

# Fan Xi | Liminal Space: Fan Xi and the De- iconification of the World of Images

By Mao Zhu 2017-02-23



I

Roland Barthes drew a critical conclusion on contemporary photography in *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*: the contemporary transformed the world into images, where photographs allowed the world to come to the surface, where people's desires are magnified. As a technique of image production, photography is divided into two paths: one is *studium*, and the other is *punctum*.<sup>[1]</sup> Since the beginning, the photograph's testimonial property is similar to Gerhard Richter's "photo-realism" that attempts to wipe out "the subjective and spiritual residue of every detail" through meticulous depiction of existing objects, by which to maintain a neutral and anonymous attitude. While this viewpoint is not new, insofar as the invention of photography at the

beginning of the Nineteenth century, the debate evolved around painting and photography has not ceased, primarily evolved around whether photography produces images devoid of metaphorical meaning? For Roland Barthes, photographs are “that-has-been”, it’s a testimony, a “curse”, not art, because everything is given without provoking the desire for or even the possibility of a rhetorical expansion.[ii] While Blanchot held the opposite view, who stated, “The essence of the image is to be altogether outside, without intimacy, and yet more inaccessible and mysterious than the thought of the inner most being; without signification, yet summoning up the depth of any possible meaning; unrevealed yet manifest, having that absence-as-presence which constitutes the lure and the fascination of the Sirens.” [iii]

This debate anchors the dialectical qualities in the medium of photography: on the one hand, the realistic and testimonial qualities allow photography shoots reality into images, lucidly exposing everything in front of the viewer; on the other hand, the image frames and magnifies the features of everyday reality forcing them to confront the reality in the photograph. Those experience and phenomenon we are indifferent of suddenly draws our attention, and become the object framed and reiterated by various art theories, as if there is still certain source of undisclosed meaning in very moment framed by the lens – a viewing experience would urge people to realize their distant separation from the so-called “reality” through the lens. Roland Barthes satirically banter, the image world backfires all people’s everyday experiences, exacerbates people’s sense of distance in treating their daily experiences, so they would sometimes agree that, “Look, how gloomy they are! Nowadays the images are livelier than the people.” [iv]

Images reconstruct the real experiences of our everyday life, especially with the assistance of technology. The liminal image between reality and fiction created through photography can instantly satisfy people’s gratification for creativity. The instant of pressing down on the shutter may generate an artistic lexicon that resonates with profound significance. Indeed, engulfed by modern technology,

the artistic threshold set for photography has hit the rock bottom. Snapshots and Photoshop had been naturally adopted as a necessity in people's daily usage. At the same time, this also obscured the boundary of possibilities in considering photography as a contemporary artistic vernacular. For those artists who chose photography as their creative medium, the ways in which the artistic expression between the image world represented through one's photographs and the realms of experiences would be structured might be a serious issue worthy of exploring. On this issue, whether to focus on the technical aspects of the medium or not would be rather general and superficial classification of the divide. Instead to challenge and inquiry into this artistic language is what distinguishes artists working in the medium of photography.

Paradoxically, we are born into this era of images, and the world is increasingly iconified. The debate on whether photography would become a new art form had always been the romantic nostalgia of the good old times in pre-World Wars era among western intellectual, predating to the popularization of photography at the beginning of the last century. The gushing torrent of contemporary art has swept photography under its umbrella, like video art, installation, performance art are adopted as mediums of contemporary art, whereas painting and sculpture - the more traditional and "outdated" artistic forms seem to demand extra efforts in challenging its own lexicons in order to protect its legitimacy. Being part of this epochal context, upon graduation, Fan Xi did not make use of the basic training she received from her undergraduate studies at the Sculpture Department of the Central Academy of Fine Art, as if she purposefully adapted to her time and dived into to a general trend tailoring to the demand of a rapidly developing art market. Indeed, as a recent graduate, Fan Xi has yet to decide on a language or a direction for her art practice. Having produced a series of realistically rendered sculptures in the studio, Fan Xi began to reflect on the condition of the artistic language she confronted in her practice. She picked up a camera, pressed on the shutter, out of sheer desire to take actions. As Fan Xi mentioned in her "self-statement" , "Since 2011, the medium of my practice

began to shift from sculpture to photography and video art. For me, it's a more straightforward mode of expression. The moment you are pressing on the shutter, what you need and the choices you make filter out the unnecessary preconceptions of an image. To a certain degree, video art and photography share similar ways of looking, the difference lies in their temporalities." [v]

In spite of switching the medium of her practice, it is remarkable that Fan Xi's photographs have shown texture since the very beginning, revealing an unhinged aura, one that does not rely on obsessing with photo techniques, but rather came out of Fan Xi's understanding on the relationship between looking and temporality. For Fan Xi, technicality has never incurred any issue in her practice, at the instant when the shutter is pressed down, those images that once existed, the captured "past", is being stored in her mind. In other words, photography is a way by which Fan Xi's proactively chooses which "that-has-been" she would like to co-exist with. In an interview, she mentions, "A lot of things will become the past, on the surface, photography responds to this past, while it also encapsulates what is relevant to the 'past'. They may seem contradictory, yet they are real, like co-present forms." [vi]

As Roland Barthes has conceived, there is a dual dynamic in the "co-presence" of the image and "that-has-been": when taking the photograph, something "existed" in the pinhole of the lens, and remained there eternally; when we are looking at the photograph, there is an inevitable notion of that moment in "my" gaze. No matter how short that moment was, at that very instant, something real existed in front of my eyes. In other words, in photography, the presence of a thing (at a certain past moment) is never metaphoric; and in the case of animated beings, their life as well.[vii]

Thus, in spite of attributes of likeliness, photography has somewhat diminished its compositional capacity, a table is nevertheless a table, one cannot demand more complex notions from what it actually is, but in Fan Xi's view, photography offers the option to overcome the viewer's fast "image glancing" habit, perhaps opening up an entrance into another wide field once one crosses over

the crevasses of the image, it may be a possibility of objecting the fragmentary form, whereby to go behind the surface. Regardless of the ways one chooses, the “person” or the essence of life, is the object of depiction in Fan Xi’s photography. It is her way of looking at “enlightenment from the complex process of life through one’s own means, and to reach a compromise in reaching for depth” .[viii]

## II

Prior to 2013, Fan Xi’s practice consisted of taking large quantity of photographs and periodically selecting the ones she considered works of art. In other words, taking photographs does not imply art making. It’s out of Fan Xi’s desire to labor over something in which she could continue to verify the uncertainty in her creative method through trial-and-error. The photographs she has taken around this period were neither grounded on any theme, nor adoptive of any carefully planned approach, yet they were images taken with sincerity through the instinct of looking. This means, what’s taken at the moment Fan Xi presses on the shutter is entirely a matter of “luck” . If every photograph would be a testimony of subjects that had existed in the past, then the reality of the image would always depend on a kind of arbitration. In other words, during this period, Fan Xi has sought to replace her lack of accuracy in focusing on a creative approach through the process of eliminating of artistic language by engaging in intensive labor.

Art practices driven by libido of the body may easily reveal the artist’s most hidden psychological impetus, and the most non-deliberate ones are often the most genuine and untainted by craftsmanship. Freed from the methodology of abstraction, Fan Xi’s earlier photographs have set the tone for a sense of indifference and ritual, that are then internalized it into her expressions about time and existence. Within this framework, the series “Nothing” (2011-2015), implicit of Fan Xi’s own annihilation of meaning in her earlier phase of photographs, is driven by the impulse to labor over large quantities of images,

for which the artist adopted a vernacular of “nothingness” to convey an inherent doubt about her own practice.

“Nothing” is the title of a photograph Fan Xi has taken during this period, which she then used as the title for this entire series. Hereby, “nothing” highlights the full extend of the rejected characteristics: in spite of her a laborious workload, Fan Xi was yet uncertain about whether the photographs she had taken may be considered “artworks” ; at the same time, Fan Xi frankly admitted that it was only during the course of editing the images, she felt she was making art. In a way, the series “Nothing” is the alternative example to what the artist imagines her works of art to be, which implies, this massive undertaking of image collection shot over the years was a method of trial and error that helped Fan Xi to discover an approach for her art practice. Every vernacular adjustment and improvement has been propelled by the dissatisfaction in the inaccuracy of the methods and languages she adopted in the past.

However, the “Nothing” series intrigues with Fan Xi inquiry into the complexity of her subject of narration, as if unveiling another layer of the world where the viewer may choose the reality he/she perceives and understands. Fan Xi played with colors, monochrome, male and female models, wigs and etc., among which, the light was the transmitter that guided the viewer towards the essence of things and the expression these subjects embody. As the lens captures the moment of what had once existed, where the light radiates from its surface, from the grass, water surface, wall corner, the model’ s hair, skin, the tangled wires and her gaze.

If the figurative narration of the subjects had been preserved in “Nothing” series, then Fan Xi had intentionally used the flashlight in the making of “Among” (2012) to emphasize the infinite distance between the image and the world of reality. The theatrical effect brought on by the flashlight allows the image to create a strong emotional aura, the flashlight enhances the individual’ s sensation on the represented content: it is a distant reality, while embodying a

personalized and veiled narrative. Because "Nothing" was completed through rounds of filtering and selection, the process of selection was in fact the backbone behind the work's surface, and in other series produced around the same time, Fan Xi was no longer satisfied with building her artistic vernacular through amassing large quantity of images without any themes. "More or Less" (2012) is an attempt to explore the spatial relationship in photography by drawing experiences from her training in sculpture. In a series of photographs capturing consecutive movements of an action as in the frames of images of an anime, Fan Xi chose three photographs from each set to represent the three various relationships of the subject to its environment. From this perspective, whether the model's wig is an extension of the figure, or attached to the wall, or to other people, Fan Xi's presentation of an individual's lonesome circumstance in his environment adopted a most literal language, in spite of its labor-intensive planning process, photographing and post-production processing.

The creative impetus for "More or less" and "The Room" (2012) series is identical. The latter began around the same time, marking Fan Xi's rejection to tamper images with Photoshop. It is also Fan Xi's attempt at completing the making of an artwork in the act of photographing. For this reason, the "More or less" series inevitably brought out certain craftsmanship of "making art for the sake of making art"; In "The Room" series, the model's deadpan expression, rigid pose, color tone and shadows rendered a tension, an effect the artist purposefully instilled into the image. Such personal emotions may be private, but emotions affect one's expression that is then externalized on the image, just as one perceives happiness from sadness through the eyes of a person, whether the artist has noticed the difference or not, the viewer would.

For the same reason, Fan Xi's ongoing photo project "Upfront" (2011-) launched in 2011 would embody the power and dignity of an alternative narrative: in that year, one of her lesbian friend unexpectedly announced to her, "I am getting married." A painful reality check that stirred Fan Xi, inspired her to shoot, "Upfront" that depicts the topless Ts among her lesbian friends. The

issue with shooting and exhibiting such photographs is, in spite of the efforts one puts into a photograph, the work may still be taken down upon the subject's request. It takes courage to be photographed topless and agrees to display them in public. Although this work of art may easily be misled into discussions of popular issues by the viewers and critics, but gender politics and role playing are not the focus of Fan Xi's interests. Rather, she's stated clearly that, "What I would like to emphasize is a kind of dignity, it comes from the dialogue between the viewer and the subjects, standing in front of them, the outcome of their conversation no longer matters, but the power an image conveys, a power of exhibiting dignity. Dignity does not have an opposition, it's independent and proactive, and hopes to dissolve the common way of looking at female bodies. Moreover, it is also a viewing experience that tries to dissolve the consumer experience. In other words, it's not representing a gender phenomenon, but the essential dignity of a human being, or the works of art provides me such experience and understanding." [ix] This experience and understanding invariably reaches for the sentimentality in Fan Xi's mind, those gentle, sharp, rigid, heavy, concerns of an individual's experience.

### III

Roland Barthes mentioned in *Camera Lucida*, the silence of the photographs is a question of music, "Absolute subjectivity is achieved only in a state, an effort of silence (shutting your eyes is not to make the image speak in silence). The photograph touches me if I withdraw it from its usual blah-blah: "Technique" , "Reality" , "Reportage" , "Art" etc.: to say nothing, to shut my eyes, to allow the detail to rise of its own accord into affective consciousness." [x] This suggests the qualities in photography are such that "I had understood that henceforth I must interrogate the evidence of photography, not from the viewpoint of pleasure, but in relation to what we romantically call love and death." [xi] The eternal discussion on love and death traces back to refined cognition and knowledge on the essence of human existence. Photography, through the eyes



of the lens, captures the “genuine” and often unnoticed everyday phenomenon.

Since 2013, Fan Xi’s works gradually became more conceptual. Although the ongoing series “Wall” and “Parallel” from this period may seem to embark on completely different forms of representation, are in fact inferences to the same issues through different angles. “Wall” series exudes a desolate beauty, provoking a reflection on post-industrialization, where the ruined, abandoned and ignored architecture may still house the remains of sentimentality from the past. People did not destroy them, but they are left forgotten. In the course of urbanization, those abandoned and ruined architectures, absent of any human trace, are like the healing wounds of a developing city, they are rapidly repaired, occupied, devoured, or even effaced by urban spaces. Fan Xi nominates the helplessness and sincerity of those people living in such environment with the series “Wall”. It may embody an implicit indifference, one that objects destruction. They stare back at the viewer apathetically, as they wait for the imminent “outcome” or the “end”, as if it has become “Scenery”. To a certain degree, the implicit meaning in Fan Xi’s “Wall” is greater than the straightforward impression of a “post-industrial” imagery. Her lens quietly responded to such dreary outcome: the desolate wall, the wild grass by the road, and the budding flowers, the prosperous streets, or the crushed corpse, chiming in on the same impression.

Here, it’s apparent that Fan Xi began to avoid a narrative based on personal emotions, and shifts toward an expression that’s more abstract. One that extracted the implicit storylines of the images and intense emotions, where the images captured through the lens are calmer and contained. This is a gradual process of “de-iconification”. In fact, the “Parallel” series, began in the same year marked a critical shifting point in Fan Xi’s practice, “Once this work was completed, it seemed to have separated from you and grows on its own. It became independent, and that’s a great feeling. Your making of it reciprocates in its shaping of who you are.” [xii]

The "Parallel" series is Fan Xi's realistic representation of the most "genuine" reality of those living in dire circumstances. Unlike everyday scenarios, the environment under water creates a "genuine state". As what the artist has written in the work statement, "The burdensome reality often shatters its internal setup. For me, photography creates a liaison between the two, visualizing the space between the surface and the internal. The choosing of environment for "Parallel" is to be simple, as it equally demands calmness, the message conveyed by the external body points to an internal reality. All of these concrete connections will configure into the most realistic realm. Being alive is the most cruel reality." [xiii]

The setback of the water eliminates any possible elements of performance and vigilance from the model's body and facial expression, as well as possible impact from the earth's gravitational force. For Fan Xi, the setup of the scenario implies that reality of an existence in its most genuine display. This is true creativity. In an extreme condition, the model's endurance under water to shoot the photograph is usually less than one minute, and during this short period of time, they wouldn't have the time to think about how they would look beautiful – holding one's breath, being there, wait, and staying alive, are the basic experiences of life. At the same time, Fan Xi had intentionally chosen both male and female models to avoid the subject of gender discretion. Under the extreme condition of being under water, gender difference may be overlooked. The way this work is displayed for the exhibition, Fan Xi has placed these works at an angle so the viewer may not perceive the entire image; some were fixed to the ceiling, some on the floor, engulfing the viewer's points of view from top to bottom, asserting a sense of urgency by placing them in the same scenario. Here, Fan Xi has equally eliminated the "scenic" aspect of being under water, and the tension is sensed from the reality beneath the surface of each image – survival in itself, is a cruel, dramatic and extreme experience.

It can be said that "Parallel" series is the only work hitherto has adopted the human figure to "de-iconify". Even though every photograph is a realistic depiction of the extreme condition of being under water, yet the reality of this series does not fully respond to the facial expression or the bodily movement of each subject, but displaying a "genuine state" the work. In her later works, Fan Xi pushed such experiment of "de-iconification" further with "Time Length" (2013). The composition, scenario, mood are gradually replaced by the simple form of the objects – it may even be unrelated to the form of the objects, the high exposure from the blinding flashlight enhances such effect, where the information of the objects are effaced by the blind spots, only leaving its most visible "silhouette". Such exposure prolongs the time of framing the image, at the moment when time cross over the object, the exposure disrupts the specific linear narrative between the order of time and representation. This approach to deduce information allows the image to be simpler, restoring the limitations of the image, while providing other possibilities of entrance and interpretation.

The title "Time Length" literally comments on the linear narrative of photography with satire. On the relationship of photography and time, Fan Xi points out, "Long after the invention of photography, the photographs evolved around the concept of time, and photography is one of the mediums for linear narration of time. Its subjects are actual objects, and no object would escape the fate of disappearance and eventually be possessed by time. In other words, time is a basic quality of photography, or in a certain sense, a readymade of time. In photography, time is not only the most sentimental depiction, but can also be kidnapped by time. Roland Barthes' "that-has-been" is now possible for everyone as photography became widely available today. In this case, how would the embodiment of true meaning in time be represented? If time is the barometer for the existence of life, then how can photography become its most effective evidence? I took out the appearance of time in its linear progression, for example, simple narratives. Instead, I' ve adopted a seemingly crude approach to over expose certain details, and by eliminating the singular

narrative of the time, the destroyed image is precisely the depiction of actual meaning in life under time' s influence." [xiv]

The title of "Time Length" refers to the double entendre of existence and time. If photography is a portrayal of reality, then a representation of reality at present is only timely – whether in particular effects such as the news, or the rendition of a nostalgic past, or pointing to the future. But in the "Time Length" series, Fan Xi' s "length of time" deflected multiple meanings, not only an acknowledgement to the period preceded this series, but also the overdue expectations of the viewer' s response to the work. Nevertheless, the implicit desire of this work has transcended the limitation of time, by focusing on the pure exploration of the state of existence, as well as the infinite distance between the work of art and its viewers. In Fan Xi' s photographs, attributes of humanist elements are instilled into the relationship between light and shadow, color and shape, subject and setting, the viewer' s psychology and the work itself in "Time Length" , rather than aiming at fulfilling technical standard. For example, the depiction of violence, people' s response in certain situations, or the environment' s affect on people and etc., have all revealed the conditions of existence. By eliminating the adjective and rhetoric of iconification, Fan Xi has laid out the fragile and naked truth of existence before the viewer, the unbearable weight of existence "should not disappear because its weakness and insignificance, in the contrary, it should become stronger as its superficial impression has been stripped away to live up to the dignity of independence."

[xv]

The issue then becomes, to what extent is photography the appropriate medium on the discussion of survival? Here, to simply restore the figures, or deduce form by over exposing the object are obviously inefficient in supporting Fan Xi' s vernacular of expression. Moreover, can "image" be restored, or is there a so-called pure and original state? In the course of learning traditional techniques of photo processing, Fan Xi unexpectedly discovered a new way of developing the photographs: one in which, the chemical agents disfigures the original image,

and its fragments float continuously as time progresses and the image further disintegrates. Fan Xi calls such works, derived from the destroyed developing process, the "Reduction of Image" (began in 2012, and is still in progress). The most conceptual endeavor of "Reduction of Image" is its extension of the discussion on time and survival from the "Time Length" series, at the same time, exploring other possibilities in the vernacular of photography.

In the "Reduction of Image" series, the works of art visualized with the effect of time undergo the dual processes of destruction and generation: the addition of chemicals to a framed image reassembles the information originally conveyed by this image, this definite image continues to transform and grows into the unknown. According to phenomenology, the only constant in this process of transformation is having had the experiences of reducing the destruction, the fixed image faded and nearly wiped out of the original, what is then reduced may precisely be the form of the object. Thus, as the "form of the object" is reduced, the eyes would be unable to piece together the form when it was captured. It becomes an experience in opposition to experience.

V

If the image is considered as a point of departure on the idea plain, then photography still cannot break free from its reliance on the frameworks of spatial relationships and form within the two-dimensional medium. In the "Time Length" series, through reducing information on the photograph, Fan Xi found the infinitely penetrating meaning towards the "core" underneath the surface of the image, where "Reduction of Image" appropriates an outwardly expanding process of destruction to allow the image to be reduced with possibilities beyond sensible experiences. At the instant of pressing on the shutter, the unexpected, the blind fate, the beauty and vulnerability in the process of destruction that infinitely approaches extinction constitutes the source of inspiration for Fan Xi's "Reduction of Image". Here, the creative destruction inevitably reveals Fan Xi's deconstructive parameter of rebirth after death, meanwhile following a constructive impulse in the sane vein.

If “Reduction of Image” explores the medium and subject of photography through traditional methodology, then “The Tree” series, began in 2014, has adopted the technology of Photoshop: where the branches of each “tree” had been collaged from different trees by the artist. In other words, every seemingly real “tree” is the outcome of Fan Xi’s bona fide image editing. The exploration of structure in this series inevitably benefits from Fan Xi’s training in sculpture from the earlier years. The reason each tree seems so real is precisely because the branches are put together without giving the impression of violation. If Fan Xi’s aim is to reveal the infinite distance between the object and its reality on the surface, then we should continue to question which one is more real, the collaged “tree” or the actual one? The image of the reconstructed “tree” challenges people’s knowledge and experience of looking at a tree – and because they are assemblage of a different trees, then how can the tree be identify upon the first glance?

Since the “de-iconification” initiated with the “Time Length” series, the series “Reduction of Image” and “The Tree” are simultaneous undergoing the processes of destruction and regeneration: the former destroys people’s preconceived notions of the objects from their everyday experience, and the latter tries to re-establish a viewing point of experiencing the world. Whether in her attempt to restore this experience, or to reconstruct it, what Fan Xi’s works is interested in exploring is nevertheless the experience related to existence. In “The Second Meditation” , Descartes asked a classic question on cognitive theory: When we see something wears a hat and a coat, we would think that’s a person. However the question is, why are we certain that’s a person rather than the obvious hat and coat? Our everyday experiences shape our cognition. By the same token, it also hinders our judgment. Fan Xi’s tree challenges such cognitive inclination derived from experiences – when we see the “tree” in her work, how would we know the “tree” put together with Photoshop is one that exists, and is the same tree?

"The Tree" series consciously reconstructs a way of looking. This is a highly rational process, and the position of every branch requires sufficient reason. It is constituted by a large amount of sensible material (branches from different trees), while not limited by them.

In 2016, Fan Xi started a new series, "All Beings". If Fan Xi has not clearly identified the sufficient reasons between the work of art and its implied meanings with the "Nothing" series, then starting with "All Beings", the artist began to clearly grasp the inner logic in her art practice. The ability to convey one's own artworks is a process of legitimization, just as art practice cannot be sustained with whimsical idea. The artist's discussion of her own work should first of all follow a continuous reflection and progression of thought process. All photographs in "All Beings" are shot at night, like being dressed up at night, it's an impulse to document the madness in growth, its unnoticeable details, and thriving lives hidden in the night.

This series has been given a rather serious title, "I've never trusted reality: I have too much respect for it, so I wouldn't trust it", from which Fan Xi thought about the ensuing work in the same vein, "I've never imagined about death: It should still be a surprise". "All Beings" eventually adopted the meaning of these two long titles, perhaps already encompassed everything Fan Xi wishes to express. Every image in "All Beings" is taken with long exposure and multiple flashlights. Here, Fan Xi reduction of the image to its "genuine status" no longer relies on the physical deconstruction of the image as in the "Reduction of Image" series, but allows the object to be revealed through its own desire to be "alive". This is the most appealing aspect of "All Beings". Whether in the growth of life, or the disappearance and extinction (what Fan Xi wishes to continue with), the desire to "grow and live" is the essence of existence for all beings, presented without any constraints. In other words, the desire "to live" engenders the restoration of all things' essence. In this sense, Fan Xi shares Spinoza's point of view that, all beings make its own effort to preserve its survival.

The splendor of "living beings" exhibits the speed at which the myriad of things exists in "All Beings". Those sprawling vegetation, audacious and towering architecture, the formless objects under high exposure, and the dancing branches... existence has its own speed of growth and decay, however, through Fan Xi's lens, the images emit splendid radiance, gathering all the objects' speed of existence into the image.

## VI

The debate on photography and painting waned at the beginning of the last century, people no longer doubt whether photography and film with the advance of modern technology would be considered an artistic medium, or to formulate into a new artistic language. The mediums were considered modern, constitutes as part of our modernity. If Shakespeare and Jane Austin live in the contemporary, perhaps they'd also pick up a camera or become playwrights. However, Walter Benjamin has incisively observed the essence of photograph as a kind of image, which means photography would have to rely on the mechanical reproduction for a work of art. With this mechanical reproduction, the so-called aura in the "work of art" is disappearing[xvi]: Semantically, mechanic suggests, photography is a type of technique; and reproduction suggests, photographs are products can be quickly consumed. In the developed capitalist era, the poet expressing emotions, the aura and all the sources that provide energy to the work of art have disappeared. We live and survive in the present, in this superficial and rapidly consumed world of images, everything in this world has become a subject of desire, superficial, and the body is immersed in the bombardment of sensible desires inflated and consumed rapidly, then relentlessly abandoned. The works of art in a time of images production became consumer items, a product with a price tag, edging for new heights with a voyeuristic gaze, renewing auction records. As revealed in Jean Baudrillard's *The Consumer Society* (1976), parties in the position of distribution appeal to and incite uncontained desires to consume through various technological means to people of all social strata, with which to re-organize social status.



This is not a theoretical hypothesis. The past has already disclosed the “world of image” of our time. According to Jean Baudrillard’s theory, photography, or images, is a new witchcraft invented by modern society. We think we can control the world as we wish, we think “we” photographed certain landscape based on our interests, rather it’s the world emphasizing its own existence in these images with the assistance of technology. Here, the subjective and objective accomplishes a chilling inversion – the landscape is performing itself, and we are only playing the supporting roles of in relation to this image. However, anywhere we look, image technology inadvertently suggests, “We” are the subject, the essence of existence who are in the administrative role. Paradoxically, photography as an expression subservient to the subject’s will, enwraps contemporary art in various ways as a new technological mean, coercing for its confirmation on being a respectable art.[xvii]

Borrowing one of Heidegger’s popular saying, the present time is a stiff undying “Weltbild” . If the essence of the image is representation, representing the representation, and imitating the imitation, where an infinite gap exists in the “concept” of existence.[xviii] Then, the representation of image hinders the thriving physis of existence. Unfortunately, the conclusion on the crisis of modernity does not offer any salvation, Heidegger simply stated, the crisis of modernity is comparable to the “abyss”, where redemption can’t be found. The courageous ones jump into it, or the existentially enlightened guards it silently. This is also the reason Susan Sontag firmly believes photography should not be an artistic category expressed in *On Photography*, based on the classical Platonic principle, the imitation of imitating the object itself, is placed at the lowest level of conceptual order.[xix]

Even in the present, as much as photography has stepped up to being works of art, widely collected by art museums and sold in auction houses, and owned by art collectors, yet the daunting prospect for an impoverished time of images is not only the disappearance of the “aura” - a critical component of the works of art, but also the people who carry, sense and represents such aura, in other

words, the artist. Walter Benjamin has projected that behind the strong impact of images in the time of mechanical reproduction for photography and film over traditional techniques is the implicit social, cultural, psychological and intellectual disconnect between the present and the past. The way in which one accepts this kind of change suggests the kind of "modern" person one chooses to become. In Benjamin's view, this is the so-called modernity. It's not love at first sight, but the sentimentality of the last glance. Confronted by modernity, everything is passing by rapidly, and becoming inconsistent with time. Thereby, it renews, renovates, disappears, or becomes a classic reminiscent of modern life. In a world where everything becomes old quickly, one has to put a lot of effort to strive for eternity, to leave a mark on these short-lived objects, or destroy them completely. The Arcade Project (1926-1940) was a theoretical framework that tried to encompass everything, Benjamin tried to "study the overall through fragments" [xx], discovering the existential essence of the overall from the basic individual component. In this project, the most difficult aspect for researchers is to understand the absence of Benjamin's own writing. Instead, he's only copied and edited secondary materials.

Photography's own controversy is perhaps similar to the psychological fear behind Fan Xi's early transition from sculpture to this medium: how can photography be an accurate artistic language, as the vehicle and an expression of the artistic aura? At the beginning, Fan Xi had obviously rejected it. As early as "Nothing" to today's "All Beings", Fan Xi's works completed the transition in the liminal space, from "nothing" to "everything", a transition not only conveyed through the ambition seen in the titles of her artworks: if "Nothing" captures the weakness and ephemerality of one's existence, from Fan Xi's eyes to the lens of the camera, she consciously tries to build an existence with "All Beings", framed in those full and rich physics in spite of its vicissitude. This liminal transition is Fan Xi's attempt to transcend photography as a technique, a way of representation and its possibility as an artistic language. To which, "All Beings" tries to structure a framework of meaning as in Benjamin's Arcade Project, by

encompassing all sentient beings passing through life – even the most insignificant wild grass, should live up to its dignity and solemnity of being. This is even more so in “The Tree” series, where Fan Xi tries to protect the effusive meaning of existence, allowing it to grow into a silent “tree” . The notion of existence is the essential core in Fan Xi’ s art practice, as well as the infinite distance between her art photography and all frivolous ways of looking.

[i] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), p107-119.

[ii] *Ibid*, p. 49.

[iv]*Ibid*, p. 118.

[vi] *Ibid*.

[vii] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), p78.

[ix] *Ibid*.

[x] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), p55.

[xi] *Ibid*, p. 73.

[xiii] *Ibid*.

[xv] *Ibid*.

[xvi] Walter Benjamin, trans. Xu Qiling, Lin Zhiming, *Towards the Years of Disappearing Aura – Walter Benjamin on art*, (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2004) p. 60-61.

[xvii] Jean Baudrillard, “The Disappearing Technique” , in Gu Zheng, *Selected Papers in Western Photography* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Photography Publication, 2007), p.122.

[xviii] Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege*, trans. Sun Zhouxing, (Shanghai: Shanghai Yiwu Publication, 2008) p.86.

[xix] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Shanghai: Shanghai Yiwu Publication, 2008), p.145.

[xx] Walter Benjamin, "The Arcade Project" , David Frisby, trans. Lu Huilin et al.,  
The Fragments of Modernity, (Beijing, Shangwu Yinshu Guan, 2003) p.255.