Is another way of knowing possible? For the past two years, the ICA has been exploring alternative epistemes, lived through by other artists, that counter modes of positivism, rationality, and traumatic dualisms in modernity. But what about meaning altogether? Unacknowledged within this project of recuperating “other” knowledges may be the fundamental premise of seeking meaning, or the interpretation of sensory experiences and signs (images, sounds, etc.), as a kind of epistemic hegemony itself. We can and do know things, through sensory perception, intuition, etc., without it necessarily being about something else. Is it possible to break from the hegemony of meaning, that spectral world which interprets sensory experience; cognition that is expressed but limited?

We the singular in multiple ghosts. I the multiple as parts of whole.¹ is an exhibition by Yu Ji, in collaboration with Dong Longyue and Wang Xiaofu. Together they present an assembly of made and found objects, works on paper, moving images, sound, text, and performance as a Gesamtkunstwerk, or “total artwork,” that performs the fluid, overlapping process of their collaboration and of life imbricating art. Their experiments with the site, their bodies, materials, and storytelling work to expand the limits of how we know things.

Yu Ji is an artist who makes sculptures, installations, and performances that intervene in a particular place with an approach to materials and form that are experimental and open-ended. We may find it challenging to ascribe semiotic meaning to her work, but a sensuous immediacy can be felt in the experience of it — the simultaneous weight and ephemerality of cement, mysterious images that allude but don’t signify, the texture of surfaces that feel familiar but are still alienating, or movements and gestures of the body that seem received but are reconsidered. If we tried to interpret the perception of these things as something else, such as commentary on the rapid urbanization of China, as ecological critique, or maybe even as psychoanalysis of loss, we diminish the value of (her) art as a sensory knowledge of its own, which was developed through years of training (her) intuition. By trying to ascribe meaning, we risk neglecting the making and experience of art as the production of sensual, situated knowledge.

But there’s more to this exhibition than just “sensing as knowing” (or maybe “embodied cognition” would be a more recognizable concept for some) as an aesthetic experience and practice. Yu Ji invited two other artists, Dong Longyue and Wang Xiaofu, whom she met and befriended through AM art space, an alternative arts organization she founded and ran for more than a decade in Shanghai, to learn and experiment with making art together. Dong Longyue creates video and performative works featuring written text as the main subject, playing with language, grammar, sound, and form. Wang Xiaofu is a painter, who also writes and makes videos, interested in playing with the boundaries of perception and existence. For over a year, they met around a table in their studios; they read books, they talked, they wrote stories; they ate and drank together. They explored a construction site; inhabiting the space together with the construction workers, testing the potentiality of the space and materials onsite that became the finished form (as well as the detritus) of the ICA gallery and the site of this exhibition. They also went to the seashore, the tidal flats of Shanghai, near Yu Ji’s studio and conducted similar tests there as well.

We could say that they are researchers in perception and cognition, taking unstable events, processes, and effects, and transfiguring them into new forms and other sensory impressions, organized somewhere between idea and reality — or all of these things, layered upon each other, keeping traces of each iteration, experiment, and gesture, to form a whole — like a palimpsest. There are duplicates and originals. There are images of imagined objects and physical manifestations of what’s represented in those images. Though there may be discrete “artworks” throughout this exhibition, each “artwork” also seems to contain more parts within. It’s difficult to parse them apart from each other and the whole, as well as their individual authorship. Though their individual subjectivities do glint and glimmer here
and there: emerging in fragments of materials lying on a table; images layered and reflected onto multiple surfaces; shapes and structures that support other images, objects, and bodies; and texts that tell stories of truth and fiction.

Like the artists, our own bodies are implicated in the experience of these multiples and the whole, through light and shadows, reflective and transparent surfaces, shifting timbres of sound from one level to another; moving about in the space and encountering these sensory impressions – as though we are also researchers in perception and cognition. Can we understand the work they’ve done here without interpreting? Withholding explanation, and yet as the most generous move of all, the artists have instead written a novel and shared it with us. These stories position you elsewhere in other times and spaces, from which to understand their project, its parts and as a whole. Maybe in order to “understand,” as Joseph Beuys once said, we need to “stand elsewhere”?:

She is overshadowed by a stalking, obscure sensation, as if a grey block lumps underneath her chest. This time when her feet are trapped again, she feels that instead of the mud, what arrests their movement is a membrane between the surface of objects and her consciousness. It is thin and resilient and grows more impermeable with every touch or scrutiny. When she wakes to her senses, she looks over again to the boat and the sense of urgency edges her forward.

The answer is right there, she feels, and she is heading towards the end.

Yu Ji and her friends, Dong Longyue and Wang Xiaofu, have been learning and laboring together — doing the “work of art” — to make things for us to see, hear, and feel. But the “art work” they’ve made is unstable. They are somewhere between idea and reality, complicated further by light and shadow, superimposed upon multiple times and places. It’s tempting to try to break down the whole into parts; each image, sound, material, and movement organized into a syntax that extracts meaning from their shapes, textures, timbre, weight, and duration. It’s easy to forget that there are bodies here. If we do, we might not grasp the sensuous surfaces abound in these invisible layers and infinite sets, refracted between the form and content of things; working to expand the limits of how we know things.

Text by Michelle Yeonho Hyun
