

STEPH HUANG*Everything and nothing*

3 February – 9 April 2022

Fragment/abandonment/driftng/intuition/oscillation/transience/alienation/passage/caesura/
solitude

It's a very grey January day... **[fragment]**... typing that in, my old iMac, (too-passed-it to *any* longer be of *any* use to *anyone* in the gallery office **[abandonment]**, and hence, now mine, and now, situated before a window, looking out onto said grey day at our home in the Irish countryside) suggests, rather prompts, that it is January 22nd – it's actually the fifteenth. But what's a week here and there, particularly these days? The computer also took about twenty-five minutes to start up, so it's little wonder that clock and calendar are a tad out **[drifting]**. I wonder what year it thinks it is? Let me, however, not get your imagination too carried away with itself, running loose and free, as I would place a small wager that you are visualising one of those really vintage-type Macs, the ones with the transparent cone-shaped teal casings, perhaps, even the tiny-screened, cream plastic ones that went a nasty yellow, after a time, in the sunlight, and had the keyboard that almost broke the sound barrier, [[[*klonk, klonk, Klonk,*]]] as you hit (literally) the keys. It's not that bad. Though in a retro way, it might actually quite suit the room. I like this room, spend a lot of time in in, write in, I do (says mts ghost writer in Yoda-like sentence-structure, syntax... yes we watched it over Christmas). It's got a lot of art in it – the room, not Christmas or Yoda; twenty-eight, maybe nine, at a quick scan. At the beginning of the first lockdown (when was that – I better ask my computer [!]), we eventually got around to installing a chunk of the gallery's collection, that had been sitting about the place, just resting, for quite a long time, actually. Two of the more recent additions, a buff-over-painted wire rack attached to the wall, which looks like it originated as a refrigerator bottle rack, and now vertically-aligned hosts a hand-blown glass 'bubble', like a tumour bulging around its rigidities. Just below it, on a small modernist tripod table shaped like a kidney, sits a slightly disturbing, pink wax cast of an amputated pig's trotter. Art can be surprising/should be surprising.¹ Again, it's vertical and beside an internally illuminated globe of the world that used to live in Finola Jones' (bossperson) family living room as a child. The globe is permanently orientated to show Australasia and Southeast Asia. A part of the world that means a lot to us – where we met, loved, lived and still feel culturally connected to. There is also a Eucalyptus tree – planted for much the same reasoning - directly out my window, now higher than the house (needs cutting back)... A day later, (the 23rd/16th) the same scene has almost spring-like sunlight upon it. Light (Lee Kit-like) dapples on the wall through the Eucalyptus foliage.

You may by this point, start, legitimately, to wonder what this has to do with Steph Huang **[intuition]**, a young-now-London-based-artist, but most recently of the Taiwan parish. The answer is pretty simple, *everything and nothing*. In that *anything* has absolutely *everything* to do with *nothing*, that in turn, has *nothing* to do with *everything*. In a text, 'FRAGMENT(s)', that has significantly influenced Huang's present thinking, by the painter and writer Jonathan Miles; he notes; "Il y a (there is) is a term employed by both Levinas and Blanchot, which is a double figure **[oscillation]** of *not anything* but neither being *nothing*, implying that everything has been withdrawn. It relates to a state that is interminable, like insomnia, in which the arrival of the day appears impossible. It has a quality of a presence that lurks [much like my computer's clock and calendar], or is like an incessant murmur, that solicits the feeling of horror in which the subject is stripped of subjectivity. The relationship between literature and philosophy is mediated by "*il y a*" which affirms simultaneously the presence of being and the presence of the absence of being, thus refusing incorporation within the totality of history or time. The "*il y a*" precedes the concept as its simultaneous condition of both possibility and impossibility. (see footnote No.4) "*Nothing comes from nothing*".²

Steph Huang is also the artist responsible for both the wire rack and glass sculpture³ and the waxy pig's trotter. When we visited her in the tiny but absolutely immaculately organised workspace at the Studio Voltaire complex in South London (masked and as socially distanced

as the tiny footprint could allow – even all of *that*, from this morning, is *about* to be history, the past, passed [**transience**]), from where she is currently making a new show for *mother's tankstation* in Bethnal Green, she handed over a sheath of notes⁴, in reference to Clarice Lispector [**alienation**], Simone Weil and Walter Benjamin, and a list of ten, relatively random words, that were on her mind as she had been cutting and bending things. Huang, I suspect somewhat self-deprecatingly, has expressed; “I mainly think through making”.⁵

The next *thing* (oddly nearly *nothing*) that caught my attention was the meticulous organisation of space and the present absence of the tools of Huang's trade. Files (the raspy sort), saws, clamps and blades etc, were all stored away in racks and carefully 'categorised' in order of ascending and descending scale. Given the exploration of 'ideas', similarly ordered into a kind-of-neatly-amenable randomness in FRAGMENT(s), and the arrangement of the studio (the 'putting away of'), it was evident that we were engaging with a proprietor of very particular, practical perhaps, but specific interrogative intelligence. A bibliographic sensibility perchance: wherein the process of *making* has equivalences to managing literary materials by identifying and recording 'data' for each item – shapes, colours, textures, materialities, and organising it for retrieval (by others) in a manner desired by (desirous of) the maker/thinker. If indeed Steph Huang does *think* through making, it is a thought process organised as *data retrieval* into a sort-of non-linear taxonomy – *the organisation and categorisation of things* – collated into sensory narratives, [de]posited in stratified layers, accumulating as a *historical* process, of *not anything*, but neither being *nothing*.

Possibly and impossibly, I wonder if the orbit around the ideas of '*everything and nothing*' is even *partially, tangentially, abstrusely*, influenced by the dialectical political relationships of Taiwan (ROC – Republic of China) to both Japan and the PRC (People's Republic of China), as well as the tangential connections of anything to everything, which evolves in the storytelling accretions of Huang's sculptures and installations. Steph's work clearly amasses from her experience of Taiwanese cultural paradigms; *culture* culture and living cultures, food, apartment layouts, decoration, homewares, family, generationality, and the exploration of how one finds a new way of life, away from them, *it*, newly alone and literally, without. [**passage**] The sound of a metronome emanating from the handmade doppelgänger of a room-dividing screen, it beats the time of Huang's absent piano.

A little history: Japan's colonisation of Taiwan commenced in 1895, and throughout the twentieth century, Imperial Japan continued a slow expansion until the 1930s, when military leadership took the reins of power in Tokyo and began to aggressively expand throughout Asia. The power-drive for empire, as well as Tokyo's official control of Taiwan ended in ignominious defeat and infamous mushroom clouds of death, in 1945. Subsequently, with the signing of the San Francisco Treaty in 1951 and the improbably named Treaty of Peace, between Japan and China in 1952, Japan officially ceded all claims to Taiwan. But left a legacy of cultural love/hate. Upon attaining independence from the American occupation in 1952, the Japanese leadership followed the United States, and much of western powerbase, in maintaining official diplomatic relations with the Republic of China or Taiwan, rather than the People's Republic of China in Beijing. However, Japanese leadership tacitly understood that, for the efficacy of post-war recovery, trade with Mainland China (PRC) would be indispensable. Thus, an ambivalent China policy that inclined Tokyo toward a de facto "Two Chinas" policy emerged, a state of neither this, nor that, a double figure of *ll y a*. But history is just a story (?)

One of the joys of writing, [**caesura**] is that if you apply enough words to proverbial paper, almost everything, every argument, turns towards 'nothing', as elegantly exemplified in Danto's *Analytical Philosophy of History*.⁶ Danto argues that to ask the significance of something is to ask a question which can only be answered in the context of a narrative story – that presupposes, or is predicated on, a complete philosophical history of past, present and future. A complete, therefore, impossible understanding of everything, as the future cannot be known, hence the double figure, everything is nothing. In short, the nearest we get to understanding, is storytelling, which in it-self is determined as a matter of scope – stories only work if you leave things out – wherein increasingly complex middles are required to explain the outermost edges. *Beginnings and ends*, which pretty much encapsulates Huang's work. Danto "represents this graphically as follows"⁷, (arranged like Steph's tools):

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Reconstruct the same data differently and the outcome is quite something other:

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[solitude]

¹ Further examples; include an electrocuted stick and a pair of maracas wrapped in starlight-patterned socks (both **Nina Canell**). A dysfunctional laptop hard drive, with a thumb drive (functioning) implanted in it, literally in the form of an amputated thumb, **Yuri Pattison**. And right above me to my left, a pair of aluminum casts, one above the other, of Styrofoam packing (heavy) that forms a kind of robot face, **Brendan Earley**. A transistor radio, over-painted with a 'Dixie' flag in monochrome black and white, **Garrett Phelan**. A handsome handwritten letter in copperplate blue ink, in French, and purporting to be date from "20 janvier, 1861", **Dahn Vō**. A hand-painted ceramic tile of a topless man, well wearing a hat, smoking a pipe, **Noel McKenna**. A small painting of a rabbit holding a fluorescent pink skull wearing aviator sunglasses. **Atsushi Kaga**. You see what I mean?

² *Nothing comes from nothing* (Latin: *ex nihilo nihil fit*) is a philosophical dictum first argued by Parmenides, that appeared in Aristotle's *Physics*: It is associated with ancient Greek cosmology, such as presented, not just in the works of Homer and Hesiod, but also in virtually every internal philosophical system: there is no break in-between a world that did not exist and one that did, since it could not be created *ex nihilo* in the first place. The Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius also beautifully expressed the principle in his first book of *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*):

*But by observing Nature and her laws. And this will lay
 The warp out for us—her first principle: that nothing's brought
 Forth by any supernatural power out of naught.
 For certainly all men are in the clutches of a dread—
 Beholding many things take place in heaven overhead
 Or here on earth whose causes they can't fathom, they assign
 The explanation for these happenings to powers divine.
 Nothing can be made from nothing—once we see that's so,
 Already we are on the way to what we want to know*

– The idea is also somewhat perverted in Joris-Karl Huysmans (1884) *Against Nature* (*À Rebours*), a novel about the rich but jaded aristocrat Des Esseintes, and the isolated life he crafts for himself – a life governed by aesthetic considerations and the desire to subvert, and even supersede, nature. Nothing good comes from it. Lear also responds to Cordelia's guttural utterance of "Nothing", in Act 1, scene 1 of *King Lear*: "How? Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again".

³ Exhibited in her MA graduate exhibition, Royal College of Art, London, 2021

⁴ Jonathan Miles, **FRAGMENT(s)**, is a meandering ideological journey around singular ideas in art and culture influenced by: Clarice Lispector's, *Aqua Viva*, Simone Weil, *Notebooks* (Vols. 1&2) and Walter Benjamin's, *One Way Street*. "The reader is simply invited to wander (and wonder) within this labyrinth-like organisation of fragmentary texts. There is of course a whole array of preoccupations that are woven into these dis-continuous encounters..." the notes begin...

The brief chapter-like passages are: *The Fragment, Out of Tune, Mysterious Guest, Unrepresentable, Pollen, No-place, Strange, Ladder, Pause, Leaden, Disruption, Curved, Abandonment, Affect, Steps, Drifting, Inscription, Obscure World, etc., Withdrawal, Semiotic, Presentation, Maps, The Call, Double Eyes, Marginal, Factory, Violence, Original Experience, Deceased, Il y a, etc.*

⁵ Extrapolated from an email conversation with the artist.

⁶ Arthur C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History*, Cambridge University Press, 1964. Along with *Winnie the Pooh*, my favourite book.

⁷ *ibid.*, pg.241

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*Out of Tune*Plywood, mild steel, paint, metronome
45 x 65 x 22 cm (open)
45 x 33.5 x 22 cm (closed)
2022*Enjoy Your Meal*Baguette, hand-blown glass, powder
coated mild steel, string, wax
81.5 x 98 x 5.5 cm
2021*Verbalise Vase*Mesh metal, speaker, cable, amplifier,
sound (00:02:00), hand-blown glass
79 x 64 x 29 cm
2022*Forest*Mesh metal, bamboo leaves
108 x 73 x 28.5 cm
2022*Subdued Sea*Perspex tube, dye, silk
13 x 108 x 28.5 cm
2022*Non-Functional*Plywood, mild steel, paint, hand-blown
glass
45 x 65 x 22 cm (open)
45 x 33.5 x 22 (closed)
2022*Balance of Terror*Weathered brick, powder coated mild steel
54 x 2.5 x 28.5 cm
2022*Inedible*Plywood, mild steel, paint, clay, pigment
45 x 65 x 22 cm (open)
45 x 33.5 x 22 cm (closed)
2022*Pampas*Hand-blown glass, black mild steel,
twisted bar, pampas grass
Dimensions variable
2022*Tea Ceremony*Plywood, mild steel, hand-blown glass,
paint
28 x 44 x 27 cm
2022