

Lisa Tan

Sunsets  
Notes From Underground  
Waves

Archive Books

# Time is a Dictator

by Lauren O'Neill-Butler

During the initial pulses of Lisa Tan's video *Waves*, she focuses her lens and attention on a Word document open on her laptop. She recites from this text, highlighting and reading aloud a few lines in an even and reserved tone: "I've been anchoring myself to certain literary figures—writers who tried to drift away from language—and into something else. But they knew the necessity of having a few words to hang on to." These authors include Susan Sontag, Clarice Lispector, and Virginia Woolf, and the movement implied by Tan's choice words—"anchor," "drift," and so on—points to the liquid choreography at work.

Each video in Tan's trilogy considers a specific writer—Woolf in *Waves*; Sontag in *Notes From Underground*; and Lispector in *Sunsets*—though there is always fluidity and room for two or three to tango. Throughout, Tan italicizes her scholarly and personal interests, which are wide-ranging and capricious: in *Notes From Underground*, for example, a connection can be made between the cave as Bataille's site of the birth of art and the Östermalmstorg subway station in Stockholm. Just as unpredictable are the work's bibliographies, which feel unruly—promiscuous, even. *Waves*, for instance, cites Gilles Deleuze amid a range of other thinkers—Lispector, Neal Stephenson, Paul Virilio—as well as the Wikipedia entry for pink noise. Tan never attempts to master this potpourri of material; her text is an open file, constantly being updated. As an artist, she lights up certain ideas to see how they move together, and how, in turn, they affectively move us. What is most lucidly illuminated overall is an elliptical self-portrait of the artist connecting dots in a way that follows an internal code, a personal logic.

Throughout, time plays a central role, and, per Kant, it yields no shape. "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," Tan has said in an interview about these works. "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.” The videos query what time is, where is it is, and if it is at all. Tan connects her choreography to such spacious ontological questions as if she were dancing along something like the Heideggerian notion of time—an understanding he also calls “primordial,” in which time reveals itself as the glimmering horizon of being. In brief, time goes on but you die.

“Where does it go; what does it do? Most of all, is it alive?” asks Nina Simone during a soliloquy on time before launching into a live cover of Sandy Denny’s “Who Knows Where the Times Goes?” (*Black Gold*, 1970). Simone’s gambit in that short speech that “time is a dictator” finds a surprising kinship with Heidegger—intangible time micromanages all aspects of life (“you go to work by the clock; you get your martini in the afternoon by the clock,” forecasts Simone). Tan’s works heed this everyday reality but also try to grasp or “connect” to primordial time—to the horizon. Her subjects often seem at once here and gone, contemporary and primordial: Tan reads from a portion of her text titled “To the Shore,” then cuts to a scene of waves closing out on the beach; dripping stalactites give way to a craggy, cardiograph-like sound wave of Sontag’s voice; a video of Lispector being interviewed moves to twilight over a darkened body of water. One becomes aware of layered meanings, of different temporal layers, while consciousness does “something else.”

In quoting Simone, I don’t intend to simply read another (deceased, female) voice into Tan’s work. I’m more interested in how that flickering, that “something else,” which may indeed prove to be hovering between life and death, can be activated, as Tan does, by foraging and bringing others into a rich mélange with the self. By relating her interests in the primordial to a few of her favorite writers and other sources, Tan also eschews producing an egotistic memoir or blog-like diffusion of random thoughts. In *Waves*, she writes and rewrites her document, highlights, and recites. She documents this process: the videos often show her studio, revealing the apparatus of production and the importance of context—how images are always conditional on experience, on where and how they are viewed. In this, a political consciousness and ethics emerges. As a whole, the videos explore precarity disguised as freedom, a pedestrian reality birthed by the marriage of digital technology and

capitalism. Moreover, she examines how this union opens up new affective relationships and novel forms of nostalgia: when a real landscape meets a cosmos screensaver; in the voice of a friend over the internet. The latter is explored in *Sunsets*, wherein we hear Tan’s friend (another voice in time) casually translating Lispector’s Portuguese via Skype, in a typical intimate conversation, with no undue self-awareness. Like a great pop song, this tendency to explore the possibility and mutability of intimacy is characteristic of all of Tan’s work. It is buttressed by her insistence on a specific material delivery and her deployment of particular archives.

Yet not all is exposed. In the end, the trilogy produces a subject—the artist—and she remains elusive. Tan states in *Waves* that the person she loves the most says he is “incapable of living anywhere that isn’t near water. Sort of like Paul Virilio.” It is a fact given coolly and with restraint, a bit like Simone’s soliloquy. But not much more needs to be said about her lover, nor Virilio, because her reply comes quickly: “But don’t these guys know that the desert is just an older sea that has distanced itself from its former boundaries?” This is sharing with a point: by not fully revealing every aspect of her interests and her research, Tan productively calibrates and attunes her viewer to what is public or social, speculative or concrete in her work—and our interest is piqued.

Skillfully composing with disclosure in mind, Tan’s videos dovetail with the “something else” (the unnamable? unsayable?) each writer harbors in her own work. In *Waves* she quotes Woolf’s diary: “I am writing *The Waves* to a rhythm, not to a plot.” Simone might add that time dictates all rhythm—from the personal to the geological and the meteorological. For Tan, the monologues by six characters told in the third-person regarding a littoral scene and its effects of light in the book, break up the sense of linear time and telegraph back to the primordial, to a “continuum that has gone on and on, and will go on with or without us,” as she says. And while that’s true, it’s not easy to connect to intellectually, visually, nor emotionally in our everyday always-already phenomenological experience. The movements in these videos, however, inch us towards a sophisticated network of stratifications, both temporal and spatial. In the end, they produce a porous voice: a fragmented, decentered self constantly in flux (like the text being written and rewritten). We see that

these works trade not just in affect, but in the shared, multi-vocal quality of *affects*—Tan queries not just intimacy but the possibility of it and the ways in which it affects are not “owned” by specific bodies but can be public and transmutable.

The videos flourish in this primordial soup, if you will, between abstract, universal, and lived experiences (of time and affects) and the primary self-observation of the “something else.” In *Notes from Underground*, Tan links clips of Sontag’s 1969 film *Duet for Cannibals* shot in the Stockholm subway to caves in New Mexico, which she visited as a child growing up in the southwestern US—like water leaving the desert and returning someday in the future.

So, who knows where the time goes? Only time will tell.

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An earlier version of the text "The Shadow is Just as Tangible as the Origin" by Mara Lee was published for Lisa Tan's solo exhibition *For every word has its own shadow* at Galleri Riis in Stockholm in 2015.

Cover: Lisa Tan, *Notes From Underground*, 2013 (still)

Installation images by Jean-Baptiste Beranger

*For every word has its own shadow* at Galleri Riis, Stockholm, 2015.

Three 190 x 106.8 cm single-channel projections in 16:9 HD video with speakers and headphones, carpet, paint, and wooden pedestals.

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