

Symphony of Fluid Punctum

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In the summer of 2005, I moved from a working-class suburb to an urban area to attend high school. Perhaps driven by a sense of estrangement from my new living environment, the elite class, and my new neighbours, wandering the streets became my favourite after-school activity. Walking, wandering and photographing, the ambulatory state akin to that experienced by Baudelaire's flaneur, served as a shelter to store my nostalgia. From unfinished buildings and damaged spots to scaffolding, I was attracted to construction sites, finding my gaze exploring the roles they play in the urban environment.

The heavy beats of construction sites endow cities with a layer of sonic space. It is through the solemn "symphony" played by the percussion of construction sites, the drums and shouting slogans of construction workers, that "abstract and physical spaces are navigated,"¹ intertwining with collective beliefs. Various construction activities seem to have a kind of religious purpose, manifesting an absolute rightness. People all "feel its excitement and believe in its promise."² Like the church or cathedral of the pre-industrial period, construction sites become contemplative places in the contemporary world. Pedestrians project nostalgia onto disappeared architectures, creating a kind of heightened reality, which is only "accessible through religious or philosophical meditation."³

As the visual embodiment of the destruction–reconstruction–recovery cycle of urbanism, construction sites exist in the process of being demolished, of becoming something, instead of being the ultimate presentation of something. They are "visual traces of history at one stage, implicitly moving to another."⁴ The impermanence of the ever-changing urban landscape leads citizens to reflect on what is in the process of being destroyed, and what is yet to be constructed. As is written in *Wounded cities: destruction and reconstruction in a globalized world*, "Whatever the source of the affliction, wounded cities, like all cities, are dynamic entities, replete with the potential to recuperate loss and reconstruct anew for the future."⁵

¹ Chatterjee, E., Krishnan, S., & Robb, M. E. (2017). Feeling Modern: The History of Emotions in Urban South Asia. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 27(4), 539-557.

² Berman, M. (1983). *All that is solid melts into air: The experience of modernity*. Verso.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Harper, D. (2012). *Visual sociology*. Routledge.

⁵ Susser, I., & Schneider, J. (2020). *Wounded cities: destruction and reconstruction in a globalized world*. Routledge.

The main concept in the work, namely “fluid punctum,” is a metaphor symbolising the ever-changing state of these unfixed scars in cities. The phrase is based on the concept of the “punctum,” which initially referred to sharp points and wounds in an anatomical context. It was introduced later by Roland Barthes to photography theory, indicating the touching detail of a photograph that pricks or wounds the spectator. In the work, symbols of the “fluid punctum” are the industrial debris in *Symphony No.1* and the flag on top of an unfinished building in *Symphony No.2*. In *Symphony No.3*, “fluid punctum” is the text written on the sign of a construction site—安全通道 (safe passage). The invisible aura of the “fluid punctum” reminds me that construction sites are spaces with complex temporal meanings, shifting spatio-temporal sites of past and future, marked by “flux, a spectacle of change and the violence of building and re-building activities.”⁶

In the study of urban culture, large amounts of existing research are dominated by “explanations of experiences drawing upon notions of visuality,”⁷ despite the fact that visual and auditory experiences of places are of equal importance for its understanding. *Symphony of Fluid Punctum* is a creative work that is conceptualised and visualised using photographic language, musical language and accompanying texts. The works consist of a photograph of a construction site, a photograph of a fictional “construction site” and a piece of “image symphony.” Through photographing ephemeral visual traces of our great era, then abstracting the visual information by translating it into musical language, *Symphony of Fluid Punctum* attempts to introduce a mixed perspective to observe “fluid punctum,” a creative and intuitive perspective that attempts to build a bridge between visuality and musicality in the form of photo collage.

In the works *Symphony No.1, No.2 and No.3*, visual information in the photos is translated using the musical terms: “musical notation” and “stave”. The image’s unequal length and asymmetrical arrangement constitute its tempo, which corresponds to fluctuations in my mood, responses to construction noise in the neighbourhood. In the work *Symphony: AND*, three pieces of “image symphony” gather and play a piece of grand symphony together. In the centre, “punctum” of *Symphony No.3*—“安全通道” (safe passage) is repeatedly typed with “道法自然”. “道法自然” can be translated as “Tao regulates itself by its own inherent nature or, spontaneously.”⁸ In Daoist cosmology, the shifting temporality of the cosmos is composed of fluid, porous events that express both persistence and spontaneity, “both continuity and disjunction.”⁹ Together with the text, a symbol from musical notation—the treble clef—is drawn on the image of a manhole cover, in reversed direction or right direction.

On the right-hand side of the work, the photograph of a fictional “construction site” is presented. The small-scale site was built with printed photos, tree branches and rubber bands. It is an installation that expresses itself through contrast. The contrast exists within collective lived experience, between surviving in wild nature, surrounded by woods and tree branches, and living in disordered urban culture, confined by the ubiquitous “fluid puncta.” Through constructing an installation combining the earliest method for building a basis for life—tree branches, my daily essential shelter—rubber bands and our

⁶ Blum, A. (2003). *Imaginative structure of the city* (Vol. 1). McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP.

⁷ Bull, M. (2020). Sounding out the City: An auditory epistemology of urban experience. In *The Auditory Culture Reader* (pp. 73-86). Routledge.

⁸ Tadd, M. (2022). The Translingual Ziran of Laozi Chapter 25: Global Laozegetics and Meaning Unbound by Language. *Religions*, 13(7), 596.

⁹ Ames, R., & Hall, D. 2010. *Dao de jing: A philosophical translation*. Ballantine Books.

contemporary way of documenting the surrounding environment—digital photography—the installation serves as a “memorial site,” a site of remembrance, for loss, in a demolished and wounded urban landscape.

Images stimulate ideas, which then lead to non-visual expressions. Being led by the flow between musicality, visuality and materiality, the work is created with a kind of “nomadological thinking, a desire to be on the move.”¹⁰ Each stage of the work informs all other stages. The act of taking photos originates from the drive to reconnect with the “fluid punctum” in my heart from the summer of 2005. The subsequent work emerges from a wish to escape the excesses of industrial noise, into an imaginative and symbolic assemblage of plants and trees, before the forthcoming replacement of a new city texture.

Images of cigarette ash and industrial debris are placed in the work *Symphony: AND* as its outer shell. My cigarette ash and industrial debris symbolise a personal “fluid punctum” and collective “fluid punctum” respectively. Similarities in form, colour and attributes make these two types of “fluid punctum” serve the role of “guards,” preventing the symphony from being interrupted and intruded upon. They set up smoke-like boundaries between the outside world and an imaginative world.

AND — “Ash and Debris”

They flow in cosmos
in the gesture of Baudelaire's flâneur.
They are Magic Figures-like texts.
They are waves of the grand symphony.
They make cigarette ash and industrial debris
scatter around.
A new shelter was built.

More shelters will be created.
Still after-work activities
few intermediate steps.

The process is a ritual
a ritual filled with smoke
debris
and ash.

Punctum is flowing
in the symphony.

They are playing
not for us.

We are playing
not for them.

¹⁰ Flusser, V. (2013). *Towards a philosophy of photography*. Reaktion Books.

I hear the sound of my breath.
I am playing another symphony.
An image symphony
a response
a muted blast
and a silent shout.

A split flag
an apple
or a basket of apples.

They stand alone
on top of an unfinished building.

They are waiting
for the end of construction work
and the beginning of reconstruction.

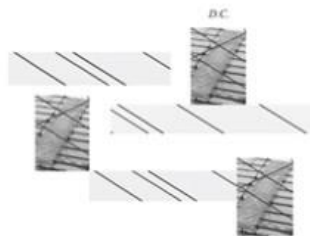


Figure 1. an unfinished building

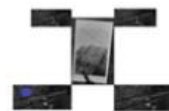
Symphony No.1



Figure 2. a fictional "construction site"



Flag: Pantheon: the flag on top of the unfinished building
Musical Note: the electricity lines
D.C. Da Capo (to be repeated from the beginning)



Stars: the tree branches
Musical Note: the printed photo

Helle Wu Xuanzhan, *Symphony No 1*, 2021 & 2022. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 1. a construction site

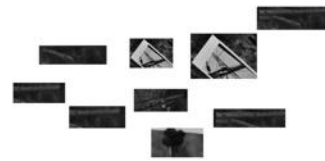


Fluid Punctum: 安全通道 (safe passage)
 Stave: the reinforcement cage
 Musical Note: the pedestrians
 D.C.: Da Capo (to be repeated from the beginning)

Symphony No.2



Figure 2. a fictional "construction site"

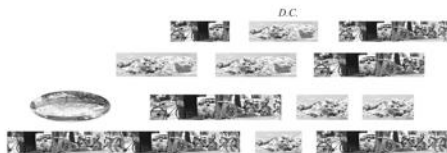


Stave: the tree branches
 Musical Note: the printed photos
 Music Rest: the rubber band

Helle Wu Xuanzhan, *Symphony No 2*, 2021 & 2022. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 1. a damaged spot on the surface of city road

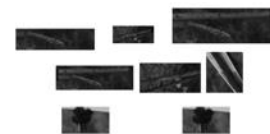


Fluid Punctum: the industrial debris
 Stave: the bicycles
 Musical Note: the manhole cover
 D.C.: Da Capo (to be repeated from the beginning)

Symphony No.3

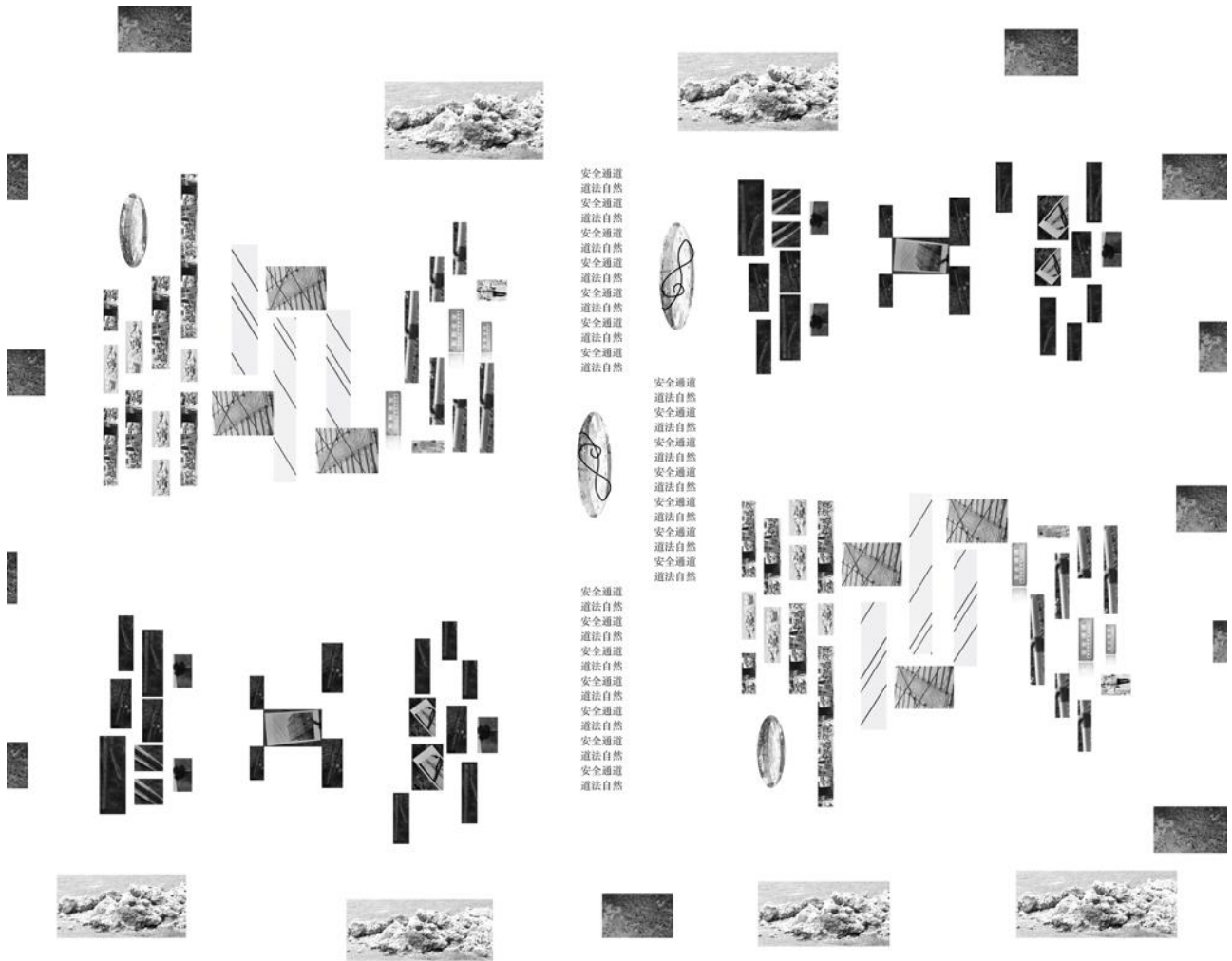


Figure 2. a fictional "construction site"



Stave: the tree branches
 Musical Note: the printed photo
 Music Rest: the rubber band

Helle Wu Xuanzhan, *Symphony No 3*, 2021 & 2022. Image courtesy of the artist.



Helle Wu Xuanzhan, *Symphony: AND*, 2021 & 2022. Image courtesy of the artist.

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Helle Wu Xuanzhuan is a visual artist, poet, researcher and writer. She graduated from the University of Leeds in 2019 with a Master thesis on “*Postwar alienation, Authenticity and Primal symbolism*”. Her artistic practice is mainly based on texts, images and symbols. Through listening to the energy of different mediums, her works become conduits where various elements can interact with each other. Her current research and practice centre around the concepts of time, space, utopia, trauma, collective trauma, biodiversity, justice and intersections of natural landscape, urban environment and habitable potentials on planets. In addition, as a bilingual writer, translator and independent researcher, she collaborates with ArtReview China and international research organizations. Her research work, art critique and visual poetry have been featured in publications including Voice & Verse Poetry Magazine, QiLu Art Criticism and Engage, the National Association for Gallery Education. Helle is the Accent Accent International Poetry Award Finalist in Emerging Voice Category in 2022 and she has received an honorable mention in the MonoVisions Photography Awards in 2020. Her artworks were exhibited in several museums and galleries in Chicago, Rome, Suzhou, Chongqing and Leeds.