

# A Three-Course Fish Meal

translated from Chinese by Banyu Huang,

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It seemed that Yi Xin Tong initially had three reasons for going fishing: 1) he didn't have a lot of money to spare, he needed to save money to make work; 2) he has always lived in Gravesend, Brooklyn, as he was drawn to its hint of darkness, and Coney Island was 20 minutes away by bus from where he lived; and 3) he was not particular about what he ate, but got hungry easily - so he could "catch" his own food.

Fishing came naturally to Tong. Imagine a young artist exploring that which lies outside the perimeter of the city; he could go home with a full basket of fish and indulge himself on the fruits of his labor. Such an economically-beneficial act, while anachronistically romantic, was filled with sincerity. In 2017, after regularly fishing for almost a year, Tong sorted his fishing life into a solo exhibition composed of five videos and six mixed-media installations.

[1]

The neat visual appearance of the exhibition was achieved through the rectangular screens displaying the video works and the squareness of many of the installation, which reflected the common shape of easel-based works. In the artist's own words, in lieu of exploring spatial relationships, he simply tried to "put the works right there." [2] The eleven square-shaped works on view juxtaposed against white walls bore a strong resemblance to eleven dishes. Furthermore, the visuals hearken to the tastiness of the food he prepared after his fishing trips, so much so that I once blurted out to someone after seeing the show that "it was delicious."

I was not the only one to recognize the synesthesia between sight and taste—a review aptly likened in the garrulous script in *Water Is in Front of the Bushes* (2016) to "name-dropping from a restaurant's menu." [3] The video was shot with a handheld camera as Tong rushed through bushes near the riverbank. In the voice-over, he mutters, almost in sort of poetic

“rap:” “Weakfish, Black Sea Bass, Bluegill, Rainbow Smelt...” He lists a few hundred fish species, as though excitedly looking forward to a feast of ocean fish just within reach.

Another eye-catching video, entitled *Camera Popper Lure* (2017) [Fig. 1], occupies an entire wall; its sound reverberates throughout the entire space. A “popper lure” is a lure that attracts fish by way of simulating the sound and vibrations a fish bait makes when it hits the water; Tong’s lure was a waterproof spy camera, which was tightly tied to the end of a fishing line then thrown into the water. It captured a series of fuzzy images: weeds, the horizon, buildings in the distance, and ripples in the water.



Fig. 1: Yi Xin Tong, *Camera Popper Lure* (2017), SD video with sound, 5'34", video still.

Both *Water Is in Front of the Bushes* (2016) and *Camera Popper Lure* (2017) are like a delicate [fish broth] in which the main ingredients have been infused into the broth. No meat is in sight, just the flavor of it. Throughout the show, rarely do we see images of whole fish. Although the works were shot during fishing trips, they are entirely devoid of images of fish. In *Camera Popper Lure*, the lure failed to catch any fish. Regarding the misleading effect of the lure, perhaps the only ones who took the bait were the viewers themselves. Of course, as the one who controls the fishing line, Tong also “fishes” himself into view—he appears from time to time with a pair of headphones, his reddish hands swaying sporadically, letting the sun’s rays pass through to the camera’s lens. No fish in other works on view as well. While *NYC Fishing Trip—From the American Flag to Gone Fishing* (2016) shows the artist by the shore “chewing the fat” with a graffiti artist, he labors with a logging machine in *NYC Fishing Trip—Cut up a Fallen Tree to Clear the Fishing Spot* (2017). The angler, like the viewer, is equally a fish that swallows the bait. I thought of Barnett Newman’s analogy that artists need to simultaneously be birds and ornithologists. [4] Likewise, Tong is both a fisherman and fish, a walking paradox that reflects reality. Furthermore, Tong views his artmaking as “anti-productive.” Having spent a lot of time on fishing and therefore a lot less on artmaking, the artist maintains a vigilant outlook on the mutual exploitation between artists and materials, viewers and institutions, opting to produce through an anti-productive lens. In essence, by becoming a fish that allows itself to be caught, the artist engages in self-exploitation in his dual role as fisherman and fish as a way to avoid exploitation by or towards others.



Fig. 2: Installation view of “NYC Fishing Trip”

Work in the front: *Fish Scale III* (2017), aluminum, cardboard, yarn, screw, dimension variable.

Works on the back wall: *Fish Scale I* (2017) & *NYC Fishing Trip - From the American Flag to Gone Fishing* (2016)

The main “dish” in the exhibition is none other than [fish skin], a component of the fish that would normally be discarded. Each work in the Fish Scale series has an intriguing web pattern. *Banana Trout* (2016) uses flickering editing to show the similarities between trout skin and speckled banana skin, *Prattsville Swimmer* (2017) collages snippets from magazines with the round-mouthed white fish. *Wild Brown Trout Watermark Drawing* (2017) features marks made with black Sharpie pens, bringing to mind diamond-shaped fish scales.

*Take Fish Scale III* (2017) [Fig. 2] for example. It features a sturdy piece of cardboard that Tong coincidentally discovered from a fishing trip, and hangs from the ceiling (again, as though

taunting the viewer with a fish bait). The cross-section where each layer of cardboard meets forms a fish-scale image, whereas the wrinkling and curling of the material reveals traces of having been submerged in water. The most remarkable detail is on the side, where a serrated aluminum sheet and a screw are inserted into the cardboard—like a fishing spear securing its prey, or better yet, a strong link exerted upon a point of fracture.

This point of fracture and connection is ever-present in Tong's work. We see people, landscapes, and other subjects, but not fish, when his works depict his fishing trips; however, when he returns to the everyday, fish are curiously everywhere, and manmade fossils and speaker shells are incorporated into the installations. This aspect of Tong's work very much embodies what Allan Kaprow describes as an "un-artist" spirit: "as un-artist takes a lifelike form and setting... That's why art cannot be entirely forgotten and why, at the same time, it can be left behind." [5] Or, in the words of the Situationist Internationals, Tong attempts "to become an increasingly full-time spectator of the prevailing absurdities." [6] Such spectatorship can be described as pessimistic because Tong brings us along on a journey, yet with little to see along the way: a charred, abandoned boat stranded on the shoreline against the bushes; abstract, wobbly imagery captured by the camera bait; his banter with the evasive graffiti artist; and a fallen tree that Tong failed to clean up. These fragmented pieces are far from conventional narratives. Tong, the anti-productive producer, views the world through an anti-materialism lens, and finds delight through nothingness. Perhaps this "nothingness" is Tong's resistance against "prevailing absurdities." In his understanding, a more serious mode of production, more specific mode of viewing, or more ostentatious form of interest cannot escape becoming absurd.

Although Tong has explored topics such as itchiness, vomiting, and "strange new health" in past works, he seems to have always been concerned with what he calls the "unfathomable, yet

uncontrollable,” [7] a concept closely aligned with the writing of Deleuze and Guattari: “The elements of the pack are only imaginary ‘dummies’, the characteristics of the pack are only symbolic entities; all that counts is the borderline—the anomalous.” [8] Tong’s fish-skin and fish-scale metaphor symbolizes the links between more general points of rupture, such as the pack versus the individual, the anomalous versus the borderline. Like the corresponding themes of “contagion through the animal as pack,” and “pact with the anomalous as exceptional being” found in *A Thousand Plateaus* [9], borders consist of the skin wrapped around different entities, while mutual contamination between connected areas as well as the coalition of contaminants constitute the form. Skin is the pathological product of an internal system that has been penetrated by countless contaminants, infected by various packs, which are then sorted, digested, assimilated, and purged. The configuration of a fish-scale, the fantastical, alternating colors of fish skin, encompasses a more profound and complex directionality, just like itchiness and vomiting are symptoms of contaminants within the body—merely the tip of the iceberg. Perhaps the recurring fish-skin and fish-scale in Tong’s installations is a borderline by the anomalous. The artist is saying: one should not be afraid of expression, yet one should not be taken advantage by expression itself; one needs to keep making art, but one should be wary of the threat of exploitation hidden within the process of artmaking. But then again, the reason why *A Thousand Plateaus* is quoted here is simply because it is the book that Tong is currently reading right because he says it’s for “stretching the brain.” [10] [Fig. 3]

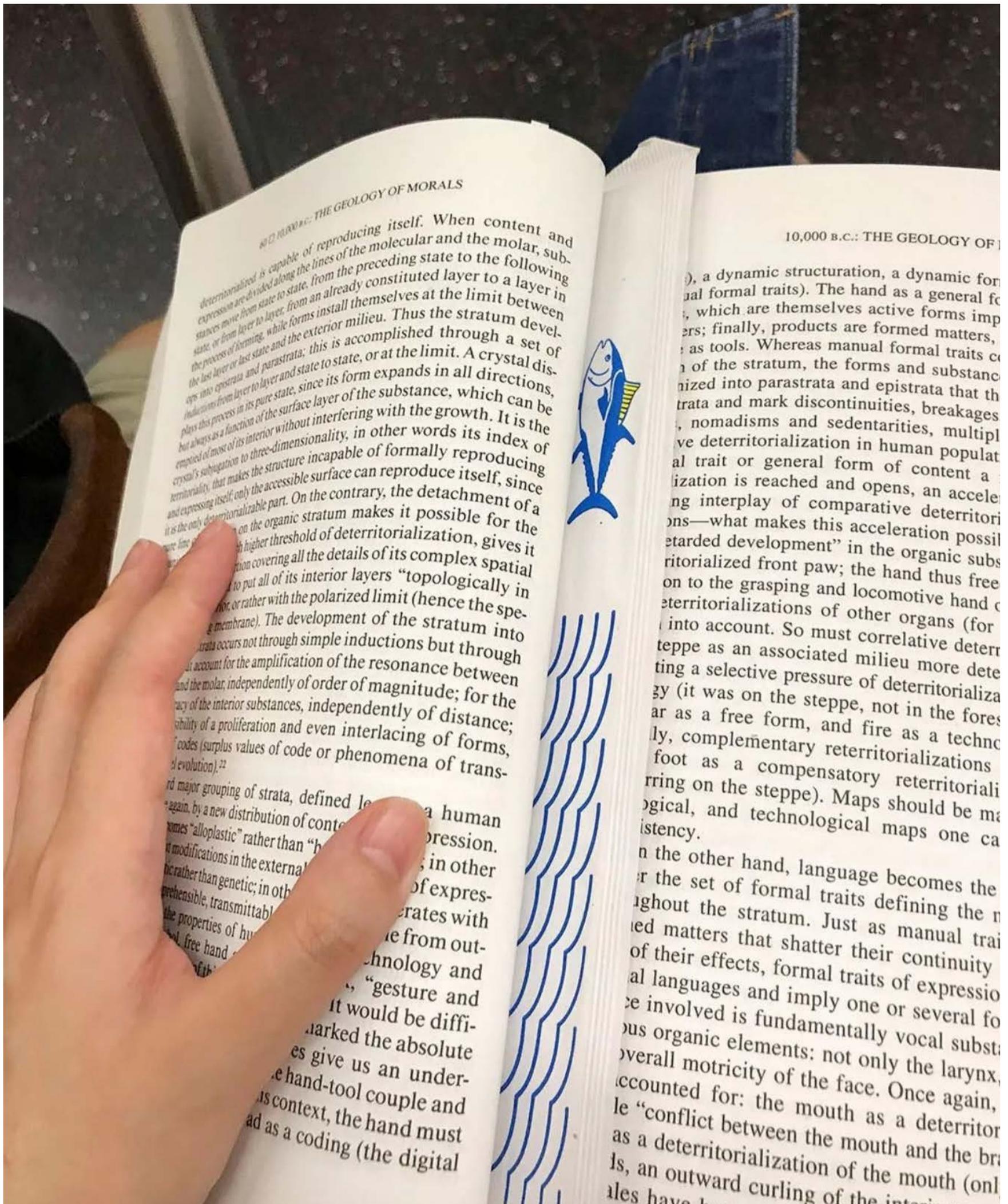


Fig. 3: Yi Xin Tong's book *A Thousand Plateaus* and the paper package of disposable chopsticks with printed patterns of fish and waves that he used as a bookmark.

A [fish broth], plus a dish made with [fish skin], these two courses can be pretty diluted and tasteless. Tong mentioned that fishermen have a mutual understanding that one should not consume wild-caught fish more than once a month; most of the fishes must be returned back to the wild. Thus, several weeks after his exhibition, I invited Tong over to have a meal of real fish, to eat the [fish meat]. There were three or five of us around the table, and we all ended up arguing over different interpretations of preexisting concepts in art. Grilled fish was placed on the table. The group seemed like a fish ‘pack’ consisting of different individuals wrapped in various skins, simultaneously distant and tight-knit. I remember that Tong was able to confirm that we were indeed feasting on freshwater fish based on the compactness of the meat. He also brought up the potentially erotic qualities of fishing—the fishing rod resembles the extension of an erect sexual organ. With this comment, I could no longer tell the difference between cracking jokes and discussing art.

Could a meal of fish constitute a moment of “anti-art” in life? With no strong emphasis on any values or views, just the mundane, relaxed, undisciplined, and the self-sufficient, the permeation of tiny details, could such a practice constitute the “anti-art” in art?

With the questions in mind, I thought of another work by Tong—

In *New Comment on Your YouTube Video* (2017), Tong took a screenshot of a stranger’s comment: “the damn thing is making me high at least after watching this I won’t have to buy no weed because I’m high LOL.” The artist was pleasantly surprised, so he printed out the screenshot and placed it on top of the woven object, which was then attached to the exhibition wall, as though it was the most beautiful fish he had ever caught.

The stranger's comment once more reminded me that even though we cannot personally experience other people's art, the most feasible thing to cherish is none other than the after-taste of a sumptuous meal, the unforgettable feeling of excitement after a viewing experience. Indeed, we stay for the [dessert].

End Notes:

[1] Exhibition "NYC Fishing Trip", Brooklyn NARS Art Foundation, August 4 – September 1, 2017.

[2] Excerpt from email correspondences between Yi Xin Tong and the author, September 16, 2017.

[3] "Yi Xin Tong: NYC Fishing Trip," *Artforum China*, text by Duan Ziyang

Link: <http://www.artforum.com.cn/archive/10768>

[4] What Newman said was: "Aesthetics is to artists as ornithology is to birds." For here, the reference comes from Jordan Kantor: "To recall Barnett Newman's famous quip, it can feel like having to be both ornithologist and bird at the same time." Quoted from Kantor's "Frank Painting", *Frank Stella: A Retrospective*, (Yale University Press, 2015), p. 41.

[5] Kaprow, Allan, and Jeff Kelley. 2003. *Essays on the blurring of art and life*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), p. 230.

[6] Author Unknown, "The Use of Free Time," *Situationist International Anthology*, (Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), p. 74.

[7] Excerpt from email correspondences between Yi Xin Tong and the author, September 16, 2017.

[8] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Trans. Brian Massumi, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1987), p. 245

[9] *Ibid*, p. 246

[10] Excerpt from email correspondences between Yi Xin Tong and the author, September 16, 2017.



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