

FILM COMMENT

Interview: Tiffany Sia on *On and Off-Screen Imaginaries*

By Catherine Quan Damman (/author/catherinequandamman/) on March 18, 2024

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Image from *On and Off-Screen Imaginaries* by Tiffany Sia (Primary Information, 2024)

In her first book of essays, *On and Off-Screen Imaginaries*, artist, filmmaker, and writer Tiffany Sia brings together her enduring preoccupations: stubborn visual imaginaries of the Cold War, Hong Kong as it is both experienced from within and mythified from without, and cinema's role in all of this. The book's six essays, several of which previously appeared in other contexts, are joined together by a propulsive logic that brings the reader from Sia's sharp analyses of works by the Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers collective, Chan Tze-woon, An-My Lê, and others to her refutation of "visibility" as a political goal (first presented as a talk at a symposium on Asian-American art and aesthetics) to her drives along the misty highways of Taiwan while making her 2023 film *The Sojourn*, and her confrontations with her family history and professional milieu. Throughout, Sia writes from her own position as someone born in Hong Kong who left, returned, and left again.

Though her work has often been conscripted as a ready-made surrogate for the Hong Kong diasporic experience tout court, both her films and writing belie such easy symbolism, choosing instead to approach the vexed special administrative region as a scrim through which to view, however obliquely, the choke holds of Cold War history and the ongoing, jagged lurches of anti-colonial political struggle. Ghosts and specters appear and recede throughout the text—apparitions that are, for Sia, "akin to exilic figures," out of time and out of sync. In the screen-based works she draws together, faces are blurred, and mists intrude, evoking "[a] vision of ordinary life in Hong Kong—defined by forgetting, redacting, and obscuring."

I spoke with Sia about political disappointment, books as open secrets, and, in her words, "the ghostly presence of history ... spectral shapes that are both personal and highly impersonal, and don't just belong to me but to a collective haunting." This conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Present in the book, but certainly not central to it, is your own artistic practice. Equally, if not more often, you're writing about others' work.

In the second and third essays—on Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers and Chan Tze-woon's *Blue Island* (2022), respectively—I was interested in using an artist-on-artist format, to make some critical interventions around works I didn't think were being dealt with thoroughly in terms of the full stakes of their formal gestures, or their narrative decisions. These films are often talked about in this over-sensationalized way, that they were banned. But that's not helpful. I desired to think through them not only with an understanding of Hong Kong history and cinema, but also as models of 21st-century practices with the camera in the context of a surveillance state. In criticism there's not enough of that embodied approach—analyzing the way the camera exists in the world, the way one moves with the camera, and the way the camera interacts with others.

You connect your own experiences in Hong Kong to a wide array of thinking about diaspora, exile and self-exile, the legacies of the Cold War, and anti-colonial thought: Jonas Mekas on “small countries,” Edward Said on Palestine, James Baldwin on a lover in Hong Kong, the history of Vietnam. How does Hong Kong relate to these other sites and places, actual and imagined?

It's interesting, the people you pulled out. I'm trying also to summon the more inconvenient figures: Edward Snowden in the Mira Hotel in Laura Poitras's documentary [*CITIZENFOUR*], and the design-studies scholars who write about the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation and corporate logos. I was trying to contend with the complexity of post-colonial discourse vis-à-vis Hong Kong, which is often an awkward example within the discussion globally about post-colonial struggle. It was until very recently a British colony, and among certain people there is even a kind of nostalgia for British colonialism, which doesn't fit into discourses around post-colonial revolution. My point is to try and face head-on some of these paradoxes, not be tempted to smooth out history's lumpiness.

Hong Kong, for me, is “method” because it happens to be the place I'm from and the place that introduced me to cinema in some ways. So that is my milieu, but I relate to the Arab scholar Fadi A. Bardawil, who says that the deadlock of post-colonial revolution is that you're caught in between imperial democrats and authoritarian nationalists. Those lessons are alive for me—and for all of us in many ways, especially towards Palestine now—when we try to conceive of the century we're in. A lot of it is trying to think about, and not avoid, the unresolved questions of Hong Kong among other “elsewhere” sites in the Cold War and the histories of decolonization from the British Empire.

The book is recursive in its preoccupation with generations. There's a feeling of failure, that the political ambitions of decades ago have not been achieved, and that therefore a younger generation must inherit both the consequences and the ongoing struggle. This is also made explicit in your writing about your own family history.

I struggle with disclosure, and I don't love writing about myself. But sometimes it is the easiest and the fastest way to deliver a sense of scale to big events through telling the quotidian, and also to illustrate a sense of urgency and the stakes of personal sacrifice. It also shows clearly why I'm interested in history in the first place; these family stories are not so easily absorbed into the standard retelling of that period, and many of these stories offered up are inconvenient to national, or even geopolitical, narratives. I'm interested in inconvenience, and less in the moment of political becoming than in the unresolved

aftermath—the moments of fissure, of disenchantment. Those offer more honest questions than the romanticization of revolutionary ideals. Attending to that is an attempt to resist any kind of calcified disenchantment that leads to a reactionary politics.

Can we talk about the book as an object? It's conveniently pocket-sized, something to be held in one's hand, to be carried around. It's also completely monochrome, with film stills—both from your work and others'—interspersed throughout and captioned in a recto-verso format, rendering the fore edge with a cinematic quality of alternating "frames" of blacks and whites. How did you and Bryce Wilner, the designer, think about the book's look and feel? And how much were you influenced by your experience making artist books likes *Salty Wet* 咸濕 (Inpatient Press, 2019) and *Too Salty Too Wet* 更咸更濕 (Speculative Place Press, 2021)?

Salty Wet began as a film treatment. I never ended up making the film, but I had sent the treatment to Adam Khalil after working with him and Bayley [Sweitzer] as a producer on their film *Empty Metal* (2018). I'm trying to summon cinema by other means—it's montage. In the same way that montage attempts to create some sort of memory, the image and text are not perfectly aligned, but are meant to play into that kind of recall of image or of a description you read 10 pages before. It's important to experience the book from beginning to end, because, with the help of Bryce, it is constructed to vivify this "cinema by other means"—a kind of offering to Pavle Levi [author of *Cinema by Other Means*].

There's a delay; the act of making such a personal work is very different from making a film, where we get to watch the finished product together in a setting with the audience. Writing and publishing is such a staggered experience. It's important that the book be small because I want it to fit into a pocket; I want it to feel like an open secret, a quality I really like in certain books about politics. It's not something where you're locked into a coffee table to experience it. I really want to see someone read it on the subway. That's a dream of mine.

I'm sure you will! Writing is lonely, but in the book there's a real sense that all the work, at least in some ways, takes place in conversation and in community with other people—at screenings, at conferences, in cars, over dinner—which I appreciated. Not the singular auteur, but a collective encounter.

I'm glad that came through. Some members of that community are no longer living—Said is a very important one. A book about any kind of imaginary—and its powerful consequences—wouldn't exist without *Orientalism* (1978). What I wish for the book, even though it speaks about a historical context specific to Hong Kong, is that it rhymes with other places. My suspicion about why Hong Kong is so contentious within historical struggles is that it reminds us more of a place like New York City than we're comfortable with—living the paradox of sublimated settler-colonial histories in major global financial capitals; making sense of political collectivity in cities that have been a first port of asylum for refugees and exiles. There's not a perfect alignment, but there is an echoing. What does it mean to think about a post-colonial struggle when we're diasporic subjects in New York? That kind of friction is exactly what's so alive to me about using Hong Kong as a method and a comparative milieu.

These essays are my best attempt at presenting someone with a sense of gratitude for their work. I used to run a residency called Speculative Place, and it was funded by day jobs between myself and my husband. That was all about living together. Writing this way feels like a very natural way to enact that kind of

togetherness on the page. It's ironic: the book is about the illusive place of togetherness and the loss of it.

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