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Lisa Tan

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ISSUE 7

WAX

**on literary
references,
'Wave of
Mutilation' and
oceans of data.**



**Photography by
Boru O'Brien O'Connell**

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In **LISA TAN**'s video essay "Waves", the artist uses **Virginia Woolf's** novel by the same title as a point of departure to explore language, technology, and the pursuit of capturing that which is always in motion. Using the space where ocean meets shore as a metaphorical field of self-reflection and peaceful respite, Tan creates a network of associations that include **Google Data centers**, the **Städel Museum in Frankfurt**, 19th century realist painter **Gustave Courbet**, cultural theorist **Paul Virilio**, and **Woolf's** poetic musings. Filmed on location in **Ireland**, **Santa Barbara**, **Portugal**, and her adopted home of **Sweden**, "Waves" is a meditative work contemplating the tidal fluctuations between digital networks, literature, personal narrative and art.

In Conversation with **Nicholas O'Brien**

Nicholas O'Brien: I appreciate the literary references and poetic metaphors you use within your work "Waves". Besides **Virginia Woolf**, what other authors have you been 'anchored by'? How do you think this piece is adopting their 'drifting away from language'?

Lisa Tan: "Waves" is the third video in a trilogy. The **Brazilian** writer **Clarice Lispector** 'anchors' the first video and **Susan Sontag** the second. As far as drifting away from language, well it's a paradox, because you need language in order to drift away from it—provided you care about being understood. So it's a conundrum, but the intention is there.

NO: Maybe this is apropos of nothing, but it's interesting that you've made a landscape connection with **Woolf**, because **Brazilian** literary peers have referred to **Lispector** as 'hurricane **Clarice**'. What similarities do you find between their work and how do they inspire your videos?

LT: There's a point in "Waves" that I think answers your question! It goes like this: when someone asked **Woolf** about literature, she responded, "To whom are you speaking of writing? The writer does not speak about it, but is concerned with something else." I think her something else was just what merely is. **Lispector** called it the 'it.' Or the 'is of the thing.' Or even better, 'whatever is lurking behind thought.'

These remarkable writers inspired me, yes, but none of my videos are really about them; they are rather made with them—and with the other things, phenomena, and histories that are all connected within the space of the works.

NO: Culture commonly uses natural metaphors to discuss contemporary technology, like 'oceans of data', or 'sea of information', both used to describe the internet. If we could extend those metaphors, what do you see are the waves within those oceans and seas?

LT: Right. Oh... now that great **Pixies** song "Wave of Mutilation"

immediately surged into my head—probably because I know we're having this conversation for **WAX**—and that tune is so very beachy. Well, that song isn't a metaphor for the proliferation of Internet technology... But actually, maybe it's still relevant—and much more interesting. Because it's supposedly about a spate of group suicides in Japan where men were driving off of piers with their wife and kids in the car. That's such a profound image of the ocean's fatal force and powers of attraction.

But those metaphors are actually something I'm trying to open up as material realities. There are 'oceans of data'—as in—the oceans do consist of data—in the way of an ever-increasing number of under sea fiber-optic cables. And there is a 'sea of information'—certainly seas that are affected by information. This is something that I play out in the video, in that the activity of me looking at **Courbet's** painting "The Wave" on the internet while sitting in my studio in **Stockholm** connects me—I speculate—to **Google's** data center outside of **Helsinki**. The data center's





Lisa Tan, *Waves*, 2014-2015, HD video with sound, 19:12 minutes, video still. Courtesy of the artist.

servers are cooled by water from the Baltic Sea, creating a spectacular relationship between me looking at “The Wave” online and that of Courbet looking at waves as he painted them in 1869 on the shores of Étretat. The future digital dissemination of his painting would entail the sea that he depicted, and I am heating up that same sea by looking at it online.

NO: That feedback between the original painting and your digital browsing is fascinating since you also fluctuate between the physical room and the digital gallery. Cutting between the physical and the digital frequently happens in “Waves” and I was wondering what draws you to that motif?

LT: It comes out of the specific situation of viewing Courbet’s “The Wave” online. Looking at the painting on my screen is one reality, and it takes place in a certain way—with certain movements—awkward Google “street view” movements, where you zoom in and out in regulated increments—we’re all familiar with this. So I wanted to take that reality and put it next to another—that of being in the museum itself where the painting hangs (usually). But I applied the same strange navigation to that space as well, by way of my camera movements. I think I just wanted to know how it would feel to close that distance between the two sites.

NO: You talk about waves as ‘the place where sea meets land’, a liminal space of perpetually being between two states. How do you think this video accomplishes standing at a threshold? Are we riding on the whitecap, or washed up on desert sands?

LT: My brain kind of shuts down on this one, I’m sorry... But I’ll just

say that I think the video is not depicting threshold but performing it.

Interviewers note: upon further asking along this line of thinking, Lisa responded that she wanted to leave this initial answer in as part of our conversation.

NO: You focus, both visually and within your voice-over, on Courbet’s painting, “The Wave”. Can you talk about how your video, like his painting, is an attempt at capturing something always in motion?

LT: My favorite Courbet wave painting is in Berlin at the Alte Nationalgalerie. It’s rough and puffy. It’s very physical. You can sense the force and motion of waves while standing in front of it. At the same time, it is approaching abstraction. It reminds me of a Rothko painting—with distinct yet blurred-out rectangular forms, that in Courbet’s painting form the sky, sea and shore. Anyway, it’s extremely hard to make or take an image of the ocean—especially from the vantage point of the beach—that doesn’t look cliché. So that was a real task for me...To film (or edit) and avoid making another sequence of images that we’ve all seen way too many times before.

NO: There is a comfort created in that though, seeing images that we’ve seen many times before. It allows for more challenging material to come to the surface. Using the waves as a visual metaphor—however cliché—is like a soothing way of unpacking the futility of trying to capture something that is very abstract.

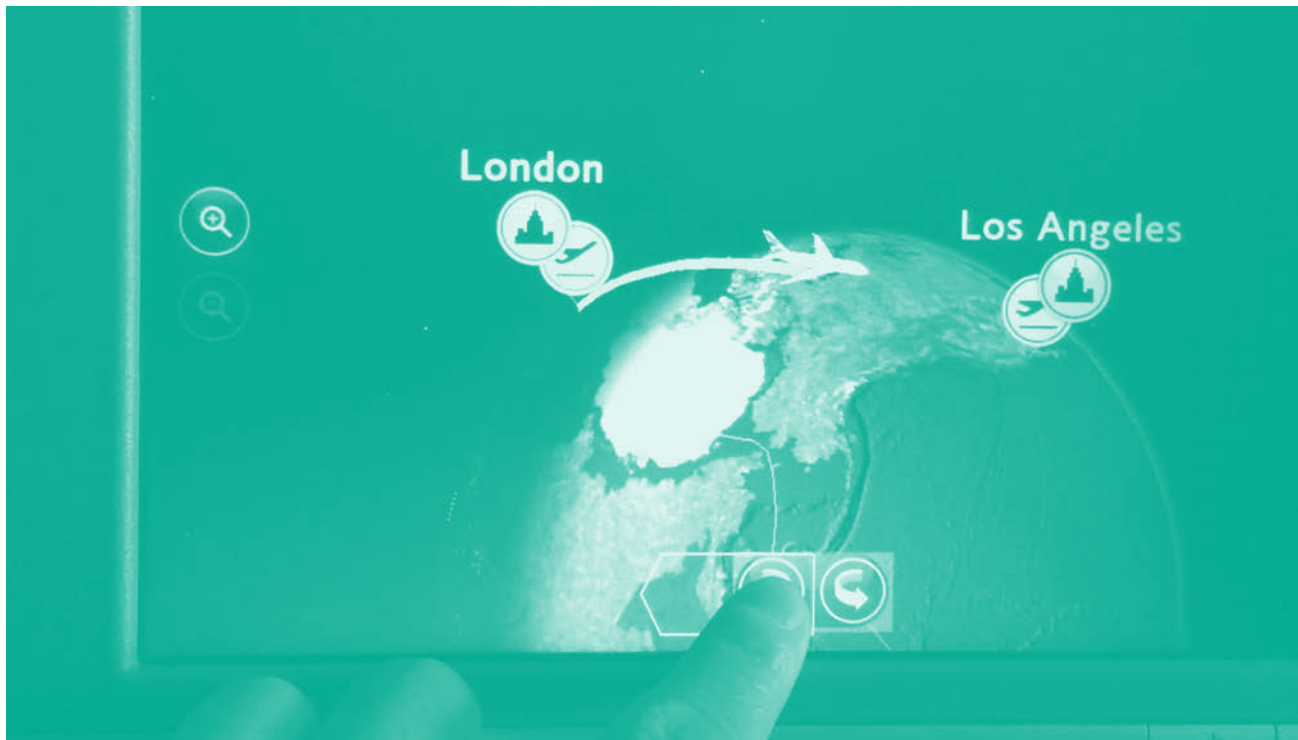
LT: I think you’re absolutely right, and that’s where the sea comes in; it’s something that all things have a relationship to in one way or another. But the way familiar things are filmed and edited—the

work’s visual language—is somehow just off in places, and outside of certain conventions. And I think it’s that peculiarity that helps mediate our experiences of the familiar. I guess this can probably be said about any art.

NO: I recently flew across country, and when I re-watched your piece I couldn’t resist thinking of it as a kind of travelogue. Is that an accurate read, or would you think that the elements of travel are speaking to something else?

LT: Right. It probably is. It certainly required a lot of travel in order to make it. I filmed on a few flights across the Atlantic. But also footage was taken on the west coast of Ireland, the southern Atlantic side of Portugal, up in Norway, southern California, Gotland, Frankfurt and Texas. Most were places that I was already going to for work, but I brought my camera in the hopes of filming waves, and I’d check the surf reports in advance.

But more than travelogue, I think the piece serves as a mapping of my relationship with large bodies of water. Everyone has a strong primordial relationship to the ocean no matter what landscape(s) they’ve been exposed to and it’s something that can be tracked. I lived in LA for several years, and my boyfriend at the time was a surfer so I spent a lot of time at the beach (I don’t surf but I’m highly skilled at laying in warm sand. I also really love to watch people surf). And the surfer and I broke up and shortly after that I moved to Brooklyn—and then to Stockholm where I live these days. All these places are next to water. But I grew up in a desert. I’ve been thinking about the desert for what it is: “An older sea that has distanced itself from its former boundaries”—as I say in the video.



Lisa Tan, *Waves*, 2014-2015, HD video with sound, 19:12 minutes, video still. Courtesy of the artist.