

POST-CAPITALIST AFFECT MACHINES TOWARD AN AFFECTIVE ART HISTORY

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FOREWORD

Affect Machine is a project born of the pandemic and the consequent uncertainties of international shipping and travel. In the process of facing such obstacles, the art world realized the limits of the digital turn of exhibition culture, as the current institutional structure found itself unprepared to handle the disconnections that come with social distancing and related crises. While preparing for the exhibition, my cocurator Gladys Lin and I were reflecting on the over-production in the artworld when we found that we shared the belief that art in the post-capitalist age can empower us to face our subjectivity and slow ourselves down as a result of the recurring lock-downs worldwide. In the 21st century, art has assimilated into explorations of archives, histories, discourses, theories, representations, and identities, in order to rejoin society and establish its own alterity and autonomy. This exhibition asks whether we can return to affect in an era when concepts and discourses dominate artistic practice and institutional systems. *Affect Machine* concerns artistic registers of feeling and audience engagement that diverge from relational art and the way in which technology influences exhibitions.

It became clear during the pandemic that feelings are socio-somatic — they transmit through overflows of information and among communities through word of mouth and internet memes. Feelings are experienced on an individual basis, but what triggers them are registers of certain universal languages or collective experience, both of which can fall prey to manipulation by political machines. The works that have been selected address the empirical nature of immersive installation, audiovisual expressions, body art, and other reenactments of reality with daily icons and symbols to which audiences can directly relate. *Machine* appears at first to be antithetical to *affect*, but the terms have actually been inseparable ever since postmodernism conjoined the flesh machine with the industrial

machine. *Affect Machine* refers to prostheses, cybernetics, how digital cultures resonate with and control our emotions, and the shared visual poetics of genome and informational coding.

AFFECT MACHINE: A BRIEF WALKTHROUGH

Imagine that we enter *Affect Machine* on this path that delineates an affective art history: we hear Rebecca Horn scratching the wall with pencils affixed to her face, turning her body movements into drawings in the film documentation of *Pencil Mask* (1972). The violin in the kinetic work *Sonnenseufzer (Sigh of Sun)*, 2006) repeats a two-part harmony of lamentation and solitude. The space behind is devoted to Chen Hui-Chiao's "flat-bed" painting on military cots. We discover, as we walk closer, that the textures and flamboyant colours are composed of needle and thread; behind the wall, Chen Chen Yu's audiovisual installation broadcasts media spectacles and displays soft sculptures as a meditation aid for an experience that is slowed down and tactile; in the adjoining gallery, we find ourselves in a smaller, almost all-white space where the minimalist poetry of Cam Xanh has been carved into plexiglass and silkworm cocoons; John Akomfrah's film installation with vocals spans the three screens of *The Airport* (2016), bringing the audience from post-industrial ruins to views of the sea and mountains; Olafur Eliasson's kinetic sculpture blurs the boundary between humans and the environment, and links the reality inside and outside of the museums; and Chu Hao Pei's and Lee Chang Ming's collaborative photographs replicate the tropical tree shrines built by anonymous worshippers along the northern shores of Singapore. The walkthrough presents various types of affect that invite us to project our personal experiences of illness, pain, mourning, anxiety, dream, and secular longing. Affective art is not about reproducing and transferring the original emotional experience to the audience but creating legible registers of feeling that resonate with individuals. This route is designed to lead the audience into an ensemble of self-healing machines, traveling from the mental to the physical, from interior to exterior. The body art, kinetic works, moving image, and sound together form an environment for us to slow ourselves down in the immersive experience and consider the self from outside.

This sensuous experience is based on the premise that affect and emotion restore our relationship to the physical world and other individuals, and can be considered an act of meditation and self-care. Healing, here, does not refer to restoration to our original state but rather to how we return to the autonomy of mind and body in the face of postmodernist schizophrenia. *Affect* is used in the title with a nod toward affect theory to evoke the indescribable flow through which we communicate without language.

Affect and emotion are flows that propel sensibilities, and they play an indispensable part in the reception of art. Various layers of feelings come into play during the affective process, ranging from personal to non-personal. On a biological level, “emotions are corporeal reactions of the organisms of the world,”

which bear the function of monitoring our well-being by adjusting the emotional mechanisms that trigger behaviors.¹ Here, affect is primarily a “somatic encounter with an object,” which describes “the felt change in the power of the body.”² This process of cognition is also about the sense-making of body politics when discussed in a broader sociocultural context.³ Intuition, sensation, and emotion used to be considered merely cognitive, but increasingly sociologists are recognizing the social aspects of how they were constructed and recognized.⁴ In the field of cultural studies, particularly in poststructuralist theory, emotion is considered temporary and individualized, whereas affect has autonomy and brings up more profound experiences for reflection, comparable to afterimage. Affective transmission takes place before consciousness. In general, emotion is fleeting and describes individuals’ sensational experience in the moment, whereas affect is long-lasting and capable of arousing empathy and collective reaction. Emotions are always experienced in passing, whereas affect is beyond representation.⁵

Scholars have generally explored how emotions and affects move rather than identifying what they are. Sara Ahmed suggests that feelings are not a psychological state but “a form of social presence.”⁶ For Ahmed, emotions mark boundaries between the interior and exterior — specifically, how we respond to each other and the environment. Individuals might have various reactions towards the same affective phenomenon, Ahmed suggests, and these reactions are beyond what words can describe. We also need to recognize the

role of cultural difference in revealing the features of affect. In this vein, the universality of emotion is questionable and may be socially and culturally constructed.⁷ Further, emotions have private and collective layers: pain is often considered more private and elusive. In subaltern subjects, pain can become a spectacle through media effects that are detached from the original context. Happiness, by contrast, can be felt more collectively. Fear of strangers, on the other hand, is considered a social construct. Before the era of globalization, affect varied much more from culture to culture; but now we have acquired collective emotional responses to certain events through memes and spectacle on the worldwide web.

Considering the various approaches for situating feeling in poststructuralist theory, how are we to understand affective register in art practices? The current exhibition is not just about visualizations of registers for feelings; the artists employ distanced narratives to summarize or inscribe trauma, pain, toil, sense of loss, orientation, and media spectacle, thereby forming an “affective” art history. Although art has always been an affective experience, the exploration into affective flow is overshadowed by conventional art historical approaches such as style analysis and social history. “Affective” art history provides an alternative model to explore the technique of addressing emotion after postmodernism. It also consciously detaches from stylistic, linear, and rational readings of modernism, notably the Kantian notion of art as intellectual reflection and revelation. Clement Greenberg’s formalist approach has dominated the history of modern art, through his emphasis on the purity of medium, such as the “flatness” of painting, and art history as an evolution toward the purest forms of art — from Eduard Manet to Jackson Pollock, artists developed their own distinct approaches to flatness. In this genealogy, modernist painting is critical to itself and its own history, becoming self-referential, to paraphrase Rosalind Krauss. Notably, the notorious linear diagram “Cubism and Abstract Art” (1936) by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. is still considered central to the philosophy of the collection at the Museum of Modern Art. Even Arthur Danto failed to alter this logic of linear modernity with “the end of art,” which argues that art turned toward concept and philosophy in the 1960s, leading him to call for an end to linear and formalist art history. Pop art became another advanced style or form in postmodernism. On the other hand, post-1970s art history with institutional critique has entrusted the interpretation of artwork to its audience. This paradox shows the vulnerability

of conventional approaches to the visual perception of art, and it is when facing our own vulnerability in viewing and sensing that art can be understood more openly beyond concepts and discourses.

Affect is strongly bound to post-capitalist life: sex, exploitation, and postcolonial schizophrenia. Affective art history thus can be considered a less hegemonic approach to the art of any society, function, and form, particularly in that it involves the bodies and overall sensorial experiences of the artist and the audience. There are no stable definitions for affect in affect theory except that it concerns non-individualized, non-specific emotions, leaving much room for interpretation. It describes autonomous flow traveling through the body, action, and mind that is shaped before knowledge and discourse. In the writings of Deleuze and Guattari, affect mainly refers to a synthetic way of feeling, in which the body resonates with the environment or other species. Affect transmits faster than profound thought and becomes a catalyst for deeper reflection. Deleuze and Guattari suggest that affect is contained in artwork without the author's awareness, as the sensations of the authors are inscribed in the work through mediums and techniques of expression, which are further transmitted and interpreted individually.⁸ The autonomous feeling is a result of bodily resonance with various receivers.

Following Deleuze and Guattari's mode of autonomous feeling, Jill Bennet and Jennifer Biddle see affect as a possible route for disrupting the existing hegemony of knowledge. Affect moves more rapidly than rational narration and critical thought; thus, affective art potentially rejects direct objectification and theorization, and opens up more individualized interpretations. Treating affect as having its own autonomy beyond current knowledge also opens up a wider range of readings, detached from norms and the powers that be. Biddle, for example, focuses on "affective ontologies" rather than aesthetics in her writing on indigenous art.⁹ For Biddle, affect is "messy, impure, unbounded" and spreads faster than politics or ethics.¹⁰ In this vein, affect creates an opportunity to escape knowledge, structure, and theory from the North, which can thus potentially cross the boundaries of identity.

Bennet offers a vision for affective art history in her discussion on the expression of trauma in visual art. In traumatic experiences, she suggests, affect does not communicate the original emotional experience but rather arouses empathy. In such a process, individuals do not participate in a unified field of feeling but respond to the experience differently. In *Empathic Visions*, Bennett provides an analysis of how artists arrived at “affective” art, specifically how they choreograph an empathic vision.¹¹ Affect, here, cannot be understood as representation.¹² Affective events are felt through various tactile experiences, instead of a sheer projection on the retina. Bennett describes the emotional experiences as “transactive,” as trauma art is not about faithfully reproducing the original experience but first and foremost creating an affective connection with individuals.¹³ Trauma art communicates a distanced affective truth rather than the first-hand experience of the witness.¹⁴ In a similar mode to trauma, affective art should not be considered as reproducing the original experience through representation but registering emotions. These authors above, when discussing affect, more or less follow poststructuralist approaches to various activities related to emotion.

Although affective art history seems to have its potential, I do not intend to construct a linear history based on types of affect. What we see here can be considered a footnote of post-capitalist expressions to affect in various layers and approaches. All installations in the exhibition demand a bodily resonance in ways that are not merely aimed at the subject-object tension in body art as suggested by Amelia Jones. These experiences — from tactility and sound resonance to a more cooled-down viewing situation with a constructed alterity — evoke certain affective incidents in our memories. *Affect Machine* turns on the modes of sensing ourselves sensing and training ourselves to sense.

POST-CAPITALIST MACHINE ART

Affect and *machine* appear to be antithetical; however, they coexist in various mechanisms, automata, and coding systems, which generates tensions between us and the environment. They are embodied in the exhibits through the painting machine, prostheses, and biological and informational coding. *Machine*, here, does not refer to a concrete automatic object but to mechanisms of affect.

The postindustrial machine has already been explored in early exhibitions about art and technology. Pontus Hulten's curated exhibition *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age* (Museum of Modern Art, 1968) is a notable example. The show concerns how artists interpreted the machine or the technology of the time — which at that moment was seen as both the “creator and destroyer” of humanity in the transition from the postindustrial to the postmodernist age.¹⁵ Approaches to the machine contain utopian visions of anti-humanism, as well as reflections on the violence brought about by technology in the second world war. On the conceptual level, the machine produces fantasy and spectacle, and makes possible extensions and actions of the human body such as cars and other functional tools.

In the 21st century, the borders between the body and the machine have increasingly become blurred. Today, the machine is not inorganic or merely mechanical. Digital objects and spheres have replaced the classical machine with simulations of physical mechanisms and tangible controls. We live and work with machines that not only support but also augment our tactile, sensual, and intelligent experience. Our bodies are vulnerable to, and will continue to be coded with, augmented technology, versatile biological products, and various measurements of control. The digital discipline has infiltrated all aspects of our lives, while the machine has come to be modelled after the biological sphere. Machine, here, reflects the mechanism of affective flow that connects human and non-human (even AI), and can give rise to affective dialogues across time.

REBECCA HORN: FROM BODY WORK TO PAINTING MACHINE

That emotion is considered as having its own autonomous system can be observed in artistic approaches to affect, beginning with body art of the 1970s. In the history of performance art, there is a conventional division between intuitive, visceral body art and conceptual practices. These two converge in Rebecca Horn's body extensions with autobiographical narratives and environmental approaches. Born in 1944 in Michelstadt, Hesse, Germany and studying at the Hochschule für bildende Künste in Hamburg, she inhaled toxins in the late 1960s while making polyester and fiber glass sculptures and was hospitalized for months.¹⁶

Diverging from the politically oriented work of the 1968 generation in Germany, she responded in many of her early works to the experience of confinement and the process of self-healing. The 1968er Generation in Germany — including Gerald Richter, Sigmar Polke, and Wolf Vostell — led the trend in capitalist realism, employing realist languages and political symbols to critique capitalism; yet in real life they co-opted the gallery and art academy system to ensure the circulation of their art. It is no coincidence that Horn adopted a more immersive and intuitive approach as an alternative to an art scene entangled with leftists movements and capitalism. The prostheses that Horn used in performances were “body extensions,” barriers, and mediums for communication with the environment. *Performances 2* is a series of film documentations of her performances of the 1970s, in which affects such as pain, sickness, and desire are transferred into actions and the repositioning of self in various painterly environments.

One of the earliest performances to employ sculptures as prostheses was *Unicorn* (1970). Its German title “Einhorn” plays on Horn’s family name and bears autobiographical references. In the film documentation, she immerses viewers in her mental resonance with nature and vividly describes the tactile experience of performing in the sun. “The performance took place in early morning — still damp, intensely bright — the sun more challenging than any audience... her consciousness electrically impassioned.”¹⁷

In *Pencil Mask* (1972), eighteen green pencils of equal length (2 inches) were bound to Horn’s face.¹⁸ As she swung her head and body, they recorded the rhythms, strength, and weight of her movements in pencil lines along the wall. The scratching sound creates a tactile link between the audience and the material. To make pencil marks back and forth, she had to control her muscles in such a way that her facial expressions were static, creating external output of her affect. The drawing accelerates, getting more intense, until finally she has covered all of the wall within reach of her prosthesis. The movements were staged between spontaneity and controllability, which Doris von Drathen describes as a self-portrait of the artist.¹⁹

The white wings and feathers in *Cockatoo Mask* (1973) cover the faces of the performers. Their shape and delicate material and texture are metaphors for intimate experience and

desire, as if they were a curtain blocking the interior from view. In Horn's words, it "isolates" the heads and "forces us to remain intimately alone, together."²⁰

Steven Henry Madoff considers how Horn's work was predicated on the emotions tied to her physical trauma — using prostheses and objects helped her distance herself from her emotions.²¹ This is most evident in *Rooms Encountering Each Other* (1974-75).²² For this piece, Horn wore mirrors on her body, which reflected the windows, doors, and interior of her household, to expand the fragmented landscape on the reflective surface of her body, while assimilating herself into the scene. By manipulating mirrors, even holding two in her hands while standing in front of another, she expanded the spatial depth as a clunking sound accompanied the fragmented images shifting across her body like a collage.

The prostheses such as pencils and feathers interacted with the environment and created her self-image — which also expresses how our bodies and machines have become unprecedentedly intimate. Horn's intuitive reaction and affective output was later replaced by her painting machine in 1987. The first "machine" that Horn created was *Overflowing Blood Machine* (1970). Equipped with a mechanism that pumped red colour into a tube, it was worn by a male performer and looked like a medical apparatus, creating sensual and direct associations with the life force and desire. In the 1980s and '90s, Horn developed other painting and drawing machines that seem to possess an agency of their own. An example is *Bride Machines* (1988), which ejected Prussian blue paint onto an installation of high heel shoes. The *Peacock Machine* at documenta 7 (1982) spread a fan-like structure across the floor; these emotional machines replace her body, caress the space, reach toward the audience, and serve as automatic drawing machines. Bruce W. Ferguson describes the activities of Horn's kinetic and audio mechanisms with verbs that parallel human activities: "Dance, explore, grope, flute, falter, hesitate, shudder, stroke, tickle, whisper, and waver; all tender articulations of the deepest preoccupations of human subjectivity."²³ Beyond being spectacular and performing painterly acts, the erotic machines tickle the mind.

Horn has written quite a few poems for her site-specific installations; many are autobiographical, infused with stories of illness, self-healing, or sensorial experiences related to the histories of specific sites. Old hospital bed racks were hooked together in a spiral reaching to the dome in *Inferno* (Chapelle Saint-Louis de la Salpêtrière, Paris, 1995).

The Salpêtrière is an old hospital where neurology patients received hypnosis treatments in the 19th century. The objects are reminiscent of this history as well as individual corporeal experiences of life and death.

Sonic objects such as pianos, violins, and metronomes are frequently used to measure and infiltrate physical spaces. Drops of water add an auditory dimension but also serve as a metaphor for time travel.²⁴ *The Turtle Sighing Tree* (1994) consists of a bundle of meandering copper tubes that look like elongated trumpets, generating whispering sounds. Von Drathen compares the sound to tones of suffering.²⁵ The violin is a recurring element of her installation; it seems to play mourning sounds in *Jewish* (1998) — in a monotonous melody. As if a prayer is taking place on site, the work is built on a cross-section of the Jewish and Christian histories in a synagogue in Cologne. In the current exhibition, *Der Sonnenseufzer* is a sonorous mechanical sculpture evocative of breathing organs enlivened by the action of a violin playing a two-tone composition, delicately reaching out to the viewers' emotions.

JOHN AKOMFRAH: AFFECT AND THE POSTCOLONIAL ARCHIVES

Film is another outlet of machine-output and theatrical experience. John Akomfrah's films, although often related to the micro-histories of migrants, are full of romanticized scenery for identarian musing. Affect appears as a border and medium for encounters — through which we move with the protagonists in the frame. This is not an imagined consolation with the colonial past and other oppressive powers but a series of affective narratives that draw our attention to the subjectivities of individuals.

Born in Ghana in 1957, and now residing and working in London, Akomfrah is a founding member of Black Audio Film Collective (active 1982-98), which investigated diasporic and black cultures in England through moving image, installation, and writings.²⁶ Akomfrah employs archive in the mode of essay film, and recently expanded his practice to three-screen installations. He sees immigrants being objectified in the curricula and propaganda to represent the national history woven into educational programs — they are studied as images of other, including multi-ethnic, African Caribbean descendants, rather than

individuals. Using footage and images from various archives, Akomfrah pieces together fragmented moments from those individual lives.

The three large-screen installations offer a new mode for using the vast sceneries of mountains and seas to evoke European romanticist painting in a way that narrates the construction of modernist subjectivity based on philosophical reflections. Responding to the financial meltdown in Greece, which was just the tip of the iceberg in the global neoliberal development, an essential part of *The Airport* (2016) focused on urban ruins. The three-channel moving image presents various scenes evocative of contemporary schizophrenia, ranging from open space to ruins, bus stations, and plazas, mostly unpopulated. The affective dimension of the space in *The Airport* is mapped through sound, landscape, and singers dressed in an anachronistic style. Sonorous machines such as a gramophone and cello are installed in the post-industrial ruins of an airport. The songs infiltrate these vast spaces. A brief narration at the beginning narrates the economic crisis in Athens. Aside from occasional voice-over and songs, however, there is no conspicuous plot to the film; our bodies simply move with the camera.

The protagonist, an astronaut, roams the city while introducing the audience to various interior and exterior scenes: men and women dressed in fashions of the pre-war period sit in the ruins holding suitcases or roaming aimlessly; their movements suggest a sense of anachronism and time travel as well as a strategy of postcolonial and post-capitalist hauntology. Toward the end, an ape appears at the airport entrance, evocative of a scene from *2001: A Space Odyssey* — a dystopian symbol of evolution and civilization as well as disillusionment with post-capitalism.

Alessandra Raengo argues that what is “moving” in Akomfrah’s *tableaux vivants* is not merely the bodies of other migrants; migration takes place through digital technology and our philosophical musings while vibrating with the moving image.²⁷ Here, the wandering body of the migrant is not racialized or limited to specific identarian politics but expands the diasporic experience to include all digital nomads. Raengo calls this “a cinema of open-endedness,” made possible by the new multi-screen technology through which the viewers can explore connections between images and sources.

An important thread of Akomfrah's post-cinematic film is his apt fusing of his own and other migrants' lives in relation to the history of colonialism, through archives and personal narratives sometimes incorporating Nordic scenes reminiscent of the cold and gray England that he and his family experienced when they had just arrived.²⁸ Much of the film *The Nine Muses* (2010) features sublime views of a solitary figure travelling through snowy and watery expanses. The Nordic landscape is the core poesis in *Vertigo Sea* (2015), a European romanticist aesthetic — the back of a standing figure is used to address the history of colonialism and human migrations. Here, the movement and contemplation of a romantic landscape are employed as a common tradition shared by all.

OLAFUR ELIASSON: SENSING AS ALTERNATIVE REALITY

Nordic scenery, a recurring motif of Olafur Eliasson's (b. 1967) interactive installation, blends into various post-media and post-human environments for the musing of the contemporary subject. In Eliasson's hands, the arctic and the sublime landscape becomes a strategy for narrating posthuman politics and the decolonization of neoliberal natural ideology.²⁹ He has commented on this poesis of artificial landscape: "Just like in pop art, I steal natural phenomena and scientific representations."³⁰

Eliasson has a stronger interest in atmospheric media — immersing the audience in a situation, a legacy of the happenings and light art of the 1960s. Eliasson's signature works exist at the intersection of design, environmental installation, and augmented reality. This reality does not seem to have been designed for the purpose of community engagement or for instigating discourse on relational aesthetics. Immersed in a situation, the audience reacts on a physical level rather than participating through intellectual musing or action.

An alternative reality that filters nature into a display had already become a strategy for him in the 1990s, as in *Your sun machine* (1997). The light of the gallery shifts with the movement of the sun. The whole gallery space becomes a projection screen, and a site inscribed with the temporality of this natural cycle.

Eliasson's mechanization of affect and sensations turns them into artificial weather, waterfalls, and light installations. His natural drama creates a tactile experience in which the audience become immersed. This is done in a way to arouse awareness about how the installation is mediated. *The weather project* opened in winter 2003 in the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern, a blockbuster exhibition and widely circulated example of immersive installation art, transcending the boundary between natural and artificial.³¹ Artificial mist was sprayed from sixteen motorized nozzles. This exposed mechanism also uncannily reminds viewers of their distance from nature. Ahead of the visitor at the far end hung an artificial sun. The light source consisted of a semi-circular steel frame 50 feet in diameter, with approximately 100 sodium lamps like those typically used in street lights. It emitted a hazy yellow radiance that assimilated the audience into its yellowish ambience as if they had been caught in a sun shower. On the ceiling, mirrored panels covered an area of 32,000 square feet, which expanded and enhanced the foggy scenery. Merely staring at the yellow glow was enough to make one feel the warmth.

In *The weather project*, viewers are immersed in an environment that makes them aware of each other's reactions. This direct sensorial experience is individualized and cannot be faithfully documented through photographic media. At the same time, it turned participants into a spectacle bathed in yellow fog, and making Terry Smith ask whether this is "aesthetic greenwashing" or contains a criticality of its own.³² Claire Bishop suggests the possibility of seeing such direct sensual experience as an alternative to the consumption of visiting an exhibition.³³ Madeleine Grynsztajn holds a utopian reading of the mechanism,³⁴ claiming that the contrast between the natural spectacle and the exposed mechanism of the "weather" was intended to reveal the "celebration of the commodity system," even though it was prone to creating a spectacle.³⁵

As part of the extended strategy for display and promotion of the exhibition, posters with provocative questions about the weather were placed in public spaces such as bus stops, taxis, magazines, and the internet. These texts, derived from a survey sent to Tate staff, included statements such as "47% believe that the idea of weather in our society is based on culture; 53% believe that it is based on nature." Weather is known to be a conventional topic of conversation in British social culture.

By displaying these texts, Eliasson plays with the cultural state of climate — that nature should really be understood as culture, through which affect is generated in the alternative reality of the art museum.

Eliasson challenges the audience's perception in a way that disorients and thus makes them aware of their subjectivity in relation to the environment. *Din blinde passager* (2010) again employs fog and lights to disrupt viewers' vision as they walk down a long hallway. They navigate the space by themselves, struggling with the color. What remains is the sound of others' footsteps. It creates an anxiety similar to that of facing a natural disaster.

As can be seen in those contexts, Eliasson considers the staged situations as becoming "more and more real,"³⁶ because of not only the visual sensorial experience but also the specific setting in which the viewer is positioned. He compares the alternative reality in museums with the Lego Skagen in Legoland, which is not trying to be an illusion. "This is what I mean with the museum. It's in fact very representational, but it's also trying to hide it to a certain extent."³⁷

Resonating with Rebecca Horn's painting machine is Eliasson's *Connecting cross country with a line* (2013), which documents the route of its own transit. An ink-coated ball completes a drawing on moving trains on different continents in order to record the mobility of artworks and interaction with the earth. The drawing completes itself but is also dependent on the traveling body of performers, as well as the movement of the vehicle and the earth. This drawing machine is triggered by the motion, nature, and mobility that is made possible through globalization.

In a similar mode that is expressive of human disorientation and reorientation with the help of technology, *The compass* series was developed from 2009. Here, the humble sculpture does not reenact any light, wind, or atmospheric reality but goes back to the natural cycles that drive its vibration and orients the viewer to connect with the external. The vibration of the compasses is triggered by the magnetic field, a machine driven by nature, reconnecting us with the primordial GPS.

CAM XANH: AFFECT BEHIND MINIMALIST POETRY

Born in 1977, Cam Xanh (Tran Thanh Ha) is a poet, curator, arts educator, and visual artist who lives and works in Ho Chi Minh City. Her pseudonym in Vietnamese translates as “Green Orange” — a playful image that encourages free visual associations, as Cam Xanh loves to do with her objects and poetry. Cam Xanh’s work derives from her daily life and observation of ontopolitics in geopolitical contexts. The geometric elements of her minimalistic style are supported by personal stories and affect, including autobiographical narratives of being devalued or pressured as a female artist. Various literary sources are assembled into minimal-looking concrete poetry that signifies the language of coding in the informational and biological spheres. There seem to be two extremes: soft material, such as cotton and silk, in opposition to hard and rigid minerals and acrylic, all with little use of color. Her poetic narratives and metaphors contrast with the political tropes that are vivid in her writing and the stories behind the images, and hinder direct retinal experience. Cam Xanh likes to think of all human beings as AI, androids created by intellectual beings of another universe or actors on a stage with no access to reality.

Reflecting on self-healing during the pandemic and the connection and disconnection of individuals due to lock-down and information overflow, her recent cocoon series addresses the visual and conceptual similarities between coding and biological genomes. Biological materials and repetition of motifs on transparent plexiglass create boundaries between human, animal, and machine. Cam Xanh holds a particular poetic and sentimental view on the digital spectacle of crisis. “Maybe we are all organic AI. How about thinking of it this way: we were created to fight against our souls.”³⁸

The cocoon works extract well-known political statements, which can be sensational or manipulative. The texts inscribed on the cocoons with ballpoint pen and marker were developed in 2016 and taken from various sources, such as national anthems, popular songs, poems, and political speeches, and broken into fragments on individual cocoons. In a way, this “citation” creates new interpretations, and the viewers must stand very close to scrutinize the details. For Cam Xanh, the obstacles to directly decoding the language are a metaphor for how history is written by the powers that be, whereas individuals are not

always allowed to see the full picture. Silkworm cocoons are also symbolic of neoliberal globalization, as silk has a long history of transmission that connects the world — from the silk road and maritime trade. It is a biomaterial for healing wounds and regenerating skin, due to its biocompatibility with human physicochemical properties. At the same time, the ephemerality of such material is emphasized: the cocoons in the box continue to change their shape and position throughout the shipping and installation process, leaving the audience to struggle between the legibility and illegibility of the information. The cocoons are also metaphors for self-protection related to Cam Xanh's various emotions. In light of the life difficulties during the pandemic, the cocoon seems to provide a mechanism for protecting one's self and maintaining agency.

The visual features of this series resonate with neo-concretism in South America and minimalism and Fluxus in the US and Europe. It is, however, not born out of the same concern over the spatial relationship to the audience. The works demand viewing from an intimate distance. The audience will be provoked by the futility of their efforts to decode the textual materials, grasping the gap between language, sound, and the visual. The text-based engraving on plexiglass evokes machine aesthetics; and the texts and dots resemble the computer punch cards that were once used as Fluxus scores.

Equally Blind is based on several translations and transferences. A passage from a poem written by the artist in Vietnamese was translated into Braille using Google translate. As the accents in Vietnamese were removed, the translated text became unreadable. The Braille version was then created by filling in the concave dots in the plexiglass with marker pen to form the first panel, titled *le toi du moi*; these patterns are reflected in the second panel, titled *et de l'absence*. The final visual result takes the form of repeated circular shadows on the wall, illegible to both the blind and non-blind.

Cam Xanh's section in the exhibition was designed to be a minimal, white cube space for the purpose of meditation. In the back is a sound piece recorded from the prayer of a master processed to be nearly silent. It represents symbolic information that is aired but drowned out by the noise of the contemporary spectacle.

CHEN HUI-CHIAO: DREAMS, HOPES, PASSIONS, AND REALITY

Compared to the previous sections, the works by Chen Hui-Chiao, Chen Chen Yu, Chu Hao Pei and Lee Chang Ming are more concerned with secular life and affect from everyday practice, perhaps due to the special forms of crises where their practices are situated. In a statement on her solo exhibition *A Separate Reality* (1995), Chen Hui-Chiao is critical of the popularity of discourses surrounding locality in the Taiwanese art scene. In this context, artists can be trapped in the exploration of identity, political motivations, and power structures, rather than developing a deeper reflection on art and life. She writes, “progression is a conscious process and effort [...], freeing the mind, cognition and spirit are sober rather than mechanic activity.[...] the biggest challenge for me is to experience the most of what I can catch through senses, neither trapped nor pressured by the reality.”³⁹

This passage reveals her approaches to affect, form, and material in her art — the most crucial concern is to find a balance between affective and rational expression.

The registers of senses can be found in minimal paintings, sculptures, painterly surfaces and ensembles, including concrete objects such as petals, needles, threads, ping pong balls, and steel. Her work is choreographed between contradictions such as warm and cold, soft and rigid, round and pointy materials. She transforms her sensual and poetic vision in a rational way.

As a co-founder of IT Park, Chen was a driving force behind the post-martial law art scene in Taipei in the 1990s, and between 1988 and 2018 juggled between art administration and her own practice. IT Park was the first multi-functional artist-run space in Taiwan used for art gathering, discussions, and exhibitions.⁴⁰ The experimental atmosphere provided Chen with the best setting to stage her solo shows throughout the 1990s, and she became one of the pioneers of installation practice in Taiwan. Her arts education was tied to the avant-garde practice of the 1980s. Born in 1964, she received fine arts education at Youde Senior High School and joined Lai Chun Chun’s Modern Art Studio in 1986. At that moment, Richard Lin, Lai Chun Chun and Tsong Pu had spent substantial time in Europe and brought back ideas of European modernism. This community was experimenting with material and structure, which resonated with the formal languages of minimalism and Mono-ha but with

a distinct local view on audience participation and transcultural issues. With these instigations, Chen developed paintings and sculptures made of dried flowers and office pins around the late 1980s; and in the early '90s shifted to formalist experiments with abundant symbols and narratives that registered her sensual experiences and reality. It can be said that such installations which stick to personal narratives humbly critique the formalist conceptual art of the previous generation.

One of her early signature needle “paintings” is *Silent* (1992). The 6000 needles and silver thread shine not just as materials, they also hold and fix the soft cotton layer to an abstract field within the frame, creating nuanced color and three-dimensionality through the contrast between softness and stitches. *Bees Collect Flowers* (1992) reminds viewers of color field painting and employs distinct colors of pink and green with textures of thread. In *You're the Rose I'm the Needle* in 1993, needles were inserted into dried rose petals scattered across a table and the floor — an admonition regarding relationships that contain desire, warmth, and pain. Chia Chi Jason Wang remarks on the ritualistic aspect of the work, “Chen Hui-Chiao employs needles that stich through petals in the process of drying roses, which is comparable to crucifixion in life, or martyrdom for a religion.”⁴¹

In a computer-generated graphic, *Whispering, I Pass through the Darkness* (1997), Chen diagramed a constellation of thoughts and feelings. Partly inspired by Carlos Castaneda's *Tales of Power* and other works about Zen, she instilled her own views about love and the universe. We can see that “dream” is located in the middle, which extends and develops into branches such as will, language, reason, feeling, intuition, visions, and other activities used for making sense of the world.

For Chen, dreams are where rational thinking and creative thoughts, personal affect and collective memories are interwoven. In the statement for *Smiles of the Skeptic* (1997), she wrote that “dreaming is a synchronizer coming from my own body, between the virtual, the real, and deep memory; here mental images merge in a natural way that resonates and passes on powers.”⁴² It is through dreaming that she “senses other worlds,” and dreaming is “an alternative affect, another reality, a thinking process in my body, exploration into sensation in my soul.”⁴³ Dream here is a mechanism for sensing the world as well as processing various kinds of thoughts.

It is perhaps through dreams that she sketches the most intense sensuality for art. Beds became a symbol of dream, desire, and healing in her work since the late 1990s. Huang Hai-Ming has commented on the affect of Chen's bed installation as not dependent on the material; rather, "it is about the contradictions that the audience immediately felt: softness, happiness, gentility, pain, thrill, and excitement."⁴⁴ The current exhibit *A Room with a View* employs beds as objects and the surface of paintings to narrate historical events, contemporary global conflicts, and personal sensual experiences through dreams. Originally commissioned by the C-LAB for the exhibition *Re-Base: When Experiments Become Attitude*, the 16 military cots are positioned so as to form the shape of Canis Major when seen from above. They are an interface for paintings made of needles and thread. The scenic motifs can be associated with aerial views of the sea in various times and seasons seen from aircraft, as well as dream visions or memories of past lives — as a pilot in the Second World War in her dream, she reflects on the development of aerial weapons over the past century. Chen has always positioned herself as viewing from above, as a way of distancing from confined views on the earth. In her installation with abundant feminine symbols, everyday tropes, and critiques of histories, Chen developed the poetics and narratives of her work from the unconscious, mythology, and astrology.

CHEN CHEN YU: MEDITATING WITHIN THE MEDIA SPECTACLE

Born in 1984 in Taipei and trained in electrical engineering, Chen Chen Yu turned to art practice and completed a BFA at School of The Art Institute of Chicago in 2015. His early works, from *The Fall*, *Advance Copy* (2015) to *Vapor Equilibrium* (2018), are essay films that reflect on the materialist aspects of digital objects, neoliberal globalization and the mass production underlying the consumption of digital technology, commodities, and data. Behind the stories are the labour and inequality of proletariat life; they concern how we understand, pass on, and consume information in the digital era.

Vapor Equilibrium (2018) takes fog (or "gaseity," in the artist's words) as a metaphor for informational fragments and their afterlife on the internet. This gaseity is a condition of

contemporaneity with several virtual and physical associations, including cloud storage and smog from industrial pollution and the production chains of smart devices. The artist compares information in our daily and digital life with vapor, fog, and clouds. The cloud is also a metaphor for what hinders us from seeing reality through information online. Surveillance has exposed us to a state of transparency. Overproduction and information pollute the air, which prevents us from seeing reality as it is refracted through the cloud.⁴⁵ The fog spreads like memes on the internet; also reminding us of poor images (as discussed by Hito Steyerl) and fragments of texts.⁴⁶ The fog thus encompasses the anxiety of the digital era. In the pandemic, aerosols became a medium for spreading COVID-19. The cloud thus is a metaphor for the spread of both information and sickness.

Chen's recent work shifted from critiquing the production of information in the post-capitalist era to reflecting upon the impact of media on post-capitalist life and ways of fostering resistance. The audio-visual installation *Here Each Vibration Long Away* takes as its point of departure the artist's personal experience of self-healing over the past several years. Due to many sports injuries, physical therapy became part of his daily routine. He was attracted to instructional videos and how they provide information through sound and image, on topics such as sports therapy, meditation, time management and intellectual training. How do we process this information and turn it into movement? Can we foster ways of resisting spectacle as well? This process of transference is comparable to autonomous affective flows, apart from our consciousness of processing it.

Chen became interested in the interaction that takes place between the body and the media due to information flows. How do we slow down and reflect on our subjectivity in the face of information overload? A meditation guide that instructs viewers to play with the objects runs on the monitors. Sounds captured include a performer hand-coloring mundane images and ever-transforming memes — such as an image of a press conference on the pandemic and an auction of NFT (non-fungible token) artworks. Here the artist incorporates materials and bodies into the process of recreating images from images, as well as the sounds of responding to images.

With audio-visual elements and touchable sculptures, Chen intends to present how information flows trigger affect and the mechanisms of meditative, rational thinking. One

example is a soft sculpture made of expanded PU foam and silicone rubber, which is not only resilient, but when one squeezes it, expands with a puffy sound. It is through such tactile relationship that we may reposition our subjectivity and detach from industrial time.

CHU HAO PEI AND LEE CHANG MING: AN EARTHLY HEAVEN

Exhibited at the exit is an early photographic installation by the Singaporean duo Chu Hao Pei and Lee Chang Ming, documenting an “illegal” pantheon composed of various tree shrines and deities that have washed ashore or disposed of by anonymous people on the Sembawang beach, where Singapore overlooks Malaysia. This work draws the audience from intimate and introverted affect to the open-air setting. The deities range from Buddhism and Hinduism to Daoism, and represent the most earthly longing for better life, presumably set up by passersby. Some were disposed of according to the Hindu tradition — when a family moved house or switched religions.⁴⁷ After some investigation, the artists realized that the statues were often quietly removed by the authorities due to unlawful transgression of public space.⁴⁸ The statues are embedded in falling leaves, or sometimes given a real shrine and offered fruits; others are only framed images wrapped in plastic bags.⁴⁹ This work concludes the exhibition with the most earthly contact with religions and nature.

Lee Chang Ming graduated from the National University of Singapore in 2015 with a BSocSci (Hons) in Communications and New Media. His portrait works are mostly represented through close-ups of the body and intimate moments, examining the semiotics, representations, and identity behind visual forms. In the series *Until Then* (2017), he documents the queer communities around him. These photographic works are visceral and ambiguous in a way that is almost anti-representational. He describes these works as a process of developing his own identity.⁵⁰

Holding a Bachelors of Fine Arts from Nanyang Technological University with a focus on Interactive Media and Design, Chu Hao Pei has focused his research on ritual through anthropological approaches to connections and disconnections of various sites in Southeast Asia. Before the pandemic, fieldwork was an indispensable part of Chu’s life. A recent project displays the routes of the Chinese traveler and diplomat Cheng Ho (Zheng He, 1371-

1433), whose legendary stories in Indonesia are still recounted by priests in different *Masjids*. Through visits to those religious sites and interviews with local Muslims, Chu's bodily experiences are deeply inscribed in the artist notes and video documentations. Chu's research into agriculture offers an entry point into the relationship between humans and nature in the post-capitalist world through the looking glass of culture, and ritual in particular. Another example is *Mbok Sri Mulih* (2019), a project based on his research into the relation between faith and farming culture under the Javanese *kejawen* system.⁵¹ Through a residency at Cemeti - Institute for Art and Society, Chu learned to grow rice following the local farming calendar—where traditional rituals and workshops of local rice deities are waning, as a result of oppression from centralized power that seeks to control the agricultural harvest. The site-specific installation places rice plants in bamboo cages—a humble and truthful work that directly derives from his labour and local wisdom.

RETURNING TO AFFECT

In the era of post-capitalist spectacle, the body is increasingly mechanized and instrumentalized. It travels in the virtual space as much as in the physical world. We are fragmented into data and becoming trainers for AI.

Affect Machine thus responds to this post-capitalist life with constructed and re-enacted realities that bring back the affect of individual bodies and their subjective emotions. Even if they do not serve as means of resistance, they encourage a temporal fluctuation and interference into the reification and surveillance that we experience in every minute of daily life. The artworks trigger empathy and actions such as caressing, healing, and sensorial experiences that enforce the awareness of subjectivity. Such experiences shift between visceral and rational (Rebecca Horn and Chen Hui-Chiao), between media spectacle and meditation (Chen Chen Yu), between minimal visual codes and political language (Cam Xanh), between industrial ruins and fictional narratives (John Akomfrah), between human and ecological (Olafur Eliasson), and between earth and heaven (Chu and Lee). The affect is registered through three paths: first, the communication sways that take place between body and environment via various mediums before emotion is perceived; second, the transformation from post-capitalist anxiety into poetic or theatrical forms of expression; and third, folk culture's valuing of time beyond capitalist time — namely, dream, oracle, and

religion. It is hoped that the paths liberate the audience from a reflective, mental sensibility to feel affect resonating with the open landscape and the universe. This affect machine can thus be compared to a circuit or nervous system that transmits messages and information from the senses.

The pandemic has entered a phase where it seems to have no end. Perhaps the biggest revelation of the pandemic is how we must slow down to indulge in rituals of self-healing and embrace affect in a way that opens up an alternative understanding of art and its histories.

¹ Antonio Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza* (New York: Harcourt, 2003), 35.

² John Protevi, *Political Affect: Connecting the Social and the Somatic* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 49.

³ Protevi, 51.

⁴ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

⁵ Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 23.

⁶ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 10.

⁷ Protevi, 24.

⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 169.

⁹ Jennifer Biddle, *Remote Avant-garde: Aboriginal Art under Occupation* (Durham: Duke University Press), 9.

¹⁰ Ibid., 10.

¹¹ Ibid., 36.

¹² Bennet, *Empathic Vision*, 23.

¹³ Ibid., 7.

¹⁴ Ibid., 2.

¹⁵ K.G. Pontus Hulten, *The Machine as Seen at the End of The Mechanical Age* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2006), 6.

¹⁶ Jeanette Winterson, "The bionic woman," *The Guardian*, 23 May 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2005/may/23/art>, accessed 1 May 2021.

¹⁷ Rebecca Horn, "Unicorn" in Germano Celant et al., *Rebecca Horn: Diving Through Buster's Bedroom* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1990), 38.

¹⁸ Rebecca Horn, "Pencil Mask," in *Rebecca Horn: Diving Through Buster's Bedroom*, 43.

¹⁹ Doris von Drathen, "The Heartbeat of Drawing: On the Circulation Between Performance, Sculpture, and Painting," in *Rebecca Horn, Bodylandscapes. Drawings, Sculptures, Installations 1964–2004* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz), 129-143; here, 130.

²⁰ Rebecca Horn, "Cockatoo Mask," *Rebecca Horn: Diving Through Buster's Bedroom*, 42.

²¹ Steven Henry Madoff, "Hinge Life," *Rebecca Horn: Moon Mirror. Site-Specific Installations 1982-2005* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz), 23-40; here, 35.

²² An alternative title is *Rooms Meet in Mirrors* 1974/75. See Madoff, "Hinge Life."

²³ Bruce Ferguson, "Rebecca Horn: Really Dangerous Liaisons," in *Rebecca Horn: Diving Through Buster's Bedroom*, 19.

²⁴ Doris von Drathen, "Places at the Zero Point," *Rebecca Horn: Moon Mirror*, 41-61, here, 51.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

²⁶ Members include John Akomfrah, Lina Gopaul, Avril Johnson, Reece Auguiste, Trevor Mathison, Edward George and Claire Joseph. See Kobena Mercer, "Becoming Black Audio: An Interview with John Akomfrah and Trevor Mathison," *Black Camera* 6, 2 (Spring 2015): 79-93.

²⁷ Alessandra Raengo, "Cosmopolitanism, Contemplation, and the Ontopolitics of Movement in John Akomfrah's Gallery Practice," paper presented at MIT symposium *Cinematic Migrations* in Spring 2014, 4.
https://www.academia.edu/47733166/Raengo_Cosmopolitanism_Contemplation_and_the_Ontopolitics_of_Movement_in_John_Akomfrahs_Gallery_Practice_with_images.

²⁸ Nina Power, "Counter-Media, Migration, Poetry: Interview with John Akomfrah," *Film Quarterly* 65, 2 (2011): 59-63. Here, 62.

²⁹Helga Hlaðgerður Lúthersdóttir, "Transcending the Sublime: Arctic Creolisation in the Works of Isaac Julien and John Akomfrah," *Films on Ice: Cinemas of the Arctic*, eds. Scott MacKenzie and Anna Westerståhl Stenport, 325-334 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

³⁰ Dieter Buchardt in conversation with Olafur Eliasson, "wie in der pop art klaue ich direkt naturphänomene und wissenschaftliche darstellungen," *Kunstforum International* (Nov/Dec 2013): 190-207. Here, 195.

³¹ Installation shots are documented on the Tate's website, <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series/unilever-series-olafur-eliasson-weather-project-0>, accessed 25 May 2021.

³² Terry Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (London: Pearson, 2011), 295.

³³ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Tate Modern, 2011).

³⁴ Madeleine Grynszetjn, "(Y)our entanglements: Olafur Eliasson, the museum, and consumer culture." In *Take your time: Olafur Eliasson, 2008-2009* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2007), 11-32, here, 12-13.

³⁵ Ibid., 14.

³⁶ "Daniel Birnbaum in Conversation with Olafur Eliasson," in *Olafur Eliasson* (New York: Phaidon, 2002), 9.

³⁷ Ibid., 10.

³⁸ The author's conversation with Cam Xanh, 30 January 2021.

³⁹ Chen Hui-Chiao, statement for *A Separate Reality*, 1995.

⁴⁰ IT Park was established in 1988 by Chen Hui-Chiao, Liu Qingtang, Tsong Pu, Huang Wenhao. The first exhibition was launched in 1990.

⁴¹ Jason Chia Chi Wang, "Dream Weaver of Art: Chen Hui-Chiao", 2011, http://www.itpark.com.tw/artist/critical_data/37/457/102.

⁴² Chen Hui-Chiao, statement for *Smiles of the Skeptic*, 1997.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Huang Hai-Ming, "Chen Hui-Chiao and Ku Shi-Yong Bi-solo", 1998, http://www.itpark.com.tw/exhibition/data_group_column/103.

⁴⁵ Personal statement by Chen Chen Yu, unpublished.

⁴⁶ Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," e-flux journal #10, November 2009, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.

⁴⁷ Chu Hao Pei, "Transience of Tree Shrines," published in Chu and Lee Chang Ming, *Beneath the Bodhi & Banyan* (Singapore: Nope Fun, 2018), n.p.

⁴⁸ According to the Parks and Trees Act Chapter 216 Section 63, Parks and Trees Regulations originally enacted in 1883, no person shall erect a shrine within any public park.

⁴⁹ See images published in *Beneath the Bodhi & Banyan*.

⁵⁰ See Lee Chang Ming's website, <https://leechangming.com/Until-Then>, accessed 1 May 2021.

⁵¹ Mbok Sri Mulih is Javanese for "Mother Sri Return." Mother Sri is a local rice goddess in Javanese culture.