

clay dies when you stop listening

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Abstract

This thesis explores listening as a material, temporal approach to artmaking through clay, unstable systems, and unintentional processes. It is guided by three related research questions. What happens when art begins not with control, but with listening? How might clay, time, environment, and unstable systems participate in the making of a work? Can clay be understood as a listening material, and what does it mean for clay to listen on its own? Drawing on post-structuralist thought, the Fluxus movement's emphasis on chance, and Korean experimental art of the 1960s and 1970s, this research examines how authorship can be loosened through material processes that continue beyond intention and control.

The works in this thesis take the form of clay-based experiments, performative situations, and installations using unfired clay, toys, vibration, air, water, writing, and delegated movement. Left unfired and exposed to gravity, vibration, airflow, humidity, and delay, clay cracks, sags, absorbs, and shifts. Rather than treating these changes as accidents to be corrected, I approach them as forms of response. By positioning listening as both a method and a stance, this thesis proposes an artistic practice grounded in delay, instability, incomplete form, and the quiet activity of matter.

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Introduction: Listening Before Making



Figure 1. Hayeon Lee, *dialogue wrinkles*, 2025, unfired mid-white clay, variable dimensions.

Art often begins with intention.

Imagine. Plan. Shape. Execute.

In my studio, intention usually arrives late. Sometimes it doesn't show up at all. Clay sags. Slip dries. Bubbles land wherever they want. A machine suddenly behaves like it has opinions. None of this feels dramatic. After watching this long enough, I stopped asking how to fix it. I started asking why I was there.

If materials are already performing, failing, rebooting, and collaborating on their own, then what exactly is the artist doing? What I began to hear in these moments was that material did not need my clarity in order to act. This research begins from that shift. Rather

than treating clay as passive matter, I approach it as something that stays active while changing. I mainly work with commercially prepared clay bodies, including mid-white and other colored clays, in an unfired state. Before clay becomes a studio material, it comes from the land. The clay I use is not wild clay taken directly from a site, but clay that has already been extracted, refined, mixed, standardized, and packaged for use. I started using these clay bodies because they were among the most accessible materials available to me. But what became important in my work was not a specific clay body, but the unstable state of unfired clay. As standardized commercial materials, these clay bodies offer a relatively consistent starting point, making changes caused by drying, pressure, gravity, humidity, and time easier to observe. This in-between state also matters to me conceptually. The clay still carries its relation to the land, yet it has already passed through processes of preparation and commodification. Left unfired, it stays vulnerable to further change rather than being fixed too quickly into a final form. Figure 1 introduces the kind of surface I return to throughout this thesis. One that does not present a finished form so much as register pressure, contact, and slow change.

Clay became important to my work because it does not simply hold the form I give it. It keeps negotiating with the conditions around it, so the work begins to feel less like a fixed object and more like an ongoing situation. Art is treated here less as a finished object than as a situation. When I use the term relations, I partly draw on Nicolas Bourriaud's idea of *relational aesthetics*, where art is understood through the situations and encounters it produces.¹ But I use it somewhat differently here. I am interested in relations that persist through material response, uneven duration, and environmental change even after direct encounter loosens. The sections that follow move through key terms, artistic and theoretical

¹ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002), 6–8, 12.

contexts, and a series of works in which listening becomes visible through slowness, awkwardness, humor, and partial loss of control.

Literature Review: Who Listened Before Me

I did not invent the idea of stepping back. Fluxus was already playing the “kill your ego (but make it fun)” game long before I was born. Emerging in the 1960s, Fluxus was an international experimental art movement that shifted attention away from the finished object and toward event, gesture, instruction, and processes. Rather than treating chance as accident or failure, artists associated with Fluxus used it as a compositional condition.² In *Apple* (1966), Yoko Ono allowed an apple to rot publicly and asked viewers to decide whether it should be replaced, turning decay into a participatory question.³ In *Water Walk* (1959), John Cage used everyday objects as instruments, allowing ordinary action, timing, and unpredictability to structure the work.⁴ In this context, chance was not chaos, but a kind of choreography. Everyday actions became events. It was never about masterpieces, but about moments. What draws me to these works is not simply their use of chance, but their refusal to treat unpredictability as failure. My own practice shares this openness, but it shifts the emphasis toward slower material negotiation, where clay, vibration, gravity, and delay continue acting after the visible event has passed.

A related attitude appears in the Korean experimental art scene of the 1960s and

² Owen F. Smith, “Fluxus: A Brief History and Other Fictions,” in *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, ed. Janet Jenkins (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1993), 22–37.

³ Yoko Ono, *Apple*, 1966, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1494>.

⁴ John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 7–11

1970s, where artists explored action, perception, instability, and non-fixed form.⁵ Lee Kun-Yong used the body not to represent something, but as a kind of notational system through which movement, repetition, and physical limitation could be registered. In works such as *Bodyscape* (1976–), lines were produced through the body’s restricted range of motion, so that form is shaped not by ideal control but by constraint and repetition. Kim Ku-Lim moved across performance, film and action, unsettling the boundaries between event and object. In *Phenomenon to Traces* (1970), he set fire to a patch of lawn by the Han River, so that the work existed not as a stable object but as an event and the traces it left behind. Lee Kang-So allowed the environment to lead, staying open to chance and incompleteness. In *Disappearance* (1973), he set up a bar inside the gallery and ran it for a week, so that the everyday situation itself became the work.⁶ Across these practices, form is not fully secured in advance. It emerges through action, interruption, duration, and context. This history matters to me not only because I am Korean, but because it offers a way of thinking about instability as something productive rather than something to correct. My work shares this receptiveness to contingency but asks more directly what happens when material response itself becomes the focus of attention.

Several contemporary precedents sharpen this position further. German artist Isa Genzken is known for working across sculpture, installation, photography, and film, expanding the boundaries of contemporary art through unstable forms and shifting material relations. Her work often walks a fine line between funny and tension, where playful

⁵ *Only the Young: Experimental Art in Korea, 1960s–1970s*, National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea, 2023, <https://www.mmca.go.kr/exhibitions/exhibitionsDetail.do?exhFlag=1&exhId=202302010001613>.

⁶ Lee Kang-So, “MMCA Artist Talk | Lee Kang-So,” National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea, 2021; Kim Ku-Lim, “MMCA Artist Talk | Kim Ku-Lim,” National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea, 2020; Lee Kun-Yong, “MMCA Artist Talk | Lee Kun-Yong,” National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea, 2020.

elements slowly become unsettling. In *Empire/Vampire, Who Kills Death* (2003), toys, aluminum foil, and medical equipment are assembled into an installation that appears playful at first glance, yet gradually becomes grotesque, dazzling, and disturbing.⁷ This helps me think through how light or absurd materials can sustain pressure, instability, and unease. While Genzken uses toys to speak about the external world, in my own practice toys function a little differently. In relation to clay, time, and chance, they function less as symbols than as small mechanisms that disturb timing and redirect material behavior.

This approach is further extended through practices that treat making as durational and embodied. *RAW*, presented at the Gardiner Museum in Toronto in 2020 and curated by Dr. Sequoia Miller, brought together four installations using unfired clay, all of which remained in flux and transformed throughout the exhibition.⁸ The exhibition is important to my thesis because it foregrounded clay not as a finished ceramic object, but as a material still undergoing transformation. Within this context, Cassils, a visual artist working across live performance, film, sound, sculpture, and photography, engages clay not as a passive surface but as a resistant material shaped through force, endurance, and repeated bodily contact. In *Up To and Including Their Limits* (2020), Cassils is suspended from a harness inside a plexiglass box whose walls are covered in thick raw clay.⁹ From within this structure, they propel themselves back and forth, claw at the walls, and hurl chunks of clay to the floor, gradually creating “windows” through the surface. What emerges is not a stable sculptural object, but a record of impact, bodily effort, and the politics of spectatorship. This matters to

⁷ *Isa Genzken: Retrospective*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1454>.

⁸ *RAW*, curated by Sequoia Miller, *Gardiner Museum*, Toronto, 2020, <https://www.gardinermuseum.on.ca/event/raw/>

⁹ Cassils, *Up To and Including Their Limits*, 2020, <https://www.cassils.net/cassils-artwork-up-to-and-including-their-limits>.

my own practice because it frames clay as something that receives force, registers contact, and changes through exposure rather than simply preserving form.

This expanded understanding of making also appears in exhibitions that approached craft through performance, action, and temporality rather than through finished objects alone. *Gestures of Resistance*, curated by Judith Leemann and Shannon Stratton at the Museum of Contemporary Craft, and *Hand+Made: The Performative Impulse in Art and Craft*, curated by Valerie Cassel Oliver at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston in 2010, both emphasized process, live action, and material transformation.¹⁰ Rather than presenting craft as a field defined only by finished objects or technical refinement, these exhibitions highlighted performance, audience activation, temporary situations, and making as an ongoing event. They matter to my practice not because they place it neatly within craft, but because they expand how making can be understood as unstable, durational, and publicly enacted.

Since clay is central to my practice, this research also engages writing on craft concerned with material knowledge, embodied process, and making through repeated contact with matter. I do not use craft here to mean a fixed category of objects or a tradition defined only by skill, finish, and refinement. Rather, I turn to this writing because clay carries histories of touch, labor, skill, and embodied knowledge that remain relevant even when the material is used within contemporary art. My own work is better understood as a contemporary art practice, but one that remains in contact with questions often associated with craft. I am less interested in producing functional or resolved objects than in how material changes through time, humidity, pressure, and gravity. My work is concerned less with the completion of form than with sustaining situations in which clay can keep shifting.

¹⁰ *Gestures of Resistance*, curated by Judith Leemann and Shannon Stratton, Museum of Contemporary Craft, Portland, 2010; *Hand + Made: The Performative Impulse in Art & Craft*, curated by Valerie Cassel Oliver, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2010.

Glenn Adamson, an American curator and author of *Thinking Through Craft*, argues that craft is not only a category of objects but also a way of thinking that emerges through direct engagement with materials. From his perspective, craft thinking is formed not only through prior planning or abstract ideas, but also through handling, repetition, adjustment, and negotiation with materials.¹¹ This notion is relevant because the significance of clay in my work lies not only in what it becomes, but in how understanding develops through repeated engagement with material behavior. The work does not begin with a fully determined form to be executed. It develops as I return to the material, observe what has changed, and adjust my decisions around what the clay has already begun to do. I do not turn to craft writing because I define the work as craft, but because it helps articulate a mode of attentiveness grounded in material change. What I take from this strand of writing is an embodied responsiveness to process rather than mastery as display.

If writing on craft helps me understand material intimacy, post-structuralist thought helps me understand why authorship in my practice never feels stable. Post-structuralism questions the idea that meaning originates in one controlling subject and instead emphasizes that meaning is shaped through language, context, discourse, and relations.¹² In my practice, I do not experience myself as the sole origin of the work's meaning or behavior. In "What Is an Author?," the twentieth century French philosopher, historian, and social theorist Michel Foucault argues that the author is not simply the source of meaning, but a function shaped by discourse and institutional conditions. As he writes, "the author is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work," but a principle that limits, organizes, and classifies

¹¹ Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 3–4.

¹² Foucault, "What Is an Author?," 113–17; Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 142–48; Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 278–93.

meaning.¹³ Roland Barthes, a French critic and semiotician of the twentieth century, further supports this position in “The Death of the Author” by shifting attention away from authorial intention and toward the plurality of meanings that emerge around the work.¹⁴ Together, these texts help me understand the artist not as a singular authority, but as one condition among many.

Listening in this thesis is also informed by artistic and theoretical approaches that understand listening not as passive hearing, but as an ethical and situated form of attention. Pauline Oliveros, the American composer who developed the concept of *Deep Listening*, is important here because she distinguishes listening from the automatic act of hearing and understands it as a conscious practice of attention that can include daily life, nature, thought, and imagination.¹⁵ *Deep Listening* is both the title of her 1989 album and the philosophical term that emerged through its recording.¹⁶ This helps me understand listening as a way of remaining with what unfolds over time. Christine Sun Kim, an American artist based in Berlin, also extends this further by approaching sound through drawing, notation, visual language, and the body. In *Ghost(ed) Notes* (2024), a large wall mural composed of wavering four-line staves and scattered note-like marks, sound is approached as something that can be visual, spatial, and bodily, rather than something received only through the ear.¹⁷ Rebecca Belmore, a Canadian multidisciplinary Anishinaabe artist, also understands listening as something relational and grounded in place. In *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother* (1991), a performance centered on a large wooden megaphone, invited

¹³ Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” 118.

¹⁴ Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 142–48.

¹⁵ Pauline Oliveros, *Deep Listening: A Composer’s Sound Practice* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 2005).

¹⁶ Pauline Oliveros, Stuart Dempster, and Panaiotis, *Deep Listening* (New Albion Records, 1989).

¹⁷ Christine Sun Kim, *Ghost(ed) Notes*, Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, June 2024–January 2026.

speakers addressed the land directly.¹⁸ These references do not stand as equivalent to my practice. Rather, they help me think more clearly about listening as material, relational, and ethical at once. They help me frame listening as a way of attending to clay, delay, vibration, and environmental change instead of treating it as a symbolic theme.

This literature review maps the conversations I am entering. It brings together artists who trust accidents, movements that privilege everyday gestures over perfected objects, and theories that say “maybe the material was listening first.” These references help me name what I kept encountering in the studio. Clay “listening” more patiently than I could, materials misbehaving with a kind of unexpected wisdom, and forces such as gravity, vibration, airflow offering forms beyond my direct intention. The next section turns from these contexts to the studio, where listening becomes less a concept to explain than a condition to build, endure, and sometimes mishear.

¹⁸ Rebecca Belmore, *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother*, 1991; Museum of Anthropology at UBC, *VALUE: Rebecca Belmore* exhibition materials.

I am not loyal . 가나 나정 차정스레만 해주는 나정 뿐이다 .

I wait in corners .

I scatter in tobacco ,

I get stuck by rubber bands ,

I stretch when tied with rope ,

I hum with the wind , soaking in too much water , turning in to mud again .

Clay saves its best for the moment Haye on finally relaxes .

Clay collapses . 해이 마구치긴다 .

Clay listens . 해이 풍조에 힘긴다 .

셀전하 . 나 신산이 룬에 못지않다 .

I will dry a bit faster , or explode in the kiln .

나정 는 최후의 나정만 가예끔버정지함 나정 always .

해정 나정 정중이다 .

She pulls → I crack

She pushes → I slump

She calls me delicate , but I know she is the brittle one .

나정 나정 hands shaking , eyes shining .

후가 마구 매에인후 포크베르스정정다 .

And the Haye . 버하나 최한거 해해정 나정 .

Sounds fancy , riding . But , still dirt . Just wearing a label .

나정 나정 해정 " Reed Clay " 가 정정다 .

Suddenly I was " Midsummerstone " .

Ma chiees riding , washing , bagging .

The name as chance to me . F.U.C.K.E.R.S . 나정 나정 정정다 .

해정 나정 나정 정정다 . I was busy listening .

Just dirt . Just dirt . Just dirt .

I was dirt .

I Still Am

Working Through Listening

Theory enters here not as something to decorate the work, but as language that helps me recognize what is already happening in the studio. I do not begin with theory and then apply it to the work. Usually, the material moves first, and theory helps me name the patterns afterward. Writing is one of the ways I stay close to those patterns while they are still unfolding.

Writing as Listening



Figure 2. Hayeon Lee, *notebooks and logbooks*, 2025.

Writing is an important part of my methodology, but it does not function as documentation or reflection after the fact. It runs alongside the material process and becomes another way of paying attention.

My primary digital studio journal is kept as a chronological document. This structure let me hear duration more clearly: how long something took, how often nothing happened, and which questions kept returning. The document collects work-in-progress images, videos, research notes, fragments of thoughts and visual materials I find interesting. It is less a

polished archive than an expanded studio space.

Alongside this, I keep handwritten notebooks that move differently (Figure 2). I do not begin at the first page or proceed in order. I open them at random and write wherever there is space. Notes interrupt one another, overlap, and often remain unfinished. I did not design this as a method in advance. It is simply how I have long worked. While reading late twentieth century French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari, particularly their concept of the *rhizome*, I began to see this habit as something already present in my practice. The rhizome describes a way of thinking that spreads in many directions rather than following a single line of development.¹⁹ Unlike a tree, which begins from one trunk and branches outward in an ordered way, a rhizome spreads through unpredictable connections, interruptions, and returns. My notebooks and studio thinking do not move in a straight line. Ideas reappear across different pages, connect later, and often remain unfinished for long periods. I also carry small handheld logbooks in daily life. They hold notes from lectures, conversations, readings, and stray observations outside the studio, allowing thoughts to be caught before they become organized or resolved.

Writing did not simply record the process. It let me notice patterns before I knew how to explain them. In that sense, writing is not separate from making. It is one of the ways I remain with what is still unclear.²⁰ This is one way rhizomatic thinking was already present in my process, not as theory applied afterward, but as a pattern of return, interruption, and delayed connection. 경청 (kyung-cheong) mattered not only as a concept, but as a way of remaining with what had not yet become legible.

¹⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 3–25.

²⁰ Jon Fosse, “A Silent Language,” Nobel Lecture, delivered December 7, 2023, NobelPrize.org.



Figure 3. Hayeon Lee, *rubber-band gun*, 2025, rubber band, stoneware clay, variable dimensions.

Systems, Waiting, and Non-Events

Before my current approach became clear, I made works where something always happened. I was already interested in unintentionality, but I often designed the systems too carefully. By unintentionality, I mean refusing to settle the result too quickly, keeping the setup open to delay, accident, and material response. I dropped unfired clay coils and slabs onto the floor. Gravity did the shaping. Moisture decided the outcome. Every time was different. But I was still checking dryness. Still choosing the height. Still watching too closely. I made other system-based works. Rotating my wrist to draw circles in clay, inviting viewers to adjust a scale, shooting rubber bands, throwing clay, walking clay on a leash (Figure 3). These works questioned authorship, but they still depended on an immediate relation between action and result. That's when I started to feel uneasy. My desire for visible results was sabotaging the uncertainty I claimed to value.

Waiting did not begin as a method in my practice. It began as a problem. I wanted a visible change. Some kind of proof that the work was "working." When nothing happened, I read it as failure. That discomfort showed me how strongly I was still expecting the work to follow my timing. What I heard in those stalled moments was not emptiness, but my own impatience. One early experiment made this tension very clear. I used a ventilation fan and a turkey baster to release water into the airflow by hand. The water scattered. It produced visible marks on clay. At first, it felt like the kind of instability I was looking for. But the timing still belonged to me. I decided when to release the water, how much to use, and when the event would begin. The work appeared unstable, but control was still present. I was still asking the work to perform. This made me realize that introducing chance is not the same as giving up control. It requires stepping back enough for the system to continue without me.²¹

²¹ Cage, *Silence*; Smith, "Fluxus: A Brief History and Other Fictions," 22–37.



Figure 4. Hayeon Lee, *early water-drip system with manual intervention*, 2025, unfired clay and mixed media.

Trying to step back, I built a more continuous setup. As shown in Figure 4, a water pack connected to a toy mechanism allowed the system to run without my direct action. But as I added tubes, containers, and adjustments, the setup became more complicated, and I became more involved in maintaining it. The system kept running, but I was still managing it. At that point, I began to understand that autonomy does not come from complication. It comes from fewer decisions. Eventually, the fan stopped carrying water and began carrying bubbles. This shift changed the logic of the work because bubbles no longer guaranteed an event. They appear, float, burst, disappear. Some reach the clay and leave a trace. Others vanish before arriving. The setup no longer insisted on a result. It only maintained exposure. The fan runs. Bubbles drift. Clay stays open to whatever arrives.

In my practice, method is not a fixed procedure but a set of conditions.²² I do not build a system in order to secure a predictable outcome. I build one to let material, environment, and timing remain active within the work. A setup may repeat, but its result cannot. What returns is the apparatus, not the trace. I do not use humor to make the work lighter or more entertaining. It loosens the pressure that builds around open-ended processes. A toy inside a serious system, or a slightly awkward mechanism, makes it harder to judge the work only by whether it performs well. When something stalls or misfires, it does not immediately become an error. Its unreliability becomes usable.²³ Toys are not decorative props in my work. They work as components that introduce repetition, interruption, and uneven timing. Over time, stillness stopped feeling empty. Materials stalled. Systems seemed to fail. Rather than correcting these moments immediately, I allow them to continue. Many of my installations are set in motion so that they can continue without constant supervision. Once activated, they do not depend on my continuous presence. Some of the most significant changes arrive later, after the setup appears to have settled. What seems stable in one moment may shift hours later, outside my view.

During a summer residency at Fleming College, I became more aware of this temporal difference by working with glass alongside clay. Clay begins soft and gradually settles. It dries, waits, and continues changing even after I leave. Glass felt different. When molten, it moved quickly and demanded quicker decisions, but once cooled, it hardened fast and could break without warning. Clay, by contrast, allowed more delay. Working with both materials made me realize that unintentionality is not only shaped by chance or loss of control but also shaped by the temporal structure of the material itself (Figure 5).

²² Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft*, 3–4.

²³ Smith, “Fluxus: A Brief History and Other Fictions,” 22–37.



Figure 5. Hayeon Lee, *glass blowing works*, 2025.

This temporal difference feels especially strong within the background of Korea's ppalli-ppalli (빨리빨리) culture, where speed and visible productivity are often expected.²⁴ I feel pressure for quick proof, quick response, quick image, quick explanation. But clay does not work that way. In the studio, I try to make a counter-tempo. Small, stubborn, and slow. These works hold open a situation in which something may happen or may not. I do not disappear completely. I design the setup, activate it, and remain responsible for its conditions. But once the process begins, I loosen my authority and allow material, environment, and time to take priority. Partial disappearance thus became a method rather than a metaphor. I remained responsible for the setup without claiming full authority over what followed.

²⁴ Byung-Chul Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals: A Topology of the Present*, trans. Jeon Dae-ho (Seoul: Gimmyoungsa, 2022).

Listening Without Ears



Figure 6. Hayeon Lee, *listening of drying clay*, 2025, video still from studio experiment.

My thinking about listening did not remain with the ear for very long. At first, as shown in Figure 6, I tried to listen to drying clay as sound. I used a highly sensitive recording device to capture sounds that usually live below attention. It picked up tiny friction and faint shifts that were difficult to isolate. I listened very carefully, leaned toward the clay. I was trying to listen to the clay itself. When I listened back, I found myself searching for something clearer, something that could be recognized as “sound.” What stayed with me was not what I heard, but what I could not fully hear. The recording did not fail, but my expectation of listening did. I did not hear the pure sound of clay. I heard that clay never exists alone. What became audible was its exposure to air, room, machine, and body. Everything blended. I was no longer sure whether I was listening to the clay or listening with it. This confusion became important. It moved my attention away from sound alone and toward transmission, contact, and bodily reception. From that point on, listening in this thesis came to mean attending to vibration and contact across bodies and materials. The concept of the *Body without Organs* (BwO), developed by Deleuze and Guattari, becomes useful here because it describes a body before fixed organization or stable function.²⁵ It does not mean a body with no structure at all, but

²⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 149–166.

one that has not yet been fully organized into stable roles or uses. I find this useful because wet clay also exists in a state of openness, still reorganizing itself through contact, pressure, and duration.



Figure 7. Hayeon Lee, *feedback body*, 2025, bass shaker, unfired stoneware clay, clay body 12 x 7 x 7 in.

This led me to the works that use bass shakers. Unlike speakers, bass shakers translate sound into vibration. I recorded the sound of clay drying and sent it back into an unfired clay body through tremor. The clay trembled. Not metaphorically. Physically. Its surface responded through small movements and delayed shifts. Watching this, the clay stopped feeling like an object. It felt more like a body under sensation. In *feedback body* (2025), shown in Figure 7, I became less interested in whether clay “understood” sound than in whether it changed through exposure. What this work revealed was that reception did not depend on recognition. The clay did not reply, it changed. Its sensitivity lay in its unfinished, vulnerable condition.



Figure 8. Hayeon Lee, *two bodies*, 2025, unfired clay, chairs, bass shakers.

These questions developed further in *two bodies* (2025), shown in Figure 8. Two clay bodies are placed on separate chairs facing each other. Each chair contains a bass shaker. One carries a recording of clay drying indoors, the other outdoors. There is no clear dialogue between them and no synchronized exchange. Each receives vibration in its own rhythm. What I heard here was that relation did not require mutual understanding. It could emerge through uneven transmission, delayed response, and simple co-presence. I do not think of the work as staging a conversation between two clay bodies. It is closer to a condition of keeping company. They remain side by side, exposed to different environments, receiving different tremors and continuing without agreement. Here, sculpture begins to operate like an ear, receiving through contact, pressure, and time rather than sound.

Deleuze and Guattari's notion of *becoming* is useful here because these transformations are not aftereffects. They are the event itself. Becoming is not a transition from one stable

identity to another, but an ongoing process of change that happens through relation, contact, and exposure.²⁶ In this sense, drying, trembling, settling, and delay are not background conditions surrounding the work. They are the work. The clay body does not speak back. It changes. It registers. It stays with what acts upon it.

²⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 232–309.

What Fragility Keeps Open



Figure 9. Hayeon Lee, *stuffing*, 2025, pantyhose, unfired clay, variable dimensions, from left to right: before clay insertion, immediately after insertion, and two weeks later.

In my practice, incompleteness is not a temporary stage before completion. It is the form. Finishing often feels like closing something too soon. Unfired clay often holds itself together until it doesn't. It continues to dry, crack, sag, and respond to humidity and gravity, even after installation. This is why I choose not to fire clay. By refusing to fire, I allow the work to stay vulnerable to time. This vulnerability is not a technical limitation but a conceptual position. In an earlier stage, I placed colored pantyhose over ceramic jars that I had made. The form underneath remained intact, and the pantyhose functioned mainly as a surface. Later, this developed into the *stuffing* works. Instead of covering a fixed form, I began placing clay directly inside the pantyhose (Figure 9). The support changed completely. Clay was no longer held by something rigid, but by a material that stretches, sags, and responds to weight over time. Fragility no longer appeared only as an image. It became structural.



Figure 10. Hayeon Lee, *pantyhose with hangers*, 2025, stoneware, mixed media.

At one point, I hung these forms on the wall using hangers (Figure 10). However, the hangers brought in an industrial tone that felt too rigid for the sensitivity of the material. Later, I replaced them with padded and beaded hangers. This added a slight sense of humor but also changed how the work held itself. The support was no longer neutral. It became part of the work's unstable condition. Around the same time, I stopped using preformed jars and began inserting leftover clay from my own process. It had been handled, delayed, pressed, interrupted, and set aside. What remained in the form was not purity or completion but accumulated studio time.



Figure 11. Hayeon Lee, *Condition 2. could probably be a pantyhose ad (holding more than it should)*, March 18, 2026 (before), and March 22, 2026 (after) pantyhose, unfired clay, hangers.

In a later exhibition, the works were suspended from the ceiling (Figure 11). Each day, I added the same amount of wet clay into the pantyhose and watched how the form changed. As weight accumulated, the structure stretched, adjusted, and redistributed itself. Over time, the work held several temporal states at once. The bottom became dry and hardened. The middle remained in transition. The top stayed wet from recent addition. The form became a vertical section of time. Weight became time. Time became pressure. Shape was no longer made by my hand alone. It was being made by dates. A fired object can preserve a moment, but an unfired one continues to negotiate with what surrounds it, hardening in one area, softening in another, and sometimes sagging, crumbling, or cracking later, outside the moment of making. Incompletion, then, is not the absence of form. It is a form held open by time. Support was never neutral here. It also stretches, yields, and records pressure.

I also began to question whether the distinction between clay and soil really mattered. They are not opposites, but different forms of earth. Clay, however, has already passed through processes of extraction, refinement, standardization, and use. As historian of science William R. Newman argues in *Promethean Ambitions*, alchemical thought was often shaped

by ambitions of “perfecting nature.”²⁷ Material transformation has often been tied to the desire to improve, refine, or complete what is given. My work moves the opposite direction. When clay begins to sag, crumble, or collapse, it does not simply return to earth. It reveals the breakdown of an earlier order. I do not try to preserve that order through firing, protection, or completion, nor do I stage the material as a return to some pure state of nature. Instead, I keep adding wetness and let it fail back toward earth. Once earth is selected, carried, and placed in a gallery, it is already shaped by framing, context, and display. It cannot become nature again in any pure sense. What remains, then, is not permanence. It is trace, pressure, and temporal residue. Drying, powdering, accumulated weight, and the moment the pantyhose finally gives way become records of instability. My question is not whether art can return to nature, but how it exposes the failure of that return. At this point, listening comes back into focus. In this thesis, listening is not a search for pure nature or an attempt to recover an original condition beneath the clay. It is a way of staying with what appears when return proves impossible. Sagging, drying, pressure, accumulated weight, delay, and collapse become material events. I do not try to correct or overcome these changes. I let them remain as traces of instability.

This sensibility also appears in works that remain suspended between holding and collapse. In Isa Genzken’s *Fuck the Bauhaus: New Buildings for New York* (2000), architectural models are constructed from tape, toys, shells, and unstable materials.²⁸ The structures stand, but they never feel secure. They wobble between function and collapse. This sensibility resonates with my own work, not because the forms look similar, but because they

²⁷ William R. Newman, *Promethean Ambitions: Alchemy and the Quest to Perfect Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 4–5.

²⁸ *Isa Genzken: Retrospective*, Museum of Modern Art.

remain visibly unsettled. My clay works also hold themselves only temporarily, so that instability is not a failure of form but part of how the work stays alive.

This same concern appears in one series of experiments in which I submerged dried clay forms into everyday liquids (Figure 12). Water. Dish soap. Vinegar. Windex. CLR.



Figure 12. Hayeon Lee, *liquid experiments*, 2025, unfired clay and mixed media.

Comet. Bubble solution. I wanted to see what would happen if a material that usually hardens over time were placed back into conditions that undo it. As the clay absorbed liquid, the surface softened. Cracks loosened. Edges gave up their sharpness. It did not feel like destruction. It felt like reversal. As if time was slightly moving backward. Some forms resisted longer. Others gave in quickly. Thickness mattered, but not consistently. Liquids do not simply coat the surface. They entered the material, seeped inward, and revealed what had already been there. Instead of shaping from the outside, I allowed change to occur from within. Here, fragility becomes a condition of exposure, and incompleteness is what allows the work to continue.

Partial Bodies and Intimate Conditions

My approach to the body did not begin with representation. It began with contact. In the early stage of my process, I tried to encounter clay not only through sight or sound, but also through the mouth. I bit the clay, pressed it with my tongue, and pushed my lips against its surface. I wanted to understand how clay responded when touch, pressure, moisture, and taste overlapped. This shifted the work away from distant observation and toward bodily contact.

Working in this way, I became clearly aware that closeness is never neutral. The materials I use, such as clay, hair, pantyhose, wax, and lip marks, were often read first through images of intimacy, decoration, or femininity before their tension and structure were fully noticed. Cold industrial materials, by contrast, were more easily associated with control and rigor. For example, when I used pantyhose filled with wet clay, I was interested in how they slowly stretch and change shape under gravity and weight. Yet before their structural tension and temporality are recognized, some people responded to them first as soft, bodily, or even slightly perverse forms. Clay marked with lip prints also carries traces of pressure, moisture, repetition, and hesitation, but it can just as easily be reduced to something decorative or excessively intimate. The issue was not that these materials are essentially feminine, but that materials associated with tactility, softness and bodily closeness, such as clay, have long been culturally coded as feminine.

Because I am also working from within those codes, I cannot treat material response as a purely formal question. Kim Jihye, a ceramic artist and professor at Ewha Womans University, discusses tactility in contemporary ceramics as a way of challenging visual dominance and rethinking the relation between body and material. In her article “*동시대 도예: 서로를 만지는 촉각, 탈시각의 미학*,” she writes that “clay is more tactile than any

other material.”²⁹ She describes wet clay as a mutable and sensory material and argues that the tactility of ceramics remains important both in the direct contact between maker and material and in the way a work communicates through use. These ideas matter to my practice because clay, for me, is not simply looked at. It is pressed, bitten, marked, and encountered through intimate and unstable forms of contact. The mouth became important in this process. Unlike the hand, it is not easily accepted as a public tool of contact. The moment one imagines bringing lips close to clay, questions of hygiene, contamination, intimacy, and excess appear very quickly. It reveals that touch is already socially organized in advance. This made clear to me that touch is never innocent. It carries pressure, hesitation, and already socialized rules of contact.

Thinking through touch therefore also became a way of thinking through value, because forms shaped by bodily intimacy, softness, ornament, and awkward intimacy are often more easily dismissed than works associated with distance, control, and visual rigor. In this project, I am thinking especially of wet clay, lip traces, black slip transferred from the body, and partial forms drawn from intimate or awkward zones of contact. These materials and forms can be read as minor, decorative, or excessive too quickly. That quick reduction is part of what the work resists. In this context, feminism became important here not as a fixed label for the work, but as a way of understanding how such judgments are historically produced. As art historian and feminist scholar Linda Nochlin argues in her essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”, the issue is not the lack of women’s innate genius, but the institutional conditions that shaped artistic training and recognition.³⁰ Her discussion of women’s restricted access to the nude model is especially important here, because it shows

²⁹ Kim Ji-hye, “동시대 도예: 서로를 만지는 촉각, 탈시각의 미학,” *Art In Culture*, no. 4 (2022): 162–165.

³⁰ Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” in *Art and Sexual Politics: Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*, ed. Thomas B. Hess and Elizabeth C. Baker (New York: Collier Books, 1973), 1–39.

that what counts as serious art has long been tied to regulated forms of bodily study, propriety, and permission.³¹ This helps me think about why bodily intimacy, softness, ornament, and humor can still be reduced or treated as minor.



Figure 13. Hayeon Lee, *lip tiles progression*, 2025, unfired clay and mixed media.

From there I began making lip tile works (Figure 13). I pressed my lips onto wet clay to leave traces of texture and pressure. At times, I applied black slip to my lips like lipstick and transferred that surface onto the clay. These marks are not expressions of speech. They are records of contact. What remains on the clay is not a stable image, but the result of pressure, angle, wetness, and surface resistance meeting differently each time. Humor also became necessary here. The humor in this work is not light playfulness or simple cuteness. It is awkward, excessive, and slightly embarrassing. Repeatedly pressing lips into clay is intimate but it is also overly direct and somewhat ridiculous. That ridiculousness matters. It prevents these traces from being too quickly read as confession, romantic surface or pure decoration. As this process continued, I also made plaster lip molds and used them to press clay forms. Over time, however, the image became too easily recognizable. As soon as the form was identified as “lips,” the tension dropped. This moved me away from direct representation and toward fragments. The fragments in my work do not come from idealized body parts. They come from awkward and less visible zones of the body: the roof of the

³¹ Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?,” 24–26.

mouth, the ear hole, the underside of the breast, the spaces between fingers and toes, the cleft between the buttocks, the back of the knee (Figure 15). A partial form delays meaning without becoming fully abstract. When Hannah Wilke, an American feminist artist, placed small gum forms resembling vulvas onto her skin, they appeared both ornamental and wounded, both decorative and interruptive.³² My own clay forms are also not made to depict specific body parts. They are partial encounters with the body, traces that refuse to settle into a single symbol.



Figure 14. Hayeon Lee, *body parts experiment*, 2025, unfired clay and mixed media.

This instability expands further when I use hair and wax (Figure 14). Hair can appear natural or attractive when attached to the body, but once it falls away from the body, it can suddenly become uncomfortable. The translucent surface of wax blurs visual certainty while also suggesting softness, stickiness, and sensitivity to temperature. This tension between attraction and discomfort continues in the massage table installation. I began to use the massage table because I wanted to interrupt the normal posture of gallery viewing. Usually, viewers stand upright, look from a distance, and stay in control of what they see. In this work, however, they must lie down and approach the work from a position that is physically lower,

³² *Hannah Wilke: Art for Life's Sake*, curated by Tamara H. Schenkenberg, Pulitzer Arts Foundation, St. Louis, 2021, <https://pulitzerarts.org/art/hannah-wilke/>.

less stable, and more exposed. This shift is not simply about creating discomfort or testing audience tolerance. Rather, it reorganizes the encounter through restricted access, and bodily vulnerability. The work is less concerned with discomfort itself than with how viewing is reorganized so that intimacy is felt materially. My work therefore does not treat tactility simply as an alternative to vision or as a recovered sensory condition. Instead, tactility becomes a field where intimacy and distance, attraction and discomfort meet. In some parts, I also made openings so that viewers could insert their arms and touch the wax forms directly. Nor is the work concerned with interactivity in a general sense. It asks how posture structures the possibility of contact without granting comfort or control. In this work, the body does not appear only as a performer or participant. It becomes one of the conditions of the work. By showing the body only partially, I try to keep its meaning open rather than fixed. What returns on the clay surface is not only the trace of touch, but also the social and bodily conditions that shape how touch happens.



Figure 15. Hayeon Lee, *body fragments*, 2025, unfired stoneware.

Handing Movement Over

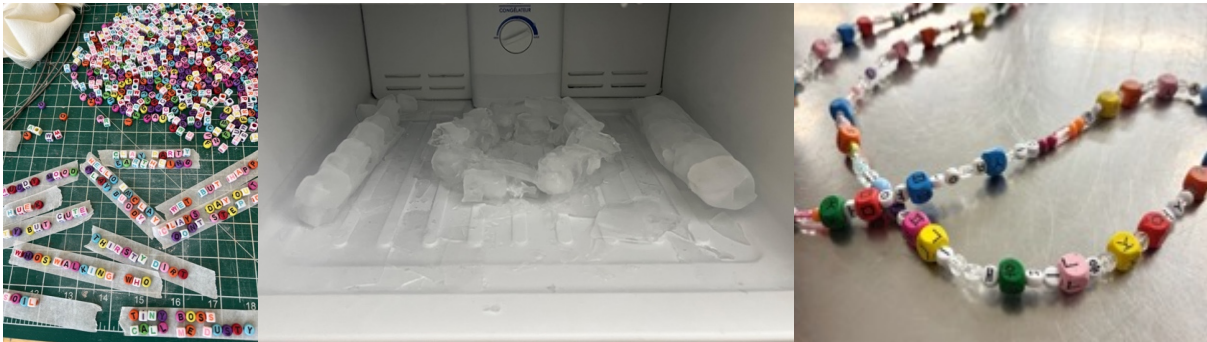


Figure 16. Hayeon Lee, *leash variations*, 2025, letter beads, ice.

In one work, I attached a leash to a lump of clay and walked it through public space as if it were a dog. At first, I used a ribbon. It made the clay look wrapped or packaged. I walked between buildings. Some people laughed. Some were surprised. Others stared with curiosity. The ribbon itself did not break easily, but the gesture felt unresolved. As shown in Figure 16, I experimented with other materials including ice and beads. The ice broke too quickly. It could not sustain relation. The beads remained. At first, I used English phrases such as “I MAY BE DIRTY BUT CUTE,” “I’M UR SOILMATE,” “CLAY IS THE NEW BLACK.” Later, I replaced them with Korean Hangeul. “경청 중,” “산책 나옴,” “흙.” Because I live and work in Canada, text is often assumed to be English. From a distance, the leash appears readable and familiar. Up close, it resists understanding. The language remains slightly out of reach, like the clay itself.

I also changed the location to a public park, where it entered a more crowded social field. The leash sometimes broke. I also tried filming in several perspectives. At first, I filmed the walk from my own point of view, from the position of the one holding the leash. But that perspective felt too predictable and kept me too clearly in control. I shifted instead to two views. A third-person perspective and another from the height of the clay itself (Figure 17).



Figure 17. Hayeon Lee, *who walks whom*, 2025, video still.

In the third-person video, my body, the clay, and the street appear together. Some laugh, some stare, some hesitate before understanding what they are seeing. Dogs often approach the clay, sniff it, pull toward it as if it is another animal, while their owners hold them back and then look at me again, confused. Curious people ask questions. Children move toward the clay and their parents intervene quickly. In the clay's point of view, the city becomes fragmented. The camera stays low. The clay drags, stumbles, and scrapes. Leaves stick to it. Human legs pass like large moving structures. When a dog approaches, the scene shifts toward something almost cinematic, even slightly threatening. As the walk continues, the clay collects dust, dirt, debris (Figure 18). It becomes less itself and more street. At a certain point, it becomes unclear who is walking whom. The leash did not guarantee control, it only kept two different bodies temporarily connected.



Figure 18. Hayeon Lee, *who walks whom*, 2025, unfired clay, letter beads, from left to right: before and after the walk.



Figure 19. Hayeon Lee, *robo-fish*, 2025, robotic fish, slip clay, video still.

This shift continues in a work using toy robotic fish (Figure 19). At first, I struggled with how to use toys. It felt superficial. Then I watched the fish in water for a while. It swam, generating small waves. The movement around it fascinated me. I transferred that movement into slip. The fish is placed not in water but on wet clay. It flaps and twitches as programmed but the context breaks its logic. It moves, but it cannot swim. It struggles, slides, pauses, and starts again. As it moves, it leaves dragged lines, small dents and uneven impressions. These are not marks I compose. They are records. Evidence of confused motion. Over time, the battery drains and movement ends in exhaustion. The slip dries. The fish becomes partially embedded. What was moving turns into something closer to a fossil than a prop. The object stays still while the video keeps moving. What remains between them is tension between movement and residue, action and what is left behind.

This also led to a series of experiments with delayed action. In one experiment, as shown in Figure 20, ceramic beads were scattered across a room and I moved through them like a snow-angel. The beads shifted, collided, and produced sound. The patterns disappeared as soon as I moved. In another, I inserted dry pasta into beads with small air holes. When



Figure 20. Hayeon Lee, *snow angel*, 2024-2025, video still from studio experiment.

water was added, the pasta slowly softened and bent. Then, suddenly, the beads started to fall. Later, I intensified this delayed action through a different mechanism using a sparkler, ink, and stacked beads. As the sparkler burned, it slowly released liquid ink. When the ink finally dropped, the structure collapsed. Beads scattered. Ink splashed and spread. A drawing appeared through impact and gravity. These experiments taught me that delay alone was not enough. The systems still moved in one direction. Force entered, collapse followed and nothing really circulated.



Figure 21. Hayeon Lee, *Condition 6: in the loop*, 2025, stoneware and mixed media.

That realization led me to develop more reciprocal systems. From there, the talking cactus emerged (Figure 21). The toy reacts to sound. When it hears noise, it starts to move and dance. I attached miniature broom-like arms to it, almost like a foosball mechanism. As it dances, it strikes ceramic beads. The beads collide and produce sound. That sound activates the cactus again. Movement generates sound. Sound generates movement. A loop forms. The installation is placed on a mirrored surface. Earlier attempts using paper failed because they absorbed and muted the movement. The mirror reflects, amplifies, and destabilizes what is happening. Visitors do not control the work. They enter it. Their voices and movements become part of the loop. Sometimes it responds. Sometimes it does not. What appears playful in these works is also structurally unstable. The humor here is awkward and a little pathetic. The clay drags. The fish flaps but cannot swim. The cactus keeps reacting to its own noise. These systems are funny because something is slightly off, but they are also unstable, excessive, and a bit sad.

- 1 I set up something.
- 2 Then I stop.
- 3 I pretend not to care.
(This is a lie. I care a lot)
- 5 Water waits.
- 6 Clay waits longer.
- 7 I check again.
- 8 Still nothing.
- 10 This is not inefficiency.
- 11 This is 경청.
- 12 I turn things on and leave
before they decide
wheter to cooperate.
- 13 If something happens, it happens late.
- 14 If nothing happens, it happens very well.
- 15 If someting collapses,
- 17 I act surprised.
- 19 Humor helps.
- 20 It lowers expectations.
- 21 Waiting keeps me
from fixing things
that were never broken.
- 23 Time continues
- 23 The work does not
- 24 I dries.
- 27 It pauses.
- 28 It forgest me.
- 29 I am still here.
- 30 Not directing.
- 31 Not explaining.
- 31 Listening.
- 33
- 29 I am still here.
- 30 Not directing.
- 31 Not explaining.
- 31 Listening.
- 29
- 29 I am still here.
- 30 Not directing.
- 31 Not explaining
- 32 Listening.
- 29
- 30 ...
- 31 ...
- 33 ...

Where Things Begin to Listen: Thesis Exhibition

November. 25. 2025



Figure 22. Hayeon Lee, *installation view*, November 25, 2025

Before the format of my March 2026 thesis exhibition became fully clear, I made a test installation in November 2025 by bringing several works together in one room (Figure 22). I wanted to observe how the works would affect one another in space, and what would shift when they were seen together rather than individually.

The first thing this installation revealed was a difference in tempo. In Figure 23, the works that had video such as the robo-fish and walking pieces reinforced each other's rhythm and brought movement into the room while the work with spaghetti inserted into ceramic beads felt much slower and almost motionless by comparison. As a result, it appeared less compelling in the shared space. This difference was not simply about the strength of individual works, but about how tempo and density shape one another within an exhibition.

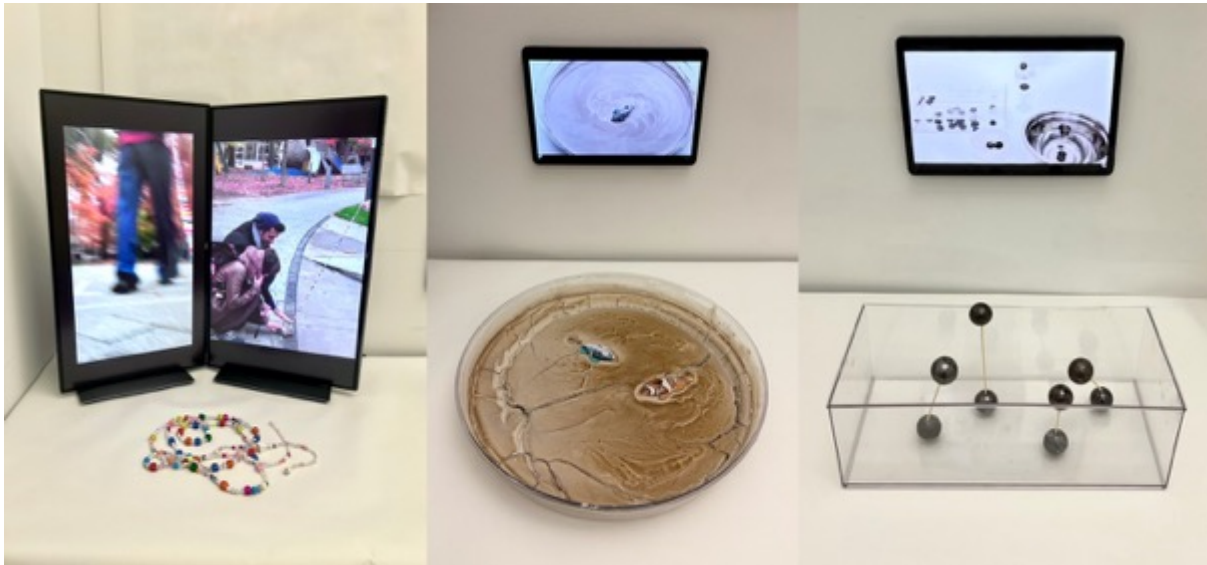


Figure 23. Hayeon Lee, *left to right: who walks whom, robo-fish, spaghetti with ceramic beads*, 2025.

It also became clear that the humor I had been using operated more quietly in space than I had expected. The room felt more subdued than I had imagined, yet the lump of clay placed in the middle of the room looked strangely funny. Its awkward and excessive material presence produced a humor that was not loud or direct. This showed me that humor can emerge not only through action, but also through stillness, placement, and material excess.

The responses I received during this installation were also important. I heard comments that the videos could be larger and louder. I also heard the exhibition described as feeling like a sad party or the moment after a party had ended, and the works as pathetic and oddly alive. The word “pathetic” stayed with me because it named something I had not yet fully articulated. Here, it did not mean simply pitiful but a state of being less solid, more easily shaken, and more open to the world.

I think this quality also came partly from the materials I was using. Rather than polished or self-contained forms I was working with cheap, familiar materials that already felt exposed and slightly under-defended. The bubble machine remained barely active. The clay and party curtains on the bed created an awkwardly theatrical scene (Figure 24). The beads collapsed at an awkward moment. No one tells them to keep trying, but they do. In this sense, “pathetic” was not failure, but a condition of excessive openness. It showed me that the

delay, awkwardness and late collapse I had been working with were also reaching others as an emotional condition.



Figure 24. Hayeon Lee, *massage table installation*, November 25, 2025, unfired clay and mixed media.

Sensations that did not fully emerge through individual objects became much clearer through light, distance, circulation, sound, and the relation between neighboring works. While thinking through this, I also looked at works by Anthony Discenza, including *Black Specularii*.³³ In this work, anthracite facsimiles of scrying objects are arranged with a striking sense of distance and restraint. What interested me was not only the individual objects, but the way they were given space. The works are often sparsely that the surrounding wall, floor, and empty space begin to matter as much as the objects themselves. As seen in Figure 25, the black forms sit low against a rough, worn architectural surface, so that

³³ Anthony Discenza, *Black Specularii*, <https://anthonydiscenza.info/black-specularii>.

placement, spacing, and the viewer's orientation become part of how the work is experienced. This helped me think more about my own exhibition, not simply as an arrangement of separate works, but as a spatial condition in which clay, light, distance, and bodily encounter could speak together. That shift shaped a few decisions in the final installation. I revised the ceramic beads work, changed the hanging structure of the pantyhose piece, replaced the jar inside with leftover clay, adjusted the fan work so that it could operate more independently, changed the outside of the massage table to mirror, and brought the actual clay body from the walking piece into the gallery. These decisions were less about refining isolated objects than about shaping how the works would live together in space.



Figure 25. Anthony Discenza, *Black Specularii*, installation view, anthracite facsimiles of scrying objects.

Thesis Exhibition, March 17-23, 2026



Figure 26. Hayeon Lee, *Floor plan for thesis exhibition*, 2026.

While preparing for the thesis exhibition, I visited Ada Slight Gallery many times. The gallery was divided into a narrow entrance area and a larger main space, and the sliding door on the main wall became an important part of how I thought about the exhibition. I treated these architectural conditions not as background, but as elements that shaped how viewers would enter, move, and stay in the space. In the exhibition map shown in Figure 26, the circulation begins at the entrance, moves through the main room, and ends near the exit with the takeaway zine (Figure 27).

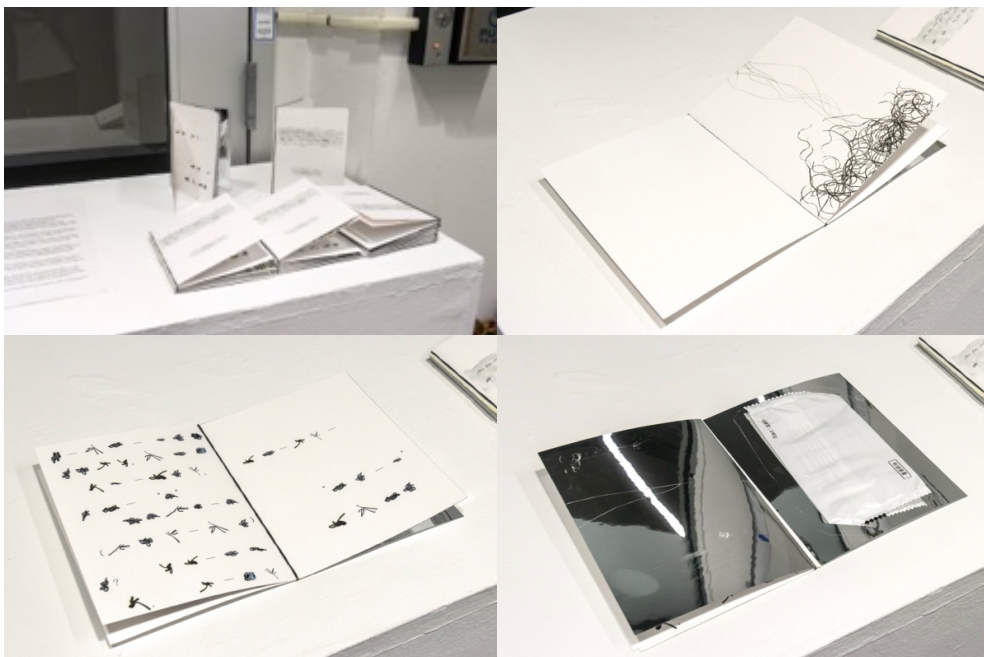


Figure 27. Hayeon Lee, *Condition 8: To Go*, 2026, takeaway zine. Photo by Yifan Wang.

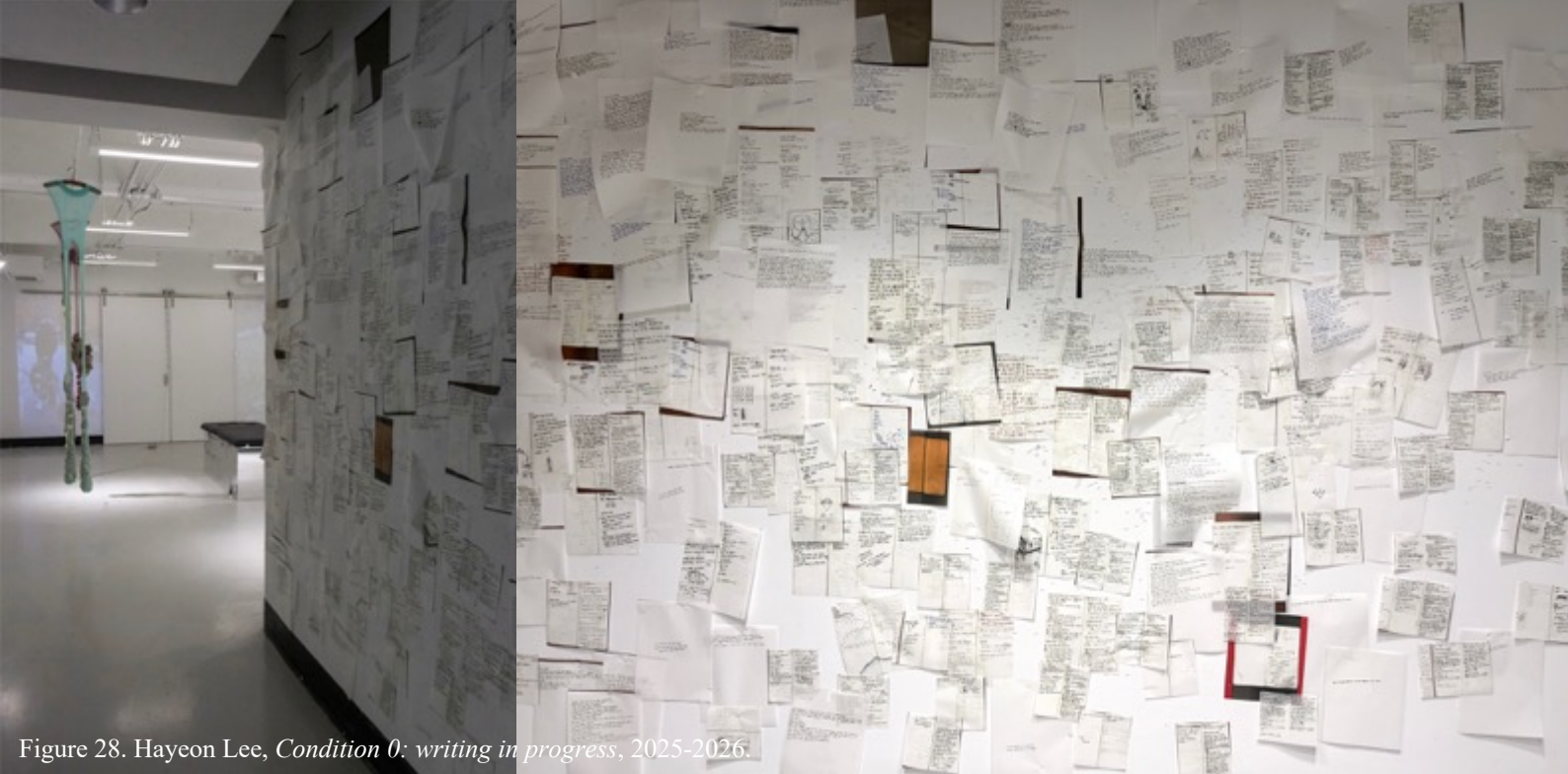


Figure 28. Hayeon Lee, *Condition 0: writing in progress*, 2025-2026.

In the entrance area, I installed scanned practice notes across the wall. I printed them on drafting vellum and attached them with staples so that they would feel less like a polished archive and more like an active surface of thinking (Figure 28 and 29).

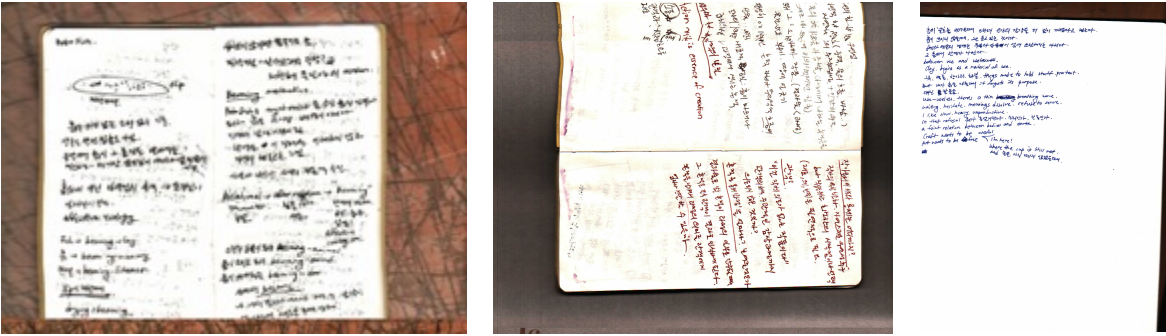


Figure 29. Hayeon Lee, *hand scanned notes during installation*, 2025.



Figure 30. Hayeon Lee, *Exhibition 'clay dies when you stop listening'* view from the entrance, 2026. Photo by Yifan Wang.

Near the entrance, I placed the robo-fish work on its own. The video was shown large and the sound was clear, allowing it to function as an immediate point of entry. I also wrote the exhibition title, *clay dies when you stop listening*, by hand in large letters. I felt that this hand drawn quality matched the overall tone of the exhibition (Figure 30). The exhibition title emerged from my studio notes while I was thinking through clay in relation to Deleuze and Guattari's idea of the *BwO*.³⁴ At that stage, I was thinking of wet clay as a body still in process, still open, and still listening. Drying did not feel like a simple loss of water, but a shift in intensity and a movement into another layer of time. Even when clay appeared dry or "dead" on the surface, I felt that something was still continuing internally. In this sense, the title does not mean that clay literally dies. Rather, it names the moment when I stop attending to it as a changing, responsive surface and begin to see it only as an artwork or finished

³⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 149–66.

object. The title therefore connects the physical condition of unfired clay with the larger method of the exhibition, where listening means continuing to attend even after the work appears still, dry, or finished.

The main space was organized around the massage table. Around it, I placed the pantyhose work, the walking work, the fan piece, the cactus and ceramic balls work, and *two bodies*. Rather than presenting each work separately, I wanted viewers to move through different speeds, moods, and material conditions within one shared environment (Figure 31). The installation process made the physical limits of the gallery very clear. The pantyhose work was extremely heavy, and because I could not drill into the ceiling, I had to distribute the weight carefully across the existing pipes.



Figure 31. Hayeon Lee, *Exhibition 'clay dies when you stop listening'* view, 2026.



Figure 32. Hayeon Lee, *Condition 3: who walks whom*, 2025, unfired clay and mixed media.

The sliding door also became part of the walking piece. I projected the two walking videos on either side of it, hung the bead string on the door, and placed the actual clay lump in front of the door. The scale contrast between the large door and the small clay body created both tension and quiet humor (Figure 32 and 33).



Figure 33. Hayeon Lee, *Condition 3: who walks whom*, 2025, unfired clay and mixed media.



Figure 34. Hayeon Lee, *interaction between 'Condition 5: bubble bubble' and 'Condition 6: in the loop'*, 2026.

What became especially important in the exhibition was the actual interaction between works. In Figure 34, the bubbles from the bubble machine did not remain within one piece, but landed on nearby surfaces, including the mirrored cactus work and clay of the two bodies. The cactus works also changed the atmosphere of the room quite strongly. Its sound was louder than expected, and at times it interfered with the vibration based work in Figure 35. When the cactus and bubble machine were active together, the room became more outward, social, and reactive. By contrast, two clay bodies on the chair depended on low frequency vibration so its subtle presence was harder to sense when the surrounding sound increased. This showed that the works did not all occupy the space equally. More audible and social works could quickly dominate the room, while quieter works required a different kind of attention. The exhibition taught me that works do not simply coexist. They interrupt, affect, and partially erase one another. Here, after-after relation became visible, as the works continued to affect one another beyond direct encounter beyond my deliberate coordination. This made clearer to me that relation also emerged through differences in tempo, sound,

spatial proximity, and the uneven way works continued to affect one another over time. What operated here was an after-after relational condition. Relation here was not limited to direct participation or shared human presence, but continued through delay, residue, vibration, interference, and material coexistence. The works did not simply sit beside one another as separate pieces. They shaped each other's conditions, sometimes subtly and sometimes quite forcefully, even when no one was actively engaging them.



Figure 35. Hayeon Lee, *Condition 7: keeping company*, 2025, unfired clay and mixed media.

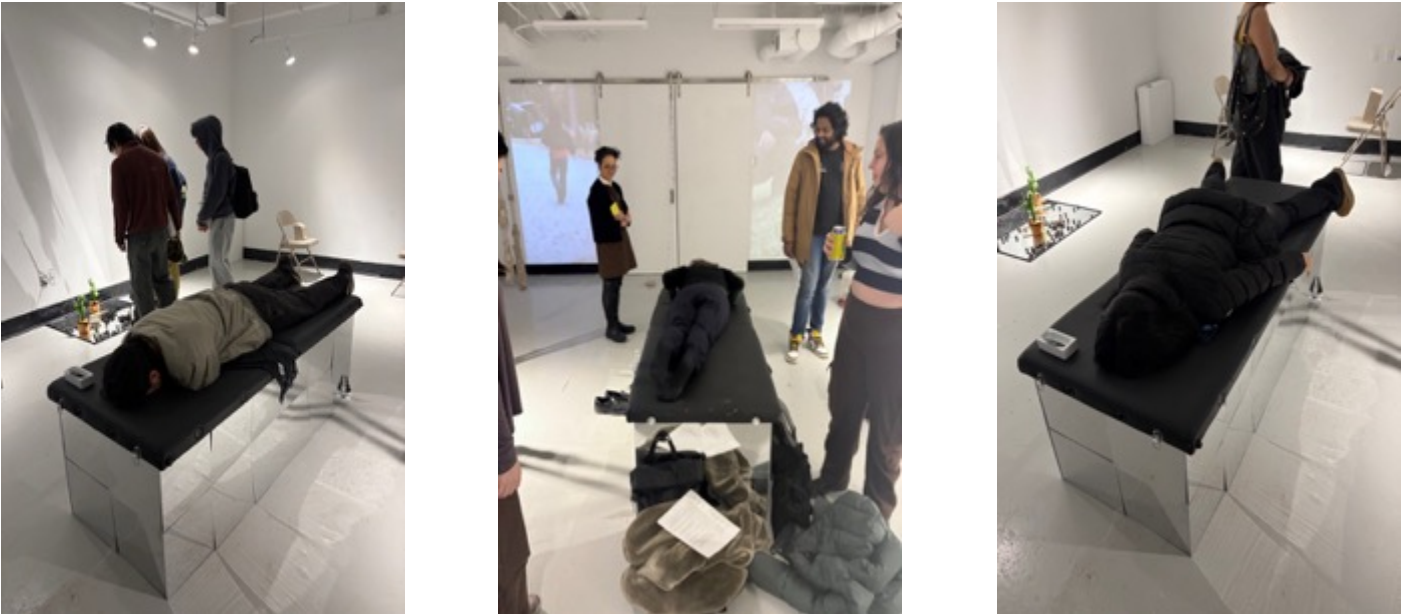


Figure 36. Hayeon Lee, *visitors experiencing Condition 4: resting, technically*, 2026.

The massage table most directly involved the viewer's body. However, I chose not to include any instruction such as "please touch." For me, not touching was also part of the work. Viewers responded in different ways. Some only put their head inside, some lay down for a long time and some reached in with only their arm without looking. Because of the mirrors, parts of the viewer's body were reflected back into the work and one person described the piece as seeming to breathe when the mirrors shifted slightly (Figure 36, 37).

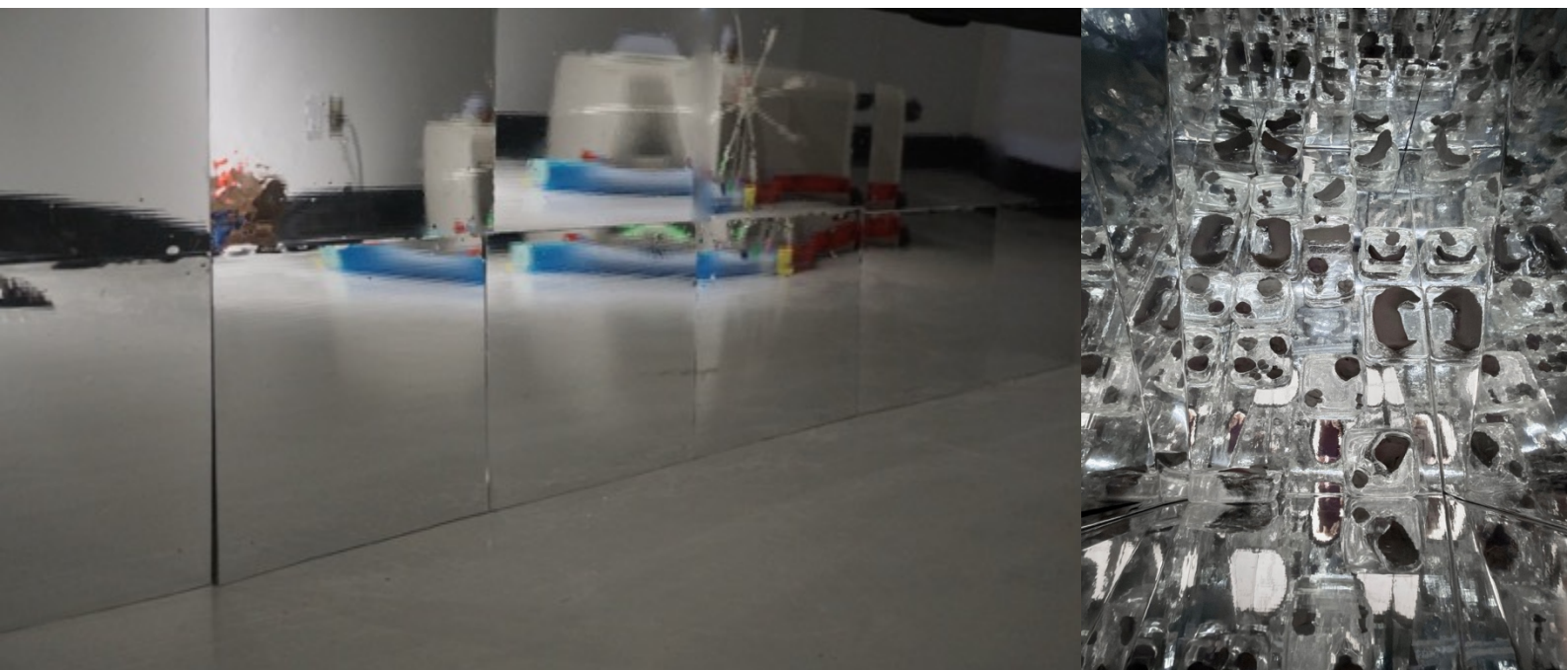


Figure 37. Hayeon Lee, *Condition 4: resting technically*, 2026, unfired clay and mixed media.



clay dies when you stop listening
Hayeon Lee

- Condition 0:** writing in progress
hand scanned studio notes
still flapping
- Condition 1:** A toy robotic fish on slip clay, where it can move but cannot swim. Its erratic motion leaves marks on the surface until the battery drains. As the clay dries, the fish becomes partially embedded, turning action into trace and movement into residue.
- Condition 2:** could probably be a pantyhose Ad (holding more than it should)
Filled with unfired clay, the pantyhose stretch, sag, and hold as if trying to keep themselves together. Each day of the exhibition, the same amount of fresh clay is added so the work grows heavier over time, taking on more pressure, more responsibility, and the constant possibility of failure.
- Condition 3:** who walks whom
A lump of clay is taken for a walk through the city. Presented through two projections, one from a third-person view and one from the clay's perspective, and accompanied by the clay itself in the gallery, the work slowly unsettles who is walking whom.
- Condition 4:** resting, technically
Beneath a massage bed, wax, hair, and clay fragments gather like a body in an awkward state of maintenance. Encountered through reflection, posture, and proximity, the work shifts intimacy away from narrative and toward vulnerability, uncertainty, and the discomfort of staying with what cannot be fully seen.
- Condition 5:** bubble bubble
A fan hums, bubbles drift, and clay waits. Some bubbles land, others vanish before arrival, and the work continues without demanding change, making space for slowness, humor, and the possibility that nothing much will happen. Through repetition, the surface begins to record these minor events, turning something playful into a slow condition of pressure and change.
- Condition 6:** in the loop
Talking cactus toys "play" ceramic beads on a mirrored surface, responding not only to each other but also to the noises of the room. Movement produces collision, collision produces sound, and sound activates movement again, forming an unstable loop shaped by delay, failure, and uneven listening.
- Condition 7:** keeping company
Two clays face each other and listen through their bodies. Beneath each chair, a bass shaker transmits a recording of clay drying in another environment, one indoors, the other outdoors. Rather than speaking, the clays enter into a silent conversation through vibration, listening to each other across distance, time, and different conditions.
- Condition 8:** To Go
A takeaway zine - something to carry out: part document, part residue, part misbehavior.

Figure 38. Hayeon Lee, *Exhibition 'clay dies when you stop listening'* floor map and text, 2026.

I also chose not to place individual wall texts beside each work. Instead, as shown in Figure 38, I provided a map and a portable text at the entrance. I wanted viewers to first respond through movement and bodily experience, and only later turn to language if needed. Many people asked about the texts and rechecked the titles while moving through the space. The structure of the exhibition, beginning with *Condition 0* and ending with *Condition 8*, helped hold the whole room together as a loose sequence. Audience response was very active. Many people smiled, laughed quietly, or described the works as strange but funny. Others described the exhibition as a laboratory, a children's play space or a place where the works felt strangely alive and visceral. What stayed with me most was hearing that all the works seemed to operate together in one shared environment. That was the spatial logic I cared about most. What stayed with me most strongly was the difference between the room when it was full of people and when it was completely empty. With many viewers present, the exhibition felt more reactive and outward. When I was alone in the gallery, it felt very different. At those moments, I felt less like the person who had installed the work and more like one of its elements. This showed

me that the exhibition did not hold one fixed mood, but shifted according to density, activation, and attention. For this reason, the thesis exhibition was not simply a presentation of individual works. It was an attempt to organize listening, delay, humor, fragility, and unstable relation as conditions across the whole space. The works did not merely sit beside one another. They affected one another, and viewers entered that field as another active condition within it.

Conclusion

This thesis began with three questions. What happens when art begins not with control, but with listening? How might clay, time, environment, and unstable systems participate in the making of a work? And can clay itself be understood as a listening material? I do not think this thesis has arrived at one clean answer to these questions.

This research did not lead me toward skill or mastery. It led me toward tolerance. Tolerance for delay, tolerance for misfire, and tolerance for the slow embarrassment of not yet knowing what the work is doing. By the end, listening felt closer to a condition. Clay was never simply a medium waiting for me. It was already receiving pressure, humidity, vibration and time, responding through alteration. When I say that clay listens, I do not mean that it understands like a person. I mean it registers what happens to it and changes because of that contact. At this point, that my work begins to move slightly away from the theories and precedents that helped me think and begins to make its own place. Fluxus opened chance. Korean experimental art opened instability, action, and non-fixed form. Post-structuralism loosened authorship. Relational aesthetics provided a framework for thinking about encounter. I learned from all of them, but my work does not remain there. I am more interested in creating situations in which listening takes material form through delay, awkwardness, and partial response. The toys, bubbles, bass shakers, pantyhose, mirrors, and delegated systems are not there to describe uncertainty from a safe distance. They make uncertainty operate. They allow timing to slip, rhythm to break, and surfaces to hold what I did not fully plan. It is a setup, an exposure, and a way of allowing interruption and incompleteness to remain visible.

The exhibition made this clearer in a way that the studio alone could not. When the works came together, they did not simply wait in the room to be viewed one by one. They interfered with one another, leaned on one another's conditions, and changed one another. What emerged there was not only a harmonious or warm relation, but a condition in which things continued to affect one another without agreement.

This thesis is written in English, but many of the thoughts that shaped it began in Korean, in another speed, and under another kind of pressure. For me, 경청 (kyung-cheong) is not exactly the same as listening. It feels slower, heavier, and closer to staying with and receiving than to quick understanding or immediate response. The gap between Korean and English was not something that needed to be solved. It needed to remain active. Clay did not solve that gap either. It let me stay with it. It received pressure, tremor, delay, and trace without demanding immediate clarity.

So where has this thesis arrived? This thesis arrives instead at a clearer understanding of what this work asks of me. To set conditions without closing them too quickly and to stay with clay as a listening body. My work does not use clay as a passive material for expressing an idea I already know. It builds situations in which time, vibration, gravity, humor, instability, and delay can continue to act. For me, listening is not simply the way I approach the work. It is the condition that allows the work to continue.

the way out:

a hand that keeps the door from latching

carefulness is not etiquette but technique

(i'm still learning that)

so i leave this page slightly open: 열림(開)

: not the opposite of completion,
but a habit that messes with completion's habits

end

...if i write "End,"
it might actually end, so i'll just

break the line ㄱ
cre

,

Glossary

These terms do not define the work. They describe how it behaves.

경청 (kyung-cheong)	For me, 경청 is a Korean way of listening that feels slower than just “responding.” It is closer to staying than understanding. It is more about receiving than interpreting. When I think about 경청, I think about how my body stays with material, time, and people. It is not a skill I learned. It is more like an attitude I grew into. In this thesis, 경청 is not passive. It is choosing to wait, even when I feel pressure to decide.
listening (as method)	Listening here does not simply mean hearing sound. It is a way of working that allows materials to act without immediate control. Sometimes that means letting things be slow, strange, or unresponsive. Instead of asking “what does this mean,” I try to notice what is happening without forcing an explanation.
time and tension	Time in this work is not neutral. It stretches, accumulates, presses. Tension builds slowly through waiting, drying, hanging, throbbing. Nothing explodes, but everything is slightly strained. This tension keeps the work awake.
unintentionality	Not the absence of intention, but the refusal to settle the outcome too early. I leave space for things to shift. Accidents are not treated as mistakes. They are allowed to stay.
clay (as listening body)	I do not treat clay as a dead material. It receives humidity, pressure, and time. A crack is not failure, but evidence of listening.

rhizome	In Deleuze and Guattari's sense, thought that spreads sideways. ³⁵ There is no clear starting point and no clear ending. Connections appear later, sometimes by accident. This thesis does not move forward cleanly. It circles around ideas. It returns. It drifts. It grows where it can.
BwO (body without organs)	In Deleuze and Guattari, not a body without parts, but a body before organization. ³⁶ Before roles are decided. Before functions are assigned. Clay, machines, and systems are allowed to misbehave. Form emerges through sensation rather than design.
post-structuralism	Post-structuralist thought, especially in Barthes and Foucault, taught me that meaning is never completely stable. ³⁷ Interpretation stays open. No final author. Control is always moving. In my practice, this feels very familiar. I am not the center of the work. I am just one condition among many.
ppalli-ppalli (빨리빨리) society	I grew up in a culture that values speed. Waiting is treated as failure. Silence feels unproductive. In this thesis, this background pressure is always there. It is why slowing down, delaying, and doing "nothing" can feel like resistance.
women	Not an essence. Not a category to represent. Women artists are not connected by a single shared femininity, but by historical circumstances, negotiations, and institutional structures. The relation is rhizomatic rather than rooted. In my work, this awareness does not produce identity based symbolism. It shapes how I understand material choice, authorship, and attention.

³⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 3–25.

³⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 149–166.

³⁷ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image–Music–Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142–148; Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 113–138.

humor	Humor is not decoration. It lowers pressure. It makes failure easier to accept. When a toy enters a serious system, authority becomes weaker. Control becomes less convincing. Humor allows the work to hesitate without feeling ashamed.
artist	Not a controller. Not a hero. A listener, co-creator, organizer, caretaker, and occasional interrupter. Sometimes present. Sometimes absent. Control is a rumor.
waiting	A methodological stance of maintaining conditions while resisting the urge to make something happen. Waiting is not inactivity but sustained attention to slow, uneven material change like drying, settling, absorption, vibration, on a timeline that doesn't match human urgency.
after-after	If relational aesthetics centered the encounter, after-after relational refers to what continues after it. It describes relations that keep operating even without human participation. These are not metaphors. They are ongoing events.
setup / conditions	I design conditions rather than outcomes. A setup is not a finished form but a frame that lets forces do their work. The setup can repeat, the result cannot. What returns is the apparatus, not the trace.
partial disappearance	I do not disappear completely. I begin the work and remain responsible for the setup, but once the system is running, I loosen my authority. Partial disappearance is a way of being present without dominating what happens.
vibration	Here vibration is less something to hear than something to feel. Low frequencies move through surfaces and structures before they become "sound." The work does not translate vibration into a message. It registers it as delayed traces, uneven responses, and small shifts in form.

fragility / incompleteness

Fragility is not a flaw to fix but a condition that keeps the work open. Incompleteness holds the form in time, leaving it responsive to environment and duration. The form does not exist to be finalized. It exists to keep changing.

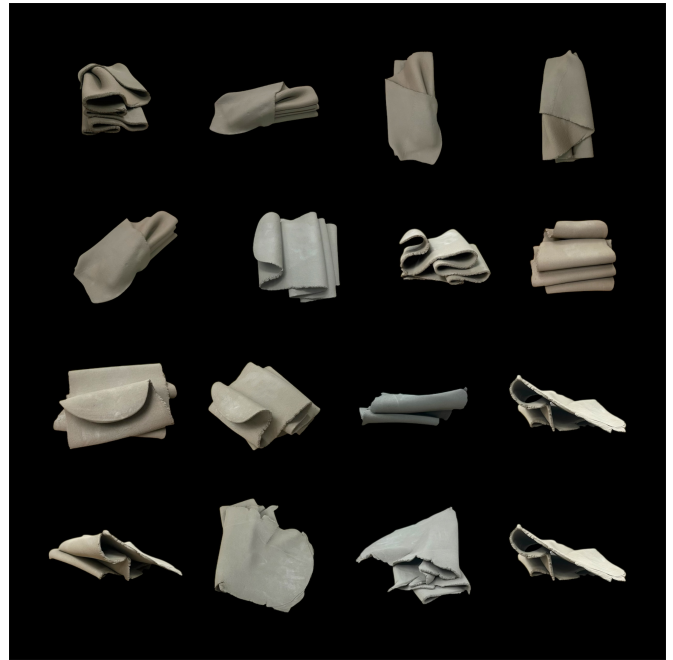
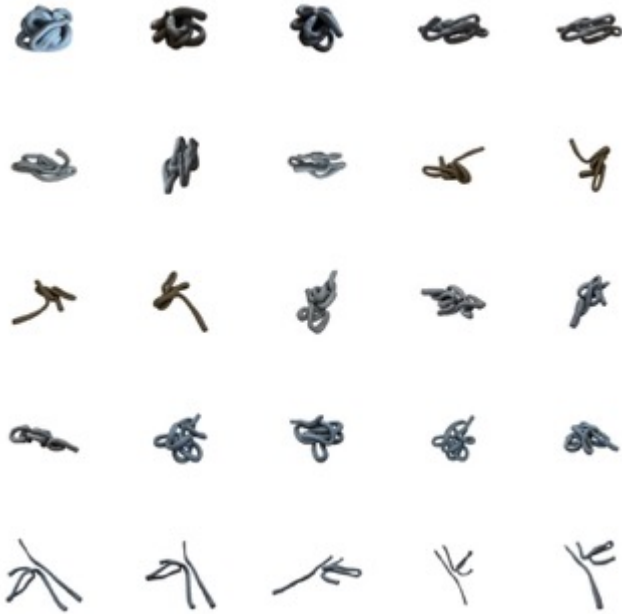
toys (as co-workers)

Toys are not decorative props. They are co-workers. Their cheap, awkward mechanisms make authority feel more fragile. They introduce misalignment, repetition, and strange timing. By messing up intention, they keep the work active.

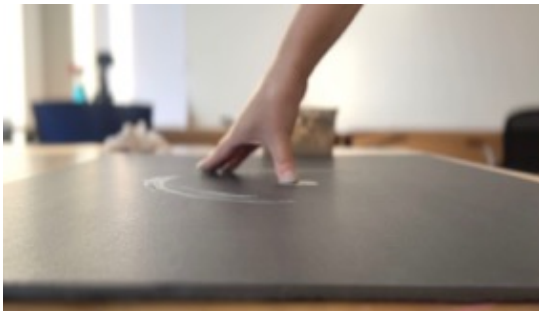
Studio Archive

For extended process documentation, I keep a studio journal in a Word document. This document contains work-in-progress images, video links, and daily studio notes referenced throughout the thesis.

I. early experiment (Jan.-Aug.)



variation coils and slabs through gravity



rotating wrist



swinging experiment



early idea sketches in 2024

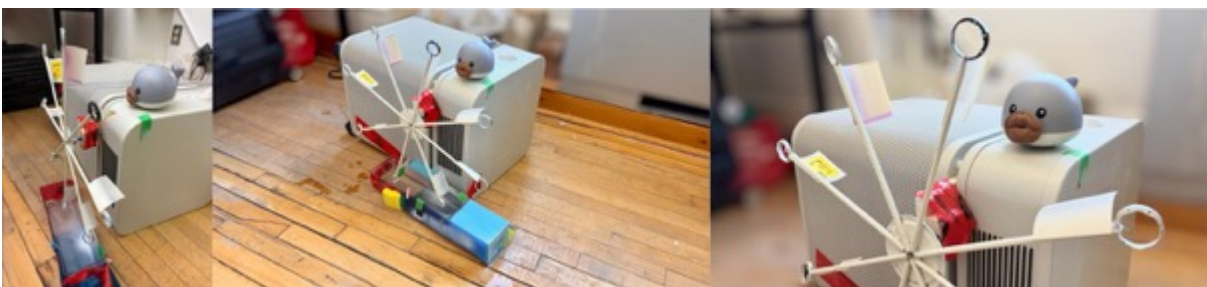
II. ventilation fan to bubble machine



turkey baster



toy mechanism



III. massage table work



IV. ceramic beads progression



V. two bodies



VI. exhibition photos



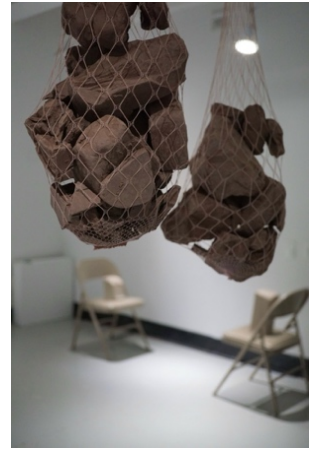
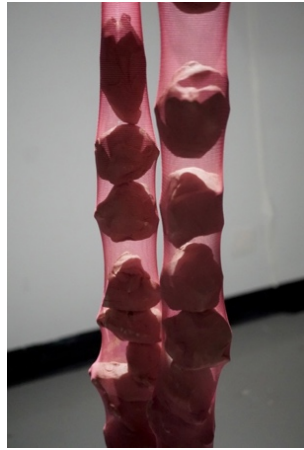
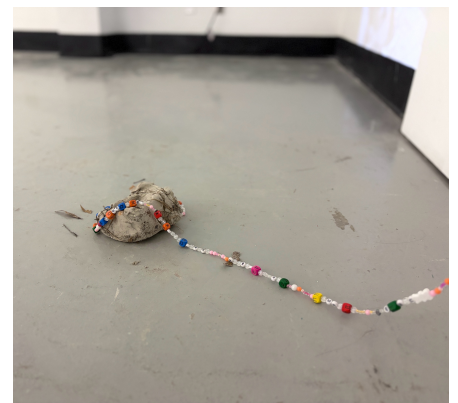


Photo by Yifan Wang.



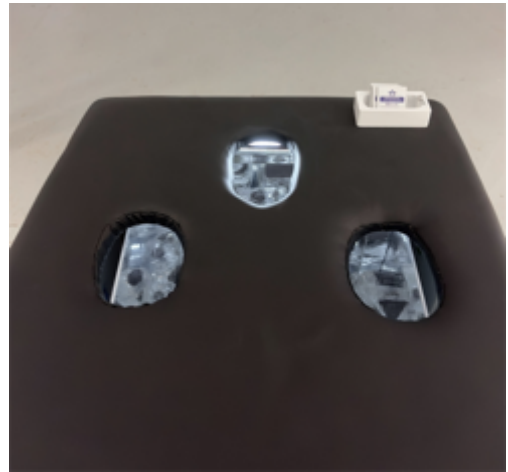
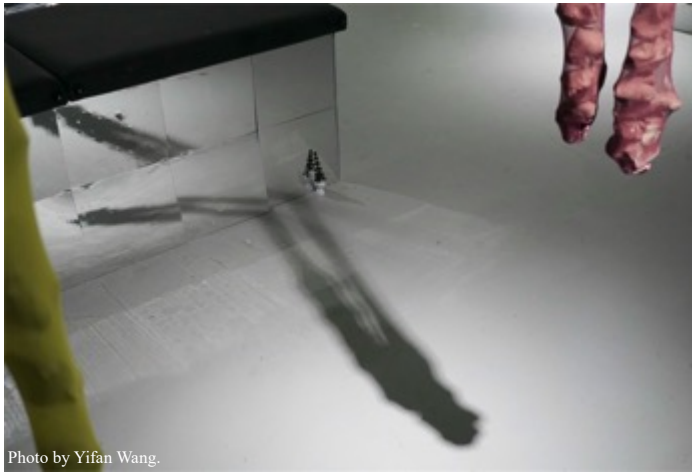


Photo by Yifan Wang.

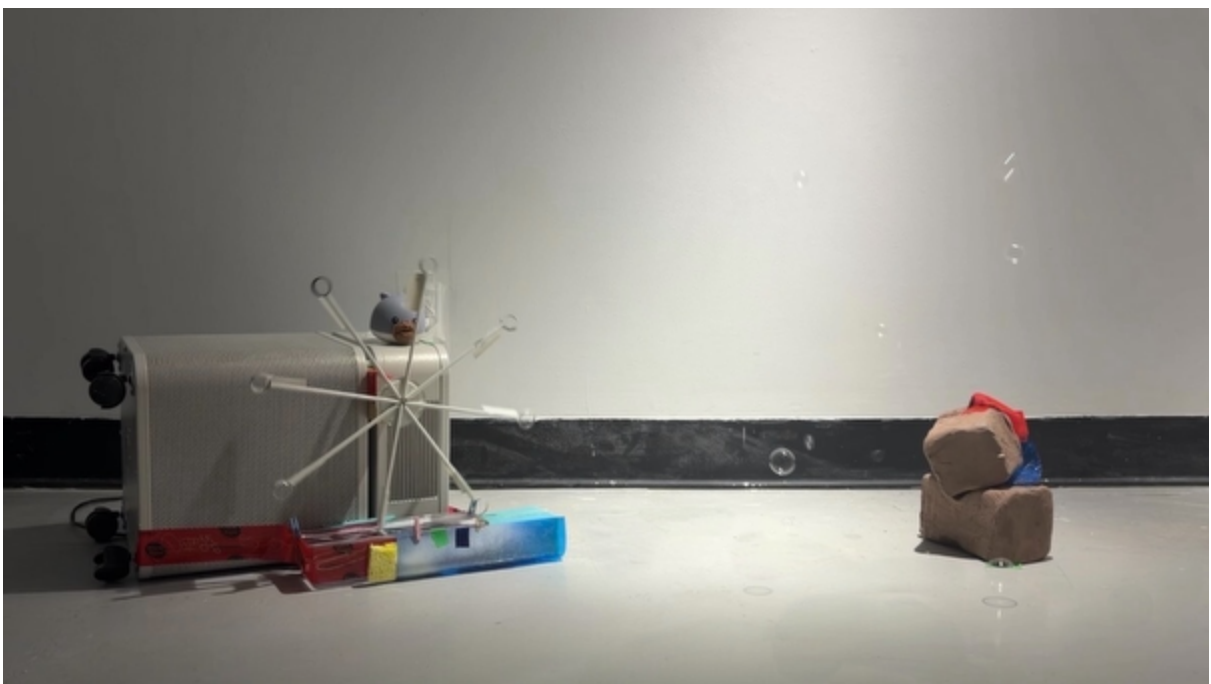




Photo by Yifan Wang.



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