

Learning to Be Here: a collective endurance for decentralization
Curatorial Essay by Jasmine Liaw

Learning to Be Here is an exhibition of five looping films by Anika Iyer, Dee Dee Decay, Hala Alsalmi, Wang Zi, and Xinyi Tian. Embodiment within a decentralized lens → these films focus on the curiosity of deciphering communication sequences, understanding hi/stories through an oneiric epistemology, symbolic cognition, forming self through communal mark-making, and practices of re-languaging.¹

Documentary-driven in experience, research, and process the works inhabit an ideology of disruption through experimental processes. With a connection to OCAD (University), all five artists come from different programs and practices: from ceramics, sculpture and installation, printmaking, analog integrated media, and animation → all innovate and bend the traditional meanings of these practices through durational filmmaking.

In my own practice as a curator and artist, I am drawn to notions and strategies of *unworlding*.² Unworlding, coined by Jack Halberstam, is the open invitation to do the hard work of un-making entrenched world systems of power that affect bodies and being. These films allow us to let go of these established containers and arrangements → as a way of “world-making” through reframing communication systems and destabilizing socially bounded concepts with diverse articulations of emergence.

Last summer, I participated in ON DURATION, a durational performance residency curated by Dr. Raegan Truax in Blanca, Spain.³ There, I was offered the chance to explore non-time → continuing to unearth my movement research in simultaneity, repetition, and temporal disruption. This allowed me to recognize more of the totality of myself with/in my practice → acknowledging cultural and personal interconnectedness in documentary filmmaking and movement. The village of Blanca also interpreted time through the sound and repetition of bells; sounding time. In this process of *Learning to Be Here*, the memory of sounding time made me curious about visualizing non-time? In an attempt to offer a different embodied relationship to time, all of the films in this exhibition are shown on one large plinth screen, with the ability to project the films on both sides. The first side (facing out of the gallery) cycles through the five films, but with each rotation, an additional loop is added to every film, cumulatively expanding the exhibition’s duration until each reaches five loops. The second side

1. This way of writing “histories” is inspired by Mihyun Maria Kim’s interdisciplinary practice as she explores “researching (un)translatable affects shaped by languages entangled with unresolved historical grief and transmissions of longing … fragments of hi/stories, and suspended feelings are explored between memory and imagination across space and time.” In thinking of non-time, breaking histories into hi / stories emphasizes that what we call “history” is not a neutral record of facts but a collection of narratives → chosen, shaped, and told by community, <https://www.mihyunmariakim.com/bio-cv>.

2. Nebraska-Lincoln, “An Aesthetics of Collapse - A Lecture by Jack Halberstam,” YouTube, October 25, 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wf6Xw6bHAfs.

3. Raegan Truax, “ON DURATION,” 2025, <https://www.raegantruax.com/onduration>.

(facing into the gallery) loops through all of the films just once, repeating without accumulation. Both sides loop the films as an in-flux relationship, challenging this sense of arrival using visual duration. This curatorial approach transforms how we choose to sit with experimental films, how they are accessed, as well as the expanded significance when sustained together: *a collective endurance for decentralization*.

The Rod and The Ring by Hala Alsalmán floats the viewer across Iraq, engaging with the symbolism of two Mesopotamian objects: a rod and ring. Grounded in deep research, Alsalmán provides a counter-futurist approach to documenting these objects as an embodied measure of time, with the rod representing linearity and the ring symbolizing eternal cyclical. In the film, they take many forms within the binary code of ones and zeros, imprints in clay, ceramics, and digital oracles in the sky → allowing technology and clay to coexist as a dream space of collapsed time. The documentary movement of the camera gently carries the viewer's eyes forward, moving through days and nights → mirroring the duality of the rod and the ring in motion. As a method of dreaming, Alsalmán retraces her ancestral motherland (its land and architecture across three different eras) mapping embodied, material, oneiric registers of both future and hi/storic knowledge. These registers converge as a multi-dimensional understanding of colliding temporalities that exceed linear time and erode into non-time.

Alsalmán's work represents three generations of women as translators of oneiric epistemology, reframing time into a praxis "interconnected by the genomes of our cosmology."⁴ Actively carrying both life and epigenetics, the female body becomes a site for interpreting an invisible lifeline connecting past and future, earth and cosmos, situating dreaming as consciously universal places of relationality → time travel → beyond existence → beyond geopolitical memory.⁵ Watching how Alsalmán and her Iraqi team record the moving body and landscape, it's clear that her documentary approach is a mode of listening that echoes this kinesthetic sense of totality without resolving toward a singular or totalizing acknowledgment of motherland. Through its looping structure, the film translates the rod and ring into a oneiric pathway that "brings back a glorious past that never existed," while resisting and reframing rigid, stereotypical Western readings of Islam through the ontology of dreams.⁶ Thus, *The Rod and the Ring* unfurls an expansive temporality that refuses to centre the present, excavating possibilities that have already been in formation.

Both (Alsalmán and Dee) are looking at relationships with motherland beyond the maternal, proposing cosmological attunements to non-time through oneiric symbols and fire elements.

4. Connie Bell discusses interconnectedness of movement and the act of noticing/referencing the formations of how we engage in collective leadership, which directs back to Alsalmán's depiction of regeneration through retracing ancestral place, Association of Art Museum Curators, "Decentralizing the Curatorial," YouTube, October 25, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hJ-1Lbx8fY8>.

5. Alsalmán, Hala, "The Rod and the Ring: Remember the Future and What it Could Bring," Master's thesis, OCAD University, 2024. 33.

6. Hala Alsalmán, personal interview, November 10, 2025.

"I was born with too much fire in my Chinese birth chart. Water was put into my name to cool down the fire," explains Dee Dee Decay.⁷ Their looping film, *Flammable*, investigates an inter-elemental netting of familial Buddhist ritual, mark-making through movement, grinding and heat-treating metal, and political ramifications of fire. A sacred Vietnamese ritual, burning joss paper (or spirit money) is an act of ancestral worship, as the smoke creates a spiritual bridge to protect loved ones in the afterlife. Using experimental keying, Dee collages their fractal awareness of familial positioning, rooted in their reciprocal kinship with their grandmother, Kim Ngo, a matriarchal guardian whom Dee both learns from and actively cares for.⁸

Navigating their complex understanding of fire through layered video and pixelated thresholds, the film sits with the mesh of diasporic knowledge gaps, traversing censored familial histories and stories that then resist the slope of linear narration. Withholding English translation, Dee leans into the privacy and diasporic weight of what remains untranslated. In this refusal, silence and blank space operate as active elements within the film, releasing the burden of legibility and allowing meaning to be felt in absence.

The film uses the recorded body to research the dual meaning of burning. By employing phone footage as a material strategy, Dee inter-layers their emotional anticipation for change across intimate and systemic scales → while connecting the hyper-access to recording on-camera, news, and informative inquiry through today's phones. These visual and embodied processes expand outward to grapple with the broader political and ecological stakes of burning joss paper, the ecocide produced by colonial oppression, and both local and ongoing military invasion → as layered videos.

Flammable uses the space of a process-based, documentary film to ask: *What does it mean to move forward in life → How can we do this laterally?*

In response, *Flammable* intentionally reflects on the mutability of ritual knowledge and fire carried through care and proximity → yearning toward decolonial transformations of equity, resilience, and restoration.

Both (Dee and Wang) are looking at relationships with motherhood of diaspora, while spotlighting the breakage and destruction tied to these investigations of communication through language, self, and self-criticism. They're informed by the ways language and digital glitches interrupt continuity, not as spectacle, but as evidence of misalignment beneath the surface.

7. Dee Dee Decay, personal interview, November 14, 2025.

8. adrienne marie brown explores this sense of fractal awareness in complex movements through their research in emergent strategy. Highlighting resilience and liberation within what can feel branched in complication → this alludes to how the nature of the element: Fractal resembles the Relationship between Small and Large, as Dee Dee is looking at both their positioning and the bigger picture to their impact on Earth. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Edinburgh, Scotland: AK Press, 2017), 24–50.

As a collective curation, these works also question each other → exploring a de-sequencing → the wilderness of homeland from diasporic and immigrant perspectives and through the phenomenology of pan-Asian hi/stories.⁹

Wang Zi 王紫 mobilizes the kinesthetic logic of a hunt in her work, *Kindergarten*, comparing the vulnerability and constant autocriticism that comes with learning languages with the unsettled pacing required to navigate an unknown terrain. During the pandemic, Wang and her mom, Zhu Dandan 朱丹丹 began practicing English and Italian, while Wang started her MA in Italy. Together, they would read out loud, and Wang would replace her errors with scribbled corrections. This work visually showcases Wang's notes as presentation slides. In sound, we hear rigorous writing scribbles, her mom's vocal "mispronunciation" from her daily reading exercise, layered with a choral musical adaptation of Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy* (Purgatorio, Canto I) → connecting the motions of practicing the words out loud with the performance of the choral opera. When I translated the lyrics, it reminded me of the form of a Shakespearian sonnet (alike to the large sheets of paper in Western high school English curriculums, where as the student, you're assigned to dissect its meaning). The feeling of learning in panic carries through the work, not just from the interstice of survival as an immigrant, but as a person trying to communicate basic needs and care for themselves.

Kindergarten exposes the experience of learning a new language as an adult → the curiosity, witnessing the pace of your learning, the newness. *The Divine Comedy* conveys the light of the dawn as a major symbol of spiritual readiness; a new journey. Wang redirects colonial translations of her "journey" or "discoveries" by redefining them through an international and intergenerational relation. Wang animates one of the slides into a Rubik's Cube moving form. Rather than a mistake to be corrected, Wang's use of glitch in the animation holds similar experience to her autocriticism, where the glitch symbolizes an opening into the unknown logics of a system, momentarily exposing a system's limits → decentralizing the idea of making mistakes alone, and sharing this time of learning with her mom. While in relationship with *The Divine Comedy*, *Kindergarten* holds Wang's humility within this sense of exposure and re-examination of what it's like to discover yourself through your own openness to failure in company.¹⁰ Unmaking language, Wang unworlds her framework of communication through the moving repetition of the slides in scribbled self-corrections.

These artists' works are part of larger project series, research, and practices. You can feel the incredible vastness of each work as they meet between the brief blankness of the black screen.

9. Wang Zi, CDCC Application 2025 → *Kindergarten* is part of Wang's series "First Language Spoken" (FLS) → "[unveiling] how modern languages hunt FLS in the wilderness."

10. brown's context of "discoveries" as "being humble in the face of the unknown," *Emergent Strategy*. 28.

In *Signs and Symbols*, Anika Iyer probes the miracle of written language and universal communication training, by composting alphabetic sequences through the freedom of intuition. Iyer notes that the binaries of language actually water down the translation of our experience, especially within the English language → so *Signs and Symbols* is built through the slow, physically laborious process of using Letraset lettering sheets to "rub-down" type letters and graphics onto the surface of a roll of film. Similar to Dee, Iyer manually video collages the letters to break, remediate, and reform to create more space → revealing how limited our use and experimentation with language structures can be, as a society. Iyer also uses found ASL fingerspelling, expanding the interrogation of language through the animated hand gestures. This scavenging process illuminates the spontaneity of communication, especially through the movement of letters on film.

By integrating found materials, Iyer's process also actively incorporates a community viewpoint with symbol access → how communication systems are accessed globally. By interweaving each frame by-hand, Iyer unfolds this quick-paced intimacy through re-languaging time and place into an unknown affinity. Re-sculpting language, *Signs and Symbols* revisits the innocence of experiencing the world through the accessible material of the Letraset by breaking the form of letters as a tactile and auditory practice → making new connections with the hi/story of language. We are left with the sound of the film physically "ending" in the decomposition of the letters. Fragmenting the constraints of societal sequence, Iyer questions what it means to imprint on things that already exist.¹¹ The cycle of this work exponentially interacts with repetitive mark-making, which allows the viewer to feel the aging and growth in process-based work. Like the other artists, Iyer explores non-time → but does so by foregrounding play.

Encompassing the flux and fluidity of a wavicle, Xinyi Tian's *STRIDE&SHINE!* guides us through curiosity and the experience of leaping through intermixing paths → the (im)balance of social integration as an international student, while also holding the tides of inherited culture close, and building community through this complex entanglement.¹² Tian creatively takes us back to birthing ourselves into a world existing in relation → what it means to join different stages of life → freefalling into the movement of the Western conveyor belt. The pace of the film carries us into the life of one tiny creature: an explorer with a head shaped like a glass water spout. The spout-head encapsulates the creature's capacity for growth and nurturing thoughts, with an opening to physically collect memory and experience. Her legs make up most of her body, alluding to the combustive rhythm of navigating the speed of language, place, and education, plus the physical sense of adaptability of/in moving. Tian's work reclaims the joy of hyper-literal humour and earnest animation largely absent from contemporary practice, evoking the sensibility of early twentieth-century animation while translating the density of Tian's storytelling intentions.

11. Anika Iyer, personal interview, November 11, 2025.

12. brown references the Detroit-based collective Complex Movements, and explains their emblem system, which includes a wavicle: exhibiting both wave and particle properties → A wave evolves on its own across different paths → while a particle inhibits the definite measurement of location and speed → "Uncertainty/doubt. Valuing both process and outcome," *Emergent Strategy*. 50.

Both (Wang, Iyer, Tian) converse within the contrast between colour vibrancy, yet the films meet in growing movement: rhythm and pace.

Like the labour of Iyer's analog film process, Tian works with hand-drawn oil pastels for each frame of the animation. With a crew of young women supporting this workflow, Tian's lived experience (moving to Canada with her twin sister from Jinzhong 晋中市, part of the Shanxi Province 山西 in China) quite literally *shines* through the value and vibrancy of collectivity in the film, where the tiny creature is never alone.¹³ Peaks of saturated red colour blanket scenes that symbolize prosperity and good fortune in Chinese culture. Tian reflects on her strongest impressions of arrival to Canada, remembering a lemon scent on the highway. The repetitive brightness of yellow holds the embrace of self-discovery through community and self. *STRIDE&SHINE!* embodies the waves of mark-making in life, while questioning how we meet failure with sensitivity, the "gentle reminder that growth isn't just endurance."¹⁴

All five films visualize kinship with the plurality of "identity" through the uplifting focus on experimental processes that unmoor societal attachments to symbols and communication. So what does it mean to talk about this sense of "everythingness" through the work of pan-Asian women and non-binary artists? It disrupts the cultural, political, and personal amnesia that often surrounds us through the linear, extractive, temporal-effected speed of the colonial economy.¹⁵ *How long does it take to form a geographical memory that meets between place and thought?* All five pieces grapple with this question, beyond linear senses of time and memory. They each activate an understanding of decentralization by sharing stories linked through collectivity and collaboration. By recognizing duration as both place and body, this topographical approach to filmmaking traces the artists' truths as something emergent and expansive, unworlding the ossified linear systems that shape time, memory, and be-longing.

13. Capitalization in English signals properness, legitimacy, and sovereignty. By refusing to capitalize *Canada*, this symbolically withholds and refuses recognition of colonial authority over Indigenous peoples and lands. For me, I am adopting this from Quill Christie-Peters, "Hands Off! On Indigenous Women's Love and Labour in the Institution," in *Every, Now, Then: Reframing Nationhood* (Art Gallery of Ontario, 2017).

14. Xinyi Tian, personal interview, November 11, 2025.

15. Immyon Mèn, personal correspondence with the author, December 22, 2025.