Time Passing: Image of Reality and Reality of Image

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Time Passing: Image of Reality and Reality of Image

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A thesis presented to the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts
Washington University in St. Louis

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

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May 2017
Abstract

This thesis examines how my practice addresses the subjective and metaphysical nature of the photographic and cinematic medium. Neither the assumed objectivity of a camera lens nor the objective reality suggested by the photograph exists. However, for me, the camera perceives the world by itself, subordinated to the photographer’s subjective interpretation. Along with my photographic/cinematic practice, this thesis examines how the camera perceives the world on its own way and how the audience member’s ultimate perception is formed not only by his or her personal experiences, but also by the camera and the photographer’s perceptions. Using a non-representational method, my work encourages the audience to take time to peel off layers upon layers of images/stories and to enter into the world of meditation. The layered still images or moving images represent an implication of past, presence and future.
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Introduction

Duration is the medium that makes thought possible, therefore duration is to consciousness as light is to the eye.

Time has been considered as the material of photography and cinema. A photograph or a film always implicates a period of time, no matter a fraction of second or a few hours. Through my practice, I further use the photographic/cinematic medium beyond its nature of documenting or recording, as a way of representing or murmuring my own stories. The work encourages the audience to experience a need to stop and spend time with my work. During the stop, audience members are encouraged to consider their own memories and feelings. I create a solitary environment in my work without the presence of people, and it corresponds to the meditation atmosphere. Layered sound is like layered space, through which one possibly hears the sounds from different depths of his or her heart.

My photographs or videos never represent a single moment or a single period of time. Photographs are layered of still images. Videos are layered of moving images and sounds. They are not representations of a dead past but implications of past, presence and future.

In my thesis, I examine how my practice addresses the subjectivity of photography and cinema. The camera perceives the world by itself. The photographer sees the world through the camera lens subjectively, in spite of seemingly objective view in front of him/her. In addition to these two perceptions, works which allow different perceptions and do not limit viewers’ visual and mental activities add another layer of personal perception.
Chapter 1

Time: Why My Work Needs to Peel Off Layers of Time?
I am fascinated by the mysterious and ambiguous existence of time, which becomes an important tactic in my work, to entice viewers to spend time, to enter into my world. I can only perceive time when it has passed already, or when it is waiting ahead of me. I cannot feel it around me as time is untouchable, invisible and odorless. Even if I am staring at a clock, I can only see the pointer move, or hear the tick-tick; I can’t feel the time itself. I only perceive the signs of time passing, the traces it left behind. George Kubler states in his writing *The Shape of Time*:

> Time, like mind, is not knowable as such. We know time only indirectly by what happened in it, by observing change and permanence, by marking the succession of events among stable settings, and by noting the contrast of varying rates of change.²

I choose time-based medium—photography and video—as my way to approach the world, and through which, to interpret the world subjectively. If photography is a subjective medium and “photographs are as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are,”³ why shouldn’t we remove the objective appearance of the world and focus on how the inner personal space could be expressed by this medium. I think about the medium of photography through its essential properties and make my work represent something beyond the outside world. That is, my work represents the self and my inner world.

In my photography work *Through*, I light up papers with origami patterns from behind. The patterns were derived from unfolding the origami objects to flatten papers. Thus, the cracks left behind the folding activities are revealed in an unexpected way. Hundreds of dots create lines and further, space. These traces are geometric and delicate, which resembles the cosmos. This is not a representation of the real cosmos, but a
representation of part of my own cosmos---- a world constructed by paper, by folds, by the apparatus of my camera.

Figure 1. Yihuang Lu, Through, 2017

I am inspired by Hiroshi Sujimoto’s way of expressing the language of time in his photography, especially in his Seascape series. He depicts time by representing how it passes by on the surface of ocean, the air, the sky. At first glance, his Seascapes are images characterized by simplicity of form and a strong sense of peace. They appear to border on the reductive. In particular, I am influenced by his composition of lucid simplicity. The centrally positioned horizon line divides the photograph into top and bottom, sky and sea,
air and water, void and substance. Within the simply framed images, time passes through quietly and subconsciously.

![Figure 2. Hiroshi Sugimoto, Seascape](image)

*Seascapes* series makes me consider the issue of memory. Thousands of layers of images are present in the same frame and each one has its partial traces of the sea. The air, the sea and the light keep moving during the entire time of the long exposure process. The immobile images that are achieved in the end are actually built upon a condition of continuous transformation. It is not a one-shot moment, but different moments appearing simultaneously in the same image. Layer upon layer, the images are overlapping in an undisclosed way, akin to the operations of memory. They create a reality but at the same time it is not a single reality, but a sequence of realities. This is a portrait of a sea and it resembles how the sea sees itself. This is not a portrait of a sea the way we see it.

In my work, I use a non-representational method to depict time and an indirect way to express emotion, which takes time for viewers to understand and meditate upon. This non-representational way of depicting time and emotion relates to my background. The conservatism in Asian culture has deeply influenced me in every part of my life. I have been taught to hide my emotions or to digest them by myself. Hiding emotion is a sign of politeness, maturity, self-control and culture.
I examine the world with my camera, which gives me a way to hide myself behind its apparatus when capturing others’ expressions. It is also more comfortable for me to turn the lens to objects which reflect my feeling, my experience, my history and myself, instead of people. I prefer showing my sadness, my sorrow, my longing to those who are willing to approach me, to know me, to see through me.

Abstraction allows my work to interact indirectly with viewers. As mentioned, because my work is non-representational, it needs time to be recognized and understood. It may formally contain representational geometric patterns or natural elements, but they are depicted in an abstract way. When viewers watch my video, *Murmuring*, at first it is hard for them to know what they are seeing. Is it an image of a landscape, an object, or a surface? They need to look closely and find a clue, which creates a delay between seeing the image and understanding what it is. My thesis work also requires time to explore and experience. The time ranges from a few seconds to a few hours. Sometimes the emotion and expression I integrate in the video may need a longer time to resonate with viewers. *The layered image is murmuring its layered stories, which needs meditation to peel it off.*
The solitary environment I create in my works corresponds to the meditation feature within. I would like my work to be viewed and experienced in a relatively private space. It is better to be alone. Just as I always express my feelings to a specific person or myself, now I am telling stories to a viewer who is approaching my life. Growing up in China—a country where the concept of meditation was originated more than 2500 years ago, —I consciously pursue the solitary and meditative features in my work. I have approached and been influenced by Lao Tzu’s meditation concept from a young age. He is an ancient Chinese philosopher and the founder of philosophical Taoism. His basic Taoism ideas are conveyed through his reputed book, *Tao Te Ching*, where the central meditative concepts “emptiness” and “quietude” are emphasized.

Arrived at the extreme of emptiness, firmly anchored in quietude, whereas the ten thousand existents come into being with a single leap, I contemplate the return…Knowing the constant gives access to the infinite, the infinite to the universal, the universal to royalty, royalty to heaven, heaven to the Way, the Way to life that lasts, death can do nothing against me. (Chapter 16)\(^5\)
Meditation in Taoism seems to me to be a way of generating, transforming and circulating of inner energy. Meditation purifies the body and mind, unifies body and spirit, and harmonizes with the Tao. In my work, meditation is not necessarily conducted with an empty mind, but with minimal distracting thoughts and maximum concentration on the image itself. Through this process, I hope viewers see beyond the image, entering a world which belongs to themselves. It is a world as Bill Viola describes in his writing *Chott el-Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat)* 1979:

> I want to go to a place that seems like it’s at the end of the world. … where all becomes strange and unfamiliar. There is nothing to lean on. No references. It is said the mind plays “tricks.” Standing there, a place where, after a long arduous journey, you realize you can go no further. Each time you advance towards it, it recedes further. You have reached the edge. All you can do is stand there and peer out into the void, watching. Standing there, you strain to look further, to see beyond, strain to make out familiar shapes and forms. You finally realize that the void is yourself. It is like some huge mirror for your mind. Clear and uncluttered, it is the opposite of our urban distractive spaces. Out here, the unbound mind can run free. Imagination reigns. Space becomes a projection screen. Inside becomes outside. You can see what you are.6

Figure 4. Bill Viola, *Chott el-Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat)*, 1979. Videotape, color, stereo sound; 28 minutes.
We finally see what we are when entering our inner worlds through meditation. It is not a place that is hard to reach, but it is hard to realize that you have already reached the point somewhere. I like to look out the window, to see the far-away view. When I am staring off into the distance, I am usually thinking about things that are not related to the space, the objects, the view I am looking at, but more about myself. I am trying to know the true self from the traces left behind by my meditation and my reaction to the world.

Meditation exists not only in an imagined world, but also in real life. As Roni Horn describes in her monologue, thinking about water is also a way of meditation.

Thinking about water is thinking about the future. Or just a future, my future, yours. It’s a personal thing, especially now. It makes sense children fear water. They can’t see into it and then too, doesn’t it make sense for someone who can’t imagine a future to be attracted to it, to this semblance of water, to this other water? It is night. The darkness of the water reflects the darkness of the sky. But when daylight comes again, the water will remain dark, cutting everything in it, off from everything beyond it.”

Figure 5. Roni Horn, Still Water, 1999
The meditative feature of water in Roni Horn’s monologue is similar to what I pursue in my work. Water usually has a reflective surface. It reflects you, reflects me and reflects everything except itself. Water cannot reflect itself because it is continuously changing.

My video work, *Murmuring*, projected on the wall is constantly changing as well. It mimics the moving mind through the metaphysical nature of the cinematic medium. It is a mirror through which you could see your true self.

The root of the cinematic process remained the still picture, but images now had behavior, and the entire phenomenon began to resemble less the material objects depicted and more the process of the mind that was moving them……Conceptual and physical movement become equal, experience becomes a language, and an odd sort of concreteness emerges from the highly abstract, metaphysical nature of the medium.⁸

Horn shoots dozens of photographs and each of them is distinctively different from others. Each photograph gives us a peek at the portrait of water. However, no one can capture the true identity of water. In my video, dozens of frames are fragments of my own portrait. Each of the images reflects a part of the true self.

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Figure 6. Yihuang Lu, *Murmuring*, Still from Video, 3’29”, 2017
In my work, *Murmuring*, I use abstraction to depict the traces left behind the origami folding activity, thus creating an atmosphere to meditate on this specific Eastern tradition and at the same time telling a story about myself. The folding traces are activated by light of different colors and shapes, moving with different rhythms. It seems like we are witnessing a breathing organism that has geometric patterns. The layered sound, contains the voice of a priest worshipping in a church, a bell ringing by the wind and ambiguous paper folding. I hope the overall sound could create a murmuring atmosphere as the moving images are trying to intrigue viewers into the meditative world. What the priest is saying is not distinguishable, but the rhythmic quality of the sound matters. I hope to build a meditative atmosphere through the musical quality of the ritual, instead of speaking about issues related to the ritual itself. The priest’s level of voice creates a lulling atmosphere. This atmosphere engages the viewers, enhances their concentration on the images, and helps them enter a world that belongs to themselves.

Works with meditative and phenomenological features tend to trigger memory. When I look at Uta Barth’s work, *...and of time*, it reminds me of the warm winter afternoons I have spent in my home. Golden lights shine through the windows and cast shifting shadows on the wall. Then I look out the window to track where the light comes from, and the answer is nowhere. There is only the quiet street with few people walking, and the familiar smell from the kitchen. At that time, I was a young girl, who had big dreams and no fear of the future. After a few minutes, the shape of the shadow is changed and the light begins to recede. Finally, the darkness is coming and the shadow disappears. Barth’s work triggers in me states of memory and meditation.
A set of three photographs depicts light and its presence in the space with minimal representative objects. Barth’s seemingly monochromatic painting creates a meditative and evocative environment. The rhythm in movement of light triggers a sense of time elapsing. Historically, light contains the metaphor of time. For example, Johannes Vermeer is a master of depicting light in his paintings from the 17th century. Thorough the direction, color and the intensity of the light he depicts, viewers could tell what time of day it is in his paintings. Barth not only conveys time elapsing in the way of depicting the subject itself, but also stresses the time-passing through framing and composing images. The two photographs in juxtaposition on the right with similar vague light shapes could be read as adjacent or contiguous. However, the one on the left with the window frame and ambiguous landscape indicated on the lower side is apart from the other two. The white space is delicately placed between to indicate light movements and imply time passing. These photographs depicting continuous but also separated moments, have created a world in which photography represents not just a dead past moment as Roland Barthes states, but vibrant moments that indicate past, present, and future.
Every photography is a certificate of presence.\(^9\)
The Photograph flows back from representation to retention……In the Photograph, Time’s immobilization assumes only an excessive, monstrous mode: Time is engorged. That the Photograph is “modern,” mingled with our noisiest everyday life, does not keep it from having an enigmatic point of inactuality, a strange stasis, the stasis of an arrest. Not only is the Photograph never, in essence, a memory, but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory.\(^{10}\)

Barth recreates these moments which were ostensibly void of meaning but trigger emotion and memory immediately. The overall warm orange color tone and the fragments of intimate interior enhance the evocative atmosphere.
Chapter 2
Photography: The Context of Veracity versus Subjectivity in My Work
Six years ago, I began to learn photography. It was exciting for me to experience how some significant moments were captured instantly and how the world in flux was recorded by a small box. I kept exploring the world around me, from my surroundings to unfamiliar places, from the suburbs to downtown, from landscape to portrait. I belonged to a group of six or seven people of the same age who went to different places and practiced different types of photography every week. I enjoyed exploring this variety of experimentation and testing the limitations of the medium. However, the more we tried, the more we discovered the differences of photographic styles among each student of the group. Sometimes although we had the same model in the studio, the facial expression we preferred, the light effect we adjusted, and the angel we chose, made the final photographs look ultimately different. Gradually, I have realized how much subjective factors influence a photograph, which reflects a specific reality, just as a journalist unconsciously installs personal perspective in words. I started with the perception that photography is a way to record the world; however, it turned out to be a way to represent the world which has been filtered by my eyes, and interpreted by myself. It doesn’t represent a real world but a world real to me, to the photographer. After that, I read Susan Sontag’s words to address this “veracity problem” at a deeper level:

But despite the presumption of veracity that gives all photographs authority, interest, seductiveness, the work that photographers do is no genetic exception to the usually shady commerce between art and truth. Even when photographers are most concerned with mirroring reality, they are still haunted by tacit imperatives of taste and conscience. The immensely gifted members of the Farm Security Administration photographic project of the late 1930s would take dozens of frontal pictures of one of their sharecropper subjects until satisfied that they had gotten just the right look on film—the precise expression on the subject’s face that supported their own notions about poverty, light, dignity, texture, exploitation, and geometry.¹¹
She uses the concept of mirroring to describe the reality photography creates, which perfectly explains how the real is reflected through the photographer’s lens into a photograph, thus indicating the real as a particular or subjective reflection of reality.

*Figure 8. Yihuang Lu, Folds, 2016*

*Folds* is a series of photographs that I began last year, which depicts personal emotion and experience, with a focus on folds and creases from unfolded origami paper. The traces of folds left on the paper are representational. They represent the referent, the decipherable object, however, in an abstract way. This work inspired by origami, not only speaks to the vanishing Eastern tradition, but also alludes to the history of origami-making activity.

Several photos which represent the process of unfolding an origami to a piece of flattened paper, revealing creases, are layered into one single frame. The origami object is inundated by other layers, and the entire image becomes a vague shape which may be read as
flowerlike. It also echoes the concept of time compression. In this sense, the representational feature of the medium is being altered. I chose where to leave my personal marks and what shape I would like the image to become. Although the image itself still has objective referents, I direct the way viewers read and understand the photographs.

Roland Barthes states time is engorged in photography because photography always represents the past moment. In *Folds*, the stasis has been broken by showing a process, rather than a point of time in the same image. It does not implicate the dead past, but the past, presence and future. It in some ways resembles cinema:

I project the present photograph's immobility upon the past shot, and it is this arrest which constitutes the pose. This explains why the Photograph's *noeme* deteriorates when this Photograph is animated and becomes cinema: in the Photograph, something *has posed* in front of the tiny hole and has remained there forever (that is my feeling); but in cinema, something *has passed* in front of this same tiny hole: the pose is swept away and denied by the continuous series of images: it is a different phenomenology, and therefore a different art which begins here, though derived from the first one.12

*Folds* breaks the conventional concept that photography represents an instant moment or a short period of time. It has been animated and resembles cinema.
Chapter 3

What I see? What my Camera Sees?
The camera sees with its own eyes; it sees things the human eye does not detect.\textsuperscript{13}

For me, the camera has its own way to see the world, which is different from human perception, or to some extent, beyond human perceptive limits. For example, in portraying an invisible phrase of motion, Eadweard Muybridge’s camera expands visibility, retaining the fragmentary gestures and postures of the world of motion. His seminal series of photographs of the horse in motion establishes that the horse was suspended in the air in trot and gallop.

![Figure 9. Eadweard Muybridge, *The Horse in Motion*, 1878, albumen printed on card](image)

The movements recorded are beyond the limits of human perception and reveal a new world which is invisible without the help of the apparatus of the camera. Besides Muybridge’s motion photography, Vera Lutter’s pinhole photography also interests me, in a way of recording views from the perspective of the camera. She projects the outside views directly and immediately onto photographic surfaces, recording how the photographic papers perceive the world, instead of adjusting the negative to a
conventionally positive image to mimic how humans perceive the world. “In such cases the camera itself has been conceived of as the artist,”¹⁴ and the photographs are taken from the camera’s perspective rather than the operator’s.

Figure 10. Neon Light Landscape, Inkjet Prints, 2015-2016

In my work *Neon Light Landscape*, I use the camera as brush and the light as paint to create drawings of moving light. The invisible neon light movements become visible through the apparatus of the camera and build up ghostly but magnificent light landscapes. The photographs are composed of strands of light with a minimal black and white color palette. Layers upon layers of light within the images express a sense of stretched time, bringing the invisible moving images onto the photographic surface. The light movements depicted in the image refer to a world beyond human’s perception, as they uncover an image not otherwise visible to the human eye that is only seen when represented through the lens of the camera.

I reveal a world with the idea of reflecting how the camera perceives the world in its own way. Vilem Flusser states in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*:

In the act of photography the camera does the will of the photographer but the photographer has to will what the camera can do…but what appear to be their
criteria for going beyond the camera nevertheless remain subordinate to the camera’s program. In Flusser’s description, the camera’s imagination is greater than the photographer’s. The camera not has its own perception, but we humans/photographers remain subordinate to it. The traditional belief of photographer dominating the camera has been overturned to some extent in this view. In my art practice, I believe that every element in the photograph reveals itself. However, the photographer is the one who set up all the elements and activate them. In this sense, the photograph is subjective because it is controlled by the photographer. The camera truly has its own vision but is subordinate to the person who controls the apparatus.

We humans have our perception, but more importantly, every individual has his/her own unique way to observe the work. It is important to the concept of my work that every individual’s perception is based on his/her different previous experiences, mental activities, visual preferences and other countless factors. Maya Deren described in *Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality*:

*The Creative Use of Reality:*

The term ‘image’ also has positive implications: it presumes a mental activity, whether in its most passive form (the ‘mental images’ of perception and memory) or, as in the arts, the creative action of the imagination realized by the art instrument. Here reality is first filtered by the selectivity of individual interests and modified by prejudiced perception to become experience; as such it is combined with similar, contrasting or modifying experiences, both forgotten and remembered, to become assimilated into a conceptual image.

As we perceive the world differently, works which allow different perceptions and do not limit viewers’ visual and mental activities could be seen as a contemporary method of resolving the rigid and imposed representation by the author.
The video work, *5th Light*, by Paul Chan exemplifies work opening to different perceptions. The triangle-shaped video was projected on the floor and reflected again on the wall. It is seemingly not a normal situation in which the reflection is on the ground; however, it resembles how the water near the border reflects light and waves onto the bricks. *5th Light* gives me a sense of transcendental upon my first glance, but simultaneously implies a potential reality behind. The objects are moving in different directions, which obscure our ability to tell which direction they fall from.

![Image of Paul Chan, 5th Light (2007), Digital video projection, 14 minutes, Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York](image)

Chan breaks the rectangular frame of moving-images and allows viewers to walk around to experience and choose their own perspectives. This innovation to break the rectangular frame and deemphasizes borders. For me, the silhouetted elements in the video are more likely to be a creation based on our daily life, rather than imagination. I relate the
silhouetted objects to the dramatic shadows happening in certain lighting situations. The video is more powerful as it is a reality beyond our visual perception.

![Image](image_url)

Figure 12. Breathing Waves, Video, 2'01”, 2016

The light movements I depict in my work, *Breathing Waves I*, evoke a sense beyond vision, as they uncover a world not otherwise visible to the human eye. The video work has three sections. In the middle section, the consistent light movement in the smaller inner frame contrasts with the intruding “glitches” which move much faster and more unexpectedly in the outer frame. In the beginning and end, bubbles come into the frame constantly and interact with the moving light which sits on the ocean surface. The light movements remain the same from east to west, from my childhood to present, acting as a metaphor of personal memory. My video attempts to disrupt elements referring to the present reality. Two scenes which happen in different periods of time, with different frame sizes, now occur in the same scene and “happen” in the same time. Although the video still remains in a rectangular frame, the bubbles which come from the outside do not have restrictions. They come from every direction, from outside.
Conclusion
I can only perceive time when it has passed already, or when it is waiting ahead of me. The signs of time passing, the traces it left behind confirms its presence. Through my work, I want my viewers to experience a need to stop and spend time, so that they could consider their own memories and feelings. I choose abstraction as a form of expression because it alludes to states of meditation through a non-representational method. In fact, my non-representations represent something very real — the inner reality.

In the first Chapter—Time: Why My Work Needs to Peel Off Layers of Time?—I examine how I use time as an important tactic in my work, and how I use time-based media to depict time. Inspired by Hiroshi Sugimoto, Uta Barth, Roni Horn and Bill Viola’s different ways of depicting/expressing issues related to time, memory and meditation, I investigate how I use a non-representational way to depict time and an indirect way to express emotion.

In the following two chapters, I address the subjectivity of photography and photograph is a subjective reflection of reality. Moreover, I examine the paradox of how the camera perceives the world by itself but at the same time it is also subordinate to the photographer’s will. Ultimately, the perception is altered when viewers encountering with the work.

I choose the photographic/cinematic medium because it conveys another kind of perception, which takes place on the inside of the camera apparatus. I reveal a world with the idea of how the camera perceives the world in its own way. I believe that the camera has its own voice in a photograph even it is subordinate to the photographer. Photographic/cinematic medium’s subjectivity is generated not only from the photographer’s manipulation and personal perception, but also from the medium’s
imperceptible autonomy. The subjectivity is further magnified when viewers encountering with the work. In general, the viewer’s ultimate perception of a photograph is formed by the subjective perceptions from the camera, the photographer, and the his/her personal experience.
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10. Ibid., p 91.


Illustration Citations

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Figure 2: Hiroshi Sugimoto, Seascape

Figure 3: Yihuang Lu, still frame taken from the video *Murmuring* (2017), digital film, 3 minutes 29 seconds.

Figure 4: Bill Viola, *Chott el-Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat)*, 1979. Videotape, color, stereo sound; 28 minutes.

Figure 5: Roni Horn, *Still Water*, 1999.

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Figure 8: Yihuang Lu, *Folds*, Inkjet Print, 2016

Figure 9: Eadweard Muybridge, *The Horse in Motion*, 1878, albumen printed on card

Figure 10: Yihuang Lu, *Neon Light Landscape*, Inkjet Prints, 2015-2016

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