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Caught In The Betwixt-And-Between: Visual Narrative of an Asian Artist-Scholar

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Abstract

Juxtaposing visual images with stories, this work addresses the formation of my transnational identity and my experience in the “betwixt-and-between,” illustrating my struggles as artist, scholar, and international faculty member at an Anglo American university. I exacerbate tensions between my professional and attributed identities to complicate and problematize my other identity—neatly constructed as a faculty member of color by the corporate management of U.S. higher education.

Recontextualizing within colonized discourse as inquiry mode, my visual narrative conveyed as photocollage-cum-essay shows how I came to accept rootlessness as a form of empowerment. The substantive findings include strategies to maintain integrity in such an existence: cherishing the vitality of the senses, preserving the vernacular in the voice, and summoning volition from my Asianity. Drawn from the visual narrative that helped me come to terms with my “out-of-placeness,” some suggestions to expand the scholarship of teaching learning by combining it with personal creative works and research interest are offered.

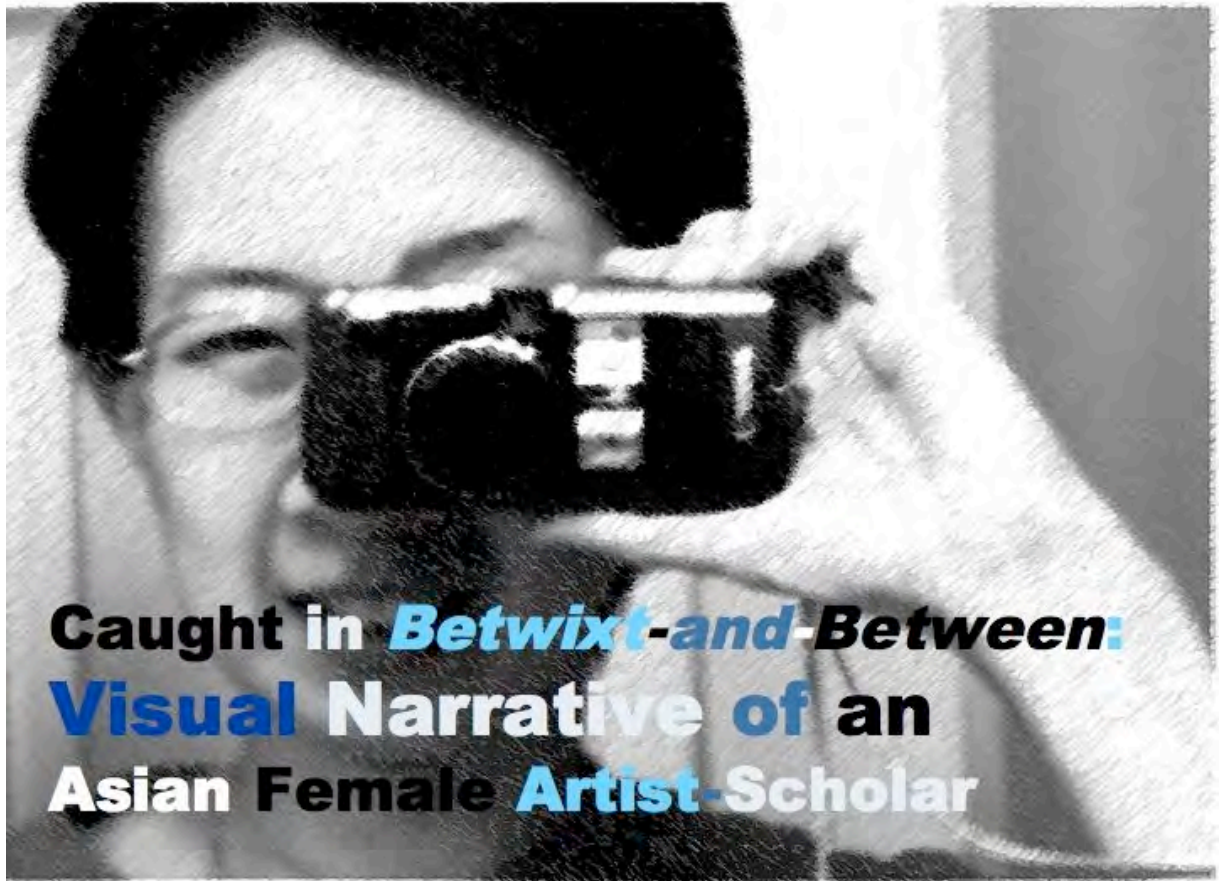


Figure 1: Playful Title

This visual narrative was originally inspired by Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929/1989); however, her dated, elitist–feminist perspective provides minimal contextual support for my work. Her idealistic advocacy of a fixed income and a private room for talented females at the beginning of the last century seems so removed from my situated context. After all, I have an assigned office at my university and a roof over my head, yet these material possessions in the secular world could not provide me with a well-defined identity from within: What does it mean to be an artist–scholar from the perspective of an Asian female?

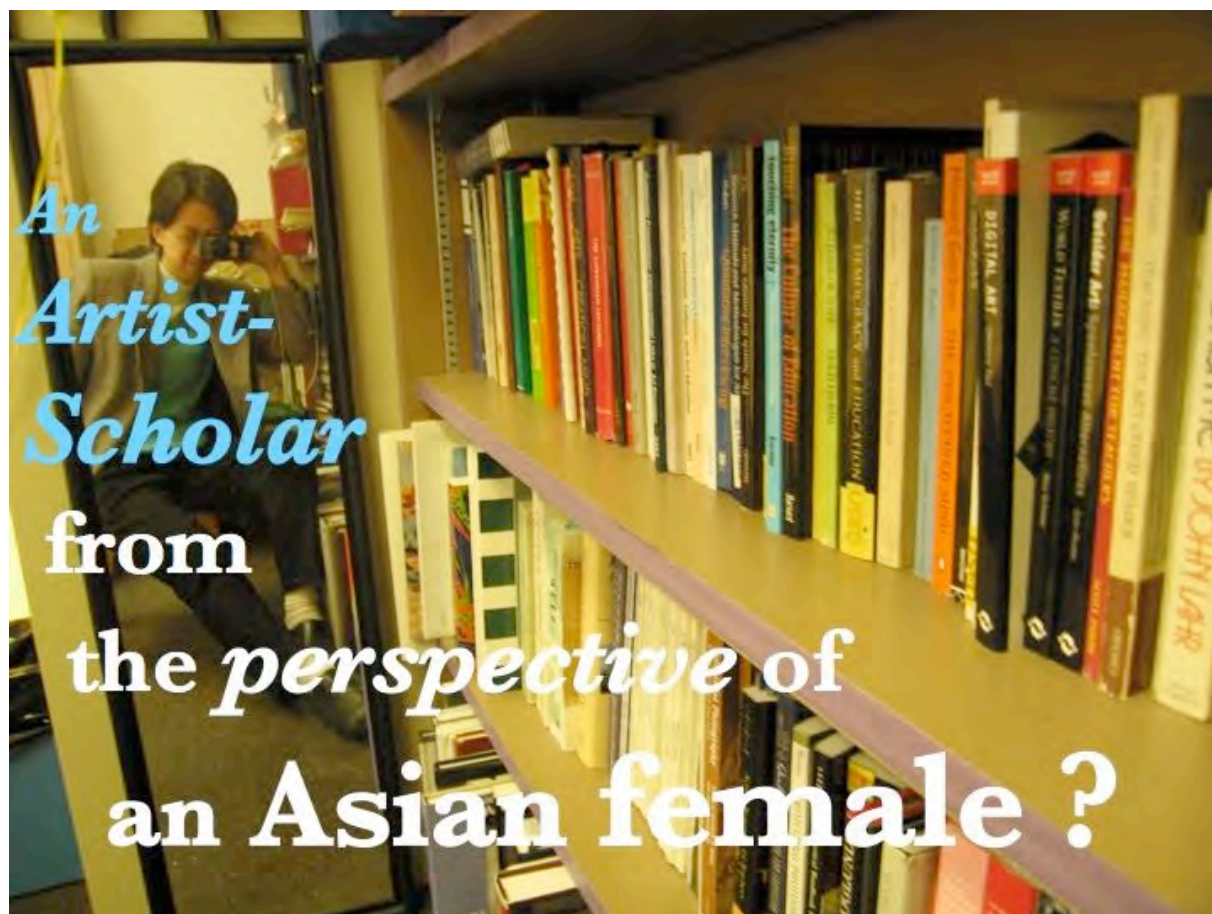


Figure 2: Research Problem

Bolstered by stories and visuals, this inquiry into the multiple realities of the formation of my fragmented identity aims to understand my shifting perception and ambiguous conception of selfhood in changing locations and contexts. A forceful impetus behind this visual narrative was in fact the increasingly marginalized role of the arts in education. Agonized by such center-periphery positioning and arbitrary designation of my field/discipline/passion in academia, I see parallels in my conditioned mobility and preordained identity at present—working and teaching as an Asian female artist–scholar in the context of U.S. higher education. This investigation is part of an ongoing personal dialogue about an appropriate place/space for my national/ethnic/gender identity in my scholarship and artistic work. It is also part of an ontological wondering stemming from my own inner curiosity. Using photocollage-cum-essays, I attempt to illuminate the sense of eternal uncertainty and ambiguity that the Tang poet, Du Fu, a contemporary of Li Po, once claimed: “Floating amidst nowhere, between Heaven and Earth, is a solitary seagull.”

飄飄何所似，天地一沙鷗

Inquiring Into My Betwixt-and-Between State of Being

Framing/labeling this work with one of the proliferating “postisms” (postcolonialism, postmodernism, poststructuralism) would be theoretically justifiable but ontologically demeaning and existentially meaningless. Nonetheless, I was pleasantly surprised by the resemblance of this defiant manifesto to Bhabha’s introduction to *The Location of Culture* (1994), which I recently encountered upon the recommendation of a reviewer of this manuscript.

Perceived as imperative and procedural, a theoretical framework will unmistakably situate any inquiry in a context and connect the inquiry to the accumulated literature to enable its readers’ ease of understanding. Such centripetal enforcement and unshakable axiom within the theorizing enterprise of scientific knowing, however, compelled my centrifugal rebellion in such work—I just want to tell my stories visually and do not want to be stigmatized as appropriating and promulgating any colonized scholarship. Moreover, forging a way into the political discourse of knowledge construction may prove the least of the contributions that artist-turned-researcher like myself can offer. Instead, my sensitivity and curiosity, or intuition (Bastick, 1982; Bruner, 1960; Dewey, 1934), is the asset that better allows me to reconnoiter the landscape of inquiry. I will rely on my visual narrative later to recontextualize and challenge the colonized canon for its hypocritical advocacy of inclusion yet ultimate rejection of the views of the rest of the world.

I begin this work with Behar (1996) in mind: “It doesn’t require a full-length autobiography, but it does require a keen understanding of what aspects of the self are the most important filters through which one perceives the world and, more particularly, the topic being studied” (p. 13). Ruth Behar, a Cuban-born Jewish woman who followed her family to New York as a child and went through the U.S. education system, reflected deeply in her anthropological work upon the tension occurring during her enculturation process. Her writing served as an inspiring model for my own inquiry, which in short, scrutinizes my professional identity as an artist–scholar through the lens of my attributed identity, that is, an Asian female. No doubt, such a crisscross examination has jeopardized my neat identity construction by the corporate management of U.S. higher institution, which on a daily basis has had a 3D effect (not three-dimensional), branding me as a “diligent, docile, and disciplined or devoted” faculty member of color to the extent that I often experienced an erasure of what’s “I, me, and mine.” This I formulated into the central issue for investigation in this inquiry.



Figure 3: The Issue Involved

This kind of inquiry is messy. Geertz (1988), anthropologist turned writer, warned, “How to convey this mood—an enormous tangle of epistemological, moral, ideological, vocational, and personal doubts, each feeding upon the others . . . —is itself a bit of a problem” (p. 90). A possible side effect of calling forth lengthy confessions from the researcher would result in boredom, and a narcissistic monologue is embarrassing—both ineffective. My visual narrative purports to achieve both verisimilitude and vindication by mimicking the rhythm of my ongoing contemporary lifestyle—frequently interrupted by memories and self-criticism while continuously entwined within inner negotiations and self-assurance.

In this work, the visuals often aggressively disrupt the text, serving as a deraileur switching gears between a first-person confessional reminiscence fraught with inner doubts and the external detached tone of the third-person analysis and interpretation; and yet occasionally the images stand in harmony with the words. This composition approximates the Marxist aesthetic tradition of formulating judgment about the form of an artwork by the degree to which it mimics its content (Durrant & Lord, 2007). An ambiguous space created between the

visual images and texts aims to abandon the readers at a place of uncertainty and confusion by omitting clues about the relationship of visual to text and also blurring their relationship with each other. This ambiguity thus disallowed a cohesive flow and a seamless pace in reading. By jolting the reader in this way, the visual narrative embodies issues of my own concern and mirrors the notion of the betwixt-and-between.

This work has another critical limitation: It is not an advocacy aimed at fueling antagonism but instead seeks to open a passage between words and images to accommodate the various neglected dimensions of my existence in my consciousness. I also earnestly anticipate a sort of transformation from this point onward as I reformulate my own destiny in situ on a day-to-day basis with more clarity. To achieve this kind of mindfulness, I have to rely on one overarching assumption as a built-in mechanism: Sincerity and curiosity—yes; objectivity and indifference—no!



Figure 4: Limitations

Telling My Stories Visually

Data collection involved revisiting old artworks, refreshing previous field notes, and reframing journal entries from the past 2 decades. I purposefully selected stories and visuals that documented the notion of the betwixt-and-between before and during the shift in my identity from graduate student to faculty member. By doing so, I wanted to avoid labeling by established publications, such as *A/r/tography* (Irwin & Cosson, 2004) or *Art Practice as Research* (Sullivan, 2004). Both methods developed during and after I began my own initial crude experimental works. The avant-garde spirit in me, however, drew inspiration from many artists' *strategies of being* (Fineberg, 1995) and the transcendent power of Bach's (1972) seagull, who wants to fly instead of eat, unlike the rest of its flock.

Selected from different series of photo collections, the raw visual data captured the following:

1. My emerging artistic confidence when I made college choices and future vocational plans upon recognition with distinction for my photo project, submitted in partial fulfillment of the Cambridge–Singapore GCE “Advanced” level art exam (1988);
2. My diminishing enthusiasm for art advocacy when I encountered mainly relics and replicas of Greek and Roman civilizations at the Getty Villa in Malibu, outside of Los Angeles, after reading about the Getty's supposed promotion of multiculturalism in graduate school coursework (1997);
3. My heightened sense of surveillance at the time of my first presentation at NAEA in Washington, DC (2000), as I stood with all my cameras shooting at elevated angles, mesmerized by the monumentality of the architecture and the beauty of the public art erected everywhere; and
4. My gradual contentment with everydayness when I zoomed in upon the consumable food items in my kitchen pantry as still life objects (2005).

To compile data for the essays, I first extracted excerpts from my dissertation completed in 2003, then sorted through discarded field notes that had not previously made it to print. To facilitate systematic analysis and critical examination of my experience over time and the gradual formation of my transnational identity, I color-coded old journals and identified reoccurring stories to endorse relevant themes. To enhance the fluidity of my ideas visually, I experimented with tools and filters on various software to represent both visual and text data. When digital photocollage was combined with photoessay, it easily transformed into “*a new form of storytelling*. . . . The arrangement has a certain expressive potential—with many pictures interacting, by nature either heightening or lessening the impact of the single image” (Mora & Hill, 1998, p. 322).

The following three sections open with a short anecdote from my dissertation to compare and contrast with an abbreviated discussion of how my multiple selves have been caught in my roles and identities on a daily basis. I seek out more questions and inconsistencies, both from the past and present, to complicate and problematize each category of my identity. To end each section, I share a little personal realization of what matters during my transnational identity reconstruction: (a) cherishing the vitality of my senses; (b) preserving the vernacular in my voice; and (c) summoning volition from my Asianity.

My Artist Identity Caught in the Betwixt-and-Between

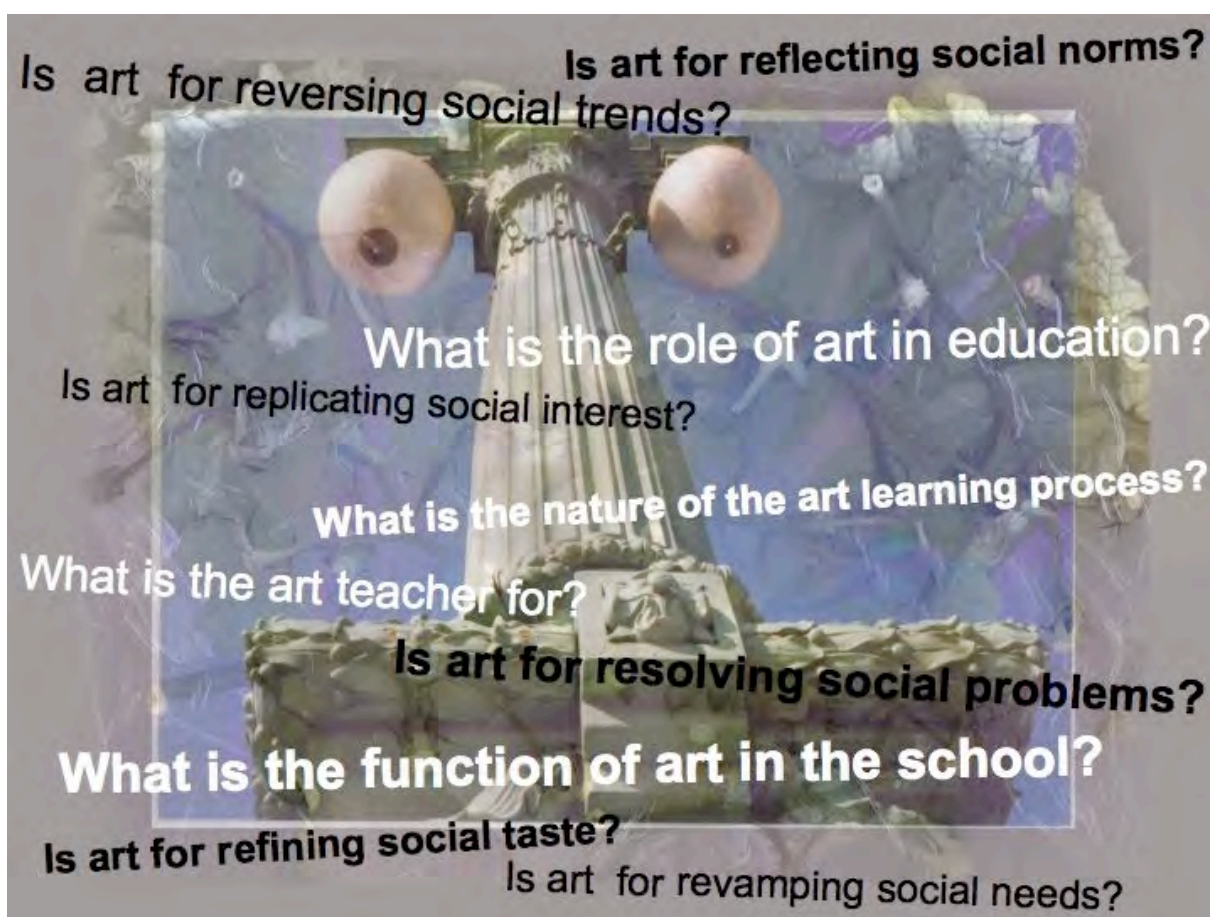


Figure 5: Artist ID Caught

When I am engaged in artistic creation, writing, or other forms of representation in praxis, my mind mysteriously operates on its own, contemplating a parallel reality beyond my control and prediction. The happenings in my real life seldom follow either the linear progression of time or space. A decade ago at the beginning of my graduate study, I asked endless questions:

“What is the function of art in the school? What is the role of art in education? What is the art teacher for? What is the nature of the art learning process?” To complicate matters further, I was perplexed by the relationship of art and society in general. Is art for reflecting social norms (like popular art)? Is art for reversing social trends (like the mission of postmodern art)? Is art for resolving social problems (like both avant-garde and propaganda art)? Is art for replicating social interest (like fine art for a certain class and folk art for others—although one is often supposed and imposed without consulting the other)? Is art for revamping social needs (like religious art in the past and applied art in the present)? Is art for refining social taste (as museum art honors and decorative art prescribes)?

Although I could continue to pose an endless list of questions, I soon made enough progress in graduate school to believe that my commitment and concerns as artist are not about being “right” as opposed to “wrong” or “right” in contrast to “left.” The socialist versus capitalist argument can be tossed aside for the moment; so can the moralist’s view. Instead, I the artist am always reminded to focus on what the learned lesson is here and now—a social-cultural indoctrination since youth that I will explain in detail later. Taking Dewey’s *art as experience* (1934) more seriously later on, I shut my mouth and simply allow the artist in me to flow with everydayness so that I can fully embrace the intensity and continuity of each *experience*.

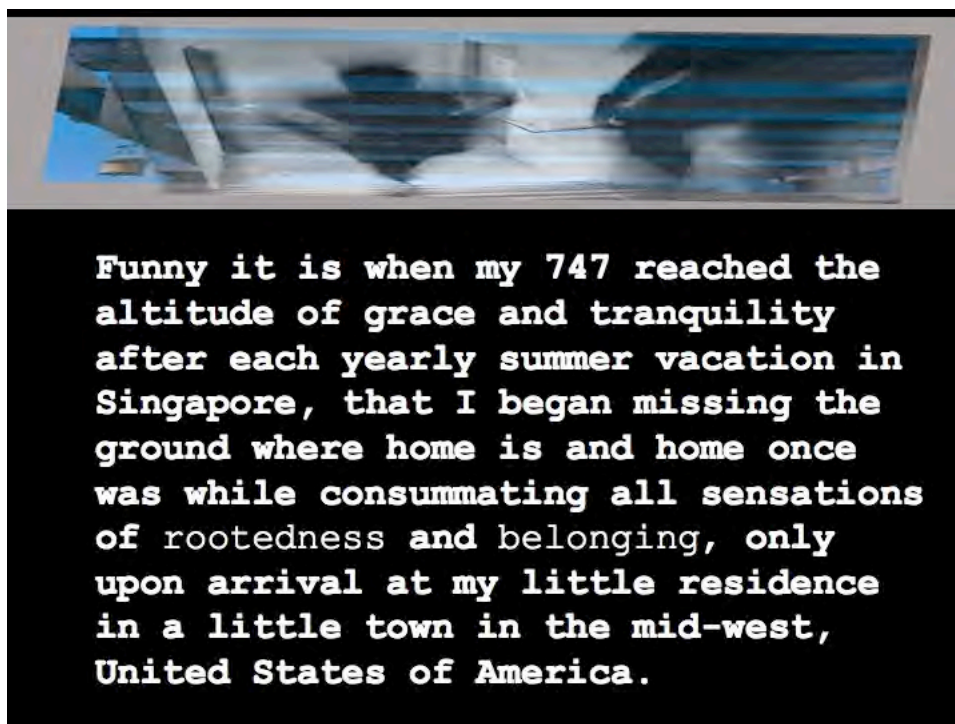


Figure 6: Story 1

Understanding one's experience likely entails some form of interaction between past experience and each new experience. In the course of understanding, our perceptions of experience—both past and present—changes. Only over time did I realize that my experience had been affected and pretentious.

The realization of my own research intention and study purpose came long after I submitted my presumably 100% perfect dissertation. This happened after years of engagement in the “paradigm,” to use Kuhn's term (1970); in the “field,” as Csikszentmihalyi put it (1990); and in the “dominant discourses” in art education in Foucault's (1972) terms. My intuitive distaste for certain art forms and rejection of certain kinds of art education literature also gradually became apparent much later in life, and it is not a matter of mere superior intuition. I learned that to associate (or not to associate) art with certain values, standards, and criteria, often happens to be the outcome of specific social and cultural constructions in a specific era. As such, my knowledge of what is art and what constitutes art education is merely another product of the time in which I exist. My taste, being, and even my responses to bodily sensations could be largely acquired. My pride in embodying distinct subjectivity as an artist could be also a form of acculturation.

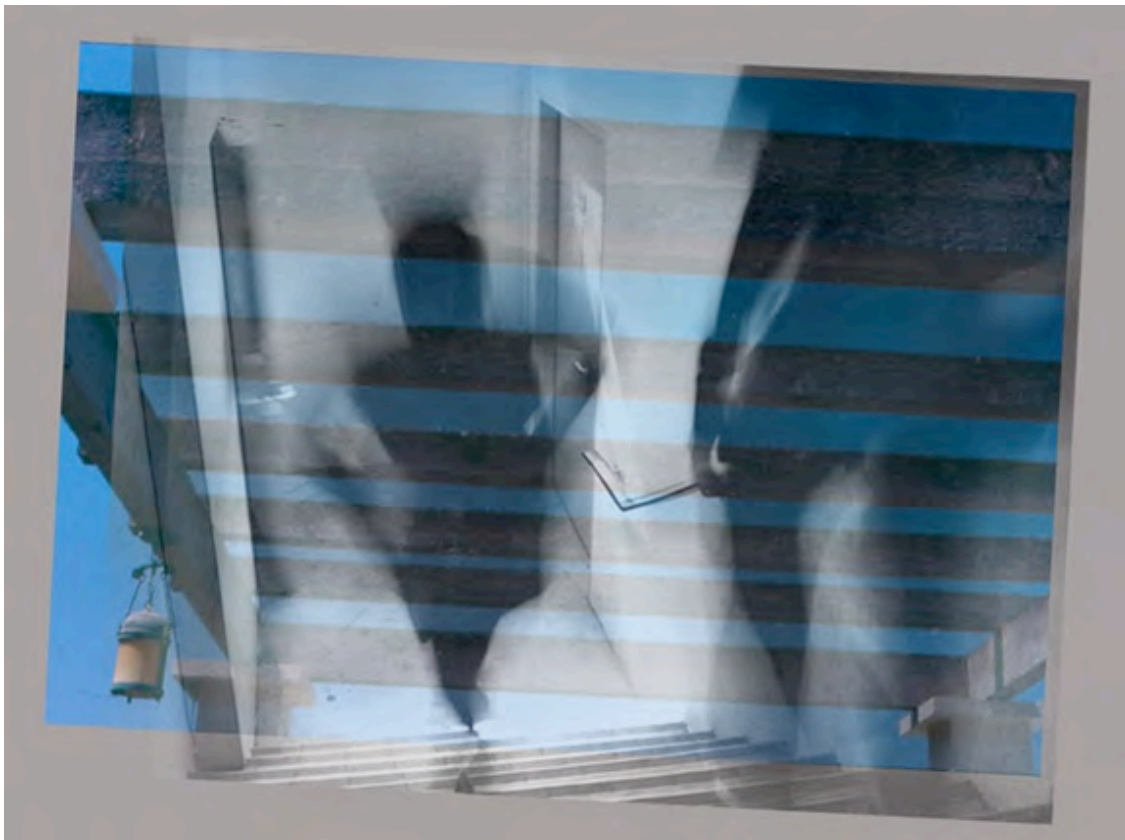


Figure 7: Internal Irregularity

No wonder my formative education in the arts seemed disjointed and lacked cohesiveness. Visual art has been part of the holistic education advocated in Far East Asian civilization since the time of Confucius (Tu, 1985)—at least that’s implicit in my upbringing—however, the compartmentalization of knowledge as school subjects is fairly recent. Similarly, the emergence of childhood and adolescence as social and educational enterprises with designated roles and targeted performance emerged only recently in Western civilization (Postman, 1994). The education enterprise apparently has too short a history and was concentrated too scarcely at a few locations of development with too narrow foci in terms of goals and method. Needless to compare is the infant status of art education as a discipline. As an artist and researcher in art education, I have to remain cognizant of multiple implicit objectivities imposed upon me.



Figure 8: Everyday Food for Thought 1

I was often struck by how smell, taste, and touch more than sight caught my sense of nostalgia unexpectedly and instantaneously brought back profound memories, ignited sudden insights, and led to deepened understanding. Experiences of the body locked nearly away, or

consciousness casually passed by, could still impact my judgment, perception, and imagination. The cheap perfume worn by my English tutor reencountered at Grand Central Station in spring 2001, reminded me of 20 minutes of struggle to pronounce Shostakovich accurately. The not-too-fatty fried mee-hoon (rice-noodle), not-too-salty leek-pork dumplings, and not-too-sweet red bean soup served by my Taiwanese colleagues' wives and mothers supplied sufficient nourishment for my first month-long winter writing retreat as junior faculty. Hugs from my mom at the airport and from my professors (academic mommies) at annual conventions provide year-lasting warmth and vibes as I inch forward in all seasons and in all kinds of weather.

Vitality of My Senses Matters

My experience with time and space on campus as a university faculty member is ossifying. Time is segmented into weekly classes plus office hours, minus pockets taken up by administrative chores for teaching, multiplied by 16 weeks for each semester, then divided by tedious meaningless meeting after meeting. The definition of my role and responsibilities is also daunting and designated by senior faculty members as shown in my annual reappointment reviews: The seniors decreed that those in art education should not teach studio courses and that their creativity and talent counts only in publication; however, sagacity is an embodied knowing. With an annual 100+ hours in the air flying across time zones to different places around the globe, my unstable body-mind challenged the understanding of experience and consciousness I have taken for granted, and I can now appreciate how my maturing and aging body shows various symptoms of maladjustment. As my senses get scrambled, my moving body in fact alerts my mind that I am again trapped in the betwixt-and-between. As long as my senses remain alive every day, the artist in me can at least become mindful of my own entanglement.

My Scholar Identity Caught in the Betwixt-and-Between



Figure 9: Scholar ID Caught

My conformity to logical scientific thinking as professionalism was finalized after faithfully completing my graduate course work and successfully producing a piece of writing worthy of my dissertation committee members’ signatures, which also transformed me in rank and status. I became a “doctor,” a trained researcher, a qualified scholar as defined by contemporary academia.

Nonetheless, I always believed my stumbling into the scholarly field was a false start and hence reluctantly accepted such existence. Toward the beginning of the 10-page false start of my dissertation, I wrote:

The false start serves several functions. Foremost, I wish to demonstrate the blurred distinction between objectivity and subjectivity, that there is no discrete difference between them but eternal relativism governed by one’s positioning and perspective, a

fundamental concept of Taoism. This is elaborated upon extensively in Zhuangzi, which I read at 17 but whose manifestations had pervaded my life and surroundings long before I understood the text. Next, the false start—my way of challenging the often expulsive, exclusive meaning of self in the classics of empirical research and its recent awkward and often apologetic inclusion and my last resistance to benign cultural imperialism—is an ongoing reminder of the patronizing enterprise of the western research endeavor that promises a few correct means and ends to knowledge in substituting what is wisdom in life. Last of all, the false start illustrates my own ambivalent position from now on—my act of kowtowing to the tradition of scholarly discourse, my submission to research inquiry and methodology, my compliance to the rules of the latest edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, my adherence to the grammatical and rhetorical structure of the English language, my surrender to the scientific form of knowing, and my constraint by the demonstration of knowing—through a written text. In brief, the false start demonstrates a mindful manifesto of my “acculturation.” It is a literal device, a writing strategy; yet for my being, it is a must.

Funny also it is when my rebellious self-imposed exile extended beyond its long-expired date into an official contract for a H1-B and an assistant professor position in the US, that I, began entering the art of Chopin, Pushkin, Chagal, Du Fu, Li Po, and many artists and poets who were forced on non-volunteered leave from their homeland, and whose work is a journey of their longing and eternal yearning of home.

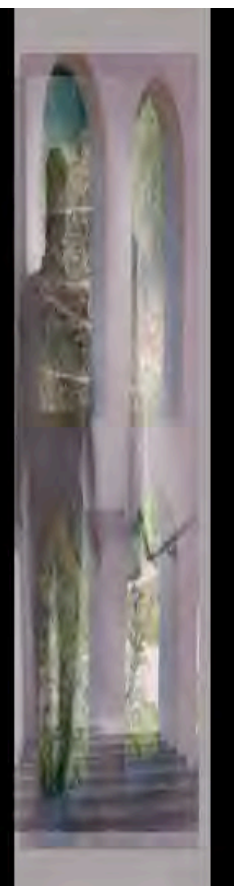


Figure 10: Story 2

My mode of thinking while collecting field data deviated from the academic training I received. Instant reflection was closer in proximity to my conversational speech in Singlish (colloquial English in Singapore) with my research participants, adolescent students mostly. Even my journal entries in English mixed with Chinese also better captured messy feelings, complicated emotions, and entangled inner thoughts. An unofficial version of the English language commonly spoken by Singaporeans, this idiomatic language has a distinguishable stress, intonation, and pacing. Although it can be conveniently classified as an English dialect, its unique characteristics include the replacement of English vocabulary with words from Malay and other non-Mandarin local Chinese dialects. To complicate matters, its use has been a contested issue on the national front, engendering decades of debate regarding its official acceptance as standard for teaching purposes in the island-state (Kramer-Dahl, 2003); yet when I lost the ability to perform simple tongue-switching between Singlish and a gradual fluent use of American English speech, I suddenly realized I had lost my voice. This immobility of one part of the body (the tongue), however, triggers reflection on another level.



Figure 11: Joyless Journey

Although I firmly believed my scholarly research benefited from my ability to locate advantageous information with an insider's knowledge of the underground language system in Singapore, I have found that my recently acquired American slang, embellished with unconscious insertion of technical jargon during casual conversation, rewards me with more respect from fellow Singaporeans. I wondered:

- Did I overlook my privileged position in the field, and had my informants been more willing to share precious information because of my speech more than our common nationality?

Although I used to take pride in including the Singlish of my interviewees in my writing, the irresolvable problems of presenting the complexity of the language in scholarly writing caused me mental exhaustion from trying to answer journal editors' queries and assuage their doubts. I pondered:

- Am I overselling my work with an additional exotic flavor by insisting on Singlish insertion, or had I the intention of promoting the English dialect indirectly to distinguish my national pride?

Although I once confidently displayed my wealth of acquired knowledge of English literature and continental philosophy in both my U.S. graduate classrooms and my middle-class background in Singapore, I am now besieged by common folks (mostly the students I need to please to ensure optimal class evaluation) more interested in *American Idol* and *Extreme Makeover*, I am puzzled:

- Is this phenomenon an issue of patronizing on my part or a matter of differences in taste and class, complicated by our differences in geography, culture, and age?

Although my inquiry into Singapore secondary school art had received two significant awards in my field, my university continued to nullify my effort and scholarship as if my substantive research findings are invalid and the methodology not rigorous enough as a piece of research. I am finally prompted to ask:

- Is international research only a subcategory of "the rest," acceptable merely to supplement and footnote the canon?



Figure 12: Everyday Food for Thought 2

The official demarcation and rigorous standardization of various levels of education around the world, including life-long learning, is considered a postcolonial stratagem (Cannella & Viruru, 2002). For instance, a hidden agenda of the international education system, endorsed through the UK Cambridge-syndicated General Certificate Secondary Education (Abraham, 2003; Hickman 1991), exists to exercise implicit control over formerly colonized regions. By offering education as a legitimate mechanism of social-economic mobility and postulating rationality as the ultimate purpose of schooling, the movement of those on the periphery can be better regulated in the process of postcolonization (Cannella & Viruru, 2004). As such, education completes the business of effacing the subjectivity of the “other” (Said, 1993), yet Spivak (1994) warned of the limitation of adhering to a simplistic dualist conceptualization of what’s native versus what’s foreign. Romanticizing the native identity is problematized by assuming those back home are untouched by the effect of diasporas, never disrupted in any situation, and never disoriented in a globalized world. Therefore, reading the established cultural “text” from the vantage point of “being-the-rest” (Williams & Chrisman, 1994)

through the lens I am obligated to wear as a transnational artist–scholar means always to bracket each reading at least twice or thrice.

Vernacular in My Voice Matters

Without a compatriot among my immediate circle of friends and acquaintances at present to bounce around the use of Singlish, I have lost my ability to speak in the accent. I have also lost touch with the Singlish words I had once used to replace English terms as I aspired to conduct perfect lessons with flawless English as a university professor in the U.S. I have to rely on the *Coxford Dictionary* (Singapore’s Premier Satirical Humour Website, 2009) to confirm my own mother tongue. With this disappearance of the vernacular came a realization of my emerging satirical tone in daily speech when interacting with others—to camouflage my vulnerability at times and other times, my inner disgust with the real-life drama of cultural imperialism happening within me. Because satire “is a blend of criticism, wit, and ironic humor . . . [used] to reform society by exposing its vices” (Hornstein et al., 1973, p. 471), it serves as an ultimate shield for my voiceless insecurity.

My Asian Identity Caught in the Betwixt-and-Between



Figure 13: Asian ID Caught

My nearly 7 years of teaching as an assistant professor in a U.S. higher education institution, where I am defined more as an instructor of color instead of as an artist or a scholar, had kept me muzzled, which was, of course, uncomfortable and impersonal; however, when happenings at my corporatized university resembled scenes from Samuel Beckett's theater of the absurd, which both alarmed and amused me, muzzling is valuable as protective. It is a reminder that I am a cultural alien in this land and thus required a self-imposed sanction on any immediate negative criticism of what I experienced. "Suspend judgment" should be the rule of thumb for even the most ludicrous situation just as it was a commandment for researchers conducting studies in remote lands of "primitive" cultures.

I detected a widening void between private space (e.g., inside my little apartment regularly, in front of the bathroom mirror frequently, and occasionally even during mouthful of hot steamed rice, cereal with cold milk, or healthy sandwich with lots of vegetables) and public space (e.g., behind the lectern in my classroom, onstage for my conference presentation, between the printed pages of my journal articles, and across platforms of my art exhibits) that negated the possibility of a continuous and coherent identity. This void seemed to confirm what I used to wonder:

What is the nature, or even the possible benefit, of an identity with many facets? What is it like to live a life with a multiplicity of identities? What if I cannot clearly declare a coherent self or maintain a consistency throughout my life? Am I in danger of being pathologically classified as malfunctioning or schizophrenic as a result of clashes among my id, ego, and superego? Should I still adhere to my familiar understanding of selfhood through the classical Freudian lens, or do I buy into Lacan because his referencing of self-image arising from desire approximates my Buddhist understanding of life and suffering?

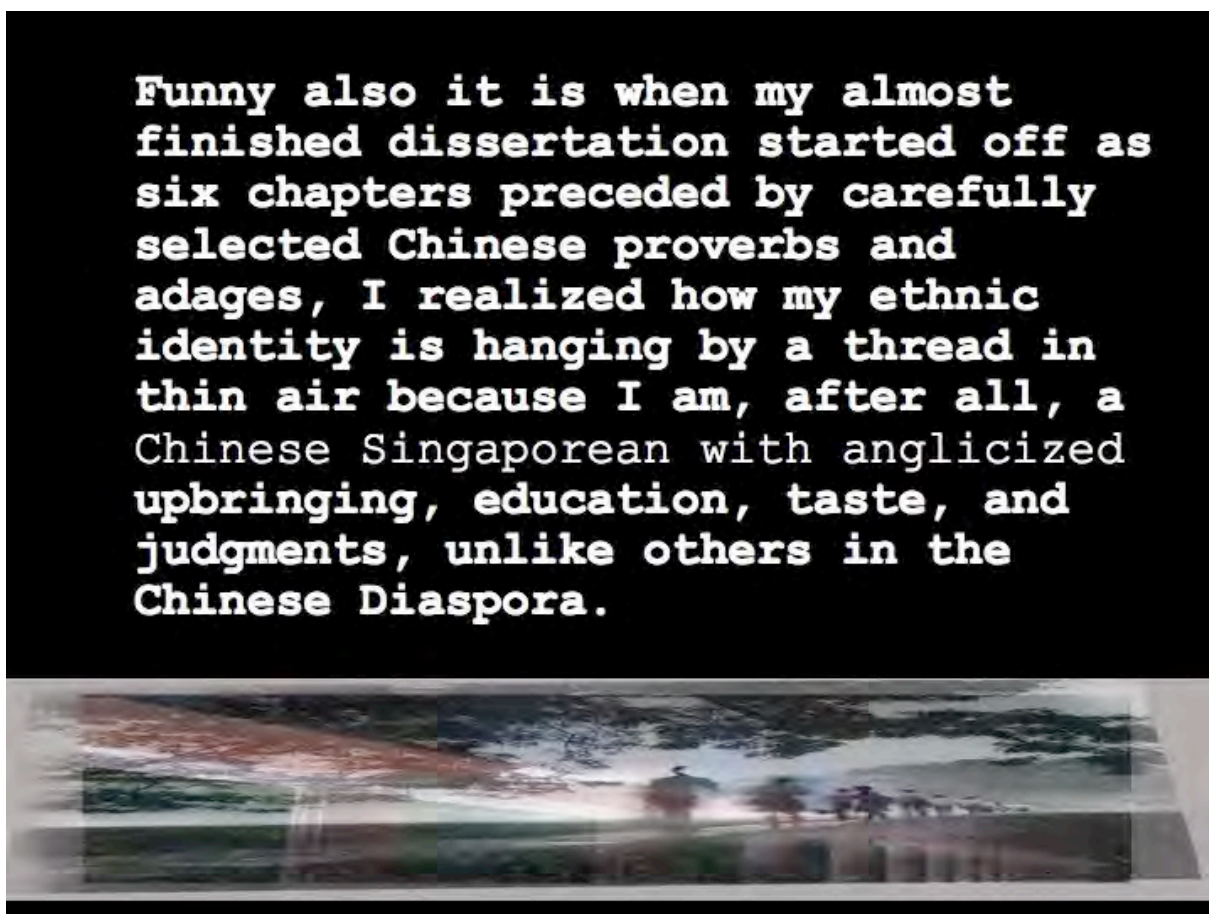


Figure 14: Story 3

The traditions of my accustomed culture have never proclaimed the self as an independent entity (Tu, 1985). Confucianism is altruism, proposing a dual self, with *Ren* as a superior form of moral checks that can be learned and internalized to become instinct. Taoism offers the relative-self approach to life as a spontaneous and natural way of living, in which the common, opposite meanings attached to binary terminologies, can be completely erased. Buddhism, from its beginning more than 3,000 years ago, argues in favor of the no-self within the mind–body as attachment.

During my doctoral fieldwork, a cognizance germinated within me that I could actually be “a self with multiple selves.” When I faced adolescent students full of zest and pretense, at least in verbal expression, their authentic voices naturally allowed my no-self to emerge and interview dialogue frequently reached beyond the surface to deep layers of meaning. By contrast, although all teacher–participants were friendly, cooperative, and vocal, they showed a constant adult awareness of the tape-recorder and, therefore, guarded their stories. I was equally aware of my role and responsibility in the co-construction of their stories and the liabilities of “our” words that prompted me to adjust my dual identity regularly—taking into

consideration their perspectives and keeping in mind my own mission. Finally, when confronting formal and less flexible school administrators, officially reluctant to listen to alternatives and my curious inquiry, I was most grateful for a relative-self that helped me become situated, diplomatic, and rule-abiding, simultaneously exempting me from negative emotions that could have savaged my own conviction of the worthiness of my study.

The multiplicity of my identity became apparent, especially when my outsider and insider identities collided, merged, or tangled into a big mess in the field. The self I brought into the field when interacting with my research participants was always a work in progress. Unfixed and often challenging, that self is also characterized by flexibility and the potential to be considered a becoming self.



Figure 15: Hollow Honorarium

Reflexivity is indispensable because the research instrument of qualitative inquiry is people, and the researcher is a “someone” with hopes and fears, desires and disillusion, likes and dislikes, also a “someone” with a past, a present, and a future; so are the research participants and the readers of research. Scrutinizing “how we know what we know” is a vital methodological tool. Deviating from self-reflection that has spanned phenomenology,

hermeneutics, and interpretative and other naturalistic studies, reflexivity is situated within this interminable academic tradition whose roots can be traced from the Enlightenment to Dewey (Pillow, 2003). Self-reflection cultivates awareness and sensitivity toward uncovering buried personal preconceptions and value systems that may appear as bias and prejudice inscribed on the research. In particular, reflexivity takes into special consideration the dialectic and interactive relationship of human factors in the research and writing process because “to be reflective does not demand an ‘other’; whereas to be reflexive demands both an other and some self-conscious awareness of the process of self-scrutiny” (Chiseri-Strater, 1996, p. 130).



Figure 16: Everyday Food for Thought 3

My displaced consciousness eschewed such clarity and resistance; instead I lived in an imaginary coat padded with hypocrisy as I fell deeper into the abyss—I was recently tenured and promoted to associate faculty member of the institution. My pretentious performance of power and strength in public is beyond redemption. Recognizing axiomatic beliefs and critically examining them are difficult. Accepting “mistakes” and making immediate corrections or changes for improvements are much easier in theory than in real life. Almost

equivalent to soul-searching, diversity training if practiced well means surrendering myths, roots, values, and axioms. As such, education can be painful. I have grown accustomed to candy-coated teaching and instruction but must now

1. Understand there is no longer a single universal truth, neither from the West nor East (especially during airline ticket sales when I found I could take the New York route over the Atlantic versus the San Francisco route over the Pacific to reach home);
2. Accept that social and economic progress may not be better than differentiation in humanity (especially because my university just announced that every 50 international students we welcome to campus bring in at least a million dollars in revenue); and
3. Realize it is necessary to live with the irregularity of life instead of a neat and pretty scenario of “living together happily ever after” as in fairy tales (especially when my ethnicity becomes a highly valued asset by the recruitment unit planning for its next China “Vision” enterprise).

Volition from My Asianity Matters

Giving instructions in front of a sea of Whiteness amidst an occasional spot of color in the U.S. higher education setting, my Asianity stands out, distinctive, forcing me to recognize the immediate political message of my presence. Theoretically, I believe that diversity training without helping students to understand the complicated nexus of sociocultural ramifications beneath the negation of people of color in context is problematic. Such orientation toward inclusion and theories of diversity often perpetuates stereotypes of people of color in the mass media, sports, and entertainment industry (popular culture). Neatness and implicitly should be avoided. Leveling of diversity leads us to “labeling,” “stickerizing,” and “bumperizing” (compressing and trivializing all complicated issues into a catchy phrase to fit onto a label, a tiny sticker, or a car bumper). Pigmentation of the art curriculum is unworkable; nor can I accept the notion of “adding artists of color into any art curriculum to create a politically correct art history.” I have often contemplated how I have benefited as a person of color, for example, in my hiring and employment; yet affirmative action in higher education is contestable.



Figure 17: Homage to the Living Years

Why I Recommend Visual Narrative?

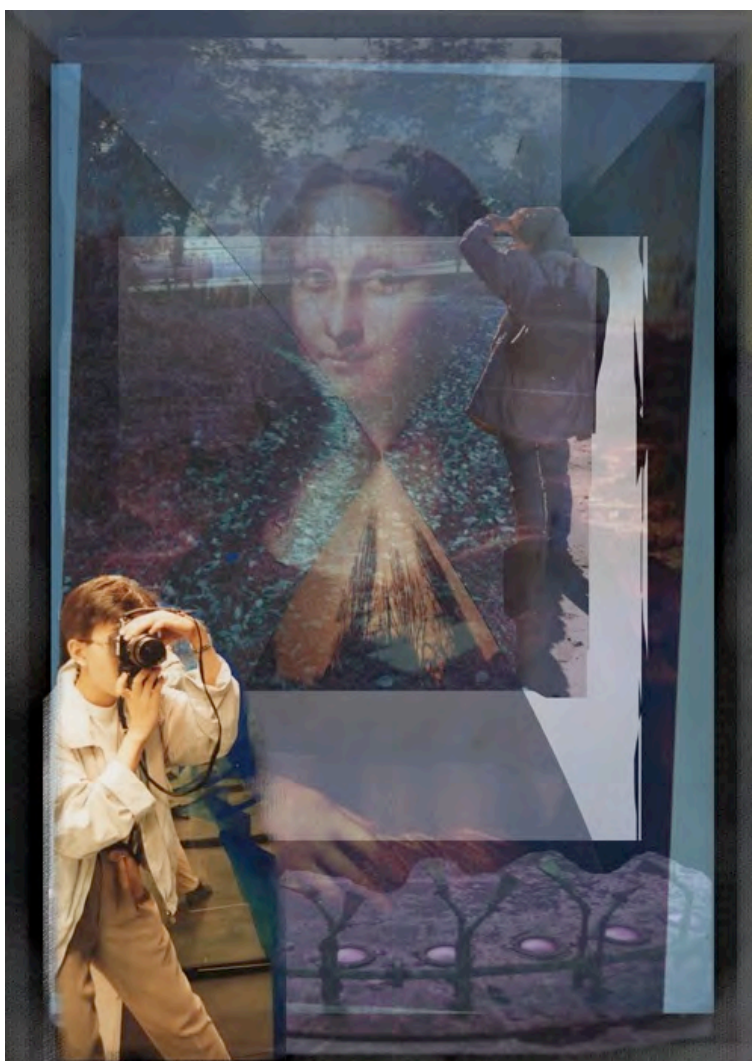
I have grown highly suspicious of people who advocate for something; even the most persuasive propaganda art fails to convince me. I am also not very ambitious, hence, do not intend to advocate for visual narrative as another grand trend in educational inquiry. I believe, however, that this type of work can change the culture and society we inherited by serving as a means to envision the world in which we want to live.

Using visual images together with text to tell stories essentially involves playfulness—pushing against the norm and challenging the established standard so as to create an exit (both in the imagination and in real life)—despite decades of schooling that have domesticated me with a near intuitive sense of cautiousness and conservatism. Such transformation at play—of mental experimentations into concrete stylistic manifestations—helps keep the human spirit alive. It is perhaps also a strategy to deal with the *crisis of psyche* for a scholar–musician like

Morris (2009), who was forced to play safe in developing scholarship as a junior faculty member, hence gave up playing both the musical instruments and losing an intact playfulness.

This photcollage-cum-essay allows numerous ways to play out the relationship between text and images with postmodern principles of art (Gude, 2004). When text is superimposed upon image—I experimented with layering using different font type and font size by paying special

attention to the space of the layering to from the speak out. simply placed images, one frame—I symbolic pushing against the adjustment of permits the over the other to deeper within the form. When from an carefully sequencing of visuals to tempo of the whole, an episode suddenness



the negative multiple text allow images background to When text is adjacent to especially within independent considered the meaning of text squashed images edge. Such minor the composition dominance of one so as to give rise meanings from representational text is absent image—I monitored the these individual modulate the stories as a especially when occurs with a too difficult to

capture adequately and transmit smoothly in words. I tested images like **Figure 18**: Visuals within Text wrapped around text and pondered what sort of meaning this would convey to the readers. I also tried out letting an image continue and finish up the meaning of the text (as shown in the last figure). In this way, the virtual space between text and images actually offers me, the researcher, immense possibilities to engender understanding and the reader/audience numerous opportunities to understand in multiple ways.

I did not submit this manuscript to a printed publication because I am well aware that the distribution of visual narrative will benefit from advanced technology, such as high-speed Internet; I capitalize on its advantages to disseminate my 20 visuals and stories. Integrating various software programs (Photoshop, PowerPoint, and Word), ubiquitous in the field of art education, to produce this photocollage-cum-essay, I hope such a mode of representation may open up more channels for others' reception of knowledge and perhaps stimulate a sense of curiosity and motivate readers also to examine the nexus of ideologies embedded in the axioms underlying their everyday decisions and actions.

Visual narrative authorizes the researcher to act upon the carnal aspect of vision to counter discourse and form a resistance to the monopoly of text-based knowledge. Against the mainstream paradigm, however, the likelihood that it will take center stage in educational inquiry is bleak; nevertheless, such work and also working in such a way have become imperative and endearing to me in the following ways:

Emotionally, the visuals served as comforting cushions for the insecurity I felt about the quality of my early writing output as a junior faculty member, who needed to publish or perish. Convinced that a picture is worth a thousand words and adding them to my ritualistic word-counting custom, I overcame the self-blame associated with low productivity and let go of insufficient-page phobia, channeling enough work to meet publication demands.

Psychologically, the visuals served as a preventive prescription against the "perfect-writing" syndrome that plagues so many beginning scholars. Consuming words accompanied by visuals, I cured myself of unrealistic expectations and recovered gradually from self-doubt, procrastination, and perfectionism. Redirecting my narratives from inept wordiness to ostentatious visual representation, I easily amputated redundancies in stories that typically evolved into voluminous texts impossible for the ego to edit or let go.

Bodily, engagement in two different representational forms entails complex and completely different actions, movements, and carnal concentrations; all simultaneously activate both the right and left sides of the brain. Mental images served as valves in my head, permitting the interchange of mind activities and effectively mediated my overindulgence in analytical and judgmental thoughts about words. I could also maintain a healthier and balanced academic life style, free from a compulsive desk-bound posture and laptop-cradling habit because a sketchbook pad or a camera in my hand requires more action-packed exercise.



Figure 19: Join Me

A “work” is what an “author” produces, and a “text” is what a “writer” produces. For an author, “to write” is an intransitive verb—“he [or she] is [someone] who radically absorbs the world’s *why in a how to write*.” For a writer, “to write” is a transitive verb—“he [or she] writes something . . . (to give evidence, to explain, to instruct) . . . Language supports a *praxis*; it does not constitute one.” (Barthes, as cited in Geertz, 1988, pp. 18–19)

Because I was first and foremost a creative artist before any promotion in status and upsurge in authority, I knew only one means to resolve the problems and issues in my life. Perhaps therein lies my contribution—to raise attention to the anomaly of the disappearing inner reality and attest to what Walter Benjamin (1968/1986) called nostalgia, a most powerful reason to create art in the age of mechanical reproduction. By transforming my betwixt-and-between presence into a unique asset in my inquiry and work, I substantiate my frequent use of the “little flying fish” as self-metaphor. Herein I refer to Margaret Mead’s famous analogy: If we are all fishes, human beings will be the last to discover water, that is, the culture

surrounding us. For me, the “little flying fish” despite its insignificant size, will be among the first creatures to discover the presence of culture in the endless sea of mundanity.

Coda

In conclusion, my juggled roles, intentions, and mutable responsibilities were intense as was my adjustment to ad hoc events and situations endlessly arising everyday, no fixed matrix in place for a single identity to cling to. Nothing is static and ready for subscription; neither is there a singular style of communication that could be microwavable and ready to serve instantaneously during daily interaction. Although with my background closely shaped by Anglo American academia over the years, I still experience an unshakable sense of being caught in the betwixt-and-between. What more can millions of transnational workers/citizens (legal or not) live through daily? Inspired by Said’s memoir (2000), I therefore declare (on a humbler scale) that



Figure 20: Empowering by Out-of-Placeness

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About the Author

Koon Hwee Kan is associate professor at Kent State University School of Art. Koon received her doctoral degree from the University of Illinois at Champaign–Urbana. Her doctoral research, entitled “A Story Told Visually: The Singapore Secondary School Art Style,” was co-winner of the 2006 Dissertation Award from the American Educational Researcher Association, Arts and Learning Special Interest Group. She has published in *Art Education*, *Arts and Learning Journal*, *Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education*, and *Visual Arts Research*. Her current research interests include hybridity of contemporary school art, adolescent artistic schooling experience, and qualitative methodology, especially visual narrative inquiry.

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