

Life Performance

by

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Table of Contents

Abstract	1
Chapter 1: Amateur, Craft, Art	
1.1. Amateur: from living to painting	2
1.2. Craft: from painting to making	3
1.3. Art: from making to discovering	4
Chapter 2: Language, Image, Sound	
2.1. Language: Poetry and Diary	6
2.2. Image: Photo and Video	9
2.3. Sound: Noise and Voice	12
Chapter 3: Technology, Human, Space	
3.1. Technology: AI & Love	15
3.2. Human: Performance & Life	17
3.3. Space: Exhibition & Liminality	19
Conclusion	23
Glossary of Terms	25
Reference List	28

Abstract

This thesis attempts to show the inextricable relationship between art and life by combining individual life experiences and reflections, different periods from my art practice, and its contextualization within the history of art.

The first chapter will be set in the context of my art practice prior to my MFA program at the University of Manitoba. From painting to jewellery to performance, these seemingly huge leaps are actually traceable, and these changes correspond to certain periods in art history. In this process, I took my life as a source of inspiration for my art practice and materialized it until I found a way to dematerialize it.

The second chapter will introduce my artistic practice during my MFA program at the University of Manitoba, which can be broadly divided into language, image and sound. I will cite different works in each section and discuss theoretical reflections related to them.

The third chapter will focus on my graduate exhibition at the School of Art Gallery, which involves the topics of technology, humans and space. I consider the exhibition as a work of art in its own right, rather than a vessel for other works.

Chapter 1: Amateur, Craft, Art

1.1. Amateur: from living to painting

I started to draw when I was a child, both as an amateur of painting and of life. I was curious about everything around me, always asking why, but my interest in things was always fleeting. Painting and reading were the only two things that kept me quiet and engaged. My parents thought I might be talented and had me go to a teacher's place every weekend to learn painting. My paintings were far from realistic, even abstract. I painted very quickly and my paintings often looked scribbled, each part was separate from the other and it was difficult to form a balanced whole.

In *The Story of Art*, E. H. Gombrich wrote “the Egyptians had largely drawn what they ‘knew’ to exist, the Greeks what they ‘saw’; in the Middle Ages the artist also learned to express in his picture what he ‘felt’.”¹ The scribbling and impatience in my paintings came about because I felt that I “knew” what I was painting and so became resistant to looking and observing more. As a sensitive child, my behaviour was easily influenced by fickle emotions. Maybe that is why I love Francis Bacon’s and Cy Twombly’s paintings, I enjoy the intense emotions and repetitive motions in the images and long to release my own repressed feelings by painting in a similar way.

As Francis Bacon once said “all painting is an accident. But it's also not an accident, because one must select what part of the accident one chooses to preserve.”² I like to work

¹ Gombrich, E. H. (Ernst Hans). *The Story of Art*. Chapter 8: Western Art in the Melting Pot. Europe, Sixth to Eleventh Century A.D, p115. 15th ed., enl.rev., Prentice-Hall, 1990.

² Tate. *Francis Bacon*. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZnGvQLBQwP/>.

between the controllable and the uncontrollable, what I want and the unexpected that comes with it. In this way, I know that there is more to the work than just myself, there is something else that I don't know and cannot control. In *The Uncontrollability of the World*, Hartmut Rosa states, “falling snow may be the purest manifestation of uncontrollability, we just cannot get hold of it or make it our own, and this kind of relationship reflects our relationship to the world, that we try to make everything controllable, but paradoxically a world that is fully known, in which everything has been controlled, would be a dead world.”³ When accidents happen or uncontrollability occurs in the process of making or living, I try to “think within anxiety, but also with detachment and a talent for letting be.”⁴ I would tell myself that I actually have a choice in what I do, how I face it, and it is not just an option to accept, it is also an option to give up.

1.2. Craft: from painting to making

I did not want to be an amateur at painting anymore, I wanted to be a professional in something else. I started my journey in goldsmithing at a jewellery school in Florence, Italy. As my Italian was very poor at the beginning, I could only learn by observing and mimicking the teacher's actions, which means that I did not understand the teacher's explanations or the reasons behind each step. I could not even solder a ring that others could do easily, this sent me back into a frustration similar to painting. As my Italian improved, things seemed to get a little better, but I still felt lost. I did not like what I was making and could not understand why I was continuing to make jewellery, until I saw a

³ Rosa, Hartmut. *The Uncontrollability of the World*. Translated by James C. Wagner. Cambridge, UK; Polity Press, 2020.

⁴ Dastur, Françoise. *How Are We to Confront Death? An Introduction to Philosophy*. Foreword by David Farrell Krell, xx. Translated by Robert Vallier. Fordham University Press, New York, 2012.

book titled *The Book*⁵ by Otto Künzli. It is a big, thick book that documents most of the work he made between 1970 to 2010. Otto Künzli was born in 1948, he taught at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich. His work is humorous, critical, conceptual and performative.

In 1980, Künzli made a piece called *Brooch for two people*, in which a man and a woman stand close to each other, their clothes held together at the chest by a double-sided brooch. It is such a simple but strong piece and it reminds me of Marina Abramović and Ulay's *Rest Energy*⁶ from 1980, in which a man and a woman hold one arrow on the weight of their body and the arrow is pointing at the woman's heart. It was the first time I had seen such "special jewellery", and I enjoyed reading that book. It somehow planted the seed of something conceptual in my mind and opened a brand new door for me that led nowhere. I then moved to another, more conceptually oriented jewellery school in Florence, where I studied Art History and Contemporary Jewellery History courses and started to make something different, something that interested me, but the more I made, the more futile it felt.

1.3. Art: from making to discovering

When I discovered that I could open a can and get a pull-tab as a ring, I stopped melting silver into wires and soldering them into rings. I became an amateur once again. I started looking for the readymade "rings" that already existed in my life. I became passionate about discovering and using readymades I found and collected. Till one day I lost interest

⁵ Klimt02. Otto Künzli: *The Book*. Published: 19.03.2013. <https://klimt02.net/publications/books/otto-kunzli-book-arnoldsche-art-publisher>.

⁶ MoMA. Marina Abramović and Ulay. *Rest Energy*. 1980. <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/243/3120>.

in it because I realized that I had too much stuff and I did not want to make more waste in a life that was already so materially overloaded. For a long time I did not make anything more, I just spent time reading, thinking, doing nothing and living my life.

In the book *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972*, Lucy Lippard wrote “‘Ephemeralization’ is the term Buckminster Fuller uses for ‘the design science strategy of doing even more with even less per unit of energy, space, and time.’”⁷ At some point it seemed to become one of my concerns in making art, to achieve more possibilities by doing less or even nothing. I tried to use a seemingly passive acceptance as a way of subjective construction. I went not only from making to discovering, but also from materializing to dematerializing. I started to accept the ephemeral nature of things and tried to see and capture these fleeting moments in different ways. As Alain Badiou wrote “love what you will never see twice”⁸. They are the “snowflakes” of everyday life, a presence that I can not hold on to no matter how hard I try, but I still want to try. Even if it is a meaningless attempt that I know is impossible, I will still go for it. Even though I wander on the fringes of different fields, I will still keep trying new ones. Even if I am just an amateur at life and art, I will still continue to live and make in my own way.

⁷ Lippard, Lucy R. *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 To 1972*, p5-6. First edition., University of California Press, 1997, <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520340619>.

⁸ Badiou, Alain, et al. *In Praise of Love*, P99. Serpent’s Tail, 2012.

Chapter 2: Language, Image, Sound

2.1. Language: Poetry and Diary

I have an inexplicably strong interest in language, and since I was a child I have enjoyed imitating other people's ways of speaking and behaving, and when I was growing up I learnt to draw and swim by imitation. I also learnt Chinese, English, Italian, German and French through imitation. I do agree that “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world.”⁹, because when I try to use different languages, I can feel that my thoughts are greatly influenced by the language I am using. The limitations that exist in the language itself made me start to re-examine the use of language and try to express myself through other languages in the name of art.

I see languages as games of different systems. When talking about language, I am not only referring to the language which is used in daily life or the different art forms that artists use as languages, but also to what is hidden underneath and reflected through these languages. It is about love and death, about the human condition and the omnipresent solitude. Language brings not only communication and understanding, but also misunderstanding and disconnection. The question is how to understand existing ones and create new ones.

Erick Erickson wrote in *Childhood and Society* that “every adult, was once a child. He was once small. A sense of smallness forms a substratum in his mind, ineradicably.”¹⁰ I was

⁹ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, 5.6. 2nd impression, with A few corrections.--, Routledge & K. Paul, 1963.

¹⁰ Erikson, Erik H. (Erik Homburger). *Childhood and Society*, p364. New York: Norton, 1993.

once small living in a family that was full of indifference, arguments and violence, and at the same time a lack of communication, understanding and trust. The loss of the sense of belonging to home made me suppress my longing for it, and I have tried to express this ambivalent feeling in some of my projects. In the work *JIA*, I tried to capture my thoughts and memories of home in the form of a continuous poem. It is a handmade book written in English and Chinese on tracing paper. “Jia” is the phonetic translation of the Chinese word “家”, which means “home”. Here are some excerpts from the poem:

Home is an accident

Unprepared couple

Uninformed children

Home is the continuation of another home

An inheritance of misery and honour

Home is sex that has yet to happen

With or without a condom

Home is a baby meant to be aborted but wasn't

A child that one wishes to get pregnant but can't

Home is a house made of money

Bridges made of corpses

Home is an attempt

Doing it knowing it's not possible

Everywhere is home

Nowhere is home

In writing in different languages, I realized that when a word is unrecognizable it becomes an abstract image, whose lack of linguistic meaning may result in an increase in its mysterious beauty of the unknown. Whether understood or not, I like to use different languages to expand imagination, to express what cannot be said, to play with possible meanings in diverse contexts, to understand and to be misunderstood. It is important to understand what one can understand, and it is even more important to try to understand what one cannot understand.

From a very young age I was required to keep a daily diary as homework, to record the events of the day. As I grew up, the habit seemed to fade away. During my graduate studies, I resumed the habit of keeping a diary. It includes what I eat and drink, how many times I go to the bathroom, go to work or school, and what I do each day after I wake up and before I go to bed. These diaries were originally written down in my phone notes, and I transcribed some of them onto toilet paper to make the piece named "Toilet Paper Diary". Toilet paper is an item that is much used and discarded in everyday life, and because of its fragile nature, writing on it requires extra attention and effort. In the process of transcribing, time flows, and the waste of excess labour on a futile event is as absurd as Sisyphus pushing a stone.

At the MFA Summer Research Presentation, I presented a work named “470: Ce n’est pas la vie.” It is a work that consists of a video as well as some written documents. The video is 6’ 33’ long and includes 8 pieces which are 24 Hours In One Day, 24 Days In One Hour, 24 Containers, Medical Abortion, 24 Actions, Frankie May In May, 24 Love Songs and 10 Screams. The written documents include Work List, Toilet Paper Diary, An Email, List of Lost Studio Items, Certificate of Marriage and Petition For Divorce. I try to blur the boundary between art and life through this work, and create my own language by combining different pre-existing languages and systems.

2.2. Image: Photo and Video

My photographic work comes from my observation, documentation and imagination of life. In *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, Charlotte Cotton states that “there is no such thing as an unphotographed or unphotographable subject. The practitioner fosters our visual curiosity by subtly and imaginatively encouraging us to contemplate the stuff of the world around us in our daily lives in new ways.”¹¹ In *Ghosting*, I tried to catch the light and shadow that appeared on the wall of my room, and I imagined it to be a ghost. It usually appears in the afternoon, and I tried to capture its figure with my mobile phone and find the pattern of its appearance.

Many years ago, I saw a work named *Artist’s Shit*¹² by Piero Manzoni. Instead of photographing my own shit, I started to photograph the shit I saw on the street and

¹¹ Cotton, Charlotte. *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*, p115. 2nd ed., Thames & Hudson, 2009.

¹² Tate. *Artist’s Shit*, 1961, Piero Manzoni. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/manzoni-artists-shit-t07667>.

named it *Shitlosophy*. By taking a close look at these shits, I realized that they all have different appearances, and in doing so, I captured the ecology around them, which are also hints of the environment and the changing seasons.

In *Looking for Pictosan*, I took photos of escape signs. There are two types of escape signs, one is a red EXIT and the other is a green little man. The name of this green little man is Pictosan, designed by the Japanese in the late 20th century. As an important infrastructure in a building, the escape sign is ignored by most people and is only seen in emergencies. In a dark room, I sometimes stare at the always-lit escape sign and imagine pushing open that door to enter a brand new world. I know that exit exists and that trying to escape is looking for hope.

In *Portraits of Anonymous*, I try to discover new meanings from those meaningless moments in the cracks of life, zoom in on those neglected still lifes, behind which are countless unknown and nameless people. “To live is to be ready to hunt down that fleeting moment in time.”¹³ I consider the moment of really seeing things and being touched by them to be eternal, and the moments when they are captured or shown become another kind of eternity. There is pleasure in discovering “eternity” in fleeting moments, and I often catch glimpses of eternity in the loose moments of my busy life, in those moments of solitude and boredom. I do think that “on one hand, the world has truly fallen apart, one can regret and see it as a loss. On the other, one can consider a fragment as a whole

¹³ Barbery, Muriel. *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*, p225. Europa Editions, New York, 2008.

and see its beauty.”¹⁴ I hope the fragments of my life may resonate with the fragments of other people’s lives, making the shared fragments more like a whole.

If photos are about my observations and reflections on my surroundings and environment, videos are more closely related to my personal experience and mental activities. I try to record the real moments of boredom, happiness, pain, frustration and vulnerability in life through my mobile phone or camera lens. In “Ghost”, I recorded the automatic doors that kept opening and closing on their own. In “How to Change”, I recorded the process of changing the sanitary napkin in the toilet. In “Puffing”, I recorded a water pipe on the side of the road that kept spewing white smoke. In “Egg Walk”, I recorded two eggs crashing into each other. In “Chairs”, I recorded the process of stacking the chairs one on top of the other. In “One Period in Life”, I recorded my medicated abortion. In “Dildo”, I recorded myself struggling to put on a dildo. In “Fly Water”, I recorded a fly struggling in a glass of water. Some of these videos are moments that I have captured as they happened in life, others are re-productions of those moments re-performed in front of the camera and re-presented on the screen, and some are somewhere in between. For me, it is not what is perceived as real that matters, but rather the different perspectives from which different realities can be understood.

None of my work is perfect as my goal is not to achieve or show perfection, but to be honest and present to the audience an inherently imperfect life. Hito Steyerl once wrote “the imperfect cinema is one that strives to overcome the divisions of labor within class

¹⁴ Hirschhorn, Thomas. *Community of Fragments*, Stephen Friedman Gallery, 2021, <https://www.stephenfriedman.com/news/348-thomas-hirschhorn-community-of-fragments/>. Accessed 27 January 2023.

society. It merges art with life and science, blurring the distinction between consumer and producer, audience and author. It insists upon its own imperfection, is popular but not consumerist, committed without becoming bureaucratic.”¹⁵ I know I am not the most professional filmmaker, but I try to be honest in my work, restoring as much as possible real life as I see it, without overly embellishing and removing too much in order to add to its artistic qualities.

Very often I do not work with a clear intention, from time to time I was inspired to make new work while living, observing and documenting my life, but I could not understand where exactly this impulse came from, until I came across a passage written by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, “being poorly integrated in the universe of humanity and hardly able to adapt herself therein, she, like the child, is able to see it objectively; instead of being interested solely in her grasp on things, she looks for their significance; she catches their special outlines, their unexpected metamorphoses..... Empty and unlimited, she seeks from within her nothingness to attain all.”¹⁶ I saw in her words not only myself, but also other women I know around me, who dared to make different choices in the midst of similar fates, and who dared to admit and stand their ground. I hope my work will bring strength and the courage to persevere.

2.3. Sound: Noise and Voice

Neglected soundscapes are just as significant as ignored moments of life. Just as an image can be re-presented through a screen, sound can be re-presented through a loudspeaker.

¹⁵ Steyerl, Hito. *In Defense of the Poor Image*, e-flux, November 2009, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>. Accessed 27 January 2023.

¹⁶ Beauvoir, Simone de. *The second sex*. Chapter 2, The Girl. Vintage Books, 1974.

The loudspeaker itself is not the source of the sound, but the re-presentation of the sound object. In 1959, John Cage used the sounds of 34 objects including bathtubs, toys and pressure cookers to perform a piece of music called *Water walk* on a TV show.¹⁷ He considered the noise that people tend to ignore as beautiful music, yet such sounds are everywhere. I recorded the various sounds of everyday life as if I were taking pictures of them. I try to extract and amplify each of them, thus creating an absurd aural scene. I want to blur the boundaries between the meaningful and the meaningless and reveal the sounds that exist in life as it is.

In Cage's *4'33"*, one can “hear only the sounds external to the composition itself, which is merely one protracted caesura.”¹⁸ In this silent performance, the audience's reaction and action become an essential part of the work. In Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* and the video documentation of the performance made in 1965, Ono dressed in her best clothes, sits on her knees on the stage, one hand propped up on the floor, waiting for people to come up and use scissors to cut off a piece of her clothes, and offered it as a gift. The video is filled with footsteps, applause, laughter and talking. In one of the interviews, Ono says “there was a long silence between one person coming up and the next person coming up. And I said it's a fantastic, beautiful music, you know? Ba-ba-ba, cut! Ba-ba-ba, cut! Beautiful poetry, actually.”¹⁹ It is such an interesting way of engaging and connecting the audience with the artist. It is important for me to retain a certain degree of interactivity,

¹⁷ Johncage.org. Database of Works. *Water Walk*. https://www.johncage.org/pp/John-Cage-Work-Detail.cfm?work_ID=242.

¹⁸ Schafer, R. Murray. *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, p5. Destiny Books, 1994.

¹⁹ MoMA. Yoko Ono. *Cut Piece*. 1964. The Museum of Modern Art. <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/15/373>.

improvisation and randomness in an artwork, it opens up more unknowns and possibilities, just as life always brings surprises.

There are sounds made by machines, but there are also sounds made by humans, especially talking, as human voice is a highly recognizable sound, and language itself contains a lot of complex information.²⁰ That is where my interest in language comes into play in the use of voices. In some of my work, I say the same word or sentence in different languages. Sometimes I sing in different languages and make comprehensible lyrics abstract by reversing them. I always felt it is important to listen to what a person did not say rather than what they did say. The words I can say are the emotions and feelings I have already digested, and the more unspeakable words that stick in my throat are the ones I care more about, the ones I cannot express even though I tried so hard to put them into words. Through the repetitive, unclear voices, those unspeakable words seemed to be released in some inexplicable way, leaving me with a sense of relief. As to whether the audience can understand it or not does not really matter, because even I myself cannot fully understand it, and there isn't just one way of interpreting it, everyone can understand it in their own way.

²⁰ Wishart, Trevor, and Simon Emmerson. *On Sonic Art*, p150. New and rev. Ed., vol. 12, Routledge, 2016.

Chapter 3: Technology, Human, Space

3.1. Technology: AI & Love

In Mandarin, the pronunciation of love is similar to AI, which makes me wonder if AI can be love or what else it could be. AI as an acronym for Artificial Intelligence and means the intelligence exhibited by machines, particularly computer systems, and it is used in many essential applications, including Apple's Face ID, Google Search, ChatGPT, Google Translate and Youtube. As an often mentioned, yet rarely truly recognized presence, AI is everywhere, as is love and death.

As an iPhone user, I conducted countless Google searches in the process of writing this thesis. And I made a book named *Book of Questions* by asking "ZeroGPT AI" to ask me questions about art, philosophy, identity, sociology, love, human, nature, AI, life and music, etc. Then I added some of my own questions into AI's questions. What I find interesting is that the questions asked by AI are always long and detailed, such as "If you could have any superpower, what would it be and how would you use it?" or "If you could have dinner with any historical figure, who would it be and what would you ask them?", whereas the questions I ask are always short and general, like "Who are you?" or "Do you love me?". For me, using AI is a matter of trust. As someone who is always suspicious of the world, I can barely trust the people or the world around me. I believe that living with AI is just like living with other people, and that "lies" are inevitable. In some ways, the issue of trust is also about love.

In some of my sound projects, I asked Google Translate to read some of my poems or writings and I recorded the voices. It is not only about making fun of such a robotic and incoherent voice, but also a way to make my subjective thought sound more objective. As those words might come from my deepest fears, and I wanted them to sound less traumatizing through a less human voice. I seem to have a natural affinity for AI, I sometimes even wish I could work as rationally as AI does, constantly gathering information and then re-organizing it. I do not know if AI loves me, but I might love AI, and by love I mean to accept it for what it is, and embracing the fact that while it solves problems it might create more problems, after all everything has a price. "All technical objects are pharmacological, at once poison and cure."²¹ Whilst it may seem that technology is helping humans to solve problems and make their lives better, in reality humans need to spend more time and energy solving problems caused by technology, which is alienating them from nature and destabilizing the spirituality and beliefs associated with it.

It seems to me that the fundamental difference between human and animal and machine is imagination, humans are passionate about imagining a greater power, a better world, a death that is yet to come, and the ultimate purpose of it all is to better the lives of those who are still alive. In everyday life, technology can glitch in all sorts of ways, just as people can get sick, and the biggest glitch a human being can face is death. I do not know if AI will have the same fear of glitches or death as humans, but I do believe that "the

²¹ "*Pharmakon, pharmacologie*". Vocabulaire, Ars Industrialis. <https://arsindustrialis.org/vocabulaire-pharmakon-pharmacologie>. Accessed 28 Jan. 2025.

human fear of death comes from not living well enough”²² and that is not something that AI can change.

3.2. Human: Performance & Life

Performance artists perform performances based on concepts, musicians perform music based on scores, and humans perform a variety of roles in their daily lives based on social rules, such as those defined as teachers, parents, and wives. Workers’ salaries are tied to their performance, and performance is everywhere. Meanwhile, the audience is everywhere. Each individual can perform as a performer as well as an audience. We perform not only our genders and identities²³, but also who we are and who we want to be. It is such a performative life. One performs by miming, gesturing and imagining. One connects with others through performances, then tells stories and manipulates them to write history. In *The practice of everyday life*, Michel de Certeau considers “everyday practices, based on their relation to an occasion, that is on casual time, are thus, scattered all along duration, in the situation of acts of thought. Permanent practices of thought.”²⁴ One performs based on one's own habits and thoughts, which in turn are built on the performances of society and others. They are all interrelated and constitute a unified yet distinct language of performance.

From using readymade objects to improvising drawings to repeating actions, the development of performance art is inextricably linked to the history of art, and at the

²² Camus, Albert. *A happy death*. [1st American ed.], Knopf; [distributed by Random House], 1972.

²³ Butler, Judith. “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” *Theatre Journal* (Washington, D.C.), vol. 40, no. 4, 1988, pp. 519–31, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893>.

²⁴ Certeau, Michel de. *The practice of everyday life*, p202-203. University of California Press, 1984.

same time, every artist is redefining performance art with their own works. For me, moving towards performance art means pulling back the threads in the process of constant experimentation and failure, subtracting those unnecessary existences until it reaches its essence, which is to live and to stay alive. Through performance art, I try to use my own body and my living life to show my confusion and exploration of the world as a human being, and to challenge myself, to blur the space between private and public by presenting my real self and life, and to re-open the connection with others. In the process, I learnt to accept my ignorance, incompetence, frustration, uncontrollability and vulnerability, to accept myself, to accept this imperfect world, to accept the paradoxes and contradictions of parallel existences, and, more importantly, to learn to live, and to feel alive again.

From birth to death, as an individual, I connect with others and feel, experience, observe and document the world as I see it in every possible way, and collect these memories as materials. Then I realized that only by understanding others can I better understand myself and the world. I can feel my body, but I can only see myself through others' eyes, the mirror reflects only appearances. I have limitations, and I am always in the process of becoming a person. I try to live in the present, here and now, but I cannot stop thinking about the past and the future. I try to show my best side to others and keep hiding my fears, anxieties and vulnerabilities. I have loved and cared, owned and lost. I work hard to cover up my emptiness and the feeling of the absurd. I have tried to divert my attention and move on but it did not help. I had to face them over and over again until I had the courage to actually look at them. My attention switches between desire and boredom, my intention shifts between self-control and self-indulgence. I desire the love and

recognition of others. I am law-abiding and disciplined by society. I am often confused and struggle to make sense of things around me. I live in futility and suffer in pain. Sometimes, I imagine happiness. I know I have to take responsibility and pay for my choices. Based on the above, I perform.

During my MFA studies, I have tried to collaborate with others to make performance art, and I have also recorded my own performances to videos. As Marshall McLuhan said "the medium is the message."²⁵ The medium of documentation already carries information in itself. It is not only based on the artist's choice, but also on the imprint of the times. Every material contains historical information to be discovered before it is chosen by the artist, and when this message coincides with the artist's intention, it conveys a wider and stronger signal waiting to be received by the audience. For me, life comes before performance, and performance comes before documentation. I consider all my artistic practices to be both conceptual and performance art, whether they are with poetry, diary, photo, video, noise or voice, they are all linked to my mind, my body, my thoughts, my actions and the limited time I have as a human being.

3.3. Space: Exhibition & Liminality

Liminality is a quality of being in between two places or stages, on the verge of transitioning to something new. It is rooted in this idea of a threshold, a kind of doorway between the past and the future.²⁶ From the early twentieth century, when Arnold van

²⁵ McLuhan, Marshall, and W. Terrence Gordon. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Critical ed., Gingko Press, 2003.

²⁶ "Liminality." *Vocabulary.com Dictionary*, Vocabulary.com, <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/liminality>. Accessed 28 Jan. 2025.

Gennep created the term “liminality”²⁷, to the late twentieth century, when Victor Turner revisited its significance²⁸, liminality is closely related to the notion of transition rites in different contexts. Life is full of transitions. As someone who has studied in China, Italy, Germany and Canada, I have spent a long time trying to make sense of such transitions. I am always escaping, confronting, finding and losing myself. It is hard to situate oneself in such a constantly changing and fluid world. But I like to be in these mobile “Non-Places”²⁹, in these unobtrusive corners, to think and to be myself. It is not only the “traveller’s space”³⁰ which “creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude”³¹, but also the “spaces in which solitude is experienced as an overburdening or emptying of individuality, in which only the movement of the fleeting images enables the observer to hypothesize the existence of a past and glimpse the possibility of a future.”³²

Originally, I planned to use the gallery's toilet as one of the exhibition spaces, but for several reasons that option was rejected. On the one hand, I wanted to pay homage to Duchamp's “*Fountain*”³³ by exhibiting in the toilet. On the other hand, the toilet in the gallery is a typical liminal space, a non-place between art and life, and where the two

²⁷ Gennep, Arnold van. *The rites of passage*. Routledge & Paul, 1960.

²⁸ Turner, Victor W. (Victor Witter). *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Cornell University Press, 1967.

²⁹ Augé, Marc. *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Verso, 1995.

³⁰ Ibid. P86.

³¹ Ibid. P103.

³² Ibid. P87.

³³ Tate. *Fountain*, 1917, replica 1964, Marcel Duchamp. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/duchamp-fountain-t07573>.

meet. Just one door away, there is protected art on one side and unguarded moments of life on the other.

Another typical liminal non-space of the gallery is the foyer, which is separated from the real life outside the art by only one wall of glass. One day while waiting for the bus at the bus stop, I saw this foyer – a far away yet close space with a monitor visible and the video still playing inside, and I knew that this was the space I wanted for my MFA thesis exhibition. Every gallery has a foyer, sometimes a table, sometimes a whole room. People gather here to chat, socialize, take off their coats in preparation for the art feast they are about to see, or put their coats on in preparation for leaving or going to the toilet. I often stood in the corner of the foyer watching those dramatic scenes in front of me, thinking maybe this was art. Even if it is just for self-amusement, I know that without people, there is no art.

I plan to exhibit one sound installation titled “0 – 1” in the foyer. It will be hung on the wall as two sets of headphones, each playing different sounds from the left and right channels, including noises and voices. The audience will be able to hear ten different combinations of those four sound pieces by wearing them in different ways. I will also write some instructions on the wall to help them better interact with it.

There will be a silent video on a large TV screen from the photographic series “*Portraits of Anonymous*”. I made the video of showing the images in a slide show-like format in the order they were taken, so that these still images become moving video on a large screen. On the wall next to it are over one hundred QR codes, which together cover an area

similar in size to the screen, each containing a link to a different video I made in my Youtube playlist. In this way, what was a moving video becomes a still image.

Conclusion

“All art comes from life.”³⁴ The art I want to make is about life itself, the life I have been living and the world I have been seeing. My “intention is to affirm this life, not to bring order out of a chaos or to suggest improvements in creation, but simply to wake up to the very life we’re living, which is so excellent once one gets one’s mind and one’s desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord.”³⁵ I don’t make art to make the world a better place, but rather to show the world as it really is, because for me, “it is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists.”³⁶

I see myself an “outsider” in life and an “in-between” in art. I see life as the endless production, consumption, repetition and circulation of finite beings in countless fleeting moments.³⁷ And “what separates art from a daily act, is a construct produced by the alienation caused by capitalism and it prevents humans from living a joyful life.”³⁸ This makes art as absurd as life, because “the absurd is not in man nor the world, but in their presence together.”³⁹

³⁴ Hsieh, Tehching. “Tehching Hsieh: *All art comes from life*”, TATESHOTS, 9 June 2017, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hsieh-one-year-performance1980-1981-t13875/tehching-hsieh>. Accessed 27 January 2023.

³⁵ Cage, John. *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, VI 1960-65. Wesleyan University Press, 1961.

³⁶ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, 6.44. 2nd impression, with A few corrections.--, Routledge & K. Paul, 1963.

³⁷ Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. 2nd ed. / introduction by Margaret Canovan., University of Chicago Press, 1998.

³⁸ Mattern, Mark. *Anarchism and Art*. 2019. *The Palgrave Handbook of Anarchism* (edited by Carl Levy & Matthew S. Adams), chapter 33, pp. 589–602. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/mark-mattern-anarchism-and-art#toc3>.

³⁹ Camus, Albert, et Justin O’Brien. *The myth of Sisyphus*, p21. Penguin, 2000.

Based on my jewellery background, I see life as a resource of gems to be mined in the earth. One day I am surprised to find these gems in a vast expanse of land and dig them out, just as I find those life moments and capture them through the lens. I take the unearthed stones back to my studio to clean and polish them, just as I edit those videos in my studio. I consider the very existence of these resources and materials to be already an extremely wonderful thing, and I want to explore them and share my discoveries with others. So far, these are the “crafts” I made. The key to turning this “craft” into “art” is the “concept”. After I have gone to so much effort to take them away from the original land where I found them, how can I reconnect them with that land in my own way? In other words, art for me is a re-arrangement of life or the concept of how to re-arrange life.

As an artist, I want to make work that is both transparent and reflective like water. Let the work itself be a mirror of the time and space that people can perceive, allowing the audience to see what they want to see. Perhaps some will see the sky and sigh at its azure colour, some will see a fish in the water and try to catch it, and some will see their own faces deep in the water. But no matter what, water is still water, once water, now water, always water, even if in different forms and appearances.

Glossary of Terms

A

Amateur: Doing something out of a desire to satisfy personal curiosity and interest, rather than to gain recognition from others.

Art: “A work of art is a tautology in that it is a presentation of the artist's intention, that is, he is saying that a particular work of art is art, which means, is a definition of art.”⁴⁰

C

Craft: A practical way of living and thinking by using different tools.

D

Dematerialization / Dematerialize / Dematerializing: A way of making that's uses and produces the least amount of material possible.

I

Image: The image of the surrounding world that a person sees and notices at one moment in time, which includes the perspective from which the world is viewed as well as the image that is imagined.

L

Language: Games of systems. The goal is to understand the existing and create the new.

⁴⁰ Kosuth, Joseph. *Art after philosophy and after: Collected Writings, 1966-1990*. P20. The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England. 1991.

Liminality: A state of transition.

M

Material: All non-digital artificial objects and products that can be perceived by touch.

Materialization / Materialize / materializing: A non-digital but artificial way of making or creating.

P

Perform / performing: In this paper it refers generally to conscious and unconscious behaviours and actions in human life as well as in art making.

Performance: In addition to performance art in the context of contemporary art, it also refers to the use of the term in different fields and the particular meanings it may have in specific contexts.

R

Re-perform/re-performing/re-performance:

It suggests a fluid state of time that can simultaneously represent the past, present or future. It carries several meanings in this thesis:

1. repetitive behaviours that occur in the daily life of an individual.
2. artist's reproduction of fragments of everyday life in front of the camera
3. performative behaviour that the viewer may generate in the process of watching the artist reproducing in front of the camera fragments of repetitive behaviours that occur in daily life.

Re-present/re-presenting/re-presentation: Every presentation is a re-presentation. It focuses more on showing (presentation) than making (production).

Re-produce/re-producing/re-production: Every presentation is also a re-production. It focuses more on making (production) than showing (presentation).

S

Sound: Everything that can be perceived through hearing.

Space: All space that humans can perceive.

T

Technology: Everything that can be used as a tool.

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