

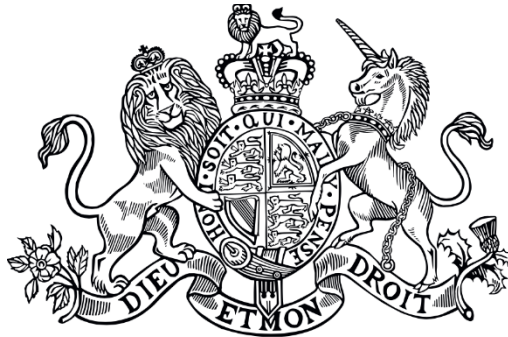
To Paint as if a Stranger: Minor Practice in an Era of Shifting Perception

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Abstract

This research explores how artists in painting practice can escape from established, rigid models and embark on a continuous internal revolution along a line of flight toward the minor. Drawing upon Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the minor, this research proposes that a minor practice is not an aesthetic style or a category defined by mainstream discourse, but rather a continuous movement of self-alienation initiated from within the major system.

To find this line of flight, the research is grounded in thinking from within the practice, adopting the researcher's own position of in-betweenness as its core perspective, a position shaped by multiple systems, including traditional Eastern, Western realist, and contemporary art. This unique perspective critiques any singular, linear conception of art history, which in turn leads to the working method of drawing the future from the past, aiming to strategically revisit and reactivate the latent potentials within histories that mainstream narratives have deemed obsolete.

To translate these into concrete action strategies, this research draws on Roger Caillois's theory of biological mimicry and Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming to construct an operational model named Mimicry-Becoming. This model employs mimicry as a strategy to suspend the centralized artistic subject, thereby opening up two intertwined paths of becoming: the first replaces clarity of meaning with the purity and continuity of intensity itself as the internal measure of practice; the second moves outward to capture the rhythms and forces of heterogeneous others, translating them through the irreducible force of bodily intensity and producing an unfamiliar, unstable hybrid through collision and mixture. Ultimately, these paths converge toward an intensive practice that embraces process and becomes-with-the-world.

This research positions minor painting practice as a necessary vital gesture and a perceptual revolution. It not only challenges singular art-historical narratives through its unique strategies but, more importantly, enables painting to function as a potent ethical and political response in an Anthropocene era defined by systemic uncertainty and ecological crisis, thus opening up new dimensions of meaning for the practice of contemporary painting.

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Summer, summer, this journey seems to be coming to an end. In countless moments, looking up at the lush ferns inside the library, I used to imagine how I would feel upon finishing this journey. Accompanied by London's endless, almost daytime summer light, I immersed myself in a bubble woven of Kafka and insect mimicry, much like K in *The Castle*, trying to untangle a path through the chaotic threads toward truth. Did I find it? Seems that.

Looking back, I am deeply grateful to my supervisors, Catherine Ferguson and Josephine Berry, for their guidance and encouragement. I will always treasure Cath sharing with me to "*Think through your painting*," and the moment spent with Josie standing before Paul Nash's *Dead Sea* at Tate Britain. Those conversations did not just shape this thesis; they are keeping shaping how I think as both a painter and a researcher.

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Introduction

If I were to describe this practice-based research in one word, I would choose: **escape**. This is not a romantic escape toward a pure outside, but rather a continuous movement of internal dismantling, reshaping, and blending. What exactly do I want to escape from, and where do I want to go? It all began with a real and urgent predicament in my painting practice. Forgive me for recounting this personal experience first, for it is not merely the origin of this research but, like the ice Melquíades brought to Macondo in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, it introduced a new tactile sensation while simultaneously triggering an inevitable chain of questions and explorations.¹ I must first clarify this point of origin before I can unfold the path of this escape.

After completing my undergraduate studies in traditional Chinese painting in 2018, I chose to move from China to the United Kingdom to pursue postgraduate studies, shifting my practice to contemporary oil painting. At the time, I believed that the blank canvas of oil painting could liberate me from the rigid conventions of traditional Chinese painting, allowing me to achieve true creativity. However, after about two years of this liberated practice, I became aware that my work had stagnated into a wax museum-like state: each painting became a replica of the last, featuring repetitive themes, converging colour palettes, and fixed compositions. It seemed that before I even acted, an invisible cliché was already guiding my hand.

Gilles Deleuze, in his discussion of Francis Bacon's work, notes: "*In fact, it would be a mistake to think that the painter works on a white and virgin surface. The entire surface is already invested virtually with all kinds of clichés.*"² This insight made me realise my own predicament: even after shifting the battlefield of my practice, the clichés returned in another form. The problem, then, perhaps lies not in the medium but in the results-oriented mode of thinking behind the action.

¹ Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. by Gregory Rabassa (London: Penguin Books, 2014).

² Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. by Daniel W. Smith (London: Continuum, 2003), p. 11.

The core of this mode is an obsession with painting a good painting. This paradigm, rooted in the binary evaluation of good/bad, has permeated my entire art education and has accumulated within me like geological strata. It originated from the realist training in the Chinese art education system, which was inherited from the Soviet model. It was later shaped by the reverence for pictorial paradigms and classical brushwork in traditional Chinese painting, and is now influenced by the standards of the mainstream academic and market systems of Western contemporary art. It is precisely this mindset, aimed at the perfect painting, that has unconsciously led me to pursue stable and validated outcomes, trapping me within established clichés. This obsession is not merely an aesthetic preference; it is, in essence, a manifestation of anthropocentrism in the form of a subject-object dualism. It presupposes that the artist—the human—is a sovereign subject, while painting is a passive object waiting to be conquered, disciplined, and moulded into a perfect form. Thus, I began to realise that the key to escape lies not in seeking a new medium or style, but in delving into the root of the problem to question and subvert the entire results-oriented logic of practice.

In fact, this binary scale of self-assessment can be seen as the internalisation of a macro-level evolutionary theory of art at the individual level. This evolutionary narrative resonates with the logic of modernity, which emphasises linear progress, instrumentalisation, and control. The latter has not only shaped the modern world and its ecological predicament, but has also shaped the former—a view that sees artistic development as a linear progression, akin to biological evolution or technological iteration, constantly advancing toward a more perfect form. Within the stylised, commercialised, and institutionalised context of contemporary painting practice, this evolutionary narrative often confines practitioners to a logic of progress and stable outcomes. Meanwhile, within a global framework where academic institutions, art markets, and aesthetic values remain predominantly Western-dominated, the path of artistic development is often simplified into the worldwide dissemination of a single modernity. Other cultural traditions, usually deemed peripheral based on geographical determinism, are frequently labelled as backward or underdeveloped. My choice in 2018 to shift from traditional Chinese painting to Western oil painting was, to some extent, unconsciously influenced by this narrative, as if only through a change of medium and context could one plug into the mainstream track of artistic development.

These invisible disciplinary forces from the mainstream constitute the core predicament faced by myself and many other artists: how can we escape the clichés in our practice? Meanwhile, for practitioners like myself who traverse different cultural soils, the intersection of this issue with cultural identity renders it unavoidable: are those heterogeneous cultures marginalized under the Western-centric gaze a shackle to be cast off, or a novel weapon capable of catalyzing breakthroughs in practice? Furthermore, in an era when the scale of human activity has propelled us into the Anthropocene, the limitations and unsustainability of this worldview that objectifies nature and subordinates it to human will can no longer be ignored.

This interrogation, sparked by a personal practical dilemma, intertwines with creative logic, cultural identity, and ecological ethics, collectively revealing a structural predicament: a crisis of perception, a crisis in the way we see, feel, and establish relationships with the world. I emphasise perception here, rather than thought, because underlying the pursuit of perfect results, the Western-centric narrative, and the logic that seeks to objectify and instrumentalise the world is the same hardened paradigm of perception: it presupposes a sovereign subject and treats the non-human presences in the world, whether organic or inorganic, as passive objects available for judgment and representation. Thus, the path of escape we seek concerns not just an intellectual revolution of ideas, but points toward a more direct and embodied way of encountering the world as beings. It is precisely within this reflection that I attempt to stage an ontological shift within the practice of painting: transforming painting from a noun-object (*a painting*) into a continuous, moving bodily practice as a verb (*to paint*).

To address this question, I refuse to privilege theory over practice, and oppose treating the former as a mere explanatory manual for the latter. Instead, I adopt a mode of embodied thinking that emerges from within the practice itself as the methodology of this research. By translating theory into physically perceptible actions, I allow it to form a symbiotic feedback loop with practice. Specifically, every impasse encountered in the studio compels the theoretical framework to adjust and reshape itself; conversely, every deepening of theory translates into new strategies of action, driving the painting into a state of continuous revolution.

This embodied thinking mode is rooted in my own unique, “in-between” position: having been trained in both traditional Chinese painting and realism in China, later turning to

contemporary painting practice, and using oil paint, the conventional medium of Western painting. It is from this fluid perspective that this research refuses to take cultural essentialism or geographical determinism as its starting point. Instead, it aims to examine and deconstruct the major narratives existing within both Chinese and Western art traditions, and to demonstrate that the minor is not an innate attribute of certain cultures but a creative strategy that can be actively adopted by any practitioner.

Thus, the core question this research seeks to address becomes clear: how to establish a strategy within painting practice that rejects fixity and pursues a state of continuous becoming, thereby transforming painting from a static object as a noun into a continuous movement as a verb? Around this question, I shall pursue my inquiry along three paths. First, how can this transformation be initiated from within the practice, that is, a “minor” revolution in the sense of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, rather than being achieved through external substitution or a change of medium? Second, how can the practitioner, through concrete actions, open up this line of flight by suspending the centralised subject and dissolving its rigid boundaries? Finally, when the strategy of suspending the centralised subject itself inherently carries the risk of a closed loop, how can it be advanced into an open practice of co-becoming with heterogeneous actors? These three paths will be advanced respectively in three chapters, and will converge in the conclusion to provide an overarching response to the core question.

To explore this path of escape, this research introduces the concept of the minor from Deleuze and Guattari's *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* as its core theoretical tool, extending it to the field of visual art.³ In their framework, the minor does not refer to a numerical minority, but rather to a deviation from and subversion of fixed standards. Taking Franz Kafka's literary practice, which unfolds in the deformed and localized Prague German, as an example, we see that it is precisely by creating “stutters” and “stammers” from within the language, causing it to deviate from its intended path and territory, that he launches a revolution from within the major system, achieving the status of “*a sort of stranger within his*

³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. by Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

own language”.⁴ Based on this logic, this research argues that in a painting practice moving toward the minor, artists do not necessarily have to invent a new painterly language or change the medium of practice. Instead, they must continuously alienate established modes of expression and action through constant displacement within painting, unearthing the inherent revolutionary potential of elements that are excluded or ignored by the major system.

To practice this transformation, this research proposes a dynamic “mimicry-becoming” model consisting of two interconnected, progressively unfolding actions. The first action is “mimicry”.

In the Western philosophical tradition, mimicry has long been understood as the representation of an external prototype: from Plato’s indirect replicating of the world of Forms to the Renaissance’s precise reproduction of the appearances of the external world. This tradition is rooted in a logic that presupposes a subject possessed of absolute sovereignty and views the external world as an object waiting to be cognised and copied, which has long locked mimicry within the framework of representing outward appearances. However, Roger Caillois’s theory of mimicry offers a fundamental subversion. He rejects the utilitarian Darwinian interpretation that understands mimicry as the external morphological camouflage of organisms to evade natural predators. Instead, he positions mimicry as an internal perceptual drive: the organism is seduced by inorganic space, actively surrenders its individual boundaries, and desires assimilation with the environment, entering a state of trance or hypnosis. Within this framework, the site where mimicry occurs is not the visual surface, but the perceptual boundaries within the body. Extending this state of dissolving boundaries into the realm of human psychology, Caillois describes it as a porous experience where the subject is permeated by external heterogeneity, the body detaches from thought, and the individual crosses the boundaries of the skin.⁵ This state of dissolving subject boundaries is not an abstract theoretical construct, but a tangibly felt experience within the practice of painting. In my own creative process, as well as in the experiences of practitioners like Philip Guston and Jackson Pollock, this state of practice dominated by the body rather

⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, pp. 26–27.

⁵ Roger Caillois, ‘Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia’, trans. by John Shepley, *October*, 31 (Winter 1984).

than subjective consciousness has truly occurred. It is precisely this marginal state that is actually encountered in practice yet difficult to name, which prompts this study to turn to Caillois's theory of mimicry. Proceeding from this internal perceptual dimension, this research views actively entering a state of self-dissolution as a critical path to breaking fixed subjectivity and becoming a porous existence open to the world.

However, through my own practice, I critically reveal the risks inherent in this strategy. In the practical process of using mimicry as a core strategy, I discovered that it does not always lead to creative encounters with heterogeneous elements, but instead falls into a homogenised self-replication. This forces me to ask: why does the strategy of suspending the subject instead create a new cage? Upon closer examination of Caillois's theory, I realised that the root of the problem lies in its foundation upon a Freudian, death-drive-oriented model of the unconscious: an instinctive impulse that drives living organisms to surrender organic complexity and desire a return to the stillness of inorganic matter. In this model, the world becomes a mirror of the self. It is fundamentally inward-looking and closed. Consequently, in the absence of a genuine connection with the external world, the porous self opened up by mimicry easily collapses into a closed internal loop, captured once again by homogenised self-repetition.

Therefore, the model must advance to the second action: "becoming". This strategy is based on a Deleuzian-Guattarian model of the unconscious that is open and productive. It aims to establish active connections with the external world and manifests as a movement of pure intensity focused on motion rather than outcomes. By examining Kafka's texts through Deleuze and Guattari's theory of becoming, I propose two intertwined paths of becoming, named respectively after two animals in Kafka's literature. The first is Gregor Samsa, who transforms into an insect in *The Metamorphosis*.⁶ And the second is Red Peter, the ape who learns how to become human in *A Report to an Academy*.⁷ These two paths manifest specifically as: the Gregor-esque path establishes the purity and continuity of intensity itself as a new immanent measure, while the Red Peter-esque path actively captures the

⁶ Franz Kafka, 'The Metamorphosis', in *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, trans. by Joyce Crick (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁷ Franz Kafka, 'A Report for an Academy', translated by Ian Johnston, Kafka-Online, <https://www.kafka-online.info/a-report-for-an-academy.html>, (accessed 7 September 2025).

heterogeneous other, translating and appropriating it through its own intensity to generate a strange variant within the mixture. It is precisely the immanent tension between these two paths that prevents the practice from settling in any single direction, continuously unfolding a line of flight.

It must be pointed out that the embodied methodology of this study permeates the entire process from real practical impasses to theoretical evolution. This ensures that the site where the mimicry-becoming model occurs remains the body itself, rather than an abstract conceptual space. It is precisely through this continuous opening of embodied practice to the external world that this research intersects with the core positions of queer ecology. This genealogy rejects the dualistic notion that views the human body as a closed domain of dominance and nature as a passive background, aligning instead with a radically relational stance. As Caillois's analysis of insect mimicry reveals, the body is no longer a closed, solid fortress, but is instead riddled with countless pores opening up to the exterior. The queer ecological perspectives further propel this porousness into a decentered, non-human dimension: the body and the material world are mutually permeating and co-becoming. Here, my embodied methodology is not only a mode of perception, but also a critical approach to the logic of modernity. Through the radical materiality of the body within painting, it dissolves the boundaries between subject/object and culture/nature, transforming painting practice into a symbiotic act that crosses cultural, gender, and species boundaries. It concerns not only how to paint, but more fundamentally, how to survive as a porous entity entangled with the world.

To fully present this process of argumentation, this research is divided into three chapters.

Chapter 1, "In Search of the Minor: Rethinking Painting Practice from the Margins", will introduce the theoretical framework of the minor and the major. I will argue that the minor is not a classification or definition of style or identity, but rather a movement of continuous self-alienation initiated from within the major system. By analysing how Philip Guston reactivated those heterogeneous forces judged by dominant narratives as obsolete or even as something to be overcome, and combining this with my own practice, this chapter will propose "drawing the future from the past" as the core method of minor practice: reactivating

those heterogeneous resources viewed by dominant narratives as obsolete or needing to be overcome, and transforming them into a power that subverts the major system from within.

Chapter 2, “Mimicry as a Generative Strategy: Deconstructing the Subject to Forge the Minor”, will turn its focus to the artist’s inner subjectivity. This chapter will delve into mimicry as a concrete method for dismantling the centralised subject. I will further test the effectiveness of this strategy by analysing how Paul Nash perceived and depicted the inherent personage of inanimate objects.

Chapter 3, “Mimicry-Becoming: The Porous Body and the Paths of Intensity”, will directly confront the dilemma where the strategy of mimicry may fall into a closed internal consumption guided by a Freudian model of the unconscious. To break through, this chapter will propose a theoretical model of evolution from mimicry to becoming based on Kafka’s texts, and systematically distinguish two paths of becoming: the Gregor-esque and the Red Peter-esque. By analyzing how Claude Cahun, in her photographic self-portrait series, radically projected herself into the external world as a non-normative body in a state of flux, and how Guo Fengyi utilised the body as a medium to resonate with cosmic energy, this chapter ultimately points out that under the guidance of the mimicry-becoming theoretical model, minor practice no longer takes the suspension of the subject as its endpoint, but instead evolves, based on a porous body, into a movement of intensity co-becoming with heterogeneous beings.

Chapter 1 In Search of the Minor: Rethinking Painting Practice from the Margins

When an artistic practice becomes trapped in clichés, how does a self-revolution occur? To develop this argument, this chapter begins with my observations at a Philip Guston retrospective. It was there that my encounter with his turn from abstraction to figuration in the late 1960s introduces the chapter's core question. Subsequently, this chapter will introduce Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the minor as the central theoretical framework to explore the possibility of an artist subverting their own rigid expressions from within. Based on this, this chapter will analyse Guston's practice in depth, unearthing how he, through medium transformation and spatial reconfiguration, initiated an immanent deformation and revolution against the language of Abstract Expressionism, which had already become a new hegemony at that time. Finally, this will lead back to my own painting practice, arguing that by looking back and appropriating non-Western-centrism modes of artistic production, I actively challenge and reshape my established and stabilising painting language.

1.1 A Room in-between

I find myself irresistibly drawn back to that room. In the retrospective for Guston at Tate Modern in October 2023, paintings from different periods were categorised chronologically into various rooms. Among them was a room containing massive, coal-black forms suspended amidst a crisscrossing of cool-grey brushstrokes, a grey that seemed to permeate the space like a kind of "air". Beside them were a dozen or so works on paper of no great size. Each was sparsely scattered with one or two black lines, some straight, some curved. These works on paper appear too simple. They do not represent any tangible object or abstract symbol. Compared to Guston's earlier abstract paintings that brought him worldly success or the KKK figures that later became his personal emblem, these works in the retrospective seem like the most insignificant footnotes of his painting career. But why is it that ever since I first entered that room, the lines in these works have become entangled in my mind, summoning me back again and again as if by an incantation?

Let me situate my observation in the period when Guston created these paintings and drawings, which seem so difficult to place within any recognizable or readable context:

between 1964 and 1968. This was precisely the journey during which his struggle with abstract painting was coming to a close, as he attempted to reorient his practice toward a full recovery of figuration. This room stands as a testament to such a state of in-betweenness.



Fig 1-1 Installation view of *Philip Guston: A Retrospective*, Tate Modern, London, 2023. Left: Philip Guston, *Untitled*, 1964; Right: Philip Guston, *Head I*, 1965. Artworks © The Estate of Philip Guston. Photo: © Yajie Liang, 2023.

In the biography *Philip Guston: A Life Spent Painting*, Robert Storr describes a painting from this period with a mysterious black mass, *Untitled* (1963), as follows: a work that “*does not function in any traditional sense of that term, but it vividly embodies the troubled state of Guston’s enterprise.*”⁸ From a worldly perspective, for someone who had just held a career retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum in 1962, why would he view his painting in this way? What kind of dilemma had he fallen into? What exactly was he fighting against?

⁸ Robert Storr, *Philip Guston: A Life Spent Painting* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2020), p. 86.

In Guston's earlier abstract paintings, the compositions are dominated by agitated, short brushstrokes. They gather in the centre of the canvas, interwoven vertically and horizontally. Storr describes this as "*broadening of the weave of that basic matrix, made for a pictorial arena devoid of gravity.*"⁹ Under the dominion of this formal language, which he had developed and refined over more than a decade, Guston perhaps felt that his accustomed mode of painterly production had become a kind of dogma, one that could no longer authentically express his thoughts on the contemporary social environment and his life within it. In a 1974 conversation with the art historian Dore Ashton about the motives behind his shift from abstraction to figuration, he stated:

*In general, I feel I am always described as in trouble and in crisis. Most artists feel that way. But when the picture comes out there's a calm and feeling of continuity. I think the frequent use of crisis and anxiety gives the impression that I am in constant pain. As it feels to me, when the picture takes form, the new structure itself calms me and I would hope that the looker does not feel he is looking at pain, trouble, and anxiety, but at a new structure which he can contemplate. Ideally! That he gets a real, positive change.*¹⁰

This desire to pursue a real positive charge amidst anguish is not just Guston's impulse to escape his own rigidified language; it reveals a universal predicament: when a stable and mature artistic language transforms from a tool of liberation into a self-imprisoning dogma, how can an artist launch an effective self-revolution from within it? To explore the origin and generative mechanism of this real positive charge, I will now enter the subterranean labyrinth that Deleuze and Guattari charted around Franz Kafka, and the concept of the minor.

1.2 Minor Literature and Minor Art

The concept of the minor originates from a lengthy diary entry written by Kafka on December 25, 1911.¹¹ In this entry, reflecting on the vitality of a minor literature, Kafka describes the Czech and Warsaw-Jewish literatures of his milieu and envisions an ideal literary community in which he hopes to participate. In his vision, literature should be the

⁹ Ibid., p. 92.

¹⁰ Philip Guston, *I Paint What I Want to See* (London: Penguin Books, 2022), p. 247.

¹¹ Franz Kafka, *Diaries 1910–1913*, trans. by Joseph Kresh (New York: Schocken Books, 1948).

diary of a nation, a direct and vibrant force, by no means something to be admired and critiqued from a distance. It is noteworthy that one of the conditions for keeping a minor literature alive is the absence of dominant literary masters to serve as its standard and centre, as well as its independence from the literary tastes of the era, thereby maximally preserving the independence of its competing writers.¹² This reveals the importance, in Kafka's initial conception of producing a minor literature, of dismantling the standardised forms prescribed by mainstream society. Connected to the dilemma Guston faced, when he found that the abstract language he had forged had gradually solidified and could no longer carry his authentic feelings about reality, Kafka's advocacy for a minor literature offers a possible path for understanding his chosen turn: a path of escape from the constraints of mainstream norms.

Taking Kafka's diary as a point of departure, Deleuze and Guattari developed a broad concept of a minor literature.¹³ In their view, Kafka's writing is itself a form of minor writing. Compared to standard German, the language Kafka, as a Jew living in Prague, used in his daily life and writing was itself a fusion of the linguistic habits of different ethnicities and cultures—an alienated, local German. Whether in its pronunciation or its syntactic structure, such a language is undoubtedly a deformed one. Thus, compared with the mainstream German literary world writing in standard German, the writing of a minority figure like Kafka naturally occupies a minor position. This leads to one of Deleuze and Guattari's definitions of a minor literature: it is not a literature written in a minor language, but rather that which a minority makes in a major language. It should be noted that this does not simply refer to the subject carrying out the action being of a minority ethnicity, for example, a Jew expressing himself in standard German. Rather, it means that the major language being used is one that has been alienated by the subject's use of it, as with the deformed German in Kafka's hands. This deformed language, in the process of being used, is stripped of its original meaning within the major culture and becomes filled with new, subversive uses. To use Deleuze and Guattari's words, the process of alienation is "*to be a sort of stranger within his own language.*"¹⁴

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 26.

When a familiar language becomes strange and unrecognizable, the minor begins to be generated. In Deleuze and Guattari's definition of major and minor, the fundamental difference between the two lies in their conformity to the standards and norms of the social mainstream.¹⁵ The major signifies a formed, stable, and dominant state that maintains norms. In contrast, the minor signifies a deviation from the standard, rather than a numerical minority. For example, in a patriarchy, the masculine is major relative to the feminine because men make the rules. Or, in anthropocentrism, the human is major relative to other non-human others, and as the non-human others are governed by the rules, such as animals, plants, etc., they are minor.

However, to be minor does not mean to be forever subservient to the rules set by the major. For a subject who wishes to maintain a minority identity, the desire to escape the content and forms prescribed by the major and to re-establish their own expression becomes paramount. Yet this escape is often not a sudden and complete betrayal of the rules, a casting off of everything to move toward entirely new forms and content. Deleuze and Guattari argue that the minor is a tendency or a movement, a continuous act of alienation that occurs *within* the major.¹⁶ Take Kafka's novella *The Metamorphosis* as an example: even after Gregor awakens to find his body transformed into that of a monstrous insect, in his consciousness, he is still a man, even worrying that his inability to get out of bed due to his sudden transformation will cause him to be late and criticised by his manager.¹⁷ As time passes, he gradually adapts and begins to use his insect body proficiently. Throughout this process, Gregor remains a man who is in the process of becoming an insect. It is not until the end of the story that he fully becomes an insect in death. In Deleuze and Guattari's reading of Kafka, "*becoming-animal... constitutes a continuing deterritorialization of the human.*"¹⁸ It could replace animal with any group situated at the margins according to mainstream societal standards: becoming-woman, becoming-disabled, becoming-plant, and so on. Such a transformation does not point toward becoming any single subject, but rather is a continuous movement of alienation and

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Kafka, 'The Metamorphosis'.

¹⁸ Robert Brinkley, note to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "What is a Minor Literature?", *Mississippi Review*, 11.3 (Winter/Spring 1983), 13–33 (p. 32), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20133921>.

subversive reconstruction directed against established rules. As John Cage used it, this is “*not as descriptive of an act to be later judged in terms of success and failures, but simply as an act the outcome of which is unknown.*”¹⁹

In order to more precisely understand this logic of acting from within, I need to clarify the relationships among several key concepts in Deleuze and Guattari’s theory: territory, deterritorialization, lines of flight. First, “territory” points to any stable, dominant system, whether in language, culture, or artistic paradigms. Like its literal meaning, it is a governed land, representing the order and norms defined and maintained by the major. Second, “deterritorialization” is an act of liberation launched against this territory. By breaking the established codes and rules within the territory, it renders it unstable to the point of collapse. This process is not a total negation, but rather unfolds along a “line of flight” filled with potential and uncertainty.²⁰ The core of this research, the minor practice, is precisely the revolutionary strategy deployed along this line of flight.

The concepts of the minor and major are not only applicable to the fields of language and literature. In his essay *Notes Towards a Minor Art Practice*, Simon O’Sullivan integrates them into the domain of contemporary art, envisioning a minor art that could produce new subjectivities in visual language.²¹ Using Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of a minor literature as a theoretical framework, O’Sullivan argues that becoming-minor in art means that “*art begins with a deterritorialization of forms that have become fixed.*”²² For example, if Western traditional art and modernism are considered a major artistic language with established forms and standards, then artistic practices such as feminism or post-colonialism that decode the former, or cause it to stammer and stutter—that is, make its typical symbolic language system strange—are the minor art that deconstruct and subvert the major art. It can be understood that the major is a commanding discourse that requires artistic practice to operate according

¹⁹ John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), p. 13.

²⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

²¹ O’Sullivan, ‘Minor Literature’.

²² Ibid.

to certain rules and forms. Practices that disrupt these rules, or even overthrow them, are minor arts.

O’Sullivan also categorises forms of artistic practice as the major and the minor: “...*think about the major media of art, specifically painting, and thus characterise those practices as minor which abandoned the canvas (happenings, performances, and so on) or otherwise deterritorialise the figure.*”²³ However, O’Sullivan’s method of distinguishing between these different media based solely on the number of practitioners or their share in Western art history is too simplistic. He overlooks a key characteristic of the minor proposed by Deleuze and Guattari: that the minor, in fact, occurs within the major. The former will employ the same elements as the latter, but in a different way. Just as Kafka reconstructed the form and content of expression using a deformed German, any attack on the practice of painting, which has long occupied a major position under Western centrism, must also be launched from within. Otherwise, if one merely changes the medium without the practitioner alienating and attacking their own mindset or mode of artistic production, they are still perpetuating the already-formed modes of expression and language of the past.

The critical examination of O’Sullivan’s view raises another question: is the minor an action actively taken by the practitioner from within, or is it an identity label conferred by the major discursive system according to the standards it defines? This distinction is crucial for my action. In the latter case, for example, in the logic of the mainstream art world categorizing certain artists’ works as “Outsider Art”, the major, precisely through the act of defining and categorizing, re-establishes its own central position and power of judgment, safely isolating the “other” it has defined to prevent its own system from facing any risk of being challenged. In contrast, this research insists that the minor is an immanent revolution that can be initiated by any practitioner. It is not about the artist’s identity, but about the actions they take.

Let me return to the writing of Kafka, the pioneer who proposed the concept of the minor. Deleuze and Guattari describe it as “*a rhizome*”.²⁴ Deleuze and Guattari argue that it is precisely because his writing lacks a unified form and is more like the proliferation of different lines of growth: the reader makes connections as they read. They do not need to explain and state the meaning of the text; they can discover where passages in the text lead,

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. 3.

and what they can connect to. This reading experience means that Kafka does not fix his perspective in one place in his writing but constantly shifts his position. Such an act of expression through a constantly changing perspective is, in Deleuze and Guattari's view, one of the conditions for a minor revolution to produce new forms, because it is "*only in discontinuity and displacement can there be new potentialities*."²⁵ From this perspective, perhaps the reason behind Guston's shift from abstract to figurative painting was precisely such a displacement—an internal action aimed at transforming his mode of seeing and thinking? Before analysing Guston's painting practice in detail, I need to discuss how to apply this action, which occurs in language, to the visual arts. And what impact would such an action have on the individual artist, and even on the practice of the entire community?

Take Surrealism in the early 20th century as an example. The Surrealists opposed the mainstream art of the time under European centrism, which was centred on logic, rationality, and formal aesthetics, namely, Realism and Naturalism. They believed these traditional frameworks overemphasised the controllability of order and reason while neglecting the deep forces surging in the subconscious and unconscious. As David Craven points out, "*Surrealism at its most profound was not about reducing art to personal subjectivity, but rather about expanding art production to address the historical, hence also institutional, construction of subjectivity per se*."²⁶ Such a practice, which attacks the hardened modes and scope of artistic expression of the time, is undoubtedly minor.

In the actions they carried out, André Breton, as the leader of Surrealism, advocated for automatism as a mechanism "*where devices to release the power of unconscious drives*", with specific actions including automatic writing, dream recording, and their publication.²⁷ He believed in a "blindness", where the artist must abandon all conscious activity and rational

²⁵ Marie Maclean, note in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature: The Components of Expression," *New Literary History*, 16.3 (Spring 1985), 591–608 (p. 591), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/468842>.

²⁶ David Craven, "Abstract Expressionism and Third World Art: A Post-Colonial Approach to 'American' Art," *Oxford Art Journal*, 14.1 (1991), 44–66 (p. 49), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1360277>.

²⁷ Rosalind E. Krauss, 'Cadaver', in *Formless: A User's Guide*, by Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss (New York: Zone Books, 1997), p. 63.

thought, like “*in a dark room, eyes wide open...and put nothingness in its stead.*”²⁸ And this void, devoid of any rational thought or logical framework, would provide an architecture for the artist's unconscious, a space where “*the distinction between subjective and objective ceases to be necessary or useful*”, and an invisible force binds things together.²⁹ Breton declared that to excavate, pursue, and record what is there, one should throw oneself into the darkness of existence, into a state where only automatism can provide direction.³⁰

Breton's manifesto on automatism directly discards the techniques acquired by the artist, shifting the highest realm achievable by artistic practice to the domain of the most instinctual motor responses, akin to the libido. But is this actually the case? How does this state of subjective automation actually operate? And does it, as Breton claims, lead to a pure release of instinct? I will explore the possible paths and complexities of the subject's automation during the practical process in the next chapter on mimicry.

Here, the logic behind his idea of blindness may offer some inspiration for artists to generate the minor in their practice. From the literal meaning of blindness, when a physically normal, rational person is in a lit environment, he/she uses vision every moment he/she is not asleep to observe and experience the world. Vision is part of existence, and humans have long been accustomed to this mode of perception. However, when humans are in darkness and cannot rely on vision, how do they perceive the space outside our bodies? Humans can only move their bodies slowly to touch the surrounding dark space, using their other senses to feel their surroundings. If they step beyond the literal meaning of blindness to consider the logic behind the act of perceiving with other senses instead of vision, it resonates with the action of displacement discussed earlier. Blindness refers not only to visual impairment but also to the need to develop an action that releases oneself from accustomed, fixed modes of perception. This offers a new perspective for thinking about our practice, helping me to break free from a fixed mode of perception, thought, and action, and to re-examine and re-evaluate all the constituent elements of our practice, including the seemingly basic questions of what to paint, how to paint, what to paint with, and where to paint.

²⁸ André Breton, “The Automatic Message”, in *What is Surrealism? Selected Writings*, ed. by Franklin Rosemont (London: Pluto, 1978), p. 98.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 109.

³⁰ Susan Morris, “Drawing in the Dark: Involuntary Drawing”, *Tate Papers*, no. 18 (2012), <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/18/drawing-in-the-dark> (accessed 4 September 2025).

1.3 Philip Guston: From 无为 (*Wu Wei*) to Negative Space

Let me return to Guston's room to re-examine the dozens of single-line works on paper, which are part of the *Pure Drawing Series*. They are so simple, undisturbed by colour or mass, and so different from everything he had done before, that they cannot be interpreted in the same way one reads his earlier abstract paintings. Storr points out that, to break through, Guston had to be:

*changing his mode of attack and finding a new position from which to challenge attitudes and habits that prevented him from freely traversing the boundaries of tradition: the separation of abstraction from figuration... in short, the misleading binaries that plague modern culture.*³¹

If I use Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of minor and major as a theoretical framework to consider Guston's actions during this period, then the practice of these single-line works on paper was precisely the self-transformation he undertook to escape the painterly language he had invented and matured over the previous decade. By stepping outside of a fixed perspective and shifting the focus of his practice to works on paper—a relatively minor medium in the mainstream Western painting tradition—while keeping the site of practice within the bounds of easel painting, Guston threw aside the historical residues and clichés on the blank canvas, in order to start anew, to “*clear the deck*” in the simplest way possible.³²

Evidently, this act of clearing the decks was thorough. Hundreds of works on paper feature only small amounts of ink or charcoal. Such directness was unprecedented in his work. In a lecture Guston gave to students at the Yale School of Art about his works on paper, he referred to charcoal as “*an extension of your fingers*”.³³ Unlike oil painting, which allows for repeated layering and revision, once charcoal is on paper, it can never be altered. This means that these are “*one-shot works. Yes, like a tennis player practising his serve, the all-important attack needed to be clean and decisive, and the following-through in keeping with the*

³¹ Storr, *Philip Guston*, p. 104.

³² Philip Guston, ‘On Drawing’, in *Philip Guston: A Life Spent Painting*, by Robert Storr (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2020), p. 251.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

attack.”³⁴ From the nature of the material, a work that cannot be revised also means a work that cannot be reproduced. Each action is different from the last. These works on paper became a test of the limits he could reach: “‘*if I eliminated everything except just raw feeling and the brush and ink, the simplest of means without even the seductions of color?*’ It was like *testing myself, to see what I am, what I can do.*”³⁵ It can be said that these two years of pure works on paper were Guston’s experiment with his entire expressive language. The purpose of the experiment was not to develop a new language in the realm of works on paper, but to find a tool to help him transform.

So how did such a sustained experiment with single-line drawings, carried out across hundreds of sheets, actually work? Or rather, how did he know when a work on paper was effective? Where was the fulcrum for judgment? Guston provided his own answer to this question:

*The successful ones, to me, were the ones where the space felt filled and they weren’t just lines....If you do two roughly vertical lines, the ones that don’t work, the ones you throw away, are just lines. But the ones that work are, of course, where there’s a double thing going on. I mean, they’re lines, but they’re not lines, because the spaces are brought into operation. And if you ask me: How do I know? I can’t answer that, except that in the last analysis it’s feeling.*³⁶

When a line is drawn on paper, there is not only the line itself, but also the space on either side divided by it. This passively formed space is referred to as “negative space”. I think that unlike the “positive space” actively created by the artist, negative space is invisible in the Eurocentric painting tradition, and considered to have no value for discussion. In particular, negative space unoccupied by colour was even something to be eliminated. This neglect of negative space is a manifestation of the major logic of painting. Guston’s pure-line works on paper launch their attack precisely from this minor space ignored by mainstream rules. In Guston’s view, these works on paper are effective because the divided negative space is no

³⁴ Storr, *Philip Guston*, p. 106.

³⁵ Mark Stevens, ‘Philip Guston in Conversation’, *Ursula* (Hauser & Wirth, 30 October 2019), recording of a 1980 conversation, <https://www.hauserwirth.com/ursula/25111-philip-guston-conversation-mark-stevens/> (accessed 4 September 2025).

³⁶ Guston, ‘On Drawing’, p. 251.

longer a background but has, like the lines that divide it, become an active form. As forms, negative space and positive space naturally influence each other on a sheet of paper, jointly constituting the rhythm and feel of a picture. In fact, in the sketches on paper he made for paintings in the 1950s, I can see that the space and lines were not arranged haphazardly. Guston also mentioned that during that period of practice, he wanted to do more than leave marks on paper based on intuition and impulse. There had to be “*a certain kind of balance*” between the lines and the white space; otherwise, both would be mutually destructive.³⁷ This idea of actively using negative space was further developed during his intensive practice on paper in 1966-1967. It was also inspired by his friend John Cage’s practice of “silence” between 1948 and 1952.

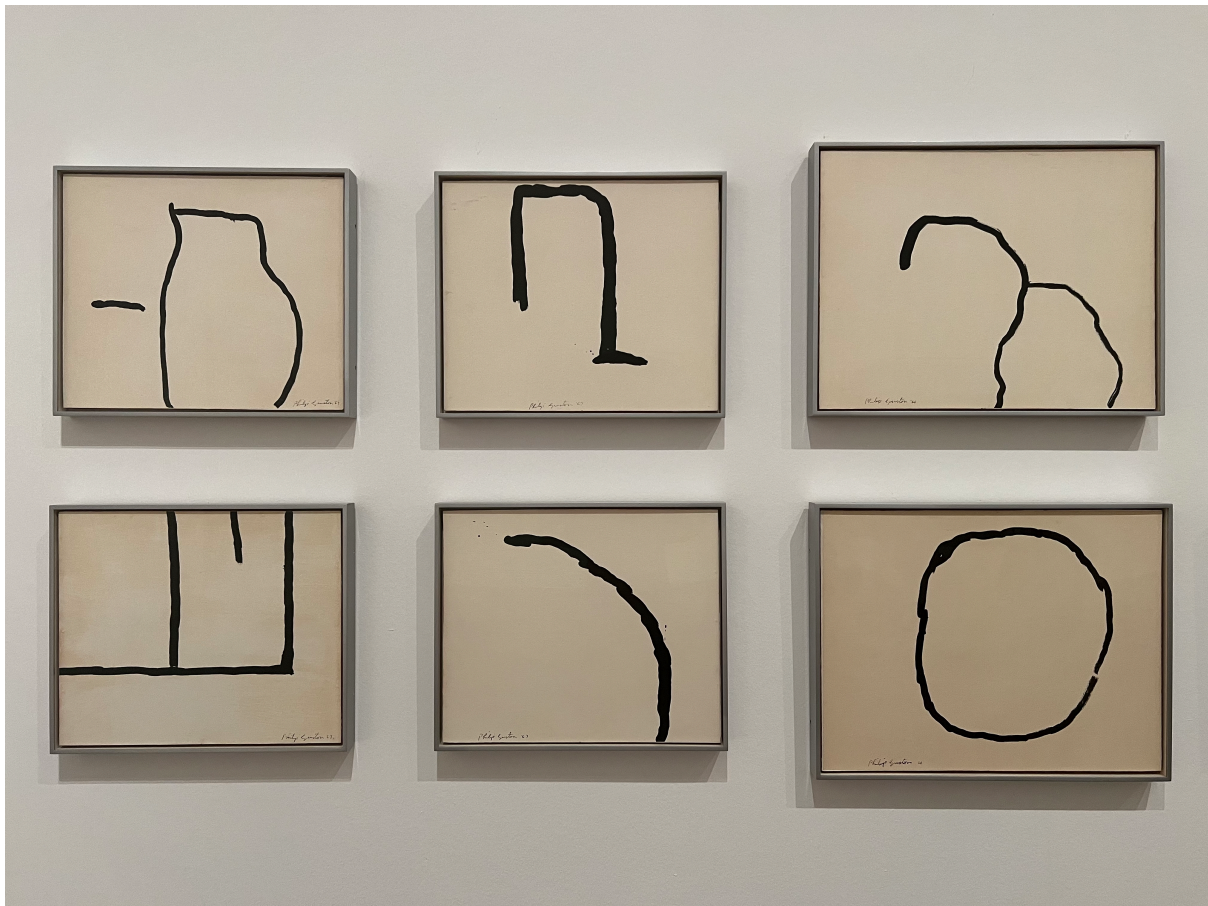


Fig 1-2 Installation view of *Philip Guston: A Retrospective*, Tate Modern, London, 2023. *Pure Drawing Series*, c. 1966–1967. Artworks © The Estate of Philip Guston. Photo: © Yajie Liang, 2023.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 248.

In 1952, Cage performed a period of silence for the audience in his work *4'33"*. In the video recording of the performance, the piece comprises not only the performer's silence (soundlessness) but also the noise generated by the audience in response to the unexpected performance. By introducing silence into the concert hall, a privileged space of discourse, Cage's practice extended the rule of silence, customarily observed by the audience, to the performer. It forces the listener to shift their auditory perception to other sounds, those excluded by the concepts of mainstream auditory culture's music, including both the ambient background sounds of the environment and the noise generated by the audience themselves out of unease and confusion. This concert about listening to silence redefines what music is: all sounds are music, including silence.

In Cage's view, his inspiration for silence came from Eastern philosophy: "*just then in the flush of my early contact with oriental philosophy. It was out of that that my interest in silence naturally developed: I mean it's almost transparent.*"³⁸ In the United States during and after the 1940s, universalism and global progressivism became popular. At the same time, "*many American artists during the 1940s, under the influence of surrealism, Freud, and Jung were interested in dethroning the monarchy of the ego in order to tap the unconscious.*"³⁹ Their practices developed after coming into contact with cultures outside of Eurocentrism. Unlike his contemporaries, who expanded the boundaries of self-expression by investing in the realms of spirituality and the unconscious, Cage was more interested in "*removing the ego so more of the world could get in unobstructed.*"⁴⁰

In Eastern philosophy, there is the concept of 无为 (*wú wéi*, "non-action" or "effortless action"), which is a way of letting things happen naturally, where an individual should not alter the course of events for their own interests or desires. In *A Composer's Confessions*, Cage mentioned: "*If one makes music, as the Orient would say, disinterestedly, that is, without concern for money or fame but simply for the love of making it, it is an integrating*

³⁸ Stephen Montague, 'John Cage at Seventy: An Interview', *American Music*, 3.2 (Summer 1985), p. 213.

³⁹ Douglas Kahn, 'John Cage: Silence and Silencing', *The Musical Quarterly*, 81.4 (Winter 1997), p. 565, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/742286>.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 566.

activity and one will find moments in his life that are complete and fulfilled."⁴¹ Douglas Kahn points out that the term "*disinterestedly*" became the concrete link between Cage's Orientalism and his initial proposal of silence.⁴² He began to rethink his musical practice through this idea of letting nature be nature, rather than adhering to the logic of systematic control and organisation of sound found in the modernist musical tradition.

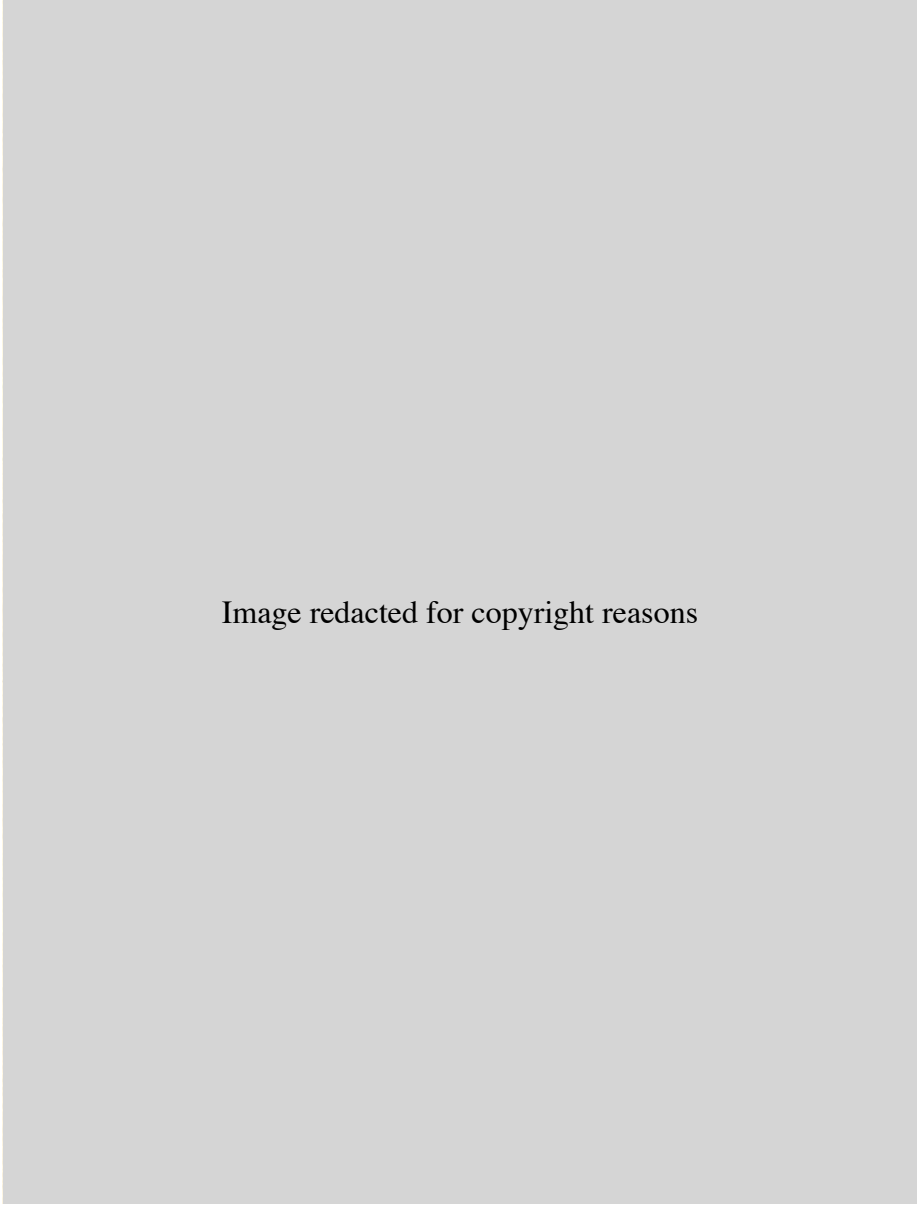


Image redacted for copyright reasons

Fig 1-3 John Cage, *4'33"* (Performance Score), 1952. Score © Henmar Press Inc. / C.F. Peters Corporation. (Source: *The Cross-Eyed Pianist*).

⁴¹ John Cage, *A Composer's Confessions* (lecture, Vassar College, 1948), quoted in Douglas Kahn, 'John Cage: Silence and Silencing', *The Musical Quarterly*, 81.4 (Winter 1997), p. 566.

⁴² Kahn, 'John Cage: Silence and Silencing', p. 566.

Between 1948 and 1952, Cage drew upon the concept of *wú wéi* from Eastern Zen Buddhism and transformed it into his own musical language, that is redefining the void within sound through silence. Although “*music was composed most fundamentally of sound and silence*”, in traditional Western auditory culture, silence was merely “*a way of hearing time within the being of musical structure*”.⁴³ For a long time, it was excluded from audible musical sound. Therefore, when Cage chose to make silence the protagonist of the performance, the range of audible musical sound was expanded, and art music was no longer a vehicle for expressing the performer’s subjectivity but, as his slogan says, “*to let sounds be themselves*”.⁴⁴

The reason I say Cage transformed *wú wéi* into silence in his own way is that in *4'33"*, the staging of silence has a clearly theatrical framework. I can see the pianist taking the stage, turning pages, and timing the piece. Through the deliberate design of the venue where silence occurs and the performer’s cancellation of his own actions, Cage’s experiment with silence is, in essence, a simplification of the Zen concept of *wú wéi* into a carefully designed “anti-act”. Through a replicative critique of the power mechanisms of the concert hall, he completed his critique of mainstream Western auditory culture. Although Cage’s practice of nothingness did not strictly adhere to the original concept of *wú wéi* in Zen philosophy, he placed the centre of the practice on silence: a language that already existed but was marginalised by the major culture. By transforming the perspective from which each component of the practice was understood, he precisely achieved the minor strategy that Deleuze and Guattari describe as “*to be a sort of stranger in one’s own language*”.⁴⁵

Let me shift my gaze from Cage, inspired by *wú wéi*, back to the single-line works on paper that Guston created between 1966 and 1967, to see how Eastern philosophical thought created longer ripples through the influence between different artists. “*The camaraderie among painters and composers was rather unusual in New York during the 1950s and 1960s, creating a robust cultural situation of mutual aid.*”⁴⁶ Although Guston did not directly attend Black Mountain College, he was exposed to Cage’s practice and ideas through their mutual

⁴³ Ibid., p. 574.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 557.

⁴⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, pp. 26.

⁴⁶ Dore Ashton, ‘Introduction’, in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures, and Conversations*, ed. by Clark Coolidge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), p. 4.

friends, such as Morton Feldman and Clark Coolidge. In fact, there exists a hidden intertextuality between Cage's declaration to let sounds be themselves and Guston's practical method of removing everything to return to raw feeling. The former perhaps became a catalyst for the latter's campaign to clear the decks.

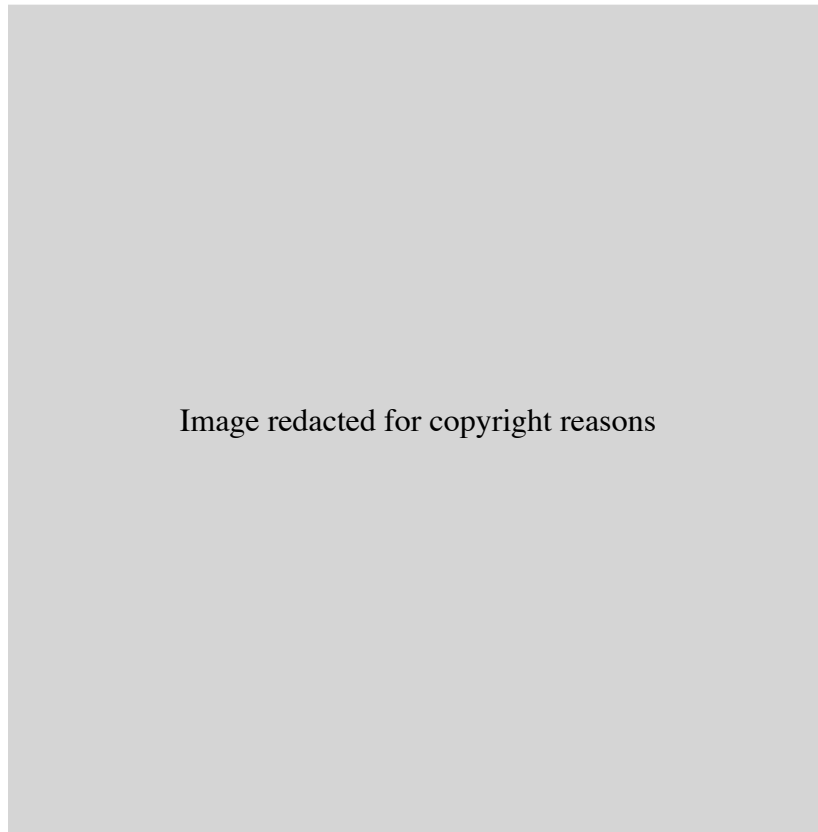


Fig 1-4 Philip Guston, *Untitled (Pure Drawing)*, 1967, ink on paper laid to Masonite, 35.6 × 41.6 cm. Artwork © The Estate of Philip Guston. (Source: Artsy).

From Guston's active use of negative space in his works on paper, I can infer that he was perhaps thinking about how to translate Cage's silent sound into a visually active and working void. I can see that in the performance score for *4'33"*, Cage used the framework of the rest to frame and define silence. Correspondingly, in *Untitled* (1967), Guston used a single line to divide the white space of the paper. The rest and the single line, as two of the simplest forms in their respective artistic practices, here play the primary role of defining the void. As Guston said, "*things shrink, swell out. And then I found that all sorts of things can happen. With the most limited means.*"⁴⁷ With the most limited means, the blank space as an active form begins to work. Unlike in *4'33"*, where the noise made by the audience becomes a

⁴⁷ Guston, 'On Drawing', p. 253.

passive participant filling the sonic void, in Guston's single-line drawings, the viewer's gaze is forced to abandon the identification of images and instead becomes an active part of constructing the form of the negative space.

This chain of transmission—from *wú wéi* in Eastern philosophy, to Cage's silence in *4'33"*, and finally to the negative space divided by a single line in Guston's works on paper—underwent a dual translation. The choice of *wú wéi* in its original Eastern philosophical context, seen as a way to eliminate artificial subjective desires and let things develop according to their natural state, was transformed by Cage into a complete cancellation of deliberate action under a designed framework. Guston, in turn, influenced by Cage's non-intentional action, consciously limited the interference of various elements in his practice, using the simplest method, the single line, to test the potential of painting's negative space to work as a form.

Examined from the theoretical framework of Deleuze and Guattari's minor, Guston's practice on paper in the late 1960s was, in essence, an act of self-alienation aimed at the language of painting. This alienation was not a superficial change of style but a systematic deterritorialization of the major order established by Abstract Expressionism in his previous painting, achieved through dimensional reduction of the medium (from oil painting to works on paper), symbolic minimalism (single-line operations), and spatial reconstruction (the empowerment of negative space). As Deleuze and Guattari point out when discussing Kafka's minor literature, minor production does not happen elsewhere, or outside the major; on the contrary, it is a movement that uses the same elements as the major but in a different way from within.⁴⁸ Although Guston shifted from oil painting to works on paper, his action always focused on the self-subversion of the language of painting. By abandoning the expressive forms he had acquired in his abstract painting and utilising the irreversibility of charcoal and the productivity of negative space, he pushed the act of painting to an extreme, thereby launching an internal attack on the logic that had sustained his previous practice.

Guston's ultimate goal was not to subvert the ontology of painting itself. After concluding the two-year practice of pure works on paper, Guston chose to return to the world of tangible things, taking with him everything he had learned from those single-line experiments. In his early figurative works, such as *Untitled (Picture)* (1968-73) and *First Book* (1967), the single

⁴⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*.

lines from the paper phase were transformed into readable, everyday objects—the open pages of a book, the outline of a brick wall, a doorframe—while the large areas of white space evolved into uninflected monochrome spaces.

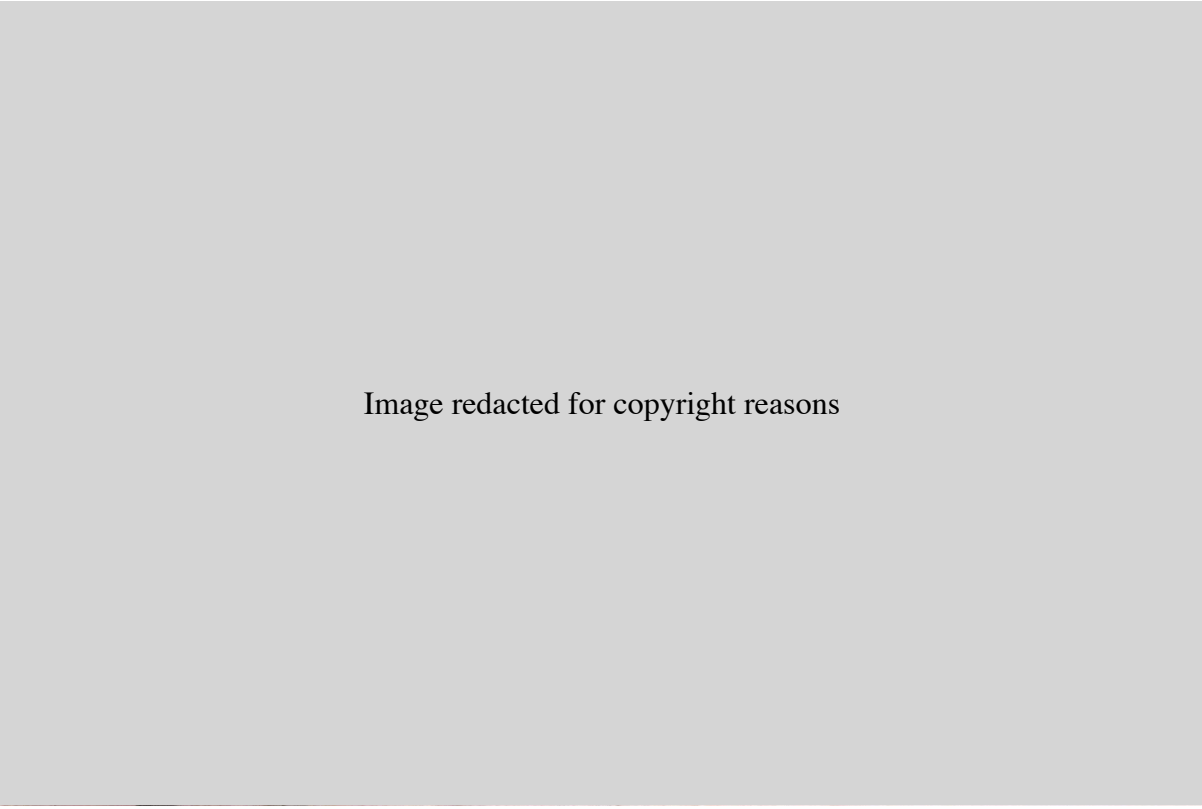


Image redacted for copyright reasons

Fig 1-5 Philip Guston, *Untitled (Book)*, 1968, oil on panel, 30.5 × 38.1 cm. Artwork © The Estate of Philip Guston. (Source: Artchive).

This evolutionary process confirms Deleuze and Guattari's definition of minor practice: the deterritorialising movement against the major is essentially an unfinished, dynamic process, and the minor must continuously mutate to escape the fate of being recaptured by the major.⁴⁹ Since the positions of the major and the minor are never fixed, any successful movement of deterritorialization can be co-opted by the institutional system within a new historical context, becoming the next major that needs to be attacked. Looking back, the major that Guston attempted to escape in the late 1960s was precisely Abstract Expressionism, represented by Jackson Pollock. The latter, having subverted the Eurocentric painting tradition with a minor posture in the 1940s, rapidly became an art movement representing a new American hegemony in the 1950s. It is precisely this never-ending game that constitutes the driving force for self-revolution within artistic practice.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Guston's practice thereby also reminds practitioners that the core of minor practice lies not in inventing some entirely new form or genre, but rather in an act of self-alienation through the continuous shifting of perspectives and positions. Its generative mechanism does not occur in isolation, but is instead influenced by a broader cross-cultural dialogue. Cage's simplified appropriation of the Zen concept of *wu wei*—translating it into the theatricalised silence of 4'33"—constitutes a key mediating link. Although his interpretation of *wú wéi* deviated from the core tenet of Zen, which is to let nature be nature, it activated the potential of silence within Western auditory culture. This misreading was transmitted through the New York avant-garde art network to Guston, ultimately becoming an experiment concerning negative space in the field of painting. In this process, Eastern culture, which holds a minor position relative to Western centrism, was re-contextualised through Cage's auditory translation and Guston's visual reconstruction, becoming a tool to help practitioners generate an attack on the major practice in which they were situated.

1.4 I: Go Back, Go East

This approach of looking back into non-Eurocentric cultural histories to find tools for attacking one's own fixed practice simultaneously challenges a deeply ingrained assumption within art historical narratives. Descriptions of Western art history often imply an "evolutionary" perspective, suggesting that art, like biological evolution or technological development, constantly updates and evolves into more advanced forms. Those artistic traditions that developed prior to or parallel to this narrative framework, particularly Eastern art that continues to this day, are often labelled within this framework as primitive, undeveloped, or imperfect forms. This view, however, does not hold true when applied to the actual circumstances of an individual artist's practice. The trajectory of Guston clearly subverts this logic, which reactivated the negative space in painting by drawing on the *wú wéi* philosophy of Zen Buddhism. This practical strategy of looking "backwards" in history reveals that generating the minor, while it involves producing new forms, does not necessarily mean seeking methods in a strictly linear, "forward" direction.

This historical dialectic can be clearly captured in the figurative paintings Guston began in early 1968. As his interest developed from an exploration of negative space in his works on paper to a focus on tangible objects, everyday items increasingly occupied his canvases. When he began to paint a book or a cup, he spoke of the comics and films he read and

watched in his youth, his passion for politics, and the frescoes he saw in Italy. All these experiences from the past came flooding back, influencing his continued journey into figurative painting: “*I found when I was doing these pictures that I had made a circle, you might say. All my older interests in painting, the children fighting with garbage cans and all that stuff, very influenced by Uccello and Piero, came flooding back on me, and I felt like I had so much to handle.*”⁵⁰ It can be said that Guston realised that the solution to his abstract predicament was perhaps “*right in front of him—or rather behind him*”.⁵¹



Image redacted for copyright reasons

Fig 1-6 Philip Guston, *Dawn*, 1970, oil on canvas, 170.82 × 274.32 cm. Collection of Glenstone Museum. Artwork © The Estate of Philip Guston.

In the figurative paintings that subsequently emerged, Klansmen in white hoods appeared in various scenes: smoking in the studio in front of a canvas, or driving under a blood-red sunset. These cinematic scenes connect to the hidden rivers of Guston’s youthful memories: the violent lines of comics, the dark humour of films, the coarse symbols of political posters. These elements of popular culture, denigrated as “low” by modernist high culture, were rediscovered by Guston and forged into a new linguistic system for his expression. This

⁵⁰ Guston, ‘On Drawing’, p. 259.

⁵¹ Storr, *Philip Guston*, p. 113.

cognitive reversal of “drawing the future from the past” rather than “inventing the future” conveys to me a method for unfolding self-alienation within the major: when a language solidifies into a norm and a standard, the revolutionary forces hidden within it may exist in the practitioner’s own history.

In his discussion of minor art, O’Sullivan also mentions the practice of “*the use of clichés in order to disrupt clichés*”.⁵² It just needs to understand more clearly what cliché refers to in different positions. This practice is by no means a culturally nostalgic, replicative review, but an excavation of neglected parts of the past to reactivate the potential of the cliché in a new way.

My return to traditional Chinese painting in late 2021 was a conscious imitation of this method. When I found myself in a state of predicament with Western easel painting in 2020-2021, I chose to return to the traditional Chinese painting I had once abandoned. In the parallel world composed of Xuan paper and ink, those Tang and Song dynasty landscape paintings and bird-and-flower paradigms, which I had once regarded as stale, suddenly revealed a startling power to me through a renewed bodily experience starting from the qualities of the materials. This working method of drawing the future from the past was further expanded in my practice into a cross-cultural experiment. To generate the minor, between past and future, East and West, I attempt to discover the untamed revolutionary potential within my own practical history.

Before practising Western canvas-based oil painting, using brushes to apply oil paints to cotton or linen canvas, I had a period of practising traditional Chinese painting since my youth, using slender brushes to apply mineral pigments or ink to Xuan paper or silk. I initially regarded this experience as a norm to be overcome, like the painting templates of flowers, birds, and plants repeated thousands of times by Song dynasty painters. Such a pre-determined painting model made me feel that I had lost the possibility of creating new forms. When I went to the UK in 2018 to study contemporary painting, I was convinced that only by completely abandoning those rigid formulas could I achieve true creative freedom on the blank canvas of Western oil painting.

⁵² O’Sullivan, ‘Minor Literature’.

In my practice from 2018 to 2020, my Western paintings were dominated by hybrid human-animal figures. These mutated bodies occupied most of the canvas, with the remaining gaps simplified into flat, monochrome backgrounds. My working method was first to find images online that could trigger my desire to paint. These images often had a tactile quality of fur or exuded a strange, abnormal feeling. By copying and collaging the figures from the pictures into the paintings, these works were, to a large extent, an appropriation of ready-made images.

After continuing this practice for about two years, I noticed that my easel painting had fallen into a dual predicament. In terms of form, the fixed composition of the hybrid human-animal bodies against a monochrome background endlessly reproduces a predictable structure. In terms of working method, the appropriation of online images turned painting into a mere image collage. When my painting entered a state of wax-museum-like stillness, I realised I was experiencing the same predicament Guston had in the mid-1960s—the process and result of painting had become a template. No matter how I changed the subject, it felt like I was repeating the last painting.

It was this predicament that compelled me to employ the working method I learned from Guston: drawing the future from the past. Perhaps true liberation lay not in the complete abandonment of my own Chineseness, but in the re-excavation of ancient Chinese traditional art, which is marginal in relation to the Western art world. Consequently, I immersed myself in a great deal of traditional Chinese painting practice in late 2021.

Unlike traditional Western painting, which requires the canvas to be vertical and parallel to the standing body, the tradition of Chinese painting is to lay the Xuan paper flat on a table or the floor. However, due to the fragile nature of paper, the painter cannot stand directly on the painting. This gives rise to a mode of bodily engagement that differs from the planar use of the body in Western canvas-based painting: the latter allows the use of the entire body whether the canvas is vertical or horizontal, while the former primarily uses the upper limbs. This compression of bodily space meant that when I painted in the Chinese style, I often worked with my head down, focusing only on a limited area. This shifted my body from the state of gazing at the whole canvas in Western painting to focusing on the local part.

In terms of material properties, another characteristic of Chinese painting is that, unlike Western oil or acrylic painting, the painting cannot be modified through glazing. When ink,

watercolour, or mineral pigments are dropped onto Xuan paper, the colour, mixed with water, spreads out rapidly, like a drop of ink falling into a glass of water, which can never return to its original clear state. 落笔无悔 (*luò bǐ wú huǐ*, “No regrets once the brush is down”) is an important feature of Chinese painting. This material limitation prevented me from making preliminary drafts as I did in my Western paintings. I had to either pre-determine in my mind what to paint in which parts, or start directly from a local section and then paint the connecting parts based on it. Due to the first characteristic of Chinese painting mentioned earlier, I often focused on the limited area I could see with my head down and reach with my hands, so I chose not to design the composition in advance and started directly from a local part.



Fig 1-7 Yajie Liang, *Echoes from a Distant Land I*, 2021–2022, watercolour, ink, acrylic and oil on Chinese rice paper, 74.5 × 142 cm. Image © Yajie Liang.

These differences in material properties and working methods, so completely different from Western painting, led me to produce a practice entirely different from my oil paint works. The painting process became very fluid: as I moved from one part to another, everything

happened very naturally, without the need to carefully consider how to build connections or what the overall structure of the picture looked like. At the same time, the fixed compositional model of a single figure against a ground that existed in my previous Western paintings was broken, and the ways of entering the painting changed from a single entry point to multiple ones. “Entering the painting” refers not only to my working method but also to the way of viewing these works after completion. In these works on paper, one can feel different structures intertwining and colliding, much like Deleuze and Guattari’s description of Kafka’s literary structure: a confusing multiplicity of stems and roots that can intersect at any point and form all sorts of possible connections.⁵³ It did indeed confuse me, because the appearance of such a structure was not my preset; it gradually emerged during the process of practice.



Fig 1-8 Yajie Liang, Installation view of the *Echoes from a Distant Land* series, 2021–2022.
Image © Yajie Liang.

⁵³ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*.

I tried to find a logic to clarify how this non-unified, not-yet-systematic form was generated. Firstly, in the process of Chinese painting, I neither followed the traditional method of painting existing templates, such as the standardised landscape or bird-and-flower motifs in Chinese painting, nor did I use my habitual working method from my Western painting practice of the past two years: selecting an image to paint in advance and then transplanting it onto the canvas. Instead, I acted by directly perceiving the characteristics of the materials and decided on my working method based on these characteristics, such as how to use my body and how different parts of the picture should connect. In short, I acted directly according to the inherent characteristics of the materials themselves, rather than relying on my previous work habits or the standard way of using this material in Chinese art history.

The practice of pure Chinese painting during this period forcibly overthrew my creative inertia: the mode of working locally and the irreversibility of Xuan paper forced me to abandon pre-designed compositions and the habit of considering the overall picture in real-time. When there was no pre-set image in my mind, the painting process became an experiment with an unknown destination. This practice was, in essence, a minoritarian deterritorialization of two major systems. It was both an escape from the solidified working model in my Western canvas-based oil painting and a subversion of the formulaic painting templates of traditional Chinese painting I had previously learned. This made me realise that minor is not a fixed cultural attribute but an action. By experiencing marginalised, historically buried practical elements—in my case, the material properties of traditional Chinese painting—one can, with their help, transform one's perspective of thinking and acting to break through one's own habitual working patterns.

This experience of dual deterritorialization became the weapon for my return to Western painting. I began to consciously apply the working methods I had felt in traditional Chinese painting to the canvas. Next, I will take my work *Wave* (2022) as an example to specifically analyse how these cross-material experiences reconfigured my painting language.

After nearly two months of pure traditional Chinese painting, I felt a desire compelling me to immediately apply the completely different working method I had created to the canvas. *Wave* was born at that moment. The first thing to appear on the canvas was a seated human figure to the right of centre. Its appearance had no special meaning; it was just the texture of the human skin that captured me. Please note that between painting and not painting, there is



Fig 1-9 Yajie Liang, *Wave*, 2022 oil and acrylic on canvas, 190 × 235 cm. Image © Yajie Liang.

always a desire from a bodily sense. Following the appearance of the nude body came the vertical bones pressed against it, and then some overlapping lines connecting two standing birds that faced these bones. Subsequently, a black body was ejected from the bird's rear, its feather-textured torso entwined with ribbons. Finally, my action concluded with a small, smiling bear giving a thumbs-up on the right side of the picture. The above is a review of the entire painting process of *Wave*. As you can see, I no longer pre-set the picture and the overall composition, but turned to the creative logic of "one thing leads to another". At the same time, there is no logical connection between the elements, such as the human body, bones, birds, black torso, and the small bear. Their appearance deconstructs the viewer's expectation for reading a figurative painting: that it is readable and can be identified within a certain narrative experience. These objects with no logical connection no longer serve the metaphors of popular culture; instead, they form new networks of meaning in the viewing: the important thing is not to analyse the symbolism of each object, but for the gaze to follow their lines of

movement, forming a personal, rather than rule-based, way of reading within the different lines of movement.



Fig 1-10 Ma Yuan, *Solitary Angler on a Wintry Lake*, 1195, ink and colour on silk, 27 × 32 cm. Collection of Tokyo National Museum. (Photo: Public Domain).

In addition to the changes in the picture brought about by the mode of action, the practice of consciously using what is called negative space, which I prefer to call it 留白 (*liú bái*, “leaving blank”), also appeared in the painting process of *Wave*. Slightly different from the inspiration Guston drew from the Zen concept of *wú wéi*, I directly felt the presence of blankness from the practice of traditional Chinese painting. Leaving blank as an anti-representational strategy runs through the history of Chinese painting. During the Northern and Southern Dynasties in China, the painter and art theorist Xie He proposed the six fundamental principles of Chinese painting, among which 气韵生动 (*qì yùn shēng dòng*, “spirit resonance”), related to the concept of *liú bái* (“leaving blank”), was regarded as the first principle.⁵⁴ “*Qì yùn*” (spirit resonance) does not refer to the clouds and mist in the picture, but to the “real *qì* between heaven and earth”, which points to the foundation of all

⁵⁴ Xie He (谢赫), *Guhuapinlu: Preface* [古画品录·序] (Beijing: Renmin Meishu Chubanshe, 1962), p. 1.

things in the world according to Taoist cognition, the origin of everything.⁵⁵ In traditional Chinese painting, blankness is not the incompleteness found in traditional European painting, but rather, by refusing to be filled by things, it invites the viewer's imagination into the composition of the picture, becoming an active part of its construction. For example, in the Southern Song dynasty painter Ma Yuan's *Angler on a Wintry Lake* (1195), the entire picture features only an angler sitting alone at one end of a boat, contrasted with the blank river surface. By choosing to leave the vast river surface blank instead of depicting its ripples, Ma Yuan further accentuates the infinity of the wintry river.

This strategy of actively using blank space, rather than treating it as a negative space waiting to be filled, was used in the painting process of *Wave*. I deliberately retained the original white of the canvas, not only in the parts where different objects connected, which were not deliberately depicted, but even more so, I actively covered some parts that I felt did not need colour with white according to the overall composition just before the painting was almost complete. The presence of blankness, for viewers accustomed to Western easel painting, is more like a state of incompleteness, but it is precisely this sense of strangeness that forces people to pay attention to these white spaces. They are no longer the background for the figures, but become an active part of constructing the non-narrative dynamics of the picture.

Through the activation of blankness, this "incorrect language" rejected by the tradition of Western painting, a new structure emerged in my painting practice: a shift from a single figure-ground relationship to a visual network with multiple visual centres. Under the combined effect of blank space and the local leads to the local working method, viewing becomes a dance: each time the gaze moves across the canvas, new connections and meanings are formed between different local parts, just like Deleuze and Guattari's description of the rhizome model: they are entangled in a disorderly fashion, with no single centre, and the viewer can reconstruct the narrative in the picture with each viewing.

This practice not only deterritorialized the solidified model of my Western painting but also unexpectedly deconstructed my inherent cognition of the tradition of Chinese painting. The rules of Chinese painting that I once regarded as clichés, such as blank space and irreversibility, unleashed new potential in the cross-cultural collision. Blankness was no longer a norm to be overcome but became a tool to make the language of Western painting

⁵⁵ Tang Dai (唐岱), *Huishi Fawei* [绘事发微] (Jinan: Shandong Huabao Chubanshe, 2012), p. 44.

strange; the irreversibility of Xuan paper forced me to abandon my dependence on collaging online images and turn to a more direct, more bodily creative method: the local leads to the local. This process of dual deterritorialization reveals the core of minor strategy: by introducing heterogeneous elements rejected or overlooked by the mainstream, one creates fissures within the solidified form, thereby opening up new possibilities for art's self-renewal.

In addition, for the group of people who grow up in the cracks between cultures, they do not need to confine themselves to the binary narrative of Easternness and Westernness. Choosing either one means choosing to imprison oneself within a specific set of rules. Of course, when practitioners attempt to appropriate Easternness as a heterogeneous element in the production of Western painting, they must also be wary of falling into the trap of iconographic collage through a nostalgic, formalistic replication of Easternness. Practitioners need to become traitors to their own tradition, while at the same time using that very tradition to alienate the hegemonic rule of any major art. The charm of this practice lies in this: people can never predict what mutations the addition of a heterogeneous culture will have on an originally stable system, just as no one could have predicted that the Zen concept of *wú wéi* would nurture a revolution of negative space. But it is this very uncertainty that constitutes the essence of practice's self-renewal: in the corners ignored by mainstream history, there always exist untamed revolutionary forces. They are like seeds dormant in the permafrost, waiting for the thaw to break the glacier of rules set by the Western art world, and to grow in the cracks.

Chapter 2 Mimicry as Generative Strategy: Deconstructing the Subject to Forge the Minor

In Chapter 1, I introduced Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of the major and the minor as a core theoretical framework, exploring how artists, through the deterritorialization of established rules of practice, open up a line of flight towards the minor from within the major. Through an analysis of the practices of Guston and my own, I propose a method: drawing the future from the past, that is, by looking back at the heterogeneous elements excluded and ignored by major systems and personal histories, and transforming them into a force that subverts ossified systems. Ultimately, Chapter 1 argued that the minor is not an identity or label conferred upon a certain group by the major according to its standards, but rather a continuous and dynamic process of self-alienation and reconstruction. It often achieves the subversion of and innovation within mainstream norms through constant displacement and the absorption of heterogeneous elements.

Building upon the first chapter's exploration of the question, "what is the minor practice?", this chapter centres its discussion on how artists themselves can act to initiate a minor state. **I** will focus on a more specific strategy that occurs within the practitioner's body: "mimicry". This inquiry stems from the asynchronous transformation of Gregor Samsa's body and consciousness in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, as well as from my own recurring experiences in **my** practice of a state where consciousness drifts while the body leads the action. This chapter proposes that mimicry, as an internally driven action undertaken to become something or a state that is not oneself, is key to actively dismantling the artist's subjective boundaries, embracing more unforeseeable heterogeneous elements, and thereby opening up a line of flight. To explore this proposition, the chapter will re-examine the potential of mimicry by drawing on Roger Caillois's theory of biological mimicry, alongside Rosalind Krauss's interpretation of automatism. The British surrealist artist Paul Nash will serve as the core case study, whilst the artistic practice of the Chinese contemporary artist Liang Yuanwei will be interwoven throughout as a supplementary example to Krauss's theory.

2.1 "Am I a human being? Or vermin?"

*“As Gregor Samsa woke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed into some kind of monstrous vermin.”*⁵⁶ In the opening of *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka presents the *fait accompli* of Gregor’s transformation from man to insect with this statement. I am given no insight into the cause or process of this change. What is interesting is that Gregor, the subject of the transformation, quickly accepts this absurd reality after realising that his “*armour-like back*” and many “*miserable thin legs*” are not part of a dream.⁵⁷ As a hard-working insurance salesman, his most pressing anxiety is not his physical metamorphosis but the fear of missing the seven o’clock train. This professional inertia even compels him to issue commands to his strange new body: “*couldn’t possibly stay in bed, and the most sensible thing was to sacrifice everything if there was just the slightest hope that this would release him from bed.*”⁵⁸

Implicit in the monologue about work, his superior, and supporting his family that circles Gregor’s mind is the idea that metamorphosis is not an instantaneous identity switch. So, is he a man or an insect? As the story unfolds, I witness an asynchronous transformation: although Gregor’s body changes overnight, his consciousness as a human fades progressively, like a slowly discolouring photograph. This asynchronicity is most evident in the reconstruction of his sensory system. Initially, he instinctively craves fresh milk, a favourite from his human life. But, within days, his palate begins to pursue the pungent odour of rotten cheese and the sourness of fermented pickles. Eventually, any fresh food elicits a physiological revulsion. Concurrently, a similar alienation occurs in his patterns of movement. Those small legs, which at first flailed helplessly like a drowning person’s arms, soon prove strong enough to defy gravity, and the ceiling quickly becomes the primary plane for his daily diversion.

This alienation of the sensory and motor systems suggests that the dissipation of the subject follows a certain internal logic: repetitive external bodily behaviours are subtly reshaping the subject’s self-perception. A hidden intertextuality exists between Gregor’s former professional life as a salesman and his post-transformation insectoid habits: his past routine of visiting clients along the same routes daily mirrors his present crawling circuits on the

⁵⁶ Kafka, ‘The Metamorphosis’, p. 29.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 29.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 33.

ceiling; the alarm clock that once rang punctually at 5 a.m. is now replaced by physiological hunger. The cruelty of Kafka's narrative lies in making me realise that Gregor is perpetually in an intermediate state of becoming-insect, situated on the threshold dividing the human and insect subjects: neither fully human nor purely insect. This incompleteness is manifested in the temporal ambiguity of the transformation, as I know neither its beginning nor its end; in the spatial dislocation of the human and insect bodies, with the insect body still occupying a human bedroom; and in a cognitive schism, a struggle between the deep-seated sense of family responsibility in Gregor's mind and his insectile instincts. It is this unresolved intermediate state that compels me to ask: as repetitive crawling, eating, and hiding dissolve Gregor's humanity, are these programmatic actions simultaneously reconstructing a new subjective state?

In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari trenchantly point out:

*To become animal is to participate in movement, to stake out the path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold, to reach a continuum of intensities that are valuable only in themselves, to find a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone, as do all the significations, signifiers, and signifieds, to the benefit of an unformed matter of deterritorialized flux, of nonsignifying signs.*⁵⁹

They emphasise that becoming is not about arriving at a fixed destination but about deconstructing existing territorial boundaries through movement. In Gregor's transformation, the stable boundaries of the original subject are broken, and his position slides from a mainstream, socially identified human subject to a fluid, non-dominant, unclassifiable state of being that can be understood as minor. Every clumsy turn of Gregor's body, every attempt to swallow rotten food, is a test of a new line of flight. These seemingly mechanical actions, in reality, create tension between the deterritorialization of his initial socially identified subject (the insurance salesman) and the reterritorialization of his mode of existence as an insect. Furthermore, I find that his death reveals the essence of the minor as a movement: it is not a compromising adaptation to a new order, but a resistance to any form of reterritorialization through a ceaseless escape.

⁵⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, pp. 13.

In his final moments, “*Gregor thought back on his family with affection and love. His own opinion that he should vanish was, if possible, even more determined than his sister’s.*”⁶⁰ This is his last attempt to play a meaningful social role: that of a family member sacrificing himself. This act of willing death is driven by the desire for his death to be understood by his family as a sacrifice, thereby emotionally rejoining the family order. In essence, it is an attempt to return to the major system and be reterritorialised by it. Cruelly, Kafka does not fulfil Gregor’s wish; instead, this very act becomes the most radical line of flight. Upon seeing Gregor’s corpse, his family feels not a sense of his sacrifice but one of relief. His death is not endowed with any meaning. Simultaneously, his body is swept away by the charwoman with a broom, like rubbish. This erases his final material existence as an insect. Through this dual treatment, even in death, Gregor remains as he was in life: neither human being nor insect, but an existence that cannot be assimilated or defined by any major order, whether it be familial, social, or natural. Such an ending is precisely the radical, reterritorialization-refusing line of flight that Kafka presents to us.

Reflecting on the continuous movement of Gregor’s inner subject towards the margins and its refusal to be reterritorialized during his metamorphosis, I began to realise that the dissolution of a stable subjectivity is not an abstract concept but a tangible experience that can be felt in practice. Particularly in the process of painting, I have often found myself entering a state of “forgetting how I am painting”. This is not an absence of will but rather the body’s capacity to continue working without the full control of consciousness.

Specifically, I would occasionally focus my attention on other media, such as watching a television series or talking to a friend on the phone. In these situations, while my consciousness shifted to the content of the call or the screen, my hand continued to work on the canvas. When I refocused my attention on the painting, the parts completed during my conscious drift often exceeded my expectations, even surprising me. I could not recall the specific process of creation, yet I knew with certainty that these images came from my own hand.

Many artists have described this authentic experience of the subject’s retreat. For instance, Pollock stated in 1947: “*It is only after a sort of ‘get acquainted’ period that I see what I have*

⁶⁰ Kafka, ‘The Metamorphosis’, p. 71.

been about."⁶¹ Guston, quoting what Cage told him, described the experience thus: "*When you start working, everybody is in your studio – the past, your friends, enemies, the art world, and above all, your own ideas – all are there. But as you continue painting, they start leaving, one by one, and you're left completely alone. Then, if you're lucky, even you leave.*"⁶²

These experiences of practice led by the body rather than consciousness remind me of the asynchronous transformation that occurred in Gregor: his human consciousness did not vanish instantaneously but was slowly reconstructed through repetitive, sustained actions. Superficially, these actions are repetitive, but in reality, they constitute an active process of adapting to a heterogeneous state of existence, gradually dismantling the subjective boundaries that previously defined him. Similarly, in my own experience, I am not in a state of complete unconsciousness, but rather one that is neither fully controlled nor entirely out of control. More accurately, these seemingly passive actions and the retreat of consciousness appear to be a liminal state where the subject actively allows itself to be shaped by inertia.

This leads me to question: if Gregor, who originally existed as a major human being, gradually slid towards a minor, unclassifiable non-human state as his repetitive bodily actions continuously dismantled his subjective boundaries, then, returning to painting practice, can I actively approach this unstable perceptual position? Could those non-consciously controlled bodily actions, those moments when consciousness recedes, be transformed into a strategic operational path for initiating the minor practice in painting? Thereby, I began to realise that mimicry, that is, an action undertaken to become something or a state that is not oneself, may be the key to the minor. In painting, this might not concern representation at the level of image, but rather a perceptual strategy constituted by rhythm, gesture, and sustained action, which, by disturbing the position of the subject, opens up the possibility of another kind of practice. Here, it is important to note that these moments of setting consciousness aside do not constitute a complete relinquishment of subjectivity, nor are they a passive state of unconsciousness; rather, they represent a more strategic state: a decentred subject. In this state, the artist proactively steps back from the central, command-issuing position,

⁶¹ Richard Shiff, 'Performing an Appearance: On the Surface of Abstract Expressionism', in *Abstract Expressionism*, ed. by Michael Auping (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), p. 95.

⁶² Robert Mayer, 'Philip Guston Talking', *ArtNews*, Summer 1971.

strategically cedes a degree of accustomed control, and allows heterogeneous elements to emerge naturally.

2.2 The Lure of Space: Mimicry, Automaticity and Decentred Subject

In the Western philosophical tradition, any attempt to trace the origins of the concept of mimicry reveals its almost constant entanglement with the notion of representation. The source of this intellectual lineage can be traced back to the ancient Greek philosophers. Plato incorporated imitative arts, such as poetry and music, into his idealistic aesthetic system of “beauty” and “form”, considering them indirect imitations of the “truth” and “forms” in the world of Ideas.⁶³ This established the foundation for mimicry as a means of “reflection” or “representation”. Although his student, Aristotle, affirmed a more positive role for mimicry in domains outside of art, viewing it as an innate human tendency from childhood and an important means of acquiring knowledge, his discourse also reveals a deep-rooted anthropocentrism.⁶⁴ When Aristotle declared that mimicry is “*natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world and learns at first by imitation*”, and used this to mark humanity’s superiority over lower animals, he effectively placed the act of mimicry within a hierarchical order with humans at its apex, limiting its primary function to serving human cognitive and expressive activities.⁶⁵ While this perspective reveals the importance of mimicry for human understanding of the world, it also imperceptibly confines the discussion of mimicry within a human-centric framework, setting the stage for posterity to primarily understand it as a reflection of external reality or rational order.

This conception of mimicry as the reflection or representation of a certain prototype, after settling through the Middle Ages, was pushed to a zenith during the Renaissance, which centred on the representation of the external world’s appearance. In that era, the masterful skill of creating a three-dimensional illusion on a two-dimensional plane became the supreme criterion for measuring an artist’s talent and a work’s value. Under the shadow of this long

⁶³ Ani Maita, ‘Of Mimicry and Identity’, in *Effect 3: Mimicries* (2022), <https://effects-journal.com/archive/of-mimicry-and-identity> (accessed 7 September 2025).

⁶⁴ Aristotle, *Poetics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ii, ed. by Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984).

⁶⁵ Ibid. p. 2318.

and powerful tradition, an ideal artist was often shaped into a subject possessing a stable cognitive framework and consummate representational techniques.

However, it is precisely this traditional view, which locks mimicry firmly within the framework of representation and has the pursuit of resemblance as its core objective, that I seek to dismantle in this chapter. For when I am searching for a mimicry strategy capable of actively deconstructing subjective boundaries and generating a line of flight from fixed rules, what I evidently need can no longer be an imitation that is content merely to act as a mirror or a translator. Here, I must ask: does mimicry harbour other possibilities obscured by the tradition of representation? Can it transcend the replication of appearances to touch upon deeper processes of transformation and generation?

In reflecting on the traditional notion that equates mimicry with the representation of external appearances, the ideas of Roger Caillois, a thinker who traversed anthropology, biology, and psychology, and a pioneer of mimicry theory, offer a profoundly subversive perspective. His thoughts on mimicry, particularly the phenomenon of biological mimicry, help me shift the understanding from external visual appearance to the internal perception of the organism.

He directs my gaze away from the utilitarian explanations of traditional Darwinism, which emphasise survival adaptation and visual deception, towards the internal driving forces behind mimetic behaviour that are difficult to capture visually. The Darwinian view typically defines the camouflage of insects, such as the mimicry of stick insects or butterflies, as an ingenious survival strategy evolved under the pressure of natural selection to evade predators or capture prey, a visual game based on external morphological similarity. However, Caillois's objection to this evolutionary hypothesis is that for some organisms, mimicry actually reduces their chances of survival, such as certain insects that mimic edible plants and are consequently eaten by herbivores. In his 1935 essay, *Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia*, he referred to this tendency as “a dangerous luxury”.⁶⁶ In another article from 1934, *The Praying Mantis: From Biology to Psychoanalysis*, Caillois noted that this desire for “self-destruction” in an organism suggests “an anti-Darwinian, nonutilitarian, universal instinct d'abandon (instinct of letting go)”.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Caillois, ‘Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia’, p. 25.

⁶⁷ Claudine Frank, ‘Introduction to “The Praying Mantis: From Biology to Psychoanalysis”’, in *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader*, trans. by Claudine Frank and Camille Naish (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 69.

It is noteworthy that in Caillois's era, mainstream scientific research tended to emphasise the adaptability and utility of biological behaviour, often unconsciously using human rationality and survival logic as a reference point. His focus on such non-utilitarian, even self-destructive, phenomena in heterogeneous subjects was in itself a deviation from the dominant scientific narratives of the time. Nidesh Lawtoo points out that long before "*the affective turn and the cognitive turn, the new materialist turn and the environmental turn*" in contemporary philosophy, Caillois had already turned his attention to those minor life phenomena that did not conform to the major logic of evolution.⁶⁸ In an article interpreting Caillois's theory of mimicry, Lawtoo said that it is precisely because of these phenomena, which cannot be explained by mainstream cognition and narratives, that Caillois believed we "*need a different, perhaps more aesthetic-oriented, but not necessarily representational mimetic hypothesis.*"⁶⁹

Caillois trenchantly observed that in these mimetic organisms, "*the search for the similar would seem to be a means*"; "*indeed, the end would appear to be assimilation to the surroundings.*"⁷⁰ As organic beings, they are irresistibly drawn to inorganic space itself. More abstractly, this is "a regression of the animal towards the inanimate".⁷¹ This idea of regressing towards the inanimate was inspired by Sigmund Freud's theory of the death drive. In his 1920 work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud proposed that all living organisms contain an instinctual impulse to return to the quiescent state of inorganic matter.⁷² This intrinsic connection provides a clue for understanding the complexity of mimicry. I will delve deeper into this death drive and its potential risks in artistic practice in Chapter 3.

Returning to Caillois's perspective, organisms such as insects seem to actively surrender the clear boundaries that define them as independent individuals. Their autonomy is diluted and assimilated by the surrounding space, ultimately entering a state of hypnosis or trance in

⁶⁸ Nidesh Lawtoo, 'Caillois on Mimicry', in *Effect 3: Mimicries* (2022), p. 21, http://www.homomimeticus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Lawtoo_Caillois.Effects.pdf (accessed 7 September 2025).

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Caillois, 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia', p. 27.

⁷¹ Jeannine Worms, 'Animal Mimicry: An Interview with Roger Caillois', in *Effect 3: Mimicries* (2022), trans. by Jeffrey Stuker, <https://effects-journal.com/archive/animal-mimicry> (accessed 7 September 2025).

⁷² Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. by John Reddick, ed. by Adam Phillips (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

which they are indistinguishable from their environment. As he put it, “*life takes a step backwards*”.⁷³ This is not a perspective he saw, but one he felt. More importantly, this idea of returning to an inorganic state interestingly subverts our way of thinking about biological mimicry. Whereas previously, mimicry was considered from an external viewpoint through visual similarity: a behaviour of insects to become invisible against their inorganic background or to appear as something else for attack or defence. Caillois contemplated the phenomenon from *within* a non-human organism in a trance-like, hypnotic state. Lawtoo emphasises that this perspective “*goes beyond anthropocentrism or even biocentrism*”.⁷⁴ This is no longer a simple adaptation of a biological subject to its external environment; instead, space itself seems to possess a powerful magic, tempting the organism to abandon its individuality and dissolve into the general similitude of its surroundings. Mimicry, as a force driving a living, vital organism to regress towards inanimate, inert matter, is “*leaving a living being on the side of life, or better, on the shadow-line that both connects and divides organism and environment, foreground and background, life and death*.”⁷⁵

In Caillois’s view, this mimetic phenomenon exists not only in animals but also in humans.⁷⁶ Both belong to the same world. Specifically, he extended this mimetic drive into the realm of human psychoanalysis. He drew on cases of spatial perception disorders in psychopathology, such as the fear of being devoured by space experienced by some psychasthenia patients and their resulting doubts about the integrity of their own bodily boundaries, to elucidate the internal, affective experience of this dissolution of the subject’s boundaries.⁷⁷ His interpretation of this phenomenon is as follows:

*To these dispossessed souls, space seems to be a devouring force. Space pursues them, encircles them, digests them in a gigantic phagocytosis. It ends by replacing them. Then the body separates itself from thought, the individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his senses.*⁷⁸

⁷³ Caillois, ‘Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia’, p. 30.

⁷⁴ Lawtoo, ‘Caillois on Mimicry’, p. 24.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 24.

⁷⁶ Caillois, ‘Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia’.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 30.

Thus, building upon non-human biological mimicry, he extended his theory to humans and introduced a discussion of the *porous body*. In Caillois's description, the body is no longer a closed, solid fortress but is instead like a surface riddled with countless microscopic pores, open to the external world.⁷⁹ This perceptual state, where the boundary separating the individual from the exterior becomes progressively blurred, operates from within the body. As described earlier with the psychasthenia patient, the subject feels itself being infiltrated and assimilated by external heterogeneity. These heterogeneous elements seem to easily penetrate the self's defences, and through merging with it, ultimately dismantle the stable boundary that distinguishes the individual from the outside. In a way, rather than a purely passive dispossession, it is more like life being tempted to "*no longer resist its integration into the material*", actively choosing self-shattering and self-deprivation.⁸⁰

In the context of the crisis of perception, Caillois's concept of a porous body open to the external world is particularly relevant. Lawtoo points out that Caillois presciently revealed that humans and non-human beings are not as autonomous as we might think, but exist in an open, entangled, and vulnerable state under the envelopment of the environment.⁸¹ This view subverts the traditional perception of the environment as merely a passive backdrop and the anthropocentrism that separates the human from the non-human world. As Caillois opined on mimicry: "*Indeed, the end would appear to be assimilation to the surroundings.*"⁸² This act of assimilation subverts the human conquest or control over nature; rather, the relationship between the human body and the environment is no longer adversarial, but rather opens up to the environment, allowing the two to interpenetrate each other.

It is worth noting that a tensional dialogue exists between Caillois's thoughts on mimicry and the contemporaneous currents of Surrealism. As I discussed in the previous chapter, the Surrealists, particularly the group centred around André Breton, were committed to challenging the Eurocentric artistic tradition that was governed by logic and reason. They sought to open channels to the deep forces of the subconscious and unconscious through

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Denis Hollier, 'Mimesis and Castration', *October*, Winter 1984, 31 (The MIT Press, 1984), trans. by William Rodarmor, p. 11.

⁸¹ Lawtoo, 'Caillois on Mimicry', p. 31.

⁸² Caillois, 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia', p. 27.

practices like automatism.⁸³ In this context, Caillois's intervention is particularly crucial. John T. Hamilton notes, "*throughout his association with André Breton and the Surrealists, Caillois sought a biological basis for artistic practice, especially for the surrealist practice of 'automatic writing.'*"⁸⁴

In fact, Caillois's theory resonates with and deepens, at a more fundamental level, the Surrealists' core aspiration to break the cage of rationality and embrace the forces of the irrational and the subconscious. If the Surrealists attempted to release unconscious drives through psychological paths, such as dream analysis or free association, and specific artistic techniques like automatic writing, then Caillois, drawing from phenomena like biological mimicry, the temptation of space, and psychasthenia, revealed a more primitive and ontologically significant possibility for the dissolution of individual boundaries. The tendency he described, that a living organism being drawn to space, assimilating into the environment, and even regressing towards the inanimate, provides a biological explanation for the breakdown of the subjective-objective boundary sought by the Surrealists. This perspective no longer merely expands the scope of artistic creation to "*the historical, hence also institutional, construction of subjectivity*", but touches upon the more fundamental, and at times dangerous, interpenetration between a living being and its existential environment.⁸⁵

If Caillois's theory reveals the possibility of the subject's boundaries dissolving at the level of internal perception through the act of mimicry, then Rosalind Krauss's analysis of automatism provides a detailed framework for how this dissolution can be strategically employed in artistic practice. In analysing why a decapitated praying mantis can still mechanically imitate mating or feign death, Krauss points to the "automaticity" quality behind this behaviour.⁸⁶ In her view, the mantis not only makes itself visually indistinguishable from a branch but also transcends the visual domain by "*playing dead*",

⁸³ André Breton, 'Manifesto of Surrealism', in *What is Surrealism? Selected Writings*, ed. by Franklin Rosemont (London: Pluto, 1978).

⁸⁴ John T. Hamilton, 'The Luxury of Self-destruction: Flirting with Mimesis with Roger Caillois', in *Flirtations: Rhetoric and Aesthetics This Side of Seduction*, a Poetics and Theory/Comparative Literature Workshop, Draper Program (New York University, 3 March 2012), p. 4.

⁸⁵ Craven, 'Abstract Expressionism and Third World Art,' p. 49.

⁸⁶ Rosalind E. Krauss, 'Entropy', in *Formless: A User's Guide*, by Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss (New York: Zone Books, 1997), pp. 73–78.

achieving a complete de-subjectification.⁸⁷ Here, automaticity is not simply equivalent to unconscious mechanical repetition but points to a certain suspension or sidelining of consciousness, allowing bodily actions to operate autonomously as if following an internal or externally triggered program, free from the control of the rational, habituated, centred subject.

In her discussion of the practice of Surrealist photographers like Eugène Atget and Man Ray, Krauss suggests that the act of looking itself can exhibit automatic characteristics.⁸⁸ For instance, prolonged staring, the defamiliarization of everyday objects, or the use of non-traditional techniques like solarisation and photograms can temporarily suspend the viewer's inherent cognitive frameworks and subjective presuppositions, leading them into a *formless* state where the boundary between subject and object is blurred, and meaning is uncertain.⁸⁹ This concept of the “formless” was first proposed by Georges Bataille in 1929; it points to a radical betrayal and destruction of the sublime categories of art, replacing them with a return to art's most basic materiality.⁹⁰ Building on this, in the formless state proposed by Krauss, viewing is no longer a process of clearly defining and rationally interpreting an object, but more of a discrete, decentred, and even mechanically repetitive perceptual experience.⁹¹ This reveals that artists can strategically construct this state of automatism through specific practical actions.

So, when the subject's boundaries tend to dissolve within its blending with space, as Caillois described, and when the artist's creative act tends towards the automatism and mechanisation analysed by Krauss, entering a state akin to a trance or reverie, does this mean the subject can more openly welcome external, heterogeneous elements? This is the key question I must now explore in depth: how exactly can the dissipation of the subject's boundaries lead to the minor? More importantly, how can it be understood as an artist's active, strategic practice of decentring the subject, rather than a passive stance that completely relinquishes agency?

⁸⁷ Krauss, ‘Entropy’, p. 78.

⁸⁸ Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993).

⁸⁹ Krauss, ‘Entropy’, p. 78.

⁹⁰ Rosalind E. Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois, *Formless: A User's Guide* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997).

⁹¹ Krauss, ‘Entropy’, p. 78.

From a practical perspective, this strategic decentralization implies that the practitioner consciously suspends those stabilities that precede the creative process, whether they be preset concepts, mature personal styles, or established expressions internalized under the influence of external factors such as art history or the market. When artists rely too heavily on these pre-existing stabilities, their practice easily falls into a predictable, fixed state. Therefore, decentralizing the subject is an action of actively opening oneself up to create space for encounters with heterogeneous elements.

To discuss this strategy of mimicry more clearly, I will first bring the practice of contemporary Chinese artist Liang Yuanwei as a case study. Her work, characterised by an almost ascetic labour, responds to Krauss's analysis of automatism.

Liang's working mode is to construct both concrete and ambiguous planar patterns, such as textiles, florals, or geometric motifs, on the canvas through dense, repetitive, and multi-layered brushstrokes. Unlike Surrealism, which relies on spontaneous and unconscious gestures, Liang's practice is built upon a set of precisely pre-planned actions: she divides the canvas into uniform grids and completes them grid by grid in an almost mechanical manner.⁹² However, what appears to be an extreme rational control is, in fact, a suspension of the subject within high-frequency mechanical repetition achieved through disciplined bodily labour, thereby relinquishing the practice to the materiality of the body and the medium.

Taking her *Diptych Painting 2010-1 (right)(study)* as an example, through hours of mechanized labour work, the brushstrokes no longer pursue the representation of floral or textile forms; instead, they vividly manifest the material tension formed by their mutual squeezing and overlapping. Just as Krauss uses the decapitated praying mantis as an example to point out that automatism enables a living organism to cross the boundary of suspended consciousness and achieve total de-subjectification, accompanied by the continuous labour of bodily mechanization, Liang's practice also breaks free from the rational control of the self-subject as a decision-maker. When viewers confront these layers of piled-up pigment, their inherent image-decoding mechanism fails, and they are instead immersed in a tactile-like visual perception. Here, the practitioner's will to control gives way entirely to the bodily

⁹² Fu Yuan, 'Talk with Liang Yuanwei about her solo exhibition 'Golden Notes' ', *ArtForum China*, 14 August 2009, trans. by Yajie Liang, <https://www.artforum.com.cn/interviews/3194> (accessed 7 September 2025).

movements and the material expression of the medium itself, thereby constructing a decentralized perceptual field within the interior of painting practice.



Image redacted for copyright reasons

Fig 2-1 Liang Yuanwei, *Diptych Painting 2010-1* (right) (study), 2009, oil on linen, 40 × 50 cm. Artwork © Liang Yuanwei. (Source: liangyuanwei.com).

While echoing Krauss, Liang's practice also critically expands upon her theory through the concept of 无为而无不为 (*wú wéi ér wú bù wéi*, "acting effortlessly so that nothing is left undone") in the Daoist philosophy. In the discussion of Guston in Chapter 1, *wú wéi* is intended to allow things to happen naturally according to their own logic. In Liang's practice, this philosophical thought attains a nearly paradoxical bodily expression. She achieves ultimate *wú wéi* ("non-action") through an extreme form of *yóu wéi* ("purposeful action"), which is formulating commands and executing them mechanically, thereby relinquishing spontaneous subjective judgments during the creative process and allowing the brushstrokes,

materials, and bodily rhythms to operate naturally. This path of achieving freedom through discipline and achieving surrender through control expands the theory of automatism within the context of Western modernity, which relies on psychological unconsciousness or improvisational mechanisms. Her practice thus reconfigures the meaning of the automatic within a contemporary art context: it does not have to be improvisational or spontaneous, but can also be a bodily, durational, ascetic discipline.

Liang's practice also raises a new question. Her approach to suspending her own subject relies on a pre-formulated guide for action. This means that the occurrence of decentralization is, to some extent, still planned. Does there exist another path through which the dissolution of subjective boundaries no longer needs to rely on preset rules and procedures, but instead occurs directly at the perceptual level where the artist encounters the external world? This is precisely the question toward which the practice of Paul Nash points. In the following section, I will enter the site of Nash's practice.

2.3 Paul Nash: Object-Personages

I still clearly remember the feeling of first seeing *Totes Meer (Dead Sea)* (1940-1), it was an experience of being almost "pulled into" the painting. In the gallery at Tate Britain, the painting was not conspicuous. Displayed alongside numerous traditional British landscapes, its large areas of greyish-blue appeared even dimmer under the gallery's subdued lighting. The first thing I saw was the title: *Dead Sea*. Consequently, I initially assumed it was merely a seascape under moonlight, with the churning, gloomy waves perhaps representing some melancholic mood of the artist. As my gaze followed the waves, trying to discern their shape, the edges of these "waves", some sharp and some rounded, began to morph into a mass of surging "fish", densely covering the entire surface of the sea. The title made me wonder: were these fish dead? Was the artist, in fact, depicting a sea of fish carcasses? I began to doubt my own intuition and searched the canvas carefully again for evidence to support my conjecture. I started to see human symbols that belonged neither to the ocean nor to living creatures: a cross in the centre of the frame, the letter B in the upper right corner. At that moment, a wave of fear suddenly gripped my stomach. This was not a sea of waves, nor a shoal of fish, but a "dead sea" formed by the wreckage of countless downed aircraft.

This was an unprecedented experience. In my continuous process of identification and searching for proof, the painting seemed to be in constant metamorphosis. And I, like Alice

falling down the rabbit hole, had to continually reshape myself according to the size of the door, adjusting my perception of the painting. How could a painting that appeared to be merely depicting a landscape present such an unstable image, one that seemed to be in perpetual motion and transformation?



Fig 2-2 Paul Nash, *Totes Meer (Dead Sea)*, 1940–41, oil on canvas, 102 × 152 cm. Collection of Tate Britain. (Photo: Public Domain).

In the opening of his novel *Transparent Things*, Vladimir Nabokov described inanimate objects thus: “*When we concentrate on a material object, whatever its situation, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntarily sinking into the history of that object. Novices must learn to skim over matter if they want matter to stay at the exact level of the moment. Transparent things, through which the past shines!*”⁹³ For me, the experience of viewing *Dead Sea* was just as Nabokov described. The surface of this dead sea seemed to be covered with layers of different “films”. As I continued to identify them, these films suddenly

⁹³ Vladimir Nabokov, *Transparent Things* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 2.

ruptured, one after another, and I was “*no longer walking on water but descending upright among staring fish*”!⁹⁴

This viewing experience did not just make me understand the artist’s intended meaning; it forced me to readjust my own position in the act of seeing. From this perspective, Paul Nash’s *Dead Sea* transcends the simple graphic representation of aircraft as war machines, as seen in traditional naturalist painting, or the Symbolist use of aircraft as a metaphor for the death-bringing nature of war. The painting is no longer an object to be identified within a fixed category but becomes something in the process of metamorphosis during the act of seeing. And I, involuntarily, became a part of this metamorphosis.

In the earlier discussion of mimicry, from the perspective of Caillois’s theory on the drive behind biological mimicry, mimicry is not merely the replication of external forms for offence or defence, but an internal perceptual collapse of boundaries: the organic being is irresistibly drawn to inorganic space itself, actively surrendering its distinct individual boundaries.⁹⁵ In *Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia*, Caillois’s reference to Flaubert’s novel *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* bears a striking resemblance to my experience of viewing *Dead Sea*: “*plants are now no longer distinguished from animals. . . . Insects identical with rose petals adorn a bush . . . And then plants are confused with stones. Rocks look like brains, stalactites like breasts, veins of iron like tapestries adorned with figures.*”⁹⁶ I believe Saint Anthony, perhaps like me, slipped into the interior of the image or object during the process of viewing, no longer resisting his integration into the material. I began to understand things through affective perception rather than visual observation, and simultaneously, the image or object was continuously generated through this non-anthropocentric act of perception.

In fact, the constantly transforming image in *Dead Sea* is a viewing mechanism consciously constructed by Nash. Before creating this painting, Nash had already produced many sketches and watercolours of aircraft. During the First World War, as an artist for the British government’s news department, Nash developed a great interest in aeroplanes. He noted that these man-made machines fascinated him because they were the “*real protagonists*” of the

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 2.

⁹⁵ Caillois, ‘Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia’.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 31.

war, yet they were utterly out of place in the surrounding natural landscape.⁹⁷ Andrew Causey points out that in Nash's view, aeroplanes were, in a sense, "*potentially living monsters*".⁹⁸ Nash discovered a unique personality in these metallic objects. This practice, which involved perceiving latent vitality in inanimate objects and then transforming them according to his focus, became a primary working method in Nash's painting practice in the mid-to-late 1930s.

In a letter to Kenneth Clark, Nash clearly explained *Dead Sea* as a metamorphic image: "*To me, the thing had suddenly the look of an inundating sea. Under a moon, for instance, you might feel, under certain influences, this is a vast tide moving across the fields, the breakers rearing up and crashing on the plain. Then, no: nothing moves, it is not water or even ice, it is something static and dead. It is metal, wreckage.*"⁹⁹ This indicates Nash's intention to create a visual sense of contradiction between movement and stillness. In his biography of Nash, Causey similarly notes the contrast between motion and stasis in the painting: on the one hand, the metallic "waves" seem to surge, and on the other, there is the absolute stillness of the aircraft wreckage.¹⁰⁰ Although Nash intended to convey "*the lack of motion*" through the debris, he achieved a "*continuity of movement*" through the viewer's experience, placing the image in a constant state of "becoming".¹⁰¹

In Nash's other works depicting found objects and natural elements, the metamorphosis seen in *Dead Sea* is not an isolated case. In the mid-1930s, following his deep engagement with Surrealist ideas and the European Surrealist movement, he gradually shifted from the juxtaposition of objects in his earlier Symbolist phase to ideas related to "*the interpenetration of contrasting environments, the metamorphosis of materials, and the independent life force of found objects juxtaposed in imagined environments.*"¹⁰² In a letter to Anthony Bertram dated 14 April 1934, he spoke of his attempt to view nature from a new perspective, no

⁹⁷ Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, one-volume abridged edition (London: Macmillan, 1959), p. 622.

⁹⁸ Andrew Causey, *Paul Nash* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 310.

⁹⁹ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, p. 649.

¹⁰⁰ Causey, *Paul Nash*, p. 310-315.

¹⁰¹ Causey, *Paul Nash*, p. 315.

¹⁰² Emma Chambers, 'Introduction', in *Paul Nash*, ed. by Emma Chambers (London: Tate Publishing, 2016), p. 12.

longer satisfied with the normal formal associations between objects in Symbolism, but wanting to find “*object-personages*” existing within non-human matter.¹⁰³ More specifically, his interest was no longer content with the graphic replication of natural objects; he wanted to find a new way to reorganise matter, to make the landscape a living presence rather than a dead appearance.

To understand more clearly the mimicry strategy Nash practised in his painting, especially how he developed a mode of perception that treated inanimate objects as possessing personality or will, I can analyse his practice from the perspective of Caillois’s theory of mimicry. It is necessary to clarify a key difference between the two. Caillois’s mimicry describes a process in which an organism’s boundaries dissolve and are assimilated by space, driven by an impulse akin to the death drive. Nash’s practice, however, involves perceiving and transforming objects to grant them a certain personality. So, why does this chapter choose to bring these not-quite-identical processes together? The reason lies in the seeing experience that Nash’s work elicits: the viewer is pulled into the painting, and their stable perception disintegrates. Caillois allows me to understand the internal feeling of a breakdown between the subject and its environment, and Nash constructs precisely such an experience for me visually. Here, I use Caillois to analyse more specifically how Nash achieves this. Building on this, I must delve further into his working method itself: how exactly did Nash organize images and handle materials in his painting practice, and how did he evoke the personage of objects through different visual media to create his unique, metamorphic landscapes?

From the early 1930s, Nash began collecting natural objects outdoors. Feathers, stones, and deadwood gradually replaced the landscape as a whole as the subjects of his paintings. In P. Morton Shand’s article on the relationship between Nash and these objects, he notes that when Nash saw “*a large piece of driftwood on the banks of the River Rother, near Rye, Nash says he was instantly and intensely aware of being in the presence of what he could only call a ‘personage’ and Coleridge might have called a ‘personality.’*”¹⁰⁴ Nash did not provide a precise explanation for the term “personage”, but I can understand it as a kind of vitality or personality, one that makes the object so special and is usually hidden behind its external features, needing to be discovered. In his own essay on these found objects, *The Object*, Nash

¹⁰³ Causey, Paul Nash, p. 261.

¹⁰⁴ P. Morton Shand, ‘Object and Landscape’, *Country Life*, 3 June 1939, p. 593.

stated that “*all [ready-mades] belong to the common world, equivalents of each might be found, literally, anywhere by anyone*”, but the condition for finding these objects is that “*you must be able to perceive*”.¹⁰⁵

The core of this condition that Nash emphasised: “*you must be able to perceive*”, lies in an inner insight based on affection that is beyond a simple observation of external phenomena. This creates an intertextuality with Caillois’s analysis in his theory of insect mimicry, which focuses on internal drive rather than just external morphological similarity. With this perspective, which differed from the observation of inanimate objects in traditional realist and symbolist landscape painting, Nash began a new approach to landscape: making it dynamic through the dramatic encounters between found objects and the landscape, as well as between objects themselves.¹⁰⁶ This method was the concrete practice through which he transformed the “inner personality” and “will” he perceived in objects to produce his “imagined events”. Through multimedia practices including photography, collage, and installation, Nash expanded his ways of engaging with found objects. Emma Chambers points out that in these preparatory actions before painting, the encounter of objects staged as an assemblage, and the handling and arranging of these objects, stimulated Nash’s memory of the landscapes where he found them and allowed him to create new imaginary scenes.¹⁰⁷ These multimedia rehearsal experiments with assemblages laid the perceptual and conceptual groundwork for him to evoke the personality of matter and produce metamorphic landscapes in his paintings.

Taking his collage *Swanage* (1936) as an example, objects collected at different times and places—pebbles, fossils, shale, gorse wood, anchor chains, and so on—are combined against a watercolour sky. These objects, not cut to the same scale, suggest the realities Nash experienced at different times. In the analysis of this work in *The Tate Gallery Report 1972-1974*, most of these objects were found in Swanage, a seaside town in Dorset, which Nash regarded as “*a Surrealist dream*”.¹⁰⁸ The reason was that the town was “*full of various*

¹⁰⁵ Paul Nash, ‘The Object’, *Architectural Review*, November 1936, p. 208.

¹⁰⁶ Emma Chambers, ‘The Life of Inanimate Object’, in *Paul Nash*, ed. by Emma Chambers (London: Tate Publishing, 2016), p. 37.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁰⁸ Tate, *Paul Nash, ‘Swanage’ 1936*, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/nash-swanage-t01771> (accessed 7 September 2025).

bizarre, decontextualized things—swans on the sea, the lamp post from St George’s Church, Hanover Square, and things transcending time: fossils thousands of years old, existing and dead, strange flora and fauna of past and present, mysterious geological structures, and historical relics from different periods.”¹⁰⁹ It was, one might say, an undefined place. The entire town of Swanage was itself a collage.



Fig 2-3 Paul Nash, *Swanage*, 1936, graphite, watercolour, and black-and-white photographs on paper, 40 × 58.1 cm. Collection of Tate. (Photo: Public Domain).

In *Beyond Painting*, Max Ernst described the practice of collage as “*the chance encounter of two distant realities on an unsuitable plane*”.¹¹⁰ His words hint at the instability and dynamic narrative inherent in this working method, which generates new meaning by collecting, dismantling, and reweaving existing elements. This seems to operate much like our everyday

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Chambers, ‘The Life of Inanimate Object’, p. 42: quoting Max Ernst, *Beyond Painting*, “...utilizing the accidental encounter of two distant realities on an inappropriate plane.”

perception and memory recall, which are full of fragments and non-linear time and logic. In Nash's *Swanage*, it can find a very unique strategy of imitating reality: the artist is not imitating the external features of a specific object, but consciously imitating the heterogeneity, sense of rupture, and overlapping layers of time and narrative that he perceived in the place itself. In Nash's own words, what he did was to use the innate vital qualities of these "irrational" found objects, "*assembling and associating different objects in order to create that true irrational poise*".¹¹¹

Caillois's theory of mimicry may not have directly influenced Nash's creative practice, but considering the impact Caillois had on the French Surrealist movement, from which Nash himself drew much inspiration, exploring the potential intersection of their ideas remains enlightening. A deep intrinsic connection may become apparent, especially when I juxtapose Nash's adopted irrational philosophy—an idea that echoes Dalí's concept of the "*irrational acquaintance of things*" and aims to propose an intuitive reflection on objects that bypasses ordinary perception—with Caillois's theoretical framework.¹¹²

This intuitive reflection enables the artist to capture qualities in objects that are imperceptible through conventional cognition, and revealing these overlooked personages was perhaps the core of what Nash sought in his artistic practice. For example, in Nash's view, a fallen dead tree is no longer an object scientifically classified and named a "tree"; instead, "*in a horizontal position, they have, or acquire, the personality of monsters*".¹¹³ Herbert Read believed that these objects found and collected by Nash "*stimulated his imagination. ...They could serve as referents or archetypes of natural forms—and then be used literally or realistically. They could be objects for still-life arrangement—and then be used imaginatively, but still depicted in their natural forms. Finally, they could command or inspire the imagination—they were the beginnings of fantasy, and the final form of the fantasy was no longer realistic—it was, in fact, superrealistic.*"¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Paul Nash, 'The Life of the Inanimate Object', *Country Life*, 1 May 1937, p. 497.

¹¹² Chambers, 'The Life of Inanimate Object', p. 41.

¹¹³ Paul Nash, 'Monster Field', *The Architectural Review*, October 1940, p. 122.

¹¹⁴ Herbert Read, 'Paul Nash', in *The Philosophy of Modern Art* (New York: New American Library, 1953), p. 186.

This implies that the relationship between Nash and things shifted from a scientific, resource-classificatory cognition to a perceptual connection. It was no longer a one-way process of him observing and depicting objects from the outside; rather, the personality of the object, in turn, commanded his imagination. It could be said that his body opened up completely to the object.

If I use Caillois's theory of mimicry as a tool to discuss Nash's active search for the irrational, I find a resonance. Nash's excavation of the irrational in inanimate objects, and the porous body state he thereby entered, which Caillois described as "*the body separates itself from thought, the individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his senses*", was key to helping him transcend a narrow anthropocentric perspective and traditional realist representation in his practice.¹¹⁵ Therefore, what Nash presented in his multimedia artistic practice, especially when creating what he called a true irrational poise, can be seen as the visual expression of this unique bodily perception and deep experience. The mimicry he performed was no longer a simple replication of the external form of what he saw, but a more profound re-enactment of the object's personages as touched by irrational cognition. This is exemplified in his work *Swanage* by its capture of the heterogeneity of that location and multi-temporal qualities, and even, to some extent, mimetic of the artist's own experience of his boundary merging with objects, being drawn in and permeated by their personages. The core of this practice lies in abandoning the aesthetic tradition aimed at faithfully representing the world, as "*Caillois reminds us that aesthetics stems from purposive yet not necessarily utilitarian drives that are rooted within a human, and thus animal body.*"¹¹⁶

Furthermore, Nash's multimedia experiments surrounding the work group *The Nest of the Wild Stones* (1936-37) provide an excellent case for understanding his perception-driven mimetic strategy. His own description of this series, which explores the fluid relationship between the inorganic and the organic, between stillness and life, is full of poetic insight:

If the stone is egg, the bird is egg. Not always the gape-mouthed bird, nor the comic bird like the toucan, but partridges and landrails, pretty little quails too. Larks even. All furrow birds, earth-landing birds too. Sculptors carve birds out of stone. When they have finished

¹¹⁵ Caillois, 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia', p. 30.

¹¹⁶ Lawtoo, 'Caillois on Mimicry, p. 31.

*they are neither bird nor stone. Except Brancusi. But the stone birds of the field are always both... Perhaps, they are stones when they lie down and birds when they stand up but, thank God, they are never stone-birds.*¹¹⁷



Fig 2-4 Paul Nash, *The Nest of the Wild Stones*, 1937, oil on canvas, 37.1 × 55 cm. Collection of Arts Council Collection, London. (Photo: Public Domain).

This passage exquisitely reveals Nash's way of perceiving the world, which goes beyond simply juxtaposing materials or using the inorganic as a symbol for the organic. Firstly, "*If the stone is egg, the bird is egg.*" Here, "egg" does not refer to a biological ovum but to a primitive, undifferentiated origin of life. By tracing both stone and bird back to this common origin, the "egg", Nash not only steps outside traditional scientific classifications but also dissolves the boundary between inorganic minerals and organic lifeforms. Similarly, the description "*they are stones when they lie down and birds when they stand up*" implies a transformation from the inorganic to the organic. I do not know if Nash was influenced by

¹¹⁷ Paul Nash, 'Unseen Landscapes' (1938), in Andrew Causey, *Paul Nash* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 142.

animistic ideas of a common, spirited origin for all things, but it is clear from this passage that, in his eyes, the world is not composed of fixed, classified objects, but is a fluid network in which different forms of existence can interpenetrate.



Fig 2-5 Paul Nash, *Black and white negative*, “*The nest of wild stones*”, 1936, black and white negative, 7.9 × 12.4 cm. Collection of Tate Archive. (Photo: Public Domain).

Secondly, his critique of representational sculpture: “*Sculptors carve birds out of stone. When they have finished they are neither bird nor stone. Except Brancusi*”, clearly expresses the kind of practice he endorsed. In his time, the artistic mainstream in Britain and Europe was, in some respects, still influenced by traditional concepts of representation, which emphasised the artist’s complete transformation of material through consummate skill to impose a pre-conceived, idealised form. Nash questioned this. He objected to the practice of forcibly imposing a specific form (like a bird) onto another material (like a stone) through artificial processing, thereby causing the loss of both the material’s authenticity and the form’s vitality. This state of being “*neither bird nor stone*” was, in his view, a deprivation of life and material personality, a practice that placed the artist’s will above the material and the object. In contrast, Nash’s affirmation of Constantin Brancusi suggests his approval of a practice that captures the “essence” of an object rather than merely its external form. Brancusi’s practice is often seen as transcending the surface appearance of objects, revealing the inner life of the material and the pure spirit of the form through highly simplified forms and the direct use of materials. This aligns with Nash’s own search for “*the stone birds of the field are always*

both". What he sought was the natural personality revealed by the object itself, one not overly imposed upon by the artist's will.

In the photograph Nash took for this project, *Black and white negative*, "*The nest of wild stones*" (c. 1936), I can sense his initial interest in these collected stones. Even in the relatively objective visual language of photography, through the arrangement of the stones, the position of light and shadow, and the curved contours of the different stones, Nash seems to begin to perceive the tension and dialogue forming between these inanimate objects. This subjective intervention is even more apparent in his manuscript *Study for "The Nest of wild stones"* (c. 1937). The stones and bird eggs are removed from their specific natural environment and placed on a redefined, "stage-like" gridded plane. By removing the specific narrative context, this stage paradoxically enhances the power of the objects themselves.



Fig 2-6 Paul Nash, *Study for "The Nest of the Wild Stones"*, 1937, watercolour, pencil, pen and ink, 13.8 × 22.8 cm. (Source: Bonhams / Photo: Public Domain).

The final painting, *The Nest of the Wild Stones* (1937), places the objects in an open, ambiguously bordered landscape. Nash retained the dappled shadows cast on the stones from his earlier photograph and manuscript. This not only maintained a sense of three-dimensional

space but, more importantly, these shadows, along with a light source in the background landscape that is not entirely realistic and a slightly discordant scale between the objects and the background, significantly enhance the surreal atmosphere of the painting. He visualised the duality he perceived in the stones: they are both stone and bird, an internal state of transformation. As Sarah Fill points out: “*At a conscious level the stones are only stones, yet, just below the level of consciousness they gather life, stand up and become birds.*”¹¹⁸ Through non-realistic colours, the suggestion of material texture in his brushwork, and subtle deformations of form, Nash guides the viewer beyond the ordinary level of consciousness to feel the material personality he perceived. Through this duality of matter, Nash not only maintained a connection with external reality and internal perception but also clearly leaned towards the latter, practising his critique of naturalist and symbolist modes of cognition. This painting and its creative process demonstrate how Nash, working within the tradition of painting that represents nature, used his affect-driven mimetic strategy to perceive the inherent vital qualities of matter, and to discover and generate heterogeneous, metamorphic expressions.

In summary, in Nash’s practice, mimicry transcends the representation of material appearance and becomes a strategy for generating material personality through perception. Although Nash always worked within the traditional medium of painting, he effectively heterogenized the traditional languages of British landscape and still-life painting by introducing Surrealist concepts of the irrational, repurposing natural objects, and emphasising bodily intuition. For example, his works *Dead Sea* and *The Nest of the Wild Stones* do not offer the viewer a stable, closed image, but consciously construct an image that is continuously metamorphosing within the seeing experience. This invites the viewer to abandon the interpretation of a single, fixed meaning and instead enter a participatory viewing experience where meaning is constantly generated. This not only reshapes the act of viewing itself but also reveals the core of the minor practice, that is, finding a line of flight within an established framework and achieving self-alienation through the re-encoding of language and perception.

Thus, through the discussion of Caillois’s concept of mimicry and Krauss’s theory of automatism, alongside the analysis of the two cases of Liang and Nash, this chapter seeks to elucidate that when mimicry transcends the replication of external appearances and instead

¹¹⁸ Sarah Fill, ‘Paul Nash, Surrealism and Prehistoric Dorset’, in *Paul Nash*, ed. by Emma Chambers (London: Tate Publishing, 2016), p. 57.

becomes an internal perception and strategic practice, it can effectively trigger the loosening and dissolution of the practitioner's subjective boundaries. This decentralization is not a passive stance of totally abandoning agency, but rather a posture of taking a step back to move forward, creating space for encounters with unforeseen, heterogeneous elements. However, this openness itself harbours risks. Does the dissolution of the subject's boundaries inevitably lead to a creative encounter with heterogeneous elements? Or might it slide into a closed loop of being swallowed by space? This is precisely the question that Chapter 3 will address, exploring the boundaries and limitations of the mimicry strategy through my own practical experience, and investigating how to find new paths of breakthrough within these limitations.

Chapter 3 Mimicry-Becoming: The Porous Body and the Paths of Intensity

3.1 From Mimicry to Becoming

In the previous chapter, I analysed how mimicry, acting as a core strategy, guides practitioners to dismantle the centred subject's total control over action, entering a state governed by internal perception and bodily work. The intention of this strategy is not to eliminate the subject's role in practice; rather, it transforms the subject from a sovereign who possesses absolute control into a porous body, as described by Caillois, that is riddled with countless tiny pores, open to the outside. It is a body that is willing to encounter more heterogeneous factors during the course of practice, to deviate from the established route, and to create new modes of perception and existence.¹¹⁹ However, does the promise of openness inherent in this porous state, which is entirely open to heterogeneity, come with its own risks? Caillois's analysis of the psychasthenic patient reveals a critical, reflective perspective: "*He feels himself becoming space, dark space where things cannot be put.*"¹²⁰ When the mimetic subject is invaded by heterogeneous continuities, these continuities dissolve the distinctions between interiority and exteriority, between the human self and non-human space, causing the subject to fall into a state of being lost in space. He further uses the example of a child's fear of the dark as an example: it is not the darkness itself that is feared, but rather the fact that within it, the boundaries between the self and the background, between the organism and the environment, begin to dissolve. This reveals the source driving mimicry: it does not originate from the external environment, but is an immanent impulse of permeability within the subject's psyche. This mimetic impulse, which fuses the organism's body with the inorganic environment, may result in a depersonalisation that is utterly erased in assimilation.

This addresses a growing confusion in my own practice. When I devoted myself to the strategy of mimicry, the subject that once sought to control everything was indeed effectively suspended, and unexpected brushstrokes and expressions emerged with the rhythm of the body's actions. However, this state of openness did not always lead to the anticipated creative resonance with heterogeneous elements. Sometimes, the automated actions would fall into a closed self-loop. The repetitive movements occurring between the body and materials no

¹¹⁹ Caillois, 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia'.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 30.

longer generated new differences, but instead built a closed fortress, falling into a non-productive, entropic state of stagnation.

This compels me to address two questions in this Chapter: under what exact conditions can the porous subject triggered by mimicry lead to a creative resonance with the heterogeneous other, and under what conditions does it collapse into a closed loop of self-circulation? Furthermore, if this mimetic strategy based on spatial assimilation already inherently contains a trap leading to closure and stagnation, how then can it be transcended to foster a more productive, outwardly connected mode? To investigate these questions, I will analyse two paintings from my own practice employing the strategy of mimicry: one that fell into the dilemma of homogenized expression, and another that led to the continuous generation of heterogeneity in practice.

3.1.1 Homogenization in *Sha Sha*

Sha Sha (2023) was a deliberate and rigorous test of the principle of automaticity discussed in the previous chapter. I intended to reduce the creative process to its most fundamental components: the body, brush, paint, and canvas, eliminating any external pictorial references or preconceived compositions. I wanted to verify whether, by focusing solely on the repetitive, rhythmic application of brushstrokes, I could induce a state of subjective absence, thereby allowing a truly heterogeneous visual language to emerge from the process itself.

The final picture presents itself as a storm of gestures. Viscous strokes of ochre, raw sienna, and dark green churn across the surface, creating a dense, almost impenetrable zone of activity. There is no central anchor, no resting point for the eye. Instead, the viewer is confronted with a surging, omnipresent energy. The texture of the work is replete with its own history of creation, a palimpsest of overlapping movements that both construct and obscure form.

Initially, during the creative process, I felt I was successful. The prolonged, repetitive labour did indeed induce a state of forgetting how I paint, a state in which my body seemed to operate without the full control of consciousness. The anxious self, the critical self, and the directing self retreated, and my hand moved out of habit, feeling free. In a sense, I was mimicking the process of painting itself, allowing the physical logic of the medium—the drag

of the brush, the viscosity of the oil paint, the feedback from the canvas surface—to guide the work’s formation.



Fig 3-1 Yajie Liang, *Sha Sha*, 2023, oil on canvas, 200 x 160 cm. Image © Yajie Liang.

On the canvas, this automated bodily movement left clear evidence. The viscous oil paint was repeatedly applied, scraped, and agitated by the brush, forming a turbid and convoluted texture. In certain areas of the painting, short, swirling brushstrokes can be seen overlapping and entangling one another; raw sienna was covered by dark green before it had fully dried, then partially removed by a palette knife, revealing the earlier layer of ochre beneath. This movement was not intended to construct a clear image, but somewhat resembled a purposeless release of energy. The trajectories of the brushstrokes constantly spiralled

inwards, like a self-devouring vortex, ultimately forming a dense, airless, chaotic region. Although these gestures are full of dynamism, it is a dynamism of internal friction. They do not point to anything outside the picture plane but merely reaffirm their own existence within the finite space of the canvas, eventually succumbing to a state of visual entropy.

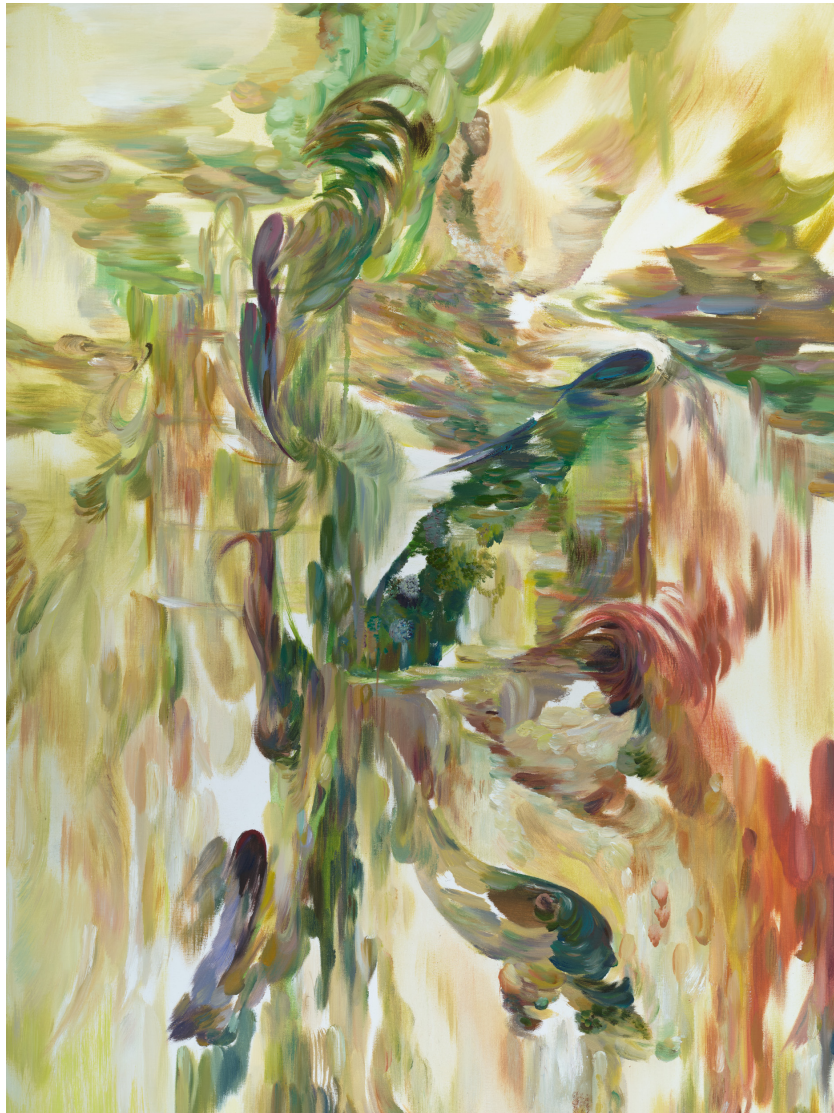


Fig 3-2 Yajie Liang, Detail of *Sha Sha*, 2023, oil on canvas. Image © Yajie Liang.

This liberation, however, was ultimately an illusion. The line of flight intended for escape had returned to its own origin. The automated gestures I had planned to use to deconstruct the solidified expressive patterns in my practice, far from opening up new territory, instead began to cohere into a recognizable stylistic signature. My practice failed to become a conduit to the outside, but was instead a mirror, reflecting only its own claustrophobic loop. I was indeed lost, not in the unknown of forging new paths, but in a constantly attritional, self-devouring void.

Why did this experiment, which strictly followed the logic of mimicry, ultimately lead to the homogenization and reterritorialization of the practice?

To answer this question, I must examine the theoretical foundations of this model itself. In the previous Chapter, I pointed out that Caillois's theory of mimicry is rooted in the Freudian concept of the unconscious, particularly his formulation of the "death drive" (*Thanatos*), the core of which points toward an instinctive impulse to return to the stasis of inorganic matter. Contrary to the "life drive" (*Eros*), which represents life, union, and development, the death drive seeks to eliminate the inherent internal tensions of life and return to a pre-vital state of void. In the Freudian model, the unconscious is a theatre filled with repressed traumas, desires, and instincts; the death drive, however, is not a particular character within this theatre, but rather the immanent drive that impels the entire theatre toward extinguishment.¹²¹ Therefore, when Caillois describes mimicry as a desire to merge with space, he is in fact describing the operation of the death drive: the subject relinquishes the complexity and individuality of its organism, desiring to be assimilated by undifferentiated, lifeless space. Fundamentally, this model is a closed system. It presupposes a binary relationship between the subject and the world, in which the world serves as a giant mirror, reflecting the subject's internal conflicts and desires. The porous body, though open, is open only to be devoured by a space that is ultimately its own internal projection. Its goal is not connection, but dissolution; not the formation of dynamic assemblages with others, but a static, entropic equilibrium.

This explains the predicament of *Sha Sha*: in the absence of external connections, my decentred subject could only communicate with itself. The canvas became a narcissistic mirror, and those repetitive gestures, driven by a kind of death-drive-like inertia, could do nothing but trace their own enclosed contours until their energy was exhausted. This strategy, intended as an escape, ultimately became a prison defined by style. At this point, I realised that mimicry itself could not guarantee the continuation of the escape. For a practice that strives towards the minor, if the subject is merely suspended through mimicry without connection to the external world, then this very strategy of escape risks being reterritorialized by the closed self.

3.1.2 Heterogeneous in *No night can lull me into slumber, no dawn can wake me up*

¹²¹ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

A crucial turning point came from my encounter with the work of the Surrealist artist Claude Cahun. This encounter provided the external catalyst that was missing during the creation of *Sha Sha*, transforming the strategy of mimicry from a closed loop into an open line of flight. The painting that emerged from this was not a pictorial representation of Cahun's photography, but an attempt to generate a hybrid of intensity with the energy her work released.

No night can lull me into slumber, no dawn can wake me up (2023) directly references the *Self Portrait* that Cahun created in 1928 in collaboration with her partner, Marcel Moore. What I did was more than copy the image; I adopted a more material and affect-oriented mimesis, starting from an internal perception to experience how Cahun positioned herself at the liminal point between the organic and the inorganic, the fluid and the solid, life and death.

Her body separates rock and water, presenting an almost gelatinous tactility against the contrast of black silence and mottled rock face. Her slightly curved back is like a gently tensed bow, in no hurry to shoot itself forth. She is less a person swimming by the sea and more a humanoid creature, because her body carries no socially appended signs or symbols. It is pure, unformed, undifferentiated matter. My feeling found a resonance in the experience described by Rosalind Krauss in her essay on Surrealist photography. She points out that several surrealist photographers, such as Man Ray, Brassai, and Jacques-André Boiffard, are adept at creating a “*see as if*” viewing experience, for example, “*the breasts seen as if horns, the arm as if ear*”.¹²² Krauss argues that this effect is not merely the application of the irrational metaphors favoured by Surrealism, but is more accurately achieved “*through the syntax of the camera's hold on its object, its inversion of the body, its angling from below, its radical foreshortening and cropping*”.¹²³ She subsequently defines this specific means as a spatial apparatus that pushes the image into the realm of “*dizziness*”: “*a demonstration of falling*”.¹²⁴

¹²² Rosalind Krauss, ‘Corpus Delicti’, *October*, 33 (Summer 1985), p.34.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

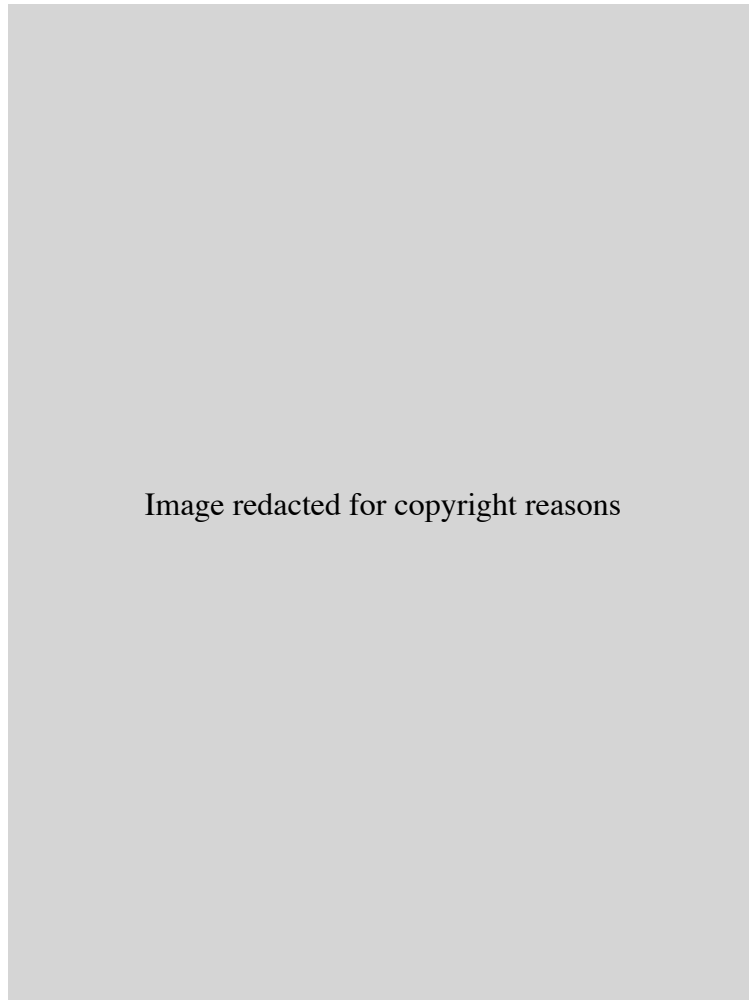


Fig 3-3 Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, *Self-Portrait*, 1928, exhibition print, 18 × 13 cm. Jersey Heritage Collections. Artwork © Estate of Claude Cahun. (Source: *Radical Landscapes*, Tate Publishing, 2022).

It should be noted that the “*falling*” here does not refer to a physical fall from a height, but to a subversion of traditional perspective and perception. As I discussed in the first chapter regarding Pollock’s action of moving the canvas from the wall to the floor, this is precisely one mode of expression of this falling machine. It achieves “*an axial rotation from vertical to horizontal*”.¹²⁵ In Surrealist photography, the numerous abnormal segmentations of the frame, distorted perspectives of the body, or close-ups of body parts, all serve to “*defamiliarizing the human body, redrafting the map of what we would have thought the most familiar of terrains. ... with similar, unsettling effects.*”¹²⁶ The falling apparatus proposed by Krauss here blurs the clearly demarcated boundary between human and animal in traditional consciousness,

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 37.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 33.

because “*The body cannot be seen as human, because it has fallen into the condition of the animal.*”¹²⁷

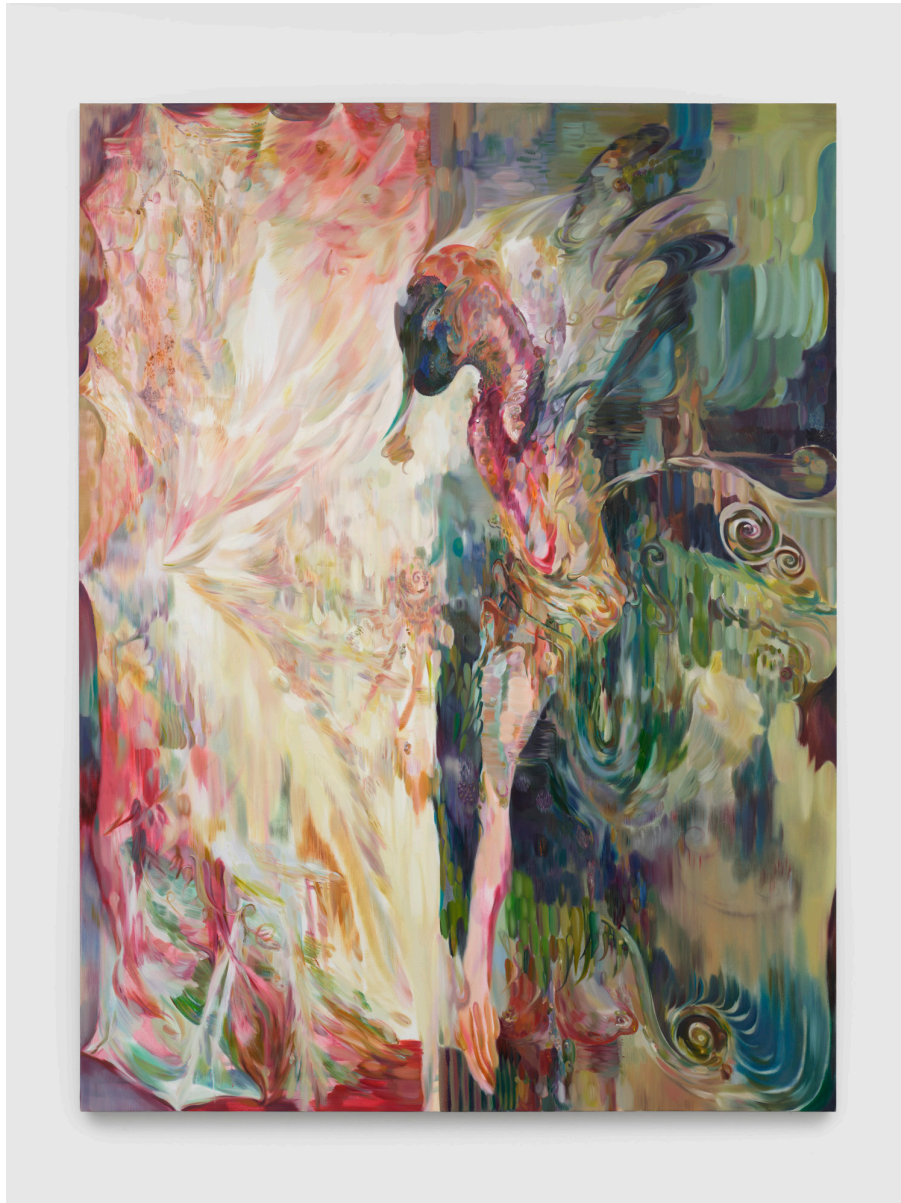


Fig 3-4 Yajie Liang, *No night can lull me into slumber, no dawn can wake me up*, 2023, oil on canvas, 200 x 160 cm. Image © Yajie Liang.

This fall from human to animal is not a moral or axiological degradation, but a metamorphosis of state: a return from the human defined by society and culture to unformed life force itself. Cahun’s work is a perfect demonstration of this falling machine. The bodies poised on the threshold stubbornly refuse to be captured by any field; their desire is to blur

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 34.

boundaries. Just as Cahun undertook a metamorphosis of her own gender identity, she propelled her own body—originally defined by society and culture with clear feminine symbols—into a constantly changing, fluid process through a series of photographs that blurred gender signifiers. In *Self Portrait*, she places her body at the junction of rock and water, being neither one nor the other. This posture is itself the construction of a line of flight: an escape from the socially coded body towards an undifferentiated zone full of potentiality. This is not merely a symbolic gesture, but a practice of intensity. Her body is no longer a collection of signs awaiting interpretation, but a generator of intensity and force, an intensity that arises from the continuous transgression and dissolution of boundaries.

In the studio, this perception entered my creative process. My practice was no longer a binary relationship between myself and the canvas, but a triad: myself—Cahun’s intensity—the canvas. My porous subject was no longer just dissolving into an abstract, empty space, but was being permeated by a specific, energised external force. My body’s repetitive, automated gestures were now guided, drawn into a current of intensity and force initiated by her work. These gestures were no longer merely my gestures, but a continuation of her line of flight. The final work is the result of the collaborative flow of intensity between my body, the materials, and Cahun.

The fundamental difference between this practice and *Sha Sha* forces me to re-examine the vastly different roles that the unconscious actually plays in creation. In *Sha Sha*, the unconscious functions more like a closed theatre, wherein the automated postures of the body repeatedly perform an internal drama of self-dissolution. Conversely, when working alongside Cahun’s work, the operational mode of the unconscious underwent a radical transformation: it was no longer enclosed inward, but functioned instead as an “interface” for outward connection. To be precise, rather than representing Cahun’s images, it connected to the intensities already immanent within her work and utilized these intensities to produce something new. This experience happens to coincide precisely with the model of the unconscious proposed by Deleuze and Guattari.

The Freudian unconscious, which underpins Caillois’s model, is a theatre of representation, a closed stage that endlessly re-enacts the Oedipal drama of family, lack, and the law. It is structural, mythical, and essentially personal. The Deleuzian and Guattarian unconscious, by contrast, is a factory of production. It is machinic rather than representative, composed of

countless “desiring machines” that constantly connect with other machines to produce flows of desire. It is therefore social, political, and worldly, rather than personal and familial. The unconscious thus becomes an open system whose primary function is to connect with the outside. As they point out, “*Desire does not ‘want’ revolution, it is revolutionary in its own right, as though involuntary, by wanting what it wants.*”¹²⁸

From this perspective, the homogenization of *Sha Sha* lies in its being trapped within a Freudian logic of representation. It attempted to represent a state of self-dissolution on the canvas, ultimately falling into the involution of the death drive. The reason the work referencing Cahun generated a heterogenized expression is that it followed a Deleuzian and Guattarian logic of production. It did not need to represent anything, because it had already connected to the active flows of desire in Cahun’s work and co-produced a new hybrid of intensity. I realised that to continuously self-alienate, my practical strategy needed to evolve from mimicry to becoming.

3.2 Two Becoming Paths

If becoming is to be employed as a line of flight to avoid the risk of being reterritorialized within a closed loop, do there exist different operational logics within it? At the same time, does the tension existing between these logics also constitute the fuel that drives practice to continually become a stranger within its own language? The case of working alongside Cahun provides me with an effective model of alliance and connection; yet, if this is taken as the sole path of the strategy of becoming, it risks ossifying into a new dogma. Therefore, I must return once again to the theoretical site where Deleuze and Guattari construct the concept of becoming: the literature of Kafka. The answer lies in the burrow with countless entrances that Kafka excavated through his metamorphosed German.

The aim of this operation is not to visualise the text for the purpose of image analysis, but to examine how many lines of flight are manufactured within his writing machine. By dissecting the immanent generative mechanisms of these paths, this section aims not to provide a clear yet singular operational manual for practice after mimicry, but rather to map out an experimental cartography capable of accommodating contradictions and entanglements.

¹²⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 116.

In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari point out that, from a linguistic perspective, Kafka's writing is minor not only because it chooses to use "*the German language of Prague*", a marginal expression that is "*very poverty*", stricken and incorrect compared to standard German, but also because he radically reshaped this language by substituting metamorphosis for metaphor.¹²⁹ They quote Kafka's own words: "*Metaphors are one of the things that makes me despair of literature.*"¹³⁰ He rejects metaphor, symbol, sign, and any semantic use of language, seeking to "*oppose a purely intensive usage of language to all symbolic or even significant or simply signifying usages of it. Arrive at a perfect and unformed expression, a materially intense expression.*"¹³¹ On the one hand, this expression achieves an absolute deterritorialization that prevents it from being dominated by the established German literary system. On the other hand, it shatters the structural correspondence between the form of content and the form of expression prescribed by the major literature, deconstructing them to mix them in "*a single intense matter*".¹³² In Deleuze and Guattari's view, this fluid, intense matter that has broken the boundary between form and content is the productive force that precedes language and meaning, which they call "*intensity*".¹³³

When utilizing the concept of intensity, it is necessary for me to grasp its precise formulation within Deleuzian philosophy. As Deleuze elaborates in *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, intensity operates through sensation.¹³⁴ In Deleuze's own words,

*The Figure is the sensible form related to a sensation; it acts immediately upon the nervous system, which is of the flesh. ... And at the limit, it is the same body which, being both subject and object, gives and receives the sensation. ... sensation is that which is transmitted directly, and avoids the detour and boredom of conveying a story.*¹³⁵

¹²⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. 19.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 22.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 19.

¹³² Ibid., p. 28.

¹³³ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*.

¹³⁴ Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 34-36.

This indicates that sensation, as a force acting directly on the nervous system, bypasses the brain's functions of representation and narration. It is a real vibration of the body that occurs at a pre-linguistic, pre-conscious level.¹³⁶

Borrowing the core characteristics of intensity—acting on the body, preceding meaning, and dissolving form—I inquire further: within Kafka's literary burrow, through what kind of paths of becoming is this intensity activated? Deleuze and Guattari point out that becoming is not to copy the appearance or behaviour of the heterogeneous other, but rather to connect with, capture, and possess their modes of perception and states of existence. In this process of resonating with the heterogeneous other, the subject is disturbed and penetrated, entering into a process of continuous metamorphosis that engenders novel perceptions and expressions. Just like Gregor, who remains perpetually suspended in the process of becoming-insect, Kafka chooses animals as figures in his stories precisely because animals are always attempting to "*try to find a way out, to trace a line of escape*".¹³⁷ This state of continuously seeking a way out, which cannot be territorialized, or even reterritorialized, is precisely why becoming-animal becomes a core component of Kafka's minor literary machine: it keeps expression permanently in motion, shatters any form that attempts to fix it, and encourages ruptures and new flowerings.

3.2.1 The Gregor-esque Path

In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor's transformation from human to insect reveals the first possible path of becoming. Its core dynamic comes not from the visible insect-like body, but from his vocal organ: his voice.

Kafka deliberately shifts the narrative focus from visual alienation to auditory shock. Upon waking, what truly startles Gregor, more than seeing his bulging abdomen transformed into a hard carapace, is the sound he himself produces: "*it was unmistakably his previous voice, but merging into it as though from low down came an uncontrollable, painful squealing which allowed his words to remain articulate literally for only a moment, then stifled them so much as they died away that you couldn't tell if you'd heard them properly.*"¹³⁸ At this point, the

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 64.

¹³⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. 34.

¹³⁸ Kafka, 'The Metamorphosis', p. 31.

metamorphosis has just begun; he can still use short phrases to express himself, only these words are permeated by a noise from “*low down*”.

On the most direct physical level, “*low down*” corresponds to Gregor’s already insectile body structure. Compared to the human voice, which is primarily produced from the relatively high position of the larynx, the vocalisations of insects or many animals originate more from vibrations in the thorax, abdomen, or through bodily friction, a deeper, more instinctual sound from the lower torso. Secondly, this “*low down*” signifies all the instincts, desires, and animality suppressed by Gregor’s social identity as a family provider and company employee. As a pre-linguistic mode of expression, it exists before the formation of clear, meaningful words. On the path of becoming-animal, as Gregor attempts to speak the human language located “*up top*”, which is highly formalised and symbolic, the uncontrollable, non-human voice from below begins to permeate the former. Its purpose is not to express new meaning, but to dismantle meaning itself, to make way for the materiality of sound itself.

This confrontation between the two voices reaches its climax and receives its verdict in Gregor’s encounter with the chief clerk. The clerk’s arrival is no ordinary visit; he is the agent sent by the major social-commercial machine that dominates Gregor, an auditor dispatched to diagnose and repair a system error. His appearance elevates Gregor’s metamorphosis from a domestic “Oedipal” event to a defection from the social machine.

The clerk’s diagnostic process is procedural. He first tests whether Gregor’s voice conforms to the encoding rules of human language: “*Could you understand a single word?*”¹³⁹ Having confirmed that the signal cannot be decoded into valid information, he initiates a second procedure: an attempt to re-code this abnormal behaviour within a human motivational framework. “*He’s not making a fool of us, is he?*” This question is crucial. It is the social machine’s final effort to pull Gregor’s voice back into the human sphere, attempting to define it as a form of deception that can be understood and disciplined.¹⁴⁰ However, the pure intensity and non-human quality of this voice completely overwhelm any possibility of reterritorialization.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 37.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 37.

Finally, after all decoding procedures have failed, the clerk, as the representative of the system, is forced to make the final judgment: “*That was an animal's voice*”.¹⁴¹ This assertion is the key to the entire event. It is not a description of a visual image but a conclusion based entirely on an auditory event. Kafka specifically notes that this was said “*noticeably quiet*”, which is not the shriek of an individual facing terror—that is the mother’s emotional reaction—but the social machine calmly and dispassionately classifying and exiling an irreparable error.¹⁴²

Interestingly, Kafka arranges for everyone, including the clerk, parents, and sister, to be outside the room to hear Gregor’s voice before they see his insect-like body. I can imagine the reverse sequence: if they had first seen Gregor’s insect form, then the strange sound they subsequently heard would merely have been a logical symptom or attribute of this monstrous body. It would have been a simple cause-and-effect relationship: because he is an insect, he makes an insect’s sound. But Kafka reverses this order. In the absence of sight, with only sound, the voice itself becomes the core of the metamorphic event. What the clerk and family confront is not a visual sign identifiable as an insect, but a resonant vibration that blurs words. This is precisely the manifestation of the pure intensity of sound’s material substance after its signifying function has been completely stripped away. It is no longer a signifier carrying meaning, but an event composed of frequency, timbre, and physical vibration, acting directly on the nerves.¹⁴³

Finally, these deterritorialized sounds ultimately complete the reshaping of Gregor’s inner perception. The evidence for this shift lies in his seemingly contradictory confession: when the outside world can no longer understand him, he feels his words are “*clear enough to him, clearer than before, perhaps because his ear was adapting*.”¹⁴⁴

This signifies an ontological calibration. Gregor’s system of evaluation has undergone a decisive deflection: it is no longer anchored to the external standard of semantic clarity in human language, but has begun to adopt the line of flight itself, the “*continuum of intensities*”

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 38.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 38.

¹⁴³ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. 6.

¹⁴⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. 6.

of that non-human voice, as a new internal measure.¹⁴⁵ What he considers clear no longer points to a meaning that can be decoded by society, but to the purity and continuity of the intensity itself. When he embraces this expressive material composed of vibration, frequency, and timbre, which blurs the boundary between human and animal, he accepts not a new identity as an insect, but the very process of becoming-insect as a new way of being, one filled with its own internal clarity.

The Gregor-esque path provides the first concrete route of becoming for a minor painting practice after mimicry. Kafka's key move lies in having sound precede vision, revealing the primacy of the event of intensity over the recognition of the sign. This point is extremely crucial for my reflection on practice. The homogenization that occurred in *Sha Sha* was not simply a failure to embrace external heterogeneous elements, but rather from the fact that I myself was still playing the role of the clerk: I subjected both myself and the materials to a preset visual goal, obsessively attempting to anchor the act of painting into a recognizable pictorial outcome.

Therefore, the core of the Gregor-esque path is not the invention of a new form to replace an old one, but rather the radical subversion of the evaluation system itself. When painting is no longer judged by whether it can be decoded by an established system of signs, or whether it produces a consumable image, but instead follows Gregor by taking the purity and continuity of intensity itself as its sole internal measure, the very question of whether one paints well enough becomes irrelevant. The premise upon which it relies—a painting as a static, recognizable object awaiting judgment—no longer holds in a world of pure intensity. Just as Deleuze and Guattari's manifesto echoes the ontological turn in painting: "*all forms come undone, as do all the significations, signifiers, and signifieds, to the benefit of an unformed matter of deterritorialized flux, of nonsignifying signs.*"¹⁴⁶ Within this space dominated by vibration, there is only motion, and no outcome. This path, which concentrates on intensity rather than signs, and focuses on movement rather than the destination, constitutes the core driving force behind the ontological turn of painting.

3.2.2 The Red Peter-esque Path

¹⁴⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. 13.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 13.

The above Gregor-esque path establishes an internal metric for minor painting based on pure intensity. However, once this logic aimed at a movement of deterritorialization is established, a new question arises: how exactly is this pure intensity, which dismantles form, to be concretely activated? Furthermore, how does it connect with the external world we inhabit without falling into a new form of enclosure, thereby ensuring the continued movement of this line of flight? Most crucially, for a practitioner, it is impossible for me, like Gregor, to wake up one morning and find that metamorphosis has already taken place. These inquiries lead me to another animal story within Kafka's burrow: the "becoming-human" of the ape Red Peter.

Two years after the publication of *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka completed a short story about how an animal becomes human, *A Report to an Academy*.¹⁴⁷ In the story, an ape named Red Peter recounts to an academy how he was captured by humans in the jungle, confined in a cage, and then chose to learn human behaviour. Unlike Gregor's belated realisation, upon waking, that his body had already transformed, Red Peter's process of becoming-human can be described as his conscious plan, originating from an extremely real and urgent predicament: the need to get out of the cage. When he awakens after being shot, finding himself trapped in a cage in the ship's hold with three iron-barred sides and one nailed to a wooden crate, his only feeling is one of being "*without a way out*".¹⁴⁸ Kafka specifically emphasizes that what he wanted was not "*this great feeling of freedom on all sides*", but "*only a way out—to the right or left or anywhere at all*."¹⁴⁹

Deleuze and Guattari accurately capture this key distinction. They point out that the act of escape itself must be scrutinised. If an external, physical escape is a "*useless movement in space, a movement of false liberty*", then it is meaningless.¹⁵⁰ Conversely, if the escape is "*a stationary flight, a flight of intensity*", then even if it is static, it should be affirmed.¹⁵¹ This is because it is an escape achieved not by changing physical location, but by changing one's own internal intensity and state of being. What Red Peter seeks is precisely the latter, a

¹⁴⁷ Franz Kafka, 'A Report for an Academy', translated by Ian Johnston, Kafka-Online, <https://www.kafka-online.info/a-report-for-an-academy.html>, (accessed 7 September 2025).

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. 13.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 13.

movement of intensity, a way out that leads not elsewhere, but only to a change in himself. When he arrived in Hamburg with the ship and was faced with the choice of either the zoo, which would be a new cage, or the music hall, he chose the latter without hesitation, because it was the only viable way out that could achieve this transformation of internal intensity.

Textually, Red Peter's process of becoming-human is presented as simple imitation, but this imitation is only superficial, for it is no longer a representation of a character. As Red Peter himself states: "*imitating human beings was not something which pleased me. I imitated them because I was looking for a way out, for no other reason.*"¹⁵² Deleuze and Guattari point out, "*The act of becoming is a capturing, a possession, a plus-value, but never a reproduction or an imitation.*"¹⁵³ What Red Peter does is precisely to "capture" certain conventional "codes" of human society. He learns to shake hands, to spit, to drink, to speak, not to become a perfect replica of a "human", but to strip these common skills of human society from their original cultural context and transform them into tools for his own survival, enabling him to escape the zoo cage and live in human society. This is a "possession". He finds a way out of the cage by creating a new "plus-value" for his own existence.

The driving force of this becoming is, likewise, intensity. But unlike Gregor's pure sound that dismantles meaning, Red Peter's intensity manifests as an "ape-nature" that cannot be eradicated by human reason, which continuously surges throughout his process of becoming-human. This process is painful and violent: "*learned with a whip; whenever I showed the slightest resistance, I was whipped until I was raw. My ape nature tumbled out of me, head over heels*".¹⁵⁴ This is not the disappearance of his ape-nature, but the violent process of the ape's intensity of being being forcibly infused into human reason. Deleuze and Guattari describe it as "*a nonparallel and asymmetrical evolution*": the humanity captured by Red Peter is constantly permeated by his inner animal intensity, thereby generating a completely new existence that is neither ape nor human, a human-ape "*continuum of intensities*".¹⁵⁵ He is not playing at being human; he is forcibly wearing the suit of humanity with the intensity of an ape, and in the process, stretching this suit into strange and new shapes. At the same time,

¹⁵² Kafka, 'A Report for an Academy'.

¹⁵³ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. 13.

¹⁵⁴ Kafka, 'A Report for an Academy'.

¹⁵⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. 13.

this becoming also completes a revolution against the system of domination. A former ape who can quote classics and deliver a speech to an academy in itself destabilises the seemingly solid boundary between human and animal. Red Peter uses his indelible ape-nature to deterritorialise the fixed definition of the human.¹⁵⁶

I must here clearly distinguish between the “textual Red Peter” and the “methodological Red Peter path”. In Kafka’s story, Red Peter’s situation dictates that he can only capture and possess the major, dominant set of human codes. However, when I adopt this as a general method for a practice moving towards the minor, I need not, and should not, be bound by the specific plot of the text. Its methodological core lies in the series of operations “capture-possess-hybridise-becoming”, not in the specific attributes of the object captured.

Therefore, if this path is applied to painting practice, the status of the captured external heterogeneous element is no longer important. What is important is that I form an alliance between this external element and the intensity of my own untranslatable body. This process will inevitably produce a “two-way defamiliarization” effect. Firstly, for myself, when I force my own inherent, habitual bodily rhythms and gestures to follow an external, heterogeneous internal mode of operation and rhythm, my own language is forced to deform in this process, becoming no longer fluent and natural. I thus become a stranger in my own creation, thereby escaping the risk of being ossified by style. Simultaneously, for the captured element, when that external internal mode is executed and polluted by my own personal, noise-filled, impure bodily intensity, it too loses its natural or authoritative status within its original system, and its original rational structure is revealed as a fragile construct that can be distorted and reshaped.

Ultimately, this two-way defamiliarization generates a new, unstable hybrid variant. This variant belongs neither to our original selves nor to the captured other. It is precisely the line of flight itself, a new perceptual field that is continuously being created in active connection and engagement with the world.

Thus, the exploration into Kafka’s literary burrow has responded to the core dilemma posed at the beginning of this chapter: how exactly can the porous subject triggered by mimicry transcend the trap of an enclosed self-circulation, and how can it evolve into a more

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 14.

generative practical path of outward connection and continuous alienation? Upon this terrain cleared by mimicry, two distinct yet complementary paths of becoming unfold. The Gregor-esque path establishes a new criterion: taking the purity and continuity of intensity itself as the metric, thereby displacing the clarity of meaning. The Red Peter-esque path answers how intensity is activated: it actively captures the immanent operational modes and rhythms of the heterogeneous other, translating and appropriating them with its own indelible bodily intensity to generate a strange, unstable variant amidst collision and hybridity. It is precisely the immanent tension between these two paths: wherein the Gregor-esque path establishes an immanent metric that can never be fixed as an outcome, while the Red Peter-esque path continuously introduces the heterogeneous other to perpetually test and renew this metric, that prevents the practice from coming to settle in any single direction, thereby constituting the line of flight that drives the practice to continually become a stranger within its own language.

3.3 Body as the site of Mimicry-Becoming

Now, this research has established the theoretical model of “mimicry-becoming”. By suspending the centralized subject, mimicry functions as the initial step of action, transforming the practitioner into a porous body that opens outward. Subsequently, becoming enters the stage, continuously conducting self-alienation along two complementary paths. However, this establishment does not imply that the discussion on minor painting comes to an end. To test the validity of this map, this section will focus on the practice of Claude Cahun and the Chinese contemporary artist Guo Fengyi.

The reason for selecting these two female practitioners, who are far removed from one another in the space-time of art history, lies not only in the similarities of their identity politics, specifically, that both are female operating on the margins of the institutional frameworks of their respective societies: Cahun in relation to the official narrative of Surrealism, and Guo in relation to the Chinese contemporary art system. More importantly, the practices of Cahun and Guo share a more fundamental operational logic: both treat the body as the true site of practice. It is neither a vehicle for meaning nor a semiotic system awaiting decoding, but rather a porous field that establishes direct, intensive connections with external forces. At this level, both of their practices refuse to produce images that can be consumed by existing discourses, seeking instead an intensive event that dismantles form at

the contact zone between the body and the world. It is precisely this reason that allows the analysis in this section to transcend isolated case studies. Across two entirely distinct cultural contexts and sites of practice, what mimicry-becoming produces is not a style, but a deeper operational mode: how the body, within its intensive connection with the world, continuously produces the possibility of escaping major systems.

3.3.1 Claude Cahun: Dissolving into Alliance

In the discussion of Section 3.1.2, I analyzed how Cahun's work entered my practice as an external catalyst on the perceptual level, triggering a shift from mimicry to becoming like the flutter of a butterfly's wings. This section will analyze, from the perspectives of art history and theory, how Cahun's practice implements the mimicry-becoming model. As one of the few women actively participating during the most critical period of the Surrealist movement, Cahun's practice consistently maintained a critical tension with the eroticized narrative of the female body prevalent in Surrealist art.¹⁵⁷ As she wrote, "*Shuffle the cards. Masculine? Feminine? It depends on the situation. Neuter is the only gender that always suits me. If it existed in our language no one would be able to see my thought's vacillations. I'd be a worker bee for good.*"¹⁵⁸ She rarely played with distinct femininity or masculinity in her works. This is precisely the radicality of Cahun's practice: she refused to treat the body as a representation of social signs, pushing it instead beyond the boundaries of all established categories.

Abigail Solomon-Godeau points out that self-portrait photography constitutes Cahun's earliest photographic work and spans her entire lifetime.¹⁵⁹ In these works, she frequently employed tactics of masquerade and habitually concentrated the central focus on her own face and head. Cahun occasionally disguised herself as a man, and at other times as an androgynous figure. She shaved her hair off completely, or clad herself in the garments of a Hindu yogi. These faces, incompatible with one another, strangely coexisted simultaneously.

¹⁵⁷ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'The Equivocal 'I': Claude Cahun as Lesbian Subject,' in *Inverted Odysseys: Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, Cindy Sherman*, ed. Shelley Rice (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999), p. 119.

¹⁵⁸ Claude Cahun, *Disavowals: Or, Cancelled Confessions*, trans. Susan de Muth (London: Tate Publishing, 2007), p. 151, 152.

¹⁵⁹ Solomon-Godeau, 'The Equivocal 'I': Claude Cahun as Lesbian Subject', p. 113, 114.

Take the *Self-Portrait* (1928) as an example. In this picture, Cahun stands pressed close against a mirror, the collar of her checkered jacket is pulled high, and one hand tightly clutches the lapel, as if resisting some external force. Shaved-headed, bare-faced, and expressionless, a gender-ambiguous figure occupies the space. The mirror is small, yet sufficient to frame the two heads of Cahun tightly together at the centre of the image, appearing like two heads growing out of the same body. The gaze of one pierces straight through the pictorial space to stare at me, while the other gazes to the right, toward an unknown space beyond the frame.

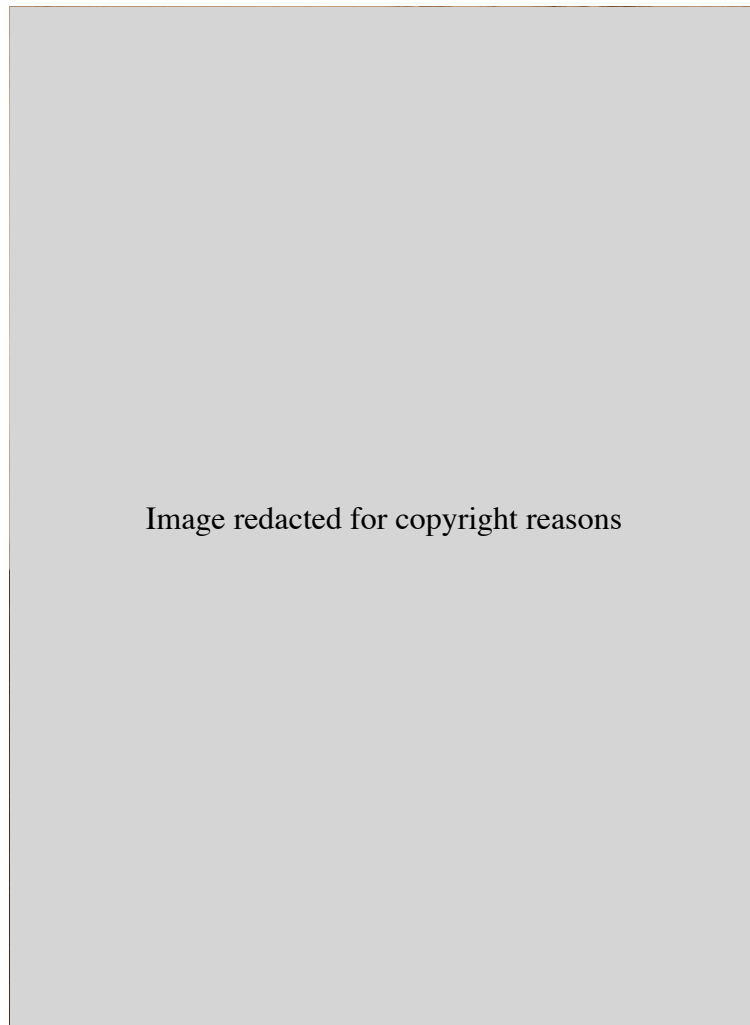


Fig 3-5 Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, *Self-Portrait*, 1928, gelatin silver print, 9.1 × 6.6 cm. Collection of SFMOMA. Artwork © Estate of Claude Cahun.

In *The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism*, Krauss terms this strategy of producing a mirror-reflection structure within photography as “doubling”.¹⁶⁰ To Krauss, photography, as “the image of simultaneity”, is “a declaration of the seamless integrity of the real” and “a document of its unity as that-which-was-present-at-one-time”.¹⁶¹ For the Surrealists, however, this unified presence is precisely the illusion that needed to be shattered. What they pursue is the revelation of reality itself as writing: a representation that is already “configured, or coded, or written”.¹⁶² Photography, by virtue of its nature as a direct index and imprint of reality, becomes the ideal tool to execute this operation. Doubling is precisely the most important strategy for Surrealist photographers to produce spacing and difference inside the picture without destroying the photographic surface. By juxtaposing the copy with the original, “the double destroys the pure singularity of the first”, thereby “opens the original to the effect of difference”.¹⁶³

As I gaze at Cahun’s two heads in the photo, I begin to fall into a state of disorientation: which one is more real? This is a body standing on the boundary of gender, much like the body I discussed in Section 3.1.2 that falls from a socialized human being toward unformed, undifferentiated non-human matter. This posture of continuous flux between an either-or state causes the internal tension of the body to reach its apex between these two faces gazing in different directions. They are like two coexisting subjects, both of which are originals, incapable of being reduced by the other into a copy. This is precisely where Krauss’s semiotic framework is limited. In her analysis, Cahun’s body is merely a passive surface written over by signs and meanings, and it produces nothing of its own accord. However, the attraction and disorientation acting directly upon my own body are precisely what evaporate within that semiotic translation.

If I refuse to view Cahun’s body merely as a vehicle for signs and identity, what exactly is she doing? In her book *Aveux non avenue (Disavowals)*, Cahun wrote, “under this mask, another mask. I will never finish lifting off all these faces.”¹⁶⁴ This sentence is often

¹⁶⁰ Rosalind E. Krauss, ‘The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism’, in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), p. 109.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 107.

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 113.

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 109.

¹⁶⁴ Cahun, *Disavowals: Or, Cancelled Confessions*, p. 183.

interpreted as a poetic expression of her identity masquerade and instability. I think, however, that this is a manifesto of pushing the body to its limits. Why will she never finish lifting them off? Because within Cahun's logic, there is absolutely no authentic self waiting to be validated beneath the mask. What she is obsessed with is precisely the practical logic of movement itself: continuously entering into every state, traversing it, leaving it, and then withdrawing to enter the next heterogeneous instant.

Following this logic, I cannot treat each of Cahun's photographs as an isolated, static semiotic text. The self-portraits spanning her entire life should be understood holistically as a continuous movement interwoven by countless slices. These slices do not record fixed identities; they record only lines of flight. This concentration on pure movement enables Cahun to reject the Freudian enclosed narrative driven by the death drive to return to inorganic stasis, and to translate directly into a transcendence of the mimicry strategy within her bodily practice. She deploys mimicry not to passively merge with a space like an insect, but to radically decouple from the previous state through this repetitive traversal, thereby allowing herself to embrace new bodily states.

It is worth noting the specificity of the medium Cahun used. Unlike painting, which functions as a temporal practice wherein the traces of brushstrokes, hesitations, overlays, and corrections together constitute a traceable history of bodily movement, photography, as a capture and freezing of the instant, possesses the nature of a medium that dictates its inability to accommodate phased transitions within a single frame. It is precisely this limitation that reveals a more fundamental structure in Cahun's practice: in her self-portrait series, the execution of mimicry and the emergence of intensity are not two events occurring sequentially, but are rather two facets of the exact same movement.

Here, the operation of mimicry manifests precisely as that continuous accumulation of slices collapsing and rebuilding. It is precisely within this movement that no single state can serve as an original or destination. This transforms Cahun's originally rigid subjective boundary into a perpetually vibrating field of intensity. There, the line of demarcation between self and non-self is continuously redrawn and continuously invalidated. In other words, intensity is not something generated after mimicry ends, but is something that cannot be intercepted while mimicry is in continuous motion. It is the force produced by the body through repeated fracturing and transformation, preceding any semiotic system and incapable of being captured

or represented by it. The photographic freeze-frame can only capture the intensity carried by a certain specific bodily state, whereas that more fundamental intensity, accumulated through the repetitive traversal itself, happens to escape beyond every shutter release. It cannot be possessed by any single outcome, and can only be perceived within the movement of the entire series. This is precisely the manifestation of the Gregor-esque path within Cahun's practice: the purity and continuity of intensity itself displaces the clarity of meaning to become the core immanent metric.

In this sense, the radical nature of Cahun's practice is evident at the level of the medium: through the repetitive, performative invocation of the body, she loosens what were originally isolated, enclosed single photographic slices into a continuously vibrating heterogeneous space within the continuous extension of the overall movement of the series.

However, the immanent metric of this vibrating space cannot be sustained solely by isolated self-scrutiny. To prevent the line of flight from stalling in enclosure, the practice must actively open itself toward the heterogeneous other and form alliances. Accordingly, another line of flight grows out of the interior of Cahun's practice: the Red Peter-esque path of becoming.

Unlike painting, self-portrait photography involves a structural problem: who presses the shutter? In *Enter Nous: Between Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore*, Tirza True Latimer points out that "*photographs typically described as 'autoportraits' result from some sort of collaboration, since Cahun could not possibly have realized the majority of them alone, even with the aid of a timer or cable release.*"¹⁶⁵ This technical issue pushes another individual, hidden behind the lens, directly to the foreground: Marcel Moore. She was Cahun's lifelong partner, companion, and half-sister, whom Cahun called the "*other me*".¹⁶⁶ Both Solomon-Godeau and Latimer note that many of Cahun's iconic works, such as the ten photomontages in *Aveux non avenus*, were precisely the products of a deep collaboration between the two women: Cahun herself was responsible for the imagination, composition, and performance, while Moore was responsible for envisioning, visualizing and pictorializing them.¹⁶⁷ How did

¹⁶⁵ Tirza True Latimer, 'Entre Nous: Between Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 2 (2006), p. 198.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

¹⁶⁷ Solomon-Godeau, 'The Equivocal 'I': Claude Cahun as Lesbian Subject', p. 116; Latimer, 'Entre Nous: Between Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore', p. 198.

Moore, as the controller executing the shoot, the photograph's first viewer, and the initial other for whom Cahun performed, this continuously present external force, permeate and defamiliarize Cahun's bodily practice?

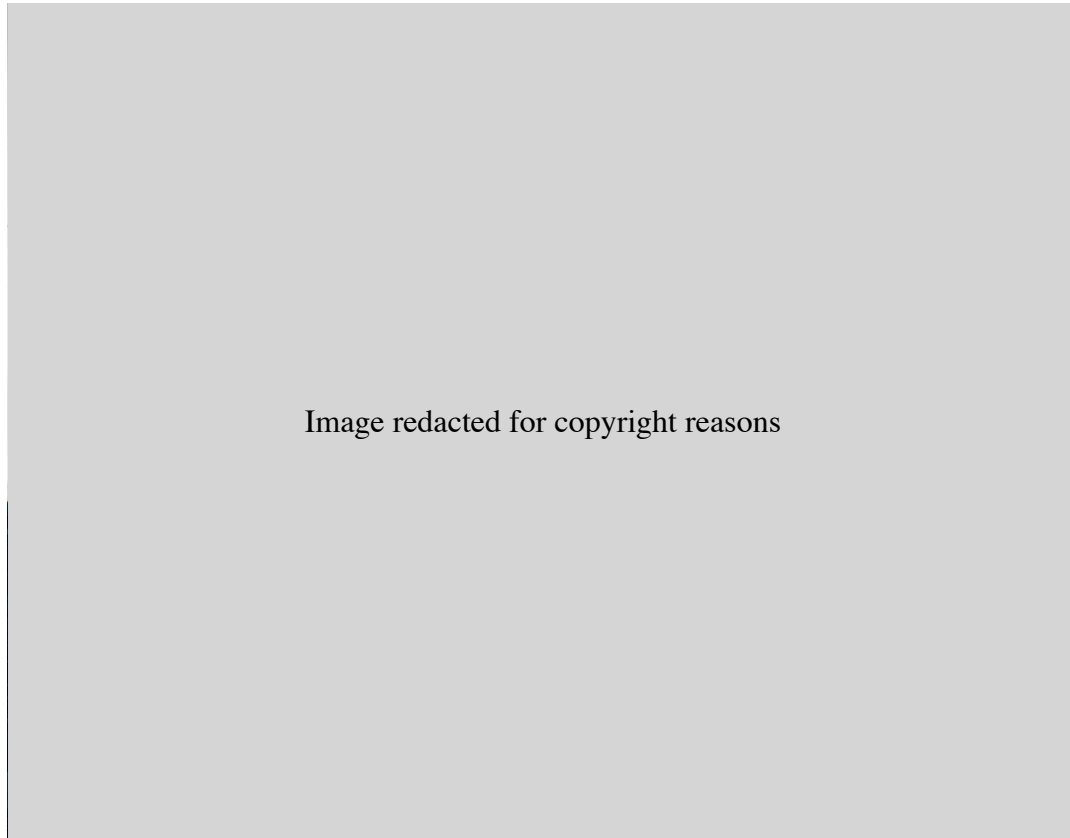


Fig 3-6 Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, *Self-Portrait* [left] and *Self-Portrait* [right], 1928, gelatin silver prints. Jersey Heritage Collections. Artwork © Estate of Claude Cahun. (Source: PAMA).

Forming a pairing with Cahun's 1928 *Self-Portrait* is another *Self-Portrait* of Moore taken from the identical perspective. In past discussions, this work of Moore has often been overlooked by the public. However, when these two photographs, taken mutually of each other by the two individuals, are placed together, they function as a pair and produce a highly intriguing dynamic of gazes. On the left, Cahun gazes expressionlessly at the viewer outside the frame, while her reflection in the mirror, refracted by the glass surface, falls upon Moore on the right; on the right, Moore, standing in profile, gazes at Cahun on the left, while her own reflection in the mirror, via the same refraction, looks back smilingly at the viewer outside the frame.

In a letter dated 1920 to Moore, Cahun wrote, “*our two heads (hair intermingling inextricably) inclined over a photograph. Portrait of one or of the other, our two narcissisms drowning together there, it was the impossible realized in a magic mirror. Exchange, superimposition, the fusion of desires. The unity of the image achieved through the close intimacy of two bodies*”.¹⁶⁸ Although these words were written eight years before the shooting of these two photographs, they read like a pre-emptive description of the operational logic of these two works.

This “*magic mirror*” occurs first at the level of capture and appropriation. The four intersecting gazes of Cahun, Moore, the mirror, and the viewer constitute a continuously flowing circuit. Within it, no single participant is the absolute controller, and no single gaze is isolated; the visual presentation of each node is being captured by the other three nodes. What Latimer describes as “*each partner enables the vision of the other*” is the visual-structural articulation of the two-way defamiliarization that occurs in the Red Peter-esque path.¹⁶⁹ Then, what does the “*impossible*” achieved by “*our two narcissisms drowning together there*” point to? Is it a hybridity or mixture of Cahun and Moore?

“*Exchange, superimposition, the fusion of desires*” provides the answer. Yet this answer is not a static result written by meaning, but a continuously unfolding process. The gaze coming from Moore is not a neutral machine, but a desiring, heterogeneous force carrying its own intensity. The bodily experience generated when Cahun poses under the gaze of her lover is completely different in intensity from when she poses for an unmanned camera. It is precisely the tension immanent within this intimate relationship that ensures the emerging bodily states are no longer what Cahun would present when facing the lens alone, but are a third kind of existence produced through the mutual penetration of their respective intensities. Ultimately, “*the unity of the image achieved through the close intimacy of two bodies*”. Here, this unity is not a homogenized merger, but what Deleuze and Guattari call “*a nonparallel and asymmetrical evolution*”: Moore’s gaze seeps into Cahun’s bodily practice as a heterogeneous force, activating and altering the latter’s state of existence, producing a bodily state that can

¹⁶⁸ Letter dated September 20, 1920, quoted in Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, *Aveux non avenue* (Paris: Carrefour, 1930), 13, quoted in Latimer, ‘Entre Nous: Between Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore’, p. 199.

¹⁶⁹ Latimer, ‘Entre Nous: Between Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore’, p. 208.

only surface within this relationship, one that belongs to Cahun yet cannot exist apart from Moore.¹⁷⁰

However, if this line of flight contents itself with remaining inside the intimate relationships of human subjects, it faces the constant risk of being renamed and redefined by dominant discourse systems at any moment. To completely escape the reterritorialization of major semiotic systems, the body must go further, opening itself toward the non-human that precedes cultural coding. When Cahun relocated her body from indoors into the desolate reefs, beaches, and vegetation of Jersey, the Red Peter-esque path underwent a radical operational expansion.

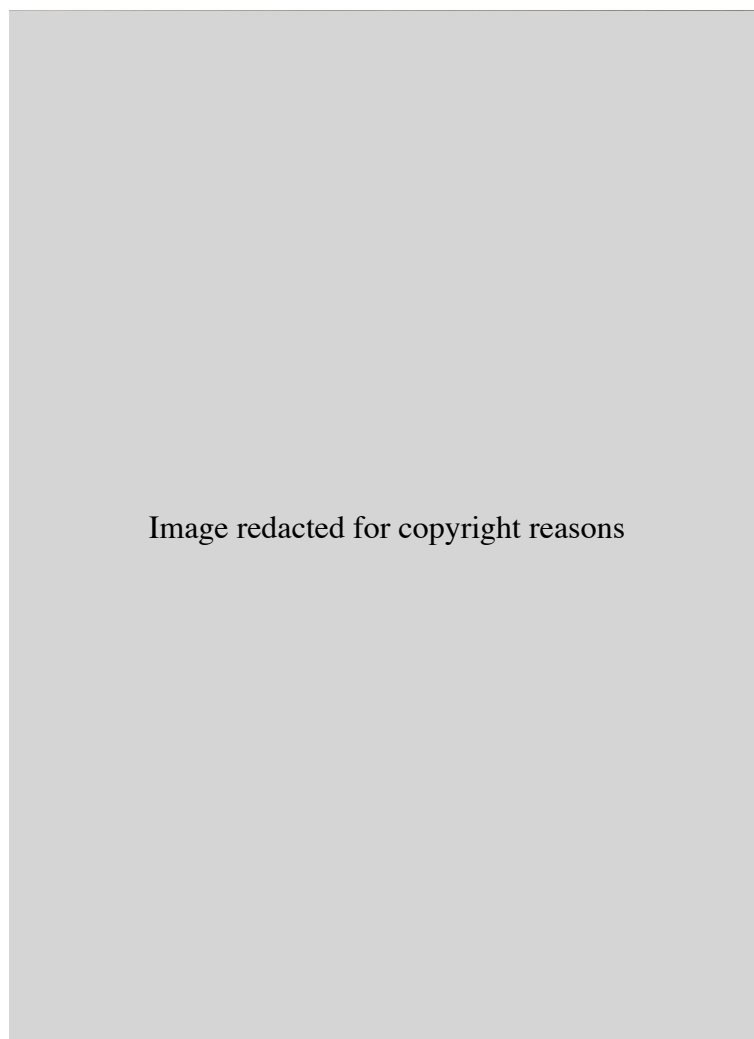


Fig 3-7 Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, *I Extend My Arms*, 1931 or 1932, gelatin silver print on paper, 18.2 × 12.9 cm. Collection of Tate, London. Artwork © Estate of Claude Cahun.

¹⁷⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. 13.

I Extend My Arms (1931 or 1932) provides an aid for my examination of this expansion. Cahun's arms extend straight out from a lichen-covered boulder. This stone is human-sized and wide, completely concealing the entirety of Cahun's body except for her arms. It cannot help but make one imagine whether Cahun is currently situated inside the narrow interior of the boulder, or has already fused with it. Her hands are exaggeratedly open in the air, as if desperately clawing for something, or yearning for something. Here, the core characteristic of Cahun's early work, which is the focus on the head and face, is deliberately obscured. She no longer concerns herself with these organs that most represent human social identity, reducing the body instead to its most primordial materiality: a pair of limbs used solely for action and perception.

Reading this in conjunction with the title *I Extend My Arms* makes everything even more fascinating. Who is the first-person "I" here? If "I" am the stone, then this event is the rock's capture of human bodily codes, crossing the boundary between the organic and inorganic to grow flesh-and-blood arms. Conversely, if "I" am Cahun, then this event is the plummeting of Cahun's flesh toward a hard, cold, lithic structure. These two circuits perfectly echo, on an operational level, the core alliance mechanism in the Red Peter-esque path: producing an unstable hybrid variant through two-way defamiliarization. The capture and appropriation occurring between these two bodies—the human flesh and the matter of the inorganic earth—produces something that is neither a pure human subject nor a pure natural background, but an entirely new, heterogeneous hybrid that belongs neither to the original self nor to the captured other: a stone growing human arms.

Thus, Cahun's self-portrait series fully demonstrates the collaborative operation of the mimicry-becoming model within a single site of practice. Based on the characteristics of the photographic medium, mimicry and the Gregor-esque path of becoming are no longer two steps occurring sequentially, but have become two sides of the same movement. Through the repetitive enactment of different bodily states, Cahun's centralized subject dissolves, while pure, continuous intensity displaces meaning to become the sole immanent metric. Subsequently, to prevent the line of flight of this movement from falling into enclosed self-replication, the Red Peter-esque path intervenes. As the person pressing the shutter behind the lens, Moore's gaze, carrying its own intensity, alters Cahun's bodily state. Meanwhile, the

natural environment of Jersey acts as a non-human heterogeneous existence that pushes Cahun's bodily practice beyond the limits of all social semiotic systems.

Furthermore, it needs to be pointed out that when Cahun allows her body to recede into the rocks and blend into the vegetation, making human limbs an extension of inorganic matter, her practice is already touching upon a question that far exceeded her era: the non-human world is not a backdrop for identity politics, but an active force participating in bodily disruption. The boundary between the human and the non-human is not fixed; it can be traversed and reshaped through bodily practice. This posture of mutual penetration between the body and the non-human material world is both an escape from the gender order and an escape from anthropocentrism. In the broadest sense, this is precisely a queer posture. To call it queer here is not based on Cahun's biological or sexual identity as a lesbian, but because she completely transcends established identity categories like woman or lesbian, throwing herself into the external world as a degendered, flux-bound, non-dominant body.

When the flux of the body does not halt at the boundaries of gender but continues to extend toward the boundary between the human and the non-human, queer escape and ecological connection merge into one and the same bodily practice. This posture is an early prefiguration of what is known as "queer ecology": a radical stance that refuses to separate the human subject from the material environment it inhabits, where the two mutually penetrate and become together. It manifests via photography as a medium in Cahun's practice, and this posture expands in another form within the practice of Guo Fengyi, who opens the body to become a conduit for cosmic energy through qigong and painting, pushing the practice of the porous body into a much vaster dimension.

3.3.2 Guo Fengyi: Creating a Resonant Universe

As a middle-aged rural woman without any background in formal art education who only began painting at the age of 47, Guo Fengyi's creative motivation was to heal herself and to comprehend the universe. She initially took up the paintbrush to record the visions she witnessed while practising Qì Gōng. This mode of practice, which cannot be fully accounted for by established frameworks of knowledge, caused her from the very outset to be *othered* in distinct ways by both Western and Eastern mainstream art systems. In China, her identity as an artist was called into question due to its deep entanglement with traditional spiritual

healing.¹⁷¹ In the West, she was co-opted under the category of Outsider Art.¹⁷² This category includes “*self-taught, accidental, and psychologically or physically impaired artists*”.¹⁷³ Guo’s practice, in the view of Laura Hoptman, is “*the product of visions by women, by the untutored, the decentralized, the marginalized, or the strange*”, in fact bypassing the evaluation system of contemporary art, thereby exposing “*the limitations of its vocabulary*”.¹⁷⁴ The reason Guo’s art is revolutionary is not because of this challenge to the mainstream discourse, but because her creative process itself is a way of producing new perspectives. She once said in an interview, “*I draw because I do not know.*”¹⁷⁵ This means that painting for her is a way of understanding things, whether spiritual or material. I will now introduce the mimicry-becoming theoretical model as an analytical tool to consider how she produces her practice with the power to subvert the singular interpretations of the contemporary painting field.

Guo’s practice began during the period of the large-scale qì gōng fever in Chinese society in the 1980s and 1990s. At that time, this traditional Chinese health-preservation practice, collectively known as qì gōng and including breathing techniques, meditation, and gymnastics, attracted tens of millions of people to start practising for the purposes of health and healing, under the joint promotion of the Chinese government and the scientific community. Guo began practising to cure the rheumatoid arthritis she had developed from her past work in a factory. To better facilitate her treatment, she began to keep a diary, meticulously recording the dates and times of her qì gōng practice, as well as the feelings and changes in her body during the process.

Not long after she began to record in words, Guo saw her first vision during a meditation in the spring of 1989: a yellow Buddha statue. Interestingly, this vision would also change according to her movements: “*When I practice qigong I see a very bright Buddha in yellow*

¹⁷¹ Rosario Güiraldes, ‘The Ungovernable Images of Guo Fengyi’, in *Guo Fengyi: To See from a Distance* (New York: The Drawing Center, 2020), p. 36.

¹⁷² Ralph Rugoff, ‘The Universe That Fell to Earth’, in Ralph Rugoff and Roger Cardinal, *The Alternative Guide to the Universe* (London: Hayward Gallery Publishing, 2013).

¹⁷³ Laura Hoptman, ‘To See from a Distance Is Still to Be Seen: Guo Fengyi at The Drawing Center’, in *Guo Fengyi: To See from a Distance* (New York: The Drawing Center, 2020), p. 12.

¹⁷⁴ Hoptman, ‘To See from a Distance Is Still to Be Seen’, p. 14.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

color,” she wrote. “The third time I moved my finger, I saw a little Buddha standing in front of me, and when I moved my finger again, the Buddha became smaller.”¹⁷⁶ In order to record more clearly, Guo began to draw these visions in her diary.

The artist Xu Tan observed that the act of drawing itself became a way of bringing Guo into “a state of transcendence”, a state in which she desired to understand and heal her own body.¹⁷⁷ Xu analogises this state to the “one’s own soul leaving the body” or “being possessed by the soul of another” that traditional Chinese shamanic doctors enter during diagnosis and treatment.¹⁷⁸ Such an experience may sound like superstition. However, from the perspective of the internal practice, it is essentially a transformation at the level of perception. This responds precisely to the state of the porous body described by Caillois. The boundaries of Guo’s subject began to dissolve, and the body opened itself completely to the external world.

The method Guo used to initiate and induce the body’s porosity was precisely qì gōng. In the traditional Chinese worldview, “qì” is the essential energy that flows through all things, and “gōng” is the bodily technique aimed at allowing the body to enter the rhythm of the universe and participate in the flow of all things. Through continuous focus on breathing, meditation and body posture, qì gōng extracts the practitioner’s attention from everyday logical thinking, allowing the body to enter an open field of energy exchange with all things and resonance with cosmic rhythms.

Subsequently, intense inner visions began to emerge continuously. Initially, the drawings were supplementary to the text in her diary. However, this initial act of recording rapidly evolved into a more complex practice. As Güiraldes points out, these ever-increasing visions “became so powerful that she couldn’t prevent herself from drawing them”.¹⁷⁹ The urgency that Guo felt is precisely the non-utilitarian “dangerous luxury” described by Caillois that drives organisms to assimilate with their environment: a desire from within the body, full of generative power, to establish a connection with the outside world.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁶ Guo Fengyi, personal journal entry, trans. by Lu Jie, 2 April 2019, Long March Space, Beijing.

¹⁷⁷ Xu Tan, ‘The Story of Guo Fengyi’, in *Guo Fengyi: To See from a Distance* (New York: The Drawing Center, 2020), p. 76.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 74.

¹⁷⁹ Güiraldes, ‘The Ungovernable Images of Guo Fengyi’, p. 28.

¹⁸⁰ Caillois, ‘Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia’, p. 25.

*“Within two months, Guo transitioned from describing her visions in written script, ... instead filling the pages of her journal with larger images.”*¹⁸¹ When words were insufficient to carry the intensity of what she saw, drawing naturally became the new medium of record. At this point, qì gōng and drawing formed a generative cycle within Guo’s practice. Qì gōng suspended her subject while simultaneously opening up her body. Painting, in turn, helped her to continue exploring in this newly opened perceptual field and to try to obtain from it the power to treat her illness.

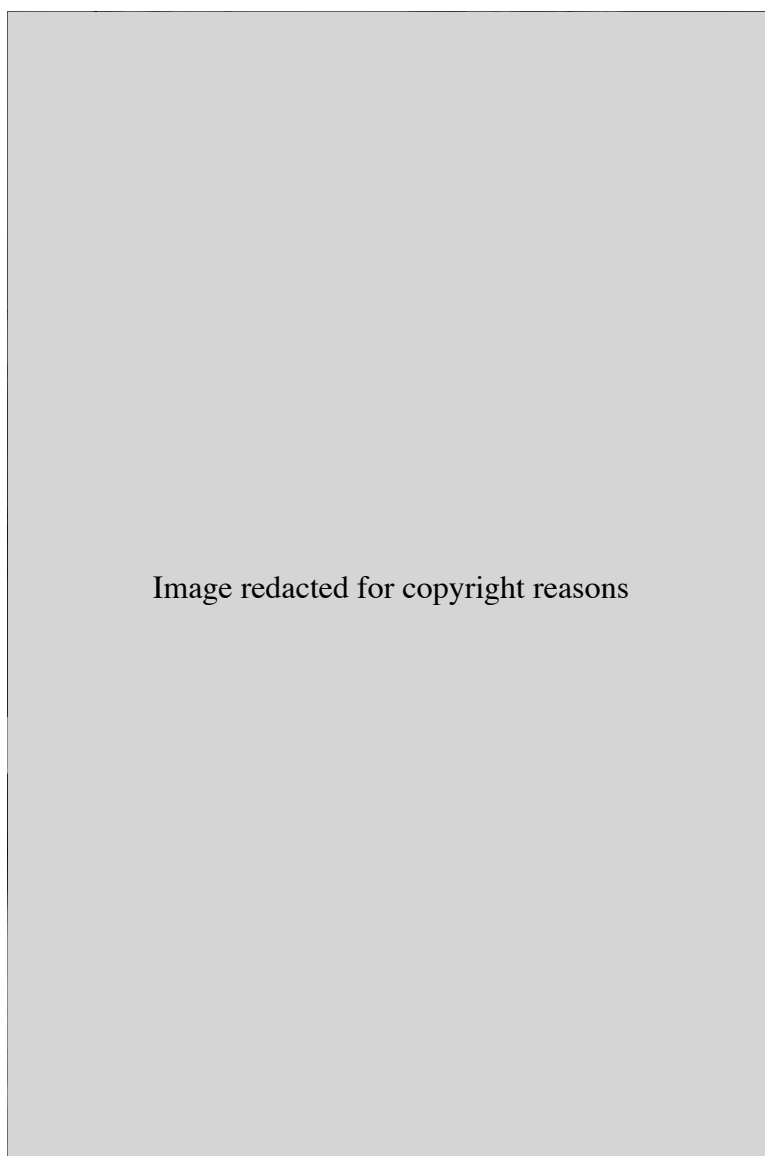


Fig 3-8 Installation view of *Guo Fengyi: Cosmic Meridians*, Long March Space, Beijing, 2023. Artwork © Estate of Guo Fengyi and Long March Space, Beijing. (Source: Long March Space).

¹⁸¹ Güiraldes, ‘The Ungovernable Images of Guo Fengyi’, p. 28.

Guo once said that each of her paintings begins with words, such as names of people, places, or things: “*Whatever I want to draw, I write it in the middle of the paper... Afterwards, it is through energy that I draw stroke by stroke.*”¹⁸² This working method is not intended to represent the meaning of words, but to find a trigger point for an event of intensity on a spiritual and energetic level. Just as Kafka, in his writing, used the intensity of words rather than their meaning, Deleuze and Guattari point out that in a standard language system, language and meaning usually correspond; “*the word dog, for example, would directly designate an animal and would apply metaphorically to other things (so that one could say ‘like a dog’)*”.¹⁸³ What Kafka did in his writing was to “*deliberately kill all metaphor, all symbolism, all signification*”, and thereby “*be a sort of stranger within his own language*”.¹⁸⁴

Guo and Kafka share an important starting point, in that they both refuse to use words as a tool that points to a predetermined meaning. However, their practices steered towards entirely different destinations. Kafka’s linguistic practice is a pure line of flight rushing towards absolute deterritorialization; Guo’s practice, on the other hand, is always guided by a clear purpose—namely, to understand things through drawing. She said that “*I have no idea when I’m drawing—I know my subject only after completing the drawing....I particularly excel at subjects I know very little of.*”¹⁸⁵ This means that for Guo, dismantling the symbolic meaning of words was not the ultimate goal, but a necessary means. Its purpose was to bypass the imagination fixed by common sense and reason, and to use the body to establish a more direct, more essential connection of intensity with the objects she was trying to understand.

The objects fall into two main categories: one is specific people or places, especially scenic spots she could not visit or did not know about, such as ancient Chinese ruins or international landmarks; the other is spiritual concepts, such as content from traditional Chinese cosmology like Bā Guā and Tàì Jí. I will next combine her specific works to analyse how Guo acted upon these two types of things.

¹⁸² Guo Fengyi, quoted in Lu Jie, “Who is Guo Fengyi?,” in Lu Jie, ed., *Who is Guo Fengyi* (Beijing: 25000 Cultural Transmission Center and Long March Foundation, 2005), 93.

¹⁸³ Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. 22.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22, 26.

¹⁸⁵ Xu, ‘The Story of Guo Fengyi’, p. 73.

In June 1989, Guo created a work completely different from her previous paintings of visions: *Mystery of the Bermuda Triangle*. As China opened up to the West in the 1970s and 1980s, television and the news brought unprecedented visual and intellectual stimulation to Guo's generation.¹⁸⁶ In this work, she chose as her subject of study the site of the mysterious disappearances that were a global sensation at the time: the Bermuda Triangle.

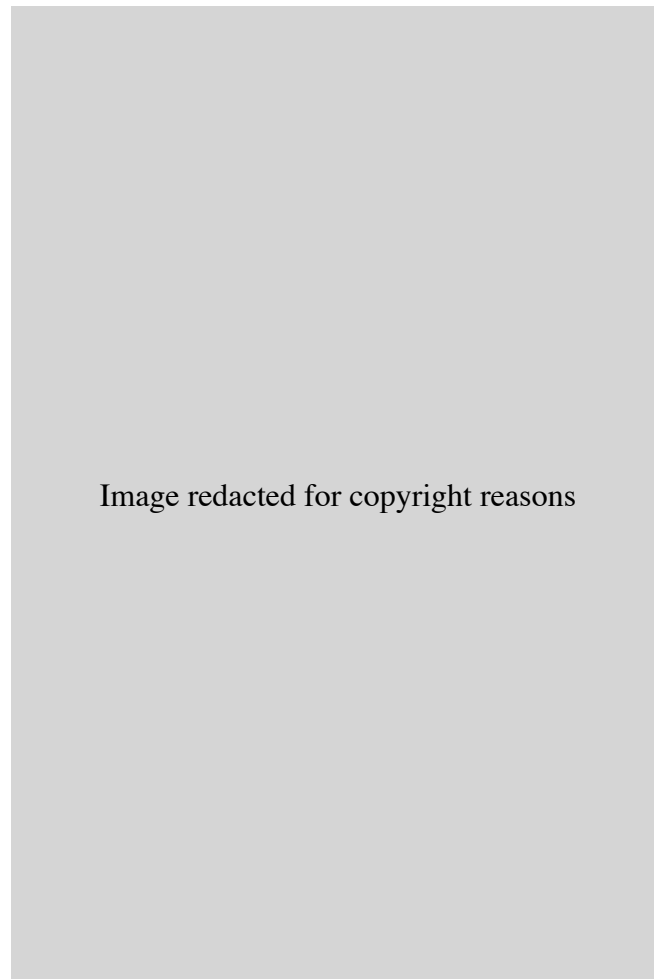


Fig 3-9 Guo Fengyi, *Mystery of the Bermuda Triangle*, 1989, pencil on paper. Artwork © Estate of Guo Fengyi and Long March Space, Beijing. (Source: The Drawing Center).

From the perspective of a generative strategy, this choice echoes the first step of the Red Peter-esque strategy: to capture and possess a conventional code. What is more interesting is the way she captured this code. She said, “*I analyze these things with energy from a distance*”.¹⁸⁷ The “distance” here is not only physical, but also methodological. Guo chose not to accept the objective analyses of this location from the news and television, but to use

¹⁸⁶ Güiraldes, ‘The Ungovernable Images of Guo Fengyi’, p. 31.

¹⁸⁷ Guo, personal journal entry.

her own body to directly perceive these objects, and suspends all major logics of representation based on knowledge, experience, and direct observation.

This method is clearly shown in the pictorial structure. The left side of the picture is a macroscopic energy field, where countless dense lines burst forth from a circular form at the bottom that resembles an energy core, traversing the entire image. Conversely, the independent, diagrammatic ellipse on the right functions as a focus and magnification of certain specific nodes of intensity. Here, I must be wary of interpreting this work by matching symbols to their meanings. Therefore, rather than saying that these rotating, magnetic-field-like strokes represent waves or geological structures, it is better to say that they are tracking and recording the very process of how she captured the distant location of the Bermuda Triangle. Consequently, the entire painting is no longer a static image, but a dynamic record of this complete process of “capture—possess—hybridise—becoming”. Through bodily intensity, Guo impacts, permeates, and reshapes this external code, ultimately producing a new hybrid variant: a continuum of intensities of herself and the Bermuda Triangle. More importantly, this exploratory journey broadened Guo’s practice to a wider field. Güiraldes points out that “*she was no longer solely focused on recording her subjective experiences through meditation, and turned outward to embrace new subject matter and explore new modes of artistic expression*”.¹⁸⁸

Then, how did Guo grasp the abstract concepts in traditional Chinese cosmology? Kathleen M. Ryor emphasizes that “*Guo’s relationship to Chinese cultural traditions was not one of subject matter or artistic style, rather she sought to make manifest a deeply rooted understanding of the relationship between human beings and the universe in Chinese culture that still informs various disciplines today*.”¹⁸⁹ Xu also commented, “*The images in Guo’s drawings bear no resemblance to traditional Chinese painting—neither the art of the literati, nor vernacular folk art*.”¹⁹⁰ This implies that Guo had no intention of appropriating established symbols, but relied instead on an alternative path.

¹⁸⁸ Güiraldes, ‘The Ungovernable Images of Guo Fengyi’, p. 33.

¹⁸⁹ Kathleen M. Ryor, ‘Guo Fengyi and the Embodied Cosmos’, in *Guo Fengyi: To See from a Distance* (New York: The Drawing Center, 2020), p. 65–66.

¹⁹⁰ Xu, *The Story of Guo Fengyi*, p. 77.

Wen C. Fong points out that in traditional Chinese cosmology, “*the signifying practice of all graphic conventions originates in both the physical body and the psychological state of the artist as a sign creator*”.¹⁹¹ This means that artistic practice does not rely on the objective representation of the external world, but is rooted in the intensity within the artist’s body. However, this intensity is not an isolated personal emotion; it is closely linked to the concept of “body-cosmos isomorphism” in Chinese culture. Traditional Chinese medicine regards the human body as “*a replica of the macrocosm*”: the circulation of qi and blood within the body, and the rhythms of life, all correspond and resonate with the movement of the stars and the changing of the four seasons in the universe.¹⁹² This view of body-cosmos isomorphism influenced Guo’s perspective on “spiritual reality”. The body is no longer a material substance in an anatomical sense, or a symbol carrying a sociological identity, but a field for experiencing and internalising the cosmic order.

Taking *Bagua Tower* (1992) as an example, the title means a “building” of the “Bā Guā”, what the image shows is an inverted body composed of surging lines. In Chinese Taoist philosophy, the 八卦 (“Bā Guā”) is a system used for divination, and closely linked to bodily cultivation. For example, qì gōng practice requires regulating the breath according to the sixty-four hexagrams evolved from bā guā. What Guo did in this painting was precisely to connect the body as a medium to enact this set of cosmic laws, rather than to illustrate the symbols of bā guā.

Xu Tan’s feeling about the lines in Guo’s painting may provide an entry point to enter this body: “*I was struck by the imagery and the lines, which seemed to reverberate rhythmically in my body. As long as the image held my gaze, the sense of movement and vibration persisted, though I was standing still.*”¹⁹³ The dynamic lines that are spread around the contours of the body are not a symbolic correspondence between a certain part of the body and a certain trigram, but are precisely the trajectories of movement that Guo perceived when her own body resonated with the cosmic rhythm. Just like the uncontrollable, painful squealing in Gregor’s voice, *The Bagua Building* also shows such an event of intensity. The

¹⁹¹ Wen C. Fong, ‘Chinese Calligraphy: History and Theory’, in *The Embodied Image: Chinese Calligraphy from the John B. Elliott Collection* (Princeton: The Art Museum, Princeton University, 1999), p. 29–30.

¹⁹² Ryor, ‘Guo Fengyi and the Embodied Cosmos’, pp. 47.

¹⁹³ Xu, ‘The Story of Guo Fengyi’, p. 72.

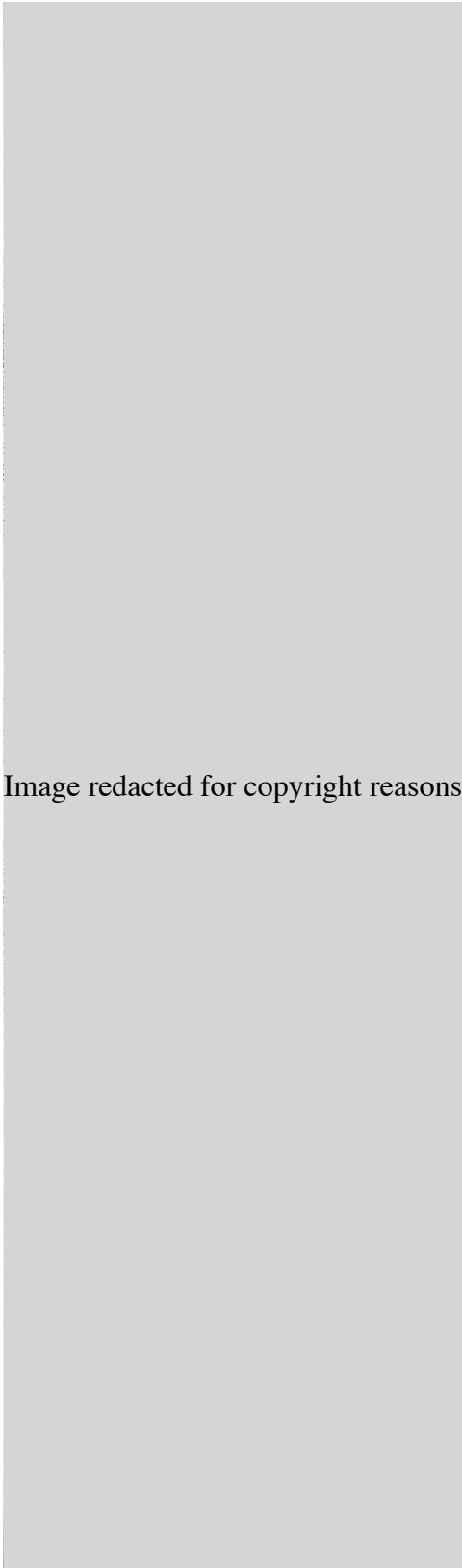


Image redacted for copyright reasons

Fig 3-10 Guo Fengyi, *Bagua Tower*, 1992, colored ink on rice paper mounted on cloth, hanging scroll, 151 × 53 cm. Artwork © Estate of Guo Fengyi and Long March Space, Beijing. (Source: Long March Space).

lines no longer carry meaning or describe an image, but merely transmit rhythm and speed, acting directly on the nerves. These vibrating lines dismantled the architectural meaning of the building and the biological form of the human, reducing both to a common, fluid state of energy. Upon completing the painting, Guo also understood the subject she wanted to study through her body. However, this was not an intellectual understanding achieved by studying classics and decoding symbols, but a more fundamental embodied understanding.

Whether it is the Red Peter-esque path of generating a hybrid by capturing external elements in *Mystery of the Bermuda Triangle*, or the Gregor-esque path of producing pure material intensity in *The Bā Guā Building*, Guo was interested in how to use the body to establish a more direct, more essential, intensive connection with different objects, and to comprehend those objects through this very connection. Guo's porous body is not an abstract metaphor but is rooted in a concrete reality: severe rheumatoid arthritis rendered her body a battlefield that constantly required struggle and negotiation. It is precisely in this sense that the queerness of Guo's body manifests: it challenges the abled and normal body as defined by dominant society. Her practice is not merely a means of healing, but a radical strategy to transform this very body—excluded as it is by the normative order—into a site of perception and becoming.

Through qì gōng, Guo renders herself porous, subsequently utilizing energy to analyze things from distance, whether it be a remote geographical marvel or an abstract cosmic semiotic system. In this process, her body becomes a field sharing a common energy with these objects: she comprehends the real within resonance. It is precisely this practice, with the body at its epistemological core, that causes her work to refuse co-optation by any single framework. It is at once the trajectory of bodily rhythm guided by qigong and the material presentation of inner visions; it both connects to ancient Chinese cosmology and captures globalised news events; it is both a struggle against illness and a pure expression of desire full of generative power. These are the traces of all these forces meeting, colliding, and generating entirely strange forms within a porous body.

Therefore, this chapter has completed the construction and validation of the theoretical model of mimicry-becoming. As the initial step of action, mimicry transforms the practitioner from a subject in control of the creative outcome into a porous body completely open to the outside. However, this openness in itself does not guarantee the continuity of flight. The dilemma that occurred in my painting *Sha Sha* reveals a crucial trap: when the porous subject

lacks a genuine connection with the external world, it can only communicate with itself, ultimately exhausting itself within an enclosed loop. It is precisely this dilemma that pushes mimicry toward becoming. Along the two complementary paths within Kafka's literary burrow, the Gregor-esque path replaces the clarity of meaning with the purity and continuity of intensity itself, establishing a new immanent metric; conversely, the Red Peter-esque path actively captures the immanent rhythms of the heterogeneous other, translating them with its own indelible bodily intensity to produce a strange variant, neither self nor other, amidst collision. The immanent tension between these two paths drives the practice to continually become a stranger within its own language.

Aside from validating the efficacy of this theoretical model, the two entirely distinct sites of practice of Cahun and Guo reveal a shared logic: the site where they establish intensive connections with heterogeneous existences is invariably the body, rather than the intellect. Through the repeated traversal and reshaping of her own body, Cahun allows intensity to displace meaning as the sole immanent metric. Guo, through *qì gōng*, transforms her painful, abnormal body into a body that refuses definition by any singular standard and is capable of establishing fluid connections with all things. When Cahun extends the flux of the body from the boundaries of gender to the material boundaries between the human and the non-human, and when Guo broadens the body's connecting power from concrete matter to traditional Chinese cosmology, both of their embodied practices touch upon the same posture, which is a refusal to separate the human subject from the material world it inhabits. It offers minor practice a way of imagining how, in the process of returning to bodily experience and by embracing the heterogeneity of both self and other, one can carve out radically different routes of perception and existence within dominant systems.

At the conclusion of the Gregor-esque path, I pointed out that when painting is no longer benchmarked against whether it can be decoded by a semiotic system, but instead takes the purity and continuity of intensity itself as its sole metric, the classic question of whether a painting is good enough loses its validity. The practices of Cahun and Guo corroborate this declaration from two different directions. This implies that when intensity precedes meaning and movement precedes the outcome to become the immanent logic of practice, the ontology of painting undergoes a fundamental transformation as well. This transformation will be addressed in the following conclusion, not as an enclosed result, but as a point of departure for how painting, functioning as a verb, continuously escapes.

Conclusion

This research begins with an urgent question: In a contemporary context where painting practice is increasingly institutionalised, stylised, and commercialised, how can artists continuously escape rigid patterns of thought and action to generate heterogeneity and revolutionary potential along a line of flight toward the minor? The title of this thesis, *To Paint as if a Stranger*, is neither a symbol nor a metaphor, but a real demand that practitioners pose to themselves from the very interior of practice. In response to this question, any pursuit attempting to secure a fixed answer will inevitably bring the flight to an end. Because once an answer is determined, the movement immediately ceases. Therefore, what this study explores is not a new set of aesthetic rules, but a trajectory of movement open to experimentation. Correspondingly, painting as the field of study is no longer a noun denoting an objective thing (*a painting*), but a verb in continuous motion amidst the vibration of intensity (*to paint*).

Within this ontological transformation of painting, the practitioner also shifts from a producer of enclosed results into a participant in an open process. Because this shift occurs entirely within practice, this research refuses an approach that prioritises theory over practice, and firmly opposes using the former as a guide to illustrate the latter. Instead, it advocates for transforming theory from an intellectual understanding into an embodied perception, to experience and respond to questions from within painting with one's whole being. It is precisely this stance that determines that the theoretical construction of this study is not a castle in the air, but the product of a continuous evolution triggered by the shocks of repeatedly encountered practical dilemmas.

Introducing an experience of my own practice here is not a summative review of practice, but a means to perform an embodied demonstration of the core argument of this research. This experience took place before the construction of “mimicry-becoming” theoretical framework. It is an event of intensity that had already occurred but remained uncomprehended. By employing the methodology of drawing the future from the past, I mobilize the mimicry-becoming framework to reactivate and grasp its inherent vitality. Consequently, this event becomes a recognized instantiation of the model in my studio practice, and an embodied nexus traversing the thesis's core arguments.

It was in the autumn of 2022, that I participated in a one-month artist residency program in Città della Pieve, a small town in the Umbria region of Italy. The residency was situated on

the periphery of this medieval town, surrounded by mountains. For someone who had lived exclusively in urban environments since birth, this was my first experience being removed from modern urban civilization for an extended duration and living immersively in nature. What I mean by immersion is not a poetic narrative, but a highly concrete, even oppressive, physical experience. For instance, the thick, viscous sunlight of central Italy poured through the floor-to-ceiling windows of the studio, dancing dynamically across the canvas alongside the silhouettes of the trees outside. At night, the mountains were never truly silent; I could discern the murmuring of animals and the vibrating wings of insects in the distant darkness. During that time, these non-human heterogeneous existences—the sunlight, the plants, the animals, and indeed the cosmos itself—powerfully assaulted my nerves and senses.

The effect of such an immersive experience was quickly reflected in my painting practice. Before the residency, I was accustomed to rationally examining the picture plane, for example, painting a few strokes, then stepping back a few paces, squinting my eyes, judging the overall relationships in the painting, and then thinking about the next move. But during the residency, this act of scrutiny automatically disappeared. I found myself involuntarily, almost stubbornly, standing or sitting extremely close to the canvas. The movement of my body replaced the judgment of my eyes, and the swings of my arm and wrist became short and urgent. The brush shuttled frantically between the palette and the canvas, as if chasing a fleeting rhythm. It was an action purely driven by impulse, full of urgency, as if I were any slower, those vivid sensations would slip through my fingertips. I did not think about whether I was painting well or not; there was only one thought in my mind: “I feel it must be this way.” However, I attributed this inexplicable loss of control to the sensory stimulation of an unfamiliar environment. After finishing the one-month residency and returning to London, I quickly put it behind me.

However, bodily memory is never truly interrupted. It was only after I had embodied percept the essence of minor practice as a process, delved into the inner workings of other artists’ practices, and established the mimicry-becoming theoretical framework that I acquired the key to reopen this sealed experience. Re-examining this encounter through the method of drawing the future from the past, I realized that what occurred during the residency was not a novelty brought by a strange environment, but a movement of intensity that operated directly upon the body, preceding consciousness. In that movement, mimicry operated not as a conscious strategy, but as a spontaneous reordering of bodily perception within a

heterogeneous environment. It was no longer a case of me deciding to suspend the centralized subject; rather, it was the external world enveloping me that took the initiative to dismantle my rigid boundaries. My enclosed self, highly coded by modern urban life, was temporarily suspended, and under the seduction of nature, the body transformed from a state of closure into a porous state. This was not only a true depiction of the desire to merge with external space described by Roger Caillois, but a continuous reshaping of my entire state as an existential entity.



Fig 4-1 Yajie Liang, *Stay Gold*, 2022, oil on canvas, 114 x 99 cm. Image © Yajie Liang.

Armed with this reactivated cognition, when I gaze once more at *Stay Gold* (2022), painted during the residency, the interlacing feeling of familiarity and strangeness it evokes is finally answered. What is familiar are the figurative elements I am accustomed to using: tentacles, organs, and vague but barely recognizable shapes, such as a head or a vessel. This familiarity itself constitutes a moment that demands scrutiny. In Chapter 1, I noted that my practice had once fallen into a wax museum-like stasis, continuously replicating predictable, fixed

compositions. When this homogenized composition, a simple juxtaposition of figure and ground, reappeared in *Stay Gold*, I was startled. Yet, the same formal elements produced a radically different texture on this canvas. Tracing the brushstrokes reveals that the velocity of each stroke was exceedingly fast; colours collided, squeezed, and overlaid one another with high intensity. This highly intensive mode of combination entirely exceeded my experience and control, constituting the strangeness I perceived. It can be said that this painting is no longer the complete creation of my solidified subjective consciousness, but rather the material trace left behind by the violent intertwining and collision of two paths of becoming within the canvas.

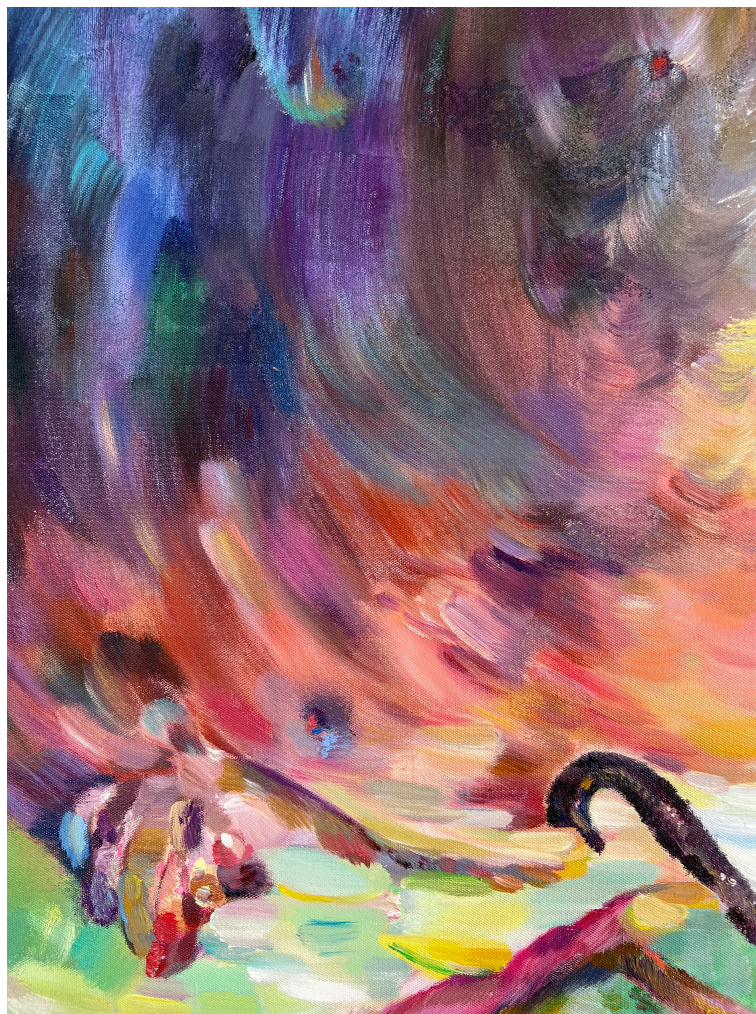


Fig 4-2 Yajie Liang, Detail of *Stay Gold*, 2022, oil on canvas. Image © Yajie Liang.

The first is the Red Peter-esque path, which operates by actively capturing the internal operational modes and rhythms of the heterogeneous other, translating and appropriating them with one's own indelible bodily intensity, thereby generating a strange, unstable variant

through collision and hybridity. At that time, I forced my body, disciplined by the urban clock, into a violent translation with nature. As I attempted to use the paintbrush to capture the fleeting movement of light spots on the canvas, chasing the speed of the mountain wind and the frequency of insects' wings, my habitual, deliberate painterly posture was completely disrupted, and the swings of my arm and wrist became rapid and desperate. Much like the scars left by the whip on Red Peter's body, those short, urgent brushstrokes, where a violent material confrontation occurred between wet and dry layers, were the precise embodiment of the two-way defamiliarization effect. On one hand, my inherent bodily rhythm was permeated by heterogeneous speeds, making me a stranger within my own creation; on the other hand, when that natural rhythm was executed and appropriated by my noisy, impure body, it stripped nature of its objectivity, becoming-together with me into a brand-new, unstable hybrid variant: a "human-nature continuum of intensities".

The second is the Gregor-esque path, which takes the purity and continuity of intensity itself as its metric, displacing the clarity of meaning. When I was enveloped by a massive amount of non-narrative sensory information—the smell of the earth, the whispers of animals, the temperature of the sunlight—the language system I relied on to understand and represent the world began to fail. This sensory information, like Gregor's undecipherable squealing, acted directly on my nervous system as pure intensity. Under this overwhelming intensity, I abandoned the external, rational evaluation of whether the painting was good enough, that is, a judgment originating from the dominant system. I adopted the intensive continuum of the non-human other as a completely new immanent weights and measures. This was not merely a reorganization of the senses, but an ontological calibration. At this point, the operational logic of painting underwent a fundamental change.

The activation of these two paths does not demand the abandonment of figure itself. As Gilles Deleuze points out in his analysis of Francis Bacon, the concept of figuration and figure must be thought distinctly. Figuration serves to tell a story or depict an object, whereas the figure is a contour or container of intensity, whose purpose is to render invisible forces visible upon matter and flesh.¹⁹⁴ As Deleuze reveals, without a territory, deterritorialization is impossible. So if there is no figure, there is no possibility of launching an attack against it. This is precisely the strategy proposed in this research of using clichés to attack clichés: when

¹⁹⁴ Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, p. 2, 56, 58.

practice falls into self-replication, the root of the problem lies not in the figures that are repeatedly used, but in the modes of thinking and acting that drive those figures to appear. Therefore, the solution is not to discard the figure, but to transform one's relationship with it. The familiar antennae, organs, and heads in *Stay Gold* are no longer homogenized replications, but the very sites where intensity is allowed to take place.

Thus, *Stay Gold* serves a dual argumentative function within this research. First, as a recognized example of the mimicry-becoming model, it demonstrates how the intensive movement described by this model actually transpires within individual practice, not through the conscious application of theory, but through the body's spontaneous response within a heterogeneous environment. Simultaneously, it demonstrates that the research method of drawing the future from the past can function not only as a creative strategy to revisit neglected heterogeneous cultures, but also as a critical tool for academic reflection applied to the micro-scale of the practitioner's own experiences. This implies that past experiences overlooked due to the lack of an interpretative framework are not merely random fragments, but containers of uncaptured heterogeneous forces. It provides a mechanism for re-evaluating past experiences through theory, enabling practitioners to peel away the misjudgments produced by a prior lack of framework, thereby discovering the minor logic capable of producing lines of flight within those bodily encounters that were once marginalized.

This continuous mutual activation between theory and practice constitutes the immanent driving force for the progression of this research as a whole. Three inquiries arising from within the interior of practice drive the entire research to advance layer by layer across epistemological, methodological, and ontological dimensions. The trajectory is as follows:

First, the inaugural question concerns *what minor practice is, and how it operates within the major*. To address this, Chapter 1 utilizes Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the minor as its core theoretical tool, pointing out that the minor is not a categorization or definition of style or identity, but a movement of continuous self-alienation launched from within the dominant system. By analyzing how Philip Guston's practice and my own reactivate heterogeneous forces deemed obsolete or destined to be overcome by mainstream narratives, this study innovatively proposes the research methodology of drawing the future from the past.

Second, the subsequent question targets the practitioners, inquiring *how to initiate the minor within concrete action*. Drawing upon Roger Caillois's theory of biological mimicry and Rosalind E. Krauss's reading of automatism, and taking Paul Nash's practice as a case study, Chapter 2 explores the potential of deploying mimicry strategies to actively suspend the practitioner's centralized subject, dissolve its stable boundaries, and transform it into a porous body open to the exterior, thereby producing the potential for heterogeneous expression.

The third question bursts forth from within the practice itself: *when the artist faces the risk of enclosure immanent within mimicry, how can it be evolved into a more generative path of outward connection and continuous alienation?* Based on the actual experience of my own practice being captured by homogenized expressions under the mimicry strategy, I analyzed two intensity-core paths of becoming in Franz Kafka's texts. Mobilizing the practices of Claude Cahun and Guo Fengyi, I originally formulated the theoretical model of mimicry-becoming. Within this model, minor practice no longer terminates at the suspension of the subject; rather, on the foundation of the porous body, it evolves into an intensive movement of becoming-with heterogeneous agents.

The advancement of these three questions ultimately converges upon the ontological transformation of painting: it shifts from a noun (*a painting*) into a verb (*to paint*), and the practitioner correspondingly shifts from a producer of outcomes into a participant in a process. These two shifts are two facets of the exact same transformation, mutually conditioning and inseparable. What this transformation responds to is precisely the crisis of perception raised at the very beginning of this study. That enclosed perceptual paradigm, which sharply isolates the practitioner from the world and defines non-human existences as passive objects, is dismantled from within the moment painting becomes a verb.

Along this theoretical trajectory, the original contributions of this study manifest across three dimensions:

At the methodological level, this study provides a mode of embodied thinking originating from within practice for practice-based artistic research. It overturns the traditional priority of theory over practice, refusing to use philosophical concepts as external rulers to illustrate practice. Guided by this methodology, I propose the concrete research method of drawing the future from the past. This method repositions both macro-cultural traditions and micro-personal practice histories as vital, re-activatable heterogeneous elements, offering a tool for

conducting non-linear, generative dialogues between contemporary painting practice and art history.

At the level of research perspective, the uniqueness of this research stems from an in-between practical position: a subject born and raised in mainland China, trained within both Eastern and Western art education systems, and executing creation with oil painting. This in-betweenness is not a static identity label but a critical tool. It prevents the practitioner from settling stably within any single art historical narrative or aesthetic judgment system, thereby yielding the sensitivity and necessity required to unfold cross-cultural interpretations. Within this research, the significance of cross-cultural interpretation lies not in achieving a shallow, east-meets-west style of juxtaposition or cultural synthesis, but in deploying it as a tool for creative deterritorialization. This perspective unfolds specifically as a mechanism of bidirectional mutual reading: reading the East through the West, and reading the West through the East. By analyzing how different cultural systems, such as Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophy and Eastern Zen philosophy, or European modernism and Chinese qì gōng practice, collide and transform during concrete practical processes, this research breaks the enclosure of a single cultural viewpoint. It enables the researcher to stand at the cultural boundary, not only to identify the presuppositions within Eurocentric discourse, but conversely to inject it with embodied, non-Western lines of thought and action.

At the theoretical level, this research originally proposes a theoretical upgrade model that evolves from mimicry toward becoming. In traditional Western theoretical genealogies, Caillois's enclosed mimicry model, which is immanent with a Freudian death drive that leads to self-dissolution, and the Deleuzian concept of becoming, which is productive and open to the exterior, are frequently treated as incompatible discourses. This study creatively combines the two. This is not a superficial theoretical juxtaposition; rather, through the actual encounters within my own painting practice, it exposes the risks of enclosure and self-replication immanent within a mimicry strategy based on the Freudian death drive, thereby demonstrating the necessity for minor practice to evolve toward an open, productive becoming after mimicry. Furthermore, utilizing Kafka's texts as a foundation, this study systematically delineates two paths within the strategy of becoming: the Gregor-esque path, which aims at the purity and continuity of intensity itself, and the Red Peter-esque path, which centres on capture-appropriation-hybridity-becoming. Although these paths originate in literature, this study proves through cases of diverse media and concrete life experiences

that they can serve as an underlying operating system, transcending the limitations of any single cultural form.

Collectively, these contributions demonstrate that I am no longer merely responding to the dilemmas of my personal practice. Within the broader context of contemporary painting, the questioning of anthropocentric creative logic, that is, the resistance against the paradigm that views the practitioner as the absolute subject and the canvas as a passive object waiting to be conquered, has formed a continuous wave of critique. The core argument of this wave is to re-conceptualize painting from an outcome-oriented productive activity into an open, relational process. It is precisely in this sense that I am enabled to enter into substantive dialogue with other contemporary practitioners who are equally dedicated to processes and states of openness.

First, the contemporary American artist Amy Sillman, in *Ab-Ex and Disco Balls: In Defense of Abstract Expressionism II* (2011), explicitly treats painting as a process-oriented practice. Addressing the judgment that Abstract Expressionism is now obsolete and represents a male myth, she proposes that those chaotic, viscous, and intensely physical brushstrokes should be re-understood as a technology of the body. When female, transgender, or queer artists take up this brush, these chaotic, crude strokes that refuse to pander to elegant taste become weapons of resistance against the mainstream social discipline that demands identity be clearly legible.¹⁹⁵ This strategy resonates with the minor practice logic of this study: minor practice does not need to invent an entirely new painterly language, but rather performs a bodily reorganization of elements already solidified by the major system. However, the limitation of Sillman's perspective lies in the fact that her processual practice remains rooted in the internal inheritance and ironic activation of Abstract Expressionism. This implies that her deterritorializing movement remains confined within a single Western art history. This study expands this logic into a cross-cultural, heterogeneous dialogue. When I activate Eastern traditions long marginalized by Eurocentric art historical narratives and introduce them as a heterogeneous revolutionary force into the practice of Western oil painting, minor practice transcends an internal revolution against a single aesthetic convention, turning instead into a challenge against the linear, Western-centric narrative structure of modernist art history itself.

¹⁹⁵ Amy Sillman, 'Ab-Ex and Disco Balls: In Defense of Abstract Expressionism II', *Artforum* 49, no. 10 (Summer 2011), <https://www.artforum.com/features/ab-ex-and-disco-balls-in-defense-of-abstract-expressionism-ii-197674/>.

If Sillman's deterritorializing movement is heavily charged with sociological and gender critique, the contemporary British artist Cecily Brown adopts an affirmative, embodied mode of translation toward the heritage of Western painting. In her studio practice, Brown deconstructs and copies the painterly compositions of classical and modern masters such as Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Peter Paul Rubens, and Willem de Kooning, reconstructing and transforming their visual languages into personal muscle memory. On this level, Brown shares the same conception as this study, refusing to view tradition as an oppressive dogma and choosing instead to actively activate it as a generative resource. However, regarding the ontological function of the figure, this study and Brown diverge onto different tracks. The abundance of fleshly figures in Brown's paintings, which continuously surface, tear, and dissolve on the boundary between figuration and abstraction, functions essentially on a phenomenological and sensory level, generating a bodily experience of indeterminacy. In contrast to Brown, this research strips the figure of the frameworks of sensory representation or psychological mapping, viewing it instead as an anchor for deterritorialization. It no longer fulfils any function of elucidating meaning, but serves as the material prerequisite for an intensity event to take place.

Unlike Sillman and Brown, who both unfold their processual practices within the Western painting tradition, the contemporary Chinese artist Qiu Xiaofei provides a reference point that is culturally much closer to this study. Qiu's practice similarly rejects the representation logic of outcome-orientation, transforming painting into material traces between conscious control and unconscious surge by introducing spontaneous, improvisational movements onto the canvas. Crucially, his creation clearly carries the traces of Chinese visual traditions, such as the mobilization of *lúu bái* (negative space) and the transformation of ink-and-wash calligraphic line dynamics, introducing them into the medium context of Western oil painting. Like this study, Qiu refuses to treat Eastern tradition as an identity label, deploying it instead as a productive force capable of manufacturing heterogeneous tension within a Western medium. However, Qiu tends to apply these Eastern elements to individual memory, traumatic experiences, or psychological narratives tinged with mysticism, ensuring they ultimately remain at the service of a subjective self-expression. This study, conversely, strips the non-substantial flow of *qì* and the deterritorializing space of *lúu bái* away from the frameworks of individual psychology and identity recognition, allowing them to directly intervene in the material structure of Western oil painting as heterogeneous, revolutionary forces.

In dialogue with these contemporary painting sites, the unique stance of this study comes into sharp relief. Specifically, the critical power of this research's in-between position lies in its inability to be stably anchored within any homogenized contemporary painting group or established aesthetic movement; it can only continuously generate tension at the boundary. It is this structural instability, rather than some supposedly superior aesthetic stance, that constitutes this research's particular contribution to the critical wave of contemporary painting. In this sense, to paint as if a stranger re-emphasizes its position: it refuses to establish a new centre on the opposite side of the major system, choosing instead to execute a never-ending movement of minoritization from deep within the major system itself.

Finally, it must be noted that this posture of flight and anti-outcome orientation transpires not only upon the canvas, but is equally carried through the writing of this text. Consequently, this study is not a perfect closed loop, but an open theoretical and practical proposal. Its arguments are constructed primarily upon my personal artistic practice and a selection of specific case studies; its objective is not to put forward a formula universally applicable to all individuals and all media, but to offer a methodological path rooted in specific contexts that can be activated from within. While this embodied methodological mode brings first-hand experience to this study, it simultaneously implies that its findings inevitably carry an ineradicable subjectivity. This is precisely where the power of practice-based research resides, as well as its boundary that defies complete objectification. Furthermore, this study relies extensively on the theoretical framework of Deleuze and Guattari's minor theory; while this theoretical stance endows the analysis with acute insight, it also unavoidably eclipses alternative interpretative spaces that other theoretical perspectives might offer.

Ultimately, this series of explorations pushes the act of painting into a vaster ethical and perceptual field. Here, practice rids itself of that anthropocentric, enclosed mode, no longer indulging in the individual's internal psychological theatre, but opening itself completely to a broader field of symbiosis. At the same time, this shift forms a profound resonance with the concerns regarding embodiment, porous boundaries, and cross-species entanglement found within queer ecological thought. Both positions jointly refuse to comprehend the body as an enclosed sovereign territory, viewing it instead as a relational site of continuous negotiation and mutual penetration with the non-human world. The concept of the porous body and the intensive movement of becoming-together with non-human heterogeneous agents advanced in this study are the concrete extensions of this thought within the interior of painting

practice. However, this study has no intention of making an activist-style, explicit external intervention targeting the climate crisis; rather, it attempts to dissolve the binary opposition between the practitioner and the external world from within painting. The artist is no longer the master or representer within practice, but a porous medium and participant; the goal of painting likewise transforms from producing an enclosed artwork into a relational process of co-breathing and negotiation with numerous non-human heterogeneous forces. That self-scrutiny regarding not painting well enough, which has echoed since my childhood, did not receive an enclosed verdict during the journey of this research. Instead, it dissolved itself within the infinite openness immanent to minor practice, arriving at an entirely new point of departure. To this end, what this research provides is not a set of rigid aesthetic rules, but a methodological invitation in continuous motion: to transform painting from the creation of a thing into a relational process of continuous becoming, unfolding as a line of flight with no ultimate end.

Key Terms

Automatism: A method of artistic creation originating in twentieth-century Surrealism, in which the artist suspends conscious control to allow unconscious impulses to direct the work. As theorised by Rosalind E. Krauss, automatism is not pure spontaneity but a structural condition that displaces the unified subject.

Becoming: A Deleuzian concept denoting a process of transformation that does not move toward a fixed identity but remains in a state of continuous flux. In this thesis, becoming names the generative movement that opens new perceptual possibilities in the wake of mimicry.

Deterritorialization: In Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's framework, the process by which established codes, forms, or subject positions are destabilised and loosened from their fixed territories.

Formless: Derived from Georges Bataille, formless does not denote the absence of form but a destabilising operation that brings high and low into contact, undoing categorical hierarchies. As developed by Rosalind E. Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, it functions as a critical procedure rather than a fixed concept.

Intensity: A Deleuzian term referring to differential forces that drive becoming and transformation, operating below the level of representation and preceding the organisation of stable forms.

Liú bái (留白): Literally "leaving white". A compositional principle in Chinese painting in which unpainted space is treated as an active pictorial element rather than absence, creating breathing room and productive indeterminacy within the image.

Line of flight: In Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, a trajectory of escape from dominant structures and fixed identities, opening toward transformation rather than simply negating what it departs from.

Major: In Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's framework, the dominant, normative mode of a language, practice, or cultural system that sets the standard against which all other expressions are measured.

Mimicry: Drawn from Roger Caillois's theory of mimicry and legendary psychasthenia. In this thesis, mimicry does not denote adaptive camouflage but a compulsive dissolution of the boundary between subject and space, in which the mimicking organism loses its grip on a centred self and risks being absorbed into its environment.

Minor: The counterpart to major in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: not a lesser or marginal practice, but one that works from within the major to deterritorialise it. Minor practice is characterised by collective enunciation, political immediacy, and the refusal of fixity.

Gregor-esque Path: A term coined in this thesis, named after Gregor Samsa in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. It points to a becoming path in which the clarity of meaning is replaced by the purity and continuity of intensity as the measure of practice.

Red Peter-esque Path: A term coined in this thesis, named after the ape protagonist of Franz Kafka's *A Report to an Academy*. It points to a becoming path whose core operations are capture-appropriation-hybridisation-becoming.

Qì (气): A foundational concept in Chinese philosophy and aesthetics referring to vital breath, energy, or animating force. In the context of Chinese painting, qì denotes the living energy that circulates through brushwork and composition, connecting the practitioner's embodied state to the work.

Reterritorialization: The process complementary to deterritorialization, in which new territories, codes, or formations are established in the wake of a line of flight. Reterritorialization is not a simple return but a reconstitution on different terms.

Territory: In Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, a stabilised domain of habit, identity, or expression. Territories are not merely spatial but refer to any organised consistency, aesthetic, subjective, or institutional, that tends toward fixity.

Thanatos: Sigmund Freud's concept of the death drive: the compulsion to return to an inorganic state of rest. In this thesis, it is invoked in relation to mimicry's tendency toward dissolution and self-annihilation.

Wú wéi (无为): A central concept in Daoist philosophy meaning non-forcing or acting in accordance with conditions. It does not denote passivity but a mode of attentive responsiveness in which action arises from nature rather than the imposition of will.

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