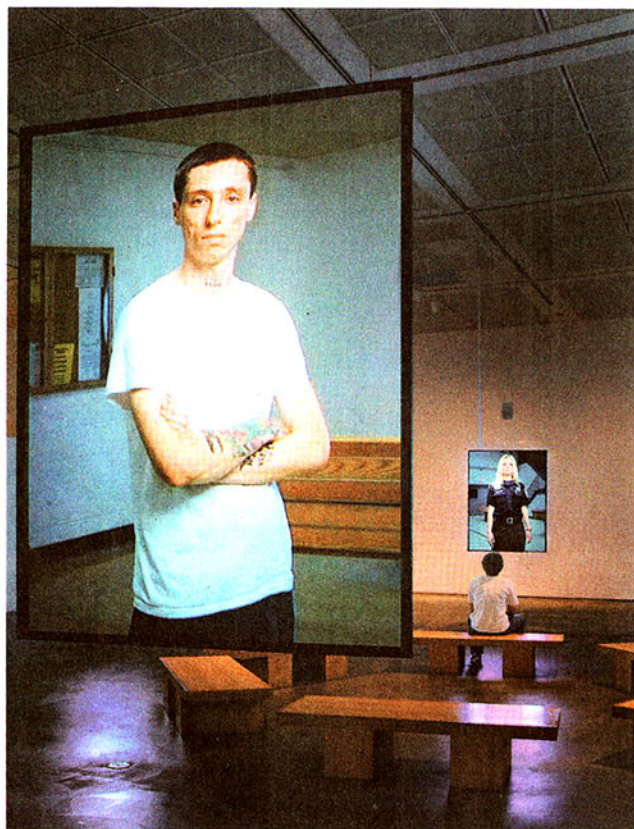


Some of the images in the film and video artist Fiona Tan's installation "Correction," a collection of video portraits of prisoners and prison guards.



Courtesy of the Frith Street Gallery, London

Is That Portrait Staring at Me?

When you look at Fiona Tan's prison inmates, the inmates look right back.

By PHILIP GEFTER

STANDING face to face with prisoners might be a threatening prospect, but that didn't stop Fiona Tan, a film and video artist, from seeking more than 300 felons to pose for her.

First she had to persuade various Departments of Corrections to sign on to her project. It took three months of pleading correspondence, in which she relied only on her credentials as an internationally exhibited artist. One prison in California and three in Illinois finally relented, and Ms. Tan was escorted to the dormitories, dayrooms and workshops where she recruited her subjects last summer for the video portraits in "Correction," now on exhibit at the New Museum in New York.

One female inmate agreed to participate upon learning the work would be shown in Chicago. "That's great," Ms. Tan said the inmate told her. "My mom lives there so she can come and see me!"

Ms. Tan, who lives in the Netherlands, conceived the idea for the piece after reading an article in *NRC Handelsblad*, a national daily newspaper there, comparing the American prison population with others around the world. "While in the late 1960's the population of inmates in American prisons numbered close to 200,000, the number now exceeds 2.2 million," she wrote in a statement for the exhibition catalog. "Correction" was commissioned by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago as part of a collaborative program with the New Museum and the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles.

In Ms. Tan's video portraits, the inmates and guards are stationary, taking our measure as much as we're taking theirs. She posed her subjects as still as possible during the taping

sessions, and they stand head-on, staring directly into the camera, centered within the frame. They are displayed on six flat-panel video screens, for 20 to 50 seconds each; 300 inmates and prison guards appear over the course of three hours. Movement is almost imperceptible as you watch — you're never quite sure you just saw the blink of an eye or the twitch of a muscle.

The screens hang in a circle, with benches for the viewer in the center. The circular configuration is a deliberate reference to the Panopticon, a spherical prison plan designed by the utopian philosopher Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th century as a way to centralize the surveillance of prisoners. (Though the Panopticon was never built, it has lived on as a symbol of ubiquitous Big Brotheresque surveillance.) Each portrait can be viewed in mirror image on both sides of the screen — inside or outside the circle. Recordings of actual sounds heard in prisons — ventilation fans, human voices, slamming doors — play on speakers in the room.

The relationship of subject to viewer is central to Ms. Tan's work, and the title "Correction" applies as much to the viewer's experience as to the subject's: while inmates are in prison to "correct" their behavior, the portraits may alter viewers' preconceptions as well. The viewer participates in a kind of stare-down with the subjects. This type of extended eye contact with strangers incites primitive transgressive feelings: it's a dare; it's a threat; it's erotic.

Time is one of the keys to "Correction": the idea of "doing time" in prison is emphasized by the video portrait format. The subjects are standing still, but since time is passing in the portrait, the subjects are trapped in their poses, trapped in the frame. Francesco Bonami, senior curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art,

said of the work: "Time passes, but it never passes. Time is wasted; time is neverending." In an earlier project, "Facing Forward," Ms. Tan explored the ways white colonials had viewed natives of Papua New Guinea. The piece was based on archival film material from an early-20th-century expedition in which groups of locals were asked to stand still before the film camera, as if the filmmakers weren't aware that people could be filmed in motion.

"I am interested in the twilight zone between film and photography, the gray area," Ms. Tan said in a recent telephone interview. The documentary film from Papua New Guinea provides a revealing parallel to 19th-century photographic portraiture: technologies like the daguerreotype required the subject to maintain a perfectly still pose for the duration of an exposure, which could take up to a minute. While today's portraits can be taken in fractions of a second, the idea of holding a pose for the video camera over time brings us full circle.

In her last project, "Countenance," shown at Documenta 11 in Kassel, Germany, in 2002, Ms. Tan presented 200 filmed portraits of residents of Berlin. She was inspired by August Sander's magnum opus, "People of the Twentieth Century," an exhaustive photographic catalog of archetypes of German society between the 1920's and the 1940's. Sander's societal categories ("The Farmer," "The Woman") seemed archaic to Ms. Tan, because of his male-centric choices and the professions that have emerged since then. Her portraits included female bakers, single fathers with children and media professionals, filmed the same way Sander photographed his subjects — positioned head-on, staring at the camera, centered in the frame.

Moving images almost always cross hori-

zontal planes, so Ms. Tan's decision to rotate the frame vertically underscores the photographic foundation of her video portraits. "I don't consider myself a photographer," she said, "but I consider photography to be at the base of my work." To arrive at a format for the standing portraits in "Correction," she filmed photographs out of the pages of a photography book and projected them on the walls of her studio to see what the proportion would be like.

Ms. Tan is not alone in using film and video to explore the conventions of still photography. In recent video portraits by the photographer Thomas Struth, each subject posed perfectly still for an hour before Mr. Struth's video camera, head and shoulders framed in square format. Evidence of time passing is visible only in strands of hair that flutter in the breeze, or in the light as it changes at the end of a day. Another photographer, Rineke Dijkstra, took portraits of teenagers in a rock club in Liverpool that present the same subject in split-screen still and video images.

"A filmed photograph stretches time, and in those often uncomfortable moments a lot happens," Ms. Tan said. "The viewer can see the embarrassment, the bewilderment and anger, or the curiosity and shyness due to the confrontation with the camera."

Photography and video both reflect the world as it looks to us, but when it comes to the way we experience the results, the two are different species. A photographic portrait captures a moment in time, and our response to it is shaded by the amount of time passed since it was taken. A video portrait records the passing of time, engaging us in an active, perpetual here and now. Ms. Tan's work insistently blurs that line — and, in the process, sharpens it.