



LUX YUTING BAI

COCOON

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INTRODUCTION

There are two Chinese proverbs about cocoons: “作茧自缚” (*zuò jiǎn zì fù*) and “破茧成蝶” (*pò jiǎn chéng dié*). The former, which means spinning a cocoon around oneself until one is imprisoned, is an admonition; the latter, which refers to breaking the cocoon during the metamorphosis from caterpillar to butterfly, is congratulatory. This pair of metaphors describes two contradictory phenomena in the course of a single life: one is static, passive, and inert—a mere thing in-itself (*en-soi*); the other is fluid, active, potent—an animated being for-itself (*pour-soi*).¹ These proverbs encapsulate a duality that echoes Jean-Paul Sartre’s notions of facticity and transcendence, which coexist in an ambiguous mixture.² One constitutes the givenness of a human being’s here and now: a past, a body, and a social environment; the other entails the freedom of the choices one must make in order to interpret and surpass one’s current bearings. A conscious individual is always caught between the immediacy of the concrete present and the unfolding of life toward an unknown horizon.³ Time, with all of its paradoxes, transcends one’s situation into the “happening,” but a person must consciously take authorship of their future identity to avoid turning into an automaton amid the practicalities of everyday life.⁴

Søren Kierkegaard asks how one can “become what one is.”⁵ Authenticity, or a way of being that is sincere to oneself, is defined by Martin Heidegger as a fundamental condition of achieving the wholeness of *Dasein*, a temporal being whose authenticity lies in its potential for becoming.⁶ In the Western philosophical tradition of Cartesian dualism, one’s consciousness is both the center of reference and the departure point for one’s relation to the world. In this vein, does one, as Heidegger suggests, encounter one’s utmost potential through experiencing the possibility of death?⁷ Should one, as Immanuel Kant suggests, take the public use of reason to confront one’s own subjection to the machine,⁸ or, as Michel Foucault proposes, shape one’s life as a work of art?⁹

Alternatively, and breaking for a moment with the subject-object dichotomy, perhaps truth and liberation lie in the dissolution of the self in the totality of the world, like a drop of water in the sea. Along these lines, ancient Taoism advises learning from animals and losing oneself among them in unity with nature,¹⁰ while Jean-Luc Nancy finds freedom in the essential coexistence of all beings. Gilles Deleuze, finally, suggests becoming imperceptible

- 1 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 403.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 710.
- 3 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Malden: Blackwell, 2013), 12.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to “Philosophical Fragments,”* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992 [1846], 130.
- 6 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 322.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 354.
- 8 Immanuel Kant, Henry E. Allison, and Peter Lauchlan. *Heath, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 36.
- 9 Michel Foucault, “An Aesthetics of Existence,” in *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1990), 49.
- 10 “Zhuangzi Yinde (A Concordance to Chuang Tzu),” *Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series*, Supplement no. 20 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956).

- 11 David R. Jarraway, *Wallace Stevens among Others: Di-va-dames, Deleuze, and American Culture* (Montréal, Québec: McGill-Queens University Press, 2015), 195.



Liam O'Brien, *Early April* (2017), HD single-channel video, 5:15 min, courtesy of the artist

in the rhizomatic universe as if by “painting oneself gray on gray.”¹¹ But how does one transform into a “butterfly” without flying into the void?

This essay comprises four chapters. The first, *Being-in-itself & Being-for-itself*, discusses Sartrean duality through a comparison of two video works by Liam O'Brien, *Early April* (2017) and *Whistling in the Dark* (2013). The second, *Being-for-others*, examines subjectivity and objectivity in Amalia Ulman’s interdisciplinary work *Bob Life* (2018) and Graham Wilson’s installation *Identity Crisis* (2018). The third, *Being-with*, reviews the relationality of being in Magdalena Dukiewicz’s anti-sculpture *Singular Plural* (2018) and Liang Shaoji’s bio-art practice. The final chapter, *Being-as-becoming*, reflects on the figure of the artist in Richard T. Walker’s *an is that isn’t always* (2015) and introduces the curator’s ongoing project *Becoming* (2018), made in collaboration with Liang Shaoji and many others. All artworks being analyzed are found in the physical exhibition *Cocoon*, a collection of inquiries and answers that address the ontological question of being. Created by a diverse group of contemporary artists from across the world, these original

works vary vastly in their theoretical underpinnings and approaches. While these artists draw inspiration from a wide range of philosophies – including Taoism, existentialism, onto-aesthetics, ecophenomenology, and many more – these pieces are more than illustrations of schools of thoughts. Achingly poetic, profoundly philosophical, or amusingly absurd, they all share an autobiographical quality, and each tells the artist’s own history of overcoming and becoming.

Although inspired by Sartre and by Heidegger’s phenomenology, this essay is by no means an in-depth academic study of the subject; rather, it assembles fragmented thoughts and inspirations that emerged during the curatorial process. Through research, gallery and studio visits, and stimulating conversations with the artists, professors, and friends, these ideas have been developed and eventually consolidated in the final form of the physical exhibition. This catalog offers a documentation of the project, an existentialist interpretation of the works, and an explication of the philosophical framework of the exhibition.



Richard T. Walker, *an is that isn't always* (2015), HD single-channel video, 9:16 min, courtesy of the artist © Richard T. Walker

I. BEING-IN-ITSELF & BEING-FOR-ITSELF



Liam O'Brien, *Early April* (2017), HD single-channel video, 5:15 min, courtesy of the artist

The Sex Doll

In Liam O'Brien's video work *Early April* (2017), the artist incarnates himself as an emasculated sex doll. When sex toys are approached through the lens of Heidegger's concept of *Zuhandenheit* (ready-to-hand), their essence is seen to lie in the intentionality of their potential sexual relations with human beings.¹² However, the doll in O'Brien's video has lost its ready-to-handedness: it lacks the organ that could provide pleasure. Thus, the object has become a present-at-hand with no functionality, a useless representation. O'Brien's gesture of self-objectification is a literal translation of the Sartrean ontological status of being-in-itself. This self-

sufficient, inert aspect of existence has neither potency nor becoming—it has only passive involvement in the situations it is thrown into.¹³ *Early April* shows O'Brien in a series of mundane everyday scenarios that suggest a truthful portrayal of his daily life in New York City: cooking in his humble sublet apartment, commuting on the L train, staring blankly in the ISCP (International Studio & Curatorial Program) studio, and watching pornography on an iPhone in bed. The familiar settings do not function as backdrops to psychological dramas; on the contrary, they constitute a world of objects that overshadow the already objectified protagonist in becoming the real subject of the film.

12 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 12.

13 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 403.

14 James Wood, introduction to *Nausea* by Jean-Paul Sartre (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), 5.

15 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 220.

16 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 73.

17 Samuel Beckett and Steven Connor, *The Unnamable* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 168.

18 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 292.

19 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 38.

The accentuated sounds of traffic, home appliances, and technological devices subsume the silence of the figure. Close-ups of these instruments produce anthropomorphizing effects that render the world menacing to humans. As the human subject has become an object, so too do the objects become subjects; flattened to the same level of subjectivity, each takes its turn as the subject of the film. The effect recalls Sartre's description of nausea: the "in-itself" everyday objects oppress and apprehend humans with their pure existence and their resistance to being swallowed into meaning.¹⁴

Embedded in the narrative of *Early April* is a series of references to existentialist thought. For example, as the doll leaves his apartment he plunges his weightless body down the stairs like a feather from the sky, performing Heidegger's idea of the *Verfallen*: "*Dasein* has . . . fallen away from itself as an authentic potentiality for *Being its Self*, and has fallen into the world."¹⁵ The artist's desk is stacked with such books as E. M. Cioran's *The Trouble with Being Born*, Emile Durkheim's *Suicide*, and Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*, all further nods to existentialist thought. Then, in front of this desk, the noticeably depressed protagonist abruptly deflates himself, in a literal and humorous image of "the unbearable lightness of being." Seen through a sociopolitical lens, the personification of the artist as a castrated, disposable, mass-produced sex doll humorously evokes an existential crisis with contemporary characteristics: as a symbolic commodity, it is a surplus and a lack at the same time. O'Brien's video also implies a self-reflective critique of the role of the artist—someone whose value is often denied in our culture and whose agency can become compromised in an industry in which the self is regarded as capital.

The Hand

While *Early April* highlights the repetitious circularity of everyday life, exemplified by Sterling Ruby's poster *Sunrise Sunset* above the artist's bed, *Whistling in the Dark* (2013) presents a forwardness in the temporality of being. In contrast to the idle human surrogate, the artist now renders himself as a relentless hand that keeps pushing itself toward a future. The character (i.e., the hand) represents a Sartrean being-for-itself that is highly aware of and tenaciously countervails its given conditions—namely, gravity and darkness.¹⁶ Tasked with the arduous duty of dragging an overwhelming sack toward an arbitrary finish line, the protagonist is reminiscent of Sisyphus and evokes Samuel Beckett's famous quote "I can't go on, I'll go on."¹⁷ Yet it demonstrates a Heideggerian "resoluteness," a commitment to its project and thus, in a sense, to taking ownership of its life.¹⁸

As the film slowly and painfully progresses, the viewer becomes invested in the tension between colossal effort and potential resolution. However, while their expectations are never fulfilled—as Godot never comes, what is beyond the horizon in *Whistling in the Dark* remains unknown—the film ends with a twist: the artist retracts his hand, throws off the baggage that has been concealing him, and crosses the street into the night a free man. This gesture of abandoning the external body can be interpreted in numerous ways. From an existential-phenomenological standpoint, the sack represents the corporeality of being or the being-in-itself. As Sartre says, for one to achieve self-transcendence, the "for-itself" must be brought out by the internal "nihilation" of the "in-itself" upon which it depends.¹⁹ On the other hand, from a Marxist standpoint, the sack symbolizes

the laborer role that one takes on in the late-capitalist market. Thus, this gesture of self-liberation epitomizes Herbert Marcuse's assertion in *One Dimensional Man*: "If the individual were no longer compelled to prove himself on the market, as a free economic subject . . . the individual would be liberated from the work world's imposing upon him alien needs and alien possibilities. The individual would be free to exert autonomy over a life that would be his own."²⁰ Furthermore, that the artist runs into the darkness is representative of the idea that the post-capitalist future is completely unknown; for the artist—a product and object of this economic system—to imagine a world beyond capitalism is shrouded in darkness.

As *Early April* and *Whistling in the Dark* represent the ontological being-in-itself and being-for-itself respectively, O'Brien's intention here goes beyond the illustration of their duality to address alienation. Far from the Greek ideal of *Kosmos*—a perfectly ordered and harmonious place²¹—the world in both films is depicted as an utterly isolating place in which individuals manifest

conspicuous anxieties. The problems of excessive labor and the precariousness of the creative class contribute to the characters' estrangement, yet the culprits are complicit. Thus the question arises: is alienation an ontological condition of being-in-the-world? As Heidegger argues, it is through one's projects that the world takes on meaning—what he calls the acts of "building" and "dwelling"²²—yet the world retains its otherness, and thus can come forth as utterly alien, *unheimlich*, with the strangeness of a world in which one precisely does not feel "at home."²³ Or, is alienation a result of our political and sociological realities in neoliberal capitalism, an era that David Harvey posits is defined by "universal alienation"?²⁴ Colliding fiction and reality, *Early April* and *Whistling In the Dark* are poignant autobiographical allegories that induce fascinating interpretations of the unbearable "lightness" and "heaviness" of being.

- 20 Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (London: Abacus, 1974), 2.
- 21 Martin Heidegger and Eugen Fink, *Heraclitus Seminar* (Northwestern University Press, 1997), 32.
- 22 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 107.
- 23 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 214.
- 24 David Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* (London: Profile Books, 2015), 150.

- 25 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 321.
- 26 Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Vintage International Edition, 1946), 53.
- 27 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 2015), 33.
- 28 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 107.



Liam O'Brien, *Whistling in the Dark* (2013), HD single-channel video, 4:50 min, courtesy of the artist



Amalia Ulman, *Bob Life* (2018), HD video, 21min, courtesy of the artist

II. BEING-FOR-OTHERS

If there is an Other, whatever or whoever he may be, whatever may be his relations with me, and without his acting upon me in any way except by the pure upsurge of his being—then I have an outside, I have a nature.

— Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*²⁵

The Pigeon

Hell is—other people!²⁶ Or rather, in the eyes of Bob the Pigeon, hell is people. Under the gaze of the "Idiot Lady Human," to fly becomes "an extraordinary privilege." How does one assert one's own existence? In a complex interplay of subjectivity and objectivity, Amalia Ulman's mockumentary *Bob Life* (2018)—in which the artist stars as a self-absorbed version of herself—interrogates the ontological foundations of freedom. According to Sartre, freedom is the definition of man in the sense that man is a being "for-itself" with the potential to live authentically.²⁷ Authenticity is also central to Heidegger's definition of *Dasein*, and he develops a neologism in relation to the word "ownedness," *Eigentlichkeit*, to contend that "*Dasein* is essentially something that can be authentic [*eigentliches*], that is, something of its own [*zueigen*]."²⁸ Bob's ownedness of his authentic self has been usurped on two interconnected levels: literally, he is enslaved in Amalia's apartment as a prop for her social-media fabrication, the success of which in turn perpetuates his imprisonment; ontologically, he is subjected to the gaze of his masters, the camera, and the viewer of his photographs, which

alienate and lock him into a mode of “being-for-others,” a presence in a world whose center of reference is outside the subject’s consciousness. Under layers of objectification, the story of Bob’s journey oscillates between asserting the independence of his own consciousness and catering for the projection of the Other (i.e., the humans).

Joseph Catalano says, “We are born into the world twice, once from the womb of our mothers and then again from our relation to others.”²⁹ Thus, Bob’s autobiography does not begin with his biological birth, but with his capture—the pivotal starting point of his relationship with humans, marking the birth of his subjectivity. According to Descartes, subjectivity arises from the perceptions people have of existence. However, a third-person perspective of oneself reveals the extent to which one is alienated from the dimension of one’s being. The story follows Bob’s constant crushing realization of the discrepancies between his subjective self and the objectified being as seen by the Other. The Other says: “He looks like a baby!” “On the chubbier side.” “Is Bob gender neutral?” Bob feels humiliated because he knows, in essence, that he is “a full grown homing pigeon,” “a racer” who is “fast and strong” and “has hair under armpits.” As Sartre says, “I am possessed by the Other; the Other’s look fashions my body in its nakedness, causes it to be born, sculpts it, produces it as it is, sees it as I shall never see it.”³⁰ The Other holds the power to freeze Bob into a being that he is not, and thus deprives him of his freedom.

The violent gaze of the Other not only exposes Bob, making him weak and fragile, but also turns him into an object. He is little more to Amalia than the physical manifestation of body in her sight. When Amalia asks the vet to take off his band, a symbol of his authentic

being, because “it didn’t look good in pictures,” identity is annihilated for the sake of representation. In the film, Bob observes that the “Idiot Human Lady” has obsessive “strange behaviors” of using an artifact to play “make believe,” which is the way he refers to how she uses her phone to take selfies and fabricate a life on social media. While Bob’s being-for-others is imposed by the gaze of Amalia, Amalia actively embraces her being-for-othersness through constructing her virtual presence. Her behaviors evoke an enactment of “bad faith”—a flight from freedom through self-deception. That Amalia dresses Bob in a bow tie is reminiscent of Sartre’s example of the waiter whose exaggerated behavior is evidence that he is play-acting at being a waiter. Bad faith is contagious. As Bob says, “As if suffering from some sort of Stockholm syndrome, I began liking them.” He masochistically caters to the “bourgeois” lifestyle they construct, play-acting the social role he has been ascribed by the Other. In shame, Sartre writes,

in the first place there is a relation of being. I am this being. I do not for an instant think of denying it; my shame is a confession. I shall be able later to use bad faith so as to hide it from myself, but bad faith is also a confession since it is an effort to flee the being which I am. But I am this being.³¹

When opportunities arise, Bob fails to escape, out of shame. This is a symbolic specification of the original shame, as Bob says, “I am naked, I exist naked. Unlike humans, who let themselves be overcome with shame. Ashamed of what? And before whom? In their stupidity they dress. In their stupidity they dressed me.” Human beings put on clothes to hide their object-state and win the right to see without being seen; that is, to be pure subject.

29 Joseph S. Catalano, *Reading Sartre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 77.

30 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 475.

31 Sartre and Robert Denoon Cumming, *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* (London, England: Routledge, 2013), 199.

32 Ibid.

33 Jean-Paul Sartre and Stephen Priest, *Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings* (London: Routledge, 2005), 227.

34 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 268.

Bob is dressed to be seen, to become the shameful object of the Other’s attention. Thus, his shame involves what Sartre describes as “a recognition of the fact that I am indeed that object which the other is looking at and judging.”³² The shame of the body is our defenseless state as objects under the gaze of the Other, the shame of being-for-others.

The power relation of subjectivity and objectivity represented in the film is reversed by Bob’s perspective, which directs the film. As the artist structures Bob’s life story in a manner that forms an individualized identity particular to him and defies the fragmented images made of him, Bob reclaims his autonomy. The recurrent close-up shots of Bob’s eye represents the Sartrean voyeur behind a keyhole, returning the gaze back to the camera and to human beings. As Sartre says, “While I attempt to free myself from the hold of the Other, the Other is trying to free himself from mine; while I seek to enslave the Other, the Other seeks to enslave me.”³³ All beings are the embodiment of the Other. In the end, answering a “call of conscience” that, in Heidegger’s words, “silences the chatter of the world [and] brings [one] back to [one]self,”³⁴ Bob escapes the social order and returns to the natural order in which his essence belongs. In this sense, the ongoing narrative of *Bob Life* is a motivational tale in response to the ontological state of being-for-others, a return of the Other’s gaze, and an assertion of authenticity.



Amalia Ulman, *Bob Life* (2018)

Installation, variable size

White desk with stickers, inspirational framed poster, 1717 clock, calendar, 811 Wiltshire blueprint, pens, greyhound luggage tag, red dice, pigeon racing bands, clock frame, “Pigeon Family” mirrored frames, red office chairs, “Pigeon in my pocket” 3D printed figurines, donation stand, whiteboard, photo album

Ed. 1 + AP

Courtesy of Barro Arte Contemporaneo



Amalia Ulman, *Bob Life* (2018), HD video, 21min,
courtesy of the artist

Bound to seek recognition of its own existence in categories, terms, and names that are not of its own making, the subject seeks the sign of its own existence outside itself, in a discourse that is at once dominant and indifferent. Social categories signify subordination and existence at once. In other words, within subjection the price of existence is subordination.

— Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*³⁵

The Closets

Developing Sartre's philosophy, Linda A. Bell writes, "One simply is the ambiguous being that is being-for-others and being-for-itself."³⁶ This statement implies that a person is both an autonomous being of consciousness, with no fixed essence, and a body that is subject to the perceptions of the Other. This existential conception of being can shed light on issues around gender identity, in particular the incongruities one often experiences as a sexed being: while one may perceive one's own identity as free, fluid, or unformed, one surrenders to social definitions in prescribed terms external to oneself. In Graham Wilson's *Identity Crisis* (2018), the viewer encounters gender-specific objects that stand in as the bodies of their represented beings. Wilson's device of objectification is suggestive of the body's ontological attribute of being-for-others. As Sartre describes:

My body is utilized and known by the Other . . . But in so far as I am for others, the Other is revealed to me as the subject for whom I am an object . . . This is the third ontological dimension of my body . . . it follows that even in reflection I assume the Other's point of view on

my body . . . thus the nature of my body refers me to the existence of others and to my being-for-others.³⁷

Employing objects that suggest femininity and masculinity, such as high heels and Timberland boots, Wilson deliberately points to the othering, stereotyping gaze imposed on individuals in terms of what their external body is clothed in. His work thus asserts that gender is ascribed by a third person, and that gender is always distant from the self. On the other hand, the closets that contain the installation, symbolizing the sexed body and sexuality that constitute one's biological situation, bring forth sex as a given that one is simply "thrown" into.

Identity Crisis approaches gender from a Butlerian standpoint, which views it as "a shaping process by which the body comes to bear cultural meanings."³⁸ Filling the closets on each side with blue and pink light, the artist explains that, contrary to contemporary references, historically blue represents female and pink represents male. The installation brings forth the arbitrariness of gender signifiers, indicating how gender is a "historical idea" that is formed by societal forces over time.³⁹ Simone de Beauvoir claims, "One is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman."⁴⁰ If gender, as she says, is produced through a series of "stylized repetitions of acts"⁴¹ and the Body is a site of becoming, does it mean it is a matter of freedom of choice, or, is gender identity simply a perspective we should abandon all together? Does choosing one's gender constitute a form of being-for-itself, or, as a social construct and historical situation, has it no place in the ontological structure of being? Does the subject have gender?

35 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006), 20.

36 Linda A. Bell, *Sartre's Ethics of Authenticity* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989), 30.

37 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 218.

38 Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution:," 520.

39 Ibid, 521.

40 Simone de Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde (New York: First Vintage Books, 2011), 18.

41 Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 522.



Graham Wilson, *Identity Crisis* (2018), installation, variable size, courtesy of the artist and Anna Zorina Gallery, New York, photo by Stan Narten

III. BEING-WITH

That which exists, whatever this might be, coexists because it exists. The co-implication of existing is the sharing of the world. A world is not something external to existence; it is not an extrinsic addition to other existences; the world is the coexistence that puts these existences together.

—Jean-Luc Nancy,
*Being Singular Plural*⁴²

The Capsules

In existential terms, authenticity is a question of freedom, in the sense of preserving the essence of Being. The phrase “to be free” is always followed by a preposition. In a negative sense, one is free “from” something external to one’s existence, for example the Other or facticity. In a positive sense, Heidegger proposes that one is free “for” meanings; as he argues, *Dasein* has the possibility of being free “for the freedom of choosing and grasping itself.”⁴³ In Cartesian dualism, the Self—whether as being-for-itself or being-in-itself—is always the center of reference and presupposes a single subject as the point of departure to the world. Magdalena Dukiewicz’s project *Singular Plural* (2018), a title borrowed from Jean-

Luc Nancy, abandons the subject-object dualism by taking up an alternative ontological perspective, discarding the third person singular pronoun for “plurally singular” or “singularly plural.”

Nancy proposes a “non-subjective” freedom. He asserts that one’s freedom does not end where that of the other starts, but that the existence of the other is the necessary condition to be free.⁴⁵ Contrary to the belief that one’s autonomy stands against alterity, Nancy believes that there is no freedom without the presupposition of our “being-with,” and of our being thrown into the existence.⁴⁶ Inspired by Nancy’s philosophy, Dukiewicz glues thousands of gelatin capsules together to form a large-scale installation in the shape of wasps’ nests. In doing so, she intends to create a rhizomatic bio-organism constituted of interconnected singularities that enunciate their essence of “being-with”—being as a part of a hybrid totality.

The term “being-with,” or *Mitsein*, coined by Heidegger, is an essential part of *Dasein*, which he defines as “entangled-disclosed, thrown-projecting being-in-the-world which is concerned with its ownmost potentiality in its being-together with the ‘world’ and in being-with with the others.”⁴⁶

42 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson. Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2010, 29.

43 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 188.

44 Kathryn Simon, “Time and Presence,” *e-flux*, http://e-flux.com/aup/wp/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/doc_373.pdf.

45 Ibid.

46 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 175.

47 A.J. Barnard-Naude, “Beyond the Brother: Radical Freedom,” *Acta Juridica*, no.1 (2008), 283.

48 Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 33.

49 Andreas Wagner, “Jean-Luc Nancy – A Negative Politics?” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 32 (2006), 95.

This complex, critical definition affirms being-with as a fundamental trait of Being, yet still presupposes a singular subject. Nancy radically subverts the Heideggerian definition by asserting that the “with” is not simply an addition to a prior Being; instead, the “with” is what constitutes Being.⁴⁷ Thus, there is no Being without “being-with” and no existence without coexistence. It is based on this premise that Nancy announces that *ego sum* is actually *nos sumus*, “it is” is actually “we are,” and being is “being singular plural.”⁴⁸

Dukiewicz’s *Singular Plural* adopts Nancy’s ontological discourse while also depicting his utopian political vision. The installation resonates with his description of a society in which relations are in a way prior to and constitutive of the individual subjects. The transparent, fragile, linked singular capsules are like anonymous citizens that are dependent on, “exposed,” and “vulnerable” to one another through their “respective openings.”⁴⁹ The whole transformative organism is like a plural, heterogeneous society with no hierarchy, but instead a network of contingent fragments that evolve together.



Magdalena Dukiewicz
Singular Plural (2018)
Gelatin capsules
Dimension variable
Courtesy of the artist

You have to be able to love the insignificant, to love what goes beyond persons and individuals; you have to open yourself to encounters and find a language in the singularities that exceed individuals, a language in the individuations that exceed persons.

— Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands*⁵⁰

The Silkworms

For decades, Liang Shaoji has raised tens of thousands of silkworms in his studio in Tai Shan, a remote mountain city in China. Every spring, as the insects wake from hibernation and start to produce silk, Liang arranges them around man-made objects and lets them conduct their “performances”—living, dying, circulating, existing—all the while weaving their threads around things, concealing them and transforming them into complex, wholly wrapped structures. The process sometimes takes years and can involve tens of thousands of silkworms working collectively. Inspired by Deleuze’s idea of immanence, the artist, from a micro-perspective, reveals a harmonious universe, where interconnected multiplicities coexist on a common plane. The silkworm kingdom represents to the artist what Deleuze calls “a world of pre-individual, impersonal singularities”⁵²; “It appears therefore,” writes Deleuze, “as a pure stream of a-subjective consciousness, a pre-reflexive impersonal consciousness, a qualitative duration of consciousness without a self.”⁵³

Thus, when Liang says “I am a silkworm,”⁵⁴ he’s not simply speaking of a metaphor for the artist as a producer of art, but of an ontological renunciation of “I,” the first person

singular subject. His work resonates with Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi, who similarly posits that human perception transforms everything into fixed and isolated objects and beings. He argues that this rigidity in thought means a person is “tethered to things” [i.e., *qi* being congealed]. Liang’s incredibly labor-intensive project suggests we should strive to “de-congeal” (*jie*) the “congealed” (*qi*) in ourselves.⁵⁵ When we do so, we are no longer enslaved by things, and are instead able to make all things mutually interpenetrating and nourishing again. By abandoning the division between subject and object, multiplicities and entities, and constructing a universe where all beings—whether they be humans, animals, plants, or objects—share expressivity, Liang suggests that we are the totality of all being, and that freedom lies in recognizing one’s essence as being-with-one-another.

50 Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953-1974*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Michael Taormina (New York: Semiotext(e), 1995), 138-139.

51 Ibid, 142.

52 Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life*, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 25.

53 Wu Hung, “I Am a Silkworm,” Trans. R.R. Donnelley, *ShanghaiART*, 2006, accessed on January 18, 2018, <http://www.shanghartgallery.com/galleryarchive/texts/id/8093>.

54 Sebastian Hsien-hao Liao, “Becoming Butterfly: Power of the False, Crystal Image and (Taoist) Onto-Aesthetics,” *Deleuze and Asia*, ed. Ronald Bogue, Hanping Chiu and Yu-lin Lee, (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2014), 6.



Liang Shaoji, *Window* (2013 ~ 2015), 100*92*3cm, installation, window, silk, cocoons, courtesy of the artist and ShanghaiART Gallery



Liang Shaoji, 《蚕瀑瀑》 (*Silkworm Spinning*) (2011), single-channel video, 5:09 min, courtesy of the artist and ShanghaiART Gallery

IV. BEING-AS-BECOMING

A long night I spent
thinking that reality was the story
of the human species

the vanquished search
for the vanquished

Sounds come by, ruffling my soul

I sense space's elasticity,
go on reading the books
she wrote on the
wars she's seen

Why do seasons who
regularly follow
their appointed time,
deny their kind of energy
to us?

why is winter followed by a few
more days of winter?

We came to transmit
the shimmering
from which we came; to name it

we deal with a permanent voyage,
the becoming of that
which itself had
become

— Etel Adnan, from "Surge"

The Artist

Kant proposes that one possibility for becoming oneself comes through encountering the sublime in the natural world, an experience that he states "gives us the courage to measure ourselves against the apparent all-powerfulness of nature."⁵⁵ Alone in the center of dramatic landscapes, Richard T. Walker's figure in *an is that isn't always* (2015) reminds one of Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* (1808), a work from the Romantic period that involves an artist contemplating the infinite, awe-inspiring mysteries of an impersonal natural world. Walker refigures the Romantic focus on experiencing authenticity through an engagement with the sublimity of nature. In stark contrast to these nineteenth-century Romantic definitions of the sublime, the artist uses a series of radical, seemingly naïve gestures to approach nature: he relaxes his body in the soil like a child, erects a ladder on a cliff, and collages little pen drawings with a real mountaintop in front of the camera lens. Walker fuses and juxtaposes the natural and the man-made, the mundane and the awe-inspiring, to evoke the sublime in his own distinctive contemporary visual language.

55 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 145.

56 WCharles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 4.

57 Di Jens Brockmeler, *Beyond the Archive: Memory, Narrative, and the Autobiographical Process* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 118.

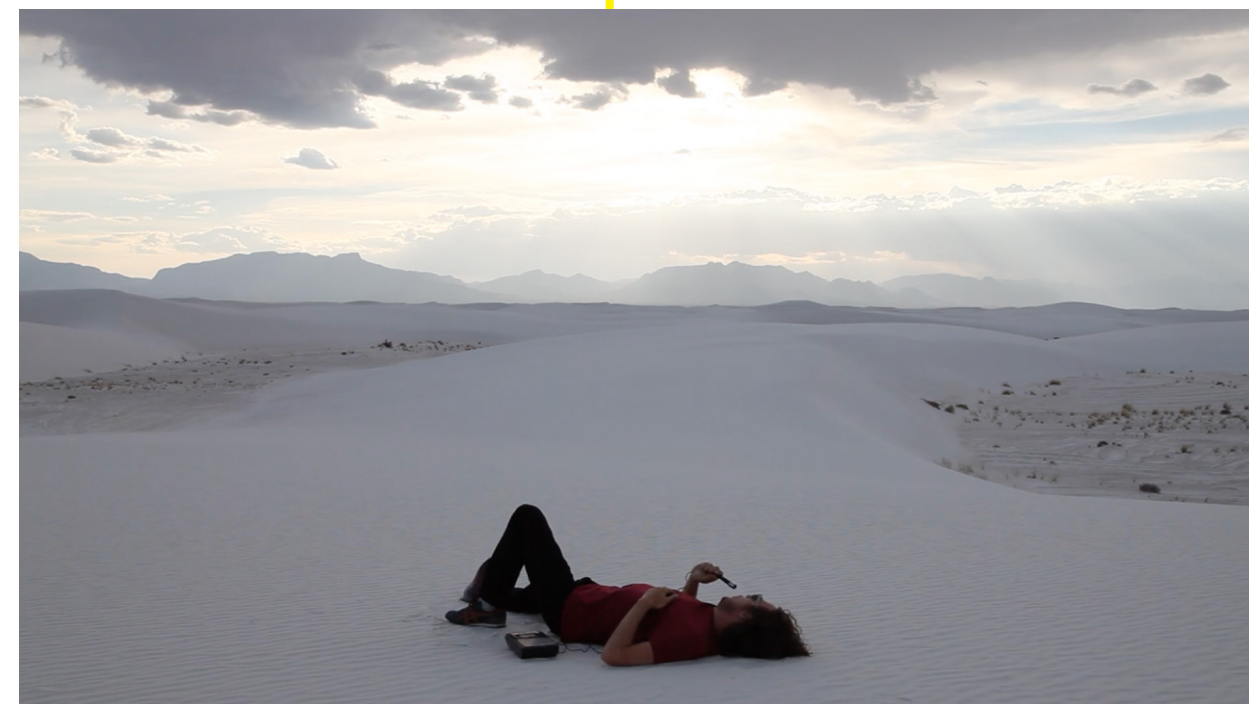
58 Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" trans. Mary C. Smith (1784), accessed on April 5, 2018, <http://www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/etscc/kant.html>.

59 Ibid.

60 Esmaeel Najjar Daronkolaee and Mehdi Bakhtiari Hojjat, "A Survey of Man's Alienation in Modern World: Existential Reading of Sam Shepard's Buried Child and True West," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, vol. 2, no. 7 (2012), 204.

Stories have a self-shaping quality that generates a continuity of identity through narrative. As Charles Taylor says, human beings are "self-interpreting animals" where the interpretation is constitutive of the interpreter.⁵⁶ One is engaged in a continual process of enquiry and reflection about what makes life worthwhile.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, Kant argues in his essay "What is Enlightenment?" that autonomy can be achieved through the public use of reason, by which he means that reason has no other end but itself.⁵⁸ Through this public use of reason, one is able to question one's own subjection to the machine and seek other possibilities.⁵⁹ Walker's introspective monologues adapt these strategies to a contemporary context. In doing so, his monologues demonstrate a genuine effort to examine his understanding of reality as an end-in-itself. In this sense, that the artist's diarylike, incoherent thoughts and feelings are patchworked on top of each other seems similarly to suggest that narrative and reason

are the means of identity formation. Crucially, this process is delivered in a tone of utter honesty, one that reveals deep vulnerability. Sartre suggests that the norm of authenticity refers to a kind of "transparency" with regard to one's situation, recognizing that "I am a being who can be responsible for who I am."⁶⁰ In these therapeutic expressive confessions, the sublime is the audience; in situating the viewer in such a position, the artist proposes that self-transcendence is possible in the contemporary world.



Richard T. Walker, *an is that isn't always* (2015), HD single-channel video, 9:16 min, courtesy of the artist © Richard T. Walker

There is no difference between what a book talks about and how it is made.

— Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari,

*A Thousand Plateaus*⁶¹

The Book

Deleuze says that a book has neither object or subject; it is made of variously formed matters, and very different dates and speed.⁶² It is an assemblage of multiplicities where the process of “becoming” takes place.⁶³ Curated by Lux Yuting Bai, *Becoming* (2018–) 《流變》 is an ongoing collective experiment in collaboration with Liang Shaoji, live silkworms, and many others. Taking the form of an unfolding, open-ended book, the project is an ever-changing assemblage that is constantly in flux, with multilateral interventions taking place over time. Every year, artists, poets, and thinkers from across the world and spanning many disciplines are invited to add new pages to the book in the knowledge that what they create will be affected, transformed, and eventually dissolved by innumerable unpredictable forces. Every spring, the curator uses silk threads to sew the newly received pages together by hand. Depending on the climate of the year, she ships the work to Liang’s studio in China to house thousands of silkworms. The insects, in turn, recreate the object with their living traces, wrapping silk over it until their life cycle is complete. The book is then shipped back to the curator in preparation for the next year. As time goes by, the book grows thicker, the silk layers become more complex, and the conversations delve deeper among artists and curators, human beings and nature, life and matter.

Each invited participant is given the following instructions:

1. Contemplate on the question of being (some ideas for your inspiration)
 - a. Time/Tao as the only subject
 - b. Nonhuman expressivity
 - c. Haecceities (unique qualities)
 - d. Natural morphogenesis
 - e. Repetition as metamorphosis
 - f. Assemblage
 - g. Becoming
2. Imagine how your creation will be subject to the following risks and “affects”
 - a. Random curatorial decisions
 - b. Imperfect holes, threads, and stitches
 - c. Traces of other materials
 - d. Traveling without insurance
 - e. Being consumed, devoured, and destroyed by silkworms
 - f. Their residues and bodies
 - g. Becoming invisible
3. Create four A4-sized pages of any kind of content using any medium you prefer
4. Submit your creation to the curator
5. Forget about this project

61 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota, 1987), 4.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

64 James Gibson, “The Theory of Affordances,” *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (New York: Psychology Press, 2015), 58.

65 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 3.

In *Becoming*, each part—artists, curator, silkworms, time, and space—is affected by and affects others: one piece is drawn into the territory of another piece; the pages provide a surface — what Gibson calls “affordance”⁶⁴ —for the insects to operate upon, yet are in turn devoured by them; the curator grants the artists the freedom to create but physically violates their creation. Nothing is predictable. No one is in control. Temperature, pressure, light, speed, the shape of the pages, masses of air, and thousands of other almost imperceptible phenomena in the atmosphere can utterly transform the work—each is subject to its own “Butterfly Effect.” Thus, rather than a tightly mapped out and coherent body, *Becoming* renounces control and organization. It becomes a process of what Deleuze terms “deterritorialization”⁶⁵ —a jumbling together of discrete singularities flowing in a plurality of spaces and a complex rhythm of times. In this chaos, one’s self is dissolved among all other beings. When individual works eventually become concealed by the extremely complicated and resilient silk patterns produced by thousands of silkworms, human creativity is overshadowed by nonhuman expressivity; the single subject becomes invisible among multiplicities, and identity and recognition are erased in the process of becoming.



Becoming (2018–)
Variable size, silkworms,
cocoons, paper
Curated by Lux Yuting Bai
Current participants:
James Chan, Jia Chao,
Huiqi He, Zheheng Hong,
Jingyu Shi
Screenshot of video by
Jingyu Shi and James Chan

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ARTIST CHECKLIST

Magdalena Dukiewicz

Singular Plural (2018)
Gelatin capsules
Dimension variable
Courtesy of the artist

Liang Shaoji

《蚕游游》 (*Silkworm Spinning*) (2011)
High definition single-channel video
5:09 min
Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART Gallery,
Shanghai

Becoming (2018-)

Variable size, silkworms, cocoons, paper

Curated by **Lux Yuting Bai**

Current participants: **James Chan, Jia Chao, Huiqi He, Zheheng Hong, Jingyu Shi**

Liam O'Brien

Early April (2017)
High definition single-channel video
5:15 min
Courtesy of the artist

Whistling in the Dark (2013)

High definition single-channel video
4:50 min
Commissioned by Artbank, 2013
Courtesy of the artist

Amalia Ulman

Bob Life (2018)
Installation. Variable size
White desk with stickers, inspirational framed poster, 1717 clock, calendar, 811 Wilshire blueprint, pens, greyhound luggage tag, red dice, pigeon racing bands, clock frame, "Pigeon Family" mirrored frames, red office chairs, "Pigeon in my pocket" 3D printed figurines, donation stand, whiteboard, photo album
Ed. 1 + AP
Courtesy of Barro Arte Contemporaneo

Richard T. Walker

an is that isn't always (2015)
High definition single-channel video
9:16 min
Courtesy of the artist

Graham Wilson

Identity Crisis (2018)
Installation. Variable size
Courtesy of the artist and Anna Zorina Gallery
New York



Magdalena Dukiewicz
Singular Plural (2018)
Gelatin capsules
Dimension variable
Courtesy of the artist

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Graham Wilson, *Identity Crisis* (2018), installation, variable size, courtesy of the artist and Anna Zorina Gallery, New York, photo by Stan Narten

How does one “become what one is”? Inspired by Sartre and by Heidegger’s phenomenology, *Cocoon* is a project that investigates the existential and ontological question of being. Created by a diverse group of contemporary artists across the world, these recent or newly commissioned works vary vastly in their theoretical underpinnings and approaches. Drawing from a wide range of ideologies, such as Taoism onto-aesthetics, ecophenomenology, and many more, these works are, however, more than illustrations of schools of thoughts. Achingly poetic, profoundly philosophical, or amusingly absurd, they share an autobiographical quality, and each tells the artist’s own history of overcoming and becoming.

Cocoon

Curated by Lux Yuting Bai

Opening reception: April 19, 2018, 6-9 pm

April 19 - May 4, 2018

Pfizer Building, 8th floor

630 Flushing Ave, Brooklyn, NY 11206

COCOON
By Lux Yuting Bai
April 19, 2018

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