

Fiona  
Tan

With the  
other  
hand

*Reader*

Edited by Gilda Williams

snoeck

brilliantly understands how to deconstruct and polyperspectively resolve stereotypes of perception and narrative.

We are very grateful to Gilda Williams who, as editor, has been responsible for selecting and editing the texts, while also contributing an insightful introduction. This reader is a pioneering feat and a major contribution to understanding one of the most prominent practitioners of contemporary art.

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# Gilda Williams Open Letters: Writings by and about Fiona Tan

Saskia Bos: *When [while making your films] do you write your texts?*  
Fiona Tan: *Before, during and after.*

Rarely do we encounter a visual artist whose work is as rooted in language as Fiona Tan's. As this Reader celebrates, her nearly thirty-year span of art-making has attracted some of the finest art-writers of her generation, and is moreover regularly associated with eminent literature. In her art and writings Tan often takes inspiration from literary sources, from W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* (1995) to Ariosto's epic poem *Orlando Furioso* (1516–32). David Campany associates the artist with T. S. Eliot, linking Tan's extraordinary fusion of antithetical media (moving and still image) with the poet's 'collisions of almost-opposites'. Jorge Luis Borges and Italo Calvino are repeatedly cited; Stéphane Carrayrou's essay notes how Borges' magical experiments in overlapping past, present and future – as Calvino discusses in his *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (1988) – centre on 'a growing and bewildering network of diverging, converging and parallel times', comparable to Tan's multi-temporal artworks.<sup>1</sup> Often drawn from distant times and places, her art nonetheless belongs resolutely to the here-and-now, embedded by the artist's hand in present-day debates and technologies.

This Reader pays special attention to Fiona Tan's own texts, across the variety of formats she inhabits: research, scripts, diary entries, statements of intent, cultural theory. Just as Tan's camera imitates varied gazes – that of tourist, observer or

researcher, as Sabine Maria Schmidt importantly notes – the artist's writing adopts multiple tones. What unites all her texts, however, is Tan's consistently uncluttered, honest and probing written voice. 'There are two works', the artist writes in 2005. 'The one in my head, or in my desires, and the one it will become.'<sup>2</sup> If the major retrospective that coincides with the publication of this Reader exhibits Tan's finished artworks 'as they became', this volume is the expression of that earlier artwork: the one composed of the artist's thoughts and desires.

In her writing Tan proves an indefatigable researcher, forever tracking down her subjects in the depths of dusty libraries, secretive museums, bottomless archives. Research-writing in her hands becomes a hybrid and highly pleasurable genre, a cross between fact-finding and personal discovery which (as Lynne Cooke describes) 'erodes the boundaries normally drawn between so-called amateur observation and "scientific" recording'. Her investigation into Théodore Géricault's *Portraits of the Insane* (c. 1819–24) in the essay '10 Madnesses' (2018), for example, combines 'straight' factual research with personal reflections on the French artist's painted-yet-living subjects; Tan sensitively notes how Géricault somehow 'caught their loss-ness ... which slips past and away from any easy grasp'. At times Tan's research is spoken by characters in the voice-over, such as Hiroshi's explanation in *Ascent* (2016) of how images of Mount Fuji were exploited during World War II by both Japan and the US to induce feelings of patriotism and longing among homesick soldiers. Voice-overs sometimes conceal a sly humour: at the close of the (male) Architect's self-aggrandising step-by-step account of his working process in 'Folly One' (2010), the Female Commentator describes the finale as the 'stage of shameless megalomania'.

At times the tone is work-a-day and diaristic, at others the words are filled with wonder. Sometimes her texts unwittingly reveal distant origins for later artworks; Tan's accidental discovery of Rembrandt's third, unsung daughter Cornelia van Rijn

during her investigations for *Provenance* (2008) became the springboard for the subsequent work *Nellie* (2013). Tan moreover proves an insightful theorist; in 'Women in Storage' (2019) she brilliantly captures the paradox at the heart of Agfa's archive of 1950s commercial photography:

*A woman in the '50s was said to have only two questions in life: What shall I wear? and What shall I cook? But the reality of daily life across much of Europe [...] was that there was nothing to wear and no food to cook.*

Tan plainly loves to tell a good story. In *Ascent* she shares the tale of the lovesick Japanese Emperor enamoured of a beautiful but fleeting moon goddess. With *Depot* (2015) she recalls Voltaire's *Micromégas* (1752), a myth centring on two colossal space-travellers who, having glimpsed only a portion of ocean on a visit to our planet, determine that Earth is inhabited solely by 'tiny' whales. Often Tan recounts the true stories of forgotten but inspiring historical figures whom she encounters in her investigations. In '10 Madnesses' the artist introduces readers at length to Jean-Baptiste Pussin (and his wife Marguerite), the warden and former inmate who unchained asylum inmates and initiated humane psychiatric care in the late eighteenth century. In 'Women in Storage' Tan tells of Shirley Polykoff, the talented but overlooked female advertising copyeditor and real-life inspiration for Peggy Olson's character in TV's *Mad Men* (2007–15). We sense the artist's desire to bring broader attention to their valuable yet neglected lives, generously loaning the space of her texts to pay them due homage.

Above all Fiona Tan's writings reveal an ongoing process of ethical self-scrutiny. She explores systematically her fascination with the young Balinese boys puffing on a cigarette in *Smoke Screen* (1997), meticulously putting into words their complicated – and potentially problematic – attraction for her. In examining her ambiguous curiosity with these images, Tan is recognising the delicate balance she must tread in order to avoid retracing

the voyeuristic paths of the long-ago colonisers who originally took this footage. How can Tan revisit pictures without re-inhabiting an exploitative gaze? This crucial 'moral dilemma', as defined by Cooke, is broached by numerous critics (including Godfrey, Monk, Chan and Gioni): how to avoid trespassing on the photographic lives of distant strangers, the subjects of Tan's art? She responds with gratitude towards them, for example describing an image appearing in *Vox Populi Norway's* family snapshots as 'a lovely gift'. 'I feel that I owe this much, at least, to these anonymous individuals and to my own artistic integrity', she writes, explaining her copious research into the lives of the unfortunates depicted in Géricault's *Portraits of the Insane*, in '10 Madnesses'. Surfacing again and again in her written words is Tan's abiding feelings of indebtedness towards all her subjects.

*With the other hand* gathers three kinds of art-writing clustering around Fiona Tan's art: firstly, the artist's own voice ('Artist's Texts') and secondly, commissioned essays ('Critical Overviews'). The final section ('Writings around Selected Works') draws together the artist's words alongside initial commentary and, on occasion, its critical reception in the form of exhibition reviews – the third art-writing type here. This work-by-work discussion of selected artworks from multiple perspectives reflects the project-based progression of Tan's artistic life. Critical essays can provide much-needed context, such as Joel Snyder on the American incarceration catastrophe behind *Correction* (2004); or Adelina Vlas' detailed account of Sir John Soane's life and collection at the heart of *Inventory* (2012). Others embed Tan within broad art-historical contexts, for example Mark Godfrey's discussion of portraiture's perpetual capacity to renew itself, as articulated by art historian Benjamin Buchloh, in analysing the 200 Berlin-based portraits that comprise *Countenance* (2002). Still others analyse Tan in relation to film theory; Thomas Elsaesser recalls Gilles Deleuze's discussion around the agency of the human face in relation to Tan's *Facing Forward* (1999). Okwui Enwezor contextualises Tan's work within Homi Bhabha's

postcolonial framework which asks that we now favour the archive, over tradition, when addressing the cultural past. A commonly recurring – and, arguably, overused – soundbite is Fiona Tan's self-description as a 'professional foreigner': an evocative early interview comment that has perhaps adhered excessively to her. Better summaries of the artist have since been articulated, such as Massimiliano Gioni's encapsulation of Tan as an 'untiring cataloguer of gazes'.

While some writers pin Tan's work to notions of physical space, such as Doris von Drathen's discussion of 'exile' in the work *Island* (2008), it seems to me the richest and most frequent topic is *time*. Tan herself reflects continuously on time: the way it lasts forever in Chantal Akerman's films; the way a moving projection of still photography arrests time; the inherent short lifespan of digital data.<sup>3</sup> Many note how time seems to slow in her art, from 'the unhurried slowness with which [Tan] looks at people' (Frankel) to the lingering gaze Vlas describes in *Inventory*, whose images of the ageing Soane House Museum's peeling paint and cracked windows draw attention to time's relentless passing. For Adrian Searle, Tan's revisitations of old imagery suspend the viewer in an impossible and even supernatural time, staging a ghostly 'encounter with the dead'. Brian Dillon describes the multi-styled Brighton Pavilion in *A Lapse of Memory* as a 'time machine', while Christophe Gallois considers how *The Changing's* timeless young women exist 'beyond Barthes' "that-has-been" to assert that the image is never frozen in time'. Taken together these writers articulate the 'staggering network of diverging, converging and parallel times' (Borges, cited by Calvino) that consistently marks Tan's complex art-making, as Carrayrou wisely recalls.

Perhaps Tan has attracted such high-quality writing because of her own palpable appreciation for language. She seems actively to cultivate relationships with words: some she loves (the Dutch word *sinaasappel*); others she resists (the English term 'medium'); still others need defending ('For me there is nothing

derogatory in the word “study”<sup>4</sup>). Critics have commented on Tan’s careful attention to language; Midori Matsui notes the telling repetition of the pejorative ‘savages’ in *Disorient* (2009), taken from Marco Polo’s 1298 travelogue. Tan is a skilful inventor of similes – ‘The film screen is a like an empty bowl’; ‘Memory is a fold in the fabric of time’<sup>5</sup> – and her commentators similarly display some exquisite word-smithing. Enwezor describes the character of Henry in *A Lapse of Memory* (2007), ceaselessly wandering the empty Brighton Pavilion, as occupying ‘the iron cage of his failing memory’, while Denis Gielen imagines a beached whale – mountainous in scale, stubbornly immovable – as ‘a landscape’.

Writers often evoke senses other than the solely visual, from Hettie Judah’s ‘smell of tar [that] smacks of the harbour side’ accompanying the marine ropes suspended in *Circular Ruins* (2019), to Juliana Engberg’s description of maritime Venetian sounds ‘that roll like a tide around the walls’ and suitably accompany her canal-side viewing of *Disorient*. Reviews can feature powerful visual descriptions – perhaps because aimed at readers who may not have seen the art – such as Laura Cumming’s detailed roll call of *Depot*’s watery onscreen imagery:

*Fish, eyeless and lacquered, vector forward like spiky bronze dragons; seahorses ride high in their glass vitrines; nameless serpentine forms turn gold in the museum light.*

I note two special formats that recur in this Reader: lists and letters. Tan has recognised in her attachment to list-making a desire for order – despite the corresponding recognition that even compulsive list-making will never counter the world’s prevailing chaos. Many of Tan’s most admired figures are con-summate list-makers and cataloguers: Umberto Eco, Paul Otlet, August Sander, Aby Warburg. Lists join people and things together without judgement, allowing relationships to be forged unremarked. *Depot* lists all the marine species that begin with the word ‘sea’, producing a wave-like rhythm: ‘sea star,

sea lily, sea cucumber ...’. The long list of supplies needed to climb Mount Fuji spoken in *Ascent*’s voice-over reflects the climber’s respectful preparation when approaching that majestic mountain.

The other crucial format is epistolary writing. Opening this Reader is the exploratory letter she pens to writer and artist John Berger which set off an engaged, and eventually quite affectionate, conversation. The chapter comprising the artist’s texts begins with her published 1986 letter to Chantal Akerman: a letter about letter-writing. Philip Monk takes advantage of the letter-writing format to ask open-ended questions, and consider varying types of ‘correspondence’ – from conversing on paper, to forming personal connections with images.

All Tan’s writings are perhaps like open letters, addressed to her audience and laying bare her sources, methods, hopes, worries, heroes, perplexities and even doubts – ‘put[ting] her own gaze on show’, as Gioni writes. ‘Framing is a choice, an act of selective reality’ she ‘confesses’ to her readers,<sup>6</sup> and Tan repeats throughout the Reader that she wants viewers to become aware of art’s artifice: the text-and-image’s inherent manipulation. Fiona Tan’s writings offer a site, parallel to her visual art, where this essential admission is candidly and emphatically made.