

# **CAN I USE WORDS TO BUILD A HOUSE?**

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Fine Art Sculpture 2022

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This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

Signed: 吴妍冰 Yanbing Wu

## Acknowledgment

Thanks to my father Yong Ping, for sharing his story with me to get this thesis off the ground. Thanks to my thesis supervisor Tatjana, for guiding me to make the text grow. Thanks to all the houses that I have lived in embraced me, given me a place to put the anxieties and instability. Thanks to all those who helped me in the writing process.

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## ABSTRACT

I started from my father's dream - his future house.

From a dialogue with him, dives me into memories and shapes a poetic space through the idea of Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*. The house becomes the imagery in which the memories stay that we can enter in and touch it, to interact with the house that belongs to us, or never belongs to us.

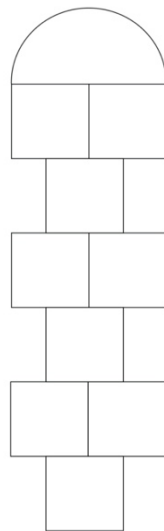
Through the 'experience of imagination', the house exists not only to provide a space for perception and memory to meet but also to bring 'awareness' to the 'back of self'. When the imagination circulation begins to drift away, a space is needed to enclose it.

By encounters with the theories, literature, films, artists and artworks mentioned in the text, it is like walking through a forking path where you learn that yourself can be a way of knowing others.

## INTRODUCTION

Last summer I went back to my hometown, it's been for two years I didn't back. My father and I used to walk along a riverside path after dinner, one day he suddenly talked about his plans for his future house, and this is how I began to write these texts. By recording conversations with my father and memories of my childhood, I try to through his future house to understand our family and surroundings, how to find my "shelter" in a huge mainstream narrative, and what kind of "house" "I" want to build and "live" in. This is the title and my starting point also try to bring a question: "Can I use words to build a house?"

When I start to write, I tried to write the ending first then go back to the beginning. I imagine I'm playing a hopscotch game, I build a space which I can easily jump from the beginning to the end, or jump from the end back to the beginning, or jump to any of spaces in between by throwing a stone without fear of getting lost.

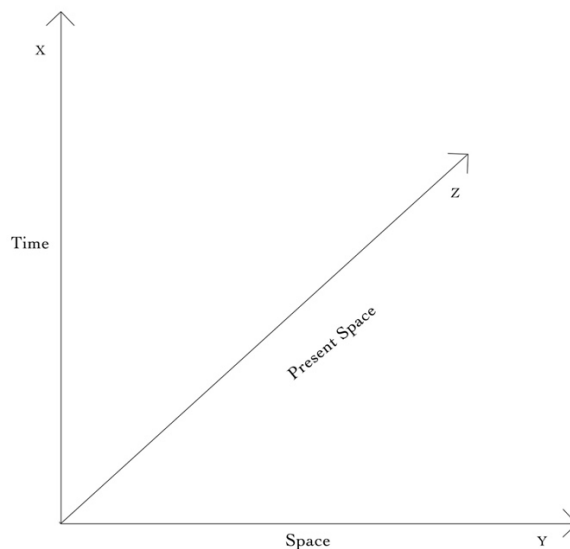


1.

Writing is also an act of seeing. In Wim Wenders' book *The Pixels of Paul Cézanne : And Reflections On Other Artists*, introduction *I Write, Therefore I Think* he mentioned: There are those people who can think clearly. Others don't get very far, they lose their thread after a while and have to start all over again. I'm one of the latter group. It's only when I write that I can think things through to their conclusion. When I see the words written in front of me, thoughts become clearer all by themselves. I think this comes down to always being reliant on seeing and having sharpened this sense more than any other. If I'm able to *see* the barely even there noumenon, it can think its way out, become a written symbol of the train of thought, and propel itself forward through thinking<sup>1</sup>.

I'm also in this latter group, I keep a habit of recording my dreams, by writing them down I realize that the moment you record them is also the moment they disappear, if I don't write them down, they will immediately fade away. And I have a strong feeling of anxiety that if I don't write these dreams I will lose myself, so my writing is visual because I want to capture the images that are becoming slowly transparent and to trace my thoughts by looking at the imagery in the words. So I created the map in text, which I call a map of inner space, as in Wenders' visual blocks of thought when he tells how he writes, a structure of any rate, where a kind of grammar of images helps him keep an eye on the grammar of him thinking. You can enter this "house", by looking at the map. The map also looks like house construction drawing I remembered that I often find some architecture drawings on the desk at home, all related to my father's work, lines, squares, measure numbers, piles and piles of them on the table, when I build the inner map I related them to the image of architecture drawings, that helped me to store, place and move around in the "house" when I am write the text and the images are cross-referenced and corroborated here, shifting back and forth..

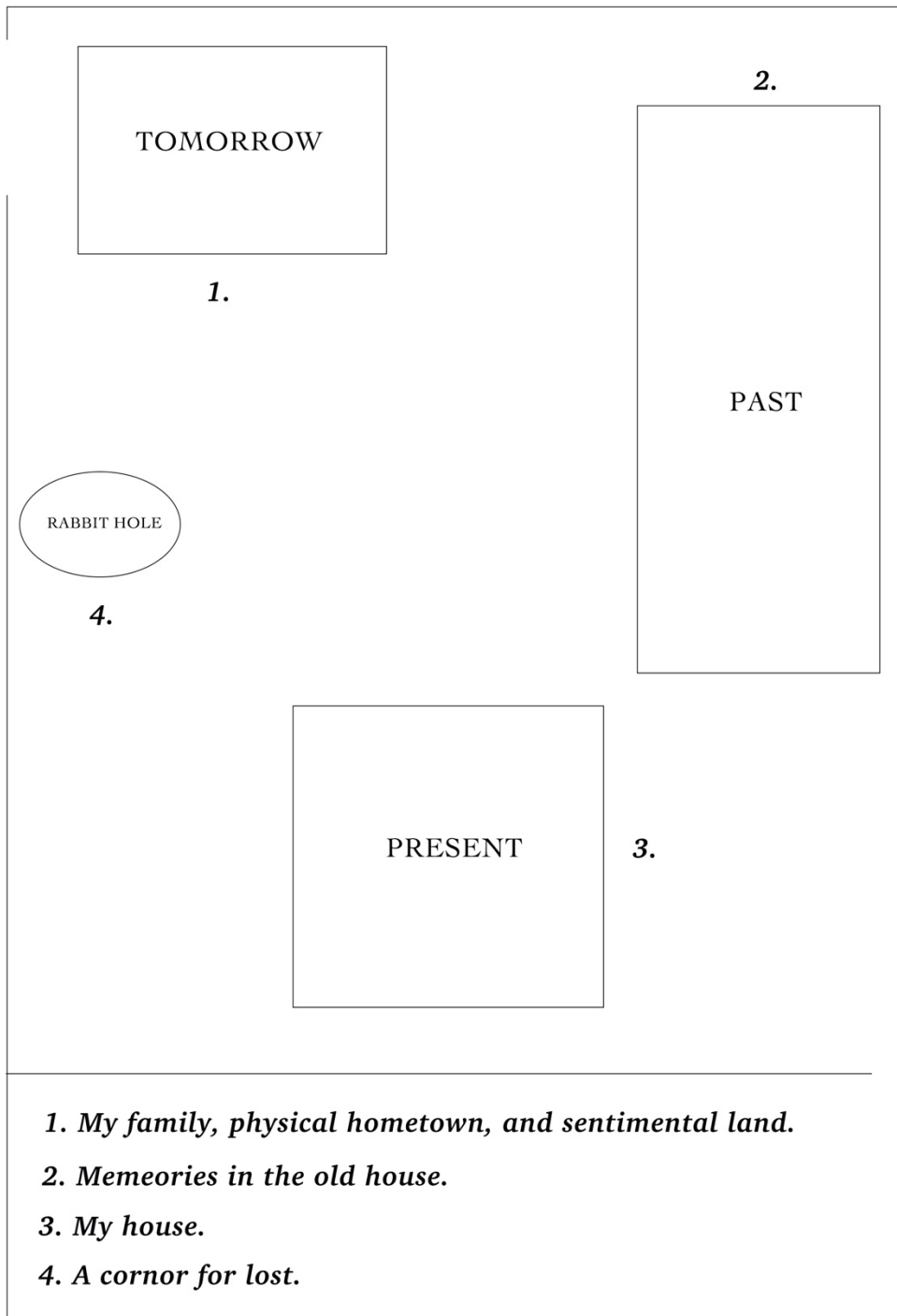
Inside the shelter, the spaces of future, past and present are constructed through the vessel of time, each of them having different shapes and sizes echoing how I perceive them. If we assume that time and space are the X-axis and Y-axis of the coordinates, then we can also pull out a Z-axis at each meeting point to derive the "present space", where each node on it is projected from a different time and space, creating new nodes. The memory of the present moves as it is reflected and folded again and again, which is constantly renewed and comes with a new form.



I walk through walls in different times and space, in the overlapping memories, in the time of “simultaneous existence”, in the space where the body and the imagination arrive together, in the different moments of self, in the space and objects enter each other. With all the tedious, boring and unimportant things of everyday life drifting together, flowing everywhere. What I want to build is not a physical single object by its own space and time, but a different perspective, about the relations and the paradox that can exist inside, a poetic space like the structure of a novel, the structure of an onion. In the process of writing, it feels like the word grows out by itself, no matter how long it has been crouching in the brain, it is still uncontrollable when it comes out.

I don't want to use the term “research”, to stand so high and felt so hard as to touch a stone. Indeed, I use my perception to approach the stories, poems, books, authors, films, directors, artists and art works that I have mentioned to meet them, to use their perspectives to reach my dreams, to have “calm” and “clear” dreams in the midst of what seems to be “chaos” and “blurriness”, which is extremely selfish.

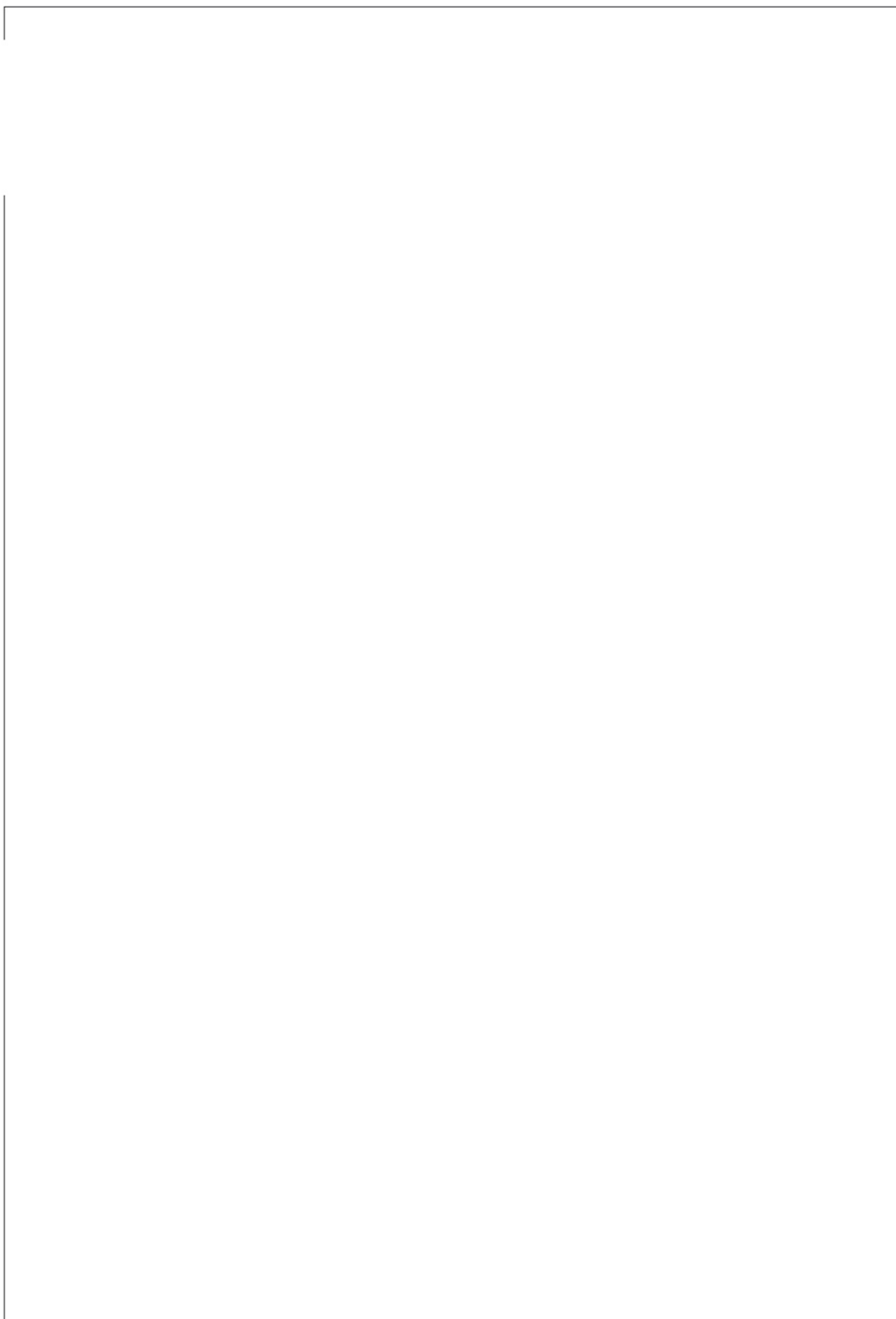
## Shelter



3.



## Shelter



4.

## SHELTER

*Your house is your body.*

*It grows in the sun and sleeps in the stillness of the night;*

*and it is not dreamless.*

*Does not your house dream? And dreaming, leave the city for a grove or hill-top?*<sup>2</sup>

- Gibran.K.

My parents experience China's society opened up and the economy grew rapidly, the city keeps on changing. I had the impression that every year house price went up, so I grew up with this feeling - I can't afford to buy a house, and this seems to be the collective consensus of society especially for young people, many of whom work all their lives. Last summer I went back to my hometown after a two-year absence, my favorite activity was to walk with my father after dinner. Many of our walks were spent discussing our surroundings when we passed through - trees, mountains, dead butterfly on the road, color of the street lights, smell of food coming from building, and his future house which he never tired of mentioning.

They moved four times my mother told me that they lived in my grandparents' house when they married, then moved closer to the city center to a two-bedroom flat, the place where my memories begin, the third time to a house my father also participated in constructing, a three-floor house with a front yard planted with laurel trees, ironwoods, camellias, it must have been the biggest change in the family in terms of space, at that house I experienced the birth of my brother, my childhood to adolescence to adulthood, and the loss when we moved out to next place. Now we live in a three-bedroom, two-bathroom flat, suitable for a family of four, which is plenty of space for me, but for my father, what he lost was not only the house also his wish of a family. We didn't talk much about the house for years after we moved out, I even forgot about it from time to time. Last summer I realized that what he wanted to build was not only a physical house but also a shelter, a corner to return to, a space and a dream that he had lost, also his "identity". The person whose identity has been taken away spends a long time in a narrow stairwell, piling up all the layers of their past life, so cramped and so cold.

Space, a biological necessity to all animals, it to human beings also a psychological need, a social perquisite, and even a spiritual attribute. A house is a relatively simple building, for many reasons, it is a place. It provides shelter, its

spatial hierarchy reflects social needs; with care, a repository of memories and dreams.

“ Why didn’t you leave the forest?”

“ We can’t go out of our place.”

“ Why?”

“ We love to stay in our forest.

We like it here.

It is a quiet place to sleep.

It is warm. Not loud.”<sup>3</sup>

The Tasaday in the *Space and Place* by yifu-tuan: The outside world discovered the Tasaday in 1971. As yet very little is known about them. They appear to have lived for generations in complete isolation, even from tribes that share the Mindanao rain forest with them. Their material as well as mental culture is perhaps among the simplest in the world. They are food gatherers; their hunting skills are elementary. They seem to lack rituals, ceremonials, or any kind of systematic world view. They are not curious to know about the world beyond the small confines of their homeland. Their language contains no word for sea or lake, although the Celebes Sea and Lake Sebu are less than forty miles away<sup>4</sup>. My father is one of the Tasaday who will return to his sheltered forest in the end.

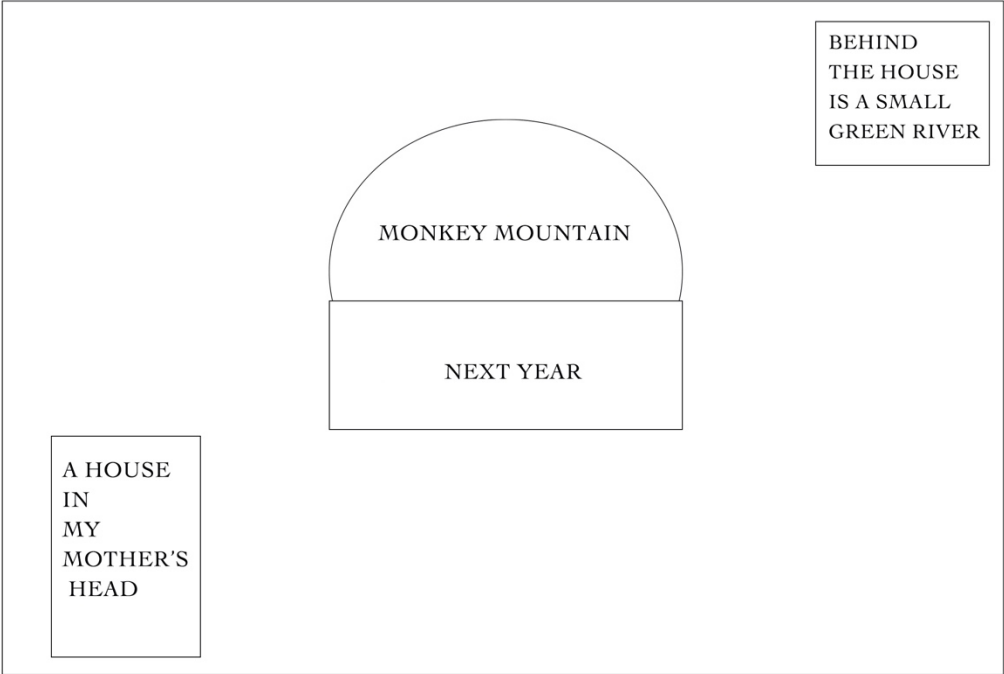
In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard describes one of Franz Hellens’ characters, wishing to make his daughter a present, hesitates between a silk scarf and a small, Japanese lacquer box. He chooses the box “because it seems to be better suited to her reserved nature.” A rapid, simple notation of this kind may well escape the attention of the hurried reader. And yet it is at the very core of a strange tale, in which father and daughter hide the *same* mystery. This same mystery is heading toward the same fate, and the author applies all his talents to make us feel this identity of intimate spirits<sup>5</sup>. What I can’t avoid in the conversation with my father is that I disagree with many of his choices or his attitude to things, but we are so similar, through the symbol of the “house”, as in this story, father and daughter, two human beings “understand” each other without a word, without knowing it. Two pent-up human beings communicate by means of the same symbol.

TOMORROW

**1.**

5.

HOUSE OF TOMORROW



*1. My family, physical hometown, and sentimental land.*

( *Sometimes the house of the future is better built, lighter and larger than all the house of the past.*)<sup>6</sup>

- *The Poetics of Space* by Gaston Bachelard

## MONKEY MOUNTAIN

We were walking along the riverside, opposite was the mountain that in the middle of the city, the sun setting slowly, its tail still carrying the rest of the soft light that melted into the cobalt blue sky, the mountain in the distance didn't seem real.

"Do you see, over there is Monkey Mountain."

"Why is it called Monkey Mountain? Do monkeys live in it?"

"Because the shape of the mountain looks like a monkey crouching there."

"I can't see that."

"You see, that's the head and the body underneath. My friend's farm is there and I think in the future that I might build a house there, when your mother and I are getting old we will live there."

My father's dream is to build a house. This is not an easy thing to do, especially in the city. Whereas in ancient times we built our homes by instinct, today we have to comply with laws and regulations in order to build: before we can build we have to buy land, but in China there is no private ownership of land, which fundamentally cuts off the possibility for individuals to build their homes. Land in the cities is state-owned and land in the countryside is collectively owned. Individuals cannot own land, but at best have the right to use it, built a home is unable to truly connect to the ground.

## NEXT YEAR

"Do you think the house will be built next year?"

"....."

"How big will the house be?"

"Around 300 square meters big, and 2800 yuan a square meter there."

"Is it the same size as the house we lived in before?"

"The house we lived in before was about 266 square meters."

"So this house will be slightly bigger."

"Yes."

"Isn't 2800 yuan a square meter very cheap? If you compare it to a house in the city."

“Yes, because there is industrial land, which was approved by my friend as a farm from the government.”

“Why he can sell it to you?”

“When the time comes I will apply to the court in the name of this friend who has borrowed money from me to file a lawsuit, as long as he doesn’t pay me back, he can mortgage this piece of land to me and it will become my private property, it will change from industrial land to private, the term of industrial land is 40 years, the private land is 70 years.”

“Then you can only have ownership of this land for 70 years, but a land can never belong to a person, isn’t that just a kind of wishful and innocent thinking from ourselves?”

“I don’t want to think about it now, we’re at that age where we want to settle down and make the rest of our lives comfortable.”

“You mentioned last time that you hadn’t been able to start building because you were waiting for the government to build a road there.”

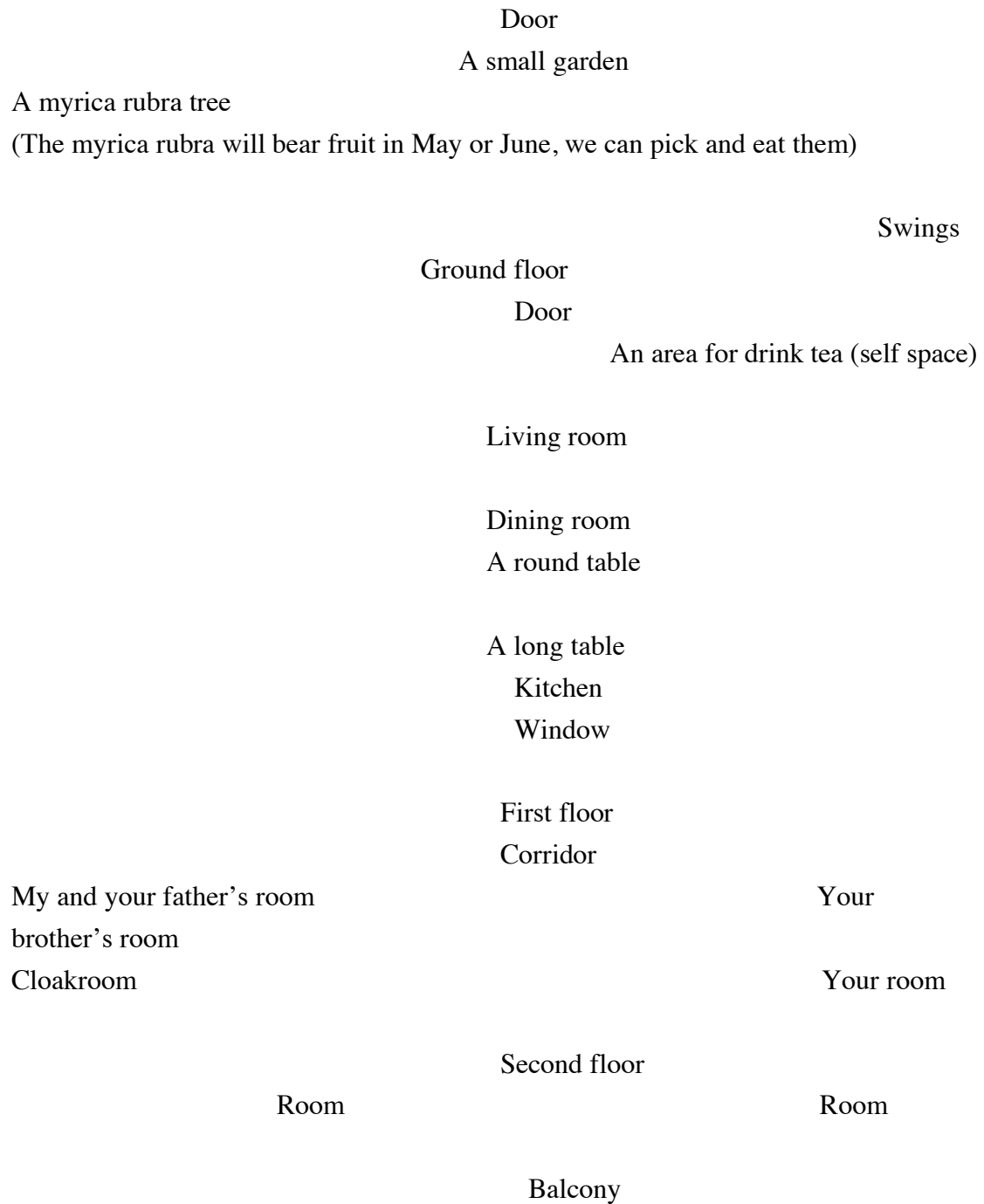
“Yes, a road for trucks mainly.”

“Besides the road as traffic function, I feel that the road is also what enables us to identify the existence of a house, we know roughly what direction, what kind of building will be there when we talk about a road as if you want to build a space of your own and eventually you need the government to demonstrate its existence. When does the government start building this road?”

“It’s going to be next year, I think. As long as it starts, you feel fast, you feel slow to wait until it happens, always like this.”



## A HOUSE IN MY MOTHER'S MIND



## BEHIND THE HOUSE IS A SMALL GREEN RIVER

“This is your future house.”

“Yes, I will be live here in the future.”

As Bachelard wrote “We continue to say that we are going to do what we have not yet done: we are going to build a house. This dream house may be merely a dream of ownership, the embodiment of everything that is considered convenient, comfortable, healthy, sound, desirable, by other people. It must therefore satisfy both pride and reason, two irreconcilable terms. If these dreams are realized, they no longer belong in the domain of this study, but in that of the psychology of projects. However, as I have said many times, for me, a project in short-range oneirism, and while it gives free play to the mind, the soul does not find in it its vital expression. Maybe it is a good thing for us to keep a few dreams of a house that we shall live in later, always later, so much later, in fact, that we shall not have time to achieve it. For a house that was final, one that stood in symmetrical relation to the house we were born in, would lead to thoughts – serious, sad thoughts – and not to dreams. It is better to live in a state of impermanence than in one of finality.” We always dream about our future house; it could be a hut, a mountain, a rock, an onion, a cocoon, a snake, a river.

Behind the house is a small green river, what it would be to stand in the house and look out of the window, whether on a sunny afternoon the light would reflect the ripples of the river on the walls, whether you could touch the surface of the river when you put your hand out as if you were stroking a river like a piece of spring grass.

The little house seems to fade further away but it always gives me comfort.

“What kind of house do you want to live in the future?”

“The house beside the sea.”

“What about you ?”

“I want to live in a house with a huge window, in the outside is a tree, the sun will cover the tree, you will see the shadow of the tree on the white wall during the afternoon moving gently with wind

sha lala ~

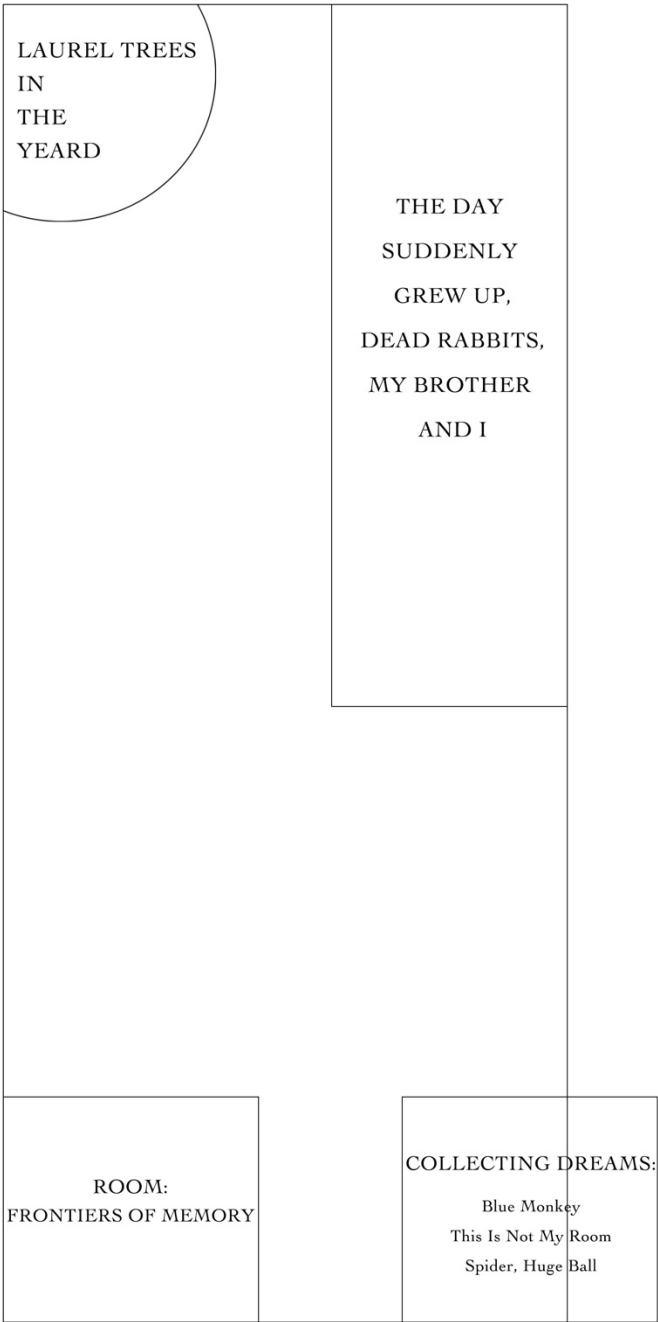
sha lala ~ .”

2.

PAST

7.

HOUSE OF PAST



2. Memeories in the old house.

*(The house we were born in is more than an embodiment of home, it is also an embodiment of dreams. Each one of its nooks and corners was a resting-place for day-dreaming. And often the resting-place particularized the day-dream.*

*If we give their function of shelter for dreams to all of these places of retreat, we may say, that there exists for each one of us an oneiric house, a house of dream-memory, that is lost in the shadow of beyond of the real past. I called this oneiric house the crypt of the house that we were born in. Here we find ourselves at a pivotal point around which reciprocal interpretations of dreams, through thought and thought through dreams, keep turning. But the word interpretation hardens this about-face unduly. In point of fact, we are in the unity of image and memory, in the functional composite of imagination and memory.)\**

- *The Poetics of Space* by Gaston Bachelard

## TREES IN THE YARD

In the courtyard, there were two laurel trees, but they never bloomed.

## THE DAY WE SUDDENLY GREW UP, DEAD RABBITS, MY BROTHER AND I

I used to have two rabbits in that house, they both died because of me.

When I was in primary school, there were stalls outside the school selling small animals in cages, rabbits, chicks, ducklings, mice, turtles. I had been saving money and finally one day I bought a rabbit with white hair and red eyes, on the way home I carried the blue cage with the rabbit in it as if I had all the joys I imagine. After arriving home I took the rabbit out and looked at its dirty front paws, the rabbit needed a wash I thought. I bring the rabbit to the bathroom, grabbed it by the ears to give it a shower. Later, I used a hairdryer to dry its fur, it was winter. I was touching the rabbit's soft, fresh fur. The rabbit stood on the sink and then fell down, I shook it hard and it didn't move, the rabbit died. I didn't know until a long time after someone told me that rabbits are not supposed to be touching the water. The second rabbit I begged my mother to buy for me after I lost the first one, that feeling my hand touch a creature still left. The second rabbit looks the same as the first one with white fur and red eyes, I keep it in my room, I learned not to wash the rabbit. It was an energetic animal, running around and eating a lot, pooping everywhere, no matter how much I cleaned it up there was always a bad smell in the room, I decided not to feed it anymore, of course, I didn't know the consequences of this decision, I just hoped that it would stop it pooping. Within a few days, the second rabbit died, it was starved to death by me. I still can't forget the sound of a slowly dying rabbit, lying in a corner with its stomach sunken in.

After that, I lost interest in rabbits and the guilt of I had caused the death of two animals, that shame turned into fear. Later, when my brother, who was nine years younger than me, was the same age as I got my first rabbit, he got two white rabbits in our front courtyard with a neighbor's girl of the same age, and I didn't want to look at them, they reminded me of my rabbits and I had a feeling they would die soon. Things didn't go as I had worried, the neighbor's grandmother and my mother were taking good care. The rabbits were getting bigger and bigger, like two giant white rabbit candies, or two clouds moving through the grass from a distance, but I didn't

want to focus on them because they could disappear so easily like the candy melted away in the summer, or clouds blown away by the wind without a trace.

The neighbor's grandmother and my mother were hoping to have more rabbits, but the rabbits never showed any signs of pregnancy, so we guess they were the same gender and it was difficult to identify from the outside. One day, the neighbor's grandmother came to my mother and suggested that we should eat the rabbits instead of keeping them, as she knew of a place where they could slaughter the animals and take them to a restaurant to cook the meat. My mother, agreed without speaking to my brother and I was there when they had the conversation and I asked her, "Don't you want to ask my brother first?" "He doesn't even take care of his rabbits, so maybe he's forgotten about them." "But it's not a good idea to cook his rabbit, is it?" "Just don't tell your brother."

The next day we received a bowl of meat from the grandmother next door, no longer distinguishable, all cut up and cooked to a shine of oily meat. I sat with my brother at dinner and I leaned over to his ear whispered to him, "This plate of meat is your rabbit." My brother stood up immediately, he suddenly realized that there was no rabbit in the yard, he angrily questioned my mother, and then he left the table. I had forgotten what they had said, I was absorbed in my evil pleasure of destroying something. I could not accept that I had caused the death of the rabbit and that my brother's rabbit could grow up healthy. The neighbor's grandmother and my mother became my accomplices in taking revenge on my brother without knowing. After that, no one in our family discussed any rabbits, and my brother became sensitive to the fact that every time there was some unidentifiable meat on the table, he would ask what it was.

I think everyone has that day when they suddenly grow up and you wake up as usual, it's not going to be the most frustrating day for you. That day there will be a seemingly small loss, definitely not as powerful as the frustration you felt before. But it's that small loss, like when someone takes a block away, the childhood as a protective umbrella disappears, the pieces of "glass" fall off with it, entrapped in the past that you don't even have time to process. It's a gentle push that childhood becomes behind you; it's not even a sad or mournful thing to call it, it's the weight of a definite loss, you know it's nothing to others.

The day when we finally grew up, it such an ordinary day.

## COLLECTING DREAMS:

(When dreams repeat past, turning it into images and filtering out the meanings like a sieve, I begin to feel that the past as the future, is unknown and unpredictable.)

### Blue Monkey

I describe that house as a blue monkey, I still dream of it after I have moved away, sometimes the scenes of the story do not seem to have any particular connection to what is happening in that space. The light in the house was stagnant, a pale yellow with a greenish hue that was not warm, like a strange low-budget family film. The last time I dreamed there, the house turned into a blue monkey holding my hand, we were spinning, jumping, taking to the air, landing, round and round, the spinning circle became smaller and smaller, tighter and tighter, without gaps it slowly returned to a ball falling to the floor, disappeared, I disappeared with the blue monkey, some part of me disappeared with the blue monkey, how do you say goodbye to a space?

In this memory stage, where each past self exists, the space preserves compressed time in millions of tiny holes as we search for the time passed. Here space is everything; in space, we find memories condensed down by time. All the spaces where we have been alone / The spaces of childhood memories / The spaces of dreams.

### This Is Not My Room

It was a disordered space with rooms that were always moving around. I stepped closer to a room and flipped the light switch, which didn't come on, and the sound came from the ceiling

da

as if a wet tea bag had fallen to the floor. I walked on, arm in arm, and met two girls who suddenly sang a song of goodbye, for missed trains missed once more, hugs with people I hadn't seen in a long time, unfinished exhibitions never finished, the clothes I wanted to change finally gave up. Let's go and find my room, which is full of strange men with long mustaches and various portrait or landscape paintings on the wall, this is not my room.



### Spider, Huge ball

I was lying on bed in a summer afternoon when I noticed a spider on the ceiling, my eyes moving slowly with the spider as it walked along the edge of the ceiling. I stood in the middle of the corridor in the room, my hands raised, imagining that I was hugging a huge ball around me, my body swinging from side to side and my head turning freely with it.

### ROOM: FRONTIERS OF MEMORY

How can we build storage space in a room so that memories are not lost?

In the map of past house, I placed all the stories in the corner, they are the rooms of corners. Bachelard mentioned in his book: “Associated with the nooks and corners of solitude are the bedroom and the living room in which the leading characters held away.”<sup>9</sup> The intimacy of these places allows us to connect with the past in solitude and to have a conversation with ourselves in a corner.

In the bedroom, we are completely alone, in this private space, the image of the self comes together, each moment belongs to its bedroom, and those bedrooms are folded together to become one.

Bachelard focuses on the people and space becoming together, connecting through space to their past selves, the continuous of space that envelops the discontinuous time and allows the self to settle in, in each moment. I am constantly “splitting” the room, arriving at the past, and the self left behind in the past can only be “folded”, not ‘united’ as one. The “I” of the present can only walk on the frontier of memory, but not as its core.

Those rooms are filled with objects from childhood, representing memories of the past. We cannot bring the baby teeth, the calendars, the dust of that time into the future, but abandon them, in some boxes, and collect them in the corners of the private space of the past. The form of the object may disappear, but the self-attached to it doesn't. They come to the place where they are and they build a room that belongs to that moment, which falls together in the end. The room of the past and the former we are with each other only, suffering together, abandoned there by us who

are moving towards, destined to go through this journey, splitting off parts of ourselves along the way so as not to stagnate.

This cruel choice, if we don't leave something here, how will we find way back? It is a marker that identifies the childhood home, that cannot be tolerated by the world that "forces them to grow up", like a small blanket that you have held on to since you were a child and that smells familiar to you, to be thrown away by your parents one day when you are older. We are always asked to "transform" into different people, to become "mature", fearing that if we "fully transform", self will disappear, or that if we "fail" to transform, we will not be accepted by society. We have to let our memories be sealed in a container, both to discard and to preserve them, just like taking off part of the blanket we used to cover ourselves with since childhood, smelling it and being wrapped in the familiar tenderness, satisfied and happy. If we could, we would prefer to stay in the small world of our childhood forever, growing up in the stillness of time, and seeing the wide world even without leaving it. Once we are forced to leave, we are at a loss and attempt to return without success, like the child taken away by the Pied Piper.

Away from the family house, we are no longer sheltered, the home we return to is not the same one. Every moment we stand at the edge of our house, looking at the outlines of memories, longing to return, but continuing to wander around the city.

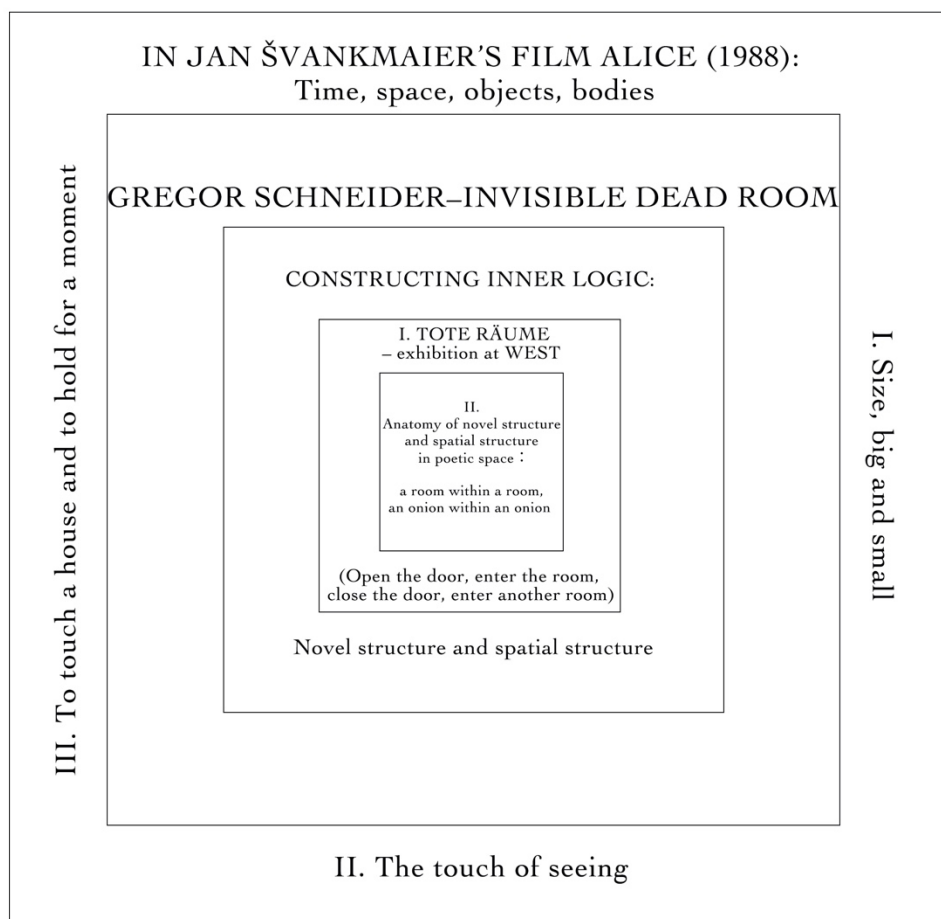
Childhood memories are left in the past house, when we grow up, they are either placed in rented houses or left in hotels that travel to various places. In every room with a bed, the "sleepwalkers" who enter into daydreams pass through the gaps of the bed to the memories of the past. If they have not yet entered, the present self falls back on will stray to the frontier of memory, trying to find a path to the center.

PRESENT

3.

9.

## HOUSE OF PRESENT



### **3. My house.**

## IN JAN ŠVANKMAJER'S FILM *ALICE* (1988): Time, spaces, objects, bodies

### I. Size, big and small

Jan Švankmajer 's film *Alice*<sup>10</sup> is based on the famous book by Lewis Carroll '*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*'<sup>11</sup>. Follow the beginning lines:

Alice is thinking  
“Now you're about to watch  
a film made for children.  
Or  
I almost forgot,  
you must  
Close your eyes.  
Otherwise  
you will not see anything.”<sup>12</sup>

Bring the viewer into this strange world. Alice chases White Rabbit, who is always in a hurry, into a deep rabbit hole, the entrance is a drawer in the wilderness, she climbs into the drawer enter to an unknown land.

There are many symbolic objects in the film, such as the tunnel filled with cupboards and bookshelves during the descent, on which there are dolls, animal specimens, jams... Alice picks up a jar of jam, opens it, sticks her finger in, and pulls it out to see a silver spike, an object that should not be in the jam, and the sharp spike seems to reveal the cruelty of the child's world that is present throughout the film. Food as a vital part of the body is also a constant desire, the biscuits and potions in the film tempt Alice all the time. After eating the biscuits and drinking the potions, the size of her body keeps changing, but there is always a disorder and disharmony between body and space and object, each time the size does not fit, either the body is too big and the space is too small, or the body is too small and the key is too big. In the film, there is always a small door on a larger door, and each time Alice opens the door enters another time and space. In White Rabbit's room, Alice occupies the entire space with her huge body, curled up just enough to fit in, her head pressed up against the ceiling, her arms stretched out from the window can fill it. White Rabbit is not as gentle as in the book, he turns aggressive, throwing stones at Alice from the ground

and climbing to the window to cut her arm with a sharp saw. Is this a world for children? Or this is the real children's world?

The drawer in the film, Alice enters another world through the drawers, each time a drawer appears, a new space opens up, the triangular ruler, the compass, the scissors... These sharp objects are stored in closed drawers, the first time Alice opens a drawer, her finger is pricked by a compass, the image of her bleeding finger brings to mind that these dangerous objects for children are always placed in drawers that children cannot easily open, the parents want the children stay away from danger. But this can never be prevented. For "children" all the unknown is attractive, as in the case of the drawer handle in the film, every time Alice tries to open it, the handle is pulled out and falls off, losing its function on the floor. But she always can find another way to open it, whether with her fingers or some other tool.

Time is a figurative presence, the White Rabbit who keeps looking at his watch and muttering to himself "Oh! The Duchess, the Duchess! Oh! Won't she be savage if I've kept her waiting!"<sup>13</sup>, the Mad Hatter and March Hare in the mad party, they are keeps changing places around a table, a circular process. The physical duration of the film is 1h25min54sec, but it creates a story structure that is cycling and at the same time everything is temporary, as the March Hare, he needs to keep pulling on the falling button eyes and winding up the body by a key.

The world of childhood is full of strangeness and fantasies, as in my memory of seeing a green moth as big as a man resting on the wall of an alley, I was sitting in the car passing through the street. I can't tell if this memory is true or not, could such a huge moth exist in reality? Even if it did exist how could it be so normally resting on a wall of a city street? If it didn't happen, why do I still remember the color and pattern of its wings and the shock of its enormous size in my mind? Maybe I was like Alice that day when I accidentally drank the potion of becoming smaller and met the green moth in the wrong body size. Later, the body changes back and slowly grow into an adult, but there is a mismatch of size between the physical growth and the remembered self, as a person who is late, which at the end of the film, Jan Švankmajer cruelly tells us through Alice:

"He's late, as usual.

I think I'll cut his head off."

Alice thought.<sup>14</sup>

## II. The touch of seeing

The apple cores besides the window, the landscape painting on the wall, the animal specimen on the cupboard, the clock in the room passing with the sound of di ge di ge di ge, the mousetrap in the corner, the big and small dolls like Alice and her sister sit on the ground, she was throwing the stone into the cup of tea, she heard something move, it was the White Rabbit in the glass that had come to alive and struggling to pull out its nailed front feet. Then he opened the drawer hidden in the ground, put on his gloves, clothes, hat, took the scissors to break the glass box, saying, "Oops, oops, I'm late." and disappears into the drawer. This is the beginning of the film, each object in the room is a symbol of the story that happens later. Throughout the film, there is no soundtrack, only the sound of objects moving and bodies touching. These sounds, led us into a material world, through the combination of image and sound, I feel like I am touching a physical presence, a touch achieved through seeing.

In Jan Švankmajer's book *'Touching and Imagine. An Introduction to tactile Art'*, he talks about *Tactilism* in his earlier work on E.A. Poe's story *'The Fall of the House of Usher'*<sup>15</sup>, he found himself struggling in a complex world. In Poe's work, he discovered what an enormous role touch played in his psychological studies of pathological behavior. The sense of touch, which we are barely aware of in everyday life, at times of psychic strain becomes hugely amplified, which is why in E.A.Poe's stories are teeming with descriptions of tactile sensations. Whether for the readers or the person watching his film these sensations are second-hand, not directly experienced with our bodies, but the tactile imaginations are capable of re-creating us quite intensely. Like he described "There exists such a thing as 'tactile memory', reaching into the most remote recesses of our childhood. From there it emerges in the form of analogy evoked by the slightest tactile stimulus or tactile fantasy, thereby making 'tactile art' communicative."<sup>16</sup>

Touch played a significant role in his films. "I worked deliberately on evoking these neglected or hidden tactile feelings and tried to enrich the emotional arsenal of filmic expression. I became increasingly conscious that to revive the general impoverishment of sensibilities in our civilization the sense of touch can play an important part, as so far it has not been discredited in 'artistic endeavors'. After all, we have all been seeking the sense of tactile security since our birth, through physical contact with our mothers' bodies. That was our first tactile contact with the world, before we could see, smell, hear or taste."<sup>17</sup> In the film, many scenes zoom in on Alice touching objects, by watching, we project our feelings on her body, connecting the

self to the objects and space inside to creating a sense of 'inward cohesion' and 'outward expansion' at the same time.

### III. To touch a house and to hold for a moment

There is a scene in the film where Alice opens a drawer and puts her hand in it then her finger is pricked by a compass, the blood on the girl's finger looks bright, touching is also dangerous. Once I tried to trace my earliest memories, and what came to mind was a blue starfish made of glass in the fish tank. I often put my hand into the fish tank to hold the cold glass stone, and by touching it, the 'moment of encounter' was come to be frozen in a moment of 'time'. Leaving time 'inside', from 'outside' - cutting through the material that carries it - to see its activity more entirely. The manifestation of time depends on the physical space that holds it, and in turn gives meaning to the existence of spaces, bringing together those scattered, ungraspable times. When we are still, the visible and perceptible things around us present and the distance between us opens up, leading to a sense of space. The objects around us project themselves, creating a connection with the 'I' and spread out the depths of the imagination, leaving the present moment to find similar objects in our memory, which become intimate with us even if they are all seen for the first time. Our memories are thus separated into different moments with these objects and reunited by being in the same space.

When talking about touch, we usually imagine a conscious act in which we try to approach a particular object, a directed and purposeful act. But understanding touch in this way easily hides dimensions that appear difficult to detect at first sight. In touch, we confront the world through two different and sometimes conflicting forms of consciousness: one that aims at the object or given content, and the other that feels or affects it. The character of this latter experience usually becomes apparent when we see the presence of touch as an act. Thus, you cannot be touched without being touched. The experience of touch usually involves the experience of being touched. Touch is a two-way experience; when I say I want to touch a house, I also want to be touched by the house.

Bachelard based on the Bergsonian sense of time talks about the 'house of memory': "We are unable to relive duration that has been destroyed. We can only think of it, in the line of an abstract time that is deprived of all thickness. The finest specimens of fossilized duration concretized as a result of long sojourn, are to be found in and through space."<sup>18</sup> When we create a connection of 'feeling - time - space



– body’ through touch, temporal the feeling, spatial the time, physical the space, this is undoubtedly a series of relationships that carry each other. Time retains perception and forms feelings of a moment, allowing those feelings to be retrieved in memory becomes ‘memories of a place’, which are recalled when we return to an old place or step into a space where we know each other; the body retains space, and when we are in a familiar place, we feel safe and comfortable. As Bachelard wrote: “In short, the house we were born in has engraved within us the hierarchy of the various functions of inhabiting. We are the diagram of the functions of inhabiting that particular house, and all the other houses are but variations on a fundamental theme.”<sup>19</sup> We explore and remember those places with our physical bodies, evoking the past through the places, bringing the feelings from memories, the past meet the present, temporarily merging into one moment.

## GREGOR SCHNEIDER – INVISIBLE DEAD ROOM

### CONSTRUCTING INNER LOGIC: Novel structure and spatial structure

#### I. *TOTE RÄUME* – exhibition at WEST

(Open the door, enter the room, close the door, enter another room)

I went to see Gregor Schneider’s exhibition *TOTE RÄUME*<sup>20</sup> at last year. It was a strange space, I was facing the corridor, lined with closed doors, and from the windows, I could vaguely glimpse the space inside; each room was different from the other. Open the door, close it, open it, cross the corridor, enter another door. I didn’t meet anyone, because of the epidemic, every time slot needs to be booked; I was probably the last person in that time slot that day.

Continuing down the stairs into the basement, I could not back to the previous space; I had been told at the front desk that if I continued down the stairs, I would find the exit. A large sculpture placed in the corner that looked like a weapon, I was afraid to go near it, after wandering around for a while, I finally found the next door that I could open, entering a vacuum, probably a freezer, with a small yellow light hanging on ceiling; I looked around and found the door with the exit sign on the handle, which opened into an underground parking garage leading to the outside, I reached the street

outside, looking back It turned out to the back of the building. I almost escaped from there.

## II. Anatomy of novel structure and spatial structure in poetic space :

a room within a room, an onion within an onion

Gregor Schneider's work comes to my mind from time to time, I am fascinated by the spatial structure he creates as if the structure of a novel. In Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*<sup>21</sup> the chapter of old Buendía dies, he travels in his dreams through a train of rooms. In his time of madness, the recurring dream every night was to go through these rooms, he was dreaming of a series of same rooms, each of which was a simple little bookcase, a religious painting on the wall, an iron bed, he opened the door went to the next room, it was the same, the next one was still the same, and when he ends up walking through these rooms, he reaches the deepest part of the dream. He see an old friend that he had killed, and then he would go back through all these same rooms, following the same path back to the first room that was his first dream. But the night he died, he got lost in one of the rooms, he couldn't find the door to go back to the first room, and that was his death.

The internal space formed by the train, the timeline is circular, with a rotating movement, the "front" is connected to the "back", a time outside of time, before departure and after arrival, a stillness that belongs only to the speed of that train, all the illusions of fiction in a train of carriages that can be increased infinitely.

In a lecture, Gregor Schneider described his work: "You look at the wall, you listen to the space, you have to deal with the same thing over and over again and at some point, something comes of it, just as you can spend of hours by a wall and look at it, you do it once twice or month or longer and at some point you can tell everybody about the wall. The work is the construction of a wall in front of a wall, a room within a room, the work is visible but it might be maybe completely overlooked, other works are hidden invisible, but they may still influence perception. The work is work with swallows itself on the subject of the process, of making the work unrecognizable, we do not wish to say that this is a negation of the figurative, a way of bringing the experience or event into the foreground."<sup>22</sup> I imagine whether this process unfolds in a 'starting again', a room within a room, seeing the unfolding 'polyhedron' through the relationship between 'inside' and 'outside'.

When we read a novel, the imagery we encounter is no longer an object for cognitive purposes, but an object that inspires the imagination and opens up poetic space. Here I wish to describe or refer to how the novel constructs a ‘linguistic space’ through the narrative by drawing on how poetic imagery constructs a ‘linguistic space’ as described by Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*. The poetic consciousness is ‘immersed’ in the poem’s imagery, which is revealed through language, is different from the language of everyday life, the latter being used to communicate, to be rational and logical, while the former is used to open up the imagination, to return to language and the materiality to which it refers. Language is not only a network of meanings but also a representation of matter, a three-dimensional space that can be expanded, with infinite possibilities. Through language, we imagine everything endlessly.

Language is the house of existence; man lives inside, the thinker is the guardian of this shelter. In the relationship between the language of the poem and the poet, one finds that the language of the poem shapes the house, that the reader is invited to enter this house, to see every corner, and that the poet is the guardian of the house, guarding the imaginative energy in the house, that the poet brings the imagination into the language. In Taiwanese poet Chien, Cheng-chen book *Poetic Heart and Poetics*<sup>23</sup>, he describes the reader’s access to poetry in living imagery: the reader ‘touches’ a ball of fruit, although the fruit is silent, the fingertips perceive the round, soft, self-contained world. The metaphor of perceiving the poet’s world through a ball-shaped fruit is taken a step further in Bachelard’s: “What a joy it is then to dream with the poet according to his words, to believe what he says, to live in the world he offers us, symbolized by objects, the fruits, and flowers of the world!”<sup>24</sup> The world seen through the fruit is the place where the poet dreams, where the world enters one’s dreams in a fruit-like roundness. Through the eyes of Hsia Yu, a Taiwanese poet, the core in the fruit, is a core of writing poetry: “We write poetry like eating an apple, and in the end, we will come into a core, and I mean this in a less post-modern way. I usually tend to translate things into a childish situation, so is there a core of the apple or not? Yes, there is, I am believing in it, to wishfully and romantically. I wrote the poem for the apple core, but I can’t tell you what it is in more depth than that, I can only tell you that it is an apple core, that’s all.”<sup>25</sup> Hsia Yu dreams of the apple core and writes poems about it to facing life, she is romantic and sincere without any intention, believing in a world where “apple core” exists.

For me, the structure of the novel is not a being with a middle core, but more of an onion than an apple. An onion has no center as in the map of present house, layer after layer, each layer is equally important. When one cuts through an onion, one does not

find a central point. The onion has an objective. The objective of the onion is the new onion. This is basically where the idea begins. The story within the story is not directly associated with the plot, but which, like an onion within an onion, is the core of the whole thing, the stories and spaces are constantly interwoven and twisted together.

RABBIT HOLE

**4.**

11.

RABBIT HOLE



A JOURNEY OF THE CEMETERY

***4. A corner for lost.***

12.

JOURNEY OF THE CEMETERY: In *The Garden of Forking Paths* – Jorge Luis Borges

It was two years ago my friend took me to a cemetery in The Hague, as I remember, the cemeteries in China are usually built in the hills away from the city, the gravestones like dominoes arranged in neat rows, if one stone falls, all the other seem to follow in a moment. Last summer, I made a trip to the cemetery with my mother to visit my grandfather. We are walking on the road up the mountain, the sun was blinding, burning on our face and body, my armpits were sweaty, everything was bright and we had to half-squint our eyes. There was no one on the path, only the sound of dragonflies flying around with their wings flapping, the sound of the wind blowing through the leaves, the birds or unknown creatures moving silently in the woods, we were breathing heavily, I saw butterflies staying on the ground, only when you walked get close, they start lazily lifting their wings and flying about three steps away — so quiet, yes, no one comes here at this time. My father believes it's unlucky go to cemetery except on particular days, this would bring bad luck to home or that we would be haunted by the ghosts still lingering around. This is a secret visit, when we were at the entrance, my mother said to me, "Don't tell your father."

It's a big cemetery, the gravestones all look the same and can only be distinguished by their names and numbers, whether it is the house we lived in before or after we died, the numbers are used to distinguish and locate us. We passed a gravestone with fruits, flowers, burning incense and a small chanting machine singing the Buddhist sutras, which I remember seeing in my grandmother's house, a music player that could not be connected to other media, but only played the sutras stored in it. The first thing Grandma does when she wakes up is turn on this little chanting machine next to the Buddha, the house is filled with soft, slow, self-talking melodies and sutras that are almost impossible to recognize by ear, as I open my eyes and am immersed in this morning religious light. I looked closer at the name and date, it felt like a female name, died a young age and had left not long ago, which is probably why here still a lively presence, while all the other stones appeared to have fallen into an eternal silence. When I was still imagining how she or he died, my mother finally found her fathers' gravestone, "It's been a long time, baba." She said.

I placed the wildflowers I picked on the way up here in front of my grandfather's grave, my mother began to sweep up the dust and dead leaves fallen around, watering the trees planted next to, then she began to murmur to the grave: "Please bless the whole family is well and healthy." The cemetery covers a large area and is still expanding, divided into several areas, the entrance to the ground floor on the one side

of the wall are drawers of the same size to store urns, walk up the stairs to the bigger area, more space you have more expensive it is. We stayed a short time thereafter said goodbye to Grandfather we slowly walked back. On the way we met a man who work at the cemetery, from a distance, he approached hesitantly with a puzzled serious look on his face, probably afraid that he had met two ghosts in the daylight after he saw us, he asked with relief look: "Come to see someone in the family?" "Yes." My mother replied. "This place doesn't have many people coming on weekdays, it's extremely quiet." "Yes, we're getting ready to leave now." We walked back, which seemed even hotter than when we come, sweat hanging on our faces, looking back at the cemetery when I will come here again, I thought.

The cemetery in The Hague is set in the city like a beautiful garden, with a variety design of gravestones in strong contrast to the memory of my grandfather's gravestone. The friend took me to see the most memorable gravestone for her, a boy who died in his childhood, the graveyard was covered with shells of different types and sizes, the central monument was a sculpture of parents standing on each side and embracing their child with their arms wide open. I don't know how to describe how I felt, I can't relate, but I was hit by an emotion that could be shared without understanding. We spend a long time walking through the cemetery, sitting on benches with flowers of different colors in bloom lining the path. Later on, we also went to two other cemeteries in The Hague, one of which contained some Chinese cemeteries with similar styles at home. We walk through an archway and sit in the pavilion, talking while eating the mandarins we brought, also some other food but I don't remember, only the mandarin juice left on my fingers with the sticky feeling and smell. The third cemetery was close to where I lived before, I found it by chance because I had just moved there at the time and wanted to see the surroundings on the map, the cemetery called St Barbara Cemetery, a lot of factories and office buildings around there, we saw a grave with a fox sculpture standing in front of it and the text engraved on the stone *The postman always on time*. "This is no point because the postman is always not on time." my friend said.

The cemetery is a space that holds the past, the present, and the future. It is a closed world floating, abandoned. Like in *The Garden of Forking Paths* by Jorge Luis Borges - a lost maze, a labyrinth of symbols, an invisible labyrinth of time.<sup>26</sup> Is an enormous riddle, or parable, whose theme is time; this recondite cause prohibits its mention.<sup>27</sup>

I start from the house of tomorrow to the past end at the present, the stories are woven together through time, when I say that I want to build a house like in *The*



*Garden of Forking Paths*, the conversation between the main character “I” and Stephen Albert: “Ts’ui Pen must have said once: *I am withdrawing to write a book*. And another time: *I am withdrawing to construct a labyrinth*. Everyone imagined two works; to no one did it occur that the book and the maze were one and the same thing.”<sup>28</sup> “He believed in an infinite series of times, in a growing, dizzying net of divergent, convergent and parallel times. This network of times which approached one another, forked, broke off, or were unaware of one another for centuries, embraces *all* possibilities of time.”<sup>29</sup>

When I write I am building a house, a shelter for myself, the reality I see is different from the reality I write, the former with an end, the latter with a door and a door and a door to open, I want to find my place in a mainstream narrative, even in a small place.

## *IMAGE LIST*

1. Hopscotch game structure, digital, 2022, image by me.
2. “Present space” coordinate axis, digital, 2022, image by me.
3. House internal composition, digital, 2022, image by me.
4. Shelter, digital, 2022, image by me.
5. House of tomorrow, digital, 2022, image by me.
6. House of tomorrow inside, digital, 2022, image by me.
7. House of past, digital, 2022, image by me.
8. House of past inside, digital, 2022, image by me.
9. House of present, digital, 2022, image by me.
10. House of present inside, digital, 2022, image by me.
11. Rabbit hole, digital, 2022, image by me.
12. Inside rabbit hole, digital, 2022, image by me.

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## ENDNOTE

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- <sup>2</sup> Kahlil Gibran. "House." *The Prophet*. S.L., Alma Classics, 2020, p. 19.
- <sup>3</sup> Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis, Mn, University Of Minnesota Press, 1977, p. 160.
- <sup>4</sup> Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis, Mn, University Of Minnesota Press, 1977, p. 159.
- <sup>5</sup> Bachelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space*. New York, Penguin Books, 2014, p.103.
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- <sup>7</sup> Bachelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space*. New York, Penguin Books, 2014, p.81.
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- <sup>14</sup> *Alice*. Directed by Jan Švankmajer, First Run Features, 1988.
- <sup>15</sup> E.A. Poe's, *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Burton's Gentleman's Magazine first published, 1939.
- <sup>16</sup> Švankmajer Jan. *Touching and Imagining : An Introduction to Tactile Art*. London, I.B. Tauris, 2013, p. xxii.
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- <sup>18</sup> Bachelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space*. New York, Penguin Books, p.31.
- <sup>19</sup> Bachelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space*. New York, Penguin Books, p.36.
- <sup>20</sup> Gregor Schneider exhibition *TOTE RÄUME* at WEST Den Haag 29.08.2020-31.01.2021, Lange Voorhout 102 2514EJ, The Hague The Netherlands.
- <sup>21</sup> Gabriel García Márquez, and Gregory Rabassa. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. London, Penguin Books, 2014.
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