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Japanese Aesthetics in the Age of New Media

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JAPANESE AESTHETICS IN THE AGE OF NEW MEDIA

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B.S., Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2013

A Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
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Approved by:

Professor Robert Spahr, Chair

Graduate School
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The purpose of this project is to use new media as a platform for the values found in Western modernization and in Japanese traditional aesthetics to work together. Key points within the research find that with the advancement of technology our perspective, attitudes and aesthetics of time have drastically changed. The first part of the research investigates the fundamental effect of media brought into the human environment, how electric media has become so powerful as well as looking at the principles of new media. The second part of the research reveals the differences between Western and Japanese aesthetics by focusing on the value of simplicity. While simplicity found in Western modernism came from the pursuit of efficiency and practicality, simplicity found in Japanese traditional aesthetics is based on the idea of emptiness. Emptiness is different from nothingness, but it calls for free imagination and interpretation by leaving room to be complemented. The research includes a series of the net art works that employs both the principles of new media and Japanese aesthetics, which diametrically oppose to each other, to offer viewers a new experience of time.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Throughout the history of the world, development of media and technology has played an important role in human environments. Especially, with the electric media that has made instant communication possible, our perspective, attitude and aesthetics of time have been drastically changed from taking time to saving time. Through such changes in fashion, simplicity seems to have become a common aesthetic value in the Western modernization in pursuit of maximizing practicality and efficiency. However, comparing Western cultures and Japanese culture, there are some significant differences in the way of viewing simplicity: in fact, while simplicity used be considered as a sign of lacking in wealth in West, Japan has already recognized since the 15th century the richness of extreme simplicity in an aspect of emptiness that calls in a variety of imagination and interpretation like an empty vessel (Hara, 2014). Emptiness is an important concept in Japanese culture where the passing of time plays a huge part in creating unique aesthetic senses.

The first part of this research seeks to better understand the fundamental effect the media brings to human environments and the key characteristics of new media objects to reveal the changes introduced into our experience of time and space. The second part of the research focuses on the genealogy of simplicity in Western modernization and in the traditional Japanese culture from a historical point of view to find out the core values underlie the both aesthetics. The research also covers some modern Japanese pop culture to see how the aesthetics changed through the adoption of the Western modernization.

Finally, I produced a series of the net.art works that contains Japanese aesthetics while utilizing the characteristics of new media to create an aesthetic experience that manipulates the viewers' sense of time. The goal of the project is to use new media as a platform for the values found in Western modernization and in Japanese traditional aesthetics to work together, finding the common ground in characteristics such as imperfection (incompleteness) and perishability (ephemerality). As media and technology affect our human association by creating changes in our experiences with time and space, it always results in giving a birth to new ideas.

CHAPTER 2

Media and technology

When looking back at the history of the world, the advancement of time has been closely related to the advancement of technology because technology has always brought changes into a human association and affected the way of living. Today, the advanced technology of media such as computers and electric devices and the popularization of the use of the Internet have had a great impact on the modern lifestyle. With such media, the world has gained the ability of an instant connection. As a result, these changes in our perspective of time and space have affected every other area of our life.

As our lifestyle is changing with new media technologies, critics often include the discussion of whether they have a good effect or not. Some may point out that it depends on how and for what they are used. For example, social network sites such as Facebook or Twitter have established a new way of communication in today's society. While they can connect people so easily, instantly and virtually over the Internet, it is criticized that they have caused problems that people no longer communicate in reality and have lost the ability to make face-to-face conversations. If then, however, social networks did not exist, would our communication have remained the same way as it used to be? I do not believe so because it is not the social network sites or how they are used that is changing our way of communication and association, but simply Internet media itself. The radical power of Internet media is such that our previous common habits have been totally restructured. With the appearance of this new media, our perspective of speed and space has been changed already, regardless of the invention

of social networks. Thus, in fact, the Internet did not directly create social networks.

They are only popular contents, or the result, of the Internet. It is too often that the

content of a medium is confused with the character of the medium, but the content of a

medium is in fact always another medium, for "the content of writing is speech, just as

the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph"

(McLuhan, 1964/2013). For example, the invention of railway did not directly introduce

transportation, movement, the wheel or roads into human society, but they are the result

of the "totally new human environment" (McLuhan, 1964/2013, location 81) created by

the acceleration and enlargement of the previous scale of human functions. The new

formation and developments of cities, politics, works or leisure happened independently

from whether the railway carried only passengers, or only freight as its contents

because new technology always dissolves the previous human association in any case

(McLuhan, 1964/2013). In short, the content of a medium or its purpose of use are only

a secondary matter and they have little impact to our life, in comparison to the more

fundamental changes of scale, pace and pattern they introduce into human affairs. This

is the reason to say that the Internet did not create the social networks, but the human

association accelerated in speed and scale by the Internet fit to the structure of social

networks.

Therefore, the discussions of whether or not social networks are good, or,

whether or not mobile devices are good are in fact pointless, unless this medium's

character, in other words, the true effect, is correctly recognized. McLuhan (1964/2013)

called this essential, radical power of a medium that brings changes in speed and scale

of human association, the message of a medium. The message of a medium is often difficult to be understood because it is independent of the content of the medium.

Today's general definition of media often includes the belief that media is a neutral medium to transmit information and its quality depends on how it is used. It is no doubt that transportation of information is one of the major characteristics of the media as an aspect of the mass media, but I think that is a fairly restricted definition to prove why, then, media so often appears to have such ability to impact on human life. But McLuhan's definition of the media more accurately reveals the essence of the media: all media, that is, all technologies are the extension of human bodies and nerve systems to increase power and speed (1964/2013). The spoken word is a technical extension of our consciousness; the written word, the visual function transferred from auditory experience and so on (McLuhan, 1964/2013). To better explain the idea of media being an extension of our human body can be allegorized using a pencil. A pencil, which is a communication conduit, acts as an extension of our physical body to transmit ideas from our head to the paper, extending time and space in that written words outlast the thoughts that they are representing. The most elementary effect of a pencil is extension of time and space. A pencil can be used in many different ways, causing good or bad results. Yet no matter how a pencil is used, fundamentally its purpose is extension of time and space. Much the same, media also can be used in many ways with many different results, but yet fundamentally it acts as an extension of our human bodies to expand in time and space. However, this long-believed value is now being dissolved in the electric age where instant, non-visual forms of interrelation began to take over and create a new structure of society. The message of the electric

is a total change as it is "radical, pervasive, and decentralized" (McLuhan, 1964/2013, location 180) and its effect is total and inclusive and causes deep involvement. While other media had always alternated the time-space experience by accelerating the speed, electric media, in short, has the ability to completely eliminate time-space factors in human association. For example, emails can be sent instantly regardless of location factors as long as electricity goes whereas letters take time to be transmitted physically.

Until electric media, the order of the world was still following the laws of nature more or less, even in an attempt to accelerate the speed and overcome the space factor. In other words, there was always a linear direction in communication and some sort of limitation of a physical factor, required or perceived. But, in the electric media age, a direction of communication goes freely to the right and left, up and down and back and forth, the physical substance being almost non-existent.

Any technology (media) is an extension of a physical body and has the power of changing our perspective of time, space and human association in one or more ways. That is to say, no matter what people do with respective medium, or how they use it, once a medium is introduced, "a totally new environment has been created" (McLuhan, 1964/2013, location96) already to bring radical changes to a previous common human association, regardless of whether we are ready to accept it or not. And what is troubling is, that once our perspective of time has been radically accelerated, it is extremely difficult to make it slow down, just as a sweater that has been stretched cannot return to what it was.

CHAPTER 3

The age of new media

As the acceleration of speed continues to increase as a result of the development of technology, for example, the time and effort required to take a single photograph has drastically changed. Photography once attracted great attention as a technology to catch the beauty of a moment. Taking a photograph used to be limited to those skilled specialists and it required meticulous care and patience because the chance of the shutter failing to release was critical and often it could not be redone due to a limitation of a film use. Therefore, photographers used to have to take time to wait for a perfect moment to come for one shot. However, later on the invention of digital cameras has made unlimited retakes and manipulation possible. As the result, not only the time and effort required to produce a photograph has been reduced, but also our attitude and aesthetics towards photography has changed; for the primary value of photography as a solid, accurate record of events are no longer significant, but it has been made available for anyone and easy to acquire and manipulate.

In such a way, today, to an extreme degree, a perfect photograph no longer even needs to require a real, physical process in the age of new media, where the computer can easily create the synthetic graphics. Manovich (2001) points out that "although we normally think that synthetic photograph produced with computer graphics are inferior to real photographs" in fact, they have become "too real" and "too perfect" because computer graphics are "free of the limitation of both human and camera vision" (p.202). The subject of concern used to be how close to real a photograph could be, but now it does not matter if a photograph is a projection of reality. Making what is not

real look real and perfect very impressive. In fact, this sort of synthesis technique has been commonly employed by various media industries such as movie graphics and virtual computer games. But what is significant with computer graphics is that, while traditional media objects (such as real photographs) could only represent what is in past, computer media objects (such as synthetic photographs) can anticipate a future event. Because computer graphics are free from physical limitation, they can create the impossible with real photographs. This example proves McLuhan's definition that a new medium is an extension of a human body to accelerate speed (1964/2013). In the age of electric media, we have gained the ability to manipulate the time both literally and metaphorically as well as media objects in terms of easiness of modification.

In a general sense, new media can be defined as traditional media that has been transformed into a digital form and processed digitally. But that alone does not fully convey the fundamental characteristics of new media. It creates such discussion: shall photographs digitally exhibited on a computer be considered new media while the same photographs printed in a book not? (Manovich, 2011) If photographs were created on a computer with the cutting edge technology but then printed on paper, should they still be newer media? But a revolution of new media should bring more overall effects, not only to exhibition but also to all stages such as production, acquisition, manipulation, storage, distribution and communication (Manovich, 2011). In addition, what causes misunderstanding about the characteristics of new media is that the term "new" as in new media does not necessarily mean "newer" as in comparison to old (traditional) media. A new technology (medium) is never simply an addition to old technologies, but

it creates a totally human environment (McLuhan, 1964/2003). That is to say, new

media is a totally new concept that radically changes our experience and perspective.

There are fundamental characteristics that make new media distinct from

traditional media. According to Manovich (2001), the key principles include such as

numerical representation, modularity, automation, and variability. These principles are

made possible by the use of the computer. What is generally referred to digitalization is

actually the principle of numerical presentation. In new media, continuous data is

converted into a numerical representation and becomes programmable (Manovich,

2001). Thus, a new media object is consisted of collections of digital data no matter

whether originally produced analog or digital. These collections of discrete units of data

maintain independency and respective identity and this principle of modularity enables a

new media object to "be accessed, modified, or substituted without affecting the overall

structure of an object" (Manovich, 2001, p.31). These two principles of numerical

representation and modularity make "the automation of many operations involved in

media creation, manipulation, and access" (Manovich, 2001, p.32) and the variability of

an object "that can exist in different, potentially infinite versions" (p.36) possible. Unlike

traditional media objects of which the elements and the structures are "hard-wired

together," new media objects are "independent of each other" (Manovich, 2001, p.38)

and therefore, they can be often automatically "assembled into numerous sequences"

and "created and customized on the fly" (p.36). All these principles contribute to

significant characteristics of new media that make it open to constant and infinite

changes and updates, unlike traditional media objects. The Web pages, which consist

of various editable computer files, are a good example to show the open nature of new

media; they never have to be completed, but can keep growing (Manovich, 2001). On social network site such as Facebook, news feed is constantly renewed as new information is added and every time it is accessed it displays different posts. It is like a stream; it never stays the same. Another example is writing experience on a computer. Unlike traditional paper media, redoing and undoing are made possible with new media. Generally speaking, writing or drawing on a piece of paper had been the act of irreversible and final and thus there lived the desire for accomplishment, perfection, and sophistication (Hara, 2008). But today such aesthetics embracing consistency and permanency has become old-fashioned. Instead, the acceptance of objects' ephemerality and incompleteness is becoming a new common sense.

CHAPTER 4

Genealogy of aesthetics: simplicity and emptiness

Simplicity and the Western modernism

As human environment became more and more complex by the development of technology, simplicity became one of the common, universal aesthetics highly valued today. What is simplicity? Simplicity does not indicate only the plainness of a shape or appearance. For instance, the shapes of early stone implements look simple and minimal-oriented from today's point of view, but they should be rather called primitive because simplicity is a concept that can be recognized only in contrast of redundancy, excessiveness or complexity (Hara, 2011). A similar example may be black and white photography. Some may prefer black and white photography to the color because of its modest, simpler look. However, it was not meant to be simpler than anything but was the cutting edge technology of the day when the advanced technology of color photography had not yet existed. For black and white photography to be called simple, there must be a comparison with what is more than black and white.

What is the genealogy of aesthetics of simplicity then? In the history of civilization, the complexity of objects' pattern and decoration generally represented power and wealth of authorship (Hara, 2011, 2014). The more complicated and decorative design requires the greater effort, cost and time in making process. That directly represented the power hierarchy in society and the evidence can be seen in many historical architectural buildings and other art forms. The hall of Mirrors in Palace of Versailles in France could be one of the examples (Figure 1). In the 17th century, the hall of mirror "served daily as a passageway and a waiting and meeting place,

frequented by courtiers and the visiting public" ("The hall of Mirror – Palace of Versailles", n.d.). The luxurious decoration of the hall was the most suitable means to show off the might of the royal family to the visitors. In McLuhan's definition, clothing is an extension of private skins to store and channel energy and housing is a collective means of achieving the same end for the family or the group (1964/2013). It can be said only natural that technology as an extension of one's body came to be used as a means to display one's power. In such time when the world was developing in pursuit of power, simplicity was only perceived as a weakness (Hara, 2011). Literally, abundance was a sign of power and wealth and simplicity was a sign of shortage and poverty.

Figure 1. The hall of mirrors, Versailles Palace, France. Photo by Dennis Jarvis / licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0. Retrieved from https://flic.kr/p/oC7koZ

But, at the threshold of modern society, such absolute belief in complexity began to change gradually. When sole royalty or titled nobility were no longer to rule citizens, the modernism came in as the process of reconstruction, shifting from the complexity for power to the simplicity for freedom of lifestyle, and the perspective of rationality began to infiltrate the world as "the idea of necessary review of the relationship between functionality, materials and form" around 19th and 20th century (Hara, 2011, 2014). The more liberal and economical the human environment became, the greater diversity of choices in individual's life occurred. Reducing what is unnecessary, an organizing system to make many appear fewer, archiving notable efficiencies in saving time are the examples of what we refer to as simple today (Maeda, 2006). As the result of seeking prominence of rationality, efficiency and practicality, simplicity was found to represent a virtue of modesty. Thus, it can be said that the preference for simplicity as aesthetics in the Western world is a relatively new idea.

Comparison of Western and Japanese aesthetics

Comparing a traditional Western style painting with one of Japanese, even though they both were created around the same time in the mid-late 16th century, the differences are significant. In Pieter Bruegel the Elder's painting of "The Procession to Calvary" from 1564 (Figure 2), the details of objects are densely and realistically described, no space is left blank, and much greater weight is put on human beings, whereas in Tohaku Hasegawa's painting of "Pine Trees Screen" approximately from 1593 to 1595 (Figure 3 & 4), objects are more abstract and ambiguity, a great space is left empty, and the nature is the primary focus.

Figure 2. The Procession to Calvary by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1564). Photo credit by Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY. Retrieved from http://www.artres.com/Doc/ART/Media/TR2/F/4/C/D/ART2826.jpg

Figure 3. "Pine Trees Screen (left)" by Tohaku Hasegawa (Approx.1593-95). Photo credit: HIP / Art Resource, NY. Retrieved from http://www.artres.com/Doc/ART/Media/TR2/F/K/C/D/AR924702.jpg

Figure 4. "Pine Trees Screen (right)" by Tohaku Hasegawa (Approx.1593-95). Photo credit: HIP / Art Resource, NY. Retrieved from http://www.artres.com/Doc/ART/Media/TR2/F/0/H/I/AR924703.jpg

One of the reasons for these differences could be based on the difference in a general worldview: while the Western culture typically "believes in control of nature" and "romanticizes technology," the Japanese culture "believes in the fundamental uncontrollability of nature" and "romanticizes the nature" (Koren, 2008, p.27). The relationship between human and nature represented in each painting is almost contrary. In addition, the Bruegel's painting is easy to assume it was drawn from a particular person's point of view, represents a scene in a continuous space but completed as a whole and gives a feeling of depth profundity by highlighting outline. In the Hasegawa's painting, a particular viewpoint is absent in a flat composition. It only draws a few major objects and the rest is so defocused into empty space that it is unsure what lies in between. The ambiguity of outline gives no clear beginning or ending of the scene.

Speaking of simplicity, the Hasegawa's painting is obviously simpler than the Bruegel's in terms of the density of description or the use of colors. However, how has the Japanese painting obtained such significant reflection of characteristics of simplicity? Is the essence of simplicity shown in the Hasegawa's painting same as the Western simplicity?

Simplicity as Japanese aesthetics: emptiness

Represented by Hasegawa's painting, the Japanese aesthetics is also known for its simple, concise characteristic. But the simplicity found in Japanese cultural aesthetics did not come from the same path as simplicity found in Western modernism (Hara, 2011). Simplicity in the Western modernism came in as the result of an attempt to find a logical sophistication and beauty in a balance of functionality and efficiency, but the essence of Japanese simplicity does not share the same logic. Simplicity in Japan

is based on a clearly conscientized concept of emptiness, which is one of the most important key concepts and components of Japanese traditional communication technique (Hara, 2008, 2011). In general, emptiness may be considered as a shortage or something equal to nothing. But there is a creative perspective that works within the concept of emptiness to consider that "nothing is an important something" (Maeda, 2006, p.56). If there were an empty spot in Bruegel's painting, it might be assumed that the part was somehow left incomplete and thus a critical failure of completion. But Hasegawa's painting could not have been more perfect without those empty spaces. It is because emptiness is different from nothingness or energy-less, but it indicates a potential for fulfillment, like an empty vessel (Hara, 2008). To better explain, when one wants to drink something, that person would need an empty cup, not one already filled with another drink. In this case, an empty cup is by no means valueless because of its emptiness, but rather is full of potential. The essence of emptiness is, in short, the power that provides a space for imaginations to be inserted and calls in a variety of interpretations, thoughts and expectations of whoever perceives it (Hara, 2007, 2008). Hasegawa's painting may be considered inexpressive if the empty, ambiguous space was taken as a space of nothing, but the beauty of this painting must be found in that empty space that arouses the audience's imagination.

What is the genealogy of emptiness? According to Hara (2011), a revolutionary change with the Japanese culture was caused in the mid 15th century when the nation's one of the worst civil war, known as *Onin-no-ran,* resulted in an enormous cultural loss. Especially, under the authority of the Shogun system of the day, displaying wealth and power by complexity must have been as important as in Western cultures. However,

after the civil war, the style of the architectures began to shift to find the natural, rustic

beauty in extreme simplicity, which was first represented with *Jisho-ji,* commonly known

as *Ginkakuji* or the Silver Pavilion in English (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Ginkaku-ji (The Silver Pavilion). Photo by Gavin Anderson / licensed under
CC BY-SA 2.0. Retrieved from https://flic.kr/p/JQbYk

The appearance of *Ginkakuji* is very different from the common historical

architectures generally decorated with the complexity of patterns. It was built by the

Shogun of the day of the civil war, Ashikaga Yoshimasa, originally as his ideal mountain

villa for his retirement around 1480s (Hida, 2006). Creation of *Ginkakuji* is believed to

be historically significant because the culture originated from there became a basis of

many things that are considered to be original to Japanese such as *Dojin-sai*, a study

built in a division of the temple (Figure 6). As Yoshimasa spent his life in a pursuit of

aesthetic experience there, emptiness as a firm aesthetics came into perfection along

with the perfection of *chanoyu* (tea ceremony) in the 16th century.
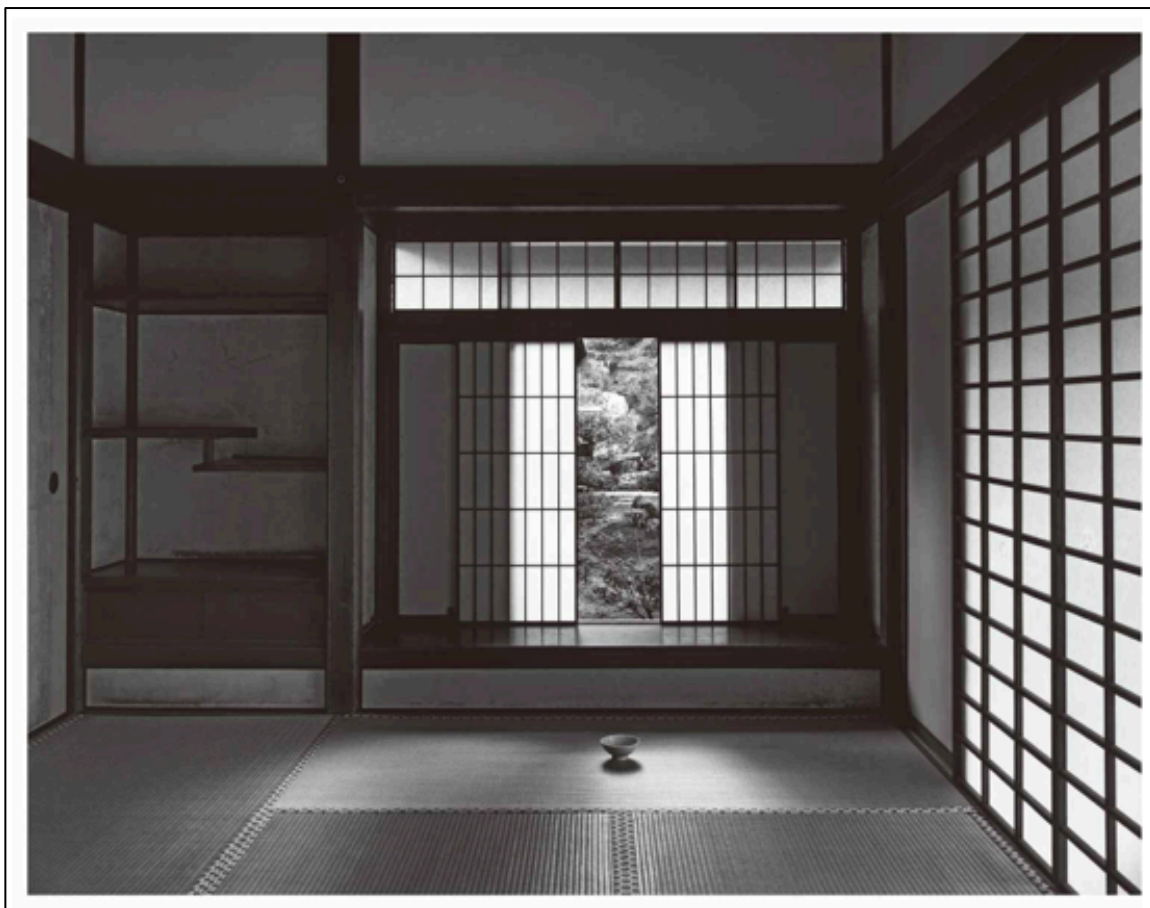

Figure 6. Donji-sai, the original model of Japanese traditional style rooms including *chashitsu*. Adapted from *Nihon no design: biishiki ga tsukuru mirai [Japanese design: the aesthetic creates the future]* by K. Hara, 2011.

C*hanoyu* is held in an extremely small and simple room called *chashitsu*

(tearoom) following the style of *shoindukuri* of *Dojinsai*. There is no special decoration,

typically only a single flower in an unobtrusive vase and a calligraphy scroll on the wall

(Keene, 2003). Generally, a space to which a visitor will be invited is expected to be

well arranged with decorations, like an example of the hall of mirrors in Palace of Versailles. However, *chashitsu*'s characteristics are almost opposite to what can be seen in such rooms. Not that *chashitsu* was made economizing; decorations are rather disturbing in an intentionally designed simple space. In *chashitsu*, which Hara (2014) called an "empty place of ultimate simplicity" (p.13), the master offering a tea and a guest drinking it in a handmade tea bowl will engage in an intimate communication by "exchanging images via the medium of emptiness" (Hara, 2007, p.276). The pleasure of *chanoyu* is not in the beauty of *chashitsu*, but in the sharing of the moment there.

The mechanism of a tearoom is that it is so simple and unfixed that imagination and interpretation can run freely without limitation. Also, creating the space of emptiness enhances attentions on what remains (Maeda, 2006). It is like a movie theater where there is only a simple, white screen; as a movie is projected on a screen the audience will immerse themselves into a virtual space as if they were in the world of a movie as well. If a screen were decorated with patterns, such experience of deep involvement is impossible to happen.

Suggestion

An essential part of emptiness is in the other word, suggestion. Emptiness suggests (in the other word, offers) a platform for free imagination to run through and never restricts the variety of interpretation. In other words, it is "the power of suggesting unspoken implications" (Keene, 1964, p.295) and can be said particularly unique in Japanese culture because the concept of suggestion is commonly known as a fundamental characteristic of the Japanese language itself (Keene, 1969).   The

ambiguity created by unspoken implications requires much complement by recipients. In contrast to Western languages, the Japanese language uniquely works while, for example, omitting the subjects of sentences and lacking in distinctions between singular and plural or between definite and indefinite (Keene, 1964). In Japanese sentences, pronouns are frequently used instead of directly indicating what exactly is being discussed. Japanese classic style of poetry *haiku* or *tanka* is a good example of what utilizes the power of suggestion; for the readers are to extract many meanings and implications from what is mysteriously expressed in a restricted use of seventeen syllables (Keene, 1964). The power of suggestion makes communication to function with minimal setting and arrangement. One is given an opportunity to expand his imagination and look for meanings that exist beyond what are visible or directly described.

The value of simplicity would not have been found without the contrast to the recognition of complexity; the aesthetics of emptiness would not have been born without the resignation of a loss. To value emptiness is to expect the possibility of being fulfilled, but at the same time it requires to accept the possibility of never being fulfilled. Also, it is inevitable that misunderstandings and misinterpretations would happen when facilitating emptiness in the center of communication. Yet, this great receptivity is the essence of emptiness itself.

CHAPTER 6

Modern Japanese aesthetics

Just as the *Onin* civil war caused the radical changes in aesthetics and lifestyle

of the Japanese, modern times of Japan had gone through nation-wide changes

through the opening of the country (cultural enlightenment) in *Meiji* period in 1868 and

through the defeat in the World War II in 1945. These major events are significant

because they introduced Western modernization to Japan. As a result of the adoption

of Western modernism, Japan's so-called modern industries developed by importing

European and American technologies and imitating their idea of civilization (Uchida,

2010). Many traditions and customs were forced to change their form as the society as

a whole went under some radical reconstructions. The realization of what have been

culturally unique in Japan perhaps came to be revealed at this point when they began to

be oppressed by the values of other cultures.

MUJI: Western simplicity and Japanese emptiness

MUJI's design concept is one of the successful examples of a modern Japanese

design that employs simplicity based on efficiency and functionality to meet the

customers' needs for inexpensive products while keeping a sense of Japanese

aesthetics represented in the quality of emptiness. MUJI is a Japanese brand founded

in 1980 based on the concept of the creation of "extremely straightforward, low-cost

items by thoroughly simplifying the production process" (Hara, 2007, p.232). They

cover a wide array of products, from daily commodities such as stationaries, food and

clothing to household commodities such as electric applicants, kitchen utensils, and

furniture. But no matter if it is a single pencil, a pair of socks or a bicycle, they are consistent in a simple, generic appearance. In fact, all the MUJI products are designed with "no design" in order to provide the satisfaction of "this will do" for users (Hara, 2007). The concept of "this will do" means, in other words, that the products are designed so simple, modest and anonymous that they would be suitable for any users and any situation. Not only that but because it is designed with "no design," customers may personalize the products by decorating as they like (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Examples of MUJI products. Photo by Sean Su / licensed under CC BY 2.0. Retrieved from https://flic.kr/p/gDR74

The essence of MUJI's concept is the power of receptivity and it works as an empty vessel to accept a variety of thoughts, expectations, and interpretations. MUJI reflects the same concept not only upon the products but also on their advertisement

designs. MUJI does not follow a common advertising communication, which generally

works by clarifying the advertisement message for the audience to easily understand

(Hara, 2007). Instead of putting assertive sales copy, MUJI's advertisements usually

consist of bare minimum information such as a simple photograph, a few sentences of

explanation and the brand logo. Especially, a series of the 2013 advertisement

campaign posters, named "Horizon," stands out as an example of the message of

extreme simplicity in the sense of emptiness (Figure 8 & 9). Hara (2007) explains that

his attempt as the art director was to present an empty vessel in epic scale by using the

"the ultimate composition of earth and human being" (p.247) on the horizon, implying

the message that there is "nothing, yet everything" (p.251). These images of the

horizon do not promote any particular product, but successfully represent the spirit of

MUJI: the essence of communication is not within assertiveness, but receptivity.
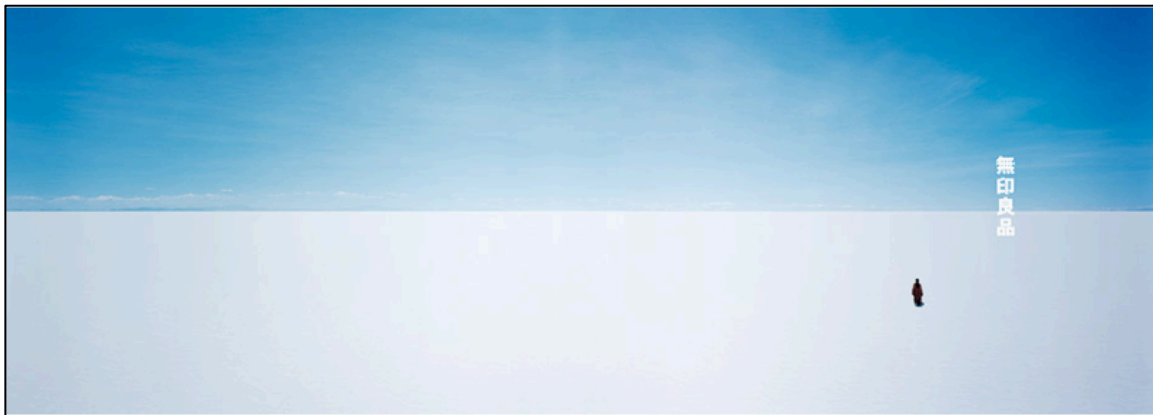
Figure 8. A poster of the 2003 MUJI advertising campaign series*.* Photographer: Tamotsu Fujii, Art Director: Kenya Hara. Screenshot taken on http://www.ndc.co.jp/hara/en/works/2014/08/muji-a.html

Figure 9. Another poster of the 2003 MUJI advertising campaign series. Photographer: Tamotsu Fujii, Art Director: Kenya Hara. Screenshot taken on http://www.ndc.co.jp/hara/en/works/2014/08/muji-a.html

Just as Hasegawa's painting of "Pine Trees Screen" (Figure 3), half of the space is left empty in the projection of the spectacle of the posters: the majestic view of nature. What would be associated with the horizon is completely depended on the audience, and that is exactly the intention that lies under the concept of MUJI. It is suggestive, yet never assertive.   Like a simple mechanism of *chashitsu* (tea room), the MUJI design believes in potential that a creative mind will "admit that meanings exist beyond that can be seen or described" (Keene, 1964, p.298). That is, emptiness itself. MUJI finds its way of balancing out the two ideas of simplicity based on Western efficiency and simplicity based on the Japanese idea of emptiness.

Kawaii: modern Japanese pop culture

Another example of Japanese contemporary aesthetics is seen in a pop culture called the Kawaii style*. "*Kawaii"* is a Japanese adjective that means cute and adorable in general and is made up with two *kanji* (Chinese characters), "able" (可) and "love" (愛), which in a combination, means "lovable" (可愛い). The word is used in a broad sense

to describe people, animals, fashion, art, food, entertainment, toys, daily commodities, behavior, or anything that potentially has the quality of cuteness.

Figure 10. "Pamyu Pamyu Revolution" Photo by Dick Thomas Johnson / licensed under CC BY 2.0. Retrieved from https://flic.kr/p/c6e18y

Kyary Pamyu Pamyu, a Japanese singer, and a fashion model, is one of the most popular figures known for the unique Kawaii style (Figure 10). As seen in her fashion, Kawaii is often represented by the brilliant use of colors, extreme girliness and childlikeness. Kawaii culture is often considered to be relatively a new, modern trend that started to be recognized worldwide during the 2000s and 2010s. However, the root of Kawaii traces go back its origin to the nation's ancient time and its headstream can

be found in the 11th century classic Japanese literature, Sei shonagon's *Makura no Soshi* [*the Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon*], where it writes that things that are small, immature, pure and in need of protection are lovable (as cited in Yomota, 2006, location 316). Examples include small children, doll-sized materials, baby birds or tiny leaves and flowers. They are all adorable themselves, but what makes them Kawaii is that they are so small, immature and fragile that they arouse one's desire to protect them. Kawaii may be, so to speak, a value added by others. While the quality of immaturity in Western cultures is generally regarded as inferior, there is a firm sense of values in the Japanese culture that embraces what is small, childlike and immature is positive and lovable (Yomota, 2006). This can explain the reason that Japan became a birthplace of Kawaii culture and the word Kawaii came to be used as is non-translated. It is simply because, there is no other word that can accurately describe the quality of Kawaii*;* because the word "cute" in English technically came from the word "acute," which originally indicated the quality of keenness and intelligence (Yomota, 2006). That is fundamentally different from a Japanese sense of values of cuteness that recognizes the quality of immaturity and childlikeness.

The core values of Japanese aesthetics

Although the characteristics of Kawaii and emptiness seem to be radically different from each other, imperfection and perishability play an important role of connecting them all together. While immaturity represents the nature of Kawaii embracing smallness and childlikeness, Kawaii's eccentric use of colors and asymmetric decoration can be considered to be a manifestation of the rejection of

uniformity, which is, in other words, a fondness for incompleteness and imperfection. Imperfection plays a huge part in supporting the power of suggestion, which is the essence of emptiness, and creating a value of irregularity. Japanese tends to avoid symmetry and regularity in general because they restrict the power of suggestion (Keene, 1964). If objects were set in good order, perfection is already archived and there is nothing left allowing a space for imagination. Imperfection is important because they suggest the potential for growth (Keene, 1964). These characteristics of imperfection and irregularity can be seen in Hasegawa's "Pine Trees Screen" as well. Pine trees are arranged in an irregular order and it creates an asymmetric composition in contrast with a right and a left screen. The empty space like a heavy thick fog arouses imagination that something might come out of it, giving a mysterious feeling of imperfection. Imperfection is not a negative factor; both in Kawaii and emptiness, it plays a huge part of suggesting potential for future growth and fulfillment.

A fondness for all these aesthetics finally contributes to the love for perishability. While the Western world has generally desired and sought to achieve artistic immortality, the Japanese culture recognized that perishability is a necessary element in beauty (Keene, 1964). The Japanese favor the cherry blossom because the period of full blossom is poignantly short, but that ephemerality is what makes them precious and valuable. In the same way, small, fragile and childlike things are Kawaii because they are only temporal; nothing will stay the same forever. Kawaii attracts people for its fragile existence and calls for the nostalgia of childhood, which is fleeting and therefore precious, just like cherry blossoms.

CHAPTER 7

Project

I produced a project that contains a series of net.art works in which a single

tanka (a type of Japanese classic poetry) takes place in delivering variety of screen-

based interactive narratives and interpretations (Figure 11). All the works are designed

for the users to navigate through virtual space on the computer screen, manipulate the

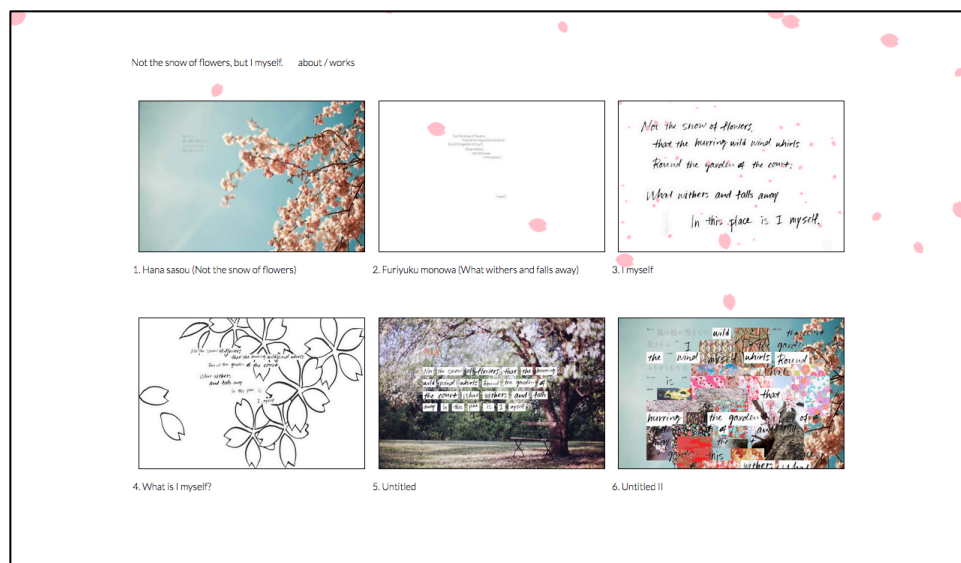meaning of the original poetry by clicking images and texts, or simply wait on a page for

actions to happen.

Figure 11. Screenshot of the webpage of the project.

Through the act of creating the net.art works, I began to discover connections

between new media objects, emptiness and simplicity. I then further researched the

history and concepts of the genealogy of emptiness and simplicity as aesthetic ideas as

well as the other distinctive cultural aesthetics such as irregularity, imperfection,

immaturity of Kawaii and perishability.

The poetry I used in this project was written by Saionji no Kintsune (1171-1244) and was selected for famous, classic Japanese poetry collections such as *Shin Chokusen Wakashu* [New Imperial Anthology of Japanese Poetry] and *Ogura Haykunin Isshu* [the *Ogura* Anthology of One Hundred *Tanka*-poems by One Hundred Poets] both published in the early 13th century. *Tanka* is a type of Japanese classic poetry usually consisted of five units with a pattern of on 5-7-5-7-7 syllables.

花さそふ [*Hana sasofu*]

嵐の庭の雪ならで [*Arashi no niwa no yuki narade*]

ふりゆくものは [*Furiyuku mono wa*]

我が身なりけり [*Wagami narikeri*]

Not the snow of flowers,

That the hurrying wild wind whirls

Round the garden of the court;

What withers and falls away

In this place is I myself.

I chose this particular poetry because it deals with the passage of time in an interesting, double-structural way. In the courtyard where those fragile petals of the cherry blossom flowers fluttered to the ground, like falling snow, the author comes to realize that it is not "the snow of flowers" that is vanishing, but rather "I myself" (himself) who is truly withering and falling away. In the poem, a *kakekotoba* (pun), which is a

common poetic technique used to suggest a twofold meaning, is used in the third line; the verb *furiyuku* means for the petals to "fall" (降りゆく) and for a man to "get older" (古ゆく). This *kakekotoba* gives a significant effect on portraying the parallel timeline of the flowers and the man (author) experiencing the fading.

Each work was produced one by one in serial order, so that the refinement, regeneration and new ideas derived from a previous work would be recognized in comparison. Some works have similar ideas, inspired by the previous work in the series, while others may be more conceptually independent. Larger images of the works are available in the section of appendices.

Hana sasou (Not the snow of flowers)

http://aisaito.net/netart/notthesnowofflowers/1/hanasasou.html

In this net.art work titled "Hana sasou (Not the snow of flowers)," the page is loaded in the Web browser with the background image of the light blue sky and the branches of the cherry blossom tree with pale pink flowers (Figure 12). The branches are slightly waving as if the gentle breeze is blowing them on a nice spring day. This background image is created using a technique of cinemagraph in format of animated GIF. The original image is a single still photograph. I made layers of the image and manipulated various small parts so that it is animated and creates an illusion as if it looks like a video. This sort of an art form is made available because any image becomes variable and modifiable in new media where an object's components are broke into individual modules. In the screen, there is no sound of the wind, no air flowing through, no smell of the flower and no warm temperature felt on skin, yet it

reminds a viewer of his experience with those things as staring at the image which is imitating a reality.
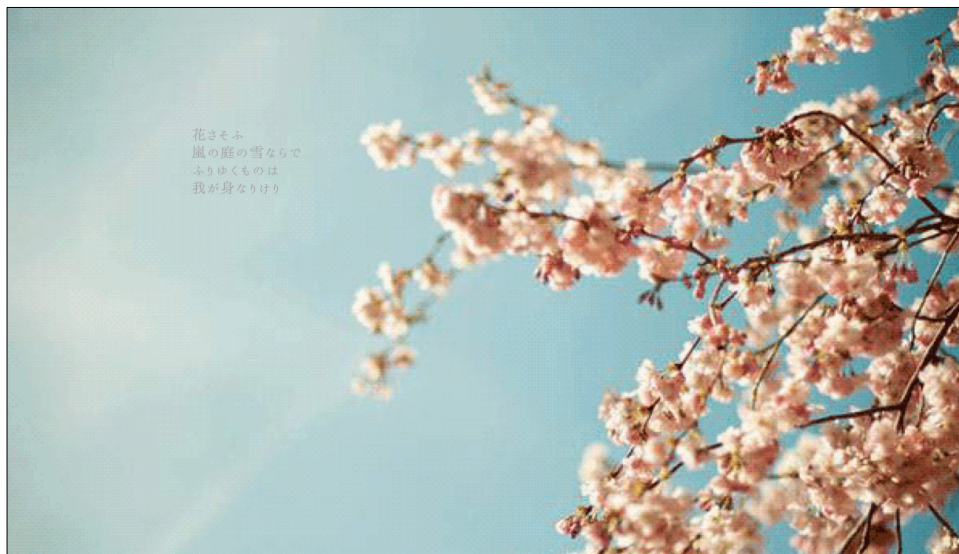
Figure 12. Screenshot of the initial page of the work.

There is a poem written in Japanese in light gray font on the upper left. When a viewer clicks it, the petals of the flower appear and start fluttering on the screen. The movement of petals is automated with JavaScript. When a viewer clicks the flower that is fixed on the upper left, it takes the viewer to another page where the background is simple white and the poetry is translated into English while the petals continue to flow around (Figure 13). As the poetry indicates the realization that it is not the flowers falling away, but it is the author himself who is failing in the passage of time, the white background of this last page, shifted from the previous background with cherry blossoms, plays a role of implying perishability.

Figure 13. Screenshot of the last page of the work.

However, it does not mean the white background is a representation of nothingness; there is emptiness**.** By using the color of simple white, it enables a viewer to reflect whatever image or interpretation gained from having gone through the previous pages. In addition to that, it is programmed so that the last page will automatically reload and go back to the first page after a certain amount of time has passed. It represents the repetition of the seasons; the flowers fall, but they will bloom again.

Furiyuku monowa (What withers and falls away)

http://aisaito.net/netart/notthesnowofflowers/2/furiyukumonowa.html

In the work titled "Furiyuku monowa (What withers and falls away)," the page displaying the poetry in English text is loaded in the Web browser. Each verse line is irregularly aligned and the last two words, "I myself" is separated in the bottom part of the page. Irregularity is one of the distinguishing characters of Japanese aesthetics that

arouses a feeling of incompleteness and, therefore, the expectation for change. The

background is white with no images embedded because in a space where the amount

of emptiness is great, a viewer is likely to pay more attention to what actually exists

(Figure 14).

Not the snow of flowers,
That the hurring wild wind whirls
Round the garden of court;
What withers
and falls away
In this place is

I myself.

Figure 14. Screenshot of the initial appearance of the work.

When a viewer clicks any of the verse lines, it begins to disappear from the

screen (Figure 15). Some may disappear immediately while others may take little

longer. The sequence of this operation is determined by the viewer, who contributes to

make the new media object unique. Even though there are numbers of possible orders

for the disappearance of the verse lines, I as the creator of the work do not have control

over how a viewer experiences the work. Depending on which verse a viewer clicks on

and in what order it happens, it creates various, different images in the progress. For

example, if a viewer eliminates the first, the second and the fifth verses, then the

remaining verses create such a phrase;

Round the garden of court;

what withers

In this place is

I myself

In this way, regeneration of the poetry happens as a viewer manipulates the elements of the work. This is made possible because of the new media's principle of variability. When the work is made up of discrete module data, changing one part does not affect the rest of the parts, unless of course, such an effect is desirable.
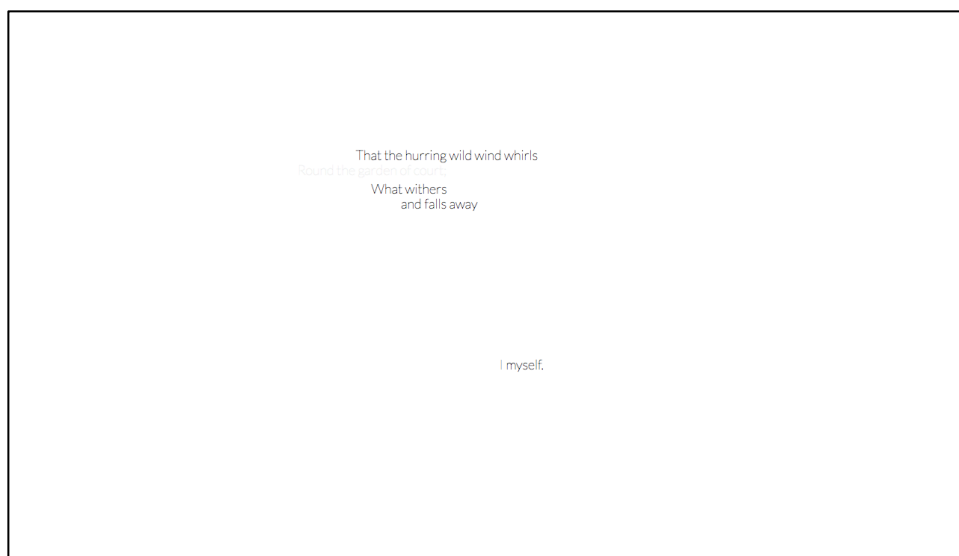

Figure 15. Screenshot of a possible sequence.

However, the time of which each verse line takes to disappear is programmed in the file already. Therefore, the phrase that is more likely to remain until the end should be "I myself," which takes the longest time for disappearance (Figure 16). When the phrase remains in empty space, it seems to suggest some unspoken meanings. Yet, it does not offer an answer to it. Interpretation of the work is completely left to the viewer.

I myself.
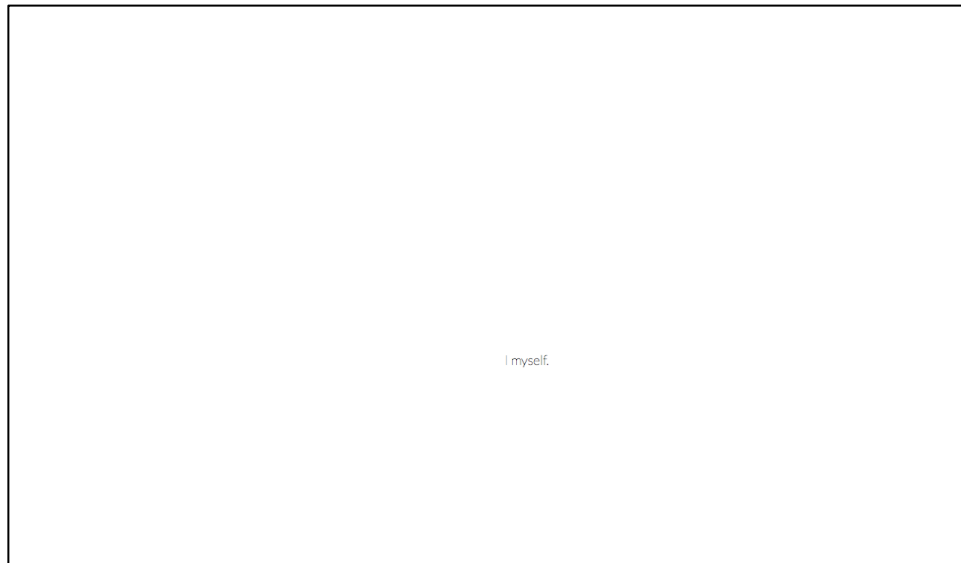
Figure 16. Screenshot of the intended result of a sequence.

A general expectation for new media objects is that they make quick action and shorten the time of waiting as acceleration of speed has been made by advancement of technology. Therefore, the assumption is that when the viewer reaches to a possible end result one may leave or close the page immediately. But in this work, after five minutes the page is programed to automatically jump to another page where the petals of cherry blossom are programed by JavaScript to flutter all over the screen (Figure 17).
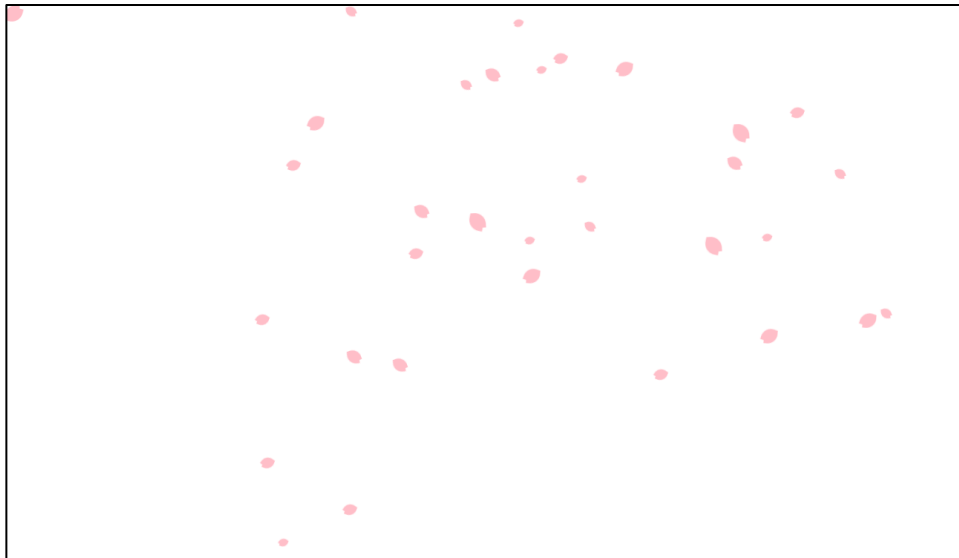
Figure 17. Screenshot of the page to which the initial page
will automatically load after a certain time has passed.

The viewer may or may not reach to this hidden page of the work. After the

viewer has eliminated all verses from the screen, if the viewer decided to wait for

another sequence to happen, or leave the page open for a while, the viewer may end up

with cherry blossoms. However, this page is also programed to go back to the initial

page of the work after five minutes. Therefore, for example, if a viewer kept the initial

page open and took his eyes off until the cherry blossom page would reload back to the

initial page again, it is possible that the viewer may never notice the existence of the

cherry blossom page. This nature that new media objects can be programed to change

constantly regardless of human interaction is unique to new media. Although they are

digitally created and controlled, the nature of constant changes reminds viewers the law

of nature.

I myself

http://aisaito.net/research/2015/ms/3/imyself.html

The title of this work, "I myself," was inspired by the manipulation of the poetry made on the previous work, "Furiyuku monowa." In this work, the page with the full-screen sized background image shows the English handwritten script of the poetry loaded in the Web browser (Figure 18). The cherry blossom pastels falling down are also homage to the last sequence of the previous work.
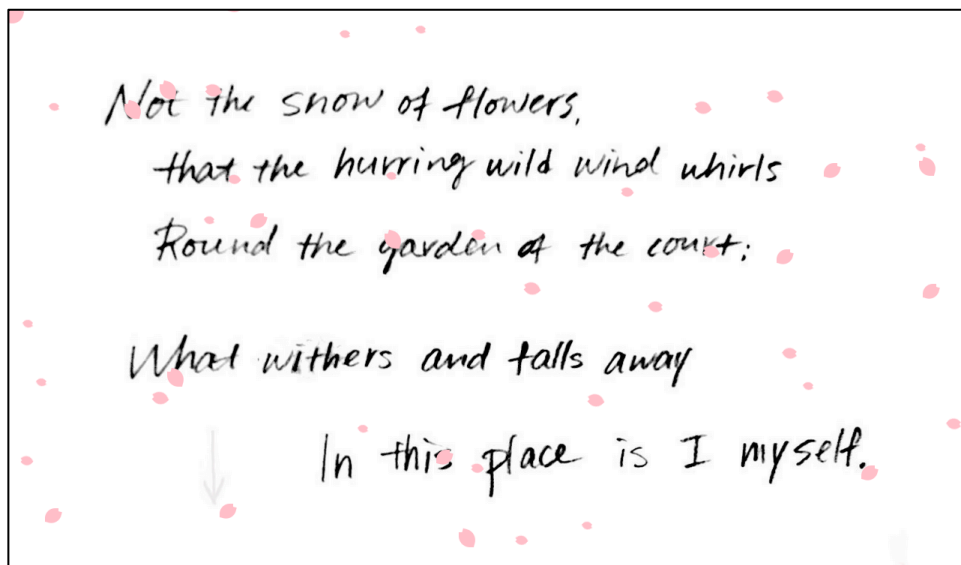

Figure 18. Screenshot of the Initial appearance.

This work installs a web design technique called parallax scrolling, where background images and foreground images move at slightly different speed so that they create an illusion of depth as the page is scrolled. In this work, a technique is applied to create a simplified effect like a flipbook, utilizing the principle of variability of new media. Figure 18 shows the original appearance of the background image. There are 20 derivative images loaded on the page and each of them is slightly different from the

others. Therefore, as the viewer scrolls down the page, those images are replaced one

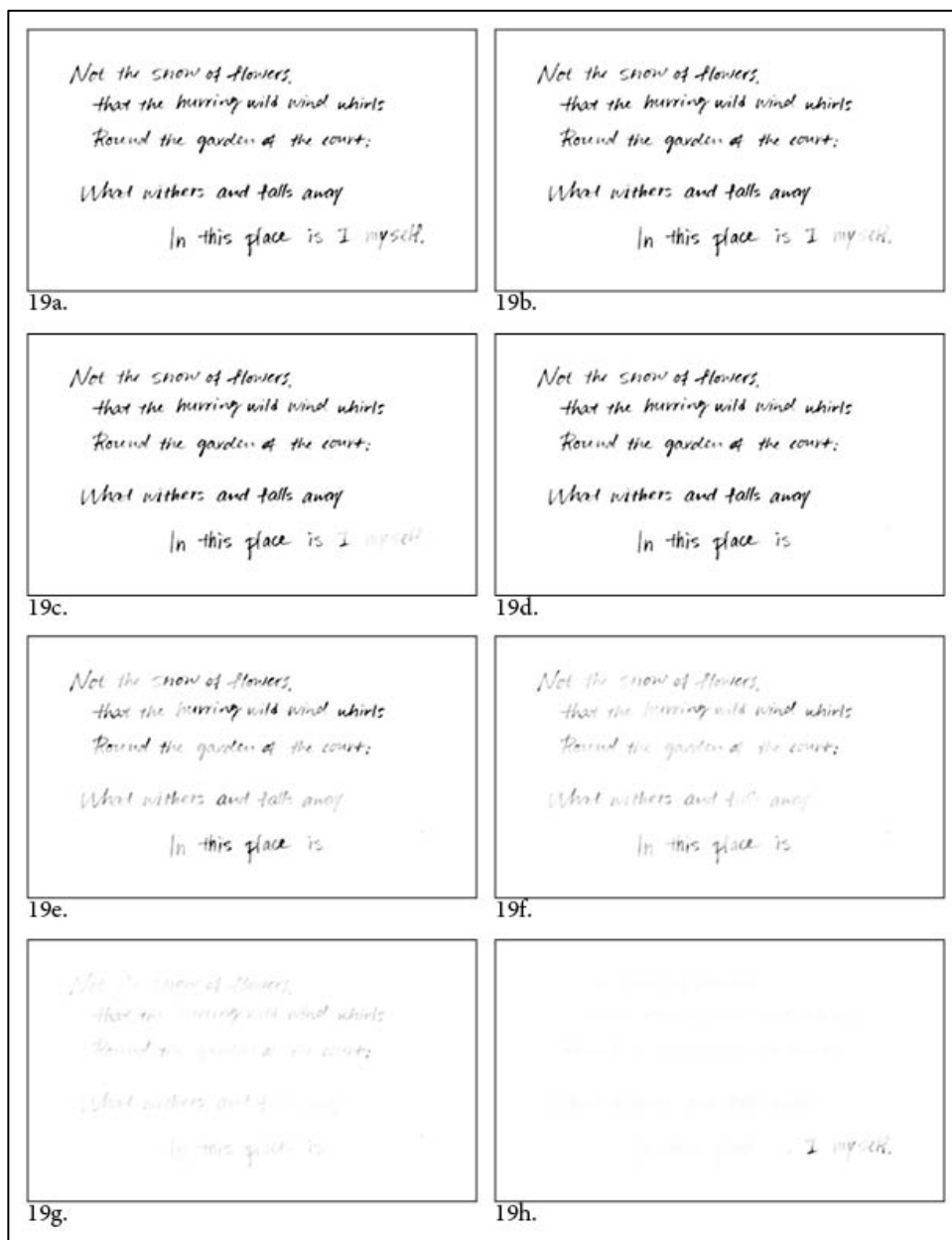by one and it creates a flipbook effect (Figure 19).

Figure 19. Images change as the page is scrolled like a flipbook.

The part "I myself" disappears first as if erased by an eraser or wiped out by a hand (Figure 19a to 19d) and so does the rest of the poetry afterwards (Figure 19e to 19g). Once most of the parts have disappeared, the words "I myself," from which the title of the work is derived, will come back to the screen again (Figure 19h). My intention is that the increased amount of empty space will enhance the meaning of what is left behind as the remains of those words irregularly and incompletely erased by scrolling will suggest to the viewer a variety of thoughts and interpretations.

What is I myself?

http://aisaito.net/research/2015/ms/4/whatisimyself.html

This work titled "What is I myself?" employs the same technique used in the work "Furiyuku monowa," which make objects to fade away by the passage of time. This work uses module images of the handwritten script instead of simple text. Also, the black and white outline drawing of cherry blossoms is loaded as the background image (Figure 20).
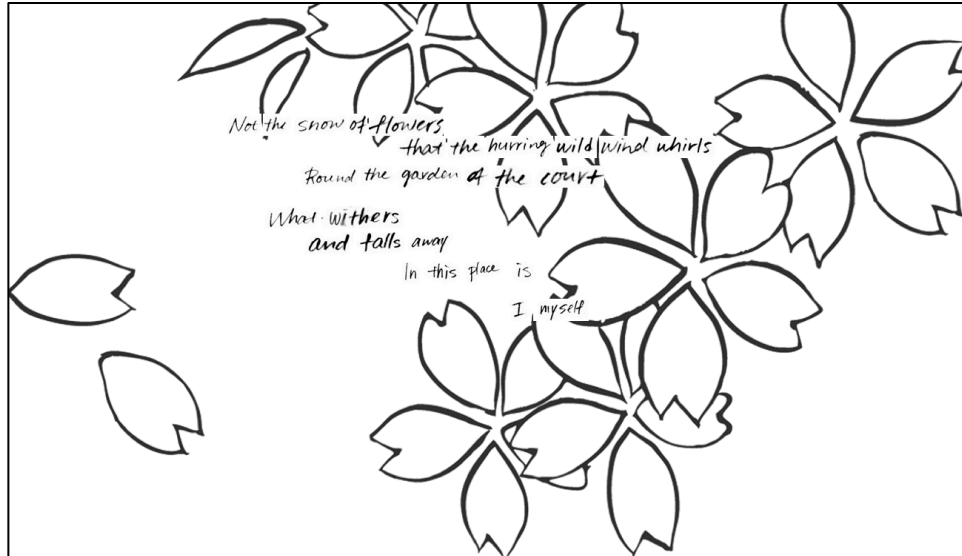
Figure 20. Screenshot of the initial appearance of the work.

As the viewer clicks each image of the script, it begins to disappear from the screen. While in "Furiyuki mono wa," each verse stays at the same position, in this work each image gets left justified when an image next has disappeared (Figure 21). There are various possible patterns a viewer may experience. Depending on how the view navigates through the page, what the viewer sees on this page changes.
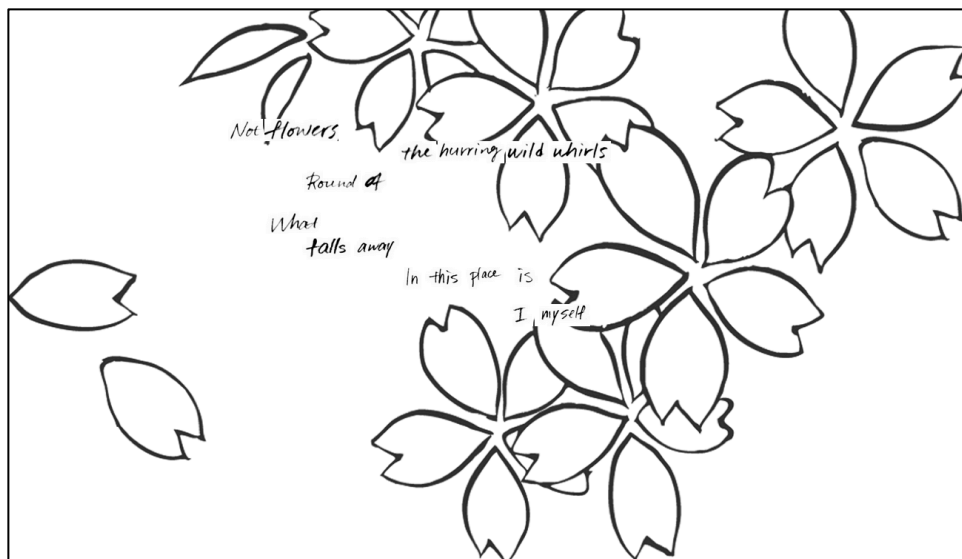

Figure 21. Screenshot of a possible sequence.

Although there are various paths to reach the result, at the end, a viewer should find that there are words that do not disappear. They create the phrase: "What is I myself," from which the title of the work is derived (Figure 22). It suggests this phrase in the form of a question, but just like other works, there is no definite answer and interpretation is left to a viewer.
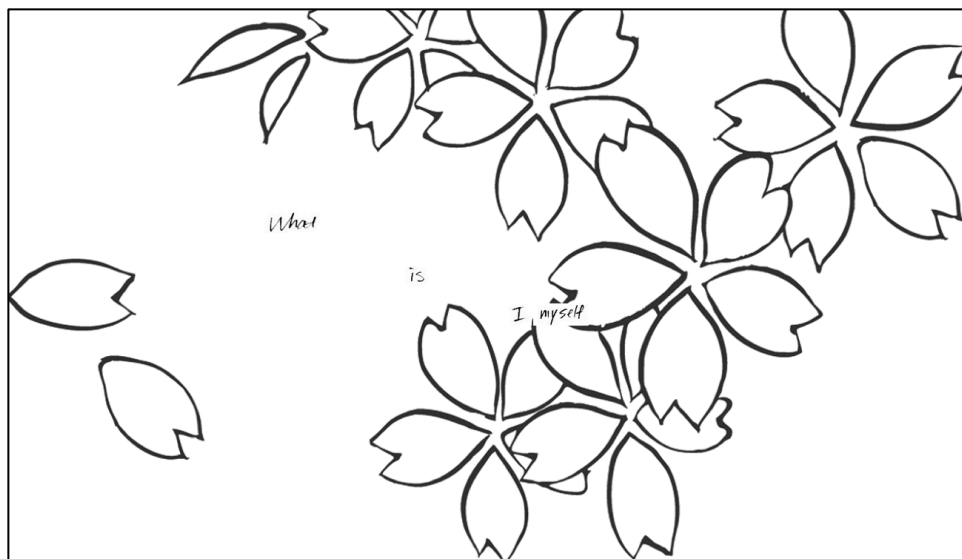

Figure 22. Screenshot of the result image of actions made on the work.

While in "Furiyuku monowa," the page reloads automatically so that the appearance of the work constantly changes regardless of the viewer's action, in this work the page will not automatically reload or move to another pages. That means the work will keep its state as it is as the viewer may or may not make action on the page. It is interesting that a computer "waits" for action, but there is no sense of actual time passing in the digital world. Therefore, when action is made with new media objects a change (can) happen instantly and immediately, and thus new media objects often won't keep the same state for long time (which I refer to as ephemerality); however,

paradoxically speaking, they will stay the same as long as action changes won't be made unlike physical objects. In this sense, time in the computer world may be frozen rather than eliminated.

Untitled

http://aisaito.net/research/2015/ms/5/untitled-shuffle.html

In the work called "Untitled," the poetry scripts written in white modules laid over a photograph of a bench sitting under a cherry tree in full blossom are loaded in the Web browser (Figure 23). The poetry script is in order of the original form, but there is no break between each verse so all the words are put in one paragraph making total four lines. Space between each word and line is about 20 pixels.
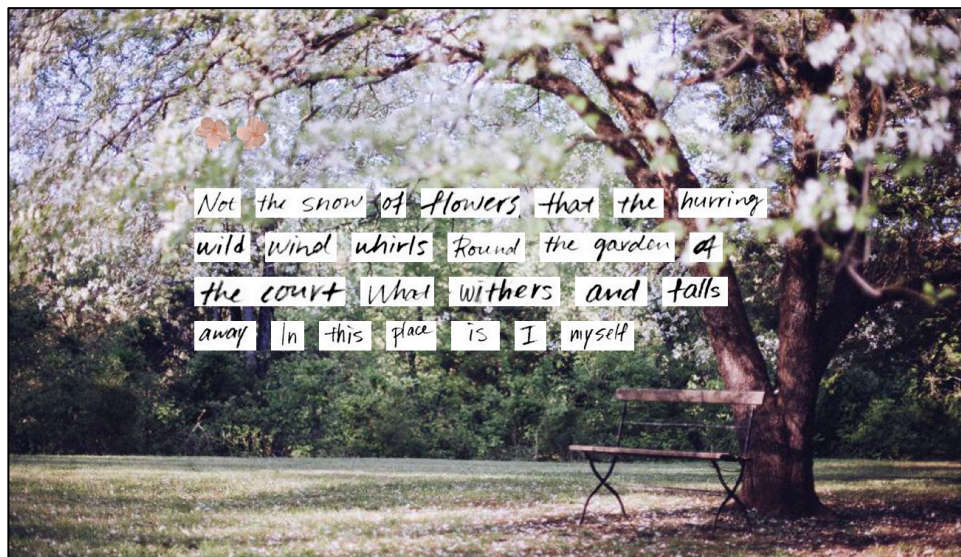
Figure 23. Screenshot of the initial appearance of the work.

There are two flowers on the top left of the page: the right one is to shuffle the order of the script and the left is to reset it to the original. When a viewer clicks the right flower, the order of total 24 images of the script is shuffled and regenerates the original

meaning of the poetry. In shuffling, 10 transparent images are added to the original 24 images of the script in order to create irregular blank spaces. Therefore, there will be an enormous number of combinations that these 34 images can create by chance (Figure 24).
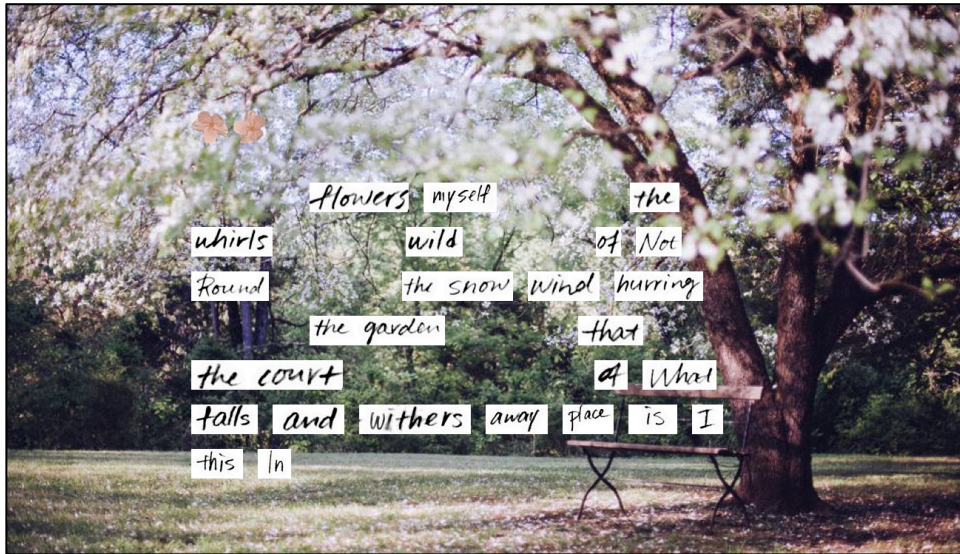

Figure 24. Screenshot of an example of a result of the action made on the work.

Irregularity is one of the characteristics that contributes to the traditional Japanese aesthetics and creates a feeling of incompleteness, which is considered to be equal to potential for changes. Empty spaces also create a room for imagination to be inserted. A viewer can freely fill his own thoughts in the blanks and create his original interpretation. With traditional paper media where the objects are "hard-wired together" (Manovich, 2001, p.38), such manipulation of the poetry is impossible to happen unless one cuts out pieces of a work physically. But in that case, restoration to the original form will be extremely difficult. In contrast, with new media objects, manipulation and restoration can happen easily at the same time because of the principles of modularity,

variability and automation. Irreversibility of a form is no longer a problem with new media objects.

Untitled II

http://aisaito.net/research/2015/ms/6/untitledII.html

The work called "Untitled II" was inspired by the previous work "Untitled," in which the objects in the work are randomly shuffled. Instead of using only the scripts of the poetry, this work includes variety of images such as cherry blossoms, origami papers, the words written in Japanese and smaller and bigger size of words in English (Figure 28). As soon as the page is loaded in the Web browser, those images appear all over the screen in a random order and the page automatically reloads itself every second. Thus the appearance of the work constantly changes in an extremely short span of time (Figure 29). It creates a very busy feeling to a viewer unlike the other works in which actions happen more quietly.

Figure 25. Screenshot of an example of a sequence of the work.

Figure 26. Screenshot of another example of a sequence of the work.

The attempt in this work was to create something that has a different character from the previous works. Upon reflection, I realized that this work contains the characteristics seen in Kawaii, such as childlikeness, irregularity or incompleteness, rather than traditional aesthetics of simplicity. The movement seen in this work is like a child playing with scraps of paper and gluing them on canvas. They are all randomly layered on top of one another without any logical sophistication. Unlike other works that tend to require time of waiting, changes on this work happens so harshly that even the background image is constantly moving. This work is a reflection of ephemerality of new media objects.

Reflection

Throughout the net.art works, I have put a special emphasis on the phrase, "I myself," as I interpreted that the message of the poetry is that it brings awareness to

changes happening around the man and he himself is also the subject of changes. A question of "what is I myself," which was asked in one of the works, is the question to all mankind living in the age of new media today. In McLuhan's theory of media (1964/2003), our human physical bodies and nerve systems have been stretched and extended in the acceleration of speed made by advancement of technology, and as the result, in the age of new media time-space factor has been completely eliminated from human association because of the ability of instant connection given by the electrics. Space of the computer world is totally different from physical space in which mankind has always lived through the history. In such "totally new human environment" (McLuhan, 1964/2013, location 81), where our previous habits and perceptions are forced to change, the question of "what is I myself" is important to be asked to see the existence of one's self in a new light and seek the balance between conceptual time that keeps accelerating by technology and actual time in which we still physically live by.

CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

The paper has shown how our experience of time and space has been changed by the advancement of technology, as it is the fundamental effect that the media brings into the human environment. Especially, the impact of the media is significant in the age of new media because they have ability to eliminate time-space factors in human association while traditional media had always alternated the time-space experience by accelerating the speed. The research has also revealed reveals the differences between Western and Japanese aesthetics by comparing the view of nature and by analyzing the genealogy of simplicity. While the common aesthetics of simplicity in Western cultures came through the advent of the modern society in a pursuit of seeking efficiency and practicality, simplicity found in Japanese traditional aesthetics is based on the concept of emptiness, which was given a birth though the great cultural loss cased by the 15th century civil war and developed by art of *chanoyu* (tea ceremony). The essence of emptiness is suggestion, which creates room for imagination and interpretation to be inserted to find the unspoken meanings. Kawai is an example of modern Japanese aesthetics developed out of traditional aesthetics over time.

The aesthetics found in Western modernization and Japanese aesthetics are often diametrically opposed because the Western aesthetics values the increase of speed and scale and the simplification of a process to archive efficiency and functionality, whereas the Japanese embraces the passing of time and leaves the progress of action to be fulfilled by complement of others. Yet, my research has discovered that new media can create a platform for the modernization of Japanese

aesthetics. Although there are many differences, with the platform of new media, the aesthetics of Western modernization and the aesthetics of Japanese culture can work together: for they share the significantly unique characteristics of imperfection (incompleteness) and perishability (ephemerality) as the common ground that integrates all other distinctive characteristics.

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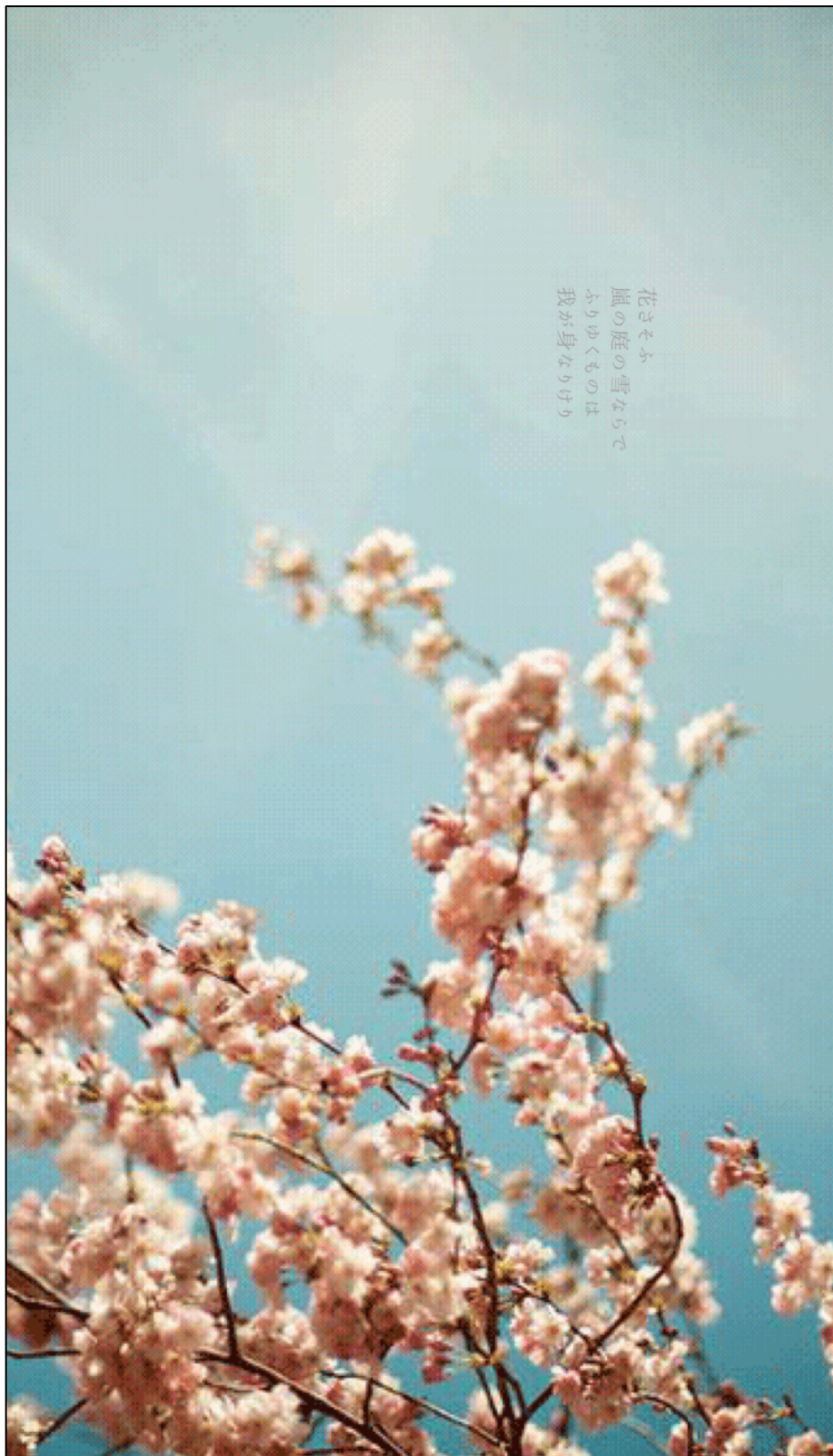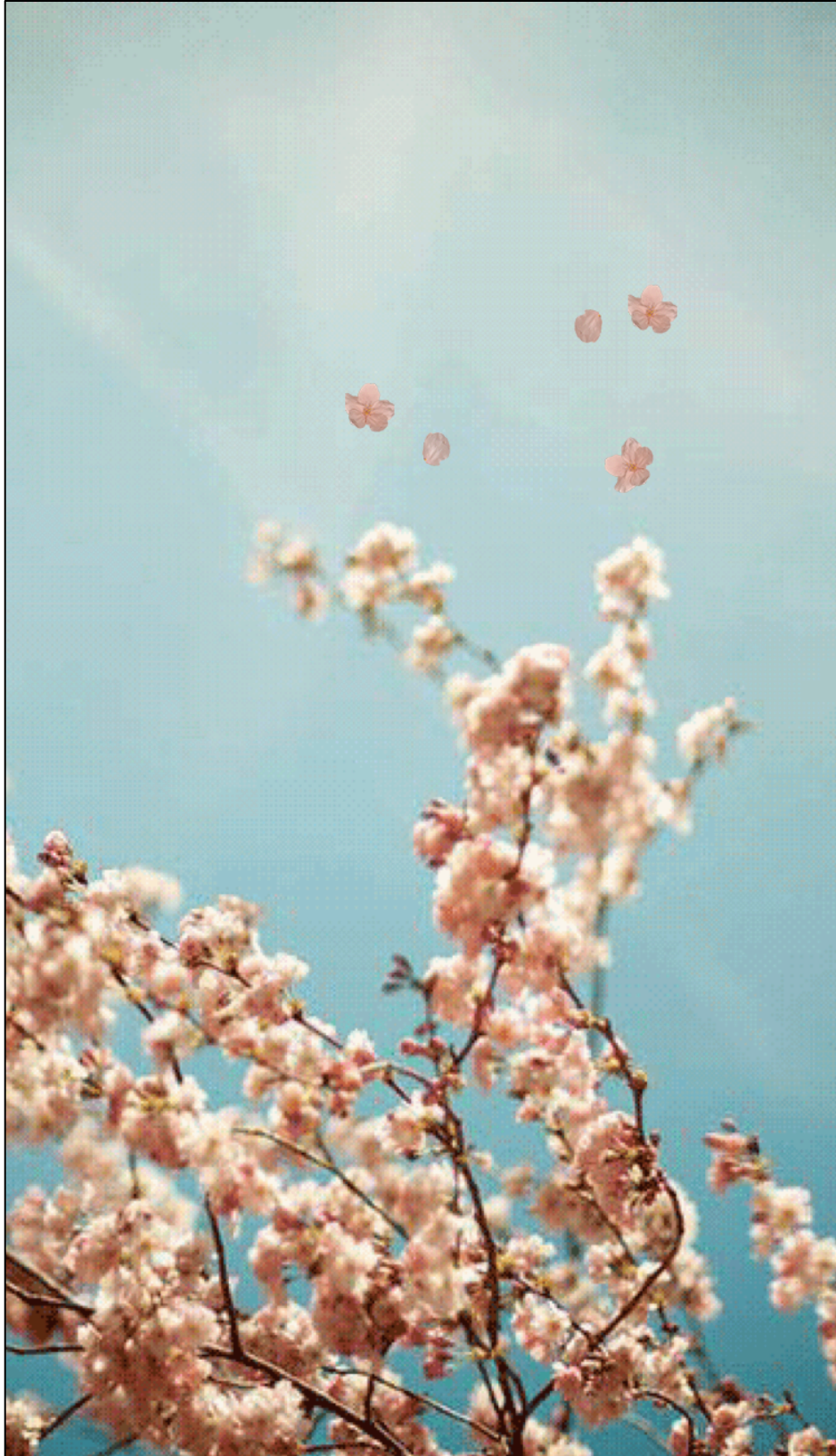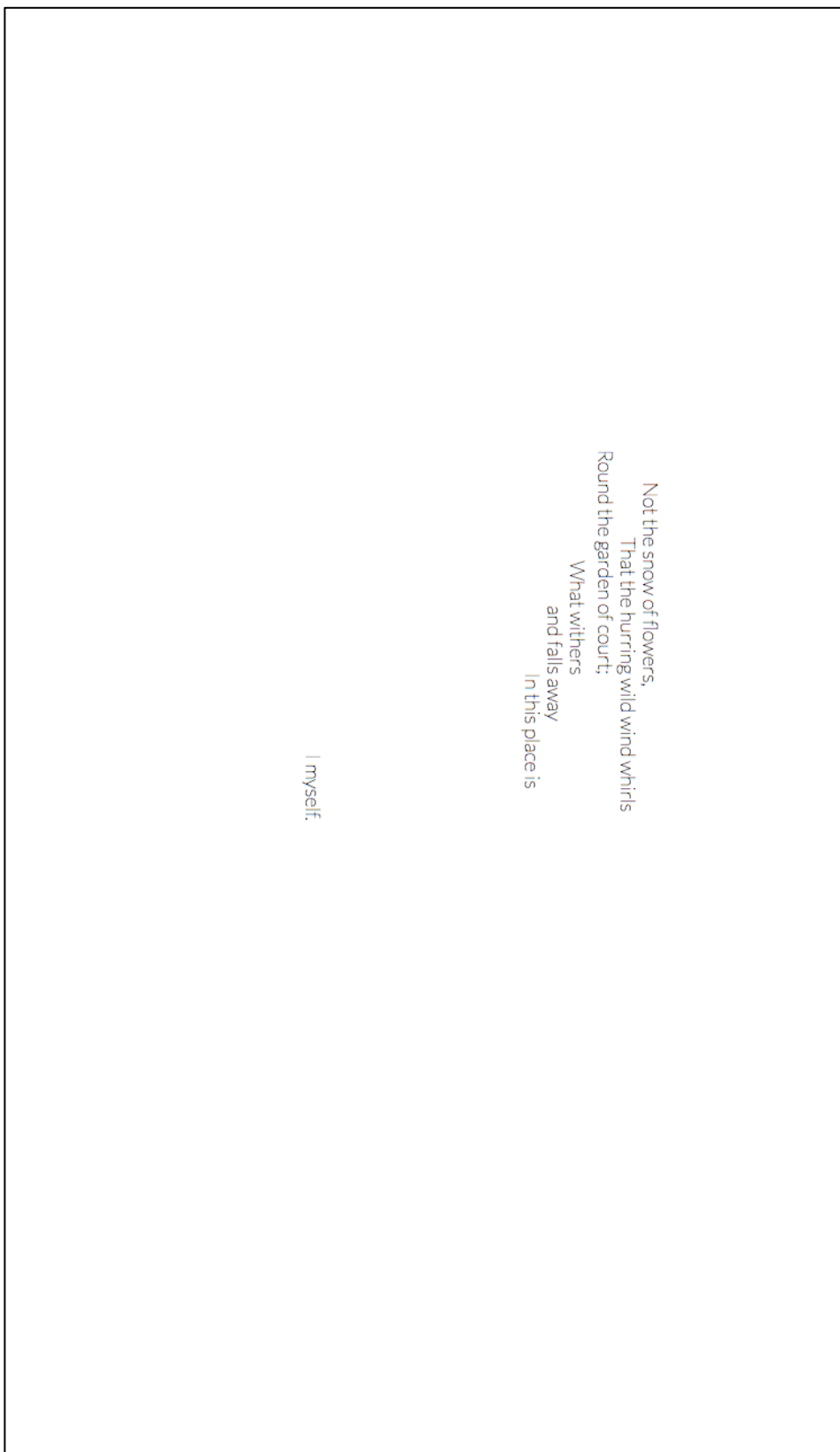
Amazon.co.jp.

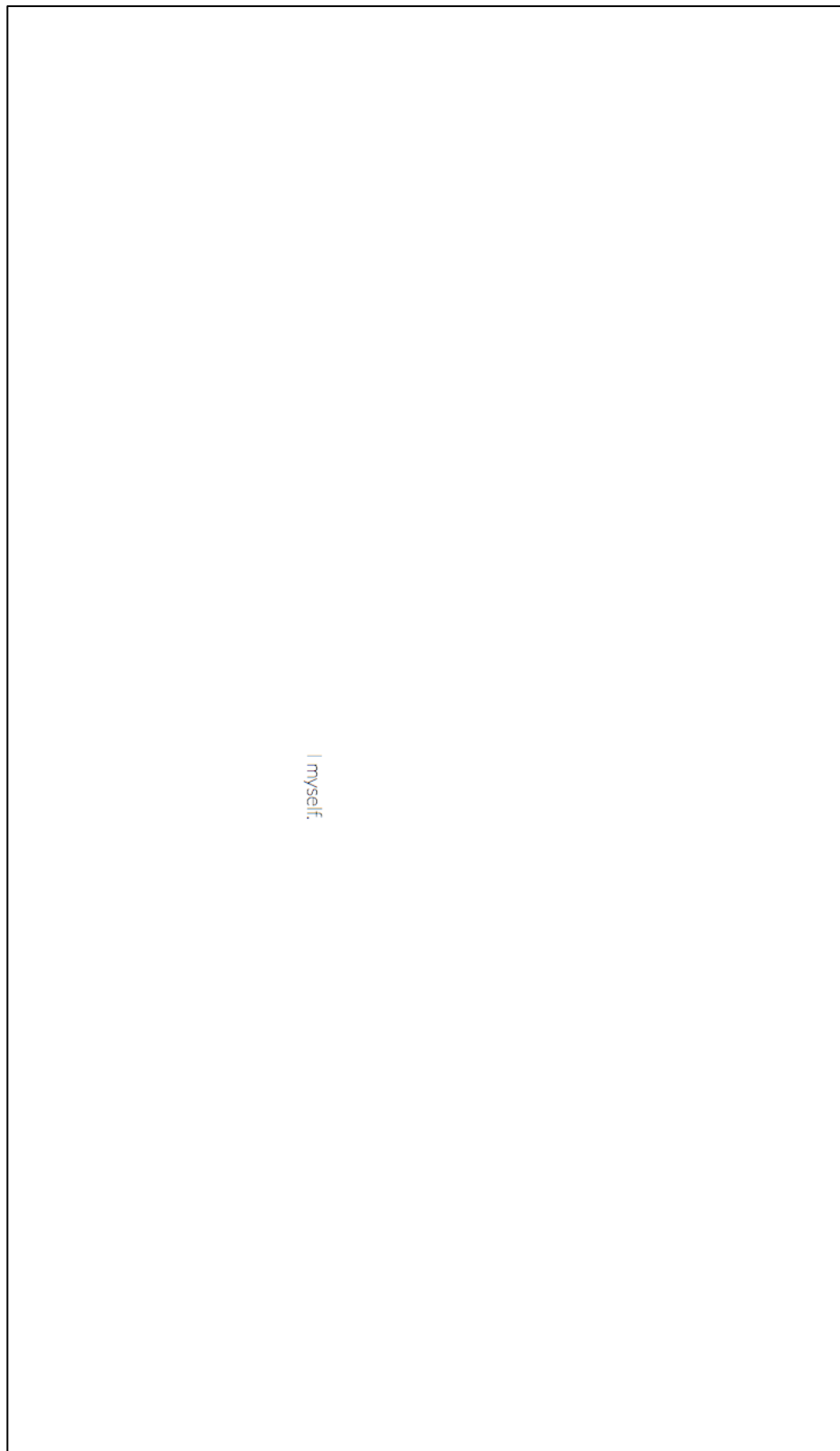APPENDICES

Appendix A – Project images
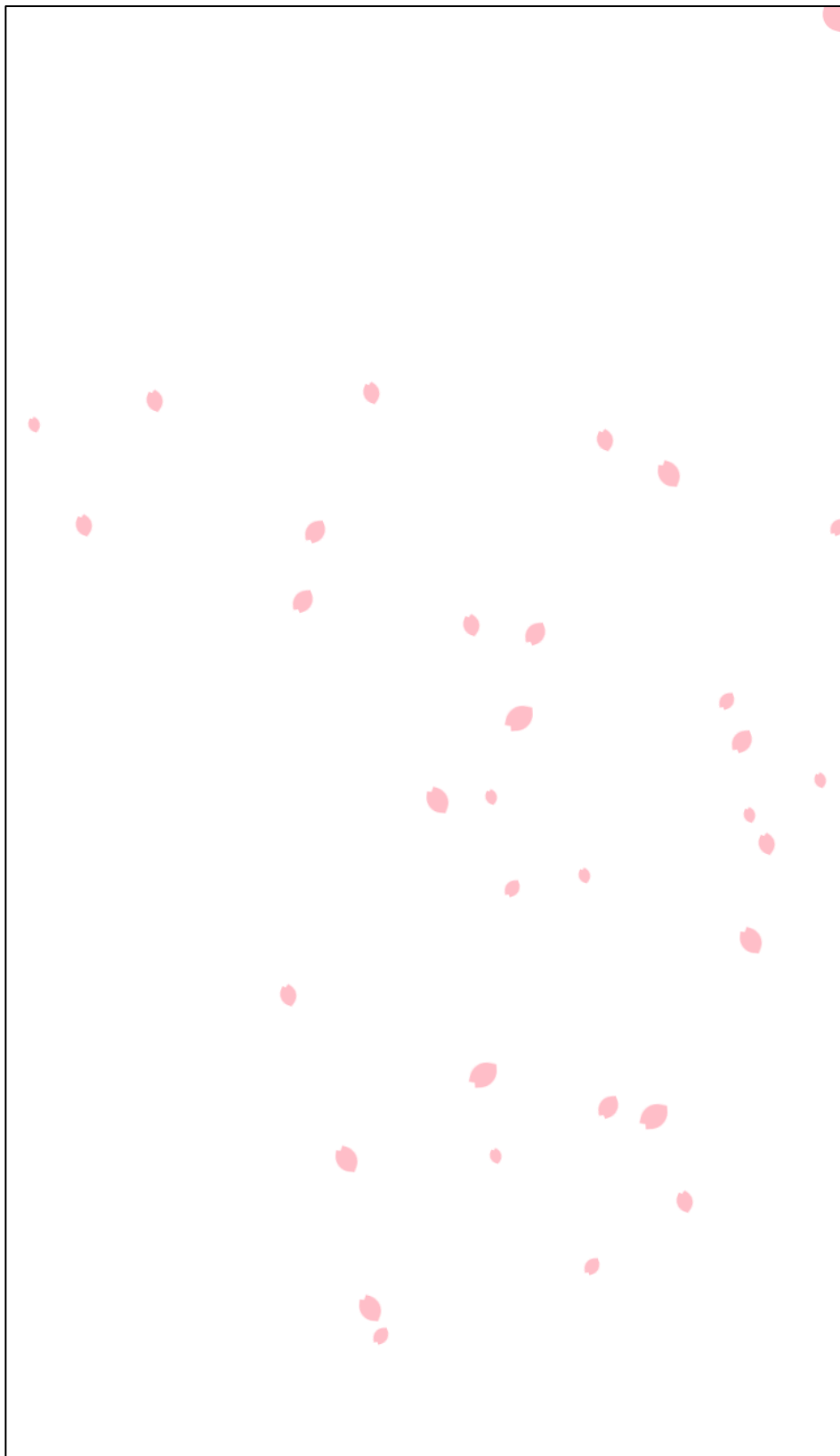
花さそふ
嵐の庭の雪ならで
ふりゆくものは
我が身なりけり

Figure A1.

Figure A2.

Not the snow of flowers,
That the hurrying wild wind whirls
Round the garden of court,
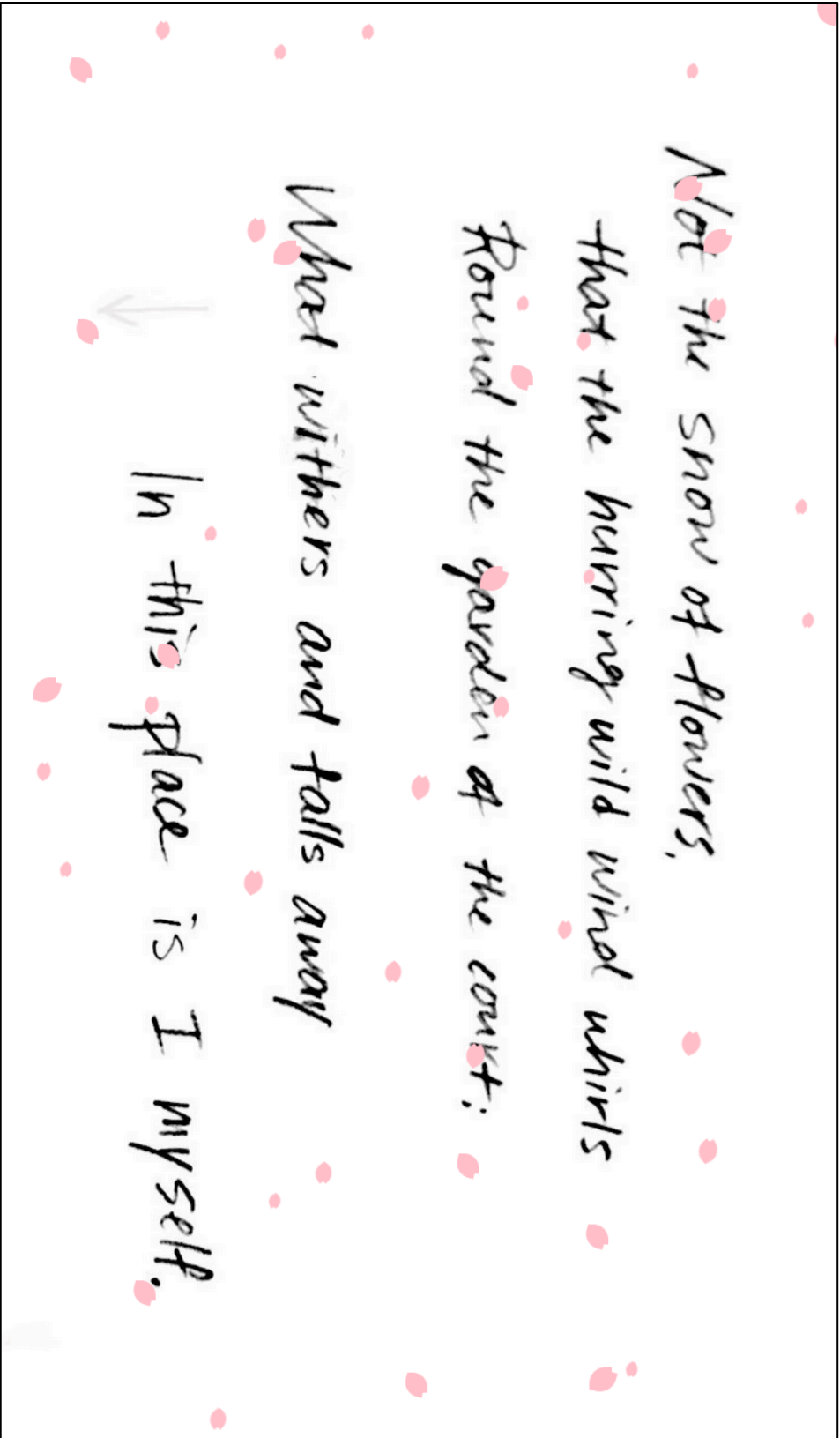What withers and falls away
In this place is I myself.

Figure A3.

Not the snow of flowers,
That the hurring wild wind whirls
Round the garden of court;
What withers
and falls away
In this place is

I myself.

Figure A4.

That the hurring wild wind whirls

Round the garden of court

What withers
and falls away

I myself.

Figure A5.

I myself.

Figure A6.

Figure A7.

Not the snow of flowers,
that the hurrying wild wind whirls
Round the garden at the court;
What withers and falls away
In this place is I myself.

Figure A8.

Not the snow of flowers,
that the hurrying wild wind whirls
Round the garden at the court;
What withers and falls away
In this place is

Figure A9.

Not the snow of flowers,
that the hurrying wild wind whirls
Round the garden at the court;

What withers and falls away

In this place is

Figure A10.

Figure A11,

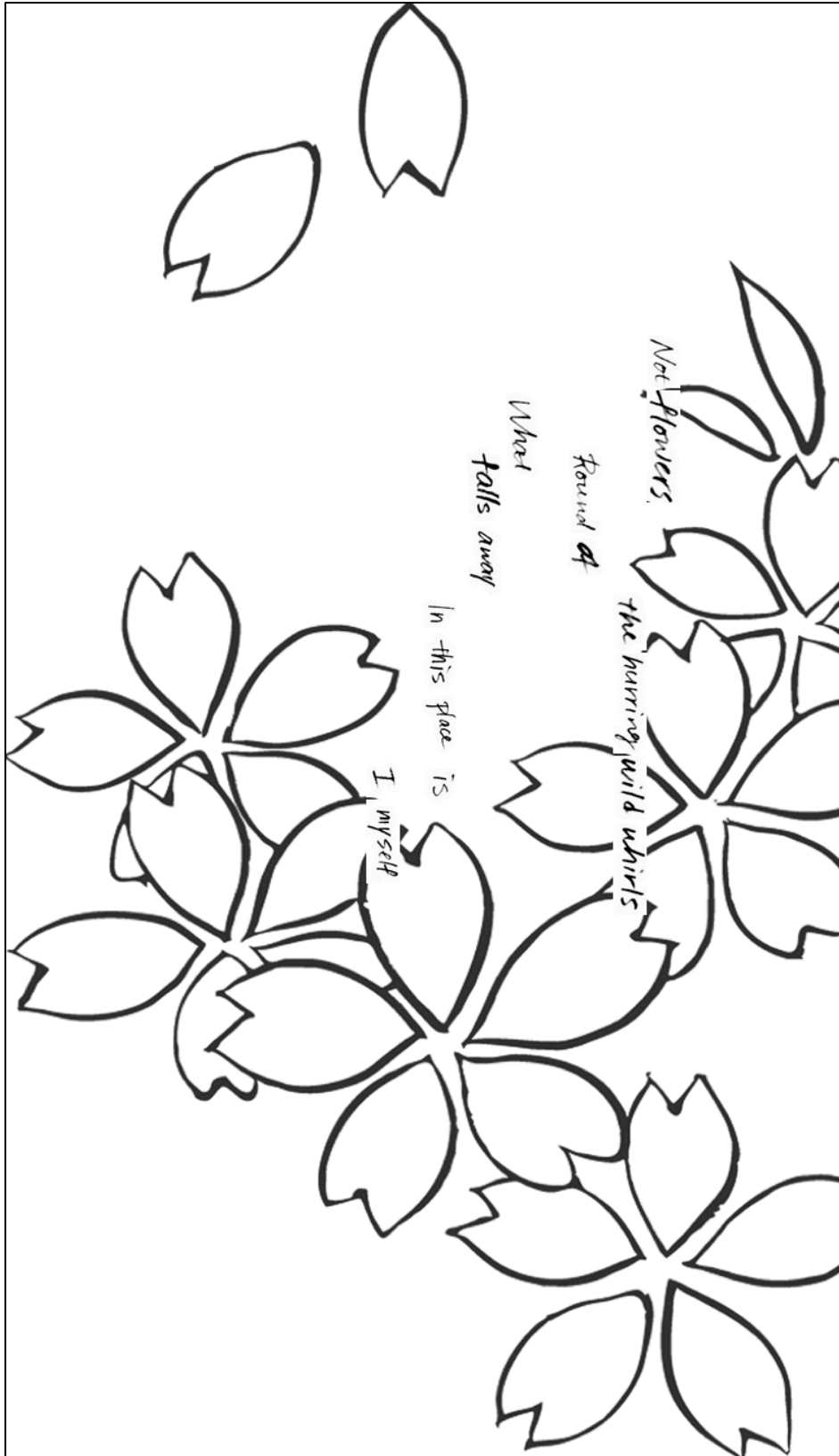Figure A12.

Not flowers.

Round at

the hurrying wild whirls

What falls away

In this place is

I, myself

Figure A13.

Figure A14.

flowers myself

whirls

wild of Not the

Round

the garden

the snow wind turning

the court

that

falls and withers away place is I

a What

this In

Figure A15.

Not the snow of flowers that the hurrying
wild wind whirls round the garden a
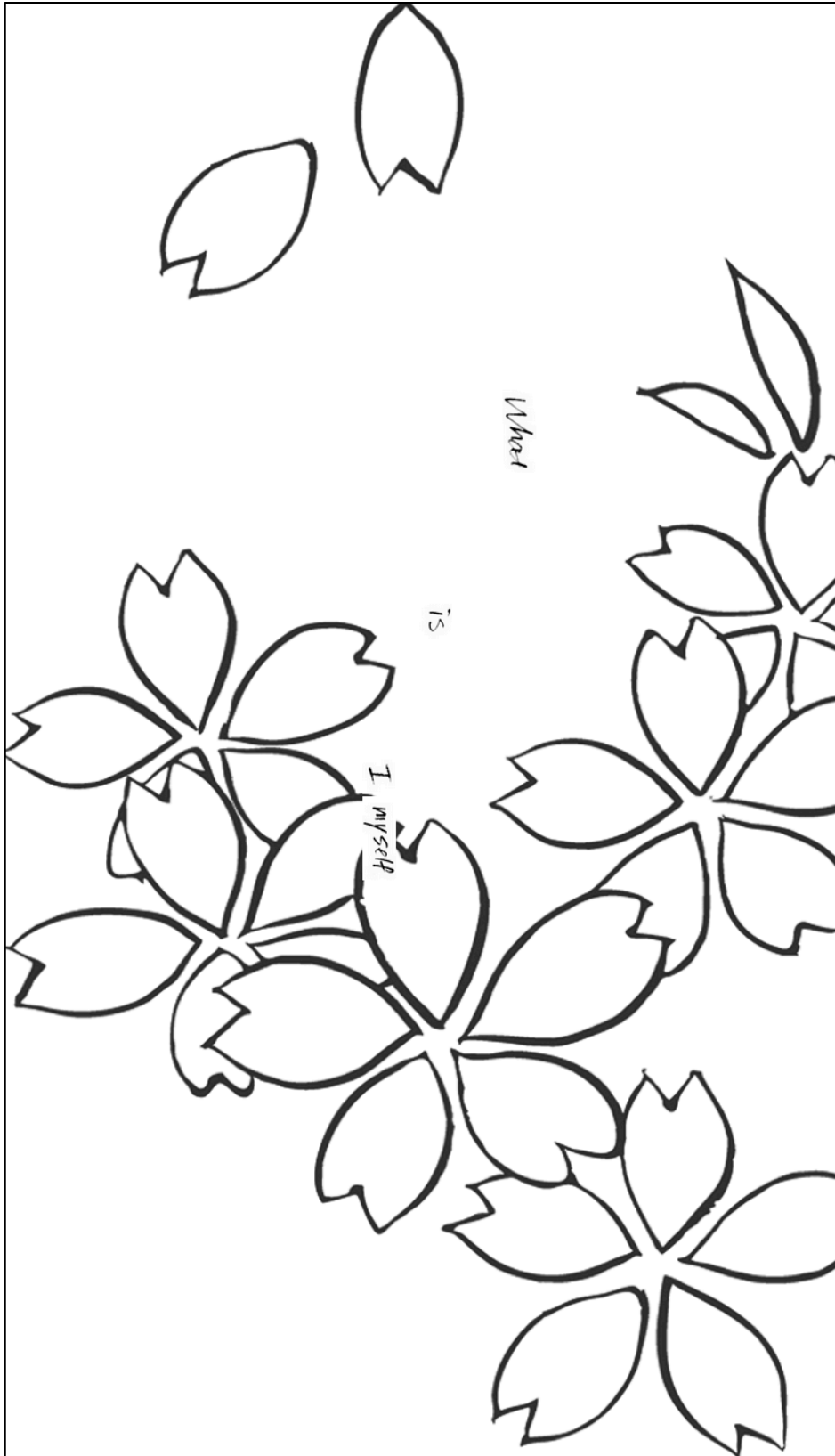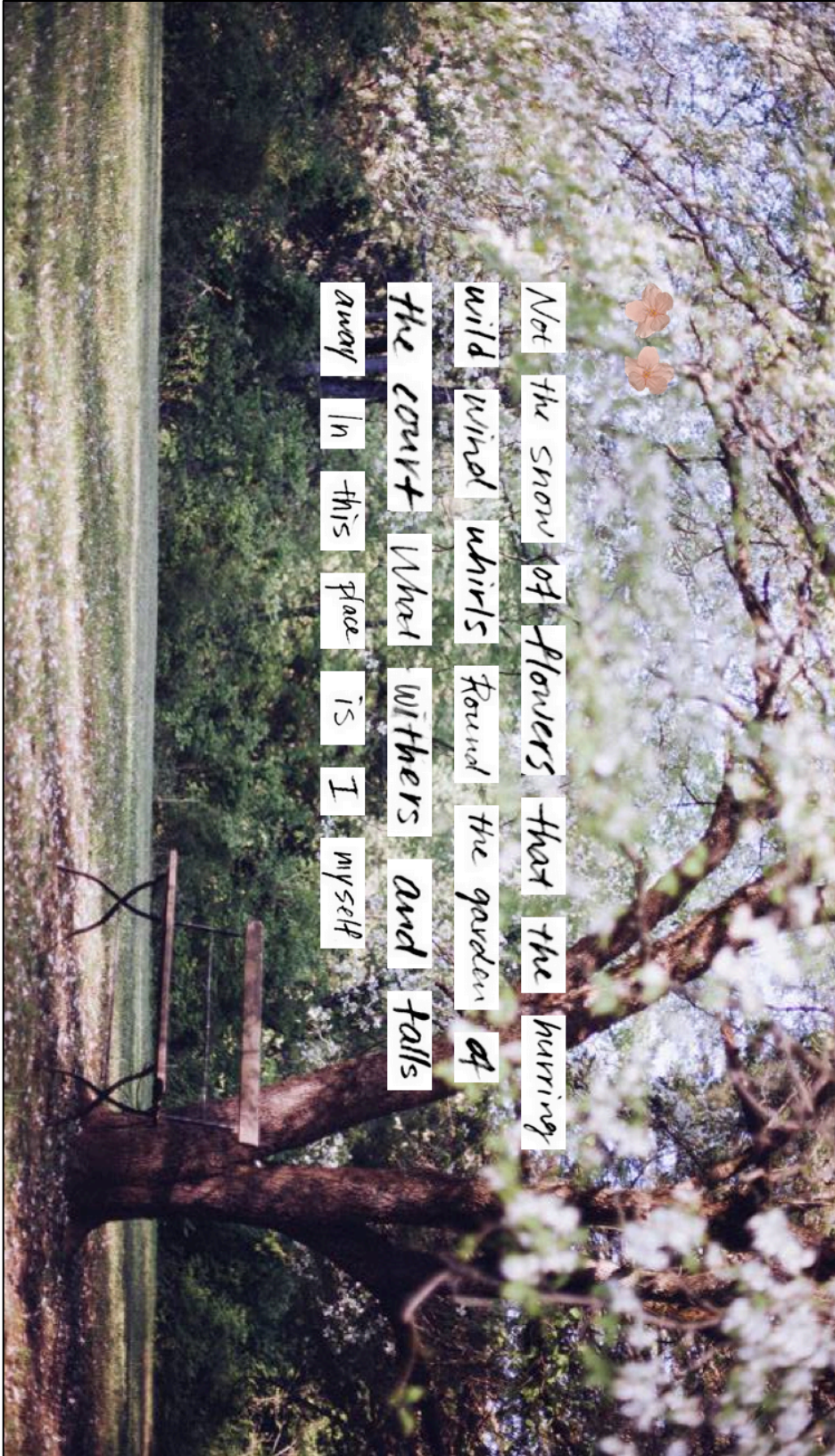the court What withers and falls
away In this place is I myself
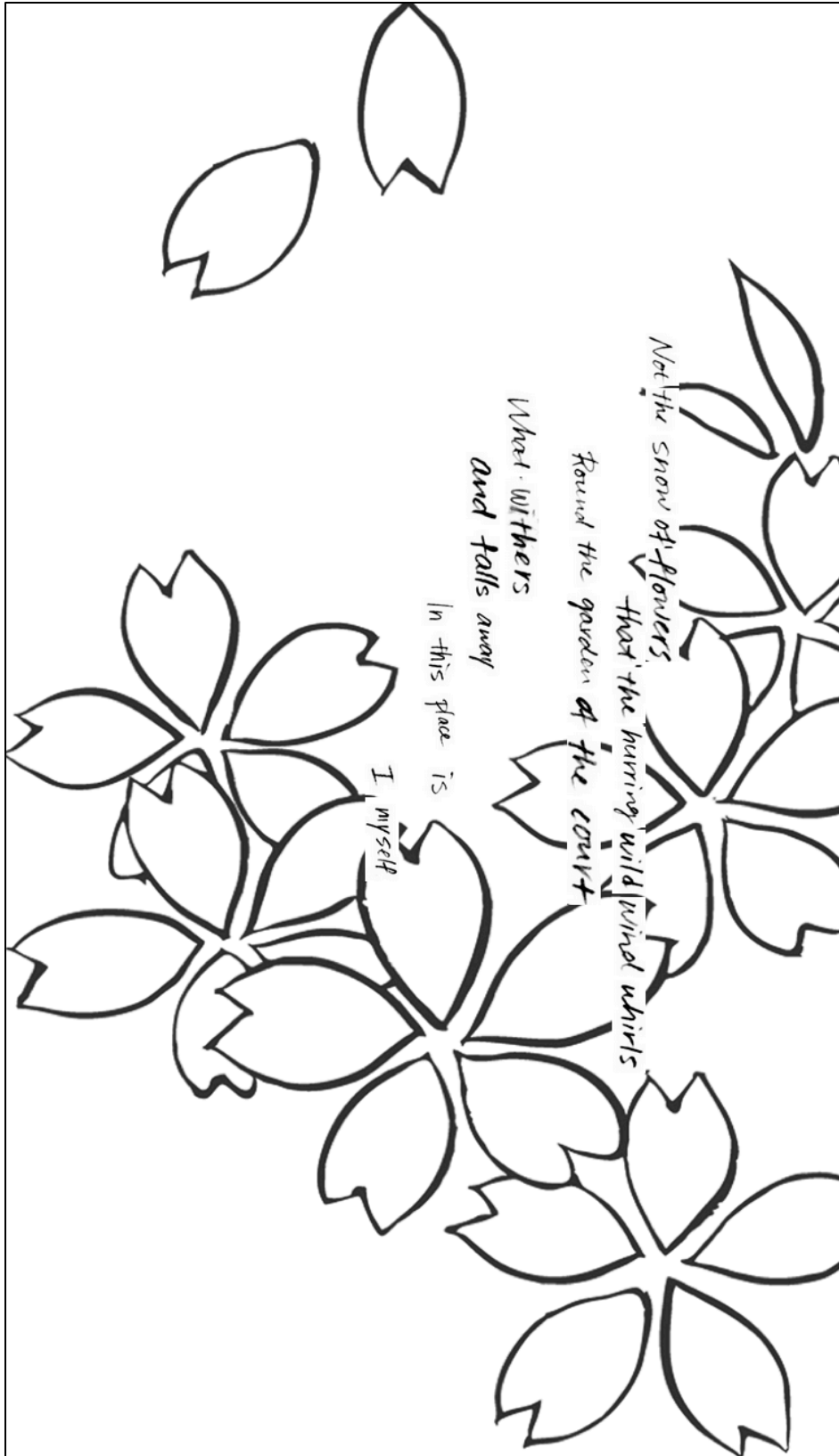
Figure A16.

Figure A17.

Figure A18.

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