

EXHIBITION DOCUMENTATION FOR:

Staying with the Trouble: Unraveling Power Relations through the Lens of Care

By Jingxi He

Exhibition at Ignite Gallery (OCADU)

100 McCaul St, Toronto

March 8-18, 2024

A thesis presented to OCAD University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

of Master of Fine Arts

In Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media and Design

Tour of Exhibition:

<https://youtu.be/s0u9KpCzHCE>

气 (qi) Exhibition:



Photo by Yitong, Wang. [气 (qi) Exhibition]. 2024



Photo by Jingxi, He. [气 (qi) Exhibition]. 2024



Photo by Jingxi, He. [气 (qi) Exhibition]. 2024



Photo by Jingxi, He. [气 (qi) Exhibition]. 2024



Photo by Yitong, Wang. [气 (qi) Exhibition]. 2024



Photo by Yitong, Wang. [气 (qi) Exhibition]. 2024

Artwork Title: 静默 *Shredded Truth*

Date: 2022

Size: installation, variable

Materials: 200-inch roll of printed Censored News (6" × 200"), Paper Shredder

Description and Action:

The artwork 静默 *Shredded Truth* (2022) is a response to the #whitepapermovement, a significant protest movement challenging government censorship in China during the post-pandemic reopening phase. This installation symbolizes the traditional power dynamics between the ruling government and the populace, depicting a top-down approach to authority. The core of this piece is a series of Chinese news articles, downloaded and then shredded. These articles, which narrate the harrowing experiences of individuals living under China's stringent Zero-Covid policies, were often censored mere hours after being collected in November 2022. This period saw the emergence and escalation of the #whitepapermovement, marking the most extensive protests in China in three decades (Yang, 2023).

静默 *Shredded Truth* subverts this narrative through a performative act, where a continuous scroll of pre-censored media posts is methodically destroyed by an automated shredding machine. This action was performed on the last day of the exhibition. This act serves both as a mimicry and a critique of governmental censorship, highlighting the struggles and suppressed voices under an overly controlled society. The installation metaphorically positions the shredder as the government, and the news articles as the embodiment of free speech, thereby reflecting the ongoing political strife. This artistic expression stands in opposition to the pervasive control and violence exerted by the state, offering a poignant commentary on the conflict between authority and freedom of speech, as discussed by art critic Walter Benjamin (277-300).

Final Action of Shredding 静默 *Shredded Truth*:

<https://youtu.be/M3Rl6VPKeWQ>



Photo by Jingxi, He. 静默 *Shredded Truth*. 2024



Photo by WenWei, Chen. 静默 *Shredded Truth*. 2024



Photo by Jingxi, He. 静默 *Shredded Truth*. 2024



Photo by Jingxi, He. 静默 *Shredded Truth*. 2024

Artwork Title: *Respire to Rise*

Date: 2024

Size: 7.25" × 13" × 13" each (set of four)

Materials: 4 custom-built plexi enclosures with artists' schematic sketches on sides; top molded acrylics, custom Arduinos, humidity sensors, air pumps, balloons, cabling and a/c power, humidity sensor.

Description and Action:

Respire to Rise is a set of four sculptural installations. Each box in the set features etched schematics of artist's initial sketches on the side of the boxes, symbolizing the creative process. The boxes are topped with frosted, curved acrylic, vacuum-formed into a soft shape. This design not only aesthetically pleases but also guides the balloons back to the center of the box. A key interactive element of this artwork is audience participation. Each box is equipped with a sensor that activates an internal air pump, causing a small balloon to rise. In front of each box, the sensor is placed on a stand waiting to be picked up by the audience. This sensor is triggered by the breath of a participant, emphasizing the initiative and bodily participation of the audience. The four box installations interact with each other, creating a playful air dance with the balloons moving in a seemingly improvised symphony.

Positioned in the center of the exhibition space beside the artwork *静默的呼吸 Governed Breath*, this piece serves as an introduction, making visitors aware of their breath and its metaphorical significance in the context of the other artworks. The piece resonates with Foucault's concepts of power, highlighting its immanence and the way it can be influenced by subtle, non-subjective forces, much like the balloons' flight paths altered by minor disturbances. Collectively, these boxes symbolize the power of community. Through audience interaction, the artwork conveys that everyone can partake in and influence the dynamics of power, as natural and integral as breathing.

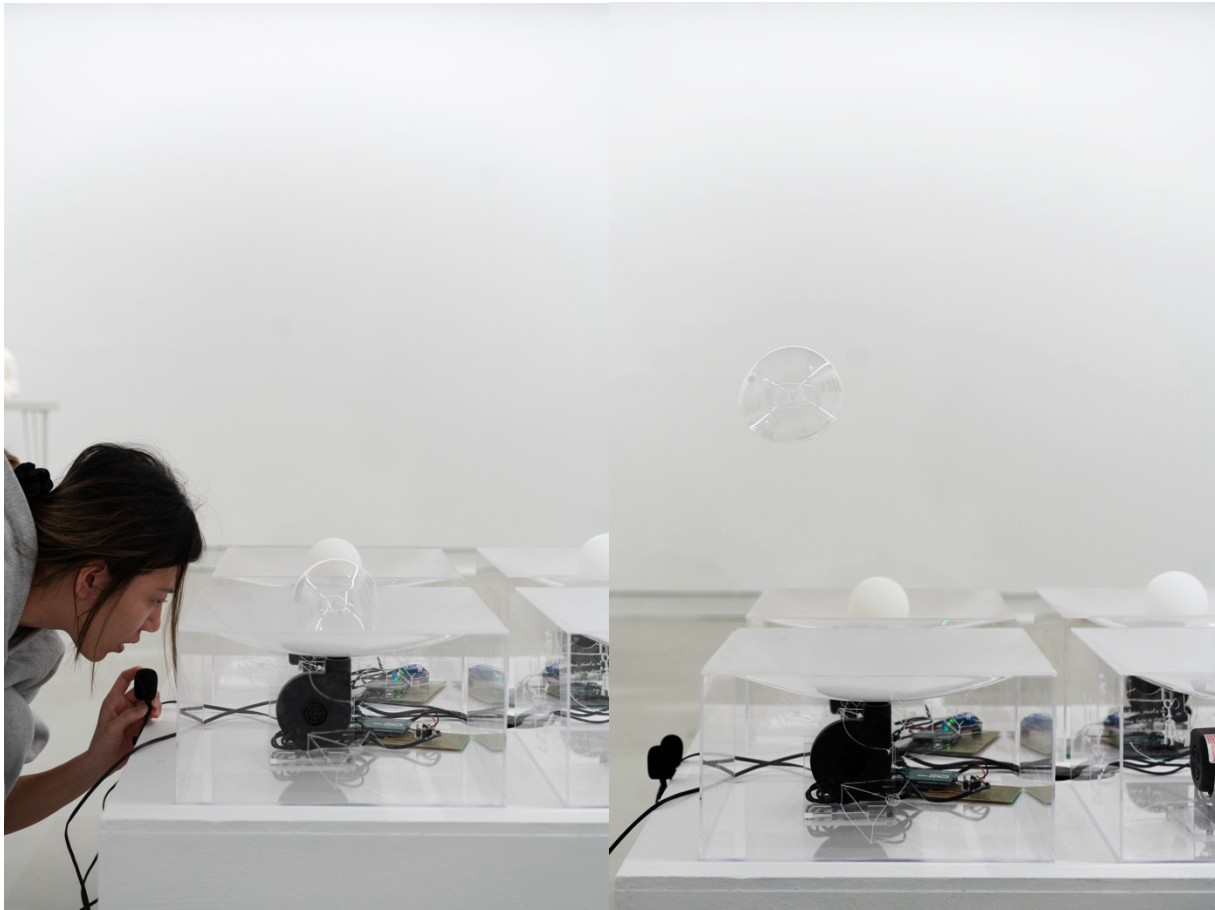


Photo by Yitong, Wang. *Respire to Rise*. 2024

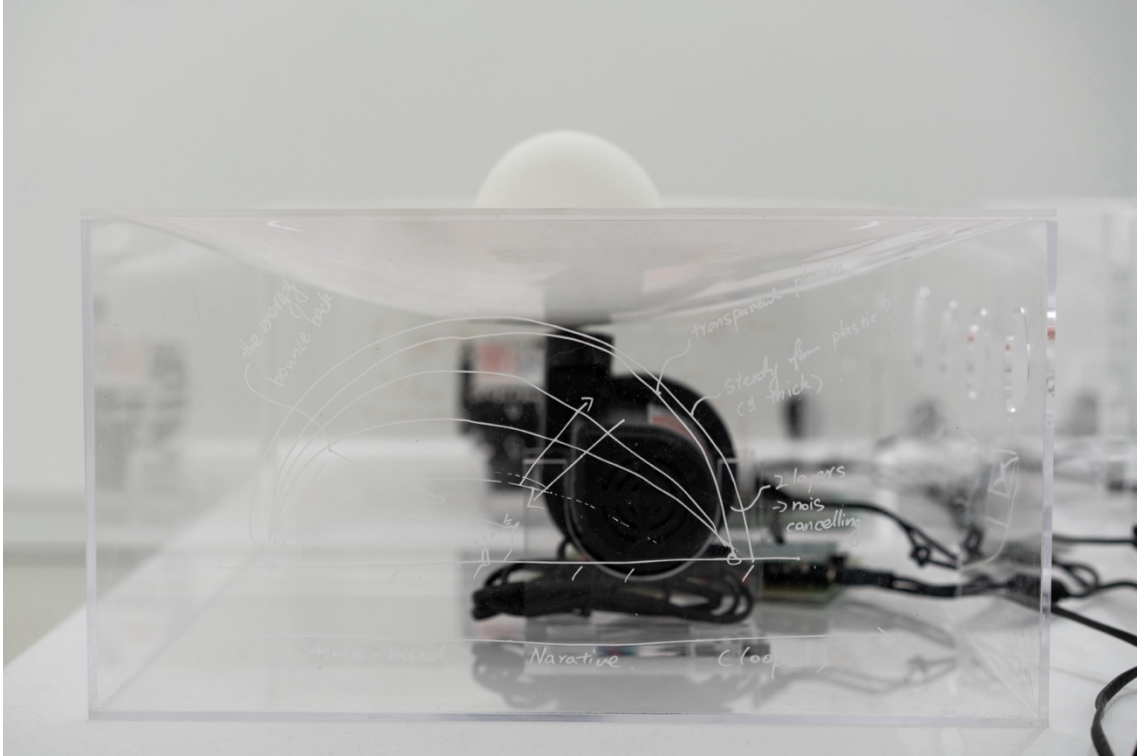


Photo by Yitong, Wang. *Respire to Rise*. 2024

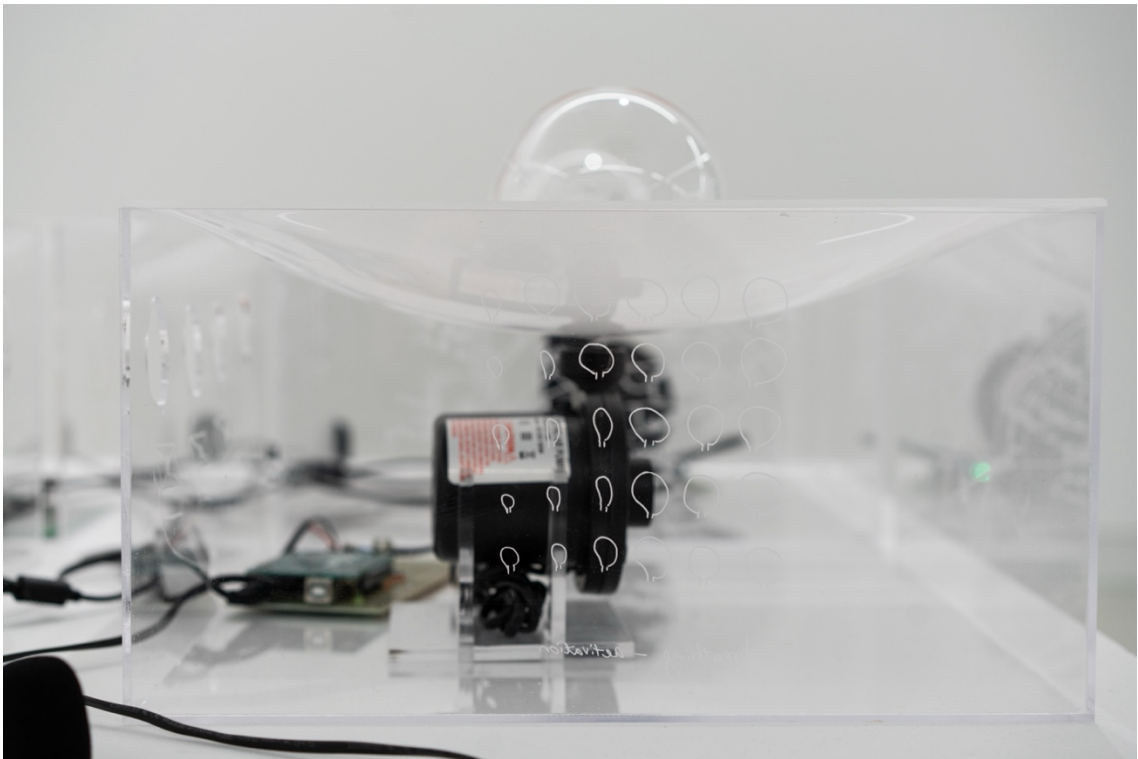


Photo by Yitong, Wang. *Respire to Rise*. 2024

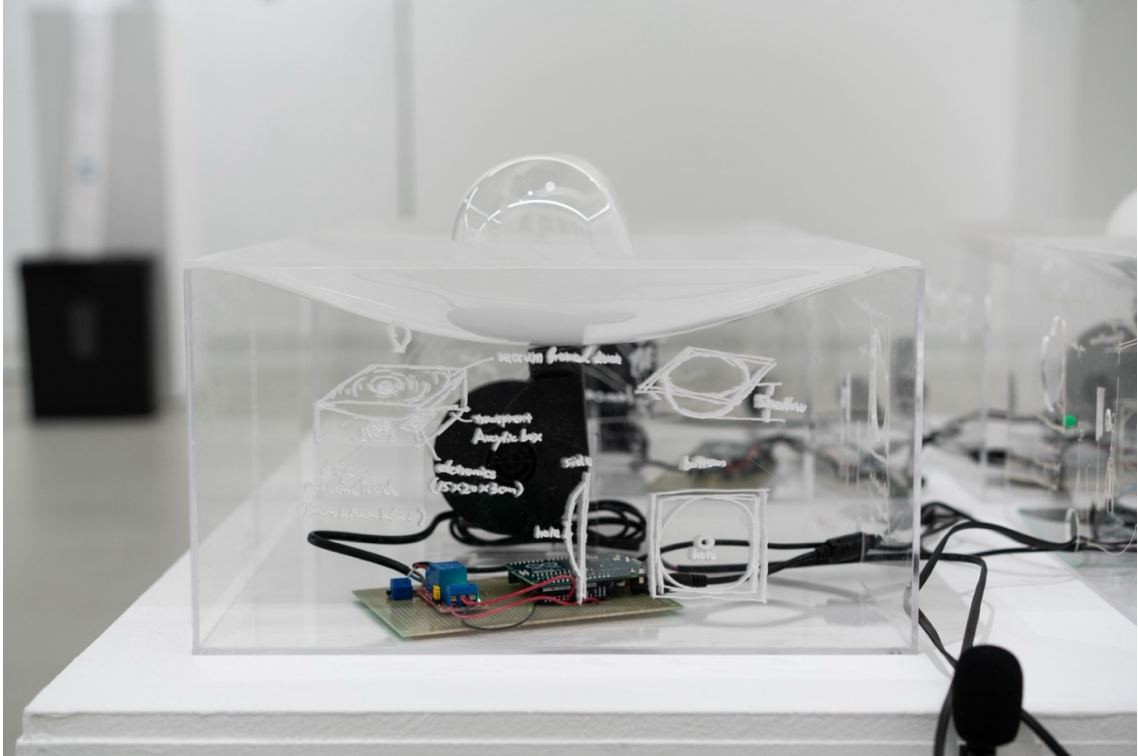


Photo by Yitong, Wang. *Respire to Rise*. 2024

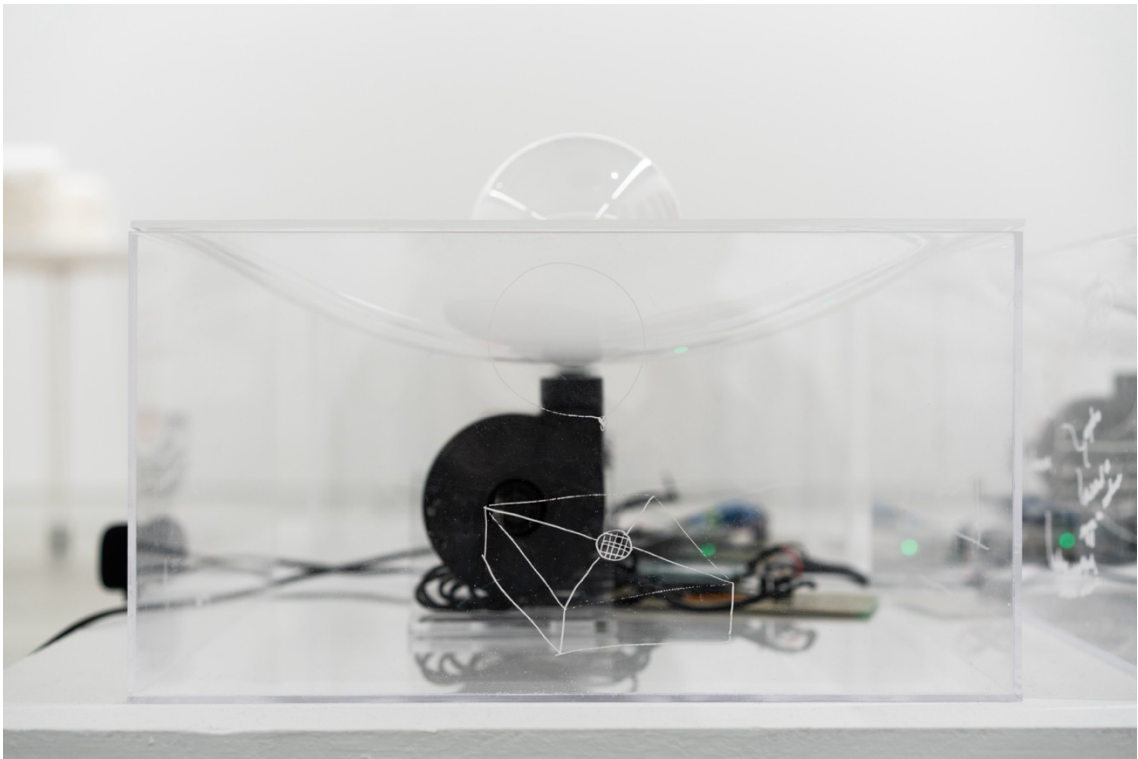


Photo by Yitong, Wang. *Respire to Rise*. 2024

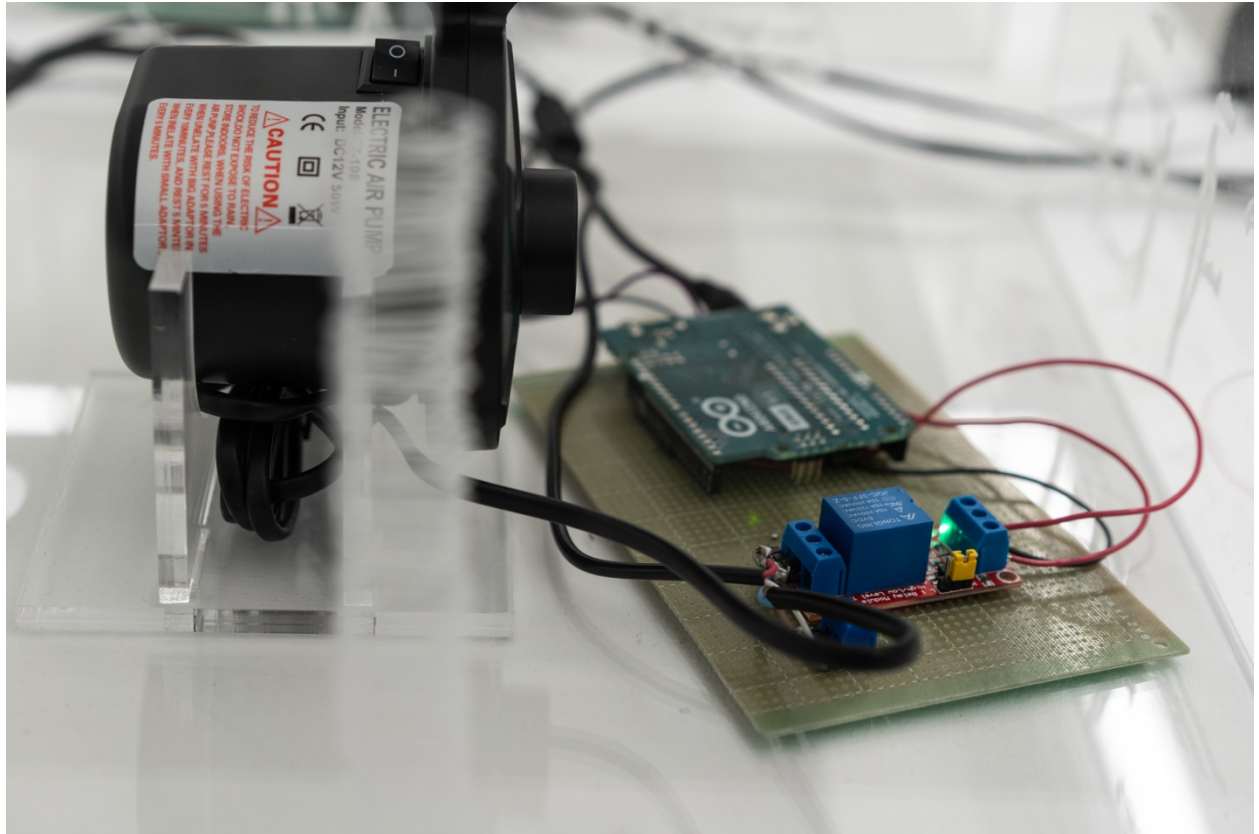


Photo by Yitong, Wang. *Respire to Rise*. 2024

Artwork Title: *Ephemeral Pops*

Date: 2024

Size: 22" × 33" each (set of five)

Materials: Large-scale Photographs

Description and Action:

The *Ephemeral Pops* photography series of large-scale photographs captures the fleeting interplay between breath and bubble gum through a sequence of photographic stills. Each image chronicles the ephemeral state where the artist's breath expands the gum, creating a delicate tension. Achieving larger bubbles demands increased effort and precision in the act of blowing. This tension is a dance of forces: the more air infused, the greater the resistance felt by the artist's mouth. Foucault perceives resistance as an intrinsic element within the framework of power dynamics. He posits that resistance is essential to the very concept of power, implying that without the presence of resistance, the notion of power becomes non-existent.

Each photograph in the series symbolizes a moment of equilibrium between the air within the bubble and that within the artist's mouth, with the exception of the bursting point. This continual exchange and balancing act mirrors the power relations inherent in human interactions, be it with the state, societal norms, or established rules. Like these power relations, the state of the bubble is often in a precarious balance, vulnerable and transient.

The stability of each bubble, although seemingly steady, is inherently fragile. Both internal and external influences can disrupt this balance, leading to significant consequences. The act of blowing bubbles, much like navigating the complex web of power relations, is an exercise in finesse, requiring acute awareness, care, caution, patience, and a sense of responsibility. This series invites viewers to reflect on the subtleties of power and the transient nature of balance in our lives.



Jingxi, He. *Ephemeral Pops*. 2024



Photo by Jingxi, He. *Ephemeral Pops*. 2024

Artwork Title: 静默的呼吸 *Governed Breath*

Date: 2024

Size: Base: 12" × 20.625" × 20.625" ; Dome: 10" × 20.625" × 20.625" ;

Materials: Top molded acrylics, weather balloon, customed Arduino, air pumps, cabling and a/c power, wood

Description and Action:

静默的呼吸 Governed Breath stands as not only the initial concept for this exhibition but also its focal point. This work is intricately constructed, featuring a robust wooden box foundation, which serves as a stark contrast to the delicate architecture above. Crowning this foundation is a crystal-clear acrylic dome, an embodiment of both visibility and barrier. Encased within this transparent yet confining dome is a solitary balloon. This balloon, ever in motion, engages in a rhythmic dance of expansion and contraction. Its movements are evocative of gentle breathing, symbolizing the essence of life and flow of a living being.

The balloon, vibrant and dynamic, represents an organic entity, almost creature-like in its behavior. Its movement within the dome is a powerful juxtaposition against the rigid and unyielding structure that encapsulates it. The dome, while transparent and seemingly inconspicuous, is a potent symbol of an established, overarching system. It presents an illusion of openness and freedom, yet it exerts an unspoken control over the balloon, dictating the limits of its movements and existence.

This interplay between the balloon and the dome is a poignant metaphor for the nuanced and often powerful dynamics at play between individuals and the state, especially resonant in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in China. The artwork reflects the unpredictable shifts in autonomy and control experienced during this time, mirroring the political climate and the state's influence over its people. Moreover, it also seeks to capture the artist's personal turmoil experienced under such a power dynamic. *静默的呼吸 Governed Breath* thus stands as a multifaceted symbol, a confluence of political commentary and personal expression, encapsulating a moment in history through the lens of artistic interpretation.

静默的呼吸 *Governed Breath* In Action:

An inflation and deflation cycling of the balloon every three minutes.

<https://youtu.be/OociESt4Mxo>



Photo by Jingxi, He. 静默的呼吸 *Governed Breath*. 2024



Photo by Jingxi, He. 静默的呼吸 *Governed Breath*. 2024



Photo by Jingxi, He. 静默的呼吸 *Governed Breath*. 2024

Artwork Title: *Performing Care – 5241*

Date: 2024 (Ongoing)

Size: installation, variable

Materials: Tissue paper, fishing wire, tape

Description and Action:

In the immersive performance artwork *Performing Care — 5241*, the artist undertakes a solemn act of remembrance and resistance through the meticulous folding, sewing, and hanging of 5,241 pieces of tissue paper. Each piece symbolizes an individual life lost to COVID-19 in China, embodying a gesture of care and respect towards those who departed amidst the pandemic's shadow. This act, performed for one hour each day, transcends mere memorialization, engaging deeply with the concept of 'staying with the trouble' as articulated by Donna Haraway and explored within the broader socio-political critique of power dynamics in contemporary China.

Rooted in auto-theory and Art-Based Research (ABR), this piece weaves the artist's personal narrative with a critical examination of state-individual relationships, offering a poignant critique of the state's management and the societal implications of such crises. Through the lens of care, the artist not only navigates the intricacies of power and resistance but also invites the audience into a shared space of reflection, empathy, and understanding. *Performing Care — 5241* is a testament to the transformative potential of art in challenging times, embodying the act of caring as both a personal and political act that resists the invisibility of power relations and fosters a collective consciousness toward the realities of life and death during the pandemic.

By situating the artwork within this theoretical and methodological framework, *Performing Care — 5241* becomes a dynamic space where personal and collective grief, care, and the quest for understanding and resistance are performed and interrogated, offering insights into the complex fabric of human relations in the face of adversity.

***Performing Care – 5241* Performance in Action:**

<https://youtu.be/jgVCfLnEdKA>



Photo by Yitong, Wang. *Performing Care* – 5241. 2024



Photo by Jingxi, He. *Performing Care* – 5241. 2024



Photo by Jingxi, He. *Performing Care* – 5241. 2024



Photo by Jingxi, He. *Performing Care* – 5241. 2024



Photo by OCAD Graduate Study. *Performing Care* – 5241. 2024



Photo by Jingxi, He. *Performing Care* – 5241. 2024



Photo by Yitong, Wang. *Performing Care* – 5241. 2024

气 (qi) Exhibition with Audience:



Photo by WenWei, Chen. [气 (qi) Exhibition]. 2024

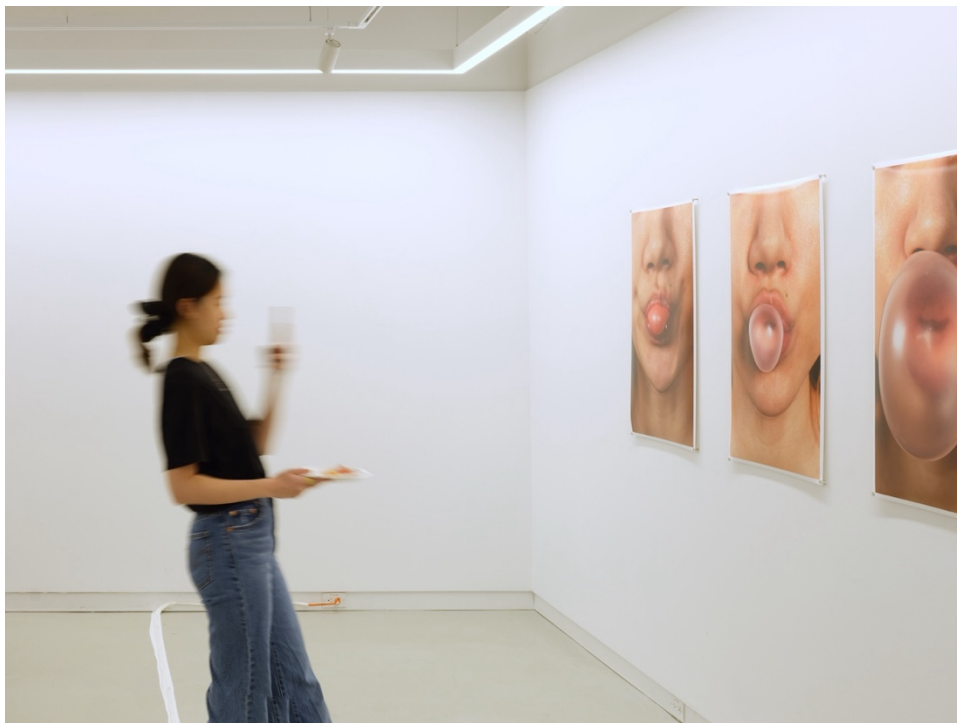


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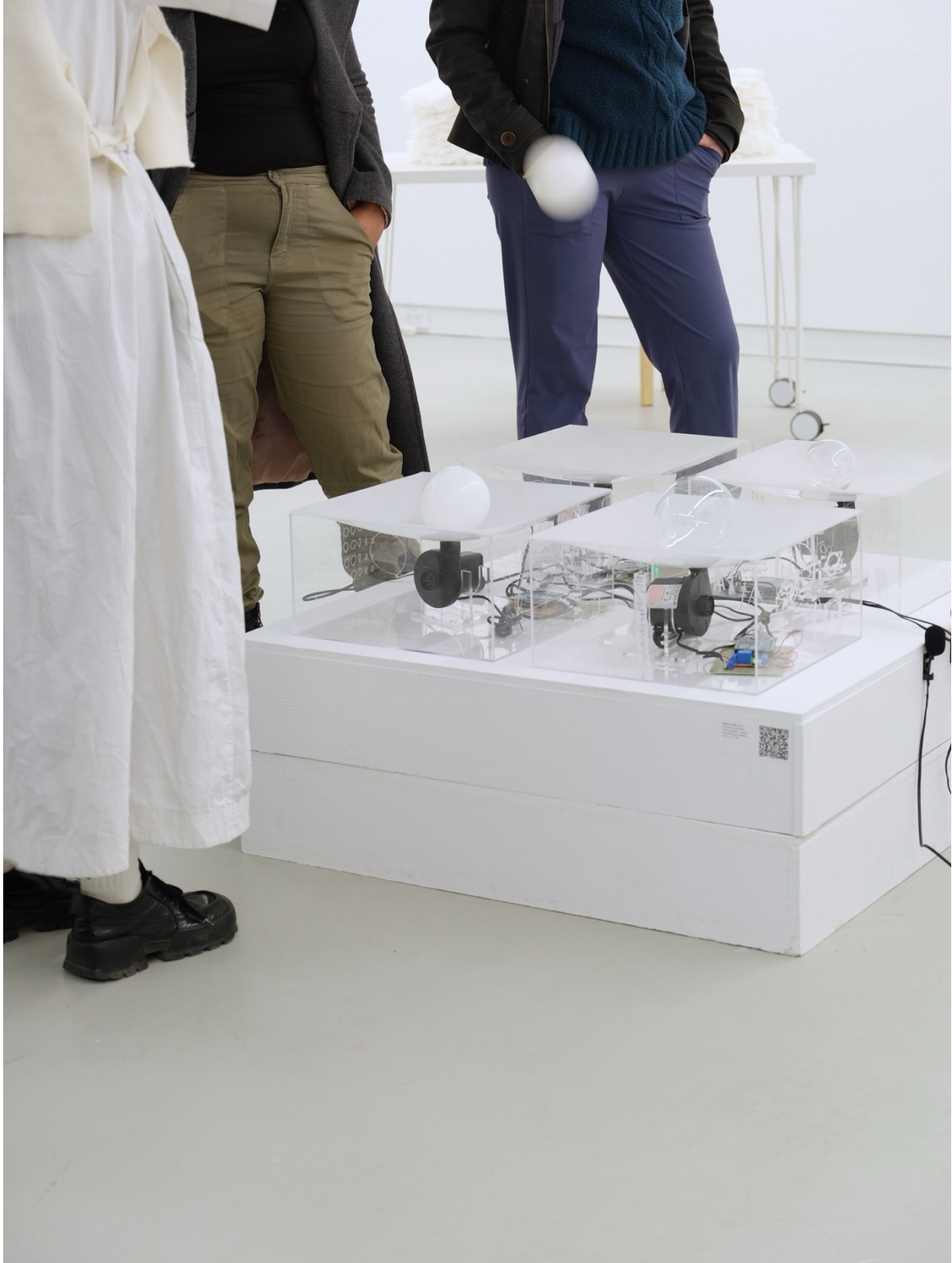


Photo by WenWei, Chen. [气 (qi) Exhibition]. 2024