

frieze

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Tiffany Sia Looks Off-Screen
By Madeleine Seidel



Tiffany Sia, *Journey From North to South*, 2024, video, 3-channel rackmount monitor, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Maxwell Graham, New York.

In 1977, Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan appeared on *The Mike McManus Show*. Conducted three years before his death, the interview is a particularly solemn one, which reveals a man coming to terms not only with his own mortality, but with the notion of afterlife in the digital age. ‘When you’re on the telephone or on radio or on television, you don’t have a physical body,’ McLuhan mused. ‘You’re just an image on the air. You’re a discarnate being.’

It is eerie, then, nearly 45 years after his death, to read McLuhan’s words in filmmaker and media theorist Tiffany Sia’s exhibition ‘Technical Difficulties’ at Maxwell Graham in New York. Set in the gallery’s unassuming front window, *An Image on Air* (all works 2024) consists of a small surtitle board – an LED screen used for live translation in opera and theatre – that displays a silent lecture-of-sorts from the artist. In it, Sia compares McLuhan’s testimony of seeing oneself onscreen to that given by American children’s television icon Fred Rogers in a 1997 PBS interview with journalist Charlie Rose. Discussing lessons learned over the course of his career in broadcasting, Rogers references a quote from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince* (1943): ‘What is essential is invisible to the eye.’

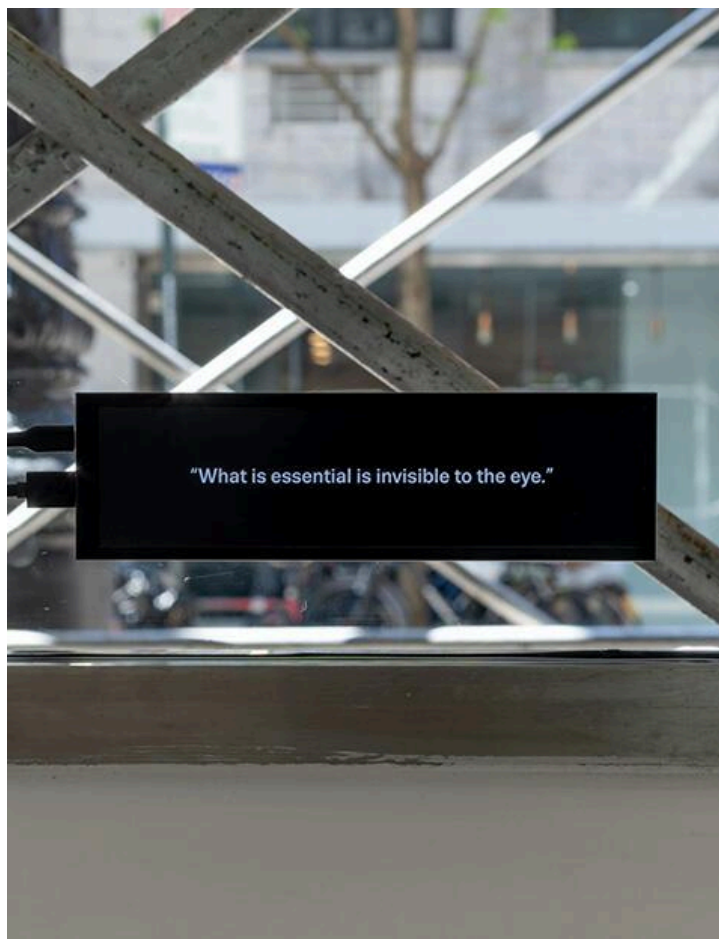


Tiffany Sia, *A Child Already Knows*, 2024, video, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Maxwell Graham, New York

Didactic in the truest sense, *An Image on Air* serves as an opening gambit to those unfamiliar with the Hong Kong-born, New York-based artist, whose practice fuses personal narrative and rigorous media theory to form a cohesive, cross-media study of

filmmaking's political power across mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. The three works that make up 'Technical Difficulties' see Sia shifting into a different mode of inquiry that focuses on the subtle, subversive, sociopolitical messaging that can be transmitted via mainstream media, from public television to genre blockbusters.

The other two works on view, *Journey from North to South* and *A Child Already Knows*, are the artist's interpretation of *wuxia*, a genre of Chinese martial arts epic often defined by the hero's journey across beautiful-yet-treacherous landscapes. The heroes in Sia's *wuxia* films are never shown, and their travels are approximated by unpopulated landscapes, found footage and text – a necessity, Sia states in the exhibition literature, given the financial and geopolitical hurdles to telling these stories. Shown via a three-channel rackmount, *Journey from North to South* consists of black and white dashcam footage of interstates and highways, tracing parts of the Mississippi Delta. The endless roads – imagery only interrupted by brief visits to the Mississippi towns of Greenville and Biloxi – symbolize the migration of Chinese immigrants from Guangdong Province to the Reconstruction-era Gulf Coast, where their racial identity as neither Black nor white made them outliers in an otherwise segregated society.



Tiffany Sia, *An Image on Air*, 2024, video, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Maxwell Graham, New York

Another story across borders, *A Child Already Knows* uses intertitles and mid-century Chinese cartoons to narrate a young child's move from Shanghai to Hong Kong during the period between the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). The young narrator's innocence – but not ignorance – is represented through cartoons of woodland creatures frolicking through a forest while dodging fearsome predators such as wolves. The video plays on a hulking television console set on a grey carpet which, paired with a white-noise train soundtrack, feels both nostalgic and uncanny, as if *A Child Already Knows* is a secret message from a sleepless night spent in front of your family's television set. Again, what is important is what is unsaid and unseen: Sia's videos are necessary substitutes for the real stories that are passed between loved ones in whispers and solemn nods. Here, filmmaking is the language of the invisible, its secrets kept safe by staying just outside the frame.