



HAIRY ENCHANTMENT

A NEW APPROACH TO MATERIAL STUDY IN CRAFT

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**Hairy Enchantment:
a new approach to material study in craft**

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Figure 1. Yang Xu, digital collage, *Hairy Enchantment*, 2021.



ABSTRACT

Hair is a *human* material: a filamentary vessel for our genetic information, it multitasks as an aesthetic band-aid, a mourning conduit, an intrinsic identity card, and an overall knotty entanglement with our existence.

Craft is a *human* practice: the *hand* being its essence, it embarks on a journey, from conception to execution, of problem-solving. Dexterity and tenacity are the sought-after traits; materials are to be tamed.

Inspired by Jane Bennett's *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*, the artistic research delves into these two sites where vibrant materiality is muffled by the smothering hands of anthropocentrism and sets to cultivating a response-ability to the affective dimensions of *things* and tell tales of their emerging moments of enchantment.

Two particular states of wonder, encountered during the making of the artwork that constitutes the artistic research together with a written thesis, are highlighted in an attempt to provide the reader with an immersive experience of an enchanting materiality that heightens senses, suspends critical faculties, and immobilizes time.

At the concluding yet certainly not ending stage of the research, an *ink wash painting* arises; a renewed ontological understanding of materiality in craft is hoped; perhaps an ethical generosity encouraged by a wondrous joy rather than a tragic self-loathing can thus be imagined.

Keywords: craft, hair, enchantment, materiality, new materialism, matter



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Figure 2. Yang Xu, hairy raw material in cellophane bags, 2021.



THANK YOU

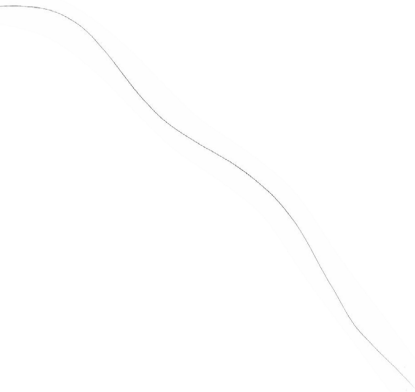
Thank you, David Huycke, for being my supervisor. Your words that tangled my thinking into a daunting knot like the hairy flower that wouldn't come off, only to relieve it like a pair of iron scissors. My sincere respects to you, as an artist as well as a craftsman.

Thank you, Peter de Cupere, for opening a fragrant door for me to the world of scent in art to which I had been so oblivious. Your generosity and help in my first expedition to the shore of seeing through smelling.

Thank you, to everyone I met during my short stay at PXL-MAD, for your much-cherished company in this peculiar time of the century. I thank you for listening to and laughing with me when my rumbling was just a messy utterance.

And thank you, mum, for your endless and much under-recognized support to a daughter who is as capricious as I am and to an artist who is as lost as I am. Thank you, for never once in my life asking me, *why don't you go find a real job.*

FIRST ENCOUNTER



To you, my dearest reader who decided to flip through this artistic research unfolded in the ensuing successions of signs and doodles, allow me a moment of caveat to pave for you the way to a sense-activating enchantment that you are about to be entangled into.

I chose to compose the thesis in a less than conventional structure, fragmented as if the beginning and the end were lost in translation and in a narrative sometimes humorous, a few times wordy, almost always sentimental, for I deem it to be the only appropriate way to honor the messiest exuberance with which *hair*, our protagonist, charmed me during this artistic exploration. Some words are left out; some void is created, but as the poetic of Chinese ink wash painting (making its appearance in the chapter *Gut Feelings*) praises a blankness burdened with meaning, I hope my work will offer a meditative space for nuanced information and interpretations, to you and to me.

In that sense, the text functions as a piece of artwork in and of itself, but also as a textual counterpart to the physical artwork constructed with hair, specifically my hair, in reaction to my lingering and agitating attachment to it. The work is made wearable jewelry, as a metaphor for the hairy heroine's return to the body of origin after a journey of meaningful and meaningless intermingling, and as a disciplinary reference to the context of craft where the research is situated.

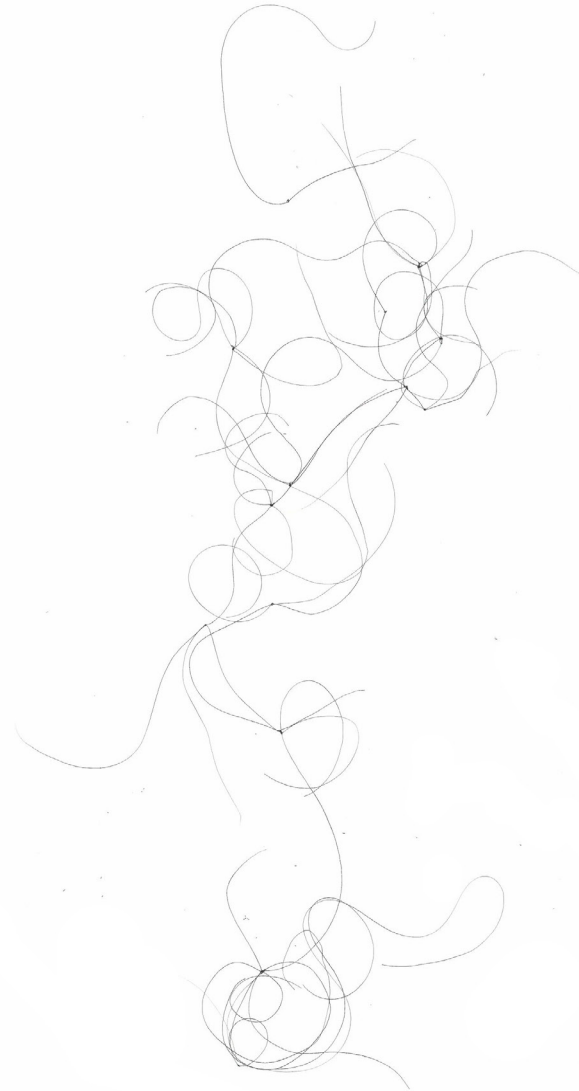
So, shall we?

MY BANGS



AND
PANTENE
AND

I



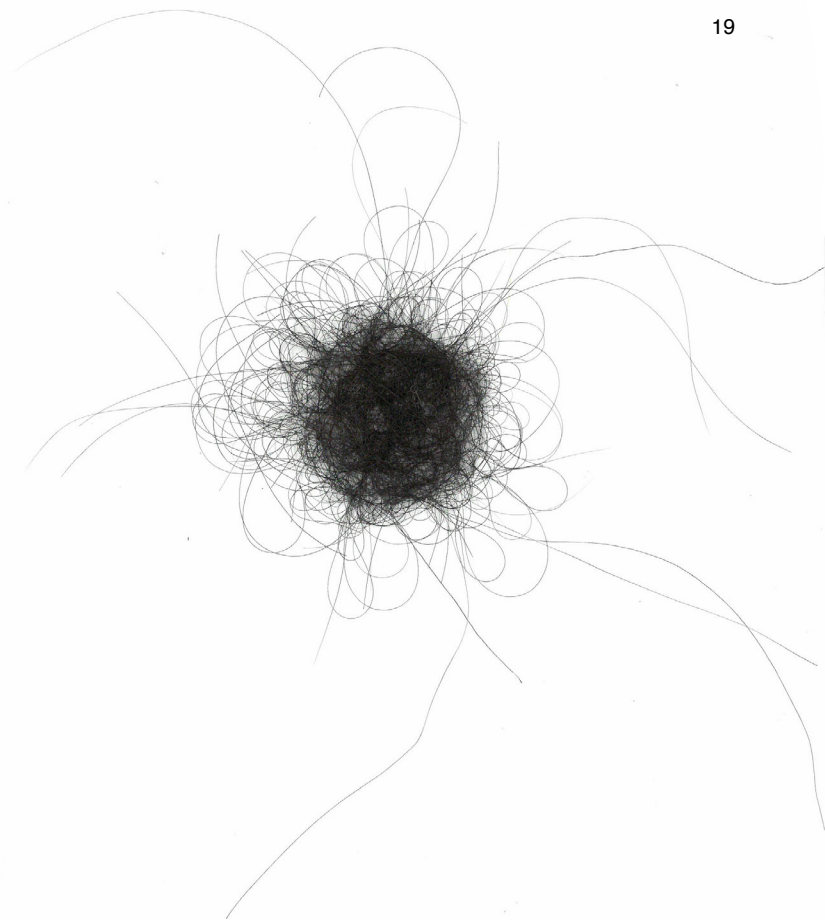
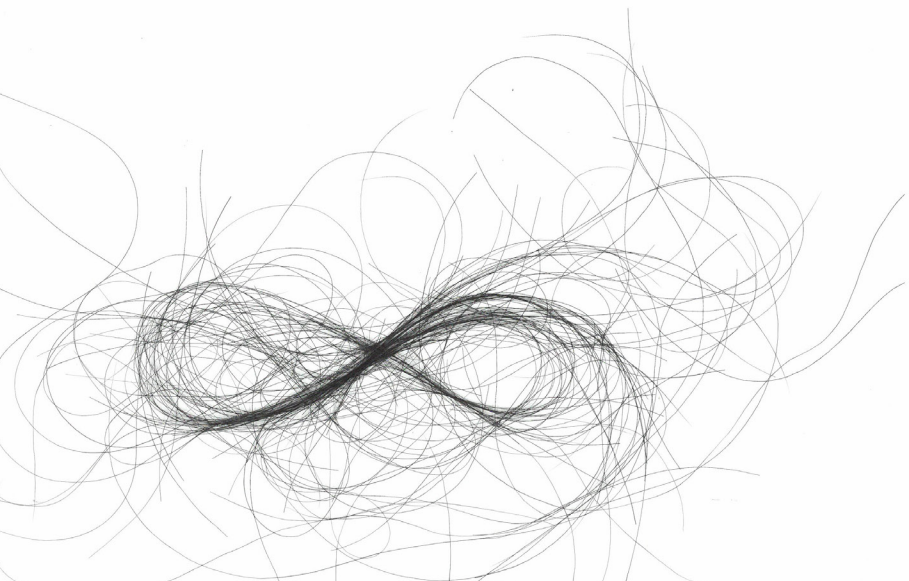
Brushing hair could be a painful endeavor.

Anyone who has or has had long hair at some point in their life knows that I am not exaggerating. A glossy head of hair so smooth that any brush which gets into contact with it freefalls like going down a playground slide only exits in a Pantene commercial. It usually results in a neck and neck battle between my incontestable commitment to detangling the hair knots and their sheer tenacity of staying in formation. But what truly makes knots vicious beings is their mastery of chicanery. A brushing experience almost always starts with them being on good terms with the brush, yet the moment my attentively moving hand becomes complacent, the bristles dash into a ball of intermingled strands, like a wild animal stuck in a swamp. It is a quotidian struggle of deciding whether to leave the house with a trapped brush as the newest trendy hair accessory or to manufacture a homemade pixie-bob cut.

By a determined yank fed on a temporal urgency, I managed a show of dominance and relieved one unruly knot from its birthplace. The freed fluff instead, clung onto the wooden bristles of the brush. I tried to pull the hairy entanglement off from the comb, yet somehow the force catalyzed an even more enamored bonding between the two. It just wouldn't come off!

As cheesy as Gump's box of chocolate, the poetics of life sometimes catch you off guard at the most unexpected times of frustration. As I put the mess away, a black line drawing of a flower emerged from afar.

On that struggling morning, I saw a blossoming flower through a wild lump of hair and a stern wooden brush. Pitching the chaotic against the orderly, a juxtaposition is concocted. Thus a seductive micro-universe is created, with an ambivalent undertone of something in between. The pulling tensions between contrasting components forming a dynamic stagnation, like a tug-of-war that just stalled into a deadlock, are reminiscent of the persistent standstill happening in my daily chore of hair brushing. This flower of formation, this paradoxical coexistence of order and disorder, this precarious equilibrium balancing the myriad constituent forces, the ultimate state of being, is what fascinates me.



I

As a vestigial structure that is no longer required to serve our thermal insulation needs, hair has become an appendage of human skin. Mature hair shafts are nonliving bilocia fibers,¹ with the cuticle, cortex, and occasionally medulla as the three constituent layers. Except for a few growing cells at the base of the root, hair is dead tissue that is composed primarily of keratin and related proteins.² Thus regarded as a part of the human exoskeleton, along with nails, our hair, due to the lack of nerve endings, does not respond to damaging stimuli nor generate the sensation of pain. Hence the non-detrimentality of mindlessly trimming these corporeal appendages. This insensate attribute should also help us to carry out an effortless deduction in regard to why compared to other body parts, we are more willing to subject our keratinized filaments to brutal mutilations on a regular basis. A casual search on Wikipedia with the keyword *hairstyle* yields 105 different names of tool-assisted intricate techniques, to just name but a few of which: cutting, metal blades with sharpened edges; curling, sizzling iron heated up to 250°C; bleaching, harsh chemicals such as ammonia to strip away the genetic information...A time-traveling executioner from the medieval times when ideas of torturing were crafted with great creativity might spot some intersections of these fashioning methods with his own metier.

1. Bertolino et al., *Biology of Hair Follicles*, 292.

2. Ibid..

II

While the fact that hair is continually shed and renewed by the operation of alternating cycles of growth, rest, fallout, and renewed growth³ presumably also contributes to our nonchalance towards frequent hair makeovers (since for example, a bad haircut will always convalesce in a timeframe of months), this flippant attitude may result in some less lighthearted implications in the legal system. "Advances in technology and keratin analysis make hair an increasingly important substance for DNA testing, drug testing, and, the most recently announced development, cancer screening."⁴ Yet unlike the intrusive seizure of blood sample that is more likely to induce concerns on violation of the individual's constitutional rights, the benignity of hair taking, with its minimum level of pain and intrusion seems to guarantee an argument that denies any infringement on the aforementioned rights of such an action.⁵ The stark contrast between the significance of the genetic information and biological identity that can be revealed through hair analyses and the insignificance of property interest over such a bodily material that is generally regarded as a mere waste product due to its fast regeneration rate thus calls to attention an urgency for reform in the legal systems.⁶

3. Ibid., 290-91.

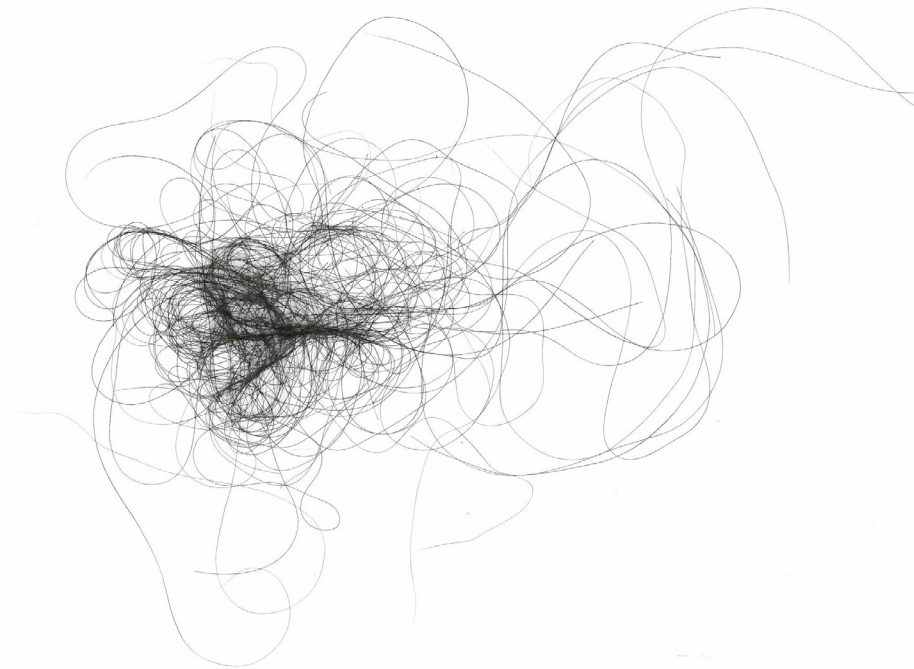
4. Hansen, *Comeback for Hair Evidence*, 66; James et al., "Hair for Breast Cancer," 33.

5. Pergament, *Not Just Hair*, 58.

6. Ibid., 59.

III

For the most part of my autonomic self-styling years, the fluctuation of my hair length has been kept inconsequential. Yet, one day I decided to chop up a big portion of it in the hope of a mood revitalization coupled with a saving on shampoo expense. Never will I forget the hesitant and inquiring look that exploded on my friends' faces the moment when I showed up in front of them with the new look, compliments expected. Instinctively I answered: "No, I didn't break up with my boyfriend." And it turned out that this was exactly what they were so nosily trying to find out with their silent stare. So where does this seemingly arbitrarily established yet widely shared correlation between hair cutting and relationship problems come from? One potential explanation that I would like to offer here is located within the context of Chinese culture. It stems from an old Buddhist analogy of describing hair as, word for word, three thousand threads of nuisance. Oftentimes this rhetoric can be found in poems that convey the philosophy of how the ceremonial act of cutting up one's hair symbolizes the determination of letting go of one's worldly obsessions, a concept that is quintessential in Buddhism and the ideological backbone of its tonsure. As much as China purports to be a secular state, this Buddhism-inspired analogy has permeated our daily life for centuries through literature and without doubt, left a mark in our way of thinking, and in this particular case, muddled our way of perceiving hair.



IV

The colorful (yes! literally) diversity of hairstyles doesn't just mirror the contemporary population's close reading of Vogue's hair segment. It is also an important entrance into understanding one's social, cultural, religious, and even political identity. Recall the teenage days, you sport a Mohawk in honor of your admiration for David Beckham and your attempt to claim freedom from the "suffocating" parenting; the monks with their shaved heads collect alms from households in Thailand. Begone! Hair; begone! Ego. Also recall the self-imposed equations between hip hop and cornrows, hipsters and dreadlocks, LGBTQ and ombré rainbow dye. Interestingly in today's political climate where public discourse is dominantly hypersensitive and has the tendency of politicizing anything and everything, a proud declaration of one's proclivity for certain characteristics in their potential partner's hair seems to be the only few left that triggers minor or no repugnance, with the worst possible judgment stopping at a harmless laugh at the subject's taste in beauty or lack of it for that matter. To say that one prefers not to date a bald person hardly erects any cry of discrimination among the members of the targeted group. Yet is hair in and of itself really devoid of any substantial play as a social signifier?

V

Asian hair, usually straight due to its round follicle, grows perpendicularly to the scalp, with the fastest growth rate yet the lowest density among all the ethnicities. While we obtained a scientific account for my fine and flat threads of nuisance, let us now take a look at a sinister twist on them: L-Cysteine is a non-essential amino acid used as an additive in food to prolong its shelf-life. Despite the possibility of synthesizing it in laboratories, most of the L-Cysteine used in products such as commercial bread comes from human hair gathered in barbershops and hair salons in China, because of its low cost and abundance.⁷ Thus on our hand is another example of *Made in China* found in international trades, this time, of baked goods. Would you say that the consumption of bread consisting of human substance, albeit in the form of an extracted protein, is a subcategory of cannibalism? Or a cannibalistic capitalism?

7. Brones, "Gross Ingredients in Food"

VI

The haircut has a startling effect on every woman's appearance. Individuals become a mass of bodies. Height, stoutness, or slimness: there is no distinguishing factor—it is the absence of hair which transformed individual women into like bodies. Age and other personal differences melt away. Facial expressions disappear. Instead, a blank, senseless stare emerges on a thousand faces of one naked, unappealing body. In a matter of minutes even the physical aspect of our numbers seems reduced—there is less of a substance to our dimensions. We become a monolithic mass. Inconsequential.⁸

As survivor Livia E. Bitton Jackson unfolds a chilling and heart-wrenching recount of Nazi's use of shaving as a form of systematic humiliation namely, the desexualization and removal of any signs of individual identity,⁹ we are reminded again of the terror that Jews were subjected to in concentration camps. As a means of totalitarian control, the degradation of the prisoners' humanness and personal worth was facilitated through the loss of hair, as well as the use of tattoos in replacement of names—acts analogous to the stripping away of any individuality, in other words, any connection with the outside world. Human beings were cruelly viewed as raw material for economic gains, with the hair harvested from the deceased utilized in Germany's felt and textile industry during the early 1940s.¹⁰



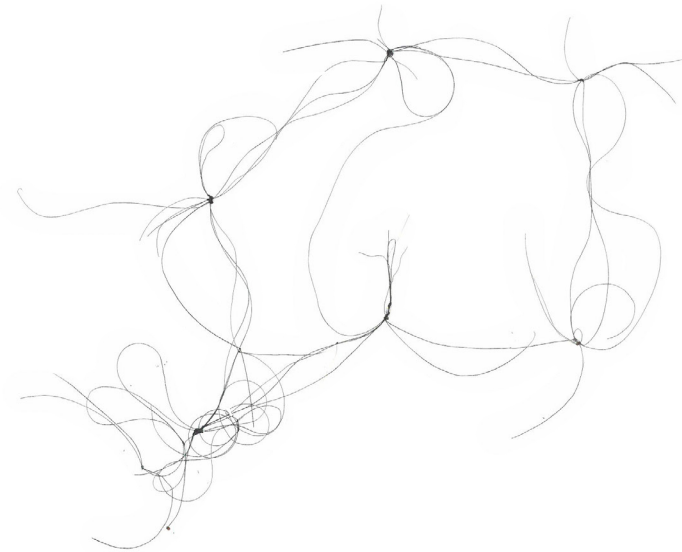
Figure 3. Yang Xu, hair knots photographed with long exposure, 2021.

8. Jackson, *Blond Braids at Auschwitz*, 16-17.

9. Pergament, *Not Just Hair*, 50.

10. *Ibid.*, 49.

Today, worldwide Holocaust memorial museums are displaying heaps after heaps of victims' hair in memory of the sufferers and as the undeniable evidence of the evil. These human remnants, standing as relics of the horrid past, have become faded and brittle, with some even diminishing to dust. The deterioration of the states is brought about by insect repellents, inadequate control of the ambient conditions, occasional washing, as well as the inexorable passage of time. Most of the hair is kept in the shape of the moment when it was seized: individual braids, tight knots, elegant waves along with tresses of every color.¹¹ Motion froze in time; arises a tranquility that sends shivers down your spine. Visitors come and go. Their minutes of contemplating silence are paying homage, to the tragedy, but how can you not say, also to the growing voyeuristic fascination with man-made atrocities as well as the capitalist success of dark tourism.¹² Hair, bearing witness, to time and to man.



11. Ryback, "Evidence of Evil."

12. Hodgkinson, "Concentration Camp 'Dark Tourism'" 22-32.

Some years ago, I did an exchange study in Stockholm, Sweden. On one breezy summer night, in the name (or disguise) of celebrating the completion of a project, my classmates, with whom I had hitherto managed to sustain a Nordic-style affability, and I decided to go to a bar that was near and dear to the heart of every student in that school. Not only because it was conveniently located just 50 meters away from the institution, but also serving mass-produced mediocre beers with an exceptionally user-friendly price point. Several jugs later, one of my contemporaries, a fellow Swedish jeweler, known for her display of bluntness which is very uncharacteristic of her countrymen, turned around at me, eyes piercing my soul, and enunciated: "why do Asians all have bangs?" For a millisecond, I was thrust into a vegetative state by the sound of the debate-inducing word *Asian*. Frozen was my faculty for comprehending the rest of the presumably rhetorical question rather than an inquiring one.

Oh, she is talking about my hair!

I mean, how can you not admire the mystery of the subconscious mind? The instant that the revelation presented itself in my mind, I noticed that my palm was already stroking the controversial strands of hair that were covering my forehead as if offering some kind of comradely comfort and condolence. Too dismayed to respond with anything sensible, mumbling and rumbling, I abruptly halted the night in a gnarly dissonance.

Figure 4. Yang Xu, digital collage, *Hairy Enchantment*, 2021.



Years later, time has slipped away, together with the mind-numbing stupefaction of being suddenly put in the spotlight and the incessant suspicion of the existence of malicious racial profiling. Under a clearer mind, the observantness of this comment, albeit muffled in a distastefully flavored delivery, is hard to dismiss. Hairstyles featuring bangs are the go-to choice in the eastern continent as yours truly is here to serve as a living breathing admittedly anecdotal evidence. It came to my realization that my forehead has not been scrutinized in the public eye ever since I claimed autonomy over my exterior display of individuality. So maybe a more prudent and less intrusive way of phrasing the problematic question and still helping my then colleague to prompt a due investigation on such a phenomenon might be: *why do I wear bangs?*

Growing up, I was surrounded by photos of celebrities who effortlessly integrated bangs into their highly praised personal style. Volume, length, curvature, density, translucency, airiness...all play an important part in determining the perfect bangs. In Asian countries such as Korea, Japan, and China, bangs are never appendant to the overall hairstyle as their location seems to suggest. They have their own world, serving an aesthetic and perhaps a utilitarian function in our comprehension of physical beauty. Bangs not only help render a more youthful and innocent image of self, qualities that are highly sought after since attractiveness is heavily based on the idea of cuteness in Eastern Asian countries. They also conveniently function as a portable tool to create an illusion of a smaller and slimmer face shape, another beauty standard that reaches the pinnacle of visual appreciation. As autonomous as I would like to believe myself to be over my own appearance, I realized I have ticked all the boxes listed above. My bangs tell a story of who I am or who I want to be, before I do.



HAIRY ENCHANTMENT

Craft is a practice.

By that, I mean a relatively small-scale production substantiated through the application of skill and material-based knowledge.¹ At the heart of craft, the curator and scholar M. Anna Fariello posited “the hand,...the process of working, of *making*.”² Craft disciplines, despite characterizing singularities vis-à-vis the produced outcomes stand boundaries blurred with a shared perpetual longing for a sensuous tactility. Hands/the *maker* on the one end and material/the *made* on the other, the continuum of craft coalesces into the middle ground of material expression in the manner of the *making*. The tale of *making* resonates a decorous romance of contemporary humans rekindling a bygone time when handmade spoke the language of mysticism and offered an asylum of transient pastorality.³ In an age saturated with 1 and 0, no wonder such a form of human creativity that evinces the tinkering of earthly matter as craft transcends to a mythological escapism, into the land of nostalgia.

To blossom into the perennial flower of “a thing well made, a thing that rightfully can claim the title of ‘craft’”, imagination needs to burgeon from the ground of parameterized design, but ultimately it is the skill of the hand that nourishes and flourishes.⁴ In essence, craft is a fluorescent journey of problem-solving. From conception to execution, a gnarled topography twisted and wretched by myriad natural matters and processes. The craftsman stands in the center, propelled by an instinct to sort things out and armored with *tacit knowledge*;⁵ problems are turned into opportunities, solved and exploited.

1. Adamson, *The Craft Reader*, 2.

2. Fariello, “Making and Naming,” 23.

3. See Adamson, “Pastoral,” 103-137.

4. Fariello, “Making and Naming,” 23.

5. *Tacit knowledge* is an epistemological concept promulgated by the Hungarian-British polymath Michael Polanyi in his books *Personal Knowledge* and *The Tacit Dimension*. In short, he argues that all knowledge is personal and rooted in the tacit dimension. “We know more than we can tell.” (Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, x.)

On the thought of Polanyian way of knowing—the transfer of knowledge—where the master is to be trusted unquestionably for their legitimacy and credibility in a specific practice and to be emulated uncritically by the apprentice in order to pick up its rules, both explicitly and implicitly known to the master themselves,⁶ somewhere in my brain, some synapses fired up; an old memory from my silversmithing training days is jogged: I used to be scolded a lot by my *master* at the time for my “headache-inducing, beastly” way of filing. “Never drag your files back and forth like a seesaw!” Never, even when your legs are bouncing incessantly due to the frustration induced by the uncooperative metal that seems to never dwindle into powder. Files are only meant to cut on a forward stroke. “Precision is the key to success.” He’d always say.

In the making world of craft, tips and tricks, knowledge and know-how are what set you on the path to blocking all the knocks thrown at your face, or more accurately at your hands. For they are the sedimentation congealed from generations of makers’ experience and skillful performance in trying to block similar or even the same knocks. In a way, there is no mystery in craft. Only a simple formula of a relentless application of precedent wisdom—tradition in combination with “practice makes perfect”. Of course simple doesn’t imply easy. Dexterity and tenacity are almost a given in any prospect of a prosperous craft career. Together with “truthfulness, honesty, and hospitality,”⁷ the almost antiquated commitment to stringency is what makes craft, as less and less efficient it may be, an art that twines its disciplinary values to human moral character.

6. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 53.

7. Fariello, “Making and Naming,” 34.

As a craftsperson in becoming, to me, one of the glistering lures of conjuring up objects with my own hands, so to speak, lies in the final moment of rejoicing at the substantial product, knowing the hurdles that have been overturned, the sweat and tears (perhaps blood) that have been shed, the technical obstacles that have been flattened and the imaginary that ceased to be imaginary. This sense of pride can't be too dissimilar from what Genghis Khan might have felt when he stood on the mountaintop of Burkhan Khaldun, overlooking the earth that he called his. But please, my dear reader, don't get too hung up on the Hollywoodian grandeur and inherently grisly undertone of my analogy. It is the human nature of control and conquest that I want to bring your attention to, which you must have tasted at some point in your life.

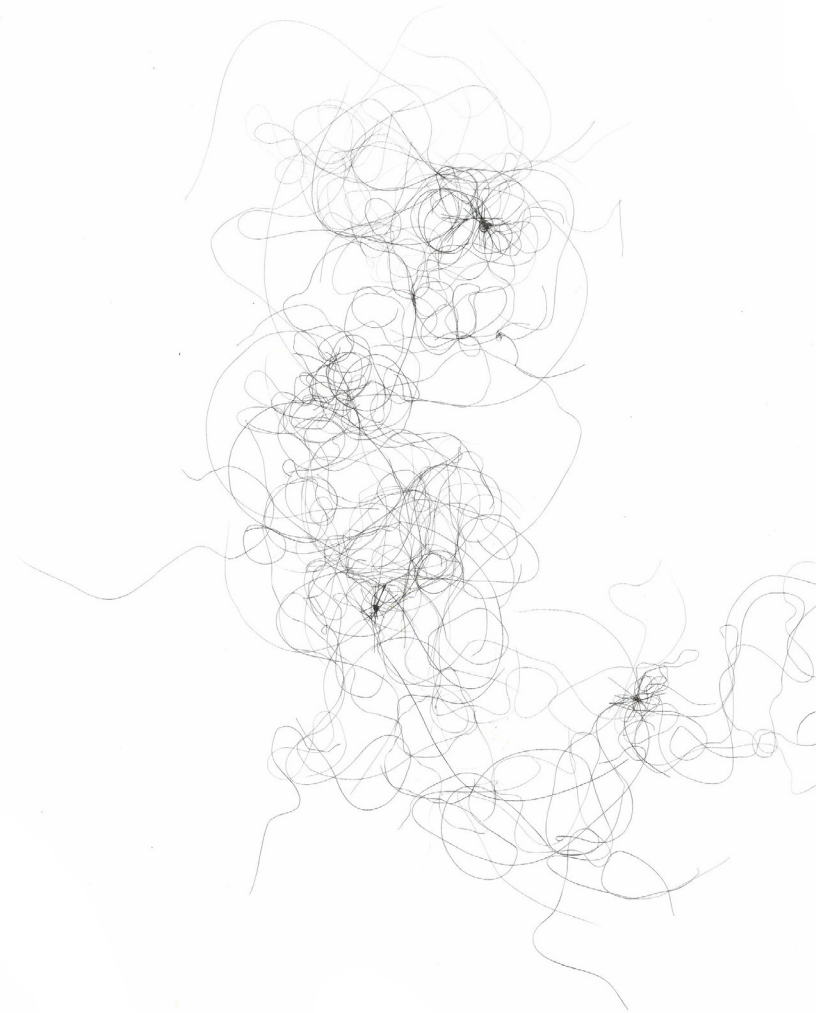
Craft is all too human.

It speaks the language of human desire. A syntax built upon tradition. A lexicon made up of ingenuity and mastery. Material is instrumentalized to sound the sound of humans. Craft objects, like the wavy grooves etched on a vinyl record, reenact the happenings in the studio. "Each mark—in clay, wood, stone, fiber, glass, pigment, or metal—is the archaeological evidence of an action taken by its maker."⁸ More than occasionally, writings on craft would take an anthropomorphic turn and use expressions such as "crafts objects...with a dynamic quality that begs for interaction."⁹ I always read with refreshing delight in their comical quirkiness threads of an animated *messy* past but only to find out the ouroboros of metaphor has circled back to the direction where the spiritual force with which material culture is imbued is a reflection of its maker.¹⁰

8. *Ibid.*, 25-26.

9. *Ibid.*, 38.

10. *Ibid.*, 39.



But just one small retreat back we would quickly realize the more than obvious fact that the making is always multilateral, with an army of participants that includes the human, the material, the rusty tools, the wooden bench, the tap water, the urban power grid, the intimidating gas tanks, the invisibly polluted air, just to name a few. If we were to peel away the layers of intangible meaning¹¹ radiated from a craft object, are there any that belong to the members other than *us*? How can I forget my embarrassingly sweaty armpits when trying to solder a delicate silver structure without melting it back to a lumpy nugget? Sometimes you do want to grow a hand that is fireproof. Or the exhilaration when opening up a pack of gold leaf, *the game is on!* Only to be ravaged soon after by the gentlest spring breeze. Or the eyeball-sized hole inscribed on the orange trousers you just bought, who should take the blame? Your shaky hand, the shabby pair of pincettes that is losing its grip, or the newly blown scorching glass? The inertia that we give materials credit for never ceases to stir *troubles* in our human experience with the world. After all, it is all too intuitive to think that the urge to tame a material implies a *force* of rebellion. I am always drawn to the instances that shower me in the material vitality, instances when sheer human agency cannot provide a satisfactory account. If problems are no longer problems, if imagination proliferates in multiple languages, if there is no center stage but an entangled web of threads and knots, what kind of approach to materials would it be and what kind of discipline would craft become?¹²

So what do you say to *thinking with matter*?

11. *Ibid.*, 38.

12. *Ibid.*, 40.

The unyielding dichotomies of problems/designs, dominated/dominating, tamed/conquering, matter/spirit, materials/hands, things/knowledge that compose the bedrock of craft practice are nothing more than the modernity where we are living in miniature. "A place of reason, freedom, and control,"¹³ drowned in the Cartesian tradition that pits the superiority of the mind against the elementary materiality; a damning epoch that agitates the once *slow* Earth with a label of catchy novelty called Anthropocene—an age where mankind plays a central role in geology and ecology and relishes its Great Acceleration¹⁴ of explosive growth in *Homo sapiens* numbers, resource appetites and environmental footprint.¹⁵ Anthropocene is as massive and ominous—hyperobjects being its sediments¹⁶—as it is ubiquitous and mundane—"nature" is no longer anywhere because humans (via climate change) are now everywhere."¹⁷

Having entered into this literal era of humans, we, athropos, contrived to stomp Gaia Earth under our feet, our rubber tires and our rocket exhaust plumes. The agency we are exerting, has turned the planet small and us large. And it is ours alone. Storming across the earthly terrain, we afloat beyond and above the world. Superseding the obsolete gods over their throne, we overlook (and overlook!) discrete objects and inanimate matter.

13. Bennett, *Enchantment of Modern Life*, 10.

14. See <https://www.anthropocene.info/great-acceleration.php> for charts that visualise the human activity in numbers from the start of the industrial revolution in 1750 to 2010.

15. Revkin, "An Anthropocene Journey."

16. *Hyperobject* is a term coined by Timothy Morton in his book *The Ecological Thought*, elucidating objects that are so massively distributed in time and space as to transcend spatiotemporal specificity, such as global warming, styrofoam, and radioactive plutonium. (Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 130.)

17. Benson, "New Materialism," 252.

It is the legacy of representationalism that bestows on man a sense of separateness from the rest, and a distant place from which to reflect, on the world, his fellow man and himself.¹⁸ But lest we forget the *ropes* that plunging up, bite the groping hands. The purportedly intuitive yet hastily concluded assumption of the exceptionalism of man who is solely worthy of agency sings a similar song, for Spinoza's conatus, Deleuze and Guattari's vitalism, Jane Bennett's thing-power...many minds have already flirted with the recalcitrance of matter that defiles human omnipotence as if possessing an active power. After all, recall my freshly blown scorching glass, succored by a slippery pair of pincettes that managed to heat up my rationality in just a split second; the capitalist destruction and multispecies survival unfolded by Anna Tsing's *Matsutake*;¹⁹ a striking cry for the creation of a geopolitical map for too many different CO₂s from a chemist colleague of Bruno Latour's...²⁰Each one of us human agents has stories of those *je ne sais quoi* moments stirred up by *mere objects* like the undulating waves caused by a mere pebble gliding into the stream. Only we enlightened humans of reason and logic, muffle too quickly the murmuring, humming, rumbling and screaming of nonhuman materials, for fear of reviving shamans and gurus and for precautions against a divine transcendence. But "'connected' does not mean 'holistic'; any more than 'animated' means 'having a soul'"²¹ That which "has efficacy, can do things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events"²² is granted to be an actant, the source of an action.²³

18. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 133-134.

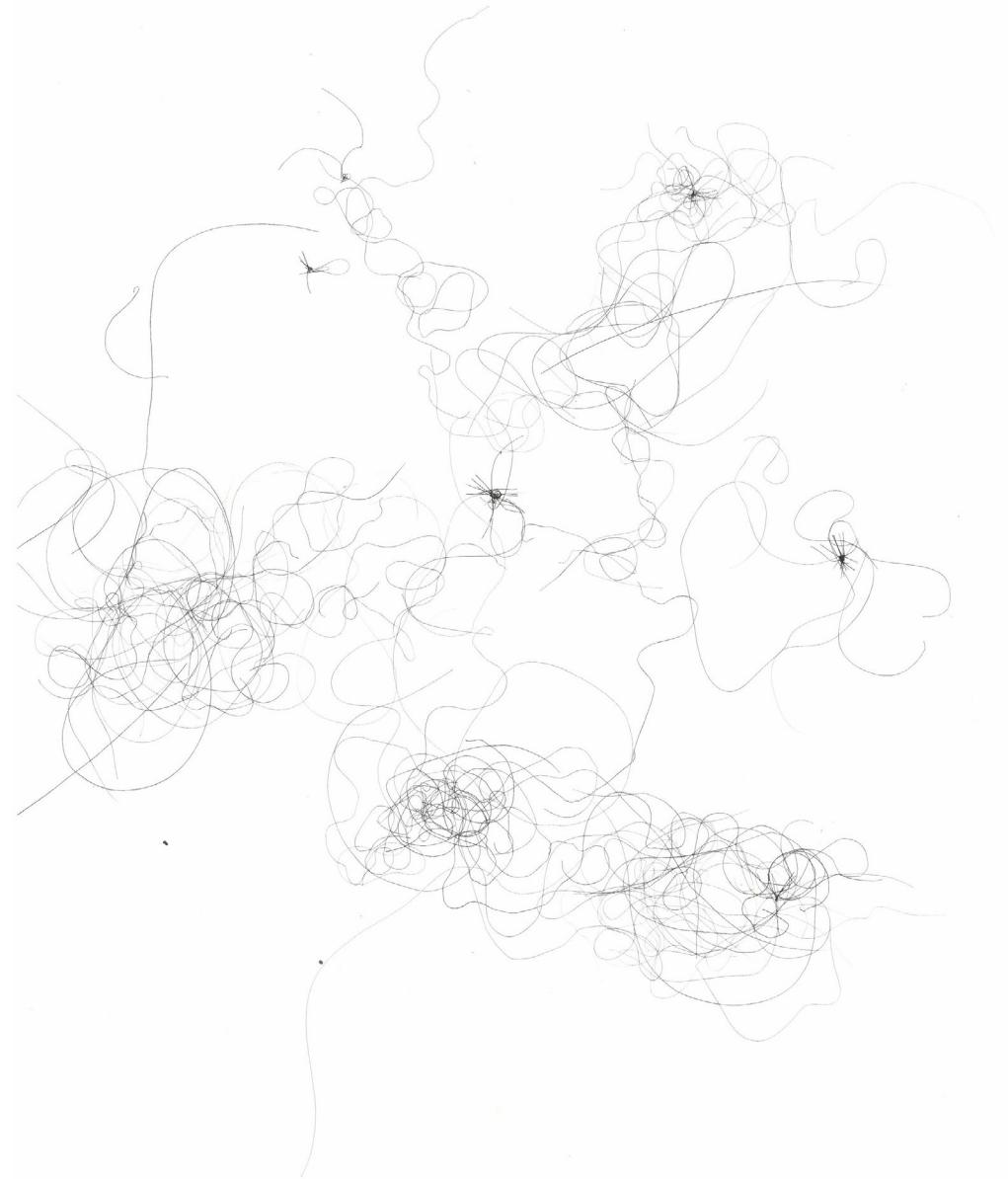
19. See Tsing, *Mushroom End of World*.

20. Latour, "Anthropology Time of Anthropocene," 9.

21. *Ibid.*, 10.

22. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, viii.

23. *Actant* or *actor* is a vocabulary developed by Bruno Latour in conjunction with his actor-network theory (ANT), a new ontological approach to social theory. See Latour, "On actor-network theory."



Humans and nonhumans are both active participants, as a conglomerate of forces, in the becoming of the world. In order to know, to obtain knowledge of this ongoing morphosis, we need to be aware of our entanglement with the world, in the world.

Of course, insofar as all seeds scattered will not metamorphose into edible crops, the truism of human experience can never be truer: things are always easier said than done. As we see through the embedded Cartesian lens that cuts subject from object whilst navigating the world, matter is mechanically fixed and awaits our volition. A givenness that leaves us epistemologically in the void, stumbling and spluttering as if choking on a drunk fly that has darted into our yawning mouth, when interwoven into the affective dimensions of inert matter. For along the way, we have lost “the sense of play,”²⁴ and the “sensory receptivity to the marvelous specificity of things,”²⁵ that which “is produced and productive, generated and generative.”²⁶ In a world of singularities that animate and awe, we have become dull and immune to its marvelous enchantment, an affective state of “temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement,”²⁷ a participation in “a momentarily immobilizing encounter.”²⁸

24. Bennett, *Enchantment of Modern Life*, 10.

25. *Ibid.*, 10.

26. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 137.

27. Bennett, *Enchantment of Modern Life*, 11.

28. *Ibid.*.

To be enchanted is to quiver when tickled, reel when bewildered; to be enchanted is to enjoy the tingling that is crawling up your spine and the goosebumps that stand up like on command; to be enchanted is to put down the ongoing books that tell a tale of a modern world of calculation and breathe and gaze, through the concrete window stills, into a cosmos of wonder and exhilaration; to be enchanted is to see and hear, to smell and touch, to chant and repeat, to stop and jump, to shake and be shaken, to deviate and run, to reverse and fall, and just, to exist and be present. To be enchanted is to be alive in the moments when:

*Thoughts, but also limbs...are brought to rest, even as the senses continue to operate, indeed, in high gear. You notice new colors, discern details previously ignored, hear extraordinary sounds, as familiar landscapes of sense sharpen and intensify.*²⁹

I descend into a discomfort while thinking about craft: as practitioners are fondling their materials, objects are born and disappear. Objects are concocted, transmuted, demolished, molded and remolded, cast and recast. It is one of the most intimate relationships one can have with matter. But at the same time, I surmise it is more a relationship dominated by our prudent pursuit as well as unequivocal confidence in the world's calculability than a congealing assemblage of agentive bodies, small and large, deployed in cooperation, collaboration and interactive interference.³⁰

29. *Ibid.*, 12.

30. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 21.

If the contentment and meaning of craft making derive from a controlling experience that by seizing upon the structure or logic of things and the principle of their organization,³¹ imposes some sort of order, I can't help but wonder if we forgo another kind of joy, a sense of adequacy or fullness that emanates from a temporary suspension of one's critical faculties³² and answers the sensuous appeal of the nonhumans. Max Weber remarks on a life where one can in principle, master all things by calculation as a disenchanted world stamped with the imprint of meaninglessness.³³ If that is cynically so, in the midst of the meaningless disenchantment, I want to dig up the oomph with which benches, aprons, sinks, hammers, torches, scissors, ateliers, sites of craft... are sprinkled. How would a tactic of honing one's sensitivity towards discerning the animated vitality of things be envisaged in the context of craft practice?

I wander adrift along with my hairy companion: picking up and flicking away another fallen hair straying on my keyboard, the flashback of that blossoming hairy flower is flickering before my eyes. What is she narrating, if not a story by the Victorians to immortalize their deceased; if not a smoking gun by the modern humans against their spouse's infidelity; if not a thread to braid who we are and who we want to be? If she stops being a token, a relic, a label, a band-aid...who is she? What kind of becoming do I dare marvel at, one no less than a struggling morning, a wooden brush, a head of hair and a flower of emergence?

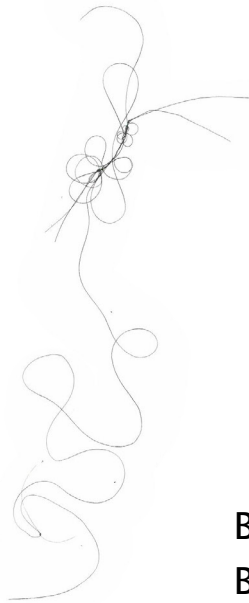
How will she enchant me, in her full vitality?

31. Bennett, *Enchantment of Modern Life*, 60.

32. *Ibid.*, 16.

33. Weber, "Science as A Vocation," 139-140.





BURN
BABY, BURN

The mood I'm calling enchantment involves, in the first instance, a surprising encounter, a meeting with something that you did not expect and are not fully prepared to engage. Contained within this surprise state are (1) a pleasurable feeling of being charmed by the novel and as yet unprocessed encounter and (2) a more unheimlich (uncanny) feeling of being disrupted or torn out of one's default sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition. The overall effect of enchantment is a mood of fullness, plenitude, or liveliness, a sense of having had one's nerves or circulation or concentration powers tuned up or recharged.¹

It is really just a whim.

Well not really, this is the culmination of a collective doing: precipitated by the covert yet omniscient youtube algorithm who is also allegedly immortal, the act is then effectuated in the form of a three-minute video on the process of horsehair pottery² who has procured for itself the top position in my video recommendations. Index finger performs a pressing motion; mood is further cheered by a mellow nevertheless synthetic background music; mind is relatively blown while frames of an unfamiliar male figure strewing what is to be believed fragments of horsehair onto a custard yellow pot (might be white, hard to confirm due to low resolution) freshly taken out of the kiln unravel in front of the eyes. Pixels scrambling through the semiconductors, the subconscious noting down the definitive inscription in *Times New Roman* with shadow. But for the collective effort to apex, a few more days need to tick-tock.

1. Bennett, *Enchantment of Modern Life*, 12.

2. 11chuckles1. "Process of Hair Pottery."

So It's really just a whim. A few more days have tick-tocked when I waltz past the glass workshop located on the first floor of PXL-MAD, *out of nowhere*, I think to myself, *why not try burning hair on molten glass and see what happens?*

What happens is the smell of burnt hair. It starts like a chalky blow, a snappy jab that stings whilst it recoils. The sulfurous stench, brought about by a sulfur-containing amino acid called cysteine abundantly found in the keratin in human hair, somewhat smokes out an obscure remembrance of a summer barbecue. Only the summer is too dreadful where air wiggles in front of the naked eyes and the barbecue is as appetizing as the flies orbiting overhead. As my novice's wariness is effaced by repetitions, the amount of hair used each time starts to increase, my movements become unshackled and the punches quickly sink into a chokehold. An acrid chokehold that thickens and substantializes. You can almost taste and chew on the air if you extend your tongue and engulf a portion of it into your mouth. And then, it is no longer just your cranium region. Your whole body is motivated in these bashing waves of sensory assault. As if sympathizing with their nasal comrades who are on the brink of death from overwork, every pore on your body begins hyperventilating. *Inhale, exhale, more, just a little bit more for my friend...* But suddenly, in the next breath, the hits, the chokes, the assaults, all will have vaporized. You are abandoned alone in the vapor of the cauterized hair corpses. Abandoned alone to hobble in this smothering white cloud. Only when you leave the spot, the working bench that you have been occupying for so long, the wind propelled by the moving body whirls up the putrid scent particles. The strike resumes.

But I wonder if these particles, these minuscule minions of odorous bogeyman have already exploited the porosity of my meat and flesh, infiltrated into the deepest folds of my cerebral cortex. For now, wherever I go, they creep up from time to time, announce their nearly forgotten existence, to make my nostrils shiver and my brows frown. I equally wonder if people who happen to pass the already vacated and stalling glass-blowing workstation, shiver and frown as well. If they long for a steak cookout or a binge-watching of CSI.

I was once curious about the smell of hair. Not the newly released Pantene shampoo with rose water and 0% parabens; not the bacon oil from this morning's breakfast that got trapped inside the fibers of hair; not the pillowcase that hasn't been washed for a fortnight and it has been a humid and moist fortnight. But the smell of hair, of this protein filament that grows from follicles located in the dermis. With the help and instructions of olfactory artist Peter De Cupere and his generous gift of a grocery bag full of hair purchased from a Brazilian hairdresser who has been collecting cut off hair from his clients for 40 years, I explored the fragrance extraction method of distillation and extracted two amber glass bottle worth of fragrant compounds from hair mixed with denatured ethanol. The enjoyment of the whole experience lies in the exhilaration of learning new techniques, the novelty of making your own perfumes and the intimidation of science experiment esque setup. But the smell, is another story. It is a stink of an aromatic sweetness intermingling with a nauseating meatiness which makes you wish you could run further away from it than further. Amongst all the lionhearted who were willing to endure a whiff of it, some concluded the same disdain as I did; some inflated their lungs as if meandering in the spring breeze. Therefore, my curious reader, I can only conclude:

It just smells, like human.



Figure 5. Yang Xu, hair used for distillation, 2021.



Figure 6. Yang Xu, distillation setup, 2021.



Figure 7. Yang Xu, distillation close-up, 2021.

What happens is also the viscosity of time, like honey squirming on a honey dipper. To inflate a molten blob of glass, I have meager seconds of working window. My field of vision has already been expanded to encompass the hair that I laid out on the corner of the benchtop beforehand while my mouth is still huffing and puffing into the blowpipe, struggling to rearrange a network of disorderly bonded atoms constituting the liquid structure of glass. Then what follows is brushing the blown glass with the hairy raw material, which all comes down to the thermal state of the glass: not too hot, for the heat blasts off the strands before they even get the chance of landing on the glass surface; not too cool, otherwise hair would stick to the bubble as it is, resembling a wiggly snag that calls for a reparative trim. I race against time, during the in-between. How much you are tempted to scoop up the hair with your agile as well as trusty digits, witnessing the trembling jerks performed by the decaying tweezers. Luckily the heat hasn't melted your brain off, nor its judgment. How much you desire a "painting" with harmonious compositions only to end up leaving behind a carbon trail of maddening tangents. Dream big, wake up small. How much you are torn between reheating the glass to start over and waiting for the glass to cool down. Speedily the conclusion is drawn, you gamble on the status quo. For god's sake, you are running out of hair! As thoughts are sprinting, the world slows down. Time stops being linear. The panic strikes viscerally as soon as you realize phenomena as instinctual as time can veer off into la-la land. I wager this must be the same queasiness of a lesser magnitude as felt by people who survived traumatic accidents and reported a distorted passage of time where everything transpired in slow motion. In a split second, you experience an intensified presentness, "a kind of instantaneousness: as though if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything."³

3. Michael Fried, "Art and Object Hood," 9.

Commensurately rapid is the cooling down gradation of my newly tempered glass bubbles. As a glistening orange-brown assuages its jazziness, a gentle black materializes. Depending on the thickness of the blown creation, the inky color either loosens up, uncovering a hidden hint of blue while welcoming the transit of light, or coagulates into a devouring mass of sun blocker. In any event, it will become the backdrop against which lines, dots and blurs of shimmering grey impose their presence. They are the mourning over my cremated hairy fibers. They are the earthly incarnation of the hair's once filamentary growth. They are the ultimate witnessing of my taking chance, my creative spontaneity. I gauge each surface, three-dimensionally, aesthetically, compositionally, and futilely. For the exact chance I am taking, is relentless and savage. It doesn't bestow upon you a comfortable allowance to imagine and wonder, or to terrify and reassure. Content or not, take it or leave it. Just as though the ground embraced the idling vagabond with a surprising fissure, I plummet into a hypocenter of the unknown. A queer place where anything can happen, or nothing at all. Anticipation and thrill, fuse into and permeate one another, externalizing themselves in the form of a temporal eclipse against the mind's laudable critical faculties. The unknown and the unknowable slip through the purposive human existence, designed and programmed, and bring about some sort of fragility that squeezes you onto the very edge of a cliff, whereby your heart starts to pound, sweat break out and you finally feel alive. Its contingency eludes meanings and structures and its *counter-design* muddles the familiar sense of causality where the experience of effects is always attributed to purposive causes. It is as inspiring as it is fearful, an extraordinary state where you are "both caught up and carried away, an odd combination of somatic effects."⁴ And that, my patient reader, is the everyday enchantment of which we express wariness in exchange for the monopoly of eliciting order by designing the universe.

4. Bennett, *Enchantment of Modern Life*, 12.



Figure 8. Yang Xu, molten glass cooling down, 2021.



Figure 9. Yang Xu, the fragrant moment when hair is burnt on glass, 2021.

During an engagement in a material-based practice such as craft, instead of a fixation with an elaborate plan in advance aiming at problem-solving, contingency can alternatively be considered to be accommodated as a generative and transformative force. By that I mean fostering a response-ability—the ability to respond, an openness to the unpredictable and inconsistent emergence, an attentiveness to the cues from the world in progress, and a malleability that acts on indeterminacies and sustains serendipity. Discrete and preordained entities as the materials we presuppose to be, are in actuality injected with peculiar potency that in their clashes with one another including you and me, engender changes that are singular and ephemeral becomings. The *making* will thus resonate with what the artist and filmmaker Tacita Dean reflected on the show she curated in 2005 titled *An Aside*: taking form “from itself, and not despite itself.”⁵

I wipe the cremated corpses off the benchtop. For eternity gone they are, with their death mask in the shape of dusty residues, powdery smudges, or curled-up lines. Together away are the shards of glass and particles of time deposited on the benchtop due to lack of maintenance for nobody knows how long. I groan with exclamation, how the abundance of hair secured on my scalp cloaks itself into invisibility, whereas when its fallen fellow is evaporated into an otherworldly ghost, solemnly the departure is bemoaned.

Except that it stays. Wouldn't you say?



Figure 10. Yang Xu, the cremated hair corpses, 2021.

5. Dean, *An Aside*, 4.

Entry: As the only blinders in the working location are never seen drawn up, day and night are unfamiliar concepts. It is to be mentally prepared that time will surely be wasted. The inexperience of the cutter in such a primeval act is the main factor. The circumstances of the hair at the moment of collection is another. Mostly preserved in lumpy entanglements, threads must be extricated one after another, which for most of the time, results in an even more compressed knob (presumably due to the laws of quantum physics—estimated as the explanation for everything). The natural curvature of each fiber varies greatly. Straightening, a prerequisite for the best grip possible, is thus a skill requiring a physical endeavor, as well as a psychological one.

Entry: A surprising(?) discovery is unearthed. When the fingers of the laborer rub against each thread while in a pulling motion, in an attempt to subvert the overtly curly characteristic of the raw material due to prolonged compression, segments of divergent thickness and texture are detected within one filament. It is thought to present no discernible patterns as to the disposition and the heterogeneity of thickness and texture across all hairs, following a less than thorough (the laborer has reached her laboring threshold on the matter) tactile examination on the acquired samples.

Entry: The vibrations of life. The tilting of summer grass. The climbing of the smoke escaping from a chimney. The snuggling of the end of the ponytail into the corner of eyes from a sudden blow of wind. The blustering of the wind chimes from the next-door neighbor. The rustling of the walking feet on the carpet of fallen autumn leaves from outside the window.

Entry: Additional remarks are proclaimed that thicker strands ought to be preferred. Simply owing to the fact that they take up more tangible space, easier domestication is guaranteed. Their worldly presence can be viscerally apprehended even through the barrier obtruded by the blades of the scissors. Conversely, avoid thinner and softer ones at all costs. Spirit drains away, just to confirm their flimsy beings through naked eyes.

Entry: Do the variations embody the competition for nutrients that has taken place during their developmental cycles?

Entry: Hair on end. Muscle twisted. Frozen is the correct word.

Entry: Infinitesimal they are, proceed with prudence. Even with the most delicate maneuver, grips however humanly possibly firm they are, will be lost eventually. Estimated causes: (1) failure in finger muscle twitch control; (2) excessive perspiration localized in the finger regions; (3) carelessness. During the act of cutting, they also seem to exhibit animistic locomotion of jumping, which has never been witnessed on other occasions in human history. Do not retain any hope of retrieving the fragments after they have jumped (or hope with minimum optimism), the reason being that they are blessed with the most advanced camouflage technology. It has been shown and proven that they are dazlingly invisible even in environments with the most progressed human interference. Precedence among all critters capable of concealment in nature.

Entry: While the understanding is established that to achieve the desired effect, even with tools as simple as a pair of scissors manifests itself to be a tremendous struggle, another unexpected (and undesired) effect is furthermore observed *on* the actor. Cut segments display strong autonomy despite the robust human command of “come”: they stick to her; they infest her laptop like an army of hopping grasshoppers on a cornfield in mid-summer, conjuring up a neologism of *detight* through impeding the growth of the lowercase L with an extra dot of hair squatting on the screen; they hide between her eyebrows, comfortably sinking in the sebum produced by the sebaceous glands; they befriend fibers of her sweater; they submerge under the ridges and grooves of her fingertips (note: mostly right index fingertip). Caution: they haunt, like old memories who stalk the sweetest dream.

Entry: The invisible lines.

Entry: Staying with the trouble.

Entry: It is astonishingly outrageous to learn that the worker believes she has been creatively liberated from the constraint of the rational mind, for via the cut and uncut fragments scattered on the parchment paper, she allegedly sees:

1. House on a reclining hill.
2. Black cat on hind legs reaching a curtain rail.
3. Black forest, the cake, not to be confused with the mountain.
4. Half of a centipede.

Advice: taking breaks from work is essential.

Entry: The disgust launched by the sight of the pale creamy-brown follicles with waxy consistency is likely to be individually variable, though only in degrees not in occurrence. They are much more cherished when in the dermis.

Entry: Who is the authority everybody turns to?

Entry: Powders are subsequently congealed into a hemisphere with gum arabic being the bonding agent. The reference to the historical practice of making sepia pigment employing the same components in the 19th century is incontestable as the author herself so admitted.

Entry: Particles are combined and recombined with each other, treading in a slimy pool of sweetness. The non-differentiable days and nights previously utilized in the primal (let alone boring) action of cutting appear to be, gone. In the sense of being blended into the void. Fragmented selves enter into affiliations, with an embodiment of a beauty mark lookalike. After days of curing, the compound substance gains a surprising scratchproof resistance, albeit nonwaterproof. Experiments have shown a distinguishable change of state to a mucous superficiality in the event of prolonged immersion in moisture. However, rest assured, a complete meltdown is highly improbable.

Entry: Time is fragmented, time is assembled. It became the partner in crime.



Figure 12. Yang Xu, fragmented hair on paper, 2021.



Figure 13. Yang Xu, the aftermath as shown on a tissue paper, 2021.

Entry: ~~The non-differentiable days and nights previously utilized in the primal (let alone boring) action of cutting appear to be, gone. In the sense of being blended into the void.~~ Recantation: particles that are too fine to observe are rendered observable and furthermore vindicated as existing, through their enhanced collective presence thanks to amassment.

Entry: What might be the point?

Entry: The fair question on the *point* has been inquired numerous times. The person has been consistently refusing to provide a satisfactory and logically sound answer. She even once exhibited aggressive behaviors upon hearing the repeated query. *Only I know the work, only I cry the loss:* the definition of *point*, which in the current context, is estimated as equivalent to value, is demanded to be challenged. The debilitation to channel enjoyment is credited to the inherited momentum of framing questions about value around the hula hoop of money (excuse the vulgarity, that's what she said). Ontological sentimentality (?) is neglected. Despite herself, received responses are rather evoking a nagging lament on futility in a dog-eat-dog world and an empty yearning for a hazed alter ego.

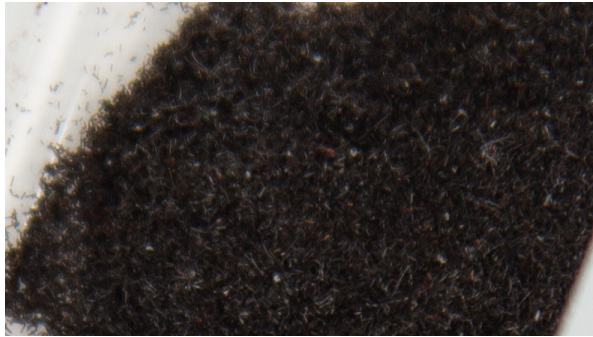


Figure 14. Yang Xu, close-up of fragmented hair, 2021.

Entry: In addition, the assumption on the banality of such work on the grounds of its bare repetition is heavily criticized by the author in an attacking manner. The prevailing argument is that each copy is simply different, slightly or not, which is unfortunately too inconsequential to overthrow the original assumption. The twists in repeats that she swears on are currently too obscure for the general public, and therefore require supplementary investigation to confirm or dismiss.

Entry: Phone is caressed way too much. Time goes slow, only too slow. Eternity ceases to be something of splendor, exclusively accessible to monks deep in their transcendence. An excruciating grace is in stillness when every second feels like an eternity. Past and future bleed into a now on iteration. Time is concretized, palpable, audible, visible. The perception of time turns into carnival mirrors. Boundaries become fuzzy, blur into clouds, blowing up shrinking down.

Entry: The materiality of time.



Figure 15. Yang Xu, hair balls, 2021.

GUT FEELINGS



Gut feelings.

The pleasant and unpleasant bowel movements gyrated by the colossal army of colonizers amounting to 100 trillion¹ in your gastrointestinal interfaces; the valleys and peaks of your moody fluctuations arising from the multi-channeled communication between your brain and your gut microbiota;² your dispositions and behavioral traits fashioned by these microbial foreigners who outnumber you as you by 10 to 1.³

But also, gut feelings are a growling stomach, a profound queasiness without source, a thought keeping you awake all night, a light bulb or a lightning strike, or an inner voice, an epiphany, a revelation.

Gut feeling is an affective trance agitating a tale, an image, a connection. Spellbound my body, a current pervading my thinking. I am carried away in my imagination, dots are connected, a tale of an immersive intensity. By mobilizing the emergent *things* during my crafting journey, I respond to a stream of imaginative resonances that come to resemble what looks like a monochromatic

Ink wash painting.

1. Harvard Health Publishing, "Gut Bacteria Improve Health?"

2. Butler et al., "Gut Microbiome Mental Health"

3. University of Oxford, "Gut Bacteria Linked Personality"; Thursby and Juge, "Introduction to Gut Microbiota."

Different shades of black. It is a state of colorlessness achieved through the adjustment of ink concentration, telling a tale of a tonality varying from the transparent grey of a thin thread, to the dull onyx of the congregation of fragmented hair and gum arabic, to the glossy glass bubbles that betray the classification of black and shine a tint of blue, to the meticulously polished obsidian stones that generously return all the light back to your retina.

Spontaneity through self-perfection. It is an intuitive splash of brushwork that conveys a sense of effortlessness accomplished only through endless practice, telling a tale of the odorous carbon trails of burnt hair on glass reenacting a torrent of silvery eddies.

Natural imperfections. It is a candid rendition of the ever-changing and multifaceted state of being of the painted object matter,⁴ telling a tale of the hair-like needle inclusions that disturb the impeccable luster of obsidian stones, however resolute the will of taking them away is, human and machine, registering a forgotten formation of layered cooling of viscous lava.

4. Lin, *Art of Chinese Painting*, 95.



Figure 16. Yang Xu, digital collage, *Hairy Enchantment*, 2021.

Seeing largeness in smallness.⁵ It is to observe the utterly meaningful from the simplest simplicity by accentuating the rhythmic versatility of the painted object matter through the movements of plain lines, telling a tale of a microcosmos veiled underneath the timid porosity of a round matte blackness detaching hair into an otherworld by (literally) deconstructing and reconstructing its identity.

The resounding emptiness of Lao Tse.⁶ It is the profound void born from the stark contrast between the white rice-paper and the ink strokes bespeaking the culture-founding philosophy of the harmonious dualism of yin and yang, telling a tale of the eternal presence of an ephemerality, an invisible existence emerging from a beguiling absence, a hauntology that pays a visit in the mind, at the evanescent moment of burning hair.

A conduit for the spirit. It is to surrender an immediate imitation, integrate oneself beyond the constraining superficiality, strive to bridge the metaphysical force with which nature is imbued, and adore the non-verbalizable beauty among the sordid facts of the quotidian life,⁷ telling a tale of an unrecognizable hair that gnaws and troubles, articulating a vibrant materiality, and an I, invaded by it in waves of collision, becoming a “partaker of influx and efflux”, experienced and shaped, while “subject to influence and still managing to add something to the mix.”⁸

5. 以小见大 (yi xiao jian da).

6. From Tao Te Ching, “大音希声, 大象无形” (da yin xi sheng, da xiang wu xing): “the most resounding sound is the sound that cannot be heard, and the greatest image is the image that cannot be formed.” (Abdollah, “Absence of Color,” 8.)

7. Okakura, *The Book of Tea*, 1.

8. Bennett, *Influx and Efflux*, xii-xiii.

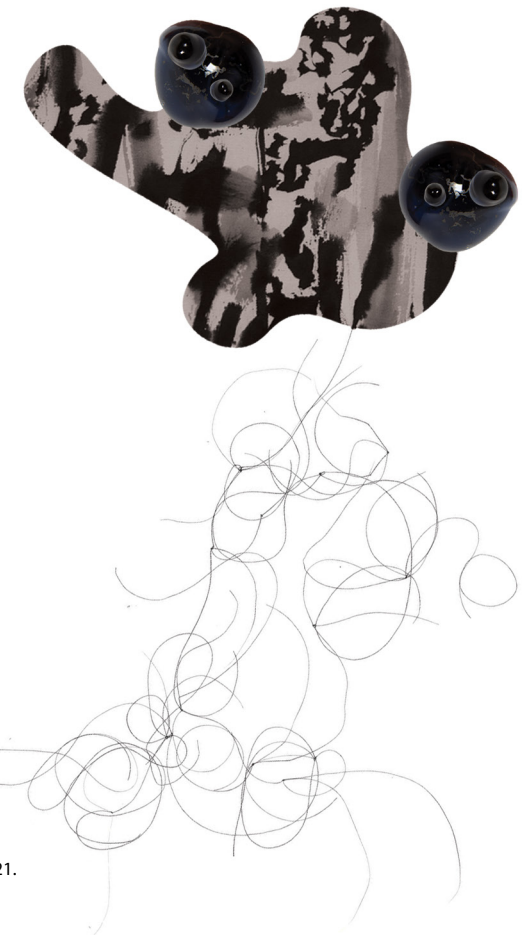


Figure 17. Yang Xu, digital collage, *Hairy Enchantment*, 2021.

Tao. It is the search for the way or the truth and essence of everything, an ideal visual artistic carrier for implying the very essence of Taoism: a detached rationality tinged with an abstract otherworldly consciousness,⁹ telling a tale of a sharp-edged flint flake knapped from the jumping obsidian following a surge of impertinent pressure against the rolling wheel of the polishing machine; a distressed face decorated with rust orange speckles of cerium oxide polishing powder; a soaked leather apron, dripping water along the seam lines; tenosynovitis and crossed eyes thanks to an exceedingly bent thumb and a pair of non-ergonomic scissors; chains and meshes of hair tightly looped into itself, inscribing the unyielding passage of time in an embossed tangible; finely dissected hair in the clothing of fluffy specks that seems to belong no more than inside a vacuum cleaner worth its weight in gold, in the eye of the beholder; a communal working space of denounced collectiveness, privatized via an ever-expanding minefield of fallen filamentary DNA containers; a blood-curdling warmth brought about by the close proximity of molten glass to exhaling mouth, alongside cuts and burns generously bestowed by flying slivers of burst bubbles; trembling hands and conative mind; a parsing tale between a hair demarcating a passive thereness for the convenience of human metaphors and one with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of its own, running alongside and inside humans.¹⁰

9. Abdollah, "Absence of Color," 7.

10. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, viii.



Figure 18. Yang Xu, digital collage, *Hairy Enchantment*, 2021.

But with certainty, this is not a tale of renewing attention to materiality only to return to digging up a Tao of modernist symbolism, nor one on the moment of truth when surrealist automatism discloses its subconscious associations. It is less about a poetic painting pieced together from a human and nonhuman assemblage than about a mood for enchantment, “the self’s negotiation with dissolution or compactness, inertia or movement, through the meetings of materials,” an affective dimension of process that cannot be absorbed into any symbolic schema.¹¹

11. Krcma, “Drawing Time,” 145-146.



Figure 19. Yang Xu, digital collage, *Hairy Enchantment*, 2021.

Standing on the dynamic, associative and affective ground that renders creative practices of materiality compelling,¹² I find on my hands a body of work concluding but ongoing. I wipe off the sweat after this journey long and short, agonizing and sublime. The hairy flower keeping me company, swerving thinking from the beginning is still as knotty as it is sleek. Senses poked, an eye for the enchanting others, under this new ontological microscope, I am thinking of an alternative for material-based craft making. A sensual and sensuous joy where the independent rational thinkers step down from the pedestal and are reconfigured to participate as opposed to control; where affectivity is taken into account and matter is recognized as active, provocative, receptive and responsive, albeit risking the ambiguity of anthropomorphizing; where process becomes organic, constantly in a state of flux so that serendipity and entropy can exert generative and productive power. Likewise, by embracing the decentralization of humans with sprinkles of material enchantment, is it possible to reimagine an ethics that might suit better our turbulent, hopeless and hopeful epoch called Anthropocene? An ethical generosity cultivated by a response-ability to the wondrous *wilderness* that encourages fullness, plenitude, liveliness and affective attachment¹³ as compared to a sense of existential resentment¹⁴ fueled by a set of pre-determined codes that use brusque qualitative judgment namely good and bad to condemn a human villain and pity an innocent nature while reinforcing the subject/object split. In a time of uncertainty, it is still a choice. For "the energy and inspiration to enact ecological projects,...or to respond generously to humans and nonhumans that challenge our settled identities."¹⁵

12. Ibid., 146.

13. Bennett, *Enchantment of Modern Life*, 10-12.

14. Ibid., 18.

15. Ibid., 161.

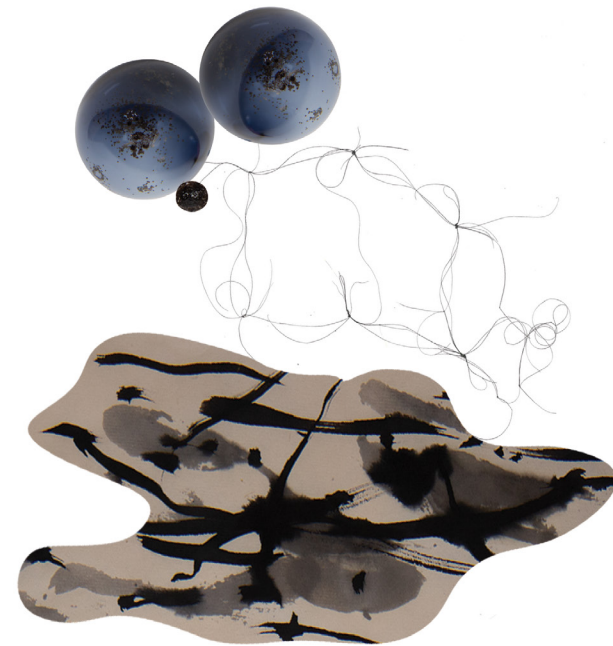


Figure 20. Yang Xu, digital collage, *Hairy Enchantment*, 2021.



Figure 21. Yang Xu, digital collage, *Hairy Enchantment*, 2021.



Figure 22. Yang Xu, digital collage, *Hairy Enchantment*, 2021.

Thank you for listening, to the story of my hair and me.



Figure 23. Yang Xu, digital collage, *Hairy Enchantment*, 2021.

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