Whispering Messengers: Everyone has a bunny

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Whispering Messengers: Everyone has a bunny

by Tracy Shih-Tung Cheng

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Abstract

How can I connect people through my art? My research focuses on the “bonds” of relations. The intent is for my art to become a bond to connect people. Compared to just walking around and staring at the artwork, I believe that experience with touch and play can impact audiences more directly.

The idea of my work is based on the experience of passing notes to exchange messages. When I was a student I wrote notes to friends, then folded the note to create an origami form before passing them to the recipient. The origami from transformed the note into a gift, loaded with emotion, feeling, and wishes while also containing the content so that only the intended recipient could read the message. The presentation of my work is arranged into three sections: Static Area, Playground Area, and Statue Area. Among them, The Static Area attracts visitors the most. The area demonstrates how to make a bunny origami.

Due to time restrictions and the availability of multiple activities in the exhibition, I do not ask my audience to perform every activity. Understanding is obtained by watching the video or exploration. If visitors start to fold an origami, which is not an easy task, they might ask for help from whoever is next to them. After that, they might or might not make a bunny successfully. When people begin to help each other finish the origami, the bond is created.
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Section I: Context
**Background and Influence**

Most of my artworks focus on relations, between people or between humans and nature. I believe that art is not only about aesthetics but also powerful and influential. Through my work, I hope to create an experience which in turn inspires a relationship or a reflection on the idea of relations, triggering introspection or developing a new perspective for people to relate to others.

I believe that when visiting an exhibition, touching or interacting with the art creates more profound impact than just viewing it. The touch of the object will evoke different feelings based on one’s personal and unique memories. For example, the texture of paper could remind a person of a letter he/she wrote, an exam he/she messed up, or a paper boat he/she made. Likewise, interaction makes people feel that art is easier to get close to and not just something to be viewed from a distance, creating more opportunities for the audience to feel the art through actions or their consequences. There is a trend in Asian society of taking a selfie with the artwork, for all kinds of reasons. Sometimes this is an annoying gesture, but there is a shred of evidence showing that viewers yearn to memorize the moment. This leads some exhibitors to design the art show in an amusing, approachable, and family-friendly style.

Furthermore, looking back on my artworks and the artists I follow, they are all somehow related to interaction. One of the artworks I will never forget was part of Cai Guo-Qiang’s retrospective exhibition, *Hanging Out in The Museum*. The work presents an herb hot pool in which audiences can choose to take a bath and talk about art, society, or anything. Participants who do that will become part of the artwork. Other installations I am fond of are *The Obliteration Room* and *Flower Obsession*, both by Yayoi Kusama. The artist invites each individual to complete the art by pasting stickers until the whole room is covered. Furthermore, I cannot avoid mentioning my favorite artist, Lee Ming-Wei, who focuses on relations. His work
*The Mending Project* is based on hospitality. He invites people to bring their damaged textile articles and choose a string color they want, and he will mend it. On the last day of the exhibition, he shows all the articles he mended to commemorate the repair. The other artwork *The Moving Garden* is about choosing to be kind. He allows members of the audience to take a flower out of the museum, as long as they promise to hand this flower to a stranger. Studying these influences and their work led me to focus on creating a real “relation” through art, rather than just presenting sculptures.

Consequently, I began to ask myself, how can I connect people through my art? How can I make my art be a medium for creating relationships? As a result, I decided that my task is to make my art be a kind of bond to connect people. Rather than just walking around and staring at the work, I believe that experiencing the work by touching and interacting with it can have a direct impact on audiences.
Section II: Evolvement
Ideology

At first, the idea proved difficult to organize in my head. What kind of art should I make to represent the idea? What kind of interaction should I choose? What kind of result do I want to achieve? What kind of format will easily guide the audience? How can I lead viewers to touch the art? So many questions and thoughts occurred in my mind. It was very difficult to decide what to make.

By examining these uncertainties, I began to have some clue on what I envisioned the work to be. I wanted the result to be positive, something that will warm the hearts of the audience. This reminded me of the idea of children’s picture books, which usually teach some ethics with simple stories. A story will introduce the idea of the process and outcome. The next step is what action I should choose. I expected my work to connect visitors through some kind of exchange such as communication, interaction, or sharing with others, while accepting differences. I listed some actions that I preferred, like sharing a secret, giving a hug, exchanging an object, and asking a question.

I chose the gesture of sharing a message, which can either be a simple gesture or one with a deep meaning. Also, this action is taken from a common experience for people who were students in school. Students often pass notes to their classmate, friend, lover, or enemy during class time. They even fold the note into an origami, which is loaded with their emotions and wishes. Sometimes, people are eager to say something, but for some reason the message is not sent. Similarly, for me, the person I would like to speak to is my father. Therefore, some of the development design originates from him, a vital person in my life.
Ideology Fig. 1. Idea Development

- Interactions (See Fig.) in my art
- Ideas not about a particular theme
- Create the bridge between people
- First, engagement on space for people to simply move
  with and other simply
- Second, a reason or guide for the structure of
  sharing (a positive interaction)
  with the
  warm
  to guide or a life experience
  the
  exchange without any concern.
  a life experience passing note
  common
  held in a core shape.
  Shape → buoy → father.
  Everyone has a buoy.

- The buoy is a symbol of the person/object
  that people want to talk to
  is private / intimate / important / significant
  Motivation to fold → small
  Movement → large / iron

- the feeling I want to say has come and had to express
Ideology Fig. 2. Idea Development

**Sketch**

At first, since the main idea revolved around human actions, my work started from a place where people can interact with each other. The first stage sketch was a series of designs for the area where my audience can feel comfortable stepping in or playing around. Then, following the idea of an allegorical story, I chose the rabbit, from a story I wrote, to be the shape of my sculpture. Over time, the design of my sculpture gained a deeper meaning. I sorted my artwork
into several parts: form, exhibition booth, scale and activities, material, origami and color, video, and psychology, and so on.
Form

The form I selected for this artwork, a rabbit, is cheerful, approachable, and adorable. It is something that people would like to get close to. The idea of the shape came from its association with an allegorical story I wrote. The story is based on a bunny that shares and sees things from different perspectives when it meets various farm animals. However, through constant investigation, I found that there could be another reason, stemming from my unconscious, for why I chose particular form. The concept is sharing messages and my father is the person I would like to talk to the most. My father was born in the year of the hare, possibly why I unconsciously selected the rabbit to be the shape of my sculpture.

Exhibition Booth

My belief centered on the idea that the impact becomes stronger if people appreciate art not only by viewing. More than one action takes place in this artwork, which bothered me a great deal. How can I guide my audience to touch and interact with my sculpture, as well as discover the secret within it? This presented an obstacle. With the idea of bunny sculptures, folding origami gradually matured, and the small area became three sections composed of a static area, a playground area, and a statue area. Each section remained independent, but the three parts also related. The audience could follow the video to go through the entire process or remain in one specific place. As an artist, I put my idea in the artwork I create, but I cannot force people to feel the way I feel. They are free to experience art as they wish. To return to my initial questions, I hope people can enjoy art not only by viewing but also by being involved in it. What visitors do
in the booth depends on their choice.

Exhibition Booth Fig. 1. Booth Setting

Exhibition Booth Fig. 2. Booth Design
Scale and Activities

There are three different dimensions to my sculpture, for different activities. The small-size sculpture (4”x4”x2”) is for exchanging origami. The movement of exchange not only is a treat for people who are able to create a little origami messenger but also represents an actual response from me to people who expect one small-size sculpture.

The medium-size sculpture (10”x10”x5”) is like a child’s toy, which is easy to move around. When children play with a toy, they might invite people to join them, even strangers. However, there is so to speak, an invisible chain restricting adults, pushing them away from activities such as opening up their heart, being a child in a public space, and playing around.

The large-size sculpture (30”x20”x20”) is placed in the statue area. It is carved with some messages which have been in my heart for a long time, so I decided to materialize the words to make it permanent.
Scale and Actions Fig. 1. Playground Area Design
Scale and Actions Fig. 2. Playground Area Arrangement

Scale and Actions Fig. 3. Exhibition Booth Detail

Scale and Actions Fig. 4. Playground Area Detail
Material, Text, and Texture

Exchanging a text is a fleeting moment; yet, in some way, the moment has a kind of permanence. For this reason, I applied metal casting and carved the text on the sculpture. In the beginning, the large-scaled sculpture was conceived as being cast in iron, and the small ones cast in aluminum. Nevertheless, considering that the small-sized sculpture is for giving away, the material changed to cast plastic. Plastic is less expensive than metal and, more importantly, it can be produced faster. One more advantage of plastic is the ability to add multiple colors, which could match the colorful origami paper. After the first iron casting, the large-scaled rabbit did not work out. The unexpected sequel minifies the final scale, affects the color, and alters the material to be aluminum, which was not an exciting thing at the time, but I am happy with the result.

Why is the texture important? In an exhibition, the sense of touch is more powerful than that of sight. Sometimes, people cannot help but use their hands to feel an intriguing thing. Since I allow attendees to touch my artwork, why not use texture to give the artwork another level of impact? Texture can create the pattern of fur for my rabbit, allow the visitor to have a variety of experiences of the artwork, and obscure the text so it is not easy obtained unlike most written communications. My main intention was to make the sculpture as if it were a letter, although including a message on the sculpture was not my original plan. This was one of the struggles in my head. The struggle comes from the fact that the message will reveal my feelings, the story which I am not sure I am ready to tell. However, I hide the words within the texture, acknowledging that through the casting process the form may crack presenting as if the story has survived a long time but has not yet been told.
Material, Text, and Texture Fig. 1. Paper, Wax, Aluminum in Progress

Material, Text, and Texture Fig. 2. Colored Aluminum Rabbit and Colorful Plastic Rabbits
Material, Text, and Texture Fig. 3. Colorful Plastic Rabbits and Paper Bunny

Material, Text, and Texture Fig. 4. Texture Design
Material, Text, and Texture Fig. 5. Real Life Story Sample

Material, Text, and Texture Fig. 6. Real Life Story Sample
Origami and Color

The origami concept originates from folding and passing a note to others. Compared to showing the ready-folded message to the audience, my concept revolves around creating deeper impressions and enjoyment with participants folding the message by themselves. Talking secretly on a sheet of paper is a universal phenomenon among every age bracket; for instance, students pass a note to friends during class, and coworkers inwardly send messages to each other to avoid their boss. To prevent the conversations from being overseen, some of the writers fold the message into a shape. Gradually, friends or lovers make cute origami to stand for their goodwill. Folding origami is a common memory for many people. It is a simple game for a child to make a plane, a boat, or a hat. It is a genuine past or present for human beings.

“… color is not just physical attributes of the visible and cannot be considered and studied exclusively as such, but also and always an affective quality of the experience of the image.”¹ Traditional, simple, colorful origami paper allows creators to pick their favorite color, according to their mood or to the recipient’s preference of color. Studies show that color not only signifies objects or emotions, but also expresses people’s thinking, and the content they write can affect the color they desire. Some people might write delightful content, whereas some will write something heavy and serious.

Color is an expression before language and object. “… shows how impossible it is to speak of color without immediately connecting it with the word of emotion and passion.”²

Besides the origami paper, the plastic rabbits apply the corresponding primary color as well. “Our brain sees colors a fraction of a moment before they distinguish shapes, so we see a red ball first as a red something and then as a ball.” According to the colors I placed in the setting, the audience automatically feels joyful and welcomed, and consequently drawn to the shape of the bunny. Similarly, the visitor chooses a bunny based on the color they prefer. The shape is just a symbol. What is vital are the person’s emotions and intentions. In the words of Etel Adnan, “Color is life. And as long as we live, we are alive.”

**Video and Instructions**

In contrast with sculptures and origami, the video and instructions tend to guide visitors as far as what to do in the exhibition. Paper instructions only teach people how to fold a paper bunny step by step, but video instructions show both the instructions for folding and the procedures for before and after the making the origami.

Origami rabbits are either easy or difficult to fold, but the shape is always abstract. Therefore, it is necessary to have a film to support the instructions. Also, video can be a part of the artwork demonstrating the process of the artist (me) writing down the words deep in my heart and then transforming the words onto a paper bunny to exchange with a consolation plastic bunny, or giving it to the one I want to talk to. The performance carries through the concept. Hence, the actions are an intrical practice of my motive.

YouTube link: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kf14OWWKKhE&t=17s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kf14OWWKKhE&t=17s)

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3. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, “A Color that is a Form of Thinking”, *Colori: Emotions of Color in Art* (Italy: Silvana Editorale, 2017), 19
Origami Folding Instructions

1. Fold Arrow A to the middle of the paper, then fold Arrow B perpendicular.
2-1. Open up arrow A
2-2. Bring Point B to Point C to create a shape like the image then fold tips to line up the center.
3-1. Open up the Arrow A and squeeze the sides to form 2 triangles.
3-2. Fold part B the other side of the paper.
Flip part C like the next image.
4. Fold the outward edges to the center.
5. Fold tips at the line.
6. Fold just the tip to the back. Fold the line 1 to the back, not line 2, and fold the entire piece in half.
7. Hold Point B and pulling up tips A then fold in place.
8. Grab the tips A inside and bring it down. Then open tips B to form ears.
9. Congratulations! Mission completed!

Video and Instructions Fig. 1. Paper Instructions

Video and Instructions Fig. 2. Video Setting and Testing
Psychology

While creating this work I felt vulnerable. The course of events making required addressing questions deep in my heart, revealing the struggle in my mind, making me honestly face myself, and even face the thing or the person I should face, head-on. It led me to understand the motivations, emotions, and potentials of myself and the artwork. For this design, the inspiration just popped into my head, but I needed to integrate all the ideas together to arrive at a complete and mature result. The rabbit idea existed from the beginning, but why does it fit with the gesture of sharing? The question, the intention of my work, the significance of the rabbit, and so on, led me back to my childhood, and to the influence of my father. This personal connection to my concept created vulnerability, not just during the making process but also in anticipation of the exhibition.

In relation to my art, the public might not have as complex personal feelings as I do. Through the artwork and the interaction, they might have multiple levels of feeling such as welcomed, joyful, excited, struggling, and confused. If the attendees know more about the art piece, they might reflect on themselves and convey personal emotions when they go through the origami process. In psychology, the series of processes and feelings can lead to a concept called “unfinished business,” which belongs to the Gestalt approach of Fritz Perls.

According to Fritz Perls, “The goal of Gestalt therapy is to establish an individual's natural overall harmony. As far as our golden day is concerned, people, fragmented people, are breaking into pieces. The analysis of these pieces is just to cut them into more pieces, to no avail. What I want to do in Gestalt is, integrating all these self-expelled and unrecognized parts makes man a complete person again.” 4 Perls assumes that people are inherently capable of self-regulation and self-healing, and that people construct their perceptual experiences, organize what
they know and feel, and organize things into those that they regard with interest or disinterest. Everything that people perceive is a whole perceptual that they are interested in and give meaning to. Compared with completed experience, people will remember the experience of unfinished experiments in the past. They have a natural tendency to complete unfinished business. After people face their unfinished business, they will meet with a “disturbed cycle,” which entails exposure and irritation, and they will go through six stages: introjection, projection, confluence, retrojection, desensitization, and egoism. The person might undergo the six stages over and over again. Throughout this process, the person will rediscover, reorganize, and re-recognize himself/herself. The process of constructing the exhibition may serve as therapy for me, but for the audience it becomes a game. Like Gestalt image tests, which show pictures with information missing, so people spend more time thinking about other ways that their perception can be completed, and usually get different answers based on different personal experiences.

**Failure Process**

In the beginning, the rabbit was designed as a 50”x50” sculpture and cast in iron. However, this plan did not succeed. There were several mistakes and unpredictable accidents that happened in the process of making the sculpture. First, the wax model itself was too large and thin, even with the head and the body separate. I needed to mix the sand two or three times to get a complete sand mold, but this meant that the different layers of sand did not seal together well. Second, the sand mold cracked during the baking process making it fragile to move around.

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4. Petruska Clarkson and Jennifer Mackewn, 張嘉莉 譯, 波爾斯：完形治療之父（台北市：生命潛能，2000），57
and to hold the hot flowing metal. Third, the molten iron was not as fluid as expected. All of these factors affected the final result, and the first iron rabbit did not work out, leaving a huge negative impact on me, but I had no time to mourn the failure. I quickly moved on to the back-up plan, aluminum.

Thanks to the experience and lessons learned from the first rabbit, all sizes of the aluminum rabbits cast successfully. There was only one failure in casting, which was due to under-estimating the amount of molten aluminum so that the rabbit was cast twice. The first layer of aluminum had already cooled down, so the second layer of casting did not integrate with it. Luckily, I made more medium-size rabbits than I needed, therefore I still had enough rabbits for the exhibition.

Failure Process Fig. 1. Sand Mold Cracked
Failure Process Fig. 2. Iron Cooled Down in the Middle

Failure Process Fig. 3. Separate Pour of the Aluminum
Section III: The Body of Work
The Body of Work

People having fun and interacting with others throughout my artwork overall indicated a successful exhibition. Individuals were attracted by the huge bunny in the Statue area; they wandered around the sculpture; some people discovered the sentences on the sculpture bunny; some people did not. The most popular place was the Static area, because people were enthusiastic to fold the origami. Most individuals tried hard to finish the origami bunny, and neglected the video. All visitors were curious about the Playground area. Adults were afraid to touch or step on the astroturf because it was part of the art, while children ran into the Playground area without a second thought.

Exhibition Booth

Exhibition Booth Fig. 1. All Areas Included
Statue Area

Statue Area Fig. 1. Three Large Rabbits Included

Statue Area Fig. 2 and Fig. 3. Individual Large Rabbit
Statue Area Fig. 4. Individual Large Rabbit

Static Area

Static Area Fig. 1. Static Area Section View
Static Area Fig. 2. Static Area Table with Origami Mess

Playground Area

Playground Area Fig. 1. Playground Area Section, Panoramic View
Playground Area Fig. 2. Display and Exchange Platform 1

Playground Area Fig. 3. Large Rabbit Statue Display Area
Playground Area Fig. 4. Playing Section

Playground Area Fig. 5. Display Platform 2 Detail
Exhibition Interaction

Exhibition Interaction Fig. 1. Busy Hands at Static Area

Exhibition Interaction Fig. 2. Visitors Try to Finish the Origami Bunny
Exhibition Interaction Fig. 3. Visitors Try to Finish the Origami Bunny

Exhibition Interaction Fig. 4. Audience Tries to Find the Sentence on the Medium Rabbits
Exhibition Interaction Fig. 6. People Relaxing and Playing in the Playground Area

Exhibition Interaction Fig. 7. The Last Guest in the Show
Exhibition Interaction Fig. 8 and Fig. 9. Variety of Patterns Arranged by Audience

Exhibition Interaction Fig. 10. Variety of Patterns Arranged by Audience
Exhibition Interaction Fig. 11 Different Paper Bunnies Made by Audience
Invitations

Invitations Fig. 1. Four Different Styles
Section IV: Introspection and Conclusion
Introspection and Conclusion

Mostly, I received positive feedback from visitors. Some people told me that they had never attended an art exhibition like this before, and some people said that the starting point of the artwork and the form of my sculptures were unique. Others indicated that they had a good time in the exhibition. As for myself, to sum up, the whole show was fantastic. Visitors had a spectacular time in my art booth. They not only tried to learn how to fold a rabbit, but also shared a moment to help a stranger or a friend to finish their origami. Some of the attendees who were bold enough to step on the astroturf played with and rearranged the bunnies. I was invited by a young audience member to join her and play with the bunnies together. At that moment, I myself became a part of my artwork, bonding to create a friendship with a little girl through the bunny.

To review the exhibition, there are a few things I would like to modify in the Static area to improve the exhibition. First, I would like to reform the instructions. The instructions in the show illustrated how to finish an origami. To link up each section additional information about writing a message, exchanging a plastic bunny, or giving out the origami rabbit would allow people to understand why they might make the origami. Second, I would like to continue the astroturf under the origami stand. By connecting the Playground area and the Static area with an astroturf, the audience will not be fear interaction as they are already walking on the artwork.

All in all, this exhibition represents a new step in my art career. Techniques such as applying foundry methods and cast metal instead of casting paper, which is the material I frequently used in the past, were new. This medium can exist longer and is harder to break, which allows people to touch the art. My artwork prior to the thesis presented the idea of relations in an abstract way or left a space for the viewer to imagine. With this exploration, I
made up my mind to create an opportunity to forge bonds through art. Hence, there are actual interactions between people and with the artwork in the show, and that is the most important part of the overall concept.

Appendix

As my thesis work began coming together in preparation for the exhibition I put all the raw models together to show to my thesis committee members. On that day, one of the professors brought her daughter to the critique, and she not only immediately started to play on the artificial grass with the wax rabbits, but she also asked her mom to play with her. That was really a lovely and exciting moment, because it is the action that I hoped and expected to see. Another interesting moment occurred during the opening night; at the beginning, nobody was touching my artwork, because it is “art,” which is not supposed to be touched. However, a boy ran to the display section and grabbed a small bunny to give to his mom. His mom stopped him right away, even when I told her it was ok to play and take one. It is fun to see this kind of phenomenon when people are used to being limited by the traditional rules of art and forget to learn how things actually operate.

The third touching moment was on the day when I took my show down. One of the exhibitors took his niece to see the show at the last moment. The process has stood numerous tests and the result is still the same, the mother tried to stop her four-year-old daughter before I gave permission. What was memorable this time was that I became the guest of my artwork, since the little girl invited me to play with her. What touched me the most was that a person, who is not limited by the traditional rules, naturally started to interact with others in the area I created. People who knew the new rule, and played in my booth, told me this might be the most unique
art show they ever experienced. Therefore, I will never forget this exhibition: not only because I created the work as the artist but also because I was able to experience the core concept myself and bond with viewers.

Appendix Fig. 1. Professor and Her Daughter in the First Review

Appendix Fig. 2. Me and the Little Girl on the Take-Down Day
Last but not least, special thanks to my three wonderful committee members (sadly, not in this picture) and those who helped me finish my project. All the reviews, professional advice, wise solutions, mental support, and physical help … I could not be any more grateful!
Notes

Ideology (Works Consulted Before Making)


Mathew S. Clarke, *From Fire to Form: Sculpture from the Modern Blacksmith and Metalsmith* (Pennsylvania: Schiffer, 2009)

Martin Friedman, *Sculpture Inside Outside* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989)


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