

There is always a forward that one would never know

an on-going conversation between Ran Zhang and Sonia Fernández Pan
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Sonia: In almost every flight I've taken in the last few years my seat has always been next to the aisle. In the last few flights I selected the seat in the window, exchanging one habit for another. I am a person of temporary habits that, however, seem immovable to me when I inhabit them. Looking out the window of the plane made me realize that they are a vision technology that allows us to see things that we cannot see "on the ground". Or at least they allow us to perceive the world from a very different perspective. I think especially of clouds, but also of roads, buildings, oceans, mountains, lakes or even airports themselves. The window of the plane made me think of your microscope, especially when I landed. I suppose you also know very well that moment when the plane descends, crossing the clouds, which cease to be clouds and become fog, to approach the ground as if in a kind of slow motion (that travels at hundreds of kilometres per hour). This time the fact of landing was disappointing to me, because the microscope disappeared and the airplane was just one more (air)plane among many others. Because it was no longer possible to be in that state of suspension and contemplation "from above", without it implying the

hierarchy of the super-observer that appears in so many novels. The super-observer is a kind of scientist who always knows everything. But “everything” here only means that (s)he knows more than the rest of the characters.

Ran: Ran: I totally agree Sonia! The funny thing about the moment of descending is that the total mass of our physical volume (the body) is fixated on the seat. This safe (as i was told) position restricts our bodily movement to stretch our neck and head towards the tiny window next to the seat. Consequently, the eye muscles are extremely charged with excitement, curiosity and fantasy, extra excited to look out of the window. One can feel the retinal blood vessels and the waters in each protein cell are expanded ‘forward’: to a world revealed in front of the eyes. It is a world neither alien nor familiar, regardless of any recognizable object or texture. It is a world one dimensional, in relation to scale. As if reality is composed with onion layers. During the physical descending, the eyes dive into different layers of reality, from macro to micro, and from micro to macro. One always know that there is a crucial point - a border line - between the transition of each layer: when does a car suddenly become so big; or when is the horizon behind these trees just a millisecond ago, or two and a half milliseconds ago, or when does the idea of horizon even kicks in. But one can never catch it, or experience it on the spot. Instead, one thinks that (s)he saw it while it happened just a second ago, but one is left experienceless, knowledgeless in this second. So one tries harder, until gaining a collective memory/knowledge of the entire process. One can no longer remember each layer of the reality, but only remembers an overview of reality as a whole and the amazing experience as an incident. The layers are locked up, again, or always locked up in the swirl of reality itself, and in each one of us. Disappointed but also satisfied at the same time; addicted to that experience, blurry but also crystal-vivid at the same time. This entire matter is through for observing subjects under a microscope. Perhaps the best thought experiment I can give to express this in words is:

Observable reality can be:

Layer 1 reality - layer 2 reality - layer 3 reality - layer 4 reality - and so on.

Or, observable reality can be:

Layer 1 reality - back to a sort of beginning with layer 1 reality in mind - layer 2 reality - back to a sort of beginning with layer 1 and plus layer 2 reality - layer 3 reality - back to a sort of beginning with layer 1, layer 2 and plus layer 3 reality - layer 4 reality - back to a sort of beginning with layer 1, layer 2, layer 3 and plus layer 4 reality - and so on.

How do i see it all? How can i digest such a matter in the kind of ‘order’ that i can have an access to honor all the details that come along the way? I started making pictures, and I ended up making pictures, even though the in-between just continues.

Sonia: A few days ago I was telling you that the images you produce are vision technologies. Among many other things, because they are also three-dimensional objects with an unequal load of content. One side of the image is "full" and the other side is "empty", as you told me. It has always seemed unfair to me the way in which we can reduce artistic works and many other things with a phrase or a description. It is unfair in relation to the artists, but above all towards the works themselves. At the same time, I also find this perception of language as a reductionist tool very unfair. I especially like

Wittgenstein's idea that the inexpressible is inexpressibly contained in what is expressed. I know it because of Maggie Nelson's writing, who is especially skilled at "inexpressing". Do you think the invisible is invisibly contained in the visible? Is it something that could apply to your work?

Ran: I love the term 'vision technologies'. The understanding of technology goes much broader than just electrical or scientific gadgets of 2019. As you were saying, gleaning an idea from Ursula K. Le Guin, the first piece of human technological evolution might be the invention/discovery of a container-like shape for eating and drinking. Much earlier than any weapon invented for killing. For me, the term technology means a cultivated confirmation of a manner for simply reaching a goal. The term itself is independent from any general action of tool invention. This is because of practicality in naming and communicating. All cultures developed phrases for everything, i.e. throat sounds and finger strokes for everything. But when it comes to a none-verbal situation, phrases and descriptions seem to fail. As you say, the unfairness. Because none-verbal situations need to expand: the inexpressibly contained express. Such as poetry. We never land on the written lines. We sculpt the in-between lines that is not written. I do feel that I share the similar logic with the idea, though my work is not poetic at all. It is hard lingers and traces of vision technology. Theory of techno?

Sonia: Going back to the clouds, with them I put into practice another habit: that of taking compulsive pictures with my phone. There are thousands of thousands of images that I keep in files that I will barely look at again. I also took pictures from your microscope that afternoon we spent together. It seems especially poetic to me that we were looking at things through a microscope surrounded by images of an enlarged molecular reality. I remember very much the images on the wall of your studio, even though we scarcely talked about them then. I think there is a relationship, beyond the similarity in the visual representations, between the macro-scale realities and the micro-scale realities. The difference between an atom and a galaxy is simply a change of perspective. Both are things we cannot access with our eyes. The two are realities represented by a similar aesthetics. We need other eyes to approach them, as I also need the camera on my phone to look at the world differently and not so much to represent it. It's particularly reassuring that my phone is as short-sighted as I am, that it always needs a few seconds to focus its vision. Is knowledge short-sighted? Unlike something you wrote in relation to your work, I don't think that knowledge replaces experience, but that it's just another form of experience. Have you ever been "high on rational thinking"? Me many times. In fact, I love reading theory so much because of how it affects my body and not just my mind. Since months now and thanks to a conversation with Siegmund Zacharias I can refer to "visceral thinking" in order to make the emotions visible in the thought. Is there something you have not yet seen and would like to see? Why are you so fascinated by molecular life? They say that there is a melancholy about the universe itself, caused by the feeling that something is too big to comprehend. What (human) feeling would you associate with the molecular scale of things?

Ran: I like these 'short sighted' snapshots from your phone. Last time we sat in Cafe Bateau Ivre, you were trying to take a zoomed in snapshot of the window blind. Since your phone camera is 'short sighted', the snapshot was totally different from what the camera

was pointing at. It was not a distortion, but a completely different scenery, a motion of short sightedness, a manifest of the camera 'muscle' which turns the snapshot back to the 'eye' (the camera) and becomes about the 'eye'. This reminds me of how I started to get interested in the molecular scale.

On one hand, I have been observing subjects under a microscope for six years. This constant long term action has truly become a habit of mine, or a ritual towards 'a melancholy about the universe itself'. Just when I am in the 'melancholy', I would not even notice because it has been placed by a motion of looking: isolated, clinical, clean and fleeting. On the other hand, every time when the illuminating light source is switched on and flows into my eyes through the double eyepiece station, I can see my own eyelashes projected upside down in the lens, and my own eye floaters and sparkling white blood cells scratching my eyes and overlapping with the observed subjects. Each floater is a chain of molecules, magnified by my own bio-lens. I see the inside of my own body, magnified spontaneously. Yet the inside is out, becomes one body with the magnified subject that is at the other end of the eyepiece. I become self aware, a nobody but anything that is possibly being shaped by the observed subjects. It scares me that what I am made of is transparent and without outsource, simply biochemically shimmers and vibrates.

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But there is so much to dig in deeper when I can see the even smaller information is beyond my vision. Through reading and learning, I know there is the atomic plane and many planes beyond. Up to now, knowledge replaces my direct experience of simple observation. I cannot get around biology and chemistry if I want to 'see' the non-observable level of reality. So I don't think knowledge replaces general experience, but I think knowledge hijacks its own subject that is beyond the threshold of the perceivable reality. You and me vanish beyond that threshold. Perhaps the melancholy is not because it is too big to comprehend, but because it is 'nothing', or everything.

There is so much I have not seen yet. Maybe to the extreme of that desire, I can even be blind when I cross the threshold. So for the last time, to go a bit further with the thought experiment in words:

From the observable to the non-observable:

Direct experience based Layer 1 reality - direct experience based layer 2 reality - direct experience based layer 3 reality - and so on - threshold - knowledge based layer X reality - knowledge based layer Y reality - and so on - until no one knows anymore.

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Sonia: Maybe it's arrogant of me, but when I get involved with a person who, not by chance, is an artist, I relate my main working material to her or his own. And by "my" work material I mean language, which is also shared by all human beings. It is also shared by machines, which are not intelligent but large data computing systems. Here I can't help feeling anthropocentric, understanding intelligence from a creative force that the AI certainly doesn't have and won't have if it continues to operate under the same parameters. But what I wanted to tell (you) is that reading you has made me think again that it is very absurd to believe that language is immaterial, when almost all words refer to

things or situations that are enormously material. How can we say that the word "table" is not material if it potentially contains all the tables in the world? And, at the same time, the materiality of the molecules, of the data, of the proteins, of the digital images, of love, of tobacco, slips away from me, although I live with all of them every second of my life.

Moreover, even the "things" you produce are beyond my understanding and this is where I believe that a possible definition for art (or for an ideal of art) would be "production and knowledge with continuous remnants of meaning". What fascinates me about art is what cannot be said with words (even if words appear), in what "messes up the discourse", in what transforms the anatomy of "what is said" and "what is seen". I also believe that art could be considered a technology with very diverse functions. Some are extremely exciting, like "your vision devices"; others are politically disheartening, like financial speculation or institutional manipulation. But to believe that there can be a satisfactory definition for art is another of the many fictions we support without realizing it. And I wonder, how many things that we don't believe in are we continually supporting? Things we don't see, but we do by participating in them. And then there are the things that we don't see, but that are part of us. Lately I think that, when we get sick, it's a symptom that we're very hospitable to these organisms called viruses.

But I didn't want to talk to you about abstractions, but more practical things. It's striking how what I end up writing is nothing like what I intended to write. I wanted to try to make you an exercise of (my) reality this morning based on layers. I wanted to expose all the chaos that surrounds these words that I write, from shower soap to critical theories on AI. Does it happen to you when you're thinking about making a piece, that materials and files take you completely to other places? This morning I looked for the images I took with my phone that afternoon we were together at Cafe Bateau Ivre, accompanied by chocolate with tiny chunks of bretzels inside it. I remember that this chocolate later disappointed you, because you didn't get to feel the flavor of the bretzels promised by its packaging. This disappointment is something I relate to conferences in institutions; they never fulfill the promises they announce in the handout programs. Those brezel chunks also make me think of the bug that has been permanently printed on one of your digital-material images. But then the situation would be inversely different: biting a piece of any chocolate that tastes unexpectedly like bretzels. Has it ever happened to you that you eat something and it tastes like something else? In my mouth, corn tastes like meat on many occasions. And I like not knowingly knowing why.

This bug shows us how even within such a meticulous process as yours, inserts of (another) life appear, forms of contingency. Between insect and insert there is only a difference of one letter, but this small difference leads to very distinct but complementary worlds. The appearance of the insect printed on your work helps me connect with the structure of this conversation. I wrote a long text and, instead of continuing it with another long fragment, you decided to enter between my paragraphs, modifying my thinking logic and breaking the linear character of my writing. You inserted yourself into my text, producing yours/ours. When I opened the document my surprise was enormous. Thanks to you, I realized that I have been using one method for years without realizing that there are other methods that can be put into practice. If this conversation were an onion, its layers do not appear one after the other, but some layers appear in the middle of others.

To differentiate the different layers and times, we could use colors. At the moment, it would be a two-colored onion, but it could have many more if we keep rewriting (between) our words. Until it is impossible to define the colors or authorship of the words at first glance. This is something that your layer exercise contains too. There's something geological about this conversation, about thinking, about your images. It seems that if we make a cut in the Earth, it is not true that there is a temporal sequence from the past to the present in its layers. Because of tectonic movements, earlier fragments of earth appear closer to those born later. What is the temporality that this insect is pointing at? How does time manifest itself in the digital strata? I'm imagining a kind of digital dust that accumulates between the data.

I'm really looking forward to knowing how you'll get into these fragments I'm writing, although this conversation ends here for a while and continues in other media, like our email accounts or winter cafes.

The past survives in the future.