

I Poked the Smoothness

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Introduction



Photo of my round face, 2019

My face is round, really round. My old nickname is Circle Jung. My mom would often say that my face looks like a circle drawn with a compass, ever since I was young. I see a small circle in a square mirror every day. Then, I grew attached to a circle. A circle is the most similar form to me, giving me a sense of stability and comfort. A sphere, a 3-Dimensional version of a circle, is the same at any point. There is no beginning and end, there is no front, back, side, top or bottom. There's no edge, no border. When you choose one point and keep moving your eyes to the side, it doesn't end. You return to the spot without knowing where you started: your gaze repeats. This equivalence, this tension-free smooth repetition makes me relax. The thing which is round and soft doesn't hurt or harm me. It gently enfolds me. No matter what my body looks like, it doesn't hit or break when it's against my skin. It



adapts to me by flexibly transforming. My affection for a circle gradually grew and I even came to love the surface properties of a circle: *smoothness*. I suddenly wondered what exists deep in my affection and obsession with roundness and smoothness, other than the resemblance to me. This essay was born to trace this curiosity and I cautiously poked the surface of *smoothness*.

Have I come to like the round and smooth with my own will? Or do I perceive it as a good thing because it has a positive meaning in this society? Whichever is true, roundness and smoothness are the characteristics of certain values that we tend to view as positive. In *Saving Beauty* (2017), a book of contemplation on beauty by Korean-born German philosopher Byung-chul Han, he says that smoothness is a symbolic attribute representing the positivity of present society.

“The smooth is the signature of the present time. It connects the sculptures of Jeff Koons, iPhones and Brazilian waxing. Why do we today find what is smooth beautiful? Beyond its aesthetic effect, it reflects a general social imperative. It embodies today's *society of positivity*. What is smooth does not *injure*. Nor does it offer any resistance. It is looking for *Like*. The

smooth object deletes its *Against*. Any form of negativity is removed.”<sup>1</sup>

Here he asked why we associate beauty to smoothness and then answered himself that it is because it's accepted as positive. Then is positivity synonymous with beauty? It's always hard for me to say exactly the difference between good and beautiful, and the two have always seemed to be interconnected. In asking some people around me about the things they think are *not* beautiful, the answers varied. Though one of the most frequent replies were, which I found interesting, related to moral feelings. They mostly spoke of the things that they shouldn't feel are beautiful. For example, weapons used to kill people, Nazi uniforms, or violent scenes in a movie of someone being stabbed and blood being splattered. They explained they can be visually beautiful, but they can't be truly beautiful because of their unethical meanings. From this point of view, it seems that we take the formula *good (positive) = beautiful* surprisingly natural in our perception.

To tell a little side story, this seems true not only in Western society but also in the East. In *The History and Spirit of Chinese Art* (2015), aesthetics

1 Han, Byung-Chul, *Saving Beauty*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017, EPUB e-book, chap. 1.



expert Fa Zhang deciphers the etymology of [美], the Chinese Character which means beautiful, as follows.

Beautiful [美] = Sheep [羊] + Big [大]

The word *beautiful* is a combination of *big* and *sheep* in Chinese. Beauty originated from the meaning of a big sheep. There was a custom of offering sheep as a sacrifice at ancient rituals, and if a big sheep was sacrificed, it would have made the people of the tribe who participated in the ritual, as well as God's mood, pleasant.<sup>2</sup> According to this explanation, beauty, not only for the ancient Greeks but also for the ancient Chinese, already contained a meaning of good. Back to the main point, that we naturally take the good as the beauty which means we take the smoothness that represents the positivity of this society as beauty. On the other hand, characteristics opposite to smoothness are received as nonbeauty, and as negativity.

But I also began to think about the dangers of smoothness. It has the risk of exclusion. To be smoothly trimmed and polished, something must be removed. Sandpaper, a tool for grinding,

2 Kim, Dong-hun, Facebook post, 15 August 2016. My own translation from Korean. <https://www.facebook.com/ggcfaca/posts/527171197472729>

consists of fine flexures formed on the surface by gluing sand or abrasives to thick paper or cloth. It is a form of very fine saw blades planted on a two-dimensional surface. These fine saw blades eat at the surface of an object little by little. A smooth surface is obtained by being eaten and removed. The act of eating is almost violent, in a way. The things that are being eaten and removed are dirty, rough, and protruded that obstruct the smooth flow. Useless things that hinder the smooth functioning of society. The society we belong to is one big machine that should function smoothly. For the operation of the system, all elements shall be as smooth as well-lubricated parts and be *manageable*. Today is a manageable society in which all situations are controlled and regulated. Things that we cannot manage, such as disease and death, cause malfunction. Even in the recent global pandemic situation of COVID-19, the virus must be eliminated because it is an *unmanageable* thing that interferes with the smooth functioning of the system. Various measures are taken by each country to drive the virus out of society. Those exposed to the virus cannot avoid icy, stinging stares from others and are completely isolated. The fear of viruses leads to distrust and hatred toward others, and more and more people are experiencing depression due to isolation. The body may be quaran-



ted from germs, but the mind is not quarantined from mental infections possibly occurring due to the process of smoothening out the society.

This essay will serve as an attempt for me to investigate further into the notion of smoothness. What other meanings does it have other than to describe the surface of objects? Does the meaning of smoothness, which symbolizes the positivity and functionality of present society, only manifest entirely positively? What is hidden under a smooth surface? This work of exploration begins with these questions.

In the first chapter, I will view in the context of descriptive communication. As can be seen in phrases such as “the conversation went smoothly” or “the presentation was very smooth,” the notion of smoothness is often borrowed in situations of communication. In terms of communication, smoothness is linked to comfortable emotions. What does the exchange of positive feelings that create comfort ultimately bring? In contrast, is it really desirable to keep avoiding disturbing feelings reluctant to be shared? By seeking answers to these questions, I will discuss the value of emotions caused by the smooth and rough texture in the context of communication. The second chapter focuses on smoothness from the perspective of our bodies. Today, a smooth form of the body

(externally) is revered, and a smooth function of organs (internally) is pursued in the name of health. Where did such a desire for our smooth body come from? Do we really long for it with our own volition? Does the blind pursuit of health and hygiene, symbolized by a smooth body, have only a completely positive aspect? I will follow these questions. Besides, as a supportive argument of my exploration, I will occasionally look at the epistemological differences between the West and the East originating from ancient Greece and ancient China. In the last chapter, from a more personal perspective, I will reflect on myself what smoothness means to me and how it relates to my sculpture practice. Several social issues and artists will be discussed throughout the whole text, however since my main purpose is to find the root of my own obsession with smoothness, a lot of personal appreciation, struggles of thoughts and self-reflection will be included in between. To precisely share the inside of smoothness I observed, I will get some help from words related to the smoothness such as,

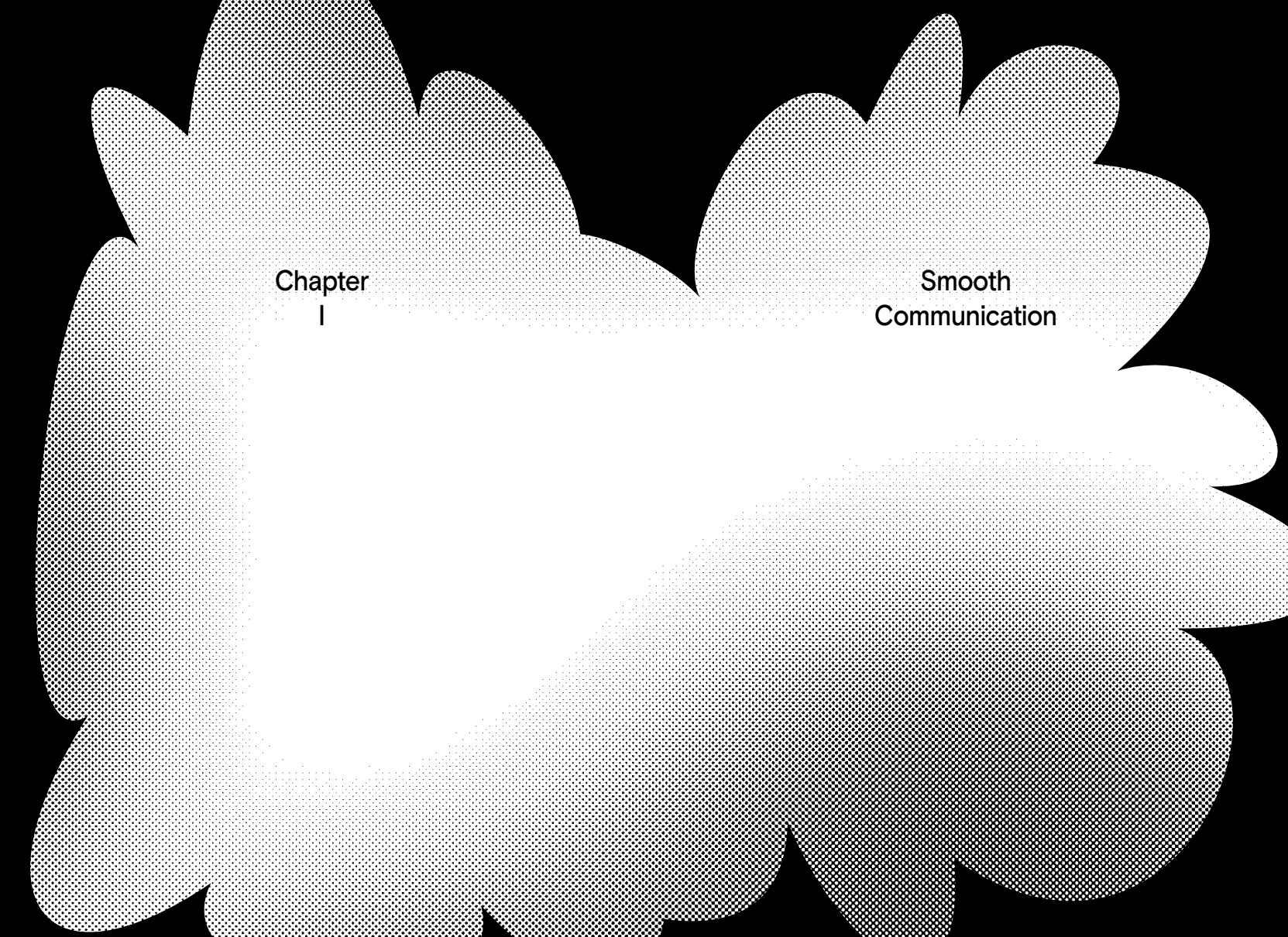


Synonyms with smooth:

round, soft, clean, even, refined, trimmed, comfort

Antonyms:

rough, sharp, dirty, stab, spiky, shake



Chapter  
I

Smooth  
Communication



## 1.1 SMOOTH COMMUNICATION: COMFORT



*Round* has a positive meaning in the context of social communication and relationship. In Korean culture where I was born and raised, people say to a bad-tempered person: “Can’t you be more round?” And the expression “He is such a round person” is a compliment meaning he is very intimate and inclusive. On the contrary, the word *an angled person* is used in the negative sense of being temperamental and picky. The definition of *round person* on Google is, someone skilled, capable, or knowledgeable in a lot of different things, or someone that covers a lot of different areas or subjects. An example of a well-rounded person is someone who is good at school, plays sports, and has a good relationship with their family. As a form of the subject, *roundness* can be mingled with any object without collision and is welcomed and beloved by everyone. Even in contact-free relationships with others, an attribute of the smoothness without an obstacle is pursued. In *Saving Beauty*, Han describes not only the smooth surface of a smartphone but also the smoothness of the way we communicate through it.

“The aesthetics of the smooth is also adopted by smartphones. The LG *G Flex* is even covered with a self healing skin which makes any scratch, that is, any trace

of an injury, disappear within the shortest of times. It is invulnerable, so to speak. The artificial skin of this smartphone keeps it smooth at all times. It is also flexible and bendable, with a slight curvature so as to perfectly follow the contours of the face and back pocket. This adaptability and absence of resistance are essential characteristics of the aesthetics of the smooth. Smoothness is not limited to the outside of the digital apparatus. Communication via a digital apparatus also appears smoothed out, as it is mostly polite remarks, even positivities, which are exchanged. 'Sharing' and 'Like' represent communicative means for smoothing. Negativities are eliminated because they represent obstacles to accelerated communication."<sup>3</sup>

Communication through smartphones is usually smooth, as well as in its design, leaving only good things behind. Craving for *Likes*, people on Social media share the best experiences, glossy and gorgeous moments as if they were their daily routines. They do their best to take photos that make

the moment look better than it really is. Tough and messy moments are not captured and shared. But I suppose sharing only positive moments and exchanging *Likes* is just a confirmation of self-existence through an agreement and recognition of others. They just repeat the reproduction of agreeable content, making everyone's lifestyle similar and eventually, differences and diversity disappear. Smooth communication leads to the disappearance of the enemy and differences: the enemy who disagrees with me and the difference between you and me. In a society of smoothness, the difference means a protrusion. A strange protrusion and an enemy with a sharp sword is losing friction and can no longer stab anything. Jeff Koons, a master of smooth surfaces, nakedly expresses this current state of present days through his work. Han describes Koons' work as an art of comfort.

"In his work, there exists no disaster, no injury, no ruptures, also no seams. Everything flows in soft and smooth transitions. Everything appears rounded, polished, smoothed out. Jeff Koons's art is dedicated to smooth surfaces and their immediate effect. It does not ask to be interpreted, to be deciphered or to be reflected upon. He says that an observer of his

works should only emit a simple 'Wow.' It seems that his art does not require any judgement, interpretation or hermeneutics, no reflection or thought. It intentionally remains infantile, banal, imperturbably relaxed, disarming and disburdening. It has been emptied of any depth, any shallows, any profound sense. Thus, his motto is: 'to take the observer into your arms.' Nothing is meant to shake, injure or shock the observer. Art, according to Jeff Koons, is nothing but beauty, joy and communication."<sup>4</sup>

Koons uses a mirror-like reflective material that makes the audience see the reflection of themselves as they face the sculpture. It makes them continuously confirm themselves, thereby strengthening their self-assurance. Like a sort of religion, it embraces, comforts, and saves them. He never loses his smile during the interviews, and repeats himself with the positive words such as potential, admiration, hope, sharing, and conversation. He says we are all blessed individuals with potential, and we should celebrate our lives through art. Just like a pastor preaching at a service.

4 *Ibid.*, chap. 1.

"Art is about your own possibilities as a human being. It's about your own excitement, your own potential, and what you can become. It affirms your existence."<sup>5</sup>

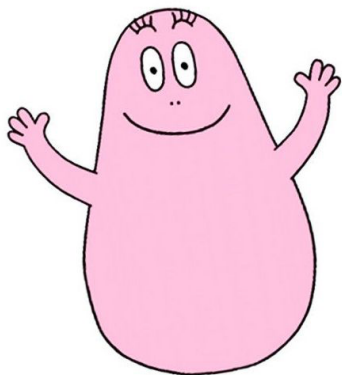
Full of affection for round and smooth things, I have, of course, loved Koons' giant, round, smooth and shiny sculptures for a very long time without knowing exactly why. Along with Koons' sculptures, the sculpture of Yoshitomo Nara; *Pup Cup* (2004), and also the roundish cartoon characters that seem to have no expression of aggression, much like *Moomins* and *Barbapapa* which I have loved for years, disarmed me. Its softness and brightness are comfortable with neither any pointy parts nor any suspicion hidden behind it. However, the work of Koons and Nara, which seems to have similar appearances, actually have quite opposite meanings. If Koons' work is an art of comfort and self-affirmation, Nara's work brings feelings of guilt and self-questioning. I have been in love with Nara's work since I was young for its adorable appearances. But now as a grown-up, I can feel another side of his work hidden behind its loveliness. He describes young girls and cute animals in bright colors playfully, but it subtly shows the fear,

5 Koons, Jeff, and Gagosian Gallery, press release, Beverly Hills, CA: Gagosian Beverly Hills, 2017.

loneliness, defiance, and cruelty hidden inside the people of today. His work usually features raised eyes of children and animals, sad eyes with tears, or closed eyes. I feel the inner anxiety, solitude, and precarious self in the eyes gazing upward, and the deep grief which is uncharacteristic of a child in dewy eyes. I can also detect the feeling of avoidance, wanting to be protected, hiding, and not wanting to be hurt in the closed eyes. Their eyes seem to express rebellion against a world of pain and confusion, such as war created by adults, and they seem to be stabbing the conscience that exists behind the cruelty they have committed. The work of Koons puts across the individual's ability and improvement-oriented message like, "You are the best! *Go ahead*. Trust yourself." On the contrary, Nara throws a guilty and remorseful message like, "Look *back* on what you've done. You made this innocent kid sad, haven't you?" This difference shares points with differences in West and East perspectives on *purity*, to be mentioned in Chapter 2.2.



Jeff Koons, *Balloon Dog*, 1994-2000  
Yoshitomo Nara, *Knife Behind Back*, 2000



*Barbapapa*, Cartoon character  
*Moomins*, Cartoon character



Yoshitomo Nara, *Pup Cup*, 2003

However, as a child who couldn't read those hidden messages in Nara's work, I liked it just because of its cute roundish looks along with Koons' sculptures and cartoon characters. Perhaps this roundness they share, resembled my own round face, so it would have embraced and comforted me and allowed me to close my eyes with a soft, blanket-like warmth without causing me any hurt. Then it sang a sweet lullaby. So I might have fallen into a deep sleep without seeing anything. Smoothness is comfortable. Visual smoothness is beautiful. Auditory smoothness is mellow. Tactile smoothness is soft. Gustatory smoothness is sweet. Olfactory smoothness is fragrant. All of them are comfortable feelings that make us smile instead of frown. The comfort satisfies me and makes me want to stay in my current state, so I don't feel any reason to explore unknown territory. A lack of discomfort *paralyzes* the sense of necessity for moving to another state. It makes me stop. It puts me to sleep in comfort. I sink deeper and deeper into myself.

But all of a sudden, Han's sharp and critical view on smoothness started to shake me. It seems something is waking me up from a comfortable sleep of smoothness. At the moment in this journey of finding the root of my attachment to smoothness, I feel the whole root of my interest is swaying wildly. According to another book of Han,

*The Agony of Eros* (2012), spirit originally meant *unrest*. The German word *Geist*, meaning *the spirit*, came from the Indo-European language etymon *gheis-*, which means shudder, excited, fear, amazed, and so on. The English word *ghost* which means *to scare* in German also shares the same etymon. *Unrest*, which can also be described as fear, anxiety, or surprise, is the most fundamental emotion of human beings. It is the feeling we want to escape from, but allowing us to feel certain energy inside our bodies at the same time. German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) says that all living things are painful, and the spirit of suffering makes the soul great.

“The spirit which bears the gift of the *great soul* is pain; pain is the animator. And the soul so gifted is the giver of life. This is why everything that is alive is in the sense in which the soul is alive, is imbued with pain, the fundamental trait of the soul's nature. Everything that is alive is painful.”<sup>6</sup>

Negative feelings like anxiety and pain break the

serenity. Spirit owes its spiritedness and its animacy, to negativity.<sup>7</sup> In *Wir Genussarbeiter* (2011), German philosopher Svenja Flaßpöhler says Friedrich Nietzsche already knew that there can be no happiness without pain.

“Finer senses and a finer taste,’ he wrote, a person can only have if he is capable of suffering and exposes himself to the danger of being injured. ‘The abundance of kinds of suffering falls on such a person like an infinite whirl of snow, just as the strongest lightning bolts discharge on him. Only under this condition, to always be open to pain from all sides and down to the depths, can the finest and highest forms of happiness be open to them.’ Those who want to avoid pain at all costs live as if they are wrapped in cotton wool and experience the world only in a subdued manner. The person capable of suffering, on the other hand, is as vulnerable as a person in a thunderstorm in an open field: pain can strike like lightning at any moment, and it is precisely this openness, this exposure to pain that is required

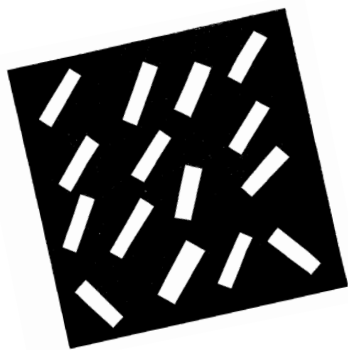
7 Han, Byung-Chul, *The Agony of Eros*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012, PDF e-book, p.51.

to achieve the highest kinds of happiness, ecstasy (in Greek: *step out of oneself*) to receive. Lust, desire; Love, longing; the attraction of everything foreign: none of this can be experienced by those who are not open to pain.”<sup>8</sup>

In this chapter, I contemplated on the negative aspects of smoothness, which seemed entirely positive. Smooth communication through modern media only leads to the reproduction of repetitive things and gets rid of the negativities to accelerate standardization. Also by bringing up the extremely shiny and smooth work of Jeff Koons, I found out that the comfort that smoothness gives us can trap us inside ourselves. On the other hand, the feeling of discomfort opens up our senses and allows us to get closer to freedom. In the next paragraph, I will look into artists who have tried to evoke discomfort and attempted to open the door to freedom by the shaking-up and dismantlement of existing perceptions that seemed solid. This will lead me to think about the generative value of *roughness*.

8 Flaßpöhler, Svenja, *Wir Genussarbeiter. Über Freiheit und Zwang in der Leistungsgesellschaft*, Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2011, EPUB e-book, chap. 11. My own translation from German.

## 1.2 ROUGH COMMUNICATION: DISCOMFORT



Contrary to Jeff Koons, who tried smooth communication by sharing joy and positivity, some artists attempted *rough communication* through ideas with a completely negative meaning in the social context. I would like to name the act of questioning and attempting to evoke changes in the existing system by using socially unwelcome materials, behaviors, and ideas as *rough communication*. In this chapter, I will talk about the French artist Jean Dubuffet and the Vienna Actionism Movement who acted shortly after the historical catastrophe of World War II. I will also look at the Abject Art of the 1990s, one of the critical voices to all kinds of exclusive situations committed under the name of rationalism. In order to break the inertia of a particular state of motion that has been maintained for a long time and cause a change, a large force or impact must be applied that has not existed before. I invited them into this text in the context of *rough communication* since they attempted to break and overthrow the inertia that lasted firmly before, in a very aggressive manner in common.

“I get satisfaction from rough and unfinished things,” French artist Jean Dubuffet (1901-1985) said. He was moved by halfway finished or ruined pieces. He also used rough materials and images for his work to create noise-like discomfort. Shortly after World War II, when Dubuffet was active,



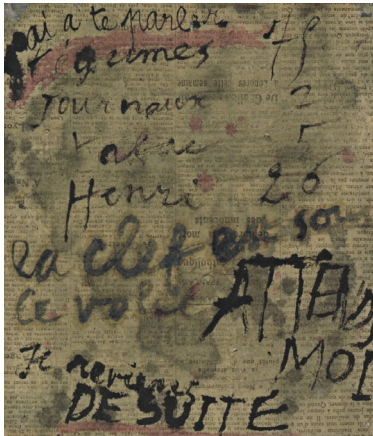
existentialism arose amid the urgency of recovering humanity and freedom that had been lost due to the experience of the war. Dubuffet, who was also deeply immersed in post-war existentialism and phenomenology, denied the traditional values of Western culture that relied strictly on reason and intelligence and insisted on being faithful to human instincts and returning to primitive roots. Through the concept of *Art brut*<sup>9</sup>, he valued the views and expressions of people on the fringes of society such as the disabled, the mentally ill, inmates, and children. By embracing those of whom he thought had the purest souls, he expressed his desire for the restoration of primitive humanity and freedom of human instinct. In addition, he overturned the language system, which was accepted as rational and logical, into graffiti which acts to break the habitual promise of language consisting of signified and signifier. Also, by using uncut and rough materials and uneven surfaces, he declared that formalized rules, norms, and regulations are no longer valuable. He also claimed that beauty and ugliness were indistinguishable in primitive society. Therefore, he would express the body of

9 *Art brut*: an art with an unsophisticated and unrefined form, a term coined by Dubuffet in 1945 to refer to a kind of pure art that appears in works created by amateurs. The word brute which has the meaning of raw, unrefined, barbaric, means the exclusion of Western intelligence, or refusing to be tamed by it, or something created by instinct and unconsciousness.

a woman as a substance itself, filth of the flesh, to remove eroticism from the woman's body which was an object of beauty and eroticism in the history of traditional Western art. Dubuffet's woman's body, the substance itself, conveys neutral feelings like landscapes, minerals, and plants.<sup>10</sup> His main interest was to question the values that Western civilization had pursued so blindly, and to restore the values of things that have been ignored for too long. Realizing the imperfections of reason and logic, he pursued the values of instinct, passion, caprice, intensity, and madness instead. In Dubuffet's work, there is an urge of *retrogression* to go back to the state before the distinction between prohibited and allowed, or sophisticated and vulgar existed.<sup>11</sup> Such a path Dubuffet took shares ideas with *Taoism* in Eastern philosophy (to be mentioned in Chapter 2.2.), in which it is argued that the ultimate ideal of human beings is to reach a primitive natural state.

10 Kim, Hyun-hwa, *Jean Dubuffet: The Second World War and Human Condition* (master's thesis), Seoul: Association of Western Art History, 2008. My own translation from Korean.

11 Chin, Jung-kwon, *The Story of Modern Art: Informel*, 14 September 2012. My own translation from Korean. [http://news.khan.co.kr/kh\\_news/khan\\_art\\_view.html?art\\_id=201209142203105#csidx027340e2572b27ba0603e34bdd3825](http://news.khan.co.kr/kh_news/khan_art_view.html?art_id=201209142203105#csidx027340e2572b27ba0603e34bdd3825)



Jean Dubuffet, *Message: "The Key is Under the Shutter,"* 1944  
 Jean Dubuffet, *Woman's body, the incarnate rose,* 1950

In a similar period to Dubuffet, Actionism artists were also active around Vienna, Austria. Vienna Actionism was the most extreme artistic project of the 1960s, mainly led by artists Günter Brus, Otto Mühl, Hermann Nitsch, and Rudolf Schwarzkogler. They exposed the memory and fear of war and violence, opposing the dictatorial tyranny imposed on the human body and the self of society at the time, by bringing the human body and literal event itself into the form of performance. It mostly preceded and surpassed the other performative art, body art, and happenings of the time in terms of sheer violent excess. They established the body as a site of exploration, and its blood, sweat, and excrement as materials: performance as the transgression of both social and religious taboo, and art itself as a violent, tragic recognition of the brute fact.<sup>12</sup> They intentionally stabbed, cut, and bled, spit and urinated on a naked body covered with blood, or even drank their own urine. The bleeding sheep whose skin was peeled off was displayed showing its intestines, with the four legs of the bleeding sheep grabbed and spinned to splash the blood on the audience and wall in the gallery. They sucked raw eggs on the plate and spat it out again, and chewed a rose. They exposed their

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Badura-Triska, Eva, and Klocker, Hubert, *Vienna Actionism: Art and Upheaval in 1960s' Vienna*, Köln: Walther König, 2012.

body in a way that the cultural norms of conventional behavior would read as something between shocking and pathological.<sup>13</sup> Hermann Nitsch, one of the main artists from Vienna Actionism, says,

“Through my artistic production (a form of life worship) I take upon myself everything that appears negative, unsavoury, perverse and obscene, the lust and the resulting sacrificial hysteria, in order to spare YOU the defilement and shame entailed by the descent into the extreme.”<sup>14</sup>

13 Mumok museum, *MyBody is the Event - Vienna Actionism and international Performance*, exhibition booklet, 2015.

14 Brus, Günter, and Green, Malcolm, *Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists*, London: Atlas Press, 1999, p.109.



Otto Muehl, Hermann Nitsch and Adolf Frohner, *Blood Organ* (Performance), 1962

Highly influenced by Vienna Actionism, Abject Art arose around the 1980s and 1990s. Abject Art refers to works, which contain abject subjects, materials, and substances.<sup>16</sup> Abject Art re-examined the human body after decades of neglect in previous mainstream art movements: Pop, Minimalism, Conceptual Art all largely ignored the visceral body. From ancient Greek to the Modernism era, the idea that the mind was non-material and transcendent was dominant, and the body was the object of fear, reminiscent of sin and desire, disease, and death. Entering the Postmodernism era since the 1960s, rationalism from the past was criticized and a more active form of exploring the body has taken place. Interest in plurality and fringe areas led to the reinterpretation of bodies, women, race, and other things that had been considered abnormal or inferior because they failed to meet standards being set by society. *Abjection*, as employed in art, was a concept borrowed from the French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva's book *The Powers of Horror* (1980). For Kristeva, abjection is the feeling of revulsion and disgust when the boundaries we use to categorize the world—such as inside/outside, animal/human, animate/inanimate, and life/death—

16 Becky Bendy Legs, *The Abject - it's not just about poo, blood, and body bits*, 20 March 2013. <https://beckybendylegs.com/the-abject-its-not-just-about-excrement-blood-and-bodily-parts>

are transgressed. Indeed, in Abject Art, it is hard to draw clear boundaries between what is included as the body and what is not. *Tale* (1992), by Kiki Smith, is a life-size sculpture of a woman seeming to crawl on all fours like an animal on the gallery floor. Her haunches are smeared with faux faeces, and a nearly 10-foot long tail of excrement stretches in a straight line behind her. Is Smith's crawling figure animal or human? Is her excrement part of the body or exterior to it?<sup>16</sup> Abject artists reinterpret the body of a woman, which in the past was designed to satisfy men's prejudices, desires, and fantasies, and instead show new bodies. Since the representative object hidden and distorted in the history of male-centered Western art was the body of women, the vocabulary of the body created by women themselves has the power of new resistance. In a broad sense, Abject Art dismantles the power imbalance brought by gender, race, spirit and body, human and nature, civilization and primitivity, high and low, normal and abnormal, beauty and ugliness, and guides to a new world of plurality.<sup>17</sup>

16 Artspace (American website), *What is Abject Art?*, 14 August 2019. [https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews\\_features/book\\_report/what-is-abject-art-tell-me-thats-not-what-i-think-it-is-56210](https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/book_report/what-is-abject-art-tell-me-thats-not-what-i-think-it-is-56210)

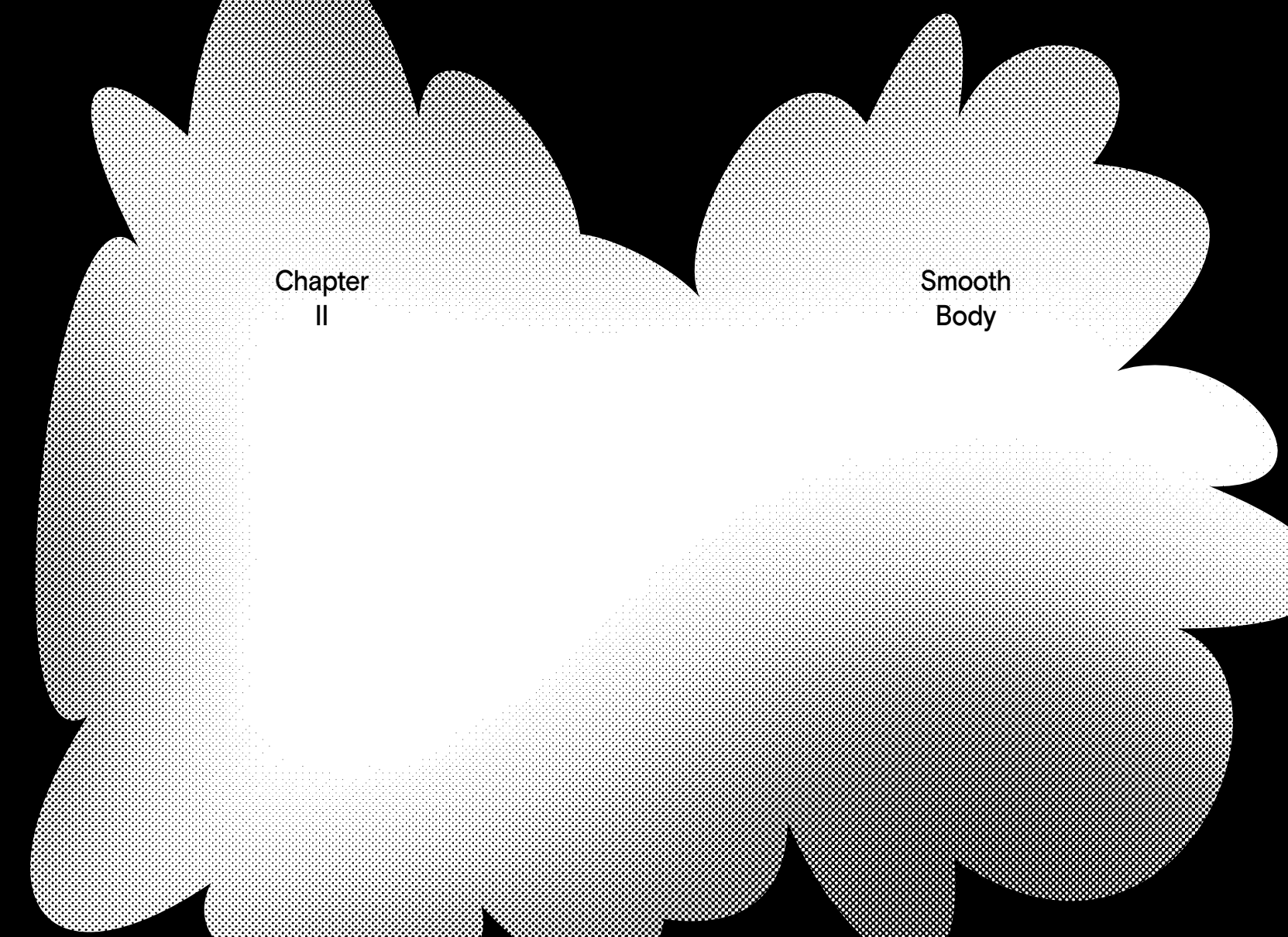
17 Lee, Moon-jung, *A Study on the Abject Somatic Symptom and Artistic Sublimation Shown on Women's Art: Feminism Art* (doctoral dissertation), Seoul: The Graduate School of Ewha Womans University, 2012. My own translation from Korean.



Kiki Smith, *Tale*, 1992

The works of the above artists provoke frown and shock to the audience in common. The sharpness of the shock makes a wave in the mind which seems like the calm surface of the water without a single gust of wind. With distorted expressions and turbulent emotions, it raises the questions like, "Is this the right thing that I'm seeing now?" It's like a very rough, harsh wind. What I instinctively took as completely positive seems to be not absolutely positive. So does sensory and mental comfort. It is a dangerous idea to think that absolute positivity can be valid. Absolute positives accompany absolute negatives and this idea eventually creates hierarchies and boundaries such as mainstream and fringe groups, superiority, and alienation. What these artists desperately tried to show was to break these social, psychological and moral boundaries. I should try to see the negative aspect of positivity, and vice versa. I should try to see what's invisible but apparently present. To see it, I have to get out of the comfortable smoothness which makes me fall asleep. I should throw myself out to an uncomfortable rocky road. The pain from spiky discomfort will keep my senses and spirit awake. To move from comfort to discomfort, breaking the inertia of comfort, it will consume a great deal of energy. Nevertheless, I must continue to consume inefficient energy. I should stay in tension and keep

shaking. The negativity of roughness would be the only force that will enable us to change, generate, and eliminate the boundaries.



Chapter  
II

Smooth  
Body

# COMPULSION ON HYGIENE AND HEALTH



A smooth body is what most people of the present time long for. The smooth body with well-shaped muscles and no extra fat is a representation of health and beauty. From diet foods to weight-loss drugs, fat-removing surgery, juice cleanses, yoga retreats, skin scaling to make skin tone transparent and Botox injections to smooth out wrinkles...

There are countless efforts people can take to get a sleek body. Not only the external smoothness of the body but also the inner smoothness, namely, clean and tidy reason, is an essential requisite for modern people. In this chapter, I will discuss the obsessive aspects and problems of present society whose desire for a smooth body symbolizes. I will also try to draw the root of it from the fundamental differences between Western and Eastern ways of thinking. Although the clear distinction between the West and the East is a bit dichotomous, for the simplification of expression of the mainstream thoughts of Western roots from ancient Greece and that of Asians from ancient China, I will refer to the former as Western and the latter as Eastern.

The craving for a smooth body illustrates today's obsession with hygiene. All of the above-mentioned efforts for a smooth body are not to soil the body, but to purify it. Citing Brazilian waxing, Byung-chul Han criticizes that the blind pursuit of cleanliness makes us feel disgusted at any kind of



negativity including dirtiness.

“Brazilian waxing makes the body *smooth*. It represents today’s compulsive hygiene. The essence of eroticism, for Bataille, is soiling and, accordingly, compulsive hygiene would be its end. Dirty eroticism gives way to *clean pornography*. Depilated skin, in particular, gives the body a pornographic smoothness which is felt to be pure and clean.”<sup>18</sup>

Hairs removed through Brazilian waxing is like dirt that has to be kicked out of our body. *Soft on Skin, Hard on Dirt*. One day I saw this phrase on the hand wash bottle of cleaning supplies brand Dettol in my toilet. I thought this phrase shows the positive and negative attributes of this society immediately: *softness and hardness*. It also illustrates the way in which things with these attributes are to be treated respectively. On this bottle of hand wash, there is the reflected desire to treat precious skin with softness, and bad dirt with hardness. Through softness, the body is embraced, and through hardness the dirt is purged.

18 Han, Byung-Chul, *Saving Beauty*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017, EPUB e-book, chap. 1.



Hand wash bottle, Dettol

As French philosopher Bataille (1897-1962) said, dirty Eroticism has been pushed out from our surroundings.<sup>19</sup> Erotic desires cannot be proudly revealed in public sphere. Openly sharing about eroticism makes others frown. This problem with the erotic has bothered me for quite a long time. My affection for the smooth and round naturally led me to express those forms in my sculptures. For example, they are atypical forms consisting of curves that are associated with things like clouds, ducks, peaches, pebbles, and cartoon characters. But when people see my works, they often say they feel strange because they are linked to erotic forms such as buttocks, penises, and breasts. I was embarrassed. I didn't want those feedbacks, because I felt as if I had accumulated erotic desires and reflected them in my work. I was ashamed and felt guilty. So, at some point, I intentionally tried to reduce the atypical curves and to use refined curves and straight lines. In this era of 'the end of eroticism,' borrowing this expression from Bataille, I was trying to prove my *purity* by moderating *dirty* atypical curves and using more *clean* lines. By doing this I was insisting that I'm not a disgusting person.

19 Bataille, Georges, *Eroticism*, London: John Calder, 1957.

The affection for cleanliness is applied not only to the outside of the body but also to the inside, and it leads to the pursuit of clean reason. According to Austrian philosopher Robert Pfaller, filthy sacred (he referred to all kinds of pleasures as filthy sacred) gives way to pure rationality and is being pushed out. Pleasures that alcohol and tobacco give are something to avoid because it interferes with polished rationality. Pfaller says self-moderation of these pleasures leads to moral superiority of individuals.

"Today, we pull the sting on most pleasures: bars without tobacco culture, beer without alcohol, coffee without caffeine, whipped cream without fat, virtual sex without physical contact... People in this society, something else takes the place of lust: self-moderation. People who are ascetic almost always feel that they are of higher value. They think they are smarter than others and morally superior to them."<sup>20</sup>

20 Pfaller, Robert, "*We defiantly enjoy*," interview in Der Spiegel (German magazine), 30 May 2011. My own translation from German. <https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/mass-und-masslosigkeit-wir-geniessen-trotzig-a-766210.html>



In a neoliberal society where anything can be accomplished through well-trimmed rationality, excessive labor and workaholicism through moderation of pleasure become a virtue. After since social status is given depending on the abilities of the individuals, labor has become a promise of happiness. Along with sports addiction, work addiction is the only socially acceptable, even demanded and promoted addiction. Drug addicts, alcoholics, chain smokers are all seen as marginalized, pitiful, suicidal. Workaholics, on the other hand, steer companies and the fortunes of the state, are served, admired, and idealized.<sup>21</sup> The unconditional affirmation of youth and health was so natural to me, such as staying away from alcohol, cigarettes, and refraining from unhealthy food. I had never found anything wrong with being healthy, young and lively. But an uncritical positive perception of health seems to be embedded in me far more externally than I thought. It is created by the social atmosphere that requires a healthy individual for an efficient capitalist production system, rather than by my own will.

In 1980, the term *Healthism* was coined by the political economist Robert Crawford. He defined it as “the preoccupation with personal

21 Flaßpöhler, Svenja, *Wir Genussarbeiter*, chap. 1.

health as a primary...focus for the definition and achievement of well-being; a goal which is to be attained primarily through the modification of lifestyles.”<sup>22</sup> Put bluntly, healthism entails seeing health as an individual matter, a primary value, and a moral index: basically, if you get sick, it’s your fault.<sup>23</sup> We may get disgusted when seeing an image like cheesy exploding burgers because it directly brings up the image of it entering our bodies and creating extra fats and substances that disturb the idealised smooth body. A piece of chocolate cake, whipped cream, and greasy burgers become very bad things we have to keep away from, and we feel guilt and shame for eating them. Eventually, the ability to resist temptation becomes a measure of our own value. A person without a purified body is tacitly considered as less-evolved and lacking in self-control, or as an unorganized and lazy person who doesn’t take good care of oneself. In a book review of Canadian philosopher Alexis Shotwell’s *Against Purity* (2016), Swedish researcher Claudia Gilbert summarizes Shotwell’s opinion on healthism as follows.

“*Good health* as a moral imperative and

22 Crawford, Robert, *Healthism and the Medicalization of Everyday Life*, in: *International Journal of Health Services*, 1980.

23 Michel, Frann, “*Healthism*”: *A neoliberal version of wellness*, 09 December 2012. <https://solidarity-us.org/healthism>

superior state of being has been the bane of the chronically sick and disabled for decades and is not a category to be understood as automatically positive. Governments portraying it as such lack historical contexts, enabling them to make claims to a timeless, unproblematic normative moral superiority, legitimising the exclusion of sick people from society.”<sup>24</sup>



Still image from *The Office*, NBC, 2005

## DIFFERENT THOUGHTS ON PURITY IN THE WEST AND EAST



Shotwell emphasizes that an uncritical positive perception of good health leads to the exclusion of the sick and disabled, regarding them as abnormal or to be corrected. In addition, she thinks that the love of individualism in the West has reinforced the tendency to value moral purity. She insists that the act of judging an individual's morality and superiority by health comes from the idea that boundaries between individuals imply the perfect separation from others. But she thinks the meaning of boundaries between individuals actually holds the potential to connect with others.

"I think individualism fundamentally comes back to the idea that the individual is a self-governing unit who can make decisions about what comes in and what goes out. Of course, boundaries are really important. But boundaries are there because we're porous, we're available to the world. So what a boundary means actually is connection, being next to something or being with something that's potentially part of you or it's already part of you. In the West, there's this *purity ideal* that imagines that's not true. It imagines that we have these walls that nothing could or

should cross."<sup>25</sup>

Shotwell's thoughts here seem to be touching with the Eastern way of thinking. In the Western thought, the boundaries are very clear. Not only the boundary between humans but also between humans and animals, reason and emotion, good and bad, beauty and ugliness and so on. On the other hand, the boundaries are ambiguous in the East, with its roots in a relational way of thinking. The hierarchy between subject and object does not exist. There exists only a relationship in which *yin and yang*<sup>26</sup> take turns to have a temporary dominant position. Like the two sides of a coin, when the front of the coin is visible, it does not mean that there is no backside. This enables the front of the coin to support the back in a continuous relationship with the front. It is not clear which of the two sides is front or back. In *Analects of Confucius* (475–221 BC), a person who is wary of separating and doesn't distinguish oneself from others is described as a sage, virtuous person. It's the ultimate

25 Shotwell, Alexis, *The Folly of 'Purity Politics'*, interview in The Atlantic (American magazine), 20 January 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/01/purity-politics/513704>

26 *Yin and yang*: Chinese concepts that refer to two opposing principles or forces that permeate all aspects of life and the universe. It describes how seemingly opposite or contrary forces may actually be complementary, interconnected, and interdependent in the natural world, and how they may give rise to each other as they interrelate to one another. (from Wikipedia)

goal of human beings to know that we should not see things based on *I* and to know that *I*, others, and the universe are all connected.

Also, the meaning of purity in Eastern philosophy is to return to the pure state of nature. I will now make a few remarks about *Taoism*, because it is such a huge and complicated theory, I can only touch upon certain aspects of it. In *Taoism*, one of the major Eastern philosophies together with *Confucianism* and *Buddhism*, child and water is used as a metaphor for a good life. A child is the most pure and honest state of nature. And water flows from high to low, lowering itself while wetting and creating all things in the universe. Therefore, it is ideal to live a natural life like water that is the most vulnerable and at the same time stoutest. According to Laozi (the founder of *Taoism*), the more regulations are demanded, the harder life becomes. If we relax artificial rules and regulations which are supposed to improve life, only then we will be in harmony with *Tao*<sup>27</sup> which regulates, binds, releases all things naturally. He describes *Tao*, the ideal of *Taoism*, as follows.

27 *Tao*: (in Chinese philosophy) the absolute principle underlying the universe, combining within itself the principles of *yin and yang* and signifying the way, or code of behaviour, that is in harmony with the natural order. The interpretation of *Tao* in the *Tao-te-Ching* developed into the philosophical religion of *Taoism*. (from Oxford Languages)

“In harmony with the Tao,  
the sky is clear and spacious,  
the earth is solid and full,  
all creatures flourish together,  
content with the way they are,  
endlessly repeating themselves,  
endlessly renewed.

when man interferes with the Tao  
the sky becomes filthy,  
the earth becomes depleted,  
the equilibrium crumbles,  
creatures become extinct.”<sup>28</sup>

Nature is perfect on its own with no space for human intervention, and *Tao* is to go with the flow of nature. Laozi said morality is also a man-defined artificial concept. Moral attributes such as benevolence and righteousness only confuse the ways of nature. Therefore, Laozi dislikes morality. He says to not respect good people and wise people. People set moral standards arbitrarily and blame those who fall short of them for being immoral. Laozi’s *Tao* is not morality but nature. *Tao* does not have any feelings of compassion for human beings and is heartless and indifferent to human affairs. It is unbi-

28 Laozi, *Tao Te Ching*, New York: Vintage Books, 1972, verse 39.

ased, so it doesn’t get any restriction from human standards like good and evil, beauty, and ugliness.<sup>29</sup>

In both Western and Eastern thought, purity is something that humans need to pursue, and it connects to the ideal life. But the meaning of purity and the norms of behavior that humans should have in order to reach it seems to be very different. For the practical principle of living a good life that can reach purity, regulation based on reason is emphasized in the West, while *Wu wei*<sup>30</sup> —non-action— is required in the East (in the perspective of *Taoism*). *Wu wei* means, in short, not doing anything artificial or forced. For example, if you lost a sheep, wait for them to come back. Don’t shout or beat a drum to find it. It makes it harder to know where the sheep is. It is a way to find *Tao* to leave everything as it is without trying to do anything.

I think such different ideas on purity and different views on how to reach it are also linked to the meaning of smoothness in each society, and the direction to the ideal life. In the West, purity has to be *attained* through smoothening. And smoothness means a restrained, refined, trimmed state

29 Kim, Gyo-bin and Lee, Hyun-gu, *Oriental philosophy essay*, Paju, South Korea: Dongnyok, 1993. My own translation from Korean.

30 *Wu Wei*: It means – in Chinese – non-doing or ‘doing nothing’. It sounds like a pleasant invitation to relax or worse, fall into laziness or apathy. Yet this concept is key to the noblest kind of action according to the philosophy of *Taoism* – and is at the heart of what it means to follow *Tao*. (from *The School of life*)



with a clean reason which is opposite to wildness. Therefore, from my own point of view, by removing the dirty and obstructive things from the primal wild state, a life of *going forward* is aimed for in the West. On the other hand, in the East, purity is something that has to be *restored*. By removing the dirt that will be gained by intervening in human affairs after birth, a life of *going backward* to the original state is aimed.

In the Eastern sense, smoothness means that letting all things spontaneously flow like water, being wary of restraint and regulations. From the Western view on nature as wild and rough, it can be seen that the Eastern thought pursues roughness, but when recognizing the difference in the meaning of smoothness, it can be said that it is not true. In the East, the process of self-discipline to achieve a value like *Tao*, is described as *grinding and polishing* the spirit. Returning to the original state is the goal of life for humans, but as time passes after birth, dirty things such as desires, selfishness regarding all kinds of human affairs, always contaminate us even if we do nothing. Over time we lose purity. To recover it, and to shake off the dirty things, the process of grinding and polishing the spirit is necessary. Therefore, smoothness has a positive meaning in both societies, but it is pursued to *proceed* to smoothness in the West, and

*regress* to smoothness in the East.

## 2.3 SMOOTH FUNCTIONING BODY



In the preceding chapter, I approached the different views on smoothness, and the direction of ideal life in two cultures. But this is only from a traditional perspective. Present societies have become westernized around the world, following the Western direction of life in general, regardless of East and West. Therefore, we are all living in a society that is moving forward based on clean rationality and all kinds of regulations. In this chapter, I will bring two artists who questioned the *smoothly functioning body*, a body suitable for this performance-oriented society, and made resistant voices by bringing *Taoistic* philosophy into their works. By bringing them, I would like to explore and extend further on the meaning of smoothness from the Eastern angle which is often interpreted differently from the dominant view.

The *Taoistic wu-wei* philosophy of harmonizing with the flow of nature is completely contrary to the concept of an extremely productive and result-oriented present society. In this society, people survive only when they get personal achievements by constantly 'being active,' and the result of their continued actions becomes the personal property and social status. Our bodies must continue to function smoothly. In *Wir Genussarbeiter* (2011), Flaßpöhler looks at people of today constantly being chased by things to do, always lacking time,

without an empty space in their daily lives with a critical view.

“Hustle and bustle brings nothing new,’ writes Byung-chul Han. ‘It reproduces and accelerates what is already there.’ You can only be creatively active and open to your object if you are not continuously active, but go for a walk, sleep, dream, fantasize and indulge in boredom. But that is exactly what we are less and less allowed to do today – or we don’t allow it to ourselves.”<sup>31</sup>

Also remarking pain and painkillers, she says, since the 19th century when Aspirin and anesthetic were developed, our body has become a machine that should always be operating. The weakening concentration and increasing exhaustion in the office are not interpreted as a warning sign to rest the body, but as an obstacle to be removed as efficiently as possible. The works of the following artists showed resistance to this constant activism and functionalist society through *Taoistic wu-wei* attitude.

Francis Alÿs, a Belgian-born, Mexico-based artist does not produce much other than just walk-

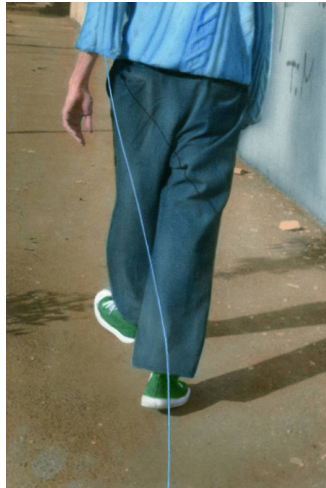
31 Flaßpöhler, Svenja, *Wir Genussarbeiter*, chap. 4.

ing. In her book, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (2000), American writer Rebecca Solnit said, “Thinking is generally thought of as doing nothing in a production-oriented society, and doing nothing is hard to do. It’s best done by disguising it as doing something, and the something closest to doing nothing is walking.”<sup>32</sup> Because, historically, walking has been mentioned as an opposite of development. Not as progress, but as a symbol of regression, and as a difference in mobility or speed that exists between advanced and underdeveloped countries.<sup>33</sup> *Paradox of Praxis 1* (1997) is the record of an action by Alÿs. For more than nine hours, he pushed a block of ice through the streets of Mexico City until it completely melted. For hour after hour, he struggled with the quintessentially minimal rectangular block until finally it was reduced to no more than an ice cube suitable for a whisky on the rocks, so small that he could casually kick it along the street. His hours of labor were themselves distilled into a video only five minutes long.<sup>34</sup> In addition, he developed and played with

32 Solnit, Rebecca, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, New York: Viking, 2000.

33 Woo, Jung-Ah, *Francis Alÿs: An Artist of City Strolling*, Seoul: The Korean Society Of Art History, 2014. My own translation from Korean.

34 Ferguson, Russell, *Francis Alÿs: Politics of Rehearsal*, Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2007, p.55.



Francis Aljys, *Paradox of Praxis I*, 1997  
Francis Aljys, *Fairy Tales*, 1995

a variety of actions that produced minimum results with maximum efforts. In *Fairy Tales* (1995), while walking, the sweater he has on is being unraveled after him, leaving an ever-lengthening, blue-thread trail in his wake. The longer he walked, the sweater he was wearing became shorter and eventually was lost. The hours of labor used to knit sweaters were lost through walking and so did the function of it. The animated film *Song for Lupita* (1998) consists of an act of a woman just pouring water from one glass to another and back again. Aljys has described this work as “literally *the doing but without doing it, the non-doing but doing it*, staging a kind of resignation in an immediate present, inducing a complete hypnosis in the act itself, an act that was a pure flux, without beginning or end.”<sup>36</sup>

Chinese artist Song Dong’s work shows his *Taoistic wu-wei* attitude, by respecting everything’s own law. The piece *Writing Diary with Water* (1995-), which he has been working on continuously since 1995, is a diary in which he wrote with water on a calligraphy brush on a stone. No traces are left behind and the writing already starts vanishing while it is being written. In his poor childhood, his father let him practice calligraphy with water on a stone to save expensive ink and paper.

36 Ibid, p.44.



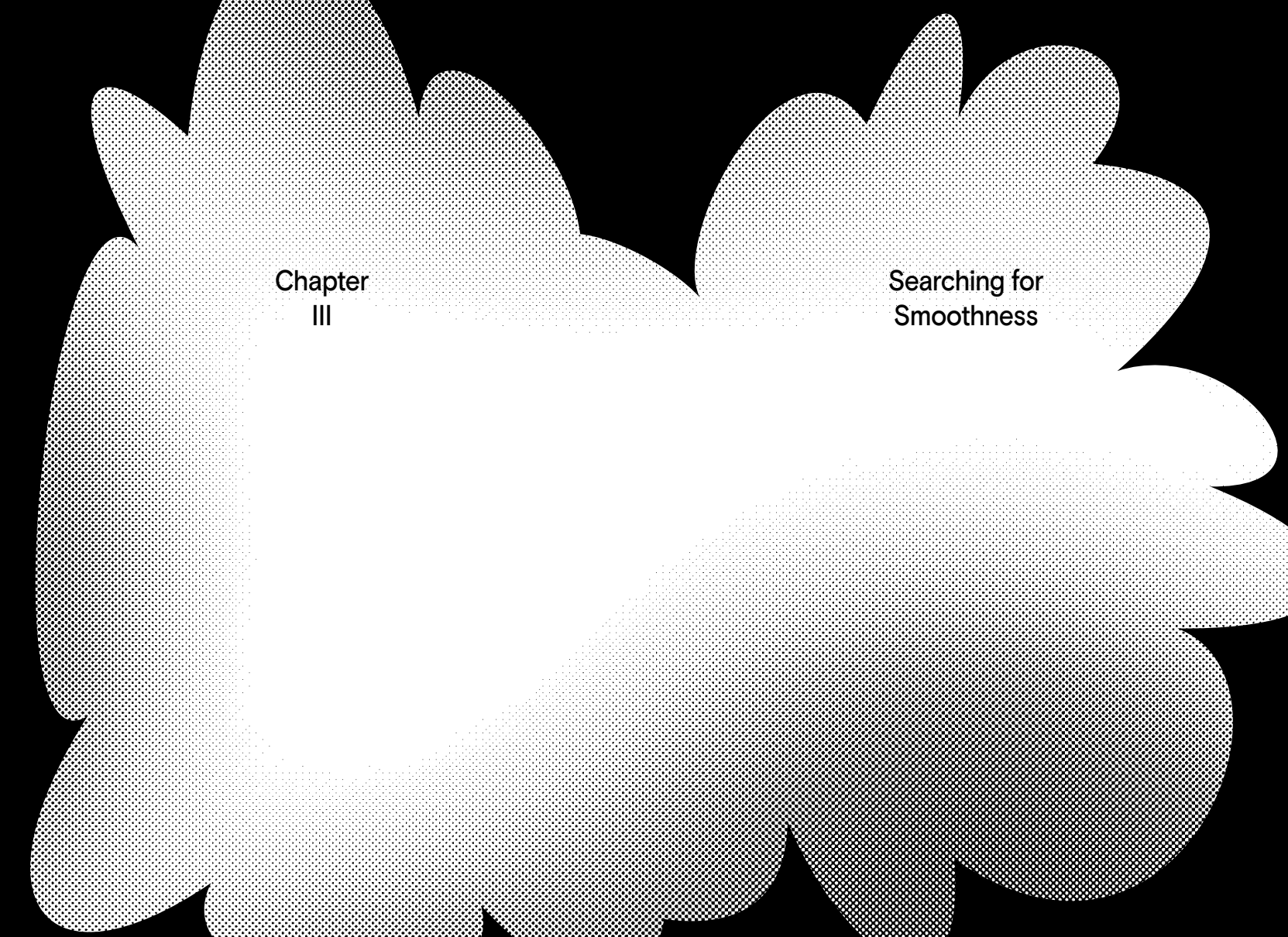
Song Dong, *Writing Diary with Water*, 1995-  
Song Dong, *A Pot of Boiling Water*, 1995

Under the protection of the invisibility and volatility of the contents, he opens up the possibility of making uncensored messages to himself.<sup>56</sup> Stone and water: solid and liquid, eternal and disappearing. The two different materials do not meet to form a confrontational relationship, but try to have a conversation for interdependent harmony in his work. Song Dong maintains the characteristics of water and stone without losing them, respecting, and moving on to the process of *wu-wei* that has no desire to achieve anything. In *A Pot of Boiling Water* (1995), he carries a pot of boiling water as he walks through a narrow alley of Beijing, while pouring hot water onto the ground, drawing a wet line that emits steam and vanishes almost immediately. It exists as soon as it touches the ground, but soon it is absent, and the time of his labor becomes useless. Meaning exists only in a process and the implications that unfold during the process can be extended infinitely. Song Dong's work includes a record of time that flows indifferently with no interest in what it wants to be and wants to make.<sup>57</sup>

56 Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, *SONG Dong*, exhibition booklet, 2015.

57 Bae, Hyun-Jin, *The Meaning of Nonsense Action Practice: Focused on Francis Alys (1959-) and Song Dong (1966-)*. Seoul: The Korean Society of Eastern Art Studies, 2019, p.135. My own translation from Korean.

Ancient Chinese often linked water to time because time was considered to have a water-like character in that it exists at every moment of our lives, it just repeats filling and emptying, and we cannot take it back or make it stay.<sup>38</sup> Considering that Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, “No man ever steps in the same river twice,” a similar idea seems to have existed in ancient Greece. Both Alÿs and Song Dong use materials with no absoluteness that disappear or change over time, such as water. The practice of walking or writing by the two artists using these impermanent materials is seen as wasted time without producing anything from the perspective of a production-oriented society. Their bodies are considered nonfunctional. The view of people of today, who cannot let time simply flow without wanting to seize and own it and use it completely efficiently, and the view of *Taoism*, that respects the value of things that cannot be grasped, seem to be at a distance that can never be in touch.



Chapter  
III

Searching for  
Smoothness

On this journey to find the root of my attachment to smoothness, I have so far taken a look at the notion of it in a social context. In this chapter which is the final stage of the journey, I will explore the smoothness from my personal point of view relating to my sculptural works.

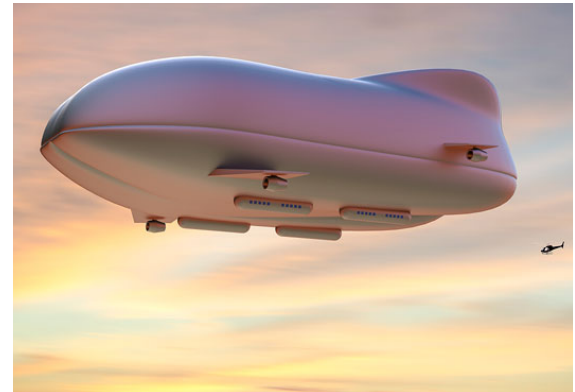
To me, round and smooth objects cause a desire to touch. When we see an object, the first thing we do to know if it is real or not is to touch it. Aristotle said touch is a factor that determines all senses. “All the other organs of sense, no doubt, perceive by contact, only the contact is mediate: touch alone perceives by immediate contact.”<sup>39</sup> For Roland Barthes, the sense of touch “is the most *demystifying* of all senses, unlike sight which is the most magical.” The sense of sight keeps a distance, while the sense of touch destroys it. Without distance, there can be no mysticism.<sup>40</sup> The moment I touch it, I confirm the object’s real existence and it comes closest to me. The mysterious ideal that was far away becomes degraded to a real being that is in touch with me. In *Mythologies* (1957), Barthes points out that smoothness has always been an attribute of perfection.

39 Aristotle, *De Anima*, volume III, Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1931, 435a17.

40 Han, Byung-Chul, *Saving Beauty*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017, EPUB e-book, chap. 1.



“It is well known that smoothness is always an attribute of perfection because its opposite reveals a technical and typically human operation of assembling: Christ’s robe was seamless, just as the airships of science-fiction are made of unbroken metal.”<sup>41</sup>



Airship, 3d illustration

41 Barthes, Roland, *Mythologies: Roland Barthes*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1957, p.88.



Perhaps there is a possibility that my obsession with smoothness may have come from the desire for perfection. However, this perfect smoothness creates a compulsion of touch to me, and eventually, the perfection disappears as soon as I touch it. My mind is always full of certain images. These images are not very specific, they feel like they are behind a layer of fog. It may have been seen either in my dreams, or created from combinations of memories that went through mysterious processing in the brain. The images beyond the fog feel very smooth and perfect. I feel a strong desire to touch these. So I always attempt to give shapes to these images and bring them to the real world through my sculptural work. To achieve this, I continuously imagine contact between various materials and my body and search for the materials closest to my ideals. The following is my reflection on some materials and things around me.



Trees: Feels firm. Its dark color and bumpy bark give a rough sense. Thin branches stretch irregularly outwards, leaving plenty of empty space in between them. It's sometimes beautiful to see the sky coming through the branches, but the overall form is raised up, elongated and spiky, so it is not the ideal type for me.

Plants: Feels more tender and delicate than trees. It's slender and long, and it's always about to break. The leaves are so thin and weak that they can't exist independently unless they depend on the stem. The stem cannot exist independently without soil and roots, either.

Paper: Crumpled when touched and torn when wet. Generally, it exists flat and it is always scattered here and there, which I feel is insecure. Straight, sharp, its matte texture doesn't invite me there.

Glass: Its transparency catches my eyes, but my sensory experience whispers to me that it can easily break and be dangerous. This whisper makes me hesitate to approach it and keep my distance

from it. Besides, my knowledge about silica, the raw material of glass, melts at an extremely high temperature of 1700 degrees, makes me perceive it as almost a synonym of inflexibility.

**Metal:** The strongest, coldest, sharpest and most aggressive material, I think. I remember I had worked with metal once, the noise and flames of cutting and welding were so terrifying that my body shrank like a snail hidden in its shell. Just thinking of this material makes me feel like I have pain.

**Fabric:** Soft and flexible. Thin and fluttering. It can't stand alone without hanging around something, somewhere. It sounds prejudiced so I'm careful to say it, but I feel this material has a sense of a quiet, obedient and dependent woman.

**Upholstery foam:** Soft, flexible and comfy just like a fabric. It has an appropriate thickness and texture. Is it finally the ideal material I'm looking for? But when it gets wet, it will give my body a cold and unpleasant sensation. Even after it dries up, because of its dense fiber structure, it smells. It makes me



frown.

**Clay:** The state of raw clay before firing is ideal. With appropriate volume and moisture, it's soft, bouncy and chewy, freely changing its form adapting to the movement of my hands and willing to give room to my hands. When raw, it can be anything, it's softer than anything else and has the most intimate relationship with me. After fired, it hardens but is fragile at the same time. But it apparently remembers the state when it was soft and retains the past. However, flexibility is lost.

**Plastic:** Feels light, inexpensive and looks like it lost its depth. It's so clear, no ambiguity, no mystery, so it doesn't really attract my attention. It feels like it's going to be pushed away from me by its lightness when touched.

**Stone:** Rough and very hard. Even if 100 people pile up on a chair-size rock, it won't break. It's like another piece of land on the ground. As with glass, it is perfectly non-flexible. It never changes its appearance. Only time makes it possible. But it feels poetic somehow. Is it because of its general calm and

colorless tone that gives it such a feeling? Or is it the depth of time it would have endured? It is attractive to have the opposite appearance before and after weathering like a very rough rock and a smooth pebble.

Water: No form. It is both flat and the most voluminous. The most flexible and can be the most intimate when touched by me. It completely embraces me. But it always needs a wall to lock it up. Without a wall, it collapses. The collapsed water is absorbed into the ground or evaporated into the atmosphere and disappears.

The conditions of the ideal material I'm looking for seem difficult to be fully fulfilled. It should be able to be touched very softly and have the most intimate relationship with my body. At the same time, it should stand independently without relying on anything, and nevertheless shouldn't break, be sharp or aggressive. In addition, it should not get wet or should be able to be handled easily even if it does get wet. It should have adequate weight and some mystique. My attempt itself to find such ideal materials and fully realize the image from my abstract idea is self-contradictory. The ideal is no lon-



ger ideal when it becomes real. The 'it' in my mind can never be seen or touched, be told, or exist. Only the things that are made of substances from outside of reality and without a touch of the hand of humans can remain ideal, like Christ's robe and airships of science-fiction. Things made through my hand can not be as smooth as perfect. In this respect, my attempt to perfectly realize the image in my mind, an ideal, is a process of *demystifying*.

In this process of demystifying, my expectation for the subversion of the hierarchy is a very important point. From a conventional point of view, there is a hierarchy between the ideal and reality. The ideal is located higher where we hope to climb, while the reality is here, low with us. But at the moment I open the kiln, sometimes this hierarchy is reversed. The moment of opening the kiln is my favorite part of the whole process of making ceramics: the last step. At this moment, I am always surprised by a discrepancy of what is actually there and what was originally in my mind. I seek the ideal and truly believe that I can really approach it, and bring it into reality. But I always end up failing to achieve this, and I realize that what I was actually seeking is this discrepancy between the ideal and reality. In the kiln, there is something that I never expected, but looks higher than the ideal that was in my mind. There it lies, looking at me with an

appearance of more ideal than the ideal that was in my mind which looked vague because it was beyond a layer of fog. This moment of subversion of the hierarchy is more fabulous and exhilarating than anything else. This twist cannot be experienced without the attempt of bringing out the ideal into reality through my act of making. The ideal can never go beyond the ideal, so if they stay in the ideal, nothing more can be created in there. I have experienced several moments of subversion, and the expectation of it seems to be the force that keeps me working on sculptural practice.

A large, stylized white flower with a halftone dot pattern on a black background. The flower has multiple layers of petals, with the outermost layer being the most prominent. The petals are rounded and have a slightly irregular shape, giving it a soft, organic appearance. The halftone pattern consists of small, evenly spaced dots that create a textured effect. The word "Conclusion" is printed in a simple, sans-serif font in the upper left quadrant of the flower's center.

Conclusion

Here I am ending my exploration of smoothness. I investigated its position within communication, the human body and from my own empirical perspective. I first showed how smooth communication, entirely received as positive, confines us in ourselves, on the other hand, how an unpleasant feeling which we are desperately reluctant to share, leads us to experience the ecstasy that takes us out of ourselves. And then I made observations on the obsession towards purity of modern people in the pursuit of a smooth body, and argued on how the meaning of purity and smoothness accepted by the West and the East is different, further on, how it connects with the direction of life ideally pursued in each society. Lastly, I shared my own fascination with the completely personal view on smoothness.

The children's book *The Missing Piece* (1976) by Shel Silverstein is a story of an incomplete circle rolling around looking for its missing piece. The story centers on a circular creature that is missing a wedge-shaped piece of itself. It doesn't like it, and sets out to find its missing piece, singing:

“Oh, I'm lookin' for my missin' piece  
I'm lookin' for my missin' piece  
Hi-dee-ho, here I go  
lookin' for my missin' piece”



The creature starts out on a grand adventure searching for the perfect piece to complete itself, while singing and enjoying the scenery. But after the circle finally finds the exact-sized wedge that fits it, it begins to realize that it can no longer do the things it used to enjoy doing, like singing or rolling slowly enough to enjoy the company of a worm or butterfly. It decides that it was happier when searching for the missing piece than actually having it. So it gently puts the piece down, and continues searching happily.<sup>42</sup>

Starting from a huge affection for smoothness, I took a walk at the surface of the sphere, poked it to see inside and saw unexpected things. The dangers of it made me stay away from it. I became scared of the smoothness, but I still loved it. It looked so perfect. It was the ideal that I wanted to reach. But through this journey, I became aware that what I've been looking for was not the perfect smoothness, but the wonderful things that I never expected to encounter on the way to the smoothness. Now, it seems that smoothness has become a tool, not an aim in itself to me. By rolling around to search for the smoothness, I expect to meet other things, not the smoothness itself. Those other things are not something that is out of reach,

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*The Missing Piece (book)*, Wikipedia, 16 December 2020.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Missing\\_Piece\\_\(book\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Missing_Piece_(book))

but something that is closer to me than anything else. Looking forward to meeting them, I, as a kind of circle, again am starting to roll around in search for smoothness.



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