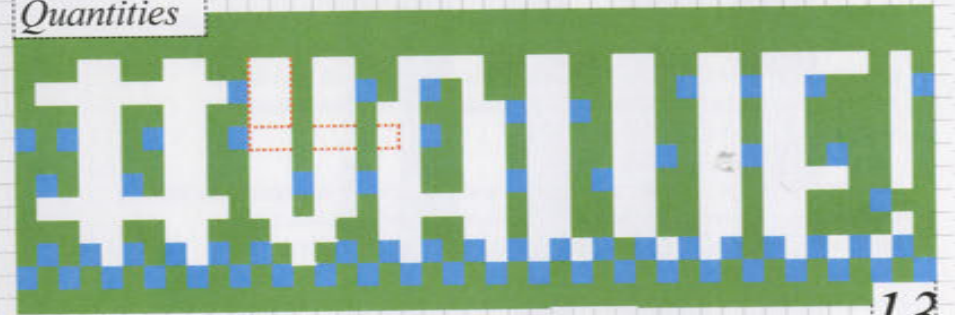


Unknown
Quantities



13

EDITORIAL

#VALUE! is an error code, raising its voice in protest, signalling a conflict between expectation and delivery. This mismatch, between the data the function anticipates and that which it receives, may be understood more plainly, as the moment of failure. For the 13th issue of Unknown Quantities, we decide to pause at the error, prolonging the period of hesitation that precedes correction.

UQ 13 seeks to reveal what may exist within this juncture when more time is spent there, when processes of expression and experimentation risk faltering in the presence of assumption. We have invited our contributors' to inhabit this evasive zone, embracing the friction of failure through gestures of anti-professional thinking. The return is varied, and often personal, united by a resistance to the institutional and hierarchical structures that govern creativity.

In a time when cultural homogenization and the policing of expression are narrowing the space for dissent, UQ 13 is deliberately flawed. Our approach to both editorial and design processes, whilst chaotic and unconventional, pursue an authenticity that feels urgent. The decision not to choose between British and American English, rejects editorial standards and functions to preserve our contributors' voices. In using Excel, the paragon of corporate productivity, as a design tool, we further harness an intentionally counter-productive exercise.

#VALUE! is an error code. According to Legacy Russell, "to become an error is to surrender to becoming unknown". With this, we invite you to become an unknown quantity, to scramble around with us across the slippery terrain of failure.



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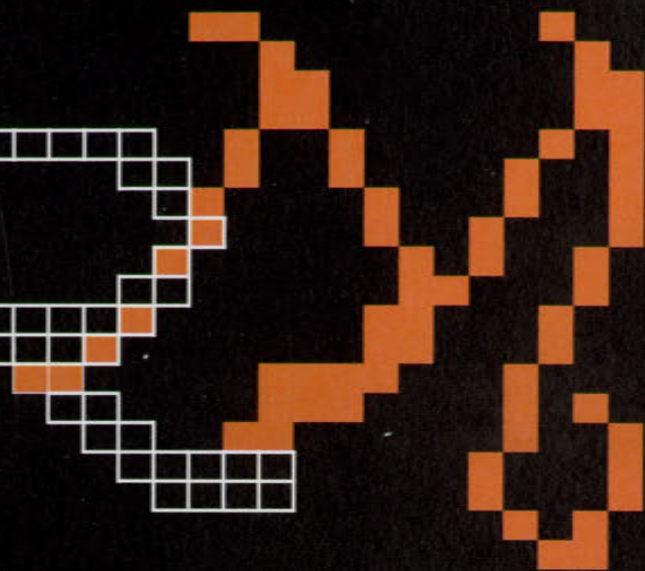
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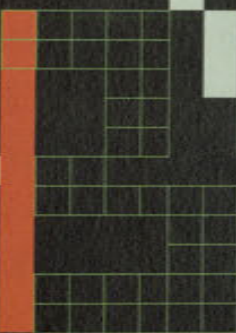
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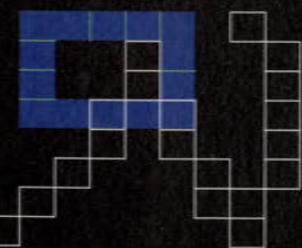
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CONVERSATION FRAGMENTS

Euan Witcombe
in conversation with
Ant Beltrán

Euan Witcombe in conversation with Ant Beltrán

Ant Beltrán

In the open call I ask, "how do you want to be represented in the spaces you inhabit?" Do you see your work as a form of representation or is it more about representing a state of non-representation or alienation?

Euan Witcombe

I think it was all about representing internal struggles with the environment. The way environments make me feel penned in. I come from a very rural area of the UK, so things like dressing the way I like to dress open you up to acts of violence. I was in these transient spaces where I felt like I couldn't dress or experience things the way I wanted to because of my environment. I feel disconnected from the spaces that I inhabit because I cannot be who I want to be within them. That's why I use distorted figures a lot. It's that fracture of identity.

The way I describe this piece in my thesis was like a panopticon. I saw environments through the lens that the fear <https://www.cidianwang.com/images/appqr.png> of being watched forces you to conform. I think a lot about John Szarkowski's Mirrors and Windows, art exists as either a window into the artist or a mirror to society/environment. I think of this approach to art as a spectrum. Dislocate was intended to fit somewhere in the intersection between these concepts, acting as a window into my personal disconnect with environment, and a reflection of how environments exacerbate internal struggles with gender.

AB

I picture it as a visual representation of that space you feel pushed to by external gaze and judgement. Would you agree?

EW

Yeah, absolutely, by your environment or by the immediate threat or the very real threat of there being a danger because of the way that you're presenting. I often feel like the spaces and environments I inhabit are at odds with my personal and creative expression. Gaze can act like informal social control.

AB

I noticed you employ the distorted human figure in your works, Dislocate and Morph. Is this motif something that is intentionally present throughout your practice?

EW

The distorted human form is a central theme in a lot of my work, deliberately achieved through the disruption of process. Which I believe mirrors the distorted figure. I think it's integral to the ways in which I've chosen to work. My chosen methods of working always revolve around distorting something. It's a disruption in the practice. Everything I produce, while maybe I intentionally try to look outwards, is always a reflection of my inner being. That is why I've chosen this route of diffusing and disrupting these techniques, because it is how I feel a lot of the time, disrupted.



Euan Witcombe, Dislocate, 3D Depth Scan, 2024.

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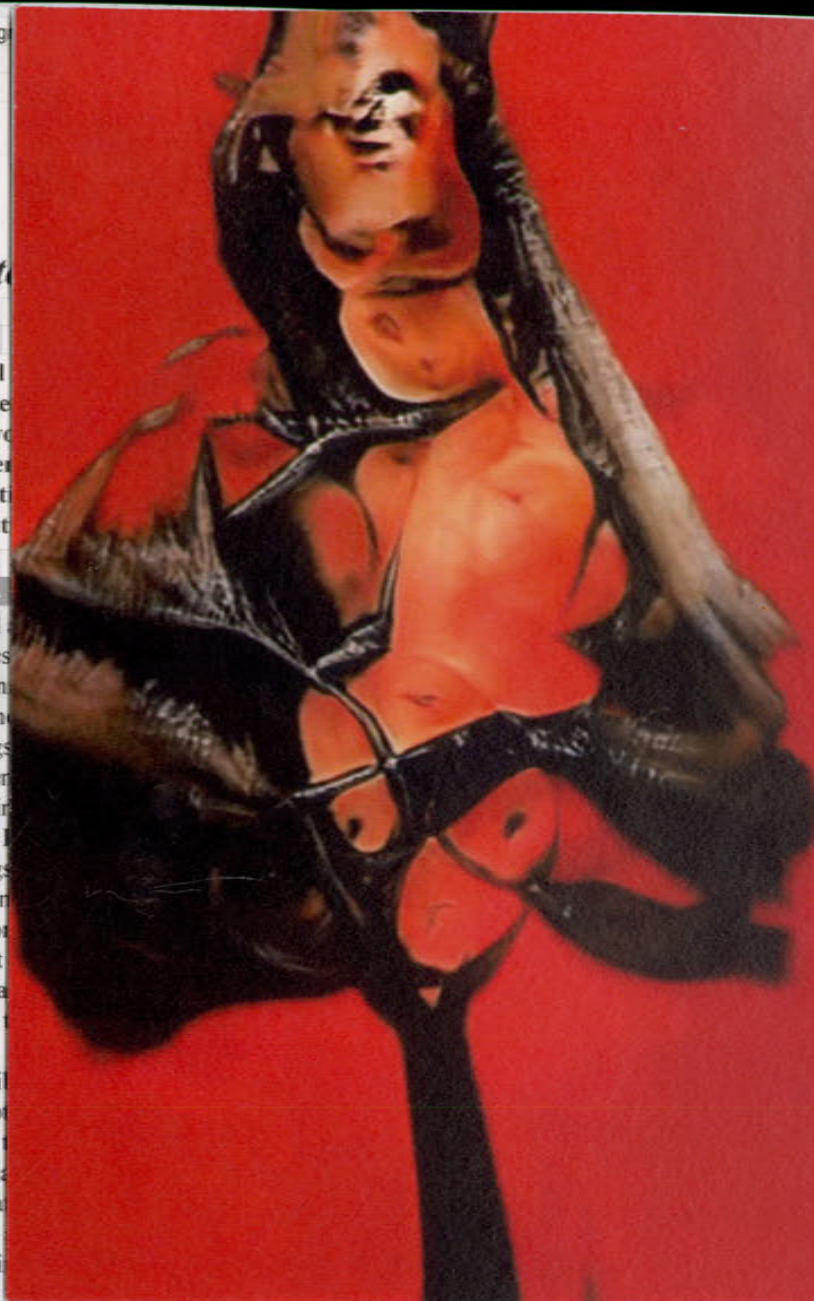
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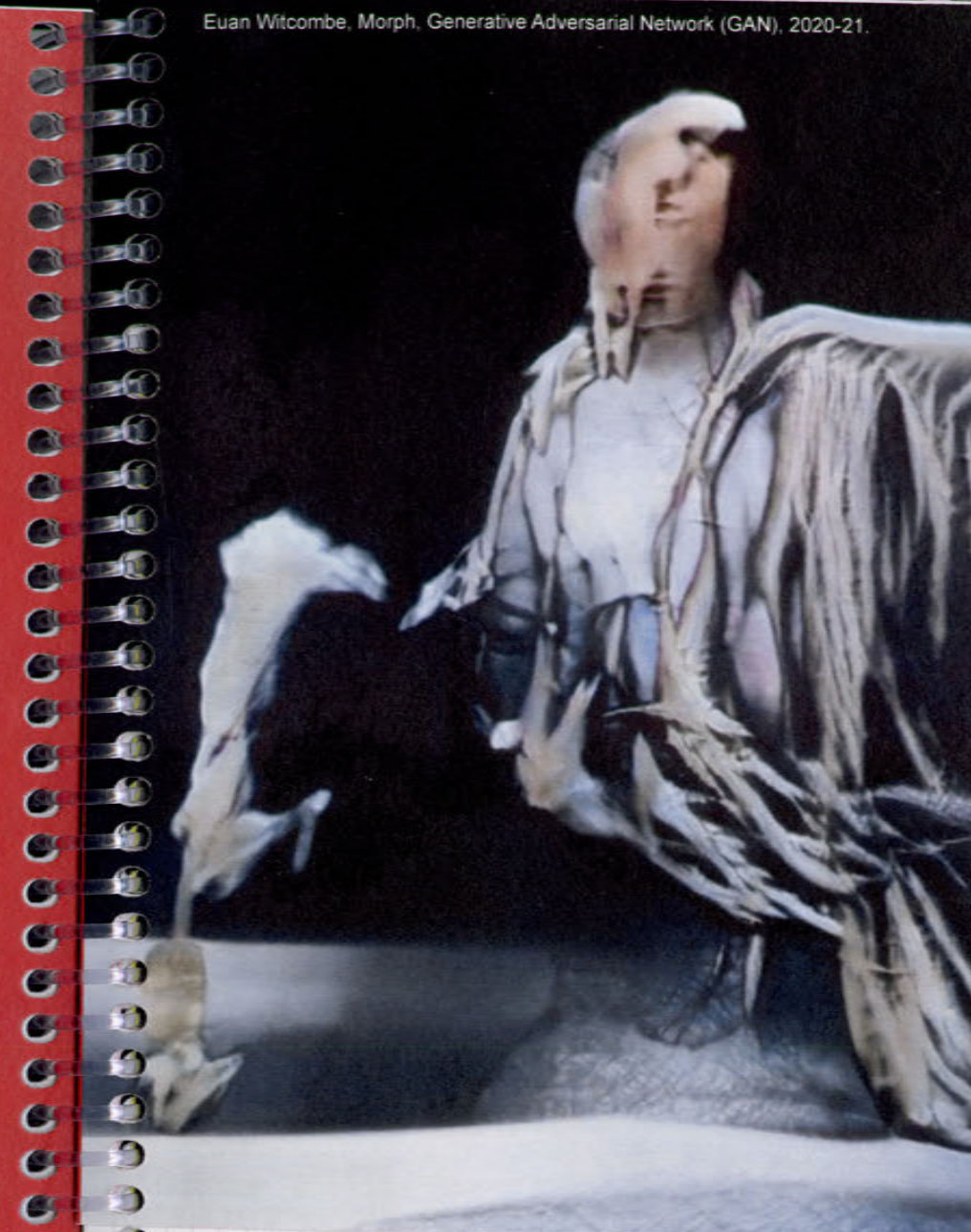
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Euan Witcombe, *Morph*, Generative Adversarial Network (GAN), 2020-21.



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Euan Witcombe × Ant Beltrán

AB

I'm really interested in the way you disrupt 'pristine' machine reproduction. Do you see this process as a way of subverting the technological process, or is it more of a "how far can I push its limits," "how can I find the holes within this process" approach?

EW

It's exactly that. It's finding the holes. A lot of these technologies are used to make imagery that's technically perfect but I'm more interested in the process. I think that is the subversion. You subvert that by finding the holes. You've got to push it to its extreme to do that. I think it's all a subversion of what's expected from these technologies.

AB

You mentioned earlier how your practice reflects your internal emotions. Do you feel like by subverting technology you are then also subverting the physical, the tangible, the immediate environment through your art?

EW

Yeah, that's a tricky one.

AB

Let me clarify, rather than subverting yourself, is it more of a reclamation of your identity through the process of subverting the machine?

EW

Yeah, I think so. Subversion is something internal, like that fracture. And I think by putting it out there, you kind of, you do reclaim it a bit. It is therapeutic to kind of say these things through imagery. If it goes over some people's heads and they don't understand, that's another form of safety. That is part of Dislocate, I think. That idea of armor. Of performing a certain way in certain locations.

AB

I personally find Dislocate aesthetically beautiful. Do you consider the aesthetic quality when creating your work? Is it a prerequisite in your practice?

EW

I personally really enjoy the aesthetic qualities of it, but they were always second to the process. I remember when we showed it at my master's showcase, my granddad came, bless him, and he had no clue what he was looking at. I remember all he said was, "Oh, I can't wait to one day see you take actual pictures". Some people may look at my work and dismiss it because it doesn't carry the formal properties that people consider beautiful in a photograph.

AB

So the title of the exhibition proposal, "Public Palimpsest." When you create these distortions by overriding the 3D scanning process, do you see yourself operating under the conceptual parameters of a palimpsest?

EW

I think that whole process that I've done in Morph, and another AI project I made around the link between fashion imagery and pornography, it was very similar where I made the dataset and put the images through it, but this time, I would stop the data set and train it on its own images, making a new dataset out of its own output. I kept doing that until I got these twisted, barely recognizable figures. I think that process is very similar to exactly what you're talking about, this idea of rewriting, and writing over and over again, inherently in digital work, digital work sometimes does write over what has come before.

AB

I'm interested in how digitality or the digital realm can create disruptions even if it's not in the physical space. Do you think there is a potential?

EW

You have to be intentional about finding things in the digital realm. Finding public spaces that fit you, though, is much harder than it is digitally. The forms in Dislocate can't exist as they appear digitally. But digitally, they can. These are intentional disruptions to form. Online, the barrier for entry is much lower.

AB

And with Dislocate, do you see it existing in the physical realm?

EW

Absolutely, in some form. Taking these environments that I've had to create digitally and then throwing them out into the real world. I've rendered them all in 16k or something, so they can be blown up to insane sizes. That's how I want them to be seen. Like big, almost impositions. I feel imposed upon by my environment, so I kind of want to position them as a pushback. I've actually bought myself a projector so I can go out and I can throw them up onto actual buildings, maybe I'll go straight to the Tate and throw it off on the side of the building or something.

Euan Witcombe is a London-based British photographer and visual artist, and an MA Fashion Photography graduate from London College of Fashion. Witcombe's ethos explores fashion, gender, and the form of the human body through the use of non-traditional photographic technologies, such as 3D scanning. Their process involves creating disruptions, and exploiting flaws within the image-making process, leading to distorted and disrupted representations of human form so frequently found within their work.

euanwitcombe.com

Ant Beltrán is an interdisciplinary curator, art historian, and researcher specializing in collaborative projects that bridge historical archives with contemporary artistic practice and sociopolitical discourse. Their practice is grounded in feminist, queer, and decolonial discourse.

@antoniceys | antbeltran.com

Curatorial Afterword: On Generative Failure and the Queer Image

Text by Ant Beltrán

This conversation took place on 28 July 2025 at Gallery Café in Bethnal Green, London. Euan Witcombe and I were initially connected through an open call I put out early March 2025 for an exhibition proposal, "Public Palimpsests"¹, to which they submitted their work, *Dislocate* (2024).

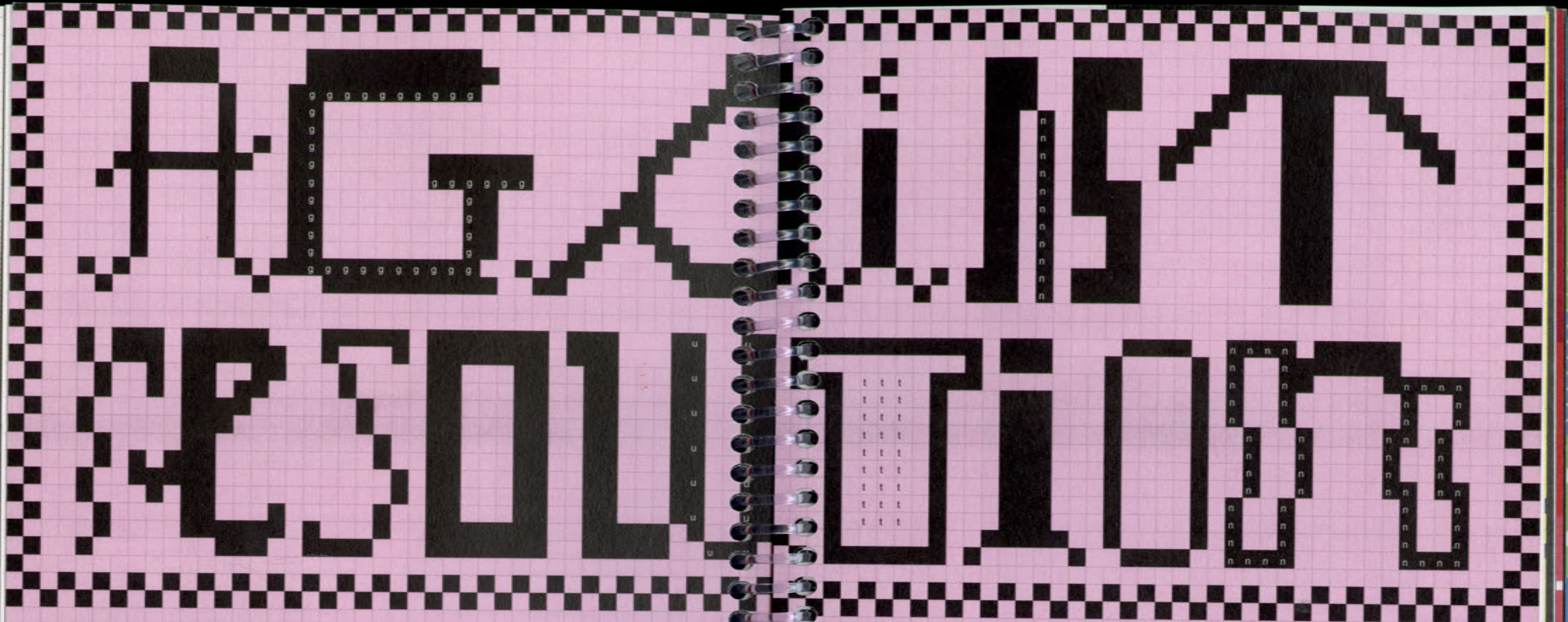
In theory, "Public Palimpsests" was a dissertation in the form of a curatorial project for my MA in Culture, Criticism, and Curation program. In reality, a lack of access to funding, exhibiting spaces, and any tangible opportunities for the production of independent projects on behalf of my program meant the project, myself, and the artists involved faced a four month long stall. This period of failure, of waiting, is what ultimately created a space for conversation.

My invitation to Witcombe had been framed as a way to explore how our modes of operating and understanding overlapped or diverged, using conversation as a co-curatorial methodology, a way of co-creating. But with the exhibition itself in limbo, and thanks to Witcombe's generous willingness to meet regardless, our chat shed that formal weight. What emerged instead, over coffee sips and vape inhales, was a genuine convergence of thinking, a mutual understanding of each other's practice, and a shared expansion of meaning, proving that failing and unmaking can, as Jack Halberstam writes in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), "offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world." Through this conversation, the stalled fate of my initial exhibition proposal and Witcombe's powerfully personal,

¹Palimpsests typically refers to manuscripts on which new writing is superimposed over scraped, older text. I first began thinking with this term through Marina M. Álvarez's 2022 article on feminist graffiti in Mexico ("Monumentality and Anticolonial Resistance: Feminist Graffiti in Mexico"), where she describes how layers of feminist graffiti on state monuments create a palimpsest as they write over colonial and patriarchal symbols while simultaneously documenting erased histories and mobilising resistance in civic spaces. I use the term here to think about public disruption and protest: how acts of civil disobedience, subversive art, and everyday interventions by civilians, activists, and artists can "rewrite" public space: reordering, effacing, and breaking down outdated structures and dominant narratives.

subversive work came to overlap with the very themes UQ's #VALUE! ultimately set out to explore. This feature is what organically emerged from that encounter.

Witcombe's approach to machinic and technical subversion within photographic and digital reproduction sits at the heart of this edition's concern with failure, subversion, and value. For those who equate "professional" image-making with clean, seamless, representational accuracy, their process can look like error, a failure to reproduce the reality that the camera or software was built to capture. Yet it is precisely this risk of failure, this willingness to break the rules of professional order and structure, that allows Witcombe's work to attend to queer experience: fragmentation, blur, glitch, the sense of not quite fitting the formats through which the socialised body is meant to appear. What might be read as failed representation from within dominant visual regimes becomes, instead, a subversive form of value. A way of insisting on lives and feelings that exceed what normative structures are built to show. This note is not intended to fix a single reading, but to situate why Witcombe's work, and this conversation, feel vital within this edition.



Coding encourages a polished, high-resolution output. Creating low fidelity or mimicking

labour-intensive, imperfect processes raises critical questions

about the software's default processes.

Text by Neyomi Parikh

What does the deliberate introduction of lo-fi elements reveal about the materiality of design?

How can textures, movements or errors be created within a binary digital space?

What becomes possible when we stop asking for resolution and start listening to the cracks?

With this project, I wanted to shake the conventional role of coding by transforming images into something unrecognisable, unpolished and intentionally inefficient, reminiscent of low quality art. Coding is often associated with optimisation and finesse, yet I seek to invert these expectations, using it as a means of distorting images until they break. This experiment moves in-between the very strict binary logic behind code, which results in a series of experimental compositions that embrace failure and reject digital precision.

When the digital world is arguably governed by efficiency, I ask, "Can we code towards decay rather than precision? Will the image still be as revered?"

I begin with familiar works so firmly established in our collective memory that they no longer need an introduction. These are images that have transcended time, that have survived centuries, preserved and archived into cultural permanence. I take these very images, so celebrated, and subject them to a process that unsettles and fractures them.

The Mona Lisa does not smirk; she falters. She flickers and vanishes from time to time. These works, once untouchable, become malleable.

Raymond Queneau's *Exercises in Style* (1947) provides an example of such refusal of finality in his 99 retellings of a mundane episode; he demonstrates the flexibility of narratives through continuous recomposition.

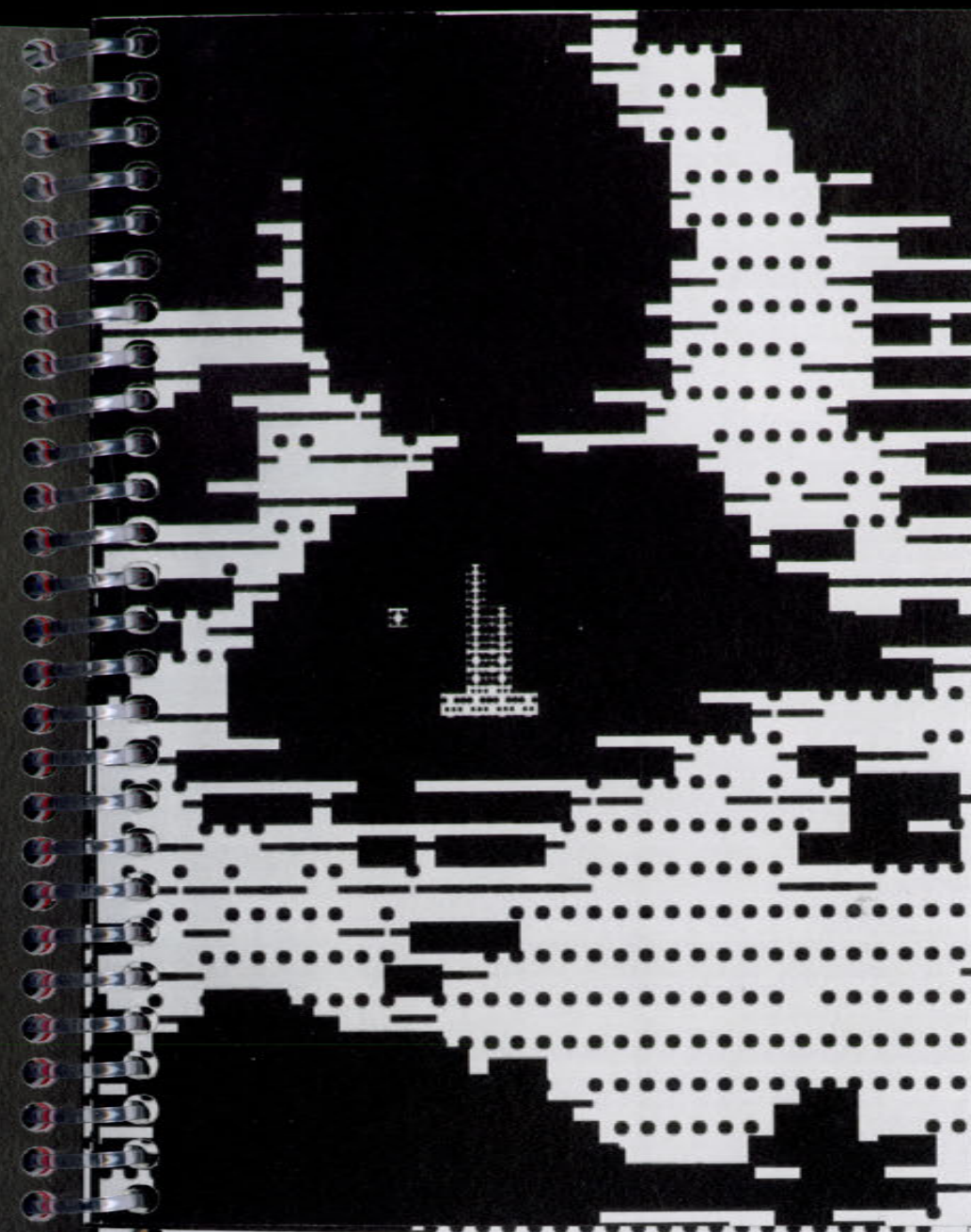
Each variant removes assumptions about form, exposing the artificiality of a "correct" version.

It's a thorough study of how variation alters perception and in a similar vein, my project explores the instability of images when subjected to an iterative process which results in more than one outcome, each different from the other. This idea resists an "ideal" output, opting instead for an attempt at an image, an endless, generative deferral of meaning.

I also lean into a different kind of urgency. Hito Steyerl's *In Defence of the Poor Image* (2009) reclaims the degraded, low-resolution and endlessly copied image as a site of resistance. It's an image of survival, in contrast to high-definition, high-value images that remain clean and controlled, this one circulates in loss and in its very brokenness, resists the smooth mechanism of capitalism.

Coding is typically formal in its nature: it demands precision. Its language is unforgiving, syntax must align and functions must resolve. If it's a tool used to create powerful visuals, high-tech aesthetics and computationally detailed images, then subverting it becomes an act of resistance. If professionalism demands optimisation, efficiency and smooth outcomes, then my refusal of these qualities becomes unprofessional by design. The broken, the degraded, the faltering image is not evidence of incompetence, but of resistance. It is a conscious hijacking of the systems that demand clarity, speed and control. We live in an era of media exhaustion where economic acceleration demands ever-increasing resolution, processing power and excess.

There is a sense of rationality in slowness and the aesthetic of the broken.

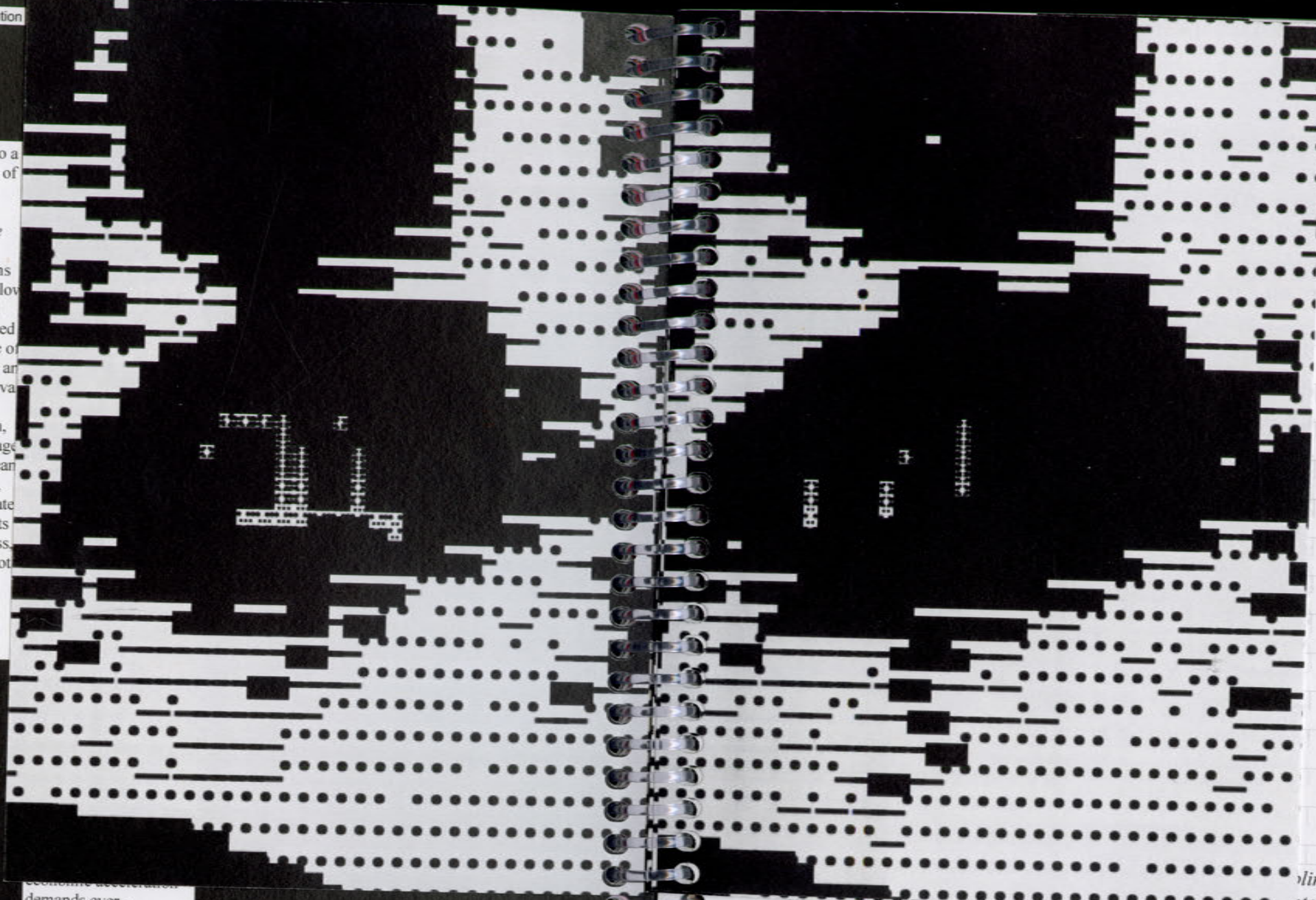


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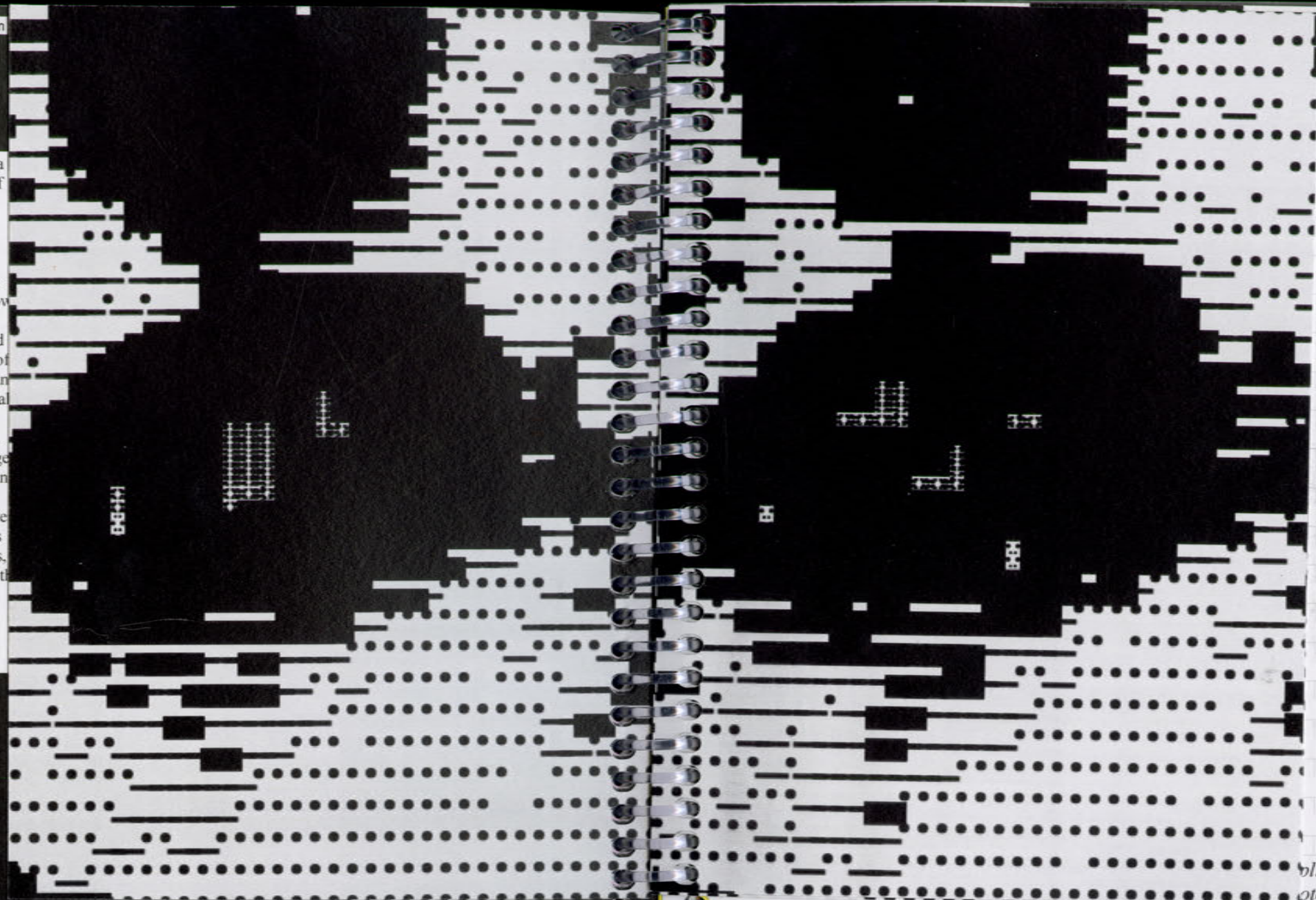


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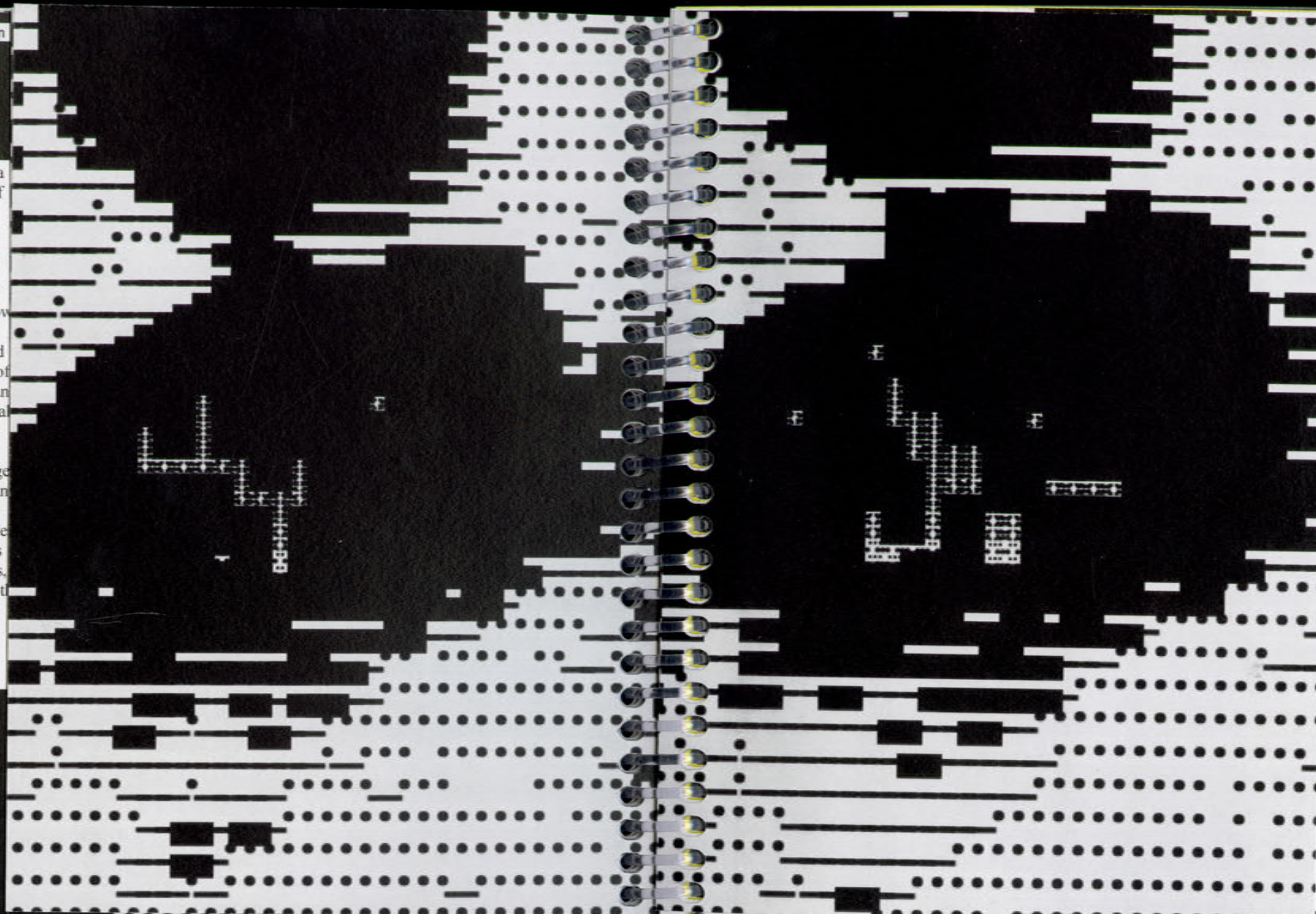
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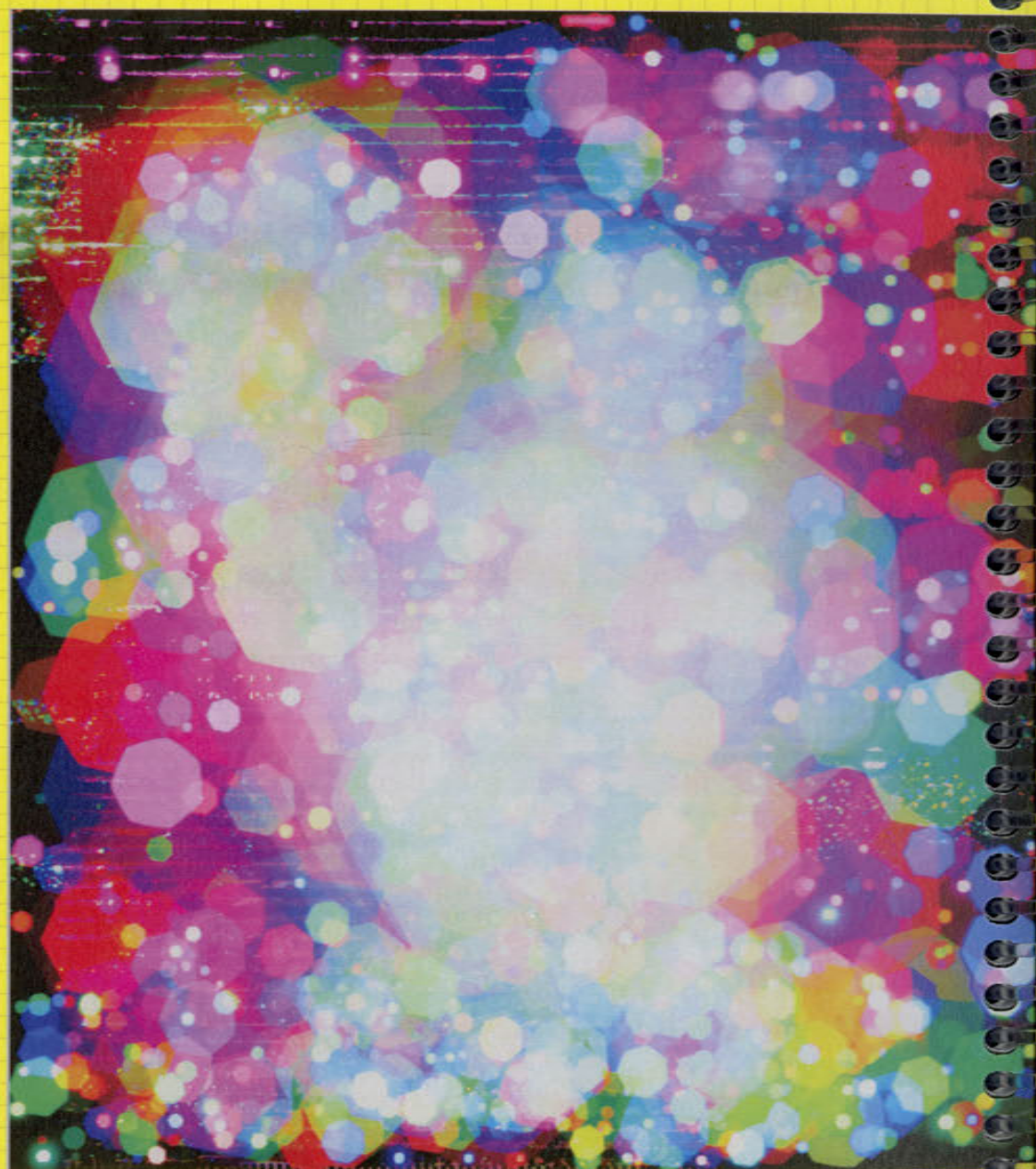
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There is a sense of rationality in slowness and the aesthetic of the broken.

This is why failure feels necessary now. Because failure disrupts the narrative: that progress must always mean refinement, that professionalism must always mean control. By refusing to resolve, these images create space for another kind of aesthetic. One anchored in ambiguity rather than clarity.

So perhaps the question is not: is the image still revered? But rather, what new reverence can we find in the broken? What unexpected beauty in the failed? What freedom in the unprofessional?

Neyomi Parikh I am a multidisciplinary visual designer. My practice is rooted in the exploration of in between spaces where disciplinary boundaries, identities and visual paradigms intersect to produce alternative modes of seeing and understanding. It is in these thresholds that I explore design as a generative tool, one that resists fixed narratives, binary thinking or finality. Informed by social justice and critical inquiry, my work seeks to unsettle established systems and open up new, more expansive possibilities of communication.



Computer
Language
Tutorial

Text by Oliver Evans

There is a threshold at which the body reveals itself: an involuntary twitch, a sudden shudder, a yawn that leaves your legs trembling.

These are not gestures of intention, but interruptions, reminders that we are tenants of flesh, inhabiting forms that sometimes move beyond our consent. In these brief flashes, we are confronted by the strange intimacy of living inside ourselves, acutely aware that consciousness is never fully sovereign over muscle and bone. Our bodies remind us that we are not just minds, but living matter, existing within the fragile boundaries of skin and muscle.

In the act of creation, I encounter a parallel limit in the machine. My computer, burdened by computational intensity, begins to falter. Fans whirl into panic, pixels fracture, code stutters. The system, like the body, signals its limits through error and glitch, a choreography of breakdown that resists optimisation. There is a moment when both artist and apparatus become aware of their thresholds, when effort transforms into tremor. Yet, like the body's involuntary movements, these digital misfires reveal something essential: the machine's own kind of exhaustion, its materiality asserting itself against the abstract logic of code.

*There is a moment
when both artist and
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thresholds*

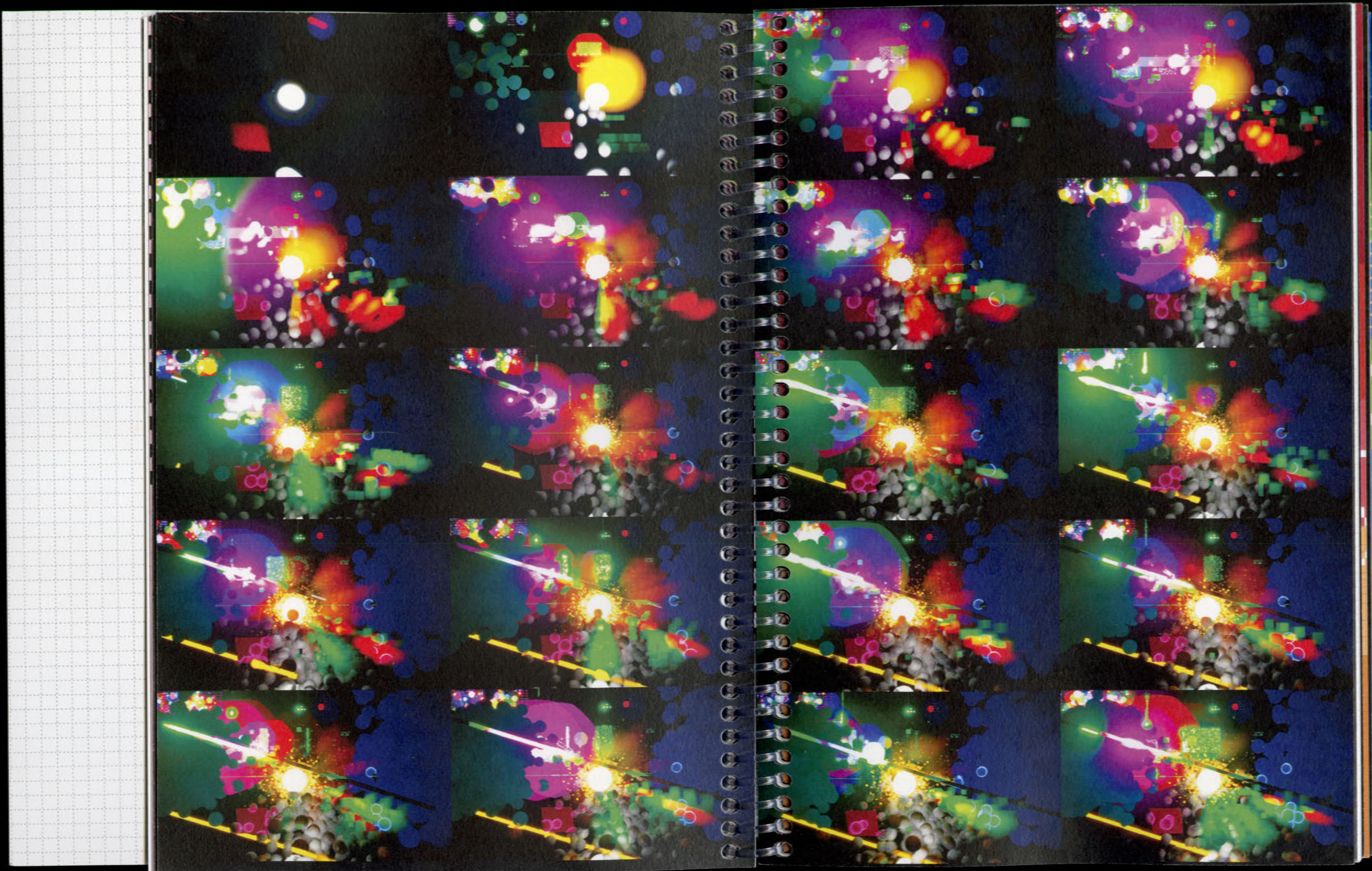
We are taught to seek seamlessness, to render process invisible, to hide the seams where intention unravels. Yet it is precisely in these moments of collapse, when bodies spasm and machines glitch, that something vital surfaces. Exhaustion becomes an aperture. Glitches, whether muscular or mechanical, like shivers, are not failures but disclosures: evidence of the hidden negotiations between will and matter, desire and fatigue.

In both cases, exhaustion becomes generative as glitches and twitches disrupt the smooth flow of intention, making space for surprise, a beauty born from limitation, and making us aware of the boundaries and possibilities of our respective vessels.

I ask myself, what does it mean to create in a state of mutual depletion, to work alongside the unruly rhythms of muscle and motherboard, each capable of surprise, each insisting on their own forms of resistance? Perhaps true inspiration arises not from seamless control, but from embracing these ruptures as the very spaces where light breaks through and the new takes shape, moments when the imperfect synchrony of exhaustion gives rise to unexpected beauty.



Oliver Evans is an artist and creative technologist exploring the outer edges of technology's physical and conceptual boundaries. With a background in AI research, Evans's practice is grounded in philosophy and media theory, probing the extremes of ideas and systems. Working within a space of error, they embrace deliberate rupture as a generative force, envisioning mistakes and breakdowns as sites for newness and innovation.



Michael Mui and Albert Ng in
conversation with Wonjoo Gu

WHEN WE DOVETAIL PERFECTION NEEDS THE

This part of the publication explores the themes of failure and unprofessionalism to shed light on emotions and narratives that exist outside socially defined standards of success. These ideas are often seen as signs of weakness or deviation, yet they also open spaces for sincerity, tenderness and a refusal to perform perfection.

For me, unprofessionalism is not simply a lack of discipline or skill. It is a gesture that resists the pressure to appear complete. It is an act or a style that intentionally or unintentionally challenges institutional expectations. Instead of hiding flaws, unprofessionalism and failure can become aesthetic strategies that reveal the truth of memory, vulnerability and loss.

My interest in these ideas began when I started to notice my own sense of loneliness, especially while moving between Seoul and London. What began as a reflection on distance, slowly became a way to understand how emotions exist between the private and the public. Following Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), I came to see that loneliness and longing are not only personal feelings but also relational ones, shaped by the conditions of belonging and displacement.

In this context, I began conversations with two artists, Michael Mui and Albert Ng, whose works approach the experience of loneliness in different ways. Through our dialogue, I wanted to explore how emotional exposure, whether through sound, image or language, could reshape the boundaries of what is considered professional.

Their reflections on home, distance and vulnerability helped me recognise how unprofessionalism can also mean honesty. It can be a way of staying true to emotional reality instead of performing control or success. Through their stories, I found a shared language that connects loneliness with care and sincerity.

The following conversations with Michael Mui and Albert Ng unfold around the idea of emotional failure. Each of them carries their own story of movement and memory, shaped by their transition from Hong Kong to London. In our discussions, loneliness was not treated as something to be overcome but as a space to pause and feel. Their voices reveal how homesickness, longing and tenderness can become creative forces, quietly challenging what it means to be professional or successful.

MICHAEL MUI

ALBERT NG



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SNIPPETS

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SNIPPETS

Travelling on the Night Tube,
Thinking about Iced Lemon Tea,
Less Sugar

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In this context, I borrow from two artists, Michael Snow and Bill Viola, whose works approach loneliness in different ways. In dialogue, I wanted to explore emotional exposure through sound, image or language, and the boundaries of the professional.

Their reflections on vulnerability helped me to explore unprofessionalism. It can be a way of seeing reality instead of pursuing success. Through this, I found a shared language of loneliness with can-



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SNIPPETS

In the Raw Wind of the New World

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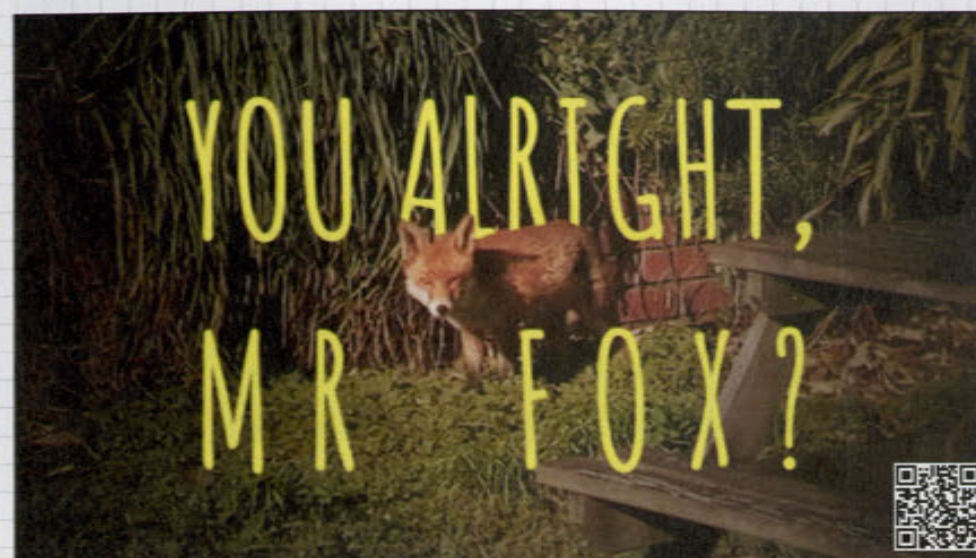
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You Alright, Mr Fox?



Still from Michael Mui's *You Alright, Mr Fox?*, 2024

The film is about a fox, a boy, and his traumas in the past.

You Alright, Mr Fox? (2024) is an experimental documentary that chronicles the director's journey of moving to a new home in a foreign country following a traumatic event. The film juxtaposes footage shot in 2024 with footage filmed by the director's parents during a two-week trip to London in 2004. And the contrast is a powerful tool for the director to reflect on childhood trauma and the lasting impact it has on their ability to cope with uncertainty and loneliness as an adult.

As the director waits for a wounded fox to return to their garden, memories and emotions flood back, leading him to reconsider past relationships and the sense of isolation that comes with living alone abroad. Filmed over nine months, the documentary not only serves as a visual record of this personal experience but also as a therapeutic process of confronting and processing past mistakes and emotional pain.

Travelling on the Night Tube, Thinking about Iced Lemon Tea, Less Sugar



Still from Michael Mui's *Travelling on the Night Tube, Thinking about Iced Lemon Tea, Less Sugar*, 2025

Travelling on the Night Tube, Thinking about Iced Lemon Tea, Less Sugar (2025) is a fictional short film directed by Michael Mui. It begins with a simple craving for Iced Lemon Tea and gradually becomes a bittersweet journey about memory, distance, and homesickness.

On a quiet London night, a boy and a girl from Hong Kong meet by chance and travel together on the night tube. She says she is searching for iced lemon tea with less sugar. And he doesn't ask why.

As the train glides through the sleeping city, their conversation wanders between memories and losses. When they arrive at Heathrow Airport, there is only one question that remains:

"Where are we going next?"

Wonjoo Gu

Michael Mui in conversation with Wonjoo Gu

WONJOO GU

I'm really interested in how you think about failure within your practice. Do you see failure as a technical flaw, an emotional exposure, or perhaps a quiet form of resistance against what counts as "professional" filmmaking?

MICHAEL MUI

I think I am a filmmaker who is not 100% aiming for professional filmmaking. I see the commercial value of professional filmmaking, like using high-end cameras, beautiful lighting, beautiful sound recording, and lots of visual effects, all that. I think I understand the commercial value, but I'm not chasing it because I don't feel like it's something that I would like to do in my film. The most important thing for me is to express what I want to express. Like for my film, *Iced Lemon Tea*, I rarely use lighting. When we were filming it, we just went on the street to find a spot in the city that had sufficient lighting for the scene. These kinds of things, I think, are just sufficient to deliver the story. I won't say that it's a failure. I won't say that it's unprofessional. I just think that it is what it is..

WG

How do you understand unprofessionalism in your own practice? Do you see it as an obstacle, a method, or a kind of honesty?

MM

Professionalism in filmmaking is about the fineness of everything. The colour has to be very cinematic, the camera angle has to be very professional, the editing has to be on point, and the sound effect has to be perfect. I don't think that, as independent filmmakers, we are chasing these kinds of things. I think the only thing that we are chasing as independent filmmakers is to deliver what we want to express.

WG

Both of us may think differently about loneliness. For me, loneliness is not merely a feeling of isolation but an essential condition in the process of shaping one's sense of self. How would you personally define loneliness? Do you see it as an emotional state, a condition of displacement, or perhaps a creative necessity?

MM

I think it's helpful for me to understand more about myself, because when you feel lonely and you start to think about whether the people you know right now, the friends that you know right now, are truly people that care about you, then you will think about what is within you and what you want people to understand, what you want people to define you by. And that's why, in the process of finding people to understand you, it is actually the process of knowing more about yourself. In that case, I think feeling loneliness actually makes me understand more about myself. And I would say, it's a core element in my recent films.

WG

Through the themes of memory, loss, and vulnerability, what do you hope viewers feel or recognise in themselves when they encounter your films?

Do you imagine your loneliness meeting theirs in some way?

MM

Yeah, I feel like I hope the viewers will, if my definition of loneliness is not being able to find someone who can understand you, I hope the audience who is feeling lonely at that moment, after watching my film, will have a sense of "Oh, actually, someone understands me." That would be an achievement of my filmmaking career, to have someone feel that someone could understand, like knowing how they feel. And I actually got some feedback after the screening of *Iced Lemon Tea*.

The most memorable one was someone from Hong Kong. I think she is an accountant, working in the business sector, completely not art-related. She sent me a very long message after the screening of *Iced Lemon Tea*. She told me, "Oh, thank you for making this film, because I love iced lemon tea, and also it's very difficult to find the traditional iced lemon tea in London." And in her text, she said the film really touched her because she had the same feeling as well when she was living in London, not able to find the traditional Hong Kong food and Hong Kong drinks. So that's why she's very grateful that I made this film. After receiving the text, I felt like it was an achievement, and making the audience feel that they're not alone, like someone feels the same way as them, is a really great thing as a filmmaker to accomplish.

WG

Given the current state of the film industry, where audiences increasingly turn to streaming platforms rather than cinemas, how do you position your work within this shifting landscape? Does this change how you think about intimacy, scale, or connection in filmmaking?

MM

It's a kind of achievement as a filmmaker, showing your film in the cinema. Like "Wow, a rare opportunity!" the lead curator of the Hong Kong Film Festival UK told me that it's going to screen in a church in New Malden, because it is a place where a lot of Hong Kong people and Koreans live, and it is closer to the community. Then I was like, okay, cool. After a few days, I thought about it, and it actually makes sense, because the reason why I want to make films is to have more people connect with me, to deal with loneliness. Making a film about loneliness, and then showing it to people, and then people connect with you, and people understand you, resonates with people. That is the main intention, the main purpose of making a film. If you put it in a cinema in Central London, I think most of the audience will be artists and filmmakers. And yeah, maybe they are not my target audience. But if you do community screenings in places where a lot of Hong Kong people are living, a lot of immigrants, it encourages the people who left their own country to come to London to watch my film, which is a good thing. I feel like maybe in the 2020s, during this period of time, showing your film in different places other than a proper cinema is a new way of film screening. It's not necessary to show your film in the cinema, I think.

WG

You mentioned that working in Hong Kong felt limiting because of censorship and certain expectations within the film industry. I'm curious, do you see "professionalism" as something that's institutionally imposed rather than personally defined?

In other words, when professionalism becomes a system of control, like political, commercial, or aesthetic, how do you navigate or resist it through your filmmaking?

MM

I was the director of one of the most famous documentary series in Hong Kong called *Sunday Reports*. At the end of 2019 or the beginning of 2020, we were making a documentary about people having mental issues because of the political movement in Hong Kong. There were many families arguing with each other because their friends and family were not on the same political stance. These situations were very common. The parents were all pro-government, and teenagers and people in their 30s were mostly against the government and fighting for freedom. During that period, there were a lot of arguments within family units. We were working on the documentary to explore these issues. We tried to make it not political; we just wanted to focus on mental health issues. But two or three days before the launch of the documentary, the producer stopped us from working on it because it was too sensitive, and we cut half of the documentary. This is an example of how censorship in Hong Kong hinders the development and making of documentaries. As a documentary filmmaker, I didn't feel comfortable continuing to work in Hong Kong because of the censorship. I feel that London is a place where I can continue practising documentary filmmaking without too much censorship.

WG

I'm not very familiar with UK politics or documentaries. How do you find the freedom to express yourself here, especially within the rules of the UK?

MM

I think definitely more freely, but of course, there must be restrictions. There are a lot of protests happening in London, and some protesters were arrested due to their political stance. So, of course, there are restrictions in the UK as well. But compared with the restriction and censorship in Hong Kong, I don't think it's at the same level. Freedom of speech is something that we always need to fight for, and we always need to work for as creative industry people. Comparatively, I think we have a bit more freedom in the UK when we create arts and films.

WG

Is there anything you want to share?

MM

I also want to share a story that happened earlier this year. There was a Hong Kong artist called Rachel. She made an exhibition in South London, and the reason she chose a small gallery in South London to do her exhibition, rather than any gallery or exhibition space in Central London, was that she wanted to be closer to the community. I don't think I fully understand the word professionalism, but I would think that maybe a professional curator or professional artist would aim for a prestigious exhibition space, whereas others would decide to put it in a space closer to the community, somewhere that would attract people living there, including immigrants who don't always have the time and opportunity to go to Central London to visit exhibitions and watch films. This is what she was targeting. I found it quite thought-provoking, and this is my opinion about professionalism in art.

In the Raw Wind of the New World

In the Raw Wind of the New World is a photographic exploration born from the artist's feelings of turbulence in a long-distance relationship between London and Hong Kong, delving into the ephemeral nature of memory within our digital realm. Over the course of a year, as distance dictated the contours of love, images emerged as pivotal communicative tools. Yet, the absence of the beloved in images became an ever-present echo. Images, communication, and traversing time zones entwine the past with the present, gently transforming lived moments into cherished memories that reveal love's inherent fragility and vulnerability.

This series is cultivated from a trove of personal images from the remnants of the artist's archive with his past lover. Through the transformation of photographs — via tearing, cutting, and folding — artists bestow upon them traces as proof of presence. These altered fragments are reconstituted into collages that dwell in the interstices of clarity and obscurity, merging the abstract with the tangible, and intertwining the past with the now. Prioritising tactile resonance over visual precision on a plain canvas, these new images symbolise the inexorable gulf between the digital facade and the corporeal world.

This series probes for a deeper comprehension of memory and distance that meanders through the elusive demarcation of the digital and the actual. This series offers a novel lens on perception, an invitation to view the digital age through a mosaic of emotion and time.



Photograph from Albert Ng's series
In the Raw Wind of the New World, 2023

Albert Ng in conversation with Wonjoo Gu

WONJOO GU

Your work suggests a lingering attachment to a past lover, a sense of being trapped in the past. Do you relate to this? Which do you find more significant in your life, the past, present, or future?

ALBERT NG

I wouldn't say I am trapped in the past. My work is more about addressing the past in relation to the present and future. The past is fixed, time has already passed, but when we look back, the way we grow and reinterpret those experiences transforms the past into something more than an ending. It becomes a flow that continues to shape our future.

That said, I used to feel strongly drawn to the idea of being trapped in the past, especially when I was younger. There were things I had done that felt irreversible, and for a long time, they haunted me. But through making this work and reconnecting with the materials, I've found a sense of relief. The act of constructing the work gives those memories a place to exist in that world, but not as a place where I need to remain. They belong to the work, while my life needs to move forward.

As the Diamond Sutra says, "Neither the past, the present, nor the future mind can be found." The past was once a future, and the future will one day be a past. So why not focus on the present? It's not easy, but I am still learning.

WG

If you do feel bound by the past, do you believe growth is still possible? Are you open to future relationships, or do you feel unready? Is this a comfortable state or something you wish to change?

AN

Maybe we are never fully ready, there is only the moment when timing aligns. But what I can say with certainty is that when the time comes, I will be a better person for a future relationship.

WG

What guided your choice to tear, cut, or fold imagery of your former partner? What emotions surfaced during that process, and do those emotions still feel unresolved?

AN

At first, my decision to tear or cut the images was practical. I didn't want to show her face out of respect for her privacy. But when I shifted my focus away from her direct presence, I began to notice how even the smallest details, her hair, the places we shared, the sunlight, or the shadows, carried a strong sense of her. That realisation led me to cut and tear, leaving behind these surrounding traces. Since many of the photos were taken during a long-distance relationship, I also realised that most of them lacked the presence of either of us. By altering the images, I wanted to leave my own trace upon them.

In the process, I discovered that those fragments told me stories about her that I had never noticed before. Surprisingly, many of the emotions that surfaced were positive, even hopeful. Not hopeful in the sense of wanting to go back together, but hopeful because I could see the joy and love that once existed between us. To me, at least, we were supporting and caring for each other. That recognition feels like a gentle closure, and I truly hope she is living a good life.

WG

Looking back, what aspects of the relationship felt unfulfilling or led to its end? Did these relate to societal norms around relationships? If you challenged those norms, how did it affect your partner and you emotionally?

AN

I think we were simply too young to handle complicated issues, especially the traumas rooted in our families of origin. Those wounds often stood in the way of our communication. Looking back, I wish both of us had been braver.

WG

Do you see your photography as pushing against traditional norms? If so, which conventions are you rejecting, and why?

AN

I do believe my photography pushes against traditional norms. In this post-social media era, photography is no longer just about technique or even content, but it's also not entirely about context. What interests me is how images can be reconfigured to create new meaning. That's why, in my work, I often hide or remove large amounts of information from the original photographs. Yet by rearranging them within a different context, they can still hold power.

WG

Compared to your earlier work, *In the Raw Wind of the New World* feels shaped by the digital age. How has this shift influenced your themes or aesthetics?

AN

The most significant shift has been in perspective. In my earlier work, I thought like a photographer, asking myself what to capture and how to frame it. But with *In the Raw Wind of the New World*, I find myself standing on the other side as a receiver. I am drawn less to the act of taking images and more to the act of reading them, the fragments, the traces, the endless flow of visuals that surround us in the digital age. This shift feels like listening rather than speaking, allowing the images to reveal their own stories instead of imposing mine upon them.

To Miss Home Professionally

Text by Wonjoo Gu

I moved from Seoul to London in 2022, and it has been almost three years, a period that feels both short and long. Reflecting on my time here, I noticed something curious. In Seoul, I have many friends and lived with my family, so loneliness should have been impossible. Yet I often felt lonely and melancholy. In London, surrounded by a new culture, environment and experiences, I found a sense of freedom, and loneliness rarely took hold. Occasionally, I do feel the loneliness of being a foreigner, but even that can feel exhilarating. Unlike Seoul, this loneliness does not feel like a lack. I felt lonelier in Seoul and freer in London. It was this contrast that first made me start thinking about my experiences in a more reflective way, which eventually led me to write my MA research in Culture, Criticism and Curation at Central Saint Martins.

Looking back on why I felt so lonely in Seoul, I think it connects to why I left for London. Social pressure, the gaze of others and the fast pace of city life made me long for space and quiet. During a week-long visit to London in 2019, I first realised that even as a temporary visitor, I could escape the constant scrutiny of others and feel a freedom I had not known before.

나는 2022년 서울에서 런던으로 왔다. 어느새 3년이 되어간다. 짧은 듯 길고, 긴 듯 짧은 시간이었다. 이곳에서의 삶을 돌아보며 문득 흥미로운 점을 발견했다. 서울에서는 친구도 많고 가족과 함께 살았기 때문에 외로움 이유가 없었지만, 나는 종종 설명하기 어려운 외로움과 우울을 느끼곤 했다. 반면, 낯선 문화와 환경, 새로운 경험 속에 던져진 런던에서는 오히려 자유를 경험했다. 외국인으로서 외로움이 가끔 찾아오지만, 그 감정마저도 때로는 묘하게 짜릿하게 느껴진다. 서울에서의 외로움이 '부족함'이었다면, 런던에서의 외로움은 나를 옥죄지 않는다. 나는 서울에서 더 외로웠고, 런던에서 더 자유로웠다. 이 대비를 곱씹으면서 자연스럽게 내 경험을 더 깊이 들여다보게 되었고, 그 성찰이 결국 Central Saint Martins에서의 MA Culture, Criticism and Curation 석사 연구로 이어지게 되었다.

서울에서 왜 그렇게 외로웠는지를 생각해 보면, 그것은 내가 런던으로 떠난 이유와 닿아 있다. 사회적 압박, 타인의 시선, 거칠게 흘러가는 도시의 속도가 나에게 숨 막히는 감각이었다. 2019년, 일주일간 런던을 여행했을 때 나는 잠시 머무는 방문자였음에도 타인의 시선에서 벗어나 있을 수 있었고, 이전에는 느껴보지 못했던 자유가 오래 남았다.

Unlike the two artists I interview in this issue of UQ13, I do not translate my loneliness into artworks. Yet through the opportunity to write for Unknown Quantities, I am glad to share my experiences and feelings with readers. I hope many will recognise themselves in my story and find some comfort.

The two artists I interviewed are my closest friends in London. We share a sensitivity to loneliness, though in different ways. I learned that loneliness has many facets and cannot be fully captured by a single word.

Michael and Albert came from Hong Kong to London in the early 2020s, missing their families and former partners. I, however, moved from Seoul without longing for something specific. Occasionally, I feel lonely, but I have never been sure exactly why. I noticed that at night I often think of Korean food, and in those moments, the sounds, smells and familiar routines of eating become like a map that reminds me of home.

앞서 UQ13 인터뷰했던 두 아티스트와 달리 나는 외로움을 작품으로 옮기지는 않는다. 하지만 Unknown Quantities를 통해 내 경험과 감정을 글로 독자들과 나눌 수 있어 기쁘다. 누군가는 내 이야기 속에서 자신을 발견하고 조금은 위로받기를 바란다.

런던에서 가장 가까운 두 친구인 마이클과 알버트 역시 외로움에 민감한 사람들이지만, 느끼는 곁은 서로 달랐다. 그들을 통해 나는 외로움이 하나의 단어로써 결코 담아낼 수 없는 감정이라는 것을 깨달았다.

마이클과 알버트는 2020년대 초에 홍콩에서 런던으로 와 그들의 가족과 전 연인을 그리워한다. 반면 나는 서울에서 떠나왔지만, 특별히 한 사람을 떠올리며 그리워하는 것은 아니었다. 가끔 외롭지만 이유가 명확하지 않았다. 그러다 나는 어느 날 밤에 한국 음식을 생각한다는 사실을 알게 되었다. 그 순간의 소리, 냄새,

My feelings of loneliness, rooted in my private life, may appear unprofessional. Longing for home is personal and emotionally vulnerable. Is sharing such private feelings truly unprofessional? To show longing for Korean food in a professional profile is, by some standards, unprofessional. To do this, is to let the private leak into the public. According to Sara Ahmed in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), emotions are not private feelings contained within the self but social relations that connect us to others and to the world. Feeling longing for home is not simply missing a place. It exposes how one's sense of belonging is shaped by cultural and political structures. My loneliness is not isolated. It reveals my position as someone who has moved across geographies, languages and expectations.

익숙한 일상이 마치 지도처럼 펼쳐지며 나에게 '집'을 불러왔다.

이렇게 개인적인 나의 삶 속 외로운 감정은 종종 비전문적으로 보인다. 집을 그리워하는 마음은 사적인 것이고, 감정적으로 연약해 보일 수도 있다. 그렇다면 이런 감정을 드러내는 것이 정말 비전문적인가? 한국 음식을 그리워한다고 말하는 것이 어떤 기준에서는 공적인 곳의 글쓰기에 어울리지 않는다고 여겨질 수 있다. 하지만 Sara Ahmed가 *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*(2004)에서 말하듯, 감정은 결코 개인 내부에만 머무르는 것이 아니라 우리를 타인과 세계에 연결하는 사회적 관계이다. 집에 대한 '그리움'은 단순히 장소를 잃어버린 감정이 아니라, 우리가 어디에 속하고 있는지, 어떤 문화적, 정치적 구조 속에서 살아가는지를 드러낸다. 그래서 나의 외로움도 고립된 감정이 아니다. 그것은 내가 지리적, 언어적, 그리고 기대를 건 너온 사람이라는 사실을 보여준다.

Michael reflects on a similar tension between professionalism and personal expression in filmmaking. He says, "I'm not 100% aiming for professional filmmaking, it is what it is." He continues, "The one thing that we are chasing for as an independent filmmaker is to deliver what we want to express." Like Michael, I feel that professionalism often serves commercial or institutional agendas, whereas my goal is simply to convey the truth of my experience, my feelings of loneliness and the constellation of home, without polishing them to meet external expectations. He also emphasises that "feeling loneliness is actually making me understand more about myself, so it's quite necessary," showing how emotional exposure can be generative rather than simply painful. Similarly, my own encounters with longing and home have become essential to understanding myself and shaping my creative practice.

Furthermore, audience resonance matters. Michael hopes that viewers of his films will feel understood. "I hope the audience will have a sense of 'oh, actually someone understands me'." This reflects my own desire to connect through sharing emotions, showing that private feelings can form bridges between people rather than barriers.

To speak openly about missing home, about missing the taste of Korean food or the sound of a language, crosses a boundary between the personal and the public. Professionalism demands emotional control, a distance that aligns with reason and neutrality. Yet to admit vulnerability is to resist that demand, showing that emotion itself is a form of knowledge, a way of understanding how belonging and displacement are produced.

마이클은 그의 영화 제작에서 전문성과 개인적 표현 사이의 긴장을 이렇게 설명한다.

"나는 100% 프로페셔널한 영화 제작을 목표로 하지는 않아. 영화는 그냥 있는 그대로야."

그리고 이어 말한다. "독립 영화인으로 우리가 끝까지 좇는 것은 우리가 정말 표현하고 싶은 것을 전달하는 거야."

나 역시 전문성이 종종 제도나 상업의 기준을 반영한다는 점을 느끼며, 내 목표는 감정을 다듬지 않고, 외로움과 집의 감각을 있는 그대로 나누는 것이다. 마이클은 "외로움을 느끼는 건 나를 더 이해하게 한다. 그래서 꼭 필요한 과정이야"라고 말한다. 감정이 고통만이 아니라 생성과 이해의 공간이라는 의미다. 나 역시 집과 그리움의 감정이 나를 이해하고 내 작업을 이어가는 중요한 자리가 되었다.

또한, 관객과의 연결 역시 중요하다. 마이클은 그의 영화 관객에게 바란다.

"관객이 내 영화를 보며 '아, 누군가는 나를 이해하는구나'라고 느꼈으면 좋겠어."

이 바람은 나의 글쓰기에도 닮아 있다. 사적인 감정이 누군가에게 닿아 공감의 다리가 되는 것, 그것이 내가 글을 쓰는 이유이기도 하다.

집의 기억, 한국 음식의 맛, 언어를 그리워한다는 사실을 공개적으로 나누는 것은 분명 개인적인 것과 공적인 사이의 경계를 넘는 일이다. 전문성은 종종 감정을 절제하고 이성적 중립성의 거리를 유지하라고 요구한다. 하지만 취약함을 인정하는 일은 그 요구에 대한 작은 저항이기도 하다. 감정 자체가 지식의 한 형태이고, 소속감과 소외감이 어떻게 생성되는지 이해하는 방식임을 보여준다.

Albert's reflections on photography resonate with my approach. He notes that "photography is no longer just about technique or content, what interests me is how images can be reconfigured to create new meaning." This mirrors my expressions of loneliness and my feelings toward home. It is not about polished form but about fragments of lived experience that carry meaning. He further explains that his focus shifted "less to the act of taking images and more to the act of reading them, listening rather than speaking," which parallels my own way of experiencing and translating emotion into creative work.

To admit loneliness can also feel like admitting failure: failure to adapt, to perform, to appear whole. But perhaps failure is another word for honesty. In the spaces where I cannot be professional enough, I find the beginnings of something more genuine, a softer way of being, one that resists the performance of perfection.

알버트가 사진에 대해 말한 문장은 나의 글쓰기와도 닮아 있다.

"사진은 이제 단순히 기술이나 콘텐츠의 문제가 아니야. 이미지를 다시 묶고 새롭게 배치하면서 새로운 의미를 만드는 일이 더 중요해."

이는 내가 외로움과 집에 대한 감정을 표현하는 방식을 반영한다. 완벽한 형식보다 경험의 조각들이 더 깊은 의미를 만든다는 점에서 나에게도 크게 울린 말이다. 그는 사진을 "찍는 행위보다 읽는 행위에 가까워졌다. 말하기보다는 듣기에 가깝다"고 설명했는데, 이것은 나의 감정 경험과 창작 방식과도 닮아 있다.

My longing is not weakness. It is evidence of connection, a reminder that even the most private emotions are, as Ahmed writes, "the very material through which the social is lived." To confess this longing is to practice what I think of as anti-professionalism, a refusal to tidy up emotion, to polish it into something respectable. My emotions spill over into language, into taste, into the way I write. Ahmed reminds us that emotions "do things", they move us, connect us and expose the surfaces where we touch the world. To write about home and loneliness in public is to expose that surface. It is to resist the professional demand for smoothness. My longing becomes a small act of resistance, not by being loud, but by being sincere. To speak from emotion is to insist that care, softness and vulnerability belong in public space too.

외로움을 인정하는 일은 때로 실패를 인정하는 일처럼 느껴진다. 적응하지 못했다는 실패, 강해 보이지 못했다는 실패. 하지만 어쩌면 실패는 다른 형태의 정직함일지도 모른다. 내가 충분히 프로답지 못하게 느껴지는 순간에서, 완벽함을 추구하는 행위를 멈추는 순간에야 비로소 나의 진짜 모습이 드러나기 때문이다.

그래서 나의 그리움은 약함이 아니다. 그것은 연결의 증거이며, Sara Ahmed가 말했듯 가장 사적인 감정조차도 "사회가 살아가는 물질 그 자체"임을 드러낸다. 이 그리움을 글로 쓰는 것은 감정을 정리하고 숨기거나, 사회가 요구하는 방식으로 다듬어 놓지 않겠다는 반전문적 실천이고, 진심이 내 글의 결이 되어, 미각과 기억, 그리고 글쓰기 방식 속으로 흘러 든다. Ahmed가 말했듯이 감정은 단순히 존재하는 것이 아니라 행동하고, 관계를 만들고, 우리가 세계와 맞닿는 표면을 드러낸다.

To be unprofessional is not to fail, but to feel, to admit that our longing and our belonging are inseparable. My home is not a single place but a network of emotions that travel with me, and writing them down is the only way I know to stay connected.

집과 외로움을 글로 쓰는 일은 그 표면을 드러내는 행위이고, 동시에 전문성이 요구하는 매끄러움과 감정의 통제를 조용히 거부하는 일이다. 그렇게 나의 외로움은 소리 높이지 않고, 오히려 진심으로서 작은 저항이 된다. 감정으로 말하는 것은 돌봄과 부드러움, 취약함 또는 공적 공간에 속할 자리가 있음을 주장하는 일이기도 하다.

비전문적이라는 것은 실패가 아니다. 느낀다는 뜻이다. 우리의 그리움과 소속감은 분리될 수 없다. 나의 집은 하나의 장소가 아니라, 내가 이동할 때마다 함께 움직이는 감정의 네트워크이며, 글을 쓰는 것은 그 연결을 이어가는 나만의 방식이다.

Michael Mui (b. 1996) is an independent filmmaker from Hong Kong, now based in London. Formerly a Visual Director at TVB, one of the city's largest broadcasters, his projects have been recognised by multiple film festivals and awards, with screenings at Sundance Hong Kong, the Tokyo Gatsby Creative Awards, and most recently in London, Berlin, and Los Angeles. He also served as the Video Director for the Arts Council-funded project *Mind The Gap* with artist Alison Lam, featuring moving-image artwork presented at Westminster Library, the Museum of the Home (in London), and SEESAW Space in Manchester.

Michael has also worked on high-end projects with BBC Maestro and Channel 4, editing full-length documentaries broadcast on UK television, and contributed to a wide range of documentaries for theatre productions and music concerts. As he is living between two cities, his films often explore displacement, memory, and the intersections of personal and cultural identity.

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Albert Ng (b. 1999) is an artist and art critic from Hong Kong, currently based between London and Hong Kong. Working across photography and painting, his practice explores themes of memory, intimacy, and social structures. Often drawing from both found photographs and his own archive, Ng employs techniques of tearing, cutting, and bending to create layered collages that evoke rupture, erasure, and the fragile nature of connection. His work is marked by fragmentation and materiality, unfolding as a visual language of longing and brokenness.

Ng graduated with a BA in Visual Arts from Hong Kong Baptist University in 2021 and completed an MA in Photography with Distinction at the London College of Communication, University of the Arts London, in 2024. His works have been exhibited internationally, including a solo presentation of *In the Raw Wind of the New World* at the Experimental Photo Festival in Barcelona, as well as group exhibitions such as the International Photography Exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery in London and *Obsess and Observe* at Uncool Gallery in Brooklyn, New York. He has also shown work in venues across London, including Copeland Gallery, Belsize Community Library, and The Glasgow Gallery of Photography, as well as in Hong Kong at the Dimensional Civilisation Archaeology Exhibition.

He has undertaken a residency with Uncool Artist in New York, which is affiliated with the same organisation as Uncool Gallery, and his work has been featured in international media, including *Canto Cutie* (US) and *Stand News* (Hong Kong). In addition to his artistic practice, Ng contributes to art criticism, with his writing appearing in *Ming Pao*.

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Wonjoo Gu is a curator, writer, and cultural researcher based in Seoul and London, currently pursuing an MA in Culture, Criticism and Curation at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London. Her practice explores the politics of space, collectivity, and emotion through psychogeography and feminist approaches, tracing how loneliness, displacement, and belonging take shape across urban life. Moving between the differing rhythms of Seoul and London, her recent projects and writing investigate social relations, public engagement, and collaborative forms of making through research-driven curatorial inquiry.

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WHO
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Text by Eduardo Loureiro

QUEM
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Campo Buriti is a small village located in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil. Together with neighbouring Coqueiro Campo and Campo Alegre, it has a decades-long tradition in pottery and marked the beginning of our craft-exploring journey through the Jequitinhonha Valley. When entering the small village, we see pottery at the heart of the region. It's easy to spot people in their backyards creating pieces, and we soon realised most of them burn their pottery at home. That's how we met Terezinha. When stopping for ice cream we noticed a kiln at the back of the store. It was her home and atelier, one of the many in the community. In between slices of chocolate cake, coffee and oranges from her backyard, she told us a bit about the production process. She buys chunks of clay from nearby — some artisans get their own clay — grinds them into powder, filters it, then she adds water until the consistency is right, shapes the piece, leaves it to dry in the sun, applies the *oleio* — the ink made from pigments extracted from clay — and burns the piece in the kiln. We also met her daughter and grandson, who Terezinha was helping care for while working on vases for a large Brazilian retail chain.

Our next stop was a planned one. The owner of the local bar pointed the way to Zezinha's. We had heard about her earlier in Campo Alegre, and even before reaching her home studio we realised why. Trees and rocks were adorned with dozens of flower-shaped pottery and beads. She welcomed us with a big smile, and showed us around her beautiful garden with many more pieces hanging from trees, fences and on the ground, before treating us to coffee and biscuits. She told us she started doing pottery toys when she was about 12, after her mother taught her. That is a tradition followed by ceramists from this region. Learning the craft from an early age, developing the skills, and passing on the knowledge to the young ones. While we chatted her husband Ulisses carefully wrapped our pieces. They work together nowadays, but like many men from the region he used to do seasonal work on distant farms, and was away from home for months.

Campo Buriti é uma comunidade localizada no estado de Minas Gerais, Brasil. Junto com as vizinhas Coqueiro Campo e Campo Alegre, ela tem uma tradição de décadas em cerâmica, e marcaram o início da nossa jornada de exploração do artesanado do Vale do Jequitinhonha. Quando se entra no pequeno vilarejo, vemos a cerâmica no coração da região. É fácil ver pessoas nos seus quintais criando peças e logo percebemos que a maioria delas queima sua cerâmica em casa. Foi assim que conhecemos Terezinha. Quando paramos para um sorvete, notamos um forno nos fundos da loja. Era a casa e ateliê dela, um dos muitos na comunidade. Entre pedaços de bolo de chocolate, café e laranjas do seu quintal, ela nos contou um pouco sobre o processo de produção. Ela compra pedaços de barro dos arredores — algumas artesãs pegam o próprio barro — moe os pedaços em pó, filtra, então adiciona água até obter a consistência certa, molda a peça, deixa secando no sol, aplica o *oleio* — a tinta feita de pigmentos extraídos do barro — e queima a peça no forno. Nós também conhecemos sua filha e seu neto, de quem Terezinha ajudava a cuidar enquanto trabalhava em vasos para uma grande varejista brasileira.

Nossa próxima parada foi planejada. O dono do bar local apontou o caminho para a casa de Zezinha. Nós ouvimos falar dela em Campo Alegre e mesmo antes de chegar a sua casa percebemos porque. Árvores e pedras estavam adornadas com dezenas flores e miçangas de cerâmica. Ela nos recebeu com um grande sorriso e nos mostrou seu lindo jardim com muitas outras peças penduradas em árvores, cercas e no chão, antes de nos dar café e biscoitos. Ela nos contou que começou a fazer bonecos de argila com 12 anos depois que sua mãe a ensinou. Essa é uma tradição seguida por ceramistas dessa região. Aprender o ofício cedo, desenvolver as habilidades e transmitir o conhecimento para as mais jovens. Enquanto conversávamos, seu marido Ulisses embrulhava nossas peças cuidadosamente. Eles trabalham juntos hoje em dia, mas como muitos homens da região, ele costumava trabalhar sazonalmente em fazendas distantes e ficava longe de casa por meses.

While doing research for this article I saw one of Terezinha's vases being sold on the large retailer's website. The product page was full of tokens like "culture" and "ancestrality" with no further context. Expressions like "full of history" were used with nothing about that history. The manual labour becomes a selling point for the objects, while the stories about the people who make them remain unseen. The product description says the collection was "inspired by the delicacy of a ballet". It is an example of detachment from local tradition. In capitalism, where smoothness and homogenisation are the rule, narratives don't have to relate to the actual culture as long as they get good SEO scores. In her 2020 article "Can We Teach Graphic Design History Without the Cult of Hero Worship?", Aggie Toppins invites us to look at graphic design history "omit[ing] all mention of design heroes" or

The meaning of designed objects is heavily influenced by local culture instead of one individual author

"the objects of design", and instead focus on the "social forces that surround design as a practice". The (hi)stories behind the designed objects from the region show that the act of making is an integral part of its people's lives. We saw people picking fruits from their gardens, raising animals, and growing crops on their land. The communities we visited in the Jequitinhonha are known for what they produce. Pottery is part of the identity of Campo Buriti, Campo Alegre, and Coqueiro Campo. In Faceira's Quilombo¹ people showed us how they make furniture and other objects from woven corn leaves, and percussion instruments using wood and leather from their territory. In Roça Grande people plant cotton, and prepare their own threads before weaving textiles. And Curtume's famous embroidery depicts women doing everyday activities like raising farm animals, and creating embroidering itself.

¹ Quilombos are communities where people settled after escaping from slave owners, and sites of resistance during and after slavery.

Enquanto pesquisava para este artigo, eu vi um dos vasos de Terezinha sendo vendido no site da grande varejista. A página do produto estava cheia de palavras como "cultura" e "ancestralidade" sem nenhum contexto adicional. Expressões como "repletos de história" eram usadas sem nada sobre aquela história. O trabalho manual vira argumento de venda dos objetos enquanto as histórias das pessoas que os produzem permanecem invisíveis. A descrição do produto diz que a coleção foi "inspirada pela delicadeza de um balé". É um exemplo do descolamento da tradição local. No capitalismo, onde suavidade e homogeneização são a regra, narrativas não precisam ter relação com a cultura de fato, desde que tenham uma boa pontuação de SEO. Em seu artigo de 2020 "Can We Teach Graphic Design History Without the Cult of Hero Worship?", Aggie Toppins nos convida a olhar a história do design gráfico

O significado de objetos de design é fortemente influenciado pela cultura local em vez de um autor individual

"omitindo qualquer menção a heróis do design" ou "objetos de design" e em vez disso observar as "forças sociais que cercam o design como prática". As histórias por trás dos objetos de design da região mostram que o ato de fazer é parte integral da vida da sua gente. Nós vimos pessoas colhendo frutas dos seus jardins, criando animais e plantando em suas terras. As comunidades que visitamos no Jequitinhonha são conhecidas pelo que produzem. Cerâmica é parte da identidade de Campo Buriti, Campo Alegre e Coqueiro Campo. No Quilombo Faceira as pessoas nos mostraram como fazem móveis e outros objetos a partir de palha de milho, e de instrumentos de percussão usando madeira e couro do seu território. Em Roça Grande, plantam algodão e preparam seus próprios fios antes da tecelagem. E o famoso bordado de Curtume mostra mulheres realizando tarefas cotidianas como criar animais na fazenda e o próprio bordado.

To live in small towns in Brazil's countryside means to know your neighbours, or the whole town. Artisans' work is exhibited in the co-op run by them, so everyone sees each other's work. Despite personal preferences and different skills, recurring themes run through the production of different artists. It's typical to see home utensils in similar styles, and elements from the local culture, like the dança de roda², brides, flowers, and animals, real or imagined, like the sapo-boi, a hybrid of frog and ox. In *Made In Patriarchy* (2020), Cheryl Buckley critiques the notion of "the designer as the 'auteur'—a ... heroic figure" solely responsible for "the meaning of design". The concept of authorship among the Jequitinhonha artisans is different. Because the ceramicists share themes inspired by their common background, the meaning of designed objects is heavily influenced by local culture instead of one individual author.

² Dança (or ciranda) de roda is a traditional dance where people sing and dance in circle holding hands, and in pairs.

The ancestral knowledge flowing through these communities is passed on orally from generation to generation. It is a form of design education that happens outside academia. A more open view on design that encompasses handicraft, but also activities like raising farm animals, singing and dancing, or caring for children. The everyday informs the act of making, and the making is part of everyday life. Buckley says we should "understand making/producing/assembling as part of a continuum that is design. This perspective can include the close-up, domestic, intimate, personal". The everyday and the making are intertwined. Ceramics design in the Jequitinhonha Valley, like other craft experiences, is collective. This history is told by the hands and voices of many women across generations. Every piece is part of this tradition, and carries meaning rooted in local culture.

Eduardo Loureiro is a Brazilian graphic designer exploring the intersections between design and ethnographic research.



Eduardo Loureiro é um designer gráfico brasileiro explorando as interseções entre design e pesquisa etnográfica.

Brasil significa
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To live in small towns, your neighbours, exhibited in the context of other's work. Design skills, recurring themes, different artists. In styles, and elements: roda², brides, flow sapo-boi, a hybrid (2020), Cheryl Br as the 'auteur'— "the meaning of the Jequitinhonha ceramicists share background, the influenced by local

² Dança (or ciranda) traditional dance with singing and dance in circles, hands, and in pairs.

The ancestral knowledge is passed on orally of design education: an open view on design activities like raising children and the making of things should "understand a continuum that is close-up, domestic making are intertwined. Valley, like others, is told by the hands of generations. Even meaning rooted in



Eduardo Loureiro is a Brazilian graphic designer exploring the intersections between design and ethnographic research.



Eduardo Loureiro é um designer gráfico brasileiro explorando as interseções entre design e pesquisa etnográfica.

Brasil significa O trabalho das artesãs, então todas as preferências e utensílios da cultura material, animais, reais ou ideais. *made in Patriarchy* designer como acessível pelo diálogo entre as artesãs e designers. Rico comum, o influenciado local.

comunidades é uma forma de memória. Uma tradição, mas também, cantar, forma o ato de fazer que devemos ter um contínuo aquilo que é a vida e o fazer. Vale do artesanato, é a voz de muitas partes dessa cultura local.

To live in small towns, your neighbours, exhibited in the other's work. Design skills, recurring to different artists. Styles, and elements: roda², brides, flowers, sapo-boi, a hybrid (2020), Cheryl Buckley as the 'auteur'—the meaning of the Jequitinhonha ceramicists share background, the influenced by local

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Viver em pequenos vilarejos no interior do Brasil significa conhecer seus vizinhos, ou o vilarejo inteiro. O trabalho das artesãs é exposto na associação dirigida por elas, então todo mundo vê o trabalho de cada uma. Apesar de preferências pessoais e diferentes habilidades, temas recorrentes permeiam a produção de diferentes artistas. É comum ver utensílios domésticos em estilos semelhantes e elementos da cultura local, como a dança de roda, noivas, flores e animais, reais ou imaginados, como o híbrido sapo-boi. Em *Made in Patriarchy* (2020), Cheryl Buckley critica a noção do "designer como autor—uma ... figura heroica" e único responsável pelo "significado do design". O conceito de autoria entre as artesãs do Jequitinhonha é diferente. Porque as ceramistas compartilham temas inspirados pelo seu histórico comum, o significado de objetos de design é fortemente influenciado pela cultura local em vez de um autor individual.

O conhecimento ancestral fluindo por essas comunidades é transmitido oralmente de geração a geração. É uma forma de educação de design que acontece fora da academia. Uma visão mais aberta de design que engloba artesanato, mas também atividades como criar animais na fazenda, cantar, dançar, ou cuidar de crianças. O dia-a-dia informa o ato de fazer e o fazer é parte do cotidiano. Buckley diz que devemos "entender fazer/produzir/montar como parte de um contínuo que é o design. Essa perspectiva pode incluir aquilo que é próximo, doméstico, íntimo, pessoal". O dia-a-dia e o fazer estão interligados. O design de cerâmica no Vale do Jequitinhonha, como outras experiências artesanais, é coletivo. Essa história é contada pelas mãos e vozes de muitas mulheres através de gerações. Toda peça faz parte dessa tradição e carrega significados enraizados na cultura local.

Eduardo Loureiro é um designer gráfico brasileiro explorando as interseções entre design e pesquisa etnográfica.

Words by Silvio Lorusso

Silvio Lorusso

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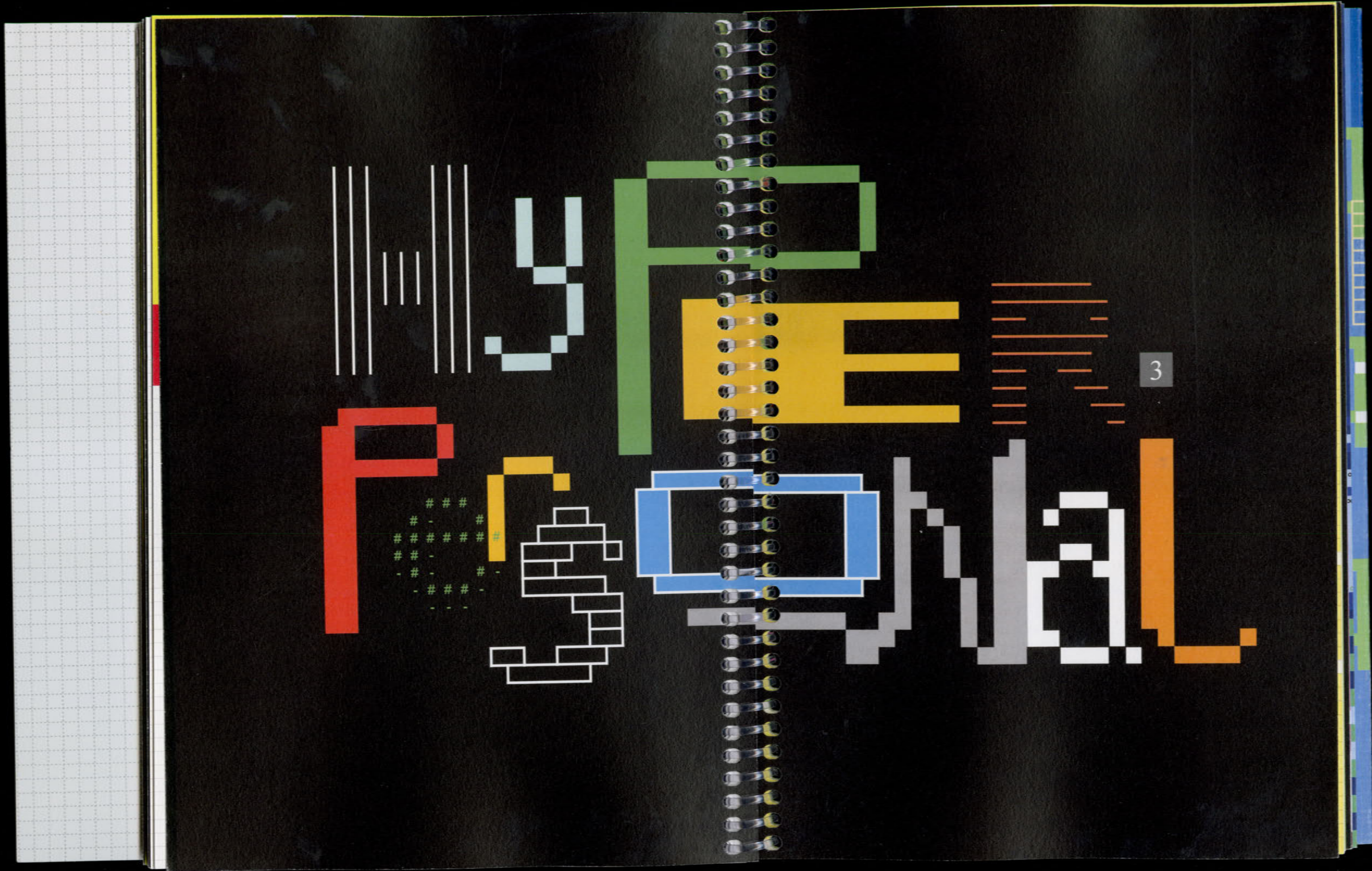
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Text and Image by
Candy Gao

——关于酸味、失败与未
被驯服的野性

—— On Sourness, Failure,
and the Untamed

Chapter I: The Absurd Departure

第一章：荒诞的

启程



Dream of the Sour Apple

牙齿咬破月亮
流出银色的酸

等一场春末的雨敲开门
我就滚进泥土的皱褶里

腐烂的皮肤
拥抱晶亮的甜

继续酸成
未被翻译的

蚂蚁长出翅膀
游乐树梢

而如果我是一颗酸苹果

最初
形态

Teeth bite through the moon,
spilling silver sourness.

Rotten skin
embraces crystalline sweet.

On a certain night in late spring this year,
I had a strange dream about a sour apple.



So
I set out on an absurd journey

to search for it.

Chapter II: The Mountain's Refusal

第二章：山的

否定



The Standard Method

The Mountain Asks

I entered the mountain with coordinates of acidity.
The GPS spat garble in the fog.

Mountain folk pointed to pear, hawthorn, wild plum—
collapsing into sweet matter at the instant of observation.

But the sour apple I wanted
kept wandering outside the probability cloud.

The spectrometer
drafted a constitution of sweetness.

Every fruit vein had to
follow a standardized curve.

Pesticides erased wild memory.
Wax coatings unified reflectivity.

The assembly line is time's dictator.

Each apple receives
the same nationality of sugar content.

Their gloss is certified by congress.
Sourness becomes an outlawed heresy.

So wild acid goes underground,
founding cells of resistance in the seed.
Those expelled genes of sourness
trade mutation codes on the black market.

Sweet is legal tender;
sour is a wanted poem.
When every fruit has the approved stamp,
the sour write, in rot, a last testament to freedom.



After a week-long field investigation, it can be confirmed that traditional sour-apple varieties in the Jianchuan mountains of Yunnan¹ have basically disappeared. We visited 4 natural villages and found that even the old trees in household courtyards had been grafted into sweet varieties such as "Fuji" and "Guoguang." My friend told me she does remember that her aunt once had a sour apple tree, but no one knows why it is gone now.

¹云南剑川山区, at the southwestern borders of China

Perhaps the "failure" of the sour apple is precisely its most precious quality—it refuses standardization, refuses to be sweetened, refuses to become a commodity. In a world ruled by sweetness, sourness itself becomes the gentlest resistance.



Farmers are resigned and pragmatic. Many sour-apple trees in the mountains have long been marked for grafting; high-grade seedlings from elsewhere have poured into these hills. Farmers only hope that the high-sugar varieties in their hands can guarantee a good year's income. The modern orchards in the mountains look more like precision factories: row spacing and plant spacing are strictly uniform; even the size of each fruit seems precisely calculated.

Chapter III: The Tyranny of Sweetness 第三章：甜味

****Divine Rite****

接收器里传来百年前的静电
白族人说
那是酸苹果神最后的电波

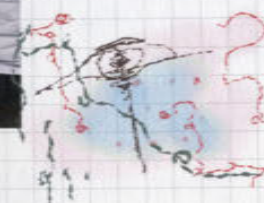
While filming in the mountains, we encountered a torrential storm, and a landslide blocked the road. Trapped in the car, we watched a flock of sheep with copper bells suddenly cross the highway; their bells produced an uncanny resonance within the sound of rain. We also discovered an abandoned monkey habitat — the monkeys had once fed on sour apples. Most unsettling of all were the orchards in the mountains: three consecutive years without any fruit. We were not sure whether all of this meant the gods had withdrawn their gift from humankind.

On the eve of leaving Yunnan, my friend and I went to a fire ritual, but by the time we arrived, only a near-spent fire remained. On the way back, my friend suddenly pointed at a fruitless tree and said to me, "Look—sour apples!"

暴政

Static from a century ago came through the receiver.
The Bai² people said
it was the Sour Apple God's last signal.

²a minority group living in Yunnan Province



Chapter IV: The Sour Existence of Miss Lemon

第四章：柠檬小姐的

酸性存在

Through countless days after returning from Yunnan to London, I still could not put down the missing sour-apple tree, nor my friend — sour like the apple itself — Miss Lemon. So in late summer this year, in the season when mushrooms ripen, at her aunt's invitation, I returned to the mountain once more.

Aug 17, 2025 · London

The plane cut through thick fog; Miss Lemon was waiting for me. She said the summer rainy season was about to end, thunderclaps rolled one after another, and the mushrooms had sprouted. She and I would finally return to Xinsheng Village³ — back to the mountain that hid sour apples and unfinished stories, back to the “home” she had to relearn after her mother passed away.

³新生村, the village name means a new life in Mandarin

Aug 19, 2025 · Dali

She drank coffee and talked about new dreams: a film studio, two partners who needed looking after. In the sunlight she planned a “professional” future, then in the next breath dismantled it herself: “Maybe I’m still better suited to being alone. I’m used to solitude.”

The failure of professionalism lies here: it teaches us skills but not connection. Her cousins were around; standing in the sun, Miss Lemon seemed finally to blend into this family. At dusk she suddenly asked, “Will you still come this winter?” I said I’d come for fresh pork. She said softly, “Thanks for helping me finish my KPI of returning home.”

Aug 20, 2025 · Xinsheng

We wore 20-yuan work shoes up the mountain. Mushrooms appear only after thunder, wild and refusing cultivation. To seek them, you must be devout and accept coming up empty most of the time—you can barely make it a professional labour.

Aug 20, 2025 · Xinsheng

We wore 20-yuan work shoes up the mountain. Mushrooms appear only after thunder, wild and refusing cultivation. To seek them, you must be devout and accept coming up empty most of the time — you can barely make it a professional labour. She moved like an expert, yet back in her grandmother’s old house that expertise failed instantly. “Still planning a PhD?” “Almost thirty — time to marry?” She slumped on the sofa with her phone, fending it off with a bitter smile. Her mother had once been the pillar separating her from such questioning; now the pillar had fallen.

At the market we ate “pear-apples” and “huahong”— they look like apples but are not; the pear apple’s sweetness felt bland, the huahong’s sour quickly turned astringent. It dawned on me that the “search for the sour apple” itself was a failed field investigation.



photos... She pulled down the brim of her hat and hurried past, unrecognized, then slipped into the hospital corridor and a long silence.

⁴the capital city of Yunnan Province, 460 km away from Jianchuan

When I left, it rained again.

Late summer felt colder than last spring.

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但缝隙中确有新芽萌生。

如山酸涩的故事必有回音，
或许没有回答。

Chapter I 第四章：

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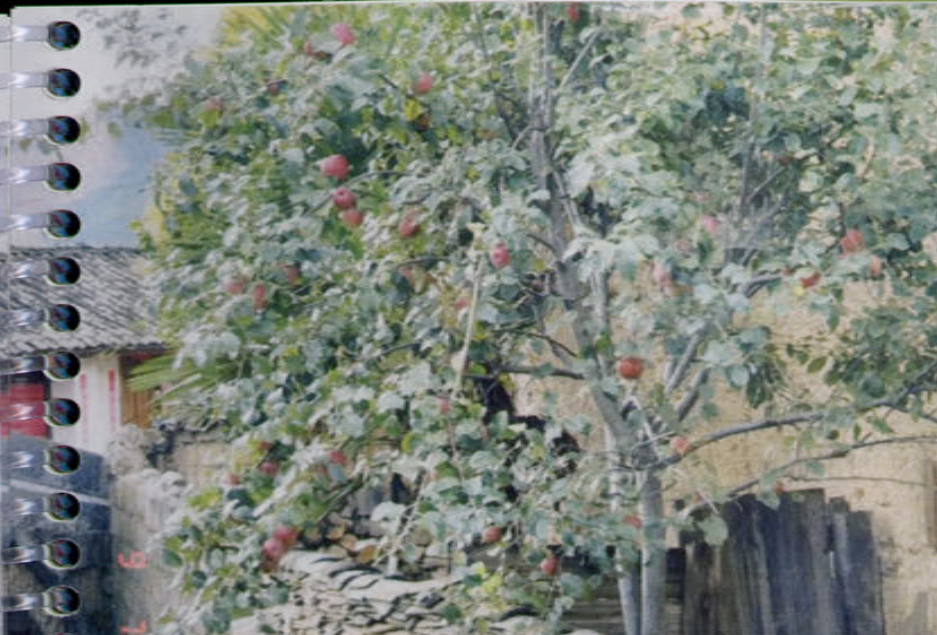
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Aug 21–23, 2025 · Xinsheng

We unearthed old photos at her cousin’s place: a family portrait missing the three of them; playful selfies with retro stickers; a New Year’s feast. “This must have been taken by my mom,” she said. “She loved taking photos.” She lay down on still-damp cement; leaves floated in puddles; she looked up and smiled. I raised the camera, an untimely, even failure-like posture—yet it felt like touching something solid for the first time.

Aug 24, 2025 · Xinsheng

In heavy rain, she insisted on leaving. Her aunt dug a basket full of mushrooms for her to take. Driving down from Grandma’s, the car filled a little more each time we passed a relative’s house. She told me her aunt had secretly transferred 600 yuan: “She hardly has any money. I just hope the next basket sells well.”

Aug 25, 2025 · Chuxiong

Her parents’ love began on a dark night: one night road, two movie tickets. Later they merely notified the families and married; her father didn’t go to Xinsheng to meet his mother-in-law until four years after the wedding. During her mother’s treatment days in Kunming⁴, the hotel she stayed at happened to host a wedding downstairs. Firecrackers, laughter, red carpet, group photos... She pulled down the brim of her hat and hurried past, unrecognized, then slipped into the hospital corridor and a long silence.

⁴the capital city of Yunnan Province, 460 km away from Jianchuan

When I left, it rained again.

Late summer felt colder than last spring.

Aug 29, 2025 · Chuxiong

At three in the morning, we were glazing clay cups. She said her mother’s last gift was the renovation of their home—a complete makeover before she passed. Yet in Miss Lemon’s heart, the old house is forever frozen at the moment before renovation. She goes only to fixed places—restaurant, park, KTV—refusing the new. Eating dumplings, she remembered those days of illness when every bite had to be saved—because she thought all the money would be needed for treatment. She cannot “professionally” process grief or “move on” by society’s clock. She chooses to live with memory and pain—an acidic persistence.

柠檬小姐，
我的朋友。

无法被标准化的酸苹果，
雷雨夜的野菌。

所有梦想、愤怒、孤独温柔，
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Final Chapter: A Defense of Sourness

终章：酸的

辩护

Sour

铁罐盛着鸣响的雨
将顽石叩出星火

A tin can holds the sobbing rain,
knocking sparks from stubborn stone.

荒草在暗夜中
反刍青涩的决意

In the dark, wild grass
chews and rechews a green resolve.

鸟群衔走时间的轴心
深埋于沙丘的脉动

Birds carry off the axis of time,
bury it in the pulse of dunes.

风蚀的岩洞深处
升起一面不屈的旗

Deep in a wind-eroded cave
an unyielding flag rises.

河岸人群垂首而立
杯中空无一物

People stand bowed along the riverbank,
their cups empty.

他们俯身贴地
聆听大地的酸痛

They bend close to the ground
to listen to the surge of sour.



In the field of contemporary art, fieldwork is often seen as outdated and naïve; the supernatural is mocked as unprofessional fantasy. Colleagues view our search with skepticism, insisting that in a data-driven age, persisting in the quest for a sour apple that may not exist is futile. Yet I still chose this much-questioned path — not because I was sure I would find anything, but because doubt itself is already an answer.

We insist on recording moments that cannot be quantified: the jolt of misrecognition on a stormy night, the shiver upon hearing a mountain legend, the inexplicable awe before a failed orchard. These experiences — dismissed by scientism as “unprofessional” — are precisely the field notes we value most. Amid a wave of standardized research, we deliberately remain clumsy, allow ourselves to get lost, accept the possibility of failure — because that is the gentlest resistance to efficiency-absolutism.

In my view, the sour apple is a silhouette of many “sour existences.” Ill-timed dreams, unmeasurable feelings, lives that refuse efficiency — all struggle to breathe under the hegemony of sweetness. Like a street performer’s improvisation, an artisan’s stubborn technique, a poet’s ungrammatical line — these “unprofessional” presences form the undertow resisting standardization’s tyranny.

This research did not ultimately find the sour apple, but it led us to more: all those unique, precious existences like the sour apple — those “acidic” lives that survive with difficulty in a world ruled by sweetness — glow quietly, waiting to be heard and seen. This contemporary-art-like exploration does not pursue the validity of conclusions, but cherishes loss of control and deviation in the process. Just like that, forever-unfound sour apple, our failure proves that possibilities exist outside the empire of sweetness.

In an era obsessed with efficiency and results, insisting on “unprofessionalism” and “failure” is resistance in itself. Our fieldwork is not about collecting proof, but about pleading the case for all sour existences — for life forms that cannot be measured, will not be standardized, and refuse to be enlisted.

Candy Gao is an artist and filmmaker based in London. Her practice begins from a silent, outsider perspective. The words left unspoken become her work. Memories circulate within her, until she draws them out to construct a universe of her own. Her work carries the texture of dreams and the rhythm of ritual, growing slowly in the play of light and shadow. In this hurried century, Candy chooses to be slow: to speak slowly, to understand slowly, to weep and laugh slowly. At this rhythm, she lets another universe, bit by bit, become visible.

gaomengxiaojn22@163.com
@cccandygao00

Watch Candy Gao's film,
The Sour Apple Murder Case

<https://youtu.be/hfpt6N2LVfg>





Text by Harriet Shepherd

Working in the museum
restaurant, disaffection and
failure through proximity.

I was navigating the famously uneasy post-graduation period, attempting to trace the fabled trajectory of the Art History graduate. The one that finds you front of house at a museum, as a supposed way to gain proximity to museum work. I was noticing positions that already felt like compromises reveal themselves to be aspirational. Group interviews were overwhelming, oversubscribed and uncomfortable — being tasked with interpreting the V&A's prospective exhibition as a dance in front of 50 other candidates was ultimately humiliating. Adjusting my expectations, I began applying to in-museum hospitality jobs, eventually finding the position at The Great Court Restaurant at the British Museum.

It was the closest I had ever been to a museum job. A clichéd yet persistent desire to work in museums led me to study Art History with the hopes of eventually finding myself in one of these institutions — and here I was in the museum at last. Those around me would say, "You are in the building, it shows you want to be there", their sentiments becoming an internal affirmation for me during the following months.

As time passed, details of the job that initially appeared as minor discomforts began to inflate, pushing space between who I hoped to be (personally, professionally, present and future) and where I was physically. Clip-on ties, stale scones. It is hard to know what is significant about my own perspective, and what it may say about working within these dominant cultural institutions generally. It is also hard to know when is appropriate to connect the two through my own experience, as well as when to step back and acknowledge that the British Museum has committed much greater atrocities than making me wear a clip-on tie to serve afternoon tea.

Not dissimilar to my tie, the restaurant, the museum too, always presented an unconvincing performance. Something false, masquerading as care and professionalism whilst motivated only by efficiency. It is driven, unsurprisingly, entirely by profit and frictionlessness. The British Museum being the most visited attraction in the UK, the restaurant is guaranteed an infinite flow of new customers, permitting the quality only ever to exist at the facade: good enough on the surface to draw people in, but never good enough to guarantee their return. A few times I was taken aside to be told I was "being too nice to customers", causing them to stay too long, a perplexing approach towards 'hospitality'.

Despite the bleakness of perpetually unsatisfied customers, it sort of worked. The volume of guests meant we were making fairly good money for hospitality. The service charge was great because the food was expensive, but crap — visitors didn't even want to stay, meaning more customers, more money, or at least when the tips made it into our pockets.

However, it is this unwavering commitment to efficiency that necessitates a moment of separation from myself. The restaurant's dedication to ensuring the tables turned as quickly as possible, came frequently at the expense of overtly discriminatory behaviour. During the training period, I was instructed that if serving an "Asian" table for afternoon tea I am not to ask the customer whether they would like english breakfast, earl grey, chamomile or strawberry as we would to the white visitors. Instead, we must select "english breakfast", as attempting communication would be "a waste of time". Maximum guests, maximum profit.

Such practices were habitual; members of staff working in other sections of the restaurant such as bartenders and chefs, would ask that Chinese visitors not be seated at tables in view of their workspaces. Occasionally, the manager would follow up by seating the guests nearby anyway, as a "joke". It goes without saying that such prolific and habitual racism, literally embedded within steps of service, is vile, and yet I never felt that my colleagues shared this feeling. However, perhaps given our status simply as workers, they could say the same and include me.

It is the question of responsibility that frames a wider failure. I recognise in myself too, that it is easy to excuse oneself through acts of distancing. Critical to this, is the detail that regardless of its placement, literally in the centre of the building, the Great Court Restaurant is not a part of the British Museum. As staff, we were encouraged to remind visitors of this when they would ask for directions; stating "we do not work for the museum". Opposing the mantra offered by friends and family, that at the very least I was in the museum, these words acted as an anti-affirmation, a reminder that I had failed to land where I should have.

In 2020, Samantha Evans, psychologist and researcher of inequality within cultural workspaces published her thesis; *Struggles for Distinction: Class and Classed Inequality in UK Museum Work*. Within her investigation, Evans identified the condition of aspiring cultural workers in front of house jobs in museums, experiencing a state of being "out but still in". She understands the position of being "out" as enacted by processes of "distinction", through which museum roles are distanced from one another with little prospect for inter-departmental mobility. Such moments of distinction are characterised simultaneously through racialised and classed asymmetries apparent across museum hierarchies. Positions considered to be distinctly "lower" than coveted curatorial or directorial positions, namely security, visitor assistance and retail are the most disproportionately occupied by minorities. Unsurprisingly of course, also the lowest paid labour within the institution.

Evans describes how such identities across social scales, relate to "an economy of recognition", revealing how front of house employees report higher-paid staff such as curators and directors failing to acknowledge their presence. Serving the director and other senior staff often, I frequently felt them struggle to make eye contact, affirming again that I did "not work for the museum". It was demeaning to have the singular quality of the job that I valued, withdrawn by their gaze, affirming an "out but still in" condition, a failure manifested through proximity.

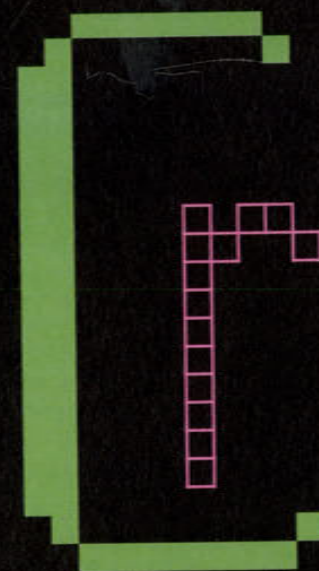
Further than my own discomfort, I was left to wonder about how the use of contractors within major cultural institutions potentially forges a convenient rift between the management of the museum itself and contractors operating "independently". Particularly when many major sites are reckoning with enormous and very public pressures to reappraise their collections and practices in light of their colonial and violent realities. Positioning these operations as external mobilises a rejection of responsibility. Whilst these museums endeavor to present a public facade, they are able to actively shelter discrimination, facilitated by fostering such professional distances.

It is a struggle to believe that a museum can claim to value the "extraordinary diversity of human cultures", when the director fails to make eye contact with those inhabiting the enormous "diversity" of roles inside the institution he oversees. These interactions affirm suspicions that the museum has little care for the conditions and practices within the hospitality and customer-facing roles. The institution cites care and commitment - but never with a concern for the individuals working in their lowest paid positions, or indeed for the cultures that are cultivated within them.

Now that I exist outside once more, the institution reassumes its position as aspirational and imaginary. I can feel more in when I am out, when in exists safely in the arms of possibility. When my in-ness belongs to the future, I can relax back into a soft and familiar aspiration. I hope I am not the only one who finds myself returning all too often to my well acquainted place, suspended between success and failure, distance and proximity.

Harriet Shepherd is a curator, researcher and writer. With an expansive approach to access and inclusion, her practice reckons with questions of representation and presence, often with an attention to feminist ephemera and networked artforms.

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4



Text by Niccolò Abate



Niccolò introduces the project....

FUCKSPOTIFY is two things. Firstly, and pretty blatantly, it's a manifesto advocating for corporate distrust. Companies like Spotify are so keen to display how much they support and love music and musicians. At the same time, they run a business model that completely destroys any type of financial stability to any non-famous artist, enriching labels that own the music industry and CEOs funding Military AI. Secondly, it's a tool to move your music to other platforms and fuck off from Spotify, connecting the political statement into an easy concrete action which directly impacts the company...

...FUCKSPOTIFY is a weird creature though. It's definitely punk: its glitchy and abrasive graphics (shoutout to winamp for still looking so cool), anti-corporate messaging, self-hosting and sharing mostly through word of mouth are very reminiscent of grass-root anarchist movements. Its main functionality, connecting to Spotify and transferring its library, is based on barely-legal and community-made practices and APIs. Its existence lives in a liminal space between an art experiment, a proper tool, and a political manifesto.

At the same time, it's confined in an online space that is completely against its own existence. My reach is the largest on Instagram, a platform arguably way worse than Spotify. It also, by design, diverts your focus constantly and fucks your attention span. This gives an instant reward by having people liking, sharing and saving the post. Then everybody forgets it exists. It's by far my most liked and saved post, but barely anybody opened the website and even less people actually used it.

I created something both professional, a tool with a simple purpose that tries to function and convey a message in the utmost optimised way, and unprofessional, a fuck you to companies abusing artists packaged around a very personal and uncaring style. I'm trying now to figure out whether anything like this has a purpose to exist on the main internet or if it should just be bound to the dark forest of the internet, remembered by a dedicated but smaller group of people.

FUCKSPOTIFY is a web-app based protest facilitating the transfer of music away from Spotify. Artist Niccolò Abate talks to Harriet Shepherd about their web-based project.

HARRIET SHEPHERD

You mention that as a platform the project exists in a "liminal space". It reminds me a little of Legacy Russell's manifesto *Glitch Feminism* (2020), in which she understands embodying the "inbetween" as a "strategic blurring of binaries", in reference to identity and the concept of "truth" in contemporary society. How do you understand this "inbetweenness" as important to the identity of the project?

NICCOLÒ ABATE

It definitely has a correlation to what you're talking about. Whilst not directly connected to cultural hegemonies such as Russell's work, I do think that working "inbetween" the labels of meaning imbues more power to the project itself. At the same time, I wouldn't call my process particularly strategic. Its positional blurriness comes more from the fact that I don't think about what it needs to be at all while making it. Even with a completely different output, my process in creating this platform was similar to how I made a few short animations in the past: I feel strong feelings toward something, and I create an emotional response to it.

Of course there is a step of curation and strategy when making something that needs to be used and shared, but it's often an afterthought rather than a fundamental part of my work. FUCKSPOTIFY comes from my hate, and then was repurposed to make it understandable and actable upon. It's true because it's mine, and, as I am hard to describe and label, my work is too. I guess the inbetweenness here comes from that.

HS

It seems there is a tension between FUCKSPOTIFY's "success" and its existence. You speak about it being "against itself." The way the promotion has been sucked in and spat out by the Instagram algorithm left you wondering if it was meant for a smaller audience. Do you think that there is something about the platforms or actions necessary to promote it in a way that would see it become popularised and far-reaching, that would risk devaluing the project's political significance? Does it feel necessarily at odds with its own success?

NA

It does to a certain extent. The issue at hand is that the big platforms that have monopolised the internet such as Instagram, Facebook and X don't really value usage but instead diverge to fast, constant and mindless scrolling by design. Tools such as FUCKSPOTIFY, which at heart is a boycott tool, need a rather large system of interactions to work, and the platforms on which I have the largest reach actively push against that. I am also concerned about how hypocritical it is to publicise such a type of disruption on a platform created and run by very similar money-driven pricks.

At the same time, I don't think that success and a big reach would make it devoid of meaning: if spread through the right sources, such as mailing letters, smaller devoted internet communities, and maybe even physical spaces and events, it could still work. Mainstream social media can somehow still work as a supporting element, but by themselves they tend to work against the whole point of an active following. I'm now trying to find the right platform for

HS

I wonder what it would look like to somewhat magically and utopically imagine the perfect conditions for FUCKSPOTIFY to thrive in a way that wasn't antithetical to its political agenda. Thinking about how you see the project reminiscent of grass-roots anarchist movements, relying on community based proliferation and word of mouth. Admittedly a fantastical question but; what do you think needs to exist, or not exist in order to imagine such conditions?

NA

I have been thinking about this for a long time, and honestly I'm not too sure. There are of course factors like access to the time and money necessary to actively participate in these environments, but it would be very superficial of me to consider just that when so many historical movements have spurred from marginalised and economically-oppressed communities. My current idea is that we do already exist in conditions that could be great: political unrest and exhaustion of the middle and lower class are great motivations for the creation of independent thriving counter-cultures. What I'm worried about is that, by design of social monoliths, when something successfully enters the public's eye it starts being "trendised", losing its intellectual honesty. Counter-cultures such as Punk and Goth, while still very active, have lost most of their core subversive political values they once spear-headed, and have instead been replaced with a weirdly fetishised version of itself where looks are more important than ideology.

By saying this I don't want to imply that small politically-charged cultural movements don't still exist, on the contrary. Communities here in London, such as the punk newsletter and publication "Another Subculture" and the SET spaces are a perfect display of thriving niches, but they created a space for

themselves that requires some type of digging to find. I guess it's similar to what it was before, but instead of having to just physically find these types of spaces, some type of online lurking can be used to access them. By creating this type of entry "fee" based on interest, a superficial filter is applied which removes people that are not really interested in the niche in itself but rather its appearance. At the same time, a good balance needs to be respected to not create any type of pretentious classism.

In short, I don't think much needs to change to create an environment that fosters niche communities. The shortening of attention spans and focus on ultra-individualism developed by the same companies that monopolised the internet are a big hurdle to overcome, but the web is still a thriving and incredibly diverse world filled with plenty of communities. Are these strong enough to create a large-scale movement and boycott? I'm not too sure, but it's worth trying out.

HS

One of the most intriguing things to me about the project is its status as somewhat legal, somewhat illegal (another "inbetween" I suppose). Is this defiance an aspect of the project that feels crucial to its existence?

NA

I think this specific inbetween comes from a mix between political honesty and being involuntarily forced by the platforms themselves. The only way to get a hold of your Spotify library is through their API (application programming interface), which states in their terms and services "do not take any action in connection with the Developer Agreement, that could adversely affect Spotify's commercial reputation or

otherwise reflect unfavorably on Spotify, including any action that may damage, disparage, or be detrimental to Spotify". This actively means that I can't concretely create a platform such as mine without finding legal loopholes. The same applies to Tidal: they do have a public API, but it's a bit shit. I had to find a Python library created by people smart enough to backtrace the proprietary API calls that are used just by Tidal themselves or close partners.

In reality, creating things in this weird legal gray zone is not optimal. Private companies can decide by themselves what to give and not give to the public, and the workarounds most often are legal gray zones or bugs unnoticed by the platforms themselves. Realistically, if FUCKSPOTIFY was actually big, Spotify could change their developer program to require a verification or a fee (such as Apple) and completely destroy the web-app.

But what is a good political project without abuse of the systems it's criticising? While the lazy version of me would love for full open-source access to all these APIs, they don't exist for the same political reason we're revolting against them. It's necessary for FUCKSPOTIFY to be semi-illegal because otherwise what the fuck is its point? If I'm doing something that they openly allow me to do, probably I'm not disrupting much at all.

HS

How does your creation of this platform, with its condemnation of the exploitative practices of streaming companies, relate to your own experience as an artist? How does FUCKSPOTIFY traverse the personal and the impersonal for you?

NA

For me, FUCKSPOTIFY is a way to try taking back a little control over my own personal practice, and I guess it's a bit of a grand gesture to display where my moral compass stands. What happens in music happens, less openly, in every art industry. My day job is working front of house in one of the biggest art museums in the world, and I have noticed that most employees care so much about art, but they're never at the top of the ladder. Everything in art is about money, and I fucking hate that.

As an artist I've seen time and time again how the whole industry is based on exploitation, and I personally think musicians often get the worst of it all. At least going into visual arts and design I knew I was gonna be jobless surrounded by evil, rich and pretentious people! Music seems and feels so liberating, but working with musicians so much I've seen how this quickly falters away as soon as the money-side of things gets in the way. This eventually ends up impacting every role that works around music: videographers, graphic artists, audio technicians, etc etc. I love working for musicians, but, unless they're insanely big or sponsored by evil labels, the pay will always be a bit shit.

At the end of the day, I'm just trying to put my foot down and say that we need to support every type of artist, because what we do is really fucking hard and should not be a given. Everybody with some interest in arts should always try to help out by making projects like this, buying prints and merch, going to events, donating, and ideally even by refusing work for big evil companies such as Spotify. To each their own; just do something.

HS

In the way that FUCKSPOTIFY seems to be at odds with its own success, I wonder if you ever feel similarly about your identity as an artist or a creative person, like creative expression clashing with the pressure of professionalism and of course financial necessity?

NA

I often do. My position as an artist is weird since I don't really do it full-time, and it's exactly for the reasons you just mentioned. I know that every start of a career with any type of job requires some flexibility and compromise since the job market is a fucking disaster right now, but I've never seen a point in saying yes to everything when a lot of my work is decently political and most corporate entities are morally opposite to what I believe in. To give myself some type of control, I got a minimum wage part-time job that gives me the money and stability to survive each month. Do I love doing it? Absolutely not. But it has given me the option of working for very good projects with smaller budgets and a lot of personal projects such as exhibitions, magazines, animations and tools like FUCKSPOTIFY with no budget at all. It does slow my output a lot and I work much too often, but I am fine with my career progression taking a while longer and actually enjoying what I'm doing.

HS

Finally, it would be wonderful to know how you think about the future of FUCKSPOTIFY, is it as you say that it should exist "in the dark forest of the internet", as a moment of time, remembered by just a few individuals who share the sentiments it preaches, or if you would imagine a future iteration.

NA

I think as a practical product I'm pretty much done with it apart from maybe adding more streaming services to transfer to and maybe a couple more features. After that, I think I'll leave it as it is and move on to new ventures. As I mentioned before, my plan now is mostly to find/create a good way to share tools such as this, both online and physically. I have an idea of a pretty grand project I want to start, but it will require a lot of work and collaborators so we'll see. If anybody reading this feels particularly akin to me or has any kind of crazy ideas, please get in contact!

THE ASSHOLE IN THE PHOTO IS DANIEL E. SPOTIFY'S CEO. HIS INVESTMENT COMPANY RAISED 13 Bn\$ IN AI WARFARE. - STREAMING WILL NEVER BE A GOOD WAY TO BRING REVENUE TO ARTISTS, IT'S ONLY GOOD FOR EXPOSURE. BUY ALBUMS, MERCH, GO TO CONCERTS AND DONATE. MUSIC IS NOT A GIVEN.

fuckspotify.netlify.app

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FUCKSPOTIFY

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Niccolò Abate x Harriet Shepherd

Niccolò Abate is a trans non-binary Italian artist, animator, and creative technologist based in London. Working at the intersection of technology, identity, and power, they blend 3D animation, game engines, physical computing, and speculative design to craft dreamlike worlds and critical experiences. With an MA from the Royal College of Art and a BA from Politecnico di Milano, their work spans intimate animations on gender, video games critiquing technocratic futures, and experimental performances.

Their projects have shown at Ars Electronica, Centre Pompidou's IRCAM Forum, New Designers London, Hybrida.space, and the Singapore Art Museum. Collaborations include Berlin's Moving Castles (Rat237, Clearnet Paranoia), stage visuals for Paris Texas at Coachella, and 3D work with Object & Animal and UNCANNY. Part of the multidisciplinary crew Covo, they create tools that disrupt or streamline production, always probing how digital systems shape our insecurities and collective dreams.

@sylathas | Sylathas.world

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Text by Cornelia Skrok

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"Transubstantiation Part II: Proliferation and Rot" was an exhibition held in the startling Brompton Cemetery in July 2025. Cornelia Skrok, in collaboration with Niccolò Abate, displayed *Save Me*, a multi-media interactive artwork.

This piece was quite unusual for me as an artist, as despite discussing familiar themes to my practice, the act of working with the medium was quite challenging. We tried to make a piece that was very grand and structural, to match the other artworks, as well as consider the chapel the exhibition was held at. *Save me* consists of a metal theatre-like structure/cage with collage-paintings at the back of the structure, which surround a TV with a digital character enclosed within the whole space. On top of the structure all sorts of chains and ropes were hung to allow the viewer to interact with the piece—receive responses from the character while slowly uncovering the artworks underneath.

The concept for the artworks was research-heavy, as the collage was to be focused on uncovering media's takes on different major issues in the world and juxtaposing data, in order to make huge scary numbers more comprehensible for the everyday human brain. Despite being quite depressing, showcase a shift of some responsibility from the average person and perhaps shed some hope. I explored topics such as Western war profiteers aka "defense spending" from the public sector, the right to protest in the US vs UK in the latest years, in context to the war on Gaza, and how Western media, on either of the political spectrums approach and present to us factual data – or don't. On top of this, I found a great opportunity to not only show how "liberal" Western governments fail us, but also focus on the statistics to really showcase how little we

understand of what is happening in the world, and actually how much money there is in circulation that everyday people have no power over. For example, in the collage I juxtapose the current market price of AI in the US alone—estimated to reach over \$1 trillion by 2025, according to Statista—with the amount of funds needed to rebuild Gaza, reported as more than \$50 billion in 2025 by journalist Alastair McCready. Depending on data sources, it could cost anywhere between 30 to 70% of the US AI market as of 2025, and despite that being a crazy comparison to make, it really makes it more understandable for our brains but also so much more disappointing that the money is there, just no will to act from those who hold the power.

I think in this way I am building a bridge of information, that on one hand further divides us— from the people in power but on the other hand furthers a more comprehensible idea of the world and the current priorities of different states— which in turn should bring a grand majority of us closer together. As the big text on the artwork summarises, despite our wide differences and various struggles as a humankind - freedom is not selective, but struggle is collective.

With all of this being said, as an artist in the process of uncovering this I was truly disheartened to see the sheer amount of propaganda, misleading information and how powerless we feel as an individual in the middle of these horrendous legislations, and acts of terror around the world, either physical or purely political. As a person, I have a great amount of curiosity and hope, but I also tend to overthink like crazy and I am prone to depressive episodes, and to say the least this research did not help. However, making the time to make these intricate connections that people simply don't have a reason or time to do was in itself a success and a step forward a



possibility of better future, not to mention the ability to exhibit this piece, make others rediscover information for themselves, and engage in meaningful, hard yet hopeful conversations.

Through speculative storytelling, the installation addresses the faults in corporate social responsibility. It explores how neo-liberal capitalists manage to do the social bare minimum, whilst putting the choice of responsibility and change on individuals, actively infecting them with the sickness of apathy and hopelessness. Modern slavery, technological bias and informational censorship are highlighted through the physical and collective act of uncovering the installation itself.

Save me

A short description of *save me*, as seen in the exhibition's catalogue:

A small, distorted character hangs in a dark space, trapped. Its body, human and unnatural, trembles under invisible weights controlled by God-knows-who. You're invited to free it, piece by piece. As the chains come off, it changes - learning or forgetting. Something will be revealed. It's unclear who this is really freeing: the figure, you, or both.

*Save me, echoes in the void.
Save me, from what?
Save me, why?
Save me.*

Cornelia Skrok is a London-based multidisciplinary artist working across short film, graphics, painting, and publication. Embracing DIY methods, and raw aesthetics, their work resists digital perfection and automation.

Rooted in a critique of mass media and consumption, Cornelia draws from anthropology, sociology, Polish Soviet-era design, music subcultures, and Y2K optimism. They often use overlooked media or data to disrupt familiar narratives. Cornelia holds an MA in Visual Communications from the RCA and a BA in Design from Goldsmiths, University of London.

Unapologetically blunt, their practice rejects sanitized aesthetics in favour of visceral and provocatively human work. They seek to spark dialogue, challenge comfort zones, and foreground the messy realities and truths that often sit beneath polished surfaces— as befits a Pole.

@corn.jpg



POSTMODERNISM

Text by Samuel Christopher Ng

Nowadays, to be a “professional” designer means to have accountability, discipline, relevancy, neutrality, skill, etc., which are values that elevate the practice from mere hobbyism into something that contributes to society. On the other hand, it has also come to signify conformity, good designers treated merely as a marketable commodity, aimed to satisfy commercial goals.

In this sort of environment, creativity that is the core of design practice suffers as it becomes secondary. It is a shadow of the spark that got us into design in the first place. Because of this, working freelance has the appeal to enjoy some level of freedom that we used to have, while being able to sustain our livelihoods. Interrogating this tension, thus, reveals a critique that should invite us to rethink what professionalism should mean.

"The Sterile Apolitical Design Tradition" (Katherine McCoy) and "The Thrill is Gone (Almost)" (Michael Bierut)

Since the mid-late twentieth century, design as a practice has wrestled with the effects of commercialization. In her essay "Countering the Tradition of the Apolitical Designer" (1993), Katherine McCoy criticized the "white lab coat" neutrality of professionalism in design, in which designers are discouraged from their personal beliefs and values, adhering only to client goals. In this environment, design is treated merely as a tool, rather than a cultural act. "Good" designers are thus reduced to commodities, expandable, and interchangeable, expected to deliver designs with efficiency rather than insight.

This is echoed by Michael Bierut's essay "The Thrill is Gone (Almost)" (1980), which points out the hidden cost of professionalism that pushed true creatives of the field to the fringes: the sacrificing of the thrill of creation in favor of short- and long-term corporate goals. We commonly find in professional design life, be it fashion, graphics, product, etc., outcomes that do not steer far from Pinterest echo chambers, clients who change the work, and decision-making marketing teams who prefer to play it safe. In this system, the value of design work is not defined by originality or meaning, but by the predictable delivery of marketable outcomes. It is the same way generative AI, which produces work based on existing case studies instead of abstraction, is more favored by companies due to its efficiency.

Creativity and the risk are inseparable, and the thrill of freelance that accommodates risk

While all this is going on, freelancing seems to offer a degree of freedom away from reductive standards. Yes, freelance design would technically still be considered a business and requires fulfilling the client's goals, yet here the risk involved is honestly embraced rather than avoided.

Generally, freelance clients are bold enough to value an outsider's point of view to help their business. These clients are willing to take risks to break into the market, pushing limits and challenging conventions to grow. Freelance jobs could also include simple passion projects like a humble greeting card for a loved one, involving virtually no risk, allowing almost unlimited creative muscle flexing.

Creativity and risk are inseparable. We can never know for sure the outcome of a design, we can only trust the process that presupposes risks of failure. In an environment where risk is demonized, breakthrough and innovation is also limited. To quote Milton Glaser, "...when you eliminate the possibility of failure you also limit the imagination."

Professional vs Unprofessional

If commercial success isn't the ultimate goal, what value takes its place? To be a professional, originally meant one who professes publicly to master skills, rigor, and specialized knowledge. It was less about how much money one makes, and more of a cultural act of expression using skill and insight driven by personal or societal values. We should therefore disown or "unprofess" the narrow values that are suffocating the creative sphere.

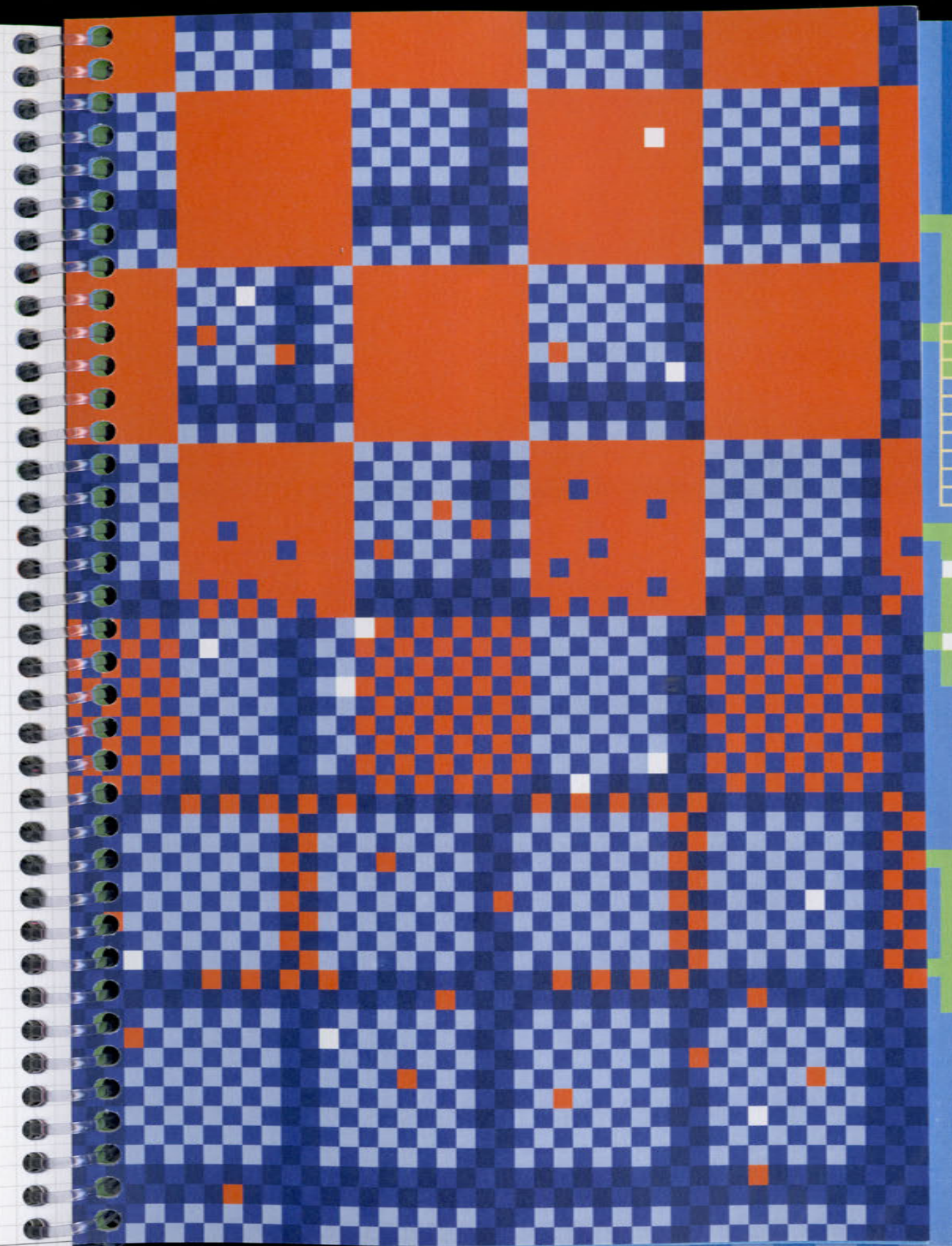
This is not to encourage a full romanticisation of failure as the counter ideal because it is unsustainable and risks self-destruction, and complacency. The alternative should not reject skill, discipline, and rigor. Design, after all, is a practice of communication, and communication requires responsibilities to audiences as well as clients.

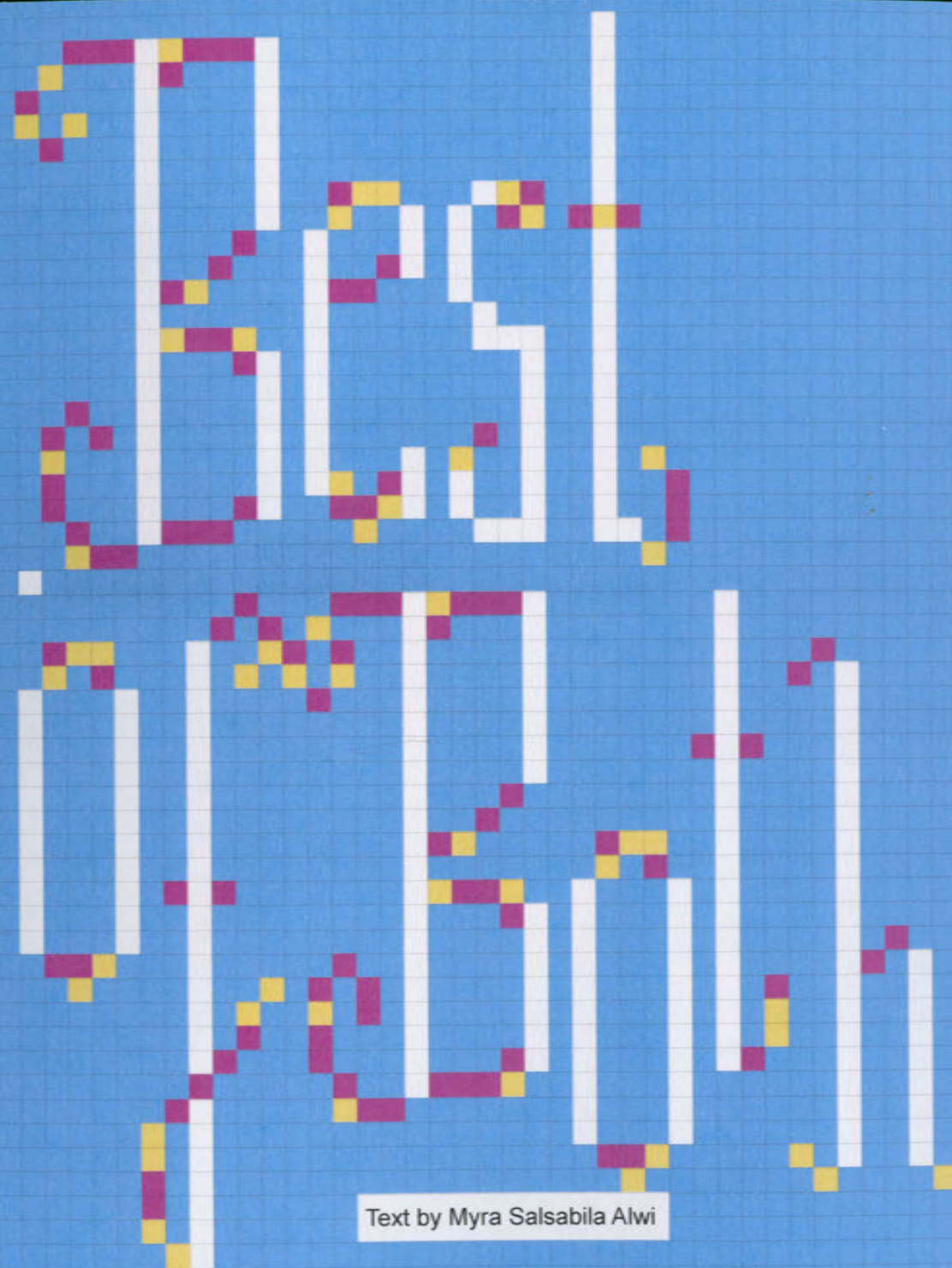
What we need instead is to reclaim what it means to be professional. Design, then, must be disentangled from narrow monetary dictates without discarding its core values. Tenacity, brilliance, and discipline are not enemies of creativity; they are the scaffolding that allows risk to become meaningful rather than reckless.

Let's then unprofess market goals as our guiding principles through our practice. Instead, profess proper design as life, as a cultural practice. McCoy points out we designers need to reclaim our voices as individuals contributing to society. Besides surviving, we also need to be aware that design is also an extension of the values we hold, rather than only existing as mere business tools.

The problem of professionalism in design is ultimately a problem of values. If we accept the current system, avoiding risks and playing safe defeats the purpose of creative design in the first place that corporations benefited from. If we reject professionalism entirely, we risk complacency and unsustainability. We need to reclaim and reorient design toward values beyond money, embrace risk of failure as part of creativity, and see that the role of a designer is not only to serve commerce, but to shape culture.

Samuel Christopher Ng is a multidisciplinary designer whose work spans branding, packaging, and illustration. He approaches design with an analytical mindset — seeking clarity through research, exploration, and thoughtful problem-solving. His practice is driven by a curiosity for cultural narratives, and he is particularly interested in weaving diverse cultural themes into cohesive visual experiences. With a strong focus on purpose and meaning, Sam creates design solutions that are both conceptually grounded and visually compelling.





Text by Myra Salsabila Alwi

Hannah Montana Works a Creative Role in a Corporate Setting

There is a certain "look" that is attributed to people who work in corporate settings, the specific sharp edges and clean-cut forms of work attire. I position "look" in quotations as to suggest two things; the way office workers look in a literal sense, and as in "fashion looks". One can look like they work a desk job, or one can cultivate looks that conform with the norms of office work through styling. Pencil skirts, modest kitten heels, a blazer with shoulder pads if you're feeling bold. Goyard bags and Tory Burch lanyards, in neutral colors that don't scream but subtly whispers, "Take me seriously. I am a serious person who does serious things."

For creative workers, that standard sounds like a distant dream. We could wear more colors, more out-there garments. Silhouettes that can be played with more. Showing a lot of you in your outfit is widely accepted. It is less about conforming and more about showing how different one could be, how to make it obvious that they work in the realms outside of Microsoft Excel and databases. It's putting personalities forward and making a statement that one is creative enough not to be another cog in the corporate machine. It's almost a completely different world, more vibrant and forgiving with what you wear to work.

In a capitalistic world that values people based on how much profit they can amass for their employer, what is considered professional often overlaps with what the people who earn a lot do. How we have a dress code to spot which ones are professionals and which ones aren't is just part of the bigger scheme of corporate language that professionals speak. I would liken it to being inducted into a club, where you have to know how to dress and how to talk to be considered one wolf of the revered pack.

Of course, creatives aren't lucky enough to be an exception to this capitalistic system. It is a unique experience having to keep the ideals and identity of a creative practice while still earning enough money to live another day first and fund the next creative endeavor later. Oftentimes, taking up a corporate job is the only way to ensure livelihood. Not many can deny that the predictable amount in a monthly paycheck gives a better sense of security than a lush check for a three-month long freelance project that comes and goes.

This results in a phenomenon that I constantly see among my creative peers: creatives trying to fit into a corporate setting.

In the office space, a space deeply entrenched in the foundations of capitalism, individual identity isn't valued. We work together as a team, oriented by results, and generate profit. There is a language to be spoken, a delicate push and pull of corporate dynamics muddled by bureaucracy and under the guise of professionalism. Styles to be adhered to, pencil skirts and pressed trousers to wear, subtly worded emails instead of direct communication.

And yet, as the only graphic designer in the marketing department, the creative one of the team, your workload increases by an additional covertly assigned task: to balance between both worlds. You must conform to the work attire enough to be a part of the pack, but must also be bursting with enough personality to ensure that they can trust you with designing their pitch decks.

You could draw a comparison to the "signaling" historically seen in queer fashion. A subtle carabiner to show a bit of your identity in a safe manner, a bright pink tote bag as a testament that you are someone who knows aesthetics and composition and probably calls it "typeface" instead of "font".

But one shouldn't lean into one side more than the other. The line is not meant to be crossed but to be straddled, each foot in both worlds. They don't want Miley Stewart or Hannah Montana, they want someone who is simultaneously both. Here is a person who can travel between worlds, over the threshold, borrowing traits and insights from both sides to be able to deliver results.

How much "creative" is palatable for the corporate world? This is yet another measurement one must decipher when you are expected to break the standards in a way that remains digestible to be deemed professional. One must not surpass this invisible threshold when figuring out how many statement necklaces and funky socks one can wear to be taken seriously at the office while remaining regarded as capable of performing profitable creativity for the company.

After all, it could be argued that what is wanted is a manageable rebel, a pop star who passes as a normal girl next door. Someone who can create new Memphis-style illustrations for the company website, is creative enough to draw but not enough to question or much less dismantle a system that has been there since the 90s.

Which brings me to this conclusion: management doesn't want the creatives in their corporate bubble to break conformity or defy standards. Rather, they are just given a little more wiggle room that is necessary to show enough identity through business casual outfits, communicating that this one, albeit a little different and quirky, is still one of the cogs in the machine that moves to generate profit. Which is more often than not a direct parallel of how they work in the office. It is also why most of them — most of us — have a separate creative endeavor, design practice, however you wanna call it that we consider our actual practice. The things that only belong to us, our ideals, our identity, that exist for the sake of existing instead of to be profitable. The thing that our corporate day job funds, what makes every business casual Friday worth it.

The language of corporate has been spoken through many facets over many years, a standard to conform to for the sake of professionalism. And yet, as more creatives live only on their art, we start coming into these professional settings, forcing us to speak their language and adhere to their norm. It begs for us to challenge it. If we must show that we are as professional as we are creative — effectively creating a bigger tolerance on what is considered acceptable contradicting corporate norms — then is the norm itself needed? Shouldn't we be passing the era of industry where we are anonymous workers and loudly embrace our identities as unique individuals without compromising our day job?



Myra Salsabila Alwi is a proud Indonesian graphic designer and architecture graduate. Driven by social justice and the belief that every struggle is interconnected, their practices polarize between commercial works ranging from social media and advertising, set design, and community based participatory design workshops. In between design, they occasionally teach about visual arts and write about cultural phenomenons. You can find them on instagram under

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Unknown Quantities 13 thanks our fifteen contributors for sharing their worlds with us, from personal reflections to challenges against the rules that shape our lives, and to deeply political insights. Our gratitude extends to Nick and Matthew for their steady guidance, and to Central Saint Martins for creating the conditions that allowed this collaboration to take form.

In responding to the hope carried by *Unknown Quantities 12*, *Unknown Quantities 13* continues the work of questioning the systems we move through, especially those that claim to define professionalism, value, and success. We hope this issue acts as a space where uncertainty is not hidden, where mistakes can be spoken, and where unconventional voices can find room to breathe.

To *Unknown Quantities 14*, we pass this responsibility forward. May you continue to look closely at what troubles the world, and may you also welcome the stories that hold care, curiosity, resistance, and the possibility of imagining otherwise.

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Unknown Quantities is an experimental print publication. A collaborative effort of MA Culture, Criticism and Curation & MA Graphic Communication Design

Unknown Quantities 13 was printed and bound in the Publications Workshop at Central Saint Martins, UAL.

Type: Arial and Times New Roman

ISSN 2055-1479

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Special thanks:

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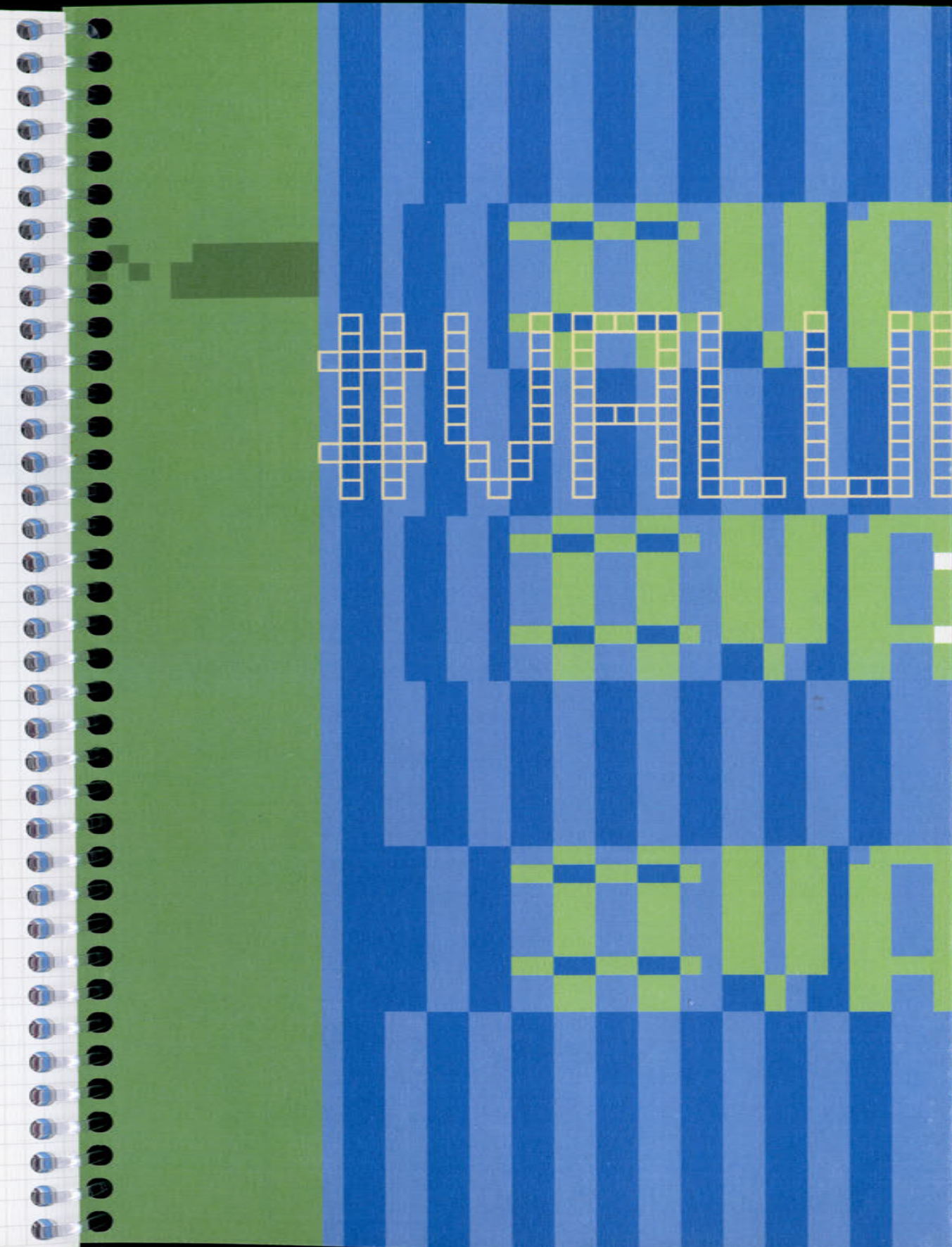
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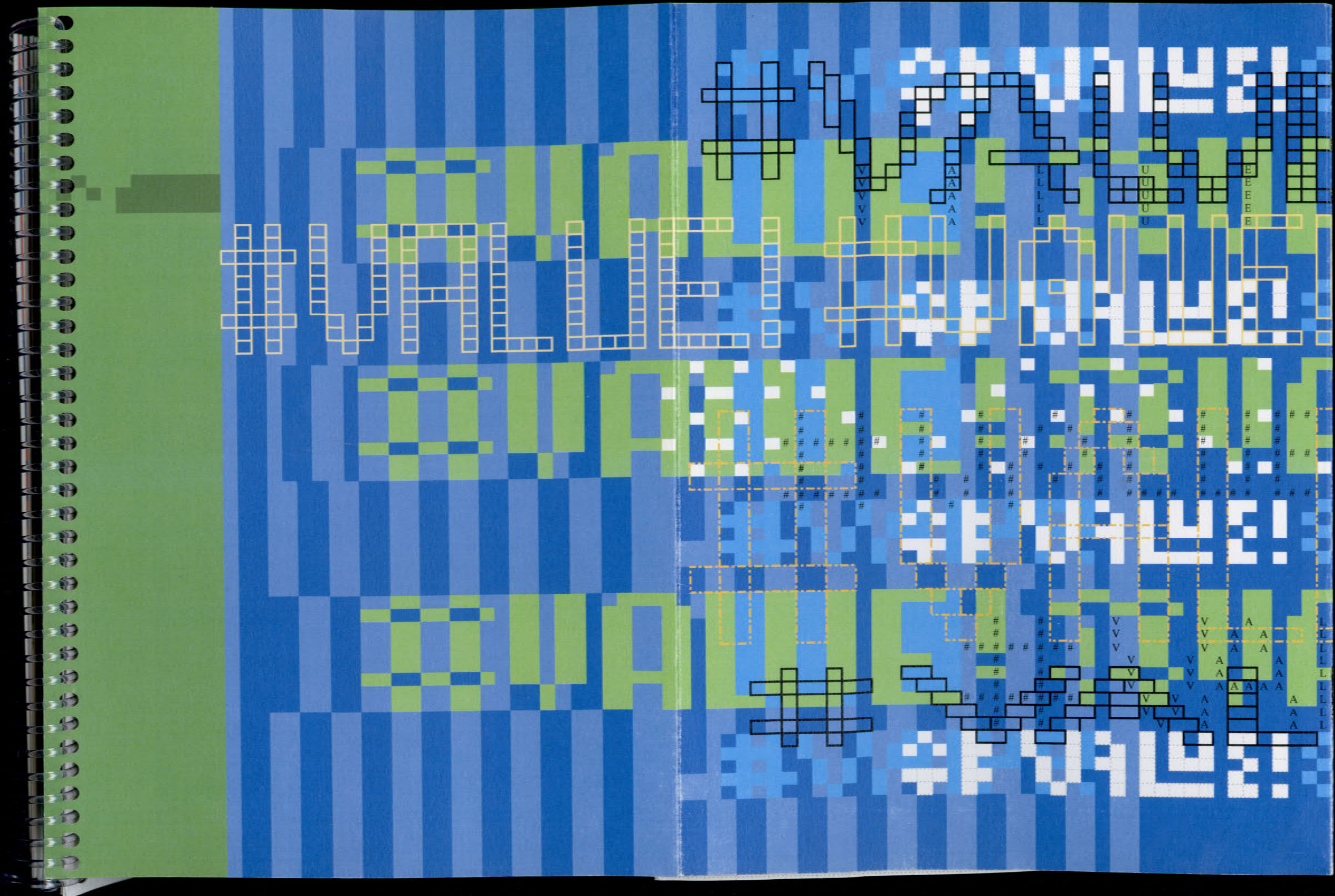
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saint martins

Unknown Quantities 13 is printed on surplus paper generously donated by Fedrigoni. By utilizing high-quality stock destined for recycling, we are prioritizing reuse, saving resources and extending the material's lifecycle. This reflects a core shared commitment between UQ and Fedrigoni.

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