

Interview: Lisa Tan

Av Martin Grennberger

Two artists based in the Nordic countries are participating in the New Museum Triennial opening this week. One is Ane Graff (an interview in Norwegian can be read [here](#)), and the other is Stockholm-based, American artist Lisa Tan. A practice-based PhD at the University of Gothenburg, Tan recently had a solo exhibition at Galleri Riis in Stockholm, where she presented three video works: *Waves* (2014), *Notes from Underground* (2013) and *Sunsets* (2012). Kunstkritikk's review (in Swedish) can be read [here](#).

In these videos, the amalgamation of image, text and sound is mainly constructed through the presence of the voices of three iconic writers: Susan Sontag, Clarice Lispector and Virginia Woolf, respectively. Although they unfold like conversations, the voices also function as signs of raptures, incongruities, as states of possible incomprehension. Often these utterances of a somewhat refracted subjectivity are in dialogue with imagery connected to the artist's own autobiography – the relocation to Stockholm and Sweden – but also to more general cultural references (art history, literature, philosophy, film), as well as references that traverse «a terrain of images drawn from potent thresholds within natural processes and phenomena».

Tan is also occupied with issues of translation, and in using narration as a state of liminality, a tool «to gauge distances of all sorts». This is connected to a double movement both of construction and erasure. Or, as the artist herself puts it in relation to *Waves*: «the work is not about the strange thing it seeks to touch – liminality – rather, it aspires to be that very thing itself».

Kunstkritikk met with Lisa Tan to ask some questions about her recent work and the upcoming Triennial.

Lisa Tan. Photo: Jonas Dahlberg.

What were your first thoughts when you got invited to the New Museum Triennial? Were you asked to show a particular work?

I was invited late in the selection process. It was quite a surprise, but a nice one. Regarding

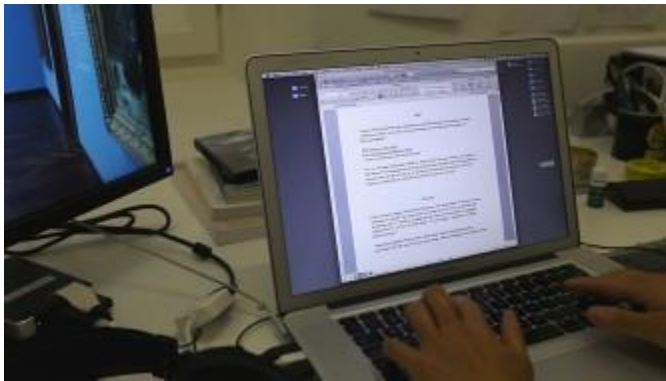


the generational/emerging artist aspect of the Triennial, I wondered about it for half a second until I realized how great it feels to be in such company, and to still be emerging at forty-one! The curators of the Triennial, Lauren Cornell and Ryan Trecartin, specifically requested my video *Sunsets* from 2012, but decided on presenting my most recent work, *Waves*, upon seeing a rough edit.

Tell us about the preparation for the show.

There's nothing much to tell, since the piece was well on its way towards completion when I was invited. The installation is going to be very different from what was seen at Galleri Riis in Stockholm. Naturally, I don't have the total freedom to conceive of and design the installation as I did there. But I think the Triennial curators have done their very best to position the works in the show in relation to each other in ways that'll allow for pointed connections.

Waves engages with Virginia Woolf's seminal novel The Waves (1931). What drew you to the work of Virginia Woolf in the first place? And at what point did you realize that her novel would be a suitable point of departure for your project?



Lisa Tan, *Waves* (still), 2014.

I've been attracted to something she said: «To whom are you speaking of writing? The writer does not speak about it, but is concerned with something else...» (quoted in Gilles Deleuze, *Essays critical and clinical*, p. 6). It's that «something else» that I am ultimately interested in. Woolf

also wrote in her diary – and this is arguably the most key line in my video – she wrote, «I am writing *The Waves* to a rhythm, not to a plot.» In reading *The Waves*, I was attracted to the structure in which interludes of italicized passages appear interspersed throughout the book, which follows six characters from childhood to death. These interludes follow the sun and describe a seaside place, and the affects of light, air, wind, etc., on both an interior and exterior setting. A flowing continuum that has gone on and will go on, as I say in the video, «with or without us». And so I try to articulate this sensibility for the time that I'm living in now, riffing off of the affective dimensions of our current technological moment.

A prominent feature in your work is the visibility of the apparatus that made the work possible. You often show your workspace, your devices, the computers/monitors that you use, in order to create comparisons between images, different image-milieus, and diverse dispositifs (almost a Farockian «soft montage» of sorts). Talk a bit about this approach, and how you work.

Well, it started with *Sunsets* in 2012, with the relationship between the representational space of a computer screen/screensaver and the world beyond it. I wanted to treat the screen space as an affective material, like the setting sun and its affect on me and on the landscape that is featured in so many of the summertime shots.



Lisa Tan shooting *Waves*, Algarve. Photo: Jonas Dahlberg.

The same goes for the workspace and its attendant sounds in *Notes From Underground*, from the year after, but there it is a lot more complex. In a way, the videos all document their own making. The workspace is a banal setting – definitely in my case – it’s just a white tabletop, laptop, monitor, maybe a few errant items. So it makes for a boring, if not ugly, image. But like, as you mention Farocki, his *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*, or say Akram Zaatari’s *This Day*, or Moyra Davey’s *Les Goddesses*, the worktable or workspace, screen, picture of a picture, etc., communicates that any image is contingent upon the conditions of its viewing. Showing this way of looking is a way of showing this contingency, or even enacting it.

In *Waves*, the screen is a vehicle in which to track distances and newfound relations. The activity of me looking at one of Courbet’s wave paintings on Google Cultural Institute connects me – and by extension the viewer – to a data center situated outside of Helsinki (formerly a paper mill designed by Alvar Aalto). The data center’s servers are cooled with water from the Baltic Sea, creating a nearly unfathomable relationship between my (your, our) looking at *The Wave* in the Städel Museum collection online, and that of Courbet’s looking in 1869 as he painted an image



whose digital dissemination would entail the force of the surging sea that he depicted. So again, the surface of the screen is an affective material in multiple, quite spectacular ways.

In Sunsets, an informal Portuguese-to-English translation of an interview with Brazilian author Clarice Lispector is used as a vector for a polyvalent meditation that deals with finding a language for the incomprehensible in relation to subjectivity. And also, just to name a few things in this rich work, a sort of striated movement between an image and its absence, between light and darkness. Could you talk a bit more about the conceptual and formal intentions of this particular work?

I started reading Lispector several years ago after a Portuguese friend tipped me on her. In fact it's that same friend who is the translator in the video. I knew of an interview conducted with Lispector the year of her death (1977). But since I couldn't find a subtitled version of it at the time, my friend agreed to translate it for me as we both simultaneously watched the interview on YouTube, while talking over Skype. It took several sessions to get through all of it. I had recently moved to Stockholm, and I think my friend just knew that this activity of having a loving chitchat plus a translation session for my research, would make me feel less lonely and displaced in my new surroundings.

But the translation was in no way 'professional.' Even though Portuguese is her mother tongue, my friend is from Portugal and Lispector was from Brazil so there's a dissonance there. Lispector also had a strange manner of pronunciation. Also, at the time I didn't at all think that the recording would end up being the soundtrack for what would become *Sunsets*. So that's why it's so very casual, and why there's hardly a trace of self-consciousness on the translator's part. I think all of this made for something beautifully generative in its uncertainty and searching and vulnerability, something of the essence of what translation is.



Lisa Tan, *Waves* (still), 2014.

In the interview, Lispector talks about her creative process – the way she works and when she works. When I started filming, I was thinking a lot about active and passive states in making art, and in life in general. As you know, in Sweden, work and recreation schedules are highly regulated. I don't fit in in this regard. I started

filming *Sunsets* after one night when I woke up around 3 o'clock in the morning, and saw my laptop 'sleeping' in screensaver mode (I have the screensaver called «cosmos»). My computer had never been more interesting to me than in that moment when it was doing 'nothing', not working. In sleep, it was more productive for me than ever before.

So, after that I woke up at 3 o'clock in the morning that whole summer – when the Nordic sun does its thing and hovers at the threshold between night and day. I then waited for the winter solstice – when light is so fleeting – to film during sunset at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. The video

only got its legs when I edited the soundtrack of the translation parallel to the video footage, sometimes crossing image with soundtrack to create transient moments of alignment.

What's the main difference between presenting your work in a solo context or in a constellation with other artists, like in the Triennial?

Well, I fear the level of focus and amount of time spent with a work is always under threat in a large group exhibition, especially within an architectural space like the New Museum's. But the main difference is probably that in the solo show in Stockholm I was able to install all three videos in a very specific manner, and that was great for me to experience – and hopefully for the audience too. The videos cross-fertilize and pollute each other in interesting ways. They can definitely be seen each on their own, but as a threesome they reinforce their visual, emotional, and intellectual searching.



Lisa Tan, *Waves* (still), 2014.

I'm interested in how time is presented and perceived in your work; the figurations of time, as well as the phenomenological experience of subjective time. This is, in my understanding, connected to spatial problems and how you elaborate with different layers of movement within a particular work, or even within a singular

space. Take Notes from Underground (2013), where the Stockholm underground and Susan Sontag's short but intense film sojourn in Sweden in the late 1960's is linked to a cavern system in New Mexico and to your own personal history. This work of montage creates an intricate web of stratifications and temporal perspectives. How do you view the function of time in your work?

With *Notes from Underground*, the piece started to form around a particular scene in Sontag's film *Duet for Cannibals* – made in Stockholm in 1969 – combined in relation to my present-day feelings around riding the Stockholm subway system, which for me is a very affecting experience (too much to go into).

I've also been thinking about geological time, trying to connect to it, and even trying to connect to a future whose vastness is so utterly incomprehensible. So I've looked to things that I can grasp – yes, my own personal history and references – but also other histories that have some resonance with the primordial. Correspondences. Like the cave, which is also the subway line, just as it is the literal and psychological underground space of my youth – or a notion of the psychological id – or the cave as Bataille's site of birth of art, or a space for utopian idealism in Siri Derkert's frieze in the Östermalmstorg subway station in Stockholm.

Or take the sound wave, which is not only Sontag's voice transformed or translated, but also looks like a moving line drawing of stalactites/stalagmites, a cardiograph, the elevation drawing of a subway car moving above and below the surface of the Earth, passing strata of geological time. Or the Sontag interviews – one made for Swedish radio in 1979, and another for C-SPAN on the cusp of the American invasion of Iraq in 2005 (Sontag died shortly after the interview). Perhaps all this, in the space of the video, is an enacting of the movement of consciousness amidst the complexities of time.

Last question. What are your plans for the coming months?

I'll be working on a book for the videos.