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Parts of a Whole

Hsiang-Lu Meng

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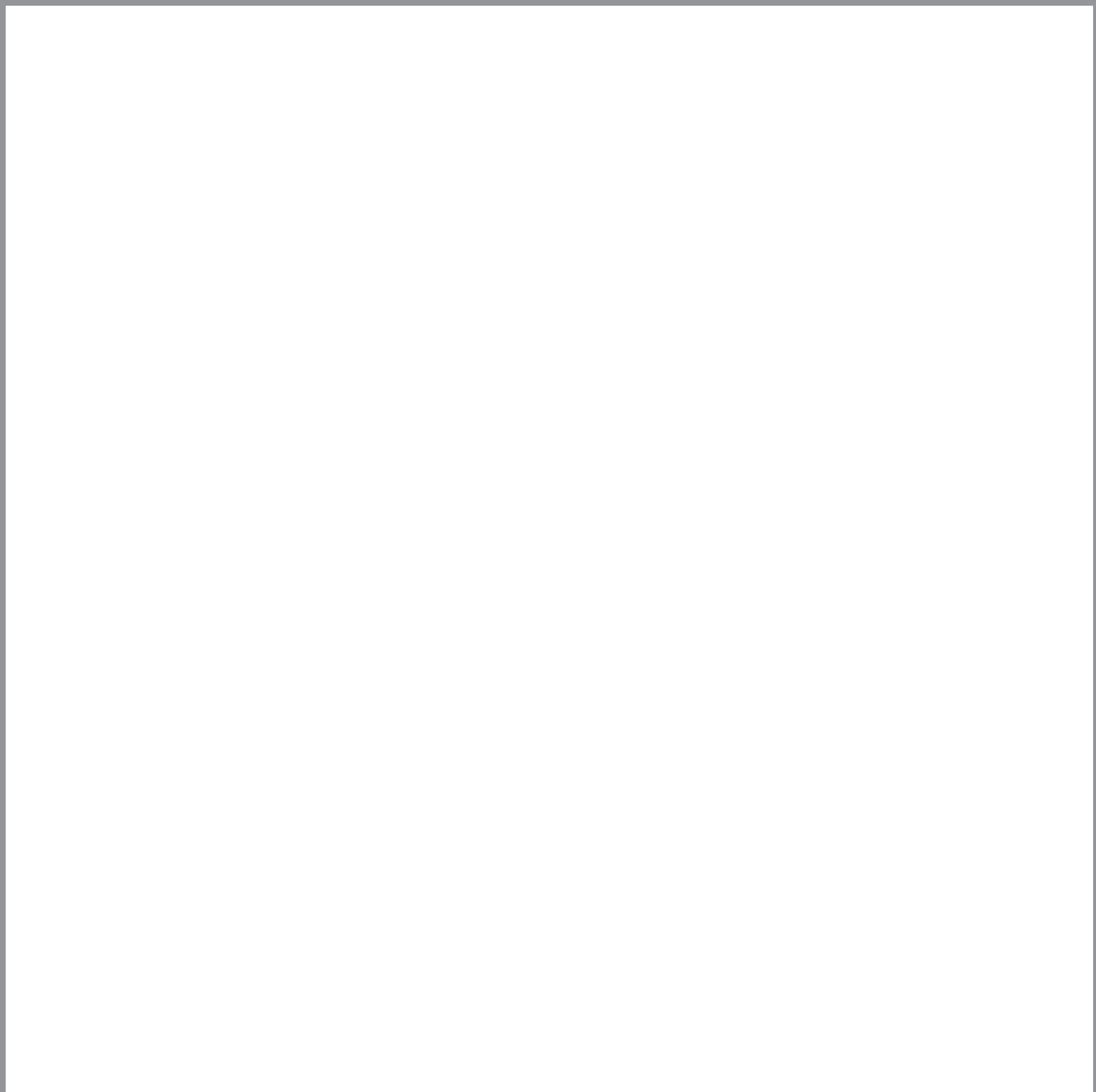
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Parts of a Whole

Hsiang-Lu Meng



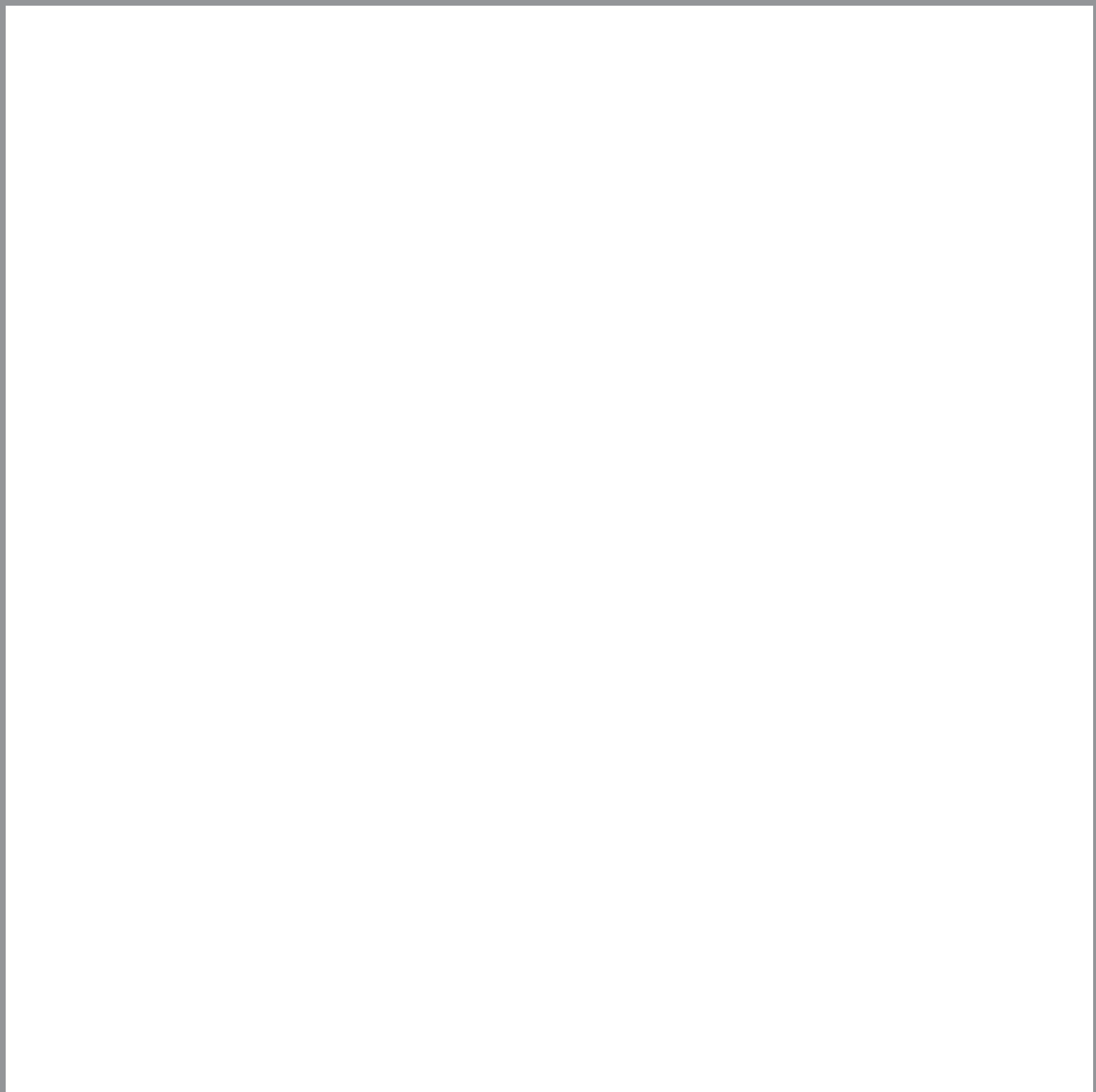
R · I · T
Parts of a Whole
by
Hsiang-Lu Meng

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts
in Imaging Arts
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, NY
June 19, 2014

Thesis Committee Chair
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Thesis Abstract

This exhibition is comprised of two complementary bodies of works. Each body of work explores the concept of a societal structure where culture and rules erode individuality. The community is ultimately conditioned to behave according to the conventions dictated by the environment.

"Parts of a Whole" is a performative installation which explores my fascination with the relationship between the individual and the collective. It is constructed with fabric, with custom-made buttons and passport photos attached and lighting device. Each button contains a face, and therefore represents the individual. Passport images are used to illustrate the extent of unification.

In the installation "I" is made up of four sets of desk and chairs are lined up to representing a typical classroom setting. Imbedded in each desk is a video screen which plays the same video loop on all four screens. A single performer in the video writes the same Chinese character while another erases the character till "perfection" is achieved. Through my work, I hope to evoke discussions on how societal rules cause conformity and erode distinctive qualities within the individual.

Artist statement
Hsiang-Lu Meng

This exhibition is comprised of two complementary bodies of works. Each body of work explores the concept of a societal structure where culture and rules erode individuality. The community is ultimately conditioned to behave according to the conventions dictated by the environment.

“Parts of a Whole”

In this performance/ installation, I explore my fascination with the relationship between the individual and the collective.

Suspended from the ceiling, a large white light form glows as it occupies the center of a large rectangular installation. The floor to ceiling light box is made up of four walls containing twenty-three strips of fabric. Each strip further contains a series of transparent buttons, behind which lie photographic images of individual faces downloaded from the internet. The entire structure is held together by attaching each button to its corresponding black buttonhole. Individual faces are transformed into an array of sameness; the black thread of the button holes run across the eyes obliterating difference and suggesting conformity.

The performance aspect of this production is meant to mirror the build-

ing of an entire society. The process is steady and consistent. Each button slides through its proper slit just as each individual takes his/her proper place in society. The construction of the installation is performed via a labor-intensive process of attaching each button to the strip just above it. At its completion, the strong light at the core of the structure is reduced to a soft glow as a result of the fabric that now lays over it. The distance between the fabric and the light source also serves to reduce the full force of the light box. The strips of fabric and each button clinging on to one another stabilizes the structure but the weight created also produces a drag on the entire structure.

As individuals, we are deeply rooted in our society. The process begins early on in an education system where discipline and etiquette are strongly enforced and teamwork is consistently emphasized. The process is certainly a double-edged sword. It provides stability for the individual as well as the whole, at the cost of suppressing individualism. The conscious and subconscious pressure to conform becomes debilitating for anything outside of the "norm".

At its completion, in its entirety, the 9 feet tall monument-like structure is large and strong, reflective of a social structure. At the same time, it is somewhat flexible and fragile. The light piercing from the core, illuminating the faces is representative of the energy emitting from the individuals core and their desire to stand out.

As individuals, we all try to find a place from which we can coexist within the environment. We differentiate ourselves by doing different things. Yet, what is the real difference between us? How can we link ourselves to the collective and still find the light from which we can shine? What is the ideal place where we belong in this fast changing modern society?

“I”

In the installation “I” is made up of four sets of desk and chairs are lined up to representing a typical classroom setting. Imbedded in each desk is a video screen which plays the same video loop on all four screens.

As a child, I practiced the same Chinese character hundreds of times. The goal was to create a symbol that is identical to the model. The process was monitored by teachers and parents alike and was strictly managed. The sequence and motion of each stroke was critical to creating the character.

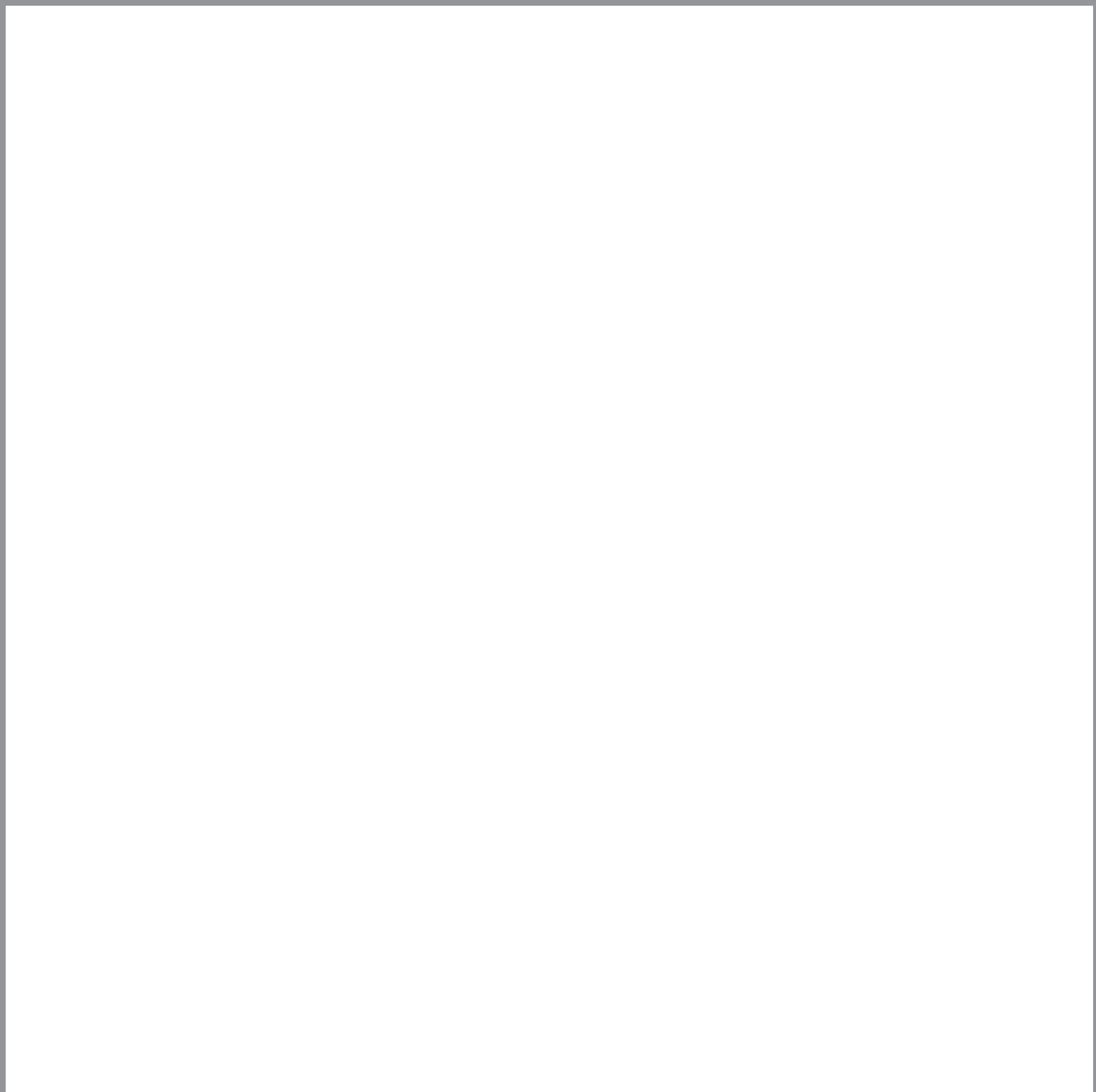
This invokes the question how many repetitions of the Chinese character “I” must I repeat to achieve the perfectly acceptable “I”? As many as it takes it seems.

The standard was set and I eventually learned what was “correct” and acceptable.

“Artist book”

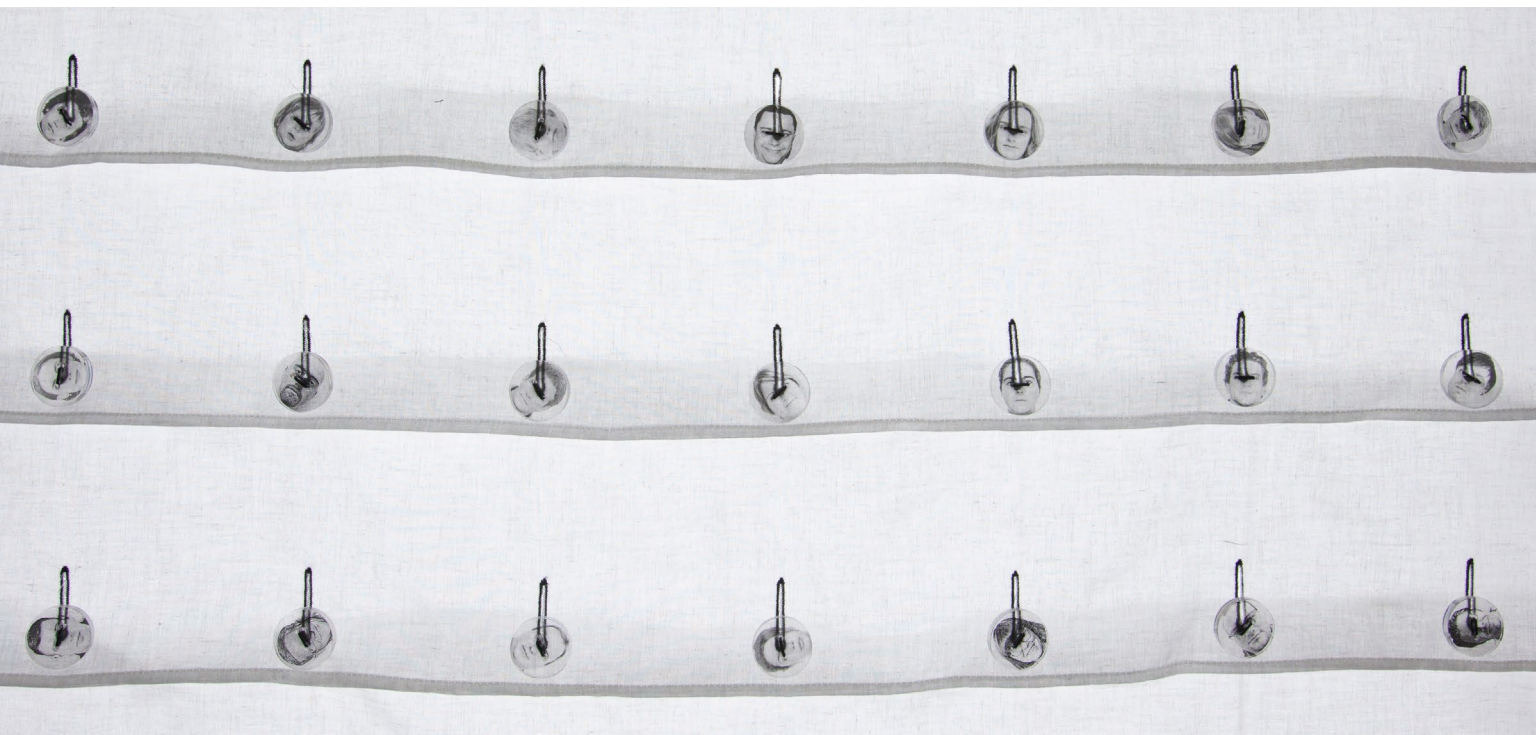
This is a book version of the exhibition “Parts of a Whole”. A singular white box contains two separate books. The outer book holds within it, a insert which resembles the life size installation, the fabric strips, the buttons, with the portraits between them, on a significantly smaller scale relative to the original installation.

The inner book documents the installation itself, consisting of photographs of the performance aspect of the project along with the artist statement. The inner book fits nicely within the window of the outer book just as each button fits perfectly through its designated buttonhole.



“Parts of a Whole”

Installation
Arylic, fabric, threads,
wood, metal, lighting device, 2013



Photography helps and shapes our understanding of the identity. However, the identity is blurred by and hidden behind the photos.

Each button contains a face representing the individual. Passport images found online are used to demonstrate the extent of unification.

The cool white lights generated the unreal, cold and isolated feelings. The solid touch of the light box also reinforces the cool and immovable core values of the society.







As the construction beginning, the fabric strips are gradually transfer from the table to the frame hung in the air.

The monument-like prism was constructed from top to bottom as the performer gradually buttons the fabric.

The movement of the performer was constant. The performer took the same steps up to the ladder and buttoned the same amount of buttons at once. This systematic movement implied the rules that must be followed.

At first, there was only one strip attached at a time. This movement was repeated for eight times then the performer began to attach the panel of several strips at once.

This implied that it took more time to set the foundation and once the foundation is established, there is a pattern that can be followed. The steps were similar but the it progressed faster.







In its entirety, the 9 feet tall monument-like structure is large and strong, reflective of our true society. At the same time, it is somewhat flexible and fragile. The structure is impenetrable. Each button adds a certain amount of weight to the structure, which becomes more and more stable as additional buttons are attached.

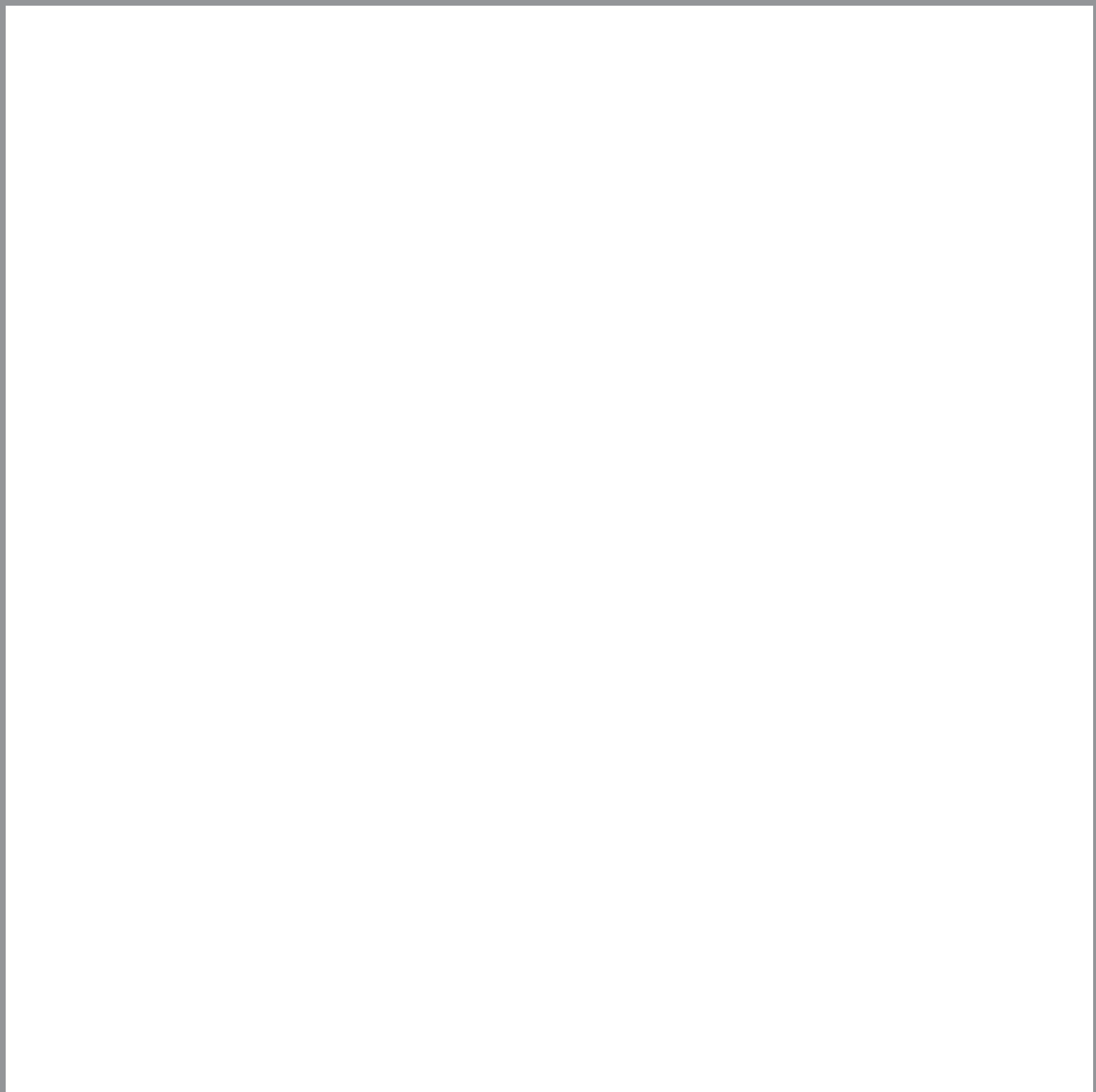


The best way to lead the viewers into my world is to create a specific space to draw them in. The viewers are surrounded by the work and space and for a brief moment, away from their everyday lives.

In this way, I think once we are drawn away from where we normally are, we can have more room to reconsider and absorb the new ideas or the ideas we ignore and neglect.







“1”

Installation
Wooden desks painted white
Flat screen (size: 19")
Video Loop, 2013

The furniture can not only recall memory.

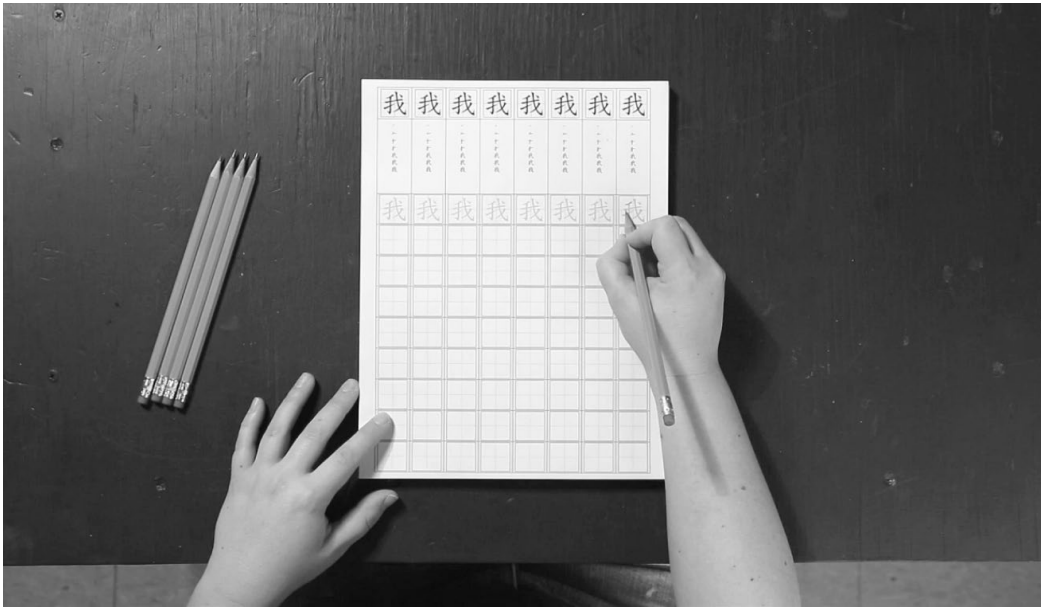
I think Body gesture can effect how people receive message. Installation for me is to create a specific setting to draw viewers away from their own reality and to enter the world I create.

The children size of school furniture change the gesture of viewers. When they sit on the small chairs, put their hands on the small desks, the memory of childhood will be recalled simultaneously. When the body is in the right gesture, the mind is prepared and opened to receive more information.





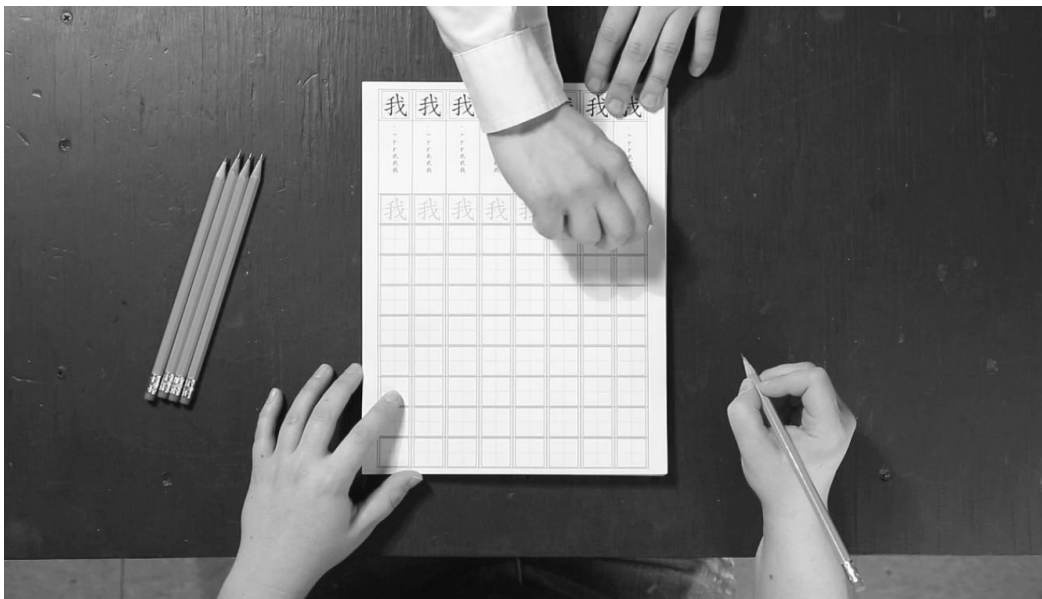
Who I am now is shaped from years of practicing knowledge I have to learn and social skills I have to have.



Still photo from the video , "I"

Repetition was employed to sharpen the skill, to give definition and to form structure.

Both pairs of hands in the video are distinguished by their looks and the tools they have. The teacher or supervisor wears white cuffs and carries the eraser. The student by contrast has clean, undefined hands and pencil.



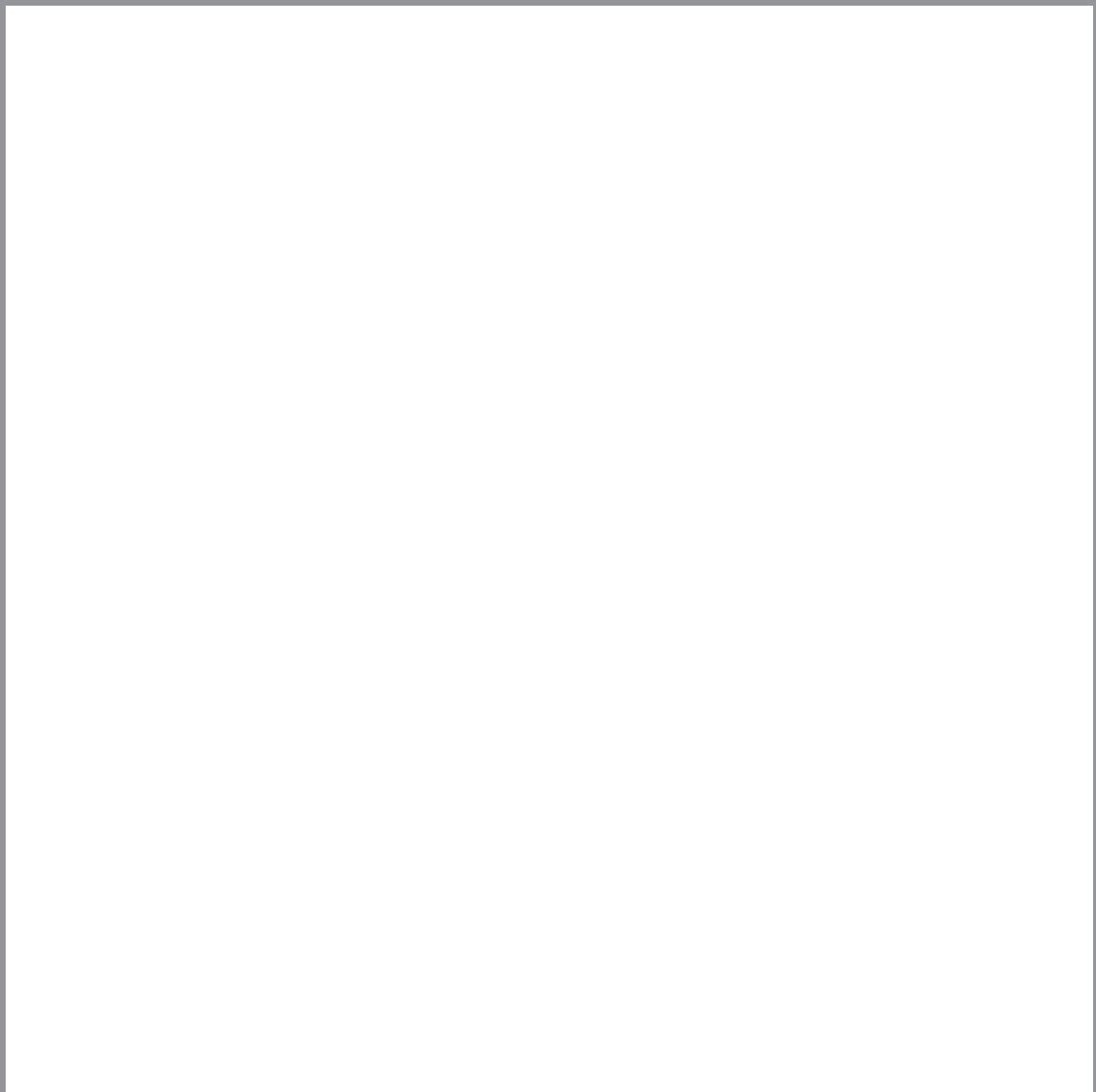
Still photo from the video , "I"

Controlling and correction:
from top-to-down gradually becomes self-disciplining.

The experience is nearly identical for all students. It may be viewed as a small and insignificant process, but it speaks volume for the degree of discipline demanded and how a certain standard can be imposed in so many aspects of daily lives.



Still photo from the video , "I"



“Artist Book”

Book

Hand-made box, lighting device, vellum,
paper, 2013



