

PREFACE

Fiona Tan works within the contested territory of representation: how we represent ourselves and the mechanisms that determine how we interpret the representation of others. Photography and film – made by herself, by others, or a combination of both – are her mediums; research, classification and the archive, her strategies in skilfully crafting moving and intensely human works that explore history and time and our place within it.

Within the interconnecting narratives that she weaves into her work, Tan takes on the dual persona of “the traveller and the anthropologist”^[1], simultaneously revealing her own impressions and self-consciously questioning their very validity. Her adeptness in handling her material becomes a sympathetic reflection of questions with which we ourselves, as viewers, are faced; questions about who we are and how we are categorised define in turn how we recognise and define those around us.

First presented at *Documenta 11* in Kassel in 2002, the multi-channel installation of *Countenance* holds in tension themes central to Tan’s work. Drawing on August Sander’s vast photographic project, *Citizens of the Twentieth Century* (1910-1964), in which he attempted to capture a social portrait of Germany in the first half of the century, Tan created around ninety minutes of filmed portraits of some two hundred and fifty citizens of Berlin. While subtly signalling the historical

[1] Lynne Cooke, ‘Fiona Tan: Re-Take’, in *Scenarios: Fiona Tan*, Mariska van den Berg and Gabriele Franziska Götz (eds.), vandenberghwallroth, Amsterdam, 2000, p. 21

resonance of the work within the contemporary reality of a re-unified Germany and an increasingly mobile Europe, Tan also inverted and created new and less clear-cut relationships between subject and viewer. Tan's lucidity of purpose is matched by the respectful tentativeness of her declared approach: *Could I possibly [...] collate a time in history? And if it were possible, Whose History?* As Mark Godfrey points out in his original and illuminating essay written for this publication, doubt is the very stuff of Tan's project with which she confronts contemporary ways of seeing.

For her exhibition at Modern Art Oxford, Tan presents *Countenance* (2002) alongside two subsequent works: *News from the Near Future* (2003), a meditation on water, time and memory which she has constructed from footage found in Amsterdam's Filmmuseum archive, and *Vox Populi* (2004) – a photographic installation which presents a vast collection of photographs from family albums collected by Tan in Norway. Tan presents us with a richly textured 'Tree of Life' in which the enduring themes of birth, adolescence, old age and death are played out across multiple generations.

We are greatly indebted to Fiona Tan for agreeing to show such an important body of work in Oxford, and for her engagement with the exhibition and publication.

The exhibition at Modern Art Oxford and this publication have been generously supported by the Mondriaan Foundation, Amsterdam and the Royal Netherlands Embassy, London, for which we are enormously grateful. Their support is an important acknowledgement of Tan's work and the significant place it holds in contemporary visual art.

Jane Hamlyn has been instrumental in the success of this project, for which we thank her. We also thank her colleagues at Frith Street Gallery, Charlotte Schepke, Dale McFarland and Karon Hepburn who provided their assistance and advice in the planning of the exhibition.

We are grateful to Mark Godfrey for his insightful essay on *Countenance*, which offers a new contribution to the already impressive bibliography on Tan's work. For the design of this book, we extend our fullest thanks to Gabriele Franziska Götz who worked with great sensitivity and in close collaboration with the artist.

Finally, our thanks goes to our colleagues at Modern Art Oxford who have worked with their usual energy, intelligence and passion in bringing Fiona Tan's work to a broader public.

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