

To a non-existent island

**DESCRIBE THE CITY  
YOU LIVE IN**

# DIVING INTO THE FIELDS

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Fine Arts in Digital + Media in the Department of Digital + Media  
of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

by

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Chapter 0:

Describe the city you live in

Chapter 1:

The vibration lifts a bridge from one city to another

Chapter 2:

The silent song of the Interstate 95 highway

Chapter 3:

The shape (converstaion)

Chapter 4:

Days in, Days out

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I dive into the fields: frequency (sound), wavelengths (light), shapes (conversation): they build connections. What is action without reflection? Now I'm a city drifter. Through artmaking and dialogue I try to drop the anchor into the futuristic turbulent ocean (of society, speed, and the status quo ). Did I drop it? Not sure. I grew up in the most fast-paced city in China, Shenzhen. I feel pressured there. Do I feel that pressure here? of a precarious, unpredictable future? These questions push me out of the turbulent ocean to grab the present.

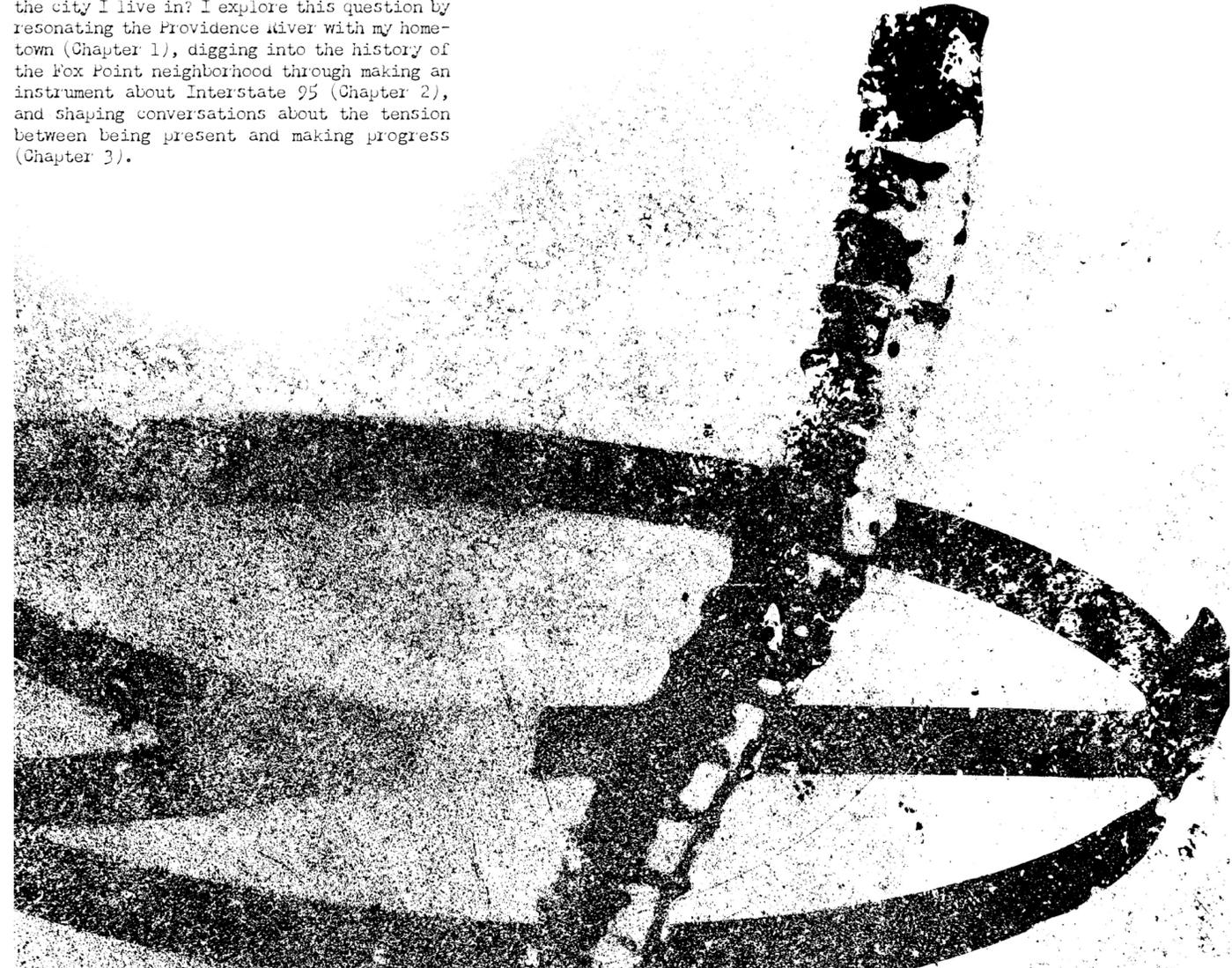
There are three stages of time: past, present, and future. But these are always bouncing around like the flow of water; a fading point of flow, the infinite approach, and an eternal past. Hand me the trees that come along, hand me a history book, out and about death suffers the cold, conveying the power inscribed in the heart. Through artmaking and dialogue, this is what I do to live in the present.

Like frequencies, wavelengths, and shapes, I am influenced by the quickly changing cityscape. Within this change, how do I live in the present and also make connections with the city I live in? I explore this question by resonating the Providence River with my hometown (Chapter 1), digging into the history of the Fox Point neighborhood through making an instrument about Interstate 95 (Chapter 2), and shaping conversations about the tension between being present and making progress (Chapter 3).

How do I find my own way to live without the promise of stability and belonging? How to keep up with the irony of art and fight against capitalism but still operate within it? My work is my present. When they are standing, they also bring me experience back to the "present."

"The smell evokes sadness in the loss of summer's easy riches, but it also calls up the sharp intensity and heightened sensibility of autumn." Summer is in the past and autumn is in the future. I am 23 and I will not be 23 again.

# ABSTRACT



I walk

walk

I walk on the same path

I walk on the same path

I walk until the path doth fade

I walk until the path doth fade

I walk until the path doth fade

And nothingness doth it pervades

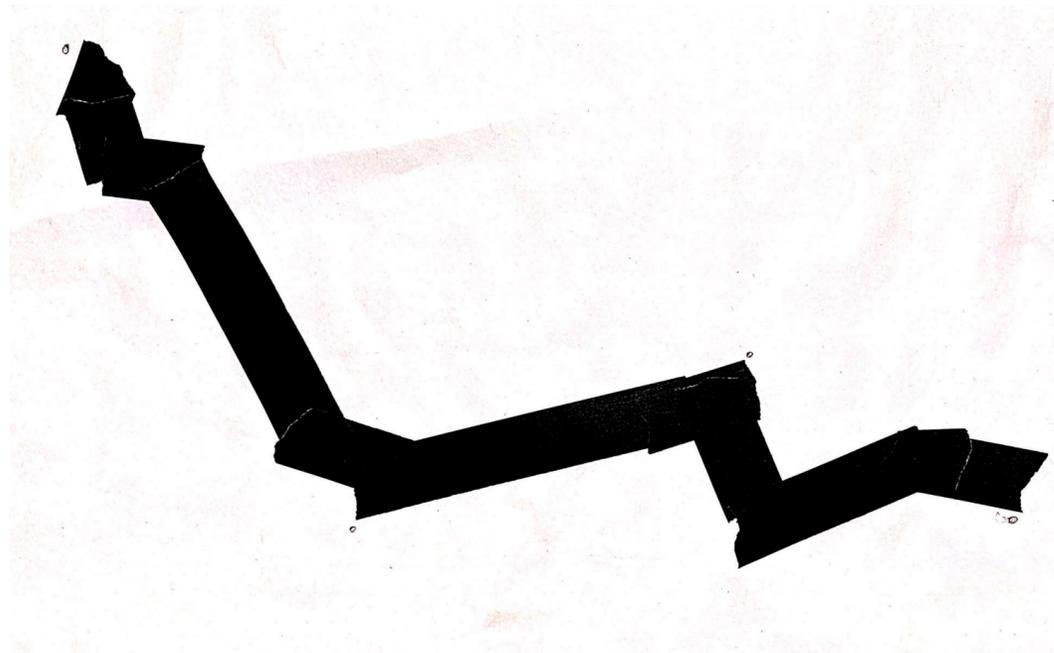
walk  
walk  
walk

walk

walk  
walk

I walk





## PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND

FROM 41°49'33" N 71°25'26" W

TO 41°49'07" N 71°23'19" W

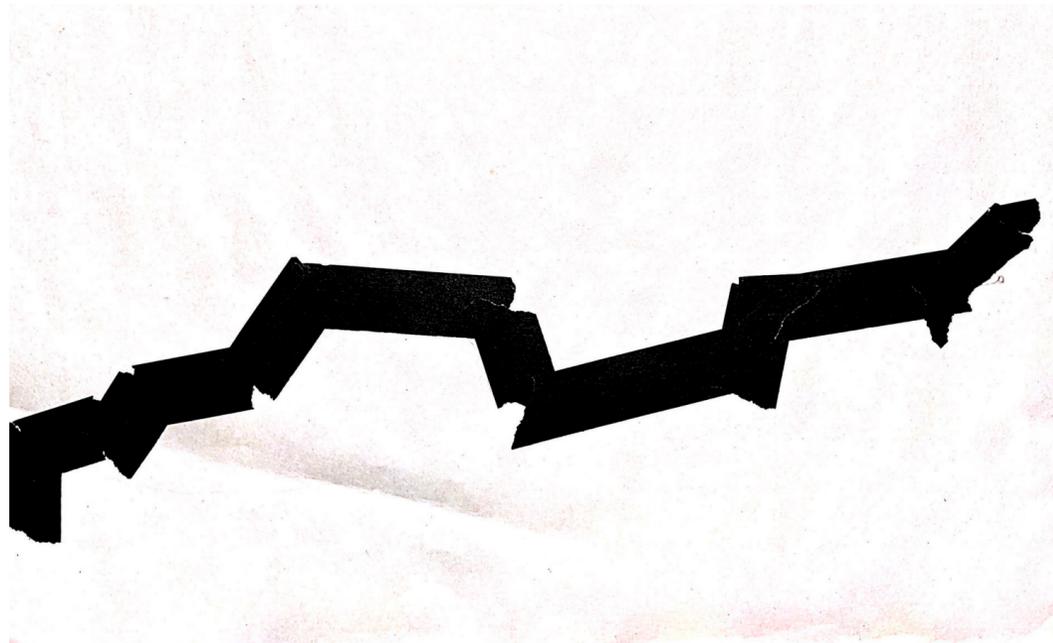
I walk...

I walk...

FROM 22°31'27" N 113°54'58" E

TO 22°32'58" N 114°05'38" E

## SHENZHEN, GUANGDONG



## CHAPTER 0

### DESCRIBE THE CITY YOU LIVE IN

I was walking alongside from Highway 195 to Interstate 95...

I was walking alongside Hongli Road...

A phone call between Providence and Shenzhen

P: Hello

S: 喂

P: Where are you?

S: 我不知道, 我现在地铁上, 可能有点吵, 你在哪?

P: I am underneath the Providence River Bridge. Next to the pier. Where are you going?

S: 我回家, 你要去哪?

P: Nowhere, just walking alongside the town. From Highway 195 to Interstate 95.

S: 那是什么?

P: It feels like a subway system to me, communicating in different parts of the city.

S: 明白了。我到站出来了, 可能有点吵。

P: It used to be quiet.

S: 现在就不曾安静过。路以前没有这么宽, 车以前没有这么多。

P: Say that again? I can't hear you.

S: 等下我上桥, 现在没办法直接穿马路回家了。

P: What? It changed a lot. I remembered people used to sleep in the grass when it's summer.

S: 你什么时候回来看看? 估计你已经认不出了。

P: I don't know. When are you gonna leave?

S: 我不知道。这边租金涨了挺多, 我不知道。别说了, 你那边怎么样?

P: Yeah, people still sleep in the grass when it's summer.

S: 听起来像小时候。

P: Not really. There used to be factories here. Those chimneys went straight up into the sky. They disappeared before the highway descended.

S: 想起这里曾经有好多木棉树, 直冲云霄。它们在地铁向下延伸之前就消失了。你走到哪了? 突然有回音。

P: I am walking across the bridge. Heading to the town. Where are you right now?

S: 我在小巷子里, 这样走比较快。

P: It sounds like you have already arrived.

S: 要走好一会儿。现在好容易迷路。

P: It sounds like you have already arrived.

S: 这边的地铁站修了又停用, 修了又停用。

P: The city just never stops.

S: 我快到路的尽头了。

P: How's it?

S: 消失又重现的房子。

P: I guess I can tell. Still the same.

S: 你在哪儿? 感觉你走在高速公路上。

P: I am walking alongside Interstate 95.

S: 你要去哪儿?

P: Heading back home. Just like you.

S: 别被城市杀死了。

P: Don't get killed by the city.

# CHAPTER 1

## THE VIBRATION LIFTS A BRIDGE FROM ONE CITY TO ANOTHER

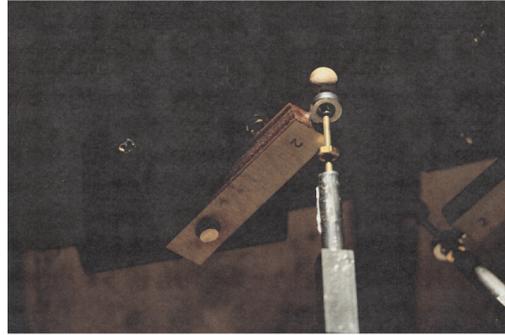
If I am the boat, what is my ocean? Sitting next to the Providence River, have you ever perceived yourself as the bridge? How do you see the obstacles of distance as friends? Every object has its own natural frequency and the vibrating is the heart-beat of connection. When the spoons spin at the same speed, they are trying to flow into the heartbeat of the Providence River.

淡绿色的钢架桥架起了两地的匆忙，只有船记得桥底无边的回响。

The light green steel frame is a bridge between these two places; in a hurry, and only the boat remembers the endless reverberation under the bridge.

In Providence, wandering in the chilling autumn night, I remembered the first time I walked underneath the Fox Point Hurricane Barrier. High-speed tires rattle the steel frame; the ground vibrates. I suddenly think of my hometown, Shenzhen, the city of highways. When I put my hands gently on the bridge, I wish I could feel the heartbeat of the city. Looking at the pale green bridge, the reflection of the water appears as shadow shapes. The waves of the ocean are growing with it. The sound of the bridge, car, ocean, they compose the city sonata. How can I remember this moment?

When the natural resonant frequency of an object is excited by an external force, matches in a moment, a higher amplitude is reached. The Providence River Bridge at that moment was vibrating with me.



Jingfei, Hu, *Resonance*, kinetic installation, 2021

The repetitive movement is a space left to be filled; a possibility for communication. A conversation between data and poetic abstract motion.

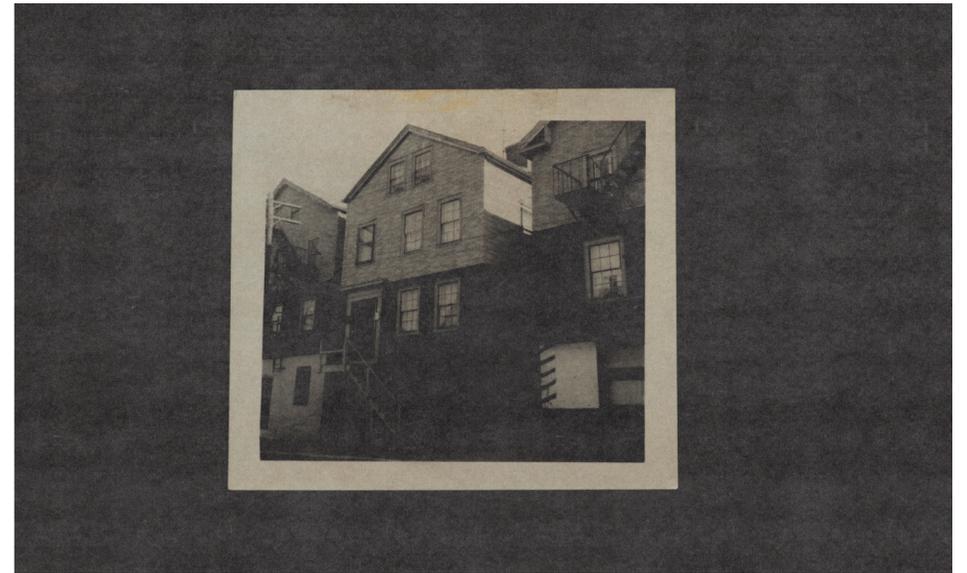


Jingfei, Hu, *Resonance*, kinetic installation, 2021

穿过喧嚣的普罗维登斯桥, India Point Park 的宁静仿佛不属于这个城市。除了海边吹来的微咸气息, 所有普罗维登斯的一切都被隔离在了高速公路外。在还未入冬的秋季, 这里经常是我歇脚的地方。公园里的人们安静地凝望着远处的风车, 仿佛与这个公园拼凑在了一起。

Across the hustle and bustle of Providence Bridge, the tranquil India Point Park seems like it doesn't belong to the city. Everything about Providence is isolated from the highway except for the salty scent blowing in from the ocean. Before winter, the park is where I often take a break. People in the park gazed silently at the windmills in the distance, as if they had grown up with the park.

"It didn't use to be this noisy," Lang said, "It used to be a place where people came out to cool off in the summer evenings, but now it's a highway." "It didn't used to be this quiet," I said. "This used to be the dock where the fishermen used to live." "So all this has disappeared?" asked Lang. "Yes. Because of city gentrification, most of the factories and residents were forced to leave their homes." "Sounds the same in Shenzhen." "I know."



Houses in Fox Point, 1967  
Picture took on March, 22, 2022 at Providence public library special collection

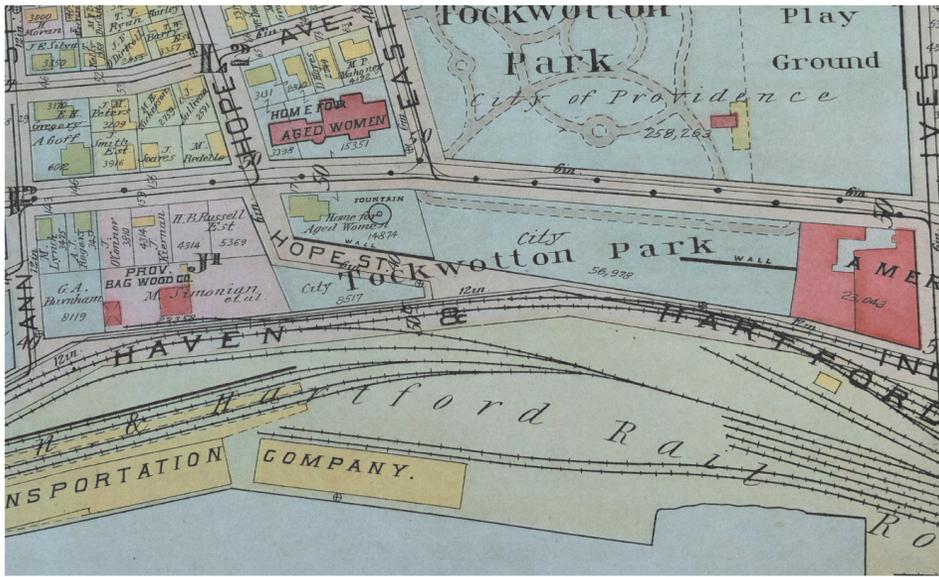


Factories in Fox Point, Jan, 1963  
Picture took on March, 22, 2022 at Providence public library special collection

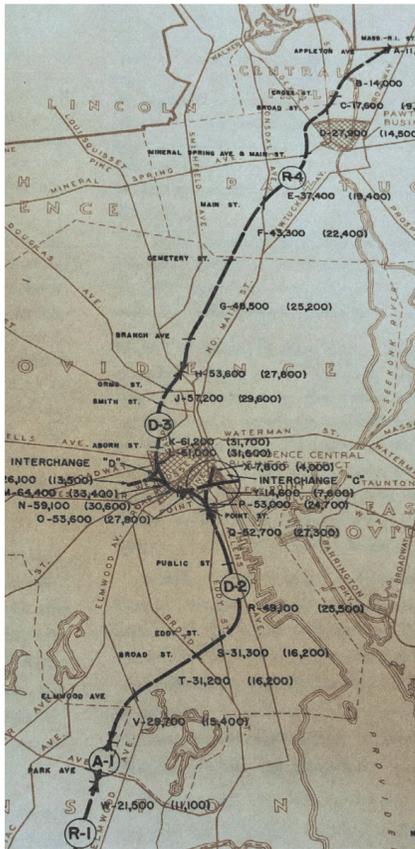
# CHAPTER 2

## THE SILENT SONG OF THE INTER- STATE 95 HIGHWAY

# CHAPTER 3 THE SHAPE (CONVERSATION)



Providence Map in 1976  
Picture took on 22, March, 2022 at Providence public library special collection



East Urban Renewal Plan, 2006  
Picture took on 22, March, 2022 at Providence public library special collection

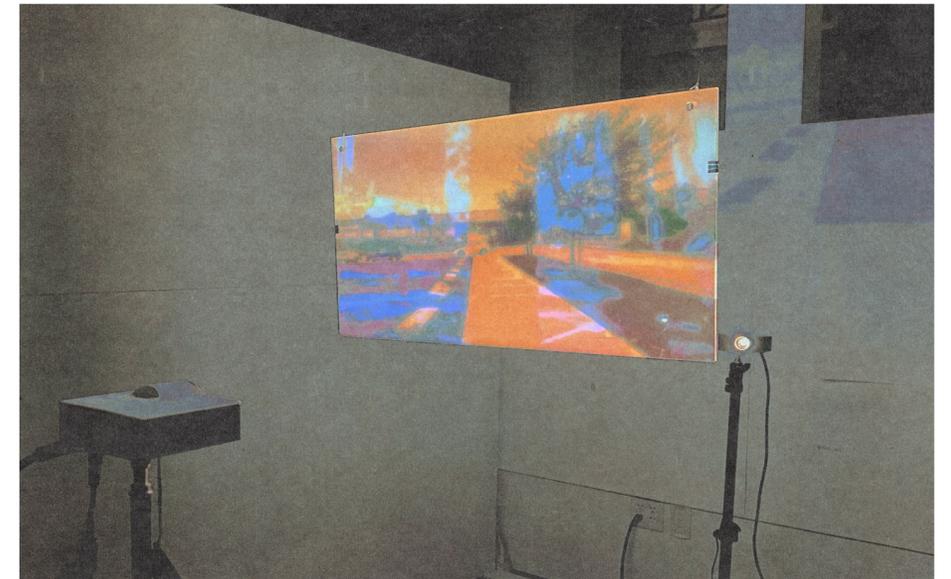
Providence Map in 1976  
Picture took on 22 March, 2022 at Providence public library special collection



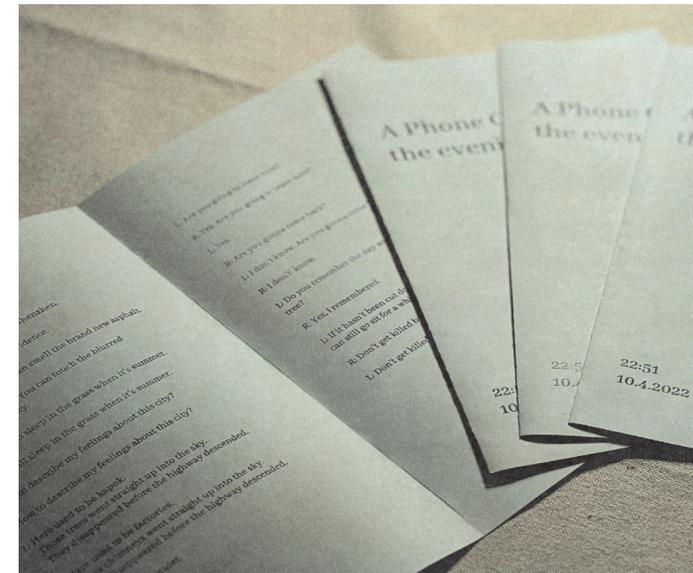
After moving to the United States, I always wonder what are the similarities and differences between people's relationships with cities in different countries. "Gentrification can be subtler than ramming a highway through a neighborhood, but effects and its intentions are often similar. Its exchange value is that it's worth much more without the residents in it."<sup>2</sup> Based on the knowledge of gentrification and my personal gentrified experience, wrestling with the governance of space became my journey. Space can be regarded as a site in which forms of identification and alienation are performed and where the production of social and power relations are revealed, reproduced, and maintained.

My research question and my personal context drove me to dig into the history the 195 and the 95-195 interchange. My process in exploring and connecting in Providence involves using a scanner to copy the old photo archives, including a lot of dilapidated houses and streets that are not able to be found. Then comparing the old maps with the current Google map made me understand more about the layout of the city.

We stared at each other, talking to each other, dancing with each other. Creating art and design is about having a conversation. Through art and design I can connect with an audience, with my family and friends, and with myself. Recently, I had a serious conversation with my family. My mom asked me if I was going to be able to find a job after graduation. I said I wasn't sure, but that I will try my best. Meanwhile, I was staring at the documentation of my art and design on my computer screen. At that moment I thought, "how can this art help me find a job?" At that moment I held anxiety about connecting my art and design to the corporate jobs I was applying to in installation design, product design, and creative technology. After applying to these corporate jobs, I realized that it didn't matter if my artwork was poetic or conceptual. My creative imagination didn't seem to map. I realized that my artwork was not able to support me to financially stand in this world.



Jingfei, Hu, *A phone call in the evening*, video installation, 2022

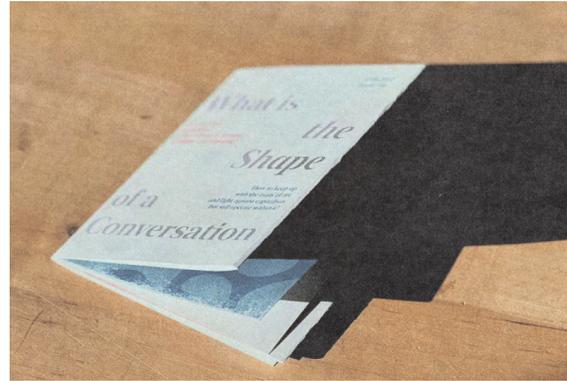


Jingfei, Hu, *A phone call in the evening*, zine, 2022

My friend said: "Business companies only care how professional you are, and how much value you can bring to the company. Not how poetic you are."

A company hit said: "Can you please show us some of your practical design principles? Your works are amazing and should be placed in a museum. But I am afraid our clients are not able to appreciate your art concept."

"How much money is enough for you? Have you ever considered that?" my graphic design professor Ramon Tejeda asked me. I replied, "I don't know. The amount of money that is enough right now, will change tomorrow."



Jingfei, Hu, *What is the shape of a conversation*, 2022

I realized that my multidisciplinary skills couldn't support my efforts in finding a job. Why did this hit person express that my art and design can only exist in the museum and gallery? I personally think that my art and design should not only exist in museums or galleries. The extreme anxiety and fear of not being able to find a job crushed me down for two months. At that time, my therapist gave me an advice, "You should take a break, Jingfei."

But how? How can I take a break from these systems geared to work?

A conflict between my reality and my wish: I contacted the International Student Office at the Rhode Island School of Design. I asked them if I could take a leave of absence from school for the remainder of the semester. I was told that as an international student, I shouldn't take a break from school because my visa would be suspended immediately. This meant if I took a break, I would be forced to leave the city. This is a conflict between being present (to take a break) and making progress (within capitalism's giant web). I have no place to hide.



Jingfei, Hu, *Plumcot*, kinetic video installation, 2022

After having many conversations with different people, I decided to use my conversation with other people to create a series of works to express my tangled feelings toward the audience. Inspired by Yoko Ono's book "Grapefruit", I also tried to "burn this book after you've read it."<sup>3</sup>

Like my therapist, my friend Liang mentioned that she wanted me to take a break. Why is it so hard to reach out to the present? What is the tension between being present and making progress? If I am not able to stay in the present, what should I do to free my mind?

"I look for disturbance-based ecologies in which many species sometimes live together without either harmony or conquest."<sup>4</sup>

I gradually tested out my ecologies in shapes and light. My shapes are my words and light is my new ecology. "Mixing blue and yellow light yields white light, but the light reflected from a mixture of blue and yellow pigments is green. In additive mixing the reflectances add; in subtractive mixing the absorbances add."<sup>5</sup> Instead of using the words to describe my tangled feelings, I extracted different color channels and recombined them together. The two way mirror and polarizing film I applied to the shapes reflected lights on different surfaces, creating a space with touchable feelings.

The name of this work, "Plumcot", is inspired by the fact that hybridization is not simply combining two species together. I see myself not living in the present or living in progress, I live in the tension in between. It comes with anxiety and fear, but also the chance to grow my new branch. Like Plumcot, like Matsutake.



The reflection on the wall.



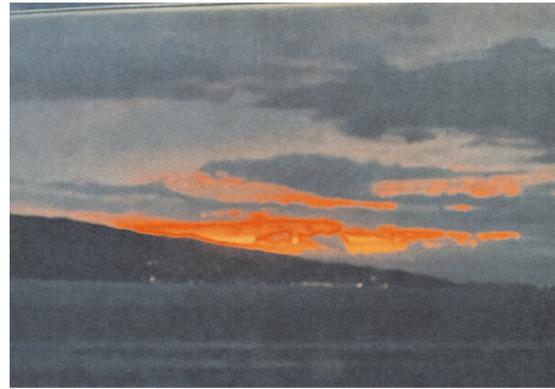
Jingfei, Hu, *Plumcot*, kinetic video installation, 2022

# CHAPTER 4

## DAYS IN, DAYS OUT

11.28.2022

I am heading to Lausanne, Swiss.



11.20.2022

I finally have the time to visit Beavertail. It was almost 5 PM. I and Lilan Yang were sitting straight forward to the sun. The infinitely hot sun kissed the sea surface before night falls, dragging me back to the old time.



11.5.2022

The light skips into your eyes.

11.1.2022

Feel Empty  
I didn't go to Beavertail state park last weekend.  
After I finished my personal portfolio website, I felt empty.  
This feeling walks around me and struck me when I have nothing to do.  
I still have a lot of things to do.

10.22.2022

I started to drive to a lot of places after I got my license.  
Warwick, Cranston, New Port, Plymouth, Cape Cod....  
I didn't feel free at all.  
I still think I am forced to travel, forced to enjoy the world.  
Why do I need to go to a lot of places to feel "free"?  
Can I just sleep in my bed and feel I am free?  
I can't stop feeling this way when I am searching for jobs.  
All the things I want to do on the weekend are getting away from work but I still can't escape from it.  
Since the eagerness to travel to different places is the result of unstoppable working.  
The loneliness, the unbearable hard work(I don't know if I am hard enough or not).  
Why, why, why?  
If Thoreau knows the place where he wrote the Walden Pond makes me feel extremely anxious then what will he feel?

I realized I am afraid of having eye contact with cows when they are being milked.  
The efficiency, the sound, the obedience. She stared at me, I stared at her.  
I almost wanted to cry when I saw her just standing there.  
I don't even know how to describe the emotion I am feeling right now.  
It is sanctimonious to think in a way that they are pathetic because I directly headed to the milk shop and enjoyed all the cakes and milk.  
The feeling of inescapable and not able to realize you can escape drives me crazy.  
They work so hard.  
They work really hard.  
They work suspiciously hard.  
They are forced to work so hard.  
Probably because I think I am a cow when I am working.  
How to stop thinking that I might actually be a cow?  
Or I just be a cow.

10.15.2022

“肥胖的城市”们拥有一整套成体系的手段来对付这些不甘平凡野兽。对难啃的骨头会面带关怀地“递一个传统的方法，来克制恐慌”，将剥削伪装成自由的交易：“卖掉武器、风暴和喉咙，换取饮食。背叛能让你获得自由”。至于那些小虾米，直接“驱赶拒绝沉没的人”就行了。<sup>6</sup>

The so-called "fat cities" have established a comprehensive system for managing these unwelcome intruders. They distribute a traditional technique for suppressing panic to those who are most resistant to change, presenting scarcity as an exchange for liberation: "Give up your weapons, your turbulence, and your autonomy in return for sustenance. Betrayal will grant you your freedom." Meanwhile, for those who are more vulnerable, they simply "eliminate those who refuse to conform."

10.15.2022

I am writing in the bathroom.  
If growing up means the unwillingness to show my deep heart, then I refuse to do so.  
Heating the flow to the ground and burning up the night.  
I was standing in the tide of my breath.  
My words are  
翻腾在你脑海里的河流  
粗暴 重迭  
It's the love in my heart.  
How seduced these words are.  
The lighthouse.  
Drive me back to my hometown.

Maman

My mom is not like a spider.  
Heavy, Pressing, Viscous.  
That's the way I describe my feelings about her.  
She is as strong as steel, or ceramics.  
She is able to handle the fire of burden and the entire family.  
But still not a spider.  
She didn't connect the whole family, actually she is the one who cut them off.  
It is like the unstoppable river flows into my dream ocean.  
I still remember the day she went to my high school at night just to check what I was doing.  
It's the breath of the Earth, diving deep down into the heart.  
How to use soft adjectives to describe a woman?  
Soft, Shiny, Curves, Gentle.  
I probably won't use these words to describe my mom.  
"She is a strong woman."  
Yes, I think so too.  
But that's not my way to describe her.  
I haven't seen her for a long time but I still think she is around me.

10.12.2022

I am a stranger in my hometown.  
"Buried as a stranger in the soil of Khorasan."  
Accept the coldness of the city.  
No place to be back.  
Transparency  
The helpless of  
Kill the One from Shijiazhuang.

9.26.2022

Spending two years immersed in another cultural context for me is growing branches, trying to get entangled with the luxuriant forest.  
How to embrace the brand new exterior environment and stick closely to your natural habitat, is the question I am working on.  
Then how do you perceive your own works?  
Audiences are asking, friends are asking, family are asking.  
My work is my eagerness to drop anchor in a turbulent ocean.  
Trying to reach a concrete and solid basement.  
It is about memory, about understanding, about love.  
Living in the most fast-paced city in China, witnessing the whole city growing from a small village to thousands of high-rises in only 20 years, it is hard to feel connection or belonging.  
As a city drifter lives in Providence, embracing the blue distance between me and the people, the city and even the language.  
I am struggling and trying to find the resonance as the anchor.  
It is a lively season, brimming with vitality, and romance.

2.28.2022

Falling down into the shimmer of farewell  
Witnessing the silence escaping from purification  
All the records are flowing into the river  
May I favor part of my soul to this land?  
Let the roaring solemn stroking on my body  
The wind is breathing  
Those light, swift fires, running into the midnight  
Windmills Standing stiffly and watching the city  
The light dots jumping into the turquoise sky  
Left the chill menace floating into my lungs  
How to perceive the tangible departure?  
Arrived to a place that you can leave without kissing the ground  
The land asks you why you are here  
Ask whether you are looking for the destination or not  
C...  
I didn't leave anything  
I didn't take anything  
Probably receive the gently caress from the bridge and the waves  
When they meet each other in the moment  
I stopped by a huge truck for a while  
The words I tried to spell were always blew back to my throat  
I didn't say take care  
I said wind covered my mouth  
Otherwise I don't have anyone to blame on  
Goodbye is dull  
Sometimes even the water evaporate from the words  
Even tears have to postponed during this season  
Dryly scorching  
I can't give you anything  
But greedily trying to leave some traces  
Take it as the friction from feet to feet  
You don't have to lament and detain  
Just send me a burst of raining

听到离别的叫嚣  
一种不由空旷产生的洗涤  
连一张照片也没有留下  
如何将自己的一部分赠与这个地方  
将狂啸的萧穆划进身体的一部分  
风还在吹着  
夜半的野火在高声中炸裂着  
风车嘎吱地注视着  
在藏青色的暮色下火光也消散了  
只剩呼进呼出的阵阵寒意  
如何去看待可触的别离?  
来到一个无需亲吻地表就可以离开的地方  
它问你为何而来  
它问你是否在寻找着终点  
无声的否认  
啊  
我什么都没有留下  
也什么都没有带走  
或许收到了云边与大地的轻抚  
它们经历了刹那的相逢  
我在巨大的卡车边停下了  
也没有捎上一句保重  
想说的话总是被风刮进了心里  
就当是风捂住了嘴巴  
不然就没有人可以怪罪了  
离别是干燥的  
在水气都蒸发的白日里  
在眼泪都只能延迟掉落的雨季里  
干燥地炙热  
我无法赠与你什么  
却贪婪地试图留下一些痕迹  
就当是脚与脚相贴产生的摩擦吧  
你无需挽留与感慨  
只送我一场雨吧

1.28.2022

这并不是一段值得阅读的文字  
但感谢你看到这里  
这段文字写于一个和我暂时无法产生联系的城市  
或许联系本身也是无所谓的  
但人总会有些偏执

一周前我回到了米兰  
它还是和以前一样坐拥历史的堆砌  
7年前以为自己可以拥有在意大利的几年时光  
时过境迁倒也走在了当时所迈的路上  
但再偏遇到日落的时候也少了些执念

我并不是一个严谨的人  
行文的思路也像我的作品一样散漫  
与很多人交流后发现自己并不具有任何异于常人的地方  
是一个正常的普通人  
说起来还有点失落

有很多人说既然很多想法没有办法用言语去表达  
那就去做作品吧  
但现在做作品也需要文字去表达了  
发现自己其实很讨厌说话  
很讨厌去发表观点  
所以做完作品也只会和它面面相觑

什么时候感觉自己的作品成立了的呢  
是感觉到它重新回到了家里  
变成洗衣盆的支架  
而不是美术馆的钢筋

与其说自己从15岁后一直在不同的地方流浪  
倒像是被不同的地方收留  
对“家”的概念也很弱  
我把所有可以歇脚的地方都称为家  
也可能只是自私的想拥有一个城市的角落  
就像是在纽约欣赏在街上填补空白的行人  
他们或许也在吞噬城市

感谢与我产生联系的人们

1.28.2022

"This is not a text worth reading,  
But thank you for making it this far.  
I wrote this in a city where I am temporarily  
unable to connect,  
perhaps the connection itself doesn't matter,  
but people always have some paranoia.

A week ago, I returned to Milan,  
It still sits there with its history piled up,  
just like before.  
Seven years ago, I thought I could have a few  
years in Italy,  
But time has passed and I am still on the path I  
chose back then,  
But even when I chance upon a sunset, I am less  
obsessed.

I am not a rigorous person,  
The writing style is as scattered as my works.  
After communicating with many people, I found that  
I am not different from ordinary people,  
I am a normal person,  
And it's a bit disappointing to say that.

Many people say that if there are many thoughts  
that cannot be expressed in words,  
Then create works.  
But now, creating works also requires words to  
express,  
And I found that I actually dislike talking,  
And I hate expressing my opinions,  
So even after creating works, I will only stare  
at them.

When will I feel that my works are established?  
Perhaps when I feel that they have returned home,  
Becoming a support for a washbasin, rather than  
a steel frame in an art museum.

Instead of saying that I have been wandering to  
different places since I was 15,  
It's more like I have been taken in by differ-  
ent places.  
I have a weak concept of "home,"  
I call any place I can rest my head "home,"  
Perhaps it's just my selfish desire to own a  
corner of a city,  
Just like appreciating pedestrians filling the  
gaps on the streets in New York,  
They may also be consuming the city.

Thank you to those who have connected with me.

# NOTES

1. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton etc.: Princeton university press, 2021).
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3. Cno Yoko and John Lennon, *Grapefruit: A Book of Instructions and Drawings* (New York: Simon et Schuster, 2007).
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5. Magaret Livingstone, *Vision and Art: The Biology of Seeing* (New York: Abrams, 2014).
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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"Have you ever taken a deep look at the city you live in?"

When I was 10 years old, my mom asked me this question that stayed with me. I brought it to Providence, and after 2 years, I can finally answer, 'Yes, I have.' Unlike bustling Shenzhen, Providence is a small city, bisected by the Providence River, and inhabited by both those who stay and those who leave, all with their own memories.

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I am appreciative for all the support in my life.



The Providence River Bridge on my arm

To the city we love.  
To the roads we love.  
To the people we love.