

# ARCHIVES OF A ~~DEMYING~~ HEART

Rooted in self-initiated conversations, this exhibition  
brings together the practices of

**Fred Lai**  
**Irie Qiwen Cao**  
**Ruowen Mei**

Duration: May 16-24, 2025  
Venue: der TANK / Freilager-Platz 1,  
4142 Münchenstein, Basel

In curatorial dialogue with Shen Jun.

May 16  
Opening at 18:00h  
Introductory dialogu by artists at 18:30h

May 18  
20:00h Participative performance as a rite  
of gathering by Ruowen Mei

## A Foreword

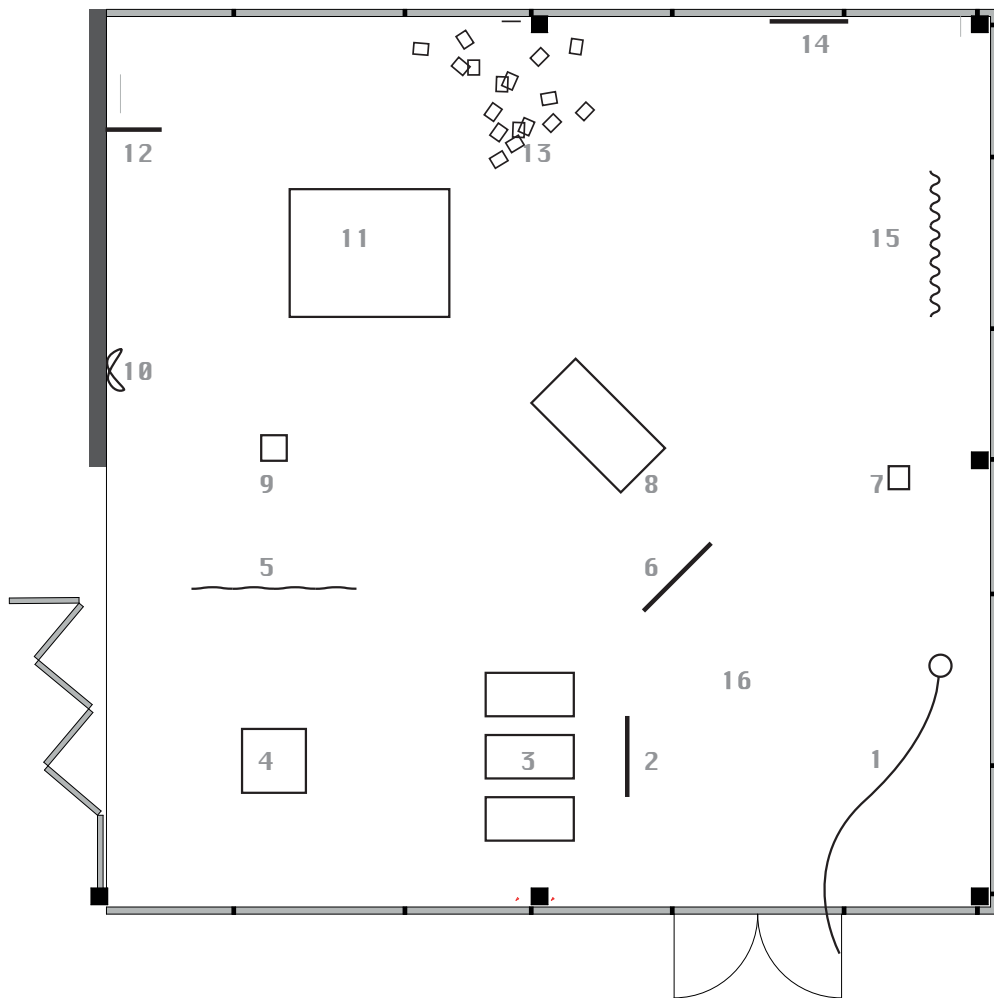
***Archives of a Denying Heart*** arrives in the form of an exhibition through continuous dialogue between three diasporic artists and researchers. Drawing on their experiences within and beyond China, the exhibition looks at the entanglements between bodily experiences and historical truths on both personal and social levels. These entanglements are often fraught, haunted by memory, prompting the artists to question and even dismantle the archival impulse toward wholeness. Instead, they turn toward fragments, fragility, and the ephemeral as the very essence of lived experience.

At the core of such reconceptualisation of the archival impulse lies a denying heart—a heart that beats uncomfortably, speaks a foreign language, and gravitates toward darkness. Heart acts as both a bodily metaphor and an affective topos for the contemporary feeling that we share in this unsettling world despite our incompatible differences, and a common sound we pronounce. A denying heart is nomadic, taking an uncompromising stand on erased histories, revisited truths, imposed identities, and vanishing landscapes. This is exactly the space that holds those fragments irreducible to documentation, lingering beyond official records, spilling over given frameworks and resisting erasure.

To enter the exhibition is to step into a bodily archive—an assemblage of what resists definitive inscription: broken language, fleeting gestures, silent whispers, and half-remembered dreams. The artists' works grapple with the incommensurability of longing and loss, unpacking the ontological ruptures of gendered silencing (Ruowen Mei), imposed forgetting (Fred Lai), and the erosion of relationality (Irie Qiwen Cao). These resonances speak to diasporic experience, but also to the embodied queerness of existing in a world that struggles to hold complexity.

Rather than turning to negation or reconciliation, the artists offer another approach: to dwell in fragility and live it fully. Fragmentation becomes a point of reflection—a vital pause, a glitch in the binaries that shape our world. *Archives of a Denying Heart* invites us to sit with the discomfort of a heart that won't settle, to embrace disorientation, and to imagine new possibilities along less-traveled paths.

***A denying heart  
is the only heart we have.***



***And denying is the only gesture we agree with.***

1

## Irie Qiwen Cao, *Strike I*, 2025

Metal pole, metal chain, hair  
6m

Tied to an upright structure built for control, I am displaced.

2

## Fred Lai, *Are You Alright?*, 2023-2025

Single-channel video, colour, sound, 16:9  
37:40:00

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I conducted 22 months of ethnographic fieldwork in southern China, working with people and families living with dementia. The main outcome of this is my PhD thesis in anthropology, which examines aging, care, memory, and their entanglements with the historical process of place-making. The creative byproduct of this is a series of lino- and wood prints based on quotes, scenes, and stories from my fieldwork, and a performance on the final evening before I left the field in July 2023.

The video you see here documents the whole process of the performance, filmed on my phone. In editing, I juxtapose this process – which involves intensive physical labour – with the sound archives that I accumulated during my fieldwork. All the sound remains opaque yet dear to me, some personal (like my mom's chattering on a family dinner) and others public and even explicitly political (like the wailing tribute to COVID-related deaths in 2023). They mirror what I was thinking when performing on the site. They are also ghosts of memories that continue to haunt me, my elderly informants with dementia, and the city that is under drastic transformation. Drawing on embodied experiences of dementia and social forgetting, I wonder, if any attempts at remembering are in vain after all?

3

## Fred Lai, *I Feel Like I've Burnt Out Like the Setting Sun*, 2025

Chinese paper, printmaking paint, sweat  
A triptych, 138 x 68cm each

In an old neighbourhood where I worked and lived, I found a stele on the ground that was

used as a roadstone. In the performance, on the final night of my fieldwork in July 2023, I used the stele as a printing block, applying red paint onto it and printing with Chinese paper. The inscriptions on the stele were barely recognizable, with a few words that identified it as originally being from an ancestral hall of a lineage. Its surface, meaning, and embodied memories were effaced, wrecked, and obscured by the regime of time.

The outcomes of printing the stele, as you see here, are as ambiguous and illegible as the stele itself. The uneven and scraggy surface of the stele made it impossible to apply the paint. The inscriptions, now transferred to the paper, are in reverse and even more difficult to read. Histories became tactile, haptic and more intimate than ever, as I touched every inch of the stone with my fingers. It provoked a great sense of irony and helplessness that I often felt when conducting fieldwork with elders with dementia who barely remembered me, and in a city that they barely recognised from before.

The title comes from a poem by the Chinese poet Ni Zhanghe. Translation is my own.

4

## Fred Lai, *The City Oblivious*, 2025

Zine

The zine juxtaposes images that I took during the fieldwork and segments of reflections, observations, and questions from my fieldnotes. The title indicates things, people, histories and feelings that we are oblivious to yet are omnipresent in our life. They constitute what Paul Connerton calls the 'topography of oblivion', as if there was another city – the city oblivious - enfolded in the city that we live in.

5

## Fred Lai, *Tracing Oblivion I - V*, 2023-ongoing

Digitalized prints

This is a series of wood and lino prints that I made during my fieldwork. They are based on quotes, scenes, people, and personal reflection I had during my fieldwork. I use printmaking as an alternative ethnographic method to explore the negative spaces of emotions and histories unsettled by dementia.

6

Irie Qiwen Cao, *Strike III*, 2025

Metal rings, hair  
180cm x 120cm

What was once fragmented now weaves. To move beyond representations of order and chaos, vulnerability and strength, collectivism and individualism, is my refusal to polarities. I choose solidarity, not order.

7

Irie Qiwen Cao, *Strike II*, 2025

Aquarium, metal rings, hair  
70cm x 36cm x 32cm

Binding and breaking and binding again. Soft and hard forms reproduce without hierarchy. A suspended terrain of emotions, ungoverned.

8

Ruowen Mei, *Time That Bites Its Tail*, 2025

Ice  
Variable dimensions

Everyday objects cast in ice, plaster, or resin—such as knives, steel wool, mobile phones and so on—gradually melt and disappear over time. These objects are continuously replaced by new, symbolizing the body's resistance to linear time through reproductive labor and the monotony of daily life.

9

Ruowen Mei, *A Ruler About Place A/B/C*, 2025

Transparent resin  
20cm x 1cm

The work is inspired by a myth the artist heard in childhood: the closer one holds chopsticks to the thicker end, the farther they will live from home as an adult. Each routine act of eating thus becomes a quiet rehearsal for measuring the distance between one's future and their hometown. A red line is engraved at the middle of each pair, marked "Inheritance," while another red line at the thicker end is marked "Departure." This small, everyday object becomes a tool for measuring one's identity and the dynamics of attachment or estrangement from home.

10

Ruowen Mei, *Blood Pearl, Flesh Pearl*, 2025

Resin, plaster  
48cm x 70cm x 15cm

The process of pearl production in the pearl industry involves implanting a small piece of donor mussel tissue into the mantle of a host mussel. The shell is pried open, and the tissue is inserted to stimulate the secretion of nacre, which gradually encases the foreign object. After 2 to 5 years, the mussel is cut open, the mantle torn apart, and the pearl extracted. The mussel becomes a metaphor for the female body. The value of women's labor is often erased, much like the formation of pearls: the mother-body nurtures the pearl, but the final harvest is no longer hers. This mode of production is not only reflected in childbirth but also mirrors the broader roles women occupy in society—whether in domestic work, factory labor, or the larger economic system. This piece is in dialogue with another work, *Magic Mirror*.

11

Ruowen Mei, *A Map Of Family*, 2024

Charcoal and pencil on Canva  
199cm x 250cm

*A Map Of Family* is an architectural floor plan of over 100 square meters, hand-drawn on canvas. Multiple temporal layers are superimposed on the plan, and the cluttered objects and family members within the rented home are depicted in meticulous line drawing. Objects and spaces associated with specific memories are marked with serial numbers.

This work originally stemmed from a desire to archive things that are disappearing or undergoing change. It is also an exploration of how memory transforms each time it is told, and how, once translated into a narrative, the way a story is told in turn reshapes the memory, thereby influencing the present.

This piece was first exhibited in 2021. The current version on display is one in which the private memories have been intentionally obscured.

12

Irie Qiwen Cao, *Window: The Crossed Cross*, 2025

Glue on plexiglass, wooden frame  
110cm x 90cm

As the second work in my *WINDOW* series, *The Crossed Cross* emerges from both process and symbol. By removing duct tape, a large cross as negative space reveals itself—an absence that dominates the composition. This gesture is both subtractive and declarative. Rooted in my practice of automatic drawing and cross-cultural symbolism, the cross becomes a site of internal conflict, holding meanings of negation, protection, and navigation.

13

Irie Qiwen Cao, *Treasure Hunting My Lost Grief*, 2025

Photo transferred on zinc sheet  
40 sheets with average size of 24 x 17cm

It is an image archive of discarded cigarette boxes I collected in Paris, 2023, marking a 2-year journey of emotional excavation.

14

Ruowen Mei, *Magic Mirror*, 2025

Acrylics on Canvas  
249.5cm x 123.1cm

A large-scale, red monochrome full-body portrait, larger than human scale, depicts a naked woman standing in front of a mirror, examining the dark void on her abdomen caused by Diastasis Recti Abdominis. Scattered on the ground in front of the painting are several apples, red and green in color—resembling those in fairy tales, like the one the evil stepmother offers Snow White: half poisoned, half safe. This work is a reinterpretation of the fairy tale Snow White, with a visual style inspired by the aesthetic of 1990s Japanese shōjo manga. It resonates with the piece *Blood Pearl, Flesh Pearl*.

15

Ruowen Mei, *The Moon Panting*, 2024

Single-channel video installation, video, color, sound  
Variable dimensions

This video installation occupies a semi-enclosed space defined by white fabric curtains. At its center, a screen displays footage of the moon suspended above darkened mountains. Shot handheld, the camera's subtle tremors and the audible breath of the filmer make the moon appear to "breathe" in sync. Here, the moon—a traditional feminine symbol—is reconfigured as a "mother" figure, while the intimate breathing sound simultaneously evokes erotic associations. The work deliberately juxtaposes maternal identity with sexual desire.

16

Ruowen Mei, *To Write the Field Into Ashes*, 2025

On-site performance

In this live performance, Ruowen Mei selects words tied to her hometown and interweaves them with personal memories, inscribing fragmented annotations onto paper. She then burns these papers, reducing the written words to ashes. Using a pair of transparent chopsticks, Mei carefully arranges the ashes into the shape of the Chinese character "田" (tián)—meaning field. The character's structure mirrors the physical organization of terraced rice fields, where raised earthen mounds form boundaries and pathways between plots.

By shaping the ashes into "田," the artist symbolically reenacts the act of farming, transforming language into a gesture of cultivation. Over time, the ash-character is gradually scattered by the footsteps of passing audiences, its traces dissolving like ephemeral furrows. The chopsticks used in the performance also appear as *A Ruler About Place A/B/C*, further linking measurement, memory, and displacement.

The performance will take place on-site at 7 PM on 18 May, serving as the closing event of the exhibition.

## About the Creators

**Fred Lai** is a Ph.D. candidate in anthropology at the London School of Economics. His research lies at the intersection of dementia, care and kinship, and he is especially interested in examining memory as both an autobiographical construct and a place-bound historical process. Fred has conducted 22 months of multi-sited fieldwork in southern China during the COVID-19 pandemic from 2021 to 2023. As an artist-anthropologist, he adopts creative approaches as alternative ethnographic methods and continues collaborating with research-based artists. His works have been published on various media platforms and presented in New York, Shanghai, and the Singapore Biennale 2022.

**Irie Qiwen Cao** is a visual artist drawn to liminality in materiality, fond of investigating objects and symbols that embody contradiction and transformation. Growing up amid the drastic urbanization of Guangzhou, China, and later completing their undergraduate studies in the UK, they attach to ghostly presences that dwell in the shadows of global modernization. With a background in narrative architecture, they approach art as spatial composition—constructing interfaces where emotional residues merge with rational structures. Through holding sensory spaces that resist linear interpretation, they manifest gates for detours in the relentless flow of progression, hinting at unexplored paths within modernity.

**Ruowen Mei** is a visual artist. She works across painting, installation, and performance. Her practice resembles a detective work of images and symbols—guided by personal memory and accessed through the body—returning to the ‘site of the event’ where speech fails or histories are obscured.

In her painting practice, she focuses on the power dynamics embedded in romantic narratives. Grounded in the East Asian context, she uses local cultural forms—such as shōjo manga and online romance fiction—as materials for political allegory, examining how “romance” is woven into a cultural script that shapes contemporary desire across various media. She often employs unconventional materials such as red and black ballpoint pens and correction fluid, appropriating the aesthetic of 1990s Japanese girls’ comics. Through a sugary, kitschy visual style paired with scenes of tension and violence, she constructs dreamlike, almost nightmarish landscapes—within which the latent violence of everyday life quietly lurks.

**Shen Jun** is a curator and founding member of a new London-based non-profit project space launching in 2025, dedicated to amplifying contemporary artistic practices rooted in Asian and diasporic contexts. Previously, she held curatorial and research roles at organisations including Long March Project and Guangdong Times Museum. Her practice is informed by the interest in self-initiated archival approaches that respond to social transitions, viewing the act of archiving as a daily practice of mobilising memory, affect and consciousness. She co-founded the digital archive *StepBackForward*. *art* (2020–present) and artistic research platform *PhantomArchives.com* (2022–present), and co-authored the research publication *No Misery* (Hong Kong: The Phantom Archives, 2022).

## **With Gratitude**

Graphic design: Ho Chinhwa

Photography & Documentation: Ilja Zaharov

Technical support: Daniel Kurth, Qidi Feng

Special thanks: Qidi Feng, Jinni Wang

Supported by GGG Kulturkick



University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland  
Basel Academy of Art and Design