

Tiffany Sia by Re'al Christian

Tiffany Sia's work unfolds as a continuous scroll weaving between discrete forms of image-making. Her assemblages of archival and firsthand documentation connote a lived past that outstretches the limits of the present imagination. Sia's new book, *On and Off-Screen Imaginaries* (2024), is a collection of six essays that grapple with the unique feeling of estrangement that pervades and embodies the postcolonial experience. Following her 2021 book *Too Salty Too Wet* 更咸更濕, which emerged in the wake of the mass anti-extradition protests that swept Hong Kong in 2019 and 2020, *On and Off-Screen Imaginaries* examines the national security policies, censorship, surveillance, and obfuscated dissent tactics that followed the protests. Sia pits the legacy of the protests against the visual vernacular of Hong Kong cinema and myriad aftermaths of the Cold War, manifesting a transgenerational account of social unrest captured within a broader narrative of diasporic image-making. Within this vernacular, as with Sia's films, the image serves as a proxy, "a reenactment in a place of no return."

Re'al Christian Let's begin with your new book, *On and Off-Screen Imaginaries*, which brings together several cross-temporal events in and beyond Hong Kong. Could you speak about the book and what inspired you to trace this nonlinear trajectory?

Tiffany Sia Thinking and working across text and film, I've been interested in the essay as a form and its shape in different mediums. *On and Off-Screen Imaginaries* is a compendium of six essays, chronologically sequenced in the book by when they were written. Each essay has its own rhythm and pacing, with each distinct in tone along with the form and sets of questions posed. Some are written in first person, others in third person. The first three essays, "Handbook of Feelings," "Phantasms of Dissent," and "Elliptical Returns," surround the topic of new Hong Kong cinema and also catalog an inventory of rumor to tell the chilling effects of the National Security Law on film distribution within and beyond the local.

The latter half of the book abruptly drifts toward other geographies, specifically the US, as I challenge how dominant Asian American aesthetics conceive of a falsely unified imaginary of Asia and its politics in "Toward the Invisible." I reimagine the work of Vietnamese American photographer An-My Lê as a filmic montage, using her work to think toward a conception of what I call "No Place" in an essay that is eponymously titled. I end the book with "A Blurred Conceit" by vivifying an exilic filmic imaginary through the work of Taiwanese filmmaker King Hu. Interspersed throughout the book are images that summon a kind of "Cinema by Other Means"—as Pavle Levi terms it—in an effort to make montage through print form.

The essays trace a shift in my focus beyond Hong Kong—toward the "elsewhere" sites of the Cold War, such as Vietnam, Taiwan, and even Lithuania and Turkey, in brief mention—and facile East-West tensions to illuminate a lattice of North-South tensions and their vexing histories and politics. You're absolutely apt in describing this as a nonlinear connection across geographies. I'm interested in seeing connections across histories as elliptical, as cyclical, and also holding a great absence of understanding to be filled in. My

practice at its core is propelled by animating and rewiring images and text through various genres and forms as a way to understand history and to reencounter how we understand geography.

RC The intentional oscillation between forms becomes an interesting throughline in your work. In your essay “Phantasms of Dissent,” you refer to the connections between filmmaking, time, and artifact, quoting a passage in which Mary Ann Doane describes the notion of “archival desire” as it relates to indexicality—the colonial impulse to document, to capture. Perhaps that also relates to the act of collective remembering you describe in “Handbook of Feelings” and the conceptual position of remembering that appears in your work. For instance, in your recent film *The Sojourn* (2023), stills from which open and close the book, you approach national memory through an act of reencounter.

TS My new body of work attempts to trace the shape and speed of material loss. I deal with this through scales of national memory and also personal, inherited memory. *The Sojourn* takes on the genre of the *wuxia*—martial arts—film and empties it of action, of people. The audience is left with diegetic sound to hear tourists and travelers off-screen reveling at the iconic mountain vistas in Taiwan that I film in pursuit of King Hu’s landscapes. I go specifically in search of the actor Shih Chun’s personal memories of shooting *Dragon Inn* and *Touch of Zen*. In the case of *The Sojourn*, I’m interested in how the legacies of *wuxia* cinema pose understudied questions on an exilic cinema in order to think about exilic cinema as not only relevant in contemporary Hong Kong cinema but also a motif that was there all along in Sinophone cinema. Exilic figures, such as King Hu, inconvenience definitive national memory, or a single national canon.

Official missives constantly fail us. Images reveal, but they are also mediums of concealment and obfuscation. It is toward this immense possibility, toward an invisible ontology, against forgetting, which I work. My practice, between film/video and text, lies within unsettling the means and forms of material culture that become memory. Such quests are elusive, even unachievable. This is why I oscillate between forms of appearance, disappearance, and reappearance in my work. I am attempting to mimic the feeling of memory.

RC You’ve also spoken about the process of remembering from a place of exile as a form of estrangement, which in turn engenders a desire for return. This idea is present in your newest film, *A Child Already Knows* (2024), recently on view in your solo exhibition, *Technical Difficulties*, at Maxwell Graham. In that film, short clips from early Mao cartoons flicker across the screen, mimicking a channel flip that subtly recalls your film *Never Rest/Unrest* (2020), where you unpack the “spectacle of unrest” seen in the images of the Hong Kong protests that circulated on social media. In *A Child Already Knows*, we see a loose narrative of diaspora and return unfold.

TS *A Child Already Knows* tells the escape of my dad’s family from Shanghai, wherein they flee southward under the guise of a family vacation. For this film, I was interested in that singular emotional place where a child gradually becomes privy to the adult world: how the emerging complexity, tragedy, and melancholy of the world begin to come into view at around eight or nine years old. My dad is at this age during the climax of this story. I was interested in illustrating a child at the center of these scenes as one minor scene of the Cold War period and to paint the uncertainty of a child living in a world of increasing unknowns who is completely dependent on adults for safety.

RC Picking up on the idea of media memory and mutability, the flicker, as a cinematic tool, reveals the mechanisms by which a film is made by adapting the perception of discontinuity into the aesthetic of the work. I'm interested in how the discontinuous properties of your film relate back to the idea of disappearance, to the security tactics of the Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers group, to modes of filmmaking that subvert surveillance technologies, and to your personal approach to documentation, not as a means to capture but to recall. In *A Child Already Knows*, how does the presence or perception of a child complicate diasporic narratives emerging from the Cold War, or by extension, the elusive desire for return?

TS I was inspired by the format of silent film for *A Child Already Knows*, where the absence of sound and image sync are sutured with delayed intertitles of text. Within this rhythm, I wove in my dad's retellings, presented as white text over black, juxtaposed with animations of the early Mao era. The irony is that my dad never watched these cartoons. Not desiring to foreclose these memories into any kind of reenactment, too costly and impossible to make anyway, the collision of these cartoons and his childhood memories attempts to construct a wholly speculative plane of memory. I was interested in attempting to restore the agency of the child with all his imperfections of recounting. One might even look for clues or meaning in the cartoons, where the inner world of the child possibly holds information about the outer world. At the time when my dad becomes aware of the secrets of adults, the adults around him are also learning the rapidly changing social order, surviving on secrecy.

While the film addresses my father, I'm also interested in interpolating the viewer as a child. I wanted to use the device of flicker, mirroring channel-flipping, as a kind of sleep-inducing montage of images soundtracked by a hypnotic train sound wherein the child comes in and out of view. But rather than having the satisfaction of an allegory to show any clear moral lesson, the scenes that he recalls in this film are left enigmatic, not explained, just as how he experienced them at that age. In one scene, he eats ice cream at the Sino-Soviet Friendship Mansion. There is no additional context. I blur parts of my family's retelling that might be the most sensational. These motifs of security and threat scale up beyond the child to security and threat as a Cold War allegory: suspected insurgent actors were targeted in the time of the Cold War across this East-West ideological binary. In this particular moment of Chinese history, the figure of the child is simply adrift in *A Child Already Knows*, swallowed up in the dreamscape of cartoons and half-remembered scenes of the past.

Tiffany Sia's [On and Off-Screen Imaginaries](#) is available through [Primary Information](#).

Re'al Christian is a writer, editor, and art historian based in Queens, New York. Her work explores issues related to identity, diasporas, media, and materiality. Her writing has appeared in *Art Papers*, where she is a contributing editor, as well as *Art in America*, *Artforum*, *BOMB*, *Brooklyn Rail*, and numerous catalogues and anthologies, including *Track Changes: A Handbook for Art Criticism* (Paper Monument). She received her MA in Art History from Hunter College and holds a bachelor's degree in Art History and Media, Culture, and Communication from New York University.