

Profile

Tiffany Sia

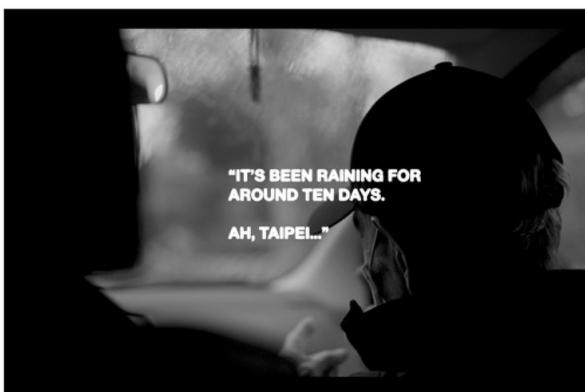
The Hong Kong-born, New York-based multidisciplinary artist addresses themes of exile, memory and the sense of place, both real and imaginary, revealing the truths that lie outside the frame and beyond the camera lens.



A Child Already Knows, 2024, video installation, Maxwell Graham, New York



An Image on Air, 2024, video installation, Maxwell Graham, New York



The Sojourn, 2023, video

In Tiffany Sia's 2021 exhibition at Artists Space, 'Slippery When Wet', a ream of perforated, continuous form paper stretched across a wooden table, folding upon itself into a chair. The piece, *The Bastard Scroll*, 2021, included the artist's still-raw memories of the 2019-20 protest movement in Hong Kong and its aftershocks. 'I lived my fears in my dreams,' she wrote in the text. 'Sometimes traumatic experiences came back in literal ways, scenes re-lived precisely during sleep.' Black boxes interrupt the text where a proper name or identifying characteristic would be. Sia had trouble finding a printer in Hong Kong to take on the job. It was ultimately self-published as *Too Salty Too Wet* 更咸更濕, 2021, and bound in a reflective Mylar that sheaths the book's cover.

Sia's newest book, *On and Off-Screen Imaginaries*, which was published this year by Primary Information, is written at a slight distance from those years, yet pants with the same energy and exertion of having lived through them. It contains essays on the situation of art and exile in Hong Kong, the making of a new vernacular Hong Kong documentary cinema, An-My Lê's photographic work, the possibility of a cinema of 'no place', and an itinerant account of filmmaking in 'small countries' (using Jonas Mekas's phrase). Sia's theoretical exposition is tied together with a more personal mode, bringing us into the conditions, moments and ideas underlying her videos, including a detailed description of the making of her video *The Sojourn*, 2023. 'I thought about making this last essay a manifesto,' Sia confesses. '[B]ut in the end, I settled on writing about writing, writing about reading.'

This extensiveness of her writing - extensive in its breadth, and in its entanglement with video - places Sia within the tradition of the artist-theorist. Or, even more particularly: the video artist-theorist. Writing is placed at an angle perpendicular to video-making, sometimes intersecting at a meaningful inflection point where the theoretical curves into self-understanding. Rather unlike others working in this idiom (Hans Haacke, Hito Steyerl, Cameron Rowland), the production of printed words comes at particularly high cost. Sia's mother tells her, bluntly: 'You've written a book. They're particularly sensitive about printed materials.'

The coincidence of text and image is foregrounded in *Slippery When Wet*, which still exists as a website on an Artists Space-hosted URL. The backdrop of the site is a gritty 1990s-era image of Hong Kong's skyline, with the outlines of a blue orb at its centre. The work has been segmented into different 'threads' that enable viewers to click on and cross-reference material. Sia's current exhibition at Maxwell Graham, 'Technical Difficulties' (the euphemism used to explain cancellation of a censored event in mainland China), marks something of a departure. Rather than toggling between text and video, starting from disaggregation as premise, we are presented with a streamlined triangulation between three video works. There's a tight circuitry here; the videos looped together by unspoken formal and thematic continuities.

In *An Image on Air*, 2024, white sans-serif text set against a black background is displayed on a small surtitle monitor mounted on the gallery's window. The video focuses on two moments of US broadcast television history: Marshall McLuhan's 1977 appearance on the Mike McManus show, and a 1997 interview between Charlie Rose and Fred Rogers (aka Mister Rogers, the American children's television presenter). Rogers describes his experience on broadcast television with oblique reference to a plaque that sits in his office: 'What is essential is invisible to the eye.' 'What we see,' Rogers further explains, inverting the formula, 'is rarely what is essential.' It is not that images are dishonest, but rather that what is essential, true or real is – by its nature – unseeable.

At the back of the gallery, the intertitles of *A Child Already Knows*, 2024, express a similar sentiment: 'The real film is neither here / Nor here / But in its interstices.' The 30-minute video features stitched-together animated children's television made by the Shanghai Broadcasting Corporation between the years of the Sino-Japanese War and the Cultural Revolution. Bunnies, ladybirds and pandas flit across the screen's edges and are interrupted with text drawn from Sia's father's narration of his escape as a child from Shanghai to Hong Kong. The images are, however, confected memories; the truth of the matter is not depicted in the video, but excised (and perhaps thereby protected). One of the final intertitles reveals: 'You had no such television memories as a child / These animations were not familiar to you.' As a child, her father watched the Johnny Carson show.

Sia is interested in cinema's seductive, linear qualities, and how those qualities, simultaneously, press truth outwards beyond the bounds of its aspect-ratio. Yet another car trip is documented in *Journey from North to South*, 2024, a 22-hour two-channel video that follows a car journey from New York to Mississippi. One camera focuses tightly on the road ahead, an ugly interstate freeway, while another looks out of the window on an equally dismal view: the trees and concrete slabs of fence that line tracks of highway. The sense of place is crowded out to the edges, beyond the screen. The only indication of where we might be is provided by the exit signs, resolute and uniform in their announcement of particular geographies.

Both bi-polarity and the road movie are focuses of Sia's earlier work. In *The Sojourn*, 2023, Sia connects with actor Shih Chun to revisit some of the sites of

King Hu's 1967 martial arts (*wuxia*) film *The Dragon Inn*. Chun is charismatic, with a photogenic and mesmerising face, but the camera doesn't linger on him for very long; instead, Sia turns to the Taiwanese landscapes that pass by, like scroll-paintings coming to life. The camera continues to attempt to capture these locations: fog rolling over green mountain tops, leaves and branches shaking in the foreground before a sublime vista. A total view is sought, yet impossible to find – or perhaps it is merely a brief episode in the history of numerous previous attempts. In another text-on-video film series, *Scroll Figure #4*, 2022, the text reads: 'regarding sublime landscapes is a process over centuries'. The work is to be continued.

Sia's video work repeatedly points, like a self-deprecating dinner host, to the things outside of it. There is something of this even amid the clips of the anti-ELAB protests in *Never Rest/Unrest*, 2020, the intense action interspliced with the view from a ferry, on an aeroplane, or of books covering the top of a table. In these moments, shot on an iPhone camera and presented vertically, there is some ineffable feeling of relief: the absence of a claim to see everything. Video, for Sia, frames its own failure. Or, in a quote from Trinh T Minh-ha that Sia has placed towards the end of *On and Off-screen Imaginaries*: 'Truth never yields itself in anything said or shown. One cannot just point a camera at it to catch it: the very effort to do so will kill it.'

The task of video might, on this view, be rearticulated as recognising its non-primacy, its partialness. This is made implicit by Sia's writing practice too, undermining video's claim to truth via an insistence upon an ever-present textual supplement. Such an approach offers one possible, graceful path beyond some of the central dilemmas of video art in the 1990s and 2000s, which continually problematised the falsehood of images, leading to a somewhat navel-gazing concern with the meta-problem of medium. Though Sia deals, especially in the video essay *Do Not Circulate*, 2021, with canonical themes in video art (surveillance, broadcast television, digital media, epistemology of the image), there is not so much self-flagellation as there is a kind of productive resignation. Video becomes less of a problem if we are not so concerned with the falsehood of images, but focus instead on a truth that must always accompany it, sitting alongside in the shadows undesiring of visibility.

Mimi Howard is a writer based in New York.



Journey from North to South, 2024, two-channel video