

Touching Space

- The Architecture of material and Spatial relationships under Cultural contexts

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1. The Truth of Breathing II - The superposition of three layers of space

The Truth of Breathing II is an extension of the Truth of Breathing, which are two pieces made of chicken skin and wood frames. The chicken skin, which has been dried - heated with salt - and then dried again, has a translucent effect with natural texture and a hazy aesthetic. The inspiration of this work comes from the group assignment in class, "How to express skin problems", which is a kind of cheating way to solve the problem - directly processing the skin.





Truth of Breathing, 2022

In my works, I always try to avoid very obvious figurative images, especially the representation and depiction of real things. So instead of "replacing" the skin with other materials, I used Turkey skin and chicken skin while maximizing their natural texture. As you can see, the skin has shrunk with heat and natural drying, and it has a distinct undulation. This is because the direction of the skin and the thickness of the fat under the skin are different in different areas.

In Truth to Breathe 2, I would take a bunch of chicken skins and sew them together to create a "screen" like a door. But stitching together multiple chicken skins isn't as simple as drying them to a certain extent and then heating them up. Heat is used to hold the skin in place, and the skin's transparency depends on how long it takes to dry, the more transparent it becomes. To hide the seams, I need to dry them to a point where they are not visible again after bending, and then clip the edges together. This requires all the skin to work at once, forming a large sheet. In this state, the chicken is then continuously drizzled with hot salt (because steam from steaming and boiling will re-soften the skin) until it is fully cooked.

I expect that the whole skin may be distorted to a certain extent due to heat contraction, requiring constant pressing and attention to the location of the clamps on the edges. Let it sit for a while, then remove the clips and sew the edges with clear fishing line. I hope this work can show the natural texture to the maximum extent, and the handmade traces are hidden behind it. After stitching, I cut and curl the extra pieces so that they cover the line without compromising the translucent effect on the front. After cutting, the wood frame is used as a warm material to surround the edges. Both materials belong to the warm tone, and because they are natural materials, both have obvious natural texture. They are relatively uniform visually.

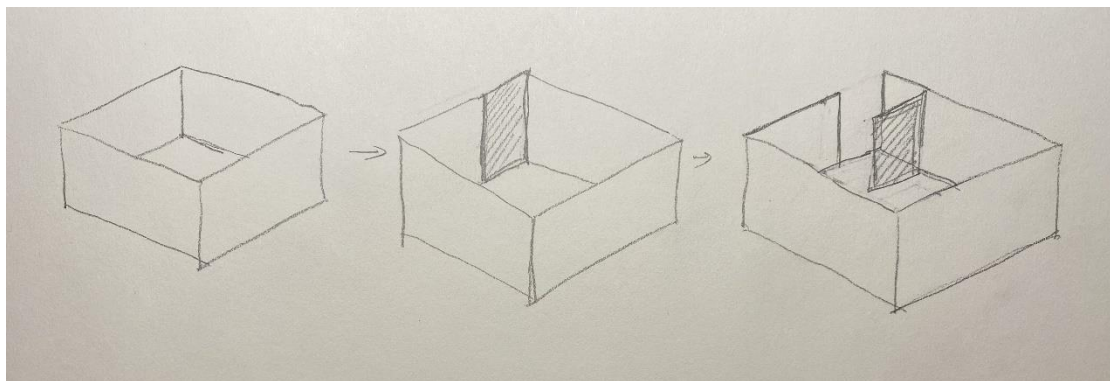
In his research, Wu Hong divides the "Gesamtkunstwerk" proposed by German musician Wilhelm Richard Wagner into three levels for the study of art history materials, all of which are centered on the concept of space: "On first level, artifacts, images, display, and the architectural setting together construct a *visual and material space*. On the second level, the constitutive elements of a space also include non-visual senses of taste, hearing, and smell triggered by such materials and objects as food, wine, musical instrument, dancer, lamp, floral arrangement, and others. I thus call this space a *perceptual space*, whose scope overlaps with *visual and material space*, but whose implication diverges from the latter. On the third level, a further constitutive factor of a space is the action of inhabited subjects. Such action could be performed in reality, such as rituals within religious architecture or a literati gathering in a private garden. But they could also be imaginary, as in the case of the soul's dwelling in a tomb or journeys of supernatural beings across heaven and death. During the course of these real or imaginary actions and sensations, the space is understood as the locus of subjective experience (including imaginary experience), and thus could be called an *experiential space*."¹

For me, The Truth of Breathing II has the same threefold meaning. The first level is the

¹ Wu Hong, *Space in Art History, Translated by Qian Wenyi* (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2008), p. 319-320

immediate feeling of the work and its place in the space. In my personal exhibition at skylight, the size of this screen is the same as the size of the door at the entrance. When opened, the skylight door slides into the wall, so it looks like it's gone, and the screen replaces the door as a barrier to the space and encloses it again.

I interpret this spatial perception as a second level. Screen in ancient China is a kind of movable furniture used to block the sight and isolate the space. It is usually placed at the entrance and can be used to decorate a space. If the personal exhibition is about the interior of the whole skylight, then Truth about Breathing 2 is the starting point of this exhibition. It's parallel to the wall on the side of the door, about a meter away. After a door is hidden in a wall, it means the same as a door, but with a distance that people can enter and leave.



Analysis: from close space to screen

Skin is often associated with the concept of outer skin, surface, etc. We often think of it as a kind of spatial separation: it is the protective layer of the body surface. Here, to some extent, we can also think of it as a kind of "skin" : distinguishing the interior space and the exterior space of the exhibition. If we use the inside and outside of the material itself to distinguish the front and the back, the smooth and only slight gaps are undoubtedly the "front", and the rough and attached to the slightly raised subcutaneous fat, seams with obvious suture marks is undoubtedly the "back". However, I want to put the "front" towards the interior of the exhibition hall. If the whole

exhibition space is a creature, the other pieces inside are organs, and the wall and the Truth of Breathing II form the skin. However, in addition to the artificial meaning, we can't clearly distinguish the obvious difference between the inside and outside space. Is it just because the exhibition hall is a relatively closed space and the corridor is outside? Even so, there does not seem to be a significant difference in the rapidly crowded exhibition hours. There is also a practical reason: if all face the door, people will assume that the narrow space in the doorway is a "static space" to stop and look at, resulting in traffic jams that make it difficult to move.

It seems hard for me to find some theory of spatial architecture that explains why I turn the "outside" inward in order to turn the inside out of the space. But maybe we can distinguish between people -- people on the inside and people on the outside. People on the inside do the same thing: look at the work; The outside people (the scope should be the people near the door of the exhibition hall) are going out and coming in. This distinction does not seem to be able to get some exact explanation, only some ambiguous feelings.

I also imagined another fish-skin screen placed on its diagonal, making the whole space achieve a relative symmetry in layout. The difference is that the fish skin screen is not transparent, and there is no door in the back. This echo strengthens the sense of form inside and strengthens the integrity of the space. The exhibition hall is not simply a collection of artworks, but also a space experience. The structure of the entire exhibition hall reinforces the closed nature of the screen. The two "doors" of one true and one false seem to form cycle, but they seem to be just two similar and independent works. I try to resist using abstract concepts like "Yin and Yang" to interpret this opposition, because for me, the distance between extremely abstract concepts and concrete works is too far. I would have to work very hard to prove that there is a unique and irreplaceable connection. Therefore, I needed something tangible and accessible as a basis to prove that it was not an isolated object resting on a white box, but a part of the

space that actually spoke to the site.

In the third level of "Gesamtkunstwerk" explained by Wu Hong, the spatial component of "the action of inhabited subjects" also includes the context in which the work is located. Compared with the first and second level, the content contained is more abstract and broader, which is difficult to be measured by specific standards. Although I am confused that this exhibition should be located in Norway, naturally it should be discussed in the context of Norwegian culture. However, I did not have a deep enough understanding of the local culture in Norway, so I could not use my known knowledge to complete the structure of the cultural background. Therefore, most of the works in the individual exhibition described in this text are based on the context of Chinese culture, and the prototypes come from tools of different uses.

In the third layer, *The Truth of Breathing II* can be considered either a "flat painting" based on natural materials or a "furniture" with decorative functions. In ancient Chinese paintings, screen elements often appear in the background of the picture, "one of the spatial strategies is that of the "double screen", or a layered composition that achieves foreshortening and illusionism through the appending of *internal frames* – parallel to the pictorial plane- within the painting." This overlaps the scene depicted on the screen with the actual scene in the painting." Despite the absence of linear perspective, the painter is still able to produce pictorial *illusion* and trigger the imaginative process of magic transformation through this composition."²

Wu Hong also mentioned the influence of non-linear perspective on this kind of "double screen" composition. In this work I'm talking about, there is no specific scene painting, and naturally, it is impossible to extend the perspective from the painting inside the painting to outside the frame. I'm talking about a different kind of "double screen" caused by translucent materials.

² Wu Hong, *The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1996), pp. 102-33

In his interpretation of "double screen", Wu Hong uses such spatial analysis legends to introduce the difference in viewing angles brought about by such paintings (Fig. 1). A dotted line extending from the pattern on the screen in the painting represents the point of view of the subject in the painting. The line continues outward through the figure in the painting. Although this does not conform to the law of perspective, is it possible that the angle extending out of the picture is the "correct" viewing Angle for the people in painting?

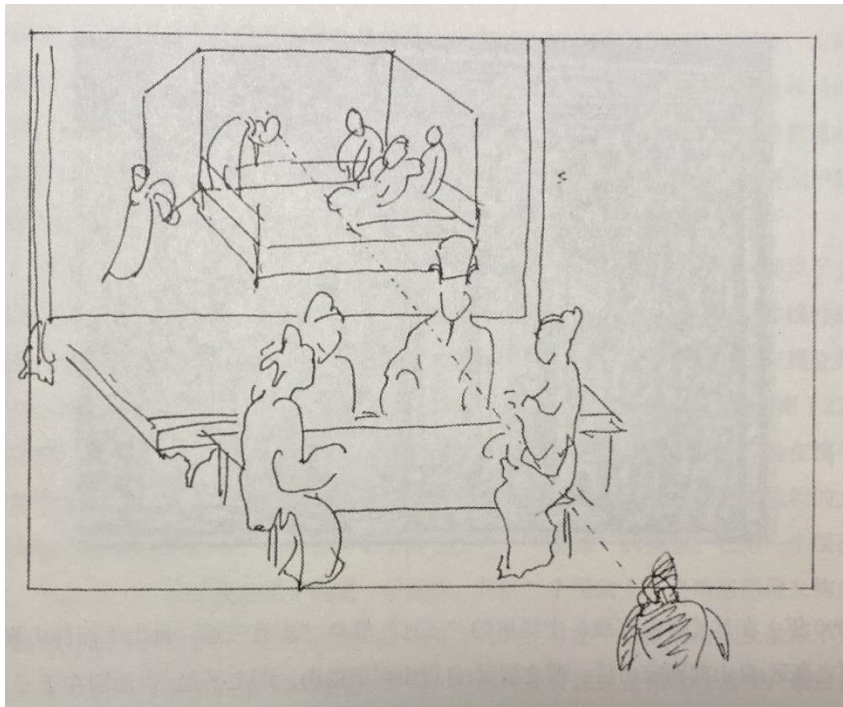
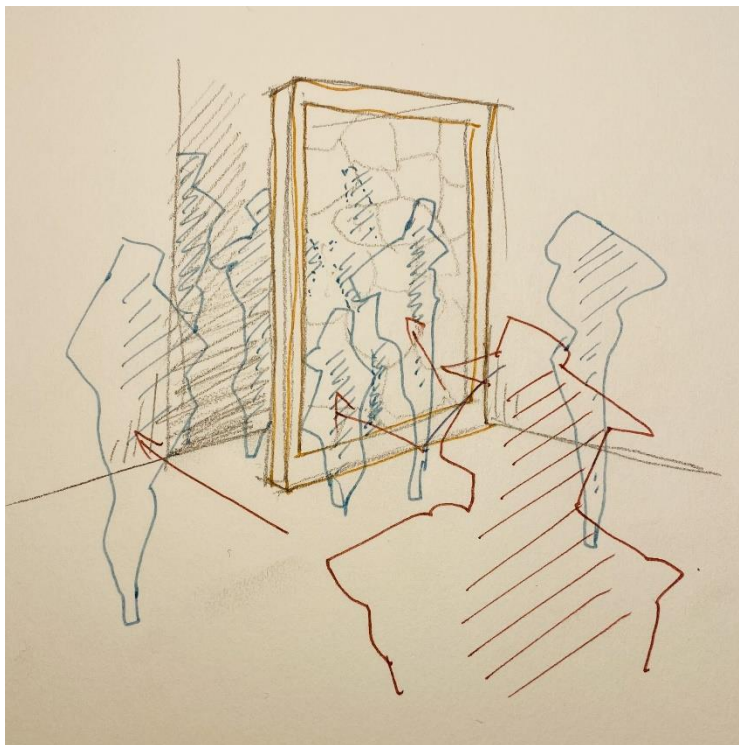


Fig. 1³, drawing by Wu Hong

As a contemporary work with the same "screen" attribute, I try to extend this perspective. Although there is a certain degree of bending due to the characteristics of biological materials, in general we can regard it as a special material flat work. When we are faced with a flat image, we often stand in front of the work, so that we can see the whole picture of the work. But the screen is not just a single flat picture, it also carries

³ Wu Hong, *Space in Art History*, Translated by Qian Wenyi (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2008), p. 35

the functional properties of the space. Therefore, we can extend the scope of "beyond the screen" in the painting to the whole exhibition hall. The space in the analysis diagram drawn by Wu Hong (Fig. 1) is in this order: in-screen space - in-painting space - out-of-painting space, while the spatial analysis of Truth of Breathing 2 can be divided into the work itself - people around the work - people watching the screen. People in the vicinity of the entrance are inevitably affected by it: it limits the direction of entry and exit, and because of its translucency, others can see the shadow of the person behind them through the natural texture while watching. This way of viewing allows the visitor to have a dialogue with the work while re-emphasizing the concept of division. Compared with the affected people, those who are separated from the entrance and screen can see the overall relationship between the work and the internal exhibition space in a more macroscopic way, not only its spatial structure, but also the intimate interaction between people and the function of "furniture".



The imagination of the exhibition

The above is the Truth of Breathing II's interpretation of "three levels of overall art". This

kind of interpretation is more based on the material itself, aiming at the spatial characteristics and cultural context of the site.

2. Salt Crystallizing Vessel

This is an upcoming project that is still in the conceptual stage. The structure of this work also continues the ancient Chinese context of objects with specific functions -- vessels.

The Ewenki are a group of forest nomads in northeastern China who, like the Sami, raise reindeer. The Ewenki used wet wood and moss to create smoke, which the reindeer, who were looking for food in the mountains, would see and return to the settlement to eat the salt cakes provided by the Ewenki and take in their essential salt. Thus, salt and smoke form a bridge of communication between the two sides, which is also a solid language over long periods of time.

I'm going to make what appear to be containers out of salt crystals and lay them upside down. The exact shape of the container I haven't decided yet, maybe it's a natural material like a crab shell, maybe it's just a lot of different kinds of potato chip bags and soda bottles. Under the overturned container, my initial plan was to place small pieces of wet wood and light them to create a continuous smoke. I may have to replace the wooden block many times a day during the exhibition, but this act is part of the work, just as the family idol worshippers replace the tribute every day. But because of the indoor smoke alarms, I'm not sure if this is enforceable. I'm looking for an alternative to burning a wet wood block.

In "Monumentality in Ancient Chinese Art and Architecture," Wu Hong talks about the connection between portable objects and tall monuments. At the same time,

inscriptions on bronze ritual vessels were often engraved on the inside or bottom of the vessels. Wu Hong's interpretation of this spatial angle is: "The signification was articulated through the association of text with the vessel's interior, to which is opposed the association of pictorial of decoration with its exterior. When we integrate these two facets into the observation of an object, we combine its shape, ornamentation, inscription, and space into a comprehensive analysis." ⁴This connection is made through the process of masking and concealment. I wanted to recreate this process with the crystal obscuring the smoke. This is not necessarily a sacrifice, but an attempt to restore some primordial connection between man and nature.

3. Paradox Hug

Paradox Hug, though, feels like a sort of spatial concept study based on materials, but with a less complex cultural context and complex historical roots, it feels lighter and freer. This piece is more like a whimsical idea from a boring moment and is presented in a serious way of humor.

In my life, I often see some spatial illusion images -- the illusion of flat graphics to form things that are impossible to achieve in real space. Therefore, I tried to combine the characteristics of the material itself to complete the deconstruction of the space in a way similar to cheating.

How do you make two diametrically opposite angles of a cube intersect? That's the heart of the piece, and everything is based on that. Although this is an unfinished work, the specific steps have been shown in the software. The steps are as follows:

⁴ Wu Hong, *Space in Art History, Translated by Qian Wenyi* (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2008), p. 288



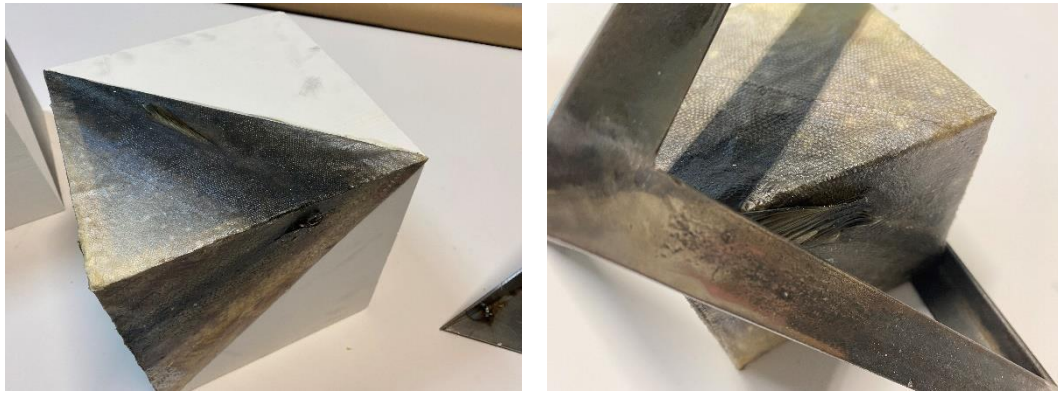
1. Cube is deconstructed as a unit;
2. Divide the cube into three parts, and take two opposite angles on each side;
3. Subtract the excess in the middle, leaving only two solid tetrahedrons;
4. Continue cutting, reducing one side from the object to the face of three right triangles, and the other side to the frame and become double;
5. Reassemble the plane part while keeping the same area;
6. The plane part becomes a square again and is within the frame.

In this step, I disassemble the cube into two different directions, and gradually reduce the dimension while maintaining the balance of both sides. As a result, the two sides are reduced from a three-dimensional entity to a two-dimensional plane and a one-dimensional frame, and the one-dimensional frame becomes an even number to "counter" the two-dimensional plane. It's more of a geometric equation of space, and my goal is to balance both sides of the equation and achieve spatial balance at the same time.



(Unfinished) Paradox Hug (1)

To achieve this decomposition, I used fish skin and metal to show the confrontation between the two sides. Animals have different symbolic meanings in different regions. When we see the image of the animal, we need to think about it in its current context. I hope that I can use a common "language" and understand the meaning of the work without understanding the cultural background and context of the author, rather than just reaching a consensus at the conceptual level. And "fish can swim in water" this is a common understanding. The fish uses its own power to push through the current and the water moves around the fish. Fish move from one place to another, and the whole body of water is connected by the movement of the fish. Therefore, I believe that the skin of the fish is directly in contact with the water and has the characteristics of flow. I also hope that the space can also "flow" with the help of this material, so as to achieve some impossible connection.



(Unfinished) Paradox Hug (2)

In this work, I seem to have forcibly associated an overly abstract concept with a certain material. This practice is not without precedent. For example, in classical Indian dance, touching the forehead and the ground with the hand successively represents kowtowing (i.e. touching the ground with the forehead as a sign of respect), and in ancient China, people carved hymns into the inside of sacrificial vessels, which were filled with liquid and emptied. It is believed that in this process the hymn inside the cup is conveyed to the gods along with the liquid⁵. There is no specific cultural meaning to the use of metal materials. Perhaps it can be read as a "representative of human civilization" as opposed to the natural symbol of fish skin. This reminds me of the fact that in the Epic of Gilgamesh, both Gilgamesh, a symbol of city-state civilization, and Enchi, a symbol of nature, changed from a hostile state to a friend. Some scholars believe that this is the embodiment of ancient people's original concept of the conflict between city-state and nature. In ancient times, people could not understand "abstract concepts", everything was a concrete representation, which is why scholars try to interpret these ancient epics and legends as the archetypes of the story, in order to understand people's understanding of things at the time. Although the work has no concrete image, nor is it directly related to the conflict described in the epic, it seems that some reference can be obtained from the records of ancient culture.

⁵ Virginia Kane, *Aspects of Western Zhou Appointment Inscriptions: The Change, the Gifts, and the Response*, (Early China, 1982-83), p. 14

The only thing that seems to be constant in postmodern art is the deconstruction of animals. I avoid returning the animal image to objectivity, but rather disassemble it to explore other possible dimensions. In this way, it is possible to break down the symbolic images that have been perpetuated by civilization for thousands of years and rediscover the potential connections that other people have with animals and nature. We focus on the animal's features themselves, rather than the additional cultural-political implications behind them, allowing images that connect directly with our senses to reconnect with us in the new context. When we project ourselves onto animals, we are no longer central. Here, "I" is invisible, but everywhere.

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