

OTHER FACETS OF THE SAME GLOBE

A conversation between Fiona Tan and Saskia Bos

Saskia Bos [SB]: Fiona, you told me you stopped making works that could be characterised as 'post-colonial' about three years ago, after having touched on such issues for ten years or so. Many people still view your work in terms of a search for identity, of finding cultural roots, and although your recent works are not that far removed from this, the search for identity seems to have shifted towards an unravelling of memory.

In *A Lapse of Memory*, you seem to be in pursuit of what is recollection, as it determines and influences our fleeting identity. How do you see the connection with earlier works?

Fiona Tan [FT]: *A Lapse of Memory* was born out of a chance encounter with a highly unusual building – the Royal Pavilion in Brighton. As one of the finest examples of eastern-style architecture in the West, this building and its interior are a wonderful homage to fantasy. It was an unexpected feeling – I felt that I just had to do something with that place. My own hybrid background straddling East and West and my personal questions relating to 'Chineseness' were for me personally linked to that building.

It was over ten years since I had made *May You Live in Interesting Times* and I felt I had left 'all that' – meaning my post-colonial roots/routes – behind me. But here, all of a sudden, was this building, which refused to go away. It felt like full circle, like a way of completing a sentence. Ten years later, I felt that a conclusive explanation was required of me. And I felt a need for closure. For once and for all, or so I liked to pretend, I would deal with these matters and then put them behind me.

It was only after I completed the piece that I could see that in some ways the character I created to inhabit this empty building was not only a certain personification of the building itself, but also had links with me personally. Identity and memory are undeniably linked. That is the great tragedy for patients with Alzheimer's disease or senile dementia. By losing their memory, they lose themselves and their family, and loved ones lose them too.

SB: Does the work deal more with cultural recollection as a part of collective memory than with individual memory?

FT: That I was in pursuit of cultural recollection is a nice way of putting it. Although it felt like an impossible undertaking, I was attempting to look at things on a larger scale.

Not just my personal history or identity confusion. I wanted to tackle the persistent paradigms of 'East' and 'West'. It will not surprise you to hear that whilst I was working on the script for *A Lapse of Memory* I read not only Edward Said's *Orientalism*, but also Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit's *Occidentalism*.

I see clear connections between *A Lapse of Memory* and earlier works like *May You Live in Interesting Times* and *Linnaeus' Flower Clock*. Because the piece required this, I worked with an actor in front of the camera for the first time. This perhaps seems unexpected, but it grew out of a natural progression of works. For *The Changeling*, I worked intensely with several actresses to record the voice-over and it was this experience that made me feel that this was the right way to go.

Looking back at my development, I see a steady progression, in formal terms, from initially a documentary mode of working towards an increasingly controlled and staged representation. This is a development I see continuing on into the piece I am working on now for Venice – a piece called *Disorient*.

SB: Your new work is inspired by the geo-strategic position Venice once had through its connections to the Middle East and Asia.

FT: I intend the piece to have a specific in-situ character – both geographically and temporally speaking.

For this work, Venice is my point of departure and of return, literally and figuratively speaking. Venice was a lively and wealthy trading port in medieval times. Its wealth came mainly from goods brought back from the Middle East and Asia, which is why the city was traditionally portrayed as the bride of the sea.

I have been researching the subject and have focused particularly on a book that was written over seven hundred years ago. The author was a Venetian merchant who left home at the tender age of seventeen and travelled extensively for the next twenty-five years. His name is Marco Polo. Arguably, Marco Polo undertook his epic journey twice. The second time, he journeyed through his memories – languishing in prison, recalling and remembering with as much detail and accuracy as he could muster every memorable episode from a quarter of a century of travel.

SB: The search for the self in *A Lapse of Memory* was a psychological journey into the construction of identity. This time you seem to be taking a more sociological approach, as you focus on Venice and how people relate to its cultural history.

FT: The tenuous relationship between sight, memory and knowledge, the unreliability of visual memories, is something I have been concentrating on in recent works. I am still exploring these ideas in this new work, as I continue to experiment and develop a filmic language that could perhaps be described as simultaneously constructing and deconstructing – employing the tricks of the trade and at the same time exposing them, laying them bare. I am interested in the juxtaposition of word and image,

in conflicting and contradictory relationships between the two and between fact and fiction, in the displacement of text and image. I am also interested in the slipperiness of truth or truths and the many versions of Marco's account.

I have always tried to imagine what the world would look like without this dominating paradigm of East and West, which all too often implies East *versus* West, without the traditional dichotomies of dialectical thought.

One of the things that bothered me about the whole multicultural/post-colonial discussion in art is that it became a discussion only about politics and political positions, particularly during the last decade of the last century. The visual side of things was too often neglected. Images – and as an artist I consider myself an image-maker – their role, their importance, their ambiguities seemed to play too minor a role. It is easier to write and talk about ideas than it is to talk and write about images, I guess. But ultimately that is what visual art is hinged on: images – whether they are three-dimensional, figurative or abstract, multi-dimensional, time-based or even invisible. I also find it ironic that my work as an artist is still pigeonholed, filed away in the post-colonial box, whilst the idea of the whole debate was to do away with such categorisations and the need to categorise at all.

SB: How do you relate to your own bio-geography: have you been deliberately articulating places and periods in your life by visually (re)constructing stories and situations or did the works 'surface' as if you were reliving your own memories? Or is it somewhere in between?

FT: The answer changes at different times. That's the nice thing about years passing: the older I get, the larger my body of works becomes and I see the positioning of each work and the relationships between the works steadily shifting and developing. When I worked those three years on *May You Live in Interesting Times*, I was in my late twenties. I have since realised, thanks to some of my students and to films I have seen over the years, that it is a relatively common reflex to go through an identity crisis and to seek answers to the personal question of 'Who am I and where do I come from?' at that age. Soon after that, I engaged in works involving archival footage, mostly of an ethnographic nature. This was an attempt to deal with the larger framework around such images. With works such as *Smoke Screen*, I felt my partially Asian background to be a help, as the question of where I stood was not at all straightforward. Was I 'us' or was I one of 'them'?

There is this desire to be looking at camera-based and time-based images, not only in an intellectual way but also in other ways. Physically, haptically, emotionally: these may be some of the types of looking to which I am referring.

SB: Some films you make seem to exist in a suspended realm: figures are stylised and framed, movements are slowed down or people are asked to pose or sit, which creates

anticipation both in the eyes of the beholders and in those of the sitters, who seem to be staring straight back.

FT: Empowerment is a key word. Cinema and photography have a lot to do with manipulation: framing automatically means that the gaze is confined and there are things off-screen that are left out. With montage, the editing and cutting of a film, the director not only dictates the order in which scenes are presented, but also their exact length. The impact of sound, be it spoken word, music or ambient sound, is much greater than many people realise. I am interested in exposing and exploring all of these mechanisms. I want to empower the subject, empower the viewer, and to bring aspects to the surface, to create a certain visibility, if you like, to foster awareness of our interpretation of the images that surround us.

SB: Many shows have been based upon notions of archive, where art questions the document as a fragment of collective memory and the manipulation thereof. Is the meta-language of your use of found footage 'true life'?

FT: 'Document' is for me inextricably linked to documentary film. I am really happy that I ended up living in a country where the tradition of documentary film is much stronger and better than that of moviemaking. Grandfathers of the Dutch documentary film, like Joris Ivens, Bert Haanstra and Johan van der Keuken, were my 'teachers'; I learnt so much from studying them, as I did from my extended encounters with the wonderful archives of early film from the Nederlands Filmmuseum. The Dutch national film archives are, in my opinion, more interesting because of the early documentary footage that they have kept and have thankfully preserved and restored than for any movies they might contain.

There is of course a lively, if at times tedious, discussion in the film world about where (artificial, staged) film stops and where documentary film starts. There are actually quite a few renowned documentary filmmakers who rehearse with the people they film, who instruct their real-life subjects and who happily film multiple takes of so-called spontaneous scenes. The idea of the fly on the wall, of *cinéma vérité*, is arguably impossible. Whatever action or scene a camera lens points at is changed by the presence of the camera and camera operator, however subtly. Similarly, the boundaries of cinema have blurred, even if only on the surface. The handheld rough camera work that smells of true-to-life documentary has become very popular in recent movies.

And then there is the document as it is found in the archive. Whether or not documents are accessible hinges upon the system of the archive, on how and why an archive came into existence and the way it is structured and organised. I do not think that documentary, archival footage is 'true life'. It is, as any image is, a 'take' on life, a subjective view, a limited and manipulating viewpoint. Nevertheless, like any viewer,

I make snap judgements as to the truth of a film or a photograph, as to how realistic a representation we sense it to be. I am all for the stimulation of creative archival techniques – I mean this also in a poetic way. For fresh approaches to where and how we file away the images in our memory, in our mind, in our view of the world.

SB: Your titles are often about time, time lapses, repetition, and transformation, while the works themselves play with time by slowing it down, speeding up movement, or suspending it. In *Provenance*, a woman swings back and forth like a pendulum. What is time for you: a friend or a foe?

FT: Time is most definitely a friend. In many works I overtly deal with this – in *Rain*, in *n.t. (Leidsestr.)*, in *Linnaeus' Flower Clock*. Time, history, memory, they are all connected; they are facets of the same globe. As an artist working almost exclusively with time-based and lens-based media, time is one of my major tools. No, perhaps I can be more precise than that – time is both tool with which to shape and chisel and material to fold, distort and configure. I am thinking here in particular of my most recent work, *Rise and Fall*; a memory is a fold in the fabric of time.

SB: You sometimes look for the no man's land between biography and fiction, as you do in *The Changeling*, where you explore the notion of a chameleon: 'Now she slips into the skin of her mother,' the voice-over says. Is this 'a searching image of the self', as you wrote somewhere? Or the fantasy of someone who likes to imagine she was born someone else?

FT: It is more the former – a changeable, metamorphosing self. With *The Changeling*, I was interested in testing the boundaries of the meaning of an image. The first screen shows hundreds of schoolgirl portraits of great uniformity in quick, anonymous succession. On the second screen, I give the viewer only one single image – the portrait of a young schoolgirl. You hear this twelve-minute monologue that endeavours to pull and push at your view of that one unchanging photographic image. I worked on the text of the monologue for a long time and increasingly personal and partially autobiographical elements came into it. Of course, all the photos of the schoolgirls reminded me of my time at school. I grew up in Melbourne, Australia, and went to a girls' school and had to wear a uniform that was not that dissimilar to the uniform that these girls wear.

SB: Some of the early works you made were very physical, like *Roll I & II*, where you are the performer and use your body as material. Some black-and-white portraits seem more conceptual, or seem to have a more graphic quality. Do these distinctions make sense to you? And, if so, do both extremes come together in a work like *A Lapse of Memory*, where the protagonist is the visceral element and the filmic eye seems to be more detached, attentive to pattern and detail?

FT: It is certainly true – my early works often had a performative and physical character. As a young artist, I employed myself and my own body as material – not an uncommon practice. It was partially, I feel now, a search for my own identity, but also a way to appropriate and get closer to the medium with which I was working. Besides, I was always available and so putting myself in front of the camera cost me nothing, except for the occasional bruise or headache. But I became increasingly tired of looking at myself and dealing with myself in editing and so I started to work more and more with other people. My latest work, *Rise and Fall*, is, I feel, once more a very physical and haptic work. This struck me when I projected it large on my studio wall a few days ago.

SB: When do you write your texts? Before you start a film, as a sort of storyboard ('My text sets out as a tentative line, like a drawing') or afterwards, when you have filmed the scenes ('Henry is waiting for a story he can make his home')?

FT: Before, during *and* after. Writing is a sort of sketching, a way of getting my thoughts and ideas clear in my head. And then, both during and after the process of film editing, I find myself writing again. Often this is the writing of the voice-over or the text in the film. Whether a text is spoken or written can make such a difference, as can which voice reads it and how the words and the image combine. I quite often think of this writing in terms of sculpting. Patience is necessary. In the case of *A Lapse of Memory*, I had written the voice-over text before filming the work, but I ended up rewriting it completely during and after the film editing and the sound editing. I think I must have written at least twenty versions before it finally fell into place. And, right now, I realise once more that my work does not develop as a linear progression. The works follow on from one another organically, but not in a rigid framework. It is more as with a cloud or a spiral that new works link up with earlier works.

SB: Let's come back to the piece you are working on at the moment. Within *Disorient*, the pavilion-based project, you are focusing on a world of objects, goods, trophies, and in a different view you disclose its deconstruction, or the fact that we have been looking at a stage. Is the process of the making of a film, an installation, of interest to you here? Or is it more its metaphorical meaning, from riches to rags?

FT: Right now, at this very moment in its development, I am experiencing a great deal of stress due to setbacks in the preparations for this piece. But that too is all part of the process! I am not interested in this work illustrating an idea of 'the making of'. That is not what I am trying to get at with the twofold presentation structure I have chosen for this work. Between two apparent opposites a gap comes into view and the piece extends beyond a simple dialectical juxtaposition of rich and poor, positive and negative. The interpretation of this 'opening' or hiatus is more complex and challenging. I am interested in investigating and, if necessary, undermining persistent paradigms of thought, of the way we perceive the world, even if they originate from many hundreds of years ago.