

My Dear Computer

Suanna Zhong

February 21, 2025

The computer is not my enemy. Do not tell me to paint French gardens when so much of my time is spent gazing at the computer.

Growing up, I saw my father, a mathematician, collect composition notebooks full of scratch work. It felt like magic, a language of intricate pictures I could not comprehend. As I took more math classes, the true meaning of these mysterious symbols rose to the surface. Throughout my time at CMU, I have also accumulated many pieces of paper from problem-solving, and these small drawings serve as precious artifacts in my artistic practice.

In particular, I am most drawn to problems that lend themselves to diagrams. For example, I had to implement a memory allocation library for one of my classes,

an assignment that was completed thousands of times before me. By the end of the assignment, I was left with scattered pages of hasty arrows, numbers, and boxes. At some point in time, these lines represented what was happening in my implementation, but now, the meaning has faded from my memory. Although the end product felt insignificant to me, the drawings are still evidence of my time and labor being spent towards something.

Someone very close to me asked me what makes me angry. I believe that there are three big evils in my life: imperialism, gender, and generational trauma. It felt easy to say that the computer married these three evils; it was invented during war-time, Computer Science is a male-dominated concentration at most schools, and quite a few members of my family hold positions in software engineering. Following this statement, I told them that love was the antidote. My emotionally charged compositions were a childish attempt at expressing my resistance to the three big evils. I strictly made art without the computer; using large, bold marks felt faster than typing and debugging.

My junior fall semester was my first time experiencing university without any programming assignments. I filled up my new free time with oil painting. However, after a few weeks, I found myself missing the computer. This time away from coding taught me a very valuable lesson: the integration of analog and tech must be carefully thought out. As technology further progresses, artists,

including myself, place a special value on analog processes with tactile materials such as film photography, bookbinding, or in-camera practical effects. Hence, the way technology interacts with analog mediums must be done with intention. There are infinite permutations of combining art and CS, and whether its web development, knitting, creative coding, time-based media, or translating computer processes into analog form with my paintings, I began to embrace the cyclical nature of my interests, exploring each of these possibilities, one by one.

I have been shown the computer against my own will but I still look for her when she's gone.