Expand!

by
Bettina Funcke

I
CONSCIOUSNESS

I believe we are in a very delicate transitional period.
The ground beneath us is shifting, and it takes some time
to see what will solidify in the future.
—Alice Wang [1]

The ground shifting under our feet is historical change happening in front of our eyes, largely driven by the rapid development of digital technologies. What began in the 1990s as an open, creative, global communications forum in which we could research, produce, and exchange content, has gradually transformed itself into a controlled space of profit-oriented extraction and reuse, creating an algorithmically determined hall of mirrors for every one of us. Moreover, everything that is converted into a digital format, every word and every image, can and will be manipulated; that is the inner logic of the digital. Digital means immaterial, so deep questions are creeping up: What will be left of nature? What distinguishes human intelligence, since it's linked to our way of being in the world, which is different from analytic algorithmic intelligence? Consciousness is one answer. Consciousness is embodied. It means mysterious, means magical, means on the edge of knowing and not knowing. Consciousness does not begin with thought, higher order of thought in the cerebral cortex, but with feelings in the brainstem.

[1] Epigraphs and other quotes from Alice Wang are from emails between Wang and the author from January–February 2026 unless otherwise noted.

Alice Wang's work is situated between thinking and feeling. She traverses the space between the analytical brain and sensual embodied knowledge, boldly stating that she wants nothing less than to ask: "How do we change the way we see the world?" That's why she makes art. That's why her work carries universal questions with deep personal urgency. Her path to art is unusual and took some twists and turns. When her father, a theoretical physicist, departed from China for a job at MIT, she was left at a young age with her grandparents in Xi'an, a mega-city in central China. Finally, her parents were able to get her out of the country, and she joined them in Canada at age seven, only to return to her grandparents once more from age eleven through thirteen. From her films, we know that her mother, having been the daughter of a spy, carries family trauma from growing up in a world of double truths in which relationships were based on utility. Any sense of trust evaporated in a maze of lies. This is the artist's material; it's part of her consciousness.

Having grown up between Eastern and Western conceptions of the world, Wang thinks of nature as cosmic. Her years living in China exposed her to ancient Chinese cosmological thought and experience. "I had learned meditation when I was five years old in China," she shares in an email. "I still remember the experience of bending of time, or at least my perception of it. My dad also taught me to harness my qi through the breath when I was eight or nine."

Wang went on to study computer science and international relations. By chance, she attended a talk by the artist Allan Sekula about his seminal book and photo essay *Fish Story* (1988–95), a critical investigation into globalization through the lens of oceans, maritime space, and labor.

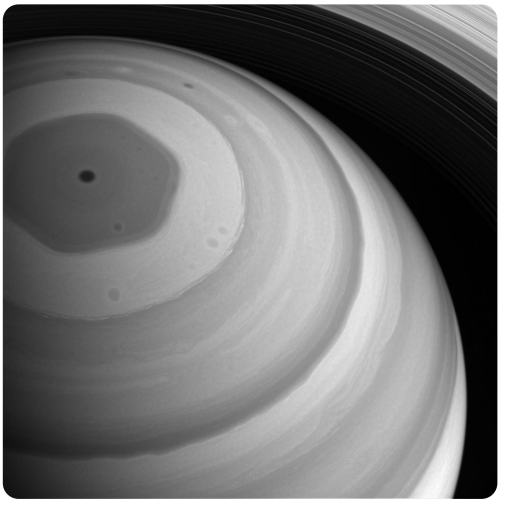
Windstorm on Saturn, **Basalt Columns,**

Wang must have been blown away that one can turn one's questions and ideas into something that can be experienced, through both body *and* mind, where ideas or critical concerns can come alive, and engage us without offering resolve—as Sekula did with his book. That made sense! And that experience had such an impact that she decided to study art. She went to CalArts, which turned out to be productive in that its theory-driven, conceptual dogma pushed her to find her own voice. To give an idea a form, she needed to investigate it through an embodied experience, through material experiments and processes. Further studies with Carol Bove and Trisha Donnelly at New York University became formative.



"Panorama. Mid-Atlantic," 1993, from Allan Sekula's *Fish Story*, 1989–95. Courtesy of the Allan Sekula Studio.

Wang's films and sculptures treat with urgency the elemental parts that make up the world: What is real? What are Earth's and other planets' material facts? She finds comfort in facts. Zero, hexagon, the sun are facts. Her explorations bridge the physical with the metaphysical, the material world around us as it expands into the inner world inside us, and from there back out into planetary space in which Earth travels. Can we trace the emotional aspect of being in the world to something planetary? Take the exhibition title *Windstorm on Saturn, Basalt Columns, MDMA, Serotonin:* By turning a lens from the vast outer world to the microscopic, Wang finds the same shape, which becomes the structure for this presentation: the hexagon. Following the circle, the hexagon is the most stable geometric shape, and it is because of this that it appears in nature. The decades-old, possibly centuries-old windstorm at the North Pole of Saturn, in the shape of a hexagon, is one of the most fascinating atmospheric phenomena in our solar system. It is so large that Earth could fit inside it four times. In *Space Analogs: Pyramids and Parabolas III* (2024), one of a series of four films, Wang traces basalt columns in Iceland's rock formations, which are also hexagonal and become a kind of readymade material for her sculptures in the exhibition. The molecule of MDMA is hexagonal, too, as is serotonin's, which MDMA releases in our brains with an effect of euphoria—both (MDMA and serotonin) are implied in the second half of the film. The hexagon's quality of stability can provide grounding in times of radical change, a center to return to.



Hexagon-shaped jet-stream of Saturn's North Pole. Photo from 2016. Image credit: NASA/JPL-Caltech/Space Science Institute.

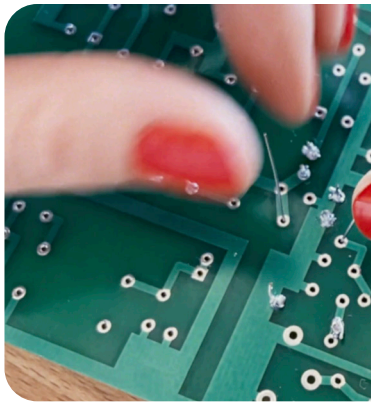
Space Analogs: Pyramids and Parabolas III portrays not just empty, extraterrestrial-feeling landscapes but also Earth's elements in their different states of density: mountains and rocks, stones and sand, still or swept up by storms; water, frozen or liquid, solid or evaporating. From visualizing nature's continuous transformation, the artist turns her attention to interiority. From there, she radically expands outward again to take us beyond a geocentric or human-centric experience, into planetary space. Try to *feel* in your body the artist's description of the gravitational pull: "The Earth is plummeting towards

the sun but missing it—and that's why we are orbiting it." Can we read this not just as a theoretical construct? Can we locate it in our body? The space between an idea and a feeling is what Wang's art is all about. It's an invitation or offering to tune into the dialogue between the mind and the body, and to create some kind of sensorial relationship to that spaciousness in between. "The Earth is plummeting towards the sun but missing it—and that's why we are orbiting it."

Already four hundred years ago, Copernicus described heliocentrism as a revolutionary mathematical and cosmic system. He demonstrated that the sun, not Earth, sits at the center of the cosmos and disseminated this idea in a self-published pamphlet, which circulated privately among scholars. This was such dangerous thinking that it took decades to be officially published, and then only in the year Copernicus died, 1543. Why is it still so challenging for humans to imagine we are not the center? The phenomenological thinker, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, describes: "It is, rather, a space reckoned starting from me as the zero point or degree zero of spatiality. I do not see it according to its exterior envelope; I live it from the inside; I am immersed in it. After all, the world is around me, not in front of me."[2]

[2] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind* [L'Œil et l'esprit] (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), trans. Carleton Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 178.

How we conceive of our embodied experience and its relationship to the world is part of the foundation of our way of life, our politics, ethics, and beliefs. So when Alice Wang asks, "What is the connection between our body and the world around us?," she is quietly shaking foundations. Ancient Chinese cosmological thought, such as in the *Dao De Jing* or the *Yijing (I-Ching: The Book of Changes)*, describes how humans are part of nature, not separate from or outside of it, how we are energetically linked within a dynamic interdependent cosmic model that negates the possibility of any kind of autonomy—from neither the environment surrounding us, nor the time of day, nor the time of year. Just think of the effect of the changing angle of the sun over the course of the day or the year, as it touches us and everything around us: more light, less darkness, changes to the temperature of air and water, and all other matter. Consider sunlight's orchestration of plant growth, the cycles of conception and birth, of expanding, harvesting, and storing, be it in the animal, human, or plant world. Wang takes us one step further: "Nature is not limited to terrestrial landscapes and life-forms in the geocentric Newtonian world, but includes planets, black holes, electrons, protons, as well as other celestial and quantum entities." Note how she expands both outward as well as inward here. How does she tame this vast expansion and deep introspection? How does she arrive at giving it a form?



Pyramids and Parabolas II (film still), 2021. 16mm film and digital video (color, sound), 18:44 min. Collection of the artist.

II
I AM A MODERNIST

The inventive spirit of Modernism is attractive to me,
for its insistence on the autonomy of art objects,
and the purist idea of art for art's sake,
where artworks are not instrumentalized for other purposes.

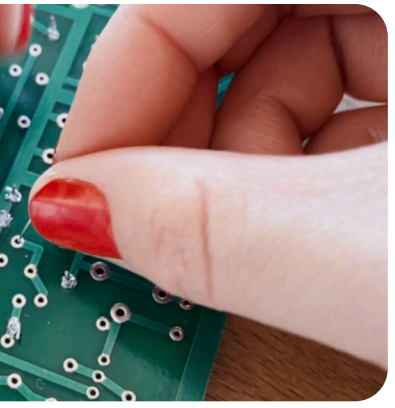
—Alice Wang

In preparation for my studio visit, Wang shared Zadie Smith's article "In Defense of Fiction," in which the novelist enlists our power of imagination to think of and envision different possibilities. She describes the "profound mystery of consciousness itself" that for her starts as a consciousness out in the world: looking, listening, noticing—a kind of awareness, attended by questions. The novelist goes on to describe the ways the book is different from our digital devices: "A book does not watch us reading it; it cannot morph itself, page by page, to suit our tastes, or deliver to us only depictions of people we already know and among whom we feel

comfortable. It cannot note our reactions and then skew its stories to confirm our worldview or reinforce our prejudices. A book does not know when we pick it up and put it down; it cannot nudge us into the belief that we must look at it first thing upon waking and last thing at night, and though it may prove addictive, it will never know exactly how or why." [3]

This account of the book, the modernist object *par excellence*, can help us understand what informs Wang's approach to her sculptures. They do not change for us. In contrast to the malleability of the digital, she makes singular, physical objects that invite careful observation. These works bring the viewer sensorially in touch with the experience of perception, which in turn stimulates our capacity for imagination. Minimalism was also based on the premise of carefully making and then staging an object to heighten the viewer's experience of perception, of making us aware of the process of perception itself. Wang expands this idea into the twenty-first century by proposing a kind of ecological or planetary art. For her, "Art and literature and even science, exist at the border of what we know and what we don't know, between what we imposed order upon and what we can't." [4]

To start her formal investigation, Wang uses the hexagonal column as a kind of readymade form for the self-organizing and self-generating intelligence of nature and takes advantage of the shape's stability. The tall, slender columns solicit bodily attunement. We can sense that these works push clay to its physical limits. At a height of about 4 feet and just 5 ½ inches wide, the two ceramic pillars feel precarious. One is reflecting light off its moonscape, silver surface, the other swallows light with its smooth, matte exterior. A passage from Merleau-Ponty's *Eye and Mind*, one of Wang's favorite modernist texts, reads almost like a description of these two works: "The enigma, though, lies in their bond, in what is between them. The enigma consists in the fact that I see things, each one in its place, precisely because they eclipse one another, and that they are rivals before my sight precisely because each one is in its own place—in their exteriority, known through their envelopment, and their mutual dependence in their autonomy." [5] Like Merleau-Ponty, Wang enjoys the interplay of logical, mathematical thinking and sensual materiality.



III

PHENOMENOLOGY

Begin by bringing your attention into your body.
You can close your eyes,
if that's comfortable for you.
You can notice your body seated,
wherever you're seated,
feeling the weight of your body
on the chair, on the floor. . . .

—Alice Wang, *Pyramids and Parabolas II* (2021)

A two-minute body-scan meditation in the dark opens *Pyramids and Parabolas II*. Before Wang shares any images, she leads the viewer to turn inward and get in touch with the sensation of their body, its weight, temperature, texture, its aliveness inside and its relationship to the world outside. This is how she prepares us to see her film, this is her film, and I would argue it is her art in general. It is a prerequisite to be able to enter into her work. It's an invitation to feel into our bodies, to get in touch with our capacity for embodied perception, to touch on quiet or stillness inside, and from there to expand outward, beyond our selves, beyond the space around us, beyond Earth, even, and into planetary cosmic space. And to know we are all this, we are connected to and part of all this. The world and our bodies are made of the same stuff. From

3 Zadie Smith, "Fascinated to Presume: In Defense of Fiction," *New York Review of Books*, October 24, 2019, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/10/24/zadie-smith-in-defense-of-fiction/.

4 Alice Wang, interview by Ben Eastham, *E-Flux*, podcast, "Cosmos Cinema," May 17, 2024, https://www.e-flux.com/podcasts/609245/cosmos-cinema-conversation-alice-wang.

5 Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*, 181.

a Chinese cosmological point of view, we are nature, we are not separate, we are intertwining rather than in separation. There is no absolute inside/outside split because everything exists within a dynamic relationship to everything else.

Classical physics is based on a relatively static or calculable Western linear worldview with origins in Greek cosmological thought, where humans observed and described the world in mathematical ways, but placed themselves *outside* of this description, as witnesses. Chinese cosmology, however, suggests that all existence is merely the cyclical, interdependent movement of relationships and the resonance of yin and yang, of light and dark. It describes a world made of energy, a world of cosmic resonances. What takes place in the outside world is equally reflected, or even happens, inside us. This is articulated in the description "As above, so below." Hence even the most subtle action influences the whole, affecting this dynamic, mobile model that is perpetually moving in and out of balance. While Western cosmological thought holds on to a rational mathematical and calculable model, Chinese cosmology includes the experience of unknowability within the complex weave of its relationality.

To reclaim fiction for her art, Wang wants to make us expand from a narcissistic culture into a heliocentric planetary reality. She offers us a way to understand film not as representation but as reorganization of perception. In her four *Pyramids and Parabolas* films to date, what's immediately striking is that geometry is not presented as an abstract system, but as something encountered—through movement, framing, rhythm, and scale: Geometry emerges from corporeal orientation in space. *Space Analogs: Pyramids and Parabolas III*, the film in this exhibition, delays perceptual certainty as it takes us into vivid imagery of vast deserts, ice fields, and volcanic formations. The film moves from no sound, shots from great distance, forces of nature, inhuman landscapes to coming up close, family history, inner life, feelings, and arriving at the possibility of losing oneself in a weave/wave of everything; starting with vast emptiness and natural forces of extraterrestrial terrain and finishing with a human body gliding underwater; from silence to texture to beats that are cultural textures: club music. A voiceover takes the viewer along between reflection and narration. The artist resists stable figure-ground relations. She lets form hover between structure and sensation. The hesitation is crucial, and points to an unknowability of the vastness that is our world, whichever geometric patterns we apply.

For Merleau-Ponty, too, perception is not instantaneous recognition but a temporal unfolding. The viewer's body is quietly recruited: We can feel the effort of visually tracking space. We feel balance and imbalance. We sense extension and compression. We anticipate motion when the image is still. Shapes are not immediately mastered by the viewer. The image flickers, or quivers: an undoing inviting us into feeling the unknowability of . . . almost everything. The artist's (and thus the viewer's) body is the silent center of the film, which reveals visibility itself as something structured and fragile, contingent. Spatial logic is sensed before it is understood. Perception feels in process. The geometric forms do not dominate vision, but *strain* it. This aligns with Merleau-Ponty's claim that "the visible world is not fully available—it always exceeds the gaze." [6]

[6] Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*, 180.

Without going out the door,
Know the world.
Without looking out the window,
See the way of heaven.
The further one goes, the less one knows.
—Lao Tzu, Dao De Jing, chapter 47

Artist's Biography

Alice Wang is a Chinese-born American artist based in New York. She was an artist-in-residence at ISCP from December 2024 to May 2025, supported by the Canada Council for the Arts. Wang received a BSc in Computer Science and International Relations from the University of Toronto, a BFA from the California Institute of the Arts, Santa Clarita, and an MFA from New York University. Her work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at the UCCA Dune Art Museum, Qinhuangdao, China; Vincent Price Art Museum, Los Angeles; Capsule Shanghai; Human Resources, Los Angeles; and 18th Street Arts Center, Santa Monica, among others. Group presentations include The Renaissance Society, Chicago; New Museum, New York; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Para Site, Hong Kong; Fotografiska, Shanghai; and the 14th Shanghai Biennale.

Windstorm on Saturn,

Basalt Columns,

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International Studio & Curatorial Program, New York

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