

...just a moment

by Carlina Shang-Ing Chen

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Declaration

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...just a moment

Carlina Shang-Ing Chen
OCAD University
Master of Fine Arts
Interdisciplinary Masters in Art, Media and Design
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Abstract

...just a moment considers how mundane, everyday materials and objects measure and materialize time. Borrowing Henri Lefebvre's lens of everyday life, Tim Edensor's argument of everyday life performance, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's and Elizabeth Chin's analysis of objects, this exhibition and treatise explore how one perceives and experiences time through things. Each object and material in the exhibition, whether natural or man-made, indicates contemplation through its physical changes, transformations, existence and interaction in time with humans. Everyone passes time with pastimes.

Keywords: time, everyday, everyday life, material, object, nature, man-made, performance, transformation, existence, music

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Dedication

獻給

baba's arms
mom's lap
A-ma's almond milk
uncle Emil and uncle Tiger

爸爸的手臂
媽媽的雙膝
阿嬤的杏仁奶
和
大舅舅 郭一鳴
么舅舅 郭寅生

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*"No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's
not the same man."
Heraclitus*

Chapter 1 Introduction

A vivid but fragmented image has remained in my memory for a very long time. In this image, I am held by my father and we walk in circles under an umbrella again and again. One day, while chatting with my mother I finally realized this memory's origin. My father used to take me for a walk every day after he came home from work, always at the same time of day. Even though I was too young to tell time, I knew this as the time we went for a walk. If it was raining and we couldn't go out, I would cry. So, my parents figured out how to have our daily walk even when it rained: with one arm holding an umbrella, the other holding me, my father and I would walk in circles in my parents' small yard. As a child who couldn't understand the meaning of a clock, I embodied time.

I was born and grew up in Taiwan where I studied English through to high school. I was told to memorize all of the grammar, especially the tenses. In my mother tongue, Mandarin Chinese, the expression of tenses is not as specific as in English. Even after living in Toronto for so many years, I still, on occasion, catch myself speaking of the previous day's events in the present tense.

Given these past memories of my life in Taiwan and that I regularly communicate with friends and family in Taipei, I remain aware of these two time

zones: the one here in Toronto and the one in Taiwan. Depending upon whether daylight savings time is in effect, the difference between the two countries is twelve or thirteen hours; thus I have to consider if I will wake friends or family when I call them. They are living in my future and I'm living in their past. In my graduate work, I decided to focus on the exploration of time within my art practice.

The foundation of my work then is anchored in questioning and exploring how experiences of time and space help people find meaning within the contexts of their daily lives. These enquiries spring from my life history – born in Taiwan, I immigrated to Canada as a young woman in order to pursue an art education, ultimately deciding to become a Canadian citizen and take up an art practice in Toronto. My artwork is thus grounded in personal experience, in memories of time and place – such as in these early walks with my father. I question how materializations of these experiences in everyday objects assist me, (and others), to adapt to the changing social and cultural parameters of everyday life. To begin to address this issue, I have experimented with form and material to realize my own creative vocabulary; namely, I use mundane, found objects that comprise the fabric of routine in our lives, such as tea, coffee, roadside stones, and fallen petals. The materials and objects used in my thesis exhibition were collected at various points between 2016 and 2019, in locations from Florence to Toronto. These omnipresent elements are staples in my language of art-making, enabling

me to reconceptualize how we relate to the spaces and the temporal dimension we occupy. In this light the objectives of my project are:

1. To use my art practice as a visual lens through which to materialize how people, especially moving among geographic locations, experience space and time in everyday life.
2. To use the everyday, including found materials, in ways that enable “new” ways of seeing and understanding the role these materials play and their value in our everyday lives.
3. To demonstrate how people use everyday objects in specific routine daily activities (e.g., drinking tea, wearing specific clothes) to situate themselves vis a vis place and time in a changing society.

Through these objectives, I argue, like Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981:38), that things do not have meaning in themselves but that we give things meaning by using, living with, and exchanging them. Indeed, Media Design scholar Elizabeth Chin speaks further to this issue in her 2016 book, *My Life with Things: The Consumer Diaries*. Examining the multi-layered nature of her relationship with objects, Chin (2016:38) suggests that we give richer meaning to our lives and our social relations by using objects to express ourselves. In this light I collect and then use some of the everyday objects I encounter (e.g., stones collected from construction sites, fallen flower blossoms, tea leaves) to materialize not only my personal identity but how I see myself

positioned in the different environments in which I work and generally live. My art practice thus builds on this approach and understanding to explore the ways I might capture a fleeting moment in time through materializing that intangibility; how does it lie within the mundane object or the experiential path of the senses?

Chapter 2 Methodology

As a practice-based artist with a printmaking background, it is common for me to think about how each layer of a matrix can contribute to the final image. Likewise, my research methods are an assemblage of diverse approaches, including the self-reflexive studio practice (Sullivan 2010:110), the social science method of participation in place-based research (Luker 2008:160), and a “zig-zag” studio approach (Morin 1989:114), to name a few.

My own art practice – and how I think through it – is a process. Australian artist and art theorist Graeme Sullivan (2010) writes, “a self-reflexive practice describes an inquiry process that is directed by personal interest and creative insight; yet it is informed by discipline, knowledge and research expertise”. (2010:110) I undertake this “reflexive practice as transformative research,” (ibid) in which I recognize that “knowledge creation in visual arts is recursive and constantly undergoes change as new experiences ‘talk back’ through the process and progress of making art in research settings....”. (ibid) What does self-reflexive mean? Generally speaking, self-reflexive is a term that implies a reflection or image of itself, or is self-referential. Sullivan’s theory of self-reflexive practice in visual arts is that in each stage of creating an artwork the art will change, with each stage informing the next one through the artist’s apprehension of their own field of knowledge and an openness to adopt and adapt to what

creation will bring. For example, while creating my work *Si Un Caffé* - the act of embroidering and exploring the material itself led to discoveries about the making of the material itself- the where and the what- which led to larger understandings about the nature of the object, its relation to myself as tourist and the implications that came along with having bought it. As Sullivan (2010:155) notes in writing of Chen Zhen- my 'awareness was awakened' and opened out to larger research. The object (the necktie) itself asked that I look at it more deeply, it 'talked back', forcing a recursive connection. The object spoke to me of something new. Subsequently the piece morphed from being about a relationship to place and experience- a mapping of sorts- and grew into a questioning of place and experience as consumption- how we as tourists use and are used by global culture. In *Cuppa Tea* as well, there were iterations as I responded to the scroll as object over time, played with it, sat with it; from the initial understanding of it as a recording of patterns of habit, I began to recognize and want to point to more of its possible readings- from it as landscapes to musical scores. It seemed it could be understood by more of the senses. Earlier in my studies I had been learning to code for an action to activate sound so the musical scores iteration piece could also draw on a mode I'd been experimenting with. The iterations of both pieces involved a self-reflexive process of inquiry. In both cases, one reading or understanding would end up fueling the next, setting interesting challenges as to how to realize what I envisioned.

The second method I want to discuss is Betty Goodwin's "zig-zag" studio approach. In an interview with Frances Morin, the late Canadian artist referred to her studio practice as a "zig-zag" approach (Morin 1989:114). She said that in addition to constantly keeping notes, she considered everything in her daily life as a continuation of her studio practice. In Tina Horne's film *There Is Plenty of Room*, Goodwin (Horne 1989) takes pictures of road maintenance equipment during her daily walk and says, "In my head, I am working practically all the time. You see something that is totally unrelated, it will suddenly, magnetically cling to an idea that is not coming, push ahead a little bit. I take the camera with me, just take what I see of interest, not even for any reason. I figure out the reason after." (ibid) In an audio interview recording, Goodwin's friend and agent, René Blouin mentions that during his weekly visit to her studio, Goodwin would share her notebook sketches with him and ask about his thoughts and suggestions: "She then transferred it [her sketches] to a small drawing. Of course, it became something else; the scale changed, and the detail got specified. Later from that little drawing, she would make a larger one, another larger one; sometimes it reached an amazing scale, like nine feet by seven feet." (Art Gallery of Ontario, 2010) These two interviews clearly depict Goodwin's "zig-zag" studio approach of randomly gathering and collecting mundane materials and objects and keeping them well-displayed in the studio, which she then worked and reworked from sketches to large sculptural artwork. I argue that her "zig-zag" studio approach

should be considered an ethnographic fieldwork research method like American anthropologist Kristen Luker suggests in her book *Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences*. Luker (2008:129) uses the metaphor of salsa dancing when talking about her research method of gathering data through different channels (e.g., interviews, archival research, personal participation). Being a practice-based artist, I follow a similar multi-platform method. I collect whatever materials, information, and objects I may find as long as they interest me and make me think. I continue this multi-method approach by conducting cross-sectoral research, in order to discover articles and engage in new experiences. Finding the meanings of new words in my research is sometimes a spark. My own “zig-zag” approach toward materials ranges from collecting flower petals that fall off houseplants to picking up roadside gravel; while they seem to have no connection with each other, they are my fieldwork, the extension of my work space. I bring them back to my studio for further study.

Furthermore, I agree with Sullivan’s (2010:155) use of “artist as theorist”, in which he uses Chen Zhen, the late Chinese conceptual artist, as an example to support what ‘artist as theorist’ means. Reflecting on the importance of process and the progression of realizing a site-specific art project from the inception period of the idea to the final fulfillment of project, Sullivan (2010) concludes,

[T]he process can indeed lead to progress as attitudes change, views broaden, and awareness is awakened. The patten of planning, reviewing, adapting, managing, analyzing, and revealing is characteristic of the transformative nature of visual arts research. This attitude and practice are also reflected in the art of the late Chen Zhen...who move[s] between and among cultures as their art reveals connections and quietly questions how we think about who we are.
(155)

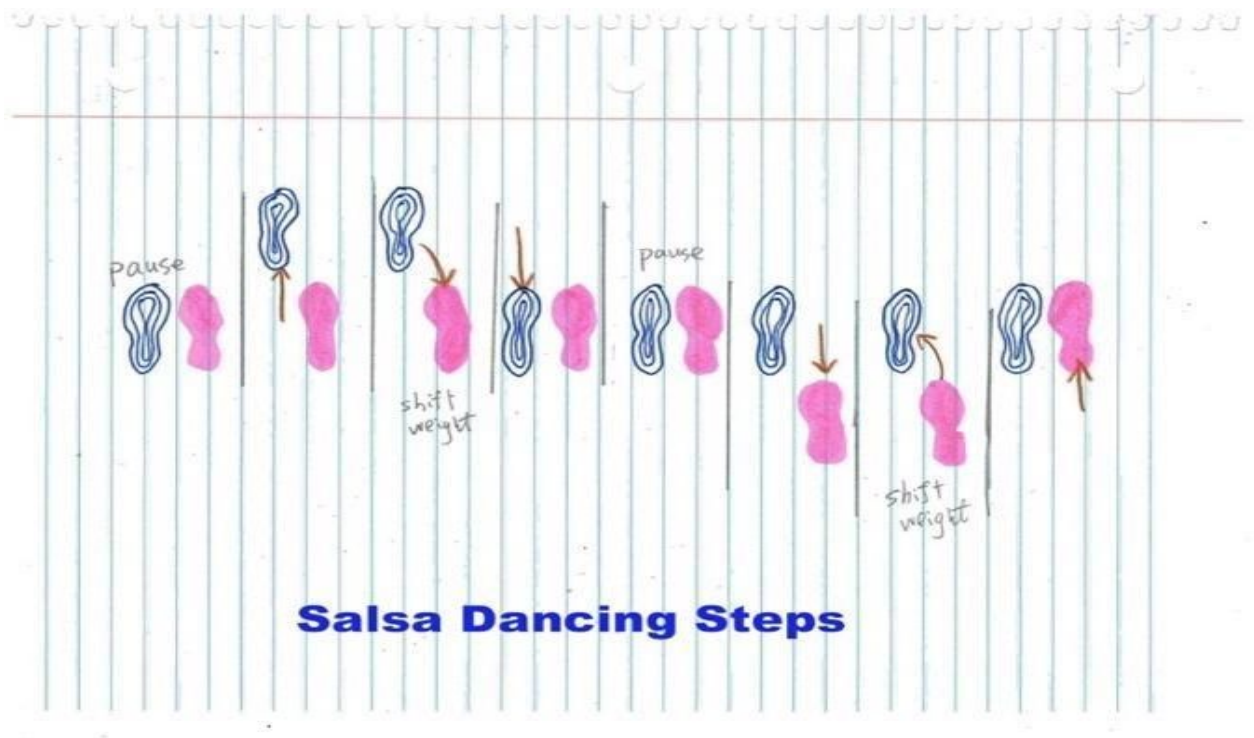


Fig. 1 *Rendering of salsa dance pattern*, 2018, Pen, Marker, Pencil, Colour Pencil, Lined paper, 10.5" x 8"

Indeed, Chen coined the term *transexperience* to describe his own art after moving to France:

[T]ransexperience summarize vividly and profoundly the complex life experiences of leaving one's native place and going from one place to another in one's life. ...[It] also represents a concept of art. ...a mode of thinking and method of artistic creation that is capable of connecting the preceding with the following, adapting itself to changing circumstances (Chen 1998)

Melissa Chiu (2007:329), an independent curator and museum director, suggests that many artworks produced by overseas Chinese artists in the 1980s and 90s, addressed the tension between their homeland (China) and their newly foreign hosting culture; however very often their *Chineseness* was prioritized. She notes,

[O]ne might argue that this Chinese diaspora engages in the construction of different and at times divergent ideas of being Chinese. ...Although most theoretical explanations for diaspora incorporate this dual or binary axis of homeland and site settlement, [Chen is] able to consider the interstices between cultures or the new experiences of diasporic subjects. (ibid).

Chen (1998) further emphasizes that “this type of experiential concept relates to an extremely important matter – to immerse oneself in life, to blend and identify oneself with others.” Therefore, Chiu (2007:330) refers to Chen's notion as “the idea of evolutionary change.” To me, *transexperience* is a state of constant change – it includes the past, adapts to the present, and continues into the future, representing fluidity both in life and in art. Being an artist, I incorporate Chen's *transexperience* in my approach to studio practice. In *Cuppa Tea (2016 – ongoing)*, I take a habit that I began when I was young and explore what it contains of my creative world. From the tea-drinker in Taiwan to the tea-drinker in

Toronto, to the work itself which evolves from a tracking and tracing of that habit into a manifestation of song; my habit evolves with me as it expresses itself and adapts to who and where I am over time. As in Chen's evolution and fluidity, so in *Cuppa Tea* the piece evolves from one media to another and its fluidity is literal, as the patterns of the tea flow into notes.

As did Chen, I live and work in a place far from where I was born. As an artist, as clichéd as it may sound, I believe my adopted culture and that of my heritage form an integrated whole, encouraging me to explore different voices and ways of thinking in both my art and my research. In my exhibition there is a set of drawers and each of them contains objects that have been collected on sight and reviewed – as in Goodwin's "zig-zag" method – and all those objects are signifiers of time, like Chen's "evolutionary change" (Chiu:330) and my own evolution over time; where and who I am in moving from one place to another, what is retained and what is not. Like the petals in their liminal state, like the stones being adopted as building material- a dresser-full of objects in Chen Zhen's (1998) words "adapting to changing circumstance".

My research methodology is a bricolage of methods that includes social science, as in Luker's (2008) metaphor of salsa dancing as research method- a mode of gathering data through a variety of channels; echoing that of Goodwin's (1989) "zig-zag" studio approach, also one of gathering although more spontaneously. In addition, Sullivan's (2010) self-reflexive studio practice which

involves using expertise, research and creativity to 'talk back' to the work so that it evolves, and Chen's (1998) '*transexperience*' that recognizes transformation, connection, adaptation and evolution. My work with its foundation of meaning in time, has relied on all these methods to reach this final exhibition. It has grown out of a time of gathering, considering, collecting, and transforming.

Chapter 3 Theoretical Framework and Review of Literature

Background

My thesis is about time - how we experience it and how we measure it, using everyday materials and objects. Generally speaking, we have five senses – sight, touch, hearing, smell and taste. Each sense is associated with one corporeal receptor. However, there is no single, corporeal receptor that measures time. Time is a continuing process of existence – it is omnipresent. Time is intangible, but we follow a regulated measurement device, the clock, in order to go about our daily lives. Different cultures measure and understand time differently, and timekeeping devices vary from one culture to another. Ancient Egyptians started to use the sundial in the thirteenth century B.C.¹ Ancient Romans often used the water-clock to chart time. In the past, people in China measured time through increments of burning incense. As American historian Silvio Bedini suggests that (1963:6),

Although fire may have been employed for time measurement in earlier epochs in China, the first mention of its use for this purpose which has come to notice was in the sixth century. This occurred in the poetic writings of Yu Chien-ku (floruit A.D. 520). Two lines from one of his poems

¹ Prof. Susanne Bickel, University of Basel, and her team discovered one of the world's oldest sundials dug up in Kings' Valley in March 2013.
<https://www.unibas.ch/en/News-Events/News/Uni-Research/One-of-the-world-s-oldest-sun-dial-dug-up-in-Kings--Valley.html>

may be translated as follows, “By burning incense [we] know the *k’o*² (quarter) of the night, with graduated candle [we] confirm the tally of the watches. “

In contrast to these past practices, currently the majority of people globally are taught to read time in a more standard linear way. The 24 time zones start at the Meridian Line in Greenwich, England. When visiting Greenwich Park in London, many people pose for a photo with one leg on either side of the Meridian Line³. In that place and in that moment, we experience two different time zones simultaneously. In reality, though, our moment of experience and how we experience time, has not changed.

Quotidian

French Philosopher Marxist Henri Lefebvre’s (2008) *Critique of Everyday Life* informs my way of looking at everyday life in my research and art practice. Lefebvre (2008 vol.1:31- 32) speaks of a totality of life that should not be separated into work, family and private life-leisure activities, because doing so implies an alienation of one thing from another. He mentions that “[we] should examine the details of everyday life as minutely as possible – for example, a day in the life of an individual, any day, no matter how trivial”. (196) Our everyday

² k’o 刻

³ Meridians run between the North and South poles. A (geographic) meridian (or line of longitude) is the half of an imaginary great circle on the Earth's surface, terminated by the North Pole and the South Pole, connecting points of equal longitude, as measured in angular degrees east or west of the Prime Meridian

activities – though seemingly habitual, repetitive, ordinary and insignificant – are actually meaningful. I explore, in minute detail, the everyday through my practice.

British cultural geography scholar Tim Edensor further deciphers the notion of everyday life. Edensor (2002:17) referring to ‘national identity’⁴ notes that it is “grounded in the everyday, in the mundane details of social interaction, habits, routines and practical knowledge.” In my work, I am not looking at national identity in particular but at personal identity which is as well built from interactions, habits, routine and knowledge. (ibid) How do our habits situate us in our lives and our identities? Edensor gives heed to “the quotidian realms experienced most of the time by most people, since it is here that identity is continually reproduced in unreflexive fashion.” (ibid) In the everyday, in our habits, lie the ground of our identities. Yes, humdrum as it may be, everyday life and its habits define us, become the ground of our being, situate us.

Objects – meaning and identity

Much of our experience of the everyday is through the objects that surround us and to which we pay little attention. I am surrounded by everyday objects, some that I own, some with which I have a relationship. Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and American sociologist Eugene Rochberg-Halton (1981:38) point out, “through time and space humans have

⁴ Tim Edensor follows Billig’s notion of ‘banal nationalism’ when discussing of national identity.

used objects to express, or to explore, some of the purposes that animate their own individual lives.” Take pens and pencils, for example. I use them for a utilitarian purpose: to express myself in writing or drawing. I only need one pen to write with, yet I have more than one; in fact, I have a collection of them. Do I really need so many pens when I only use one hand to write with (unlike an octopus, if it could write, it might need one for each tentacle)? Csikszentmihalyi (1988:107-108) suggests that “artifacts are sometimes symbiotic with humans, but at other times the relationship is parasitic, and the survival of the object is at the expense of its human host.” He urges us to take a closer look at our relationship with objects and their thrall, and to be aware of our dependence on them ‘to stabilize and order the mind.’ (Csikszentmihalyi 1993:22)

Csikszentmihalyi argues that “artifacts help objectify the self in at least three major ways: demonstrating the owner’s power; continuity of the self; and signifying one’s relationship in the social network.” (23)

In particular, in this paper, I am interested in his second point that addresses the meaning of objects and the continuity of the self. In order to explain what he means, Csikszentmihalyi further writes that “objects embody the values and tastes as well as the accomplishments of the owner.” (26) My interpretation of his claim is that objects are no longer as is – that objects do not have meanings in themselves but their meaning is derived from the meaning people give them through their interactions; objects actually become extensions

of those who own them. The best way to demonstrate my understanding is to outline the circumstances or the interactions I have when visiting a friend of mine. Anyone entering her home will notice running medals hanging along the stairs from the basement all the way up to the third floor. The medals are not merely disks inscribed with her name, but rather, the events she participates in and the awards she receives; they speak of her passion as a runner and validate her accomplishments – they are a continuation of herself. She is a social worker, as well as a dedicated, award-winning runner. The medals, as objects, speak of who she is.

Media design practices professor Elizabeth Chin (2016:37) affirms the relationship between objects and oneself when she states, “[W]e just cannot live without them [things] and all that they do for us. Just as our thoughts have no meaning without language, our lives have no meaning without things through which to express who and what we are.” Chin and Csikszentmihalyi share a similar point of view of things/objects as a continuation of the self.

Influential artists’ practices

Three artists – Alison Knowles, Gwen MacGregor, and Tehching Hsieh – have helped me understand and develop my research and practice. Their specific works address everyday life: Knowles’ *The Identical Lunch* (1969 - present), Hsieh’s *One Year Performance 1981-1982 (Outdoor Piece)*, and MacGregor’s

Stupid little moments 2000-01 from a series of exhibitions at the Art Gallery of Ontario entitled *Present Tense (2001)*.

Alison Knowles, an American visual artist and founding member of the Fluxus movement, created one of her best-known works *The Identical Lunch* in the mid-1960s in New York City. This piece began with her regular lunch – a sandwich of wheat toast with tuna fish, lettuce, butter (no mayo) and a large glass of buttermilk – that she ordered each day at a local diner. Her friend and fellow Fluxus member Phillip Corner pointed out: “Alison, you always have the same lunch, you have an identical lunch”. She realized her daily lunch constituted a performance of its own, and it went on to become a seminal work of performance art. In an interview with Allie Wist in *Saveur* magazine, Knowles explains her piece:

The Identical Lunch was my opportunity to offer a work that exemplified breakthroughs in intermedia, chance, relational art, and living which emerged from my generation's expanded awareness of the impact of everyday life. The act of making the same sandwich each day, often seen as insignificant, could lead to changes in our daily perceptions once conceived as a personal performance. Ordering and eating *The Identical Lunch* allowed art to take place without calling for an audience. (Wist: 2018)

Knowles' *The Identical Lunch* speaks of a mundane daily activity – having a meal- a habit associated with time, one that takes place at the same time every day. I find her project compelling for three reasons: the rule-based meal with the same food, eaten at the same time; and its expansion from a local café to

iterations in foreign countries from the 1960s on; and how a personal exploration of a dining experience becomes much larger when performed as a symphony in front of a large audience⁵. As Lefebvre (2008 vol.1:13-14) points out “The most extraordinary things are also the most everyday; the strangest things are often the most trivial... Once separated from its context, the trivial becomes extraordinary, and the habitual becomes ‘mythical’” Indeed, eating a meal is a universal daily activity and in its mundane nature may barely be heeded. Notes Tim Edensor (2002:18) “everyday activity is too apparent to lend itself to be analyzed, and we take the quotidian much for granted.” However, this is exactly what Knowles wants us to notice –an insignificant daily activity as performance makes the ordinary spectacular.

⁵ As part of the Smart Museum of Art's symposium Of Hospitality on May 5, 2012, Knowles conducted *Identical Lunch Symphony*.



Fig. 2 Alison Knowles. *The Identical Lunch*. 1973. © Alison Knowles
<http://www.on-verge.org/essays/identical-lunch-at-the-museum-of-modern-art/>
Accessed January 15, 2019. (Permission by the artist)

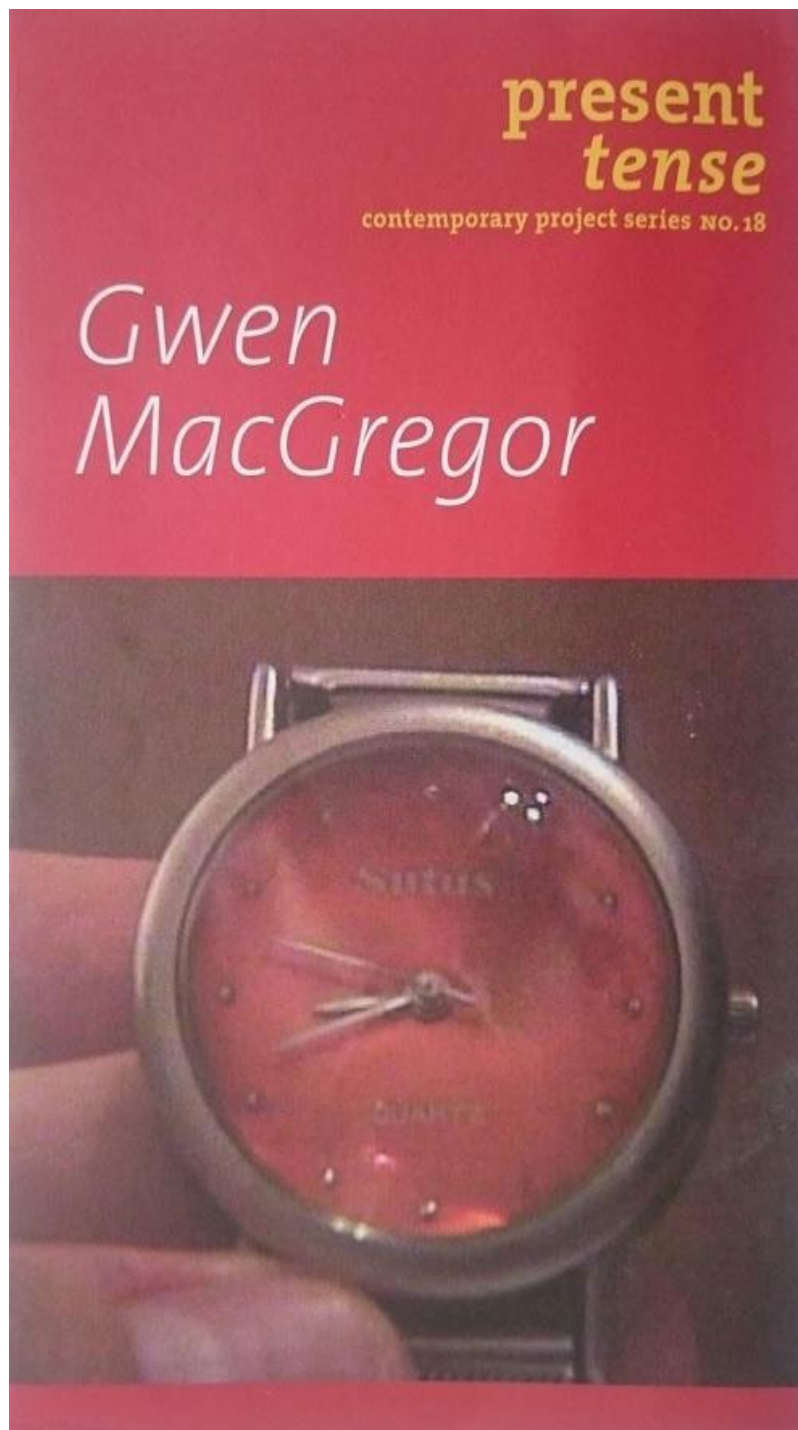


Fig. 3 Gwen MacGregor. *Stupid little moments 2000-2001*. Photograph of Video Still image from Exhibition Pamphlet (Permission by the artist).

The work of another artist – Torontonians Gwen MacGregor – examines everyday life through time. Specifically, *Stupid little moments, 2000-01*, from a 2001 AGO exhibition entitled *Present Tense*. In this piece MacGregor loops five videos and projects them side by side. Each video records mundane situations with unusual twists. In one video, we see a malfunctioning wristwatch whose second hand repeatedly runs backwards as time advances. In another video, our eyes follow a Winnie-the-Pooh balloon bobbing around in the corner of a room. This piece attracts me because MacGregor shows familiar -and at times absurd- moments of daily life. Once these moments are fixed in an installation, out of the everyday context, they manifest into wonder. The piece speaks to Lefebvre's (2008 vol.1:13) notion of extraordinary things arising from the trivial and becoming strange; when things are removed from the context of ordinary life, they can become extraordinary.

Along with these works that deal with time and everyday life, the work of artist Tehching Hsieh has added to my research and informed my studio practice. Hsieh is a Taiwanese-American artist who lived as an undocumented migrant in New York City from 1974-88. During that period, he created five pieces all entitled *One Year Performance*. I will focus on the third *One Year Performance*

1980-81 (*Outdoor Piece*). In an interview, Hsieh⁶ says, “There were rational rules for me to follow for each performance piece. As long as I did not break the rules, it did not matter what I did during that art time.” His rule for the third piece was to stay on the streets of New York and never enter any building, shelter, vehicle or tent, rain or shine. I became aware of his work when I visited the 57th Venice Biennale in June 2017. Outside the Palazzo delle Prigioni, while waiting for his exhibition *Doing Time*, a woman offered to take a picture of me in front of Hsieh’s poster, as she saw a resemblance in our outfits. At the time, I thought it was funny, so I gave her my cellphone to take the photo. But until the fall of 2018, I was not aware of the importance of this photograph. A seemingly mundane photograph turned out to be of myself and an artist whose work on time, movement and space would inform my own- an occurrence of the ordinary becoming the extraordinary.

Strolling inside Palazzo delle Prigioni, there was a wall full of maps marking every single day of his walk, wherein he used red pen or marker to outline the area of his routes through New York City. In this light, French philosopher and sociologist Michel de Certeau (1984:93) writes, “The ordinary practitioners of the city live ‘down below,’ below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk – an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are

⁶ *Inside the Arts 12-1: Hsieh Tehching's Doing Time*, YouTube video, 10:16, Public Television Service Foundation, January 1, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kijqJlOzSdI> This interview was conducted in Mandarin Chinese. The author did the translation for the purpose of this paper.

walkers, wandersmänner, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban text.” Hsieh marked his ‘urban text’ with maps of where he was, what he was doing and when he was doing it, even though his activities, such as waking up and buying bread, were trivial. British writer and curator Adrian Heathfield (2009:39) thinks of “[Hsieh’s] walking of this city as a vast mapping of repeated and interlacing driftways”. What interests me in this piece is that although people often comment on his work as a performance of endurance, Hsieh does not consider it so: “Life is a life sentence; life is passing time; life is freethinking”. (2017) If life is passing time as Hsieh suggests, then it includes all that we do (or do not do). It seems to me that Hsieh believes that there is no such thing as wasted time, no matter what one is or is not doing. This holistic view of life echoes Lefebvre’s claim of the totality of everyday life. (2008:31)



Fig. 4 *Meeting Hsieh in Venice, 2017, Photograph.*

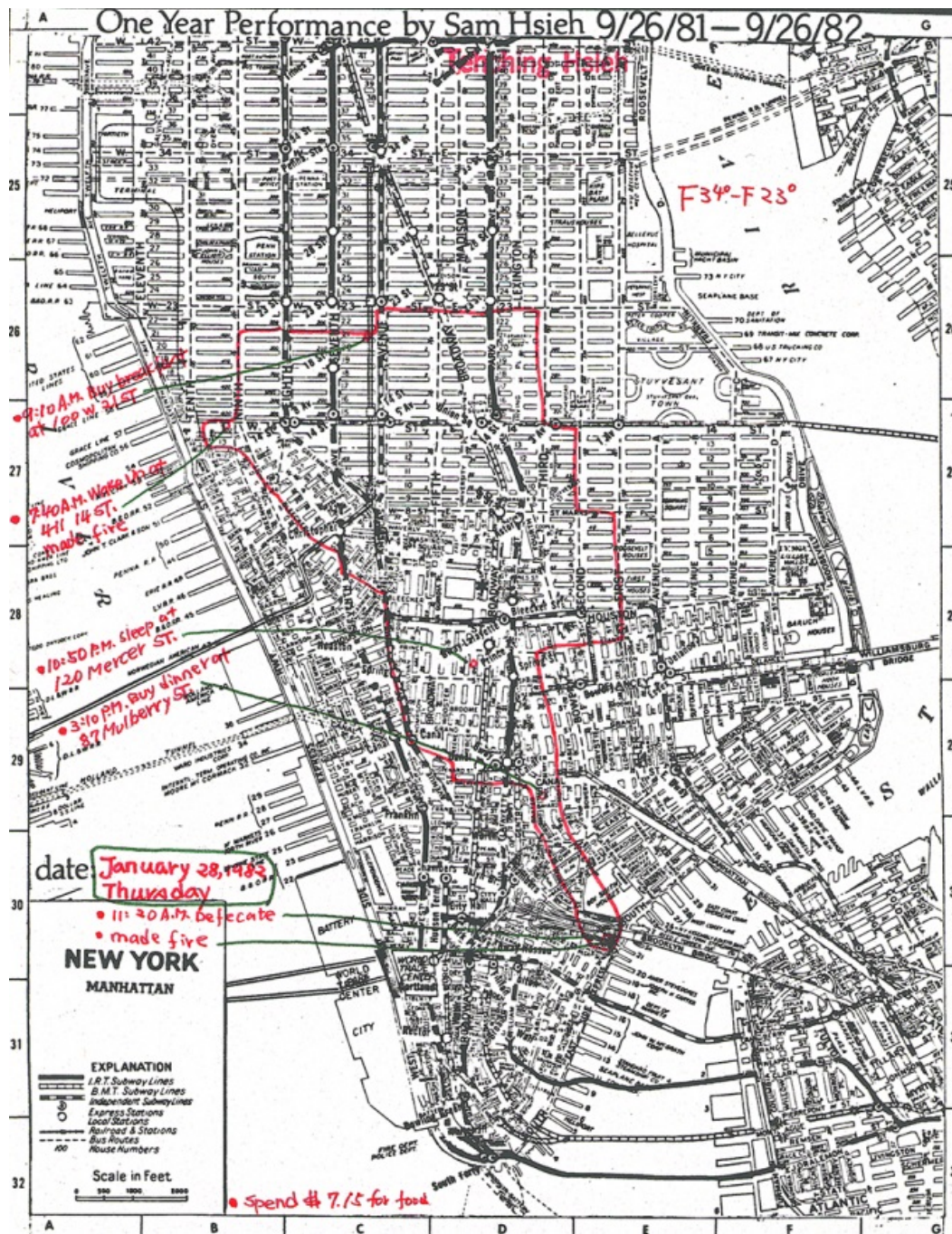


Fig. 5 Tehching Hsieh, *One Year Performance* 1981 – 1982.
Daily map. ©Tehching Hsieh. Courtesy of the Artist.

Chapter 4 The Marking of Time: studio practice

As time may be ephemeral, we depend on the clock regulating and measuring it to go about our daily lives now. My research and studio practice set out to visualize time in everyday life, no matter how small and ordinary, be it through an activity or an object. My intention is to capture the visual and physical markings of time, its passage, and its duration. In the thesis exhibition, I am working with the familiar objects and materials of everyday life: houseplants, roadside stones, tea, coffee, etc.; when searching for a way of mounting my work, I chose a unit of drawers as a display mode- an object that reflects everyday life. Thinking of the moment when I open my paper drawer at Open Studio, there's always wonder, seeing the prints anew, whether it's a new idea coming out of old prints, or a recharged energy to work through previous frustrations.

I start this thesis with a personal statement about my childhood and remembering this alternative conception of time. I am looking at the issue of how different people experience time in different ways, and that there are different non-linear ways to experience time, such as the 'two-country positionality' I've mentioned previously. And this is the "wonder" or experience that I want my viewers to have.

Cuppa Tea

I drink tea every day. My tea-drinking is personal, yet is also arguably cultural. In this work however, the focus is an investigation of a daily, habitual activity; a habit ultimately not associated with any particular culture. From the English to the Tibetans, tea drinking is a global habit. It is mundane yet underlyingly meaningful. Edensor (2002:94) argues that “the embodied habits evident in ways of walking, sitting, conversing with friends and other modes of conviviality... constitute shared worlds of meaning and action.” In 2016, I used tea and paper to materialize the recording of a seven-day experience. My tea habit became embodied in the scrolls that soaked in it. The ground rules were that whenever I felt like a cup of tea, I made loose tea in a pot, poured it into a cup, then placed a blank roll of paper inside that cup, recording the time of the action on lined paper. I left each roll of paper in its cup until the end of the day. By the end of seven days, there were seven rolls of tea-stained paper in various patterns. I displayed the paper scrolls side by side, hanging from dowels, and placed behind each scroll a single jotted diary page of that day’s notable happenings and any responses I had. The form of display with the scroll hanging from the dowel echoes the way newspapers have been traditionally hung on racks in public places such as cafes and libraries. Tea-drinking and newspaper-reading are both common daily habits; the newspaper in particular plays with time, as a supposed record of ‘current events’ that have already happened. Meanwhile the diary

pages refer to events that stood out, but in this work, they are small and hidden behind the larger landscaped pieces created by the cup of tea. In *Cuppa Tea*, it is the habit that is prioritized and revealed as something of wonder, eclipsing that which is usually prioritized as meaningful in our daily lives. Edensor (2002:90) states that “the repetition of daily, weekly and annual routines, how and when to eat, wash, move, work and play, constitutes a realm of ‘common sense’”. *Cuppa Tea* asks you to look more deeply and consider what your world of ‘common sense’ holds and reveals.



Fig. 6 *Cuppa Tea*, 2016, Rice Paper, Taiwanese Oolong Tea, Wood, Aluminum Bracket, 13.75"x26.75".



Fig. 7 *Cuppa Tea*, 2016, Rice Paper, Taiwanese Oolong Tea, Wood, 13.75"x26.75".

I continued looking at what would be revealed by changing the mode of display for *Cuppa Tea*. For the second iteration in summer 2017, each day's diary entry was printed directly on the wall with carbon paper. The act of inscribing every word from the diary notes onto the wall not only marked my past experience, but also allowed me to relive those moments. The action of inscribing

spoke of the accumulation of time in the past - those seven days in 2016, and then the current time in 2017 when I was actually writing on the wall via carbon paper. It is those passing experiences that though perhaps imprinted in memory, are most ephemeral; whereas it is the ignored everyday that ultimately organizes and shapes our lives. In the fall of 2018, further opening up the patterns, the habits, for examination, I mounted each scroll horizontally, resulting in images that look like natural landscapes or musical scores- ever new expressions of wonder hidden in the habitual. For a fourth thesis exhibition iteration, I placed a music box on a plinth and transcribed the pattern of tea-stains on each scroll into music notes. To achieve this, I placed the patterns of the tea stains over strips of lined music staff paper on a light box, then pricked with an etching needle. I enlarged the needle-holes with a hole-punch; and once I transcribed the tea patterns, I hung the lined music staff paper below the scrolls, thus staff paper is ready to be played in the music box. (In showing this work in future, I will need to have extra music boxes on hand, as during the exhibition itself, the music box was broken by too vigorous or counter-clockwise cranking). During the exhibition, visitors were invited to play the music box to experience an action simultaneously present and past – the songs of habitual time that defines and maintains our lives – a tune narrating events past, yet a moment present, as the visitor was the one to turn the music box crank, therefore having drawn themselves into the moment as activator.



Fig. 8 *Cuppa Tea*, 2019, Ready-made Music Box, Music staff paper, Exhibition view



Fig. 9 *Cuppa Tea*, 2019, Marking music notes.18.5"x1.75"

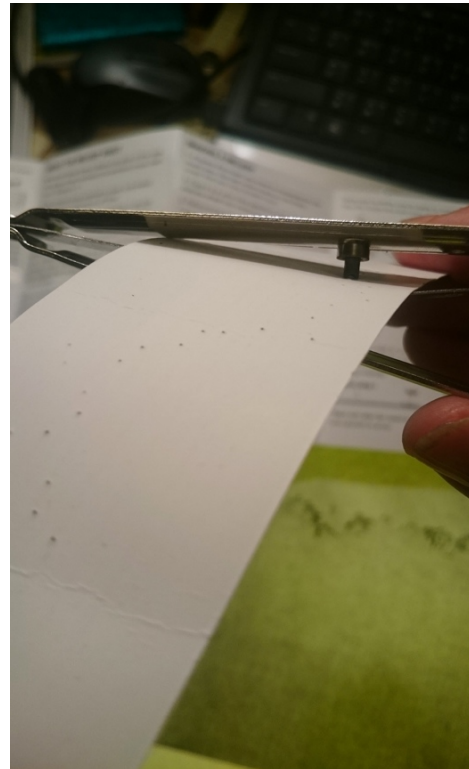


Fig. 10 *Cuppa Tea*, 2019, Pricking the notes Fig.11 *Cuppa Tea*, 2019, Punching the notes

Over the course of my inquiry, this work's several iterations speak to an approach that Sullivan (2010:110) defines as a self-reflexive studio practice. As Sullivan writes, "a self-reflexive practice describes an inquiry process that is directed by personal interest and creative insight...reflexive practice as transformative research ...recursive and constantly undergo[ing] change as new experiences 'talk back' through the process and progress of making art in research settings." (ibid) In this piece, an everyday personal experience which needs no audience, becomes, as in Knowles' performance, something in the nature of shared experience.

Si Un Caffé

During my short, four-week stay in Florence 2017, I noticed on my walks how many street vendors were selling Florence souvenir ties. These ties became the ubiquitous Florence souvenir in my mind and came to represent the city and my walks there. I bought a series of these ties and decided that embroidering them with Florence's own emblem, the time required to do so, would become emblematic of my time there as a tourist explorer of place and culture. While there, I soon developed habits to order my time and the most pleasurable one was drinking espresso; also, observably the habit of the locals. Inspired by this connection of habit between us, I immersed the piece's cotton threads in coffee grounds. What does it mean to immerse oneself in another culture, in another

place and time out of one's own time? In doing the embroidering, I was reminded of my school uniforms in Taiwan where a new line was embroidered onto the lapel for each year from junior high through high school. Each line represented the passage of time and the passages we moved through. The souvenir, what it is and what it comes to represent of time spent in another place either becomes associated with a memory of the destination, allowing for a kind of imaginative return, or it becomes a memento of longing for an imagined place. This speaks to



Fig. 12 *Si Un Caffè*, 2017, Necktie, Cotton Thread, Coffee Ground. 59"x3.5"

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1991:38) claim, “The objects that people use, despite their incredible diversity and sometimes contradictory usage, appear to be signs on a blueprint that represent the relation of man to himself, to his fellows, and to the universe.” Embroidering the ties was transforming a commercial souvenir with a personal notation of time and habit. In the object of the tie was a kind of written observation steeped in the moment of being there. In the exhibition, the collection of embroidered neckties is in one drawer, with its particular tale of time and place.

A Scent from the Past

Although it is not one of my duties, I look after the plants at work. In addition to watering them, I also trim off their withered parts. Lefebvre’s (2008 vol.1:17) notion of familiarity “an awareness of what is familiar becomes transformed into an awareness of something strange” informs my understanding of why in addition to watering the plants, I collect the fallen petals and place them in petri dishes. Objects in petri dishes imply scientific examination; I however, am examining the dead blossoms not as a scientist, but as an artist. In the act of placing them in petri dishes, leading to a more focused examination, the viewer can experience Lefebvre’s notion that the “trivial can become extraordinary.” (14) Even though the fallen petals are no longer as robust as before, they still look alive.

Picking them up from the window sill or the base of the flower pots, taking great care not to break the delicate petals, is followed by documenting the dates they presumably fell. The fallen petals no longer have a robust texture; they are translucent, fragile, and make the sound of crumbling paper if handled too roughly. Knowing that these petals will eventually disintegrate, I document them in their petri dishes on a photocopier. The roller moves from left to right as the machine scans them. Over that few seconds, the moving action reads the life story of each petal. Lefebvre (2008 vol.1:14) writes “a humble plant taken from the soil and from the plants around it, seen up close, becomes something marvelous.” The effect of the fallen petals, frozen in the scanned image, focuses them as if under a magnifying glass. This act of examination, via petri dishes and a photocopier, turns these mundane objects into objects of wonder. In the exhibition, when visitors open the (flower) drawer, they first see the petri dish petals, the video of scanned images projects on a nearby wall. I invite viewers to see the last moments of the fallen petals as if they were still alive, knowing they are in fact no longer alive. The scanned image, as all photographs do, preserves their life in time, while being clearly past, while the actual petals in the petri dishes, somehow neither quite alive nor fully dead, ask the viewer to consider this liminal state – the object in time – the object of wonder.

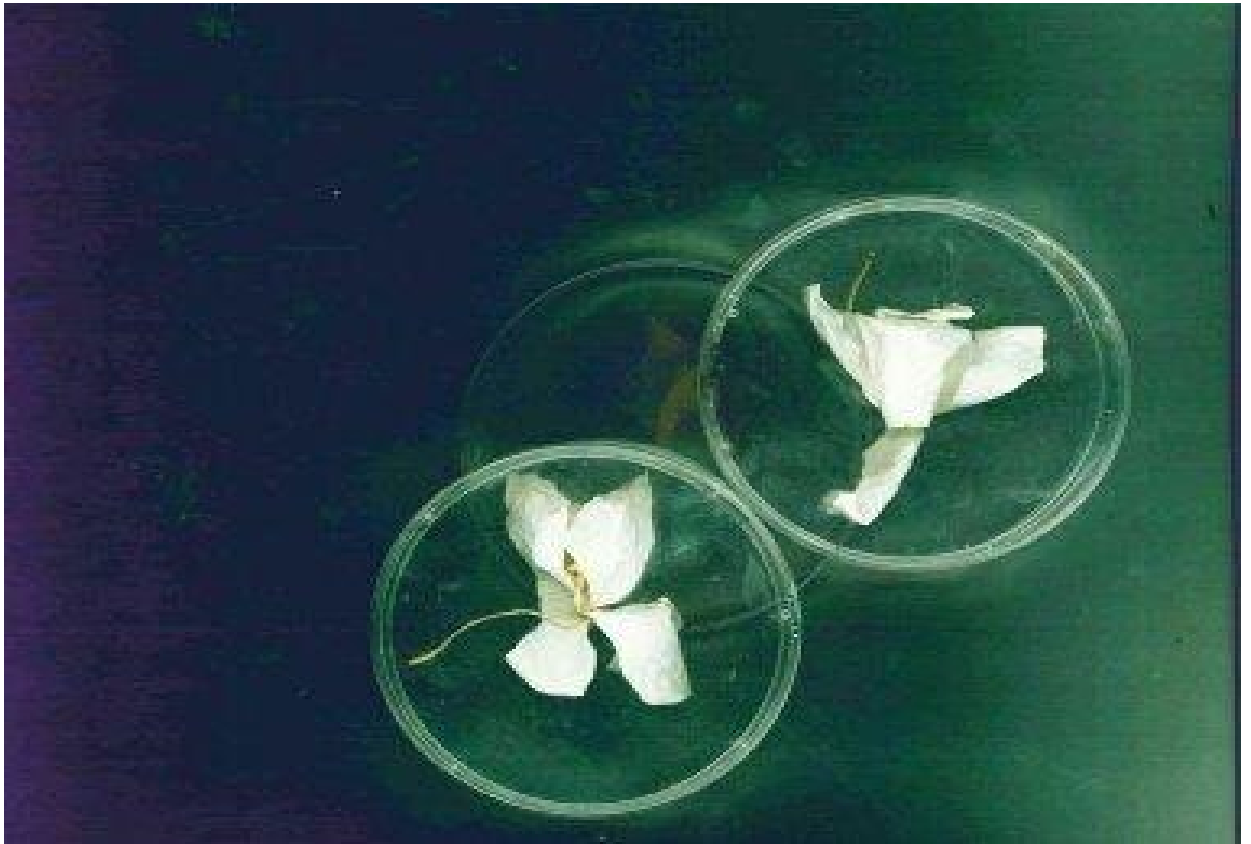


Fig. 13 *A Scent from the Past*, 2018-2019, Video, 3 minutes, Looped



Fig. 14 *Sun Dances*, 2018-2019, Video, 5 minutes, Looped, Exhibition View - Day

Sun Dances

Sun Dances is a video recording of the reflection of light- movements of the sun disturbed by clouds or branches on a window; a flickering, ambiguous moment of movement captured, looped and slowed down. Exactly how long is a moment? In our daily lives, what does it mean to say: 'Just a moment'. A moment is without

precise measurement. It is a pause we request. 'Just a moment' I tell a caller at work. That 'moment' is a duration- a brief interval acknowledged by the caller and myself yet differing signs for those at either end of the phone. We may share the same moment, but feel the time differently. So, what is a 'moment'? Lefebvre (2008 vol.2:345) writes of the moment,

The moment has a certain specific duration. Relatively durable, it stands out from the continuum of transitoriness within the amorphous realm of the psyche. It wants to endure. It cannot endure (at least, not for very long). Yet this inner contradiction gives it its intensity, which reaches crisis point when the inevitability of its own demise becomes fully apparent.

A memorable moment may be shapeless- a sensation. The moment of waking up is memorable, so Hsieh noted it on his map; a Winne-the-Pooh balloon spinning up by the ceiling may mark out that moment from others in MacGregor's work. According to Lefebvre (2008 vol 2: 356), "it does not appear simply anywhere, at just any time. It is a festival, it is a marvel, but it is not a miracle. It has its motives, and without those motives it will not intervene in the everyday. Festival only makes sense when its brilliance lights up the sad hinterland of everyday dullness".

Sun Dances marks out that sense of unexpected festival that is there for those who seek it in sudden momentary arisings and fallings away. The moment calls us, mesmerizes us. In this piece- the momentary dance of sun is looped and slowed down. We can watch it forever. What does that make of the moment- what is the moment when endlessly looped- no longer fleeting but allowed to

endure. Does its endurance return the moment to dullness? This work will be projected onto a gallery window painted with buttermilk (a tribute to Knowles) and will stay on flickering through the night.



Fig. 15 *Sun Dances*, 2018-2019, Video, 5 minutes, Looped, Exhibition View – Night

A Mountain Within

As Toronto's population grows, we see more and more condominium towers in the downtown core. No matter where I walk downtown, currently under constant construction, I am sure to find a piece of gravel. Where do those small rocks come from, I wonder? These everyday materials help create the structure of our homes, then become invisible again; after a building is complete, any unused gravel is removed from the site. However, the lives of these small rocks will last far longer than the people who use them, just like the high-rises they helped build. By how far do they predate human history? Looking at them in this way, gives us a feeling for Lefebvre's (2008 vol.1:13-14) "The most extraordinary things are also the most everyday; the strangest things are often the most trivial..." These bits of the past and the present are underfoot yet their meaning and even their uses are ignored (although they contain our larger history).

As Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981:16) argue, "[T]he things that surround us are inseparable from who we are. The material objects we use are not just tools we can pick up and discard at our convenience; they constitute the framework of experience that gives order to our otherwise shapeless selves". In collecting and giving recognition to these insignificant stones, meaning is created. The object, given a place of prominence, removed from its usual site, becomes something worth examining. I have placed my gravel collection in one

drawer within sight of the looped video projection, in hopes that viewers will make a connection to their hidden role in the structures that hold us up and recognize their value as tool and placeholder of time. The video of me drawing buildings, where I collected the gravel from, under construction projected on the gallery wall underlines the ephemeral nature of what we build and by extension ourselves, versus what we leave behind, the eternal below. Gravel can be seen, in Michel de Certeau's earlier quote (1984:93), as "The ordinary practitioners of the city [that] live 'down below,' below the thresholds at which visibility begins". Given their 'moment', the mundane 'found' objects around us, can be re-evaluated and their value understood anew.



Fig. 16 *A Mountain Within*, 2019, Video, 1:14:05, Looped, Exhibition view



Fig. 17 A collection of gravels from *A Mountain Within*, 2018~2019, Exhibition View.

An Earful of Time

The reading of time from sundials and hourglasses to digital clocks and cell phones are how we mark and monitor the habitual. More and more the direction of technology has been to capture time in the smallest increments. It is a wonder that the hourglass form is still used to measure time, even if only in miniature and for moments of egg-timing or game-playing. The hourglass reads the passage of time through the passage of sand from one half to the other. There is the turning of the object itself and the visual of time passing in

tiny increments. There is perhaps the increasingly muffled sound of falling sand. In *An Earful of Time*, I have recorded an hourglass filled with small beads as they fall from one side to the other. The sound starts distinctly and then grows muffled, as when rain drops start before a shower. The sound would seem to reflect the way time is experienced over a lifetime, and even from day to day, from distinct moments that stand out to a rush or a flow. Listening rather than watching allows the listener to feel the nature of time evolving, of time accumulating. It is an aural investigation that draws the listener in intimately and allows time to be sensed in the body. It ties together the past and the present and suggests the future. Time passing via a lost way of time-telling (the hourglass object) – has been recorded in the past – and will be picked up by the listener in the present at the exhibition via a QR code set up online. The listeners use their cell phones to scan and upload the sound of the hourglass through the QR code link in the hour drawer. They can listen from one object technology to another, from one era to another, from one point in time to another. Reading the time is the most familiar of acts. Here, it becomes transformed into an awareness of something strange.



Fig. 18 *An Earful of Time*, 2019, QR Code, Audio Recording, 1' 34"

Chapter 5 Conclusion

Summary

I came to the Interdisciplinary Art Media and Design (IAMD) program to expand my art practice with more in-depth research, and to work with a medium other than printmaking (my undergraduate major). I also hoped to present a body of work that would inform my friends back in Taiwan of my new understanding of meaning and object, 99% of whom have no art background. Although I was never a student of any particular art teacher in Taiwan, my mother and I visited and discussed art exhibitions from the time I was in elementary school. Art is my daily life. With these thoughts in the back of my mind, I have been, in my work and through this thesis, investigating and analyzing meaning in objects and the everyday. In asking myself what I have in common with my non-artist friends, one answer is of course, time, as obvious but unconsidered as that may be.

Says Lefebvre (2008 vol.2: 357) "There are men who are not artists and not philosophers, but who nevertheless emerge above the everyday, in their own everyday lives, because they experience moments: love, work, play, etc." In thinking of the moment and its meanings, Lefebvre's (2008) *Critique of Everyday Life* resonated. Tim Edensor's (2002) 'everyday life performance', and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's (1991) and Elizabeth Chin's (2016) 'analysis of objects', also spoke to the direction my work was taking. They are the backbone of my

theoretical framework in research and studio practice. In this paper and the corresponding exhibition, I set out to realize how ordinary, everyday materials and objects measure and materialize time. Borrowing research methods from Chen Zhen's (1998) *transexperience*, Betty Goodwin's (1989) "zig zag" studio practice, Graeme Sullivan's (2010) self-reflexive approach and Kristin Luker's (2008) ethnographic field work method, I danced my own my salsa steps in hopes of answering these three questions: 1) how to materialize one's experience of space and time in everyday life- noting that one moves among geographical locations; 2) how may one use common daily materials to create "new" ways of perceiving and acknowledging the role that things play in one's daily life; and 3) how one addresses specific routines in regards to place, time and a changing society, vis a vis objects in everyday life.

A number of the works address the first question, allowing viewers to explore materially how they experience space and time. *An Earful of Time* concerns space and time, the space between our ears, time within an object, time experienced through the senses. The hourglass materializes time in a way that makes time material. During the actual exhibition it was interesting to note the reactions to the QR code, necessary to access 'Earful of Time'. The younger visitors 12 –18, gleefully scanned the code and listened on their phones, while those older were more wary. Ideally, should I display this work again, a pair of

WIFI headphones playing the recording on a loop, would make the piece more accessible to all.

Sun Dances asks what is time, ambiguous time, when it is looped, when we are focusing on a window corner, as we often do without it claiming our attention or time; how does the everyday feel when we slow it down and focus on it. *Si Un Caffè* looks at the space and time of the traveler, materializing it in an actual piece of everyday material, marking space and time with threads – everyday handwork, then later questioning what it truly means to cross space and time in a global culture.

With the use of found materials such as petals and gravel in *A Scent from the Past* and *A Mountain Within*, I explore insignificant and often discarded objects to open them up to new ways of seeing. As in the second question, these pieces ask the viewer to re-evaluate what is ignored. The fallen petals placed in petri dishes are there for our examination and a consideration of where they stand in time. Do they live- are they dead? In addition, they are photographed and illuminated so their beauty becomes timeless. Will it lead to the viewer looking at fallen petals differently in the future? The pieces of gravel gathered in a drawer and the projection on the wall of me drawing a building under construction are an exploration of real time, ephemeral time and timelessness. The building material, tossed aside and forgotten, the building that seems like it

will be there forever, drawn in pencil. In asking the viewer to consider how objects carry time, a space is opened up to reconsider their value.

In regards to question three- how people use routine objects to situate themselves, *Cuppa Tea* looks at that most banal of activities- tea-drinking- and materializes it as pattern, as landscape, as music. It suggests that the habit is the situating event as opposed to the less mundane occurrences that would seem to be the more important markers in our daily lives. The diary pages are behind the scrolls. The scrolls are the evidence and traces of time that the habit holds, situating us in time. The works looks at the habit as the wonder that Lefebvre suggests it might be and Knowles' performed to show that it is. *Si Un Caffé* is the piece that addresses changing locations and then further, a changing society. A traveler takes themselves to a different place and time yet often marks that time by creating similar routines, then before leaving chooses an object to represent that time and place that may in fact have more to say about global culture than any specific time and place.

Future Research

Before working on *Si Un Caffé*, I took apart one of the Florence neckties in order to embroider it and found a small tag hidden inside the folds stating the tie was actually imported from outside Europe. Meanwhile, another label indicated the tie was '100% silk'. I subsequently tested the tie with matches, and it burned quickly

and continued burning after the flame was removed, therefore it was not genuine or pure silk. I believe the majority of people who purchase these street commodities know they are not genuine, but they still buy them. Noting this, I altered the tags to read: 'Cucita a Mano a Firenze' (Hand-sewn in Florence) and **PRODOTTO ITALIANO** (Product of Italy) printed in silk, then sewed them on after returning to Toronto. This work implicitly comments on the culture of tourism and raises larger questions around its authenticity; it looks at how we are all drawn into the manufactured nature of global culture. As anthropologist Edward Bruner (2005:96-100) argues in his studies of tourism, any interpretation of an object's "authenticity" emerges as a dynamic co-production of meaning grounded in the dialogic interaction among makers and consumers and contingent upon specific social and economic contexts. Through my interventions, I question this particular object, the culture of tourism and what is "authentic" and an 'authentic' experience of time and place.

In general, I rarely seek to associate my creative work with social or political concerns. My work has stemmed from and revolved around my personal experience, yet as we now live in a global village, perhaps it is time to look at the larger context, at forces beyond my personal bubble. As an artist and researcher, I can continue to use everyday objects such as the neckties, to consider what they have to tell us about global culture and the nature of our shared experience.

In my third objective, it was stated that I would consider routines vis a vis time and place in a changing society. In fact, it is only with this exploration into the context of tourism and global culture that I begin to address this question.

In addition, the sound component of *Cuppa Tea 2019* received overwhelmingly positive responses during the exhibition. Through this, I was introduced to the American artist Christine Sun Kim. Deaf since birth, Kim communicates using American Sign Language (ASL) and ASL interpretation. Growing up, she was taught that sound was not part of her life. After her 2008 art residency in Berlin, she realized that much of what she was encountering in the galleries and museums was sound art. This realization prompted her to reclaim sound and subsequently to investigate and experiment with sound as tactility and visual language. In her 2015 TED Talk⁷, she showed an image of her work, *Pianoiss...issimo(Worse Finish)*, 2012, which she refers to as a 'P-tree' in which she visualizes each *p* branching out, to show there is always endlessly diminishing sound – no matter how soft and quiet that our ear cannot hear, the sound of silence is there. As a hearing person, I consider silence to be a state of the in-between moment, that which follows sound, and is followed by sound. Kim materializes silence visually; while I materialize the visual pattern of the passage of time – ordinarily silent in comparison to the present – and make it audible as

⁷ https://www.ted.com/talks/christine_sun_kim_the_enchanting_music_of_sign_language?language=en

visitors play the music box. I find Kim's alternative understanding of sound and who owns and controls it, compelling and refreshing. I would like to continue to research more on how sound can measure and materialize time in different forms in the near future.

Every object in this exhibition – whether from nature in the form of fallen petals and pieces of gravel; or mass-produced in the form of IKEA drawers and Amazon music boxes – has been captured to capture and make tangible, intangible, ephemeral time, making of them, momentarily at least, objects of wonder.

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Appendix A: Images of work as installed at Ignite Gallery April 14~20, 2019

Available on <http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/2573/>

Appendix B: Video excerpt of work as installed at Ignite Gallery April 14~20, 2019

Available on <http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/2573/>