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# Unspooling of Experience into Space: Diary Projects

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**Unspooling of Experience into Space: *Diary Projects***

by

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A thesis presented to the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts  
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requirements for the degree of  
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**Abstract**

Through meditation and layering of yarns, I visually present the process of embracing myself, specifically my personal traumas, and cultural duality. The tension between concealing and revealing of constant shifts in emotion is a crucial facet of my artwork. Evolving from an art therapy technique, the Winnicott Squiggle Game, I am drawn to the connections one can make with one another from a simple cluster of lines and create images as a result. These images are a result of intention and accident, a combination that mimics inevitable life choices.

My method of creating each canvas is a very intricate process and becomes a form of meditation, embodying the essential meaning of my work. Expressing obsession of art making and repetitive labor with use of yarn is essential for me. Tangible interaction with the fluid yarn, that I do not have complete control over, is crucial as I 'draw' with thread and yarn. These sets of lines create texture and movement, which allow for a distinct experience of the viewer depending on what has been done to these organic forms. The organic forms represent the macro and micro; the forms all come together to be complete. The audience are able to experience my process of art making and meditation.

In the thesis, I will discuss the importance of repeated artmaking process and influences of abstract expressionism. I will also examine how emotions and sympathy is universal through my visualization of a space that encompasses the viewers.

## Introduction

My practice of artmaking is predominantly focused on process and the meditation that comes from it. The process is executed in intricate steps that are consistent; preparing thread or yarn which is cut into lengths, priming the canvas surface with gesso or glue, laying the cut lengths onto the surface, and setting them with paint mediums. The repetitive labor of laying down thread and yarn onto the surface becomes a ritual that creates a rhythmic, serene, therapeutic space. The composition of strands of thread or yarn that are tangled together on the surface is an outcome of accident and intentional decisions made consciously with materials that I do not have full control over.

Labor is usually understood in terms of its physical values, but, intellectual labor was considered to be the most demanding, work intensive, as it demanded a different set of mind.<sup>i</sup> One needed to be exceedingly thoughtful and careful in order to develop a philosophical question. Nowadays, meditation can be considered a type of both physical and intellectual labor that allows room for the understanding of oneself and of one's surroundings. Repetitive labor accompanied by meditation focuses on process rather than outcome. In my artworks, I present the viewers with a space to experience my repetitive labor; in the concept embodied by each strand of thread or yarn.

The technique that I developed myself derives from an art therapy technique called the Winnicott Squiggle Game. The Winnicott Squiggle Game is an interactive technique, conducted between a therapist and a subject, where each draws doodles while the other tries to find imagery in the drawings.<sup>ii</sup> The goal of the technique is for the therapist to break the ice, communicate and understand the subject. D. W. Winnicott, who created the Squiggle Game, asserts how it is crucial for the therapist to bring out the inner state from the patient, "Psychotherapy takes place

in the overlap of two areas of playing, that of the patient and that of the therapist. Psychotherapy has to do with two people playing together. The corollary of this is that where playing is not possible then the work done by the therapist is directed towards bringing the patient from a state of not being able to play into a state of being able to play.”<sup>iii</sup>

Use of the Winnicott Squiggle Game technique allows me as an artist to play and explore with a purpose, giving myself the capacity to use the space given, which leads to meditation. As Winnicott states, “it is in the space between inner and outer world, which is also the space between people--the transitional space--that intimate relationships and creativity occur,”<sup>iv</sup> I make full use of artmaking solely for the creation of meditation and space. Instead of interacting with different subjects, I draw lines with thread and yarn. I visualize emotions and feelings, which are very vulnerable, and cannot be seen; only experienced. Through the use of haptic materials, I celebrate the vulnerability of emotions and create boundaries of patterns as a means of navigating through something unfathomable. The thread and yarn work is a drawing medium, allowing the recording narrative of feelings, and the painted surface becomes a journal of inscription. Through the use of tactile and tangible material, I make visible the physical repetitive labor onto the canvas, strand by strand. The resulting composition becomes a symbol of meditation and thought.

My use of yarn and thread is also to visualize the action of spooling and unspooling of the painted surface and a ball of yarn. My artmaking technique with addition of thread sometimes implies the action of dismantling the canvas, whereas only addition was made. This is only sometimes suggested as the use of yarn certainly only suggests addition because the characteristics of the canvas and yarn are different. As these many lengths of thread and yarn come together, I weave in my acknowledgment of the bond between other interlinked

relationships; whether these be emotions, sufferings, acquaintances, or life events. By presenting the outcome which carries all the traces of its making, the artwork reveals to the viewers each strand and trace of repetitive labor. The final product embodies the repetitive and meditative process.

### **Asian Beliefs**

Although my practice of artmaking derives from Western techniques and ideology regarding therapy, my practice also carries some aspects of Eastern ideology regarding meditation. My practice is both an autobiographical act and a performance, acknowledging the interlinked relationships between understanding myself, others, and the surroundings. Geri De Paoli is an artist and an art historian, who wrote an essay in *The Trans Parent Thread* on Asian art, and explains the influence of the Asian philosophy to the American culture,

Asian sources, which filtered into American intellectual consciousness, included de-centering the sacred, rejection of absolute judgements, acceptance of paradox, recognition of the Yin-Yang (relativism), a trust in chance or randomness, and a notion of cyclical processes... Artists chose mechanisms of meditation whereby they placed the viewer/participant within a framework of experience. Works of art were considered to be the mirrors in which the viewer could see through to the "Self." The intent was to achieve a new perspective or an altered awareness of a dynamic network of connections.<sup>v</sup>

Mandalas are spiritual rituals of sand drawings that are created in Buddhist cultures in order to understand the essence of the universe and transcend the visible reality and are destroyed once the image is complete. In the Zen mind, the target is a mandala, a centering device, a place for facing paradox and of dissolving the duality of reality and illusion.<sup>vi</sup> 'Manda' of mandala means essence and 'la' means to change. The original meaning of mandala is that the essence is always changing due to various conditions, and that nothing is permanent. Through

the creation of mandalas, the monks meditate in effort to reach enlightenment and understand the ways of universe.<sup>vii</sup> Through such action, presenting the viewers with the experience of repetitive labor and meditation is my focal point. *Diary Project: Part 2* is a presentation of a total-environment, surrounding all planes of the interior of a room with rhapsodic paintings layered with yarn. The circular forms on each artwork come together to bring wholeness, entering through meditation. The artmaking process is a self absorbing action while being very silent and the experience of a consciousness to enter into this space also allows for self-absorption. Self-absorption, like mandalas, takes place during the artmaking process, as well as in viewing art. A square room, filled with circular forms produces an effect of circular consciousness. The total-environment produced becomes a 3D mandala both for viewers and the artist.



## Obsession of Shoes and Karma



Figure 1. Image of personal shoes only worn in Chicago

As a little child, who had to travel and move in between different countries very often, there is one ritual I developed. I flew twice every month back and forth from China to South Korea through 5<sup>th</sup> grade to 10<sup>th</sup> grade, and sometimes more. This left me very unsettled; never being able to find home, or to find peace. I remember the first time I had to move to a different country and I begged my parents if to stay, but I knew we had to go. I remember the last day before I took off, I took a short walk around the area where I always went out to play. As I was trying to capture images of the area, slides and swings and every grain of sand in the playground, I looked down at my shoes. Then I thought to myself, ‘these would be my last steps here’ and stepped onto the ground as hard as I could, leaving footsteps on the ground, but also for my shoes to capture and remember the last steps I took where I thought I belonged. This started my

obsession with shoes, and my belief that shoes carry the surrounding environment of where I have been. As I made acquaintances, I was forced to move again. Whenever I was to visit a certain city, I was not sure if I would be able to return. There is a Korean phrase that goes, 'even brushing past a person is one's karma.' Karma used here means a destined relation, and there is a unit to count the destined relation of brushing past a person called 'gup.' It is believed that it takes at least 500 gup to brush past a person, 7000 gup to become wife and husband, 8000 gup to be a child and a parent, and 10000 gup to be a teacher and a student. I strongly believe in this idea of a slight acquaintance being something very significant. The idea of leaving a place became a metaphor for me of losing somebody and losing my own identity. Soon it became one of my biggest fears. In order to overcome this fear, I would wear a certain pair of shoes that are only worn in different cities. The effort of capturing and preserving my steps and my surrounding environments is something that has become a ritual for me.

*Diary Project: Part 1* and *Diary Project: Part 2* are the outcomes of me unraveling a ball of yarn. Unraveling the gathered form creates something that visualizes this idea of destined relations of days, acquaintances, and emotions. Yarn in a ball cannot tell a story, like how my shoes that stay in the closet cannot tell a story. This is also why the viewers are not to wear shoes while viewing *Diary Project: Part 2*. I wish for the soles of the feet of the viewers to absorb the total-environment and empathize with my belief of connection with each element, instead of capturing the total-environment presented. Through *Diary Project: Part 1* and *Diary Project: Part 2*, I am able to decipher my interpretation of my beliefs and allow the viewers to trace my steps.

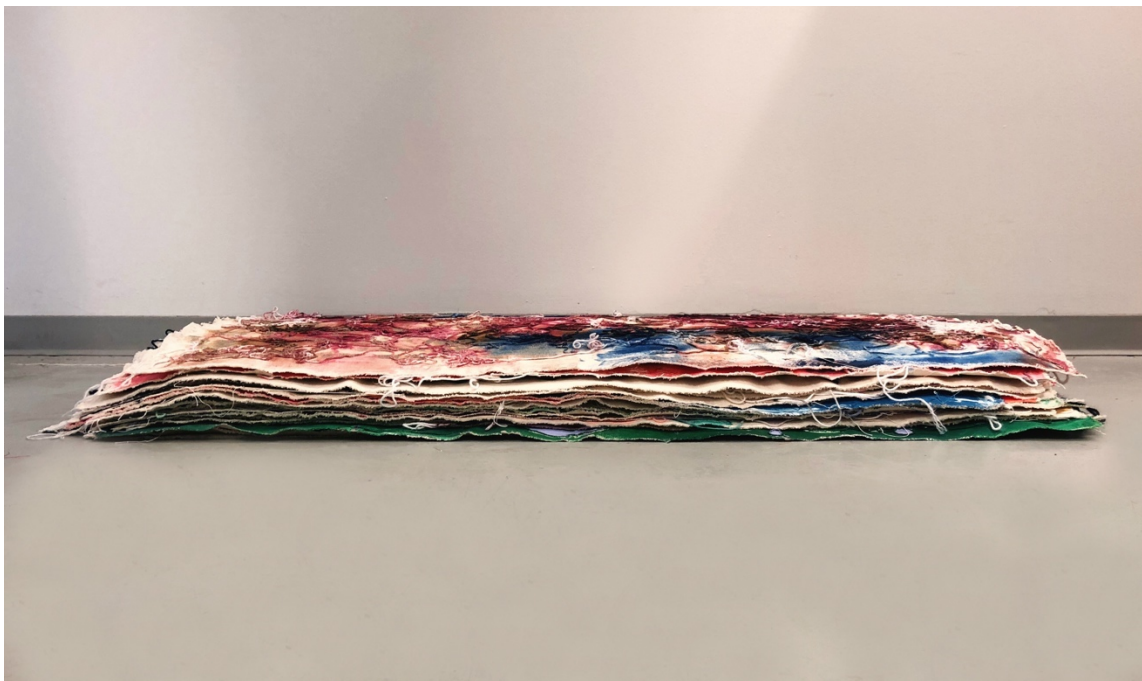
*Diary Project: Part 1*

Figure 2. JinHee Kim, *Diary Project: Part 1* as one stack, thread, yarn, mixed media on canvas, 44"x36"x10", 2017

*Diary Project: Part 1* is an interactive, sculptural piece, that is activated when viewers manipulate its elements. The work developed from pages in my sketchbooks that are pasted with yarn, then painted. My sketchbooks also become art objects as they become very dense and bulky because of the layered yarn and thread. *Diary Project: Part 1* evokes the pagination in my sketchbooks, displayed as two stacks of adorned unstretched canvases, presented on the floor. The artwork allows viewers to mimic turning “pages” by going through the stacks. The canvases are placed adjacent to each other, edge to edge, to resemble a book. However, how each stack is activated is dependent on the viewer’s choice.

***Diary Project: Part 2***

The artwork *Diary Project: Part 2* is an installation piece that reiterates the design of *Diary Project: Part 1*, with additional pieces. The original project consisted of multiple unstretched painted canvases that were stacked one upon another on the floor in such a manner that a viewer was expected to flip through the pile, as if one were to turning pages. In *Diary Project: Part 1*, each surface was adorned with thread and yarn, then treated with different mediums. In *Diary Project: Part 2*, the ‘pages’ are placed adjacent to each other on the wall, where all can be viewed, with additions to the original project. In the *Diary Project: Part 2*, all planes of the space are activated, including the ceiling and the floor, creating an environment.

In the *Diary Project: Part 2*, once the viewers enter the viewing space, they are confronted with dynamic colors that cover all surfaces. An immersive ‘total environment’ welcomes the viewers, as the suspended canvases of varying sizes with yarn or thread coming off of them drape over the viewers; a visually overwhelming situation of stretched and unstretched canvases. Even before the audience can enter the environment, the floor, beautifully decked with unstretched canvases, bewilders them. Viewers are expected to enter the space without shoes in order to fully experience the environment. As the colorfully treated thread that come off from the sides of the suspended canvases barely touch the audience, the three-dimensional thread and yarns and the colors of the walls create a sense of comforting enclosure.



Figure 3. JinHee Kim, Detail of *Diary Project: Part 2*, thread, yarn, mixed media on canvas, 2018

The walls and the floors can visually resemble a rug merchant in South East Asia or the Middle East, which captivates customers eyes very easily. When one enters a rug merchant setting, one is usually invited in for a welcome drink, such as tea. The merchant would greet the customer with a casual yet friendly approach. There would also be a little personal side story of the merchant, and the customer would not be able to make a purchase after going through of all

these experiences. Visiting a rug merchant is a mash of sensory experiences, captivating all the senses of a person. Like a visit to a rug merchant, the phenomenology of full sensorial experience applies to the total-environment of *Diary Project: Part 2*.



Figure 4. JinHee Kim, Separate detail of *Diary Project: Part 2*, thread, yarn, and acrylics on canvas, 20"x20", 2018

There are also a few stretched canvases that complete the installation like puzzle pieces. As some parts of the stretched and unstretched canvases are left unworked, colors of mediums and materials used are emphasized by juxtaposition, creating contrast. As a whole, the use of thread and yarn is dominant, as these materials are my version of drawn lines. Varying colors

and the thickness of the thread and yarn emphasize the shifting density of line and material choice. As materials are very pliable, the lines created are very organic and fluid, flowing from one canvas to another.

The light source shines on the suspended panels, making shadows on the wall from the lines of yarn that dangle from the sides of the panels. The shadows overlap the organic lines of the yarn on the wall, creating an atmosphere of harmony with the colored and uncolored lines. The circular lines created by the thread and yarn create patterns throughout the planes of the space. The repeating pattern forms a certain rhythm in the viewing process. However, when looked at closely, the rhythm slows down, as the pattern requires one to follow from one line to another. The space can evoke a symmetry, however no one form is identical to another. When looked at from afar, the viewer's eye movement can be rapid, whereas when looked up closely, the eye slows down. No one single piece of the whole catches the viewer's eye and therefore creates an uncertain movement from one direction to another while viewing the walls.

When the installation is viewed as a whole, the pieces that are presented on the wall can be described as the background, and the pieces on the ceiling and the floor can be the foreground. However, when the installation is viewed up close, the background can be how the surfaces of the canvases are treated, and the foreground as how the thread and yarn are treated and laid onto the surfaces. The background and the foreground vacillates depending on how the viewer wishes to perceive the installation.

The texture of the installation can be described as three-dimensional, and also warm, as the elements are mounted onto every surface of the site. Even though thread and yarn in this case are not treated like how they are typically found in a domestic space, the physical characteristics of thread and yarn gives off a warm ambience.

## Total Environment and Ufan Lee

Understanding of the artwork and its relation to its environment is essential, as well as the atmosphere created by an artwork in a situation. When approaching artworks, understanding of the artists' intentions of placement must be made. Ufan Lee is a Korean minimalist artist who often is referred to as an artist who interprets a Western movement, minimalism, in an Asian perception in Japan and Korea.

Lee studied philosophy and art in Japan, and also contributed to the Mono-ha movement in Japan. After he released a critique, *Beyond Being and Nothingness*, on a key artist from the Mono-ha movement, Sekine Nobuo, he had a great impact in creating a foundation for theoretical analyses of the Mono-ha movement. The Mono-ha movement is when an artist presents untouched raw materials, such as wood or stone and uses these materials in paintings or sculptures. By presenting raw materials as they are, Mono-ha approaches the understanding of the object, space, circumstances, relationship, and its political and environmental context. Mono-ha presents a new universe of the object, disregarding the learned cognition of the object, often manipulated and presented as desired forms. Although I do not present materials in their raw forms, I use thread and yarn in an unconventional way than they are traditionally utilized. In Lee's sculptures, Rocks are presented in their natural state, varying in size and color. However, steel plates are manipulated into the artist's desired forms. Steel plates are made from extracting components from stones and rocks; therefore these two share the same origin whereas they do not share the same properties and qualities. Similar to how I use canvas fabric as well as thread, to find significance in unraveling and dismantling similar materials, Lee finds meaning in the process and the outcome of allowing these two very similar, yet opposite materials, to exist in the same space.



Ufan Lee presents everything that surrounds an actual art piece as also a part of his artwork by creating a space to be enjoyed as a whole. In a lecture, Lee mentioned that, “There is a huge canvas hung on the gallery wall with a few dots on them. Some enjoy, some feel the tension, some do self reflections due to the atmosphere.. There are some who view the show with positive mindsets. But there are also some who say, ‘What is this? He wants us to see a dot? This is nonsense.’ and just leave with laughter. Is that wrong? It is difficult to say who is right or wrong. But the truth is that the artists wants to create a space that gives feelings as it allows, rather than to enter the space and see an object.”<sup>viii</sup> Lee claims that he is not creating separate art pieces, but is desiring to manipulate an area for understanding the corresponding communication created between the materials and the space. Lee’s opinion of the term correspondence is very similar to my ideas on total-environment and destined relations. I create an atmosphere with intense repetitive patterns. Like Lee, I pursue a total environment, utilizing all planes of a space.

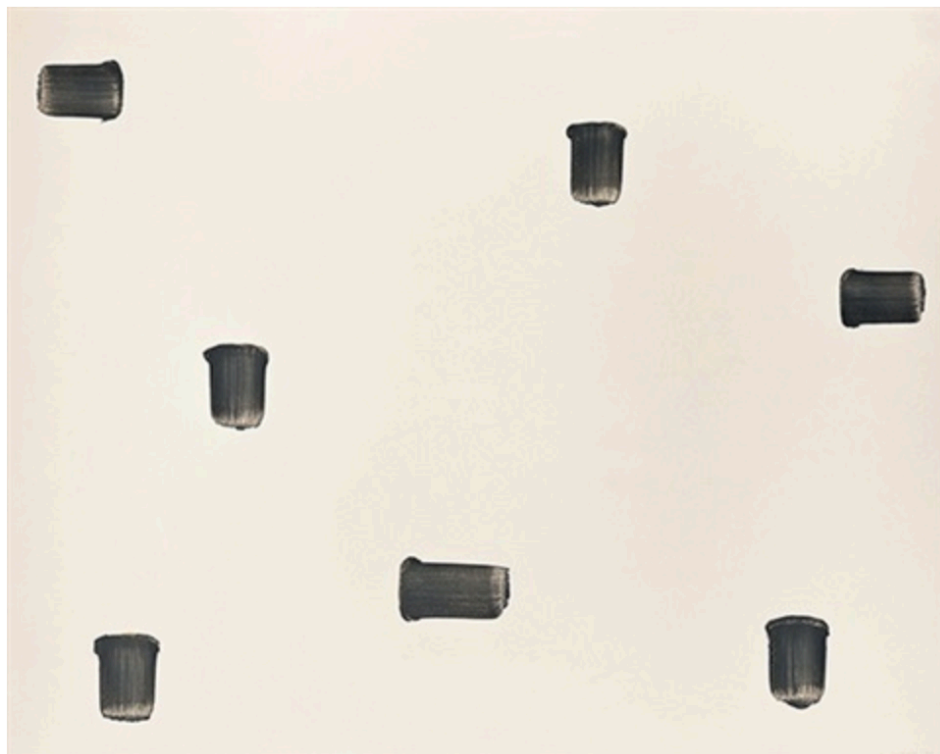


Figure 5. Ufan Lee, *Correspondence*, oil and mineral pigment on canvas, 71.1"x89.2", 1993

In the 1990s, Lee made his signature paintings, the *Correspondence* series. All of the materials used to make these works, including canvas, paint, and brushes, were specially manufactured just for the artist. The canvas fabric is very thick, and the canvas itself up to two inches in depth and already has up to five layers of gesso and white paint on it. Also, the artist finds the perfect rocks and stones to grind up and create paints, and uses the brushes which are specially made to create a perfect sized dot. A unique blend of minerals and stone dust, with pigments only known to the artist, is key to understand the concept of relationship that the artist pursues. As Lee is most concerned about the concept of relationship and each aspect's correspondences, he uses the most traditional and archaic method to proceed in making an artwork. After all the materials are ready, Lee lays the canvas on the floor with a piece of paper cut to the size of the desired dot, and moves these around to see where the dot should go. Lee would bend down to paint the perfect dot, and Lee says that even a breath could ruin the dot, therefore he has to paint the dot when he is breathing out or has to hold his breath. Lee repeats this process, for about two months to finish one piece. Lee's artmaking procedures are very similar to mine specifically in how I compare my process with mandalas. I work on the floor with all my concentration on the artmaking process, integrating meditation and creation.

Throughout a vast series of artworks, Lee pursues balance and harmony. Like the alchemists of Medieval Europe, Lee suggests that all matter is related, and that all matter shares a common substance. Relationship is the most prevalent idea in Lee's work, the idea of coexistence that cannot be ignored. Though his works are comprised of very simple qualities, Lee wishes to change the viewers' perception of the display space, even its empty parts, allowing viewers to have a new understanding of their surroundings. Lee believes that everything is in correspondence with each other and, by creating a space where an object meets another object,

Lee expresses that idea of correspondence. Human to human, object to human, human to universe are all corresponding metaphorical subjects. His artworks include presenting a steel plate along with a stone, or having a large dot on a canvas, or drawing repetitive lines until there is no paint left on the brush. Relationship and correspondence became an essential topic for him as he was a foreigner in various countries for a long period of time. He focuses on himself as a connecting bridge from one cultural aspect to another rather than to expose himself as an artist.

Lee, as a minimalist artist, focuses on creating an atmosphere, a space for one to realize, for one to ponder. Also through use of raw materials, Lee presents relationships between object to object and to the viewers. Opposite yet very similar materials equalize the tension of the contrasting properties of matter. Lee creates rhythmic eye movement by using balance between negative and positive space. Although my presentation of artwork is very different from Lee, I also aim to create an atmosphere, a total environment, for understanding of relationships and correspondences.

## **Mapping**

Idea of mapping is significant for *Diary Project: Part 2*, as each piece come together to take up all planes of a space. Making evidence of self-reflection can essentially be interpreted as mapping of my emotive shifts dealing with different subject matter each time. Maps are usually created to understand exterior surroundings, whereas *Diary Project: Part 2* allows for a space to understand my inner self. *Diary Project: Part 2*, is an enlarged vision of my mind map and an emotional map, beyond the boundaries of geography and convention.<sup>ix</sup> Layers of thread and yarn, and layers of raw canvases are much more easily observed in the magnified, amplified

version of my sketchbooks. As thread and yarn work as drawing elements, multiple layers of thread and yarn above each other can be created, and the mapmaking process becomes the layering of these mediums.

### **Lygia Clark and Process**

Lygia Clark is a renowned Brazilian artist who focused on geometric abstraction but later focused on alterations of physical experiences of perception as a means to marry herself to the outer world, and art to life. Thierry Davilla, an art historian and the curator at MAMCO in Geneva, wrote an essay on the artworks of Lygia Clark. He states, “Since they are in themselves nothing but pure openness, they elicit movements, processes, or actions that are alone the bearers of meaning – meaning in the process of constituting itself: an emerging life-line, which briefly takes on a plastic form as a way of experiencing itself.”<sup>x</sup> Davilla explains how Clark’s works present a space to experience the artworks as they are; of their purity, thus giving life to each of them. Clark’s works suggest the process of establishing themselves. Similar to Clark’s works, I define my artworks to act in a similar way, presenting them in such a way that viewers are not only able to conceive the final outcome as a fixed picture, but the process of my artmaking can be somewhat relived by following each strand of thread and yarn. My art making is about giving a space, an experience of the process, and “about the production of therapeutic space. It considers the ways in which art making, in particular, opens up spaces for the reworking of subjectivities.”<sup>xi</sup> As DePaoli explains, “the conclusion is that personal expression is universal if art is made without superficial ego or self-conscious planning and that art, and the viewing of the art, is process.”<sup>xii</sup> My artmaking is a result of a process without self-conscious planning. The

visual outcome of the process is a composition of thin and thick lines that come together to form organic patterns that do not stop at the edge of the surface, but continue to grow, dangling beyond the edges of the surface.

### **Agnes Martin and Gilles Deleuze**



Figure 6. Agnes Martin, *I Love the Whole World*, acrylics and graphite on canvas, 60"x60", 1999

Artworks by Agnes Martin are illuminated with horizontal pastel toned planes that are emphasized by the parallel alignment of these planes. Grid-like arrangement of the structures within each artwork give power to each of her paintings, allowing the viewers to ponder. In a

review of Martin's show at the Whitney Museum in New York, Barry Schwabsky writes that, "At its best – which is often – Martin's work is hypnotic; its near-emptiness, if you give yourself over to it, seems to hush the hurly-burly of everyday life, the world that Wordsworth once observed was "too much with us; late and soon." Two minutes in front of her work – or even 15 – can have its rewards."<sup>xiii</sup> Because the artist uses only lines and colors to create forms, the viewers are forced to look closely and wonder through the vibrations to the resonance a thousand lines create. The rewards Schwabsky suggests may be a realization of the contrast between the void and the presence, and its connectedness to the viewers. Later in the essay, Schwabsky adds about Martin's paintings

"[They] are about losing yourself in something ungraspable, and the time you give to them, that minute or more or even less, is time that loses its measure because it is unending transformation. Martin explained it this way: 'I used to pay attention to the clouds in the sky... I paid close attention for a month to see if they ever repeated. They don't repeat. And I don't think life does either.' [...] painting hundreds of variations on more or less the same painting ...but only in the sense that the sky is always the same. Martin allows the viewers' minds to wander freely and "get what they need from a painting."<sup>xiv</sup>

Despite Martin's works being non-representational, they convey a sense of immanence. Losing oneself in self absorption, as mentioned before, like Martin's works, is crucial in my artworks. Repetition does not mean the same object replicating but the repetition of individual elements, in Martin's, as in my artworks. My use of thread and yarn acts like the drawings of grids in Agnes Martin's paintings. Briony Fer, an art historian, critic, curator, and a professor of Art History at University College London, argues that "Martin's graphite-on-acrylic grids manifest the Deleuzian formulation of repetition and difference, or repetition as infinite difference, therefore closing the gap between the many binary terms that determine Martin's

reception [...] Martin's graphic traces are like 'lines of flight' that both demarcate and escape the parameters that enclose them."<sup>xv</sup>

Deleuze is a renowned French philosopher who discussed differences within repetition, "secret, disguised and hidden repetitions, animated by the perpetual displacement of a difference, restore bare, mechanical and stereotypical repetitions, within and without us."<sup>xvi</sup> Here, difference is not a stable, inactive word, but rather takes an active form, to exist as a different being.

Deleuze does not generalize difference, nor neutralize difference using repetition and sameness, similar to how I view each strand of thread and yarn. Repetition does not have to be the reproduction of the same product over and over. Also, repetition is not a process of an alignment of regularity but is a process of unique singularities that are condensed to a set. Also, 'line of flight' is a term often used by Deleuze to support his concept of how human beings need their own black holes to escape. Deleuze expresses how society mechanizes the human being through the parameters of tax, culture, law, education, etc., and that we seek escape from these capital regulations, aspiring to find our own identity. To escape from these fixed boundaries, after critical understandings of social norm, we search for our own path of creative activities to deviate from the boundaries. This is the black hole, the line of flight to which Deleuze refers.<sup>xvii</sup>

The paradox of containing and escaping the parameters of Martin's reception is explained through the lines of flight, a black hole for each individual, which allows the tendency of one's desire to break loose from fixed perceptions. Lines of flight surpass deterritorialization and reterritorialization, unmasking laws and regulations, leaving the senses and instincts.

Repetitive labor with thread and yarn in my practice signifies a reconciliation of relationships that are woven together into harmony, each act of laying of thread being unique, in a way similar to the use of lines in Martin's works. Michael Newman, a current professor of art

writing at Goldsmiths University of London, clarifies, “for the viewer to perceive lines as repeating rather than as a simply a group of different lines, there must be an identity between them, they must in some sense be the same. But in order for them to repeat, each instance must also be different. Thus the repetition of lines on the paintings generates not one but two kinds of difference: first, qualitative variation in which no line is the same, and, second, the ‘pure’ difference generated by the repetition of the same.”<sup>xviii</sup> The overlay of lines created by thread and yarn demonstrates the repetition of maximum difference, uniqueness, forming a system of pattern and organization, that does and does not have a beginning and an end at the same time.

### **Formalism, Yayoi Kusama and Joan Mitchell**

The term formalism in art means giving form the most importance of any qualities in a given work. According to the formalists, it is possible for one to comprehend the qualities, the properties, and relations to be abstracted, only when an artwork is visually perceived and analyzed. In the field of visual arts, formalism refers to modern art theory in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and to its theorists such as Clive Bell, Roger Fry, and Clement Greenberg. Bell proposed a common denominator from different cultures and timeline under the branch of visual arts that ties the subjects together. One of the qualities of the common denominator is called the “significant form,” a term to define the marriage of lines and colors that causes artistic emotions. Art historians, including Alois Riegl, claimed that artists have an “artistic volition” of form, and that the purest form of creative arts is music, and therefore all forms of art aspire to fulfill the conditions of music. Thus, a concept of formal abstraction was constructed, whose characteristics included a tendency to defy content in favor of a pure form of abstraction and



expression. The formalists made artworks that were not associated to the outer world. Thus, the formalists progressed onto detaching form in relations to part and whole, and asserting art as being distinctively individual, as a being on its own.<sup>xix</sup>

The ideology of formalism may seem idealistic at first; however, formalism was criticized by other artists and scholars, and was challenged, and eventually challenged by the postmodernists. Although formalists believed that one has to leave one's background in order to shed outer layers and reach the center, to understand the core essence, this idea became the opposite of utopia as history progressed. Formal abstraction began to be exhausted and the lexical semantic aspect began to feel tedious to the public. Formalists were criticized for creating an 'elite' art and being irresponsible by not discussing social and political issues, and only being focused on expressions the public could not understand. Many Postmodernists believed that in art, there is no core essence, but only multiple layers of meanings that are reworked and blended together. Therefore, the postmodernists believed that one does not need to leave the 'outside world' aside when experiencing art, but rather that it should be understood that everyone has a different background. However, the postmodernist approach towards experiencing art condones disorder and chaos, which can also be considered as a flaw in contemporary perception. A group of artists who worked in between the formalist and the postmodernist propositions called themselves the 'second-generation abstract expressionists.' The second-generation abstract expressionists approached art with works that seemed abstract but carried lyrical qualities. The artists from this movement did not disregard but embraced the emotive qualities of expression in artmaking.

One distinctive artist from the second-generation abstract expressionists was Joan Mitchell, who painted across the boundaries of formalism and abstract expressionism. Mitchell

was an abstract expressionist painter who knew very well the potential of abstraction to deliver and communicate her ideas, capturing emotions and feelings. Art historian Judith Bernstock notes, “Expression of feeling has always been crucial to [Mitchell’s] painting and has reflected both a heightened sensitivity to the condition of objects in her environment and a life filled with emotional crises.”<sup>xx</sup>



Figure 7. Joan Mitchell, *La Grande Vallée XIV (For a Little While)*, oil on canvas, 110"x 236 1/4", 1983

Because of the abstract forms and lines that run across her paintings, which suggest emotions and movement, Mitchell’s enormous paintings are often described as action paintings, whereas Mitchell did not specifically define her artworks to be such. “Mitchell’s paintings seem to arise from specific emotional occasions: from a terrible argument in a beautiful kitchen, ecstasy in a dark city, disappointment on a warm afternoon.”<sup>xxi</sup> Art critic Dave Hickey writes about his understanding of Mitchell’s work as sending a message of human beings as vulnerable creatures under the universal cycle of life and death. “Mitchell’s paintings might be attributed to the fact that she believed in death-- and life too, ... the attribute that defines their bitter glory best

for me is their uninflected atheism, which is not the atheism of one who has forsaken God but of one who never thought to imagine that we were anything more than lonely creatures on a big planet.”<sup>xxii</sup> Mitchell’s paintings are inclusive yet paradoxical, in ways that carry the ambivalent, opposite emotions in one surface, “like a living organism, a microcosm of the universe-- a world of colors suggestive of sadness and loss, hopefulness and fulfillment...in which the life and death of humanity and nature are felt.”<sup>xxiii</sup> Mitchell’s paintings are experienced through sensations of colors and the mark-making of the artist’s brushstrokes. Through her use of gesture as feeling and unison of colorful abstraction and devotion to subject matter, Mitchell’s paintings represent a timeless and deeply felt humanistic response to the good in humanity, an “appeal to our basic and universal concerns such as freedom, death, and immortality.”<sup>xxiv</sup> Expression of emotions is a fundamental human instinct and through release and dissemination of emotions, Mitchell was able to bring a universal language to her audience. One can experience artworks by Mitchell without having to shed one’s background and can encounter fully Mitchell’s colors and forms.

Another female artist, Yayoi Kusama, emphasizes the importance of one’s desire to express and share in her installation works. Kusama’s use of her signature polka dots or ‘dots’ that cover an object or entire surroundings are due to her obsession with expressing what she experiences. Curator Alexandra Munroe explains and presents Kusama in the catalogue on the artist’s 1989 retrospective show, “She has said that she suffers from hallucinatory visions where she sees ‘nets’ and ‘dots’ that profoundly affect her artistic development and manifest themselves in her visual vocabulary. She was recurrently afflicted by hallucinations, and by visions of repetitive and proliferating patterns of dots, nets, or flowers which spread over her surroundings and threatened to dissolve her own self.”<sup>xxv</sup> Kusama seeks radically different

modes of expression by unfixing, dissolving, or expanding unconventional expressive modes.<sup>xxvi</sup> Kusama accumulates, repeats, proliferates, and spreads her obsessed visions of the patterns of the same elements, connecting her paranoia to her artmaking. Such artmaking process is the only way the artist can liberate herself through a form of catharsis.



Figure 8. Yayoi Kusama, *Kusama's Peep Show or Endless Love Show*, hexagonal mirrored room and electric lights, 1966

Visual patterns of her hallucinations duplicate endlessly in a proposition of repetition and proliferation. By constructing mirrored spaces, Kusama's use of mirrors produces reflection upon reflection. Proliferation therefore is Kusama's obsession but also becomes a kind of personal erasure. One's existence is no longer significant, as a status of 'self-obliteration' is reached through an infinite macrocosm. Also, Kusama has been very socio-politically active as

an artist, especially in fields such as gay liberation and human rights. Kusama rejects being identified with any art movement, whether pop, minimalist, or Zero group. Her path in artmaking can be understood as autobiographical self-discovery or broadly, as a resistance against ordinary life and society, to fight for something that is greater than her mental illness, desire, pain, and her hallucinations. “Kusama acknowledges that this level of production has psychedelic advantages, calling her work ‘art-medicine,’ both because it allows her to gain control over her extreme anxieties and also because the activity involved is, in itself, healing.”<sup>xxvii</sup> Kusama’s ability to grab one’s attention is Kusama’s witty and humorous attitude while dealing with such solemn subject matter, the vivid colors, and the visual richness that immerse viewers.

Both Joan Mitchell and Yayoi Kusama are female artists who express their personal concern and experience to viewers. While both artists are driven by different personal interests to create art, through examination of their artworks, it can be inferred that their instinct is to express and share their sympathy towards the universe. Both artists are very inclusive about the duality of their processes of expression. Oppositions of form and subject matters coexist within the content, as well as the outcome of their practice. These artists are concerned with what their audiences see, but also with how their own expressions of their personal experience are visually represented; similar to the ideology of the formalists. However, the fact that these two artists were not only solely concerned with the forms of their artworks, but with how their experience and emotions were portrayed formally, demonstrates how art can be a blend of formalism and expression. Form is the universal language that allows for communication without intellectual knowledge of the other. However, in understanding any artwork, a basic knowledge of the artist’s driving force must be given to fully understand the artist’s intention. A reconsideration of

the formalist movement, or rather, considering formalism as one among many other major factors in understanding art and artist is crucial.

## **Conclusion**

Like the formalists, I strongly believe that form itself can convey emotions. However, I disagree with the formalists that context is an impediment in considering form as a universal language. Also, like the postmodernists, I believe that individual experience, understanding and interpretation of such experiences are essential, but do not disregard the notion of ultimate universal truths and principles. *Diary Project: Part 2* carries a shared spirit between these two movements, conflating with the second generation abstract expressionists. One cannot see a 'day' or recreate something identical to one. *Diary Project: Part 2* is a narrative of feelings and emotions, trying to create the unseeable in an expansive configuration. *Diary Project: Part 2* is a visualization of something that cannot be seen, by creating boundaries and patterns, as a way of navigating through something unfathomable.

In my art practice, I draw attention to the process of meditation in art making through repetitive labor. My meticulous use of simplified forms of lines and geometric forms is meant to communicate this understanding. The thread and yarn in my artworks are evidence of repetitive labor. By looking at these traces of therapeutic and meditative acts, the viewers also become a witness to this meditation and are able to experience the process by looking at the intricate arrangements of organic forms that are both intentional and accidental. The patterns that naturally form as a result of the layering of the thread and yarn assemble into individual works then come together to create a whole. *Diary Project: Part 2* is an installation that uses all sides of

a space; the floor, the ceiling, and all of the walls, except for the entrance; which instead enchants the audience with captivating colors and mediums. The thread and yarn utilizes all of the surfaces, while crossing the boundaries of the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional. Visually working as both lines, and as tangible objects, the main medium radiates throughout the ‘total-environment,’ creating a warm and soft yet rhapsodic ambience, a manifestation of the medium as lines. Through use of enveloping repetition, I rediscover the bond of relationships that are destined for each other.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> Konrad Paul Liessmann and Manfred Fullsack, *Arbeit*, vol. 1 (Vienna: Facultas Wuv Universitaets, 2009).
- <sup>ii</sup> L. R. Berger, "The Winnicott Squiggle Game: a vehicle for communicating with the school-aged child.," *Pediatrics.*, December 1980, , accessed October 1, 2017, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/7005855>.
- <sup>iii</sup> D. W. Winnicott, *Playing And Reality* (S.l.: Routledge, 2017), 38.
- <sup>iv</sup> Donald W. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena," *Oxford Clinical Psychology*, 1953, 89.
- <sup>v</sup> Gail Gelburd and Geri DePaoli, *The trans parent thread: Asian philosophy in recent American art* (Hempstead, NY: Hofstra University, 1990), 15-16.
- <sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.
- <sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.
- <sup>viii</sup> Ufan Lee, "Art of Negative Space" (lecture, Special Lecture: Humanities, SBS CNBC, Seoul).
- <sup>ix</sup> Katharine A. Harmon, *You Are Here: Personal Geographies and Other Maps of the Imagination* (New York, NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), 1.
- <sup>x</sup> Jessica Morgan, *Pulse: art, healing, and transformation*(Gottingen: Steidl, 2003), 40.
- <sup>xi</sup> Candice P. Boyd, *Non-representational geographies of therapeutic art making: thinking through practice* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 1.
- <sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Schwabsky, Barry. "The Brilliance of Lines: Agnes Martin at the Guggenheim and Carmen Herrera at the Whitney." *The Nation*, November 16, 2016, 33-37.
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xv</sup> Rhea Anastas et al., eds., *Agnes Martin* (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2011), 157.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), xx.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
- <sup>xviii</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.



<sup>xix</sup> Monthly Art, *World Art Encyclopedia* (Seoul: Monthly Art, 1999). 487

<sup>xx</sup> Judith E. Bernstock and Joan Mitchell, *Joan Mitchell* (New York: Hudson Hills Press in association with the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, 1988), 11.

<sup>xxi</sup> Dave Hickey, *25 Women: essays on their art* (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 16.

<sup>xxii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xxiii</sup> Judith E. Bernstock and Joan Mitchell, *Joan Mitchell* (New York: Hudson Hills Press in association with the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, 1988), 192.

<sup>xxiv</sup> *Ibid.*, 203

<sup>xxv</sup> Midori Yamamura, *Yayoi Kusama: inventing the singular* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2015), 3.

<sup>xxvi</sup> *Ibid.*, 5

<sup>xxvii</sup> Lynn Zelevansky et al., *Love forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958 - 1968* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1998), 15.

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