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**Word Count:** 8113

# Swimming across a Hot Tub:

The "**Trace of Life**" and Something to do with It

Yuan Yihang

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MA Contemporary Art Practice

2022



Figure 1: Yuan Yihang, *Trace of Life and Hot Tub*, 2022.

## Abstract:

This writing constructs and deduces the theory of “Trace of Life”, aiming to provide an alternative viewpoint and methodology for treating, experiencing and practising our life and our surrounding reality. The writing is divided into three chapters. The first chapter built up the “Trace of Life”. As the time involved in analysing individuals’ life experiences, we started to see a developing “segment of life” extending in the uniform flow of time. The “segments” travel surrounding outside reality, a complex, holistic system consisting of ever-flowing and fusing liquid matter and consciousness, called “Total Fluid”. The “events” happen in individuals’ life experiences, and any interactions with the surrounding “Total Fluid” can extend “Tentacles” to apply forces and stir the surrounding “fluid”, leaving “Traces”. The energy concentrating at “Traces” can then diffuse and disperse as “Ripples”, spreading influences and chain reactions of the “Traces” inside the liquid reality in time. The second chapter revealed the existence of the “Hot Tubs” we swim through our life, limiting our vision and spiritual level, therefore limiting and generating uncertainties about the effect of the “Traces” we leave to this world. Chapter Three returned to the “Life” itself, revealing a possible artistic practice using “Life” itself as the great “Trace of Life”, which consists of fragmented, day-to-day art production. I advocate an attitude for artists to return to life itself and emerge in it.

### Keywords:

trace, life and death, time, liquid reality, daily practice

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## Preface

This writing is the result of two-year solid thinking. It started in Covid time when I was trapped in my tiny flat alone for months, facing severe mental problems. It is time I began to realise art we do nowadays is almost powerless in facing this catastrophic disaster. This is no way it can save lives or penetrate all the complex political and beneficial conflicts. I felt like a canoe travelling in the ocean under a windstorm, all the power I obtained was to keep surviving. After that, two years of separation from school removed the protection from the tower of ivory, forcing me to face reality itself. I started to retrospect my own culture and philosophy for support and answers. I began to see my life in a developing timeline, to sense the dynamical, ever-changing reality, to treat artistic practice as something that naturally happens in my daily life, as staircases lifting our spiritual level powered by challenges and suffering in life. The theory motivating these changes is called “Trace of Life”, which will be deduced and practised in the main body of this writing. Let us start by citing Su Shi (蘇軾)’s poem:



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# Recalling Past Times with My Brother Ziyou at Mianchi

Su Shi

Running everywhere, to what can life be compared?

Like a swan treading in snow,

accidentally leaving tracks in it.

After the swan has flown, does it remember where the tracks are?

The old monk died, a new stupa was built;

No traces of our written poems can be found on the ruined walls.

Do you recall those mountainous paths?

The way is long, the traveller exhausted,

the cripple donkey cries.

## 和子由澗池懷舊

蘇軾

人生到處知何似？應似飛鴻踏雪泥：  
泥上偶然留指爪，鴻飛那復計東西？  
老僧已死成新塔，壞壁無由見舊題；  
往日崎嶇還記否，路長人困蹇驢嘶。

([https://fgsihb.org/dictionary/search-result/00266/?\\_\\_locale=en](https://fgsihb.org/dictionary/search-result/00266/?__locale=en), no date)

## I

## Swimming and “Trace of Life”

We are swimming through life, living traces behind it.

In my hometown of Wuhan, there is a long-standing tradition of swimming across the Yangtze River from its most turbulent point. Swimmers, mostly middle-aged men, gather on the shore every summer and meet up to swim across the Yangtze. The Yangtze River in Wuhan is at the confluence of its largest tributary, the Han River, and because of that, a significant number of large ships travel up and down to carry goods. All these elements make the crossing extremely dangerous. Swimming in the Yangtze is always at risk of being affected by the giant waves on the surface and the undercurrents beneath, making it rather impossible to maintain swimming form for even skilled swimmers. Thus, encounter danger every year, we hear of swimmers drowning while swimming across. Experienced swimmers choose the safest route and the most suitable weather to cross the

river based on the experience of those who have swan crossed before them, feeling the current keenly at each stroke and changing their swimming stance in response to the feedback.

Is not that what our life is supposed to be? As soon as we arrived in this world, we started swimming to the other side, towards the end of our life; as Heidegger (2001, p. 236) suggested, we are all “Being-towards-death”, regardless of “death is 'known' as a mishap” (2001, p. 296). What is in between is to apply normative gestures to maintain posture and move forward; to save ourselves from unexpected danger; to study, feel and interpret the law of how the world functions on account of human nature of curiosity. All these determine the dynamic of individuals travelling through the trip of life, the paths they choose, and the traces, the "spindrift" or "wakes" they left behind.

We may be able to start to visualise and abstract our journey of life by using the metaphor of swimming using diagrams. First, aware or not, we have a deemed starting and end point, like any journey in this world. It starts when you are born, you begin to have a physical body, a skin layer as a boundary distinguishing you from your outside world, and your perception begins to form

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a shape and distinguish you from your surroundings. It ends when all the physical and mental barriers go dysfunctional, so-called death. We can put these two points in time down:



Figure 2: Yuan Yihang *Two Dots*, 2022

As soon as we reached the point when we started to feel our existence, we began to travel in time, from the shore of birth to the coast of death. It is like all the living creatures in this world. As time cannot be accelerated and decelerated, every individual travels at the same, constant speed. Travelling towards an end, the "line" cannot overpass the ending point, as “Neither my birth nor my death can appear to me as experiences of my own” (2002, p. 250), as the swim will not continue when the

swimmer reaches the other shore and leaves the water. The lines of our life are always segments. Let us put it down in the diagram as well:



Figure 3: Yuan Yihang, *Two Dots and Segment Extending Constant Speed*, 2022

This is the line of cascaded series of dots representing presents. There is no doubt that we are all living in the present, and we feel time moving forward by “inferred from things” (1999, p. 20) : the hair grows; the day moves towards night; the kids become taller than last minute, and adults grow wrinkle. When we look at this "lifeline" and slice it, every cutting plane is the present status of this individual that soon becomes the “past” . “Time has an arrow” (1999, p. 19).

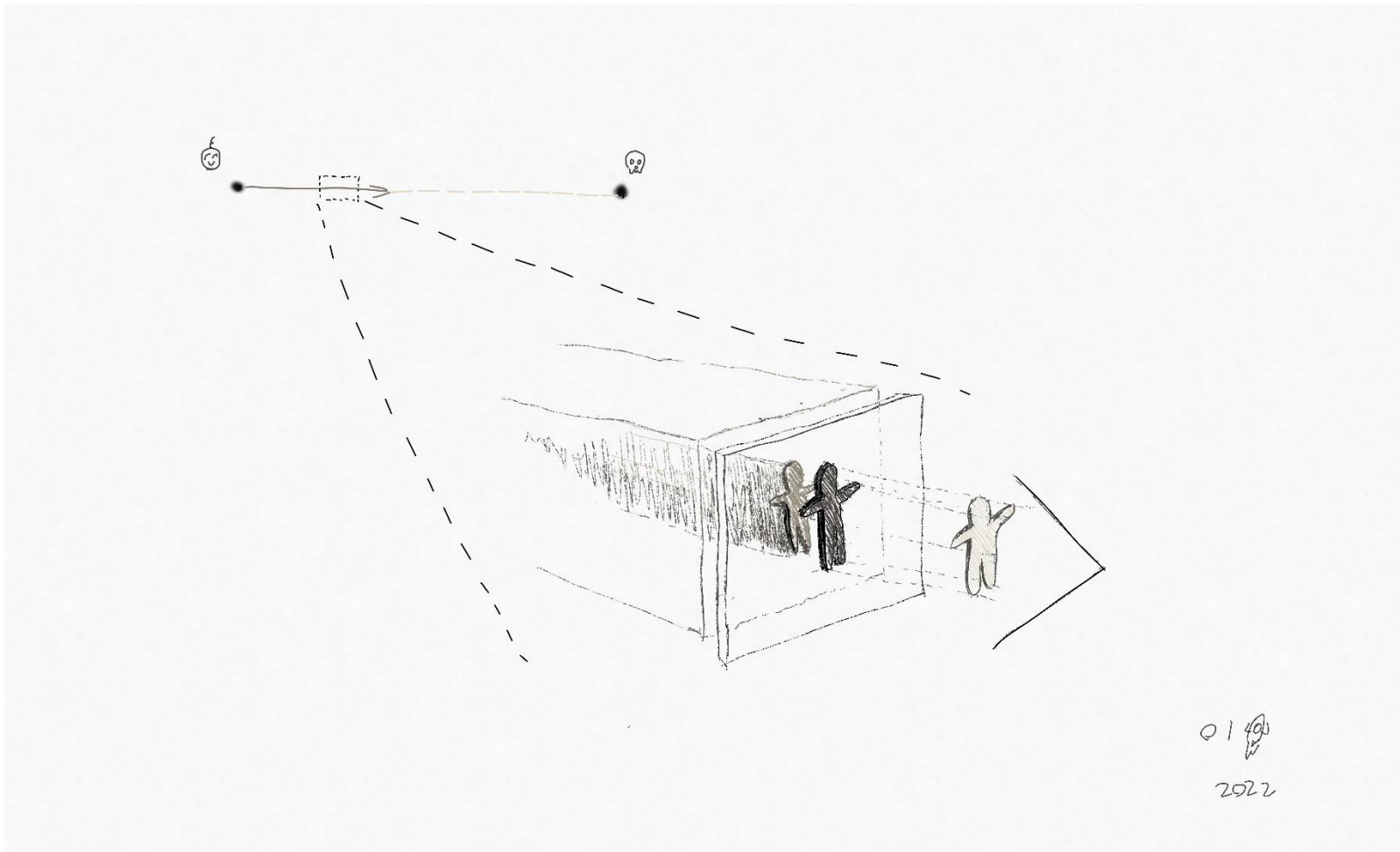


Figure 4: Yuan Yihang, *Cutting Plane*, 2022.

We are certainly not travelling in a vacuum. Taking each cut through the travelling line and the material surrounding it, we can see a massively complex structure of abundant material surrounding each “cut plane” . This can be understood as “three-dimensional snapshots” , as Barbour (1999, p.18) pictured. The structures are combined by matters with different physical characteristics, like metal, wood, stone, air, and consciousness, including thinking, memory, and what is more, procedure and evidence visible, including culture and politics. They together have already been shaped and composed of visual products that surround our daily life: what we use daily, like tables, beds, our living spaces, houses we live in, offices we work, and all the information surrounding us, like news and advertisement, culture and race identity, moral codes. These elements that appear in our life are also the carrier of human memory, knowledge, custom, and culture, as byproducts of humans' consciousness. We are tightly enclosed and surrounded by those materials in every single present and flow and gradually transform with each individual while they move forward in time.





Figure 5: Yuan Yihang, *Cutting Plane and Surrounding Material*, 2022.

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The famous "pitch drop experiment" by Professor Thomas Parnell revealed that matter which looks solid is also a kind of fluid, making morphological changes without stopping round-the-clock. Deleuze revealed the fact that constant dividing and "folding" (1993, p. 3) matter, generating more details and "vortices" (1993, p. 5). The action of "flowing" itself is time-based change based. Water is being witnessed flowing down the cliff, forming a waterfall; heated glass is being bloated and stretched by skilled craftsmen, becoming a beautiful vase; nebulas draft around the universe like jellyfish shaped by gravity, forming new stars. Why should we look at matters surrounding us metaphysically and think they will keep holding into shapes when time is involved? We see food start to decompose in the fridge; we see great content carved on Steeles and monuments began to be wiped off in time and collapse into pieces; great mountains never stopped sculptured by water, wind, glacier, and gravity, and they are just one of the outcomes of tectonic plate movements within an Aeon. Everything changes; everything flows. When we look down to the atomic level of the solids, particles are locked together to make them solid. When the heat increases and particles move, the solid turns into fluid or gas. With humans involved or not involved, the physical moves, like striking, carvings, grindings, and dissolving, the chemical reactions, like corrosion, decay, and crystallisation, have been endlessly bending

“folds” on top of the surface (1996, p. 104). When we stand on the macroscopic level, everything flows and fuses. We are living in the physical world of “fluid” , surrounded by the “fluidity of matter” (1993, p.4).

The total consciousness of humanity, operating in the human brain, adhering to surrounding objects, is streaming around us. It fills in the gap of the matter, “placing side by side in space” (1950, p. xxiii). As a medium, it conducts and transforms force and reshapes and recombines the matter, transforming it into the shape and form that mobilises our subjective initiative. We turned raw materials into tools we use, structures we live in and warships; we carve monuments, write stories, and take pictures to remind us of precious memories; we make art to pursue the ultimate aesthetic and question our existence. Besides the eternal and ultimate natural law, human activity powered by natural law is the uppermost force in shaping how the surroundings of each look like.



Figure 6: *Matter and Consciousness*, Yuan Yihang, 2022.

Undoubtedly, as the subject of “growth and diminution” (1950, p. 1), consciousness is also in liquid form. This characteristic is twofold: The new information generated by the process of thinking and the currency of memory, which leads to forgetting. Combining these, we can see how consciousness flows and changes forms; we can see how memory provides the raw material for the process of thinking, how thinking contracts contents in the blank areas of memory, and how these two mechanisms lay on top of each other, and how this process within an individual's conscious participating the contraction of the elevated structure of collective consciousness.

In conclusion, as our journey of life moves forward in time, we are travelling in the liquid with streaming total consciousness that individuals can receive in their lifetime, through family numbers, friends or surrounding people, through word of mouth, or the practices from early stages, sandwiched between matters characterised differently, could be our daily object, our living space, or the art we see, the book we read. With the time involved, we can process our surrounding reality as the edgeless flowing liquid. Everything that is statically solid and immortal around our eyesight is on the routine of constantly moving and changing shapes, and we are all "swimming" in it.

We know from above that consciousness acted as the media of force conduction between matters and matters. For example, when a sculptor making a marble sculpture, like Michelangelo, was making his famous *David*. His acute sense of art, his memorised skills, and his knowledge have guided the chisel and hammer in his hand to sculpt and peel off layers of material till the sculpture was complete. Other phenomena could shape the marble, like grinding with water or dropping off the cliff through gravity. However, this piece of marble will not have been shaped into *David* without the consciousness of Michelangelo.

Let us look into this closer when we bring ourselves to Michelangelo, a unique individual who has ever existed in this world. While he was "swimming" through his life, producing *David* is one of the most influential and memorised events that linked his life travel. The piece soon became a masterpiece, and his fame of being an artist had been raised. Did he have a purpose when answering the request to finish the statue of *David*? It is hard to answer. Simply because of the classical question from *Zhuangzi* (庄子), "You are not a fish. How do you know the fish are enjoying themselves?" (子非鱼，安知鱼之乐?) (1999, p. 283).

We can still measure the echoes of the great event of him finishing *David*. The incredible beauty of *David* has made citizens

decide to move it to prominent places; the imagery of *David* became one of the iconic symbols of the renaissance, for its contained spirit of no fair to the suppressed power, and awakening of human consciousness, and has cheered people us since it was created; the plaster replicas of *David's* head has become one of the essential pencil sketch models for Chinese art students and keep inspiring new artists.

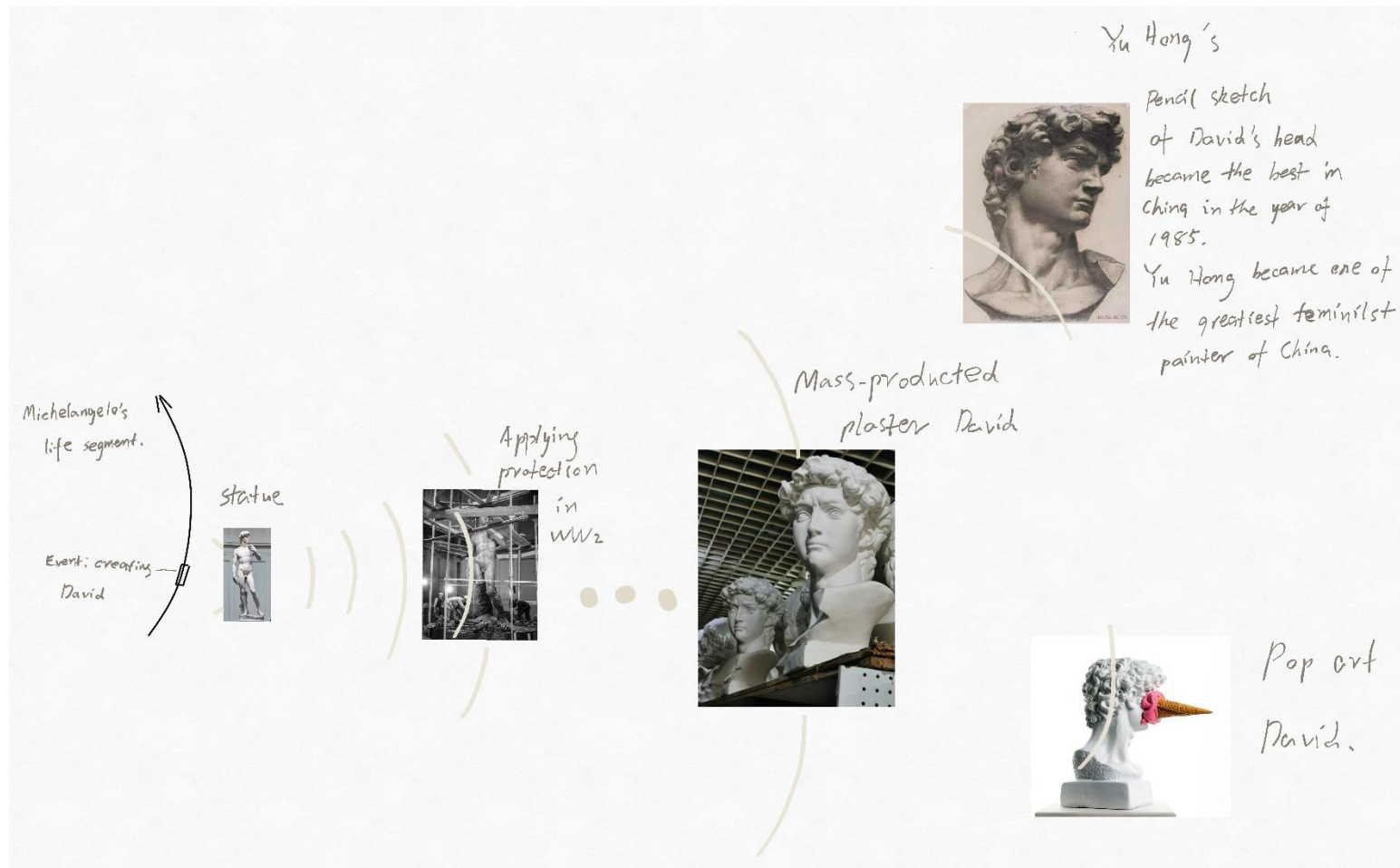


Figure 7: Yuan Yihang, *Ripples of David*, 2022.



What is crucial is what we can see through those obvious Wikipedia facts. According to what was discussed above, as a historical figure, Michelangelo had existed in this world and swam through his life in his surrounded liquid reality. In this linear "swimming model" of analysing his life, his age between 26 to 28, his consciousness took the action of creating *David*. In our model, where the individual is placed in the centre of reality, we will find out that this particular piece of marble approached Michelangelo in this segment of his journey. His thinking and skills transferred forces through his physical body and applied them to the material of marble. The marble absorbed the force and turned into a "trace", a visible wave. The wave is *David*, the physical trace of Michelangelo's action.

All the forces that apply to the "fluid" around us will see the chain reaction of power transmission with energy loss and energy diffusion, just like giving a yell inside a hollow valley, hearing echoes; it is like throwing a piece of stone into quiet water, seeing the splash and ripples. The fluidity of the reality determined the twofold characteristic of "events" and their outcomes: First of all, their stretching and extending effects. The second is the rheologic existence of objective information in time because of the developing ambiguity and translation layers through the "Ripple" effect. I have recently discovered a book named

*Rimbaudmania, l'éternité d'une icône*, from my friend who is a writer. The book has documented some byproducts, like souvenirs, greeting cards, sexual wear, and secondary creations, including films, music, paintings, and graffiti, of the legendary French young poet Arthur Rimbaud. The book is a great collection of “Ripples” centralising Arthur Rimbaud's influence. His short five-year career as a great poet, his writing, his love story, his travel, and his sudden leave of his writing career and becoming a merchant has inspired not only the future poetry but in a much deeper and broader dimension. In the book, we see Rimbaud-inspired drawings and painting from post-impressionism and cubism to more-recent street art; we see little statues, furniture, case shelves, and shirts of his imagery; we see poems, music, and movies inspired by him, including the cinema named *Total Eclipse* with Leonardo Wilhelm DiCaprio, cast Rimbaud. As long as his name is still mesmerised by the collective memory, his writing and story are still read and discussed, and his influence continues, the “Ripples” and its chain reaction are still breeding new contents and will be developed into the future.

It is noteworthy that people nowadays cannot say Rimbaud directly influenced them. They can only be influenced by the “Ripples” . The time and space distance has led to the fact that people can only get influence from Rimbaud via layers of

medium, not directly from the source, which is Rimbaud himself. Therefore, the depletion of transforming the force of accurate information has kept obfuscating original details and adding new information based on the loss and mistranslation of information—the book documented this process. For example, one of the products related to Rimbaud is a white gay sexual underwear printed with Rimbaud's famous portrait imagery (Jeancolas, 2010, p. 276) because of his romantic, tragic and mysterious homosexual relationship with poet Paul Verlaine.



Figure 8: Jeancolas, C. (2010) 'String CafePress (USA)', p. 276.

We have finally accomplished the complete picture of our “swimming” journey of life:

Imagine this picture: a smooth, growing line that continues forward in time along with a constant and uniform forward motion. This line represents an individual’s lifetime, almost like a time-lapse of a swimmer’s swimming trace. As we are not immortal, what we all have in time is a segment in this picture, which has a beginning, the moment when the person is born into the world, and the moment of death, when the development of the line ends. The journey that is deemed to end. For a better description of this diagram, it is given the name **“Segment of Life”**. For those who have passed away, their “Segment” is locked in the past by the time stream. When we look back to the past, these segments are static, frozen, like mature, even dead trees. On the other hand, those who live have their “Segment of Life” that is still growing and developing but does not extend forever. What is different from actual swimming is that when we look at segments of other individuals while we are in

ours, we see that they are all anchored in the river of time, flowing at the same constant speed, as no one exceeds the speed of time-based on the universally recognised law.

These “Segments of Life” travel in a “Fluid” that is sometimes as thin as cloud and fog or sometimes as thick and sticky as cough syrup. This “Fluid” is far more complex than all the fluids we can see in this world: it is unpredictable, with varying concentrations in different areas and unpredictable mingles and swirls that exist all the time. This “Fluid” is an abstracted image of everything surrounding each individual: the totality of our lives, which includes all kinds of matters, and the total consciousness of humans, which includes thinking, memory, and human-involved activities, powered by consciousness. The element of this “Fluid” is twofold: the tangible matter fluid and the thought and memory fluid non-tangible. To clarify, this liquid reality is named **“Total Fluid”** ; thus, we do not have to subdivide different areas of it. “Total fluid” is exceptionally unpredictable and dangerous: there are people who are swept up to the tip of the wave by the sudden surge of it, and at the same time, there are a great many who are swallowed up by the whirlpool and disappear.

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These “Segments of Life” are not smooth “arrows” but have “**Tentacles**” stretched out of their surface like flagella structure out of unicellular organisms living in the river. As the “Segment” develops in “Fluid” , “Tentacles” reach out from it, representing “**Events**” happening to that individual. An ‘event’ can be: an art piece made by someone, a name carved on a classroom wall, a story told to children or a glory death in a battle when an event occurs; in this visual picture we are building, the “**Event Tentacles**” reach out from the “Segment” itself. “Tentacles” sway back and forth or are dragged by the forward movement of the “Segments” . Particles in the surrounding fluid are stirred up, and the structure and order in the original fluid are altered, turning up a wave that follows the “timeline” . The structure and order of the original fluid are altered, creating “waves” that move following the “Segment” , like waves left by a swimmer in the river, leaving a trail of water splashes beside and behind them. These stirrings create “Traces” on the surface and within the complex structure of the fluid, and as the “Segment” passes through, the “Traces” are like a splash in the water, all of which will be pulled and smoothed out by the tension of the “Total Fluid” . Till one point, any observable “Traces” will disappear or be transformed into some form of undercurrent.

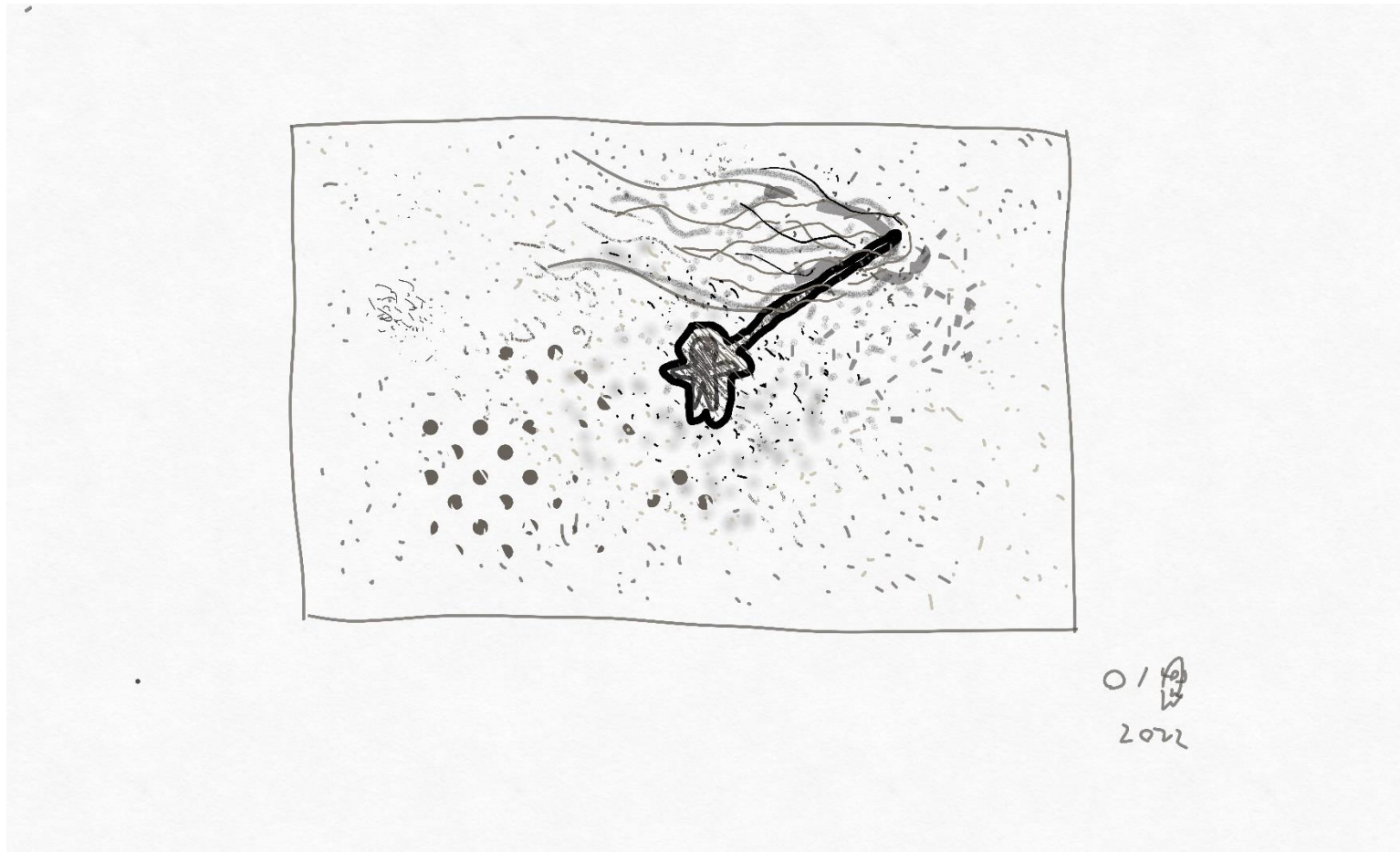


Figure 9: Yuan Yihang, *Tentacle*, 2022.



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The forces exerted in the “Total Fluid” are highly complex and unpredictable. The “Event Tentacles” stir the fluid, leaving “Traces” . A series of complex chain reactions occur, centring the “Trace” and distributing, diffusing, and transforming its force to a much broader realm, coursing a series of chain reactions. Like dropping a stone into peaceful water, this chain reaction can be described as a “Ripple” . As mentioned above about the complex nature of the “Total Fluid” , the “Ripples” around the “Trace” will be highly unpredictable in time. We do not know if the immense “wave” created by one individual will disappear in an instant or if a tiny, easily missed “Ripple” will start a “tsunami” within a much more extended period, as in the classic discussion of the “Butterfly Effect” : a flapping of a butterfly's wings causes a hurricane.

What is described above is a picture named “**Trace of Life**” , as a combination of diagrams directly projected from reality, showing the relations between each human being and a complete view of every element outside its physical body—life in its entirety. Time, as the most important clue in this picture, adds another dimension to the top of it. Things in this system start flowing, growing, moving, drafting, decaying, and changing shapes, and we will no longer look and think about things only in the present moment. We take what it is from the past and wait for what it will be in the future.

Why can't time be reversible, stretchable, and foldable? In the picture of "Trace of life", our life, whether it is still developing or has already ended, is diagrammed as a piece of line, a segment. Every "Segment" is developed from the continuous movement of the "present", which quickly becomes the "past". Everyone is situated at present. No physically travel forward and backwards in the timeline (under the current technical level), but our mind travels. Time can be reversed through memory, records, or archaeology; time can be stretched by adding more detailed and delicate experiences at the present period; time can be folded when collecting different moments in the past, present, and future, making younger and older you face-to-face. When realising it, the consciousness transcends its precious moment, travelling back and forth the string of time.

Centralising individuals, the "Trace of Life" focuses only on the relationship between a human being with the total picture of outside reality. It does not analyse the relations between one and one type of element of the outside world, for example, man and nature, man and other people, man and politics, and more. All mentioned above in "Trace of Life" are all liquids with different densities and physical properties in the system of "Total Fluid". Even when I, for example, am sitting in front of

someone you are deeply in love with, in this picture, that person's physical and mental form is still a kind of liquid, but maybe with higher density. By doing this, it is managing to simplify the analysing process of our reality, as it is usually overly complex to go through most of its structures, relationships, and reactions.

However, "Trace of Life" only analyses how individual influences or leaves something to the outside reality as a straight subject-object relationship. "Subject" is always the source of output, making traces by stretching "Tentacles" into "object", the "Total Fluid". It is not deliberately ignoring the process where individuals are hollow containers, taking influences from the surrounding environment and building their shelves influenced from, for instance, their family, their school, their hometown, their religion, or just a random incident, an encounter. It is also not trying to look at an individual as a metaphysical reality; something only exists as a solid dot in a line travelling forward. What "Trace of Life" is trying to highlight is the phenomena of the "Trace", how a human being, simply by existing, makes intended or unintended impacts on this world, deliberately or unintentionally making changes around, accumulating force to move our time forward. Here, the existence in

time and space is the only requirement, whether this person is a big name, like a great star, a powerful politician, a no-body, a guy who lives in a remote village, or a hermit who never shows up in the crowd.

## II

# Going out of a “Hot Tub”

We are swimming through life, but in a hot tub.

As discussed in the first chapter, we are swimming in the outside reality in our life journey, the “Total Fluid” . Nevertheless, we are not swimming in the “open water” ; we are all saturated in our realm with a hard shelf, like a hot tub, swimming from one side of it to another. The reasons for this are clear: The limitation of being can only allow us to receive and interact with flowing mediums around us due to the limit our particular time and space we saturated, our vision, our boundaries of consciousness, cultural background, implosive amount of information received because of the "information cocoons", and more. The "hot tubs" are the limitations and boundaries of the vision and abilities of an individual in their lifetime. It marks the

maximum “length” of an individual's "event tentacles". The "shelf" of the hot tubs is still in the liquid form but can only be expanded, not penetrated through.

These "hot tubs" overlap and parallel each other. All the "hot tabs" are soaking in the united "Total Fluid" when an individual "swam across" their hot tub; the "tub wall" shields our vision to the outside; the "event tentacles" stir the fluid inside the tub, coursing the "inner loop". The force is transmitted outside the tub and into other people's "tub". With the obstruction of the "tub", the force we applied to make a “Trace” might spin inside the tub, absorbing most of the energy going out to the "open water". They lead to "failures" and “fruitlessness" under the value judging system.

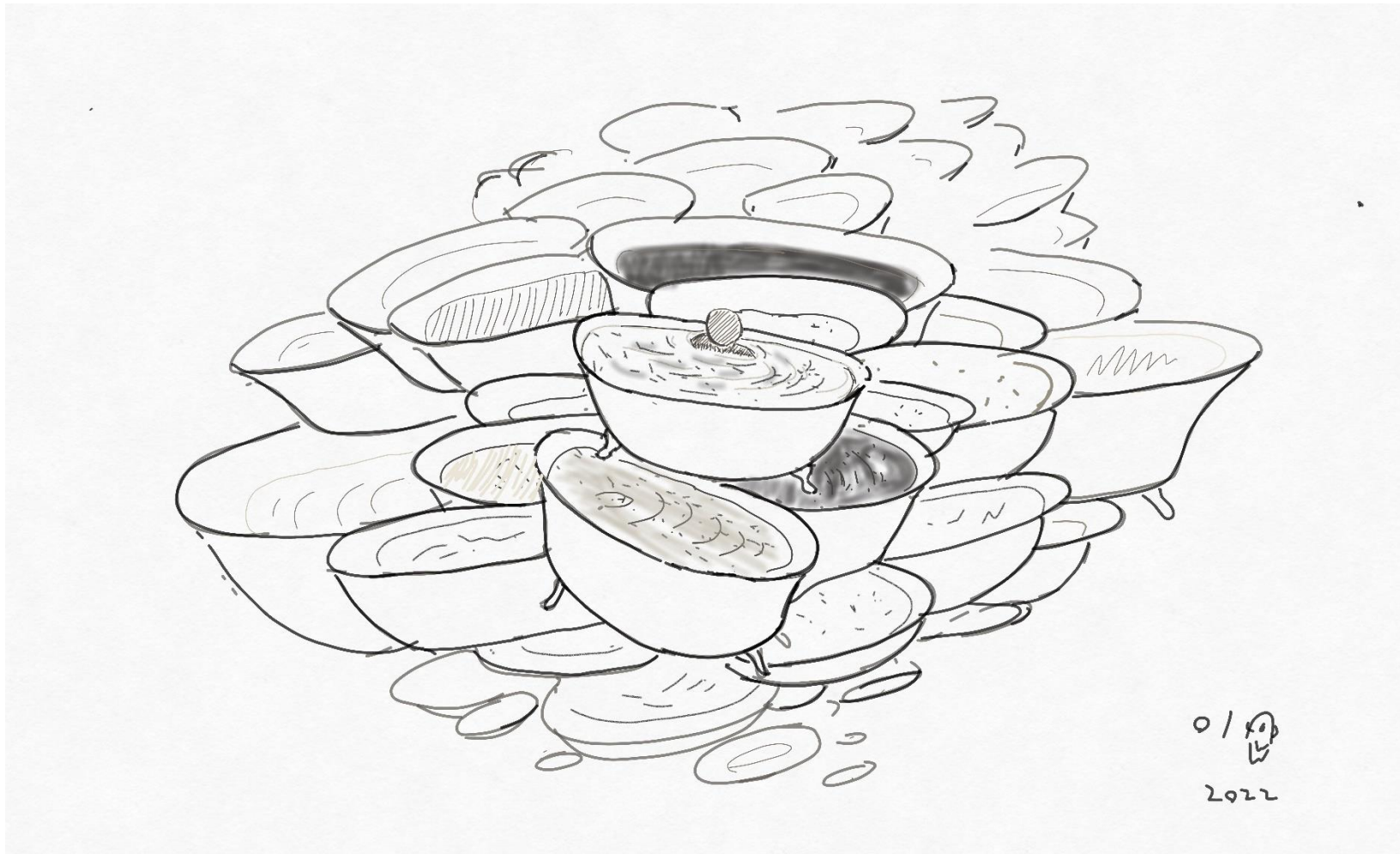


Figure 10: Yuan Yihang, *Hot Tubs*, 2022

What is described above is something that always happens, nevertheless cannot be defined as “failure” . In my last dissertation *Ai Weiwei and Francis Alys: The power of explicitness and implicitness in contemporary political art*, I compared the political art practice of Ai Weiwei and Francis Alys and led to a conclusion that the explicit practice of Ai Weiwei, as a critical example of the genre “art activism” , consistently “could not achieve the effect···as expected” (Yuan, 2020). Francis Alys’ poetic and implicit practice is a more effective artistic expression because “the poetry and ambiguity in his art provide a psychological distance” (Yuan, 2020). The “Trace of Life” theory provides another layer of understanding of this issue. Ai's practice is not a failure, as his “Traces” and their “Ripples” still stand in our artistic and political life. The issue is that his "hot tub", which is his privileged background and rigidly grafting Western experience into Chinese society, prevented him from locating the real issue, which is “awakening” artists, and they “will, in turn, awaken the rest of society by exposing reality (2018). He also ignored the "Ripple Effect". He can make wide and deep “Traces” by his influence and fame, attracting attention. However, none of them lasts for a longer time. His investigation during Sichuan Earthquake only touched Western audiences, and his overly exposed need to search reveals the government’ s dereliction of duty by reaching exposing the personal details of



children who died in the Earthquake has led to the opposite effect. Sorace (2014, pp. 397-419) has described Ai's practice as “an open-ended experimental performance piece” . In other words, Countless efforts led to almost no result.

In this situation, how do we leave “Traces” to ensure it goes out of the "tub" and make the effort we are looking for? If there are specific "laws" making sure every effort to leave an effective “Trace” will lead to a good result? How can we transcend the "tubs" we situated ourselves and become an undermining power of “Trace leaving” ?

There are three incidents I want to address from the beginning of the chapter:

#### **Incident A:**

A friend of mine Mr. Zhang, was preparing for an exhibition, and I was helping him. After shooting footage overnight, we carried part of his sculpture — a sixty-centimetre tall "flower pot" made out of cardboard, back to his studio via underground.

We were starving, so we found a nearby restaurant to buy some panini and coffee for breakfast. The "flower pot" was left where

we stood, by the street. While we were eating, an old lady quickly walked to catch the train and threw her tossed food package inside the "flower pot", the part of the sculpture that many will view in the extensive exhibition. The old lady chased the tube, leaving Mr. Zhang and me speechless.

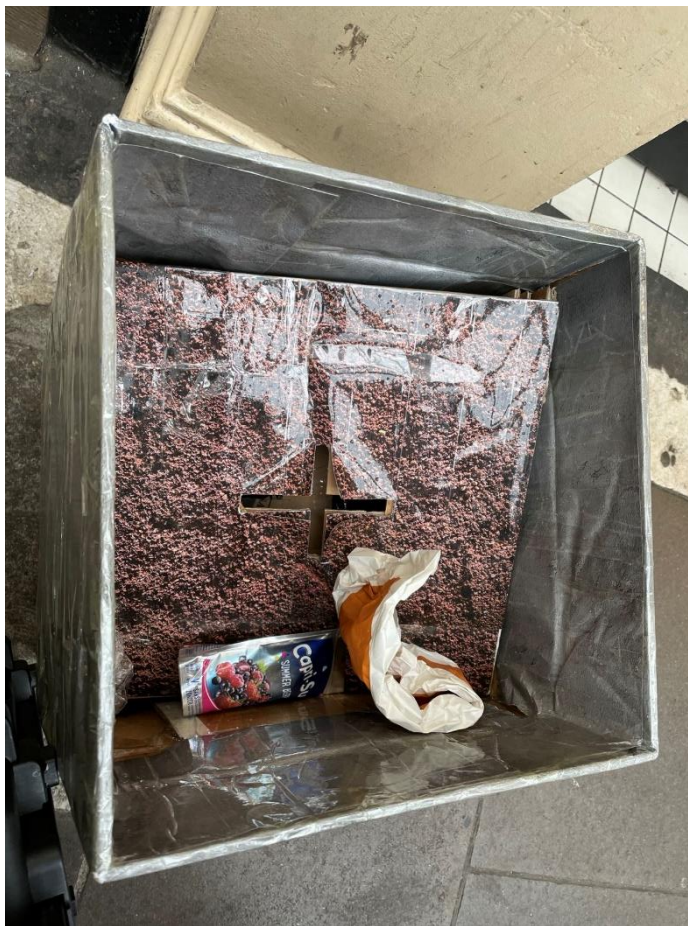


Figure 11: Yuan, Y. 2022. *Untitled* [photograph] (Self-taken photograph)

**Incident B:**

Su Shi (苏轼) is a legendary Chinese poet, philosopher, artist, politician, and gourmet who lived in the era of the Song Dynasty, around the 11th century. As a scholar-official who served

In the very centre of the central government, he was expelled from the capital city to the remote countryside Huangzhou (黄州), barely surviving the political conflict. With life standards suddenly switched from wealthy to poverty, he found himself on a hillside facing east, built a small hut and started ploughing by himself. Experiencing this dramatic drop, he was not happy at the beginning. Reading his most famous calligraphy piece (also renowned as the second greatest calligraphy piece ever existed), *The Cold Food Observance* (寒食帖), he expressed the endless sorrow of his current situation:

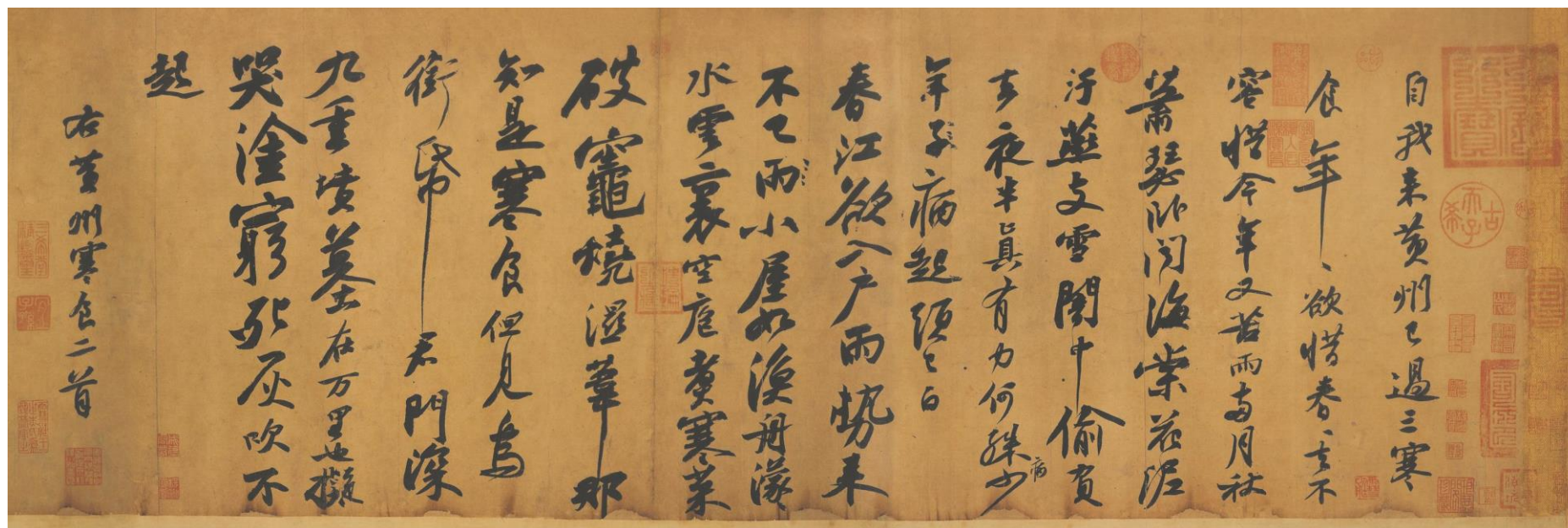


Figure 12: Su, S. (1082) *The Cold Food Observance* (寒食帖) [Calligraphy]. National Palace Museum Taipei (22 June 2022).

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In the empty kitchen I cook cold vegetables,  
Burning damp reeds beneath a broken stove;  
How was I to know it was Cold-Food Festival Day?  
From the paper-money ravens collect.  
The emperor's gate is nine-layers deep,  
While tombs are ten-thousand miles away;  
I would cry over having come upon the road's end,  
But, like dead ashes, my heart'll never kindle again.

空庖煮寒菜，破灶烧湿苇。那知是寒食，但见乌衔纸。

君门深九重，坟墓在万里。也拟哭途穷，死灰吹不起。

(<https://chinese.stackexchange.com/questions/42456/english-translation-of-su-shis-cold-food-observance>, 2021)

A bit later, in the spring again, he went on a countryside path with friends when he encountered sudden heavy rain. "everyone felt pathetic, except for me" (同行皆狼狈，余独不觉) (2011), he wrote. After he came back from the rain, he wrote the poem called *Calming the Wind and Waves* (定风波), which marked one of the most significant enlightenment in his life:

Listen not to the raindrops' tap on leaves throughout the woods;

Instead let's sing and holler while sojourning leisurely.

Bamboo staff and straw shoes make much lighter way than hooves.

Who should fear?

With a straw hat and coat, I could stand rain-battered all my life.

The spring breeze in its crispness lifts the liquor from my mind. This slight chilliness!

Yet at the peak I'm welcomed by the slanting light of dawn.

Looking back at where the storm had howled and blown and raged,

I walk back there-

And now there's neither wind, nor rain, nor warmth, nor sunny days.

莫听穿林打叶声，何妨吟啸且徐行。竹杖芒鞋轻胜马，谁怕？一蓑烟雨任平生。

料峭春风吹酒醒，微冷，山头斜照却相迎。回首向来萧瑟处，归去，也无风雨也无晴。

(2011)

**Incident c:**

I plan to suggest the college I am studying in (Royal College of Art London) install a public hot tub in the cafeteria area, by the floor-to-ceiling windows with a view over Battersea Bridge and River Thames.





A shared  
hot bath  
tub over  
here?

Figure 13: Yuan Yihang, *A Shared Hot Bath Tub Over Here*, 2022

I am planning to unite students who major in different areas to do this: Posters can be designed by graphic designers taking terms; a blueprint of the "hot tub area" aesthetically and functionally, including tracing water and electricity, can be designed by architects and interior designers to make it realisable. Suppose this idea is absorbing enough to mobilise a wide range of talents to work on it, whether or not the college agreed to build this hot tub inside the campus after a series of dialogue and negotiation. In that case, this idea and layers of thinking could be spread, memorised, and reinterpreted by a group of people and could become an opener to some changes that cannot be expected from this point.

These three incidents marked the three scenarios of Trace-leaving. Incident A is a witnessed unintended Trace-leaving. The old lady threw garbage into the wasted bin she thought had left an involuntary "Trace" inside the artist Mr. Zhang and the writer's mind, triggering the artist Mr. Zhang to think deeper about his practice. What kind of "Ripples" is echoing inside Mr. Zhang's mind, how it is perceived in his future work, and how his work will continue this thinking and be received by others is still unknown and is worth expecting.

The “Trace” left by the old lady in incident A is the most unexpected but the most common. For example, a casual behaviour of parents, like ignoring some needs of their kids, like accompanying, being understood, or overly providing the care they do not need, like spoiling them, might cause destructive behaviours or mental problems of the kids when they grow up. Parents usually would not be able to realise that during the process, an ordinary person who posted a funny Tik Tok video could suddenly respond with overloaded clicks and attention. Instant opportunities, wealth, and popularity rush in till the person cannot take it; unintentional negligence by a maintenance man might lead to an air crash and destroy hundreds of families, leaving them to digest their pain and sorrow. In the "Total Fluid", even a subtle “Trace” , a sentence spoken, a hand gesture presented, a mood expressed, or a small decision made, is a standing chance to set off a giant wave that turns the world around. For example, Christian Griepenkerl, the artist and professor who rejected Adolf Hitler's application for training as a painter, would never imagine his rejection of a young painter had become a critical push for him to become the great war criminal and responsible for the inhumane massacre of Jews. Now, netizens never stop discussing what would become if the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna accented Adolf Hitler. Ironically, we make plenty of attempts to leave something almost permanently in this world; we stir our surrounding fluid so hard and make an effort, but sometimes what works in the slightest, unintended moves, like after painting

and teaching for the entire life, artist Christian Griepenkerl only be memorised by rejecting Adolf Hitler. After churning inside the “hot tub” through life, sometimes the most significant impact on the reality in life is a “drop” spilling out of the “tub” .

The incident B represents those “Traces” left by a great soul with their “Ripples” agitating for a long time. There is no need to doubt the significant influence of Su Shi as a cultural icon in Chinese society and worldwide. His poetry is read and memorised by young children at school and sung by today's some of the most famous singers as lyrics; his legendary stories and fable stories with his friends, wisdom Buddhist monks, and a made-up sister are the results of adding layers of newly created "details" from his original story over a thousand years; As one of the most famous gastronomes in Chinese history, his name is named after some of the most famous Chinese cuisines, including the famous Dongpo pork belly. The "Life Segment" of a legendary individual can be a radiation centre of “Traces” and “Ripples” , continuing to shape the consciousness and the form of matter for a long time, like an earthquake epicentre deep undersea, triggering the undermining force of a tsunami. The total value of the significant “Trace” will be divided, like great waves hitting the sand, turning into smaller waves and thread.

Su Shi's poetry was used as lyrics of modern pop songs; his name is tightly connected to a pork knuckle dish; the places he travelled in his exile has been using his fame to attract travellers and tourism; his poem describing his love in litchi has risen the fame of this fruit after him, and there is more. Baudrillard (1983, p. 7) has pessimistically defined this phenomenon as the "impossibility of meaning circulates among messes". He believes that the "Decomposition" of force, meaning, value and information is part of the "natural law" we have to obey in "Trace leaving". The "Ripple" effect starts to diffuse and decompose the totality of the "Trace" you left. On the other side of it, the "diffusion" and "decomposition" of the "Trace" make the distance, the breadth, and the depth of influence of our "Traces" in time and space. The "Ripples" from Su Shi have agitated for a millennium, and his name, his poetry, his art, his gossip, and his spirit are widely planted in Chinese and Eastern culture and have divided into even smaller "Ripples", continuing to surge underneath the "Total Fluid".

There is no way we can travel back to when Incident B happened, but we can try to resemble it by picking up fragments carrying in "Ripples" that are still surging today. After years of being trapped in a physical and mentally dilemma, His attractive, optimistic, and poetic nature started to be re-discovered after a long time of being politically at the very top of the empire. He

began to get his feet on the ground and work as a peasant in his field; he started to make friends with locals, chatting with old peasants sitting by the rice field barefoot. In his word:

“Up above, I can associate with the Jade Emperor of Heaven, and down below I can associate with the poor folks. I think there is not a single bad person in this world” (1948, p. xi).

He merged himself into the current reality and enjoyed it. Then the time reached when he walked into the heavy storm "sing and holler". There are two chapters in the poem *Calming the Wind and Waves*. He was out of himself in the first chapter; he was not afraid of the storm, so he was not fearful of dilemmas in life. With only the "straw hat and coat", he can spend his life over.

The second chapter has raised the spirit to another level: The rain stopped suddenly, and the wind blew, waking him up from his drunken, dissipated mind. He looked back to where he walked past; under the light of the setting sun was the storm-tortured

view, the current reality. After that, he returned to the "terrible" and "real" truth. What a great spiritual turn-back! A true release from suffering is not escaping but coming back to it with peace and generosity. As a "Trace" , *Calming the Wing and Waves* has carried the most precious part of Su Shi's spirit — optimism, homespun, talented but not arrogant, enjoy everyday life with passion and wisdom. Living a thousand years after that moment, the total wisdom of Su Shi contained and revealed behind *Calming the Wind and Waves* still enlightened the individuals who had or have been suffering from the tremendous pain and dilemma and guided them to the great relief and reconciliation. This is the great value of a great piece as the "Trace" : The mind behind it transcends the limitation of the "hot tub" and generates profound influences.

Incident C is a planning interactive art project experimenting with discovering the mechanism of "Trace leaving" , finding a match point between the feeling of an artistic expression is adequate and the natural effect of this artistic expression doing the outside reality of the artist, who is the "Trace leaver". Art is always about leaving "Traces" . It is the production of recombining and reshaping substances through drawing, painting, carving, casting, pasting, removing, piling, and various other movements. As the "Trace" itself and the medium of transmitting, the artworks carry the thinking and emotions of the

creative individuals and start to spread and reprocess via the consciousness of audiences and participants, gradually submerging under the texture of human society.

We see increasing practice about “Trace” itself nowadays in contemporary art practice. *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* from Marcel Duchamp and other Futurism paintings froze the “Trace” of the moving body, expressing the infinity of “Traces” ; Felix Gonzalez-Torres weighed 175 pounds of candy to represent his beloved partner who died from AIDS, and the audience's interaction of taking the candies away marks the “Trace” of passing away; Song Dong wrote every current time along the Millennium Bridge with Chinese brush and water, revealing every present and past that is fading away. Their practices are focused on recording and leaving “Traces” in multiple scenarios, reminding audiences of the passing time and memory.

Is the developing interactive art the form works directly on the mechanism of “Trace leaving” ? I believe the answer is yes.

The art world sees the development of interactive art practice, encouraging artists to make direct “Traces Leaving” into the life of individuals. These practices concentrate on the effect triggered after the practices as "Ripples' ', focusing on stretching and



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the "fermentative" effect of the particle itself. The performance piece *The Artist is Present* by Marina Abramović is a great example. Through looking at Marina's emotionless face and eyes, participants looked at the emptiness, which surged their feelings and emotions, and goes with the experiences as a "Trace" of memory; In the project *Faith Moves Mountains*, Francis Alys invited local volunteers to accomplish the goal both ambitious and invisible. Explaining the project, recruiting locals, negotiating details, and dispatching and organising volunteers, are expanding the influence of the practice locally. No one will find the differences between the moving mountain afterwards; nevertheless, the corporation itself provided material for rumours to spread to the broader population and topics to chat about; the political and political thinking hidden behind the event got a chance to spread and mutate; *Gramsci Monument* produced by artist Thomas Hirschhorn intervenes into the local area with a "community centre". Events, assemblies, library services, and computer facilities attract and gather locals and gradually permeate the idea and thinking of the philosopher Antonio Gramsci. The intention of interactive art is not to solve the problem or make immediate changes; it is to set off a starting "Trace" into the mind of people or a macroscopical group and let it diffuse and ferment as "Ripples". Before the project finished, a mother said, " 'Thank you for teaching the kids in our community how to use glue guns instead of real guns.' " (2014, pp. 170-176). The changes have already started.

Incident C is similar. The emphasis of this plan which suggests a hot tub in the common area of the administrative department of the college is to create a flowing scene, a multiple “Trace Leaving” action. By putting forward a doable proposal beyond the authority’s expectation, it is expected to gather a group interested in fighting to make it come true. As a centre of creativity, the group itself will become a radiation centre of topic for discussion. The original intention of suggesting a hot tub was to criticise the high rampart between different departments and the growing bureaucratism of this institution, which led to rigidity, lack of communication and lack of possibilities. Having a hot tub inside the common area might be a starting point to increase the opportunities for closer contact and increase the chance of exchanging information. This undermines “meaning discussion”, layers of new “meanings”, “purposes”, and “intentions” piling and growing on top of the base. The outcome is unknowable and open to changes. Agreed or not agreed by the authority, or there would be other possibilities, the process of accomplishing it will leave “Traces” in a broad and deep realm and could become a “fulcrum” of making things happen.

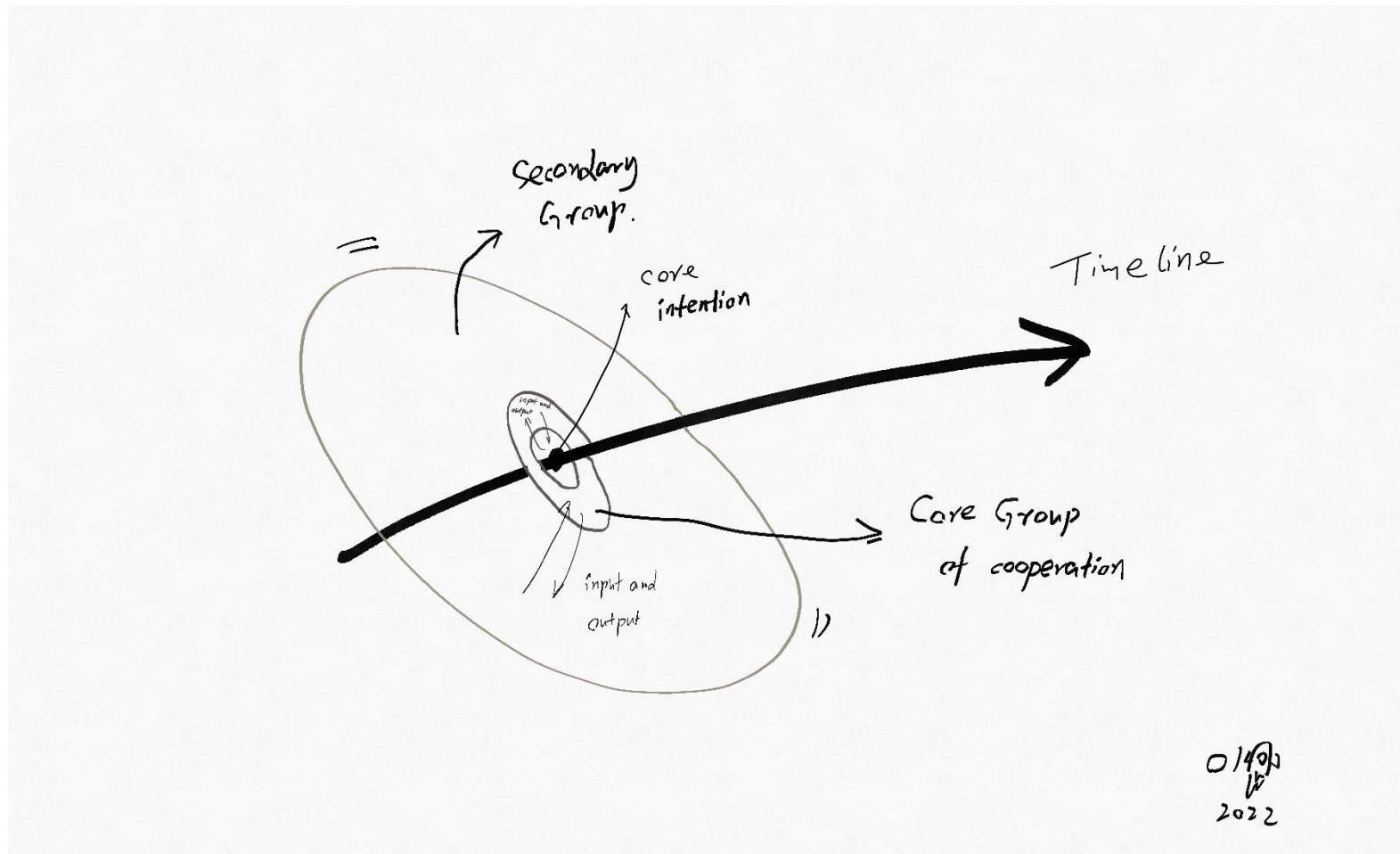


Figure 14: Yuan Yihang, *Untitled*, 2022.

# III

## Life

We can start to answer the questions in chapter 2.

Laozi wrote, “The Dao in its regular course does nothing (for the sake of doing it), and so there is nothing which it does not do. (道常无为而无不为)” (*Chinese text project*, no date) There is a certain nature of our reality, a good “Trace” structure in between the laws.

Laws are “mysterious (玄)” (*Chinese text project*, no date) and cannot be predicted, like nature itself. From the examples listed in the last Chapter, we can list the characteristics of “Affected Traces” : they are **growing, persistent, hidden, pervasive,**

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**connecting, and de-centred.** It echoes the surrounding “fluid reality” , advancing and diffusing like ripples. It does not only stay on the surface, as an appearing wave will disappear in a short amount of time. In most conditions, the effective “Traces” appear as an undercurrent, steaming under a period, like blood in a vessel, supplying nutrition the social structure needs. An example is the underbred ancient Greek and Roman culture, art, and knowledge that inspired and enlightened the rebuilding of Western civilisation after the dark Middle Age period.

How can we leave “Traces” like this? There is no specific answer or methodology which can be learnt. Let us look back to the “life” in the “Trave of Life” , the segment extending at a constant speed in time. It is the “Segment of Life” that collects the “Events” and “Traces” together, like a thread connecting a chain of pearls, forming a necklace. We look at a pearl necklace as a whole; we can also look at life itself as a “Trace” out of any microcosmic, singular “Traces” , the whole “Trace of Life” . The “hot tubs” every one of us saturated in limited our movement, vision and consciousness, indulged us in the illusion of accomplishing a great or few significant “Traces” that are gigantic and worth proud of, like entering into a world top university; became the top of a multicounty company; create a masterpiece as an artist, and more. The custom, the

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education, and the market have trained artists nowadays to focus on deliberately making projects one after another, to maintain the identity of artists, and their business around their art and creation. Art is profoundly separated from their life and spirit. Life itself became the supplement of leaving “great” Traces. I believe it is put the cart before the horse. What we learnt from the “Trace of Life” ; the “segment of life” is the principal axis of the structure. The living itself is the greatest “Trace Leaving” of an individual.

Let us investigate the artistic life of Su Shi and the life of other great Chinese literati artists. Their great “Traces of Life” had constructed by engaging, diversiform life experiences; how they were born talented; how they lived their everyday life; how they overcame or understood the great sorrow and dilemmas in their life; how they chose to sacrifice themselves for a greater social and moral ideal. The great romantic poet Li Bai (李白) had a wonderful time drinking wine with friends; the toast *Bring in the Wine* (将进酒) became one of the most remarkable pieces of the Tang Dynasty, the greatest period in Chinese history; one of most excellent cursive script calligraphy piece *Letter about a Stomachache* (肚痛帖) was Zhang Xu (张旭) a random manuscript complaining about his sudden pain in stomach; The musician Ruan Ji (阮籍) played his last piece of music before his

death sentence, complained the injustice on himself and on every people in his time. These great pieces of art are micro, life-related, and daily practices, which reveal their natural struggle, feelings, and gnosis. They helped lift their spiritual level, and those who were influenced by the “Ripples” and all these fragmented daily practices collected by their “life segment” formed the “Trace of Life” . This started the thinking of the possible “daily practice” for artists, immersed in their life, solving problems artistically using their talents, leaving “Traces” . Art and life would be finally in one.

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