

Speculative Materializations in Erika Tan's *Barang Barang: Spectral Entanglements* (2021)

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Abstract

Erika Tan's double screen video work *Barang Barang: Spectral Entanglements* (2021) imagines an impossible meeting between four women artists: Georgette Chen, Dora Gordine, Kim Lim and Fay Tan. Enabled by video technology, these four figures traverse the span of time and space, and lives lived across continents and in different epochs, to share their stories of creative feminist endeavour. Tan's film, like many of her media installations, stages a speculative space to ask far reaching questions on the gaps and ellipses of the colonial archive. The Malay term "barang barang," variously defined as "stuff," "bric-a brac," "freight" describes the convergence and circulation of objects that are in transit, unsorted and outmoded. This term could equally describe the lost and fading images and apparatus of the media archive, and the ways in which they might find new lives in a speculative fiction.

Keywords: "Barang barang;" Erika Tan; Georgette Chen; Dora Gordine; Kim Lim; Fay Tan; Archive; Presence; Media Archaeology; Temporal Drag

Abstract

L'opera video a due canali di Erika Tan, *Barang Barang: Spectral Entanglements* (2021), immagina un incontro impossibile tra quattro artiste: Georgette Chen, Dora Gordine, Kim Lim e Fay Tan. Grazie alla tecnologia video, queste quattro figure attraversano il tempo e lo spazio, e le vite vissute attraverso continenti ed epoche diverse, per condividere le loro storie di impegno creativo femminista. Il film di Tan, come molte delle sue installazioni multimediali, mette in scena uno spazio speculativo per porre domande di vasta portata sulle lacune e le ellissi dell'archivio coloniale. Il termine malese "barang barang", variamente definito come "roba", "cianfrusaglie", "merci", descrive la convergenza e la circolazione di oggetti in transito, non ordinati e obsoleti. Questo termine potrebbe anche descrivere le immagini e gli apparati perduti e in via di estinzione

dell'archivio mediatico, e i modi in cui potrebbero trovare nuova vita in una narrativa speculativa.

Parole chiave. “Barang barang”; Erika Tan; Georgette Chen; Dora Gordine; Kim Lim; Fay Tan; Archivio; Presenza; Archeologia dei media; Trascinamento temporale

1. Introduction

Entering Erika Tan’s exhibition *Barang Barang* at the Stanley Picker gallery in Kingston, south-west London, I am in a narrow passageway between gridded walls of metal shelving, on which are amassed an array of miscellaneous objects and receptacles. Neatly stacked varnished wooden boxes, plaster casts, bubble wrapped pictures and labelled VHS tapes don’t give much away about the purpose and provenance of these archived objects: wrapped, packed and inert (Fig. 1). But whilst these assorted containers withhold information about what lies inside, a passage of time is eloquently described across their surfaces. Date stamped and scuff-edged boxes evoke decades of wear and histories of changing innovations in packaging: from wood to plastic. Eschewing chronological arrangement, the objects in *Barang Barang* also follow no discernible temporal ordering, so that the distinctive yellow of Kodak slide sleeves from the recent past sit alongside the sculptural heads and packing cases of an earlier epoch.

Also suggestive in the scratches and dents, or the Chinese script on the side of some of the containers, is the past in motion, as these now becalmed objects whisper of circulations across cultures and continents. The term “barang barang,” as Wendy Teo explains in her exhibition essay, refers to the material detritus often left behind, or carried along in these currents: “commonly used to describe haphazard agglomerations of “stuff.” For instance, the clutter of bric-a-brac one might encounter and patiently sift through in a flea market” (Teo 2022). Tan takes this vernacular understanding of the term further, probing its etymology and cultural and linguistic emphases, to release other potent meanings. “‘Stuff’ or ‘belongings’ in Malay, also meaning freight. Khemer means ‘French.’ In Thai, a similar sounding ‘farang’ is used for ‘stranger’ or ‘foreigner,’ ‘white person,’ but also used to describe things that are imported. Filipino, Cebuano Language, it means ‘mythology’ and ‘magic’ or ‘malignant sorcery’” (Tan 2024).

The definitions she finds extend beyond exchanges in the trading of goods to encompass its human interactions and circulations. I think, for example, of how the word “belongings” identifies to a place or a people, as well to the ownership of things. Tan’s attention to these lexical shifts and transformations reflects her enduring scrutiny of the archive, and the critical address that she makes through her films and installations to its spectacularization of the colonial subject in museum and exhibition display. As she has discussed, in relation to a previous three screen film *Persistent Visions* (2005), made in response to the

moving image collection of the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol:

It is this “gap,” created by the “death” of significant connections, which I find of interest. The “gap” becomes a contested space, one I am interested in propping open, maintaining the breach; not only through an irreverence to the principles of *respect des fonds* (and by implication the original creators of the material I am sourcing), but through emphasizing the role of interpretation and the role of the viewer in relationship to the concept of the archive’s value and significance... For me the activity of “dis”-respecting the original order gives the archive possibilities of new changing and alternative purchases on “truth.” (Tan 2006, 70)

I am reminded of this objective to “(dis)respect,” as I encounter the archival melange of objects in the gallery at *Barang Barang*, where Tan’s destabilisation of chronological ordering draws to the surface new dialogues and insights through unexpected juxtapositions.

However, it’s important to stress the affective dimension particular to *Barang Barang*, in contrast to her earlier works on the archive such as *Persistent Visions*. For the *Wunderkammer* of objects which I peruse is an intensely personal archive, comprising of her own creative back catalogue and that of her mother: also an artist until her death in 2005. Thus, the question of how to “(dis)respect” the archive is given a further emotive charge when extended to the creative provenances of a mother and daughter, who are also implicated in cross-cultural and cross-country circulations between homes in Singapore and London. And here, chronology is entangled with familial memory and coloured by an archival custodianship always partial and subjective. What to do with all this stuff?

I have been slowly burning my mother’s art works to much consternation from curators, artists, and people outside my direct family. The process is seen as destructive, reducing of value and lacking in respect. Limited by the lack of space and financial means to archive the work properly and lacking an institutional “home” for this work (much produced in Singapore), my ambition has been to find a transformative or transgressive process by which the work can take on new significance or resonance. (Tan 2024)

Just as she turns over the word “barang barang” to find alternate derivations, so Tan challenges the connotation of destruction attached to the action of burning, making the case for fire’s significance in Asian cultures as a ritual of cleansing and preparation for the next life. She asserts that: “Burning, as with Chinese funerary rituals, can also be seen as a form of release and support for a new life. Within art practices, the notion of appropriation, re-use and the afterlife come to mind. Alongside burning my mother’s work, I have also been burning my own” (Tan 2024). A nod to her own part in this alternative model of archive practice is embedded amongst the shelves at *Barang Barang*, where a

small monitor plays a video of burning tea chests which had once formed part of Tan's 1998- 2001 installation, *From China to Chintz*.¹ This might be understood as a form of archival cataloguing, entered not in a ledger but made anew, and recirculated in dematerialized form, as video performance.



Figure 1. *Barang Barang* (Erika Tan, 2021). Exhibition entrance showing archival display, Stanley Picker Gallery, Kingston University, 17 February–9 April, 2022. Courtesy of the artist and Stanley Picker Gallery.

It is, as I shall discuss, a strategy that she brings to the cataloguing of Fay Tan's work too. Intergenerational rather than chronological, Erika Tan honours her mother's creative estate, but without detaching it from the complicated provenance of her own identification as fellow artist but also daughter. By inhabiting her mother's "barang barang" through her own creative interventions, often calling on feminist historiographies and reimaginings, she opens up the archive's potential to be a tangible, and unfixed entity, responsive to the visitor's contemporary encounter. As part of this process, the moving image operates across multiple registers in *Barang Barang*: as a recording device, a tool for speculative framing, as well as an archival object itself (those neatly stacked VHS cassettes).

1 For further details of *From China to Chintz* see: <https://www.erikatan.net/east-chintz-from-china-to-chintz>. Accessed July 1, 2025.

Tan's affective archiving processes resonate across different epistemologies and their associated modes of media analysis, whether archival, ethnographic, archaeological or museological. Speaking from the perspective of media archaeology, Vivan Sobchack reflects on the significance of *presence*, and how the overlooked media fragment might elicit "intense awareness," of a sensate past simultaneously irretrievable, but also always spectrally present in the everyday.

[...] at both ends of the discourse of presence—real, if partial, presence or illusory presence effect, existential encounter or its posthumous aftershock—the previous overlooked and unthought metonymic fragment or trace provokes intense awareness not only of an irrecoverable larger absence (conceived as "the past") but also of an existentially present "otherness" (recognised as a difference located in, yet distinguishable and distant from, the order of things that constitutes the everyday world we live intimately as "the present"). (Sobchack 2011, 326)

Sobchack's insights evoke for me Walter Benjamin's famous historical materialist revelation of a past triggered by an image or object, that "can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again" (Benjamin 1968, 255). The elusive—yet visceral—charge which both Sobchack and Benjamin intuit, as the object momentarily throws the patterns of the past into relief, is deeply at work throughout *Barang Barang*, surfacing in a number of different registers and provocations.

At first encounter, the passageway of neatly shelved objects gestures towards the immutable permanence embodied by the archive, where objects might survive intact and undisturbed on its catalogued shelves. Yet *Barang Barang*'s artfully lit display of disparate objects also resemble the props of cinematic *mise en scene*, so that its paint pots, plaster casts and video tapes might perhaps have been recently constructed as scene setting, prior to the appearance of fictional protagonists. Operating in an ambiguous space between fact and fabrication, *Barang Barang*'s disparate shelves of unnamed objects undermine any authoritative claim of timeless capture where, as Derrida has noted, "social order are exercised, in this place from which order is given" (Derrida 1996, 1). But for Tan this installation is not simply a mode of archival critique. Its allusions to staging and illusion foreground strategies that she explores in two key works also exhibited in *Barang Barang*: the video monitor installation *Pouring Milk (I)* and *(II)* (1990s/2021), which could be seen as co-authored with Fay Tan, and the two screen film *Barang Barang: Spectral Entanglements* (2022). In both cases the temporal and spatial fluidities of the moving image offer Tan a potent archiving tool, with the ability to trace impossible meetings across history and continents. Drawing to the fore the etymologic roots of "barang barang" in "magic" or "malignant sorcery" (Tan 2024), the spectral manifestations she conjures on-screen—as I will discuss—could be considered a speculative mode of making present, which might loosen the binds of the archive, and the colonial canons it continues to uphold.

2. Analogue Re-enactment

In the low-fi temporalities of analogue video Tan finds a generative tool for a close-grained study of her mother's creative process, where the operations of rewind and replay are reflected back through her own performative mimesis. Echoing the small screens which already flicker amongst the shelved objects in the exhibition's opening corridor, two monitors vertically stacked both depict a simple action akin to the task-like performances of video artists from the 1970s such as Joan Jonas or Martha Rosler. In an image of quiet minimalism, a figure in black pours milk from a white jug into a stack of white bowls, which rests on the curved edge of a marble table against a white wall (Fig. 2). The duration of the video is determined by the careful filling of each bowl which is then placed in a semi-circle with the jug. The two soundless videos, which both loop the performance of lifting and pouring until the bowls on the table are laid out full—before the process starts again—create an uncanny mirroring, not quite in sync. It becomes apparent that one is a performance to video-camera made in the 1990s by Fay Tan, which she produced whilst studying at Goldsmiths College of Art, on her return to London from Singapore. The other—using the same table, jug and bowls—is a recent re-enactment by Erika Tan which seeks to copy as exactly as possible her mother's earlier piece.



Figure 2. *Pouring Milk (I) and Pouring Milk (II)* (Fay Tan / Erika Tan, 1990s/2021). Single channel videos. Courtesy of the artist and Stanley Picker Gallery.

Tan's mimesis in *Pouring Milk (II)* (2021) creates an intimate choreography in dialogue with her mother's past performance. Writing in the context of historical re-enactment culture, Katherine Johnson touches on how, for its hobbyists, modes of re-enactment can be a connection to a past which they had not inhabited: "Re-enactors have described intense moments of felt historical connection—moments when they feel almost as if they were in the past or as if they really were, for a moment, the historically-inspired persona they perform" (Johnson 2019, 171). But these re-enactors seek to embody historic figures

separated from them not only by the distant past but through the characteristics gleaned from historic record rather than personal knowledge. By tracing her mother's performing body through her own, and by placing her new recording next to Fay Tan's original tape, Erika Tan joins in the same temporality of repeated gestures. Looping together on adjacent screens, at times their movements are almost in sync before losing register, to find it again, in a moving dance to reach each other across disparate time signatures.

By choosing to re-enact Fay Tan's video performance, Tan also acknowledges her mother for her status as a fellow artist, whose singular creativity—outside the bounds of her maternal role—she was still discovering as she sorted through her estate. Furthermore, the re-enactment of conceptual art and video practices of the 1960s and 1970s, with which *Pouring Milk (I)* shares its minimalist characteristics, have since emerged during the 2000s as a field of art practice in itself. For Sven Lütticken, a key exponent of this millennial phenomenon,² performative revisitation offered a means of “notation and mediation” (Lütticken 2022, 8) in order to access the authenticity of the original but from a different cultural context. Speaking critically of “re-imaginings” of Allan Kaprow's environments and happenings during a retrospective between 2006–08, Lütticken attributes the “normalized, bureaucratic versions” that emerged as in fact “an apt actualization, as it foregrounds the effects of institutionalization and the need to come to terms with the work under vastly different circumstances—situating it between then and now [...]” (Lütticken 2022, 9). In *Pouring Milk (II)* this appropriative model of re-enactment becomes less about assimilation than reconciliation across time, where the “then and now” meet in the looping replayed present of the double video work.

As a phenomenon which emerged to historicize art works resistant to archival conventions, being predicated on their ephemerality as performance and happenings, modes of restaging become—like *Pouring Milk (II)*—a way of getting closer to the processual properties of a performed work, including through the uneven documentation that might sometimes exist of its original iteration. As Lütticken observes, “If critics and scholars once treated the “actual” performance as a privileged event and relegated all mediations to secondary status, the process of mediation has now come to be seen as an integral element of performative practice. Oral and written accounts, film, and video are no longer seen as derivatives of the “real” artwork but provide access to it even while (re) shaping it” (Lütticken 2022, 10). This may be, as he infers, to account for the afterlives of what are now perceived as seminal art works of the last century. I would also add that we could detect in re-enactments by scholars, curators and artists alike a salvage impulse that might be recognized by anthropologists,

2 Lütticken was responsible for the seminal exhibition and associated catalogue (Lütticken 2005).

ethnographers and archaeologists. By committing them to record, cultural traces at risk of disappearance can be saved and their loss mitigated. Despite the problematic elements of salvage anthropology raised by James Clifford and others³, the salvage impulse echoes in Tan's earlier comments on the search for a transformative or transgressive means of archiving her mother's estate.

But in lieu of preservation Tan chooses re-presentation. Her approach differs from the reprisals of historical performance works discussed by Lütticken in two ways. Firstly, the two-screen video work asserts an intergenerational dialogue which does not privilege one work over another. Erika Tan's mirroring gestures are set up in wordless, rhythmic adjacency to Fay's performance, instead of the former coming to stand in for the latter. As a response to Fay's original performance *Pouring Milk (II)* neither subsumes it into a new work, nor stands in obeisance. Joined in equal, rhythmic syncopation, mother and daughter occupy the same performative present, across the timespan of some thirty years.

Secondly, the ability afforded by analogue video replay to leap this temporal chasm is marked in a temporal rhythm quite different from the more advanced digital moving image in which Erika Tan records her re-enactment. But whilst the operations of circular looping, record, copy, replay and erasure available to 1990s video technology may now seem limited, in the context of the *Pouring Milk...* double installation they emit a rich and multi-layered manifestation of time, with profound metaphorical implications. The textural patina of degrading tape can be traced in the fuzzy edges of de-lacing image as Fay Tan lifts her jug. Likewise a slight halo of light behind her, and the loss of detail in her fingers on the handle, suggest an entropy of the image which reflects the fading presence of Fay herself. Sobchack understands this ability for the material present of media technology to transcend notation when she notes that, "Presence, then, emerges not at the level of narrative and meaning but in meticulous *description*, which is, as potentially endless, always metonymically partial and open—and prior to the summary comprehension accomplished first by name and then by interpretation" (Sobchack 2011, 326). Spoken not in words but through the static on the looping tape, this sense of loss in *Pouring Milk* is movingly transmitted.

It is also important to remind the reader that *Pouring Milk (II)* refuses the reproductive properties so characteristic of media technology, in favor of a poor copy made through human performance. Rather than deciding to digitally preserve her mother's video performance to camera as a means of archival safeguarding, Tan has chosen instead to re-record (re-master?) it through her own inexact and painstaking bodily repetitions. In this regard she has become a video copy herself, but one which goes beyond technological mimesis to a deeper,

3 For a delineation of this methodology and the arguments raised around it see (Clifford 1989, 73–78).

affective mode of embodiment. In his study of “bodily practices” the social anthropologist Paul Connerton delineates performative acts as “mnemonic systems.” As he explains: “Many forms of habitual skilled remembering illustrate a keeping of the past in mind that, without ever adverting to its historical origin, nevertheless re-enacts the past in our present conduct. In habitual memory the past is, as it were, sedimented in the body” (Connerton 1989, 73). Connerton extrapolates this “past in the present” through three distinct but connected bodily practices, which are worth delineating here for the insight they offer into the interplay of bodies—human and technological—in the conjoined videos of *Pouring Milk*....

Connerton conceives of practices of “inscription,” where a performance is used to facilitate “modern devices for storing and retrieving information” such as writing or speaking. In contrast, “commemorative” and “incorporating practices” involve the body in forms of remembering at different degrees of awareness. Connerton’s concept of “commemorative ceremonies” introduces the notion of codes of behaviour modelled through the experience of past events, often of a formal nature, such as religious festivals or ceremonial events. He explains them as: “[...] re-enactments of the past, its return in a representational guise which normally includes a simulacrum of the scene or situation recaptured” (Connerton 1989, 72). The mode of “incorporating practices” re-enact learnt performances which are integrated into the everyday almost unconsciously. As he points out: “We may not remember how or when we first learned to swim, but we can keep on swimming successfully—remembering how to do it—without any representational activity on our part at all” (Connerton 1989, 72).

In my view all three modes of bodily practice play across Fay Tan’s *Pouring Milk* and Erika Tan’s affective copy of it. Both artists attend to the creation—or inscription—of the video work itself, and to the performance of pouring milk: a daily task so habituated as to be unconsidered. But the ritualized commemorative re-enactment of that same incorporating act, brings an additional gravity and attentiveness to Erika Tan’s performance. It is as if the everyday gesture of pouring is now leavened with a necessary significance, not only for its inscriptive emphasis as an art performance, but also as a formalized gesture of remembrance, which like the burning of boxes and her mother’s paintings, performs a rite of passage. The subtle interplay of these differently nuanced performances of remembering express time as a dynamic process, where the act of pouring milk—endlessly repeated, doubled and replayed—might loosen the reifications of past and present to activate a different sort of archive. I might also add a fourth bodily practice to Connerton’s grouping: that of the gestures incorporated through the slow affective filter of family relations and memories. Almost imperceptibly, I would argue, codes of family behavior are sedimented through years of interactions: meal times, jokes, arguments, stories. Could Erika Tan’s

careful mimesis be a way to trace, and commit to video memory, the particularities of her mother's posture, in which she might find her own already mirrored through a life lived together, as an embodied familial archive?

An additional element introduced by Erika Tan into her reenactment in *Pouring Milk (II)* recalibrates its familial dimension further. For it is not milk that Tan pours from her mother's jug during her re-performance but latex. Extending the metaphor in the work's catalogue description, Tan explains how she replaces the milk used in Fay's performance with latex in her "attempts to stretch these references of family and motherhood" (Tan 2022). Indeed, resonant associations of maternal nurture might already be drawn from the doubled video portrait of mother and daughter simultaneously pouring milk. But what Tan is stretching is the benign metaphor of mother's milk towards a more corrosive narrative, which undermines the familial intimacy of *Pouring Milk* with allusions to more violent power relations wrought by colonial rule in Malaysia, where rubber latex was an important crop of colonial extraction. In the *Barang Barang* exhibition book, I note a photograph of a colonial era botanist (Henry Nicholas Ridley) tapping a rubber tree, which Tan has solarised so that he shines white against the tree he taps. The image was exhibited at an earlier iteration of "Barang Barang" in 2021–22, when it formed part of the exhibition "Art Histories of a Forever War: Modernism between Space and Home," Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taiwan.⁴ For Tan's Kingston show, the photograph is positioned next to a page of text, also solarized white words on black, taken from the influential philosopher, historian and politician Syed Hussein Alatas's influential book during Malaysia and Singapore's struggle for autonomy, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and Its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism* (1977). As Tan explains in her labelling, "The material histories of coir and latex emphasise conflicting labour relations between the British and their Malayan subjects. Alatas traces how these relationships carry over time various ideas around race and productivity" (Tan 2024). Tan's choice to solarize the incriminating colonial image and the page of "Alatas" text signals how this shadow history of colonial violence continues to exert its spectral presence with a material force. Tan exposes it—quite literally—through her solarized photographs, but also materially embeds it in her work. Returning to Connerton, it could be argued that incorporating practices have the potential to contain a sinister colonial dimension: where inattentive actions include the normalization of colonial values, of lazy workmen. And where the ritual practice of pouring reveals the material abundance of goods of colonial extraction unwitting consumed.

4 Curated by Kathleen Ditzig and Hsu Fang-Tze. October 2021 to February 2022.

3. “Temporal Drag” and the “Presence Effect”

The question which permeates all elements of “Barang Barang”—and for which Fay Tan provides the anchor—asks how women artists negotiated the shifting freedoms and constraints offered by colonial circulations and their legacy across Asia and Europe through the twentieth century. In the two-screen film at the heart of the exhibition, *Barang Barang: Spectral Entanglements* (2022), the intimate domestic scale of *Pouring Milk* is turned outwards to a larger cast of characters and introduces a more explicit feminist advocacy to Tan’s investigation of colonial extraction, mobilities and over-looked histories traced between Britain and Asia.

In the case of *Spectral Entanglements*, (Fig. 3) its four protagonists are known to art history through the paintings, sculptures and ceramics that have accrued, in some cases with increasing value placed upon them by art history and the art market. Like Fay they traversed different geo-political contexts in their journeys between Singapore and London. Georgette Chen (Chang Li Ying) (1906 Paris/China, 1993 Singapore) began her career as an artist in Paris and the United States, before coming to Singapore via Hong Kong, China and Malaysia, where she settled in Singapore from the 1950s, teaching at the Nanyang Fine Art Academy, and painting landscapes, portraits and still lifes. Dora Gordine (1895 Latvia, 1991 London) grew up in Estonia of Latvian heritage, training as a sculptor in 1920s Paris followed by Singapore, where she specialized in sculptural heads of Asian figures. She settled in London in the 1930s in Dorich House, a modernist studio and house built for her in Kingston Vale, and now part of the University estate close by the Stanley Picker Gallery. Kim Lim (1936 Singapore, 1997 London) came from Malaysia to London to study at St Martins School of Arts in 1954, where she remained until her death: a working artist married to the sculptor William Turnbull.



Figure 3. *Spectral Entanglements* (Erika Tan, 2021). Still from video.
Courtesy of the artist and Stanley Picker Gallery.

The trajectories of each artist may be sketched through countries, domiciles, workplaces, exhibition lists and reviews, yet their more intimate thoughts on making art, and how their geographies, gender and place in society might constrain it, remain little known. In the conversations which Tan orchestrates between them, they compare experiences, share anecdotes, memories of making work and of where they had lived, from Paris to Singapore and London. Though their meetings, conversations and monologues in the film are speculated, their words were drawn from and shaped by biographical materials such as archives, interviews, published texts. Rather than fiction, Tan refers to her approach as “apa jika” meaning “what if” in Malay, which is also the title of her film and installation *Apa Jika, The Mis-Placed Comma*, about another overlooked artist, Halimah Binti Abdullah, a Malayan weaver who participated in the 1924 British Empire Exhibition in London.⁵ Tan takes inspiration from Saidiya Hartman’s concept of “critical fabulation,” which challenges the absence of subaltern histories through acts of reimagining: “a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history written with and against the archive” (Hartman 2008, 12). Hartman’s speculative approach offers a way to write back into history those effaced stories and unheard voices—of the enslaved, the working class, women, first nations—which have never been written.

Following Hartman, Tan makes the speculative tangible and embodied through her interposition of cinematic staging to create “a space in which other truths might exist—in the past, present, and future” (Tan 2024) Encountered through the narrative momentum of the moving image, the artists are brought off the academic page and out of archival storage, to inhabit their stories in a palpable spectatorial experience that overrides art historical mediations. The four⁶ come together in the drawing room of Dorich House, Dora Gordine’s studio and residence, now open to the public and part of the University of Kingston, and a location which Tan was able to access as part of her 2018 Stanley Picker fellowship. For although Tan is clear that *Spectral Entanglements* is not a fiction, it is the story-telling conventions of fiction film-making that offer a means of convincing convergence across epochs and continents for the viewer.

The “total world of the story action” which David Bordwell refers to as “diegesis” (Bordwell 2016, 76) enables Tan to create a compelling onscreen space for the viewer. Whilst the rules of “classic narrative” in cinema have been much challenged and complicated since they were first articulated in the 1970s⁷, the

5 For more details on *Apa Jika, The Mis-Placed Comma* see <https://www.erikatan.net/videos>. Accessed July 18, 2025.

6 The four artists were played in *Spectral Entanglements* by Eugenia Law (Georgette Chan), Lucia Tong (Kim Lim), Cathy McManamon (Dora Gordine) and Emma Vansittart (Fay Tan).

7 More famously expounded in (Bordwell et al. 1988). In recent years Bordwell revised his analysis of film narrative in relation to developments in cinema and film studies, see Bordwell

creation of a convincing world making remains central to drawing the cinematic viewer into a film. This world, as film studies tells us, is “governed by verisimilitude, then, rather than by documentary-style realism” (Kuhn 2007, 45). A number of factors are necessary to hold the viewer’s attention, as Annette Kuhn explains: “The narration ensures that a fictional world, understandable and believable to the recipient of the story is set up. Verisimilitude may be a feature of the representation of either, or preferably both, the spatial location of events in the narrative and the temporal order in which they occur” (Kuhn 2007, 45). In the case of *Spectral Entanglements* the spatial location of Dora Gordine’s studio home, Dorich House, enables the different temporalities of the artists to co-exist across the same spatial plane.

This is a fragile verisimilitude however, for the rendering of a coherent mise-en-scène—where the setting, actors, costume and staging inhabit the same world—is clearly subject to inconsistencies carefully crafted by Tan in her choice of costume and actors. Each of the artists appears to wear clothes which mix their era with the contemporary (I note Georgette’s jeans below her cheongsam style silk shirt). They also inhabit particular decades from their lives with no apparent sequential logic. Kim Lim and Georgette Chen are portrayed as their younger selves, in comparison to Fay Tan and Dora Gordine. One collective activity attempts to re-stage gestures from the famous Chinese painting by Emperor Hui Tsung *Ladies Preparing Silk*, an ancient Chinese painting of women weaving silk, but reveals itself as the assemblage and erecting of flat-packed furniture: in both playful riposte to the idealisation of Chinese women as well as an allusion to the performance of packing and unpacking which runs throughout “Barang Barang.” Like the archival melange in the exhibition’s opening corridor, in *Spectral Entanglements* the sequential temporalities required to maintain cinematic verisimilitude and diegetic continuum are subtly disordered and undermined.

These diegetic displacements also serve an allegorical purpose. The anachronisms which rupture the viewer’s immersion in the fictional world onscreen raise the ghosts of difficult or unspoken histories. The queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman has characterized this as “temporal drag.” Specifically formulating the term through the episteme of queer time, performativity and its archiving, Freeman posits the artist Sharon Hayes’ singular re-enactments of past protests *In the Near Future* (2005), where she revisits the original site of the protest, standing alone with a placard. For Freeman, “[...] in this moment of the performance her body looks less like a historicizing *détournement* than corporeal and sartorial recalcitrance [...]. I’d like to call this “temporal drag” with all the associations that the word “drag” has with retrogression, delay, and the pull of

and David (2022, 16–28). For a history of different approaches to narrative theory, see Cook and Pam (2019).

the past on the present” (Freeman 2010, 61–62). Freeman’s concept, theorized within the wider discourses around the writing of lesbian, queer and feminist histories, has much to offer as an insight into how corporeal anachronisms of performance, costume, setting might create a diegetic dissonance and allegorical charge, which calls suppressed histories and silenced subjects into the contemporary. As she argues: “Exteriorized as a mode of bodily adornment or even habitus, temporal drag may offer a way of connecting queer performativity to disavowed political histories” (Freeman 2010, 65).

With this in mind, we can trace examples of “temporal drag” in traditions of radical documentary filmmaking. Jonathan Rosenbaum sees Peter Watkins’ *Le Commune, Paris 1871* (1999) as not “so much a realistic re-creation of anything as it is a dialogue between past and present, with each time frame used to shape and define the other” (Rosenbaum 2002). He is referring to the uncanny effect of history represented as a temporal drag where contemporary film crew are glimpsed in the nineteenth century attired crowd, whilst costumed news reporters address the viewer with microphones in hand. Other filmmakers of the radical left during the 1970s, sought like Watkins to bring visibility to working class and feminist struggles through temporal anachronisms, Jonathan Curling and Sue Claydon’s *The Song of the Shirt* (1979) collided costumed reconstructions of conditions for women in the 1840s rag-trade with current day urban settings and contemporary speech. More recently, a mode of temporal drag can be traced in the films of John Akomfrah, where in works such as *Vertigo Sea* (2015) costumed figures pace contemporary landscapes, invoking crimes of colonial extraction and enslavement once sited there.

As these works intend, temporal drag creates a jolt of revelation and a different level of engagement with the histories represented and the ideologies underpinning them. Freeman recognizes the potential in temporal drag to trouble—and thus apprehend—the past through the corporeal. Indeed, in making her argument she touches on Benjamin’s historical materialist flash of history as a forebear: “This call for a more sensate, sensory historical method also appears in other important critical theories, whether explicitly Marxist or not: Walter Benjamin’s concept of ‘shock’ for instance, suggests that modernity reorganizes the human sensorium. Raymond William’s phrase ‘structures of feeling’ suggests that social change can be felt as well as cognitively apprehended, and that it appears alongside dominant structure in the uncanny persistence of obsolete formations and the proleptic, partial emergence of new ones” (Freeman 2010, 9–10).

The artists in *Spectral Entanglements* might themselves be understood as “barang barang”: temporal fragments traversing a geo-political terrain that stretches beyond their lifetimes, plunging back into the past and then resurfacing in the contemporary encounter in the gallery. As Georgette confides, she is the product of “four world events, two Chinese revolutions and two world wars, and multiple leavings and arrivals.” Whereas for Dora or Fay, it was the pressures

of patriarchy and social standing which impelled their departures from familial homes: “leave or be caged.” Their words, extrapolated from Tan’s research, may be speculative but they help convey the complexities and ambivalences of mobilities which are simultaneously cosmopolitan and precarious.

From a feminist perspective *Spectral Entanglements* could be seen as an act of enunciation and advocacy, when the contribution of women artists—particularly those of Asian heritage and from the global south—still remains occluded in histories of modernism (Andrews 2020, 19–64; Su Ling Welland 2018). Alongside the depiction of their collective encounters, Tan presents each artist in a separate monologue, facing the viewer to recount their story in a diegetic rupture of filmic immersion. Also known in narratology as “metalepsis,” this stepping out of the narrative fabric into the domain of the viewer, entails a transgressive shift from one narrative address to another, known more commonly in both film and theatre as breaking the fourth wall. In this trespass from the diegesis on-screen to the contemporary space of the viewer, *metalepsis* provides a powerful and unmediated assertion of each artist’s practice. However, that this is always posited as a transgressive act of breaking diegetic barriers could be seen as a subtle critique on Tan’s part, concerning the continued barriers to artists working outside western contexts and the canonic art discourses they support. As she says, “The work speculates, labouring to create value where none was previously acknowledged, pushing back received histories to uncover the structures and ideologies underpinning them, and to create space for future interpretations” (Tan 2024). These ideologies and structures are made tangible in the rows of modernist-infused Asian heads presented in Dora Gordine’s studio (Fig. 4). Once celebrated in Singapore for her depiction of Asian characters, their reifying inscription of orientalism is challenged in the speculative gaze of Georgette and Kim.

Tan’s words also recall Sobchack’s insights on the role of presence, or “presence effect,” elicited by the overlooked media object, as “both familiar and strange” (2011, 235): “In the case of media archaeology, an overlooked media artifact (whether realized or only imagined and/or schematized) seems, at once, both familiar and strange. Thus, its suddenly ‘being here’ (and, all along, having ‘been there’) produces a ‘presence effect’ that is capable of overturning the premises (and comprehension) of established media hierarchies and media histories... some uncanny—and punctual—experience of re-cognition” (235).

Sobchack’s hyphen in the word “re-cognition” is apposite here. There is a temporal dimension to the act of recognition, in the short pause or hesitation before a remembered face, song or house comes into familiar focus. Sobchack’s hyphen invests the word with a deeper slower resonance, suggesting a process of apprehension which reveals difficult, unknown and unimagined pasts latent in an object that now seems banal, innocent, even obsolete. Following Benjamin, Hartman and Freeman, Tan’s archiving processes of disordering,

re-enactment and “apa jika” reveal difficult provenances behind the objects, bodies and art which she makes present through her moving image works. But “Barang Barang”—as its etymological derivations of stuff, freight, strangers and magic signal—also proposes an unfixing of the archive, opening it to different temporalities and mobilities. And bringing to it a new affective and feminist dimension.



Figure 4. *Spectral Entanglements* (Erika Tan, 2021). Georgette Chan (Eugenia Low) confronts an Asian Head sculpture by Dora Gordine in her home studio at Dorich House. Courtesy of the artist and Stanley Picker Gallery.

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