



**Vanitas**

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# Vanitas

*on home, apartment complex, reconstruction, mourning, archive,  
memory, memorialization, a god within, collective memory,  
photogrammetry, cyberspace, omnipresence, meandering,  
heterotopia, alleyway, construction site, and mirror.*

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Vanitas

## Abstract

*Vanitas* is a tribute to the missing pieces within the reconstruction of human memory, places, and data. It is a cartography of words, including home, apartment complex, reconstruction, mourning, archive, memory, memorialization, a god within, collective memory, photogrammetry, cyberspace, omnipresence, meandering, heterotopia, alleyway, construction site, and mirror. I invite viewers and readers to meander in the map of relations and be lost in the topography. What can you discover when you meander? What happens when you renounce being a subject and become an object seamlessly blended into the topography?

## 타자로 활자를 만드는 일

네가 찰나만큼 빠르게 여행하는 언어라고 상상해봐  
음절이 양자적 조각들로 나뉘어지고  
주어가 동사로 그리고 목적어로  
부사가 음운으로  
소리 그 다음엔  
마찰로

이제 해저를 지나 사막  
점멸, 클릭, 신호, 그리고 소수가 아닌 정수  
구조 없는 구조 속에서 얼굴들을 발견하면  
너는 이제 그 모든 이름이 될 거야

그 다음엔 사막을 지나 해저로 지상이 아닌 지하 그리고 마침내  
네가 마주친 모든 이들을 켜켜이 지층으로 쌓아 만든  
너의 껍데기로 돌아와  
너는 행복하게 될 거야

모든 것이 될 수 있다는 건 아무것도 될 수 없다는 것과 같고  
무언가가 될 수 있다는 건 무엇도 될 수 있다는 것과 같다고

그래서 타자로 활자를 만드는 일은  
선고하는 것과 같다고

## when you type a type

imagine you are a language traveling as fast as perception  
syllables segmented into quantum pieces  
subject, verb, object,  
adverb to phoneme,  
a sound  
a fraction

you pass the seabed and enter the desert  
you are a dotted light, a click, a signal, an integer  
you see the faces within the shapeless structure  
and now you are each one of their names

you pass the desert and enter the seabed  
you finally arrive and return to your shell  
engraved with the faces of the stack  
of each one of the names you encountered  
then you surrender

when you wish to be everything is to wish to be nothing  
when you wish to be something is to wish to be anything

so when you type a type  
is to sentence the other



# Home Apartment Complex Reconstruction Mourning Archive Memory Memorialization A God Within

The urban landscape of Seoul, the capital city of South Korea, is visually epitomized by a tapestry of copy and paste apartments. Functionally, apartments provide residents with convenience, safety, and privacy. However, they are perceived as a negative symbol of modernization, homogenizing the cityscape, weakening the community, and consolidating social hierarchy based on housing styles. Owing to the high population density and limited space for each household in South Korea, apartment complexes offer stable rental income for investors, which can be expected to provide stable long-term returns. Consequently, apartment complexes tend to be considered as commodities rather than homes. Therefore, the apartment landscape in Seoul can be perceived as representing the placeless geography of a modern metropolis.

As one of the “apartment kids”<sup>1</sup> who live their entire lives in the same apartment complex, I am intrigued by how the seemingly characterless apartment topography can speak about a home within a city. What makes a place a home, and what is “home”?

The Canadian geographer Edward Relph describes a home as “the foundation of our identity as individuals and as members of a community, the dwelling-place of being”<sup>2</sup> and “an irreplaceable center of significance.”<sup>3</sup> This definition extends from a microscopic level to a macroscopic one, encompassing the physical home, the way back home, the neighborhood, the city, the country, the planet, and

p.14 Laurent Lecat, *céleste boursier-mougenot plants a kinetic forest at the venice art biennale*, photograph, designboom, May 06, 2015, <https://www.designboom.com/art/celeste-boursier-mougenot-venice-art-biennale-french-pavilion-05-06-2015/>.

p.15 *Laputa: Castle in the Sky*, directed by Hayao Miyazaki (Studio Ghibli, 1986), 1:58:25. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eNZZgoPzNVQ>.

1 Apartment kids, also known as the Echo generation (born between 1979 and 1992), are defined as the children of the Baby Boomer generation (born between 1955 and 1963) according to Statistics Korea (2019). The members of the Baby Boomer generation were the first major occupants of urban areas in South Korea.

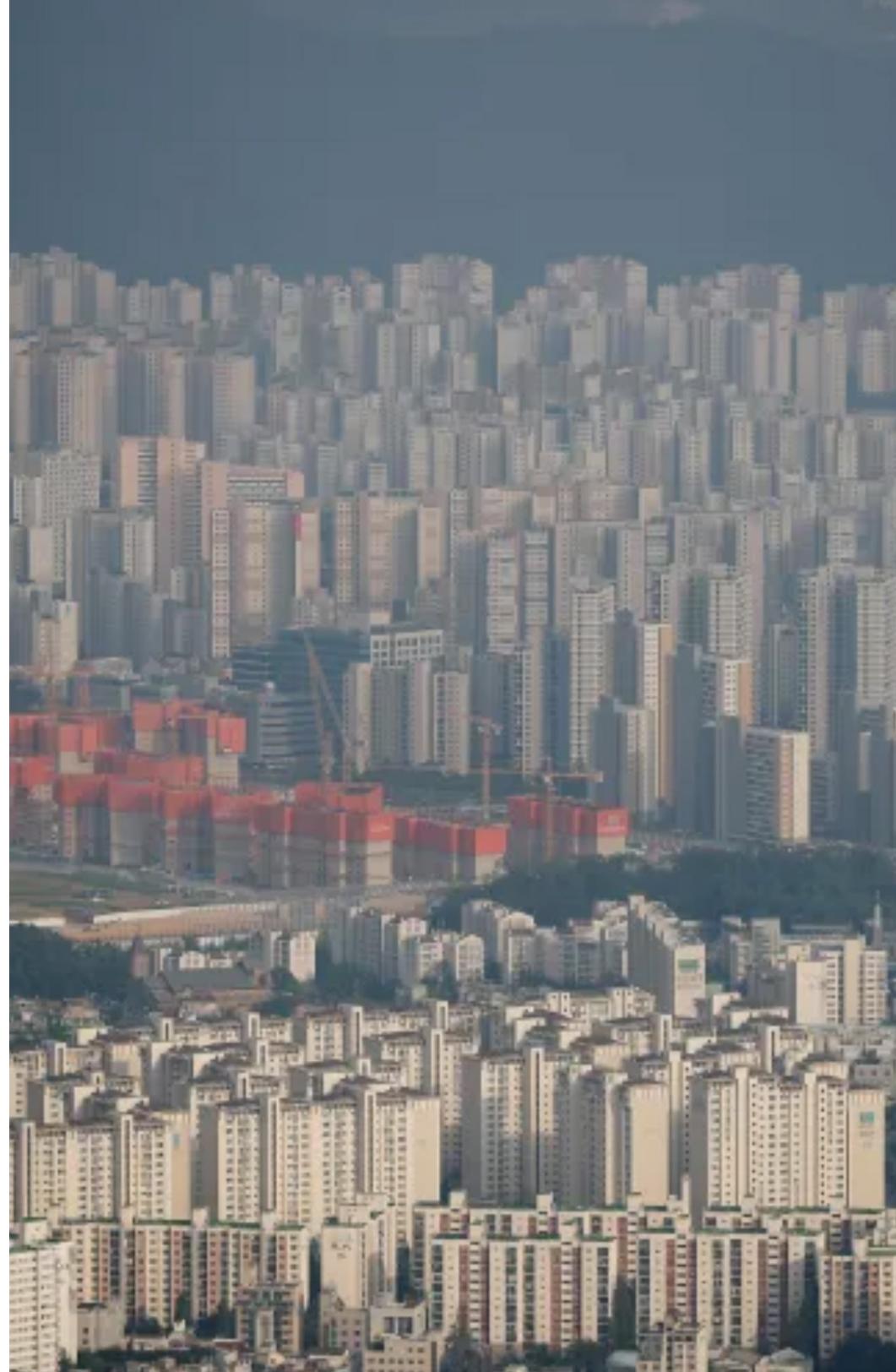
2, 3 Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion Limited, 1976), 39.

the galaxy. What constitutes a home is influenced by one's personal attachment to it, as well as ideological factors. While a reduced sense of ownership regarding a place can discourage political participation, an increased sense of responsibility to one's nation encourages interest in national defense and military enlistment. The macroscopic concept of home can enhance a sense of community on a global scale, as exemplified by the scientist Carl Sagan's famous statement about the pale blue dot captured by Voyager 1 in 1990: "That's here. That's home. That's us." Essentially, home is a place one is intrinsically attached to, be it the planet, a country, a city, a familiar route, a physical dwelling, a room, a security blanket, or the scent of a madeleine biscuit soaked in tea.<sup>4</sup>

In mass media, home is often represented by the roots of trees. In Studio Ghibli's *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* (1986), produced during the exponential advancement of technology in the 1980s, the protagonist traces her unrooted origin and ends up in Laputa, a floating island in the sky that is untethered to the ground. In the film *Avatar* (2009),

Right Kim Hong-ji, *The average price of an apartment in Seoul has doubled in the last five years*, photograph, Al Jazeera, April 28, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2022/4/28/south-koreans-struggle-to-climb-property-ladder-as-prices-soar>.

4 Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time: Swann's Way* (New York: The Modern Library, 1998), 60–64.  
*No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory – this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me it was me. (...) And suddenly the memory revealed itself: The taste was that of the little piece of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray (because on those mornings I did not go out before mass), when I went to say good morning to her in her bedroom, my aunt Léonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of tea or tisane. The sight of the little madeleine had recalled nothing to my mind before I tasted it. And all from my cup of tea.*





the homeland of the Na'vi is symbolically represented by the rhizome of a gigantic tree that is rooted physically and spiritually in the planet. If humans can be metaphorically referred to as trees rooted in their homes, how should the ontology of urban residents be understood? Are urban residents similar to trees that have lost their roots and origins? Or has the ground, rather than the trees, migrated to concrete?

In South Korea, during the 1970s and 1980s, under a military dictatorship and the influence of a significant surge in economic growth, village-scale apartment complexes (which I define as an apartment complex with over 1,000 households) were constructed to alleviate a severe housing shortage in urban areas. For instance, the Banpo apartment complex, built in 1974, covered an area of approximately 2.2 square miles with five-story buildings. Since the 2000s, village-scale apartment complexes have not been constructed because the housing shortage is no longer a problem. Instead, newly constructed apartment complexes tend to occupy smaller areas and have taller structures. For instance, the Banpo Xi apartment complex, built in 2009, has twenty-nine floors and covers an area of 0.2 square miles. In the 2000s, before the village-scale apartment complexes were reconstructed, the urban landscape in South Korea was a mixture of new high-rise apartments and old low-rise apartments.

The reconstruction of the old apartment complexes was planned in the 2000s and commenced in the 2010s. The purpose of this reconstruction is not stability or safety but the densification of the residential population to raise

Left Unknown, *Banpo Apartment Complex 1 Composed of a Group of Low-Rise Buildings*, photograph, Seoul Museum of History, 1977, [http://museum.seoul.go.kr/archive/archiveNew/NR\\_archiveView.do](http://museum.seoul.go.kr/archive/archiveNew/NR_archiveView.do).

the economic value. Imagine how the economic value per square meter will increase once all of the five-story buildings covering 2.2 square miles are replaced with buildings that are thirty stories or higher. As of April 2023, every village-scale apartment complex built before 1985 in Seoul has been reconstructed or targeted for reconstruction.

The village-scale apartment complexes built in the 1970s share some distinctive characteristics in addition to their massive scale. For the most part, the exterior walls of the buildings were originally painted with white or ivory-colored paint, which has peeled and corroded over time in many cases. Furthermore, the buildings generally have a maximum of six floors. The Banpo, Jamsil, Duncheon, and Gaepo apartment complexes are characterized by their extensive width but relative shallowness and low volume, resembling a horizontally positioned matchbox. Due to the buildings' low height, the rooftops are either officially or unofficially accessible to the residents, who use the space to hang laundry or cultivate small plants. Most of the rooftops were originally painted with green waterproof paint, which is not commonly used in recent buildings due to aesthetic considerations. Tall trees, such as metasequoias, and green spaces with a variety of foliage are interspersed between the buildings; this is a distinctive feature of an old apartment complex, as apartment buildings built after the 2000s have strictly planned greeneries. Some of these green spaces are used by residents as gardens, where they grow herbs and flowers. In addition to garden-like green spaces, small parks and playgrounds are located between the buildings.

Right Unknown, *A Resident Hanging Laundry on the Rooftop*, photograph, Seoul Museum of History, 2018, [http://museum.seoul.go.kr/archive/archiveNew/NR\\_archiveView.do](http://museum.seoul.go.kr/archive/archiveNew/NR_archiveView.do).





Due to the close proximity of the low-rise buildings and the tall trees in the green spaces, the sounds of insects and birds are audible inside the buildings. In the 1970s, only approximately 25 out of every 1000 people in South Korea owned cars; thus, the parking spaces were inadequate to match present-day needs. A few apartment complexes have underground bunkers that were originally built as a wartime precaution; these are no longer used. The residents use parking spaces as exercise areas, and children play at the entrance to the underground bunkers.

In conjunction with the wave of reconstruction, there have been community initiatives to archive the residents' memories of the old apartments. The first and the most community-engaged case that successfully gained the public's attention was the *Hi Bye, Duncheon Apartment Project* (2013–present), launched with an independent publication series by Lee In-kyu and later extended with video archives and exhibitions. Lee In-kyu continues to develop the project, even four years after the Duncheon apartment complex's demolition in 2019. Through an insider's perspective of the apartment complex,<sup>5</sup> this project is building a virtual memorial, or a "site of memory,"<sup>6</sup> with multimedia archives. In addition, the former residents of the apartment complexes being reconstructed have been expressing their attachment

Left Laya, *Long Farewell Main Teaser*, still shots, Cine21, October 25, 2018, [http://cine21.com/movie/info/?movie\\_id=53431](http://cine21.com/movie/info/?movie_id=53431). (Long Farewell is a documentary film about Duncheon Apartment complex and its reconstruction.)

5 Junha Rhim, "Place Attachment and Memory of 'Apartment Kids' to an Apartment Complex - A Case Study of Duncheon Jugong Apartment Complex" (master's thesis, Seoul National University, 2017).

6 The term "a site of memory" (*lieu de mémoire* in French) was first used by the French historian Pierre Nora in his three-volume collection *Realms of Memory (Les Lieux de Mémoire)*. It is a physical place or object that acts as a container of memory or a form of memorialization.

and nostalgia through various media, including films, exhibitions, and social media, though these records are not as popular as the Hi Bye, Dunccheon Apartment Project.

These archives, which encapsulate subjective place experiences and capture details of apartment homescapes, appear to be a tribute to the site. Evocative of a funeral or a mourning ritual for the deceased, the archives are composed of the memories of the residents who yearn for and idealize the place, as if it has been sentenced to death. The majority of the residents will return to the newly built apartments at the same location after the reconstruction. Then why does the reconstruction imply death to the residents? What is permanently lost in the process of reconstruction?

Being an apartment kid myself, I have been obsessed with capturing the details of my home ever since the reconstruction of the Banpo apartment complex was announced. I had a ritual of mourning: regardless of the season, time of day, or the weather, I meandered along the village's streets and on the rooftops of the buildings. I touched my nose to metasequoias' bark to smell the scents. I walked on grass and moss to feel the tickling on my ankles. I observed how the color of the sky changed at sunset and how bright the moonlight was on the rooftops. I wrote and filmed what I saw, felt, and remembered about the place.

It was the scenery I would lose: how the buildings' surfaces dimmed at dawn when the air was blue with the petrichor of metasequoias. It was the sounds I would lose: the birdcalls in the morning, the insects' weeping at night, the orchestra of cicadas in summer, the waves of leaves, and the dotted notes of rain from the trees. It was the topography I would lose: how I meandered without any fear of getting lost and how my body knew the way back home no matter

where I went. It was the feelings I would lose: how much I loved the place, how much I loved being there, and how much I loved hiding in the tall grass in Nari Park in front of my home until I found my friends hiding there as well. It was the memories I would lose. The memories attached to the site are like the air in the environment, like the metadata embedded in a digital image.

Edward Relph declares that “the spirit of a place lies in its landscape.”<sup>7</sup> Citing René Dubos, Relph explains that “the identity of a particular place can persist through many external changes because there is some inner, hidden force—‘a god within.’”<sup>8</sup> I think the phrase “a god within” is accurate, albeit somewhat ambiguous. Similar to religious gods, constructed on the faith of believers through the ages, “a god within” at a place is constructed by the residents' collective memories. The ghosts of past residents haunt the landscape to make a space the place.

Perhaps what I was doing while trying to exhaust<sup>9</sup> the place with walking was building a virtual topography in my mind. Like a medieval monk memorizing the plan of St. Gall to meditate, I drew a map of the Banpo apartment complex in my mind. It was to keep the “god within” in that place safe in my memory and to draw a virtual map for my future self. By keeping the virtual map in my mind, I prayed for safety against the destructive fragility of human memory, for being able to recall the place. According to the psychologist Charles Fernyhough, St. Gall was never meant to be built; rather, the plan was for it to be a guide using which monks could meditate. He explains medieval memoria in *Pieces*

7, 8 Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion Limited, 1976), 30–31.  
9 Georges Perec, *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* (New York: Wakefield Press, 2010).

*of Light* (2013): “Larger structures, or pictoriae, such as the Plan of St. Gall or scriptural descriptions of other real or imaginary architectures, provided monks with frameworks, handy blueprints for organizing their knowledge. A thinker could internalize such a plan and populate it with his own images.”<sup>10</sup>

However, memories are not powerful enough to keep village-scale architecture in a person’s mind forever. This is why the former residents of the apartments being reconstructed, including myself, are obsessed with archives. To make an archive is akin to preserving the plan of St. Gall: to renavigate the future self who has been sentenced to forgetting. Charles Fernyhough wrote of the nature of human memory: “Autobiographical memories are not possessions that you either have or do not have. They are mental constructions, created in the present moment, according to the demands of the present.”<sup>11</sup> We do not browse the shelves of videotapes in our brains when we recall a memory. Rather, we reconstruct the memory every time we recall. Sometimes, in the process of reconstruction, we add emotions, beliefs, and even knowledge gained from later experiences. Thus, remembering is the process of narrative reconstruction.

What constitutes the integrity of existence? I believe it is the memories accumulated on the surface of oneself: numerous moments of our past pile atop our bodies to make us who we are, even though more than 90 percent of the human body is renewed within a year. Knowing that human memories are not a complete product but a continuous

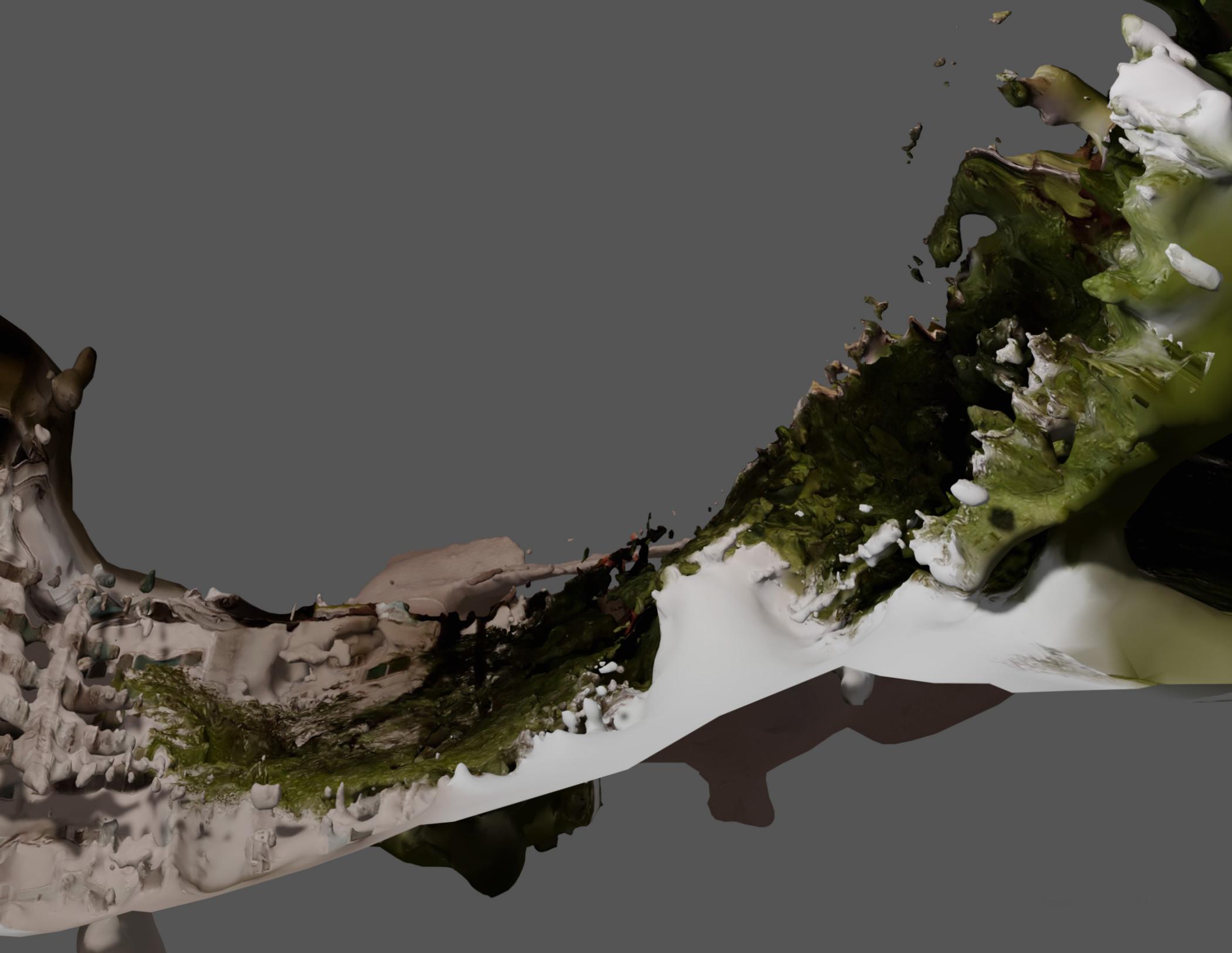
process and that they are what makes a space the place and a person the person, the ontology of both humans and places is “under construction.” The horizon of existence looks like a construction site. To remember is to construct, and to reside is to construct.

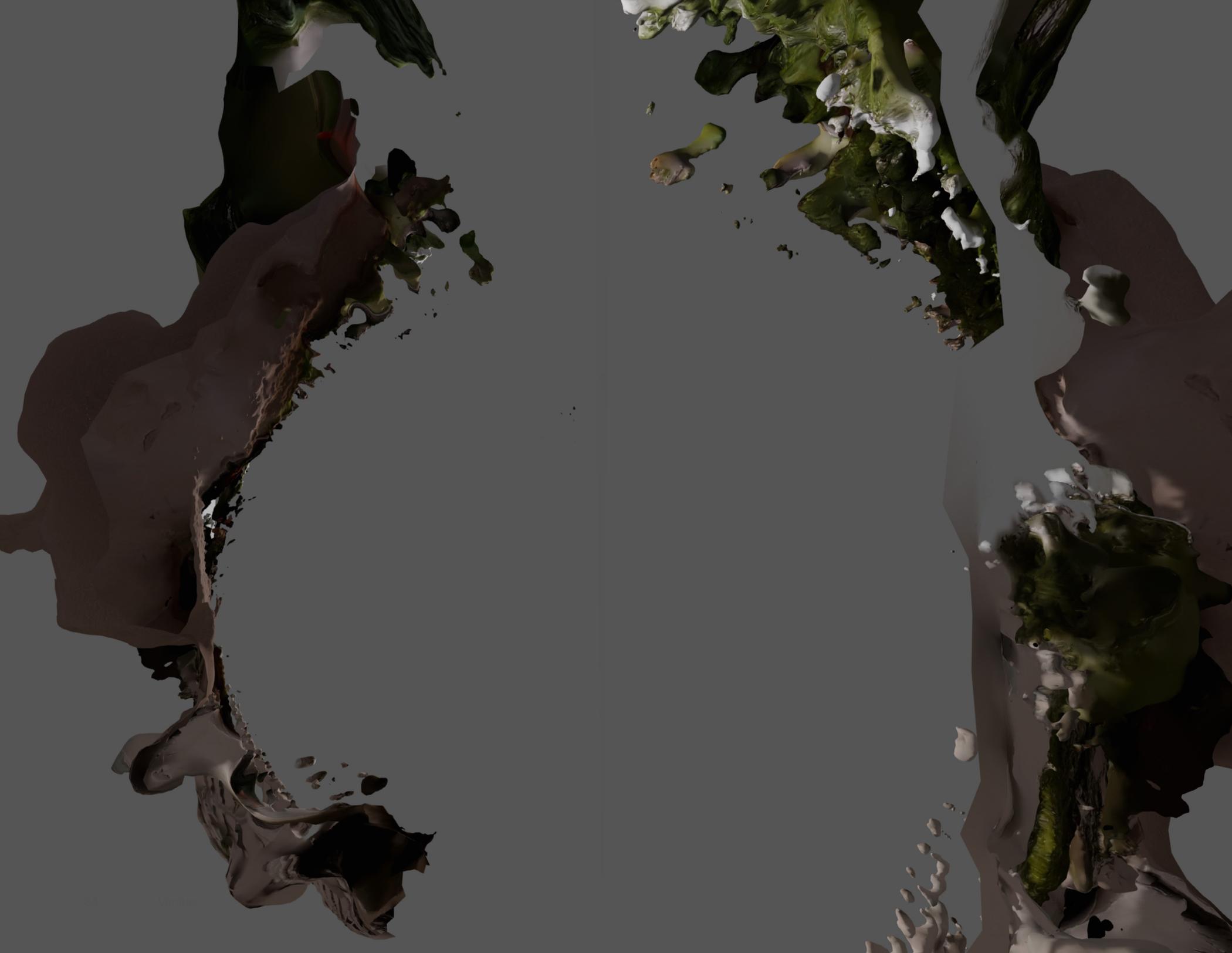
10 Charles Fernyhough, *Pieces of Light* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2013), 122–23.

11 Charles Fernyhough, *Pieces of Light* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2013), 10.

p.30, 31 Unknown, *Plan of Saint Gall*, early 9th century (ca.820–830), Parchment, 1 folio, Stiftsbibliothek Sankt Gallen, Reichenau.



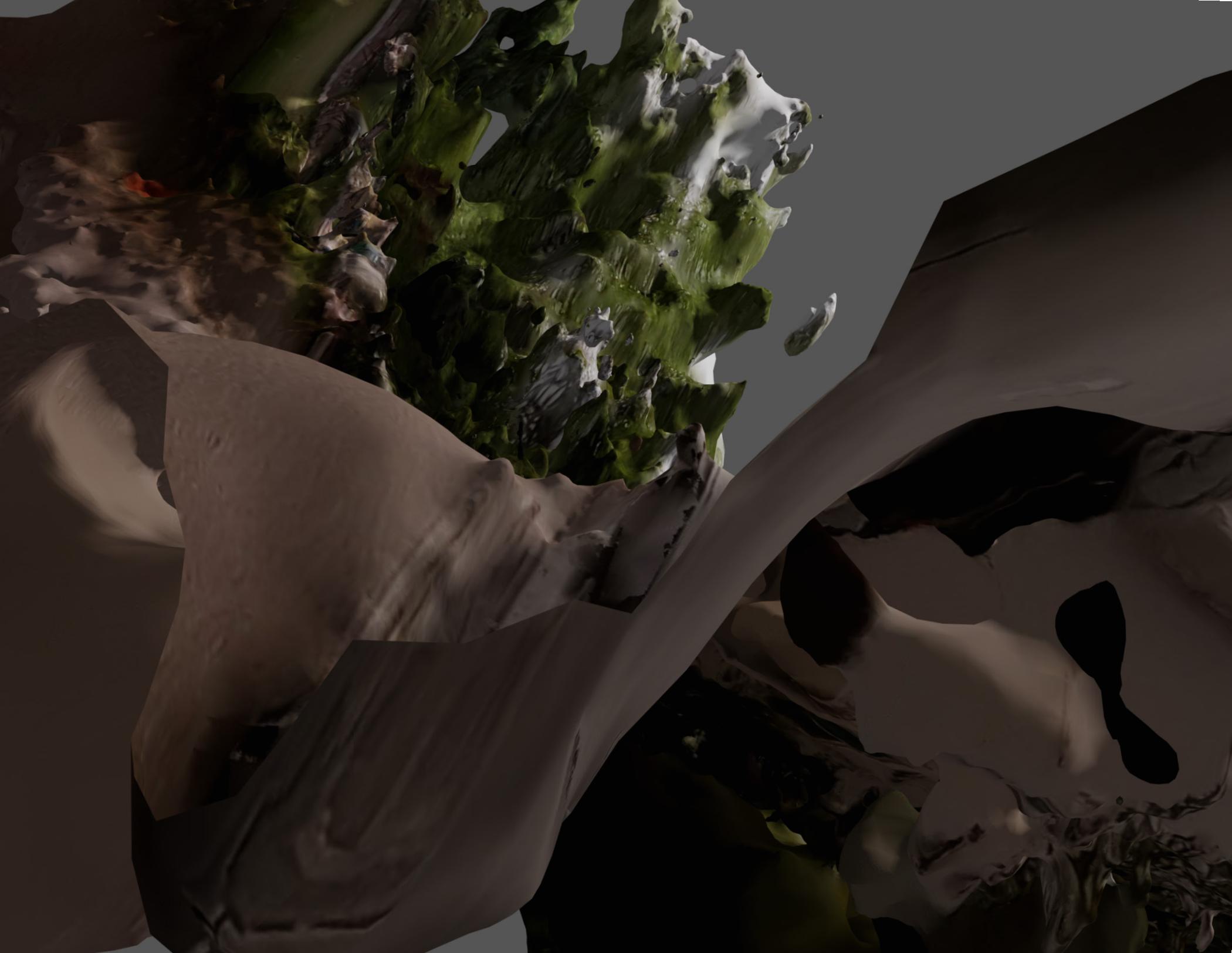




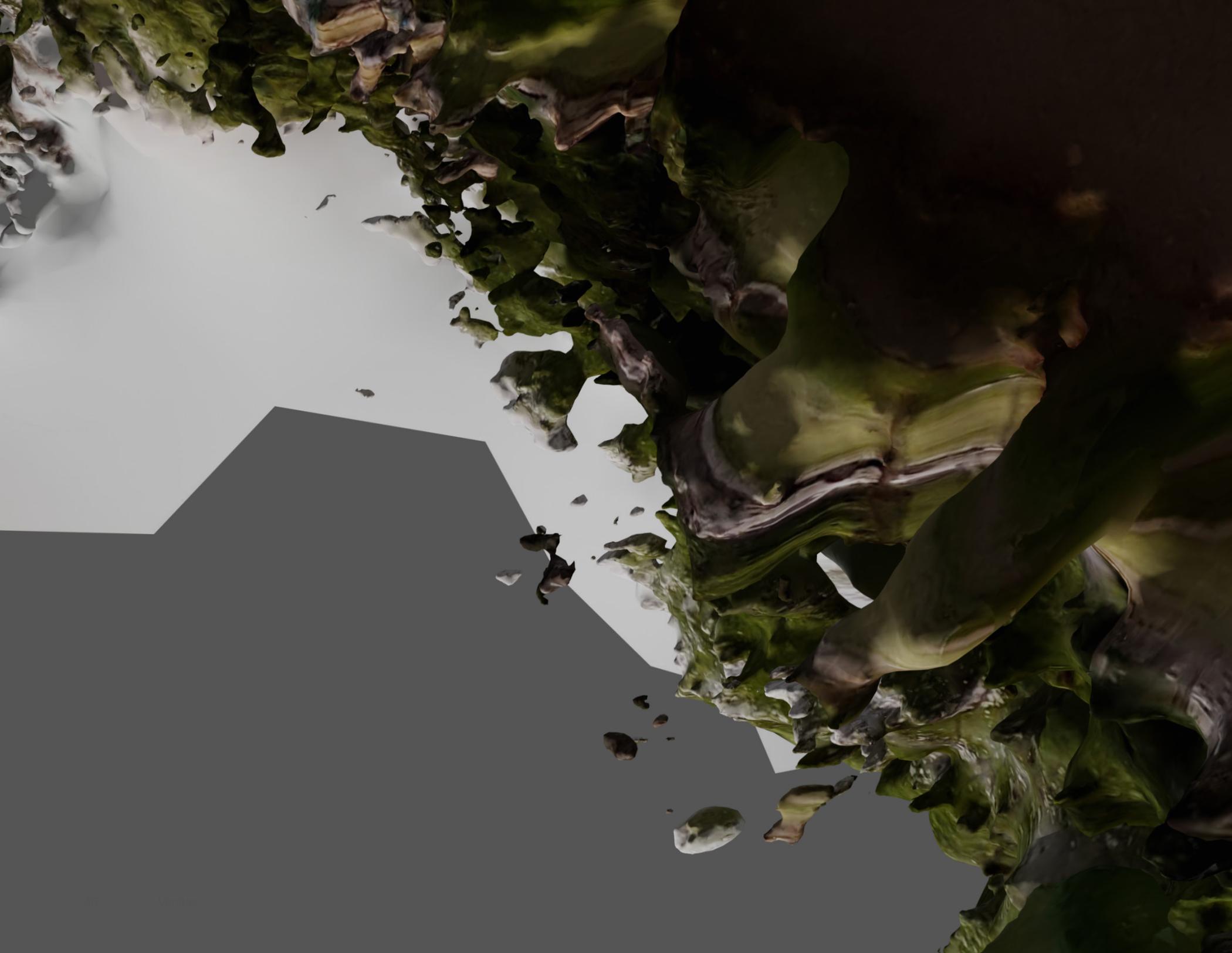














# Collective Memory Photogrammetry Cyberspace Omnipresence Meandering Heterotopia Alleyway Construction Site Mirror

If “a god within” a place is constructed by the collective memory of those who resided there, the visual construct of a lost place might look like a virtual 3D model created by collective photogrammetry.<sup>12</sup> The high resolution of topographic representation in photogrammetry relies on the number of images taken from various angles and focal points. Therefore, the virtual topographic model in a collective mind would be in high resolution, with a large file size, and would lack consistency in its representational appearance due to the number of rememberers and unverifiable datasets from memories. It might look like an assemblage of everything—people, places, memories, voices, smells, sounds, lights, and air—whether made up or not. In this sense, a lost place could be considered a “consensual hallucination,” borrowing William Gibson’s allegory of cyberspace in *Neuromancer* (1984).<sup>13</sup> The sense of a lost place might be similar to that of cyberspace—a virtual void inside a digital screen operated by the internet.

At present, digital space is broadly categorized into cyberspace and metaverse. The term “cyberspace” was popularized in the 1980s by William Gibson’s novel *Neuromancer* (1984), which used it to describe a global

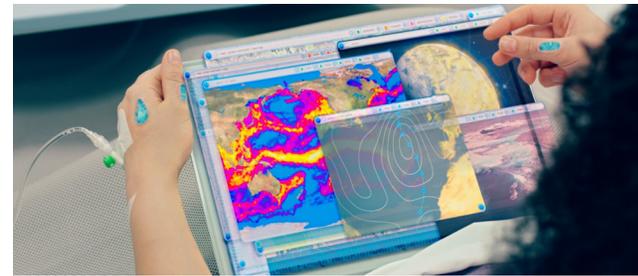
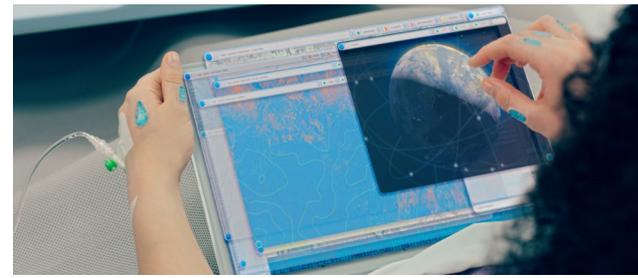
- 12 Photogrammetry is the process of creating accurate measurements and 3D models of physical objects and environments using photographs. It involves taking multiple photographs of an object or scene from different angles and then using specialized software to analyze these images and generate a 3D model. The images are typically taken using a camera or a drone, and the software uses algorithms to calculate the position and orientation of each image in the 3D space. Afterward, the software uses this information to reconstruct the geometry of the object or scene and create a digital 3D model that can be viewed and manipulated on a computer.
- 13 William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Berkley Publishing Group, 1984), 128. *Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation (...) A graphic representation of data abstracted from banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding..*

technology-driven environment. Neal Stephenson coined the term “metaverse” in *Snow Crash* (1992) to describe a virtual immersive space succeeding the internet. Both cyberspace and the metaverse revolve around control that utilizes digital technologies. However, while cyberspace is a boundless, seamless, and bodiless digital plane, the metaverse is a built environment divided by community-based boundaries.

I think the present-day digital experience resembles that of cyberspace rather than the metaverse. We are naturally familiar with the sense of digital connection or extension. Fingers existing as weightless keystrokes, a thumb existing as an endlessly scrollable page, and eyes existing as a pixelated void, we are dependent on our personal devices’ CPU capacity to keep up with the world. In contrast, the metaverse requires our bodies to undergo a counterintuitive process of translation. As it involves a digital-physical experience in an onscreen virtual environment, our senses must translate the virtual physicality into the language of cyberspace to be within the metaverse.

The spatial characteristics of cyberspace are well illustrated in the science fiction miniseries *Years and Years* (2019), created by Russell T. Davies. In it, Bethany, the oldest daughter in the family, identifies herself as a “transhuman,” defining herself as an extension of technology. In episode 5, set in a hypothetical 2028, Bethany receives a brain implant that enables her to interact directly with the internet. She explains what she is capable of to her parents:

While we were talking, at exactly the same time, I wondered about the 80 days of rain — where it came from, why it was, what comes next. And I keyed into satellites, just 30 seconds ago, so I can see the course



of El Niño. And I can tap into pressure sensors along the Atlantic coast and barometric readings from the ships at sea. If I put all of that together, I’m there. I’m inside it. The tide, the depth of the sea, and the curl of the waves within me. And right now, in Charles Street, Pasadena, a 15-year-old girl called Ephanie Cross has written her first song and put it online. And, ah, she’s got the

Top

*Years and Years*, episode 5, directed by Lisa Mulcahy, written by Russell T. Davies, aired June 11, 2019, on HBO, video, 31:04–32:00, <https://play.hbomax.com/player/urn:hbo:episode:GXN7iNwHs88lpYAEAAAP->.

sweetest voice. So, when I combine all of that — it's joy. In my head, it is absolute joy.<sup>14</sup>

Although her parents are concerned after this conversation, the way Bethany explains how she is connected to technology exemplifies the spatial experience in cyberspace these days. The only difference between Bethany and us is that we need a PC to be omnipresent, while Bethany does not. Within the digital context, time is compressed and space is expanded. The extreme level of compression and expansion makes users feel omnipresent, which is a god-like experience to a certain extent. By sitting in front of a computer monitor and extending our arms to a keyboard, we access data from desktops, power lines, the underground, the seabed, and a data center in the middle of a desert, seemingly simultaneously. The way we can float everywhere while being in one physical location is like being lost in the map of words floating inside our minds, which simultaneously reflects in cyberspace.

In contrast, an analog technology-mediated experience involves a delay in time. In the film *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982), a draughtsman is invited to draw the garden of a manor and ends up discovering evidence related to a murder case. This is possible because the draughtsman exists within the location but does not truly belong to it. He only exists as a stranger to the place; in front of an art grid placed between the garden and the easel—a small heterotopia of an observer.

Michel Foucault explained the concept of heterotopia

14 *Years and Years*, episode 5, directed by Lisa Mulcahy, written by Russell T. Davies, aired June 11, 2019, on HBO, video, 31:04–32:00, <https://play.hbomax.com/player/urn:hbo:episode:GXN7iNwHs881pYAEAAAP->.



in two lectures: “Heterotopia” (1966) and “Utopian Body” (1967). Heterotopia has its etymological roots in the combination of *héteros* (other, different) and *topos* (place) in Ancient Greek, literally meaning “other space.” Although ambiguously phrased by Foucault, heterotopia describes “a world off-center with respect to normal or everyday spaces, one that possesses multiple, fragmented, or even incompatible meanings.”<sup>15</sup>

Roland Barthes practiced “present writing” in *Incidents* (1987), passively and objectively writing the scenery in front of him as if he was taking a snapshot. While the speed of the camera shutter prevents rational

Top Peter Greenaway, “New trailer for *The Draughtsman's Contract* - in cinemas from 11 November 2022 | BFI,” BFI Youtube Channel, September 23, 2022, Movie Trailer, 0:23, 1:04, 1:21, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CmCMum1xfX0>.

15 Michiel Dehaene and Lieven De Cauter, eds., *Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 1.

interference, hands-on writing facilitates tactile translation from an idea to the physical. Therefore, Roland Barthes's attempt at "present writing" is a paradox of existing both inside and outside the scenery, meta-experiencing the present, and being an observer while being an actor. This in-between or delayed spatio-temporality is caused by the tactility of analog technologies—an art grid, pen, pencil, and paper—and the time needed to develop a snapshot taken with an analog camera. While digital technologies provide virtual simultaneity, a disconnection in time and space is an artifact of analog technologies. We are seamless with the digital, while the seam is visible in the analog.

Returning to a remembered lost place and how it resembles cyberspace, it can be said that these are similar in the sense that they are built on collective memory. Moreover, recollection occurs in the present, just as we feel omnipresent in the digital. When we recall a memory, we are present simultaneously at the place in our memories and where we are in the present reality. Recalling a memory of a lost place involves meandering in the topography, similar to wandering in floating words in the digital. Perhaps to mourn a place is to wander within the memories and the loss of emotional direction.

Meandering is a heterotopian act. Aimless wandering halts an individual's experience of time within the spatial context, delocating them to a certain extent. This type of walking is distinct from a tourist's strolling, in which they experience the world around them like a stranger. A walker in a tourist destination does not exist in the scene but forms a part of its collage: the place and the walker exist on different planes. In contrast, walking in a familiar place involves becoming a part of that place; it is the act of withdrawing

subjectivity and acquiring objectivity, seamlessly merging into the place and becoming the scene.

Itaewon is one of the busiest areas in Seoul, South Korea, and it has strong heterotopian characteristics. In modern post-war Seoul, Itaewon was initially developed as a nightlife district for U.S. soldiers stationed at the nearby U.S. Army base. Subsequently, Itaewon became an area where a large population of foreigners resided. Itaewon is currently the most diverse cultural area in South Korea and is also known as the center of queer culture. It is common to see small alleys in Itaewon lined with queer bars and clubs, making it a place where queer people are relatively visible on the street.

Every October, Yongsan-gu hosts the Itaewon Global Village Festival in conjunction with the Halloween Festival. On October 29, 2022, 159 people died of suffocation at the festival. The cause of the incident, which occurred in an alleyway in Itaewon, was attributed to overcrowding and inadequate crowd control by the police. Mass suffocation in a modern metropolis was a shock to the general public, especially as it could have happened to anyone unlucky enough.

Two months after the incident, I visited this alleyway. The alley walls were covered in sticky notes with mourning messages, and drinks and flowers had been placed on the street as offerings to the deceased. People prayed or shed tears in front of these, and Buddhist monks bowed three thousand times over six hours at the opening of the alley. In Buddhism, bowing is a ritual for mourning the deceased; some say that, if a person bows ten thousand times without pausing, it can bring the dead back to life.

Like any other alley, this alley had a starting point and an endpoint, and both ends were connected to other

streets. I had seen this street prior to the incident and might even have walked there before. Everyone certainly knew the structure of the alley they were standing in. However, no one there used the street as a street. Everyone was lost there. As if I was drifting in a current of water, I felt the loss of direction. Mourning, anger, sadness, and despair swirled in the direction of suffocating pressure in muddled governmental systems that should have prevented those 159 people from dying.

An alleyway is a by-product of a city's architecture since it is formed as the result of two buildings constructed side by side. This specific alleyway in Itaewon used to be considered a passage, as opposed to a place, until the mass suffocation converted the space into a heterotopia. It has become a heterotopia that is "simultaneously represented, contested and inverted; the kinds of places that are outside all places."<sup>16</sup> It contests the city and its function, inverting its function to a mourning place. Merely imagining a narrow alley now makes me feel death. The place acts like a mirror—when I see the place, I see the deaths of those 159 people, my own hypothetical death, and the death of social infrastructure.

The reconstruction of the Banpo apartment complex, where I had spent the majority of my life, began in the fall of 2021; I was not in the country then. In December 2022, I visited the site following the same route I did in high school. Standing in front of the crosswalk at a large intersection, I encountered my former home village. The whole neighborhood was blocked by white walls, which looked like



Right A Screen Shot of Google Map in Itaewon, Seoul, South Korea, April 2, 2023.

16 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" (1967), in *Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society*, edited by Michiel Dehaene and Lieven De Caeter (New York: Routledge, 2008), 17.



a virtual plane where spatiality had been eradicated as if it had been synthesized with a digital tool. As the buildings in the apartment complex were only five stories high, the entire complex was obscured by the walls. When I entered the neighborhood's main street, pedestrians and cars rarely passed by. There was no one waiting at the bus stop. All the shops and restaurants had become empty lots, and only the residents and workers in the Hanshin residential-commercial complex (two five-story apartment buildings connected by a one-story market building), which had not been a part of the reconstruction, occasionally passed by. The Hanshin complex was nestled within the construction site, positioning itself between the site and non-construction areas. The inside of the walls was visible through the mesh screen at the construction site's entrance. I could see the upper parts of some buildings that had been destroyed. I was able to see the construction site more closely from the surrounding streets of the Hanshin buildings. The buildings that had not yet been demolished were surrounded by scaffolding, and all the windows had been removed. The windowless buildings seemed like windows themselves, allowing views of the landscape behind them through the front facade. I was able to see the construction site through the holes in the white walls, over some relatively short white walls, and through the accidentally opened entrance of the site. The streets that



Left Kelly, *Cemetery in Manila Philippines*, photograph, Pexels, April 15, 2022, <https://www.pexels.com/photo/cemetery-in-manila-philippines-11828648/>.

used to surround the buildings had become a static grid, no longer an accumulation of dynamic walkways. The gardens, trees, birds, and insects had disappeared, leaving only residues of living which had been pushed aside like a pile of waste. The site was quiet, and I stepped in through an open entrance to observe until I was kicked out by a worker. The site was no longer my place. The apartment complex had become an object of a gaze rather than a place of residence. What did I gaze at?

The scenery was in a state of suspended flux, condensed by the process yet inestimably still. It was either dead or preborn, but neither tangible nor real. It was an unintentional but inevitable by-product of urban planning, in which only compartmentalization and construction exist.

The present was suspended at the site, while previous and forthcoming terrains were superimposed on one another like ghosts. It was not only a window frame for viewing other spaces but also a portal connecting the past and the future, the assumed and the imaginary. The construction site was simultaneously a disorganized backstage for a performance and a proscenium theater for a dramatic illusion, a film and the screen on which it was projected, a white wall and the art on it, an alleyway between buildings, the ship of Theseus on a great journey, the throne of Oedipus, and a graveyard.

As by-products of a city, a construction site and an alleyway reflect the city like a synecdoche. As we see ourselves in certain deaths, the city reflects its own death in heterotopias. Perhaps these heterotopias reveal the city's inherent destruction: how it is not a complete product, how it





is constantly dying, and how it is always under construction. Perhaps knowing the city is mourning the city, knowing the place is mourning the place, and knowing one is mourning one. Judith Butler wrote of grief in “Violence, Mourning, Politics” (2002):

Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing. But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility. If my fate is not originally or finally separable from yours, then the “we” is traversed by a relationality that we cannot easily argue against; or, rather, we can argue against it, but we would be denying something fundamental about the social conditions of our very formation.<sup>17</sup>

We see our surfaces when we look in a mirror. A mirror is a mediating technology that pulls the ego down to a physical form. Seeing our reflections in the mirror makes us realize that we are not the shapeless speakers in our brains; rather, we are bodies. The body confines the ego, the master of its world, and sentences the ego to mortality. Therefore, when we look in a mirror, we see our own death. As with two sides of a mirror, a reflection and the reflected, mourning occurs bidirectionally. Mourning is grief for the dead and for one’s future self. Therefore, the ability to mourn is a

17 Judith Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics,” in *Precarious Life* (London: Verso, 2004), 22.

common ground for us as human beings. To mourn is an acknowledgment that we are incomplete, always in process, under construction, and constantly dying.







# Missing Pieces

Reconstruction has several synonyms. It is the reconstruction of a place as well as human memory, the translation of languages, and the transduction of data. Within every process of reconstruction, the loss of data is inevitable. What I am intrigued by is the missing piece—the “god within” the place, memory, language, and data. Moreover, it is the collective memory of the residents in the place, the exact moment in the present that will soon be forgotten, the nuance of an idea before it was verbalized, and the raw data prior to transmission. They are, by nature, untranslatable, uncapturable, unpossessable, and sometimes ineffable. It is an art by which I can capture what is impossible to capture or, at least, what is left as a by-product of the process.

What can I discover when I translate a handheld video of my home into a 3D model, my footsteps into a midi file, or a poem into an image? What do the glitch-only results mean? Surrendering to the loss of data and embracing the glitched results is, paradoxically, a tribute to what we have lost. By acknowledging the distance between the original and the reconstructed, I believe we can find the “god within” the place, memory, language, data, and self. With art as a tool, I aim to make a cartography of the untranslatable, the by-product, and the missing pieces—a map of topography where the viewers can be lost and meander.

## Acknowledgement

*Spirited Away* (2001) is an animated film about Chihiro, who is accidentally left in a strange world and struggles to return to where she came from. To live in the strange world, Chihiro has her name taken away and receives a new name: Sen. If she wants to return to the real world, she cannot lose her true name. Chihiro's main ally is Haku, who has forgotten his real name and cannot return to the world he came from. Toward the end of the film, Chihiro rides on the back of Haku, who has transformed into a dragon, and feels a sense of déjà vu. She says, "Haku, listen. I don't remember this, but my mom told me about it. Once when I was little, I fell in a river. Now a mansion<sup>18</sup> is built over and the river is buried underground. But I just remembered. The river was called, it was called the Kohaku River. Your real name is Kohaku River."<sup>19</sup>

Haku sees Chihiro off toward the path that leads to the real world and says, "I'm fine now. I have my name back. Now I can go home too." He promises Chihiro that they will meet again. The following scene shows a close-up of them holding each other's hands. Chihiro then lets go of Haku's hand and moves forward. Haku's hand lingers in the scene for a moment before it falls and disappears from the frame. The background, old stones covered with moss, fills the entire screen for a second, and then Chihiro returns to her world as if nothing happened, as if it were all just a dream.

I remember the shock of watching this scene. Haku said he would return and that they would meet again, but it was a white lie since Chihiro is a human who lives within a flow of time that only moves forward, whereas Haku is a

<sup>18</sup> In Japan, a mansion is functionally similar to an apartment building.

<sup>19</sup> *Spirited Away*, directed by Hayao Miyazaki (2001, Studio Ghibli), video, 1:58:46–1:58:52. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bkpMLAMOU7U>.

place that has been demolished and buried under a building. Humans are like fish that cannot swim against the current and can only breathe within time. We live, saying goodbyes to all the remnants that cannot keep up with the current that carries us. Therefore, life is a constant farewell. We cannot hold on to it no matter what we do. This grief is our ontology, the common ground of our existence.

I want to bid farewell to the two years I spent in the strange world of RISD while expressing my gratitude to the people who supported me so that I could become who I am today.

I would like to thank the teachers I met here, namely Shona, Stephen, Fletcher, and Mairéad, who believed in my potential more than I did and made me trust my capacity.

I am also grateful to my family: Mom, Dad, Hyunjung, Areumma, my aunts, my grandmothers, Sanghak, Jungmin, and everyone who was there for me.

To my friends who are both near and far, thank you for not letting me fall apart.

I also want to thank my teachers in South Korea, especially Professor Baik. I am grateful that I was taught by you.

Finally, I would like to say goodbye to the home I loved. These last two years were a constant walk within the memories of you. In the first year, I could not trace you anywhere, but now, when the spring breeze tickles the back of my neck, I feel like I can see you when I turn around. Mourning does not mean I have lost you; I have you everywhere I go, a constant *déjà vu*.

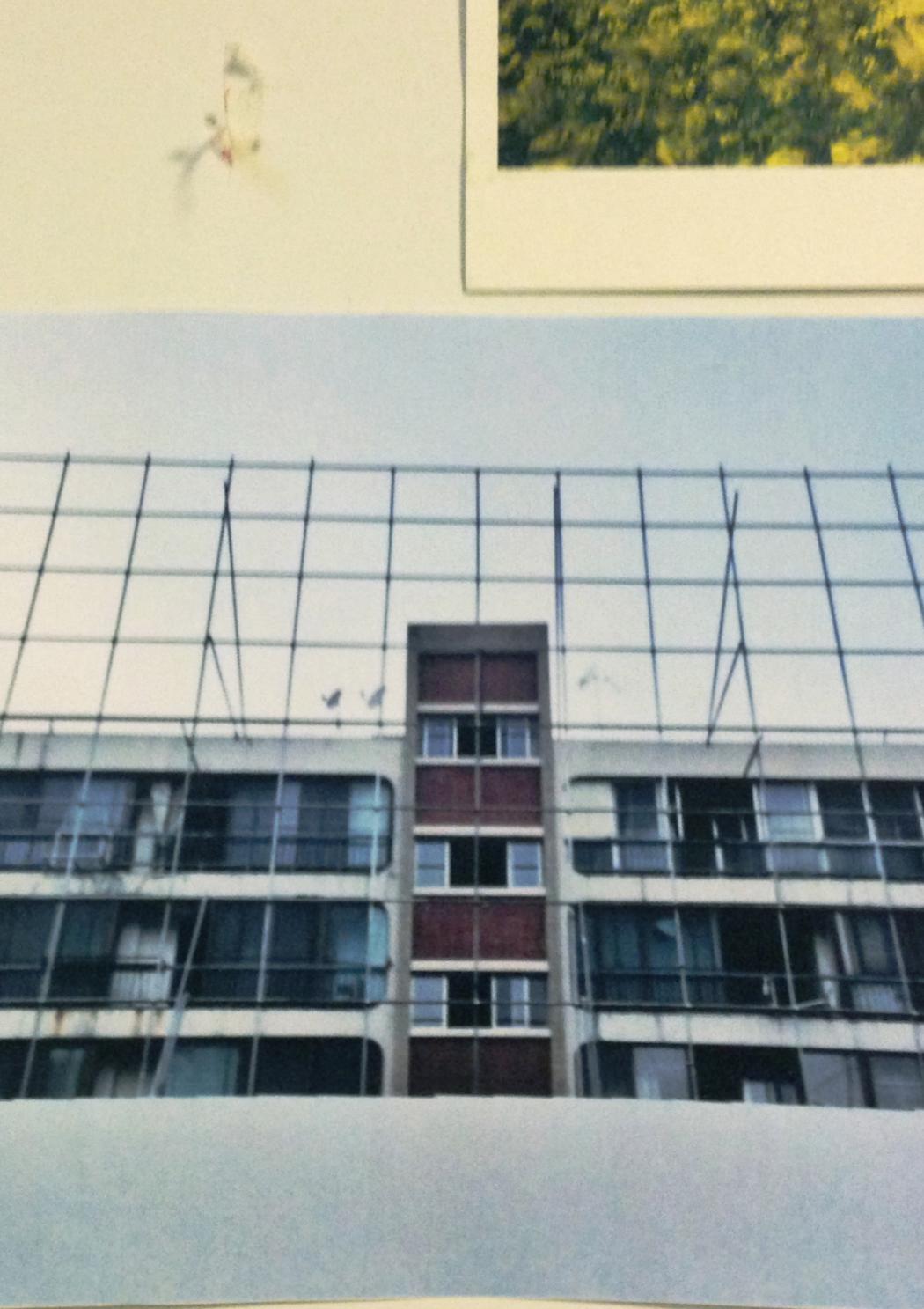
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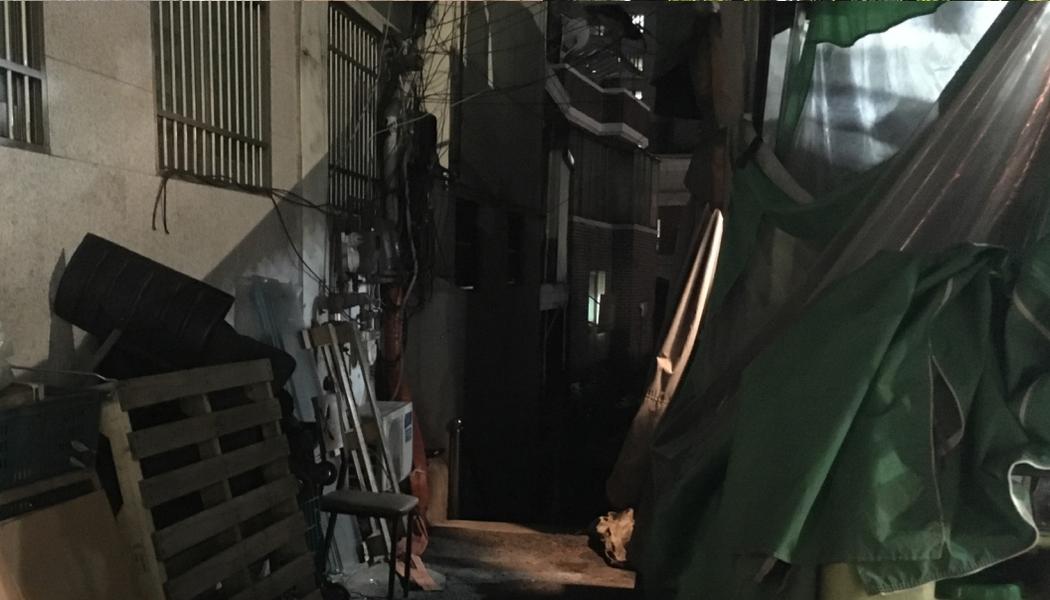


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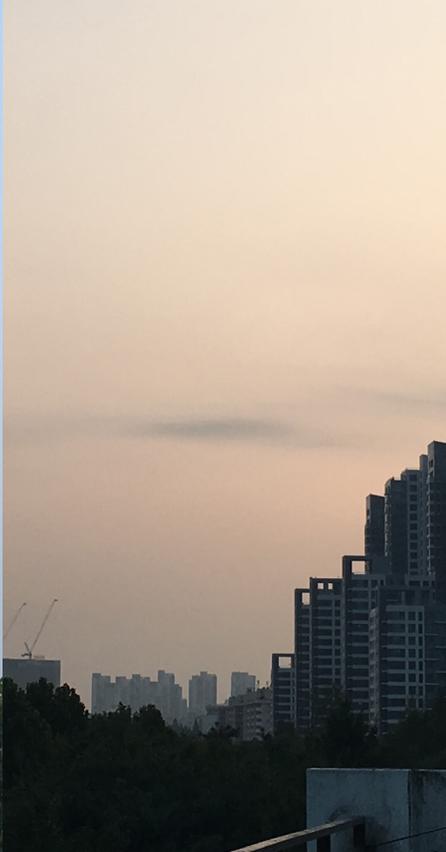


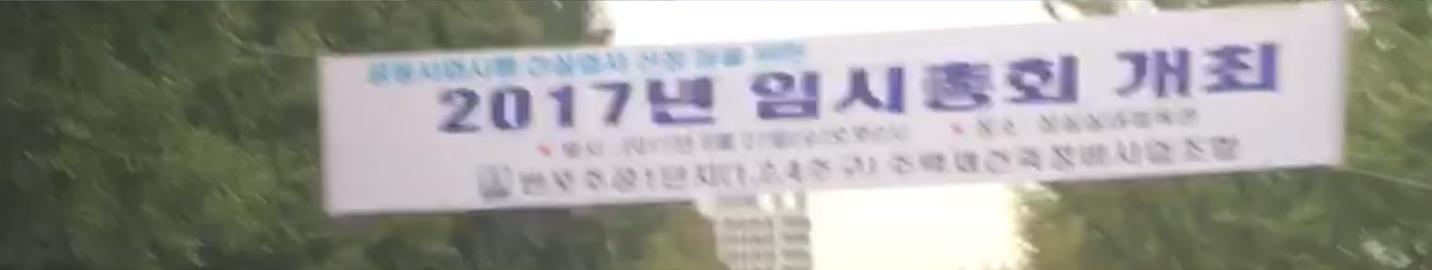
















































66





수돗물 안전  
가정용 수돗물 안전  
수돗물 안전  
수돗물 안전

안전보호구  
착용 철저

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안전보호구  
착용 철저





출자시 일시정지  
보행자 확인필

출자시 일시정지  
보행자 확인필

국립중앙도서관  
국립중앙도서관  
국립중앙도서관





if\_you\_can\_go\_back\_you\_can\_come\_back

Though she may ,

### If You Can Go Back, You Can Come Back

2021  
Interactive Video

When the mouse passes by the window, one-line poem is generated based on the sentence, "If you can go back, you can come back."

if\_you\_can\_go\_back\_you\_can\_come\_back

Though she would move somewhere , he could leave somewhere





## Chada

2021  
Performance with Kamari Smalls

December 4–9, 2021, Fletcher Building #606, RISD

Two performers are seated back to back, facing speakers, playing back each other's voices after a 10-second delay. The performers recite a poem together titled *Between Autumn Equinox and Winter Solstice, Today*, written by Emily Jungmin Yoon, a Korea-born American poet. Once they both finish reciting, the voices from 10 seconds ago linger in the room, between the performers. Similar to the Korean word 'chada,' which can simultaneously mean 'it is cold,' 'it is tea,' 'it is being filled up,' and many other things, the performance unveils the perceptual delay and untranslatability inherent in language. Furthermore, with the echoing and lingering voices between the performers, the performance caresses the poetry of untranslatability.







**Left** (Top to Bottom) Performance with Jordan Metz, Kamari Smalls, Tess Oldfield, and Lilan Yang

Full project documentation can be found on  
[saeohooviii.com/Chada](https://saeohooviii.com/Chada)  
[vimeo.com/657287878](https://vimeo.com/657287878)

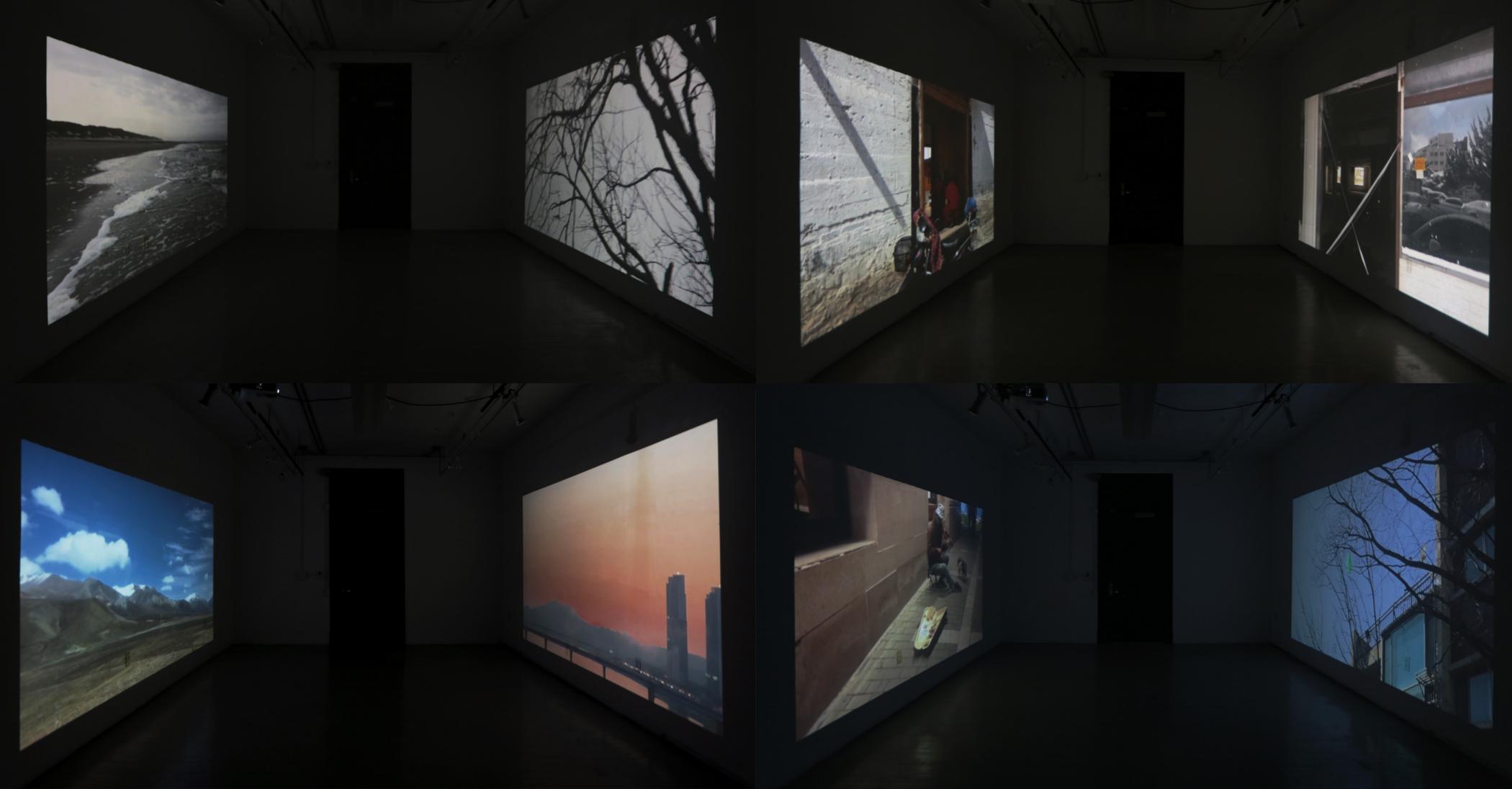


**Letters (with Zuhui Kang)**

2021  
Video Installation

December 4–5, 2021, Fletcher Building #606, RISD

*Letters* were made based on a delayed conversation between two friends living in distant lands during the COVID year. One channel was shot by Zuhui Kang, and another was shot by Sae Oh, within a similar time frame but at a distance.



Full project documentation can be found on  
[saeohoviii.com/Letters](http://saeohoviii.com/Letters)  
[vimeo.com/657356400](https://vimeo.com/657356400)



## Yours Truly

2022

Interactive Installation

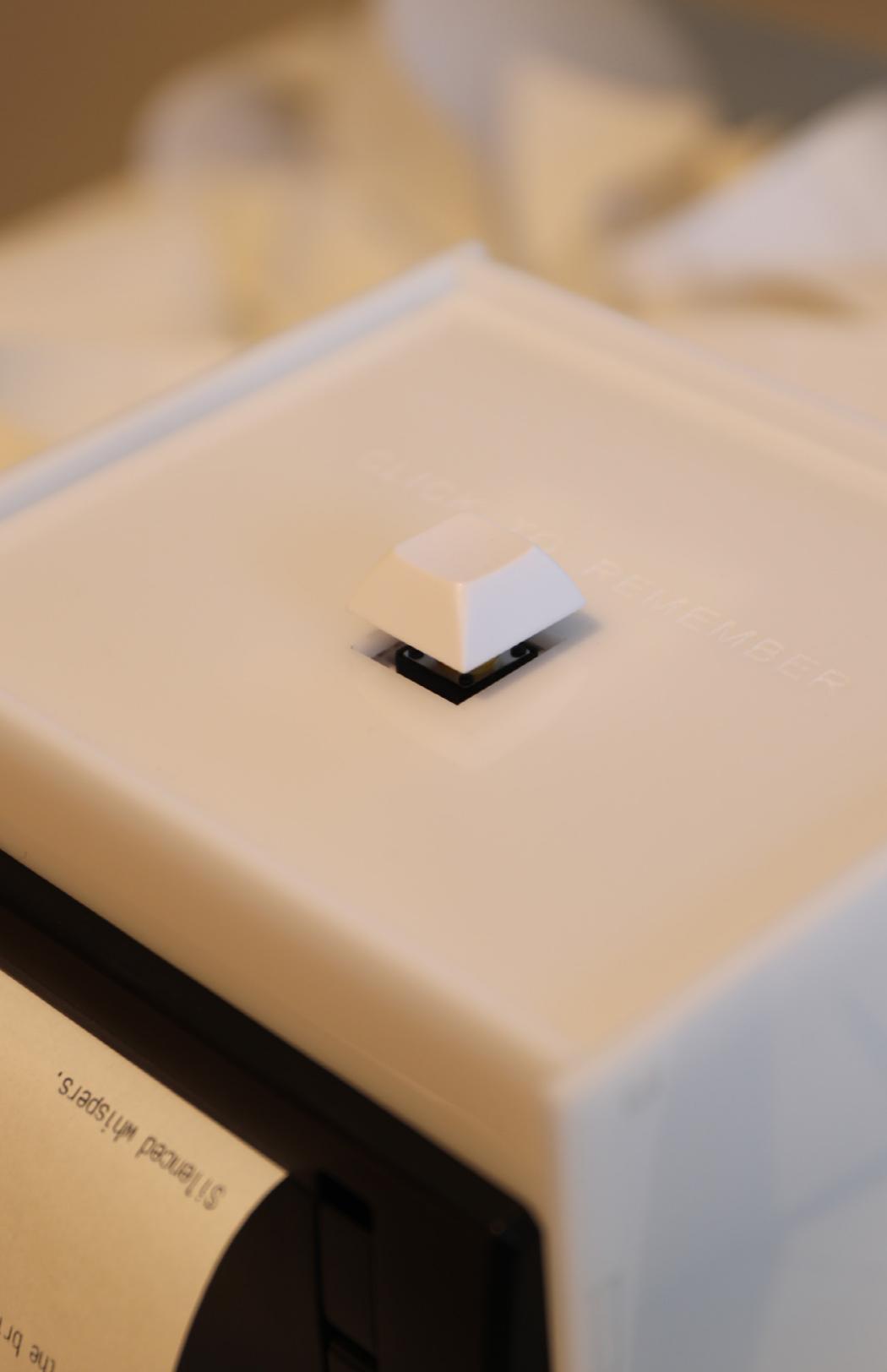
"1+1=22," January 28–February 27, 2022, Sol Koffler Gallery, Providence RI  
"Transitory Void," March 25–27 April 1–3 2022, Cyberarts Gallery, Boston MA

The sentences on screen are from the past writings, depicting a lost place. The place is my home village, which is now deconstructed and only exists in the former residents' memory. The sentences from the writings were rephrased into the present tense and reordered in seasonal order. Without neither temporal specificity nor linear time structure, the sentences in an infinite loop are presented to the viewers for two seconds per a sentence, which makes the viewer's experience rather seeing the traces than reading the text. The viewers can print the sentences to cut and own. However, the printed text will evaporate slowly but eventually, like forgetting a memory. Due to the forgetting traits of human memory, we truly do not own any of our memories. How do we possess our own nostalgia if we cannot claim ownership of our memories?

Small informational text block on the left wall.

Small informational text block on the left wall.





You hear a shovel scratching the frozen ground.



Small informational card on the left wall.

Small informational card on the right wall.





## Letter to Dujo

2022  
Multimedia Installation

"No Longer Transparent," November 4–December 11, 2022, Gelman Gallery,  
Providence RI

Dujo is the unofficial name of my deceased grandmother, a name that only my mother remembers. On one music stand, there is a letter written by Dujo to her daughter when she was studying abroad in the 1980s. The letter was written horizontally on a letter paper in a vertical direction, reflecting the lingering impact of colonialism. Following this approach, the letter was translated into English and written on a music paper. In the video displayed on the other music stand, Dujo's granddaughter recites the letter, which is subsequently transformed into the sound of a string ensemble. Through this piece, I aim to reimagine the process of inheriting memory.



Suppose! It has been a while since  
quite then, but writing a long letter into me  
It must have been cold here the you nearly your ground, not going

Take care of yourself, and always believe your health worth  
If you get sick in such a distant land, you will be lonely and worried  
so keep this in your mind and pay attention to your health. I shall  
care about that before winter, but naturally I do not expect you

attention to nutrition, because when I had, even for a bit, a few  
trouble to breathe and more. It is not about the way I have spent  
to eat meals like eating medicine. I'm sending my special  
love at this level. It's strangely hard to buy a new bag of rice in

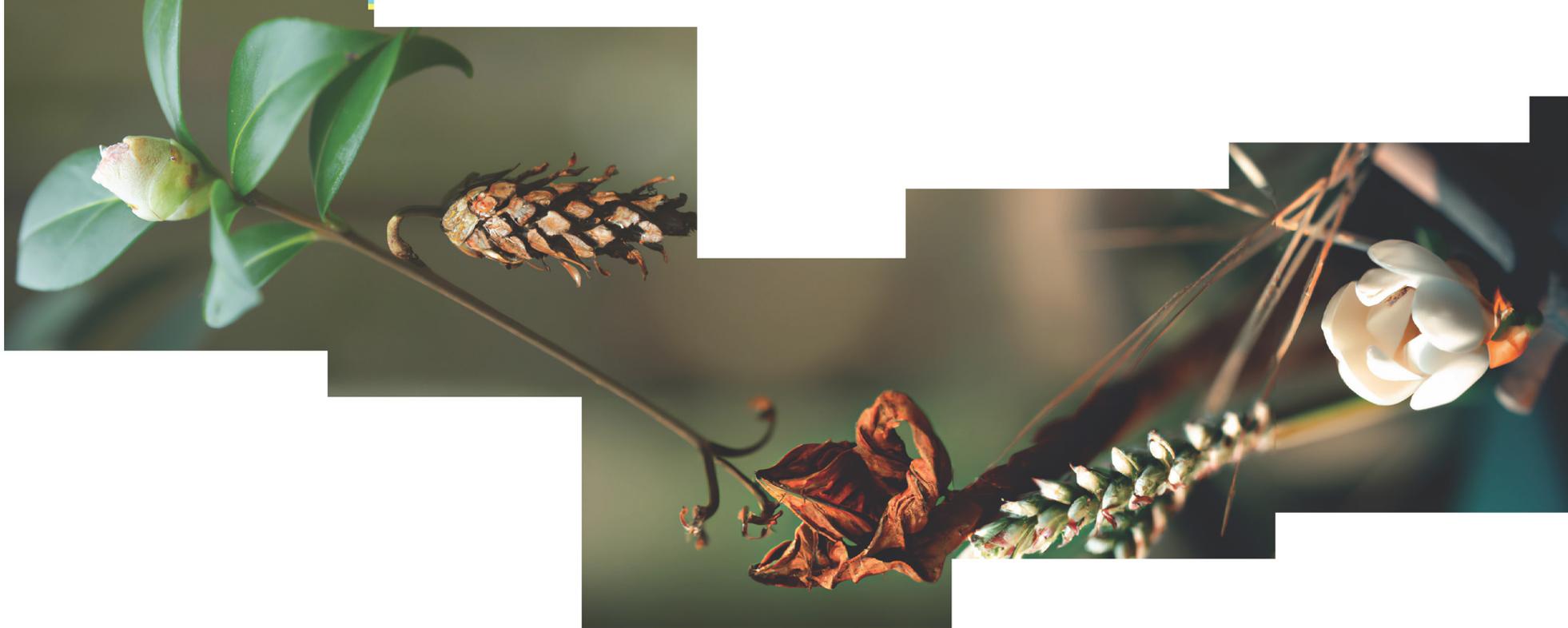
Your father, brother, sister-in-law are well. Since yesterday (17th),  
Singapore has been visited for the holidays. He is surprised to get a  
response to his letter he sent to you. He will be disappointed if he had  
get anything with Christmas. Your sister-in-law was worried about you, so

she sent the post a present. It was not too far from it. I think she  
It was so kind to her to care about you. Don't forget to write her.  
Your sister don't like her, but she should be complimented to say that her  
husband was very kind to her. She should be happy to see you

because she is doing better in her marriage than they are.  
The sister-in-law is also very kind to you. She is very kind to you.

...

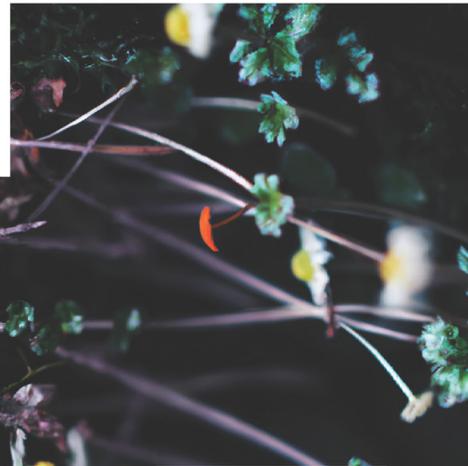
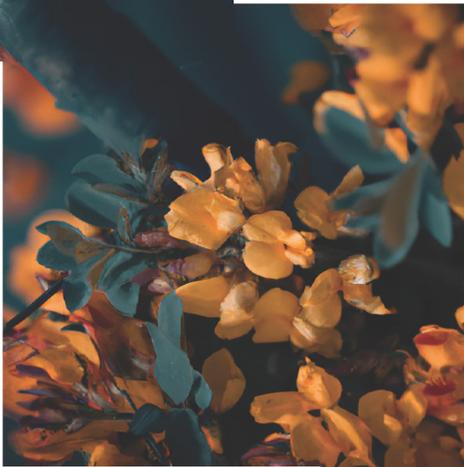
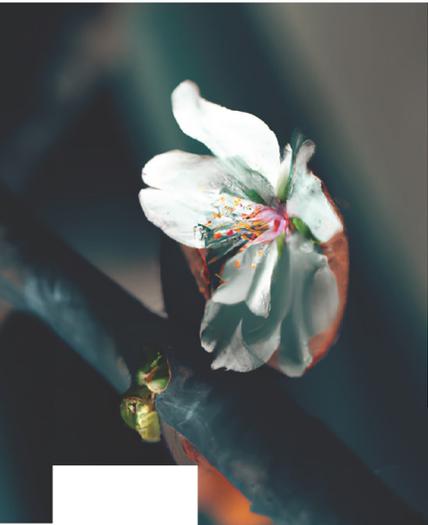




## A Memory

2022  
Poem + Digital Imagery

*A Memory* is an exploration of AI-translated poetry. Each image frame is generated based on the previous image using prompts provided by me to OpenAI Dall E. Each prompt corresponds to a line of poetry, capturing a nostalgic depiction of my hometown. The AI model translates my nostalgia into a stanza of vivid imagery. Now, to whom does this memory belong? Is it the artist's, the viewers', the developers of the Dall E model, or the anonymous owners of the extensive dataset used to train the model? I seek to repurpose the AI image generator's functionality, from averaged results of the vast expanse of the internet dataset to a long stanza of concrete poetry. Can you discern the nostalgia woven between the pixels? Or do you perceive the absurdity of the technology?













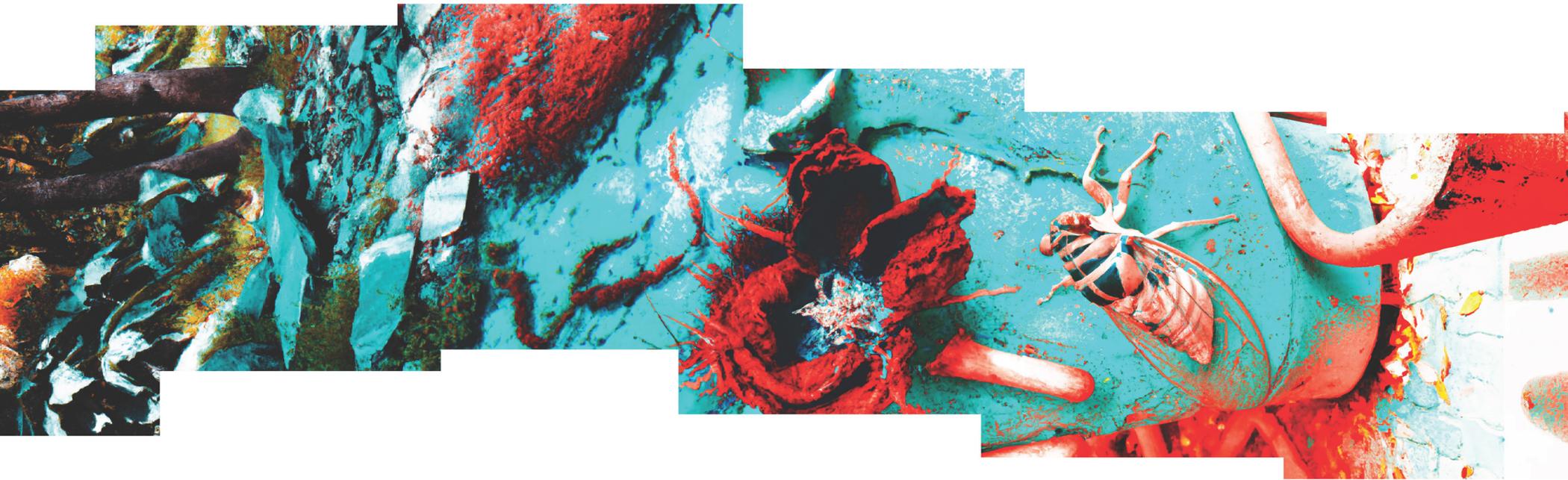
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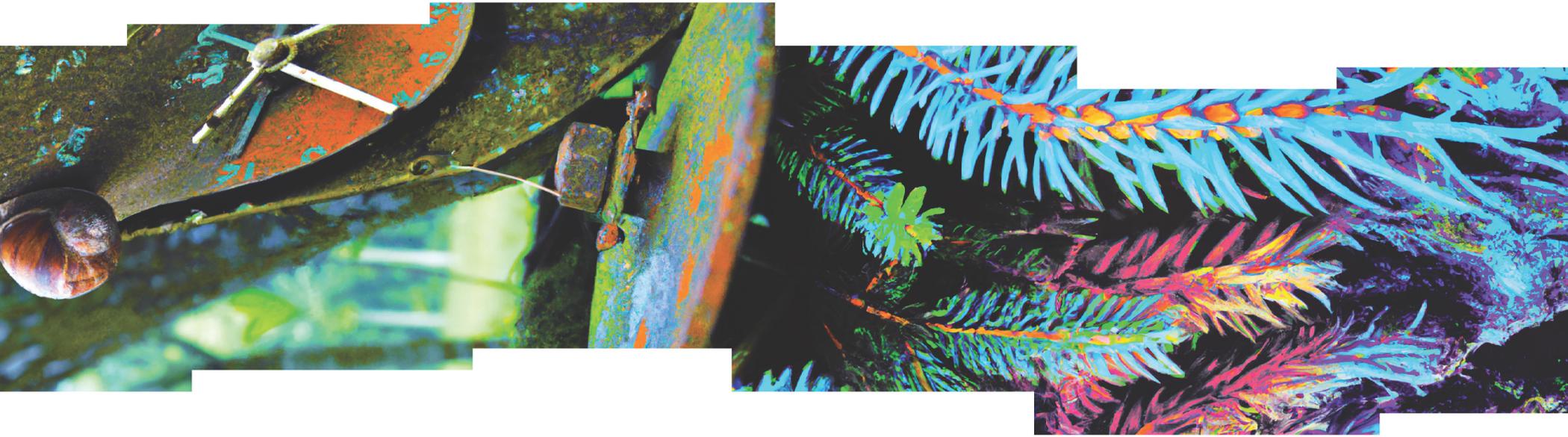


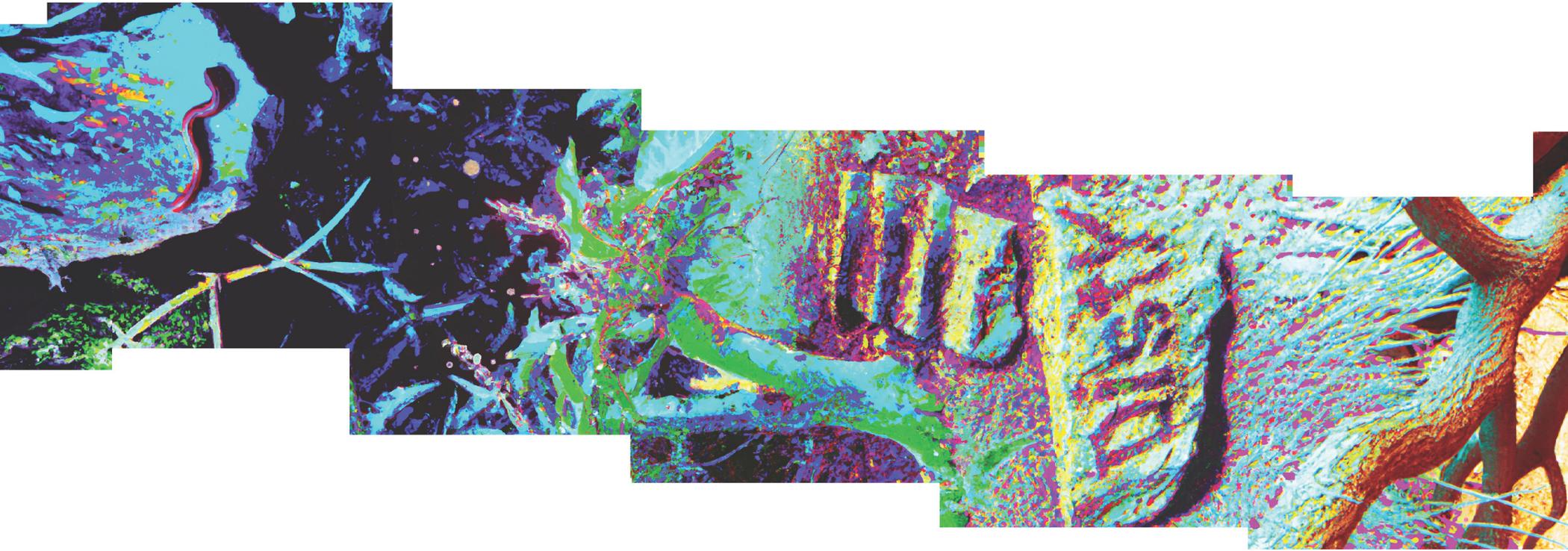










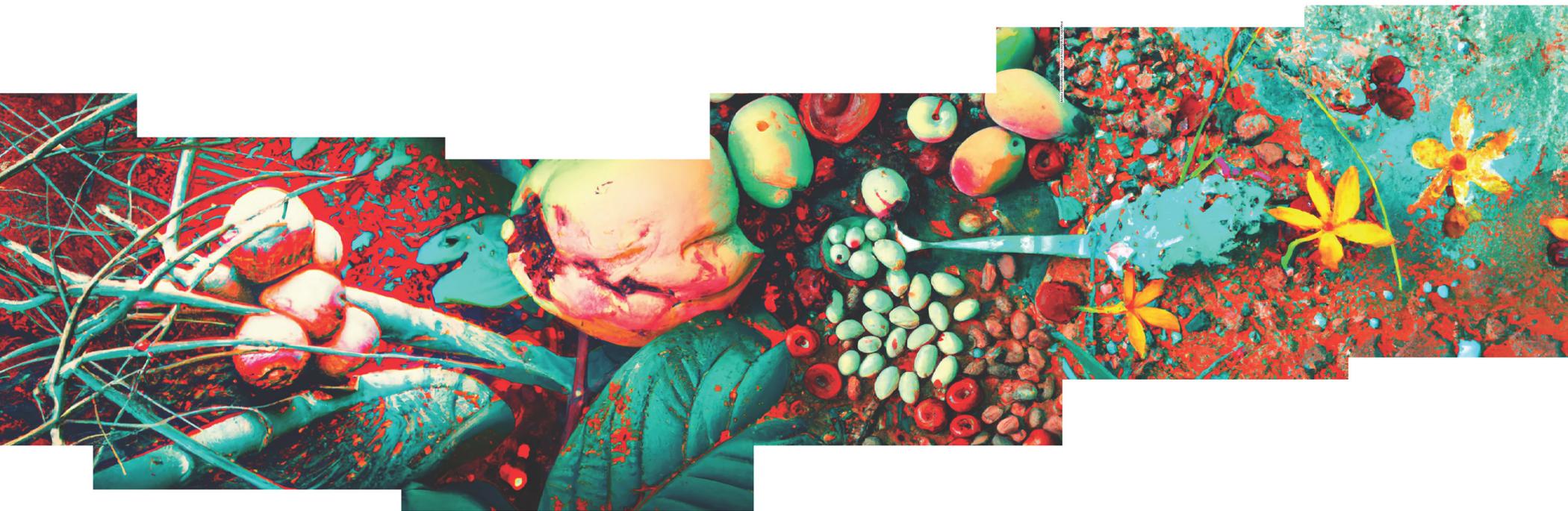


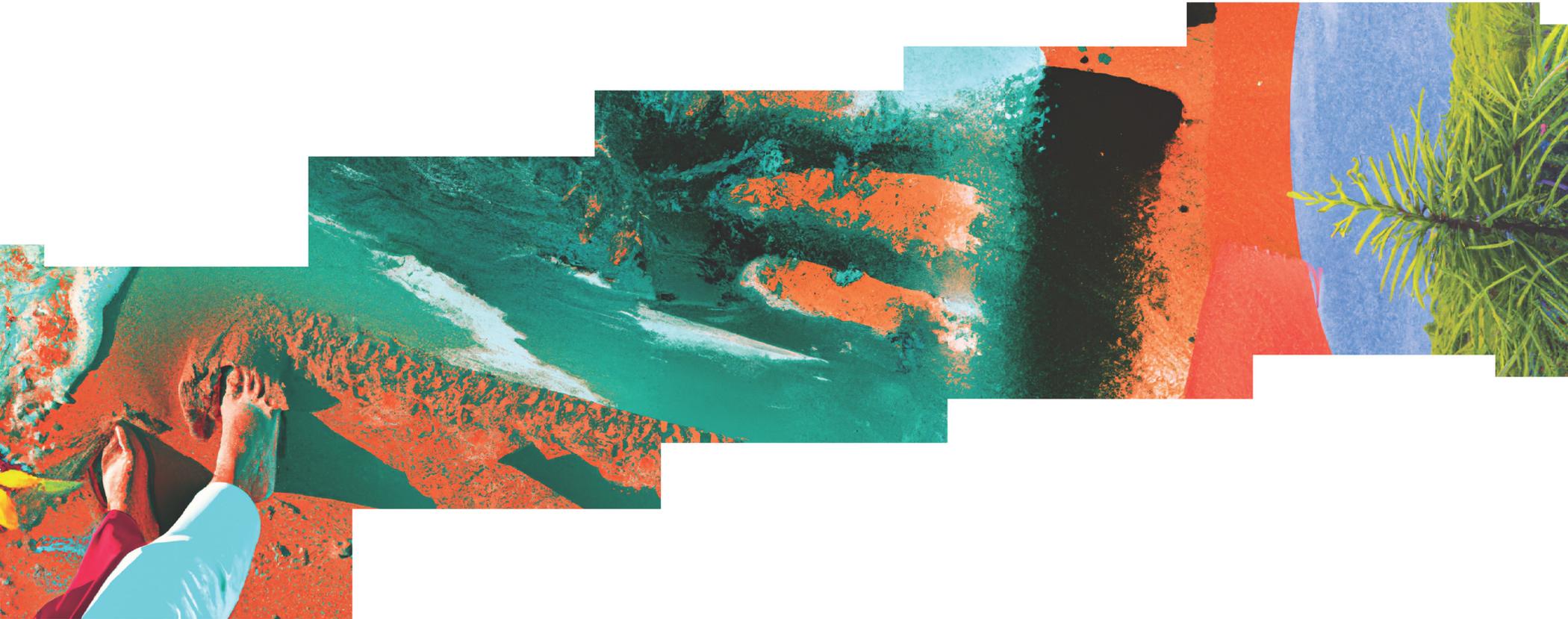




NEBIS VEFOS















## Vanitas

2023  
Multimedia Installation

"RISD Grad Show 2023," May 25–June 3 2023, Rhode Island Convention Center, Providence RI

Reconstruction has several synonyms. It is the reconstruction of a place as well as human memory, the translation of languages, and the transduction of data. Within every process of reconstruction, the loss of data is inevitable. What I am intrigued by is the missing piece. It is, by nature, untranslatable, uncapturable, unpossessable, and sometimes ineffable. It is an art by which I can capture what is impossible to capture or, at least, what is left as a by-product of the process.

Surrendering to the loss of data and embracing the glitched results is, paradoxically, a tribute to what we have lost. *Vanitas* is a tribute to the missing pieces within the reconstruction of human memory, places, and data.

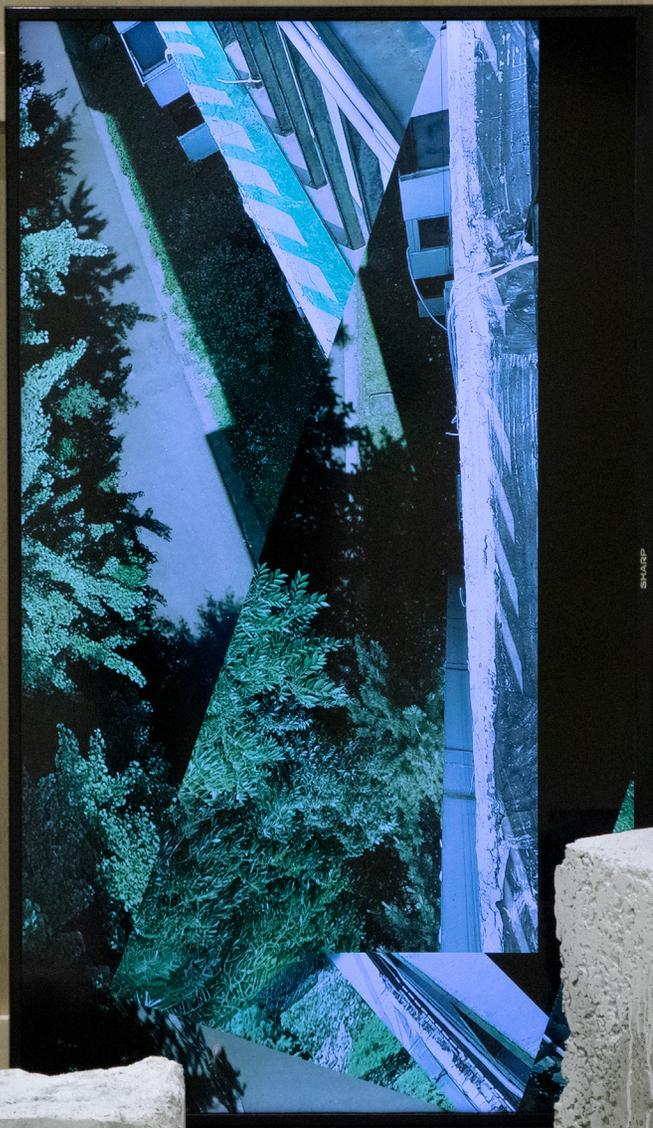


*Vanitas*, Latin for vanity, a mirrored reflection, means Baroque still life painting which uses symbolism to show futility of life, and certain mortality. By using this as a title for my installation, I appropriated the concept of a mirrored death as a symbol of mourning, and turned concrete, wood, and videos into elements constituting a still life.

Wall structures, pallets, concrete, and void inside the monitors are the artifacts of transience. Tall wall structures in the same height with the gallery walls, resemble stage flats and create a small temporary corner facing one of the gallery corners, mirroring their heterotopian characteristics. Inside, pallets act as a temporary space where the viewers can stay, halting the usual time and space. Concrete is a remnant from the process of construction and demolition of urban places, and it is engraved with text. Lastly, the videos show a glitched photogrammetry made from handheld video, a collaged walking sequence in a lost place, and the movement of the virtual walking pathways.

I define this installation as a cartography of the untranslatable, the by-product, and the missing pieces — a map of topography where the viewers can be lost and meander. I question, What can you discover when you meander? What happens when you renounce being a subject and become an object seamlessly blended into the topography?

Full project documentation can be found on [publications.risdmuseum.org/grad-show-2023-digital-media/sae-oh](https://publications.risdmuseum.org/grad-show-2023-digital-media/sae-oh)  
[saeooviii.com/Vanitas](https://saeooviii.com/Vanitas)





A photograph of a sculpture. It features a light-colored, rectangular stone block with a rough, broken top edge, resting on a larger, solid rectangular stone base. The background is a dark, textured wall with a blueish tint. To the right, a vertical wooden beam is visible. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the textures of the stone.

if you can touch the sound  
then a touch is the answer  
distance is missing



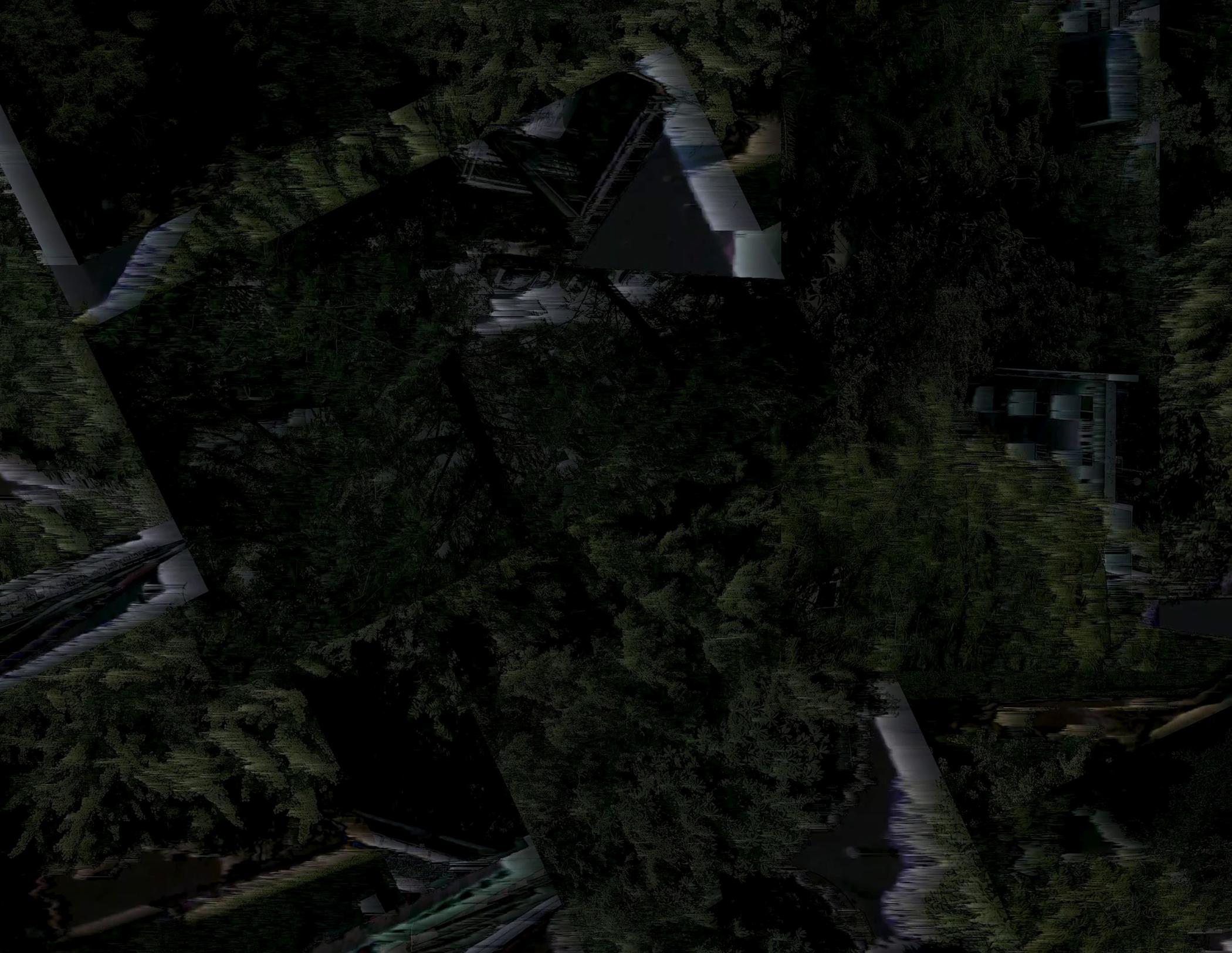


at a vacant breaker  
where the waves only become the waves by  
holding onto the hints of buried fear and hidden  
tactly on the narrows where the vague unveils the

in the gravestone  
blank will do  
blank will do  
found everything









## **Vanitas**

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 Sae Oh (Sae Jung Oh)  
2023

Approved by Master's Examination Committee:

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Shona Kitchen, Associate Professor, Department of Digital + Media,  
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Fletcher Bach, Critic, Department of Experimental & Foundation Studies,  
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