Memory Bread: Between Performance and Objects

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As the great film director Martin Scorsese once said, *the most personal is the most creative*. I seek the subjectivity of translating my voices and the objectivity of projecting that action as my art practice. Having grown up in China as a Chinese-Mongolian and later moved to the United States, I have spent my life living in-between cultures while negotiating who I am or who should I be. My work examines the generational identity struggles of Chinese-Mongolians under the pervasive cultural assimilation from the mainstream Han-Chinese society. My research has been concerned with themes in cultural identities, postcolonialism, and ethnic studies. Through my art practice, I hope to bring more global attention and provide an outlet for under-discussed contemporary Chinese-Mongolian ethnic issues. Among various mediums and techniques, I find the expression of performance and the use of synthetic materials appropriate in translating my voices and perspectives. I perform and I make objects out of the action.

My thesis work is *Memory Bread*, a daily performance ritual of me studying Mongolian words by literally consuming them. I would write one Mongolian word and its Chinese translation on a slice of bread, only subtract the portion of the bread with the written word, eat it, and then pronounce the word that I have consumed to prove that I have learned. The duration of this continuous action varies depending on my physical and mental ability to eat. One stack of bread with a collective void is left after each study. I then cast the missed language void with concrete. I specifically chose concrete sculpture to be the projection of the performance for its capitalistic nature. This invasive material that took over the traditional architectural lifestyle globally mirrors the colonization of native Mongolian culture in China. Meanwhile, the materiality of concrete being a mixture of various substances also metaphors the mixed culture that Chinese-Mongolians are living.

The performances and the post-action objects constitute *Memory Bread* to address the generational decline of mother language use in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, a post-colonized province of China. This work presents me, as a Chinese-Mongolian longing for my native culture, confronting a powerlessness to retrieve it. I assumed, “mother language” should be innate in its children, however, the reality is that the difficulty of learning is almost painful.
Images

1-2: Memory Bread Performance

3-7: Post-performance Sculptures
Vocabulary

Wladyslaw Szymborska

"La Polegne? La Polegne? Isn't it terribly cold there?"

she asked, and then sighed with relief.

So many countries have been turning up lately that the safest thing to talk about
is climate.

"Madame," I want to reply,
"my people's poets do all their writing in mitrens. I don't mean to imply that
they never remove them; they do, indeed, if the moon is warm enough. In
surnames composed of rauous whooping, for only such can drown out the
windstorms' constant roar, they glorify the simple lives of our walnut herders.
Our Classicists engrave their odes with inky circles on trampled snowdrifts. The
rest, our Decadents, bewail their fate with snowflakes instead of tears. He who
wishes to drown himself must have an ax at hand to cut the ice.
Oh, madame, dearest madame."

That's what I meant to say. But I've forgotten the word for walnut in French.
And I'm not sure of trecle and ax.

"La Polegne? La Polegne? Isn't it terribly cold there?"

"Pou du ton," I answer idly.
Memory Bread
Performance | Sculpture
Concrete, Sliced Bread, Edible Pro
2020

I grew up with a Japanese cartoon, Doreamon. Memory Bread was one of the episodes. Doreamon is a blue gadget cat with a magic pocket on its belly that within it you will find anything you need. One day, Doreamon’s friend, Nobi, didn’t prepare for his upcoming exams so he was panicking in his bedroom. Doreamon reached into the pocket and brought out this magical thing called memory bread. Nobi could just press a slice of memory bread on a page of his textbook, eat it, then he would memorize everything on that page.

I am Mongolian from Inner Mongolia and find myself learning the Mongolian language as my third language, behind Chinese and English. There are over six million Mongolians born and living in China, most within the region known as Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. Positioned in a rapidly globalizing Han-Chinese society, urban Mongolian families have been struggling between cultures for a long time.

My parents who struggled in their career for the incompetence of speaking Chinese deliberately sent me to Han-Chinese school to study Chinese language and culture, so I could adjust to the Han environment better and suffer less. The parental choice of choosing Chinese as their kids’ first language was especially common for my generation of city Mongolian. However, this voluntary decision later became a guilt and punishment to their children. Language possesses the core of a culture in its history and philosophy and construction of the world. The incapability of using the Mongolian language to communicate is one part of the major guilt for my generation as we are witnessing an ongoing culture assimilation.

In my work, Memory Bread, I as a Chinese-Mongolian longing for my native culture, confront a powerlessness to retrieve it. I assumed, “mother language” should be as easy and mundane to learn as eating slices of bread, however, the reality is that the difficulty of learning is almost painful.

Title #2: Memory Bread
Printed Thesis Poster
Memory Bread
Nisii | MFA Thesis Exhibition | 03.17-03.21
Trisolini Gallery, Baker Center
Reception: Thur, 03.19, 6-8 pm

Kinetic Thesis Poster Video

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