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Title: Living with the Unassimilable

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ABSTRACT

Living with the Unassimilable is a creative practice PhD research project initiated in response to a haptic experience – a violent encounter with the surface of a framed canvas – which triggered a repressed trauma within me. I interpreted the trauma as a consequence of my mother's transmission to me of her experience of the Chinese government's gender policies in her youth during the Cultural Revolution. The purpose of this research was to realise a new art language to express and release the repressed trauma in order to achieve catharsis. Despite the challenging cultural and psychological distancing of being voluntarily 'displaced' in New Zealand from China (the land of my birth and upbringing), a sense of freedom gradually developed without the previous constraints experienced in my homeland.

A series of explorations engaging with diverse materials and modes of display was conducted to arrive at an appropriate and original art expression to reflect upon the significance of past memories, relevant historical and cultural backgrounds, and to communicate the traumatic and cathartic experiences. The creative investigation was undertaken in parallel to pertinent theoretical analysis. From Sigmund Freud theories, I interpreted the experience with my mother as a trauma and Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection contributed to deciphering the sensations experienced in the traumatic event and haptic experience, and confirmed my related artistic articulation. Representing something far wider than a personal experience, a reflection on China's patriarchal system led to Michel Foucault's theory of power in order to unpack the government's regulation of people's sexuality, and to Judith Butler in relation to the performance of gender and identity. 'Touch' and 'surface' were rendered significant by the haptic encounter and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's body schema and Erin Manning's politics of touch offered theoretical perspectives that advanced my creative practice.

Jill Bennett's notion that trauma-related art directly engages with viewers by embodied sensations to register the repressed memory, coincided with establishing the appropriate means of artistic expression for this research: a hybrid sculpture/video installation. Through the orchestration of elements, in particular, the combination of static sculpture and moving imagery, and diverse material qualities and media, the final installation 'transformed' an inner, individual, and psychological experience into a visual and material art language. In the embodied sensations, it uttered the otherwise unspeakable trauma, thus becoming an expression of living with the unassimilable.

The hybrid practice is not the only contribution the research makes to the field of trauma/catharsis-related installation art and to contemporary Chinese art. Situated in a

globalised world and positioned in relation to relevant contemporary Chinese and Western art and theory, this creative practice assimilates my heritage – including Chinese language and philosophy in relation to gender power politics – thus presenting hitherto unexplored perspectives.

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PROLOGUE

Approaching from the Periphery

On 31st July 2016, I arrived in New Zealand for the first time to undertake PhD study in the creative arts. I had already done my masters in Singapore, which included reading and writing about Heidegger. Apart from that, I had limited knowledge or experience of western and Chinese contemporary art or theory. In addition, both my bachelor's degree in China and my master's degree were concerned with painting, which was what I originally intended to research for my PhD. Some years before this research began I experienced an 'uncanny' moment while I was working on an oil painting. Touching the canvas triggered a series of reactions including scratching and digging into its surface with my fingers resulting in an emotional 'turbulence' of anger, passion, and guilt. I understood the event as 'an unsolved, demanding puzzle,' and interpreted it as one related to painting. Yet, this original direction soon shifted to exploring concerns related to my gender and my mother's behaviour towards me years earlier.

Soon after my arrival in New Zealand, I became aware of these connections between the conflicted sense of my gender, which I associated with specific experiences with my mother. Through these experiences, she 'transmitted' to me what she experienced in her youth during the period of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-76) (pp. 44-46) – the Chinese government's gender policy and representation of women – which sharply contrasted with the era I was brought up in after the instigation of the Reform and Opening-up Policy (1979) (pp. 46-48). Following the awareness of these links, I plunged myself into the exploration of both familial and national histories in order to gain a contextual understanding of my conflicted sense towards my gender identity.

It was not until the last stage of my PhD in 2020 that I interpreted an experience with my mother as a trauma and the 'uncanny' moment with the canvas as an encounter with a traumatic moment of my youth. Before this, I had skirted around the periphery of the factors that had 'constructed' the situation, including a series of readings and research of the relevant history and policies, especially of the Chinese government's manipulation of women's sexuality, accompanied by western gender theories. Meanwhile, proceeding alongside this was my art practice. This practice 'drew out' from me a continuous theme from my choice of materials and my ways of engaging with them, that gives voice to the persistent trauma, its wounding, and its appeal for healing. Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger¹

¹ Ettinger is an Israeli-born French and Israeli artist, visual analyst, psychoanalyst, philosopher, painter and writer.

captures my experience: '[i]n art, repetitions ... make present the unrepresentable Thing, crypted in the artwork's unconscious, a Thing that keeps returning, for its debt can't ever be liquidated. This Thing inhabits the artist as if it dwelled outside, or rather, it is the artist who is de-habituated out from its own habitat by it, from its own body and history' (Lichtenberg-Ettinger, 1999, p. 90).

Outside Looking In

Since my arrival in New Zealand, a number of events have contributed to how I have approached my research topic. The first concerned a realization that I was 'displaced' from the place of my birth and upbringing. Soon after arriving I experienced a sense of displacement – personal, cultural, and geo-political – that has enabled a certain 'distance' for me to contemplate my personal experiences that form the basis of this research.

One significant experience to influence the direction of my research during the PhD was a visit to China at the beginning of 2019 to spend the Chinese Spring Festival with my parents and to acquaint myself with some of the latest developments in contemporary Chinese art at museums and galleries in Hangzhou, Shanghai, and Beijing. Things that were once so familiar now were a little strange to me. I found myself sometimes observing my hometown from an outsider's perspective, which was surely due to living in another place, so remote from China, for more than two years. When I was on the airplane crossing the Pacific Ocean from Beijing back to New Zealand, psychologically and geographically, I felt I was in a place of 'in-betweenness.' And I didn't belong to either China or New Zealand. Strangely, this produced a sense of confidence and freedom, a confidence of claiming to be newly born, and a freedom to approach new possibilities without previous limitations. Barbara Pollack discussed 'transnationalism' in her book *Brand New Art from China: A Generation on the Rise*, and how some Chinese artists' conceived of their identity as a hybrid one 'formed from the many places they had lived and influences they had studied' (Pollack, 2018, p. 6). My visceral understanding of the fluidity of identity means these experiences are not foreign to me.

On reflection, I regard the three parts – the research of relevant histories, my art practice, and my experiences – as having all played their roles in the final 'discovery' of the trauma which once was repressed. Probing into the historical and political background has provided me with a comprehensive understanding of my mother's behaviour and of the time she went through. My practice in the earlier part of this research explored how artistic processes and materials might convey trauma. Meanwhile, the gradually emerging sense of freedom due to the geopolitical and cultural distancing slowly loosened what once constrained me. Eventually, all of these fall together and are embodied in my final creative

output, the installation – *Living with the Unassimilable*.

Mum and Me

My first name, 靓 (*liang*), was given by my mother. It is a polyphone with three pronunciations, *jīng*, *qián*, and *liang*. All three pronunciations describe (especially) feminine beauty. When I was a child, this character was not widely used in Hubei province in China, where I was brought up. So people mixed it up with another character, 亮, which is also pronounced as *liang*, yet means ‘being bright and shining’ and is normally used as a male’s name. People would say ‘Oh! Your family chose a boy’s name for you.’ And I would explain to them that the character was 靓 instead of 亮. When I recall it now, I realise how my awareness of the gender confusion concerning my given name, has coincided with my PhD research.

As a woman born in 1955, my mother spent most of her adolescence during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-76). She worked in a silk factory in Chongqing from 1972 to 1982. After getting married to my father, my mother gave birth to me in 1981. It was five years after the end of the Cultural Revolution and three years after the introduction of the Reform and Opening-up Policy. To prevent projected overpopulation, the state started its One-Child Policy in 1979. It required families in most cities to have no more than one child while rural families and minorities were allowed a maximum of three if the first child was female. Those who violated this law would face punishment including the payment of a large fine or being fired from their work.² Thus, I am the only child of my parents.

My parents brought me to Hubei province in 1982. Both of them worked hard to financially support the family, while my mother did most of the housework as well as working in a government department. Even though I was female and males were, and still are, usually preferred to females as offspring in China, my parents, especially my mother, tried their best to satisfy my educational needs and to encourage me to develop myself. During my childhood, my mother frankly conveyed to me her belief in gender egalitarianism, and told me that as a girl, I should not regard myself of less value to boys. No doubt her education concerning gender has had positive influences on me, but in regard to some of my expressions of my sexuality, her behaviour, somehow, coincided with the ‘defeminisation’ gender policy during the Cultural Revolution. From about the age of four

² One unexpected consequence of the instigation of the One-Child policy is the significant imbalance of the male-female sex ratio in China today. The preference for male offspring has led to female infanticide and consequently more than 30 million male than female offspring; many of the former are unable to find female partners. Paradoxically, female offspring, as the only child of their families, benefitted from this policy getting access to unprecedented educational and economic resources (Hong, 2016).

until twenty, my mother showed her disapproval of some of my behaviours which would be considered to be traditionally 'girly,' such as being excited when wearing beautiful dress, or painting my nails. Occasionally, my mother would call me 'my son.' I never asked her about the reason, but from my understanding, it had something to do with the cultural context of categorising desired qualities such as braveness and being intelligent under masculinity. It may be her expression as a mother, wishing me to have these qualities. During my puberty, my mother's indifferent attitude to my changing body contrasted with her strong reaction when she found out from some love letters, that I was dating one of my male schoolmates. She interrogated me about the letters and criticised me fiercely. Though those letters were precious to me, I tore all of them into small pieces because I was frightened and wanted to calm her down.

That Moment

One adolescent experience with my mother has remained a traumatic memory for me since it occurred. When I was about 16 years old, I had a trivial argument with my mother concerning my hairstyle. It escalated into her intense criticism of my attempts to make myself physically attractive in what could be understood as a conventional feminine manner. My mother used some scornful and harsh words which was hard for me to take. At the same time, she kept roughly fiddling with my hair. I started crying but it didn't stop her. It was more than I could bear, so I ran back to my bedroom and locked the door. Trying to get in, my mother started slamming her body hard against the door. After a while, she stopped, and suddenly everything went so quiet. I thought that finally she would leave me alone, until I heard a noise from the other side of the door. It was my mother; she was trying each of our apartment's keys in the keyhole.

I was frozen. I had never been so scared of her before. Her behaviour made me feel *as if* I was not her daughter, and she, not my mother. She was like those female warriors represented during the Cultural Revolution (p. 45) being driven by hatred, chasing after and trying to destroy the party's antagonists with weapons in their hands.

While I am writing down this experience now, it still provokes a traumatic response. One question being repeatedly asked for years was: Why did my mother treat me like that at that moment? Whenever I try to probe into that moment, to interrogate the details in my mind, there would be an invisible force 'pulling' me away from it. Yet I could remember how my body, due to the overwhelming tension, suddenly became stiff, and I desperately wanted to disappear from the room and to escape to 'somewhere else.'

My Mother Once was Young Herself

It is hard to accept that the experience with my mother caused a trauma for me. However, to contextualise her in the historical event she has gone through, I have gained an understanding of my mother's behaviour then, which spoke to the Cultural Revolution she has experienced in her youth. When I returned to China at the end of January 2019 to spend the spring festival with my parents, I asked my mother for some of her old photos from the Cultural Revolution period, and there are two of them closely relevant to her experience during the time. One of the photos was taken around 1970 or 1971 when my mother was 15 or 16 years old in Nanchong City, Sichuan province. In the photo, she is with two of her friends and all of them are performing the “忠字舞” – the Red Guard dance.³ As a member in the local propaganda team, my mother often went to rural areas nearby with other members. They performed the eight model operas, including *The Red Detachment of Women* (pp. 112-113), for the farmers for propaganda purposes to promote the party's ideology. Another photo was taken around 1976 when my mother was 22 years old. To respond to the nation's call, ‘Entire nation in arms!’ (全民皆兵), many militia groups emerged. As a member of the local militia group, my mother went on patrol with other members. One of their duties was to look for dating couples in locations such as parks, or squares in the evening, and to stop their ‘indecent’ behaviour in a public place. In the photo, she was in an army uniform and held a rifle. Showing me the photo, my mother told me what she held was a real gun. ‘I was a very good shot then,’ she said, with a proud smile.

Looking at these photos, I saw a young girl, then a young woman, who was neither someone's wife, nor someone's mother. She dedicated herself to the Red Guard dance performances, and was so proud of being in a militia. She was not born as my mother and there was a part of her life which I have never experienced, at least first-hand.

The ‘Transmission’

In my memory, as a response to my mother's ‘education,’ I gradually – consciously, or unconsciously – avoided ‘feminine’ expression in the ways I dressed, or my manner in front of her. The internalisation could no longer be maintained with the arrival of my period at age 14. For quite a while, I was very depressed. It was a ‘farewell’ to my childhood in which I could ‘pretend’ to be a ‘neuter’ because of my seemingly ‘ambiguous’ body. My period, as a clear signal of the beginning of my womanhood, forced me to face my gender as a

³ As a mass social movement led by students, Red Guards was instituted by Chairman Mao, especially during the first phase of the Cultural Revolution.

woman, a gender defined by my mother's disapproval. By the age of twenty, following a couple of failed heterosexual relationships, I was constantly stressed by the sense of being trapped by two conflicting sets of gender standards. One standard showed discomfort of the feminine qualities I acted out in these relationships, while the other one asked for such qualities to maintain the relationship.

I had never investigated the connection to my life with what happened in my mother's youth before starting this research. When she recalled that part of her life, she remembered how she enjoyed a melodic love song with her friends, while at the same time remaining vigilant, since anything 'romantic' was forbidden. In some areas, the Red Guards cut off women's long braids and floral dresses were forbidden. Now I can see how these experiences left their marks on my mother, and, in turn, on me.

Other Women's Lives

Artist, curator, and critic Liao Wen described a trend she had encountered among some Chinese female artists – especially those who experienced the Cultural Revolution – after the introduction of the Reform and Opening-up policy. She found they 'wanted to return to femininity' yet didn't know how (Liao, 2007). When I visited Luise Guest, the previous research manager of the White Rabbit Gallery in Sydney in August 2019, she mentioned the confusion felt by many female artists she met in China about their gender identity, especially from the older generation who had experienced the two sets of gender policies, respectively in the Cultural Revolution and in the reform era.

I have communicated with some other Chinese women about this issue. For some who are of my generation, they didn't experience a similar relationship as me with their mothers, while others did.

The Impetus - the Encounter with the Trauma on the Surface

It happened when I was about 30 years old. I was painting in oils using impasto on a framed canvas, frequently pressing the brush heavily loaded with paint against the surface. Now, when I recall it, I think I sensed an uneasy feeling. The feeling gradually built up, like there was 'something' behind the canvas surface, which was both threatening and repelling. With each press on the canvas, the 'something' which I felt ominously silently got closer and the uneasy feeling became stronger. To a certain point, a nearly compulsive urge developed into a sudden rage and led me to violently stab at the surface with the brush. It was a piece of tough canvas, so it bounced back to me, which exaggerated the tension I felt. In response,

I scratched with considerable pressure into the surface with my finger nails. The more I struggled with the surface, the more frantic I felt. In desperation, I wanted to break the surface to identify the ‘something,’ and to ‘destroy’ it. Yet, somehow I knew that, as soon as the surface was broken and the tension disappeared, the possibility of finding the answer would ‘evaporate.’ It was as if maintaining this tension by pressing into the surface would lead to the answer, which was as tenuous and evasive as a shadow, yet as strong as a sudden blow. At the time, multiple emotions were experienced – rage, disgust, desperation, affection, guilt, as well as a hint of ‘*jouissance*’ (p. 40). The emotions, with the evoked sensations were transformed into an image in my mind – a stretch of land, and its earth was rich and dark.

The only evidence of my persistent and violent attacks was a few dents in the surface. I was left exhausted yet was perplexed by the ‘something’ because of the conflicting emotions it evoked. It was like a ‘stranger’ outside of my body, but it felt somehow intimate to me at the same time. It repelled me but also drew me towards it. Several years later, I recognised that in my violent ‘engagement’ with the surface’s materiality, its bouncing back towards me was like it was alive, and was trying to catch me, and engulf me. It was like a female body, and, a maternal body.

INTRODUCTION

to Living with the Unassimilable

This creative practice-based research was instigated in response to a traumatic event in my youth resulting from my mother's behaviour towards me. I contend her conduct was shaped by the Chinese government's gender policy in her youth during the Cultural Revolution. I regard the experience and ensuing impact of my mother's behaviour as a trauma according to Sigmund Freud's⁴ theory in which he proposed that trauma 'would arise from the inability to meet an overpowering emotional experience' (Freud, 1920, p. 238). The stimulus resulting from the traumatic event exceeded the mind's ability to integrate the event at the moment it occurred. The memory and accompanying emotions were suppressed to the unconscious and were, therefore, absent from the conscious. Being 'unspeakable,' its after-effect was evidenced in my haptic experience on the surface of a framed canvas, which I interpret as an encounter with the trauma.⁵

The research is titled 'Living with the Unassimilable,' the same name as its creative output – the hybrid sculpture/video installation. 'Unassimilable' is an expression registering that while the elaboration of the trauma, due to repression, 'can no longer be effected by normal means' (Freud, 1920, p. 238), its after-effect keeps evoking negative emotions. There are two aspects that illustrate the long-lasting after-effect in a relatively explicit manner. One is the aforementioned haptic experience on the surface of the framed canvas leading to an outburst of emotions which can be seen as a discharge or a 'crying out' of the repressed trauma (Kristeva, 1982, p. 2). The other is the question I repeatedly asked myself which lasted for years and always caused me pain: 'Why did my mother treat me like that at that moment?' Therefore, 'unassimilable' in my research refers to the trauma that could neither be ignored due to its after-effect, nor could it be processed enabling me to come to terms with it. Thus, to 'live with' implies that the research, as well as its final output, is a means by which I have managed to accept the trauma by approaching a catharsis of its after-effect, and, therefore, to reach a reconciliation with it.

The research approaches achieving a catharsis of the trauma through visual and material creative arts practice. This aligns with Judith Herman's⁶ definition of trauma's catharsis as storytelling, a means to put what was unspeakable in the past into words and to gain an understanding of the trauma. In the process, the accompanying negative emotions in the past are able to be relived, managed, and released, and the meaning of the trauma

⁴ Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) was an Austrian neurologist and the founder of psychoanalysis.

⁵ The narrative of the trauma and the haptic experience on the surface of the canvas are in the prologue, respectively on page 4 and pages 6-7.

⁶ Judith Herman (1942-) is an American psychiatrist.

reconstructed to regain what was destroyed in the traumatic moment (Herman, pp. 173-187). The selected art language provides this research with a process to investigate, understand, and express the unspeakable trauma. It allows the repressed emotions to be relived and released. On a personal level, the research endows the trauma with a new meaning and renders it as a subversive power to the gender structure imposed on me, as well as reconstructing my relationship with my mother.

The research topic unfolded over time and was ultimately revealed to be initiated by trauma, which led to referring to appropriate theory and a survey of the field of related creative art practice. The ensuing research parameters were set according to the research topic and the chosen art language. In the first instance, the research aims to express the unspeakable trauma and achieve catharsis. Secondly, the research is concerned with the transference of the regulation of women's sexuality intergenerationally through a mother-daughter relationship. Thirdly, the research is conducted from a cisgender perspective (as assigned at birth as a biologically defined woman) according to my experience of China's heteronormative patriarchal discourse before, during, and after the Cultural Revolution.⁷ The topic's context endows it with a historical dimension, which, in my case, is the experience of Chinese social, gender, and political systems in the seemingly discrete gender policies of the three aforementioned eras. The research's theoretical underpinning is drawn mainly from western scholars and philosophers. The reason being, from my consideration, the relevant theories of Chinese scholars lack a women's gender perspective to underpin the research. In official discourse women's rights and interests are usually subsumed under China's national and political interests. This was evidenced in the women's movement in China, which originated to face the national security and economic crises of the time rather than to enhance women's wellbeing.⁸ One example of this lack of a women's gender perspective is Zhang Zailin's 'Haptocentrism in China's Philosophy' (2017), the argument of which is based on China's traditional philosophy. There is no criticism from the author about the embedded gender bias in that philosophy. From a women's gender perspective, therefore, it is problematic.⁹

The parameters concerning the art language of the final creative output were identified over the course of this PhD investigation. After engaging with a range of art forms, processes, and materials,¹⁰ my choices were located in a visual and material, hybrid

⁷ Though my first-hand experience is limited to the period after the Cultural Revolution, it is deeply entangled with two other eras in Chinese history. Firstly, the influence of the gender policy during the Cultural Revolution, which my mother transferred to me, and, secondly, the gender structure rooted in traditional Chinese culture before the Cultural Revolution, which encompasses all three periods. This view will be discussed in Chapter Two from page 30 to page 32, and Chapter Three (pp. 42-49).

⁸ See 'Historical Contextualisation' (pp. 42-49) of my interpretation of the government's conflation of women's rights with the national interest. Min Dongchao's *Translation and Travelling Theory: Feminist Theory and Praxis in China*, presents an engaging discussion about women's awareness of the gender structure imposed on them in China's social reality, and their negotiation with introduced western feminist theories. However, Min's book is concerned with the social acceptance of western feminist thinking in China, and therefore, has little relevance for my research.

⁹ My discussion of Zhang Zailin's argument can be found from page 32 to page 33.

¹⁰ An in-depth discussion of how key decisions were made for the final work can be found in Chapter Five (pp. 84-85).

sculpture/video installation. The materials were employed symbolically and/or metaphorically to refer to the concerned trauma. Hybridity, in this case the combination of two art forms – video and sculpture – was required to produce an art language expressing the richness, singularity, and complexity of the experience of the trauma and catharsis.

In view of other relevant considerations, three questions were proposed for the research.

1. How can cultural, historical, and gender-specific, intergenerational trauma be expressed through an art practice?
2. How might this visual and material art practice employ performative, material, and haptic qualities – specifically fragility, ephemerality, and surface – to represent the moment of encountering the trauma?
3. How can catharsis be embodied in an integrated visual arts language?

These questions contain several terms and concepts that underscore the main concerns of the final outcome, in which ‘trauma’ and ‘catharsis’ have already been defined.¹¹ Drawn from the haptic experience, ‘surface’ is to be understood with ‘touch’ and was applied in two features in the final work; namely, physical objects being able to stimulate sensations when touched, and as spatial boundary. While the former relates to touching the surface of the canvas evoking in me a range of emotions, the latter is employed according to my experience of space. The canvas surface became a boundary between me and the ‘something’ behind it, and the sense of my body owning a coherent boundary was at stake.¹² Besides, a conceptual application of surface, which derives from my review and theoretical analysis of the national regulation of people’s sexuality in China, refers to the implication of women’s gender being deprived of agency in Chinese patriarchal discourse.¹³ Regarding touching as an act of perception, a ‘haptic quality’ is an attribute leading (especially) to a visual experience of gazing on surfaces of objects or images as if to visually ‘touch’ the surfaces to comprehend their tactile qualities. Thus, this quality mainly concerns the employment of visuality and materiality in the final output.

The performative quality is defined in relation to Judith Butler’s performativity theory,¹⁴ which proposes that through the repetition of a set of norms what once was intangible is substantialised. Accordingly, this quality in the context of my final work links to repeatedly evoking the range of sensations relating to my encounter with the latent

¹¹ More in-depth discussion of trauma and catharsis can be found respectively in Chapter Two (pp. 36-38) and Chapter Four (p. 61).

¹² This echoes with my experience of the ‘something’ and its connection with my body in the haptic experience (pp. 6-7). A more thorough analysis of this experience is in Chapter Two (pp. 34-35)

¹³ An in-depth discussion of this is presented in Chapter Two (pp. 30-32).

¹⁴ Judith Butler (1956-) is an American philosopher and gender theorist. Her performativity theory challenged a widespread belief that our sexuality is innate. The theory argues that gender identity is produced through the formative power of constructing repetition of gendered norms (Butler, 1990).

trauma in the haptic experience. Through repeatedly evoking the related sensations, the work attempted to get access to the repressed trauma aligning with Butler's performativity theory.

Ephemerality and fragility in my research are the two qualities registering the evasiveness and fugitiveness of the 'something' I sensed in the haptic experience, which now I understand was the repressed trauma. Sharing with each other several overlaps, ephemerality describes the quality leading to an impression of being susceptible to mutation, therefore, is elusive and fleeting; while fragility relates to being tenuous and vulnerable, and easily damaged or changed. The two qualities are embodied in the properties of the work such as its delicate structure, its immateriality in the video imagery, and its employment of filmy or mutable materials such as silk and salt.

Two concepts significant to the research are presence and absence, which are defined by reference to each other. These concepts echo with the manner trauma is encountered at a psychological level – it is absent from the conscious mind, yet is present in its after-effect. One instance of how the two concepts are embodied in the final work is through the video imagery appearing and disappearing in a loop.¹⁵

* * *

This exegesis aims to contextualise the final output and to demonstrate it is a valid response to the proposed research questions. The following section will outline the narrative, theoretical, and creative arcs of the thesis concluding with identifying the observed gap in contemporary Chinese art and in the field of trauma/catharsis-related, hybrid installation art and the original contribution the research is making.

The narrative arc of the exegesis consists of the prologue – which is concerned with outlining the personal experience of trauma and the appeal for its catharsis; the discussion of the adopted practice-based methodology; the theoretical background; the historical contextualisation; a literature review; the interpretation of the final creative output; and, a review of the development of the PhD art practice which led to the final output. The adopted methodology (Chapter One) offers an overview of the manner through which the research was carried out, while the literature review of relevant art practices identifies the observed gaps both in the field of trauma/catharsis-related hybrid art installation and in contemporary Chinese art as a prerequisite to make a claim for the research's original contribution.

The theoretical arc of the exegesis is framed by three components: an analysis of the Chinese government's gender policies before, during, and after the Cultural Revolution, and the status of women's gender in the policies; the understanding of the haptic experience

¹⁵ A more detailed discussion can be found on page 93.

on the surface of the framed canvas; and the unpacking of the trauma and catharsis. The analysis of the relevant gender policies and women's status employs concepts mainly from Michel Foucault's power theory¹⁶ and Butler's performativity theory. The study of the haptic experience largely relies on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's body schema¹⁷ and Erin Manning's notion of touch's political power.¹⁸ The trauma and its revelation are basically interpreted through a Freudian perspective, while the mother-daughter relationship is through Julia Kristeva's concept of initial loss.¹⁹ The sensations evoked when the trauma was encountered are examined through Kristeva's abjection theory²⁰ and Jacques Lacan's concept of *jouissance*.²¹ Catharsis is defined according to Herman, that is, to express the traumatic experience and to release the associated negative emotions.

The creative arc comprised a range of practices that led to – and included – the language of the final artwork. This process went through a number of stages as the intention of the research unfolded, enabling experimentation with, and understanding of, various art forms and diverse materials, colours, and spatial arrangements. Early on in my studies I produced a two-dimensional element (a photograph) and time-based video employing visual material from the Cultural Revolution. This then developed into the use of three-dimensional works (sculptures), and eventually to a hybrid sculpture/video installation, the form employed in the final work.

During the early 3-D works, in order to express internal qualities of the human body, the choice of materials became more organic. For example, meat (beef and pork purchased from a butcher) was used for its fleshy and bodily associations; but rejected in the later stages of the research because its overt references were no longer suitable to represent the psychological dimension of the trauma. For the same reason, vivid colours – referring to the propaganda art of the Cultural Revolution – were replaced by more subtle ones, and finally, monochrome. These changes coincided with a shift in focus from my mother's experience to my own.

Decisions on material use and processes developed alongside a comprehension of their

¹⁶ Michel Foucault (1926-84) was a French philosopher and historian. His power theory in *The History of Sexuality* refers to a nation's power system and its manipulation of its people's sexuality.

¹⁷ The body schema theory of French phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-61) contributes a perspective of seeing our body as central to our understanding of the world, the senses of our body as a united system, and perceiving each local stimulus as a whole.

¹⁸ Erin Manning (1969-) is a Canadian cultural theorist and political philosopher. She proposes the act of touch has a subverting political power which is able to challenge the national regulative body policy.

¹⁹ Julia Kristeva (1941-) is a Bulgarian-born, French philosopher. Her theory concerned with initial loss refers to the baby being separated from the maternal body. The separation and the ensuing loss are regarded as indispensable in terms of the emergence of the subject and the separation creates a wanted 'object' opposed to the subject.

²⁰ Kristeva regards abjection as a replacement of maternal body, breast and caress being expelled in the initial loss. To experience abjection is to have the boundary between subject and object challenged (pp. 38-39).

²¹ Jacques Lacan (1901-81) was a French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist. *Jouissance* is defined by Lacan as an enjoyment beyond the pleasure principle. The Freudian pleasure principle, which is to avoid the unpleasure, is understood by Lacan as a mechanism to avoid the patriarchal linguistic system to be transgressed (Lacan, 2007, p. 185), since what is pleasure is defined and is found in the linguistic system (Lacan, 2007, p. 12). Therefore, *jouissance* can be understood as a violation of the linguistic system. In view of this, I associate Lacan's theory of *jouissance* with Kristeva's notion of initial loss (p. 40).

potential to achieve certain artistic expressions and effects leading to the art language employed in the final outcome. Materials were chosen for their metaphorical and/or symbolic associations with the trauma and its catharsis. The potential of video and sculpture, identified in earlier stages, led to their employment in later experiments in hybrid sculpture/video installations. The capacity of these two art forms to provide various temporal-spatial experiences, and their juxtaposition within the same artwork enabled the nuance and complexity required to express the experience of trauma and catharsis.

The literature review (a survey of related art practices) identified gaps both in contemporary Chinese art and in the specific realm of trauma/catharsis-related, hybrid sculpture/video art installation. The research deals with my personal experience that *brings together* three concerns: trauma in a Freudian sense experienced first-hand; intergenerational transmission of the gender policy during the Cultural Revolution in a mother-daughter relationship; and, the shifting gender policies before, during, and after the Cultural Revolution rooted in China's patriarchal system. The investigation demonstrates that prior to my research, there is no evidence that other artists' practices have addressed the three concerns in an integrated approach in contemporary Chinese art. Against the rapidly changed social reality of China, the integration allows the after-effect of the Cultural Revolution – as a national trauma – to be investigated through a gender and intergenerational perspective on a personal level.

In the realm of trauma/catharsis-related, hybrid art installations, my survey shows that the related works of relevant artists (Christian Boltanski and Doris Salcedo) demonstrate a relatively direct association with the original traumatic experience. This is usually achieved through 're-creating' the original experience and/or introducing objects from or referring to the experience. The indirect way I refer to the trauma in my work contrasts with the aforementioned approaches. At the same time, I have been unable to identify examples of the mode of trauma/catharsis-related, hybrid art installation that I employed in my final work, namely, the combination of video and sculpture.

The haptic experience uttered the otherwise repressed emotions of the trauma in a range of sensations and reactions. By exploring and expressing these sensations, the work is able to access the trauma without explicitly pointing to it. On the other hand, the interrogation during the research of my mother's behaviour, its impact on me, and the transmitted Cultural Revolution's gender policy allows the trauma to be addressed contextually without being literally represented. The selected materials, the manner in which they were processed and presented in the work, and the visual mode of the work employed metaphor and/or evoked the experiences of the sensations, as well as embedded the work in its personal and cultural context. One example is the employment of silk in the work. While it is not directly involved in the event which became the trauma, as a principal material, it addresses the cultural backdrop and the mother-daughter relationship. Its

fragility, at the same time, talks to the evasiveness sensed in the haptic experience (p. 7).

The art form – hybrid sculpture/video installation – is employed to convey how the sense of reality was disturbed when I encountered the trauma. My experience with sculpture and video in my previous practice during this research²² showed that time and space can be experienced differently in each of the two art forms. Appealing to this potential of each of them, the juxtaposition of the two art forms aims to achieve the effect of ‘being disturbed’ by having the moving imagery appear and disappear repetitively. This process enabled the related sensations to be evoked and experienced again and again. Drawing on Butler’s performativity theory, the repetition aims at approaching the repressed trauma.

Therefore, the final outcome of the research makes its original contribution *as an integration* of three aspects both to contemporary Chinese art and to the realm of trauma/catharsis-related, hybrid sculpture/video art installation. Firstly, in contemporary Chinese art, no previous practice has brought together the three aforementioned concerns as my research has done. Secondly, the work approaches the trauma indirectly and contextually through sensations and performativity. And, thirdly, it expresses the trauma and catharsis through the combination of static sculpture and moving imagery. These factors differentiate the final outcome from the works of other artists whose concerns overlap with mine.

* * *

The following section introduces the chapters which form the main body of the exegesis. The exegesis starts from an unpacking of the applied methodology, which is the focus of Chapter One. Being motivated by highly personal memories, the research required an individually customised methodology which comprised an approach combining material-based art making, writing to reflect personal experience, textual analysis of theoretical, historical, political, and cultural material, and a literature review of related creative practice. After a period of reflection, the above elements that were concerned with the provisional research questions were identified and new iterations advanced until a convergence was attained. Two examples are given to demonstrate how the methodology has benefited and pushed the progression of the four main concerns of the research, namely surface, touch, trauma, and catharsis. Overall, the approach enabled the development of an art language registering personal and psychological experience against a specific historical and cultural backdrop.

Chapter Two provides a theoretical framework in which western philosophies and concepts are employed in parallel with pertinent traditional Chinese ideologies and contemporary Chinese scholars’ perspectives. Embodying the trajectory of the

²² See Chapter Five, “Key Decisions” (pp. 84-85).

development of the research, this chapter runs from the periphery – the historical events – to the centre, the discovery of the trauma. The first section, through Foucault's unfolding of the connection between national discursive power and sex in his power theory, reveals the operating power structure in the Chinese government's regulation of sexuality. Drawing on Butler's performativity theory, the government's construction of people's identification of sexuality is disclosed. The following section starts by arguing for Chinese women's gender association with the concept of surface through Butler's perspective of matter's status in gender structure. The related perspective of two Chinese scholars – feminist cultural critic, Dai Jinghua, and literary and cultural critic, Meng Yue, is introduced to embed the argument in a Chinese context, which reveals the implication of both – surface, and Chinese women's gender – being deprived of agency in the patriarchal discourse. The next section is concerned with Merleau-Ponty's body schema and Manning's interpretation of the political power of touch. Along with the two American philosophers, Avrum Stroll's and Mark C. Taylor's conceptualisation of surface,²³ this part validates the proposition that the act of touch is potentially a subversive power and reveals the concealed depth of surface. In my research, touching on the canvas surface triggered conflicting sensations about my body, which put Chinese national gender policies into question. It also revealed the once repressed trauma.

The last section deals with the trauma and its appeal to achieve catharsis, both of which are central to the research. I turned to Freud for his association of trauma with the psychological mechanism of repression, and its symptoms such as compulsively repeated acts and condensation in language, from which I identified the trauma. Meanwhile, linking the initial loss with trauma, Kristeva casts light on the mother-daughter relationship in my trauma; her interpretation of abjection aligns with, and provides theoretical support for, what I encountered in the haptic experience. Finally, Lacan's *jouissance* theory in which *jouissance* is defined as, 'the satisfaction of a drive' (Lacan, 2007, p. 209) is discussed to explain an 'uncanny' sensation evoked by touching the canvas surface – a discharge of the bodily tension being triggered by encountering the trauma.

This chapter supports my interpretation of the trauma, the haptic experience, their association both with each other and with the power structure – the patriarchal system in China. The theories contributed to conceptualising the final creative output except Foucault's power theory, which operates mainly to unwrap relevant historical phenomena relating to the trauma.

Contextualising the trauma in relation to its cultural and historical background is indispensable. Chapter Three reaches to the history of China before the Cultural Revolution, a period which revealed China's entanglement with other areas of the world.

²³ Avrum Stroll (1921-2013) reveals the capacity of surface to maintain a sensory stimulus in his book *Surface*, while Taylor (1945-) assigns to skin infinite depth since it is our largest organ of haptic sense.

With this context setting the basic tone, the chapter is mainly concerned with the shifting gender policies which impacted especially on the mainstream representation of women. It demonstrates the cultural and generational contexts of gender conditioning in China (before, during, and post-Cultural Revolution). Besides embedding my personal experience in a broader perspective, this chapter lays out a backdrop for a brief review of contemporary Chinese art which begins the next chapter.

Chapter Four comprises a literature review and addresses three main concerns – contemporary Chinese art, installation art, and trauma/catharsis-related art. To conclude, the relevant works of three artists, He Chengyao, Doris Salcedo, and Eva Hesse are chosen for analysis. The brief review of contemporary Chinese art demonstrates its association with the nation's political climate, and the artists' understanding of their national identity after the Reform and Opening-up Policy under the influence of western perspectives. This section also discusses a selection of Chinese artists' works relating to gender issues, and their negotiation with feminism (which is generally regarded as a western movement yet partially overlaps with the conditions of Chinese women). The intention of focusing on these aspects is to embed my art practice in the pertinent concerns of my national and gender identity.

The next section, aiming at validating the choice of art form for the final output, provides a short introduction to the main properties and categories of installation art, followed by an investigation of trauma/catharsis-related art. Trauma and catharsis, in terms of creative art, are discussed in relation to the works of key artists such as Joseph Beuys, Louise Bourgeois, Christian Boltanski, and Ai Weiwei. This section contextualises my research in respect to a key component of the investigation – the catharsis of the trauma through creative practice.

The three artists He, Salcedo, and Hesse, whose concerns are closely related to this research are identified and elaborated upon later. A work from each of them which exemplifies their wider practice concerning elements such as trauma, mother-daughter relationship, and/or materiality is discussed. The relevance of the selected works to my research is evidenced by the shared spaces relating to trauma, art languages such as the employment of materiality, key elements to register relevant sensations, and atmosphere, etc. These overlaps make these artists' selected works suitable references to examine my final output and its original contribution to the field.

Chapter Five is the interpretation of the final work, the hybrid sculpture/video installation, *Living with the Unassimilable*. Here, based on my understanding of the association between trauma, catharsis, and art, the work – as an aesthetic expression of the repressed and surfaced trauma, and its catharsis – is interpreted along with the materiality, the making process, spatial arrangement, and the unpacking of the work's meanings. Key concepts that underpin the research, such as surface, touch, and trauma and catharsis, are woven in as the work's theoretical support. The installation is intended to reflect multiple aspects of the

research topic that coalesce in a resolved whole. The last section – the conclusion – illustrates how the work has resolved the three proposed research questions, and its claim to make an original contribution in the field of trauma/catharsis-related hybrid installation art, and in contemporary Chinese art.

The Appendix demonstrates the development of the visual and material practice embodied in this research. It includes a process of shifting from two-dimensional works to three-dimensional sculptures and finally, to mixed media installations. In this process, both the development of the art forms and expressive art language are drawn out from my bodily engagement with materiality and space, and my exploration of diverse media. A personal drive initiated by the encounter with the trauma in the haptic experience on the surface of the framed canvas has led to approaching something ‘internal’ and ‘bodily’ and constantly showing a certain quality in my juxtaposition of contrasting elements.

* * *

The following section provides a summary of the theoretical, cultural, and historical framework as well the literature review. It is foregrounded by four considerations of this research. The first consideration is to foster a theoretical framework to articulate the haptic experience, the revealed trauma and its catharsis, the relevant gender policies in China, and the connection between the three. The second, given the particular cultural and historical backdrop of the research, is to develop a cultural lens and to present the historical context in which the research is embedded. The third is to examine those art practices or art forms whose concerns overlap with my own, while the last is to theoretically confirm that the art language developed and employed in the final output is a fitting conceptual, visual, and material articulation of the research questions.

Responding to the first consideration, I mainly refer to Foucault’s power theory, Butler’s performativity theory, Merleau-Ponty’s body schema, Manning’s concepts of the political power of touch, Freud’s understanding of trauma, Kristeva’s abjection theory, and Lacan’s *jouissance* concept. The definition of catharsis in my research is drawn from Herman. At the same time, other scholars’ views are considered which provide indispensable perspectives and are key for the coherence of the theoretical articulation, both of the trauma and of the haptic experience. They include Gilles Deleuze’s concept of surface effect (p. 34), his perspective of sensations as catalysts for profound thoughts (p. 38), and Cathy Caruth’s proposition of the manner in which trauma is encountered (p. 39), etc.

To provide a cultural lens for the theoretical framework, the review of *I Ching*’s embedded gender bias, and of Dai Jinghua and Meng Yue’s analysis of Chinese women’s marginal status is conducted in parallel to the argument of Chinese women’s deprived agency unpacked through Butler’s performativity theory. This juxtaposition also uncovered

the exploitation of women's gender shared by both Western and Chinese patriarchal systems. To bridge the gap between Merleau-Ponty's body schema and Chinese culture, I turned to Zhang Zailin's notion that the haptic sense is essential in the formation of China's traditional ideology. The central status of the haptic sense in Chinese culture, claimed by Zhang, echoes with Merleau-Ponty's body schema theory in which he argues for the essentiality of the role our body, including its senses, plays in our perception activity (p. 33).

The review of the historical/cultural background principally focuses on the shifting gender policies before, during, and after the Cultural Revolution in China. The investigation concentrates on the three periods' mainstream representations of women in China, one of the key channels for the discursive power to regulate people's sexuality. Besides visual material from the three periods' mass media, the textual resources are respectively from Huang Jinlin's *History, Body, Nation: The Form of Body in Modern China (1895-1937)*, Harriet Evans's *Women and Sexuality in China: Female Sexuality and Gender since 1949*, and Laikwan Pang's *The Art of Cloning: Creative Production During China's Cultural Revolution*. Huang illustrates the connection of modern China's national crisis instigated by past invasions by foreign powers with people's altered understanding of the body, which has prepared for the ensuing extreme politicisation of people's sexuality. The review of his argument endows my articulation of the highly politicised gender policies during the Cultural Revolution with a comprehensive and historical perspective in terms of its relation to external forces and to prior history. Evans's analysis reveals how Chinese women's sexuality was regulated through the educational system, pop culture, national propaganda, etc., while Pang focuses on propaganda art during the Cultural Revolution, especially in forms such as posters and model operas, and its influence on the people's identity. The review of these texts enables mainstream visual representations of women in China during the periods (before, during, and after the Cultural Revolution) to be analysed in terms of their impact on women's sexuality, and the political and/or economic imperatives they were to serve.

The review of historical material is also conducted in my interpretation of one of my works during this research, *The Red Detachment of Women – the Oscillation* (pp. 112-116). This work employed imagery from the Cultural Revolution-period model opera, *The Red Detachment of Women*. The review endorses my investigation of the history and its formation of my gender identity through the employment of the historical visual materials. The textual sources were from documents both of the real life of the opera's archetypes and of the history of the opera's interpretation, which were to serve political imperatives and/or China's heteronormative gender stereotypes. In the textual analysis of these documents, overlaps were revealed between the construction of the opera and its archetypes' life experiences with my experience as a woman in China.

In terms of the art historical context, the research reviewed contemporary Chinese artists whose concerns are located in China's political environment, and/or national and

cultural identity, such as Wang Guangyi, and Cai Guoqiang. Several practices of female artists from China such as Xiao Lu who deal with the existing gender structure are also included. Textual material covering the key facets of my research in contemporary Chinese art is largely from Wu Hung's *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, Gao Minglu's *The Wall, Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art*, Cui Shu-qin's *Gendered Bodies: Toward a Women's Visual Art in Contemporary China*, and Barbara Pollack's *Brand New Art from China: A Generation on the Rise*. While Wu and Gao offer a chronological document and analysis of the development and changes in contemporary Chinese art after the Cultural Revolution, my opinion is that the two are mostly representations of and from male artists' perspectives from China. In this sense, Cui's claim for the underestimated value of Chinese female artists' practice is an insightful observation, and her demonstration of how these art practices have reshaped the understanding of history underlines the significance of my research. Meanwhile, the inclusion of Pollack's investigation of contemporary Chinese artists' negotiation with western ideological influence deals with the research's 'displacement,' that is the fact that I undertook the research in New Zealand instead of in China.

A brief discussion of installation art is included in my literature review. The text I have referred to for this discussion is mainly derived from Faye Ran's *A History of Installation Art and the Development of New Art Forms: Technology and the Hermeneutics of Time and Space in Modern and Postmodern Art from Cubism to Installation*. The historical perspective being proffered by Ran in terms of the development of installation art, especially the investigation of its key properties, support my employment of the art form for the final output. Meanwhile, *Understanding Installation Art: from Duchamp to Holzer* is included which presents Mark Rosenthal's interpretation of enchantment installation art. According to Rosenthal, such art provides an immersive experience by creating a psychological space through synaesthetic and multimedia effects, which coincides with the properties of my final outcome.

The review of creative art concerning trauma and catharsis includes the works of Beuys, Bourgeois, Boltanski and Kira O'Reilly. The chosen artists' works illustrate key considerations of trauma/catharsis-related art, such as the articulation of the psychological dimension of experiencing trauma, the collectively experienced trauma and its intergenerational transmission and impact, catharsis and its artistic realisation, etc. This section is initiated by Herman's definition of trauma's catharsis in *Trauma and Recovery – The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, while Kristeva, in her *Power of Horror*, illustrates the deep entanglement of catharsis with art. In *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture*, James E. Young claims the significance of the next generation's memory of collectively experienced trauma for understanding history. It echoes with my appeal to express the trauma, which is a vicarious experience of the Cultural Revolution induced by my mother's behaviour. Jill Bennett's

instructive views in *Empathic Vision – Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*, about trauma-related art are parallel with my position of how trauma is to be expressed in art, which is embodied in the final work. To contextualise the concern of trauma and catharsis in the cultural and political background I come from, relevant practices from artists such as Cheng Conglin, Zhang Xiaogang, Ai Weiwei, and Lei Yan in contemporary Chinese art are reviewed. The selected artworks represent reflection and artistic expression of historical and/or political traumas of China. Relevant textual analyses of their work, such as by critic and curator Li Xianting, are applied. The investigation in this part offers my research a platform in terms of embodiment of trauma's catharsis through art, both in a Chinese context and elsewhere, and major considerations of representing trauma and its catharsis through art.

The works of three artists, He, Salcedo, and Hesse are examined in detail due to their relevance to my research. Published interviews present the artists' motivations in their artmaking processes, while the articles provide informative material for conducting a discussion of their arts; both are indispensable to investigating the overlaps and distinctions of their art with my work. To take Hesse's art as an example, I reviewed the interview of her by Cindy Nemser (2002) and the analysis of her employment of materiality (Krauss, 2002a, 2002b). Meanwhile, Yve-Alain Bois's *Formless: A User's Guide* provides theoretical support for claiming a distinction between my work and Hesse's in the employment of ephemerality.

The interpretation of the final work *Living with the Unassimilable* and the claim for its original contribution in Chapter Five is based on the theoretical framework, the historical and cultural contextualisation, and the examining of relevant artists' prior practice. The textual review of other scholars is added in this section to legitimate the art language as a valid artistic expression to meet the aims of the research. Those that are significant for my argument include Laura Marks's theory 'haptic visuality' in *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (p. 94), and Kristeva's articulation of the concept of 'filth' in her *Power of Horror* (p. 97). Marks's 'haptic visuality' substantiates the employment of materiality and the visual mode in the final work as an appropriate one. Kristeva's interpretation of filth's connection with abjection theoretically supports my employment of salt in the final work, referring to its implication as 'cleansing' in many cultures.

* * *

Finally, I will define four terms which will be used in the main body of the exegesis. Three of these terms refer to my personal experience: 'that moment,' 'original haptic experience,' and 'something.' 'That moment' (this term is in italics in the main body of the exegesis) means the moment when my mother tried to force her way into my bedroom when

I was about 16 years old (p. 4). The 'original haptic experience' describes the encounter with the trauma by touching the canvas surface when I was about 30 years old (pp. 6-7). The 'something' refers to my feeling that there was 'something' behind the canvas in the original haptic experience (pp. 6-7). These three memories are essential for understanding this research.

As described in the prologue, during the original haptic experience, with each press on the canvas, a feeling gradually got stronger, as if 'something' which was dangerous and ominous was slowly and silently approaching me. I regard this process of the 'something' approaching me as the suppressed trauma surfacing from the unconscious, and describe this process as the trauma's 'looming up' due to the feeling of it 'being ominous.' 'Looming up' will be used in my interpretation of the final outcome.

ONE

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this research comprised an integrated approach of art making with a focus on material exploration; reflection of personal experience through writing as a method to scrutinise previous memories; textual analysis of theoretical, historical, political, and cultural material; and investigation of related creative practice – particularly, but not exclusively – in the realm of contemporary western and Chinese art installation practice. Following a period of reflection, the above elements that were concerned with the provisional research questions were identified and new iterations developed until a convergence was achieved.

The appropriateness of the methodology comes from the nature of this research, which is motivated by a highly personal experience and subsequent psychological impact; the haptic and material manner in which the trauma was encountered; at the same time, the indispensable contextualisation of the trauma. Two examples are given below to demonstrate how the employment of the methodology has pushed the progress of the three essential elements which underpin the whole research: ‘surface,’ ‘touch,’ and ‘trauma,’ which refer to the bodily engagement with the canvas surface in the original haptic experience, and the revealed trauma.

The first example is how key texts contributed to my thinking relates to ‘surface’ and ‘touch.’ When reassessing my earlier PhD practice, I realised my original haptic experience when touching the surface of a framed canvas revealed my conflicting feelings about my sexuality through the bodily reaction. This awareness was followed by a reading of Butler’s *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* and *Emerging from the Horizon of History: A Study of Modern Women’s Literature* by Dai Jinghua and Meng Yue. In the latter’s feminist analysis of modern Chinese literature, Dai and Meng reveal that in their texts, women writers deliberately inscribed their marginalized gender status and feminine ‘difference.’

From these readings, I appreciated how women’s gender role in China was manipulated, which helped me reach an understanding of women’s status in the patriarchal structure overlapping with the concept, ‘surface.’ This realisation extended the significance of ‘surface’ from my personal experience to a wider sphere involving many other women in China, and reinforced the importance of ‘surface’ in my practice. At the same time, ‘surface’ serves my research from two aspects: an abstract concept; and a sensory stimulus evoking sensations through pressing against it in the original haptic experience. Manning’s book, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty* reveals how sensing bodies are confronted with political structures and the subverting power of touch. Manning’s theories provided me with a perspective of my experience that legitimated the essential role of touch both in

my research and in my final exhibition. Other key texts concerned with touch, such as Merleau-Ponty's body schema concept, cast light on how different senses 'translate' what is being sensed by one of our sensing organs to another. This concept provided theoretical support of the visual sensations I experienced in touching on the canvas surface, as well as my employment of the haptic sense in my art practice, including the final output.

Touching the surface of the canvas, which I now understood as a political gesture due to its subversion of the imposed construction from the national patriarchal discourse, evoked another dimension: one dimension in front of the canvas was corporeal, like the skin of a human body. The other dimension was behind the canvas. It was not real; rather a metaphor that expressed the virtual, the psychological space of trauma that reveals itself only when touched. The centrality of surface in my practice and its spatial dimensions, in front and behind, had to be realised. This revealed spatial dimension would not be achieved by the soft sculptures of my earlier practice. At the same time, the fleshy materiality and form of the sculptures, apparently making direct reference to human body parts would not suit for the abstract and metaphorical aspects that were required. The appropriateness of abstraction and an expanded experience of space – one provided by installation practices – now became apparent. This key methodological development prompted an assessment of the field, specifically artworks concerned with installation practices.

The unearthing of trauma's significant role in my research was another essential breakthrough, as well as its connection with the original haptic experience. The process of its discovery illustrates the employment of personal reflection through writing, woven together with art making and textual analysis of theoretical material; all of these elements have benefited progress. Due to the involvement of highly personal and psychical elements, the writing was conducted from the early stage of the research to the end. It mainly focused on my experience with my mother, but also included other events which I regarded as being relevant. During the writing process, memories which once seemed trivial gradually showed their significance. One episode in the early stage, without direct linking to my research topic though aligned with the textual analysis and art making, has benefited the research's long-term trajectory. It is a piece of writing about a body regulation which I have experienced. At the end of my twenties, my mother told me that I once was left-handed but was 'corrected' to right-handedness by my kindergarten teachers when I was two. I had no memory of the event, at least in a conscious way. However, in my textual reflections of these memories, I realised the experience left its 'trace' like an 'error' – as long as I can remember, I cannot immediately tell right from left.

What makes this episode relevant is my gained apprehension of how memories may be stored and 'utter' themselves in other ways rather than cognition. In my case, due to being too young to recall the circumstances, the memory was 'stored' and was spoken out as a bodily reaction to the event. This first-hand apprehension laid the groundwork for the

development of my discovery of the trauma, in which my reading of Griselda Pollock's *After-images: Trauma and aesthetic transformation in the virtual feminist museum*, and Kristeva's *Power of Horror* have played their significant role. What led me to the two texts was my reflection of the constantly emerging theme in my art making – the combination of contradictory elements in many respects, such as the spatial arrangement and the expressed emotions. Pollock's discussion presents the parallel, yet opposing, aspects of expression relating to trauma; Kristeva's poetic conceptualisation of abjection coincides with how the sense of my body as a boundary was at stake in the original haptic experience, which was expressed in my art making through its spatial aspect. Reading the two texts, especially Pollock's argument that trauma's after-affects can be encountered in art (Pollock, 2013, p. xxvi) drew my attention to trauma and Freud, who interpreted trauma as being caused by a given stimulus being too enormous to assimilate, and thus can no longer be affected by normal means (Freud, 1920, p. 238).

The most critical breakthrough after my reading of Freud about trauma occurred in my writing to reflect the traumatic experience with my mother when I was 16 years old. When I tried to probe into the memory for further details in my writing, the resistance I met coincided with Freud's explanation, and caused me to interpret the experience as a trauma. In retrospect, the reflection on my experience as a two-year old prepared me to build the connection of the discovered trauma with my bodily reaction in my original haptic experience – the apprehension of how the body is capable of 'uttering' memories that are not speakable is key here. As the most important breakthrough, this discovery happened at the last stage of my research due to restraints from many respects. The realisation enabled me to understand and describe the creative practice in theoretical terms. It also shed light to further exploration with a clearer destination, in respect of its employment of visual art language through elements such as lighting and materiality to express the relevant sensations about the trauma.

The investigation of other artists' practices in the field continued as the creative practice evolved, but some key art works were not identified until I was confident in the visual and material language being developed. To investigate other artists' practices functioned mainly to navigate my exploration of the art language for achieving its original contribution. Among these artists, one evident influence comes from my investigation of Zhao Zhao's *Constellation*, 2017 (p. 68). His method of transforming marks left by violence into delicate embroidery inspired me. Before encountering his art, my previous art making which involved the act of stitching had fostered my appreciation of the implication of this act in relation to my research concerns. Accordingly, his method was adapted to match with the expression I aimed at, and became a significant element in my final work, albeit significantly distinguished from his practice. The difference between our works will be further discussed respectively in Chapter Four (p. 68) and in Chapter Five (p. 90).

TWO

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This chapter is concerned with the theoretical background of the research, which is to validate my interpretation of the relevant history, my personal experience, and of the meanings of the final work *Living with the Unassimilable* (see chapter Five). Four essential concepts – surface, touch, trauma, and catharsis – underpin the research. While catharsis, the concept's definition and its employment in my research will be fully unpacked in Chapter Four (pp. 61-71), the other three will be discussed in this chapter.

According to Stroll, there are many concepts of surfaces (Stroll, 1988). My research refers to this concept's definitions both as physical objects being able to stimulate sensations when being touched, and as an abstract spatial element – boundaries. It also implies Chinese women's gender. Drawing from the original haptic experience, touch is employed in my research as an act of touching on another surface in order to perceive. The two concepts, touch and surface, are deeply entangled with each other. The concept of trauma in this research is based on Freud's definition of it as experiencing a stimulus too overwhelming for the psyche to process (Freud, 1920). Meanwhile, from Kristeva's feminist perspective in *Power of Horror – An Essay on Abjection*, I regard the trauma as a recurrence of her concept of initial loss and the encounter with it as the experience of the abject, which is defined by her as to experience the realisation that the whole meaning system is based on the initial loss.

The Anatomy in the Periphery

Foucault's power theory in *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1, The Will to Knowledge*, as well as Butler's performativity theory in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* provided me with the tools to 'anatomise' the mechanism behind the manipulation of women's sexuality during the relevant historical events before, during, and after the Cultural Revolution. The two theories, by working on what I regard as the periphery area – the historical context of the research – prepare for probing into the core of the research later.

Foucault's Power Theory in China

According to Wang Minan, a Chinese researcher of Foucault, the work of Foucault

was introduced into China at the end of the 1980s and discussed in academic articles, becoming popular at the end of 1990s (Zhao, 2014). Wang regards Foucault's understanding of discipline and power are the two ideas that relate to China's context best in terms of the political regime.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault described a national power system in relation to sex as 'a subtle network of discourses, special knowledges, pleasures, and powers' (Foucault, 2008, p. 72). He started his investigation from the Victorian Age, during which sex was severely repressed in the west. According to Foucault, sex was 'seized' by discourse and was manipulated by the normative power roughly through two stages.

Firstly, discourse sets sex as an object of secrecy outside of it. Thus, the discovery of sex became something that is / was 'difficult and necessary, dangerous and precious to divulge' (Foucault, 2008, p. 35). Therefore, sexuality was constituted as an area of investigation being established by power relations.

Secondly, being able to get access to sex as a 'secret,' the techniques of knowledge and procedures of discourse has enabled the currently exerting power to conduct diverse manipulations. These include the exclusion of 'illegal sexuality' through criminalisation, stigmatisation, and pathologisation, etc.; and the regulation and intervention in sexual behaviours which coincide with the current main value system to better serve the current imperatives of the hegemony.

For Foucault, the prerequisite for the power system is inequality which causes ceaseless struggles and confrontation and the power system is not static but is able to transform. As a western philosopher, his theories of the operation of power on sex is applicable in China's context too during the last century.

At the beginning of 20th century, when China faced a national crisis after the First Opium War, the state started its regulation of its people's births, fertility, state of health, education, etc. Sex and its legal form, heterosexual marriage, thus became the locus of the state's regulation of sexuality. In Foucault's analysis, during the industrialization of western countries in 18th century, states started to regulate people's sexuality to grow their populations, so that to increase the nation's power. (Foucault, 2008, p. 26). In China, besides this aim, the national regulation of its people's sexuality also included the production of intelligent and healthy citizens (Liang, 1902, pp. 1-11).

During this period, individuals' sexual practice and their marriages were shifted from the grasp of their federal families to the regulation of the state. All of this located individuals' sexuality in the national discourse and established the foundation for the intervention of the state's power into people's sexual practices after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949.

During the Cultural Revolution, China experienced an extreme repression of people's sexuality (Evans, 1997, p. 2). In fact, how to vest the most 'natural' yet 'rebellious' sexual

drives in political terms had been a question confronting the party from its founding era. As Foucault argued, in order to gain mastery over sexuality in reality, 'it had first been necessary to ... control its free circulation in speech' (Foucault, 2008, p. 17). Throughout this period, any public suggestion relating to sex in language or image was regarded as ideologically unsound and shameful. While individuals' marriages needed to be approved by their working place's party and government's department, marital ritual was filled with political symbols (Evans, 1997, p. 22).

The repression of sexuality was exerted to such an extreme extent that even sex was considered a taboo (Evans, 1997, p. 2). Inevitably, this repression met resistance at the time. However, according to Foucault, resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power but provides a means by which to exert the power (Foucault, 2008, p. 95). Moreover, the repression of desire at the period triggered a potential transformation which, in turn, strengthened the whole power system which was embodied in at least two forms. The first was that the repressed desire was transformed into an aggressive 'war-fever,' usually occurring in public places where 'class antagonists' were verbally and physically humiliated and tortured. The publicly demonstrated punishment was to achieve a mass revolutionary education as well as a warning to the audience who secretly opposed such savage acts (Lu, 1994, p. 534).

Meanwhile, the repressed desire required a release which could be transformed into the blind and fervent worship of the leader at the time, Chairman Mao. For example, to be loyal to Chairman Mao was the most dominant theme in the political propaganda during this period (Pang, 2018) – the restrained passion was to be channeled to the idolisation of the leader.

The ensuing Reform and Opening-up Policy (1979) introduced the western economic model which called for both production and consumption, rendering the extreme repression of sexuality during the Cultural Revolution meaningless. With an unchanged regime, the regulation of individuals' sexuality has showed some similarities with its western counterparts, and the sexuality based on male-oriented, sexual pleasure has been employed again in the introduced market economy to produce economic benefit.

The first move was the reintroduction of the difference between the two genders, male and female. The depiction of heterosexual relationships appeared in various areas, including literature, mass media, and popular medicine, etc., normally illustrating conservative gender roles in a heterosexual relationship, the 'active actors' and the 'passive actors' in sexual intercourse, respectively, male and female. Against such a backdrop, the marriage relationship required certain duties for the two genders to fulfil – men as breadwinners and women as homemakers. To identify with the required gender norms, individuals needed to consume certain goods. The voices of magazines, mass media, or even popular medicine, increase such anxieties for both men and women to closely identify

with the set models – that women should be sexually attractive from ceaselessly consuming make-up products and fashion (Xu & Feiner, 2007), while masculinity can be maintained through the consumption of expensive goods (Song & Lee, 2010). When the constructed gender paradigms continuously require individuals to conform to them, the conformance reversely reinforces the whole power system. In parallel to those sexualities which are ‘unacceptable,’ the power system stigmatises them, pathologises them, or makes them nameless.²⁴

One opinion that the rehabilitation of the traditional sexual identities was a backlash to the repression during the Cultural Revolution, provided a valuable viewpoint (Min, 2017). Meanwhile, as has been discussed, individuals’ sexuality during the three periods has never been liberated from force relations, rather it has been appropriated and involved in the system to produce benefit accordingly.

Butler’s Performativity – The Substantialisation of Gender Identity

One argument of Butler’s performativity theory is that the gender identity, which is taken as internal and essential, is indeed a phantasmatic effect of ‘the apparatus of cultural construction’ (Butler, 1990, p. 7). It challenges the widespread belief that our sexuality is innate, and analyses how gender identity as an effect is produced through a specific power formation – the corporealising, constructing repetition of the gendered norms. Butler’s performativity theory, therefore, provides me a perspective to invest the government’s construction of people’s sexuality.

From Butler’s perspective, repetition is an important element in the operations of performatives. Meanwhile, the repeated performing needs to depend on a rule-governed discourse which renders the act either as intelligible to produce certain effects or not. It can be regarded as a process to re-enact and re-experience a set of meanings already socially established, and the process itself is therefore a temporal duration sustained by the cultural construction. What is important for the theory is that there is no subject as an agency preceding this process to execute the performance. It is generated as a consequence of the repeatedly performed norms. All signification ‘takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat’ (Butler, 1990, p. 145), while agency is located within the potential variation in the process of repetition.

Temporality is crucial to Butler’s performativity – norms and conventions get validated only through their repeated citations. In other words, the ontological effects are unstable, since it is a politically tenuous constitution in time, which means there has to be a

²⁴ Homosexuality has been decriminalised since 1997, and no longer classified as a mental disorder in 2001. Yet it is banned in the mainstream mass media, especially from the regulation to online broadcast in 2017 (Li & Zhang, 2017).

'stylized repetition of acts' (Butler, 1990, p. 140). Butler regards the repetition as 'the vehicle through which ontological effects are established' (Osborne, et al., 1994, p. 236). What is produced, therefore, is not a substantial being, but a corporealisation of time.

It is not hard to find such a pattern in the discursive regulation of people's sexuality during the three periods in China. To take the Cultural Revolution as an example: in its particular context, the national discourse set models in its propaganda art, including the model operas,²⁵ as a political tool to implant the party's ideologies, including the expectation of sexuality. People were asked to repetitively practice and re-perform the performance, and to closely identify themselves with the heroes and heroines in these model operas. The extent of the people's participation was unprecedented, since acts of copying were both a national duty and a way to entertain. This way 'can be seen as a most radical one to construct identity and subjectivity through culture and performance' (Pang, 2017, p. 118) which also included gender identity. In the post-Cultural Revolution era, the stereotypical gender pattern for people to 'perform out' can be found everywhere including in advertisements, movies, magazines, etc.

²⁵ Model Operas, also known as revolutionary operas, were a series of shows planned and directed during the Cultural Revolution by Jiang Qing, the wife of Chairman Mao. Accordingly, they were highly politicalised and totally served the party's propaganda.

Touch/Surface

This section is concerned with understanding my original haptic experience – touching the canvas surface. It is initiated by an unfolding of the implication of surface in China's gender structure, relying on Butler's discussion of matter's status in patriarchal discourse. Then, starting with a brief introduction of touch in Chinese traditional philosophy to provide a cultural lens, I will discuss surface and touch along with Merleau-Ponty's body schema. The discussion here is to form a basis for the interpretation of the power of touch. Gilles Deleuze's surface effects provide me with an inspiring perspective to view touching on a surface as an action that triggers 'events' (Deleuze, 2001, p. 5). In concert with Manning's claim of touch's political power, I will unfold my touch in my original haptic experience – as a subverting verb, and a revealing event.

Merely a Surface

In my previous discussion, the employment of Butler's performativity theory revealed the manner of constructing regulative power upon people's sexuality. Meanwhile, it provides me with a structural instrument to facilitate my understanding of women's gender in China's social discourse through Butler's investigation of the status of 'matter' tracing back to western philosophy in Ancient Greece. In her interpretation, gender construction is based on an obliteration performed at the very beginning that matter, or material is constructed as 'always posited or signified as prior' to language (Butler, 2011, p. 30). This seemingly prior existence is from a discursive constitution in which the discourse claims that it discovers 'matter' that is irreducible and inert, both opposite to and outside of the formative and active discourse. This is an invented matter by the discourse while the matter is totally cast out from the system. To validate the system, this construction is erased, which renders the 'invented' matter irreducible and a firm base for a problematic gendered matrix, and the dualisms of mind/body and form/matter, as well as male/female, to gain their legitimacy.

This theory of Butler's was introduced into China from the end of last century. In Dai Jinghua and Meng Yue's book *Emerging from the Horizon of History: Modern Chinese Women's Literature* (2010), Dai describes performativity theory as one of her theoretical frameworks. Its influence can be found in several of the author's discussions including:

all these [women and their sexuality] being repressed, hidden, covered and erased are to sustain and secure the coherent systematicity of the ruling structure. Women are one of those being erased, and what has been left for them is only a term, the meaning

of which is interpreted by the ruling patriarchy, while the real women are concealed by all of these interpretations. Moreover, the act of erasure itself is erased ... this second erasure keeps the enslavement of women by the patriarchy as a permanent secret. Due to this, the patriarchy successfully conceals its base and its power has become indisputable (Dai and Meng, 2004, p. 4).²⁶

The obvious influence of Butler is shown in the two authors' interpretation of the double erasure to secure the coherence of China's patriarchal system in which the erased gender – women – in China's discourse has been replaced by 'a term' – 女人 (*nüren*) women. Like the invented matter, this term is symbolically essential for the construction of the whole system, since China's ethics system is only valid from the subordination of women in their hierarchical relations with their husbands.²⁷ And this term is appropriated by the dominant party to serve diverse imperatives.

For Butler, a heterosexual domain demands the construction of a boundary. Foucault's productive power in Butler's theory is rendered 'negatively' in her interpretation of its functioning through 'excluding' all 'others' which are 'object,' 'unthinkable' and 'unlivable.' In this exclusion, a periphery is created and validates a domain within it. To apply this in the constructed binary of matter/form, the validation of this binary excludes matter's potential to actualise itself and to be deflated as being inert and waiting to be signified and defined by form. Being embodied in gender structure, matter is associated with femininity while form with masculinity and in reproduction 'women are said to contribute the matter; men, the form' (Butler, 2011, p. 31).

Though Butler's discussion is based on western traditional philosophy, this operation can be found in Chinese traditional ideology as well. *Qian* (乾) and *kun* (坤) are two essential elements in the Chinese philosophical system. *Qian* is *yang* (阳), referring to masculinity and *kun* is *yin* (阴), femininity. In *I Ching*,²⁸ *qian* contains all the meaning belonging to heaven (Rutt, 1997, p. 176). By changing and transforming, *qian* allows everything to obtain its correct nature as appointed by the mind of Heaven (Rutt, 1997, p. 120). *Kun*, at the same time, obediently receives the influences of Heaven, and supports and contains all things (Rutt, 1997, p. 120). Thus, *kun* is to be mild and docile. As *kun*'s embodiment, the gender of women is defined as having no agency and passively receiving its formation from Heaven. This is an interpretation strongly implying the process of intercourse and giving birth, the core area of the two genders' relationship in which women are be penetrated and then to

²⁶ The material from this book, which is in Chinese, is translated by me. Apparently there is no English version of this book yet.

²⁷ 'Heaven and earth exist. Then the myriad entities are produced. There are the myriad entities; then there are man and woman. There are man and woman; then there are husband and wife. There are husband and wife; then there are father and son. There are father and son; then there are prince and retainer. There are prince and retainer; then there are high and low. There are high and low; then property and rights can be arranged' (Rutt, 1997, p. 451).

²⁸ *I Ching* (易经) is an ancient Chinese divination text and the oldest of the Chinese classics (Rutt, 1997, p. 61).

be actualised. Given this, it is not hard to understand the lasting denigration of women's sexual desire and their agency in the heterosexual framework in China. In a number of contexts – including during the Cultural Revolution and the Reform and Opening-up era, despite changing political circumstances, the definition and control of the performativity of women's gender is maintained by the dominant (patriarchal) system. Not only to meet the traditional family ethics but to serve the shifted political situation, the implication of women's gender is deflated as a blank surface. It has to be deprived of its depth and agency to be inscribed with what is regarded as most imperative for the discourse.

The Concealed Depth

An interesting coincidence in both Chinese and western culture is surface – both of objects and of our bodies – being regarded as lacking of depth. In this research, the concealed depth of surface is revealed by the act of touch in which the two surfaces – the canvas and my skin come into contact, which renders the investigation of touch indispensable here.

One scholar, Zhang Zailin (张再林) in 'Haptocentrism in China's Philosophy' (《中国哲学内蕴‘触觉主义’思想》) claimed that China's traditional philosophy was based on the haptic sense (Zhang, 2017). This opinion is supported by many other Chinese scholars and the argument is based on their interpretation of Chinese traditional ideology being developed from *yin* and *yang*, the basis of China's two main ideologies, Daoism and Confucianism.

In *I Ching*, *yin* (阴) and *yang* (阳) are the two principles the whole world originated from. 'The principle of all being (*dao*) is the constant alternation and interaction of the positive heavenly pole (*yang*) and the negative earthly pole (*yin*)' (Rutt, 1997, p. 45). In *Zhou Yi* (周易) and *Commentary of I Ching*, the extension and footnotes for *I Ching*, *yin* is analogised with *rou* (柔) – soft and flexible, and *yang* with *gang* (刚) – hard or rigid. In ancient times, even Chinese people's knowledge of time was built on a corporeal perception of seasons' changes which is embodied in the saying, 'Cold goes, then heat comes; heat goes, then cold comes. As cold and heat change places, the round of the year is fulfilled' (Rutt, 1997, p. 423).

While these traditional ideologies are from bodily perceptions of certain physical qualities, all have been categorised under a binary frame constructing the gender's unequal system in a heteronormative discourse. My opinion is that this categorisation made the 'haptocentrism' problematic: *yin*'s softness and flexibleness are associated with femininity and every 'feminine' quality such as women, the female body, motherhood and earth; *yang* is linked with somatic attributes of hardness or rigidity, and with men, the male body, and

heaven that gives form to the world. 'Heaven is lofty and honourable; earth is low' (Chinese Text Project, n.d.). Therefore, *yangqi* (阳气) is a synonym of energy and vitality while *yinqi* (阴气) refers to a ghostly quality and abject beings. This binary construction and its ramifications are applied to daily life and become natural expressions and metaphors, while the deeply embedded hierarchy is taken for granted. My haptic experience can be seen as surfacing the hidden hierarchy in haptocentrism, which has been deeply implanted in me as a Chinese: I immediately associated the soft and flexible surface with earth, the female body, and the maternal body, and the feminine quality of the haptic experience repelled me. The direct bodily reaction spoke out the problematic hierarchical structure in these ideologies.

However, what is undeniable in the haptocentrism in China's traditional philosophy, is the emphasis of bodily perception, which is also the core for Merleau-Ponty's theories. Claiming it as 'the latent horizon of our experience,' Merleau-Ponty's body schema defines the perceiving body as a united system (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 95). All the senses (there are likely many more than five) do not work as being simply spatially juxtaposed, but integrate with each other so it is not possible to fully divide them into separate sense experiences – the body perceives each local stimulus as a whole. Therefore, haptic sensation entangles with other senses, 'synesthetically, operating along relational vectors always in dialogue with other senses,' (Manning, 2006, p. xiii). This includes Merleau-Ponty's investigation of haptic sense's close association with vision – that the translation between the 'givens of touch' into 'the language of vision,' and the assemblage of the two, for Merleau-Ponty, 'are completed once and for all' (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 151). This association is also evidenced in my original haptic experience in the evoked virtual image. Meanwhile, as a network of nerve endings and receptors for the sense of touch, the hidden and infinite depth of skin is conceptualised by Mark C. Taylor: 'the organism as a whole is formed by a complex of dermal layers, the body is, in effect, nothing but strata of skin' (Taylor, 1997, p. 12). Therefore, a touching skin is not only omnipresent but also deep.

Touch happens between two surfaces. A physical surface being described by Stroll is the outer or upper aspect of physical entities. Depending on the nature of the object, the surface can be its boundaries in forms of edges, rims, margins, brinks, etc. It can be described as 'rough, smooth, wet, dry, slippery, sticky, chipped, pitted or damaged' (Stroll, 1988, p. 51). I would like to emphasise the productivity of such a surface since it always maintains a sensory stimulus – it owns its depth both in a material base and by being involved in an act of perception to be effective.

Touching Surface

For Deleuze, touching a surface leads to surface effects, which he defines as ‘incorporeal entities’, resulting from actions and passions. They are ‘not things or facts, but events not substantives or adjectives but verbs’ (Deleuze, 2001, p. 5). I appreciate the two words that appear in this definition – verb and event, because they precisely point out the incorporeal aspects in the contact of the two physical surfaces in my original haptic experience – the canvas surface and my skin. Manning’s view of touch as a political power to national regulation of the body makes her argument pertinent to my research (Manning, 2006). Based on her discussion, I will unfold my haptic experience and the triggering event.

Manning’s investigation regards the sensing of touch on a surface – either of an object or of another body – renders the linguistic system redundant, since touch allows an unmediated access to evoked sensations – it directly casts light on the presence of a body. Relying on Merleau-Ponty’s perception theories that touch as a sense is omnipresent, touch for Manning is an action which ‘saturates’ the whole body in evoked sensations and turns it into a sensing and thinking body. Touch is a continuous movement which requires both space and time. Meantime, being entangled with other senses, touch enables the synchronisation which acknowledges ‘the complex layering of the senses’ (Manning, 2006, p. 58). The body in touching, therefore, is a moving body that ‘responds to various strata and textures of articulation and gesture’ (Manning, 2006, p. 58). At the same time, what is touching is being touched. Touching a surface that maintains a sensory stimulus – that is, being effective – therefore validates a mutual exchange.

For a national regulation of a body, what is required is a static body – a surface in my research being deprived of its agency – to be inscribed by discursive power. However, such a policy is rendered invalid by touch in which the sensing body is both a thinking and a moving body, directly approaching the sensations and bypassing language. A touching body is incommensurable to the policy and is against the required static body being located in time and space as stable and linear. Accordingly, touch is a productive and violent power to the national body-policy – it provokes a body going against normative discourse through ‘reaching across the boundaries imposed by the body-politic’ (Manning, 2006, p. 86). It is a verb to do, that is, to resist and to subvert.

The two surfaces involved in my original haptic experience are respectively my body – a surface being deprived of agency in the national/patriarchal discourse, and the surface/the framed canvas I engaged with. The canvas, being effective, stimulated sensations when my skin came into contact with it. Being unmediated, the body directly approached to the sensations, making no space for language/national body policy to intervene. My body, responding to multi-layered articulation and gestures synchronously,

was turned into a sensing, thinking body and directly reacted to the evoked emotions which revealed the repressed trauma.

Going back to Deleuze's surface effects, that touching a surface as verbs and events, my original haptic experience has redeemed the agency deprived by the national discourse from embodying a self-articulation beyond the national regulation. The conflicting feelings rendered the seemingly coherent gender construction questionable. Moreover, transgressing the set barrier by language, the touching triggered my encounter with the trauma, the relevant theories of which will be thoroughly discussed in the next chapter.

Trauma, and Abjection

My PhD research has been in response to the ‘irrepresentability’ of traumatic experience in a past encounter with my mother. In processing this episode throughout my PhD studies, several restraints have caused me to turn quite explicitly to the concept of trauma at the end of my studies. Generally, the deification of motherhood in the culture renders connecting motherhood with trauma unacceptable; personally, the emotional bond with my mother led me to unconsciously avoid this association. Therefore, the discovery at the end of my studies has emerged as a fascinating taboo. What follows is my unfolding of my traumatic experience through relevant theoretical writings: alongside Freud’s definition of trauma and its symptoms, is his analysis of its connection with the unconscious and the operation of repression in it. Of trauma as a lack of language, which renders it irrepresentable, I identify Kristeva’s abjection as more closely associated with my research due to her feminist perspective. This section concludes with a brief interpretation of Lacan’s *jouissance* to explain what I term as ‘an uncanny feeling,’ which was similar with yet at the same time different from the sense of pleasure in the original haptic experience.

That ‘Something’ as a Trauma

It has not been a straightforward step to state unequivocally that what I experienced was, in fact, a trauma. What made me claim the moment in the encounter with my mother as a trauma was, for me, the clearly sensed resistance when I endeavoured to narrate it in detail in my interpretation of *that moment*. My writing to reflect the moment was that my mother ‘was, as if, not my mother, but was someone who was “chasing after,” and trying to “beat down” *something* with her final blow.’ The unpacking of the implication demonstrated my association of my mother’s behaviour with the Cultural Revolution. The image of my mother was replaced by those female warriors being represented during the era. At the same time, ‘her final blow’ showed that it was at *that moment* my mother’s behaviour exceeded my ability to process the stimuli. Moreover, what exactly was that ‘something’? With each attempt, I sensed a force in my mind prohibiting me from probing into the memory. From my reading of the psyche’s condition in encountering trauma – the repression and unconsciousness, I can now confirm it as a trauma.

Freud defines trauma as an event the given stimulus of which happens in a very short space of time and is too enormous for the individual to process at the moment. Therefore, the trauma is left as a missed encounter that ‘its assimilation, or rather its elaboration, can no longer be effected by normal means’ (Freud, 1920, p. 238). Trauma can remain dormant for long if not stimulated and perhaps remain blocked from conscious recollection. However,

its aftermath can develop into symptoms, including the repetition of compulsive activities, the purpose of which is to correct a painful past which was not processed at the moment it occurred.

Two phenomena in trauma, repression and repetition, have led to the development of the theory of the unconscious in psychoanalysis. Freud explained that, '[t]he essence of the process of repression lies ... in preventing it from becoming conscious' (Freud, 1957, p. 166). Therefore, the repressed idea can be said to be in a state of being 'unconscious,' a term conceptualised by Freud to refer to 'any psychic process whose existence we are forced to assume on the evidence of its outward effects' (Bracken, 2002, p. 119). In Freud's interpretation of language's association with the unconscious, the outward effects can also lead to condensation in language when approaching the repressed. This approach is regarded by Freud as a process of transformation of an idea in two forms located in two levels of mental apparatus – namely the conscious and the unconscious. The transformation of the unconscious emotions into conscious language goes through a similar process of repression with trauma, and makes the expressed events or emotions unrecognisable. The process 'may go so far that in a single word ... the representation of a whole train of thought' (Freud, 1957, p. 199) is taken over, and the trauma is transformed into metaphorical language.

If to view *that moment* (p. 4) in my experience with my mother from the perspective of Freud, the stimulus, being too overwhelming to deal with at the moment, caused the negative emotions to be repressed and remain in the unconscious. Yet, in my original haptic experience, the evoked sensations – by association with cultural implications and metaphors of motherhood and femininity – stimulated the repressed memories. At the same time, the canvas surface that bounced back towards me let me feel it was trying to 'engulf' me, which echoed with my mother being a threatening figure trying to get me at *that moment*. My reaction to the canvas surface can be seen as an expression of my hostility towards femininity as a result of my mother's influence. Mixing aggression with passion and guilt, it also connects to a Freudian defence mechanism – displacement: since hostility towards motherhood is unacceptable, the surface replaced it as the target of the repressed impulse. According to Patrick Bracken, the original haptic experience can be understood as the 'outward effects' of the trauma of which I knew nothing directly, and, for the same reason, my relation to the trauma was the same as 'to some psychic process in another person,' except that it is one of my own (Bracken, 2002, p. 119).

In my writing to reflect the memory, the narrative of the trauma used metaphors such as 'chasing after,' 'beat down,' and 'her final blow,' while the first person pronoun 'me' is replaced by 'something.' All of these have caused *that moment* – when I realised my mother

tried to hurt me²⁹ – becoming an absence in the conscious, the memories in which are stored in a manner of linguistic narrative. However, through the original haptic experience, bypassing the restraints from language, the trauma was surfaced. I regard the trauma acting itself out through the evoked sensations along with Deleuze: '[m]ore important than thought there is "what leads to thought" ... encounters which force us to interpret, expressions which force us to think' (Deleuze, 1972, p. 161). Sensations as catalyst trigger profound thoughts. Based on this, being inaccessible through language, the evoked sensations are the trauma's expression of itself as an act which forced me to think, to have it interpreted.

Kristeva's Initial Loss, Abjection, and Being at the Border

Kristeva's abjection, closely associated with what she terms an initial loss (referring to the infant's separation from the maternal body), is a philosophical development of trauma and the unconscious through a feminist perspective. According to Kristeva, the abject is that which replace what we have lost in the separation from the maternal body, and experiencing abjection is the realisation that all 'are based merely on the inaugural loss' (Kristeva, 1982, p. 5). From Kristeva's perspective, we are all haunted by the initial loss which endows and structures the ensuing traumas with its pathogenic quality. Being identified as a trauma from a Freudian perspective, what I experienced at *that moment* is akin to Kristeva's initial loss by its deep embedding in the mother-daughter relationship.

The initial loss is usually an experience of thorough helplessness and miserableness for the baby. Yet, the separation plays a significant role in setting off the prerequisite for the emergence of the 'I' and the deprivation created a wanted 'object' that is opposed to the 'I.' It is from the relationship between the two in this opposition 'any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded' (Kristeva, 1982, p. 5). Since the whole meaning system is based on the initial loss, the maternal body and all that inhabit it – the caress, the breast, etc., are expelled from the system, and are replaced by abjection. To experience abjection is to be faced with the truth that everything is formed upon the initial loss, in which the sense of being a subject is threatened, and 'I,' the subject, is 'at the border of my condition as a living being' (Kristeva, 1982, p. 3). 'At the border' is a frequently used phrase by Kristeva. From my understanding, the border is formed synchronously with the initial loss. Its existence is the prerequisite of the establishment of the subject to keep the 'I' from the abject. When being 'at the border,' the boundary between I – as the subject, and the other – as the object is disturbed and challenged.

²⁹ This is my personal interpretation of these events. I have not sought her perspective to ascertain whether or not it aligns with my own.

On reflection, I realised the most traumatic outcome of *that moment* was that my mother, the one to nurture me, to protect me, turned into a threatening stranger capable of hurting me – according to Kristeva, a recurrence of the initial loss with its miserableness and helplessness. Being too overwhelming, I was ‘withdrawn’ from myself and what was happening – I ‘froze’ myself, as if I was not there and then, and it became both a ‘void’ in my memory and inaccessible by language. As what Cathy Caruth states: ‘the traumatic event ... is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time’ (Caruth, 1995, p. 8). Avoiding facing the trauma at that moment meant its after effects were evidenced in my original haptic experience.

I understand the encounter with the trauma on that canvas surface was to experience Kristeva’s abjection. It was not only because the trauma was, in any respect, a recurrence of Kristeva’s initial loss, but also because the experience of the encounter aligned with Kristeva’s being ‘at the border’. In retrospect, the ‘something’ I felt being ‘behind’ the canvas was sensed as being both alienated yet intimate to me, as if a part of my body was jettisoned and was forgotten. The feeling challenged my sense of my body being a coherent border – at the peak of the experience, I felt as if I was both ‘inside’ and ‘outside.’ Kristeva gives an interpretation of from where such a sense comes – the baby once senses the maternal body as one within its own. Therefore, the subject, being established in the initial loss, is based on a violent expelling of this part – a process to ‘expel *myself*, ... spit *myself out*’ (Kristeva, 1982, p. 3). To encounter the abject, that to find out the ‘I’ is given birth amid the violence, is to have ‘I’ abject ‘*myself* within the same motion of the subject’s establishment’ (Kristeva, 1982, p. 3) – the body ‘is turned inside out’ (Kristeva, 1982, p. 146) and its boundary is at stake. Moreover, the time of experiencing abjection ‘is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth’ (Kristeva, 1982, p. 9). This is illustrated in my experience both in the original haptic experience, being as shocking as ‘a flash of lighting’ (Kristeva, 1982, p. 8), and in revisiting the memory of *that moment* with my mother after more than twenty years. It felt like the time stood still ‘there,’ and everything was preserved well. The trauma being repressed is ‘*a land of oblivion* that is constantly remembered’ (Kristeva, 1982, p. 8).

The ‘something’ I felt behind the surface both repelled and drew me towards it. Being ‘the twisted braid of affects and thoughts,’ it ‘lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated’ (Kristeva, 1982, p. 1). Abjection has its power to be a violent, ‘dark revolts of being’ (Kristeva, 1982, p. 1) to eject the ‘I’ beyond ‘the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable’ (Kristeva, 1982, p. 1). Therefore, the repulsion towards abjection is to defend the subject in front of such a threat, while in Lacan’s *jouissance*, I located an appropriate interpretation for the feeling of being drawn to the ‘something.’

Lacan's *Jouissance*

There existed one sensation in my original haptic experience to encounter the trauma which fascinated and puzzled me for quite a while. It felt like a bodily spasm was being discharged by my aggressive attack on the canvas surface, by a fleeting sense of joy which evaporated swiftly and left me feeling emptied, yearning for its reoccurrence. The feeling was similar to 'pleasure' but was also different from it. It was not until my reading of Lacan's *jouissance* that I found a suitable interpretation for the sensation.

Lacan defined *jouissance* as an enjoyment beyond the pleasure principle (Lacan, 2014). I would like to contextualise Lacan's *jouissance* within Kristeva's initial loss, in which the maternal body, being expelled, becomes what is longed for yet forever missed. This longing which would never be met is replaced by desired objects. The subject, from then on, is 'ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to' (Kristeva, 1982, p. 2) the desired while at the same time suffers from the permanent loss. It is by this means that desire, for Lacan, is a metonymy of what is truly wanted (Lacan, 2002, p. 439), and distinguishes pleasure from *jouissance* even though both are about a desire. Pleasure relates to satisfied desire, and needs consumption of a desired 'object,' while *jouissance* is defined 'not purely and simply as the satisfaction of a need' (Lacan, 2007, p. 209) – it is a delightful release of a bodily tension from wanting something impossible, the expelled in the initial loss. Meanwhile, experiencing *jouissance* is to transgress the subject/object dichotomy – in *jouissance*, there is no 'object' opposite to the subject, and 'the subject is swallowed up' (Kristeva, 1982, p. 9). This experience of *jouissance* in my encounter with the trauma, the desire of an important 'object' and the delightful yet fleeting release, has also weighed on the unassimilability of the experience.

Touching on the Surface – The Revolt of Being

The sense of touch illustrates a way of our being which 'adheres to the surface of our body' (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 330) in which we perceive the world through our body and bypass language. Experiencing trauma is to face with the raw material of our existence, which belongs to what is encapsulated in the realm of the pre-linguistic at the moment of the initial loss. Therefore, trauma and its memory do not survive as 'a representation in the mode of objective consciousness, and as a "dated" moment,' but 'as a manner of being' (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 85). This manner of being – 'an effect which is not to be classified among being' (Bréhier, 1928, as cited in Deleuze, 2001, p. 5) like the nerve endings and receptors on skin being stimulated and responding in a physical reaction in the present, in my case, finds its way in my touching the surface as the 'revolt of being' (Kristeva, 1982, p.

1) which is fostered through the regulative force from language.

THREE

HISTORICAL CONTEXTUALISATION

Aiming at proffering a historical background for the research, this chapter starts with the history of China before the Cultural Revolution to reveal the historical entanglement of China with other areas of the world. Against this context, the chapter's main focus is the shifting gender policies being illustrated by the mainstream representation of women during the Cultural Revolution and after the commencement of the Reform and Opening-up Policy, and the impact especially on women.

The Formation of the Individual in Modern China and the Status of Women

The Cultural Revolution, the full name of which is the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, was set out by Mao Zedong, the Chairman of the Communist Party of China. It was a socio-political movement that took place from 1966 until 1976. The initial aim of the Cultural Revolution was to further establish Maoist thought as the dominant ideology and to pursue the 'true' communist spirit. It is notorious for human rights abuses, as well as the extreme politicisation of individuals. The party's capability of executing such a power upon individuals and their daily life was closely pertinent to China's history and the global context prior to the Cultural Revolution.

The First Opium War (1839–42) between Britain and the Qing dynasty of China started from the Chinese official seizure of opium stock to stop the banned opium trade (mainly from Britain) and set the death penalty for future offenders. Following defeat by the British Navy, China signed its first unequal treaty, the Treaty of Nanking in 1842. From the First Opium War in 1839, China experienced an unprecedented national crisis. After learning from Japan and western countries, government reform of people's minds and bodies started, and people in China were regarded as 'citizens' subordinate not to their feudal, familial network but directly to the state for the first time. A series of measures ensued, including replacing the old ethics laws by individuals' rights laws and building modern schools. Two movements during the time greatly advanced this process of reform: Military Citizen Movement (*军国民运动*) and New Culture Movement (*新文化运动*). Both of the movements aimed to train qualified citizens for the country and foster collectivism and nationalism as the mainstream ideologies (Huang, 2006). Having weakened the patriarchal families' power and fostered people's awareness of national



Figure 3.1. Zhou, Baisheng. (1920).

[Poster of Nanyang Brothers
Tobacco Co. Ltd].

[https://www.ucreative.com/articles/
the-fascinating-
history-of-shanghai-cigarette-
posters/](https://www.ucreative.com/articles/the-fascinating-history-of-shanghai-cigarette-posters/)



Figure 3.2. Yuan, Xiutang. (1930s). *Shanghai – A Prosperous City That Never Sleeps*.

[https://www.ucreative.com/articles/the-
fascinating-
history-of-shanghai-cigarette-posters/](https://www.ucreative.com/articles/the-fascinating-history-of-shanghai-cigarette-posters/)

[The two images are advertisements during the Republic of China (1912–1949). Attractive female subjects were in advertisements for cigarettes, cosmetics, and other daily products during the time. The two women on these advertisements illustrated the gendered roles for women. While both of them are indoors, the image on left is maternal and domestic, whereas image on right could suggest a single, available woman in a 'bedroom' setting.]

sovereignty, these movements and reformation formed a basis for the extreme politicisation that followed.

The liberation of women was executed from top to bottom, including abolishing foot-binding, forbidding breast-binding, and establishing female schools. The measurement stopped the mutilation of women's bodies to release them from families as a potential labour force for the state. Moreover, the introduction of theories of social Darwinism in 1895 made Chinese intellectuals realise the importance of having strong women to provide healthy offspring for the state. With the introduction of the idea of eugenics, it was believed that to allow individuals (especially women) the freedom to choose their partners by themselves would enable them to produce stronger offspring, since they would tend to choose mentally and physically strong partners (Huang, 2006). However, the liberation didn't challenge the gender structure and the basic gender roles of women (Fig. 3.1), either chaste and loyal spouses in a familial context, being depicted as domestic, sexually passive, and tame, or

sexual objects for males (Fig. 3.2).³⁰

The Cultural Revolution and the Alteration of Gender Policy

After the establishment of People's Republic of China in 1949, to strengthen its regime, the Communist party led China into a highly politicised era which reached its peak in the Cultural Revolution. Besides the extreme personality cult to the leader, the Cultural Revolution was known as a period of 'socialist androgyny' (Young, 1989, as cited in Evans, 1997, p. 134). Against the backdrop of the gradually prevailing politicisation during the period, the gender difference was 'erased' in the public sphere to serve what was believed as most important at the time, the class struggle. The mainstream representation of women during the time were sexless, or even masculine characters. The ten years' duration of this social-political movement coincided with my mother's youth and a formative period of her gender role formation.

The main images representing females widely circulated in mass media can be categorised in two types. The first one is the 'Iron Girl,' which presented female subjects as ruddy-cheeked, robust figures, making assertive 'masculine' gestures (Fig. 3.3). In addition, instead of being depicted as passive, they were engaged in heavy labour surrounded by tools and necessities for their physical work in tough, outdoors environments as opposed to a domestic setting.

Another main theme is the revolutionary female warrior. With eyes shining with revolutionary zeal, their stereotypical gestures were full of strength and determination; an expression which could be interpreted as representing their loyalty to the party and / or their hatred towards the party's antagonists (Fig. 3.4). Images were filled with the ever-present political symbols, choreography, uniforms, and weapons. These bodies presumably reject any anticipation of sexual pleasure from the male gaze.

From the two stereotypes of the time, what women were required to fulfil were the roles of social labour engaging in the social construction and firm defence of revolutionary ideals. The female figures in the model operas at the time were mostly without any romantic experience or marital relationships. Being described as having equal status to men, the gender equality policy 'erased' women and their gender from the public discourse and advocated women be like men. In daily life, any interest in romance or appearance would be regarded as unsound and would be criticised.

³⁰ The loyal female characters were exemplified extremely in some stories in *The Biographies of Exemplary Women* (《列女传》) compiled by male historians to reinforce Confucian orthodoxy. 'The Painted' in *Strange Tales from a Scholar's Studio* (《聊斋志异》) by Pu Songline of the Qing Dynasty can be seen as an example of dangerous and seductive female figures, another gender role for women in such a discourse.



Figure. 3.3. Jin, Chen. (1974). *New Gunners*.
Jiangxi People Publisher.
<https://chinese-posters.net/posters/e13-808>



Figure. 3.5. Shanghai Fine Arts Academy Work
Propaganda Team, Revolutionary Committee.
(1970). *Long Live Chairman Mao! Long, Long
Live!*
Shanghai People Publisher.
<https://chinese-posters.net/posters/e13-701>



Figure. 3.4. Shanghai
Worker's Revolutionary Rebel
General Headquarters. (1967)
*Thoroughly criticize the
bureaus of industry of the
Shanghai city, region and
district and the reactionary
line of the capitalist class.
Oath taking rally. Hold high
the great red banner of Mao
Zedong Thought.*
[https://chinese-posters.net/g
allery/e16-353](https://chinese-posters.net/gallery/e16-353)



Figure. 3.6. Shi, Shaohua. (1970).
Screenshot from *The Red
Detachment of Women*.
[40 x 40.5 cm].
[https://bbs.wenxuecity.com/mu
sic/500617.html](https://bbs.wenxuecity.com/music/500617.html)

While the party claimed its complete severance from the old days, it ironically inherited the idea that feminine beauty and women's bodies were 'a metaphor for moral degeneration or ideological impurity' with the potential to incur rebellion and chaos (Evans, 1997, p. 135). To fulfil the role as a vital threshold to guarantee a sexual orderliness, women's bodies were covered by sexless garments and presented in male-like behaviour. In such a manner, individual energies were expected to be channelled into working for the collective benefit and individual enthusiasm was directed towards the extreme worship of the leader.

The national ideology of apparent gender equality during the Cultural Revolution allowed women to experience certain opportunities and freedoms. Yet, few of these measures suggest any real challenge to the binary framework.³¹ Most women were still bound to their gender roles, especially in the domestic realm. From the posters of the worker-peasant alliance at the time, while men were depicted as urban industrial workers, women were often the farmers, a character closely associated with the earth, nature and fertility (Fig. 3.5). Romantic imagery was not completely absent, but was reserved by the official discourse to express an individual's emotional ardour towards the party and the leader (Fig. 3.6). Revolutionary women were called 'the daughters of the party' which underlined the political, patriarchal nature of the party. According to Shuqin Cui, women are subordinated 'first to the repressive tradition of patriarchy, then to the collective symbol of communism. Facing these two symbolic father figures, woman in socialist representation experiences a double bind' (Cui, 2003, p. 80).

Reform and Opening-up Era

After the Cultural Revolution and the death of Chairman Mao in 1976, the country was suffering from severe poverty and its people were exhausted by ten years of political turbulence. The inception in 1979 of the Reform and Opening-up Policy by Deng Xiaoping, the paramount Leader of the People's Republic of China, aimed to transform the previous planned-economy into a market-oriented economy. It also adopted western social, cultural and economic ideologies which, in turn, led to a more open Chinese society. However, it hardly conducted any ideological change of the dogmatism that had defined Chinese politics throughout the Mao era (Downie, 2014, p. 57). Neither did the openness extend to all aspects of human expression. For example, sexual behaviour considered

³¹ Ironically, '[i]t was during the Cultural Revolution that the All Women's Federation was forced to suspend itself, an indicator that women's affairs were placed in a secondary position compared with what the Chinese Communist Party considered as the more pressing political agenda during those years' (Yu, 2000, p. 33).

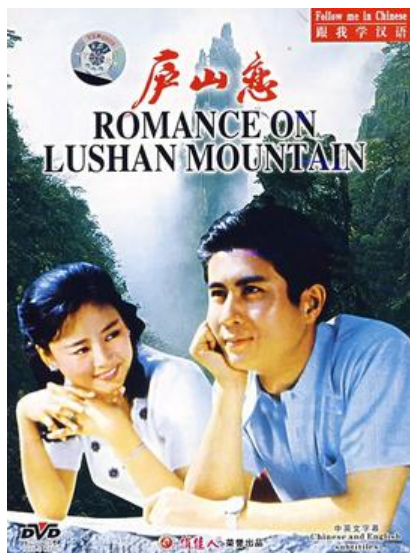


Figure. 3.7. A poster of *Romance on Lushan Mountain*. (n.d).

<https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E5%BA%90%E5%B1%E6%81%8B#/media/File:Lushan1980.jpg>



Figure. 3.8. The first fashion show by Pierre Cardin in Beijing, China. (1979).

<http://vestoj.com/fashioning-change/>

‘abnormal’ by the state would be punished: people would be detained for watching pornography at home, and homosexual behaviour was deemed to be a crime of ‘hooliganism.’

With the launch of the market economy, the definition of women’s gender roles and its representation gradually received a rehabilitation of stereotypical femininity in a heterosexual frame, which radically departed from those of the Cultural Revolution period. The hugely successful *Romance on Lushan Mountain* (1980) (Fig. 3.7) was the first romantic film after the Cultural Revolution about a heterosexual couple (Guangming Daily, 2020). The film’s beautiful heroine and her pleasant, girly manner echoed with the pre-Cultural Revolution ideals of femininity. From then on, many post-Mao female figures that adhered to stereotypical femininity emerged in mass media and started to demonstrate their potential in China’s gradually booming economy.

‘Beauty economy’ (*meinü jingji*) is a term associated with women who conform to feminine beauty (*meinü*) with the development of the economy (Xu & Feiner, 2007). Narrowly defined, *meinü jingji* refers exclusively to the beauty pageants and model competitions that are wildly popular in China. It can be traced back to 1979, the year the first post-Mao fashion show was held by Pierre Cardin in China (Fig. 3.8). In a broader context, *meinü jingji* indicates the market in which images of sexualised women are used to promote commercial products and services including cosmetics, plastic surgery, beauty and healthcare services (Otis, 2011). It functions in accordance with mass media such as

magazines, advertisements, television and cinema which are full of women's images celebrating feminine beauty. In a broader social environment, it is generally supposed that beautified, female bodies will gain certain advantages in a highly competitive job market, while the decline of women's status intensifies their unease. Thus, feminine beauty has become a necessity for women in many respects, and is able to be accessed by purchasing cosmetics, fashion, and having plastic surgery. According to China Daily (2004), the beauty economy was ranked fifth in China's consumer goods industry and Chinese women annually spent 20 billion *yuan* (approximately US \$2.42 billion) on changing their looks (China Daily, 2004).

There is a popular claim that since the reform era started in the early 1980s, women have suffered setbacks in many ways (Yu, 2000, p. 38). Statistically, it is true, especially from the investigations about the rate of women's labour force participation, and the gender difference in income after the reform, which have shown severe gender bias (Yu, 2000, p. 38). Withdrawn from some of the state's previous protection, women were more frequently turned into sexualised objects in the new economic structure, and more susceptible to the social demand of returning back to their traditional gender roles. For example, as part of a reorganisation of the national economy, tens of millions of workers at state-owned enterprises were fired in China in the 1990s. Around that time, a slogan 'Women Return to the Home' became popular and many more women were fired than men to deal the rising unemployment (Hong, 2013). More than a decade ago, a stigmatizing phrase '*sheng nu*' – leftover women, was coined and was used by the National Women's Union in 2007 to describe unmarried women over 27-years' of age.³² The purpose of using this term might have been to encourage women to form heterosexual relationships in an environment of a male-female sex ratio imbalance.

Other Sexualities

Modern China is a heteronormative society. However, there were times, for example, during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, when attitudes were much more tolerant of homosexuality, especially to gays. The criminalisation of homosexuals began after the introduction of western morality at the end of Qing Dynasty. During the Cultural Revolution, homosexuals underwent the cruellest suppression. Several were beaten to death or were sentenced to the death penalty. Homosexual behaviour was illegal until 1997, and was included as a psychotic disorder until 2001 (Li, 1998). Today, the

³² China's National Women's Union was founded in 1949 as a women's rights organisation. However, it is not an organisation independent from China's official structures but relies on the government's political protection and financial support. It plays a controversial role in Chinese gender issues.

prevailing attitude towards gays and lesbians is more tolerant compared with the Cultural Revolution. However, homosexual marriage is still illegal and homosexuality-related content or images are banned in public.

New Challenges and Possibilities

During the last century, Chinese women experienced two top-to-bottom liberations. The first one at the end of the Qing Dynasty was a reaction to the national crisis. The second one since 1949 had been achieved to meet political needs. Neither of them has radically challenged the patriarchal structure.

In a heteronormative context, Chinese women's liberation and movements have entwined with other parts of the world from the beginning of China's modernisation. After engaging in the global market due to the Reform and Opening-up Policy, western ideologies, including some feminist thoughts were introduced into China.³³ However, Chinese female scholars held diverse attitudes to adopting the concept of 'feminism' due to China's specific political and cultural reality. For instance, in the early period of the Reform and Opening-up Policy, after experiencing the extreme 'defeminisation' during the Cultural Revolution, Chinese people asked for reconstructing binary gender. Generally speaking, it is believed that the gender issue in China has its own dimension. Yet, being engaged into a global context brings Chinese women new challenges, as well as opportunities.³⁴

³³ The first two books being introduced were Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949).

³⁴ The 4th World Conference on Women in 1995 was held in Beijing, as the first international conference held in China. It was 6 years after the 1989 Tiananmen Event, 'one way that the Chinese state has sought to confront its legitimacy crisis is by using its opening to the outside to promote a favorable international image. Women's issues are one means by which this has been attempted, both through passing a law on "women's rights" in 1992 as well as by hosting the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995.' (Wesoky, 2002, p. 11). At the same time, the globalisation, which challenged Chinese identity, caused the claim of 'rehabilitating Confucianism.' This ideology is the main source of China's traditional patriarchy.

FOUR

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will start with a brief introduction to contemporary Chinese art practice as a cultural and art phenomenon responding to China's political unease and social shifts against the backdrop of globalisation. The following discussion concentrates on installation art to contextualise my choice of the art form of a hybrid sculpture/video installation for the final work *Living with the Unassimilable*. Trauma and catharsis are the two key concerns of the research. In this research, catharsis concerns the release of emotional tension due to the trauma experienced being unspeakable. The following is a review of selected, relevant, contemporary art practices dealing with catharsis and trauma both in western and Chinese contexts. The work of three artists will be discussed: He Chengyao and Doris Salcedo in relation to trauma, catharsis, and gender, and Eva Hesse concerning materiality and ephemerality. While He's art is located against the same historical and cultural backdrop as my own, Salcedo's work overlaps with mine in her use of visual language and artistic strategy. Hesse's art and mine share the employment of ephemerality through materiality. The discussions conducted in this chapter comprise a review of the field as well as forming the basis for my discussion concerning my original contribution, which will be thoroughly unfolded in Chapter Five.

Between China and the West – Contemporary Chinese Art

The term 'contemporary Chinese art' (Zhongguo danggai yishu) is not a purely temporal concept, but is defined more generally in the context of post-Cultural Revolution Chinese society, politics, and globalisation. Briefly, the term refers to a broad artistic sphere that began to take shape in the 1970s and that has undergone continuous development over the past thirty years. It consists of various trends that self-consciously distinguished themselves from official art, mainstream academic art, and traditional art (although also constantly interacting with these categories). [...] its basic characteristics include persistent experimentation and social engagement, and a strong disposition towards internationalisation (Wu, 2010, p. xiv).

As described above, the birth of contemporary Chinese art was undoubtedly a response to the urgency to find appropriate forms of expression after the political



Figure. 4.1. Luo, Zhongli. (1980). *Father*.
[Oil on canvas, 216 x 152 cm].
<https://secretimages.org/2019/08/03/luo-zhongli-father-1980/> [This is the first art work depicting an ordinary farmer on a scale which used to be only for Chairman Mao.]



Figure. 4.2. Fang, Lijun. (2002). 20. 6. 2002.

[Oil on canvas, 270 x 120cm].
<https://wikioo.org/paintings.php?refarticle=AQQ82S&titlepainting=2002.6.20&artistname=Fang%20Lijun>
[As a representative figure of 'Cynical Realism,' Fang Lijun 'treats all of his bald figures in a poetic way – inserting these homely yet amusing characters into the lyrical realm of a blue sky, white clouds, and the vast ocean – and achieves an effect that is sarcastic, ludicrous, and humorous' (Li, 2010, pp. 160-161).]



Figure. 4.3. Wang, Guangyi. (2005). *Great Criticism – No Time*.
[Prints and multiples, screen-print, 54.9 x 73.9 cm]. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/wang-guangyi/great-criticism-no-time-2005>

turbulence – including extreme repression – of the Cultural Revolution. It was influenced by the introduction of western ideologies and practices, including modern and contemporary art. Critic, curator, and scholar, Gao Minglu, categorises the evolution of contemporary Chinese art into three stages (Gao, 2006).

Firstly, the ‘Post Cultural Revolution’ from 1976 to 1984 in which art practices mainly reviewed and reflected on the Cultural Revolution and its influence (Fig. 4.1). Secondly, the ‘85 New Wave Art Movement’ from 1985 to 1989. This was a Chinese avant-garde art movement in which a lot of artists formed art groups to explore diverse art languages. And thirdly, a multiplicity of expressions of avant-garde in the 1990s. During this period, ‘New Generation’, ‘Political Pop’, and ‘Cynical Realism’ movements caught significant international attention. This stage closely followed the Tiananmen Square incident in which the appeal for freedom was crucially suppressed (Fig. 4.2 and Fig. 4.3).

Among a diversity of concerns, I will concentrate on two aspects that are affinitive to my research: firstly, contemporary Chinese artists’ understanding of their national and cultural identity; secondly, gender issues in this area. Relevant art works concerning political unease will be included in the later section about catharsis-related art practice in China.

Chinese Identity, Being In-between and Cultural Symbols

‘Chinese-ness’ is a term used to refer to Chinese identity. Yet, indicating a Eurocentrism, it is a false concept according to Barbara Pollack, as it ‘means many things to many people and has often been employed for divergent political and cultural agendas’ (Pollack, 2018, pp. 8-9). However, since contemporary Chinese art is born from the impact of western culture, a negotiation of cultural identity has become an unavoidable issue for the contemporary artists.

Most of the first generation of contemporary Chinese artists embraced their Chinese identity and played ‘their role of ambassadors’ (Pollack, 2018, p. 35) to export Chinese characteristics to western countries. Artists such as Cai Guoqiang (Fig. 4.4) and Xu Bing (Fig. 4.5) are examples in this generation through the use of materials or art forms associated with traditional Chinese culture. While gaining global attention, this strategy gradually started to show its negative side. As curator and artist Wang Nanming observed, ‘[b]y appropriating simple motifs or symbols left behind by tradition, they formulate these motifs into some “essential” markers of Chinese-ness’ (Wang, 2000, p. 353). With the increased



Figure. 4.4. Cai, Guoqiang. (1998). *Borrowing Your Enemy's Arrows*.

[Wood boat, canvas sail, arrows, metal, rope, Chinese flag, and electric fan. Boat approximately 152.4 x 720x 230 cm, each arrow approximately 62 cm]. The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA).

<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81348>

[‘It delivers a timeless message rooted in Chinese philosophy and expressed in the Western vocabulary of the readymade. Built on the skeleton of an old fishing boat excavated near Cai’s birthplace, the sculpture, suspended aboveground, is pierced with 3,000 made-in-China arrows and flies the national flag’ (The Museum of Modern Art, 1999, p. 362).]

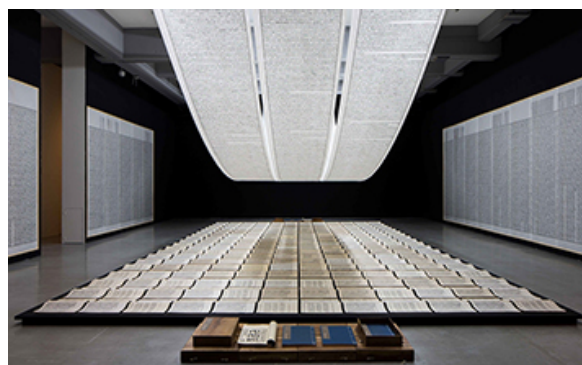


Figure. 4.5. Xu, Bing. (2014) *Book from the Sky*.

[Mixed media installation/hand-printed books and scrolls printed from blocks inscribed with ‘false’ Chinese characters. The work was produced in 1987-91].

Taipei Fine Arts Museum.

<https://www.moma.org/calendar/events/4657>

exposure to global exhibitions after the 2000 Shanghai Biennale,³⁵ the internet,³⁶ and experience of studying and travelling abroad, new understandings and practices have emerged. Some claim to be a 'global artist,' according to Pollack, a self-defined worldliness. New phrases were created, such as 'transnationalism,' 'a hybrid identity formed from the many places ... [these artists have] lived in and influences they had studied' (Pollack, 2018, p. 6). There are also 'post-passport' artists who embrace a 'new identity forged in a collision of forces that characterized present-day China' (Pollack, 2018, p. 8).

Based on my experience of living and studying in New Zealand for the duration of my PhD (pp. 1-2), the name of Paris-based, Chinese art curator and critic, Hou Hanru's book *On the Mid-Ground*, echoes with my comprehension of my identity now being located 'in-between.'³⁷ Meanwhile, against the backdrop of western influence in the realm of contemporary art, the materials I have used and the aesthetic effects in my artwork and some cultural symbols, could be viewed as possessing qualities of 'Chinese-ness.' Yet, they are also associated with my connection with my mother, my bodily comprehension of materiality, and the culture I am rooted in. As Chinese artist Zhang Xiaogang has expressed: 'Maybe the day when our historical reality overlaps with that of Europe, there would no longer be any Chinese elements in our artworks.... Chinese elements cannot be seen as simplistic visual codes, but rather something more profound' (Pollack, 2018, p. 26). At the same time, Chinese identity is experienced differently from a gender perspective in terms of the cultural heritage that excluded Chinese women, which I will unfold below.

Gender in Contemporary Chinese Art

Being contextualised in China's patriarchal structure, female artists' voices in contemporary art were generally subsumed by the dominant discourse from the beginning. Xiao Lu's work, *Dialogue*, exhibited in the China/Avant-garde Exhibition in 1989 at the National Art Museum of China, deals with the artist's personal experience (Fig. 4.6).³⁸ It was hijacked by a male artist Tang Song,³⁹ and the public media as a challenge to the government's authority. Against the backdrop of the absence of 'a socio-political movement

³⁵ After joining the global economy, the government realised that art could be China's 'calling card,' and poured money into art academic organisations and commercial galleries in Beijing and Shanghai (Perlez, 2017).

³⁶ Great Firewall of China (GFC) combines legislative actions and technologies enforced by the People's Republic of China to block access to selected foreign websites (Mozur, 2015). Yet, it is possible to get access to those websites abroad through VPN.

³⁷ Hou Hanru was the curator of the 5th Auckland Triennial in 2013.

³⁸ In this work, Xiao Lu fired two bullets into her installation, *Dialogue*, with a handgun to express her frustration of her relationship and a sexual insult she experienced (Merlin, 2018). The exhibition played a significant role in the history of contemporary Chinese art.

³⁹ Tang Song, a Chinese artist, claimed himself the co-author of the work, and became Xiao Lu's partner afterwards. After 15 years in 2004, Xiao Lu claimed herself as the unique creator of the work.



Figure. 4.6. Xiao, Lu. (1989). *Dialogue*
[Mixed media installation]. The Museum of Modern Art
(MoMA).
<https://www.moma.org/calendar/galleries/5156>

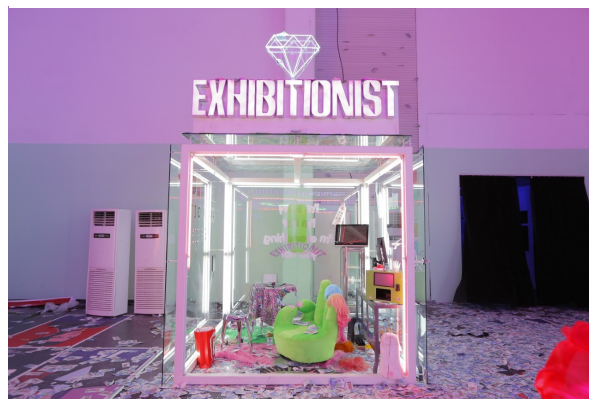


Figure. 4.7. Ye, Funa. (2015). *Curated Nails*.
[Online project]. Courtesy of the artist.

initiated by women and a discourse articulated from a women's perspective' (Cui, 2016, p. 6), women's narratives of their life experiences are always regarded as not important.⁴⁰ However, some Chinese female artists, whose work evidently demonstrates gender concerns, deny their connection with feminism. Ye Funa's project *Curated Nails* in Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) Shanghai invited the audience to participate and curators to submit their proposals to the project (Fig. 4.7). The project 'turned MOCA Shanghai into a nail salon' (Pollack, 2018, p. 86) and was shocking to some males (Pollack, 2018, p. 87); however, the artist doesn't see her work as feminist. In Pollack's interview with another Chinese artist, Liang Yuanwei, who used the term 'patriarchy,' the latter said: 'I don't use my work to express my feminist concerns. But I am interested in the feminist movement, and the rise of feminist consciousness in China. It is important, but not important to the point that it eclipses other problems. I pay attention to many issues at the same time' (Pollack,

⁴⁰ The Introduction of *Experimental Beijing – Gender and Globalisation in Chinese Contemporary Art* provides a reflection of the underrepresentation of women artists and their artistic expression in the realm of contemporary Chinese art.

2018, p. 85).

Apart from the Chinese mainstream media's stigmatisation of the term 'feminism,' this ambiguous attitude may also address 'the complex relationality between the center and the periphery, the local and the global' (Reilly, 2007, p. 16). Judy Chicago's project, 'A House for Chinese Women,' in Lugu Lake in 2002 is an appropriate example here – the invited Chinese female artists reacted to her with negotiation rather than cooperation, since the project failed to correspond to local gender conditions (Cui, 2016, p. 3).

Besides this negotiation with feminism, some Chinese female artists' works also illustrate a complex association with cultural heritage. One dilemma for Chinese contemporary artists, according to Xu Zhen, is the need to 'constantly question whether you are abandoning traditions for something completely Western' (Pollack, 2018, p. 63). Yet, the long-existing gender exploration in China renders the relationship between Chinese female artists and their cultural heritage more problematic. Liang Shuo, a male contemporary artist in China, uses what he called 'ready-made' materials such as stones, plastic products, and mud to rebuild landscapes valued in classical Chinese literature and painting to express the artist's nostalgia to the ancient times (Fig. 4.8). At the same time, in Peng Wei's *Summer Garden*, 2011 (Fig. 4.9), a classical Chinese scene is painted on a female



Figure. 4.8. Liang, Shuo. (2015). *Temple of Candour*.
[Mixed media installation] Courtesy of Beijing
Commune and the artist.

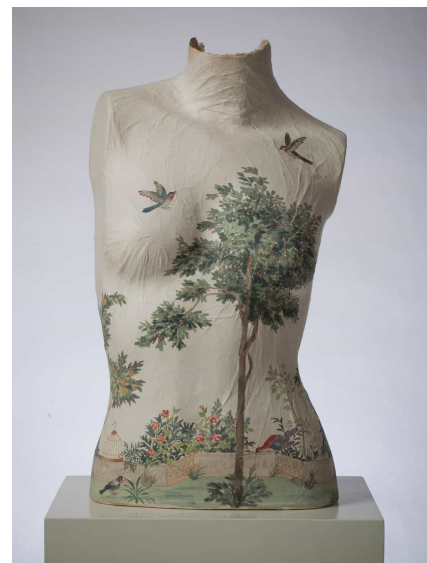


Figure. 4.9. Peng, Wei. (2011). *Summer Garden*.
[Sculpture. Ink on rice paper. 53 x 30 x
22 cm].
<https://freeyork.org/art/traditional-chinese-paintings-sculptures-human-body-parts-peng-wei/>



Figure. 4.10. Lu, Yang. (2013) *Poster for Uterus Man*
[Animation video, 11'20"].
<https://wsimag.com/yarat-contemporary-art-centre/artworks/74264>

torso sculpture. With a hint of nostalgia, the female torso in Peng Wei's work is hollowed and pale, without limbs and head. It shows a more complicated relationship between gender identity and Chinese traditional culture.

In *Living with Unassimilable*, its negotiation with the unequal gender structure in China relates it to feminist concerns, although gender is not the work's only consideration. The reference to classical Chinese landscape is employed as one of its visual elements speaking to the geographic and temporal displacement of the research. It is differentiated from Liang Shuo's art by its phantom-like atmosphere, especially its material quality, which is intended to evoke a required psychological dimension.

While my work is framed by China's heteronormative context, it doesn't mean there's no voice for other expressions of sexuality in contemporary Chinese art practice, though this is not what my research concerns. One example of alternative ways of considering gender is Lu Yang's *Uterus Man*, an animation made in 2013, which created a character whose appearance is male and yet attacked enemies with an electric umbilical cord (Fig. 4.10). This contradictory combination calls into question the constructed binary gender structure. The investigation of identity in the animation is further complicated by the character's design, which is a mixture of Chinese elements with white hair, pink eye colour, and the animation's high-tech visual effect and electronic sound effect. With the tightening of China's censorship since 2016, artworks portraying same-sex relations were gradually banned from public exhibitions since they depict 'abnormal sexual behaviours' (Jiang, 2019).

Installation Art

This project's research leading up to the final installation sought for an artistic language to embody and to convey to viewers, the encounter with my trauma and ensuing catharsis. This presented a challenge to address the intensity and complexity of the psychological experience. After exploring a variety of discrete means of expression from two dimensions to objects and video, the final outcome of the research took the form of an installation.⁴¹

Given the wide range of artistic phenomena and experimental practices that fall into this category, it is almost impossible to proffer a clear definition of installation art. However, an essential property of installation art may be its potential to challenge and negotiate the previous demarcation between art and life, which defined art as 'fixed,' 'bounded and restrictive,' and as 'established truth,' and life as 'immediate personal experience' (Shiff, 1978, p. 107). This potential is due to the capacity of installation art to assemble various concerns, media, and material qualities, which means that it is able to contain and embody 'the individuality and the immediate experience of a world conceived as evolving' (Shiff, 1978, p. 110). This property of installation art is derived from the influences on it from the art practice and movements, such as readymades, collage, Futurism, Minimalism and post-Minimalism and 'happenings,' along with the development of technologies (Ran, 2009).

From Futurism, elements of time and space are incorporated into installation art (Ran, 2009), while the development of film and photography altered the senses of time and space from being linear and literal to being configurational.⁴² This technological trend has been pushed further with the emergence of video and computers. Time can be experienced both as animated and frozen, and space both being enclosed or being opened up, or even a juxtaposition of diverse spatial-temporal experience. A heritage from Minimalism and post-Minimalism for installation art is the artwork is more of a system rather than a given art object – the concern of the artwork includes its spatial arrangement, light, and the relationship between its diverse components (Ran, 2009). According to Michael Fried, it approached 'the condition of theatre' which 'binds together a large and seemingly disparate variety of activities' (Fried, 1998, p. 164). At the same time, readymades and collage, redefining the concept of art, forecast installation art's capacity to assemble a range of media and material qualities – including immateriality such as light, which is the main medium for film and video. For example, Robert Irwin uses light in his art as the principal medium. Installation art is, therefore, an eclectic, hybrid art form providing multi-sensorial experiences not being limited to vision but including other senses such as tactility and

⁴¹ The Appendix describes and illustrates this process of experimentation to find the appropriate language. This process is also summarised in Chapter Five (pp. 84-85).

⁴² Willoughby Sharp expressed his excitement of the new possibilities being brought up by the technology that it has 'created an environment that has reconfigured our senses' and fostered a new art (Sharp, 1995, pp. 317-318).

kinaesthesia.

By orchestration of spatial arrangement, duration, and multi-sensorial stimuli, installation art can be a re-creation of a public event or an externalisation of an individual fantasy that ‘challenges reality with an all-encompassing experience’ (Pollack, 2018, p. 130). This enables installation art to ‘accommodate the needs, complexities and contradictions inherent in daily life and culture’ (Ran, 2009, p. 160).

It is this capacity that has drawn me to installation art as an appropriate art form to embody and to convey to viewers the highly psychological and individual experience – the encounter with the trauma. The intensity and the complexity of the experience came both from the conflicting emotions it evoked, and from its force to disturb the sense of time as linear and the sense of my body as a spatially enclosed being. To explore the experience in great depth requires an art language not only embracing both temporal and spatial elements, but conveying both of the conditions before and after sensing the force. Installation art, being eclectic, is ‘the locus of ... relationships’ (Iles, 1990, as cited in Ran, 2009, p. 205) among the work’s diverse components. Accordingly, it enables the representation of different conditions and the capacity to address their relationships.

Installation art can be broadly categorised as site and nonsite concerning the artwork’s association with its location. Generally, site-specific work will address and define (or redefine) the space in which it is installed, and this as a context will become part of the work’s meaning. Conversely, nonsite work rarely refers to the history, architectural settings, etc., of the space and might be remade at other locations, since the coherence of the work usually does not rely on its location in a significant way. As a nonsite installation work, *Living with the Unassimilable* serves as an expression of a private memory, a highly psychological experience.

For Mark Rosenthal, such installation art can be categorised as what he terms ‘enchantments’ (Rosenthal, 2003). These forms draw heavily on a theatrical root which is to offer an immersive experience. Offering the experience of a contemplative immersion of the self in the work, it is mentally absorbing, being endowed with the power to ‘transport its viewer into a state of awe’ (Rosenthal, 2003, p. 33). Such an end may be achieved through synesthetic and multimedia effects in order to create a psychological space – such as an extreme vision of reality, a simulacrum, as if being inside of the artist’s mind. In this sense, the encounter with such a work can be an intimate experience for one to observe ‘in a kind of voyeuristic fashion’ (Rosenthal, 2003, p. 39), and the viewer is put on the verge of trespassing in some private place. While Rosenthal describes enchantment installation as an environment with little or no escape route, others see it as an escape from the reality to a ‘withdrawal into the self, to a place of bodily sensation’ (De Oliveira et al., 2003, p. 49) due to the same quality of being immersive through sensory manipulation.

Rosenthal’s interpretation of this category of enchantment coincides with what is

required from the final outcome of my research. The research topic inserts into the orthodox record of the relevant history a private narrative. The omni-spatial, and multi-sensorial experience of the work is intended to ‘saturate’ viewers in the relevant sensations and thus convey the tremendous power of the trauma as an expression of an individual memory parallel with the narrative of the history being manifested through Chinese official institutions.

Trauma and Catharsis

American psychiatrist Judith Herman interprets catharsis as a storytelling of the previously unspeakable trauma, and ‘transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor’s life’ (Herman, 2015, p. 175). Her understanding of catharsis aligns with the aim both of my research and its final outcome. It is to have what once was unspeakable to be expressed, therefore, to release the suppressed emotions.

According to Kristeva, catharsis is the basis on which religion, philosophy and art are founded and is to purify the abject (Kristeva, 1982). Discussions about catharsis in art can be referred back to Aristotle’s theory defining tragedy as an imitation of an action ‘with incidents that arouse pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions’ (Aristotle, 1449b, as cited in Shaper, 1968, p. 131). Therefore, to meet such an effect, a re-experience of negative experience has to be triggered as a premise. However, not to experience it as overwhelming, such art needs to offer a safe distance for audiences to play out and expunge their emotions. Thomas Scheff described it as ‘a properly *distanced* recurrence’ of the traumatic experience (Scheff, 1977, p. 485). Rather than a physical negotiation of proximity, the distance here refers to how conscious the audience is of the situation at hand, and how much do they identify with the works, or the artists. For artists, the negotiation of distance is essential to provoke certain emotional responses.

Ritual and drama are the two traditional forms used to achieve a cathartic effect. Due to their ability to mimic reality, and their employment of what is called by Scheff a ‘distancing device’ (Scheff, 1977, p. 484) through the setting of a stage, etc., they are able to reawaken collectively held distress and to purge it. Ritual and drama have been widely adapted by contemporary art practice concerned with catharsis. German artist Joseph Beuys frequently employed such elements in his performances, such as *Kukei/Akopeenein/Browncross/Fat corners/Model fat corners* in 1964 (Fig. 4.11) to yield certain social, political and psychological effects in order to cope with the trauma of the Second World War. Beuys may be the first contemporary artist explicitly claiming art as therapeutic and himself as an artist-shaman (Tisdall, 2008, p. 23), based on his alleged war experience of being rescued by Tartars and wrapped in fat and felt.⁴³ Therefore, Beuys’s art was intended to initiate ‘a healing process’ (Tomberger, 2003, p. 66); for him and his use of fat and felt work as means of transformation and survival (Fig. 4.12).

Due to its close association with wounding and healing, artworks dealing with

⁴³ ‘Beuys was not always an entirely reliable witness to his own war record. The cardinal scene of his fantastical biography, the Beuysian Ur-myth, took place in 1944, when he was involved in a near-fatal plane crash in the Crimea. ... On 16 March he was shot down in the mountains, where, he claimed, he was saved by Tartar tribesmen, who wrapped him in insulating layers of felt and fat to keep him from freezing to death. This narrative, which was still repeated as fact in Beuys’s New York Times obituary, has by now been conclusively disproved. Beuys was in a plane crash, which killed his pilot and badly injured him, but there were no tribesmen, no fat nor felt’ (Laing, 2016).



Figure. 4.11. Riebesehl, Heinrich. (1964).
Joseph Beuys after being struck by a
spectator during his performance
Kukei/Akopee-nein/Browncross/Fat
corners/Model fat corners at the Fluxus
Festival for New Art, Technical College
Aachen.

<https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/in-focus/heroic-symbols-anselm-kiefer/kiefer-and-beuys>



Figure. 4.12. Beuys, Joseph. (1964). *Fat Chair*

[wax, fat, wire, wooden chair].

<https://www.cupblog.org/2012/03/20/mark-c-taylor-on-fat-chair-by-joseph-beuys/>



Figure. 4.13. Bourgeois, Louise. (1974). *The Destruction of the Father*.

[Installation. Plaster, latex, wood, fabric and red light].

<https://wikioo.org/paintings.php?refarticle=8XYFQU&titlepainting=destruction%60+del+padre&artistname=Louise+Jos%C3%A9phine+Bourgeois>

collective or personal trauma are usually described as having cathartic properties. The affinity of catharsis-related art with ritual and drama makes performance and installation two commonly employed art forms, however, other art media can also be found under this category, such as photography, painting and sculpture. At the same time, such art goes further than a mere narrative of the trauma since it is to purge relevant negative emotions until 'they are distilled and sublimated into a healing brew' (Kearney, 2008, p. 182). This is demonstrated by Louise Bourgeois in her own words about *The Destruction of the Father* (Fig. 4.13), which was the first work referring explicitly to her childhood trauma involving her father. For Bourgeois, the work was to deal with fear, and what interested the artist was the conquering of the fear (Gibbons, 2007, p. 16). The work which was reminiscent the inner of the mouth, can be seen as an expression of the artist's fantasy involving the dismemberment and cannibalization of the father (Gibbons, 2007, p. 16). Art is, for Bourgeois, to work through trauma in her own life, especially in sculpture and installation. This constant theme endows her art with the quality of resembling 'the comparatively unregulated realm of the unconscious mind' (Gibbons, 2007, p. 18) such as the *Cells* series. As Robert Storr has put it, the content of her art is the 'direct or indirect transcription of her own unblinking glimpse into the murkiest waters of the psyche.' (Storr, 2003, as cited in Gibbons, 2007, p. 18)

In contemporary art practice, an exploration of personal trauma usually extends itself into a wider and public dialogue involving certain shared historical, national, gendered or racial issues. In this manner, what once was personal becomes part of collective memory which once was erased, or ignored by officially recorded history. The trauma can be first-hand, or vicariously experienced either collectively or individually. Vicarious experience of historical trauma is a main focus for James E. Young. By asking how well can historians 'represent the past without knowing how the next generation has responded to it in its art and literature' (Young, 2000, p. 5), Young claims the significance of the mediated memory for the next generation, for 'these phenomena, too, are part of the history that is being told after the fact' (Young, 2000, p. 5). This claim forecasts the demand of investigations such as: how should we understand history as 'historical' when it keeps impacting and shaping the life and psychological condition of the generations after it? This perspective validates and underlines the importance for these generations 'to make meaning out of experiences they never knew directly that constitutes the object of memory' (Young, 2000, p. 9) as catharsis of the negative emotions caused by the history. In this respect, Christian Boltanski is an artist whose installation art explores his second-hand experience of the Second World War. The created atmosphere, and the adoption of monumentality of his work foster a sublimated encounter of the trauma being framed by the loss, and extend his personal experience into a public discourse through archivalism (Jones, 2016, pp. 112-145). This method includes into his works images of, usually, anonymous individuals from magazines

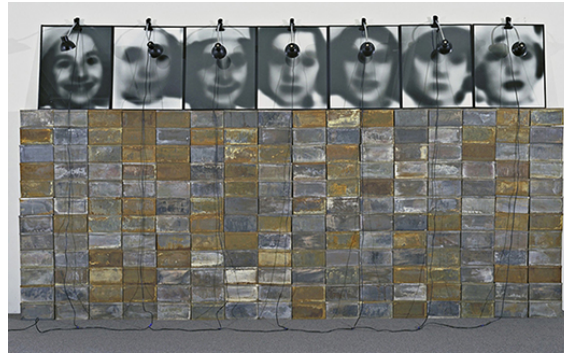


Figure. 4.14. Boltanski, Christian (1988). *The Storehouse*. [Installation. Gelatin silver prints, electric lamps, and tin biscuit boxes containing cloth fragments. 211.2 x 375.8 x 21.6 cm]. The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA).
<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/80857>

and newspapers. The artist's process of the images, such as making them out of focus and using electric lights has the potential of evoking the tragedy of the Holocaust, which is a central concern of Boltanski's art (Fig. 4.14) (The Museum of Modern Art, 2007, p. 86).

What needs to be pointed out is that some art practices regarded as cathartic do not necessarily indicate any particular historical, social, or personal trauma. Also, catharsis-related art in contemporary art practice is different from art therapy, while they overlap with each other in terms of expression of negative emotions. From my understanding, the essential difference between the two is that, for contemporary art practice, what the work needs to achieve should be beyond a merely personal psychological purgation, which is art therapy's main aim. This difference requires certain strategies from artists, which have been investigated by Jill Bennett in *Empathic Vision* and will be discussed later. One example of such art which is without explicit association with trauma, yet is cathartic in the effect on its audience, is Kira O'Reilly's one-to-one performance *My Mother* (2003), which does not indicate any particular trauma.

Rachel Zerihan provides her experience of *My Mother* as an audience member as well as a participant (Zerihan, 2010). From the author's observation and experience, the arrangement of the space and the artist's management of the dialogue 'easily allowed for a transference of feelings and emotions to occur, reminiscent of the safe space needed for a cathartic response to take place' (Zerihan, 2010, p. 35). It was after the author told a story about her mother that the artist proposed and performed cutting herself after being given consent. Through this performance, the signification of the author's story is revealed in O'Reilly's wounding. The author felt being afforded a rare encounter of her emotions which works on her as cathartic – 'a purgative, emotional cleansing marked by a ritual'

(Zerihan, 2010, p. 36). In his explanation of *Show the Wound*, Beuys said that '[...] one has to reveal the wound which one wants to heal' (Beuys, 1980, as cited in Tomberger, 2003, p. 65). In the encounter with *My Mother*, the author's unspeakable pain and wound are expressed through a visceral showing – the cut – on the artist's body. With the setting that made the author feel 'safe,' the cathartic effect of the performance resulted from 'a power of vicariousness, of being elsewhere (in another time or place) ... of experiencing the world through the eyes of strangers' (Kearney, 2008, p. 182).

Kira O'Reilly's *My Mother* is reminiscent of Jill Bennett's proposition that trauma-related art does not function as a testimony of traumatic experience, but as a language to communicate 'sensation and affect with which to register something of the experience of traumatic memory' (Bennett, 2005, p. 2). Without directly declaring themselves to be about trauma, the artworks evince the trauma not in a narrative component but in direct engagement and negotiation with the experienced sensations. It can be regarded as a means of catharsis in the sense that it gives voice to what once might be unspeakable 'coming into language' (Bennett, 2005, p. 2). Without explicitly referring to personal experience, these artworks do not impact on the audience from an emotional identification or sympathy perspective, but immediately engage with audience's sensations. Bennett's argument is based on Deleuze's claim that affect or feeling is a catalyst for profound thought. Trauma, being constitutively a conglomeration of sensations involving bodily response, is approached by art through embodied sensations to stimulate thoughts. Bennett's view aligns with my intention to express the trauma I experienced both at *that moment* and in my original haptic experience.

Another valuable opinion Bennett proffers is that, trauma-related art is realised from the contact between representation and affect. It means that trauma-related art also requires an intelligible, discursive framework so that the encounter with the embodied sensations is not to be reduced to a purely emotional or sentimental reaction. Since to sense is always a happening in the present, the request for the trauma's discursive context makes trauma-related art 'a continuous negotiation of a present with indeterminable links to the past' (Bennett, 2005, p. 38), in my understanding, an interface of the contact between present and past, affect and discourse.

According to Bennett, such an artwork is always in a dialectical relationship with the officially recorded history as its counterpart. It thus becomes 'a contingent and culturally situated practice – linked to social histories – that requires framing against a backdrop of cultural knowledge' (Bennett, 2005, p. 26). Two of Bennett's discussions closely associated with my research and what the final work *Living with the Unassimilable* is concerned with, will be discussed in detail later in my interpretation of the work.

Contemporary Chinese art practice started to reflect on China's national and historical trauma from the period which is defined by Gao Minglu as 'Post Cultural Revolution' from 1976 to 1984 (Gao, 2006), and mainly focused on the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath. The practice, which usually demonstrates some cathartic qualities, was found in an art school of 'Scar Art' to 'restaged tragic moments from the Cultural Revolution' (Wu, 2010, p. 19). The name is inspired by a popular short story, 'The Scars' by Lu Xinhua, published in 1978, about a family tragedy in the late 1960s. It refers to artistic narratives about the trauma experienced in the Cultural Revolution and the school consisted of artists usually belonging to the generation who experienced its chaos. To address the trauma, their art works as a complement to, or even a revelation of, what the official discourse ignored or tried to cover up. Exemplary art works include Cheng Conglin's oil painting *Snow on X Day X Month* (Fig. 4.15), a visual narrative of the tragedy caused by the fighting among Red Guard groups at the time. Through the style of Russian realist art, the painting endows the tragedy with a perspective of a grand historical narrative. As a reflective critique of the period, it expresses lament for the loss during the time (National Art Museum of China, n.d.). Wang Keping's wood sculpture *Silence* (Fig. 4.16) is another piece of representative work from the school. It is both an expression of the extreme repression and the artist's protest. *Silence* is abstract in terms of not having any particular historical symbols of the



Figure. 4.15. Cheng, Conglin. (1979) *Snow on a Certain Day in a Certain Month, 1968*.
[Oil on canvas. 196x296cm].

<https://www.chinesenewart.com/chinese-artists15/chengconglin.htm>
https://link-springer-com.ezproxy.massey.ac.nz/chapter/10.1007/978-3-662-45411-4_2



Figure. 4.16. Wang, Keping. (1978).
Silence.

[Sculpture. Birch. 48 cm (high)].

New York Times.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/16/world/asia/a-muzzled-chinese-artwork-absent-but-speaking-volumes.html>



Figure. 4.17. Sheng, Qi. (2000).
Memories, Mao.

[Type C photograph. 119.4 x 80.5
cm]. National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne.

<https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/76831/>



Figure. 4.18. Zhang, Xiaogang. (1995). *Bloodline Series – Big Family*. [Oil on canvas. 179 x 229 cm].
<https://www.wikiart.org/en/zhang-xiaogang/a-big-family-1995>

Cultural Revolution, however, the sculpture's muzzled mouth speaks volumes for individuals suffering from dictatorships, not only in China.

After this period, contemplation of the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution does not stop. In Sheng Qi's photograph *Memories, Mao*, (Fig. 4.17) the mutilated hand holding the photo of Chairman Mao is a visceral narrative of trauma through a traumatized body and a metaphor of its lifelong impact for the people. Zhang Xiaogang is famous for his portraits of Chinese families inspired by the family photos from the Cultural Revolution period and surrealism (Fig. 4.18). The subjects in these portraits are all dressed in army uniforms worn during the Cultural Revolution and are almost identical to each other in their look and their positions. This unification is emphasised by the artist's extremely smooth and restrained brushwork, relating the collectivism in the Mao era with the patriarchal clan in Confucian ideology (Pollack, 2018, pp. 18-36). Such a technique also produces a dreamy atmosphere, endowing his works with a theatrical quality. While the art forms are different, this atmosphere Zhang has created in his paintings echoes with my installation. The psychological dimension in both of our works is an artistic expression of trauma against a similar historical backdrop.

I was born in 1981 and my generation is said to be apolitical since it lacked the experience of the Cultural Revolution's political upheaval (Pollack, 2018, p. 78). The first-

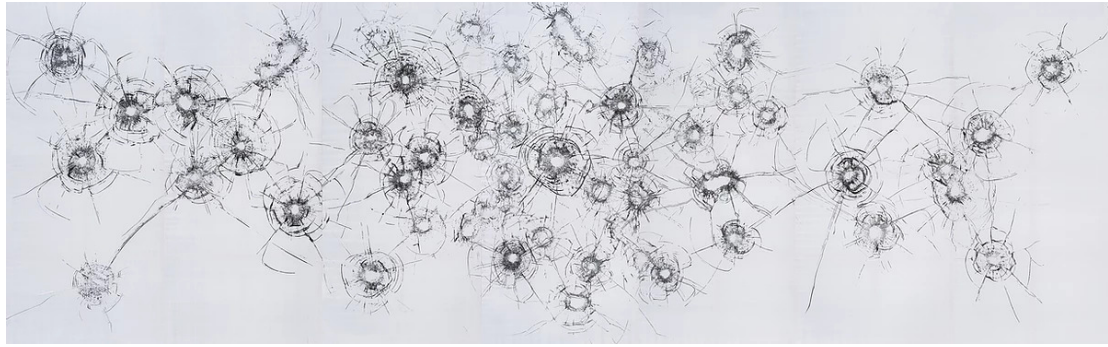


Figure. 4.19. Zhao, Zhao. (2017). *Constellations*.
[Embroidered silk. 300 x 980 cm]. Courtesy of the artist and Tang Contemporary Art.

hand experience of politics for this generation is basically from the One-Child Policy and official internet censorship. Yet, some artists of my generation do work on historical and political issues, e.g., Zhao Zhao (b. 1982). His series, *Constellation* (first created in 2013), was inspired by photographs of the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre. When he examined the photographs he found the traces of the violence – bullet holes in cars and on walls. After buying a gun (through an illegal channel), he shot at mirrors and glass panels, creating ‘a fascinating pointillism that was reminiscent of stars in the sky’ (Pollack, 2018, p. 105). In 2019, I encountered his *Constellation* (Fig. 4.19) in the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne. Assisted by his mother, Zhao Zhao transformed the bullet hole patterns of violence into silk embroideries. My final work adopted his notion of transformation – stitching into the silk sculpture to transform something traumatic into an embodiment of catharsis. Zhao’s embroidery is representational, simulating the visual effect of the shooting, while my ‘abstract’ stitching is concerned with the transformation of the trauma while based on the lard and graphite marks made by my fingers on the silk.⁴⁴

Sui Jianguo (b. 1956) graduated in the same year of the Tiananmen Square Incident in 1989 from Central Academy of Fine Arts. One of his sculptures, *Space of Memory*, (Fig. 4.20) continues the artist’s employment of sealing, binding, or nailing hard and heavy materials together. Through the confrontation of two tough materials, his work expresses a certain unspeakable sense of imprisonment and heaviness and inner conflict (Li, 2020). For critic, and curator Li Xianting, the work in which human body-sized railway sleepers are nailed together vertically to form a wall standing in front of the audience ‘becomes a sensational symbol - an “image that records countless times of rolling over” emerged’ (Li, 2020). As its title implicates, the form and the material of the sculpture make it a monument and a space to store and mourn for what is unspeakable both politically and psychologically.

⁴⁴ The making process and its implication is from page 86 to page 91.



Figure. 4.20. Sui, Jianguo. (1994).
Space of Memory.
 [Installation. Ready-made old
 sleepers, nails. 250 x 500 x 60 cm].
<https://news.artron.net/20121204/n287265.html>



Figure. 4.21. Lei, Yan. (2009). *How Do I Protect You?*
 [Installation. Parchment paper, photos in white and
 black]. Used with permission from the artist.
<https://blog.luofei.org/2016/09/exploring-spiritual-art-expression-on-lei-yan-art/how-can-i-protect-you08-2/>

The 8.0-magnitude earthquake in Wenchuan and Beichuan on 12 May 2008 killed thousands of students both due to the natural disaster and the poor quality of the construction of the schools. Many of their bodies were never recovered. Those who demanded an investigation into corrupt officials and contractors being responsible for the tragedy were silenced in the end.

In 2009, Lei Yan exhibited her installation *How Do I Protect You?* (Fig. 4.21) Recreating the site of a collapsed school building by paper-made sculptures, Lei Yan meticulously hand-sewed paper items such as shoes, back packs and pencil boxes. For the parents of students whose bodies were never recovered, these objects remained as the only means by which they could collect to mourn for their loss. Small black and white photos of the students were tucked into the front pockets of the backpacks. Tiny paper flowers were implanted on these sculptures referring to the personal items of the missing students.

The form of the artwork adopted the ancient Chinese practice of memorialising dead loved ones or ancestor worship. Combined with the ephemerality of the material and the art form, the whiteness of the work is both the main colour for Chinese funerals, and references the fragility of the deceased lives, especially with the photos of the absent. However, the choice of materials can also be regarded as referring to the poorly constructed buildings, a factor which caused the tragedy. Combining all these together, the work presents as a public mourning for the lost children, a contemplation of the precariousness of life, as well as a criticism of the corruption and the silence (Welland, 2018, pp. 255-257).



Figure. 4.22. Ai, Weiwei (2008-2012).
Straight.
 [Installation. Steel reinforcing bars. 600
 x 1200 cm]. Royal Academy of Arts,
 London.
<https://publicdelivery.org/ai-weiwei-straight/>

The constant concerns of Ai Weiwei's art are the political oppression and social problems in China. He created an installation *Straight* (Fig. 4.22) about the 2008 Wenchuan and Beichuan earthquake. The installation consisted of 90 tons of steel reinforcing bars which were destroyed and mangled due to the earthquake, and the collapse of the schools which caused the death of the students. All of the steel bars were painstakingly straightened by hand after being recovered from the schools. Being floor-based, the bars formed an undulating surface resembling a Richter scale graph of an earthquake (Public Delivery, 2021).

The work expresses the artist's criticism of the Chinese government. The straightening of these previously deformed bars can be understood as an implication of the government's covering of the corruption which caused the poorly built schools. At the same time, the bars were supposed to offer protection for the students. Yet, in the installation, they were laid out on the floor, a powerless position being totally subject to gravity – the natural force which is, like the earthquake, from the earth. It is a metaphor of the government failing to protect its people. When the work was exhibited in the Royal Academy of Arts show in London in 2015, the co-curator Adrian Locke said: 'It is I think the heaviest work we've ever put in our galleries here' (Brown, 2015). The close association of these steel bars with the lost lives, the physical and psychological heaviness of the work, and the sombre visual effect all conveyed a sense of sadness and made them into an expression of silent mourning for the tragedy at the same time.

Most of the works discussed above concern historical tragedies and demonstrate the

contemporary Chinese artists' negotiation with the oppressive political atmosphere in China to varied extents. Some, like Sui Jianguo, employ abstract rather than representational approaches which might be a strategy to avoid attention and criticism from the government. Some works expressed the artists' criticism of the government with subtlety. For instance, in *How Do I Protect You?* Lei Yan expressed her protest by combining the fragility of the paper with the sculptural form that resembled the collapsed buildings. Materiality is also used to build the work's connection with the events concerned, such as the steel reinforcing bars in Ai Weiwei's *Straight*. These strategies allow the works to refer to the tragic loss without inviting viewers to 'extrapolate a subject, a persona' to emotionally identify themselves with (Bennett, 2005, p. 7). Even *How Do I Protect You?* includes images of the students, the mode in which the images are presented strongly refers to that used at funerals. The association with death allows a distance to be kept between the represented figures and viewers. Therefore, implying loss and pain, the artists managed to evoke certain sensations and emotions mainly through the expressive power of materials, the atmosphere created, metaphors, or symbols. Adopting theatrical or monumental elements, the artworks let the unspeakable emotions be expressed, which demonstrates the potential for catharsis both for the artists and for those who lost their loved ones by having the loss remembered. The abstraction, at the same time, benefits the works by opening up them to multiple readings, and possibly approaching to viewers from different cultural and/or political backgrounds.

The elements and strategies above are also demonstrated in my final work. For example, the work is highly abstract and is contextualised through metaphors and symbols. It also applies the expressive power of materials and gestures to evoke sensations and so communicate with viewers. Differences in the art languages employed by these artists and my own will be discussed later (pp. 109-110).

Trauma, Catharsis, and Gender

He Chengyao – Series: *Public Broadcast Exercise* (2004)

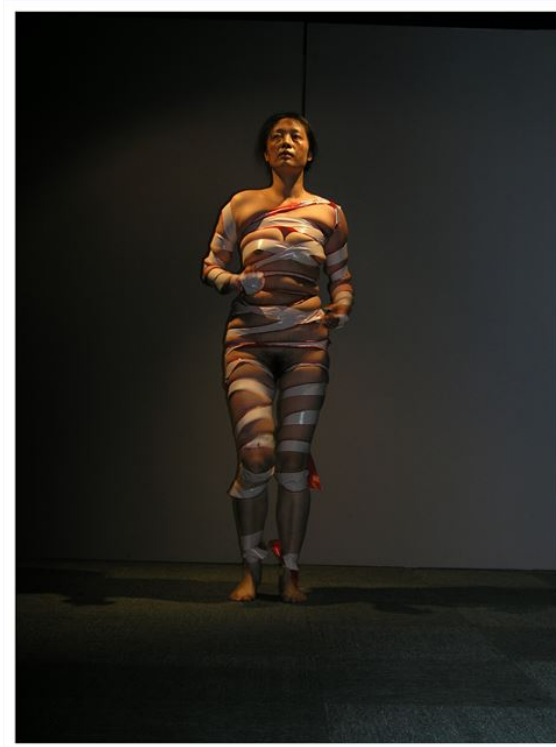


Figure. 4.23. He, Chengyao. (2004). Series: *Public Broadcast Exercise*.

[Performance. 4 min 14 sec] Courtesy of the artist and Eli Klein Gallery.

In an interview, Chinese performance artist He Chengyao (b. 1964) said that one of her works, *Homage to Joseph Beuys* (2001), which was adapted from a performance Beuys made in 1964 at the auditorium of the Technical College in Aachen in Germany, was her way of expressing gratitude to Beuys. It was Beuys who had shown her the way in which art ‘could recuperate and heal’ (Man, 2016, p. 98). In the work, He held a photo of her mother; the deep feeling for her mother was the inspiration of her work.

Conceiving the artist unmarried, the mother was punished by being fired from her work and her mental disorder started after He’s father was jailed for his political ‘wrongdoings’ during the Cultural Revolution. She would strip herself in public and shame her children. To ‘cure’ her, she was tied up by the local people and painful acupuncture applied by amateurs. He, as a little girl, alienated herself from her mother out of her shame

and fear of her mother's madness. In He's work, using her own body as the main medium, she 're-performs' on herself the bodily torments her mother had gone through.

One of He's works, *Public Broadcast Exercise* (Fig. 4.23), is closely associated with her mother's experience. Naked, the artist tied herself up with gummed tape in public, and performed the nationally practised exercise usually broadcast on the radio in public places.⁴⁵ With each movement, the tightly tied, sticky tape constrained the artist's limbs and made unpleasant sounds. Tying up her own naked body with tape was the artist's re-performance of her mother's experience and intended to overcome her fear of her mother when she was a little girl, and instead to understand and accept her behaviour (Man, 2016, p. 92). This was a reconstruction of the mother's experience, which means that by setting up the conditions, the recurrence of the previously traumatic experience was under control and less overwhelming, which is one prerequisite to achieve catharsis. To reconstruct the mother's experience by performing the broadcast exercise was to combine the expression of an individual's suffering with the accusation of the nation's suppression of any form of individualism. Moreover, He's naked and female body, which was presented in public as suffering and deformed, is an overt challenge to the representation of the idealised female body in public by meeting the male gaze.

Against the backdrop of the same historical trauma, He addresses China's gender structure and mother-daughter relationship in her work, which are key concerns of my work as well. Both of our art extends an individual memory/ trauma to a broader sphere of public issues through certain strategies. However, in contrast to He's use of her own body, my work employs materials and the concept of 'surface' to negotiate with the national patriarchal discourse of manipulation of women's gender. Moreover, He's work is performance while mine is installation.

At the same time, He's work is intended to deal with the pain and sorrow she felt for her mother, which was hard for her to bear at the time (Merlin, 2013). Witnessing the cruel treatment meted out to her mother was undoubtedly a traumatic experience. However, there is no explicit evidence or expression from the artist that it developed into a trauma in Freudian terms, which, usually, is demonstrated by related psychological symptoms. What my research deals with was my first-hand trauma (in a Freudian sense) resulting from my mother's behaviour which 'transferred' to me the historical trauma repressing people's sexuality. Due to the psychological dimension of the experience, my work directly negotiates with the sensations I experienced in encountering the trauma so as to represent the absent in the trauma – *that moment*. In He's work, the witnessed trauma of her mother was represented through a reconstruction of a past event on her body, which is employed in her other works concerning the artist's negotiation with the past relating to her mother.

⁴⁵ This is a compulsively and daily practised exercise for many Chinese students, including myself, from elementary school to senior high school, for strengthening students' bodies and fostering a sense of discipline.

In another work concerned with her mother and trauma, *99 Needles* (2002), He had a doctor friend practice acupuncture on her body with 99 needles, a recurrence of her mother's experience.

In the case of performance art, it seems He is the only Chinese artist to deal with trauma involving both a mother-daughter relationship and the repression of sexuality during the Cultural Revolution. Unlike my practice in *Living with the Unassimilable*, the trauma (in a Freudian sense) she dealt with was not experienced first-hand. As far as I can ascertain, therefore, the topic of my research has not been previously dealt with in contemporary Chinese art. This claim follows a survey of the field and other resources. In the beginning of 2019, I visited Jia Fangzhou, an eminent curator, critic and artist in Beijing. Jia has curated several exhibitions focusing on Chinese female artists' practice including *Century Woman* at Beijing's National Art Museum in 1998. During my visit, he recommended several artists he felt were relevant to my topic. Except He, the concerns of these artists – including Lin Tianmiao, Chen Yanyin, Lin Jingjing, Xiang Jing, Lei Yan, and Jiang Jie – either did not involve trauma, or the relevant histories, or the intergenerational aspect. In a subsequent discussion with Luise Guest, the previous research manager of White Rabbit Gallery during a visit to the gallery in 2019, and in my communication through email with Cui Shu-qin, the author of *Gendered Bodies: Toward a Women's Visual Art in Contemporary China* (2016), the artists being recommended largely overlapped with those being mentioned by Jia Fangzhou.

Doris Salcedo – *Atrabiliarios* (1992/2004)



Figure. 4.24. Salcedo, Doris. (1992/2004). *Atrabiliarios*.
[Installation. Shoes, animal skins, drywall, paint, wood, animal fibre, and surgical thread. 43 niches and 40 boxes]. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA).
<https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/atrabiliarios/>



Figure. 4.25. Details of *Atrabiliarios*.
<https://www3.mcachicago.org/2015/salcedo/works/atrabiliarios/>

Much of the work of Colombian artist Doris Salcedo (b. 1958) is concerned with the trauma in her country. She represents the trauma as a witness to victims' stories of constant violence and political oppression in Colombia; therefore, her works 'always originate on the basis of the testimony of a victim of violence' (Salcedo, 2006, p. 123). Salcedo's work provides a voice for the unspeakable experiences of the victims in the form of hybrid furniture and clothing sculptures. Usually, her work contains objects and materials almost directly connecting to the stories behind it. Yet, through her artistic process, the trauma is transferred through these objects – which once belonged to *Los Desaparecidos* ('The Disappeared') – allusively rather than explicitly. My installation, *Living with the Unassimilable*, shares concerns with some of Salcedo's work, including *Atrabiliarios* (1992–1993) (Fig. 4.24).

Atrabiliarios is a work that refers to the female victims in the political turbulence in Colombia. Due to the country's internal conflict and dictatorship, for years thousands of ordinary people have 'been disappeared.' The shoes of these women are encased in niches in a wall, each of which is covered with a piece of semi-transparent animal skin. The skin is sewn across the niche by black stitches of surgical thread. Nearly all the shoes on display in *Atrabiliarios* are feminine in style from their heels, point toe or delicate ankle straps, which locates the physical constraint and sexualisation of the women's body into the political discourse of the country.⁴⁶ The surgical thread bordering the niches evokes the sutured wound, suggesting a process of healing while it renders it as a wound. At the same time, the skin-like surface confines the shoes, as though the traumatic memory and loss with which they are associated is unreachable in the 'inner' space. The membrane also blurs the image of the shoes evoking a sense of duration, which is for Salcedo, to bridge the viewer with what is lost by setting up 'conditions of silent and extenuated contemplation which allow such lived to reappear' (Gibbons, 2007, p. 65).

One key cause of trauma is due to the pain being unspeakable, therefore, it is unable to be treated. The well-worn shoes in the work, which bear the traces of the body of the deceased, invoke the presence of the missing person. The art language gives voice for the emotions to be expressed through materiality, metaphors, and visual effect, while at the same time addresses the trauma both being obscured and latent. These aesthetic strategies in *Atrabiliarios* make it possible to achieve catharsis, which is to speak out what once was unspeakable.

Several similarities exist between *Living with the Unassimilable* and *Atrabiliarios* in terms of the integration of gender perspectives into the negotiation of political and national trauma through the employment of materials' implication of femininity. Both of the works involve stitching as a symbol of wounding and healing, as well as the adoption of surface as an element for spacial experience of inside-ness and outside-ness.

However, the two are different from each other. Firstly, the trauma being expressed is

⁴⁶ This perspective is my summary after reading Vera Mackie's 'Doris Salcedo's Melancholy Objects' (Vera, 2008).

vicariously experienced by Salcedo as a witness, like many of her other works. Yet, my work deals with the first-hand experience of trauma which led to the vicarious experience of the political turbulence in China – the Cultural Revolution. Secondly, while Salcedo's art is concerned with approaching 'the unrepresentable, absence, silence, void, [and] death' (Salcedo, 2006, p. 127), which overlaps with concerns in *Living with the Unassimilable*, my work addresses what is absent from the trauma in a different manner. In *Atrabiliarios*, it is through the shoes that once belonged to the 'disappeared,' an approach that is 'quite literally connected to the reality of the person' (Gibbons, 2007, p. 59). Such a means can be found in many other works of Salcedo, for instance, in her hybrid furniture, which integrates into the work pieces of clothing once directly touching the body of the missing, or bones of the deceased. This method aligns Salcedo's art with some other artists' works which are concerned with trauma and catharsis. For example, Christian Boltanski uses everyday objects such as clothes, which suggest human beings, or black and white imagery of people in works such as *The Lake of the Dead* (1990) and *Reliquaire* (1990). In Lei Yan's *How Do I Protect You?* (2009), the students killed in the Wenchuan and Beichuan earthquake in 2008 are represented by their black and white photos. In *Living with the Unassimilable*, however, the absent is addressed in a less direct manner, through metaphors, and abstraction, which locates the work more in a psychological sphere. In Chapter Five, the interpretation of the work will provide further discussion of my approach to the absent trauma.

Materiality and Ephemerality

Eva Hesse – *Right After* (1969)

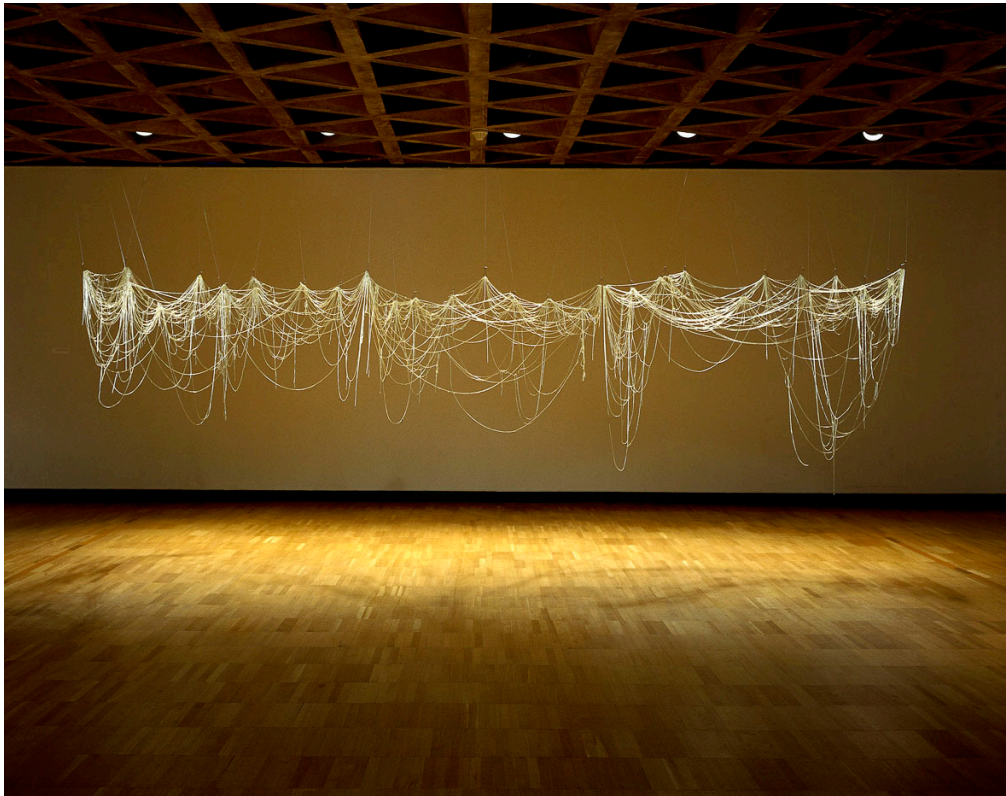


Figure. 4.26. Hesse, Eva. (1969). *Right After*.
[Sculpture. Resin, fibreglass, S-shape hooks].
<https://arth207-spring.tumblr.com/post/51066632076>

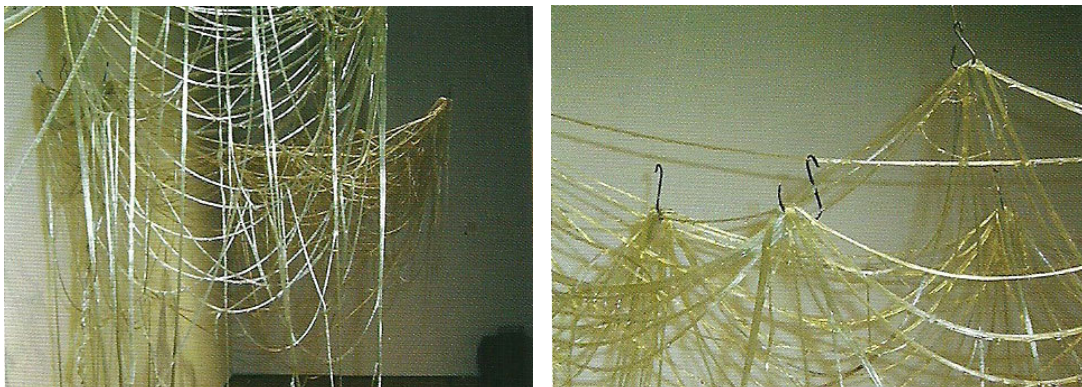


Figure.4.27. Details of *Right After*.
<https://arth207-spring.tumblr.com/post/51066632076>

Eva Hesse (1936–1970), whose art always works with contradictions to ‘walk on the edge’ (Nemser, 2002, p. 2), is a portrayal of the absurdity of her own experience (Nemser, 2002, p. 7). This quality aligns her art with French philosopher Georges Bataille’s *informe*, which ‘is not only an adjective with a given meaning but a term which declassifies’ (Bataille, 1985, p. 31). Key concerns in Hesse’s art are the use of repetition – which is aligned with her aim to exaggerate and thus to approach to absurdity (Kölle, 2013, p. 25); ephemerality both from her art’s form and from the materials she used; and her employment of materiality, which, according to Rosalind Krauss, is ‘a declaration about the expressive power of matter itself’ (Krauss, 2002a, p. 28).

The implication of the title of Hesse’s suspended sculpture *Right After* (Fig. 4.26) can be understood through Hesse’s own interpretation of this work’s intention as ‘to allow things to happen’ (Godfrey, 2006, p. 30), which is echoed by the making process of the work – the artist set up the conditions under which something would happen. The work is made by coating the fibreglass cord in a layer of resin and hanging the cord down from ceiling by S-shaped hooks. In the hardening process, the resin fixes the fibreglass cord into certain shapes in different moments. The form and materiality of the work endow it with a visual effect reminiscent of the hanging sculpture of *Living with the Unassimilable*. Both works employ ephemerality as an essential element yet to achieve different aims. The following discussion is concerned with this quality, or, more precisely, the temporal experience evoked by Hesse’s work. It demonstrates how Hesse’s employment of materiality, which shows a negotiation between the artist and the material through controlling the making process to some extent, serves to express her idea and illustrates how the two works are different from each other.

This discussion begins with art historian Yve-Alain Bois’s interpretation of Bataille’s *informe* (Bois, 1997). Four concepts – base materialism, horizontality, pulse, and entropy – are either developed or extrapolated from Bataille’s *informe* (Bois, 1997). Along with Bataille, Bois interprets *informe* as being ‘only an operational existence’ (Bois, 1997, p. 18), and the four concepts as operations. Among the four, horizontality and pulse are closely pertinent to what *Right After* has achieved. For Bois, both horizontality and pulse disturb ‘pure viscosity’ that dominated modernism through embodied sensation (Bois, 1997, pp. 26–32). Horizontality challenges the vertical position of human beings – a position to resist gravity, which results in repression and opposition of the horizontal position. Pulse brings in temporality, which is realised not as a linear time but as ‘the bodily production of our own nervous systems’ through kinaesthetic affect (Bois, 1997, p. 161). In contemporary art practice, horizontality is an operation which involves our bodily sense of gravity in the experience of the art, while pulse is usually realised in a ‘rhythmic’ manner as a bodily sense of time.

In *Right After*, the two operations are realised through the employment of materials in the making process, and the installation method. Both of the materials – the fibreglass and

the resin – are colourless, which makes it hard to visually differentiate the two from each other. The lightness of the materials and the installation method leads to an impression of the work being ‘ephemeral.’ However, a closer look at the work discloses that, rather than hanging down regularly between two hooks to ‘form a perfect curve of the kind known as a catenary’ (Godfrey, 2006, p. 35) under its own weight, some fibreglass cords appear as irregularities, that they veer off at diagonals instead of drooping straight down. This irregularity unsettles the beholder’s expectation of it, and achieves what Mark Godfrey described ‘as a *visual* surprise’ (Godfrey, 2006, p. 35). This visual surprise disturbs our sense of gravity and of the materials, since it is from this sense of gravity in our body, and the sense of the materials, we expect that the sculpture’s shape would be defined by gravity. In this respect, the work casts light on our body and ‘in the very functioning of the retina, hooks directly into the body’ (Bois, 1997, p. 32). While the work does not directly refer to the body, it challenges ‘the strict demarcation between the realms of the “purely visible” (the verticality of the visual field) and the carnal (the space that our bodies occupy)’ (Bois, 1997, p. 27). At the same time, the moment of identifying the ‘visual surprise’ is an occurrence of a previously seemingly unified visual experience – by the impression from afar – being agitated by a shake, a puncture of the carnal, which can be seen as a pulse (Bois, 1997, p. 32).

The fixed sculpture indicates a fleeting moment of the past which is absent from the present, and registers a sense of fixation to that moment. This goes along with Hesse’s understanding of the logic of flows of material such as latex, and fibreglass, frequently used by Hesse. For Rosalind Krauss, this logic that produces a continuum allows an act of ‘cutting into’ in Hesse’s use of materials (Krauss, 2002b, p. 52), an effort to invoke meanings from what once was a void. This employment of materiality can be identified in many of Hesse’s other works, such as *Contingent* (1969) and *Untitled* (1970), the last work Hesse completed. Being key for Hesse’s making process of her art, which also works as a vehicle of expressing meanings, the manner of using materials distinguishes her art from *Living with the Unassimilable*. According to Hesse, processing materials in her art was ‘in the least pretentious and most direct way,’ and to ‘do so little with them’ (Nemser, 2002, p. 20). In contrast, in *Living with the Unassimilable* the materials were used with considerable control to achieve the desired end result.

Meanwhile, both *Right After* and *Living with the Unassimilable* involve ephemerality and express a sense of fixation, and are ‘disturbing’ to a certain extent. In *Right After*, ephemerality is a created visual effect while the sculpture itself is fixed, and the combination of the two elements – being ephemeral and being fixed – express the idea of fixation and achieve the ‘disturbing’ effect. In *Living with the Unassimilable*, the ephemeral quality is realised through the mutability and the transformation of materiality, the immateriality of the media. At the same time, it is through repetition to convey a sense of obsession, which

means being fixated on the trauma, and through the combination of sculpture and video, the experience of the work is disturbed. All of these concepts and the employment of relevant elements will be thoroughly discussed in Chapter Five.

On the whole, while there are several shared facets in Hesse's art and my final work, they are different from each other in, for example, employing the same elements such as fragility and ephemerality to express dissimilar ideas, or addressing the same concerns by two different methods.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Although I have not experienced these works in person, images of the works and the theories and observations of others have enabled me to come to these conclusions.

FIVE

LIVING WITH THE UNASSIMILABLE

INSTALLATION



Figure. 5.1. Cui, Liang. (2020). *Living with the Unassimilable*.
[Sculpture/video installation. Silk, silk thread, salt].

The hybrid sculpture/video installation, as the final creative output of my PhD research, was titled *Living with the Unassimilable* (Fig. 5.1). It was initiated by my original haptic experience (p. 6-7), an episode that had accidentally ‘touched’ on a personal trauma experienced as a result of my mother’s behaviour towards me (p. 4). The title derives from my apprehension of the magnitude of the experience in terms of both its contribution to the construction of my gender identity, its chronical haunting, and my acceptance that I would have to ‘live with’ the consequences of the trauma. The installation has provided the means by which I have been able to reach a state of catharsis, that is, to express what once was unspeakable. Hybridity refers to combining the two art forms – static sculpture and time-based videos. Through the orchestration of elements such as materiality, lighting, spatial arrangement, and duration, the coalescence of the two forms allows the work to convey the richness and complexity of the experience.

The work comprised a suspended, silk sculpture; its shadow cast on an adjacent wall; two time-based video works; and, on the floor, a composition of salt covering the floor and delineating the installation space. Two perspectives have influenced my approach. Firstly, that of Griselda Pollock: as the ‘void’ of experience, trauma is not ineffable as a mere structural gap, its traces ‘may thus be processed aesthetically’ (Pollock, 2013, p. 20). Secondly, Jill Bennett’s claim that trauma-related artworks function as a language to communicate ‘sensation ... to register something of the experience of traumatic memory’ (Bennett, 2005, p. 2) and ‘a continuous negotiation of a present with indeterminable links to the past’ (Bennett, 2005, p. 38).⁴⁸ Therefore, the installation is an ‘aesthetic processing’ of the sensations when the trauma was encountered in the original haptic experience. Being embedded in the context of personal and national history, the investigation also required a negotiation with the mechanism behind China’s shifting gender policies, and its transmission as a vicarious experience from my mother. Because this research investigation has been undertaken in New Zealand, not China, this ‘distance’ has provided a further perspective concerning my own cultural and geopolitical displacement, in turn becoming a dynamic of this work. Ultimately, all of these factors contribute to approaching the event, *that moment* in my traumatic experience with my mother – being suppressed in the unconscious and therefore is ‘absent,’ the irrepresentability of which has become the impetus for this work.

This chapter will provide an introduction to key decisions made, followed with a discussion of materiality and immateriality, a description of the making process, and the spatial composition of the installation’s elements. Next comes the unfolding of key conceptual elements involved in the work – presence and absence, and surface. This, in turn, leads to the interpretation of the work’s meaning and an unfolding of how it offers an aesthetic experience in relation to the research topic. It concludes with how the research

⁴⁸ See my interpretation of the two discussions of Bennett (pp. 65-66).

questions were addressed by the work, and the original contribution the research has made to the field.

Key Decisions

There are many decisions, both formal and conceptual which contributed to the final work. These were made in the trajectory of my practice based on the developed understanding of diverse materials, various art forms, and so on. They go in parallel with my investigation, both of my haptic encounter with the trauma on the canvas surface, and of the trauma itself.

The original haptic experience occurred during my visual art practice, and it evoked a vision in my mind of ‘a stretch of land, and its earth was rich and dark’ (p. 7). I linked the vision with motherhood and gender regulation in China because earth, which is supposed to provide nutrition, is a widely used metaphor for motherhood. At the same time, earth refers to femininity in Chinese traditional philosophy (p. 33). Drawing on my first-hand comprehension of the connection of haptic sense with vision in the original haptic experience, the exploration commenced in the realm of visual art. Through my reading of theories such as Merleau-Ponty’s body schema, this association has been further validated. The haptic manner of encountering the trauma is employed and is developed into a method – ‘haptic visibility’ – to communicate the sensations, which will be fully unpacked later.

Some elements and materials employed earlier in the research were absent from the final work. This included the imagery from *The Red Detachment of Women* (pp. 112-113) due to its strong political implication and the possibility of de-emphasising fundamental readings of the work – the relevant histories became the backdrop. Meanwhile, as the focus gradually shifted from exploring my mother’s experience to my own psychological experience, the bright and colourful nature of earlier iterations of the work, which reflected the historical film and opera references, was replaced by monochrome to address psychological, uncanny, and inner qualities.

The choice of installation as the form for my final work has been reached by a process of my investigation of the evoked sensations in the original haptic experience, and its connection with the trauma. Experiencing ‘something’ being both intimated and alienated with my body in the original haptic experience compelled me to make ‘something’ tangible yet ‘outside’ of my body. This led to a shift from 2-dimensional works to soft sculptures. In an earlier stage meat was used for its fleshy and bodily associations. This material was rejected in the later stages of the research because of its overt references against my intention to represent the abstraction of the experience. The decision to explore installation relates to a further development – the investigation of the original haptic experience reveals

the spatial aspect of the experience, in front and behind the canvas surface. This development exposed two dimensions: the one in front of the canvas was corporeal, and the other dimension was behind the canvas – which was virtual, as a metaphor of the psychological space of trauma. The expanded experience of space would not be achieved by sculptures alone but by installation.⁴⁹ The combination of video with sculpture in the installation was explored in earlier phases of the research (the Peking opera *The Red Detachment of Women*) as a means to investigate my sexuality and its connection with relevant historical events.⁵⁰ This hybrid sculpture/video form was adopted in my final work because of the immaterial qualities offered by the video which had become apparent to me in earlier iterations. Being immaterial and time-based, it is able to address key concepts, such as presence, absence and repetition. The appropriateness of this hybrid form to my research topic, and the original contribution to the field of this combination will be discussed later, especially in the interpretation of the work and the conclusion section.

Living with the Unassimilable is a non-site specific artwork which refers to the moment in which I was ‘overwhelmed’ by the power of the trauma, being saturated in its affect. The work’s meaning does not relate to the installation space’s architectural setting, or its history, but to elements such as materiality, visual effects, spatial arrangement, and the atmosphere enabling an intimate, private and immersive experience in real time. To achieve this outcome, an enclosed interior site – one in which lighting could be carefully controlled – was required. After considering a variety of potential exhibition spaces, the site was chosen for the intimacy provided by its scale, the aforementioned ability to control lighting, and the curvature of the end wall which enabled desired relationships between the videos and the shadow.⁵¹

Materiality and Immateriality, Making Process, and Spatial Arrangement

Materiality and Immateriality

In Chapter Four, I discussed the works of other artists such as Beuys and Hesse and their employment of materiality to express certain conditions, states of mind, symbolism, etc. Combining sculpture with videos, *Living with the Unassimilable* involves both materiality and immateriality being employed in a symbolic and metaphorical manner. The materials

⁴⁹ See my discussion of installation art in ‘Literature Review’ (pp. 58-60). It also includes discussion about non-site specific installation being termed by Mark Rosenthal as ‘enchantments.’

⁵⁰ The example of combining video with sculpture can be found in several of my previous works listed in the appendix.

⁵¹ The curved wall facilitated this relationship but the latter did not rely on this architectural feature.

used included silk and salt in the sculptural installation. Silk thread was used for the stitched pattern on the suspended silk sculpture, and for installing the sculpture from the ceiling and the floor. Lard and graphite were used in the video when movements, including gently pressing against and caressing on silk, were performed. Immateriality refers to the videos and the shadow, the medium of both is light. While immateriality has its metaphorical indications associated with trauma being a psychological experience, and the implication of presence and absence, the materials have personal associations as well as wider symbolism, with certain properties serving to communicate relevant metaphors.

Silk refers to the particular mother-daughter relationship (p. 116) and indicates the cultural context of the research – it has a strong association with ancient China where it was first developed as a fabric. Both salt and lard are able to preserve and to heal, and working with them in earlier stages of the research provided me with an understanding of their materiality and metaphorical capacity. Salt is a crystalline mineral while lard, is rendered from the fatty tissue of pigs. I first used salt in earlier sculptural works in this research to apply on raw meat to draw the blood out, and neutralise the unpleasant smell (pp. 119-121). Both the preserving and purifying properties of salt provide this material with appropriate associations to encountering trauma as experiencing the abject, and to its catharsis. Other associations are useful: in many cultures, salt is used in rituals to drive out evil, that is, to cleanse what is filthy. Lard, however, is ‘chaotic’ and ‘heterogenous’ – the shape of it is always malleable.

All three materials are closely associated with the human body. Silk is a luxury clothing material that directly touches the skin. While both salt and lard are food and essential for our survival, salt as a mineral is somehow ‘alien’ to us – its crystalline form is visually distinguished from the fleshy being of our body. Haptic experiences with the three materials are different. To touch, salt is dry and granular; lard is soft and greasy, enabling its use as a medium to move the graphite around the silk and fix it in place (Fig. 5.2); and the smoothness of silk provides a sensual haptic experience.

In addition to its mark-making qualities, graphite was employed for its cultural and conceptual implications, which is to refer to writing as a symbol of the patriarchal structure and exertion of power over women in the ancient China.⁵²

Making Process

The principle elements of the work include the suspended silk sculpture and two videos – the first one is performing movements such as pressing against and caressing the surface

⁵² Graphite is the first material recorded for producing ink in ancient China. Participation in activities such as ink painting and calligraphy in ancient China was limited to males and women were excluded (Guest, 2018).

of a piece of silk, and the second one is to perform piercing through a piece of silk with an unthreaded needle.⁵³ Both of the videos refer back to the making process of the sculpture. The following is to explain the making process and its implication.

The performance in the first video⁵⁴ is adapted from my original haptic experience. As the first step, it ‘reconstructs’ the encounter with the trauma, rather than it being a recurrence: the original canvas surface was replaced by a piece of framed silk; lard was mixed with graphite and applied on my hands; I bent my upper torso towards the prone, framed silk, and engaged bodily with the surface using my hands; and, during the process, I closed my eyes to emphasise the haptic sense. In contrast to the durability of canvas, silk’s fragility required a higher level of sensitivity in my bodily contact with it. The evoked sensations therefore were much more subtle, and the evoked emotions were harder to describe in words. While the lard fixed the graphite on the silk, its materiality, which is formless and greasy, registered the performance’s abject quality as a recurrence of the encounter with the trauma.

The movements of my hands in the performance of the first video left marks on the silk from the mixture of lard and graphite (Fig. 5.2). I nailed this piece of silk – I term it ‘the original silk’ – on one side of a wooden frame,⁵⁵ and then another piece of silk on the other side. Due to the semi-transparency of the silk, the marks on the original silk were visible

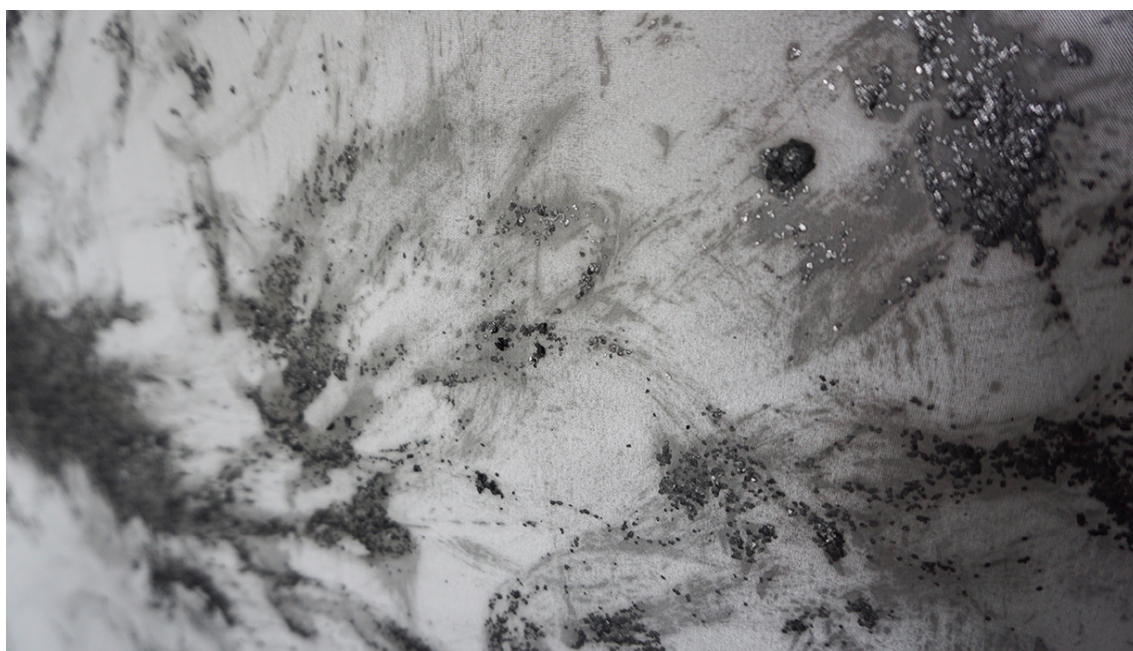


Figure. 5.2. The marks left on the silk after the performance.

⁵³ The two videos can be found respectively at <https://vimeo.com/483270351> and <https://vimeo.com/481145717>.

⁵⁴ The length of this video is 4'35".

⁵⁵ The size of the wooden frame is 190 cm by 130cm, with the thickness of 3 cm.



Figure. 5.3. 'Transferring' the marks to another piece of silk.



Figure. 5.4. 'Transferring to the third piece of silk.'



Figure. 5.5. The stitching patterns on the suspended silk sculpture.

from the side the second piece of silk was nailed on to. Then I ‘transferred’ the marks to the second piece of silk by stitching.

Because the marks were left from the performance which addressed my encounter with the trauma, to stitch on these marks worked as a metaphorical expression of my intention to ‘repair,’ so that to be healed from the traumatic experience. Therefore, the aim of the stitching was not a transformation of the marks on the original piece of silk into a form of embroidery on the second piece of silk. The process concentrated on the act of stitching: it was to perform the act of stitching on the marks – passively, yet obsessively. The finished stitching patterns (Fig. 5.3) on the second piece of silk partially represented, but lacked visual fidelity to the graphite and lard marks left on the original silk.⁵⁶ In the process, the two pieces of silk on the two sides of the wooden frame were separated from each other due to the thickness of the frame. This distance between the two silk pieces was to serve two purposes. Firstly, it caused the resulting stitching patterns on the second piece of silk to be slightly deformed from the marks on the original silk, which referred to the instability both in gender regulation and in inheritance of historical events – how my mother experienced the history and how I experienced it from her. Secondly, due to the distance being kept between the two pieces of silk, the marks – which I intended to stitch on from the side of the second silk – were left untouched. What I was hoping to capture and stitch on during the process were the ‘shadows’ of these marks, separated from me by a certain distance. This is a metaphor for the trauma which is painful, required to be compulsively acted out for healing, while the event which has caused the trauma – *that moment* – was kept untouched since it was suppressed, being veiled from the conscious, and thus absent.

After the stitching process which followed all the marks, I took the original piece of silk away from the wooden frame, and from the same side I nailed the third piece of silk on the wooden frame. Following the same method, the stitching patterns on the second piece of silk were ‘transferred’ to the third piece of silk (Fig. 5.4). This ‘transference’ was mainly to meet the requirement of the scale of the work. After I stitched the two pieces of the silk – the second one and the third one – together, the scale and shape of the suspended silk sculpture related to my body which could be enclosed by and framed within the sculpture’s structure (Fig. 5.8).⁵⁷

The second video performs an act of ‘piercing/stitching.’⁵⁸ Implying the stitching process of the silk sculpture, it is to repeatedly perform a piercing action through a piece of framed silk, yet by an unthreaded needle. Without the thread the stitching act is unrealised, unable to repair. This is a metaphor for the trauma being ‘untreated’ and so catharsis is unobtainable – the corollary of not confronting *that moment*. The action of forming holes in

⁵⁶ This is how my stitching is different from Zhao Zhao’s *Constellation* (2017). See my discussion of his work in page 68.

⁵⁷ The whole process of stitching took around three hundred hours. The contributed amount of labour is another expression of ‘being obsessed.’ Each silk is about body size of 130 cm x 190 cm.

⁵⁸ The length of this video is 3’20”.

the silk, underlines the violent aspect of this act as wounding.

The Spatial Composition of Elements

The silk sculpture is located in the centre of the installation space and is suspended in mid-air and anchored to the floor by silk threads. The original piece of silk, whose surface I pressed my lard and graphite-loaded fingers against, is physically absent from the work. The scale and form of the sculpture is determined by gravity, my body within its structure, and its materiality evokes a bodily and intimate quality (Fig. 5.8). The height of it enables envisaging a 'place' to be inside, an implication of the privacy and interiority of the trauma. The salt composition covering the floor defines the space of the installation and distinguishes it from the area provided for viewing the work. The sculpture casts its shadow on the wall opposite to the entrance, while the two videos are alternatively played with a 3-minute interval on another side of the curved wall.

All the components in the work were associated with each other through the spatial arrangement and the employment of materiality. The silk sculpture relates to the videos both by its materiality aligning with the surfaces in the videos and by its shadow which shares the videos' immaterial and spectral quality. The shadow's hanging nature and potential reference to a vaporous mass, together with the floor being covered by the salt, refers to my personal displacement by potentially suggesting Chinese traditional landscape painting. Each element is integral to the work which is intended to be experienced as a unified whole.



Figure. 5.6. Spatial arrangement of the work.



Figure. 5.7. The work without the video imagery.



Figure. 5.8. The detail of the silk sculpture.

Key Conceptual Elements

The key conceptual elements to the work are respectively presence and absence, and surface, while the latter was employed in multiple senses – as concept, spatial aspects, and as a communication strategy.

The juxtaposition of the two contradictory concepts – presence and absence — is consistent with conceptions of trauma being suppressed in the unconscious, constantly appealing to be healed. Therefore, the repeated acting out of its after-effect makes it permanently remembered, while the event itself is absent.

The work embodied the juxtapositions of the two concepts in several ways. The marks left by the mixture of graphite and lard on the original silk were shed from the work, yet were ‘present’ in the stitching pattern on the silk sculpture and the two videos – one is a record of the touching performance as a part of the making process, while the other one, piercing through the silk surface with an unthreaded needle referred to the stitching process. Involving both materiality and immateriality in the work is another way to register the two concepts as an expression of the psychological dimension of the experience. Meanwhile, the repetitive appearance and disappearance of the video imagery alluded to the recurring surfacing and latency of the trauma.

In the work, surface is an essential element employed in various aspects. Firstly, it works in the installation as a symbol to implicate the status of women’s gender in China’s

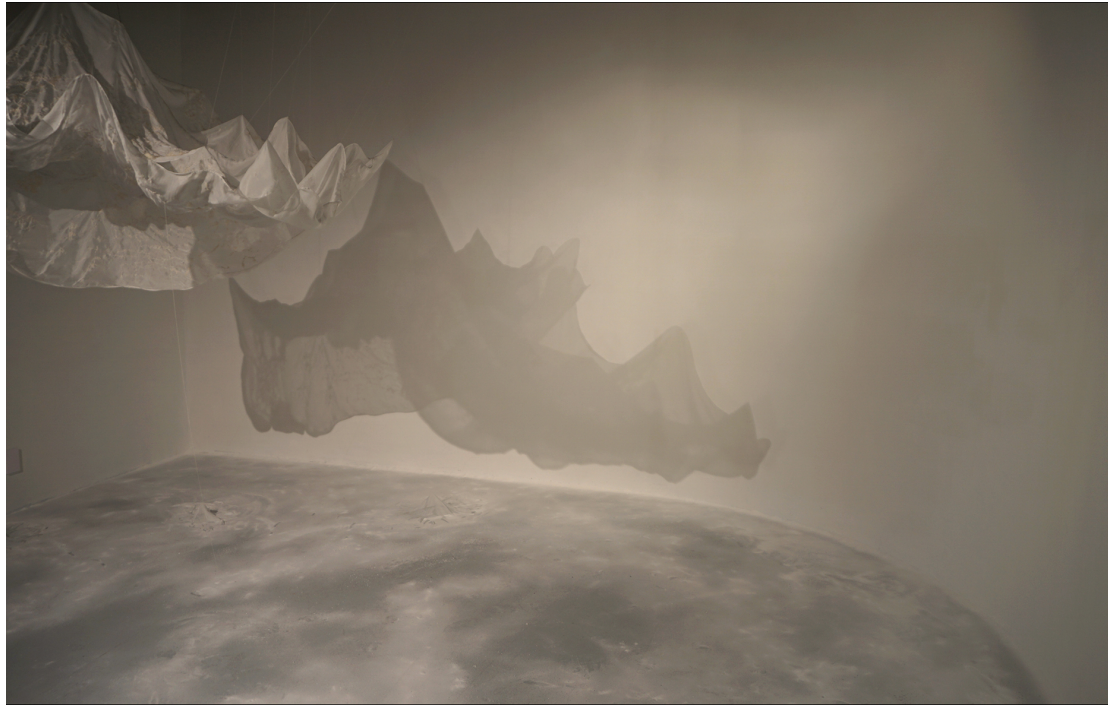


Figure. 5.9. The shadow.

national patriarchal discourse (pp. 30-32). While its materiality conveys the personal and cultural context, the suspended silk sculpture registers women's gender as being a surface to be inscribed upon in this discourse. The suspended form – being subject to gravity – is a metaphor of women's gender being deprived of agency. At the same time, it serves as a metaphor of the 'I' being subject to the overwhelming power of the 'something' (the trauma).

Secondly, surface is employed spatially emerging from my original haptic experience – I sensed 'something' behind the canvas surface. Drawing on Leonardo da Vinci's definition of surface as the interface of the contact between two contiguous things (Stroll, 1988, pp. 40-46), the surface was both the 'interface' on which the conscious and the unconscious were in contact, and the boundary between the two. The concept of boundary plays an important role in achieving a disturbing experience of the work, and is also associated with Kristeva's abjection, which will be discussed later.

Thirdly, the concept of surface should be understood in the act of touching. My earlier discussion demonstrated that touching a surface stimulates sensations. Since our visual perception of objects can be understood as 'touching' the surfaces of objects or images with our gaze, it is possible to embody anticipated emotions or sensations by the modulation of a surface's property we visually 'touch'. Laura Marks offers a theory of 'haptic visuality,' a vision that is embodied and material, as a haptic approach (Marks, 2002, p. xiii). Being drawn 'into a rapport with the other' (Marks, 2002, p. 1), the viewer is in an intimate contact with the images 'not through the eyes alone but along the skin' (Marks, 2002, p. 2). For

Manning, such a contact has the potential to involve the body of the viewer in perceiving the work, and to turn it into a 'thinking and perceiving body.'⁵⁹ Through Bennett's perspective that art dealing with trauma is 'generating sensation' (Bennett, 2005, p. 28), I convey to viewers of the work the emotions and sensations aligning with Marks's theory of haptic visuality. This communication strategy is realised by the modulation of the lighting, the visual mode of the videos, and the employment of the tactile quality of the materials such as silk and salt. They are to 'stylise' the visual 'touch' on the work's surfaces so that to embody the evoked sensations in the original haptic experience.

The Interpretation of the Work

The two modes of the work – before/after the video imagery appeared respectively refer to the trauma that was latent and was encountered. Before the video imagery appeared, the space was one of potential registering the trauma as latent (Fig. 5.7). The psychological dimension of the space was addressed by an ethereal and otherworldly atmosphere created through the semi-transparent silk, its shadow, the salt which caught the light and glistened on the floor, the low lighting, its orchestration in the space, and the monochromatic quality of the work. The lighting and the materiality rendered the profile of the sculpture indistinct and the shadow of the silk sculpture on the wall was gently configured by soft tonal variations rather than high contrast. The embroidered patterns both on the silk and within the shadow could be discerned yet were undefined. Such an effect was intended to induce the viewers to visually 'touch' the silk sculpture and the embroidery patterns on the silk and the shadow, thus engaging with the materiality of the silk and its sensual aspect and lightness, the spectral quality of the shadow, and the entangled, unsettled sentiments these embroidery patterns bear.

As the main colour tone in a Chinese funeral, the whiteness of the work could refer to lifelessness⁶⁰ to serve that the trauma is both absent and permanently present – that is, being 'out of the time.' This sense of time was also conveyed by the motionless sculpture suspended in the mid-air. It was to create an impression of stillness as an embodiment of 'being frozen,' in which the apprehension of the lightness of silk is indispensable. The subtle tensility of the six silk threads connected to it, thus preventing some parts of the sculpture drooping naturally under gravity, increased the impression of being 'out of the time.' As a portrayal of me 'being frozen' at the traumatic moment, it also addressed my revisiting of the memory – after more than twenty years, it felt like the time stood still 'there' and

⁵⁹ This expression adopts Manning's argument that a touching body is thinking and sensing (Manning, 2006).

⁶⁰ The employment of whiteness to address pertinent qualities can be found in other Chinese artists' practice, like Lei Yan's *How Do I Protect You?* (2009) which was discussed in 'Literature Review' (p. 69).

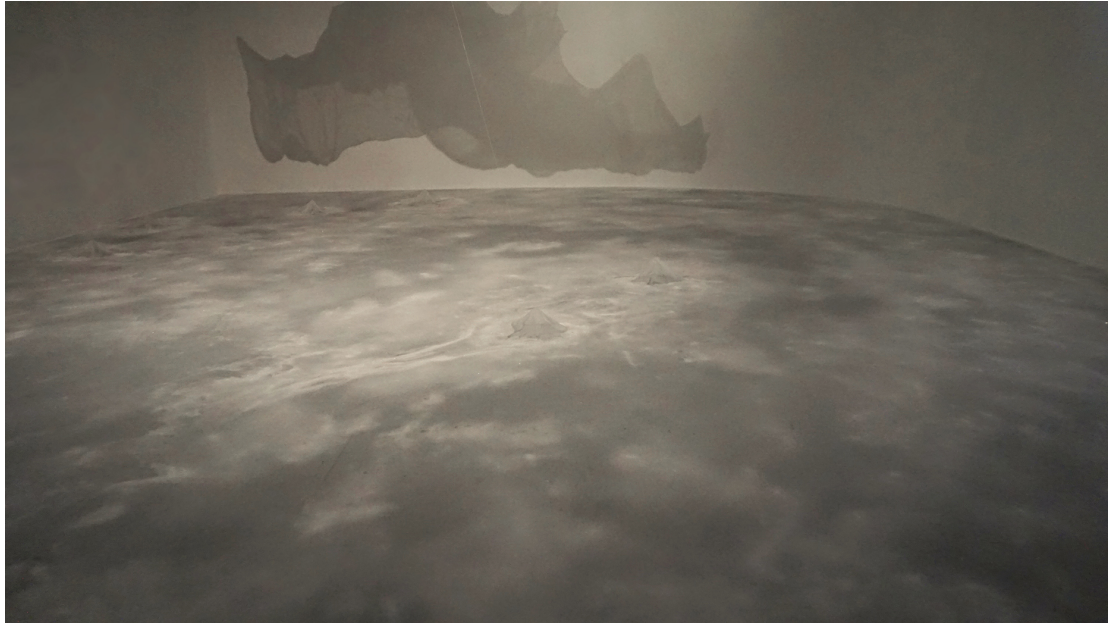


Figure. 5.10. The salt composition on the floor.

everything was well-preserved, yet lifeless.

The salt composition (Fig. 5.10) was also to evoke a haptic engagement through its potentially tactile quality. Unevenly arranged on the floor, viewers could potentially imagine pressing their feet on the granular surface of the salt composition and moving the granules around, experiencing the dry, and soothing quality, and the sound produced gently ‘caressing’ the eardrums. The haptic engagement with the materiality of salt and silk through vision, which is sensually disarming and smoothing, also operates to embody the uncanny sensations (*jouissance*).

As described previously in reference to the original haptic experience, each time I pressed against the canvas, an ominous feeling gradually got stronger, as if ‘something’ dangerous was slowly and silently approaching close to me (p. 6). I call this process the trauma’s ‘looming up.’ It was expressed in the two videos appearing then fading in the space at a very slow pace. Linking the sensation of time in sensing luminosity by visually ‘touching’ the surface, it aligns with Peter Eisenman’s ‘blurring action’ (Eisenman, 2007, pp. 109-110). The extended experience of duration can be said to conceptually ‘thicken’ the surface on which the trauma emerged. The experience of encountering the trauma meant the once coherent sense of time and space in me was disturbed. Therefore, it was a process of the space ‘becoming’ in both of its temporal and spatial conditions, and the viewers’ experience of the work being disturbed.

Following the appearance of the video imagery, the muted lighting effect, and the materiality of the silk in the videos, the wall was turned into the surface – the interface on which the conscious and the unconscious were in contact, and the latent trauma was encountered. The imagery of the videos, which was intimate and detailed, isolated it from

narrative functions and impelled the viewer's gaze to move on the surface of the images like caressing fingers. Obviously, this sensation is not the same as actual touching. Shooting both of the videos from behind of the fabric I performed on, enhanced such a tactile quality of the imagery. The surface is gently pressed into and tenderly caressed by the fleeting hands which are partially obscured due to the angle, thus emphasising the tactile contact on the silk and underlining the sensuality of the touching. Meanwhile, the sharp point of the needle which caught the light was exposed when it pierced through. The hands in action are therefore touching the space; the unthreaded needle, piercing through the wall created an illusion of something outside, interrupting, and intruding violently into the exhibition space. Together with the close-range vision, to experience the images is *as if* the skin is being touched, and being pierced through, therefore embodying a haptic approach to the unspoken and conflicting sensations in encountering the trauma. While at the same time, the surreal mode of the images registered the psychological dimension of the encounter relating to, or happening in, the mind rather than in the body. The holes made by the needle evoked the interiority of the space that preserves the trauma.

There was a discernible connection between the static sculpture and the moving imagery through the shared materiality of the two, and the suggested alignment of the piercing needle in the video with the sculpture as a piece of sewing work. It was to introduce an association of the exterior intrusion with the interior and once static space. This is the moment the permanently remembered, yet latent trauma was activated. The suppressed memory is only to be experienced in the present through the embodied sensations. The wall, once solid, was turned into a skin-like surface, and exterior was in contact with, and intruded into the interior when the hands touched the silk and the needle pierced through.

Kristeva described this sense of time and space as experiencing the abject, being 'at the border,' and aligns it with 'filthy,' since 'filthy' 'particularly, represents the object jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin' (Kristeva, 1982, p. 69). Such an association between filthy and boundary conforms with Mary Douglas who regards that 'pollution is ... to occur ... where the lines of structure ... are clearly defined' (Douglas, 1969, as cited in Kristeva, 1982, p. 69). The work, which at the moment was both spatially and temporally 'at the border,' verged on turning into the filthy. This sense is also embodied in the work's materiality of the two qualities – fragility and ephemerality. The silk sculpture has the semblance of being ephemeral due to its fragility. The salt composition on the floor is movable and transformable due to the materiality of the salt – it absorbs moisture and its state changes according to variations in the atmosphere of the viewing space. Meanwhile, light, as the medium both of the shadow and of the two videos, is ephemeral and its modulation rendered the whole space indistinct enhancing the sense of uncertainty. While both qualities refer to a material condition of being 'at the edge' of transforming, or disappearing, they work as metaphors of the fugitiveness and evasiveness I sensed in my

encounter with the trauma, the sensations of which were nonetheless as strong as a sudden ‘thunder’ (Kristeva, 1982, p. 9). Such a contrast is symbolised especially through the materiality of the silk in the form of the threads being both extremely strong yet vulnerable due to their thinness.

On reflection, I came to the realisation that the inclusion of salt in the work had two purposes. The first purpose associates closely with my previous practice of using salt to draw the blood out and neutralise the unpleasant smell of raw meat. Implying ‘cleansing’ in many cultures, salt is a material to expel the abject that ‘takes the form of that which is defiled or polluted, therefore evil and to be excluded and purified’ (Kearney, 2001, p. 491). This could be interpreted in terms of purifying the abject. Therefore, when the video imagery was on, the salt was activated by the light and movement in the videos. Secondly, the salt operated as a boundary between the spectators’ space and the space of the installation.⁶¹

⁶¹ A further discussion about the significance of the salt operating as a boundary is in page 108 and page 109.



Figure. 5.11. Video still of the touching performance 0'56".



Figure. 5.12. Video still of the touching performance 1'01".



Figure. 5.13. Video still of the touching performance 2'27".



Figure. 5.14. Video still of the touching performance 3'11".



Figure. 5.15. Video still of the touching performance 3'46".



Figure. 5.16. Video still of the touching performance 3'55".



Figure. 5.17. Video still of the touching performance 4'00".



Figure. 5.18. Video still of the touching performance 4'14".

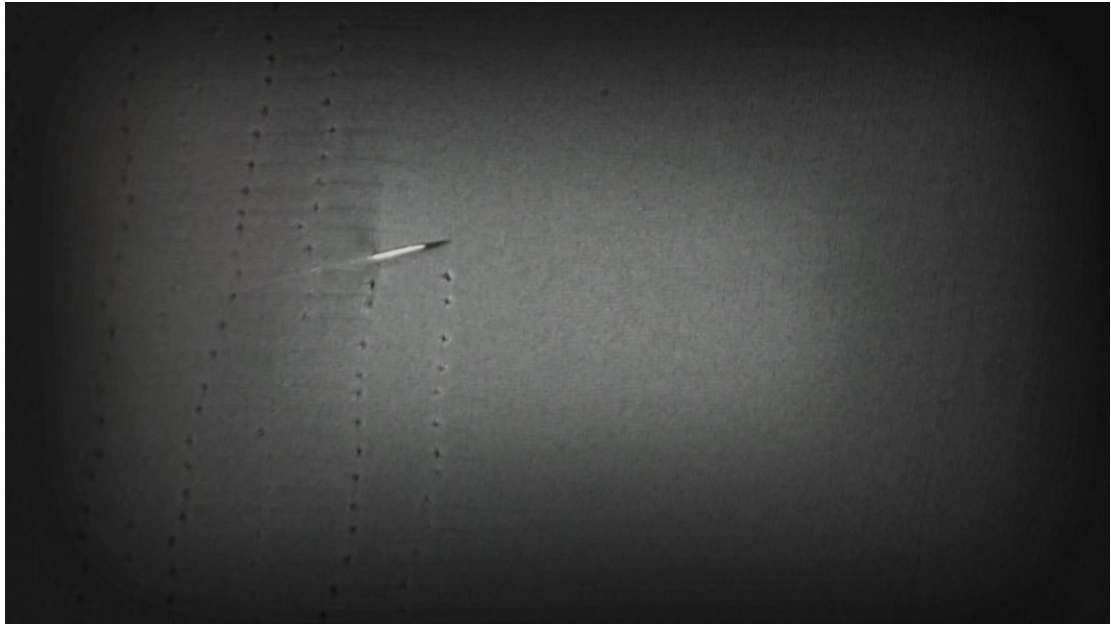


Figure. 5.19. Video still of the unthreaded needle piercing through the silk 1'53".

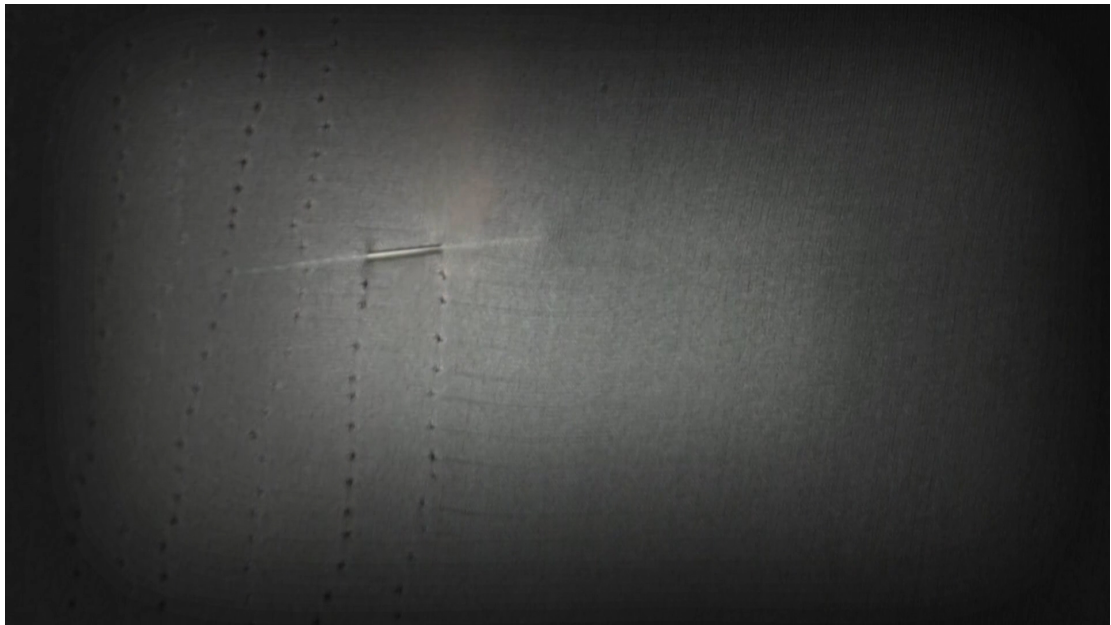


Figure. 5.20. Video still of the unthreaded needle piercing through the silk 2'06".

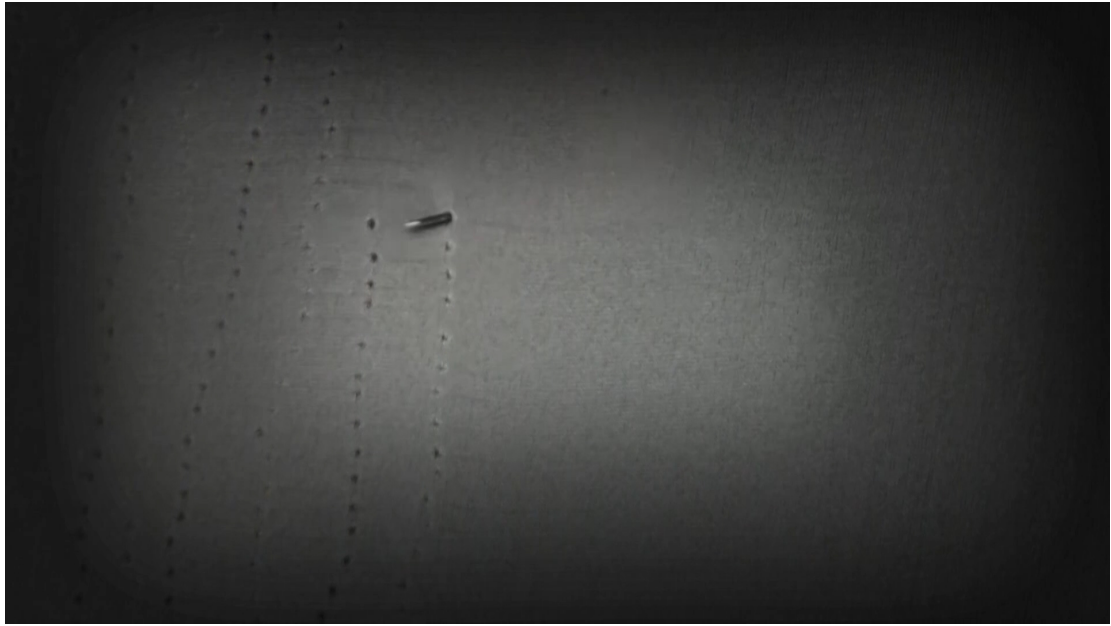


Figure. 5.21. Video still of the unthreaded needle piercing through the silk 2'14".

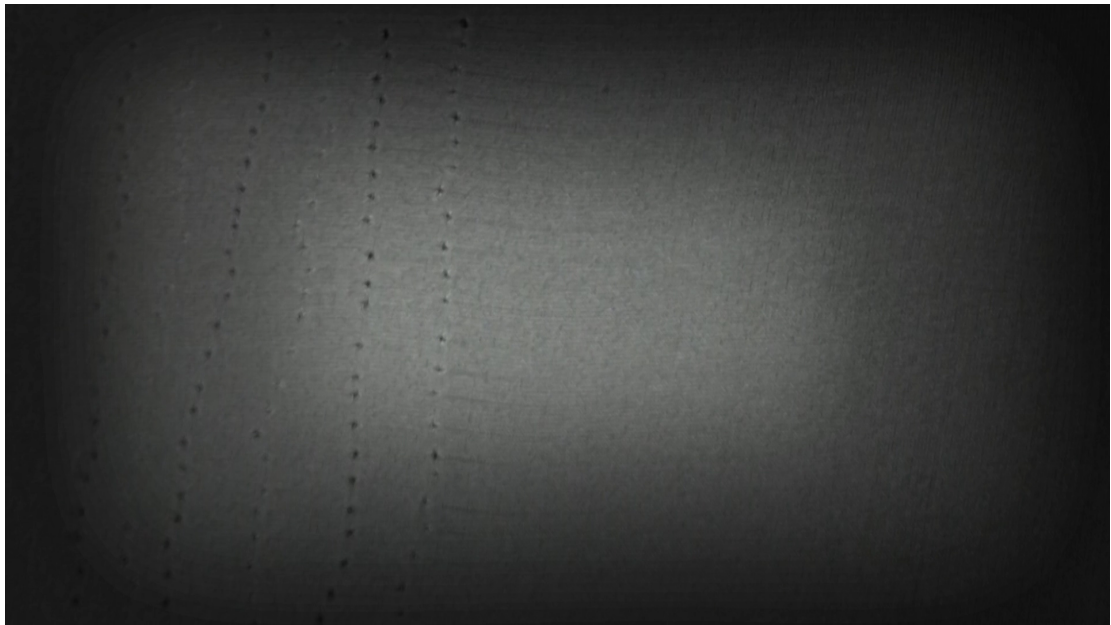


Figure. 5.22. Video still of the unthreaded needle piercing through the silk 3'02".

Repetition – Approaching the Absent

Repetition, an important element in *Living with the Unassimilable* was used to echo with my feeling after the original haptic experience that I would re-perform the same act again if faced with a similar surface, compulsively yet without knowing why. According to Freud, the compulsive recurrence of certain acts is one symptom of trauma which is termed ‘fixation.’ Unable to be processed in the first place, trauma, is ‘something’ constantly appealing for healing, stimulating repetitive acts to correct a painful past while the event itself is absent. Thus, repetition is closely associated with the absence – *that moment* – of the trauma.

In the work, the shadow is one form of repetition (of the trauma). Being cast on the wall, it addressed an absent quality by its presence. Another form of repetition is the looping of the video imagery. By repeating the videos with intervals, viewers recurrently encountered the latent trauma, its looming process, through embodied sensations. The repetition is an endeavour to approach to ‘something’ and to grasp it, however, it is contrary to the ephemerality of the work. The oscillation between the two sentiments was expressed in the video of stitching as well by having the stitching process focused on making the second column of holes from the left side of the image. The even pace of the repeated act and the resultant rigid pattern of the holes in parallel lines accentuates the repetition which is conducted both passively (without thread) and obsessively. Meanwhile, the act and the pattern provides a sense of sequence which creates an expectation that the whole surface may end up being pierced through. While the stitching itself – due to the unthreaded needle – is an ineffective ‘repair,’ the repeatedly played process stops in the same area each time, leaving the right side of the fabric intact and incomplete. This renders the act both in vain and obsessive in its repetition.

I term the work’s approach to the absence – *that moment* in my traumatic experience – as a performative one due to its alignment with Butler’s performativity theory (pp. 28-29) even though her theory focuses on gender identity. In Butler’s performativity theory, to substantiate gender identity is to repetitively perform out along certain norms. During this process, gender identity is gradually formed along the trajectory. Gender identity is something intangible, and it lacks a subject as the agency to conduct the performance. Therefore, it calls for duration of the repetition to establish ontological effects.

As discussed previously, a trauma is caused by an overwhelming event being suppressed in the unconscious and being absent from the conscious. Therefore, to get access to the absent event is key for catharsis of trauma. In *Living with the Unassimilable*, my approach shares similarity with Butler’s performativity theory. Instead of directly referring to what happened at *that moment*, the installation approached the absent event by performing out the sensations experienced in the haptic encounter with the trauma. Being a ‘void’ in my

memory and inaccessible by language, the absent event is only approachable through the sensations. Because sensations are only to be experienced in the present, it forecasts the fragility and ephemerality of the result. Yet, sensations have the effect to ‘force us to think’ (Deleuze, 1972, p. 161). In my case, the contemplation and investigation of the evoked sensations in the original haptic experience led to the repressed memory, the trauma, in the past. Therefore, the process needs to be repeated so as to maintain the effect, to proximately approach to what it intends – the absent in the memory. This implication of going back to a point in the past is also embodied in the two videos’ relationship to the sculpture. While the original silk was physically absent from the work, the two videos that dealt with the making process of the silk sculpture caused the final work to always refer back to the moment of its becoming.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this exegesis, I proposed three questions for the research. What follows is my exposition of how the work has addressed the following questions.

Firstly, how can cultural, historical, and gender-specific, intergenerational trauma be expressed through an art practice?

This question is allied with Bennett’s argument that trauma-related art requires an intelligible discursive framework (p. 65). In the context of my research, the framework comprised the above four concerns in the question. The cultural aspect in my research, being associated with the gender-specific aspect, refers to China’s patriarchal structure and the role of women’s gender formation in it, while the historical aspect concerns the shifting gender policies during the historical events in such a structure. The intergenerational aspect concerns the traumatic experience with my mother against the backdrop of the relevant historical shifts. Therefore, the four aspects are deeply entangled with each other.

The four aspects are embodied in the work’s expression of the trauma through its visual representation created by the spatial arrangement of the components which refers to the traditional Chinese landscape painting, and the materials of silk and graphite as symbols of the cultural background. The hanging composition, and reference to human scale and bodily form of the silk sculpture made it a metaphor for being subject to the power of the trauma. It also embodied the concept of surface which refers to the cultural and historical aspects, while the silk addresses both the cultural and the intergenerational concerns. In the two videos which reconstructed the encounter with the trauma, the employment of silk and graphite embedded the experienced and embodied sensations within the topic’s cultural context as well as intergenerational connection.

Secondly, how might this visual and material art practice employ performative,

material and haptic qualities – specifically fragility, ephemerality and surface – to represent the moment of encountering the trauma?

For Caruth (1996), trauma, closely relating to the initial loss, is a metaphor of the limitations of representation which is, generally, a construction of meaning through language, signs and symbols (Kidd, 2015, p. 4). The visual art form of my work, being ‘more ambiguous, suggestive,’ and ‘not pinned down in language’ (Kidd, 2015, pp. 26-27), is an appropriate vehicle to express the experience of trauma. The work represents the moment of encountering the trauma through indirectly referring to its context (as discussed previously) and through embodied relevant sensations by employing the qualities mentioned above.

The employment of haptic and material qualities in the work draws on my understanding of the haptic sense’s immediate engagement with our perception. Here, Marks’s theories pertaining to haptic viscosity were useful in determining the orchestration of lighting, the imagery mode of the videos, the employment of the tactile quality of materials, including silk and salt, to communicate sensations relating to the trauma. Fragility and ephemerality were embodied through the work’s materiality, its installation structure, the media of the videos, and the shadow. The gloomily-lit space further enhanced such qualities. The potential experience of the two qualities is to express the fugitiveness and elusiveness of my encounter with the trauma.

Surface is also engaged as the concept of boundary to express the encounter with the trauma aligned with my original haptic experience, in which I sensed ‘something’ behind the surface. This aspect is represented through the spatial arrangement of the components such as the videos, the shadow on the wall, and the salt-composition on the floor.

The performative quality is associated with the trauma’s revelation – acting out (p. 38) through the evoked sensations in the original haptic experience. This quality is embodied by the work having the potential to evoke relevant sensations through gestures, materiality, and immateriality. Meanwhile, the trauma appealed for a recurrence of the experience to approach to *that moment* which was absent. Therefore, the quality also allies with Butler’s performativity theory and is represented in the videos being repetitively played to iterate the experience of relevant sensations, while the shadow of the silk sculpture is both a repetitive element and addresses the absent. Being contextualised in the particular discourse, to repeatedly perform out the sensations is to approach to the absent event – *that moment*.

Thirdly, how can catharsis be embodied in an integrated visual arts language?

In my research, catharsis requires the unspoken experience to be aesthetically expressed and the suppressed emotions to be released (p. 61). To embody catharsis, besides contextualising the expression and evoking relevant sensations, the work also needs to address the two aspects of experiencing trauma, presence and absence. The two were registered through the original piece of silk both being absent and being ‘present’ in the

work, and through the materiality and immateriality, and the video imagery's repeatedly appearing and disappearing in the space.

At the same time, three conditions needed to be met – the trauma being latent, the trauma's looming up, and the encounter with the trauma. The work embodied the three conditions through the visual and material arts language integrating time-based videos with sculpture. Two different experiences of the work – when the video imagery was invisible and when it was visible, respectively referred to experiencing the trauma being latent, and it being encountered. The video imagery gradually fading in and out links the sensation of time in the sense of luminosity. The extended experience of duration echoed with the experience of the trauma's gradually looming up. Through the juxtaposition of videos with sculpture, the work achieved the embodiment of catharsis addressing the three aspects. This links back to the title of the work – *living with* – and its connection to catharsis – releasing, understanding, and coming to terms with *the unassimilable*.

As an artwork, *Living with the Unassimilable* was intended to achieve an individual catharsis by expressing what once was unspeakable and thus releasing the associated negative emotions. It also aimed to reach to a wider sphere by 'transforming' an inner, individual, and psychological experience into an art language to communicate with viewers of the experience through their engagement with the work.

Being a 'void' in memory, trauma is a psychological experience full of contradictory elements. It is both intimate and strange to the 'I.' The experience of it is an act both to heal and to wound, while the event that caused trauma is permanently present, yet absent. Encountering trauma, according to Kristeva, is to express the abject which is to be 'at the border' both temporally and spatially (Kristeva, 1982). Accordingly, the richness and complexity of my experience of the trauma, and the altered sense of reality both temporally and spatially requires an art form to provide a multisensorial and omni-spatial art experience. Installation art allows various media, material qualities, and spatial arrangements to be combined as an integrated whole, and to configure and juxtapose diverse experiences of time, space and sensations. It is also able to transform the whole exhibition space. This comprehensiveness makes installation art an appropriate art form for my research.

A decision was made during the exhibition which relates to how the work should be engaged with. Firstly, viewers were encouraged to enter into the area being covered by the salt composition on the floor to physically interact with the work. Such an interaction was to enable a physical experience of the work's materiality, and to serve the expression of 'living with.' In the end, I decided to change the form of engagement to one of experiencing the work from outside the physical parameters of the salt-covered floor.

While this decision was based on a practical consideration concerning viewer safety, the work's fragility and the space's dim lighting, most essentially, it relies on a further

understanding of the research topic. As discussed previously, installation art is an art form converging concerns of numerous relationships (p. 59). Therefore, the work is the orchestration of its various components including the manner of viewers' engagement with the work. *Living with the Unassimilable* is an artistic embodiment of the experience of trauma which was felt as a threat of 'losing ... [the] whole life' (Kristeva, 1982, p. 55). Even with such tremendous power which disturbed the sense of reality, it is, after all, a psychological experience which needs to be addressed in the work. The employed haptic visuality, and the omni-spatial arrangement realised an intimate and immersive experience of the work. At the same time, the physical distance set between viewers and the work rendered the experience with it physically unreachable, and the perception of the work, therefore, required the activation of the viewers' imaginations. This manner of engagement, conveyed how the trauma was approached in a sensorial and psychological manner. The lack of physical access equates metaphorically to the impossibility, and the engagement with the work may provide the opportunity for someone else experiencing trauma in a similar manner as I have, to live with, not without, that which cannot be assimilated.

The original contribution of the research is firstly located in its topic. The topic, involving first-hand trauma, intergenerational transmission of the Cultural Revolution's gender policy and its impact – especially on women – against the shifting social backdrop after the period, has not been investigated in contemporary Chinese art. Secondly, the art language *Living with the Unassimilable* achieved makes its original contribution to the field of trauma/catharsis-related, hybrid sculpture/video installation art. The work of three artists – He Chengyao, Doris Salcedo, and Eva Hesse – were analysed in detail. The works chosen are examples of their wider practice related to trauma/catharsis (He and Salcedo), and materiality and ephemerality (Hesse). While other artists have been concerned with both trauma and installation art (including Louise Bourgeois), this investigation focuses on Salcedo's work because, besides trauma and installation, both my research and Salcedo's art involve considerations of political events.

While He's and Salcedo's works overlap with mine in a number of areas, one obvious difference is how trauma has been addressed. Both artists refer to the trauma in a relatively direct way either by 'reprising' the event (He), or by using objects that once belonged to, or were a part of, the deceased (Salcedo). My work addressed the trauma by evoking relevant sensations without direct reference to the event. Both Hesse's work and mine include the employment of materiality and ephemeral qualities, and the experience of both of our works are potentially 'disturbing.' However, each of the elements are employed in different ways or to meet different ends.

Meanwhile, the art forms of the three artists are different from my use of a hybrid sculpture/video installation, which also distinguishes *Living with the Unassimilable* from other installation artworks in the field of trauma/catharsis-related art. The combination of the

two art forms enables the work to orchestrate static and moving elements, diverse material qualities and media to evoke temporal, spatial, and visual sensations to communicate with viewers.

One example is how the work reflected the moment when the temporal and spatial sense was disturbed in the original haptic experience, which is also one of the main challenges for the work to achieve catharsis – to express the unspeakable feelings. This sense of being disturbed was embodied through the combination of static sculpture and moving video imagery. The static sculpture alone, by its suspended form and materiality, realised a timeless quality, yet the experience of its tranquillity was punctuated by the moving imagery slowly emerging into the space. At the same time, the material sense of the wall as a solid and coherent boundary was disturbed by the visual effect of it gradually becoming a skin-like surface, ‘pierced’ by the needle intruding from ‘outside.’ The combination of the static sculpture and the moving imagery, and of the two material qualities were indispensable for conveying the moment.

This combination of the two art forms is another instance of the work’s original contribution to the field of trauma/catharsis-related, hybrid sculpture/video installation art. By the juxtaposition of static sculpture and time-based videos, the installation expressed the contradictory experience of time and space, the trauma that felt both intimate and alienated, and both present and absent. It allowed the psychological dimension of encountering the trauma which once was unspeakable to be uttered. At the same time, the work communicated to viewers by directly engaging with sensations. Its abstract form, materiality, and manner of engagement endowed the work with the potential to convey not only the artist’s intentions but also to evoke their own related memories.

The value of the research should also be viewed in its being rooted in Chinese social-political reality, which is for Zhang Xiaogang ‘so different from the rest of the world’ (Pollack, 2018, p. 25), yet, as curator Weng Xiaoyu observes, is ‘often influenced and shaped by different cultural contacts’ (Pollack, 2018, p. 181). It means that the life experience in China is not isolated from the impact from other areas in the world, even though it is undoubtedly distinguished from them.⁶² For this research, the influence of another culture on a Chinese life experience is also realised by being physically ‘displaced’ as this investigation was conducted in New Zealand. The distance allowed for reflection, along with a gradual loosening of the previous restraints back in China, eventually resulted in the discovery of the trauma. The research itself could be interpreted as ‘hybrid,’ being born among diverse cultural and social-political impacts.

Gender inequality and repression in China being investigated in this research is not unique but a life experience shared by many women in other parts of the world. The under-representation of female artists’ voices and contributions is a global phenomenon including

⁶² My analysis of Chinese historical events relevant to my research also illustrates such an entanglement (pp. 42-49).

in the realm of contemporary Chinese art. The research inserts an individual narrative into the official record of the history, and also legitimates ‘female experience previously invisible in historiography and calls attention to women’s art formerly on the canonical margins’ (Cui, 2016, p. 9).

Such a gesture towards the omnipresent patriarchal system casts light on the core consideration of the research, which is concerned with trauma and catharsis. Along with Kristeva’s abjection, I understand trauma as ‘shattering violence ... that ... is inscribed in a symbolic system’ (Kristeva, 1982, p. 3). It is a wound needing to heal and calls for catharsis, yet its power tears a fissure leading to a reality that was once concealed and potentially offers another possibility of constructing meaning besides what is given. I acknowledge this research and what I have gained from it is a legacy of what I perceive as my mother’s struggle and her experiences as a woman – a possibility of resistance, which may be neither loud nor striking, but is able to invoke a subverting body – a touch of/on a surface.

APPENDIX

Developing a Visual and Material Practice towards *Living with the Unassimilable*

This chapter reviews earlier PhD works through which I developed the appropriate visual and material language to convey my ideas by the exploration of material, form, colour, etc. These explorations have led me to the final work – *Living with the Unassimilable*. The chapter is divided into 4 stages in which I consider the problems I encountered and what I have gained from each practice. In each stage, some works being selected from my previous practices are interpreted because they illustrate the development of the project in terms of its conceptual and/or material advances.

01 *The Red Detachment of Women* – the ‘Oscillation’ April – May 2017

Model opera was a highly politicised propaganda art form during the Cultural Revolution. It was considered both revolutionary and modern in its themes and its art forms, such as musical features, when compared with traditional Chinese operas. The main characters of the operas were fictional heroes that were totally malleable to the party’s demands. To exert ideological control and construction, the party encouraged people to continuously copy these characters in their firm revolutionary spirit and complete loyalty to the party through the people’s mimetic performance. I regard them as imposing a heavy influence on my mother’s identity in her youth, therefore, an effective means to engage with the discourse my mother once experienced. *The Red Detachment of Women* is one of the eight officially approved model operas. A part of my practice has focused upon the investigation of this opera mainly for the following two reasons.

Firstly, it is based on a real event in history, and the female protagonist – a fictional character – is a combination of the women involved in the actual event. What these women experienced in real life vividly revealed the intersection of political and patriarchal powers imposed upon Chinese women.⁶³ Secondly, to accord with diverse political and ideological needs, the opera has undergone several adaptations in various art forms, including a movie,

⁶³ Some parts of articles I found online (in China) in the early stages of this research about the experience of the female protagonist have been deleted. The article (in Chinese) which I can find that still keeps the part about the female soldiers being ill-treated during the Cultural Revolution is from Phoenix New Media (Phoenix New Media, 2009).

a ballet and an opera⁶⁴ (Kong, 2014). Each adaption is a manifestation of the construction of women's identity and sexuality.

In May 1931, in Hainan Province, a company of 103 women was formed to fight for the Communist Party against the Kuomintang government. In the spring of 1933, they were defeated and the company was disbanded. Most of those who survived the battles were imprisoned by the Kuomintang until the two forces began to cooperate in 1938 against a common enemy, the Japanese. After that, being characterised as 'communists' or 'shared wives' (women who were the common property of the male soldiers in the army) or being 'too old' to marry, some of them married Kuomintang members or became concubines of local gentries. During the Cultural Revolution, most of the former members of the female company were labelled as 'traitors' for 'being released by Kuomintang' or 'being involved in a politically incorrect marriage' and were miserably tortured. In 2000, the memorial hall of *The Red Detachment of Women* was founded in Hainan province for patriotic education. In 2014, Lu Yexiang, the last soldier, died.

In 1956, a record of the female company was found by Liu Wenzhuo, an officer in the Hainan Military Command. After interviewing several women who once were cadres of the company, he wrote a report named *The Red Detachment of Women* (1957).

Between 1961 and 1972, *The Red Detachment of Women* was adapted in film and operas. In 1961, a movie was produced under the same name, depicting the story of a woman, enslaved by a cruel and wealthy landlord, who became a loyal soldier in a small unit of Communist troops. The fictional heroine, Wu Qionghua, was based on the women in Liu Wenzhuo's report. The most notable invention in the cast was a male character, Hong Changqing, the party representative who acted as the saviour and a spiritual mentor for the heroine and replaced the real female role. A subtle romantic element between the two in its draft was later cut to fit the current political atmosphere in which any individual's emotional expression was labelled as unacceptable 'bourgeoisie taste.'

In 1964, the story was adapted for ballet. This art form was promoted as a token of the friendship with the Soviet Union in the 1950s. In this potentially more sexually provocative art form, the erotic female body became the most politically problematic element in this adaption. In 1972, *The Red Detachment of Women* was adapted for the Peking opera (Fig. 6.1.1). The heroine's first name was changed from Qionghua (Jade Flower) to Qinghua (Clean China) to imbue the heroine with a stronger political expression. The male party representative was further highlighted.

⁶⁴ It was performed by the Peking opera.



Figure. 6.1.1. Schumaker, Byron. (1972). A scene from *The Red Detachment of Women*.

White House photo.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Revolutionary_opera.jpg

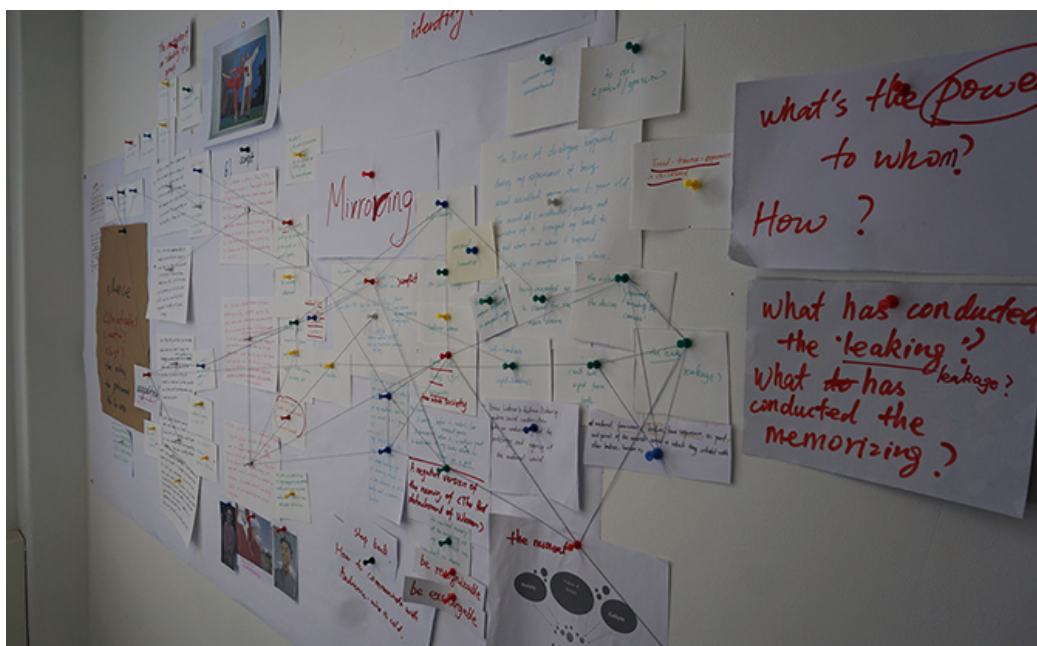


Figure. 6.1.2. Mapping the mirroring structure between some of my personal experiences and those of the female protagonist's life experience.

The Work



Figure. 6.1.3. Cui, Liang. (2018). *The Red Detachment of Women – the 'Oscillation.'*
[Colour photograph, silk, paperboard, a freeze frame from *The Red Detachment of Women*, the film of its Peking opera version in 1972].



Figure. 6.1.4. The silky surface I made for the work in 2018.

In this work (Fig. 6.1.3) I chose the moment of the heroine declaring her fervent self-devotion to the party and projected a freeze-frame of it on a blurry surface made of strings of silk (Fig. 6.1.4). Silk is a material relating to my mother and is associated with a significant part of her life from a teenager to a young woman before my birth when she worked in a silk factory from 1972 to 1982. It also bears a personal and intimate connection with my mother who used to make silk summer dresses for herself and for me. My mother is very fond of silk for its elegance and smoothness. Sometimes, she would ask me to share her appreciation of her collection of silk. To me, it is one of her expressions of her sexuality connected to the pursuit of feminine beauty. Though this image belonged to a past more than forty years ago, it is still able to evoke a sort of traumatic emotion in me because of its close association to the Cultural Revolution. I can sense its traces in my mother's behaviour to me.

By covering this woman's face and patriotic expression in the artwork, I intended to undermine this historical and cultural past and thus assuage my contrasting emotions: a combination of repulsion and a sense of undeniable connection. Being partially absorbed into the depth of the surface, this blurred figure is about to be liberated from her designated roles, to be opened to new possibilities. The 'blurring', which mitigates the discomfort she caused me, puts her at the edge of being emptied of her individuality and being unrecognisable, except for her uniform, a gesture of both power and conformity. A structure is revealed here, a lasting oscillation between my inclination to disavow a traumatic fragment of the past, and my awareness of its irreducibility.

02 Shifting to making 3-D sculptures

April – July 2018

There was a short period before shifting to sculpture, during which I explored the concept of 'surface' through performance and stitching on canvas. When I pressed on or pierced through the surface, the 'depth' I felt from these actions – both from the dented surface and the act of piercing – led to an intention to 'embody' the spatial dimension of my encounter with the surface and caused a shift from working in two-dimensions to three-dimensions.

The sculptures that I made in this series were all 'organic' in their shapes and potentially reminiscent of the human body. In some of my notes written at this time, I commented the process of making was to constantly approach 'something' which 'I feel inside and which relates to my own body and sexuality.' This led to an attempt to 'build a body to express how I felt my body in my initial encounter with the surface.' A series of brightly coloured sculptures followed influenced by my previous practice concerned with the model opera and this new interest in the body (along with its fluids and flesh).

Two directions came from these practices, one concerned with organs and the other with sculptures in which the use of meat was central conceptually and physically. In this stage there was a focus on an exploration of spatial composition and materiality (including the use of meat, blood, and salt). This was the first time I had used salt as an art material and initially it was for its preservative qualities, extending the life of the meat, in addition to absorbing blood issuing from the meat. Though it was not a primary material at that stage, the experience with it 'left' its trace on me and is embodied in my final work for my examination.

1. Organs (May 2018)



Figure. 6.2.1. Cui, Liang. (2018). *Organs*
[Sculpture/video installation. canvas, plastic sheet, foam, acrylic, footage from *The Red Detachment of Women*, the film of its Peking opera version in 1972].



Figure. 6.2.2. Detail of *Organs*.

The materials used in *Organs* include canvas, foam stuffing, wires, painted plastic sheet, and meat, as well as fishing line to hang the sculptures. I sewed the canvas into some 'organic' shaped containers, and filled them with foam. Afterwards, they were painted with bright colours because of my intention of making 'some organs that look like there is something wrong with them.'⁶⁵ The colouring also refers to the model opera and propaganda art during the Cultural Revolution.

Plastic sheet was used to mimic pustule-like growths, a bodily phenomenon representing injury and healing. This 'flashy' effect of this work was influenced by the Political Pop Art in China, mainly represented by Wang Guangyi. Yet the pursuit of a narrative from my own experience, which I understand as 'somehow much subtler,' gradually led me away from this trend of making explicit political and cultural references. At the same time, out of the pursuit of an 'internal' bodily quality, I attached some pieces of raw meat onto the sculptures' surfaces (Fig. 6.2.2). This forecast my further exploration of organic materials.

As a 'group' of sculptures, this work instigated a more conscious exploration of spatial arrangement, which had rarely been considered given my previous practice as a painter. To speak to the history that had imprinted itself on me, I projected onto the sculpture, moving imagery from the film of the ballet version of *The Red Detachment of Women*.⁶⁶

2. Organic Objects (June 2018)

From then on, more 'fleshy' works emerged, exploring new ways of involving meat in the form of making organic-shaped, soft sculptures (Fig. 6.2.3). The work hung on the right is made by covering a canvas sculptural object in dried butcher's meat that I had sliced into small pieces and added red additional colouring to the meat surface with acrylic paint to intensify its bloody appearance (Fig. 6.2.4). The making process was to apply salt to the meat to preserve it. When the meat slices were dried, I stitched them on the surface of the canvas-made object and applied layers of transparent acrylic and coloured the meaty area. The work hung on the left is made by wrapping the dried meat left from the previous practice with the salt used for preserving. The form was reinforced by being tied up with wire (Fig. 6.2.5). Finally, I projected footage of *The Red Detachment of Women* on both of the works.⁶⁷

There are two important aspects I have gained from the process of making the two soft sculptures, though the significance was not immediately apparent. By cutting the large

⁶⁵ Personal notes.

⁶⁶ See <https://vimeo.com/393110445>.

⁶⁷ Projecting the video on the colourful sculpture on the right side: <https://vimeo.com/393322282>. Projecting the video on the sculpture made by wrapping dried meat and salt in plastic sheet: <https://vimeo.com/393325244>.



Figure. 6.2.3. Cui Liang. (2018). *Organic Objects*.

[The right one's materials include plastic sheet, meat, salt, wire, and was projected by footage from The Red Detachment of Women of the film of its Peking opera version in 1972. The left one's materials include canvas, dried meat, acrylic, wire].

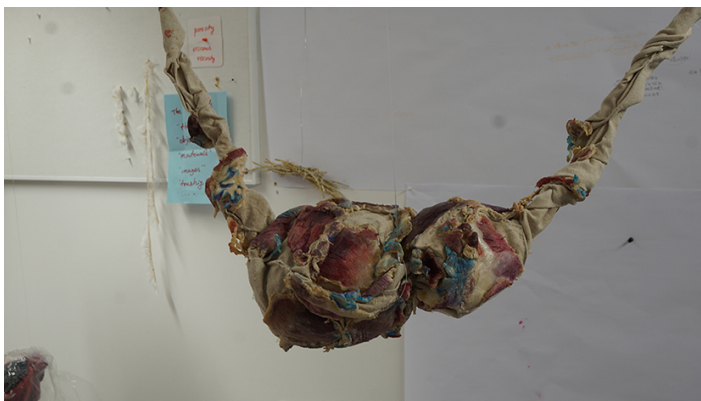


Figure. 6.2.4. The coloured sculpture.



Figure. 6.2.5. The sculpture by wrapping dried meat in a piece of plastic sheet by wire.

chunk of meat into small pieces, I gained the bodily experience of touching and smelling, as well as looking at the raw meat for a relatively long duration.⁶⁸ From the latter I gained a somatic apprehension of how expressive a piece of raw meat can be. Yet, after applying a large amount of salt on the meat, the colour, as well as the texture of the meat, changed dramatically (Fig. 6.2.6). This process also ‘purged’ the scent, which once turned my stomach after the two hours of cutting. Witnessing the process, the ‘traces’ the experience left on me are apparent in my last stage and my final work in my employment of salt and of its potential implication. Stitching dried meat as a symbol of repairing something ‘dead’ impacted on me and was involved and adapted in my last work in the video of performing stitching.

When I hung up the piece of wrapped meat and salt from ceiling by wire, the object’s heaviness caused the wire to be embedded into my hands and wrists, producing pain and leaving marks. This led to the involvement of my bodily experience into the next stage of my practice. Meanwhile, I gradually felt the urge to produce works focusing more on exploring relevant sensations from the original haptic experience, rather than on political criticism of the gender-related policies in China.



Figure. 6.2.6. The dried meat and salt.

⁶⁸ This may sound not persuasive enough, especially to consider the meat was bought from local butcher store but not from butchering livestock myself. Yet seeing the oozing blood and lymph secretions, and feeling the raw meat in my hands, as well as being exposed to the smell for a considerably long duration (about 2 hours, which I had never experienced before) undoubtedly produced a certain effect.

03 Silk, Organs, and Surface

July – December 2018

Out of my pursuit of a bodily/internal quality, I turned to more organic materials in this stage and replaced the canvas and plastic sheet with silk. This stage began by making two silk 'objects' involving the use of meat. The practice forecast the exploration of materiality, absence and presence. The practices that followed include the development of spatial composition, atmosphere, shadows, the awareness of bodily engagement with the work, as well as the emerging intention of involving my bodily experience.

This is the stage when I tried to make a 'body.' I would like to refer to Louise Bourgeois here; though I would not say that she had a significant influence on my work, my 'body' sculptures echo with some of her works in the blurring of internality and externality, as well as their organic quality.

Selected works:

1. Silk sculptures (July - August 2018)
2. Exhibition for Asian Aotearoa Arts Hui 2018 (AAAH2018) (September 2018)
3. Cave (October 2018)
4. The test in The Engine Room art gallery and comparison of the two stages (December 2018)

1. *Silk Sculptures* (July – August 2018)



Figure. 6.3.1. Cui, Liang. (2018). *Two Silk Sculptures*.
[Soft sculpture. Silk, meat, wire].



Figure. 6.3.2. One Sculpture of *Two Silk Sculptures*.



Figure. 6.3.3. Cui, Liang. (2018). *A Group of Silk Sculptures*.
[Soft sculpture. Silk, meat, wire].



Figure. 6.3.4. One sculpture of *A Group of Silk Sculptures*.

This stage starts from the two pieces of silk sculpture (Fig. 6.3.1) which then was developed into a group of silk sculptures (Fig. 6.3.3). The intention of the low-hanging work was to create a form that was something ‘between’ organs and body. I sewed several pieces of habutai silk together, each with one or two openings to blur the boundary between internal and external, and added wire to support the shape. The top form was created from two pieces of chiffon sewn together and fishing line (Fig. 6.3.2). Both were hung at different heights from the ceiling by wire and raw meat was added for a while and then removed leaving its trace: the blood’s colouring was absorbed by the fabrics, and the meat’s weight shaped the two sculptures – it was absent yet also present. This practice introduced another sculptural form, the floating surface of the flag-like chiffon silk. And the combination of silk and wire creates a contradiction due to the materiality of each; one is soft and tender while the other is hard and sharp, yet they share a similarity of visual delicacy.

After completing these first two sculptures, making multiple silk sculptures as a group allowed the development of spatial compositions and consideration of how my audience might negotiate my work. At the same time, new expressions from making continuously emerged.

The making process was similar to the previous one, while I added chiffon silk and fish line to create more organ-like shapes, or to mimic fat (Fig. 6.3.4) in order to refer to an internal quality. After completing the sculptures, I projected on them footage from *The Red Detachment of Women*.

The use of wire in this practice played multiple roles. As a means of hanging the work, it suggests violent constriction, or remolding the body. It also illustrated a ‘blurring’ intention of evoking the audience’s bodily engagement with the work – I hung several pieces



Figure. 6.3.5. A Group of Silk Sculptures after being projected by a video made by me from the footage from *The Red Detachment of Women* of the film of its Peking opera version in 1972.

of wire from the ceiling and exposed their sharp ends – bent into a curve – in the spaces between the sculptures. It was my intention to create a partly ‘dangerous’ space.

The awareness of the imprint from the history led me to continue the exploration of the works' connection with the visual material from the Cultural Revolution. Projecting the film of *The Red Detachment of Women* onto the sculptures was intended as an ‘embracing,’ or ‘engulfing’ gesture to refer to a maternal body (Fig. 6.3.5).

2. The Asian Aotearoa Arts Hui 2018 (AAAH2018) Exhibition (September 2018)

In response to an invitation to participate in the Asian Aotearoa Arts Hui 2018 (AAAH2018) exhibition, I made an artwork concerned with my PhD investigation at the Massey University School of Art gallery, The Engine Room (Fig. 6.3.6).

The space of the gallery allowed me to explore different compositions of the forms while also involving some elements newly emerged from one of my previous practices. In my pursuit of the internal (bodily) quality, I started to apply lard on the silk and wire. I also added another kind of finer steel wire in the ‘bags’ made from chiffon. Some of the ends of the wire pierced through the fabric and were exposed (Fig. 6.3.7).

The technique I used to make the hung objects for the AAAH2018 exhibition didn’t change. What I gained from this exhibition started from my reaction to the space. The Engine Room has a transparent glass roof which is much higher than the test space in which I usually made my works. Feeling ‘dizzy’ myself when I looked at the gallery’s roof, I intended to make the body of the work ‘spin.’ I realised this intention by building a wire structure not just to hang the silky objects, but to support some parts of the objects, while the pieces of wire themselves supported each other to ‘draw’ horizontal lines in the air. (Fig. 6.3.8). In this process, I had to be highly conscious of my own body’s movement, including how much strength to exert when I bent the wires, and to what angle so that they would be able to support a certain amount of weight. Due to the delicate structure and the thinness of the wire, any incaution on my part could potentially lead to the collapse of a significant part of the work. The dynamic led to a somatic apprehension of the potential of such qualities as delicacy and fragility, the potential to evoke a sense of evasiveness and fugitiveness.

This work also demonstrated my awareness of the audience’s bodily engagement with my work. Around the ‘creeping’ wire that was hung from the work, I dripped lard on the floor. While it suggested an ‘echoing’ between the floor and the work in the air, the lard drops were also to evoke the audience’s awareness of their own bodies when moving around the work.



Figure. 6.3.6. Cui, Liang. (2018). *Installation*.
 [Installation. Silk, lard, meat, wire]. Exhibition at The Engine Room
 gallery, Whiti o Rehua School of Art, College of Creative Arts, Massey
 University, Wellington, New Zealand.



Figure. 6.3.7. Detail. Thin wire and lard.



Figure. 6.3.8. Detail. Wire configuration.

3. Cave (September 2018)



Figure. 6.3.9. Cui, Liang. (2018). Cave.
[Installation. Silk, meat, lard, wire].



Figure. 6.3.10. The wall and the silk sculptures being implanted.



Figure. 6.3.11. The pillar and the silk sculpture being implanted.

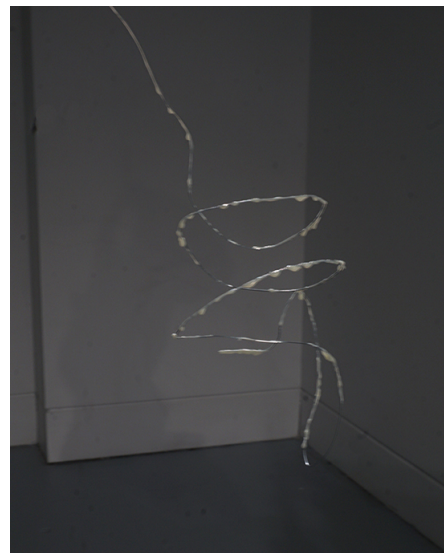


Figure. 6.3.12. The wire was shaped by being tightly wrapped around one of my arms (which caused pain). After taking it off my arm, the shape was left. I hung it from the ceiling and applied lard on it.

The work *Cave* (Fig. 6.3.9) made more obvious my intention of actively considering space. I arranged the silk object and wire in a way as to provide an experience of being contained in a 'cave.' The 'roof' (built by the entangled wire above) and the two 'walls' (of hung objects and wire) defined the space. In addition, I implanted silk objects into one pillar in the space and a wall (Fig. 6.3.10 and Fig. 6.3.11).

What emerged in this practice, and is embodied in my final works, is my attempt to communicate my bodily sensations to my audience. During the making process, the fine wire was the material causing pain, both from occasionally piercing its sharp end into my skin, or from wrapping my fingers and arms tightly while I shaped it. In this practice, I deliberately wrapped wire around my hands and then hung these pieces of wire – which I regarded as being marked by the bodily pain – from the ceiling (Fig. 6.3.12).

4. Test in The Engine Room (December 2018)

At the end of 2018, I installed a test work in The Engine Room gallery as a means to push the development further. Before the test, there were several developments.

- 1) Lighting temperature and shadows (Fig. 6.3.13).
- 2) Replacing wire by silk threads to hang the objects (Fig. 6.3.14).
- 3) Embroidery on the silk objects (Fig. 6.3.15).



Figure. 6.3.13. Cui, Liang. (2018). *Lighting Temperature and Shadows*.
[Installation. Silk, lard, meat, wire, blue light].



Figure. 6.3.14. Cui, Liang. (2018). *Floating*. [Installation. Silk, meat, silk thread. After replacing wire by silk thread. It produced a very obvious 'floating' visual effect].



Figure. 6.3.15. Embroidery on the silk object.

Awareness of the potential affective nature of lighting originated from my occasional 'encounter' with a 'death-like' lighting effect in my studio one early morning (Fig. 6.3.16). I also observed that the stitching process left holes and 'gestures' on the silk objects. Replacing wire by silk thread emphasised the fragility of the work and tension was introduced into the space.



Figure. 6.3.16. Morning light effect, 2018.

In this test I juxtaposed two works together in the space (Fig. 6.3.17). The brightly coloured sculpture, hung from the ceiling by fishing line, was from my previous practice. The white work, that was hung by silk threads and delicately touched the floor, was newly made.



Figure. 6.3.17. The two pieces of work being tested in The Engine Room.

While I had changed direction away from using imagery with the significant historical reference of *The Red Detachment of Women*, I wanted to retain this allusion by dyeing the silk using the meat's natural pigment as in my previous practice. I extracted the meat 'juice' by applying a significant quantity of salt.

I positioned the newly made piece much closer to the floor than most of my other works to emphasise the object's 'floating' quality and the pull of the gravitational force. Being subtly tinged by the meat juice, this work contrasted with the very colourful one. I realized I could convey the internally felt 'something' with subtlety rather than 'shouting out.'

One aspect gained from this practice which played a significant role in my final work, is from the salt crystallisation. I undertook the test in the summer time; the hot sun, directly shining through the gallery's transparent roof caused the salt in the meat juice to gradually

crystallise (Fig. 6.3.18). Seeing these beautiful, neat crystals in the meat juice, I was struck by the realization that this material could speak to a very essential element of my haptic experience with the canvas.



Figure. 6.3.18. The salt crystallisation.

04 Surface, Salt, and Piercing
August 2019



Figure. 6.4.1. Cui, Liang. (2019). *Surface, Salt, and Piercing*.

[Installation. Silk, silk thread, salt].



Figure. 6.4.2. 'Copying' process.



Figure. 6.4.3. One of the played video of stitching process.

In the last stage of my research, many of the main elements in the final work emerged. Events such as my visit to China, presenting on my PhD research at the PopCAANZ 2019 conference,⁶⁹ and a thorough reflection on my previous practices all contributed.

Being back to China at the beginning of 2019 produced my understanding of my displaced position as someone 'in-between.' Attending the conference let me see the different dimensions of gender issues in China from a historical and political perspective. Also, I realised the potential pitfall of employing visual material from the Cultural Revolution, and the importance of understanding the history before it. The latter provided me with a more comprehensive historical background while I removed the direct reference

⁶⁹ The Popular Culture Association of Australia and New Zealand (PopCAANZ) 10th Anniversary International Conference was held in RMIT university in Melbourne, Australia in 3 – 5 July, 2019. I participated in a stream titled 'Gender and Queer.'

to the Cultural Revolution from my work. The thorough reflection on my previous practices allowed me to realise that what I dealt with in my topic was 'surface,' and this led me to go back to this concept and to re-explore my haptic experience. I also pondered on a quality that repeatedly appeared in my practice, that to juxtapose two contrasting elements, or aspects together, such as the materials that were both 'pleasant' and 'repelling', the bodily experience that mingled pain with pleasure, etc. These finally led me to express this quality through the act of stitching, which both wounds and heals. The reflection of my experience with salt's materiality let me see its potential in my work as a key material.

The central component of the work (Fig. 6.4.1) was composed of a silk sculpture suspended from the ceiling by silk threads. It was connected to three pieces of chiffon silk on the floor by silk threads, while the silk on the floor was covered by salt. Three videos played on two walls in the space, respectively from two monitors and one projector.

The silk sculpture was embroidered with the gestures/traces transferred from my performance on a piece of framed canvas. I applied some dark grey acrylic on my hands and touched and felt the surface. After the acrylic dried, I laid over the canvas a piece of silk and 'copied' the marks by stitching (Fig. 6.4.2). Through this process, the marks from the improvisational bodily performance were transformed into embroidery patterns by a series of even, repeated acts – stitching.

'Gravity' as a concept is employed in my expression as a symbol of yielding to an overwhelming power. Responding to this concept, I set the silk sculpture in a horizontal direction. 'Constraining' the silk sculpture from the floor by invisible silk thread was intended to create a 'tension' in the space.

In this work, the videos being played were of the process of making the sculpture, including my performance on the canvas and the process of stitching (Fig. 6.4.3). They were developed into the two videos played in the final installation.

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