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Image at Surface

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
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by

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Introduction

When we see an image, by here I mean a visual image such as a photograph, film or video, we perceive it at its surface, just like when we approach a physical object, we experience the physical surface of it. My project and research focus on digital image, which manifests the virtual materiality at the image surface. When we describe materiality at the physical surface, we usually describe a sensory experience of looking, touching, tasting, etc. Similarly, the materiality of an image is associated with bodily experiences—while our minds comprehend and dissect the image, our body are simultaneously sensing its surface. The image’s materiality, influenced by the recorded material, space, time, rhythm, motion, and story, corresponds to the physical space, real time, physical motion, as well as our body. Eventually the recorded materials in the filmic scenes appear as the imagery materiality at the image surface. Our experience of the image surface is then connected with our perception of the physical surface, and our attachment to the physical material shifts to an attachment to the virtual body.
Image Surface and Its Materiality

When we see a physical material, the visual information triggers our tactile cognition and a sense of materiality so that we recognize how this material will feel if we touch it. This phenomenon happens with digital images as well. Juhani Pallasma in his book *The Embodied Image* argues that we embrace an image not only visually but through an “integrated experience” with our body as a whole being.¹ Upon perceiving an image, we develop mental images, which he describes as an embodied, multi-sensory, spatialized, materialized and emotion-driven experience (Pallasma, *The Embodied Image*, 41). We reach the image’s surface before we try to pry its underneath to intellectually understand it. Even though we are mostly conscious of our frontal, focused vision, Pallasma points out that a clear vision actually requires unconscious eye movement and blurred, peripheral vision, as he further writes that “Static vision does not exist; there is no seeing without exploring” (Arthur Koestler, cited in Pallasma, *The Embodied Image*, 51). Our focused seeing and cerebral understanding of an image is significantly affected by our body sensing the image surface. Seeing an image is also experiencing the mental image triggered by it.

An image’s surface reveals the image’s materiality. The materiality of an image is not what materials/objects are included in its content; it is rather the mental image constructed from the filmic/photographic image. In *Surface: Matter of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* Giuliana Bruno connects fashion with the

image surface of films directed by Wong Kar-Wai.² In the film *In the Mood for Love*,³ the cheongsam fabric extends out to the filmed space; the floral pattern on the cheongsam matches the floral pattern on the wallpaper, the red coat continues to the red curtains, the tone of the clothes blends with the tone of an alley or a room (see figure 1). The pattern of cheongsams shifts as the mood of the wearer shifts, and is present in the atmosphere of the filmed space as well. As Bruno points out the space in the film is no longer architectonic but rather sartorial (Bruno, *Surface*, 48-9), as if it is another “enveloping dressing (Bruno, *Surface*, 38)”.

![Figure 1](image)

As the filmic space becomes a piece of clothing, this layer of clothing constructs not only the tenor of the film story but also the materiality of the filmic

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³ *In the Mood for Love*, Directed by Kar-Wai Wong, (Hongkong, 2000), Film.
image. In the video installation, *Majiang Project*, which my brother, Zhengzhou Huang, and I collaborated on, we made the videos so that the filmic spaces become a continuous piece of material. The videos are based on a Chinese board game Mahjong. This game, Mahjong, intrinsically deals with materials; the mixing, piling, drawing and throwing conducted on the Mahjong tiles, the touching on the green tablecloth, and the formed Mahjong patterns become the tension and coordination of the four players on the four sides of the table. For this project, we made four videos representing four sides of the game. Each video constantly switches between the green and the red: the green tabletop on which the hands play with the Mahjong tiles, and the red, veiled space where the Mahjong players move through in the video.

![Figure 2](image)

The green in the video is the green, matted table surface; the Mahjong tiles thrown on the table make dull sounds and the players’ hands touching and tapping
on it, making the green a hard surface. The red, on the other hand, is the red veils covering the kitchen and walls; the players come in, eat, drink, move through and leave the red space, where the red becomes rather a soft, absorbing surface. The floral patterns and saturated red and green colors in the video settings make the video’s image bright (see figure 2 and 3). The green scene transitions into the red scene smoothly as the player’s hand gestures continue from one sequence to the other. The red and the green seamlessly switch as if two pieces of fabric were stitched together. The whole video becomes a continuum of surfaces.

Besides filmic settings, in time-based images like films and videos, the way we move through an image’s time also affects the materiality of the image. Bruno recognizes filmmaking as a matter of tailoring. (Bruno, Surface, 36-40). The tailoring in Wong’s film fashions not only the layered structures of space but
also the time as changing materials. In *Chungking Express*, another film directed by Wong,\(^4\) the city of Hong Kong becomes a series of layered enclosures, where we are always seeing through something—from inside to outside, from outside to inside, through the movement of running, dancing, etc. (see figure 4). We experience time simultaneously through materials. Food spoils as a relationship ends, or the décor of the bedroom changes as the mood of its resident changes over time.

Time affects our mental image, as Andrei Tarkovsky writes in *Sculpting in Time*, “(cinema) is able to record time in outward and visible signs, recognizable

to the feelings”.\(^5\) Time is an intrinsic visible, real form in cinematic images; the distinctive course of time recorded in sequence of film engenders rhythm, named by Tarkovsky as “time pressure” (Tarkovsky, 116-9). He further connected the rhythm in cinema with the material recorded, as he writes:

Rhythm in cinema is conveyed by the life of the object visibly recorded in the frame. Just as from a quivering reed you can tell what sort of current, what pressure there is in a river, in the same way we know the movement of time from the flow of the life-process reproduced in the shot (Tarkovsky, 120).

For Tarkovsky, filmmaking is sculpting in time, where the editing of time pressure corresponds to the “organic process going on in the material as a whole” (Tarkovsky, 121).

In another aspect, Yasunari Kawabata’s novel *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa* proposes time not so much as a moving entity that pushes the story forward but rather as entrance points to the image his book created.\(^6\) *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa* seems to have no start or end; each chapter and story do not follow the time of the storyline so the reader can enter at any chapter of the book, as if the book itself becomes the Asakusa district where we run into the middle of events.


In the videos of Majiang Project, the movement of the players’ hands on the green table produces a slow, steady rhythm over a rather prolonged course of time. On the other hand, the players’ moving, eating, and drinking in the red, veiled space generate a faster pace and a more buoyant rhythm. The switching between the green scene and the red scene becomes also the switching between these two rhythms. The shifting between rhythms is presented repeatedly in a cycle, in which entrance points are created for the video. For the four videos in the installation, the Mahjong game is made into a cycle of events where the leaving of one player is ensued by the entering of another and the end of the game is the start of the next. One walks into the video as if walking to watch a friend playing in the middle of a game.

The many entrance points into stories in The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa construct a whimsical journal into the virtual city’s events, while this journey is achieved by flipping through paper—by physical touching of materials. The four videos in Majiang Project, installed in four different rooms, cannot be seen all at once, extending the video’s image surface to another space as one physically walks to each room to see each set of the installation.
Double Surfaces

We never experience an image solely in its virtual state. We see a photograph printed on a piece of paper, or a video playing on a monitor screen, or a film projected on to a large white projection screen; we always experience the virtual image surface and the physical surface together. Sometimes this physical layer is so invisible, such as a monitor screen or white projection screen, that we forget its presence. Other times, this physical layer is active. In an earlier work titled *Cat Eye*, I projected a video onto a sink full of black dyed water. While the video becomes the virtual reflection of a person’s face on the water, the images’ surface and the water surface connect as they share one surface (see figure 5).

Krzysztof Wodiczko further influenced my idea with his monumental video projections onto buildings, where the buildings’ surface reshapes and continues the image surface. In his work *If You See Something*..., which was
shown at New York City’s Galerie Lelong in 2005, four virtual windows were projected onto the wall in a dark gallery space (see figure 6). His work shows immigrants as the invisible citizens of the United States; the immigrants appearing behind fogged windows in the video. The virtual windows act not like windows but as a thick, blurred, textural layer through which the immigrants are never clear. This virtual layer morphs the physical wall so that the wall no longer acts like an architectural wall but, as Bruno recognizes, like a screen. She suggests that this screen—the transformed wall—further becomes an imagery border on which the immigrants stand and through which the viewers see (Bruno, *Surface*, 75-9).

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This idea of the physical connecting with and extending the virtual is evident in *Majiang Project*. In the installation, the four videos are set up in four domestic rooms. In each room, a set of wooden stools, stands and fabric screens are placed to form a furniture-like object. In each furniture set, a wooden stool’s seat is lifted up like a lid and under this “lid” is a white screen onto which the video is projected (see figure 7 and 8). The materiality of the video creates a virtual iteration of the physical material, as if the video is another piece of material layered on the orange-stained wood and in front of the fabric screens. Furthermore, by projecting the videos in which the Mahjong players’ hands touch, their feet move and their bodies act, the furniture sets are occupied by the virtual players in the video.
Like physical materials, physical space also interplays with the virtual images. As we move across a physical space, we are also moving through a mental space. The virtual space in an image could extend to the physical space, or vice versa. The four videos in *Majiang Project* sync up across four rooms. As one walks from one room to the next room, the memory of one video is carried to the next. The game is completed with the four videos extending across space; as we walk through different rooms, we also experience the game cycle.

The video walks series made by the artists Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller present a tour of both the physical space and the filmic space at the same time. In their video walk at Alter Bahnhof station, the video, played on a small phone that can be held by one hand, is a virtual tour of the Alter Bahnhof led by Cardiff’s voice (see figure 9). The viewer, holding the phone and directed by the

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video’s image, physically tours Alter Bahnhof. The tour starts in the video’s filmic space and ends with the viewer walking in the physical space. One encounters the street musicians, the ballet dancer, the barking dog, etc. on the phone, while also seeing the passers-by, the moving train, the pigeons, etc. in the actual Alter Bahnhof they visit. The physical space and the image surface overlie with one another.

Movement itself can construct a materiality on the image surface. The moving blur in *Chungking Express* (Wong, 1994) created by the camera’s slow shutter speed forms a textural layer through which we see the city of Hong Kong (see figure 10). In my work *Lotus Project*, I also try to include the filmic movement as a moving material. The video is shot inside a driving car with a blue, paper-folded lotus flower in the middle of the image. The blue lotus floats in front of the windshield (see figure 11). As the car moves forward in the video, the
floating lotus implies a surface as it bobs and glides in front of the moving roads. This surface removes the depth of the space through the windshield and makes it rather flat. The moving scene seen through the driving car acts like a flat, flowing surface on top of which the lotus flower floats.

The flowing surface constructed by virtual movement in the video can be further activated with physical movement. The virtual tour in the video walk by Cardiff and Miller must be activated and completed by the physical tour; without physically moving through the space, the virtual walking in the video makes a much weaker mental space. While Cardiff’s voice, recorded using binaural microphones, creates an immersive world and attracts one to follow her in the video, one constantly returns to the physical space through which one consciously walks. The tourist cannot visit the virtual without the physical. The activation and transition from physical movement to virtual movement is intended in my work *Lotus Project* as well.
The video, as described above, is playing on a screen and is installed on top of a blue cart. The cart is padded with thick, protective cushions and the viewers are invited to kick it. The cart moves in the room as the lotus flower flows in the video (see figure 12). The direction of the physical movement and that of the virtual movement are similar; the physical movement of the cart is horizontal across the room, while the lotus in the video bobs and glides on a horizontal surface as well. The virtual movement of the lotus in the video is slow. The physical movement caused by the kick starts rather quick and abrupt, but the cart slows down as it moves. The abrupt yet slowing-down movement of the cart transitions to the slow virtual movement of the lotus. At the same time, the bobbing and gliding movement of the lotus interplays with the cart physically gliding on the floor or bumping into a wall. By moving the cart, the virtual movement is activated by the physical movement as well as the virtual image being affected by our bodies’ action.
Attaching to the Virtual Body

While talking about materiality inside and outside an image surface, there is a mental and physical attachment to the material(s). In Wong Kar-Wai’s *Chungking Express*, the room becomes a second life of its resident, where another person secretly enters. In Andrei Tarkovsky’s 1979 film *Stalker*, the “Zone” is the constantly changing organism of a life form in which the stalkers carefully walk.\(^9\) The curiosity and affection toward a person in *Chungking Express* becomes the changing and renewing of the objects in that person’s room. The expectation and wishes of oneself in *Stalker* become a physical journey on land. The room and the “Zone” in a sense turn out to be a virtual body that transforms the emotional attachment to a sensory action. Not only does this happen in film stories; in Krzysztof Wodiczko’s large projection projects, the emotion of a group of people associated with a social issue is expressed with an architecture as the building becomes a performing body.

A virtual body can also be a stuffed toy in our rooms or an empty chair we sit opposite to everyday during meals. In *Weather Chair*, I created a virtual character, an interactive video featuring a stuffed piglet toy, for an empty chair. The video, playing on a monitor, is installed on the back of the chair and a speaker is placed on the seat. The video features a piglet performing in front of weather maps, mimicking a weather report (see figure 13). Stools/bench for the viewers are placed in proximity facing the chair. While seated, the viewer’s face

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\(^9\) *Stalker*, directed by Andrey Tarkovsky, (Dom Kino, Moscow, 1979), Film.
and the screen are at the same level, where looking at a chair becomes facing a body. Sitting opposite to the chair, the viewer can move closer to the two sides of
the chair and blow air closely at the two “ears”, which are actually two small, round sensors. The action of blowing air into the tiny sensor requires one’s mouth to be really close to the sensor, making this gesture an intimate act with the chair. Then the air from one’s mouth becomes weather—the rain that the piglet starts to produce or the wind that blows it away. This rather human-to-human interaction is carried over to the interaction between human and material, and further to the interaction between a body and a virtual body. If two people blow at the two sensors on either side of the chair, the piglet will hide itself, making the interactive system pause for five minutes. By doing this, the intimate interaction from a person to the virtual body—the coexistence of the chair and the pig—shifts to the action between two people.

Our mental attachment and physical action toward a virtual body can also influence the real body. Weather Chair presents a shift, or to say switching, between the real-body-to-virtual-body interaction and the real-body-to-real-body interaction. In another sense, the virtual body could cast a greater shadow over its real counterpart. The art historian Wu Hung writes about Chinese paintings on screens and scrolls in his book The Double Screen,10 in which he addresses the various and constantly changing relationship between the figures’ images on the screens and the people owning the screens. He points out that the women figures, like those on The Biographies of Exemplary Women compiled by an Imperial Librarian Liu Xiang, act as women paragons and function to teach emperors morals (Wu, 85-9). This teaching position of the screen disappears in post-Han

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China and the women’s image eventually become “the subject of visual appreciation” (Wu, 90). Wu recognizes the stereotype and oppression of women is constructed with the gaze of male owners of the screens, on which the women are quiet and their bodies are contained (Wu, 91-8). But there is more than that. While the owner’s gaze controls the body on the screen, the screen also has an illusionistic power over the owner. In the anecdotes and tales Wu tells in his book, the life-like women on the screen escapes from the daytime gaze and comes to life in the owner’s dream at night. The once illusionistic but now “real” figures presage the dynastic decline (Wu, 121-2). Or the life-like female comes to life because a devoted lover appears, yet she was suspected to be a demon and goes back to being an image on the screen (Wu, 104-22). The tales, as Wu writes, “reflect the paradox of a screen with women’s images and the dilemma faced by its owner” (Wu, 122), where the admiration of a beauty on the screen shifts to terror and suspicion of danger toward a virtual figure coming to life. The bewildering power of the virtual female body represents the “underlying male anxiety (Wu, 123)” and the reversal of the relationship between a virtual body and its spectator (Wu, 122), as the power shifts from an owner’s real power to a virtual figure’s illusionistic power.

The power of virtual bodies, suggested by Wu Hung, that exists on the screens also exists in digital images, such as websites, selfies, profile pictures, avatars, etc. The piglet toy in Weather Chair in a sense turns out to be an avatar, even though I did not expect to address the various issues associated with avatars in this work. While the pig avatar is manipulated with blowing of air on the
sensors, a certain amount of power is assigned to it during the five-minute-pause
time when it disappears. Invented and dependent on the users, at the same time
the virtual characters could unexpectedly affect the users in digital media. Kon
Satoshi’s film *Perfect Blue*\(^{11}\) presents a website, with ongoing photos and
personal diaries of the protagonist, as another fantasized person acting freely and
independently. In a recent project that deals with the idea of avatars, Qiuyang
Shen and I collaborated on a mask made with lenticular photos of a mannequin’s
face. A lenticular photo is an image which changes when one looks at it at
different angles. The front of the mask is to be the front of the mannequin’s face
quickly turning from the front to the sides. The sides are the profile of the
mannequin’s face in the process of turning to face the viewer or turning back to
the profile angle. The back is the back of the mannequin’s head turning from side
to side (see figure 14 and 15). The lenticular image makes a variation of what
could be seen, as a person standing still sees a different face from a person who
walks around the mask. The mannequin’s face turns as the viewer walks around
the mask, while its eyes respond to or turn away from the viewer’s gaze. In this
process, the walking around the wearer of the mask becomes the looking and
looking back between the image of the mannequin’s face and the viewer’ face,
where the wearer’s presence is replaced.

The lenticular image on the mask provides serial images of faces. Walking
around the mask one can see a quick blur of faces; it is the serial images of the
front, sides and back of the mannequin’s head that constructs this virtual face. Jill

\(^{11}\) *Perfect Blue*, directed by Satoshi Kon, (Japan, 1998). Film.
Walker Rettberg writes in her book Seeing Ourselves Through Technology about serial selfies that “digital self-presentation and self-reflection is cumulative rather than presented as a definitive whole”. She suggests that people feel the need to change profile pictures or take another selfie because there is no photo that can “fully correspond to what you want to see in yourself” (Rettberg, 43). The cumulative face also offers choices of what the avatar can look like. Our freedom in picking facial features, expression, body type and clothes for an avatar (usually in a game) is always limited according to how many haircuts, clothes, facial types, etc. are designed for selection. Simultaneously, the characteristics of a virtual body/face also depends on who sees or expects it. As for the mask, the specific angle of the face becomes the viewer’s decision, instead of the wearer’s. What’s being looked at is different according to the viewers’ position and is separate from the wearer’s intent.

Collaboration

Since collaboration has figured prominently in my work, I am going to talk a bit more about the collaborations for my thesis project. In the *Majiang Project*, my brother, Zhengzhou Huang, and I closely collaborated throughout the process of developing ideas, video and audio production, object making, and in the installation of the piece. As for the mask collaboration with Qiuyang Shen, we discussed and developed our approach to making the mask together. She shot the photos while I did the mask-making part. I value collaboration for the discussion of the work with another person before, during and after the making process to have a clearer idea of what the work is about. It also comes across for me that art-making is usually not an individual’s intellectual act but is rather collaborative in many aspects.
Conclusion

From the virtual materiality on the image surface to the double layering of the physical surface and the image surface, and further to the virtual body created by our attachment to materials and images, an image, rather than being truly virtual, is interwoven with material(ity). Not only are we sensing the image, but also a tension—immersion, activation, even suppression and coercion—between the image and us is generated as we spectate, act on or interact with it.
Bibliography


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List of Figures

(if not otherwise noted, the image is by Zhengyang Huang)


   [https://mealenscene.wordpress.com/2015/02/19/chungking-express-1994-pineapples-relationships/](https://mealenscene.wordpress.com/2015/02/19/chungking-express-1994-pineapples-relationships/).


