

YUN XIAO



Curating Dream Experiences

Studio-based journey for mental well-being

"I came to see my brain as the mailbox of the house of 'myself', and the dream as the constant delivery of letters from my subconscious mind."

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*“What though the radiance that was once so bright, be
now forever taken from my sight. Though nothing can
bring back the hour of splendor in the grass, of glory in
the flower; We will grieve not, rather find strength in
what remains behind.”*

— William Wordsworth

Abstract

In the universal sense, as nonexistent, invisible, and subconscious things, dreams have a deep connection with our reality and the self and provide great help to self-study. Everybody dreams and every dream means something, no matter how fragmentary and ridiculous it may appear (Coriat, 1915). They are the products of combinations of our experience, physical activities, mental activities and subconsciousness that we experience during the day, which are fermented in the brain during sleep. My research is a cross-disciplinary journey that takes a philosophical stance of combining arts and design, to interrogate how dreams and subconsciousness help people get close to their psychological world and serve as critical contributors to creatively knowing the self.

The major research approach in my work, that of curation, extends beyond the museum field. The curatorial concept works as a mechanism for dealing with information, “sifting, sorting, hiding, and standing out” (Davis, 2016). It is used in this project for doing design works addressing dream therapy, exhibiting aesthetic works, and collecting the audience’s opinion. Curation, the activity serves for people’s mind elicits dialogue and connection between human and multiple artifacts, escapes the constraints of space and time, and conveys deeper emotions or thoughts to the audience. What’s more, curation delivers a social function. Because exhibitions, as a common outcome of curation, are needed by society and are also a good tool for spreading information.

On any random day, how much of what we say, feel, and do is controlled by the unconscious mind? Based on the psychological fact that our unconscious mind plays a crucial role in shaping behaviour, defining character, managing thoughts and ultimately, determining how we live in life each waking moment, and the intimate connection between dreams and unconscious, this work explores methods for creating an environment of mental well-being for people to pay attention to their psychological world in creative ways – getting to know our dreams.

Keywords: Design for mental health, dream therapy, curation, dream interpretation, psychotherapy, art therapy, surrealism, highly sensitive person

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Dedications

For me and my psychological world.

Even though life is meaningless, being alive is not my choice, everything will be an end...

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Glossary

Cabinets of Curiosities

The “cabinet of curiosities” is an early antecedent of the modern museums emerging in the Renaissance. It stored and exhibited a wide variety of objects and artifacts, with a particular leaning towards the rare, eclectic and esoteric. The cabinet of curiosities is the early prototype of curation, representing the owner’s collecting taste and social status.

Dream Interpretation

Dream interpretation is the process of using symbols and experiences to give meaning to the content of dreams. People in ancient times tended to believe dreams as a supernatural phenomenon and made decisions about their waking activities and beliefs according to the content and meaning of dreams. A hundred years ago, Sigmund Freud used the analysis of dreams to understand unconsciousness and help him to give treatment to his patients.

Highly Sensitive Person (HSP)

A highly sensitive person (HSP) is a term for those who are thought to have an increased or deeper central nervous system sensitivity to physical, emotional, or social stimuli. Some refer to this as having sensory processing sensitivity, or SPS for short (Scott, 2020). They see life through the eyes of compassion and caring. But they’re also the favoured prey of “vampires” who feed off empaths’ energy and disrupt their lives on every level—physical, emotional, and financial (Northrup, 2019). It is a personality that incorporates both positive and negative influences.

Psychology of Collecting

Collecting is a prevailing behaviour in human society. However, there are social psychological factors concealed in the motivations of collecting. Firstly, people collect as an irrational behaviour because of their obsession and emotional state. Secondly, some people collect because of investment. Thirdly, collectors do it for pure enjoyment. And fourth, people tend to express themselves and state whom they are by collecting. The above four aspects were identified by Unity Marketing (Saari, 1997). And there are also extensive motivations for people who collect like aesthetics, risk, fantasy, etc. (Pearce, 1992).

I

Introduction

This research was initiated from my personal experience about the psychological and artistic journey of me dealing with my anxious and depressed emotions in the past several years.

Prelude

I became interested in designing for people's mental health when I was planning to transfer my major from arts administration to design in 2018. During that period, I fell into the anxious situation of "upward comparison", which was always feeling concerned and depressed because I doubted my ability and thought other designers' works were much better than mine. Therefore, in that year I started to make some small design works based on Cognitive Behavior Therapy¹ aimed at relieving negative moods because of upward comparison.

In the year 2020, my psychological problems escalated. I always felt sad and pessimistic anytime and anywhere without any reason. I was surprised to find out my negative situation after I did the Symptom Checklist-90 (SCL90)², which is a questionnaire for quickly self-assessing mental distress in the past week. The author of the checklist did not propose a cutoff value. But according to the results of the Chinese general norms and instructions, if the total score exceeds 160 points, and the average score for each item exceeds 2 points, a further examination should be carried out. And if the standard score is greater than 200 points, it means that you have obvious psychological problems, and you can ask for help from psychological counselling. And more than 250 points is much more serious. However, at the time, my self-rating score was 397.

1. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a form of psychological treatment that has been demonstrated to be effective for a range of problems including depression, anxiety disorders, alcohol and drug use problems, marital problems, eating disorders, and severe mental illness (Society of Clinical Psychology).

2. Symptom Checklist-90 (SCL-90) is a 90-item multidimensional self-report measuring the severity of current psychological symptoms designed by Dr. Leonard R. Derogatis and colleagues in the early 1970s and has involved into Symptom Checklist-90-Revised in 1994. The version I was doing is translated by Zhengyu Wang in 1984 and was published with data of Chinese norms by Jinn and Wu in 1986. Since then other scholars have continued to improve the norm to this day.

Healing through an exhibition

In September 2020, I went to an exhibition in Shanghai called *More, more, more* (TANK SHANGHAI, 2020); this was the first time I realized that exhibitions could help me gain some powerful energy from the mental perspective. In the exhibition, one such installation was a series of meditation chambers (Fig.1). The artist Zhao Yao (1981-) acquired self-built wooden huts for spiritual practice from local monks in some areas in Sichuan, China, and played TED videos about the human experience of anxiety and depression. Having experienced some mental struggle, I felt a sense of being noticed and cared for after going through these meditation rooms.

And I will always remember the saying from one of the videos that cheer me up every time I feel a sense of emptiness and helplessness: “People will come to me and say, I think, though, if I just stick it³ out for another year, I think I can just get through this. and I always say to them, ‘You may get through it, but you’ll never be 37 again.’” (Solomon, 2013)



Figure 1: Zhao Yao, *Signals from Heaven*, 2018, monitor, wood, fabric, plastic, carpet. Courtesy of the artist and TANK SHANGHAI. <https://manamana.net/activityDetail/419#!en>

3. According to the previous dialogue, “it” means depression.

After that, based on the fact that I am an exhibition enthusiast and my educational and working experience is in the field of art management, I began to re-examine the role of exhibition and curation. I saw the role of exhibitions in serving people’s mental well-being and realized curating and exhibition design could also be a practice to help build and influence people’s mental health.

Stepping into Psychology

In February 2021, I started one month of psychological counselling and began to dig into the reasons that caused my negative state. I began to reflect on myself from my childhood, my parents and educational experiences, and I learned more about myself and human nature. During this process, I realized that I belong to a personality type with characteristic traits⁴, which is that of the highly sensitive person (HSP).

Highly sensitive people (or empaths) “see life through the eyes of compassion and caring” (Northrup, 2018), tend to have a higher perception of their surroundings and human senses than others and are easily influenced by other people’s emotions. However, if they cannot handle this emotion properly, they can easily be countered by this hypersensitivity. Their personality could be easily taken advantage by another group of people who feed on empaths’ energy, and in Dr. Northrup’s study, are called “vampires”⁵. As an unknowing empath, I was in a relationship that was energized by a “vampire”, which directly contributed to my depression. Nonetheless, there are other deep-seated reasons behind this.

4. People’s personalities are complex, varied, and difficult to be sorted, but there are some commonalities to be found.

5. Vampire in Dr. Christiane Northrup’s book *Dodging Energy Vampires: An Empath’s Guide to Evading Relationships That Drain You and Restoring Your Health and Power* refers to people with psychopathic, narcissistic, borderline, or antisocial behaviours, which according to the *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* are classified as Type B personalities that are with the thinking and behaviour of dramatic, overly emotional, or unpredictable. Survive by ingesting other people’s mental, physical and financial energy, those people often make others feel guilty and negative.

During the process of growing, the emotions of people who have high empathy are often easily ignored by their parents or others around them, because they are much more sensitive than others and need more care, or even get shamed for

showing their true selves. Gradually, they are afraid to express their needs and even sacrifice themselves to take care of the emotions of others. Therefore, their personality and their upbringing environment are usually fundamental reasons leading to their characteristics of lacking self-confidence, cognitive dissonance, and pessimism.

I started to get into psychology because I intended firstly to rescue myself. And my struggle helped me understand the influence of people's mental activities on their behaviours and the deep reasons behind people's behaviours and thoughts. Not only that, but this also motivated my design problem area to design for people's mental health related to people's personality.

Dream: A creative way of knowing myself

During one of the psychological consultations, I accidentally told my therapist about my dream the previous night. I was surprised to find that her analysis of the dream allowed me to notice my emotions and thoughts that I had not noticed when I was awake. At the same time, it also made me interested in how dreams are generated, and the interpretation of dreams.

Therefore, starting in April 2021, I began to record my dreams continuously and use my dreams as research resources to practice dream interpretation. This was learned from Sigmund Freud in his *Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1905). In my point of view, perhaps because of my strong perception of my emotions and surroundings, my dreams are also abundant, rich and colourful. Gradually, I came to see my brain as the mailbox of the house of "myself", and the dream as the constant delivery of letters from my subconscious mind. Dreams have already become a platform for me to understand my recent mental and physical condition. What's more, by recording and interpreting my dreams, I intended to discover the undiscovered ego, difficulties encountered by myself and the prediction of my future, to heal my inner world.

Curating as a design tool

At the same time, I also started to try to use curatorial approaches to help me do research and studio work. First of all, I believe curation is a practice that supports mental wellness for human beings. Each of the stages of curation — collecting, maintaining and exhibiting — preserves the meaning of therapy. We collect because of curiosity and aesthetics; we maintain because we are taking care of duplication of ourselves; we exhibit because of the achievement of gratification. Moreover, I realized curation, more than activity within the museum and gallery field, can be also used as a design tool for fulfilling research and design works. I would like to illustrate my definition of dream therapy, curation as a research method and my art and design practice based on curatorial concepts in the next few chapters.



Thesis Statement and Objectives

2.1 Thesis statement

This research is a studio-based practice about how to care about people's mental well-being through dream therapy and analyzing other psychological activities. The aim is to facilitate researching how dreams and the subconscious help people pay attention to their mental health and serve as critical contributors to creatively knowing ourselves, to create a community of mental well-being.

2.2 Project objectives

- Explore how dreams can be used in a therapeutic studio practice for healing people's mind
- Explore possibilities to use artistic studio-based practice to serve people's mental health

3. Research Method

3.1 Curation

Curation is composed of a series of activities including collecting, organizing, maintaining, and exhibiting artworks or artifacts which was for a long time utilized by museum professionals. Currently, the word is “borrowed by aesthetically-minded persons looking to collect ideas or objects” (Persohn, 2020). However, no matter how far it spreads as a fashionable action and a buzzword in different kinds of fields, it should not be ignored that the word “curate”, comes from the Latin *curatus*, initially meant “to take care (of souls) (cure (v))”.

Curation’s main responsibility, in my opinion, has to do with the mental wellbeing of people.

As the precursors to the museum, the Cabinet of curiosities (*Kunstkabinett*, *Kunstkammer* or *Wunderkammer* in German), was an exemplar of curation as an action serving people’s spiritual life. By collecting, maintaining and displaying all kinds of curiosities, curators and or virtuosos not only show their rank of connoisseurship but also evince their social status and civilization to the public. In addition, the cabinets also served as entertainment. Those functions are all establishments of people’s higher hierarchy of needs as the need for aesthetics and beauty, and the need for self-actualization.

- *Collecting* — helps people keep the past in the present, relieves insecurity and anxiety, provides a safe place and connection. Satisfies people with the motivations of leisure, aesthetics, competition, risk, fantasy, a sense of community, prestige, domination, sensual gratification, sexual foreplay, desire to reframe objects, the pleasing rhythm of sameness and difference, ambition to achieve perfection, extending the self, reaffirming the body, producing gender identity, and achieving immortality (Pearce, 1992).
- *Selecting* — Needs for aesthetics and reflect themselves. Satisfies with self-identity and self-enhancement.
- *Exhibiting* — helps uphold rank in society, satisfies with social identity and gratification from others and themselves.

Curation as a design method

According to the original role of curation, I summarize the definition of curation as a design thinking tool and method.

The primary function of curation as a design method works like **a mechanism for dealing with information, ideas and materials**: sifting, sorting, hiding and standing out for doing research work. Secondly, exhibitions, as one of the possible results of curating, often provide a meaningful experience to the audience. But as the center of communication and controversy, they are also **a practice tool for collecting the audience's thoughts and opinions** through possibilities of interaction with the audience. The display of information in a curated exhibition gives the audience a more intuitive impression of the research work.

From another perspective, curation works as a conceptual and thinking tool which I would like to call a curator's eye, which is similar to the film technique montage: collecting, selecting and displaying information in a certain order, so that the information can escape the limitation of time and space, and express a variety of narratives. Broadly, curation refers to the discriminate selection of materials for display. The curator's art is to carve out that which is most provocative, beautiful, relevant, etc (Davis, 2016). They place multiple artifacts in dialogue with each other, instantiates them around a complex set of themes, elicits multiple meanings from related artifacts and narratives, and promotes questions as often as answers (Persohn, 2020).

3.2 Autoethnography

Autoethnography is an approach in which the researcher uses self-reflection for study personal study and uses "research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political" (Ellis, 2004).

Autoethnography has been one of my major research methods. During the process I got into the understanding of myself as a highly sensitive person with depressed emotion, I used autoethnography to study this personality and ways to relieve negative moods. After I decided to study dreams as a therapy method, I documented and interpreted a large number of my own dreams and strived to sum up a general and reasonable dream healing method with personal characteristics. Autoethnography has impacted me and provided me motivation to research that has value to both the researcher and the others

4.

Context and Framing

4.1 Theoretical context

The interpretation of dreams

In Sigmund Freud's (1856 –1939) *Interpretation of Dreams: The Complete and Definitive Text (1913/2021)*, his theory of “a scientific method of dream-interpretation is possible” and “dream actually possesses a meaning” (Chapter II, Freud) gave me a path to study dream interpretation. And by reading his interpretation, I acknowledged that the dream could be used as a way of healing people's inner world. For instance, by interpreting his dream, Freud explained to himself the unpleasant experiences he had with the patient during the day, and thus found himself a reason for not being optimistic about the patient's illness.

In the second chapter, Freud discussed the concept of dreams from both scientific and unscientific viewpoints. He had critical thinking and did not completely reject the two non-scientific methods of interpretation, which were symbolic interpretation and cipher method. Although I don't think that the so-called non-scientific way of dream interpretation should be completely resisted, because through the interpretation of dreams, what I want to do is to build a culture that pays attention to people's own feelings, and some non-scientific explanations are beneficial to the spread of the culture. But I also think that Freud's dream analysis method has a certain scientific basis and deserves to be affirmed. In my view, the breakthrough point in his thinking compared to symbolism and cryptography is that the interpretation of dreams should be based on reality and specific mental activities generated by specific people. This is of great help for interpreting dreams for others and thus for psychological healing.

Carl Jung and unconscious

Carl Jung's (1875 – 1961) theory of three layers of consciousness has built a strong theoretical basis in my study of dreams. In Jung's view, human consciousness can be divided into three levels: consciousness, personal unconscious, and the collective unconscious. The personal unconscious at the edge of consciousness stores our forgotten memories and repressed past, which is an important source of dreaming. Compared with Freud's belief that people's constellation originates from trauma in their early years, Jung believed that in addition to trauma constellation, there are also some constellations that originate from deeper reasons, that is, in the collective unconscious, which comes from our ancestors left over from generation to generation. The traces can still be collected in dreams.

In Jung's view, dreams represent a wider world. One would do well to treat every dream as though it was a completely unknown project, look at it from all sides, take it in one's hand, carry it around, and let one's imagination play around with it (Jung, 1968). Many unresolved questions are accumulated in the depths of our hearts, but we dare not touch them or treat them negatively. Over time, they become the source of repressed emotions. And Jung believed that dreams just provide a function of compensatory. When we set out to interpret a dream, it is always helpful to ask: What conscious attitude does it compensate (Jung, 1934)?

4.2 Practical context and precedents

How Dreams connect reality and surrealism: connecting the self

My exploration of surrealism originated six years ago when I was studying at Indiana University, a typical American Midwest campus that sits in Bloomington, IN, with vast lands and lush natural surroundings. In particular, there was an ample clearing space with vivid browned weeds in front of the apartment I lived. The empty scene accompanying my lonely mind always reminded me of Andrew Wyeth's famous painting *Christina's World*. Primarily a realist painter, Andrew Wyeth also had full of magical realism in his paintings; that is, everyday things are given a coat of surrealism. Therefore, I started my photographic recreation of the work of Andrew Wyeth (Fig.2) and other surrealists (Fig.3, Fig.4) on campus, trying to use these photos to describe my mood at that time.

Surrealism that prevailed between the two world wars was a literary, philosophical, and artistic movement exploring the irrational, poetic, and revolutionary aspects of the human experience. The study of surrealism has further stimulated my deep understanding of dreams. Influenced by Freud's psychoanalysis, surrealism is devoted to discovering the power of the subconscious mind, integrating realistic concepts, dreams and subconsciousness, and presenting the deep psychological world of human beings. From my perspective, surrealism brings out the freedom of the dream to the greatest possible extent. The mere word "freedom" is the only one that still excites me. I deem it capable of indefinitely sustaining the old human fanaticism (Breton, 1969).



Figure2: Remake of Andrew Wyeth's Christina's Word, 2017. Photo: Yun Xiao



Figure3: Remake of René Magritte's The False Mirror, 2017. Photo: Yun Xiao



Figure 4: Remake of René Magritte's *The Son of Man*, 2017. Photo: Yun Xiao

Cao Fei and her curatorial works

The curatorial works of many artists inspired my understanding of curatorial concepts for doing research and works, one of them was the Chinese artist Cao Fei⁶ and the “HX” gallery in her solo exhibition named *CAO FEI: STAGING THE ERA* (2021).

Hongxia Theatre, previously as the postwar-year built Soviet factory, was the new studio from 2015 after Cao Fei's long hunting for potential venues. And the studio allowed her to embark on an epic art and research project. Taking the researching potential of Hongxia Theatre as the starting point, the artist has carried out interdisciplinary study on the past and present life of the theater and its surroundings. In addition to the science fiction film *Nova* and the documentary *Hongxia*, the entire project also includes archival materials and objects she and her team collected among the folk.

The gallery “HX” which exhibited the whole project was decorated as Hongxia Theatre (Fig.5). And the entirety of the project was documented in the book *CAO FEI: HX* academically and artistically, as a counterpart to the research project and the artworks.

The book, which is a personal archive of the project and a blueprint of the exhibition, is edited in a curatorial way. Both the book and the curation of the exhibition gave the audience an immersive and comprehensive experience of this exhibition touring. After I read the artist's narratives about the research process, historical literature, interviews and comments from other scholars and artists in this book and took a tour of the exhibition, I found that the whole exhibit gallery is not only a real bibliography of the book but also a three-dimensional presentation of the research.

6. Cao Fei (1978 -) is a Chinese Contemporary artist, and she has a specialty in working with multimedia – film, video, virtual reality and installation, to make surreal images of the great changes of real societies and individuals under the transition of er as.

In my view, her exploration and research of the historical building, artworks, video works and exhibitions that were derived from the research have greatly influenced my curatorial thinking and helped me realize that curation can be a design concept and practice to help us with our research and works. Curation, other than a way for collecting, arranging and exhibiting artworks or objects, and a design method for collecting the audience's opinion, is also a tool for practice and hybrid expression that facilitates making and documenting research and works. Furthermore, this book and the exhibition provided me a reference point for conducting, processing and recording my research project and an approach for presenting the social, political and historical context of my thesis.



Figure 5: Cao Fei, CAO FEI: STAGING THE ERA, 2021, exhibition view. Courtesy the artist and UCCA Center for Contemporary Art. Photo: Yun Xiao



Figure 6: Cao Fei, CAO FEI: STAGING THE ERA, 2021, exhibition view. Courtesy the artist and UCCA Center for Contemporary Art. Photo: Yun Xiao

5.

Dream Therapy

5.1 Introduction to dream therapy

Based on my study, **dream therapy** is the process by which recording dreams, recalling dreams and interpreting dreams, we tend to develop a dialogue between one's conscious and unconscious, and to achieve wish fulfillment, release stress and fear, compensate emotion, cure childhood trauma, and ultimately to better know oneself and heal one's mental world.

Another level of dream therapy is being aware of dreaming in dreams, or lucid dreaming in which the dreamer has control over the characters, dialogues, and storyline in the dream. In the process of lucid dreaming, we can do many "impossible" things, such as flying in the underground forest, returning to the childhood home that has been demolished in reality, or communicating with relatives who have passed away. However, since lucid dreaming occurs infrequently and uncontrollably in a normal person without any external lucid dream triggering device, and requires the dreamer to have a strong wish to explore the dream, it is not included in my study of dream therapy. Most of the time the case I discussed in this paper is about the situations in which we do not realize when we are dreaming.

The dream analysis procedure is complicated and cumbersome, and it also differs between different analysts. Therefore, the dream therapy method I have summarized is based on my personal dream interpretation experience, and I hope it can be meaningful to others as well.

Step 1: Know about ourselves

Recalling dreams and working with them while awake is a huge step forward for mindful living, as it connects us with the deepest part of ourselves (Johnson, 2017). And I think that the connection is based on understanding ourselves and the awareness to pay attention to our emotional and physical condition.

A friend of mine once told me the story of a dream that changed her real life. Once she came to a concert in a dream and was moved by a beautiful and pure piece of piano playing. After she woke up, the piano melody was still in her head. She suddenly realized that music had been absent from her life for a long time. My friend remembered that she participated in a chorus in college and sometimes went to the National Grand Theater to see music performances, feeling that she was very close to music. Later, she went to Norway as a graduate student, and there was a piano in school for her to practice by herself. Several years have been passed since she went back to China, and when her sleeping musical memory was awakened again by her dream, she decided to sign up for piano lessons and started learning it well.

Her story touched me. Because the dream conveyed to her a virtually real experience, accompanied by strong emotions and physical experience, poetically informed her inner thoughts. And what is more important, the reason this dream functions very well also has to do with who she is. I think my friend is a self-motivated person. She cares so much about herself, so it was easy for her to decode the information in the dream.

Step 2: Being mindful at daytime

The connection between dreams and reality is coherent and appropriate, with indistinguishable boundaries. Therefore, paying attention to our emotional and physical state when awake is another element of dream therapy. It is also an important key to remind us how much we need to understand our minds and bodies.

In many cases, our physical and emotional state during waking life is accurately and bizarrely reflected in the dreams. For example, whenever I stay up late or have a frustrating day, I have intense and exhausting dreams, even nightmares. At that time, I would sleep early by half an hour to an hour the next day; in another dream, I was having a family reunion dinner at my grandparent's place. In the process of eating, I felt uncomfortable because one of my teeth was about to fall out. I kept playing with it with my hands, and finally, I pulled it out. Then I looked at the tooth's root with evident fracture and wondered if it belonged to childhood tooth replacement or tooth loss in old age. I woke up and found that it was indeed the tooth I lost in the dream that was hurting. This dream happened when I wrote this thesis; anxiety and insecurity caused me acid reflux. The toothache was most likely inflamed by my restlessness or eroded by my stomach acid. In this case, when the dream emphasized my own psychological and physical situation again, I did not choose to continue to increase my workload or keep me busy, but to adjust my emotions and ask the professor for more help about my thesis to relieve my stress.

Step 3: Dream interpretation

Before I conclude my study of dream interpretation, I would like to illustrate what I think dreams are.

What I admire a lot is the dream production scene in the movie *Inside Out* (Docter, *Inside Out*, 2015). The place where Riley dreams in her brain is depicted as a studio, and the dreams are movies. The actors in the studio perform based on the protagonist's daytime experience. And ordinary actors are transformed into Riley's real-life characters under the function of "reality distortion filter".

The process of dreaming is very similar to making a movie. As a film studio, the brain shoots according to the instructions of emotion, and every time people and things that appear in the dream are actors who are caught to act temporarily by your brain. Therefore, one of the most critical keys to cracking the dream code is the emotion in the dream. When a particular feeling arises, people or things that made you have this emotion in real life are prone to appear in your dream story. Some of us who have graduated for many years still dream of forgetting to do homework for elementary school class the night after work is over. This is most likely due to the anxiety we experience at work being similar to the stress we experienced in elementary school.

In the second place, we can find the source of dreams from wounds. Dr. Mario Martinez, in his brilliant book *The MindBody Code*, points out that all tribes wound their members with three archetypal wounds: shame, abandonment, and betrayal (Northrup, 2018). Although we are sometimes reluctant to admit it, wounds often come from tribes with whom we are close, such as our family or our profession. These traumas have shaped us, built our thinking systems, and implanted our dreams, which surfaced on an unexpected night. To paraphrase the dream about me losing a tooth, the elements that appeared in this dream were my grandparents' home, eating, losing a tooth, restlessness, and isolation.

One of the most memorable family scenes in my childhood and teenage years was having dinner at my grandparents' (my father's side) place. Those

memories are wonderful and happy. However, I was the youngest child in this big family, and although I was often loved by everyone (because I was an adorable kid), deep down in my heart, I always thought that my grandparents liked my cousin more than me. Because there will always be an inexplicable feeling of being isolated in my mind when I was staying with my grandparents' family, and my cousin's emotions are always taken care of first. In light of this, my real-life anxiety causing my dream of having a meal at my grandparents' house and rattling my teeth uneasily can be explained. In addition, in China, there is a traditional interpretation of the dream of losing teeth, which is the separation of flesh and blood; that is, there is a possibility of the death of a relative. Although I don't believe in the method of deciphering dreams with symbols, I have deeply embedded this statement in my mind. My grandfather passed away a few years ago, and my beloved grandmother is getting into advanced age. I am terrified if there will be a day of her passing. Therefore, tooth and grandparents were written into my dream archive in this way.

Dream interpretation helps us achieve emotional balance and health by searching for connections between our dreams and real-life images. The dream therapy process I concluded above complements my exploration of specific dreams in the following sections.

5.2 Getting rid of my childhood trauma through dreams: the personal unconscious

This is one of the therapies I designed for myself based on the process of dream therapy. The dream occurred after moving to Vancouver from my hometown China in May 2021. The summer semester began, and I officially started the experience of studying alone in another country.

I did a bad job in my maths class at high school, and my mother was very angry at me. In my grandmother's old apartment, fierce quarrels, the cold war, and criticism are around my mother and me. After a while, the situation seems to have calmed down. I said that I did not want to live anymore. My mother said you could jump off the building if you don't want to live.

Then I said yes.

My mother said I could go with you.

So my mother and I slowly went upstairs to the top of the five-floor old building. I could meet my neighbours on every floor. The corridors were dark, and the smoke was mottled. When we went to the fifth floor, we needed to go through a window to reach the top. My mother said you go. I went through the window because I knew there were places outside the building where I could hold my hands even if I jumped down. I turned over the window, planning to walk to the top of the building, and then my mother pushed me from behind, and my foot slipped and fell. I heard my mother suddenly scream. Because she did not expect that. I fell downstairs and grabbed the handle outside the building on the third floor. Then I slid down little by little without any injuries. When I thought that my parents might see me unscathed when they came down, I looked up, and my mother jumped off from the top of the building. Because she might not know there is a handle outside the building, she jumped very far. I was so scared and hurried to pick up my mother. But I did not catch her. My mother fell heavily to the ground and knocked her head.

I was stressed after I had this dream. To help myself relieve this mood, I shared this on my social media and talked about it to my therapist. Here are some interpretations I collected from my friends and classmates.

- We love our mothers; we always want to pick them up, we want to hold them.
- You dreamed that your mother jumped off the building to express your hatred for your mother when you were young because she was so strict with you on school problems.
- Amplifying anxiety and fear is the result of human evolution. I want to say that the real world is different from the cruel world in your heart, chased by competition and pressure. In fact, you dream that your mother has been putting pressure on you, and you want to escape and pursue freedom, but you are worried that this behaviour will hurt your mother. The parents' logic is that if you are not good, you are not worthy of living. So we become disgusted with relationships. However, when we think we are falling, a broad world is actually below.

According to the emotion theory I discussed in section 5.1.2, although I dreamed of a high school math class, it reflected my current state of study. Combined with my mental activities during the day, I thought I did not fully devote myself to studying. I have many thoughts of anxiety and guilt. So in my dream, I went back to the high school math class, which was the period when I was always anxious and felt that I was a lousy student at math.

Another thing was my reconciliation of the relationship between my parents and me. When I shared this dream with my parents, they said they felt so sorry about what they did to me when I was small. They never thought of how to educate children because that was how their parents raised them. But I should be glad I can talk about this with them and try to heal myself through this.

And the interesting thing is, after a month, I had another dream about math class and my mother, which was I got isolated from my primary school class, and my math teacher was not treating me well, so I told my mother. She was so angry about my teacher bullying me. And said she wanted to talk to my teacher. I was glad that my mother's image changed radically in my dream.

5.3 Your dreams are connected to your ancestors' experience: the collective unconscious

Our dreams have many functions. Sometimes your trauma appears in your dream; it may directly bring healing effects – alertness, prediction, imitation. But sometimes trauma appears in an ambiguous form; it might be from intergenerational inheritance. For example, the offspring of people who have experienced war may dream of war scenes or people who died due to conflict in their dreams, but they have not experienced war.

I would like to relate this to my personal dream experience with my grandmother's dream.

I remember once my mother told me that my grandmother had a dream; in that dream, she and my grandfather were searching for something, they did not know what they were searching for. I considered it a typical dream that could happen to anyone until I saw my grandmother's writing about her experience of travelling to Beijing in 1968. During that period, China went through a violent sociopolitical purge movement called the Cultural Revolution. My grandmother, a teacher working at school, was labelled a capitalist roader and became the target to be revolutionized. In that year, my grandmother escaped from her hometown and took my mother to the city (near Beijing) where my grandfather worked for refuge. On the weekend, they went to Beijing for a short trip. But my grandparents lost my mother in a large shopping mall. After an extremely anxious search, they found my mother at the counter.

Countless traumas can happen in one's life. However, my grandmother's generation has experienced the most turbulent China in a century compared to me. These experiences: the anxiety, fear and sadness caused by the loss of a loved one, refugee, natural and human-made disasters are deeply rooted in their bodies and brains.



Figure 7: My grandmother and mother at Tiananmen Square in Beijing, 1968

The “searching dream” must be inseparable from her experience when she was young.

And my grandmother also shared her experience about how she escaped from her hometown. During the escape, her friend was riding a tricycle, sending them to the train station, and my grandmother was holding my mother, hiding under a big overcoat in case someone noticed she was on the tricycle. This experience impressed me and made me think of my own dreams. I always dream of myself hiding from someone’s chasing. I was anxious and nervous in those dreams and tried to use different ways to hide. I remembered once I transformed my own body into a ball in case someone recognized me.

Although this can’t fully prove that my dream comes from my grandmother’s experience, I still felt relieved. Because I have partly found the source of my natural “highly sensitive,” which is from my ancestors, the original traumatic experiences will write their memories and emotions into their genes and create the family a corresponding atmosphere for future generations, which is very important for the formation of the offspring’s personality and behaviour. And it is also a tone for their dreams.

Indeed, the impact of trauma can be passed from one generation to the next. Some of the problems in our lives are not caused by us personally, but by our parents, grandparents, great-grandparents and even many generations ago. Nonetheless, what comforts and excites us is that you are here not only to heal your wounds but also to heal your painful legacy. You are here to end the pain! (Northrup, 2018)

After experiencing this, I curated memories from my grandmother and myself about Beijing into one art piece. I imitated my grandmother in an old photo she took in a photo studio in Beijing in 1986. And for me, I cannot forget what I experienced and thought during the seven years I studied and worked in Beijing in the 2010s. This stands for the intergenerational inheritance of dreams.



Figure 8: Yun Xiao, *Dreamer's Album*, Apr. 2021, resin, mixed material.



Figure 9: Yun Xiao, *Dreamer's Album*, Apr. 2021, resin, mixed material.



Studio research with the curatorial frame: Design propositions

For the past year and a half, I have turned my own life and research field into a journey of seeking healing. My dreams and spiritual activities have become my mood board for my design and artworks, providing me with a larger space to think and a more creative perspective to start. At the same time, because of the healing effect of art itself, this experience, in turn healed my mind and spiritual world. In addition to conducting some psychological research about dreams by art, I also practiced many different therapies, including collecting therapy and walking therapy. And curation became my essential research method.

I would like to illustrate my experience and academic work using different therapies based on my personality study and dreams in the following subsections.

6.1 Getting to know your personality: a self-healing process

In April 2021, I took my courage to start one month of psychological counseling sessions to heal my depressed emotion and psychological wounds. It was a life-changing experience. To know more about myself, I re-examined my childhood and upbringing experience and learned some psychological theories superficially. I acknowledged my personality traits, which is a highly sensitive person, and I took myself as the research object to understand the formation of this personality, characteristics, and the reasons why this group of people is usually vulnerable to be harmed by people with personality disorders like people who have a borderline personality disorder.

During the healing process, I gradually regained the enthusiasm I had for life, and I also began to decide to carry out this precious healing experience creatively. Therefore, I designed myself an artistic self-healing plan under my therapist's instruction. It was a process of paying attention to my emotions, recovering from trauma and disturbance, building my self-confidence.

Based on Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, our consciousness can positively and negatively affect our behaviour. And the behaviour can, in turn, affect consciousness.

Face Recording

From the beginning to the end of my counselling, I recorded my face every day to see how my face changed while I was building my confidence and cognition. Because people’s personalities and emotions always reflect on their faces. As the counselling gradually took effect and my cognition slowly returned, I would feel a great sense of accomplishment as I watched my face improve day by day. And even on my way to getting better, there was still some decline of my state, which could be shown on my face. Apparently, there were two kinds of personalities on the first day and last day.

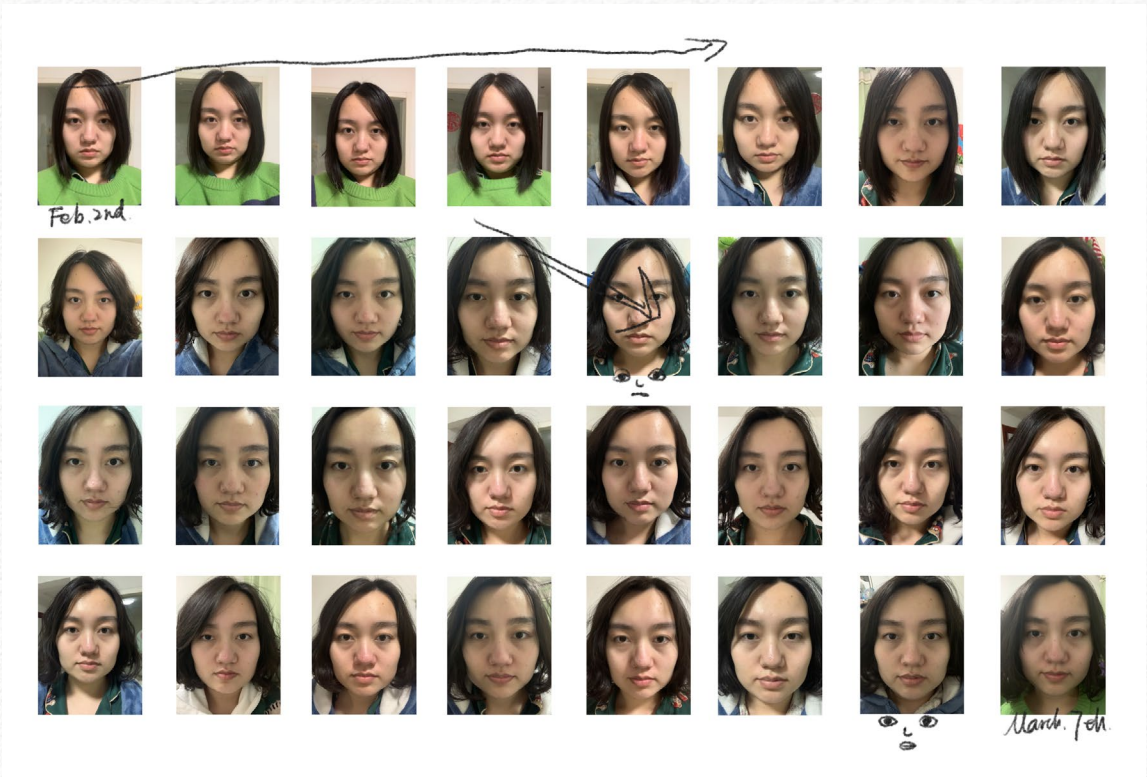


Figure 10: Yun Xiao, Recording of my face during psychological counseling, 2nd Feb. 2021-7th Mar.2021.

Emotion tracking

During the healing process, I have been insisting on recording my emotions, including the positive and negative emotions that were happening at any moment and my perception of life. And I gradually tried to reconcile with the destructive emotions by myself. At first, I would like to use my cellphone to post my feelings privately on social media, which was convenient and had a sense of ritual. Then I tried to use collage to record my emotions and experiences creatively. Because compared to traditional written records, the visual effect of collage is more intuitive, and it is another way to express complex feelings. What’s more, compared with traditional painting, collage involves mixed materials and is more creative. This method of emotional recording has also been extended to my life after psychological counselling.

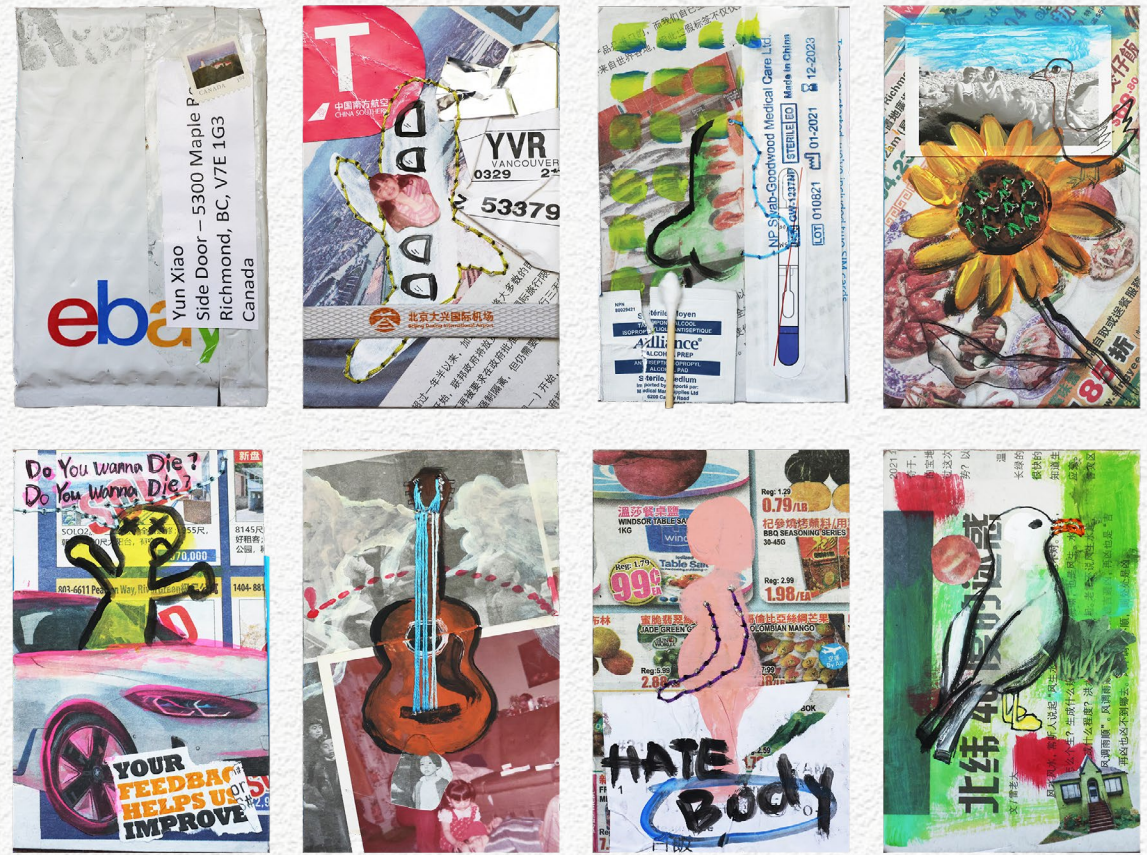


Figure 11: Yun Xiao, Emotion tracking from April to November, 2021, mixed material. (This series of collage depicts my emotion and experience from April to November 2021 after I made my transition from China to Vancouver.)

Art therapy: visualizing my inner heart

To express my inner trauma and to express what high empathy people do when they are injured, I have made a series of artistic creations.

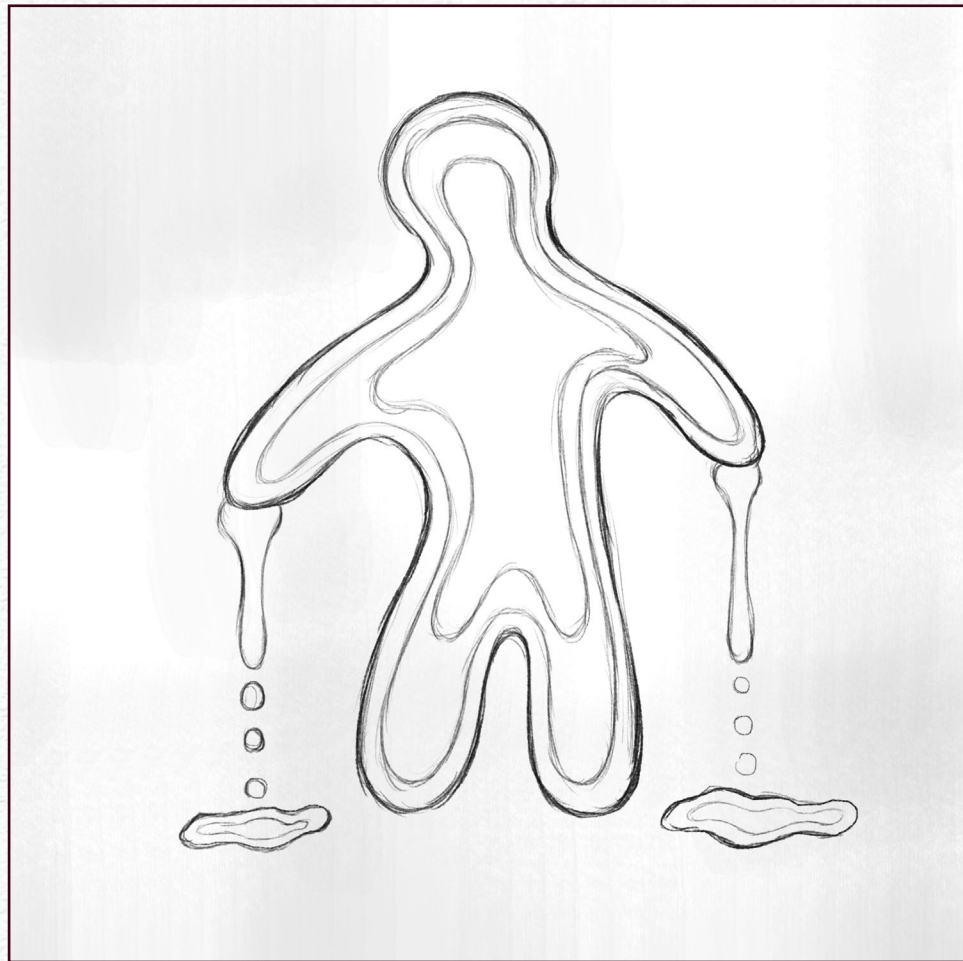


Figure 12: Yun Xiao, *Waiting, where I'm going*, 2021, digital painting. (This picture depicts the bewilderment I had in my depressed emotions. My body was limp, my emotions were unstable, and I felt like my body was gradually draining. But I was not actually aware of this feeling.)

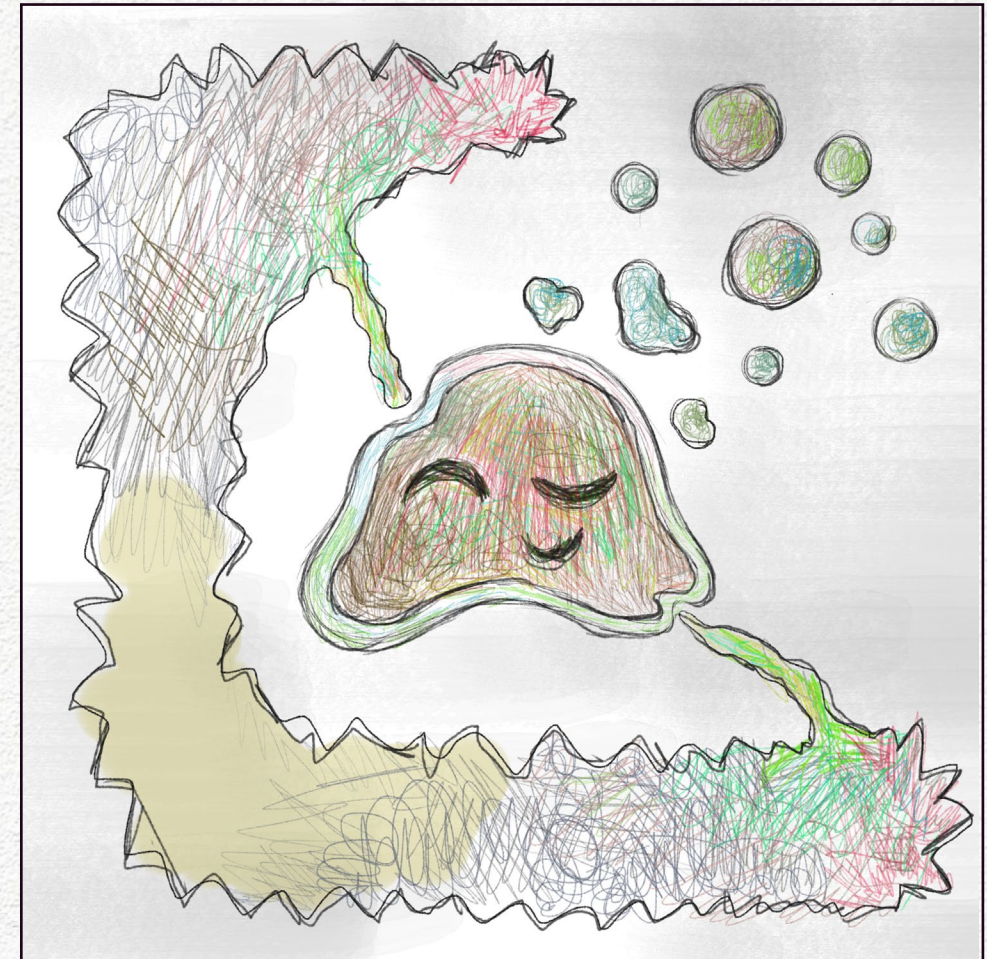


Figure 13: Yun Xiao, *Feeling "good"*, 2021, digital painting. (This picture describes another state of myself as a highly sensitive person. Due to a lack of caring in their childhood, the HSP usually believes that "love" is obtained by sacrificing themselves. So, their emotions and energy are easily exploited by a class of people (e.g. borderline personality disorder people). And HSP also enjoy this kind of paying while they are being absorbed by those "vampires")



Figure 14: Yun Xiao, *Portrait of a Highly Sensitive Person who is being absorbed energy by "Vampires"*, 2021, Oil on canvas. (This painting was adapted from the first photo in my face-documenting series. At that time, I had not yet come out of my depressed emotion. I depicted myself as a vulnerable animal with dull eyes and sagging skin. It was like a ghost walking around any time.)

Knowing about highly sensitive people is my first step in healing myself. When our ego is strong enough and mature enough to face it, the pain will pay off. And the process of realizing pain is the process of changing. However, this is just the first step for us to get better. People with high empathy or even anyone should not be bound by their so-called "character" or "personality" because people are creatures that can change or even be changing every second. It is challenging and rewarding to dare to break through your "character flaws".

So I gradually tried to use the inspiration from my dreams to do some exploration of the city and life in the following design and artworks.

6.2 Dream “re-entry”: exploring the dream, the city, and the self

This piece started with a dream I had about childhood photos, cities and seeking for myself, in which I set out from my spiritual world, tried various healing methods, and finally made an online exhibition for the whole process through my personal narratives.

When I had this dream, I had come to Vancouver from my hometown China; living alone and the epidemic which continued to heat up made me stay at home isolated from the world most of the time. Some of my mild depressed emotions began to unfold again. And I kept thinking about the meaning of life because I felt like everything would fade away in the end.

I walked into a thrift store, and everything on the shelves was piled up in a mess. I wandered around and saw a lot of old photo albums, which looked like albums with nylon covers used by Chinese families in the 1980s and 1990s. I wanted to buy it, but I found that the people in the photos were me from my childhood when I opened it. I was a little surprised, so I ran to ask the owner where he got it. He asked what had happened. I said it was me in this photo. He said that it could be acquired in a special way if it was me.

He then began to question me who I was. I said I am a student at Emily Carr, and pointed across the street on the right, indicating that the school was nearby. But the street on the left is the where I lived when I was in junior high school.

He said these photos were collected by a photographer who lives next to their store. Then he showed me many pictures taken by him. I looked at the glass showcase with many images of rural older adults. Some of the other photos were on the computer. There was a series of pictures of children without eyes and facial features.

I felt weird and wondered if this was true. Then the owner took me to the row of shelves where the photo album was placed and took out a Polaroid to take a picture of me. He said that this camera could show how you looked like when you were a child, and if the person photographed was a child from the album; then it proved that the child was you.

However, when I looked at the photo from the Polaroid, it was another child. I said it was not me. Then I brought the previous album again, but none of the images in the album were me anymore. She looks a lot like me, but it is not me.

I constantly wanted to prove myself and relate myself to the environment and society in this dream and did not want to fade away. But I didn't realize that the environment was changing, people were changing, and my mood was also changing. One day I will no longer be associated with this world.

Being with this state, I designed a healing process for myself based on this dream—**dream re-entry**, doing what I did in my dream in reality.

As I began this journey, I went to thrift stores and flea markets in Vancouver, as I dreamt of. Along with walking through the city, I used **collecting as a form of healing therapy** and “a means of cultivating a positive sense of self by setting up a process of goal information and attainment that is clear and attainable” (Mcintosh and Brandon, 2004). Many items with my personal qualities, such as defocused but textured old photos, navy shirt doll brooches, and my favourite Chinese old songs vinyl, were collected during this trip. I did not think much in collecting them, but then I found out that they could be inextricably linked with myself.

When I looked back at these old photos I bought from the flea market; I pleasantly found there are many common things between my old photos and photos I collected from the flea market. (Fig.15, Fig.16) I suddenly realized this probably alluded to what I experienced in my dream.



Figure 15: Photography of a child sitting next to toy, N.D (up), Photography of me sitting next to doll, 1995 (down)



In the part of the online curation of *Eternity and termination — a lifelong story*, I showed the life of a being from the perspective of an ordinary creature. In all the exhibits, no matter where he/she/it comes from, what form of that creature is, their life is given the same meaning. They start as individuals, combine with other creatures to form a new tribe, and then new life is conceived, grows, emigrates, flows like a river, and finally dies. (Fig. 17)



Figure 16: Photography of a mother holding child, N.D (up), Photography of my mother holding me, 1993 (down)



ENTRY VARIATION + CONFORMITY ETERNITY + TERMINATION SHE'S LIKE ME, BUT NOT ME THEME

Staying in this city for over a year, I still regarded myself as a visitor. Therefore, I planned to continue to explore this city on a larger scale. Everything, every person, every building was about to be given a new perspective, which was my point of view.

I picked up a film camera purchased at a second-hand store for ten dollars, loaded with the film that a friend gave me four years ago and embarked on a new path of exploring the city. I would like to call it **city walking therapy**, which was by walking around the city without a destination, discovering some novelties and taking some interesting photos to find a relation with the city.

Accordingly, my documentation of venues in this city during my city roaming had been presented in the curation of *Variation and Conformity* — *an evolution of a city*. Alongside them were photos of how they have changed over the past a hundred years.

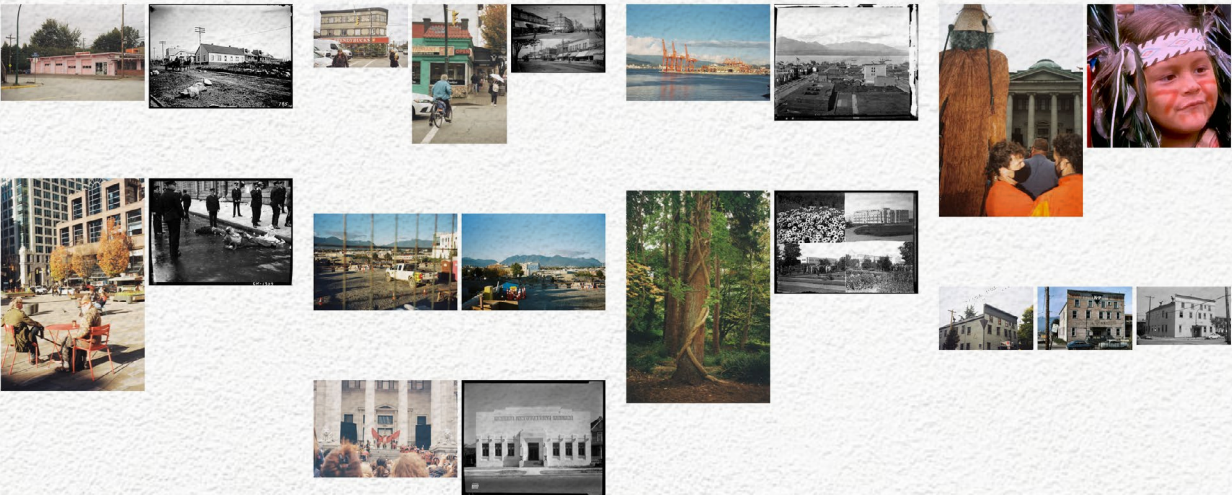
Figure 17: Yun Xiao, *Eternity and Termination — a lifelong story*), screen capture, <https://eternitytermination.tumblr.com>, 2021



Figure 18: Post office and art gallery sit down, 1938, Province Newspaper photo, Vancouver Public Library 1309. (This photography depicted a sit-down strike at Vancouver Art Gallery's old venue)



Figure 19: Two old men at Vancouver Art Gallery's north plaza, 2021, photo: Yun Xiao



ENTRY VARIATION + CONFORMITY ETERNITY + TERMINATION SHE'S LIKE ME, BUT NOT ME THEME

Figure 20: Yun Xiao, Variation and Conformity — an evolution of a city, screen capture, <https://variationconformity.tumblr.com>, 2021

Life itself is meaningless.

The variation contains conformity and termination also exists in eternity.

We are only one ten-thousandth of everything in the universe, and all we can see is only a few percent of the discovered universe.

All the rules we make are subjective.

Since it's all like this, why not try our best to do what we want to do and don't be bound by any kinds of values. This starts to be my point of view to heal me when I encounter setbacks.

She looks like me, but not me. Because she could be any ego that splits from me and let me watch her being emotional, think about her thoughts and witness her growth. The world sees us fading away in itself, but we are watching everything in the universe.

6.3 Curating cabinet of dream-curios

After analyzing several dreams, I began to furtherly study the definition of dreams, how dreams work in our brains, and how dreams can be used as a therapy to heal our minds. In this practice, I decided to go back to the very essence of dreams. By using my dreams and previous research on dreams, I tried to make this intangible thing tangible to better show people the healing effect of dreams, and make people pay more attention to their mental health in a creative way.

Using the concept of curation and inspired by the originality of curation: the cabinet of curiosities, I ended up making a diorama box to depict what is happening in my dreams. I picked the themes and scenes that appear most frequently in my dreams and visualized them in this cabinet. They were my home in my childhood age, tomb or death, and sex. And I found material in thrift stores, which are existing things (music box, clock, miniatures, etc.) that were owned by other humans and restored them to give them new meanings. This could represent dreams coming from the existing memories and events happening in our real life and producing other shapes in our minds when we are sleeping. I also found that the process of visualizing dreams is also a process of resolving my nostalgia, fears, and other emotions in my mind.



Figure 21: Yun Xiao, *Cabinet of Dream-curios*, 2021, mixed material



Figure 22: Yun Xiao, *Cabinet of Dream-curios (my childhood home)*, 2021, mixed material.



The piece was exhibited on campus during the 2021 fall studio class in a way that engaged audience interaction. This cabinet was not only the introspective self-analysis of my dreams, but also an attempt to provide a space for the audience to explore, think and express. While on display, people were encouraged to be explicit about what happened in their dreams through visualization or words. Curating also provided me with the opportunity have an impact on a wider public and collect the audience's thoughts. (Fig.24)

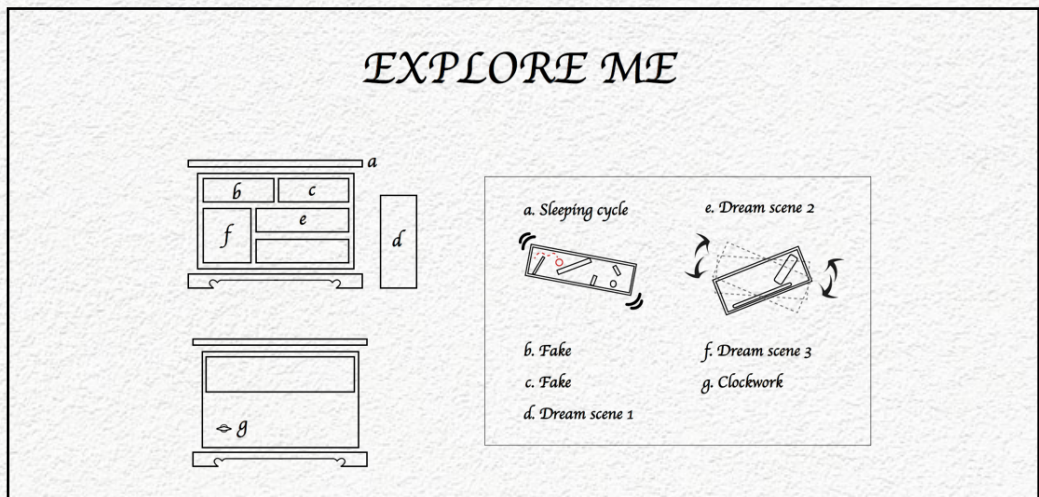


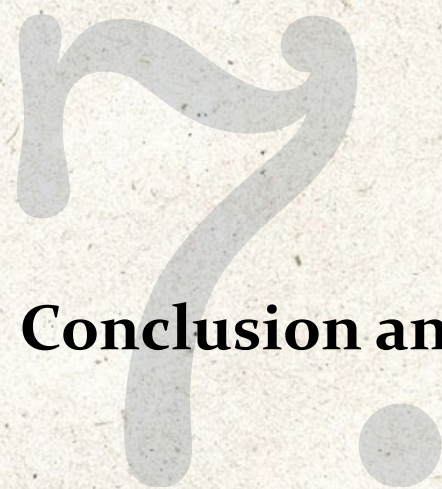
Figure 24: Yun Xiao, Cabinet of Dream-curios, exhibition view, 2021, mixed material.



Figure 25: Yun Xiao, Cabinet of Dream-curios, dream visualization from audience, 2021.

Through collecting audience feedback, I saw multiple research possibilities in the future. Firstly, there is the possibility of research on how individual and collective unconsciousness appear in people's dreams, or other possibilities of psychological activities that affect dreams. For instance, in the dream visualizations collected from the audience, some of these (such as flying and being trapped in cliffs) might show the effect of the collective unconsciousness on dreams. The personal unconscious, on the other hand, might be manifested in visuals that explicitly express recent experiences (such as the references to relatives and friends in audience descriptions). Secondly, what also interests me is the dreams that people of different personalities have: the connection between dreams and personalities.

From my point of view, the most precious moment of the entire process of making and exhibiting this art piece is the indirect impact on the audience. While I think we are our own best dream interpreters, and for most of the research period I have been working on my own dreams instead of those of others, my process of externalizing my spiritual world to myself is equally externalizing to the audience. Through exhibiting the cabinet, I indirectly help the audience to start getting to know how dreams happen during our sleep, and pay more attention to their unconscious activities and dreams because they may influence our conscious minds and daylight activities. My journeys and stories could also be opportunities for people to be aware of various types of dreams and reflect on their own experiences.



Conclusion and Reflection

My research is a self-investigating and reflecting journey that deals with my psychological activities; it intends to indirectly inform audiences who are also in search of healing, as well as designers and artists who are trying to express themselves and connect with others.

Fortunately, my passion for arts, design and curating have helped me find creative ways to solve my mental problems and document my emotion innovatively, my experience and research can be a little bit more meaningful because they can be seen by the public. The method of curating provides me with logic and inventive thinking for doing research and design works. From my perspective, my use of a curatorial approach including collecting, selecting, and exhibiting in the project *Dream Re-entry* could be used by other artists and designers who are conducting a storytelling project. And my approach in the project “*Getting to know your personality: a self-healing process*”, using the method of face recording and emotion tracking could be taken up by creative practitioners as a way to acquire inspiration through ongoing, creative documentation of their emotions and personal growth.

Dreams are complex, and our human brain is even more so. Dealing with mental health entails a lifetime of fighting. But “Though nothing can bring back the hour of splendor in the grass, of glory in the flower; We will grieve not, rather find strength in what remains behind” (William Wordsworth). Dreams, like our experiences, are precious gifts that “remain behind” in our life.

For the future directions, I would like to explore more ways for dealing with my personal mental well-being through innovative paths as a starting point of enriching my experience of helping other people’s mental issues.

This has not been my life, but I have found a way for it to be worth living.

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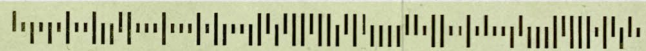
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