

London Metropolitan University

**The Mind of the Everyday in Contemporary
Fine Art and Zen Buddhist Practice**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement of London
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THESIS CONTAINS

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PREFACE

The observation of Eastern thinking where it suggests that physical entities are impermanent is part of the original motivation for me to take on this research. I consider however, that human knowledge is likely to be perdurable and able to be passed on. I hope therefore that this research will not only advance my knowledge and understanding to a higher level but that it may also make a contribution to that wider human knowledge.

This research grows from my art practice and my Buddhist background. People make art for various reasons, I continue to make art because art transformed my life. It changed me from a 'squarish' personality to a much more rounded one. I continue to roll and become rounder and rounder. Art brings discovery and realization to my life in different stages throughout the process that is, in my opinion, comparable to the ideas of 'sudden awareness' and 'inner development' in Zen Buddhism practice. It crystallized itself into this academic research when I was finalizing my work for my MA studies. I gained valuable knowledge through

art practice over the years, and now I would like to shed some light and hope to contribute something to the system that brought me here.

In 2003, I briefly mentioned my interest about investigating the parallel between art and Zen practice to Mr. Ian Robertson, my 2nd supervisor, who gave me great support and recommended me to work with Dr. Mike King (my former director of studies) to refine my thoughts and proposal. Dr. King has experience in the study of art and Eastern spiritual practice, and we came to a mutual agreement that some aspects of my work are parallel with Zen Buddhism practice of the everyday. I then carried out an inclusive domain survey when drafting the proposal using 'Concepts of the Everyday in Art Practice and their relationship to a Spiritual Practice of the Everyday' as an initial research title. It was then refined to the current one as the research developed.

The Mind of the Everyday in Contemporary Fine Art and Zen

Buddhist Practice

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement of London Metropolitan

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Buddhism, comparative study

Abstract:

Since the beginning of the 20th century, contemporary art has been saturated with references to the everyday and there are a mass of available views addressing the subject by profound social thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau and Agnes Heller. Towards the end of the 20th century and at the beginning of the new

millennium, scholars and writers such as Helen Westgeest, Alexandra Munroe, Arthur C. Danto, Jacquelynn Baas and Mary Jane Jacob began researching the relationship between Western art and Zen. Among these views, an Eastern perspective is lacking, particularly in relation to Zen Buddhist practice of the everyday. The aim of this research is to make a comparative study of the mind of the everyday in contemporary fine art and Zen Buddhist practice, including in art-making from the beginning of the 20th century to recent contemporary fine art practice and understanding, from the West and the East, as represented within, and integral to, my art practice.

This research emerged from my personal experience and discoveries as an artist working from a Buddhist background. It adopts reflective qualitative research methods and theory grounded in practice and observed experiences. The core of the research is my studio practice with the theoretical framework operating in the intersection of personal and social perspectives. I situated this enquiry within my own cultural background, the context of Zen Buddhism and its teachings. It developed an enhanced understanding of the everyday in contemporary fine art and Zen Buddhist practice in new and original ways, through bringing forward and integrating the physical and theoretical components of my studio practice.

The everyday in my studio practice refers to things we encounter day-in and day-out that we are unlikely to give a second thought, like background noise, we hear it but hardly pay any attention to it. The thesis explored the understanding of Beginner's Mind, the spirit of attentiveness, the idea of the circle, art and meditation, it-is-ness, the relativity of things, "nothingness" and the entanglement of art and life as they revolve around my studio practice, all of which have a connection with Zen Buddhist practice of the everyday.

This research serves as both territory expansion and to provide new sources for the 'art world' and Zen Buddhists, offering a more balanced understanding of the concepts of the everyday in contemporary fine art and Zen Buddhist practice. Extended study may also be made in connection with psychoanalysis, and the cultural significance of food, cooking and eating in the Far East.

CONTENTS - *summary*

Introduction, 2

Chapter 1 Background, 28

Chapter 2 Interpretations of Zen Buddhism in Western Art, 64

Chapter 3 Contextualisation, 122

Chapter 4 Comparative Studies, 166

Chapter 5 Conclusion, 265

Documentation of the Exhibition, 285

Bibliography, 332

List of Images, 346

List of Images – *by title, artist and description*, 354

CONTENTS

Introduction, 2

Origins and Rational, 2

The Original Contribution of this Research, 5

Research Methodology, 12

i) Field Survey, 14

ii) Readings, 15

iii) Information Technology, 16

iv) Studio Practice and Process, 18

The Structure of this Thesis, 22

Chapter 1 Background, 28

1.1 The Everyday as Adopted in My Work, 28

1.2 The Everyday in Art Practice, 36

1.3 The Everyday in Zen Buddhism, 45

1.3.1 Basic Principles, 47

1.3.2 Buddhism and Everyday Life, 48

1.3.3 Mindfulness, 50

1.3.4 Now, 51

1.3.5 Suchness, 52

1.3.6 Interconnection, 53

1.3.7 Impermanence, 55

1.3.8 Middle Way, 55

1.3.9 Wabi-Sabi, 56

1.3.10 Meditation, 57

1.4 Chapter Conclusion, 59

Chapter 2 Interpretations of Zen Buddhism in Western Art, 64

**2.1 Concepts of the Everyday as Examined in
the World of Art, 65**

2.1.1 'The Art of the Everyday: the Quotidian in Postwar French
Culture', 66

2.1.2 'Every Day: 11th Biennale of Sydney', 67

2.1.3 'The Everyday: Documents of Contemporary Art', 69

2.2 The Arrival of Zen in the West, 71

2.2.1 Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, 74

2.2.2 Shunryu Suzuki, 76

2.2.3 Other Influential Thinkers, 79

i) Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, 79

ii) Thomas Merton, 80

iii) Chögyam Trungpa, 82

2.3 Zen's Influence on Western Contemporary Art World, 85

2.3.1 The Case of R. Mutt, 86

2.3.2 Artists Exploring Concepts of the Everyday, 89

i) John Cage, 90

ii) Alan Kaprow, 93

iii) Robert Rauschenberg, 94

iv) Jasper Johns, 97

v) Joseph Beuys, 101

vi) Günther Uecker, 103

vii) Richard Long, 104

viii) Andy Goldsworthy, 106

2.3.3 Publications/Exhibitions Explore the Relationship between
Western Art and Zen, 108

i) 'Zen Buddhism and its Relation to Art', 108

ii) 'Zen in the Fifties: Interaction in Art between East and West', 110

iii) 'The Zen of Seeing: Seeing/Drawing as Meditation', 111

iv) 'Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art', 112

v) 'Smile of the Buddha: Eastern Philosophy and Western Art', 114

vi) 'The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989',
115

2.4 Chapter Conclusion, 117

Chapter 3 Contextualisation, 122

3.1 Cultural and Social Changes, 123

3.2 Personal Background and Encounter, 130

3.3 Aspects of Zen Buddhist Teaching, 136

3.4 Food, Cooking and Eating, 139

3.5 Poverty and Creativity, 142

3.6 Transformation of Reality, 145

3.7 My Studio Practice in Relation to Art Movements, 147

3.7.1 Western Art, 147

i) Kurt Schwitters, 147

ii) The Conceptual and Dematerialization, 149

iii) Arte Povera, 151

3.7.2 Eastern Art, 153

i) Gutai Art (Concrete Art), 153

ii) Mono-ha (The School of Things), 159

3.8 Chapter Conclusion, 162

Chapter 4 Comparative studies, 166

4.1 Beginner's Attitude, 167

4.2 In the Spirit of Attentiveness, 170

4.3 The Circle, 173

4.3.1 Assemblage of Used Disposable Chopsticks, 174

4.3.2 Assemblage of Ring-pulls, 179

4.3.3 Circumrotation, 181

4.3.4 Bǎo Yòu (Strange/Familiar), 187

4.4 Action, Repetition and Meditation, 191

4.4.1 6 Minute Performance of Smashing Bottles, 191

4.4.2 Every Corner of My Flat, 198

4.5 Seeing Things as they are, 204

4.5.1 By the River Thames at Windsor, 207

**4.5.2 A Single Leaf Trapped in Between Two Pieces of Paving Stone,
210**

4.6 Relativity of Things, 213

4.6.1 Cigarette Butts Formed Shadow, 213

4.6.2 Shredded Airliners Stuck on Aquarium, 217

4.6.3 Labeling Tags Attached to Clothing, 219

4.6.4 Stir, 222

4.6.5 Nice to Meet You, 227

4.7 Nothing Happens, 234

4.7.1 Condom Inflated with Helium, 234

4.7.2 Assemblage of Loose Bristles from the Brush that Painted the
Wall, 239

4.8 The Entanglement of Art and Life, 244

4.8.1 P&S Recipe Shop, 245

4.9 Chapter Conclusion, 260

Chapter 5 Conclusion, 265

5.1 Where was the Original Contribution? 265

5.1.1 Evaluating My Studio Practice, 267

i) On Beginner's Mind, 267

ii) On Mindfulness, 267

iii) On the Idea of the Circle, 268

iv) On Action, Repetition and Meditation, 269

v) On Seeing Things as they are, 269

vi) On Relativity of Things, 270

vii) On Nothingness, 270

viii) On Life and Art, 271

5.1.2 Evaluating from the Historical Context, 272

5.3 Outstanding Questions and Possible Future Work, 278

5.4 Ordinary Mind, 280

Documentation of the Exhibition, 285

Bibliography, 332

List of Images, 346

List of Images – *by work title, artist and description*, 354

INTRODUCTION

CONTENTS

Origins and Rational, 2

The Original Contribution of this Research, 5

Research Methodology, 12

i) Field Survey, 14

ii) Readings, 15

iii) Information Technology, 16

iv) Studio Practice and Process, 18

The Structure of this Thesis, 22

INTRODUCTION

Origins and Rational

Developed from my childhood, the language of found and discarded materiality in art is central to my studio practice. Rather than solely using found and discarded objects, with their inevitable connection to the tradition that can be traced back to the early work of Pablo Picasso, I expanded the territory to embrace more inclusive 'everyday objects' or 'everyday materials', a post Duchampian terminology for the 'readymade', which is less specific and more appropriate to the direction of my own art practice. Everyday things are both the products and the by-products of our needs and wants. They are the repercussion of the life we live. I saw the connection between the everyday objects and activities that make up the everyday as a whole. This was also the point where I began to show interest in revealing the characteristics of the objects I choose, as well as their relationships with people. I started to produce a body of work consisting of three-dimensional, photography, film, performance and interactive work

Introduction

with an audience, all of which explored objects and activities of everyday life. I situated this enquiry within my own cultural background, the context of Zen Buddhism and its teaching such as *Mindfulness*, *Suchness*, *Nothingness* and *Oneness*. This aspect of cross-cultural art practice is under acknowledged, and I seek to contribute to its deeper understanding and I evidence this knowledge through this research. My intention is to make a comparative study of the concepts of the everyday in art practice and Zen Buddhism, including art-making from the beginning of the 20th century to recent art-practice and understanding. This thesis explores Art and Zen Buddhism practices, from the West and the East, as represented within and integral to my art practice.

In the West, most academic commentary on the everyday is by sociologists; and is mainly theorised by social thinkers such as Henri LeFebvre (1901-1991), Michel de Certeau (1925-1986) and Agnes Heller (born 1929). These sociological studies mostly relate to Marxist theory and revolve around the theories of everyday life affected by socio-political systems and economic activities, rather than observing the nature of things such as the notion of interconnectivity and impermanence as suggested in the Buddhists' discourse of *Mindfulness*. Zen Buddhist ideas suggest that the everyday often went unnoticed due to our lack of attention to and our disregard of its content.

In contemporary art practice the theories of the everyday have been influenced by sociological focus rather than by an engagement with Zen Buddhism. There have been relatively few attempts to theorise a link between Eastern thinking and Western art on the subject of the everyday. Nevertheless a few scholars and writers such as Helen Westgeest, Alexandra Munroe, Arthur C. Danto, Tosi Lee, Yuriko Saito, Jacquelynn Baas and Mary Jane Jacob began to show an interest in the connection between Western art and Zen towards the end and the beginning of the new millennium. This research attempts to make an original contribution to this discourse of the everyday *from the point of view of an Eastern artist*, taking a fresh look at the subject through the prism of contemporary art and Zen practice. I will now seek to define my field of interest and enquiry through this research.

Following the publication of Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki's (1870-1966) '*Essays in Zen Buddhism*' in 1927¹, and especially since World War II, Zen Buddhism has had a major impact on the West including in the USA and Europe. Zen Buddhism has flourished and has been an important influence on the Western 'art world'.² Admittedly, Zen Buddhists' texts were not the sole reference for the Western artists.

¹ Christmas Humphreys, *Zen Comes West: the Present and Future of Zen Buddhism in Western Society* (UK: Curzon Press Ltd, 1977), 15.

² In the art world (that is to say in the commercial, public and academic fields of art practice, understanding and dissemination).

Ernest Francisco Fenollosa's collection of East Asian Buddhist art displayed in the new 1890 Asia Wing at the Museum of Fine Art, Boston and his two volumes publication *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art: an Outline History of East Asiatic Design* (1912) potentially "set forth the art-historical trajectory, prejudices, and taste for East Asian art in America for generation."³ By bringing forward and considering my own fine art practice as a body of work from which to make a comparative study, together with the support of my Buddhist background and research findings, I hope to make an original contribution to enrich the field of contemporary art and allow new complexities to arise within this aspect of the cross-culture study.

The Original Contribution of this Research

The fundamental basis of this research is to explore the potential relationship between defined aspects of the everyday in contemporary fine art practice and the practice of Zen Buddhism as integrated and understood from the perspective of an artist with a Buddhist background. I allow my studio practice to exchange dialogue with, and thereby to develop and enhance an understanding of Zen in new and original ways.

³ Alexandra Munroe, *the Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989* (US: Guggenheim Museum Publication, 2009), 28.

Correspondingly, my further research into Zen will inform and enrich my own fine art practice. I will also present evidences from art history and the work of other more recent and living artists to make a comparative study. The historical time frame of the investigation is from the beginning of the 20th century to the present time.

Arthur Waley, the author of *Zen Buddhism and its Relation to Art* gives a view on the relationship between art and Zen that provides an important affirmation for my research. He said:

“The connection between Zen and art is important, not only because of the inspiration which Zen gave to the artist, but also because through Zen was obtained a better understanding of the psychological conditions under which art is produced than has prevailed in any other civilization.”⁴

Everyday objects and materials were used in works of art dating from Pablo Picasso’s collage paintings and found object sculptures. Marcel Duchamp’s readymades built a platform for artists to explore the notion of the everyday and extend the boundaries of art to adopt more directly aspects of ‘real’ life. Rather than only using everyday objects in their work and presenting them in gallery spaces, they also used everyday

⁴ Arthur Waley, *Zen Buddhism and Its Relation to Art* (UK: Luzac & Company Ltd, 1959), 21-22.

situations to interact with the viewers in galleries and public places. Many later artists that took their inspiration from these origins also studied the doctrines of Zen Buddhism and integrated them with their works. The concepts of the everyday in some of the works by artists such as John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, Allan Kaprow and Richard Long were increasingly related to the spirit of Zen Buddhism in Post-Duchampian readymade and Post-modernism climate. From the Dadaists, and the Surrealists, to the Situationists and Fluxus artists, investigations into the meanings of the everyday in art have been ongoing. In the East, artists who were influenced by the Western art such as Mono-ha and Gutai art movements also merged art with Zen Buddhism teaching. However, left alone investigating the relationship between the everyday in art and Zen, researching on the everyday in art is still being seen as marginal. As Nikos Papastergiadis framed it so acutely:

“Despite repeated efforts to break the divide between popular culture and high art, the concept of the everyday has remained relatively untheorised within the contemporary discourse of art.”⁵

My research suggested that the art theories of the everyday were unevenly explored and mostly attuned to sociologists’ perspectives. They came from the texts of

⁵ Jonathan Watkins, *Every day: 11th Biennale of Sydney*, Ed. Jo Spark and Jonathan Watkins (Australia: The Biennale of Sydney Ltd, 1998), 23.

profound social thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre in his *Critique of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* and Agnes Heller's *Everyday Life*. For example, in 1997 there was an exhibition in New York called *The Art of the Everyday* that looked at the work of Postwar French artists interested in the minutia of the everyday. *The Art of the Everyday: the Quotidian in Postwar French Culture*, edited by Lynn Gumpert, was published in conjunction with the exhibition to examine the everyday from different angles. The book contains six essays but none of the six writers' offers an Easterner view point, Henri Lefebvre was considered as their key theorist on the everyday but his texts elaborated on a critique of consumer society in post-war France.

I departed on this research in December 2003 and started the literature survey soon after. I then discovered there was a group of art professionals in America organized into a consortium called 'Awake: Art, Buddhism and Dimension of Consciousness'. They were trying to explore the relationship between art and Buddhism, and used the materials gathered from the consortium to produce a book called *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art* published toward the end of 2004. They focus mainly on the desire to "elucidate the common ground between the creative mind, the perceived mind, and the meditative mind", and "revealing the threads of Buddhists influence that run

through the fabric of American contemporary culture”⁶. Their work generated a field of enquiry for me to extend their quest to enrich this area of study.

Helen Westgeest’s book *Zen in the Fifties: Interaction in Art between East and West* published in 1996, explores the relationship between art and Zen during the 50s and 60s. Her work traced the relationship between the two in that specific period from America and France before moving on to Germany. The majority of the works examined in her book are on painters that came to prominence during the 50s and 60s, she studies their interest in Zen Buddhism and Zen art and the way they transformed their works. This includes, for example, how Pierre Alechinsky corresponded with modern Japanese calligraphy and the parallel with *Shō* and *Sumi-e*⁷. Westgeest’s book reveals important evidences on the ‘interaction’ between East and West through Zen and Art. My research may be seen as a supplement to her research because it broadens the knowledge of the readers on the subject of the everyday in Zen and art, an area she did not covered in her book. Apart from that, her research was made now some 15 years ago and I consider there is a ground to update the works of contemporary artists and commentators.

⁶ Jacquelynn Baas and Mary Jane Jacob, ed., *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art* (US: University of California Press, 2004), 9.

⁷ Helen Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties: Interaction in Art between East and West* (Netherlands: Waanders Publishers, Zwolle. Cobra Museum Voor Moderne, Amstelveen, 1997), 113-114.

Toward the end of 2007, I discovered that ‘Every day’ was the theme for 11th Sydney Biennale in 1998, where the works of artists from around the world that have a connection with the everyday were presented. The biennale also published a compilation of five essays on the subject by some of the important writers in *Every Day: 11th Biennale of Sydney*, edited by Jonathan Watkins. Similar to Lynn Gumpert’s *The Art of the Everyday*, there was no comment on the relationship between the everyday in art and the everyday in Zen in their publication.

In 2008, *The Everyday: Documents of Contemporary Art* edited by Stephen Johnstone was published by the Whitechapel Gallery. This book is a comprehensive survey of the everyday in art since 1950s; it has a compilation of documents that offer diverse approaches and access to various perspectives defining the theme. One of the documents in the book is called ‘Equality Celebrates the Ordinary//1993’ by Sally Banes, it briefly mentioned that John Cage’s embracing of Zen Buddhism ‘led to a non-hierarchical, non-judgmental appreciation of dailiness and the commonplace’ in a sentence. She also mentioned that both John Cage and Erik Satie’s work ‘accord with Zen tenets of renunciation and the acceptance of the world-as-it-is.’⁸ Stephen Johnstone’s *The Everyday* is by far the most comprehensive book on the subject to

⁸ Stephen Johnstone, ed., *the Everyday* (UK: Whitechapel Venture Limited, 2008), 113-114.

date in my survey, however I failed to find a document that is related to the question addressed in this research.

Contemporary art is saturated with references to the everyday since the beginning of the 20th century. As Stephen Johnstone appropriately described in his book, the exploration of the everyday was “drawing on the vast reservoir of normally unnoticed, trivial and repetitive actions comprising the common ground of daily life, as well as finding impetus in the realms of the popular and the demotic, (...) Since the mid-1990s numerous international biennales, site-specific projects, historical overviews of modernism and themed group exhibitions have attested to the widespread appeal of the quotidian to curators and artists alike.”⁹

We may collect a mass of available views addressing questions on the subject of the everyday, however, among the views, an Eastern perspective is lacking particularly in relation to Zen Buddhists’ practice of the everyday. From the examples given above, I see my studio practice and research on the everyday posing a unique question which is beyond the scope of available work as scholars thus far who were mainly interested in the historical evidences and the work of the related artists when they explored the

⁹ Johnstone, *Everyday*, 12.

connection between art and Zen. For some, there are grounds for updating their sources as time progress. Therefore, this research serves as both territory expansion and to provide new sources - to contribute a fresh view on this un-prolific area to broaden the scope of contemporary art. It provides a fairer understanding concerning the relationship between the concepts of the everyday in art and Zen, in relation to both my own and other artists' studio practice, for those who already have an interest in this area of study and those to come who may discover their interest.

Research Methodology

This research emerged from my personal experience and discoveries as an artist working from a Buddhist background. The core of the research is my studio practice with the theoretical framework operating in the intersection of personal, cultural and social perspectives. The research adopts reflective qualitative research methods and methodology of grounded theory i.e. theory grounded in practice and observed experiences. Apart from carrying out a series of activities for my studio practice and studying a number of artists in order to make a comparison with Zen practice of the

everyday, I also participated in a Zen centre to observe Zen Buddhists' activities and to extend my knowledge in the area.

I have no interest in producing direct or indirect representations of types of Zen Buddhist art which may include images of Buddha, Buddhist hand gestures and the lotus flower. Nevertheless, one may find Buddhists' discourses such as those mentioned above merge with the theory and subject matters of my work. Evidences drawn from my own studio practice are central in supporting the discussion of this thesis. The support is strengthened by discussing other artists working in various art disciplines using the everyday that are similarly related to Zen Buddhists' practice.

Part of the research assesses the process of my art practice and my encounter with the everyday, it also delves into my family background, cultural upbringing and life journey when I was in Malaysia (my country of origin) as well as since I arrived in the UK in 1994. This is relevant because the contemplative thinking implicit to and embedded in my studio practice revolves around and makes reference to those experiences. For the most part, data are drawn from literatures to develop and underpin the discussion.

The thesis reveals the creative investigations occurring in the ‘everyday’, my studio practice and as presented in exhibition spaces, through searching the internet, readings and interacting with the public. These investigations pulling together the diverse threads and may be considered as “a form of research”¹⁰ in its own right. They provide greater clarity to the two main parts comprising the research, the physical art works and the theoretical component, become mutually informative, integrated and enhanced.

i) Field Survey

A crucial field survey was carried out in the beginning stage of this research, to gather evidence and identify what aspects in their research remain unexplored. Apart from examining my own practice and utilizing my own knowledge, the survey reached into books, journal articles, artists’ statements, publications from art exhibitions, and internet websites and blogs. The subject areas being analyzed cover sociological studies of the everyday, concepts of the everyday in art, Zen Buddhism discourses,

¹⁰ Graeme Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in the Visual Arts* (US: Sage Publication, Inc, 2005)

and the relationship between art and Zen. The retrieved information is evaluated to corroborate the originality of this research.

ii) Readings

The focus of my research is to elucidate the complex practice of the everyday in an Eastern context against the concepts of the everyday in Western art. I analyse and make a critical response to a mixture of established texts before making a comparison with my own thoughts to explore and reveal knowledge in this research.

The majority of the sources and data come from reading, analytical and critical responses to literary texts against subjective and personal cases are the main components of the research methods. I compared different theories and concepts, both in art and Zen Buddhism, against my own work and the comparative research question to evaluate the appropriateness of these materials offered. The analysis of literature texts includes both primary sources by the originator and secondary sources about the originator in dialogic and interpretative manner. The reading may be divided into five categories, they are on:

- 1) Art - reading which investigates art theory, art history, artists, art of the everyday, art and Zen Buddhism, and selected art movements and groups.
- 2) Zen Buddhism – reading which covers Zen history, Zen teachings, Zen masters, and different Zen traditions.
- 3) Zen Buddhism and Art – which examines texts that explore the relationship between Zen and Eastern art, and Western art and Zen.
- 4) Sociology – which the investigation focuses mainly on the study of the everyday.
- 5) Cross-cultural study – which covers writers and thinkers active in cross-cultural study such as Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), Thomas Merton (1915-1968), Arthur Waley (1889-1966) and Masao Abe (1915-2006).

iii) Information Technology

The internet is used to source the information required for the studio work as well as for this research in searching through online bookstores, libraries, and online journals (JSTOR, Wilson Web and Oxford Art Online).

The ‘Google Alerts’ tool was utilized to set up two subject alerts - ‘The Everyday in Art and Zen’ and ‘Zen Buddhism and Contemporary Art’, to monitor writings being published on websites and blogs. In other words, any writing published on the internet that is relevant to these two alerts, whereby ‘Google Alerts’ will send a link to my email automatically in a daily basis, to inform that such information is being published. Clicking on the link will connect to the website to retrieve the given information. Some of the useful websites and blogs discovered through the alert tool include:

- Everyday Foundation (www.everydayzen.org/index.php)
- Buddhist Education and Information Network (www.buddhanet.net)
- Shambhala (www.Shambhala.org)
- Rinzai-Obuku Zen (www.zen.rinnou.net)
- The Metropolitan Museum (www.metmuzeum.org)
- A Zen Life: The D. T. Suzuki Documentary Project (www.azenlife-film.org/top.htm)
- Suzuki Roshi 50: San Francisco Zen Center (<http://suzukiroshi.sfzc.org>)

In April 2007, I set up a blog which I titled *The Ground We Share* (www.thegroundweshare.blogspot.com). This was done in order to record and publish

my continuing projects and issues related to my research. This is an informative online space aimed at discussion, to share ideas and information about the work and the research. Apart from being updated regularly to provide the information about my work and activities, it also includes a bibliographic list and study link on Zen Buddhism.

iv) Studio Practice and Processes

My studio activities include the production of physical art works, collaboration with other artists and experimenting with audience interactive performative events. It explores two areas of the everyday simultaneously that is to say everyday objects and everyday situations (please refer to chapter 1, section 1.1 for detailed explanation) with their shared interactions and which are explored as equals. The art works may be made out of objects, situations, or both objects and situations in the same space. On one hand, very humble everyday objects are used to produce physical art works. On the other, in the case of everyday situations, familiar activities from everyday life are brought into gallery spaces to thereby engage with members of the viewing audience. In this category, everyday objects are also used or displayed in the same space in order

to facilitate audience interaction (please refer to chapter 4, section 4.8.1 *P&S Recipe Shop* project for details).

I consider collaborating with others as a way to acknowledge engage with the fact that we as individuals are part of the whole. Collaboration becomes a way to explore human relationship, making connection and bringing art into everyday situations. This was framed as ‘Relational Aesthetics’ in contemporary art practice by Nicholas Bourriaud in the 90’s, and its history can be traced way back to *Happenings* and *Fluxus*. This may be regarded as comparable with Zen Buddhist’s idea of ‘Sangha’ in their ‘Three Jewels’ discourse (please refer to chapter 4, section 4.6.5 for extended discussion). Collaboration activities have the potential for new possibilities of art practice to emerge, they helped to develop this research and extend my studio practice into new territory. Besides initiating self-curated projects, every possible opportunity to take part in group exhibitions was sought and considered. I exhibit regularly in the UK as well as presenting my work further a field in Malaysia, China and Italy. *Stir* (2004), *P&S Recipe Shop* (2006), *As Much as You Like* (2007) *Strange/Familiar* (2008) and *Barely Notice* (2010) were some of the self-curated collaborative projects. Artist talks and exhibition monographs were organized and produced alongside some of these projects. During a trip to Malaysia in 2007, I was invited to deliver a series of

artist talks in the *Dasein Academy of Art* and a gallery called *Lost Generation Space* (both in Kuala Lumpur) to discuss my work and research. In March 2008, I introduced my art works to and exchanged conversation with the audience about my practice and research during artist presentations at the *Candid Arts Space* in a programme called *Artists Corner*, organized by the *Manchester Chinese Arts Centre*. In 2011, I delivered an artist talk called *Ordinary Mind* at the Malaysian Institute of Arts, Kuala Lumpur, which discussed my studio practice that led to this research.

Some of the key methods and models adopted in my studio practice and research include:

- Defining aspects of the everyday in art and Zen Buddhism.
- Make analytical and critical views as an artist in regard to the issues embodied in my practical work and projects which underpin this research.
- Examining my practice and theory to identify the underlying ideology behind my art theory-practice to enable my point of view to be advanced to the wider audience.
- Identify and analyse key aspects explored in the work in regard to attentiveness, meditative quality, cultural symbolic form and audience engagement.

- Foregrounding and discussing different elements contained within the work, including this research wishes to examine, which covers the idea of the circle, it-is-ness, nothingness, relativity, impermanent, and everyday life and art, and to express views about their in/compatibility within a wider contemporary art practice and Zen practice.
- Investigate and identify the writers, theoreticians, critics, thinkers, Zen masters and philosophers who have written extensively about ideas which have become keys to my work and my research field.¹¹
- Identify artists - working in any medium such as installation, performance, painting and drawing - who deal or have dealt with the aspects of my interest, and make a comparative study between their approaches and mine.
- Identify and examine various theories in art such as art of the everyday and 'Relational Aesthetics' that raise questions on role, position, value, development and the judgement of art. Verify what they say about form in relation to content, function, art and wider society.
- Establish and examine definitions or models of daily life, awareness, ways of looking, perception, self, human nature, these various theories or philosophies that can be associated with this research. Identify a range of ideas or concepts

¹¹ For example D. T. Suzuki, Helen Westgeest, Nicolas Bourriaud, Stephen Johnstone, Alexandra Munroe, Mary Jane Jacob, Jacquelynn Baas, Toshimitsu Hasumi, Arthur Waley, Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, Thomas Merton and Agnes Heller.

in these areas of study, showing examples of each using past and recent writings for the purpose of discussion. Indicate how my personal views relate to these together with what I see as the important, significant, intellectual issues that artists can seek to engage in relation to art of the everyday.

- Suggest, in general, what contribution an artist can make to art, culture and society now; and the extended contribution that may be made in regard to this research.

The Structure of this Thesis

In the last three sections of this chapter I provided an explanation as to the motivation of this research, its potential original contribution and research methodology. My main challenge in the subsequent chapters of this research has been to remain analytical and critical about my own studio practice and set out the theoretical framework of my work and understanding about Zen Buddhism teaching to provide support for a comparative study. Certain areas in the thesis use Chinese texts in Mandarin or Cantonese to make reference to Chinese proverbs or sayings, I shall state this in the texts and provide an English translation. Although Mandarin and Cantonese share

same writing, I can only provide Mandarin ‘pinyin’ as Cantonese ‘pinyin’ does not exist. The layout of the subsequent chapters is set out as below.

Chapter 1 gives background to the notion of the everyday in my art practice and fine art practice in general. It provides a context in relation to key exponents as well as to how the everyday is used as raw material before going on to elucidate the everyday in Zen Buddhist practice. As the chapter progresses, it begins to identify the meeting points between the everyday in art and Zen that indicate further exploration.

Chapter 2 reviews important literatures that are relevant to my research question. It confirms the originality of this research as well as lays the ground for further discussion. It analyses the everyday in Western sociology studies, particularly those that have a close relationship with contemporary art practice, as well as reviews of exhibitions and other published works that have examined the concepts of the everyday in art practice. It also details ways in which Zen Buddhism arrived in the West before looking into the influence it has had and still exerts on contemporary art.

Chapter 3 contextualizes my studio practice. It considers cultural and social changes in the capitalist society from different angles, including how the issues of waste and

the discarded, of information technologies, online social networking and computer games have contributed to significant change in contemporary everyday life. The chapter also discusses how the contemporary 'hectic' life style and fast food culture transformed the event of the traditional family meal, and how excessive spending has brought economic catastrophe. I expand the discussion to personal memories and upbringing, food, cooking and eating, the creative drive of poverty, and issues of disillusion with 'reality' in everyday life, and how these experiences are generally explored in artistic expressions and are relevant to my studio practice. Finally, I examine and relate Western and Eastern artists and art movements that had an impact on my studio practice as presented within this thesis.

Chapter 4 presents the results and findings. The core of the chapter is a description of the art works, theory and the process of production. It foregrounds a selection of the body of works I have produced to date, and locates them in the contexts as discussed in chapter 1 and chapter 3, to discuss analytically and critically, and makes a comparative study with Zen Buddhist practice of the everyday.

Chapter 5 presents the conclusions and summarizes the original contribution of the total research. It re-examines the supporting groundwork and discusses wider

Introduction

perspectives based on the findings, including the implications for expanded studies and other broader areas and domains. It evaluates my studio practice i.e. how the practice and theory informed each other, and discusses what I learned through the process of the research and its findings.

CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND

CONTENTS

1.1 The Everyday as Adopted in My Work, 28

1.2 The Everyday in Art Practice, 36

1.3 The Everyday in Zen Buddhism, 45

1.3.1 Basic Principles, 47

1.3.2 Buddhism and Everyday Life, 48

1.3.3 Mindfulness, 50

1.3.4 Now, 51

1.3.5 Suchness, 52

1.3.6 Interconnection, 53

1.3.7 Impermanence, 55

1.3.8 Middle Way, 55

Chapter I Background

1.3.9 Wabi-Sabi, 56

1.3.10 Meditation, 57

1.4 Chapter Conclusion, 59

CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND

This chapter is divided into three main sections to clarify the idea of the everyday in my research. It provides a context on the everyday in my own studio practice before taking an overall view on what constitute the mind of the everyday in the ‘art world’ and the everyday in Zen Buddhism practice.

1.1 The Everyday as Adopted in My Work

Devoting attentiveness to the everyday is central to my studio practice. The everyday referred to here is the trivial, mundane, workaday, ordinary and inconsequential objects and activities that people tend not to pay any attention to, neglect or take for granted. Apart from the found and the discarded, it also embraces our daily activities and encounters.

But what exactly is the 'everyday'? To define the concepts of the everyday is problematic because the nature of the everyday is immanence, ever-shifting, endlessly recurrence and being, and investigating the everyday compels us to confront almost everything that we encounter in a day-to-day basis. The everyday is cyclical in pattern and interconnected, it is the beginning as well as the ending of every action and occurrence. It is endlessly building, deforming and re-emerging. The notion of the everyday may be different in each individual both living in the same space or same cultural context. It is much more likely to be different, more diverse in character when making comparison between people living in different spaces and cultural contexts. Something may not be the everyday of one person but may be the everyday of another. The everyday for a homeless person is more likely to be the extreme of a person living in the comfort of their own home with their family. Things that are encountered by one socio-cultural group on a daily basis may not represent the everyday of another. The everyday in London may be different in comparison with Cornwall for example. The everyday in the United Kingdom is likely to be very different in comparison to the everyday in Malaysia due to weather, ethnic, culture and economic differences.

The everyday as a whole can be both easy and, at the same time, difficult to grasp. This research refers to a broader sense of something we encounter everyday such as

the activity of having a meal and the objects such as the cutlery we use for eating, something we are so familiar with that we are less likely to give them a second thought when we encountered them. The everyday is like the background noise; we hear it but hardly give it any particular importance or pay any attention to it. Nevertheless, the everyday embodies far deeper dimensions and richer textures than usually appears to be the case. My studio practice draws attention to both *objects* and *activities* of the everyday, with the two main components that make up our daily living in this regard being:

1. *Everyday objects* that embrace the man-made such as disposable chopsticks, bottles, cans, and price tags. And, the nature such as leaves and dusts.
2. *Everyday activities* implicit to our routine situations and occurrences of daily life such as cooking, eating, gatherings of families and meeting people.

Objects of the everyday are ubiquitous. They are the very ordinary, humble, humdrum, and unvalued objects that we encounter day in and day out. Among these objects can be something found on the street, something discarded in our workplace, and those used and accumulated throughout our lives. They are everywhere and nowhere simultaneously. They are everywhere when we look at them and *see* them, they are nowhere when we look without attention or no intention to *see*. When we *see*

something we are being attentive. To see something is to go through the process of being aware, regardful and willingly contemplative. Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggested that,

“...the world which is revealed to us by our senses and in everyday life, seem at first sight to be the one we know best of all. For we need neither to measure nor to calculate in order to gain access to this world and it would seem that we can fathom it simply by opening our eyes and getting on with our lives. Yet this is a delusion. ...the world of perception is, to a great extent, unknown territory as long as we remain in the practical or utilitarian attitude.”¹

Whilst, *activities* of the everyday are of the present moment, we can never draw a line from where they start and where they end. Activities of the everyday are right here, right now and right at this moment. They are right in front of us when we are aware and contemplate every action we undertake, and they pass unnoticed when our mind or attentiveness has wandered. Everyday activities in my work embrace situations and occurrences we encounter on a daily or on a regular basis. They can be routines that we carry out at home, occurrences on the street, or situations that we encounter at work that form part and parcel of our everyday life.

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *the World of Perception*, trans. Oliver Davis (London & New York: Taylor & Francis, 2008), 31.

My studio practice uses everyday *objects* and *activities* and engages with elements of the social, the cultural and memory. The element of time is the space between awareness, attentiveness and physical actions. It (the studio practice) is the collection of materials together with contemplative process, as well as the absorption of the current moment in the process of making and inconsequential repetitive actions on materiality and situations. Contemplation and expression lend new meaning in artistic form to the everyday. My cultural upbringing and life experiences are revisited, examined and evidenced in the work. They make connections and link the subjects, connect objects and people together and cultivate a space for self-improvement and development. The work provides opportunities for the viewer to take a new look at as well as nurture interest in and appreciate the neglected and mundane.

In Zen Buddhist practice, attention to the trivia of the everyday is a crucial foundation in developing wisdom or the so-called ‘higher’ state of the human mind. There is a sense of awareness and enthusiastic observation in the process of attentiveness that allows us to connect our ‘self’ with our environment to become ‘one’ with where we are. The process of attentiveness has the potential to allow us to rediscover our often unrealized inner self, to become a fully integrated person. As proposed by Michael E. Gardiner in his *Critiques of Everyday Life*, when he said that “the everyday is where

we develop our manifold capacities, both in an individual and collective sense, and become fully integrated and truly human persons.”² He then explained that “Only then the critique of everyday life makes a ‘contribution to *the art of living*’ and fosters a genuine humanism, a ‘humanism which believes in the human because it knows it.’”³ In comparison, this is explained in a much more subtle and indirect manner through observing and contemplating the everyday activities by Eihei Dōgen Zenji (1200-1253) in the East. In his book on *How to Cook Your Life* written in 1237, Dōgen suggested that:

“When washing the rice, remove any sand you find. In doing so do not lose even one grain of rice. When you look at the rice see the sand at the same time; when you look at the sand, see also the rice. Examine both carefully. Then, a meal [the self] containing the six flavours and the three qualities will come together naturally.”⁴

Eihei Dōgen Zenji’s texts do not merely comprise direct cooking instructions for the monks in a monastery but rather imply that we should allow humble activity such as cooking to enlighten how we should live our lives. As I interpret it, what he means is that the way we handle a simple everyday task such as preparing a meal reflects the

² Michael E. Gardiner, *Critiques of Everyday Life*, (UK: Routledge, 2000), 2.

³ Gardiner, *Critiques of Everyday Life*, 78.

⁴ Eihei Dōgen Zenji, Kosho Uchiyama & Thomas Wright, *How to Cook Your Life: From the Zen Kitchen to Enlightenment* (US: Shambhala Publication Inc, 2005), 4-5.

way we prepare our life. The better we apply our *Mindfulness* to the everyday, the better we will be able to develop our essential self. The quality of the human self relies on our *Mindfulness* to our encounter with the everyday as suggested in Zen and in my studio practice.

A life lived in a hurry does not allow us to appreciate the many things around us, and therefore I choose to slow down my pace and take a second look at things. I see devoting attentiveness to the minutiae of the everyday as the basis of my work. This attentiveness helps to reveal the significance within what seem to be insignificant everyday objects and situations. It is like polishing a humble piece of stone or wood to reveal the inherent colours and pattern contained within. Something quite ordinary in life may have the potential to be transformed into something extraordinary, and the unfamiliar can come from things that we are familiar with. They come along hand in hand, and exist in a contradictory structure that is simultaneously both familiar and unfamiliar, comparable to the notion of dualistic world as suggested in the Eastern thought that the positive is in the negative and vice versa.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, art has drawn inspiration from the everyday, and in return everyday life is stimulated by art. Art and the everyday work hand in

hand, and complement each other, like two sides of the same coin. My art practice is concerned to link one to the other - to operate the everyday in art and art in the everyday. The former pays attention to the everyday objects and activities and allows their influence to disseminate in art spaces. The latter allows my experiences gained from art practice to extend into the everyday and to be manifest in daily encounters. Life is more fully lived when art and life are integrated as one.

Socrates (469 - 399 B.C.E) observed that “an unconsidered life is not worth living”⁵. His meaning was that we should observe the important things in life that can enrich our life. I myself find simple pleasure in art making. It enriches my life through observing and contemplating what within the everyday is considered to be trivia rather than focusing solely on the ‘important’. This is how my art took on a form that relates to an activity i.e. an activity of self-development rather than complacency. The everyday is not a condition which exists apart from us, it exists where we function now. Our inner self takes shape from where we are operating, working and being. My interest is in unpacking this hidden potential through attentiveness and the contemplation of everyday objects and activities in my studio practice. Art is a journey into the process of self-development, comparable to that of Zen practice.

⁵ A. C. Grayling, *the Meaning of Things: Applying Philosophy to Life* (UK: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2001), i.

1.2 The Everyday in Art Practice

Pablo Picasso's use of found, everyday objects to form parts of other objects linked art to the reality of everyday life and may be considered as revolutionary in their progression of art in the beginning and early part of the 20th century. This is evidenced in his *Guitar, Sheet Music and Wine Glass* collage in 1912 and *Tete de Toro (Head of Bull)* sculpture in 1943 (please refer to image 1.01 and 1.02) where the original utilitarian purpose of these found objects is removed. Marcel Duchamp realized that modernists "could be as doctrinaire, exclusive and tyrannical as their supposed enemies, the academicians"⁶ when his *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)*, 1912 was criticized and rejected at the *Salon des Indépendents*. He decided to use unmodified, readymade everyday objects to question what art is (please refer to images 1.03 and 1.04). In so doing he went further than Pablo Picasso and put forward the idea that the everyday can be appropriated as art, and art can be displayed just as the everyday, with nothing being altered and all being within the scope of the 'art world'. Marcel Duchamp posed a seemingly contradictory question about art and manufactured everyday products by building an intellectual platform for his contemporaries to find alternatives to explore the everyday provocatively outside the restriction of galleries

⁶ Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art* (UK: Phaidon Press Ltd, 1998), 27.

and museums. Following Marcel Duchamp, artists in the beginning of the 20th century began to question what constitutes a work of art, by challenging aspects of 'traditional' art and the role of then current museums and galleries. A manifestation of 'anti-institution' or 'anti-art' thinking arose in the 'art world', to liberate art from the constraints of 'salon art' that formed and dictated conventional standards.

From the time of the pre-World War II period, artists such as Kurt Schwitters, Man Ray (1890-1976), and Méret Oppenheim (1913-85), who were heirs to a tradition that began with the Duchampian revolutionary readymades, began to put everyday objects at the centre of their work. In the post-World War II period, artist such as John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg and Allan Kaprow expanded their practice to include the use of everyday objects, activities or situations. Art of the everyday tended to abandon traditional art materials, and sought inspiration in everyday circumstances and surroundings, using mainly the found and the discarded as their raw materials to create works of art with their works revealing a diverse range of approaches. For some, the use of the everyday is a reflection of a critical and political stance towards the consumerist society that generated these items (please refer to chapter 3, section 3.1 for extended discussion). Others preferred to associate everyday objects with personal experiences, memories, cultural significance and the story behind the objects. Artists

such as Richard Long and Lee Ufan showed interest purely in the characteristics and the inherent qualities of the objects themselves rather than making association with subjective views (please refer to chapter 2, section 2.3.2 (vii) and chapter 3, section 3.7.2 for extended discussion), and prefer to experiment with objects that may involve spontaneous play or chance. Artists such as Tom Friedman, Martin Creed, and Peter Fischli and David Weiss controversially made the everyday look just like the everyday in their works (please refer to chapter 4, section 4.7 for extended discussion).

Historically art of the everyday continued to evolve through the Dadaists, the Surrealists, through Happenings, Gutai, Pop Art, Mono-ha, Minimalism and Arte Povera. Kurt Schwitters, originally associated with Dada, collected material found on the streets to use in his work. He utilized discarded objects and stuck them onto canvas for his 'Merz' collages or assembled and constructed them in his 'Merzbau' architectural collage (please refer to chapter 3, section 3.7.1 (i) for extended discussion). He accepted what was thrown away and presented it in his work as combination of the aesthetic, the unvalued, of abstraction and realism, and of art and life.

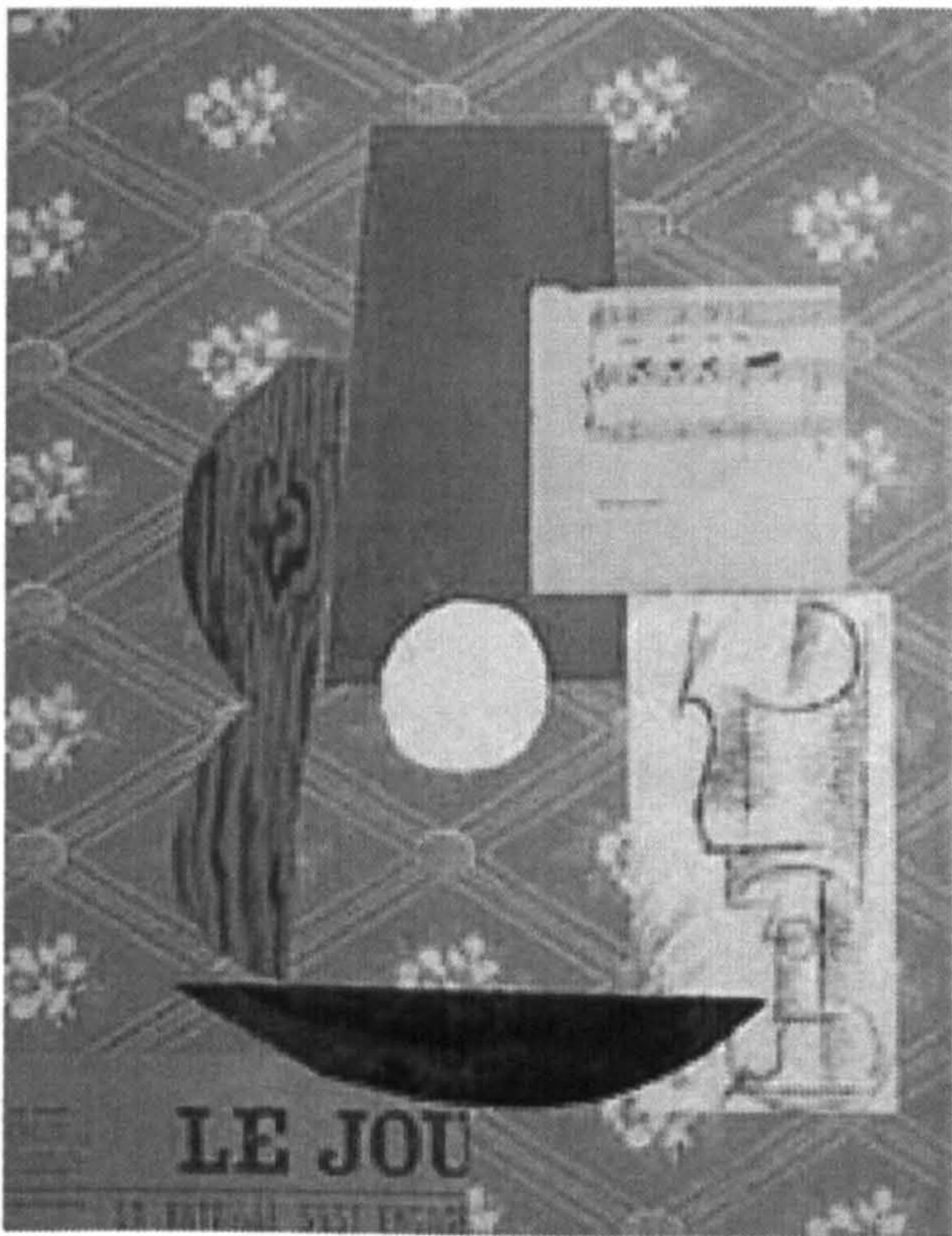


Image 1.01
Pablo Picasso, *Guitar, Sheet Music and Wine Glass*, 1912

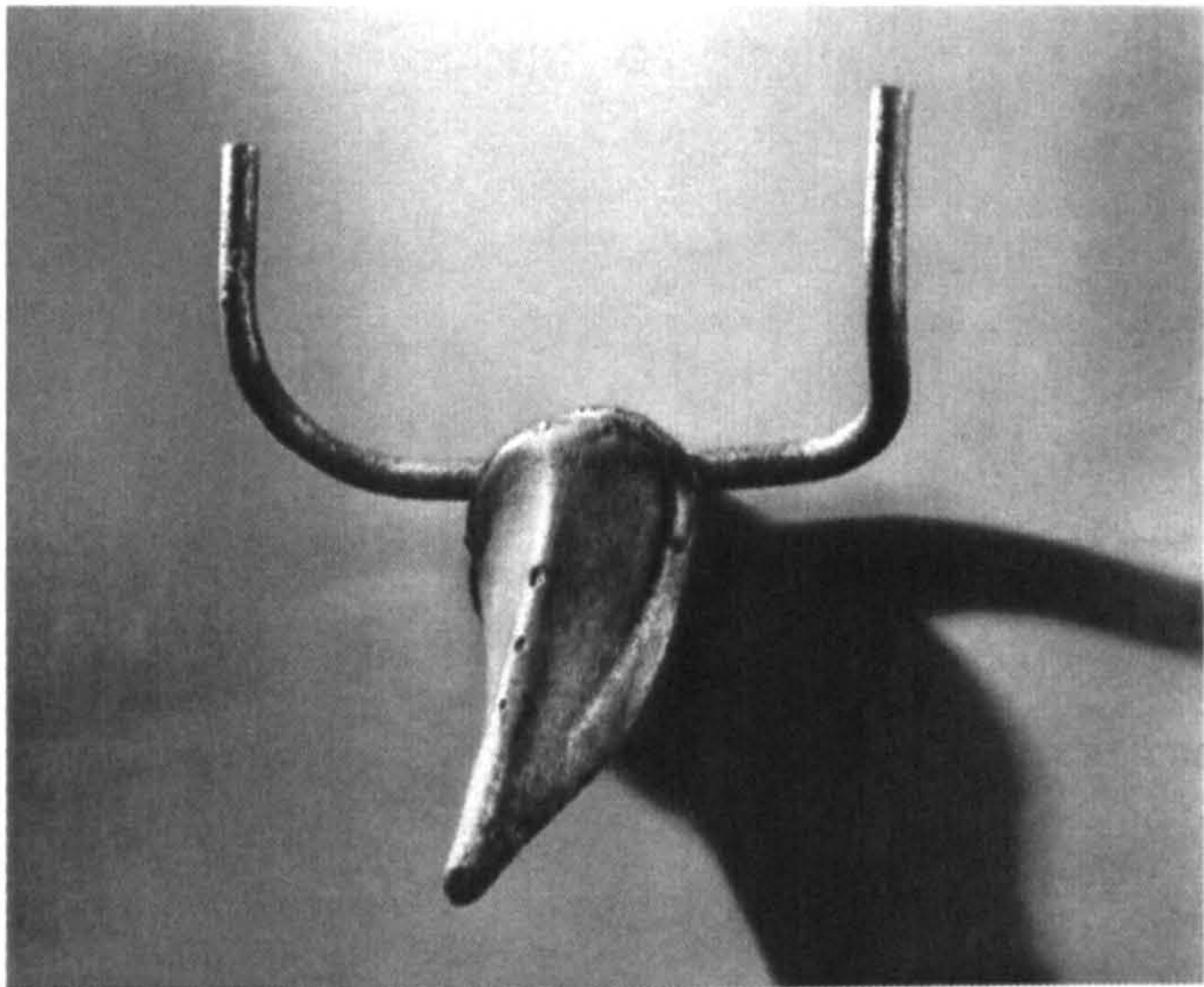


Image 1.02
Pablo Picasso, *Tete de Toro*, 1943 (Photo by: unknown)

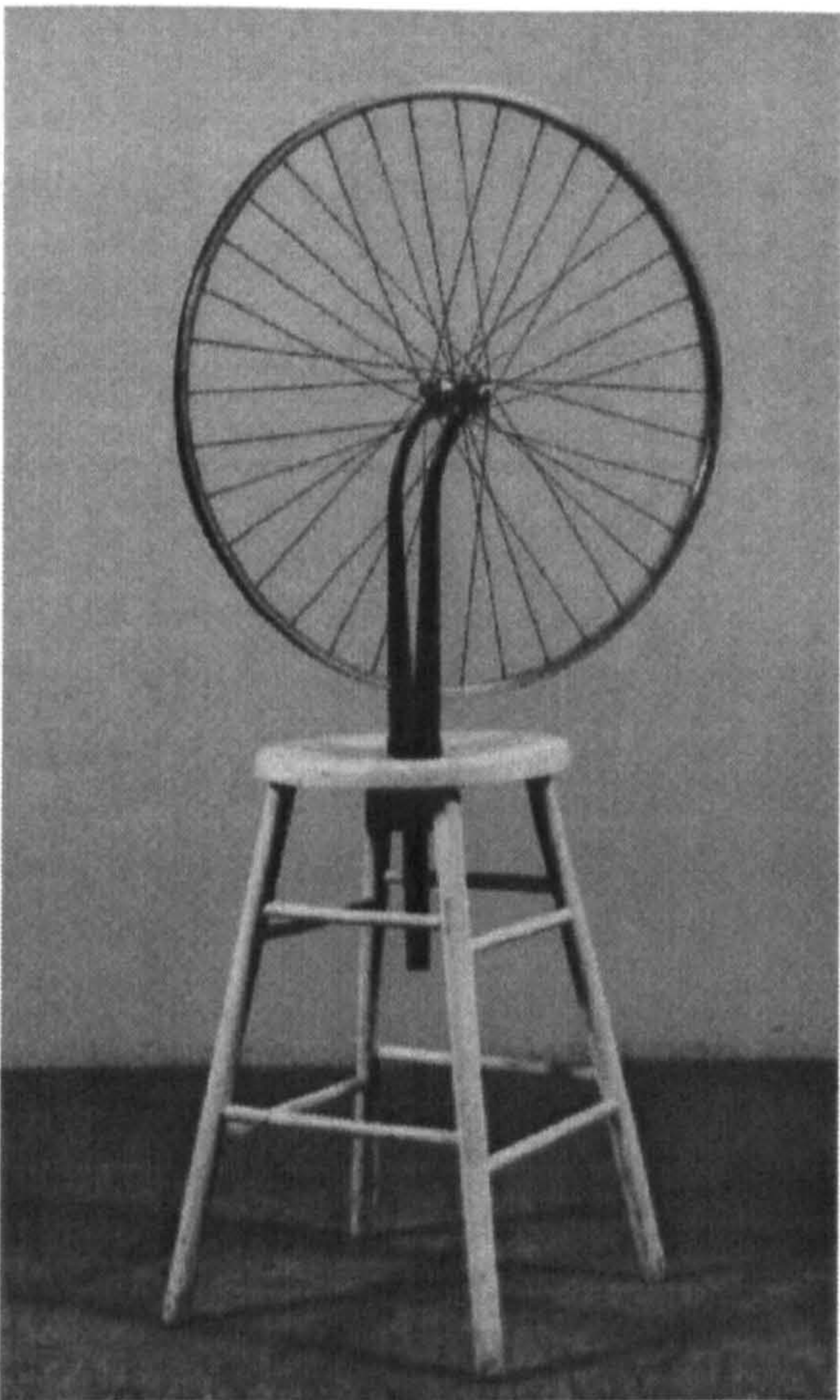


Image 1.03
Marcel Duchamp, *Bicycle Wheel*, 1913

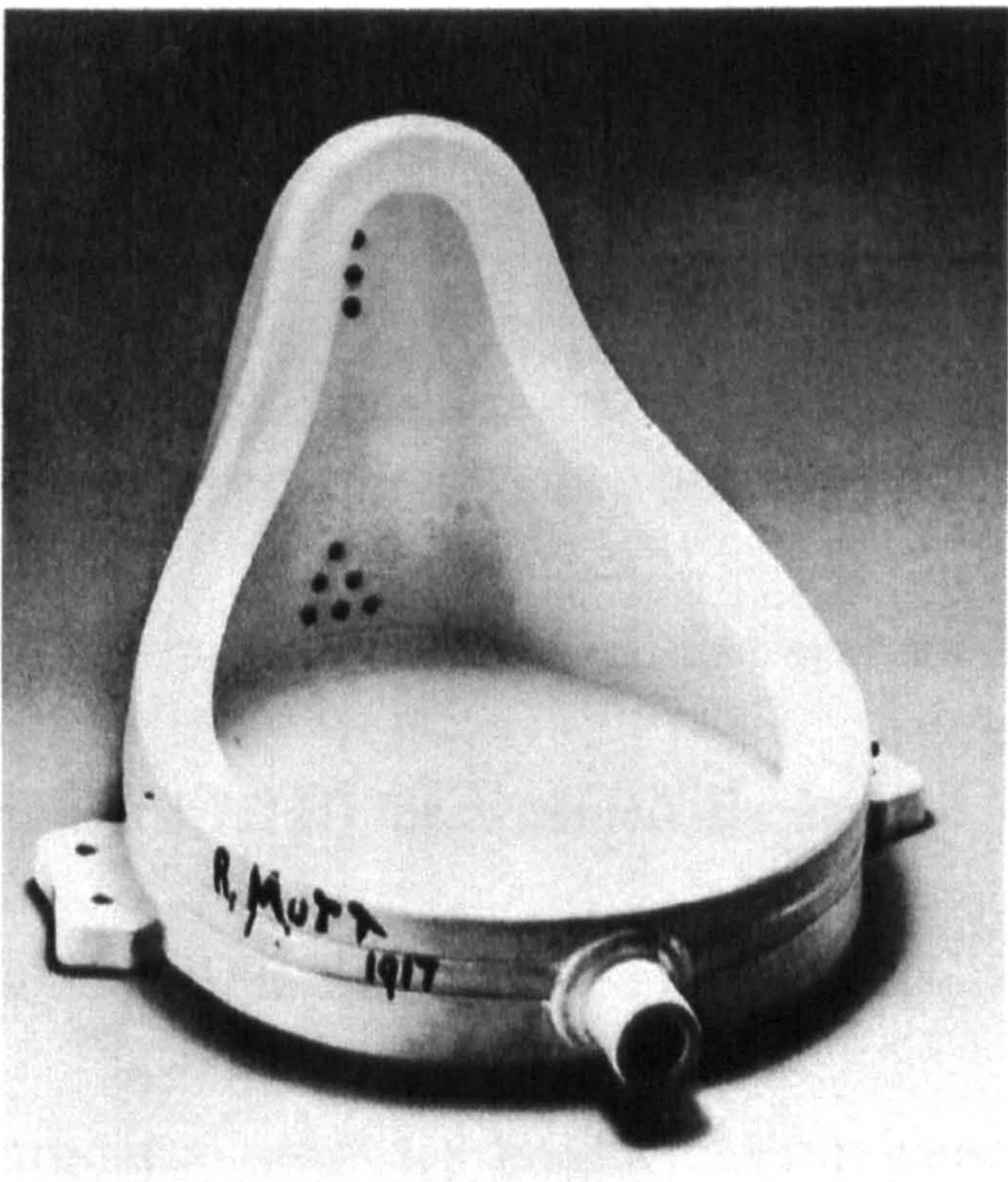


Image 1.04
Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917

Being seen as a precursor of Pop art and of Installation Art, Joseph Cornell was influenced by the American Transcendentalists. Often associated with the Surrealists, he made boxed assemblages out of a careful collection of visually pleasing or collectable everyday objects such as corks, watch faces, images of birds, balls and rings, all from book stores and thrift stores. His assemblages reveal a poetic quality of the commonplace based on the various personal themes all of which that can be related to dream, fantasies and memories. Allan Kaprow, John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg and Merce Cunningham are the practitioners who invariably mentioned in relation to Happenings and Zen Buddhism. In organizing situations, events or performances that sometime involved using everyday objects to intervene in people's everyday life, their art is 'lifelike' because it could take place anywhere in real life and involved active participation by the public.

The Gutai group were concerned with the impermanent nature of things and mainly presented the everyday as they saw it, drawing attention to qualities such as damage and decay (please refer to chapter 3, section 3.7.2 (i) for extended discussion). Pop art found inspiration in themes and techniques from mass and popular culture such as advertising, comic books, and mass produced everyday products. Prominent artists associated with Pop Art include Andy Warhol, Richard Hamilton, Jasper Johns and

Roy Lichtenstein. Using everyday objects and borrowing images from mainstream culture, their works were in contrast to the so-called 'high art' through their adoption and celebration of the mundane, the banal and even the kitsch. Mono-ha artists used both the manmade and natural everyday objects in their works and were motivated by engaging things together and allowing the materials to 'speak' for themselves (please refer to chapter 3, section 3.7.2 (ii) for extended discussion). Minimalist Carl Andre rejected the 'theatrically' of things, and like mono-ha artists, he presented materials as they are, metal as metal, to reveal their 'is-ness'. Arte Povera artists rejected any rigid theoretical structures in art, and adopted a complete openness toward everyday objects and materials as well as the art-making processes (please refer to chapter 3, section 3.7.1 (iii) for extended discussion). Other artists, such as Joseph Beuys while not formally associated with any art movement, used everyday materials to make symbolic works that can be associated with his personal experiences of survival in World War II. He considered himself to be an activist and promoted his belief through theoretical concepts of art in public places, believing that art has the potential to influence social, culture and political change (please refer to chapter 2, section 2.3 (v) for extended discussion).

In SoHo, New York in 1971, Gordon Matta-Clark and Carol Goodden co-founded the ‘*Food*’ project along with Suzanne Harris, Tina Girouard, Rachel Lew and other artists. *Food* was ‘in fact’ an ‘art restaurant’ that was run by artists, and where they experimented with various food ingredients, turning the everyday experience of dining into art events.⁷ Gordon Matta-Clark’s *Food* project not only provided a platform to discuss aspects of sharing, caring and connecting through food and eating, it also worked on “the borderlines between architecture and art, the museum and public space, urban space and private space, art and life”,⁸ as according to Paul C. Ha (Executive Director of White Column, 1999). *Food* questioned authorship of the work of art, and formulated some of the categories we accept today such as *Relational Aesthetics*⁹, *Socially Engaged Art*¹⁰, *Social Sculpture*¹¹ and *Institutional Critique*¹².

⁷ The restaurant was also a performance space, meeting and gathering space, a place to ‘hang out’, and a place where an artist could earn money through serving.

⁸ Klaus Bußmann, Gordon Matta-Clark & Catherine Morris, *Food: an exhibition by White Columns* (Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, 1999), 7.

⁹ *Relational Aesthetics* is a term coined by French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud in 1998 that refers to contemporary artistic practice where its theoretical and practical point of departure relates to human relations and social contexts. The work of artists that he often referring to include Henry Bond, Carsten Höller, Douglas Gordon, Pierre Huyghe, Philippe Parreno and Rirkrit Tiravanija.

¹⁰ *Socially Engaged Art* may be widely understood as community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, littoral art, participatory, interventionist, research-based and collaborative art. In her article for Artforum (February 2006), titled *The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents*, London based art critic Claire Bishop argues that Socially Engaged Art “rehumanize” a “numb and fragmented” society. Between 11th and 13th October 2007, *Open Engagement: Art after Aesthetic Distance* was an international conference took place in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada that brought together artists and thinkers from Japan, UK, Denmark, France, Canada and the United State to explore the understanding of Socially Engaged Art.

¹¹ *Social Sculpture* refers to the interconnection between people and transformation of the society as a whole as a sculpture. During the 60s, Joseph Beuys formulated the idea of *Social Sculpture* to frame the central theoretical concepts of his art practice concerning the social, cultural and political function in relation to the potential of art. He was inspired by Rudolf Steiner’s social ideas known as ‘Social Threefolding’.

¹² Associated with the work of artists including Michael Asher, Robert Smithson, Marcel Broodthaers, Walter De Maria, Daniel Buren, Andrea Fraser, Fred Wilson and Hans Haacke, *Institutional Critique* is an art term that describes the systematic inquiry into and commentary on the workings of art institutions such as galleries and museums. It developed from Minimalism and its concerns with the phenomenology of the viewer, and formalist art criticism and art history such as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried.

Many of the newer generation of artists at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century still made use of everyday objects and activities. Examples include Linda Montano, whose experience included living in a Zen monastery in upstate New York for three years, studied with Dr. Ramamurti Mishra for about thirty years, all of which had a significant impact on her vision of art and life. She maintained a remarkable performance of endurance of the everyday with Taiwanese artist Teh-ching Hsieh in which the pair were tied together with a rope and lived together 24 hours a day for a year (July 4 1983 – July 3 1984).¹³ Linda Montano became fixated on the ritual of art-making, and a connection can be made between her Art/Life counselling workshop and Joseph Beuys' 'Social Sculpture'. Peter Fischli and David Weiss' work reveals spontaneous play, ironic humour, and a sense of the real and the unreal by using objects and situations from everyday life. Their child-like innocent play lures the viewers beneath the surface of the mundane so often missed in our haste to process through ones busy life. An aspect of Tracey Emin's work uses everyday but meaningful and significant objects, such as the used cigarette box from her uncle's car crash, stones which had been thrown through her window, and her controversial 1999 *Unmade Bed*, all of which make reference to her personal experiences and memories. Tomoko Takahashi's scrap yard-like installations of found

¹³ Her other projects include *Seven Years of Living Art* started in 1985 where she wore single colour clothing and listen to designated tone in a coloured room of her own home.

and discarded objects create a version of order within chaos. Her work is often triggered by her responses to the spaces and situations she is given to exhibit in and the available 'raw' materials. Tom Friedman used familiar everyday objects such as bamboo skewers, pencils, human hair, sugar cubes, pain-killer pills and disposable cups. His work explores material transformation through minimal yet obsessive repetitive process. Rirkrit Tiravanija engaged with his Thai cultural life and transformed it into conceptual art practice. He achieved prominence with his food and eating piece, where he cooked Thai curry in a gallery and served it free to the public. His work, often associated with the 'Relational Aesthetics', used everyday situations to activate chance interaction between the artist and his audiences and thereby blur the line between art and life.

Since Marcel Duchamp introduced the readymade, the use of the everyday by modern and contemporary artists has been, and continues to be, ongoing and shows no sign of diminishing. This section acknowledged the theme of the everyday in art-practice by giving various examples that show profound observation of our everyday life as it is lived. The broad span covered by their works, in diverse styles and media, is articulated by a wide range of concepts and stances. The fundamental strategy of this thesis is to use my own studio practice as the focus for discussion. In addition, the

thesis will also discuss selected important works produced by key artists who expanded on the Duchampian tradition. I consider that the concepts of the everyday in some of their works can be made a comparative study with that of the everyday in Zen practice.

1.3 The Everyday in Zen Buddhism

Buddhism and Taoism originated in India and China respectively about two thousand five hundred years ago. *Siddharta* gained enlightenment in approximately 535 B.C. and Lao Tzu's teaching of Taoism is dated at approximately 500 B.C. Buddhism was then brought into China around 60 A.D., approximately 500 years after the Buddha had 'left the world'. At time it began to merge with Chinese culture, Taoism and later some elements of Confucianism. The Indian monk *Bodhidharma* is recognized as the first patriarch of Buddhism in China, and he is said to have arrived from the Southern Indian Brahman community and is credited as being the transmitter of Chan Buddhism into China. According to an explanation given by D.T. Suzuki:

“Zen is one of the products of the Chinese mind after its contact with Indian thought, which was introduced into China in the first century A.D. through the medium of

Buddhist teachings. (...) its profound philosophy, its subtle dialectics and penetrating analyses and speculations, stirred Chinese thinkers, especially the Taoists.”¹⁴

When the Chinese mind was stimulated by Buddhism, they actively considered the practical side of the teaching and maintained its connection with the plurality of things in their everyday life. According to D. T. Suzuki, in comparison with the more philosophically-minded Indians, the Chinese are inclined to be ‘attached to the earth’¹⁵ and ‘devoted to the worldly affairs’.¹⁶ This Chinese-ness or racial characteristic transformed Indian Buddhism into another version of Buddhism which became known as *Chán* (禪). Chan shared much with the Taoism teaching of Lao Tzu and Zhuan Tzu, so much so that it is difficult to determine how much of Chan has Buddhist origins and vice versa. Dào Shēng 道生 (360-434) was one of the followers of Kumarajiva and belongs to the early generation of Buddhist adherents who combined Buddhism with Chinese thought. He is widely acknowledged as ‘the actual founder of Zen’.¹⁷ Today in the West, Chan Buddhism is more commonly known as ‘Zen Buddhism’ following Japanese influence and promulgation.

¹⁴ Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (US: Princeton University Press [Mythos series], 1993), 1.

¹⁵ Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, 1.

¹⁶ Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, 1.

¹⁷ Heinrich Dumoulin, *a History of Zen Buddhism* (India: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 2000), 61.

1.3.1 Basic Principles

Buddha maintained that basic human nature suffered from *Four Pains* – namely birth, aging, illness and death, and Buddhists devote themselves to *Three Treasures* or *Three Jewels* - Buddha, Sangha and Dharma to overcome this suffering. Sangha means ‘community’ and refers to the group of Buddha’s disciples. The doctrine known as the *Dharma of Right Mind*, Buddha developed which includes the *Four Noble Truths* and the *Eightfold Path* were based on his experience and subsequent thinking and conclusions about the nature of life. The *Four Noble Truths* attend to the nature of the four pains, their cause, their path and their extinction. The *Eightfold Path* refers to the implementation of *right seeing, right thought, right speech, right action, right living, right effort, right mindfulness* and *right meditation*. The Buddha called his path the *Middle Way*, which embraces the understanding of balance and is situated between a life of luxury and a life of poverty. It also means to accept the reality of impermanence and Karma (cause and effect) within our lives. Buddhist practice places importance on chanting, purifying mind and body, as well as practicing meditation, to achieve enlightenment and embracing the idea of reincarnation.

There are a number of different elements in Zen Buddhist teaching that are possible to fit into different situations and contexts in everyday life. There are also many different schools but most schools revolve around the *Dharma of the Right Mind*, a core which may include the *Three Treasures*, *Four Noble Truths*, *Eightfold Path*, *Middle Way*, and *Mindfulness* teachings. The following sections investigate some of these elements that are relevant to this research.

1.3.2 Buddhism and Everyday Life

Buddhists consider that everyday life will “contain many dimensions, depths, texture, and meanings extending far beyond our familiar beliefs and concepts.”¹⁸ When Nán Quán Pǔ Yuàn 南泉普願 (748-835) was asked, “What is Buddhism?” he answered, “Everyday life”.¹⁹ Meaning not only that Buddhists practice ‘Mindfulness’ at all times i.e. that they are expected to be attentive to the everyday *objects* and *activities*, he also meant that Zen Buddhism and everyday life are not two but one, and that the ‘Dharma’ or Buddha teaching should be practiced at all time. Everyday life and Zen Buddhism are a non-duality, and Buddhists practice this in real time in real life - at home, at work, at study, on the street, in social situations and private moments. When

¹⁸ John Welwood, ed., *Ordinary Magic: Everyday Life as Spiritual Path* (US & UK: Shambhala, 1992), xiii.

¹⁹ Gyomay M. Kubose, *the Center Within* (USA: Heian International, Inc, 1999), 6.

each action in life is an expression of Buddhist teaching without pretention, this is what Nán Quán Pǔ Yuàn means by “Buddhism is everyday life”.

The basis of the teaching of Zen Buddhism is that the Buddha is in all things, and that all things possess Buddha nature. Zen Buddhists observe and follow the teaching of the Buddha to react to the humble and trivial things in order to find deeper meaning to life, as in the common saying in Zen Buddhism, ‘佛往心中作，莫向身外求’ (fó wǎng xīn zhōng zuō, mò xiàng shēn wài qiú) which means in a direct translation, ‘cultivate the Buddha within your heart, do not seek it externally’ or as Arthur Waley puts it ‘I seek the heart, I do not seek Buddha.’²⁰ It also means that a Buddhist cultivate his or her ‘authentic self’ through reacting wisely to their every day encounters – the understanding of right Mindfulness, non-attachment, cause and effect, the here and now and above all not praying to an external spirit or god for the purpose of gain as this is seen as a form of attachment in its own right. Buddhists consider that everyone has the potential to be enlightened, and believe that this is achievable through ordinary day-to-day activities and by doing them mindfully.

²⁰ Waley, *Zen Buddhism and Its Relation to Art*, 10.

1.3.3 Mindfulness

‘Attention! Attention! Attention!’ were the words Zen Master Ichu wrote when he was asked by his student to write something of a great wisdom.²¹ What he meant is simply to be mindful at the moment we engage in a situation or look at something. Zen Buddhism suggests that we tend to take things for granted and that we do not pay enough attention in order to experience the essence of things, herein they advocate a core practice called *Mindfulness*. Translated from the *Pali* word ‘Sati’, Mindfulness is a process of awareness that can be practiced through formal meditation sessions as well as any time during our daily activities. Awareness is the key to the practice of Mindfulness, and examples of its applications include being aware of our breath, being aware of where we are, being aware of what we are doing, being aware of what we say, being aware of what we think, being aware of what we feel and being aware of ‘Now’. Being mindful is being aware of and appreciating every aspect of our everyday life and allowing it to impinge upon our mind. Buddhists free themselves from the restraint of ignorance and open up to new possibilities when they commit themselves to and practice Mindfulness. Zen Buddhists suggest that sudden enlightenment may be achieved through the practice of Mindfulness.

²¹ Charlotte Joko Beck, *Nothing Special: Living Zen* (US: HaperCollins, 1993), 168.

1.3.4 Now

Mindfulness is present moment awareness, it takes place in the here and now and is living in the present. An example of this teaching is the often cited ‘washing the dishes to wash the dishes’.²² Rather than thinking about such as what is on the television while doing the washing, Buddhists suggest that one should just become immersed into the process of washing, to concentrate on handling the dishes, using the washing-up liquid, the water temperature, and organizing the dishes for drying and so on. Activity that is done in an attentive manner is a form of meditation. This is what it meant by Mindfulness, as part of the Zen practice of the everyday that focuses on ‘now’.

For Zen Buddhists, the most important thing to do in our life is the thing we are doing right now, at this very moment. The practice of Mindfulness refocuses the mind, allowing it to be aware of the activity happening in the present moment rather than allowing the mind to shuttle between thoughts of the past and the future. The mind is always in coherence and harmony with the body in Mindfulness practice. The basic principle of Zen practice “teaches us not merely to hear, but to listen; not just to look,

²² Thich Nhat Hanh, *the Miracle of Mindfulness* (UK: Rider, an Imprint of Random House Ltd, 1991), 24.

but to see; not only to think, but to experience; and above all not to cling to what we know, but to accept and rejoice in as much of the world as we may encounter”²³ each moment of our life. Mindfulness urges us to pay attention to the smallest details in life no matter how trivial they are, it places great importance on moment-by-moment awareness and emphasizes the importance of seeing deeply into the nature of things by direct experience.

1.3.5 Suchness

Zen repeatedly demands us to throw away everything we know and constantly be in the state of not-knowing. As suggested by Shunryu Suzuki (1904-1971), it is the expression of maintaining a humble *Beginner's Mind* (please refer to chapter 4, section 4.1 for extended discussion). It also means that every time we are handling an object that we are ‘familiar’ with, we should attend to it as if we are handling it for the first time. For example, when we look at the same tree on our journey to work every morning, we would see the tree afresh. The same tree looks different in the morning, afternoon and in ever-changing weather conditions. In comparison to what we had already registered in our mind, it appears to be different in spring, summer, autumn

²³ Stephen Addiss, *the Art of Zen: Paintings and Calligraphy by Japanese Monks, 1600-1925* (Harry N. Abrams Inc, 1989), 6.

and winter. After a long period of persistent practice of Mindfulness, the notion of attentiveness will come naturally when we get on with the day-to-day. The practice of Mindfulness is able to take away things that we tend to hold on to in our ‘belief’ or preconception, to allow us to have a better idea of what we think we know. Zen Buddhism encourages us to abandon our preconceived ideas or subjective projections and to see things as they are. This experience is the manifestation of ‘Thatata’ meaning Suchness, Thusness or it-is-ness, and is the way things are as expressed in their teaching.

1.3.6 Interconnection

Zen Buddhists suggests that seeing is a result of mindfulness because when being mindful we begin to observe and trying to understand. Seeing something is not merely looking at something but attending to its details as well as being aware of the quality and impact it might have in connection with our life. It is also important to understand things as they are through the process of Mindfulness – the interconnectivity, the impermanent and cyclical nature of things. Sōjō or Sengzhao (378 – 413), the noted Chinese monk-scholar who lived between Han and Tang dynasties illustrated this when he said that:

“Heaven and earth and I are of the same root,

The ten thousand things and I are of one substance.”²⁴

天地同根 (tiān dì tóng gēn),

万物一体 (wàn wù yī tǐ)

The teaching of ‘Oneness’ in Zen Buddhism relates to a reality where people and things have a ‘co-conditioned origination’ or share ‘mutual arising’. Buddhists perceive that we exist because people are interconnected with us, and that our family, relatives, friends and *Sangha* sustain the ‘I’. In term of materiality, when we grasp the reality of an object, that particular object exists because other related things sustain it.

As Thich Nhat Hanh put it:

“the table existence is possible due to the existence of things which we might call “the non-table world”: the forest where the wood grew and was cut, the carpenter, the iron ore which became the nails and screws, and countless other things which have relation to the table, the parents and ancestors of the carpenter, the sun and rain which made it possible for the trees to grow.”²⁵

²⁴ Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, 353.

²⁵ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Miracle of Mindfulness*, 47.

1.3.7 Impermanence

Zen Buddhism suggests that everything changes, and that nothing is permanent. Constant change is the phenomena of our Nature. Mindfulness brings awareness to ever-changing reality and participates in its ongoing process. Mindfulness observes the beginning, the growth, the growing, decay, and the dying and participates in it. Mindfulness perceives that the cyclical pattern in which exists a beginning is also the starting point of an end, and conversely an end becomes the starting point of a new beginning.

1.3.8 Middle Way

Zen Buddhists consider and acknowledge the dualistic aspect of things, they understand that silence is the companion to sound, that sadness exists because of happiness, and form exists because of emptiness. They are aware of the positive as well as the negative aspects of things without gravitating towards either the left or the right. Mindfulness avoids adding or subtracting from things, and it discourages distortion and enhances what we observe. This is also one of the key elements in the

teaching of the *Middle Way*, where it treats all experiences equally and does not form value judgements (please refer to chapter 4, section 4.8.1 for extended discussion).

1.3.9 Wabi-Sabi

Apart from impermanence, Zen Buddhists also observe the notion of the imperfect, the incomplete and of chance in their practice. They embrace a sense of the rustic, of simplicity, naturalness, and artlessness in both natural and man-made things in their everyday life and arts. The Japanese identify this aesthetic principle as *Wabi-Sabi*. The word *Wabi* “fundamentally [it] means poverty, and at the same time simplicity and calm, but it also implies an inexpressible inner joy hidden deep in modesty. (...) The idea of ‘Sabi’ is closely akin to the idea of ‘Wabi’, as has already been mentioned, but it is less aesthetic. By the idea of ‘Sabi’ the Japanese understand such concepts as solitude, tranquility, poverty and simplicity.”²⁶ For D. T. Suzuki, “... *sabi* contains much more than ‘tranquility’, ...its implication is ‘poverty,’ ‘simplification,’ ‘aloneness,’ and here *sabi* becomes synonymous with *wabi*.”²⁷ The meaning of Wabi-Sabi is intertwined so much that today it is difficult to differentiate the two words. One

²⁶ Toshimitsu Hasumi, *Zen in Japanese Art: A way of Spiritual Experience* (UK: Routledge & K. Paul, 1962), 51 & 58.

²⁷ Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, 284.

of the many arts that disseminate the aesthetic of Wabi-Sabi is in Japanese Zen gardening, which involves a selection of found stones and their arrangement in the garden directly - without undue modification. This art of gardening uses 'readymades' found in nature instead of that which is imposed upon nature. "So this rock that you would find in a Japanese garden is the uncarved block, or what we call in the West an **objet trouvé** where the artist instead of making something, selects it."²⁸ In Western art, Marcel Duchamp's 'readymade' is using a similar principle. In Eastern art, ideas of imperfection and chance are suggested in broken brush strokes rather than the perfect solid strokes on the rice paper in Chinese ink paintings and calligraphy.

1.3.10 Meditation

Mindfulness may also be cultivated by Meditation. Sitting meditation specifically fosters awareness through a formal seated posture in a quiet setting. However, some schools of Zen Buddhism also embrace walking, standing, and lying down as a posture for meditation. Within the Chinese tradition, *Tai Chi* and *Chi Gong* are also forms of meditation.

²⁸ Alan Watts, *Uncarved Block, Unbleached Silk: the Mystery of Life* (US: A & W Publishers Inc, 1978), there is no page number in the book.

Zen meditation fosters the power of focusing on the now. For Zen Buddhists, sitting still quietly encourages awareness of the ‘internal chattering’ – in other words considering, discussing, and having judgmental thoughts. Noticing this condition during meditation, Zen Buddhists will try to eliminate them and bring back the awareness of breathing and of the body, and they will continue to bring back the awareness again when the chattering re-emerges. Thinking of not thinking is also a form of chattering that they try to avoid in the process of meditation. According to Zen teaching, what we experience in reality is the reflection of our mind’s condition. By sitting quietly and practicing meditation, the mind that operates like the waves from the ocean, pushing forward one thought after another, has an opportunity to calm down eventually. Zen Buddhists perceive that a calmed mind is like the even surface of water that works like a mirror when it throws our own image back at ourselves and allows us to observe the consequences of our actions. Meditation gives a chance to dispose of the subjective thoughts in our mind – judging good, bad, unpleasant, and so on. By detaching these thoughts, Zen Buddhists believe that meditation allows us to get to the point where we may return to our essential self, an ‘authentic self’ that has stripped away the negative distractions or thoughts that we have accumulated.

An artist's mind immersed in the process of creating his art is almost like Zen Buddhist meditation focuses on the here and now and lives in the present moment. Zen Buddhists consider sitting meditation and art making processes themselves are means of *Mindfulness* practice. They both serve the purpose to allow the mind to attend to the action undertaken at the present moment. The Oriental, especially Chinese and Japanese perceive that arts have meditative quality. "Oriental paintings have organic relationship to Zen"²⁹ said D. T. Suzuki. And, according to the reference made by Helen Westgeest about arts and Zen meditation, she said:

"It is striking how close the ties are between Rinzai Zen and art. ...the Zen arts are seen as a means in the quest for *Satori*. There is, accordingly, a specific connection in Rinzai Zen between art and meditation. Heinrich Dumoulin described this connection as follows: 'The Zen arts are inspired by meditation and the meditation experiences manifest themselves in the arts.'"³⁰

1.4 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter provides some background to the idea of the everyday in my total work, in visual art practice, and in the Zen Buddhism practice that is central to the

²⁹ Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, 37.

³⁰ Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 62.

comparative study in this research. It indicated that the focus of my studio practice is mainly on neglected and mundane everyday objects and activities. The art world was stimulated and to some extent, liberated by the readymade introduced by R. Mutt.³¹ His radical thinking in art was carried forward and an art of the everyday continued to be developed by a new generation of artists in multiple ways. Zen Buddhism, which places great emphasis on the practice of *Mindfulness* to the everyday, has been the alternative inspiration for the intellectuals and artists in the post World War II West openness, and it was coincided with the attitude of increased towards the everyday in the world of art. Thanks to the increase in publications on Zen Buddhism in European languages available since the beginning of the 20th century important references have been provided for artists that search for inspiration outside their own culture. The following chapter will reveal some of the important literatures that are able to provide a ground for comparative discussion in my research. They are also the sources to help define the original contribution of this thesis.

³¹ The name chosen by Marcel Duchamp when he signed the 'Urinal', please refer to image 1.04.

CHAPTER 2

INTERPRETATIONS OF ZEN BUDDHISM IN WESTERN ART

CONTENTS

2.1 Concepts of the Everyday as Examined in the World of Art, 65

2.1.1 'The Art of the Everyday: the Quotidian in Postwar French Culture', 66

2.1.2 'Every Day: 11th Biennale of Sydney', 67

2.1.3 'The Everyday: Documents of Contemporary Art', 69

2.2 The Arrival of Zen in the West, 71

2.2.1 Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, 74

2.2.2 Shunryu Suzuki, 76

2.2.3 Other Influential Thinkers, 79

i) Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, 79

ii) Thomas Merton, 80

- iii) Chögyam Trungpa, 82

2.3 Zen's Influence on Western Contemporary Art World, 85

2.3.1 The Case of R. Mutt, 86

2.3.2 Artists Exploring Concepts of the Everyday, 89

- i) John Cage, 90

- ii) Alan Kaprow, 93

- iii) Robert Rauschenberg, 94

- iv) Jasper Johns, 97

- v) Joseph Beuys, 101

- vi) Günther Uecker, 103

- vii) Richard Long, 104

- viii) Andy Goldsworthy, 106

2.3.3 Publications/Exhibitions Explore the Relationship between Western Art and Zen, 108

- i) 'Zen Buddhism and its Relation to Art', 108

- ii) 'Zen in the Fifties: Interaction in Art between East and West', 110

- iii) 'The Zen of Seeing: Seeing/Drawing as Meditation', 111

- iv) 'Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art', 112

- v) 'Smile of the Buddha: Eastern Philosophy and Western Art', 114
- vi) 'The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989', 115

2.4 Chapter Conclusion, 117

CHAPTER 2

INTERPRETATIONS OF ZEN BUDDHISM IN THE WEST

This chapter investigates the current knowledge available on my research topic to confirm its originality and discuss its potential contribution. It examines the perspectives of the art world on the concepts of the everyday before studying the texts and the work of some important Western writers and artists on the relationship between art and Zen. It also provides a brief history on how Zen arrived in the West both in Europe and the United States.

The study of the everyday in the West is mainly derived from sociologists from Europe in the beginning of the 20th century. The concept of everyday life “does not make its first appearance in social thought until the 1920’s.”¹ Zen Buddhism being brought to the West around the middle of the 19th century began to have a greater impact from the early 20th century, while the emergence of the everyday “...as a

¹ Tony Bennett and Diane Watson, ed., *Understanding Everyday Life* (UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), x.

recognized area of inquiry in sociology is limited largely to the period after the Second World War”² through sociologists such as Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau and Agnes Heller. While contemporary artists, art writers and critics often make references to their writings when they discuss the concepts of the everyday in art, nevertheless they lack references made in connection to Zen Buddhist teaching of the everyday.

2.1 Concepts of the Everyday as Examined in the World of Art

Between the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century there were few exhibitions and publications that explored the concepts of the everyday in contemporary art. The Sydney Biennale (1998) and Stephen Johnstone’s book (*The Everyday*, 2008) in particular included works and texts by artists from all over the world, however the results of their investigations are mainly covered by the perspectives of earlier named sociologists. This is especially apparent in an exhibition investigating the art of the everyday in postwar France and is discussed in the following section.

² Bennett and Watson, *Understanding Everyday Life*, x.

2.1.1 'The Art of the Everyday: the Quotidian in Postwar French Culture'

In 1997, *The Art of the Everyday: France in the '90s*, an exhibition at the Grey Art Gallery of New York University, celebrated the concepts of the everyday that dominated the arts and culture of the 20th century post-war France. Curated by Lynn Gumpert and co-curated by Thomas Sokolowski, the exhibition featured eight contemporary French artists, many of whose works, according to Lynn Gumpert, were about the everyday “dealing with the routine, nitty-gritty existence of urban life.”³

The Art of the Everyday: the Quotidian in Postwar French Culture edited by Lynn Gumpert was published in conjunction with the exhibition. Stimulated by the interest in ‘the concept of the quotidian’, which had been investigated in postwar French culture, it features essays by six prominent writers namely Tom Bishop, Peter Brunette, Michele C. Cone, Shelley Rice, Kristin Ross, and Thomas Sokolowski. The essays explored the art of the everyday of various disciplines, including the prevailing topics of the quotidian in philosophy, cinema, theatre, photography and other visual

³ Lynn Gumpert, ed., *the Art of the Everyday: the Quotidian in Postwar French Culture* (US: New York University Press, 1997), 12.

arts in postwar France.⁴ Kristin Ross in particular contributed an essay called *French Quotidian*, referring to key texts by Henri Lefebvre, Roland Barthes and other French philosophers. Her writing explored the modern rise of the concept of the everyday, the postwar ‘left wing’ radical political position, and the disapproval by young people and workers of some of the de Gaulle government’s policies, all of which triggered the student demonstrations and unrest in May 1968. In his preface, Lynn Gumpert addressed that the purpose for the volume is to introduce “the critique of the quotidian to audiences interested in both contemporary French culture and arts in general, and to shed light on this important but under-acknowledged theoretical approach.”⁵ However, their texts are not comprehensive in a sense that they focused on a very particular geographical area (France) and period (90s). There is no mention on the relationship between art and Zen in this book.

2.1.2 ‘Every Day: 11th Biennale of Sydney’

⁴ Shelley Rice’s essay explored how photographers reproduced and restructured the visual landscape of the everyday. Michele C. Cone’s writing chronicled the art of the Situationists, the ‘Nouveaux Réalistes’, and others in the late 60s and early 70s who incorporated everyday activities into their works. Tom Bishop focused on theatre to question how after years of increasingly unrealistic modes, the theatre of the quotidian turned to naturalism and silence in observation of daily life. Peter Brunette’s texts traced how ‘New Wave film directors’ within the postwar French were in favour of highlighting the extraordinary of the unrelentingly ordinary. And, Thomas Sokolowski was interested in how the artists in the exhibition find inspiration in the mundane of everyday life.

⁵ Gumpert, *Art of the Everyday*, 12.

Every Day was the title and theme for the 11th Biennale of Sydney in 1998. The biennale brought together a range of important visual artists and works from Asia, America, and Europe, to explore the concepts of the everyday in contemporary art. According to Jonathan Watkins, the artistic director of the biennale, the central question of the biennale arose out of important artistic practices at the end of the 20th century that profoundly observe the nature of our contemporary daily lives.

A book with the same title was published to introduce the artists and their works, and features five essays contributed by Nikos Papastergiadis, Viktor Misiano, Djon Mundine, Phatarawadee Phataranawik, and Jonathan Watkins himself.⁶ Among them Papastergiadis' essay analyzes the sociological study of everyday life by Karl Marx, Agnes Heller, Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, and expanded to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis in relation to the everyday. The manifesto of some of the works featured in the exhibition such as Martin Creed's "minimal interventions using the most basic of materials", Ceal Floyer's "rigorous attention to modest appearance",

⁶ Viktor Misiano's essay *Radical Quotidian: Art of Meta-quotidian* recalled Russian artist Ilya Kabakov's project *Five Year Plan of Emptying the Slop-pail*, he proposed that there are three possibilities for art practice in Soviet society. The first is the "museum and gala exhibition" art, the second is the type of art which "rejects officialdom", and the third is art that "reflects upon the everyday and think of itself as part of this." Viktor Misiano expanded on the third type of art practice and went on to discuss its relationship with the idea of quotidian. Djon Mundine's essay entitled *A Casual Acquaintance* examines the art and craft from the Australian natives, revealing their life, art and craft co-existence in the history and present stories of places and the environment. Thai writer Phatarawadee Phataranawik's *When Two become One* introduces Thai's contemporary art scene instead of providing a theoretical framework on Thai artists' work in relation to the everyday. He discussed how a new generation of Thai artists, curators and art administrators returned from abroad since 1995 "challenge the complacency of the old guard."

Rirkrit Tiravanija's "Buddhist philosophy influences his emphasis on art as a process that make interesting interactions happen in the present moment" while being worth investigating from a Zen Buddhist perspective, nevertheless no relevant text can be found throughout the five essays.

2.1.3 'The Everyday: Documents of Contemporary Art'

The Everyday is one of the *Documents of Contemporary Art* series published by the Whitechapel Gallery in March 2008 to survey the everyday's central significance for art since the 1950s. Edited and introduced by Stephen Johnstone, each volume in this series focuses on a specific subject or body of writings that has been of "key influence in contemporary art internationally".⁷ Stephen Johnstone sees contemporary art as saturated with references to the everyday, his introductory essay in this anthology urges readers to consider the importance of attending to and investigating the everyday. The three sections of the book documented various ways in which artists have engaged with the everyday since the middle of the 20th century. The diverse texts collected in the book may well address some questions considered and raised by Stephen Johnstone that are important to contemporary art practice, such as why should

⁷ Johnstone, *Everyday*, 5.

we investigate the everyday in the first place? Why bother? Why the everyday now? If the everyday is easily overlooked, how we can attend to it and bring into light?⁸

The essays in the first section of the book focus on the complexity of art's position in relation to the everyday. Not only that, it features Kristin Ross's essay *French quotidian* from *The Art of the Everyday: the Quotidian in Post-war French Culture*, as well as including Jonathan Watkins's *Every Day* and Nikos Papastergiadis's *Everything that Surrounds: Art, Politics, and Theories of the Everyday* from *Every Day: 11th Biennale of Sydney 1998*. The second section, *The Poetics of Noticing* features a number of shorter texts by artists and critics that highlighted strategies to represent the untellable and unattended. It focuses on art that explores the idea of looking and noticing that is relevant to the notion of attentiveness as suggested in my practice. The final section *Documentary Style and Ethnography* focuses on how artists are motivated by and investigate the everyday and revealed some of the important international exhibitions since the early 1990s that bear witness to a range of contemporary art engaged with the everyday.

⁸ Johnstone, *Everyday*, 13-14.

The interest in art that explores the everyday has generally increased in the subsequent twenty years. The books reviewed in this section remain three of the most important publications in the 'art world' that examine the everyday in contemporary art principally because of the comprehensiveness of the subject. Apart from Sally Barnes's 1993 essay entitled *Equality Celebrates the Ordinary* which briefly mentioned John Cage and Erik Satie's interests in Zen⁹, I could find no texts in the compilation that discussed the everyday in art in connection to Zen Buddhism.

2.2 The Arrival of Zen in the West

Eastern philosophies, in particular Buddhism and Taoism have gradually increasingly influenced the Western world from around the middle of the 19th century. There are traces of Zen Buddhist thinking in Western philosophical works by thinkers such as Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). For example, in seeing human desire as causing suffering, Arthur Schopenhauer mirrors the Buddhist notion of attachment. Henry David Thoreau

⁹ Johnstone, *Everyday*, 114.

translated Buddhist texts from French into English, and in my opinion, Friedrich Nietzsche's transcendental thought and declaration that 'God is dead' corresponds with the notions of enlightenment and suggestion of godlessness in Buddhism. He also praised Buddhism in his 1895 work *The Anti-Christ*.

There is no detailed account on how Buddhism reached the West, although in general the ways in which knowledge of Buddhism came to the West may be narrowed down to five important channels:

- i) The presence of the British in India (1612-1947)
- ii) European trade with China during the second half of the 18th century.
- iii) The return of Westerners who had travelled to the East.
- iv) The migration of Buddhists from Asia to Western countries.
- v) Dissemination and popularisation of Zen notably by the two Suzukis (D. T. Suzuki and Shunryu Suzuki).
- vi) The prominence of The Dalai Lama, Chogyam Trungpa, and Thich Nhat Hanh as more recent and contemporary authorities.

It was suggested that Buddhism arrived in America as early as 1844, when the essay '*The Preaching of the Buddha*' appeared in Ralph Waldo Emerson's (1803-1882)

journal, *The Dial*.¹⁰ Other records suggested that Eugène Burnouf (1801-1852) published a translation of *The Lotus Sutra* into French around 1840.¹¹ Madame Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891) encountered Buddhism when she was having her training with masters in Tibet between 1868 and 1870. Subsequently she began to spread her teaching of Theosophy in 1875 and her book in two volumes, *The Secret Doctrine*, was published in 1888. Hermann Hesse (1877-1962) went to India in 1911 and published a novel about the spiritual journey of Gautama Buddha called *Siddhartha* in 1922. However, the channel in which Zen Buddhism came to the West through ‘two Suzukis’ remains probably the most influential and has closest connection with this research. In 1893, Soyen Shaku’s (1860-1919) appearance in ‘World Parliament Religions’ held in Chicago did not have far reaching results in the West. Helen Westgeest, the author of *Zen in the Fifties: Interaction in Art between East and West* commented that:

“In 1897 Shaku sent his pupil Teitaro Suzuki (1870-1966), whose Buddhist name was Daisetz (great simplicity) to the publishing company in LaSalle. There Suzuki translated a great many books into English and started writing about Zen himself, in a way which was to make it more accessible for Westerners.”¹²

¹⁰ Baas and Jacob, *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, 9.

¹¹ Jacquelyn Baas, *Smile of the Buddha: Eastern Philosophy and Western Art from Monet to Today* (US: University of California Press, 2005), 7.

¹² Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 52.

2.2.1 Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki (1870-1966)

D. T. Suzuki had been writing and publishing books on Zen Buddhism in English since 1898. After returning to Japan from America in 1909, D. T. Suzuki remained there as *Professor of English* at Tokyo Imperial University. He continued to make translations of Buddhist texts and published his essays on Zen Buddhism while keeping up to date with developments in the West.

From 1912 onward he visited the UK several times. There he met Alan Watts (1915-1973) who went on to lecture and write extensively about Zen Buddhism and publish books that briefly examined the relationship between Zen and Art including *The Spirit of Zen: a Way of Life, Work, and Art in the Far East*, and *Uncarved Block, Unbleached Silk: the Mystery of Life*. Christmas Humphreys (1901-1983) founded the London Buddhist Society in 1924, and claimed that Zen came to the West in 1927 when D. T. Suzuki published *Essays in Zen Buddhism*¹³ which contains a series of articles on Zen that had been first published in 1921. D. T. Suzuki also took part in the work of the original Buddhist Society of Great Britain and Ireland founded by Christmas Humphreys who also published *A Western Approach to Zen, Zen Comes*

¹³ Humphreys, *Zen comes West*, 15.

West, and Zen: a Way of Life. A year after D. T. Suzuki's articles were published, Arthur Waley explored the relationship between Art and Zen and published *Zen Buddhism and its Relation to Art* (1922).

D. T. Suzuki sent Carl Gustav Jung a copy of the second series of *Essays in Zen Buddhism* in 1933, to which Carl Gustav Jung responded with a letter suggesting that he was already an admirer of D. T. Suzuki's work and described Zen as "a true goldmine for the needs of the Western 'psychologist'." Carl Gustav Jung's interest in D. T. Suzuki's writing continued, and six years later he wrote a foreword to the German edition of D. T. Suzuki's *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*. Carl Gustav Jung's foreword was then translated into English for the re-publication of that book in 1949. In the same year, at the age of seventy-nine, D. T. Suzuki left Japan again and returned to America. He spent a year in Hawaii and another year at Claremont College in California before going on a tour of American universities. After some travelling and lecture tours he settled in New York in 1951, where he was Professor of Religion at Columbia University until 1957.

In 1936, the German diplomat Eugen Herrigel (1884-1955) delivered a lecture to the German-Japanese society in Berlin which later appeared in the magazine *Nippon*

under the title *Chivalrous Art of Archery*. Eugen Herrigel and his wife (Gusty Luise Herrigel) were living in Japan between 1924 and 1929. During their time in Japan Eugen Herrigel studied *Kyūdō* (traditional Japanese archery) under Awa Kenzō, and Gusty Herrigel studied Japanese Ikebana and published *La Voie des fleurs*. His lecture and texts aroused interest among artists from the German *Zen 49* group. In 1953, it was also reprinted in a little book called *Zen in the Art of the Archery* with a foreword by D. T. Suzuki. The *New Yorker*, a leading cultural magazine in the fifties, published an extensive biography of D. T. Suzuki in their 31th August 1957 issue, added to which he was interviewed on television.¹⁴ In the 1950s, during the period when D. T. Suzuki was lecturing in New York, interest in Zen had increased significantly among artists, musicians and writers. The scholar Rick Fields even referred to the popularity of Zen Buddhism in the America as a ‘trend’ and a ‘Zenboom’. Writers such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs who personified the *Beat Generation* with their mainstream rejection of materialist culture, professed a strong interest in Zen and published in that spirit.

2.2.2 Shunryu Suzuki (1904-1971)

¹⁴ Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 52-53.

Shunryu Suzuki, a direct descendant of Eihei Dōgen Zenji and a Japanese Zen priest, went to San Francisco in 1959 “to minister to a small Japanese-American congregation”¹⁵, but decided to stay when he was impressed by the seriousness he found among Americans’ interest in Zen. Shunryu Suzuki arrived at the height of *The Beat Generation* period, where several books by Alan Watts on Zen Buddhism were influential, bringing with him the *Soto Zen*, that is to say Zen Buddhism that focuses on *Zazen* (Zen meditation). Words began to spread about his arrival among the members of *The Beat Generation* through institutions such as *The San Francisco Art Institute* and *The American Academy of Asian Studies* where Alan Watts was once director. The teaching of Shunryu Suzuki was gradually spreading across America, and the students who practice Zazen with Shunryu Suzuki eventually formed the *San Francisco Zen Center* with him. They soon established another called *Tassajara Zen Mountain Center* in Los Pedras National Forest as a Zen training temple, being it was first of its kind in the West.

Shunryu Suzuki expressed his vision of the potential for Zen Buddhism in the West in *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*.¹⁶ His expression of ‘Beginner’s Mind’ is a “metaphor for

¹⁵ David Chadwick, *Crooked Cucumber: the Life and Zen Teaching of Shunryu Suzuki* (US: Thorsons, 1999), xii.

¹⁶ This is a collection of his Zen talks as given to a small group in Los Altos, California; and which was published shortly before his death in 1971.

awakening, a paradigm for living.”¹⁷ It is a basic attitude and understanding to make Zen practice possible. Another book, *Not Always So*, edited and compiled a selection of thirty five lectures Shunryu Suzuki had delivered to his students in the last three years of his life. It was arranged into five chapters and covered teachings such as ‘living fully in each moment’, ‘Emptiness’ and ‘calmness of mind’ in everyday language. In 1999, David Chadwick, a student of Shunryu Suzuki published *Crooked Cucumber* to commemorate the life and work of Shunryu Suzuki and suggested that Shunryu Suzuki’s teaching “exemplified what had been for Westerners an almost entirely intellectual interest.”

D. T. Suzuki was the pioneer in spreading the teaching of Zen Buddhism to the West, while Shunryu Suzuki did something almost as remarkable fifty years later in America. D. T. Suzuki’s Zen is dramatic and his focus was on *Satori*, while Shunryu Suzuki’s teaching was geared toward the beginner’s mind on the ordinary. The two Suzukis remain the important channels feeding and sustaining the interest in Zen on the part of Westerners.

¹⁷ Shunryu Suzuki, *Not always so: Practicing the true Spirit of Zen*, ed. Edward Espe Brown (US: HarperCollins Inc, 2002), viii.

2.2.3 Other Influential Figures

i) Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877-1947)

Born in Colombo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Ananda K. Coomaraswamy who inherited Hindu and Buddhist thinking, had a close relationship with the Western art world. He was a philosopher in Indian Art and one of the interpreters who brought Indian culture to the West. He moved to America in 1917 and worked as a 'Keeper' of Indian art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and was a contributing writer to their catalogue texts later on. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy's third wife was American artist Stella Bloch and both became part of the New York 'bohemian' art circles. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy studied Sanskrit and Pali religious literature as well as Western religious works. In 1927, his *History of Indian and Indonesian Art* was published and in 1933, he became *Fellow for Research in Indian, Persian, and Mohammedan Art* at the *Museum of Fine Arts* and remained there as a curator. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, who claimed that Art "is a part of the higher things of life"¹⁸, was a contributor in bringing Eastern art to the West and vice versa. He wrote many books throughout his career including *Hinduism and Buddhism*, *The Living Thoughts of Gotama the*

¹⁸ Rama P. Coomaraswamy, *the Essential Ananda K. Coomaraswamy* (US: World Wisdom Inc, 2004), 153.

Buddha, The Transformation of Nature in Art, and Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art. His books and essays on scripture, art and culture, metaphysics and symbolism remain one of the important resources available for readers interested in cross-cultural perspectives acknowledged by prominent figures such as John Cage¹⁹ and Thomas Merton.

ii) Thomas Merton (1915-1968)

Thomas Merton is one of the Western minds that were 'at home in Asian experience.'²⁰ He wrote more than 70 books, mainly on spirituality but also on social justice and was a keen figure in inter-faith understanding. Thomas Merton was first exposed to and became interested in Eastern religions when he read Aldous Huxley's *Ends and Means* published in 1937, the year before Huxley's conversion to Catholicism. He became a close friend of the artist Ad Reinhardt²¹ while they were both studying at the Columbia University in Manhattan.

¹⁹ See Cage's autobiography statement. It was first appeared in print in the *Southwest Review*, 1991. Also, published online: New Albion, "John Cage: An Autobiographical Statement" *New Albion*, last modify not indicated, <http://www.newalbion.com/artists/cagej/autobiog.html> (accessed 19 march, 2011). Author's note: "'An Autobiographical Statement' was written for the Inamori Foundation and delivered in Kyoto as a commemorative lecture in response to having received the Kyoto Prize in November 1989. It is a work in progress."

²⁰ Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of the Appetite* (US: New Directions Books, [26th Printing] 1968), see back cover.

²¹ Munroe, *Third Mind*, 17.

Throughout his life within the religious order of Trappists, he had contacts with Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism in addition to his monastic studies and responsibilities. Thomas Merton exchanged dialogue with prominent Asian spiritual figures such as D. T. Suzuki, Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Mahanambata Brahmachari the Hindu monk while in New York and visiting from the University of Chicago. Apart from meeting Dalai Lama in India on three occasions during his tour of Asia at the end of 1968, Thomas Merton also met the Tibetan Buddhist, Dzogchen master, who he then followed to a solitary retreat near Darjeeling. He also made a visit to the ancient city of Polonnaruwa in present day Sri Lanka, where he encountered Buddhism while viewing enormous statues of the Buddha. Of the non-Christian religions and approaches to the spiritual life, he was perhaps most interested in, and wrote most about, Zen, finding many parallels between the language used in conveying the thinking of the Christian mystics and that found in Zen teaching. In 1959, Thomas Merton began a dialogue with D. T. Suzuki where their discussion about the idea of 'Wisdom in Emptiness' featured in his book *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*.²² Like D. T. Suzuki, Thomas Merton believed that there must be a little manifesto of Zen quality in all authentic creative and spiritual experience, the study of

²² Merton, *Zen and the Birds of the Appetite*, 60 & 99.

Zen for Thomas Merton is “simply an attempt to reach the ground of pure, direct experience which underlines all creative thought and activity.”²³

iii) Chögyam Trungpa (1939-1987)

In exile in India and having studied comparative religion, philosophy and fine arts at Oxford University in England (1963), Chögyam Trungpa was a renowned and controversial teacher of Tibetan Buddhist meditation that related to the tradition of the Dalai Lama. Chögyam Trungpa also studied *Ikebana* (Japanese flower arranging) and received an ‘instructor degree’ from the *London Sogetsu School of Ikebana* in the late 1960s. He is considered as a scholar, artist, poet and founder of *Shambhala* vision. His vision on ‘Dharma art’ presented in his courses, seminars, public talks and discussion was compiled and edited by Judith L. Lief into a book entitled *True Perception: The Path of Dharma Art*. Chögyam Trungpa considered Dharma art as created out of ‘awakened state of mind’ and characterized by the qualities of ‘directness, unselfconsciousness, and nonaggression’. Part of his teaching includes how to apply a meditative approach to various art-related disciplines included Japanese archery, calligraphy, Ikebana, the Japanese tea ceremony, dance, theatre, film and poetry. He

²³ Merton, *Zen and the Birds of the Appetite*, see back cover.

encouraged his students to integrate a contemplative approach into their everyday activities and bring "art to everyday life." Named after *Nalanda University*²⁴ and founded in 1974 in Boulder Colorado, Chögyam Trungpa's *Nalanda Foundation*²⁵ is an umbrella centre to extend his 'Shambhala training' to include those art activities that he considered have a meditative quality. In 1974, Chögyam Trungpa founded the *Naropa Institute* in Boulder, Colorado which later became *Naropa University*. He "realized his vision of creating a university that would combine contemplative studies with traditional Western scholastic and artistic disciplines."²⁶ He had a number of notable students, among whom were Allen Ginsberg²⁷, William S. Burroughs²⁸, Diane di Prima²⁹, José Argüelles,³⁰ and Anne Waldman.³¹

²⁴ Nalanda University was a center of Buddhist learning which flourished in India from the 5th to 12th centuries.

²⁵ Nalanda Foundation of Canada was founded in 1983 as its international headquarters to establish the Shambhala training program and a Naropa Institute project in Canada, the foundation was then moved to Halifax in 1985.

²⁶ As mentioned in Naropa University's official website. Naropa University, "About Naropa," *Naropa University*, last modify not indicated, <http://coursecatalog.naropa.edu/about-naropa> (accessed 19 March, 2011).

²⁷ Irwin Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997) was an American poet who was a practicing Buddhist and studied Eastern religious disciplines extensively. In the 1950s, Ginsberg was a leading figure of the Beat Generation, he was vigorously opposed militarism, materialism and sexual repression. His epic poem "Howl" celebrates his fellow "angel-headed hipsters" and excoriates is one of the classic poems of the Beat Generation.

²⁸ William Seward Burroughs II (1914-1997) was a novelist, poet, essayist and spoken word performer and considered to be 'one of the most politically trenchant, culturally influential, and innovative American artists of the 20th century.' He was one of the primary figures of the Beat Generation and a major postmodernist author who affected popular culture as well as literature.

²⁹ Diane di Prima (born 1934) participated in the emerging Beat movement during the late 1950s and early 1960s in Manhattan. She was a key figure between the Beat movement and the later hippies, as well as between East Coast and West Coast artists.

³⁰ Twin brother of poet Ivan Argüelles, José Argüelles (born 1939) is a Mexican-American author, artist, and educator, who holds a Ph.D. in Art History and Aesthetics from the University of Chicago. He is the founder of Planet Art Network, and has taught at numerous colleges, including Princeton University and the San Francisco Art Institute. He produced a series of psychedelic art paintings and has provided illustrations for numerous books, as well as mural paintings at different universities.

³¹ Anne Waldman (born 1945) is an American poet, writer, performer, collaborator, professor, editor, scholar, and cultural/political activist. She has been an active member of the "Outrider" experimental poetry community since the 1960's.

Chögyam Trungpa, Thomas Merton and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy's teaching and writings about Zen Buddhism provide an opportunity for Westerners and others to access Eastern thought through Western views. Besides, other information such as Zen paintings, Japanese and Chinese calligraphy, martial arts and haiku poetry were also available sources for the West to encounter Zen. During the period of the blooming of Zen, around the 1940's and 50's, Carl Gustav Jung's psychoanalysis had an impact on some of the prominent American artists³² of the day including Jackson Pollock and Marrie-Louise Von Franz. Apart from the foreword for D. T. Suzuki's *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, Carl Gustav Jung also wrote the introduction for Richard Wilhelm's translation of *I Ching or The Book of Changes* and *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, and mentioned that he bridged the culture between East and West.³³ Some of the psychoanalysts who came to prominence after Carl Gustav Jung such as Erich Fromm and Martha Jaeger were also motivated by Zen. In 1960, *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* was published under the co-authorship of Erich Fromm, D. T. Suzuki, and Richard De Martino, it having originated from a workshop on Zen Buddhism and psychoanalysis, which was held under the auspices of the *Department of Psychoanalysis of the Medical School, Autonomous National University of Mexico* in

³² Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, ed., *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: an Anthology of Changing Ideas* (UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 378.

³³ In the conclusion of his collaborative work with Richard Wilhelm, Jung suggested that "The purpose of my commentary is to attempt to build a bridge of psychological understanding between East and West."

Cuernavaca in 1957. The three sections of the book include *Lectures on Zen Buddhism* by D. T. Suzuki, *Psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism* by Erich Fromm, and *The Human Situation and Zen Buddhism* by Richard De Martino.

2.3 Zen's Influence on Western Contemporary Art World

“Immediately after the Second World War confusion prevailed. It was a period in which questions arose as to Man's existence and the nature of reality. Various artists not only sought answers to these questions in Western cultures, but also opened their minds to views from non-Western cultures. ...One wonders what those artists found in those remote cultures.”³⁴

Zen Buddhism's influence has grown and continues to have an impact on many artists and writers in the West including up until the present day. Many artists of international standing who worked in the aftermath of Marcel Duchamp were influenced by Zen teaching with its emphasis on the ‘spiritual’ practice of the everyday. Artists such as John Cage, Allan Kaprow, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper

³⁴ Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 7.

Johns, Mark Tobey and Ad Reinhardt, together with Zen-inspired art groups and institutions like *The Club*³⁵, *Zen* 49³⁶ and *Black Mountain College*³⁷ are among the important individuals and collectives associated with Zen Buddhism.

2.3.1 The Case of R. Mutt

“Artists of the Surrealist era were especially interested in various esoteric traditions from Alchemy and Zen. One of these artists was Duchamp. ... He wanted to return art to something that could be (as he said) ‘at the service of the mind’.”³⁸

Marcel Duchamp produced various iconoclastic pieces to question the traditional values of a work of art that caused significant change in the ‘art world’ at the beginning of the 20th century. His less well known *Draft on the Japanese Apple Tree* (1911) shows a seated Buddha-like figure suggests his interest in oriental culture and Zen Buddhism (please refer to image 2.01). *Buddha of the Bathroom*, an article by Louise Norton published in *The Blind Man* magazine (number 2, 1917) compared and

³⁵ Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 59-61.

³⁶ Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 143, 148, 150 & 151.

³⁷ Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 62.

³⁸ Lanier Graham, “Duchamp & Androgyny: The Concept and its Context” *Articles, Tout-fait: The Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal*, Vol. 2/Issue 4, January 2002. Last modified unknown. http://www.toutfait.com/issues/volume2/issue_4/articles/graham/graham3.html (accessed on 17 July 2011).

described how the simplicity line and colour of Marcel Duchamp's 'Fountain' was being described 'like a lovely Buddha'³⁹ (please refer to image 2.02), and Guillaume Apollinaire suggested in *Mercure de France* (1918) how *Fountain* was "transforming into Buddha an object of hygiene and male convenience."⁴⁰ In the poster he designed for his own retrospective exhibition (1967) in Paris Marcel Duchamp incorporated a montage of his right hand with palm facing the viewer and which may be considered alongside Buddhist and Hindu *Mudra* or hand gestures⁴¹ (please refer to image 2.03). The appearance of his *Fountain* is comparable to the Zen master giving his monk follower a strike on the head to be awakened by the sudden impact. It reminded the 'art world' that art emerges from the everyday and that non-art, art and the everyday coexist. Just as he gave advice to John Cage on the game of chess where he said, "Don't just play your side of the game, play both sides"⁴², John Cage thought that it was a 'very Oriental advice'⁴³ similar to Zen Buddhists' teaching of *The Middle Way*. (Please refer to chapter 4, section 4.8.1 for further discussion on *The Middle Way*).

³⁹ Louise Norton, *Buddha of the Bathroom* (The Blind Man, number 2, 1917).

⁴⁰ Apollinaire, Guillaume, *Mercure de France* (16 June 1918). Original French version in *Mercure de France: Le point de vue se la Society of Independents Artists* est évidemment absurde, car il par du point de vue insoutenable que l'art ne peut ennoblir un objet, et en l'espèce il l'ennoblissant singulièrement en transformant en Bouddha un objet d'hygiène et de toilette masculine. English translation extracted from: Jennifer Gough-Cooper and Jacques Caumont, *Ephemerides on and about Marcel Duchamp and Rose Sélavy 1887-1968*, ed. Pontus Hulten, (UK: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 16 June 1918.

⁴¹ Baas and Jacob, *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, 138.

⁴² Baas and Jacob, *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, 126

⁴³ Baas and Jacob, *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, 126

The idea of Marcel Duchamp's 'readymade' troubled the traditional Western concept of a work of art and blurred the boundary between 'art' and 'non-art', where an everyday object became art and art became an everyday object, and where the attention on physical artistic product shifted to process. This dilemma may be seen as a landmark in advancing the conventional to embrace the everyday and turning the idea of art into an open-ended one.

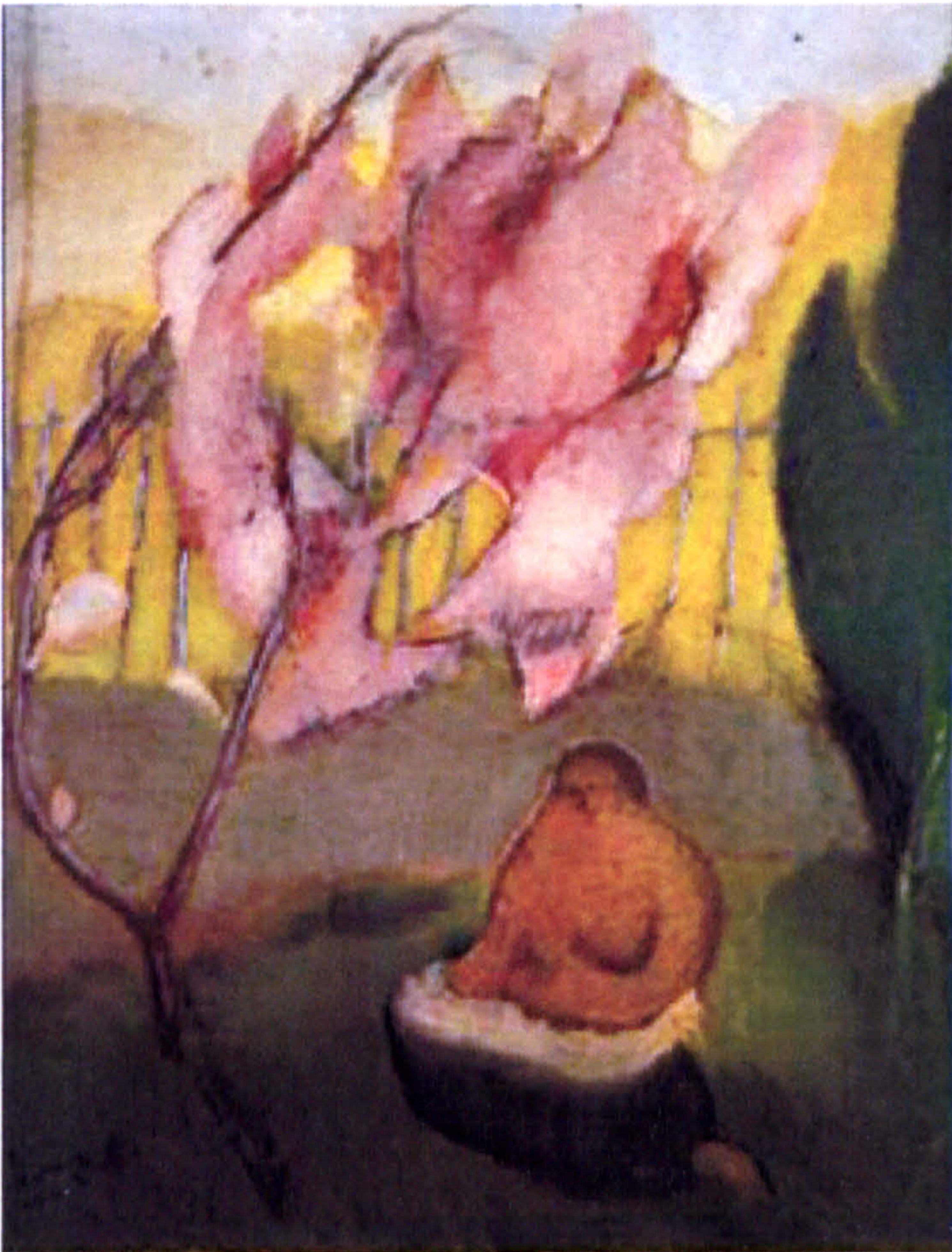


Image 2.01
Marcel Duchamp, *Draft on the Japanese Apple Tree*, 1911



Image 2.02
Comparative images of *Fountain* and Buddha statue

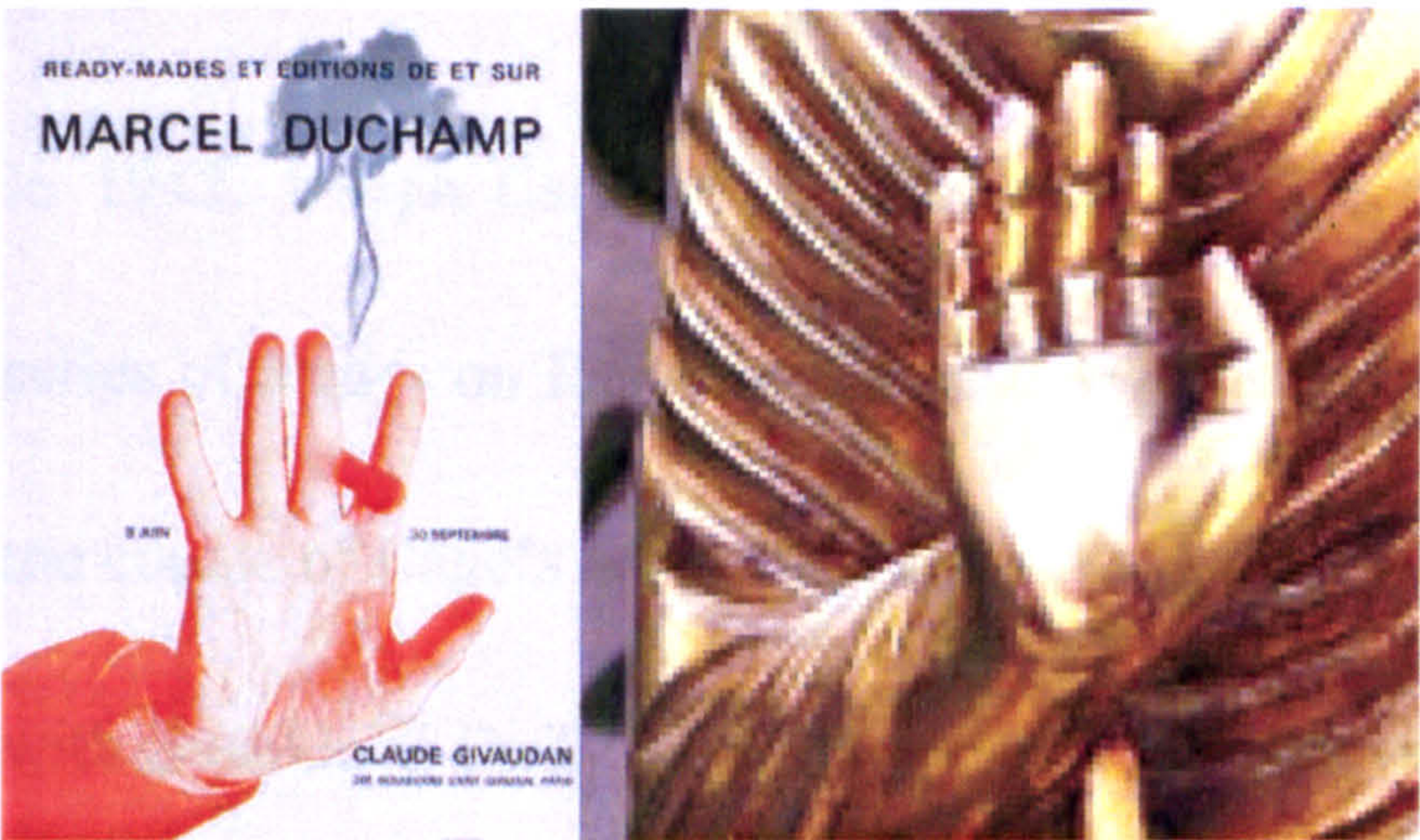


Image 2.03
Comparative images of *Marcel Duchamp's poster* and
Buddhist and Hindu's Mudra

2.3.2 Artists Exploring Concepts of the Everyday

Since the beginning of the 20th century, following the emergence of Pablo Picasso's collage and found objects, Dadaists' collage, as well as Marcel Duchamp's readymades, the everyday was open for interpretation and eventually developed into

many possibilities including Happenings, Conceptual Art, Fluxus, and Arte Povera. The arrival of D. T. Suzuki in the West provided an opportunity and stimulus for artists to find new ways to consider questions of everyday life and art including outside their own culture.

i) John Cage (1912-1992)

In 1942, Joseph Campbell, introduced John Cage to Ananda K. Coomaraswamy's series of essays on Eastern and Western art and spirituality. "This encounter changed the course of Cage's aesthetic philosophy and prepared him for his later studies of Zen with Suzuki."⁴⁴ D. T. Suzuki's series of lectures at the Columbia University became formative experiences for a number of writers, artists and musicians. Mary Farkas, the 'Woman Master of the First Zen Institute' in New York, who knew D. T. Suzuki personally and followed his lectures, suggested that "The artists who attended the lectures included John Cage, Ad Reinhardt, Philip Guston and Abram Lassow. And the gallery owner Betty Parsons was also present...." ⁴⁵ John Cage, who developed under the combination of 'Duchampian' and 'Suzukian' influence, remains probably the most prominent artist in adopting Eastern thought into Western art. In his

⁴⁴ Munroe, *Third Mind*, 29.

⁴⁵ Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 52-53.

autobiographical statement he attempted to associate Marcel Duchamp with Zen, saying that, “The taste of Zen for me comes from the admixture of humor, intransigence, and detachment. It makes me think of Marcel Duchamp...” He then indicated that “It was at Black Mountain College that I made what is sometimes said to be the first happening.” John Cage’s interest in ‘Nothingness’ or ‘Emptiness’ stemmed from his long interest in Zen Buddhism, and in his own words John Cage said:

“It was also at the Cornish School that I became aware of Zen Buddhism, which later, as part of oriental philosophy, took the place for me of psychoanalysis. (...) In the late thirties I heard a lecture by Nancy Wilson Ross on Dada and Zen. I mentioned this in my foreword to *Silence* then adding that I did not want my work blamed on Zen, though I felt that Zen changes in different times and places and what it has become here and now, I am not certain. Whatever it is it gives me delight and most recently by means of Stephen Addiss’ book *The Art of Zen*. I had the good fortune to attend Daisetz Suzuki’s classes in the philosophy of Zen Buddhism at Columbia University in the late forties. And I visited him twice in Japan.”⁴⁶ (Please refer to image 2.04).

⁴⁶ See Cage’s autobiography statement.



Image 2.04

John Cage with D. T. Suzuki in Japan in 1962

John Cage followed D. T. Suzuki's courses from 1952 onwards at a time of experiencing emotional problems in his private life and with respect to the function of art in society. He also mentioned that "The Buddhist texts to which I often return are the *Huang-Po Doctrine of Universal Mind*."⁴⁷ In 1950, Christian Wolff visited John Cage's with *I Ching* or *The Book of Changes* that had just been published by Pantheon. Inspired, and as a homage to that book, John Cage used the *I Ching* coins and charts to compose his 1951 piece called *Music of Changes*.

⁴⁷ See Cage's autobiography statement.

ii) Allan Kaprow (1927-2006)

Throughout his career, Allan Kaprow experimented with his idea of 'lifelike art' where he attempted to shift art from the 'art world' to 'everyday life'. He said that "The line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible."⁴⁸ This may imply that Allan Kaprow sensed that Western art had been set apart from the experiences of everyday life. Alongside John Cage he is, "...famous first as the inventor of Happenings – a late fifties art form in which all manner of materials, colors, sounds, odors, and common objects and events were orchestrated in ways that approximated the spectacle of modern everyday life..."⁴⁹ According to Jonathan Fineberg, Allan Kaprow "signed up for Cage's course two years in a row... Cage's discussion of the ideas of Zen, Duchamp, Artaud, and above all his description of the active participation of the audience in the 1952 "Event" at Black Mountain College stimulated Kaprow to arrange his own happening in 1958."⁵⁰ The idea for the first Happenings was seeded from the *New School for Social Research* in New York in which John Cage was teaching a class in the 50's.⁵¹ The theatre of Happenings took place in the everyday rather than on the stage, instead of pre-written script it embodies

⁴⁸ Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, ed., *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings* (US: University of California Press, 1996), 709.

⁴⁹ Jeff Kelly, ed., *Essays on: The Blurring of Art and Life* (US: University of California Press, 1996), Xii.

⁵⁰ Jonathan Fineberg, *Art since 1940: Strategies of Being* (US: Laurence King Publishing, [2nd edit.] 2000), 188.

⁵¹ Fineberg, *Art since 1940*, 188.

a sense of spontaneity and chance as in the way the *I Ching* is used in John Cage's work. Allan Kaprow moved from the everyday or found objects to the juxtaposition of 'found events'. In his 1958 article on *The Legacy of Jackson Pollock*, Allan Kaprow wrote his comment on the use of the everyday in 'new art':

"Pollock, as I see him, left us at the point where we must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life. (...) Objects of every sort are materials for the new art ..."⁵²

iii) Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008)

Robert Rauschenberg began to study at the Black Mountain College in 1948. Apart from his celebrated 'White Paintings' and 'Black Paintings', he produced a number of remarkable but less mentioned pieces such as having a female model positioned herself face down on light-sensitive blueprint paper, bathing her in floodlight (please refer to images 2.05 and 2.06). On another occasion he directed John Cage to drive his 'Model A car' with inked tyres to produce an *Automobile Tire Print*, 1953 on long paper sheets (please refer to image 2.07). He also produced a *Dirt Painting* that sprouted with real plants and had to be watered. For these, as suggested by Jonathan

⁵² Fineberg, *Art since 1940*, 190.

Fineberg, it seems that he was inspired by John Cage's idea that 'art should emulate natural processes'⁵³ which also correlates with John Cage's autobiographical statement, "I also found in the writings of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy that the responsibility of the artist is to imitate nature in her manner of operation."

In 1954, Robert Rauschenberg met Jasper Johns and shared conversation about art (please refer to image 2.08). They came to understand each other's work and developed an interest in an introspective content in art echoing Buddhist practice. Robert Rauschenberg absorbed information from talking with friends especially including John Cage and Jasper Johns about what they were reading.⁵⁴ Robert Rauschenberg associated with Abstract Expressionists at 'The Club' and was a friend of most of the prominent artists of the time and also participated in the 'Event' orchestrated by John Cage and Merce Cunningham at Black Mountain College. Jonathan Fineberg pointed out that:

"In the 1952 'event' M. C. Richards and the poet Charles Olson read poetry from ladders; Rauschenberg's "White Paintings" hung overhead while he play Edith Piaf records on an old phonograph; David Tudor performed on the piano; Merce Cunningham danced in and around the audience (chased by barking dog); coffee was

⁵³ Fineberg, *Art since 1940*, 179.

⁵⁴ Fineberg, *Art since 1940*, 179.

served by four boys dressed in white; and Cage sat on a step-ladder for two hours – sometimes reading a lecture on the relation of music to Zen Buddhism, sometimes silently listening.”⁵⁵



Image 2.05
Creating an artwork using nude model, sun lamp and blue print paper in 1951



Image 2.06
Washing the artwork with peroxide solution

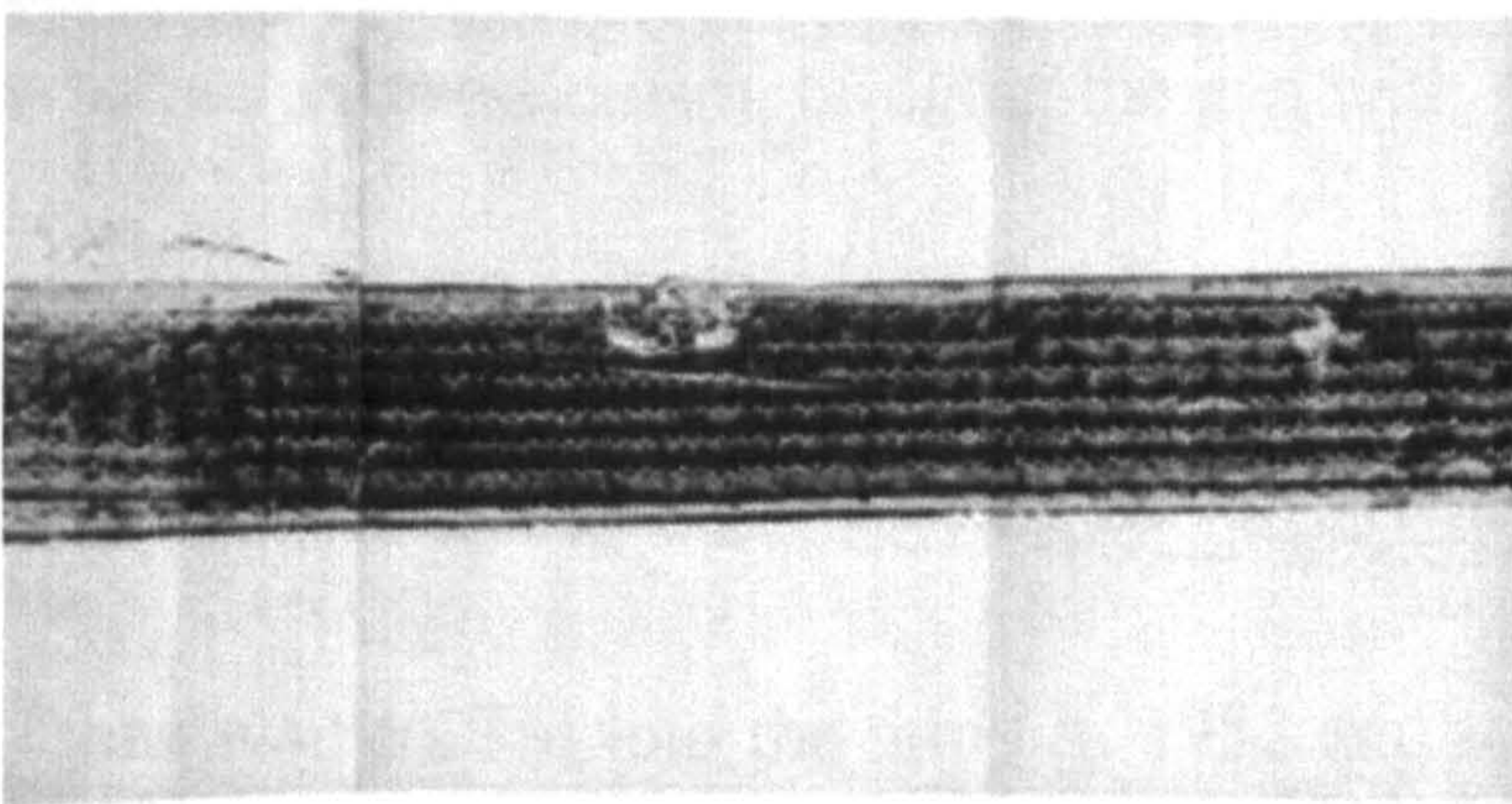


Image 2.07
Robert Rauschenberg, *Automobile Tire Print*, 1953

⁵⁵ Fineberg, *Art since 1940*, 173.



Image 2.08

Robert Rauschenberg sharing conversation with Jasper Johns in 1954

iv) Jasper Johns (born 1930)

Named after Sergeant William Jasper, a revolutionary war hero, Jasper Johns is often considered part of the Neo-Dadaist movement. He is also considered as a particularly influential artist during his early career, shaping the artistic movements following Abstract Expressionism, bridging the gap with Pop Art and laying the groundwork for Minimalism.

Johns was drafted into the army in 1952 and stationed in South Carolina and Sendai, Japan during the Korean War, while his second visit to Japan was between May and June 1964.⁵⁶ Upon returning to New York in 1953 after serving in the army, he

⁵⁶ Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, 150.

became friends with John Cage, Merce Cunningham⁵⁷ and set up his studio in the same building with Robert Rauschenberg the following year. Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg met Marcel Duchamp in late 1959⁵⁸ and which deeply influenced both of them. Their subsequent involvement in Merce Cunningham's modern dance company⁵⁹ also inspired Jasper Johns's painting during this period. John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns shared friendships as well as rich sources of Zen Buddhism.

Although his early work drew on Abstract Expressionism's ideas and techniques, Jasper Johns led art-making into a new direction by endowing ordinary objects or familiar things such as stencil numbers, targets, ale cans, flag and maps of the US with artistic importance. His 'target painting' (please refer to image 2.09) with plaster cast sense organs (1955) including mouth, ear, penis, perhaps suggests that he might had come into contact with Eugen Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of the Archery*⁶⁰ where the teaching based on the understanding of bow, arrow, mind, Zen Buddhism and aiming/un-aiming on the target. His *Painted Bronze, two cans of Ballantine Ale cast in*

⁵⁷ "Jasper Johns (born1930)", Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed May 10, 2011. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/john/hd_john.htm

⁵⁸ Calvin Tomkins, Profiles, "The Mind's Eye," The New Yorker, December 11, 2006, 76.

⁵⁹ Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, 149. According to Jacquelyn Baas, Jasper Johns was the artistic advisor to the Merce Cunningham Dance Company in 1967.

⁶⁰ Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, 147.

bronze (please refer to image 2.10), was a sculpture that came to define his theories of reality and highlighted the power of ordinary objects. Jasper Johns played with the ideas of opposites, contradictions, paradoxes and ironies. The beer cans piece, where he punctured the top of one and left the other closed, “portrayed himself and Rauschenberg – one open and light, the other solid, heavy, impenetrable.”⁶¹ It also implies his thesis/antithesis approach including the understanding of solid and liquid, full and empty, light and heavy, and before and after that can be related to a Zen Buddhist understanding of the *Middle Way*. *Savarin Coffee Can with Paint Brush*. *Painted Bronze* (1960) is another prominent example of his work where he has used ordinary objects to considerable effect (please refer to image 2.11). Jacquelynn Baas suggested that, “As Johns’s career has progressed, however, personal content has assumed an ever greater role in his work. At the same time, Tantric Buddhist subject matter has become explicit, suggesting that a Zen Buddhist reading of his earlier work may be helpful to its interpretation.”⁶²

The often mentioned ‘Black Mountain Event’ had an obvious influence on both Allan Kaprow and Robert Rauschenberg, but most notable was the friendship between Robert Rauschenberg and John Cage. Inspired by the idea of the ‘readymade’ and Zen

⁶¹ Fineberg, *Art since 1940*, 213.

⁶² Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, 111.

Buddhism, John Cage regarded the everyday world as a source for art. The art-life paradigm, the notion of ‘Now’ and ‘Nothingness’ was developed and introduced into his most famous 4’33” silent piece in 1952.

“Rauschenberg pioneered an art style that promoted an unfocused openness to external events.”⁶³ He absorbed and shared information on art and Buddhist teaching through his extensive conversations with John Cage in the late 40s and early 50s. Following the arrival of D. T. Suzuki; John Cage, Allan Kaprow, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns influenced each others’ thinking and works and through their encounter with Zen Buddhism and Eastern philosophy.

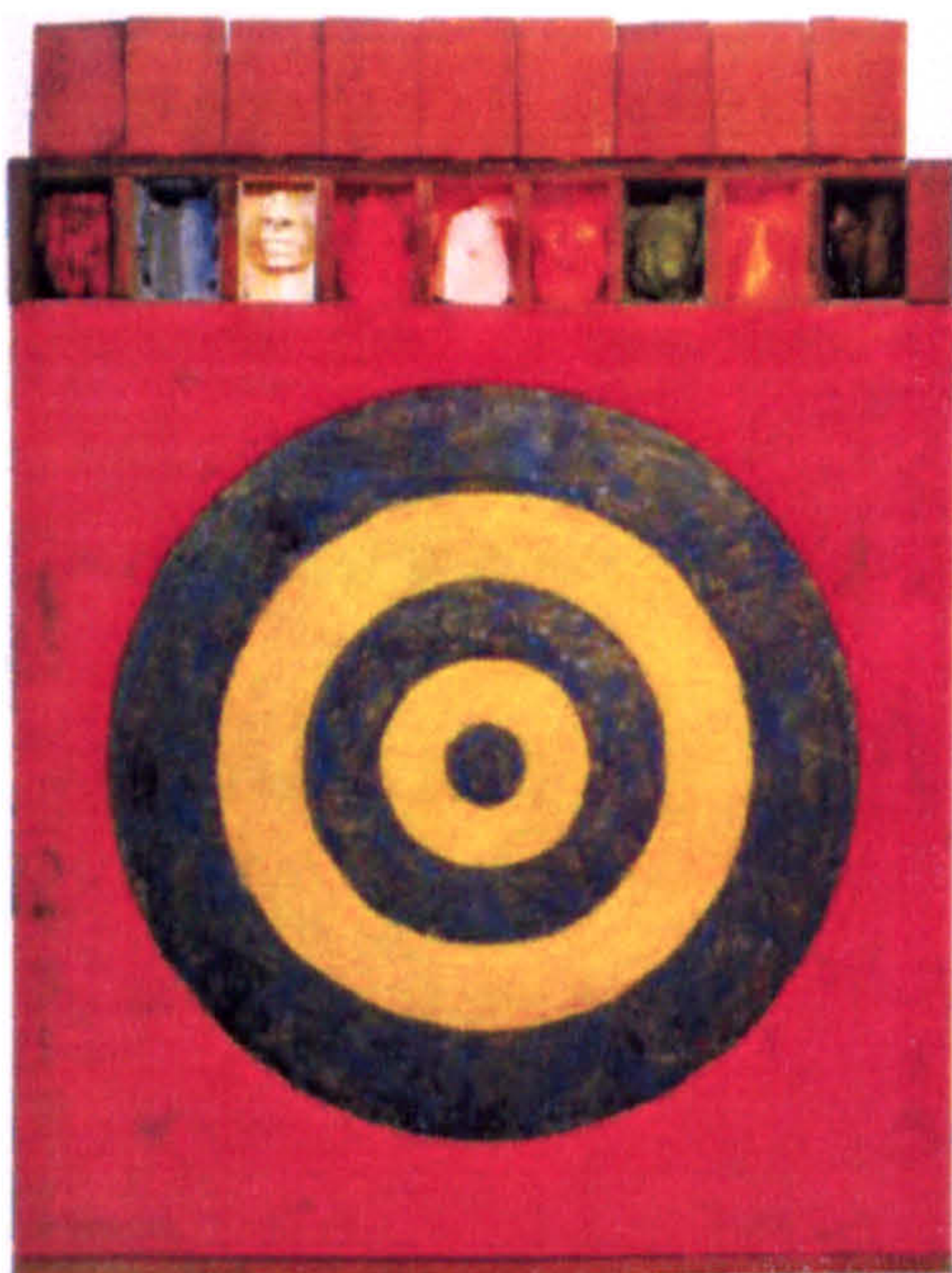


Image 2.09
Jasper Johns, *Target with Plaster Casts*, 1955



Image 2.10
Jasper Johns, *Painted Bronze*, 1960

⁶³ Fineberg, *Art since 1940*, 181.



Image 2.11
Jasper Johns, *Savarin Coffee Can with Paint Brushes*. Painted Bronze, 1960

v) Joseph Beuys (1921-1986)

In Germany, Joseph Beuys not only utilized materials such as fat, honey and felt, he declared that ‘Everyone is an artist’ in a similar way to that of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy when he suggested that “the artist is not a special kind of person, but everyman is a special kind of artist”⁶⁴ and when the Buddha said that ‘everyone has the Buddha nature’. Joseph Beuys used everyday objects as well as everyday actions. He believed creative art activities have potential to bring revolutionary changes and help shape society and politics. His lecture series (please refer to images 2.12 and

⁶⁴ Brian Keeble, ed., *Everyman an Artist: Readings in Traditional Philosophy of Arts* (US: World Wisdom Inc., 2005)

2.13) was an evolution from referring to physical sculpture to a wider ‘Social Sculpture’, suggesting that people are connected and that anyone who took part in his lectures made up part of his sculpture. In other words, the society as a whole regarded as a work of art, an idea that mirrors the Buddhist teaching of *Sangha* and *Oneness* (discussed in chapter 1, section 1.3.6 and chapter 4, section 4.6.5).



Image 2.12

Joseph Beuys delivering his lecture at The Poorhouse in Edinburgh in 1975



Image 2.13

Joseph Beuys delivering his lecture in Achberg, Germany in 1978

vi) Günther Uecker (born 1930)

The subject of Günther Uecker's work revolved around the matter of life, suffering and death, all of which have a connection with the basic teaching of *Four Pains* in Buddhism. Beginning his 'trademark' nail project in 1957 (please refer to images 2.14 and 2.15), throughout his career, Günther Uecker repeatedly hammered hundred of nails into furniture, canvases, and all kinds of other objects of everyday use, indicating a ritualistic meditative quality in the repetition process. Westgeest suggested that:

“Although Uecker believes he recalls having read the slim volumes by Herringel and Suzuki, his friends and critics were the prime agents in acquainting him the parallels between Zen (and Zen arts) and his own outlook on life and work. (...) Some critics take the similarities with Zen as a substantiation that Zen was an important source of inspiration for Uecker. (...) A meeting with John Cage when he was staying in Düsseldorf in 1959 made a great impression on Uecker. (...) The presence of the ‘physical element’ implies that much of Uecker’s work, like that of Cage, could be classified as living art.”⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 163.

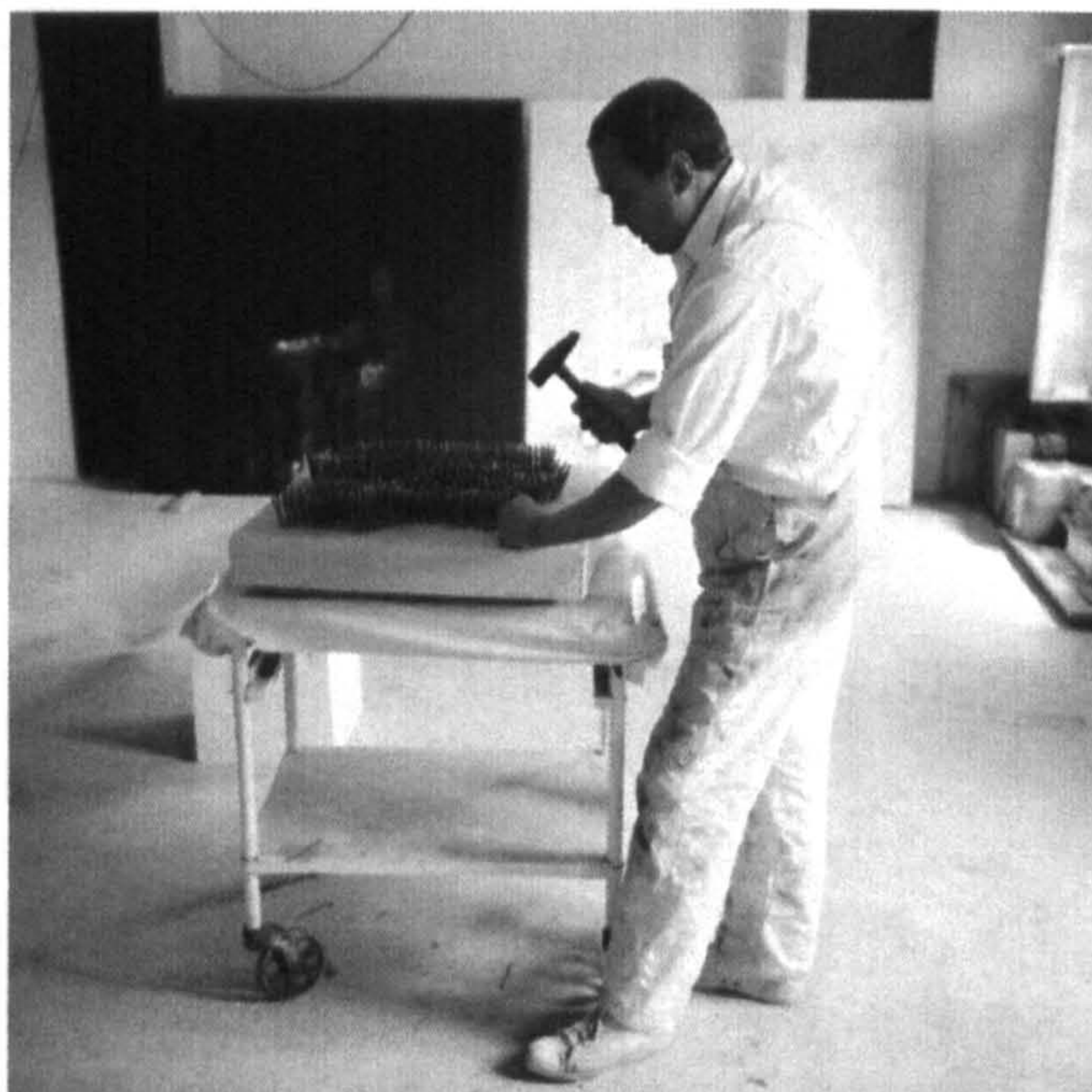


Image 2.14
Günther Uecker working on his nails artwork

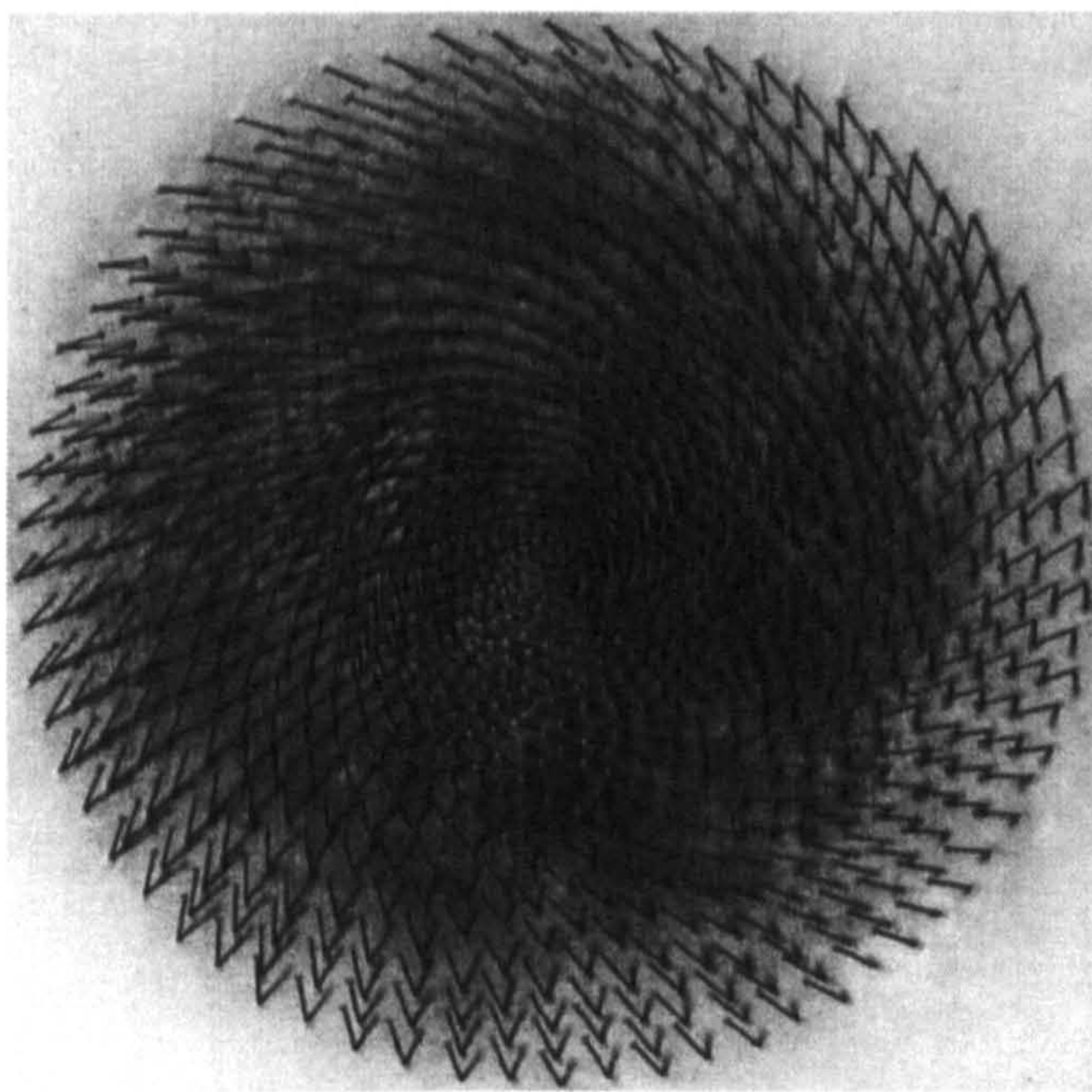


Image 2.15
Günther Uecker, *Nails and Charcoal on Canvas*, 1969

vii) Richard Long (born 1945)

Since 1967, Richard Long has incorporated nature into his work, similar in many ways to that of the Zen inspired poets from China and Japan. In *A Line Made by Walking*, 1967 (please refer to image 2.16), Richard Long walked up and down in a straight line in empty field to leave traces of his walk and documented the event in black and white photograph. In walking as art, the body replaced pencil and the earth replaced paper. For Richard Long, walking is a very free and simple way that enabled him to be an artist potentially anywhere.⁶⁶ Walking explores the concepts of physical presence and

⁶⁶ An article published in The Independent in conjunction with Long’s ‘Heaven and Earth’ retrospective exhibition at Tate Britain. Tom Lubbock, “Richard Long: Walks on the Wild side,” *The Independent*, last modified 2 June, 2009, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/richard-long-walks-on-the-wild-side-1694454.html> (accessed 20 March, 2011).

the presence of the mind that relevant to Zen Buddhists' walking meditation. Richard Long suggested that:

“Walking itself has a cultural history, from Pilgrims to the wandering Japanese poets,
(...) My first work made by walking, in 1967, was a straight line in a grass field,
which was also my own path, going 'nowhere'.”⁶⁷

Matsuo Basho (1644-1694) the celebrated Zen poet of 'hokku', the precursor to 'haiku' who was active during the Edo period in Japan, found inspiration through walking in the countryside and wilderness throughout much of Japan. Walking is an everyday action, and Zen Buddhists emphasize the importance of walking and introduced the practice of 'walking meditation'. Richard Long's series of text works are comparable with haiku in that they describe what exactly happened rather than adding projected ideas. This is one of the examples of his 1988 text called *Two Sahara Stone*:⁶⁸

Sitting on a mountaintop

In the hoggar

Clapping two flat stones together

A thousand times

⁶⁷ Clarrie Wallies, ed., *Richard Long: Heaven and Earth* (UK: Tate, 2009), 146.

⁶⁸ Wallies, *Richard Long: Heaven and Earth*, 108.

Nicholas Serota suggested that “Long’s work has conventionally been linked to a tradition of English engagement with landscape and nature”⁶⁹, I see that Long’s work can also be linked with the Zen haiku and walking meditation, as he himself has stated.



Image 2.16
Richard Long, *A Line Made by walking*, 1967

viii) Andy Goldsworthy (born 1956)

Like Richard Long, Andy Goldsworthy works with Nature and experiments with various natural materials such as leaves, grass, stones, wood, sand, clay, ice and snow.

⁶⁹ Nicholas Serota, “How Long’s Artwork Changed Our World” *The Independent*, last modified 8 May, 2009, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/nicholas-serota-how-longs-artwork-changed-our-world-1680690.html> (accessed on 4 August, 2011).

Goldsworthy stated:

"At its most successful, my 'touch' looks into the heart of nature; most days I don't even get close. These things are all part of a transient process that I cannot understand unless my touch is also transient-only in this way can the cycle remain unbroken and the process be complete."⁷⁰

Richard Long's and Andy Goldsworthy's engagement with the land and poetic evocations of the beauty, grandeur and impermanent nature of the earth may be studied alongside Zen Buddhists' ideas of 'impermanence' and 'Mindfulness' of nature.

My thought connects with the works of the artists discussed in this section, I made brief suggestions as to their connections with Zen Buddhist practice to prepare the ground for further discussion in later chapters. There are few contemporary artists who were not and are not influenced by Marcel Duchamp in one way or another, and his influence continues to expand even up to the present day. At the beginning of the 20th century, D. T. Suzuki played a major role in introducing the teaching of Zen Buddhism to the West thus providing Western artists with an alternative to their own

⁷⁰ Hobby Holmes and Emily Busse, "What is Art...? What is an Artist...?" Sweet Briar College, last modify not indicated, <http://www.arthistory.sbc.edu/artartists/photoandy.html> (accessed on 20 March, 2011).

culture and thereby creating a new impact on the world of art. These two influences, which started during the period of Dada and Surrealism, continued to grow during the period of Abstract Expressionism of Pollock and de Kooning to the Neo-Dada or Conceptual era of Cage and Beuys. The following section explores some of the most relevant books that compiled important sources on Western contemporary art meeting Zen Buddhism.

2.3.3 Exhibitions/Publications Explore the Relationship between Western Art and Zen

i) ‘Zen Buddhism and its Relation to Art’

In 1913, Arthur Waley (1889-1966) was appointed as an ‘Assistant Keeper of Oriental Prints and Manuscripts’ at the British Museum. His ability to understand Chinese and Japanese languages assisted him in cataloguing the paintings in the Museum’s collection. On leaving the British Museum he was appointed as a lecturer at the ‘School of Oriental and African Studies’ in London. Throughout his career he translated Chinese classic texts including *The Analects of Confucius* and *The Way and*

its Power also known as 'Dao Te Ching', as well as Japanese texts such as *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon* (1928).

In *Zen Buddhism and its Relation to Art* (1959), Arthur Waley felt that books on the Far East often mentioned that "Zen Buddhism exercised a profound influence upon art and Zen" but tell very little "the exact nature of its influence upon the arts."⁷¹ Arthur Waley's discussion mainly provides some background about Zen and art, and his discussion on Zen Art is mainly restricted to two types of traditional Chinese Zen paintings rather than contemporary art. Firstly, he discussed traditional paintings with representations of animals, birds and flowers where the artists attempted to identify themselves with the objects depicted and externalize their 'inner Buddha'. Secondly, he discussed paintings that dramatically illustrated episodes in the lives of the great Zen teachers. Arthur Waley's discussion did not extend to any kind of Western arts but his suggestion that artists can obtain "a better understanding of the psychological conditions under which art is produced"⁷² somewhat coincided with John Cage's recovering from 'emotional crises'⁷³ through Zen. Similar to Arthur Waley's essay is Toshimitsu Hasumi's *Zen in Japanese Art* in which he discussed at great length the

⁷¹ Waley, *Zen Buddhism and its Relation to Art*, 7.

⁷² Waley, *Zen Buddhism and its Relation to Art*, 21-22.

⁷³ Fineberg, *Art since 1940*, 175.

spirituality of different Japanese arts such as ink painting, poetry and the tea ceremony. Hasumi briefly mentioned abstract art but had not made a comparative study with any sort of Zen Buddhist practice.

ii) 'Zen in the Fifties: Interaction in Art between East and West'

Helen Westgeest (born 1958) suggested that, after World War II, a number of artists in Japan and China who created work “resembled those contemporaries in the West” inspired her “to seek greater clarity concerning the connection and contrasts between modern art in the West and its counterpart in the Far East”⁷⁴ during the 1950’s. In 1996, her PhD dissertation *Zen in the Fifties: Interaction in Art between East and West* was published, to “elucidate the complexity of the observed affinity of artists with Zen and the Zen arts in the fifties.”⁷⁵ In my survey, Helen Westgeest’s book is one of the most important to cover the subject of how Zen Buddhism influenced Western modern art. She looks at the influence of Zen Buddhism on a number of Western modern artists from the United States, Japan, France, and Germany, and offers insight into Zen and the characteristics of Zen art.

⁷⁴ Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 7.

⁷⁵ Hasumi, *Zen in Japanese Art*, 74.

Helen Westgeest's consideration is on the inclusion of Zen in the 1950s into the new artistic, philosophical and psychological theories which helped to open up the way for Western artists to explore both inner landscape and outer reality. She also analyzes the works of John Cage, Ad Reinhardt and Mark Tobey in America, Yves Klein and Pierre Alechinsky in France, and Rupprecht Geiger and Günther Uecker in Germany, showing how the ideas, methods and works of these artists can be studied alongside those of the teaching of the Zen masters'. Helen Westgate's research mainly covered modern painters from the 1950's instead of more recent contemporary artists in other fine art disciplines such as sculpture and installation. Her aim for the thesis did not emphasize the concepts of the everyday between Western contemporary art and Zen. However, her discussion of 'living art', 'emptiness and nothingness', 'direct experience of here and now', 'nondualism and the universal' in her conclusion chapter are relevant to my practice and will be expanded on subsequently.

iii) 'The Zen of Seeing: Seeing/Drawing as Meditation'

In 1973, Dutch artist Frederick Franck (1909-2006) offered his concepts of seeing and drawing as disciplines to rediscover the everyday world as a way of experiencing Zen. In his first book, *The Zen of Seeing* the drawing process is used as Zen-like meditation

to stretch and improve the way artists see and draw. 'Seeing/Drawing' offers a way of contemplation by which things are made afresh in the observant eyes of an artist through drawing that requires attentiveness, by which the world is experienced 'now at this moment' as in Buddhist practice, freshly experiencing every moment. Frederick Frank said, "Once you start drawing an ordinary thing, a fly, a flower, a face, you realize how extraordinary it is. (...) What I have not drawn I have never really seen."⁷⁶ Franck also published his other book *Zen Seeing, Zen Drawing: Meditation in Action* in 1993. His books offer an account where attentiveness in the process of drawing corresponds to Zen meditation. Franck's view is restricted in representing the everyday through drawing, this research extends to the direct use of objects and activities of the everyday in works of art.

iv) 'Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art'

Published in 2004 in America and edited by Jacquelynn Baas and Mary Jane Jacob, *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art* uses material collected from a national consortium working under the title *Awake: Art, Buddhism, and the Dimension of Consciousness*. Between April 2001 and February 2003, the consortium focused on the influence of

⁷⁶ Frederick Franck, *The Zen of Seeing: Seeing/Drawing as Meditation* (US: Vintage Books, 1973), see back cover.

Buddhism in contemporary American art-making, a recurring theme that “had not been fully acknowledged or comprehensively analyzed.”⁷⁷ Arts professionals were brought together to explore and elucidate the relationship between the creative and perceptive mind in art and the meditative mind in Zen practice, attempting to tackle the questions about the relationship between art and life. Among them were artists, art critics, writers, curators, educators, and Buddhist commentators on psychology, literature, and cognitive science.

The book compiled a series of essays contributed by writers from a range of disciplines together with revealing interviews with some of the most influential international artists working today namely Bill Viola, Ann Hamilton, Rirkrit Tiravanija, and Lee Mingwei. Extending earlier 20th century aesthetic interests in blurring the boundaries of art and life, these artists consider art as a way of life, a daily practice, in ways parallel to that of the Buddhist’s practice. Their art works, as featured throughout the book, may be perceived as source material for the influence of Buddhist teaching on art making and for providing an Eastern viewpoint to interpret contemporary art. For example, the editors consider that many Western artists of our time began to recognize the Buddhist’s ‘Emptiness’, derived from meditation and

⁷⁷ Baas and Jacob, *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, 9.

which may be a concept conveying understanding of creative potential for art making.

The book provides rich sources for my research on the interaction between art and Zen, historical background, and artists receptive to Zen.

v) ‘Smile of the Buddha: Eastern Philosophy and Western Art from Monet to Today’

Published in 2005, Jacquelynn Baas’s *Smile of the Buddha* traced the connection and influence of Zen Buddhism on the art of Europe and America since Impressionism. Jacquelynn Baas offers her views in her informative introduction and essays on twenty artists ranging from Claude Monet, Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Wassily Kandinsky, Constantin Brancusi, Marcel Duchamp, Ad Reinhardt, Yves Klein, Jasper Johns, John Cage, Nam June Park, Yoko Ono, through to Richard Tuttle. She suggested that “For the artists in this book, Buddhist perspectives provided a mean to confront and engage both personal issues and the issues of their time... For a few others, ...the evidence for Buddhism is implicit rather than explicit.”⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, 1 & 10.

Jacquelynn Baas analyzed how Zen Buddhism offered and offers alternative ideas and ways of thinking to Western artists, and attempted to expand the readers' horizons as to how spirituality and creativity interact and inform each other. She pointed out that both Wassily Kandinsky's concept of 'the state of not understanding' and 'great, eternal question mark', and Buddhist's mind of not knowing; 'opened viewers to the experience of art', and that line, colour and form in art have the potential "to awaken the human spirit to its full potential."⁷⁹ She explores various topics such as how the emphasis on 'change and the interdependence of all existence'⁸⁰ in Eastern thought appealed to American and European artists, encouraging them to imagine a 'new connection between artist, viewer and object'. What this book has not provided is a view that comes from an Oriental practicing artist coming from a Buddhist background.

vi) 'The Third Mind: American Artists contemplate Asia, 1860 – 1989'

Organized by Alexandra Munroe, *The Third Mind* was published on the occasion of the exhibition of the same title at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2009. The exhibition explores how culture from the East such as art, literature, and philosophy

⁷⁹ Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, 61.

⁸⁰ Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, 1.

influenced the Abstractionists, Conceptualists, Minimalists, and Neo-avant-garde art movements that emerged in New York and on the West Coast in USA. Thus, according to Alexandra Munroe, Eastern culture influenced the artists who adapted it to create not only “new styles of art, but more importantly, a new theoretical definition of the contemplative experience and self-transformative role of art itself. The Asian dimension also gave a universalist logic to the modern and neo-avant-garde premise that art, life, and consciousness are interpenetrating realities unified by an existential concreteness.”⁸¹

Alexandra Munroe, a former lay disciple at the Rinzai Zen monastery of Daitoku-ji of Kyoto in Japan between 1977 and 1980, and latterly a Senior Curator in Asian art at the Guggenheim Museum is an authority on both Asian and Western Art histories, their philosophical traditions, and the theoretical discourses. *The Third Mind* sought to bring to light the appropriation and integration of Asian source into Western art practice, examining “the transformative impact of Asian art and thought on American creative culture.”⁸² The aim of the book is not to be about Asia itself but to reveal “a range of approaches that artists and writers used to collect ideas for their creative

⁸¹ Munroe, *Third Mind*, 22.

⁸² Munroe, *Third Mind*, 10.

strategies and historically conditioned worldviews.”⁸³ “The creative and historical phenomenon of how ideas were mediated, recombined and rearranged between the shifting mirages of East and West”⁸⁴ is what is described and identified as ‘The Third Mind’.

2.4 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter includes a comprehensive survey of the subjects related to my research question including perspectives from sociologists on the idea of the everyday, concepts of the everyday as examined in the art world, and the ways by which Buddhism arrived in the West and influenced artists. My research suggested that curators and writers tend to refer to the work of sociologists rather than providing a view from a Buddhist perspective when examining the concepts of the everyday in contemporary art. In most cases, when attempting to associate some artists’ practice with Zen, their discussions lack an analytical insight. Nevertheless, since I started this research in the end of 2003, the interest in investigating the relationship between Western art and Zen has grown, particularly so in America. This became relevant

⁸³ Munroe, *Third Mind*, 24.

⁸⁴ Munroe, *Third Mind*, 26.

when I became aware that *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art* was being published in 2004. In the following year, Mary Jane Jacobs's *Smile of the Buddha* was published. In 2010, I discovered that *The Third Mind* had been published recently in 2009. Running between November 2010 and April 2011, *Grain of Emptiness* curated by Martin Brauen at the Rubin Museum of Art, New York features five contemporary artists - Sanford Biggers, Theaster Gates, Atta Kim, Wolfgang Laib, and Charmion von Wiegand. These artists inherited the practice of incorporating Buddhist beliefs into their works, such as the ideas of emptiness, impermanence and Buddhist ritual practice. I see that my work and my findings are able to add to those areas covered so far, mainly due to the fact that my thesis elucidates what practice of the everyday in Zen Buddhism really is before going on to unpack individual elements in it in order to make a comparative study with my own art practice as well as with that of selected artists that are currently exploring the everyday in their art practices. My contention is that this area of study has been insufficiently emphasized in relevant publications.

There are two books I have not covered in this chapter but worth mentioning here, they are *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream against the Sky* (1994) which was by the same author of *The Third Mind* Alexandra Munroe, and *The Art of Zen* (1989) by Stephen Addiss. These two books focus solely on the Japanese contemporary art

world, Zen paintings and calligraphy respectively, but I shall make reference to them in subsequent chapters of this thesis. Some texts by Buddhists explore Zen Buddhism and oriental art e.g. D. T. Suzuki's *The Awakening of Zen* and *Zen and Japanese Culture*, Hugo Munsterberg's *Zen and Oriental Art*, Stewart W. Holmes and Chimyo Horioka co-written *Zen Art for Meditation*, Audrey Yoshiko Seo and Stephen Addiss co-written *The Art of Twentieth-Century Zen: Paintings and Calligraphy*, and Toshimitsu Hasumi's *Zen in Japanese Art: a Way of Spiritual Experience*. However, while they are long overdue, none of these works deliver a study of Western contemporary art and provide an insightful view of the subject explored in this research.

For decades, the teaching of Zen Buddhism and Zen arts e.g. ink painting, calligraphy and haiku have offered inspiration for Western artists to articulate the theoretical frameworks of their practice. It is hard to measure precisely the exact extent the influence of Zen Buddhism on Western art today, but the position, role, status, and the significance of the everyday in both art and Zen is under-acknowledged and deserves scholarly investigation.

CHAPTER 3

CONTEXTUALISATION

CONTENTS

3.1 Cultural and Social Changes, 123

3.2 Personal Background and Encounters, 130

3.3 Aspects of Zen Buddhist Teaching, 136

3.4 Food, Cooking and Eating, 139

3.5 Poverty and Creativity, 142

3.6 Transformation of Reality, 145

3.7 My Studio Practice in Relation to Art Movements, 147

3.7.1 Western Art, 147

i) Kurt Schwitters, 147

ii) The Conceptual and Dematerialization, 149

iii) Arte Povera, 151

3.7.2 Eastern Art, 153

i) Gutai Art (Concrete Art), 153

ii) Mono-ha (The School of Things), 159

3.8 Chapter Conclusion, 162

CHAPTER 3

CONTEXTUALISATION

The aim of this chapter is to contextualise my practice, to provide relevant background to help interpret the body of work I have produced to date, and to lay the ground to enable further discussion in the following chapter. The texts mainly offer three access points: Firstly, in relation to the capitalist system of distribution, consumption and waste, also covering issues of contemporary life style in the age of information technology. Secondly, I relate my studio practice to my childhood and personal background and explore origins and meaning. Thirdly, I position my work within a historical context of art practice to make relevant references. I refer to, but do not emphasize, the concepts of the everyday from both an art and Buddhist perspective, as this has been discussed at length in chapter 1 and it will be discussed again in chapter 4 when examining the individual works I have produced.

3.1 Cultural and Social Changes

The culture of waste is the by-product of a capitalist society based on a market economy and consumption to fulfil both basic human needs and aspirations. The 200-mile long Citarum River in Java West, Indonesia consisting of residential homes as well as over 500 factories along its bank sets a vivid example. In some part of the river, the surface of the water is often covered with human waste and rubbish thrown away, and is considered to be possibly one of the most polluted rivers in the world¹ (please refer to image 3.01). In China alone, an estimated 45 million pairs of disposable chopsticks are used and thrown away every year, which adds up to 1.7 million cubic metres of timbers or 25 million fully grown trees.² Often, artists find their inspiration within the discarded. Trained as a scientist, Tony Cragg produced a body of work in the 1970s and 1980s to elucidate the modern way of life and thereby raise questions about the increasing of consumerism. He suggested that the problem of environmental degradation is caused by “our lack of respect and understanding towards the world we live in.”³ Tony Cragg said that “Man functions in everyday life without knowing what

¹ Richard Shears, “Is this the World Most Polluted River?” *Daily Mail*, last modified 5 June, 2007, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-460077/Is-worlds-polluted-river.html> (accessed on 20 March, 2011).

² Clifford Coonan, “The True Price of Disposable Chopstick” *The Independent on Sunday*, last modified 27 March, 2006. <http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/the-true-price-of-disposable-chopsticks-471574.html> (accessed on 20 March, 2011).

³ Alistair Hicks, *New British Art in the Saatchi Collection* (UK: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 122.

the objects around him are, he is hardly aware of the political situation, the social reality, the chemical problems, even basic things like electricity.”⁴ Walking down the bank of the River Thames in London, it is not hard to find the remains of artefacts as evidence of irresponsible disposal. For Tony Cragg, pieces of abandoned plastic, furniture board and steel that he picked up from the river by his Wuppertal studio were the prime sources for his works such as *Minster*, *Spectrum* and *Stack* (please refer to images 3.02 to 3.04).



Image 3.01
A scene from Indonesia’s Citarum River



Image 3.02
Tony Cragg, *Minster*, 1987

⁴ Hicks, *New British Art in the Saatchi Collection*, 122.



Image 3.03
Tony Cragg, *Spectrum*, 1985



Image 3.04
Tony Cragg, *Stack*, 1975

Trash. From Junk to Art curated by Lea Vergine was an exhibition that examined the phenomenon of using waste and refuse as a material in 20th century contemporary art, stretching from the early decades of the century right through the 1960s, 1970s and up to 1990's. The exhibition featured artists such as Pablo Picasso, Kurt Schwitters, Allan Kaprow, Robert Rauschenberg, Joseph Cornell, Nam June Paik, Vladimir Vladimirovich Dimitriev, Pino Pascali, Francis Picabia, Mario Merz, Tony Cragg, Peter Fischli and David Weiss, and many others. Back in 1966, Giorgio Manganelli suggested that 'trash is a language', while Guido Viale, the author of *Throwaway World* (1994), perceived that "Waste materials are a world in themselves, a complex world parallel to goods and merchandise."⁵ Lea Vergine pointed out that the world of waste "...is a world lurking behind the mirror in which a consumer society... find[s]

⁵ Lea Vergine, *Trash. From Junk to Art* (Italy: Electa, 1997), 22.

the real nature of the products that are such an integral part of our daily lives.”⁶ He also suggested that “over the last hundred years the strategy of contrasting and mixing themes and means of expression specifically used in high-blow culture with others used by the mass media has flourished and expanded into other fields of artistic expression.”⁷ Similarly to Tony Cragg and the artists featured in *Trash. From Junk to Art*, I have found a plentiful supply of everyday materials and discarded artefacts to consider for the purposes of art-making.

The endless advances in information technology play a big part in the accelerating pace of change in contemporary everyday life. The way children are being brought up today represents a significant change and is in stark contrast to the childhood I had. My childhood involved making my own toys using discarded and unwanted materials, engaged in spontaneous interactive play with other children from the neighbourhood which I believe has an impact on my studio practice. Today, all such play seems too easily replaced by pre-designed computer games, offering indirect human interaction. People now spend time on virtual gaming and online socializing networks. So much so that governments and health authorities have begun to address the issue of lack of exercise and consequent obesity among young children. Recently, the South Korean

⁶ Vergine, *Trash. From Junk to Art*, 22.

⁷ Vergine, *Trash. From Junk to Art*, 20.

government went considerably further by banning late night online virtual gaming.⁸ “Technology elides distance and thus abolishes space”⁹ said Peter Conrad, the regular contributor to arts radio, television and newspapers including ‘The Observer’. As a consequence, our everyday life is undoubtedly, changing ever more quickly in contemporary society as distance is reduced and spaces conjoined. A new generation of children from this age of information technology, as well as the many generations to come, will possibly grow up in a social and cultural environment that will lack of the opportunity to have regular direct encounter and spontaneous play with real objects and other human beings.

Nowadays, supermarkets sell a bigger range of ready-cooked meals designed to accommodate the fast pace of our modern life. They save time and yet encourage a hands-off experience and limit creativity with food. And yet the family meal is fast becoming a thing of the past with working parents, the “increasingly busy life styles

⁸ Justin McCurry, “Internet Addiction Driving South Koreans into Realms of Fantasy,” *The Guardian*, last modified 13 July, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jul/13/internet-addiction-south-korea> (accessed on 20 March, 2011). Also reported on ‘One News Page’: Caleb Johnson, “South Korea Enforces Ban on Late-night Online Sessions,” last modified 13 April, 2010, <http://www.onenewspage.com/news/Technology/20100413/10049084/South-Korea-Enforces-Ban-on-Late-Night-Online.htm> (accessed on 20 March, 2011). The ‘Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism from South Korea has enforced a video game curfew for teenagers. It’s an effort to curb game addiction in a country where, according to Huffington Post, a recent survey of over 1,500 public school students found that about 29-percent showed signs of addiction. Gamers can choose between three different six-hour blackout periods: midnight to 6 am, 1 am to 7 am, or 2 am to 8 am’. Also, reported on BBC News 24, “Sunday Morning,” 18 April, 2010.

⁹ Peter Conrad, *Modern Times, Modern Places: Life & Art in the 20th Century* (UK: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 695.

are killing off the family meal in many households”¹⁰ according to a recent article in the online Daily Mail. A survey revealed that “four out of ten of those interviewed admitted to spending less time eating in the evening with their children than they did with their own parents.”¹¹ For some families, rather than sitting around the dining table together to share conversation over dinner, they choose to leave the dinner table and have their meal in front of their TV sets¹² and computers. My work *Stir* framed the idea of gathering around the table for a family meal from my own culture, and located it in a gallery setting, to provide a platform to discuss these contemporary issues. My other works *Assemblage of Used Disposable Chopstick* and *Assemblage of Ring-pulls* engage with the idea of convenience lifestyle and waste derived from artefacts of mass consumption (please refer to chapter 4, section 4.3.1 and 4.3.2 for detailed discussion of these works).

Once again, since 2008, we have faced and are facing economic crisis and even countries are becoming bankrupt and many people are losing their livelihoods. I heard

¹⁰ Andrew Levy, “How the Family Meal has Split into Two,” *Mail Online*, last modified 6 September, 2010, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1308067/Death-family-meal-One-mothers-cook-different-dinners-children-themselves.html> (accessed on 20 March, 2011).

¹¹ It was a survey commissioned by Red Tractor beef and lamb to mark the launch of its ‘Memorable Meal’ campaign which seeks to reunite families around the dinner table. Andrew Levy, “How the Family Meal has Split into Two,” *Mail Online*, last modified 6th September 2010, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1308067/Death-family-meal-One-mothers-cook-different-dinners-children-themselves.html> (accessed on 20 March, 2011).

¹² “28 per cent said they regularly ate their evening meal on their laps in front of the TV, 3 per cent confessed to eating dinner in bed.” Andrew Levy, “How the Family Meal has Split into Two,” *Mail Online*, last modified 6 September, 2010, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1308067/Death-family-meal-One-mothers-cook-different-dinners-children-themselves.html> (accessed on 20 March, 2011).

on the news how people are blaming incapable politicians, greedy bankers and mindless individuals spent 'future' money excessively. Back in 2001, Michael Landy's *Break Down* (please refer to images 3.05 to 3.06) in the closed down C&A store in Oxford Street in London commented on our attachment and desire on a personal level, and consumerism in a wider context by destroying all his possession. The author of 'Affluenza', Oliver James argued that the recent financial crisis is the consequence of materialism and people's dogged pursuit of external gains. My work *Labeling Tags attached to Clothing*, and *Circumrotation* both of which were included in *The Affluenza* exhibition, responded to James' book and addressed these contemporary issues (please refer to chapter 4, section 4.3.3 and 4.6.3 for detailed discussion of these works).

In recent times, the everyday is experienced differently, and I have both witnessed and become part of these changes. It is difficult to evaluate the positive and negative aspects of these shifts and the impact they have on our everyday life as they operate according to the ideology of capitalism, where everyday things are overshadowed by the issues as discussed in this section. These issues remain the undercurrent and may be used as a wider context to access the body of work I produced using everyday objects and activities.



Image 3.05
Michael Landy, *Breakdown*, 2001(a view from outside the former C&A store)



Image 3.06
Michael Landy, *Breakdown*, 2001(inside the former C&A store)

3.2 Personal Background and Encounters

I grew up in an under-privileged family and neighbourhood in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia where during the 60s and 70s most parents had to spend their earnings on priorities for living rather than toys for their children. Our first house was built illegally (please refer to images 3.07 and 3.08) on a piece of abandoned tin mine land

using mostly recycled materials from torn down government servants' houses. I was taught by my family and neighbours how to improvise and make use of discarded things and turn them into my own toys. For example, my sisters showed me how to create flower pots by making holes in old tin cans by using a hammer and a nail. I was also taught by my neighbours how to make revolving lanterns out of tin cans, bobbins and a broom handle to take part in Chinese 'Mid-Autumn Festival' celebrations. They also showed me how to transform unwanted planks into toy guns so that we could play war games together around our houses. I also learned how to make kites from used plastic carrier bags and bamboo sticks retrieved from the abandoned cages found in the local poultry market. Like the scene in the film *Kite Runner*, we ground used light bulbs and fluorescent tubes into powder form and applied them with glue on string to use in kite fighting. I went fishing in abandoned tin mines with my do-it-yourself fishing rod using a broom handle and fishing line that rolled around a tin can. Unaware that I was risking my life at the time, I swam in those abandoned tin mines with my friends using discarded inner tubes from car tyres. Unlike the many children who are so fascinated with virtual gaming today, I found simple pleasure in rejuvenating what people had abandoned as rubbish by turning it into something usable or appreciable. I had been carrying these 'art and craft' like experiences unknowingly and it was not until later that I discovered that they had an effect on my

subsequent fine art practice. *Assemblage of Used Disposable Chopsticks*, *Cigarette Butts Formed Shadows*, *6 Minute Performance of Smashing Bottles* and *P&S Recipe Shop* are some of my works using found and discarded objects and illustrate this point (please refer to chapter 4 for detailed discussion of these works).



Image 3.07
An image of me taken when I was around six years old, at the front of my neighbour's house similar to ours.



Image 3.08
An example of illegal housing estate in Malaysia

I have hardly any memories of my grandparents because they passed away when I was a toddler, but was later told many times the story of how they left the *Chao Zhou* province of Guangdong in China, with just a pair of shoes each and a few clothes and managed to build a new life in Malaysia. This story is similar to many Chinese

immigrants who attempted to escape poverty after the collapse of *Qing* dynasty in China around the end of the 19th century and in 20th century and migrated to what was then Malaya. They worked as miners and ‘Coolies’ (苦力 kǔ lì) or ‘hard’ labourers during British colonial rule. I was always fascinated by their stories and amazed by what they managed to achieve. Their stories share the same impulse with how my wife and I started our life in the UK but, of course, our story was far less extreme. We arrived in London in 1994 after a four months backpacking journey in Europe with the intention of staying just for a year or two but ended up building a new life in the UK. We had to make every possible saving by utilizing what was available to us. Charity shops, second hand markets, jumble sales, and car boot sales all contributed to building our life here after we arrived with just two backpacks and little money. We sometime received unwanted things from friends as well as saving a few pounds by making good use of discarded things found on the street. The *P&S Recipe Shop* project collaborated with Yak Beow Seah is particular revealing about these aspects of my life experience. The old-fashioned or even collectable food related objects on display in the show came mainly from the same resources (please refer to chapter 4, section 4.8.1 for detailed discussion).

Since 1994, I have been working part-time to finance my fine art studies. In 1995, I was trained in a Japanese restaurant to become a ‘Tepanyaki Chef’ (please refer to images 3.09) specializing in American-style Japanese cuisine, and where I had to cook and perform different cooking skills and tricks in front of the diners. I later worked in various restaurants between 2001 and 2004 mainly in Japanese cuisine. Kitchen organisation, food preparation, the use of cutlery to food presentation, experiences and knowledge of the Eastern way of cooking and eating all expanded into my fine art work. Apart from incorporating food in my work, some of the materials that I used, such as used disposable chopsticks and bottles, came from these work places. In fact, knowledge of food and cooking came into my life when I was in primary school, when my parents ran a canteen and then a hawker stall selling noodles, rice dishes and drinks, to help to bring up me and my three sisters. After school and during school holidays, I used to help my parents with food preparation, as well as serving and washing-up. Back in 1992, my friend Yak Beow Seah and I set up ‘Be My Friend Café’ in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and where we served food and hot and cold drinks. As suggested in the name, the Café was also a place to connect with people and meet new friends, and which was a precursor to the *Stir* and *P&S Recipe Shop* projects. Food was still an important part of my everyday life when I moved to the UK, because it gave me a living and helped me to realise my ambition to become

an artist. These are some of the reasons why food became part of my work, others were due to the *Stir* project in collaboration with Yak Beow Seah where I initiated the use of food ‘as a medium’ in my work.



Image 3.09
An image of me working as a Teppanyaki Chef

Towards the end of my degree studies in 2000, I encountered the stage performance in London, ‘Stomp’.¹³ The opportunity to see a ‘Stomp’ performance (also introduced in *Trash. From Junk to Art*) continues to be a crucial part in my work because I was, and continue to be, inspired by their persistent use of everyday objects as musical

¹³ ‘Stomp’ started out as two ‘buskers’ on the streets of Brighton, the idea behind their performance was not to have any traditional instruments on stage. Instead, they chose to experiment with the sounds produced by ordinary everyday objects and their bodies to create extraordinary rhythms and sounds.

instruments. I am amazed by how ordinary everyday objects such as match boxes, brooms, rubbish bins and plastic carrier bags, some of them found or used, can be used to compose extraordinary music and become an amazing piece of theatrical work. It reminded me of the toys I made to entertain myself when I was a child and the simple pleasure derived from making them and playing with them. Thus, 'Stomp' boosted my confidence and determination to carry on using objects and materials from the everyday.

3.3 Aspects of Zen Buddhist Teaching

The use of the everyday not only has a connection with the way I was brought up, my financial situation, life experiences and jobs I had in order to support my fine art study, it also 'unveils' the influence of Zen Buddhism and Taoism in emphasizing Mindfulness and the everyday. I was born into a Buddhist family and was educated in Chinese primary and secondary schools all of which that preserved and taught something of these values. These influences gradually revealed themselves towards the end of my MA study (2001-03) as I began to sense that my contemplation would revolve around these experiences and influences quite naturally when seeking to

produce works of art. My further readings about Zen Buddhism not only expanded my knowledge about Zen Buddhism but through them I began to discover the common ground between art and Zen practice as indicated in chapter 2, section 2.3.

My studio practice considers the potential to reclaim the less attended for it to be rejuvenated for re-examination and contemplation. I explore the boundaries between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the familiar and the unfamiliar, the real and the unreal. In exploring work which represents aspects of our everyday life and the environment that are often overlooked, instead of focusing on the historical, or political aspects of man and materiality, my work researches the ‘is-ness’ of things and that which authentically connects man, objects and space, relating to an understanding of Zen teaching of ‘Suchness’, ‘Interconnection’ and ‘Oneness’. I advocate a meditative process to examine the interaction between the mundane material environment and the behaviour of the people living in it. Illustrative examples of my studio practice include, *Shredded Airlines Stuck on Aquarium*, *Labeling Tags Attached to Clothing*, *Stir and Nice to Meet You* embrace these teachings (please refer to chapter 4 for detailed discussion on these works).

I see that the everyday is shaped by the accumulation of connections that bind us together in a diversified and complex totality. Inter-relations between people and things - conscious and unconscious, important and less important, transitory and long lasting, weave us together in a perpetual cycle. Endlessly spun, such threads, drop, replace, reconnect and link together in the ever-shifting life of birth, aging, sickness and death. These dynamics lie within the undercurrent of the everyday and are accessible only through utilizing attentiveness or in Zen Buddhist's term 'Mindfulness'. In the Zen Buddhist teaching of 'Truth' and 'Oneness', objects and people are seen as they are, interconnected. They are interdependent and yet mutually conditioning. Everything is related to everything else under a condition of impermanence. Gyomay M. Kubose said, "Buddhism is awareness. In our lives, unless we are aware, we will not see the truth: the truth about ourselves, other things, and the truth about our lives."¹⁴ The notion of attentiveness in my work echoes the teaching of 'Mindfulness' in Zen Buddhism, mentioned as 'awareness' by Gyomay M. Kubose here.

My work investigates the interstices between everyday objects and people to make connections by bridging and revealing hidden threads. By bringing different materials

¹⁴ Kubose, *Center Within*, 1.

and people into contact, the work foregrounds the less attended space to be observed and contemplated. The process itself is both a form of recreation and re-creation. Marcel Duchamp said towards the end of his life, “my art would be that of living: each second, each breath is a work which is inscribed nowhere, which is neither visual nor cerebral. It’s a sort of constant euphoria.”¹⁵ The idea of recreation in my studio practice responds to the ‘euphoria’ as suggested by Marcel Duchamp and can be associated with the meditative process in Zen which pays attention to breathing. Recreation refers to the progressive ‘self’ in the art making process on the part of some artists where it is developing constantly from one level to another transmitting a sense of ‘euphoria’.

3.4 Food, Cooking and Eating

In the light of the popularity of food programmes on TV using ‘celebrity’ chefs and their cookery books, we are unavoidably exposed to information about food - bordering on obsession. Food, cooking and eating have becoming prominent feature of cultural plurality in contemporary life.

¹⁵ Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (UK: Thames and Hudsons, 1971), 72.

Apart from the obvious nutritional needs, food embodies cultural identity, gender, social class, ritual and the sacred. Cooking can be about contemplation and organisation. Just as in sculpture and painting, it is also about handling of materials, tools, temperatures, techniques, procedures, timing control, composition, finish and presentation. Cooking stimulates the senses using a combination of ingredients including form, texture, colour, aroma and taste. Taste provides a sensory and aesthetic experience that can be studied alongside art. For this, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett pointed out that “taste as a sensory experience and taste as an aesthetic faculty converge. ... can be found in Enlightenment aesthetics and in the Hindu concept of *rasa* alike.”¹⁶

My former job as a ‘Teppanyaki Chef’ involved cooking and performing in front of the customer requiring improvisation, spontaneous play and entertainment. In fact, the ‘open kitchen’ concept, where the diners can see the chefs at work in the kitchen, has become a trend in modern dining. This aspect of performance in cooking is an intriguing one and Joanne Finkelstein elaborated this in her ‘Foodtainment’¹⁷ essays in length, where she suggested that “...food has become both more subject to the social imperatives of fashion and more deeply located within the entertainment

¹⁶ Richard Gough, ed., *Performance Research: on Cooking*. (Routledge, [vol. 4] 1999), 2.

¹⁷ Gough, *Performance Research*, 130-136.

industries.”¹⁸ *Stir* and *P&S Recipe Shop* engaged qualities of spontaneous play and entertainment in live cooking performances as works of art (please refer to chapter 4, section 4.6.4 and 4.8.1 for detailed discussion of these works).

From my original cultural perspective, cooking reflects one’s level of accomplishment or self-cultivation to also mean that you are what you cooked. The Chinese proverb mentioned ‘病从口入’ (bìng cóng kǒu rù) can be directly translated as ‘sickness is fed through our mouths’, which can also be interpreted as ‘you are what you eat’. Writing about ‘Zen cooking’ can be traced back about 750 years ago to 1237 when Eihei Dōgen Zenji wrote *Instructions to the Zen Cook*. Food and cooking are part of our everyday life and yet most people tend to take little or no interest on its implication. Richard Gough, the editor of *Performance Research: on Cooking*, suggested that “Food, and all that is associated with it, is already larger than life. It is already charged with meaning and affect.”¹⁹ Like art-making, I consider gastronomy itself to be a form of art, having the potential for the integration or enlightening of the self as suggested by Eihei Dōgen Zenji. The Chinese like to say ‘多经一事，多长一智’ (duō jīng yī shì, duō zhǎng yī zhì) which means ‘experienced another matter, become more wise’ in a direct translation. An aspect of art-making is about mind, physical body interacting

¹⁸ Gough, *Performance Research*, 130.

¹⁹ Gough, *Performance Research*, 1.

with matter, when an artist produced a new piece of work he ‘experienced another matter’ and may ‘gained new insight’ in return. The aspects of social and cultural implications and discourses of cooking have the potential to generate dialogue in a work of art, as revealed in my work mentioned in the previous paragraph. Food, cooking and eating in my work is directed toward aspects of attentiveness, raw experience, chance operation, audience participation or engaging audience, towards the process of the work rather than its permanence.

3.5 Poverty and Creativity

In my childhood play, I transformed things into enjoyable toys that others decided to abandon. It was not until I began to examine my tendency to use very humble everyday objects that I became aware of it as a subconscious approach in sustaining the body of work I produced to date. This strategy of utilizing unwanted resources helped on cost savings later in my life and echoes the Chinese saying which gives advice on dealing with poverty saying ‘穷则变，变则通’ (qióng zé biàn, biàn zé tōng), in a direct translation meaning ‘seek change when poor, change brings accessibilities’.

An association or connection may be made between poverty, Arte Povera (Poor Art) and my work. Active in the late 1960s during a period of social instability in Italy, Povera artists used low value everyday objects for their works. For example, Pino Pascali (1935-1968) used old cans and bits of metal to construct full-scale ‘military weapons’ to comment on global manifesto of military power and mass consumerism (please refer to image 3.10). Arte Povera manifested an impulse to get back to ‘reality’ by presenting what was available in everyday life including the discarded and the found. Poverty has the energy to create something new and extraordinary because it forces us to stretch our imagination. I learned how to improvise with what I could find and transform such things into something to amuse myself. It helped to exercise my imagination and nurture my habit of using the discarded. There is another Chinese saying popular among Cantonese speakers and which says ‘when the horse dies you walk 马死落地行 (mǎ sǐ là dì xíng). In other words, one should find alternative means rather than just stand there and wait, and possibly die with the horse. When you cannot afford to buy basic necessities like a pair of shoes, you make them using your imagination and whatever you can find and then get on with life (please refer to image 3.11). As it says in the West ‘necessity is the mother of invention’. Poverty breeds creativity - improvisation prevails in extreme circumstances because it forces us to work on alternative means, and the will to improvise has the power to stimulate

creativity. My work *Circumrotation* using unwanted shoes, *Bǎo Yòu* using used joss sticks, *Every Corner of My Flat* using dust, *6 Minute Performance of Smashing Bottles*, *Assemblage of Used Disposable Chopsticks*, *Cigarette Butts Formed Shadow*, and *Assemblage of Ring-pulls* represent this category of improvisation with almost worthless materials (please refer to chapter 4 the discussion of these pieces).



Image 3.10
Pino Pascali, *Contraerea*, 1965



Image 3.11
Water bottle sandals (photo by Kinzenguélé, 2008)

3.6 Transformation of Reality

Apart from virtual gaming and online socialising networks, so-called 'reality' is sometimes enhanced using computer software and digitally altered representations, as regularly seen in images of people as they appear in glossy magazines and advertisements. With the latest technology and advances in medicine, more and more people are keen to undergo cosmetic surgical procedures as a short cut to 'beauty'. Botox injections, fake sun tanning using sun beds and spray tan have become popular and commonplace in recent years. Fake and dramatised 'realities' are appear in 'reality TV programs' such as Big Brother.²⁰ Our experiences of these are therefore stimulated by distorted, exaggerated and artificially enhanced suggestions that are gradually conflated with the real. Like eating a crabstick made with flour and artificial enhanced substances to provide a fictional crab meat texture and taste, this aspect of conflated reality penetrates many aspects of our everyday life and is gradually being read, albeit subconsciously, as a realistic part of our everyday life. Correspondingly, what is non-

²⁰ Broadcasted by Channel 4 (changed to channel 5 in 2011), Big Brother is said to be 'the biggest reality show on TV. The programme features locking a selection of people from different background in a 'Sensory-bending House' where, they live their life according to instructed suggestions or rules in a set period to stimulate drama. (See Channel 4 website <http://bb-cache.channel4.com/bigbrother/about.html> for further details) 'Big Brother' first appeared in George Orwell's Post WWII classic '1984' that featured the phrase 'Big Brother is watching you', to suggest everyone is under surveillance by the authorities using 'telescreens' or CCTV. Further to this, Graffiti artist Banksy created a piece called 'One Nation under CCTV' in 2008.

fictional, authentic and commonplace seems less attractive and may be treated as dull, boring, and old-fashioned and may be swept aside in this environment.

Rather than live the as-it-is process of birth, ageing, sickness and death, people fall in this category to become immersed in their own particular sense of an idea of the 'self', and through such means intervene and attempt to alter their self-image and reverse the passing of the years. For Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007)²¹, "Simulation is the collapse of the real with the imagery, the true with the false. Simulation does not provide equivalents for the real, nor does it reproduce it – it reduplicates and generates it."²² In the similar level like what Jean Baudrillard suggested, cosmetic alternation, virtual gaming imitate reality and attempt to make things look more extraordinary than real. My work *Shredded Airlines Stuck on Aquarium, Condom Inflated with Helium, Assemblage of Loose Bristles from the Brush that Painted the Wall and Labeling Tags Attached to Clothing* attempted to explore the line between the real and the unreal and thereby indirectly relate these issues, like the images derived from glossy magazines, they created an illusion to trick the eye of the beholder (please refer to chapter 4 for detailed discussion of these works).

²¹ Jean Baudrillard was a French sociologist, philosopher and cultural theorist who blurred the boundaries between reality and simulation.

²² Chris Hollocks and Zoran Jevtic, *Introducing Baudrillard* (UK: Icon Books, 1999), 109.

3.7 My Studio Practice in Relation to Art Movements

My studio practice is inspired by and physically derived from objects and activities found in my immediate environment. Historically, it can be linked to and studied alongside some of the art movements under Marcel Duchamp's influence e.g. Conceptual Art and Dematerialization, Art Povera, Gutai, Mono-ha and above all the work of Kurt Schwitters. I break these into five sections below to explore the possible association.

3.7.1 Western Art

i) Kurt Schwitters (1887-1948)

The work of Kurt Schwitters includes collage, assemblage, performance constructed painting and installations using everyday materials that he gathered from the streets and parks. He coined the term 'Merz'²³ which he took to stand for 'the combination of all conceivable materials' as a means of addressing and identifying his artistic output.

²³ The term 'Merz' derived from 'Kommerz Und Privatbank' in one of Schwitters's early assemblages, having various associations including both with commerce and to discard or eliminate or reject (ausmerzen).

‘Merz’ is an art-making discipline that is accepting of socially ‘rejected’ materials and unites painting, sculpture and the architectural under one banner.

Kurt Schwitters’s collage works utilized pieces of discarded materials such as newspapers, bus tickets, strings, rags, bits of wood, wires, and nails. The work entailed cutting and connecting everyday materials and rubbish to create ‘most usually’ but not always a piece of abstract work rather than symbolizing, representing or depicting the everyday. From 1923 he began to construct a series of assemblage works known as ‘Merzbau’.²⁴ Using scrap metal, wood, plasterboard, old furniture and other discarded objects found in rubbish bins and dumps, and unwanted objects from his friends, he began to assemble them, combining them with the interior of his family house in Hanover. The ‘Merzbau’ may be seen as an expanded daily changing document on Kurt Schwitters and an integrated part of his everyday life in the way that he developed and altered it over a period of eight years, defining it neither as a sculptural object nor as an architectural space.

Kurt Schwitters insisted on not being ‘dogmatic’ or ‘elitist’ but manifested the potential of creative liberation through the use of things taken from everyday

²⁴ The Hanover ‘Merzbau’ gradually expanded to occupy other rooms on different floors. He continued to build ‘Merzbau’ in Norway in 1937, and later in England in 1947 after the Hanover ‘Merbau’ was destroyed by Allied bombing during World War II.

circulation. The characteristics of his work are of tension deriving from the juxtaposition of high art and junk art, abstraction and realism, and art and life. Kurt Schwitters' sense of openness is particularly relevant to the use of materials and combinations of different disciplines in my studio practice. Kurt Schwitters' process in the construction of Merzbau is perpetually unfinished, suggesting a sense of endless flux in the process of artistic creating just as in everyday life. My work *Every Corner of My Flat* (please refer to chapter 4, section 4.4.2) and Jonathan Monk's *Continuous Project Altered Daily* that I visited in 2005 at the ICA in London also responded to this idea of endless flux, where the works are being permanently regenerated and transformed, open for interpretation and raising new questions.

ii) The Conceptual and Dematerialization

The term 'Dematerialization' was first coined in relation to art practice by John Chandler and Lucy Lippard in 1968 in their seminal text *The Dematerialization of Art*. In 1973, Lippard published *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972* featuring a selection of texts that widely reflected the phenomena of art practice that questioned the materiality of artworks during that period. She described Dematerialization as being "focused on so-called conceptual or information or idea art

with mentions of such vaguely designated areas as minimal, antiform, systems, earth or process art....”²⁵ The Conceptual Art embraced by the “Dematerialization of object” refers to a wide and extremely diverse range of artistic practices by artists including Allan Kaprow, Robert Rauschenberg and to later artists such as Richard Long, Gilbert and George, Eva Hesse, Robert Smithson, Sol LeWitt and Joseph Kosuth. The definition of ‘Dematerialization’ as applied here did not necessarily mean not using material, referring rather to a work of art in which the concept is primary and the use of material form is secondary, such as cheap, found, rejected and ephemeral materials.

My own studio practice can be linked to that of the group of artists whose work may be labeled as ‘Conceptual’ as embraced by Lippard’s identification of ‘Dematerialization’. The works of John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, Allan Kaprow, Richard Long and Gilbert and George are often studied in relation to art of the everyday,²⁶ they position their lives and studio practice on the boundary between art

²⁵ Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972* (US: University of California Press, 1997), 3.

²⁶ In 1969, Gilbert and George designated themselves as ‘Living Sculpture’; “they reasoned that as artists they themselves constituted living art and that everything done by an artist is art as long as it is conceived in an aesthetically conscious way”, said Fineberg in *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being* (page 343). There is as if no boundary between art and life in their work, they insisted that all activities in their life are art. John Cage’s ‘Silent’ piece allows everyday sound to compose its rhythm. Cage’s statement ‘On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist and his Work’ in 1961, described Rauschenberg’s ‘white painting’ is the “airports for the lights, shadows and parties”. Allan Kaprow blurs the boundary between art and life with his ‘Happening’ pieces. The act of walking constitutes a work of art in Richard Long’s work. Zen Buddhism is often linked with these artists producing art of the everyday.

and life. Concepts of the everyday, nothingness, and art and life in their work are questions I pursue in my wider work as well as in this research.

iii) Arte Povera

Arte Povera branched out from Conceptual Art and emerged from the instabilities and inefficiency of Italian economics and the corrupted politics as dominated by the Christian Democrats during the post-World War II period. In 1967, Italian art critic and curator, Germano Celant coined the term 'Arte Povera' introducing it in an exhibition at the Gallery Bertesca in Genoa. Arte Povera, meaning 'Poor art' emerged from "the government's insensitivity to the widespread poverty"²⁷, and had an impact on many artists and curators from the 70s as the result of Germano Celant's texts and the exhibitions he organised.

Arte Povera artists adopted an attitude of openness towards the use of materials similar to many ways to that of Kurt Schwitters, promoting the idea of a revolutionary art freed from the conventional. They explored the social and economic context of art itself, the space of the gallery as well as spaces beyond the gallery, to reflect the

²⁷ Fineberg, *Art since 1940*, 332.

relationship between art and life. The subject matter of Arte Povera embraces everyday-ness - the ephemeral and the transitory. For example, Giovanni Anselmo's *Senzo Titolo* (1968) sculpture was made out of two polished blocks of granite and a fresh lettuce (please refer to image 3.12). The use of granite may be associated with grave stones thereby relating to death, and the lettuce may be taken as signify vitality and life. The piece emphasizes the effect of deterioration over time and the transitory nature of reality. Other illustrative Arte Povera work include American artist Anita Gibson's *Untitled* (nails) 1968, that consisted of nails glued onto a canvas (please refer to image 3.13). The transformative rusting process of Gibson's nails and Anselmo's lettuce pieces reflect the shifting and inherent instability found within the subject matter of Art Povera, echoing Zen teaching of impermanence. In terms of using humble materials, there is a sense of poverty embedded in both Povera art and my own studio practice. The subject of impermanence in my work, to be discussed in chapter 4, shares common ground with Arte Povera's work as mentioned here.



Image 3.12
Giovanni Anselmo, *Senzo Titolo*, 1968

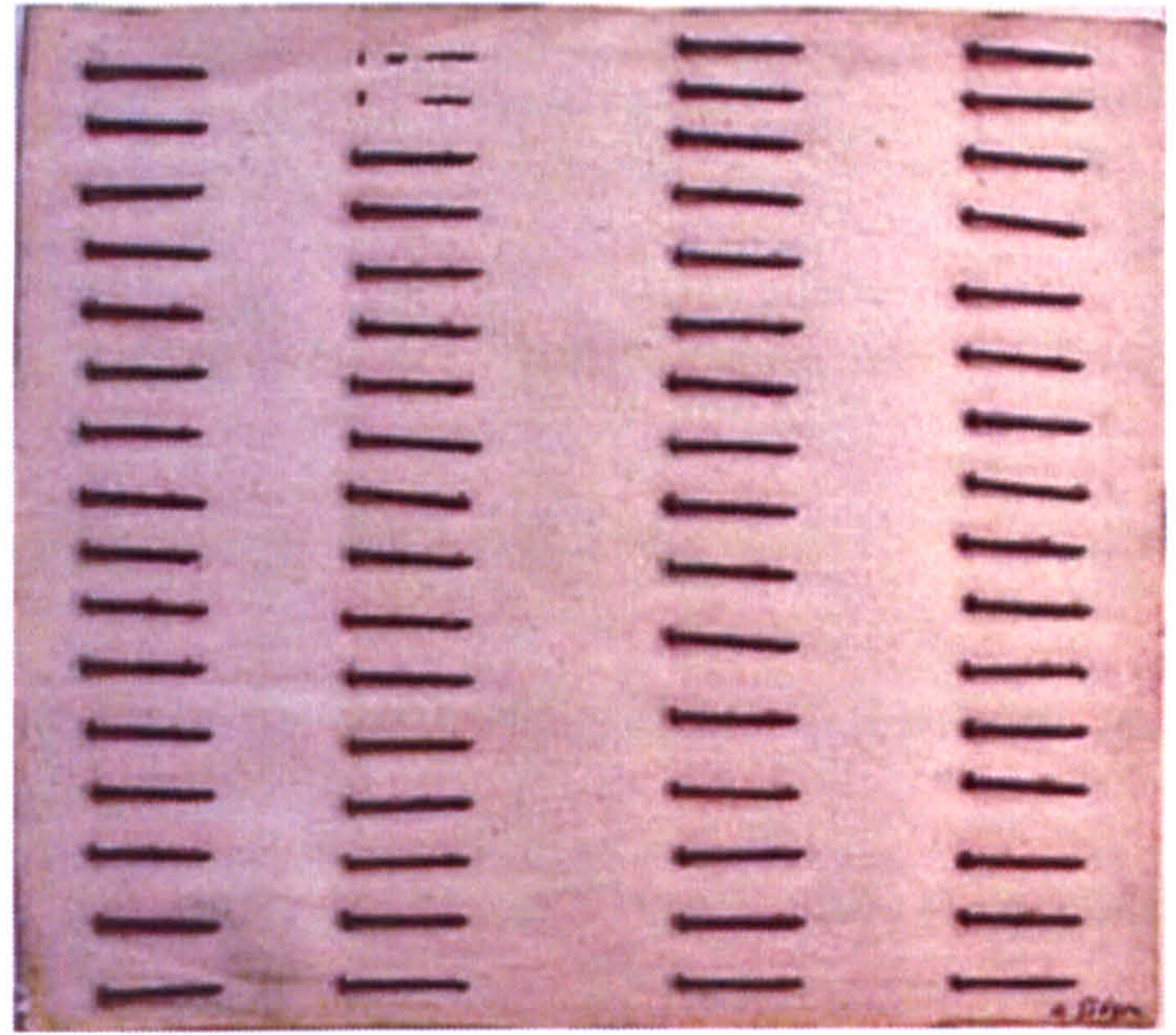


Image 3.13
Anita Gibson, *Untitled (nails)*, 1968

3.7.2 Eastern Art

i) Gutai Art (Concrete Art)

In December 1954, Yoshihara Jiro (1905-1972) formed the Gutai group in the Kansai region in Western Japan.²⁸ Consisting of some twenty artists including Kanayama Akira, Murakami Saburo, Shiraga Kazuo and Shimamoto Shozo, the Gutai artists emerged during the struggle between modernity and the traditional in post-war Japan.

²⁸ The outdoor event held in the suburban town of Ashiya, near Osaka in the summer of 1955, marked the first exhibition held by the Gutai group.

They anticipated the changes in Western art such as the emergence of Happenings, 'Action Painting', Art Informel²⁹ and COBRA³⁰ during the post-war period.

Yoshihara Jiro, after initial interest in Surrealist and Expressionist ideas and forms of painting, made a series of 'ensō' like circle paintings between 1962 and 1972 (please refer to images 3.14 and 3.15) placing emphasis on the temporality of the here and now. Alexandra Munroe suggested that "the ensō represents void and substance, emptiness, and completion, and the union of painting, calligraphy, and meditation"³¹ deeply associated with Zen Buddhism.

²⁹ Art Informel is the French style of abstract painting popular in the 1940s and 50s that is considered as the European version of Abstract Expressionism. Artists associated with Art Informel include Jean Dubuffet (1901-1985), Willem de Kooning (1904-1997), Pierre Soulages (born 1919), Hans Hartung (1904-1989), Georges Mathieu (born 1921), Jean Fautrier (1898-1964), and Henri Michaux (1899-1984). Art Informel (meaning 'Formless' art in French) was used by the French critic Michel Tapié in his 1952 book *Un Art Autre* to describe a style of art which adopted processes that are improvisatory, informal, displaying irrationality, the gestural and freedom of form.

³⁰ COBRA or CoBra was a European avant-garde movement formed on the 8th November 1948 in the Café Notre-Dame, Paris, launched by the signing of a manifesto, "*La Cause Était Entendue*" (*The Case was Settled*) as drawn up by Christian Dotremont. The group was comprised of like-minded artists including Karel Appel (1921-2006), Constant Anton Nieuwenhuys (1920-2005), Guillaume Cornelis van Beverloo (born 1920), Christian Dotremont (1922-1979), Asger Jorn (1914-1973), and Joseph Noiret (born 1927). The name "COBRA" was coined by Christian Dotremont, and was a combination of the initials of its members' home cities namely Copenhagen (Co), Brussels (Br), Amsterdam (A). COBRA which was disbanded in 1951, has had great influence on Scandinavian art (particularly in Denmark), but was not popular in the Netherlands. While COBRA's origins partly lie in Surrealism the group rejected aestheticism for more concrete qualities within semi-abstract paintings, COBRA artists preferred to use brilliant colour, violent brushwork, and distorted human figures. Similar to 'American action painting', their inspiration mainly came from primitive and folk art.

³¹ Alexandra Munroe, *Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky* (US: Harry N Abrams Inc, 1994), 94.



Image 3.14
Yoshihara Jiro and his circle painting

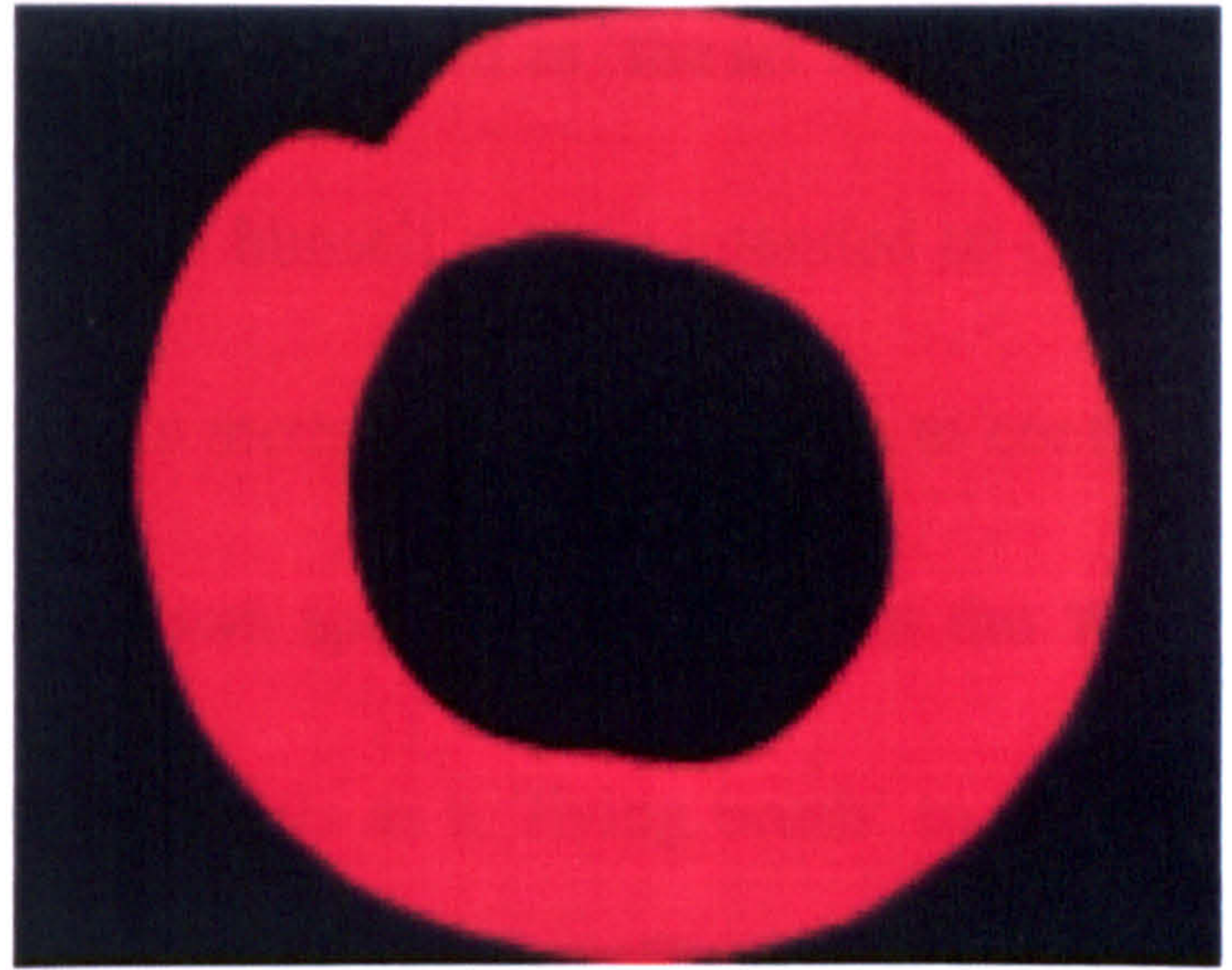


Image 3.15
Yoshihara Jiro, *Red Circle on Black*, 1965

Gutai artists used paint, clay, marble and metals but refused to attribute, what they maintained to be, false significance onto materials. They saw the projection of ‘foreign’ meanings onto a material as insincere to the material in taking on the appearance of something else instead of just presenting it with its ‘it-is-ness’. They believed that intellectual aims in art-making could potentially detract from the materials, resulting in the authentic quality of the materials themselves being no longer present to engage with the viewer.

Another Gutai artist, Buddhist priest Kazuo Shiraga (1924-2008) placed a lump of paint on a large piece of canvas on the floor. Holding on to a rope hanging from the ceiling, he then spread the paint with his bare feet (please refer to images 3.16 and

3.17). Art writers have described this unprecedented method as ‘the art of committing the whole self with the body’ but Kazuo Shiraga himself merely intended to display ‘traces of action carried out with speed’ finding a method that enabled him to confront and unite the material he had chosen with his own spiritual dynamics. In the West, Yves Klein used the nude body of his female models as a ‘living brush’ to paint or print his ‘trademark’ blue paint onto his canvases (please refer to images 3.18 and 3.19). Both Yves Klein and Kazuo Shiraga were associated with Zen Buddhism. Yves Klein visited Japan in 1952 and studied Judo, and his ‘*Le Vide* (The Void)’ piece in 1958³² was said to have embraced Zen’s notion of ‘spiritually energized emptiness’.³³ Kazuo Shiraga entered the Buddhist priesthood at the Enryaku Monastery on Mount Hiei, near Kyoto. As a monk he adopted the name ‘Sodo’ and continued to paint until the end of his life.

Shozo Shimamoto (born 1928) was a student of Yoshihara Jiro, his ‘holes’ painting³⁴ (please refer to image 3.20) was shown alongside work by Lucio Fontana, Jackson

³² Fineberg, *Art Since 1940*, 224 & 230. According to Fineberg, Yves Klein whitewashed the Galerie Iris Clert and impregnating the space with his spirituality. He managed to get a cabinet minister on the guest list and arranged Republican Guards in regalia flanking the door at the opening. Yves Klein appeared at the door of the gallery and began to guide a small group (nearly 3,000 people turned up) into the empty gallery. Many burst into laughter and left, but some of them stayed for hours and commented in the guest book “with the void, full powers.” Two years later at the same gallery, Arman show ‘*Le Plein* (Fill Up)’ that responded to ‘The void’, he filled the gallery, from floor up to the ceiling, with the rubbish he found.

³³ David Hopkins, *After Modern Art 1945-2000* (UK: Oxford University Press, 2000), 79.

³⁴ In 1950, Shimamoto started to glue layers of newspaper together and attached them on to a wooden frame to then apply household paint and pencil marks. When the newspaper canvas was accidentally torn open by his pencil work, he deliberately made more holes in the rest of the canvas.

Pollock and John Cage in the touring exhibition *Japanese Art after 1945: Scream against the Sky*, organized by Alexandra Munroe in 1994. His 'holes' canvas 'represents the beginning of a Gutai style' and suggests 'chance physical action with materials' although at the time he was unaware of his contemporary Fontana's work 'Spatial Concept'.³⁵ Throughout his career, he produced 'explosive' paintings where he repeatedly threw bottles of bright paint on canvases in many of his live performances (please refer to image 3.21), including 1993 Venice Art Biennale.

Gutai artists tend to ignore the intellectual aspect of modern art history, seeking to bring body, matter and spirit into interaction through art-making. They disassociate themselves with social and political messages, and denied symbolic and figurative content, seeming instead to favour spontaneous play and chance. The idea of physical interaction with materials and spontaneous play in my *6 Minutes Performance of Smashing Bottles* can be associated with Kazuo Shiraga's feet painting and Shozo Shimamoto's paint-throwing performance. The ideas of as-it-is-ness, and the circle and meditative quality in *Assemblage of Disposable Chopsticks*, correspond to the way Gutai artists remain 'true' to the characteristic of the materials and the circle in Yoshihara Jiro's ensō-like paintings.

³⁵ Munroe, *Japanese Art after 1945*, 88-89.



Image 3.16
Kazuo Shiraga, *Untitled*, 1959



Image 3.17
Kazuo Shiraga working in his studio



Image 3.18
Yves Klein, *Performance: Anthropométries*, 1960

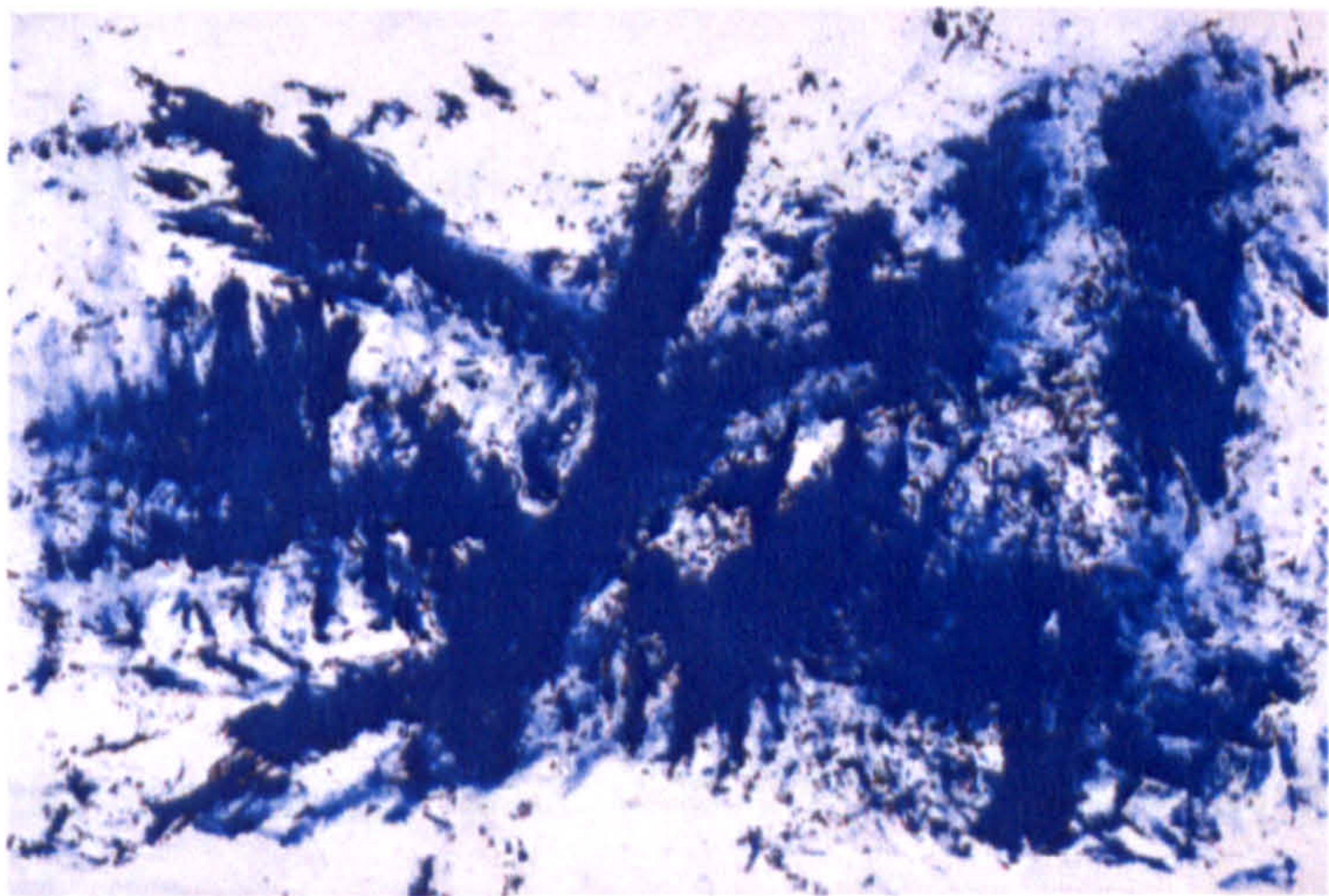


Image 3.19
Yves Klein, *Anthropométries*, 1960



Image 3.20
Shozo Shimamoto, *'Holes Painting'*, 1950-52



Image 3.21
Shozo Shimamoto's live performance of throwing paints

ii) Mono-ha (The School of Things)

The Mono-ha movement emerged in Tokyo between late 60s and early 70s. Unlike the works of Gutai artists that emphasized the quality of the materials that they use, Mono-ha artists prefer to use both natural and man-made materials to explore the relationships between object(s) and object(s), or object(s) and the spaces they occupied. Mono-ha work is fundamentally concerned with our involvement with the world of matter. Similar to the Gutai, they set out to show things as they are by rejecting representation, intervention, and symbolic expression. Using the

juxtaposition of natural and man-made materials such as stone, earth and glass, Mono-ha artists set out to abandon the creation of objects and to rearrange items into art works instead. They drew attention to complex relationships between materials, space and viewers.

As the main theorist, Korean-born Lee Ufan (born 1936) is often associated with the Mono-ha movement. His sculpture entitled 'Relatum' shows a stone sitting on a piece of cracked glass (please refer to image 3.22). The work deals with the tension between contrasting objects i.e. natural and industrial materials functioning in an exhibition space, and show that things are relational, with many conditions and situations such as time and place, cause and effect.

In October 1968, Nobuo Sekine (born 1942) created a monumental piece entitled 'Phase-Mother Earth' where he dug a cylindrical hole in the ground measuring approximately three meters deep and two meters in diameter. He then shaped the extracted earth into a corresponding large cylinder with the same dimensions as the hole (please refer to image 3.23). The piece explored our space of habitation and embraced the idea of positive and negative spaces and in its way was a precursor to Rachel Whiteread's (born 1963) *House* (1993) in 193 Grove Road, East London

(please refer to image 3.24). Lee Ufan commented that this piece by Nubuo Sekine was an art work possessing ‘a real life, real time absence and presence presented in temporal juxtaposition.’

In the context of exploring things as they are and the relationships between things, Mono-ha work can be related to the teachings of ‘Suchness’ in Zen Buddhism. My work explores the relational nature of things and people as they correspond to both Buddhist teaching and Mono-ha work.

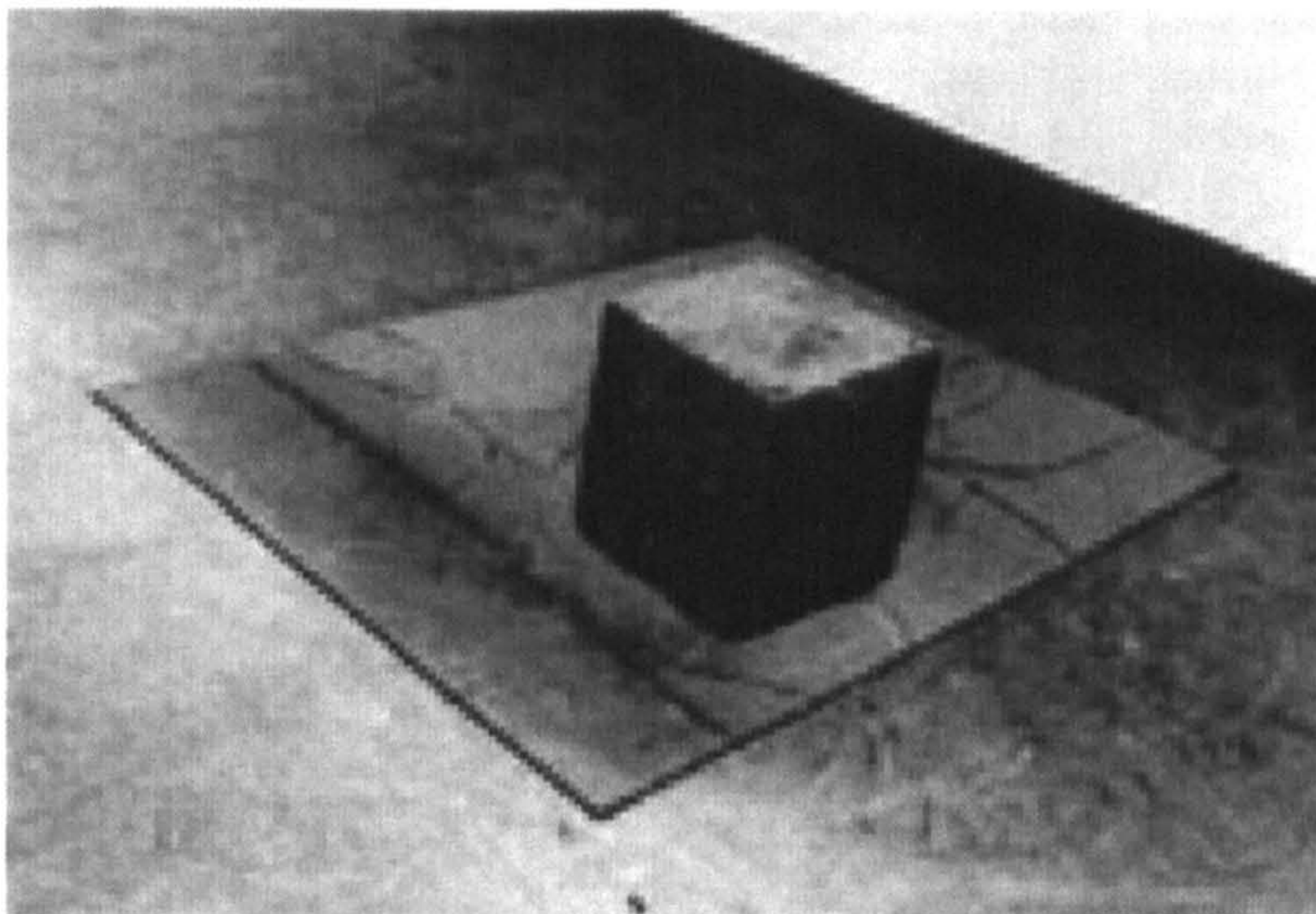


Image 3.22
Lee Ufan, *Relatum*, 1969



Image 3.23
Nobuo Sekine, *Phase-Mother Earth*, 1968



Image 3.24
Rachel Whiteread, *House*, 1993

3.8 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter provides the relevant context and background that impact on, or can be associated with, my studio practice. The first half of the chapter examined wider social issues that give rise to aspects of the everyday and the discarded. It discussed how they are being adopted as the raw material for my work. It also investigated my personal background and I related the idea of comparative poverty and under privileged circumstances to indicate their impact on my work which I consider to be highly relevant in accounting for my tendency to use the humble, the everyday and the

discarded. My encounter with food and cooking, both in Malaysia and the UK, are equally relevant in my analysis, and these experiences offered the associated skill, knowledge and issues as well as food-related objects for experimentation. My encounter with *Stomp* is also accounted for encouraging me to carry on using the everyday. In the second half of the chapter, I began with examining Kurt Schwitters' work in relation to accepting the discarded physically and creatively in art practice. I then associated my work with recent art history to explore the possible connections. I consider that my work relates to Dematerialization, Arte Povera, Mono-ha and Gutai art in that they all invite attention to humble everyday things. Some of the work by the artists from these art movements corresponds to the ideas of meditative mind, Mindfulness, Suchness, impermanence and interconnection in Zen teaching and which provide the basis for comparative study in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 4

COMPARATIVE STUDIES

CONTENTS

4.1 Beginner's Attitude, 167

4.2 In the Spirit of Attentiveness, 170

4.3 The Circle, 173

4.3.1 Assemblage of Used Disposable Chopsticks, 174

4.3.2 Assemblage of Ring-pulls, 179

4.3.3 Circumrotation, 181

4.3.4 Bǎo Yòu (Strange/Familiar), 187

4.4 Action, Repetition and Meditation, 191

4.4.1 6 Minute Performance of Smashing Bottles, 191

4.4.2 Every Corner of My Flat, 198

4.5 Seeing Things as they are, 204

4.5.1 By the River Thames at Windsor, 207

**4.5.2 A Single Leaf Trapped in Between Two Pieces of Paving Stone,
210**

4.6 Relativity of Things, 213

4.6.1 Cigarette Butts Formed Shadow, 213

4.6.2 Shredded Airliners Stuck on Aquarium, 217

4.6.3 Labeling Tags Attached to Clothing, 219

4.6.4 Stir, 222

4.6.5 Nice to Meet You, 227

4.7 Nothing Happens, 234

4.7.1 Condom Inflated with Helium, 234

**4.7.2 Assemblage of Loose Bristles from the Brush that Painted the
Wall, 239**

4.8 The Entanglement of Life and Art, 244

4.8.1 P&S Recipe Shop, 245

4.9 Chapter Conclusion, 260

CHAPTER 4

COMPARATIVE STUDIES

The core purpose of this chapter is to put forward the body of work that I have produced to date to explore its links with the principle research issues. It addresses what has been done and the process and the rationale. It will discuss the formation of concept, the process of production and theoretical aspect of the work.

Adding to the conclusion section, the chapter is organized thematically into eight additional sections. Each theme brings forward an element of Zen Buddhist practice of the everyday and each section reveals the aesthetic and intellectual strategies that shape my conceptual approach to art-making via a selection of work. I begin by looking into the ideas of the beginner's attitude and attentiveness in my art practice before discussing concepts of the circle, as-it-is-ness, relativity, nothingness, and art and living in the remaining sections. Alongside, I also make a comparable study with the studio practice of artists such as Lee Ufan, John Cage, Allan Kaprow, Joseph

Beuys, Martin Creed, Richard Long, Tom Friedman, Teh-ching Hsieh, Gilbert and George, and Peter Fischli and David Weiss.

Artists who contemplate and use everyday objects and activities in their works are comparable to Zen Buddhists who devote Mindfulness to ordinary matter in their spiritual practice. Coincidentally my studio practice devotes contemplative attention to things that have close connections with my everyday life in much the same way that Zen Buddhists devote *Mindfulness* to ordinary matter in their spiritual practice and that requires a '*Beginner's Mind*'.

4.1 Beginner's Attitude

Human nature tends to prioritize things that are considered important and fails to appreciate the seemingly trivial. Focusing on the most 'pressing' things is particularly relevant when life is lived in a hurry. Some tend to hold the *belief* that the familiar is what they already know and is therefore inconsequential. However, in so doing it may be overlooked that *belief* and *doubt* coexist as one. In thinking one knows something,

by jumping quickly to *belief*, and attaching labels, Frederick Frank says that “labels that stick once and for all. By these labels [one] recognize[s] everything but no longer SEE[s] anything.”¹ In my studio practice, I try to slow down my pace, to examine the inconsequential and its relationship to my everyday life. I embrace a beginner’s attitude in order to see things attentively rather than adopt an unreflective attitude.

Making an effort to examine and contemplate what we are aware of is an attentive attitude which is opposed to ‘indifference’ and which I consider to be as a hindrance to art-making. I try not to carry fixed views as to my everyday experience. I make basic enquiries such as ‘what is that?’ in the art-making process. This is my way of dealing with the tendency of indifference, and it is comparable with the practicing of a *Beginner’s Mind* 初心 (Shoshin in Japanese and chū xīn in Chinese) in Zen as suggested by Shunryu Suzuki when he said that:

“In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, in the expert’s mind there are a few. (...) In the beginner’s mind there is no thought, “I have attained something.” All self-centered thoughts limit our vast mind.”²

¹ Frank, *the Zen of Seeing*, 4.

² Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind: Informal Talks on Zen Meditation and Practice* (US & Japan: John Weatherhill Inc, 1988), 21-22.

The understanding of the ‘mind’ in Western and Chinese cultures is an intriguing one. In the West there is a tendency to connect or associate the mind with the brain, while the Chinese tend to understand the mind as ‘心’ (xīn), and which may be translated as ‘heart’ in English. When a Chinese tries to show his mind, he directs his palm to his chest not his head. The meaning of Mindfulness should be translated as ‘专注心’ (zhuān zhù xīn) meaning a ‘heart that is focussed and attentive’. Therefore in the Eastern context ‘Beginner’s Mind’ may be understood as ‘Beginner’s Heart’. Similarly, being ‘meticulous’ is ‘细心’ (xì xīn), which may be directly translated as ‘conscientious heart’ or, more precisely, ‘heart that is attentive to smallest details’. A Beginner’s Mind is made “When we have no thought of achievement, no thought of self, we are true beginners”³ said Shunryu Suzuki and a beginner’s attitude is the attitude of not having presumption, prejudgment and expectation. It is like a child who has not lost the quality of innocent and restlessly questions ‘why?’ When I fix my view on things, I limit myself, and when I maintain a fresh mind and see things without any preconceptions, I am open to possibilities.

The process of art-making provides me with the possibility to reconnect with, and to develop, my inner self. This was not envisaged at the early stage of my art-making

³ Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, 22.

journey which was based on the enjoyment of turning humble objects into something for appreciation. For John Daido Looi, the “...willingness to return to simply doing what we’re doing it is enough to open our eyes and let seeing happen.”⁴ D. T. Suzuki provided an insightful explanation on ‘*knowing*’ and ‘*seeing*’, when he said that “...these two must come together. To know they must be two – subject and object. ...Knowing is philosophical, knowing about; and seeing is seeing directly, personally, i.e., by personal experience. ... When we think we see something, that seeing is not real...”.⁵ Whilst John Daido Looi suggested that “...in knowing, we kill reality, or, at least, we make it inaccessible. We live and create out of our ideas, out of the apparent comfort of certainty that they offer.”⁶ In art-making, as well as in life, it is important to always *see* things that you think you ‘know’, with a fresh and attentive mind, a ‘Beginner’s Mind’.

4.2 In the Spirit of Attentiveness

⁴ John Daido Looi, *the Zen of Creativity: Cultivating Your Artistic Life* (US: Ballantine Books, 2004), 76.

⁵ Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *the Awakening of Zen* ed., Christmas Humphreys (US: Shambhala, [Shambhala Dragon Edition]1980), 23.

⁶ Looi, *Zen of Creativity*, 71.

John Welwood suggests that “Artists often feel most alive when their work demands their total attention.”⁷ Alexandra Munroe sets the tone when he said that:

“Artists’ interests in multiplicity; ephemerality; art’s relation to the everyday; and the use of concept, language, and the artist’s body as art, all blurred conventional distinctions and gave rise to Happenings, performance art, Conceptual art, and multimedia and interactive installations. In the process, art became about the act of attention – a state of mindfulness that could correctly assume a certain cultural fluency with Asian concepts of being and consciousness.”⁸

I consider the trivial to have the potential to be transmuted into something extraordinary, and that what seems to be insignificant may be transformed into something significant and able to be appreciated. When John Cage was asked by Henning Lohner about how he thought uninteresting things could become interesting, he replied, “When and if you pay attention to them.”⁹ In Zen’s *Mindfulness* teaching, Buddhists pay attention to the most ordinary circumstances of everyday life such as cooking, washing the dishes and sweeping the floor (please refer to chapter 1, section 1.3.3 for

⁷ John Welwood, ed., *Ordinary Magic: Everyday Life as Spiritual Path* (US & UK: Shambhala, 1992), xiv-xv.

⁸ Munroe, *Third Mind*, 23-24.

⁹ An essay by Henning Lohner entitled ‘The Making of Cage’s One11’ compiled in: David W. Bernstein and Christopher Hatch, ed., *Writings through John Cage's Music, Poetry, + Art*, (US: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 265.

Mindfulness teaching). D. T. Suzuki proclaimed that “the most ordinary things in our daily life hide some deep meaning that is yet most plain and explicit; only our eyes need to see where there is a meaning. Unless this eye is opened there will be nothing to learn...”¹⁰ Art potentially exists everywhere in the everyday, only to be discovered through an attentive attitude to begin with, slipping away the moment we disregard what we saw. As John Cage said, “Art is everywhere; it’s only seeing which stops now and then.”¹¹ His claim echoes a description on Zen which said that, “Zen is everywhere: It is just beneath your feet; it is right in front of your face... Zen uses whatever is at hand.”¹²

My earlier work *Assemblage of Used Disposable Chopsticks* produced in 2000 (please refer to images 4.01 and 4.02) demonstrates the connection between my studio practice and elements of Zen Buddhist teaching in that it translates the idea of attentiveness into material form. I encounter chopsticks every day because I eat my meals with them (as well as serving them to the customers who dined in the restaurant where I used to work). They are something so mundane to me that they can be easily overlooked and go unnoticed. My attention to a pair of chopsticks not only allows me

¹⁰ Suzuki, *Awakening of Zen*, 30.

¹¹ An essay by Constance Lewallen entitled ‘Cage and the Structure of Chance’ compiled in: Bernstein and Hatch, *Writings through John Cage’s Music, Poetry, + Art*, 235.

¹² Gary Thorp, *Sweeping Changes: Zen and the Art of Household Maintenance* (US: Macmillan, 2001), 4.

to consider how they function to assist eating, they also extend my thoughts to include ideas of socializing, celebration of relationships, as well as the environmental issues they may infer. I observed what other possible connections a pair of chopstick might have with our everyday life apart from the constrained views of chopsticks as a cutlery. Through attentiveness in the process of art-making, I learnt that a humble pair of chopsticks can contain more than it immediately apparent. Over a period of time, the attentiveness not only takes place while I am in my studio contemplating the materials that I have chosen for my work, it also extends to my everyday life - at home, walking in the street and at work. Attentiveness to the everyday gradually dissolves into my daily activities in different environments. It is in this sense that the everyday, my self, and art are integrated.

4.3 The Circle

The chopsticks piece embodies ideas of childhood memory, identity, and elements of Eastern culture such as celebration, family values, reunion and living a full life. Apart from manifest ideas of waste and sustainability, all of which draw attention to the impact consumerism has on our environment (please refer to chapter 3, section 3.1 for

extended discussion), the piece also explores aspects of control and the uncontrollable, together with functionality and the art object through the use of time and three-dimensional form.

The characteristics of the disposable chopsticks themselves informed my decision to assemble them together. My intention was therefore to allow the physical qualities of the material to speak for themselves as well as to relate my own personal experience to the material. I was concerned to allow the finished work to be partly composed from the colour, texture, size, shape, and the food stains of the disposable chopsticks. The overall round form of the sculpture is determined by the size and shape of the disposable chopsticks.

4.3.1 Assemblage of Used Disposable Chopsticks

Chopsticks are identified as the Oriental way of eating, and the Chinese prefer to use round rather than square or rectangular dining tables. Round signifies a sense of unity, harmony, infinity and perfection in Chinese culture. In the *Reunion Dinner* ‘团圆饭’ (tuán yuán fàn) held on the eve of the Chinese New Year, family members, include those that live or work in different places come home to wish each other well and sit

around the table to share a meal. The word ‘团’ (tuán) means unite or join, ‘圆’ (yuán) means round or circle and ‘饭’ (fàn) means dinner or rice, thus ‘团圆饭’ (tuán yuán fàn) means ‘a ‘dinner that reunites the circle’ in a direct translation. ‘圆’ (yuán) therefore is often being associated with reunion ‘团圆’ (tuán yuán), fullness ‘圆满’ (yuán mǎn) and completeness ‘圆美’ (yuán měi). As revealed in the format of the dining room, the Chinese place their own emphasis on family values. They prefer to use the round table because it represents harmony, peace, completeness and eternity. The circle derives from that part of Chinese culture that is closely associated with Taoism and Buddhist teaching, and it is often evident in both their arts and everyday life. I embrace the repetitive pattern of our everyday life into my work - birth, aging, sickness, and death, day and night, spring, summer, autumn and winter, and the 12 animals represent the 12 years cycle in the Zodiac calendar from Chinese culture. The chopstick piece provides an opportunity for the viewer to have free association and create a dialogue with the work. It embraces both controllable and uncontrollable elements. The controllable is the intention in the thought process, and the focus and precision when laying the chopsticks to construct a perfectly round form. The uncontrollable is the as-it-is element of the disposable chopsticks that largely determines the physical appearance of the sculpture, with the colour of the chopsticks also changing over time.



Image 4.01 Full view of the sculpture made from approximately 25,000 pairs of disposable chopsticks



Image 4.02 a close-up view

Image 4.01 and 4.02

Assemblage of Used Disposable Chopsticks, 2000

Material: disposable chopsticks and PVA

Dimension: 106cm (W) x 64cm (H)

The piece took three months to assemble, indicating time, and utilized all the chopsticks I collected with the help of my colleagues working in the dishwashing area indicating collaboration. The sculpture is made up of approximately 25,000 pairs of used disposable chopsticks and represents the same amount of meals being consumed, within which conversations were shared, friendships were celebrated, convivial moments were memorized, jobs were created, and trees were cut down. The chopstick makers are aware of the reality that they needed to produce, the customers are aware of the reality that they needed to consume, and my dishwashing colleagues are aware of the reality that they needed to bin the chopsticks. Although they may be less likely to contemplate the physical qualities and the many things entailed by the chopsticks within our everyday life, it is possible to connect with this level of reality through attentiveness. I learned that a humble pair of chopsticks, as triggered by the awareness following plain and simple looking contains more than we normally ‘know’. The inner self is enriched by the process of contemplation of a very trivial thing I encounter daily that reflects the Chinese saying ‘多经一事，多长一智’ (duō jīng yī shì, duō zhǎng yī zhì), (please refer to the discussion in chapter 3, section 3.4). Of the many books about Zen Buddhism that I have read, Gary Thorp’s description on the Zen’s *Mindfulness* practice coincides my view when he said:

“As you become more aware of the nuances of the things [the everyday] before you, you gradually come home to your own true self. You begin to identify with the various forces surrounding you and are more ready to accept your place among things”.¹³

The chopstick piece devotes attentiveness, thought process and time consumed on a very humble material. The attitude, decision and the passing of time eventuate in form. It repeats and multiplies the same form to build a solid autonomous form of perfection that indicates both motion as well as stillness. The concepts of attentiveness, repetition, time, duration give rise to a state of being and consciousness. The minimal intervention and repetitive process of constructing the chopstick piece also suggests the characteristics of meditation in Zen practice (Zen meditation is discussed in section 1.3.3 and 1.3.10 of chapter 1, and section 4.4 in this chapter). A similar process can also be found in *Assemblage of Ring-pulls* also made in 2000 (please refer to images 4.03 and 4.04). Laying the chopsticks next to each other is a lengthy process that requires patience and concentration. I realize that these processes are comparable with the way Zen Buddhists go through the chanting to eradicate the random thoughts with beads in their hands. Comparison can also be made with the way they repeatedly

¹³ Thorp, *Sweeping Changes*, 126.

use breath counting as a method in meditation to retrieve awareness back to the present moment and away from unrelated thoughts of the past and future. These are few examples on how Zen Buddhists foster *Mindfulness* in their spiritual practice of the everyday, and I perceive that they coincided with my work and art practice.

4.3.2 Assemblage of Ring-pulls

The ring-pulls used to construct the *Assemblage of Ring-pulls* piece (please refer to images 4.03 and 4.04) were collected on the streets over a long period of time. They were then tied together with staples from a staple gun using pliers and constructed according to the form of an inflated car tyre inner tube. The piece establishes a dialogue between ring-pull and tyre inner tube, two seemingly unrelated everyday objects, to engage with sustainability and childhood memory in sculptural form. As a child, I used an inner tube as a float to swim in flooded abandoned tin mines and which context also suggests a sense of prevention and saving. The piece embodies similarities as well as differences with the chopstick piece – they both relate to consuming in the sense of eating and drinking. They both embrace a sense of the social, the environmental, memory and the meditative process of making. The

chopstick piece is an independent form that occupies a negative space, and the ring-pull piece is the negative shell of an object that contains or surrounds a positive space. Its structure is determined by two different shapes of ring-pulls and I allow the ring-pulls to dictate the shape of the sculpture as assisted by the inflated inner tube. The reformed ring-pulls and en-caging the form of the inflated inner tube directly relates to my risky childhood play. The piece experiments with multiplying and repeating a trivial object to create a striking visual form. The action of repetition equates with time, and over time and through concentration a process is generated that guides me into the meditative state where the existence of the self is anchored.

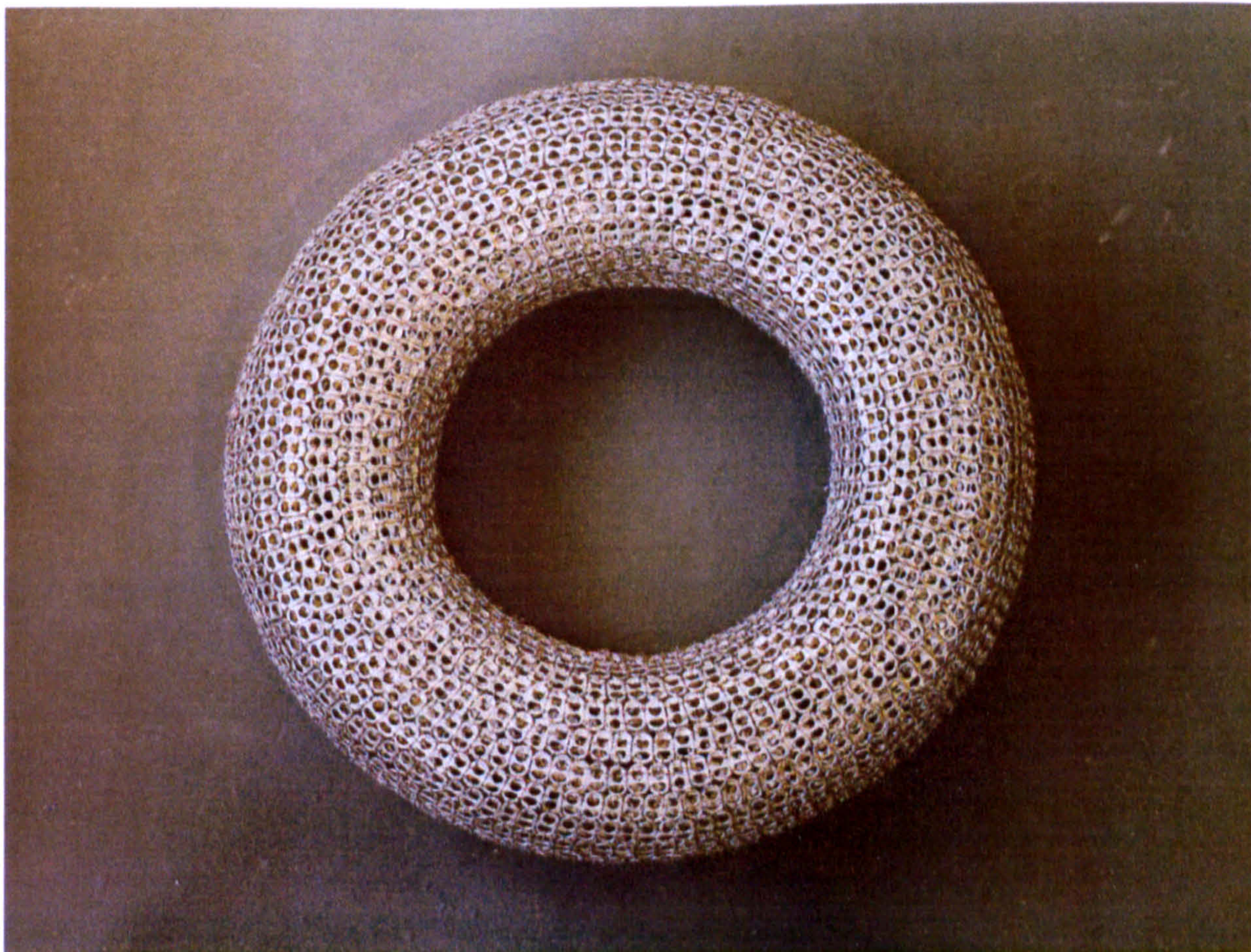


Image 4.03 A silver ring made from ring-pulls from aluminium drink cans



Image 4.04 A close-up view

Image 4.03 and 4.04

Assemblage of Ring-pulls, 2000

Material: ring-pulls and staples

Size: 60cm (W) x 17cm (H)

4.3.3 Circumrotation

In March 2009, I took part in an exhibition entitled *The Affluenza Exhibition* in Clerkenwell, London. The name of the exhibition was taken from the book *Affluenza* by Oliver James who uses the term to describe the ‘painful, contagious, socially transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more.’ The aim of the exhibition was to explore the effects that the financial

crisis (started in 2008) and consumer values have on people's emotional health, and it created a platform for open discussion on the related issues.

I used to listen to a Cantonese song called *The Earth is Round and Round* 地球圓又圓 (dì qiú yuán yòu yuán) from a very popular Hong Kong movie called *Happy Together* ‘大家乐’ (dà jiā lè) at the end of the 70's. The song was composed and written by James Wong Jim 黃霑 (1940-2004), and I find that the lyric is particularly meaningful and it continues to play in my mind even now many years later. The lyric goes like this:

個地球係圓又圓

The earth is round and round

何必怕後爭前

Worrying about falling behind and struggling to be at the front is unnecessary

無話扒頭就會前

It is not necessary that leading is at the front

一轉左變後邊

It falls behind again when the earth turned around

個地球係圓又圓

The earth is round and round

無分你後他前

It does not count that you are at the back or he is at the front

佢在前頭未算前

The one at the front is not really at the front

兜左圈佢重遠

When the earth turns a round he is falling far behind

Inspired by the Chinese song, I had an interactive audience project in mind to be realized before *The Affluenza Exhibition*. My initial idea was to build a large wheel-like structure using everyday materials and to allow gallery visitors to run inside like a guinea pig. The wheel resembles the cyclical pattern of life and nature. I wanted to use man running in a circle to resemble memory and pursuing in life but showing that he remains at the same spot no matter how hard he runs in the wheel. Due to time and financial limitation, I substituted the wheel running idea with ‘*Circumrotation*’ for the exhibition in which it consists a ‘constellation’ of old shoes hanging overhead in a large circle (please refer to images 4.05 to 4.07). The exhibition took place in a former

meat processing factory where different meats were hung, processed and packed daily. The hanging of shoes refers to meat hanging thereby engaging with life and death, while the idea of a circle suggests a sense of the infinite in an Eastern context. In the West, as a 'halo' it can be related to religious paintings in Byzantium and in Middle Ages where it was used to depict advanced spirituality.

The shoes circle (12 foot in diameter) is hung approximately six-and-a-half feet above the floor to create a sense of tension and overwhelming force when the viewers are standing under the work. It provides a rare moment for them to observe the worn areas of the shoes base to suggest the trace of walking footwork and part of someone's life journey in time and space. *Circumrotation* explores a sense of being 'trapped' in human living conditions. On one hand, it embodies a journey of life of many who live in endless pursuit of external gains such as fame, power, wealth or possessions. They suffer from imprisoning themselves in competitions, making comparison with others, in fear of falling behind, unaware that they are trapped in a circle with no beginning and no end, with no sense of first and last that resembles the lyrics of the Chinese song. On the other hand, it portrays life revolves in causality, where what goes round comes around. People and things are interconnected and co-arising as suggested in the teaching of 'Oneness' in Eastern philosophy. In this, Toshimitsu Hasumi suggested

that “... there is a need for a mode of contemplation that disregards the specificity of all things and comes to the experience of the transcendent-immanent, to the experience, that is, of all-oneness, which is the universal link binding the world together.”¹⁴



Image 4.05 *Circumrotation* in ‘The Affluenza Exhibition’, London, March 2009

¹⁴ Hasumi, *Zen in Japanese Art*, 10.



Image 4.06 *Circumrotation* in ‘Strange/Familiar’, Dasein Academy of Art, Malaysia, November 2009



4.07 *Circumrotation* in ‘I am Solitary, I am an Army’, Surface Gallery, Nottingham, September 2010

Image 4.05 - 4.07
Circumrotation, 2009
Materials: used shoes
Size: 12’ diameter, 6.5’ high approx.

4.3.4 Bǎo Yòu (Strange/Familiar)

Bǎo Yòu 保佑 (please refer to images 4.08 to 4.10) meaning ‘protectiveness’ is a new work I produced for *Strange/Familiar*, my debut solo exhibition in Malaysia. It is also the first piece of work that I have created in Malaysia since I left home for the UK in 1994. The piece is made out of used-joss-sticks collected from my family, friends and local temples, and I assembled them together in a circle using hot-melted glue.

In the everyday life of my own family and some traditional Chinese families in Malaysia, before they leave home to work in the morning they present joss sticks to the ancestors and deities. It is a way to pay respect, entreat safety and prosperity. The same ritual is applied when individuals leave the family to go abroad and also upon returning to their homeland. They look upon an image of a deity, an ancestor or the sky when entreating with the joss sticks in their hands. The burned or used joss sticks have no value and are normally discarded after that. I wanted the first work I produced in Malaysia for the exhibition to depict the everyday life of Malaysian Chinese families. I consider that joss stick is the most common and relevant everyday object that the majority of Malaysian Chinese families use.

The circle remains a symbol of omnipresent power and eternity since mankind first looked up to the sky and experienced the light and warmth of the sun. I make reference to the light circle around or over the head of the images of their deities. The idea of a circle also corresponds to the halo on the head of holy figures in different religions, including often used when depicting Jesus Christ. These images are commonly seen in religious illustrations and paintings. Holding the joss sticks and entreating to the image of the deities in Chinese culture represents wishes and hopes. I consider that the used joss sticks represent consumed hopes and dreams that may or may not be or have been realised. *Bǎo Yòu* corresponds to the idea of entreating and wish making that shuttles between the time and spaces of now and the uncertain future. It engages the psychological space and ideal space of the prayers to explore the notion of faith and healing. *Bǎo Yòu* coincided with my own father's ill health and I dedicated this particular piece to him in the *Strange/Familiar* exhibition. He was admitted to the hospital due to his heart problem and discharged a day before the opening of the exhibition.

The works discussed in this section have the tendency to use the circle in ways that I had not consciously planned. The Circle embodies a sense of *Co-arising* and *Oneness* as suggested by the Buddhist teaching, in which they see everything is in everything

else, one in all and all in one. This teaching is often revealed in Zen Buddhist *ensō* (Zen circle) paintings where a simple circle is drawn on paper using brush and ink in a single breath and stroke, to reveal a sense of one cyclic return and wholeness through a clear and focused mind absorbed in Zen meditation (please refer to images 4.11 and 4.12). The meditative quality in my studio practice is embedded in the chopstick, ring-pull and joss stick pieces that will be discussed in the following section.

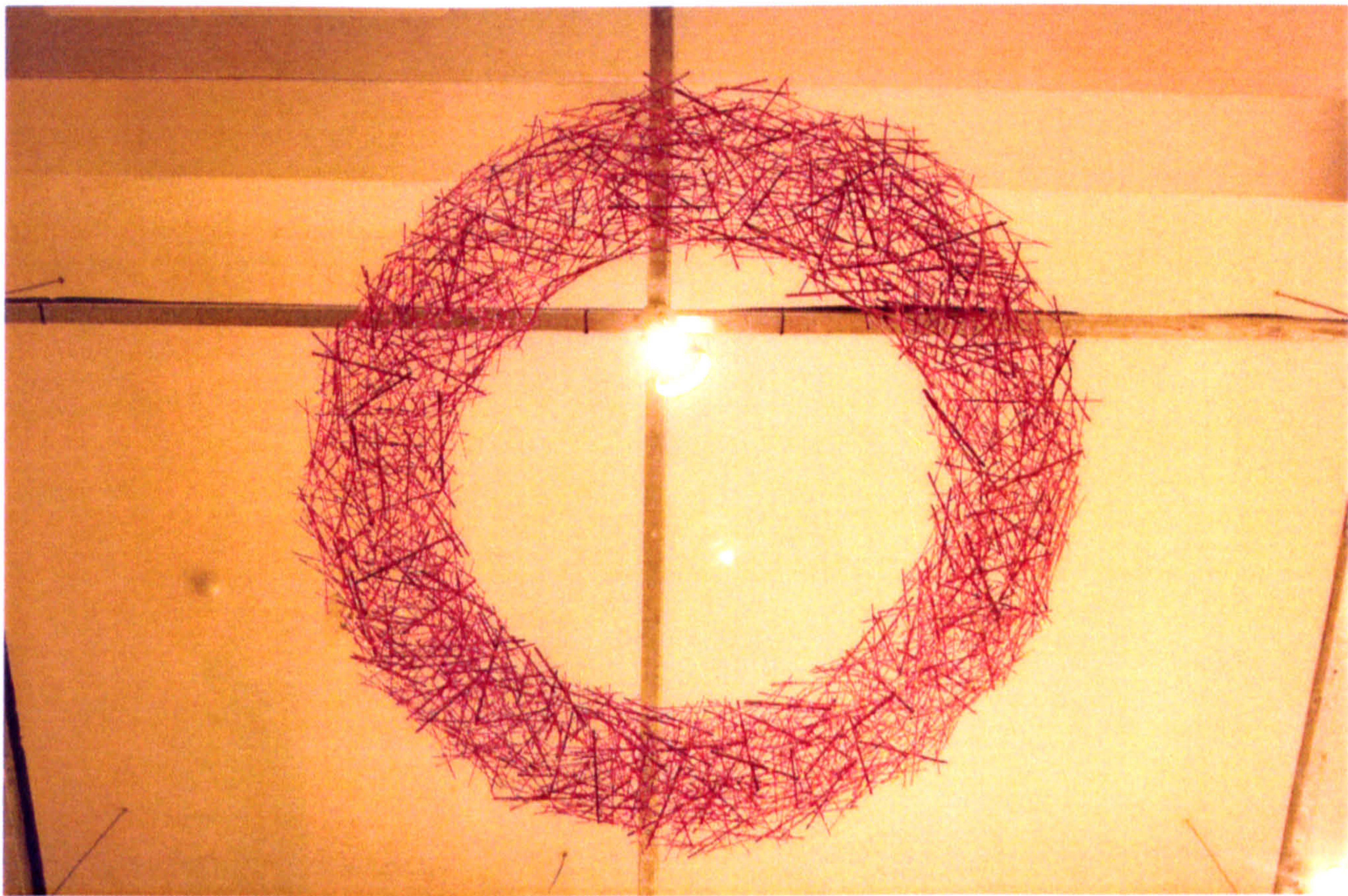


Image 4.08 *Bǎo Yòu* in ‘Strange/Familiar’ exhibition

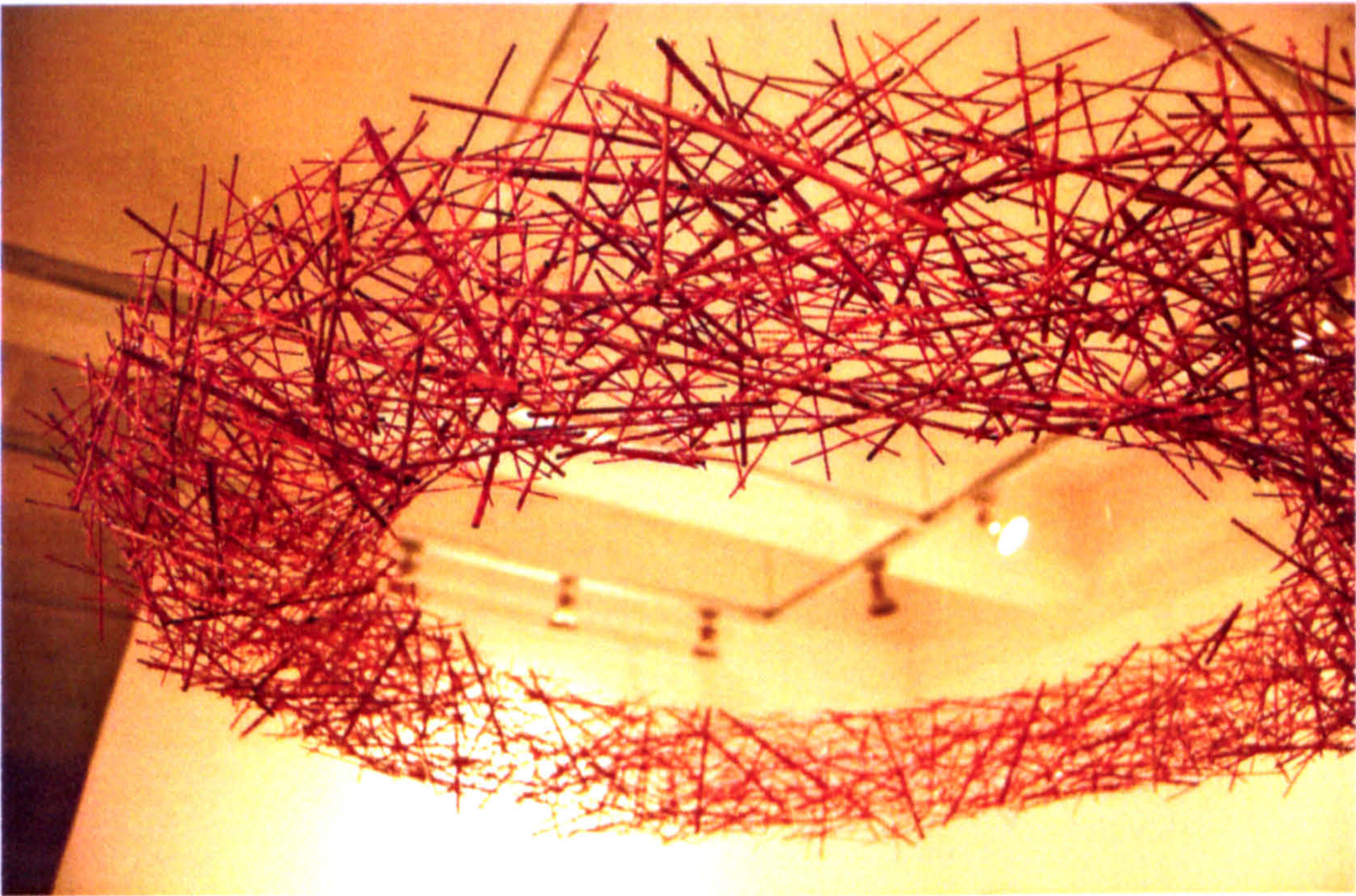


Image 4.09 Close-up view of *Bǎo Yòu*



Image 4.10 *Bǎo Yòu* in ‘Strange/Familiar’ exhibition

Image 4.08 – 4.10
Bǎo Yòu (Protectiveness), 2009
Materials: used joss sticks and hot-melt glue
Size: 3.5’ x 3.5’ approx.

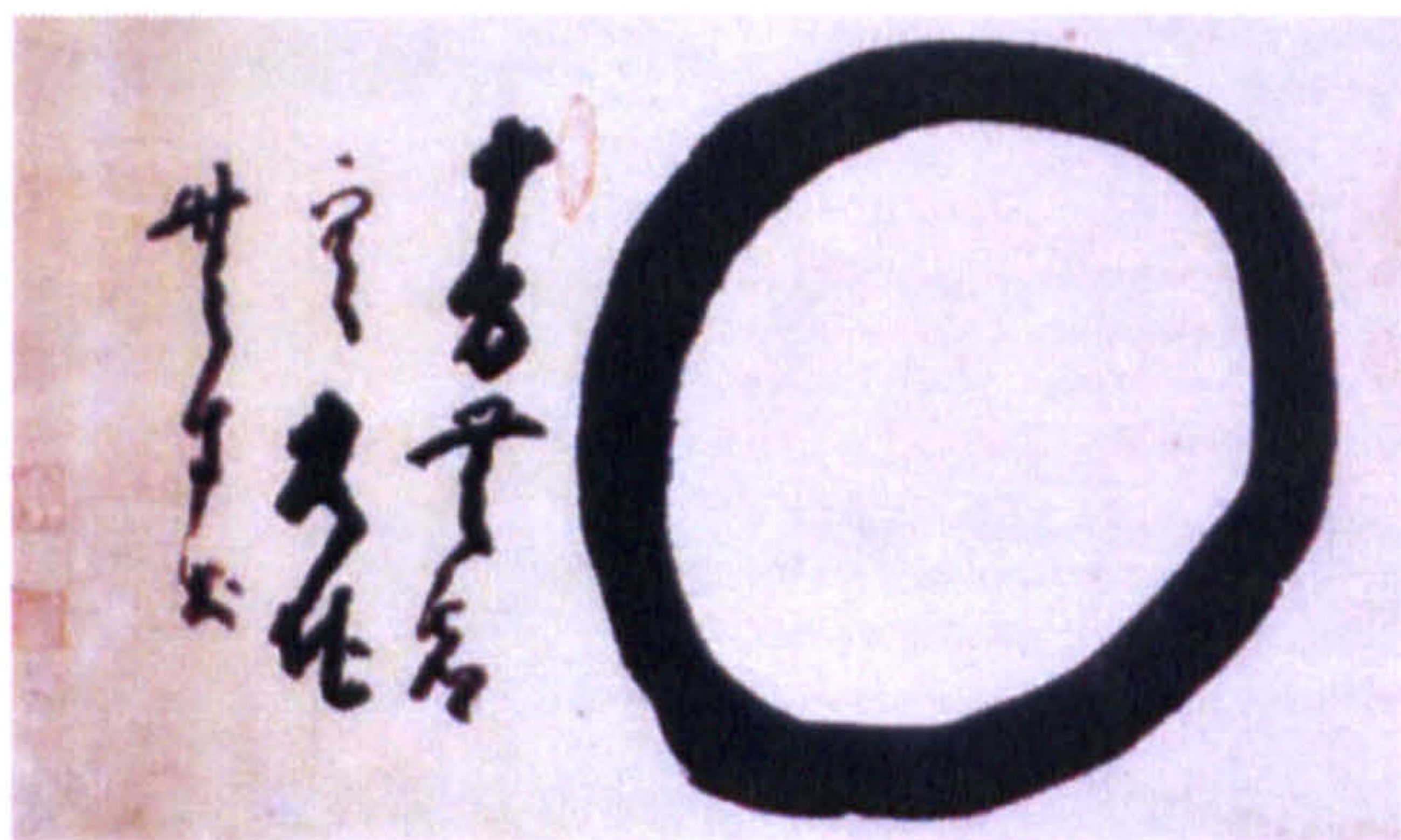


Image 4.11 Ensō by Hahuin Ekaku Zenji (1686-1769)



Image 4.12 Ensō by Torei Enji (1721-1792)

4.4 Action, Repetition and Meditation

“When we relax our attempt to get hold on life, we start to appreciate the richness contained in the simplest things.”¹⁵

4.4.1 6 Minute Performance of Smashing Bottles

My work *6 Minute Performance of Smashing Bottles* (please refer to images 4.13 to 4.15) involves the smashing of beer and wine bottles, one after another, for approximately 6 minutes. The piece was presented in ‘East End Lives’ at *The Rhythm Factory* space in Aldgate East; as well as at the *Sir John Cass Faculty of Art, Media*

¹⁵ Welwood, *Ordinary Magic*, xxii.

and Design in *London Guildhall University* in 2001. The bottles were collected from a restaurant where I used to work, and approximately 150 of them were smashed, live in front of the audience in each performance. The piece borrows a common discarded object from my workplace to incorporate into the smashing of bottles (a situation that I regularly encountered in our urban streets). It frames both the sight and the sound of the situation to present them in an art space. The bottles of different colours were arranged on the floor and they smashed randomly into a large rectangular container during the performance. This worked like a frame for a painting as well as ensuring adequate health and safety. During the performance, the spectators experienced the live act of making as well as the physical work as revealed on the floor. The bottle smashing performance generated sound as well as a rectangular visual field of broken glasses on the floor when the frame was removed. After the performance, a video documentation of the performance was shown next to the broken glasses over the length of the exhibition.

My initial intention with the bottle piece was to try to experiment with a different working method - destroying the chosen objects in order to build. This method makes reference to two Chinese proverbs ‘留芳百世’ (liú fāng bǎi shì) and ‘遗臭万年’ (yí chòu wàn nián) that have opposite meaning to each other, the direct translation would

be ‘disseminating the gracefulness for hundreds of centuries’ and ‘leaving the stink for millions of years’. The former is often associated with the people that are famous for many generations because of their positive contribution to the society. The latter refers to people whose names are being memorized because of the destruction they caused to the world e.g. Hitler and Pol Pot. These two Chinese proverbs demonstrate the possibilities of forming something by using either the method of building or the method of destroying, in either an orderly or chaotic situation consistent with the Taoist and Buddhist understandings of *Duality* and *Oneness*. This method is opposed to the one I adopted in many of my previous pieces where the assemblage of collected objects can be related to the category of building through positive action. It also marked the first step where I began to incorporate everyday activity into my work. I consider the piece more as a painting with a twist because the paint is replaced by objects (bottles) and the rectangle frame and the floor is the canvas. It challenges our traditional perception about painting in which the marks are permanently painted on a canvas and where the work is normally hung on the wall. The piece suggests a sense of temporariness because the ‘painting’ ceased to exist when the exhibition finished and the work was removed.

The piece embraces non-conventional art materials to create an event using both two and three-dimensional related works. It used actions that perform the bodily movements that are initiated by the mind, to interact with objects as matter, to focus on the idea of the moment rather than projected meanings. Although it stems from observing situations that may be related to violent acts, the performance was not intended to express any emotional issue. Rather the intention was to generate a dynamic field with energy drawn from the impact of smashing the bottles. The performance suggests a sense of awareness of and focuses on the present moment. It embodies the concept of time, space, form and chance through spontaneous gestural play. It explores dualistic aspects of reality where an element of order can be embedded in chaos, with destruction as an act of building, and where a quality of calmness may be found in the frantic. The action in the performance embraces a sense of calmness in an absorptive process within what seems, to the bystander, to be a violent and chaotic situation. This process is difficult to be interpreted and comprehended without involving oneself in the action of creating the work. I make the comparison with the way Zen monks strike the bells in their monasteries, where they remain mindfully serene within the sound. Relatedly, known among the Chinese, there is an ancient bell striking Zen story that goes as follows:

An old monk listened to the sound of the bell attentively one morning, he couldn't wait to call a monk over when the sound of the bell ended and asked, "Who was striking the bell?" The monk replied, "A young monk who has just arrived recently." The older monk called for the new monk and asked, "What mood were you when you stroke the bell this morning?" The new monk replied, "No particular mood. I was just striking the bell." The old monk said, "But the sound of the bell was extremely noble, only a wholehearted person could evoke that sound." The new monk pondered and replied, "Actually, before I became a monk, my family teacher often reminded me that I should think of the bell as the Buddha when striking the bell."¹⁶

Zen's Mindfulness practice is about the purely 'now'. It is about being aware of the present moment and not allowing the mind to alternate between thinking about the past or the future. Striking the bell becomes the most important thing for that moment of his life when the new monk struck the bell. He was wholeheartedly striking the bell and Mindfulness was applied to the task instead of being distracted by the outer element i.e. the resonant sound coming from the bell. Similarly, the process of smashing the bottles induced a sense of calmness in me, coming from inner concentration on the actions, and absorption at the moments of picking the bottles up

¹⁶ Unknown source, the story is popular among the Chinese.

and then smashing them. The chopstick piece for example, results from the concentration and the action of just gluing the chopsticks one after another, round after round, instead of pondering other things when building the work. The ring-pull piece and joss sticks piece also have a similar meditative quality during the process of assembling the objects together. When a work of art is made wholeheartedly, there is no separation between the medium and the artist because there is no obstruction and no challenge, no gap between the repetitive actions and the mind. The artist is not competing with anything else but is just aware of the moment of making and which may be considered as a form of meditation in action by Buddhists. The artist is just trying to be himself in a very simple and meditative way. This direct experience can be linked with 'the artistic process in the form of intense concentration during work, adding a ritualistic character to the creation of art-work, ...a disciplined ritual, comparable in a way with the practice of Zen arts.'¹⁷

¹⁷ Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 221.



Image 4.13 The performance in 'East End Lives', Rhythm Factory space



Image 4.14 The safety barrier is removed after the performance to reveal a field of broken glasses



Image 4.15 Close-up view of the broken glasses

Image 4.13 - 4.15

6 Minutes Performance of Smashing Bottles, 2001

Material: empty alcohol bottles

4.4.2 Every Corner of My Flat

First presented in the *Strange/Familiar* exhibition, *Every Corner of My Flat* (please refer to images 4.16 and 4.17) is inspired by the dust that accumulates in my living space and which I clean from time to time. Dust penetrates every corner of our living environment like the way we are surrounded by the everyday. Started in 2009 and ongoing, the piece uses photography to document the process of removing the dust in

my studio flat. The dust is rolled into the shape of a ball and it continues to grow. The process provides a chance for me to study and scrutinise my own living space more intensely. Along the way I observe and become re-familiarized with myself as I recollect my life when going through my own physical personal belongings. Engaged with the distant, recent and immediate past, the process of this piece is similar to the chopstick piece where the object is accumulating and built up over time in the form of one single object.

The piece is concerned with the relationship between objects, space, man and his behaviour and how they influence each other. It reflects the way a space can affect its inhabitant and how we arrange our living spaces to suit our needs. It is one of many potentials to 'draw a portrait' of a person, or to describe the character through his living space. Self-evidentially the things we own, and the way we arrange them, reflect or provide clues as to who we are and how we live. House cleaning is a very trivial domestic activity, some people do it daily, weekly, monthly, annually or never at all. I try to do it regularly and attentively whenever I find time. The endless repetitive and accumulative activities manifest a sense of infinity linked to Buddhist's meditation that is reflected in my work. In a separate thought, the issue of dust also reminds me of two equally great and yet contradictory Buddhist poems by *Shén Xiù* 神

秀 (605 – 706) and *Huì Néng* 慧能 (638 – 713):

身是菩提树

The body is the Bodhi Tree;

心如明镜白

The mind is like a bright mirror standing.

时时勤拂拭

Take care to wipe it all the time,

莫使有尘埃

And allow no dust to cling.

神秀 *Shén Xiù*

菩提本无树

There never was a Bodhi Tree,

明镜亦非台

Nor bright mirror standing.

本来无一物

Fundamentally, not one thing exists,

何处惹尘埃

So where is the dust to cling?

慧能 *Huì Néng*



Image 4.16 *Every Corner of My Flat* in ‘Strange/Familiar’ exhibition



Image 4.17 One of the photographs from the documentation

Image 4.16 and 4.17
Every Corner of My Flat, 2009 and ongoing
Material: dust and spray glue

Lee Ufan produced a series of very minimal monotone paintings consists a single brushstroke on the canvas called *Correspondence* (2002), *Resonance* (2006) and *Dialogue* (2007) respectively (please refer to image 4.18). These highly focused and precise brushstrokes require moments of attentiveness when the artist applies his brushstrokes to the canvas. Like Buddhists' *Ensō* painting, he focuses on the medium, the surface, time and a single point on his canvas. When he is painting, the brushstrokes he is applying, between the inhaling and exhaling of breath, must be the most important thing in his life. The mind, the breath and the action of the artist must connect with his brush and his paints and exist as one. If the mind is alternating between unrelated events in the past or future when he was applying the brushstroke on the canvas, the spirit of the brushstroke being applied ceases to exist because it is disconnected from the mind. Similarly, the actions when I lay the chopsticks, join the ring-pulls and glue the joss sticks together were done in the most absolute attentiveness possible to me. So did the new monk when he was striking the bell. Zen Buddhists suggest that when we carry out trivial activity such as sweeping the floor we should only be sweeping the floor, which means that we should be completely aware of the fact that we are sweeping the floor. By Mindfulness in our action we become conscious of our presence, our mind and our action as a coherent whole and it

can be related to the understanding of ‘meditation in action.’¹⁸ As Thich Nhat Hanh pointed out, “When you are washing the dishes, washing the dishes must be the most important thing in your life.”¹⁹ What he means is just wash your dishes with full attention with no barrier between you and the dishes you are washing, between Lee Ufan and the brushstrokes he was applying, and between me and the chopsticks I was laying.

According to John Daido Looi, by gradually working on our concentration through Mindfulness, we can develop a potential to touch a still point in which it makes reference to Zen meditation. It is a single-pointed concentration that develops our intuition where “we become more directly aware of the world. We notice in ways that are not clearly understood, but very accurate.”²⁰ While Mindfulness of the everyday is a form of meditation for Zen Buddhists, as Chögyam Trungpa the Buddhist teacher and artist claimed “Creating art is like meditating.”²¹

¹⁸ Welwood, *Ordinary Magic*, xxiv.

¹⁹ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Miracle of Mindfulness*, 24.

²⁰ Looi, *Zen of Creativity*, 56 & 57.

²¹ Chögyam Trungpa, *True Perception: The Path of Dharma Art*, ed., Judith L. Lief (US: Shambhala Publications Inc, 2008), 124-125.

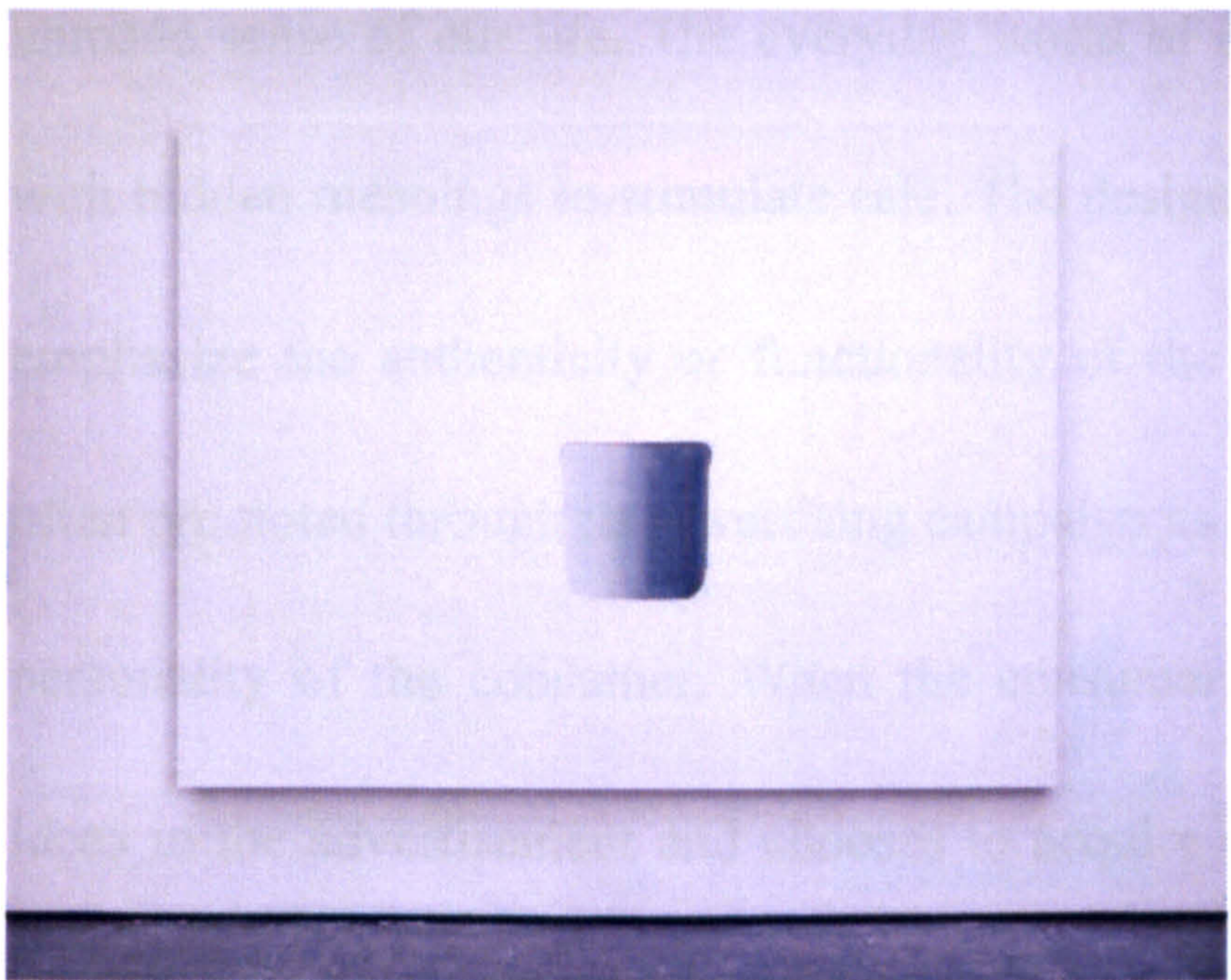


Image 4.18 Lee Ufan, *Correspondence*, 2002

4.5 Seeing Things as they are

“...stories often operate in the background of the mind, as part of an ongoing stream of subconscious gossip we keep up with ourselves... [that] creates a distorted reality.”²²

Black is not always complete darkness and white is not always void, a colour or an object may represent different meanings in different cultures and contexts. Different perspectives and propositions stimulate thought and debate to make sense as well as

²² Welwood, *Ordinary Magic*, xxii-xxiii.

unmade sense of our life. The everyday world of commodities too may be saturated with hidden meanings to stimulate sale. The design of a product does not necessarily emphasize the authenticity or functionality of the product itself, but the product is often promoted through its advertising campaign as if it has the power to transform the personality of the consumer. When the consumer accepts the projected image and ideas in the advertisement and chooses to acquire and use the product, the authentic self of the consumer is replaced by the image as projected in the advertisement. This situation penetrates our everyday life and is very similar to ‘Commodity Fetishism’ as suggested by Karl Heinrich Marx in his *Das Kapital*, where he used the phrase ‘production of commodities by means of commodities’ which narrowly means that marketing and advertising tactics may transform what people do and how they behave.

In the world of art, different representational or metaphorical meanings may be projected by artists in works of art for appreciation. There is an aspect of my studio practice where I prefer to see things as they are, simply because I prefer to be ‘truthful’ to the materials I use. This is similar to the way I prefer to detach from the alien persona lodged in myself when using a product, e.g. wanting to relate to the glamorous image as suggested by the advertisement rather than for real needs and necessities. In some of the works that I produced, I try to study and reveal the as-it-is-

ness of things. This does not mean that I present strictly untouched plain materials, but rather I attempt to present plain materials to avoid projecting subjective meanings. I go as far as to study the material's connection with people and other objects. Therefore some of the works that I have produced do not depend solely on me as the creator but also rely in part on the world around me to be able to enter into dialogue.

I enjoy using the discarded and being able to give them new 'life' or purpose through my work. The chopstick, ring-pull, shoes, and joss stick pieces combine the idea of transforming the discarded and revealing the as-it-is-ness of the materials I used. In the chopstick piece, for instance, I was intrigued by the physical appearance of the chopsticks and then to avoid letting the authentic qualities be submerged under a layer of other meanings. I allowed the colour, the texture, the size, the shape, and the food stains of the disposal chopsticks to orchestrate the work, the disposable chopstick-ness of the material takes control of the physical appearance of the sculpture where I can become immersed in the meditative process of making. Similarly *Assemblage of Ring-pulls* is another example where I allow the as-it-is-ness of the material to form the sculpture. Regardless of its perceived insignificance, I try to transform the materials to suggest that there is always a significant aspect which can be found within the ordinary.

4.5.1 By the River Thames at Windsor

By the River Thames at Windsor (please refer to image 4.19) is my first attempt to experiment with a mini DV camcorder. The piece was a result of observing things that happened around me while taking my camcorder with me on my walk at the River Thames of Windsor. I chose a footbridge as my filming spot and set my camcorder on a tripod to record on a mini DV tape what occurred on the river for an hour. An unexpected incident happened toward the end of the filming – the sound of a plane flying past could be heard, then the calmly flowing river was disturbed when the nervous swans flew into the frame unexpectedly, only to realise that it was a boat sailing past the frame that had triggered their nervousness. The whole footage with its original sound was later shortened into about ten minutes to present that chance occurrence. Leaving alone the quality of the image, the piece may be seen as the result of spontaneous play because the whole footage is unplanned, undirected and unrehearsed. The camcorder captured a chance happening without changing the angle or adjusting the equipment during the filming. Our eyes are the window for our mind and the camera works like an extension of our naked eyes, the video work for this particular piece is more still than my naked eyes because it did not change its angle in contrast to our head and eyes movements when we might be looking at something.

Apart from shortening the footage to make the film more presentable in an exhibition, the whole film remained original and sincere to what was actually happened. The methodology reminds me of the famous Zen *hokku* by Matsuo Basho:

Furu ike ya!

Kawazu tobikomu

Mizu no oto!

The old pond, ah!

A frog jumps in,

*The water's sound!*²³

The poem has no added statement apart from what Matsuo Basho was observing and contemplating. Like the swans that flew into the frame in my video piece, the atmosphere of stillness was broken when the frog leaped into the water, creating the sound of water. It records no subjective aspect of the event, and does not go beyond the phenomenon of what he witnessed which is the old pond, the water, and the frog is jumping into it. The poem indicates that he was not aware of anything other than the event when he perceived the scene and the activity as it is. Matsuo Basho and the

²³ Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, 238.

leaping frog, the old pond and the sound are in the same reality, they were all in one and one in all. Echoing Matsuo Basho's hokku, *By the River Thames at Windsor* presents what the mechanical 'eye' of the camcorder captured and what happened at the scene as it is, without adding any pre-planned or fictionally footage or added statement. Apart from the medium (one is using texts and the other is using moving image) and time element where Matsuo Basho's recorded incident happened in just a few seconds and the video piece being ten minutes of an extended period of time, both pieces registered exactly what happened at the moment when the events took place.



Image 4.19
By the River Thames at Windsor, 2004
Format: DVD
Duration: 10 minutes

4.5.2 A Single Leaf Trapped in Between Two Pieces of Paving Stone

In *A Single Leaf Trapped in Between Two Pieces of Paving Stone over a Period of Thirty Days* (please refer to the group of images in 4.20), the leaf was discovered by chance trapped in between two paving stones when I was walking on the street one day after windy rain. It captured my attention and curiosity led me to document this chance occurrence until it finally disappeared after 30 days. Similar to my video piece, I was interested in documenting the event without prearrangement and without imposing my own opinions on the leaf. Each snapshot has a poetic quality in that it describes the leaf as it is, it captures the present moment of transition of the leaf without intervention. It embodies a sense of the transitory and of the impermanence in which people and things are like visitors in our life, as they come and go. Coincidentally, the shape of the leaf piece is similar to the shape of the swans in the video piece.

Matsuo Basho's poem contains no less and no more than what he saw, there is no gap between him and the reality as the poem has no self-projected narrative. In Zen Buddhist teaching, "Everything exists according to its own nature. Our individual perceptions of worth, correctness, beauty, size, and value exist inside our heads, not

outside them.”²⁴ Mindfulness is training for insight in order to understand the true nature of things that are freed from considerations of personal reactions, to then see things ‘as they are’. Zen Buddhist called this ‘*Tathatā*’, meaning Suchness or Thusness. This objective way of looking at things in Mindfulness practice lets things speak for themselves and unfold their true nature, it cuts down the discursive and prepares the mind to take in the actual characteristics of the considered objects. The way Richard Long recorded his walks in particular places using texts reminds me of Zen hokku or haiku (please refer to chapter 2, section 2.3.2 (vii) for further discussion). Calling their process ‘motiveless appraisal’, the Boyle Family seeks to present a version of the reality as truthfully as possible by throwing a dart randomly onto a large map to select a site on earth and recreating it as they found. It is also like the Gutai artists in their refusing to load what they took to be false significance onto the materials they used (please refer to chapter 3, section 3.7.2 (i) for further discussion). The notion of as-it-is-ness in my work is trying to avoid imposing speculative symbolic meanings onto the materials I use. It is an attempt to be honest to the materials and I consider that it corresponds to the *Tathatā*. However, prejudice in the mind is almost impossible to eradicate completely, and I can only try to maximise the potential of *Tathatā* in my studio practice.

²⁴ Stewart W. Holmes and Chimyo Horioka, *Zen Art for Meditation* (Rutland & Japan: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1973), 16.

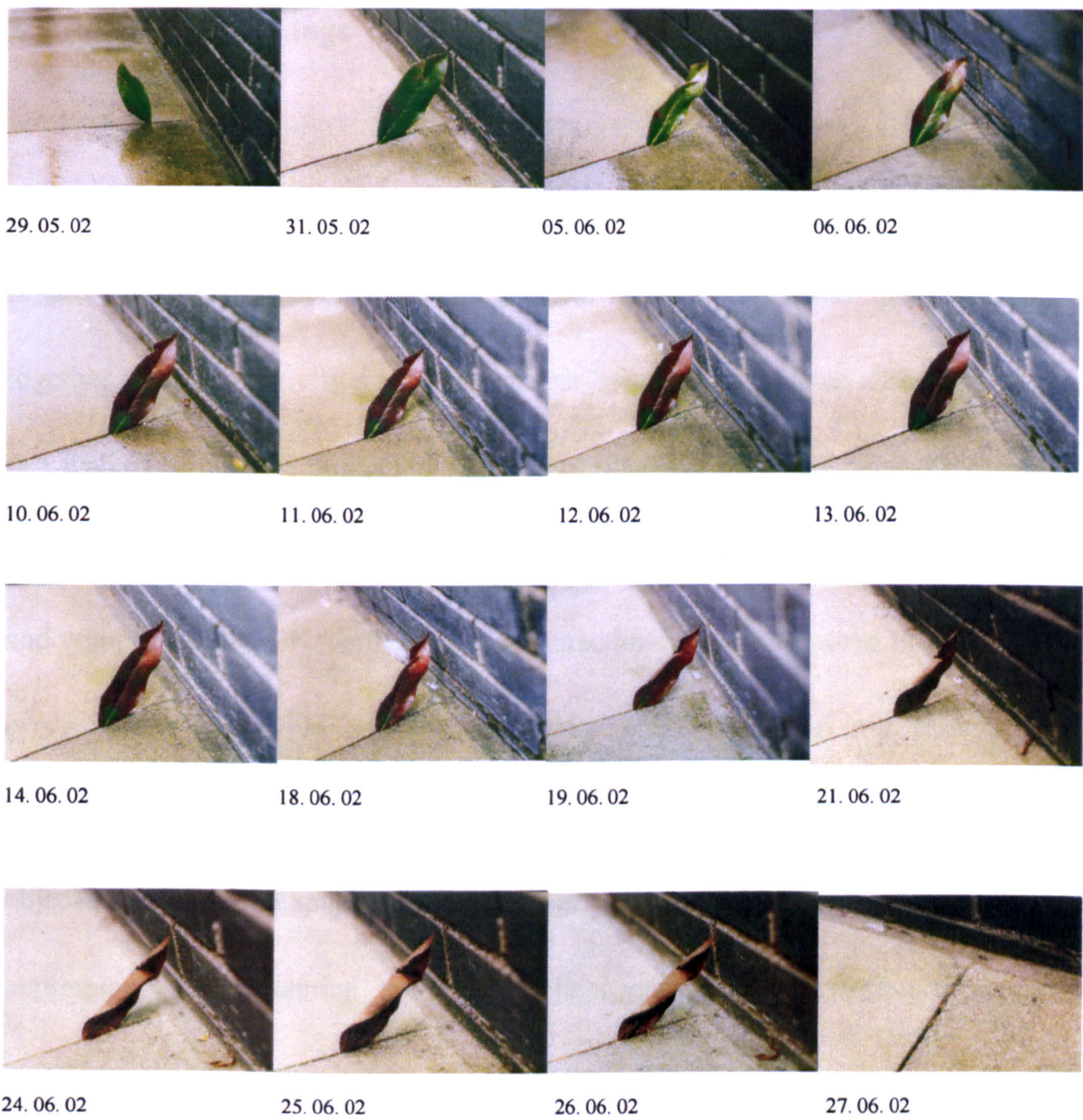


Image 4.20
A Single Leaf Trapped in Between Two Pieces of Paving Stone over a Period of Thirty Days, 2002
Medium: photographs

4.6 Relativity of Things

We are a thing among other things therefore reality cannot exist without relationship of accords and differences. I perceive that our life is merely a web of threads tangled together through relativity and causally. Our every action creates a chain reaction to this web of people and things that bind us together in a perpetual cycle. Our everyday life is in a constant state of transition as the result of our actions within this diversified and complex totality. Nevertheless, the interactions that lie between the trivial of the everyday are accessible only by our attentiveness. Some of my sculptural and performance works explore this idea of relativity as they enter into dialogues with objects, people, and spaces rather than prioritising projecting self-sentiment and expression. They examine the ever cyclical pattern of interaction between the mundane material environment and the behaviour of people living in it to allow viewers to have a new look at the everyday.

4.6.1 Cigarette Butts Formed Shadow

Supported by Vibe Bar, *Cigarette Butts Formed Shadow* (please refer to images 4.21 to 4.23) was a site-specific work for an exhibition called '*Brew*' which took place at

the *Truman Brewery Company* in London's Brick Lane area in 2001. The site relates to the production and supplying of alcohol. An overhead spotlight cast the shadows of the passerby to the conservatory area when the sky turned dark. Cigarette butts were scattered around in the building, thrown away by the people visiting and working in the building and the Vibe Bar. I decided to collect and use them as the material for the work to be installed in the show. I was interested in exploring the connections between the objects (cigarette butts), the people who were working in or visiting the building, and the space and its function and condition. I had been told by some friends they have to have a cigarette in their hands when they are drinking and socializing. The intention of the piece was to link together smoking, drinking, the space and the shadows that were cast on the conservatory area. My interest in the conservatory area was that it suggested a sense of preservation, and at the same time I was fascinated by the action so frequently used by the smokers to put out their cigarettes – where they pushed and planted their cigarette butts in the ashtray that sometime contained sand, and where the gesture suggested the act of killing off, destroying or eliminating. The Chinese believe that our own shadows are our spirits therefore the dead will not cast their shadows. Associating and combining the conservatory space, the gesture of putting out the cigarette and the human shadow creates a tension between life and death. While the repetitive action of planting the cigarette butts in the soil to form a

shadow suggests a meditative process. During the exhibition, the bodily shadows of the viewers overlapped and engaged in a dialogue with the shadow made out of cigarette butts, in which the viewers themselves became part of the sculptural elements.



Image 4.21 Close-up view of *Cigarette Butts Formed Shadow*



Image 4.22 A view from the first floor of the exhibition space

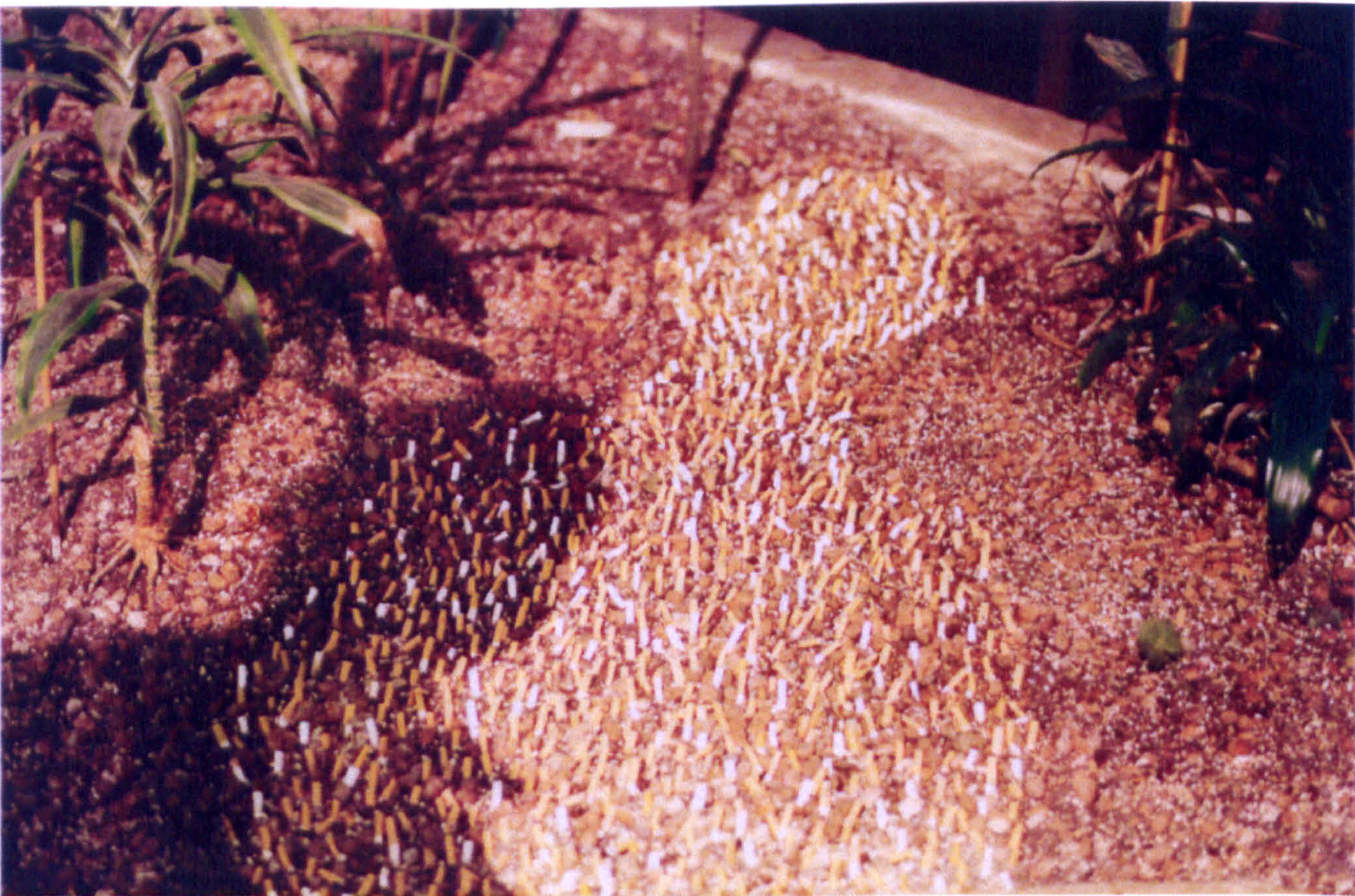


Image 4.23 The shadow of a viewer overlapped with the work

Image 4.21 - 4.23
Cigarette Butts Formed Shadow, 2001
Material: cigarette butts
Size: life-size shadow

4.6.2 Shredded Airliners Stuck on Aquarium

The inspiration for *Shredded Airliners Stuck on Aquarium* piece (please refer to images 4.24 and 4.25) came to me when I visited my wife in one of the Royal Free Hospital wards. There was an infusion bag connected to a polythene airliner inserted to her hand after an operation. The purpose of the airliner was to transfer sodium chloride or normal saline from the infusion bag to her body to prevent dehydration, the same airliner is also used to provide extra oxygen to patients. I relate the airliner to the giving of life and I extend its connection to the situation and conditions in an aquarium where a similar kind of airliner is connected to a compressor to pump extra oxygen into the water to support the life of fish, generating bubbles in the water in the process. When the airliner is cut into small pieces, it resembles the image of bubbles in water. By relating the airliner in the hospital to oxygenation in an aquarium, I found an intriguing association of function between the two, and decided to stick the cut sections of airliner to a fish tank to suggest the relationships between air, airliner, life, liquid, bubbles and the fish tank.

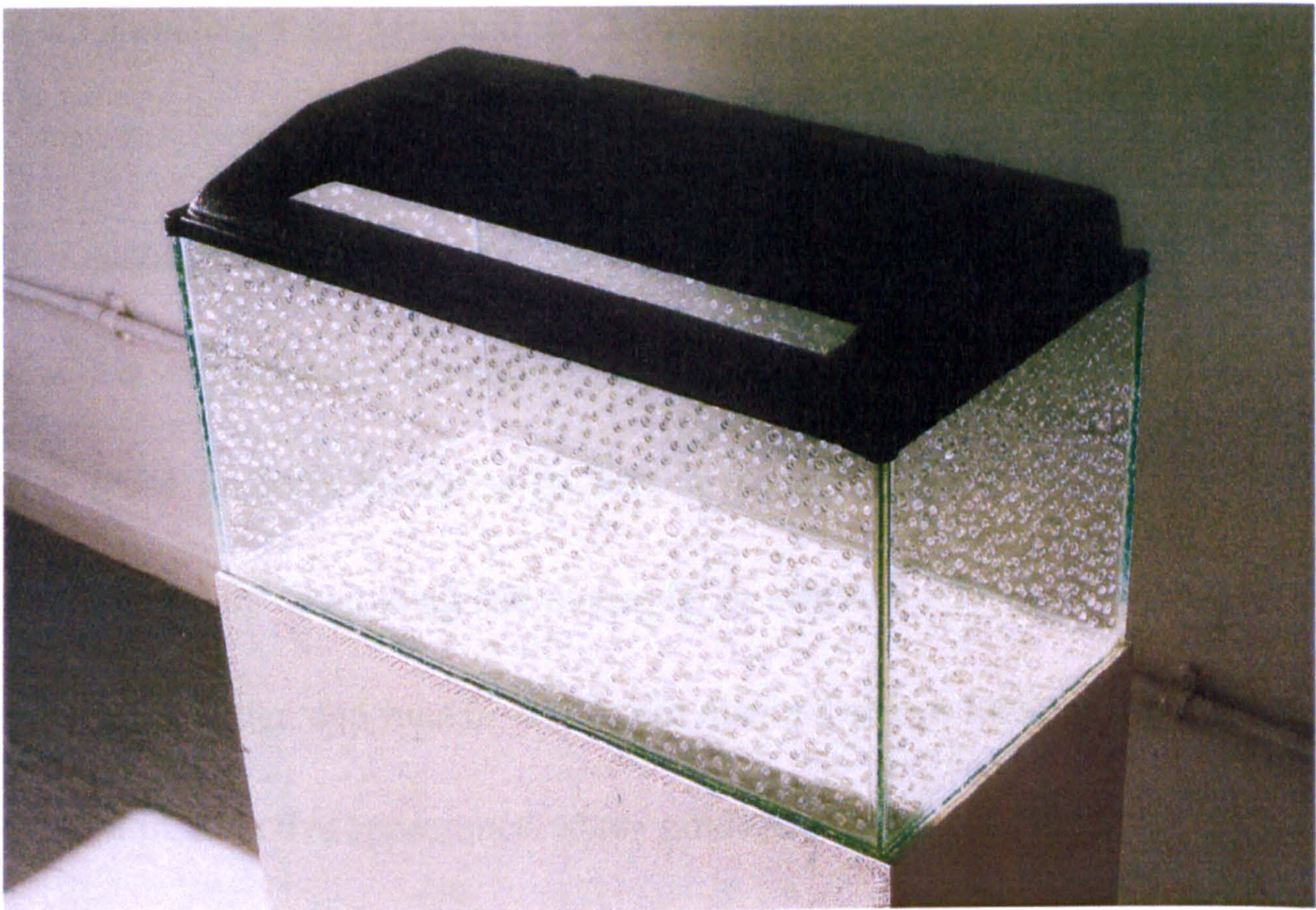


Image 4.24 The aquarium looks as if filled with water

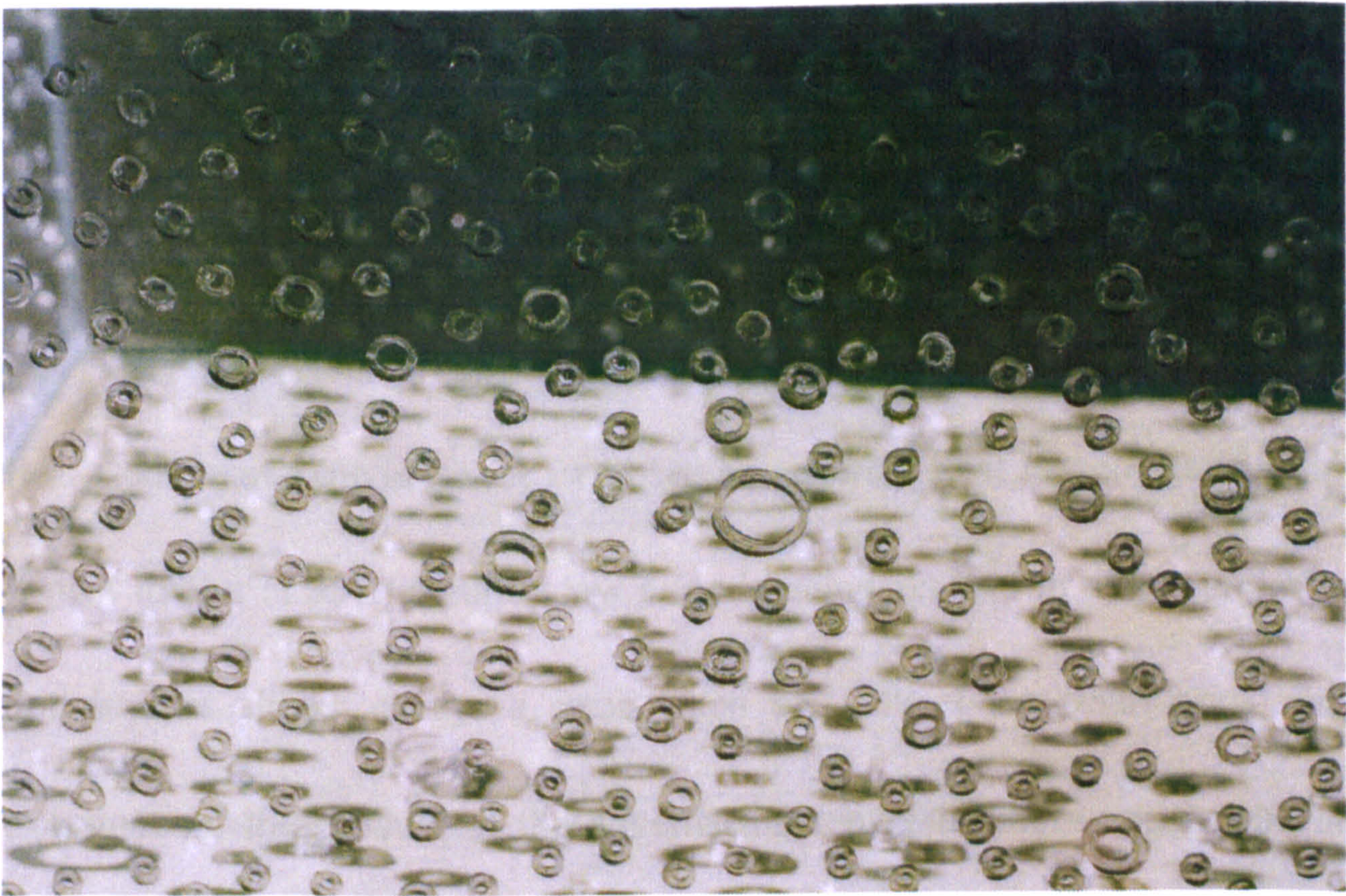


Image 4.25 A close-up view of the shredded airliners

Image 4.24 and 4.25
Shredded Airliners Stuck on Aquarium, 2003
Material: polythene airliner and aquarium
Size: 61cm x 31cm x 33cm

4.6.3 Labeling Tags Attached to Clothing

In *Labeling Tags Attached to Clothing* (please refer to images 4.26 and 4.27), I put clothing and labeling tags into interaction and suggest their permanent combination. The piece explores the sense of loss in the everyday world that is so commonly manipulated by advertising and the media. It connects with the reality where negative aspects of things and human beings are manipulated or intentionally buried under a blanket of attractive appearance. Many products in the market are often ‘dressed up’ in an impressive and expensive packaging to lure the consumer, just as some people tend to put on a flashy appearance and use alluring speech to create a good impression to achieve their intention. Things and people in this context exist in a split duality that is in contradiction with Zen Buddhist teaching of *Tathatā* or is-ness.

It is a common experience for us to see an advertisement that indicates a product is almost free or at an impossibly low price in comparison with other similar products, but there is almost always a catch when we look at the small print. On further examination, the product in the advertisement may be more expensive than other similar products available in the market. On many occasions when I look at a product in the supermarket with packaging highlighted in bold, claiming that there is a

substance in the ingredients that is able to transform and improve our health, but in actual fact contains a very small amount in the product that is not enough to have any effect at all. Both *Labeling Tags Attached to Clothing* and *Shredded Airlines Stuck on Aquarium* pieces, are a partial response to the sense of frustration that is similar to the one I experienced with certain products. They explore the ‘space’ between the real and unreal, the authentic and the illusionary that we may encounter in our daily life. The clothing piece uses the fluffy, woolly appearance created by the culmination of price tags to bewilder the viewers into believing that from a distance is a real. I also allow the piece to interact with the exhibition space and present it as close to the way we hang our clothing as possible, to look as if it is an ordinary piece of clothing hanging on the wall rather than a work of art. Similarly, the fish tank piece was presented against the wall to look as if it is an ordinary everyday object. It creates the illusion of bubbly water to mislead the viewers. Looking from a different perspective, these two pieces also embody a sense of nothingness in Zen teaching that is discussed in the following section, 4.8.



Image 4.26 The piece looks as if a fluffy piece of clothing from a distance



Image 4.27 A close-up view

Image 4.26 and 4.27
Labeling Tags Attached to Clothing, 2003
Material: price tags and jumper
Size: 80cm x 70cm approx.

4.6.4 Stir

Stir (please refer to images 4.28 to 4.32) is my first collaboration with another artist (Yak Beow Seah) and the first interactive audience performance, involving cooking and eating, and took place at the Unit 2 gallery in London 2004. The setting of the exhibition consisted of three important features – a kitchen, a communal table and a slide projection. Two types of soup (one vegetarian) were prepared in the kitchen each day, which together with slices of bread at the side were served free to the visitors. A communal table to seat around 25 people was set up. On one side of the gallery walls, there was a projection of images from our personal albums of family and friends sharing convivial moments. Newspaper and magazines were placed on the table for reading, and music from the radio was playing continuously during the exhibition.

Stir paid attention to two important features from our everyday life (mine and that of Seah) and bringing it into the gallery to engage and share with the participants. Seah and I were interested in how we are obsessed with ways of eating and are fastidious about food in our own culture. Firstly, we observed the eating culture among the Chinese. There is a common saying in Chinese, ‘Eating is the utmost for the civilian 民以食为天’ (*mín yǐ shí wéi tiān*). When two Chinese met, they would probably start

to greet each other by asking “have you eaten?” And, they would choose to go for a meal instead of a drink in the pub. The round dining table in Chinese culture is not only for hospitality, it also conveys a sense of completeness, gathering, sharing, connecting and socialising. The Chinese bring an understanding of ‘Oneness’ and ‘Co-arising’ to the table. Secondly, we looked into how the importance of eating together as a family is emphasised in Chinese culture, where soup is at the heart of such a gathering, and a meal is not a proper meal without a bowl of soup on the table. In my own family, we start the dinner when members of our family are ready to gather around the dinner table. A large bowl of soup is normally placed in the middle of the table among other dishes, with the whole family sharing a bowl of soup to suggest connectedness, harmony and togetherness. Apart from this, different recipes of soup may also be made with special herbs for those who have a hectic lifestyle or for those who are recovering from ill health. It is a remedy to revitalise body and mind in Chinese culture, and is a gesture of well wishing.

In contemporary everyday life, it is not very often that families have an opportunity to sit around the dinner table to enjoy a meal and share a conversation together. Children leaving the dining table to eat in front of the television set is a common scene. The communal table in *Stir* provides an opportunity for the visitors to meet and share

conversation over a bowl of soup. Seah and I are interested in how dining is able to connect people. The soup we served, the communal table, the visitors and the artists are the important elements that made up *Stir*. The project offers food as well as friendship, and I was interested in how we were able to connect people similar to the way in which I assemble the everyday objects for my sculptures – making connections and putting things together.



Image 4.28 Setting of the kitchen



Image 4.29 Looking through the window outside Unit 2 Gallery, as Seah and I were preparing the soup



Image 4.30 Visitors sitting around the communal table waiting to eat their soups



Image 4.31 Sharing conversation with the visitors



Image 4.32 On the wall is a projection of the images from our photo albums

Image 4.28-4.32
Stir, 2004

4.6.5 Nice to Meet You

In March 2008, I took part in *Paradise Stories*, an exhibition in Liverpool in conjunction with the '08 European Capital of Culture'. The exhibition explored what 'paradise' meant to the artists taking part. Perhaps, heaven or paradise exists in another dimension outside this world as some of the religions claimed. It may be the highest dimension in which the enlightened souls can attain when they leave this physical world. However, a paradise elsewhere remains a mystery for me. If paradise is 'an ideal or idyllic place' as suggested in Oxford English dictionary, it would be in tangible physical spaces with various possibilities of mode and scale, for example in a beautiful natural environment, a well planned town and a peaceful land. These paradisiacal spaces would be temporal and transient because physical spaces in reality are perpetually changing. Thus, in my opinion, if a physical paradise space exists, it would be impermanent. If things change and paradise changes, can we still consider this as ideal or an idyllic place?

The Eastern concept of *Nirvana* is often being interpreted as a paradisiacal world. Buddhist teaching suggests that to search for *Nirvana* one does not have to look further. It is right here, right now, right in front of us if we can see it. If one is able to

understand and embrace this idea, one may be enlightened and on the way to paradise. Inspired by the Buddhist concept of Nirvana as a mental space as well as seeing that paradise exist in the everyday around us, I proposed *Nice to Meet You* (please refer to images 4.33 to 4.35) for *Paradise Stories*. The title comes from the phrase we normally use when we met someone for the first time to indicate a sense of a possible new friendship. I see paradise as a space where people peacefully connect with each other. However, in reality, we bump into people every day when walking down the streets or in public places but rarely make eye contact. I was interested in using people as the medium for the piece, where the idea was to experiment through drawing and installation and the interaction between the participants tracing each other's shadows.

I see *Nice to Meet You* as being similar to the bowls of soup I served in *Stir* in that it closes the gaps between people by providing a space for them to take the first step to interact. The project was set up in a room with a single light bulb hanging down from the middle of the ceiling. The shadows of the participants were cast on the wall as they entered the room. They could then trace the shadows of the people next to them with the brushes and paint provided. Over a period of time, the shadows of the participants overlap and interact with the tracings on the walls as they walk into the room. In composing the drawing, when we make marks we situate our mind within the drawing

in relation to what we see. Hence in *Nice to Meet You*, when a participant traced a human shadow they situated themselves in relation to the person they were tracing, thereby constituting what is present for us as we are, a web of fluxional interrelationships. *Nice to Meet You* provides a friendly space for the participants to find their paradise in *Paradise Stories*.



Image 4.33 Members of audience tracing each other's shadows in the private view evening



Image 4.34 Members of audience tracing each other’s shadows during the exhibition



Image 5.35 The marks on the walls and ceiling made by the people who traced each other’s shadow

Image 4.33 - 4.35
Nice to Meet You, 2008

When describing the networking artists to produce the *Awake* project (please refer to chapter 2, section 2.3.3 (iv) for further discussion), Jacquelynn Baas and Mary Jane Jacob suggested that residencies, exhibition, talks, conferences and forums among artists and art professionals is in the sense similar to Buddhists' idea of *Sangha*. They said, 'The work we [they] did together might be defined by its relationship to this emerging, non-static community of persons: a "Sangha" of practitioners in art."²⁵

Buddha, Dharma and *Sangha* are three important elements that shape the teaching of Zen Buddhism. *Buddha* refers to all things in our nature, *Dharma* refers to Buddhist scriptures, and *Sangha* refers to the Buddhist community (monks, nun, laymen and women) and, in a wider sense, to be socially engaged with others. An extension based on the idea of community, *Sangha* may also suggest form, space, movement and energy. Buddhist's *Sangha* teaching activated socially '*Engaged Buddhism*' that embraces a sense of giving and receiving. In the world of contemporary art, '*Open Engagement: Art after Aesthetic Distance*'²⁶ was a conference brought together 'influential artists and thinkers who are making and informing socially-engaged art work', that inspired by 'Engaged Buddhism'. In his written introduction to the conference, Jeff Nye suggested that "Their projects mediate the contemporary

²⁵ Baas and Jacob, *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, 13.

²⁶ A three days conference at the University of Regina, Canada from 11 to 13 October, 2007.

frameworks of art as service, as social space, as activism, as interaction, and as relationship”, is that such work, for historian Miwon Kwon “no longer seeks to be a noun/object but a verb/process.”²⁷

My audience interactive performance pieces are comparable to Buddhist’s ‘Sangha’ and the idea of the ‘socially-engaged art’ in which the work engages in situations of sharing, exchanging, giving and receiving with members of the audience that have not met previously. Unlike three-dimensional static sculptures, this kind of work is sculptural in that it is transformable through time in the process of engaging and communicating. In addition, interactive work with an audience is also very sociable, and where the artist is in direct contact with the audience there is always the potential to create new friendships. All these elements may be seen as ‘*Relational Aesthetics*’ from Nicolas Bourriaud’s perspective, and ‘Social sculpture’ through the eyes of Joseph Beuys.

Zen Buddhists underscore no separation between the ‘I’ or the ‘it’ with others, they see all things as being interconnected. Their keywords such as ‘Oneness’, ‘Co-arising’, ‘Interdependent origination’, and ‘Interbeing’ frame this substantial relativity.

²⁷ Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity* (UK: The MIT Press, 2004), 24.

Thich Nhat Hanh would use the word 'Interbeing'²⁸ and 'Oneness' to frame the relativity of all things. Similar to the Buddhist's claim and reflecting on his work, Lee Ufan said that, "A single tree or a single stone are not limited objects. They are necessarily linked to the things that surround them – air, sounds, time, life, death, and dreams. They are part of an endless continuity."²⁹ Each individual person is in connection to each other individual person and everything relates to everything else. We act as a thing among other things in our actions and a world of relativity is considered in my art practice. If I see a patient, a polythene airliner and a fish tank as individual points, I should also see a line that is connecting these three points and which represents a condition of our life. *Labeling Tags attached to Clothing* too joins together two closely related objects and associates the new objects with aspects of deceitfulness that we may experience in our daily life. *Stir and Nice to Meet You* bridge the gap between people through sharing and exchanging. They provide a friendly social space to explore and unite the existing threads between people. If I see two people unknown to each other as two individual points, *Stir and Nice to Meet You* are drawing a line between the two points to make a connection. These works consider the external world of the everyday and elaborate the relativity of things and people in

²⁸ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism* (India: Full Circle, 2000).

²⁹ Lee Ufan, *The Art of Encounter* (UK: Lissoon Gallery, 2008), 45.

the process. There are indications of overlapping with Zen Buddhist's *Sangha* and practice of *Oneness, Co-arising, Interdependent origination, or Interbeing*.

4.7 Nothing Happens

Very few cultures embrace the idea of 'Nothingness'. The concept of Nothingness is difficult to comprehend and being generally understood by many as emptiness or a void. There is something in nothingness that one may fail to recognise through being unaware that the nothing in their nothingness is always accompanied by something else to create form. In seeing that the negative is always accompanied by the positive or vice versa, they are inseparable. Just as our shadows follow us, this is the nature of duality in our universe. So, Nothingness never comes single handed, there cannot be a void in Nothingness, there is always something in it.

4.7.1 Condom Inflated with Helium

Helium balloons stuck on the ceiling are often seen in places like supermarkets, restaurants, or children's party. I have also seen people inflate condom like balloons

for fun. My work *Condom Inflated with Helium* (please refer to image 4.36) frames and connects together these two everyday situations. Instead of a balloon, I filled a condom with helium gas and released it onto the ceiling of the exhibition space. The condom gradually deflated and touched the ground several hours later. The physical reaction of expanding/contracting and rising/descending of the condom may be compared to the previously linked opposites of nothing/something. What is expanded will be contracted and what is raised will descend sooner or later. They co-exist as one. The physical reaction of the latex condom can be associated with the heightened human physical sensation during sexual activity - the rising and descending of feeling, emotion and body temperature.

For *Condom Inflated with Helium*, my intention was to produce a humorous piece that conveyed the idea of 'Nothingness'. To the audience at first glance, the inflated condom looks like a real everyday situation where a balloon filled with helium is accidentally released and has floated to the gallery's ceiling rather than it being an art work. The piece wanders over the space between nothingness and something, and art and the everyday, it may be understood alongside works such as:

- Tom Friedman's life size 'Fly' piece made of play-doh, hair, fuzz, wire and paint and presented on the edge of a plinth (please refer to image 4.37).

- Martin Creed's '*Work No. 79: Blu-tack kneaded, rolled into a ball, and pressed against the wall*' (please refer to image 4.38). Or,
- Peter Fischli and David Weiss's '*Things from the Room in the Back*' where they recast objects and construct them to look as if an everyday situation (please refer to image 4.39).

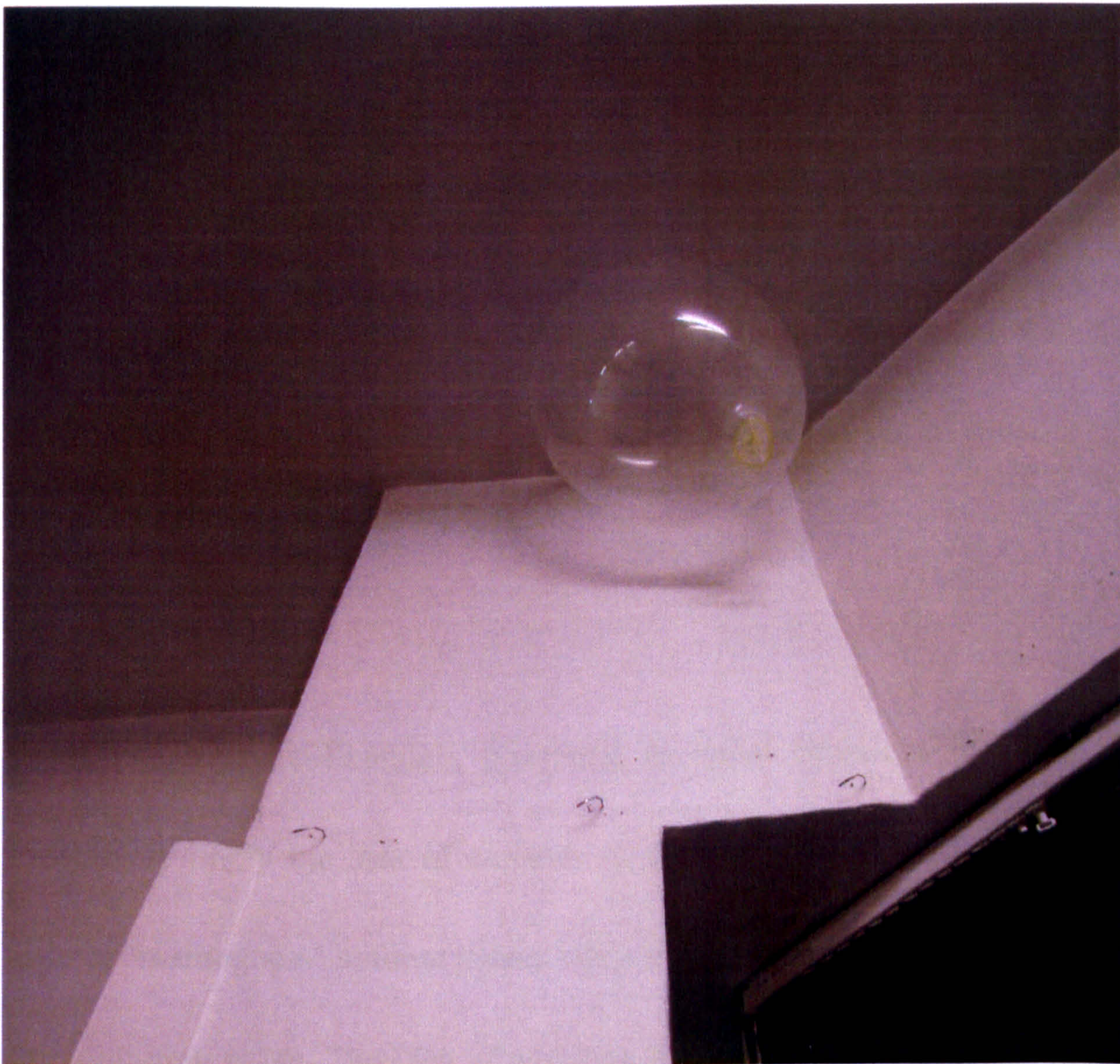


Image 4.36
Condom Inflated with Helium, 2003



Image 4.37 Tom Friedman, *Untitled (Fly)*, 1995



Image 4.38 Martin Creed, *Work no. 79 (Blu-tack)*, 1993

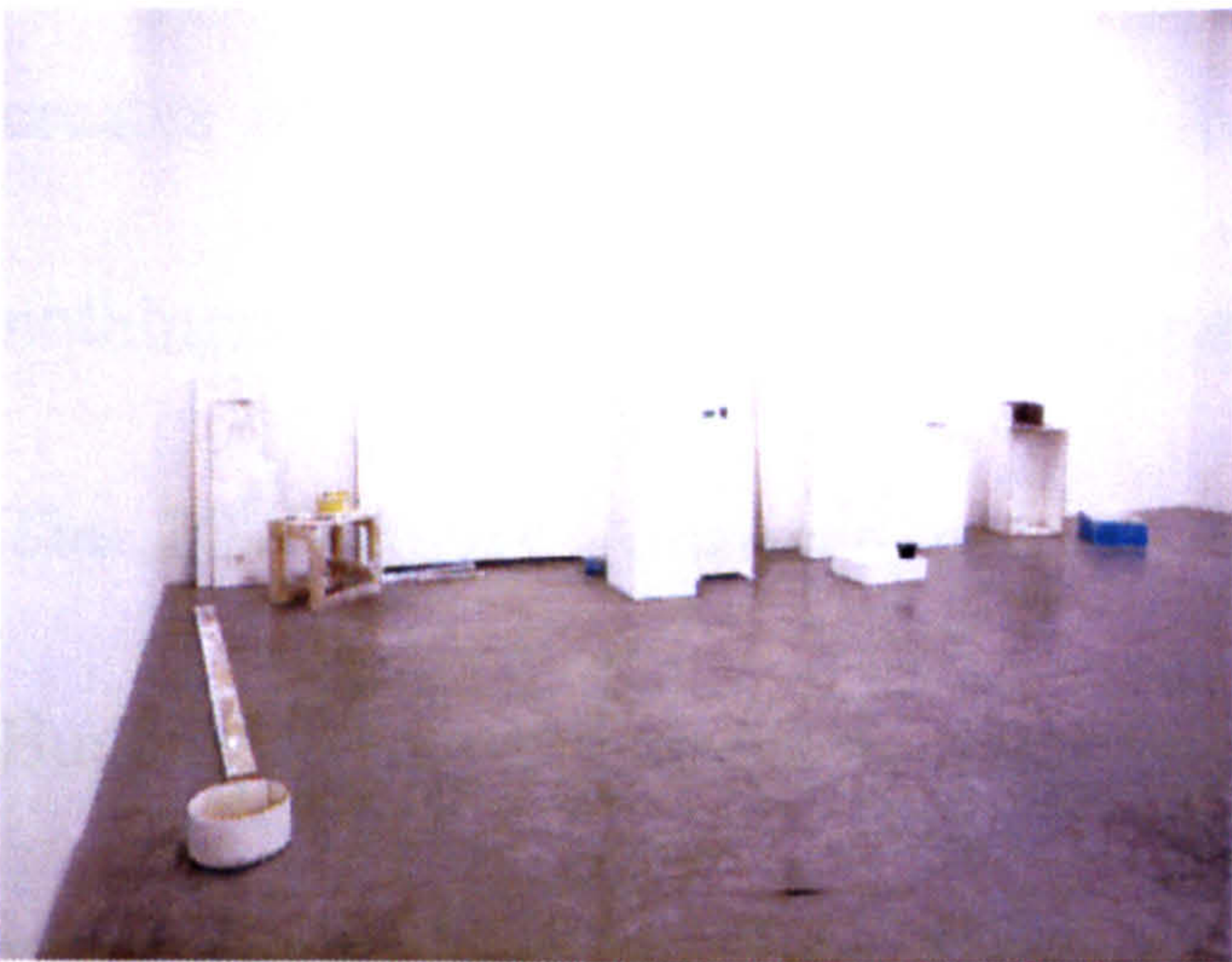


Image 4.39 Peter Fischli & David Weiss, *Things from the Room in the Back*, 1999-2000

These pieces are deliberately presented as banal situations in everyday life that deceptively imply the lack of content. At first glance, the viewer may experience a form of ‘nothingness’ in these pieces when they failed to see a work of art presented in the exhibition space. The idea of nothingness in the *Fly*, *Thing from the Room at the Back*, and *Blu-tack* pieces embrace a sense of illusion or of the simulation of the everyday, and this is very similar to my fish tank and price tag pieces as discussed

earlier (please refer to section 4.6.2 and section 4.6.3). Nevertheless, the gallery space resembles the blank canvas that constitutes a space of nothingness or emptiness. Here the artists use very slight indication to reveal or draw attention to the insignificant within our everyday life. This is similar to the way Chinese artists consciously leave white areas in their ink paintings to indicate space and to leave room for the imagination. As in John Cage's 4'33" piece, the 'nothingness' in these artworks creates a space for the viewers to live in and gain insight, and as I have said, nothingness is not the absence of something but actually the presence of something. The 20th century American painter Ad Reinhardt, who was well versed in Zen Buddhism, summed up the nothingness in contemporary art practice when said, "when space, matter was 'nothing', art was the making of something out of nothing; now when space, matter are 'something', art is the making of nothing out of something."³⁰ What is categorized as not being art is usually kept out of sight in a gallery. Visitors expect to see 'something' called works of art, to be displayed in the space, and may become confused when they encounter a work of art that mimics or resembles the everyday. It is art to create artless art out of the everyday. Or, to appropriate Reinhardt's words it is an art of "making of nothing out of something."

³⁰ Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 74.

4.7.2 Assemblage of Loose Bristles from the Brush that Painted the Wall

My other piece *Assemblage of Loose Bristles from the Brush that Painted the Wall* (please refer to images 4.40 and 4.41) resembles the ‘Nothingness’ of the condom piece. The idea came to me in 2003 when I was decorating my flat and it was triggered by the frustration I felt when the bristles from the paintbrush kept falling out while I was painting. I then decided to make a piece of work that combined the emotion (frustration), the materials (paint and paintbrush), and the space (wall). I considered the immaculate white gallery walls to be ideal spaces to explore this because exhibiting artists would normally go to considerable lengths to get their walls right, they may experience the same frustration I experienced when their walls are not even, clean and white.

I began with painting one of the gallery walls with a wide brush and white emulsion paint and collecting the loose bristles along the way. The bristles were then stuck to the same wall using clear glue constructed into a realistic looking crack line. The association of the newly painted wall, the bristles and the crack line convey the feeling of frustration I experienced when I was painting the wall at home. It connects objects with space and indicates the interrelationship between things and situations. The

minimum presentation of the piece blends into the subtle everyday, and it was as if nothing happened in the exhibition space that presented the art. However, there is something to be grasped in the piece and it is in this sense that I recognise the connection between my bristles and condom pieces with Martin Creed's work where he claimed connection with 'Nothingness'. Martin Creed made these comments on his 1993 Blu-tack-piece:

"I was taken with the idea of using the sticky substance, but had *nothing* to actually put up with it - so I just displayed the Blu-Tack. (...) I have *nothing* in particular to say. (...) I find it a lot easier if it [the work] negates itself at the same time as pushing itself forward--so there's an equal positive and negative which adds up to *nothing*, but at the same time is something too."

Martin Creed uses the slightest indication to reveal the nature of our everyday and what art can be. His method of adopting the notion of nothingness is comparable to some of John Cage's works that have a connection with Zen teaching. In John Cage's '*Lecture on Nothing*', he recites that he has "nothing to say" over and over again. John Cage suggested that silence was not the absence of sound but was the unintended operation of his nervous system and the circulation of his blood that led him to compose 4'33''. Cage comprehended that the space of 'Nothingness' or silence is

needed in order for our mind to cast the rhythm of sounds. Sounds come from no-sound, and art comes from non-art. “If you always understand sound as coming from sound, you become confused and lose the direction in which you should go. You have to know no-sound, because no-sound is your nature.”³¹ John Cage understanding of Robert Rauschenberg’s ‘*White Painting*’ was that it allowed foreign elements to land on it to enable the painting to take form, he claimed that ‘*White Painting*’ inspired 4’33’’. Like no sound, white is not nothing. “White is one color, but from white, space is created, and many colors. From this you can see the huge scale of the world: sunny days, cloudy days, oceans – all this expressed in different ways.”³²

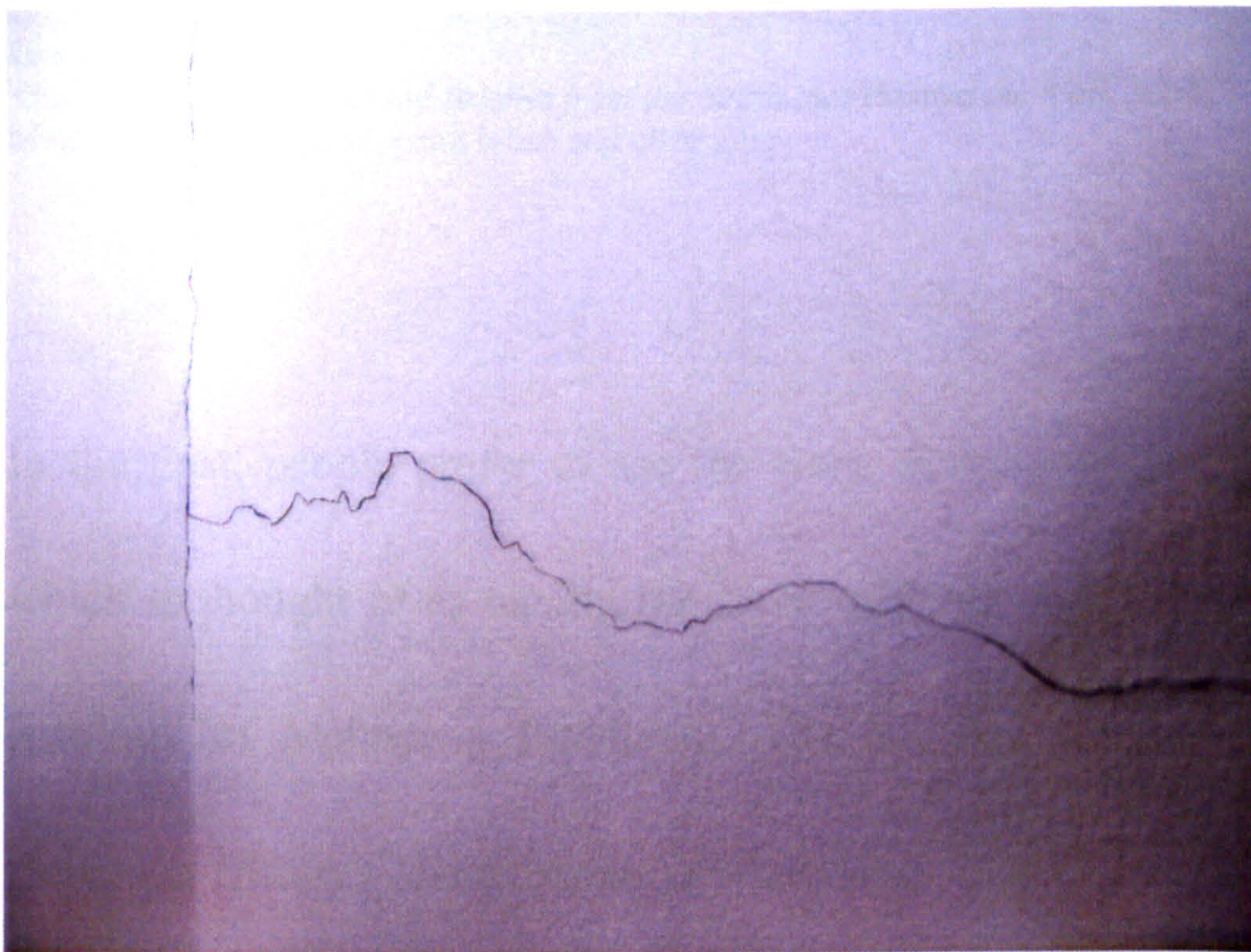


Image 4.40 Close-up view

³¹ Dainin Katagiri, *Returning to Silence: Zen Practice in Daily Life*, ed., Yuko Conniff and Willa Hathaway (US: Shambhala Publication Inc, 1988), 40.

³² Katagiri, *Returning to Silence*, 40.



Image 4.41 Full view, the piece was show in 'Strange/Familiar' exhibition.

Image 4.40 – 4.41

Title: *Assemblage of Loosed Bristles from the Brush that Painted the Wall*, 2003

Material: emulsion paint, paint brush and clear glue

In the East, people prefer to use the word 'Emptiness' instead of 'Nothingness' but which is thought of as having the same meaning. Emptiness is a key concept in the ontology of Mahayana Buddhism. The teaching can be traced from the *Prajna Paramita Hridaya Sutra*, commonly known as *Heart Sutra*, and which contains about the six hundred scrolls that collectively make up the *Maha Prajna Paramita*. This is probably the oldest Mahayana texts, originating as they did from India being

contemporary with the time of Christ. A relevant extract from the *Heart Sutra* translated into English by Edward Conze reads as follows:

“Here, O Sariputra, form is emptiness, and the very emptiness is form; emptiness does not differ from form, form does not differ from emptiness; whatever is form, that is emptiness, whatever is emptiness, that is form.”³³

This is in accord with the famous saying in Chinese’s Chan Buddhism: ‘色即是空, 空即是色, 色不异空, 空不异色’ (sè jí shì kōng, kōng jí shì sè, sè bù yì kōng, kōng bù yì sè), which can be translated into English as: form is emptiness, emptiness is form, form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form. This saying shares similarity with Edward Conze’s *Heart Sutra* translation, however, the Chinese version and its translation are often being misinterpreted not only in the West but also by a large proportion of Chinese speaking society. The West tends to interpret emptiness as *void* and see the doctrine as a form of nihilism. The East, on the other hand often relates it to sexuality because the word ‘色’ (sè) can also mean wanton.

Nothing and Being is how Matsuo Basho summed up as the essence of things in the universe when he said, “He who plays with the NOTHING suffers from being. When

³³ Edward Conze, trans., *Buddhist Scripture*, (UK: Penguin Books, 1959), 162-163.

one experience the NOTHING in being and being in NOTHING, then for both one finds CALM in being. Being is by no means explained through being, nor the NOTHING through the NOTHING. By being, by the appearance of the NOTHING the experience of which lies is being...”³⁴ Emptiness which translated from the Sanskrit word *Sunyata* (Sunnata in Pali) does not mean void, as ‘nothing’ and ‘being’ are neither separate nor in opposition. In order to have *something* to exist in the first place it must be *nothing*. Similarly in drawing, in order to draw a still life, we must observe the object (positive) itself in relation to the negative space wraps around the object. We may want to accept that the idea of emptiness and form, the spiritual and the material, positive and negative, are comparable examples of ‘Oneness’. In the same way art and life may be said to coexist, side by side.

4.8 The entanglement of Life and Art

“...art, for whatever it is, matters because it relates to life. If it doesn’t relate to life, it may still be art, but it isn’t art that matter...”³⁵

³⁴ Hasumi, *Zen in Japanese Art*, 102.

³⁵ Lawrence Rinder, *Art Life: Selected Writings 1998-2005* (US: Gregory R. Miller & Co, 2005), 4.

4.8.1 P&S Recipe Shop

In 2006, Yak Beow Seah and I put together our second collaborative project which we called *P&S Recipe Shop* (please refer to images 4.42 to 4.52) at the IMT gallery in Bethnal Green, London. Building on *Stir* which was based on the concept of food and a dining hall, IMT was temporarily transformed from a white walled gallery into a ‘grocery shop cum café’ for a period of three weeks. The project foregrounded an aspect of our everyday life to share with the visitors. It presented a selection of what we liked from our findings from living in the UK and travelling around Europe over the precious 11 years. We framed the choices of aesthetic experiences from our everyday life to share with the people visiting the exhibition. Food serving and the display of food related items were the two main components that made up the piece. As regards to food, we brought authentic Malaysian food and culinary skills that we had learned from the restaurants we were working in, as well as recipes of our own creation. Yak Beow Seah and I enjoy browsing through car boot sales, jumble sales, charity shops, secondhand markets and antique markets in our free time or whenever we go on holiday trips. Our display included kitchen utensils, cookers, equipment, containers, and recipe books that we liked and had been collecting. Most of the items were unique in design, antique and collectable. We also included some games that

gave away food and toys as prizes and are the games we once played when we were children but which are gradually fading away in the contemporary society.

On entering the IMT gallery, members of the audience were greeted with an authentic Malaysian tea or coffee before being invited to try the menu we cooked for the day with everything being prepared before them. They were also asked to help themselves other foods that were on display or kept in the fridge. Seats, sofa, books and magazines were also available for them to relax in the space while enjoying their food. We would sit down with them to exchange conversation. All these resemble the hospitality of most Malaysians. At the end of the visit, they could also choose and take away any of the items on display that they liked, all of which were in a 'pay as you like' system. A money container operated using a pulley rope and a wheel attached to the ceiling was specially designed for this operation. At a reachable height, they could pull the container down and insert the amount of money they wished to pay and then release it back to the original position (a method used in grocery shops in Malaysia in earlier times). Signed receipts with a special rubber stamp were issued to the visitors when they made their payment.

P&S Recipe Shop took its motivation from our (Seah's and mine) common interests in ideas of serving and sharing. It elaborates on the aesthetic experience that can be found within food, in gastronomic and related activities. Our joint venture turns on the belief that the common experience of food and eating might affect human relations and the social condition crucial to everyday life and be worthwhile to be explored in contemporary art. It provided a platform to discuss the tacit issues on contemporary art practice: the balance between object art and process art, idealistic art and reality, art and commodity. The piece used objects, food, as well as service as a medium to produce a psychological state that may influence social situations. However, in a much more subtle way, it simply delved into the experience of what we normally do in our everyday life, using the gallery to frame it and share it with others.



Image 4.42 An overall view of the exhibition



Image 4.43 Food and the food-related items on display



Image 4.44 Seah and I preparing the meals for our visitors



Image 4.45 A view on the food preparation counter and sitting area



Image 4.46 A view on the sofa sitting area



Image 4.47 Students from Central St Martins making payment during their group visit with Seah preparing the receipt



Image 4.48 Seah handling out the receipts



Image 4.49 Local residents visiting



Image 4.45 Menus from each day written on the wall



Image 4.51 During the artist talk with David Howell (left) and Dermot O'Brien (not in the picture)



Image 4.52 Some of the visitors attended the artist talk

Image 4.42 – 4.52
P&S Recipe Shop, 2006

Life and art exist in a complementary partnership in my art practice, with my ideal art practice like standing an island between the two carriageways of art and life, observe attentively and allowing the trivial things and actions of everyday life to inform my art, and allowing art to permeate my everyday life in return. In this, art and life are spontaneously in harmony. My *Stir, P&S Recipe Shop*, chopstick and smashing bottles pieces related to the former where I appropriated an everyday experience for a work of art. For the latter, my everyday life is disseminated with spontaneously artistic such as in preparing a meal for the guests (please refer to images 4.53 to 4.55) where, the dishes replete with creative ingredients, the table is aesthetically set, and where the gesture behind the meals is mindfully observed. John Daido Looi's Zen story corresponds to my former claim when he observed Watazumi Doso gives a concert at the Zen Center of Los Angeles and said that "...soon after the performance started, an LAPD helicopter flew into the area and hovered overhead. TUM! TUM! TUM! TUM! Doso's flute immediately picked up the rhythm and developed a counterpoint. An infant cried. Doso's flute responded. A car drove by at high speed. The flute whizzed with it. Doso's concert included the totality of all the sounds that were happening around us. He blended, merged, answered everything he heard, incorporating it into his experience and expression, rather than being distracted by it."³⁶ Allan Kaprow set

³⁶ Looi, *Zen of Creativity*, 171-173.

an example for my latter claim saying “Whether you call the result divine influence or simply being attentive, which I would prefer, it is very, very important to me and I expect, to many others. One sees this openness translated not into going to a concert or making music or whatever, but taking place in the meeting of friends, in conversations, without thinking. It’s like what the Buddhists call “right living.””³⁷

The idea of blurring the boundary between art and life is illuminated in what Lucrezia De Domizio Durini claimed of Joseph Beuys where he “finds an amplification of thought also in the cooking – a private zone... There was no separation between his public and private behavior, just as there was no division between art and life... It can thus be understood how Beuys art was one with life.”³⁸ Similarly to Joseph Beuys’, to the Japanese that influenced by Zen, Toshimitsu Hasumi said that they “...abolished the boundaries between art and life. Their everyday habits and gestures, all their conditions of living, must be art. In the narrower sense art is only a part of the art of living.”³⁹ Watazumi Doso’s performance shuttles between the spaces of life and art,

³⁷ Bernstein and Hatch, *Writings through John Cage’s Music, Poetry, + Art*, 173. Allan Kaprow in ‘Cage’s Influence’, a panel discussion with Gordon Mumma (chair), James Tenney, Christian Wolff, Alvin Curran, and Maryanne Amacher.

³⁸ Lucrezia De Domizio Durini, *Joseph Beuys: The Art of Cooking* (Italy: Charta, 1999), 13-14.

“In his studio in Düsseldorf he prepared food just as he created his works of art. If his friends or collaborators, or important cultural figures, arrived by any chance when it was getting close to lunch time, the sorcerer artist, standing beside his huge cooker, would start to weave his culinary spells. ...There was one dish that gave the idea of his plain cooking and at the same time summed up his naïve culinary art, where healthy eating was enlivened by delicious flavour and by his personal free creativity. ...His gestures were measured, intense, his actions calm and serene, almost as if he wanted to give a sacral sense to the whole culinary operation.” Page 18

³⁹ Hasumi, *Zen in Japanese Art*, 66.

for him the two dissolve into one. This is similar to art of the everyday as suggested by Toshimitsu Hasumi where, “the work of art is, so to speak, a portion inseparably connected with the whole, which is itself an essential part of the work. This aesthetic background – the unity embracing everything – can be clearly understood from the Buddhist art of the East. The various forms of art are the product of the connection between the background and what is brought to realization on it.”⁴⁰ This is also what Zen artists means when they suggest that “To become a bamboo and to forget that you are one with it while drawing it – this is the Zen of bamboo, this is the movement with the “rhythmic movement of the spirit” which resides in the bamboo as well as the artist himself.”⁴¹ For this, Judith L. Lief would suggest, “Art refers to all the activities of our life, including any artistic disciplines that we practice. It refers not only to the formal practice of art, but to the artistry of life itself - our whole being.”⁴² Judith L. Lief’s claim parallels with the expression of “one in all and all in one” and is a form of ‘no form’ ‘无为’ (Wú Wēi) in Zen practice in which the Zen artist, “rises up even to the level of the uncreated. He who reaches this ultimate is beyond the materiality of all things.”⁴³ He who reaches this stage is also like the “... flying wild geese [who] cast

⁴⁰ Hasumi, *Zen in Japanese Art*, 19-20.

⁴¹ Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, 31.

⁴² Trungpa, *True Perception*, ix.

⁴³ Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, 436

their shadow on the water below without any idea of doing so, while the water reflects the geese just as naturally and unintentionally.”⁴⁴

Zen Buddhists integrate their teachings into their daily routines such as interacting with people, sweeping the floor, cooking and washing up. It is like running the everyday as a work of art, an indication of how Zen practice can become one with everyday life, and it is comparable to the idea of art being integrated into the everyday as I suggested above. An accomplished artist reveals their mastery of art in the activities of day-to-day living, and carries the same spirit from these two spaces naturally into the events of daily life, their being and their art should be inextricably interwoven with no separation between the two. This is what I mean by practicing art in everyday life. Stephen Nachmanovitch similarly claimed that, “My life itself became a work of art. I had found a voice, I was whole again. The experience was much like what we read of in connection with the lives of Zen initiates.”⁴⁵ His claim reflects what Chögyam Trungpa once suggested is that “Being an “artist” is not an occupation, it is your life, your whole being.”⁴⁶ Stephen Nachmanovitch extended this to an extreme degree when he proclaimed that “We have no art, everything we do is

⁴⁴ Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, 17

⁴⁵ Stephen Nachmanovitch, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* (USA: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1990), 194.

⁴⁶ Trungpa, *True Perception*, 153.

art.”⁴⁷ I always hesitate to claim myself as an artist when I am being asked what I do for a living. For me, art is neither a profession nor a hobby; it is certainly not something apart from life itself.⁴⁸ Just as many Buddhists would describe the Zen Buddhist practice as ‘a way of being’ and ‘Buddhism is everyday life’. For me, art is everyday life especially so in such as Gilbert and George’s notion of ‘living sculpture’, Beuys’ ‘Social Sculpture’⁴⁹; and Teh-ching Hsieh’s one year performance series where he punched the time clock in every hour for one year, and lived outdoors for one year without entering a building.

For Allan Kaprow, art is about the everyday that is “to play at life as an artist.”⁵⁰ Art in my practice, is found exactly where we already are and interacts with my surroundings, consisting of opening up to and affirming the situation we are already in. All the insignificant things we encounter every day may seem boring, distracting, and artless, but the things I encounter every day constitute possibly the only place in which I will find art. I see that only if we are able to open ourselves to what we are

⁴⁷ Nachmanovitch, *Free Play*, 18

⁴⁸ It was mentioned in the press release for P&S Recipe Shop, the digital copy is archived at <http://www.imagemusictext.com/archive-listing/chong-boon-pok-yak-beow-seah-ps-recipe-shop>

⁴⁹ De Domizio Durini, *Joseph Beuys: the Art of Cooking*, 13. According to De Domizio Durini, Beuys used ‘visible materials’ such as fat, felt, copper, honey, animal, plants, all elements that transmit energy and heat; as well as ‘invisible materials’ such as word, gesture, smell, sound, discussion, behaviour for his physical work and *Social Sculpture*.

⁵⁰ Jeff Kelley, *Childsplay: the Art of Allan Kaprow* (USA: University of California Press, 2004), 5-6.

already in and doing every day will we be able to live a life that is suffused with art or vice versa. It is crucial in my art practice to stand at the central point between two extremes to observe equally the positive and negative, sound and silence, something and nothingness, and art and life. When we position ourselves in the middle we are more capable of seeing both sides of the dualistic world. This understanding can be compared to the teaching of *Middle Way* in Zen Buddhism, symbolized by the gesture of two palms held together at chest level. The gesture suggests that, apart from offering good feelings of one towards another and mind and body as one, one should not sway over to the left or right, instead one must maintain equal distance from both ends in order to keep our body and mind balanced and working freely. ‘从容中道, 不落两边’ (cóng róng zhōng dào, bù lào liǎng biān) explains *Middle Way* in Chinese, and the direct translation is ‘work on the middle way, do not drop to any one of the two sides’. I observe life to inspire my art, make art and learn more about my life, and when we create art life is observed and learnt.



Image 4.53 Chinese New Year potluck lunch in Jan, 2010



Image 4.54 Seah and I each prepared a special dish for the Chinese New Year dinner in Jan 2010



Image 4.55 A special ‘steamboat’ is also prepared for the same dinner in Jan 2010

4.9 Chapter Conclusion

Since 1997, I began to create a body of works consisting of sculptures, photographs, videos and audience interactive performances that responded to the everyday. The works are all pay attention to, or reinvestigate objects and situations that I am already familiar with. They are a vivid indication of my childhood, education, cultural

background and adult life living outside my own country within which collaboration became an important part in advancing my studio practice.

This chapter fulfilled the aim of bringing forward a selection from this body of works in order to make comparative studies with the concepts of the everyday in Zen practice. At the beginning of this chapter, I proposed a beginner's attitude to accompany the awareness and attentiveness where I related it to Shunryu Suzuki's *Beginner's Mind* and Zen's *Mindfulness* teaching. The circle is commonly used in my work and I revealed and explored its relationships with Chinese culture and with Zen artists' *Ensō* paintings. Some of my works suggest a sense of focus on the present moment in cyclic pattern and repetitive actions of making what consider to have a connection with Zen meditation. I tried to be truthful to the everyday objects and situations in some of the pieces that I produced, and I compared this to the Zen teaching of *Tathatā*. Zen Buddhists emphasize the teaching of *Oneness* or *Coexistence*, which I consider to be relevant to my interest in exploring the connection between objects and people. I demonstrated how some of my work blends with the everyday into nothingness from which comparative studies may be made with the idea of *Nothingness* from Zen and Taoist teaching. I also analyzed how some of the pieces produced by John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, Martin Creed, Tom Friedman, and

Peter Fisci and David Weiss have a connection. I consider that art and life are entangled in my art practice with art embracing life and, life embracing art. I related this understanding to the teaching of *Middle Way* and ‘Buddhism as everyday life’.

The everyday is what is closest to us within and from which we both consciously and subconsciously immerse and emerge. However, we tend to live by paying little or no interest in it. My studio practice enabled me to become aware of the elevated condition and status of the trivial, and to achieve a heightened awareness of where and who I am by engaging more attentively in the world around me. As Stewart W. Holmes and Chimyo Horioka wrote, “The reality of life is most truly seen in everyday things and actions.”⁵¹

⁵¹ Holmes and Horioka, *Zen Art for Meditation*, 16.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

CONTENTS

5.1 Where was the Original Contribution? 265

5.1.1 Evaluating My Studio Practice, 267

i) On Beginner's Attitude, 267

ii) On Mindfulness, 267

iii) On the Idea of the Circle, 268

iv) On Action, Repetition and Meditation, 269

v) On Seeing Things as they are, 269

vi) On the Relativity of Things, 270

vii) On Nothingness, 270

viii) On Life and Art, 271

5.1.2 Evaluating from the Historical Context, 272

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.2 Outstanding Questions and Possible Future Work, 278

5.3 Ordinary Mind, 280

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Now seen from the perspective of time, selected early 20th century art provides a particular reflection of our everyday life. In this thesis, I have sought to elucidate examples of art practice, drawn not only from my own studio practice but also from that of others as they ‘bond’, directly and indirectly, with Zen practice of the everyday. Some of the artists discussed have studied Zen Buddhism. In the case of others, whether or not they have previously encountered Zen Buddhism, I have tried to reveal where their studio practice shares similarities with that of Zen Buddhist practice of the everyday. While this thesis covers some of the relevant and important artists in and across the discipline, it nevertheless serves the purpose of providing an improved basis and understanding for expanded studies and research.

5.1 Where was the Original Contribution?

Comparatively few Eastern artists and writers have expressed their views on the subject of the everyday in contemporary fine art practice, including particularly in connection with Zen Buddhism. My research confirmed that previous examples were less than insightful and tended to be narrowly based on a Westerners' point of view. This research is different in that it provides an Eastern artist's perspective in this field of study to develop an enhanced understanding in new and original ways.

I believe that the thesis makes a positive contribution to both contemporary art practice and to Zen Buddhism. Firstly, it provides an insight and an analysis to the 'art world' on how concepts of the everyday in art can be relevant to Zen Buddhists' teaching, from an understanding of 'Beginner's Mind', 'mindfulness', meditation, 'suchness', interconnection, and 'nothingness' to the ideas of the circle and where 'Buddhism is everyday life'. My research bridged the gap in this area of understanding and provided a space for expandable studies. Secondly, the research provides resources for Zen Buddhists to access works of contemporary art that are relevant to their practice or that of artists that have an interest in Zen Buddhism. I break down the contribution of this research in the following sections, and have arranged them in the order that corresponds to last chapter.

5.1.1 Evaluating My Studio Practice

i) On Beginner's Mind

The thesis discussed *Beginner's Mind*, a concept in teaching that is emphasised in Shunryu Suzuki's tradition. In contrast to indifference, I demonstrated how an attentive attitude in my studio practice i.e. making the effort to observe and contemplate the trivial everyday is relevant to Beginner's Mind. D. T. Suzuki considered that the combination of knowing and *Seeing* with our direct experience is important in our everyday life in Zen teaching, and I made a comparison with art practice where artists observe and experiment with their chosen materials with an attentive mind. As the Zen teacher and artist, John Daido Looi considers, our willingness to return to simply doing what we are doing provides opportunities to allow observation and Mindfulness to happen, and where the quality of child-like play is relevant to the understanding of Beginner's Mind.

ii) On Mindfulness

Attentiveness, observation and devotion in art-making have qualities to enable *seeing*. In this process one focuses on what one is looking at, engaging with the experience contemplatively, choosing or rejecting what one experiences in a positive way. The process expands on to the next level through hands on experience of the chosen material, and gains direct experience that can potentially lead to real 'seeing'. I made a connection with what D. T. Suzuki once stated when he said that we learn nothing unless we make an effort to see, and to make an effort to see something is considered as Mindfulness in Zen teaching. I offer my chopstick piece as an example through which to make a comparative study on the idea of attentiveness in art-making and Zen Buddhists' *Mindfulness* practice.

iii) On the Idea of the Circle

The visual language of the circle in my work embodies the sense of unity, fullness and completeness which came from my own cultural background. It relates to that part of Chinese culture that is closely associated with Taoism and Zen Buddhism, and it is often evident in both their arts and everyday life. Alongside a selection of *Ensō* paintings, I demonstrated the connection through a series of works I produced including the chopstick, the ring-pull, the shoes and the joss stick pieces.

iv) On Action, Repetition and Meditation

Most of my works, including the bottle, chopstick, ring-pull, price tag, cigarette butt, fish tank and the dust pieces engage in the act of repetition, and which suggests a sense of moment of present awareness. I made a comparison with Zen Buddhists' meditation that focuses on the idea of the 'Now' to stop the mind wandering over the past and the future. Zen meditation allows the mind and actions to act together and to combine as a coherent whole, Chögyam Trungpa suggested that creating art is like meditating, an idea with which I am in full accord.

v) On Seeing Things as they are

An aspect of my studio practice is to see things as they are and not to impose speculative meanings on to the materials I use. I consider that this corresponds to Zen's idea of *Tathatā*, where Tathatā teaching is to learn how to be freed from attachment and the 'bondage' of personal opinions, to see things 'as they are'. Apart from my swan and leaf pieces, I also brought forward Richard Long's and the Gutai artists' works to make a comparative study with Basho's hokku poem to elucidate this aspect.

vi) On the Relativity of Things

The teaching of *Sangha* in Zen Buddhism refers to Buddhist communities and of being socially engaged with others. Jacquelynn Baas and Mary Jane Jacob suggested that residencies, exhibition, talks, conferences and fora among art communities echo the idea of *Sangha*. I made a comparative study of the concepts of *Socially-engaged Art*, *Relational Aesthetics* and Joseph Beuys' *Social Sculpture*.

The teaching of 'Oneness' in Zen Buddhism considers that all things are interconnected in a solitary unit. Some of my works enter a dialogue with objects, people, and spaces to explore their relationships. They examine the interaction between the material environment and the behaviour of people living in it. I brought forward my cigarette butt, fish tank, price tag, soup and shadow-tracing pieces to demonstrate their connections with Zen's teaching of relativity.

vii) On Nothingness

Some of my works are created and intentionally presented as if the banal or everyday 'real' situation implies deceptively that nothing has happened. These pieces, including

the fish tank, condom and bristles pieces, traverse the space between art and the everyday and nothingness and somethingness. Similarly, the artists that I discussed, including John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, Martin Creed, Tom Friedman, and Peter Fischli and David Weiss, have explored the idea of *Nothingness*. They all use the slightest of indications to 'reveal' the art and to push it nearer to the everyday. These artworks create a space for the viewer to gain insight into the idea of Nothingness. They are not about the absence of something but actually about presence of something. I discussed how it connects with *Emptiness*, a key concept in the ontology of Mahayana Buddhism where emptiness is accepted as form and where form is emptiness and where emptiness and form coexist.

viii) On Life and Art

My studio practice is founded in the observing of trivial things and actions of everyday life attentively and utilises them. In return, I allow the experience I gain through my studio practice to permeate my everyday life. I used my audience interaction performative pieces including *Stir* and *P&S Recipe Shop*, and my sculptural works such as the chopstick, ring pull and shoes pieces to demonstrate this practice. I make a comparison with the understanding of *Middle Way* in Zen

Buddhism as symbolized by holding two palms together at chest height. In this understanding, there is no separation between public and private behaviour and personal life and art life. When art is one with everyday life, it is similar to that of Zen Buddhists' 'right living' where they consider what Buddhism is everyday life.

5.1.2 Evaluating from the Historical Context

My research indicates that the influence of the everyday in Zen Buddhist practice is partly responsible for the development of the concepts of the everyday in contemporary Western art practice, and that the influence is both direct and indirect. However it is problematic to try and pin down precise cause and effect. Earlier findings (in chapter 2, section 2.3.1) suggest Marcel Duchamp's interest in Zen Buddhism. Lanier Graham, who once interviewed Marcel Duchamp, claimed that Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957) was a very close friend of Marcel Duchamp, and that he (Brancusi) moved on to Tibetan Buddhism after studying Androgyne symbolism in Theosophy, and that "a book of Tibetan teaching was at his bedside for many years. He and Duchamp worked together, play together, and seem to have shared many ideas about the etheric, the infinite, and the Androgyne."¹ Lanier Graham

¹ Graham, "Duchamp & Androgyny: The Concept and its Context" *Articles, Tout-fait: The Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal*, Vol. 2/Issue 4, January 2002.

went further to suggest that, “If he [Marcel Duchamp] had not had some kind of insight into the nature of the transcendent realm, Duchamp might well have continued as a follower of the Cubist...[approach].”² Roger Lipsey intriguingly tried to connect Marcel Duchamp to Zen Buddhism when he said that “They [readymades] had enough Zen in them to withdraw from conventional values and suggest a way of seeing without judging (...) Duchamp’s ideas are Zen without enlightenment,... They are nonetheless homegrown Zen.”³ Using the everyday, Marcel Duchamp’s readymades fulfilled his ideology of ‘art at the service of the mind’ and freed Western contemporary art. My research presents mainly secondary sources as to the extent Marcel Duchamp and his work have a connection with Zen Buddhism, while his thinking, of course, also embodied other philosophical positions. Therefore it is only fair to say that his art practice intersects with Zen Buddhist’s practice of the everyday rather than being subjected to direct cause and effect.

In 1942, when Peggy Guggenheim noticed that John Cage had also agreed to give a concert at the *Museum of Modern Art*, she decided to cancel his concert for her *Art of This Century* gallery opening and refused to pay him the shipping expenses of his

² Graham, “Duchamp & Androgyny: The Concept and its Context” *Articles, Tout-fait: The Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal*, Vol. 2/Issue 4, January 2002.

³ Roger Lipsey, *the Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art* (US: Dover Publications, Inc, 2004), 113 & 115.

instruments. John Cage recalled later that he burst into tears and in the room next to him was Marcel Duchamp sitting in a rocking chair smoking a cigar who asked “why I was crying and I told him. He said virtually nothing, but his presence was such that I felt calmer... He had calmness in the face of disaster.”⁴ Primary sources of my research suggested that the theory of John Cage’s studio practice was deeply influenced by Zen Buddhist’s practice of the everyday, particularly when comparing his 4’33 piece with Zen Buddhists’ *Nothingness* teaching. While John Cage and his work were directly influenced by Marcel Duchamp, D. T. Suzuki’s writings on Zen Buddhism, and the *I Ching*, his thinking, however, perhaps encompasses more than Zen Buddhism and other Oriental teachings, as was also the case in the circle of artists surrounding him such as Robert Rauschenberg, Allan Kaprow, Jasper Johns and Merce Cunningham.

I consider it is fair to suggest that many later contemporary artists such as Martin Creed, Tom Friedman, Tony Cragg, and Peter Fischli and David Weiss, as discussed in this thesis, are aware of the work of some of the artists I have mentioned above and that they have developed their work from the legacy of those earlier artists, and that therefore their studio practice takes on concepts of the everyday in art practice directly

⁴ Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, 173.

and Zen Buddhism indirectly. There are also other artists who came from a Zen Buddhist background and who applied Zen Buddhist teaching to their studio practice and who at the same time extended the Duchampian legacy. These include the artists from the Mono-ha and Gutai movements (discussed in 3.7.2) and more recent contemporary artists such as Lee Mingwei and Rirkrit Tiravanija. Born in Taiwan, where he lived until he was thirteen, when he was nine years of age Lee Mingwei began to study Zen Buddhism with an elderly monk in Taipei. His fine art practice that involves engaging audience in a very personal and ritualised exchanging of objects, food, and experiences of eating and sharing of conversation is interwoven with his Zen Buddhist background. Lee Mingwei said, “I use acts of common reference in aesthetic ways to heighten awareness and catalyze new experiences of familiar situations, arriving at a new awareness and self-knowledge... To achieve this, there is a need for focus.”⁵ His claim echoes the concepts of *Beginner's Mind*, *Mindfulness* and *Middleway* of the everyday in Zen Buddhist's practice as discussed in the previous chapter, and his idea of blurring the boundary between art and life extends the Duchampian legacy. Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija's work can be associated with Gordon Matta-Clark's in that it involves cooking and serving food, reading, playing music and the constructing of architectural space. Having considered his own Thai

⁵ Baas and Jacob, *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, 229.

Buddhist background as being more ritualistic, Rirkrit Tiravanija explained, “My practice is more or less a daily structure, and it is not all ritualistic... I tend to try and pare it down more to a daily-life condition. (...) it is important to bring both art and life together. And I suppose, in that sense, that is – for me – a certain kind of Buddhist practice.”⁶

Bill Viola can be considered as one of the new generation of contemporary artists from the West that mirror John Cage’s generation. However, his studio practice also makes reference to Hinduism, Islamic Sufism, and Christian mysticism. Bill Viola first encountered Buddhism through reading and meditation workshops in the 60s and early 70s. He received the *Japan/U.S. Friendship Commission Fellowship* in 1980 and lived in Japan with his wife (Kira) where, according to Viola, he had several experiences that changed his life and his understanding of art and its place in spiritual practice.⁷ He recalled that Mr Tanami, one of the directors of the Fellowship programme, said to him, “Bill, why don’t you just go to a temple and study Zen. Then

⁶ Baas and Jacob, *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, 172 & 174.

⁷ “The Light Enters You”, Shambhala Sun Magazine, November 2004. Last modified unknown.
http://www.shambhalasun.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1357&Itemid=0 (Accessed on 24th July 2011).

everything you do will be Zen Art!”⁸ In the same interview Bill Viola then mentioned that,

“Like a loud gong resounding in my brain, the reverberations of that statement are still with me... Until that moment my measure of success in art resided within the confines of exhibiting in museums, galleries, and alternative art spaces. In Japan it was beginning to sink in that perhaps art resided in life itself, that as a practice it derives primarily from the quality of experience, depth of thought and devotion of the maker. Everything else ‘virtuosity with the materials, novelty of the idea and approach, innovation craft or technique, skill of presentation, historical significance, importance of the venue’ in short, almost everything I learned to value in art school – was secondary.”⁹

On another occasion Bill Viola states that American painter James Phillips, who in the same Fellowship programme, gave him *The Transformation of Nature in Art* by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and which he claimed completely overturned his thinking about art.¹⁰

⁸ “The Light Enters You”, Shambhala Sun Magazine. See also: Baas and Jacob, *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, 249.

⁹ “The Light Enters You”, Shambhala Sun Magazine.

¹⁰ Baas and Jacob, *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art*, 249.

When examining the works of the artists mentioned above as a collective whole, it proves highly problematic to distinguish between them and to make a conclusive argument regarding cause and effect and their possible correlation because, Zen Buddhism apart, each individual artist came from a different background, had different life experiences and encompassed a combination of different thoughts. As Helen Westgeest put it so succinctly when she concluded that the interactions between “Zen and the Zen arts cannot be described as ‘influence’ or ‘cause’, or ‘merely recognition’.

[There are] element[s] which existed alongside other elements, and between which there prove to have been many cross connections.”¹¹

5.2 Outstanding Questions and Possible Future Work

My research suggests that there is wide interest in the art world in the relationship between contemporary art practice and Zen Buddhism. It is perhaps challenging for a Westerner not from an Eastern culture, or for an outsider with no hands on experience of producing works of art using the everyday, to make a comparative study and

¹¹ Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 224.

provide insight and understanding on the subject matter of my research. I considered that my studio practice, personal background and the exposure to both Eastern and Western cultures have fulfilled these criteria.

The initial research question for this thesis was to consider ‘concepts of the everyday in art practice and their relationship to a spiritual practice of the everyday’. As the research progressed, the title was developed into the current one due to the idea of ‘spiritual’ being highly problematic and probably impossible to verify in academic research of this kind. Besides that, the idea of spirituality in art has been thoroughly explored in books such as Earle J. Coleman’s *Creativity and Spirituality: Bond Between Art and Religions*, Roger Lipsey’s *Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art*, Michael Howard’s (edited by) *Art as Spirituality: Rudolf Steiner’s Contribution to the Visual Arts*, Wassily Kandinsky’s *Concerning Spirituality in Art*, and Robert Wuthnow’s *Creative Spirituality: the Way of The Artist*. Due to the fact that my research has now provided more specific insight and analysis as to the concepts of the everyday in art practice in relation to Eastern religious philosophy and spirituality and allowing for my earlier reservations and caution, I consider that expanded studies may now be made in that connection. My research briefly touched the ideas of mind and inner self, therefore expanded study may be made in the domain of psychoanalysis in connection to the quest of self, consciousness and perception of the human mind. I

briefly analysed the Eastern cultural significance of food, cooking and eating and their connections with the everyday practice of Zen and art, and I consider that there is also potential for more thorough research in this area.

5.3 Ordinary Mind

“The artist’s mind is able to tune in to a certain balance or wakefulness – we could call it enlightenment, in fact. At that point, an artist is able to execute masterpieces. There have been examples of that in the past – by artists who were not necessarily Buddhists.”¹²

Evaluating my studio practice, and analysing the findings of the comparative studies in this research, has led me into making a connection with my interest in ‘平常心’ (píng cháng xīn) or, in English, *Ordinary Heart/ “Ordinary Mind”*. The Ordinary Mind is neither an unintelligent nor is it an insignificant mind. It is the mind that is keen to observe and interact with things that are not extraordinary, rejecting indifference to the everyday. With an Ordinary Mind one is even aware of the inhalation and exhalation

¹² Trungpa, *True Perception*, 124-125.

of one's breath. The Ordinary Mind does not sway to the left or right but holds the centre, to see things as they are. The Ordinary Mind may be considered as the very mind that forms the self.

Mario Poceski says that the "... realization of truth is to be found within the context of everyday life, in the mind of each person."¹³ However, although we are seldom aware of our attitude toward ourselves and others and of the everyday around us, it is our attitude that is the key to exploring and discovering the everyday and its close relationship to, and importance in, developing our selves. With the absence of an Ordinary Mind, it is less likely that we will be able to connect with our subtle surroundings, and which therefore in turn leads to the fact that we will be less likely to be connected fully with our selves.

In short, my studio practice is a *mindset in operation* that is concerned with being attentive to the world around me where the *heart/mind* is drawn to the trivial physical things that can be seen, touched, tasted, smelled, or heard. It is about looking, listening, tasting, feeling, responding, passing on and, above all, about maintaining an *Ordinary Heart or Ordinary Mind*, and which itself can be related to the awareness of

¹³ Mario Poceski, *Ordinary Mind as the Way* (US: Oxford University Press Inc, 2007), 182.

Skandha or *Five Aggregates* in Zen Buddhists teaching namely form, feeling, perception, mental formation and consciousness.¹⁴ Arthur Waley states that “Art was regarded as a kind of Zen, as a delving down into the Buddha that each of us unknowingly carries within ... Zen aims at the annihilation of consciousness, whereas art is produced by an interaction of conscious and unconscious faculties...”¹⁵ and which I maintain can be studied alongside the understanding of *Skandha*.

This thesis confirms that the totality of my ‘Western’ contemporary fine art practice has adopted a set of theories that originated from my cultural roots, and which are derived from an awareness of the human condition and the disciplines of *mind* that are used as a path in the quest for ‘enlightenment’ in the Zen Buddhist practice of the everyday. D. T. Suzuki, Erich Fromm and Richard De Martino united this understanding with Western psychoanalysis in *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*. I demonstrated this understanding and revealed new knowledge in my fine art practice through the use of images, visual language and cultural ideas from the East. These included concepts embodied in the circle, in human body/actions/gestures and shadow,

¹⁴ *Form* (matter) refers to physical body, object and situation that link to the reaction of our five sense organs i.e. eyes, ears, nose, tongue and torso. *Feeling* or *Sensation* refers to the reactions of sense organs when they are in contact with the everyday. *Perception* refers to the mind faculty recognises object/matter by picking up the distinction. *Mental formation* refers to the subconscious reaction to an object or incident. *Consciousness* refers to mental awareness of an object or activity.

¹⁵ Waley, *Zen Buddhism and Its Relation to Art*, 22.

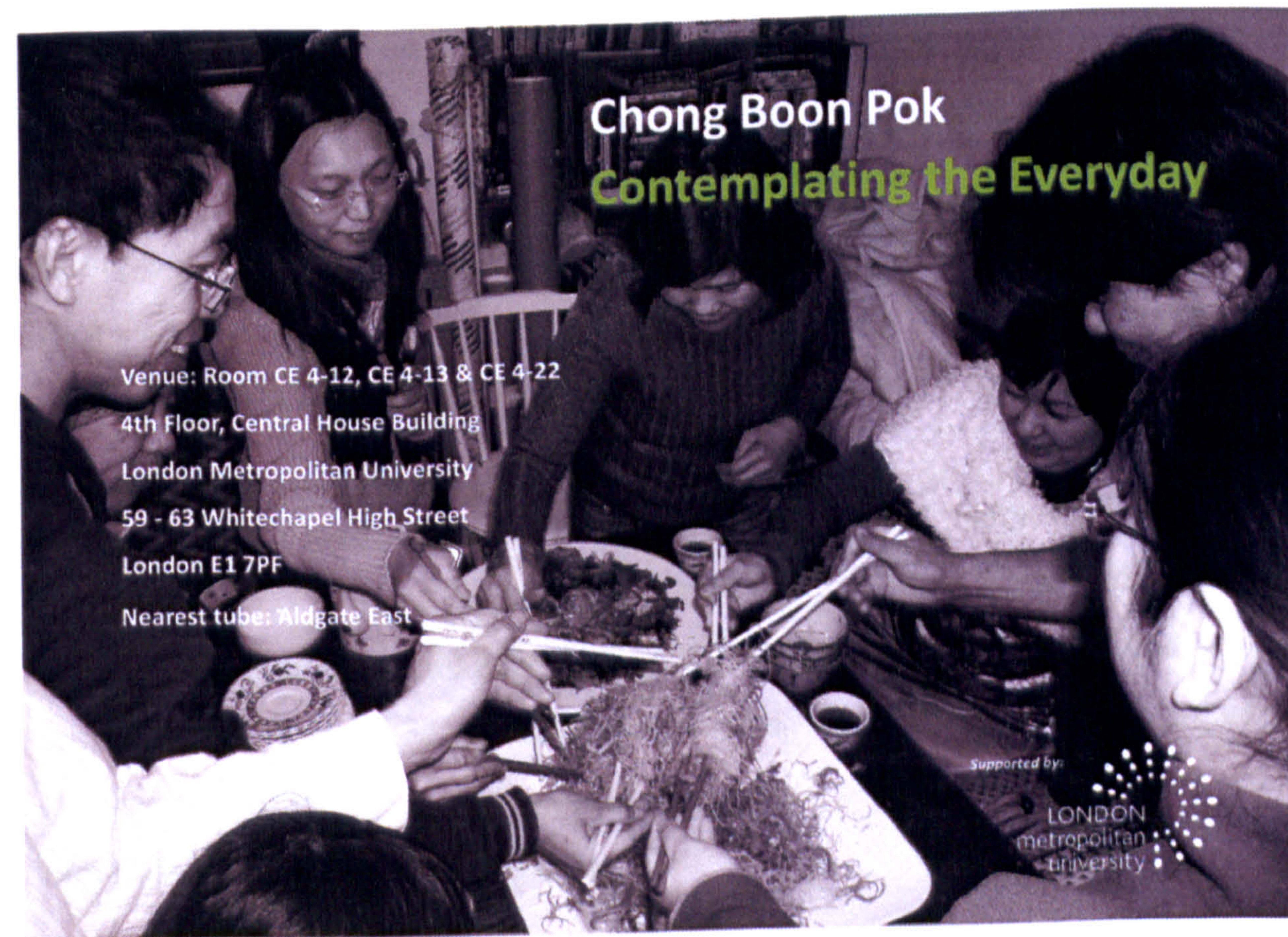
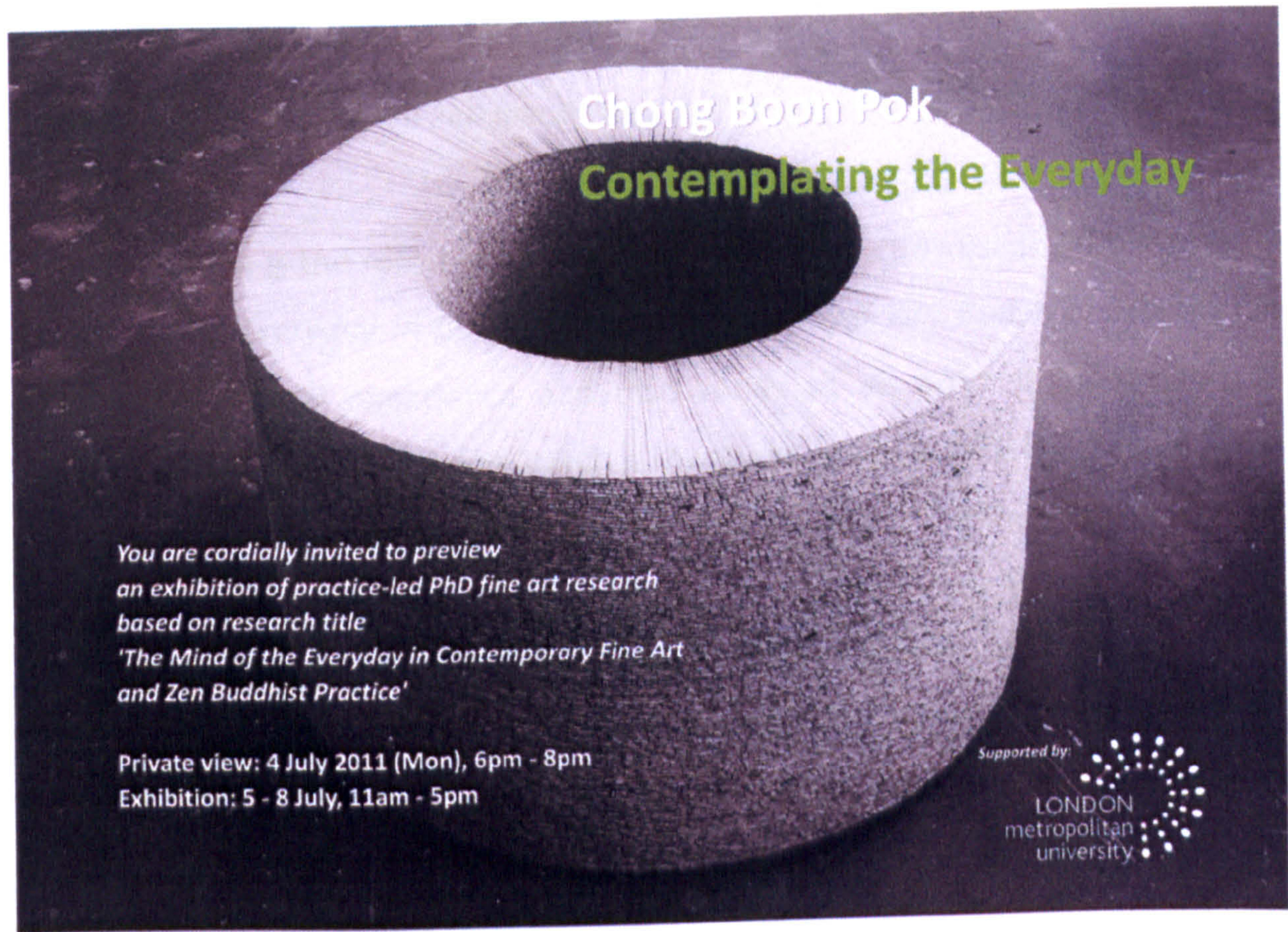
and in the adaptation of Chinese language and local dialect. I also located my work within the interaction of the two cultural polarities of my personal background and memories from South-East Asia and my more recent experiences from being in the West. All these contribute to a further, deeper understanding of the value of comparative social exchange, multi-cultural society and globalisation in the post-modern landscape. My studio practice also reveals an observation of wider social and economic contexts from the perspective of an Easterner to offer a platform for further discussion. My work is the result of a mindset in direct contact with the everyday world as I observe and embrace the experience, act upon it and offer it back to the world. It interacts with my cultural upbringing and my experience of the West in the processes that have led me to become who and what I am. I see now that my studio practice mirrors Buddhist practice and that it has given me back my own culture.

The total research project has conjoined my studio practice and theorisation through a deep and thorough critical consideration of the visual and cultural language embedded in my work. I have gained profound understanding through studying more thoroughly the works I have done, and I learned that the theory and practice are informed by and have provenance, within Chinese culture and my immediate family background. The studio practice and the theoretical components have both informed and guided each

other during the process of my creative investigation and which have now become integrated and enhanced. In examining the relationship between the everyday in art and Zen practice among other existing scholars, I have consistently alluded to these implications of cultural background and life experiences using mainly my own studio practice in the preceding chapters, and it is evident that what I have thereby revealed lies outside the scope of existing scholars. Finally the contribution of this research is that it offers new, enhanced understanding of concepts of the everyday in contemporary art and Zen Buddhism as well as potentially facilitating grounds for further study and new knowledge within the field.

Documentation of the Exhibition

The Invitation Card



Front/back of the invitation card

Press Release / Exhibition Statement

Chong Boon Pok

Contemplating the Everyday

An exhibition of practice-led PhD fine art research

This exhibition is the result of my practice-led PhD fine art research based on the title *The Mind of the Everyday in Contemporary Fine Art and Zen Buddhist Practice*. It emerged from my personal experience and discoveries as an artist working from a Buddhist background. The core of the research is my studio practice with the theoretical framework operating in the intersection of personal and social perspectives. It seeks to develop an enhanced understanding of the everyday in contemporary fine art and Zen Buddhist practice in new and original ways, through bringing forward and integrating the physical and theoretical components of my studio practice as presented in this exhibition.

Devoting attentiveness to and contemplating the everyday is central to my art practice. The everyday that I refer to is contained within the trivial, ordinary and inconsequential *objects* and *activities* that people tend to take for granted such as found in the act of cooking and having a meal. Everyday objects there are such as the cutlery we use for eating, something we are so familiar with that we are unlikely to give them a second thought when we encounter them. Besides assembling everyday objects into sculptural forms and installations, part of my work involves using food and cooking to perform with and interact with people visiting my exhibition.

My studio practice operates within subjects, time and space using the everyday, and engages aspects of mindfulness, self, memories, social, cultural and symbolic form. My cultural upbringing and life experience are often revisited, examined and evidenced in my work. The work embraces ideas of as-it-is-ness, nothingness, the impermanent nature of things, and the interconnectedness of objects and people, all of which are relevant to Zen Buddhist discourses of the everyday.



At the entrance



The exhibition space had a purpose built wall on which to hang work and to divide the space into two halves.



On the right hand side of the exhibition space (as view looking from the entrance)



On the right hand side of the exhibition space (as view looking towards the entrance)



On the left hand side of the exhibition space (as viewed looking from the entrance)



On the left hand side of the exhibition space (as viewed looking towards the entrance)

In the Spirit of Beginner's Mind and Attentiveness

Making an effort to examine and contemplate what we are aware of is an attentive attitude which is opposed to 'indifference' and which I consider to be a hindrance to art-making. I try not to carry fixed views in my experience of the everyday. I make basic enquiries such as 'what is that?' in the art-making process. This is my way of dealing with the tendency of indifference, and it is comparable with the practicing of a *Beginners' Mind* 初心 (shoshin in Japanese and chū xīn in Chinese) in Zen as suggested by Shunryu Suzuki when he said that "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, in the expert's mind there are a few."

I consider the trivial to have the potential to be transmuted into something extra-ordinary and that what seems to be insignificant may be transformed into something significant and therefore able to be appreciated. When John Cage was asked by Henning Lohner about how he thought uninteresting things could become interesting, he replied, "When and if you pay attention to them." This is comparable to Zen Buddhists practice of *Mindfulness*, where they pay attention to the most ordinary circumstances of everyday life such as cooking, washing the dishes and sweeping the floor.

One of the texts on the wall (2/8)

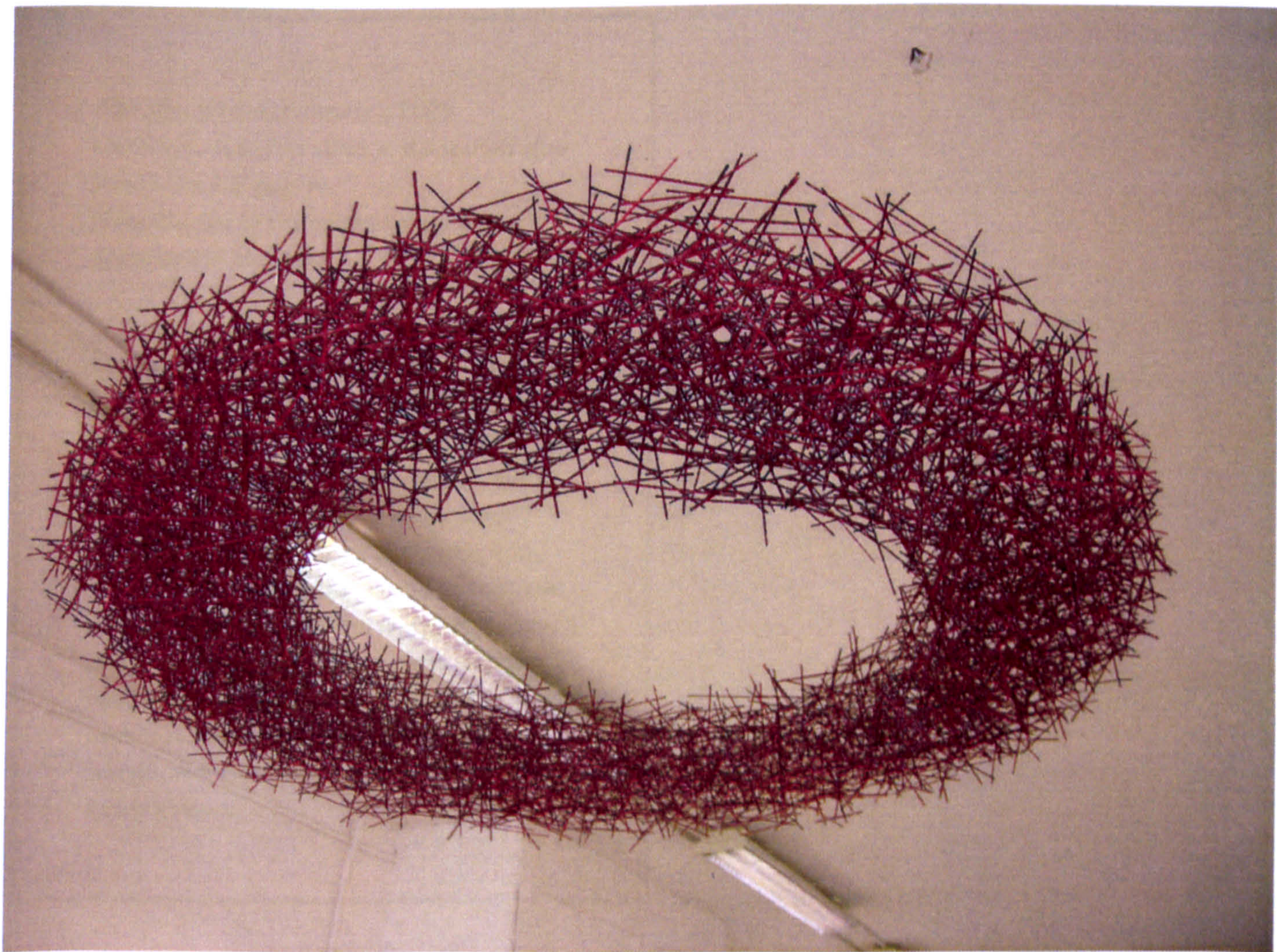
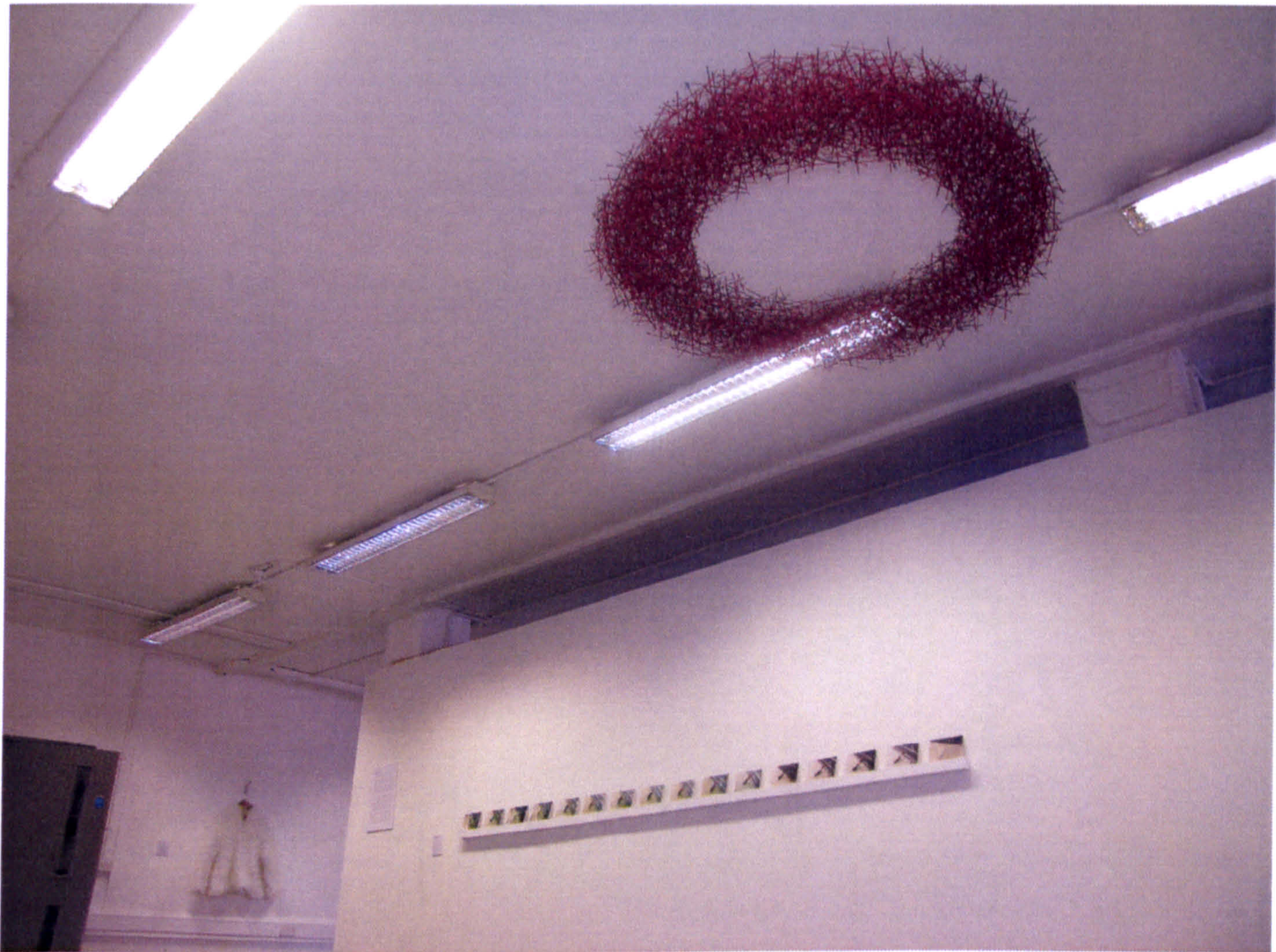
The Circle

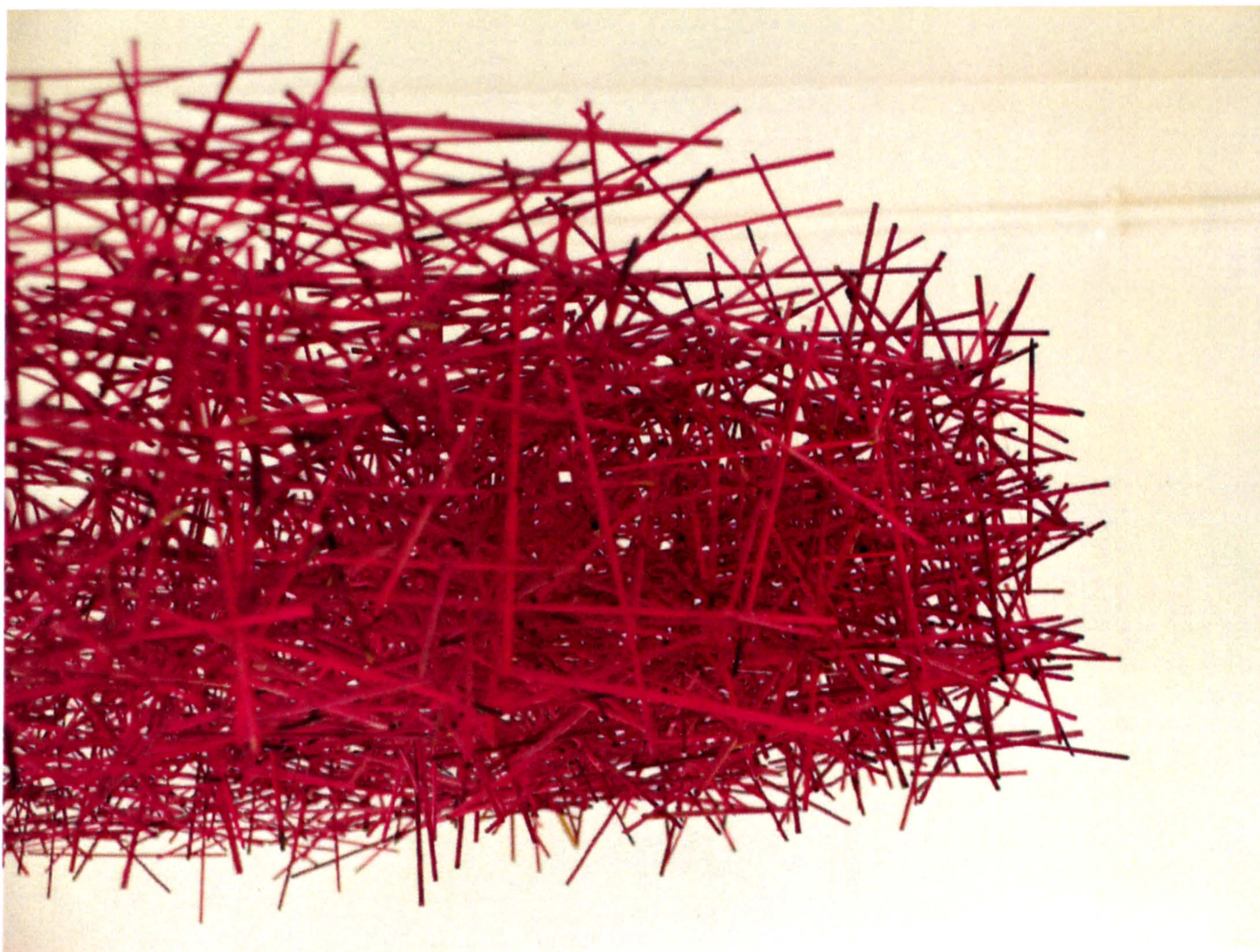
The circle derives from that part of Chinese culture that is closely associated with Taoism and Buddhist teaching. It signifies a sense of unity, harmony, infinity and perfection in Chinese culture and it is often evident in both their everyday life and arts.

Roundness signifies a sense of unity, harmony, infinity and perfection in Chinese culture. '圆' (yuán) means 'circle' in Chinese and it is often associated with reunion 团圆 (tuán yuán), fullness 圆满 (yuán mǎn) and completeness 圆美 (yuán měi). As revealed in the format of the dining room, the Chinese place their own emphasis on family values. They prefer to use the round table because it represents those qualities of harmony, peace and completeness.

The Circle embodies a sense of *Co-arising* and *Oneness* as suggested by the Buddhist teaching in which they see everything is in everything else, one in all and all in one. This teaching is often revealed in their *ensō* (Zen circle) paintings where a simple circle is drawn on paper using brush and ink in one attempt or a single breath, to reveal a sense of one cyclic return and wholeness through a clear and focused mind.

One of the texts on the wall (3/8)





***Bǎo Yòu* (Protectiveness), 2009**

Materials: Used joss sticks and hot-melt glue

Size: 3.5' x 3.5' approx.

(Remade due to the original piece was destroyed in Malaysia)

In the everyday life of my own family and some traditional Chinese families in Malaysia, before they leave home to work in the morning they present joss sticks to the ancestors and deities, to pay respect, and to entreat safety and prosperity. The piece corresponds to the idea of entreating and wish-making that shuttles between the time and spaces of now and the uncertain future. It makes reference to the light circle over the head of the images of their deities, and the used joss sticks represent consumed hopes and dreams that may or may not be or have been realised.

Description of work (1/16)





***Assemblage of Used Disposable
Chopsticks, 2000***

Material: Disposable chopsticks and PVA

Dimension: 80cm (width) x 60cm (height)

The piece took three months to assemble, indicating time, and utilized all the chopsticks I collected with the help of my colleagues working in the dishwashing area indicating collaboration. The sculpture is made up of approximately 25,000 pairs of used disposable chopsticks and represents the same amount of meals being consumed, within which conversations were shared, friendships were celebrated, convivial moments were memorized, jobs were created, and trees were cut down. The piece devotes attentiveness, thought process and time consumed on a very humble material. The attitude, decision and the passing of time eventuate in form.

Description of work (2/16)

Action, Repetition and Meditation

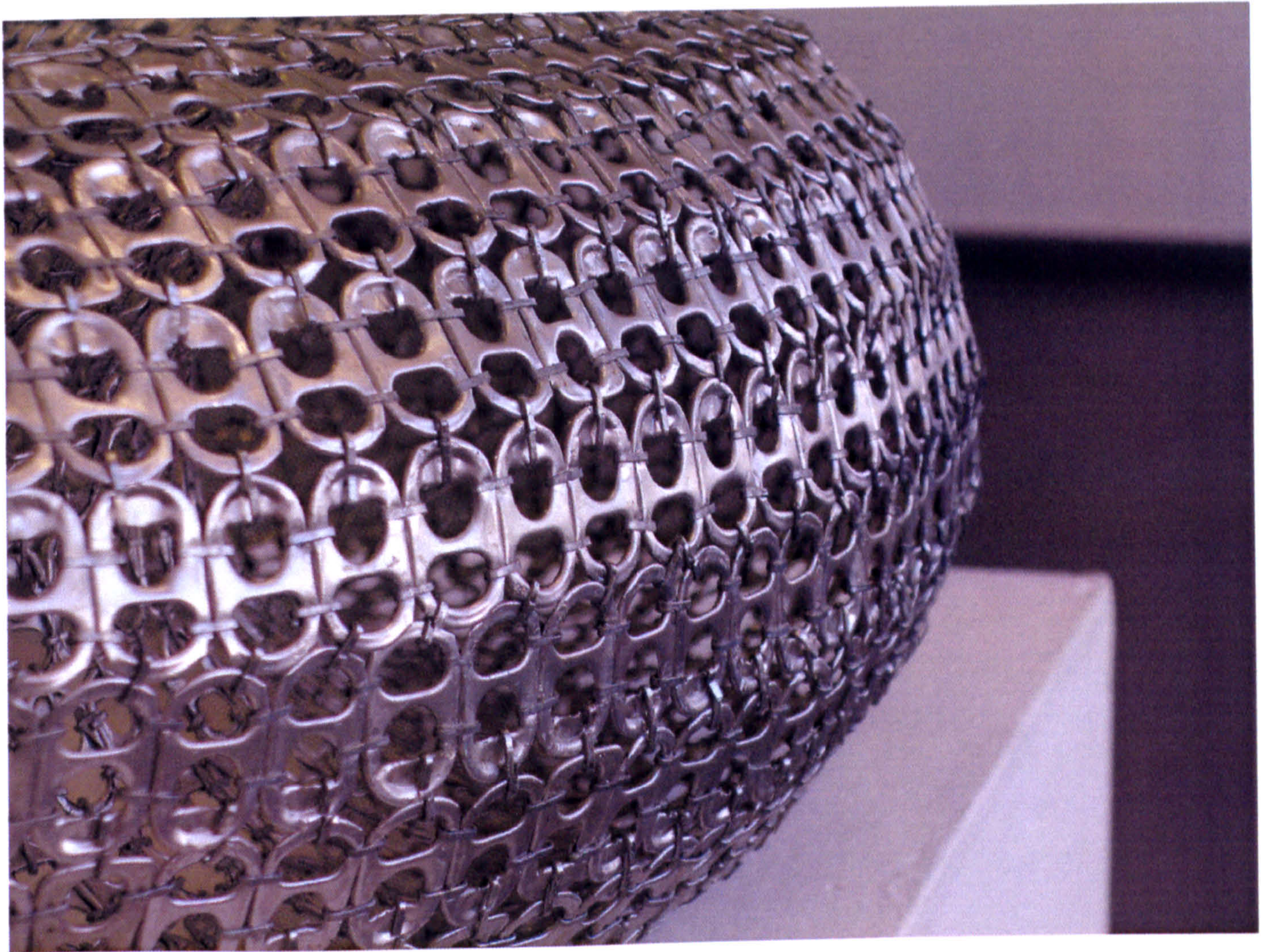
Part of my work experiments with multiplying and repeating trivial objects in order to create striking visual solid and autonomous forms that indicate both motion as well as stillness. The action of repetition equates with time, and over time and through concentration a process is generated that guides the mind into the meditative state.

The lengthy, minimal intervention and repetitive process of constructing work of art may be compared to the way in which Zen Buddhists go through the ritual of chanting, with a chain of beads running repeatedly through their fingers, in order to eradicate random thoughts. Comparison can also be made with the way they repeatedly use breath-counting as a method in meditation to retrieve awareness back to the present moment and away from unrelated thoughts of the past and future.

Zen Buddhists consider sitting meditation and art-making processes themselves are a means of the practice of *Mindfulness*. They both serve the purpose of allowing the mind to attend to the action undertaken 'Now' at the present moment. Chögyam Trungpa the Buddhist teacher and artist claimed "Creating art is like meditating."

One of the texts on the wall (4/8)





Assemblage of Ring-pulls, 2000

Material: Ring-pulls and staples

Size: 60cm (width) x 17cm (height)

The found ring-pulls are tied together using staples according to the shape of an inflated inner tube from a car tire. As a child, I used an inner tube as a float to swim in flooded abandoned tin mines and which context suggests prevention of drowning and the saving of life. The piece embraces a sense of the social, the environmental, memory and the meditative process of making. The actions of repetition and multiplying equate with time, and over time and through concentration a process is generated that guides me into the meditative state where the existence of the self is anchored.

Description of work (3/16)





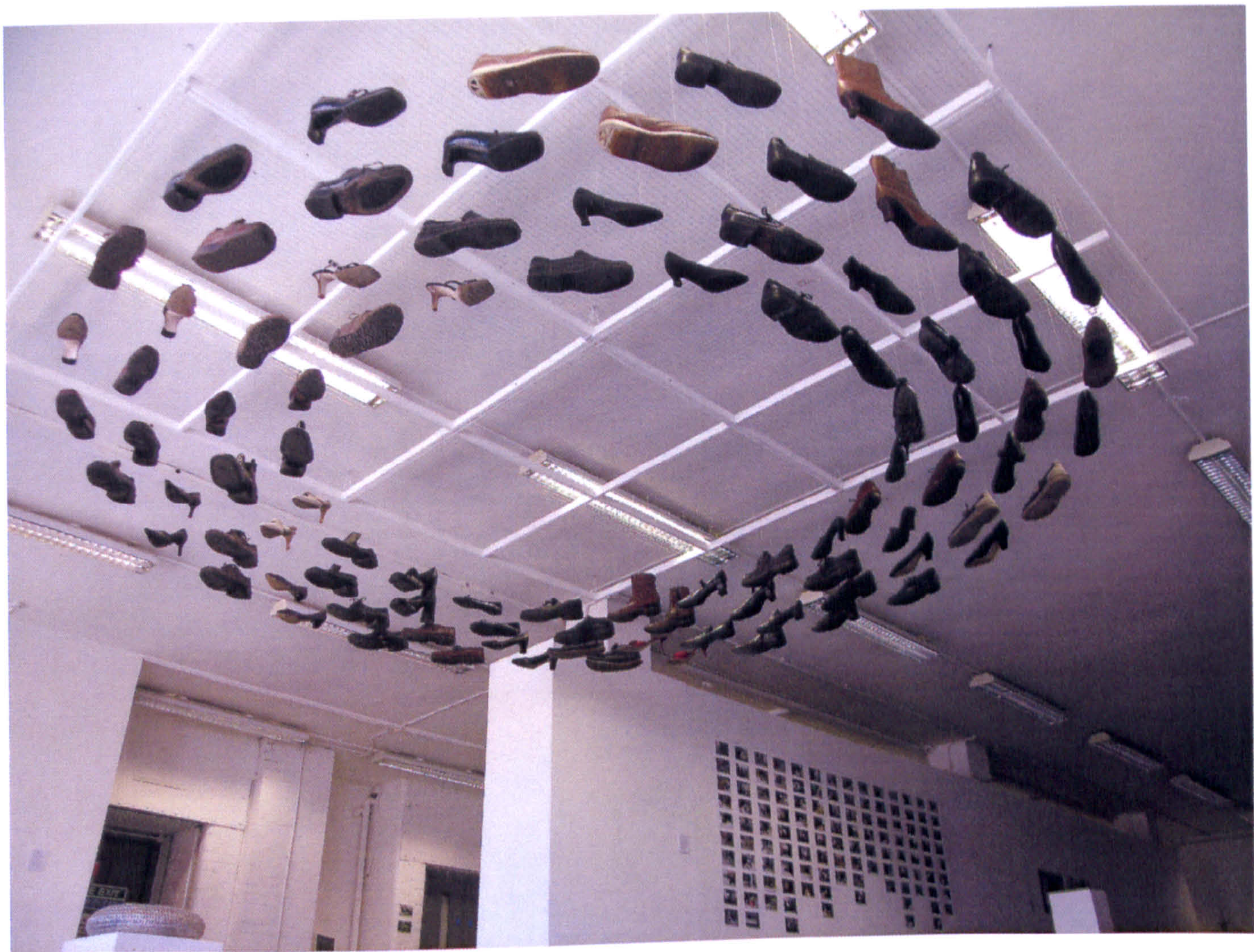
***6 Minute Performance of Smashing
Bottles, 2001***

Material: Empty alcohol bottles
(Documentation)

My initial intention was to experiment with a different working method - destroying the chosen objects in order to build. The piece embodies the concept of time, space, form and chance through spontaneous gestural play. It explores dualistic aspects of reality where an element of order can be embedded in chaos, with destruction as an act of building, and where a quality of calmness may be found in the frantic. The piece used actions that perform the bodily movements that are initiated by the mind, to interact with objects as matter, suggests a sense of awareness of and focuses on the present moment.

Description of work (4/16)

Note: *please see the enclosed dvd of the video documentation at the back of this thesis.*





***Circumrotation*, 2009**

Materials: Used shoes

Size: 12' diameter & 6.5' height approx.

Circumrotation was first shown in *The Affluenza Exhibition*, inspired by Oliver James' book *Affluenza*, to explore the effects that the recent financial crisis has on people's emotional health. The exhibition took place in a former meat processing factory where different meats were hung and processed daily. The hanging of shoes refers to meat hanging thereby engaging with life and death. The piece explores the human living condition of being 'trapped', in a circle with no beginning and no end, with no sense of first and last. It also portrays life revolves in causality, where what goes round comes around.

Description of work (5/16)



***Every Corner of My Flat, 2009 and
ongoing***

Material: Dust and spray glue

**Started in 2009 and ongoing, I use
photography to document the process of
removing the dust in my studio flat. Along the
way I observe and become re-familiarised
with myself as I recollect my life when going
through my own physical personal belongings.
Engaged with the distant, recent and
immediate past, the piece is concerned with
the relationship between objects, space, man
and his behaviour and how they influence
each other. It reflects the way a space can
affect its inhabitant and how we arrange our
living spaces to suit our needs.**

Description of work (6/16)

Relativity of Things

We are a thing among other things therefore reality cannot exist without the relationship of accords and differences. Our life is merely a web of threads tangled together through relativity and causality, and our every action creates a chain reaction to this web of people and things that bind us together in a perpetual cycle. These undercurrents of the everyday are accessible only through utilizing attentiveness or, in Zen Buddhist terminology, *Mindfulness*.

Some of my sculptural and performance works explore this idea of relativity as they enter into dialogues with objects, people, and spaces rather than prioritizing projecting self-sentiment and expression. They investigate the interstices between everyday objects and people to make connections by bridging and revealing hidden threads and foreground the less attended space to be observed and contemplated.

In the Zen Buddhist teaching of 'Truth' and 'Oneness', objects and people are seen as they are, interconnected, with 'co-conditioned origination' or sharing 'mutual arising'. They are interdependent and yet mutually conditioning. Everything is related to everything else under a condition of impermanence. Buddhists perceive that we exist because people are interconnected with us, and that our family, relatives, friends and *Sangha* sustain the 'I'.

One of the texts on the wall (5/8)



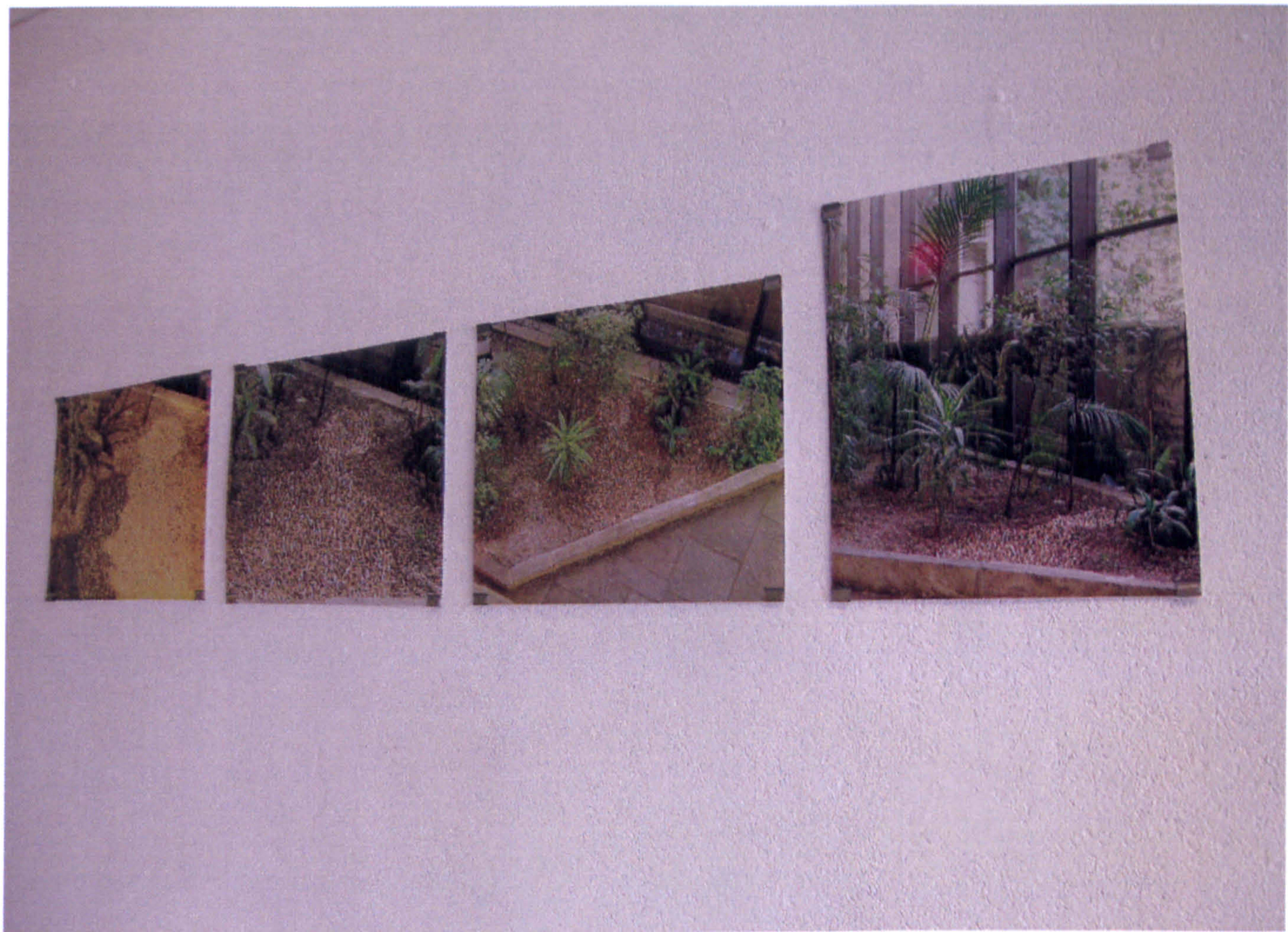
Your Name	who did you meet?	What did you share / exchange with the person you met?
Inke Kaspar DAMIEN YASSER.F. Daniel josie gotremar@xanoo.co.uk Kayleigh	Haric Ian SHADE OF ZBYSZEK UNKNOWN Kaspar Laurel kurtz Ella Bella	Words Seal story SMILE INSPIRATION. City! Heat, bodies buzzed with relaxed nervousness. Easy tension. A conversation about exchange. We converted ideas. Exchanged emails. Recorded some to gadgets. A reflection for each other - we shared a veil nose to nose. Smiles We shared a giggle together and loved it!

Nice to Meet You, 2008
Medium: audience interactive drawing and installation
(Documentation)

In March 2008, I took part in *Paradise Stories*, an exhibition in Liverpool in conjunction with the '08 European Capital of Culture'. The exhibition explored what 'paradise' meant to the artists taking part. Inspired by the Buddhist concept of Nirvana as a mental space as well as seeing that paradise exists in the everyday around us where people peacefully connect with each other, I proposed *Nice to Meet You* for *Paradise Stories*. I was interested in using people as the medium for the piece, where the idea was to experiment through drawing and installation and the interaction between the participants tracing each other's shadows.

Description of work (7/16)





Cigarette Butts Formed Shadow, 2001

Material: Cigarette butts

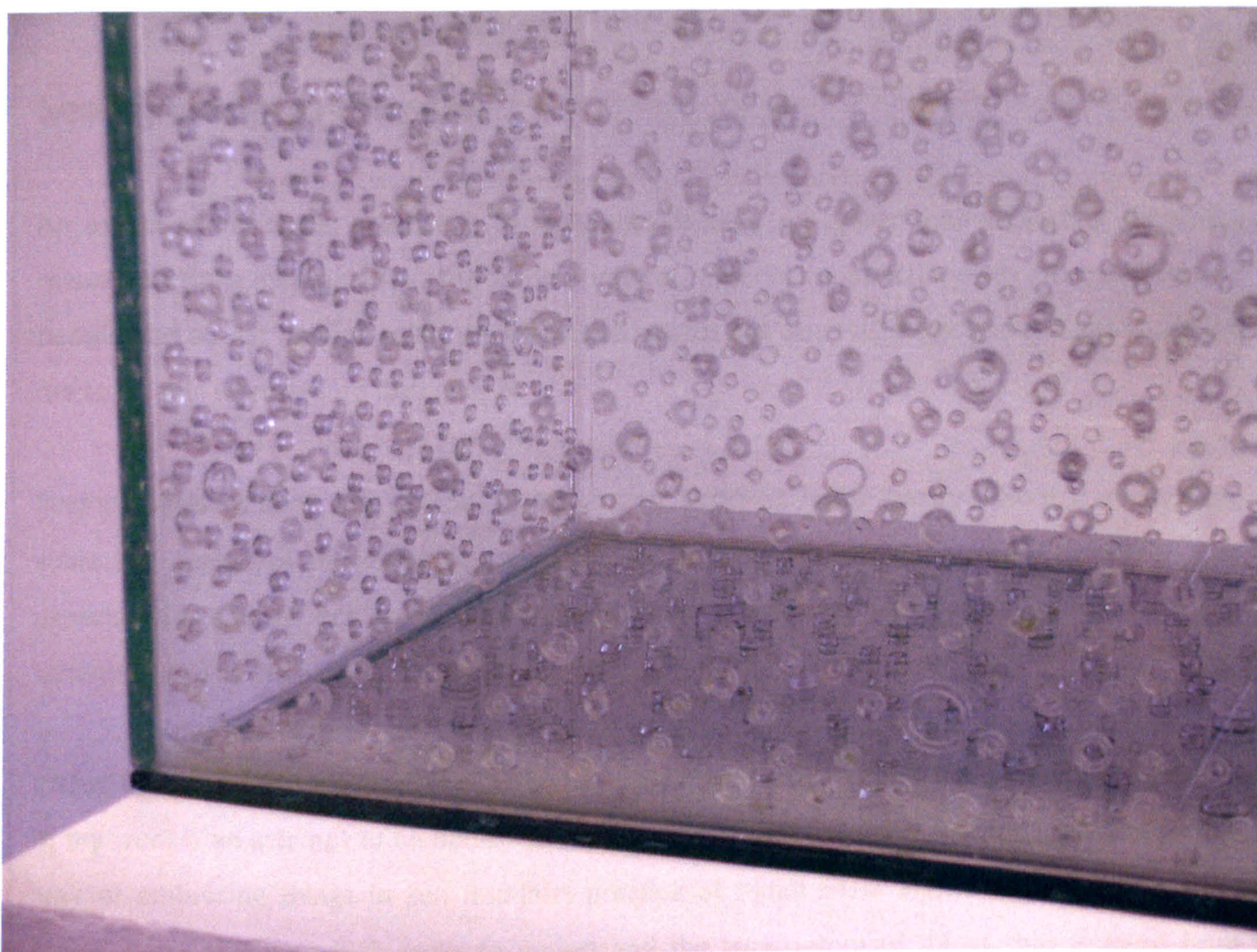
Size: Life-size shadow

This was a site-specific work for the 'Brew' exhibition which took place at the *Truman Brewery Company*. The site relates to the production and supplying of alcohol. An overhead spotlight cast the shadows of the passerby to the conservatory area in dawn. Cigarette butts scattered around the building were collected and used as the material for the work. My intention was to link together smoking, drinking, the space and the shadows. I was fascinated by the action of putting out cigarettes, where cigarette butts are pushed and planted in the ashtray where the gesture suggested the act of killing off.

Description of work (8/16)

Note: 10" x 12" photographs to show the documentation of the work.





Shredded Airliners Stuck on Aquarium,
2003

Material: Polythene airliner and aquarium
Size: 61cm x 31cm x 33cm

The piece came to me when I visited my wife in a hospital ward. An infusion bag was connected to a polythene airliner inserted to her hand after an operation to prevent dehydration. I relate the airliner to giving life in this instance, and extend its connection to the situation of an aquarium. By relating the airliner in the hospital to oxygenation in an aquarium, I found an ambiguous association between the two, and decided to stick the cut sections of airliner to a fish tank to suggest the relationships between air, airliner, life, liquid, bubbles and the fish tank.

Description of work (9/16)

Seeing Things as they are

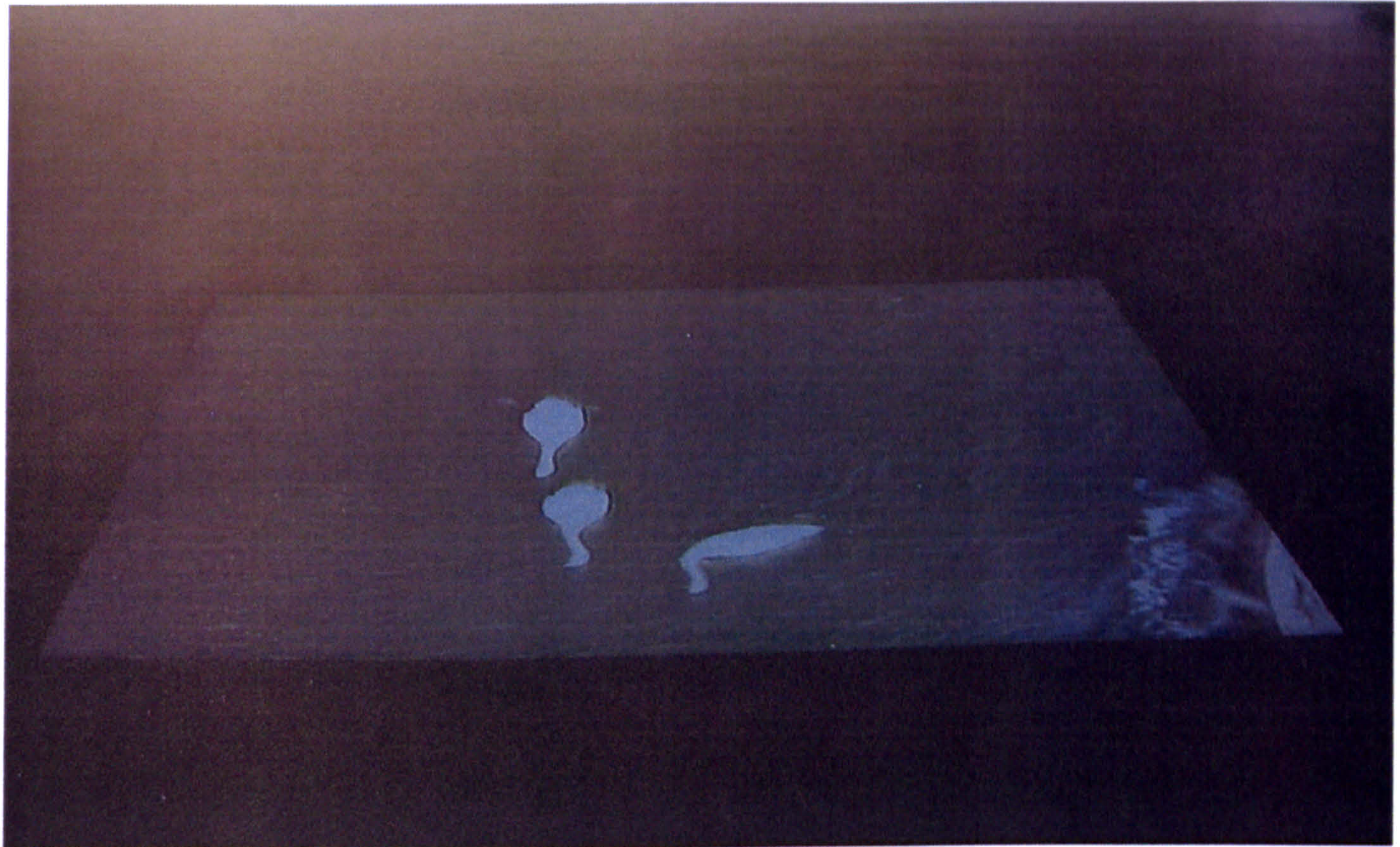
An aspect of my studio practice is to see things as they are rather than projecting subjective meanings on the material used. The works study the material's connection with other objects and people and do not depend solely on me as the creator but also rely in part on the world around me to be able to enter into dialogue.

Seeing things as they are can be linked to Zen Buddhist haiku poetry where it records no subjective aspect of the event and contains no less and no more than what was seen and experienced. It does not go beyond the phenomenon of what was witnessed, with no gap between both as the haiku has no self-projected narrative.

Prejudice in the mind is almost impossible to eradicate completely, and seeing things as there are in my work is an attempt to be honest to the materials I use. This corresponds to the objective way of embracing things in Zen Buddhist practice of Mindfulness known as *Tathatā*, a non-judgemental practice which seeks to understand the true nature of things that is freed from considerations of personal reactions, to then see things 'as they are'.

One of the texts on the wall (6/8)





By the River Thames at Windsor, 2004

Format: Dvd

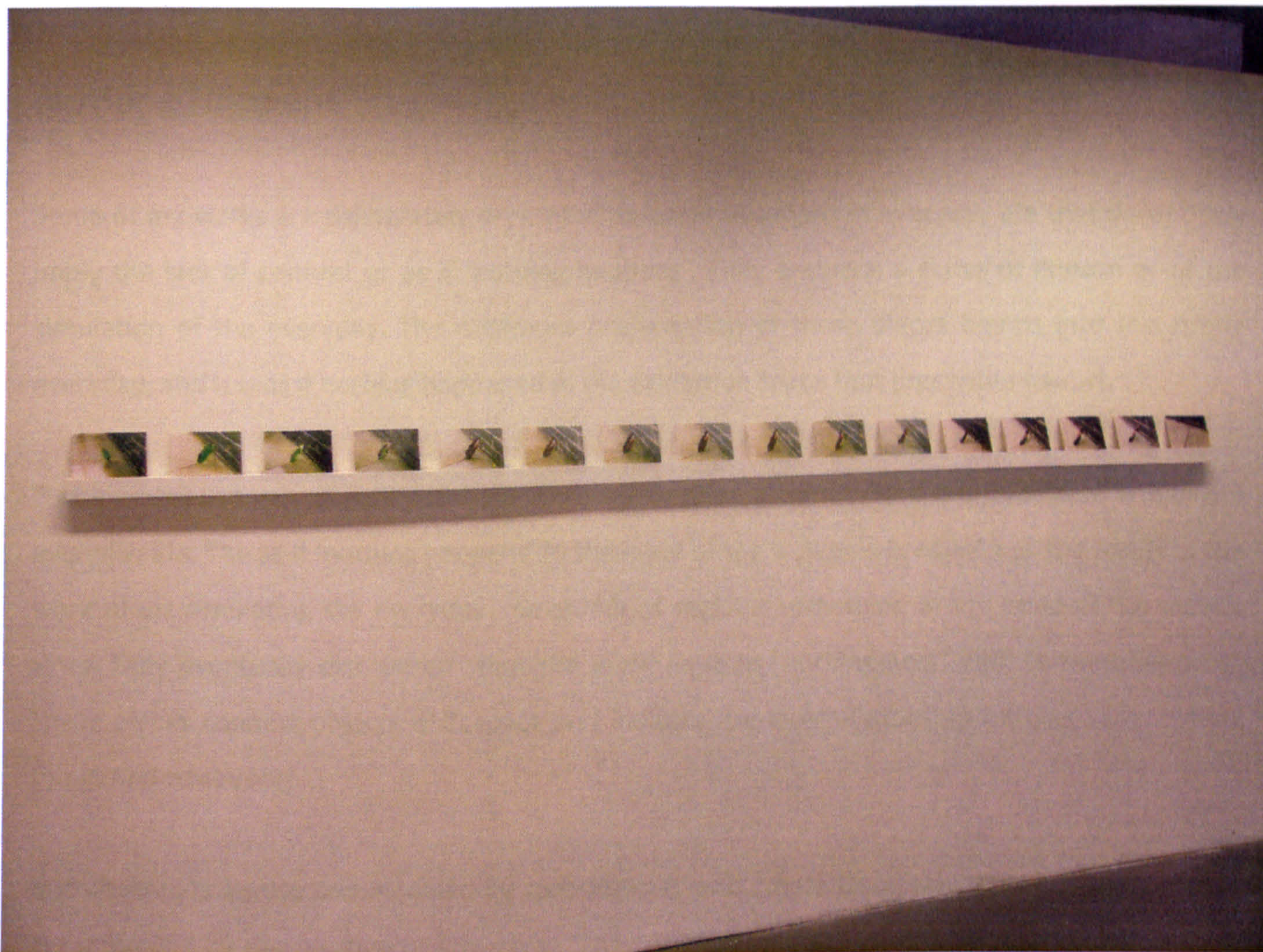
Duration: 10 minutes

Taking my camcorder with me on my walk, I chose a footbridge as my location and then set my camcorder on a tripod to record on a mini DV tape for an hour. The whole footage with its original sound was later shortened into about ten minutes. The piece may be seen as the result of spontaneous play due to the footage being unplanned, undirected and unrehearsed. It captured a chance happening without changing the angle or adjusting the equipment during the filming. It records no subjective aspect of the event, and does not go beyond the phenomenon of what I witnessed as it was.

Description of work (10/16)

Note: video projection on the floor. Please see the enclosed dvd at the back of this thesis.





***A Single Leaf Trapped in Between Two
Pieces of Paving Stone over a Period of
Thirty Days, 2002***

Medium: Photographs

The leaf was discovered by chance trapped in between two paving stones after windy rain, and curiosity led me to document this chance occurrence until it finally disappeared after 30 days. Without prearrangement and without imposing my own opinions on the leaf, each snapshot has a poetic quality in that it describes the leaf as it is, as it captures the present moment of transition of the leaf without intervention. It embodies a sense of the transitory and of the impermanence in which people and things are like visitors in our life, as they come and go.

Description of work (11/16)

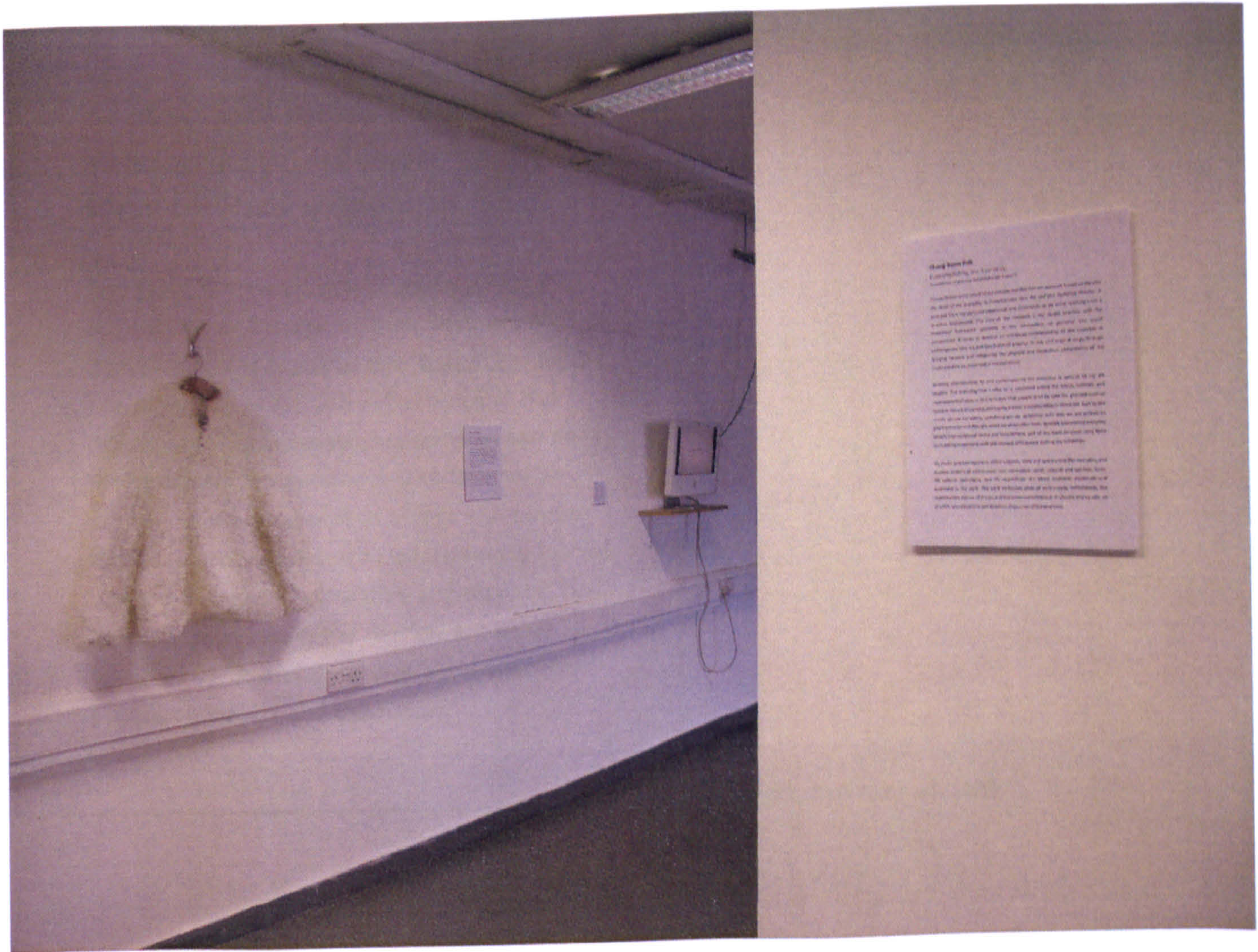
Nothing Happens

Some of my works are deliberately presented as banal situations in everyday life that deceptively imply the lack of content or as if 'nothing happens'. They embrace a sense of illusion or of the simulation of the everyday. The minimum presentation of these pieces blends into the subtle everyday, and it is as if nothing happened in the exhibition space that presented the art.

These pieces use very slight indications to reveal or draw attention to the insignificant within our everyday life. The as if 'nothing happens' in the mind of the viewer is produced as the result of the work of art simulating the everyday, does indeed register something in the mind of the viewer when they eventually discovered that the work equates 'nothing-ness' with 'something-ness'. These pieces connect objects with space and indicate the interrelationship between perception, things and situations.

Nothingness is always accompanied by something else to create form, and the negative is always accompanied by the positive or vice-versa. They are inseparable, just as we are followed by our shadows. This is in accord with the famous saying in Chinese's Chan Buddhism where "form is emptiness, emptiness is form, form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form."

One of the texts on the wall (7/8)





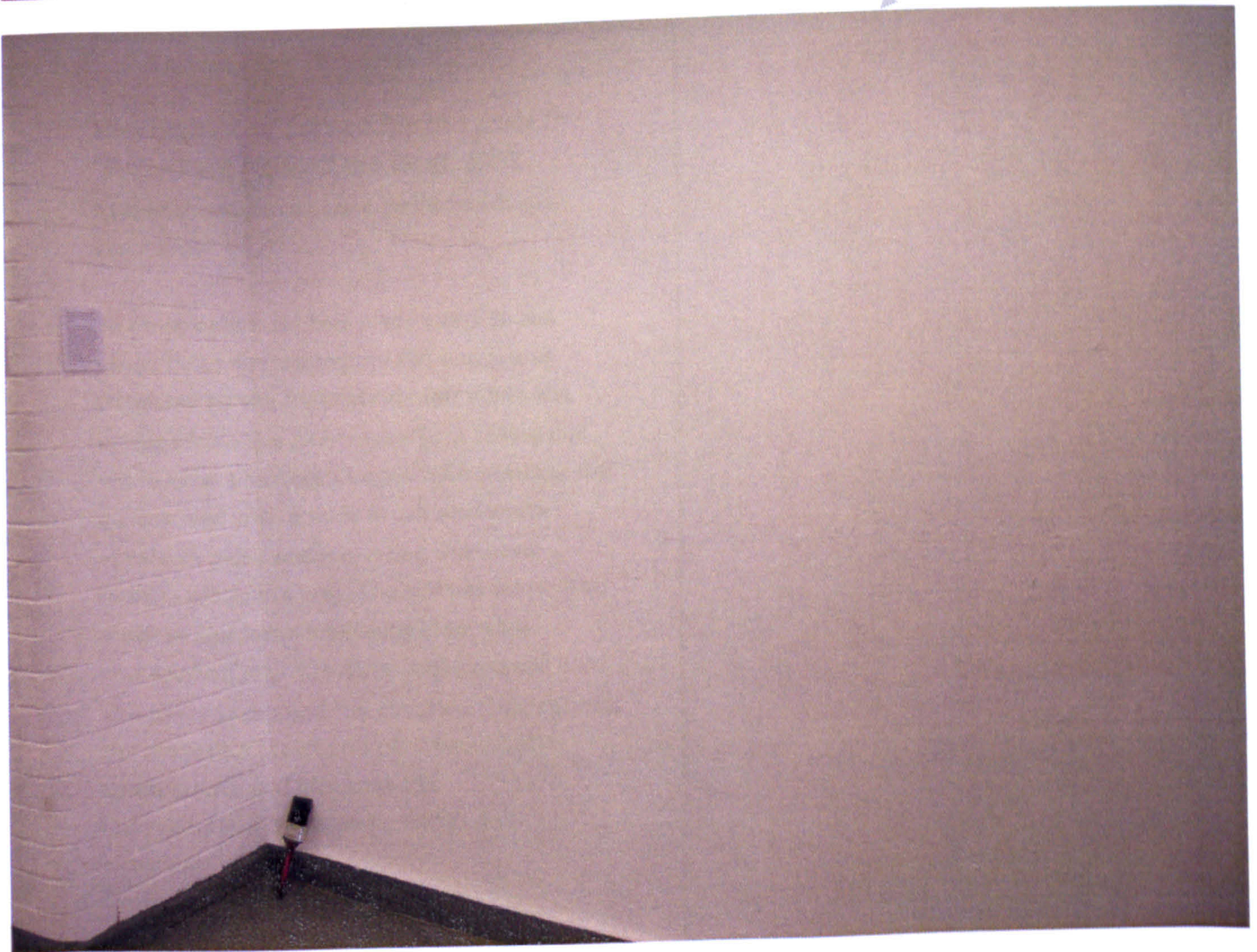
Labeling Tags Attached to Clothing, 2003

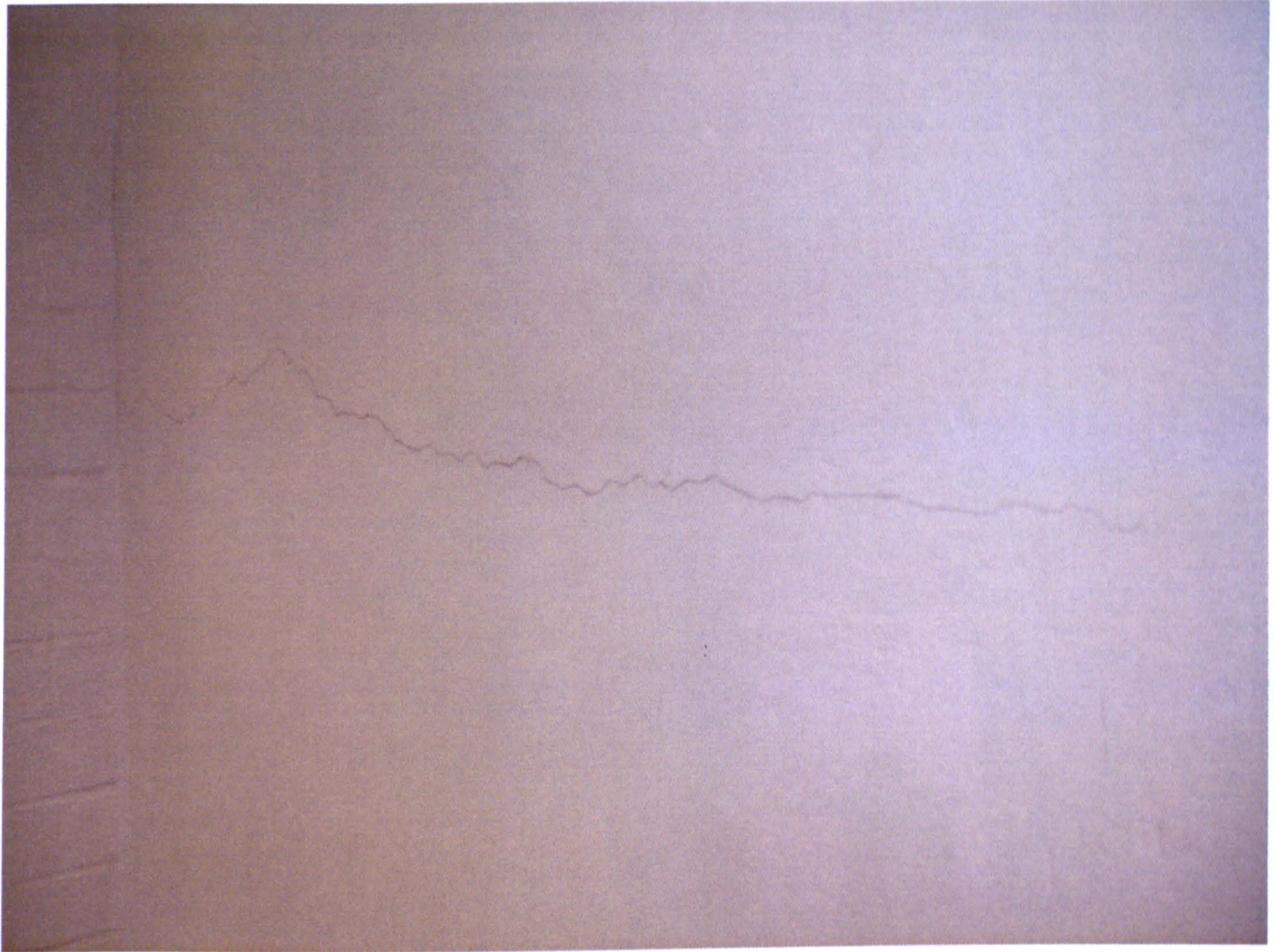
Material: Price tags and jumper

Size: 80cm x 70cm approximately

The piece put clothing and labeling tags into interaction and suggests their permanent combination. It explores the 'space' between the real and unreal, the authentic and the illusionary that we may encounter in our daily life. It attempts to connect with the reality where negative aspects of things and human beings are manipulated or intentionally buried under a blanket of attractive appearance. Just as many products in the market are often 'dressed up' in an impressive and expensive packaging to lure the consumer.

Description of work (12/16)



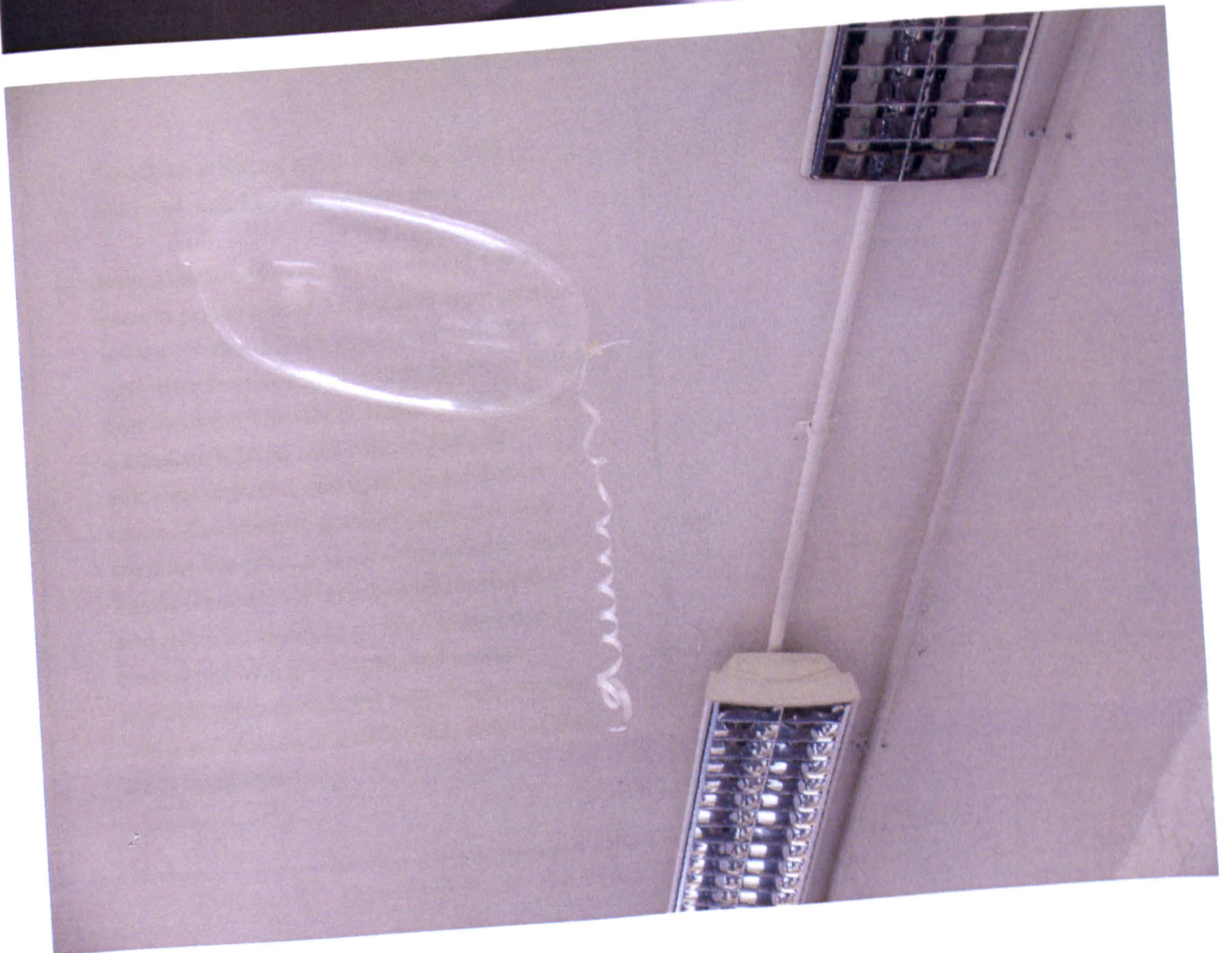


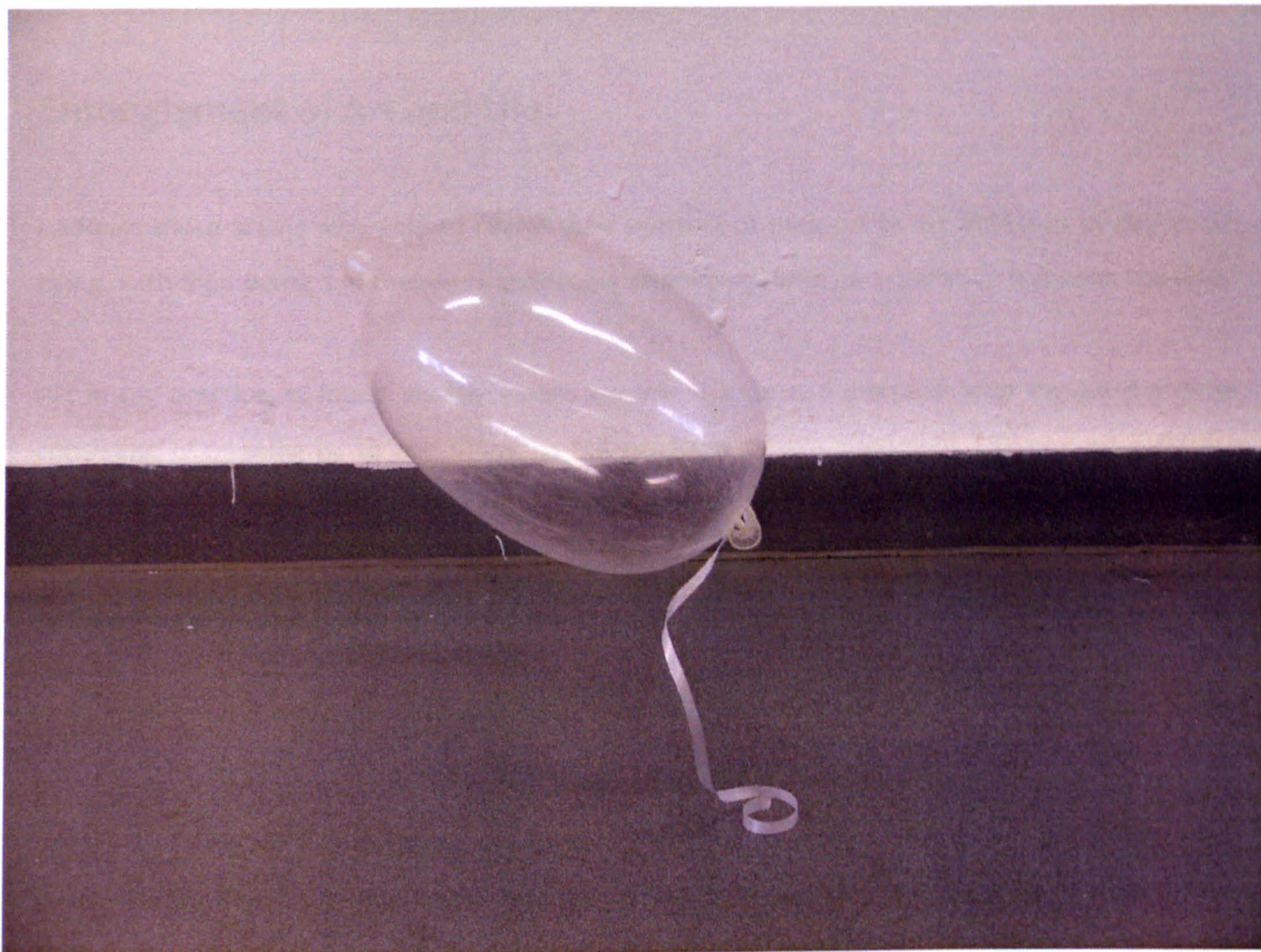
***Assemblage of Loosed Bristles from the
Brush that Painted the Wall, 2003***

Material: emulsion paint, paint brush and
clear glue

The inspiration for this piece came to me when I was decorating my flat and it was triggered by the frustration I felt when the bristles from the paintbrush kept falling out while I was painting. I began with painting the gallery wall with a wide brush and white emulsion paint and collecting the loose bristles along the way. The bristles were then stuck to the same wall using clear glue constructed into a realistic looking crack line. The piece combined the emotion (frustration), the materials (paint and paintbrush), the space (wall), and indicates the interrelationship between things and situations.

Description of work (13/16)





Condom Inflated with Helium, 2003

Material: condom and helium gas

Helium balloons stuck on the ceiling are often seen in public places. I have also seen people inflate condoms like balloons for fun. This sculpture frames and connects together these two everyday situations. Instead of a balloon, a condom is filled with helium gas and released onto the ceiling of the exhibition space. The condom gradually deflates and touches the ground several hours later. The physical reaction of expanding/contracting and rising/descending of the condom can be associated with the heightened human physical sensation during sexual activity - the rising and descending of feeling, emotion and body temperature.

Description of work (14/16)

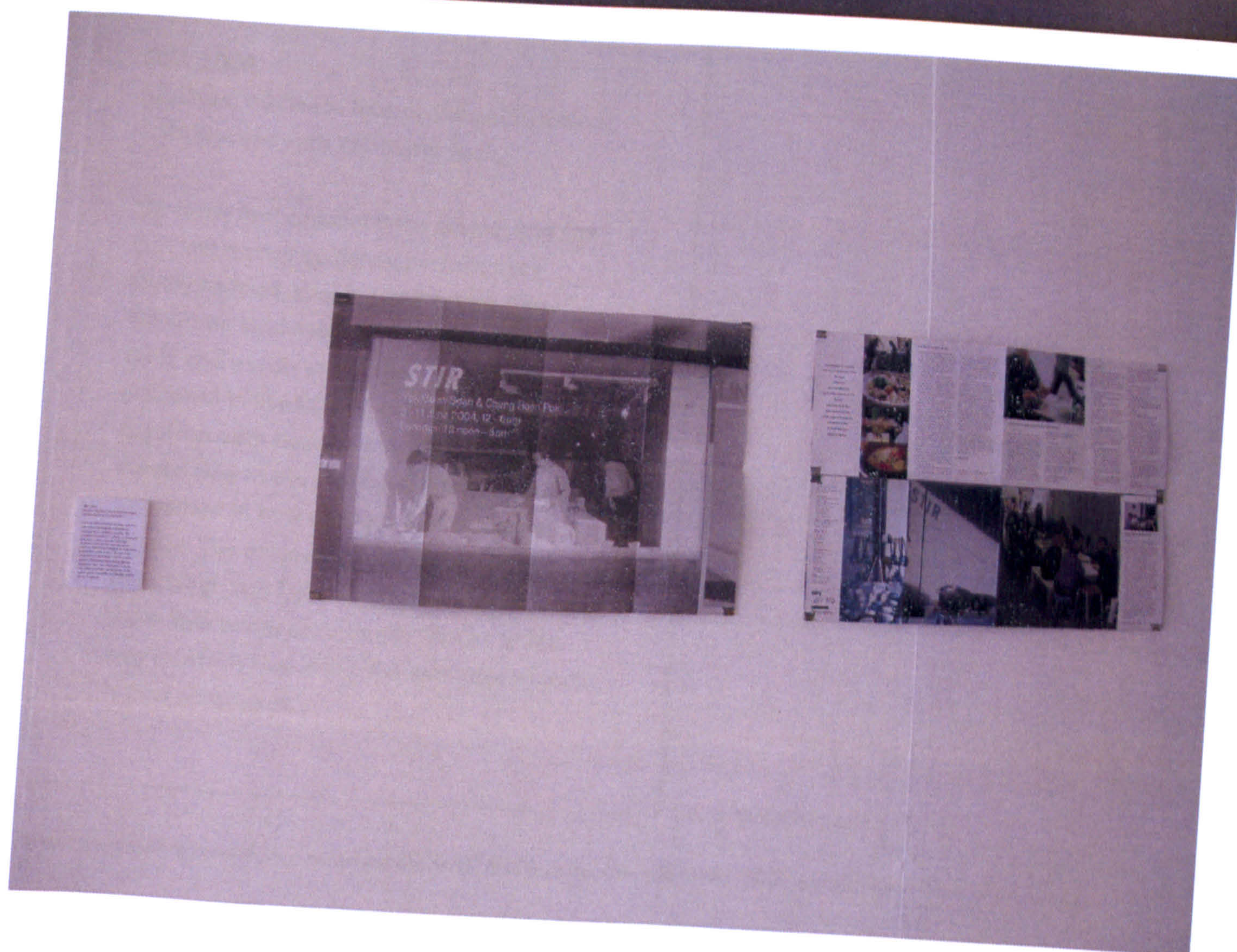
Entanglement of Art and Life

I admire those artists who are able to reveal their mastery of their art in the activities of day-to-day living, with their being and their art inextricably interwoven with no separation between the two.

Art in my practice, is found exactly where we are already and interacts with my surroundings, consisting of opening up to and affirming the situation we are already in. Life and art exist in a complementary partnership in my art practice, with my ideal art practice standing like an island between the two carriageways of art and life, observing attentively and allowing the trivial things and actions of everyday life to inform my art, and allowing art to permeate my everyday life in return.

It is crucial in my art practice to stand at the central point between two extremes to observe equally the positive and negative, sound and silence, something and nothingness, art and life. When we position ourselves in the middle we are more capable of seeing both sides of the dualistic world. This understanding can be compared to the teaching of *Middle Way* in Zen Buddhism, symbolized by the gesture of two palms held together at chest level.

One of the texts on the wall (8/8)



Smoked Mackerel & Tomato Soup

Mushroom, Chicken & Sweetcorn Soup

Miso Soup

Seafood Soup

Green Peas & Mint Soup

Lotus Root, Spare Rib & Peanut Soup

Dill Soup

Beef & White Radish Soup

Mixed Vegetable Rice Soup

Chicken, Ginger & Rice Wine Soup

Three Mushrooms Soup

Chicken & Herbs Soup

Seaweed & Egg Soup



Is there such a thing as a free lunch?

Chong Boon Pok and Yak Beow Seah have turned Unit 2 into a venue for serving free soup. On entering the gallery from Whitechapel High Street you are confronted with a simple white minimalist counter made from chipboard. On each day of the week long project, a choice of two soups are on offer, prepared by the artists from fresh ingredients.

Taking the soup, I make my way to the long functional 24-foot table that has been constructed for the event and take a seat on the simple benches that the artists have made. Instead of the quiet contemplation of objects or processes, there is lively banter, ranging from the quality of the soup to the nature of current art practice. The gallery has been transformed into a dialogical kitchen.

In between mouthfuls of miso soup, one discussion offers up some definitions of art, from art as mimesis (an early definition first introduced by Plato) to art as mental entities, a view advocated by Joseph Kosuth who wished to clear art of all aesthetic baggage in favour of propositional statements. Plato viewing art as twice removed from reality, being an imitation of an imitation could see no place for art in the education of the young or in the just State.

However, Pok and Seah's practice engages very directly with everyday life and the life of the State. The institutional context and commodity culture within which art circulates are brought into question. Pok and Seah view art as a gift, given without obligation, in the spirit of relational aesthetics. Their aim is to 'shorten the distance between art and life and to engage the viewer in the making and function of the artwork'. It's a simple but nonetheless radical premise upon which notable issues are raised. Can artworks escape commodification? Does the 'gift' imply the notion of reciprocity?

Art as ideology is a Marxist approach which views art as being to a large extent socially and economically determined, it is perhaps within

this broad definition and, particularly in relation to its formulation by Louis Althusser that Pok and Seah's work can be situated. The artwork is no longer viewed as a representation or reflection of society but as a means of contributing to its production. In post-industrial society production takes the form of services and 'experiences' that often take the place of goods and products.

Consequently, Pok and Seah's art is conceived as a service or an operational structure, moving art from a concern with the meaning of signs to the production of relationships. Like the work of John Cage in the 60's the openness of this art, its desire to live alongside the quotidian, to appropriate and be appropriated by non-art situations gives rise to an art that ostensibly engages with 'the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space'.¹

Sitting here in the gallery/kitchen I have the opportunity to engage in discussion, to meet others, to discuss how art might move from reflection to action, 'learning to inhabit the world in a better way'² and to play with the idea of a number of 'microtopias'.

However, what is the nature of the experience that is offered? What are the qualities of the relationships that are brought into existence? What do I take away from this encounter? I think it's time for another bowl of soup. We are always told that there is no such thing as a free lunch, perhaps there is, or maybe I should offer to wash up.

Ian Robertson

1. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les Presses du Real, Dijon, France, 2002, english version.
2. ibid

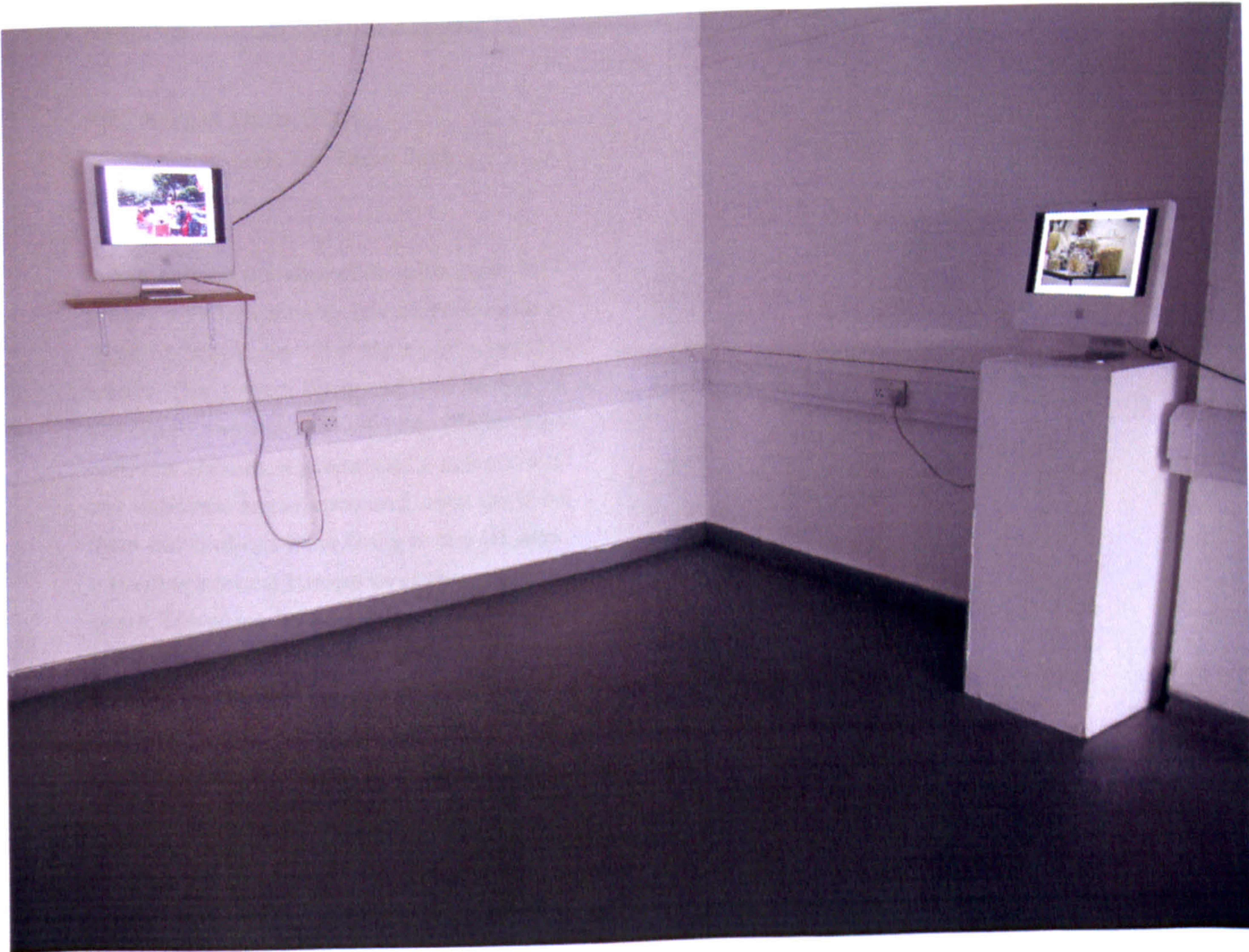
Stir, 2004

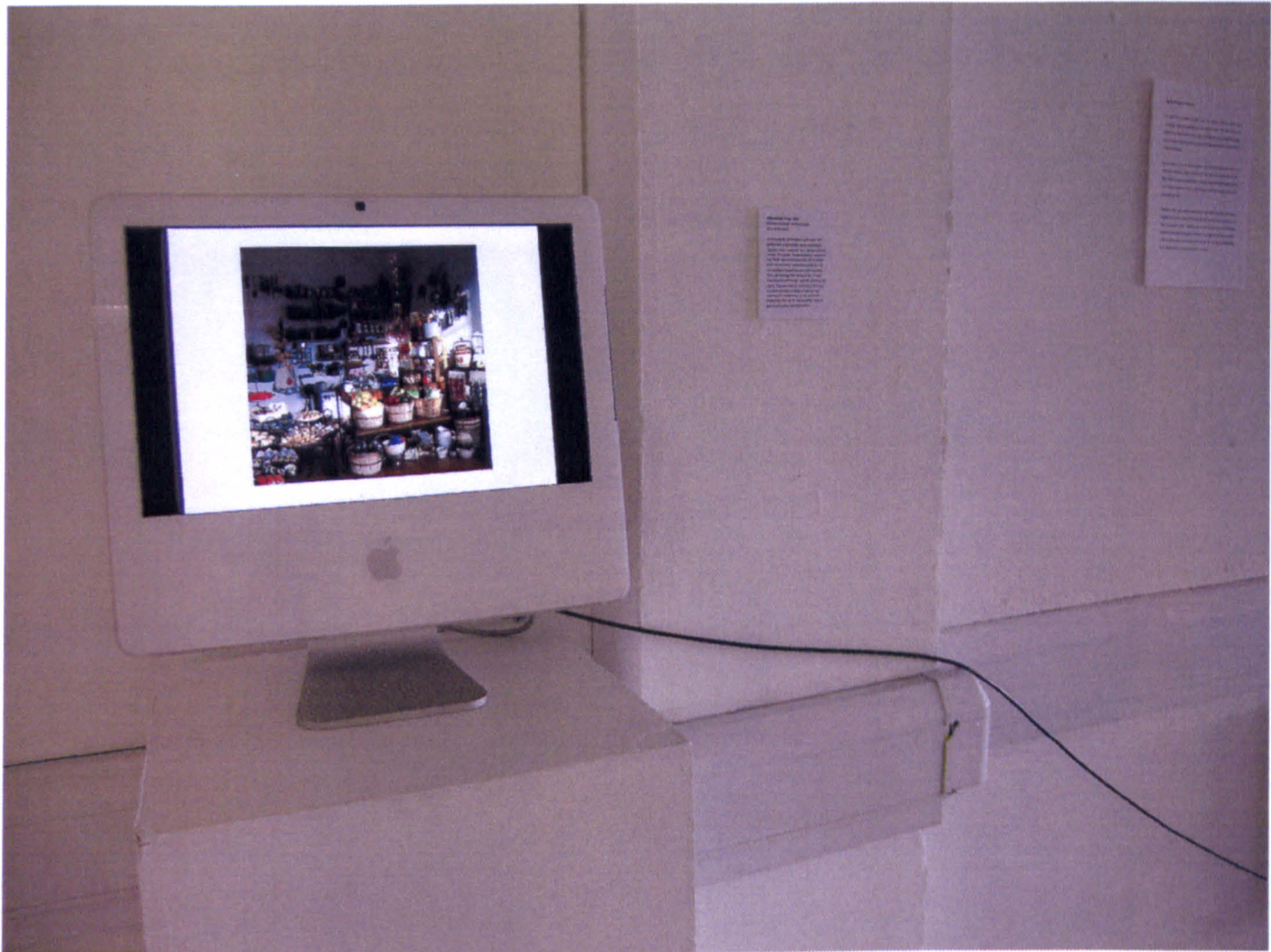
Medium: Audience interactive performance
Collaborated with Yak Beow Seah

Stir is my first collaboration project and the first interactive audience performance involving food, cooking and eating. The exhibition consisted of a kitchen, a communal table and a slide projection. Soup was prepared in the kitchen each day, which together with slices of bread at the side were served free to the visitors. Seah and I are interested in how dining is able to connect people. The project offers food as well as friendship, and I was interested in how we were able to connect people similar to the way in which I assemble the everyday objects for my sculptures.

Description of work (15/16)

Note: the leaflet/poster presented on the wall is a publication after the 'Stir' exhibition.





P&S Recipe Shop, 2006

Collaborated with Yak Beow Seah
(Documentation)

In this second collaboration with Seah, IMT gallery was temporarily transformed into a 'grocery shop-cum-café' for a period of three weeks. The project foregrounded an aspect of our (Seah's and mine) everyday life to share with the visitors. It presented a selection of our aesthetic experience and what we liked from our findings from living in the UK and travelling around Europe over the previous 11 years. The piece took its motivation from our common interests in ideas of serving and sharing and it elaborates on the aesthetic experience that can be found within food, in gastronomic and related activities.

Description of work (16/16)

Note: please see enclosed dvd at the back of this thesis (Powerpoint file).





An image from the album showing the backpacking to Europe in 1994

Personal Album

This album presents the summary of my personal background, life journey and experience, all of which examined in my PhD thesis and indicated how they impacted on my studio practice. It includes images from my childhood, a life-changing backpacking trip to Europe for four months, my work as a chef in restaurants, and sharing pleasant moments with family and friends through cooking and eating. My former part-time jobs as a chef helped to sustain my living, complete my BA and MA education in fine art, and fulfill my ambition to become an artist.

Note: *please see enclosed dvd at the back of this thesis (Powerpoint file).*

Miscellaneous



A scene from the private view



Desk with information about my other exhibitions, interviews and visitor comment book

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List of Images

Chapter 1

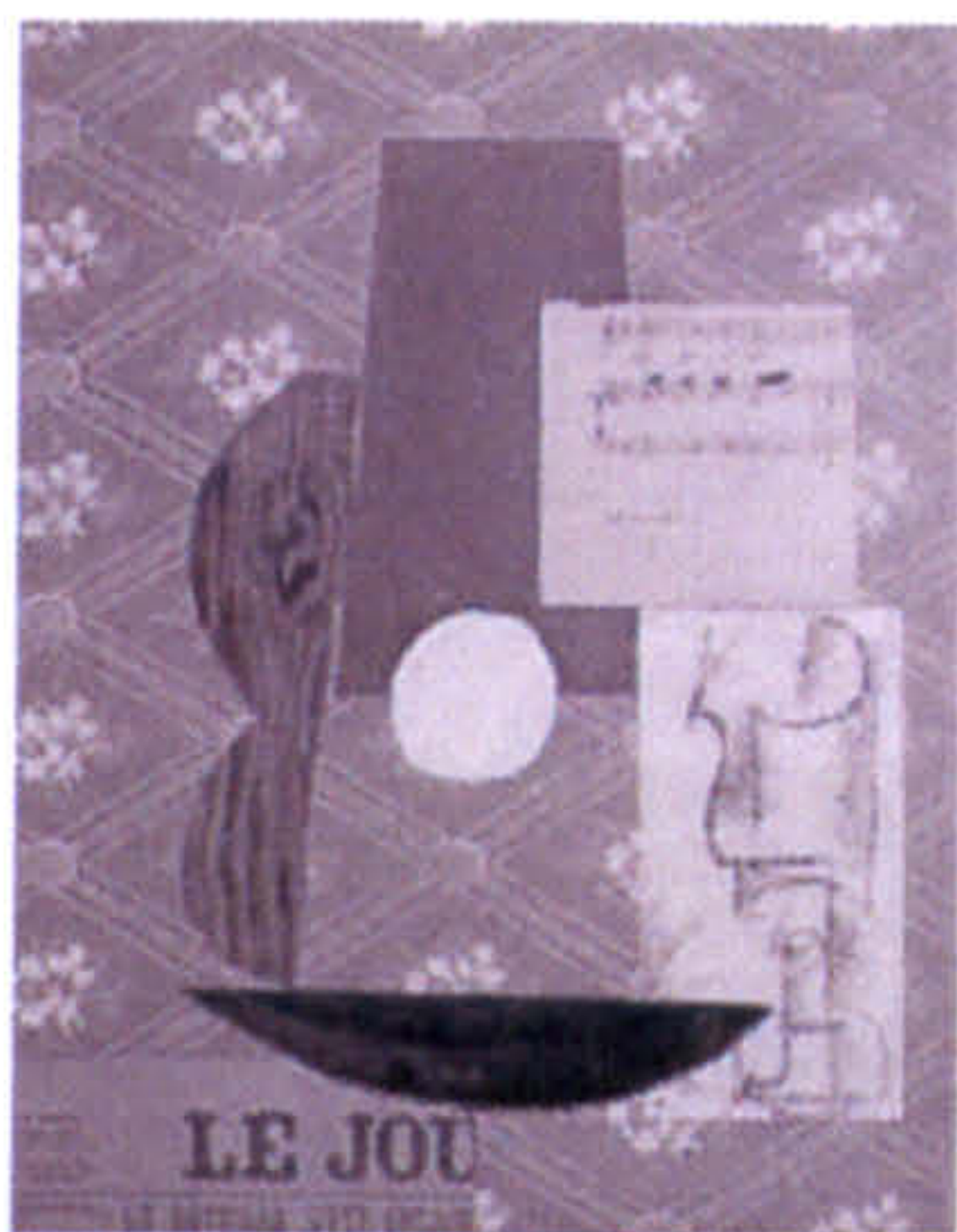


Image 1.01 (p.39)



Image 1.02 (p.39)



Image 1.03 (p.39)



Image 1.04 (p.39)

Chapter 2

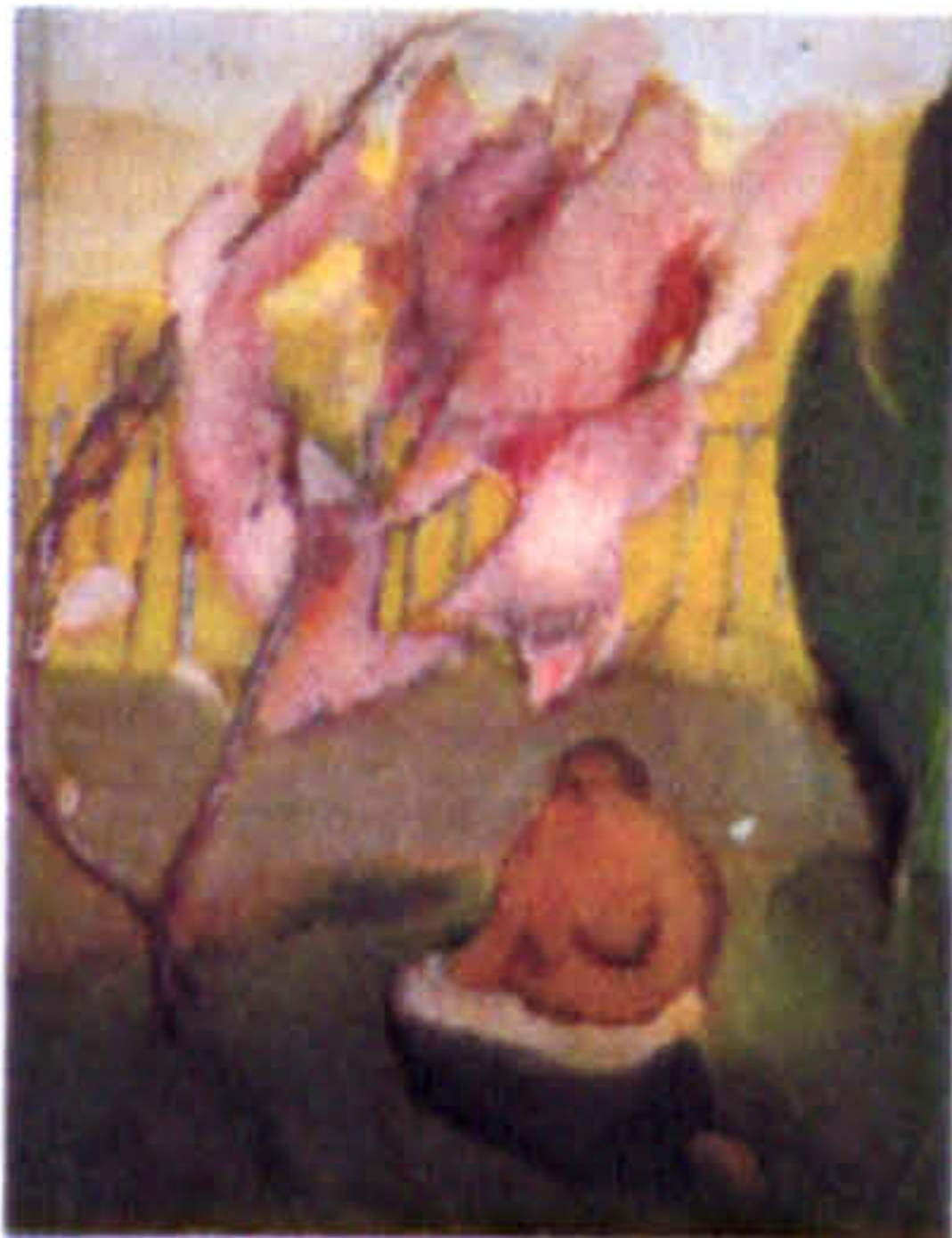


Image 2.01 (p.88)



Image 2.02 (p.89)



Image 2.03 (p.89)



Image 2.04 (p.92)



Image 2.05 (p.96)



Image 2.06 (p.96)

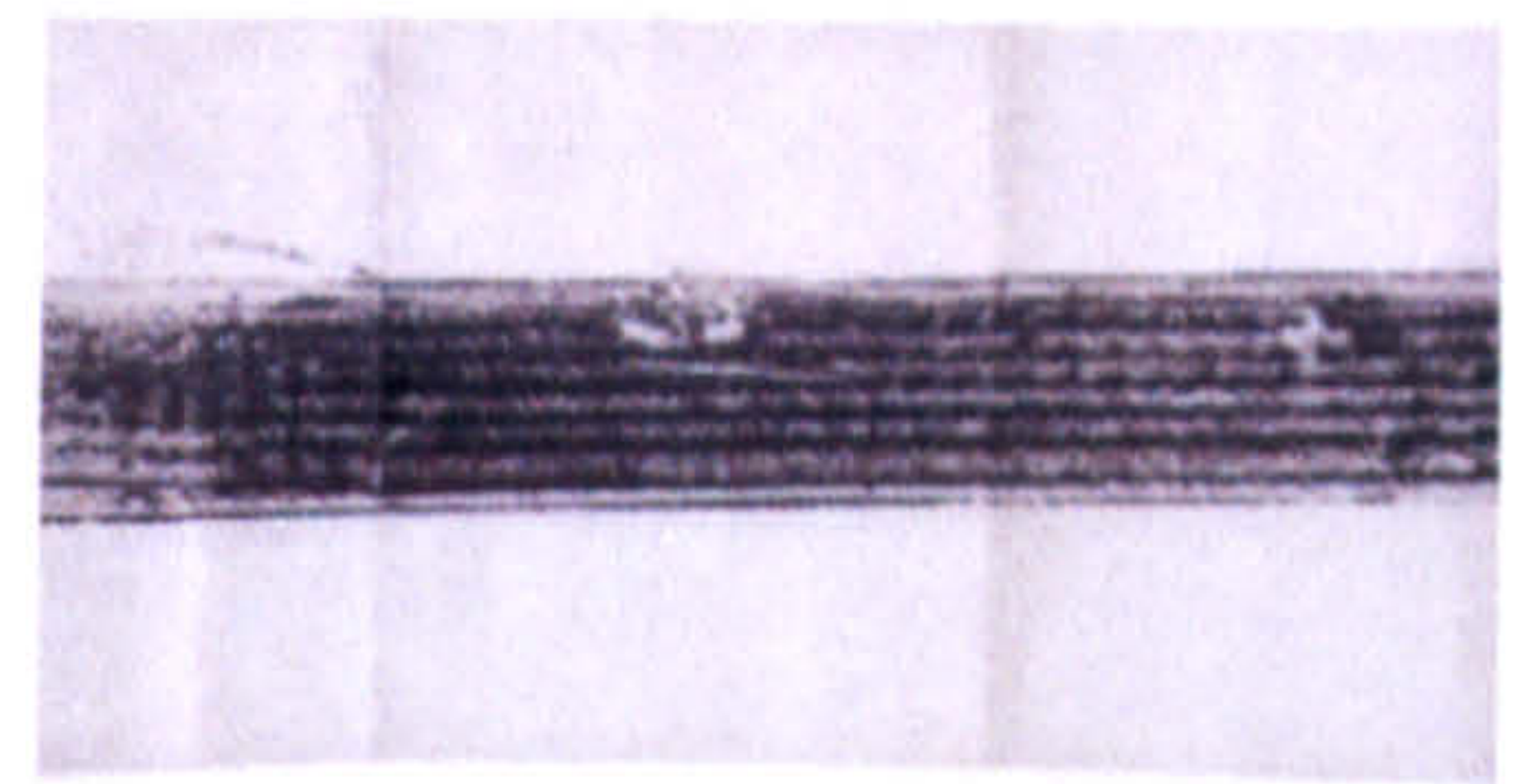


Image 2.07 (p.96)



Image 2.08 (p.97)



Image 2.09 (p.100)



Image 2.10 (p.100)



Image 2.11 (p.101)



Image 2.12 (p.102)



Image 2.13 (p.102)



Image 2.14 (p.104)

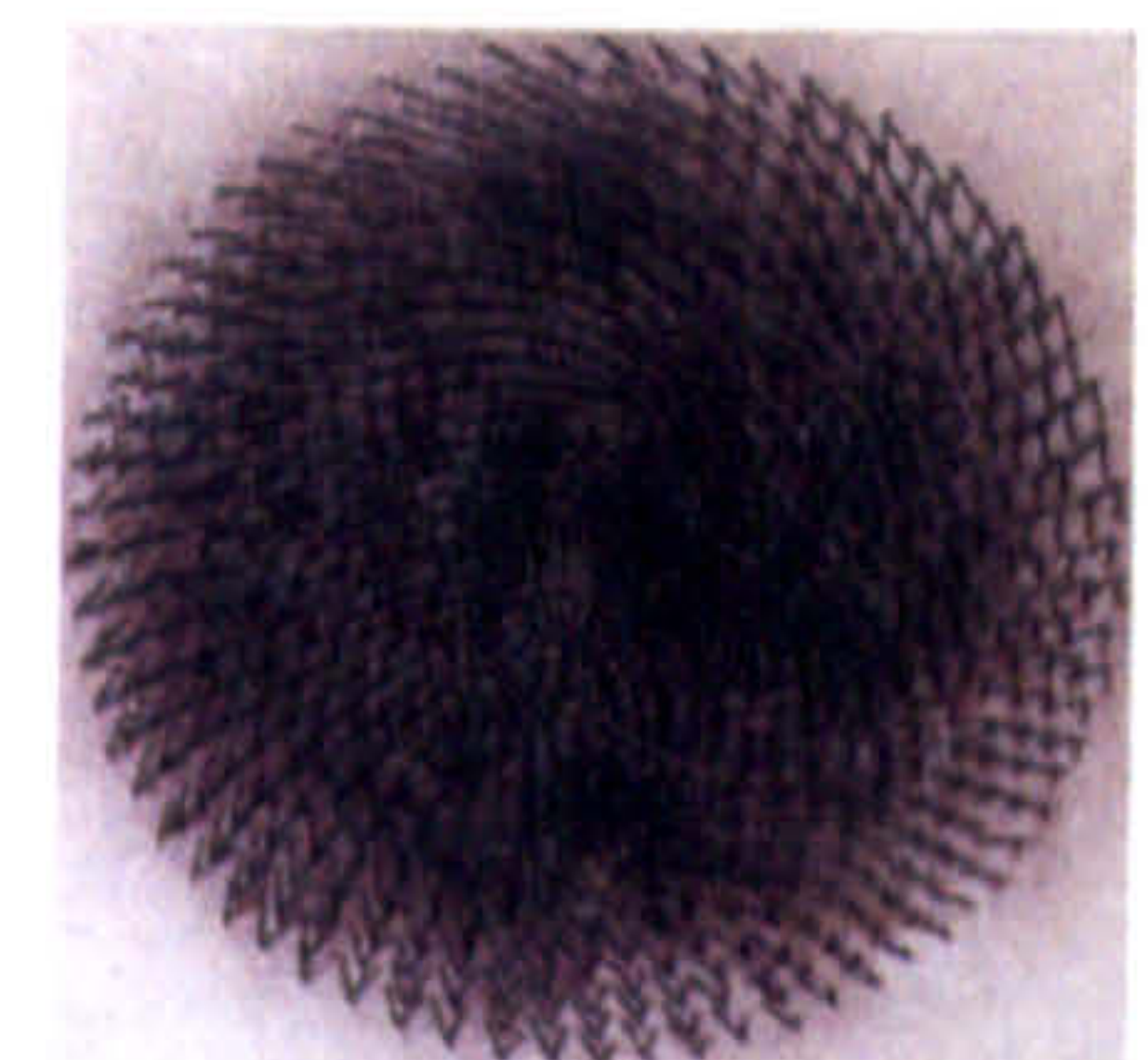


Image 2.15 (p.104)



Image 2.16 (p.106)

Chapter 3



Image 3.01 (p. 124)



Image 3.02 (p. 124)



Image 3.03 (p. 125)



Image 3.04 (p. 125)



Image 3.05 (p. 130)



Image 3.06 (p. 130)



Image 3.07 (p. 132)



Image 3.08 (p. 132)



Image 3.09 (p. 135)



Image 3.10 (p. 144)



Image 3.11 (p. 144)



Image 3.12 (p. 153)

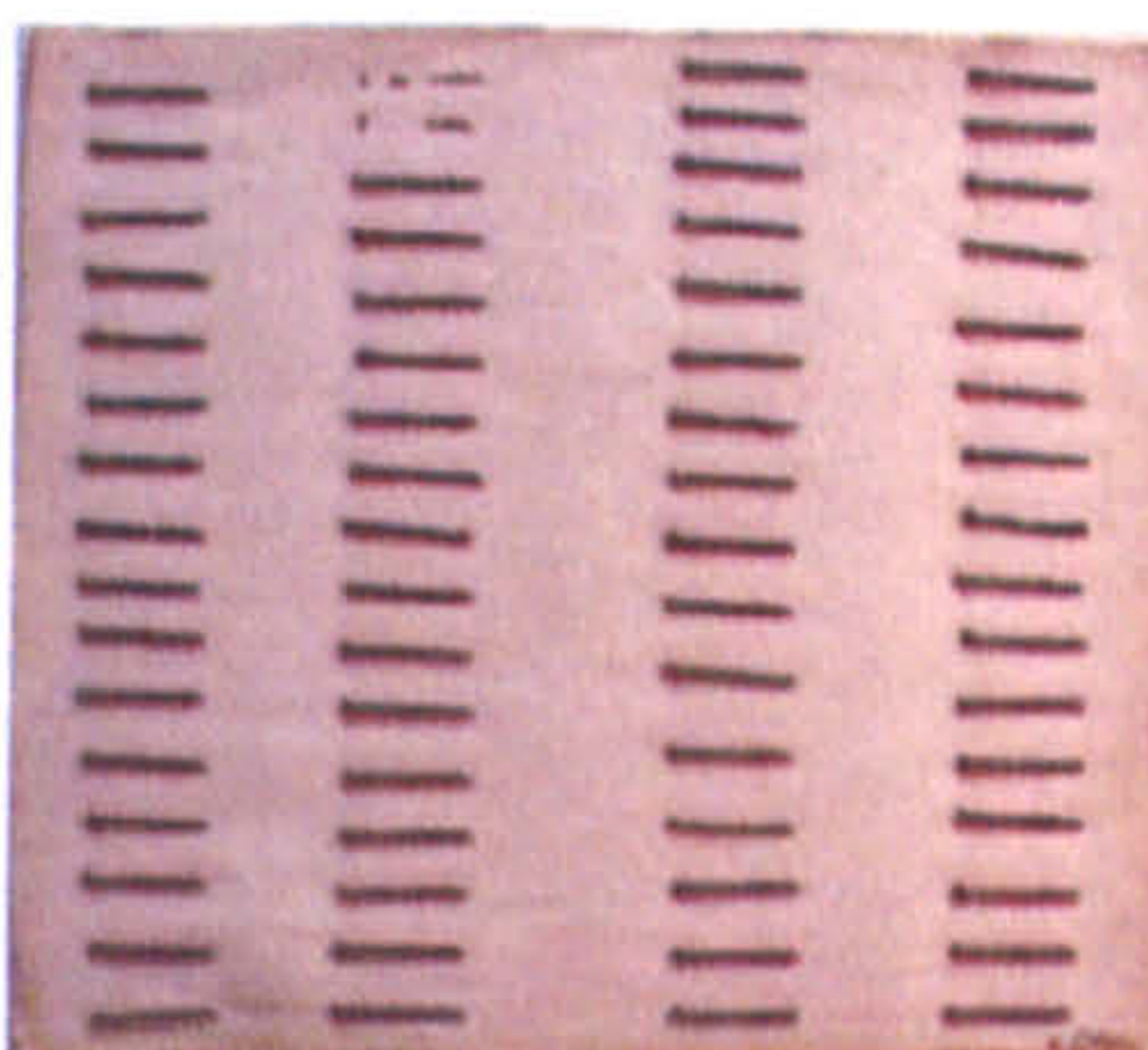


Image 3.13 (p. 153)



Image 3.14 (p. 155)



Image 3.15 (p. 155)



Image 3.16 (p. 158)



Image 3.17 (p.158)



Image 3.18 (p.158)



Image 3.19 (p.158)



Image 3.20 (p.159)



Image 3.21 (p.159)



Image 3.22 (p.161)

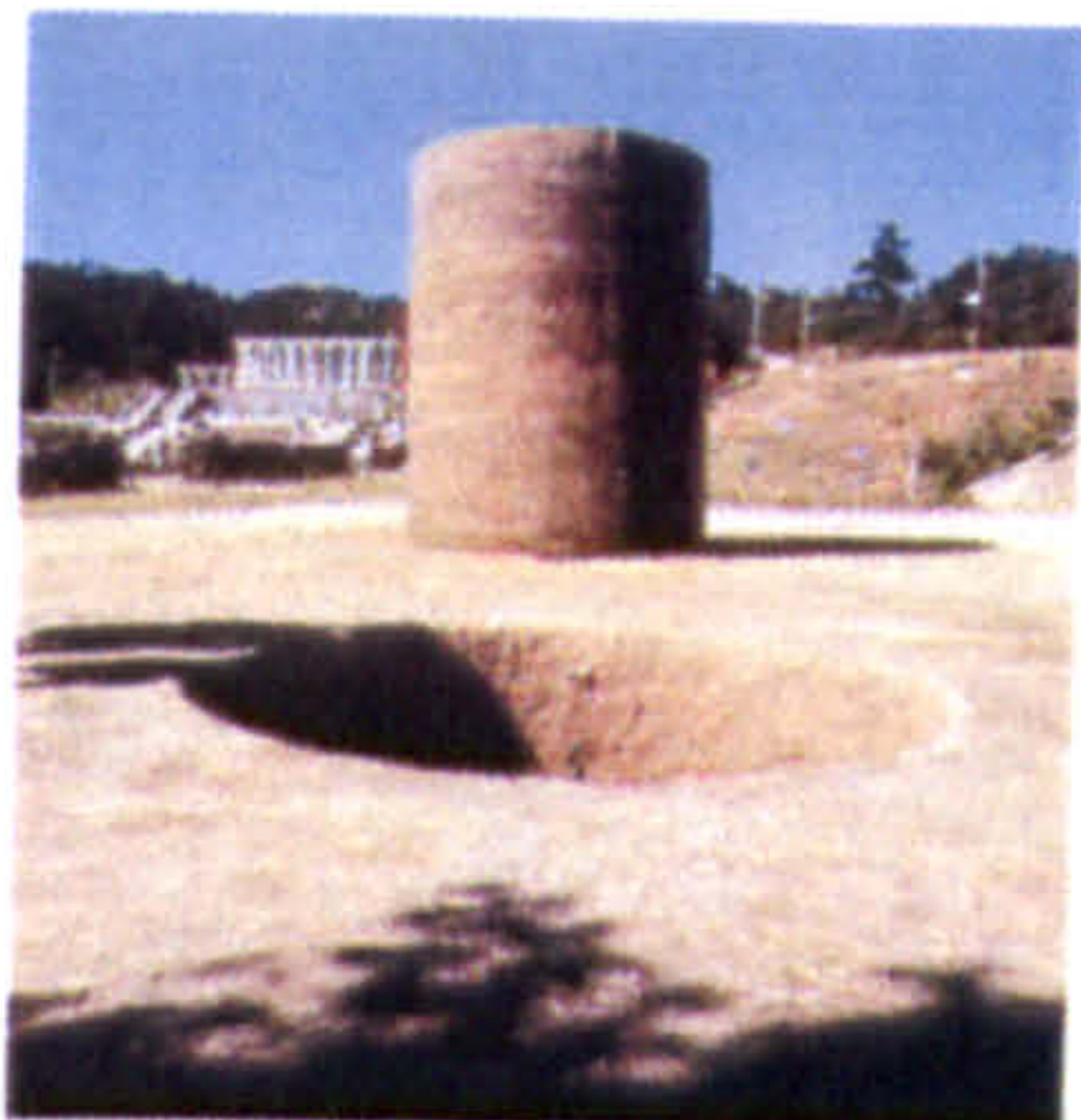


Image 3.23 (p.162)



Image 3.24 (p.162)

Chapter 4



Image 4.01 (p.176)



Image 4.02 (p.176)



Image 4.03 (p.180)



Image 4.04 (p. 181)



Image 4.05 (p.185)



Image 4.06 (p.186)



Image 4.07 (p.186)



Image 4.08 (p.189)

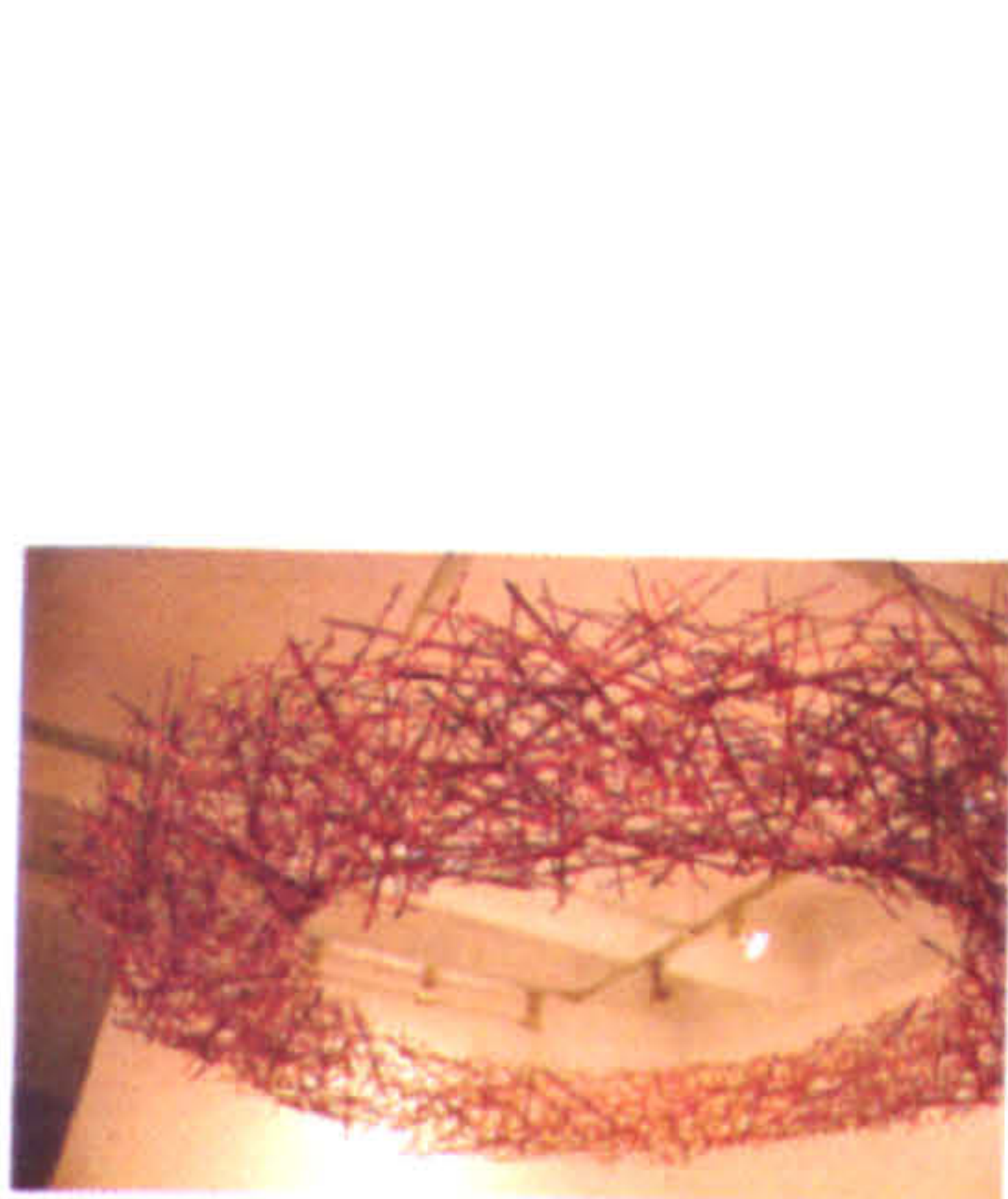


Image 4.09 (p.190)



Image 4.10 (p.190)



Image 4.11 (p.191)



Image 4.12 (p.191)



Image 4.13 (p.197)



Image 4.14 (p.197)



Image 4.15 (p.198)



Image 4.16 (p. 201)



Image 4.17 (p.201)

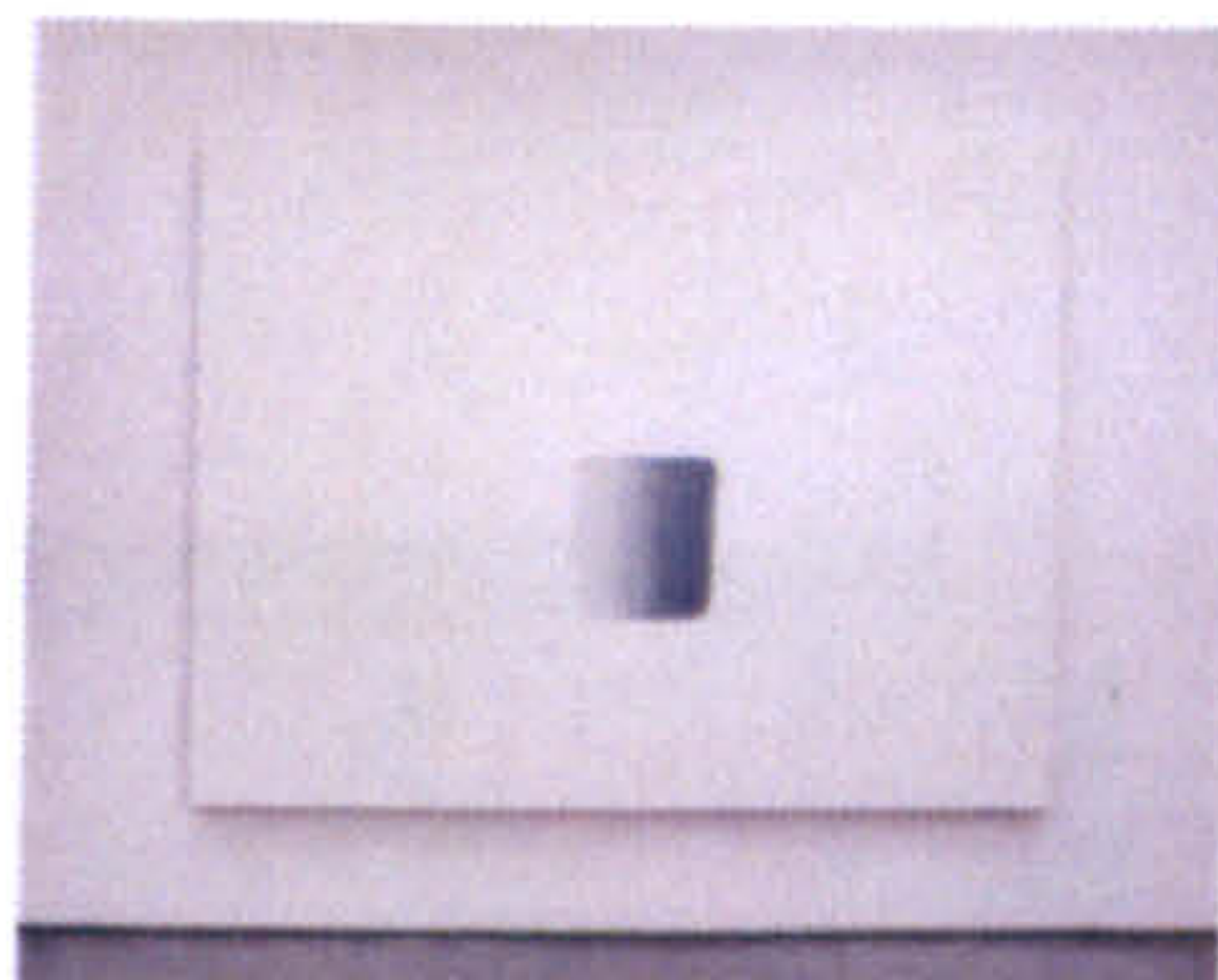


Image 4.18 (p. 204)



Image 4.19 (p. 209)



Image 4.20 (p. 212)



Image 4.21 (p. 215)



Image 4.22 (p. 216)



Image 4.23 (p. 216)



Image 4.24 (p.218)

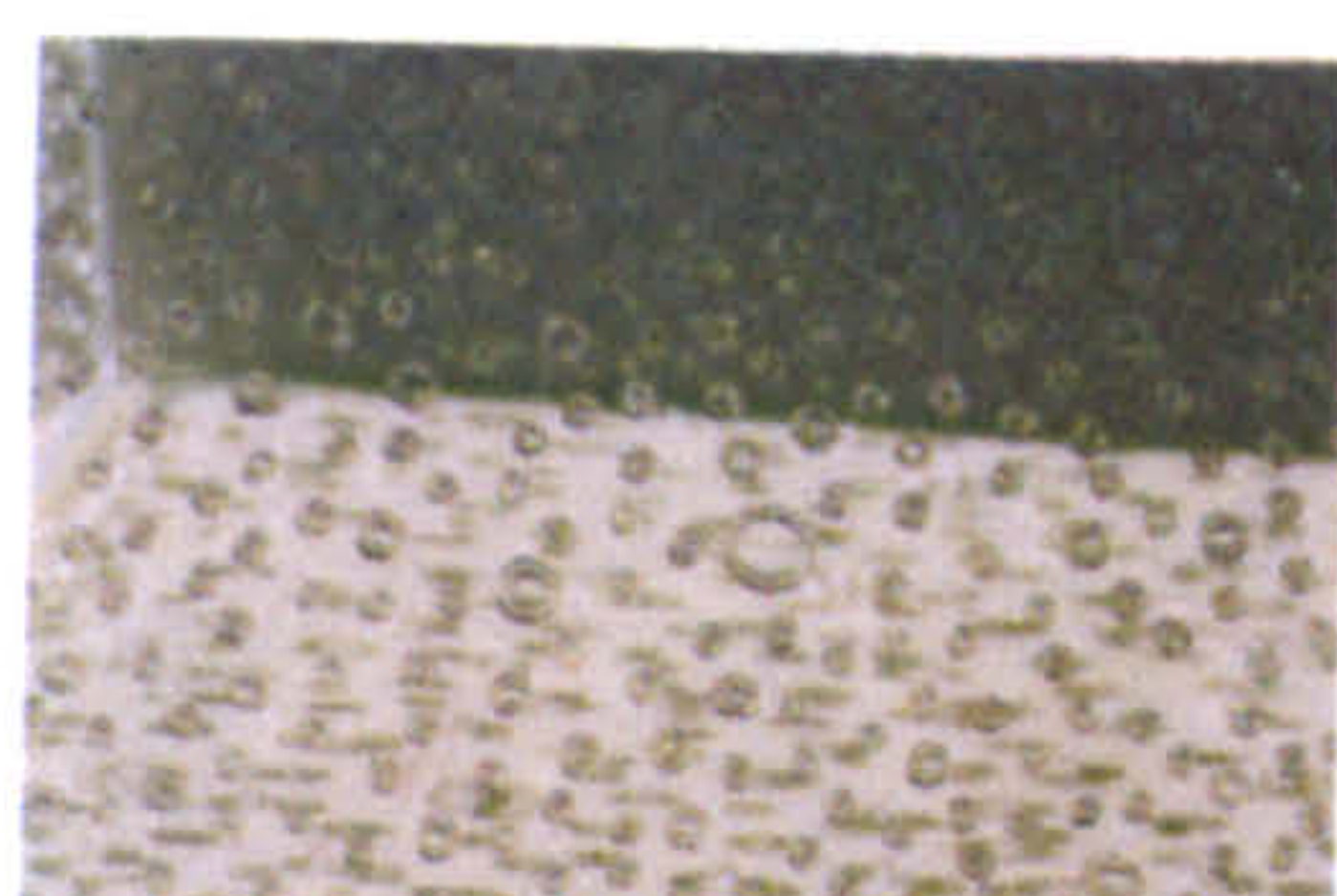


Image 4.25 (p. 218)



Image 4.26 (p. 221)



Image 4.27 (p. 221)



Image 4.28 (p. 224)

List of Illustrations



Image 4.29 (p. 225)



Image 4.30 (p. 225)



Image 4.31 (p. 226)



Image 4.32 (p. 226)



Image 4.33 (p. 229)



Image 4.34 (p. 230)



Image 4.35 (p. 230)



Image 4.36 (p. 236)



Image 4.37 (p. 237)



Image 4.38 (p. 237)



Image 4.39 (p. 237)



Image 4.40 (p. 241)



Image 4.41 (p. 242)



Image 4.42 (p. 247)



Image 4.43 (p. 248)



Image 4.44 (p. 248)



Image 4.45 (p. 249)



Image 4.46 (p. 249)



Image 4.47 (p. 250)



Image 4.48 (p. 250)



Image 4.49 (p. 251)



Image 4.50 (p. 251)



Image 4.51 (p. 252)



Image 4.52 (p. 252)



Image 4.53 (p. 259)



Image 4.54 (p. 259)



Image 4.55 (p. 260)

List of Images – *by work title, artist and description*

Chapter 1

- Pablo Picasso, *Guitar, Sheet Music and Wine Glass*, 1912, (p. 39)
- Pablo Picasso, *Tete de Toro*, 1943, (p. 39)
- Marcel Duchamp, *Bicycle Wheel*, 1913, (p. 39)
- Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917, (p. 39)

Chapter 2

- Marcel Duchamp, *Draft on the Japanese Apple Tree*, 1911, (p. 88)
- Comparative images of *Fountain* and Buddha statue, (p. 89)
- Comparative images of *Marcel Duchamp's poster* and Buddhist and Hindu's Mudra , (p. 89)
- John Cage with D. T. Suzuki in Japan in 1962, (p. 92)
- Robert Rauschenberg creating an art work using nude model, sun lamp, and blue print paper in 1951, (p. 96)
- Robert Rauschenberg washing the artwork with peroxide solution, (p. 96)
- Robert Rauschenberg, *Automobile Tire Print*, 1953, (p.96)
- Robert Rauschenberg sharing conversation with Jasper Johns in 1954, (p. 97)

List of Illustrations

- Jasper Johns, *Target with Plaster Casts*, 1955, (p. 100)
- Jasper Johns, *Painted Bronze*, 1960, (p. 100)
- Jasper Johns, *Savarin Coffee Can with Painted Brushes. Painted Bronze*, (p. 101)
- Joseph Beuys delivering his lecture at The Poorhouse in Edinburgh in 1975, (p. 102)
- Joseph Beuys delivering his lecture in Achberg, Germany in 1978, (p. 102)
- Günther Uecker working on his nails artwork, (p. 104)
- Günther Uecker, *Nails and Charcoal on Canvas*, 1969, (p.104)
- Richard Long, *A Line Made by Walking*, 1967, (p. 106)

Chapter 3

- A scene from Indonesia's Citarum River, (p. 124)
- Tony Cragg, *Minster*, 1987, (p. 124)
- Tony Cragg, *Spectrum*, 1985, (p.125)
- Tony Cragg, *Stack*, 1975, (p. 125)
- Michael Landy, *Breakdown*, 2001, (p. 130)
- An image of me taken when I was around six years old, at the front of my neighbour's house similar to ours, (p.132)

List of Illustrations

- An example of illegal housing estate in Malaysia, (p. 132)
- An image of me working as a Teppanyaki Chef, (p. 135)
- Pino Pascali, *Contraerea*, 1965, (p. 144)
- Water bottle sandals, (p. 144)
- Giovanni Anselmo, *Senzo Titolo*, 1968, (p. 153)
- Anita Gibson, *Untitled* (nails), 1968, (p. 153)
- Yoshihara Jiro and his circle painting, (p. 155)
- Yoshihara Jiro, *Red Circle on Black*, 1965 (p. 155)
- Kazuo Shiraga, *Untitled*, 1959, (p. 158)
- Kazuo Shiraga working in his studio, (p. 158)
- Yves Klein, *Performance: Anthropométries*, 1960, (p 158)
- Yves Klein, *Anthropométries*, 1960, (p. 158)
- Shozo Shimamoto, 'Holes Painting', 1950-52, (p. 159)
- Shozo Shimamoto's live performance of throwing paints, (p. 159)
- Lee Ufan, *Relatum*, 1969, (p. 161)
- Nobuo Sekine, *Phase-Mother Earth*, 1968, (p. 162)
- Rachel Whiteread, *House*, 1993, (p. 162)

Chapter 4

- *Assemblage of Used Disposable Chopsticks*, 2000, (p. 176)
- *Assemblage of Ring-pulls*, 2000, (p. 180 -181)
- *Circumrotation*, 2009, (p. 185 - 186)
- *Bǎo Yòu* (Protectiveness), 2009, (p.189 - 190)
- Enso by Hahuin Ekaku Zenji (1686-1769), (p. 191)
- Enso by Torei Enji (1721-1792), (p. 191)
- *6 Minute Performance of Smashing Bottles*, 2001, (p. 197 -198)
- *Every Corner of My Flat*, 2009, (p. 201)
- Lee Ufan, *Correspondence*, 2002, (p. 204)
- *By the River Thames at Windsor*, 2004, (p. 209)
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- *Assemblage of Loosed Bristles from the Brush that Painted the Wall*, 2003, (p. 241 - 242)
- *P&S Recipe Shop*, 2006, (p. 247 - 252)
- Chinese New Year potluck lunch in Jan 2010, (p. 259)
- Seah and I each prepared a special dish for the Chinese New Year dinner in Jan 2010, (p. 259)
- A special 'Steamboat' is also prepared for the same dinner in Jan 2010, (p. 260)