

Pseudo-well

A Dilemmatic Aura of Modernity in the west and the non-west

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“I like living, breathing better than working...”

— Marcel Duchamp¹

At the beginning of 2020, an outbreak of disease started in Wuhan, China. It's caused by a novel coronavirus, COVID-19. The symptoms of the illness aren't very special: dry cough, fever, but very soon they can cause viral pneumonia and death. This coronavirus is firstly known from wild animals in a seafood market, later it's transmitted from one person to another. On March 11th, The World Health Organization declared the coronavirus outbreak a pandemic. At this moment, there is no treatment at all. Globally, there are more than two million cases around the world². On the other side, Australia is experiencing the unstoppable wildfire, it seems like the entire country is about to be burned down. Although this pandemic chaos seems to be a big scale incident, just like Australian unstoppable wildfire, for me, they are all political crises laid out in a sheet of newspaper — “On the left, they have put knowledge of things; on the right, power and human politics.”³ Only during crisis, disaster, war time, humans become equal, sort of. I prefer to say Humans become equally raw.

To think of “rawness” and “political crisis” is to admit the paradox of modernity, the modernity in the west and the one in the non-west (or ‘the rest’⁴ I shall call with a bit western hubris). This paradox is amplified by the effect of globalization. In this globalized world, people believe in robust man-made systems: institutional education, medical system, criminal justice system, transportation system and others which humans have built, improved and relied on throughout our time. It's not surprising, because no matter if we are born in an advanced country or the Third world, everyone is automatically given the use of these systems, we are routinized and standardized. Once we get inside of this system, we start the circle: “Learn, pay, use, earn”. This system and belief are similar to Max Weber's

“Iron Cage”⁵. Gradually, we are civilized, educated, and must know how to play this game. If we don't, we will be abandoned or marginalized by this society.

What happened to lead us here? From the scale of an individual or of a country, human way of living has been chasing after modernization both hardware — social infrastructure modernization — and software — cultural modernization. Yet, this race has left many individuals behind, creating a deep social gap impossible to be narrowed within decades to come. On the one hand, this modernization brings us the growth of scientific consciousness, the advance on technologies and more efficient society and so on. On the other hand, modernization carries the mundanity of everyday life, pursuit of profit and pragmatic mentality. The term *modern* seemly becomes an role-switch from the world of old to the new. During the Age of Enlightenment, philosophers at that time believed that mankind would progress steadily towards into social, economic and political *being* as long as the reasoning was addressed properly⁶. This became the universal value to emancipate human. ‘Rationality’, ‘consciousness’, ‘scientific knowledge’ are frequently used terms. And I believe that during the outbreak of Covid-19, the handling of this crisis undercuts all the terms I mentioned above.

While the world asks for collaboration to improve life quality in all countries, why are there still poor countries whose people seem to suffer from a lack of basic needs/equality for survival such as food security or medical gear supply? In fact, this is one of many side effects of the modernity in the non-west. Taking a step back to the history of discovery or of modernization, we can observe a bigger picture of effects or consequences of our own decisions

and actions which were thought to be revolutionary⁷ and legitimate. The following era of Enlightenment became the Age of Invasion, Colonization and Exploitation. It's not the end until the late 20th century when many colonized nations gained their independence, but the entire world became sociopolitically messier due to the degradation of traditional virtue and ethic. In other words, the current global situation comprises a lack of responsibility and willingness to pay back/compensate from the West. Instead, Here is the typical dilemma among many developing countries: 1) if they choose to go back to feudal, they will be colonized again by developed countries, such as Japan in the early 19th century; 2) if they choose to modernize, their original culture will be challenged and gradually lost, such as China; 3) if they lack the condition to modernize, they have no solution at all, such as Afganistan. These can be reflected through the global anti-modernity trend⁸. This dilemma explains why the birthplaces of ancient human civilization, like Egypt, Greece and Iraq are even out of the contemporary table. China, the remaining one, becomes the second largest GDP⁹ by playing the role as world factory benefiting but exploited by modernization itself. Like China, many other developing countries are doing similar things by exporting single raw product, e.g. human labor, crude oil, banana, etc.

In addition, the accelerated modern mode of production is reinforced by the digitalized and computerized knowledge. In one sense, it brings opportunity in the non-west to catch the train under globalization to setup factories transferred from the west. A great example is the documentary film *American Factory*¹⁰ in 2019, which examined the situation of Chinese invested factory in the post-industrial Ohio and displayed the clash

between high-tech and working-class. Computerized knowledge has become the force of production over the last few decades. "Nation state will one day fight for control of info (including the computerized knowledge), just as they battled for control over territories in the past."¹¹ In other words, the modernity in the non-west became a big on-going experiment mixture of anti-modernity, modernity and post-modernity.

During my artist-in-residence in Salem in Summer 2019, my works touched the sense of globalization by simplifying the individual and globalization relationship into three elements: space, destination and ourselves. Three projects *From West to East*, *A Well* and *Root* were made to correspond to those three elements. I use tires as a means to reflect the most essential need to be modern which drives our revolutions — moving. I realized that need is not food, not sex, not humanity, it's about conquering, discovering, connecting. In my project *From West to East*, I used the tire treads that I found on the highway as material to interweave American land. At this land, everyone is involved of driving, when you drive, you conquer. However, the tire treads always sit on the highway and will not be cleared out. This is very interesting phenomenon for me to connect my rumination — why this world is so capable of producing but it lacks the capability of fixing or recycling? Currently, this pandemic stops our moving, everyone is stuck at home. As an artist, I imagine there is a 'reset' button which Covid-19 presses down reluctantly on us.

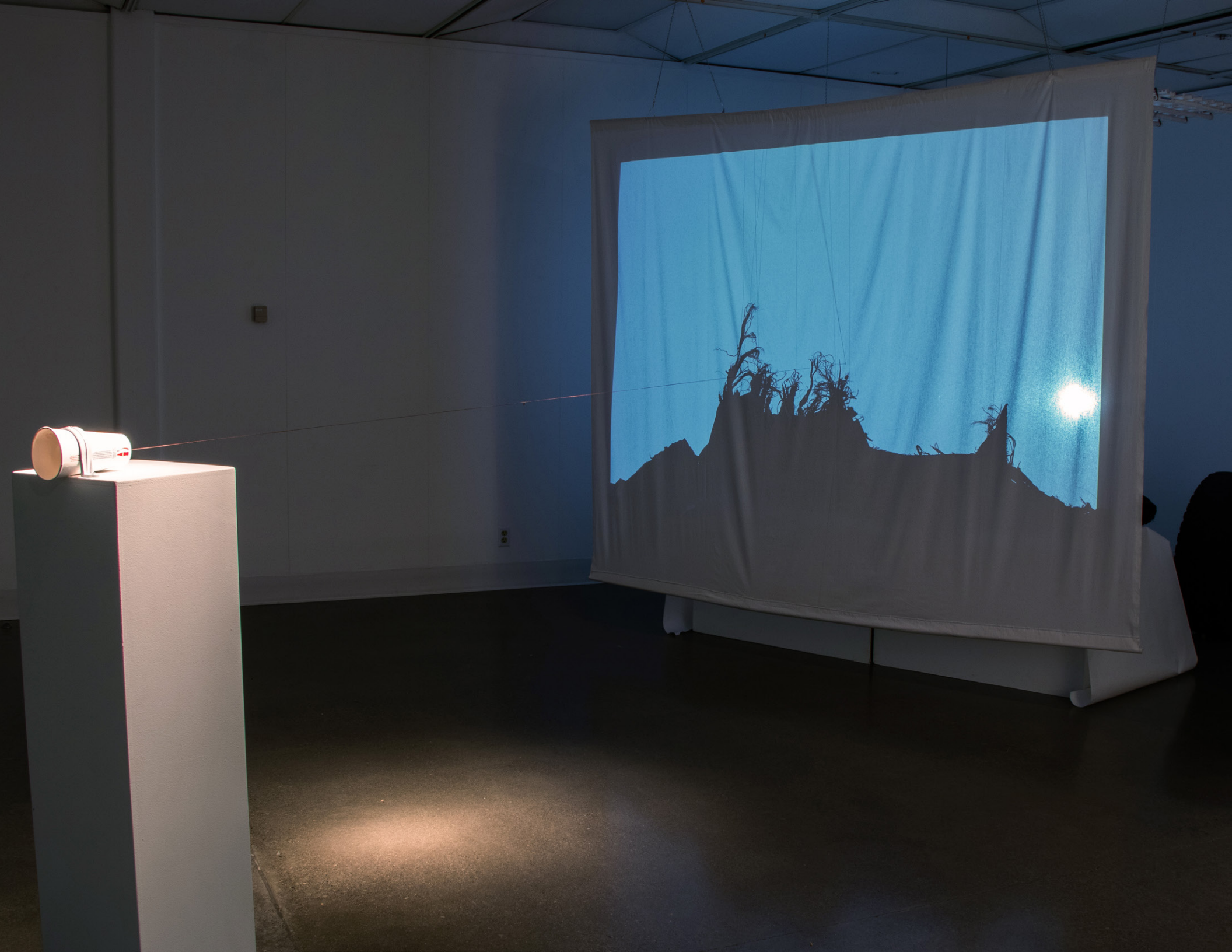
After all, the aforementioned dilemmatic aura of modernity throughout the west and the non-west becomes the background of my work *Pseudo-well*. It has two emphases: one is local community; another emphasis is that the

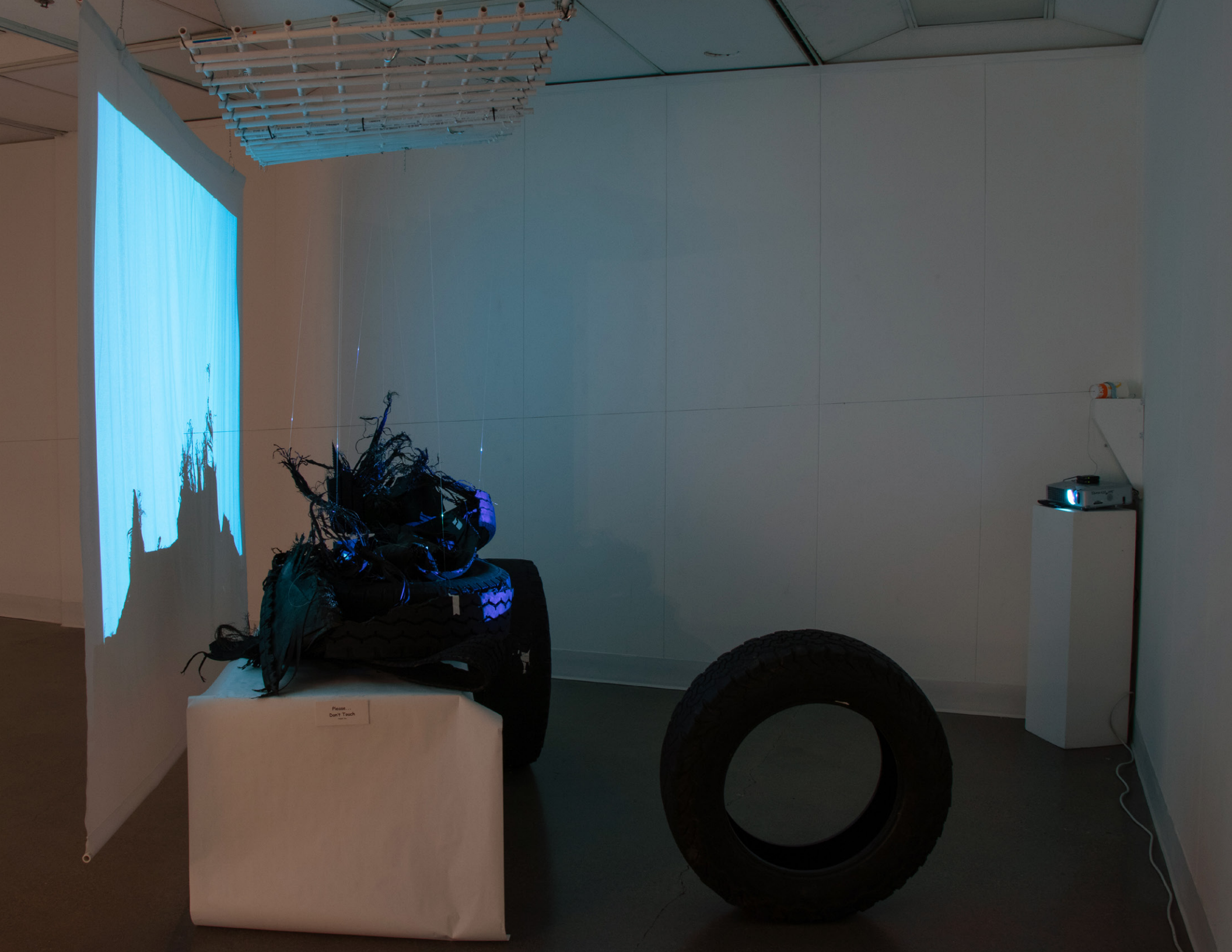
presence of self is replaced by the absence of the self. That is, we have to self-isolate to protect our lives and the lives of others. This self-isolation, social distancing period can be considered as de-industrialization and de-modernization. Depending on the degree of enforcement from different governments, most corporations are banned. International travel is banned. Non-essential access to physical places is banned. This self-isolation is seemingly sending us back to time before the Age of Enlightenment in which access to other physical areas was limited and time-consuming, and people are stuck in their local communities.

The local community in my project is built up not only with the material but also through the process. Each individual is like the junk tire which has conquered more than 50000 miles, but they end up in the junkyard, we are stuck at home. These junk tires are sponsored by a local tire shop, the experience is quite interesting to me. When I approached the manager of the tire shop, he had no interest in my project, because it doesn't have any commercial benefit to him, if I tell him my concept, it probably would be even worse. At that time, I realized the challenge of bridging art people and non-art people. If I have to make this project, I must change the way I communicate with him. After my request, he gave a tour of his shop, he explained to me how the whole system works including selling, recycling and junking. What shocked me was that these junk tires are actually bought by Chinese recycling companies. My project *Pseudo-well* is an extension of my previous work *A Well*, back then I only had a vague plan to address the disconnectedness of individual and our globalized space by using the round shape of a tire and the depth of it to mimic the limited tiny world as a well, but it wasn't everything I hope for, and it lacked the interaction and

sense of aesthetic immersion.

Pseudo-well is an installation consisting of junk tires. It looks like an abandoned playground under this pandemic. By standing on the platform, viewers can have the access to look inside the round well, at the same time they will be overwhelmed by the smell of junk tires. A Kinect interactive camera captures the body shape of the viewer and projects on what they see at the bottom of the well — the moving sky, the sky may come from the window view of a space station. When we look up, we look at the sky even if you are standing in a well, but when we look down, we look into a well, our world seems to be separated by a narrow window. With available and limited access we have under this pandemic, we somehow become frogs living in the well. Like many stranded airplanes, cars, even low price oil, these tires become junk. Thus, our presence of self is replaced by the absence of the self.





Please ...
Don't Touch



The *Pseudo-well* project shares some affinities with the work of other artists, such as *The Swimming Pool* of Leandro Erlich. When I encountered Leandro Erlich's *The Swimming Pool* in Kanazawa in Japan 2019, I was amazed by how the work pinpointed the ambiguity and illusion existing in this man-made society. Isn't our world shaped by the obscureness and illusion from us? *The Swimming Pool* allows visitors to look down into a seemingly typical pool full of water under which other visitors walk around the pool. A climbing ladder installed from below directs the gaze of the visitors upward or tempts the visitors to climb up. What they can see is the blurry image of the world outside the swimming pool. Since underwater is recreated using a thin piece of glass with water running over top of it, this technique leaves the viewers with only blurry visions when viewers look up or even look down. In other words, the thin piece of glass with water running over on top can be interpreted as a mirror of the world or simulacra¹² as Jean Baudrillard says. We expect to see things clearly in their original and natural form; however, what we get is distorted images no matter which directions we attend to. This work is fun and interactive, its concept is even in line with how I understand the unevenness of conquering and fixing. Besides shared dimensions, *The Swimming Pool* and my work of *Pseudo Well* have some differences, especially under this pandemic.

Another artist's work is Cai Guo-Qiang's *Heritage* at Queensland Art Gallery, Australia. The *Heritage* poses a 'what if' hypothesis: what if today were the end of this world, how would you want to react as a human being? In that work, 99 life-sized replicas of predators and prey are heading down respectfully and silently drinking water from the last clean water pond in

this world. Ironically, under this pandemic, we human beings are not behaving like Cai's work's assumption. I assume it's never gonna be like that.

When I first finished the prototype of *Pseudo-well*, I assumed an audience interacting with my work, not just sitting in the gallery. At this time the project still waits for people to walk around it, climb the stairs and look into the well. And the sky no longer needs to be projected at the bottom, it can be exposed under the real sky and reflected through a mirror or other mechanisms. When the installation is paired with the slide, our playground has a wider audience not only children but also ambitious men with endless conquering desires. If this pandemic lasts a bit longer, I imagine many months later, these tires are full of mosses and the platform is slippery and rotten, the slide will not be played by neither a child nor an adult. The whole project will be abandoned and forgotten, no participant to interact with it, no individual to claim the ownership, no environmentalist to criticize it, no Chinese company to recycle it.

I believe that the dilemmatic aura of modernity throughout the west and the non-west could be reflected through my work *Pseudo-well's* two emphases on local community and the shift from self-presence to self-absence.









EXIT









From the theory I read in Zen Buddhism¹³, it mentioned a stage similar to the concept which situates the goal of my work in the current global situation. This stage is surrounded by a spectrum of self-loss and self-found and that of sadness and joy,

From the very beginning, pure and immaculate, he has never been affected by defilement. He calmly watches the growth and decay of things with form, while himself abiding in the immovable serenity of non-assertion. When he does not identify himself with magic-like transformations, what has he to do with artificialities of self-discipline? The water flows blue, the mountain towers green. Sitting alone, he observes things undergoing changes.

*To return to the Origin, to be back at the Source — already a false step this!
Far better it is to stay home, blind and deaf, straightway and without much ado,
Sitting within the hut he takes no cognisance of things outside,
Behold the water flowing on, whither nobody knows; and those flowers red and fresh—
for whom are they?*

However, I realized the above theory relating to the stage is unachievable and idealistic in the mist of this pandemic, indeed, that captures the equivalency of the modernity's dilemma of the west and the non-west.

List of images:

From West to East

Tire treads, hanging mechanism, projector

Dimensions variable

2019

Pseudo-well

Junk tires, wood platform, projection mechanism, slide

Dimensions variable

2020

Artist: Leandro Erlich

The Swimming Pool

Media and technique: concrete, glass, water

Size: H280 ×W402×D697cm

2004

Artist: Cai Guo-Qiang

Heritage

99 life-sized replicas of animals, water, sand, drip mechanism

Dimensions variable

2013

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