

Whispering Memories

Xiaoyi Gao

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Art

University of Washington

2021

Committee:

Helen O'Toole

Ann E. Gale

Zhi Lin

David Brody

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Art

©Copyright 2021

Xiaoyi Gao

University of Washington

Abstract

Whispering Memories

Xiaoyi Gao

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Zhi Lin

Department of Art

Starting from inviting volunteers to tell a unique memory, I created to relive the past, to recover the future/ memory rubbing lab, a work that incorporates video, audio and interactive installations. In it, people can listen, watch, tell, and draw different memories. As experimenting with the ideas of telling personal stories through different means, I obtain most of my creative inspiration from daily life. I collect photos, audio recordings, films, text messages or letters to use as my materials, presenting discussions on topics such as daily conversations, memories, and family in different visual languages. In Everything is OK, don't worry I painted portraits of people talking in video calls on phone-shaped sculptures. In Things I don't usually think of when I think of my mother., I projected the video of my mother repeating the motion of pretending to brush someone's hair on my own body, and created an illusion of her brushing my hair. In news, I incorporate the traveling trace in digital form with my mother's reading of text messages she sent me over years. And finally, in the installation I and \_ coexist, I utilized the room itself as the work and created an immersive experience with sculptures, photos, and videos.

I want to start with two personal stories. The first story: One day in the summer of 2017, my father's elder brother, my uncle, invited his family and friends to celebrate his sixtieth birthday. As a tradition, Chinese people take their sixtieth seriously. He was dressed more formal than usual, and I could tell that he was in a good mood and was fairly excited. There were a few big round tables in the room, and everyone was eating and drinking. He stood up several times and held up his wine glass to toast, but he didn't seem to be very good at speaking in such occasions. His speech was quite awkward, and it ended up with a short silence and embarrassment, but it seemed that there were more he wanted to say. However, after being reminded by the people around him, he sat back in his seat again, without saying anything more. You could tell that he was, happy, from the smile on his face all day, which has deepened the wrinkles in the corners of his eyes a lot. I had never seen him this delighted before.

During the Cultural Revolution, under extremely left-leaning political rule, my grandparents were criticized by the Red Guards because of their personal "political elements." Their oldest son, my father's elder brother, my uncle, was hit on the head by some "Red Guards", a group of teens who actually didn't understand what happened, with an iron gate that they had tossed down as a "punishment". According to my grandmother later, his ears and nose were full of blood and brains. He survived, luckily, with suffering from lifelong epilepsy, and lack of intellectual development. My uncle likes to be surrounded by people, and he likes to be the protagonist. Especially in normal life, he has never been treated like this. In his work, he has been doing the same job for all his life. Colleagues know that he is not good at words, nor refusal, and often ask him to do extra work but rarely care how his day has been. His wife and son felt that he could not keep up



with the pace of this era because he doesn't know anything about Internet, and don't like to communicate with him. His only pleasure in life is drinking with his friend, who is a peasant, also the only person that's willing to talk to him.

The second story: In 2018, I once asked a janitor in my college if she could be one of the models for a big painting of mine. She is an immigrant from Southeast Asia. She was a little surprised at my request to paint her at first,

but she readily agreed. I didn't know if she was too shy to say no. When I finally invited her to the opening of the exhibition that showed the work with her in it, she came with her daughter. Although she didn't explain how she feel in words at all, I could tell from her facial expressions and body language what she thought — she had never been looked at so seriously in her life by people.

From my uncle and the lady who modeled for me, people who are rarely noticed in life, I found a longing for being seen, recognized, and heard. Personal experiences, memories, traumas, and feelings are concealed by the experiences of the collectives, they are invisible. Presenting them in an intimate and honest way is what motivates me to complete my thesis work. For my piece exhibited in the Henry Art Gallery, *to relive the past, to recover the future*, I invited different people to tell me about and narrate their unforgettable memories. Then, I played the recordings of these memories to other people. The listener visualized the memories with drawings based on the narrator's descriptions.

Among the five narrators that I choose to present in the Henry Exhibition, one described the time they made art in a little town, one described the process of his wife giving birth, and one described a toy that has accompanied her since childhood. One person talked about her experiences as a first generation immigrant, and one talked about her experience of returning to a home that was burnt down in a fire. None of them had a script; each story unfolded as layers of memories being recalled through their own telling and meditating. They provided rich details and descriptions about the scene, environment and their inner thoughts. The listeners then drew based on such purely subjective and somewhat private memories.



The installation of *to relive the past, to recover the future* in the Henry is composed of five monitors, five pairs of headphones and five 6 x 2 inch mirrors. In each monitor, the narration audio of one of the five stories is being played with a video of the hand movements of a different person drawing the picture. Above each monitor, there is one mirror. The monitor is lower than eye level, trying to mimic the height of the table used for drawing. When the audience's eyes move away from the monitor and turn to a position parallel to their eye level, they can observe their eyes from the mirror. On the left side of the monitors, there is a small QR code. By scanning the QR code with their phones, viewers can use their own devices to record their own memories, and will get a recording of others. They will need to do a drawing that visualizes the others' memory to finish the trading of memories.

At the installation site, the audience observes a memory through direct and indirect means, first through the description of the narrator, and then

through the interpretation of the drawer. In addition, they are also their own observers, monitoring themselves from the mirror at any time. In my works, I try to present the voice of all individuals with an equal perspective. In the interaction, the audience become the narrator, and their participation displays the personality and intimacy of the individuals' voices which are important parts of this work. The protagonists of the two stories mentioned at the beginning of the article belong to a relatively silent group in society. The group or some representatives speak for individuals. The honest and naked presentation of individual and personal stories is the confrontation and balance of all collective's voices.

The drawing in the work is a medium to materialize the imagination of the memory told by the narrators. After two rounds of translations, from language to imagination to drawing, the form of memory has changed. This work used to be called *memory rubbing lab*. I think the translation process is like rubbing, because both are trying to copy and preserve something, whereas it is completely impossible to fully present its original content. Rubbing is generally to preserve something precious, and this work is to preserve and value the memories of ordinary people.

Uncertainty is an important part of this work. It is not always smooth when trying to understand the other's narration. Language is not fully representative of the meaning but rather ethereal, and drawing is not like documentary or photography. Both narrating and drawing need improvisation. The memory has been blurred in this journey. Inspired by Calvino's *Invisible City*, I became very interested in the relationship between memory, language and imagination. Language can restore memory as much as possible, but it can never replicate memory. Marco Polo once said to Kublai Khan in the book that once the memory is told, it



disappears. In the book, Kublai Khan was fascinated by the incredible

invisible cities described by Marco Polo, but he could never see the true images of these cities. The growth of these cities depends entirely on his own imagination, and his imagination also limits the appearance of these cities. In *to relive the past, to recover the future*, all participants are in the limited reality, producing information to the best of their ability.

In the process of listening, the story of the narrator not only stimulates the imagination, but also reminds the listener of their own experience. These experiences may not all be pleasant. All in all, understanding is simple, but it could also be painful. Dori Laub wrote in *Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening*, “For the listener who enters the contract of the testimony, a journey fraught with dangers lies ahead. There are hazards to the listening to trauma. Trauma—and its impact on the hearer—leaves, indeed, no hiding place intact.” In the installation, the mirror is the window for the audience to observe themselves. The audience is undoubtedly the silent listener and the witness of the performance. In addition to passively receiving information, the mirror enables the audience to be aware of, observe and track their own mood’s ups and downs and feelings at any time. It doesn't matter if this is a pleasant or torturous experience.

At the same time when I was completing *to relive the past, to recover the future*, I continually utilized personal stories as mediums. Archival photos, physical motions, text messages, voice messages, conversations, monologues, and diaries are my most used materials. Daily conversations often have a unique tension after being stripped of the scene at the time.

In the documentary, *news from home*, director Chantal Akerman juxtaposed the daily urban scenes of New York with reading letters from her mother who lives in Belgium. This is the best description of a traveler living in a foreign and distant country. Hui-Chen Huang, director of *Small Talk*, wrote,



“A few simple questions spark a series of talks, which reveal some things that we're not sure if we're ready to face.” Daily conversations are informal, for me it has a kind of casual, interesting and humorous sense, but sometimes it touches the deep emotions of the talkers. And the gestures of daily activities share the same quality.

In *Everything is Ok, don't worry*, I used the screenshots from video calls and painted them as oil paintings on mobile phone-shaped sculptures and hung them in the air. During the pandemic, being only able to talk to the people from my hometown or other places through the phone, through text messages, phone calls and video calls, I increasingly develop my interest of using them as my new materials in art making.

In *Things I don't usually think of when I think of my mother.*, I projected the video of my mother repeating the motion of pretending to brush someone's hair on my own body, and created an illusion of her brushing my hair.



In *news*, I projected a video of manually swiping from my apartment in Seattle to my home in China on the Find My mobile app on my palm. The video is accompanied by my mother's reading of the text messages she sent me over recent years. Several years of text messages were linked together, interspersed with her telling about the trivial things in her life, her greetings to me. She was like reading a letter from hometown, and also like a chattering fortune teller. And when she whispered the words calmly and peacefully, they became musical and poetic. At the same time, the texture of the map resembled the winding lines on my palm. It tied the piece with fortune telling. In this piece, instead of learning my future from a stranger, I learned the important moments in my life from my mom, who is far away from me on the other side of the world.

Artist Yin Xiuzhen said that she chose clothing as her medium because they are deeply connected to her family's story. Her works on second-hand clothes show her empathy for the stories of different people that second-hand clothes have carried. Also, because the styles of clothing were largely influenced by the politics and economy status of her country, clothing entail more meaning beyond the material itself.

In the work, *I and \_ coexist*, old photos to me are what second-hand clothes are to Yin Xiuzhen. In the summer of a couple years ago, I found a few old photo albums in my grandmother's house that I had never seen before. They contained photos of her and my parents when they were young, recording the little moments of their lives. In the *I and \_ coexist* exhibited at Sand Point, I painted old photos of my female relatives with watercolors on the fragment shaped plaster, and made an animation incorporating the drawings on the plasters and a monologue of my understanding to fragility and memory. This work is completely rooted in my



own experience. The presence of women in my growth has greatly influenced me, especially my mother. My female family members have some common characteristics, sensitive, emotional, vulnerable, and empathetic. Their influence on me are cast as shadows from time to time in my life. By placing fragments, which symbolize broken emotions and feelings, on a soft fabric-covered display stand, the audience feels that they are cherished objects. It reverses people's general negative impression of sensibility and fragility.

The phrases start with “broken” usually make people feel sad, such as a broken heart. “Broken” in Asian culture sometimes symbolize beauty of something fragile and dying. In the room where *I and \_ coexist* was exhibited, various scratches, dents, and blemishes the room had experienced over the years were left on the floor, like scars on the human body. I realized this and thought they were similar to the trauma of the human soul, so I filled these scars with sprinkles that decorate cakes to make them bright and conspicuous. Scars symbolize injuries and pain, but sprinkles makes them all sweet.

The above-mentioned works are the result of my observation of my own life. I hope the audience can reflect themselves in my works and feel the subtlety of memories and emotions. Living in the framework of race, gender, and social status, I am used to suppressing my emotions and expressions. The work I produced, instead of in a bold usage of structures and colors, live in the subtle visual elements embedded, which allows the audience to wander in the “whispers” of the sounds or shapes.

Calvino, I., & Weaver, W. (2002). *Invisible cities*. Vintage.

Goldstein, C. (2020, October 15). 'I want to experience the complexity of the WORLD': Watch Artist Liu Xiaodong travel to the US border to paint scenes of moral ambiguity. Retrieved April 01, 2021, from <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/art21-liu-xiaodong-1915775>

*Small Talk The Film*. smalltalkthefilm. (n.d.). <https://www.smalltalkthefilm.com/>.

*News from Home*. The Criterion Collection. (1970, January 1). <https://www.criterion.com/films/20978-news-from-home>.

*Stitching Memories: Interview with Yin Xiuzhen*. ArtAsiaPacific. (n.d.). <http://artasiapacific.com/Blog/StitchingMemoriesQandAWithYinXiuzhen>.