



On Chun Hua Catherine Dong's, "To Begin"

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At last year's Visualeyez festival, the students of University of Alberta professor Natalie Loveless's Fall 2016 seminar course "Ephemerality and Sustainability in Contemporary Art" (ArH 456/556) responded to performances at the festival.

Catherine Dong sets up her piece, *To Begin*, by presenting us with a very stark, white room, with three curious sets of objects inside of it. The first, a large rectangle formed from dozens of eggs; the second, a very large, orderly, stack of books in the middle of the rectangle; the third, a small white clock.

Dong enters the room, gracefully steps over the egg barrier and into the rectangle. She quickly glances at the clock and, bending over, reaches for the stack of books. Her fingertips fumble briefly with the edge of the bottom book, she tilts the stack backwards, and they slide into the curvature of her body. Then with a technique reminiscent of a practiced weightlifter, Dong hoists the books up, neatly fitting them under her chin. The books adjust again to her figure, which captures the obvious weight of the stack; she could not manage even one more book. Dong is at her full capacity.



As she holds the stack, Dong's initial passivity fades and is replaced by increasingly ragged breaths, the tantalizingly slow ticking of the clock, and an entire audience holding their breath. This first action lasts close to ten minutes, with every second passing by at a snail's pace. Then, finally, with an ear-splitting crash, Dong's muscles give out and the books fall to the floor. The stack falls wonderfully, splaying out all over the rectangle in every direction, displacing eggs, even breaking some—the yolks spilling out, bright yellow contrasting beautifully with the bare concrete floors.

Dong shifts her position as soon as the books leave her hands, to check the time on the clock. She leans down, flips open the closest book to her, and writes down the exact time the books fell. Hong then very neatly tears out the page, walks slowly out of the rectangle and tacks the page on the wall, extending her body upwards onto the very tips of her toes so that the torn page is as high as physically possible for her. Walking back into the rectangle she turns, scans the damage, and walks purposefully over to the displaced eggs. She then takes her time assessing the trajectory of each egg and traces it with a piece of yellow chalk. Finally, she steps back into the center of the rectangle, and begins to restack the books. She almost slams them down on top of one another, patting them forcefully together to avoid displacement while lifting them. Once Dong is satisfied with her new pile, she reaches down, slips her fingers under the bottom book, and with a deep breath, it starts all over again.

Each cycle begins to get shorter and shorter, and with every resounding crash of the books, the audience flinches, feeling the labor of the artist's limbs. Each collapse, prolonged and inevitable.

One hour goes by, then two, and I begin to feel frustration in the futility of Dong's actions: why does she continue to carry this weight? As Dong continues, sweat begins to shine on her face, her limbs shake, but her mental determination does not falter. She stares at the wall or the clock with the utmost concentration, understanding and perhaps finding some sort of pleasure within her actions. It almost seems as if Dong is ultimately striving to find a place of happiness within her meaningless labor, perhaps creating space for kindness within other forms of labor and repetition.

The thematic concept behind Dong's piece comes from Sisyphus, a Greek-myth in which a human is doomed to an eternity repeating a repetitive, monotonous task (rolling a rock up and down a mountain). In a modern context, a Sisyphian task refers to a laborious and possibly futile endeavour, which we see here with Dong. Albert Camus theorizes that Sisyphus came to find happiness within his task, essentially because it's not the result that matters but the struggle, a concept critical to *To Begin*.



After exactly three hours, the books fall for the last time. Dong keeps her composure, not showing her fatigue. Dong slowly walks out of the rectangle with a small smile, and exits the room.

Based on conversation with the artist I know that, for Dong, *To Begin* investigates the metaphor of civilization in book-learning, and the collapses and transformations of social structures that happen despite all our attempts to master knowledge. It also, performs the way that disruptions create space for new beginnings and imaginings of our world. The monotony of Dong's actions was meant to breed frustration and a yearning for something different, some creativity within our usual order. And for those of us who sat through all three hours, the performance did do that: it evoked an intense series of emotions, using only a mechanized routine to bear the metaphor of an insupportable weight, a metaphor of our history that is all the more meaningful given recent events.

—Jessa Gillespie, Fall 2016

Jessa is a 4th year Bachelor of Fine Arts student in the department of Art and Design. She is currently researching ways to create space for empathy and vulnerability within a neoliberal, capital-driven society. Jessa primarily works through the mediums of painting, sculpture/installation, and textiles. Reoccurring themes throughout her research and art-practice include examining gender and sexuality, identity, and accessibility.

Photos by Adam Waldron-Blain.

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