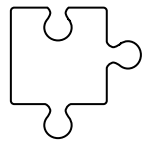


Between Silence



1 August - 30 August
Rentang Workbook



Kexin Hong



31st July - 1st August

Artist Tour Surabaya

During the tour, Dimas and Danny gave me a comprehensive introduction to Surabaya's artistic ecology, particularly the contradictory relationship between art institutions and artists. It made me begin to think about how we might embrace the agency of local artistic communities while, at the same time, distancing ourselves from the influence of a Western-centric art ecosystem.

What is collective art? And how can it be practised within such a problematic system?

I do not have the answers, and I do not believe that anyone can offer a single correct answer. However, I could strongly feel the energy and agency of the local artists, especially the painters.

Art is like a small but strong flame that people carry with them. It never bursts into a raging fire, but neither does it ever go out.

This energy gave me a sense of realness, that something deeply embedded in the everyday life of Surabaya, especially in contrast to my experience in the Netherlands.

On the second day, we visited Tambak Bayan is a historic Chinese diaspora neighbourhood. The place carried such a powerful energy that I could not help being drawn into it.

When Danny told me that I could ask the owner any questions I had, I suddenly did not know what to ask. Perhaps I was too close to the history I had long wanted to explore. Faced with it in such a direct and tangible form, I lost my voice and could no longer articulate the questions I had been carrying with me.

At the same time, I felt that perhaps there was nothing I needed to ask. The place felt too real, too immediate, and too authentic to be reduced to a set of questions.

So I decided to film the building instead. I believe images can sometimes express emotions that cannot be conveyed through language.

2nd August

Discussion with Anitha

During the residency, I will be working with Anitha, and together we will walk in Bongpai, a place beside the river in Surabaya where corpses were once thrown.

Before I came to Surabaya, I was curious about Anitha's practice of walking: how to use the body as an instrument to feel, to measure, to experience what surrounds us. For me it promised to be a worthwhile experiment, because when we speak of trauma, it is the body that holds every emotion, including the emotions the brain dissolves in order to protect us from brutal reality. The brain forgets, but the body remembers everything, and so does Surabaya.

Sadly, Surabaya has almost no comprehensive official archive of the histories that should have been documented. This historical amnesia makes the trauma harder to mourn, harder to bring into cognition and knowledge. The trauma stays frozen in time, like an innocent prisoner held by memory.

Now I am here, standing in the middle of my research, and I have realized that walking in this city is the hardest thing to do. The streets are occupied by motorcycles, cars and public transport. There are not even pedestrian crossings. When I asked Anitha about this dilemma, she said: "That is exactly why I do it. Because no one walks in the city." Walking becomes a way of representing what it means to be haunted by the past, a past that reaches us only as absence, or as silence.

"You have to walk very fast," Anitha said, "because it is dangerous." That made me realize that speed is not a choice. It is a fate embedded in your identity.

Last night, on the way back to C2O Library, Danny told me what it is like to be Chinese in Indonesia. You have no choice: either you work extremely hard and build your own business, or you are eliminated by society.

You have to walk fast, as if you were haunted by history, by trauma, by fear, or even by the blankness that time has fabricated.

First week:

Film production is never easy when it comes to synchronization and teamwork. This is my first time working with Tiong and Finsa, and what we negotiate is not only the schedule but the workflow, the style, the rhythm each of us works in.

For the first two days we went to the place where Tiong's home once stood, a house demolished years ago. The building is gone; the memory is not. It has even become part of his identity, an obscurity that cannot be removed from his body, or from his silence. That is why we are here: not to document a place but to witness a blankness that no longer belongs to us. Perhaps from the very beginning, belonging has been a luxury we do not even dare to ask for. On the second day, we went to the cemetery, a place where goats, death, hopelessness and lust coexist, every kind of desire a human being can hold.

We walked through the field accompanied by the toxic sunshine, and by the friendly inhabitants who treat the tombs as home, the safest place in this city for them.

When death lives with hope, the fear that people recoil from becomes the home that gives birth to death.

当死亡与希望共存时，每一块墓碑便在哀悼并歌颂着生的浩瀚与死的绚丽。生与死的交接其实并未如此清晰，因为每个人都在最强烈的死亡驱动中活着，与最渴望生的力量中与死亡并肩。



In film production, especially for a documentary maker, there is always a version of reality you want to capture, one that will never fit the life you are actually entering. I am torn between the two. One is the fiction in my head; the other is every second I record. It is hard to call documenting a way of witnessing. My eyes and my senses are the better recorder, one that internalizes everything through sensation and through touch.

I am not saying I am disappointed in the tools I hold. I am saying there is always a gap between the reality I sense and the one I document, the same gap that lies between what I am supposed to remember and what I actually lost. The same distinction runs between history and trauma: one is made of the victors' memories, the other of amnesia. Interestingly enough, we ended our first week by watching *The Odyssey*, a homecoming story. There is a line I remember from the film: "It told you that what you most want is what you can't have. And what you most can't have is what you already had, and lost." Indeed, people always try to return to the moment when they had the most and lost the most, what I call the moment of trauma.

A journey, particularly a homecoming, does not remind you of absence. It keeps returning you to it. So each step you take is not about finding the destination, but about building non-linear re-enactments of yourself across different times: past, present, but never future. But from my own perspective, I have regained from this city a vitality embedded in the deepest part of my body. Some part of my own absence echoes the rawness, the chaos and the heat of Surabaya. I have not figured out where it comes from, but I believe time will tell. It may be that home will never come, but absence might reveal itself.

Second week:

Tiong has the opposite working style. He is a slow person. Once a topic touches his mind, his narration has a way of slipping sneakily into every potential gap and never coming back. I always prepare everything in advance and finish it in the shortest possible time. The body is responsible for acting, not for thinking. The body is subordinate to reason, logic and productivity.

But this time, in the endless waiting, when there is nothing you can do, I have started to think about how to take my time, how to enjoy every moment I have. Perhaps I am just convincing myself to embrace this slowness, rationalizing it as something I have learned to enjoy.

Luckily, the night before the shoot, we finally came up with a very brief structural outline, which explores two dimensions of reality: documentary and fiction, both embodied by the same person - Tiong Ang. On the first day of shooting in Lawu, something has already come of it. Perhaps this is an affirmation of the slowness I have been learning to allow. But for the final presentation in Rentang, I still need a reasonably complete script, or at least a voice over. Tiong and I work at completely different speeds. Perhaps the script holds too much private material; perhaps it carries too much weight. He keeps putting it off, or rather, he keeps to his own pace, and I am still not sure whether the script will arrive as planned. It has reached the point where I have started to wonder whether I should take his place and begin writing this script that seems as though it will never come.

When Tiong and I finally talked, he said he wanted to write from his father's point of view, addressed to his grandfather, a man he never knew. Someone entirely absent and yet present. To fill one absence with another. About the self, about who I am. Throughout the shoot we have been filming caves, filming holes. For me, the real hole is Tiong himself. He represents the self through

one fiction after another, a self perhaps too vulnerable to face. So do I. This may also be why I am filming him and not myself. Because I am that hole as well, a vacancy, an extension with neither beginning nor end.

About home:

In the third week, as it happened, Tiong told us he had gotten in touch with a cousin he hadn't seen in more than twenty years, to meet up. As a documentarian, it sounded like a good choice: to capture the realness of two estranged families meeting again. Would it be touching? Full of tears? Silent? As a complete outsider, a strange familiarity rose from somewhere very deep in me. What was it?

Before I give my final answer, I want to share one of my favorite films, Werner Herzog's *Family Romance, LLC*. Here is the plot, from Wikipedia:

Yuichi Ishii runs a rental family service called Family Romance, an agency that provides rental people to stand in as husbands, friends, or other social roles. In doing so, they aim to fill the gaps in people's lives, helping them through difficult problems.

I have watched this film twice, in 2020 and 2023. and each time it summons up so much of the silence buried in my body, triggering something, if we have to settle on a term for it. I wrote the following in Chinese in 2023:

没有武士刀的武士，没有鲜血的死亡

没有生命力的观赏，没有非虚构的虚构

三年前看这部片子时，我很着迷于赫尔佐格用镜头所呈现出来的情欲感和伪纪录片中的真实，至少它可以用演员的特质，镜头的画幅使观众直接与日本色情片的情欲感相链接。从这一点来说，这部片子就已经踏入了最“真实”的一步，触发作为一个生命体的原始欲望。

而三年后重看这部片子后，我认为它不光在讲述一个虚构与非虚构之间的边界感的问题，它其实探讨了关于后现代都市生活中，人们的在亲密关系中的无力感和非常当代性的“逃避”机制。男主知道自己是谁吗？他也许对自己了解最多的，只有自己的名字。

他获取自我身份认同感的唯一方式，也许就是从非真实的扮演他人的关系中，提出他认为他不应该做的，而那个“不应该”所触及到的，就是属于他自己的真实。因此对于男主而言，真实不是去求证，而是在否定后的反证。他看着仿生鱼，背后传来“请出示你的身份证”，我看着他看着鱼，就像我看到了我自己。

很微妙的是，这种自我投射机制和镜像关系刚好又与影片的角色扮演和身份性问题相互关联。

作为观众的我，感觉自己像是男主不停地在他人的生活中扮演别人想要的角色，然后自己主动策划一场又一场“葬礼”与他们告别。

主角谁都可以成为，除了真的“自己”

就像最后，他明明有家里的钥匙，却无法进入自己家的门。

也正是他进不了他自己心里的那扇门，所以他只能不停地扮演他人

*A samurai without a sword, a death without blood
A spectacle without life, a fiction without the nonfictional*

When I first watched this film three years ago, I was fascinated by the sensuality Herzog conjured through the camera, and by the reality embedded in its mockumentary form. At the very least, through the actors' particular qualities and the framing of the shots, it could link the viewer directly to the eroticism of Japanese adult film. In that sense, the film had already taken its most "real" step, stirring the primal desire one carries as a living being.

Rewatching it three years later, I find it isn't only concerned with the sense of a boundary between fiction and nonfiction. It actually examines, within postmodern urban life, people's powerlessness in intimate relationships, and a very contemporary mechanism of "escape."

Does the protagonist know who he is? Perhaps the most he knows about himself is his own name. The only way he arrives at any sense of his own identity may be this: within these unreal relationships, where he plays other people, he names the thing he believes he should not do—and what that "should not" touches is the truth that belongs to him alone. So for him, truth is not something to be verified, but something proven in reverse, through negation. He looks at the robotic fish; behind him comes the line, "Please show your ID." I watch him watching the fish, and it is as if I am seeing myself.

The subtle thing is that this mechanism of self-projection and mirroring happens to fold back into the film's own questions of role-play and identity. As a viewer, I feel I have become the protagonist—endlessly playing, in other people's lives, whatever part they wish for, then staging one "funeral" after another to take my leave of them.

He can become anyone, except his true "self."

Just as, in the end, he holds the key to his own home and still cannot pass through his own door. And precisely because he cannot pass through the door within his own heart, all he can do is go on playing other people.



When I sat at the table with Tiong's family, his cousin, and the cousin's children, I found myself uncannily, even willingly, playing a member of the family, whose most intimate description, if I had to choose one word, would be "stranger."

When I look at the "family" photo we took that day, the moment makes me realize what "home" is, and why I chose to begin this journey.

It is this: *"And precisely because () cannot pass through the door within () own heart, all () can do is go on playing other people."*

I am the content of the blankness, as a symbol but also as myself.

Before this trip, I did an enormous amount of research into Hauntology, into what it means to be haunted. If I wanted to, those pages could easily fill the very workbook I am writing in now. Theory gave me a definition even for emotion, yet nothing about the explanation, the sensation, of what I am supposed to feel when I am haunted. As Gordon puts it, "To be haunted in the name of a will to heal is to allow the ghost to help you imagine what was lost that never even existed, really. That is its utopian grace: to encourage a steely sorrow laced with delight for what we lost that we never had; to long for the insight of that moment in which we recognize, as in Benjamin's profane illumination, that it could have been and can be otherwise."

What was lost that never even existed.

In this residency, I move like a ghost through scenes that feel already half-remembered: the family photographs, the family dinner. I pretend to be one of them. I pretend to drift into the frame as though it were nothing at all. I pretend the parting holds some ache folded inside it. I pretend I grieve for everything already lost. And then I pretend that all this losing is only a part of my work.

I pretend haunting is just a term, one I am able to objectify and put into a box I cannot open.

I pretend I have this box.

By saying this, how is the artist not a kind of ghost? A ghost held captive by memory, who then, through medium and symbol, summons every possibility that memory might hold. The work is a ritual, a ritual that lets me re-enter history, to re-enter time. Perhaps it lets me re-enact every possibility that could have happened in that time, where there is no "pretending," as real as real can be. Through documenting Tiong's non-existent family, I am re-enacting a family memory I erased, eliminated, and now give a second life.

Last Day

Home - Tiong

On the last day, at Tiong's home.

What we truly faced was only a heap of ruins, of weeds, of a few lonely standing walls and their graffiti. We moved through the wreckage, filming rooms that vines had wound themselves around, while Tiong pointed at one corner and then another. That was where I used to live, he said. That was my father's garage. And so on. I could read nothing on his face. He only went on recording the ruins in front of him with his camera.

In that moment it struck me that this pile of debris before us might be a kind of home, made solid, made visible. There is nothing you can do. You can only watch it. Watch it be eaten away by the weeds, by time. Watch it be made to vanish, little by little, and then you are simply a person holding a camera, standing here, looking at everything around you, pointing at a certain corner and saying, 'oh, how strange, I remember this was actually...'

No one comes to answer whether that corner was truly as it lives in your memory. No one tells you why this place was supposed to be your home. No one tells you why you had to leave, and then why you carry some impulse that forces you to return, that forces you to stand upon these ruins and say, this is my home.

There is no place we can call it home.



Hole:

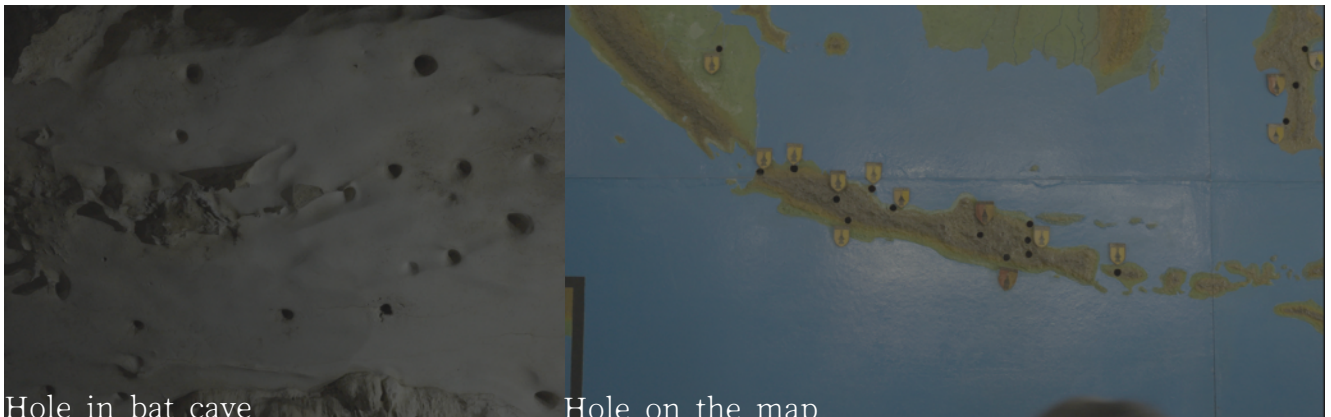
A hole appears in my film as a channel, a tunnel, something that connects. It opens toward "between silence and..." But there is no other side waiting to receive my silence, so I let the title remain as it is: *Between Silence*.

During the shooting we travelled to many cemeteries, in different places and different cities. Some of them had names. Some had none. I came upon them by chance, and also on purpose.

As the theory of the phantom suggests, perhaps each of us carries a *crypt* in the heart. The "crypt" does not refer to a trauma that has been repressed and metabolized, that belongs to the classical model of repression, internal to the subject's own psyche. It refers instead to a secret that was never narrated, never mourned, and sealed off intact. It is not metabolized and does not disappear; it simply sits behind a wall, cut off from the rest of the psyche, whole and still active.

The "phantom" is the effect that crypt leaks into the next generation: the recipient never lived through the original event, yet carries its disturbance. something that happened before they were born reappears, inverted, as a symptom in their present. This gives the phantom an inescapable defining feature: its temporality is inverted. It is not the ordinary, continuous causality of "the past affecting the present." It is the previous generation's past arriving directly in the guise of the next generation's present, with no intervening stage in which the descendant themselves lived through or consciously processed the event.

The arrow of time has been reversed.



Trauma.

My whole journey keeps circling back to this one word. It has grown into me so quietly that I no longer know where it ends and I begin, and by now it is the mirror I meet myself in.

Long before I picked up the camera, the stories of 1965 had already found me. Almost everyone around me was carrying some of it, a few of them openly, most without knowing they still did. The mind lets go of what it cannot survive. The body keeps it all. And so, it seems, does this city.

It is a wound that never quite finished burning. There is nothing to be done with it. I can only stand close and watch, the way I once stood on Tiong's ruins and watched, watch it spread, watch the weeds and the slow years take a little more of it, watch it settle into something that will not close. I want to do something. There is nothing I can do. Trauma does not easily give itself to language. It stays behind a wall somewhere inside us, whole and still awake, waiting for a mourning that never comes. So we reach for a medium to carry it across. We go looking for the symbols that hold the shape of what we feel, hoping that one day it might be received by someone else.

And that, in the end, is all any of us wants. To be understood. By those whose history lies close to our own, or by those who are no longer here to be asked. We leave a small hole in ourselves and hope some possible other might reach through it, so that we might be seen, might be heard, might at last be understood in what happened to us. But the hole is made of the same threads as the wound, of pain, of hesitation, of silence. And the silence is so deafening.

We are all living inside the silence, each of us haunted by a word called trauma. It is the last thing I have learned to say, here in the middle of my own searching, still reaching for something I lost that I never even had.

Tiong said he wanted to write from his father, toward a grandfather he never knew. To fill one absence with another. For weeks I waited for that script, unsure it would ever come, wondering whether I should write it in his place. Then, near the end, he gave it to me. Not the script I had been asking for. Something closer. He had stopped writing as his father, and written as himself. I am placing it here exactly as he wrote it, because in this whole journey it is the one opening no one had to pretend to make.

Dear father,

I think I became an artist because art was the one place where the hesitance was allowed. Where not-knowing was not a deficit but a method. Where the self that does not fully arrive anywhere can make something of its own permanent transit. Where the shirt that doesn't quite fit becomes the subject rather than the embarrassment.

I have spent decades making work about displacement, about multiple identities, about the fragility of memory and the politics of belonging. And only now, in a city I left before I knew I was leaving, with a camera in my hands and two people young enough to be my children beside me, do I begin to understand that I was not making work about these things. I was making work from them. From inside the hesitance. From the place where the warmth I was formed in and the cold I was formed by meet and do not resolve.

The early childhood that was interrupted — I carry it not as memory but as absence. Not as images I can describe but as the shape of what is missing. The feeling of heat that no subsequent temperature has quite replicated. The sound of a language I was inside before I was outside it, before I had to learn it, before it became foreign. The proximity of people who did not hold their love at a careful distance.

These are not things I remember. They are things I am still reaching for, in every work, in every collaboration, in every return to a landscape that holds the evidence of what happened and will not quite give it back.

*Your son,
Tiong*