

**The Performative Materialities of Contemporary Chinese Art**

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the discursive materialities of contemporary Chinese art, analysing six artworks or art projects featured in the exhibition *The Allure of Matter: Material Art from China* (2020) and its associated research projects, through the lens of New Materialism. Traditional anthropological approaches to contemporary Chinese art often prioritise the artist's intellectual contribution over the material, viewing artworks as "finished" or static outcomes of the artmaking-process. In contrast, this study proposes a performative and ontological understanding on the materialities of contemporary Chinese art. Drawing on New Materialist theories, it argues that materials in art can act as dynamic entities deeply intertwined with human actions and activities. Taking *The Allure of Matter* exhibition as a springboard, this study examines six featured artworks or art projects by Yang Jiechang, Lin Tianmiao, He Xiangyu, Liang Shaoji, Zhang Huan, and Song Dong. It seeks to fill the interpretative voids that exist within the study of contemporary Chinese art, with a focus on those works grounded in vibrant materialities, examining specific instances where materials in the chosen artworks manifest as dynamic and agential forces. These instances serve as illustrations of the intra-active becoming of human-non-human assemblages and the modes of knowledge production through the complex interplay of various agencies, including human, non-human, and more-than-human entities. This exploration shifts the focus from artist's individual creativity to the collaborative emergence of artwork, highlighting the inseparable and often amorphous boundaries between human and non-human, subject and object, nature and culture, as well as matter and mind. Ultimately, this study aims to pave the way for a renewed perspective on processuality, causality, relationality, affectivity, and the agentic capacities of a dynamic conceptualisation of art's materialities, advocating for the respect of non-human nature or the sovereignty of matter beyond human-centric views.

## Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	2
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS .....	4
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	10
INTRODUCTION .....	13
CHAPTER 1 .....	87
MATERIAL AS UNFIXED AND IN AN ONGOING PROCESS: ZHANG HUAN’S <i>BERLIN BUDDHA</i> .....	87
CHAPTER 2 .....	135
BLURRING BOUNDARIES OF NATURE/CULTURE AND EMBODIMENT/OBJECTIVITY: SONG DONG’S <i>WATER RECORDS</i> .....	135
CHAPTER 3 .....	191
MATERIAL’S CAPACITY FOR “AGENCY”: YANG JIECHANG’S <i>100 LAYERS OF INK</i> .....	191
CHAPTER 4 .....	231
MORE-THAN-HUMAN AGENCY: LIANG SHAOJI’S <i>NATURE SERIES</i> .....	231
CHAPTER 5 .....	274
AFFECT AND CRITICAL INQUIRY: LIN TIANMIAO’S <i>THE PROLIFERATION OF THREAD WINDING</i> . 274	
CHAPTER 6 .....	308
ONTO-EPISTEMOLOGY IN ARTMAKING: HE XIANGYU’S <i>COLA PROJECT</i> .....	308
CONCLUSION .....	337
ILLUSTRATIONS .....	352
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	382

## List of Illustrations

1. Zhang Huan. *Berlin Buddha*, 2007. Sculptural Installation. Ash, Iron and Aluminium. Aluminium Buddha Part: 370 x 290 x 260 cm; Ash Buddha Part: 350 x 480 x 290 cm. Haunch of Venison, Berlin.
2. Song Dong. *Water Records*, 2010, and *Traceless Stele*, 2016. Installation view, *The Allure of Matter: Material Art from China*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2019–2020. Photo courtesy of Museum Associates/LACMA.
3. Yang Jiechang. *100 Layers of Ink*, 1992. Painting. Ink on xuan paper, 185 x 172 cm. Courtesy of the artist.
4. Yang Jiechang. *One Hundred Miles Squared* [方百里], 1990. Painting. Ink, xuan paper, gauze, Korean paper, 78 × 78 cm. Photo courtesy of InkStudio, Beijing, China.
5. Yang Jiechang, *The Moon and the Sun*, 1991. Painting. Ink, gauze, xuan paper, 37 x 46 cm. Courtesy of the artist.
6. Yang Jiechang, *Ladder to Heaven*, 1992. Painting. Ink, xuan paper, gauze, Korean paper, 193.4 × 129.9 cm. Photo courtesy of InkStudio, Beijing, China.
7. Yang Jiechang sitting on the floor at Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1989, surrounded by his installation at *Magiciens de la Terre*. Each painting: 420x280cm. Courtesy of Fei Dawei.
8. Yang Jiechang. *100 Layers of Ink, No.1*, 1994. Painting. Ink and acrylic on paper laid down on canvas, 170.2 × 186.1 cm. Courtesy of the artist.
9. Yang Jiechang. *100 Layers of Ink, No.2*, 1994. Painting. Ink and acrylic on paper laid down on canvas, 175.3 × 186.1 cm. Courtesy of the artist.
10. Yang Jiechang. *100 Layers of Ink, No.3*, 1994. Painting. Ink and acrylic on paper laid down on canvas, 170.2 × 186.1 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

11. Liang Shaoji. *Chains: The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Nature Series, No. 79* (installation view), 2002–2007. Polyurethane, colophony, iron powder, silk, and cocoons. Dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of the artist and ShanghART Gallery.
12. Lin Tianmiao. *The Proliferation of Thread Winding* (installation view), 1995. Video & Installation. White cotton thread, rice paper, steel needles, bed, video player, television monitor. Dimensions variable, open studio, Baofang Hutong 12#, Beijing. Photo courtesy of Lin Tianmiao Studio.
13. He Xiangyu, *A Barrel of Dregs of Coca-Cola*, 2009. Installation. Coca-Cola resin, metal, and glass, 210 x 100 x 100 cm. Rubell Family Collection, Miami.
14. Zhang Huan. *Taipei Buddha*, 2010. Sculptural installation. Ash and Aluminium. 350 x 360 x 340cm. MoCA TaiPei.
15. Zhang Huan. *Sydney Buddha*, 2015. Sculptural installation. Aluminium Buddha Part: 370 x 290 x 260 cm; Ash Buddha Part: 350 x 480 x 290 cm. Carriageworks, Sydney, Australia.
16. Zhang Huan. *Berlin Buddha* (Detail. The ash Buddha sculpture before the removal of its face cover), 2007. Sculptural Installation. Ash, Iron and Aluminium. Ash Buddha Part: 350 x 480 x 290 cm. Haunch of Venison, Berlin.
17. Zhang Huan. *Berlin Buddha* (Detail of the aluminium Buddha mould), 2007. Sculptural Installation. Ash, Iron and Aluminium. Aluminium Buddha Part: 370 x 290 x 260 cm. Haunch of Venison, Berlin.
18. Zhang Huan. *Berlin Buddha* (Detail. Invited guests removing the supporting iron), 2007. Sculptural Installation. Ash, Iron and Aluminium. Ash Buddha Part: 350 x 480 x 290 cm. Haunch of Venison, Berlin. Invited guests removing the supporting iron.

19. Zhang Huan. *65 Kilograms*, 1994. Performance. Photo courtesy of Xing Danwen.
20. Zhang Huan. *Great Leap Forward—Canal Building*, 2007. Painting. Incense ash. 286x1080cm. Photo courtesy of the artist.
21. Zhang Huan. *Pagoda*, 2009. Gray brick, steel, taxidermied pig. 244(height)x335(diameter) inches. Blum and Poe, Los Angeles.
22. Zhang Huan. *Berlin Buddha* (Detail of the aluminium Buddha mould), 2007. Sculptural Installation. Ash, Iron and Aluminium. Aluminium Buddha Part: 370 x 290 x 260 cm. Haunch of Venison, Berlin.
23. Zhang Huan. *12 Square Meters*, 1994. Performance. Single channel video, 3min 2sec, documentation of a 40-minute performance.
24. Zhang Huan. *Berlin Buddha* (Detail. Workers' construction of *Berlin Buddha*), 2007. Sculptural Installation. Ash, Iron and Aluminium. Aluminium Buddha Part: 370 x 290 x 260 cm; Ash Buddha Part: 350 x 480 x 290 cm. Haunch of Venison, Berlin. Invited guests removing the supporting iron.
25. Zhang Huan. *Berlin Buddha* (Detail of the head part of the ash Buddha sculpture), 2007. Sculptural Installation. Ash, Iron and Aluminium. Ash Buddha Part: 350 x 480 x 290 cm. Haunch of Venison, Berlin.
26. Zhang Huan. *Berlin Buddha* (Detail of the middle and lower parts of the ash Buddha sculpture), 2007. Sculptural Installation. Ash, Iron and Aluminium. Ash Buddha Part: 350 x 480 x 290 cm. Haunch of Venison, Berlin.
27. Song Dong. *Water Records* (Detail), 2010. Photo courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery.
28. Song Dong. *Water Records* (Detail), 2010. Photo courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery.
29. Song Dong. *Frying Water* (Video Still), 1992. Video, Duration 1' 40," Courtesy

the artist and Pace Gallery.

30. Song Dong. *Secret Divulging*, 1995. Performance. Ban Shang Hu Tong, No.23, Beijing, China.
31. Song Dong. *Stamping the Water*, 1996. A set of thirty-six chromogenic prints, Photography, each: 61 x 40 cm. Courtesy of the artist.
32. Song Dong. *Writing Diary With Water*, 1995. Chromogenic prints, Photography, each: 44 x 64 cm; 44 x 64 cm. Courtesy of the artist.
33. Song Dong. *Breathing* (Part 1 and Part 2), 1996. Colour transparencies and compact disc, each: 150 × 226 cm. Courtesy of the artist.
34. Wang Xizhi. copy of the *Preface to the Poems Composed at the Orchid Pavilion*, Tang Dynasty, written in fourth century by the “Sage of Calligraphy.”
35. Song Dong. *A Pot of Boiling Water*, 1995. 12 photographs, gelatine silver print on paper, each: 318 × 483 mm. Courtesy of the artist.
36. Fan Kuan. *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* [谿山行旅圖], Song Dynasty (10th Century) - Song Dynasty (Early 11th Century). Painting. Hanging scroll; ink on paper, 1033 x 2063 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.
37. Yang Jiechang in process of creation at the Centre Pompidou, Paris for the exhibition of *Magiciens de la Terre*, 1989, Courtesy of Fei Dawei.
38. Huang Yong Ping. *Theater of the World* (installation view), 1987/1993. Installation. Wood and metal structure with warming lamps, electric cable, insects (spiders, scorpions, crickets, cockroaches, black beetles, stick insects, centipedes), lizards, toads, and snakes, 150 x 170 x 265 cm overall. Guggenheim Museum, New York.
39. Sun Yuan and Peng Yu. *Dogs Which Cannot Touch Each Other*, 2003. Performance. 8 Bull Terriers, 8 Running Machines Without Drive. Video.

Courtesy of Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, Beijing, Les Moulins, Habana.

40. Xu Bing. *A Case Study of Transference*, 1993/1994. Performance, mixed media installation / Ink and live pigs. Courtesy of the artist.
41. Liang Shaoji. *Chains: The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Nature Series, No. 79* (Detail), 2002–2007. Installation. Polyurethane, colophony, iron powder, silk, and cocoons. Photo courtesy of the artist.
42. Liang Shaoji. *Chains: The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Nature Series, No. 79* (Installation view at Wrightwood 659), 2002–2007. Installation. Polyurethane, colophony, iron powder, silk, and cocoons. Dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of the artist and ShanghART Gallery.
43. Liang Shaoji, *Chains: The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Nature Series, No. 79* (Installation view), 2002–2007. Installation. Polyurethane, colophony, iron powder, silk, and cocoons. Dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of the artist and ShanghART Gallery.
44. Liang Shaoji. *8 Series-8*, 2009. Installation, Video, Microscopes & Live Silkworms. Photo courtesy of the artist.
45. Trays of live silkworms in Liang Shaoji's studio. Photo courtesy of the artist and ShanghART Gallery.
46. Making-process of *Chains: The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Nature Series* in Liang Shaoji's studio. Photo courtesy of the artist.
47. Liang Shaoji. *Natural Series No.25*, 1999. Photo & Video, 98.0 X 135.0 cm, duration 5 ' 36. Photo courtesy of the artist.
48. Lin Tianmiao. *The Proliferation of Thread Winding* (Detail of the video demonstrating Lin's endless thread binding), 1995. Video & Installation. White cotton thread, rice paper, steel needles, bed, video player, television monitor.

Dimensions variable, open studio, Baofang Hutong 12#, Beijing. Photo courtesy of Lin Tianmiao Studio.

49. He Xiangyu, *A Barrel of Dregs of Coca-Cola* (Detail), 2009. Installation. Coca-Cola resin, metal, and glass, 210 x 100 x 100 cm. Rubell Family Collection, Miami. Photo courtesy of Museum Associates/LACMA.
50. He Xiangyu. Documentation of the making-process of *Cola Project*, 2009–2011. Photography. Ink-jet print on paper, dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of the artist.
51. He Xiangyu. Documentation of the making-process of *Cola Project*, 2009–2011. Photography. Ink-jet print on paper, dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of the artist.
52. He Xiangyu. Documentation of the making-process of *Cola Project*, 2009–2011. Photography. Ink-jet print on paper, dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of the artist.
53. He Xiangyu. Documentation of the making-process of *Cola Project*, 2009–2011. Photography. Ink-jet print on paper, dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of the artist.
54. He Xiangyu. Documentation of the making-process of *Cola Project*, 2009–2011. Photography. Ink-jet print on paper, dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of the artist.
55. He Xiangyu. *Cola Project Resin* (installation view at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, 2009–2010. Installation. Courtesy of the artist and White Space, Beijing. Photo courtesy of Zan Wimberley.

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## Author's Declaration

I, Yiran Chen, declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

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## Introduction

This thesis examines the discursive materialities of contemporary Chinese art, focusing on six artworks or art projects from the exhibition *The Allure of Matter: Material Art from China* (2020) and its associated research projects, through the lens of New Materialism. While material culture and other anthropologically oriented approaches to contemporary Chinese art tend to prioritize artistic intellect over “inanimate” materials, considering artmaking and artworks as “finished,” or fixed-end products, the present research puts forth a performative and ontological understanding of materiality in contemporary Chinese art. Drawing on New Materialist theories, especially Karen Barad’s concept of “post-humanist performativity”, I will here argue that materials in artworks—particularly those activating “affective,” “processual,” or “assemblage” dimensions—possess the potential to present themselves as vibrant entities intrinsically intertwined with humans and human activities. Using the exhibition *The Allure of Matter* as an initial point of inspiration, this research analyses six artworks or art projects featured therein, by Zhang Huan, Song Dong, Yang Jiechang, Liang Shaoji, Lin Tianmiao, and He Xiangyu. Aiming to bridge existing interpretative gaps surrounding contemporary Chinese art, particularly material-based artworks, this thesis ventures into the vitality of art’s materialities, exploring how the selected artworks act as an emergent outcome of multiple agencies, where human, non-human, and more-than-human entities are entangled and actively participate in artistic processes of being and becoming. This exploration underscores the inseparable and often amorphous boundaries between human and non-human, subject and object, nature and culture, as well as matter and mind, which emerge and are negotiated through complex interconnections and interactions among agencies. Ultimately, this study endeavours to set the stage for a rejuvenated perspective on processuality, causality, relationality,

performativity, affectivity, and the agentic capacities of a dynamic conceptualisation of art's materialities.

Central to this study is the consideration of the discursive materialities and the reimagining of human and non-human agencies within artworks' ongoing process of materialisation. As such, it is important to acknowledge current insights and approaches related to the materiality of contemporary Chinese art, and to identify new perspectives and methodologies that allow us to rethink anthropologically oriented approaches to material culture.

### **1. The prominence of materials in contemporary Chinese art, and primary approaches to exhibiting contemporary Chinese art**

In the wake of the seventies, as China transitioned beyond Mao Zedong's death and the end of the Cultural Revolution, its artistic landscape underwent a profound metamorphosis. The Cultural Revolution had rigorously prescribed standards for art, championing Socialist Realism. This style painted an idyllic tableau of Chinese society, industry, and daily life. However, by the eighties, many artists felt this art was increasingly misrepresentative of the truth of China's history and the authentic experiences of its people. This dissonance spurred the emergence of realistic styles, such as Scar Art, which shed light on recent historical traumas, and Rustic Realism, which extolled the everyday lives of citizens. The '85 New Wave Movement, however, embarked on a bolder path. Rather than just depict, these artists endeavoured to deconstruct traditional realist motifs, navigating avant-garde avenues such as conceptual, performance, and installation art. Additionally, they pioneered participatory events, redefining the nexus between art, the individual beholder, and the

broader society.

This artistic evolution was punctuated by the embrace of eclectic materials. Artists began to use everything from plastics and yarns to organic elements like silk and cabbages. Huang Yong Ping (1954–2019) creatively washed two books—a treatise on modern art and another on Chinese painting—in a washing machine, later displaying the pulp on shattered glass. Gu Dexin (born 1962) transformed plastic into droplets that adorned walls. Liang Shaoji (born 1945) crafted interactive silk cubes framed in red metal. Cai Guo-Qiang (born 1957) innovated a new form of drawing through his use of gunpowder and fireworks. These material explorations stand out as some of the most radical works of their times, and, in retrospect, these artists proved among the most important of their generation. The 1989 *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition first showcased these pioneering material experiments. Since then, some artists in China have tenaciously ventured into a variety of different materials. These materials range from traditional ones such as ink, *xuan* paper, porcelain, gunpowder, incense, and silk—deeply embedded in China’s long history of material culture, art, and philosophy (including Buddhism)—to more unconventional materials that are commonly used or seen today and have well-established utilitarian functions in the modern world, like plastic, cotton, water, and consumer goods such as soda drinks. In the hands of contemporary Chinese artists, these materials are presented in ways that defy their familiar roles and meanings in their predominant contexts, whether in premodern or contemporary times. The previously dominant authoritative interpretations of these materials become inadequate in understanding their values and roles within these contemporary artworks, which establish fresh, tactile dialogues between artwork, artist, and spectator.

This dynamic use of materials in Chinese art aligns in many ways with what Peter Osborne describes in *Anywhere or Not at All* as the third stage of modernism, where each artwork must establish its own legitimacy as art.<sup>1</sup> The contemporary moment in art is characterised by its engagement with the “historical present,” wherein materials and techniques must not only resonate with their historical significances but also engage with current socio-political realities.<sup>2</sup> This perspective is particularly relevant when examining the use of materials in contemporary Chinese art, where traditional materials like ink, porcelain, and silk carry deep cultural and historical significances, while unconventional materials frequently seen or used in modern or contemporary time like cotton, soda drinks, and water have their rooted socio-political realities or utilitarian roles. For instance, the traditional use of ink in calligraphy is not merely a nod to the past but is often reimagined to comment on present-day issues, thereby resisting a monolithic interpretation. Similarly, contemporary Chinese artists like Zhang Huan and Cai Guo-Qiang use materials like incense ash and gunpowder, respectively, to explore themes of memory, trauma, and environmental degradation.

These examples highlight how materials in contemporary Chinese art operate within multiple, often overlapping discourses, challenging singular interpretations and engaging with both their historical origins and contemporary significances. Moreover, the broader reading on modernity, postmodernity, and contemporaneity, such as in *Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity - Antinomies of Art and Culture* edited by Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee, supports the idea that contemporary

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

art challenges traditional categories and interpretations.<sup>3</sup> This positions materials as active agents in the creation of meaning, underscoring the complexity of interpreting materials in Chinese art within a singular authoritative framework. Consequently, more scholarly attention is needed in this regard.<sup>4</sup>

However, the diversity and plurality of materials used in these new art forms have often been overlooked in exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art. For the past three decades, contemporary Chinese art exhibitions have intricately mirrored China's rapid socio-cultural shifts, establishing a symbiotic relationship between curatorial activities, artistic expressions, and the nation's transformative journey.

If the eighties marked a significant breakthrough in Chinese contemporary art with the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition, introducing the '85 New Wave movement and acclimating the local audience to innovative formats like new media installations, video works, and performance art within the established setting of a major state museum, then the nineties represented a period of societal transformation and a loosening of governmental constraints, setting the stage for increasingly experimental exhibitions like *China's New Art, Post-1989* (1993), and concurrently establishing a distinct presence for Chinese art on the global stage.<sup>5</sup> The late nineties represented a pivotal shift on the Chinese art scene, marking a transition from curators and critics grappling

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<sup>3</sup> Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee, ed., *Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-17.

<sup>5</sup> Michelle Lim, *Navigating Floating Worlds: Curatorial Strategies in Contemporary Chinese Art 1979–2008*, (PhD Dissertation, Princeton University, 2013), 47–50; The exhibition *China's New Art, Post-1989* marked the first significant showcase of Chinese experimental art abroad. It was featured from January 30 to February 28, 1993, during the Hong Kong Arts Festival at Hong Kong City Hall and Pao Galleries in the Hong Kong Arts Centre. This travelling exhibition made its way through Taipei, Melbourne, London, Vancouver, and several cities in the USA between 1993 and 1997.

with the ideological challenges of the eighties—such as reconciling with China’s modernity and the West—to artists increasingly participating in international exhibitions. This exposure enabled artists to absorb and integrate contemporary trends and theories from the global arts scene, effectively steering the trajectory of contemporary Chinese art into the new millennium with an enriched, globally-aware perspective. Exhibitions like *Another Long March: Chinese Conceptual and Installation Art in the Nineties*, presented at the Breda Fundament Foundation in the Netherlands in 1997, began an exploration of new media formats within the context of contemporary Chinese art. Notably, *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, curated by Gao Minglu in 1998, instigated a significant paradigm shift, underlining the socio-political characteristics of contemporary mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Chinese diasporas, while also embedding Chinese avant-garde art in a globally relevant context.

In the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Chinese contemporary art scene underwent a substantial shift, ushering in a new era dominated by artists, critics, and curators from the post-seventies and eighties generations.<sup>6</sup> This transition marked a transformation from avant-garde, anti-government expressions to a more globally accessible and politically subdued depiction of Chinese visual culture, which was more closely aligned with market preferences. Artists and curators navigated the international landscape with strategic collaborations and adaptability, utilising the exhibition format as both a medium and a form of critique. Notable examples include Lu Jie’s *Long March* project (2002), which innovatively reshaped institutional systems, and Feng Mengbo’s *Long March: Restart* (2008), offering an indirect critique of exhibition

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 149–50.

cultures.<sup>7</sup> Around the 2008 Beijing Olympics, projects like Ai Weiwei's *Fairytale* (2007-2010) and Cao Fei's *China Tracy* (2007–2009) exemplify artists utilising open exhibition structures to create experiences and explore virtual/temporal spaces, showing less concern for marking historical events or opposing institutional frameworks, and more for altering the contemporary Chinese art ecosystem and building a domestic audience.

Entering the 2010s and beyond, exhibitions like *Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World* (2017–2018), held at Guggenheim Museum in New York, tended towards a poignant reflection of the transformative power of artistic experimentation in the context of globalisation. There was a shift from a strictly Sinocentric lens to a global perspective, intertwining artistic practice with the expansive cultural undertakings within China and the contemporaneous cultural, intellectual, and historic global developments.

The evolution of Chinese contemporary art from the late twentieth to the twenty-first century has been shaped by a complex interplay of domestic and international forces, curatorial strategies, and socio-political conditions, leading to transformations of the roles of critics, artists, and curators. Positioned within intricate domestic and global art contexts, each with its unique set of political nuances, artworks and curatorial approaches simultaneously support and subtly challenge established structures. The predominant methodologies hinge on socio-political and cultural-historical lenses, alongside stylistic and comparative studies, all of which serves to anchor artworks in their respective political, social, or economic origins.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 157.

Despite the predominance of these approaches, the pivotal role and significance of materials in contemporary Chinese art often remain overlooked, their contributions sometimes obscured by more dominant narratives. Exhibitions like *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* (1999–2000) exemplify this trend, framing non-Western contemporary art practices within narratives of “regional identity” or the dominance of “Western art.”<sup>8</sup> The popular theme of “contemporary Chinese” art, while prevalent, faces challenges in providing a consistent visual experience, often blending Chinese art with political overtones and underscoring needs for critical reassessments. Current curatorial strategies, notwithstanding their cultural symbolism, risk perpetuating stereotypical divides between “the West” and “China” in an era marked by shifting borders and identities.

This situation brings us to a crucial crossroads in the discourse of contemporary Chinese art, highlighting the need to reassess and potentially reform the exhibitionary model. A new curatorial approach that moves beyond direct and immediate socio-political connections, and allows for a more autonomous, discursive experience and interpretation of the respective artworks, may pave the way for a deeper, more nuanced engagement with contemporary China.

The approach that forms the inspiration and intention for my thesis, involves a focused exploration of the materiality of artworks from the past thirty years, exemplified by the 2020 exhibition *The Allure of Matter: Material Art from China*, curated by Wu Hung

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<sup>8</sup> Marie Martraire, “The Inaccessible Other: The Inside-Out Approach as Curatorial Framework,” *International Art and Culture*, September 17, 2014, accessed Mar 4, 2024, <https://www.sfaq.us/2014/09/the-inaccessible-other-the-inside-out-approach-as-curatorial-framework/>.

and Orianna Cacchione at Wrightwood 659, Chicago and the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago.<sup>9</sup> This exhibition, as its title suggests, aimed to shift our attention towards the very matter that forms the artworks, highlighting an aspect of contemporary Chinese art that is typically overshadowed by a perpetual quest to weave direct connections between artworks and their socio-political or economic contexts of production.

Marking a departure from biographical or narrative-driven exhibition models,<sup>10</sup> *The Allure of Matter* employed a variety of materials as a lens through which to interpret contemporary Chinese art, showcasing numerous artworks that had previously been exhibited under different thematic contexts at various locations. The exhibition occasioned a crucial turning point for the analyses in the present thesis, initiating a conversation that transcends prevailing socio-political narratives, fostering engagement with the artworks, artists, potential other creators, and viewers through a dialogue rooted in the very matter of the pieces and the embedded narratives they may hold.

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<sup>9</sup> The exhibition's reach extended well beyond a single venue, premiering at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art before traveling to other esteemed locations, including the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago, Wrightwood 659 in Chicago, the Seattle Art Museum, and finally the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts.

<sup>10</sup> Although a few exhibitions since the 2000s have spotlighted materials in contemporary Chinese art, they typically focus on a single material used in art. Examples include *Cement - Marginal Space in Contemporary Art* at Chambers Fine Art, New York in 2002, *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China* at The Met New York in 2013, *Craft Transcendence: Chinese Contemporary Objects* at Maison&Objet Paris in 2018, and *Clouds Gather and Unfolding: Paper – An Exhibition of Modern Chinese Art on Paper* at Ichihara Lakeside Museum in Tokyo in 2020. These exhibitions, while insightful, were presented on a relatively modest scale and failed to attract significant scholarly attention to the perspective of art's materiality or make a broader impact on the study of contemporary Chinese art.

## 2. *The Allure of Matter and Material Art*

*The Allure of Matter: Material Art from China* showcased forty-eight artworks by twenty-six Chinese artists spanning the past four decades, including various media and formats, including painting, sculpture, installation, video, and performance. Made from an intriguing range of materials, both intimate and generic, natural and artificial, conventional and unconventional—such as water, wood, silkworms, tobacco, and Coca-Cola. Rather than immediately directing the viewer’s attention to the works’ conceptual or symbolic manifestations through image or style, the viewer’s attention was drawn to the very essence and phenomena of the materials, revealing a unique perspective not emphasised in previous exhibition strategies, and providing a fresh lens through which to understand contemporary Chinese art, namely—in Petra Lange-Berndt’s words—“to follow the material and to act with the material.”<sup>11</sup>

The exhibition coined the term Material Art [材质艺术] to highlight a largely unexplored area of contemporary Chinese art. Considering that some of its practitioners—such as Huang Yong Ping (1954-2019), Xu Bing (born 1955), Yang Jiechang (born 1956), Song Dong (born 1966), Zhang Huan (born 1965), Lin Tianmiao (born 1961) and Ai Weiwei (born 1957)—are among the most influential Chinese contemporary artists, to call this area unexplored is somewhat surprising. Often discussed in scholarly terms as conceptual artists or members of the avant-garde movement, these artists are recognised for their formal and conceptual significance, particularly their critical response to socio-cultural issues. Notably, several artists featured in the exhibition have dedicated many years to experimenting with a single material, such as Song Dong’s engagement with water, Yang Jiechang’s with ink, Ai

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<sup>11</sup> Petra Lange-Berndt, *Materiality* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2015), 13.

Weiwei's with wood, Lin Tianmiao's with cotton thread, and Zhang Huan's use of incense ash. These material engagements are not mere aesthetic choices; they are integral to the expression, meaning, and resonance of the work. These engagements hint at an intimate artist-material relationship, where the material becomes a vital participant in the conceptual realisation of the artwork, rather than just a tool for conveying abstract ideas. Seen as alternative artists within their local context, and as contributors to the global contemporary art scene internationally, these artists have created works that are both culturally specific to China and globally relevant.<sup>12</sup> The exhibition's focus on Material Art encouraged reflection on the relationship between these renowned artists and the materials they engage with. By foregrounding these connections, the exhibition offers a refreshing and enlightening perspective on both the artists and the boarder landscape of contemporary Chinese art, opening up new possibilities for understanding and appreciation.

*The Allure of Matter* further broadened its impact through a series of academic and interactive activities, such as public lectures, seminars, online programs, and at-home activities (due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic). In an accompanying public lecture, Wu sheds light on Material Art as a creative surge from experimental artists filling the void left by the rigid constraints of the Cultural Revolution. This observation also helps to frame my intention to delve into the role of material in art beyond the established, hegemonic discourse and narratives.<sup>13</sup> According to Wu, following Mao's death in 1976, artists found new opportunities for international travel and access to

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<sup>12</sup> Wu Hung, "Material Art from China: An Introduction," in *The Allure of Matter: Material Art from China*, eds., Wu Hung and Orianna Cacchione (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 15.

<sup>13</sup> Wu Hung, "In the Name of Art—Destruction and Reconstruction" (Lecture, University of Chicago, Chicago, October 16, 2021).

translated Western works, allowing for a move away from the Political Pop and Cynical Realism movements that had been prevalent in the nineties. These movements ironically commercialized Maoist symbols or employed formulaic antihero motifs within the context of Chinese culture.<sup>14</sup> While elevating contemporary Chinese art on the global stage, these styles evolved into a commercialized brand, somewhat disconnected from China's actual societal context.<sup>15</sup> This shift sidelined many domestic works from the late eighties and nineties, which were rich in social commentary and innovative in installation, performance art, and site-specific projects.<sup>16</sup> These neglected works, often local and non-commercial, resisted fixed pictorial formulas, “‘distill[ing]’ essential substances of traditional material culture [...] transform[ing] such shared cultural properties into a personalized visual language.”<sup>17</sup>

Wu presents Material Art as “a thoroughly cosmopolitan approach within contemporary Chinese art *and* a culturally informed regional approach within global contemporary art.”<sup>18</sup> In contrast to the superficial, but visually striking, Political Pop and Cynical Realist movements, these non-commercial domestic works authentically address China's social transformations.<sup>19</sup> Wu stresses the importance of acknowledging the material in art, given the varied cultural connotations materials can carry, and the use that artists make of it to navigate different historical and political contexts. Wu and Cacchione aim to enrich materiality scholarship and interpret a significant, non-Western artistic phenomenon, steering away from prescriptive (“This is what Material

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Wu, “Material Art from China,” 15.

<sup>19</sup> Wu, “In the Name of Art.”

Art is”) or merely descriptive (“This is what Material Artists *make*”) narratives.<sup>20</sup> They aspire to present an authentic perspective that counteracts potentially detached global views, and they emphasize art’s engagement with material in a way in which “*material*, rather than image or style, is paramount in manifesting the artist’s aesthetic judgment or social critique.”<sup>21</sup>

Wu is careful to clarify that Material Art is neither a clearly defined nor coordinated artistic movement governed by specific agendas or rigid principles, and the present thesis embraces this idea, in that it strives to investigate a variety of artworks or projects that defy easy classification within any specific art movement, while aligning with the Wu’s conception of Material Art.<sup>22</sup> Wu’s understanding and articulation of Material Art stem from a synthetic analysis of varied and diffuse art projects created over the past thirty years, where the selected artworks are “not really based on American-Chinese or Chinese or whatever. It’s really from the works themselves, also not emphasising the subsequent ‘Chinese things’ because a lot of works are really quite global.”<sup>23</sup> Unlike conventional art movements that might adhere to strict guidelines, Material Art is characterised by hybridity and complexity.<sup>24</sup> *The Allure of Matter* has included works from some of the most radical avant-garde Chinese artists from the eighties—such as Huang Yong Ping, Yang Jiechang, and Xu Bing—all of whom are deeply connected with Chinese traditions and their early education. It also features works from younger-generation artists—such as He Xiangyu, Ma Qiushan, and Liangshuo—who often

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<sup>20</sup> J. Howard Rosier, “Boiled Coca-Cola, Human Fat, Cigarette Ash: The Materially Driven Art of Contemporary China,” *Art in America*, April 15, 2020, accessed March 4, 2024. <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/aia-reviews/allure-of-matter-material-art-from-china-smart-museum-wrightwood-659-wu-hung-1202683842/>.

<sup>21</sup> Wu, “Introduction,” 15.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>23</sup> Wu, “In the Name of Art.”

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

pursue studies in the West and perceive themselves as “self-motivated contractors pursuing independent goals.”<sup>25</sup>

This curatorial stance—which also guides my way of approaching art selection in this thesis—marks a departure from a traditional reliance on conscious selection of art works according to context, narrative, or historical relevance, shifting instead towards a material-oriented method. Given the broad time span these selected artworks encompass, and the varied generations of artists represented, there is notable diversity and intricacy in their strategies, material choices, physical and conceptual realities, as well as the socio-political contexts within which the artworks were conceived. These works entwine multifaceted layers of meanings, derived from diverse conceptual and material aspects of the art, to offer the audience a rich tapestry of ideology, functionality, tension, and psychological depth. This refusal to pigeonhole Material Art into a formal category endows it with dynamism and richness, rendering it apt to capture the nuanced realities of contemporary Chinese art.

It is here worth noting the accompanying scholarly volume was the first to analyse Chinese art from a materiality perspective, which further anchors the exhibition’s intellectual significance.<sup>26</sup> The essays in the catalogue dedicate significant space to providing comprehensive historical accounts and contextual analyses, detailing why and how specific materials were chosen, the artists’ biographies and personal narratives, and their connections to those materials, and outlining the distinct strategies employed in the art-making-process. The essays are both investigatory and inclusive,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Wu Hung and Orianna Cacchione, ed., *The Allure of Matter: Material Art from China* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019).

characterising the common tendencies of contemporary Chinese art with a focus on materials, while also acknowledging the divergences, personal choices, and shared tactics that make it so multifaceted. This is most evident in Wu’s introductory essay, which underscores the “process” as a pivotal aspect of many Material Art projects.<sup>27</sup> Inspired by Wu’s introduction of the idea of “process,” this thesis pays considerable attention to this aspect. Yet it does so through a more conceptual framework, viewing an artwork’s “process” as its perpetual state of becoming, shaped by dynamic engagements and mutual influences between materials and human agents, the details of which will be further elaborated upon below. For Wu, artworks manifest “process” by various means, including works that showcase a continuous movement of materials, rather than a static state, at the exhibition (“performative process”); the intricate stages of an artist’s preparation of materials before the actual making (“preparatory process”), and collaborative production involving a team of workers undertaking intensive labour.<sup>28</sup>

While Wu’s perspective brings the fresh understanding that materials are not inert but involved in different kinds of processes of making or displaying, this analysis is not without its shortcomings. For Wu, “process” is construed as something that can be mastered, either mentally or materially, and is perceived as solely mechanical, causal, or reactive. This understanding of “process” aligns with traditional views on human causality, which gives the artist creative mastery over the process. As such, Wu’s perspective falls short of examining or challenging the notion of process as active, volatile, self-generating, productive, and unpredictable. His stance remains largely

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<sup>27</sup> Wu, “Introduction,” 33-34.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

anchored in human behaviours and interactions with materials, reinforcing an anthropocentric viewpoint that sees humans as exclusive agents in the creation and interpretation of art. This approach inadvertently perpetuates existing boundaries and dualisms, such as human and non-human, subject and object, nature and culture, matter and meaning.

What is notably absent in the approaches of this exhibition and its affiliated research projects are discussions addressing how art can work or perform through its materialities. To a certain extent, the exhibition and its scholarly explorations, whether consciously or unconsciously, are predominantly anthropocentric, foregrounding the causal relationship between human activity and inanimate “things.” Such a perspective, as Bruno Latour’s actor–network theory suggests, sees art objects as “caused” by intentional agents known as “artists,” without fully acknowledging and exploring the potential of the agential capacities of materials in art, beyond their subservience to human intent.<sup>29</sup> In this context, materials often become mere tools for conceptualisation. Wu himself notes in the catalogue essay that “a specially selected material in these works is never a transparent medium for imagery but forcefully asserts its role in the message”—a sentiment echoing Marshall McLuhan’s famous phrase that “the medium is the message.”<sup>30</sup>

Although the exhibition may serve as a pioneering first major systematic exploration of the materiality of contemporary Chinese art, it and its accompanying research

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<sup>29</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>30</sup> Wu, “Introduction,” 35; Marshall McLuhan, “The Medium is the Message,” *Communication Theory*, Routledge, (2017): 390–402.

projects fall short of offering any in-depth analyses or nuanced research methods commensurate with the complexity of Material Art. While the exhibition indeed furnishes insights—including comprehensive reasoning about the material choices of specific art projects, and contexts within which the artworks emerged, as well as pinpointing the nature of “process” characterized by much Material Art—drawing increased scholarly attention to this field—many aspects concerning the art’s materiality or the Material Art trend remain underexamined and insufficiently explored.

So what precisely is meant by Material Art or the materiality of art? Is it a physical substance, or is it a medium through which messages or conceptual inquiries are conveyed? Can the materials in art generate or embody meanings independently? Does Material Art necessarily prioritize the physical presence of the material over other entities or agencies, or is the material still largely invested with meaning and manipulated solely by humans? Wu acknowledges that, in *The Allure of Matter*, the art projects are diverse and complex in their use of materials, formal qualities, expressions, forms, etc., having been exhibited and discussed in various contexts and under different themes, such as Conceptual Art and Avant-garde. How, then, can we approach the discursive materialities of these art projects, given their highly individual and varied nature? In the catalogue essay, Wu contends that the employment of new materials marks a significant departure from previous artistic practices and styles in China, a shift he attributes to the emergence of the '85 New Wave Movement and contemporary art in the country. This raises a crucial question: should Material Art be viewed as a cipher of social and political transformation in China, or should we instead frame artistic production strictly within nationalist frameworks? However, analysing Material Art within nationalist frameworks becomes particularly complex and ambivalent when

considering that this phenomenon emerged around the same time as “glocalization.” This term refers to the interpenetration of global dynamics and local conditions and suggests not a homogenisation but the idea that cultural differences are no longer strictly anchored to local or national situations, if they ever were.

### **3. Studies on materials, materialism, or materiality in contemporary Chinese art**

Building on the systematic insights from *The Allure of Matter* exhibition, my study takes the exploration of the materiality of contemporary Chinese art a step further. Before outlining my own research goals, it is important to acknowledge that *The Allure of Matter* was not the first occasion for scholarly research into the theme of material/materiality in or of contemporary Chinese art. Many studies have touched on the theme of materials, materialism, or materiality in contemporary Chinese art, which has predominantly aligned with philosophical and anthropological debates. The present study seeks to introduce a new perspective on art’s materiality to fill an existing research gap, detailed below.

Many scholars have assimilated knowledge from both these domains, but the spotlight usually gravitates either towards looking only at the physical aspect of materiality, or views materiality as a lens—a “material turn”—through which to unravel complex socio-political intricacies of artworks. The discussion of materiality in current studies of contemporary Chinese art predominantly follows three trends:

- The initial trend views **material as a medium** for communication—a conduit for conveying human concepts or criticisms. Here, materials are perceived as static symbols of representation. This trend essentially contemplates the material as a

mere communicator between the artist and the audience. For instance, Meiqin Wang, in her study “Waste in Contemporary Chinese Art: Byproducts of China’s Urban Development and Consumerism,” delves into artworks using waste to articulate socio-cultural disjunctions amplified by China’s rapid development.<sup>31</sup> This spotlight on waste underscores a dual facet of China’s journey—the glittering prosperity and the staggering waste generated in its wake. In “The Watery Turn in Contemporary Chinese Art,” David Clarke discerns water as a potent symbol in contemporary Chinese art, signifying a challenge to state ideologies concerning water.<sup>32</sup> Lihong Chen’s “物性展现与人文创造—中国当代艺术的材料属性和语言转换 [Representation of Materiality and Humanistic Creation: Material Properties and Language Transformation of Chinese Contemporary Art]” stresses the artist’s role in employing material to convey personal conceptual meanings, signifying that the actual engagement with material in artistic creation remains primarily dominated by the artist’s vision.<sup>33</sup>

- A different angle on materiality reveals it as a dynamic reflection of social and cultural transformation, rather than a static symbol. This approach is all about **contextualising materials or socialized materiality**. Such studies pave the way to understanding materiality not merely as a site of analysis but as an intrinsic element in the evolution of a social sphere. For example, *Crafting Chinese Memories: The Art and Materiality of Storytelling* edited by Katherine Swancutt

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<sup>31</sup> Meiqin Wang, “Waste in Contemporary Chinese Art: Byproducts of China’s Urban Development and Consumerism,” *AACS The Newsletter*, no. 76 (2017): 32–33.

<sup>32</sup> David Clarke, “The Watery Turn in Contemporary Chinese Art,” *Art Journal* 65.4 (2006): 56–77.

<sup>33</sup> Lihong Chen, “性展现与人文创造—中国当代艺术的材料属性和语言转换,” [Representation of Materiality and Humanistic Creation: Material Properties and Language Transformation of Chinese Contemporary Art] *美术观察 [Art Observation]* 10 (2010): 3.

delves into the intertwining of memories, stories, and their material embodiments.<sup>34</sup> Mary Bittner Wiseman’s recent book *A Grand Materialism in the New Art from China* delves into questions—exemplified by Xu Bing’s opening query, “how and why to use these materials [...]”—of how conceptual inquiries might be manifested in displayed art objects through an artist’s individuality and their meticulously designed artistic strategies.<sup>35</sup> Wiseman emphasizes the “stories” surrounding materials in art, drawing insight from social anthropology, cultural history, and philosophy.<sup>36</sup>

- Veering away from the anthropological stance that accentuates human actions and socio-cultural contexts, another strain of research gravitates towards **reductive materialism**. Here, the emphasis is on the inherent physical qualities of materials, illustrating how these attributes can stimulate novel artistic expressions in contemporary art practices. Eugene Wang’s “All in the Name of Tradition: Ink Medium in Contemporary Chinese Art” serves as an apt example, exploring the potential of ink to enact its intrinsic power to convey art’s values. However, Wang here tends to emphasize the ink’s formal or physical qualities, suggesting that ink, in isolation from other influential forces, can directly impart its meaning to the interpreter—a typical misconception in modernist critique.<sup>37</sup>

Through the three primary trends highlighted, a striking duality emerges: one that either

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<sup>34</sup> Katherine Swancutt, ed., *Crafting Chinese Memories: The Art and Materiality of Storytelling*, Vol. 11 (Oxford & New York: Berghahn Books, 2021).

<sup>35</sup> Mary Bittner Wiseman, *A Grand Materialism in the New Art from China* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2020), vi.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.

<sup>37</sup> Eugene Y. Wang, “All in the Name of Tradition: Ink Medium in Contemporary Chinese Art,” in *Ink Remix: Contemporary Art from Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong* (Canberra City: Canberra Museum and Gallery 2014).

positions human actions and conceptualisations above materials, or one that emphasizes the inherent physical attributes of materials over human engagement. This binary approach misses an opportunity to understand humans and objects as intertwined networks or assemblages wherein agency and perhaps even consciousness are dispersed. Such perspectives tend to oversimplify the world's complexities, its intrinsic hierarchies, interrelations, and unpredictable elements.

The predominant approaches of the first two trends are often grounded in anthropological perspectives. These emphasise the centrality of subjectivity in the humanities, drawing on theories ranging from psychoanalysis to Foucauldian thought (with insights into power dynamics, the production of differences, and the shaping of social structures, for instance). This perspective primarily regards materiality in contemporary Chinese art as passive and inert, awaiting human engagement and human-imbued significance. Consequently, materials are not seen as entities with their own agency, but are rendered subordinate to human intentions and interpretations. They are perceived as static, and largely immune to the dynamism of human interactions and sociocultural evolutions. This perspective aligns with Arjun Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things*, which posits materials and objects as contextually fluid, taking on different meanings across cultural terrains and underscoring their intrinsic material instabilities.<sup>38</sup>

Other studies, such as Alex Burchmore's "Material Chineseness: Ink and Porcelain in Contemporary Art beyond National Borders," underscores this conception of the nature

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<sup>38</sup> Appadurai Arjun, *The Social Life of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988).

of materiality.<sup>39</sup> Burchmore emphasises how certain materials—such as porcelain and ink—bear the imprints of every context they encounter, marking a continuous cycle of evolution.<sup>40</sup> The malleability and dynamism of materials such as ink and porcelain mean that they are always evolving, bearing the marks of every cultural encounter, and thus always in a state of flux.<sup>41</sup> This relationship offers a more fluid model of identification, substituting abstract ideals with a tangible specificity, one that is deeply rooted in historical and geographical nuances.

In addition, articles like Joseph Allen’s “Words as Things: The Materiality of Writing in Contemporary Chinese Art”<sup>42</sup> and Wu Hung’s “Negotiating with Tradition in Contemporary Chinese Art: Three Strategies” highlight the material facets of traditional cultural practices in the contemporary art context.<sup>43</sup> Their analyses often portray art objects as mere inanimate “things,” entities awaiting human interaction and interpretation. A substantial part of their exploration is dedicated to tracing historical contexts, examining how materiality is perceived by observers.

Another noteworthy publication is Wu Hung’s recently launched book series “中国材质艺术” [Chinese Material Art], with its inaugural volume, “艺术与物性,” [艺术与物性] released in 2023.<sup>44</sup> Stemming from his 2020 curation of *The Allure of Matter* and a

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<sup>39</sup> Alex Burchmore, “Material Chineseness: Ink and Porcelain in Contemporary Art beyond National Borders,” *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 21.1 (2021): 58–74.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Joseph R. Allen, “Words as Things: The Materiality of Writing in Contemporary Chinese Art,” *ASAP/Journal* 7, no. 1 (2022): 85–118.

<sup>43</sup> Wu Hung, “Negotiating with Tradition in Contemporary Chinese Art: Three Strategies,” *M+Matters, Ink Art in the Framework of a Contemporary Museum*, December 13–15, 2012.

<sup>44</sup> Wu Hung, ed., *艺术与物性* [“Art and Materiality”] (Shanghai: 上海书画出版社 [Shanghai Painting and Calligraphy Publishing House], 2023).

growing urge to redefine contemporary Chinese art by emphasising materiality, this series stands out. The book *Art and Materiality* mainly features detailed essays by Wei-Cheng Lin, Lihong Liu, and Elle Huang, which delve into traditional Chinese art mediums such as jade, ceramics, bronzes, stone, glass, and porcelain.<sup>45</sup> Collectively, these pieces underscore the vital role materials and materiality play in navigating the confluence of artistic creation, material culture, and technological advancement. They suggest that viewing art through the prism of materiality bridges the myriad forms and characteristics in China's art history with the multifaceted tapestry of its cultural tradition. Overall, the book also propounds an anthropological lens to understand the material's role in shaping Chinese art, revealing a desire to discern how viewing art through material and materiality can unpack layers of historical, cultural, religious, political, gender, and philosophical significance.

These studies echo Appadurai's insights, shedding light on the intricate transitions that objects undergo in various physical and cultural spheres. The primary emphasis is on understanding the movement of materiality through diverse historical and societal contexts. Their works demonstrate how temporalities are not only a present passive force embedded in the object, but are subject to context-specific conditions that allow for site-specific activation of temporalities.

Upon examining the current studies, it becomes clear that the materiality of contemporary Chinese art, though multi-dimensional, remains intertwined with overarching socio-political, historical, and cultural narratives. While different

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<sup>45</sup> The concluding essay, “当代中国艺术中的‘材质艺术’”, [“Material Art in Contemporary Chinese Art”] aligns seamlessly with the ethos set out in *The Allure of Matter* exhibition and catalogue.

researchers and critics approach materiality from different vantage points, there is a collective concern for a “description” of the landscape of contemporary Chinese art, and the significance of material. This perspective leans heavily towards the adequacy of description and a representational view of art. As Barbara Bolt points out, in representational stances on art, material is not perceived as existing in the *here* and *now* but instead denotes non-presence.<sup>46</sup> Many current interpretations render material to be perpetually emblematic of something, conveying the attitude or point of view of the artist with respect to whatever it is about. This representation is deeply anchored in social, historical, and cultural contexts, with the essence of artistic representation often moulded through a linguistic lens prevalent in the humanities. Such a philosophy of metaphorical representation, built upon an ontological chasm between entities and their descriptions, separates us from the natural and material world. It suggests our knowledge stems from this separation. Consequently, the dominant discourse appears to frame art’s materiality largely as a linguistic or cultural representation.

Perceiving materiality merely as a linguistic construct presents it as passive and immutable, only susceptible to change through discursive avenues. This necessitates a shift from conventional views of art as predominantly representational. How, then, can art and materiality be interpreted beyond representation? How might we pivot to a more in-depth exploration of the material aspects of artistic endeavours? And how do we avoid analyses that solely emphasise meanings and signification?

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<sup>46</sup> Barbara Bolt, *Art beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris), 171.

Indeed, art undeniably possesses a symbolic dimension. My purpose here is not to dismiss the importance either of representation, meaning in art, or cultural context. Instead, I aim to spotlight those often-overlooked facets of art without which there would be no meaning. Mere interpretation or recognition is insufficient for us to fully appreciate the potential that art embodies or to understand the methods by which it operates. Art influences us both symbolically (indirectly) and through its tangible materialities (directly), with these aspects constantly intertwining. Therefore, it is crucial to examine the material world and its dynamics, movements, and forces more closely.

#### **4. *The Allure of Matter* as source of inspiration and of selection of case studies**

My intention of engaging with insights from *The Allure of Matter* is not about how the exhibition and research projects offers “concrete” solutions to new perspectives or approaches to the prominence of materials in contemporary Chinese art. Instead, it is about realising how this exhibition aspires to frame questions arise from the emerging phenomenon of Material Art in such a way as to encourage further scholarship into the role of material within contemporary Chinese art. The exhibition’s insights into Material Art enable us to attend to the material-discursive force enacted in certain material-based artworks, emphasising the potential groundwork for a material-oriented methodology in the study of art’s materiality.

In the context of the present study, the questions arising from the exhibition have motivated me to dig deeper and strive for a more nuanced understanding of the materiality of contemporary Chinese art, transcending existing limitations in its

interpretation. Inspired by the curators' call for a fresh research perspective, this thesis will develop a more nuanced investigation into the materialities of, or the materials within, contemporary Chinese art. By focusing on six selected study cases that have either been featured in the exhibition itself or discussed in its catalogue essays, this research intends to illuminate previously unexplored dimensions of this fascinating artistic phenomenon, contributing both to the existing body of knowledge and to a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary Chinese art's "vibrant matter."<sup>47</sup>

The artworks or art projects I have chosen to examine in this thesis include: Zhang Huan's *Berlin Buddha* (2007, fig. 1) from Ash Buddha series (2007–2019); Song Dong's *Water Records* (2010, fig. 2); Yang Jiechang's *Hundred Layers of Ink* series (1989–1999, fig. 3–10); Liang Shaoji's *Chains: The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Nature Series, No. 79* (2002–2007, fig. 11) from the *Nature Series* (1989–present); Lin Tianmiao's *The Proliferation of Thread Winding* (1995, fig. 12), and He Xiangyu's *A Barrel of Dregs of Coca-Cola* (2009, fig. 13) from *Cola Project* (2008–2012).

The core objective (which I will detail more thoroughly in Section 6 on the specific factors influencing my selection of case studies) of selecting these particular pieces has been to encompass a diverse range of artworks that shed light on intricate human/non-human relations through different domains of experiences, practices, or activities that are often confined within dualistic paradigms. These works have been extensively exhibited and rigorously discussed within various scholarly contexts, such as the Chinese Avant-garde, Feminist, Conceptual, or Abstract art, all of which contain the

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<sup>47</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

potential for perpetual mutation and for recognising a hidden and intersectional multiplicity of unidentified elements. All the examples that this study sets out to explore reflect various instances of tension that may be difficult to unpick, appearing nonlinear or contradictory, disruptive, or counterproductive. I select my examples based on their capacity to explore the different agential forces of materials involved in material-discursive practices, and their abilities to embody shifting meanings and assume different identities in response to changing contexts. This allows for a renewed understanding of causality and the dynamic potentialities inherent in our conceptualisation of matter.

Specifically, the selection of works includes those in which artists have engaged with a specific material for years, or those where a considerable amount of time has been devoted to produce each work. The artists examined in this thesis have cultivated long-term, intimate relationships with their chosen materials. The years of practice these artists have devoted to working with a single material suggest that the likelihood that these materials act as mere passive objects is small. It is more likely that the material holds a special appeal for the artists, and that it takes a collaborative role in the making-process. These materials probably exhibit a kind of responsivity that can influence, resonate with, and affect the artists and potentially others, including other makers and viewers of the artwork.

Persistent engagement with a particular material also transforms the making and artistic journey into an experiential adventure—a deliberate and reflective process that potentially affords the artist a deeper understanding and connection with their materials. It also allows the viewer to see the material in the various possibilities explored through

the works. This ongoing process reshapes the viewer's perception and knowledge of familiar materials, generating new imaginations for these materials and respecting the value of non-humans and the "lives" of things within the same world we inhabit.

In addition, the works I have selected—all of which fall under what Wu conceives of as Material Art—defy easy categorisation into any specific artistic form. This selection steers clear of pieces that fit snugly into established genres or those that are overtly political or "socially engaged." I am driven by works that do not immediately prompt the viewer to assume a position or establish a critical distance, actions that inherently rely on a preconceived understanding and pre-set political viewpoints. Thus, I have chosen works that create a scene enveloped in ambiguity, where the viewer, confronted with an unfamiliar tableau, grapple to discern the unfolding narratives within the art. The viewer is chiefly ushered into an experience of intuitive, tactile, and affective engagement, where the material effect of the work takes precedence over instant conceptual or metaphorical comprehension. This approach privileges the primacy of phenomenological experience, which allows the viewer to enter into a slow process of perceiving the work, and take time to experience and articulate the materiality of the artworks, thereby resisting quick transitions into overt insights or interpretations. The objective of choosing this kind of works is to underscore the subtle nuances by which art can influence and engage through its inherent materialities.

These are works which, with their diverse strategies of arrangements and engagements, epitomise what Amelia Jones would term "hybrid practices,"<sup>48</sup> or that can be seen as

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<sup>48</sup> Amelia Jones, "Material Traces: Performativity, Artistic 'Work,' and New Concepts of Agency," *TDR/The Drama Review* 59.4 (2015): 20.

what Gilles Deleuze calls the assemblages in which “you find states of things, bodies, various combinations of bodies, hodgepodes; but you also find utterances, modes of expression, and whole regimes of signs,”<sup>49</sup> which I will elaborate on later in this introduction. My attention has been squarely set on those artworks that manifest as complex artefacts. These are not static pieces, but are composed of an interlocking system characterized by multiple interrelated layers that evolve and adapt in response to each other and their surrounding environment. These artworks contain the potential to challenge, or blur, the conventional boundaries of form, content, and meaning, inviting the viewer to a deeper and more nuanced engagement with various layers that constantly evolve and change through their interplay with one another and the surrounding environment.

*The Allure of Matter* and its accompanying research projects encompass a vast spectrum of artworks, so what motivated my selection of these six particular cases for in-depth study? Before delving into the specific factors influencing my choice of case studies and the roles of each case (as chapters), it is first necessary to introduce the methodology and aims of this thesis, which have ultimately guided me in pinpointing the key propositions and considerations for determining the study cases for each chapter.

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<sup>49</sup> Gilles Deleuze, “Eight Years Later: 1980,” in *Two Regimes of Madness: Revised Edition: Texts and Interviews 1975–1995*, ed. David Lapoujade (Paris: Semiotext(e), 2007), 177.

## 5. Methodology and objectives

### Material-in-process

My chosen artworks generally tend to be by artists who are more interested in the artwork's materialities and the actions involved in its creation than in the piece's artistic or expressive character. Many works of the artists chosen for this study do not intend to simply present the materials as a fixed, "finished" material product (though some of them remain formally static, on display, on a representational level); they engage the materials in entwined relationships that are perpetually undergoing change and transformation, which can either be virtually sensed through material traces or signs of artistic labour or immediately experienced on site.

The former, specifically—even if some artworks that present representational and static art objects—still trigger a quality of "process." This resonates with Amelia Jones's characterisation that artworks act as traces or remnants of past actions or labour, guiding the viewer's focus towards what actually transpires when they observe or experience the work and provoking a curiosity to learn more about its genesis in these hybrid visual forms. In her "Material Traces: Performativity, Artistic 'Work,' and New Concepts of Agency," Jones provides an alternative way of examining contemporary art making in terms of labour and performativity.<sup>50</sup>

Jones's analysis departs from traditional Marxist or neo-Marxist theories of labour by centring on materials. While a conventional Marxist materialism might explain the creation of value through task-oriented labour, Jones argues that these labour theories

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<sup>50</sup> Jones, "Material Traces."

fail to examine “how the materialities of art themselves work.”<sup>51</sup> She highlights the issue with subordinating matter to human activity and intention, noting that this approach generates its own dynamics of creation as “intra-action”—a term (which I will further explore below) Karen Barad employs to denote the continuous, reciprocal shaping of the relationship between matter and discourse, which incorporates the artist’s bodily materiality and labour. Jones demonstrates this concept using Heather Cassils’s performance *Becoming an Image* (2012–2013) as an example. In the performance, the viewer sporadically sees the artist’s labouring body pounding a large amount of clay through intermittent camera flashes. Later that year in New York, the battered clay, accompanied by a soundtrack (recorded during one performance and edited for effect) and the photographs documenting the performance process, was exhibited at the Ronald Feldman Gallery. Collectively, these elements evoke a phenomenological sense of “having been made,” affecting the viewer’s physicality and eliciting a desire to trace the making process.<sup>52</sup> The work generates a hybridity that disrupts the static nature of the objects involved and the “visceral experience of the performative moment of enactment.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. The term “visceral” will recur throughout this thesis, necessitating clarification of its use here and elsewhere. “Visceral” is defined in various scholarly contexts, typically referring to deep, primordial, or intuitive aspects of the mind and body, as well as its more scientific associations with physiological functions, particularly concerning the respiratory, cardiovascular, urogenital, and enteric systems. Often used as a performance descriptor, the term can appear vague and murky. However, in phenomenology, authors such as film phenomenologist Jennifer Barker, who follows Merleau-Ponty, explains that it is “precisely because of its vagueness” that “viscera” serves as a suitable term for describing internal organs as we experience them, referring to “the insides, the depths, the guts – that describe not organs but feelings” (Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (London: University of California Press, 2009), 122-124). Barker states that “these visceral feelings also rise to the forefront of our experience, where they shape and color our entire bodily experience” (123). In this thesis, the term is used primarily in this latter sense, emphasising the role that visceral experiences play in shaping meaning and experience within cultural and artistic contexts, adopting a phenomenological approach that views the body not as a textual metaphor but as an ongoing interconnection of mind, body, and world. The concept of the “visceral” is further developed in the works of Hayes-Conroy (Allison Hayes-Conroy and Jessica Hayes-Conroy, “Taking Back Taste: Feminism, Food and

This mode fosters multi-directional intersections that elude the confines of structural formalism and the focus on ephemerality emphasised in performance theory. Barad's New Materialist theory, rather than dissecting actions or objects, which, she argues, leads to rigid categorisations that overlook the true nature of the artwork, shifts attention to the interconnectedness within phenomena. Similarly, Jones suggests that viewing an artwork like Cassils's *Becoming an Image* as a means of doing, rather than merely presenting or describing, unveils a synergy between action and materiality. This synergy has the power to animate and enrich the embodied experiences of both the viewer and the artist (and other creators).<sup>54</sup>

Jones's perspective on art's materialities links the art object to the processual nature of performance, characterized by the phenomenological effects of artistic laborious efforts mediated by materials. Jones notes that "hybrid practices [draw] on a legacy of body, conceptual, and installation art to create complex, performative art experiences that exist in diverse material forms (including, arguably, the artist's laboring body)."<sup>55</sup> From

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Visceral Politics", *Gender, Place & Culture* 15.5 (2008): 461–473) and Hayes-Conroy and Martin (Allison Hayes-Conroy and Deborah Martin, "Mobilising Bodies: Visceral Identification in The Slow Food Movement", *Transactions: Institute of the British Geographers*, 35 (2010): 269-281), who, drawing on feminist new materialism, offer an embodied understanding of the world that embraces a radically relational perspective. This perspective is described as one that can "entertain the inclusive disjunction: man is, and is not" (Claire Colebrook and Jami Weinstein, "Introduction: Anthropocene Feminisms: Rethinking the unthinkable", *philoSOPHIA* 5.2 (2015): 172). These authors highlight that the term "visceral" is used to suggest "a non-dualistic approach to reality that emphasizes the capacity of the mind and body to judge, think, and perform" (Hayes-Conroy and Martin, "Mobilising Bodies": 269). This thesis, when referring to terms such as visceral experience positions the visceral not merely as an anatomical reference but as an idea that captures the richness of indescribable, embodied experiences elicited by encounters with the specific phenomenological or material effects of artworks or the process of making art. This "visceral" reflects a heightened awareness that can be applied to the experience of engaging with Material Art, potentially allowing a viewer or maker to connect with particular artworks in a more profound way. This perspective underscores the evolving relational experience between the viewer or maker and the artwork, opening up new possibilities for mind/body/world interactions that could deepen our understanding of our inner selves and existence as a whole.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 18, 25.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

this point of view, art objects are part of an ongoing process, manifesting an indexical trace of “having been made” and shaped by intense artistic endeavour. This interaction can resonate with the viewer’s subjectivity, suggesting their entanglement with the material world they inhabit.<sup>56</sup>

In the theoretical framework proposed by Jones, we can discern a congruence with Deleuze’s notion of the “material-discursive assemblage,” which navigates the realms of both the virtual and the actual.<sup>57</sup> Deleuze, working alongside Felix Guattari, explores the dialectic between the virtual and the actual, clarifying how assemblages possess both empirical, measurable, and tangible properties, as well as capacities that, although equally real, are not presently active.<sup>58</sup> Take the humble trowel as an illustrative example. While it possesses actual, measurable properties like weight and length, its immediate use, in this instance, is for digging a hole. However, this does not diminish its potential or “virtual” applications: it could just as well be used to slice a cake or weed a garden. These capabilities, though inactive, stay within the trowel’s scope of possibilities. These virtual capabilities are just as real, albeit not presently actualized.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>57</sup> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). The term of “material-discursive assemblage” shares similar ideas in many New Materialist theories, such as Deleuze, Pickering, (1995), and DeLanda, (2022). In all cases, according to Hultman and Lenz Taguchi, these frameworks are non-dualist ontologies, emphasising the fluid and dynamic relations among entities that are traditionally thought to exist within separate “levels” or domains (Karin Hultman and Hillevi Lenz Taguchi, “Challenging Anthropocentric Analysis of Visual Data: A Relational Materialist Methodological Approach to Educational Research,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 23.5 (2010): 525–42); For more details about “assemblage,” see e.g., Deleuze, “Eight Years Later: 1980”; Andrew Pickering, *The Mangle of Practice: Time, Agency and Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Manuel DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2002).

<sup>58</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2004).

The compelling aspect of Jones’s theory, as well as Deleuze and Guattari’s formulation, lies in their invitation to reimagine our perceptions of change and transformation. Not only do they prompt us to consider the present, tangible state of things, but also to ponder potentialities—or virtualities—that may have manifested in the past or could materialise in the future. They challenge our conventions of understanding material-based art, urging us not merely to observe what entities are doing in the *here and now*, but to probe deeper into their latent potentialities and to question the boundaries of what they might achieve. This goes beyond merely paying attention to the actions of things at any particular moment; it is a directive to concentrate on their potential actions, emphasising the recognition of inherent possibilities for dynamism and change within the materials of art.<sup>59</sup>

In this sense, although the process is recognised as the starting point of some artworks explored in this thesis, it is never formulated in isolation, nor is it considered merely a means to an end. Differently from works that show a disappearance (or that are merely shown as supplementary means of art creation, operating independently from the art object itself), whose interactions with materials are such as to achieve a final outcome—and are abandoned once that outcome is reached—in the artworks chosen for this thesis, the interactions with materials persist and evolve, structured in accordance with the characteristics of the selected materials and the physical constraints of the labour involved, simultaneously shaping the artistic intent through either intensive or repetitive labour.

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<sup>59</sup> Christina Tsoraki et al. “Making Marks Meaningful: New Materialism and the Microwear Assemblage.” *World Archaeology* 52.3 (2020): 484–502.

For example, Yang's *100 Layers of Ink* (fig. 3), created in 1992, showcases a complex surface teeming with seemingly random wrinkles, light variations, and shades, conveying a sense of ever-evolving forces at play. Its straightforward title, devoid of enigmatic undertones, further alludes to the artwork's material nature and the production process. Together, these elements serve as a sign that primarily evokes the viewer's perception of the work as a result of the artist's intensive labour.

Many artists, like Yang, adopt art production methods that maintain an openness in the fluidity of the making-process. More expressionistic works depict a continuous cycle of reaction and reinvention, by which the artist's decision-making freedom accumulates and remains adaptable and capable of altering both direction and meaning throughout the making-process. The observer acts as the intermediary among other assemblages, which are themselves in flux—described as “the dynamic interconnection of congruent singularities” (assemblage).<sup>60</sup> Thus, the art object, accessible across multiple dimensions through its reception, possesses the capacity to transition (through concepts) towards the “other.”

As such, for works like Yang's *100 Layers of Ink* series, where the distinction between means and end is not clear-cut, the focus shifts from representation to what might be termed “non-representational” or, more accurately, “more-than-representational.”<sup>61</sup>

This perspective highlights the affective ambiguity inherent in materially embodied aesthetic experiences, presenting them as sensory pathways to knowledge creation that

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<sup>60</sup> Anna Powell, *Deleuze and Horror Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 67.

<sup>61</sup> Ben Anderson and Paul Harrison, “The Promise of Non-representational Theories,” in *Taking-place: Non-representational Theories and Geography*, eds., Ben Anderson and Paul Harrison (London: Ashgate, 2010), 1–34.; Oliver Harris J. T., “More than Representation: Multiscalar Assemblages and the Deleuzian Challenge to Archaeology,” *History of the Human Sciences* 31.3 (2018): 83–104.

both invite interpretation and resist neat conceptual consolidation. This method draws the viewer's focus to the actual occurrences during their engagement with the artwork, often sparking a curiosity about the process behind its physical manifestation.

This reveals the importance of situatedness, immanence, and embodiment, encouraging a performative interpretation of the artwork, informed by the dynamics among human participants (including the artist, any other creators, and any viewer), as well as non-human or more-than-human entities that play a part in the artwork's realisation. This viewpoint steers our comprehension of art away from the comfort of fixed interpretations, the dependence on pre-existing knowledge, and predetermined political stances, toward an appreciation for art's emergent processes and its material becoming. In other words, rather than adhering to a static viewpoint that facilitates critical detachment, we should engage with the evolving nature of art. The works I have chosen facilitate a re-evaluation of research and inquiries as "assemblages" that are "processual" and "affective," within an ethic-onto-epistemological framework that explores how matter comes to matter.

Such activation of material-in-process does not necessarily equate to privileging the materials used in a work as the primary and fundamental fact. As Michael Halewood points out, excessive focus on the material's individual authority within a work that harbours a potential for constant mutation runs counter to emphasising the flux inherent in the work.<sup>62</sup> This approach may isolate entities from their contexts or their involvement in a complex web of intersecting activities, causing them to appear solitary

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<sup>62</sup> Michael Halewood, *A.N. Whitehead and Social Theory: Tracing a Culture of Thought* (London: Anthem Press, 2013), 11–12.

and unrelated. In this process, relationships and interconnections could be obscured.<sup>63</sup> An overemphasis on the material in art not only negates but also fails to account for the notions of process, dynamism, and fluidity, given the work's propensity for constant mutation.<sup>64</sup> By assuming the singular authority of material in art, we risk diminishing the rich complexity of the interplay between the human, the material, and the environment or context it situates.

The focus should not solely be on the material as the medium, but also on the dynamic process it is part of and the intricate connection and meaningful knowledge it helps shape. Instead of traditional, distanced admiration for beauty, the focus on process encourages a more engaged response, often prompting a desire to participate in the process of making—a reaction to art frequently overlooked in aesthetic discourse. Art should not be reduced to a mere object; in the artworks I have selected, the predominant force of process extends art to encompass the object as a node within a complex network of intersecting activities. This network includes the artist's making-process, the object itself, and the diverse reactions it provokes. Thus, the understanding of the artwork is expanded across space and time, with the accumulation of experiences significantly affecting the work and its meaning, rather than being dismissed as mere historical by-products.

What is needed in this research, then, is an approach that embraces the material-discursive nature of Material Art, an approach that could acknowledge how boundaries and differences are formed and how they shape the production of subjects and objects,

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

based on the interrelations of various agential forces. Traditional approaches, like straightforward reading or reading against the grain, along with concepts like “representation” and “discourse,” might not be as suitable or effective. These methods may fall short of adequately addressing the dynamic nature of art. Thus, there is a demand for methodologies that can adequately address the nuanced materialities of art and the meaningful knowledge that these materialities give rise to. Such methods should be able to engage with the radical, material processuality of art and be intrinsically performative.

### **New Materialism and Karen Barad’s ideas of intra-action and entanglement**

Moving away from predominantly reflexive accounts that privilege the artist and researcher as the prime subjects in the making and interpretation of art, this study forges its theoretical framework based upon New Materialist theories, mobilised by theorists such as Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, Gilles Deleuze, Rosi Braidotti, Patricia Clough, Jane Bennett, and Bruno Latour. However, this framework acknowledges that not all these thinkers can be explicitly identified as strictly working with New Materialism, although their ideas intersect with the objectives of New Materialism, providing a fresh perspective on issues of material or materiality.<sup>65</sup> Contrary to Jacques Derrida’s notion

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<sup>65</sup> The philosophical contributions of Gilles Deleuze and the psychoanalytic and activist work of Félix Guattari have laid the groundwork for numerous New Materialist theories and concepts. This foundation has influenced a diverse range of scholars, including nonrepresentational theorists like Derek McCormack and Nigel Thrift; Jane Bennett’s “vital materialism”; feminist and queer theory scholars such as Moira Gatens, Elizabeth Grosz, and Rosi Braidotti; Manuel DeLanda’s assemblage theory, which explores organisation, society, and interaction; theorists of the “affective turn” in social sciences like Brian Massumi and Patricia Clough; and For more details, see e.g., Nigel Thrift, *Non-representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008). Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013); Moira Gatens, “Beauvoir and Biology: A Second Look,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. C. Card, 266–85 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art* (Durham and London: Duke University

of the “violent hierarchy” embedded in binary oppositions—e.g., discourse/matter, nature/culture, human/non-human, abstract/concrete, and representation/reality—the above-mentioned theorists challenge these dualistic paradigms and the binary thinking embedded in such dichotomies, shedding light on the nuanced intertwinements where human—as well as non-human, more-than-human, and dehumanised—bodies are situated within complex power networks, encompassing both *potestas* (authority) and *potentia* (capability).<sup>66</sup>

While anthropologically oriented approaches to material culture tend to focus on examining the impact of human activities on materiality, New Materialism underscores the intrinsic vitality of materiality itself. It draws focus to the blurred and sometimes elusive boundaries between the human and the non-human. New Materialism does not privilege materiality at the expense of other entities but rather examines the synergistic interplay through which these entities co-evolve and co-emerge.

In the realm of art and the intricate processes of artmaking, traditional perspectives have often relegated materiality to a secondary role. The conventional view is that art is made with products purchased at an art supply store that are waiting to be turned into the next great painting. New Materialism, however, offers a radical departure from this conventional stance. Through its lens, the process of artmaking is no longer a one-sided imposition of the artist’s will upon passive materials. The materialities of artmaking extend beyond just the materials used to create the artworks. Rather, the materials can

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Press, 2011); Patricia Clough ed. *The Affective Turn: Theorising the Social* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>66</sup> Chantelle Gray, et al., “Deleuzoguattarian Thought, the New Materialisms, and (Be)wild(ering) Pedagogies,” *Matter: Journal of New Materialist Research*, vol. 3 (2021): 205.

and do co-constitute the emergence of artworks through the apparatus of artmaking. This intrinsic agency of materials—whether it be the fluidity of water, the looseness of incense ash, or the suppleness of cotton—influences and co-shapes the emergence of the artwork. The insights derived from New Materialism, therefore, make a compelling argument for the necessity of considering the agency of how the artmaking-process materialises work.

A significant portion of this study is grounded in Barad’s contributions—upon which, as previously mentioned, Jones’s discussions of art’s materiality are built—as her theories provided the impetus for this project. Importantly, her theory of agential realism provides insights for bridging discourse and materiality through artmaking.<sup>67</sup> Specifically, Barad’s theories, while profoundly original, are rooted in the foundational works of thinkers like Martin Heidegger—with his conceptions connecting Dasein/Being to the state of being-in-the-world—and Merleau-Ponty’s seminal writings on embodiment that reconceptualise the bond between body and world.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, Barad’s work is informed by insights garnered through her work in theoretical physics, science studies, and feminism. One of Barad’s pioneering achievements is her reconnection of the ontological and epistemological into a unified paradigm she terms “onto-epistemology.”<sup>69</sup> What this sets up is a reconnection of the

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<sup>67</sup> Karen Barad, “Posthuman Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” *Signs*, 28(3) (2003): 801–31; *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); “Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come,” *Derrida Today*, 3(2) (2010): 240–68; Barad and Documenta (13), *Karen Barad: What is the Measure of Nothingness? Infinity, Virtuality, Justice* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012).

<sup>68</sup> Ramya Nathan Ravisankar, *Artmaking as Entanglement: Expanded Notions of Artmaking through New Materialism* (PhD Dissertation, Ohio State University, 2019), 7.

<sup>69</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 185.

realms of being and knowing to be rethought not as separate but as knowing in being.<sup>70</sup> Her theory of “agential realism” rethinks the relationship between matter and discourse as causal and fundamentally links discursive practices to material consequences and material to discursivity.<sup>71</sup> Her assertion is that agential realism can achieve this aim by acknowledging the body, the nature, and materiality in their entire process of becoming, without defaulting to the simplistic transparency of nature. This intra-activity should also be discussed alongside Barad’s notion of “entanglement,” by which she sees entities—be it particles, things, humans—as fundamentally interconnected and interwoven, and defined by their entangled states.<sup>72</sup> In other words, the nature of intra-relatedness changes both human and non-human entities, and means that there is no way to make objective claims because everything emerges through its entanglement.

Barad suggests that boundaries are only enacted through the intra-action of entangled material-discursive phenomena—a continuous process of iterative becoming between subject and object—rather than as isolated incidents.<sup>73</sup> She posits that individuals are shaped through and emerge from these entwined intra-relationships.<sup>74</sup> Thus, human agency cannot be solely defined by the value of an object but is part of a processual “intra-action” characterised by ongoing influence, from which new realms of meaning emerge.<sup>75</sup> Barad’s perspective moves us away from the dilemma of representationalism—the struggle to accurately depict a world of words and things—to an understanding of the world as phenomena, composed of material/discursive

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>75</sup> Barad, “Posthuman Performativity.”

practices.<sup>76</sup>

Barad contends that “interaction” suggests the pre-existence of separate entities with their own agencies that converge from distinct origins. “Intra-action”, by contrast, implies that agencies materialise through their interconnected actions and are not pre-existent to such engagements. This perspective ushers in a more nuanced comprehension of “relational ontology,” where agency is not an intrinsic attribute of an entity or a human but a dynamic interplay of evolving forces. In Barad’s view of the phenomenal world, everything is in perpetual flux, undergoing constant change, mutation, and fusion. She posits that the boundaries and characteristics of phenomena are defined by specific agential intra-actions, which lends a new significance to embodiment.

This thought trajectory challenges the static, pre-existing boundaries of dualism, asserting that boundaries are not preordained but are negotiated through the intra-action of material-discursive phenomena. By espousing the principle of intra-action, Barad confronts and critiques the Cartesian notion of a superior human subjectivity detached from objects or things. She also disputes the idealistic postulation that things gain meaning solely through human perception. Instead, Barad’s relational ontology offers a nuanced and productive framework that comprehends the interconnectedness of various agents, encompassing and transcending human-centric views.

While Barad primarily explores scientific discourse, it becomes apparent that artmaking can similarly be constructed as an apparatus—a boundary-making endeavour by which

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 76.

phenomena are delineated through intra-actions with the world. Such an artmaking practice does not possess inherent boundaries. Instead, it is an apparatus/practice/phenomenon that is continuously reconfiguring through space and time. Embracing Barad's agential realism, which views "knowing, thinking, measuring, theorising, and observing [as] material practices of intra-acting within and as part of the world,"<sup>77</sup> allows us to dissect the active, co-constitutive role that material and matter play in art and artmaking.

From a New Materialist standpoint, terms like matter, material, and materiality, as I interpret them, denote the conditions and engagements through which the process of artmaking unfolds. Viewing the six selected artworks through the lens of agential realism, this study contends that material is not prime matter. Instead, it signifies shifting relationships that materialize a work through intra-action within an assemblage, where factors like trajectory, efficacy, and the emergence of nonlinear causality are at play. Paying attention to the insights derived from material processes that facilitate the creation of art does not necessitate privileging the material aspects in artmaking. Rather, it advocates for reflecting on the entwined nature of the materialities involved in the artmaking. The process of making art, then, embodies a practice of knowing in being that is enacted through matter. This perspective might offer a more insightful means to understanding how specific intra-actions matter.

### **The affective turn**

New Materialist theories, including Barad's, have expanded the (re)conceptualisation of the "affective turn," enriched by philosophical inquiries within the New Materialist

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<sup>77</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 90.

framework.<sup>78</sup> Aligning with New Materialist concepts, the “affective turn” emphasises the importance of bodily intensities and intuitions. It further reveals how the processual vitality of materials and deeply sensory experiences can counteract the Cartesian intuition that “cogito ergo sum,” and disrupt the prevailing notion of a self-sufficient, autonomous subject. In other words, the notion of affect is perceived as an intensity or force emerging from human and non-human interactions. In artworks that harness the affective dimension, affective operations are relational. Their manifestation hinges both on the distinct characteristics of the artwork and the sensibilities of the observer or experiencer. The emergent affective reactions and potential insights from such interactions are not mere by-products; they are deliberately embedded within the artwork’s structure.

This reformulation notably returns authority to the unpredictability or indeterminacy of sensory- and experiential-driven encounters, where aesthetic exploration becomes intertwined with engagement in historical, social, and cultural contexts. This ambiguity in sensory aesthetic experiences fosters a refined interplay between the agency of both material and subject. I suggest that this interactivity harbours the potential for transformation, affecting not only how art is made and perceived but also extending its influence to broader social, cultural, and political realms, thereby fostering new avenues for thought and action. Anchored in New Materialism, this “affective turn” aims to re-empower the indeterminate dynamics of materially embodied aesthetic experiences as a sensory mode for knowledge production in art and the process of making art. It invites interpretations while simultaneously challenging the notion of complete conceptual

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<sup>78</sup> Patricia T. Clough, “The affective turn: Political economy, biomedica and bodies,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 25.1 (2008): 1–22; Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

encapsulation.

### **Objectives of this research**

Through an exploration grounded in the notions of materialities and material agencies enacted through the practice of artmaking, the entanglements, intra-actions, and intra-sections that configure and reconfigure the world—including things, bodies, matter, forces, experiences, and other phenomena—are considered to be active agents in their mutual formation. Instead of privileging the artist's intellect and perpetuating the myth of artistic genius, this study attends to the implications of upending assumptions of artmaking, placing it outside a solely human-centric purview, while keeping questions of matter and materialities at the forefront.

This study may at times seem to take an aggressive stance against existing approaches to contemporary Chinese art, but it aims to critique these methodologies constructively while also seeking to develop and enhance them. Current methodologies in the realm of contemporary Chinese art emphasise reflection and reflexivity as primary strategies for gathering insights and to position the artist/maker at the core of both research and the artmaking-process. While the forerunners of these methods have laid the groundwork for this project, and it would be remiss not to acknowledge their invaluable contributions to art, art education, and research, it is still necessary to be critical of and develop these approaches.

My intention is to chart a different methodological and theoretical trajectory by leveraging New Materialism and adopting a processual and performative methodology, primarily influenced by Barad. Through this lens, I aspire to push the boundaries of

how we understand contemporary Chinese art, especially those works that activate the material- or processual based characteristics, and transcend the reflexive approaches that have dominated art criticism so far.

However, while this thesis primarily engages with New Materialism as the theoretical lens for analysing Material Art, it is crucial to recognise certain limitations of this approach. For instance, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* argue that although New Materialism brings a fresh perspective by emphasising the agency of matter, it can inadvertently sideline critical social and historical contexts.<sup>79</sup> This perspective might lead to a downplaying of deeply entrenched socio-political issues such as race, gender, and class inequalities, which remain crucial in understanding the material conditions of the world.<sup>80</sup> The risk here is that the focus on indeterminacy and relationality often precludes strategic intervention and diminishes the possibility of meaningful political critique or action, making it difficult to engage in effective political or social interventions.

This risk is further compounded by New Materialism's tendency toward abstraction. Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, in their book *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*, highlight that by emphasising the interconnectedness and fluidity of all entities, New Materialist frameworks can become overly complex and difficult to apply in concrete situations.<sup>81</sup> They argue that while New Materialism successfully

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<sup>79</sup> Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Iris van der Tuin and Rick Dolphijn, *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2012).

transcends disciplinary boundaries, it often does so at the cost of practical applicability.<sup>82</sup> This abstraction may lead to a more philosophical or theoretical exercise, potentially limiting its utility in addressing pressing issues like environmental justice or social inequalities in a tangible way, or in clearly defining the boundaries of the phenomena being studied, particularly in disciplines like art history, where material, cultural, and historical contexts are deeply intertwined.

A key issue arising from this abstraction is that a new materialist reading of art cannot entirely shake off semiotic interpretation without risking ineffability—a situation where the art’s meaning becomes too elusive to articulate clearly. This problem stems from the fact that while New Materialism emphasises the agency of matter and the interconnectedness of all entities, it often sidelines the culturally and historically specific meanings that materials carry, especially within a context as rich and layered as Chinese art.

Confucian aesthetics, with its emphasis on harmony, relationality, and a subtle resistance to outright human mastery, offers an intriguing counterpoint to this challenge. In Paul Gladston’s article “Dis-/Continuing Traditions: Chinese Contemporary Art and the Polylogic Translation of Confucian-literati Culture,” Confucian thought is shown to contribute a nuanced understanding of material use, emphasising the ethical and moral dimensions of how materials are employed in art.<sup>83</sup> Gladston critically examines

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Paul Gladston, “Dis-/Continuing Traditions: Chinese Contemporary Art and the Polylogic Translation of Confucian-literati Culture”, in *Translation Studies and China: Literature, Cinema, and Visual Arts*, eds., Haiping Yan, Haina Jin, and Paul Gladston (London:

the ways in which ideas and practices from both traditional Chinese Confucian-literati culture and Western modernist, postmodernist, and contemporary art have been co-opted and translated within the Chinese cultural-linguistic sphere.<sup>84</sup> A significant aspect of his discussion is the challenges posed by this polylogue for the critical interpretation of Chinese contemporary art.<sup>85</sup> This intersection not only reveals the inherent complexity in interpreting Chinese contemporary art through a single theoretical framework but also underscores the importance of understanding these works within their culturally specific contexts.<sup>86</sup> This is particularly relevant in the practice of Material Art, where traditional materials like ink and silk carry deep cultural and historical significance, or where unconventional materials like Coca-Cola and cotton textiles hold multiple and varied roles across different cultural contexts and times—meanings that cannot be overlooked in any meaningful analysis.

Indeed, when exploring the former type of the material used in contemporary Chinese art, one cannot help but notice resonances with Chinese philosophy. Chinese philosophy, especially the Confucian concepts of *qi* (氣, vital energy) and *li* (理, meaning “principle” or “structure”), presents a worldview that is dynamic and interconnected, where human and nonhuman entities are part of a continuous flow of energy and transformation. For example, ink and *xuan* paper are not merely tools for calligraphy and painting but are deeply connected to the Confucian and Daoist ideals of self-cultivation and the harmonious flow of *qi*. Similarly, porcelain, with its

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Routledge, 2023), 217-234.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

association with Chinese craftsmanship, reflects the historical evolution of Chinese aesthetics and the global exchange of cultural values.

In Leah Kalmanson's article "Speculation as Transformation in Chinese Philosophy: On Speculative Realism, 'New' Materialism, and the Study of Li (理) and Qi (氣)," parallels are drawn between New Materialism's emphasis on the agency and vitality of matter and the Confucian concept of *qi*, which permeates all things, living and non-living.<sup>87</sup> Kalmanson argues that *qi* can be seen as a form of "lively material," a term also used by Jane Bennett in her influential work, "Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things."<sup>88</sup> This resonance suggests that Chinese philosophical traditions like Confucianism can offer rich, alternative perspectives to those found in Western materialist thought, particularly in terms of understanding the interconnectedness and vitality of the material world.

Kalmanson further points out that Confucianism's focus on "spiritual" (*shen* 神) or "spiritual clarity" (*shenming* 神明) and its emphasis on harmonising human actions with the natural order introduce a normative element that is less explicit in New Materialist discourse.<sup>89</sup> While New Materialism does not entirely dismiss human agency, it tends to decentralise it, instead emphasising the distributed agency across

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<sup>87</sup> Leah Kalmanson, "Speculation as Transformation in Chinese Philosophy: On Speculative Realism, 'New' Materialism, and the Study of Li (理) and Qi (氣)," *Journal of World Philosophies* 3.1 (2018): 17-30.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

both human and nonhuman entities, thereby reconfiguring ethics within a broader ontological context that emphasises the vitality and interconnections of all matter. In contrast, Confucian aesthetics, with its subtle resistance to authoritative structures and emphasis on the suspension of human mastery, challenges the notion that material agency can be fully understood without considering the broader cultural and philosophical contexts.

Gladston, by reflecting on the implications of this polylogic translation for our broader understanding of Chinese contemporary art, suggests that any critical framework applied to contemporary Chinese art must be flexible enough to account for the multiplicity of influences and the ongoing, dynamic interplay between different cultural and philosophical traditions.<sup>90</sup> This insight is particularly pertinent when considering the limitations of New Materialism, which, while offering valuable perspectives on the agency of matter, may overlook the culturally embedded meanings and historical complexities that are central to understanding Chinese contemporary art.

Moreover, in her book *The Posthuman*, Rosi Braidotti raises another critical point regarding New Materialism's focus on relationality and intra-action.<sup>91</sup> Braidotti warns that while this approach effectively challenges the primacy of human agency, it may also dilute the concept of individual agency, making it difficult to pinpoint accountability in scenarios such as environmental degradation or social injustices.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Gladston, "Dis-/Continuing Traditions".

<sup>91</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2013).

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

This dilution can obscure the intentional actions of individuals, which are often necessary for addressing and rectifying specific wrongs.<sup>93</sup> Additionally, this decentralisation of agency and refusal to assign specific capacities to entities can obscure responsibility. As Oscar Svensson points out in “The Matter of Energy Emerges: Bridging the Divide Between Conflicting Conceptions of Energy Resources”, this makes it challenging to determine who or what is responsible for certain actions or outcomes, which can be problematic in both ethical and political contexts.<sup>94</sup>

These limitations suggest that while New Materialism offers valuable insights and opens up new ways of thinking about the material world and its relation to art, it is crucial to remain aware of the potential challenges of this approach. These include the risks of abstraction, the undermining of human agency, overgeneralisation, challenges in empirical application, ethical and political implications, relativism, and difficulties in interpretation.

Despite these risks, the core insight of the New Materialist program is still a valuable one: entities beyond humans play a significant role in shaping the world, and it is essential to analyse not just textuality but also the materiality that influences our understanding and experiences. In particular, Barad’s works enable an investigation into how materialisations are entangled with forms of exclusion and inequality, analysing how temporalities, spatialities, and materialities are mutually constituted. This thesis applies New Materialist perspectives in a way that is both rigorous and

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Oscar Svensson, “The Matter of Energy Emerges: Bridging the Divide Between Conflicting Conceptions of Energy Resources,” *Energy Research & Social Science* 72 (2021): 101895.

reflective, ensuring that they enrich the understanding of Material Art without oversimplifying or overlooking its complexities within cultural, social, and material realities and philosophical implications, while avoiding the pitfall of positing art's materialities as a self-contained sphere.

In this thesis, while New Materialism provides a valuable lens for exploring the materiality of contemporary Chinese art, the discussion will also acknowledge these cultural and philosophical complexities. But involving both perspectives in analysing specific artworks is not without challenges. The origins, and contexts of Chinese philosophy and New Materialism differ significantly. Confucianism, for example, is deeply rooted in a metaphysical and spiritual framework that emphasises the flow of *qi* and the pursuit of harmony within familial, social, and environmental contexts—a concept that transcends mere material reality.<sup>95</sup> On the other hand, New Materialism, while sharing certain resonances, is generally positioned as a response to Western dualisms and is more grounded in a posthumanist critique of human-centered thinking. My focus will primarily remain on New Materialism as the theoretical lens for a more focused and coherent application of its principles to the analysis of Material Art. Although Chinese philosophical influences are not ignored where relevant in specific chapters, they are discussed in terms of how these manifestations can only be revealed through an analysis of the processes of art-making and viewing, rather than by engaging with Chinese philosophy as a pre-assumed framework prior to the examination of the artworks.

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 18.

This methodological choice prioritises the specificities of New Materialism while recognising the potential for broader philosophical dialogues within this study, as well as the importance of cultural, socio-ecological, and historical contexts, and the artist's biography or the intentions behind the works. The thesis calls for judicious use of these sources, ensuring that we do not become overly reliant on one singular perspective. Central to this approach is understanding how these sources and perspectives aid in the exploration of the nuances of art-making trajectories and the viewer's experience.

When analysing historical context, greater emphasis will be placed on the history of specific materials featured in the case studies. I will delve into the materials' common roles, how they typically interact with humans across various practices, rather than focusing solely on the backdrop of the artworks' creation. The case studies will also consider socio-cultural factors that influence those human participants involved in the art-making-process. This entails examining how these factors mould their perceptions and how their interactions and experiences with materials might shift unexpectedly during the art-making journey.

Additionally, I will incorporate insights from artists and critics. However, instead of allowing these perspectives to solely dictate the artwork's meaning or the material's role, I will explore how their viewpoints might guide us towards a more expansive understanding of Material Art. Some artistic or scholarly insights illuminate the agential potency of materials, unveiling new dimensions of material relations, and highlight the continuous metamorphosis in the works.

In this sense, my intention to focus on subtle material becoming and complexity does not necessarily imply a detachment from social contexts or a complete departure from historical narratives. Rather, viewing these works as phenomena shaped by interactions enriches our understanding of art's socio-political response against the backdrop of the political, such that change can occur (political or otherwise) without a need for conflict.

New Materialism suggests that the political aspect of art cannot be detached from its capacity to affect and be affected. This concept goes beyond mere cultural emotions, focusing instead on the inherent capacities of various bodies or entities to undergo change and to both impart and absorb influences.<sup>96</sup> I will demonstrate how each of the works selected for this thesis creates a space or scene that serves as a rehearsal or platform for a more direct and affective experiential encounter for the experiencers, including both artist and the viewer. This aims to reflect that it is not the artwork reflecting our socio-cultural conditions of existence, but rather the artwork actively generating these conditions.

It is also crucial to mention that this study does not aim to diminish or dismiss the artist's role in artmaking. Without the commitment of artists, there would be no artworks or representations to interpret, given their dedication of time and energy that can span from several days to numerous months, and in some cases, years. While engaging with artists and valuing their insights is one approach to acknowledging their contributions, it is not the sole method by which to honour their work. Paying

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<sup>96</sup> Katve-Kaisa Kontturi, "Moving Matters of Contemporary Art: Three New Materialist Propositions," *AM Časopis za studije umetnosti i medija* 05 (2014): 50.

meticulous attention to the unique nuances of art, beyond just the overarching structures it symbolises, also honours the artist's labour.

Instead of allocating worth to individual entities, the emphasis is here on understanding what is gained by thinking about material and thinking through material. Recognising the pivotal roles that matter and materiality have in shaping and co-constituting our world can lead to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of contemporary art practices, which may thus become more profound and nuanced. This project acknowledges and resonates with the critiques of arts-based research put forward by Jan Jagodzinski and Jason Wallin, who argue for a shift from purely humanistic, reflective practices toward a more post-humanist perspective.<sup>97</sup> This thesis aspires to enrich the ongoing discourse on art's materialities and artmaking, particularly in areas that actively generate diffractions and divergences.

By tracing art's materiality through the art's ongoing process of becoming through a New Materialist lens, each study case (chapter) offers different perspectives by which to understand human/non-human relations not merely as a division or even asymmetrical relation, but as mutually affective relations. Such perspectives are often neglected or insufficiently explored in traditions systemically skewed by dominant paradigms that favour humans over nature, animals, and artificial or compound materials originating from areas like contemporary consumer culture, traditional material culture, religious culture and craft culture—essentially, any domain considered as “other.”

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<sup>97</sup> Jan Jagodzinski and Jason Wallin, *Arts-based Research: A Critique and a Proposal* (Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense Publishers, 2013).

By drawing attention to the kinds of knowledge, practices, and experiences sustained by this division between humans and non-humans, including those underpinned by nature/culture, subject/object, matter/mind, thing/action, space/time, individual/collective, all chapters pave the way for new perspectives that challenge the usual ordering of relations and their dichotomies.

Aside from the methodological considerations, it should also be noted that I do not intend to compare nor make specific connections among the study cases—although they do share some similarities or contrast with each other in terms of strategies, actions, metamorphoses, or experiences of making—as this may put the work at risk of becoming an overly simplified categorisation of the characteristics and metamorphoses of the artwork. Each artwork or project selected in this thesis is an individual work that tends to claim its own aesthetics and specificities of meaning and values, in which the artist does not intend to ascribe his or her work to any single art movement or spectrum. Although I will not discuss how different case studies connect with or differentiate from each other in any specific chapter, this thesis will attempt to reveal their shared issues, showcasing how they exemplify the way that material meanings operate as intense events. These events intertwine human and non-human entities within complex networks of power, blurring the boundaries between subject and object.

Another aspect that also warrants clarification in this thesis is my pronoun usage, particularly my choice to use “the viewer” rather than “I” when describing the phenomenological aspects of the viewing experience of an artwork. This choice stems from the complex relationship between language and experience, particularly when addressing phenomenological encounters with art. The challenge lies in how to

authentically describe the lived experience of viewing Material Art without fully resorting to either fictive examples or purely subjective first-person accounts. The difficulty was further compounded by the circumstances under which this research was conducted—the COVID-19 pandemic and my pregnancy—which limited my ability to engage with some artworks in person.

The period during which *The Allure of Matter* was exhibited coincided with the outbreak of COVID-19, a time when many people, including myself, were unable to visit exhibitions in person. Recognising these limitations, the exhibition's organisers offered a variety of digital and remote engagement opportunities, such as virtual tours, online programs, and remote symposiums. These efforts aimed to make the artworks accessible to a broader audience, despite the pandemic's travel restrictions. However, the shift to online and remote interaction presented a significant challenge in capturing the phenomenological significance of the artworks—an issue further complicated by my pregnancy and maternity during the research period.

Despite these challenges, it is worth noting again that many of the artworks featured in *The Allure of Matter* had been widely exhibited prior to this exhibition, across various contexts and thematic exhibitions. For instance, Yang Jiechang's paintings from *Hundred Layers of Ink* and He Xiangyu's installations from *Cola Project* have been exhibited multiple times in different venues. Some works, although not widely exhibited before, belong to series or projects that have been well-documented and gained significant public exposure, such as Lin Tianmiao's cotton thread installations, Zhang Huan's ash sculptures and paintings, Liang Shaoji's silk installations and Song

Dong's water-related works. In this research, I have had the opportunities to see some of the selected works or similar versions in the series in person, including Yang Jiechang's works of *Hundreds Layers of Ink* and Liang Shaoji's works of *Nature series*. However, for works I could not experience in person—such as Lin Tianmiao's *The Proliferation of Thread Winding* and He Xiangyu's *Cola Project* and Zhang Huan's ash Buddha series—I relied on extensive digital archives, including video recordings of the exhibition process and 360-degree virtual tours, as well as numerous articles, interviews, and other sources documenting viewers' experiences. Although I did not personally view all of these works or the series, I have engaged with similar works by the same artists using the same materials but presented in different forms in other exhibitions. For example, I saw Song Dong's water interactive installation *Traceless Stele* and some of Zhang Huan's ash paintings. Thus, my descriptions of experiences of viewing of the artworks selected inevitably contain some degree of fictive description. Given the challenges of the COVID-19 and my personal journey during this PhD project, key questions emerged: How do we analyse the phenomenology of art when direct, personal experience is limited or absent? Does one need to physically encounter a work of art to authentically describe its experiential dimension, or can the phenomenological aspects of art be examined through alternative means?

While phenomenology is often considered a first-person investigation, emphasising how individuals extract meaning through personal experience, I chose to navigate this by employing a third-person tone—“the viewer”—in this thesis. Using “the viewer” rather than “I” (sometimes followed by “they/their” in the same sentence) allows for a broader exploration of the artworks' phenomenological or material effects without

confining the analysis to my individual perspective. While phenomenology traditionally prioritises the first-person viewpoint, focusing solely on personal experience can lead to an overly subjective interpretation. This is especially pertinent in the context of this thesis, where the emphasis is on the inter- or intra-relationships among various entities, both human and nonhuman. Limiting the focus to a single, prioritised entity risks overlooking the broader, intersubjective dimensions of art viewing that are revealed through the artworks' material and phenomenological effects.

“The viewer” provides a middle ground between the specificity of individual experience and the universality of a generalised audience. It offers a more inclusive approach that acknowledges the diverse experiences and understandings different viewers might have when encountering these artworks. However, I consciously limit the use of the term “viewers” because it may depersonalise and objectify the audience, reducing the richness of varied individual encounters to a generalised or hypothetical collective—unless I specifically intend to convey a more generalised, collective sense in the context.

To some extent, the use of “the viewer” is not merely a grammatical choice but a methodological one. It supports the coherence of this thesis by ensuring that the analysis is not confined to either first-person introspection or third-person abstraction. For works I did not experience in person, the third-person pronoun allows me to maintain objectivity and avoid the pitfalls of speculative personal narration. For works or similar versions I did experience, it enables a dissociation between my personal engagement and the broader analysis, ensuring that the focus remains on the artwork's potential to

elicit diverse responses or experiences. This choice also hopes to address the limitations inherent in both experiential introspection and purely philosophical phenomenology. If we rely solely on the first-person perspective, we might risk reducing the analysis to an empirical method with inductive generalisation. Conversely, focusing exclusively on philosophical concepts may distance us from the actual lived experience of art. By using “the viewer,” I aim to integrate these perspectives, allowing for a more nuanced exploration of how artworks generate shifting, variable experiences depending on who is engaging with them and in what context.

## 6. Arrangement of chapters

It is with this theoretical approach and research aims in mind that I formed six propositions that inform the arrangement of the specific chapters:

- i. **Material as Unfixed and in an Ongoing Process:** Art’s materiality is seen not as comprising stable, fixed entities but as relational and perpetually emergent phenomena. This perspective emphasizes the processual and dynamic nature of materiality in art.
- ii. **Blurring Boundaries of Nature/Culture and Embodiment/Objectivity:** This approach adopts New Materialist views that advocate a non-dualist ontology, wherein nature and culture are not regarded as “distinct realms” but as “parts of a continuum of materiality.”<sup>98</sup> It challenges the binary distinctions between human/non-human, nature/culture, and embodiment/objectivity, emphasising the importance of accountability and responsibility within human subjectivity as vital to our understanding and existence (as integral to the world’s ongoing

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<sup>98</sup> Nick J. Fox and Pam Alldred, “Inside the Research-assemblage: New Materialism and the Micropolitics of Social Inquiry,” *Sociological Research Online* 20.2 (2015): 125.

specificity).<sup>99</sup> This perspective allows us to comprehend art—especially works that reveal the propensity for constant mutation—in all its relational complexity. It enables us to question any hierarchy explicitly or implicitly created by anthropocentric discourse and to reflect on environmental interdependencies and the inseparable mutual constitution of nature and culture, as well as between humans and non-humans.

- iii. **Material’s Capacity for “Agency”:** Expands the notion of agency beyond human actors to include non-human and inanimate entities, acknowledging their capacity to both obstruct human intentions and act according to their own trajectories.<sup>100</sup> This perspective recognizes the liveliness of inanimate matter in art and artmaking, understanding the limitations of human creators in their interactions with materials and the precarious nature of these engagements.
- iv. **More-than-human Agency:** This aspect extends the capacity for “agency” to encompass living or more-than-human elements, such as animals, inviting a reconsideration of anthropocentric views on autonomy and intentionality. It highlights ethical and political concerns regarding interspecies interactions, advocating for responsible and interconnected engagements with the world.
- v. **Affect and Critical Inquiry:** Operationalizes a concept of agency that demotes human action in favour of a mutual capacity to affect and be affected across all matter: human, non-human, animate, and inanimate.<sup>101</sup> This perspective emphasizes the potential of materials in art to evoke affect, fostering an embodied and intuitive engagement with art that transcends conventional representational knowledge production. Such affective encounters encourage critical reflection and

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<sup>99</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 37.

<sup>100</sup> Fox and Alldred, “Inside the Research-assemblage,” 125.

<sup>101</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 127–128.

thought evolution, enabling art's materiality to interact with social, political, and biological realms without being bogged down by overt political narratives.

- vi. **Onto-epistemology in Artmaking:** This proposition shifts the focus from epistemological debates (which address how phenomena can be known or understood by observers) about the knowability of the social world to an onto-epistemological exploration (concerned with the nature of things that exist) of art and artmaking. It aims to move beyond the perspectives of object-directedness and alienated labour of Marxist historical materialism, which often obscures the genuine vitality of human labour and fetishizes objects, to a consideration of agency redistribution. By emphasising the artmaking-process as a practice of knowing in being—as what Barad terms “onto-epistemology”—wherein the boundaries between knowing and thinking are emergent and negotiated through intra-action, this approach recognizes the active participation of both human creators and non-human entities.<sup>102</sup> This onto-epistemological emphasis has significant implications for research methodology, suggesting a more integrated approach to understanding art's role and materiality in daily life and productive activities beyond the constraints of human constructs.

These propositions highlight the tangible reality of art and artmaking, along with the immediate affect they elicit, rather than an immediate relegation of artwork to a conceptual or metaphysical realm. As I select the artworks for this study, then, I focus on what is happening within the work's display, or what things are doing within the work, what it represents to the effects and experiences that it produces, and the character of the material process in and through which artworks happen.

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<sup>102</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 185.

Each chapter goes beyond the task of a case study of a specific artwork; each aims to illuminate a particular proposition, outlined at the beginning of this section, through the lens of art's performative materialities. Thus, each chapter serves to exemplify a specific aspect of these propositions through an in-depth examination of a particular artwork that I have chosen for this study. While all the cases embody these propositions to varying degrees—they are all integral to my overall framework of the performative materialities of art—each chapter emphasizes a different facet of the comprehensive conceptualisation of performative materialities I am proposing for this type of Material Art.

Specifically, the first chapter embarks on an exploration of art's materiality through the lens of Zhang Huan's ephemeral installation *Berlin Buddha* (fig. 1), positioning it against the conventional perception of art materials as static and immutable. I chose this work as I am drawn to the material Zhang used: a discarded material commonly seen in the context of Buddhist rituals. While incense is regarded as a medium for elevating the spirituality of worshippers, the incense ash is deemed valueless and forgotten. The transformation of a significant amount of incense ash into a deliberately made Buddha sculpture, with its pronounced physical presence that intuitively makes the viewer notice the compactness and density of the large amount of ash, along with the capacity to stage a performative and ephemeral event at the exhibition site, holds a particular fascination for me. I am keen to explore further the material processes through which this artwork comes into being and its relation with the viewer and the surrounding environment. In addition, the material density and intensity, as revealed through the ash Buddha sculpture, creates a feeling that the work results from significant human labours in its process of transformation or materialisation, which

could hardly be achieved through the artist's efforts alone.

This sense deepened my interest in exploring the making-process, investigating the mode of production, the role of potential other makers involved in the artmaking—whose contributions are often overshadowed by the artist—and the relationship between human labour and the incense ash, as well as between the artist and the collective workmanship within the artmaking-process.

By emphasising the processual and relational nature of materials in art, this chapter challenges the notion of artworks as mere objects, suggesting instead that they are dynamic entities characterized by an ongoing process of material unfolding and becoming. Zhang Huan's work, and particularly his use of incense ash—a material typically discarded after religious ceremonies—serves as a vivid demonstration of how, in art, materials can transcend fixed positionalities, engaging not in isolation but as part of part of a continuously emergent phenomenon that necessitates an ongoing (re)negotiation of agential forces. This evolving role of incense ash, from its collection, creation, and exhibition to its life post-exhibition across different contexts—from sacred spaces to the artist's studio and the gallery space—will here be examined not as a pre-existing phenomenon but as intricately defined through its intra-actions within various contexts. This perspective helps unveil the material specificity and interconnectedness of incense ash, emphasising its temporality beyond mere cycles of extraction, production, consumption, and disposal. Through this analysis, the chapter advocates for an understanding of art's materiality as inherently unfixed, resonating with New Materialist perspectives, particularly Barad's concept of boundaries being perpetually under negotiation. This beckons us toward a conception of

“ongoingness,”<sup>103</sup> proposing a “methodology of continuing”<sup>104</sup> amidst uncertainty, uncontrollability, and potential futility and finality.

Transitioning to Song Dong’s video installation *Water Records* (fig. 2), Chapter 2 delves into the implications of adopting a non-dualist ontology within the realm of Material Art. The selection of Song’s work for this study stems from an extended interest following my case study of Zhang Huan’s *Berlin Buddha*. *Berlin Buddha* prompts questions about the representation of the artistic process within the artwork and whether the act of creation can itself be an art form, experienced by the viewer not present at the work’s inception. While *Berlin Buddha* requires the viewer’s real-time engagement, it invites contemplation on whether such ephemeral experiences depend on witnessing the work’s performance live. This thus leads to my selection of Song Dong’s *Water Records*. Displayed as a multi-channel video installation, it documents the artist’s hand drawing ephemeral images with water on stone. It raises questions about the viewer’s role in engaging with a recorded document of a past event and whether such re-creation, based on the documentation of the original performance, can effectively connect past and present experiences. In addition, the prominence of water in the performance of “water drawings” as demonstrated in the videos, sparks an interest in further reflecting on human conceptualisations of water across various cultural and practice domains, encouraging a reconsideration of its capacity to forge complex interconnections between humans, non-humans, nature, and culture.

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<sup>103</sup> Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>104</sup> Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *An Analysis of Maintenance Art: Inquiry and Creative Process* (Master’s dissertation, New York University, 1974), 216.

By focusing on the seamless continuum of materiality where nature and culture intertwine,<sup>105</sup> this chapter positions *Water Records* as a medium through which the principles of New Materialism are vividly brought to life. The analysis of the ephemeral “water drawings” uncovers the endless interplay of disappearance and appearance—facilitated by the artist’s hand actions, stone, brush, and water, alongside the role of the video documentation and installation in highlighting the intangible aspects of these performed and embodied events—to challenge traditional binaries of nature/culture and embodiment/objectivity. It critically examines the viewer experience as an embodied encounter, suggesting that these interactions are less a matter “of being specifically situated in the world (as an I, specific and distinct from others), but rather of being of the world in its dynamic specificity.”<sup>106</sup> This reframing foregrounds the importance of understanding the interconnectedness of all life forms and elements within the biosphere, prompting reflection on environmental interdependencies and the inseparable co-constitution of nature and culture, human and non-human. By delving into ways through which *Water Records* presents a layered and tenaciously iterative narrative of the nature–culture continuum, this chapter aims to uncover how *Water Records* paves the way for an alternative understanding to systemic or structural “explanations” of how nature and culture work, fostering a renewed ecological awareness of understanding the fluxes, dis/continuities, and “becomings” that constitute our world.

Chapter 3 broadens the discussion to encompass the agentic capacities of materials in art, with Yang Jiechang’s paintings in the *100 Layers of Ink* series (fig. 3–10) serving

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<sup>105</sup> Fox and Alldred, “Inside the Research-assemblage,” 125.

<sup>106</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 337.

as a focal point. This work serves as a study case due to the material used—ink—which holds a prominent identity in the long history of Chinese art, especially ink painting and calligraphy. This significance cannot be overlooked when examining the type of materials used in contemporary Chinese art. Ink carries deeply rooted “original” identities, yet in Yang’s painting, it is presented in very unexpected ways that make it almost unrecognisable. It is valuable to explore how ink, in *100 Layers of Ink*, carves out alternative trajectories that diverge from their traditionally ascribed roles within the established, hegemonic discourses and narratives. In addition, the multiple layers of ink in each work of the series, as well as the seeming repetition in the visual representation of different works in the series, imply the artist’s continuous practice of applying layers of ink repeatedly over an extended period. This reveals the artist’s singular, labour-intensive efforts with the material. It is therefore worth considering why the artist might favour such ritualistic, repetitive, and enduring actions over more transient artistic activities, as well as the specific dialogues and phenomena that occur between the material and the artist in such prolonged engagements.

By situating Yang’s work as illustrative of art’s materialities possessing intrinsic agentic capacities, the chapter examines the artmaking-process as a space where inert matter—ink and other materials, such as *xuan* paper and brush—transition from being under human control to acting as co-agents. This redefinition of agency, from intentionality to effectivity, underscores a continuous production of effects, celebrating a vital ontology where both artists and materials are seen as participants in a self-organising, self-generating process marked by unpredictable outcomes. Through this lens, Yang’s work exemplifies instances of emergent agency, challenging the notion of human dominance in the materialisation of art—specifically, the emphasis, in

traditional painting, on a master's brushwork, and predetermined ideological meanings over the potential capacities of ink to produce effects and affects in the creative process—and emphasising the importance of relational dynamics in the realisation of art and the world it inhabits.

Extending the exploration of “agency,” Chapter 4 focuses on the inclusion of living or more-than-human elements in art, exemplified by Liang Shaoji's sculptural installation *Chains: The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Nature Series, No. 79* (fig. 11) in his *Nature Series*. I chose this work because the silk in the installation reveals a strong sense of being produced by the spinning of silkworms, which sparked my interest in the use of biological materials in art and, more specifically, the involvement of animals in the artmaking-process. I became particularly interested in the role of the silkworm during artmaking and its relations with the artist and other material components—in this case the industrial metal chains—with which it would not normally associate or come into contact. The inclusion of Liang's work will help to reshape our traditional understanding of the human as the sole maker in productive activities, and suggest a more intricate web of relationships that constitute an artwork within which more-than-human agency actively contributes to the making.

Through tracing the silkworm's agentic participation in the continuous phenomenon of biotechnological, biological, and ecological entanglements of humans, non-humans and more-than-humans in the artmaking-process, the chapter explores how Liang's ontobiological framework offers the possibility not only to raise questions about human subjectivity, autonomy, and intentionality, but also actively challenge these notions. This exploration will help to uncover how the potential for agentic participation of

animals in art can provide a fresh ethico-political perspective on the nature of interspecies interactions, and can open up ways for us to move away from traditional human-centric ethics towards a heightened understanding of a “world” we are encouraged to reconnect with, and become more "response-able" towards.

The subsequent two chapters—while also embodying themes of processuality, agency, and a rejection of reductive dualism as a critique of dualist ontology in the context of specific intra-actions within dynamic events—shift the focus onto exploring how Material Art can serve as a conduit for re-engaging with the materiality of life and struggle, moving beyond overt political narratives or the contentious dimensions of socio-political contexts. This shift is inspired by the insights of prominent New Materialist scholars—including postcolonial scholars, feminists, and queer theorists—who have embraced New Materialism as a framework that is deeply rooted in material embodiment, aimed at both understanding and positively transforming the social world. Unlike poststructuralism and social constructionism, which often create a chasm between theory and practice through a focus on textuality and discourse, New Materialism calls for a re-engagement with the tangible aspects of life, advocating for a perception of the world as inherently contextual and relational, instead of it being essential and fixed.

The upcoming chapters delve into New Materialism’s call to revisit matter itself and its efficacy in social relations, resonating with Levi Bryant’s critique of the gradual invisibility of tangible things, which have obscured their crucial roles in shaping social,

political, and biological landscapes.<sup>107</sup> This oversight has constrained discussions on art's potential to engage with societal issues within a politicized framework, pointing to the need for a re-evaluation of power relations that acknowledges the dispersed agency among human and non-human actors within the confines of patriarchal capitalism. The two chapters seek to collaborate with a broader array of allies to uncover how Material Art can illuminate the subtleties of human engagement with materials in everyday life. This is particularly relevant for activities that shape cultural or artistic norms, fashions, tastes, and consumer standards, whether through individual craftsmanship or collective labour in mass production, and how these interactions can redefine experience and knowledge-production in the creation and perception of art. Specifically, the focus will be on Lin Tianmiao's *The Proliferation of Thread Winding* and He Xiangyu's *Cola Project* respectively, underscoring the limitations of human engagement with materials and the inherent risks of such encounters in their conventional productive activities. The argument leans towards advocating for an engagement that is more direct, affective, and ontological, rather than relying on traditional representational methods of knowledge production. This examination aims to spotlight specific practices of "knowing in being" that emphasize experiential and bodily sensing, underlining the significance of affective and ontological processes that precede conscious reflection.<sup>108</sup> Rather than merely depicting the world, this approach seeks to foster new experiences and insights into the corporeal aspects of life and productive activities, especially in contexts often associated with struggle, violence, and trauma, such as domestic handicraft and the industrial mass production of

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<sup>107</sup> Levi R. Bryant, *Onto-Cartography: An Ontology of Machines and Media* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University, 2014), 3.

<sup>108</sup> Karen McCormack, "Stratified Reproduction and Poor Women's Resistance," *Gender & Society*, 19(5) (2005): 660–79.

commodities.

Chapter 5 focuses on re-immersion into the materiality of life and struggle through the activation of the affective qualities of materials in art and artmaking, and centres on Lin Tianmiao's installation *The Proliferation of Thread Winding* (fig. 12). I chose this work as its use of materials is not primarily aimed at reflecting, representing, or reproducing the domain of crafts practices, or providing an overt feminist critique of "women's work" in the domestic sphere. Instead, it seeks to evoke affect—not in opposition to thought but as a vehicle for generating understanding—in the viewer. This affective encounter does not rely on thought to affirm its necessity but rather on the unpredictability of an encounter that sparks thought, acknowledging the critical need for thoughtful engagement or a passion to think. This chapter contends with the tendency in existing scholarship to translate Lin's visual language into oversimplified narratives of passive female experiences within the domestic realm. It rethinks traditional representational modes of knowledge production that often marginalize nuanced understandings and experiences. The discussion draws attention to the psychological and cultural implications of handicraft, particularly within the context of cotton production, advocating for a re-evaluation of these laborious processes and associated psychological experiences as integral to our shared history and experience.

Here, Lin's work exemplifies how art can catalyse a response to the social sphere through its affective qualities, connecting human bodies with their social and physical environments, eliciting specific feelings for encounters and events beyond individual experiences. These phenomena, occurring before and alongside the development of subjectivity, effectively blur the distinctions between human and non-human

materialities as well as between subjects and objects. Crucially, I will reveal that these affective encounters can act as catalysts for deeper, critical inquiries into the social sphere or serve as foundations for the evolution of thought. Lin's work showcases this type of encounter, illustrating how affect can be physically inscribed within art to forge an unfamiliar yet captivating scene in such a way that it invites the viewer to participate not just as an observer but as a co-creator of meaning and experience.

Chapter 6 introduces another perspective by emphasising onto-epistemology over epistemology as a means of re-immersion into the materiality of life and struggle, exemplified by He Xiangyu's installation *A Barrel of Dregs of Coca-Cola* (fig. 13), part of *Cola Project*. Unlike materials discussed in previous chapters, Coca-Cola is a material with neither art or craft associations (such as ink and cotton thread), nor does it hold an identity as a class of material in its own right, but is rather a subset of beverages, carbonated drinks, soft drinks, or suchlike. He's work, which involved the boiling of thousands of litres of Coca-Cola into a bitumen-like residue, serves as a compelling case study for interrogating the dynamic interplay between human labour and commodified objects. This exploration necessitates a reflection on Marxist historical materialism, which views human individuals as active agents who, through their interactions with the material world, not only transform the nature of objects and materials around them but also undergo changes themselves. This dual process of external manipulation and internal transformation underscores a fundamental orientation towards objects, where human actions are deeply dependent on and directed towards the material world. Within this framework, object-directedness morphs into a materialist form of intentionality, highlighting human engagement with materials as a foundational aspect of historical development. Historical materialism thus frames

history as a dynamic self-constitution process of humanity, navigating the complexities and potential alienations inherent in human-material relations while asserting that humans, as social beings, remain the primary agents of historical change, despite potential estrangement from their labour and themselves. Jane Bennett's critique of the "unnatural animation of artifacts" within capitalist processes adds depth to this discussion, revealing how capitalism fetishizes objects, imbues them with a false sense of vitality, while obscuring the genuine vitality of human labour.<sup>109</sup>

In this chapter, I will move beyond the foundational humanist approach that has dominated much qualitative research, which emphasizes human actions and narratives, and the interpretation of these through human-centric methodologies like ethnographic observation, interviews, reporting, and interpretive analysis. Notably, He Xiangyu, despite some photographic documentation, left no archival textual materials, nor did he facilitate interviews with workers regarding their specific engagements and experiences with boiling Coca-Cola. My exploration focuses on the onto-epistemological artmaking-process, where workers—once mere components in the industrial production system—interact with the evolving phenomena of Coca-Cola fluid in a state of entanglement, which diverges from their standard industrial experiences and understandings towards things. This encourages a rethinking of the nature of creativity, production, and opens the possibility for a more genuine engagement with the material world that respects the inherent vitality and agency of both human and non-human actors. This analysis extends beyond the insights of historical materialism to consider redistribution of agency (and responsibility) and ways of knowing that recognize the

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<sup>109</sup> Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 117.

active participation of both human creators and non-human entities. This challenges the idea of material substance as stable and predictable and advocates for a better understanding of the complex interplay of human and non-human agency in the creation and perception of art.

## Chapter 1

### Material as Unfixed and in an Ongoing Process: Zhang Huan's *Berlin Buddha*

This chapter embarks on an exploration of art's materiality by analysing Zhang Huan's ephemeral installation *Berlin Buddha* (2007, fig. 1), positioning it against the conventional perception of art materials as static and immutable. By emphasising the processual and relational nature of materials in art, this chapter challenges the notion of artworks as mere objects, suggesting instead that they are dynamic entities characterized by an ongoing process of material unfolding and becoming. *Berlin Buddha*, part of the *Ash Buddha* series (2007–2019)—as discussed in Nancy P. Lin's catalogue essay "Zhang Huan: Ash" from *The Allure of Matter*, which introduces many of Zhang's works made with incense ash and discusses the transformation from abstract ash paintings to ash sculptures, specifically highlighting works like *Berlin Buddha* that further dramatise the themes of destruction and ephemerality—exemplifies this dynamism.<sup>110</sup>

In this sculptural installation, the material of incense ash is rendered flexible and unpredictable, subject to the temporal conditions of its environment or context. It shows a monumental Buddha made of incense ash in the process of collapsing, facing its mould, which remains intact. Over the course of the work's exhibition, the sculpture eventually disintegrates. *Berlin Buddha* presents itself as an inherently unstable display, underscoring a continuous, real-time experience over any static aesthetic end product. The viewer cannot but notice the external relation between the work and its environment. This work provides an exploration of the material process, which can

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<sup>110</sup> Nancy P. Lin, "Zhang Huan: Ash," in *The Allure of Matter: Material Art from China*, eds., Wu Hung and Orianna Cacchione (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 233–7.

manifest as a direct aspect of the artwork through immediate, physical means that are available to the viewer's experience. This characteristic fosters a processual understanding of the artwork, transcending the notion of it as a collection of determined objects, to be, instead, a site of ongoing material unfolding and becoming, marked by the unpredictable disintegration and temporary stability of the ash Buddha sculpture. This underscores the incense ash's capacity for movement and change as the condition of possibility for the performance of the sculpture.

The focus of this chapter does not remain on a merely representational level, where incense ash's capacity can be seen to enact a physical change that transcends its inanimate nature in religious contexts. Instead, the kind of performativity and processuality that I aim to articulate in this chapter seek to foster an understanding of *Berlin Buddha* as embodying a philosophy of process, change, and flux, rather than merely being constrained to the components of a substance-based philosophy. This perspective confronts a traditional view of substance, which, as philosopher Alfred North Whitehead articulates in his *The Concept of Nature*, published 100 years ago, is often seen as “a substratum for attributes,”<sup>111</sup>—a notion that underpins a fundamental bifurcation of nature. This bifurcation is problematic because it implies that substance, existing merely in space and time, becomes the foundation upon which attributes are superimposed, thereby obscuring the inherent dynamism, interconnectivity, and fluidity of materials. Michael Halewood further critiques this substance-centric view by noting that it leads to a reductive perception of items as isolated entities, “unrelated to any other,” thus making “it impossible for information to pass between such objects.”<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Concept of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), 21.

<sup>112</sup> Michael Halewood, *A. N. Whitehead and Social Theory* (London: Anthem Press, 2011),

This stance not only rejects, but also overlooks, the essential qualities of dynamism, process, and fluency inherent in materials.

In contrast, Barad's notion of "agential realism" offers a compelling counterpoint, suggesting that both subjects and structures are part of an ongoing process rather than a static state. Barad's performative understanding redefines matter not as "an inherent, fixed property of abstract, independently existing objects" but as something that "refers to phenomena in their ongoing materialisation."<sup>113</sup> This materialisation is not an isolated event but occurs through exchange, relational entanglement, and intra-action, engaging all participants on an equal basis.

The dynamism of the incense ash at the display site was not due to an act of the ashes alone. Instead, the dynamic and performative nature of the ash Buddha sculpture relied on constant negotiations of human movement, environmental conditions, and—more importantly—the making-trajectories that brought the work's unique characteristics to life. The materiality of *Berlin Buddha* is thus characterised by evolving relationships and ongoing materialisations through intra-action, indicating an unfixed nature defined by a network of interactions that shape its being.

This lack of fixity gains particular intrigue when we attend to the primary status of incense ash as discarded material in the context of Buddhist ritual practices. Many studies have overlooked this aspect in their interpretation of Zhang's *Ash Buddha* series. Current interpretative frameworks (such as Nina Miall's *Like A Phoenix Rising: The*

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<sup>113</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 151.

*Ash Works of Zhang Huan* and Huangsheng Wang's *The Ascetic Artist: Zhang Huan*) have centred on how the artist's engagement with Buddhism influences the artistic activities, meanings, and values of the work.<sup>114</sup> In doing so, Miall dematerializes incense ash—a key element in Zhang's artistic expression—into a conceptual emblem filled with collective desires, representative of Buddhist spirituality. In these interpretations, the value of incense ash is linked to its role in Buddhist doctrine, where it is viewed as a static cultural symbol of ideological embodiment. Consequently, these analyses emphasise the spiritual or conceptual dimensions of incense ash above its physical properties, privileging the metaphysical above the material, and the ideological above the ontological. This perspective fails to acknowledge that incense ash primarily consists of discarded byproducts from Buddhist rituals, which Zhang and his studio workers have creatively transformed into continuously evolving art pieces.

I therefore find that it is precisely incense ash's status as waste and its association with forgetfulness that offers the potential for a re-evaluation of Zhang's work. By looking into its active and dynamic participation in the work's emergence and exhibition, we can see how it significantly contributes to the vivid materiality of the work. Indeed, while Zhang often discusses the spiritual meaning of incense ash, he does not extensively elaborate on the meaning of the work itself. Zhang identifies his ash works as taking more of an “unreasonable and reckless” approach, since “playing according

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<sup>114</sup> Nina Miall, “Like A Phoenix Rising: The Ash Works of Zhang Huan” in *Zhang Huan: Ash*, eds., Harry Blain and Graham Southern (London: Haunch of Venison, 2008) and Huangsheng Wang, “The Ascetic Artist: Zhang Huan” in *Zhang Huan: Ashman*, eds., Elena Genua (Milan: PAC and 24 ORE Cultura, 2010). For other works examining or mentioning Zhang's *Ash Buddha*, see e.g., Wu Hung and Orianna Cacchione, *The Allure of Matter* (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, 2019), 27, Elena, *Ashman*, 16–27, 82 and Alessia Daisy Lai, “Buddhist Influence in Chinese art: Zhang Huan and the Relationship with Contemporary Society” (Masters Dissertation, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, 2019), 45–66.

to the rules is simply remaining in the system,” whereas “[by] being reckless I find my own voice, my own expression.”<sup>115</sup> His employment of incense ash does not necessarily frame the work within predisposed religious contexts, but identifies the possibilities of using discarded material to reflect on the sensual experience of the viewing and art-making-process itself.

This chapter will unveil incense ash’s complex material specificity and inter-, or rather intra-, actions with human agents. This investigation acknowledges that our understanding of the roles and potential of incense ash is often incomplete. Commonly overlooked in everyday life and underestimated in its capacity for active interaction with humans, incense ash is frequently dismissed as a mere inanimate and passive entity subject to human control. It also highlights the temporal nature of incense ash beyond mere cycles of extraction, production, consumption, and disposal. I will delve into the dynamic interplay between the incense ash and the viewer during the ephemeral display process, and trace the work’s making-process, wherein humans (the artist and his studio workers) and incense ash become intertwined in an interplay that allows for a unique performance of ash Buddha sculpture to occur. Through the analysis of these processes, I aim to uncover the evolving role of incense ash that acts not as a pre-existing phenomenon but as intricately defined through its intra-actions within various stages of an art practice—from its collection, creation, and exhibition to its life post-exhibition, across varied contexts—from sacred places to the artist’s studio and gallery space.

Through this analysis, the chapter advocates for an understanding of art’s materiality

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<sup>115</sup> “Reflections on Ash: A Collective Soul Zhang Huan and Elena Geuna in Conversation” in *Ashman*, 23.

as inherently unfixed, aligning with New Materialist perspectives, especially Barad's concept that boundaries are "perpetually under negotiation." This invites us to embrace a conception of "ongoingness,"<sup>116</sup> suggesting a "methodology of continuing"<sup>117</sup> amidst uncertainty, uncontrollability, and potential for both futility and finality.

This is not to suggest that the work lacks religious meaning or is disconnected from social realities. Instead, focusing on the work's ongoing process of becoming and its state of being, where human and non-human entities jointly contribute, offers an alternative approach to exploring the artwork's connection with our realities and religious spirits. As Petra Lange-Berndt notes: "Material Complicity [...] has a clear political agenda."<sup>118</sup> To focus on the materiality of art "means not to discuss aesthetic issues of quality, expressiveness or symbolic content but to investigate transpersonal societal problems and matters of concern."<sup>119</sup>

As I examine *Berlin Buddha*, I avoid preconceived notions of the work's significance as embodying Buddhist spirituality through entrenched notions of animistic mysticism or symbolism. Instead, I seek to transcend the traditional confines associated with materials derived from religious contexts within art practices. This chapter, in alignment with Barad's agential realism, regards knowing, thinking, and observing as emerging from the artwork's intra-actions, challenging the notion that these processes exist prior to our engagement with the art or its creation. Thus, the human response, whether critical or inspired by religious sentiment, arises through direct encounters with

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<sup>116</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

<sup>117</sup> Ukeles, *An Analysis of Maintenance Art*, 216.

<sup>118</sup> Petra Lange-Berndt, *Materialit*, 15.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

the artwork's making or viewing process. While I will elaborate more on this perspective concerning the interrelations of art's materiality with social, cultural, and political landscapes in Chapters 5 and 6, the present chapter will also discuss how *Berlin Buddha*'s ongoing materialisation opens up the possibility for reflecting on wider socio-political and religious themes. This materialisation is facilitated by relational entanglement and intra-action between human actors (artist, other makers, and the viewer) and non-human elements (not only the ash Buddha sculpture but also the aluminous mould).

**i. Encountering the *ash Buddha* and the *aluminium Buddha* at the exhibition**

Zhang's series consists of installation works exhibited in different locations between 2007–2019, presenting an ash Buddha sculpture facing its aluminium mould. Versions include *Berlin Buddha* (2007, fig. 1), *Taipei Buddha* (2010, fig. 14), *Sydney Buddha* (2015) (fig. 15), and *Miami Buddha* (2019).<sup>120</sup> Each sculpture is unique in scale, shape, and placement. *Berlin Buddha* was the first—and most representative—work in the series, drawing much scholarly attention, and it is the main focus of this chapter. Created in 2007 for Zhang's solo exhibition at Haunch of Venison, Berlin, the four-metre-high Buddha (fig. 16) was made of six tons of incense ash collected from temples in Shanghai, exhibited in the process of collapsing. Opposite the sculpture, the hollow mould (fig. 17) from which the ash Buddha was cast echoes its classical posture of meditation.<sup>121</sup> At the show's opening, the ash Buddha's face was supported by a moulded plate with an iron scaffold to maintain the upper body's stability and ensure a

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<sup>120</sup> Some of the specific works have also been repeatedly exhibited in other countries without changes to the forms and names of the works, such as *Taipei Buddha* at Palazzo Vecchio and Forte di Belvedere in Florence in 2013, and *Berlin Buddha* at Art Stage, Singapore, in 2013, and the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart, Australia, in 2014.

<sup>121</sup> For meanings of gestures of Buddha statue, see Tatjana Blau and Mirabai Blau, *Buddhist Symbols*, (Sterling Publishing Company, Inc., 2003), 94–110.

relatively complete appearance, although the right arm had already decomposed. When ten invited friends of the artist removed the plate, the face of the ash Buddha immediately collapsed to the floor (fig. 18).

This work diverges from traditional artistic experiences that prioritize aesthetic permanence, as the disintegration of the ash Buddha is not pre-determined but influenced by its intrinsic properties (such as viscosity and weight), gravitational forces, and environmental conditions like temperature, humidity, and vibrations caused by the viewer. Many interpretations of the *Ash Buddha* series suggest that the incense ash is not a passive medium but rather plays an active role, and evolves in response to these external factors.<sup>122</sup> Without these environmental and human elements, the sculpture, governed solely by gravity, would likely collapse in a more uniform manner due to its inherently unstable structure. However, the presence of these factors introduces a dynamic, unpredictable, and irregular progression in the sculpture's disintegration, making them not just influential but part of productive agents to the evolving nature of the artwork.

The work's significance lies in how the collapsing process of the ash Buddha reveals layered narratives of human interaction. The ash Buddha's performative nature is partly due to its seeming out-of-placeness. At first glance, the artist presents an object whose artificiality is accentuated by its placement within the exhibition space. The structure, reminiscent of the grand, stable Buddha statues in Buddhist temples, now takes on a playful and surprising character. This transformation is also private, as only those

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<sup>122</sup> E.g. Nancy, "Zhang Huan: Ash"; Miall, "Like A Phoenix Rising"; Huangsheng, "The Ascetic Artist."

present can witness the phenomenon of the collapsing process, a spectacle not replicable elsewhere (despite the work being exhibited globally, repeat viewings are unlikely) or through second-hand documentation post-collapse.

This one-time experience, coupled with the transience of the intervention, underscores the work's emphasis on "immediacy" over durability. This immediacy is achieved by focusing on the present moment and experimenting with the process. The viewer is engaged in an active and sensual experience, where immediate understanding stems from direct, personal interaction with the work's temporal environment. This interaction fosters a deeper comprehension in the viewer of the relationship between their bodies and the physical world.

This does not imply that it is solely the human presence and the temporal conditions of the environment that cause the ash Buddha's collapse. The material composition and structure of the ash Buddha also play pivotal roles in creating a dynamic interplay of the incense ash, environmental conditions, gravity, and the viewer. The statue, meticulously made, responds sensitively to its surroundings, exhibiting a propensity for unpredictable transformation under the influence of external factors and gravitational forces. The individual incense ash is light and ethereal. When combined with a carefully calibrated adhesive, the mixture achieves a delicate balance.

The viscosity afforded by the precisely measured amounts of glue and water (I will elaborate on this below) added to the incense ash lends the material a certain degree of cohesiveness, while its innate looseness ensures the structure's fragility. As the glue's hold weakens over time, and the moist ash that was packed into the aluminium mould

gradually dries upon the mould's removal, gravity pulls at the looser particles of ash, hastening the sculpture's decay. This process is unpredictable—different parts of the statue may collapse at different times, influenced by the uneven distribution of mass and the varying strengths of the adhesive bonds. This calculated blend allows the statue to maintain its form temporarily, embodying a transitory state between solidity and disintegration. This inherent “in-betweenness” of the ash Buddha's structure is crucial. It exists in a state of suspended equilibrium, precariously balanced at the threshold of cohesion and collapse. In this dynamic, the ash Buddha sculpture continuously acts both as a reactor to and a reactant within the exhibition space.

In this sense, the work establishes a structure of temporary encounters, aligning with what Guy Debord might describe as “the construction of situations.”<sup>123</sup> The audience, the artwork, and their contextual temporalities coalesce to form a dynamic “situation,” grounded in the tension of finitude. This creates an experience for the viewer that is ephemeral and transitory. What is witnessed is something which cannot last for the non-primary audience. It embodies a sense of “immediacy,” redirecting the viewer's attention from the everyday life to a type of non-space where the usual constructs of space and time are symbolically negated. Thus, the work's significance lies in its democratisation of agency at a phenomenal level, repositioning humans within networks encompassing diverse phenomena and redefining “reality” as a web of interactions of “things” and people. The viewer is compelled to engage with the relationships between the artwork and its surroundings, becoming acutely aware of their

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<sup>123</sup> Guy Debord, “Report on The Construction of Situations and on the Terms of Organization and Action of the International Situationist Tendency,” in *Guy Debord And The Situationist International*, ed. Tom McDonough, 1st ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 29–50.

own movement, position, and physicality in relation to the object of incense ash. In this way, the visitors' bodies are, to an extent, materialised within the exhibition space.

The work transcends the mere foregrounding of the incense ash as the central subject to enact the performance process, or the return to human corporeality as an overlooked element or source of radical otherness. It probes the interplay between materiality and ideality, exploring how these are defined in relation to each other and the implications thereof. Margrit Shildrick aptly notes, "bodies, rather than being material and graspable from the start, are materialized through a set of discursive practices."<sup>124</sup> Echoing Judith Butler's assertion that a pure body cannot be referenced without its simultaneous further reformation, Shildrick contends that "[the] body, then, is not a prediscursive reality, but rather a locus of production, the site of contested meaning, and as such, fluid and unstable, never given and fixed."<sup>125</sup>

*Berlin Buddha* emerges as a hybrid of behaviourism and phenomenological inquiry. It diverges from the conventional notion of an artwork as a discrete, portable, and autonomous entity detached from its environment, revealing instead its deep interconnection with the unique characteristics of its surroundings and its viewer. This artwork envisions the viewer as a collective community, moving beyond the framework of isolated individuals engaging in a one-to-one interaction with the piece. The essence of *Berlin Buddha* is found in the collective experience it fosters—it is not just about individual reactions and interactions with the artwork, but about how the presence and collective dynamics of the viewer contribute to and transform the art experience. When

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<sup>124</sup> Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2002), 10.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

the viewer gathers around the ash Buddha statue, their combined presence influences the environmental conditions, such as airflow and the subtle vibrations of the exhibition floor.

These changes, in turn, affect the rate and nature of the sculpture's disintegration, illustrating the profound impact of communal presence on the artwork. This approach challenges the viewer to reconsider their roles, not merely as individuals within a society, but as integral components of a broader human collective. *Berlin Buddha* orchestrates scenarios that encourage the viewer to recognise themselves as part of a social entity, fostering a temporary yet meaningful sense of community. This sense of community, whether ephemeral or utopian, empowers the viewer to connect more deeply with each other and the artwork in a more profound, more collective manner.

The experience of the viewer engaging with *Berlin Buddha* is greatly influenced by the awareness of the work's inevitable disintegration. *Berlin Buddha* finds its completion in its shift from form to formlessness, compelling the viewer to grapple with the dual realities of the sculpture's tangible presence and its eventual unshaped state as part of their experience. This interaction with the artwork is imbued with a sense of anticipation and awareness. As the viewer witness the gradual transformation of the ash Buddha, they are confronted with a mix of emotions: the apprehension of witnessing the ash lose its sculpted form and the acceptance that this transition is an integral part of the work. Severin Fowles's concept of "the carnality of absence" is aptly demonstrated in this context.<sup>126</sup> The transition from form to formlessness becomes a poignant expression of this idea, emphasising the physicality of the ash's presence, even

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<sup>126</sup> Severin Fowles, "People Without Things," *An Anthropology of Absence* (2010): 23–41.

as it loses its defined shape. This experience of loss, then, is not a peripheral aspect of the artwork but a central force that anchors the viewer firmly in the present moment.<sup>127</sup> The memory and understanding of the artwork's transformation from form to formlessness become integral parts of the viewing experience, offering a contemplative reflection on the nature of form, presence, and impermanence.

This sense of loss experienced that the viewer experiences in the present inevitably brings forth metaphysical meanings tied to Buddhist spirituality, especially given *Berlin Buddha*'s direct sculptural shape, referencing a Buddha statue. This chapter does not completely dismiss the metaphysical significations. Many interpretations of the *Ash Buddha* series focus on its display stage, wherein the viewer engages in meditative observation, experiencing emotional subjectivity as the ash disintegrates. Indeed, engaging the incense ash in a process of natural falling transforms the Buddha into an unformed end product, suggesting the vulnerability of the physical body in accordance with Buddhist beliefs. In particular, from the religious perspective, the uncontrollable collapse of the massive form evokes the laws of karma concerning the circle of life, involving the passing of time and a continuous spiritual rebirth, as the ashes are remoulded for future exhibitions.<sup>128</sup> The Ash Buddha confounds the idea of a uniform, stable identity, presenting instead a mutable subject that is continuously in the process of self-redefinition.<sup>129</sup> Seeing the final process of the structure's return to ashes, the viewer may engender a similar religious consciousness about the conceptual reduction of being to emptiness.<sup>130</sup> Here, however, a sense of emptiness does not mean a formalist

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Winston, "Buddhist Resistance."

<sup>129</sup> Nina, "Ash Works."

<sup>130</sup> Nina, "Ash Works."

perspective of nothingness. Rather, it entails a Buddhist assertion of the self entering a kind of “third space of intermediate experience,” which denotes a sense of spaciousness that is experienced as something positive, joyful, and creative.<sup>131</sup>

While the spiritual significance of the work during its display is readily discerned, what has been significantly overlooked is the potential for socio-political critique that the display process of *Berlin Buddha* reveals. Zhang’s previous art practices are mostly known as socially and politically engaged performances, involving nudity, blood, and violence. *65 Kilograms* (1994, fig. 19) showcases Zhang’s naked body chained from the ceiling with his blood dripping down into a pan placed on a white cloth, suggesting both “fragile and mingled identities, wanderings of the subjects, fear and struggles, abjections and lyricisms.”<sup>132</sup> His other ash works include *Canal Building* (2007, fig. 20) illustrating a political and historical reflection on the collective efforts of building a canal in reference to the industrial and agricultural reforms advocated by Mao during 1958 to 1960. Another is *Pagoda* (2009, fig. 21), which reveals political narratives about the Wenchuan earthquake shown through a taxidermized pig poking its head out of a carved window of a bell-shaped pagoda. These both contain strong socio-political reflections on Chinese realities.<sup>133</sup> I propose that Zhang did not simply abandon his engagement with socio-political issues for an ontological viewpoint devoid of relevance

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<sup>131</sup> Mark Epstein, “Sip My Ocean: Emptiness as Inspiration” in *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, eds., Laurie Anderson et al. (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2004), 34.

<sup>132</sup> Octavio Zaya, “Zhang Huan: A Deeper Panic,” *Pilgrimage to Santiago*, 2000.

<sup>133</sup> For more details about Zhang’s ash works, including *Canal Building*, see Zhang Huan, “Statements” in *Zhang Huan - Blessings* (New York: Pace Wildenstein, 2008); “The commentary of *Pagoda* extends beyond a general observation of social ills—in a tenor deemed politically acceptable by Chinese authorities—and enters the controversial terrain of critically assessing state policies and decisions.” For analysis of the political narratives revealed in *Pagoda* see Winston, “The Buddhist Resistance.”

to his earlier work, which was deeply sensitive to societal problems. Nor is this work merely a display of his religious trajectories or a means to evoke the bodily sensations of the material dynamics of incense ash. Rather, I suggest that it is possible to garner an alternative reading of *Ash Buddha*, in which an implicit political mediation may be inherent to its material configurations.<sup>134</sup>

Existing scholarship has considered the dynamic movement of the disintegrating ash Buddha and its religious interpretations, overlooking the relational presence of the aluminous Buddha mould exhibited across from the ash Buddha. Interpreted as reminiscent of the original complete form, it is, from a representational perspective, read as manifesting the passing of life via disintegration from the perspective of religious ideology. However, while the aluminium mould represents a kind of causality, stating where the ash Buddha came from, what the viewer experienced at the exhibition was more of a juxtaposition of two forms, unstable and stable, than their initial stage as an integrated form where the incense ash was infused in the aluminium mould. The external form of the aluminium mould consists of various small concave silvery blocks, presenting less as a smooth surface, giving more of a chain-like effect (fig. 22). The contrast between the loose and fragile ash Buddha and the fixed and firm state of the aluminium mould may ultimately be seen as a trivial or fragile entity versus a tough and powerful, unshakeable, entity. When the monumental sacred Buddha statue gradually collapses, the originally collective effortful work, in turn, ceases to be detectable, while the aluminium mould remains standing.

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<sup>134</sup> Christian Berger, *Conceptualism and Materiality: Matters of Art and Politics* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 8–9.

Purposefully placing two Buddha sculptures face to face dramatizes the visual effect, establishing a visual contrast that is more antagonistic than harmonious. The mould has already served the purpose of forming the shape of the ash Buddha, and Zhang could have chosen not to exhibit it, or to place it in any other position, which might have revealed its relevance more easily. As it is displayed, however, the viewer is unable to view the frontal appearance of both sculptures from the same angle. In order to see both, and realise the causal relationship between the ash and its mould, the viewer would need to move around, or look back and forth. Set in a relatively independent observational position, the arrangement intentionally creates a visual effect of antithesis. The viewer was exposed to two oppositional physical forms: one with a hollow interior yet capable of retaining its firm shape, versus one made of solidly packed ashes but which is nevertheless unstable. This ambivalent placement is evident in later versions of Ash Buddha, such as *Sydney Buddha* (fig. 15), where the mould had also had its head purposefully removed and placed on the ground. The mould does not simply act as a reference to the origins of the ash Buddha, but as an independent sculpture with deliberately designed features, giving rise to strong comparative relations.

In *Berlin Buddha*, the viewer is situated in a sensuous environment that may engender a sense of loss of control and human fragility as the collapsing ash statue faces the monumental power of the four-metre tall mould-as-statue on the other side. The light, solid status of the aluminium Buddha, contrasted with the darkened, faded ash Buddha may suggest the pointlessness of struggles and voices below the absolute power of the state. Such unshakable power can determine or support human efforts and will, as seen in the studio workers' collective endeavour to create the ash Buddha sculpture—a

process that will be explored further in this chapter—yet also possesses the power to destroy, resulting in the disillusionment and the erasure of the human efforts invested in achieving a goal, in this instance, the realisation of an artwork for display at the exhibition. Zhang also perceives that the performance process of ash Buddha sculpture as emblematic of a “collective collapse,” which he interprets as “a collective uselessness, action through inaction.”<sup>135</sup> This ambivalence hints at the potential of political concerns deriving from or being complicit in a materialist aesthetic.

As such Zhang’s *Ash Buddha* does not necessarily mark a complete departure from his previous, socially engaged performances, as a focus on the human condition continues to be central to his conceptual framework. As Elena stresses, “from his early, radical performances associated with Beijing’s East Village [...] to his more recent, large-scale sculpture and paintings made of temple ash inspired by his devotion to Buddhism, Zhang has set himself the ambitious task of plumbing the universal aspects of human nature.”<sup>136</sup> By composing incense ash through ambivalent arrangements, Zhang uses the ever-changing meanings of the *Ash Buddha*’s materiality, to respond socio-political realities. Commenting on the suppression of state control over individual will, as well as utopian dreams of a harmonious society put forward by the nation revealed through ontological strategies, gives social meaning to the discursive roles of incense ash.

Although the work seems to emphasise experiencing the artwork in the present and the spiritual or socio-political response elicited in the materially embodied process of the

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<sup>135</sup> “Reflections on Ash,” 23.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

work's display, it does not necessarily reduce *Berlin Buddha* to a mere "happening." Current scholarly discussions often accentuate this aspect, but it is crucial to question whether the work solely seeks to offer transitory solutions in the immediate context. This inquiry becomes particularly pertinent when considering Zhang's choice of incense ash over other fine particles like sand or clay, which could similarly enable a performative effect. Zhang's selection of incense ash suggests a deliberate focus on the transformed and dislocated nature of the material, rather than merely underscoring the artwork's ephemerality. At the first glance, what the viewer sees is not necessarily the rawness of incense ash that immediately recalls its presence in temples, but the present phenomenon of a sculptural entity in dynamic movement. Unlike incense ashes lying formlessly scattered on the temple floor, what the *Ash Buddha* represents upon the viewer's first encounter is devoid of relation to the original context of the incense-burning process.

However, the encounter with the ash Buddha sculpture brings an immediate sensory experience—the smell of incense. As the viewer approaches the ash Buddha sculpture, the incense aroma subtly envelops them, triggering a multisensory experience. While the visual aspect of the ash may initially obscure its origins, the scent unmistakably identifies it as incense ash, a by-product of burned incense sticks. This realisation adds depth to the viewer's understanding of the artwork, as it brings the transformation of the ash from a ceremonial object to a component of a contemporary art piece into focus. This scent can evoke a range of emotions and memories, perhaps recalling personal experiences in temples or other spiritual settings. For many, the smell of incense is intrinsically linked to rituals, meditation, and a sense of tranquillity.

In particular, during the exhibition's launch, the viewer was invited to engage more

directly with the artwork by burning incense sticks and inserting them into the cracks of the aluminium Buddha mould, which subtly informed the viewer that the ash Buddha sculpture is composed of incense ash. This encounter would provoke an immediate realisation, prompting the viewer to contemplate the extensive and intricate process involved in transforming the once undistinguished incense ash into this form. This realisation not only heightens curiosity about the material's journey to its current state, but also connects the viewer more intimately with the artwork's transformative narrative and the displayed sculpture as a temporary state that is part of the process of its becoming. Thus, the focus shifts from the transient nature of the exhibition to the making-processes that not only contributed to, but are also closely tied to, the artwork's performance of disintegration during the display stage.

**ii. Trajectories of Buddhism and Buddhist resonances of incense ash for Zhang**

Before looking at the production of the work itself, it is necessary to ask where the incense ash came from, the material specificity of incense ash in Zhang's creation, and what physical qualities and traditional meanings incense ash and its previous physical form as incense carry. It was when Zhang moved back to China from the United States in 2005 that incense ash became one of his main materials for artistic creation. It first drew Zhang's attention when he visited the Longhua Temple in Shanghai, where he noticed that the ashes covering the temple floor was the result of people spending hours praying for their wishes to come true, burning incense as they did so.<sup>137</sup>

The Longhua Temple is one of the most representative religious sites in Shanghai, shaping the surrounding urban environment. While most of Shanghai's traditional

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<sup>137</sup> Nina, "Ash Works."

religious buildings vanished after 1949, a few Buddhist sites (such as the Jing'an and Longhua temples) remain, having received government protection as cultural sites.<sup>138</sup> Rather than remaining as traditional Buddhist structures, these temples were reconstructed to hold a plurality of functions capable of providing a unique cultural experience for tourists, as well as providing generic places of worship for both Buddhists and people of other faiths. It is thus both a monastic and profane complex in the urban fabric. According to Francesca Tarocco, Buddhism in Shanghai was once “formidable, eclectic, and adaptable.”<sup>139</sup> These buildings now act as an urban utopia against the illness of society, providing “an earthly paradise where practitioners carry out famine relief work, attempt to prevent natural calamities, and offer medical aid to those wounded in the war.”<sup>140</sup>

Zhang's choice to collect incense ash in temples around Shanghai may not only be due to him being a Shanghai resident, but may also relate to the dimension of religious places in Shanghai that integrates “religious revivalism” and “cultural nationalism,” which enables the witnessing of urban people's lives and hopes.<sup>141</sup> Zhang describes one such occasion of witnessing, and how, to him, the praying people “seemed to have entered another state of mind, as though they were hypnotized.”<sup>142</sup> To Zhang, the scene imbued incense ash with a particular material appeal, as its “remains speak to the

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<sup>138</sup> There were around 300 Buddhist buildings in Shanghai before 1949. For details about the history of Buddhist buildings in Shanghai, see Francesca Tarocco, “The City and The Pagoda: Buddhist Spatial Tactics in Shanghai,” in *Handbook of Religion and the Asian City: Aspiration and Urbanization in the Twenty-First Century*, ed., Peter van der Veer (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 90-112.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>142</sup> Zhang Huan, “Ash,” in *Zhang Huan: Ash*, eds., Harry Blain and Graham Southern (London: Haunch of Venison, 2008).

fulfilment of millions of hopes, dreams and blessings.”<sup>143</sup>

Although Zhang had not used incense ash in his art before his discovery in the Longhua Temple, his sudden interest in incense ash is not accidental, but closely associated with his developing perceptions of Buddhism. From his teenage years of worshipping Buddha to offering prayers for deceased relatives during Chinese New Year, Buddhism has been a consistent part of the artist’s life.<sup>144</sup> He recalls: “When I was young, I would go to the temple with my family and light incense and pray to Buddha. Even though at the time I didn’t really understand it, it was already part of my life.”<sup>145</sup> Although his early performance works already reflected some of his spiritual and meditative beliefs—such as *12 Square Meters* (1994, fig. 23), which shows the stoic and meditative endurance of Zhang’s naked body sitting coated in fish oil and honey in a public toilet in China, as a comment on the abject conditions of everyday life—they are more concerned with societal issues and the relationship between the self and the body than religion.

Upon his return to China in 2005, however, the art forms in Zhang’s works suddenly changed to object-based practices, often revealing a strong religious consciousness. Troubled by “a growing sense of dislocation” during his eight years in New York, Zhang felt the need to build close connections to Chinese traditions and religion so as to re-connect with his native culture, as “tradition is a nation’s body and religion is a

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Alessia Daisy Lai, “Buddhist Influences in Chinese Art: Zhang Huan and the Relationship with Contemporary Society,” (Masters Dissertation, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Venice, 2020), 48.

<sup>145</sup> Elena Guena, *Zhang Huan, Rebirth* (Milan: Project B Contemporary Art, 2009).

nation's spirit. Body and spirit form the complete existence. China charges forward at full speed now, but cannot abandon its body and spirit.”<sup>146</sup> With this ambitious perception and with the folk Buddhist culture and spirituality that had accompanied him since childhood, Zhang's return to China marked a point of a departure from progressive performance art towards religious-inspired practices, and he officially became a lay follower of Tibetan Buddhism in 2006.<sup>147</sup> Zhang became interested in Buddhism not only because it brings feelings of tranquillity and peace, but also because it helps him to better understand the relationship between cause and effect.<sup>148</sup> Concepts expressed in Tibetan Buddhism share similarities with the expressions of Zhang's artistic creations. In his view, the idea of karma within the cycle of life shares significant similarities with the cause-and-effect process. Karma, with its capacity to deliver exactly what each worshiper deserves—good or bad—governs every facet of life. Zhang believes that Buddhism equips us to navigate through hardships as effectively as a “dragon swimming against the current.”<sup>149</sup>

It is due to Zhang's Buddhist faith that he is able to have his particular artistic sensitivity to religious iconography and objects. His use of incense ash is motivated by its symbolic significance as a compound of collective spiritual messages. Zhang explains that he is

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<sup>146</sup> Miall, “Like A Phoenix Rising”; For Zhang's eight years in New York, see Shen Yu, “Zhang Huan: After Nirvana, a New Life Begins,” in *Magic Paradise: I Do | Huan Art Life Space*, ed. Mi Qiu (Beijing, China: BPG Artmedia Co., Ltd., 2015).

<sup>147</sup> Wu Hung, *Zhang Huan Studio: Art and Labor* [张洄工作室：艺术与劳动] (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2009), 133.

<sup>148</sup> Elena Genua, *Zhang Huan: Ashman* (Milan: PAC and 24 ORE Cultura, 2010), 17.

<sup>149</sup> Daisy Lai, “Buddhist Influences,” 48.

sensitive to waste materials like incense ash because they contain “a sense of time” that, in the case of incense ash, reflects back on the prayers; they carry with them the “collective memories, creations, and wishes” embodied in the incense-burning process.<sup>150</sup> In Zhang’s view, incense ash is regarded not as an end product of the incense-burning event, nor as a concrete representation of the physicality of incense ash’s material factuality, but rather as a data carrier embodying human ritual actions and spiritual narratives: “To some, ash seems useless and insubstantial; it is a short-lived witness to human spirituality and spiritual practice. To me, it carries unseen sedimentary residue, and tremendous human data about the collective and individual subconscious.”<sup>151</sup>

The entity of incense ash is here considered as a medium or agency that carries collective messages:

As artists and as individuals, we select materials as message-carriers to reconnect with the spiritual world outside of our everyday life. Incense burning touches and awakens the spiritual impulse embedded deeply in our subconscious. Therefore, the ashes produced already possess a great deal of potential for connecting the human with the spiritual.<sup>152</sup>

Incense ash is thus elevated to the notion of “message-carrier,” moving beyond its association with the object itself and evolving into a conceptual interpretation imbued with ideological significance. This reminds us of McLuhan’s assumption that “the medium is the message,” which stresses that the message is carried or channelled

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<sup>150</sup> Zhang’s interview with Wu Hung, *Zhang Huan Studio*, 48–9.

<sup>151</sup> Miall, “Like A Phoenix Rising.”

<sup>152</sup> Zhang’s interview with Wu, *Zhang Huan Studio*, 49.

through the medium.<sup>153</sup> “The message” of any medium is “the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs.”<sup>154</sup> How the content of the message brings about new ideas is as important as the means through which ideas are perceived. The interrelationships between the medium and message implies that incense ash does not have “content” until it is used to convey something. For Zhang, incense ash seems to be a communicative agency or indicator—rather than an objective form—connecting the human with the divine.

However, are the values associated with incense ash necessarily determined by the artist’s own perception, and directly translatable into conceptualised discourse? When trying to understand the meaning and significations involved in *Ash Buddha*, current scholarship (such as Nina and Huangsheng) has unquestionably employed Zhang’s idea that incense ash possesses a sacred essence, and tends to interpret the work as a symbolic reflection on Buddhist beliefs from an idealistic perspective. These studies tend to take Zhang’s words as holding interpretative authority, and rarely focus on the actual production and display of the work itself, as well as the materialities of incense and incense ash.

### **iii. The role of incense/ash in Buddhism**

One particular neglected fact is that incense ash is primarily—as art historian Mary Bittner Wiseman describes it—the “physical evidence of the incense burned as prayer

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<sup>153</sup> McLuhan, “The Medium is Itself the Message.”

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

offerings in Buddhist temples.”<sup>155</sup> The spiritual significance of ash is more of a personal story in which the ash becomes a “metonym” for Zhang’s idealisation.<sup>156</sup> In fact, incense and incense ash are materials commonly seen in contemporary Chinese daily life. Their uses are diverse and widespread, and they are imbued with a different meaning depending on the user’s understandings and experiences. In the context of the present study, it is necessary to first examine the immanent nature of incense ash and its previous form as incense in a broader historical and cultural context, outside the artistic sphere.

Historically, incense is an important element in Chinese Buddhist ritual ceremonies. Its usages for religious purposes emerged in China during the late Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BCE) and early Qin Dynasty (221–207 BCE), and has played a prominent role in Buddhist ritual practices since the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), when the Emperor Wu of Han (141–87 BCE) began to expand the territories to Central Asia.<sup>157</sup> Increasing international trade imported foreign aromatic herbs from Southeast Asia and India to China, which increased incense production and use. Incense burning as part of rituals was popularised under the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE), when Buddhism was elevated to state religion.<sup>158</sup> The Buddhist practice of using incense reached its height in the Song Dynasty (900–1200 CE) and has been continuously practiced until the present.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Wiseman, *A Grand Materialism*, 77.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> Fu Jingliang, *Chinese Incense Culture* [中国香文化] (Ji'nan: Qilu press, 2008), preface, 3.

<sup>158</sup> Fu, “Times of prosperity: completed in Sui and Tang” [盛世流芳：完备于隋唐] in *Chinese Incense Culture*.

<sup>159</sup> Fu, “Fragrance in lanes: flourished in Song and Yuan” [巷陌飘香：鼎盛于宋元] in *Chinese Incense Culture*.

The ancient tradition of burning incense in Buddhist temples strengthens feelings of spirituality and initiates the religious rite and prayer. Jean DeBernardi writes, “no act of worship is more fundamental than the offering of incense.”<sup>160</sup> In Buddhist terms, burning incense facilitates communication with ancestors and spirits, keeps the worshipper away from evil spirits, and brings hope.<sup>161</sup> Incense is a vital component for the worshipper’s interaction with deities.<sup>162</sup> For Zhang, both ancient and contemporary rituals use incense as “a mediator between the lay and religious aspects of daily rituals, while its burning brought the believer closer to ancestors and spirits, quelled their fears and engendered hope and courage,” while also recognising how “blessings, prayers, fortune-telling, dealing with bad omens and funeral rites would be incomplete without the burning of incense.”<sup>163</sup>

The significance of incense relies on its symbolic manifestations, whereby it acts as a material objectification of immaterial deities. Fabio Rambelli and Eric Reinders state that Buddhists often “theorise” religious objects and their materiality, the status of which are “material objects and entities devoid of a conscious mind, which constitute and furnish the material space where sentient beings living the Six Destinations and

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<sup>160</sup> Jean Elizabeth DeBernardi, *The Way that Lives in the Heart: Chinese Popular Religion and Spirit Mediums in Penang, Malaysia* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2006), 91.

<sup>161</sup> The burning of incense is both a collective and individual practice. This essay does not explore the collective use of incense by Buddhist (official or voluntary) associations (e.g. Buddhist Association of China), which practice the ceremonies taking place around the incense burner in different ways, including worshipping deities by burning incense, and performing sacrifices. This essay focuses instead on the common practice of the individual burning incense as part of Buddhist rituals. For details about the network of incense burner associations, see Scott Habkirk and Hsun Chang, “Scents, Community, and Incense in Traditional Chinese Religion,” *Material Religion* 13.2 (2017): 161–8.

<sup>162</sup> Scott, “Scents,” 170.

<sup>163</sup> Zhang, “Introduction” in *Ash*, eds., Harry and Graham.

buddhas live and operate.”<sup>164</sup> Incense is “sacralised through immolation” that “function[s] as sacrificial offerings.”<sup>165</sup> Such sacralisation is achieved through an immediate idealistic experience that manifests values in religious objects, but also—and primarily—through the diverse practical activities undertaken during their production and operation phases. Rambelli’s ontological understanding of religious objects suggests that dealing with Buddhism does not simply involve a dematerialised approach, without support of material substrata in doctrines and rituals.<sup>166</sup> The use of religious objects constantly “requires some kind of interaction with material objects, many of which have been specifically designed and manufactured in order to play a role in Buddhist practice.”<sup>167</sup> Studying the significance of religious objects does not mean “associat[ing] Buddhist materiality with only icons and ritual implements,” but rather to involve “various manual activities and operation phases that are necessary to actually produce an object.”<sup>168</sup>

This is particularly true with incense: the previous physical form of incense ash. Incense takes a variety of forms, most commonly sticks, powders, coils, and cones. Each type is burned and operated for offerings in a similar way, and the different forms speak to different practical needs. The stick is probably the most frequently used form by individuals in Buddhist temples. It requires mass-production of raw materials and then the fine product of a stick. The incense stick is made of aromatic biotic materials, such as agarwood, sandalwood, patchouli, and vetiver, which are then combined with

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<sup>164</sup> Fabio Rambelli, and Eric Reinders, *Buddhism and Iconoclasm in East Asia: A History* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 7.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>166</sup> Fabio Rambelli, “Materiality, Labor, and Signification of Sacred Objects in Japanese Buddhism,” *Journal of Religion in Japan* 6.1 (2017): 3

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 4

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 9, 12.

flammable binding materials.<sup>169</sup> These are selected not just with consideration of their flammability, but also of their particular capacities of diffusing special fragrances and timekeeping potential.<sup>170</sup> The natural materials are powdered or granulated with a pestle and mortar, and then pasted together with a sticky and incombustible binder comprised of potassium nitrate and water. The finished product is shaped into a firm, solid stick that allows for smooth burning with a subtle fragrance. Indeed, the Chinese word for incense (香) also means “fragrance,” indicating a pleasant aroma that helps engender the relaxed, tranquil mood of being in harmony with nature, and ready to worship a deity. The fragrance of the burning incense stick has a purposefully manufactured characteristic, as the spread of the holy smoke provides a purifying environment for promising habits, emitting a pleasant scent in the air. This sensuous experience is ideal for preventing negative qualities and evil spirits within oneself to reach the pure self within.

Another activity involved in the making of value of the incense in Buddhism is its practical use among worshippers.<sup>171</sup> The presentation of the incense stick is often part of individual acts of offerings. During the praying process, worshippers light the incense sticks with fire, then wave or elevate them over their heads while kneeling in

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<sup>169</sup> Virendra Kumar Yadav, et al., “Incense and Incense Sticks: Types, Components, Origin and Their Religious Beliefs and Importance among Different Religions,” *Journal of Bio Innovation* 9 (2020): 1420.

<sup>170</sup> Some calibrated incense sticks are also used as a timekeeping device for meditation. Some incense-stick manufacturers therefore print the estimated duration of burning on the external packaging. For details, see Silvio A. Bedini, *The Trail of Time: Time Measurement with Incense in East Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 81–92.

<sup>171</sup> It should be noted that, apart from its monastic ritual use, incense is also widely used in tea culture, and in medicine as early as the late Zhou. For details, see Joseph Needham with Lu Gwei-Djen, *Spagyric Discovery and Invention: Magisteries of Gold and Immortality*, part 2 of vol. 5 (Taipei: 虹橋書店 [Hongqiao Bookstore], 1975); C. Pierce Salguero, *Buddhism and Medicine: An Anthology of Premodern Sources* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

front of the plaque of a deity or ancestor. The burning incense sticks are then placed vertically in individual censers situated at the front of the statue or plaques, either individually or in groups of three.

The incense stick is thus both professionally manufactured and practically used in Buddhism, which is significant for its “metonymic use” or “symbolic value,” whereby the material presence exists only “directly related to what they represent,” but also acts as what Rambelli describes as “a space of interplay between the realm of buddhas and that of sentient beings, the only dimension where an exchange between the profane and the sacred can take place.”<sup>172</sup> The activities of production and operation provides an affective and experiential dimension to the incense stick, of which sacralisation is achieved through the actualisation of “human interactions and forms of access to individual conscience.”<sup>173</sup>

Rambelli provides an alternative way of understanding the signification of sacred objects in Buddhism from the perspective of materiality, emphasising human activities that direct attention beyond their hermeneutical, and to their material, value. He does not, however, mention the capacities of the objects’ physicality, which would also include the actualisation of their functionality. This is particularly true of the incense stick used by Buddhists. Apart from their production and the worshipper’s act of lighting them with fire and handling the ash while praying, their fundamental material nature consists in their own physical capacity to evolve from the concrete stick into ashes. Unlike most other religious objects in Buddhism, such as the Dorje—a ritual

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 4–5.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 18.

scepter symbolising the indestructible properties of a diamond and the irresistible force of a thunderbolt—and the *Keman*—a decorative metal plaque used in Japanese Buddhist rituals, both of which largely rely on human manipulation or simply remain static for ritual decoration—the incense stick changes dynamically during its burning stages. Its dynamic, changing status is not only reflected in the praying process, but it continues to burn out naturally and without human manipulation, due to its inherent flammability. It therefore has a relatively autonomous agency, capable of enacting a physical evolution. Compared with most religious objects in Buddhism, incense sticks are transient objects whose value decreases as they burn out.

Current research on the materiality of incense sticks in Buddhism tend to emphasise their capacity to release a fragrant holy smoke that serves to calm people and create sensuous experiences. Less noted is the dynamic nature of the incense stick as a transformative agency in itself, and its consequential material effect of ash production. Indeed, incense ash is not strictly a religious object, but more of an end-product of the physical properties of the incense stick. Incense ash—essentially a waste product—holds neither functional use nor recognised sacred significance in Buddhist rituals and doctrines, typically being treated as mere leftovers to be discarded after use.

I argue that it is precisely its status as waste material that has endowed incense ash with agential possibilities within a new value system. Referring to Victor Turner's concept of a cultural stage of "liminality," Rambelli and Reinders propose that the waste object is not a permanent and fixed form of an entity, but a temporary phase and material status in the "life span" of the object.<sup>174</sup> The idea of the "life" of a particular material is not

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<sup>174</sup> Rambelli, *Iconoclasm*, 196.

restricted to human action, but interprets objects according to “an overall process with successive investment of values.”<sup>175</sup> Objects used in Buddhism often involve transforming raw materials into durable objects imbued with sacred meaning.<sup>176</sup> This does not mean that the raw material held its Buddhist value prior to its transformation into religious use, but rather that it temporarily acquired a sacred essence, which is a preliminary stage before it is fully sanctified and integrated into religious practices. In the same vein, waste products like incense ash are entities “outside of established structures of meaning, accumulated at random in the attic of culture, as it were.”<sup>177</sup> Typically abandoned after use, they may also be “re-promoted” due to their very disposability.<sup>178</sup> The object’s disposable nature provides the possibility for its rediscovery and transformation into a new ontological status imbued with new phenomenological features.

The significance of Zhang’s use of incense ash does not simply lie in what it represents, but rather in his reimagining of a presupposed valueless object as a material in possession of agential potential. This material was not a coincidentally and randomly selected material, independent from established value systems, but chosen from Zhang’s awareness of its previously neglected material significance within Buddhist practices, coupled with a desire to explore its hidden capacities for active participation in artistic production. This, to some extent, aligns with Buddhist concept of impermanence and the cyclical nature of existence, suggesting that materials, much like living beings, undergo multiple forms and transformations. Viewing ash as part of this

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 196.

cycle introduces the idea that it carries a legacy of past life forms and potential for future incarnations. This resonates with the Buddhist notion of rebirth and transformation, wherein ash may be seen not just as an endpoint but as a component of a continuum, a bridge between past and future manifestations. Discovering that the ash is normally processed as garbage, this “useless” and “insubstantial” material brought Zhang “a profound sense of regret and pity.”<sup>179</sup> It is precisely incense ash’s “un-functionality” that enables it to undergo transitional states of disposability and beyond.<sup>180</sup> Zhang’s sensitivities towards the physicality of incense ash and activation of its material agency have been largely overlooked.

Unlike the fine, purified structure of the incense stick, incense ash is loose, impure, darkened, and changeable. It is an unstable material with indeterminate movements, which, due to its light weight, is sensitive to environmental conditions. As Zhang notes, “[ash] is a fragile material, sensitive to external conditions and easily perishable [...]”.<sup>181</sup> In the *Ash Buddha* series, the modality of incense ash is different from the form it takes in temples, where it holds a lighter, finer, firmer, cement-like form. If it had not been constructed into a Buddha-like sculpture and people who are not present cannot smell the fragrance, it may not have recalled Buddhist sensibilities at all.

#### iv. The making-process

Awake to the special value of incense ash, Zhang’s weekly collection of ash from temples in and around Shanghai was a primary factor for manifesting the materialities

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<sup>179</sup> Zhang, “Introduction.”

<sup>180</sup> Rambelli, *Iconoclasm*, 198.

<sup>181</sup> Elena, *Rebirth*.

of *Berlin Buddha*. Zhang worked closely with Buddhist communities in over twenty temples, communicating the intentions of his project and soliciting support.<sup>182</sup> As examined above, Zhang invested the previously valueless incense ash with meaning, as the carrier of spirituality. The continuous collection of incense ash is symbolically also a collection of spiritual desires.<sup>183</sup> Describing his collecting experiences, Zhang highlights the sensuous power that incense ash conveys:

When I firstly invited the incense ash from the Jingan Temple to the studio, there was no language that can express my feeling. My colleague and I were kneeling before the ash. [...] The power of ash made me sleepless and sentimental. I work with countless spirits everyday.<sup>184</sup>

Zhang endows the ash with the power to transform into a contextualised entity, embedded within his personal experience and in collective prayer.

It should, however, be noted that the actual productive processing of the incense ash for the Buddha was not done by the artist himself, but through a labour-intensive process involving his studio assistants who repetitively transported ash to the studio from various locations. This involved the repetitive and physically demanding task of transporting incense ash from multiple temples in and around Shanghai to the studio. The complexity of this process was further amplified in preparations for international exhibitions in locations such as Berlin, Sydney, Florence (2018), and Miami (2019). These overseas exhibitions required the transportation of substantial quantities of ash from China, involving intricate logistics, international shipping, and adherence to

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Wu, *Studio*, 131.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

customs regulations.

In executing this task, Zhang's assistants engaged in constant physical interaction with the incense ash, involving its collection, movement, and preservation. The collection phase was particularly meticulous, involving the careful extraction of incense ash from temple incense burners while respecting the practices and spaces of the temples. Indeed, handling fully burnt ash was a delicate process as the fine particles are prone to disperse in air. The assistants were obliged to employ great caution to minimise loss and maintain cleanliness. The physical effort and attention to detail needed in this process underscore the material properties of the incense ash—its texture, weight, and the space it occupied. Here, incense ash was not a passive material but one that necessitated and shaped the labour process. The physical demands and toll on the assistants were direct consequences of the ash's material characteristics. In this way, the incense ash exerted its agential force, influencing the actions and decisions of the human labourers and marking its presence through the physical demands of the work.

According to Wu—who visited Zhang's studio and authored the book *Zhang Huan Studio: Art and Labor* [张洵工作室：艺术与劳动], documenting many details of the making-processes of his artworks—after being collected and then moved into the studio, the incense ash underwent an extensive transformation process, driven by the need to achieve a uniform physical quality suitable for artistic use.<sup>185</sup> Initially, the collected ash

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<sup>185</sup> Wu Hung, *Zhang Huan Studio: Art and Labor* [张洵工作室：艺术与劳动] (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2009).

displayed a wide array of shapes, colours, thicknesses, and impurities, reflecting the varied degrees of combustion it had undergone.<sup>186</sup> To refine the quality of the ash, it was subjected to a continuous burning process, lasting one to two months, in oil barrels.<sup>187</sup> This stage was crucial in transforming the ash into a fine, homogeneous powder, particularly as much of it still contained unburned parts of incense sticks identifiable by their stick-like shapes.

The conditions in the burning room were challenging, marked by intense heat and smoke that significantly impacted the working environment.<sup>188</sup> The workers had to endure these high temperatures for prolonged periods, which was physically demanding. To make matters even more taxing, the air was laden with fine ash particles, necessitating the use of protective gear, including masks or respirators, to prevent inhalation. Navigating this smoky, heated environment required extra caution, especially when handling the burning barrels and managing the ash. Visibility would be somewhat reduced, and the workers needed to be vigilant to maintain safety and efficiency.

This process demanded not only physical resilience but also adaptability. The workers had to continuously adjust to the changing conditions of the room and the evolving state of the ash. Their interaction with the material was dynamic, requiring ongoing adaptation to both the ash's properties and the environmental challenges posed by the burning process.

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<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 131–135; 272–274.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 271–279.

Following this secondary burning phase, the ash still exhibited varying shapes and colours, but the prolonged exposure to heat had homogenized its physical properties.<sup>189</sup> The goal was not just to burn away impurities but to convert the raw, heterogeneous ash into a fine and powdery substance.

The next stage involved the workers meticulously processing the ash. This task required them to classify the ash based on its colour, texture, and the specific requirements of the artwork. The incense ash, now recognised as a complex material, demanded careful categorisation due to its diverse forms. A worker from Zhang's ash team described the process as extremely challenging, noting that the ash often contained additional materials like the packaging paper of incense sticks, binders, oil content, stick cores, praying cloths, and Buddha figures. To sort the numerous colour variations, workers used small spoons, indicating the precision required in this phase.<sup>190</sup>

Once the different qualities of ash were separated, a particularly fine and light-coloured variant was chosen for the ash Buddha sculpture. This selected ash was then subject to a careful mixing process with glue, a critical step for altering its texture and properties. Zhang and his team embarked on a series of methodical experiments to determine the optimal ratio of glue to ash. They prepared several cubic metres of ash, each batch sourced from different temples and possessing distinct textures. These distinct ash samples were then mixed with different amounts of glue, with the aim to observe and compare the diverse effects each combination produced. This experimental phase was

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 272.

crucial for understanding how the ash behaved with the glue, with some mixtures taking on a stiff, cement-like consistency, while others resembled loose, salted earth.<sup>191</sup>

Each variation of the ash and glue mixture was scrutinised to assess its physical characteristics and suitability for the sculpture. Factors such as structural integrity, texture, and sculptability were key considerations in finding the right balance between viscosity and looseness. The final selection of which ash mixture was to be used for the Buddha sculpture was made with some deliberation. Zhang sought a degree of viscosity that gave the impression of a firm, clay-like form, that yet retained an intrinsic fragility, making the sculpture seem to be perpetually on the verge of collapse. This careful calibration of the ash and glue mixture was not just a technical requirement but a crucial artistic choice, reflecting the delicate balance between stability and transience that characterises the ash Buddha sculpture.

In addition to precise glue proportions, the sculpture's temporary firmness was achieved through a technique akin to the tamping of cement. Having the right glue-to-ash ratio was essential for getting the right compactness and looseness when poured into the mould. Rather than using a complete Buddha mould, Zhang chose to create a piece mould, constructing the Buddha layer by layer, with the processed ashes poured and tamped into each layer (fig. 24),<sup>192</sup> reinforcing both thickness and solidity. The

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<sup>191</sup> For details of cube experiments, see [https://v.youku.com/v\\_show/id\\_XNzk5NjY4MjIw03:56-04:45](https://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNzk5NjY4MjIw03:56-04:45).

<sup>192</sup> Chen Bohan, interview for PAC di Milano, Luglio, "Zhang Huan: Ashman," YouTube video, 5:33, posted by 24ORECultura, 2013, accessed 8<sup>th</sup> December, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJUdMgQMBos> 4:00-4:02.

mould was opened layer by layer, from the top to the bottom, before being reconstructed at the opposite end of the exhibition space. The surface of the ash Buddha is smooth, as if made of clay, its inner granular texture visible only when it begins to collapse, as can be seen at the head of the Buddha (fig. 25). Several salient points are evenly distributed over the head, though some of these have already disintegrated. The middle and lower parts of the sculpture (fig. 26) clearly show the wrinkles of the cloth the Buddha wears, and the viewer can easily distinguish different textures between the smooth body and wrinkled cloth.

Throughout these making-processes, the interactions between the incense ash and the workers were not merely mechanical but involved the workers' deep engagement with the changing states of the ash. The entire process—encompassing burning, sorting, mixing with glue, carving into the mould, and eventually opening the mould—required the workers to constantly adapt and respond to the varying states of the ash.

The burning stage, for instance, transformed the ash's physical properties, necessitating the workers to adjust their approach for the subsequent stages. Similarly, in the sorting phase, attention to detail was crucial as the varied textures and colours of the ash affected its applicability to different parts of the sculpture. The mixing stage, involving the ash and glue, was an exercise in trial and error, requiring careful experimentation with ratios to achieve the right balance of viscosity and the preservation of the ash's innate fragility. As the process progressed to carving and moulding, the workers' interactions with the ash required even greater finesse. The way the ash responded to moulding and carving—whether it maintained cohesion or showed signs of

crumbling—guided the workers in how much pressure to apply. They had to carefully balance the force used to shape the ash, avoiding any excessive handling that might lead to disintegration. The opening of the mould was a critical and delicate phase, showcasing the sculpture's transient nature. The workers needed to perform this task with the utmost precision and gentleness, as any hasty or incautious movement risked causing the sculpture to collapse.

Throughout these stages, the incense ash emerged not just as a passive material but as an active collaborator, constantly influencing the decisions, techniques, and actions of Zhang and his team. The material agency of the incense ash was evident in the way it steered the making-process, necessitating ongoing vigilance, adaptation, and careful handling by those involved. This dynamic and reciprocal process underscored the ontological importance of the incense ash, positioning it as a collaborator in the artistic endeavour, shaping and being shaped by the human efforts and decisions, and thus playing a crucial role in the creation of the *Ash Buddha* sculpture.

What renders this making-process a unique experimental site of human and non-human interrelation is Zhang's involvement of experienced workers from traditional craftsmanship and art academies, whom he permits to explore their own styles and ideas under his direction. Having established a large studio in a Shanghai suburb on his return to China, Zhang's work is created in collaboration with studio assistants. Studio manager Fang Wei describes Zhang's studio as more of a "factory", considering its employment of different divisions of labourers, including woodworkers and art students,

as well as its scale and departmental system.<sup>193</sup>

Speaking of his studio, Zhang rejects comparisons to artists such as Jeff Koons, whose work was completed by a private company for assembly-line production, under his strict instructions.<sup>194</sup> In contrast to Zhang's perception of incense ash as a carrier of spirits, many studio workers do not adhere to Buddhist beliefs and see incense ash more as a raw material for further artistic manipulations.<sup>195</sup> This lack of pre-determined, pre-existing meanings of the ash allowed the making-process to remain productively open-ended for the workers. They engaged in a more reciprocal relationship with the ash, focusing on its immediate material effects and the embodied experience it provided, rather than seeking to fit into preconceived conceptual frameworks.

This might connect us to another study case, which will be examined in Chapter 6. He Xiangyu's *Cola Project*, which also employs labour-intensive processes involving a team of workers, moves away from the notion of the artist as the sole author of the artwork. In He's project, the process involved industrial workers who were largely unfamiliar with the world of artmaking, and their engagement focused more on executing tasks (though the tasks themselves were more imaginative in nature than productive labour), rather than contributing creatively to the development of making-strategies. These workers were not informed about the artistic context of their labour, leading to a unique embodied experience characterised by surprise and anxiety, yet also a sense of freedom from the typical constraints of labour in capitalist production. In

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<sup>193</sup> Wu, *Studio*, 56–65.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 57–8.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 271–9.

contrast, Zhang's process for the *Berlin Buddha* engaged specialised workers with experience in artmaking or craftwork. They were encouraged to bring their own thoughts and creativity to the process, actively participating in the development of artistic strategies and methods. This resulted in a different experience for the workers, who found their traditional crafting skills or taught knowledge techniques, such as those used in ceramics or clay work, less applicable when creating the ash Buddha sculpture.

Despite encountering unfamiliar methods and materials, their extensive artistic experience and knowledge enabled them to intuitively explore and discover new potential forms with the incense ash. The process becomes one of intuitive exploration for the workers, a blend of assimilation and differentiation. They devise operational strategies that embrace heterogeneity and otherness while maintaining a degree of self-reflective detachment. This dynamic interplay between the professional art workers and the evolving states of the incense ash reveals the incense ash's potential to facilitate both unity and variation, while also opening an affective space that navigates the balance between personal attachment and detachment. The artwork thus embodies a monumental scale of incense ash, enriched by the intensity of labour, which adds a unique "special strength and intensity" to the final Buddha sculpture. As Smith notes, the use of raw materials by Chinese artists like Zhang Huan underscores that power does not reside in inanimate matter itself but emerges through our transformative labours, both individually and collectively.<sup>196</sup>

This art-making-process of the *Berlin Buddha* is also reminiscent of Buddhist

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<sup>196</sup> Trevor Smith, "Transformative Labors," in *The Allure of Matter*, eds., Wu Hung and Orianna Cacchione (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, 2019), 75.

meditation practices. Mary Jane Jacob argues that artistic creation is similar to the practice of Buddhism in that the process of art-making is of greater value than the end product itself. An emphasis on process and the shifting, changing status of the work allows the artist to “stay open to what you don’t know and haven’t seen.”<sup>197</sup> Being open-minded in the process “liberates subsequent action and makes it more fruitful in a creation of more meanings and more perceptions.”<sup>198</sup> This insight parallels the Buddhist practice of meditation, which is not just about knowledge or learning, but requires a continuous practice of awareness to maintain an astute and open mind while evolving in a state of becoming. When sustaining a practice, “the experience outweighs the material form.”<sup>199</sup> Similarly, to let art-making evolve in a process without a designated outcome allows the artist “to move in ways we would not have found outside this process.”<sup>200</sup> Artists continuously enact activities of the mind in order to “clarify the aims and come to know the essence before knowing the form.”<sup>201</sup> It is this process of the “artist’s mind-in-making” that both has parallels with Buddhism and is key to creation.<sup>202</sup>

As could be seen at the launch of the *Berlin Buddha* (fig. 16), despite Zhang’s intention to maintain the stability of the statue by supporting the face, the right arm had already collapsed. This was due to the uncontrollability and unpredictability of the constructed material. The artist was not, then, in full control of the display, just as the making-

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<sup>197</sup> Mary Jane Jacob, “In the Space of Art,” in *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, eds., Laurie Anderson et al. (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2004), 165.

<sup>198</sup> John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1925), 371, quoted in Mary Jane Jacob, “The Art of Living: John Dewey’s Art Lessons,” *The New* (2012): 236.

<sup>199</sup> Jacob, “Space of Art,” 166.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*

process of the *Berlin Buddha* was not achieved through a prior design determining the exact strategies of each phase of its making. Instead, the experimental nature of the process involved adaptations and adjustments of the material conditions and phenomena at each phase of production. This artwork's quality of presence can thus be said to lie in the actual collecting and labouring process of its making, as well as in Zhang's and the workers' corresponding mental activities towards the developing, unstable states of the incense ash.

We can thus posit that the ash Buddha sculpture is not the result of random arrangements of flexible materials, nor does it only activate the artwork's ephemerality erasing signs of its past materialities, but it is rather a work inscribed by processes of preparing and making. Experimenting with different textures of incense ash, and the forming of the ash in the aluminium mould—made by Zhang and his assistants—determined its capacity to display a particular performativity in the exhibition. The resulting displayed sculpture is a processual entity deliberately designated on a phenomenological basis, without emphasis on its order.

## **Conclusion**

*Berlin Buddha* contains new possibilities for presenting the discarded material derived from religious contexts, which go beyond religious symbolism to reimagine the material as an active participant in the process of collecting, making, and viewing. Incense ash engages in a co-evolutionary relationship with human actors, highlighting the potential of using discarded material to reflect on the sensory experience of both the

viewing and the art-making-process. No particular stage of the art-making, and no particular shape of Buddha sculpture in the displayed installation can define the work's representation and significance. Rather, what enables the meaning and existence of the work is the ongoing phenomena enacted through intra-actions between human participants and incense ash. Zhang explores the complexities and multiplicities in creating and experiencing art through an object steeped in both materialist and Buddhist sensibilities, shedding light on relationships between actant and environment; automation and control; usefulness and uselessness, and the metonymic and nonhermeneutical dimensions. Materials derived from religious contexts typically serve specific religious usages and values, with meanings that are permanent and stabilised for ritual uses or conceptualised as religious symbols. In Zhang's work, however, it is the ongoing entanglement between incense ash and human actions that generates shifting meanings and values at different stages of the artistic creation and perception.

The Buddhist dimension in the work is conveyed, not through fixed representations of the values and meanings of incense ash but emerges through an exploration of the incense ash as part of Zhang's material-discursive practices. The temporality and destabilisation of meaning invite engagement with the underlying religious object within broader social and political tensions. This discursive material practice adheres to Stephen Batchelor's idea that "Buddhism appeals to people today because it places less emphasis on belief and more on practice," and "it entails doing something—transforming yourself—through a range of methods and exercises."<sup>203</sup> Buddhism need

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<sup>203</sup> Jacquelynn BAAS, "Nowhere from Here" in *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, eds., Anderson, Laurie, et al. (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2004), 24.

not be a determinate factor directing creativity in terms of consonances and resonances with Buddhist ideas, and works are not necessarily regarded “as” Buddhist art, but represent a “philosophy or psychology of mind” that “can be explicit, implicit, or the work may resonate with insights characteristic of Buddhism” in contemporary art practices.<sup>204</sup>

Buddhism acts, in Zhang’s art, not as a primary method by which to frame creative activities nor as an act of interpretation, but as a ceaseless flow of thought occurring within temporal, spatial, and sensory experiences in the processes of making and viewing. His work offers alternative perspectives on Buddhism and its materials in contemporary artistic practices. It challenges preconceived notions of incense ash as waste or a mere by-product of ritual practices, transforming it into an entity that dynamically interacts with the artist, creators, and audience. This interaction not only redefines the material’s role but also implicitly addresses societal issues.

This re-evaluation of incense ash as unfixed and changing, revealed by tracing its origin, making and displaying processes, also brings to light an overlooked aspect worth reflecting upon in this conclusion: the status of incense ash after the exhibition. While much attention is given to the making and displaying stages of *Berlin Buddha*, Winston Kyan briefly notes that the ashes used in *Berlin Buddha* were reused in *Taipei Buddha* and *Sydney Buddha*.<sup>205</sup> Rambelli and Reinders’s idea of the “liminal” stage of the object again provides an understanding of the value and meaning of the art object after its

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>205</sup> Winston Kyan, “Buddhist Resistance.”

display. The transformation of incense ash in *Ash Buddha* does not give incense ash a permanent value in art. Rather, its status is always in a process of change, and subject to different making, performing, viewing, and even after-use. Whether recycled or not, the post-display ash does not have a fixed status of valuelessness, but exists rather in a temporary state that may eventually be abandoned, recycled, or re-involved in New Material-semiotic contexts in other spheres of practice.

What *Ash Buddha* reveals is that art should not be the final stage of the “life” of a material. Rather, the material used in art is in a temporary stage of its “lifespan,” which contains potential for future material involvement or enactment in new spheres of practice. When researching materials used in art from a materialist perspective, it is not only the making, displaying, and viewing that matter, but also the value of the art object after its artistic use.

The processes of making and displaying *Berlin Buddha*, along with the exploration of incense ash’s potential after the display, highlight the material’s constant state of flux and the diverse human response to these changes. This dynamic interaction leads to a contingent and adaptable experience in both creation and perception, constantly redefining the involvement of all participants—artists, workers, and viewers—within a fluid context. This aspect of the work underscores the role of the material in art as an active agent, capable of embodying shifting meanings and adopting different roles throughout its lifecycle, including collection, creation, display, and post-display phases, across various environments such as religious sites, art studios, and exhibition spaces.

In addition, it is worth noting that, in Zhang's work, while emphasising the immediate sculptural experience, the viewer, when seeing the initially intact ash Buddha sculpture at the beginning of the work's display, can also sense the intense human efforts behind its formation. This leads me to wonder: can the making-process of Material Art be conveyed solely through the artwork's affective operations? Can the act of making itself become an artwork or be visually represented within the artwork? If so, could such a making-event be made present to a viewer who was not present during its original creation? Zhang's *Berlin Buddha* emphasises presentness, requiring the viewer's real-time engagement for an immediate visceral experience. May such ephemeral experiences of presentness only be invoked through the witnessing of the work's performance in real time?

The above concerns lead me to turn to another case study: Song Dong's *Water Records*. While the artist directly experiences the transient nature of the work during its creation, the viewer engages with it as a recorded document of a past event, a re-creation based on the documentation of the original performance. This juxtaposition raises pivotal questions about whether Song's attempt to capture a temporal, performative event in a recorded artefact is inevitably futile, and merely emphasises the unbridgeable gap between live performance and a fixed or reproducible artefact? Is the viewer of *Water Records* merely passively witnessing the evidence of a making-process within a static video apparatus? This query gains particular intrigue when we relate it back to the viewer's experience of engaging with Zhang's *Berlin Buddha*, where they partake in an active, sensory experience, extracting meanings and understandings from direct, personal engagement with the temporal environment of the work. In the absence of the viewer's physical presence, interaction, and response, does *Water Records*, with its

inherent ephemerality and performativity, hold any value or meaning? When analysing Song's *Water Records* in the next chapter, I will explore the potential of video documentation of ephemeral events to blur the boundaries between past and present, first-hand and second-hand experience, as well as between appearance and disappearance, all through a non-dualist perspective that bridges nature and culture.

## Chapter 2

### Blurring Boundaries of Nature/Culture and Embodiment/Objectivity: Song

#### Dong's *Water Records*

Exploring Material Art through the prism of New Materialism inherently involves engaging with the theory's foundational critique of the conventional separation between the "social" and "natural" sciences, challenging the established dichotomy between nature and culture.<sup>206</sup> This critique suggests that the making of the world—including all social and natural elements—is influenced by a broad spectrum of forces, extending beyond predetermined relations to include physical interactions, biological and ecological processes, social interactions, as well as psychological or emotional responses. This chapter explores an ontological approach that transcends the implicit prioritisations or classifications involved in dualist thinking, wherein nature and culture are not perceived as separate domains but as "parts of a continuum of materiality."<sup>207</sup> It does so through the examination of Song Dong's (born 1966) video installation *Water Records* (2010, fig. 2). This work exemplifies the interconnectedness of nature and culture while simultaneously blurring the boundary between embodiment and objectivity concerning the viewer's experience of viewing documented ephemeral events of naturecultural entanglement.

Unlike Zhang Huan's work, which necessitates on-site participation due to its ephemeral and performative nature—interdependent on the viewer's movement, environment, and the unstable incense ash statue—Song Dong's video installation

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<sup>206</sup> Rosi Braidotti, "Posthuman Humanities," *European Educational Research Journal* 12.1 (2013): 1–19; Latour, *Actor-Network-Theory*.

<sup>207</sup> Fox and Alldred, "Inside the Research-Assemblage," 4.

*Water Records*, exhibited at *The Allure of Matter*, provides a different perspective on experiencing “presentness” in ephemeral, material-based art, a sensation typically evoked through the presentation of physical art objects at the site of display. This work diverges from the perception of art’s processuality discussed above, which often revolves around art objects as either products of intensive labour or as physically dynamic entities within an exhibition space.

In contrast, this work does not allow the viewer to establish a primary relationship with the physical construction of the work. Instead, Song leverages the medium of video or film for its unique capacity to convey the fluidity of action and the ephemeral nature of moments, emphasising the interplay between visual narrative and the viewer’s perception.

The work comprises a four-channel soundless video projection of human scale projected onto three interconnected walls, which together form an encompassing, immersive viewing space. Each video, varying in duration, facilitates a detailed, magnified observation of the artist’s hand using a brush to paint a heated stone with water. The paintings range from natural landscapes, profiles of individuals, everyday utensils—such as a cup, a wok, and a baby carriage—to barcodes (figs. 27 and 28). In each video, Song’s pace is steady and smooth, betraying no rush to complete the images. The viewer can never capture the entire scene at once, as the water traces continuously evaporate as they are being drawn. Despite the transience, the viewer can still identify the figures Song is painting in each video. Importantly, the work does not adhere to a defined start or end point—though with patient observation, the viewer may notice the video looping after approximately six or seven drawings, usually by the second or third

play cycle.

On the opposite side of the exhibition room, another of Song's work, *Traceless Stele* (2016), is installed. This work invites the viewer to freely inscribe their messages on a stone, a brush and water provided, their texts soon disappearing, much like the water drawings in the projected videos.

Water holds a prominent presence in the video demonstrations of *Water Records*. Song has a long-standing practice with water, having used it in various artworks and projects since around 1992. The existing studies on Song Dong's water-themed art often interpret the formless, transparent, and ephemeral qualities of water as aligning with Daoist notions of the ineffable, or as a medium responding to socio-cultural issues. Specifically, interpretative perspectives—such as Vanessa Badagliacca's "Doing and Nothing: An Exploration of Song Dong's Doing Nothing Garden and the Possibility of Renewing Ourselves and our Environment through not Doing," Nancy P. Lin's "Song Dong's Performative Futility: Action Impact and Efficacy in Contemporary Chinese Performance Art," Sun Dongdong's "Song Dong: The Wisdom Of The Poor," Meiqin Wang, "Breathing," and Tessa Elisabeth Fluence's "A Vocabulary of Water: How Water in Contemporary Art Materialities the Conditions of Contemporaneity,"<sup>208</sup>—

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<sup>208</sup> See e.g., Vanessa Badagliacca, "Doing and Nothing: An Exploration of Song Dong's Doing Nothing Garden and the Possibility of Renewing Ourselves and Our Environment through Not Doing," *Zeteo*, accessed March 5, 2024. <https://zeteojournal.com/2014/05/21/doing-nothing-garden/>; Nancy P. Lin, "Song Dong's Performative Futility: Action, Impact, and Efficacy in Contemporary Chinese Performance Art," *Art Journal*, 82:1 (2023), 34–57 and "Song Dong: Water" in *The Allure of Matter: Material Art from China*, eds., Wu Hung and Orianna Cacchione (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 187–91; Sun, "Song Dong"; Meiqin Wang, "Breathing," *Post: Notes on Modern & Contemporary Art Around The Globe*, MoMA, February 12, 2020; Tessa Elisabeth Fluence, *A Vocabulary of Water: How Water in Contemporary Art Materialises the Conditions of Contemporaneity* (PhD Dissertation, University of Melbourne, 2015), 68–70.

have tended to emphasise water's translucency and formlessness (e.g. Tessa's "A Vocabulary of Water") in Song's water-based works, suggesting that these qualities indicate ideas about the vanity of human efforts and the impermanence of life. This metaphor is often presented through documentation (mostly photographs) of performances that demonstrate a linear narrative of the artist's repeated interactions with water—be it writing, painting, stamping, boiling, or breathing—highlighting water's natural transitions between its solid, liquid, and vapor states. Indeed, influenced by his early fascination with the *Dao de jing* (Tao Te Ching), Song draws inspiration from the paradox of opposites, saying "[t]he greatest image is formless, the greatest sound is noiseless, the greatest skill seems crude."<sup>209</sup> In early water works like *Stir-fry Water* (1992, fig. 29), Song seems to embody the principle that attempts to treat water as a bounded, concrete object often result in its elusiveness and disappearance, portraying any action with or upon water as seemingly futile, as if nothing happened at all, with the documentation being the only evidence of the work's existence.

The latter interpretations highlight the flexibility of water to generate conceptual meanings, particularly in terms of social and political aspects within some of Song's artworks. For example, in the site-specific installation *Secret Divulging* (Leaking) (1995, fig. 30), Song ingeniously played with the Chinese phrase "泄密" or "leaking secrets." A row of white silk bags filled with ice was hung on the walls of the residence of Hua Guofeng's, the former Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party. As the ice melted, the "secrets" trickled out, leaving a temporary water trail on the wall and forming a dark puddle on the ground. This trace quickly disappeared, leaving no evidence of the event. Scholars such as Nancy P. Lin interpret *Secret Divulging* in her

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<sup>209</sup> Cited in Nancy, "Song Dong," 187.

article “Immaterial Materiality: Song Dong’s Multimedia Works with Water, Photography, and Video” as using ice to allegorise the revelation of public secrets.<sup>210</sup> In his renowned performance piece *Breathing*, Song uses photographic documentation to convey the repetitive act of exhaling water vapor. This is often interpreted as an affirmation of individual vitality.<sup>211</sup> Here, the transient ice mark created from the artist’s breath, set against a backdrop of significant public history, is seen as a subtle assertion of personal identity.

In this light, water is, in Song’s works, frequently seen as a conduit for articulating metaphysical significance, or a socio-cultural critique, echoing McLuhan’s assertion that the content of the message and the means through which ideas are perceived are equally significant.<sup>212</sup> Although these works are captured through video or photographic documentation, countering the fugitive nature of water, their linear narrative, often shot from a third-person perspective and capturing the artist’s full body from a distance, positions the audience as outsiders. In these works, video or photography is not the focal medium; instead, they highlight water’s role as the primary medium through which Song communicates his artistic ideas. Indeed, as anthropologist Veronica Strang emphasises, water’s qualities of mutability “are crucial in that they provide a common basis for the construction of meaning.”<sup>213</sup> Strang posits that while water holds mutability and multiple meanings, such versatility bears no significance

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<sup>210</sup> Nancy P. Lin, “Immaterial Materiality: Song Dong’s Multimedia Works with Water, Photography, and Video,” in *The Allure of Matter: Materiality Across Chinese Art*, eds., Orianna Cacchione and Wei-Cheng Lin (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, 2021), 255.

<sup>211</sup> See e.g., David Clarke, “The Watery Turn in Contemporary Chinese Art,” *Art Journal* 65.4 (2006): 56–77.

<sup>212</sup> McLuhan, “The Medium is the Message,” 107.

<sup>213</sup> Veronica Strang, “Common Senses: Water, Sensory Experience and the Generation of Meaning,” *Journal of Material Culture* 10.1 (2005): 97.

apart from through human conceptualisations of it.<sup>214</sup> This approach to water's flexibility treats it as what science historian Peter Galison might call a "theory machine," capable of generating cultural flexibility, and directly corresponding to reality.<sup>215</sup>

Current interpretations of water in Song's art tend to anthropomorphically privilege water's formal flexibility and characteristics. They attribute an autonomous authority to water to direct the work's performance process and consider it as the sole determinant of the work's meaning, disregarding the complex interactions and mutual influences between humans and non-human entities. This interpretative perspective appears to be based on the understanding of water as an actual entity that, as Whitehead described it—which I have detailed in chapter 1—is the fundamental reality of which the world is composed.<sup>216</sup> It implies that there seems to be no way to go beyond actual entities to find anything more real. Water, in Song's works, is often interpreted as a substantial and independent thing in actuality that, due to its mutable or multiple material capacities, has the privilege to determine the work's evolution and meaning creation, independently of any other entity.

Nevertheless, interpreting a work like Song's *Water Records*, which presents itself as continuously evolving through the medium of video and convincingly engages the viewer in this dynamic process, becomes problematic if we regard water as the primary and fundamental fact. As Michael Halewood suggests, concentrating on substance conflicts with focusing on flux.<sup>217</sup> It isolates entities from their surroundings, rendering

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Peter Galison, *Einstein's Clocks, Poincare's Maps: Empires of Time* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003).

<sup>216</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: Corrected Edition*, eds., David Ray Griffin and Donald Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978) [originally published in 1929].

<sup>217</sup> Michael Halewood, "On Whitehead and Deleuze: The Process of Materiality,"

them seemingly solitary and disconnected, which in turn obscures existing relationships and interconnections. In *Water Records*, water contributes not only to the emergence of the drawings but also to their gradual disappearance. The ongoing process revealed in this work is therefore simultaneously about the creation and the disappearance of the drawings. The drawings appear and disappear concurrently, without a moment of stasis or nonactivity. Even when Song temporarily pauses his action, the work of art remains dynamically active for a while, gradually modified by the water and environmental conditions.

Privileging water when interpreting *Water Records* overlooks and neglects the presence of dynamism, fluidity, and process, in the work especially considering the video demonstrations of “water drawings” and their propensity for constant mutation. This approach may thus overlook the opportunity to develop an understanding of the effects of “naturecultural” intra-actions, a term coined by feminist scholar Donna Haraway that combines “nature” and “culture.”<sup>218</sup> By assuming the singular authority of water, we risk diminishing the rich complexity of the interplay between the artist, the materials, and the environment. The focus should not be solely on the water as the medium, but also on the dynamic process it is part of, and the intricate connections it helps shape.

What Whitehead appears to imply with the concept of “actual entity” is that no “thing” exists independently as an actual entity; rather, all things are “societies” comprised of actual entities, which he characterises as “drops of experience, complex and

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*Configurations* 13, no. 1 (2005): 57–76.

<sup>218</sup> Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003).

interdependent.”<sup>219</sup> These entities encapsulate processes and serve as the essential building blocks of existence, frequently illustrated as pulses, drops, or buds of experience. For an actual entity, the act of “becoming” is the core of its essence. As Whitehead states, “how an entity becomes constitutes what that actual entity is.”<sup>220</sup> An actual entity is an unfolding process, a “conrescence of prehensions.”<sup>221</sup> This perspective offers a method by which to conceptualise transformation that embraces both form and existence. As such, in this chapter, the focus extends beyond seeing water merely as a solitary medium to facilitate the work’s dynamic process and meaning, moving beyond an exclusive emphasis on objecthood. Instead, I emphasise *Water Records* as an ongoing phenomenon of interactions in which water actively participates and forges close connections with both human and non-human entities, such as stone and brush.

Notably, the viewer has no direct experience of these ongoing phenomena of interactions; they are, rather, conveyed through precisely made videos and strategic video installations. This approach raises questions about the absence of physical art objects and whether new media can effectively capture the “allure of matter” in art. This chapter will investigate how such an approach does more than merely present the making-process to the viewer; it also engenders an experience of “presentness,” fostering a sense of work-in-process, instead of just a witnessing of past events from the outside. The viewer is invited to immerse themselves in the ongoing entanglement between the artist’s bodily actions and the ever-changing water drawings. This exploration will delve into how video documentation and installation highlight the

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<sup>219</sup> Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 18.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*

intangible aspects of these performed and embodied events, thereby facilitating embodied encounters that redefine the boundary between embodiment and objectivity. I will uncover how these embodied encounters prompt an awareness in the viewer that their subjectivity is less a matter “of being specifically situated in the world [as an I, specific and distinct from others], but rather of being of the world in its dynamic specificity.”<sup>222</sup>

Through these analyses, this chapter understands *Water Records* as a form of behavioural exploration aimed at revealing and understanding the interconnectedness of all life forms and elements within the biosphere, prompting reflection on environmental interdependencies and the inseparable co-constitution of nature and culture; of humans and non-humans. By delving into ways through which *Water Records* presents a layered and tenaciously iterative narrative of the nature–culture continuum, this chapter aims to uncover how *Water Records* paves the way for an alternative understanding to systemic or structural “explanations” regarding how nature and culture work, fostering a renewed ecological awareness of understanding the fluxes, dis/continuities, and “becomings” that constitute our world.

#### **i. Experiencing the ephemeral through documentation**

Presenting the ephemeral event of water drawing through video installation pulls our attention away from what an artwork represents—whether it is the initial material phenomenon enacted and experienced only by the artist, or the subsequent video that documents the work. The work’s physical form as a video projection—a stationary electronic device projecting moving images onto walls—may inherently impose a sense

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<sup>222</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 337.

of separation. The evolving visual narrative captivates the viewer, while simultaneously holding them at a distance, presenting an observational vantage point of the artist's interaction with the materials. This mediated experience, while immersive, might subtly shift the viewer's role from an active participant to a spectator, adding a layer of mystique to the artistic process and the materials' allure. Indeed, many of Song's temporal performances with water, such as *Stamping the Water* (1996, fig. 31) and *Writing Diary with Water* (1995, fig. 32), have been documented and showcased in the form of photographs and videos, which, while offering broader accessibility, tend to position the audience as external observers or witnesses to the artist's past practices.

Consider, for instance, *Writing Diary with Water*, presented as a series of four chromogenic prints capturing different stages of the artist's calligraphic journey, from the onset of writing to the final vanishing of the words, all seen from a fixed photographic perspective. This work, rooted in a personal experience, involves Song's daily ritual of writing his diary on a stone tablet collected from a national park for over a decade. Unlike *Water Records*, where only the surface of the stone is displayed, *Writing Diary with Water* reveals the stone in its entirety against a wooden floor in Song's home. Song's habit of diary-writing, integrated into his daily routine, serves as an emotional catharsis, prompting introspection through metaphorical "writing with pure water."<sup>223</sup>

The photographic perspective of *Writing Diary with Water* is angled from the left side of the stone, presenting a horizontal view of the artist's calligraphic actions. This camera angle differs from the artist's viewpoint during creation, situating the viewer as

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<sup>223</sup> Nancy, "Song Dong," 188.

detached observers. Moreover, different from the heated stone used in *Water Records*—which accentuates the evaporation of water—the stone in *Writing Diary with Water* remains in its natural state devoid of artificial interference to its physical conditions. This distinction results in a slower evaporation process compared to the heated stone in *Water Records*, complicating the documentation of the full process of the emergence and disappearance of the words, particularly during long-term daily practices.

Consequently, the viewing angle, the extended duration of practice, and the artist's choice of using only four photograph pieces to represent the practice make it challenging for the viewer to decipher the artist's writing or trace the detailed process of the water's traces and their eventual disappearance. The artist's ongoing daily practice, coupled with the photographic strategy that distances the viewer from the specific making-process, characterises this work more as an artist's personal ritual of both self-affirmation and self-effacement, seemingly lacking the intention to involve viewer engagement in the making-process or to evoke immersive or sensory experiences of the process. Here, the role of water is often interpreted<sup>224</sup> as a vehicle for personal expression and a means to safeguard the privacy of the writer, considering the fact that, as Song himself mentioned regarding his intention of creating *Writing Diary with Water*, “someone else might be reading this someday.”<sup>225</sup>

When examining *Water Records*, which may somehow closely resemble *Writing Diary with Water*, we must ponder whether performance recreations based on documentation

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<sup>224</sup> See, e.g., Philippe Vergne, “How Latitudes Become Forms: Song Dong,” *Walker Art Center*, accessed March 5, 2024. <http://latitudes.walkerart.org/artists/index4133.html>

<sup>225</sup> Julie Walsh, “Song Dong Diary Keeper,” in *Song Dong & Yin Xiuzhen: The Way of Chopsticks*, ed. Sarah Archer (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Art Alliance, 2014), 12–3.

genuinely reproduce the original performances, or merely mimic the documentation. The work's enactment of the ephemeral presence of the performance inevitably brought a radical view on documenting performance art or ephemeral installations. As Peggy Phelan has articulated, such documentation is deemed somewhat impossible.<sup>226</sup> Phelan posits that performance art inherently embodies itself through its vanishing, and inherently defies archiving due to its ephemeral nature. She believes that the destined disappearance of performance art stems from her belief that "performance in a strict ontological sense is nonreproductive."<sup>227</sup> Furthermore, she argues that the unique inability to replicate a performance underscores the strength of performance art. This incapacity to repeat ensures that performance art evades the reproduction economy and leaves no imprint on the capitalist framework.

Is Song's effort to immortalise the performance as an artefact through recording destined to fail, merely emphasising the vast divide between live performance and an artefact that can be fixed or reproduced? Is the viewer of *Water Records* merely passively viewing the evidence of the making-process within a static video apparatus? Can the viewer sense or experience the "allure of matter" and build their connections with the dynamics of materials illustrated in the videos? These questions gain particular intrigue when we relate back to the experiences of the viewer engaging with Zhang's *Berlin Buddha*, who partake in an active, sensory experience, extracting meanings and understandings from direct, personal engagement with the temporal environment of the work. Does *Water Records*, the video content of which demonstrates an event that is inherently ephemeral and performative, hold any value or meaning in the absence of

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<sup>226</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked. Politics of Performance* (London; New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

the viewer's physical presence, interaction, and response?

I posit that this work does not necessarily elicit the experience through the presence of the artwork, but rather through its absence. I propose that the absence of the physical artwork, accentuated by the precisely made and strategically installed videos, can indeed maintain fidelity to the “aura” of the artwork, even without the presence of a tangible “aura”. An indirect experience of an ephemeral artwork, such as that discussed in this chapter, becomes an encounter with the absence of the material artwork. This notion of experiencing things through their absence is particularly pertinent to ephemeral artworks, especially as discussed in this chapter.

The four videos in *Water Records* are seamlessly projected, life-sized, and in a continuous sequence across three adjoining dark walks, which creates a cohesive, immersive viewing experience with no gaps between the projections, which envelop the viewer entirely (fig. 2). In addition, unlike Song's previous documentation of his water works, which often features his entire body and includes more environmental elements identifying the context Song situates within, *Water Records* solely showcases the artist's arm and hand. All four videos are shot directly from above, focusing solely on the artist's hand, the brush, the ephemeral water drawings, and the fissured stone, mirroring the artist's own viewpoint of his actions. Song's brushwork resembles the gestures used in traditional calligraphy and ink painting.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> The traditional method of using the brush requires grasping it firmly between the thumb and the first two fingers while holding the ring finger lightly behind the brush as a kind of balance. The calligrapher or painter would always keep the brush in a strictly vertical position. The amount of ink used in traditional painting is delicate and precise, necessitating the artist to dip only the bottom half of the brush into the ink and skillfully manipulate it with a combination of loose and tight grips to gradually produce various distinct shapes, including curves, dashes, zigzags, and dots.

This approach notably contrasts with his first work, *Writing Diary with Water*, which was shot from the left side of the stone and horizontally displays the artist's actions. Strictly speaking, in *Water Records*, the entities involved are not limited to water, stone, brush, and the artist's body, but also incorporate a video camera closely tied to this artistic activity. In order to film from this perspective, which enables the viewer to see from the vantage point of the artist, Song had to position himself and adjust his movements to enable the video camera to document the continuous material enactments without disrupting the process. In this sense, the recurring phenomenon of disappearance and transience are countered by a simultaneous, yet contradictory, discourse on documentation. Capturing the ephemeral by incorporating video technology into the making-process turns documentation into a dialectical practice, matched by a mirroring—complementary yet contradictory—discourse of documentation. This active engagement with the video apparatus illuminates how the video turns into a material entity, inherently instrumental to the making-process.

Rather than documenting the event from a distance, the video is here consciously produced as a part of—or perhaps by (since the video is produced as the performance takes place)—the performance. This arrangement catalyses an extraordinarily tight ontological connection between performance and document, activating their interrelationship in an exceptional manner.

Indeed, many of Song's water-related works exist solely within the confines of their documentation, with little to no witnesses or audience present at the time of their creation—especially for the writing with water series, which typically unfolds as private, indoor acts devoid of an audience. Without these documentations, the works

would remain unknown. Philip Auslander argues that some performance art exists solely in the “space of the document,” completely skipping the actual performance event. Without such documentation, the performances would remain invisible,<sup>229</sup> and Auslander asserts that documenting the performance art is what truly brings it into being.<sup>230</sup> He explains that the audience can only understand the act of performance through its documentation, regardless of their attendance of the actual event. From Auslander’s point of view, the audience is secondary; the main focus is on capturing the performance’s essence rather than its interaction with the viewer.<sup>231</sup> He emphasises the importance of the documentation process because, in his view, the context and the audience do not influence or alter this kind of performance, nor can they affect the artist’s documented work.<sup>232</sup>

The documentation of a private activity of painting with water is a conscious decision on Song’s part. The process of documentation is initiated at the point of acquisition, meticulously planned and executed, enabling future viewers to witness a scene akin to the artist’s perspective of calligraphic practice with water. Even if the work itself is not present, a comprehensive record of it exists, representing a sincere effort to preserve its essence. Song’s deliberate act of incorporating video to document the process appears to diverge from the notion of viewing documentation as an absolute failure, as emphasised by Phelan.

Instead, Song positions it in a realm of “absolute desire,” as articulated by Jane

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<sup>229</sup> Philip Auslander, “The Performativity of Performance Documentation,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 28.3 (2006): 1–10.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*

Blocker.<sup>233</sup> Any discourse on performance, according to Blocker, signifies a commitment to the longing for the event's presence.<sup>234</sup> She portrays documentation as a mediator between the disappearance of the performance and the viewer's persistent longing to connect with the performance, a longing that stems from the time gap between the two.<sup>235</sup> Song's intentional choice of video—capable of capturing the full scope of the event from any angle—illuminates the strategic placement of the video camera. Song arranges the video camera in such a way that it exists in close interrelation with the material and human agencies involved in the work.

Positioning the video camera directly above the stone to capture the act of painting with water, presents Song with a challenging setup. He must carefully avoid contact with the camera, which complicates his painting posture. His perspective is not unobstructed; instead, he must either rely on the camera screen to mirror the activity below—a viewpoint that is somewhat obstructed by the equipment itself—or opt to watch his handiwork from an angle. To maintain the illusion of a first-person perspective for the audience thus demands precise hand-eye coordination, and Song must alter his natural painting posture for the sake of the viewer's experience.

In this way, Song's painting process may not be a purely immersive and experiential practice that allows him to concentrate solely on the interaction between his actions and the ever-changing phenomena of water drawings. Instead, the situation Song finds himself in is akin to witnessing a moving image (shown on the video screen) recording

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<sup>233</sup> Jane Blocker, *What the Body Cost: Desire, History, and Performance* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*

a moving image (the painting process on the stone). This setup appears to reflect more than just a desire to record the ephemeral act; it also aims to establish a bridge for future viewers to engage with the performance, making tangible the traces of an event that is no longer present. The viewer, without the disturbance of the camera as experienced by Song, can concentrate on the pure, constantly changing phenomena enacted by the intra-action between the human body and the materials of water, brush, and stone.

Furthermore, in the installation, each panel of video projection presents an unrelated or disparate image at a different stage of drawing. One video may display the initial stages of an image's formation, capturing the nascent moments of creation and showcasing the thrilling anticipation of future potential. Another might exhibit an image nearing completion, the beginning stages of which have already evaporated, symbolising how the present carries within it the traces of the past, while simultaneously gesturing towards a future of renewal. Another projection may display a fully completed image that has already started to make way for a new image, a poignant reminder of the perpetual dance of endings and beginnings. These varying stages of the images, displayed concurrently, underscore the simultaneous coexistence of different temporal phases of the artist's act of painting. They embody the continuous process of becoming, vanishing, and renewal.

The drawings in the videos, as categorised by Song into natural landscape, human profiles, symbols, and daily things, are intended to be “random fragments of memory, imprecise, incorrect, incomprehensive and incomplete.”<sup>236</sup> They draw from everyday life, yet are presented as unrelated and disparate. This contrasts with Song's earlier,

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<sup>236</sup> From the artist's notes accompanying a sketch of the work.

more private, imagery in works like *Writing Diary with Water*. In *Water Records*, familiar objects and scenes are rendered enigmatic and ambiguous, challenging the viewer to find the underlying connections or logics.

The videos in *Water Records* transition between traditional landscape portrayals and more cartoonish depictions of human profiles and everyday objects (fig. 27 and 28). Each video has its distinct thematic focus. For example, the theme of daily things—including a bed, a kettle, a toilet, and a baby carriage—are portrayed not in a linear or orderly sequence but appear scattered, evoking the artist's fragmented contemplation. This disjointed presentation, while still adhering to specific categories and stylistic motifs, introduces a deliberate ambiguity, leaving the viewer to navigate the seeming randomness and draw their own narrative threads.

Moreover, in the videos focusing on landscapes and human profiles, the style of each painted depiction is so similar that it challenges the viewer to differentiate between individual scenes or figures. Conversely, the segments dedicated to symbols and daily things present each subject with distinct clarity, enabling easy recognition by the viewer. This contrast in visual distinctiveness across themes enhances the installation's enigmatic allure, blending thematic diversity with stylistic variety.

This varied approach does not segregate the videos but instead creates a theatrical experience, immersing the viewer in a sensory-rich environment. This blend of themes and styles marks a departure from Song's earlier water-based works, such as *Writing Diary with Water*, where the written words of his intimate thoughts follow a more linear narrative structure. *Water Records* seems to embody what Yang Geng and Lingling

Peng identifies as an “alogical approach,” which reflects a contemplation of the uncertain nature of language and narrative in video art.<sup>237</sup> It is about creating a “sensible space” where the viewer can intuitively engage with the atemporal present.<sup>238</sup>

The precise video production and the strategic installation suggest that no single video holds a standalone significance. When the viewer tries to focus on one video, their attention is quickly drawn to the others, creating an interplay of viewing experiences. Even when the viewer approaches a video closely, the human-scale projection envelops them in the video’s display of the artist’s continuous movements and the changing states of the water, preventing a complete view of the drawings.

In this setting, the specific content of the drawings becomes secondary to the overall effect of ephemerality and performativity, conveyed through four video projections on three walls. Despite their varied content, a consistent theme emerges—the interaction of the artist’s body with the materials of water, brush, and stone, and the cyclical image of creation and evaporation, represented by the ephemeral water traces.

This setting primarily invites the viewer to enter into the videos’ presentation of an ongoing process of creation and disappearance, harmoniously blending their reality with that of the videos. What is noteworthy is that this continuous play of the videos may at the first glance suggest a long spell of water drawing, yet each video only showcases around seven images in an uninterrupted loop. The similarity of the images

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<sup>237</sup> Yang Geng and Lingling Peng, “The Time Phenomenon of Chinese Zen and Video Art in China: 1988–1998,” *Cultura* 13.2 (2016): 103–24.

<sup>238</sup> Gao Fei, Qiu Zhijie, Gao Shiming et al., “An interview with the ‘Hang Zhou School,’” *New Media* 5 (2010): 72.

within each video—particularly those depicting human profiles and natural landscapes—makes it difficult to recognise the repetition on a first viewing. The viewer is likely to need to watch a single video intently for two or three cycles before noticing the repetition of images. This construction further emphasises the ongoing interplay between appearance and disappearance, rather than focusing on the quantity or variety of the images depicted.

As such, the videos are trying to convey a kind of rhythm that invites the viewer to immerse themselves in the unfolding phenomena of the interplay of materials and the human body. The focus lies not on decoding a predetermined narrative or appreciating the artist’s technical prowess, but rather on understanding the essence of lived experiences over the aesthetic values of the water drawings themselves. In this sense, *Water Records* shapes an open-ended experiential realm for the viewer, defying linear narratives or a fixed endpoint. It compels the viewer to observe and engage with the immediate, lived experience of the transient processes presented in the video installation. In this way, *Water Records* evolves into an interactive space, encouraging the viewer to engage, interpret, and assign personal meanings. It embodies what Henry Sayre defined as an “undecidable” performative document—a dynamic, evolving narrative that eschews rigid interpretation.<sup>239</sup>

These deliberate arrangements—including the strategic positioning of the camera affording a close-up, first-person perspective of the artist’s hand-actions and the evolving material phenomena; the projections of videos showing unsynchronised

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<sup>239</sup> Henry Sayre, *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-garde since 1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 7.

drawing steps in a constant loop, and the installation of enveloping, immersive video projections—collectively draw the viewer into an engagement with the past (the vanished image), the present (the existing image), and the future (the image yet to come). The videos lack a defined beginning or end, eschewing a linear narrative or a prescribed order of viewing. Whenever the viewer enters the installation, they find themselves immersed in a fluid, elusive phenomenon. This setting creates a profound temporal disjunction that fosters a non-linear experience of time, wherein the past, present, and future are interlaced in a dynamic interplay. It features internal dis/continuities and dis/connections that counter any presupposed unity of space, time, and entities.

In this sense, the viewer is less likely to perceive that they are merely witnessing a past performance. Rather, the work becomes more theatrical than documentary in nature, existing as a performance primarily through its documentation. This immersive experience seems to transform the viewer into participants within an unfolding situation, as suggested by Sayre in his seminal work *The Object of Performance*.<sup>240</sup> Sayre highlights the potency of performative documents that are “undecidable;” ones that empower the viewer to construct their own meanings.<sup>241</sup> He wrote, “its meanings are explosive, ricocheting and fragmenting throughout its audience. The work becomes a situation, full of suggestive potentialities, rather than a self-contained whole, determined and final.”<sup>242</sup> Kristine Stiles concurs with Sayre on “the contingency of the document not only to a former action but also to the construction of a wholly fictive

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

space.”<sup>243</sup> For Sayre, the nature of performance art lies in its openness, shaped by the viewer’s interpretation. This idea implies a broader understanding that the artwork is in state of dynamic change, resisting any form of static definition.

**ii. Enhancing “presentness” through interactivity: The complementary roles of *Traceless Stele* and *Water Records***

In considering the immediacy and lived experience of art, it is important to discuss another of Song’s works, also included in *The Allure of Matter*: the interactive installation *Traceless Stele* (fig. 2). This heated metal stele, placed before the three-wall projection of *Water Records*, serves as a contemporary interpretation of traditional Chinese steles, which bear inscriptions to honour specific individuals or events. In *Traceless Stele*, the viewer is invited to use a brush and water to craft their own transient messages on the stone, which will soon vanish due to the stele maintaining a temperature of sixty degrees Celsius, which contrasts with the stele’s conventional purpose as a site for enduring memorials. Despite the immediacy of this physical experience and its emphasis on the material conditions of thinking, the experience’s nuances and immersions can be disrupted by various exhibition conditions, such as visitor volume, diversity, and the individual moods of the viewer.

Amelia Jones, while acknowledging the value of witnessing live artworks, warns against deeming these experiences superior to understanding gleaned from the performance’s remaining traces. She posits that a viewer of a live performance or interactive installation, despite seemingly having the advantage of experiencing the context first-hand, might grapple with fully understanding the narrative or process until

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<sup>243</sup> Kristine Stiles, “Performative and its Objects,” *Art Magazine* 37 (1990): 40–1.

after the event.<sup>244</sup> She further argues that viewer engagement predominantly arises from the documentary traces that the performance generates.<sup>245</sup> Rebecca Schneider concurs, stating that these documents act as a testament, presenting the event as something that has already occurred.<sup>246</sup>

*The Allure of Matter* exhibition, where *Water Records* and *Traceless Stele* shared a room, suggests a potential solution to these challenges. The pairing of primary and non-primary experiences—one through direct interaction, and the other through documented performance—could facilitate a more focused and mediated viewer experience. This contrasts with the potential confusion that may arise from encountering performance art or live works in isolation. By curating a space that pairs live interaction with documented performance, both works of which include interrelated elements like water, a hard and solid substance, brush(es), and human bodies, Song's works foster a nuanced engagement and rich appreciation of the artist's exploration of ephemerality and materiality within the constructed exhibitionary space.

The immersive video projections of *Water Records*, when paired with the installation *Traceless Stele*, cultivate a sense of "presentness" in the viewer. The selection of disparate images, coupled with an emphasis on the ongoing, disorderly events that arise from interactions between humans and non-humans, illuminates the temporality of unfolding phenomena rather than projecting a fixed record of reality. In this context, Song's video projections underscore the dual function of performance

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<sup>244</sup> Amelia Jones, "Presence in Absentia: Performance Art and the Rhetoric of Presence," *Art Journal*, winter(1997): 12.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> Rebecca Schneider, "Solo Solo Solo," in *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, ed. Gavin Butt (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 215.

documentation—not only signifying the presence of the body but also the reality that emerges from it. This intricate layering of narratives stemming from these interactions amplifies the viewer’s experience, transforming it from passive observation to active engagement.

After the artist has created, experienced, documented, and ultimately disposed of the physical artwork, its existence continues solely through filmic documentation and potential narration. As a result, the viewer engages with *Water Records* through a mediated, second-hand experience. Yet it is precisely this mediation that acknowledges and presents the artwork in a way that feels immediate and engaging. These projections are particularly compelling because of their apparent incongruity, yet they simultaneously immerse the viewer in a sense of “presentness” with the unfolding phenomenon, illustrated by the video content. By blurring the boundaries between the past event and the current experience, Song’s work generates a unique viewing experience that challenges traditional perceptions of art and time.

This second-hand experience inherently signifies the unattainable—artworks that once existed but that will never be the same again. The essence of *Water Records* is deeply entrenched in this transience. While the materials—water, brush, and stone—may morph into non-objects, existing only in documentation and memory, they maintain vitality through this metamorphosis. Their significance and relationality persist, enduring not just physical changes but also transformations in perception by future audiences. Long after the temporal event concludes, these objects become an unexpected collective of archivists, safeguarding a continuously evolving piece of artistic legacy. Song’s meticulous planning and diligent execution of *Water Records*

serve as sincere attempts to preserve the transient essence of an ephemeral piece. This piece continues to actively transform and coexist within the realms of collective memory and interpretation, confirming the enduring vitality of the art objects involved, even in their transformed state.

iii. **Repositioning water in the ongoing process of appearance and disappearance**

In *Water Records*, the presence of the viewer activates a moment in time within the video installation, drawing attention to the “allure” of water that has been a hallmark of Song’s artistic practices since *Writing Diary With Water* (1995). Song consistently involves various materials or surfaces—such as brushes of different sizes, a seal, or the ground—to interact with water, typically as part of writing or painting, only to watch the water traces evaporate. Central to these experiments from the mid-nineties are Song’s emphasis on process over results, and on actions requiring persistence and physical endurance that yields only ephemeral outcomes. Works like *Writing Diary With Water*, *Breathing* (1996, fig. 33), and *Stamping the Water* (fig. 31) are examples indicative of this approach.

*Water Records*, as discussed above, strongly resonates with Song’s *Writing Diary with Water*, created fifteen years earlier. In this performance work, Song wrote his diary entries in water with a calligraphy brush on a block of stone, the text disappearing as the water evaporated. This emphasis on the fleeting nature of water traces in *Writing Diary with Water* mirrors the experience of a young Song practicing calligraphy under his father’s tutelage, where ink and paper were often substituted with water due to cost—a common situation in China for those with economic constraints. In both artworks, the brushstrokes, whether forming characters or figures, start to diminish and

vanish before the artist can finish delineating them.

However, as examined above, the documentation methods differ. *Writing Diary with Water* was partially recorded through four photographs capturing the gradual process of the writing and evaporation of words. Due to the camera's position to the side at some distance, the specific words remain indiscernible, resulting in the photographs only showing blurred, vanishing water inscriptions. This partial documentation lends an intimate, secretive aspect to the diary, indicating that water writing is a personal activity for the artist. In contrast, *Water Records*, while employing a similar technique of using brush and water on stone, adopts a more transparent approach through its strategic video documentation and installation. This method reveals a clearer vision of the water traces as they appear and disappear, making the content of Song's drawings accessible to the public audience without secrecy.

Despite employing different documentary strategies, both works feature Song's gesture of holding a calligraphy brush dipped in water, inevitably linking it to the role of water in traditional Chinese painting and calligraphic practices. Chinese painting tradition is one of the world's most intricate and enduring, distinguished by its prominent use of a water-based medium in ink painting. This approach stands in marked contrast from Western painting traditions, where using water as a medium is a relatively modern phenomenon, diverging from established artistic norms. In Chinese painting, water is not just a crucial element of the artistic medium but also a central theme in calligraphy, esteemed as an art form in its own right. In the revered genre of Chinese landscape painting, water is integral both as a medium and as a subject matter, when representing watery things such as clouds, rivers, and lakes.

Specifically, water plays an essential role in this context as it helps to control the consistency and transparency of the ink. Artists or calligraphers can achieve a wide range of tonal gradations—from deep blacks to subtle greys and delicate washes—by varying the amount of water mixed with the ink and the duration of grinding. Water is thus employed to generate a range of visual effects, such as soft washes, bold ink strokes, and intricate details. Ink on paper can often reveal the brushstrokes as a manifestation of an artist or calligrapher’s individuality. The unique expressiveness of these marks is recognised through an understanding of their creation and by identifying the distinct approach by which the artist executes the recognisable themes of the painting.

Beyond its utilitarian function in painting and calligraphy practices, water often appears as a subject matter in landscape paintings to represent watery things, such as rivers, lakes, or waterfalls. These depictions evoke a harmonious interplay between the human and natural worlds, underscoring the importance of living in balance with one’s surroundings.

Historically, China’s development has been closely tied to water management and control, as detailed in Philip Ball’s *The Water Kingdom*.<sup>247</sup> This relationship is rooted in the necessity to harness and regulate water for agricultural and societal needs, given the country’s vast river systems and the challenges posed by flooding and irrigation. Water has been a crucial element in the shaping of Chinese civilisation, often necessitating massive interventions in the natural environment. Grand projects like the Dujiangyan irrigation system and the Grand Canal stand testament to this enduring

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<sup>247</sup> Philip Ball, *The Water Kingdom: A Secret History of China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

engagement.

The significance of water in Chinese history and art is not a mere coincidence. It symbolises the profound understanding and respect for the power of water and the need to maintain a harmonious balance with nature. In landscape paintings, water is often portrayed in such a way as to highlight this symbiotic relationship between humans and their environment. These artistic expressions serve as reminders of the challenges—historical and current—involved in managing this vital resource, echoing the societal and environmental ethos of ancient China.

Thus, the frequent portrayal of water in Chinese landscape painting is more than an artistic preference; it reflects the centuries-old cultural and historical significance of water in China. This artistic tradition underscores a philosophical and practical approach to living in balance with one's surroundings, encapsulating the essence of Chinese wisdom in harmonising human endeavours with the natural world.

In *Water Records*, we also see a pronounced emphasis on the element of water. Yet Song's use of water in gestures that echo traditional painting and calligraphy reveals a subversive twist to the established tradition that places a strong emphasis on the interplay of water and ink as well as the artist's mastery over their medium. By forgoing ink and working exclusively with water, the traces of human skill and mastery over the material is no longer visually available. Regardless of the effort invested in the activity of painting or writing, the water's gradual evaporation renders the traces of human action and the textual or figurative messages previously created invisible. This phenomenon leads the practitioner into a spiritual state of effortless attainment. Song

describes how “even if you do things in vain, you’ll still have to do them.”<sup>248</sup> This sense of the human losing control over the water in Song’s work may easily lend itself to an interpretation of water having autonomous capacities to convey the metaphorical meanings of the work or socio-cultural response, as mentioned above in this chapter’s introduction.

However, through a processual and relational lens, we can uncover an alternative understanding of the videos of *Water Records* by drawing attention to the work’s emphasis on intersubjective relationships over detached objectivity. The portrayal of water might suggest an unstable physical state, visually fluctuating between emergence and gradual disappearance. This presentation may lead one to perceive water as easily influenced or controlled by the artist’s intervention, such as through brushwork or environmental settings. However, this perceived instability contrasts with the inherent physical stability of water at a molecular level. Water’s molecular structure, H<sub>2</sub>O, remains unchanged as it transitions between solid, liquid, and gas states, with variations pertaining only to the spacing and movement of its molecules.

This molecular stability is what enables water to actively participate in the unfolding phenomenon of interaction within the artwork, reacting and performing in tandem with the artist’s actions and other material entities, like the brush and stone. *Water Records* leverages these qualities through intricate interdependencies between the artist’s actions, the stone’s surface, and environmental factors such as temperature and humidity. The water’s presence in the artwork is marked by the continuous interaction

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<sup>248</sup> Sun Dongdong, “Song Dong: The Wisdom Of The Poor,” *Leap9*, July 5, 2011, accessed March 5, 2024. <http://www.leapleap.com/2011/07/the-wisdom-of-the-poor/>.

and cooperation with the elements, perpetually transforming and being transformed within the constructed scene. This ceaseless metamorphosis of water in *Water Records* is not solely a product of external manipulation but also a reflection of its molecular resilience and adaptability. The process of water vanishing on the heated stone in *Water Records* is emblematic of nature's cycle of evaporation and precipitation. As water transforms and seemingly disappears, it mirrors the natural cycle, reminding us that, even in its apparent absence, water continues its journey, and is capable of reforming and renewing itself in conducive conditions. This dynamic interplay within the artwork underscores the importance of the physical properties of water in the ongoing process of water drawings, subtly weaving in the theme of continuous natural transformation.

The work, more likely, extends an open invitation to natural and cultural processes to partake in the evolution of the work, which never truly reaches completion unless the artist halts their actions, or the environmental setting—in this case, the closed frame of a heated stone—is disrupted. It remains in continuous motion through the seamless replay of the videos, offering no stasis, no identifiable single moment, underscoring an emphasis on unending transformation or relentless becoming. The appeal and the persuasiveness of this work derive, in part, from this dynamic complexity, attesting to the intricate entanglement of natural resources, traditional cultural practices, and the visual motifs drawn from daily life.

*Water Records* thus prompts us to reflect on how a multitude of converging and conflicting forces create the potential for interactions between human and non-human elements, and between nature and culture, in their dis/continuity and intersubjective relationality. I argue that *Water Records* is not purely a display of the loss of control by

accentuating water's own agency and its independent interpretative ability. Rather, it represents more of a doing, an event, a phenomenon, or a happening. In Barad's terms, it could be characterised as the "worlding" of "differential patterns of mattering" that form through the relational intra-action among the artist, water, brush, and stone.<sup>249</sup> In what follows, I will demonstrate that the work does not adhere to the dichotomy of "water" versus "humans," or "nature" versus "culture." Instead, it constructs the indivisibility of culture and nature, or what Haraway proposes as "naturecultures." In these "naturecultures," nature and culture, human and non-human, as Vicky Kirby describes it, all emerge "within a force field of differentiations that has no exteriority in any final sense."<sup>250</sup> This perspective allows us to question any established hierarchy within anthropocentric discourse, whether stated outright or implied, and to comprehend Song's work in its full relational intricacy.

A number of authors, such as Nancy's "Immaterial Materiality," Tessa's "A Vocabulary of Water," and Laura Vermeeren's "Water Calligraphy: The Ephemeral Everyday,"<sup>251</sup> have already pointed out how, in Song's works, water possesses material agency, an idea predicated on its processual nature of gradual disappearance. They often interpret the material agency of water as independently executed by the water. I argue, however, that this material agency of water does not necessarily imply its ability to enact physical changes in itself. Instead, it might be more fitting, as Astrida Neimanis suggests, to characterise it as water's responsivity: its capacity to engage with other

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>250</sup> Vicki Kirby, *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal*, 1<sup>st</sup> Edition (New York: Routledge, 2014), 126–7.

<sup>251</sup> Nancy, "Immaterial Materiality"; Tessa, "A Vocabulary of Water"; Laura Vermeeren, "Water Calligraphy: The Ephemeral Everyday" in *Inquisitive Ink: A Study of Contemporary Practices of Calligraphy in China* (PhD Dissertation, University of Amsterdam, 2020), 92–127.

substances and entities and to react by performing an action. It is a “capacity that isn’t precisely ‘active’, but which ‘does something’ nonetheless.”<sup>252</sup>

Water (H<sub>2</sub>O) is at a molecular level a uniquely adaptable substance. H<sub>2</sub>O is a polar molecule, meaning it has a partial positive charge on one side and a partial negative charge on the other. This polarity allows water molecules to form hydrogen bonds, which are crucial for its various states (solid, liquid, gas) and for its interactions with other substances. Importantly, the agency of water includes the capacity to facilitate, offering itself in the service of other life forms, fostering diversity, and enabling new life to come into existence. The inherent capacity of water to respond and adapt to different environments and substances is central to its role in Song’s art, yet this is often overlooked or rendered invisible.

The process of evaporation, a key feature in Song’s works, further exemplifies water’s responsive nature. Evaporation is a cooling process: as water evaporates, it absorbs energy from its surroundings, causing a temperature drop. This property is harnessed in Song’s works, where the interaction of water with a heated stone surface—a critical aspect that most current interpretations have overlooked—leads to evaporation, visibly demonstrating the interplay between heat, water, and air. Song utilises a heating device to raise the temperature of the stone, a fact not readily discernible in the video. While the water would still gradually evaporate even if the stone were not heated, given its application in quantities similar to the small, delicate amount of ink used in traditional painting and calligraphy, the evaporation process would be considerably slower.

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<sup>252</sup> Astrida Neimanis, “Alongside the Right to Water, a Posthumanist Feminist Imaginary,” *Journal of Human Rights and the Environment* 5.1 (2014): 21.

Without the heightened temperature of the stone, the viewer would be more likely to see the entire illustration and would have to wait considerably longer to witness the image's disappearance, barring any video speed adjustments. This would result in a heightened focus on the presence of the water and the content of the drawings, and would not yield the rhythmic ebb and flow of the constant emergence and disappearance of painted images that we observe. The intentional heating of the stone, then, significantly impacts the dynamism and interpretive richness of the work.

It is noteworthy that Song consciously employs a heating device on the stone to accelerate the water's evaporation process, thus achieving a more fluid and synchronised interplay of the emergence and disappearance of his images. The water's process of evaporation has been sped up by the artificially manipulated conditions of the stone upon which it is drawn. Its inherent property of evaporation is not negated, but rather adjusted and amplified. Moreover, Song maintains a steady, unhurried pace in his drawing. As he draws, the images he creates begin to fade before they are fully realised, embodying the temporal nature of memory and perception. This process mirrors the anticipatory and revisionary aspects inherent in any painting practice. Just as an artist must visualise a concept before bringing it to life, and adapt as the medium—be it water or ink—dries differently from how it was applied, Song's water drawings require a similar foresight and adaptability. The constant emergence and vanishing of the water traces in Song's work reflect these universal aspects of painting.

The viewer observes not only the creation of the image but also its transformation and eventual disappearance, which offers a profound insight into the creative process itself. This cycle of creation and disappearance exemplifies the ongoing processes of

anticipation and revision that all artists experience. Each stroke of the brush is both an act of creation and an acceptance of inevitable change, embodying the fluidity and impermanence of artistic expression. Thus, while the viewer's attention is drawn to the rhythmic flow of appearance and disappearance, it also subtly highlights the dynamic nature of artistic creation. The emphasis is less on the final product or its potential message and more on the act of materialisation itself—an ongoing, evolving process that positions transformation as a persistent aspect of embodied existence and subjectification.

As such, the work emphasises the plasticity of water, not merely its formlessness, in its interrelation with the stone, demonstrating its capacity to adapt to the influence of other forces, materials, or environmental conditions. The heated stone and the artist's actions do not override the water's inherent agency, nor do they reduce it to a mere tool of human manipulation and environmental design. Water's molecular structure, characterised by its polarity, allows it to form hydrogen bonds, rendering it an effective solvent that can dynamically interact with various elements, including materials, environments, and the artist himself. This intricate interplay of entities, coalescing into a coherent rhythm of water drawings, attests to the artist's acknowledgement of water's vitality, agency, and responsiveness. It is a harmonious testament to the interplay between human and natural worlds, smoothly interweaving with the forces and movements present in the intra-active settings, subtly altering the image representations while also being changed in return.

Some might argue that by using water in place of ink for calligraphic writing or ink painting, and thus erasing visible, lasting representations, Song is making a critical

statement about traditional cultural practices that are bound by rigid ideological perspectives or deterministic views of the world.<sup>253</sup> However, I argue that Song is essentially embodying the very essence of the materiality of the Chinese writing system, while simultaneously rejecting the tethering of his artistic endeavours to any specific cultural dogmas or definitive worldviews.

In classical calligraphy, as summarised by Joseph R. Allen, the visual impact of the written word often takes precedence over its literal meaning.<sup>254</sup> Allen provides an illustrative example with Wang Xizhi's [王羲之] well-known work, "Preface to the Orchid Pavilion" [兰亭序] (Tang Dynasty, fig. 34). While the calligraphic presentation of this work is widely appreciated, few engage with its actual text, and fewer still delve into the poems it introduces.<sup>255</sup> This separation of form and content is a prominent characteristic of East Asian calligraphy. Waku Miller, whom Allen cites, notes that newcomers to this art form are often surprised to find that the meaning of the text rarely influences its execution.<sup>256</sup> Discussions surrounding calligraphy seldom involve the content of the work; rather, they focus on the creative process and aesthetic output. This phenomenon draws attention to the materiality of the Chinese writing system. Unlike alphabetical systems, Chinese characters do not consistently map onto specific verbal

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<sup>253</sup> See e.g., Martina Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare: A Semiotic Analysis, the Chinese Avant-Garde, 1979-1989* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited, 2003), 240-244; Gao Minglu, "'Particular Time, Specific Space, My Truth': Total Modernity in Chinese Contemporary Art" in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, eds., Antonio Negri, Geeta Kapur, and Rosalind Krauss (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 133-164; Birgit Mersmann, "(Ideo-) Logical Alliances between Image and Script: Calligraphic Reconfigurations in Contemporary Chinese Art," in *Elective Affinities: Testing Word and Image Relationships*, eds., Catriona MacLeod, Charlotte Schoell-Glass, and Véronique Plesch (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 387-399.

<sup>254</sup> Allen, "Words as Things," 90.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>256</sup> Waku Miller, "Translator's Introduction," in *Taction: The Drama of the Stylus in Oriental Calligraphy*, ed. Ishikawa Kyuyoh (Tokyo: International House of Japan, 2011), xv.

sounds.<sup>257</sup> This lack of predictability allows the written form to attain a sort of independence, both across time (diachronically) as pronunciations evolve, and across space (synchronically) in the diverse range of Chinese dialects.<sup>258</sup> Nevertheless, even while appreciating this materiality, most analyses of Chinese writing still situate it within a framework of linguistic communication, albeit a complex one.<sup>259</sup>

Ishikawa Kyuyoh's recent exploration of the "taction" of calligraphy, highlighted by Allen, may be one of the few studies that approach the "thingness" of Chinese writing.<sup>260</sup> Kyuyoh uses the term "taction" to denote the physical contact and motion of a stylus on its medium, exploring its implications in diverse contexts, from ancient oracle bones to modern calligraphic paintings. His study goes some way towards understanding Chinese writing as a thing in itself, rather than simply a vehicle for linguistic expression. He says,

Taction is the stuff of calligraphy, just as sound is the stuff of music. In music, the vibration of a sound source propagates waves, which travel through the air to the ear of the listener, who then perceives sounds. Similarly, subtle motion—vibration—is the essence of taction. The tip of the brush is ever undulating while in contact with its medium. And differences in the character of that undulation define the differences that we perceive in taction.<sup>261</sup>

In Song's work, the brush's constant undulation on the stone's surface, devoid of any enduring visible trace, elicits a symphony of tactile sensations. The varied textures of the stone directly influence the brush tip's undulations, and over an extended period, this interaction would inevitably lead to the gradual wearing away of the brush itself.

When the brush encounters a smooth surface, akin to *xuan* paper, it glides effortlessly,

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<sup>257</sup> Allen, "Words as Things," 90.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>261</sup> Ishikawa Kyuyoh, *Taction: The Drama of the Stylus in Oriental Calligraphy*, trans. Waku Miller (Tokyo: International House of Japan, 2011), 4.

giving rise to a wave of fluid movements. While *xuan* paper could allow the artist to produce delicate and expressive imagery or textual results, it often demands skilful control of brushwork and the amount of ink applied to prevent the fragile *xuan* paper from becoming overly absorbent or wrinkled and broken from excessive brush pressure. This constant care and control prevent the artist from fully immersing himself in the tactile experience of the interaction of brush and paper. The need to continuously adjust techniques—such as the force of holding the brush and the speed of application—can overshadow the materiality of the making-process and diminish the tactile interaction between the artist and the materials he engages with.

Conversely, Song uses stone: a dense, hard and unyielding material with a sense of permanence and solidity that resists the varying forces of brushwork. When the brush meets the stone surface, replete with natural variations and an uneven texture, the movement of the brush adjusts accordingly. This leads to diverse, immediate, and intimate physical feedback, fostering a potent dialogue between artist, brush, water, and stone. As Song moves his brush slowly and steadily across the stone's surface, the sensation transforms into a tangible exploration of texture and natural form. The hardness of the stone's surface, the irregularities, the grooves and pits—all these offer a platform far more tactile and engaging than *xuan* paper. This focus on an intense moment of contact, devoid of any permanent visible traces, and the ensuing subtle variations, gives the artist a heightened sense of presence.

This opens up the opportunity for the artist to not only feel the handling of the brush—as in traditional practices of calligraphy and painting in which the brush is often the primary conduit of feeling and which offers artists a tactile connection to their work,

but also other materials—in this case, stone and water—involved in the act of painting. Song extends this connection to incorporate a broader range of tactile experiences, reminiscent of the interplay of stone and water in the aesthetics and meaning of Chinese gardens, where these elements are central to the creation of harmony and contemplative beauty. In these settings, stone and water are not merely decorative elements but central to fostering an atmosphere of harmony and contemplative beauty, integral to the garden's design and philosophical ethos. When painting with water on heated stone through slow and steady action, Song is not just in touch with the brush; he is also sensing the stone's hard, rough surface that influences the motion of the brush and the water's responsive and plastic nature to correspond with the brush and stone while performing its transient, fluid dance.

In this way, Song here embodies the materiality inherent in the making of Chinese calligraphy or painting, by moving focus away from the traditional reliance on precise brush control, meticulous management of the amount of ink, and a keen sense of metaphysical manifestations. Instead, Song constructs his making-process from a more ontological approach, positioning the work as a material-discursive phenomenon where stone, artist, water, and brush interplay.

This intra-activity enriches a haptic or sensuous experience of the making-process and, as Ishikawa describes, defines the variations we perceive in taction, which diverge from the traditional calligraphic or painting practice, which tends to be human-centred, often with a predetermined goal of linguistic meanings or expressive pictorial representations and an aim to embody metaphysical manifestations. Song's making-process offers a new set of potential meanings, derived not from the content of the writing or painting,

but rather from the very sensation—the affective experience of ongoing entanglements with materials he engages with during his practice.

The dynamic interdependence—where all elements are mutually constitutive and engaged in a process of continuous emergence and disappearance—demonstrates how a traditional act of painting or calligraphy can become deeply entwined with natural materials, like stone and water. Song’s painting practice is rooted in the rich history of Chinese cultural practices of writing or painting. The stone and the water are not simply passive objects subjected to human conceptions and cultural practices; rather, they possess agential capacities to influence, respond, collaborate, and actively “do something.” Stone provides more than a backdrop for Song’s gesture of painting. Its varied texture and hard surface influence the brush’s undulations, the distribution of water, and thus the temporary impressions left behind. It imparts its own irregularities, its hardness, and temperature, to the brush’s journey and the subsequent formation of strokes. It becomes an active participant, shaping and directing the flow of water, altering the motion of the brush, and affecting the artist’s sensuality. Here, the natural characteristics of the stone inform and influence the cultural act of painting, demonstrating an active interplay between the two.

Similarly, also water enacts its agential forces. Its fluidity and transience render each stroke ephemeral, constantly shifting and evolving in response to the heated stone surface, the air or environmental conditions, and the artist’s brush. The water does not merely follow the path dictated by the brush; it may pool in crevices, flow along lines of least resistance, or evaporate at varying rates. Each stroke is not only dictated by Song’s hand but also by the interplay between the water’s fluid properties and the

stone's solid form.

In this way, we see the natural world actively shaping a cultural practice. The cultural act of painting does not mask or repress the natural elements; instead, it celebrates them and becomes a part of them. Nature is not a silent backdrop to culture, nor is culture an artificial imposition on nature. They emerge together in a constant, dynamic intra-action, where material agencies and human agency do not act in isolation, but influence and shape one another. Song's action, the movement of the brush, the flow of water, and the texture and temperature condition of the stone all contribute to a continuous and inseparable movement—a continuum of “naturecultures” that cannot be dissected into discrete instances or reduced to an aggregation of points.

#### iv. The structuring of the spatio-temporal narrative

An observable trend of deprioritising and depoliticising space emerges in the creative realm of Song's artwork. Existing research on Song's water-based works—such as Meiqin Wang's “Breathing” and Wu Hung's *Remaking Beijing: Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space*—frequently emphasises the environmental or spatial contexts to interpret the artistic intentions and implications of his performances.<sup>262</sup> For instance, in his work *Stamping the Water* (fig. 31), Song interacted with the surface of Tibet's Lhasa River using a large wooden seal bearing the Chinese character for “water.” The choice of the Lhasa River as the setting is not just symbolic; it is a vital body of water steeped in historical and cultural significance. The river's flows link past and present, carrying stories of Tibetan identity and

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<sup>262</sup> Meiqin, “Breathing”; Wu Hung, *Remaking Beijing: Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

resistance amidst ongoing socio-political tensions with China. In Song's artwork, the river becomes a site where different temporal and spatial dimensions intersect, creating a complex narrative field. Scholars may view Song's engagement with the river as a direct commentary on issues of control, power, and identity, positioning the river as more than just a geographical location but a dynamic participant in the artwork. The act of stamping "water" on the river's surface highlights a profound interplay between the symbol and its physical counterpart, underscoring the fluidity of cultural and political meanings ascribed to both. Thus, the river acts as a powerful space-time nexus, where the pressing of the wooden seal becomes an act of marking time and asserting cultural narratives within the continuously evolving socio-political landscape of Tibet.

In another piece, *Breathing* (fig. 33), the artist positioned himself face down in Tiananmen Square in sub-zero conditions, remaining for forty minutes, until his breath condensed into a thin layer of ice. The spatial context of this work—Tiananmen Square being loaded with political significance—gives it a pronounced socio-political dimension. Scholars suggest that Song's simple act of breathing in these locations might subtly critique political power or meditate on individual existence within a politically charged space.

*A Pot of Boiling Water* (1995, fig. 35) offers another compelling example. In this piece, Song walked through a Beijing alleyway while pouring boiling water from a pot. The location emphasises the ephemeral nature of his actions—the steam from the boiling water quickly dissipates in the cold air, providing a subtle critique of the transient nature of the cityscape and the vanishing alleyways emblematic of local culture. The setting underlines the often overlooked and mundane sites of life, tucked away from the public

gaze, which renders the work an intimate glimpse into urban life. The alleyway, a public yet residential space, carries dual connotations of the domestic and the communal, enhancing the socio-political resonance of the work. Here, boiling water, typically a household element, gains broader symbolic significance when taken into the public realm. It suggests that personal or domestic matters are inseparable from larger societal changes, further blurring the boundaries between private and public spaces.

Each work unfolds within a specific spatial context that significantly contributes to its conceptual meanings and potential socio-political interpretations. Indeed, in each of these works, the choice of location, or “space,” is far from arbitrary. Rather, it is an integral component of the artwork’s conceptual framework, substantially influencing its potential meanings and implications. Hence, current studies underscore the significance of space and environment in Song’s works, viewing these not merely as backdrops but as active contributors to the socio-political dimensions of his performances.

These studies demonstrate a tendency to attribute primacy to the spatial component of Song’s works, acknowledging that space can hold active, political, and creative force. This perspective aligns with Doreen Massey’s notion of “the chance of space,” which regards space as a dynamic entity rife with possibilities.<sup>263</sup> She emphasises that space is not a static backdrop, but an arena for serendipitous encounters and confrontations, providing a platform for creativity.<sup>264</sup> As in Song’s works, the sites he chooses—be it a Tibetan river, Tiananmen Square, or the alleys of Beijing—embody this “chance of

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<sup>263</sup> Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London, California, and New Delhi: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2005), 111.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*

space.” These are sites of confrontation, where the artist, his materials, the environment, and the potential audience intersect, and the unpredictability of these interactions generate unique meanings with socio-political resonances.

However, while current interpretations of Song’s water works recognise the role of space, they are often at risk of reducing this to static representation. The connotational characterisation of spaces as inert can obscure its dynamic qualities, which may inadvertently limit our understanding of its socio-political potential. This narrow view of space runs the risk of conflating change with events, potentially overlooking the continuous unfolding of the political within these spaces. Moreover, politicisation should not be seen as finite or fixed within a specific space or time. It would be naïve to view space as an unchallenged objectivity. This could lead to a fixation on meaning within rigid topographies, restricting our understanding to fixed significations. This fixated interpretation would result in a totalitarian illusion: the belief that one could fully master a system of signification.

It is crucial to recognise the continuous flow of meaning forming a complex and dynamic web of interpretations. As Butler and Athena Athanasiou contend, we should remain open to “unprefigurable future significations” that defy confinement within established boundaries of significance.<sup>265</sup> In the same vein, Song’s *Water Records*, devoid of overt spatial references, act not merely as depoliticisation of spatial discourse, where space is transformed into temporal dimensions and reduced to a simple surface element. Rather than fixating on static representations of space, this work redirects our

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<sup>265</sup> Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 140.

attention to the fluidity of existence, reminding us that our fundamental essence is not captured within the confines of place but is woven through the unfolding of time. This perspective emphasises the importance of seeing beyond the limitations of spatial constraints and appreciating the temporal processes that constitute our being and becoming.

Unlike his other water works—many of which were created during the mid-nineties and anchored in specific locales laden with symbolic and socio-political significance—*Water Records*, created around fifteen years later, presents a tightly focused view that isolates the artist's hand, a brush, traces of water, and a segment of the stone's surface. The complete shape of the stone, let alone any surrounding environment, is purposefully excluded. This work eschews any overt symbolisation that might be associated with spatial elements, a frequent characteristic of Song's earlier water works. This deliberate distancing from spatial symbolism is a noteworthy decision, considering the potential layers of meaning the artist could have imbued the work with, as demonstrated in his earlier projects. However, in *Water Records*, "space"—a feature that scholars could hardly overlook in his previous works—no longer seems to be Song's primary concern. Instead, the work seems to prioritise the phenomenon of the painting itself, and its vanishing process; an event that unfolds in real time, not confined to any particular location or context. Ultimately, in this process, the contemporary issues related to diversity are minimised, the accountability of individuals in creating spatial inequalities is evaded, and the role of space as a facet of social life that intersects with various developmental paths is negated.

In Song's *Water Records*, the traditional interpretation of space as a static or location-

specific entity is reconsidered. The work instead cultivates a nuanced interaction between time and space, setting a stage where Massey's notion of space-time may be particularly illuminating. Massey's view is that space is not a fixed or pre-established construct, but a phenomenon emerging from and constructed by relationships, interactions, and ongoing processes of transformation.<sup>266</sup> Space is seen as an evolving product of the simultaneous co-existence of diverse entities, always receptive to new formations, encounters, and potentialities.<sup>267</sup>

At the heart of *Water Records* is the act of painting with water on a heated stone, encapsulating the cycle of emergence and disappearance. The artist, the brush, the water, and the stone—each bearing its own established notions of form and function—converge in a specific arrangement. This convergence creates an “interactional space”—a term Massey employs—to signify a realm of potential unpredictability.<sup>268</sup> In lieu of a set spatial context or prescribed script, the emerging interrelationships within this work themselves become a form of space—one that is fluid, constantly forming, and inherently multifaceted.<sup>269</sup> Song's act of painting is less about reproducing familiar forms or actions and more about unearthing potential novelties arising from the intra-action of different elements. The resulting artwork, influenced by these unique interconnections, is neither predetermined nor static; it is in a perpetual state of creation and re-creation, embodying Massey's concept of space as a sphere of possibility for “multiplicity” and “is always under construction.”<sup>270</sup> In this sense, *Water Records* creates a viewing experience that transcends specific geographical locations,

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<sup>266</sup> Massey, *For Space*.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

emphasising instead the temporal unfolding of the work continuously formed and reformed by the interaction between artist, brush, water, and heated stone.

Massey's conceptualisation of space prompts us to perceive beyond the individual agencies of various materials or human actors, such as the water's capacity to delineate traces, or the artist's continuous acts of painting. Instead, it encourages the conception of a tapestry of experiential trajectories that allow for multiplicity. This perspective suggests a novel way of engaging with space, enabling the temporal experience constructed through *Water Records* to be part of what Massey terms "the event of place": a state of "thrown-togetherness" in an unavoidable challenge of navigating the present moment—a negotiation taking place within and between the human and the non-human, constituting the "event of place."<sup>271</sup>

If we shift our perception of Song's work—transitioning from a viewpoint that considers space as distinct, bounded locations acquiring meaning via the relationships we build over time, to understanding space as phenomena emerging from intra-actions and forming parts of contingent situations and trajectories—it does not discount the relevance of space in our existence. Instead, this paradigm shift allows for an emergent understanding of the work, revealing novel perspectives rather than merely replicating what is already known. Adele Clarke's statement drives this point home: "*The conditions of the situation are in the situation*. There is no such thing as context. The conditional elements of the situation need to be specified in the analysis of the situation itself as *they are constitutive of it*, not merely surrounding it or framing it or contributing

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 151, 141.

to it. They are it.”<sup>272</sup>

This reinterpretation foregrounds the inherent role of space within these interactions. Viewed in this light, space or place is not a mere enclosure or frame of the situation, but an integral, constitutive component of it. This change in perspective does not strip spaces of their significance. On the contrary, these spaces remain as fundamental elements for providing context, shaping interpretations, and defining experiences, while being intimately interwoven within the everchanging flux of interactions and evolving events.

This also chimes with Barad’s concept of space and time. For Barad, notions of time and space do not allude to fixed or immutable facets of reality. Rather, they are formed and shaped through material-discursive practices. As she articulates,

Time is not merely that the future and the past are not ‘there’ and never sit still, but that the present is not simply here-now. Multiply heterogeneous iterations all: past, present, future, not in a relation of linear unfolding, but threaded through one another in a nonlinear enfolding of spacetimemattering [...].<sup>273</sup>

This complex temporal framework, entwined with Barad’s understanding of materiality, implies a continuous state of change and transformation. In her paradigm, time is not a static entity serving as a substance, measure, or backdrop; it is a relative construct that co-emerges with other factors. Change, then, becomes the connective thread binding temporality and materiality.

Exploring Song’s *Water Records* through Barad’s concept of “spacetimemattering”

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<sup>272</sup> Adele E. Clarke, “Situational Analyses: Grounded Theory Mapping after the Postmodern Turn,” *Symbolic Interaction* 26.4 (2003): 571.

<sup>273</sup> Barad, “Quantum Entanglements,” 244.

illuminates the intricate entanglement of space, time, and matter. The ongoing process illustrated in *Water Records* can be viewed as an experimental apparatus embodying this complex interplay. The work is not constrained by a defined start or end point—though with patient observation, the viewer may discern the video looping after approximately six drawings. Instead, it engages in a perpetual cycle of circulation, articulation, and repetition, allowing the viewer to enter the experience at any moment and encounter a consistent experience, thereby surpassing linear narratives. The work represents a temporally varied and spatially heterotopic realm, intertwining past, present, and future in a non-linear sequence of moments and places. This realm functions as a dynamic space where conventional temporal boundaries dissolve, allowing narratives and experiences to fold into each other, creating a complex tapestry of interactions that challenge our perceptions of time and space. At first glance, the ephemerality of the water used in the creation of the artwork might be perceived as a simple nod to the transience of the present moment. Yet it is in this fleetingness that *Water Records* subtly encapsulates the fluidity and continuity of time. Water's ability to make a temporary mark is a potent reminder of past actions. The marks, though transient, bear evidence to an action that once took place, effectively embodying the past in the present. As the water dries up and the mark disappears, the past action is not forgotten but instead transferred into the shared experiences of the viewer, becoming part of a collective memory. These shared remembrances anchor the fleeting present to a communal past within the audience's consciousness.

Meanwhile, the water's potential to evolve into new images in the future adds a forward-looking dimension to the work. Each interaction, each mark made, is a new possibility, a testament to the potentiality of the future. The fluid transformations of

water serve as a metaphor for the dynamism of life, reinforcing the idea that the future is not a fixed point but a realm of endless possibilities waiting to unfold. Furthermore, the four video projections used in *Water Records* produce a captivating visual mosaic that further manifest the work's non-linear narrative of time.

As a result, the *Water Records* viewer's experience of presentness is not limited to the here-now but includes various non-linear iterations of the past, present, and future, which interlocks in a non-linear envelopment of spacetime mattering, contradicting the traditional rhetoric of impermanence. This spacetime mattering, as embodied in Song's work, leads to a deeply stratified and iterative exploration of both material and discursive conditions, enabling a multifaceted experience, scrutiny, or comprehension of phenomena. The work staunchly rejects any static or one-way progression, remaining deeply anchored in the multi-scalar process of forming understanding. This structuring of the spatio-temporal narrative within *Water Records* exists within a network of interrelated activities and experiences. The significance of these activities and experiences emerges from their intricate intertwining of time and space, framing the ongoing process of assigning meaning to lived experiences in a distinctively spatio-temporal manner.

**v. Ecological awareness emerges from the process of making**

This chapter has focused on exploring water in art as human and non-human co-production and intra-action. This perspective challenges the traditional human-centric dichotomy and emphasises the existence of a more entangled relationship with water and other non-human agents. The complex nature of such practices, where the constructed and natural spaces blend and form unique phenomena, facilitates our

understanding of the dynamic interplay between culture and nature. These expressions of form, serving as productive reconfigurations of human and non-human relationships, promote the comprehension of environmental metamorphoses and ecological awareness. Despite their ephemeral nature and seemingly non-invasive construction, these forms illustrate the fluidity of our interactions with our environment, weaving a mesh of sensory experiences, meanings, practices, and theories.

Before we delve into this ecological perspective, it is crucial to acknowledge the historical and cultural context surrounding environmental consciousness in China. Unlike the Western world, China has not experienced a significant environmental movement, nor has it produced any seminal works on the topic, like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962). Furthermore, there has been no prevalent trend of land or earth art serving as a forerunner to ecological art. However, recently, there has been a rise of ecological awareness within Chinese contemporary art, although its influence is relatively limited. Few Chinese artists have dedicated their entire careers to addressing ecological or environmental issues. Instead, they tend to commit a specific period of their careers—varying from artist to artist—to engage with ecological concerns. This context sets the stage for our examination of the ecological awareness revealed through Song's work.

*Water Records* paints a tableau of entanglement, shedding light on the intricate interdependencies between human and non-human entities. The artwork underscores how these relationships have evolved and how natural forces intertwine with human activities. The components engaged in the making-process of the work—the water, heated stone, brush, the artist's body, and the video apparatus—coalesce into a narrative

of ecological symbiosis, interdependence, and complexity, shaping its spatiotemporal mattering. Exploring *Water Records* through the lens of its nature-cultures—or intra-actions between humans and non-humans—exposes the way the work redefines the human relationship with its environment. It presents the human right to water as neither a construct nor an inherent natural fact, but as a natural-cultural or intra-active phenomenon imbued with sense and meaning. Here, water, along with other material and human elements, fosters an awareness of non-linear time and a working toward productive cohabitation.

Yet as various environmental movements have highlighted, expressing concern for bodies of water does not necessarily challenge the ontological paradigms that permit their exploitation. For that to happen, it is crucial to transcend humanism as the central tenet of ontology and ethics. This calls for a displacement of anthropocentrism, and a redefinition of sovereign ontological subjectivity. Following Val Plumwood’s critique of the “Master Model,” which emphasises dualism, hierarchy, and linear chains of meaning, we are urged to embrace non-conventional modes of existence and explore diverse ecological bodies of water.<sup>274</sup> Instead of studying the role of water from a “nature”-focused perspective, *Water Records* blurs the dualistic hierarchy of modern thought, highlighting the intertwined existence of nature and culture, and the fusion of imagination with material reality. Water in this artwork enacts a “naturalcultural ecology”<sup>275</sup> calling for an approach akin to the prosthetic vision proposed by Haraway and Barad. This perspective accentuates how our physical experience and our symbiotic

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<sup>274</sup> Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>275</sup> Dagmar Lorenz-Meyer, et al., “Anthropocene Ecologies: Biogeotechnical Relationalities in Late Capitalism,” *New Materialism*, Position paper of Working Group 2, COST Action IS1307 (2015): 2–4.

relationships with other entities—such as water—form the foundation of our comprehension of both nature and culture.

To some extent, the ecological consciousness illuminated through *Water Records* can be viewed as a manifestation of traditional Chinese ecological philosophy, most notably the concept of “天人合一” [tien-rén-hé-yi]. This ancient doctrine underscores the interconnectedness of humans and the environment, advocating for human actions that are in harmony with the rhythms of the natural world. Daoist thought further amplifies this interconnectedness. As posited by Laozi, humans draw their law from the Earth, the Earth from Heaven, and Heaven from the Dao. Essentially, nature is the supreme reality, with humans being an integral part of it. Consequently, human activities should resonate with nature’s fluctuations. This interpretation promotes actions that are congruent with nature on both an ontological, socio-political, and moral dimension. Interestingly, the concept of “天人合一” does not depict a static amalgamation of humans and nature, but signifies, rather, a dynamic relationship between culture and nature, and between the human and the heavenly. This relationality challenges the anthropocentric perspective often dominant in ethical discourse.

In the article “Learning from and for One Another: An Inquiry on Symbiotic Pedagogy,” Chia-Ling Wang delves into Chinese ecological wisdom through the prism of reciprocal learning.<sup>276</sup> Drawing upon the concept of symbiosis—a close biological interaction between different species—Wang, through adopting the perspective of Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, argues that every being on the planet is

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<sup>276</sup> Chia-Ling Wang, “Learning from and for One Another: An Inquiry on Symbiotic Learning,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 51(11) (2019): 1164–1172.

interconnected and interdependent.<sup>277</sup> This holistic view aligns with the ancient Chinese philosophy of “天人合一.” Symbiotic relationships, encapsulating co-dependency and joint evolution, exist not only between biological organisms but also between humans, other living beings, and non-living entities.

Song’s painting process in *Water Records* is far from a one-directional assertion of human intent on passive natural elements. On the contrary, it involves a dynamic exchange—his artistic gestures interact with the inherent characteristics and behaviours of the stone and water, creating a fluid, adaptive piece that evolves with the natural properties of these materials. *Water Records* does not aim to dominate or modify the materials to fit a pre-established aesthetic, but rather seeks harmony with them—aligning the making-process with the intrinsic nature of the stone and water. This echoes the Daoist concept of “wu-wei” (无为), which denotes action through non-action, and human alignment with the natural progression of things.

Seen through this prism, Song’s work transcends the confines of a simple artistic pursuit—it becomes a performance of an age-old Chinese philosophy, a vibrant depiction of the symbiosis between humans and nature, and an explicit representation of the dynamic, reciprocal relationship encapsulated by “天人合一.” Consequently, *Water Records* emerges as a profound reflection on the ethical implications of our relationship with the natural world, underscoring the necessity for harmony, respect, and mutual interaction over domination or exploitation.

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<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

In this sense, Song’s artistic practice and activities display a profound respect for, and interest in, water that extends beyond its aesthetic qualities to encompass both ecological and ethical dimensions. Evidence of this deeper engagement is his participation in the “Keepers of the Waters” movement. “Keepers of the Waters,” or “Defender of Water” [水的保卫者], is a conservation movement dedicated to the preservation of water resources. Initiated and directed by artist and environmental activist Betsy Damon in 1991, the campaign took root in Chengdu in 1995, and in Lhasa in the Tibet Autonomous Region in 1996. Damon invited both international and Chinese artists—including Dai Guangyu, Song Dong, Yin Xiuzhen, Zhang Shengquan (Datong Dazhang), and Zhang Xin—to participate. This artist collective engaged in performance and installation art to raise public awareness of water conservation. “Keepers of the Waters” sought to enrich the concept of Chinese performance art through a series of community-driven, collaborative, and participatory performances.

Song’s participation in the “Keepers of the Waters” movement indicates that his interest in water extends beyond simply using it as an artistic medium. His focus on the “rights” of water, or its intra-acting agency, signifies a pronounced ecological or ethical consciousness. His involvement in water-related art projects, including *Water Records*, and related activities, underscores a deep reverence for water. His explorations of water’s potential to enact alternate meanings and capacities further evidence this regard. Song’s recognition of the liveliness, agency, and intelligence of water is instrumental in fostering a more expansive understanding of this element. In his work, water is not a mere silent canvas or a passive resource awaiting human manipulation. It is neither powerless, lifeless, or submissive.

While humans are indeed capable of shaping, directing, and confining water in numerous ways, *Water Records* demonstrates that water possesses a will of its own. This focus on matter's vibrancy connects back to Barad's concept of agential separability and scholar of environmental studies Stacy Alaimo's idea of trans-corporeality.<sup>278</sup> Alaimo uses Barad's idea of intra-action to underscore that all humans are intertwined with other human and non-human entities in an ever-changing, porous environment. As Alaimo puts it, "the material environment is a realm of often incalculable, interconnected agencies" that necessitates "making political, regulatory, and even personal decisions within a continuously evolving landscape of constant interplay, intra-action, emergence, and risk."<sup>279</sup> By exploring the role of water in *Water Records* through its agential capacities in a continuous process of naturecultural entanglement, we are reminded that water, despite our efforts to comprehend it, always retains an element of enigma, consistently remaining one step beyond our understanding.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the ways in which Song's *Water Records* presents a layered and tenaciously iterative narrative of the nature–culture continuum. It has shown how the dynamic interplay of forces and flows within the work induces a shift from a sole focus on object-centric art towards the embrace of a more situational and phenomenological perspective. This perspective unfolds within a constructed, heterotopic field that interlaces temporal and spatial dimensions. Moreover, Song's videos artfully capture the ephemeral processes of appearance and disappearance from

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<sup>278</sup> Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010).

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

a viewing angle that is close to the artist's perspective. Presented in a compelling, immersive manner, the strategic display of four videos of *Water Records* in *The Allure of Matter* transforms the viewer into a participant within an unfolding situation, thereby creating an open-ended, vibrant experiential realm for the audience. *Water Records*, by highlighting the interconnectedness of all life forms and elements within the biosphere, invites a re-evaluation of the role of water, prompting reflection on environmental interdependencies and the inseparable co-constitution of nature and culture, and of humans and non-humans. Through this analysis, this chapter has revealed the need to develop a more mindful, conscious, and reciprocal relationship with our shared world, enhancing our awareness and understanding of the complex, interconnected system that constitutes our biosphere.

## Chapter 3

### Material's Capacity for "Agency": Yang Jiechang's *100 Layers of Ink*

This chapter expands the discussion of art's materialities to encompass the agentic capacities of material in Material Art, using Yang Jiechang's (born 1956) paintings of the *100 Layers of Ink* series (1989–1999) as a case study. This chapter reconsiders the traditional view of the artist as a privileged human subject with full control over the creation and direction of an artwork. Instead, it contends that the materials used in artwork possess their own agentic capacities that contribute to the evolution and emergence of the work. These materials actively produce effects and engage in art-processes in collaboration with human actants (artists and other potential creators). This aligns with the endeavours of New Materialist theorists like Barad and Bennett, who seek to broaden the concept of agency to include non-human forces: "For materiality is always more than 'mere' matter; it encompasses an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that activates matter, making it self-creative, productive, and unpredictable."<sup>280</sup>

By situating Yang's work as illustrative of art's materialities, in possession of intrinsic agentic capacities, the chapter examines the artmaking-process as a space where inanimate matter—ink and other potential materials, such as *xuan* paper and gauze—transition from being under human control to acting as co-agents. Yang has spent a decade (1989–1999) meticulously working with ink, creating a series with the base name *100 Layers of Ink* [千层墨], often distinguishing individual works with numbers or the year of creation. While most pieces carry the series title, some have unique names,

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<sup>280</sup> Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms*, 9.

like *One Hundred Miles Squared* [方百里] (1990, fig. 4), or names that reflect their monochromatic shapes and abstract resemblances to specific objects, as seen in *The Moon and the Sun* (1991, fig. 5) and *Ladder to Heaven* (1992, fig. 6). Despite their varied titles and some works having more distinct shapes like “ladder” and “sun,” the majority of pieces in *100 Layers of Ink* share similar monochromatic forms of multiple layers of wrinkled, ink-soaked paper, making it difficult to distinguish one work from another.

The first works of the series (1989, fig. 7) were created during Yang’s participation as one of three Chinese artists chosen for the ground-breaking exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 1989. Within the confines of the Pompidou, he filled an enclosed space by suspending four colossal rectangular works at a distance from the walls. This exhibition marked the genesis of the *100 Layers of Ink* series, which has since evolved and unfolded over the course of decades, occasionally undergoing changes in materials used. While the majority of the canonical works were created on a human scale (such as *100 Layers of Ink, No.1* in size of  $170.2 \times 186.1$  cm, fig. 8), often adopting irregular square and rectangular formats that were slightly smaller than the immersive installation at the *Magiciens* exhibition (each of those paintings is  $420 \times 280$  cm), the series gradually expanded beyond rectilinearity, exploring round, irregular, organic, and other representational forms.

All of the works in the series showcase prominent hybrid material effects of three-dimensionality, light, blackness, denseness, and laminates. The layered and wrinkled ink-soaked papers create a relief of a seemingly sculptural pattern that floats above a

relatively smooth, muted, dark background. The relief of layers of ink offers textural changes, which creates visual ambiguity that invites shifting viewing experiences, evoking feelings of infinity, mystique, or contemplative tranquillity, depending on the viewer's position. As testified by the title, upon closer observation, one gradually becomes aware that these varied effects are the outcomes of repetitive layering acts with ink and paper.

It is worth noting that Yang did not simply intend to construct a singular monochrome with a general sculptural effect. Rather, each work in the series is designed as a collaged monochrome consisting of a relatively pale black paper that encloses a darker, sculptural core at its centre. The surface of the pale section appears as a thin, matte effect. It is not fully or evenly soaked with ink, and so the viewer can still identify that the ink is applied to *xuan* paper. The uneven and irregular representation of ink in this area suggests a rough application by the artist, without multiple layers of ink. On the other hand, the surface of the central section displays a heavier, darker, and shimmering effect, with the paper appearing to be completely saturated with ink, leaving no blank areas. This results in the viewer perceiving the central part as visually prominent, resembling a sculptural element, while the surrounding pale inked portion appears as a flat background, despite both being created on the same sheet of *xuan* paper. Although both sections are soaked with ink, their distinct effects differentiate them from one another.

Many works of the *100 Layers of Ink* series have been exhibited world-wide, including the display of works like *Nos. 1, 2, and 3* (1994) (figs. 8–10), which has been featured in influential exhibitions, such as *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China* at

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in 2014. These exhibitions have sparked extensive discussions surrounding the series within the contexts of Chinese avant-garde art, abstract art, contemporary ink art, and other relevant artistic movements.<sup>281</sup>

As one of the prominent works in the burgeoning field of “contemporary ink art,” which has sparked lively discussions in recent years, the significance of Yang’s *100 Layers of Ink* has been acknowledged by many scholars (such as Susanna Ferrell and Britta Erickson, and Joan Kee).<sup>282</sup> They have recognised its role in exploring new material qualities of ink, especially emphasising its potential to achieve a sculptural effect that goes beyond its conventional use in traditional ink painting and calligraphy.<sup>283</sup>

Furthermore, these scholars often approach the series from the perspective of

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<sup>281</sup> Exhibitions such as *Magiciens de la terre* in Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1989 and *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China* in Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2014; Scholarly discussions such as Wu Hung, “Negotiating with Tradition in Contemporary Chinese Art: Three Strategies,” public symposium *Ink Art in the Framework of Contemporary Museum* organised by M+, Hong Kong, 2012; Wu Hung, *Making History: Wu Hung on Contemporary Art* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Limited, 2008), 88; Hou Hanru, “Towards a World of Poets—Yang Jiechang’s work,” in *Yang Jie Chang: No-Shadow Kick*, eds., Martina Koeppl-Yang and Wei Xing (Shanghai: Shanghai Duolun Museum of Modern Art and Tang Contemporary Art, 2008).

<sup>282</sup> “Contemporary ink art” refers to a new art practice that explores diverse approaches to traditional ink materials in order to unleash artistic creativity and expand the boundaries of ink beyond its conventional role as a physical substance. This practice embraces ambivalence and hybridity, allowing for the exploration of multiple uses and interpretations of ink materials. For discussions of Yang’s *100 Ink* in relation to issues about contemporary ink art, see e.g., Yang Jiechang, “New Ink Art,” in *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China*, ed. Maxwell K. Hearn (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013); Sarah E. Fraser, “Beyond Ink: Contemporary Experimental Ink Art,” in *Xu Bing: Beyond the Book from the Sky*, eds., Fraser, Sarah E., and Yu-Chieh Li (Berlin: Springer Nature, 2020), 59–74. For discussions about Yang’s explorations of New Material characteristics of ink beyond traditional painting or calligraphy, see e.g., Susanna Ferrell and Britta Erickson, “Yang Jiechang: 100 Layers of Ink, 100 Layers of Action,” *Yishu*, Vol 17 Issue 2 (2018): 12–28; Joan Kee, “The Curious Case of Contemporary Ink Painting,” *Art Journal* 69.3 (2010): 88–113; Ian Woo, “Erasure and Abstraction—An Artistic Process,” *ISSUE 08: Erase* (2019): 35–45.

<sup>283</sup> Such as “Two-Dimensionality in Installation Art: The Case of Xu Bing, Wenda Gu, and Yang Jiechang” in *Xu Bing: Beyond the Book from the Sky*, ed. Sarah E. Fraser and Yu-Chieh Li (Springer Nature, 2020), 87–96; David James Clarke, *China – Art – Modernity: A Critical Introduction to Chinese Visual Expression from the Beginning of the Twentieth Century to the Present Day* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019), 143.

abstraction, and frequently employ formalist analyses to delve into its artistic merits.<sup>284</sup>

However, if Yang's sole intention was to highlight ink's potential for generating a three-dimensional effect beyond its traditional application, he could have simply created a single sculptural inked paper or juxtaposed it against a blank white *xuan* paper to accentuate colour, texture, and dimensional contrasts. Instead, Yang chose to create two distinct forms of ink monochromes through a process of superposition. This method, although not the most effective in achieving the sculptural effect of ink, as both monochromes are in dark colours with textured wrinkles, seems to place greater emphasis on illustrating how different ink application techniques can yield various visual effects. In this sense, the artwork becomes an accumulation of time and actions.

While the central part of the work conveys an explicitly sculptural appearance, the collaged ink monochromes naturally invite a visual comparison between the saturated ink and the ethereal ink on paper. This juxtaposition quickly prompts the viewer to become cognisant of the laborious efforts invested in the artwork's creation. Yang's deliberate arrangement of the collaged ink monochromes provides an alternative exploration of the materiality of ink, extending beyond mere experimentation with its formal qualities. Instead, it delves into how the artwork can serve as an index or record of the artist's actions. In an interview, Yang himself also emphasises that it is not merely about form; that it goes beyond abstraction and embodies action. He underscores that "calligraphy is action" and characterises his painting as "action."<sup>285</sup> The multiplicity

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<sup>284</sup> For more discussions about the aspect of abstraction in Yang's ink works, see e.g., Marie Leduc, *Dissidence: The Rise of Chinese Contemporary Art in the West* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2018), 29; Wu Hung, *Making History*, 153; Yvonne Force, *4696/1998: Contemporary Art from China* (Vancouver: Art Beatus Gallery, 1998), 18; Li, "Action Painting is Not Calligraphy," 95.

<sup>285</sup> Ferrell and Erickson, "Yang Jiechang," 27.

and variety of phenomenological effects steer the work away from the confines of figurative representation and transform it into tangible evidence of the artist's actions and materials, transcending its status as a fixed object.

Some scholars, such as Maxwell K. Hearn in his essay "Past as Present in Contemporary Chinese Art," aligns Yang's *100 Layers of Ink* series, acknowledging the link between the artist's "repetitive" actions and the metallic, sculptural effect of the displayed artwork. Yet Maxwell seems to distinguish the making-process from the "end result,"<sup>286</sup> focusing on the physicality of ink in the finished pieces rather than the making-process or the artist's specific actions and experiences of making. Wu Hung, in his "Transcending the East/West Dichotomy: A Short History of Contemporary Chinese Ink Painting" for the same catalogue, also tends to view Yang's artmaking of the series as a predetermined technique aimed at achieving an effect of "black holes," suggesting the works are more conceptual than material.<sup>287</sup>

Many studies like Maxwell's attribute an autonomous capacity to the ink material in creating the meaning of art in the works displayed for the *100 Layers of Ink* series.<sup>288</sup> This perspective breaks away from the traditional creation-process of Chinese ink painting, which requires meticulous artistic manipulation of the ink, and instead treats the *100 Layers of Ink* artworks as independent, finalised entities, with the making-process seen as a mere means to achieve an end result. Again, this substance-centric tendency—as discussed in both chapters one and two—risks falling into a reductive

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<sup>286</sup> Maxwell, *Ink Art*, 148.

<sup>287</sup> Wu Hung, "Transcending the East/West Dichotomy: A Short History of Contemporary Chinese Ink Painting," in *Ink Art*, 30.

<sup>288</sup> See also Joan, "The Curious Case."

understanding of materials as detached elements, overlooking the potential for the dynamic interplays of entities and performativity inherent in the art and artmaking. By privileging the role of the ink material, interpretations based on this perspective risk diminishing the contributions of other actors (both human and non-human) and factors (such as environmental conditions, time, and space) to the emergence and significance of the artwork.

Moreover, these analyses often oversimplify the sense of “repetition” in Yang’s method, perceiving the artist’s application of each layer as indiscriminate, or mechanical. In this sense, they tend to prioritise material/form over process/action, repetition over difference, and confine the understanding of ink art’s materiality to its physical or formal qualities alone.

This chapter argues that approaching the *100 Layers of Ink* series solely through the frameworks of formalism or conceptualism would yield a superficial understanding. It cautions against attributing inherent authority to the ink material in the process of meaning-making, and treating the displayed works of the series as static and definitive products. This chapter, while acknowledging the significant role of ink in Yang’s art and artmaking, seeks to propose a shift in understanding agency within Yang’s work, from intentionality—defined as actions and outcomes being deliberate rather than accidental or random—to “effectivity.”<sup>289</sup> This concept of agency, according to Jessica Schmidt’s New Materialist insights of agency, while challenging the traditional notion of human dominance in the materialisation of art, more importantly evolves around the

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<sup>289</sup> Jessica Schmidt, “The Empirical Falsity of the Human Subject: New Materialism, Climate Change and the Shared Critique of Artifice,” *Resilience*, 1:3 (2013): 180.

capacity of “affecting” and “having an effect.”<sup>290</sup> In other words, agency is not confined to discrete entities but emerges from the dynamic interplay of relationships, residing in the “inter” of interrelations and interactions that self-generate through invisible, boundless connections of influence.<sup>291</sup>

This chapter will demonstrate how, in Yang’s work, ink exhibits its agency through this capacity of “affecting” and “having an effect.” This is primarily manifested in the works displayed in the series. Taking the work of *100 Layers of Ink*, created in 1992 (fig. 3), discussed as an example in Wu Hung’s introductory essay in *The Allure of Matter* catalogue, the work primarily produces a strong visual effect of a deep, glossy surface that reflects so much light that it appears white. When observing the work, it becomes challenging for the viewer to focus on a single, clear, finite line or part. Instead, it envelops the viewer in a compelling theatrical experience, evoking a diverse range of phenomenological responses. This interaction is not just about the artwork affecting the viewer; it is about creating a dynamic and reciprocal relationship where the viewer’s presence and perspective also influence the perception the artwork. As the viewer encounters the captivating beauty of the artwork’s deep black sheen, which can shift to white when the light shines at particular angles, this visual transformation is neither consistent nor predictable but varies based on the viewer’s position and the exhibition conditions, highlighting the fluid and interactive nature of the viewing experience.

In this sense, the work creates an ambiguous, unfathomable, and liminal quality that represents an infinite variety of patterns, resonating analogously with Deleuze and

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid.

<sup>291</sup> Jessica Schmidt in referencing Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, ix.

Guattari's concept of "Chaos." Here, Chaos can be understood as a primal realm of constant flux, perceptual motion, diverse possibilities, and non-specific orders.<sup>292</sup> It encompasses the unacknowledged and the unknown, the unpredictable and the new. It is a perpetual flow of new and illuminating ideas and unexpected manifestations that, as Deleuze describes, "wants to create the finite that restores the infinite."<sup>293</sup> The wrinkles, light, and shade depicted on the surface of the 1992 work appears to be randomly and disorderly generated, evoking a sense of forces that are constantly evolving and unfolding. The abrupt shift from the dark black to radiant white, beyond pure blackness, emphasises the artwork's continuous phenomenal flow (despite the objects themselves being in a static state in physical reality) and evokes an indescribable sense of theatricality rather than presenting a fixed endpoint.

What Yang seems to create in the works of the *100 Layers of Ink* series, then, does not constitute a conventional figurative depiction characterised by a centralised and singular representation of the formal element. The material of ink is utilised not as an agent of static imagery but as a conduit for evolving visual experiences. Its transformative potential is implicitly circumscribed by its physical and perceptual qualities, offering the viewer an immediate interactive or sensory encounter where the ink's propensity for visual changes is abundant yet intuitively finite, resonating within the palpable reality of its substance.

In particular, the title "100 Layers of Ink" evokes a more vividly imaginative understanding of the work's production method, conveying the sense that the work is

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<sup>292</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

composed of layers of ink applied to paper (although this perception may differ slightly from the actual production process). The artist, instead of choosing a profound or enigmatic title, employs a straightforward one to quickly convey the material characteristics, or production-process, of the artwork.

Therefore, the work of the series is not merely an independent finished product detached from its making-process. Instead, its phenomenological or material effect, along with its title, primarily affects the viewer's visceral encounter with the work. This encounter sparks a curiosity about the making-process, resonating with Jones's idea of performative materialities of art. Jones, as discussed in the Introduction of this thesis, states that artworks of "hybrid practices" can convey signs, or traces, to the viewer of the work having been made, rather than as a static endpoint of artistic practice through the work's material or phenomenological effect, and this can affect the viewer's body, eliciting a desire to trace the artmaking itself. The density and tactile quality of the materials, as revealed in the 1992 work, emphasised by the title reference to the numerous applications of ink—a number possibly in the hundreds or even thousands (as suggested by the Chinese title “千层墨” [Thousands of Layers of Ink])—provoke an immediate reaction in the viewer that the making-process is far from easy and not something the artist can accomplish effortlessly within a short period of time.

The series therefore seems to animate the ink on *xuan* paper, allowing it to exist in a state of perpetual transformation and decay over time. This suggests that ink is not inert but dynamic, part of a living process that evolves not just in the moment of creation but also in response to various contexts, whether in the act of making or viewing, and across locations, from the artist's studio to the exhibition space.

While existing studies often focus on how the series' visual or formal qualities challenge traditional Chinese painting's pictorial form, subject matter, and expressive brushwork, the primary focus of this chapter shifts from static representation of Yang's series to a dynamic continuum that honours the meticulous process of artmaking, and ink's agentic role within it. In terms of effectivity, ink's agency is not only manifested through its variable material effects that immediately affect the viewer's viewing experience when encountering the artwork, but also through its continuous interactions (or, more precisely, intra-action) with the artist in the making-process. This interaction perpetually generates shifting and unpredictable effects and affects, facilitating a making-process that is seemingly "repetitive" yet distinctly "different," infused with intuitive and sensuous experiences.

This exploration into ink's agentic participation in the making-process will uncover how the series, as exemplified by the 1992 work, and its processes foster a novel relationship between the human (artist) and non-human (ink, but also other materials, such as *xuan* paper and gauze) that challenges literati painting traditions. Within this tradition, the artist's skilful brushwork, elite culture, and spirituality are often recognised for their own agency and historical significance, while the ink material is considered inanimate and passive. A shift in perspective to the ink's agency will allow for a re-examination of boundaries traditionally seen as definitive in the creation and perception of ink painting, such as those between intuition and spirituality, and between representation and material phenomena, where the materiality of ink paintings and calligraphy is always presupposed as a foundational element within a linguistic framework. I will reveal how Yang's work exemplifies instances of emergent agency, challenging the traditional notion of human dominance in the process of artistic

creation—in this case, the master’s brushwork and predetermined ideological meanings over the potential capacities of ink to produce effects and affects—and emphasising the importance of relational dynamics in the realisation of art and the world it inhabits.

**i. The traditional practice of ink painting and its metamorphosis**

Ink holds a central position as the primary medium in traditional Chinese painting, accompanied by a well-developed vocabulary encompassing its various types, tonalities, and the metaphorical and expressive potential of brushstrokes. Within the realm of Chinese painting, the notion that form is “easy to imitate” contrasts with the difficulty of apprehending the foundational “without-form.”<sup>294</sup> The “without-form,” denoting the internal realm known as *Qi Yun*—or the harmony of mind and spirit—functions as the core essence of painting, upon which form is built. This harmony of mind and spirit in painting is not a static quality but a dynamic interplay that the artist must master. While the observable and tangible aspects of form are typically associated with an object’s outer world, the foundational without-form delves into one’s internal realm, often requiring the cultivation and focused concentration of the mind for its comprehension.<sup>295</sup> *Qi Yun* is believed to be present when all the components of a painting—such as composition, brushwork, and use of ink—harmonise to convey the

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<sup>294</sup> Francois Jullien, *The Great Image Has No Form, or On the Nonobject through Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 18–9.

<sup>295</sup> This concept finds its roots in the Han dynasty scholar Yang Xiong (53 BC–18 AD), who posited that words encapsulated the very essence of the mind, and that calligraphy functioned as a visual embodiment of the mind. He proposed that one’s character could be deciphered through an analysis of their calligraphy. Zhang Zao, a prominent figure of the Tang dynasty, active in the late 8th century, delved deeper into the connection between art, the mind, and nature. He expressed the idea that everything in the external world serves as his teacher, while his internal exploration has revealed the sources of the mind. This perspective on art was widely embraced by many art historians and artists in the history of Chinese art, all of whom saw painting as a means of revealing one’s inner self.

life force or spirit of the depicted subject, offering the viewer an experience of the artwork that is felt rather than just seen.

This concept is often seen as the ultimate goal of the Chinese painter, who must go beyond the mere depiction of form to capture an intangible, dynamic essence that animates the visible elements of the work. It involves a meditative approach where the brush becomes an extension of the artist's body and mind, moving in accordance with their breath and intent. The brushstrokes thus become a physical manifestation of the artist's inner life, embodying a sense of spontaneous vitality, or what is sometimes referred to as "life-motion."<sup>296</sup> The challenge lies in maintaining this quality throughout the painting process, as it requires the artist to remain fully present and connected to their inner vision, allowing it to guide the movement of the brush with authenticity and purpose.

The medium of ink, traditionally celebrated as reaching its fullest expression within the artist's imagination, is steeped in the duality of nature and consciousness. Painting, as a manifestation of the mind, originates from the interplay of the external world and the artist's inner vision. It is in the imagination that the ink achieves its ideal form, and it materialises on silk or paper as a tangible imprint of the artist's contemplative state. It acts as a method by which to achieve harmonious unity between humans and the natural world, fostering the cultivation of the internal self and vice versa.<sup>297</sup> When inspiration strikes and the perfected image appears in the painter's mind's eye, they move quickly

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<sup>296</sup> Wen C. Fong, *Beyond Representation: Chinese Painting and Calligraphy 8th–14th Century* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992), 4.

<sup>297</sup> Roger T. Ames, Wimal Dissanayake, and Thomas P. Kasulis, eds., *Self as Image in Asian Theory and Practice* (New York: SUNY Press, 1994), 67.

to capture it with the brush, like a hare leaping when a falcon strikes: hesitation could result in everything being lost.<sup>298</sup> The interplay between tangible and intangible elements, completeness and emptiness, hold a special place in Chinese art, lending it a distinctive expressionistic charm. This charm often manifests as a subtle and nuanced quality that transcends mere superficiality, creating a sense of loftiness beyond the confines of conventional representation. Chinese art's expressive charisma arises from a profound engagement with philosophical traditions like Confucianism, Daoism, and Chan Buddhism. Among these, Daoism particularly emphasises the reconciliation between humans and the natural world, fostering a profound unity between nature and human experience.

*Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* [谿山行旅圖] (fig. 36) by the Northern Song Dynasty painter Fan Kuan (960–1030) serves as an example of Chinese ink painting that captures the unity between humans and the natural world, resonating with a timeless harmony and deep spiritual resonance. The vastness of the depicted mountains dwarfs the tiny figures of travellers and a mule train, symbolising the immense power of nature compared to the fleeting presence of man. Fan's work, created with monochromatic ink on silk, uses varying strokes and ink density to convey texture, depth, and the illusion of mist and clouds, embodying the Taoist philosophy of harmony between humanity and nature. Critics have noted that the monumental landscape style of the painting emphasises the diminutive scale of human endeavours in the face of the grandeur of the natural world. The towering peaks and the cascading waterfall, framed by expanses of white space, create a majestic and almost otherworldly realm that invites

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<sup>298</sup> Su Shi, 1037–1101. Quoted in Chang Lin-sheng, Wen Fong, and James CY Watt, *Possessing the Past: Treasures from the National Palace Museum, Taipei* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996), 152.

contemplation. The minute details, like the temple nestled in the forest and the travellers on the road, require close inspection, which in turn draws the viewer into a meditative engagement with the painting. This contemplative quality is in line with the Daoist and Buddhist philosophies that deeply influence Chinese art, advocating for a balanced, harmonious existence within the vast cycles of the natural world. This work is celebrated not just for its technical mastery but also for its ability to convey the philosophical idea that human beings are an integral, yet small, part of the larger tapestry of the cosmos. The ink, perfected in the artist's imagination, and the silk, serving as the material substrate, combine to form a work that transcends mere visual representation to embody the spiritual essence of the Daoist worldview. For classical works like *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams*, it is through this aesthetic contemplation and philosophical underpinnings that Chinese art achieves its unique expressive power, resonating with a timeless harmony and deep spirituality.

In the realm of Chinese painting, as Charles Lachman discusses in “‘The Image Made by Chance’ in China and the West: Ink Wang Meets Jackson Pollock’s Mother,” the medium of ink is elevated from mere tool to active participant, capturing and reflecting the artist’s internal state in each stroke.<sup>299</sup> This intertwining of intention with the accidental is a thread that runs through to Abstract Expressionism, as observed in Jackson Pollock’s Action Painting practices. The performative nature of the creation process in both artistic practices—whether it be the laughter, song, and full-body engagement of the Chinese artist or Pollock’s dance around the canvas—reveals a shared artistic truth: that the act of creation is as significant as the creation itself.

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<sup>299</sup> Charles Lachman, “‘The Image Made by Chance’ in China and the West: Ink Wang Meets Jackson Pollock’s Mother,” *The Art Bulletin* 74.3 (1992): 499–510.

In the tradition of Chinese painting, mastery over ink entails not just technical control but a harmonious interplay with the ink's natural tendencies—its propensity to bleed and its responsiveness to the paper's texture. The artist's physical gestures—sometimes deliberate, sometimes serendipitous—impart a sense of vitality that is intrinsic to the work's essence. In these moments, even accidental marks are embraced as a serendipitous dialogue between artist and ink, each brushstroke a testament to the interconnection of human intention and the unpredictable nature of the ink. Abstract Expressionism parallels this philosophy to some extent, embodying a similar dynamic between deliberate action and fortuitous occurrence. In works like Pollock's, paint and canvas become arenas where planned movements meet unanticipated outcomes—each drip and daub a confluence of the known and the unknowable. The movement's essence lies in the valorisation of the process, where the act of creation itself is as revealing as the finished canvas. It echoes the performative dynamism of Chinese painting, where the spontaneous and the structured are in constant conversation, each informing and reshaping the other, resulting in art that is as much about its creation as its creator.

Lachman's insights draw parallels between the ancient and the modern, suggesting that the inclusion of chance in the artistic process is a timeless concept.<sup>300</sup> In both, the medium—ink or paint—assumes an active role, with the artist guiding, yet also yielding to, its unpredictable nature. This dynamic is not fully accidental but a deliberate embrace of the potential within the medium, a philosophy that underpins both ancient Chinese painting and modern Western art, pointing to a shared understanding of the interconnectedness between artist, medium, and the spontaneous emergence of the artwork.

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<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

Nevertheless, the performative dynamism of Chinese painting largely imply brush over ink, whereby ink receives direction and meaning from the brush, which, in turn, is controlled by the artist's wrist. As noted in one of the earliest theoretical Chinese texts on painting, "structural force and formal resemblance both derive from the artist's conception and depend upon the use of the brush."<sup>301</sup> The history of painting in China suggests a significant interplay between brushwork and ink, with ink being viewed both as an essential component for artistic expression and as a secondary object connected to the brush.

This importance of brushwork in ink painting in China has long been associated with the elitism of scholar-class culture; as Gladston suggests it served as "a form of cultural-linguistic signification with the workings of power and state in Imperial China."<sup>302</sup> The practice of painting and calligraphy was predominantly embraced by scholar-officials, or literati, who belonged to a highly educated elite class responsible for the empire's bureaucratic administration. They dedicated themselves to painting as a means of self-cultivation. Within literati painting, and landscape painting in particular, the focus was on the expression of the ethical personality of the Confucian *junzi*, or noble person. Technical showiness took a backseat in favour of a more subdued approach. Literati painters were adept at employing plain ink, sometimes adding subtle hints of colour. They attributed great significance to the notion that a painter's brush technique reflected the core of their character. Brushwork and the creative journey were viewed as reflections of the soul, rather than concerns of arrangement or mastery of lifelike

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<sup>301</sup> Susan Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting: Su Shih (1037–1101) to Tung Ch'i-ch'ang (1555–1636)*, Vol. 1 (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 15.

<sup>302</sup> Paul Gladston, *Contemporary Chinese Art: A Critical History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 8.

portrayal.<sup>303</sup>

Technique was thus seen as a secondary condition in the production of art. As Jing Hao (870–930) argued, artists would truly master the art of landscape painting when having reached a state in which technical considerations of brush and ink have become irrelevant.<sup>304</sup> In classical ink painting, the set of materials used is commonly known as the Four Treasures: ink block, brush, ink slab, and *xuan* paper. The ink block is created by mixing carbon, obtained from sources like wood or oil, with glues and oils. This mixture is then moulded and dried. When creating ink, the artist typically adds a small amount of water onto an ink slab and then proceeds to grind the ink block in a continuous circular manner until it attains the desired smoothness and blackness. These materials are often considered artistic objects, or secondary products, used in the creative process of calligraphy. They require skilful manipulation by the calligrapher, including controlling the tonalities of the water-ink solution and the ability to achieve fluent and spontaneous brushwork.<sup>305</sup> By applying varying pressure and manipulating the brush at different angles, ink lines can describe the volume, amplitude, and textures of three-dimensional forms and different materials and surfaces.<sup>306</sup>

Chinese literati paintings emphasise aesthetic qualities that often depict the grandeur of nature and convey ideological or spiritual notions of harmony between the self and the environment.<sup>307</sup> This focus on visual and spiritual significance prioritised a pictorial

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<sup>303</sup> Bush, *The Chinese Literati*, 15.

<sup>304</sup> Hao Jing and Munakata, Kiyohiko, *Ching Hao's Pi-Fa-Chi: A Note on the Art of Brush* [Ed., Transl. of the Chinese and Annotations by] Kiyohiko Munakata (Ascona: Artibus Asiae Publishers, 1974), 23.

<sup>305</sup> Caroline Self and Susan Self, *Chinese Brush Painting: A Hands-on Introduction to the Traditional Art* (New York: Tuttle Publishing, 2012), 13.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*, 15. This philosophy was further refined during the Yuan dynasty and formally

and graphic affinity over material aspects. Ink materials served as essential elements that testified to the calligrapher's mastery of materials in order to achieve a distinct expressionistic charisma.

In this sense, in ancient times, Chinese artists placed significant emphasis on the act of painting and its connection to the spirituality of art. This approach highlighted the profound philosophical and metaphysical content inherent in their works, underscoring the primacy of the spiritual realm over the material realm. It was understood that the material aspect of art could not be separated from its spiritual essence, and that the notion of an independent objectivity in the material world is illusory. In this context, the voice conveyed by the material in Chinese art does not represent the voice of nature itself, but rather reflects the perspective of the observer and the cultural context in which the objects are perceived. The material objects are imbued with meaning and significance through the eyes of the viewer and the cultural framework within which they are situated.

## ii. Difference in Yang's repetition

In an obvious sense, *100 Layers of Ink* embodies Yang's making-process of repeated acts of applying ink on paper with a brush. Scholars—such as Wu Hung, Marie Leduc, and Susanna Ferrell and Britta Erickson—tend to think of each such act as a singular, indiscriminate physical gesture without creative insight or meaning-making.<sup>308</sup>

However, I argue that Yang's repetition is not based on the intention of performing the

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established in the Ming dynasty, ultimately becoming the established orthodoxy among the literati by the late seventeenth century.

<sup>308</sup> See Wu Hung, *Chinese Art at the Crossroads: Between Past and Future, between East and West*, Vol. 2 (Nashville, TN: Turner/A&R Press, 2001), 46; Marie Leduc, *Dissidence: The Rise of Chinese Contemporary Art in the West* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2018), 60; Ferrell and Erickson, "Yang Jiechang."

same action over and over again. Rather, each act embodies a difference in repetition, and it is precisely this concept of difference that enables us to understand the act of making as an experiential, self-reflexive process, that allows for new creativity and innovation in his work. In his famous book *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze, who appears to be a great inspiration for *New Materialist* theories, claims that “difference inhabits repetition.”<sup>309</sup> He writes: “To repeat is to behave in a certain manner, but in relation to something unique or singular which has no equal or equivalent. And perhaps this repetition at the level of external conduct echoes, for its own part, a more secret vibration which animates it, a more profound, internal repetition within the singular.”<sup>310</sup> While repetition is typically associated with the recurrence of identical elements at different points in time, it is important to recognise that even seemingly identical things contain inherent differences. This emphasis on difference highlights not only the creation of something new but also the resolution of pre-existing “given problems.”<sup>311</sup>

During the entire making-process of each work in the *100 Layers of Ink* series, Yang made a number of conscious decisions concerning the tangible material conditions of the layers of ink, resulting in a constant reworking of what was already there. *Xuan* paper provides the ideal surface for ink. Its particular absorptive qualities bring out all the nuances of the varying movements of the brush. Each new application of ink would be made on a layer quite different to the one before. At the initial stages of the making-process, the monochrome surface exhibits a delicate and smooth appearance. Through Yang’s repeated action of applying ink onto the already dried ink surface, the pattern

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<sup>309</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 76.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

gradually evolves into textures characterised by density, saturation, and roughness. While each stage involves the meticulous process of saturating the surface with ink using a brush, Yang's application of fresh wet ink onto the dried surface entails continuous observation, adjustment, and control of the materials and their resulting effects. Each layer of ink applied on top of the existing surface introduces a disruption to the established pattern, requiring careful consideration and decision-making.

Importantly, Yang does not have full control over the material qualities of the work during the process. With each new application of ink, he carefully observes the existing wrinkled textures and visual effects on the dried surface. As he applies ink, he must constantly adapt to the rough and rugged surface, which prevents smooth and quick painting. In the *100 Layers of Ink* series, the paper used is often in human scale, except for a few works created for immersive installations, such as those exhibited in *Les Magiciens de la Terre; Traveling in Mexico* (1990), and *Chine demain pour hier* (1990). This approach is akin to Pollock's practices. The paper is laid on the floor when making these works. Many authors, such as Teresa L. Ebert in "The Aesthetics of Indeterminacy: The Postmodern Drip Paintings of Jackson Pollock", Richard P. Taylor, Adam P. Micolich, and David Jonas in "The Construction of Jackson Pollock's Fractal Drip Paintings", and Matthew Rampley in "Identity and Difference: Jackson Pollock and the Ideology of the Drip" have discussed the role of accident as a central participant in Pollock's method.<sup>312</sup> Pollock's technique of dripping and splashing paint onto a horizontal canvas was a deliberate relinquishing of traditional control, allowing gravity

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<sup>312</sup> Teresa L. Ebert, "The Aesthetics of Indeterminacy: The Postmodern Drip Paintings of Jackson Pollock," *Centennial Review* (1978): 139-163; Richard P. Taylor, Adam P. Micolich, and David Jonas, "The Construction of Jackson Pollock's Fractal Drip Paintings," *Leonardo* 35.2 (2002): 203-207; Matthew Rampley, "Identity and Difference: Jackson Pollock and the Ideology of the Drip," *Oxford Art Journal* 19.2 (1996): 83-94.

and the fluid dynamics of his materials to shape the work. He navigated the canvas with an awareness of the potential for unforeseen outcomes, yet his movements were not random; they were guided by an internal rhythm and a practiced hand that knew when and how to let chance take the lead. Ebert highlights how Pollock's approach to drip painting resists definitive interpretation, engaging the viewer in a continual search for meaning within the chaos of the canvas.<sup>313</sup> Similarly, Taylor, Micolich, and Jonas explore the scientific underpinnings of Pollock's technique, revealing how the fractal patterns in his work align with natural processes, thus blurring the lines between deliberate creation and accidental outcome.<sup>314</sup>

However, Yang's method in the *100 Layers of Ink* series, while also laying a large-scale paper on the floor and recognising the role of accident, does not highlight it as prominently as Action Painting. The latter emphasises the artist's physical acts in the painting process through methods like performative splashing, expressive brushwork, and dripping paint—echoing the Chinese literati tradition's emphasis on brushwork over ink, as discussed above. Yang's process is meticulous and labour-intensive, deeply entwined with the material's behaviour. The paper's texture and the ink's properties significantly constrain his actions, as he carefully oversees their interaction, allowing for natural variations. His process fosters a dialogue with the materials, permitting the unexpected within the framework of a deliberate, repetitive layering of ink.

In contrast to Pollock's Action Painting, where the artist's physicality was overtly part of the canvas work, often moving around and on the canvas, Yang would use a suspended wooden rod over his paintings to ensure physical separation (fig. 37). This

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<sup>313</sup> Ebert, "The Aesthetics of Indeterminacy".

<sup>314</sup> Taylor, Micolich, and Jonas, "The Construction of Jackson Pollock's Fractal Drip Paintings".

technique allowed the interaction of the ink and the paper to focus on their inherent characteristics rather than being directly under the artist's influence. Yang's method required careful adjustment of his position, and the rod above the work, especially given the large scale of the paintings. This careful orchestration of movement was necessary to prevent any direct contact with the paper, allowing the ink to transition naturally through its stages from wet to dry, from smooth to wrinkled, and from flat to shrunken.

Differently from traditional brush techniques, Yang deviated from the norm in his use of the brush and the amount of ink. In traditional Chinese brushwork, the brush is held with a firm grip between the thumb and first two fingers, while the ring finger provides balance by resting lightly behind the brush. The brush is usually held in a strictly vertical position, and the amount of ink is meticulously controlled. To achieve different shapes, such as zigzags, curves, dashes, and dots, the artist would dip the bottom half of the brush into ink and carefully adjust the pressure. Excessive ink would cause the lines to spread out on the absorbent paper, resulting in blotches.

Yang would use an oblate brush, slightly larger than the size of his hand (fig. 37), which deviates from the cylindrical shape of traditional Chinese ink brushes. His technique has involved spreading the ink from one side to the other, more similar to the technique of painting the walls of a house than to the delicate drawing of expressive lines with a fine brush. The way he would hold the brush was not fixed, but would vary depending on what was most convenient for spreading the ink onto the paper. Constant minor adjustments in the strength of holding the brush and the angles were made to ensure the complete and even saturation of the surface with ink.

The amount of ink used on the paper was not haphazard or excessively applied without consideration. Yang would carefully determine the quantity for each application to ensure the paper would be thoroughly soaked while avoiding an overly excessive amount, considering the fragility of *xuan* paper. *Xuan* paper, known for its absorbency, is also delicate and prone to tearing. To address this, Yang has often employed gauze as a backing for the paper, which would provide stability and reinforce its absorbent capacity. This practice is reminiscent of traditional Chinese painting, where *xuan* paper is typically mounted on a sturdier material, such as silk or paper, to create hanging scrolls, handscrolls, or album leaves.

Instead of the traditional mounting of art on silk or paper, Yang has often opted to back his layered ink monochromes with linen canvas (although he occasionally mounts on other materials, like Korean paper in *Ladder to Heaven*). This technique is exemplified in his 1992 work, featured in the catalogue for *The Allure of Matter*. By merging age-old mounting techniques from both Chinese and European traditions, he has managed to preserve the unique ability of *xuan* paper to soak in ink while simultaneously gaining the scale and strength associated with canvas stretched on a frame. After applying a new layer of ink, Yang would closely observe the initial wet appearance of the paper, which gradually transformed into wrinkles and slightly shrank as it dried. Throughout this process, the texture and visual effect of the paper underwent unpredictable and evolving changes, adding an element of surprise and unpredictability to the artwork.

In this way, while Abstract Expressionism, and particularly Pollock's action paintings, actively incorporates accident as a defining feature of its aesthetic, Yang employs a more restrained approach. Accident is recognised and allowed to inform the creative

process, but it does not dominate it. This nuanced dance with the unforeseen is a hallmark of Yang's work, where control is exerted to set conditions for chance to play a role, but not to the point of overshadowing deliberate technique. The process of creating Yang's artwork relies on an ongoing, interdependent and changing relationship between the artist and the ink and *xuan* paper materials as well as potential other materials, such as the wood rod, brush, gauze, and canvas that all play active roles in the process. This process, in line with Barad's concept, can be described as a state of "entanglement".<sup>315</sup>

According to Barad, the qualities of entities are not fixed or predetermined until they interact with one another. They only become evident through "intra-actions" and relationalities.<sup>316</sup> Barad suggests that unique agencies emerge through intra-action, emphasising the performative nature of borders and the iterative process of becoming for both human and non-human entities.<sup>317</sup> This perspective de-centres the primacy of human subjects and highlights the interconnectedness and transformative nature of all existence.<sup>318</sup> As entities entangle with one another, the nature of their intra-relatedness constantly evolves, rendering objective assertions impossible.

Yang's making-process unfolds as a dynamic interplay between various intra-acting agencies and entanglements. In this process, ink and *xuan* paper transcend their roles as mere tools for creating a physical representation. Similarly, the artist himself is not

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<sup>315</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, 815.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, 141; "Posthuman performativity," 812.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*

the sole arbiter, dictating the patterns and limitations of the artwork. Instead, Yang's creative decisions are influenced by the ever-evolving physical qualities of the ink on paper with each layer applied, as he simultaneously anticipates his next gesture. He must navigate and adapt to the continuously changing appearance of the ink on the paper. At the heart of this process lies the interplay of subjectivities between the artist's agency and the dynamics of the ink on paper. Yang's role as a human agent is provisional and intertwined with the material agencies of ink and paper, rather than driven by a predetermined intention to create a fixed end result or specific form. In fact, Yang himself is often uncertain of the phenomena and effects that will emerge from the application of new ink on paper.

In itself, ink presents a disconcerting multiplicity of physical properties. The physical characteristics of ink make it far from a perfect concrete substance to be repeated in the creation of the exact same forms and constellations. It is a material that can assume different shapes and properties depending on the parameters that influence its formation in real space and time. It is within this inherent plasticity that the ink holds the capacity to rise above being a mere mechanical or passive element, subject to the artist's creative impulses. Instead, it takes on the role of a dynamic and evolving entity, closely intertwined with the artist and actively influencing the process of making. In this context, the artist and the ink and paper materials find themselves in a realm characterised by a detachment from determinate causal structures, devoid of clear boundaries and predictable outcomes.

This intra-active co-becoming process of making through differential enactments of agency provides an alternative framework of understanding Yang's repetition in the making-process. On the surface of Yang's repetitive acts, his gesture seems a parody

of mechanical reproduction, but here, the making-process rather demonstrates a kind of phenomenological narrative, unfolding in an ongoing multiplicity of new formal and perceptible qualities and solutions of application that cannot go back to the original. It is Yang's interrelated activity with the propagating impulses of ink that enables him to experience each repetitive action as at once new and familiar. As such, the repetitive creation of layers is also the creation of difference, as no two configurations that shape the new appearance cannot be exactly the same.

Yang also associates the idea of repetition with the practice of calligraphy, which demands the mastery of gesture and form through a process of painstakingly repeated actions: "My master of calligraphy taught me that if you want to create good calligraphy, acquiring a good technique is important of course but your writing must also be 'old.' You cannot rely only on personal skill; you have to repeat and accumulate experiences."<sup>319</sup> For Yang, "in order to create something profound and different, the same gesture must be repeated tirelessly again and again."<sup>320</sup> The difference is actualised, not by the discovery of a new movement in each instance, but by the re-evaluation of and re-approach to the familiar movements in new compositions, which brings to mind Deleuze's principles about difference and repetition. Yang's repetition is, then, not automatic duplication for the sake of technique, but creative duplication that embodies the artist's active process of re-experiencing what is already there, which "are truly fundamental to the creation of novel forms."<sup>321</sup>

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<sup>319</sup> Larys Frogier and Yang Jiechang, "Eros, Global, Chaos," in *Nam June Paik's Belt: Three Conversations with Yang Jiechang* (Guangzhou: Borges Libreria Contemporary Art Institute, 2011), 73–90.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

In fact, although each version of the *100 Layers of Ink* series has its own concrete end form, they tend to focus not on the actual completed formal representation, but on how the work acts as the site of an event that goes through a process of continuous becoming with an emphasis on repetition. Yang had been practicing this series for a decade. Although the shapes of the relief patterns vary (square, rectangular, circular, and irregular), the visual qualities of the works tend to be very similar, and we cannot easily recall a feature of a single work that may be distinguished or differentiated from the other. Each version comes without a predetermined strategy or final appearance.

Although the series title suggests one hundred layers, and —as mentioned above—the Chinese title (千层墨) actually means “thousand(s) of layers of ink”), the actual works often comprise thirty to forty layers, the number depending on the artist’s own sense of when to stop. The fake number of layers in the title seems indicative of Yang’s desire to enter into a fantasy and to continue his practices beyond the actual physical presence of the work. The production of the work thus becomes a journey rather than a destination, a continuous dialogue between artist and ink. The layers are not just physical applications of ink but represent the temporal stages of the work’s evolution, each layer a step in the dynamic continuum of creation. This imaginative approach to the work’s construction challenges the viewer’s perception of completion and underscores the ongoing nature of the series. Its nomenclature, while evocative of a mythical multitude of layers, serves more as a metaphor for the depth of exploration and the infinite potential of the process than a quantitative measure. As cited above, Yang himself thinks that the work of art lies in the act of layering; its becoming.

In a sense, each artwork is ultimately open-ended and unfinalised, as Yang transitions

from one piece to another, continuously layering black ink in the same manner as the creation of each painting in the series, albeit on separate pieces and at different locations. Yang regarded the repetitive nature of the series' decade-long creation as a seemingly "useless" phase: "I didn't know what I was doing, yet I was still creating something."<sup>322</sup> In other words, his intention lies more in the experiential process of making art with self-emancipation, rather than in striving for ambitious innovation or specific artistic goals. To a certain extent, the act of continuously layering ink onto paper had become a routine part of Yang's daily life. He describes it as a symbolic record of his existence, akin to "writing a diary" and a reflection of his personal history, while also contributing to his personal growth and self-cultivation.<sup>323</sup>

More specifically, Yang deliberately chose not to rush the completion of the artworks. Instead of undergoing the intense labour of saturating papers with multiple layers of ink in a single day, he adopted a slower and more deliberate approach. Yang would only apply ink to the paper a few times per day, allowing for the slow and natural evolution of the inked surface to turn from wet to dry. This creative pace extended the overall duration of the artistic process. For instance, Yang dedicated more than a month to creating the first work for the *Magiciens* exhibition, applying ink a few times each day.

This large amount of fluid ink requires patience and time, as compared to the traditional method of dipping only the bottom half of the brush in ink. The natural drying process could not be accelerated without external interventions, such as the use of an air blower.

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<sup>322</sup> "[Project 1] an/other avant-garde china-japan-korea," accessed Sep 2, 2023. <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/OQUxBLp7DNY-LQ>

<sup>323</sup> Fritz Hansel and Yang Jiechang, "Republic of Fritz Hansel: A Dialogue," in *Yang Jie Chang: No-Shadow Kick*, eds., Martina Koeppl-Yang and Wei Xing (Shanghai: Shanghai Duolun Museum of Modern Art and Tang Contemporary Art, 2008), 211–23.

The ink needs time to be absorbed by the paper and to gradually dry. This objective fact prevented the artist from swiftly applying a new layer of ink. It is precisely this slowness in the application of the layers of ink that transformed the making-process into an experiential and self-reflective act, rather than a mechanical and laborious activity.

### iii. Embodied sensuous experience during the “repetitive” process

What becomes important in the creation of each work, then, is the intuitive process of making, with great focus on the changing material qualities and the artist’s own readjustments of the technique, because if physical repetition is to be effective, it must be committed to each movement. It is this attentive and perceptual engagement with the materials, through repeated practical trials, that affords Yang the opportunities to gradually develop what Tim Ingold describes as a “feel” and “rhythmic fluency” for what he is doing.<sup>324</sup> The perceptual, embodied, and knowing engagement with the material transforms the seemingly mundane activities into haptic and tacit knowledge.<sup>325</sup> This implies that the form of the artwork is brought into being through Yang’s active and sensuous involvements as he works. Each of Yang’s acts of applying ink is a surprising and unexpected encounter with the material without a predetermined rule to enact or goal to achieve. Especially for the very first few works, the number of layers is primarily undecided, until, after about thirty or forty layers, the pattern unpredictably appears as metallic and sculptural effects.

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<sup>324</sup> Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Psychology Press, 2000), 353.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

This evokes the emotional state that Bennett argues is like an enchantment, characterised by “a state of wonder” and a temporal and physical “suspension,” that arises from “active engagement with objects of sensuous experience.”<sup>326</sup> In other words, this emotional state of enchantment can emerge out of the artist’s own active and sensuous engagement with the material and workspace. It is a state with both motivating and transforming qualities, and is an experience that may spark new insight and understanding. This enactment is first evoked by the artist’s unexpected encounter with something. Integral to this peculiar state of surprise is the pleasurable openness to being charmed by the new and previously unknown, which also brings with it an element of the uncanny. Yang experiences such sensuous activities through repetition, where unanticipated evolution of the once-familiar material of ink comes with new material qualities and phenomenological effects that were previously ignored.

The pure experience of focusing on the definite facet of his making-process brings Yang both pleasure and uncertainty. Yang describes how his making-process would “abandon any thoughts,” and is more akin to an “altered psychic state” from which “new possibilities” might emerge.<sup>327</sup> His continued repetition of the same practice over ten years is less likely to be a painful act, and more likely one of self-cultivation or self-mediation, whereby the everyday repetition “becomes a means of reduction” for himself.<sup>328</sup> In another interview, he related his artistic creation to his daily life: “I hope that my daily life will become more and more a meditation. That’s why, when I paint,

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<sup>326</sup> Bennett, *The Enchantment*, 5.

<sup>327</sup> “Interview Excerpts,” in *Yang Jiechang: Earth Roots*, edited by Britta Erickson (Beijing: Ink Studio, 2017), 32.

<sup>328</sup> Yu-Chieh Li, “Action Painting is Not Calligraphy: A Conversation with Yang Jiechang,” *post: notes on art in a global context*, Paris, June 2014, accessed Sep 1, 2023. [http://post.at.moma.org/content\\_items/707-action-painting-is-not-calligraphy-a-conversation-with-yang-jiechang](http://post.at.moma.org/content_items/707-action-painting-is-not-calligraphy-a-conversation-with-yang-jiechang)

I don't paint. My paintings are not paintings. My ideal would be to keep them away from any trace of paint."<sup>329</sup> He seems to regard continuous repetition as a transcendental experience of an atemporal present, which involves a sensory receptivity to the encountered objects. To some extent, this approach echoes the literati tradition, wherein creating art is not merely a meditative practice but also a means to transcend the ordinary and tap into a heightened consciousness. The literati, who were scholar-artists in ancient China, pursued painting, calligraphy, and poetry not solely for their aesthetic value but as disciplines for personal and spiritual refinement. They held the conviction that through persistent artistic endeavour, one could nurture the self, attain mental clarity, and achieve harmony with the natural world. In this sense, it is not the actual destruction of the traditional painting technique and order that becomes meaningful in Yang's making-process, but the meaning resides in how he opens up the opportunity for sensitising the materials of ink in a continuous, perceptual way in which variations and differences are generated through the repetitive act.

One may contend that the painting process of traditional Chinese ink painting also involves the artist's consciousness. Indeed, as discussed above, Chinese traditional painting emphasises a free and individual way to paint a pictorial representation with expressions of poetic charm that can demonstrate the meaning and spirit in a natural way, without restricting the representation in a fixed, set pattern or appearance. Yet in traditional Chinese ink painting, the process is often infused with spiritual intention, channelling the harmony between heaven, earth, and the human spirit, following Daoist principles. This pursuit of cosmic spirituality typically sets out a predetermined

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<sup>329</sup> "Yang Jiechang: Dark Writings," Galleries Now, accessed Sep 1.  
<https://www.galleriesnow.net/shows/yang-jiechang-30-years-of-collaboration-with-the-galerie-jeanne-bucher-jaeger/>

direction for the artwork, aimed to convey specific themes or content that resonate with the natural world and its spirits.

Contrastingly, Yang's approach when creating his series is not driven by a preconceived endpoint or an ideological objective. Instead, his process is characterised by unscripted and direct engagement with the materials, allowing their physical changes to guide his actions. The evolution of each piece is spontaneous, steered by the sensory responses to the materials at hand. Yang's work emerges from a series of intuitive actions, a dynamic exploration that unfolds moment by moment, layer by layer, without a predefined notion of what each work will encapsulate.

The outcome of his method is not a distilled representation of spiritual concepts but an open-ended inquiry, a tactile dialogue that may ultimately raise new questions or suggest unforeseen ideas. His repetitive process is a testament to the immediacy of creation, an embodiment of the continuous and intuitive interaction with ink that defines his unique artistic journey. The ink's agency in this process constantly produces effects with each applied layer, affecting Yang's bodily engagement and influencing his subsequent decisions and actions. This agency of interconnectedness fosters a performance of a limitless, self-organising process, highlighting an ontology of self-propelling processes into which the artist is inextricably immersed, yet with outcomes that remain unforeseen.<sup>330</sup> During this "repetitive" yet "different" process of ink application, there is no intentional purpose unfolding in a spontaneous "immanent

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<sup>330</sup> Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms*, 13; Diane Coole, "Agentic Capacities and Capacious Historical Materialism: Thinking with New Materialisms in the Political Sciences," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 41, no. 3(2013): 3.

generativity.”<sup>331</sup> This nonlinear flow of creativity, unbounded by preconception or external directive, embodies a pure, moment-to-moment emergence.<sup>332</sup> As Yang declares, his creative purpose is not based on a predetermined theory or concept, but “is ambiguous, inchoate or erroneous in experience, in order to arrive at a form that may in the end pose a question or a concept.”<sup>333</sup> The “question” or “concept” that he appears to bring forth is to explore new possibilities for engaging with ink materials, transforming the artistic process into an ongoing event of constant evolution through perpetual and attuned repetitive actions.

#### iv. A critical response to traditional Chinese painting

Yang’s new ways of using the traditional art materials of ink and *xuan* paper inevitably awakens the desire for a response to the long history of ink-use in Chinese painting, which would traditionally emphasise cultural cultivation, expressive ink language, and moral character. Several scholars (such as Marie Leduc and Melissa Chiu) have addressed the issue of how Yang’s work comprehensively destroys the traditional manner of mastering the ink and brush, and how it endows ink with the authority to generate meanings in itself.<sup>334</sup> However, I argue that his work is not so much an antagonistic and destructive reaction against traditions, as a pursuit of “transgression” that seeks to refine or improve the limits of a predominant tradition. The concept of transgression has been the topic of many philosophical works, but Foucault may have captured it best:

Transgression is an action which involves the limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage, but perhaps also its entire trajectory, even its origin; it is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses. The

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<sup>331</sup> Coole, “Agentic Capacities,” 7.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid.

<sup>333</sup> Frogier and Yang, “Eros, Global, Chaos.”

<sup>334</sup> See Leduc, *Dissidence*, 60; Chiu, *Breakout*, 41.

play of limits and transgression seems to be regulated by a simple obstinacy: transgression incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is made to return once more tight to the horizon of the uncrossable. But this relationship is considerably more complex: these elements are situated in an uncertain context, in certainties which are immediately upset so that thought is ineffectual as soon as it attempts to seize them.<sup>335</sup>

Transgression, in Foucault's terms, appears as a paradoxical act of going beyond the limits set by the predominant conventions of historical criteria. The crossing of limits is primarily rooted in an affirmation or acknowledgement of existing systems of mechanisms or conventions and emerges with an insatiable desire to revive or improve existing barriers. Transgression thus understood is essentially a reflective act of affirmation of the limit and discovery of new territories.

Yang's work embodies such transgression. Yang has had long experience of learning and practicing traditional calligraphy and painting, having attended the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts in 1978, where he acquired a professional understanding of the style, spiritual connotations, and techniques of ink painting. However, after his move to Paris and Heidelberg, and after beginning to participate in exhibitions across the globe (the first took place in 1989), he gradually became aware of the need to rethink the values of traditional paintings that had remained an orthodox artistic practice for thousands of years. In ink painting, pictorial content and expressive language have long been emphasised over its physical affinities. In addition to the centuries-long development of classical ink painting discussed earlier in this chapter, Chinese ink painting in the modern era—from 1912 to 1979—underwent significant

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<sup>335</sup> Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1997), 33–4.

transformations influenced by modernisation, Western artistic influence, and the tumultuous backdrop of political and military conflicts, and economic challenges,<sup>336</sup> associated with the implementations of socialist realist standards during the 1950s and the unprecedented hardships of the Cultural Revolution of 1966–76. These diverse factors shaped the pluralism of styles and subject matters seen in ink paintings throughout the twentieth century. However, the dominant approach to these artistic creations consistently aimed to reinterpret the visual elements of ink painting, such as composition, colour, and pictorial standards, while still maintaining a connection to both traditional and realist ink painting traditions.<sup>337</sup>

With his rich cultural experience and artistic training, while actively participating in the global art sphere, Yang elicits a strong desire to re-evaluate and re-configure the aesthetics of “ink works,” in particular within the spectrum of aesthetically sanctioned materials, while not losing its cultural context.<sup>338</sup> For him, what restricts the new innovations with ink is the methods or brushworks in association with elite culture:

In the past, not everyone was privileged enough to hold a brush. Only one or two smart children in a village had the opportunity to be educated. The whole family would work hard to support the education of this child. This child held the brush and held the future of the clan. The brush embodies a kind of elite. The brush means a lot of responsibility, and not everybody can take it.<sup>339</sup>

Yang’s deskilled handling of ink and *xuan* paper, devoid of the presence of brushwork and re-arrangement of order, strives to go beyond the limits of a fixed mastered skill in

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<sup>336</sup> The period that includes the conflict with Japan from 1937 to 1945 and the subsequent civil war culminating in the formation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949.

<sup>337</sup> Realist ink painting emerged as a distinct art form championed by artists like Xu Beihong. It garnered substantial endorsement from official art bodies and educational establishments post the 1949 liberation, evolving steadily into a novel artistic convention.

<sup>338</sup> Alan Yeung, “Yang Jiechang: Love and Massacre in the Real World,” *Ink Studio*, Beijing, February 2015, accessed March 6 2024. <http://www.inkstudio.com.cn/press/19/>.

<sup>339</sup> Li, “Action Painting.”

the hands of a cultivated elite, to a new possibility of ink-practice as the inner drive of every creative person who focuses on the very act of making and the affects it brings. His deskilling is not a radical denial of all sides of traditional painting. Under the contemporary age when the global art sphere advocates for new artistic innovations, Yang believes that a rethinking of the past is not “old-fashioned”<sup>340</sup>: “I have never considered historical consciousness to be a retrograde attitude. It has always seemed to me that artists must take responsibility for history while transcending it.”<sup>341</sup>

In some ways, Yang still affirms the characters and elements of ink painting without changing their material properties. He employs the intrinsic qualities of ink—its darkness and fluidity—and harnesses the thin and absorbent nature of single sheets of *xuan* paper, which serve as an ideal surface for ink, capturing the nuances of brushwork in traditional painting. Additionally, he uses alum, a substance employed by painters during the Song and Yuan dynasties to modify the visual characteristics of wet ink. Although not explicitly depicted in the artwork, alum absorbs ink to varying degrees, resulting in diverse visual effects. Yang purposefully incorporates alum into his process, noting the challenging uncertainty about when to apply alum—during the drying or the wetting stage.<sup>342</sup> His comprehension of alum’s unpredictable nature allowed him to grasp a quality he found to be lacking when attempting to replicate the works of China’s renowned masters, who employed the technique known as *san fan jiu ran* [三番九染]—repetitively layering colours to achieve a distinct aesthetic.

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<sup>340</sup> Conversation with Yang Jiechang, Martina Koppel-Yang & Zheng Shengtian. March 31, 2011. Asia Art Archive in America.

<sup>341</sup> Frogier and Yang, “Eros, Global, Chaos.”

<sup>342</sup> Yee, “Materials and Process,” 53.

Yang's approach builds upon an understanding of the material properties and their functions in traditional ink painting, but seeks to approach them in a state of disorder and chaos, creating a distorted pattern within the very physicality of the artwork. This offers a stark contrast to traditional figurative representation. According to Yang, it is important to preserve the traditional technique, yet if he were to infuse too much technical language—such as points, lines, and planes—it would draw the viewer's attention more to the aesthetics of imagery rather than the essential nature of his art.<sup>343</sup> This does not imply that he desires his creativity to be purely conceptual or philosophical, but rather that he seeks artistic inspiration in tradition and his inner nature and temperament.<sup>344</sup> As such, Yang's art does not abandon rationality but involves a disregard for the rules that were originally needed to create a stable figurative outcome. These deviations allow the ink material to enter a realm unrestricted by order, one that has not yet stabilised or fully developed over time.

More importantly, Yang's repetitive and seeming endless work with the materials—employing a disruptive method without destroying their intrinsic material properties—is an act of simultaneous and continuous affirmation and denial, which evokes a desire for a constant and unending need to go beyond existing physical and aesthetic barriers. As Deleuze puts it, “in every respect, repetition is a transgression. It puts law [limit] into question, it denounces its nominal or general character in favour of a more profound and more artistic reality.”<sup>345</sup> Yang's repetitive process serves to distort the notion of a singular authorship, challenging the idea of a distinct artistic identity tied to

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<sup>343</sup> Erickson, “Interview Excerpts,” 47.

<sup>344</sup> Alan Yeung, “Yang Jiechang.”

<sup>345</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 3.

individual expression. Simultaneously, it disrupts the linear temporal flow that characterised the works of traditional masters. What is left in Yang's work is a re-approaching of the task again and again, an act of accumulation of the inner aesthetics or energy of the materials, that is without a clear linear narrative that can easily observe a start or finish line. In Yang's case, the act of transgressive repetition appears to activate a processual understanding of embodied existence, characterised by a flow of experiences. His repetition implies an unsatisfiable will to engage the creation of ink artwork into constant explorations of limits and new innovations.

As such, from a material dimension, Yang's works are not simply a repurposing of ink as fixed material properties of historical criteria for representational purposes; they do not just create new iterations of representation of ink in conceptual or abstract art practices. Rather, his works are more of a discursive practice embedded in self-critique, and a re-evaluation of traditional Chinese ink painting, by which the material of ink is no longer constructed to satisfy aspects of a formal style or functionality, but is given an agency capable of structuring and reconfiguring a multitude of temporal perceptions and effects, while working in concert with the human agent.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored how the processual enactments and embodiments of the artist's actions and the agentic capacities of ink—and other materials like *xuan* paper and gauze—and the affective experiences thus elicited offer alternative avenues for understanding the meaning and value of Yang's work. It has presented a perspective that foregrounds the agentic participation of ink in the making-process, and how it

shapes the artist's physical and sensuous experiences with each layer of application, and even each piece of the series. Through this perspective, we see how Yang's *100 Layers of Ink* series activates an ongoing process of meaning-making that invites potential changes, transformations, and shifts in the interplay between creation and perception. By activating ink's capacity to constantly produce unpredictable effects and affects, Yang creates an alternative configuration that unleashes the boundless multiplicity of Chaos. This visual ambiguity allows the ink material to transcend its predefined potential, embracing and enveloping existence in unforeseen ways, thereby liberating it from historical constraints and dogmatic norms of skill.

## Chapter 4

### More-than-human Agency: Liang Shaoji's *Nature Series*

While Chapter 3 provided an example to illustrate the notion of agency beyond human actors to include non-human and inanimate entities, acknowledging their capacity to both obstruct human intentions and act with their own trajectories, this chapter proposes a slightly different study case for the discussion of “agency.” It aims to encompass “living others” or more-than-human elements, such as animals, and their capacities to actively intertwine with human and non-human entities in the creation and perception of Material Art. The argument that I wish to pursue in this chapter is that the notion of Material Art requires a more-than-human perspective that goes beyond merely non-human or inanimate matter. This perspective will enable us to more fully acknowledge all the becomings and relationships that emerge and constitute the event of “worlding”<sup>346</sup>—the process of making the world. The inclusion of the agency of living entities will provide a deeper and more nuanced perspective by which to re-evaluate anthropocentric views of human subjectivity, autonomy, and intentionality in Material Art.

I will specifically focus on Liang Shaoji's (born 1945) *Chains: The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Nature Series, No. 79* (2002–2007, fig. 11), exhibited in *The Allure of Matter*, which shows soft white silk produced by living silkworms twining through and around several metal chains that hang from the ceiling. This work is part of Liang's prolonged and ongoing *Nature series* (1989–present), all of the works within which engage the silkworm to co-produce silk in various shapes and forms (e.g., installation,

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<sup>346</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*.

sculpture, and video), sometimes in entanglement with other material components, in this case, with metal chains. Liang has been working with silkworms in his *Nature series* for almost thirty years now.<sup>347</sup>

The use of animals in contemporary Chinese art is not new. In fact, it has been a frequent theme in the major trends of contemporary Chinese art since the '85 Movement. Some of the works involving animals as the object or performer of art are well-known on the global art scene, such as Huang Yongping's *Theater of the World* (1987/1993, fig. 38), which includes reptiles, amphibians, and insects in two cage-like boxes, in which they are left to kill each other; Sun Yuan and Peng Yu's *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other* (2003, fig. 39), which documents eight dogs strapped to treadmills facing one another, only able to run forward, and Xu Bing's *A Case Study of Transference* (1993/1994, fig. 40), which consisted of a performance of two living pigs, their bodies stamped with false Chinese characters and nonsensical English words, in a gallery space filled with books in different languages. These works have drawn much scholarly attention and debate, especially concerning their aspects of metaphorical responses to socio-political, biopolitical, ethical, and moral issues.<sup>348</sup> These works often embody

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<sup>347</sup> 1. The early stage, from 1989 to 1999, where he began to explore the silkworm as an artistic medium; 2. The period from 2000 to 2009, during which he focused more on the life process of the silkworm and its inherent vitality; 3. The phase from 2009 to the present, which engages more deeply with contemporary issues and the broader concerns of humanity. For more details about features of different stages, see Yang Jing, "Pursuit for the Tao through the Silkworm: A Conversation with Liang Shaoji," The interview took place at the artist's studio in the Tiantai Museum in Zhejiang on August 7, 2017. Originally conducted in Chinese, it has been translated into English by the author.

<sup>348</sup> See e.g., Meiling Cheng, "Animalworks in China," *The Drama Review* 51.1 (2007): 63–91; Ted Nannicelli, "Animals, Ethics, and the Art World," *October* 164 (2018): 113–32; Gaojie Pan, "Periphery and Otherness: Animals in Contemporary Chinese Art" (PhD's dissertation, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2020); Bogna Łakomska, "Animal Figures Inspirations in Contemporary Chinese Art," *Art of the Orient* 10 (2021): 79–103; Silvia Fok, *Life and Death: Art and the Body in Contemporary China* (Intellect L and DEFAE, 2012); Winston Kyan, "Humanistic Buddhism and Contemporary Chinese Art," *人間佛教高峰論壇輯七: 人間佛教與未來學* (2021): 298–311.

anthropocentric perspectives, wherein human beings act as the sole arbiters or controllers of the lives of animals. In this context, animal bodies in art frequently serves as the “non-human Other,” subjected to the human gaze.<sup>349</sup> The significance of these artworks resides in how animals act as indicators of symbolic meanings for articulation of broader socio-political concerns.

Many of Liang’s works, including the study case *Chains*, however, feature a more ontobiological engagement with animals, allowing silkworms to undergo their biological life processes—hatching, growing, spinning, cocooning, emerging, and laying eggs—while at the same time actively co-producing creative silk works with Liang’s biotechnological approaches. Once genetically selected and crossbred, the silkworms involved in Liang’s artmaking are no longer wild silkworms, nor are they the domesticated silkworms used for fabric production in sericulture. Instead, they become a distinct breed capable of retaining their silk-producing biological abilities while acquiring increased resilience and adaptability to unconventional materials. As such, they emerge as unique, active creators, capable of contributing to the artmaking-process.

In *Chains*, these worms produce dense and irregular silk threads that intertwine with large metal chains suspended from the gallery ceiling, creating a paradoxical scene, far removed from the ordinary. Metal chains are typically found on sites like steamships, harbour wharfs, industrial sites, or as part of architectural constructions. Silk, on the other hand, is usually encountered either in handmade or mass-produced fabrics that often obscure all traces of the silkworms’ biological silk-production process, or in insect

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<sup>349</sup> Raino Isto, “Organic (un)Ground in the Time of Biopower and Hyperobjects: Conceptualizing Global Posthumanism in the Art of Xu Bing and Gu Wenda,” *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 2.2-3 (2016): 197–205.

rooms in zoos, or in children's biology classes about silkworm breeding. In the cases of zoos and educational settings, the silk is predominantly observed in the form of cocoons rather than in its flat, planar form.

Liang introduces an unconventional and unexpected juxtaposition, blending two disparate elements that do not usually interact in reality. Yet the entanglement of chains and silk threads produces an ambiguous effect that is both startling and harmonious, suggesting a sense of coherence or balance, rather than confrontation. The visual presence of the displayed artworks is ambiguous, gentle, rhetorical, and silent, eliciting more of a play on the principles of phenomenology and processes of visual perception than those of Liang's contemporaries, who would use animals in a way that evokes a direct visual threat or shock in the viewer. The latter are often representational in character, offering themselves up for metaphorical articulations.

More importantly, the textured and disordered qualities of the silk fibres, resembling flesh, evoke tactile and somatic sensations in the viewer, eliciting the feeling that the silk threads entwined with the metal chains are the result of the silkworms' climbing and spinning. Further, in the *Allure of Matter* exhibition, the scale of each hollowed chain is about the size of a human body. Each chain is composed of individual links, that are vertically and cross-connected with other links. The length of the chains varies, with some hanging low, close to the floor, some suspended in mid-space, and some short, hanging close to the ceiling. The longest chain touches the floor, with five of its links laying on the ground (fig. 11). The chains are irregularly distributed, hanging from the ceiling at various distances from each other. The viewer can freely walk around each chain and through these distancing spaces. Two of the chains are not hung from

the ceiling, but placed on the floor, not in smooth, but in crooked, shapes. The effect is that they look like they have just fallen off the chains above.

The metal surface of the chains is not smooth but rusty. The silk intertwining with the chains does not homogeneously cover the whole link. Some links are fully covered by silk thread, hiding their original shape, while some are unevenly and asymmetrically covered (several links are only minimally covered), making their original shapes identifiable. When walking close to the chains, one will notice that it is not only the silk that winds through the chains, but also some cocoons, wrapped in silk thread (fig. 41).

The silk in this installation is not delicate, like the industrially-produced high-density fabric that carries no apparent testimony to the silkworm's mode of production. Instead, *Chains* comprises a more natural, organic, and unordered form of silk, with variations of density and thickness (fig. 42) making the viewer aware of it having been made by silkworms, rather than artificially or industrially produced. The silk appears to be almost alive, with each fibre displaying a lack of uniformity; its shapes and textured qualities vary due to differences in diameter and density. Upon close inspection, the fibres of silk covering the metals display a reticular, yet disordered, pattern that appears to have formed naturally by the silkworms' spinning.

This phenomenon draws us into the realm of Jane Bennett's exploration of "vibrant matter." Her theory suggests that all matter, regardless of its life status or ability to physically move, indicates a reshaping of the concepts of life or what it means to be living. Whether biologically alive or not, inert matter may possess forceful powers of life, as it has the capacity to impact on the environment it inhabits as well as the other

materialities with which it is intimately associated.<sup>350</sup> This concept was vividly illustrated through Bennett’s own observations of seemingly mundane objects—a stick, a glove, a bottle cap, tree pollen, and a dead rat—revealing that these items possess not just a passive “intractability” but also the potential to enact change and produce effects. The dynamic interaction between the glove, stick, pollen, rat, and bottle cap, alongside their collective relationships with the street, the weather, and the observer, imbues them with a lively essence, making them shimmer and spark as part of an emergent tableau.<sup>351</sup> Bennett notes that the energy and effect these objects generate are not solely the result of human interaction but emerge from the objects’ interactions with each other and their environment, suggesting that matter operates as self-organising systems, beyond any human-centric framework.

Bennett’s theory introduces a radical viewpoint that erases the boundary between lifeless objects and living entities, positing that matter itself possesses an innate “thing-power”: the capacity to animate, act, and engender both profound and subtle effects.<sup>352</sup> The silk in Liang’s installation embodies this principle, appearing to be almost sentient, with each fibre—uniquely shaped and textured—reflecting variances in diameter and density. Upon close inspection, the silk fibres covering the metals display a reticular, yet disordered, chaotic pattern. The thickness of the silk is unevenly distributed. Focusing on a single link, the viewer can observe parts that display a few clear single lines of silk, while other parts are covered with multiple layers of silk, invoking a snow-like texture. The inner parts of the wound silk reveal some cocoons, revealing to the

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<sup>350</sup> Bennett Jane, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>351</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

viewer who is familiar with silkworm breeding that this silk is organically produced by spinning silkworms.

Apart from the common contexts where one might encounter silkworms—such as insect exhibits at zoos or small-scale home breeding of silkworms—the installation renders the familiar unfamiliar, imbuing the silk and the ghostly presence of silkworms with an almost inexplicable and mythical quality. This results from the contrast between the silk that seems clean, light, soft, and gentle, and the chains that seem timeworn, heavy, rigid, tough, and cold. Although these qualities seem to contrast with one another, here, the silk and the chains are interrelated, revealing a harmonious and silent state of co-existence.

The silk threads, wrapped around chains with some cocoons nestled beneath the silk, appear both raw and fragile, as if on the brink of breaking, but not yet broken. This visual tension exposes a dynamic of force, juxtaposing toughness and softness. Furthermore, the unique “∞”-shaped trail of silk spun by the silkworms creates a captivating phenomenon of refraction. The exhibition space utilises side lighting to obliquely illuminate the sculptural installation, resulting in the shadows of the chains being projected onto the two exhibition walls (fig. 11). As the viewer moves slowly around the shimmering silk on metal chains in the exhibition room, they will notice the subtle yet continuous changes in the quivering outward diffusion of the silk halo (fig. 43) responding silently to his movement, creating an experience akin to a tour through the space.

Despite the overwhelmingly giant and weighty industrial metal chains, the volume and

intensity of the silk fibre, coupled with the changing lighting effects reflecting off the threads—particularly as they entwine the metal, rendering it seemingly trapped and passive—display a type of fortitude that the metal cannot overpower. It is a transformative spectacle: a solitary, easily breakable silk thread evolves into an emblem of strength, capable of intertwining with and even dominating another material that is ostensibly its antithesis.

This juxtaposition of soft, vibrant silk and the solid, unyielding metal chains provokes a range of affects or emotions in the viewer, ranging from curiosity and anxiety to wonder and apprehension. This ultimately leads to the central pursuit of this chapter: to reveal that more-than-human entities have an agentic capacity in art that can not only counter what the human mind imagines them to be, but that can also, as Bennett describes it, “act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own,”<sup>353</sup> capable of producing effects that primarily lets the viewer evolve into a cognitive awareness of phenomenological bodily perception.

This perception, preceding the viewer’s interpretative understanding, is not derived from the actual single objects of silk and chains and the knowledge they have, or may acquire, about them, but from the sensory experience that these materials together might bring. According to Deleuze, sensations are integral parts of actual things that happen, granting these things a “living significance” for us.<sup>354</sup> The significance emerging in Liang’s work is the cognitive awareness of what the silkworm can do, the feeling of the presence of the becoming of the silk, and this comes before understanding the nature of

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<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

<sup>354</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Francis Bacon, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (London; New York: Continuum, 2004).

the real physical presence of the work. Therefore, although composed of lifeless material components, Liang's work metonymically evokes life through the viewer's embodied, sensuous encounter with it.

Such agentic capacity and vitality of the silkworm and the silk in Liang's art are, however, aspects that are often overlooked in the current literature. Liang's works are often discussed within the themes of fibre art, craft, and bioart. Among the current discussions about his works, scholars tend to emphasise their philosophical or metaphysical significations—especially those of Daoism (or Taoism)—which have greatly impacted on the conceptual aspects of his works.<sup>355</sup>

Many scholars and critics draw connections between the theme of “自然” [*ziran* or nature] and its related worldview in Liang's oeuvre and a distinctively Chinese, Daoist-inspired, Eastern ecological aesthetic, a perspective often supported by Liang himself in interviews and published notes.<sup>356</sup> Liang's silkworm art, with its ecological aesthetic, perceives nature as a unified whole,<sup>357</sup> celebrates an artform marked by ethereality and ambiguity, and acknowledges the seamless connection between humanity and divine nature, or the harmony between humanity and nature, known as “天人合一” (which is also manifested in Song's *Water Records* as examined Chapter 2),<sup>358</sup> aligning with the

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<sup>355</sup> Xia Kejun, “The Silk Shadow of Chora-topia” in *Liang Shaoji: Back to Origin* (Shanghai: ShanghART Gallery, 2014), 18-31.

<sup>356</sup> See Marianne Brouwer, *Cloud*, (Shanghai: ShanghART, 2007); Liang Shaoji, “Liang Shaoji: About Nature Series,” 1994, accessed March 6, 2024. <http://www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryarchive/texts/id/54>; Doris von Drathen, *Windflower: Perceptions of Nature* (Otterlo: Kröller-Müller Museum, 2011); Jing Yang, “Pursuit for the Tao through the Silkworm: A Conversation with Liang Shaoji,” Interview transcript. University of Jyväskylä, 2018.

<sup>357</sup> Brouwer, *Cloud*.

<sup>358</sup> von Drathen, *Windflower*.

expansive interpretation of Eastern Daoist natural cosmology. Indeed, on many occasions, such as in an interview with Gladston and Yang Jing, Liang discusses his faith in Chinese philosophy, especially Daoism, as well as the influence of Western philosophers, such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Albert Camus, that have brought much inspirations to his creative ideas in art.<sup>359</sup>

However, this philosophical conceptualisation of the relationship between humans and nature is often articulated through an immediate translation of the work's visual language into symbolism or metaphysical understanding. Their interpretations of non-human or more-than-human entities in Liang's silk works are based on presumptive metaphysical paradigms, focusing more on what the artwork *means* or *represents*, than on what the materials *do* within the artworks themselves: the connections they forge, their ability to affect and be affected within their relationships, and the consequences of these dynamic interactions.

In addition, much of the current scholarly focus on Liang's artmaking-processes emphasises his use of biotechnology to more effectively control silkworm behaviours for dynamic visual results—a perspective that often highlights the dominance of the artist's intentionality and actions over other living or non-living entities. Less attention has been paid to the experiences (both physical and emotional) of the silkworms themselves during the artmaking-process, their agentic capacities in influencing the artist's strategies, actions, and experiences, and their role in the evolution of the artmaking. Several questions remain unexplored: To what extent does Liang

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<sup>359</sup> Paul Gladston, "A Conversation with Liang Shaoji," *ShanghART*, 2012, accessed March 6, 2024. <https://www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryarchive/texts/id/4007>; Yang Jing, "Pursuit for the Tao through the Silkworm."

manipulate and control the process, and how do silkworms, in turn, react and influence the artist? To what extent is the variability of the silk's density and thickness a result of the silkworms' natural biological processes, or of interactions and collaborations between the silkworms and the artist's actions?

While acknowledging the work's potential to redefine boundaries between animals and humans, between nature and sericulture, and between the wild and the domesticated—which might in some ways resonate with Daoist philosophy about humans and nature, I turn to a more ontological and processual approach to understanding the boundaries or relationships revealed in Liang's *Chains*. According to Barad, boundaries are not pre-existing; they emerge through continuous intra-action among different entities. They are not instantaneously communicated from a distance but are established within a phenomenon that clearly delineates them. Our understanding of the artwork's exploration of boundaries comes not from merely observing the artwork's representation by just standing outside the world but through engaging with the artwork and its embedded processes.

In fact, it is not part of the silkworm's typical behaviour to spin on metal chains. The sense of vitality is achieved through a continuous entanglement between artist, silkworms, and metal chains as well as environmental conditions, space, and time. In this process, the silkworms are not the only and central creators but they are co-agents in the artmaking-process. Bennett also recognises that the matter's capacity to be active is not isolated, but creates dynamic cooperative interconnections. She states:

[...] a landscape possesses an efficacy of its own, a liveliness intermeshed with human agency. Clearly, the scape of the land is more than a geo-physical surface upon which events play out. Clearly, a particular configuration of plants, buildings, mounds, winds, rocks, moods does not operate simply as a tableau

for actions whose impetus comes from elsewhere.<sup>360</sup>

In other words, when agents collaborate in the enactment of an event, all the agents involved in that enactment are implicated. Therefore, boundaries such as those between human and non-human and more-than-human, nature and sericulture, can only emerge through a continuous (re)negotiation, and the ongoing making-process among these different entities or components. During the artmaking-process, these entities or components depend on their relations, constantly evolving and always in flux, affecting and being affected by each other.

The interpretation of Liang's *Chains*, therefore, should not hinge on how it presents a preconceived notion such as “天人合一” or how it immediately evokes such a concept upon the viewer's encounter. Instead, it should delve into how different entities or components materialise in a complex material-discursive entanglement during the artmaking-process, and how the boundaries of these entities and processes remain fluid, temporary, and porous. Viewing the agency of the silkworm as dispersed within this ongoing relational phenomenon enables us to understand how boundaries are enacted.

In fact, while Liang has often discussed Daoist-inspired and Eastern ecological aesthetics in relation to his works in the *Nature series*, he also maintains a degree of ambiguity and ambivalence about the values and meanings of the production and displayed artworks. He appears to inscribe a more ontological understanding of his artistic intention and making-processes, and implies that scholars have, to some extent, reduced the significance of his works to mere interpretations of Western (especially

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<sup>360</sup> Jane Bennett and Klaus K. Loenhardt, “Vibrant Matter, Zero Landscape,” *GAM Architecture Magazine* 7 (2011): 3.

Nietzsche's) and Chinese philosophy.<sup>361</sup> In his *Creative Notes*, Liang places greater value on the “process” over the “result,” recognising that “the capacity and limit of an artwork are defined as soon as it is completed.”<sup>362</sup> He views the process of completion as “a dynamic, moving vehicle of art, history and thoughts, embodying great potential and infinite possibilities.”<sup>363</sup> This evolution allows for the expansion of time and space. The narrative of the work is enriched by incidental events that occur during its creation, with the “length, thickness, elasticity and uncertainty of the fibre” contributing to the work’s remaining in a state of perpetual becoming—a kind of “unfinished completion and finished incompleteness.”<sup>364</sup>

As such, although I do not deny that Liang’s works evoke philosophical implications—an aspect that has garnered significant scholarly attention—I highlight how his *Chains* offer a non-human-centred version through the complex processual ontologies that emphasise the biotechnological, biological, and ecological entanglements of humans, non-humans, and more-than-humans. I will explore how Liang’s work offers the possibility to not only question human intentionality, subjectivity, and autonomy, but also actively challenge these notions. This exploration will allow us to uncover how the potential for agentic participation of animals in art can provide a fresh ethico-political perspective on the nature of interspecies interactions, and can open up ways for us to move away from traditional human-centric ethics towards a heightened understanding of the “world” we are encouraged to reconnect with, becoming more “response-able” towards it.<sup>365</sup>

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<sup>361</sup> Gladston, “A Conversation.”

<sup>362</sup> Liang Shaoji, *Liang Shaoji: Creative Notes (1987–2021)* (Shanghai: Shangh Art Gallery, 2021), 24.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*, 24–5.

<sup>365</sup> Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the

**i. The biological value of the silkworm and the history of Chinese silk production**

The silkworm holds particular value for Liang. Biologically, as a lepidopteran insect, it undergoes a complete metamorphosis through four life stages: egg, larva, pupa, and moth. A larva, once hatched, requires 20 to 28 days to mature and begin the process of spinning silk and forming a cocoon, a process which lasts about three days before it begins to transition into a pupa, which takes a day or two. As part of the spinning and cocooning processes, it produces silk, which consists of animal protein. It is one of the essential biomolecules of living organisms and is the most primitive natural fibre. Silk spat out by the silkworm is a combination of two silk proteins secreted from the silkworm's silk glands, on the left and right sides, bonded together with the protein sericin. The behaviour of mature silkworms producing silk and forming cocoons is instinctual, driven by the silkworm's internal physiological state. As it reaches the end of its fifth instar, a surge in its moulting hormone prompts the cessation of mulberry eating and initiates the cocooning stage. Within the cocoon, the silkworm secures itself to the cavity wall, moving its head in a side-to-side motion to create a "∞"-shaped silk circle of 1–2mm in diameter (as can be seen in Liang's *8 Series-8 Installation*) (fig. 44), grouping every 15–25 loops into what is known as a cocoon piece.<sup>366</sup> The transformation from pupa to moth occurs over ten to fifteen days, concluding the silkworm's life cycle, which typically lasts a total of 40–60 days, with the moth's death following egg-laying.

The silkworm occupies a particular narrative space in the long history of Chinese

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Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (1988): 575–99.

<sup>366</sup> L. Patricia Kite, *Silkworms* (Conshohocken, PA: Infinity Publishing, 2008), 4.

sericulture and silk craftsmanship, and Liang has been an active participant in the professional and technological activities of the biology of the silkworm and biotechnology of Chinese sericulture. China was the first country in the world to rear the silkworm for the primary purpose of extracting silk. Remnants of silk as old as 8,500 years have been found in Neolithic tombs in China. Due to its porous quality, silk is permeable and hygroscopic, and has been regarded as the “Queen of Fibres.”<sup>367</sup> In Ancient China, it was historically exclusively used by emperors and empresses, and was a symbol of wealth. Silk remained confined to China until the Silk Road took shape around the latter half of the first millennium BC, during which time the silk fabric was exported to Central Asia, Africa, and Europe.<sup>368</sup> China retained its monopoly on silk production for another thousand years. Not limited to clothing, silk was also employed for other usages, such as writing, and during the Tang Dynasty, the colour of silk you wore was an important indicator of social class.

Traditional silk production immerses pupae in boiling water to unravel individual long fibres for collection onto the spinning reel. Once coiled on a spool, a single unwound cocoon can produce a silk filament between 600–1000 metres long. A single thread cannot be used for commercial purposes, as it is often too precious and fragile, and so it is normally spun into five to eight strands to achieve a single thread of silk, which will later be dyed and woven. The weaving stage then involves splitting the raw silk into warp and weft threads, which are then woven together in accordance with

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<sup>367</sup> American Fabrics and Fashion Magazine, eds., *Encyclopaedia of Textiles*, Third Edition (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1980), 124–37.

<sup>368</sup> The Silk Road trade was instrumental in establishing political and economic connections between China, Japan, Korea, Iran, India, Europe, Arabia, and the Horn of Africa. Beyond merchandise, this network enabled a remarkable exchange of ideas, scientific innovations, philosophies, and religions (notably Buddhism). These exchanges were often integrated or transformed by the cultures that absorbed them.

predetermined organisational guidelines to create silk fabric. In contemporary China, industrialised production has almost entirely replaced the traditional hand-weaving silk production process, as it is more efficient and improves the quality of the silk texture. The reared and domesticated silkworm has remained a source for textile production, while also acting as a medium for enhancing international trade and exchange, with its silk being regarded as a merely industrial fabric.

During the evolution of silk production, which centred on exploring the silkworm's capacity for producing the precious qualities of silk for human usages from a utilitarian perspective, silk's primitive property as a natural organic material and the multiplicities of the biological characteristics of the silkworm have largely been overlooked. Instead it has largely been incorporated into a standardised mode of mass production. As such, the silkworm typically holds the status of a passive object awaiting human use.

## ii. Liang's selection of the silkworm for art practices

Liang's decision to use the silkworm in art production did not emerge by accident, nor did he amateurishly use this living material without knowledge of or practical skills in its biology and rearing. Before the actual creation of this work, Liang had been experimenting with silkworms in art for ten years (his first work using silkworm is *Yi Series—Magic Cube* created in 1988 for the exhibition of *China/AvantGarde*), during which time he carried out numerous academic research studies and field work<sup>369</sup> to

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<sup>369</sup> Liang studied numerous sericulture textbooks and subscribed to scholarly publications like "Science of Sericulture" to stay informed about the latest scientific developments in the field. Beyond seeking advice from silkworm specialists at Zhejiang Agricultural University regarding the silkworms' biological rhythms and health issues, he also visited local silkworm egg farms and engaged in cross-breeding and silkworm egg production with the help of farm staff. His studies extended beyond silkworms to include the cultivation of mulberry trees. Collaborating with mulberry growers in Linhai City, Zhejiang Province, he collected mulberries to feed the silkworms. Additionally, he constructed a greenhouse to regulate

acquire professional knowledge about the biology and behaviour of the silkworm; the raising, breeding, and biotechnology of it, as well as past and current sericulture in China. Critical of the orientation of silk production that is closely connected with the decorative tradition, he emphasises the need to return the silkworm identity to its “primitiveness” [原始性] in art;<sup>370</sup> a state that goes beyond the human realm and pays attention to the biological characteristics that connects to nature. He believes that the real nature of the silkworm is not defined by the quantity or fineness of the silk it produces for human utilisation, nor by any specific stage in its lifecycle. Instead, it is found in the silkworm's dynamic biological cycle: “Based on observation and analysis of the life of the living creature, I find and cultivate its own potential and it naturally achieves the transformation.”<sup>371</sup> Liang likens the lifecycle of silkworms to “an infinitely fine line.”<sup>372</sup> In this regard, silk transcends its status as a mere non-living textile; it becomes a record of the silkworms’ life process,<sup>373</sup> embodying “the existence and being in the long journey of time and life.”<sup>374</sup> In this sense, we see that Liang embodies an ontological understanding of the entanglement and processual dynamics of the silkworm, emphasising not only its existence as a solitary creature but also its role within a broader narrative of transformation and interconnectivity. He regards the silkworm’s life as a continuum that blurs the boundaries between the living and the non-living, with its silk serving as an index or embodiment of the silkworm’s living

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mulberry growth, experimenting with silkworm breeding outside the conventional sericulture seasons of spring and autumn.

<sup>370</sup> Shen Ruijun, “A Conversation with Liangshaoji: The life of Silkworm,” [对话梁绍基：毕其蚕一生] interview, conducted at the artist’s studio at the Tiantai Museum, July 8, 2018.

<sup>371</sup> Yang, “Pursuit for the Tao.”

<sup>372</sup> “Nature Series,” *ECOARTASIA*, accessed March 6, 2024.

[https://ecoartasia.net/LSJ/LSJ\\_eng.html](https://ecoartasia.net/LSJ/LSJ_eng.html)

<sup>373</sup> Ibid.

<sup>374</sup> Lin Jiabin, “As Light and Shadow: Liang Shaoji Elaborates his Philosophy on ‘Silk Thinking’ with ‘As If’,” *Central Academy of Fine Arts*, October, 10, 2018, accessed March 6, 2024. <https://www.cafa.com.cn/en/news/details/8325698>.

process.

Liang's emphasis on the "primitiveness" of the silkworm is based upon a realisation of the silk and silkworm as something that is clearly invested with cultural and commercial values from an anthropocentric perspective. The most common recognitions of this material in people's minds is both as a commercial and domesticated product with a long history of human use, and as an organic material derived from the living silkworm. Liang's understanding of the role of the silkworm as a non-inert and diverse multiplicity in both the natural and the human world resides in some way in the silkworm's inherent property of something that recalls Bruno Latour's notion of the "quasi-object." In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour suggests that the quasi-object embodies a paradox: it is "much more social, much more fabricated, much more collective than the 'hard' parts of nature" yet "much more real, non-human and objective than those shapeless screens on which society—for unknown reasons—needed to be 'projected'."<sup>375</sup> For Latour, the quasi-object represents the essence of "modernity," acting both as a foundation for the emergence of modern dualistic frameworks and as evidence of their dissolution, especially in the wake of developments like studies of materialist science.<sup>376</sup> As Levi Bryant explains, Latour's "[q]uasi-objects are objects that are neither quite natural nor quite social [...] they are operators that draw people together in particular relations as well as drawing people into relations with other non-human objects while being irreducible social constructions in the semiotic sense."<sup>377</sup> Bryant notes the non-legitimising function of the quasi-object's ability to shift the burden of

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<sup>375</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2012), 55.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>377</sup> Levi Bryant, "Of Quasi-Objects and the Construction of Collectives," *Larval Subjects* 18 (2011).

proof away from subjectivity and place it in the “illegitimate” emergent entanglements of practice.<sup>378</sup>

The domesticated silkworm and its essential ability to produce organic silk seems to assume a non-dualist form that acts not as a substitute for an object, but rather as a go-between object in itself: representing a verb that must be practiced—either in the field of sericulture or in art—rather than a noun that is fixed in one domain. It can exist partly independently of our knowledge of it and of the language in which we talk about it, and enacts its own primitive biological activities (though the technology of raising, breeding, and post-cocoon stage silk production may vary). At the same time, it is still able to connect with us in a different field, such as consumption, arts, and crafts. The silkworm thus encapsulates non-biological matter within a biological context, leading to organic silk that undergoes a metonymic shift, persistently breaking free from its constraints. It appears to be neither subject nor object, but seems to operate more as an agency of play in and of itself, interacting with or influencing human activities to shift between nature, sericulture, and art gallery without ever turning into an inanimate object.

Through the cohabitation and observation of silkworms, Liang himself also notes that the role of the silkworm does not solely act as passive representation, relying on human control, rather, he believes that the silkworm has also “moulded China’s character, philosophy, aesthetics and history.”<sup>379</sup> Liang highlights the influence of silkworms on humans, underscoring a reciprocal (though unequal) dynamic where nature and culture

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<sup>378</sup> Ibid.

<sup>379</sup> Shaoji Liang, “About the ‘Nature Series’ – Notes on Creative Work,” in *Chinese Artists, Texts and Interviews: Chinese Contemporary Art Awards (CCAA)*, ed. Ai Weiwei (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2002), 42.

intertwine and affect one another, being inseparably connected: “Nature is not only our living environment but our cultural environment.”<sup>380</sup> Indeed, the history of sericulture in China is not simply a history of human control over the silkworm. The silkworm is the only insect that has been reared for the production of fabric in China. While many invertebrates secrete protein fibres that can be used to produce silk, it is only the silkworm that can produce enough of the consistently elegant, soft, and durable qualities to be considered for large-scale production of the coveted fabric. That is the reason why, in Chinese history of animal domestication, the silkworm is the only invertebrate to be entirely domesticated.

The silkworm’s uniqueness of combining biological skills and its active, interrelated relationships with human activities transforms this animal in a multitude of ways, affording it a crucial role in people’s lifestyles, in terms of decoration and clothing, as well as in the creation of global trade networks, enabling communication of both religious and cultural ideas. Liang’s use of the silkworm in art paradoxically disrupts the biological realm with a non-biological (or non-living) context, suggesting the concept of the quasi-object. This occupies a liminal space, neither fully representing nor being represented.

### **iii. The making-process**

Liang’s understanding of the silkworm as something indicative of the notion of quasi-object as well as the acquired knowledge and technological methods of sericulture have helped to shape his creation. At the same time, Liang has made moderate use of distinct

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<sup>380</sup> Shaoji Liang, “Liang Shaoji: About Nature Series,” *ShanghART Gallery*, 1994, accessed March 6, 2024. <http://www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryarchive/texts/id/54>.

“biogenetic engineering”<sup>381</sup> to cooperate with the silkworm based on knowledge of its genetics, and without brutal human intervention. It is not easy to make silkworms spin on metal chains. Upon creating *Chains*, Liang examined the ethology of silkworms, which are accustomed to environments containing lignin, like wood and paper, and find materials devoid of lignin, such as metal, glass, and plastic, to be inhospitable. He began to inquire why we have continued to understand the silkworm as loving lignin over other materials, as its biological or biotechnological possibilities go beyond it:

In the past, scientific researchers and silkworm growers only wanted to improve the quality and yield of cocoons and the silk-reeling process. They had never studied the possibility of silk sculpture, so they did not study the relationship between silk and other man-made materials. On the sole basis of biophysical properties, they explained that silkworms eat leaves, so they feel comfortable with materials containing lignin. For example, paper contain wood fibres, so silkworms can get along with paper. Metal, especially industrial waste metal with strange smells and greasy dirt, are of course not suitable for silkworms who love cleanliness. This is the starting point for my philosophical thinking and aesthetic thinking, to ask about the circumstances and abilities of life.<sup>382</sup>

Liang wanted to open the possibilities of the adaptability of silkworms and their life force because, in his opinion, the focus of sericulture production and research primarily aims at creating smoother and more uniform silk fabrics. He found that wild silkworms have stronger immunity and climbing abilities than domesticated ones, though the latter have more advanced silk glands.<sup>383</sup> Utilising principles of genetic selection and crossbreeding, Liang embarked on a program to combine the advantageous traits of both wild and domesticated silkworms. By selecting eggs with enhanced physical strength and tolerance, he aimed to cultivate a new strain of silkworm that could adapt more readily to unconventional materials, such as the metal chains used in his artwork.

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<sup>381</sup> Gaojie Pan, “Periphery and Otherness: Animals in Contemporary Chinese Art” (PhD’s dissertation, The Chinese University of Kong Kong, 2020), 134.

<sup>382</sup> Quoted in “Nature Series,” *ECOARTASIA*.

<sup>383</sup> Liang, *Creative Notes*, 104–21.

This selective breeding process involved the careful evaluation of genetic traits, ensuring that the resultant silkworms retained their natural silk-producing abilities while acquiring increased resilience and adaptability. The genetic selection process is meticulous and grounded in an understanding of silkworm genetics. It involves identifying and selecting genes that influence key traits. For instance, wild silkworms, with their strong immune systems and good climbing abilities, offered genes that could confer resilience to disease and environmental stressors. On the other hand, domesticated silkworms, selected over generations for their silk-producing efficiency, provided genes for high-quality silk production.

Crossbreeding these different strains of silkworms involved mating individuals with the desired traits, followed by several generations of selective breeding.<sup>384</sup> This process was meticulous and time-consuming, as it required continuous monitoring and selection to ensure that the desired genetic traits were being expressed in the offspring. The end goal was to produce a hybrid silkworm capable of producing high-quality silk while being robust enough to thrive in unconventional environments.

Once these silkworms had been fed and raised to maturity in the cocoonery in the countryside, benefiting from a professional feeding environment that likely contributed to their overall health and vitality, Liang transferred them to his studio.<sup>385</sup> The studio is located in Tiantai County, Taizhou City, Zhejiang Province. Zhejiang, known as the home of silk, boasts a well-developed sericulture industry, with Taizhou being a key town for sericulture in the region. Mulberry trees, essential for silkworm nutrition,

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<sup>384</sup> Ibid.

<sup>385</sup> Xu Feixuan, *Liang Shaoji's Silkworm Art as Rituals of 'Ziran': Agency and Techniques* (PhD Dissertation, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, 2021), 40.

thrive in high temperature and humid environments. The ideal rearing temperature for silkworms ranges from 20–30°C, and their growth cycle is about one month. Spring and autumn are the prime seasons for sericulture.<sup>386</sup> Tiantai’s warm climate, abundant rainfall, and sufficient light and heat conditions make it an ideal location for raising silkworms.

Liang continues to breed living silkworms in his studio, which includes a cocoonery space with a row of trays (fig. 45). When they begin to spin, the silkworms do not rest and can produce silk fibres that are 1,000 to 1,200 metres long.<sup>387</sup> At this stage, healthy silkworms are transferred to a room where art experiments take place. Here, they are placed on different materials for further biotechnological experiments, designed to enhance their immunity and adaptability. Enhancing immunity involves exposing the silkworms to various controlled stressors and environmental conditions, which strengthens their natural defence mechanisms against potential diseases and unfavourable conditions.<sup>388</sup> This process may involve gradual exposure to different temperatures, humidity levels, light conditions, and sounds as set by the studio, all aimed at bolstering their resilience.

In the production of *Chains*, the challenge for the silkworms was to adapt to spinning silk on the unfamiliar and unyielding surface of metal chains. Liang’s role transcended that of a centre-stage artist controlling the non-human or living entities used to create art; he became an observer of silkworms’ ethology and a caretaker, closely monitoring

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<sup>386</sup> V. K. Rahmathulla, V. B. Mathur, and R. G. Geetha Devi, “Growth and Dietary Efficiency of Mulberry Silkworm (*Bombyx mori* L.) Under Various Nutritional and Environmental Stress Conditions,” *Philippine Journal of Science* 133.1 (2004): 39.

<sup>387</sup> Liang, “Creative Notes,” 110.

<sup>388</sup> “Nature Series,” *ECOARTASIA*.

the silkworms' health and behaviour. He maintained a near-constant vigil in the studio (fig. 46), ensuring that the conditions were optimal for the silkworms' well-being and their silk production. This required a deep understanding of their biological needs, including the ideal temperature, humidity, and light conditions for their survival and productivity.

Silk production is not a mere biological function of the silkworm, but an interaction with their environment, influenced by a suite of external factors that Liang carefully modulated. Since the silkworm's spinning behaviour is governed by its biological clock, Liang manipulated the environmental factors of temperature and humidity and employed scent and lighting to guide its actions. These strategic adjustments effectively altered the silkworm's speed, spinning direction, movement, and shape.

Silkworms exhibit a varied phototropism across developmental stages, a behaviour that is mediated by the central nervous system and is reflective of their dietary intake, providing one way in which Liang was able to choreograph the interaction between the metal and the silkworm. He leveraged light, both in intensity and wavelength, to direct the silkworms' movement and behaviour, understanding that different wavelengths can accelerate or inhibit their growth and development, thus influencing their tendency to climb, and their subsequent spinning behaviour across the chains.<sup>389</sup>

Liang also discovered that the silk structure loosens in cooler and more humid environments.<sup>390</sup> In cooler environments, their metabolism slows down. This reduced

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<sup>389</sup> Liang, "Creative Notes," 113.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

metabolic activity impacts the silk production process, as the rate at which the silk protein is secreted from the glands decreases. Consequently, the silk threads produced in cooler conditions tend to be finer and less tightly wound. The reduced speed of production allows more time for each layer of silk to be laid down, resulting in a looser structure. Humidity plays a complementary role in this process. Higher humidity levels are known to affect the viscosity of the sericin, the silk protein that acts as a glue bonding the fibroin strands (the core structural proteins in silk). When the air is more humid, the sericin does not dry as quickly, leading to silk that is more pliable and less tightly bound. This results in a looser structure as the fibres are not as closely packed together.

As such, when Liang manipulates the temperature and humidity, he was effectively leveraging these biological principles to influence the physical properties of the silk being spun. The silkworms respond by producing silk that is variably looser or thicker, creating a different textural and tactile quality in terms of the denier of the silk being produced. In this way, Liang's art becomes not just a display of aesthetic choices but a demonstration of how environmental factors can be harnessed to shape silkworms' ethology and their biological processes of silk production, leading to a dynamic and evolving interplay between biological and biotechnological experiments. In addition, to produce clean, white silk wrapped around rusty, corrosive metal chains, Liang diligently cleaned up the excrement left by the silkworms on the silk they produced, resulting in pristine silk with some cocoons nestled beneath. The resulting silk carries the imprints of a collaborative journey, shaped by the silkworm's behaviours and the artist's corresponding actions, as well as to changes in environmental conditions. The texture created stands as much as a testament to the silkworm's biological capacities to

produce silk with variations in density and thickness as it does to Liang's artistic vision.

During the making-process of *Chains*, Liang's approach to silk production was one of both intervention and observation, showcasing a deep understanding of the silkworms' behaviours and the conditions that influence their silk spinning. But during this spinning process, Liang only occasionally controlled the shape of the silk cocoon, by adjusting the light and environmental conditions.<sup>391</sup> During most of the process, Liang left the silkworms to spin and produce the silk by themselves, and he would observe their behaviour in the silkworm building all night for three to five days, with minimal sleep.<sup>392</sup>

Although there is no record showing how long it took to create *Chains*, most of Liang's works span a making-process that lasts months, years, or even decades. Indeed, the silkworm's spinning and cocooning stages, during which the silks are produced, last for only around three to four days, before it evolves to the next life stage, to become a moth.<sup>393</sup> This brief window necessitates either the presence of a large number of adult silkworms (over one thousand or over ten thousand) spinning simultaneously to achieve a dense layer of silk, or a staggered, continuous introduction of new adult silkworms to maintain a consistent silk production over time.

This long making-process enabled Liang to keep meticulous record of the raising of silkworms, monitor them in their crawling form, track the dynamics and shapes of

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<sup>391</sup> Ibid., 104–11.

<sup>392</sup> "Nature Series," *ECOARTASIA*.

<sup>393</sup> Women's Silk Culture Association, *An Instruction Book in the Art of Silk Culture* (Liberia, Palala: Palala Press, 2016), 75.

spinning, and become accustomed to their scent and sound. For him, the embodied sensory encounter with the silkworm brings a peaceful feeling and inspiration: “I found that when the mind is relaxed, extraordinary sensitivity will spontaneously emerge. I can understand the general laws of motion, biological habits, and certain special life miracles of silkworms from things that I have never seen before or from accidents.”<sup>394</sup> This experiential laboratory process is devoid of direct physical interference with the silkworms’ bodies, but instead, he does “use biotech in a moderate way to activate genes while avoiding violent intervention,” allowing the silkworm to naturally achieve “its own potential and transformation.”<sup>395</sup>

Additionally, Liang’s deliberate decision to hang metal chains from the ceiling for his *Chains* significantly impacted both the behaviour of the silkworms and the aesthetic outcome of the artwork. This was not just a stylistic choice, but deeply rooted in the understanding of how gravity affects silkworm behaviour and silk production. Hanging the chains vertically introduces a challenging environment for the silkworms, as climbing upward against gravity is inherently more demanding than moving across a horizontal surface. This choice may initially seem counterintuitive, as it complicates the silkworms’ natural spinning and cocooning behaviour. On a vertical chain, the silkworms must exert more effort to cling to the surface and navigate upwards, which could potentially influence the quality and texture of the silk produced.

However, this increased difficulty is precisely what contributes to the unique aesthetic and textural qualities of the silk in Liang’s artwork. The effort of climbing and spinning

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<sup>394</sup> “Nature Series,” *ECOARTASIA*.

<sup>395</sup> Yang, “Pursuit for the Tao.”

against gravity could result in silk that is denser and more irregular, as the silkworms must adapt their spinning technique to secure themselves and their silk to the chains. This adaptation likely leads to variations in the thickness and tension of the silk threads, adding a dynamic and organic quality to the artwork. Furthermore, the vertical arrangement of the chains allows for a more dramatic and visually striking display. The silk, as it is spun and wraps around the chains, drapes and falls with gravity, creating natural, flowing forms that would not be possible with horizontally laid chains.

The silk produced in this manner, shaped by the silkworms' instincts and subtly influenced by Liang's environmental adjustments and strategic positioning of the metal chains, becomes a physical manifestation of this unique collaborative effort. In other words, the resulting artwork serves not just as a visual spectacle but also as a testament to the continuous (re)negotiation of agential forces within the artmaking-process.

The artist's activities are, in this sense, very much guided by the silkworm's life cycle, behaviour, and habits, requiring him to continuously observe the silkworms and adjust the strategies for the environmental conditions with great perseverance. The silkworms are processual and possessing agentic capacity, engaging in their own internal dynamics while forming close connections with the metal chains. The artist's intention as the creator remains ambiguous and is not the sole driving force. Regardless of how, precisely, Liang designs the shape and form of his creation, these depend just as much on the organic, biological changes of the silkworms who inhabit them. The silkworms are characterised by their own spinning and cocooning process, and the specific phenomena of the chains on which they exist. Thus, they inhabit an agential force, experiencing internal transformations that are constantly driven by a biological purpose,

and through this initial biological intentionality, they are able to trigger affective responses. Liang witnesses the silkworm's encounter with the hard, cruel, and violent metal that is often associated with China's industrialisation: "When warm, delicate silk threads are wrapped around cold metal, it affects you."<sup>396</sup> The intentionality of the making-process is thus shared between author and performer, who serve both as the work's protagonists and its matter. This phenomenon highlights the unique narrativity of this biological art practice, as well as its specific medium specificity.

This falls into a situation of what Barad refers to as "entanglement," denoting how the qualities of certain entities are neither fixed nor predetermined until they interact with one another: rather, they only become manifest through "intra-actions" and relationalities.<sup>397</sup> The concept of intra-action suggests that distinct agencies do not exist but arise through each other, through their intra-action, contrasts with the traditional idea of "interaction," which implies that individual agencies exist independently before their encounter. By arguing that borders are performed, rather than static, and that people are constructed through iterative becoming, rather than by a distinct event, Barad de-centres our primacy as human subjects. Because every existence emerges through its entanglement, there is no way to make objective assertions as the nature of intra-relatedness alters both human and non-human beings.

Liang's making-process provides a scene where multiple intra-acting agencies and entanglements are at play. Silkworms are neither the objects used to create a concrete,

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<sup>396</sup> Brouwer, "Cloud," 78.

<sup>397</sup> Barad, "Posthuman Performativity."

physical representation, nor is the artist the main decision-maker who establishes the patterns and limits of the work. The artist and silkworms are in a place and with conditions that are removed from determinate causal frameworks with clear boundaries and foreseeable results. Liang himself did not know what phenomena and effects would come of the silkworm's encounter with the metal chains and believes, instead, that any accident and outcome of the intra-active process would provide an "answer" [答案] to this work of art.<sup>398</sup>

In addition, although the metal chains are static, they primarily carry an invisible, absolute force with solid strength, as contrasted with the silkworm, which seems small and vulnerable. Placing the metal chains horizontally on the floor or table would make it easier for the silkworm to climb and spin through and over them. However, Liang chose to let the chains dangle and hang down from the laboratory ceiling, not connecting to any other material components upon which the silkworm can depend. The tough and cold qualities of the chains, and their weight, make the silkworms seem uncomfortable and in danger, while they simultaneously depend upon the chains for their survival. The metal chains, on the other hand, are gradually wrapped by silk, by which its powerful force, caused by its grand scale, rigid texture, and weight is gradually transformed into new sensuous qualities of unexpected harmonious interdependence with the silk. This contrasts with their respective initial states at the beginning of the making-process, in which the chains convey a powerful and unshakable force with which the silkworms have to passively struggle to survive.

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<sup>398</sup> Marianne Brouwer, "Liang Shaoji talk with Marianne Brouwer," *ShanghART Gallery*, 2009, accessed March 6, 2024. <https://www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryarchive/text.htm?textId=1824>

The previously solid and rigid state of the chain sculpture gradually takes on a form similar to Soft Sculpture—an art movement that sculpts out of soft, supple, non-rigid materials. Liang pursued Soft Sculpture at the China Academy of Art, and was mentored by Maryn Varbanov (1932–89)—a renowned tapestry artist celebrated for his textile creations from 1986 to 1989.<sup>399</sup> The appearance and effect of the chains is continuously reconfigured in various states of entanglement. In this sense, the artist, the silkworms, and the metal chains are in shifting relationships in an ongoing materialisation through intra-action, and assume co-constitutive roles in the emergence of the work. This work, then, transcends deterministic causality, and unfolds through continuous material transformation across time.

#### iv. Beyond representationalism

This intra-active co-becoming making-process through differential enactments of agency provides an alternative framework for how the artist may engage with the animal beyond representation, as they reside in a productive and laboratory space. Involving animals in art inevitably suggests an incommensurable level of difference, positioning them in a realm of distinct separation from the viewer, which may reduce their materiality to a mere figural shadow. As Penelope Ingram argues in *The Signifying Body*, “every act of representation necessarily participates in the fiction of representation. By its very nature, a representation claims to be representative, but all it represents is in fact the impossibility of representation, because a representation cannot contain the thing represented.”<sup>400</sup> To avoid the representationalist frame,

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<sup>399</sup> Zoe Zhang Bing, “Liang Shaoji,” *Art Review*, March 13, 2015, accessed March 6, 2024. <https://artreview.com/ara-spring-2015-feature-liang-shaoji/>

<sup>400</sup> Penelope Ingram, *The Signifying Body: Toward an Ethics of Sexual and Racial Difference* (Albany: State University of New York, 2008), 10.

according to Ingram, we must consider the body's potential to indicate more than the frames into which it is inserted; in other words, we must look for a body that is

[...] signifiable, not representative [...] because there is no category to which it belongs. It is not without signification or meaning, but its meanings are unstable [...] it is unstable matter that is nevertheless outside representation. It is this kind of material signification that facilitates the ontological becoming not only of the Self but of the Other.<sup>401</sup>

When it comes to animals, the possibilities that representationalism has blocked off from the animal must be made clear to the human. This is reminiscent of Barad's assertion about the capacity of agency to bring forth diverse possibilities. In the realm of incorporating animals into art, considering Ingram's ethical framework can illuminate the importance of recognising the material relevance of these different options. This kind of artistic practice can uncover the alternative nature of the Other and manifest a material meaning that transcends mere representation. The material body of the silkworm carries marks of its varied histories, landscapes, and interpretations within a biopolitical framework. However, as Concepción Cortés Zulueta describes, the silkworm in Liang's *Chains* keeps away from "contexts and cities marked by the excesses of industrialisation and by an anthropocentric hierarchisation of priorities," residing instead in a hybrid space "from where to reorganize the whole structure by placing nature, the environment, as the realm that encompassed everything else."<sup>402</sup> In other words, this is a space that was not foreclosed to them in the symbolic and utilitarian world, but one that was making different worldly entanglements and producing new phenomena through the construction of co-constitutive boundaries in the process of mutual co-becoming.

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<sup>401</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>402</sup> Concepción Cortés Zulueta, "Two Artists, Two Ecologies, and a Shared Empathy towards Non-human Animals' Agencies: Yanagi Yukinori and Liang Shaoji," *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 3.3 (2016): 385.

More importantly, Liang seems to inscribe animal emotion into the making of the work, introducing an element that was not previously considered in silkworm's historical representations. Anthropomorphic behaviour is underpinned not by scientific knowledge, but by the intrinsic human need to relate with someone that is easily intelligible and that readily understands us. This may result in biased interpretations of the animal's actual state, often prejudiced by the human's need for a particular form of relationship, rather than an attempt to acknowledge and understand the animal's true emotions, motives, and goals. In Liang's making-process, silkworms not only exhibit behaviour but also demonstrate living with emotional intent.

Liang drew inspiration from witnessing a silkworm that, after falling from its perch, was suspended and ultimately saved by its own silk thread. He began to be curious about its feelings: "[...] had it panicked? Was it in danger?"<sup>403</sup> For Liang, this scene is "a moment when life hangs by a single thread, as those little worms climb with great determination along the filament secreted from their own glands, back up the trembling thread."<sup>404</sup> The empathy that the silkworm elicited in Liang enabled him to query the possibility of the silkworm's lived experience when positioned in a potentially unsafe and uncomfortable situation. His experiments with silkworms on metal chains made it obvious to Liang that "silkworms don't like metal."<sup>405</sup> Yet they "show a strong will to life, an unremitting life pursuit, a force to beat the strong with softness, and life associations with endless extension."<sup>406</sup> This recognition of the silkworm's emotional experience derived not only from Liang's observations and impersonal affects, but also

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<sup>403</sup> Liang, "About the "Nature Series," 44.

<sup>404</sup> Yang, "Pursuit for the Tao."

<sup>405</sup> Brouwer, "Cloud."

<sup>406</sup> Liang Shaoji, "Questioning Heaven as Measure-taking and Homecoming: Notes on Creating *Nature Series*," in *Preguntas al Cielo – Questioning Heaven*, eds., Tong Juanjuan, Liang Shaoji and Wang Xiaoyu (Beijing and Madrid: Gao Magee Gallery, 2012), 41.

from his personal experience of using his own body to encounter metals as part of his *Nature* project. Prior to producing *Chains*, Liang created *Nature Series No.25* in 1999 (fig. 47), where he walked barefoot on metal shavings to empathise with the experience of silkworms navigating across them. He describes the experience: “I didn’t expect it to be so incredibly painful. The smaller the shavings, the more painful they were. There was no way out, no way to escape the pain except to go forward until I reached the end of the courtyard.”<sup>407</sup> He went to hospital afterwards.

For Liang, the silkworms’ encounter with the metal chains shows softness overriding stiffness and alludes to the vulnerability and resilience of all life forms. This experience reveals the silkworm’s hardship and will to life as it is entangled with the chains, just like “any human being in distress who has no way to give up or to get out of the situation he is in, and still he has to go on living.”<sup>408</sup> This recalls Edward O. Wilson’s notion of “biophilia,” or the “love of life,” illustrating the “inborn affinity human beings have for other forms of life; an affiliation evoked, according to circumstances, by pleasure, or a sense of security, or awe, or even fascination blended with revulsion.”<sup>409</sup> Wilson posits that our biological makeup might enable deep connections between humans and other life forms, as well as with the natural world at large.

It seems that the silkworm’s survival and interdependence with the metal chains evoked a sense of awe in Liang. The artist seems to share the silkworm’s emotional experience in the making-process through phenomenological body perceptions, as if co-experiencing and co-transforming with the silkworm. Through his empathy with the

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<sup>407</sup> Brouwer, “Cloud.”

<sup>408</sup> Ibid.

<sup>409</sup> Edward O. Wilson, *Naturalist* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2006), 360–5.

silkworm's emotions, we see how the silkworm in Liang's making-process plays a significant role capable of affecting the artist through its emotional intention in association with its behaviour. The silkworm contains the agentic power to enact differently-constituted possibilities that actively co-constitute the emergence of the work, while eliciting affective and emotional experiences in the artist. Its status and meanings shift in the process of intra-acting with other agencies, unfolding changing phenomena, which accord with Ingram's call to escape the representationalist frame that always demonstrates fixed or determined features or characteristics of certain entities.

**v. An alternative ethical understanding in terms of the relationship between humans, non-humans, and more-than-humans**

The recognition of the silkworm's material signification beyond the representational invokes an ethics that respects the life of the silkworm. Showing respect for the life of the animal does not necessarily mean classifying it as an independent living being, but might refer to how animals can open up new insights into the relationship between the human and the non-human. The anthropocentric perspective prioritises humans as occupying the centre of the universe, and highlights the fundamental differences and privileges that humans have over non-humans. Thus, relationships with non-humans, including animals, the environment, artificial objects, and technological advancements, are mediated by human interests, agency, and opportunities.<sup>410</sup> Liang's work offers an alternative understanding of the animal as an expansive and affective force that cannot be reduced to a simplistic definition or categorisation. Through him, silkworms can fulfil their entire life cycle, avoiding the premature death during pupation common in

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<sup>410</sup> David Roden, "Posthumanism," *Philosophical Quarterly* 65 (261): 873–6.

the silk industry. He coexists with them, attunes to their needs, and directs the viewer's focus towards their existence. His aim is to foster empathy for the silkworms and broaden this empathy to encompass all living beings within their ecosystem. This aim of involving animals in his art is not in order to exploit their "immobility" but rather to encourage us "to respect, and [...] to reduce harm."<sup>411</sup> To Liang, caring about the silkworm "is like caring about life and human beings. Deep in our hearts, we shall not think ourselves superior to any other species in any way and shall respect all other creatures and take care of them."<sup>412</sup> This principle accords with Chinese Daoist philosophy, in which—as the philosopher Zhuang Zi submits—all beings must be treated equally. This forms the basis for achieving harmony in nature. Liang notes how his *Nature series* relates to Dao:

All matter is born with nature. The silkworm is also given its own nature. The creation of *Nature Series* is a process during which I come to understand, respect, make use of, and adapt the nature of silkworm. This course is mediated by the attempt to match with the natural world and to meditate ceaselessly in experiment and experience so that "physicality" or, in other words, the "object" is sublimed to "tao/way/path/doctrine/principle".<sup>413</sup>

In his creation, the silkworms play the role of vast and interrelated, complex and active agents, impacting on both the environment in which they are found and the artist who comes into contact with them there. This engagement of the silkworms as a dynamic force of transformation broadens the scope of acceptance, care, and respect for life beyond the constrained traditional configuration of the inherently privileged human, and shifts the emphasis away from a small field of human-centric values.

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<sup>411</sup> "Nature Series," *ECOARTASIA*.

<sup>412</sup> Brouwer, "Liang Shaoji Talk."

<sup>413</sup> Liang Shaoji, "Exploration and Meditation on 'Yuan' Notes on Creation of 'Siyuan' and 'Nature Series'," in *Liang Shaoji: Back to Origin* (Shanghai: ShanghART Gallery, 2014), IX.

What's more, it is not only the artist himself that incorporates a respect and love of the life of the animal in the making-process, but the work also invites a "touch" between the materials and the viewer that provokes a new ethics of respect and attention. On site, the work depicts a mystifying sort of life that is tantalisingly fleshy but distinct from the creatures or organic materials we typically come into contact with. This visceral experience brings to mind Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory of reciprocal relations between the human observer and the perceived object. Merleau-Ponty presents a novel concept of perception as a holistic, collaborative activity between the perceiving human body and its environment.<sup>414</sup> He views the perceiving body and its surroundings (the physical and material constitution of the world) as engaged in a mutual exchange he terms "flesh."<sup>415</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, this notion of perception rests on a shared materiality between objects in nature, including the human body, illustrating the dynamic interaction between our sensory selves and the external world that is being perceived.<sup>416</sup> His phenomenological theory of embodiment offers an alternate framework for thinking about how art-biology or art-ecology might explore the relationships between people and their environments through various modalities of perceptual interaction.

*Chains* embodies both ecological and phenomenological principles, suggesting that the artwork possesses vitality by enabling sensory engagement and actions from the viewer. Their interaction with the piece becomes a dynamic form of collaboration, enhancing their likelihood of feeling a direct, unmediated connection with the artwork through the

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<sup>414</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans., Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern, 1968).

<sup>415</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>416</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

physical remnants of its creation and the tangible qualities of the surrounding space. The textured and ambiguous silk-metal hybrid contains a strong lifelike quality, conveying a tactility that prompts the viewer to imagine the sensations of touching and being touched by it. As discussed above, these coarse and heavy chains coated in soft, light silk allude to the biological process of the silkworm's effort to wrap the chains to viscerally engage the viewer. The work thus transforms the gallery into a space where the viewer's sensory responses are heightened, inviting them into a visceral and immersive exploration of the biological sciences through aesthetic appreciation. Liang also discusses the meanings of his artworks beyond the frame of representationalism:

In my opinion, installation artists often make a certain mistake: they think 'this is what material A symbolises and this what B symbolises' and then they put them together and add their symbolic meanings together. It is wrong to put materials together to get a compound meaning. The encounter of different materials is not  $1 + 1 = 2$ , but rather a fantastic biochemical reaction. The artist's mission is to discover and activate this miracle, or to create a field within which the miracle will occur.<sup>417</sup>

As can be seen in *Chains*, wrapping hardness and phlegmatic sterility in ease or softness (fig. 42 and 43) guides the viewer to imagine prospects grounded in biology and ecology. The work creates a reciprocal relationship between the viewer and its constructed lived environment. The ensuing experience hints at a fleshy band of contact between the artist, the viewer, and objects from the realm of biological science, akin to a connective tissue of interaction.

The viewer's embodied perception of this work may motivate them to become more sensory and explorative in their interactions with the biological sciences and their natural environment. The remnant of a silkworm's life and its accumulation of power

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<sup>417</sup> Yang, "Pursuit of the Tao."

exposes a condition of firm belief, and viewer are likely to organise their empathic responses concurrently with intellectual or rational interpretations. This process of visual perception and knowledge-acquisition creates opportunities for investigating and obfuscating the boundaries between humans and other animals, emphasising the dangers of anthropocentrism and the potential for more mindful approaches to preserving our planet in the future. As such, the work's empathic element evokes the perception that every living thing, no matter how small (insects) or large (the entire world), is deserving of the same respect, care, and protection.

**vi. A potential critical response to the real world**

However, one may think that Liang's respectful and caring sense for the silkworms is based on an illusory or utopian hybridisation, and that its human and non-human entanglements diverge from the represented world. Indeed, aligning this artistic realm with the actual world and sparking a critique on ethical issues and Anthropocene dilemmas appears challenging. I argue that the material constructions in Liang's work produce more of a kind of "storyworld" or "possible worlds," as proposed by Marie-Laure Ryan. It is more reminiscent of a place with physical rules, biological characters, functionality based on execution, and one can cognitively decide on its socio-moral principles based on skills.<sup>418</sup> As Ewelina Twardoch-Raś puts it, in bioart it "is possible for the story to take place in a hermetically closed space of a laboratory's incubators or bioreactors," as the biological materials can "develop, multiply, and transform in it, then formed to be autonomous creatures—the protagonists of the story."<sup>419</sup> Twardoch-

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<sup>418</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan, "Story/Worlds/Media: Tuning the Instruments of a Media-Conscious Narratology," in *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, eds., Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 33–7.

<sup>419</sup> Ewelina Twardoch-Raś, "Non-human Actors in Their "Strongly Possible Worlds," Constructions of Alternative Universes in Bio Art Projects," *Przegląd Kulturoznawczy* 40.2 (2019): 164.

Raś holds that the outcomes within such a storyworld are not predetermined by foundational rules or components. Instead, narration arises through intensely stimulating incentives, such as confrontation with the body “put” before us; contact with shapes that make us uncomfortable, or through simulation of a different form of temporality, rather than sequential verbal determinants.<sup>420</sup> This is the world that hovers between fact and fiction, within which hypotheses are not formed from textual clues but from specific physical conditions (such as temperature, air composition, pressure) and particular physical circumstances.<sup>421</sup>

As the viewer engages with *Chains*, they encounter a “possible universe” that aligns with, and makes sense in relation to, the real world, yet is not confined by it.<sup>422</sup> The feasibility and accessibility of this “possible world” in relation to our actual reality hinge not only on logical principles but also on the constraints imposed by physical laws and material cause-and-effect relationships.<sup>423</sup> These factors determine the compatibility of an imagined world with tangible reality.

*Chains* inscribes its own causality, logic, and material actuality, detached and different from the normal perception of the silkworm’s lived environment. Liang’s creative laboratory exploration is part of a scientific infrastructure that seeks to explore biotechnological possibilities beyond our ample sericulture-informed knowledge of the silkworm’s biological abilities. The work is created through the interobjective relations

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<sup>420</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>421</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>422</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>423</sup> Ibid., 167.

between the silkworm and the organic silk, chains, and even the artist himself during certain procedures—such as experiments and changes in temperature. This process involves not only the cognitive act, but it also retains its material and empirical status, such as the life cycle and specific biological activities of the silkworms, and the artist’s methods and environmental controls.

In this sense, Liang’s creation is more akin to what Francesca Ferrando describes as “a radical onto-existential re-signification of being,” which is not totally separate from the real world, but remains performative, embodied, and physically connected to reality through its ongoing variation in biotechnological experiments and procedures.<sup>424</sup> The hybrid structure of *Chains* resides in the realm of what is ontologically feasible, leading to a different kind of speculation about reality. For the viewer, it triggers an embodied response of awe and respect, which is not a mere fantasy in a fictional world devoid of values or meanings. Rather, this embodied experience has the potential to evoke real socio-political criticism by making the viewer reconsider lived bodily existence within the work’s material phenomena, which constructs a variational version of the world that questions the conditions necessary for life’s sustenance and existence. In an interview with Gladston, Liang is questioned about his long and frequent stays by the sea, far from the city, and it is suggested that his lifestyle is akin to that of Chinese intellectuals of the past, who chose to become “hermits” in their old age.<sup>425</sup> Liang, however, denies wanting to be “a hermit living on the mountain totally isolated from the world,” asserting that his works are not fully interpretable through that lens.<sup>426</sup>

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<sup>424</sup> Francesca Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 178–81.

<sup>425</sup> Gladston, “A Conversation.”

<sup>426</sup> *Ibid.*

## Conclusion

Here, in conclusion, we may detect that Liang's artistic intention seems to occupy a blurry in-between space that exists partly autonomously from, but still accessible to, the real world. The lives and silks of the silkworms mark a forceful agency that can embody an ideal, positioning them as central connectors in a dynamic network that diminishes the boundaries between humans and animals, the natural world and civilisation, and art and life, creating the possibility for some form of ethicality to be put into practise. Moving beyond the "dialectics of otherness" fostered by bio-capitalism, Liang's work stages the ontogenetic potentials of the animal–human relation, linked in a shared materiality, opening new spaces for thinking, perceiving, and relating to a more-than-human agency, and how it is enmeshed with the human subject's becoming.<sup>427</sup>

While this chapter, along with all other chapters discussed thus far, delve into material-discursive practices in art that all reveal a critical response to the dualist ontology by redirecting focus away from traditional systemic or structural "explanations" of societal and cultural dynamics towards the specific interactions—or more precisely intra-actions—that occur within events. Viewed through a New Materialist ontological perspective, these chapters reconceptualise art not as the outcome of fixed hierarchical structures, mechanisms, or systems but rather as dynamic "events"—an ongoing confluence of material effects of both nature and culture that co-shape the artworks' becoming and being. These case studies promote an understanding of art's materiality as inherently autopoietic and performative, entwined with complex interactions that dispute traditional views of human autonomy and intentionality as misconceived, and

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<sup>427</sup> Braidotti, "Posthuman Humanities," 68.

instead align with the genuine intricacies of ecological and cognitive-biological processes.

The next two chapters—while also embodying themes of processuality, agency, and a rejection of reductive dualism in critical response to the dualist ontology within dynamic interactions—pivot towards a focus of how Material Art can act as a pathway back to engaging with the materiality of life and struggle, moving beyond overt political narratives or the contentious dimensions of socio-political contexts. This shift is inspired by the contributions of prominent New Materialist thinkers—including postcolonial scholars, feminists, and queer theorists—who have embraced New Materialism as a framework that is deeply rooted in material embodiment, aimed at both understanding and positively transforming the social world. Unlike poststructuralism and social constructionism, which has often created a chasm between theory and practice through a focus on textuality and discourse, New Materialism calls for a re-engagement with the tangible aspects of life, advocating for a perception of the world as inherently contextual and relational, rather than absolute and essential.

## Chapter 5

### Affect and Critical Inquiry: Lin Tianmiao's *The Proliferation of Thread Winding*

This chapter, together with Chapter 6, aims to join forces with a broader array of allies surrounding art's materialities, to uncover the ways in which Material Art can illuminate the subtleties of human engagement with materials in everyday life. It critiques the limitations and inherent risks of conventional productive engagements with materials, advocating for an engagement that is more direct, affective, and ontologically rooted, as opposed to conventional representational knowledge approaches. This perspective is motivated by New Materialism's call for a return to the material itself and its efficacy in social relations. Levi Bryant emphasises the diminishing visibility of physical entities, noting how it has veiled the influential role of entities in social relations. He states, "an entire domain of power became invisible, and as a result we lost all sorts of opportunities for strategic intervention in producing emancipatory change."<sup>428</sup> This oversight, which overlooks the mutual influence of tangible things in shaping our socio-political and biological landscapes, also constrains discussions on art's potential to engage with societal issues within a politicised framework, necessitating a re-evaluation that recognises the agency of human and non-human actors within the confines of patriarchal capitalism.

Focusing on New Materialist perspectives on objects, art practices might offer pathways to understanding broader power relations, recognising the complex structures of power dispersed through continuous intra-actions between human and non-human agencies, rather than attributing it solely to a unified, intentional human action. Using

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<sup>428</sup> Levi R. Bryant, *Onto-cartography* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 3.

Lin Tianmiao's (born 1961) installation *The Proliferation of Thread Winding* (1995, fig. 12) as a lens of examination, this chapter foregrounds "affect" as one of the methods to re-engage with the materiality of life and struggle, highlighting "knowing in being" practices that prioritise experiential and bodily sensing. This approach, which suggests that affective processes occur before conscious thought and reflection,<sup>429</sup> is applied to Lin's *The Proliferation of Thread Winding* to promote a deeper understanding of bodily and corporeal life aspects in people's daily productive activities—particularly in activities that shape cultural or artistic norms, fashions, tastes, and consumer standards. This focus is especially relevant within the context of domestic handicraft, which is often associated with experiences of violence and trauma due to the repetitive, labour-intensive nature of these tasks and the historical context of exploitation and oppression that has often accompanied them.

Lin's *The Proliferation of Thread Winding* displays a bed covered with a cotton mattress and rice paper, at the centre of which twenty thousand needles, linked to individual hand-bound balls of white cotton thread, envelop the space in an ethereal spread. A monitor covered with a sheet of thin rice paper is placed upon the pillowcase, on the bed, displaying a video of the artist endlessly and repetitively thread winding (fig. 48). The whole work represents an intense laborious engagement with cotton thread, in accordance with traditional winding crafts, embedded in an abundant repetition of visual forms.

As one of the most illustrious female artists in contemporary Chinese art, Lin is particularly acclaimed for her intricate practices with cotton thread, a practice she has

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<sup>429</sup> McCormack, "Stratified Reproduction," 660–79.

kept up ever since her first work, *The Proliferation of Thread Winding*. The work was first created and exhibited at the *Women's Approach to Contemporary Art* exhibition at Beijing Art Museum in 1995, and it has been repeatedly exhibited at various locations in China between 1995 and 2020, including a solo exhibition at Open Studio, Baofang Hutong 12#, Beijing, 1995; the *Civil Power* exhibition, Minsheng Art Museum, 2015, and the exhibition *2020+*, Red Brick Art Museum, Beijing, 2020.<sup>430</sup> This chapter will focus closely on the earliest and most representative version (which was also the first work in which Lin started to use cotton thread in art) created for the *Women's Approach to Contemporary Art* exhibition, which is also the version discussed by Wu Hung in the Introduction of the catalogue of *The Allure of Matter*.<sup>431</sup>

Lin's *Thread Winding* has received much attention in feminist discourse, with many scholars—including Liao Wen, Catherine Dormor and Shuqin Cui—considering the works as metaphors for the domestic servitude that typically determines women's lives.<sup>432</sup> Their interpretations draw attention to the symbolic manifestations embedded in the act of winding, and in textiles and domestic objects—techniques and materials often associated with “women's work” within certain Western feminist critiques of women's art. These overtly theoretical interpretations, which hastily translate the visual language of Lin's work into conceptual understandings of narratives of passive female experiences in the domestic realm, fail to properly observe what is happening within

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<sup>430</sup> The version exhibited at Open Studio, Baofang Hutong 12#, Beijing in 1995 is a bit different from the others, as it included a suspended man's white trousers made of rice paper, hung from the roof, with another side linking to the floor, intertwining with balls of cotton thread.

<sup>431</sup> Wu, “An Introduction,” in *The Allure of Matter*, 22–3.

<sup>432</sup> Liao Wen, *Women's Approach to Chinese Contemporary Art* (Beijing: Beijing Art Museum, 1995); Catherine Dormor, “The Arts of Urgency: Textile Practices and Truth-telling,” *Hidden Stories/Human Lives: Proceedings of the Textile Society of America 17th Biennial Symposium*. Oct 15–17, 2020; Cui Shuqin, *Gendered Bodies: Toward a Women's Visual Art in Contemporary China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015).

the artwork itself. This work consists of complex juxtapositions and interrelations of domestic and textile elements that do not invite an immediate understanding of the artwork's meaning. Indeed, such a reading may inadvertently tether Lin's art to stereotypically gendered understandings of the material itself, and risks reducing the artwork to symbolic allusions to gender expression and representation.

This picture neglects the fact that the work primarily produces a strong visual effect of an unusual scene in which the commonplace objects of cotton thread, needles, and bed are transformed into complex, conflicting, repetitive, knotting textures, evoking an indefinable or even uncanny sense of the theatrical and the grotesque. When viewing *Thread Winding*, one can hardly identify a single clear, finite line of cotton thread. The work conveys a strong sense of work-in-process, although the textile objects and the bed are in fact in a static state. This sense of mid-process is further heightened by the work's title, *The Proliferation of Thread Winding*, which suggests a dynamic or dramatic scene in which the materials of cotton thread are in the process of "proliferating." In addition, the video displayed on the pillow also serves to remind the viewer of the artist's hard laborious process of thread winding, through which the spread of balls was formed. In this context, the work primarily draws the viewer into a kind of theatrical event in its entirety.

*Thread Winding* seems to place greater emphasis on the interrelation between materials and action in a continuous, phenomenal flow, rather than directing the viewer's focus to individual objects or a definitive subject. The artwork serves as an energetic and lively art assemblage, comprising video, needles, balls of thread, and a bed. These elements synergise to materially generate a phenomenological impact, actively

engaging the viewer's senses and fostering a visceral understanding of the work's production, thereby infusing the materials with a sense of energy and potential that animates the overall experience. As Peggy Wang notes, Lin's work conveys an immediate and sensuous encounter: "what appears at first to be a soft layer of fur in the bed is revealed to be thousands of piercing needles, leading the viewer to swing wildly from tactile curiosity to surprise and perhaps event trepidation."<sup>433</sup> To immediately interpret the work as essentialising femininity, based upon ideas that have simply been borrowed from Western feminist concepts, which have been shaped by the distinct historical and cultural experiences of gender politics in the Western hemisphere, would be to oversimplify the meaning of this work. Doing so would bypass the rich and actual complexities of the displayed work itself, and the nuanced interplay of form, action, and the varied affective responses that these materialities give rise to.

Moving beyond the gendered lens of interpreting Lin's art, which primarily relies on symbolic and metaphorical analyses of its visual representation, I argue that Lin's work may be understood from the standpoint of its vibrant materialities and the affective responses they inspire. For New Materialist scholars such as Bennett, materials are not merely obstacles to human intentions but can "act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own."<sup>434</sup> Matter, according to this perspective, should be understood "not in terms of what it *is*, but in terms of what it *does*: what associations it makes, what capacities it has to affect its relations or to be affected by them, what consequences derive from these interactions."<sup>435</sup> Bennett

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<sup>433</sup> Peggy Wang, *The Future History of Contemporary Chinese Art* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 131.

<sup>434</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, viii.

<sup>435</sup> Fox and Alldred, "Inside the Research-Assemblage," 24.

highlights affect as an instance of “material vibrancy,” generating a dynamic “field of forces” that does not necessarily animate a physical form.<sup>436</sup> This viewpoint encourages an acknowledgment of the affective qualities of materials that link humans to both their physical surroundings and their social contexts, which, according to Ben Anderson, echo through human and non-human interactions alike, prefiguring and accompanying the formation of subjectivity.<sup>437</sup> Anderson emphasises that it is this interplay that constitutes the essence of affect, unfolding in the spaces between subject and object.<sup>438</sup>

The significance of materiality invoking affective responses is paramount in Lin’s work. The viewer, encountering a familiar textile in an unconventional visual context may experience a sense of the uncanny. This ambiguous psychological phenomenon, characterised by a tension between what is anticipated and unexpected; the familiar and the strange, is described as “not simply an experience of alienation but a commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar.”<sup>439</sup> The viewer’s cognitive understanding of the cotton threads and their typical uses is soon augmented by the realisation that, in this context, the materials are not used for their presumed function but are juxtaposed in a peculiar and interconnected scenario, showcasing effects of organic growth or radiating energy. This blending of the familiar and unfamiliar defines the uncanny experience.

By evoking feelings of ambivalence and unfamiliarity towards cotton thread, Lin’s work invites the viewer to engage with the artwork through a sensory experience rather than relying on established notions about the material. Lin does not reference traditional

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<sup>436</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xiii.

<sup>437</sup> Ben Anderson, “Affective Atmospheres,” *Emotion, Space and Society* 2.2 (2009): 77–81.

<sup>438</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>439</sup> Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 1.

domestic handiwork scenes, such as sewing and embroidery, or the final tangible products of textiles like cloth or gloves. Instead, Lin positions the material within a mythical, performative scenario that captivates the viewer with its intensely processed and displaced essence, guiding the viewer's focus to the ongoing process and igniting curiosity about the origins of the artwork's hybrid visual forms. Integrating the making-process into the sensory perception of the artwork, Lin accentuates the meticulous efforts involved in its production, promoting a performative comprehension of the artwork that emerges from the interplay between the artist's labour and the vibrant materials.

This chapter does not intend to argue that Lin's art lacks any meaning relating to female experience. Rather, it aims for a nuanced interpretation by exploring Lin's work and its making-process, featuring a non-representational version that emphasises a more direct and affective engagement, moving beyond traditional dualistic conceptualisations of representation that have typically contributed to the marginalisation of women. In particular, this affective engagement draws on the entanglement of the materials, and emerges in the encounter with the material-semiotic nature of the visitors' bodies, which, as described by Ruth Leys, "occurs independently of intention and meaning."<sup>440</sup>

It should be noted that the conceptualisation of "affect" is complex and varied, with no single definition agreed upon across different disciplines such as social sciences, humanities, and life sciences. There are various frameworks available for interpreting the affective domain—whether rooted in psychological, neurological, cultural, social, or philosophical perspectives—and different approaches exist regarding the preferred

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<sup>440</sup> Ruth Leys, "The Turn to Affect: A Critique," *Critical inquiry* 37.3 (2011): 437.

application of these frameworks. To provide a concise overview of the key commonalities within affect theory, one can refer to Ruth Leys's comprehensive analysis in "The Turn to Affect: A Critique," which highlights several critical questions regarding the empirical and conceptual foundations of the theories of affect that have emerged over the past decade in the sciences, critical humanities, and social sciences.<sup>441</sup> Leys's conceptualisation of "affect" is grounded in the Basic Emotions paradigm, a prevalent model stemming from the work of theorists like Paul Ekman and Silvan S. Tomkins. This paradigm is also advanced by authors such as Donald L. Nathanson in "The Nature of Therapeutic Impasse", Joseph LeDoux in "Emotional Networks and Motor Control: A Fearful View", and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*.<sup>442</sup>

While Leys primarily critiques affect theory's selective appropriation of the neurosciences, I would like to engage with one specific aspect of her work that helps explore the epistemological and ontological possibilities revealed through the affective operations of Lin's work. Leys argues that a fundamental connection between the critical theorists she examines and many contemporary psychologists and neuroscientists lies in their shared emphasis on the non-intentionality of affect, which in turn leads to a diminished valuation of cognition, meaning, and interpretation. Leys structures her conceptualisation of affect through a series of overarching binaries, such as "cognitive" vs. "non-cognitive" and "intentional" vs. "non-intentional." While these distinctions offer analytical clarity in her genealogy, they also present certain

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<sup>441</sup> Ibid.; see also Ruth Leys, *From Guilt to Shame: Auschwitz and After*, Vol. 8 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>442</sup> Donald L. Nathanson, "The Nature of Therapeutic Impasse," *Psychiatric Annals* 22.10 (1992): 509–13; Joseph LeDoux, "Emotional Networks and Motor Control: A Fearful View," *Progress in Brain Research* 107 (1996): 437–46; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

challenges. This framework may force key perspectives and scholars into one side of these binaries, limiting the exploration of how they might transcend or transform these distinctions in meaningful ways. As a result, this approach could lead to exaggerated analytical claims and overly reductive critiques of various perspectives. For instance, by categorising affect theory as fundamentally “non-cognitive” and “non-intentional,” she portrays its proponents as aiming to “get rid of the notion of meaning or belief or intention or interpretation altogether.”<sup>443</sup>

While I recognise that Leys’s broad claims might reflect philosophical and political concerns about the diminishing authority of “reasoned argument,” rather than accurately representing the current state of affect and emotion studies, the aim of this chapter is not to conduct an exhaustive analysis of affect by stripping away cognition, intentionality, or meaning from Lin’s artwork. Instead, my intention is to maintain flexibility in the discussion, avoiding any premature limitations or rigid regulations on the creative, critical, and political possibilities that engaging with affect can offer. I also want to refrain from quickly categorising Lin’s work as feminist art or not.

This chapter aligns more with the shared emphasis on the non-intentionality of affect, as summarised by Leys, which considers affect as a kind of “rapid, phylogenetically old, automatic responses of the organism that have evolved for survival purposes and lack the cognitive characteristics of the higher-order mental processes.”<sup>444</sup> Affect is to be understood as involuntary, unconscious bodily responses, and importantly, there is a discernible disconnect between the causes of affect and our personal interpretation of

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<sup>443</sup> Ruth Leys, *The Ascent of Affect: Genealogy and Critique* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 345.

<sup>444</sup> Leys, “The Turn to Affect,” 473.

these causes.<sup>445</sup> Affect thus emerge from the immediacy of an experience, the contingency of an encounter, prompting a reflexive cognitive engagement, rather than being a product of deliberate thought processes. However, thinking through an affective lens does not negate or diminish the importance of human interpretation or cognition of an artwork. Instead, it offers an alternative way to rethink critical inquiry arising from the artwork in more relational, speculative, and processual ways. I highlight how a perspective on affective operations in Lin's work could prompt a reconsideration of human experience in relation to the networks of material components involved in the making and display of her art, which operate predominantly, if not entirely, outside the familiar scope of everyday human interactions with materials and their typical appearance and usage.

A turn to the perspective of affective operations articulated in Lin's work allows us to navigate past the impasse encountered by the feminist reliance on representational thinking. It encourages the development of novel critiques that are not based on adversarial models but that instead advocate for inventive alliances, fostering thinking within the realm of continuity and interconnection. Indeed, Lin herself has on several occasions rejected feminist readings of her works,<sup>446</sup> stressing instead the experiential process of making, her ambivalent feelings towards this process, and the lack of an intentional final, culminating expression in her work: "Perhaps it is only six months or a year after you produce a work that you understand why you did it, and what you were trying to say. If you know beforehand then why would you go to the trouble of making

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<sup>445</sup> Ibid.

<sup>446</sup> See, e.g., Lin Tianmiao, "Recap: Meet the Artist: Lin Tianmiao," interviewed by Barbara Pollack. Jan 12, 2021, accessed March 6, 2024. <https://www.chinainstitute.org/recap-meet-the-artist-lin-tianmiao-1-12-21/>.

it?”<sup>447</sup>

This chapter draws particular attention to the psychological and cultural implications of handicraft, especially within the context of cotton production, and analyses how Lin’s thread binding process and her unique assembly of materials in the installation redefines the relationship between the craftsperson and the textile material, providing a critical response to the processes and experiences of traditional cotton handicraft. Traditional crafts, which typically require efficiency and focus on a specific end product, demand substantial physical and mental endurance, driven by the craftsperson’s aspiration to achieve a set goal. In contrast, Lin’s approach elevates cotton thread from its utilitarian role in these handicrafts, where it was an inert element valued within a broader socio-economic context for its ideological implications. In the creation and perception of *The Proliferation of Thread Winding*, by contrast, cotton thread evokes vitality and relationality with other material components or human agents. The threads actively participate in affective processes, fostering embodied, situated, and relational experiences among humans, including the artist during the making-process, and the viewer engaging with the work. In particular, I reveal how the work prompts the viewer to engage in critical inquiry in response to experiences or emotions of violence or trauma, elicited through an indescribable “force” that inhabits the exhibition space and fosters a more embodied, relational, and processual encounter with the artwork, rather than through intentional, pre-assumed thoughts that arise immediately upon the viewer’s encounter with the piece.

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<sup>447</sup> Karen Smith, *Lin Tianmiao: Non Zero* (Beijing: Timezone 8, 2004), 21.

**i. Historical cotton handicraft production and Lin's personal experience with traditional craft**

The work's emphasis on the processual and performative nature of cotton thread contrasts with the traditional crafting technique and role of textiles in China. Traditional handicraft emphasises efficient productivity with the aim to produce a predefined, finished product. The process of making the textile requires both physical and psychological stamina, along with the craftsperson's desire or motivation to achieve a specific outcome. The craftsperson's continuous attention, judgement, measurements, and dexterity towards the material attributes allow their body and mind to learn about the material and its possibilities. However, the bodily and psychological experiences that emerge during the making-process are finally largely absorbed by the end product. The finished product functions much like a utilitarian object, without signs of acknowledgement of its making-process or material transformations. The skilled labouring process is largely deemed as a means of production, and the textile materials act simply as tools.

Lin has had a personal relation to traditional craft-making since childhood. As a young girl, she helped her mother to sew and make clothes, using white cotton threads as part of her everyday housework, which recalls the special role that cotton has played in the domestic sphere in Chinese history. Cotton was introduced to China from India as early as 200 B.C..<sup>448</sup> Since silk and ramie filament manufacturing was already thriving in China, cotton textiles did not originally attain a wide appeal, and its manufacture was restricted to the western and southern border regions.<sup>449</sup> Cotton textile manufacture did

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<sup>448</sup> Kang Chao, *The Development of Cotton Textile Production in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 1977), 4.

<sup>449</sup> *Ibid.*, 4–27.

not extend to mainland China until about one thousand years later, when the cotton revolution began around 1300.<sup>450</sup> The growth of massive-scale manufacturing and interchange of cotton textiles was facilitated by the introduction of more sophisticated spinning and weaving technology, together with an already established trading network across China.<sup>451</sup> The use of specific hues, high-quality weaving, and embroidery were crucial for identifying the worth of the textiles.<sup>452</sup> Contrary to silk textiles, which were routinely produced in factories, cotton textile fabrication remained a small-scale handicraft production, mostly undertaken by individual rural families under the “domestic industry system,” which kept its importance in China well beyond the introduction of foreign cotton goods following the Opium War of 1840–1842, and the creation of modern cotton mills towards the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>453</sup>

Since cotton textile manufacturing depended on family unity, it fell mostly on women. These female labourers utilised every spare moment to spin, weave, and sew fabrics.<sup>454</sup> Women's economic situation strengthened significantly as a result of their preference for handicraft production, as they made cotton fabrics at home and sold them in local, regional, and national marketplaces.<sup>455</sup> As a result, during the course of more than five hundred years, female income was extremely high. Home-based production techniques, underperforming labour markets, and a taxation system implemented by the

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<sup>450</sup> Ibid.

<sup>451</sup> Ibid.

<sup>452</sup> Ibid., 28–55.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid.

<sup>454</sup> Melanie Meng Xue, “Cotton Textile Production in Medieval China Unraveled Patriarchy,” *Aeon*, June 27, 2018, accessed March 6, 2024. <https://aeon.co/ideas/cotton-textile-production-in-medieval-china-unravelling-patriarchy>.

<sup>455</sup> Melanie Meng Xue, “High-Value Work and the Rise of Women: The Cotton Revolution and Gender Equality in China,” *SSRN*, Nov 1, 2016, accessed March 6, 2024. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2389218>.

government helped keep women's income high.<sup>456</sup> Women collaborated in large family units and, as in many traditional communities, weaving techniques and looms were passed down through the generations.<sup>457</sup>

Since 1949's establishment of the People's Republic of China, party leaders initially envisioned socialism as a speedy transition to collective—and subsequently state-owned and controlled—production (including cotton production) and commercialisation.<sup>458</sup> By 1954, as state control over buying and selling all types of goods intensified, local rural markets disintegrated, leaving households unable to generate income from the sale of women's handiwork.<sup>459</sup> The PRC's official discourses did not legitimise the labour involved in producing cotton textiles; instead, it was seen as a trivial home task.<sup>460</sup> Concurrently, a centralised rationing system allowed individuals to access limited quantities of state-manufactured fabric at relatively low prices.<sup>461</sup> Nevertheless, millions of women continued to spend most of their days manually crafting cotton textiles.<sup>462</sup> Jacob Eyferth's study on women's labour in socialist China identifies the persistence of rural gender roles that burden women with extensive domestic tasks, including clothing production, and a gift economy requiring cloth exchanges at significant life events.<sup>463</sup> Additionally, pervasive bureaucratic shortages (of cotton, clothing, cash, and grain) compelled rural inhabitants to sell their clothing rations and make their own, thus preserving the tradition of handicraft textile

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<sup>456</sup> Ibid.

<sup>457</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>458</sup> Ibid., 39–40.

<sup>459</sup> Gail Hershatter, "Women and China's Socialist Construction, 1949–78," *The Asia Pacific Journal* 17.12 (2019): 12.

<sup>460</sup> Jacob Eyferth, "Women's Work and the Politics of Homespun in Socialist China, 1949–1980," *International Review of Social History* 57.3 (2012): 366.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid.

<sup>462</sup> Ibid., 365.

<sup>463</sup> Ibid., 366–7.

production.<sup>464</sup>

In particular, Sun Yunfan notes the distinct significance of cotton thread for those who lived through the sixties and seventies in China, “when Chinese economic central planning was at its height.”<sup>465</sup> Women were expected to weave cotton textiles for their families to maintain respectability, secure favourable marriages for their children, and partake in the customary exchanges that knit communities together.<sup>466</sup> White cotton gloves were issued to employees in state-owned “work units,”<sup>467</sup> and these were valuable commodities “because in the hands of a skilful wife, the thread from a pair of socialist worker’s gloves could be unwound, washed, and knitted into charming xiaozi, ‘petit bourgeoisie’ things: sweaters, hats, doilies and table cloths, sofa throws, or curtains.”<sup>468</sup> In these contexts, cotton thread is endowed with utilitarian qualities necessary for domestic tasks and is positioned as a functional object within an overarching socioeconomic framework that dictates its use as a tool to exhibit ideological conformity. Consequently, the intrinsic value of cotton thread as a material, as well as the nuanced interactions between the craftsperson and the material during the craftmaking process, are often overlooked. This diminishes recognition of the thread’s material value and the artisanal skill and accompanying experiences involved.

## ii. The vital cotton threads in process

Lin’s work subverts the role of cotton thread and the value of the handiwork process—both of which have traditionally been absorbed by the value of the finished textile

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<sup>464</sup> Ibid.

<sup>465</sup> Sun Yunfan, “Wrapped Up: An Interview with Lin Tianmiao,” *ChinaFile*, Sep 24, 2012, accessed March 6, 2024. <https://www.chinafile.com/wrapped-interview-lin-tianmiao>.

<sup>466</sup> Eyferth, “Women’s Work,” 387.

<sup>467</sup> Yunfan, “Wrapped Up.”

<sup>468</sup> Ibid.

product—by highlighting the physical presence of the textile’s becoming-process. The self-contained autonomous subject is hardly detectable in her work. The material components are presented in a material flux, in mutual entanglement. The spread-out balls of thread connect with the threads as though in the working, unfinished state of production. This contrived, “unfinished” form of the thread, displayed in its thousands, provokes a sensuously bound effect of a repetitive continuum in which the dynamic process of the threads is never-ending. Differently from textile commodities by which materials are always transformed into a finalised, concrete shape, effacing signs of process, the cotton threads in *Thread Winding* appear as dynamic entities that are themselves performative and suggestive of an ongoing processual vitality. This recalls Bennett’s concept of “vital materialism”—briefly mentioned in the introduction to this chapter—which highlights how all matter has the capacity to produce effects and “to give voice to a vitality intrinsic to materiality, [and] in the process absolving matter from its long history of attachment to automatism or mechanism.”<sup>469</sup> Bennett thinks that inert matter possesses a forceful power of life, as it is capable of influencing both the surroundings it occupies and the other materialities with which it is intimately related. This notion of “vibrant matter” in terms of self-organising systems where matter itself possesses vitality and animation expands the possibilities of human experience and the ways in which the affective realm can function among things, humans, and environments.

The cotton threads in Lin’s work reveal a theatrical and performative effect, as if the work is the result of the cotton threads’ self-growth, or their breaking out from the centre of the bed by some kind of mystical infinite power. Although the actual art

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<sup>469</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 3.

objects on display remain static, the material effect is as though the cotton threads are still moving or growing without reaching an end. This processual, moving quality in Lin's *Thread Winding* does not correspond with any specific physical substance, nor is it predicated on what the human mind imagines it to be; rather, it is rather an actual, physical force in and of itself that appears to affect the viewer's body unexpectedly.

Indeed, the emphasis on continuous process over the fixed end product is straightforwardly evident in Lin's video (fig. 48), which enacts an ongoing process of intertwining thread. The video shows a close-up of the artist's handiwork of winding thread against a white wrinkled cotton cloth, and is filmed at a fixed angle. It includes no views of other body parts or background elements. Instead, it appears that only one central narrative is illustrated in the video, namely the exclusive and repetitive gesture of the singular act of winding thread into a ball. There is no start- or endpoint in the video, just a loop of this singular winding-gesture. The continuous repetition seems infinite and unmotivated, devoid of any desire to reach an end. The process of winding itself thus becomes the central subject of the video. Its endless and ongoing repetition can be seen as an act for the sake of the labour, within which the labour pertains to its own value, no longer rely on achieving an outcome. In this sense, Lin's act is less productive and more ritualised and meditative. The once purposeful and adjustment-intensive task of textile creation is now reimagined as an exercise in reflexive consciousness, attuned to the continuous physical and self-referential process.

It is this kind of undefined laborious process that allows the cotton thread to gain its own authority. In Lin's relentless intertwining, the cotton thread embodies a concept similar to Barad's notion of "inherent ontological indeterminacy," which blurs the lines

between human actor and object, and human agency is seen as transitory and interconnected with the object, rather than aiming to shape it into a predetermined form or shape. Here, the artist is not a creative master with self-determined motivations that is fully intentional and determinable to the art object of cotton thread. The artist has to control and adapt to the ever-changing appearance of the ball of thread in order to ensure the thread is uniformly wrapped into a ball shape. Her action is guided by evolving physical qualities while she is also mobilising her next gesture. Central to the subjectivity of this process lies the mutable and intertwined occurrences that unfold between the artist's engagement and the thread's dynamics. The cotton thread transcends its common status as a mere mechanical or responsive material under the artist's direction; instead, it becomes a dynamic, living presence, forming a vital bond with the artist and actively influencing the making-process.

### **iii. The affective agency of cotton thread**

Through activating the processual indeterminacy between the artist and the cotton thread, Lin showcases and confronts her sensuously bound experiences. One may think that Lin's activation of the vitality of cotton thread provokes a nostalgic longing for a historical past of a traditional textile culture that has overlooked the value of textile materials and its making-process. Nowadays, the rapidly changing social and economic environment in China has rendered craft-making techniques obsolete, and industrially mass-produced objects provide our everyday necessities. In this context, the re-enactment of traditional craft-making may be considered an act of healing from and avoidance of contemporary modern life. However, this interpretation of Lin's sensory engagement is based on a kind of anthropological understanding of the meaning of cotton thread that anchors the role of the artist as central and determining in the artwork,

compatible with Alfred Gell's description of art objects as "indexes of agency" that embody the intentionality of the human subject.<sup>470</sup> This view conceives of the art object as being endowed with value and meaning by human agency, without any productive agential force of its own.

I argue that Lin's sensuous attachment emerges in her work through an un-prescribed process of thread-winding. Drawing on Barad's onto-epistemology, Estelle Barrett provides an interpretation of the relationship between mind and body, affect and embodiment in practice-based art by proposing a kind of affective indeterminacy of materially-embodied experience.<sup>471</sup> She claims that the ambiguous and indeterminate status of art has the potential to create a dynamic interplay between material forces and human action, where the material agency has the transformative power of articulating sensation and affect in the body of the subjective agent.<sup>472</sup> The unspecificity of the cotton thread without a particular motivated process, however, affords it affective agency. When this kind of affective agency is repeatedly entangled with the labouring body over time, it affects the artist, raising her painful and confronting bodily intensities and intuitions. There is no particular visual or aesthetic enjoyment or curiosity to encounter in the effort of thread-winding. In order to convey a stable scene and the phenomenon of winding thread into a ball, Lin would persevere, patiently and continuously adjust, but remain with the same action over a long period of time. The gesture is simple, but becomes a demanding task over time.

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<sup>470</sup> Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (London: Clarendon Press, 1998), 14–15.

<sup>471</sup> Estelle Barrett, "Materiality, Language and the Production of Knowledge," *New Materialisms IV: Movement, Aesthetics, Ontology: Conference Proceedings*, New Materialisms Conference, 2013.

<sup>472</sup> *Ibid.*

In a discussion on the evolution of craft, Glenn Adamson highlights a shift in focus within contemporary craft from purely technical skill to also include the concepts of labor and obsession.<sup>473</sup> This perspective does not diminish the value of skill inherent in traditional crafts but rather expands the discourse to include a broader spectrum of practices that integrate deep engagement with materials and processes. Such views are further explored in *Sloppy Craft: Postdisciplinarity and the Crafts* edited by Elaine Cheasley Paterson and Susan Surette, which brings together leading international artists and critics to discuss the concept of “sloppy craft.”<sup>474</sup> This book challenges traditional distinctions by emphasising how contemporary practices often blur the lines between meticulous skill and intense, sometimes chaotic, engagement with craft. It focuses on the “sloppiness” in execution or appearance as a deliberate artistic strategy.<sup>475</sup> Such discussions open the field to a broader understanding of material engagement where, as seen in Lin’s work, the physical and affective investment transforms mundane acts into profound experiential statements. Lin’s practice involves both an immersive act of intensive labour and endurance, as well as maintaining of the traditional technique of thread winding. This maintaining is not to emphasise technical proficiency, nor to celebrate the pure state of the machinations of labour, but serves, rather, to crystallise one specific stage in the whole textile-making process. When transferring the commonplace into the extreme through longstanding repetition during which the cotton thread and the artist’s body are ceaselessly entangled, Lin embodies a kind of sensuous experience of “corporal punishment” associated with the act of thread winding. Lin thinks that many women encounters this form of “corporal punishment” in their daily

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<sup>473</sup> Glenn Adamson, *The Craft Reader* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2010), 586–857.

<sup>474</sup> Elaine Cheasley Paterson and Susan Surette, ed., *Sloppy Craft: Postdisciplinarity and the Crafts* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015).

<sup>475</sup> *Ibid.*

domestic tasks—tasks traditionally seen as mundane yet requiring significant physical and emotional investment.<sup>476</sup> Should she escape this situation, a new form of “corporal punishment” would emerge.<sup>477</sup>

The once-changing psychological experiences (of care, judgement, and dexterity) normally associated with traditional craft-making are here replaced with sensuously bound visceral experiences of tedious, or even tormented, evocations through Lin’s time-consuming and repetitive labour. Here, Lin’s initiative is to engage in a kind of painstaking self-experiential process, where the material—in this instance cotton thread—has the ability to reactivate sediments of sensuously-engaged housework activities of the past, which erupt into the present through physical and affective impacts on the artist.

This painstaking sensuous experience is also embodied in the process of installing the needles and branches of cotton threads during which the artist and the materials are in entangled and co-constitutive relationships. The work consists of threads linking twenty thousand steel needles to twenty thousand balls of cotton thread. Setting up the installation would obviously have been a tough and demanding task. The needles and cotton threads are not placed altogether at once, but installed individually, separately and repetitively. The needles are placed at the same angle, one after another, to achieve a coherent effect of a neat and soft, fur-like quality. Each branch of the cotton thread, however, is placed in a slightly different direction, making sure that the part that connects to the floor is left at a little distance from the neighbouring threads. Also, each

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<sup>476</sup> Lin Tianmiao, “Wrapping and Severing,” 1997, in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, ed. Wu Hung (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 197.

<sup>477</sup> *Ibid.*

is installed at a slightly different length and curve (the part from bed to floor). The series of intensive and elaborate arrangements also invokes the interrelated and entangled activities of the cotton thread, needles, and the artist's labouring body.

Each branch of cotton thread, along with its end-point, the ball, is in a dynamic physical state due to its long, lightweight, and conglobate physical qualities, making it prone to vibrations and entanglements with other thread branches and with the artist's body. The artist must constantly adjust the angle, direction, and length of each cotton thread and ball, while attentively observing and moving back and forth to position each branch. In this making-process, the artist acts more as coordinator, concentrating on the simultaneous existence of tangible material variations.

This reciprocal relationship between the human and the textile materials during the artmaking-process, characterised by continuous, mutual changes, influences, and connections among all involved agents, is frequently experienced in deeply emotional and sensory ways. Although the threads are set at different lengths, together they collaboratively convey a dramatically uniform and sophisticated effect of organic growth or natural scattering, caused by a mysterious burst of energy. Lin and the textile materials enacted these installation processes thousands of times through repeated intra-actions, involving the artist's continuous adaptation and the subsequent precise manual adjustments of the mobile, uncontrollable cotton threads with great endurance. This activity can hardly be considered self-fulfilling and enjoyable, but is more of a kind of hardship, embodied in the iterative phenomena of the making-process.

Yet this does not mean that Lin's making-process is only associated with a passive

experience of the painstaking undertaking of repetitive tasks with the dynamic, unstable state of the cotton thread. Lin has long practiced intensive and repetitive labour with cotton thread in her art, and she continues to do so. If Lin's engagements with cotton thread were understood purely in terms of the painful and unbearable work of domestic labour, it would be unreasonable for her to go on to continue her cotton labours in such an intensive and committed way.

To some extent, her artistic labour-intensive practice with cotton thread recalls the domestic handicraft production by women who had been continuously weaving cotton textiles for their entire lives in early socialist China. In Lin's works, including this case, cotton threads appear as delicate and finely ensembled, requiring careful arrangement and re-adjustment. It seems that all the painstaking action, preservation, and discovery of the cotton thread material are at play, with the artist entering into an immersive mode, on her own initiative, in which she can actively experience the pain as well as overcome the oppression brought by the demanding tasks of thread winding and installation, by which new material effects gradually unfold. As Lin describes her feelings about the making-process, "because the work takes a long time, I have all these feelings: smothering, protecting and transforming."<sup>478</sup> For Lin, cotton thread does not necessarily mark her own painful memory, but is a common and familiar material with a long history and it had an impact also on Lin's own childhood; it "was a natural thing" for Lin.<sup>479</sup>

For Lin, a possible experience of self-awakening may even emerge from this

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<sup>478</sup> Sam Gaskin, "Lin Tianmiao Speaks to artnet News About the Art of Endurance," *artnet* (News), 2015.

<sup>479</sup> Lin, "Recap."

painstaking process of making in art. She refers to the acts of thread and weaving in traditional domestic work, undertaken by the female seamstress “as a way of escaping, or even healing” from “stress—or patriarchy or oppression,” and emphasises how this experience of “healing” is particularly important.<sup>480</sup> This description seems to imply a kind of affective quality that the domestic craftwork of thread winding would bring: to some extent, the process is an immersive activity requiring meticulous and focused manual manipulation of sewing materials. This allows the craftspeople to concentrate on the immediate physical experience of the repetitive sewing or weaving actions, which can be both tedious and obsessive. The craft activity may result in spiritual or psychological release, enabling the craftspeople’s experiences to transcend everyday realities, such as domestic affairs. In this sense, the intensive focus on specific, repetitive manual crafts acts as a means to broaden the artist’s range of expressive potential through their physical methodology of artmaking, going beyond the conventional reliance on impromptu techniques as forms of artistic expressions.

This kind of “escaping” or “healing” quality associated with the craftwork as therapy seems to be manifested in Lin’s artmaking-process, which tends to embody the experience of thread winding and the intensive installation of the materials as a kind of ambiguous psychological phenomenon. It is nonspecific and affective, arising from experiences that can be either a kindness or an aggression, through the slow, precise, and repetitive acts of binding and installing. The creativity that Lin uncovers is not found in the conversion of textile into new forms for the sake of production efficiency or the legacy of crafting practical textile goods in home settings. Instead, it is discovered in the embrace of an alternate rhythm found within the inherent logic of work as a

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<sup>480</sup> Ibid.

tangible and discursive activity. This approach evolves from the continuous interactions between the artist and the material, and views this interplay as a creative practice in its entirety.

The affective force of cotton thread as experienced by the artist's body in the video and in the installation process of each individual material, however, may not necessarily be carried through to the viewer. Particularly in the video, Lin seems to bring the audience's focus on her handiwork by showcasing a close-up of her hands engaged in thread winding, with no other visible elements or narrative events either in the background or surrounding environments. Yet when the viewer focuses on this isolated component of the video, what they encounter is a time-consuming repetitive act that may well bore them, and which may require both perseverance and patience to stay with. In her discussion on the notion of boredom in contemporary art, Frances Colpitt argues that inscribing boredom in art can be a forceful communication, but that it must be avoided because it "does not meet the contemporary audience's appetite for immediate sensory stimulation and satisfaction."<sup>481</sup> She notes that the viewer normally come with "indolence or frustration" and that a valuable work thus needs to capture the viewer's interest through "commitment and concentration of attention, particularly in the case of the formally reductive and undifferentiated object."<sup>482</sup>

For the viewer, Lin's long and singular, repetitive movement with the animated object of cotton thread is devoid of any immediate visceral or sensory reach, if taken in isolation from the other installed elements. What the viewer primarily perceives in the

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<sup>481</sup> Frances Colpitt, "The Issue of Boredom: Is it Interesting?" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 43.4 (1985): 364.

<sup>482</sup> *Ibid.*

video content is its lack of any particular attracting moment or scene upon which to focus (Lin having already eliminated other materials or narrative factors). The viewer is unable to identify the ideas or narratives of the video but only the physical fact of the artist's singular gesture of thread-winding, resulting in a viewing experience that generates boredom. Similarly, although the labour-intensively installed materials contain signs that remind the viewer of the artist's effort, the viewer's awareness seems to reside more in an outsider perspective than it is embodied as a direct sensuous experience.

#### **iv. Embodied affective experiences in the viewer, and critical inquiry**

I argue that the embodiment of sensuous or affective experiences in the viewer emerges through the strategic oppositional or subversive positionings of different material components. As mentioned in the Introduction, *Thread Winding* presents the viewer with an unfamiliar scene comprised of once-familiar everyday objects. At first, the viewer finds it difficult to identify a specific subject matter and may find it difficult to stay in the moment. Talking about her use of materials in art, Lin has said that she chooses familiar materials that are present in her own personal life, and that comprise her identity. However, the strategic arrangement of materials in art often serves to “change its familiarity.”<sup>483</sup> Here, Lin does this by arranging the objects in opposition to their original forms of representation in daily life, creating a scene that is full of ambivalences and contradictions.

Specifically, the sharp 15 cm long needles are intentionally placed together in one

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<sup>483</sup> Lin Tianmiao, interview by Benny Shaffer, “Lin Tianmiao,” *Smart Museum of Art*, 2020. <https://theallureofmatter.org/artists/lin-tianmiao/>

direction, which, seen from a distance, appear as a soft, furry texture. On approach, however, the viewer soon realises that this seemingly soft texture is in fact comprised of individual needles. The original sharp, potentially harmful, and dangerous needles are thus transformed into holding qualities of gentle softness. Further, although the needles, taken together, convey a subversive visual form that stands in opposition to its normally perceived physical property, when placed on the white, clean cotton bed and linked with thousands of cotton threads in an outward diffusion, these dark needles suddenly cause another visual contradiction in which the fur-like needles reveal a darkened, wounded, hole-like texture, in stark contrast to the white, gentle bed of cotton thread that now seems threatening and violent in its sensuality. The needles commonly used in traditional Chinese handicraft are often silver in colour, short and thin in size (normally 7–9 cm), light to handle, and hard to see. Larger-size needles—such as these 15 cm long ones—are less frequently used in sewing unless in the production of heavyweight fabrics. Lin purposefully chose to use 15 cm long needles rather than the finer, more common type. They are sharp as knives and need to be handled with care. When twenty thousand of them are gathered, they start to convey more of a sense of darkness and heaviness. Strategically juxtaposed against the white and ductile cottons, it highlights the stark contrast between the light and the dark; tender and harsh. Lin arranges the needles into an ambiguous state through intensively repetitive placements. Their relational setting, with the bed of cotton threads linking to the floor, opens up a visual tension that allows for shifting and changing perceptions of the material entities as the viewer changes position in space.

This subversive arrangement can also be seen in the balls of cotton thread. Traditional handicraft treats cotton thread as an inanimate object, awaiting human manipulation

and interpretation. Its value resides in its functionality for utilitarian purposes, such as sewing everyday products or commodities such as cloths, gloves, and decorative embroidery, that are stable in meaning and function. As discussed above, the cotton thread in Lin's *Thread Winding* displays a kind of dynamism with a sense of a swelling force or radiating energy without a particular finished end. The single soft and harmless cotton thread appears as aggression when exponentially multiplied. In addition, against the video depicting the thread-binding process, the installed cotton threads display a state-reversal in which the balls are released and "proliferated." Nevertheless, although the spread of cotton thread may in some way provoke a feeling of being freed from constraints, the work is installed in a traditionally Chinese narrow, rectangular, wooden architectural-style room. The installation occupies almost the entire room, with some dispersed threads closing the three walls,<sup>484</sup> resulting in an ambiguous theatrical effect that the proliferated cotton threads are not all that proliferated.

What is more, cotton textiles are variable materials that can be dyed in different colours, yet in most of Lin's works—including *Proliferation of Cotton Threads*—she chooses to use white cotton threads. Were the cotton threads presented in other, bolder, colours—such as black or red—it may have more straightforwardly articulated a kind of visual shock to the audience. Everyday white cotton textile products, such as cloth and gloves, normally symbolise elegance, cleanliness, innocence, and silence, and does not seem to carry explicit messages of pain and cruelty. Yet Lin's *Thread Winding* can hardly be regarded as embodying the cleanness and whiteness of the cotton thread,

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<sup>484</sup> This strategy of installation in a narrow room is only used in Lin's earliest version, exhibited in 1995. The other, later, versions, such as that exhibited at Minsheng Museum of Art in 2015 and the one exhibited at the 2020+ exhibition at Red Brick Art Museum in Beijing in 2020, leave more room for the work's surrounding spaces.

tending instead to engage them in mutual correlation with other material components. Lin's decision to use white threads primarily derives from this having been the most commonly used type of cotton thread in the domestic handicraft labour of Lin's childhood. This whiteness is simple and plain and the white thread acts as a basic construction that is neither fully weaved or dyed, and thus contains the potential for further processing or manipulation of style, design, shape, form, and colour for manual or industrial production of a finer textile product. The unfinished state that possesses the possibility for future material enactments is also manifested in Lin's work, and she seems to regard white cotton thread as a force with various effects, capable of manifesting ambiguities and performativity when working relationally, both together and with other material components, such as needles.

As such, what is highlighted in Lin's displayed work is the way that the material agencies "work" together to demonstrate oppositional, contrasting, or reverse forms of representation, different to their common everyday usages, which serves to destroy the viewer's familiarity with the materials. Each material component is constantly working relationally with other components (or with the exhibition space), the perceptions of which are ever-shifting, without predetermined ideas or affects. The work as a whole embodies a theatrical effect of estrangement, that stands in opposition to reality, bringing a sense of discomfort, anxiety, shock, or even threat to the viewer. The notion of "estrangement" has been notably discussed in Viktor Shklovsky's "Art, as Device," which stresses that making a common and familiar object strange through art—sometimes by altering its form without changing its material properties—can have a violent impact on the viewer. His point is based upon the understanding that art—especially the creation of new art forms—has the potential to convey a sensory-based

knowledge through its affective operations.<sup>485</sup> By removing the relation of familiarity, the art object—not only through an unexpected form but also through a slowed perception process—enable the viewer to primarily perceive the work through their senses rather than through their preconceptions.<sup>486</sup>

By activating the ambivalences and unfamiliarity of the art objects, Lin opens up energetic intensities in the interaction of the work and its spectator. The viewer is presented with a contradictory and ambiguous scene in which the materials enact tensions of effects, between soft and sharp, gathering and scattering, gentle and forceful, inanimate and vivid, constrained and proliferated, aggressive and withdrawn. As Lin explains, her *Thread Winding* contains explorations of “the subtle relationships of things in contrast, the conditions necessary for a shift from one aspect to another.”<sup>487</sup> The viewer generates shifting perceptions and sensualities as they walk around, entering into different viewing positions, and gradually become aware of the work having been strategically made through labour-intensive processes and paradoxical operations. For example, the viewer would spend time watching the video on the bed until realising it only depicts an endless and repetitive act of thread binding, and will soon become aware of its relation to the “proliferated” balls of thread. The resulting composition makes it difficult for the viewer to immediately identify an explicit meaning or narrative of events through the visualisation, or images, of the work. The moment the viewer becomes aware of the affect caused by the effect of “estrangement,” which is the means by which the self is experienced, a sensation that is either frightening

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<sup>485</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, “Art, as Device,” *Poetics Today* 36.3 (2015): 151–74.

<sup>486</sup> Ibid.

<sup>487</sup> Melissa Chiu, “The Body in Thread and Bone: Lin Tianmiao,” in *Bound Unbound: Lin Tianmiao*, eds., Melissa Chiu, Guo Xiaoyan, and Lin Tianmiao (Milan: Charta/Asia Society, 2013), 13.

or traumatic may be triggered.

Many authors interpret the meanings of *Thread Winding* as revealing Lin's traumatic personal experience of helping to make textiles in a passive and inherently feminine domestic setting. Indeed, Lin herself also evidently speaks of the process of handicraft as a kind of "corporeal punishment," which may make her work easily interpretable as an aestheticised representation of horror through the artist's suffering. Feminist scholars have based a reading of women's domestic oppression in patriarchal society upon Lin's verbal and visual representations, using preconceived ideas of female experiences in domesticity.

However, I suggest that the suffering, violent senses brought up by the work reside not in the viewer's empathy with the artist's traumatic memory, but in the viewer's own bodily experience in the present. In her *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*, Jill Bennett proposes an alternative understanding of trauma that falls outside of the narrative framework, and is only perceivable through a lived experience of violence, felt in the viewing of an artwork. Such experiences cannot be visually "represented," but can only be felt through the affective qualities triggered by the art objects.<sup>488</sup> Rather than acknowledging the artist's personal experience, Bennett argues that trauma-related art brings the viewer in contact with trauma, as a force that inhabits the space.<sup>489</sup> In other words, trauma can only be evoked through the viewer's own embodied experiences of the artwork in real time, rather than through "crude empathy"—a feeling derived from the "assimilation of the Other's experience of the

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<sup>488</sup> Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Redwood City, California: Stanford University Press, 2005), 24.

<sup>489</sup> *Ibid.*, 42–9.

self.”<sup>490</sup>

Lin’s *Thread Winding* works in a similar way, where the traumatic experience is generated not from a sympathetic relation to the artist, or through prior knowledge of the artist’s own personal traumatic experiences, but by a triggering of the viewer’s own body through material effects. This is not to suggest that the effect of affect is inherently negative here, but rather to highlight how the affective operations in Lin’s work enable the viewer to primarily perceive the work through their senses and, in doing so, potentially provoke critical responsiveness to social reality. This is achieved by exploiting forms of embodied perception through visible traces of labor processes and by strategically positioning the materials as indeterminate, strange, and oppositional in relation to other parts of the work, which encourages a slowed viewing process. Within this slowed, embodied process of viewing, the viewer is likely to encounter a kind of destructive force that gives rise to feelings of discomfort, pain, and anxiety. Yet this does not mean that the work intends to ascribe to the viewer a passive, suffering body, nor does it re-visualise the actual traumatic event. Rather, it is these affective capacities, embodied in the viewing experience, that afford the work its possibility of articulating a critical inquiry of its content within the viewer. Bennett in particular claims that activating the affective potential in art does not necessarily entail a “passive bodily experience” but, rather, opens up the possibility that “it agitates, compelling and fueling inquiry.”<sup>491</sup> Bennett references Deleuze’s notion of “encounter signs,” by which he stresses that affect provides an effective way for promoting critical thinking, and more so than explicit representation, as affect draws the subject into a variety of

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<sup>490</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>491</sup> Ibid., 36.

psychological, emotional, and sensory experience dynamics.<sup>492</sup> This critical inquiry unfolds gradually, engaging the viewer in a way that does not emerge immediately upon first encountering the work, allowing cognition or thoughts to form slowly through a processual, relational, and embodied experience, beyond the usual influences of reasons, beliefs, or intentions that typically shape the encounter and interpretation of an artwork.

Lin brings the ostensibly painful act of self-punishment into a sensation-bound installation, inscribing an invisible tension between a sense of increasing energy and a repressive force, facilitated by the materialities falling outside of common-sense knowledge. The common understanding of cotton thread is largely limited to knowledge of how to use it and what to use it for, which, in Lin's piece, is immediately distorted by the fact that neither use is represented in accordance with their respective purpose at all. This brings the viewer into an inquiring mode regarding the meanings and conditions of the objects, in relation to their practical functions and status in reality, but it does not lead to an immediate, clear realisation of the artist's intention or the meaning of the work. Here, the cotton thread acts less as an indexical entity to reflect past narrative events and to await interpretation of the artist's intentions, and more as an active agent capable of articulating an affective and indescribable, forceful potential to actively enact an unfamiliar or even unsettling scene, diverging from everyday life. The viewer may thus develop a critical response to social reality, becoming aware of how psychological experiences of traditional handicraft processes have been hidden or neglected, and advancing their understanding of the intensively laborious process of textile-production as a shared traumatic experience in people's daily life, which

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<sup>492</sup> Ibid.

deserves commemoration rather than mere dismissal as an historical accident.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has revealed some vital materialities and an affective dimension of Lin's *The Proliferation of Thread Winding* through analysing the ongoing entanglements and intra-actions between the artist's repetitive labouring body and the cotton thread material, as well as the relational and paradoxical arrangements of the viewer's embodied encounters with the materials. By tracing the making-processes, we witness the cotton thread transform into an active agent, continuously participating in interconnected activities with the artist and other material agents. The processual vitality and defamiliarisation of the cotton thread render the work a site for affective experiential encounters (both for the artist and the viewer), rather than a mere representation of predetermined ideas. This, in turn, opens up perceptual and psychological awareness in the viewer as experiencer rather than mere observer, and elicits critical responses in relation to social reality. Through a processually and performatively-oriented approach to examining the work's materialities, and an inquiry into the affective capacities embodied in these materialities, Lin's work activates the ongoing meaning-making of art, allowing for potential shifts, transformations, and a heightened consciousness at the intersection of making and interpretation. This exploration strives to use Lin's case to demonstrate how Material Art can provoke a societal response through affective qualities that link human bodies to their physical and social environments, eliciting specific feelings for encounters and events beyond individual experiences. This encourages the viewer to become not just observers but also active participants in co-creating the meaning and experience of art.

## Chapter 6

### Onto-epistemology in Artmaking: He Xiangyu's *Cola Project*

The previous chapter exemplifies how Lin Tianmiao's *The Proliferation of Thread Winding* redefines the experiences of human engagement with textile material, and promotes critical inquiry—domestic handicraft of cotton fabrics, in particular—through vibrant materialities and affective operations in artworks and artmaking. This chapter introduces another example—He Xiangyu's (born 1986) installation *A Barrel of Dregs of Coca-Cola* (2009, fig. 13) in *Cola Project*—by which to investigate how Material Art might engage with people's lives, realities, and struggles by incorporating onto-epistemological practices in art and artmaking. Coca-Cola, unlike the materials discussed in the previous chapters, is neither a material with artistic or craft associations (such as ink and cotton thread) nor does it hold an identity as a class of material in its own right, but is simply a subset of beverages, carbonated drinks, soft drinks, or suchlike. He's work, involving the boiling of thousands of litres of Coca-Cola into a bitumen-like residue, serves as a compelling case study to reveal the potential agency of a commodity object and to interrogate the intricate relationship between human labour and commodified objects.

*Cola Project* was exhibited in different versions at various locations between 2008 and 2012, each presenting boiled-down Coca-Cola residue in its own unique way—from a coal-like solid substance for making sculptures, to a sticky and thick ink for creating paintings.<sup>493</sup> The residue was made by boiling thousands of litres of Coca-Cola over the

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<sup>493</sup> Versions of *Cola Project* include forms, sculptures, or installations of an earthy, bitumen-like black crystalline residue piling up in mountain-like shapes, either placed within a rectangular transparent glass such as *A Barrel of Dregs of Coca-Cola* (2009) and *Extraction* (2009–2010), or directly placed on the exhibition floor without the container, such as in *Cola*

course of one year. Ten factory workers were employed to complete the task in He's hometown Dandong. This chapter focuses on He Xiangyu's *A Barrel of Dregs of Coca-Cola*, created in 2009 as part of the *Cola Project*, and displayed at *The Allure of Matter*. It displays an earthy, bitumen-like black crystalline residue accumulated in the shape of mountains (fig. 49).

*Cola Project* has attracted much scholarly attention for its implicit criticism of the impact of Western culture and consumerism on contemporary China.<sup>494</sup> Due to Coca-Cola being a famous, industrially mass-produced everyday consumer product, a transformation of its original material qualities to new forms of representation lends itself to a symbolic interpretation of the artist's intention to respond to commercialisation and consumerism. However, using *A Barrel of Dregs of Coca-Cola* as my key example, this reading overlooks the fundamental aspect of the work, which primarily offers a strong visual effect: an indefinable scene composed of clumps of a coal-like, gleaming substance that elicits in the viewer an enigmatic or even uncanny sense of a post-apocalyptic landscape (fig. 13). This feeling is heightened when the viewer sees the title and realises that this substance is made out of Coca-Cola.

To stress only the conceptual perspective, and to take the artwork only as a critical response to consumerism and capitalism, however, is insufficient, particularly if this is

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*Project Resin* (2009–2010) and *Coca-Cola Project* (2009). Another version is in the form of painting, including works such as *Antique Series 12* (2010) and *Antique Series* (2011).

<sup>494</sup> See, e.g. Zhang Xinjian, “原生态·新生代与装置艺术—写在何翔宇装置艺术展之前 [Original Ecology· New Generation and Installation Art—Write in Front of He Xiangyu's Installation Art],” *艺术市场* 06 (2010): 69–71; Ai De, “何翔宇的感知空间 [He Xiangyu at Qiao Space],” *艺术当代* 16 (04) (2017): 83–85; Michele Chan, “‘I'm Sorry': The Gentle Violence of He Xiangyu,” *Sotheby's*, March 26, 2019, accessed March 6, 2024. <https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/im-sorry-the-gentle-violence-of-he-xiangyu>.

based solely on the work's omission of the symbolic brand image of Coca-Cola, so heavily promoted in the global capitalist system. The work consists of heterogeneous clusters of unidentifiable, impure sediments that lack any fixed central object upon which to focus, the meaning of which remains perpetually malleable, open, flexible, and brimming with potential to evolve.

Viewed closely, He's work presents a corrosive, bitumen-like texture of polymictic sediment. Dense and impure, the sediment consists of crystal and coal-like substances with gleaming, dark effects, in varied and contrasting sizes and shapes—some are like fine particles of dark sand and some like gravel and rock. Viewing the work at a distance (fig. 13), the piled-up dregs, which are placed in a transparent glass cube, resembles a rather harmonious yet apocalyptic mountainous landscape, effecting silence, mystery, and theatricality. When the viewer sees the title, they realise with surprise that this mystical, granular substance is made out of Coca-Cola. The well-known brand guarantees that the viewer comes with a strong cognitive understanding of the material, its origins, and how it is normally used. This knowledge is then mixed with the insight that the Coca-Cola substance is here used in an entirely new, and very different, way, presented as something unknown or unknowable, which is out of place.

He makes no image-reference to the already iconic, heavily symbolic Coca-Cola brand; rather, he establishes an object-based and immediate ambiguity of a visually intense but unidentifiable substance, in a mythical topography that draws the viewer into a sense of the materials as intensively processed and dislocated. It thus directs the viewer's attention toward what is actually happening when they look at or experience the work, and elicits a curiosity to know more about how the material has come into this physical

form. In an interview with Nancy P. Lin, He himself describes that he intends to make “the material more dominant, reimagining it through the use of Coke itself, the liquid that we ingest into our bodies.”<sup>495</sup>

Some studies have paid attention to the production of installations of *Cola Project*.<sup>496</sup> They often assume an anthropological perspective and regard the artist as the sole protagonist of the production and meaning-making of the piece. Their discussions about the work’s meaning centre on considerations of economics, global markets, and aesthetic regimes, while its production is considered in terms of skill, effort, and transformative power in aid of a preconceived final product. The role and presence of the workers are only briefly mentioned, and receive little to no analysis.

All interviews, moreover, have been with the artist. Although He himself has, on several occasions,<sup>497</sup> emphasised the importance of the making-process and how it is embodied in the final displayed artwork, no primary source has yet documented the voices and experiences of the workers involved. He has consciously documented the making-process, photographing the workers’ labouring bodies, which gives further testimony to his emphasis on the steps and contributors of the work. It is regrettable that He does not discuss the workers’ experiences and their specific activities in more detail, nor document their words.

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<sup>495</sup> He Xiangyu, interviewed by Nancy Lin, “He Xiangyu.” Vimeo video, 1:55. *Smart Museum of Art* for the exhibition of *The Allure of Matter: Material Art from China*, January 30, 2020, accessed March 6, 2024. <https://vimeo.com/388395056>.

<sup>496</sup> E.g. Xinjian, “原生态”; Ai De, “何翔宇.”

<sup>497</sup> E.g. Xu Jin, “艺术专访—何翔宇 [Artistic Interview—He Xiangyu],” *Sydney Young Chinese Weekly*, March 2012, accessed March 6, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXrYRH2Obvo&t=47s>.

*A Barrel of Dregs of Coca-Cola* exposes a sense of the density of a substance inscribed with the labour that went into its making, which places further weight on the point that the artwork has been made with great effort and could hardly have been achieved by a single artist. This aspect also echoes the material intensities revealed in Zhang Huan's *Berlin Buddha*, reminding us of the profound human labours and collaborative efforts embedded in the artwork. Although it is difficult to trace the individual workers that participated in the *Cola Project* ten years ago, we can sense the presence of the workers within the material of the installation: the ghostly voices of the labour process revealing how their embodied experiences intertwined with and engaged in the work through their perception, emotion, and cognition.

In this chapter, I reveal that the artist, workers, and material of the piece work in conditions that lack determinate causal structures with clear boundaries and predictable results. The Coca-Cola is neither the object of the creation nor a fixed physical representation; nor are the artist and workers fully intentional and determining with regards either to its evolution or the forms and patterns of the artwork. The human actions are guided by the changeable physical qualities of the Coca-Cola, while also mobilising their next gesture. The evolving, performative nature of the material substance does not reside in “things-in-themselves,” but in “things-in-phenomena”—a dynamic interplay of impacts and effects emerging from the collaborative interactions among the artist, workers, and the material.

This enables the role of the art object to transcend Marxist historical materialism, which assesses the impact of physical materials on social and economic contexts and views the artist's bodily engagement and the end result as discrete and separate entities. Use

value signifies the object's tangible utility to satisfy human needs, while exchange value represents an abstraction of the human labour invested in its production—a concept Marx encapsulates as “all commodities are merely definite quantities of congealed labour-time.”<sup>498</sup> Marx further describes how

[...] this abstraction of labour as such is not merely the mental product of a concrete totality of labours. Indifference toward specific labours corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labour to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of change for them, hence of indifference.<sup>499</sup>

This means that labour is not tied to any particular activity or action, such as farming, cooking, or clerical work, but is generalisable, facilitating the fluid movement of individuals across various tasks in the capitalist system. This fluidity objectifies labour and labourers, valuing commodities by other commodities and reducing the natural world to a mere vessel for capitalist gain.

Historical materialism contends that human actions bring about transformations in the material realm as well as in human individuals and society at large. With a natural orientation towards objects, humans exhibit intentionality—an idea established in scholastic thought (by Thomas Aquinas) and developed as a theme in the phenomenological works of Franz Brentano and Edmund Husserl.<sup>500</sup> This object-oriented intentionality has been adapted into a materialist perspective within historical materialism. It is vital to acknowledge that human interaction with objects not only alters the objects but also the individuals acting upon them. Therefore, historical

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<sup>498</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1990), 130.

<sup>499</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 104.

<sup>500</sup> Dermot Moran, “Intentionality: Some Lessons from the History of the Problem from Brentano to the Present,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 21:3 (2013): 317–58.

materialism views the unfolding of history as a process of human self-constitution. Despite the possible mismatches between intentions and actual changes, and the potential for alienation of producers from their work or even from themselves, historical materialism posits that humans, particularly in their capacity as social entities, are the sole agents of historical progression.

This paradigm masks the underlying dynamics of power but, as Bennett highlights, it also facilitates an “unnatural animation of artifacts.”<sup>501</sup> Capitalist procedures dull human liveliness while endowing objects with an “empowered” status, charging them with the capacity to awaken desires. Bennett challenges Marx's dismissal of animism, proposing instead that the transfer of vitality is not so much a misappropriation of energy as it is a double misreading that fails to recognise the interconnected, process-oriented nature of objects.<sup>502</sup> This view has seeped into the arts as well, reducing artistic creativity to a “sophisticated science of entertainment in the service of squeezing out more consumption.”<sup>503</sup>

This chapter moves beyond the human-centric approaches prevalent in qualitative research, which emphasise human behaviours and voices, and their elucidation via methodologies oriented around human perspectives, including interviews, ethnographic studies, and interpretative analytical reporting. I will explore how the workers, once mere cogs in the industrial machine, engage with the transformative Coca-Cola fluid, diverging from their uniform industrial roles to a more nuanced understanding of objects and fulfilled experience of material engagement. This prompts a re-evaluation

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<sup>501</sup> Bennett, *The Enchantment*, 117.

<sup>502</sup> Ibid.

<sup>503</sup> Ibid., 122.

of creativity and production, advocating for a more genuine engagement with the material world that honours the inherent vitality and agency of both human and non-human entities.

I argue that this engagement exemplifies a feature that Barad describes as “onto-epistemological.” Barad’s agential realist framework aims to “account for the materialisation of all bodies— ‘human’ and ‘non-human’—including the agential contributions of all material forces,” thus underlining the formative role these forces play in defining boundaries.<sup>504</sup> Within this model, cultural, material, and boundary definitions emerge from the interactions between entities, challenging the notion of their pre-existence. Agential realism, building on Butler’s concept of performativity and Foucault’s idea of discursivity, acknowledges that matter has co-constitutive roles in its own process of becoming. As Susan Hekman articulates, agential realism allows for an engagement with “nature, the body, and materiality in the fullness of their becoming,” moving beyond simple representation to embrace a reality of phenomena and material-discursive practices.<sup>505</sup>

Furthermore, agential realism, according to Barad, is a holistic approach that seriously integrates varied insights from feminist, antiracist, poststructuralist, queer, Marxist, and scientific disciplines.<sup>506</sup> While Barad does not specifically mention the arts, the tenets of agential realism resonate deeply with the discourse on materiality within art creation. Barad describes “knowledge-making practices” as methods of understanding the world

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<sup>504</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 66.

<sup>505</sup> Susan Hekman, *The Material of Knowledge: Feminist Disclosures* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 76.

<sup>506</sup> Barad, “Posthuman Performativity,” 810–11.

through “material enactments that contribute to and are part of the phenomena we describe.”<sup>507</sup> Although these practices are primarily associated with scientific fields in Barad's work, I posit that artmaking is also a “knowledge-making” practice. Agential realism suggests that activities such as “knowing, thinking, measuring, theorising, and observing” are material actions interwoven with our existence in the world.<sup>508</sup>

Thus, agential realism refrains from prioritising either cultural or material aspects, instead considering production as the result of their mutual interaction.<sup>509</sup> Barad emphasises that knowledge emerges from our integral participation in the world's continuous differentiation. Onto-epistemology is, therefore, a vital framework for exploring “the study of practices of knowing in being,”<sup>510</sup> and highlights the way that specific interactions shape realities. The separation of ontology and epistemology echoes a metaphysical stance that presupposes fundamental distinctions between subject and object, human and non-human, body and mind, as well as between matter and discourse. Ontological and epistemological insights are not distinctly and separately produced in the creative process. Instead, the boundaries between knowing and thinking are emergent and negotiated through their intra-action. This approach is instrumental when perceiving art and artmaking as an intertwined, onto-epistemological activity—a practice of knowing in being that unfolds through specific intra-actions.<sup>511</sup> As such, it is necessary to think about the materialities of artmaking as in a state of entanglement.

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<sup>507</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 32.

<sup>508</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>509</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>510</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>511</sup> *Ibid.*

My analysis of He's work and its artmaking extends beyond the insights of historical materialism to consider redistribution of agency (and responsibility) and ways of knowing in being. Delving into the complex interplay of human and non-human agency, this perspective disrupts traditional perceptions of the commodity object as a stable and predictable material substance, as demonstrated within a specific spatiotemporal context in He's prolonged making-process. I examine how, during the making-process, workers come to new understandings of the things they are familiar with in daily life, and how they experience the development of sensory and emotional responses during their ongoing intra-action with the lively, unpredictable Coca-Cola fluid. This exploration seeks to reveal how such an onto-epistemological practice, manifested in the making-process, reshapes human engagements with the capitalist, industrially mass-produced material, redefining modes of knowledge production, and blurring the existing boundaries between the productive and the imaginative, the deterministic and the uncertain, speed and slowness, controlling and being controlled—characteristics typically inherent in capitalist production and consumption. This analysis could, then, facilitate a reconsideration of the work's critical inquiry into consumption and consumer culture related to beverage, evoked not by the Coca-Cola's symbolic or indexical qualities, but through the materialities of artmaking in its entangled state.

**i. The production activity as “work” rather than “labour”**

Many scholars stress that He's work evidences collective efforts of artisanal labour, and that it is this collective productive labour that gives Cola the transformative power with which it becomes a work of art.<sup>512</sup> Their assumption is based on an anthropocentric

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<sup>512</sup> See, e.g., Trevor Smith, “Transformative Labors,” in *The Allure of Matter: Material Art from China*, eds., Wu Hung and Orianna Cacchione (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, 2019), 69–70.

perspective in which the material awaits its imbuelement with new interpretative value, and can—through great human labour power—be transformed into new states in terms of form or representation. However, it should be noted that, in He’s process, the collective actions are quite unlike those of industrial productive labour, which emphasises the production of fine commodities through efficient means, and follow strict, planned protocols. Here, ten workers are tasked with the single act of continuously boiling Coca-Cola using firewood, without much guidance as regards the finished product, or a clear blueprint for the procedures of production. The work that remains is the constant observation and responsiveness to the changing states of the liquid, as well as adjustment and maintenance of the boiling process. The outcome of this process becomes apparent only at the last moment. From the worker’s perspective, this implies an experiential and cognitive production process, which is directed and impacted by the dynamic physicality of the evolution of the liquid. The contrasting case is the industrial process of manual labour in the mass-production of commodities that rely solely on dynamics of control between master and worker.

He’s workers are engaged in what Neil Maycroft describes as an “imaginative productive activity” that is more like work than labour, and which involves a playful attitude towards the production process.<sup>513</sup> Maycroft reflects and elaborates on the conceptualisation of different forms of human activities and how they can be understood in art practices that involve productive labour. Maycroft summarises Daniel Willis’s understanding of labour as an unimaginative activity that may be intensively productive for short periods of time, but nevertheless less productive than “work,” due

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<sup>513</sup> Neil Maycroft, “Labour, Work and Play: Action in Fine Art Practice,” in *The Labour of Art*, eds., Chris Dunne, John Plowman, and Phil Eastwood (Lincoln: The Beehive Press, 2005), 4.

to its monotony and unsustainability.<sup>514</sup> Work, by contrast, can be sustained for long periods, since “[...] the uniqueness of work lies in its ability to trope cleverly the necessity of production into an imaginative undertaking that creates a world.”<sup>515</sup> In other words, Willis understands work to be not merely practical but also imaginative, and can build a domain that is both materially significant and imaginatively meaningful beyond its immediate function.<sup>516</sup> Labour, by contrast, can only be carried out by virtue of its production and efficiency. Labour does not incorporate the labourer’s imagination, as this might deprive them of the ability to attend to the many decisions they must make at all times, including those relating to the basic need to stay safe.<sup>517</sup>

He’s making-process also corresponds to this kind of imaginative necessity. It cannot be planned in advance, and it is not measurable in terms of economic gain. The boiling is riddled with accidents, openness, and chance, which allows the Coca-Cola to spontaneously evolve into different states. The workers can never know what physical form the Coca-Cola will assume in any one moment. Regardless of how carefully He and the workers design strategies for each step of the boiling process, the results ultimately depend on the dynamic and unforeseen changes to the material with which they are working. Standard Coca-Cola is comprised of both industrial and natural materials, including 90% carbonated water (soda water), sugar, caramel colour, phosphoric acid (for tartness), caffeine, as well as the mystical, natural flavourings. When boiled, these ingredients bring about magical and unpredictable effects. In the initial stages of boiling, the liquid remains a watery fluid, and as the temperature rises,

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<sup>514</sup> Ibid.

<sup>515</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>516</sup> Daniel Willis, *The Emerald City and Other Essays on the Architectural Imagination* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999).

<sup>517</sup> Maycroft, “Labour,” 10.

it slowly turns into a thick, nut-brown liquid, with some emerging bubbles (fig. 50). Surprisingly, smoke begins to emanate from these bubbles. When the smoke and bubbles fade away, the fluid gradually transforms into a syrupy black sludge (fig. 51), and then into lumps of shiny crystal, reminiscent of coal: a natural solid carbon-rich material in itself, yet historically significant for its industrial uses. Mainly carbon (with varying amounts of other elements, such as hydrogen and oxygen), this coal-like substance is likely caused by reducing the several chemical compounds contained in the liquid Coca-Cola, such as the sodium carbonate anhydrous (soda). The resulting appearance of the solid form of boiled Coca-Cola appears similar to impure coal, indicating the presence of chemical ingredients in the drink. The work appears at once natural, thus contrasting with the iconic imagery of the brand, and suggestive of something mystical, with traces of human labour. This freely developing and indeterminate material process endows the Coca-Cola with a forceful power which opens up a space for the imaginations of the artist and workers, eliciting a continuous desire to know or imagine what will happen next and what the outcome will be.

He's production mode also embodies Willis's identification of work as sustainable through activation both of the physical and the sensory experiences of the workers.<sup>518</sup> The indeterminate and imaginative process lacks tasks characterised by linear time, thus taking a form that these workers had not previously encountered. This making-process is less likely to draw the workers back to labour concerns. Instead, they become primarily drawn into an ambivalent emotional or mental state in between pleasure and pain.

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<sup>518</sup> Willis, *The Emerald City*.

## ii. Embodied physical and sensory experiences in the making-process

The boiling process is almost certainly a harsh, and probably painful, experience for the workers. Not only does it physically produce heat, smoke, and a pungent smell (fig. 52); it also brings a perceptual anxiety to workers who have already formed a set understanding of the materiality of things. In industrial, assembly-line production, workers, as examined above, are employed as mere components of a living mechanism, and have no part in the direction of the production.<sup>519</sup> The object that the worker produces is not controlled by the worker, but by the capitalist. The workers follow the predesigned manufacturing process and their actions are not self-directed, but dictated by the capitalist who purchased their labour. The worker has a clear understanding of what the object will be, without uncertainties regarding the means of production and its end product. From the worker's perspective, the produced object is a lifeless entity with unchanging material properties, more like an alien entity, independent from the worker.<sup>520</sup> During this goal-oriented production process, the object becomes, to the worker, a mere inanimate object with unchanging material properties. Such labour does not activate the physical imagination, which involves experiencing sensations and emotions when encountering the object. Instead, the worker likely experiences a heightened feeling of alienation, as they experience what is described as not fulfilling "himself in his work but denies himself, has a feeling of misery rather than well-being, does not develop freely his mental and physical energies but is physically exhausted and mentally debased."<sup>521</sup>

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<sup>519</sup> Marx, *Capital: I*, 461–462.

<sup>520</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 453–454.

<sup>521</sup> Marx, *Capital: I*, 536.

Yet in He's project, the worker's experience of work is not simply one of a simple form of physical labour; here, the way that the instruments and materials of the trade function makes their inanimateness less obvious. The worker, previously employed in industrial, assembly-line production and without prior art-making experience before being temporarily hired for this project, experiences the transformation of a familiar consumer product into another dynamic material that is constantly moving and changing, creating different and unexpected effects at various moments. The worker is not the sole controller of the material development, but the one who witnesses and corresponds to the material status in order to keep the material in a state of continuous development. The worker's engagement with the Coca-Cola enacts a phenomenon that brings to mind Barad's idea of the "inherent ontological indeterminacy" that holds between human and non-human agencies, in which the human is provisional and interrelated with the material, rather than having a specific intention of fixing it into a certain end or concrete shape.<sup>522</sup> In He's work process, the Coca-Cola acts not as a mechanical or reactive entity subjected to human creativity, but is transformed into a dynamic living and evolving entity actively contributing to the making-process. Central to the subjectivity of this process is the interrelated and indeterminate events that hold between the human activities and the dynamics of the Coca-Cola. This processual indeterminacy of production is the opposite of deterministic, causal enactments. Here, the artwork is enmeshed in its own becoming, challenging the worker's preconceived understanding of the usual allocation of agency between humans and non-humans, causing feelings of ontological insecurity.

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<sup>522</sup> Barad, "Posthuman Performativity," 815.

However, this ontological insecurity, caused by the worker's asymmetric understanding of the subject–object relation, may very well give rise to a contradictory feeling of pleasure. The worker is not required to follow the strict linear production line with a final, determined goal. All they are asked to do is to collaborate with the artist, help with the material potentials of the Coca-Cola substance, and wait for an unpredictable and imaginative outcome. Although the material displays a dynamism in the making-process that it cannot perform alone, its vitality is based on the worker's manipulation and constant adjustment of the boiling technique, allowing its continued evolution.

As previously noted in Chapter 1, Jeff Koons, like Zhang in the creation of *Berlin Buddha*, employed a private company to produce his artworks under strict, assembly-line conditions. The workers in He's *Cola Project*, by contrast, act more as creative coordinators that focus on the simultaneous existence of the means of production, the production process, and its tangible results. This interdependent relationship between the human and the Coca-Cola substance in the artmaking-process, in which all agencies are continuously evolving, influencing one another, may potentially evoke a range of emotional and sensory responses, though such experiences cannot be definitively assumed for all individuals involved.<sup>523</sup>

Alternating between controlling and being controlled by the initially fluid Coca-Cola material, the workers engage in what Michael Herzfeld describes as an “affective relationship” with their work, through which they themselves evolve from feelings of resentment to feelings of love, and from apprenticeship to mastery.<sup>524</sup> Rather than a

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<sup>523</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>524</sup> Michael Herzfeld, *The Body Impolitic: Artisans and Artifice in the Global Hierarchy of Value* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

statement or assertion of mastery or expertise, the labour experience now becomes about the feeling of asymmetry. He stresses his artistic interest in the material process and how it influences people's perception: "I'm seeking to adjust and guide people's perception through the material changes within the object".<sup>525</sup> Rather than relying on pre-existing information, He emphasises sense, play, and exploration to evoke the curiosity and imagination of the workers.

They thus come to experience two rather different, and perhaps conflicting, feelings. One is pleasurable, giving a sense of agency and bodily autonomy through the experience of a pure making-process that is free from the restrictions of industrialised production. The other is the feeling (and accompanying anxiety) that their autonomy is in danger of being corrupted by the material performance. Although the worker gains the opportunity to master the tools and to work with the artist, it is in observing and deciding what to do next, given the dynamic material conditions or phenomena, that they realise that their decisions and actions are largely relied upon (as well as affected and interrupted) by the changing, unexpected physical qualities of the Coca-Cola. In other words, the artist and workers inhabit ambivalent emotional states, with which they remain in close contact; despite their mastery of the materials, they were nevertheless directed by the animated nature of the Coca-Cola, which they are unable to fully control. This invites a perpetual sense of excitement or anxiety. This embodied physical and sensory experience of the individual worker emerges from the continuous intra-action between the human and the non-human in this production process. Maycroft calls this "imaginative productive activity": it does not aim at an efficient production towards

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<sup>525</sup> "He Xiangyu", *4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art*, accessed August 5, 2024, <https://4a.com.au/creatives/he-xiangyu>

a specific end, but instead implies a capacity to sustain a practice through emphasising the experience of making with absorption and self-fulfilment.<sup>526</sup> Einar Engström describes He's project as one that "privileges process and material inter-action over result" and that "is indefinitely unfinished; he continues to boil things in Coca-Cola in his studio from time to time, and he may even experiment with knock-off *shanzhai* versions of the soft drink in the future."<sup>527</sup>

### iii. Framing the embodied experiences within the spatiotemporal structure

It is worth noting that the significance of this making-process as intra-active and co-becoming, wherein the embodied experiences of the worker who experiences both pain and pleasure, will not be fully conveyed unless properly placed within its particular spatiotemporal framework. Although productive activities are part of the making-process in He's work, the production is very slow, spanning a whole year. Before moving onto the actual making stage, He himself boiled one ton of Coca-Cola in the kitchen of his Beijing studio (fig. 53). He experienced the full transformation process, and was aware that his project would require great human labour resources and that it might take a long time for the liquid to reach solidity.

Having been born into a wealthy family, He already owned a studio in Beijing. As a young artist, having just graduated from the Shenyang Normal University, he had yet to gain much attention from the public, at a time when contemporary Chinese art was receiving increasing attention and sparking international debates. He may have felt an urgent need to build a reputation for himself in the art field. But if his aim was to quickly

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<sup>526</sup> Maycroft, "Labour."

<sup>527</sup> Einar Engström, "He Xiangyu: The Primacy of Process," *Leap 14*, May 31, 2012, accessed March 6, 2024. <http://www.leapleap.com/2012/05/he-xiangyu-the-primacy-of-process/>.

gain exposure with a grand public installation, he could have used a factory to boil the liquid by mechanical means, or employ a greater number of workers. We can thus assume that the methodical slowness of his artwork was both purposeful and pre-designed.

He's mode of creation is also unlike the work of some other contemporaneous artists. Kara Walker made *A Subtlety* (2014) by employing the help of artisans and art assistants who were familiar with and creative within artisan or artistic production. She involved a team of experienced and skilled artisans, fabricators, and technicians for the elaborate production and construction of some pre-designed parts of the installation, such as the sugar sphinx, sugar babies, and the sugar coating. He's mode of production is also nothing like Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds* (2010), which involved a much greater number of participants; more than one thousand artisans were employed to produce each individual seed. Instead, He chose to employ only a small number of workers (ten, none of whom had any experience of artmaking), made ten iron vessels, and used a traditional method of boiling, manually burning the firewood. This required the workers to constantly monitor the fire to adjust the heat, and to repeatedly engage in the task of boiling.

I argue that He's strategic slowness, together with the collective actions and embodied sensory experiences involved in the making-process, contribute to the meaning-making of the materials. Willis discusses issues of time in relation to production activities.<sup>528</sup> He stresses that for those practitioners who engage in the production of "works" by means of playful labour or productive play (such as in the "works" of art, where the

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<sup>528</sup> Willis, *The Emerald City*.

mode of making involves labouring productive action), work-time is different from the more universal labour-time. This resonates with the idea that “fulfilled” or “autonomous” timeframes are determined by technological, efficiency-based factors in the production of commodities.<sup>529</sup> Time spent on these activities cannot be measured by clocks or assessed by production alone, as the value assigned to imaginative productive activities must consider both the product and the sensations generated by the endeavour.<sup>530</sup> Because it creates a world, work-time produces its own measure, with only an indirect link to clock-time, the passing of which we would understand in terms of a linear, steady progression.<sup>531</sup> It should be noted that this immeasurable kind of time that arises in work qualitatively differs from leisure-time. Within capitalist society, the notion of “leisure” involves a packaged and organised kind of time-consumption.<sup>532</sup>

He’s project corresponds to this sense of “immeasurable” time, alluding to a sense of time that is structurally different from clock-time, and where time is experienced and understood in terms of the events and activities that make up our being in the world. These ideas speak to a sense of there being “real” time, which can be sensed differently depending on differences in bodily experiences, or specific actions; these contrast with the speed and acceleration of time in capitalist production and consumption. Here, then, the worker’s feeling of time differs from their experiences of time in industrial production, where time falls within the frame of what Marx terms “socially necessary labour time.”<sup>533</sup> This refers to the time that workers must work each day or week to produce goods (taking into account the skills, tools, and techniques available) that are

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<sup>529</sup> Maycroft, “Labour,” 7.

<sup>530</sup> Ibid.

<sup>531</sup> Ibid.

<sup>532</sup> Ibid.

<sup>533</sup> Marx, *Capital: I*, 49.

considered essential for their survival in accordance with the socially and historically determined standard of living at the time (this does vary over time and between different societies).<sup>534</sup> In other words, it refers to the amount of time required for a worker to produce goods that meet the basic needs of society, given the availability of resources and technological capabilities. Labour time measurement serves as a crucial metric regulating the exchange value of commodities in trade, constraining producers' efforts to economise on labour, and impacting the market values of specific goods. Thus, as Stephen Bayley puts it in "The Speed of Life," in capitalist society, the nature of time is "miscegenated with metaphors of money and value."<sup>535</sup>

In the production of *Cola Project*, the worker might feel time getting slower when the work environment gets hot and harsh and the material may remain unchanged for a period of time. Yet he may at times enjoy the work, and un-sense the clock time when encountering the dramatic state of the material that invites immersive and pleasurable feelings of curiosity. The worker is situated in an arena pregnant with accident and chance, and can always bring something new into existence, such as new phenomenological effects, collaborative modes with others, or bodily experiences brought by the material effects or tasks. This newness is unanticipated and cannot be evaluated in terms of financial gains. As such, each worker can create a space (or in Willis's words, a "world") where time deviates from the ordered progression of universal, abstract clock-time, and allows the worker to instead enter into the present where art can come into being. This is made possible through fulfilled productivity, where the worker stands in active collaboration with dynamic materials.

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<sup>534</sup> Ibid.

<sup>535</sup> Stephen Bayley, "The Speed of Life," *New Statesman*, October 25, (1999): 43.

He Xiangyu employed just ten workers to process 127 tons of Coca-Cola. Yet it is precisely this slowing-down, I argue, that enables the workers to recognise the potential of the materials, and their own interrelatedness with these materials beyond labour as defined in terms of productivity and speed. Olga Blázquez Sánchez proposes that inscribing slowness (and laziness) in art-making means allowing for new attention, understandings, and reasoning to form around art materialities.<sup>536</sup> She claims that the human, as one of the material agencies in the world, has its own physical limits and is determined by these.<sup>537</sup> One of our physical limits consists in the fact that our thinking, like any other activity occurring within a material body, requires time. As part of the material human body, thinking depends on the physical limits of our brains, and cannot therefore be infinitely accelerated.<sup>538</sup> So, in artmaking, slowing down means allowing time for reflection, critical thinking, and creativity to emerge in relation to materiality and the order of things.<sup>539</sup> To enable a transition from speed to slowness in art, artists and art-workers have to work “for art to be defined as a material practice or even as material labour,” and to reject labour “in order to emphasize the importance of other activities beyond production, that relate to slowness, laziness and pleasure.”<sup>540</sup>

He’s decision to employ only a small number of workers makes the act of production into a site of temporal disruption that allows both artist and worker to identify the presence of art and to experience time as free, far away from the accelerated labour of the production of commodities. The participants of this slowed-down processual experience acquire the alternative understanding that things can progress slowly and

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<sup>536</sup> Olga Blázquez Sánchez, “Art Needs Time: Temporality of Laziness in the Performing Arts” (Master’s Dissertation, Utrecht University, The Netherlands, 2015).

<sup>537</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>538</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>539</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>540</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

that this can produce new material meanings that are ignored in capitalism, and that it is not necessarily urgent to grasp the future. The creativity that He seeks to find does not consist in reconfiguring a consumer product in a new representation (based on a capitalist logic of rational and efficient production), but rather in experiencing and embodying an alternative temporality from within the inner logic of the reality of labour as a material-discursive process.

In addition, the production space that He chooses and temporarily constructs helps to create a spatiotemporal framing of the making-process, which contributes to the meanings of the work's materialities. Rather than building his factory somewhere close to his Beijing studio, He chose to rent a timber mill in a village near his hometown, the city of Dandong in the Liaoning province in north-east China, far from China's political centre. The factory in the mill is simple and crude, lacking any mechanical equipment; it also provides a less than ideal work environment, without either air-conditioning or a professional exhaust fan (fig. 54), and with no human resources to support and manage the team. This meant that each individual worker had to make significant and excessive efforts during the making-process. The set-up is reminiscent of manual manufacture before the introduction of mechanical means of production that emphasise speed and acceleration. The smell and smoke generated by the boiling process spread through the mill and its surroundings. He recalls how, on approaching the mill, he could smell the "sweetness" of boiling Coca-Cola.<sup>541</sup> Even after the boiling process had ended, the smell remained in the area for a very long time. Still today, people passing the mill can easily detect traces of the making of the Cola Project.

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<sup>541</sup> He Xiangyu, "He Xiangyu," interviewed by Nancy Lin, video, 1:55. Smart Museum of Art for the exhibition of *The Allure of Matter: Material Art from China*, January 30, 2020, accessed March 14, 2024. <https://vimeo.com/388395056>.

He seems to create an insular space, in isolation from the external world, that concentrates all attention on the singular facets of the boiling activity and its associated sensory experiences. It is thus both literally and figuratively set apart from all industrial operations of capitalist mass production. This accords with Francesca Polletta's conception of "free spaces" that, as small-scale venues for movements or groups of people that are removed from the dominant control of institutionalised or hegemonic forms of power, are not intended for profit-making, and in which people pertain to the possibilities to actively interact, communicate, organise, and experience.<sup>542</sup>

Notably, He deliberately chooses the large-scale setting of a timber mill as base for his small-scale factory. This establishes a relatively isolated setting, devoid of direct environmental or contextual connections to the outside world; at the same time, evokes a sense of safety and deep familiarity, perhaps influenced by its resemblance to places from his upbringing, though this may not be certain. Although the workers were paid, the production was not completed according to the imperatives of profit. It was a seemingly playful or theatrical arena in which the contemporary concerns of mass-production could be dismissed; their own behaviour was impacted or guided by chance-phenomena emerging in very present, very physical realities. Rather than a comment on the power of industrial factories, this is an enactment of the space as a present existence, giving people the chance to collectively engage in a process of awareness-building of our ontological disposition towards the material world. As such, He's project is to structure a free space in association with subjective temporalities. It renders a site-specific, material-discursive project that unfolds through a continuous intra-

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<sup>542</sup> Francesca Polletta, "'Free Spaces' in Collective Action," *Theory and Society* 28 (1) (1999): 38.

action between a collective of workers and the material, where the process of intra-action is regarded as a creative praxis. The ongoing making-process is made possible by the structure of a theatricalised space and the non-linear time of a synchronised collective. He creates the illusion of a new site of productive activity, and of new realities that fall outside of capitalist production modes, with no need for speed. In these ways, He fosters more equitable relationships between human agency and the material world, engaging with the physical, sensual, spatial, and temporal contexts they inhabit.

### **Conclusion**

In sum, my analysis has been an examination of the intra-relations between a collective of workers and the Coca-Cola material in the making-process, the associated embodied experiences, and their spatio-temporal structure. This alternative reading of He's *Cola Project* does not mean to deny that He's work contains a level of social critique. Many scholars interpret *Cola* through preconceived ideas of Coca-Cola as an iconic brand, symbolising industry, commerce, and consumption, and understand an oppositional representation of Coca-Cola as a metaphorical subversion of consumerism. However, I suggest that He's critical expression does not reside so much in the work's representation in relation to Coca-Cola's symbolic or indexical qualities, as in the narratives arising from the process of its materialisation.

By tracing the making-process, we see the role of the industrial worker evolving into one of creative collaborator, engaging with and experiencing the imaginative productive act. The act of labour is here no longer an unimaginative productive activity, but a pure, sense-bound, material-discursive practice. Workers are endowed with more

rights to engage with and feel the process of production as a creative, experiential, and self-fulfilling activity.

In addition, unlike the Coca-Cola of consumer culture (which sees it as an inanimate object, heavily produced and consumed), He's Coca-Cola material becomes an active agent, entangled with the collective of workers. Engaging Coca-Cola in a process of intra-action yields a deconstruction of a binary understanding of the subject–object relation, in which meanings and values are determined by the human as sole master and controller. He also stresses that he is interested not in “the consuming but the very physical perception of drinking Coca-Cola. I wanted to transform this fizzy feeling into a solid form.”<sup>543</sup> This transformation into a “solid form” does not simply aim to direct the viewer's attention to the physical representation of the artwork. It also implicates the processual materialisation and embodied experience of Coca-Cola, which can trigger a critical awareness of the act of consuming and drinking Coca-Cola. The conflicting sensory experiences of pain and pleasure (embodied in the making-process) gives us a sense of Coca-Cola's close association with the consumer's psychological experiences. The artwork joins in the drink's delivery of happiness, enjoyment, and freshness, but also the hidden tangent of bodily pain that carries a message of its harmful effects on the consumer's health, and the darker aspects of consumer culture.

The presencing of the Coca-Cola product is also in the remnants left behind after the work's production. As noted above, the boiling left a lingering smell of sweetness. The smell extended over an area greater than the timber mill itself, resulting in Dandong

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<sup>543</sup> Quoted in “He Xiangyu: Thrown in at the Deep End,” *ELEPHANT*, February 27, 2018, accessed March 6, 2024. <https://elephant.art/xiangyu-thrown-deep-end/>.

gaining the nickname Cola Town [可乐镇] for some time after the work's completion.<sup>544</sup> These remnants also implicitly reveal Coca-Cola's material capacity to exist in and affect human life. On the surface is a sweetness that can be smelled with our senses, and which may bring enjoyment to passers-by. However, the prolonged boiling process required to transform the liquid into a coal-like sediment serves as a stark reminder of the environmental cost. This intensive use of energy not only represents a significant carbon footprint but also compels us to reflect on the broader ecological impacts of such art practices. By the same token, the continuous boiling-process almost certainly produced harmful gases, causing air and environmental pollution and impacting the health of those exposed to it over prolonged periods.

Although the installation shows the solid Coke behind glass (thus preventing the viewer from smelling the material), some of He's other works in the *Cola Project*, such as *Cola Project Resin* (2009–2010, fig. 55), had the sediments piled on the ground without containers. There, the viewer is situated in a more sensuous relation to the material, enabling them to visually experience the work's physical and tactile qualities while at the same time smelling the boiling process. For He, it seems, Coca-Cola's intra-relation with the human world can act as a force, or produce a ghostly remainder, even after production. I understand this to be a comment on the subtle, long-term effects of Coca-Cola on human life.

The 127 tons of Coca-Cola that He used for this project was also, at the time, the average amount of Coca-Cola consumed each year in the city of Dandong (which has

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<sup>544</sup> M Woods Collection, "He Xiangyu-The Cola Project," YouTube video, 2:51, posted by M Woods Beijing. October 26, 2016, accessed March 6, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S1eufV8iIc>.

a population of 2.4 million).<sup>545</sup> Coca-Cola first arrived on the Chinese market in 1979 and gained the right to be widely sold in China in 1989, after which consumption went up steadily.<sup>546</sup> It has remained a popular soft drink in Chinese consumer culture over the past three decades, and today China is the third-largest market for Coca-Cola.<sup>547</sup> He's use of a relatively small number of workers to face and process the vast quantities of Coca-Cola is a nod to the great intensive effort and endurance of its excessive labour; it also suggests that society is prone to excessive consumption. Finally, the processual enactment between humans and non-humans in Cola removes the mythical qualities of the Coca-Cola product, and reveals the signs and tricks of its production process. What takes its place is another entity evidencing its insistent rendering or materialisation, and a demystification of the secret ingredients of Coca-Cola as something visible, erosive, and crystal-like.

The emphasis on the processual experience of making is part of a quest for a different way of living and producing products, in which slowness, pleasure, pain, and the option to achieve nothing are all-important. Contemporary art concerned with themes of commerce, consumption, or mass production need not be linked to the iconic imagery of a commodity. He's *Cola Project* reveals what the artist and other participants in the

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<sup>545</sup> This enormous quantity may sound excessive for people unfamiliar with local conditions of consumption from a statistical perspective. Yet when considering the actual population in Dandong and the demographic (mainly young and middle-aged people) who often consume Coca-Cola, 127 tons suggests a moderate everyday Coke consumption. Dandong population data cited from (<https://population.gotohui.com/pdata-220/2009>), accessed November 8, 2022.

<sup>546</sup> Susanna Ferrell, "He Xiangyu's Cola Project: Creation Through Desiccation," in *The Allure of Matter: Material Art from China*, eds., Wu Hung and Orianna Cacchione (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, 2019), 119.

<sup>547</sup> Sarah Boseley, "Coca-Cola Influences China's Obesity Policy," *The Guardian*, January 10, 2019, accessed March 6, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2019/jan/10/coca-cola-influence-china-obesity-policy-protect-sales-bmj-report>.

workplace have generated, and the intangibility of the artistic process, where humans and non-humans are entangled and collaborate to produce new meanings and values.

## Conclusion

Through these case studies, which focus on various perspectives of the propositions relating to performative materialities that I have proposed, we observe how the discursive materialities of Material Art involve the artist, other human bodies (including other makers or the viewer), the materials, and living entities in active processes that contribute to the artworks' becoming and existence. Although each work of art analysed in this thesis differs in artistic form, material enactment, collaboration, production, and meaning, they all bring attention to the vitality of materiality and underscore the intertwined and often amorphous boundaries between human and non-human entities. All of the case studies analysed above affect the viewer's visceral experience, eliciting a desire wanting to act or react, or instil a sense of presentness. The artworks do not evoke an immediate or complete positioning in the viewer that permits critical distance through preconceived knowledge or political stance. Instead, they present as diverse assemblies of material elements and do not fix or define subjects as objects, resulting in an effect of unfinalisability. This leaves the sense of meaning fluid, adaptable, and ripe with potential.

As seen in the case of Lin Tianmiao's *The Proliferation of Thread Winding*, the discursive arrangements of hybrid material components make the overall effect elusive, defying immediate comprehension of any singular element. The viewer cannot easily form any ideological predisposition as to the meaning of the work through formalism or structural analyses. Rather, the work's hybridisation of materials in unfamiliar settings engages the viewer in a slowed-down perceptual process. The initial response is often to the performative nature of the work's phenomenological impact, such as the cotton threads emanating from the bed's centre, suggesting endless proliferation, and

bearing traces of intensive artistic labour. This sense of incompleteness, or unfinalisability, characteristic of all the works discussed in this thesis, provides a means to address the challenge of representing a mutable world through our diverse and evolving subjectivities.

The works discussed in this thesis primarily display what Merleau-Ponty calls the “phenomenal field”—not representations but “hybrid performative-material assemblages” that activate our bodily interconnection in a perceptually coherent environment, tapping into our fundamental openness to the world.<sup>548</sup> More specifically, these works animate the viewer’s embodied experience, prompting engagement with art as “having been made, having been formed by an intense artistic labor”<sup>549</sup> or as an ongoing process of movement and vibration. My analysis of Liang Shaoji’s *Chains* illustrates how this work elicits a strong affective quality of having been informed by a biological process of the silkworm’s climbing and spinning over metal chains. This goes beyond the representational frame by highlighting the natural, organic quality of the silk in an unordered configuration, resulting in primitive, random and natural silk qualities (within which cocoons are bound) far removed from the uniform and precious silk texture of industrialised silk production. Aside from Zhang Huan and Song Dong’s works, which create powerful sensations of immediacy, many works in this thesis, like Liang’s *Chains*, are not mere stable material products, nor are they narrative or representational forms that points to a symbolic understanding of meanings. They are, rather, intricate artefacts within an evolving system of layers that continuously change

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<sup>548</sup> Taylor Carman, “Sensation, Judgment, and the Phenomenal Field,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, eds., Taylor Carman and Mark B. N. Hansen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 51.

<sup>549</sup> Jones, “Material Traces,” 20.

as they interact with one another and their environment.

By adopting a monological perspective of emergent, generative materiality in art through a New Materialist lens, we see how the effects of art is a *process-event* shaped by the ongoing interplay between human, non-human and more-than-human agencies. These materials, or living entities—including ink, cotton thread, Coca-Cola fluid, incense ash, silk (and silkworm), and water—participate in networks of collaboration, acting as agents capable of movement and transformation, contributing to the processes of meaning-making and knowledge production.

The artists are not the key protagonists of events; rather, their actions are contingent upon working together with other agencies. While Yang Jiechang, Lin Tianmiao, and Song Dong's pieces focus on the artist's encounter with the material and material effect in their own time, experiencing it through their senses in a specific time and place, those involving collective (He Xiangyu's and Zhang Huan's), non-human, or more-than-human (Liang Shaoji's) collaborations help to shift our attention to those middlemen and other living entities. These individuals, whose names have either been omitted or never documented, contributed to the creation of these art objects, working alongside or in partnership with those we recognise as artists, who are often seen as the primary creators in artmaking. A New Materialist interpretation of Material Art, then, focuses less on individual creativity and more on the collaborative emergence of the artwork. Investigating these contributors allows us to explore Material Art in its tangible aspects. Although tracing the voices of these participants is challenging, due to limited sources, it is crucial to acknowledge and identify these overlooked figures in the art historiography of the chosen works. The variety of terms used to describe them

highlights their misrepresentation, and my focus on them uncovers the multiple layers of their impact on the art's ongoing process of becoming.

This perspective does not diminish the artist's role in the creative process but considers the insights gained by engaging with and through materials. This is revealed in Lin Tianmiao's cotton thread, as well as other materials like the bed and needles, which retains its original forms as a recognisable everyday object. While it may seem that Lin, as the sole creator, chose and transformed these objects into art, highlighting her human agency, Barad suggests that a posthuman perspective helps us to realise that Lin's subjectivity is co-constituted within the act of selecting and arranging the materials. The work's affective resonance compels us to appreciate the unique nuances of art beyond broad structural representations, acknowledging the intensive artistic labour involved. The subjectivity does not pre-exist, but rather emerges from, the material relationality between Lin's physical existence and the tactile nature of the cotton thread. The work's materialities and interpretative potential are shaped through a process of their being and evolving through the performative intra-actions of different material entities. The evidence of artistic effort is woven into the fabric of the work itself, not merely resting on its surface or as an isolated sign; it is deeply entwined with the material becoming of the piece.

Consequently, rather than being a static object brought to life through interpretation, Lin's work, along with the others featured in this study, possesses its own intrinsic kinetic materiality. This moving quality is not always as perceptible, as seen in all cases except for Zhang's Ash Buddha series and Song's *Water Records*, which clearly exhibit performative dynamism at their exhibition. However, the absence of visible movement

does not limit the scope of engagement with a New Materialist approach, suggesting that movement in art is not solely about physical motion. It is not that the works do not possess movement, but our ability to perceive and feel their dynamism is limited.

In addition, what makes this consideration of thinking through material important, is its inseparability from how the work affects us. The encounter with the artworks discussed in this thesis moves us beyond mere interpretation, encouraging a sensory engagement with the art as a dynamic process of material transformation where meanings are deeply embedded. While Chapter 5 specifically examines the role of affect through Lin's work, the transformative power of affect resonates across all the case studies. This engagement with the indeterminacy of embodied experience becomes a productive dimension of the practice, offering liberation from the constant need for critical justification and exemption from the politics of strategic positioning. As could also be seen in my investigation of Yang Jiechang's *100 Layers of Ink* (1992), the work evokes a material effect of the disordered chaos beyond the pure blackness of ink, which creates an ambiguous, unfathomable, and liminal quality that represents an infinite variety of form. The indeterminate order of representation that is full of unpredictable and illuminating ideas and manifestations allows for a moving perceptual experience. This opens up the possibility of viewing the artworks through an embodied, bodily experience without immediately ascribing a deep connection with and critical inquiry into the historical dogmatic principles with definitive norms of skill, and the unfading, unchanging element of the pictorial subjects upheld by Chinese scholar paintings.

All the case studies above reveal similar features, reconfiguring the roles of materials—ink, cotton thread, silk, Coca-Cola, incense ash, and water—that are intrinsically tied

to various facets of daily life and historical contexts, and influencing cultural or artistic norms and capitalist or industrial standards in China. Although these materials possess deeply rooted “original” identities, they are presented in unexpected ways, eliciting a sense of the uncanny by showcasing familiar materials in novel contexts. In addition, the art objects on display in these works convey the arduous and time-consuming process of their creation, contradicting the conception of contemporary art as facile and effortless. This sense of hard work, embedded in the displayed works, provides a sense of visual honesty that lies beyond the control of form and has further implications regarding the phenomenological qualities of materials. This imbedding of labour does not, however, imply that this is skilled labour; in fact, the labour involved is predominantly—and perhaps intentionally—unskilled. The resulting artworks appear to reflect the ordinary, everyday labour characterised by repetition, tedium, undervaluation, and—typically—low compensation.

In addition, the individual art objects within each work do not exist in isolation; instead, they come together to form an “inseparable part of the phenomenon.”<sup>550</sup> Even in works that utilise only a single type of material, this material is presented in vast quantities and with intense effects. This entailing of ontological priority of phenomena over objects allows the materials employed in these works to showcase their “intrinsic power, which is the power of metamorphosis, polymorphosis, or insensibility to contradiction.”<sup>551</sup> These materials thus maintain a type of subtle authorship independent of formal elements and become phenomenologically embedded in a

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<sup>550</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 315.

<sup>551</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, “The Order of Material: Plasticities, Malaises, Survivals,” in *Sculpture and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Brandon Taylor (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 201–2.

"fantasy of materiality."<sup>552</sup> They have the capacity to reactivate layers of meaning from the past, irrupting into the present through their affective impact on the viewer.

These approaches not only question the roles, identities, or statuses of materials in their most common contexts but also reveals their potential and agency to carve out alternative trajectories that diverge from their traditionally ascribed roles within the established, hegemonic discourses and narratives. In these artworks, materials transition from inanimate and objectified to active participants in the continuous process of art's ongoing process of becoming. They pulsate with life and agency, "worlding" new spaces and opportunities to voice alternative imaginaries, and responding to the silences—and silencings—of others.<sup>553</sup>

These are works that captivate audiences with artworks that are far from static objects, regardless of whether they appear motionless or mobile in their display, unfolding instead as ongoing and open-ended processes. Although some of the pieces in this thesis—barring video work and ephemeral installation—may typically be perceived as stable amalgamations of form and matter, my study has offered an alternative perspective, observing that Material Art rarely, if ever, conform to such a paradigm. Despite the façade of permanence that some of the works exude, these artworks are never static. Even seemingly typical forms of art, like Yang Jiechang's "painting" in *100 Layers of Ink*, can be more aptly interpreted as being in a perpetual, open-ended processual state.

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<sup>552</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>553</sup> Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

These works tend to primarily direct the viewer's attention through an immediate encounter with the physical artwork and the effect the materials bring. They do not encapsulate a figurative representation defined by a centralised and singular perspective of the subject, nor do they conform to a static relationship between content (or symbolic meanings) and form. Rather, they emerge as vibrant art assemblages, creating paradoxical or ambivalent scenes that primarily offer the viewer an immediate, transcendent physical or sensory experience. All works included in this study reveal a kind of visual intensity and ambiguity, along with the familiar yet incongruous presence of the materials, immersing the viewer in a sensuously bound experience. This encourages interaction with the physical artwork that moves beyond the symbolic (not immediately translatable into the conceptual sphere), plunging into the realm of the material world within a mythical and performative context.

This shift in perception, from the artistic intentionality and towards the issues of reception, underscores the dynamic, processual quality of materials, which can be carried through to the viewer, either through material phenomena; through effects that evoke a tangible perception of them as made objects, or via the temporal immediacy of the material's physical and transient movement at the exhibition site. This contrasts with the sixties and seventies notion of dematerialised art, where materials were largely symbolic or representative, serving as mere conduits for conveying conceptual or symbolic ideas, as articulated by Lucy Lippard and John Chandler.<sup>554</sup> The artworks explored in this thesis provoke both physical responses and sensory experiences, stemming from the dynamic relationship among the artistic materials, the contextual

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<sup>554</sup> Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art," *Art international* 12.2 (1968): 31-36.

material conditions, bodily matter, and the subjective conditions of experience. By delivering an intensive, tactile engagement and fostering a connection with the processual vitality of materials, these works collectively encourage a shift from distanced, representational critique to embracing practices of radical immanence. This shift challenges the foundational Cartesian concept of “cogito ergo sum” and questions the idea of the self-sufficient, independent individual.

This reveals a growing receptiveness to how the affective agency of material effectively diminishes subjective agency, steering art practices away from self-determined motivations. In the works analysed above, it becomes evident that significance in art does not derive solely from representation. Instead, what holds importance is the way that art functions through affects and sensations, that is, *materially*. While these case studies do possess a representational layer—which is often the focal point of contemporary analysis—where metaphysical interpretations are derived, it is their affective operations on a material level that truly define them as art. This perspective allows for an expanded understanding of these artworks, where accumulated experiences fundamentally influence both the work and its meaning, rather than being dismissed as incidental historical factors.

The character of the case studies in this thesis, therefore, is material-semiotic. The works affect us both directly (on the material level) and indirectly (on the representational level), though any distinction between these dimensions is inherently temporary, as they are intertwined and co-construct each other in a continuous state of becoming. According to Elizabeth Grosz, art comes into being “when sensation can detach itself and gain an autonomy from its creator and its perceiver, when something

of the chaos from which it is drawn can breathe and have a life of its own.”<sup>555</sup> Art is described as being “about transforming the lived body in an unlivable power, an unleashed force that transforms the body with the world.”<sup>556</sup> It fosters “material becomings [...] in which life folds over itself to embrace its contact with materiality, in which each exchanges some elements or particles with others to become more and other.”<sup>557</sup> There are a lot of material processes involved in the operation of art, as well as in its onto-epistemology. The aesthetic encounters it offers are deeply entwined with materiality. Hence, to fully understand how art captivates us, we must adopt a processual perspective on art, characterised by its continuous material-semiotic evolution.

By adopting a New Materialist perspective—which delves into the intricacies of objects and their influence on intersubjective connections while facilitating our interaction with the environment—we recognise the material’s innate potential for “metamorphosis”<sup>558</sup> or “morphogenesis,”<sup>559</sup> shaping meanings and affects. Critics, including, in Lin Tianmiao’s case, feminist scholars, challenge the notion that conflict is the sole driver of socio-political change. Many scholarly research studies on the trends or phenomena of contemporary Chinese art tend to focus on the political and socio-cultural relevance of art practices in terms of Western(ised) or global(ised) artistic, art-historical, or cultural influences in relation to its own indigenous national-cultural and contemporary identities. While this interpretative perspective already offers fruitful postmodernist

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<sup>555</sup> Elizabeth A. Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 7.

<sup>556</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>557</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>558</sup> Braidotti, “Posthuman Humanities.”

<sup>559</sup> Manuel DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* (London; New York: Continuum, 2002).

and/or postcolonial points of view that have provided linguistic and anthropological significance in conceptualising Chinese national-cultural identities associated with contemporary Chinese art, under a material-semiotic context, human relationships, and social and political processes of contingent creation extend beyond simple dichotomies of opposition and conflict. Meaningful knowledge and potential critical inquiry arise from perpetual productivity, distinct from purely representational thought, which tends to reaffirm what is already known. This approach gradually unveils various dimensions of the history, life, and societal aspects of art. As exemplified in He Xiangyu's *Cola Project*, the meanings are provoked through workers' continuous process of production through which embodied psychological experiences emerged within a particular spatiotemporal framework. It is this embodied sensuously bound experience, generated during the process of production within a particular spatiotemporal framework that opens up the possibility of transforming the collective labour of production into an onto-epistemological, experiential, and self-fulfilling activity, through which potential criticism of industrialised production of commercial products, excessive consumption, and the myths of Coca-Cola are evoked.

By studying specific instances of emergent, generative material being in art, as examples of the intra-active becoming of human–non-human assemblages and modes of knowledge-production through interrelations among different agencies, aligns closely with this thesis's fundamental aim. This aim revolves around the continuous interplay or mutual shaping of Material Art and New Materialist thought, encompassing practices of doing, creating, sensing, embodying, perceiving, thinking, and theorising. Such an approach facilitates processes of assimilation and differentiation, generating operational methods that embrace diversity and otherness while maintaining a measure

of self-reflexive detachment.

Ultimately, what do these case studies reveal about the significance of redirecting contemporary Chinese art research towards the vitality and affectivity of materiality, while emphasising the amorphous boundaries between human and non-human entities? How does this perspective enrich our living world, and in turn, how does it redefine the role and existence of humans, or “human rights”? Through an exploration grounded in the notions of materiality and material agencies enacted through art’s ongoing process of becoming, this thesis investigates how contemporary Chinese artworks, especially material- and processually oriented ones, can advocate for the respect of the sovereignty of non-human and more-than-human nature beyond human-centric concerns. Each of the study cases above transcends simple representation, embodying a facet of our bodily embeddedness within a perceptually coherent environment. It is a primitive aspect of our bond with the world. They reveal that our responses to materials and the “living others”—and their responses to us—are part of a reciprocal dialogue, one that defies the premise of a “right response,” reminding us of the indeterminacy and unpredictability inherent in human actions and material transformations.

Non-human and more-than-human agencies—central themes of this inquiry—highlight the perpetual novelty of matter, and its capacity to elude our comprehension and control. It subverts our attempts to define, categorise, measure, and commodify, reminding us that matter will always transcend these human-imposed limits. We realise that our encounters with the world are steeped in uncertainty. This uncertainty is not a caveat but a fundamental characteristic of our existence, informing our ethics and ecopolitics, as Alaimo articulates it, “within an ever-changing landscape of continuous interplay,

intra-action, emergence and risk.”<sup>560</sup>

By advocating for a reimagined engagement with the material world in art practices, this thesis does not propose a passive resignation to material whims but a reorientation of our agency. In re-worlding the hydrocommons—and ourselves—we acknowledge our participation in the making of worlds, yet concede that we do not hold dominion over them. We are entangled in a vast aqueous network of planetary significance; a network that defies complete understanding and invites us into a state of continuous discovery.

This research elevates the concept of entanglement over the illusion of separation; it favours mutual interdependence over linear causality; it proposes a responsive co-evolution with materials rather than the presumption of an accurate or “right” response. By deliberately shifting the anthropocentric focus, this thesis encourages contemporary Chinese art practitioners, audiences, and researchers to recognise the myriad material worlds that exist largely independently from human demands or claims of “rights.” Yet in this shift, humanity is not negated but invited to follow the trails we leave in the material world, acknowledging that our understanding of these pathways will always be partial. In other words, this perspective does not diminish the importance of advocating for human welfare and dignity; instead, it expands our ethical considerations to include the complex interplay of human and non-human forces that shape our shared world.

The study herein does not call for abandoning action or foregoing the pursuit of

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<sup>560</sup> Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 21.

equitable access to material resources in contemporary Chinese art practices. Instead, it is an acknowledgment that the concept of “human rights” is not an abstract, purely human construct, but is deeply enmeshed with material realities, challenging the dichotomy of subject versus object, human versus non-human, nature versus culture. It asserts that discourses and materials mutually co-create one another. As Barad suggests, “[d]iscursive practices are not speech acts, linguistic representations, or even linguistic performances.”<sup>561</sup> Importantly, “[d]iscursive practices and material phenomena do not stand in a relationship of externality to one another”; they are “mutually implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity.”<sup>562</sup> Materials—like the water and silk studied in this thesis—are not passive backdrops to human narratives; they are active participants in the discourses that shape our reality. These discourses do not merely overlay an inert materiality but emerge from a dynamic entanglement with it, shaping and being shaped by the material world. In this sense, materials do not merely exist prior to the narratives we construct; rather, these narratives and the material realities they engage with are co-emergent, co-constitutive, and indivisible. Thus, this thesis casts a new light on our interdependence with the material world through a series of artistic case studies, reconsidering our assumptions about agency, influence, and control, recognising that materials have their own trajectories, resistances, and agencies that challenge our conventional understanding of “human rights.”

In embracing this New Materialist vision in the interpretation of art, we are invited to reimagine our place in the world not as sovereigns over a passive nature but as participants in a lively, interdependent existence. We are urged to consider how our

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<sup>561</sup> Barad, “Posthuman Performativity,” 821.

<sup>562</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 152.

actions resonate within the material ecologies we inhabit, how we are shaped by these interactions, and how we might act with a deeper awareness of the profound entanglements that constitute our living world. This is not a simple redefinition of human roles and rights but a profound recalibration of our place within the vast, unknowable, and ever-evolving material universe.

## Illustrations



Fig. 1: Zhang Huan. *Berlin Buddha*, 2007. Sculptural Installation. Ash, Iron and Aluminium. Aluminium Buddha Part: 370 x 290 x 260 cm; Ash Buddha Part: 350 x 480 x 290 cm. Haunch of Venison, Berlin.



Fig. 2: Song Dong. *Water Records*, 2010, and *Traceless Stele*, 2016. Installation view, *The Allure of Matter: Material Art from China*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2019–2020. Photo courtesy of Museum Associates/LACMA.



Fig. 3: Yang Jiechang. *100 Layers of Ink*, 1992. Painting. Ink on xuan paper, 185 x 172 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 4: Yang Jiechang. *One Hundred Miles Squared* [方百里], 1990. Painting. Ink, xuan paper, gauze, Korean paper, 78 x 78 cm. Photo courtesy of InkStudio, Beijing, China.



Fig. 5: Yang Jiechang, *The Moon and the Sun*, 1991. Painting. Ink, gauze, xuan paper, 37 x 46 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 6: Yang Jiechang, *Ladder to Heaven*, 1992. Painting. Ink, xuan paper, gauze, Korean paper, 193.4 × 129.9 cm. Photo courtesy of InkStudio, Beijing, China.

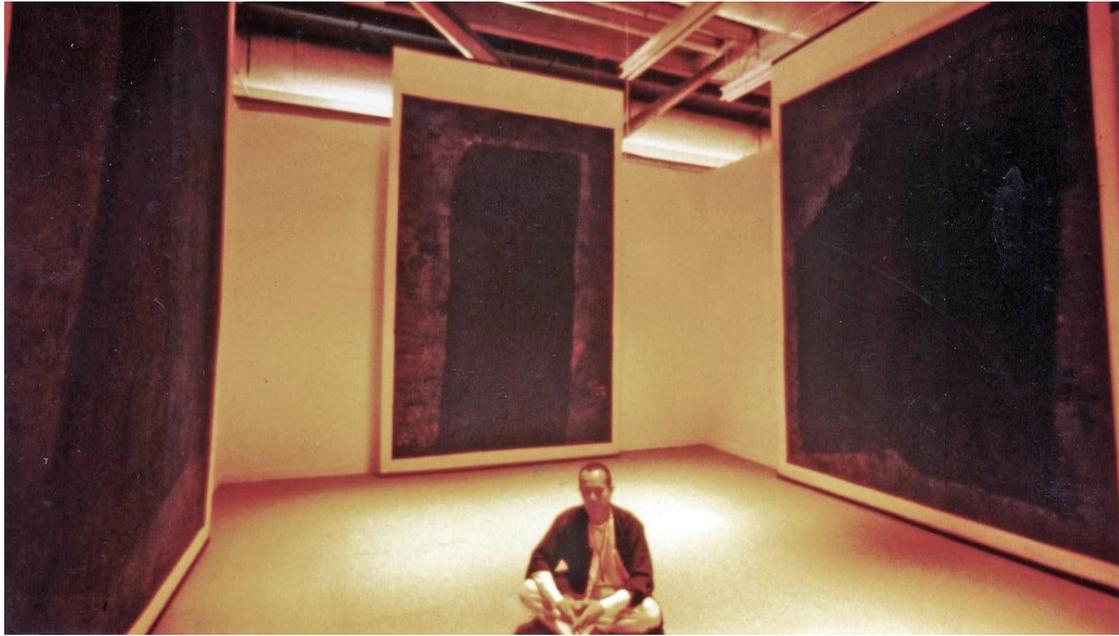


Fig. 7: Yang Jiechang sitting on the floor at Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1989, surrounded by his installation at *Magiciens de la Terre*. Each painting: 420x280cm. Courtesy of Fei Dawei.



Fig. 8: Yang Jiechang. *100 Layers of Ink, No.1*, 1994. Painting. Ink and acrylic on paper laid down on canvas, 170.2 × 186.1 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 9: Yang Jiechang. *100 Layers of Ink, No.2*, 1994. Painting. Ink and acrylic on paper laid down on canvas, 175.3 × 186.1 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 10: Yang Jiechang. *100 Layers of Ink, No.3*, 1994. Painting. Ink and acrylic on paper laid down on canvas, 170.2 × 186.1 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 11: Liang Shaoji. *Chains: The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Nature Series, No. 79* (installation view), 2002–2007. Polyurethane, colophony, iron powder, silk, and cocoons. Dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of the artist and ShanghART Gallery.



Fig. 12: Lin Tianmiao. *The Proliferation of Thread Winding* (installation view), 1995. Video & Installation. White cotton thread, rice paper, steel needles, bed, video player, television monitor. Dimensions variable, open studio, Baofang Hutong 12#, Beijing. Photo courtesy of Lin Tianmiao Studio.



Fig. 13: He Xiangyu, *A Barrel of Dregs of Coca-Cola*, 2009. Installation. Coca-Cola resin, metal, and glass, 210 x 100 x 100 cm. Rubell Family Collection, Miami.



Fig. 14: Zhang Huan. *Taipei Buddha*, 2010. Sculptural installation. Ash and Aluminium. 350 x 360 x 340cm. MoCA TaiPei.



Fig. 15: Zhang Huan. *Sydney Buddha*, 2015. Sculptural installation. Aluminium Buddha Part: 370 x 290 x 260 cm; Ash Buddha Part: 350 x 480 x 290 cm. Carriageworks, Sydney, Australia.



Fig. 16: Zhang Huan. *Berlin Buddha* (Detail. The ash Buddha sculpture before the removal of its face cover), 2007. Sculptural Installation. Ash, Iron and Aluminium. Ash Buddha Part: 350 x 480 x 290 cm. Haunch of Venison, Berlin.



Fig. 17: Zhang Huan. *Berlin Buddha* (Detail of the aluminium Buddha mould), 2007. Sculptural Installation. Ash, Iron and Aluminium. Aluminium Buddha Part: 370 x 290 x 260 cm. Haunch of Venison, Berlin.



Fig. 18: Zhang Huan. *Berlin Buddha* (Detail. Invited guests removing the supporting iron), 2007. Sculptural Installation. Ash, Iron and Aluminium. Ash Buddha Part: 350 x 480 x 290 cm. Haunch of Venison, Berlin. Invited guests removing the supporting iron.



Fig. 19: Zhang Huan. *65 Kilograms*, 1994. Performance. Photo courtesy of Xing Danwen.



Fig 20: Zhang Huan. *Great Leap Forward—Canal Building*, 2007. Painting. Incense ash. 286x1080cm. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 21: Zhang Huan. *Pagoda*, 2009. Gray brick, steel, taxidermied pig. 244(height)x335(diameter) inches. Blum and Poe, Los Angeles.



Fig. 22: Zhang Huan. *Berlin Buddha* (Detail of the aluminium Buddha mould), 2007. Sculptural Installation. Ash, Iron and Aluminium. Aluminium Buddha Part: 370 x 290 x 260 cm. Haunch of Venison, Berlin.



Fig 23: Zhang Huan. *12 Square Meters*, 1994. Performance. Single channel video, 3min 2sec, documentation of a 40-minute performance.



Fig. 24: Zhang Huan. *Berlin Buddha* (Detail. Workers' construction of *Berlin Buddha*), 2007. Sculptural Installation. Ash, Iron and Aluminium. Aluminium Buddha Part: 370 x 290 x 260 cm; Ash Buddha Part: 350 x 480 x 290 cm. Haunch of Venison, Berlin. Invited guests removing the supporting iron.



Fig. 25: Zhang Huan. *Berlin Buddha* (Detail of the head part of the ash Buddha sculpture), 2007. Sculptural Installation. Ash, Iron and Aluminium. Ash Buddha Part: 350 x 480 x 290 cm. Haunch of Venison, Berlin.



Fig. 26: Zhang Huan. *Berlin Buddha* (Detail of the middle and lower parts of the ash Buddha sculpture), 2007. Sculptural Installation. Ash, Iron and Aluminium. Ash Buddha Part: 350 x 480 x 290 cm. Haunch of Venison, Berlin.



Fig. 27: Song Dong. *Water Records* (Detail), 2010. Photo courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery.



Fig. 28: Song Dong. *Water Records* (Detail), 2010. Photo courtesy of the artist and Pace Gallery.



Fig. 29: Song Dong. *Frying Water* (Video Still), 1992. Video, Duration 1' 40,"  
Courtesy the artist and Pace Gallery.



Fig. 30: Song Dong. *Secret Divulging*, 1995. Performance. Ban Shang Hu Tong, No.23,  
Beijing, China.



Fig. 31: Song Dong. *Stamping the Water*, 1996. A set of thirty-six chromogenic prints, Photography, each: 61 x 40 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

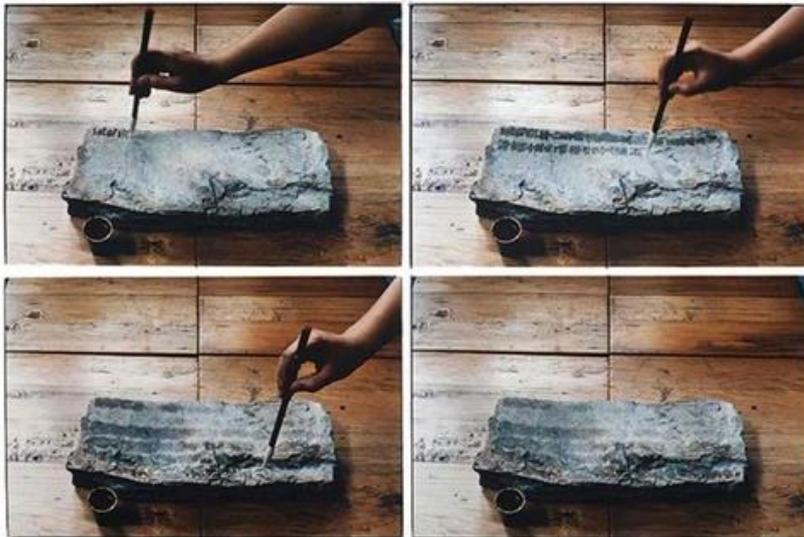


Fig. 32: Song Dong. *Writing Diary With Water*, 1995. Chromogenic prints, Photography, each: 44 x 64 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 33: Song Dong. *Breathing* (Part 1 and Part 2), 1996. Colour transparencies and compact disc, each: 150 × 226 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

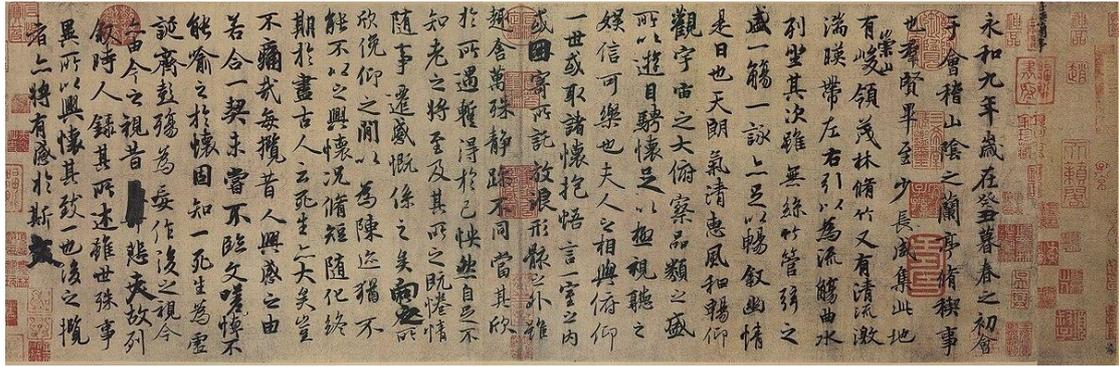


Fig. 34: Wang Xizhi. copy of the *Preface to the Poems Composed at the Orchid Pavilion*, Tang Dynasty, written in fourth century by the “Sage of Calligraphy.”



Fig. 35: Song Dong. *A Pot of Boiling Water*, 1995. 12 photographs, gelatine silver print on paper, each: 318 × 483 mm. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 36: Fan Kuan. *Travelers Among Mountains and Streams* [谿山行旅圖], Song Dynasty (10th Century) - Song Dynasty (Early 11th Century). Painting. Hanging scroll; ink on paper, 1033 x 2063 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei.



Fig. 37. Yang Jiechang in process of creation at the Centre Pompidou, Paris for the exhibition of *Magiciens de la Terre*, 1989, Courtesy of Fei Dawei.



Fig. 38. Huang Yong Ping. *Theater of the World* (installation view), 1987/1993. Installation. Wood and metal structure with warming lamps, electric cable, insects (spiders, scorpions, crickets, cockroaches, black beetles, stick insects, centipedes), lizards, toads, and snakes, 150 x 170 x 265 cm overall. Guggenheim Museum, New York.



Fig. 39: Sun Yuan and Peng Yu. *Dogs Which Cannot Touch Each Other*, 2003. Performance. 8 Bull Terriers, 8 Running Machines Without Drive. Video. Courtesy of Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, Beijing, Les Moulins, Habana.



Fig. 40: Xu Bing. *A Case Study of Transference*, 1993/1994. Performance, mixed media installation / Ink and live pigs. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 41: Liang Shaoji. *Chains: The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Nature Series, No. 79 (Detail)*, 2002–2007. Installation. Polyurethane, colophony, iron powder, silk, and

cocoons. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 42: Liang Shaoji. *Chains: The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Nature Series, No. 79* (Installation view at Wrightwood 659), 2002–2007. Installation. Polyurethane, colophony, iron powder, silk, and cocoons. Dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of the artist and ShanghART Gallery.



Fig. 43: Liang Shaoji, *Chains: The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Nature Series, No. 79* (Installation view), 2002–2007. Installation. Polyurethane, colophony, iron powder, silk, and cocoons. Dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of the artist and ShanghART Gallery.



Fig. 44: Liang Shaoji. *8 Series-8*, 2009. Installation, Video, Microscopes & Live Silkworms. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 45: Trays of live silkworms in Liang Shaoji's studio. Photo courtesy of the artist and ShanghART Gallery.



Fig. 46: Making-process of *Chains: The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Nature Series* in Liang Shaoji's studio. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 47: Liang Shaoji. *Natural Series No.25*, 1999. Photo & Video, 98.0 X 135.0 cm, duration 5'36. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 48: Lin Tianmiao. *The Proliferation of Thread Winding* (Detail of the video demonstrating Lin's endless thread binding), 1995. Video & Installation. White cotton thread, rice paper, steel needles, bed, video player, television monitor. Dimensions

variable, open studio, Baofang Hutong 12#, Beijing. Photo courtesy of Lin Tianmiao Studio.



Fig. 49: He Xiangyu, *A Barrel of Dregs of Coca-Cola* (Detail), 2009. Installation. Coca-Cola resin, metal, and glass, 210 x 100 x 100 cm. Rubell Family Collection, Miami. Photo courtesy of Museum Associates/LACMA.



Fig. 50: He Xiangyu. Documentation of the making-process of *Cola Project*, 2009–2011. Photography. Ink-jet print on paper, dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 51: He Xiangyu. Documentation of the making-process of *Cola Project*, 2009–2011. Photography. Ink-jet print on paper, dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 52: He Xiangyu. Documentation of the making-process of *Cola Project*, 2009–2011. Photography. Ink-jet print on paper, dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 53: He Xiangyu. Documentation of the making-process of *Cola Project*, 2009–2011. Photography. Ink-jet print on paper, dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 54: He Xiangyu. Documentation of the making-process of *Cola Project*, 2009–2011. Photography. Ink-jet print on paper, dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 55: He Xiangyu. *Cola Project Resin* (installation view at 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, 2009–2010. Installation. Courtesy of the artist and White Space, Beijing. Photo courtesy of Zan Wimberley.

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