



SCREEN SLATE

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Tiffany Sia: "Technical Difficulties"
By Max Levin



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

Lines of text flash by on a small display monitor in the window of Maxwell Graham gallery. From the street, we see the blank backside of hardware traditionally used to subtitle live performances. Text is only legible while looking outside from within, such that the written words become captioning for the contingent image of the sidewalk scenes beyond. *An Image on Air* (2024) is something of a preamble to Tiffany Sia's latest exhibition, *Technical Difficulties*, and it relays Sia's approach to cinema as an art of the invisible where interstitial images can be imagined but not visualized in the work.

The rest of *Technical Difficulties* is installed in an austere subterranean gallery where the works are visually estranged from the outside world and yet persistent in considering how cinema necessitates an awareness of location and point-of-view. The monitor that screens Sia's 33-minute video *A Child Already Knows* (2024) is installed on the floor, in front of a gray carpet that allows you to sprawl out on your stomach and watch it up close. In its presentation and in its content, the video takes up the political subjectivity of children, edited to the rhythm of flipping through TV channels. The text in *A Child Already Knows* is adapted from childhood memories of Sia's father, and the video's second-person address speaks to the viewer as though they were the child. Animated children's cartoons featuring forest animals and stop-motion history reenactments serve as the video's primary images.

Sia suggests in the video's text that cartoons can become more "open" images that may be "left ajar" or liable to be "pried open" — some of the sequences are left intact and articulate their pre-existing messages while other footage is heavily edited to circumvent or extend the cartoon's signals. Sia sourced most of the material from Shanghai Broadcasting films produced between the Sino-Japanese War and the Cultural Revolution (1945-1966), a similar time and place as her father's childhood. Yet we learn that Sia's father has no memory of watching these programs as a child. His first television memories came much later as an adult in Hong Kong watching *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson and Laugh-In.

The audio that loops throughout much of *A Child Already Knows* is the sound of a train gliding down tracks. A nearby 3-channel work, *Journey From North to South* (2024), depicts a drive through an American highway that can be seen as a proxy for Sia's father's journey from Shanghai to Hong Kong. The focus on transit, alongside the road sounds and the un-synced aural environment, bring to mind the entrained rhythms of Chantal Akerman's *D'Est* (1993). "While there's still time, I would like to make a grand journey across Eastern Europe," Akerman wrote about the footage, "bordering on fiction," that became *D'Est*. For Sia, the impossibility of restaging family memories becomes the impetus to make cinema reveal something that cannot otherwise be seen.

What Rules The Invisible (2022) is an earlier short film not on view in this exhibition. It mixes vintage Hong Kong travel footage with silent intertitles telling childhood memories of Sia's mother. In *Toward The Invisible*, from Sia's essay collection *On and Off-Screen Imaginaries* (2024), the artist writes about how montage can become "a method by which to force the viewer to hold an active tension between the gaze of travelogue home movies and [her] mother's childhood recollections of an adult world, a residue of history that she was just learning..." The Chinese cartoons represent a deft evolution from the travel films, allowing for a different sort of witnessing to occur.

After one last triple-slash ellipsis, ///, which Sia uses to denote gaps that cannot be spoken or visualized in her writing and moving image work, the final minutes of *A Child Already Knows* abruptly shift to a 1947 news broadcast with synced sound. A journalist speaking English with an American accent reports on black market economies in Shanghai and rampant currency speculation due to the weakness of the Chinese yuan against the US dollar. Unlike the earlier animations produced for a Chinese audience, these documentary segments are destined for receivers in faraway continents. Sia incorporates them as partial disclosures, spilling their secrets on the floor.