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Angela Zito

Performing Reading

In late summer of 2010, I volunteered to report on my rereading of *positions* for its use of images over what was at that time an eighteen-year run. Fulfilling this promise turned into a joyfully tactile appreciation of the journal's objecthood and a moment of sentimental attachment to the book on paper (figure 1). Since 2004, I have been involved in shooting, editing, and curating documentary film in China. Thus much of what I spend my time doing turns out to be hard to convey in writing. Yet I remain committed to the journal and to the journal form as an excellent forum for presenting scholarly work. Here I will try to think further about why that is so, and how suspending myself deliberately between images and texts helped me to understand that commitment.

Reading as watching: I tried to reverse the cliché that film is a text to



Figure 1 Issues of the journal

be read. Instead of watching as a kind of reading (film equals text), as an experiment, I wanted to think about how reading through the journal this time felt like a kind of film watching, watching the unreeling of the text/image/text as the pages flipped. (Remember that I was going through issues quickly at first, then zooming in for a close-up look, rewinding, and reading around and along (figure 2).¹

What we see, and what we get: The cliché “What you see is what you get” could not be more wrong. First, it demands rewriting in the plural (“What *we* see is what *we* get”) because we are a community of writers and readers. Second, “what we get” will always exceed “what we see.” This is so because each reader’s own sensorium has inputs beside the visual that are extremely difficult to encode as repeatable for others: sound, smell, and touch, the haptic senses, are literally available through media that cannot be “read” except through metaphorical description. Thus “what we get” regularly exceeds



Figure 2 Video still of the author paging through Miriam Silverberg, “Remembering Pearl Harbor, Forgetting Charlie Chaplin, and the Case of the Disappearing Western Woman: A Picture Story,” *positions* 1:1 (1993): 24–76

“what we see” as a truism of brain physiology. But the value is overfull precisely because we *are* a community; we write and read together and we see, and get, different things from these processes. The text amplifies the argument even as the image supplements the text. And the relationship between text and image ever remains gloriously uncontrollable and an object of social negotiation.

Anyone reading this essay probably reads a great deal, and a great deal has been theorized about reading. The book, the bastion of privacy, the instigator of a kind of interiority always linked to the Reformation—each man with his own Bible, each man holding the voice of God in his hands, conveyed to his mind’s reading eye. (And this early European engagement was profoundly gendered.)

The books, which we stack and dust, buy on the Internet, carry around, give away, celebrate, hate, haul around; the books over which we dislocate shoulders; the books we read in gardens, secret gardens, or wield as a guarantor of privacy in public places. The books . . . At *positions*, we are in the book business—sort of. For a journal is a special, timed, repetitive sort of book. Ours certainly would never be mistaken for a magazine—it is hefty, squat, and requires stamina to get through. A fellow member of the edi-

torial collective confessed to me that it only recently occurred to her that people did not read it through, like a novel. Many of *positions*' special issues have morphed into books—and we know this, frankly, only because they are subject to a different distribution and marketing campaign. As object, the journal closely approaches “book.” (Indeed, one can argue that they are books by that arbiter of late capitalist reality, marketing and distribution. They have an ISBN number . . .)

So I went through each of the fifty-four issue-books of the journal in the autumn of 2010. I was after images, but I was, of course, slowed down by the text that eddied around them, and I did some reading and rereading. In fact, one might say that I was distracted by text in my image hunting, and that led me to contemplate how the image interrupts, punctuates, and intensifies the text. These are the successful moments I want to talk about here. What I write here is a bit nostalgic—some imagistic greatest hits—but in service of something else.

Where the image's gestures animate, supplement, and haunt the written text, we find the edge of our critical practice, an edge that reminds me of director Andrei Tarkovsky's point when he says, “How does time make itself felt in a shot? It becomes tangible when you sense something significant, truthful, going on beyond the events on the screen; when you realize, quite consciously, that what you see in the frame is not limited to the visual depiction, but is a pointer to something stretching out beyond the frame to infinity; a pointer to life.”² The journal, like the framed shot, has its limitations. Much (if not most) of what is worth analyzing in social life remains abstract (for example, changes in ways of thinking), intractable (such as shifts in class power dimensions), and invisibly structured (capital in various manifestations). Without sustained effort to materialize analysis (in written and oral language, in images, still and moving, in diagrams and tables), no critique or even understanding would be possible. Even then, critique remains a visible gesture toward a larger problem “beyond the frame.” This communal working at discursive constitution through cultural performativity might describe the journal's critical mission. The labor is made especially visible when the object of an essay is the ephemerality of performance itself.

For example, Boreth Ly's essay “Of Performance and the Persistent Temporality of Trauma: Memory, Art, and Visions”³ provides an instantiation

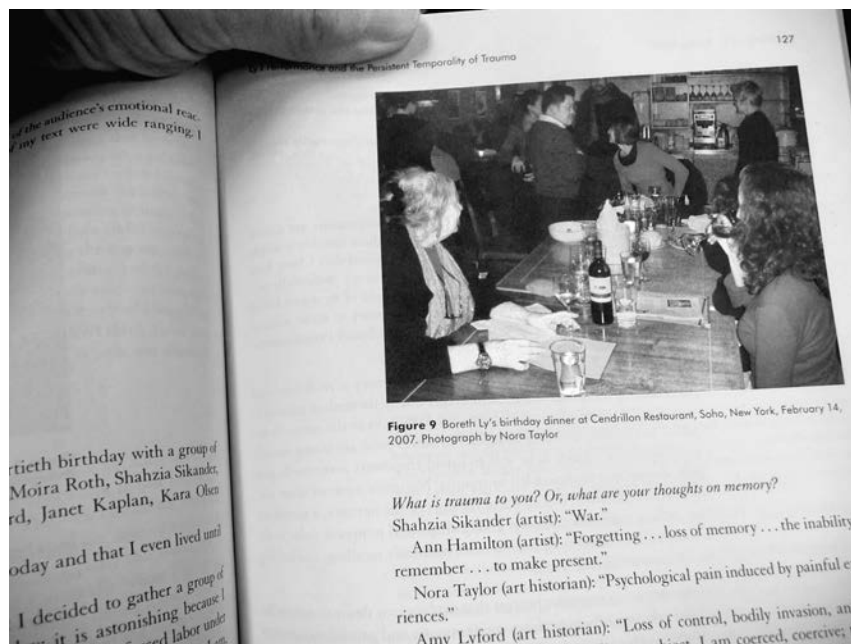


Figure 3 Boreth Ly's birthday party, from Ly, "Of Performance and the Persistent Temporality of Trauma: Memory, Art, and Visions," *positions* 16:1 (2008): 109–130

of such limits as he recounts what he felt during a performance of his piece, "A Wound (Room) of One's Own." He calls what he gave the journal a "performative text," something combining analysis, diary entries he read at the performance, photographs that were shown, and descriptions of audience reactions he saw. The mixture of first and third person address, the use of present and past tenses, and the interspersions of black and white photographs of various "pasts" of childhood and scenes in Phnomh Penh press us to recognize this trauma that refuses to remain framed as only the past. An especially surprising moment occurs when we turn the penultimate page to see that a final photograph, a candid of his fortieth birthday party, is in color. We are slightly shocked at its warmth. Our shock mimics his astonishment at having lived to see forty. And no one in the photo is looking at the camera; they all remain within the frame, looking at one another (figure 3).

Ly has carefully constructed this frame for himself and us, “giving structure to these events that now live outside time. Trauma will remain forever unpredictable and haunting.”⁴ Here the image condenses an essential attraction Ly must make us feel for the circumstances he presents. We are drawn into the present(ed) frame, only to realize that the pain and danger lurk forever just beyond each careful frame he, and we, make.

I like to think that, over the years of the production of *positions*, we have formed a critical practice that intends toward the world in this fashion. This world is now one that ironically requires reading in a new demanding register: the digital realm of the Web adds another sort of punitive exclusion to the illiterate, even as it abandons the print book.

So I turn to this precious archive as one that needs to be redefined even as we appreciate it. How might we reimagine the performance of our writing and reading in the future production of the journal?

Figure 2 is a video still of my paging through Miriam Silverberg’s wonderful essay “Remembering Pearl Harbor, Forgetting Charlie Chaplin, and the Case of the Disappearing Western Woman: A Picture Story.”⁵ Miriam called her essay “a picture story” and used an astonishing thirty-eight images in *positions*’ inaugural issue (figure 4). She discussed Japan’s prewar fantasies and the meanings attached to Chaplin’s visit there. She termed this writing a form of “associative history,” and it was not, according to her, comparative. She wanted to draw attention to how the history of the racialized politics in prewar and wartime Japan must be associated with the stories and pictures we are still hearing and seeing about racial hatred among Europeans and US citizens against Japan. She was interested in the issue of the absorption into the interior by conquest of the exterior cultural Otherness and the role of images in this.

Silverberg’s essay also inaugurates a style that I would call “see my sources.” One cannot provide the actual archival textual sources or the fieldnotes, but often, when an essay has as its subject some specific material objects—things, photos, texts such as newspapers—readers are treated to a fair and close look for themselves. Examples include toy Barbie dolls from “Traveling Barbie: Indian Transnationality and New Consumer Subjects” by Inderpal Grewal, and the children’s drawings from Andrew F. Jones’s “The Child as History in Republican China: A Discourse on Development” (figure 5).



Figure 4 Cover of the inaugural issue, featuring a photo from Silverberg’s essay

Hugh Shapiro’s “Puzzle of Spermatorrhea in Republican China” contains nine ads. (The journal has done a good deal of work on advertising.) The images reproduce the ads at a high enough resolution to make the Chinese legible—and thus are not simply illustrative proofs of Shapiro having been in the archive (figure 6). Instead, this sharing of the actual object of analysis fearlessly invites readers to join our analytic moves closely and thereby participate in the labor of the production of knowledge. The journal’s many examples attest that such an invitation is a primary motivation for the use of images; the journal has few examples of “illustrations.” Showing film stills to accompany a film analysis cannot quite accomplish the same thing, and therefore down the electronic line, working with hyperlinked versions of print essays that would allow clips seems a logical development of this visual generosity.

Figure 5 Barbies, from Inderpal Grewal "Traveling Barbie: Indian transnationality and new consumer subjects," *positions* 7:3 (1999): 811; and the drawing, from Andrew F. Jones, "The Child as history in Republican China: A discourse on development." 10:3 (2002): 697

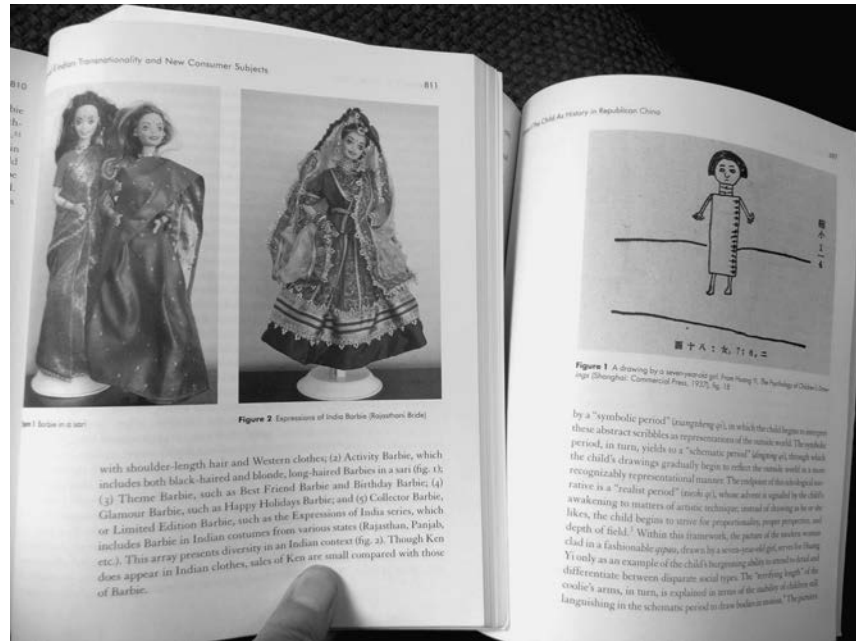


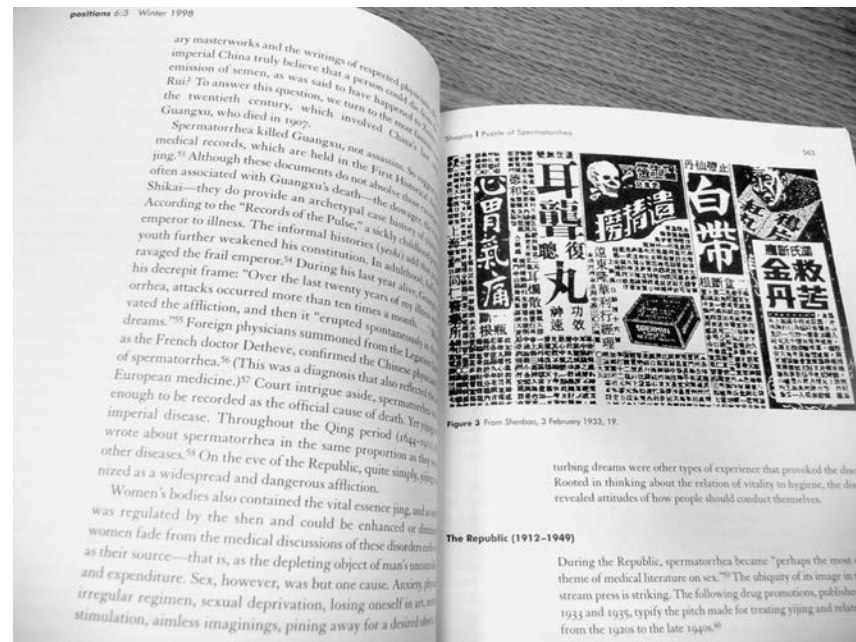
Figure 1 A drawing by a seven-year-old girl from Hsing Yü, *The Paradox of Colonial China* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1923), fig. 12

Figure 2 Expressions of India Barbie (Rajasthan, India)

Figure 1 A drawing by a seven-year-old girl from Hsing Yü, *The Paradox of Colonial China* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1923), fig. 12

Figure 2 Expressions of India Barbie (Rajasthan, India)

Figure 6 Ad for controlling nocturnal emissions from *Shenbao* in Hugh Shapiro, "The Puzzle of Spermatorrhea in Republican China," *positions* 6:3 (1998): 551–96



ary masterworks and the writings of respected physicians in imperial China truly believe that a person could control the emission of semen, as was said to have happened to the emperor of the twentieth century, who turns to the most famous physician of Guangxu, who died in 1907.

Spermatorrhea killed Guangxu, not assassins. The medical records, which are held in the First Historical Archives of Beijing,³³ Although these documents do not absolve those often associated with Guangxu's death—the dowager empress, Empress Dowager Shikai—they do provide an archetypal case history of an emperor to illness. The informal histories (yishi) add that the emperor's youth further weakened his constitution. In adulthood, he was ravaged the frail emperor.³⁴ During his last year alive, he suffered from spermatorrhea, attacks occurred more than ten times a month. He had frequent dreams.³⁵ Foreign physicians summoned from the Legations of European medicine.³⁶ (This was a diagnosis that also reflected the extent to which the official cause of death, spermatorrhea, was considered an imperial disease. Throughout the Qing period (1644–1911), spermatorrhea was written about in the same proportion as they were about other diseases.³⁸ On the eve of the Republic, quite simply, spermatorrhea was considered a widespread and dangerous affliction.

Women's bodies also contained the vital essence jing, and as such were regulated by the shen and could be enhanced or diminished. Women were often the medical discussions of these disorders, as their source—that is, as the depleting object of man's interest and expenditure. Sex, however, was but one cause. A strict, irregular regimen, sexual deprivation, losing oneself in an aimless pursuit of stimulation, aimless imaginings, pining away for a desired

Figure 3 From *Shenbao*, 3 February 1932, 19.

turbing dreams were other types of experience that provoked the disease. Rooted in thinking about the relation of vitality to hygiene, the disease revealed attitudes of how people should conduct themselves.

The Republic (1912–1949)

During the Republic, spermatorrhea became "perhaps the most of theme of medical literature on sex."³⁸ The ubiquity of its image in the stream press is striking. The following drug promotions, published in 1933 and 1935, typify the pitch made for treating yijing and related conditions from the 1920s to the late 1940s.³⁹

Images over Words

Paola Zamperini and Tina Mai Chen edited the special issue “Fabrications” in Fall 2003. The issue is rich in “see my sources” style images, but it also produces them in ways that open new functions for images that add something to words, something that harks back to Boreth Ly’s engagement with the body itself.

In “Proletarian White and Working Bodies in Mao’s China,” Chen notes,

In this article I explore the tension between the muscular exposed fore-arms and calves of peasants and workers and the white-shirted and -smocked bodies of the skilled worker or technician . . . the multilayered meanings of white working clothes as they passed through the media prism. I am interested in the complex of representations, interpretative arenas, and practices surrounding the wearing of white working clothes, the bodily coverage afforded by these clothes, and the working body itself.⁶

The photo in figure 7 captures a moment when the dress-body of Tang Shumei poses to illustrate the perfection of the transformation from peasant to proletarian worker. The photo also amplifies and gives evidence of the magazine’s descriptive text of her as a model worker by showing the joy of her facial expression.

This rich issue also gives us Paola Zamperini’s “On Their Dress They Wore a Body: Fashion and Identity in Late Qing Shanghai,” which discusses fictional characters such as Hu Baoyu, a prostitute from the novel *Jiuweihu*. But the photo we are given casts an anonymous courtesan in her role in order that we may examine for ourselves an example of the clothes people wore (figure 8).

What do we learn about the relation between fiction and the social milieu that produced it? And about how fiction rubs up against that milieu, igniting change? The illustrations never explain; they assert the dialectic before us in their anonymity. The anonymous photo is deindividualized and made available for a social imaginary project by the writer and *her* readers.

In the same issue, an essay by Henrietta Harrison opens up with a strange comment about something we are missing: “The indigenous people of Taiwan define themselves in part by wearing what they refer to as their tradi-

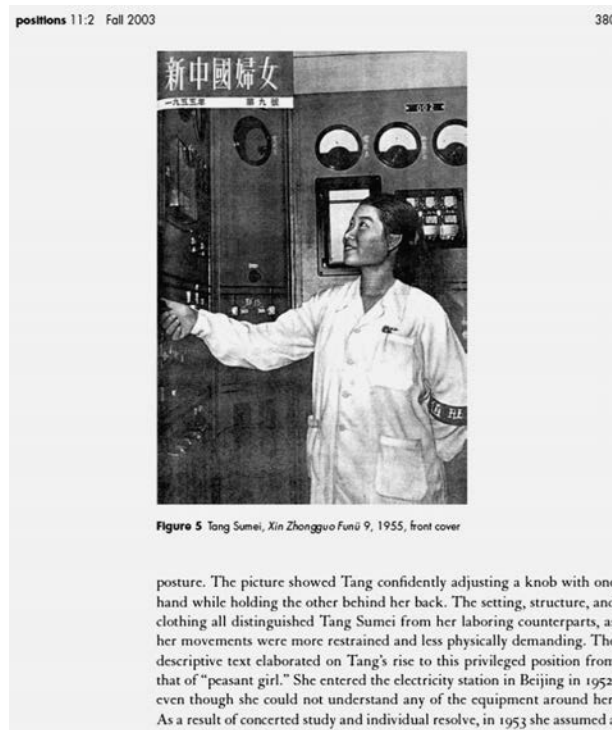


Figure 7 Screen capture of Tang Shumei as model worker, from the journal's online archive at Duke University Press. Tina Mai Chen, "Proletarian White and Working Bodies in Mao's China" *positions* 11:2 (2003): 380

tional costumes on certain festivals and holidays. A photograph . . . shows a group of elderly men of the Atayal tribe in these traditional costumes at one such festival."⁷ She goes on to tell us that the photo, not reproduced in the journal because of its quality, documented a moment of embarrassment, after a village elder had been asked to remove his Western-style trousers so that people could see the traditional costume. After the photo he covers up again. For the reader, the next mentioned image (figure 9), actually reproduced in Harrison's essay as figure 1, finally does indulge our desire to see this costume—a desire created by having our deprivation pointed out. I will return again in a moment to the instigation of a desire to see something, and the delay of that gratification while reading.

This brings us to Charles Inouye, who opens "In the Scopic Regime of Discovery: Ishikawa Takuboku's *Diary in Roman Script* and the Gendered



Figure 8 Video still of the author paging through Zamperini, “On Their Dress They Wore a Body: Fashion and Identity in Late Qing Shanghai,” *positions* 11:2 (2003): 301–30. Here, the courtesan is in front of her mirror.

Premise of Self-Identity” thus: “This reading begins with a desire to see. Upon reading Ishikawa Takuboku’s *Diary in Roman Script*, I found myself possessed by the urge to see the author’s face.”⁸ Possessed at one remove by the essay author’s urge, I immediately turned the page expecting to see the portrait. No. More riffling ensued until I finally found the portrait in question (figure 10)—a delayed gratification that performed one point of an essay about “secrecy discovering the modern writer.”

So I began to pay attention in earnest to more things that images can do that words cannot—within the context of the essays. In the entire special issue on Marxist scholarship (Fall 1995) there are no images except the cover of the journal *Spring* and Michael Dutton’s image of Mao and the driver (figure 11). That image opens Dutton’s “Dreaming of Better Times: Repetition with a Difference and Community Policing in China.” The image opens the essay wordlessly because, although it is marked as figure 1, Dutton never references it directly. Instead he opens with a description and analysis of a double-sided portrait of Mao: young Mao, old Mao, a Mao for everyone. Yet, as I read his text, my gaze kept sliding to the photo, where the doubleness is the driver, hazy in the dirty mirror, and the Mao dangling before the



Figure 9 Screen capture of Atayal costume photo from the journal's online archive at Duke University Press. Henrietta Harrison, "Clothing and Power on the Periphery of Empire: The Costumes of the Indigenous People of Taiwan," *positions* 11:2 (2003): 332

windshield. The misty uncertainty of the real person confronts the clarity of the photographed dead; the problem of the past in the present is made palpable by the photo.

An essay by David Palumbo-Liu entitled "The *Bitter Tea* of Frank Capra" employed a similar strategy of delayed gratification by entitling the opening of an essay using a still from the movie (figure 12). This scene is never specifically analyzed; indeed, the film analysis that is the point of the piece begins several pages in. But the photo looms over the history of the Exclusion Acts with which Palumbo-Liu opens the essay, and we are held suspended in its shadow as we look for the text that will unlock the image.⁹

Lingzhen Wang's essay "Rethorizing the Personal: Identity, Writing, and Gender in Yu Luojin's Autobiographical Act" provides a last example of this opening strategy.¹⁰ Yu Luojin's family appears first, and then the

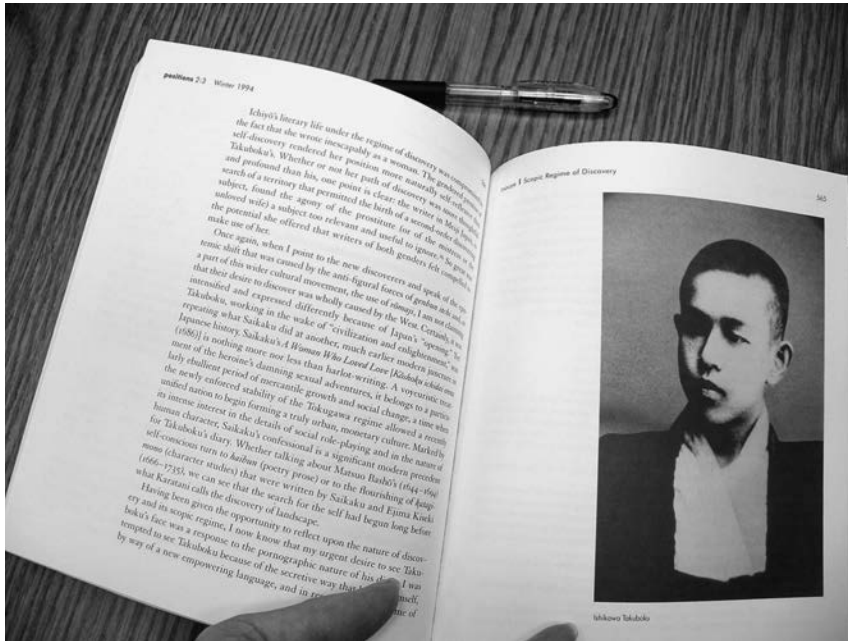


Figure 10 Ishikawa's portrait at last. Charles Inouye, "In the Scopic Regime of Discovery: Ishikawa Takuboku's Diary in Roman Script and the Gendered Premise of Self-Identity," positions 2:3 (1994): 565



Figure 11 Mao and the driver in Michael Dutton, "Dreaming of Better Times: Repetition with a Difference and Community Policing in China," positions 3:2 (1995): 416

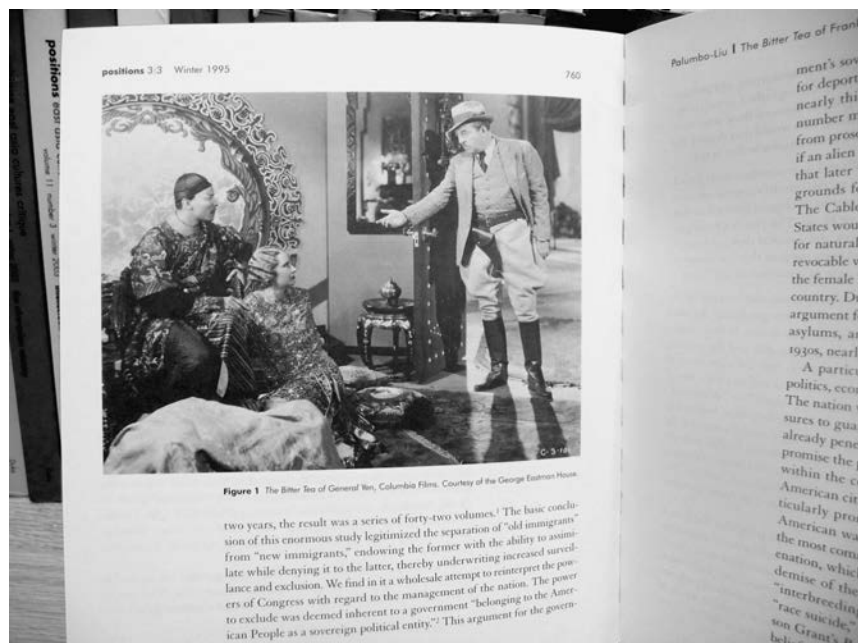


Figure 12 Film still of David Palumbo-Liu, "The Bitter Tea of Frank Capra," *positions* 3:3 (1995): 760

essay (figure 13). Why are they there first, witnessing the act of this writing? The page contains two photos: Yu Luoke, her more famous older brother alone, and the female Luojin, the subject of the essay, embedded in a family portrait. The analysis in the text ironically disembods her from this correct familiarly familial network to discuss how she arrived at the place she holds as a controversial woman writer who asserted herself and her sexuality in new and challenging ways.

The journal has worked overwhelmingly with photo images, but sometimes there were things that could not be seen with the camera's eye. The special issue entitled "subimperialisms" had an extraordinary essay by Siu-keung Cheung on "Speaking Out: Days in the Lives of Three Hong Kong Cage Dwellers."¹¹ The fantasy of glittering, wealthy Hong Kong simply outglares and outweighs the problems that laboring people have simply finding



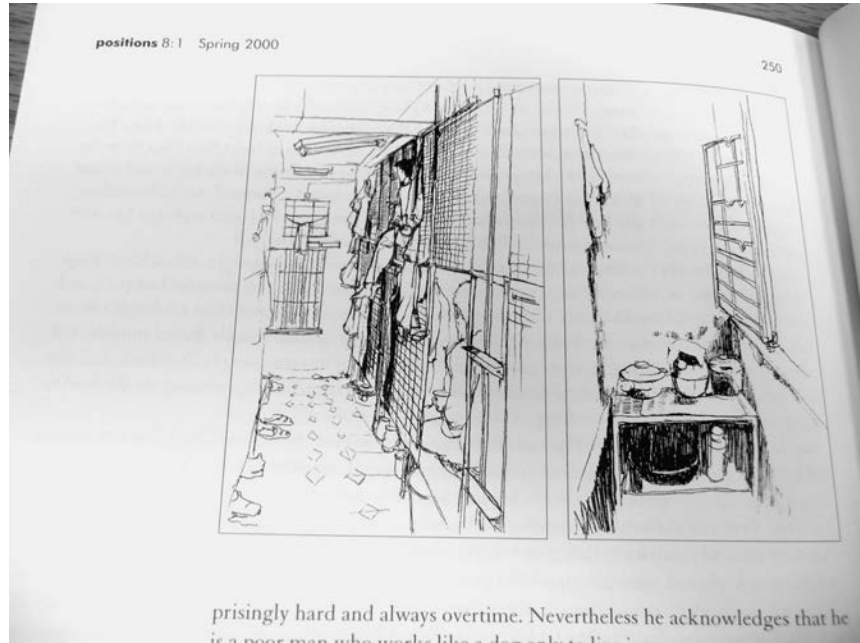
Figure 13 Video still of Yu family pictures, Lingzhen Wang, “Rethorizing the Personal: Identity, Writing, and Gender in Yu Luojin’s Autobiographical Act,” *positions* 6:2 (1998): 394

shelter. Indigent subalterns live in “cage dwellings,” and this essay opens up the problem, literally, to outside gazes through testimony and personal experience. Photography is too mechanical and too cold to show and yet to signify shame at the things that must be shown. Instead we have delicate ink drawings (figure 14).

The palpable intervention of the hand drew me in, in a way that no photograph could have. It distanced me enough from what my eye was seeing, but in a way that reassured me of the actuality of the time spent by the artist and author in that space. The special issue entitled “The Comfort Women: Colonialism, War, and Sex” in Spring 1997 likewise carried no added images in its pages of analysis, leaving the visual work to the women themselves, whose art appears last in the volume (figure 15).

If there are some things we can only look at obliquely, there are other things we cannot seem to get enough of in the journal—and the dancer Choe Seung-hui is one of them (figure 16). She also appears on the cover of that issue. This photo presents us with a benign example of what I would call the “You Gotta See This!” category of image. The adding in, piling on, of affect, surprise, distaste, and admiration, is another kind of work that the images do—a value-added effect.

Figure 14 Drawings of cage dwellings. Siu-keung Cheung, "Speaking Out: Days in the Lives of Three Hong Kong Cage Dwellers," *positions* 8:1 (2000): 250



prisingly hard and always overtime. Nevertheless he acknowledges that he is a poor man who works like a dog and a cat.

Figure 15 Art by Kim Sun-dak and Kang Tok-kyong, "Portfolio," *positions* 5:1 (1997): 276-77

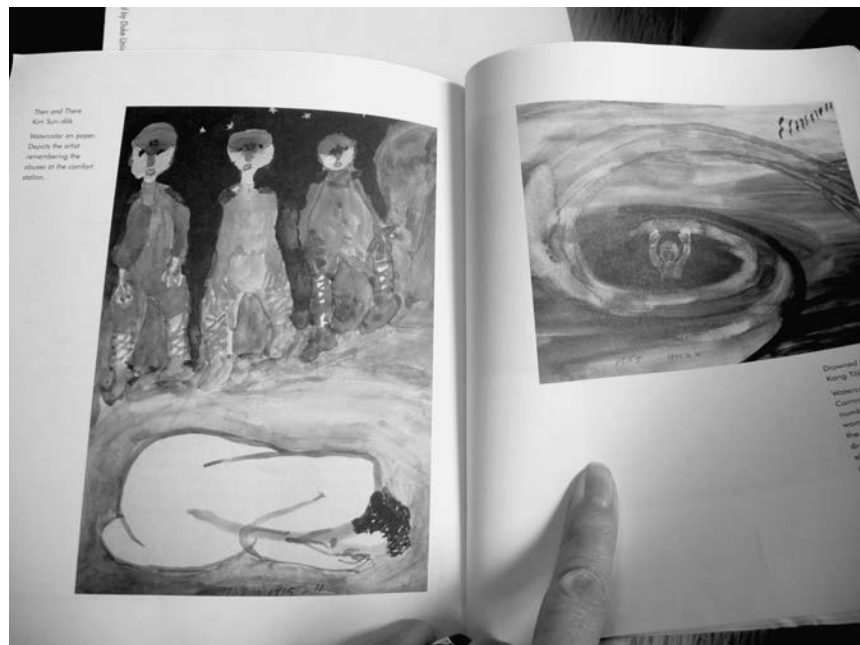




Figure 16 Screen capture of photo of Choe dancing, from the journal's online archive at Duke University Press. Sang Mi Park, "The Making of a Cultural Icon for the Japanese Empire: Choe Seung-hui's U.S. Dance Tours and 'New Asian Culture' in the 1930s and 1940s," *positions* 14:3 (2006): 603

Mutual Interruptions

How to summarize these riches? I could have added much more here. The image most definitely does things that text cannot, but I would say it does things best in conjunction with, and close by, words, so that there is the possibility for mutual interruption and dialogue. The point of this devotion on the part of our writers and editors to the image is well put by Andrew Jones, quoting Walter Benjamin in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. Jones tells us,

To articulate the past historically, does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was." Instead, Benjamin asserts that the cultural historian must recognize that "history decomposes into images, not into narratives," that

“the past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.” To grasp that image is the task of a materialist history, one that engages in “an immanent critique of the concept of progress.”¹²

I am not necessarily saying that we take Benjamin’s injunction literally as being about images; it is more about the multiplicity of the past and even more especially about an appreciation for *suddenness*, about the unexpected as bearing as much truth (if we can bear to see it) as any carefully constructed narrative. The way that images stage surprising interventions in written narrative, though a rare occurrence, remains a materialization of his point. And interestingly, images belong to the world of print media — online presentation of text/image is far too user-driven to give the same frisson of the work of the Other coming at you while reading linear print.

The other thing that images offer is reminders of the affective dimension of our style of engagement with one another as we go about the most important and pressing matters in our conjoint social lives. In this work of critique we are dependent, first of all, upon connection itself, upon reaching through the welter of distractions we face to assert and maintain our mutual attraction for one another. Then and only then can we bestow ourselves upon one another in language, which can be a slow and, in its beginnings, stuttering business. It is our relations with one another that we must tend, and the journal-book-objects are, of course, the hard-won materialization of ensemble labor. The journal is a kind of artifactual pause between the work of past production and the promise of future reception.

What can we learn for the future of the journal from our engagement with images thus far? Firstly, we must admit that there is a good deal we cannot actually fit into our precious printed object, though many writers have tried. I opened with Boreth Ly’s essay on his own performance. In the fall of 1994, Donald Lowe gave us an essay on performance artist Tseng Kwong Chiin. Of the essay’s ten pages, five are given over to full-page photos. Its layout works because it gives Tseng’s photos — which are the pointed outcome of his work — pride of place on five entire pages that repeat rhythmically on the right-hand side (figure 17).

The future of the book on paper is a grim one, we are told. If true, this



Figure 17 Several pages from Donald Lowe's commentary "Against Nostalgia: The Photo Image of Tseng Kwong Chi," positions 2:2 (1994), 406–16

is bad news for scholars who read to write, often literally, in the margins of their books. Deeper digital commitments are definitely in the journal's future, however. Our online site can act as an online supplement to the print object in two ways. Certainly it can be a space for presenting work that can hyperlink to moving images, so that their temporality can be part of the "see my sources" generosity I have already noted. But beyond that, a Web site can be the headquarters and stomping grounds where we can display for ourselves and others the relational aesthetics of our style of labor. The term *relational aesthetics* comes from the title of Nicholas Bourriaud's book, a manifesto for what amounts to a movement from representation to participation in art. He describes "artwork as social interstice: The possibility of a relational art, that is, an art taking its theoretical horizon from the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space."¹³

This form of art making insists that "objects and institutions, and the use of time and works, are at once the outcome of human relations — for they render social work concrete — and producers of relations — for, conversely, they organize types of sociability and regulate inter-human encounters."¹⁴

Bourriaud devotes an entire chapter to the theoretical legacy of Felix Gonzalez-Torres. He opens the chapter by describing a work by Gonzalez-Torres ("Untitled" [Blue Mirror], 1990, offset print on paper, endless copies) that consisted of a stack of paper posters with a sky-blue edge. Each viewer was allowed to take one copy, which meant the work was "endowed with a defined form and a certain density, a work not displaying its construction (or dismantlement) process, but *the form of its presence* amid an audience. This set of issues to do with the convivial offering and the availability of the work of art, as produced and staged by Gonzalez-Torres, turns out, today, to be meaningful" (italics in the original).¹⁵

The politics of this style of artistic engagement can be so microcosmic as to seem frivolous. Yet the commitment to making visible intersubjectivity and everyday matters of sociality such as chance encounters with their resultant conviviality, accidental meetings that lead to relationship, are the memes of connectivity that, especially in cities, can result in intentional collaboration.

In a very stripped down way, the journal also makes things available, and it is precisely the “form of its presence,” the challenges and pleasures of its materiality in the world, that will shift in the economy of the digital world.

I see our online presence being built around participation rather than representation — a community of contributors, ever-changing, ever-gaining, and constantly shedding members. If we understand the journal as emerging in a manner that can be understood through relational aesthetics, we can also open the idea of editing toward that of curating. Curating is more capacious and recognizes the social and financial involvements in assembling work that goes well beyond, but can include, intervention in the interior form of the work itself. Curating names more openly the social labor that can be too easily overlooked in the bookishness of “editing” — because editing is, of course, very social too.

In this way, the public production of a critical journal as a social project involving a relatively stable, yet constantly changing cast of characters and crew has something in common with how I have come to understand documentary filmmaking. What might cultural critique (its writing, its reading) have in common with documentary film culture in China and in the rest of the world? How can we return to “reading as watching” — which I have just applied as method in looking at images in their texts — and theorize it further?

Doing analytic cultural critique as a writer requires a peculiar mixture of distance and closeness: the critic must know something well enough, and care about it deeply enough, to be able to take it apart without destroying it in order to see as clearly as possible what its specific and contingent conditions of existence might be. Yet a critic must also be willing to relinquish affection in the object at risk, even to the point of proposing abandonment or substitution. (One particularly long-lived example might be feminist critiques of patriarchal heterosexual social arrangements and the subjectivities generated thereby for women and men who might indeed be quite attached to their pleasures or be benefiting from their institutional arrangements.) For a readership, an audience, to be appropriately moved by critique, they must trust the critic, and this has increasingly come to mean *know* the critic through various forms of built-in self-reflexivity. The critique of writing as

representation (as presenting a clear window upon a positively separated reality)¹⁶ has come about through a deepening understanding of writing as performative, as often constitutive of (and by) the discourses within which it participates as critique. This has led to a heightened visibility of the self in its dialectical production. The writer is “on the scene.”

One fresh thing in Chinese documentary is how much it brilliantly works through and contributes to the current shift in documentary at large from “representation” as the major trope to an impulse of “participation.” A favorite critical trope for Chinese documentarians is *xianchang*,—literally “the present field”—more colloquially “on the scene.”¹⁷ I would describe this process in general as one in which filmmakers everywhere spend more and more effort documenting the social process of production as a key element in ensuring the documentary’s own *authenticity*, by which I mean, ensuring its ability to persuade people of the importance of what they are seeing/hearing, to the point that they might change their minds or take action based upon their engagement—or, as Sarah Elder puts it, the ability to respond to the empathy created by the documentary.¹⁸ Such films often also reveal that the first level of persuasion of authenticity occurs for the people making the film, and that we might participate in their transformation as we watch it happening.¹⁹ For scholar Paola Voci, “*authenticity* is better described as the subjective *striving to achieve* truthful representations of reality than the objective claim of capturing and explaining the only true meaning of reality.”²⁰

Thus we can turn to documentary, both in its practice and its critical discussion, to further refine a critique of “watching” as passive consumption, rather than as engaged spectatorship. The “watching” I am prescribing is not passive; it’s more like being “on watch,” on the alert, and fully present: “on the scene.”

Like cultural critique, most documentary filmmaking nowadays has long outgrown any romance with representational verisimilitude as the most direct route for a politics of mindful intervention. Even documentary that purports only to “show the world” nonetheless has, more likely than not, enfolded some glimpses of the process of filmmaking as an integral part of the world it needs to make visible in order to gain the trust of its audience.

In that sense, the cultural critical project of *positions* likewise requires a trust that what we see and what we get from our common scholarship bind us more closely the more visible its own machinery is made. Making the machinery of critique visible requires grasping it; that is, the more we grasp critique's intrinsically socially contingent nature and image it for ourselves and our readers, the better, and the more, we get.

Notes

I'd like to thank Boreth Ly and Ellen Zweig for reading early versions of this essay, and participants for their enthusiastic response to an animated PowerPoint version presented at the *positions* workshop convened at Rice University's Chao Center for Asian Studies in Houston in October 2010. Thanks to Tani Barlow for a long discussion, only a small portion of which is reproduced in the interview with the senior editor in this issue.

1. In September 2010, I invited video artist Ellen Zweig to shoot several clips of my hands while I read. Three screen-shots are reproduced here.
2. Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Tarkovsky, the Great Russian Filmmaker Discusses His Art*, trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), 117–18.
3. Boreth Ly, "Of Performance and the Persistent Temporality of Trauma: Memory, Art, and Visions," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 16, no. 1 (2008): 109–30.
4. *Ibid.*, 128–29.
5. Miriam Silverberg, "Remembering Pearl Harbor, Forgetting Charlie Chaplin, and the Case of the Disappearing Western Woman: A Picture Story," *positions* 1, no. 1 (1993): 24–76. Miriam and I were in graduate school together, both students of Harry Harootunian, and we were friends. A founding member of the editorial collective, Miriam is the first of my cohort to have died; I particularly want to remember her in this writing.
6. Tina Mai Chen, "Proletarian White and Working Bodies in Mao's China," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 11, no. 2 (2003): 363–64.
7. Henrietta Harrison, "Clothing and Power on the Periphery of Empire: The Costumes of the Indigenous People of Taiwan," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 11, no. 2 (2003): 330.
8. Charles Inouye, "In the Scopic Regime of Discovery: Ishikawa Takuboku's *Diary in Roman Script* and the Gendered Premise of Self-Identity," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 2, no. 3 (1994): 542.
9. David Palumbo-Liu, "The *Bitter Tea* of Frank Capra," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 3, no. 3 (1995): 760.
10. Lingzhen Wang, "Retheorizing the Personal: Identity, Writing, and Gender in Yu Luojin's Autobiographical Act," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 6, no. 2 (1998): 394–438.

11. Siu-keung Cheung, "Speaking Out: Days in the Lives of Three Hong Kong Cage Dwellers," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 8, no. 1 (2000): 235–62.
12. Andrew Jones, "The Child as History in Republican China," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 10, no. 3 (2002): 700.
13. Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Wood (Dijon, France: Les presses du réel, 2002), 14.
14. *Ibid.*, 48.
15. *Ibid.*, 49.
16. Jonathan Crary provides some of the best discussion of the relationship between the model of the camera obscura and forms of vision that isolate the individual from the world and encourage the sense that he can represent it exactly, "Modernizing Vision," in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. Linda Willams (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 23–35.
17. Wu Wenguang (see note 19) produced an occasional magazine/journal on the art scene that he called *Document/Xianchang* starting in 1999 Xianchang (Tianjin Institute of Social Sciences). For a discussion of *xianchang* (the scene), see Luke Robinson, "From 'Public' to 'Private': Chinese Documentary and the Logic of *xianchang*," in *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record*, ed. Chris Berry, Lu Xinyu, and Lisa Rofel (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010).
18. Sarah Elder, "Collaborative Filmmaking: An Open Space for Making Meaning, a Moral Ground for Ethnographic Film," *Visual Anthropology Review* 11, no. 2 (1995): 94–101.
19. The activist filmmaker Ai Xiaoming provides one example of documentary, literally, as critique. She has become known for independent investigative documentary, often responding to requests from communities, as in her film over land disputes in the film *Taishi Village* (2006). For an introduction to Ai and an interview with her, visit *Screening China* (blog), www.screeningchina.blogspot.com/2010/09/evening-with-activist-documentary.html and www.hub.witness.org/fr/node/11358 (accessed May 28, 2011). She is much less present in the film than, for example, US filmmaker Michael Moore. Wu Wenguang, considered one of the founders of the post-1989 independent documentary scene, has long insisted that the filmmaker must account for him- or herself in the making of any film. For the Web site of his Caochangdi Workstation, which he shares with his wife, dancer and choreographer Wen Hui, see CCD Workstation, www.ccdworkstation.com/english/homepage-e.htm (accessed September 26, 2011). Wu has run workshops for young filmmakers for years, as well as having founded the Village Video Project in 2005 that brought several rural villagers to Beijing for training in shooting and editing. Wu's point was to send them forth to film themselves and their own lives. In 2010 he showed two new films, both highly personal: *Treatment* (190 min.), a memoir of his dead mother, and *Bare Your Stuff* (190 min.), an account of his relationship with two of the village filmmakers. Several anthologies have appeared on the

- new independent documentary in China, the most recent being Chris Berry, Lu Xinyu, and Lisa Rofel, eds., *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement: For the Public Record* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010).
20. Paola Voci, "From the Center to the Periphery: Chinese Documentary's Visual Conjectures," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 16, no. 1 (2004): 65–113, see 103. Emphasis mine.