The Appearance of

Distance

Tiffany Sia and Ed Halter
in Conversation

Published on the occasion
of the exhibition

The Appearance of Distance

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Matthew Lawson Garrett

The Appearance of Distance is an exhibition about distance, and how the networked circulation of today's media environment warps our relationship to place. Including work by artists Tiffany Sia, Kobby Adi, and Jackie Karuti, *The Appearance of Distance* features artists who are distinctly attuned to the way that ideas of distance have changed in the accelerated media environment of the 21st century, as well as the way the disorientation of distance prescribes how we see and interpret images of place.

This publication—which shares a title with and acts as an addition to the exhibition—brings artist Tiffany Sia and writer Ed Halter into dialogue. During my initial curatorial research for the show, Sia became the first artist I was determined to include in The Appearance of Distance. I first discovered her work while researching the Japanese filmmakers Masao Adachi and Masao Matsuda, and in particular the "landscape theory" of filmmaking they developed in the wake of the perceived

failure of the 1968 protests in Tokyo. Contrary to the content of popular newsreels and documentaries of that time, their theory claims that banal images of the landscape are more political than images of baton-wielding figures of state repression, because such images reveal the depth to which state control has seeped into the infrastructures that support everyday life. In searching for artists carrying on the work of landscape theory, I found in Sia's practice a similar insistence on the importance of what goes unseen in the image. Whether it's the contrapuntal text of her mother's telling of postwar Hong Kong through annotating appropriated travelogue images of Hong Kong in *What Rules The Invisible* (2022), or the deceiving stillness of the twenty-four-hour recorded livestreams of landscapes whose sovereignties are contested in *Antipodes II* and *III* (2024), the contrapuntal movement between what is seen in the image and what remains invisible beyond the frame is an integral part of Sia's artistic practice. As Sia states in the conversation: "What is tantamount remains off-screen, unseen." [1]

[1] See page 48

"Distance" is a consistently present root term in media studies. In this context, media scholars have often used distance as a measure to understand the changes in communication speed spurred by new transmission and reproduction technologies. In his 1935 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," philosopher Walter Benjamin defines the "aura" of an artwork as "the appearance of distance no matter how far," lamenting that the speed and accessibility of mechanical reproduction has affected a compression of that distance, a reduction of the artwork's aura.[2] This conception of distance—both literal and metaphorical—has become particularly relevant in an era in which a single image can fracture and arrive at multiple locations instantaneously across networks, compressing spatial and temporal separation and smoothing over the resistance that slowness once afforded. Sia's engagement with what goes unseen in images raises questions about what knowledge is made unreachable by this circulation and what histories are flattened. Her

[2] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2019).

THE RINGING OF A GONG WOULD BE A TIME-TELLING RITUAL FROM PRE-MODERN TIMES. THE NIGHT WOULD BE DIVIDED BY EVERY TWO-HOURS. EACH RINGING, *DA GANG*, WOULD INDICATE ANOTHER INCREMENT OF TIME HAD PASSED.

work suggests that something is always lost in the translation of an image across space, that something always becomes hidden when a landscape is unmoored from its contexts.

Today we live in a world still coming to terms with what it means politically to be constantly connected by networks. The contemporary internet makes possible a "casual global discourse" that was previously impossible.[3] This global discourse was made notably visible in the recent temporary ban of the short-form video app TikTok, which prompted a mass exodus of users to a similar, Chinese-owned app called RedNote; as Halter notes in the conversation, "suddenly, there's everyday American people and everyday Chinese people talking to each other about groceries."[4] It's difficult to imagine what political possibilities might come of a world whose weft is woven tighter and tighter, further compressing a rapidly flowing discourse. As Sia's work hints to us, what is more vital is to ask what is left behind by this compression, what is secreted away within the extrajudicial, the unimaginable, or the invisible, and

[3] See page 42
[4] See page 42

how the effects of these occlusions materialize in the world. In speaking of *Antipodes II*, in which a scenic view of a beach landscape in Okinawa conceals the complexity of the territory's contested sovereignty, Sia underscores the importance of taking seriously what is lost when representations of place are mass exported, what escapes their frames: "Despite film's indexical promise as a medium, history, reality, the world necessarily exceeds the frame."[5]

The conversation presented in this publication begins from a recollection of Sia's experience as an undergraduate at Bard College in New York State, where Ed Halter was her thesis advisor. Among the various insights and concepts discussed in the conversation, Sia and Halter touch on exilic aesthetics in cinema, filmmaker Jonas Mekas's concept of the politics of small countries, and how the world's media landscape has changed since Halter co-edited with curator Lauren Cornell the seminal volume *Mass Effect: Art and the Internet in the Twenty-First Century* (2014). The conversation concludes with a discussion of the

[5] See page 41

independent art spaces started by Halter and Sia (Light Industry and Speculative Place, respectively) and a reflection on the importance of artist-run spaces as platforms for experimental and politically engaged work. On the occasion of Tiffany Sia's first time exhibiting work at Bard College, her alma mater, it has been my pleasure to organize and edit this publication as a contribution to the growing scholarship on her work.

Conversation

Matthew Lawson Garrett:
I thought we could start at Bard College, since you two met at Bard and *The Appearance of Distance* will be Tiffany's first time exhibiting artwork here. It feels like a full-circle moment. Could you speak about your shared time at Bard?

Ed Halter:
It's hard because I've known Tiffany for a long time after graduation too, so things get blurred. I was trying to remember what I actually knew about her at Bard, and a few things came up. One is that I helped advise her senior project, which was on Hong Kong cinema. What went into that project are elements of what became a lasting obsession. Second, I looked up to see what classes Tiffany took, because I couldn't remember if she took a class with me, and she did take a class. It was a class in Spring 2010 called "The Aesthetics of New Media," and it was on topics like immateriality and telepresence and things like that.

Tiffany Sia:
I originally went to Bard because of the photo program, but at eighteen or nineteen, I felt that calling myself an artist wasn't something one could just claim by virtue of simply majoring in art practice. What could I even make work about? It wasn't until taking Robert Culp's class "China in the Eyes of the West" that my scope was broadened, and Culp introduced me to postcolonial theorist Edward Said's writing.[1] I ended up in Asian studies and film studies, and left the photo department. Perhaps it was then that I started to develop an ambivalence toward images.

I'm slightly embarrassed to return to a teenage era. What is interesting to me about the core of your question though, Matthew, is to pose it another way: Who were the thinkers I was studying with? What were they writing and thinking about around the time I was there? How did their work directly, implicitly, or ambiently shape my practice and approach to form and method?

Ed, you had just written *From Sun Tzu to Xbox* (2006). I started at Bard in 2006. I took your class in 2010. Then, shortly after that, *Mass Effect: Art and the Internet in the Twenty-First Century* (2015) came out. You were in the film studies department, but you were teaching new media aesthetics. It's interesting because for me that exactly connects to a relationship between cinema, other video forms, and screen culture in my work. After I graduated, Robert Culp, who was my other advisor, published *The Power of Print in Modern China: Intellectuals and Industrial Publishing from the End of Empire to Maoist State Socialism* (2019). His pedagogical approach, his masterful way of engaging a class in a debate, had a huge effect on my thinking and my work. Culp's teachings illuminated to me how publishing is and was a way of expressing civic power and political identity in a time of revolution. The classes I took with him included "China in Revolution," "Politics of Ritual," and "Gender, Power and Politics in Modern China."

There's something about these thinkers at Bard at this time and the ideas that end up transmuting just by sharing space and being in orbit. For instance, film scholar Jean Ma[2] wasn't teaching

[1] Edward Said was a Palestinian intellectual, literary critic and cultural theorist best known for his book *Orientalism* (1978), which critiques Western representations of the East and laid the foundation for postcolonial studies.

[2] Jean Ma is a film scholar best known for her work in East Asian cinema and the aesthetics of time. Her latest book, Edges of *Sleep: Moving Images and Somnolent Spectators* (2022), explores the relationship between sleep and cinema, as both subject matter on-screen and a state to induce a viewer.

when I was studying there. She had just left to teach at Stanford a few years prior, and she left a selection of books in Bard's Stevenson Library—which I actually mention in *On and Off-Screen Imaginaries* (2024), in the very last footnote of the book. These books she left became the backbone of my senior thesis. Through her imprints in the department, she was the one who introduced me to Ackbar Abbas's *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (1997)—without us ever having met, until more recently in 2022.

Major themes of my work, in thinking about notions of time and duration in cinema, are so evidently shaped by having encountered Ma's work and her book *Melancholy Drift: Marking Time in Chinese Cinema* (2010) at that impressionable time. Last but not least, there was John Pruitt, who introduced me to postwar European cinema and made us read text and literature of its time as companions to Italian neorealism and the French new wave. So perhaps this is where my thinking about film and text, and what those relationships are, originates.

Matthew Lawson Garrett:
You two have collaborated beyond your time at Bard as well. For instance, Ed, you make an appearance in Tiffany's recently published book, *On and Off-Screen Imaginaries*, buying dog-safe fireworks and discussing avant-garde filmmaker Jonas Mekas's theory of the politics of small countries.

Ed Halter:
I've been part of the New York experimental film world for a while and knew Jonas Mekas, and after his death I had written an essay, in part, about his very eclectic political ideas. He was from Lithuania, and one thing I had brought up to Tiffany, I remember, is his interest in how being from a small country brings you to a different politics than being from a bigger country. It gives you a different outlook on the world. It's not just a different politics but perhaps even a different attitude toward politics. I realized that Hong Kong must have something of this small-country outlook.

Tiffany Sia:
We were at the Cheesecake Factory in DC. I was so thrilled that I had gotten calligrapher and artist Jonathan Yu to travel all the way from Hong Kong, and art historian and artist Emily Verla Bovino was there as well. We were talking about politics in Hong Kong. I remember you observing us talking for a while and then making this remark about Jonas Mekas and small countries. It just felt so apt to me, and that's why I wanted to immortalize it in the book. *On and Off-Screen Imaginaries* was born out of so many conversations.

In terms of thinking about Hong Kong as an "elsewhere" site beyond the major metropoles of the Cold War, "elsewhere" sites, or what I define in the book as the "no place," are subject to different types of attitudes around politics, and people who are citizens of these places have a very specific relationship to politics that remains, even if they leave. They carry this attitude with them to other places, and that kind of thinking allows them to relate to others of the "no place," other small countries or — even if not recognized officially as countries — irregular and exceptional polities like apartheid states, client states, special administrative regions, or other territories not recognized as sovereign. These political questions are alive and take shape in exilic cinema.

Ed Halter:
There is another link to Mekas in your work. Mekas's films are very much about exile: about longing for homeland, reconstructing the homeland in his mind, and living in a permanent exile wherever he goes. That exilic aesthetic is something that you're interested in too. Maybe it's related to being from small countries, because part of Mekas's idea about small countries is that they're always at the whim of bigger powers. Lithuania is always at the whim of Germany and Russia and everyone around them, and Hong Kong has been in a similar situation. So I think that there are links between what size does to a country's political existence and how that affects an individual's political understanding.

Tiffany Sia:
That even informs how I think of the role of the artist. I've noticed within American milieus there's an optimistic refrain and common notion that the artist is able to change the world. I

don't necessarily see the agency of the artist being of that magnitude. I don't even see the ability for citizens to have that kind of power amid a climate of strengthening ethno-autocracies and fascisms. People are subjects more than they are actors or agents—my own family's history expresses this elliptical defeat of history. We are acted upon by these political powers. Maybe this is a "small country" way of thinking, an unhealthy attitude born out of a familiarity with the notion that we are always subject to big powers or those who have ambitions to take political power by brute force.

I relate to Mekas's work through the lens of exilic cinema, and I think it's interesting that we have a shared obsession with vernacular forms and the everyday in how an exilic longing manifests itself. Maybe that has some relation to the idea of small countries, and cultures that are not central. I think the idea of dialects, languages that cannot be written as they are spoken, really encapsulates that well. You can't write as you speak in Cantonese, Shanghainese, or Hokkien, which are all spoken in my

family. These languages are colloquial, informal, and idiosyncratic. Dialect for me finds aesthetic companion in vernacular forms, a devotion toward what is elusive or ephemeral, even the profane, and almost an impossibility of trying to record the sense of the everyday, something as close as possible to verisimilitude that is always fleeting.

Matthew Lawson Garrett:
That seems like a good segue to talk about the works in the exhibition. There are three works in *The Appearance of Distance* at the Hessel Museum of Art: the short film *What Rules The Invisible* (2022) as well as two media sculptures, *Antipodes II* and *III* (2024). There are many threads that connect these three works, such as the use of landscape as well as the use of material from the internet. *What Rules The Invisible* consists of amateur travelogue videos appropriated from video sharing sites such as YouTube, and the landscapes of Okinawa and Kinmen in the *Antipodes* series are taken from twenty-four-hour livestreams on the websites of travel agencies. The use of landscapes connects these works


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as well. Tiffany, could you speak about these works, where you see connections and where you see differences?

Tiffany Sia:
These works, *What Rules the Invisible* and *Antipodes* as a series, think about landscape art as a repertoire. Landscape is object. Landscape is image. Landscape is also duration. I was talking to scholar and film producer Timmy Chen about translating landscape film in Chinese. We were preparing for an event in Taiwan, and we asked ourselves: How do we say "landscape film" in Chinese? There were three different ways to translate it. One of the ways of course was to place it within *shanshui* painting, as a way to describe ink scroll painting, with the motif of mountain and water balancing the premodern Chinese composition of landscape pictures.

In these works, I'm trying to resolve ways of seeing landscape, spanning centuries or milieus, and dealing with it as a genre. Landscape pictures are often about situating us in a sense of place—situating in a sense of knowledge or a sense of belonging. But I think all three of these works are attempts to think about how a sense of disorientation besets our ways of looking at place—how landscape pictures cannot escape the politics of seeing and the intoxicating gaze of nationalism. With *Antipodes II*, the work presents a beachfront view of Okinawa. This idyllic view belies the complexity of the scene: a highly contested territory that is at once a site of a US military base, a territory under Japanese sovereignty, and an island that China claims as its own territory, citing Ming dynasty documents. Okinawan sovereignty is obscured by co-imperialisms. In form, the landscape genre for me best represents this paradox of what is visible and knowledge obscured: this eerily calm scene is visually interchangeable to any beachfront view. I'm interested in telling history not through events. Despite film's indexical promise as a medium, history, reality, the world necessarily exceeds the frame. I'm interested in a different kind of attunement toward what is possible with video, apart from what an image may initially appear to tell.

Matthew Lawson Garrett:
Ed, today's media environment feels like a different moment than you wrote about ten years ago with curator and fellow Bard faculty member Lauren Cornell in *Mass Effect*, which you two co-edited. Tiffany's works feel like they use the internet as a mass medium, as a material, in a unique way. Given the current media environment, which feels much faster and more fractured than in 2014, how do you see Tiffany's works responding to these conditions?

Ed Halter:
I would say that one of the major differences between the media environment now versus then is an accelerated discourse between different parts of the world. Today's internet makes possible casual global discourse at a scale that was simply not possible before. An amazing example I've been thinking about recently is when the TikTok ban was looming and a whole bunch of Americans jumped onto the Chinese app RedNote. Suddenly there's everyday American people and everyday Chinese people talking to each other about groceries. It's an insane thing to think

about, that people would talk to each other about everyday things across the globe, and imagine what new political understandings could come out of that. That's always been the dream of the internet from the very beginning, and it was the early dream of cinema as well.

I see Tiffany's work as situated in a very interesting way to a kind of biculturalism. I tend to think of her work as like a book laid open. One side is written in "American," one side is written in "Chinese." It speaks at once to those cultures in different ways, and she has no particular interest in translating those experiences. For me as a Westerner and English speaker, the work is one thing and has one set of information that it communicates to me. For a different viewer from the other side of the globe, it says materially different things.

If you're working with art that is in its essence cross-cultural, the question becomes: How do you get to the root of things that actually speak to both? The internet and cinema are both forms that have obsessed over this question of a universal language. I

think it's significant that one of the first genres of film that was given a name was the travelogue. The travelogue was super early; some of the very first films made by the Lumières can be called travelogues. One of the very first fascinations of cinema was that you could shoot a film in, say, Bombay and then show it in London, or vice versa. Suddenly people in one city are seeing another city "live." It's not a movie telling a story, it doesn't purport to have a message. It's primarily offering an experience of being two places at once and of experiencing alterity, bringing the exotic into the everyday.

So I think of the landscape film as a kind of universal form. It contains a universal modern human experience of collapsing distances. With cinema, the original problem was that it was pure image—language was a minor or totally excluded element in the early days of cinema. On the other hand, the internet is essentially a linguistic operation. It's a set of codes that translate into images and text on our screens.

So at the core of it is this question of translation and language. That's something that you can always find Tiffany playing with in the work. Our relationship to language becomes the way we try to determine our relationship to the image.

Tiffany Sia:
I totally agree with you. It's not one single thing that I'm addressing between *shanshui* painting, landscape photography in the US, and even German landscape painting and its relationship to nationalism. I'm addressing all the facets that construct our relationship to viewing landscapes. Landscape is at once a tool and genre across milieus. It's the language and vernacular of landscape itself as a universal form but one that is rooted in cultural specificities of nation building and the construction of national identity. There is a notion of distance that is inherent in landscape pictures, in the fantasy of looking, from where you are, at a place that might be very far away. Then, of course, there's the Japanese Marxist milieu of Masao Adachi, and thinking through landscape

theory around how to capture an event, trying to explode the form of filmmaking that is anti-event. Although invoking "landscape" for different reasons, here too I'm interested in the motif of distance and alienation that is inherent in the viewer's relationship to images.

I want to return to what you're talking about with this kind of binary in how I operate in my practice—which I think is true. Music, and the composition of music, is really important in my thinking. So the contrapuntal, in terms of thinking about how two lines of music can be simultaneous, is an important part of the composition of my work. In *What Rules The Invisible*, there is one line, the travelogue images of Hong Kong, and then another, the intertitles interrupting the appropriated footage. The viewer is forced to hold an invisible space between these two lines: of my mom's tellings of postwar Hong Kong and the images from the travelers' videos. The way that *What Rules The Invisible* is edited is an attempt to think through the contrapuntal in my work—simultaneous lines keeping their own time playing concurrently,

their alignments and dissonance, and the space they create between them.

Matthew Lawson Garrett:
How do you see this problematic of showing film works in a gallery setting where they exist as both a sculpture and a film, like *Antipodes II* and *III*, and the difficulty of getting people to interface with film in the gallery?

Tiffany Sia:
As a viewer you're not captive in a gallery setting as you are in the cinema. A twenty-four-hour work like *Antipodes* is highly contingent on the viewer. For most viewers, it's a film of the moments when they encounter it, whether a glance of seconds or a prolonged few minutes. Whether it's day or night, or when a rainstorm passes through, the work becomes whatever it is when the viewer passes the artwork at that particular time. I've heard from gallerists that viewers will stand in front of a painting longer than they will stand in front of a video work. Hearing this was a dare to make a twenty-four-hour work, to make the work's conceit an announcement of its own impossibility for

the viewer to watch in totality. A landscape film shot over a distended period of time, allowing a sense of disquiet to emerge. In this video work, I was thinking in relation to slow cinema. Filmmaker Theo Angelopoulos remarks of slow cinema, "the pauses, the dead time, give [the spectator] the chance not only to assess the film rationally, but also to create, or complete, the different meanings of a sequence."[3] What remains off-screen for the viewer, the knowledge of Kinmen's or Okinawa's complex history, is what completes *Antipodes II* and *Antipodes III* and conveys the landscape's disquietude. What is tantamount remains off-screen, unseen.

Ed Halter:
In my experience, there's a huge difference working as a curator with an artist who comes from a filmmaking background. Every kind of artist today, from dance to poetry to visual art to painting, picks up a goddamn camera. But I think that artists who don't come from filmmaking are often more naive about how people will view the work in the space, and people who come from cinema will make choices that take the realities of how audiences move through a space into account. Artists

[3] Theo Angelopoulos, "Interview with Tony Mitchell," in Theo Angelopoulos: Interviews, ed. Dan Fainaru (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 32.

with cinematic training often turn to ingenious solutions like in *Antipodes*.

Another answer is that what we now call film in the gallery space largely has its origins in video art. In a sense it's actually television, it always has been television, and it's never been cinema. Cinema is what happens in a cinema: it's a specific architectural form. Television happens anywhere: it's in any room of the house, television is at the deli, television is a baby monitor, television is your smartphone. TV has always been more mobile. So I think the apposite form to think about with regard to Tiffany's work isn't, perhaps, cinema at all, but rather television.

Tiffany Sia:
What you're talking about, the television in the deli, is exactly what is interesting to me! Because, what is the television broadcast at the deli? It's likely some culturally specific television broadcast through satellite cable.

Ed Halter:
The Polish photo shop in my neighborhood entertains me with Eastern European prank shows while I wait.

Tiffany Sia:
Exactly. So often in New York, the presence of television in public spaces has an innate, beautiful, exilic quality. There's a reason why there's a television always on. The person wants to be accompanied. The person may want to have the presence of something churning, and in certain cultural and exilic contexts, in a common dialect or language, to access the feeling like there's a phantom presence from their milieu that reminds them of their connection to place, of home, through television. For me that's the crux of *Antipodes II* and *III*. They come from my own obsession with watching livestreams, the comfort of nothing really happening, and it being a different time of day in Asia. There's another work, *A Wet Finger in the Air* (2021), which came out of a long-term habit of mine to watch old Hong Kong weather reports when I was in New York and I was getting homesick, just to hear the sound of the weather report jingle.

Those common aspects of television—how it delivers comfort, how it creates a sense of connection—is so much a part of everyday experience that we often overlook their significance. Television's affect and power lies for me within the relationship between film/video and exilic culture, the ability to cathect, to imbue, a sense of nearness to a distant place, to transmit dialect and a sense of home. There is an emotional magnitude embedded in always having the TV on, and my fascination with this is definitely at the core of many of my video works. I'm interested in the ways television as an object, both material and relating to object attachment, creates resonance.

Matthew Lawson Garrett:
Here we return to this connection between Jonas Mekas and the exilic present in the everyday, the link between everydayness and bigger political movements we are subject to as individuals.

As it's very close to my heart, having co-founded the independent space Datsuijo in Tokyo in 2022, I'd like to ask you to speak about the independent spaces you both started: Light Industry, founded by Ed and curator Thomas Beard in 2008 in New York City, and Speculative Place, found-

ed by Tiffany in 2021 in Hong Kong. Speculative Place is, as is noted on the website, a “living-dead space” that no longer has a physical location but continues in talks and in publications. Could you tell us a bit about running an independent space, what it means to you, and how running a platform for artists has changed since you founded these spaces?

Tiffany Sia:
I started Speculative Place because of Ed and Thomas Beard’s inspiration and suggestion. Right before I moved to Hong Kong, we were talking about microcinemas and alternative art spaces. They said: Well, if you don’t want to start an art space, then what about a residency? I didn’t even understand what a residency really was at that time.

Ed Halter:
We had that conversation in a restaurant in Chinatown in New York, I remember it. It was in 2018, or maybe the end of 2017.

Tiffany Sia:
When I got to Hong Kong, I was working my day job at this watch company, and at the same time looking for industrial spaces that I could turn into a place to live illegally. By accident I found a house on an island called Lamma Island. I was tying my shoe on a hiking trail and saw a “for rent” sign.

Made possible by day jobs and committing to a very long commute, my husband and I ran the residency for almost four years and had twenty or so residents. We were planning for Light Industry to do a residency at Speculative Place in the summer of 2020 and run events throughout the city in different cinemas, and even to do one on the beach of Lamma Island. Then, of course, 2020 became what it was. Everything was in lockdown and that was canceled. The residency came from a belief that daring work and experimental forms can only come about through weird and unconventional structures, so I was committed to carving out such a space: one bedroom for people living there, and then another bedroom if you need extra studio space. Such work

is only possible outside of commercial structures, one that afforded respite even if it was for a moment.

I didn't get an MFA to become an artist. I think running Speculative Place made me an artist. Nothing is more instructive than having to invent another structure for living, of making, and being with others. The most revelatory conversations happen only when you're living a life alongside one another. Some close artist friends came too, like Joshua Gen Solondz, Carolyn Lazard, and also Alex Nguyễn-Võ. Alex was basically a stranger at the time, and through his residency at Speculative Place has become like a cousin to me.

I'm trying to find a way to do Speculative Place again, but it's financially impossible in the US. I can't find a way to make it work financially with the day job and everything. I don't know how to materialize it, and it's very frustrating for me. Having created a tiny infrastructure that created some form of temporary respite, many can't really last—this was something Ed and Thomas had warned me about from the start.

Ed Halter:
Light Industry started in 2008. Thomas Beard and I started a weekly cinema space because, at that time in Brooklyn, there wasn't something exactly like that. What we really wanted to do was create connections between different communities and scenes that were interested in the advanced use of the moving image: documentary, the art world, academia, experimental film, and what at the time was still called new media. Those scenes were disconnected and we were trying to create a crossroads, a meeting place.

Philosophically, I really connect with what Tiffany is saying, that when you're creating a space, it's an architecture. You're creating a physical space and, through that, a structure for experience. Jonas Mekas's idea of independence in small countries carries over into his insistence on the independence of small arts organizations. He founded so many small organizations, many of which are still around, such as the Film-makers' Cooperative and Anthology Film Archives. These organizations were built small by design.

Light Industry is similar—it's very much inspired by that model. Our whole purpose is to remain on the human level. That's why experimental cinema is sometimes called "personal cinema," because it exists on the level of the individual, not on the level of the corporation, not on the level of the institution.

Tiffany, you function in New York as a kind of connector of people, especially between Hong Kong and the US. I think the spirit of Speculative Place continues in your making those connections. It's interesting to think about in regard to an ethics of non-translation in your work. You are interested in the impossibilities of translating, but at the same time you work very hard to bring people into conversation together across cultures.

Tiffany Sia:
It's really about bridging things, even if I refuse translation in my films. In *What Rules the Invisible*, I refuse to translate the Cantonese folk song my mom sings, and I use intertitles in place of her voice, so you don't get to hear her voice in Cantonese telling me those things about the POW camps and the executions that were happening in the Prince Edward police station.

On the contrary, not giving that particular translation in the part where she sings the folk song forces the viewer to just listen to her, to really hear the onomatopoeias in Cantonese. It's not what she's saying that's the point necessarily. This is what I find so beautiful about dialects. I think to force someone's ear toward that is the beauty of encountering the unknown and the ambiguous spaces that exist between milieus. That's what I'm interested in when I put two people in a room together and I just let them connect. I'm not trying to mediate or get in the way of that experience. I'm trying to see what can come about that I can't anticipate on my own.

I think the magic that expresses itself in language is so exciting. That's why in *Never Rest/Unrest* (2020), I don't subtitle anything, because there's so much already expressed in the human voice and the emotions of the human voice. Sometimes subtitles make a viewer lazy, they become confident in the fact that the subtitles have done the work for them and to tell them everything there is to know. Humor is often lost.

Translation always expresses ideology, whether or not it makes these undercurrents transparent. Translation takes shape through bias and choice. Interpreting it this way and not that way, or translating one voice over another voice that might be speaking simultaneously. What if I just tried my best to get out of the way, letting the viewer hear on their own, to encounter these images on their own, and to imagine the image that cannot be shown?

PRINCE EDWARD POLICE STATION
HAS BEEN HAUNTED FOR A LONG TIME.
PEOPLE WOULD BE HELD THERE AS
PRISONERS OF WAR. EXECUTED.

Image Credits

8-9,
10-11,
16-17,
60-61,
62-63

Tiffany Sia
What Rules The Invisible
2022
Digital film
9 minutes 49 seconds
Courtesy of the artist; Maxwell Graham, New York; and Felix Gaudlitz, Vienna

22-23,
24-25

Tiffany Sia
Antipodes II
2024
Rewired rearview mirror with recorded livestream video of the port of Okinawa for a duration of 24 hours
Courtesy of the artist; Maxwell Graham, New York; and Felix Gaudlitz, Vienna

36-37,
38-39,
Back Cover

Tiffany Sia
Antipodes III
2024
Rewired rearview mirror with recorded livestream video of the island of Kinmen for a duration of 24 hours
Courtesy of the artist; Maxwell Graham, New York; and Felix Gaudlitz, Vienna

Biographies

Tiffany Sia

(b. 1988) is an artist, filmmaker, and writer. Her films have screened at Toronto International Film Festival, New York Film Festival, Doc Fortnight (Museum of Modern Art, New York), and elsewhere. Sia has had solo exhibitions at Artists Space and Maxwell Graham in New York and Felix Gaudlitz in Vienna. She is the author of *On and Off-Screen Imaginaries* (Primary Information, 2024). Her work has been included in group exhibitions at Fondazione Prada, Milan; Museum of Modern Art, New York; and Seoul Museum of Art, among others. Her essays have appeared in *Film Quarterly, October*, and elsewhere. Sia's work at its core challenges genre. Working across mediums, her multidisciplinary practice materializes across multiple forms, including films, video sculptures, artist books, scholarly essays, and more. Her work blends nonfiction with poetics and theoretical inquiry, and her visual explorations confront questions about the representation of place and memory. Throughout, the artist and filmmaker's ongoing conceptual focus remains within the struggle to represent historical time, geography, and the limits of official records.

Ed Halter

is a writer and curator living in Brooklyn, where he runs Light Industry, a venue for cinema in all its forms. He has taught at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York since 2005.

Matthew Lawson Garrett

is a curator, writer, and artist based in New York.

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