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Through performative and participatory works, I situate myself in everyday life scenes, unfamiliar geographic locations, or in interactions with other people. My works challenge efficiencies in the mundane by being physically tiring, time consuming, absurd, obscure, unpredictable, and impractical. I use my body and often neutral and low-key bodily movements as tools to reveal alternative, unfamiliar possibilities. The works explore unproductivity's richness, aliveness, and poetry

.FINGERS, PELVIS, AND EVERYTHING WE DO NOT KNOW

by

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Through performative and participatory works, I situate myself in everyday life scenes, unfamiliar geographic locations, or in interactions with other people. These works are often composed of enduring, repetitive physical actions that challenge normalcy, such as walking 72 miles in the suburbs in the San Francisco Bay area, dragging a five-foot long boat for 2.5 miles for a routine grocery shopping trip, folding origami to retell another origami story in a circular subway line in Beijing, or asking people to assign me 15-second tasks through an online portal.

These performances and interactions reinvestigate the perception of the mundane. Often, the attitude towards the mundane is being fast and efficient through means of technology (cars, trains, buses, and subways): between home and grocery store, between town A, town B, town C..., between work and home. Here is the friction of productivity. Here is the boredom. It should be made more efficient.

My works challenge this standardized and constrained mindset. They are often the opposite of efficiency: they are physically tiring, time consuming, absurd, obscure, unpredictable, and impractical. I use my body and often neutral and low-key bodily movements as tools to reveal alternative, unfamiliar possibilities. The works explore unproductivity's richness, aliveness, and poetry.

## CHAPTER II

### GESTURES ON THE WAY

In June 2014 I re-visited Beijing, two years after my previous visit. I immediately noticed the ever-increasing pressure in everyday life: more crowded, the air pollution was much more present, more cars, more dusty, five more subway lines, more buildings, less spaces, passengers were in a greater rush, etc. The expansion of the city didn't seem to be a well-planned development, but rather an uncontrollable obligation.

During the visit, I took the subway line 10 to see a friend. The train was half empty as it departed from the center of the city for more than 20 minutes. The extra space in the train allowed me to notice two ladies sitting opposite my seat, about ten feet away. Weirdly, they were folding origami boxes using real estate advertisements, which were easy to find on the floor of subway trains. They had stacks of at least 30 pieces of the same advertisements, obviously collected from previous subway trips. They folded one box after another and then put the boxes in their purses. You could tell they had a plan. They dedicated their one-hour commuting time in the subway especially to this folding. I couldn't resist my curiosity and went to talk to them. One lady ended up teaching me how to fold the box. "There are a lot of these real-estate advertisements on the subway trains. They are good-quality paper." When I took off, they were still folding the boxes.

This encounter stuck with me. In the midst of the craziness in Beijing, these two domestic immigrants (easily recognized by their dresses and accents) took a very light approach to high-pressure urban life. They probably commute 1.5 to 2 hours each

way to work in the city every day. They probably would never be able to afford the condo, which costs about 1.5 million yuan in Beijing's housing market, depicted on the advertisement they were using. They didn't play with smart phones like everyone else did. They folded origami boxes. They recycled the "good quality" papers they had found on the train. They used these boxes to put food rubbish in when eating meals at home. "Like fish bones, rib bones, they worked well," as she had told me.

I was compelled to tell this small story by repeating the gesture of origami folding in another subway trip the second day. I chose a circular subway line, subway line 2. I wanted to add a layer to the circular subway trip through an unnecessary gesture, as if this gesture drew a circle on top of the experience of a normal subway trip, a parallel layer that didn't belong to the world in that train. It became more complex as I encountered an unexpected circumstance: not until I got to the train station and was asked to show my ID did I remember that anti-terrorism and anti-corruption measures were harsh at the time. It was a natural reaction to hide the camera. Running into the kids who held the origami crane folded from the same advertisement was pure coincidence.

Ai Weiwei, born in 1957, is a Chinese contemporary artist and activist. His work entails intensive investigations, and criticizes the Chinese government's centralized governance, corruption, cover-ups, its combination of legislation, justice, and administration, and its adverse effects on citizens' lives (Ai). For example, in *One Recluse – Yangjia Case*, Ai traced the motivations and questionable justice procedures behind a murder case in June 2008, where Yangjia "carried a knife, a hammer, a gas mask, pepper spray, gloves and Molotov cocktails to the Zhabei Public Security Branch Bureau and killed six police officers, injuring another police officer and a guard." A month

before these murders, Yangjia was stopped by Zhabei Public Security Branch Bureau for ID inspection but he refused to comply. He was taken into the office and beaten. The news illustrated: “As revenge, Yangjia conducted the crime.” (Yangjia) In the end, Yangjia was sentenced to death for his crime, but many questionable details remained unexplained. Ai made a documentary to reveal what the news didn’t cover. He interviewed almost all people that had involved either with the case or with Yangjia in his daily life: his dad, his lawyers, his landlord, neighbors, the police officer who was originally in conflict with him, his aunt, and his mother, etc. He also counseled with a lawyer and visited the Zhabei Public Security Branch Bureau and the Courthouse multiple times. Therefore, another story was unfolded: Yangjia was beaten in a room that didn’t have a camera. Yangjia sued them later and demanded public apology multiple times but failed. During the six months of Yangjia’s trial, the important witness, Yanjia’s mother, disappeared (she was later found held within an unknown police office in Beijing’s suburb), his lawyers were hired by the government, the supposedly-public trials turned out to be private trials that the public audience had no access to, etc (Yangjia).

Ai’s works reevaluate and expose the political truths that very few do. He often uses the Internet to intentionally attract international attention as one of his strategies. His works are much like a journalist, but he benefits from political independence as an artist, which is also important to his practice.

*Origami* takes a very different approach than most of Ai’s works. It’s much smaller in scale, involves much less time and fewer people, is much quieter, much less political, much more mundane, much less influential, much less exposed. It was a simple small retold story loyal to the very moment it had happened. It asks another question:

what's the freedom, as small as it is, that we can create right here, right now, as a society is transforming?

A gesture interwoven with the mundane was also the thread that connects to another work, *Grocery Shopping*, where I dragged an awkward-sized boat for a routine grocery shopping trip. I had made the boat myself about ten months ago. It wasn't doing much until a 4-inch snow in Greensboro, North Carolina, on Feb. 28<sup>th</sup> paralyzed the traffic in town and I discovered I had run out of food. Luckily I had the boat, so I built a harness and planned to drag it for grocery shopping. To my surprise, the snow melted the second day (it's North Carolina!), but I wanted to tell a real-life story as a fantasy, a tale of a pseudo-boat journey for groceries.

The closest grocery store to me was Harris Teeter that was about 2.5 miles away from my apartment. I had a friend of mine video tape the trip. We walked for about 1 hour 15 minutes for each way (a normal drive is 7 minutes). We were exhausted on the way back. I lost interest in talking with him. I forgot the fact that I was dragging a boat with groceries. I was too tired to think. My body was simply repeating what I had been doing. We had a little trouble when it was in the store. One staff tapped on my friend's shoulder and indicated the camera was not allowed. We still had some secretly acquired short footage.

Both *Origami* and *Grocery Shopping* are essentially storytelling. I was telling the stories of everyday life encounters using gestures that generated unexpected outcomes.

## CHAPTER III

### WALKING AS CARVING ON THE EARTH

“Psychogeography is the fact that you have an opinion about a space the moment you step into it. This has as much to do with the space as with our hardwired instincts to determine if it is safe,” says Wilfried Hou Je Bek. *Graphy* comes from the Greek *graphein* (to write), a decidedly polysemic word: if geographers “carve,” “draw,” or “write” the earth (*geos*), what about psychogeographers? The Latin prefix *psyche* (breath) adds a zest of soul to the mix, linking earth, mind and hand. Psychogeographic writing is an alternative way of reading the city.

- O'Rourke, 2012, Page 6

In the winter of 2013, I flew from Greensboro, North Carolina to the San Francisco Bay area, a place I had never been before. I was curious: what would happen if I walked for twenty-one days, all day, every day, in this foreign place?

I left the city of San Francisco and started my long walk. The original plan was to walk around the entire Bay counter-clockwise in two weeks. I estimated the distance to be about 210 miles, but I did not finish. Instead, my route zigzagged from San Francisco to Milpitas, covering about 72 miles in five days. I had to change the plan due to a fatigued tendon.

I made *Walking, San Francisco Series* based upon this trip. The series is composed of three works: a booklet, *An Atlas of A Work of Art – A 21-Day Journey in the San Francisco Bay area*, a lithograph called *Can I Walk Ten Minutes with You?*, and a zinc plate print, *Go for A Walk*.

The whole journey was reflected in the printed booklet, *An Atlas of A Work of Art – A 21-Day Journey in the San Francisco Bay area*. I had recorded my thoughts and experiences in a notebook each day. These daily entries are matched by short

paragraphs selected from local newspapers published on those same days. The front and back covers of the booklet incorporate the net growth of all my body hair during my trip. I shaved all my body hair, except my eyebrows, on December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2013 and after returning to North Carolina on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2014. *An Atlas of A Work of Art – A 21-Day Journey in the San Francisco Bay area* was printed in a limited edition of 56, the number of copies determined by the total amount of body hair I collected.

It was very clear to me from the first letter I wrote down for this booklet that it was not a journal. Although it had nothing but my experiences and thoughts, it was not written for myself. I was always very clear that it was written for others. I set myself up in semi-unpredictable situations. I used myself in an experiment. I changed the logic of *my* normalcy. I was asking, if I gave myself to the place and experience, what would they give back to me?

During the walk, I had a one-inch-by-one-inch zinc plate on the bottom of each of my shoes to document my steps. I also attached two recorders, one on each shoe, to capture the resulting, as well as ambient, sounds. I lost the right-foot recorder on the last evening. I made a print using the one-inch-by-one-inch zinc plates after returning, resulting in *Go for A Walk*.

I also made an experimental interactive work, *Can I Walk Ten Minutes with You?*, near Union Square at downtown San Francisco on December 22<sup>nd</sup>. I approached strangers one after another with the same question, “Can I walk ten minutes with you?” I marked routes that I had walked with the participant(s) on one map. Look at the city of San Francisco from a bird’s-eye view, and consider each pedestrian is carving a line on the earth as they walk: how to reveal part of these lines without interrupting them?

This work was informed and inspired by *The Railway from Lhasa to Katmandu*, created by Chinese contemporary artist, Zhijie Qiu, born in 1969. Qiu walked from Lhasa, Tibet to Katmandu, with a pair of foot shackles 33 inches in length. The trip was about 600 miles and it took Qiu 8 months from October 2006 to June 2007. Qiu collected metal utensils and ornaments from locals along his walk through exchange, purchase, scavenging, or gift. After his return to Beijing, Qiu melted down the collection and cast them into four 33-inch rails. Also, Qiu collaborated with a Thangka artist and finished six Thangka, a traditional art form in Tibet, to depict a history related to the British Empire's invasion of Lhasa in 1904: Nain Singh, an Indian spy explorer, trained by British intelligence especially for the mapping of the road, walked from Katmandu, Nepal to Lhasa, Tibet in 1865 (Qiu went the opposite direction.) Singh obtained geographic measurements about Tibet that contributed tremendously to the British Empire's invasion (Qiu).

Qiu revisited history through an intensive, enduring corporeal experience, which gave another history back to him and the audience. His way of giving himself to a place and history had deeply moved and inspired me. He insisted on making physical works from an art experience, as he had done in *The Railway from Lhasa to Katmandu*. The experience itself cannot be fully communicated, and it shouldn't be fully communicated. Art derived from experiences, though, has its own regime and vocabulary. He could have just walked the trip and called it a performance artwork with documentation photos, but he didn't. *Walking, San Francisco Series* was my experimental attempt to deliver a series of artworks on the genuine confrontation of my experience of putting myself in a foreign place with challenging plans (Qiu).

## CHAPTER IV

### A PARTICIPATORY GAME WEAVING THROUGH ROUTINE

*15 Seconds* was a question I asked related to the negotiation of control. I made a website interface called “15 Seconds.” On the home page it asked people to assign me tasks that I could accomplish within 15 seconds. The tasks had to take place in the month of September of 2014, Sunday to Friday, from 9am to 2pm. Each person could choose a time and assign me at most two tasks. I documented all the tasks, made 15-second long videos, and put them on another webpage on the same website. I received 49 tasks in total. The website itself is the work.

From an initial point, *15 Seconds* asked questions about how much power I would be willing to give to others, and under what framework I could reach an agreement to be the actions imagined in strangers’ minds. The framework I set to play this interactive game includes: 1. the length of the tasks, 15 seconds. It’s a short period of time, it keeps the tasks simple and of a single type. 2. I was open six days of the week, from Sunday to Friday, each day for five hours, and the length of the whole project was one month. This establishes a sense of routine, a mundane rhythm of everyday life. I was a full-time graduate student and my schedule was rather full, and the tasks wove through my days randomly. I had to plan ahead and well, although sometimes I failed. It was a constant frustration that I had to negotiate the locations and the time of the tasks while I was in the middle of the day fulfilling other obligations. 3. a list of restrictions displayed on the website: tasks cannot be illegal, related to nudity, urination, bowel movement, sex, physically, mentally, and emotionally harmful to me or to others,

put mein danger (ex. drive backwards on the road), offend privacy, either mine or others (ex. read a diary loudly in a coffee house), or related to money (ex. buy you a lawn-mower). These were the bottom lines which made the most sense to me. 4. Each person can assign up to two tasks and I only accept at most 10 tasks a day. 5. I reserve the right to deny the tasks. 6. The participants can be anonymous.

I wanted it safe for me, physically, emotionally, and ethically. I didn't want to tempt people to be evil. Again, my intention was to question and to interrupt the routines of everyday life.

As the project proceeded, I gradually realized that the control from the participants I envisioned at the beginning wasn't as strong as I expected. I had a lot of room to manipulate people's assignments. For example, I was assigned a task: "09/11 Thu. 4:00pm: Yell 'I'm a real artist!' as loud as you can for three times." I could decide the location of the task to fulfill my own intention. I went in front of a Wells Fargo ATM machine, yelled "I'm a real artist!" and pushed on a button on the machine as if I was to withdraw cash. In this way, I played an ironic joke with the task, which might be very different than the participant's expectation.

In future projects, if my goal is to deliver more direct and strong control, I would choose to do a live performance, where people can assign me tasks in person in a public space.

This project is similar in character to Roman Signer's "action sculptures," which incorporate everyday objects like tables, containers, hats, bicycles, umbrellas, etc. He is also a big fan of fireworks. The performances he conducts usually take very accurate engineering for their set-up, but the performances themselves are often as short as just

a few seconds. The video documentations are one to two minutes. They are Dadaistic, absurd, laugh-to-tear humorous, while thoughtful and serious (Roman).

Signer's works are absurd small events composed of everyday objects. He is usually part of the events, in which he doesn't show his dictation of the events. Every event, from the cause to the result, was previously designed. *15 Seconds* was more simultaneous. It grew together with the participation. Most Signer's events were singular and abnormal, while *15 Seconds* was intertwined with my everyday life. Through my work, I hope to honor humble spaces and materials through the documentation and creation of work.

CHAPTER V  
CONCLUSION

Each work has a different set of restrictions that I worked with. Each was my honest attempt to explore a new range of possibilities arising from simple, short, overlooked mundane activities or encounters. I honor labor. I honor the body. Through a series of physical engagements, often mindless, surprises kept emerging. New perceptions were made. Every next encounter is a mystery in which I hope to create a safe place for poems without words and to discover a new species of freedom.

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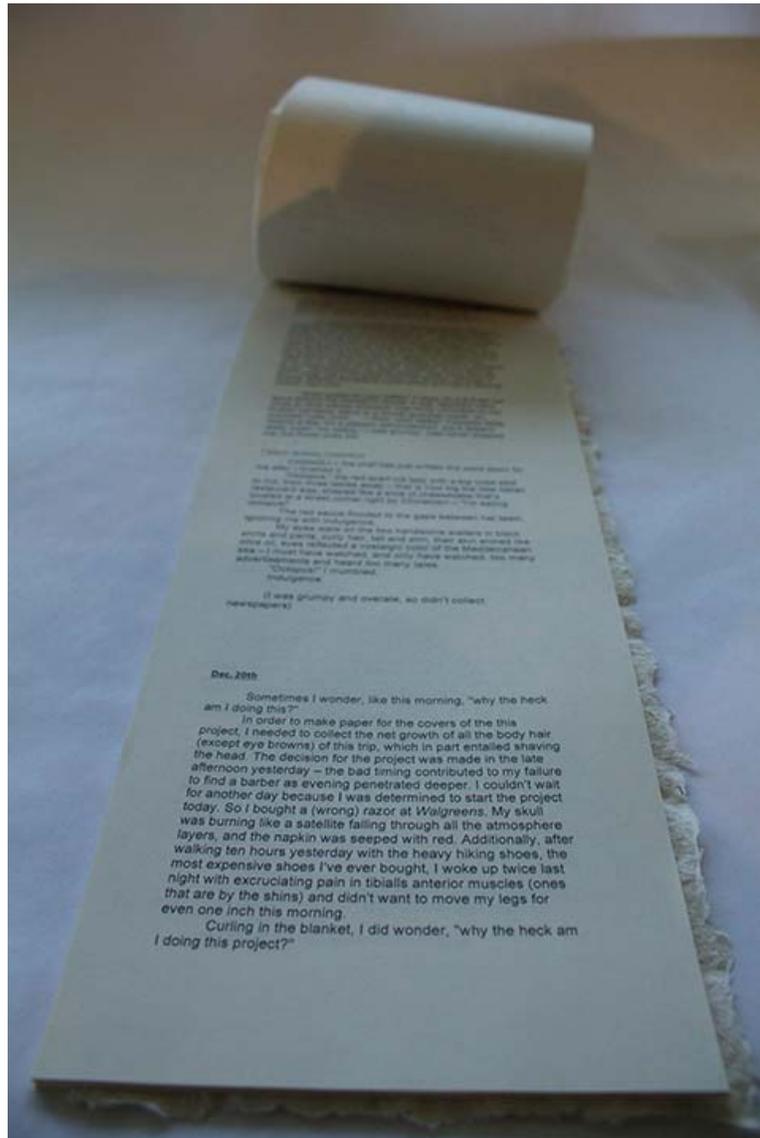
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## CATALOGUE OF IMAGES

1. *Origami*, video (picture frame), 2014.
2. *An Atlas of A Work of Art – A 21-Day Journey in the San Francisco Bay area*, self-published book, 2014.
3. *An Atlas of A Work of Art – A 21-Day Journey in the San Francisco Bay area*, self-published book, 2014.
4. *Can I Walk Ten Minutes with You?* Lithography prints, 2014.
5. *Can I Walk Ten Minutes with You?* Lithography prints, 2014.



1. *Origami*, video (picture frame), 2014.



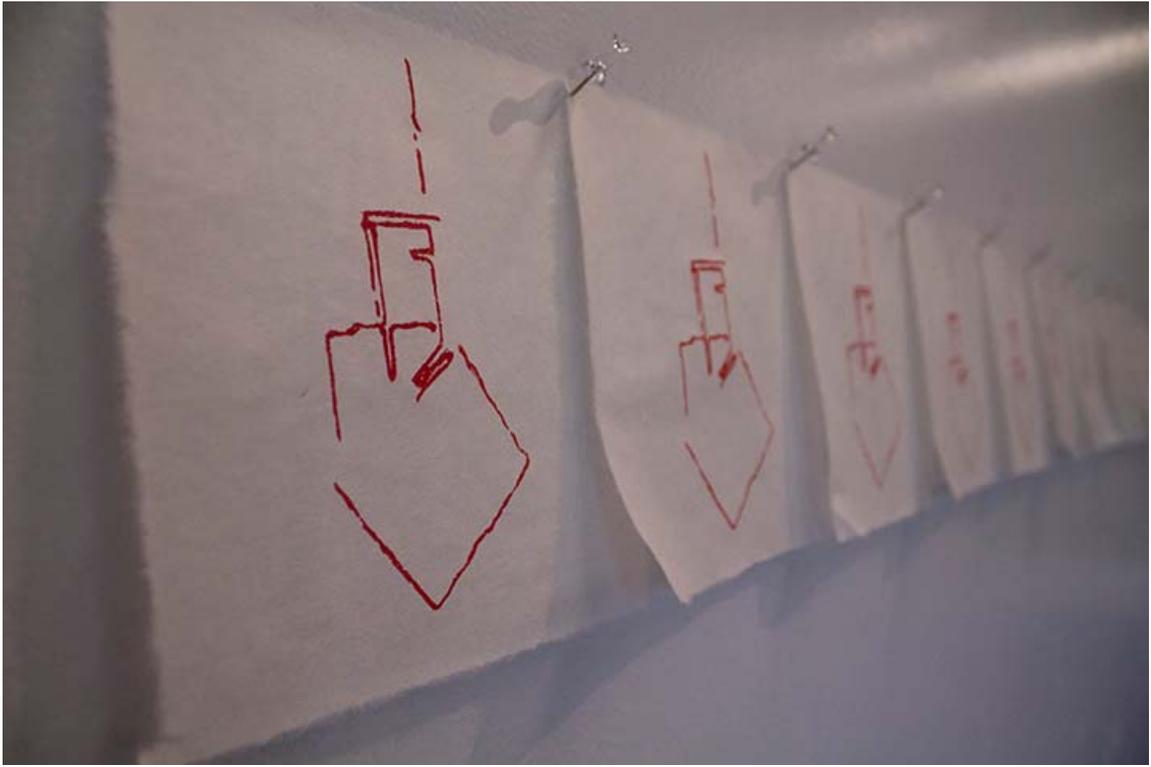
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3. *An Atlas of A Work of Art – A 21-Day Journey in the San Francisco Bay area*, self-published book, 2014.



4. *Can I Walk Ten Minutes with You?* Lithography prints, 2014



5. *Can I Walk Ten Minutes with You?* Lithography prints, 2014.