Alexander Palace, Tsarskoye Selo, 1897. Albumen print. Photographer unknown. National Archives of Thailand, Bangkok (UNESCO Memory of the World International Register). Circulated in *L'Illustration and Le Petit Journal*, 1897.

13 Morishima, "Political and Ritual Usages," 182.

14 Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Duke University Press, 2010), 91.

Figure 4. Uchida Kuichi, Mutsuhito, *The Meiji Emperor*, 1873. Albumen silver print from glass negative with applied color. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1986.1064a)

Figure 5. Maruki Riyō (after Edoardo Chiossone), *Portrait of the Meiji Emperor (goshin'ei)*, 1888. Gelatin silver print of conté crayon drawing. National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (FSA A2009.02).

"The Awakening Consciousness: Behind Body Wrapping Performance in 1980s China"

Lucie Ai

For Chinese artists in the 1980s, the past was an unbearably heavy subject, yet they could neither ignore it nor escape from it. Between 1966 and 1976, China underwent one of the darkest chapters of its modern history—the Cultural Revolution. Beyond the widespread persecution, the decade-long extreme authoritarianism under Mao Zedong resulted in stagnation across many sectors of society, from the economy, education, to culture and art. Even after its end, the shadows of the Revolution persisted, leaving many Chinese with a strong sense of continued oppression and of "lagging behind," especially in the increasing confrontation with the rest of the world. With the conviction that only a radical break from the "past" could release them from the weight of this traumatic history, Chinese artists turned urgently toward new artistic languages, experimenting with unprecedented forms in order to reimagine the role of art within society and create conditions for the birth of a new beginning.[1]

From 1986 to 1989, with increasing awareness of performance art practices in the West, an interesting phenomenon appeared: a number of artists and collectives across China began staging performances in which their entire bodies were wrapped in cloth, paper, fabric, or accessible materials like newspapers and packing sacks. Despite widely varying themes and concepts behind each piece, this shared interest in body wrapping as a performative strategy, as Thomas Berghuis observes, "demonstrate[s] how Chinese artists felt bound by the past."[2] Yet, rendered through the physical immediacy of the body and the temporality of live performances, these works were neither simple acts of reflection nor attempts at reconciliation. Rather, they constituted direct confrontations, provocatively addressing the lingering forces from the past that, in the artists' view, continued to impede the pursuit of a progressive society.

In May 1988, the art collective Concept 21 staged a series of performances on the Great Wall, including one titled *Saving People from Death*. At the first stage of the performance, artist Kang Mu painted his face with white chalk and lay on the ground with piles of bricks stacked on top of his body, as if he were "buried alive by the stone."[3] Next to him, Zhang Jianhai, Sheng Qi, and Zheng Yuke stood with their bodies wrapped in red, black, and white cloth, lowering their heads as if mourning for him.

While the Great Wall, with its monumental scale and historical significance, had come to symbolize the endurance and greatness of Chinese civilization in the twentieth century, its very association with history and tradition became a point of skepticism for many. In *Saving People from Death*, the Wall, visualized through the bricks stacked on Kang's body, embodied the role of an oppressor; in contrast, the dead figure underneath the bricks, portrayed by Kang, was a metaphor for both the artists themselves and Chinese society at large.

Later that same year, another group of young artists and critics staged *The Last Supper*. The work brought together virtually every artistic technique that these artists were then aware of, from performance and installation to painting, sound, and light, aiming to create a work that, as they ambiguously envisioned, "stands on the shared foundation of contemporary art worldwide."[4]

With their bodies wrapped in white cloths and heads in red, the artists collectively reenacted the iconic scene from Leonardo Da Vinci's painting. Their interest in reenacting the biblical narrative arose from deep personal resonance: the story of betrayal echoed the artists' own memories, whether personally experienced or witnessed, of people being betrayed, coerced, or turned against during the Revolution. By reenacting *The Last Supper*, the artists sought to raise a painful question: why do humans continue to create

1 Around 1985, a new phenomenon, later known as the '85 New Wave, appeared in the Chinese art world, where young artists in different cities spontaneously formed nearly a hundred art groups to explore experimental art practices inspired by their introduction to various Western art movements developed throughout the twentieth century. Yet without sufficient understanding of their conceptual foundations, historical contexts, and chronological developments, they perceived modernism and postmodernism not as sequential movements but as archives of available forms for reinventing the present. In *Total Modernity*, Gao Minglu characterizes the phenomenon as a "lack [of] a clear historical line of progression from premodern to modern and postmodern." What emerged was a distinct version of Chinese modernism, embraced as the freedom to selectively adopt and reinterpret elements from Western movements based on what they felt most resonant with their immediate concerns.

their own disasters and suffering? Through incorporating elements that signified the contemporary moment, such as the Coca Cola cans placed on the table and, more subtly, the faint human figure painted on the cloth behind the performers that alluded to portraits of Mao, they blended history with the present, urging the audience to recognize that if society failed to act and transform, it would eventually reenact its past.

In both works, the artists articulated a clear aversion toward the past. Yet the "past" they criticized was not merely a matter of historical fact. In *Saving People from Death*, the artists mobilized the Great Wall, a cultural symbol with no direct link to the traumatic history of the Revolution, as both a visualization and embodiment of obsolescence. On the other hand, *The Last Supper* constructed an even broader notion of the "past," in which it deliberately turned to a biblical narrative, framing their critique and posing questions aimed at the entire human race. This is to say, the "past" addressed in these performances was not anchored to a fixed temporal moment. Rather, it emerged as a culturally constructed notion—one that embodies not simply a series of historical events but all that could be perceived as "past" in an adjectival sense. This fluid notion becomes even more evident in the WR Group's *Mourning* (1989). During the opening of the landmark *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, three individuals appeared uninvited with their bodies wrapped in white cloth, staging a performance to declare the death of the avant-garde itself—transforming even the very presence of the avant-garde into something "past."

Beyond the artists' own intentions, the act of body wrapping itself conveys a richly connoted visual message. Richard Vine draws parallels between body wrapping and Scar Art—an official art movement where realist painters used depictions of ordinary suffering as counter-narratives to Maoist propaganda.[5] Through resembling the image of a wounded, or at times even dead, body, these body-wrapping performances evoke the sufferings, implying that the scar left from the past has not yet been healed.

To a certain extent, this shared interest in body wrapping can be interpreted as a collective interest in mourning. The act of wrapping one's body in white directly references the traditional Chinese mourning practice known as "Pi Ma Dai Xiao," in which mourners dress in white hemp garments and headpieces to signify grief for the deceased. The other colors the artists wore—red, evoking blood, celebration, and the Socialist Revolution; black, associated with mourning traditions of the West—further deepened this ritual vocabulary.

Mourning, as demonstrated by psychoanalysts Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, is a critical and necessary process after a prolonged period of violence and trauma: "The work of mourning is not aimed at simple restitution: slowly it leads one to accept the definitive change in reality brought about by the loss of the object."[6] Grappling with a similar psychic rupture, Chinese artists turned to mourning to negotiate their ambivalent relationship with the historical past and contemporary social environment.

Nonetheless, even as these artists attempted to declare the "past" as "dead," their work remained shaped, often unconsciously, by the very beliefs and ideologies that they sought to reject. By covering their bodies, the artists voluntarily concealed their identities, reducing their individual bodies to symbolic forms within a larger, collective whole—unconsciously reproducing the very collectivist logic prevalent under the Maoist regime. In this sense, these body wrapping performances emerged more as introspective explorations than as fully realized awakenings of individual consciousness, exposing both the potential and the limitations that existed in performance art practices at the time.

However, this conflicted form of artistic expression was entirely understandable. As Tania Branigan writes, "The Cultural Revolution was a national trauma as well as a mass of personal ones: collective traumatisation demands collective meaning and a common attempt to work through all the loss and humiliation."[7] Situated so close in time to the traumatic past they sought to confront, it was impossible for these artists to grasp a complete, well-rounded image of their surroundings or to fully understand the historical forces that continued to shape their present. These seemingly disoriented introspective explorations were in fact both inevitable and indispensable, laying the groundwork for the emergence of more self-aware, critically engaged artistic practices in the years to come.

2 Thomas J. Berghuis, *Performance Art in China* (Timezone 8, 2006), 63. Berghuis also indicates that their interests in body-wrapping "come initially from encounters with the work by Christo and Jeanne-Claude."

3 Hong Lü and Zhuan Huang, eds., *Zhongguo Dangdai Meishu Tujian-1979-1999 Guannian Yishu Fence* (Hubei Education Press, 2001).

4 Shi Huang, "'The Last Supper' Draws to a Close, 最後的晚餐散席了," *Shanghai Culture and Art Newspaper* (Shanghai), December 30, 1988, https://cdn.aaa.org.hk/_source/88tls-16.pdf.

5 Richard Vine, *New China New Art* (Prestel, 2008), 78.

6 Alexander Mitscherlich and Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior*, trans. Beverley R. Placzek (Grove Press, 1975), 64.

7 Tania Branigan, *Red Memory: The Afterlives of China's Cultural Revolution*, First American edition (W.W. Norton & Company, 2023), 235.

“To Listen Without Ends”

Noah Kupper

sonde(S) dans l’obscuritÉ, drawn by the author

The Tennessee-based deathcore band Whitechapel’s album *Hymns in Dissonance* is produced by an industry that re-produces ways of thinking. One of these ways of thinking is to assume that one can grasp a singular origin, what can be called a first principle: a singular point from which all emerges. Such a way of thinking is consistent with a logic of purity. I suggest that *Hymns* stages and then undoes a logic of purity, showing how origins as first principles only become known as first retroactively. Additionally, throughout this text I draw on María Lugones’s body of work by employing “worlds” rather than “genre” when discussing deathcore to signal that these sonic worlds organize multiple, overlapping ways of making sense, rather than a single, fixed category.[1] Therefore, what follows is a reading of a site where industry, language, and sound destabilize the fantasy of first principles. The effect of such a site is intensified by deathcore’s cacophony, which resists immediate legibility and leaves listeners with an aftertaste where meaning is retroactively assembled rather than given in advance. I define *aftertaste* as a sensory experience whose lingering temporal persistence is understood as memory. Memory, I define as the capacity to further interpret such experience.

Throughout the piece, I assume a temporally persisting experience, where previous experience defines the possibilities of future experiences, even if that future experience remains unknown. It is difficult to explain a multiplicity of causes, having been caused themselves. It is perhaps even more difficult to do so through written language. Deathcore, through guttural timbres and obscured lyrics, redraws what counts as sense, staging meaning in the struggle to interpret. Like ordinary speech, it entangles sound and sense—but pushes this relationship to extremity, reconfiguring meaning’s emergence as vibration and force rather than clarity or statement. I extend this instability by example of curdling French, Spanish, and English. If

1 Unlike fixed definitions such as utopias, possible worlds, or worldviews, a “world” in Lugones’ sense is inhabited by real people, alongside imagined or remembered figures, and shaped by cultural, social, and political constructions. These constructions differ based on dominant, non-dominant, or idiosyncratic perspectives, creating a multiplicity of worlds that are often incomplete, contested, and open-ended. A “world” may range from encompassing an entire society to existing within a smaller, specific community, often reflecting unstable or conflicting constructions of identity. For more see María Lugones, *Pilgrimages/ Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003).

I say, *Tu sonde(s) dans l'obscurité*,[2] I mix both French and Spanish. "Sonde" can mean probe (a tool for exploration, as in medical or space probes) but also has a relationship to sound. The use of French at the start might anchor a reader. Moving to Spanish creates instability before a linguistic flickering back to French. Both languages are interwoven as an interruption, but an interpretation related to one another. The phrase then attempts a resistance to a logic of purity, given that the words themselves sit in the peripheries of the established demands of ordinary languages which in turn refuse to be translated into a dominant frame.

This is what I mean when I say that *Hymns* is an interesting exercise in rendering multiple. The album follows the story of a cultist gathering followers to build an order devoted to committing the seven cardinal sins of Christian mythology to invoke a being of evil. The vocalist of the band, Phil Bozeman, describes that "*Hymns In Dissonance* is a mockery of the true nature of what hymns are… Hymns are melodious and harmonious. Dissonance is the opposite of melody and harmony. Dissonance represents evil."[3] Thus, we see here that since dissonance represents evil, it is placed in opposition to melody and harmony. What does it mean for dissonance to be "evil"? In the art-music tradition associated with Europe, dissonance is often framed as something that begs for resolution through harmony. By "Europe" I do not mean a geographic entity, but a constructed center that consolidates certain sounds and practices as proper while also constructing Others—Romani, colonial, and racialized traditions that are nonetheless constitutive of the very tradition it claims to exclude.

Therefore, organization is a political claim that determines what sound is music, what belongs, and what does not. Moreover, to mock the true nature of hymns is to invert the location of the once stable category. On one hand, inversion keeps the same categories to only switch their position, thus re-producing the logic of purity. On the other hand, such a movement points to an opening of an impurity that travels through the gap between the construction of the two.

Whitechapel operates within a global market that sells brutality and heaviness as a commodity that is, in this case, sonically legible. "There is nothing nice about *Hymns In Dissonance*, from the riffs, to the lyrics, to the overall vibe of the album,"[4] says guitarist Alex Wade. "We attempted to write our heaviest album to date. We wanted to put out something that was shockingly menacing and brutal."[5] The language of "heaviest," "brutal," and "evil" circulate as branding, capital, and sonic currency. Heaviness also functions as a moral and aesthetic standard for deathcore discourse. Early deathcore, for example, was coded as feminized or juvenile because of fashion, age, and those who embraced these worlds. While I wish to trouble the stability of genre as a category, it is necessary to acknowledge that deathcore—worlds in which Whitechapel is situated—is now often characterized by blast beats, down-tuned guitars, guttural vocals, and breakdowns. *Hymns* has been branded as a return to a heavier, more familiar sound similar to previous albums *The Somatic Defilement and This is Exile*, with *Hymns* explicitly serving as a sequel to the story in *This is Exile*. After Whitechapel's two previous albums (*The Valley* and *Kin*) explored more personal topics alongside incorporating a wider palette of styles, the records were criticized by some fans as "soft" or "country." These judgments are moralized: one ought to stay heavy because only heaviness is good.

Working in trilogies, the vocalist Phil Bozeman argues that his world of sense is a Christian one. Thus, we could say that such a world provides a ready-made vocabulary of sin, evil, trifectas, and redemption. Religion here functions as a process of world-making, much like what we call musical genre. Much like the genres of the human—the racialized, gendered, sexed, aged, and classed taxonomies that sort proper subjects from their opposite—shape definitions of real metal and audio heaviness. When *Hymns* gets framed as a return to form, it binds together the material conditions of its production (fan expectations after *The Valley* and *Kin*) with the sonic sense-experience of heaviness hitting the body. Good and evil are fashioned onto metal's structure *after the fact*, once its boundaries solidify across three axes: listener memory (aftertaste of prior albums), band self-conception (their narrative of "return to roots"), and shared scene (fan expectations of heaviness).

Between the tracks "Bedlam" and "Mammoth God," the protagonist (nicknamed "Craig" by fans) attempts to force a pure, total resurrection of evil, treating the Earth as a mechanistic vessel for his will. When the ritual fails and he violates the Earth in response, an amoeba emerges as a curdled remainder of being neither external nor pure void, but an unstable in-between that styles the supposed origin of evil visible only from the vantage point of the protagonist's failure. Bozeman has described this amoeba-like creature in interviews as the malformed child of the ritual, a figure of disorder rather than the stable, sovereign evil the cult desired.[6]

2 (You) (sound/probes) in obscurity.

3 Gregory Adams, "Hear Whitechapel's Blasphemous Deathcore Song 'Hymns in Dissonance,'" *Revolver*, January 15, 2025, https://www.revolvermag.com/music/hear-whitechapels-blasphemous-deathcore-song-hymns-in-dissonance/

4 Adams, "Hear Whitechapel's Blasphemous Deathcore Song 'Hymns in Dissonance.'"

5 Adams, "Hear Whitechapel's Blasphemous Deathcore Song 'Hymns in Dissonance.'"

6 phillybo1985, "RAW and UNCUT! Listen through of HYMNS in DISSONANCE /w Phil Bozeman," YouTube, March 8, 2025. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SMtpmaTrgPQ.

The final track, "Nothing is Coming for Any of Us" sees Craig left to reckon with a universe lacking total dominion. Since the child was not what it was supposed to be, a ripple effect occurs. Looking at the child, Craig sees a malformed reflection of himself through the character's final realization that "the universe is the only true living entity, and all else is merely a figment of its consciousness."[7] At this moment, the parameters of Craig's world are shattered. If this is the case, the amoeba serves as the excess of Craig's failure. In other words, beginning and end arise together in the instant they emerge and only after does the beginning appear as the point from which the beginning had always had to start.

The desire to bring back evil is structurally similar to the desire to bring back an earlier version of Whitechapel. In both cases, the object of longing exists as a fantasized first principle whose stability is belied by its shifting, experiential status. Like the memory of a drop of honey, what remains is not the sweetness itself, but aftertaste: a sense experience that both knows and misremembers the thing. The "thing" is not the object, but desire emergent as desire after failure, collecting, and giving meaning to what *becomes* the object. Such a failure promotes a gap that is wider than nothing, a void where Craig as the subject emerges, retroactively claiming the origin. The desire for a first principle and its return is precisely what the narrative and its amoeba undo. Aftertaste brings forth the memory of what the sense-experience could have been like, but *any access to what it was, if it ever was something to begin with, is not a direct retrieval so much as another interpretation; one that produces the illusion of having been there all along*. Since heaviness fails as a fixed object, deathcore's auditory dissonance curdle multiple worlds, allowing these worlds to emerge *through* nothing. Nothing cannot ever be simulated or repeated since Nothing is always already there when anything is there. Nothing is also the sound of those records, unable to predict that the next releases would be experienced as a return or as a betrayal of the earlier heaviness because in Whitechapel's portrayal, the future is not ahead of us, but something we can only interpret in hindsight. In this sense, the way we come to tell Whitechapel's story echoes the ancient Greek orientation toward the future as something opaque and behind us, we must always look back because we never see the thing arising.[8]

7 phillybo1985, "RAW and UNCUT! Listen through of HYMNS in DISSONANCE /w Phil Bozeman."

8 I thank Gwenda-lin Grewal for this insight.

“After Kant: Form as Aesthetic Experience”

Ruby Guralnik Dawes

Art historians have long struggled to make sense of works that defy linguistic clarity. Though artists’ suspicion of language has done little to dissuade interpretation, critics of both form and content fail to fully account for the viewing experience. While formalism isolates visual properties to produce an analysis emptied of external significance, socio-historical approaches locate meaning in politics, ideology, and identity, often missing the work’s affective charge. The former is orthodox and ahistorical, while the latter fails to adequately decode aesthetic encounters.

Immanuel Kant, writing in the eighteenth century, anticipated this problem: how can artwork think without concepts, mean without representing? Kant theorized aesthetic judgement as grounded in feeling, imagination, and nonconceptual thought. Clement Greenberg, acolyte of Kant and apostle of Abstract Expressionism, similarly viewed form and content as co-constitutive. Despite this, both Kant and Greenberg are remembered as staunch formalists, elevating form for its own sake.[1] This interpretive mistake has sanctioned the thinning of their philosophies into a form of anemic criticism that deadens the visual encounter.

Kant’s aesthetic philosophy—particularly his concept of “aesthetic ideas,” which he defines as nonconceptual representations that “animate the mind” and awaken us to our own imaginative capacity—offers a compelling account of how art generates meaning.[2] Reading Greenberg as a critic working in a fundamentally Kantian register reveals that criticism has obscured the phenomenological force of his own aesthetic theory. Freed from the strictures of modernist teleology, a Kantian-Greenbergian aesthetics emerges as a richer and more coherent framework, one that restores the centrality of feeling and imaginative play to visual encounters.

Like many critics writing in the late 1930s, Greenberg was deeply anxious to reinvigorate a culture “dumbed down” by academicism, commercialism, and oppressive ideology.[3] He found two threats particularly troubling: kitsch—an impoverished cultural form made to appease the masses—and Alexandrianism––a stagnant, bourgeois deference to tradition. Under historical pressure, Greenberg turned formalism, his remedy to the flattening of culture, into a conservative dogma. Far from transgressive, he viewed the avant-garde as the last remaining defense of tradition.[4]

He offered a historical account of the movement, arguing that beginning in the mid-nineteenth century the arts were “hunted back to their mediums,” where they were then “isolated, concentrated and defined.”[5] From Manet to Brancusi, Greenberg saw a shared tendency among so-called “great artists” to emphasize the singularity of their respective mediums. He deduced that in emphasizing unique traits, each art would “be rendered ‘pure,’ and in its ‘purity’ find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence.”[6] In other words, each art’s “indispensability” became synonymous with its “irreducibility”—by calling attention to the formal properties exclusive to each medium, the avant-garde insulated itself from corruption, securing both its autonomy and survival.

“Modernist Painting,” Greenberg’s notorious treatise on the raison d’être of modernism, further entrenched this doctrine of purity. He argued that a self-reflexive investigation into the essential nature of painting pointed to the “ineluctable flatness of the surface”; by replacing illusory three-dimensional space with the flatness of a picture plane, viewers would experience “a Modernist picture as a picture first.”[7] Greenberg wanted to prove that a canvas, void of every readable link with nature, could nevertheless be coherent and historically legible. Under this rubric, pure form, optical flatness, and medium-specificity were the sole criteria by which a work of art’s quality was determined.

To understand Greenberg primarily through the teleological sweep of “Modernist Painting”—with its genealogy of purification, its ascent toward flatness, its faith in disciplinary self-criticism—is to take him at his most programmatic, anxious, and defensive. It is this notion of modernism, underwritten by strict formal conventions, that has yielded such widespread criticism of Greenberg’s theory of art. By many accounts, Greenberg deliberately severs the sensory, rhetorical, and affective registers of art from its morphology and reduces painting to an empirical logic of purity.

But are Greenberg’s modernism and formalism indivisible? While a dehistoricized reading of Greenberg’s work may support this thesis, a closer examination of his aesthetic philosophy undermines it. Greenberg’s work may support this thesis, a closer examination of his aesthetic philosophy undermines it. Greenberg’s historically determined formalism deliberately severs the rhetorical and affective registers of art from its morphology and reduces painting to an empirical logic of purity. Yet his later writings, once separated from this historicist project, understand form as the sensuous vehicle of content.

Once extricated from a deterministic model of art historical progress, Greenberg's aesthetic theory proves far closer to Kant than his detractors have allowed. As early as "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," he asserted that content should be "dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself."[8] What Greenberg actually meant by formalism is aesthetic experience.

In uncoupling Greenberg's formalism from his modernism, a much more coherent, defensible, and Kantian Greenberg comes to the fore. Formalism emerges less programmatic and instead articulates the conditions that produce aesthetic experience. In a 1971 essay, "Necessity of 'Form'," Greenberg writes: "Quality, esthetic value originates in inspiration, vision, 'content,' not in 'form' ... 'form' not only opens the way to inspiration; it can also act as means to it; [it] can generate or discover 'content' ... yet that 'content' cannot be separated from its 'form.'"[9] Far from propping up form for its own sake, Greenberg comprehends the nonconceptual, intangible nature of aesthetic judgement, for which form becomes requisite to understanding. For Greenberg, evaluations of art "[come] out like results and answers that have swallowed their causes and questions. By a similar circularity, content and form disappear into one another."[10] Per Greenberg, because we experience works of fine art first and foremost through vision, form becomes the vehicle through which content is absorbed; far from being devoid of content, it is inseparable from it.

Like Kant, Greenberg understands aesthetic experience as a negotiation between imagination and understanding that at once activates cognition and transcends its limits. For Greenberg no less than for Kant, aesthetic judgment names a state in which cognition is fully activated cognition is fully activated without conceptualization. In this schema, form becomes the vehicle for nonconceptual content. Thus, while Greenberg's writings centered on flatness, opticality, and medium-specific purity have understandably drawn accusations of formalist dogmatism, his reflections on the nature of visual experience reveal a very different thinker—one for whom meaning is intuited through form. Greenberg echoes Kant by restoring the centrality of feeling to criticism, using visual analysis to articulate the way art moves, challenges, and enlarges us.

1 Despite the widespread condemnation of his formalist program, Greenberg's texts remain canonical. When I began writing this paper, I was convinced that Greenberg not only advocated for an empiricist theoretical program, but misread Kant. His dogmatic convictions about the importance of medium-specificity, flatness, opticality, and purity seemed unequivocally conservative and outdated. Upon closer reading, however, I realized that Greenberg-the-empiricist is but one facet of his contribution; his larger oeuvre, particularly his late lectures, is in fact very open to interpretation, and advocates for an idea of formalism in diametric opposition to the one many critics have associated him with.

2 Kant draws a sharp distinction between "aesthetic ideas" and "rational ideas," which act as counterparts: while the former cannot be expressed in language or made intelligible through "any determinate thought," the latter is "a concept to which no intuition (representation of the imagination) can be adequate." Both find their principles in reason yet neither can become cognition—aesthetic ideas exceed what can be conceptually articulated, rational ideas exceed what can be sensibly intuited. Aesthetic and rational ideas reveal each other's limits, and it is this dialectical tension that Kant sees as the locus of art's potential, for which "imagination, understanding, spirit and taste are requisite." Aesthetic ideas are expressions of Spirit (Geist), which Kant describes as the vital principle that stimulates reflection beyond what can be conceptually grasped. Unlike science or philosophy, they invite but never exhaust interpretation, "[animating] the mind by opening up for it the prospect of an immeasurable field of related representations." Art endowed with Spirit fortifies the mind by allowing it to feel its own capacity of contemplation; art lacking Spirit will feel lifeless, no matter how technically perfect, well organized, or charming it may be. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge University Press, 2000): 102.

3 The modernist paradigm was beginning to be conceptualized by the late 1930s. By the late 1940s, a deradicalization of the American Left was accompanied by a desire for art to adopt an apolitical aesthetic. Greenberg was not the only thinker to take stock of this moment. Adorno similarly viewed the avant-garde as the only viable alternative to a culture industry ravaged by industrial capitalism. Though they stared down the same barrel, Greenberg remained somewhat optimistic about the potential of cultural output, and unlike Adorno, laid claim to a rigid, narrow understanding of what that avant-garde could be.

4 There is not enough space in this paper to address the numerous issues posed by Greenberg's first polemic. I will, however, point to an important and explicit error that underwrites his argument: the tension drawn between avant-garde and kitsch is presented as antithetical rather than *dialectical*. Throughout art history, the avant-garde has drawn from or flat out appropriated popular art. For further unpacking of this argument, see Thierry de Duve, "Silences in the Doctrine," in *Clement Greenberg Between the Lines: Including a Debate with Clement Greenberg* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 43–45.

5 Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 1, Perceptions and Judgments,* 1939–1944, ed. John O'Brian (University of Chicago Press, 1988), 42. Originally published in *Partisan Review* 7, no. 4 (July–August 1940): 296–310.

6 Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Arts Yearbook 4* (1961), 103.

7 Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," 104.

8 Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Beacon Press, 1961), 6.

9 Clement Greenberg, "Necessity of 'Formalism,'" *New Literary History 3*, no. 1 (1971), 174–5.

10 Clement Greenberg, *Homemade Esthetics: Observations on Art and Taste* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 70.

“In The Meantime” Dylan Sherman

Installation view of *Gordon Hall: Hands and Knees*, The Kitchen, New York, 2025. Photo by Dylan Sherman.

What are we waiting for? So asks Gordon Hall in *Hands and Knees*, their 2025 exhibition at The Kitchen.

Five pairs of sculptures that almost look like chairs fill the gallery, their chrome frames glistening in the sunlight. These twins are unfriendly to seated postures—some are fitted with solid black wedges (if you sit, you will slide off), others are wrapped with narrow purple ribbons (if you sit, you will fall through). Still, their unmistakable reclining posture anticipates the presence of a body.

Bodies do eventually arrive in a series of performances that accompany the exhibition, but in an unexpected fashion. In one performance, two bodybuilders maneuver five sculptural stretchers, each of a different color and form. They place the stretchers horizontally in the voids between the chair pairs and then carry men—of a similar height to Hall—into the space and deposit them on top of the stretchers. The bodybuilders eventually return to haul the reclining performers away, with little happening in between.

***

When I was at a ballet summer program in 2012, I watched my roommate play Temple Run, which had come out the year before, whenever I had the chance. I had a brick phone that prevented me from downloading such an app, so I looked over his shoulder whenever I could, gazing down the path of a jungle explorer running from the monkeys in his hot pursuit.

Thirteen years later, I download the game on my iPhone to pass time on the subway. Soon I find myself sheepishly opening it in other places, at times when I want to avoid doing something else. Against my better judgment, I run again and again, telling myself that if I can just surpass my high score of three million I can fill my time in more productive ways. But I can’t quite get there.

1 Gordon Hall, *1–2pm*, 2024. Full text available at https://thekitchen.org/on-view/hands-and-knees/.

Until one day, lying in bed, I enter a flow state. I slide under burning archways and rapidly turn corners with a degree of dull automatism that removes me from the jungle pathway and makes me wonder how much time has actually passed. When I finally do stumble and unlock a new high score of fifteen million, I look back at the timestamp of notifications I received during my session and piece together that I was running for at least fifteen minutes.

***

Wally Cardona and Molly Lieber dance in perfect unison and complete silence in *TIMES FOUR / David Gordon: 1975/2025*. Can you believe it? I couldn't until I actually saw it.

The work is both a revival and an expansion of a duet by Gordon, fifty years after the fact. It takes place in the same SoHo loft as the original performance, with the audience seated around the perimeter. Cardona and Lieber progress through a series of stripped-down yet exacting movements in the tradition of and in tribute to the postmodern dance that ruled this neighborhood, once upon a time. As the title implies, they repeat each sequence four times, each time on a new axis of the rectangular room.

Many of their movements involve genuflection, prostration, or some other reverent orientation to the ground. Watching this unfold from my metal folding chair pushed against the wall, I feel like a witness to and sometimes even a part of their ritual.

Occasionally, my attention wanes and my eyes drift to the clock. Mostly, though, I am enraptured, hoping I can stay suspended in their focused gestures forever.

When they do eventually walk off, I am left with a six-note musical sequence ringing in my head that I suppose I made up to be in rhythm with the dancers. I check my phone as I stand up: almost ninety minutes have passed.

***

Cardona and Lieber are a nearly identical duo, just like Hall's sculptures, or Felix Gonzalez-Torres's two clocks who are *Perfect Lovers*. There must be something about the power of pairs to reify the weight of time.

As Hall writes in their lecture-performance *1-2 pm*, "Anticipation requires an object, something that comes next, an after to the before." They go on: "We often experience waiting as a suspension of time—we are at odds with time, and this misalignment casts us outside the shared temporal world we usually inhabit without friction."[1]

Temple Run offers one way to wait without tension, to slide a finger across smooth glass in a virtual world until it's time to arrive at what you were waiting for. But it lacks a real object that you can move through time with and against. All the game has to offer is the phantasmic promise of infinity.

***

In *On the Calculation of Volume*, a series of seven novels by Solvej Balle, Tara Selter is stuck in a time loop. Futurity and possibility are suspended as she lives and relives the 18th of November over and over again. Nothing does or will come next for her. Before and after collapse as she waits with no object on her horizon.

As the days go by and she passes a year and then a second and then a third, fear and desperation gradually recede. Instead, Tara embraces the indeterminacy of her time. On trains, she drifts from one city to the next, freed from work or personal deadlines, so that she only needs to pretend to flip through her planner. This way she can focus on dipping into fragments of other people's lives, such as hearing a young woman's tearful narration of her recent, sudden, untimely breakup.

I read the book as I ride the subway (and yes, thank you, I am proud to be passing time reading literary fiction instead of running through a never-ending jungle). When two women carrying backpacks get on at 34th Street, I listen intently to their plans for their trip and wonder what other subway stories I would pick up if I got trapped on this twenty-ninth day of January.

But I need not be trapped in a time loop to inhabit time differently. Sitting between two strangers on the subway another day, I put my phone in my pocket and glance at my neighbor, who is playing Block Blast on his phone. I used to play a similar game called 1010!, until I deleted it because I was playing it so much that I started seeing visions of geometric game pieces when I closed my eyes. I replaced it with Temple Run, which I deleted soon after my high score achievement. Now I'm onto Subway Surfers, for the time being.

A few minutes later, I notice that my neighbors have also put their phones down. There are three of us in a row, touching nothing but the present. Such sensuality is always in front of us, but it's easier to inhabit its contours when we partner up with Gordon or Tara or Wally or Molly or Felix or two strangers. A virtual explorer, not so much.

Aftertaste

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