# ONCE IN A WHILE:

## On Substitutions, Displacement and Illegible Bodies

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Author Note

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# Once in a While

Once in a while they change the pythons in the temple in Benin

Once in a while the snakes shed their skins

Once in a while the Buddha statues are taken down and replaced

Once in a while the color wheel rotates

Once in a while immigrants are welcome and then they are not

Once in a while an elephant is taken out of the fridge

Once in a while it is put back in again

Once in a while garbage is shipped to a far-away place

Once in a while the working parents come back to the hometown

And see how much their kid has grown

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# Summary

Once in a while is the master's degree graduation project of Ginko Hsu, which consists of a written thesis component and an artistic exhibition component. This thesis explores how fragmented memory, inherited grief, and cultural displacement shape the perception and construction of the body, through the concept of the ersatz body—a substitute marked by absence, rupture, and illegibility. Moving through feminist, postcolonial, and hauntological frameworks, the written component weaves personal narrative, myth, fiction, iconography, and diasporic thinking to ask how alternative systems of knowledge may emerge from what is lost, obscured, or unspoken.

The artistic component has taken place at Tasku Galleria, as a part of Kuvan Kevät Master's Degree Show, from May 17th to June 15th in 2025. It presents a series of multimedia installations, combining ceramic sculpture, hand-tufted textile, glass, photography print, projection, and participatory ritual. For me, these works evoke memories that are personal yet shared, incomplete yet intimate, distant yet felt, offering forms of soft resistance. Together, the thesis proposes a way of thinking through disjunction: not toward fixed identity or coherence, but toward meaning that is held in fragments, tenderness, and embodied process.

# Fact Sheet

## 剪窗/ Ikkunasta

2025

/ Pigment print on aluminum, glass, steel, plaster, air-dry clay

Installation: Various sizes

## In Order to Become a Child Again

2025

/ Hand-tufted wool textile, cast glass, pâte de verre, atelier glass, aluminum, stone

Installation: Various sizes

## Who Will You Turn To?

2025

/ Glazed ceramics, glass, wool felting on polyurethane, acrylic beads

Interactive Installation: Various sizes; sound, 1min 50s

*Note: Installation view of the artworks can be found in the sections of Appendix A, B, and C.*

# Table of Contents

# Introduction

This introduction is not a summary but a collage/polyphonic chorus of texts and images that sketch, distort to depict the elephant as figure, symbol, and question.

The parable of the blind men and an elephant first appeared in Buddhist sutras.

譬如有王告一大臣，汝牽一象以示盲者。爾時大臣受王勅已，多集眾盲，以象示之。時彼眾盲各以手觸，大臣即還而白王言：『臣已示竟。』爾時大王即喚眾盲各各問言：『汝見象耶？』眾盲各言：『我已得見。』王言：『象為何類？』其觸牙者，即言象形如蘆菔根；其觸耳者，言象如箕；其觸頭者，言象如石；其觸鼻者，言象如杵；其觸腳者，言象如木臼；其觸嵴者，言象如床；其觸腹者，言象如甕；其觸尾者，言象如繩。

(the Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra, chapter 32)

Then the king went to the blind people and on arrival asked them, 'Blind people, have you seen the elephant?' 'Yes, your majesty. We have seen the elephant.'
The blind people who had been shown the elephant's head said, 'The elephant, your majesty, is just like a jar.'
Those who had been shown the elephant's ear said, 'The elephant, your majesty, is just like a winnowing basket.'
Those who had been shown the elephant's tusk said, 'The elephant, your majesty, is just like a plowshare.'
...
Those who had been shown the elephant's tail said, 'The elephant, your majesty, is just like a pestle.'
Those who had been shown the tuft at the end of the elephant's tail said, 'The elephant, your majesty, is just like a broom.'
Saying, 'The elephant is like this, it's not like that. The elephant's not like that, it's like this,' they struck one another with their fists.
(Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2012, Tittha Sutta: Sectarians [Ud 6.4])

*Le Petit Prince* started as handwritten text and drawings by Saint-Exupéry around 1942. This manuscript page includes the famous drawing of a boa constrictor swallowing an elephant(Antoine de Saint Exupéry, 1942).

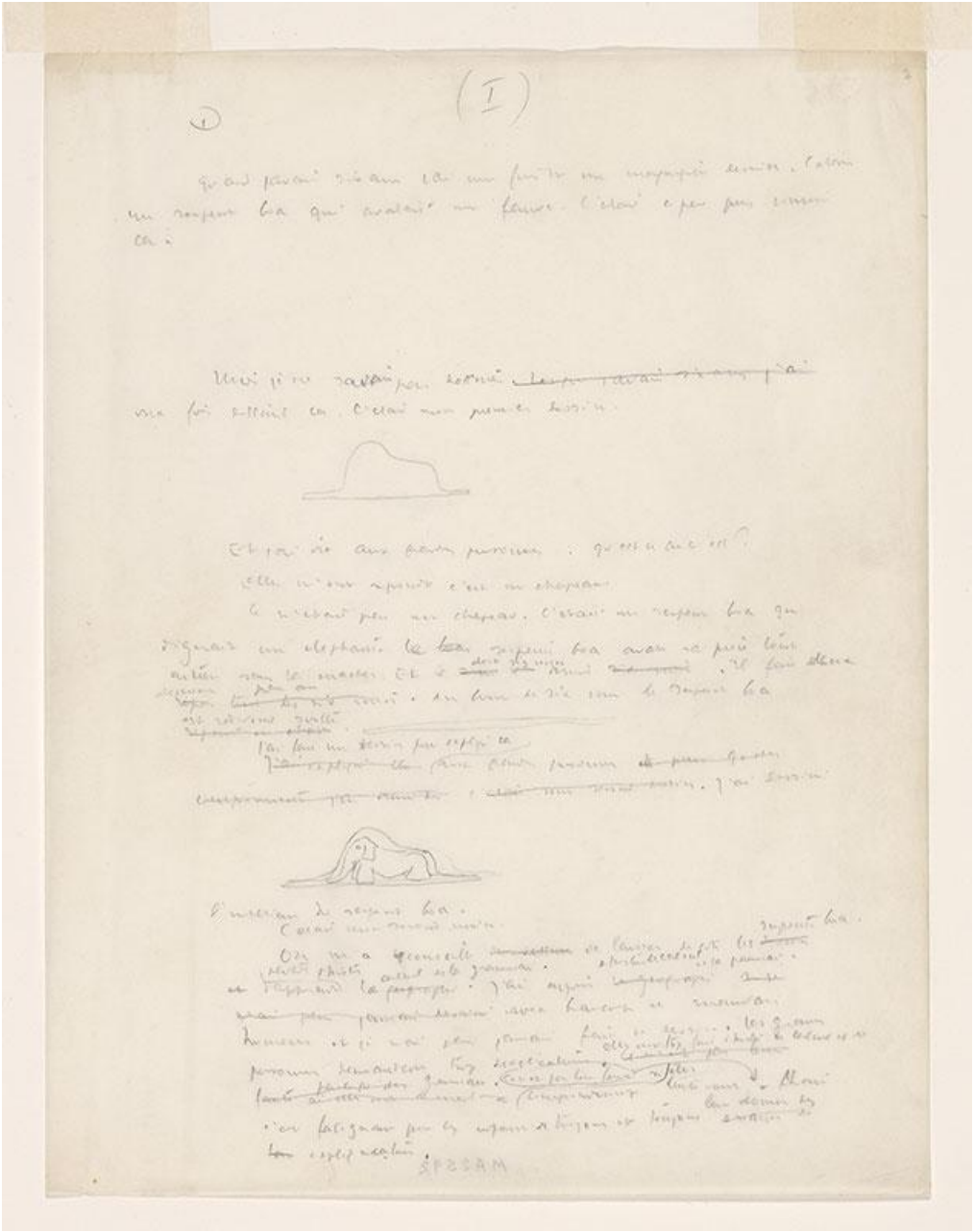

**Figure 1**

*Drawing from Le Petit Prince manuscript, folio 2.*

*Source: Antoine de Saint Exupéry. (c. 1942). Le Petit Prince, MA 2592, fol. 2 [Manuscript drawing]. Morgan Library & Museum.*

How do you fit an elephant into a fridge in 3 steps?

Step 1: Open the fridge.

Step 2: Put in the elephant.

Step 3: Close the fridge.

(Popular joke, origin unknown)

*The Story of Babar*, is a French storybook for children about a young African elephant, named Babar. After witnessing a hunter killing his mother, he escapes into exile and visits a big city. The elephant enters the domestic sphere, wearing clothes, reading books, and becomes "civilized" (Brunhoff, 1931).

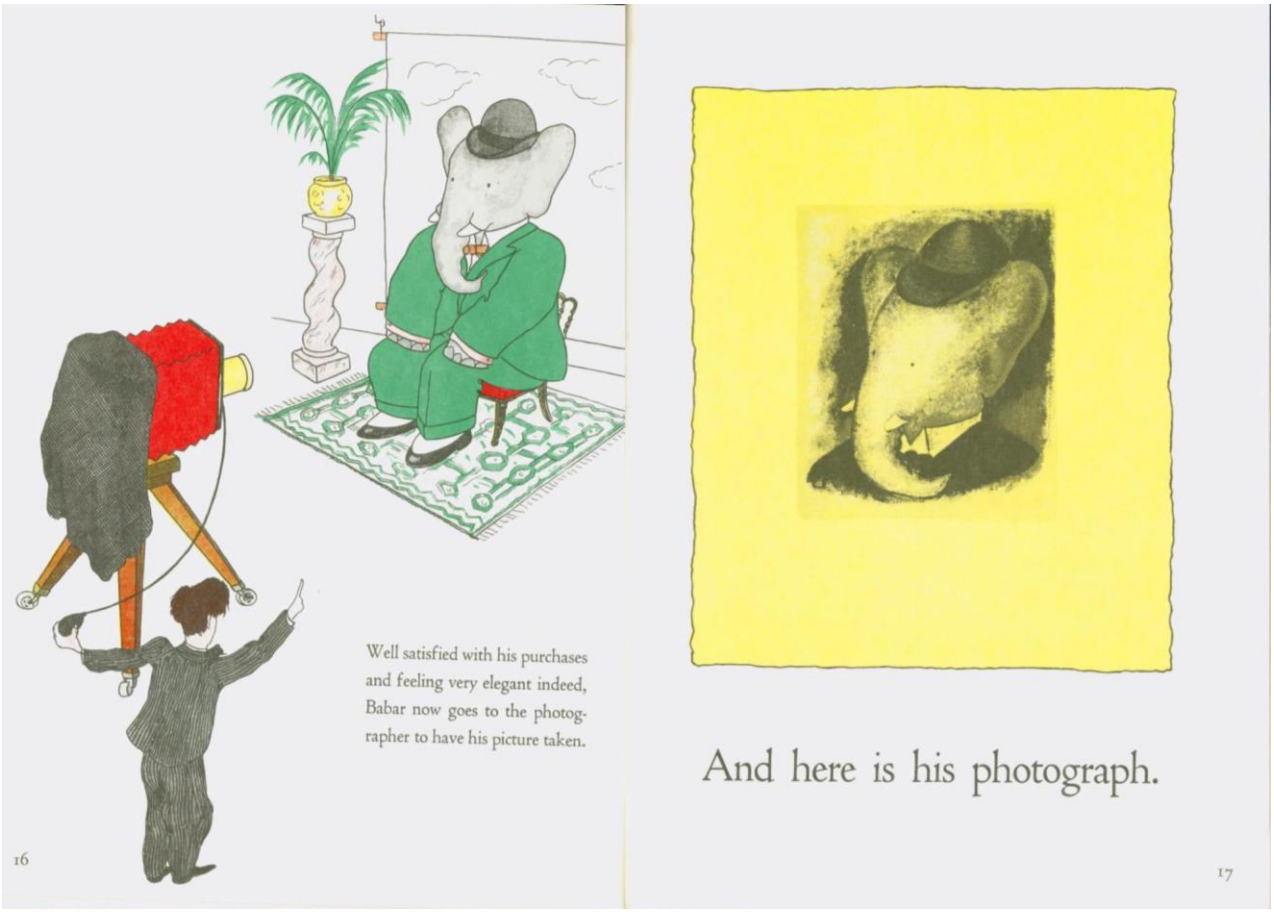


**Figure 2**

Babar went into exile in a city, buying clothes with the money of "a rich old lady". From *The Story of Babar by J. de Brunhoff*, 1931, pp. 16–17.

This book about Babar the elephant was published in 1931, the same year as the *Paris Colonial Exposition*.

Here is a snip of a review on the book, titled *Freeing Elephants* from *The New Yorker:*

> The happy effect that Babar has on us, and our imaginations, comes from this knowledge—from the child's strong sense that, while it is a very good thing to be an elephant, still, the life of an elephant is dangerous, wild, and painful. It is therefore a safer thing to be an elephant in a house near a park.
>
> "Page 2 of 'Babar'" is a code word among certain parents for the entire issue of what it is right to expose our children to…It is there that Babar's mother, with her little elephant on her back, is murdered, with casual brutality, by a squat white hunter. The pro-page-twoers think that without the incident the story is robbed of motive and pathos; the anti-page-twoers think that it's just too hard, too early, and too brutal, so they turn the story into one of a little elephant who merely wanders into Paris—not such a bad premise.
>
> (Gopnik, 2008)

The birth of the elephant-headed deity Ganesha, who originates in India, is a well-known story with many variants. Here is one popular version, narrated also in the book *Everyday Hinduism*:

> Shiva has gone out to the mountains to meditate, leaving his wife Parvati behind. She's lonely and creates a son out of a paste of turmeric and ground lentils (a kind of body scrub) that she had rubbed on her body during her bath. One day, while she is taking her bath, Parvati tells her son to stand guard outside the door and not to let anyone in. Shiva returns from his ascetic retreat and is blocked from entering his home by a 'stranger'. He demands to be let in, but Ganesha refuses; and in anger, Shiva beheads him. Only when Parvati comes out of her bath, devastated by what she sees in front of her, does Shiva learn whom he has beheaded. He sends his attendants out to the jungle to bring back the head of the first living thing they encounter, which happens to be an elephant. Shiva attaches that head, and Ganesha comes to life again and is worshipped in the form of an elephant-headed, human-bodied deity.
> (Flueckiger, 2015, p. 26)

Thailand, like other Southeast Asian countries, has a long history of trade and cultural exchange with India. Ganesha is widely recognized, not only as a religious figure but also through his growing presence in everyday visual culture in Bangkok. Ganesha appears in shrines, shops, and mass-produced goods. His popularity in recent years has developed into something close to a local cult, with widespread circulation of his image (Agarwal, 2017).

**Figure 3**

*Phra Phikanet*, the world's tallest standing bronze Ganesha statue, 39 meters high (including base), located in Khlong Khuean, Chachoengsao Province, Thailand. Photo by Thaweesak Churasri (2012), licensed under CC BY 3.0.

# 象／像

象 (xiàng)

Originally: *elephant* (pictograph).

Later extended to: *form, image, symbol, phenomenon*.

Appears in words like:

天象 – patterns in the sky *(天: heave, sky)*

气象 – shifting air, weather *(气: breath, force)*

景象 – visual scene or impression *(景: light, view)*

像 (xiàng)

Derived from 象, with the “person” radical ( 亻 ).

Means *to resemble, likeness, or simulation*.

佛像 – Buddha statue(*佛*: Buddha)

人像 – Portrait(人:human)

影像 – Image, often photographic or digital (*影*: shadow)

真象 (zhēn xiàng)

Composed of 真 (real) + 象 (elephant/image).

Homophonous with 真相 (truth).

Literally: *real elephant*.

“人希见生象也，

而得死象之骨，

案其图以想其生也，

故诸人之所以意想者皆谓之‘象’也。”

—《韩非子·解老》

“Few have seen a living elephant,
though having obtained the bones of the dead,
they imagine its form by tracing its outline.
Thus all things we imagine, we call ‘象’ (image/form/elephant).”

(Han Feizi, c. 3rd century BCE, *Jie Lao* chapter, translation of the author)

In this experimental chorus of images, metaphors of elephants across stories and dreams, perhaps what we seek is not the elephant itself, but what we imagine about it, and what we project onto it.

What if we never see the elephant at all?

What if all we have ever known are the traces around its bones, the hollow contours of what once was?

What if the truth—the real elephant— could never be whole, but only repeatedly reappearing through substitutions, simulations, and fragments?

Part of my exhibition works (*see also in the appendix,* ***Figure A2.****)*

# To Fill a Void: Ersatz

In *Orlando: A Biography*, Virginia Woolf (1928/2024) writes, “Memory is the seamstress, and a capricious one at that. Memory runs her needle in and out, up and down, hither and thither. We know not what comes next, or what follows after” (Chapter 5).

If all we have are fragments of stories, bodies, and images, then memory becomes a thread we stitch through them all.

Memory is often tied to objects, and family history is commonly passed down through material traces: ancestral records like genealogies, old land deeds, photographs in albums, faded books, and so on. However, even with such tangible things, memory as a kind of cognitive system remains wobbly, difficult to grasp.

Still, I often find myself a little envious of people who know their family histories like the back of their hand. I, on the other hand, know very little. Or rather, I know some fragments, bits of stories. But I do not know their names. There are no records in any form, and certainly no heirlooms —nothing tangible to prove that they ever lived. Even the stories themselves were told in such a short version that they feel distant, as if they belong to someone else—a stranger. They are like shadows lingering in silence.

My family is from the province Jiangxi, in the southern part of China. Beyond my grandparents’ generation, the details of my family history become sparse. All that remains is a quiet void left by the shame, grief, and hardships carried by one woman. This woman was my great-grandmother.

In my early memory, my great-grandmother was an old lady with a sharp gaze and very few words. She always combed her hair carefully and dressed neatly, even though she had little and her health was declining. Her silence was not soft —it had a sharpness to it, a kind of distance. She often listened to others talk, then responded with a dry, dismissive “hng” from the nostrils, as if none of it mattered. As a child, I did not know how to talk to her. But once, she taught me how to cook instant noodles —and they were the best I ever had.

She passed away when I was around ten. I only came to learn her story years after she died, from my grandmother. She was born into a landlord family, and received a formal education at a girls' school, which was extremely rare for women in early 20th-century China. She later married a young man who graduated from the prestigious Whampoa Military Academy and served as a civilian official in the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party of China). She was a part of an educated, progressive class. Her life was soon to collapse irrevocably.

Like many of her generation, her youth was overshadowed by the horrors of the World War II, the decade-long Japanese invasion to China. She witnessed with her own eyes, the brutal massacres of civilians. Not long after Japan's surrender in 1945, the Civil War broke out. Her husband was executed. Meanwhile, the new regime brought massive land and class reforms(Ledovsky, 1982). Her family's land and property were confiscated, as they were labeled as enemies. Once a young lady of privilege, she became all of a sudden a young widow, homeless, penniless, and with a young child to raise. She began washing clothes for others — as my grandmother put it, "scrubbing neighbors' stinky socks" —to earn a living. My grandmother recalled that, at the age of eight, she nearly drowned in the river while helping her mother rinse laundry.

That is all I know of my great-grandmother's story. She never spoke of it herself.

**Figure 4**

A group of Chinese village women, some of them with children. They are gathered on both banks of a creek to wash clothes in the water. Source: University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries Digital Collections (ca. 1930-1939).

And yet, her silence speaks.

These stories were erased, or perhaps buried. Memories she could not write about, even though she was educated enough to do that. What remains are scattered words, floating in the silence that follows loss.

The world no longer needed her as an educated woman, but merely as a body to bear the aftermath of a history that was not hers. In a way, her life was replaced, and reduced to something else, *the other*'s. Her identity remained only as a trace beneath the role she was forced to inhabit. The body of a woman who once embodied the hopes of a progressive generation of young women, forced to become a vessel of toil, labor, and silence.

Her body became an "ersatz body".

"Ersatz", was originally a German term for a "substitute" or "replacement", widely used during wartime to describe goods made from inferior materials due to shortages of the original. For example, ersatz coffee was made from roasted acorns instead of real coffee beans. Later, in Freudian psychoanalysis, as Amfreville (2024) argues, the term came to signify "a substitution that does not erase," thus a replacement that retains a trace of what has been buried. In this sense, it can carry even more meaning than the original, and the assumed hierarchy of inferiority no longer applies. Such replacements often emerge from psychological defense mechanisms, in response to traumas or loss, not only within individuals, but also across collective memory within the context of racial or colonial discourse.

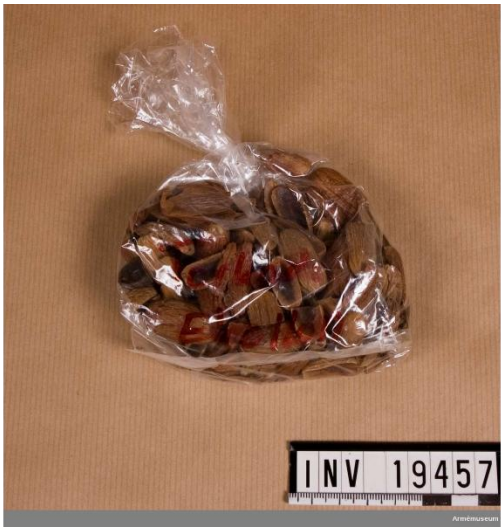


**Figure 5**

*Coffee surrogate (Kaffesurrogat) from WWII, consisting of ground and roasted acorns mixed with coffee*. Used during the 1940s in wartime Sweden as a substitute.

Image credit: Army Museum, Sweden. (AM.019457). Photo via Europeana. Licensed under CC BY 4.0.

As humans, our social and cultural identities are shaped as much by what we forget as by what we remember. Storytelling, as a form of cultural archiving, has long played a central role in shaping our sense of self, anchoring us to the past, and guiding how we imagine our future. Yet in reflecting on my own family history —fragmented, lost, and even erased —I cannot help but ask: who is represented in the narratives that are retold and archived, and who is forgotten, marginalized or brushed aside?

My great-grandmother's life story, though merely a grain in the the desert of grand historical narratives, echoes countless others that remain unspoken, unheard. These lives remind us of the violence embedded in singular historical narratives. The substitutions —and the traces of the absence and loss they leave behind —are etched into individual bodies: *ersatz bodies*. The bodies become sites of displacement, of affects. These replacements function not only as psychic defenses, but also a cultural and political mechanisms. Recognizing these replacements through alternative, counter-narratives opens up the possibility of unlearning and relearning the past. It challenges the singular historicization, and reclaims archival knowledge by questioning how the archive is curated — by whom, for whom, and to what end (Loa, 2022).

I think about the overnight transformation in the life of my great-grandmother. Then I think about how Virginia Woolf(1928/2024) writes in her groundbreaking novel *Orlando: A Biography*, the story of a young nobleman named Orlando living in Elizabethan England, who mysteriously wakes up one morning to find their gender suddenly, bluntly replaced, to become a woman. This could be read as a form of *ersatz body* in its time. Yet the duality of gender resides within that same body, which acts as a poetic container. In the story, Orlando has lived across over 300 years, and this body of Orlando seems to never age, as if it exists across centuries —as both man and woman, both ancient and futuristic, both noble and marginal.

ORLANDO ON HER RETURN TO ENGLAND

**Figure 6**

*Photo of Vita Sackville-West*, muse and inspiration for *Orlando: A Biography* (1928). Photo by Leonard George Green. Source: scan from original first edition.

This idea of the *ersatz body,* —a body as a site of substitutions and remnants of what was lost —continues to stay with me, influencing how I approach memory, form and storytelling in my artistic practice. What especially moves me is how the body so often exists in a liminal state, suspended between fixed categories, defying borders and boundaries. What appears silent on the outside is often flux within — fluid, shifting, alive with what cannot be fully spoken.

This embodied displacement, does not erase the past, nor does it fill the void. Rather, it gives it a shape we can live with into the future.

# Personal Mythology

"The bird fights its way out of the egg.

The egg is the world.

Who would be born must first destroy a world. "

(Hesse, 1919/1923, p. 116)

**How to Be Born**

Like many children, my early dreams of the future were not shaped by family archives, but by stories found in literature, imagination, and the mythologies we borrowed from elsewhere.

I became aware of the existence of social rules and judgments from others at a very young age, though I was slow to fully grasp them. In the local *Wu* dialect in the region of Suzhou and Shanghai, the phrase *ling-de-qing* describes someone who understands social behaviors intuitively and appropriately. I sensed how adults assessed children through unspoken standards —often entangled with their own projections of desire, and it made me uneasy. I was often confused, between what others seemed to expect of me, and what I instinctively felt I should do. This ambiguity, this emotional limbo, made me withdraw from human interactions.

Parental care was often absent for the younger me, and migrating was a theme throughout my childhood. As one of the left-behind children, I lived with my grandmother for almost two years, when my parents migrated to Suzhou for work. And later, I moved with my parents two times in two years. It is a more than challenging situation. Developmental psychologist Erikson(1959) emphasizes the importance of forming an identity rooted in continuity and a stable sense of self and peer bonds, which may be heavily disrupted by frequent relocation. For a child, the world is a space of wonder and at the same time a place of threats. I needed to build a framework to understand it. To do so, the solitary child turned to books, stories, and animations. Growing up at the turn of 21th century, my imagination was colored by a mixture of ancient Chinese myths, translated Western fairy tales, like those

of the Grimms and Andersen and a great deal of imported Japanese animations.

**Shōjo Anime: From Sailor Moon to Utena**

A classic from the 90s was the animation *Sailor Moon(*Takeuchi, 1992-1997). A scene deeply imprinted in the memory of my generation, is that of ordinary schoolgirls transforming into magical warriors in a dazzling full-body metamorphosis. That was a collective dream for many children at that time. Of course, there are many works in popular culture that center on heroes or heroines who defeat evil. But for me, this was the beginning of building a personal mythology, — one that helped me navigate an unstable world —a world filled with invisible traps, unspoken rules, and desires of the others.

As I grew older, I encountered the animation *Revolutionary Girl Utena* (Ikuhara, 1997). It sparked in me a curiosity to understand what it means, as Hesse once wrote in the novel *Demian*, that "who would be born must first destroy a world"(Hesse, 1919/1923). This animation is quite forward-thinking and even avant-garde in its philosophical thinking as well as its unique aesthetics. It has many layers to it and I will only draw from it my own understanding.

*Revolutionary Girl Utena* (Ikuhara, 1997) narrates the fantasy of two girls exploring identity, gender, and the body, while navigating the constraints of a patriarchal society. It speaks of dreams and loss, of fragility and growth, and of how transforming one's body does not always lead to resolution. The protagonist, Utena, holds a fragmented memory of being saved by a "prince". As she matures, she stops searching for him and instead decides to become one —dressing and behaving like a boy. This substitution becomes a projection of inner conflict: an idealization of masculinity, but also an attempt to understand and reclaim her own identity. The *ersatz body* becomes a site of self-making and self-salvage.

**Figure 7**

The Takarazuka Revue, an all-female Japanese theater troupe, is known for its tradition of women performing male roles (otokoyaku). Films, novels, folktales, and also shōjo manga are often adapted into musicals performed by women. This is a stage photograph in 1954 of Takarazuka Revue production *"Kimi no Na wa: Warsaw Love Story"*. Public Domain. (Wikimedia Commons).

**Longing and the Void: On Icons and Absence**

The image of the prince is but a void. It is a fantasy stitched together from fragmented memory and collective desire. This absence, embedded within the process of transformation, leaves behind a quiet residue of loss, —a longing that emerges where the feminine voice vanishes.

We live among absences. Our archives are rid of the stories of the disposables, of the "subalterns", as theorist Gayatri Spivak describes all those excluded from, or marginalized from the structures of cultural imperialism(Spivak, 1988). These memories slip like shadows, swept away in the storm of the dominant power structures. These absences echo through layers of displacement, across cultures, geographies and histories. They appear as ghosts in what I call the *afterlife of icons***,** of which I will elaborate more on in the following chapter.

The term *icon* originates in Western religious art, where it refers to sacred images used in worship practices, such as the painting of saints. Here in my research, the term *icon* functions not just as a religious or aesthetic figure, but as a cultural and philosophical concept,  the significance of which is often bound to the body.

Speaking of the longing that emerges from absence, I remember a scene in Herman Hesse's novel *Demian*, where the protagonist, an adolescent boy named Sinclair, embarks on a spiritual path led not by social norms, but by inner vision (Hesse, 1919/1923). Though untrained in art, Sinclair forms a peculiar, and persisting connection with a portrait he creates himself which iterates throughout the narrative. The face constantly changes. It is sometimes drawn from a dream, sometimes resembling his own or a stranger he has briefly encountered. Yet he admires the face with profound intimacy, almost worshiping it like a sacred icon. The connection he has formed to it is beyond passion, even going into being obsessive and fanatic. In his inner monologue, Sinclair describes the face:

> As I sat before the finished sketch, it made a peculiar impression on me. It seemed to me a sort of picture of a god or of a sacred mask, half man, half woman, ageless, the expression being at once dreamy and strong-willed, stiff and yet secretly alive. This

> face seemed to have something to say to me, it belonged to me; its look was rather imperative, as if requiring something of me. And there was a certain resemblance to someone or other, to whom I knew not.
> (Hesse, 1919/1923, p. 105)

This brought me to reflect on the artistic process of all us art creators, as well as my own. What kind of idol, *icon* or sacred mask, am I conjuring into being, if any at all?

# Afterlife of Icons: on Desire and Hauntology

## Icons as Projections

Before delving into my own visual language, I begin by exploring t*he afterlife of icon* through several lenses: how icons emerge from projections onto bodies, how they are stripped and reduced, and how their residues continue to circulate as fragments or ghosts.

In cultural theory, icons are figures or objects drawn from specific social, political, and historical contexts, serving as vessels for collective cultural values and desires(Truman, 2017). The aura of an icon arises not from its inherent meaning, but from what we project onto it. Within this framework, bodies positioned outside dominant cultural narratives — "the other" — are often transformed into icons, not to reflect their own truths, but to embody the desires imposed on them from the external. Their own subjectivities, histories, and meanings are reduced to residues, lingering as ghostly traces, within the hauntologies of postcolonial and capitalist systems.

## We Walk Among Ghosts

In 2023, I visited Chongshan Village in Suzhou, along China's eastern coast, where over 60% of the country's Buddha statues are produced. What struck me was not the sacred statues themselves, but the towering piles of discarded molds once used to cast divine figures, now abandoned in a deserted yard. The scene felt almost sacrilegious, as if the gods themselves had been forsaken, leaving behind only empty shells(see Figure 8). This echoed other absences that come to mind: the countless headless Buddhas in ancient Chinese temples — some looted by colonizers and now stored in Western museums; others mutilated during the infamous Iconoclasm of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s.

**Figure 8**

Discarded Buddha statue molds in Chongshan Village, Suzhou, China.

Photograph by author, 2023.

These fragmented bodies, as displaced visual images, reappear across different geographies. The afterlives of icons from dominant cultures, often resurface in the form of fragmented bodies, accumulating as castoffs in the land of "the other". In Accra, the capital of Ghana, by a roadside in the city center, I saw a mountain of dismembered mannequins — torsos and limbs packed into sacks(see Figure 9). These plastic bodies, most likely shipped from the West, once embodied glamour and charm, the desires of consumerism, only to end up displaced and discarded. Meanwhile, West Africa is flooded with surpluses of western commodities, including second-hand garments known as *"obroni wawu"*, meaning the clothings of deceased white people in the local Ghanaian language(Oduku, 2022).

On the other hand, the icons of the marginalized, though often disregarded, are sometimes fetishized as exotic symbols, stripped of their complexity. It is not uncommon to hear from many of my Asian girlfriends, how often men with "yellow fever" appear on dating apps. In this context, fetish becomes the romanticization of desire through the flattening and objectification of the body. The body becomes an object of attraction, while all other facets of identity vanish under the dominant gaze.

The complication of all these icons of different origins, is that it is almost impossible to separate the icon of the marginalized from the dominant or colonial culture's impact. In other words, there is no "*pure" or "authentic" icon* of one's own for the "subalterns" to be found. In the postcolonial context, one's identity is often a hybrid construct. British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare's sculptures, *How Does a Girl Like You Get to Be a Girl Like You* (1995), is composed of three headless mannequins, floating like ghosts, garnished in Victorian-style robes which are made from Ankara fabric(see Figure 10). The textile Ankara, though now praised for its Africanness, first came into the life of Africans as a result of commerce with European merchants. Shonibare's artwork sharply questioned the existence of pure Africanness, outside the impact from its colonial history(Shonibare, 2007).

**Figure 9**

Pile of dismembered mannequins in Accra, Ghana, West Africa.

Photograph by the author, 2024.

**Figure 10**

Yinka Shonibare, *How Does a Girl Like You Get to Be a Girl Like You?* (1995). Retrieved from the Digital Public Library of America: http://www.moma.org/collection/works/86007

What these examples reveal is that the icon, as a cultural construct — whether cast into plaster, carved into wood, molded in plastic, or projected onto flesh —is constantly in flux. Its afterlife, as a kind of *ersatz*, retains only traces of its original purpose, yet mirrors the sense of loss and displacement, appearing as ghostly imagery shaped by power and desire. In the next chapter, I turn to how these residues of icons are negotiated and reimagined through ritual, play, and personal mythology in my own artistic practice.

# Soft resistance

In *Notes from Underground*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky writes :

> In any case civilization has made mankind if not more bloodthirsty, at least more vilely, more loathsomely bloodthirsty. In old days he saw justice in bloodshed and with his conscience at peace exterminated those he thought proper. Now we do think bloodshed abominable and yet we engage in this abomination, and with more energy than ever. Which is worse? Decide that for yourselves.
>
> (Dostoyevsky, 1864/1996, chapter VII)

More than a century later, this observation remains disturbingly resonant. "Which is worse?"

Art comes from life. It is a phrase repeated so much it risks cliche. In the past year of thesis preparation, many of my fellow artists asked: Does it still make sense to make art, to make this exhibition, while the world is deep in escalating violence, while a genocide is happening in plain view, every day?

I do not claim to have an answer. But I do know that now more than ever, we must remain vigilant toward how violence is made palatable: how propaganda packages cruelty as justice; how "the other" is dehumanized, flattened and framed as hatred. Language, images, symbols, —culture itself is engineered, and narratives are formed until truth becomes one-sided.

Perhaps in a world this mad, one must allow some madness in to remain sane. Studying and living in a Eurocentric context, I wonder how much I have internalized a system that risks making its subjects complicit, or even blind.

**Process and Vulnerability**

In the hands-on artistic process of my thesis project, I embraced not-knowing, allowing myself to be vulnerable. Rather than searching for answers, I aimed to become a better listener, as Hermann Hesse once wrote, to "listen to the teaching my blood whispers to me"(Hesse, 1919/1923). I began with fragments: materials, gestures, memories, each

speaking its own language.

The poem *Once in a While,* circulating at the center of the exhibition, came to me one winter dawn. I hastily scribbled it down, catching a falling snowflake in my palm before it dissolved. Other works, like the ceramic sculpture, required much more patience. It required making and remaking over several months, during which my thoughts and research gradually evolved and fell into place.

I allowed myself slowness: to read in many directions, to follow detours, to go wherever the process led me, without rushing toward definitive meaning or conclusions. What interests me is not resolution, but getting lost, connecting threads, and getting lost again — a continual process of exploring, resting, and reflecting. The act of working with materials, and working with my hands, was not about the outcomes, but cultivating companions, entities I share the journey with. These works are, in a sense, the fragments I have gathered, in what I have come to understand as a collective dream of grief —a memory not reconstructed as a complete narrative, but emerged as fragments: vaguely familiar, yet partial, illegible and distant.

It is perhaps worth noting that the process of making by manual work can sometimes be quite challenging: having to watch the glass kiln until 11 pm on a winter night just to adjust the temperature; to make the pâte-de-verre, due to the lack of machinery, my friend and I spent hours sifting glass frits by hand to collect just two cups of glass powder, which is a very dusty and tedious job; and the days and days of maintaining a consistent working rhythm for large ceramics. During one ceramics project, part of the sculpture cracked, and I have to admit that it was because I had to take several days off in between due to back pain and burnout, which is really not advisable when working with clay, as you must be extra careful about maintaining the clay's humidity consistency. So, like these examples, sometimes works come out imperfect despite all the effort. Sometimes I can't help but wonder: is all this labor worth it? Does art-making have to be this demanding? Over the past year, I have become somewhat more at ease with myself, learning to accept whatever emerges through the artistic process. After all, artworks do not come from a vacuum. If the

artist has to balance a second job, pressure from immigration, and much more beyond that, then the work is allowed to speak to this struggle. I incorporated several glass pieces that came out "broken" from the kiln, joining them into a sword to accompany the sculpture. In a sense, as Theresa Hak Kyung Cha does in *Dictee*(2001), I turn to ruptures, fragmented forms, and broken syntax to access memories that cannot be fully told. In this way, I aim to handle memory as both artifact and absence, as something inherited but also lost.

**Radical Potential of the Ersatz Body**

I knew from the beginning that the body would be present in the works, but not as a coherent whole. It would be *ersatz*: incomplete, uncontained, and unclassifiable. It would situate in the past, present, and future, as a being nostalgic, unstable yet intimate.

In thinking through the fragmented and shifting bodies, I encountered Shannon Winnubst's writing on *fungibility* as a key concept in contemporary black feminist theory(Winnubst, 2020). Through citing C. Riley Snorton's research, Wiinnubst argues that, it is precisely because black flesh cannot be recognized within the fixed gender structures within colonial, patriarchal systems, the ungendered body opens up an radical space of freedom and new possibilities (Winnubst, 2020). This paradox about the body made illegible becoming revolutionary, resonates with how I see the ersatz body: not only marked by loss, but also carrying the potential for redefinition.

**Materiality and Tenderness as Resistance**

In my thesis project, the work *Who Will You Turn To?* is a sculpture constellation with a participatory ritual((see Appendix C for reference). The sculpture part is composed of headless, nearly life-sized ceramic body, a floating masked head, and strands of colorful acrylic beads that connect them. The ceramic torso lies on the floor with the feet upturned, in an exposed and vulnerable posture, and it is strangely cyborg-like. The surface is glazed in pastel tones and metallic silver, covered in tattoo-like drawings that feel dreamy, mythical and some manga-vibe girlish. On its back grows a shiny silver tree-like form. Suspended high up in the corner is a floating head with a masked face —part god, part drag

—gazing downwards at the body. The aesthetic references *Revolutionary Girl Utena* with its surreal imagery, hybrid genders, and metaphoric sword rituals as a longing for transformation.

In the participatory part of the *Who Will You Turn To?* , visitors are invited to touch, choose the beads in different colors which represent distinct meanings, and place them into a small plate in the center. Visitors shall use their phone flashlight to reveal the silver scribblings on the wall that guide the ritual. The threaded beads serve as a ritual that gestures towards the ersatz body, as a site of collective reflection, asking: *Who Will You Turn To In the Face of Uncertainty?* In a time marked by extreme violence, global crisis and systematic silencing, this question becomes both personal and political.

The work, *Ikkunasta(see Appendix A)*, incorporates projected shadows of windows onto the aluminum print of a starry nightsky in window frame. Glass fragments inspired by classical Chinese garden window patterns adorn the sides of the print. Beneath the print, a small metal stool decorated with white floral patterns is placed. It evoked the childhood memory of tiptoeing to look out the window in search for stars. This work is a quiet act of longing, for something cosmic in the setting of the domestic. It is about the collective memory of home.

On the left corner of the room, the work *In Order to Become a Child Again*, centers a hand-tufted wool carpet half-hung on the wall, trailing onto the floor(see Appendix B). A pink-tinted mirror is embedded in it, placed at the height of a child. In order to see oneself in it, an adult must bend or kneel. The mirror reflects not only the visage of the viewer, but the gesture for a longing to go back in time perhaps: an adult returning to a child. Traditionally, a praying carpet is to be knelt upon. However here, its own subjectivity is addressed. The carpet looks back. It is more than an object of devotion. It becomes a vessel of reflection. It is a work of longing to return through intimacy, vulnerability and displacement.

I have intentionally chosen a dreamlike palette with pastels, glitter, manga like lines, not for pure aesthetics, but as a conscious refusal. The “soft” can be paradoxically

subversive. My artistic language diverts from modernist ideals that associate abstraction and simplicity, with the strength, and seriousness of the masculine, which subsequently dismissed crafts, domesticity, ornaments, tenderness, sensitivities as feminine and inferior. As art historian Jenni Sorkin(2016) noted, handcrafts in textiles, ceramics, etc., as exemplified in the history of Bauhaus, have long been associated with femininity and hold a lower status than for example, architecture which is often associated with masculinity. Through embracing handcrafts and softness, I stand with those artists who challenge the hierarchical orders that devalue craft and feminine-coded labor, reclaiming these as languages of artistic and political resistance.

We do not need to look like princes, act like princes, or speak like them to be intelligent, strong, and defiant. Through this approach, I embrace being incoherent, illegible to systems that do not see us.

# Of No Origin: Between fiction, truth, and Home

“假作真时真亦假，无为有处有还无。”

“Truth becomes fiction when the fiction’s true;

Real becomes not-real where the unreal’s real.”

(Cao, circa 1791/1958, Chapter 1, translation of the author)

This poem is a key to understanding Cao Xueqin’s novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, a culturally rich and essential work of classical Chinese literature. I shall make an attempt to explain its rhetoric, even though a lot of nuances would be lost in translation.

The family at the center of the novel is named Jia (贾), a homophone for the character 假, meaning “false” or “fictitious”. In contrast, a parallel family is named Zhen (甄), which sounds the same as 真, meaning “true” or ”real.” The protagonist, Baoyu, exists as two figures in both families: one Jia Baoyu and one Zhen Baoyu. One family collapses after the other (Cao, circa 1791/1958). This mirroring of names and fates echoes the fine line between fiction and reality. When the truth is difficult to name, the fiction can be a portal to reach it.

Is it ever truly possible to distinguish the fictive from the real? It is also worth noting this hybridity is perhaps rooted in the Asian culture. It speaks to the fluid boundaries between truth and illusion, presence and absence. For me, this is not just a literary device—it’s a way of existing. Moving across languages, borders, and histories as an artist shaped by diaspora, I often feel like inhabiting a space where fiction holds more truth than so-called “reality.” It opens a space to speak when direct speech feels impossible.

Is there such clear line between fiction and lived experience? Boxes, categories. I understand that it is easier to identify with a group with the help of labeling, but the labels also confine us. In the queer community, I’ve been told I look too straight. In academia, I’ve been told once my narratives are “not grounded enough”. These mismatches don’t mean I don’t exist—they mean, perhaps, that the frame is too narrow.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; DSM-5) now contains nearly 300 categories in its fifth edition (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Why so many different names of disorders are needed? I can't help but wonder if the proliferation is connected to pharmaceutical profits.

One artist friend once shared this perspective, "A Black artist should make Black art. A gay artist should make gay art. That is how homophobic and racist the world still is"(artist friend, personal communication, 2024). It was a sharp critique of how identity is flattened and instrumentalized. We are expected to make work that fits our label. Otherwise, we risk being seen as irrelevant.

**Why Fiction?**

Why create imaginary things when the world already is filled with so much to respond to?

This question came into sharp focus during my undergraduate thesis, when I was criticized for creating fictional narratives based on an ancient Chinese myth rather than reflecting "reality." One external reviewer dismissed my work as disconnected and irrelevant to the local context. His feedback wasn't just an aesthetic disagreement. It revealed a deeper discomfort with ambiguity, a refusal to engage with things outside his frame. That encounter stayed with me, not because of the criticism itself, but because of what it exposed: an unwillingness to understand unfamiliar cultural structures.

Ironically, the story in the thesis project was about alienation—a character exiled to a strange land where he himself is perceived as "the other." The critique mirrored the narrative.

The last Venice Biennale was titled *Foreigners Everywhere*. I think it's a good moment to reflect on my own migration experiences as a "foreigner."

The first time I moved to Europe was to the Netherlands, where I faced significant hostility and racism. On my first day, I took the train from Amsterdam to Nijmegen with two large suitcases. I had bought an NS(Dutch Railways) card at the counter

but didn't know I had to swipe it at a small, hard-to-notice pole before boarding. The ticket inspector, a middle-aged white man, checked my card. Although I was clearly lost and unprepared, he impatiently asked for my address to send a fine. I told him it was my first day in the Netherlands, and I hadn't moved in anywhere yet. He didn't believe me at first but eventually asked me to get off with him at the next stop.

He walked fast, not bothering to wait or help. I struggled to keep up with my heavy luggage. At one point, finally, he helped with a suitcase, muttering that a small girl like me shouldn't carry so much.

Not everyone I met in Europe was like that. I remember losing my phone in a snowstorm, and a kind Finnish elderly woman stopped and helped me look for it. In many ways, Finland felt less openly racist than the Netherlands.

**"Olla ei mitään kotoisin"**

Still, subtle forms of systemic racism are common, though difficult to detect. I constantly struggled with an institution that refused to acknowledge the challenges international students face—in my case, due to Chinese national border controls during Covid-19. The university refused to accommodate this reality: I was told I had fallen behind, and according to the Finnish University Act, that being stuck in China due to quarantine protocols and the closure of Finnish Embassy in Shanghai (never mind the over 5000 euro one-way flight cost), was not a "valid reason." Because everything has been "normal" in Finland. As a result, I lost access to the master degree study trip, and was asked to submit my thesis and forfeit workshop rights a semester early. I explained my situation repeatedly, but was told, in the name of fairness, that "everyone must be treated equally." The institution does not see that fairness isn't sameness, and that to ignore context is also a subtler kind of discrimination.

At the time, I was physically and emotionally drained, trying to keep up with my studies while constantly justifying my existence within the system.

An institute claiming to be international, should be able to make conscious efforts

to try to provide corresponding support for international students as for Finnish or European students, taking into account the force-majeure due to changes in the international context. When I expressed my frustration in writing, pointing out that their rigid rules disadvantage international students, I was told my tone should be ”nicer”. The study advisor even implied that I was being unfair to her—as if my frustration with an unjust system was a personal attack. This reversal—where those in the higher power structure are more offended by criticism than they are concerned with injustice—is all too familiar. A schoolmate who shared the same feelings, and me, both went to report at the university meetings regarding international students' neglected status in the system. Yet, it feels like talking to the wall. Without anyone international in the international office, and no representation of POC in the staff, it is almost impossible.

**Archives of the Unspoken**

How can we document what's invisible, what isn't said in the official records?

I remember in the *Slide into My DMs* course I took in 2024, students were allowed to flip through at archival materials in the Henie Onstad Kunstsenter. Among them was a pamphlet version of Hal Fischer's *18th Near Castro Street x24*—a quiet, intimate record of a queer neighborhood over the course of a day(Fischer, 1978), shown in Figure 11. These subtle personal archives feel like small acts of resistance. They say: we were here.

In a similar spirit, I want to continue working with traces—archives, ghosts, personal memory, rememory, inherited memory—and blur the line between documentation and fiction. I came across the Finnish phrase “olla ei mitään kotoisin” when discussing with Lena Seraphin, which literally means “from nowhere” and it can imply low quality or no worth. That phrase stuck with me. What does it mean to come from nowhere? Or from too many places and no single home to claim?

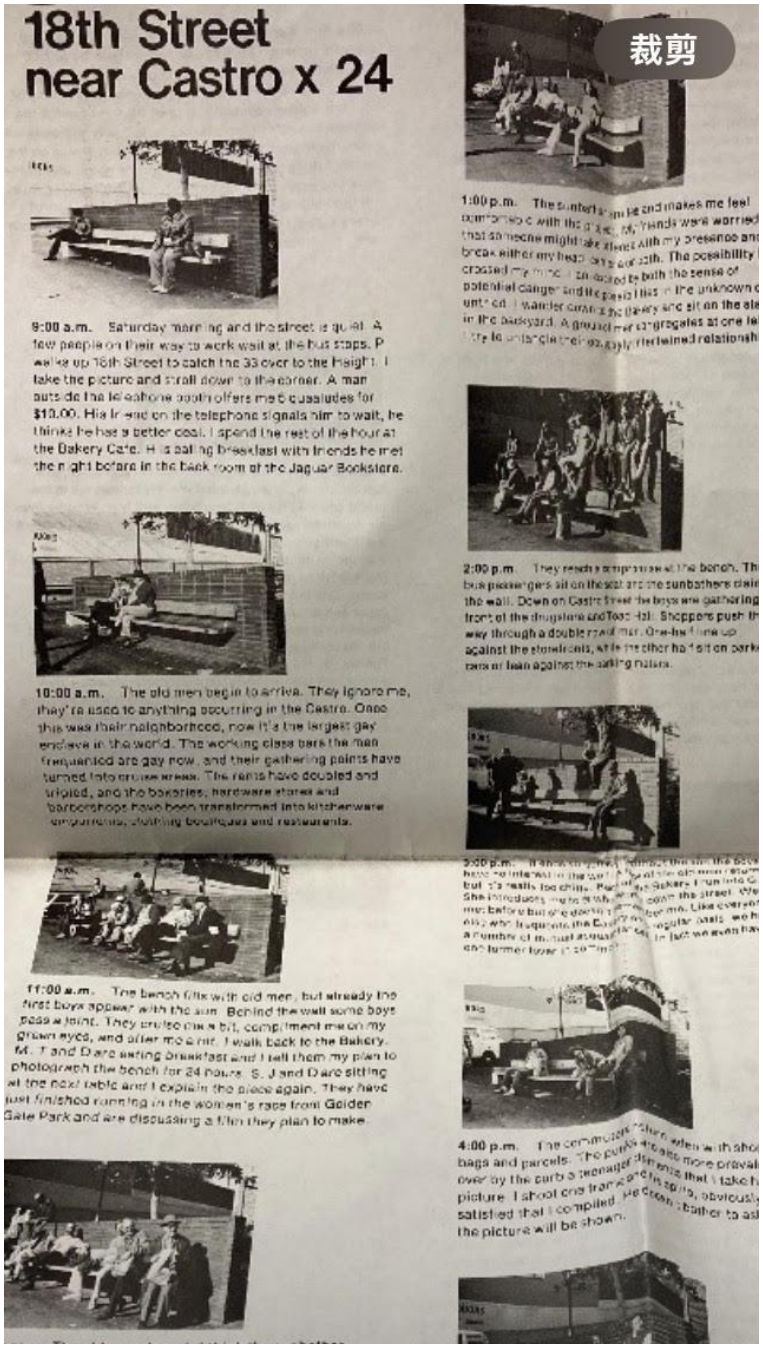


**Figure 11**

*Hal Fischer's 18th Near Castro Street x24 (1978).* This is from the archive in the Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Norway. Photograph by the author. 2024.

I have always been drawn to stories that don't have one author, or don't rely on written authority—oral histories, misremembered fragments, retellings. I want to collect those.

With this in mind, I am into curating an art research zine titled Of No Origin: olla ei mitään kotoisin. The first volume—Vol. 0—will be completed by myself. Not only as a personal archive, but as groundwork for future collaborative contributions. A space for stories and voices that don't fit the frame. In shaping this journal, I also intend to follow the legacy of artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, whose work continues to resonate with themes of fragmentation, displacement, and language. Further developments of the publication can be accessed via the link included in the appendices of this thesis.

In choosing to end this thesis not with a clear answer or closure, but with a point of divergence—Of No Origin—I want to propose an alternative system of knowledge: one that resists fixed points, stable identities, and institutional truths. It is not an escape from reality, but a method of surviving it. When the archive excludes, fiction remembers. When categories collapse, fragments hold.

This thesis, perhaps, is only the prologue of a longer artistic inquiry. It was written in the immediate weeks after the exhibition, and remains imperfect, fragmented, at times erratic. But this is precisely the texture of living in-between: to resist coherence, to embrace contradiction, to speak even when the language is fractured. In a system that fails to recognize certain bodies, voices, and ways of knowing, we must allow ourselves the right to speak in ways that might seem incoherent, or even mad. Sometimes, madness is the only reasonable response.

The elephant is in the room!

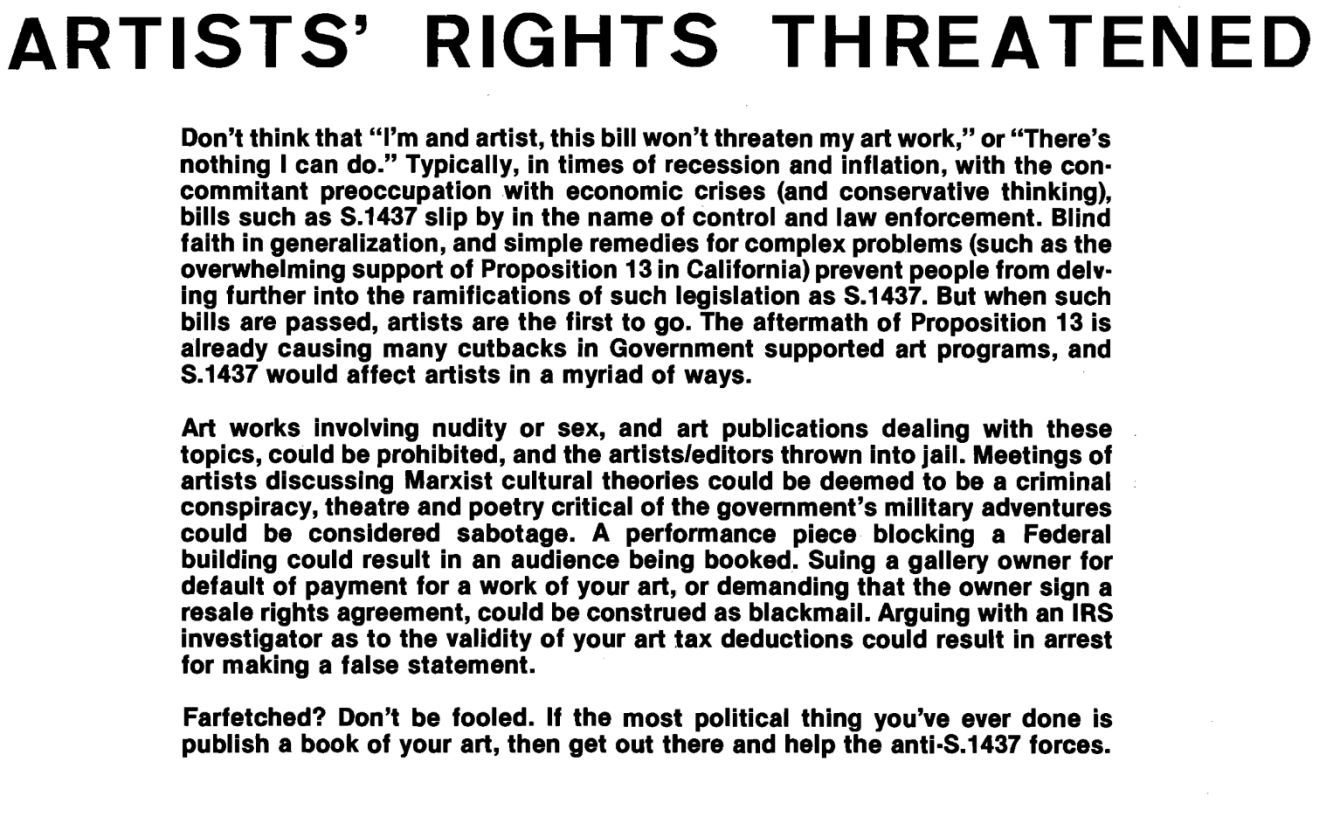


**Figure 12**

Anti-S.1437 flyer from *Intermedia* magazine warning artists about the potential legal consequences of Senate Bill S.1437. The flyer reflects concerns from the late 1970s over federal criminal code reform and its perceived threat to artistic freedom.

*Source: Intermedia Magazine, ca. 1978.*

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# Appendix A

## 剪窗/ Ikkunasta（2025）

**Figure A1.** *Installation view of "剪窗/ Ikkunasta(2025)".*

**Figure A2.** *Details of "剪窗/ Ikkunasta(2025)".*

# Appendix B

## In Order to Become a Child Again (2025)

**Figure B1.** *Installation view of "In Order to Become a Child Again (2025)".*

**Figure B2**. *Details of "In Order to Become a Child Again (2025)".*

# Appendix C

## Who Will You Turn To? (2025)

**Figure C1**. *Installation view of "Who Will You Turn To? (2025)".*

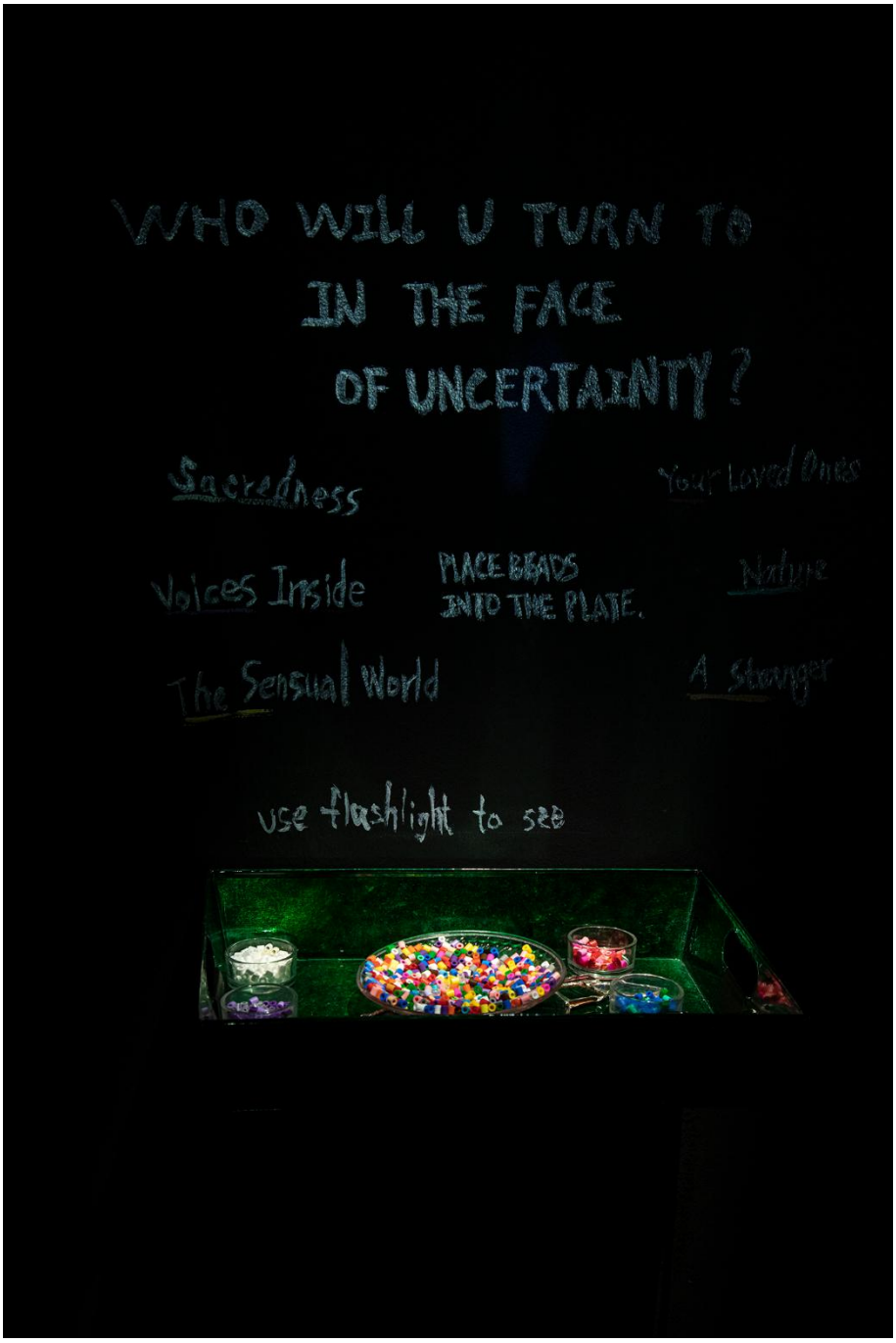


**Figure C2.** *Participatory element of "Who Will You Turn To? (2025)".*

# Appendix D

## Online Publication Project: Olla ei mitään kotoisin

Updates and materials related to the research zine can be found at:

https://ginkohsu.com/oemk