

# “FIONA TAN TERMINOLOGY” EXHIBITION: ARTIST TALK

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## INTRODUCTION

**Okamura Keiko (OK):** I'd like to begin with a warm welcome to everyone who's gathered here today. We will now begin our introduction for the “Fiona Tan: Terminology” exhibition.

Fiona Tan was born in Indonesia, raised in Australia, and pursued an art education in Europe. Currently based in Amsterdam, she works internationally as a leading contemporary artist. Since the beginning of her career in the early 90's, Fiona has presented video installations, together with a wide range of works dealing with the moving image. Moving or still, her works involve a deep contemplation on the topic of imagery.

It's only recently that film and video works have become a regular fixture of art exhibitions. Fiona's career over the last 20 years coincides with a time when the moving image gradually began to gain ground as a genre within the circle of fine art, solidifying its position alongside more traditional and conventional practices. Fiona Tan is considered to be one of the leading artists of this advancement of moving image within the field of art. As a museum specializing in photography and the moving image, we are thrilled to have this opportunity to hold a solo exhibition of Fiona's work **[fig.1]** .

**Fiona Tan (FT):** Thank you for coming. As with all video exhibitions, my show requires some time to view. Though it might seem unusual to say as much, I consider myself a sculptor—in my case, time being the main material that I work with.

To briefly introduce my background, I've been living and working in Amsterdam for over 20 years now. This solo exhibition is constructed around four major works that embody different positions and viewpoints that I've dealt with in my career. In this sense, this exhibition is not thematic, but presents the key viewpoints of my oeuvre.

**OK:** I would first like to touch on how and why we chose the exhibition titles—“Fiona Tan: Terminology” in English, and “Fiona Tan, *Manazashi no Shigaku* (poetics of looking)” in Japanese. We decided on the English title first. However, this term proved less intelligible when translating directly into



fig.1 Fiona Tan (center) Photo: YAMANAKA Shintaro



fig.2

Poster for the exhibition designed by MORI Daishiro

Japanese. After discussing with Fiona, we decided to reexamine this term from a different standpoint and came up with the Japanese title—a reference to the poetic aspect of the moving image. The starting point of the exhibition was the concept of terminology, which was something that initially came up in a discussion with Fiona **[fig.2]**.

**FT:** “Terminology” is perhaps rather unusual for an exhibition title; we came across it inadvertently. Keiko created a list of concepts related to my work. Based on this list, we then discussed what kind of exhibition and catalog we would create. The list included words such as “time,” “light,” and “action” among many others, but at the top was the heading “Terminology Fiona Tan.” I was looking at this list and thought, “Why don’t I call my show this?” I also wanted to do something different for the catalog and settled on creating a glossary of terms with corresponding images and short texts. My work deals a lot with visuality and looking at images and I consider myself to be an image-maker however, I also work with texts and words. I like to consider video as a sort of poetry in motion and I consider the “poetics of looking” in relation to this idea.

**OK:** Since this is Fiona’s first mid-career exhibition in Tokyo, we wanted to show the multiple layers and facets of her body of work, along with its underlying themes. The glossary of words acts as a guidebook that introduces the many “entrances” and “exits” for viewing the exhibition.

### ***MAY YOU LIVE IN INTERESTING TIMES (1997)*** ***KINGDOM OF SHADOWS (2000)***

**OK:** This exhibition consists of a total of ten works: eight on view in the gallery and two early documentary films which are a part of the screening program in the film theater. I’d like to first ask Fiona to talk about one of her early documentary films *May You Live In Interesting Times* as this can also serve as an introduction to her background **[fig.3]**.



fig.3 Still from *May You Live In Interesting Times*

**FT:** *May You Live In Interesting Times* is a film that I worked on between 1995 through 1997. It’s about my family and my search to find out where I came from and who I was, though I no longer ask myself such questions. I come from a mixed background: my father is Indonesian-Chinese and my mother is Australian. As a young adult, I found this quite confusing. Being born in Indonesia and growing up in Australia, by that time I had already changed countries and languages a couple of times in my life.

I moved to Europe when I was 18. I

first lived in Germany for four years and then I moved to Amsterdam, where I've been living since. Moving to Amsterdam was what particularly confused me and shook me up. I speak four languages: English, Indonesian, German, and Dutch. It was when I was learning Dutch that I became tongue-tied: I couldn't think because I couldn't decide what language to speak. This is when it became very clear to me that language, identity, and culture are strongly interconnected. For example, when I speak in Dutch, my voice is a different pitch than when I speak another language. I almost feel like a different person when speaking a different language. For me, this was unsettling; it made me feel schizophrenic.

Another film included in the screening program is my second documentary film, *Kingdom of Shadows*, filmed three years after my first documentary, which deals with photography and its collectors [fig.4]. Through this work, I wanted to find out why I liked photography so much, and also on the other hand what was problematic about it, which are both very big and important, but also difficult questions to answer. I don't know if I managed to answer them very well, but this was my attempt to do so.

## *LIFT* (2000)

### *LIFT, STILLS* (2000)

**OK:** Moving on to the works in the gallery, *Lift*, the first work in the exhibition, is part of the museum's collection [fig.5].

**FT:** I made *Lift* in 2000 which marked the turn of the millennium and the beginning of a new century. It was a very optimistic time in Europe. This led me to think about the start of the previous millennium, also an optimistic time before the start of WW I. It was the era of the invention—the moment of the discovery and development of photography, and also, the dawn of cinema. Looking at old photographs and early footage from this era, I realized that there was also a great fascination toward aviation and this led me to contemplate the pioneering spirit of the earliest aviators.

I think that dreams of flying are something that just about everyone has. I have memories of flying in my dreams as a child—not very gracefully; it was more like swimming. Deep down everyone has a desire to fly and I realized this through my work. The source of my inspirations are not always easy to pinpoint but I suddenly had an image of being lifted up by balloons. I realized much later that this idea had come from a book I'd read in my childhood based on the famous French



fig.4 Still from *Kingdom of Shadows*



fig.5 *Lift* (detail of installation) Photo: YAMANAKA Shintaro



fig.6 Still from *Lift* (16mm film)



fig.7 *Lift, Stills* Photo: YAMANAKA Shintaro



fig.8 *Roll I & II*

children's film *Le Ballon Rouge* (*The Red Balloon*).

Images can be easily forged nowadays with image manipulation but I wanted to actually follow through with this idea and this was a lot more difficult to figure out. I initially considered having someone else carry out the task of flying so that I could film but I realized that I could never forgive myself if the person flying had a big accident, so I braced myself for the occasion.

The project was realized in January 2000. I remember it being quite cold that day. The experience didn't feel dangerous; I was up in the air literally feeling as light as a feather. I chose a day where there was little wind however, this plan still proved to be a challenge for my friends who were supporting me. I went up into the air attached to a 40-meter rope that was not fixed to the ground. My friends were supposed to pull me back down before I would fly away. What I hadn't realized was that unless you've had an experience with flying, estimating the altitude of something directly above is rather impossible. In these circumstances, my friends struggled to figure out the right time to pull me back down. Had they failed, I would have flown off [fig.6].

As you will see in the exhibition, the performance is divided into three parts—before, during, and after the flight [fig.7]. I don't think I'll say anymore because it becomes clear when you see the exhibition.

**OK:** There's a series of works made around the year 2000 in which Fiona herself makes an appearance. *Roll I & II* (1997), part of the collection of the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, is one such work. For Fiona, her appearances

in her own work don't have any special meaning [fig.8]. Rather, the decision comes more from a circumstantial necessity such as the one she explained for *Lift*. The way these works employ the body and the meanings Fiona's appearance gives to the work are interesting themes to consider when viewing the work.

## *DISORIENT* (2009)

**FT:** The second piece in the exhibition is *Disorient*. This is a big jump in terms of the year the work was made; there's nine years in between. I must add that this exhibition is by no means a retrospective that looks at my career and work in a linear way. My work doesn't follow a directional progression in the first place. I don't set out a plan, conceptually or mathematically, of exactly where I'm going. The work grows organically, like a cloud or a spiral. I also frequently go back to the same themes and preoccupations.

*Disorient* is a work that I presented at the Venice Biennale in 2009, when I represented the Netherlands. It was filmed on location in the Dutch Pavilion in Venice. The work is based on Marco Polo's *The Travels*, written nearly 800



years ago—something I believe he wrote for fellow travelers, tradesmen, and merchants like himself. What particularly struck me about this text was the way Marco Polo treats and describes the world as if it's a shopping mall.

This work consists of two screens, which are placed diagonally opposite of each other, with two different sound tracks playing simultaneously. The first screen plays images of what I imagine to be Marco Polo's private museum, or the depot of his museum, if he was able to bring back what he saw on his travels on the Silk Road through the Middle East to China and on the sea route back to Venice 800 years ago.

Marco Polo was away from his country for 24 years from when he left at the age of 17 to when he returned at the age of 41. It was a nice coincidence because when I was working on this piece I was approximately the age when Marco Polo came back from his travels. Also at the time of Polo's travels, Venice was extremely well known for its connection to the East. What you see on the screen was filmed in Venice in the Dutch Pavilion where I presented the work. The location was important—I wanted to locate the work temporally, geographically, and socio-politically on this precise venue.

What you see on the second screen is footage put together of real events that I've filmed either on location or have sourced from archives. It's a sequence of documentary footage from the countries that Marco Polo claims to have traveled through on his way to China. The second footage takes objects Marco Polo was interested in and may have had in his museum, and shows where they come from and how they're produced in our time. Here, parts of the text from *The Travels* has been translated into Japanese and operates as a voiceover for the work. In this work, I'm trying to bridge thousands of kilometers of space and hundreds of years of time in one room, and at the same time trying to deal with current issues regarding global economics [fig.9, 10] .

The last thing I'll say about this work is the title. As you may know, the title refers to two opposing terms commonly used in English: "Orient and Occident," meaning "East and West." It's not for any reason that I call this work "Disorient." The title is also a play on words: It refers to the word "disorient" which means to "lose a sense of where you're going." At the same time, the prefix "dis-" implies denial, so "disorient" also alludes to the act of cutting off or negating the Orient.

**OK:** One thing I noticed about this work was how synchronized the narration and the video was. Was there a lot of meticulous edited involved in achieving this level of synchronicity?

**FT:** Yes, the editing was done in an extremely precise manner. What you hear



fig.9 Still from *Disorient*



fig.10 Still from *Disorient*



fig.11 Still from *Provenance*

are excerpts from Marco Polo's book *The Travels*. He describes in minute, boring detail, just about every single place he visited during his three-year journey to China. It's truly fascinating in its boringness. The book is like a travel guide for merchants, which understandably would speak as though things are permanent. For us, 800 years later, we could pretend that we know better but I believe we still think in a similar manner. The narrative corresponds with the footage and covers locations of present-day Georgia, Babylon, Yemen, India, and Japan among others.

**OK:** In addition to the cultural aspects of the different places he describes, I found it interesting that Marco Polo frequently makes remarks on the beauty of the women as though they're a commodity.

**FT:** He also talks about many animals that were unknown to Europe at the time. For example, he describes a rhinoceros and calls it a "unicorn."

**OK:** I believe this work deconstructs and reevaluates the likelihood that our definition of the Orient remains largely based on the misinformation Marco Polo brought back from his travels.

## *PROVENANCE* (2008)

**OK:** The next work in the exhibition is *Provenance*, which was presented at the Dutch Pavilion at the Venice Biennale along with *Disorient*. This piece is one of Fiona's many works dealing with the theme of portraiture through video **[fig.11]** .

**FT:** *Provenance* was commissioned by the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and is also a part of their collection. In preparation for this piece, I researched Dutch portrait paintings from the first half of the 17th century. Studying the many paintings in the museum's depots inspired me to create silent, black and white film portraits of people in my close circle. I'm very fond of this "local" approach. Painters of the 17th and 18th century frequently painted their close families and neighbors in the same way.

More broadly, this work is an investigation of the differences between the experience of looking at painting and the experience of looking at video. It also explores whether it's possible to capture the essence of looking at a painting through video. I hope that I've succeeded in approaching painting's potential of transcending time through this work.

And indeed, as you mentioned, many of my works deal with portraiture. *Provenance* directly addresses this theme in the sense that it looks directly at people and their faces. Perhaps *Disorient*—the previous work I mentioned—could be seen as a portrait of Marco Polo's mind.

I'd like to briefly diverge and talk about *Vox Populi, Tokyo* (2007), which was the starting point for *Provenance*. This work, comprised of a wall piece

and a publication, is a different type of portraiture **[fig.12]** . I did not take the photographs in this work: They're photographs from private photo albums of about a 100 different households located across Tokyo.

I'm very grateful that these people let me borrow their photo albums. After making a selection, I scanned the photos and arranged them as a large wall piece. Rather than a portrait of an individual, this work is an attempt to create an unofficial portrait or a cross section of Tokyo. It also questions how photography works in relation to its subjects.

This unofficial portrait of Tokyo consists of many beautiful and intimate photographs of the city's residents. These are photographs of people I've never met and do not know, but whose images I'm in love with regardless. This was also something that interested me when I did research on early 17th century portrait painting for *Provenance*: in the same way as with *Vox Populi, Tokyo*, I liked looking at the images despite not knowing the subjects.

The question I asked myself when I started working and doing research for *Provenance* was why we like looking at portraits. Why do we like looking at faces of people who we don't even know? As an artist working with photography and film, I was also questioning the difference between looking at a face through painting and looking at a face captured through lens-based technology. I film in a very uncinematic way—you could perhaps call it "photographic."

I film people just sitting down and doing nothing. This anachronistic way of working expands time. It makes the viewer look more closely at the work, and also encourages them to confront and consciously think about the idea of time **[fig.13]** .

At the time, I was very interested in thinking about if it is possible to look at a video on a wall as if it were a painting. Painting a portrait requires much more time than taking a photograph or video. However, the intention for the work wasn't necessarily to copy painting. A painting has its own unique beauty, which I enjoy, but by no means do I mean to simulate that. Rather, I was asking myself if I could achieve a similar effect which painting has on the viewer which is to slow down people's perceptions and open them up to engage more carefully with images and consequently enable a much deeper viewing experience.

On another level, this work is a personal portrait of Amsterdam. It consists of six people within my direct environment including my closest friends and family. This approach may give the impression that this decision was taken out of sheer convenience or laziness, but it is in fact a result of careful thought and intention. Painters in the 17th century employed the same approach. For example, Rembrandt painted his son, his wife, and his neighbor so I felt that it was permissible for me to do the same.

**OK:** Considering its relation to portrait painting, I'm interested in why this



**fig.12** Fiona Tan discussing about *Vox Populi, Tokyo* Photo: YAMANAKA Shintaro



**fig.13** *Provenance* (detail of installation) Photo: YAMANAKA Shintaro





fig.14 Still from *Inventory*

work was presented in black and white.

**FT:** Deciding on whether to shoot this film in color or black and white took a long time. I premiered this work in the gallery space of the Rijksmuseum right next to where masterpieces by Rembrandt and Vermeer were exhibited. This obviously put me under a lot of pressure. I was very nervous about having to show my work in such close proximity to these revered artists. I was also concerned that if I presented my work in color, people would assume that I was trying to copy these painting.

I'm also fond of images presented in black and white. It's interesting that this medium makes the images less realistic and thus somehow, more honest. The first thing you notice when you see a black and white film or a photograph, is the fact that it's black and white. Monochrome images make the viewer very conscious of the fact that the image was captured through a lens. You immediately register that these images are not reality but a representation of a moment that once was. By presenting my work in black and white, I wanted to demonstrate that my interest was not in showing off my close friends and family per se, but instead in the images as media.

## *INVENTORY* (2012)

**OK:** The last work in the exhibition is *Inventory*, which I asked Fiona to include in this exhibition. This work deals, in a very profound way, with the central role of the museum, which is to collect, conserve, and exhibit artifacts. What are your thoughts on this theme?

**FT:** Museums are in fact a relatively recent invention: they've only existed for about 200 years. In *Disorient*, I built a large set and filmed what I imagined to be Marco Polo's private museum or the depot of his museum. I've found that I've become increasingly interested in the history of museums and collections. One of the fundamental questions that I'm attempting to address is: "What is a museum?" or to put it another way: "What is a collection?"

Currently, the most common image people have towards a museum is the architecture. However, a museum is just about always a collection. The

starting point of a museum is the collection. The building is something that follows suite. Nearly all collections start out as private collections, and the collection shown in *Inventory* is an example of one of the earliest public museums. Architect Sir John Soane built up a private collection and displayed it in his own home in London. In 1833, a Private Act of Parliament was passed that ruled that his house would remain untouched after his death. It's a wonderful experience to go and walk inside his house. It's almost like being in a time capsule: It's as if he had just walked out the door **[fig.14, 15]** .



fig.15 Still from *Inventory*

Sir John Soane's collection is very physical. The majority of the collection is Roman or ancient Greek, consisting of plaster casts, sculptures, fragments of old marble, as well as many other antiquities. It's a very eccentric collection; all jumbled up and mixed together. His way of exhibiting these works was also idiosyncratic. For example, he would hang two of the same copies next to its original. I found myself thinking a great deal about the difference between the physical object and the immaterial, about what an original and replica is, and where the essence of the art lies.

Since my intent was to make a commentary about media itself, I decided not to choose just one medium but to show an array, or an inventory, of the medium that I work with. This is why the work is composed of six different projections, each one dedicated to one particular medium of film or video. This presentation has as much to do with nature of the medium that I work with as with the images that were filmed. Choosing film and video as my medium of choice puts me in the fortunate (or unfortunate) position of having a new media forced upon me every five years. When I prepare for a new work I usually conduct tests to decide which medium to film on: whether it's going to be film or video, digital or analog. Besides the technical aspects, this work is a careful choreography of still and moving images. And without going into too much detail, I'll also say that it is a narrative about mortality.

I'm fortunate to be currently showing my work in three spaces in Tokyo—here, at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, the Mori Art Museum, and Wako Works of Art, the latter two in Roppongi. However, being here to speak about the work is a bit difficult for me, because I believe that having my audience engage with the work is what's really important. So what am I doing here talking about the work? I don't want to replace the experience of looking at the work for you with this talk. I want all of you to experience that for yourselves.

**OK:** There's no specific way to look at Fiona's work: You don't have to have any specialized knowledge, nor do you have to abide by a certain interpretation. We hope that the visitors will really take their time to look at each work through their own perspective while drawing on this discussion as a point of reference.

Fiona's work can in no way be reduced to a singular theme. Indeed, countless themes are inherent in her work. It was through thinking about this multidimensional aspect of her work that led us to the title "Terminology" for the exhibition. It's also for this reason that we repeatedly emphasize the importance of looking at the work from many different perspectives. The exhibition catalog also provides possible interpretations of the work through 80 keywords, such as "physicality," "gaze," and "archive."

## Q&A

**Q:** Sir John Soane's museum is particularly known for its characteristic use of

light. His distinct use of light definitely comes through in your work. Did you work solely with natural lighting or did you add artificial lighting to shoot the images? I also would like to know if you had an interest in the architecture itself.

**FT:** I filmed this work entirely with natural lighting. I thought that it was extremely important to do so since this was what Soane was well known for. As for your second question, I intentionally did not try to capture Soane's architecture through my work. I decided to focus more on his collection, because I was interested in his relationship with Ancient Rome. Visiting the museum is a fantastic experience. You enter a very elegant, stately house in the middle of London and suddenly encounter, at the back of the building, a very, very cramped space that contains an amazing collection. This kind of unique is impossible to capture in film.

**Q:** You must have picked out and amassed quite a large amount of artifacts to create Marco Polo's collection for *Disorient*. I'd like to know if there are any anecdotes you could share regarding the making of the collection.

**FT:** Realizing this work was the most challenging thing I've ever done. I decided that it had to be filmed in Venice, so we transported two truckloads of stuff which was transported by truck, then by ship. We built the set in three days, filmed for three days, took the set apart and took everything back. I didn't want the collection to be just historically accurate. I knew that I wanted anachronistic elements such as things from recent times in the work. If you look carefully, you'll see lots of unrealistic elements in the collection like a portrait of Mao Zedong or television sets. Another thing that I wanted to do through the work was to evoke the viewers' materialistic lust.

**Q:** In your commentary on *Lift*, you mentioned that you weren't sure where your inspirations came from. How do you want your viewers to be inspired by your work? And how do you maintain a balance between the artist's intentions and the viewer's interpretation?

**FT:** The first part of your question, which I believe is inquiring as to how I want my audience to be inspired, is difficult to answer. I don't want to prescribe or force a point of view on my audience. What I'm hoping to do in my work is the complete opposite. This doesn't mean that I'm being vague or indifferent towards how my work should be seen. I'm not saying "Any reading goes. I don't care." It's a very fine line: I'm very precise about what I want to convey and I meticulously plan how my ideas will be communicated in my work, but at the same time, I don't want to dictate what you see. There is a framework. However, I want the audience to have the freedom to experience the work for themselves and choose what value and meaning the work holds for them.

I want to also point out that how you experience the exhibition is in fact very fluid. You might come away with something completely different when

you've seen the exhibition for the second time. Every time I make a new exhibition, I experience my work in a different light. This is the great thing about art and visual media. The art itself is unchanging, but the way we experience it is always in flux.

**Q:** I saw *Vox Populi, Tokyo* at Wako Works of Art. This work is constructed from many photographs and is a complicated piece. I personally felt a rhythm in the way the photographs were configured. Was there any particular rule that you had when putting this piece together?

**FT:** This work is a kind of inventory in that it has to do with classification. The work itself is made up of many narratives. What happens when you look through thousands and thousands of images is that you begin to notice certain patterns: birthdays, marriages, baby pictures, family members sleeping, bathtub pictures, people covering their faces because they don't want to be photographed, and of course in Japan, people holding up the peace sign. I consider these themes—which seem to naturally emerge—to be like islands, which I then plotted across the wall. This work is like a storyboard in some ways, but unlike film it's something that progresses in a non-linear way because the viewer can look at the wall and make their own story as they look through the work. The work elicits a lot of identification—people look at the pictures and think, "I've got a picture like that."

**OK:** I'd like to end the Q&A here. This exhibition is something that can be viewed in a very short amount of time, however, I believe that the "poetics of looking" manifests when the audience chooses to stop and confront what Fiona is offering through her work. The most important aspect of Fiona's work is not just the images: It's also how one chooses to perceive and engage with the work. The poetics of looking or, in other words, how you engage with and relate to the work can really change the experience and make it more meaningful. This is the beauty of images that transcends physical works and time. I'm truly delighted to be able to present to you Fiona's work, which presents this aspect of images, while maintaining openness to the interpretation of the audience. Finally I'd like to thank Fiona for discussing her work and the exhibition. Once again, thank you all for coming.

This text is a compilation of two lectures, one as part of the press conference and the other for general public, by Fiona Tan in Tokyo on July 20th and 21st, 2014 as part of the opening program for the exhibition, "Fiona Tan Terminology." The lectures were held with English- Japanese translation by YOKOTA Kayoko.

[Edited and translated by AISO Nobuko]

All works and images appear courtesy of the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London; Wako Works of Art, Tokyo.