

A dislocation from movement, a dislocation from stasis

Accompanying text to *Lorem Ipsum* (solo), Long March Space, July 2021

Our relationship to, and perspective on, perceived time metamorphoses throughout the duration of our lived lives. Temporal continuity fractures as we move from place to place, and this rupture magnifies when we insert ourselves into new settings.

The first instance when I became aware of a temporal and spatial gap (and perhaps the first "out-of-body" experience), was riding in the car with Uncle across the Fourth-Ring Road. Uncle hasn't left motherland like his sister – my oh-so-brave single mother – and is an anchor of stability in our family. I was fairly exhausted from a long-haul flight but was rather too excited as well, and dove into a frenzied chatter with Uncle. Naiveté, though, all of sudden seemed to break loose in the middle of a sentence, as I became intensely aware of a leap in time and space – how only ten months ago I had left Beijing as a sulky child and now have returned with an evolved state of mind – somewhat pre-adolescent.

It was a shift in my conscious state. A temporal and spatial rupture.

From then on, Beijing seems to have occupied the upper left corner of my mind map (if one were to graphically plot their entire existence). That particular corner is dimly lit, devoid of the bustle and hustle of everyday life. Time seems to come to a standstill there – it saddens me to think about the city as a distant harbour – until the year 2018, when I returned to the city with my first solo exhibition at Long March Space. From then on the city was no longer just a matter of preservation. That very personal temporal and spatial disassociation finally came to a stop.

Yet, today the pandemic seems to have generated a collective disassociation to time and space.

Months and days no longer seem relevant. Rather, 2020 was composed of disparate phases, incidents, riots, marches, and blocks of days – 7-day quarantines, 14-day quarantines, 2 day self-isolations, lockdown one, lockdown two, first wave, second wave... and the imminent third wave.

At least this is true to my 2020, or more precisely, my experience as an expat of Chinese origin living in the East London borough of Tower Hamlets with a roof over my head. I needed to place an emphasis on this, because as much as this is an unprecedented collective experience, I cannot deny the mere privilege right now to be sharing with you these unspoken thoughts from the comfort of my home and studio; and because the past year has only shed light on the clashing of values each community around the world holds (for example, collectivism in the East versus individualism in the

West); and because locally, the raw and bare exposure of the debilitating class system in the UK.

For the first time, the delivery person on the other side of our door was an Asian girl; she sounded “fresh”. For the first time, I was driven home in a Kia Sportage by a middle-aged woman of Asian descent who seemed just a tad too nervous to be driving strangers around in what was clearly a family SUV.

A lot of people are attempting to scrutinize our conditions now and evaluate if and how things have changed. Nonetheless, isn't this precisely the problem with contemporaneity – that we are not able to observe the now because we are in the now? Art has used the term “contemporary” problematically over the last decade.

A projection of the future relies on modeling the past. Hence the projected future is a paradox. At the moment we wish with great hunger to return to the “known normal” – aka the past, aka a future that is a replica of our past (at least that seems to be the roadmap coming out of the pandemic). Does this mean that the pandemic will propel a future which finally eliminates the past-future paradox?

The present has become a placeholder for me – *lorem ipsum*. Though I'm uncertain whether this state of stasis is progression or retrogression.

Lorem ipsum is a chunk of dummy text that functions as a placeholder in publishing and graphic design – until the missing quantity is finalized and subsequently replaces this temporary dummy. This scrambled bit of text has its origins from a passage by Cicero, from his theory of ethics, and it questions our relationship to pain and pleasure.

Let's take a moment to pause here. It's rather interesting to think about pleasure and pain. Pleasure, that blissful state of ignorance, can create a state of stasis. Pain on the other hand also causes inactivity, but by way of debilitation. Nevertheless, even if accompanied by physical inactivity, pain is an indication of progress, a means to an end; pain propels imagination to envisage an end to the suffering and therefore, a future yet to come. Pain temporarily releases one from the present moment. Cicero talks about the endurance of pain to avoid greater pain. So perhaps we believe that the feeling and endurance of pain is a means to control and reorienting the future. Pleasure, on the other hand, concurrently comes with an apprehension – of the ending of itself.

On the canvas, gratification can be procured from the act of painting a pixelated field. This activity releases gratification from repetition, the discomfort of control, and the pain of stillness (especially if each grid were three millimeters wide). It is an antithesis to other organic, random gestures. Over time, the act of painting each pixel becomes involuntary. Decisions in colour and order become reflexes. The mind is relieved from the intensity of attention, and is allowed to wander – from processing events and conversations to deep dives with podcast hosts. Is this multi-tasking at its best, or exemplary of the dispersion attention economy inherent to our generation?

Industriousness has been attributed to my Chinese-ness. It's a plausible but shallow deposition. Repetition is regularity and the assumption of sameness. It projects an expectation (of sameness) and therefore, a future yet to come. Repetition has played a large part in my practice and it is evermore interesting to think about the idea again now.

Heraclitus' famous words, "upon those who step into the same rivers different and again different rivers flow", precisely illustrate this. One can step into the same river, though the water that washes against the feet of those who steps into it are different. In the past year, trapped in our own bubbles, we have observed a kind of stillness – a repetition of the daily routine. Yet drastic changes are taking place in the exterior world at large – irreversible changes, ones that will form a new reality we are yet to observe and comprehend. To quote Roger Shiner's analysis of Heraclitus, each individual thing does not change, but the totality of things constantly changes. And temporal and spatial ruptures are no longer the result of movement, but rather, stasis.

The pandemic has become a mirroring reality of the studio. One could set up rules in the studio and obey them to absurd degrees of respect and obedience. The way that we have responded to the different advices in the pandemic exposes how we relate to rules and is a reflection of ourselves. The right of choice is enlarged. So for the first time, others get a taste of the struggle and negotiation that artists go through everyday – what are the rules in the studio and how does one follow them?

Back in 2010, Jörg Heiser's writing in Frieze had already captured the disassociated, fragmented temperament of today. Recently I had come across another one of Heiser's piece on collage and trauma. In the former, Heiser claims that art today has reached a state of "super-hybridity" and is a "computational aggregate of multiple influences and sources". In the latter, the writer talks about how survivors of floods undergo therapies that involve collaging fragments of memory to deal with distress. It makes me contemplate again why I build works through fragments, through weaving motifs sourced from different contexts, and through layering them on top of each other.

Perhaps there's concealed trauma to my experiences. I remember the first day of my international school experience in Nairobi. Mother had dressed me in a prim purple dress and prissy white tights. That was, I'd say, pretty marvelous for a schoolgirl in China. But what neither of us understood was I was about to step into an American-system international school where kids ran around in cool spaghetti-straps and baggy shorts. I remember eating lunchboxes sitting on cedar benches under majestic tropical trees on my own for weeks on end, because I couldn't communicate with any of the kids in my classes and was too shy to mingle. Though, none of these would be any more extraordinary than ones experienced by an average teenager – each one of us is constantly trying to fit into our surroundings?

I do know that I don't quite allow myself to construct complete narratives. Varied motifs and fragments from personal experiences intersect in the space of the canvas. I see them as multiple points of perspective and I see them as inconclusive vistas. The motifs and visual fragments come from different contexts and seem to wrestle over a pecking order within the four edges of the canvas. It makes sense to me to arrange them in intertwining layers, because I am not to adjudicate their differences, but rather, I am a conductor of their collision course. I'm self-contradictory – on the one hand I am in awe of works that so blatantly describe a scene or a story, on the other, in my own practice I don't believe in resolving any aspect of the work. I am able to construct a composition for you to travel in, but I'd rather let you do the work – apologies – and decide whether this tangled journey makes sense or is mere gibberish.

It's difficult for me to assume a conclusion. In that air con-blazing history classroom in Bangkok, I was taught for the first time that the Second Sino-Japanese War was not the mere effort of our beloved party, but more so because of the shattering atomic bomb. During the past year, accelerated by polarizing forces (and hence voices), the mechanisms of society became bizarrely and disappointingly obvious. There's the truth in my understanding of my motherland, the truth conveyed by Western media, and somewhere in between lies the complex truth what China really is. Frustration makes me tremble. I have the crippling privilege of understanding multiple narratives. I can only hope that the essence of my work extends out of the canvas and decelerate our rush to judgment and assumption.

Of course, the "new landscapes" that I create are also heavily influenced by the way I receive and plough through information today. It's influenced by the way browser windows are stacked together, the continuous scroll, the way finger gestures navigate through smartphone apps, and the way collaged components can also become windows to separate realms. The magic of collage that the Cubists and Dadaists discovered have become banal classroom exercises from Donald Trump to your best friend (mostly in the form of memes, ha).

So in many ways, I view myself and my work precisely symptomatic of the present time. We are specimens, by-products, or collateral damage.

Vivien Zhang, 2021