

Artistic In/Hindsight:
Art-Based Oral History Research of the Pandemic

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Preface

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended lives globally, presenting unprecedented challenges and transformations. As a Chinese international student in the United States, my experience during this period forms the crux of this thesis, which aims to explore the impact of the pandemic on young adults and international students. This work intertwines personal narrative with broader societal shifts, offering a multifaceted perspective on a world in flux.

When the pandemic began, it not only disrupted my academic journey but also imposed a profound sense of isolation and dislocation. This personal upheaval, resonating with the experiences of many, reflects significant societal changes. The academic frameworks of oral history art-based research provide a valuable lens for understanding these experiences in a broader context.

Methodologically, this thesis employs oral history and art-based research to capture and interpret these experiences. Oral history allows for the preservation and analysis of personal narratives, offering rich, first-hand accounts of the pandemic's impact. These stories, collected from diverse individuals, provide depth and context, highlighting the shared yet unique nature of our experiences during this period.

Art-Based Research complements this approach by enabling a more expressive exploration of these narratives. Through artistic mediums, this method facilitates a deeper engagement with the emotional and psychological dimensions of our experiences. Art, in its various forms, serves as both a reflection and a reinterpretation of the lived realities during the pandemic, providing insights that transcend traditional academic discourse.

Each artwork explored in this thesis delves into different facets of the pandemic experience, from the initial shock to the ongoing adaptation to a transformed world. The combination of oral history and art-based research enriches this exploration, bridging the gap between personal narrative and academic analysis.

Throughout this journey, I have grappled with the erosion of a sense of security and stability, a struggle shared by many. The reluctance to make long-term plans and the loss of cherished traditions speak to a broader, more pervasive shift in our individual and collective consciousness. These changes, reflected in the narratives and artistic expressions collected, highlight the profound impact of the pandemic on our lives.

This thesis is not just an academic exploration; it is an introspective journey seeking to understand whether a return to pre-pandemic normalcy is possible or even desirable. It is a collection of collective memories, an attempt to weave together the disparate yet interconnected experiences of an era that has indelibly marked us all.

I invite you to embark on this journey of reflection and healing with me, as we navigate through the memories and creations that define our shared experience of the pandemic era.

Introduction

In the last three years, the world has been profoundly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, a period marked by city lockdowns and widespread quarantines. This unique phase, termed the Anthropause, signifies a notable decrease in human activities globally. In the midst of this, a diverse array of artists have transformed their creative energies into visual artworks, creating a rich legacy of this transformative era. These pieces not only reflect the challenges faced but also serve as a legacy for future generations striving to comprehend the pandemic's impact. For example, Banksy's "Game Changer" pays homage to healthcare workers (Laboureau, 2022), and street artist Eduardo Kobra's global mural series conveys themes of hope and resilience (Wells, 2022). Another community-based example comes from interdisciplinary artist María José Contreras Lorenzini, whose art performance "talk to the future" involves the creation of transparent bubble spaces to preserve people's reflections from this era—an endeavor capturing the essence of these tumultuous yet critical times, serving as the inspiration for this project. Together, these diverse artistic responses eloquently compose a profound commentary on the enduring impact of the pandemic.

This project focuses on using art-based oral history research to gather artists' perspectives and reflections on the pandemic, addressing key questions: 1) How has COVID-19 influenced or inspired artists in their creative process? 2) In what ways do artists perceive their artwork as contributing to community healing? 3) How can future generations derive insights into the COVID era through visual art and oral history?

While my personal motivation for this project stems from a subtle shift I recognized in my sense of control and anxiety threshold, the broader challenge lies in generalizing this to resonate with a wider audience without presuming universal trauma or a need for healing. A narrator in my study likened it to how 9/11 marked a pivotal moment for the public—similarly, the COVID pandemic has caused significant changes at both macro and micro levels in human society. This triggered my intention to gather stories, perspectives, and reflections that capture the transformative impact the pandemic has had. Given that everyone has navigated this era with varying experiences, including lockdowns and altered life paths, these narratives aim to document the diverse and nuanced effects of the pandemic on individuals and society as a whole.

I conducted interviews with a diverse array of artists employing art through various mediums and pursuing distinct purposes, including installation artists, graphic designers, product designers, and an illustrator. Among them, installation artists Jinha Kang and Jingfei Hu shaped their artworks during the pandemic lockdown through independent reflection, augmented by extensive literature research. Graphic designers, exemplified by the Parklife organization, gathered pandemic narratives to curate a campus exhibit. Product designers Yoshe Li and Yu Zhou crafted artistic products addressing pandemic-induced issues, while illustrator Julie Hu created a series introducing the basics of the coronavirus and advocating responsible social distancing through illustrations, each graphic telling its unique story.

Besides their common identity as an artist, the narrators share additional facets—they are all Asian, in their early twenties, and have pursued education outside their

hometowns, with the majority identifying as international students. Recognizing these demographic characteristics, it's important to acknowledge the limitation that they belong to a privileged cohort during the pandemic. None of them reported a shortage of supplies or endured severe health conditions during the pandemic. However, they nonetheless stand as representatives of a generation of young adults whose life trajectories have been significantly shaped by the pandemic, navigating challenges such as facing their graduation year amidst the pandemic or struggling with COVID restrictions since day one of their college journey. Their perspectives should then be archived and analyzed carefully because they experience and embody the epitome of the pandemic world, including travel restrictions, economic downturn, and the erosion of a sense of security. All of these are closely bound up to the lives of young adults in their early twenties.

Methodology

This project was inspired by the passion drawn from the student artists surrounding me. Witnessing their enthusiasm as they shared their art statements and delved into the personal stories and inspirations behind their observations of societal nuances, whether on a micro or macro level, left a lasting impression on me. Intrigued by the profound depth of their expressions, I am driven to compile pandemic artwork alongside the artists' reflections on their pandemic experiences. The core methodology of this project revolves around the interactive exchange where artists narrate their pandemic memories, forming a foundational fusion with the artwork. By intertwining the artist's journey, motivations, and societal observations, this methodology seeks to illuminate the nuanced connections between personal experiences and the broader pandemic context of society, creating a richer and more immersive understanding of the art and the narratives that shape it. This prompts my consideration of a reciprocal perspective: can visual art function as a methodology or data source for oral history research? As the oral history interview and subsequent analysis derive from the artwork, I want to introduce art-based research as the foundational methodology for this project.

Art-based research (ABR) and oral history

Art-based research (ABR) is an umbrella term that encompasses a diverse range of methodological and epistemological approaches. ABR is generally characterized as the incorporation of various artistic forms, including literary, performance, or visual arts, at any stage throughout the research process, depending on the different purposes of the

research (McNiff, 2008). ABR is characterized by engaging in artistic practice that employs multimodal expression. Additionally, it involves the creation of knowledge through the analysis of aesthetic inquiries (Seregina, 2022). Consequently, the outcomes of ABR can manifest as artworks or academic papers. The emergence of ABR in recent decades is grounded in the acknowledgment that traditional qualitative methods may fall short in capturing the intricacy, depth, and multidimensionality of human experiences (Leavy, 2015).

In the context of this project, ABR serves as a lens to comprehend the pandemic's nuances through art pieces and corresponding oral history interviews, culminating in the creation of an interactive website as the project's output. This project studies the motivation behind student artists' creation of artwork and explores their memories of the pandemic through the lens of aesthetic inquiry. This project delves into the intricacies of how and why art is created, concentrating on the creators' intentions, their manipulation of artistic elements, and affordances within their specific art field. These endeavors frequently involve an exploration of both aesthetic and sociocultural dimensions of analysis (Greenwood, 2019).

This methodology values artmaking and recognizes that artistic forms have the potential to communicate complex ideas, emotions, and experiences in ways that traditional qualitative or quantitative research may not capture. When applied to the study of the global pandemic, ABR is particularly useful in terms of providing opportunities for depth, complexity, and meaningful resonance. This allows for the addition of analytical layers beyond merely recollecting the events in narrators' lives during the pandemic. The

arts in qualitative research are considered a way to enrich communication and make research accessible beyond academia, and a method for generating data beyond the scope of most interview-based methods (Boydell, 2012). Interestingly, the attributes of ABR happen to harmonize seamlessly with the objectives of oral history research. Alessandro Portelli contends in “The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History” that oral history imparts heightened value to oral sources, considering them as historical documents crafted actively and creatively through the interplay of memory and imagination. This process, according to Portelli, is a deliberate effort to grasp the intricacies of significant events and broader historical contexts (Portelli, 1991). Indeed, the integration of oral history into artistic practice is not a novel concept. When exploring the interplay between oral history and visual arts, the conventional view often positions oral history as a methodology for gathering narratives from narrators. In the book, “Oral History in the Visual Arts,” edited by Linda Sandino and Matthew Partington, they recognize the shared characteristic between oral history interviews and visual arts—they both “offer insights or stories unavailable by other means. (2)”

The Introduction chapter of the book intricately explores the multifaceted roles of oral history interviews within the domain of visual arts, emphasizing the wealth of knowledge they bring forth. Oral history interviews are revealed as dynamic creative elements integral to artistic practice, reservoirs of historical insights concerning art, and avenues for delving into the production and contested nature of identities within the art world (Partington & Sandino, 2013). Nevertheless, the authors’ use of the phrase “function of interviews” may inadvertently suggest a subordinate role for oral history

within the research method, primarily relegated to data collection. This prompts a reevaluation of the nuanced, reciprocal relationship between oral history and the research process. It is crucial to acknowledge that oral history interviews extend beyond conventional roles, going beyond being mere tools for data collection.

Considering oral history solely as a means of data collection poses a potential risk. This risk will become evident if researchers employ ABR with a strong research agenda or when interviews are conducted solely to extract information from artists or artwork, essentially treating them as an alternative voice. Despite arguments from Nepia Mahuika, who slightly advances its definition, the prevalent “Western” academic perspective maintains that the distinctive features of oral history, including co-constructed interviews, life narratives, and an interpretive mode of analyzing stories through analog or digital recordings (Mahuika, 2019), remain significant. With these characteristics defined, oral history establishes a power dynamic between the narrator and the researchers, creating space for narrators to surprise researchers by breaking expectations of the research results and fostering a more comprehensive understanding.

An example from my project illustrates this: when I interviewed artists, I delved into the stories behind their work and went beyond to explore not only COVID-related memories but also their childhood memories and relationships with significant others. Despite having some pre-knowledge of the pandemic narratives, each conversation provided a new perspective for me every time. The fieldnotes and quotes I gathered proved more enriching than a standard art review, enabling me to comprehend the artists, their experiences before and during the pandemic, and how these shaped their decisions

and worldviews. This understanding not only allows me to gain insights into their specific artwork but also reveals resonances that can connect with other audiences experiencing similar emotions in this pandemic era. Furthermore, this approach allowed me to grasp the broader societal context, contributing to a macro understanding of the era.

Additional support for the argument that oral history surpasses being a mere data collection method is demonstrated in my application during the curatorial phase of art-based oral history research. While artworks created during the same pandemic era may exhibit variations in medium and artistic styles, making it challenging to establish connections, the inclusion of oral history quotes in the final presentation of the website effectively interconnects their memories. In this curatorial process, oral history serves as a unifying thread that seamlessly weaves through diverse artistic expressions, constructing a cohesive narrative that transcends the apparent differences in media and styles among the artworks. This highlights the pivotal role of oral history in fostering a more profound, interconnected understanding of the shared experiences embedded within the diverse artistic landscape.

The purpose of this contemplation of the reciprocal relationships between oral history and ABR extends beyond determining a hierarchical position within scientific research disciplines; rather, it seeks to open up the intriguing possibility of a synergistic fusion between these two dynamic domains. In doing so, I aim to delve into the potential richness and depth that emanate from their collaborative integration, specifically in the context of art-based oral history research. This approach acknowledges and explores the

unique contributions each discipline brings to the aesthetic and narrative inquiry inherent in the research process.

Art-based oral history and pandemic study

The interview process of this project is carefully structured into two phases: In the preliminary phase, I establish contact with the artists, engaging in a 30-minute unrecorded conversation to glean insights into their pandemic artwork. Following this, I delve into desktop research on their broader body of work, crafting comprehensive interview guidelines, with a primary emphasis on their COVID-related creations. The second phase unfolds in the recording interview session, where I sit down with the artists. Throughout this session, we utilize a laptop to showcase the digital archive of their pandemic artwork, providing visual references that enrich the narrative. Additionally, a readily available search engine empowers artists to instantly share and discuss any pertinent content during the interview, fostering a dynamic and visually engaging conversation.

In the exploration of pandemic memories, visual art stands out as a particularly pivotal medium for comprehensively delving into this era as a rich source of data. Throughout the global pandemic, the disruption of familiar social bonds, routines, and leisure, typically instrumental in coping or providing reflective spaces, left many individuals grappling with a lack of tools to fully articulate or make sense of their experiences. In this void, visual arts emerged as a powerful medium for expressing emotions and experiences that defied easy rationalization or verbalization at the time

(Seregina, 2022). Consequently, constructing oral histories based on these artworks becomes instrumental in bridging the gap in narration, offering insights to address lingering questions.

In my experience conducting oral history interviews for diverse COVID-related projects, such as the documentary “The Mask,” highlighting Chinese international students, and the Western New York Chinese Pandemic Oral History Project centered on the Buffalo Chinese community, I recognized a pattern. It’s noteworthy that these narrators, sharing the privilege of not facing shortages or severe health conditions, consistently express a positive sentiment when reflecting on the pandemic—emphasizing the enjoyment derived from working remotely. While they come from diverse backgrounds that should theoretically yield distinct perspectives, they often end up succinctly recollecting events without delving into deeper layers of personal reflection or the emotional nuances that could provide more comprehensive materials for subsequent analysis. In the absence of artwork as a medium, we are confronted with a dual challenge. On one hand, the narrators lack a platform to delve more profoundly into their reflections, laying bare the potential for unexplored layers in their pandemic experiences. On the other hand, my failure to establish a connection impedes the development of deeper questions during our conversations. Consequently, our dialogue lacks a coherent thread of discourse, restricting exploration beyond the narrators’ routine experiences during the pandemic, such as lockdown, remote work, and contracting COVID. The inherent shallowness of these narratives is not comprehensive and may inadvertently mislead people into perceiving the shared experience during the pandemic as straightforward.

The self-expression inherent in visual art goes beyond merely recounting the events. It adds intricate layers to the narrative, allowing narrators a unique medium to articulate their reflections on the aftermath of the occurrences. Through oral history based on visual art, narrators of this project can convey aspirations for community healing, redefine the relationship between humans and nature, or offer insights into the profound shifts towards a virtual existence that life has taken. While their aptitude as artists inherently makes them prone to observation and reflection, visual art serves as a dynamic means through which narrators communicate not only what happened but also their contemplations on the evolving landscape and the subsequent steps that unfold in the wake of the pandemic. Oral history grounded in these thoughtful artworks then emerges as a conduit for deeper reflections based on the narratives, proving beneficial for studying different perspectives within a convergent pattern.

Lastly, art-based oral history research integrates visual art with oral history, creating a lasting legacy for future generations to comprehend the era shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. Visual art has the potential to stimulate more extensive and vibrant conversations compared to a text-only archive, offering future audiences a more immediate and impactful impression of our contemporary society. This echoes the way we now understand the Spanish Flu, a devastating pandemic from a century ago, through paintings by artists of that time. Take, for instance, the renowned artist of “The Scream,” Edvard Munch. In 1919, despite being a robust 56-year-old, Munch not only survived the ordeal but was inspired to depict his experience of contracting and overcoming the flu (Prelinger, 2002). Captured in his painting “Self-Portrait with the Spanish Flu,” he

portrays himself in the early stages of recovery, thus offering a visual testament to a critical moment in history (Goldstein, 2020). Similarly, visual arts collected for this project can provide a snapshot of our current era, allowing even future generations who have no COVID context to swiftly grasp the society of this time. Moreover, the oral history archive of the artwork and artist narratives serves to deepen and enrich this legacy, sparking a comprehensive conversation that transcends generations.

Oral History and A/r/tography

This project embraces A/r/tography, an art-based oral history research method, as its guiding framework. A/r/tography, as defined by Irwin et al. (2006), represents a form of inquiry that leverages artistic processes to deepen our understanding of the world. This method aligns closely with traditional oral history practices, incorporating tools such as interviews, transcripts, and field notes (LeBlanc & Irwin, 2019). What makes A/r/tography particularly compelling is its dynamic nature, which eschews rigid categorizations and instead explores the fluid intersections among the roles of artist, teacher, and researcher. As Greenwood (2019) notes, this approach challenges conventional boundaries, fostering a more integrative and holistic perspective.

In this project, I embody a dual role as both oral history researcher and curator, a choice reflective of A/r/tography's fluid and integrative nature. The project's outcomes are materialized through a multimedia website (<https://yuyingwu.cargo.site/>), which serves as a virtual portal encapsulating pandemic memories. This website is not just a

repository of oral history interviews; it is a carefully curated experience, employing various media forms such as a virtual gallery created via Artsteps, edited video conversations, art reviews, and a multimedia timeline. These elements work in concert to present a layered narrative.

The virtual gallery, devoid of additional context or narratives, offers visitors an initial, unguided interaction with the artworks, categorized into four thematic sections: Perspectives, Reflection, Healing, and Legacy. This structure is intentionally designed to provoke independent, self-reflective thought among the audience.

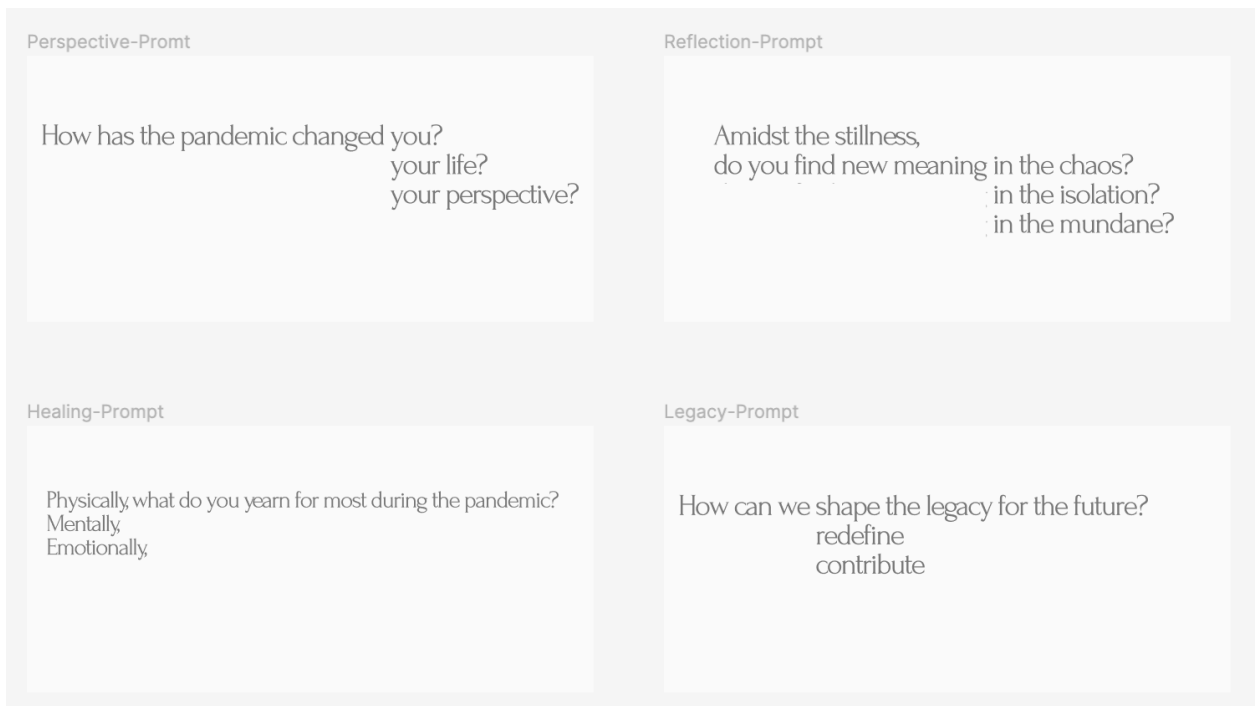


Figure 1. Reflective Prompts Presented in the Virtual Gallery

Subsequently, each artist's work, whether directly influenced by the pandemic or contextually relevant to the COVID-19 era, is explored through in-depth art reviews. These reviews do more than just acknowledge artistic merit; they weave in critical

insights, thereby enhancing the understanding of the work. This approach ensures that the artists' voices and perspectives are authentically represented and heard.

Complementing the art reviews are fieldnotes that accompany selected pieces, providing contextual insights related to the pandemic and incorporating personal reflections. This interweaving creates a rich narrative that intertwines my pandemic memories with those of the artists. The inclusion of fieldnotes not only enhances the understanding of the artworks but also captures the essence of A/r/tography. In this paradigm, the convergent roles of artist, researcher, and educator perspectives facilitate a more nuanced and comprehensive exploration of the subject matter.

Particularly, I have delicately curated the "Memory Pieces" section of the website, featuring my pandemic story as the main storytelling arc while attempting to find points that can be connected to other narrators' sharing. This process embodies the complexity and interconnectivity of our experiences. By assuming the dual role of both curator and researcher, I leverage A/r/tography's potential, using the woven narratives to complement each of our individual stories. The website thus evolves into a space where diverse memories and interpretations converge, presenting a multifaceted view of art crafted in these unprecedented times.

Memory Pieces

It is time to share my pandemic stories
and discover how my memories intertwine with those of my narrators.

Yuying Wu

Artists' Memory Pieces

Begin reading in the middle,
connecting with artists' memories on the left
and finding information on the right.

Sidenotes

My motivation for undertaking this project stems from the fact that the pandemic has been the most abrupt event affecting many aspects of my life. As a Chinese international student, a young adult in my early twenties making crucial life decisions, and a sensitive person easily touched by surrounding events, I found various aspects of the pandemic resonating with me deeply.

The pandemic hit the US during my junior year, just as I finished my finals for the winter quarter. With my school's announcement of a complete shift to online instruction, I commenced my remote life. As **Raven Hu** and others experienced, I found myself with an abundance of time spent in my bedroom, confronting the walls, screens, and windows. This was

Raven Hu

"I was actually quarantined back home at the starting point of 2020, and I didn't get any chance to walk on the street anymore. And I started to observe only from the perspective of my little room, which has a tiny little

Figure 2. Curation of "Memory Pieces" Connecting My Narrative with Narrators' Perspectives

This methodological approach, grounded in A/r/tography, empowers me as a curator and researcher to infuse more of my voice into the research, resulting in a distinctive exploration of the pandemic's impact on art and memory.

Narrators

Jinha Kang

Installation Artist | Art Director

MFA in Digital + Media

at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD)

Jinha Kang is a multidisciplinary artist and an art director based in New York City, with the aspiration to connect the realms of art, design, and technology. Kang's work explores the intersections of technology, art, and the body, with a focus on creating immersive, interactive experiences that challenge and expand the audience's understanding of human interaction and relationships. Her work encompasses a wide range of media, including sculpture, installation, video, and performance. She often incorporates cutting-edge technology into her pieces, using sensors and other tools to create dynamic, sensorial environments that engage the viewer on multiple levels.

Jingfei Hu

Installation Artist | Art Director

MFA in Digital + Media

at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD)

Jingfei Hu employs a multifaceted approach that seamlessly melds physical and virtual media, deftly navigating the ever-changing technological landscape. Her work represents a powerful and innovative engagement with technology, tradition, and the natural world. Through her art, she invites viewers to explore new possibilities for human creativity and to consider their relationship with the world around them.

Yoshe Li

Multi-media Artist | Musician

MFA in Design and Technology

at Parsons School of Design

Yoshe Li is an emerging Canadian Chinese multi-media artist with a distinctive background in architecture and cinema studies. She is currently pursuing an MFA in Design & Technology at Parsons School of Design and has gained recognition as a rising music act in the vibrant artistic landscape of New York City. Her work delves into the rich and diverse artistic expressions of human emotions. In addition to her original designs and musical releases, Yoshe Li is an award-winning songwriter and lyricist, acknowledged as a prominent music influencer on social networks. She is also a skilled cinematographer and director, with her creative works featured on CNN, QQ Music, Roblox, the Montreal Independent Film Festival, DNA music festival, and the Digerati Emergent Media Festival, among many others.

July Zhou

Product Design | Creative Technologist

MFA in Design and Technology

at Parsons School of Design

July is a second-year MFA student at Parsons, specializing in interface design, user research, graphic design, and 3D modeling. She brings one year of web design full-time experience, focusing on SaaS and B2B products with diverse stakeholders, including government, national departments, and companies. July's passion lies in the intersection of technology and daily life. Her work explores themes of posthumanism and speculative design, investigating the evolving relationship between humans and technology.

Julie Yizhe Hu

Multi-media Artist | YA Author In-Training

MFA in Design and Technology

at Parsons School of Design

Julie is a 2D/3D visual designer, as well as an author-illustrator primarily focusing on graphic novel and illustrated nonfiction. Julie's works either explain and educate STEAM concepts with heart and humor, or melds science, culture and mythology to explore the common human experience. Julie has been interested in storytelling throughout her life; her experience in science communication largely shaped how she thinks and creates. Her works have been featured by notable institutions (e.g. the ACS, Scientific American, Pomona College Chemistry Department, NASA, China Science Communication). She's represented by Posts and Telecommunications Press in China.

Organization: Parklife**Zihao Yang**

Unprofessional Graphic Designer | Storyteller

MS in Integrated Marketing Communication

at Northwestern University

Zihao was the Design Lead of student organization, Parklife, at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shenzhen (CUHK-Shenzhen). He defines himself as an "unprofessional artist" with a passion in art creation using photography, literature, graphic design, and other types of artistic techniques, though without a systematic training in fine arts. Specializing in the interdisciplinary subject of data analytics and qualitative consumer research, Zihao tells people's story through longitudinal studies and word or graphic transcripts of individuals' life, by revealing unarticulated behavioral patterns and background culture. His work explores themes of daily tensions in people's life, and how people conform or rebel against the forces of the times.

Dongni Huang

Concept Team Member at Parklife

Dongni Huang's role involves interpreting academic concepts and effectively communicating the essence of various exhibits. Dongni's contributions are instrumental in bridging complex ideas with accessible presentations, enhancing the overall impact of the exhibits.

Qinyuan Chen

Graphic Designer at Parklife

Qinyuan Chen, a senior at the CUHK-Shenzhen, majors in English in the Humanities and Social Sciences Department.

Xinyan Ju

Graphic Designer at Parklife

Xinyan Ju is currently pursuing her graduate studies in the United Kingdom, focusing on Graphic Design.

Art Review

Perspective: Exploring the Interplay Between Nature and Society Post-Pandemic

[Art Review on “Reflection of Cooperation” by Jingfei Hu](#)

When you suddenly find yourself with ample time to sit in your bedroom and gaze out at the world through your window, what reflections arise?

In the contemplative realm of self-isolation, Jingfei Hu found herself starting to question the interplay between societal and natural systems. Her reflections during quarantine prompted her to reconsider everyday objects with newfound significance, ultimately giving rise to a fresh perspective on exploring the dynamics between nature and society.

In 2020, during a two-month period of quarantine predominantly confined to her home, specifically her bedroom, Jingfei observed and contemplated her immediate surroundings. Her typical view through her window encompassed a vibrant city construction site, teeming with the sounds of people and machines amid an ever-changing urban landscape. However, with no alterations transpiring during those two months, she found herself questioning the existing societal and natural systems visible from her window. “Does nature change? Like the virus, is there something unknown altering

nature?” These inquiries propelled her to delve into the mutual reshaping of nature and society, exploring the human role in this transformative process.

Drawing inspiration from artists like Mona Hatoum and Rebecca Horn, Jingfei turned her focus to the mundane objects in her room, such as a refrigerator, desks, umbrellas, face masks, and laptops. She aimed to see past their typical uses and identities, perceiving them solely as forms. This exploration led her to concentrate on an umbrella. Stripped to its skeletal structure, it lost its original purpose of shielding from rain, sparking Jingfei’s curiosity about parallels in nature or society. “Is there something right now that has completely lost its functionality during COVID-19 or due to some other reason?”

Collaborating with fellow artist Jiahui Liang, Jingfei engaged deeply with the ideas in Richard Dawkins “The Selfish Gene,” prompting an analysis of the relationship between human society and natural systems. This exploration included considering theories about the human-made origins of COVID-19 and the development of vaccines to fight the pandemic.

Jingfei argues that despite theories of anti-natural selection, humans, as moral beings, are inclined to save lives, indicating a significant shift in our relationship with nature. She notes a pivotal moment in their research: “We began to realize we’re entering a new era, a redefined natural system. It’s no longer just about nature shaping our identity; we are also shaping nature with our actions and innovations, like technology and vaccines.”

In their art installation, Jingfei and Jiahui experimented with various materials, ultimately selecting kombucha and “victimless leather”—a substance that does not harm any animals. This decision underscores the main theme of their work: creating materials that align with their vision of harmonious coexistence.

The installation is interactive and reacts to the audience’s proximity. As people approach, the rate at which the probiotics in the kombucha receive nutrition increases. This element exemplifies the artists’ vision: the more engagement with the artwork, the more “nourishment” it gains, symbolizing a symbiotic relationship between humans and nature.

A key feature of the installation is the preserved bone structure of an umbrella, forming the conceptual base of their project. These bones are creatively reimaged as water spiders, the only known species of spider that spends its entire life underwater, according to the Encyclopedia Britannica. Jingfei’s research leads her to define water spiders as “the betrayers of spiders” due to their unique adaptation, challenging conventional patterns of natural selection observed in other spider species.

I find this choice of metaphor truly ingenious; depicting a betrayer of the system can also be viewed as a challenge to the current system. This metaphor can be extended to humanity’s role in the evolving natural system—humans employing technology to disrupt the established pattern of natural selection. Similar to water spiders, their “betrayal” doesn’t exclude them from the system but rather redefines their place, making them active participants in the emerging natural order. Actions such as vaccine

development portray humans not as adversaries of natural selection but as dynamic contributors, actively reshaping and integrating into nature.

Initially, when I encountered this installation, I was unaware of the depth of stories and concepts interwoven within it. Yet, even without this knowledge, the work captivated me, drawing me into its intricate design and compelling presence. It was only after delving deeper, through multiple conversations with Jingfei Hu, that I fully grasped the complexity and intention behind their creation. Each discussion with Jingfei opened new layers of understanding, enriching my appreciation of the artwork.

My curiosity led me to inquire about the reactions of other viewers. Jingfei shared an anecdote about a man who was so mesmerized by the flow of nourishment in the installation's tubes that he remained squatting before it for fifteen minutes. This interaction highlights the diverse ways in which people engage with art. While not every observer may grasp the full spectrum of the artists' conceptualizations, Jingfei emphasized that their primary message — the idea of humans being an integral part of nature — is what truly matters.

This installation, with its layered metaphor, extends an invitation to its audience to reconsider our relationship with the natural world. It doesn't just suggest; it vividly illustrates that we are not adversaries of nature. Instead, we are intrinsic to a dynamic, evolving ecosystem, where our innovations and the rhythms of the natural world intertwine. This revelation, brought to life through Jingfei and Jiahui's art, marks a pivotal moment. It blurs the lines between human influence and the natural environment, heralding a significant shift in how we perceive and interact with the world around us.

Reflection: Transition of Human Behaviors to Online Spaces Amidst the Pandemic

[Art Review on “Daters” by July Zhou](#)

Not all the works I’ve curated for this project were directly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, I believe their inclusion is pertinent as they resonate profoundly within the pandemic’s context. After discussing with the artists, I secured their consent to interpret and showcase their works as part of a pandemic oral history project. Among these, “Daters,” created by July Zhou, a Parsons MFA student with a rich background in UI/UX design, stands out for its unique perspective.

“Daters” stands as an interactive installation offering a profound contemplation of the evolving landscape of human interactions in our increasingly digital world. The significance of this theme has been heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic, characterized by a substantial surge in dating app usage. Faced with confinement and isolation, individuals sought connection and companionship through digital platforms. Beyond dating, a conflict or tradeoff between the emptiness of real-world experiences and online activities emerges, warranting discussion. While not explicitly prompted by the pandemic, July’s work serves as a poignant commentary on this societal shift.

She shared the source of inspiration for her work, recounting a brief story she once encountered online: “I found myself at home, hearing approaching footsteps and a subsequent knock on the door. Frightened by the knocking, I hesitated to open the door, waiting for another knock. The person eventually left without entering when I didn’t open the door. On another occasion, summoning the courage to open the door, I allowed the

person to come in, have a cup of tea, and listen to a story I shared. After hearing the story, the person departed, leaving nothing behind but an empty teacup.”

Based on this story, July created the prototype of this work, as depicted on the cover. The focal point of this prototype centers on a small figure within a confined space. Following this, external sounds of footsteps and knocking induce fear in the figure, prompting it to stay still. After the departure of the external presence, hearts descend from the ceiling, repeating this sequence multiple times. Initially absent, the hearts gradually multiply, potentially saturating the room. Despite assertions that the space is full, it consistently accommodates only the solitary figure. Even as hearts accumulate, suggesting a love-infused environment, the figure remains alone, as no one demonstrates a genuine willingness to open the door. Though the door could be easily opened, this pivotal step remains uninitiated; visitors merely glance inside and, lacking swift acknowledgment, move on to the next room. Consequently, despite the growing number of hearts, creating the illusion of enveloping love, the stark reality persists—profound loneliness prevails, with a genuine dearth of willingness to deeply comprehend the figure within.

The final installation she created, comprising an iPad, a filter screen, and a display screen, narrates a story of isolation and connection in the digital era. A small figure, confined in a transparent box, symbolizes the individual’s isolated condition amid a sea of virtual interactions. User interactions with the iPad, such as swiping right, cause hearts to fill the box, representing the affection and connection sought through digital platforms.

Yet, when viewed without the filter screen, this illusion of connection dissolves, underscoring the disparity between digital intimacy and actual isolation.

“Daters” presents a thought-provoking exploration into the growing reliance on online platforms for social interactions during the pandemic. The swift shift from physical to virtual meetings, hastened by lockdowns and social distancing measures, not only transforms dating culture but also signifies a broader shift in societal norms.

This artistic representation encapsulates the spirit of our era, emphasizing how the pandemic has seamlessly woven digital interfaces into our daily lives, thereby fundamentally reshaping the nature of human relationships. When we find satisfaction in our online experiences, it’s essential to take an extra step and ponder whether this contentment extends to our real-life experiences.

I want to go beyond July’s critique of online dating, delving into the transient nature often likened to fast-food culture. The artwork’s portrayal of hearts accumulating rapidly with each swipe acts as a metaphor for the ease and quickness of forming connections online. However, it also hints at the underlying loneliness and superficiality inherent in these interactions, urging viewers to question the depth and authenticity of relationships forged in the digital realm.

Moving beyond the discourse on fast-food culture in online dating, consideration extends to the efficiency of online tools that bring us undeniable benefits. The transition to online platforms, facilitating convenience in aspects such as working from home and efficient online instruction, allows for enhanced flexibility in time management. In my various interviews for other projects, respondents often expressed their enjoyment of the

convenience of working from home. Yet, with every such response, a subtle sense of something being missed lingered in the air.

Therefore, it is imperative to delve deeper and reflect on the potential losses associated with fully embracing online efficiency. For example, the blurring of boundaries between the virtual and reality extends to the ambiguity in lifestyles, as individuals no longer need to distinguish between a working-self and a home-self due to the absence of commuting. This inherent vagueness poses potential dangers. Additionally, the loosened human connections and concealed loneliness, as highlighted in “Daters,” undeniably emerge as another two negative aspects of transitioning human behavior to the online sphere.

In summary, “Daters” transcends being merely an art piece; it serves as a reflective commentary on a significant social shift – the migration of human activities and interactions from offline to online realms. Through this installation, July prompts viewers to contemplate the implications of this transition, particularly in the context of the pandemic. The piece challenges us to reassess the true essence of human connection in an era increasingly dominated by digital interactions. It stands as a poignant reminder of the profound impact that technological advances and global crises have on the fundamental aspects of human life, urging us to strike a balance between our online presence and the need for genuine, meaningful connections.

Healing: Tangible Expressions and Intangible Bonds in Human Connection Amidst the Pandemic

[Art Review on “Let Me Be Your Friend” by Yoshe Li](#)

I reached out to the multifaceted artist and product designer Yoshe Li because I was initially impressed by her work “Let Me Be Your Friend.” As the final narrator in my series of interviews exploring various facets of the COVID era, Yoshe adds a critical dimension to the narrative by delving into the theme of personal hygiene, a focal point heightened during the pandemic.

The pandemic has elevated the importance of personal hygiene to unprecedented levels, a shift that Yoshe astutely observes and creatively incorporates into her work. Her creation isn't just a nod to the ubiquity of handwashing signs and hand sanitizer bottles, but a deeper reflection on the era's ethos. It is a tangible representation of the pandemic, merging practicality with profound symbolism.

I visited her apartment, and we engaged in a conversation that spanned over an hour in a quiet lounge. We delved into the intricacies of “Let Me Be Your Friend,” which, in my opinion, touches upon the following intriguing questions: Apart from physical touch, what elements sustain human interaction or safeguard the recollection of a person's image? In the prolonged absence of direct contact, how can we retain the sensation of others' presence?

“Let Me Be Your Friend” stands as a product conceptualized by Yoshe during her time at Parsons, a response to the realization that she formed new connections with individuals wearing masks. Sensing a gap in human interaction, Yoshe aimed to create

something evocative that would prompt people to think of each other. Opting for soap as her medium, she sought to encourage individuals to prioritize personal hygiene and cleanliness during the pandemic. Yoshe crafted sample soap models based on the facial features of her new cohort mates, presenting them as gifts to solicit feedback during the product design process. The central question she posed was, “Would you think of me when you used the soap?” The responses were sometimes surly, and she even facetiously remarked, “I guess it’s just a very invasive way to keep you in somebody’s mind, just to have you in their home.”

While the packaging and the soap’s head shape piqued my interest, the most remarkable design aspect, in my view, is the soap’s dual role as both a functional item and a gift. In a society where gifts play a crucial role in fostering human connections, the added attribute of serving as a necessity for personal hygiene during the pandemic adds a layer of depth to Yoshe’s creation. Moreover, Yoshe’s thoughtfulness extended to adding scents to the soap, with unique fragrances tailored for each classmate. This deliberate choice aimed to infuse the gift with an additional layer of memory, with the hope that the selected fragrance would act as a trigger for recollection and connection between the giver and the receiver.

“Let Me Be Your Friend” transcends being merely a functional work of art. Yoshe Li's creation prompts contemplation on the nuanced interplay between tangible expressions, such as gifts fostering human connection during the pandemic, and the intangible threads that intricately bind us. Derived from this project, the talented musician also composed the song “All you need is a conversation.” Aligned with the healing

concept of the song, this artwork encourages us to navigate the complexities of contemporary human interaction with heightened awareness and intention, urging us to cherish and foster meaningful connections in the face of adversity. It stands not just as a product but as a testament to the resilience of human connection amid unprecedented challenges, offering a theme of healing for human interaction during the pandemic.

Fieldnotes

The anticipation that enveloped me as I prepared to interview Yoshe was unmistakable, further intensified by the realization that she wasn't just an accomplished influencer but also a notable musician on Chinese social media. Adding to this, she had prior experience being interviewed by other art review blogs. Consequently, I took extensive measures to ensure that our oral history interview stood out, avoiding any semblance to previous interviews she had participated in. Despite the heightened nervousness in preparing for this interview, it unexpectedly evolved into the most emotionally resonant session within the scope of this project.

Upon completing the oral history interview, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that Yoshe had a wealth of additional work that could be explored within the context of the COVID era. Given her remarkable storytelling prowess and the rich tapestry of pandemic memories she shared, I felt compelled to spotlight our conversation through the lens of three distinct memory pieces.

Memory Piece I

In our conversation, Yoshe acknowledged her privileged position during the pandemic, understanding the advantages that shaped her experience. Yet, a unique concern set her apart — not the fear of the virus, but the abrupt loss of independent time cast a shadow over her pandemic journey.

As the global lockdown unfolded, Yoshe's family dynamics shifted dramatically. Immigrants to Canada, her family faced stringent requirements, leading her mother to bring her 3-year-old brother to Toronto. In China, they had a nanny, but in Canada, Yoshe's mother had to solo childcare for the first time.

This adjustment turned chaotic for Yoshe. “I was traumatized by that experience,” she shared, reflecting on the upheaval of their family dynamics. The once-solitary moments she cherished within their Canadian home became a distant memory. The lockdown erased the luxury of independent time she had enjoyed since studying abroad at 16.

The solitude she once relished was replaced by the constant hum of family life. Yoshe, thrust into a vortex of familial intimacy, grappled with discomfort — an unexpected flipside to the isolation experienced by others.

Memory Piece II

In 2019, Yoshe grappled with familial expectations of an arranged marriage. Despite commendable traits in the prospective partner, Yoshe resisted having her life predetermined. Their paths briefly crossed, but a relationship failed to bloom. As Yoshe returned to her life in Toronto, the pandemic disrupted routines.

Separated physically, the man asked about her return, but pandemic restrictions thwarted it. His matter-of-fact response was, “Okay, if that’s the case, I’m gonna meet another girl.”

Then time passed, and news of the man’s marriage reached Yoshe this year. I asked Yoshe if they could work out if there were no travel restrictions. Yoshe, uncertain, replied, “Maybe not.”

Reflecting on this chapter, Yoshe composed the song “Charlie’s Song,” which will be released soon. This song channels emotions into a melody that encapsulates the complexities of this untold story. The song became an intimate expression, weaving threads of an almost relationship and the pandemic-altered world.

Memory Piece III

When I inquired about Yoshe’s current project, she shared her poignant plan to create a project about her grandfather. Hindered by travel restrictions, she hasn’t visited China in five years. Given her grandfather’s prolonged battle with cancer, Yoshe had a prescient awareness of the inevitable. During her last visit in 2019, sensing it might be her final opportunity, she devoted extensive time to being with him, eating with him, and driving him with her.

Tragically, her fears materialized when her grandfather succumbed to cancer during the pandemic. Yoshe learned of his passing through a call from her cousin: “when I received that call from my cousin, I didn’t even pick it up and I knew it was my grandfather passed away.” The family chose not to immediately convey the news, considering her emotional well-being amid the isolation of Toronto’s initial pandemic outbreak.

As Yoshe recounted this deeply personal story, emotions ran high, resonating with my own grief for my grandmother’s recent passing due to a heart attack this summer. We both cried. I found a profound connection with Yoshe’s narrative, sharing the perpetual concern for grandparents overseas and the effort to spend cherished moments with them, especially during the pandemic.

Yoshe's pandemic recollection not only unravels personal challenges but also offers a lens into the broader human experience during these tumultuous times. The recurring theme of lack of control underscores a universal struggle faced by many individuals. The upheaval caused by the pandemic disrupted routines, severed connections, and confronted everyone with an unsettling reality—a reality where familiar aspects of life slipped beyond our grasp.

Her loss of independent time, once taken for granted, became an impossibility. Furthermore, Yoshe's exploration of a potential relationship, hindered by circumstances beyond her control, mirrors the broader theme of disrupted human connections. The pandemic tested not only existing relationships but also thwarted the possibility of new ones, emphasizing the overarching impact on the intricate dance of human connections. Most notably, the inability to be with her grandfather during his final moments resonates deeply. This aspect of her story touches on the universal fear of losing loved ones and the anguish of being physically separated during such crucial times.

In essence, Yoshe's narrative serves as a microcosm of the collective human experience during the pandemic—an exploration of resilience, adaptation, and the quest for meaning amid the uncontrollable twists of life.

Healing: Reimagining Intimacy in a Post-Pandemic World

[Art Review on “Body Orchestra” by Jinha Kang](#)

What do you desire the most during the pandemic?

This was the question I posed to installation artist Jinha Kang and all the narrators of this project. In a world where physical, mental, and emotional distances grew like shadows, the elusive essence of intimacy slipped through our fingers. It is against this backdrop of estrangement that Kang sought to transmute the ache of separation into the harmonious chords of connection.

“How can we feel intimacy again that has been lost during COVID using technology?” This query serves as the heartbeat of Kang’s creation, “Body Orchestra.” This work is a wearable gadget connected by a network of wires and circuits. Its internal programming serves as the conductor, orchestrating a unique auditory experience with each interaction with a different surface of the installation.

In the peaceful aftermath of a global pandemic, where the world attempts to resume its cadence while veiling the profound shifts within, the once yearning desires now carry a weighty significance. “Body Orchestra” invites the audience to reimagine intimacy, urging people not to overlook the subtle alterations in human connection. Especially during the post-pandemic era, it transforms the absence into presence, the void into a symphony of shared experience.

This installation is ingeniously crafted to facilitate connections with strangers. Jinha intentionally designed the gadget for interactions side by side, with the deliberate choice of not making it a face-to-face encounter. This design philosophy stems from the belief that side-by-side interactions make the initial connection with strangers more accessible and comfortable. It's a remarkable concept that fosters connections among strangers in the community, providing a unique opportunity for healing after years of isolation. Everyone craves this kind of communal healing, particularly following three years of social seclusion.

Jinha conducted this performance with a diverse group, including strangers, acquainted cohort-mates, and even long-term friends. In each interaction, she observed that the physical touch aspect played a pivotal role in fostering a sense of closeness and understanding. Through this tactile engagement, she noticed a unique dynamic unfolding, wherein the shared experience of the performance facilitated a deeper connection. The power of physical touch became a medium through which familiarity grew, and Jinha found that she gained a better understanding of others in the process.

This work of art is based on technology but beyond that; it's a dynamic fusion of touch and symphony. The wearable gadget, with its intricate programming, transforms physical contact into an ethereal concert. Each touch on different surfaces of the gadget becomes a note, a resonance, a unique instrument in the orchestra of human connection.

The intentional decision to engage the audience in co-creating a symphony performance through this installation reflects a profound design choice. The exquisite harmony embedded within the work isn't a melody that can be played in solitude.

Instead, it beckons individuals to intertwine their touches, forging connections that resonate not only in personal fulfillment but ripple outward, contributing to a more joyous self and a gratified world. In this collaborative act of tactile orchestration, the installation becomes a representation of shared experiences, emphasizing the transformative power that arises when individuals come together in harmonious touch.

Legacy: Reviving Pandemic Memories: Weaving Narratives on the Canvas of AI Artistry

[Art Review on “Diary of Happening” by Zihao Yang](#)

How will the future generation comprehend the era of COVID we traversed?

What responsibility do artists bear in crafting art as a legacy to preserve our times?

In answering these questions, Zihao Yang, the Design Lead of Parklife, conceived an artwork to resurrect pandemic memories. His captivating “Diary of Happening” (2023) emerged as a centerpiece for the on-campus exhibit “Cyberpark: We Used to Have One; We Will Have One” at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shenzhen (CUHK-Shenzhen). This marks the third annual exhibit hosted by Parklife, an organization dedicated to fostering community cohesion within the school.

Identifying himself as an unprofessional Graphic Designer and storyteller, Yang gathered pandemic stories from young adults all over China. He then distilled the very essence of diverse narratives into thoughtful one-sentence creative descriptions. This refined narrative subsequently acted as the input for the generation of AI graphics, creating the visuals that eventually adorn the exhibit.

Imagine the pandemic’s multifaceted narrative distilled not into a mundane summary but into a single, potent creative sentence that acts as the input for the AI brushstrokes. The result was not only unpredictable but also poetic, reflecting the

kaleidoscopic nature of personal narratives woven during the isolated and turbulent pandemic era that we collectively endured.

For example, he shared one of the stories he collected: “It is a tradition for everyone to visit the graves of those who passed away in the previous lunar year before the Spring Festival. In Wuhan that year, all the chrysanthemums in the city were sold out. What struck him the most was that despite the complete sell-out of chrysanthemums, on his way home, the entire road was lined with these flowers. Row after row, chrysanthemums were placed side by side, covering both sides of the road.”

Yang’s expertise lies not just in storytelling but in the artful curation of experiences, where each narrative thread intricately weaves into a visual tapestry that captivates and resonates with the audience. These captivating graphics came to life on the entire glass-top corridor of the CUHK-Shenzhen campus, transforming it into an immersive gallery. As the audience strolls by, they are beckoned into a visual journey, where each graphic whispers a tale worth exploring. The strategic placement invites passersby to pause, immerse themselves, and perhaps linger a while, absorbing the stories intricately woven into the vibrant visuals.

The narratives he collected encapsulate the defining features of the pandemic era, familiar to those accustomed to the routines shaped by the pandemic. However, these stories serve as a potential legacy for future audiences who may lack an understanding of how we navigated our lives during these challenging years, offering them a glimpse into our era. For instance, he recounted a moment in the Guangzhou metro involving two girls bidding farewell. They were captured in an image, kissing through their masks. In the

current context, kissing without masks is commonplace, but during that time, this unique experience held special significance. It carries a sense of irony—an aspect of our shared journey that we truly lived through.

“Diary of Happening” transcends the conventional boundaries of an exhibition; it emerges as a compelling invitation, beckoning viewers to immerse themselves in an exploration of shared human experiences amid the pandemic. This artful creation isn’t merely a static display but rather a dynamic portal, inviting active engagement, thoughtful reflection, and a deep dive into the collective narrative that binds us during these challenging times. In essence, “Diary of Happening” extends an enduring invitation to connect, empathize, and play a vital role in shaping the legacy that will define how future audiences understand and appreciate the complexities of our lived experiences during this unprecedented time.

Fieldnotes

During my previous internship, I had the opportunity to know Zihao, an individual who left a lasting impression on me with his adept mastery of graphic design tools, despite not being a part of the creative team. Even though he humbly referred to himself as an unprofessional Graphic Designer, Zihao demonstrated a profound understanding of industry design trends and played a pivotal role in the school organization, Parklife.

In a surprising twist, when I discussed my project with Zihao, we discovered that their exhibition from the previous year resonated perfectly with my thesis. Intriguingly, Zihao had a trove of pandemic memories to share. This marked the first time that artists expressed genuine interest in my project, willingly stepping into the role of narrators. While previous interviewees recognized the project’s significance, it was a unique

moment when artists embraced their roles as narrators, reflecting a deeper resonance with the project's essence.

Given our familiarity, Zihao exhibited a high level of trust in our interview, sharing memory pieces since childhood that added a rich layer to the narrative.

Memory Piece I

In the pre-pandemic years, Zihao's small town along the Dongjiang River reveled in the cherished tradition of the Dragon Boat Festival. For the children of southern China, dragon boat racing wasn't just a sport; it was a cultural cornerstone embedded in their upbringing.

Hosting the annual dragon boat contest elevated Zihao's town, transforming the Dongjiang River into a stage for spirited competition. The festival united the community, turning the town into a vibrant sea of people lining the riverbanks. Lasting three glorious days, the festival provided a rare break from daily routines—a time of pure jubilation and festivity. However, the pandemic disrupted this annual spectacle. Social distancing measures and governmental caution led to the cancellation of the festival, extinguishing the infectious laughter and cheers that once echoed across the water. The Dragon Boat Festival, a binding force in the community, became a casualty of the pandemic.

In the stringent year 2022, the dragon boats were locked in warehouses and forbidden to ride the waves. These vessels, symbolic of unity and tradition, remained confined and untouched for over a year. The disappointment was palpable for Zihao, serving as a stark reminder of the profound changes the pandemic had wrought upon their lives.

As the dragon boats were locked away from people, Zihao eagerly anticipated the day when the festival could be revived. In 2023, it did resume, but the atmosphere had shifted. There were fewer people, and the patterns had changed. The once-unwavering celebration of the festival every year had waned. It seemed as if the townsfolk no longer paid as much attention to the Dragon Boat Festival. The vibrant traditions that once bound the community together were now tinged with a subtle sense of indifference. The festival had lost some of its former glory, and the once-enthusiastic participants seemed to have moved on to new patterns and priorities. Although the Dragon Boat Festival was back on the calendar, it was no longer the same cherished event, marking a significant change in the fabric of Zihao's town.

Memory Piece II

In Zihao's village stands a quaint temple, a place his grandfather dedicated years to. Over the past three years, a noticeable shift occurred as fewer people frequented its halls, casting a temporary pall over the once vibrant religious atmosphere.

Zihao's grandfather, the temple's devoted caretaker, expressed concern, noting a decline in visitors and a sense of sadness emanating from the Buddhas, who missed the regular attention.

The keywords of Zihao's memories revolve around the irreversible changes in patterns. Despite macro-level efforts to revert to pre-pandemic norms, individuals have gradually adapted to new routines, leading to the unfortunate neglect of once-appreciated cultural and religious traditions. These three years marked a pause in the lively gatherings around the temple and riverside, disrupting the traditions that had tightly woven Zihao's community together.

The atmosphere has shifted, characterized by altered human behavior patterns. Zihao's community, once tightly bound by shared traditions, has undergone a transformation, with certain aspects receiving diminished emphasis and attention. This shift signals a change in the fabric of their religious and communal practices, highlighting the broader societal trend of adapting to new patterns in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Legacy: Group Interview Fieldnotes

This was my first attempt at conducting a group oral history interview, and I designed a structured interview, aiming to maintain a continuous and engaging conversation. Departing from conventional life review questions, I posed hypothetical scenarios to the narrators, prompting them to envision curating an exhibit without thematic constraints from the school. Surprisingly, their unanimous response suggested that the current post-pandemic era is deemed unsuitable for another exhibit aimed at healing. Most narrators resorted to checking social media or chat records to recollect their 2022 experiences, revealing the lingering trauma from the pandemic.

Dongni: I feel like I've experienced some memory loss.

Zihao: Honestly, when I try to recall things from last year, I can't remember anything. It's a disaster.

Dongni: I think I really need to check some chat records from that time. I feel like my defense mechanism has been triggered. My roommate, who studied psychology before, mentioned that particularly painful memories are generally not remembered very clearly.

The conversation then transitioned to an observation of the current public opinion on Chinese social media. A noticeable trend became apparent, spanning from public to private spheres, as people collectively avoided discussing the events of the past three years. This unspoken consensus seems to be influenced by the defense mechanism articulated by the narrators, contributing to a general reluctance to engage with the memories of that period on Chinese social media. The term "ridiculous and painful" aptly captures the emotional burden associated with those years, highlighting the intricate interplay of societal memory and coping mechanisms.

Zihao: I believe some people, like Dongni mentioned, naturally block it out of their minds and don't even want to recall the incident. It's even more challenging to have all the experiences laid out in front of them again, saying, "Look at how tough these three years have been for you." Many individuals simply don't want to talk about it anymore; for them, it's over.

Personally, there were many small details from last year that I only remembered clearly when discussing them again. If you ask me to talk about my experiences during the pandemic suddenly, I also resist remembering it, and I think this might be the case for some members of the public as well.

Following that, I presented them with the question: When do they believe would be an opportune moment for the public to revisit the pandemic, fostering a collective healing process? Their responses offered insightful perspectives on the matter. By probing into the ideal timing for revisiting the pandemic for collective healing, the conversation delved into the intricacies of societal memory and the potential for communal catharsis. This inquiry tapped into the narrators' perceptions of when the broader public might be emotionally prepared to reflect on and collectively address the challenges and trauma of the pandemic era. Their responses not only shed light on the nuanced factors influencing the timing but also hinted at the potential effectiveness of societal healing processes.

Xinyan: Because I feel that the pandemic is no longer purely a natural disaster. For example, we often reflect on and commemorate events like the Wenchuan earthquake, or other significant incidents. However, events like the pandemic, including the previous SARS outbreak and major disease epidemics like the plague, are not frequently brought up for reflection or commemoration. This is because their nature involves not only natural disasters but also human-made disasters, revealing inconvenient societal issues that are challenging to discuss. Recollecting those two years, there was a sense of helplessness and despair, and I would wonder why things had to unfold in such a way. Reflecting on these issues now or discussing them publicly seems somewhat untimely.

Dongni: We haven't reached the point where everyone can sit down and have a thorough discussion about what really happened. Even memories are now susceptible to distortion, let alone the prospect of healing. Therefore, I don't think now is an opportune time.

Xinyan: What I want to say is quite similar. I'm curious about why we would bring this up again now. Is it to ensure that everyone remembers what happened during the pandemic, or is there another purpose?

Dongni: Avoiding any ulterior motives.

Xinyan: Exactly, exactly. I feel that if someone keeps insisting on the pandemic issue, many people might question whether there are hidden intentions or if it's influenced by external forces. So, while remembering is meaningful, I wonder what our current objective is?

Dongni: I believe it's a good time to bring it up only when we won't be questioned about having ulterior motives.

Concluding this part of the discussion, I presented the final question: "Do you think it's better to privately document these pandemic memories, or is it more appropriate to make them public, using an archival method that could potentially attract interest from the public in the future?" This question not only prompted my narrators to contemplate the delicate balance between personal reflection and contributing to a shared societal narrative but also served as a reflective moment for myself. It urged me to reconsider the underlying purpose of my thesis project, questioning the appropriateness of different approaches and timing. "What is the appropriate way, and when is the appropriate time?" I anticipate that this will remain an ongoing question for me, shaping the evolving trajectory of my project.

Qinyuan: I think, for now, personal memories are better. Even when I go back to read some of the writings I did last year, especially during the pandemic, like the posts on social media or the photos I took, there are very few things directly related to the pandemic. It seems like, perhaps when we were going through it, we were already trying our best to shield ourselves, although it may not have been entirely possible. Especially as the duration of the pandemic prolonged, maybe by the time it was ending last year, while going through it, we were slowly forcing ourselves to adapt. So, whether or not to make it public, I believe it really requires some time—some time for us to see things more clearly in retrospect.

Conclusion

The artistic expressions showcased in this thesis provide a profound reflection on the multifaceted impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on individuals, communities, and the broader human experience. Each piece contributes to a rich puzzle of insights and perspectives, addressing fundamental questions about the transformative influence of the pandemic on creative processes, community healing, and the potential legacy for future generations. Let's revisit the questions posed at the beginning of this thesis:

1. How has COVID-19 influenced or inspired artists in their creative process?

The artworks featured in this thesis collectively unveil the diverse ways in which artists have responded to the challenges and disruptions brought about by the pandemic. For instance, the metaphorical layers in "Reflection of Cooperation" by Jingfei Hu speak to a deeper understanding of humanity's interconnectedness with the natural world. Similarly, the exploration of the migration of human activities to online realms in "Daters" by July Zhou prompts contemplation on the profound social shifts accelerated by the pandemic. These artistic responses not only showcase the adaptability of artists in the face of a suspended yet chaotic world but also emphasize their role as keen observers and interpreters of societal changes.

2. In what ways do artists perceive their artwork as contributing to community healing?

Jinha Kang's "Body Orchestra" stands out as a compelling example of how art can actively contribute to community healing. The intentional design to engage strangers in a collaborative act of tactile orchestration serves as a metaphor for the transformative power of human connection. By fostering shared experiences through touch, the installation becomes a powerful symbol of communal joy and gratification. Similarly, Yoshe Li's work delves into the themes of human connection, and her personal pandemic memory sharing offers a microcosm of the collective human experience during the pandemic. Through their artwork and oral history, the artists become facilitators of healing by providing spaces for reflection, connection, and understanding.

3. How can future generations derive insights into the COVID era through visual art and oral history?

The presented artworks and narratives collectively function as a time capsule, capturing the nuanced experiences of the pandemic. The evocative stories captured by "Diary of Happening" and the reflective insights shared by Yoshe Li offer glimpses into the emotional landscape of individuals during these tumultuous times. "Daters" by July Zhou transforms into a reflective commentary on societal shifts, serving as a visual documentation of a significant social transition. Zihao Yang's creative AI narrative work also stands as a significant medium for future generations to comprehend our transforming era. These creations, alongside others in this thesis, evolve into a visual and oral history of the pandemic era, offering future generations nuanced insights into the

human experience, our resilience, and the transformative power of art during times of crisis.

In conclusion, this thesis not only showcases artistic responses to the pandemic but also underscores the role of art as a powerful medium for introspection, healing, and the preservation of collective memory. As the world continues to navigate the challenges posed by the pandemic, these artistic expressions become beacons of inspiration, inviting individuals to reflect on the past, find solace in the present, and envision a resilient and interconnected future.

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