

HOW CONTEMPORARY IMAGES SHAPE THOUGHT

Art in Mind

ERNST VAN ALPHEN



{ THE PASSING OF IMAGES }

The entanglement of memory and imagination in relation to images is one of the central themes of Fiona Tan's video *Linnaeus' Flower Clock* from 1998. The video opens with a list of names of flowers and the times of the day when they open and close. There is a flower for each hour of the day, which together forms a complete clock cycle. However, these images do not suggest a cyclical conception of life but, rather, suggest, in the words of Rilke that are quoted at the end of the video, these things "live by dying." This idea is strongly conveyed by high-speed footage of flowering poppies, in which we see the buds open then close within a period of a few seconds. This footage is repeated several times in the video. The flowering poppies do not suggest the idea that passing is passing away but, rather, that passing away is just passing.

The work alternates between video images and short texts, which are written on a black screen. One text, shown after the images of the poppies, suggests an allegorical reading of them: "The passing of these pictures is part of their nature." The poppies become an organic metaphor for the life span of images. According to this allegorical reading, it is impossible mentally to hold on to images, for as they pass through our minds, they appear and disappear, bloom and fade just like flowers.

Other footage suggests, however, that the repetition of images is not passive but a highly active and creative act. Several times we see archival footage of young men diving from a diving board. We then see new footage of Tan herself diving like the boys but with her head facing backward rather than forward. This striking juxtaposition of obviously old and new footage emphasizes Tan's act of placing herself in the image. Like Alice in Wonderland she has found ac-

cess to an imaginary world. She appropriates the old images into her present. But in order to do so she must face backward, her backward gaze leading these old images into the present world.

Images of far away worlds, or events that happened long ago, are not placed at a distance. On the contrary, images of these worlds or events are presented as passing, as appearing and disappearing in the present. This implies that acts of memory and imagination are no longer seen as directed into opposite directions, the first to the past, the second to the future. They are both seen as “passing images.” Memory can even be thought of as taking place in the future, directed toward the present. This entanglement of memory and imagination is elaborated specifically in relation to images. It is articulated in *Linnaeus’ Flower Clock* as follows: “I try to imagine what I will remember in 30 years.” And even more puzzling: “I try to remember what I will imagine in 30 years.” *Linnaeus’ Flower Clock* can be seen as a visual reflection on how we depend on images for building and living our reality.

When I say image, I especially mean the photographic and filmic image. For it is primarily since the invention of photography and film that the image has developed a specific, epistemological function. Until that moment, paintings and drawings had more typically functioned as instructive models, as idealizing models, or as objects of wonder. Photographic and filmic images, in contrast, quickly came to function as epistemological tools to get to know reality. That is why collecting images in the form of photo or film archives is a way of collecting the world.

This vision of photography and film as purveyors of “truth” about reality has become so dominant that today it underlies any commonplace thought about the image. In *Linnaeus’ Flower Clock*, but also in her other works, Tan exposes this historical “picture” of the image and does everything to challenge it. She visually argues that images are not built of reality but that we build our own reality with images. This reversal entails that image and reality are not self-contained. On the contrary, in Tan’s work the image is consistently represented as relational. In her documentary *Kingdom of Shadows*, she articulates this as follows: “An image does not exist without eyes that look at it. Thus the act of looking is the act of creating.” This remark can be seen as a starting point for all of her works. But in each work she develops it in different directions, probing different functions of the image and different ways of relating to the image.

An important theme in Tan’s work, for instance, is the relationship between image and (especially cultural) identity. Tan problematizes the fixity of cultural identity. Herself a migrant, she was born in Indonesia, the daughter of a Chinese-Indonesian father and an Australian mother. She spent her childhood and adolescence in Australia but left for Europe at the age of eighteen to study there.

She now lives in Amsterdam. In her documentary made for Dutch public television, *May You Live in Interesting Times* (1997), she undertook a search for her own cultural background and identity, which led her to Australia, Indonesia, Germany, the Netherlands, Hong Kong, and China.

At first sight, the epistemological pursuit of “getting to know her cultural identity” predominates in Tan’s documentary. In this respect, it is comparable to the novel of her American namesake Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), in which the narrator tries to get to know her cultural background by focusing on her mother’s Chinese identity. In Amy Tan’s novel and in Fiona Tan’s documentary the narrators wish to know and convey their cultural identities. They do this through tracing themselves back to their histories, to the older generations in their families, and to their homelands. In these cases, time and place are homogeneously interwoven: facing backward means looking for the homeland, and vice versa.

But on closer inspection, Tan’s search for her cultural identity is less straightforward than it appears. The documentary takes frequent recourse to different types of representations that expose the contrived nature of the history into which she dives for her search. She collates representations, such as photographs of family members, extracts read from her diary, and shots of a video monitor replaying footage that we just saw as part of the reportage. This introduces a self-reflexivity into her documentary that foregrounds the issue of the relationship between representation and (cultural) identity. It suggests that people also derive their identity from images. This is one of the reasons why people cherish certain images. In one way or another they conceive themselves by means of a cherished image.

Images are, thus, no longer assigned an epistemic role but a formative one. This different attitude toward the relationship between representation and cultural identity can also be recognized in a considerable number of allegedly autobiographical texts by migrants. For instance, Maxine Hong Kingston’s autobiographical novel *The Woman Warrior* (1976) stages a heroine who struggles with the problem of understanding neither the Chinese culture of her parents nor the American culture in which she lives. Her problem is that she does not feel a part of any world or cultural identity, let alone one that could be represented, adequately or not. By means of her narrative she attempts to create continuity with the cultures among which she is living. Hence, in this case the issue is not the truthfulness or plausibility of the autobiographical narrative but, rather, its performative effectivity.

Hong Kingston’s text seems to exemplify the postmodern view of the relation between representation and reality. In the first place, this text is formally postmodern in that it uses postmodern devices: It draws attention to its fictive and

linguistic nature, it represents multiple realities in juxtaposition, it flaunts intertextual allusions, and the narrator conspicuously draws attention to her manipulative interventions in a self-reflexive manner. Hong Kingston's text loses the realism and historical accuracy expected in an autobiography and becomes emphatically fictional.

Anthropologist Michael M. J. Fisher has formulated valuable hypotheses for understanding these postmodern autobiographical texts by migrants (1986). According to Fisher, these texts yield the following conceptions of cultural ethnicity. First of all, ethnicity is not found, transmitted, or taught, but each individual and each generation must invent and interpret it anew. Second, there is no archetype or "role model" of, for example, a Chinese-American or a Chinese-Australian-Dutch. The issue is to create a voice or style that does not do violence to the varied cultural components of which the self consists. Third, the search for ethnic identity, including the part played therein by memory, is future-oriented. Just like a performative speech act, (cultural) ethnicity should not be judged in terms of accuracy, completeness, or plausibility regarding the past but, rather, in terms of how successful, how livable it is. Components of the cultural past, such as stories transmitted by a father or mother, are often being used for the construction of ethnic identity, but they do not compose it.

This postmodern or constructivist notion of cultural identity short-circuits the straightforward relationship between time and space and, hence, radically questions the meaning of place. The homeland is no longer necessarily located in the past. And when it becomes located in the future, it is not necessarily as the destiny of the migrant's route but more as a narrative component, which can, or perhaps has to be, integrated into the migrant's notion of self.

Ultimately, Tan's documentary *May You Live* also comes to this conclusion. In it she declares the following: "It started off as a search, now it feels as if I'm constantly in search of my search." It is at that moment that the shots in which we see her looking at the footage shot by herself, receive deeper significance. It is in the image that she is able to search for her search and thus expose history on the personal level. Her film does not document her search for identity. Rather, her making of the film constitutes the search from which she derives her identity.

Tan's challenge to the epistemological role of the image does not stop at emphasizing its constitutive role in cultural identity. Tan's videos and films also complicate the relation between image and viewer by drawing our attention to the context of each of them—in terms of institutions as well as a specific place and time. Tan foregrounds time and place by means of her choice and sequencing of images. She often uses archival footage, which references the filmic discourse of the traveler and the ethnographer. She chooses footage that connotes moments from faraway places and cultures. It consists of the filmic discourse of

the traveler and the ethnographer. This material is emphatically old, not only because of its discursive framing but also because the visual qualities of the footage itself foregrounds a sense of pastness. This effect is further emphasized by the fact that the old footage is juxtaposed to new, often self-reflexive, filmic material. We see shots of an iris, of a cameraman, and sometimes of Tan herself. These kinds of images instill a reflexive awareness of the operations of the camera.

All of Tan's videos and films reflect on how different media function as agents that create specific relationships between the viewer and the image. In his essay on Tan, Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen puts it as follows: "The query 'Who am I' can never be answered without considering who is asking it, when and in which medium, and who is looking on" (2000, 161). But in contrast with the central subject in Tan's documentary *May You Live in Interesting Times*, the subjects in her videos who are looking, filming, and selecting old footage do not need to be read as actual migrants. The central agents in her videos can be seen as the focalizing subjects who are endemic to images and texts, in any medium.

Her works, then, offer a kind of metadiscourse on the nature of the image and the question of which aspects of the medium are defining for the image. Whereas in conventional film the subject of the gaze is usually invisible, Tan foregrounds the role and place of the subject of the gaze. Although her artistic work is not "about" migrancy or migrant identity, I will argue that migrancy remains an important issue for that work. However, it is no longer the life and identity of the migrant that she explores in her images but the other way around: she explores the life and identity of images through the notion of migrancy. So, in order to better understand her assessment of the image, I first reflect on migrancy.

{ VIRTUAL MIGRANCY }

Massive migration is one of the main features of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. I am not only referring to the end of the last century; as early as the first half of the twentieth century, enormous numbers of people had left their homelands for economic or political reasons. The patterns of migration have not always flowed from the same places to the same destinations. Migration has been an ongoing global phenomenon in this past century. One effect of this massive migration is that it is becoming more and more impossible to map cultures onto places. In the past, it was taken for granted that nation-states embodied cultures. This was never really, in fact, the case but, rather, an ideological belief that functioned as a legitimation of the nineteenth-century project of nation building. Nevertheless, that belief has led to the still-current assumption that

when you visit the Netherlands, you experience a homogeneous culture, namely, Dutch culture. And when you visit China, you are immersed into Chinese culture.

Of course, there are many historical examples of cultures that do not follow this easy rule of mapping cultures onto places, namely, nation-states. The borders of nation-states are often arbitrary, and certain cultures can end up in two or three different nations. The Kurds and the Armenians are obvious examples. More often than not, such situations—of cultures that cannot be mapped onto a nation—have led to long-lasting and violent political conflicts. It is precisely these conflicts that confirm the notion that cultures “want” to be mapped onto nations: if such mapping does not occur, then it becomes a political goal.

Currently, however, the situation seems to have changed more radically. It becomes more and more difficult to see peoples or cultures as identifiable spots on a map. Because of migrations that have been ongoing, in multiple directions throughout the past century, there are practically no places left in the world that are not hybrid in terms of culture. This cultural hybridity is not only the result of a literal bodily migration of people but also of a general cultural condition, a phenomenon that has been called “virtual migrancy.”¹

Even those peoples who have never migrated—peoples who have lived for centuries in the same location, in the same homogenous community—do not live in the same “local” culture as before because of radio, television, film, and the Internet. Through those media, capitalism has reached nearly every community in the world, and even in the most faraway places televisions and computers can be found. James Clifford describes the result of this for people who have never traveled and who still live in their traditional community as follows: “They do watch TV; they have a local/global sense; they do contradict the anthropologist’s typifications; and they don’t simply enact a culture” (1997, 28). The result of this virtual migrancy is, of course, not exactly the same as the result of real migration. Virtual migrancy complicates a person’s culture. It creates cultures “within,” which ultimately also leads to a hybridization of culture in general. And it is this transformation of a culture that was once experienced as stable and homogeneous into a culture of virtual migrants, which changes the relationship to place. In the words of Gupta and Ferguson: “In this sense, it is not only the displaced who experience a displacement. For even people remaining in familiar and ancestral places find the nature of their relation to place and the culture broken” (1992, 10). In this respect, the effects of migrancy, virtual or not, imply that place has been radically disconnected from culture.²

The relationship between place and culture has become one of disconnection, displacement, and incommensurability. But one can wonder whether this disconnection results in the redundancy of the notion of cultural identity. Does

the cultural state of migrancy mean that, in the constitution of a (virtual) migrant's identity, place has become an irrelevant category because the only place that now exists is the global world? In other words, do migrants experience their identity as that of a "world citizen"? This would be a naively idealistic or pessimistic conclusion. James Clifford, among others, has convincingly argued that the erosion of such supposedly natural connections between peoples and places has not at all led to the modernist specter of global cultural homogenization or world "citizenship."³

One could even argue that, because of (virtual) migrancy, the relationship between cultural identity and place has become more rather than less crucial. The difference is that "place" no longer has the same meaning in the same sense of the word. We are no longer speaking about geographical place but, rather, about imagined place. As Gupta and Ferguson have it: "The irony of these times, however, is that as actual places and localities become ever more blurred and indeterminate, *ideas* of culturally and ethnically distinct places become perhaps even more salient" (1992, 10). What becomes more obvious in the present situation is that ideas of culturally and ethnically distinct places cannot be conflated with geographic place. The place is imagined rather than real.

But what "imagined" means remains to be specified. For "imagined" is not the same as "imaginary." Imagined places are not fairytale places, they are not just fantasy. In one way or another, imagined places do have a connection with a place that exists geographically. However, the mode in which this geographic place is experienced is ontologically different: geographic place is experienced not through real interaction but, rather, through the imagination. This does not cancel out concrete interactions of a political and economic order, but it does foreground the particular aspects of migrancy that make it an urgent and important object of analysis for the humanities.

A place is somewhere "out there" in the world, whereas an imaged place is an act of the imagination, with a subject responsible for performing this act in relation to a place. This-subject, located in the present, does the imagining. It is very important to realize this, as it has consequences for the status of cultural identity. If the cultural identity of the migrant is shaped in terms of imagined place, it means that this identity was not carried along wholesale from homeland to destination. It is, rather, actively created and re-created in an act of identification with the homeland.

Paul Gilroy argues something similar in *The Black Atlantic*, when he describes the black diaspora as a genealogy that is not based on any direct connection with Africa or foundational appeal to kinship or racial identity. He exposes that historicist view as disempowering. How, then, should we conceive of what black people all over the world, many outside of Africa, share, namely, this history or

“tradition” of slavery and racial subordination? Gilroy uses the term “tradition” for what defines the black Atlantic, but in order to be able to do this he redefines the term:

[Tradition] can be seen to be a process rather than an end, and is used neither to identify a lost past nor to name a culture of compensation that would restore access to it. Here, too, it does not stand in opposition to modernity nor should it conjure up wholesome, pastoral images of Africa that can be contrasted with the corrosive, aphasic power of the post-slave history of the Americas and the extended Caribbean. Tradition can now become a way of conceptualizing the *fragile communicative relationships across time and space* that are the basis *not of diaspora identities but of diaspora identification*. Reformulated thus, [tradition] points not to a common content for diaspora cultures but to evasive qualities that make inter-cultural, trans-national diaspora conversations between them possible. (1993, 276; my emphasis)

In Gilroy’s account the act of identification does not concern a place or a homeland but a history: the history of slavery and racial subordination, which enables conversations between black people transnationally and transculturally. Gilroy rejects Africa as a privileged place. But like my description of migrant identity in relation to imagined space, he stresses the fact that specific acts of identification are what people in diaspora have in common. For him this is even a valid reason to reject the term “identity,” caught up as this term is with the notion of a fixed, pregiven entity instead of an agency or act.

As in Tan’s *May You Live*, it is of crucial importance in Gilroy’s argument that he brackets the importance of Africa as homeland and that he emphasizes the history of slavery and racial subordination as the basis of diaspora identification. For, especially in the case of the black diaspora, it is precisely the shared history that enables subjects to envision political goals. The shared homeland, in contrast, is too abstract, too large, and too diverse to fulfill the function of “Holy Land.”

A qualification is needed here. Although Gilroy’s position is strategically very important for the black diaspora, it does not imply that it can be generalized for all diasporas. The Jewish diaspora is a good example of an experience that resulted in a diaspora identity for which place—the homeland Israel—is as important a component as is the history of racial subordination, pogroms, and the Holocaust. But Israel is built precisely on the problem he formulates. The tragedy of this mapping of a culture onto a nation-state is that the same place, imagined in only partly different tropes, is also the focus of Palestinian diasporic identity.⁴

This difference between diasporas—or difference within the concept of diaspora itself—requires a specific cultural analysis in which the general concept of diaspora and its consequences—cultural hybridity and the subsequent imagined

place—is confronted with cultural utterances that further inflect the forms of experience in which migrancy entangles its subjects.

{ IMAGINING IN CONTEXT }

The conclusion that migrant, and by extension, all cultural identity, is imagined, is also presented as inescapable in Tan's video *Facing Forward*. At first sight, *Facing Forward* does nothing other than face backward. Appropriating from several filmic discourses, *Facing Forward* consists entirely of archival footage of a colonial and ethnographic nature. In weaving fragments from different genres together, the video exposes the heterogeneity of the history each of these genres claim to record. The work opens with footage of a colonial group portrait (fig. 14). We see rows of military officials and civil men, surrounded by their "native" subordinates. They all hold a pose, standing for the camera, to be appropriated visually. The next archival extract belongs to another genre, the ethnographic film. A single line of male tribesmen poses for the camera (fig. 15). The video consists of many extracts from this genre of film, showing natives from a broad variety of "exotic" cultures: Indonesian, Japanese, Chinese, and African cultures. The scientific pretext for this film genre is most explicitly and painfully enacted when the posing natives turn around on request, showing front, back, and both sides of their bodies. A third genre of film Tan inserts into her video is more touristic. Archival footage shows images of an Indonesian city with pedestrians, cyclists, and cars—in short, colonial street life (fig. 16). Nobody poses for the camera; the subjects are shot at random.

The three genres juxtaposed so far all show places and cultures that are far away from Europe. And they are archival: these are places of the past, fragments of history. However, the video also contains footage of a fundamentally different nature. Two times we suddenly see archival footage of a cameraman filming (fig. 17). In relation to the other footage, this footage functions as a countershot, as suture.⁵ But this footage is also historical. As viewers of Tan's films, we are led to identify only partly with the subject position of the cameramen. We, too, are viewing but not necessarily in the same way as they did long ago. The context from which we look is different.

Facing Forward can be seen as a kind of visual archive. The footage is old, and the sequences between the different footage are arbitrary. Together, they do not form a narrative. Modeling her video on the genre of the visual archive, Tan relates her work to an epistemological tool that has an important place in the Western tradition. In his essay, "The Archive without Museums" (1996a), Hal Foster argues that visual archives can consist of any sort of cultural images. Thereby,

14



16



15



17

14 | Fiona Tan, video still (colonial group portrait), *Facing Forward* (1999). Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Paul Andriessse, Amsterdam, and Frith Street Gallery, London.

15 | Fiona Tan, video still (tourist film), *Facing Forward* (1999). Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Paul Andriessse, Amsterdam, and Frith Street Gallery, London.

16 | Fiona Tan, video still (ethnographic film), *Facing Forward* (1999). Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Paul Andriessse, Amsterdam, and Frith Street Gallery, London.

17 | Fiona Tan, video still (cameraman), *Facing Forward* (1999). Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Paul Andriessse, Amsterdam, and Frith Street Gallery, London.

they presuppose a universal viewer-consumer who may be the ultimate descendant of the humanist subject traditionally associated with the Renaissance.

As of that period, in which world travel and discovery became paramount, this subject is positioned in the center of the world and observes the world around it, an illusion Damisch effectively exposes in *The Origin of Perspective*. For this kind of humanist subject, the world is a picture to be observed. Heidegger has said the following about this transformation of the subject in humanism:

The interweaving of these two events, which for the modern age is decisive—that the world is transformed into picture and man into *subiectum*—throws light at the same time on the grounding event of modern history, an event that at first glance seems almost absurd. Namely, the more extensively and the more effectually the world stands at man's disposal as conquered, and the more objectively the object appears, all the more subjectively, i.e., all the more importunately, does the *subiectum* rise up, and all the more impetuously, too, do observation of and teaching about the world change into a doctrine of man, into anthropology. It is no wonder that humanism first arises where the world becomes picture. (1977, 177)

Heidegger claims here that when the world was subjected to, or transformed into a picture, in the same visualizing practice “man” rose up.

Tan inserts herself into this tradition of the visual archive that constitutes humanist subjectivity by analyzing the world as a picture or visual object. She fundamentally undercuts the repercussions of this tradition by including the culturally specific human observing subject into the image. The cultural other is subjected to observation; but the observing self is also included. The footage of the cameraman shooting images of the cultural other is the radical turning point in *Facing Forward*. By inserting these shots, Tan reveals the visual unconscious of the humanist epistemological regime. For, in order to subject the world to observation, the subject itself had to remain in the center and, thus, be invisible.

The idea of a visual unconscious is given poignant, albeit comical, emphasis by the playful “Indian” feathers the white cameraman has stuck on the back of his head. Toying—as in children's play—with empathy, he cannot help “imaging” the infantile impulse in the desire to play Indian, to look like the other that fascinates Western man.

Heidegger sees the discipline of anthropology as emblematic for the humanist visual regime and the notion of subjectivity on which it depends. This explains why Tan's use of archival footage of an ethnographic and colonial nature is effective in its exposure of the history of the humanist subject. This kind of footage is paradigmatic for the notion of the image she wants to challenge and complicate. It is no coincidence that the involvement of Tan-the-artist with

ethnographic visual discourse is mirrored by the recent interest of anthropology in visual art. Indeed, while in the past two decades artists have explored cultural identity, anthropologists have started to model themselves on artists. They began to suffer from “artist envy.” “In the days when anthropology became self-reflexive, the artist became a paragon of formal reflexivity, a self-aware reader of culture understood as text” (Foster 1996b, 180).

James Clifford is one of the main instigators of this envy. The introduction of the textual model into anthropology fundamentally changed the ways anthropologists think about what they do when they “do” observation. Because of this reflection in textuality, the ethnographic text could no longer be written as a third-person text with an external narrator. Observation was no longer seen as a neutral process, but as an interactive one that determined the product or result of observation. In the words of Clifford: “‘Cultures’ do not hold still for their portraits. Attempts to make them do so always involve simplification and exclusion, selection of a temporal focus, the construction of a particular self-other relationship, and the imposition or negation of a power relationship” (1986, 10). This kind of self-reflexive anthropology has transformed the ethnographer-as-authoritative-observer into a person who constructs representations of cultures. But whereas previously the ethnographic project had consisted of observing and visualizing the other, anthropology began to take distance from its implicit visualism and its trust in and reliance on observation. The discourse of observation and visualism was exchanged for a discourse of dialogue and, a bit later, performance.⁶

In relation to Tan’s work, this entails a paradox: when ethnographers started to suffer from artist envy, their envy was not fueled by art’s visuality. On the contrary, that visuality had to be either questioned or ignored. Rather, it was a fascination with art’s constructedness that inspired this envy. It has not led to a reinforcement of anthropology’s implicit visualism but to a radical challenge to the participant-observer tradition. In her critical endorsement of ethnographic material, Tan, in contrast, does not abjure the image. Her work thus “discusses” the foundations of anthropology through visual thought about vision. She does not cast out visuality but uses the image in such a way that the viewer and her context is no longer invisible. A closer look at *Facing Forward* will show the subtle and poetic way in which Tan does this.

In *Facing Forward*, Tan uses two strategies to complicate a naive use of archival footage showing the cultural other. I previously discussed the insertion of so-called countershots, the footage of a cameraman. A second reflexive level is introduced by a voiceover quoting from Italo Calvino’s book *Invisible Cities*.⁷ The voiceover narrates hypothetical conversations between the traveler Marco Polo and the emperor Kublai Khan. The emperor asks his guest whether his under-

standing of his self, the world, and his place within the world is inevitably predicated on his own history. The questions to the traveler Marco Polo are emblematic of the migrant's puzzled way of relating to images or stories of the homeland in the past:

Possibly, in a conversation with Kublai Khan, Marco Polo said: "The more he was lost in unfamiliar quarters of distant cities, the more he understood the other cities he had crossed to arrive there." At this point Kublai Khan interrupted him to ask: "You advance always with your head turned back? Is what you see always behind you? Does your journey take place only in the past?" And Marco Polo explained that what he sought was always something lying ahead, even it was a matter of the past. Arriving at each new city, the travel finds again a past of his he did not know he had: the foreignness of what you no longer are, or no longer possess, lies in wait for you in foreign unpossessed places.

According to this doubly recycled historical figure, past, present, and future no longer form a linear continuity. The past is something that can only be reached in the present or the future. Thus, Tan indicates that the status of places visited in the past is no longer real but by definition imagined.

Places from the past are reenacted in the places where Marco Polo arrives in the present. But the status of places in not only the past has changed; the present and the future are also transformed into screens onto which the imagined places from the past are projected. Hence, even the present receives a constructed, imagined quality. Marco Polo is not only excluded from the past but also from the present. This becomes clear when the voiceover quotes for the second time from Calvino's novel: "By now, from that real or hypothetical past of his, Marco Polo is excluded. He cannot stop; he must go on to another city where another of his pasts awaits him. . . . 'Journeys to relive your past?' was the Khan's question at this point, a question that could also have been formulated: 'Journeys to recover your future?'" Past and future are inextricably entangled within the subject, who relates to the present by imagining past as well as future cities. But in order to imagine past or future cities, Marco Polo becomes dependent on the city where he arrives or dwells in the present. It is within the quality of the present city that the past city is "relived" or "recovered."

This conclusion becomes very concrete at the end of Tan's video when the credit line declares that all of the archival footage comes from the Netherlands Film Museum in Amsterdam (fig. 18) How are we to interpret this credit? Although *Facing Forward* should be seen as a fictional text and not as Tan's autobiographical account of her imagined originating places, it is telling that the past places and cultures we see totally depend on the history of the place where Tan lives now, in the present, namely, Amsterdam. She could not have made this

**Film fragments:
Filmmuseum archives, Amsterdam**

18 | Fiona Tan, video still (credit line), *Facing Forward* (1999). Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Paul Andriessse, Amsterdam, and Frith Street Gallery, London.

work anywhere else. The material collected by the Netherlands Film Museum is mainly Dutch, connected to Dutch history and the Dutch production of film. Thus, it is Dutch colonial history and the special relations the Netherlands maintained in the past with Japan that decisively determines the nature of the places in the past that can be imagined in this video.

Thus, if we see migrant identity as an imagined, identificatory relation to an originating place, the so-called homeland, the historical dimensions of the place where the imagining act actually takes place radically frame the act of imagining homeland identity. The place that is of primary importance to the migrant reliving past places is the place where she resides in the present. When I watch *Facing Forward* I look backward via the present and future-oriented collecting policies of the Netherlands Film Museum in Amsterdam. Ultimately, I only see Amsterdam. And it is in the sight of Amsterdam that past, faraway places await me.

{ SHADOWS ON THE IMAGE }

In Tan's video installation *Saint Sebastian* (2001), the life and identity of the image as understood in terms of migrancy gets yet other ramifications. This time she rethinks the idea that the visual world is objectified in the image. For instance, the so-called objecthood of images is nicely articulated in the expression "to shoot an image." The visual domain is objectified in such a degree that it can be shot. The transformation into an image is performed by means of the aggressive act of shooting. This shooting results in a visual spectacle, an image.

This paradigmatic expression also has its narrative version: the mythical story of Saint Sebastian. Sebastian, living in the third century after Christ, was

an officer in the guard of Roman emperor Diocletianus. When it was discovered that he had converted to Christianity, the emperor ordered that he be executed by bowmen. Pierced with arrows he was left for dead on the Marsfield. But it turned out that he was still alive, and at night a widow, Saint Irene, took care of him. Thanks to her loving care he recovered. When the emperor discovered this, Sebastian was successfully killed, this time by means of sticks. This story has been enormously popular in Western art, in part because the scenario provides an opportunity to turn the male body into a visual spectacle. It is typically the same moment in this narrative that is painted, sculpted, or, in the twentieth century, photographed: the beautiful body of a young man pierced by arrows.⁸ The shooting of arrows has resulted in a visual spectacle. Saint Sebastian's masculinity may be disempowered, but the visual effect of the display of his body in this emasculated condition is more impressive than ever. In the history of art it has become the occasion for displaying the male body as a beautiful image. In the wake of this tradition, in the twentieth century, representations of Saint Sebastian have become an emblem of the attractiveness of the male body in gay subculture. In the story of Saint Sebastian as well as in the expression "to shoot an image," there is significant connection between shooting and looking—that to make a successful shot is physically to touch (e.g., by means of an arrow) the exact spot at which the eye is looking. This contributes to the poignancy of the Saint Sebastian scene, as the pierced body presupposes a number of gazes outside the frame concentrating on the body.

When we take this popular tradition of representations of Saint Sebastian into consideration, Fiona Tan's video installation *Saint Sebastian* is surprising in all respects. First of all, there is no beautiful male body to be gazed at, no Saint Sebastian, and, second, also no male bowmen shooting their arrows into Sebastian's body. Even the scene that has also been used—albeit less frequently—in representing this narrative cannot be recognized: namely, Saint Irene taking care of the wounded body of Saint Sebastian. Instead we see a group of Japanese girls in traditional costume shooting with bow and arrow. The images are shot in a temple in Kyoto, Japan. The girls are involved in a coming-of-age ceremony called the *Toshiya*. The girls have just turned twenty, and they challenge each other in an archery competition. This ceremony is an annual ritual that has been taking place for more than four hundred years. But this anecdotal information is not what the video installation is about.

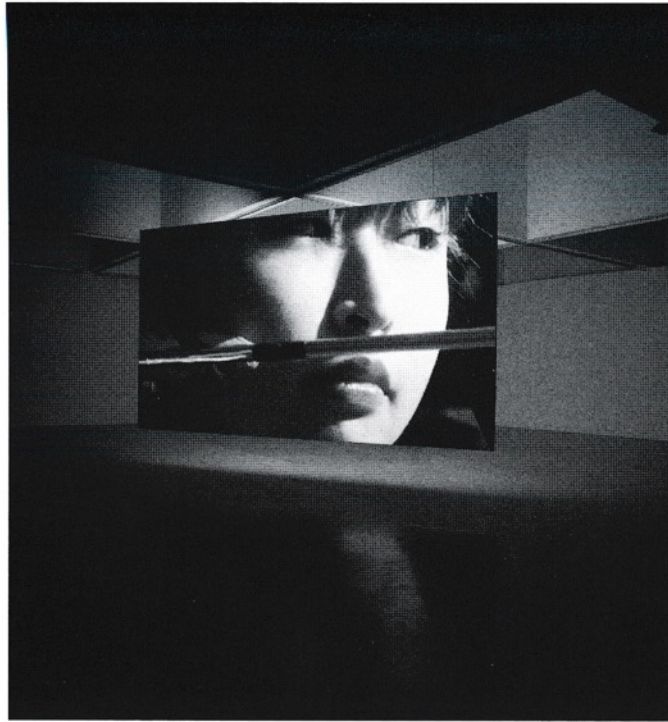
The installation consists of a large screen hanging diagonally in the middle of a gallery space. A different projection is shown on each side of the screen (fig. 19). On one side, we see the Japanese women, mostly obliquely, from behind. We are stimulated to look with them, although we never see the object of their gazes (fig. 20). On the other side of the screen, we see the same women, but this

ered
uted
ut it
re of
this,
has
ides
the
ieth
ws.⁸
nas-
y in
rt it
. In
Se-
gay
oot
nat
he
he
ut-

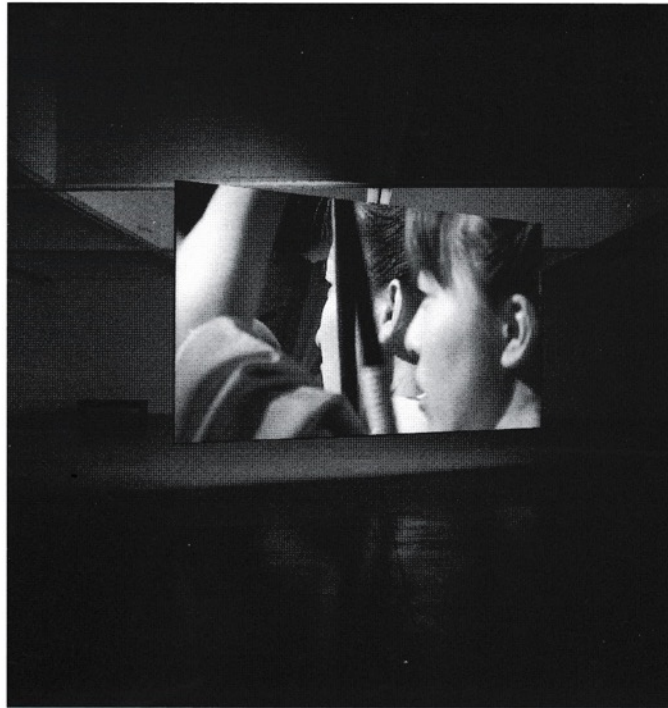
an
in
nt
as-
in
ng
se
ot
y
h
as
a-

e
f.
e
r
s

19



20



19 | Fiona Tan, video still (looking at), *Saint Sebastian* (2001). Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Paul Andriessse, Amsterdam, and Frith Street Gallery, London.

20 | Fiona Tan, video still (looking with), *Saint Sebastian* (2001). Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Paul Andriessse, Amsterdam, and Frith Street Gallery, London.



21



22

21 | Fiona Tan, video still (looking at), *Saint Sebastian* (2001). Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Paul Andriess, Amsterdam, and Frith Street Gallery, London.

22 | Fiona Tan, video still (looking at), *Saint Sebastian* (2001). Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Paul Andriess, Amsterdam, and Frith Street Gallery, London.

time with the image focused more on their faces. Whereas on one side of the screen we look with them, on the other side, we look at them—that is, we see them looking (fig. 21). One could say, then, that the two sides of the screen embody two different viewing positions in relation to the gazes of the women.

Yes, these women are shooting. We see them focusing on an object, but we do not see what they are focusing on, that is, shooting at. They stand in a row. One after another, they prepare themselves for their turn. We see them concentrating, an exertion that takes time. The images only show close-ups: of the upper part of women's bodies, of their faces, their hair, the pins in their hair, of their hands bending the bow and arrow. Although everything we see is extremely beautiful, it is not this beauty alone that strikes the eye. These close-ups emphasize that the concentration with which these women shoot their arrows is not limited to the act as such. They have dressed up with as much concentration as they deploy in their shooting—dress here is another sort of preparation for shooting bow and arrow.

The camera never takes distance from the women. Tan only shows close-ups. By doing this, she aggressively takes distance in yet another way from the tradition of Saint Sebastian representations, in which we always get to see his whole body. There, the viewer is put in a position to examine Saint Sebastian's body in whole or in part. We can visually colonize his body in pain and take pleasure from that. But showing only close-ups, Tan frustrates such a wandering and scrutinizing gaze. By showing only details without the whole, our look is directed away from the women as objectified beings, as beautiful bodies.

But the notion of the objectified image is challenged not only by the images presented to the viewers of Tan's video. It is also implied by the video installation's visual narrative. From the moment when women concentrate on their "shot" until they ultimately shoot and then stand and continue looking, their facial expressions barely change. As a viewer you almost look desperately in their expressions for signs or symptoms of disappointment or joy and victory (fig. 22). Each time, with each respective girl, it is impossible to make out whether it was a successful shot. There is hardly any difference between them: they all respond in the same way. Practically nothing in their faces or gestures indicates whether their shots were successful. It is as if their focusing and shooting had no goal. The success of their shooting does not seem to depend on hitting a specific object.

This suggestion is also strengthened by the sound track. The music iconically represents the tension that characterizes the concentration of the women. But there is never a release in the tension of the sound. It continues, even after the women have shot their arrows. The continuity in sound and facial expression suggests that the way the women look (and shoot) relies on a different paradigm

of vision from the one to which history has accustomed us. The duration of a constant (lack of) expression on their faces suggests that their looking and shooting is not object oriented but is involved in looking as an intransitive activity.

The kind of looking I am referring to has been effectively described by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*, through reflection on the frontal look. He identifies this look in photographs in which someone confronts the viewer frontally. When the same thing happens in film the effect is very different. In film, when the look is directed to the camera, it becomes immediately embedded in the narrative sequence of images, and, thus, part and parcel of the illusionist world of film. In contrast, the frontal photographic look has something of a paradox about it that also applies to Tan's installation.

Barthes describes the nature of this paradox through a recognizable situation from public life. A boy enters a bar and surveys the people present with his eyes. Barthes realizes that the boy's look has rested on him for a few moments. Although the boy looked at him, Barthes is not certain if the boy has actually seen him, however. Here lies a paradox: How can we look without seeing? It is this paradox that confronts us in the photographic look. "One might say that the Photograph separates attention from perception, and yields up only the former, even if it is impossible without the latter; this is the aberrant thing, *noesis* without *noeme*, an action of thought without thought, an aim without a target" (1982, 111). The photographic look is reluctant in the sense that the attention of the look is "held back" by something inner. The look is simply suspended. Although the scopic situation in Tan's video installation has little to do with Barthes's frontal pose, his characterization of the photographic look seems appropriate to the way the women in her video hold back attention to the object of their gazes. This suspension of their gaze displaces our attention onto what is going on in the women—to what I would like to call their "inner vision."

In her documentary *Kingdom of Shadows*, Tan describes this aspect of what I called above her relational definition of the image: "By looking at photographs, my imagination throws its own shadows." The throwing of shadows is an act complementary to the shooting of images because to shoot an image means to expose the object to light. In *Scenario*, a recently published book on her work, Tan quotes a text by Esmā Moukhtar to highlight the complementary nature of the subject and object of the look, in other words of viewer and image.

The meaning of an image always remains behind the scenes. What is in the picture takes its meaning by relying on what happens to the image behind the scenes. Whatever it is that the maker portrays is itself not visible. Behind the visible images is concealed a complex of completely personal interpretations and meanings. Even what the viewer sees and experiences is invisible. The viewer in turn imposes meanings on the image that cannot be

seen by anyone else. What is the image itself and what is our imagination—the image cannot answer that question. (2000, 120–21)

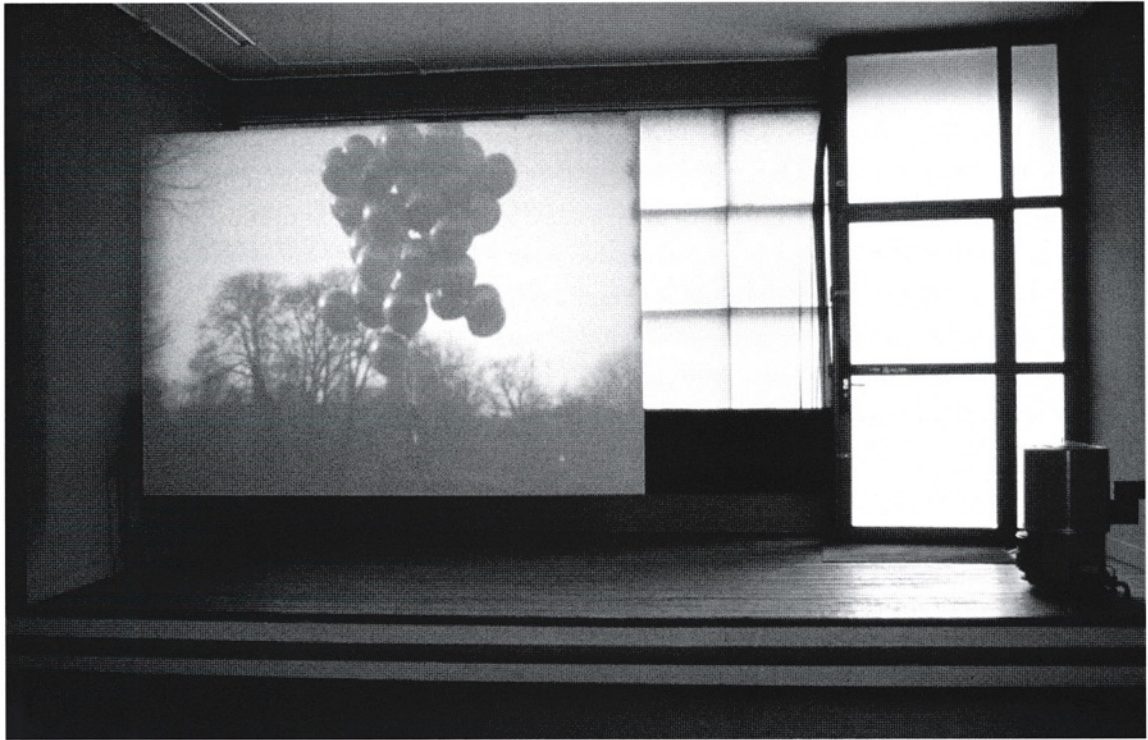
The image is portrayed as the meeting ground of two agents who are themselves invisible. The imagination is invisible not because it is hidden but because it itself has no “substance.” It needs images in order to come into being, to become visible, and to be seen. Yet it cannot be conflated with the image.

It is precisely this distinction between image and imagination (between the shooting of images and the throwing of shadows), which is made visible—in its invisibility—in Tan’s *Saint Sebastian*. The viewer is imbued with the concentrated gazes of the women. Those gazes do not direct us to the object to which the gaze is directed—not just because the object is located outside the frame of the image but also because these gazes endorse their own activity or imaginative quality.

{ IMAGES AWAKENING IMAGES }

The way images stimulate the imaginative dimension of the gaze is explored with yet different results in Tan’s video/film installation *Lift* from the year 2000. This work suggests not only that the gaze throws its shadows on the image but also that different kinds of images evoke the throwing of different kinds of shadows. The installation consists of a video monitor in which we see moving color images of the feet of a person lifted from the ground (fig. 23). In the same space, there is a large projection of a figure lifted from the ground by a large number of big balloons (fig. 24). The images are in black and white. The figure floats against the background of leafless trees and the open sky, whereas the floating legs on the monitor only have solid ground as background. Neither of these images has sound.

The effect on the viewer of the large projection seems to be intensified by the open sky or by the fact that these images show almost no horizon. The viewer is no longer aware of the frame of the image: she is taken in by the image. The lack of sound and the black-and-white nature of the images contribute to the dream-like effect. We have ended up inside a kind of visual vacuum. Strangely enough, our position “inside” the image leads us away from what we see in the images. It reminds us of our fantasies of being able to fly like a bird and of other images we have seen of flying or floating figures, like Winnie the Pooh who was taken into the air by a balloon or the mythical figure of Icarus who flew so high with his artificial wings that the heat of the sun melted the wax used to make them, and he plunged down. Whereas floating in the sky or flying like a bird is perhaps prototypical for the fantasmatic nature of the imagination, images that

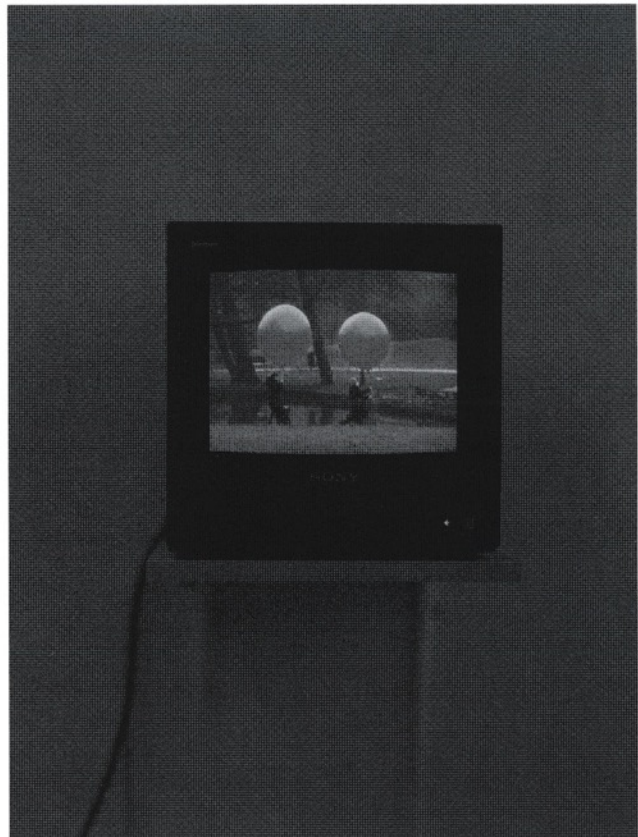


23

23 | Fiona Tan, video still *Lift*
(2000), film and video installation.
Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Paul
Andriess, Amsterdam, and Frith
Street Gallery, London.

24 | Fiona Tan, video still *Lift*
(2000), film and video installation.
Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Paul
Andriess, Amsterdam, and Frith
Street Gallery, London.

24



embody this fantasy seem to cause what they show: the viewer's gaze floats away and the viewer is reminded of past films and images seen.

The footage shown on the monitor has almost the opposite effect. The small format of the monitor and the color of the images stimulate a different kind of gaze. Although we see floating feet, we want to ground them, we want to know how it is possible that these feet are floating. Whereas the large frame of the projection is almost literally liberating because we are absorbed into another dimension, the small frame of the monitor makes us feel excluded from a vision to which we have no access. This does not mean that the shadows thrown by the viewer onto these images is less intense. But the nature of this shadow is qualitatively different: it is epistemological rather than fantastic, outer rather than inner vision.

Another installation, also with the title *Lift*, consists of three stills on three individual monitors. Tan used the same fantasmatic motif of the balloons for these stills. In the first still, we see a child in Western clothing in a park with a very big red balloon. In the second still we see two children, also in Western clothing, again with big red balloons. In the third still, however, we see an Indian boy with a red turban on his head. In his hand he holds something that could be the rope to which a balloon is attached. But the balloon is outside the frame of the still. In this series of images, the red turban seems to have the same function as the red balloons: they evoke the fantastic. However, in the case of the red turban, the domain of the fantasmatic is assigned to the place where it actually occurs: not in the air but in the head, the imagination.

In contrast with the first *Lift* installation, which consists of moving images, this installation consists of still images. The monitors are fixed to the wall like paintings or framed photographs. It is precisely the association with the photographic image that makes us aware of its difference from the still image on a monitor screen. The three stills of *Lift* lack the material substantiality that photographic stills seem to have. It is this lack of substantiality that enhances the fantasmatic quality of these images. And as in the other *Lift* installation, the images evoke in the viewer that which they are about.

{ AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE IMAGE }

For a long time the discipline of anthropology distinguished itself from other disciplines not just by its object but also, especially, by its methodology of so-called participant observation. Ethnographers had to do fieldwork—that is, they had to participate in the “other” culture that they wanted to observe. But this participation in another culture did not imply that they were also part of the ob-

served other. On the contrary, in the descriptions themselves the ethnographer remained invisible.

As argued earlier, Tan's use of archival ethnographic footage, as in *Facing Forward*—as well as in videos or films not discussed in this chapter, such as *Smoke Screen* (1997), *Cradle* (1998), and *Tuareg* (1999)—along her representation of a seemingly ethnographic topic in *Saint Sebastian* is far from arbitrary.⁹ It is highly significant visual thought on the ontology and practice of the image. This kind of footage is paradigmatic for the humanist visual regime, which grasps the world through visualizing it while leaving the subject of vision out of grasp, that is, invisible. The visualization of the other in traditional anthropology is ultimately emblematic for a more general, objectivist conception of vision and the image. Tan adopts ethnographic footage in so many of her works in order to complicate and challenge this limited and imperialistic notion of the image. As if placing it on the other side of the depicted cloud—here, the historical appearance of archival footage—she proposes a different ontology of the image.

But her engagement with anthropology goes further than that. Not only does she use ethnographic footage and topics for her works, but she also practices anthropology by applying the methodology of participant observation. Her observed object is not the cultural other but the medium in which she herself works: the image. This is why works such as *Lift* or *Linnaeus' Flower Clock* can also be seen as a sort of ethnographic film or video. In these works, too, she practices the medium that is at the same time the object of her practice. She positions herself inside the scopic regime that she attempts to understand by showing it. Contradictory as it sounds, one could say that in analogy with anthropology's practice of visualizing the other, Tan visualizes the image.