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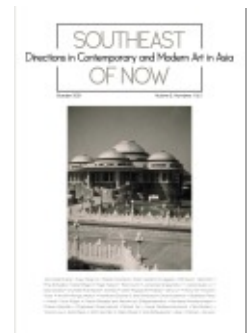
Mediating the Media: Politics and Place in Wei Leng Tay's Photo-Images

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Mediating the Media:

Politics and Place in Wei Leng Tay's Photo-Images

SOO-MIN SHIM

Sensationalist media images often become the face of political movements, protests and riots, as they are circulated by mainstream media outlets and corporations. Associated Press photographer Nick Ut's 1972 photograph of then nine-year-old Phan Thi Kim Phuc running from napalm bombs is now the associated image of the Vietnam War; Reuters journalist Jonathan Bachman's 2016 photograph of Ieshia Evans standing in front of police officers in riot gear in Louisiana established her as a symbol of the Black Lives Matter movement; and 2014 images of yellow umbrellas in Hong Kong flooding the streets became synecdochical for the ongoing struggle for democracy. These viral images as apparent snapshots of verisimilitude are often characterised by a hyper-real aesthetic and accompanied by sensationalist headlines. Exacerbated by an ever-growing attention economy, eliciting shock, scandal and virality may often be the pejorative for reporters.

At first glance, artist Wei Leng Tay's photographs seem to be extracted from the rooms of these news photojournalists. Her photograph *Article 23 protest II, Causeway Bay, 1/7/2003. Contact sheet, Kodak Portra 400VC negative film, 135mm* (2019) (Figure 1) depicts masses of protestors in Hong Kong in 2003, capturing the unrest against the controversial legislation after the

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FIGURE 1: ©Wei Leng Tay. *Article 23 protest II, Causeway Bay, 1/7/2003*. Contact sheet, Kodak Portra 400VC negative film, 135mm (2019). Digital c-print on Fujicolor Crystal Archive Paper, 28.125 × 50 cm. Installation view. Photograph by Jessica Maurer. Courtesy of the artist.

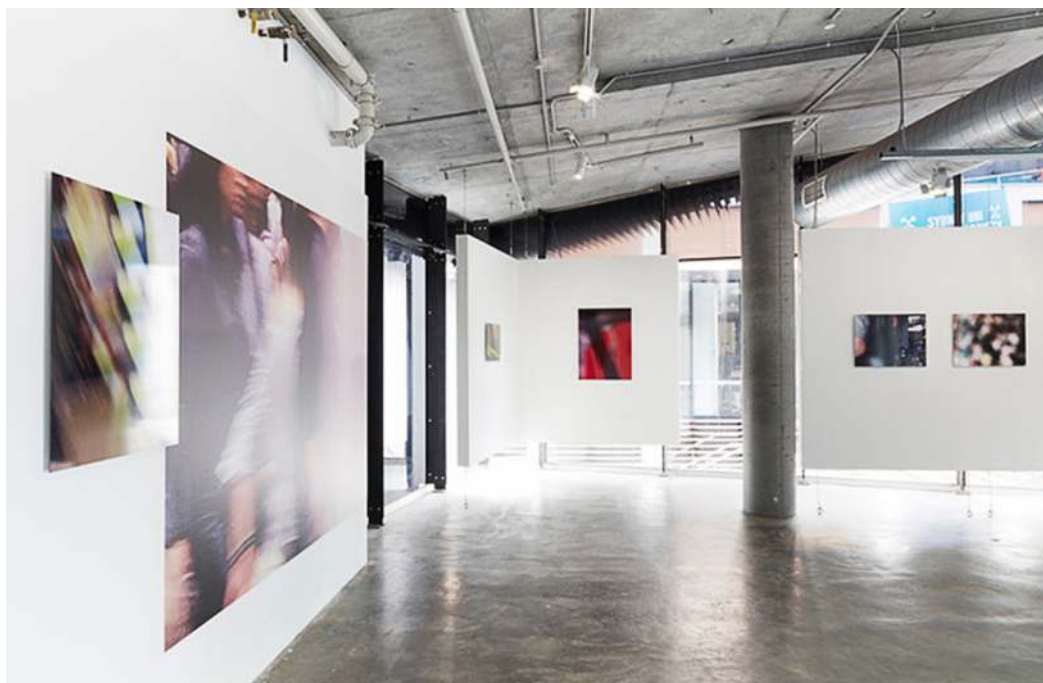


FIGURE 2: Installation view of *Abridge* at Verge Gallery. Photograph by Zan Wimberley. Courtesy of the artist and Verge Gallery.

handover of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China in 1997. Yet a glossy sheen obscures details of the location and disorients the viewer whilst the framing awkwardly amputates figures. Instead of protestors, the central focus of the composition is the black void that slices through the film negative strips. Similarly in *Article 23 protest I, Causeway Bay, 1/7/2003. Contact sheet, Kodak Portra 400VC negative film, 135mm* (2019), people are pixelated and only the crook of an elbow of an anonymous person peeking from the side of the frame suggests human action. Another layer of obscurity and manipulation is added by Tay's decision to shift between analogue and digital, re-photographing these film negatives using her iPhone and then re-printing them onto glossy C Print where they hung on the walls of her solo exhibition *Abridge* at Verge Gallery at the University of Sydney in 2021 (Figure 2). Curated by Olivier Krischer, a sense of unintelligibility and speculation informs the exhibition in contradistinction to the prescriptive bombast of more conventional photographs of political unrest as perpetuated by mainstream news organisations.

In this sense, perhaps we cannot call Tay's works photographs at all, but 'photo-images' as she exposes not just the referent or what is represented but *how* images are represented. In some works, the referent is completely dissolved as she fixates on the *surface* of images, such as in *Queen's Road Central II, 2003. Kodak E100VS slide film, 135mm* (2020), where only the film negative sprockets are made visible, rendering the surface of the photographic image visible, palpable and present (Figure 3). Hence, the titles of

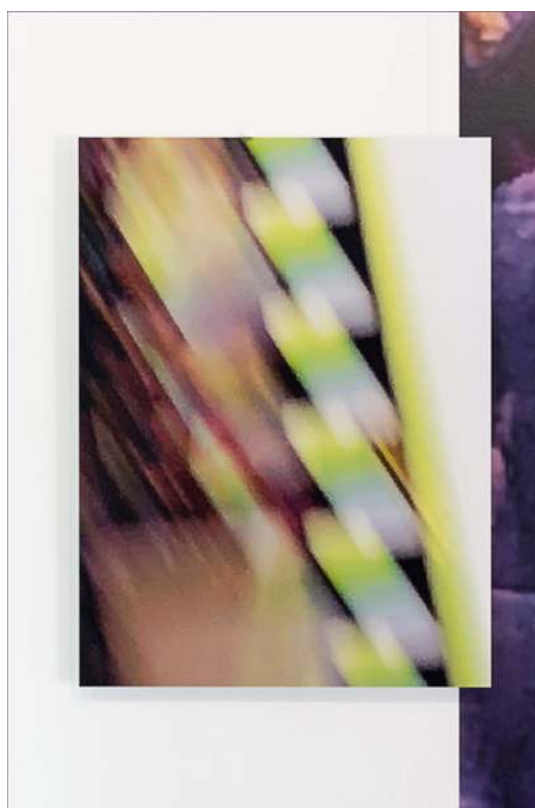


FIGURE 3: ©Wei Leng Tay. *Queen's Road Central II, 2003. Kodak E100VS slide film, 135mm* (2020). Digital c-print on Fujicolor Crystal Archive Paper, 80 × 60 cm. Installation view. Photograph by Jessica Maurer. Courtesy of the artist.

her photographs list the materials of the original images which become the subject of the images themselves. As academic Jonas Larsen writes, photography is not “a single fixed technology” but rather “a complex technological network in the making”.¹

Through photo-imagery, Tay presents a different way of envisioning politics, one that is thoroughly embodied, subjective and emotive. Whilst stereotypical media images are often bound in a meta-narrative of a nation state’s sentimentality or nostalgia, Tay’s works are abstracted. Catherine Zuromskis writes on nostalgia in photography as reductive, as images are “sanitised through the rhetoric of public memory and affect”.² It is possible to read Tay’s formalist approach as an attempt to counter a teleological narrative of Hong Kong’s history, privileging instead a palimpsestic approach where history is constructed of haptic and fleeting sensory encounters. Tay’s works are then reminiscent of Ariella Azoulay’s conception of photography as “civil imagination”, where photography is not a product or the transformation of an event into a picture, but rather an event, a meeting and a practice in itself, and “reconstructing that event requires more than just identifying what is shown in the photograph”.³ It is possible to extend Azoulay’s theory further in a consideration of Tay’s works; not only does she show photography as fluid but also place (specifically Hong Kong) as an event rather than a static and defined physical space. This concept is elucidated by Tay’s single-channel video *Bus ride, Hong Kong to Zhuhai, 28/1/2019* (2021) which is suspended to hover in the gallery space. In the video, Tay records a seemingly endless bus journey across the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge, where the destination and route is ambiguous. As buildings and roads pass, the city itself is presented as ever-shifting and evolving. Similarly an understated, quieter photograph *Missing sign, Kai Yuen Lane, date unknown. Fujifilm RVP100F slide film (Kodak E100VS slide film discontinued) 120mm* (2019), which depicts a fragment of a wall with crumbling paint, speaks to a transience of place.

On the one hand, this image may be informed by Tay’s specific experiences in Hong Kong post-handover in a particular time of political turmoil and loss. David Clarke in his book on art from Hong Kong post-handover 1997 writes that “photography also helps convey anxieties about loss”, as “this innate property of the medium, deriving from an indexical relation between photographic images and their subjects established at the moment of exposure is frequently exacerbated by Hong Kong photographers through a choice of subjects that are explicitly threatened with disappearance”.⁴

Yet many visitors may not even be able to place the image in Hong Kong due to its abstracted visual language. The curatorial decision to depict the

titles of the works on a small A4 piece of paper tucked away on one side of a narrow wall instead emphasises the abstraction of the photographs. Therefore, the contexts of the works whilst significant are somewhat minimised. Perhaps this is a deliberate choice to highlight how Tay's works are simultaneously informed by locality but also operate more broadly to speak on temporal impermanence, the obsolescence of technology and the fallibility of memory. Tay triangulates the degradation of all three to expose the flaws and pitfalls of any official History of Hong Kong or any place anywhere.

BIOGRAPHY

Soo-Min Shim is an arts writer living and working on stolen Ngunnawal and Ngambri land. She received her Bachelor of Art History and Theory (First Class Honours) from the University of Sydney and is currently undertaking a PhD in Art History and Theory at the Australian National University.

NOTES

- ¹ Jonas Larsen, "Practices and Flows of Digital Photography: An Ethnographic Framework", *Mobilities* 3, 1 (2008): 142.
- ² Catherine Zuromskis, "Ordinary Pictures and Accidental Masterpieces: Snapshot Photography in the Modern Art Museum", *Art Journal* 67, 2 (2008): 113.
- ³ Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), p. 14.
- ⁴ David Clarke, *Hong Kong Art: Culture and Decolonization* (London: Reaktion, 2001), p. 55.

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