

HOPE-HOPPING

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ABSTRACT

This collection of texts, accompanied by a series of artworks, speculates upon a new artistic ecology of displacement that emerges at the intersection between post-coloniality, cosmopolitanism, and technopolitics.

Exilic art practice takes myriad forms in this post-1989's new "New World". There are contemporary artists who are far from home, negotiating the distance between their displaced homeland and a foreign settlement. Some of whom manage to envelop their political ruins within a broader, cosmopolitical frame, tackling interconnected systematic challenges that interweave ecological, economic, and cultural knots. Other exilic artists, despite their geographic immobility, are actively practising in a politically-challenged and/or suppressed regime, mostly with limited freedom of speech. Their art goes on exile, speaking in an elusive tongue, acting without proclaiming, enacting an everyday practice that is beyond immediate desecry but thrives in hindsight. This thesis asks: against the threat of instrumentalisation, what is the hope of exilic art-making that leverages on the international, almost-borderless art world in contemplating and resolving one's political trauma? Does an increasing awareness of cosmopolitical responsibility, and the prevalence of virtual artist-activist communities constitute a new scope of hope for exilic art practice?

More often than not, hope is understood against the singular, progressive, productivity-driven type of optimism that is conventionally bestowed by promises of modernity and technology. Yet, the urgency of dismantling this positivist illusion of hope is paramount in our age of new materiality, when scientific discovery and technological advancement, ideological conflicts and anthropocentric consequences have imparted us an insurmountable sense of displacement. Where is hope in this prevailing sense of hopelessness? These questions of hope do not anticipate a simple, positivist response, because the essence of hope does not concern truthfulness but offers plausibility; its efficacy lies exactly at ambiguity. Whether it is true or fake, the (in-)sincerity of hope can only be revealed after it is no longer needed, when the speculation becomes a reality. This entwinement of hope and hopelessness serves as a precarious reminder to the thesis's desire of locating cosmopolitical neighbourhoods, revealing that the cosmopolitical reconciliation between political struggles always has one foot in an open-ended fiction. It is exactly this incompleteness which propels and motivates incessant attempts for initiating connections, practising intimacy, approaching trust.

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METHODOLOGY

This thesis begins with a photo-essay depicting a metaphorical resistance of weeds, and a short, autobiographical text unveiling the specific context of displacement where the artist-author situates. As both an origin and a metaphor, *Weeds* in the prelude chapter a nomadic position for individuals who exist at the margin of autocratic politics. This visual study of urban weeds is the author's reflection on a post-colonial challenge to assimilate into new and bestowed political identities, outlined in *My Home is a Fiction*.

The critical essay in chapter two, *New "New World Exiled"*, provides theoretic anchors for the weed metaphor, through which it attempts to relay the nomadic observation of urban weeds to a greater techno-socio context of the twenty-first century. The notion and representation of "displacement" have been continuously morphed by the advancement of new technologies, rendering the notion of exile slippery: both because of the destabilized understanding of a fixed cultural origin, and the expanding hybridity of our movements (actual or virtual). With new network economies, artists and their art now gradually partake in departed circulations. The essay posits four perspectives to understand how displacement, no matter as a subjective perception or an objective reality, has induced new opportunities and skepticisms on contemporary artistic and cultural production within evolving techno-social fabrics. This writing concludes that the incidence of exile has departed from a specific position that speaks to an outsider's empathy, to a universal experience in which everyone has a stake: from individual to collective (exile *of* one to exile *as* one). The hope of (a) new, cosmopolitical home(s) for exiled bodies is inevitably entangled with the intricacy of understanding each other's distinctive cultural and socio-political formations. A shallow alliance might be back-fired, resulting in appropriation and instrumentalization.

Yet, what is hope, especially in contemporary times when technology has conferred infinite promises to advance humanity, which is also constantly challenged by climate crises, unsettling geopolitics, and public health threats? *Hope-hopping* offers an interlude to extend discussion on hope. Tracing its linguistic, philosophical, and religious trajectories, this chapter exposes how hope is inherently dialectic in nature, deeply entwined with hopelessness. Yet, the common ignorance of this has allowed hope to be instrumentalized into technocratic rhetoric. Often deployed with surface value, the prevalent narrative of hope hinders a critical inspection of techno-positivism. The writing stresses that the operation of hope lies on its conferred plausibility, which itself is a form of hopelessness. Therefore, the ambivalence between hope and hopelessness should be seen as a generative futility: a speculative practice similar to art. In moments of ostensible hopelessness, this detour to unpack hope is necessary for one to march on and to imagine artistic strategies, reenacting the thriving weeds against adverse environments.

In this thesis, the author's personal resonance to the rootless appearance of urban weeds has been extrapolated into an observation of a universal sentiment of displacement. The last chapter, *Non-Arrival, Yet, in Proximity*, is a piece of artistic research that attempts to gather individual responses to the outlook of a cosmopolitical world driven by hyper-mobility, whilst probing the challenge of cultural hybridity that is supposed to define a new cultural identity of constant homelessness. Responding to the question of political alliance tabled in chapter two, three protagonists of different cultural roots are invited to inhabit a temporary space and perform a gesture of their own choice that has been significant to their respective formation. A series of back-stage dialogues are documented in this chapter as an open-ended finale, suggesting approximation over appropriation, in a neighborhood of the new "New World" shared by intermediaries between strangers and friends.

PRELUDE: Weeds

Worlds that They Edge

Worlds that They Edge is a photo-essay of urban weeds at places of transformation: politically, economically, socially. The photos depicted nomadic weeds in a plentitude of forms, often within mundane and unattended layers of urban landscape. The photographic approach is reality-based ethnography; to quote James Agee, “in the immediate world, everything is to be discerned, for him who can discern it, and centrally and simply, without either dissection into science, or digestion into art, but with the whole of consciousness, seeking to perceive it as it stands: so that the aspect of a street in sunlight can roar in the heart of itself as a symphony, perhaps as no symphony can: and all of consciousness is shifted from the imagined, the revisive, to the effort to perceive simply the cruel radiance or what is.”¹

Regardless of perceiving them either inside or outside, weeds are mostly gleaned at the boundary of infrastructure. They are performative, vibrant, dynamic, whispering many untold stories, those of intricacy and contingency of our world through a surprising and diffusive appearance. In the beginning, it was just about their vitality, their charm, their unflinching strength that grows through constraints. Yet after a string of photographic encounters, beyond the physical embodiment of photographing, the phenomena of weeds are refreshed anew to viewers who continue to probe the forms of weeds. There seems to be a bottom-up, discursive, almost accidental effort from weeds to bypass the order of delineated sovereignty, to inhabit the periphery of urban structures. The vibrancy of weeds drifts between both proactivity and reactivity. What can we learn from weeds, and how can we manifest weeds in ourselves?

A spirit of non-compliance?

Transgressing boundaries?

Inhabiting limits and cracks?

Never shy from thriving regardless of triviality?

Moving between circles?

Difficult to define?

Impossible to get hold of?

Being formless?

¹ Agee et al., *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 9.

They stand still at the edge of time, in plain sight. Their silent composure is contested against the cacophony of history. In alternative worlds that they etch, we carefully approach through an outdoor choreography that weaves fragmented perspectives, that dares you to bow in front of a dichotomy between nature and culture, to be transported into an unknown territory freely, and unconditionally.

When ontology is gravitated towards text but mediated through image, perhaps we could think through things, as much as working through things. The latter stands as a temptation; the former is yet a necessity of revival. In every shivering moment I return to weeds, an ongoing that conjures up a suspension in our daily spectacle, probing into frozen frames, long exposure, single and multiple temporalities. Looking at weeds through looping, zooming, scaling, and pacing is, to me, a rhetoric of resurrection.



Kwan Q Li. *Untitled (Athens)*. Digital photography. 2017.



Kwan Q Li. *Untitled (Brussels)*. Digital photography. 2018.



Kwan Q Li. *Untitled (Delhi)*. Digital photography. 2018.



Kwan Q Li. *Untitled (Varanasi)*. Digital photography. 2018.



Kwan Q Li. *Untitled (Shanghai)*. Digital photography. 2018.



Kwan Q Li. *Untitled (Beijing)*. Digital photography. 2018.



Kwan Q Li. *Untitled (Jerusalem)*. Digital photography, 2019.



Kwan Q Li. *Untitled (Tel Aviv)*. Digital photography. 2019.



Kwan Q Li. *Untitled (Boston)*. Film photography. 2020.



Kwan Q Li. *Untitled (Miami)*. Film photography. 2021.



Kwan Q Li. *Untitled (Hong Kong)*. Digital photography. 2017.

My Home is a Fiction

There is no official statistics of exactly how many people have left Hong Kong since July of 2020 after a new national security law took place. Until the beginning of April, the circulated speculative number is around three-hundred thousands. This unprecedented exodus in Hong Kong hints that the decolonialisation of Hong Kong after the handover in 1997, to many, is a unpopular re-imperialization from the Chinese Communist Party: an outlier in postcolonial theories with a negligible precolonial history.

The population of Hong Kong was merely 7,500 when the Her Majesty's Armed Force raised the union flag on this small fish village to the north of the South China Sea in 1841.² Highly perceived as a safety haven from political unrest ranging from the Tai Ping Rebellion (1850-1864), the Revolution against Imperial Chinese government (1911), the second Sino-Japanese war (1937-1945), the Chinese Civil War (1945-49), the cultural revolution (1967-1977), the community of Hong Kong has been drastically enlarged through immigration from the mainland China. Its population size reached almost 5.3 million when the negotiation of handover between London and Beijing began in 1982,³ but to what one is returned to? These are the unique coordinates of "hiraeth" (see page 34) for Hong Kong: an identity that is born in colonial time, in an occupied territory, from an immigrant influx.

Ackbar Abbas, former chair of comparative literature at the University of Hong Kong, once wrote that "history of Hong Kong has effectively been a history of colonialism." Whilst Abbas was holding an Hong Kong Special Administrative Region identity card at that time, this was what he declared when being asked about his national identifier, "I am not renewing it once it is expired. I can potentially live anywhere in the world with my teaching profession. I will survive with my British National Overseas (BNO) passport." What he did not explicate was an insider joke: BNO passport holders were recognised as British citizens anywhere in the world except being diverted to the foreign arrival lanes at passport control in airports of United Kingdom; a self-denial. Indeed, the passport was seen as a half-hearted commitment that the British government was compelled to offer as an emotional compensation against criticisms of leaving its colonial citizens to the demise of democracy and freedom. In short, those who only holds a BNO passport in the world today are citizens of fictions.

² Saw and Chiu, 'Population Growth and Redistribution in Hong Kong, 1841-1975'.

³ Census and Statistics Department Hong Kong, 'Demographic Trends in Hong Kong 1981-1996'.

During a critical theory reading group organised by the Tai Kwun Contemporary in 2017, Abbas was enquired upon his view of the doomed future of Hong Kong. Cognizant of the evoked pessimism of hiraeth, Abbas suggested to probe “the hope of hopelessness”. A generative antithesis, hope and hopelessness cohabitates in every nomad’s rootless nostalgia.

CHAPTER I. NEW “NEW WORLD EXILED”

Displacement at the Intersection of Art, Culture, and Technology

The dispersed phenomenon of weeds is not exclusive. With the world becoming ever-connected through new transportation and communication networks, displacement becomes a collective experience comprising both voluntary (relocation, nomadism) and involuntary experiences (political and climate refuge). The notion and representation of “displacement” has been continuously challenged by the advancement of new technologies. Specifically, technological advancements destabilize distance, both of language and geography: remembering Sherry Turkle’s timeless quote “we are alone together” which indicates a declination of interpersonal intimacy triggered by an abundance of cyber-connections, yet an image of resistance can also travel million miles and unite strangers in defiance.

In such contexts, the notion of exile becomes highly slippery, both because of the destabilized understanding of our native home and the expanding hybridity of our movements (actual or virtual). On a positive note, new forms of technology, media, and networks have innovated the notion of collectivity, rechanneling a sense of belonging. Virtual communities blossom across geographical boundaries and cultural roots, mediated by the immediacy of the internet.

On a broader scope, the growing significance of artificial intelligence, new imaging possibilities, and outer space exploration extrapolate the contemporary discussion of displacement to a planetary scale. Against the looming threat of climate change, it is not far-fetched to speculate that humans will be eventually be on exile from the inhabitable demise of our earth, against the colonisation of artificial intelligence, into new fluid, alternative identities: a new universality.

Against these whirligigs in political, social and technological upheavals, there is a persistent dilemma between an emotional turmoil to depart from where one belongs, and a futility in refuting suppressive regimes. More and more individuals have increasingly encountered a similar conundrum: is there hope in an eternal stray from a sense of being grounded, physically or ideologically? Who are the losers, those that evade the troubled zone, voluntarily or involuntary, or those who are immobile and forced to live against hope? Stranded, one starts pondering upon the apparatus of hope within multitude forms of contemporary displacement.

A Linguistic Play

Despite conceptual nuances and overlaps between jostling vocabularies of “exile”, “migrant”, “nomadism” and “diaspora” in existing literature, the conventional understanding of these quasi-synonyms is often related to a certain degree of dislocation, either being homeless, re-rooted in foreign land, or fluid across territories. The challenge here is not to obfuscate optional transience with political exile, but to re-focus on resisting adversaries instead of lifestyles of choice. The lingering ambiguity of these synonyms has caused contemporary nomadism being flattened into a romanticized buzzword, appropriated to describe the high-volume transaction of art and the rapid mobility of artists in international exhibitions, biennales and festivals; a struggle not too far from the criticism of multiculturalism that is instrumentalized and institutionalized as a marketable form by forces of capitalism.⁴

Nomadism no longer carries a political urgency, nor is it perceived as a resolution to coerced homelessness. For instance, whilst Harvard Business Review defines “digital nomad” as “people who embrace a location-independent, technology-enabled lifestyle that allows them to travel and work anywhere in the internet-connected world”, a precondition is missing: there are people who choose to inhabit a “nomadic” lifestyle; there are also the underprivileged, those deprived of real-life economic opportunities and/or political rights, that are forced to survive within an unprotected and unrooted system. In the case of Amazon Mechanical Turk and the like, one can see how nomadism is subsumed by the neoliberal market to legitimize exploitation for a maximum of flexibility and a minimum of commitment. Certainly, this writing concerns the latter stem of nomadism as an inevitable consequence rather than the former’s nature as a bourgeoisie lifestyle.

T.J. Demos admitted that the close relationships between exile, diaspora and nomadism “are not so clear cut in “The Migrant Image”. Demos deemed “exile” to be a geographical dislocation connotated by imperial politics and their undesirability (“tragic banishment”), and “diaspora” to be “a geographical dispersal in the collective sense”. Turning into its active form, diasporic experience is “to address the concept of identity through the politics of difference”. Citing scholars like Edward Said, Hannah Arendt, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Demos illustrated artistic nomadism as a freedom from the constraints of fixed identity, celebrating diaspora instead of postcolonial baggage, and a resistance against capital’s desire of homogenising cultures and spaces. Later in the text, Demos leveraged Archile Bonito Oliva’s succinct observation to draw a fine line between exile and nomadism:

⁴ Everson, King, and Ockels, ‘Your Company Needs a Digital Nomad Policy’.

“nomadic artists exercise their right to diaspora”.⁵ From his studies, it seems that a causal relationship can be drawn: “exile” as an undesirable estrangement of displacement from home, can be countered by “nomadism” through a “diasporic experience’ that activates a state of “diaspora” as a freedom of pluralistic cultures and identities.

Demos’ focus on migration is intentional, drawn by its impartiality which accounts for voluntary movement and self-willed acts of becoming. With Edward Said’s writing that “exile is nomadic, decentered, contrapuntal, but no sooner does one get accustomed to it than its unsettling force erupts anew”,⁶ it is immediately apparent that these terms of dislocation and mobility are slippery both conceptually and linguistically. This writing focuses on exiled nomadism instead of migrant nomadism. Whilst using “exiled” over “migrant” to foreground a specific negotiation of one’s political trauma, the preferred designation of “exiled” also acknowledges a troubled understanding of distance within new technologies, and hence refers less to literal displacement.

In fact, distance and displacement are perceived distinctively in physics. Displacement operates on a vectoral scale to measure the shortest length between initial and final positions. Distance, as a scalar unit, takes temporality into consideration and considers all lengths travelled throughout the journey, even if the subject returns to the departure point. Traditionally, exiled artists are understood as practitioners departed from their country of birth.⁷ Today, the artist and the artwork can embark on entirely different routes thanks to new circuits of physical and virtual travelling. It is not uncommon to observe that an artist resides at home, whilst their work can only be published or establish affect in a foreign environment, aided by seamless online communication and international transportation networks.

Can we potentially undermine the geographic reality (i.e., zero displacement) of these artists, and still follow the trajectory (i.e., travelled distance) of their work as exilic art? Consider Nigerian visual activist, Zanele Muholi, whose arresting photographic oeuvre of queer portraiture received wide acclaim from prestigious art avenues and major institutions like the Venice Biennale and Tate Modern, whilst the artist’s gay imagery was dismissed as “immoral and offensive” by their home

⁵ Demos, ‘Charting a Course’, 3-11.

⁶ Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, 191.

⁷ In 2017, Yale University Art Gallery presented an exhibition looking into an innovative approach to the theme of exile. In their official materials, exiled artists were defined as “artists who left their country of birth, or their adopted home, for a variety of reasons – including discrimination, war, and genocide – from the 19th century to the present day”. See Yale University Art Gallery, ‘Artists in Exile: Expressions of Loss and Hope’.

Minister of Arts and Culture.⁸ Surpassing domestic repulsion, Muholi's international success demonstrates a possible canon of exilic art, for their art would likely be unnoticed or suppressed if foreign outlets are non-existent for an "exiled" show.

Four Implications on Contemporary Art in New Exilic Conditions

When more and more visual artists and filmmakers of distinct identity struggles today operate in a spectrum of geographical realities that may or may not be removed from their political trauma, it is timely to relay and understand their evolving praxis through changing social fabrics and emerging technologies.

i. For exilic art, the constant threat of objectification from art institutions and markets is prominent. In general, exilic art documents, translates, and advocates the artists' unique experience within the international art world in order to offer alternative and unsung narratives against official histories, archives and propaganda. Muholi's expansive photographic portfolio of Black and queer communities has challenged the suppression of the local government on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex (LGBTI) people in South Africa, rejuvenating the latter's visibility. One of their series, *Brave Beauties*, has documented transwomen in South Africa since 2014 through carefully framed, upfront and powerful monochrome portraiture.⁹ Muholi described their art as preserving black queer visibility. Citing the lack of visual, oral, and textual materials featuring black lesbians and their social roles in the mainstream archive and the women's canon, Muholi described their visual activism as "to mark, map, and preserve our movements through visual histories for reference and posterity so that future generations will note that we were here."¹⁰ Suppressed within their home environments through state censorship and/or political marginalisation, the need to resort to freedom of speech in a foreign territory is a practical decision for Muholi and many others.

Nevertheless, as Boris Groys wrote "the question of identity is not a question of truth but a question of power",¹¹ the personal pain of artists constantly risks being valorized extrinsically and intrinsically, fetishized through a branding tactic and ethical trophies for dominant social forces and institutions to fabricate sympathy and instrumentalize care. It is generally positive that contemporary art institutions are often vocal of geopolitical conflicts and identity activism, as illustrated by multiple Black artists

⁸ Cumming, 'Zanele Muholi Review – Portraiture as Activism'.

⁹ 'Zanele Muholi'.

¹⁰ Muholi, 'Faces and Phases'.

¹¹ Groys, 'The Truth of Art'.

received surging exposure during the Black Lives Matter protests in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder in 2020, e.g. the travelling mid-career survey exhibitions of Julie Mehretu in the LACMA (2019-2020) and the Whitney Museum of American Art (2021), the first major UK survey of Zanele Muholi at Tate Modern (2020-2021), the selection of Simone Leigh as the first African-American female artist to represent USA in 2022 Venice Biennale, etc. Similarly, Palestinian artist Nida Sinnokrot's *KA* (Oslo) (2017) was featured on Artforum's cover right after the escalated violence in the Gaza Strip and the Occupied Territories of Palestine in Spring 2021, as well as Hong Kong artist Wong Ping receiving his first American survey exhibition in the New Museum (2021), following the international publicity of Hong Kong's protests.

The challenge here is to differentiate between seasonality and sustainability, preferring proactivity over reactivity. Celebrating the long-overdue visibility and the often yearslong research and preparation dedicated to these shows, one would also hope such institutional support to be sustainable, wishing it not to be only predatory one-off hype. To Muholi, the mushrooming acquisition of their work by the permanent collections of numerous institutes including the Orlando Museum of Art (2018),¹² the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (2019),¹³ and the Pérez Art Museum Miami (2020)¹⁴ supports her endeavours in building and substantiating visual archives for their oppressed communities. Whether the institutional spotlight is a speculative act remains doubtful, their exilic practice is potentially manifested through this attainment of myriad new "homes" away from the unwelcoming home.

ii. With looming apocalyptic threats nowadays, it becomes apparent that exilic art has increasingly de-prioritized personal toil for a cosmopolitical responsibility, with their artists devoting their work to global responsibilities such as climate change, racial justice and neoliberal exploitation; a response to global citizenship/alienship.¹⁵ Demos' "The Migrant Image" heavily situated the discussion of a politics of migration within the context of globalisation. In his words, migrant-artists practise aesthetics as the "potentiality of becoming other", a rejuvenation of subjectivity against neoliberal forces. In the last chapter, Demos left a hint of how a politics of migration opens up a

¹² 'OMA Adds "Zibuyilie I" by Zanele Muholi to Its Permanent Collection'.

¹³ 'Wangechi Mutu, Judith Linhares, and Zanele Muholi Included in More Than 100 Works Added to PAFA's Permanent Collection'.

¹⁴ 'Allied with Power: African and African Diaspora Art from the Jorge M. Pérez Collection'.

¹⁵ Understood that the experience of citizenship could be applied to contexts beyond formal citizenship status, Linda Bosniak calls for a consideration of "the citizenship of aliens", non-citizens "who live within the national territory and enjoy important rights and recognition by virtue of their presence but who remain outsiders under the community's threshold-old regulating citizenship rules", in studying and diversifying the citizenship landscape. See Bosniak, *The Citizen and the Alien*.

sensitivity that connects one's life with others afar across different temporalities and geographies, highlighting "collective debts, responsibilities and solidarities."¹⁶ This description does not only recall Hall's New World theory in terms of a shared sentiment amongst political victims, but also rhymes with another heated ideologies of cosmopolitics.

Recalling that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak stated "cosmopolitheia requires a borderless world", it seems inevitable that a sense of universality is intensified amongst global communities by technological progress.¹⁷ The ideology of cosmopolitanism is often traced back to Immanuel Kant, who understood cosmopolitanism as seeking a "perfect just civic constitution" that allows humanity to develop fully and purposefully to achieve a "universal cosmopolitan condition".¹⁸ To move beyond Kant's alleged tint of pro-colonialism, Spivak stressed that cosmopolitanism is not syncretism but "forging identities that are not focused specifically on ethnic identities".¹⁹ In fact, the diversity of cosmopolitanisms (capitalist-bourgeois cosmopolitanism, institutional-violent cosmopolitanism, etc.) have frequently been used to shatter their ostensible dichotomy towards nationalisms. Some schools of cosmopolitanism indeed rely on diplomatic relations between stable sovereignties to formulate interstate rules. Regarding cosmopolitanism's lexiconic instability, the "cosmopolitical" is introduced as a more meaningful lens to study the global forces of the political, the socioeconomic, and the cultural that continuously condition cosmopolitanisms and nationalisms.²⁰ Especially addressing global issues of the Anthropocene, such as the climate crisis, the cosmopolitical is related to the "aesthetic of intersectionality" that Demos coined as the revealing of complex causalities and effects beneath disastrous phenomena and calls for transnational movements.²¹

Ai Weiwei, one of the most influential Chinese contemporary artists who is now based internationally, has developed an oeuvre which evolves from a local criticism to address global concern. Briefly imprisoned for three months in Beijing on charges of tax evasion in 2011, Ai left China in 2015 with the state's permission, yet never shied away from overtly reproaching the Chinese authoritative regime with allegations such as a suppression of individuality and a censorship of freedom. Alongside artistic production that directly commented on his home politics such as the "S.A.C.R.E.D." installation (2013), Ai has gradually shifted to produce artwork that addresses broader geo-political contexts, including

¹⁶ Demos, 'Destination'.

¹⁷ Spivak, 'Cosmopolitanisms and the Cosmopolitical'.

¹⁸ Rorty and Schmidt, *Kant's 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim'*, 14-15.

¹⁹ Spivak, 'Cosmopolitanisms and the Cosmopolitical'.

²⁰ Cheah, Robbins, and Social Text Collective, *Cosmopolitics*, 31.

²¹ Demos, 'Blackout'.

his film “Human Flow” (2017) on migrant crises that documented displacement and precarious settlements in countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel, Mexico and Turkey. In a recent interview, Ai further related the climate crisis to his diasporic condition, pronouncing that “I fled from the suffocating and life-threatening political environment of Beijing, but leaving was not just an aesthetic and political choice. It was also a longing for fresh air, clean water and green plants, and a desire for freedom and safety. I, too, have become an environmental refugee.”²² Making the linkage from personal predicament to a universal struggle apparent, it is provoking to consider how the 7-year exile of Ai has invoked the artist into a cosmopolitical perspective that is bigger than his national agenda. Is it just another cultural assimilation, a half-hearted subsumption to an international audience, or a devout revelation: from all for one, to one for all?

iii. The third question attempts to further complicate the exilic definition of art through protean definitions of “art-making” especially in the context of a new “New World”. Belonging to people of all colours and ethnicity, the original “New World” is an empty, unoccupied and shared territory which Stuart Hall described as the home of continuous displacements in the form of physical diaspora and evolving colonisation and suppression. As a narrative of displacement, “New World” embodies an “imaginary plenitude... the infinitely renewable source of desire, memory, myth, search, discovery”.²³ Since Hall published his seminal text on cultural identity and diaspora in 1989, here we argued that the “New World” has accelerated, transformed and distorted into a new “New World”.

Most distinctively, an explosion of media platforms and a democratisation of artistic tools through the emergence of cost-free, open-sourced software have enabled dispersive, grassroots contributions to visual culture independent of institutional forces. Instead of simply resuming the dated argument of whether all artistic production can be incorporated within the discourse of contemporary art in terms of contextuality and criticality, the concern here is rather proximate to the challenge of what Boris Groys coined “the truth of art”, a search of true identity that is not merely nominal and socially constructed. Groys applauded the internet as an apposite realm in search of non-identity in this context-saturated age, thanks to its nature as an archive that offers possibilities for decontextualization and recontextualization.²⁴ Acknowledging that artistic strategies of non-identity are best revealed on the internet rather than traditional museum systems that fixate a nominal identity, we see a prevalence of anti-hierarchical activist-artist collectives utilising social media platforms and virtual connectivity to foreground multinational and cross-ethnic issues whilst emphasising solidarity across interconnected

²² ‘Ai Weiwei on Climate Loss’.

²³ Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’.

²⁴ Groys, ‘The Truth of Art’.

struggles. Besides the overt confrontation of migrant issues, social marginalisation and state suppression, these collectives construct a communal space anchored in virtual care, cross-border bonding and cosmopolitical solidarity, if not a new, immaterial “home” for moving, exiled bodies.

In *The Migrant's Image*, Demos' exhaustive case studies of individual artistic practice, such as Steve McQueen, Hito Steyerl and Emily Jacir on their mediation of migration, contrast starkly with the communal approach that is rapidly gaining currency in the contemporary art world. The new “New World”, on one hand, seemingly prefers an anonymous collectivity that downplays the leadership and authorship of a celebrity-artist; on the other hand, it frowns at the political value of aesthetic distance stemmed from modern art movements and commands direct social intervention. For instance, Decolonize This Place (DTP), with two-hundred thousand followers on Instagram, declares itself “an action-oriented movement and decolonial formation in New York City and beyond”. Their activist agenda spans from indigenous insurgence, Black liberation, free Palestine, free Puerto Rico, to working-class struggles, de-gentrification, migrant justice and beyond. Positioning themselves in the shoes of artists, a significant portion of their actions revolve around cultural institutions, including movements against the American Museum of Natural History (2016-2019), Brooklyn Museum (2018), and the Whitney Museum (2019), alongside ongoing protests supporting an independent sovereignty of Palestine, gig workers' rights, global environmental activism, to name but a few.²⁵ International groups like DTP and Forensic Architecture with their prominent presence in the contemporary art scene, both above-the-line (exhibitions and biennales) and below-the-line (coalition and activism), have urged us to unprecedentedly expand our understanding of new aesthetic strategies that can represent and engage a diasporic distance from one's dissenting political contexts.

When releasing their artist list for Documenta 15, the Indonesian art collective ruangrupa has chosen to display time zones next to each artistic unit instead of conventional country denotations. It is a prominent testimony to what this writing is grounded upon: in the new “New World”, a linearity of time and space has long vanished. This dismantlement has obscured terms that designate temporal and spatial hierarchy, and hence their related concepts of origin and diaspora, settlement and exile, statelessness and new communities. Recalling Teshome H. Gabriel's text on nomadic aesthetics in 1988, the nomad, the travelling tribes found from the Americas to Africa, to Black communities, are both linguistically (through their shared ardency for symbolism, metaphor, music and performance) and spatially (through their similar states of being marginalized and de-territorialized) connected. Today, several traits from Gabriel are still conducive to illustrate the “nomads” of our new “New

²⁵ 'Decolonize This Place'.

World”: a living modality against state, hegemonic and settler boundaries (immigration, displacement, exile), a subjective temporality through a coalescence of the past (memory) and the future (augury), a community-centric collectivity, and a passing sensibility that honours fluidity and discursion.²⁶

iv. Exile is relentlessly conditioned by technological development. It describes a physical condition as much as a subjective feeling of alienation, as Edward Said defined, “it is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place”.²⁷ In both definitions, nevertheless, the discrepancy is often mediated by technology, be it the accessibility to be physically relocated, or the extent of self-identification through new digital forms of appearance. The explosion of still and moving images since the 19th century have pre-empted a problematic notion of distance in the new “New World”, when the “native place” in the definition of exile could be understood as a sense of subjectivity. Prior to proposing “the civil contract of photography” which emphasizes the public’s right to see and enact photography free of governmental power, Ariella Azoulay reminded us that photographic encounters always involve violence, with the photographed person objectified in an image, the ownership of which is, however, assigned to the photographer.²⁸ It is a type of exile, when one can no longer locate their own subjectivity in their images. Photography is also related to other physical exiles, as Azoulay called it “an imperial technology” that made visible and acceptable imperial world destruction and legitimized the world’s reconstruction on empire’s term,²⁹ accelerating large-scale intercontinental migration in relation to capitalist exploitation.

The lens also destructs temporality. Rethinking Susan Sontag’s *On Photography* (1977), “to collect photographs is to collect the world”,³⁰ how can exile be situated when places come to us through images? In Sontag’s words, photographs reject continuity, yet “participate in another person’s, (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability”. The invention of photography was a transformation of space-time through the machinal gaze.

The rise of technical images and surveillance technology render another form of exile; their excessive applications in city-wide CCTV networks, X-ray scanners and ariel monitoring systems as a means of population control subvert a sense of safety even in one’s native home. In response, citizens “migrate” to the use of pseudonyms and non-indexical avatars, an exile of identities. The technical manipulation

²⁶ Gabriel, ‘Thoughts on Nomadic Aesthetics and the Black Independent Cinema: Traces of a Journey’.

²⁷ Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, 180.

²⁸ Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 95.

²⁹ Azoulay, *Potential History*, 32.

³⁰ Sontag, *On Photography*, 3.

of gaze manifested in state power has long been explored by an array of artist-thinkers including Harun Farocki (who extensively explored “operational images”, including images taken by missiles, as “images which do not portray a process but are themselves part of a process”),³¹ Allan Sekula (...to dismantle the essentialist nature of photographic evidence as the folklore of photographic truth),³² and Hito Steyerl (literally, *How Not to be Seen?*)³³

In addition to image production and circulation, the intensification of biopolitical interventions has separated us from our bodies: a cellular exile. Within a hype of chemical micro-engineering and a flood of advertisements for drugs, supplements, hormones and vaccines, Paul B. Preciado put the final nail in the coffin by pronouncing that “your body is the body of the planet”, as we are no longer the sole inhabitant of our bodies, but share them with interlaid forces of politics, technology, and design. Borrowing Preciado’s term, our bodies are “a living political archive”.³⁴ So, where are our dispelled fragments? Continuing Donna Haraway’s cyborg manifesto (humans as “fabricated hybrids of machine and organism”), this bio-exile also pertains to a cognitive level. When Kate Crawford borrowed the idea of an atlas to help explain her theory of AI, namely “the massive industrial formation that includes politics, labour, culture and capital”, it was a response to the predate and determinative clout of AI which is gradually dominating fields of mobility, communication and labour.³⁵ Now we see humans are not spared, but are laid off; a displacement from job equity, being forced to negotiate with temporary contracts and tedious workflows in order to comply with AI-formatted, quantifiable models. The growing significance of data transforms our intelligence to infrastructure for surveillance capitalism. Can artificial intelligence be understood as an exile of human intelligence?

Considering myriad technological exiles triggered by the boom of photography, Azoulay had long foreseen an outburst of exilic scope, stating that “photography, together with the other media that created the condition for globalisation, paved the way for a universal citizenship... making sure other cultures are accessible, in all of their prestige or misery, deeming local cultures to be worthy of documentation and public display. Photography, being in principle accessible to all, bestows universal

³¹ ‘Harun Farocki: Eye / Machine III’.

³² Sekula, ‘Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)’.

³³ *How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Education.Mov File* (2013) is a 14-minute film from Hito Steyerl, taken in a form of self-taught tutorial, exploring different means to evading surveillance and virtual representations, “to hide, to remove, to go off-screen, to disappear.”

³⁴ Tucker, ‘An Interview with Beatriz Preciado’.

³⁵ Crawford, *Atlas of AI*, 9-11.

citizenship on a new citizenry whose citizens produce, distribute, and look at images.”³⁶ The tectonics of contemporary exiles are technologically composed, largely conditioned by evolving, robotic ways of seeing. Their spreading influence has once again resonated with the aforementioned cosmopolitical agenda of exilic art: the hope of constructing nomadic neighborhoods.

Hope and Hopelessness

Recalling different examples illustrated in this essay, exilic art practice takes myriad forms in this new “New World”. There are artists who are far from home, negotiating the distance between their displaced homeland and a foreign settlement. Some of whom manage to envelop their political ruins within a broader, cosmopolitical frame, tackling interconnected systematic challenges that interweave ecological, economic, and cultural knots. Other exilic artists, despite their geographic immobility, are actively practising in a politically-challenged and/or suppressed regime, mostly with limited freedom of speech. Their art goes on exile, speaking in an elusive tongue, acting without proclaiming, enacting an everyday practice that is beyond immediate desecry but thrives in hindsight. Following the four observations in a new “New World” we ask: against the threat of instrumentalization, what is the hope of exilic art-making that leverages on the international, almost-borderless art world in contemplating and resolving one’s political trauma? Does an increasing awareness of cosmopolitical responsibility, and the prevalence of virtual artist-activist communities like DTP, constitute a new scope of hope for exilic art practice?

More often than not, hope is understood against the singular, progressive, productivity-driven type of optimism that is conventionally bestowed by promises of modernity and technology. Yet, the urgency of dismantling this positivist illusion of hope is paramount in our age of new materiality, when scientific discovery and technological advancement, ideological conflicts and anthropocentric consequences have imparted us an insurmountable sense of displacement. Where is hope in this prevailing sense of hopelessness? These questions of hope do not anticipate a simple, positivist response, because the essence of hope does not concern truthfulness but offers plausibility; its efficacy lies exactly at ambiguity. Whether it is true or fake, the (in-)sincerity of hope can only be revealed after it is no longer needed, when the speculation becomes a reality.

“Stealing the pain of others” is a phenomenon coined by S.H. Razack in questioning the authenticity of empathy, and the effectiveness of activism. Considering a representation of a humanitarian crisis

³⁶ Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 126.

through narratives, images, and films, Razack criticized the tendency of witnesses to objectify victims and reinforce a moral superiority. Appropriation of pain occurs when individual differences are identified in addition to the recognition of struggles.³⁷ Yet here we ask, how about hope - can hope be approximated? Acknowledging that political struggles are never comparable, the openness of aesthetics overcome geo-political specificity and move beyond a mere showcase of victimhood. For displaced communities, exilic art presents an alternative order against the ruling power, a pathway to reconstruct solidarity and a potential homemaking, redeeming a convivial futurity.

In a dialectic approach one may wonder, what stands opposed to hope? The oscillating abstraction of hope between poles of optimism and pessimism can be summarized within this succinct comment of Heinrich Blücher, “pessimists are cowards and optimists are fools.”³⁸ How about fear? If different politically-displaced communities cannot attain a certain level of shared hope, do we start fearing each other? It is almost inevitable when relativism comes into play between different victimhoods: the emigration wave of Hong Kong beneath its glossy, metropolitan skyscrapers is hardly comparable to the chaos at Afghanistan when civilians clung to departing planes for their last chance of evacuation before falling to their fate. The occupied state of Native American and Palestinian homelands sometimes strike a similar chord of empathy, yet violence takes over each side in divergent dimensions: to the former it is sustained via perpetual systemic discrimination and marginalisation, to the latter it is through direct aggression. And whilst imagery of Asian and African American communities standing in solidarity circulated widely during the Black Lives Matter (BLM) and Anti-Asian Hate protests between 2019 and 2021, such a rally does not come effortlessly. Research from Arizona State University revealed that Asian Americans who are born overseas had the highest rate of reporting indifference to the BLM movement amongst all racialized groups, largely due to their own immigration struggles against White supremacy and systemic racism.³⁹

“I do not intend to speak about, but just speak nearby” – in *Assemblage* (1982), Trinh T. Minh-ha reminded us that a jeopardized right of speech is the casualty of pointing an anthropological lens towards a community that the speaker does not belong to. When exile is becoming a collective journey, with individuals carrying diverse cultural, political, and emotional baggage resisting in adjacency towards a plethora of political and technological alienations, what we need is not an approximate clinical pain scale that intends to obscure suffering, but a motivation for shared hope; a poetic space that has long been explored by contemporary exilic art practice to address and unpack the

³⁷ Razack, ‘Stealing the Pain of Others’.

³⁸ Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 136.

³⁹ Yellow Horse et al., ‘Asian Americans’ Indifference to Black Lives Matter’.

increasingly fraught and abstracted notions of nationalism, nomadism, cosmopolitanism, distance and displacement.

Exilic art is a world of many worlds, a space where agency invokes a dialectical position against dominant structures: agency as defined by Warren Neidich, that “reaffirms the contingencies of the social environment and status quo to reproduce norms, to resist and challenge social order, and, thereby, to reshape it.”⁴⁰ Here, exilic art serves as the hinterland of the slippery, forced, and exploitative national consciousness. Intricately, the shared hope across inter-political struggles in this hinterland will never be complete and has one foot in hopelessness. This ambivalence is encapsulated within a Welsh word, “hiraeth”. In *Y geiraidur cyfoes* (Modern Welsh Dictionary), “hiraeth” is defined as “nostalgia, longing, grief, homesickness”. The inclusion of “grief”, derived from “-aeth”, points to an irrevocable loss of a subject matter. For multicultural exilic communities, any attempt of assimilation is bound to recall the brutal reality that there is limited commonalities to reconcile: it conjures up a sense of homesickness, except the home that is longed for is also non-exist.

Yet, with respect to black diaspora, artist-filmmakers Onyeka Igew and JD Stokely described “hiraeth” as a space that is fluid, amorphous, becoming but never becomes. In the experience of “hiraeth”, Igew and Stokely were not restrained by an erasure of their pasts in archival history. They recognised the fictiveness of those forgotten histories, and attempted to fill the gaps through “exploiting and reclaiming these pasts, to disidentify with them, to transform the past into a contentious space, and therefore queering our understanding of linear time”. “I can’t locate that (memory) in a place, because I didn’t grow up in Nigeria,” Igew confessed an impossibility of resurrection. Nevertheless, futility can be transformed into active agency through editing, layering, rephrasing. Igew’s essay video *We Need New Names* (2015) recreated historical narratives through juxtaposing the funeral footage of the artist’s grandmother with ethnographic archival materials about colonial-era Southeastern Nigeria. In her words, the creative is to “elevate the fiction to the same level as the archival material”.⁴¹

Fiction is alternative power. In Dia Center for the Art’s discussion series in contemporary culture, Philomena Mariani deemed “critical fictions” as the consideration of “the critical relationship between imaginative writing and the political and social institutions that shape the writer’s daily experience”; in other words, it directly addresses the politics of writing.⁴² Especially through fiction, the ostensible

⁴⁰ Neidich, *Glossary of Cognitive Activism (for a Not so Distant Future)*.

⁴¹ Igew and Stokely, ‘Hiraeth, or Queering Time in Archives Otherwise’.

⁴² Mariani, *Critical Fictions*, 10-12.

impossibility of resurrection in “hiraeth” is often seemed more productive than it infers. This paradox acknowledges a buffer zone for racial and contextual differences and frictions to co-exist.

CHAPTER II. HOPE-HOPPING

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希
世
望

(In Chinese, hope is read as “希望”. “希” denotes a benevolent outlook, and “望” refers to an anticipation. Interestingly, “希” can be a shorten form of “稀”, referring to a preciousness that is derived from its rarity. “禾”, as the addition within the character structure, means “crops”, and hence it introduces an extrinsic aspect of the connotation. These wordplays reveal the inherent paradox of hope, that hope is at once abundant and limited; it serves as an agency of offering, but also a tool for valorisation.)

Following up the desire to seek a hope of solidarity with other exilic political entities, however, this chapter avoids taking a superficial understanding of hope, resisting its surface value. What is hope, after all? Whilst different notions of hopes have prevailed from historic religious texts to contemporary media, its unmediated saturation, however, has allegedly reduced hopes into lesser forms: a capitalist tokenism. The chapter, in contrast, advocates for a deeper reflection on the premises of hopes through four pathways: the myth, the form, the dialectic, and the economy. Here, the plurality form of hope is embraced, despite the linguistic anomaly, to accentuate the diversity of hopes and its multi-dimensional influence on us, through both its positive and negative forms.

The Myth of Hopes

Hope surfaces, hope vanishes. Hope sustains us; hope can also betray us. Hope can be provoked organically, but much hope is fabricated artificially. Hope is a noun, a verb; a subject, an object; an act, an affect; a personal merit, a political buzzword. We can hope for something proactively; hope can also be bestowed upon us. In contrast to the word's prevalence, hope remains as a metonym for a multitude of conflated feelings. Often deployed as a tautology, its core essence remains hidden in plain sight. Its slippery definitions appropriate and exhaust latent lexicon about the future. It is exactly this ambiguity that confers an implication to the present: which Roland Barthes described as a type of speech defined by its intention, its means of uttering instead of its literal sense, the object of its message: a myth.⁴³

The depiction of hope in literature can be dated back to middle English, largely located in religious texts. In the Bible (NRSV), the word "Hope" appears 202 times. Psalm 33:22 goes, "let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us, even as we *hope* in you." And Romans 8:23-25, "for in *hope* we were saved." In contrast, hope is less a dogma in eastern philosophies, such as Buddhism and Confucianism. Buddhists believe that to "sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny"; karma functions as a deed-based natural law that seemingly does not leave much space for contingency and hope.⁴⁴ Likewise, Confucianism emphasises the practice of life instead of the honouring of spirit, prioritising act over hope.

In the Oxford English Dictionary, hope is "desire combined with expectation";⁴⁵ wish is "a feeling in the mind directed towards something which one believes would give satisfaction if attained, possessed,

⁴³ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 107.

⁴⁴ Keown, *Buddhism*, 40-41.

⁴⁵ 'Hope, n.1'.

or realised”;⁴⁶ and dream is, amongst other definitions, “a vision or hope for the future; (in early use chiefly) a vain hope or idle fantasy; (now also) an idea, goal, ambition, or aspiration”.⁴⁷ Here, dream encompasses hope, perhaps sometimes a utopian hope, but hope does not necessarily conjure dream.

Is hope an intuition, an inborn instinct? Have we ever being taught the ritual of hoping? In 1884, hope was pronounced as a type of emotion highlighted by Scottish philosopher Alexander Bain, expressing “belief (as a mental state) in its cheering or elating aspect”.⁴⁸ An evolution of hope from a plain act to a physiological state, it is also an archetypal post-enlightenment exemplar when science replaced God. In modern and contemporary art, hope has been an origin of bottomless inspiration to artists. *Hope is the thing with feathers*, a short poem published in 1891 after the poet’s death, marked Emily Dickinson’s deciphering of hope as something “that perches in the soul – and sings the tune without the words – and never stops – at all.” *Hope* is also the name of a series of sensual oil paintings created by Gustav Klimt between 1903 – 1908, in which he juxtaposed birth and mortality through the portraits of pregnant women and skulls. A similar dichotomy is spot in Paul Klee’s mixed-media lithograph, *Destruction and Hope (Zerstörung und Hoffnung)*, made in the midst of World War I (1916). And in a series of nine letterpress and lithographs of Louise Bourgeois’ *What is the Shape of This Problem?* (1999), the prolific artist and sculptor playfully put, “The papillon, the ray of hope”.

The Form of Hopes

Similar to dream, hope is quasi-autonomous. Rather than being our active call, hopelessness arrests us, shatters our rationality. A deficiency of hope activates a valiant search. It is as if hope is hidden and capricious. Self-help guides will proclaim that we need to be proactive and devotional in inviting hope into our lives: a flattering. Hope is both the contagious actant and a vaccine of its own. In light of the purgatory of hopelessness, different mutual aid groups and supportive communities emerge to share, cultivate, and compound hopes.

The active form of hope has opened up a question of materiality. To Jane Bennett, human mood, action, meaning, agenda, or ideology all represent vital materialities which are not limited to impacting human’s will and decision, but also “act as a quasi-agents or forces with trajectories,

⁴⁶ ‘Wish’.

⁴⁷ ‘Dream, n.2 and Adj.’

⁴⁸ Bain, *Mental and Moral Science. Part First*, 371, 384.

propensities, or tendencies of their own”.⁴⁹ Our unsettling encounters with hope defy a traditional subject-object relationship. The mercurial temperament of hope cements its vitality.

We depend on individual hope, as much as collective hope. From the minute to the monolithic, we are an assemblage of hopes. Whilst hope has often meant progress, a more rudimentary hope lies in our daily lives. It is sentiment of the mass, whose will to live is not bound by a level of achievement but found in lingering amidst misery: hope as makeshift. Musing on Michel de Certeau’s theory of the everyday practice, the knowledge of hope remains to us as unconscious,⁵⁰ particularly the most faint hope as survival instinct. Above all, there is a humble yet persistent rhythm, committing to no visions of advancement, but a console to distressed souls in an increasing wave of vicissitudes. This poetics of hope is felt through liberating a futile pursuit of an absolute truth into a meandering of new openings. Hope is the courage of dwindle when darkness descends.

In adversaries, more often than not withdrawal is an unviable option while a total annihilation is merely an illusion. The radicals are accused of apathy to revolution-instigated causalities of the physical, environmental, and mental; whilst others bear an eternal guilt of a *laissez-faire* appearance. The latter’s culpability can be absolved by an impossibility of death, tabled by Simon Critchley as an “indeterminate sense of something happening in the absence of all beings”.⁵¹ Inaction is a presence of nothing, in other words, a solid gesture. Against being magnetised to polarised positions, in contrast, achieving composure at a middle ground demands more than it seems.

In contrast to the spectacular, prosperous hope, the more nuanced hope is that which meanders along hopelessness, to linger on. Most timely, the malleability of hope has rejected a common definition as the singular, progressive, productivity-driven optimism that is conventionally engineered by promises of modernity. To Friedrich Nietzsche, the biggest strength is found in the most moderate ones, who effortlessly concede in pleasure, without the resolve of extreme faiths; it is what Nietzsche called, “the attained strength of humanity with conscious pride”.⁵²

Hope can be real or fake, engineered or authentic. Whether it is true or false, the fidelity of hope could only be revealed after it is no longer needed, when the speculation becomes a reality. Yet, regardless of its truthfulness, its affordance effectuates prior to its actualisation. A fact ends hope. Between its

⁴⁹ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, viii, x.

⁵⁰ Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 71.

⁵¹ Critchley, *Very Little-- Almost Nothing*, 66.

⁵² Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 38-39.

matter of existence and its realisation exists a temporal disparity. It is exactly the uncertainty embedded in hope which ratifies the formation of hope. This kind of dialectic conflict has also been generative in discussing the current techno-culture which seems to be transparent and opaque at the same time, as Jodi Dean put, “it is the secret marks the absence necessary to sustain belief...”⁵³ If its truthfulness is irrelevant, then the function of hope is to offer a plausibility; its efficacy lies exactly at ambiguity.

The Dialectic of Hopes

Can we live without hope? The central argument of hopelessness lies at an oxymoron, an impossible attempt of sketching hope. In other words, the absence of hope affirms an existence of hope that is to be unearthed. This dialectic relationship is akin to Albert Camus’s discussion of suicide, “it often happens that those who commit suicide were assured of the meaning of life.”⁵⁴ As doppelgängers, hope and hopelessness could not be felt without a fraction of one another. Hopelessness always carries the ghost of hope. It is with this principle that Camus imagined Sisyphus must be happy, in spite of the latter’s punishment to the eternal labour of nothing (i.e. to keep rolling a rock up a mountain that will inevitably fall back to its origin). Here, Camus hypothesised that consciousness and contemplation is the negation of a given destiny, even at the destitute of hope, founding the basis of existentialism.⁵⁵

One can also see hopelessness being ingrained in hope, challenging the latter’s idealism. It is evident when we compare performative speech between “I do”, “I want”, and “I hope”. The former two imply a sense of self-motivation; it does not limit what one can pursue in order to achieve the goal. Yet, if one can act with total certainty, one does not need to partially or thoroughly undertake the gesture of hope. Hope is hence implicit in a degree of withdrawal, calling for some inexplicable forces to realise the final stretch that is too far-fetched for the subject. A hope is not optimism as naïveté; it implies a sober propensity of failure. The hopelessness of hope lies in the impossibility of turning over this uncertainty.

Perhaps the Greek mythology of Pandora’s Box is the most apt in concluding the paradox between hope and hopelessness.

“A jar given to Pandora, the first mortal woman, by the gods. Pandora was forbidden to open the box,

⁵³ Dean, *Publicity’s Secret*, 21.

⁵⁴ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 8.

⁵⁵ Camus, 87-89.

but, out of curiosity, she disobeyed, and released from it all the evils and illnesses that have afflicted mankind ever since. Only Hope remained at the bottom of the jar.”⁵⁶

Although the general use of the phrase “Pandora’s box” implies an origin of insurmountable problems, the ending of this myth is often interpreted as a silver lining; at least hope is still withheld by our female ancestor. However, this reading also entails an insolvable question, for if hope was not released, how could it be spread among humankind?

Whilst hope prevails in religious texts, hopelessness has gained currency in contemporary critical theories. Fred Moten’s canonical theory on fugitive making discerns straight into blackness as a subject that is *hopelessly* troubled by, in being emphatically detached from, the action whose agent it is supposed to be. “Is a problem that can’t be solved still a problem?” Moten asked, and continued with a perhaps less conventional approach: an insistence of blackness upon interstitial, durational, escape.⁵⁷ Hopelessness does not mean a deadlock. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam noted that “there is something powerful in being wrong, in losing, in failing.”⁵⁸ The celebration of failure indeed untethers a singular, hegemonic definition of success that heteronormative capitalism has fuelled. It is critical to examine what constitutes the discourse behind hope? Who claims to give hope to (post)humanity; what is the suspicious formation of such an ostensible power?

Hopelessness denotes the lack of hope. How about the antithesis of hope? If one cannot hope, is one doomed? And if we do not hope, do we fear? The Quran [7:56] stated that “Do not spread corruption in the land after it has been set in order. And call upon Him with hope and fear. Indeed, Allah’s mercy is always close to the good-doers.”⁵⁹ In spite of seeming slightly absurd, one seems able to hope and fear at the same time. Does hope necessarily oscillate between the binary of optimism and pessimism? To the aforementioned 19th century’s philosopher Alexander Bain, the answer is apparent: instead of fear, the opposite of hope is despondency. It is “a belief in coming evil”, with its extremity as despair. To him, the opposite of hope does not diminish in strength; when this ill thought grows stronger, a condition of mind will get more depressed.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Delahunty and Dignen, ‘Pandora’s Box’.

⁵⁷ Moten, *Black and Blur*, v-xiii.

⁵⁸ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 120.

⁵⁹ ‘Surah Al-A’raf - 7:56’.

⁶⁰ Bain, *Mental and Moral Science. Part First*, 384-385.

If we see hope as a forward-looking movement, does nostalgia stand against hope? The discussion of the latter essentially leads us to the constructed linearity of time that many scholars have attempted to debug. In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym wrote that while nostalgia often confers a sense of loss and displacement, desiring for a different time, it concerns the future as much as the past. In fact, hope and nostalgia might just be two sides of the same coin, “romance with one’s own fantasy”.⁶¹ The ostensible linearity of time has been long rebutted by different scholars. The famous quote from Walter Benjamin, “history is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time” substantiated his claims for a temporal heterogeneity.⁶² The past is subject to a continuous reading and appropriation by the present. The idea of non-linear time is also deeply echoed within indigenous ideologies, as Silvia Federici put, “the past-future is contained in the present.” Against common colonial expressions, Indigenous modernity reflects a “continuous feedback from the past to the future”, and should be liberated from the baggage of “original people” for the production of contemporary knowledge, including modern science. Federici coined this exactly as “a principle of hope”.⁶³

The Economy of Hopes

In present times, it is difficult not to be skeptical when recognising the providence of hope in all sorts of news, literature, screenplay, lyrics, advertisement, our everyday conversation and exchange. Bell Hooks wrote about the young generation’s fear of talking about love, “especially when I spoke about not feeling loved enough... I was told I should consider a therapist”.⁶⁴ Yet hope is the opposite; we are not short of hope, and only few may be afraid of hope. When Hook wrote that “our silence shields us from uncertainty. We want to know love”;⁶⁵ for hope, this sentence is more likely to be turned into: “our ignorance shields us from curiosity. We don’t want to know hope”!

Perceivably, this refusal has adverse consequences. When the overwhelming usage of hope remains largely unmeditated; its discourse remains hidden. We hope without regurgitating its agency, and its operative. Because of this oblivion, we become the victim of hope; inevitably, we desert the hope of hopes. Hope is often displaced as an end-point. In an attempt to withdraw from undesirable contexts, one may conclude, “let us hope”; an immaterial gesture, a stranding in time. It is similar to saying “God

⁶¹ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xiii.

⁶² Benjamin, Eiland, and Jennings, *Selected Writings. Volume 4*, 395.

⁶³ Rivera Cusicanqui and Geidel, *Ch’ixinakax Utxiwa*, 48-69.

⁶⁴ hooks, *All about Love*, xix.

⁶⁵ hooks, xxvi.

has a plan.”, let God do the rest. It overrides all other possibilities of how one might be able to exert agency. Hope stagnates us.

This mass oblivion is a result of a century of effort by mass media, corporate campaigns, information capitalism. Indeed, their success of instrumentalising hope can be attributed to a certain degree of scientific veracity. Hope is somatic as much as sentimental, illustrated by a vast amount of medical research regarding hope as a positive behavioural trait that confers a clinical impact especially on recovery. Snyder’s Theory of Hope (1994) offered an early definition of the essence of hope as a cognitive set of positive expectations, whilst foregrounding “the pursuit of goals as the organisation principle of human behaviour”.⁶⁶ Familiarly, ongoing psychiatric interests of hope are largely dominated by a positivist frame. Progressive or not, psychologists have even made hope quantifiable. The Adult Hope Scale,⁶⁷ the State Hope Scale,⁶⁸ and the Children’s Hope Scale⁶⁹ all require patients to self-assess one’s ability in “agency thinking” and “pathways thinking” on a numerical point scale of six or eight. Within medical literature, the objectivity and validity of these scales are empirically supported; ethereal hope turned into a solid law of nature. In 2003, Jerome Groopman, M.D., published a book, *The Anatomy of Hope*, in which he put forward a formula of dopamine, endorphins and/or enkephalins as pain relief to foster resilience for endurance and recovery: the recipe of hope.⁷⁰

When hope is generalised from a physical trait into a contextual parameter, and is subsequently manipulated as a hegemonic tactic, it becomes what Foucault called as “biopolitical” strategy: a hope economy emerges which facilitates a public belief that profiteering policies, technology, and exploitation are for a better future. Perhaps a household example is *Hope* (2008) by street artist Shepard Fairey, which was the official poster for the national’s first African-American president Barack Obama’s election campaign. More recently, hope has become a buzzword for capitalist and technocratic propaganda. Amid a tax evasion scandal, Elon Musk, the billionaire and space business magnate, tweeted that “space represents *hope* for so many people” as a self-defense against criticisms of prioritizing self-funding extraterrestrial expedition over local issues.⁷¹ Without resolving ongoing concerns of transacted privacy and the spread of hate speech and fake news, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg attempted to turn around the wounded social media platform by renaming it “meta”,

⁶⁶ Gallagher and Lopez, *Introduction to the Science of Hope*, 2.

⁶⁷ Snyder et al., ‘The Will and the Ways’.

⁶⁸ Snyder et al., ‘Development and Validation of the State Hope Scale.’

⁶⁹ Snyder et al., ‘The Development and Validation of the Children’s Hope Scale’.

⁷⁰ Groopman, ‘The Anatomy of Hope’.

⁷¹ Elon Musk, ‘Those Who Attack Space Maybe Don’t Realize That Space Represents Hope for so Many People’.

which stands for the new identity of the “metaverse”. Zuckerberg pronounced that “our *hope* is that within the next decade, the metaverse will reach a billion people, host hundreds of billions of dollars of digital commerce, and support jobs for millions of creators and developers.” This is an ornated hope that is grounded on its self-denied hopelessness of controlling the world it creates, confessed by Facebook’s former civic integrity lead, Samidh Chakrabarti, “the painful reality is that we simply can’t cover the entire world with the same level of support!”⁷²

These contemporary hopes are kitsch, as Clement Greenberg defined: mechanical, formulae-based, devoid of cultural specificity nor sensitivity.⁷³ They attempt to address an universal audience for a maximisation of revenue, and they operate as spectacle, defined by Guy Debord as a pure visual ideology that mediates relationships without forms and references: “the spectacle aims at nothing other than itself.”⁷⁴ Roger Scruton called Kitsch “an attempt to have your emotions on the cheap, an attempt to appear sublime without the effort of being so.”⁷⁵ Exposing the non-commitment of hope easily explains how it becomes the top-performing instrument of capitalists; it exploits our desire and distorts expectation from a means to an end: propensity turns profits.

This is not to say that being hopeful is self-victimising. It is indeed counter-intuitive to consider hope as a languid behaviour. It is, however, useful to understand the variety of forms and functions that hope may partake in, especially within an enigmatic exodus of the appearance of hope in our unsettling world. The historic trajectory of nostalgia has pre-empted a possible future of hope. Boym investigated the politicising of nostalgia as a longing for a home by sovereign power, and observed how its affect has been incarnated in national anthems and monuments.⁷⁶ It is not so different to witness the rapid economising of hope as a progressive aspiration by capital today, which has depreciated hope from myth to kitsch. If, according to Boym, the possession by nostalgia makes us forget about our actual past, one might as well extrapolate that an obsession of hope might lead us unaware of what is actually upcoming: the present assimilated into an incessant stream simulating a non-existent future.

We are due for an agential redemption of hope, as much as hopelessness: to demystify the stigma of the latter. Historically, hopelessness is understood as our utter inability to understand the essence of

⁷² ‘How Facebook Neglected the Rest of the World, Fueling Hate Speech and Violence in India’.

⁷³ Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, 10.

⁷⁴ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 2-5.

⁷⁵ Scruton, ‘Kitsch and the Modern Predicament’.

⁷⁶ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 14-15.

things; the most we can achieve is to appropriate our own language, i.e. metaphors, to designate relations between things and humans. In the contemporary epoch, hopelessness has further materialised from a philosophical position into a wider conundrum of comprehending an intertwined intensification of climate crises, social upheavals, political division, and technocratic dominance. If truth, as Nietzsche wrote, is humans' arrogant forgetfulness of what things essentially are,⁷⁷ then hope is the spell that awakes the amnesic through embodied hopelessness.

Speculation is not monopolised as a financial strategy; it can also be an active inquisition of the alternatives, the "what-if", a temporary refugee from our inevitably short-sighted, human-centric consciousness, to unleash an artistic space for a constant deconstruction and recuperation of translation, transference, transformation. There is no coincidence of the speculation of hope with Igeu and Stokely's practice of hiraeth: to queer established structures and empower the ambiguity to be generative. Both leverages on myths to break illusionary truths: those whose prevalence has erroneously rendered their faked truthfulness. For myth shares a mutual root in hope and art, here, hope resurrects as an artistic practice.

The "New World", to Stuart Hall, conjured as a site of syncretic dynamics between people from all over the world, where "creolisations and assimilations and syncretisms were negotiated". Nevertheless, this aspiration of a hybrid community was tabled only after what he suggested as "Preséance Africaine" and "Preséance Eurpéene", respectively referring to cultural presences of the repressed and the dominant.⁷⁸ Hall was thoroughly aware of the complexity of resolving the irreversible influences of the dominant regimes of representation, yet for decades he braved this impossibility to imagine what he called "the most complex of cultural strategies". Weathering the insurmountable mission, he vividly manifested the "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will", an Antonio Gramsci's quote dearly cherished by Hall himself.⁷⁹ In the acceleration from the "New World" to our contemporaneity, the new "New World", with crises of displacement and identity politics prevalent in unprecedented forms, we should insist in the ambivalence of hope: reject hopelessness as nihilism, and resist hope in its becoming of the Master's tool.

⁷⁷ Nietzsche, Geuss, and Speirs, 'On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense', 146.

⁷⁸ Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora'.

⁷⁹ Williams, 'The Saturday Interview: Stuart Hall'.

CHAPTER III. NON-ARRIVAL, YET, IN PROXIMITY

(Studio note)

Between Strangers and Friends

“Non-Arrival, Yet, in Proximity” is a video project as well as an extended study developed simultaneously with the writing of this thesis. The video engaged three protagonists: (1) who have been working in multicultural environments with no fixed locality, and (2) who do not know each other. They were invited to a shared space to share and perform a gesture that is definitive of their cultural identities. This was the only prompt from the artist; actions unwrapped in the scenes were self-initiated by the collaborators, and were organically evolved amongst them. The protagonists’ contributions, in terms of activities within the scenes, informed the set design. Based on their selected gestures, props were brought into the space to facilitate their performance and exchange. Some props were interchangeable amongst the three characters.

The art form of this work was hence emerged from a collaborative process. Aesthetic intents, most distinctively the abstraction of a social environment, were made to foreground the core inquisition of the work, as an aesthetic strategy, instead of being an aestheticisation. The limited set visualised the intersectional space between individuals of cultural hybridity; a metaphoric space of what Stuart Hall described as “a site of an empty land where strangers of different cultures collide...it is a signifier of continuous voyage and return.”⁸⁰ It is a space of transition and momentary stay with no occupants.

*Attachment is a dangerous word, more
so for those who are constantly in transit,
who have been in search of stability
that is yet to be revealed. Journey
after journey, every new friend almost immediately
becomes emotional baggage. Time is in lieu
of the construction of acquaintance, familiarity,
trust; before which one departs again.*

Acknowledging a sense of displacement as an increasingly universal sentiment, the project delves into the rupture between characters of mobility as a new form of relationship that is both not quite *eros* (romantic love), not quite *philia* (friendship). Friendship is a complicated concept for many philosophers. Deleuze and Guattari described friendship as an intricate relationship between claimant and rival, differentiating layers of relationships that constituted the basis of cities in Greek

⁸⁰ Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’.

philosophy.⁸¹ Never being pure emotions, friendship entails relationships of possession and objectification of desire. Yet, the association between passengers in this transient space is perhaps too brief to be substantiated as friendship. They might be someone you passed by in street protests, in embassies' waiting rooms, in an online chat room, or in your social media feed... Their presence possibly remains anonymous to you; names do not matter. Direct interactions may or may not exist. Any connection is implicit, intangible, impermanent, perhaps driven by shared demands and conditions of vulnerability, lurking in the periphery of one's social circles.

Kobena Mercer delved into the formal position of strangers to dismiss the excessive and unmediated use of "the other" as an empty synonym for cultural differences.⁸² Mercer quoted an article of Georg Simmel, which described strangers not as the wanderers who come today and go tomorrow. The stranger is who comes today and stays tomorrow; one who stays long enough to synergise nearness and distance. The objectivity of strangers gives rise to new relationships of adjacency, but free of the commitment of friendships.⁸³ This generative position of strangers is what this project perceives as *neighbours*.

*What is the difference between a chai
and a chai latte? Translation is tricky.
Can I braid your hair?
Now you reach the bottom line.
The fruit bowl is orientalist.
We understand and misunderstand
each other constantly.*

Neighbours aren't without baggage. The accent we speak, the food we eat, the way we care about ourselves, the bed-time tales that we are reminiscent of again and again every night. These specificities often are our secret routes to revisit our origin, to what brought us here, resistance or ambition. Nevertheless, these gestures are also the threshold to visit each other's world. The form of a threshold inherently comprises boundaries. So we learn to be careful. Appropriation is not nice, though approximation is often a way of learning. Increasingly we are walking on a tangent.

This cinematic work hopes to sketch this boundary between appropriation and approximation, and to explore the vulnerabilities and serendipity in the provisional adjacency. Adjacency, put in the context of anti-Black violence as Tina Campt elaborated, tethers different political groups through intricate

⁸¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy*, 4?

⁸² Mercer, *Exiles, Diasporas & Strangers*, 17-18.

⁸³ Wolff, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, 402-408.

histories of suppression and/or dispossession to feel accountable to each other: a labour of positioning in proximity.⁸⁴

*Peeking,
smelling,
listening,
hesitating,
enquiring,
gossiping,
showing,
sharing,
acknowledging,
attempting,
apologising,
appreciating.*

*Offers of care,
sight of curiosity,
sequences of mimicry,
responses that are pre-considered,
fear of traversing,
eager to be together.*

Through gestures of care and curiosity, as well as threads of learning and response, the short film stages moments of (alienated) solitary, of (ambiguous) adjacency, and of (abstained) encounter. These engagement and tensions are colour-coded in the film to accentuate the visibility of nuanced interactions and to evoke sensibility of such a scenario. The core interest of this work lies in the paradoxical entwinement of pleasure and struggle in this imaginative socio-political neighbourhood. The characters' relational joint, albeit precarious, lies between the positions of strangers and friends. This contingent bonding is neighbourly love in passage: a makeshift accompaniment of impermanence, partial presence, partial absence.

Three Notes of Neighbourly Love

This section transcribes reflections of the three protagonists of the video recorded after the filming, manifesting this project an artistic collaboration as much as a participatory experiment.

⁸⁴ Campt, *A Black Gaze*, 171.

S



Kwan Q Li. *Non-Arrival, Yet, in Proximity*. Still from film, 2022.

*So, Chai leaf, I used a brand called Black Label. My go-to.
Masala - you get Badshah's masala which is the one that I used.
Cardamom pod. If you can, get them wherever you are.
Lemongrass, dried and off-fresh. Whatever you prefer.
Ginger, how could I forget, hello. A lot of good ginger. Fresh ginger. I prefer fresh because it really adds texture. But you can either create the ginger, or you can pound it. I've pounded it, I've grinded it, and I don't really think of the difference. The difference may be in the pounding I get more anger. It's a different feeling.
And, what else. Sugar, if you like sugar.
And whatever kind of milk you drink. Really.
And, love, really. Lot of love. Lot of care. Lot of togetherness.
Remember that the chai is more for people than for you.*

I find it hard to actually make chai just for myself. I really do, I find it pretty odd to just make it for me and then chill.

You know it's more than just saying "coming home and chill". It's saying "come home and I will make a warm drink for you and we will have biscuits with it". It's my way of continuing my culture and tradition outside of maybe some of the social bounds to be of south Asian descent you know. Maybe I'm intrinsically not what everybody wants me to be. Well, that doesn't make any sense... What I'm trying to say is, it's a very simple way of relations.



Kwan Q Li. *Non-Arrival, Yet, in Proximity*. Still from film, 2022.

It's an exchange that goes beyond words, and it just is, and it exists and you are to share space. The space is in itself the canvas upon which subliminally creates without thinking too deeply about it. About something as essential as food. Something as simple as food, you know. But it carries so much depth and meaning.

I learn that people come and go, but that doesn't make the intensity and the love itself wrong, or meaningless.

It felt very personal. It felt very vulnerable. It was a flow. We are just flowing. We are enjoying each other's company and we made meaning and connection and relation without it being a transaction... A lot of shared vulnerabilities are in agreement. Whether we are best friends forever is almost irrelevant.

J



Kwan Q Li. *Non-Arrival, Yet, in Proximity*. Still from film, 2022.

I was in my car, um, I had my little baby doll braiding, and my aunt was sitting next to me, and I guess she could sense I was frustrated. I told her I was trying a French braid, or a cornrow... There was a very specific hand gesture that I picked up on watching my grandmother braid, that I was trying to mimic but couldn't quite get it. I became frustrated because I was stuck on the hand gesture, so my aunt verbally gave me the instructions. She just gave me those verbal directions. It was almost like the hand gesture that I have been so attached to immediately leave my mind. And I clung to those directions, and used my intuition in that way. And was able to do it. And so, that was the moment like a personal breakthrough.

The best of me, the best of my culture, should be celebrated, and should be shared, but of course it's again, always at the risk of someone exploiting.

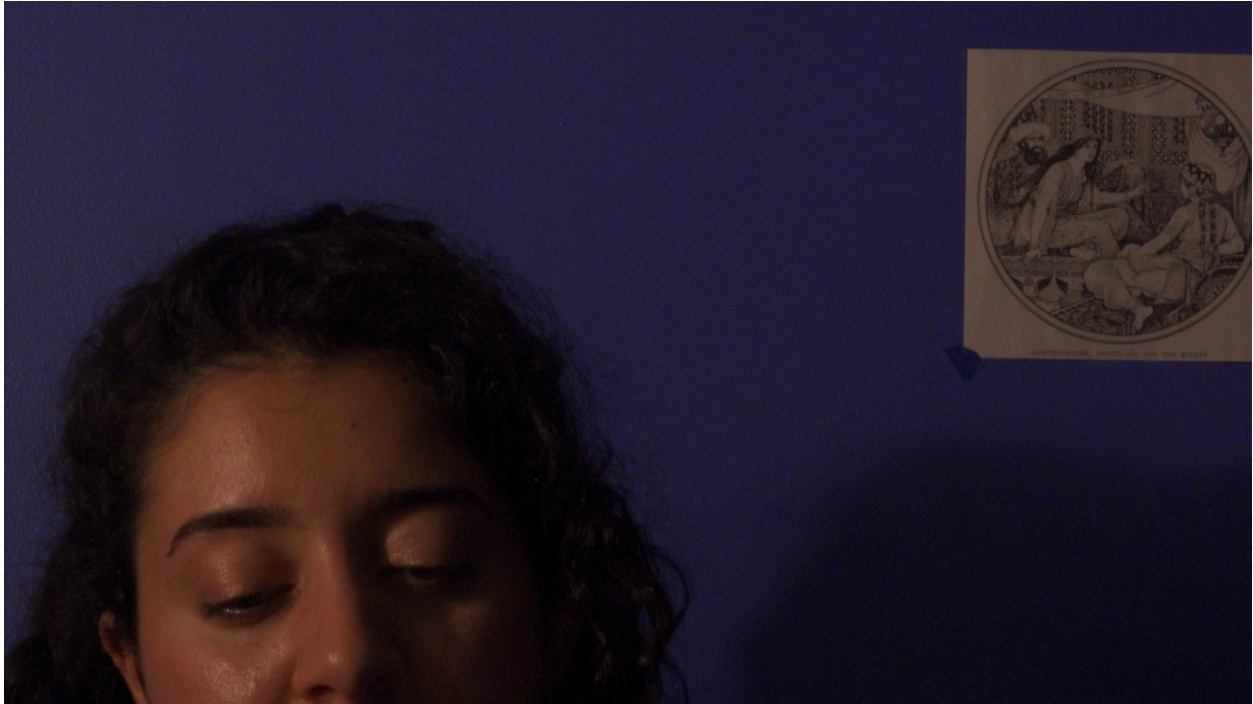
I would realistically been okay with friends or you know, people that I don't know too well but just happened to be in the same room when preparing to do my hair. Hey you are here! Help me separate these hairs! That's something that I think is harmless, I think that's something that is really beautiful to share... Loosen the grip on those things that I'm caring about.



Kwan Q Li. *Non-Arrival, Yet, in Proximity*. Still from film, 2022.

And then I have a chai tea, specifically chai tea latte, but I have never had a chai tea, I never had chai tea made from scratch. I never taste cardamon seeds. She was like cutting up lemongrass, it was really just like domestic and it felt like home. It felt like, like I got to engage, and am I going to go home start doing this? Probably not. And I think that's okay, and I don't think that's the point, and I think what I celebrate in that I just get to partake, and I will always carry the experience with me, it's not about adopting it as my own. It's about being able to share, to experience something, with someone that is facilitating from their cultures.

M



Kwan Q Li. *Non-Arrival, Yet, in Proximity*. Still from film, 2022.

I first began familiarising with the nights through stories my mother used to tell us, the little bedtime stories. The magic word would always be “افتح يا سمس”, which is “open sesame”, which is what Alibaba would say as the password to get into the cave of treasure. So that was always a fun memory.

Story-telling is a lot more linear. It implies a beginning, a middle, and an ending. But a world-building is a lot more aggregative. It's harder to appropriate. It's a collection. It's inherently collaborative. It's not easy to pay tribute to a single sole author which I think storytelling gravitates towards.

Just a few months ago, just last year, the world got its first ever translation of the night from a woman... it's funny to think that her voice has been orchestrated for so long by men. So I really enjoy reading that translation, where you really know this beautiful nuance comes through a woman's story being told by a fellow woman, there's a lot of power in that.

Because there's a long history of appropriation, and you want to do better for yourself, and your family, and your people. Then what happens before you. You know you sort-of have been trained to have your guard up. But there's also so much beauty and possibility and trusting enough to be able to share that again... to exercise the comfort of those boundaries.

It's funny that kind of distance and acquaintance and the time-span of acquaintance will tuck that into the past inevitably. But friendship is a funny thing. Some last a lifetime, some are in moments like this, but I don't think that makes one more powerful than the other.



Kwan Q Li. *Non-Arrival, Yet, in Proximity*. Still from film, 2022.

I will carry these memories with me. And they will manifest themselves every time I have a cup of chai tea somewhere with other friends. Every time I read these stories I will remember how I read to you gals. And when I see beautiful braids and try to braid my hair I will remember how J made it so beautifully.

END NOTE

I have been hesitant in writing this thesis in a first-person narrative. I have also always been hesitant in foregrounding my subjectivity in my writing and artwork. This cowardness is perhaps best explained by an incidence occurred at the start of my artistic becoming years ago.

“You talk about your home struggles because you ‘know how to play the game.’” – when I presented artwork related to Hong Kong’s post-colonial intricacy during my first semester of BFA studies in the U.K., I received this disheartening comment from a young peer, an alarming statement which I have painfully and cautiously carried forward since then. On one hand, I attempted to sympathize with a young and indifferent Western audience and asked, how can I make them care? On the other hand, I have continuously encountered other communities of political suffering, and am driven to consider collective, planetary crises greater than my own. In the summer of 2021, as I lamented the forced closure of Hong Kong’s longest-standing pro-democratic newspaper, I received a dubious consolation, “it’s fine, it’s not like you’re at war.” It is extremely difficult to unpack such a tendentious idea of relativism in victimhood, yet I believe it is of the utmost imperative to voyage into this muddy ground and consider how different exilic conditions may be tabled not for competing misery, but to invoke care and solidarity.

In this thesis project, I illustrated multiple realities of displacement, conditioned by the latest technologies and networks, and refreshed the discourse of contemporary art and exile through situating contemporary art production within the convergence of post-colonial, cosmopolitical, and techno-cultural theories. I unpacked how contemporary art production and circulation has been implicated in these hyper-movements and novel techno-visual cultures. Yet, exilic art potentially offers an experimental habitat, a radical collectivity that grows adjacent to citizenship.

Through sleepless nights of sirens in Hong Kong, this question emerged and has gradually developed into my research statement: what is hope in juxtaposition to art? Ultimately, this thesis does not propose to address the specificity of Hong Kong, but to spark new imagination towards exilic communities against geo-political and technocratic waves. In this writing, I presented my perspective on the inevitable yet productive dialectic between hope and hopelessness. I thank my collaborators in “Non-arrival, Yet, in Proximity”, who demonstrated immense generosity and courage in practising cultural sensitivity, whilst offering me a glimpse, and hope, of a possible transnational neighbourhood, regardless of its plausibility, in our fleeting contemporaneity. I also deeply thank my thesis committee in accommodating, and guiding my ambivalence between optimism and pessimism.

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