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HERBARY: CO-RESPIRATION (2023)

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Herbary: Co-respiration (2023) unfolds within a temporarily constructed immersive environment, saturated with the scent of medicinal herbs, resonating with animistic rituals that summon entanglements between herbs and humans, disease and memory, forgetting and recollection. Core elements include the medicinal herbs themselves, herb remnants scattered across the canvas, and projected moving images interweaving indigenous herbal medicine, ritual practices, and cultural trauma. In this multi-sensory space, herb remnants are objects to be trampled, transient relics carried away by the wind, and ritualistic mediators that trace the intermingling of bodies, affliction, and healing. Their discarding marks the vaporization of an indeterminate memory—one that does not dissolve into oblivion but cycles between loss and recovery. The work thus raises a fundamental question: under what conditions can these residues be reintegrated into the public sphere to form a new modality of collective remembrance?

Situated at the threshold between detritus and cure, herb remnants occupy an ambiguous position in traditional Chinese medicine and vernacular healing practices. My work explores this paradox, rendering these remnants not just as material residues but as symbols of memory and trauma. Through the ritual scattering of herbs in public domains, it resists the privatization of suffering through collective witnessing. Rituals, here, are not symbolic but performative acts, entangling healing with social memory. The scattering oscillates between benediction and malediction—offering remedy to the community while also bearing the weight of unresolved affliction. Thus, this ritual both wages war against the specters of disease and subverts the mechanisms of forgetting.

These remnants sediment the memory of historical violence, resisting their clinical expulsion as mere waste. They cling with stubborn persistence, defying both archival containment and mnemonic annihilation. They

assert their presence in public while evading disciplinary regulation, leaving an ineffaceable trace in history's gaps. The work reclaims these "impurities," reconfiguring breathing into a political act, fragrance into a mnemonic vessel, and lost medicinal knowledge into a counter-hegemonic force. In this process, the work enacts a strategy of counter-forgetting, imbuing what modernity relentlessly seeks to erase with new meaning.

Modernity's logic is one of systematic expulsion: it erases ambiguity, sequesters memory, and sanitizes history. The work inverts this: it resurrects the spectral presence of what has been designated as waste, orchestrating a sensorial polyphony that recuperates the marginal, the silenced, and the disavowed. In doing so, it restores displaced healing practices, suppressed bodily experiences, and lost public rituals into the collective sensorium. Entrenched in medical and political apparatuses, convalescence becomes spectral—to heal is to disappear, to be absorbed back into the normative condition of "health," to leave no trace of affliction. But *Herbary: Co-respiration* insists otherwise: what remains unhealed must not be erased. Healing must encompass social and political reconnection, rather than remain confined to biomedical frameworks. Memory, too, must not be individualized, but persist as a shared, unerasable imprint on public consciousness.

As a post-pandemic installation, the work interrogates how collective trauma is inscribed, processed, and potentially effaced. It poses questions on the nature of memory itself: What does it mean to remember? Who has the authority to remember? Whose trauma is legitimized, and whose history is erased? In the infrastructures of mourning that have emerged in the pandemic's wake, the politics of remembrance and the politics of forgetting operate in parallel, constructing public memory while simultaneously obliterating its inconvenient remnants. Against this, the work enacts a counter-intervention, refusing to let those traces disappear, instead

reintroducing them into the public sphere as enduring imprints that resist eradication.

Herb remnants permeate the city's circulatory system through footsteps and wind, assuming a diffuse, decentralized trace that eludes control and categorization. They exist in a state of flux, belonging neither to an origin nor an endpoint, gesturing toward absence while remaining material. The olfactory residue of the herbs lingers beyond the deinstallation, persisting on walls, textiles, and visitors' garments. Over time, they dissolve into the air, becoming imperceptible yet never entirely vanishing. This temporal transformation turns the work into a presence that resists containment by clinging to the interstices of reality. It reconfigures public memory as a shared experience, rather than one that is institutionalized, privatized, or archived. The herbs become a decentralized memorial that fragments, diffuses, and seeps into daily life. They extend healing beyond the personal; their dispersal does not erase trauma but instead reabsorbs it into greater social networks.

Within this conceptual framework, the herbs themselves are mobilized as symbolic apparatuses that confront the politics of forgetting—or more precisely, as a formula for counter-forgetting. The work thus asks: How can material traces rethread the ruptured fabric of social experience? How can illness and embodied affliction be collectively memorialized without being appropriated as a political spectacle? How can scent, residue, and moving images resist the sanitization of trauma? How might public healing extend beyond individual, psychological recovery?

Amnesia, once a neurological condition, has become a political metaphor—a vessel for erased traumas and fragmented histories. The medicinal herbs chosen—*Polygala tenuifolia* (yuan zhi), *Panax notoginseng* (san qi), *Moutan cortex* (mu dan pi)—are deeply symbolic; these ingredients have been used in traditional medicine to treat memory loss, cognitive decline, and neurological

deterioration. Yet they do not simply restore mnemonic capacities, but also resuscitate excised social memory. The pandemic has manufactured systemic amnesia. Breathing, once and perhaps still, remains a site of discipline, surveillance, and fear: masks, border-driven xenophobia, social distancing, medical isolation, paramilitary lockdowns. It is through the material inscription of herb remnants that the work seeks to reactivate suppressed circuits of memory, exposing the operations of forgetting to visibility and summoning the conditions for collective remembrance.

Herb remnants leave a transcendent trace, a ritual echo that refuses to vanish. They raise vital questions about memory: How might remembrance be salvaged from forgetting? How might the breath of plants summon human memory—or conversely, how might forgetting be inscribed within respiration itself? In a hyper-sanitized world these traces may be our only remnant. They do not offer a seamless historical narrative; yet it is precisely its incompleteness, its perpetual deferral that grants it an unassimilable, non-incorporable, non-forgettable force. Their dissipation is a deliberate act of resistance, a challenge to the biopolitical hygiene of modernity. The trace they leave does not point to closure but to an unfinished futurity, an insistence that what has been consigned to oblivion will persist, continuously mutating, perpetually resurfacing in the interstices of the present. It reminds us that forgetting is never passive—it is always engineered; remembering is never natural—it is always contested. Perhaps the role of art is precisely this: to summon forth those fragments that should have disappeared, to reinsert them, insistently, into our field of perception. And, to compel us with an uncomfortable yet necessary reckoning: What must be remembered?



Juntao Yang, *Herbary: Co-respiration*, 2023. Installation view. Single-channel digital video (4'19"), herbal medicine, glass containers. Exhibited in 300 Migratory Birds, Aranya Theater Festival, Qinhuangdao, China.

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Juntao Yang, *Herbary: Co-respiration*, 2023. Detail view. Single-channel digital video (4'19"), herbal medicine, glass containers. Exhibited in 300 Migratory Birds, Aranya Theater Festival, Qinhuangdao, China.

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