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Tiffany Sia
By Harmon Siegel

The first thing I noticed was how empty the space was: Tiffany Sia's exhibition at Maxwell Graham had only three works, all videos, all from 2024. The first of these, installed closest to the entrance, played on a surtitle LED board, roughly three by ten inches; the second, at the bottom of the staircase, on a tri-channel rack mount about three by nineteen inches; the third, on a modest CRT monitor at the end of the gallery space.

This sparseness made me conscious of my body as I approached and watched these recordings, experiencing an awareness crucial to Sia's synthesis of thematic and formal concerns. The first video, *An Image on Air*, most explicitly tackles this issue. It consists of text from two broadcast interviews--one with media theorist Marshall McLuhan from 1977 and the other with children's TV personality Fred Rogers from twenty years later. "When you're on the telephone or on radio or on television, you don't have a physical body," says McLuhan. "You're a discarnate being."

Sia positioned this surtitle board at the bottom of the gallery's street-facing window. To watch it involved looking onto the world beyond and, inevitably, seeing pedestrians as they walked along while staring at their phones. Given the usual use for such devices (to caption or translate spoken language during live performances), the text seemed to comment on how disembodied our bodily action now is. Because we are all both creators and subjects of camera recording, we all become "an image on air." This sentiment produces a discomfiting recognition that here was rooted in one's physical stance while watching the monitor.

This effect primed viewers for the more subtle attunements provoked by the other two works. Both reflected on the story of her father's flight from Shanghai to Hong Kong in 1958. For *Journey from North to South*, Sia recorded a long drive through the US, which plays back on the left and right sides of a three-channel monitor. The left screen transcribes the view from the dashboard of her car as she proceeds down the highway. The right one shows the perspective from a side window, the image moving laterally across space. In the middle, three slashes suggest an unbridgeable break between progressive advancement and aimless sliding. Attempting to hold both in view, I felt physically off balance, as though Sia were asking me to incarnate the ambivalence of leaving a familiar past for an unknown future.

Finally, *A Child Already Knows* punctuates found footage from Mao-era kids' cartoons with silent-movie-style intertitles that narrate the story of her father's exile. To give such a one-sentence synopsis, however, betrays the work's critical edge, for it is not a straightforward allegory. On the contrary, Sia made the fairy-tale symbolism of her source material exemplify the kind of untroubled legibility that she works everywhere to defeat. THROUGH RECOGNIZABILITY, the intertitles warn, THEREIN LIES A RISK OF USE.

This suspicion associates immediacy with propaganda, difficulty with resistance. The animations present eerie doubles of familiar child-hood favorites. Ladybugs bounce around, foxes taunt rabbits, but all their actions imply more or less subtle nationalist subtexts, suggesting the ideological flexibility of cartoons as consumer-cultural mediums. Breaking the footage down into individual shots, Sia estranges those conventions, foregrounding the ways in which their mode of animation imitates the effects of cameras (e.g., panning, zooming) and the syntax of montage.

In the gallery, the television was set on the floor opposite a drab gray rug and a hard white bench. At first, I sat on the bench. But as the thirty-three-minute video went on, I found myself moving closer and plopping myself on the ground. Then, four intertitles read: A CHILD IN FRONT OF THE TELEVISION / CHANNEL FLIPPING / TOO CLOSE TO THE SCREEN / IMAGES. It was startling to realize that the artist had solicited this bodily choreography, anticipating and naming it. Just as the propaganda on-screen was designed to modify its viewers' behavior, so her environmental decisions were made to reshape mine. This revelation lies at the heart of Sia's project. She asks us to examine how artworks produce their own conditions of beholding, and to see in that orchestration a prismatic repetition of the large-scale social forces that order and deform our lives.