Victoria Fu
Cult of Splendor

Curated by
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Enduring Distraction
—Kellie Lanham

The stimulations of the senses succeed one another with such rapidity that there is no room left behind them for even the slightest contemplation.[1]

In 1926, Siegfried Kracauer, a writer and film theorist often attributed to the Frankfurt School, wrote the essay, "The Cult of Distraction: On Berlin's Picture Palaces," for a German newspaper. The short piece of writing examines the growing culture around cinema and picture houses in dense urban areas. Calling such institutions "palaces of distraction" and "shrines to the cultivation of pleasure," he concludes that as political and economic tensions rise in urban communities, the working city-dwellers' need for distraction also increases; it is the only way society "will not sink into the abyss."[2] Functioning as a ruling-class tool, fast-paced film spectacles allowed viewers to fall into a fictional narrative, leaving a brief moment in which to gaze toward the periphery of industrial world problems. Yet cinema isn't simply about taking in fleeting moments of forgetting, but rather, according to Kracauer, operates as a space where one could avoid the fact that these tensions in

urban, working-class communities are "formal" and "unfulfilling."[3] That is, in a growing capitalist society, tensions within the working class have little to do with individual needs, but actually spring from the fact that the whole industrial system is disordered and corrupt: this is the "abyss."
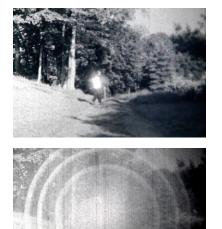
Although written during the early twentieth century, Kracauer's summation of an urban culture's want – or even *need* – for distraction through narrative spectacle is as timely now as it was almost a century ago. The screens of the movie palaces have multiplied and moved beyond cinema; no longer limited to film, distraction can be accessed as fast as it takes to reach inside your pocket (i.e. television, smart phones, laptops, tablets). In a recent examination of the effects of these technologies on contemporary society, Bernard Stiegler addresses the enduring need for spectacular narratives amidst a climate oversaturated with media:

This ancient desire for narrative still orders modern society: it animates the most complex, and most secret, of social movements. But the conditions of this desire's satisfaction have been radically transformed; it has become the object of a global industry.[4]

Moving away from the picture houses of the 1920s, the consequences of indulging in distraction have changed. The "conditions of this desire's satisfaction" are that having technological devices that take our minds off capitalism actually *solidify* our place within the system. Imagine loading a short video clip on your smart phone. Your desire to access this brief moment of escape will undoubtedly be met with advertisements for a product related to the clip

Still images from *Milk of the Eye*, 2012, black-and-white 16mm film. Courtesy of the artist and Samsøn. Photo: Stewart Clements.

you are about to watch. Then as the video starts to play, a banner pops up atop the screen explaining that the book you just looked at on Amazon is now 10% off. While we may believe these advertisements are tailored to our wants and needs, Stiegler states, "this is obviously pure illusion."[5] Fully engorged within these devices of supposed distraction, we are actually complicit consumers locked into global capitalism. Distraction and narrative have become bound to consumerism, raising many new questions: How has the fast trans-formation from analog film to digital media changed our relationship to distraction? Has this oversaturation of media caused a complete disconnection between individuals and their political and economic realities? If so, how has this transformed Kracauer's notion of the "abyss"?

This is the state through which we enter the work of Victoria Fu. Engaging and blending analog and digital pro-cesses, she creates films, videos and photographs that examine cinematic narrative *and* fragmented digital space. For example, the short, black-and-white, 16mm film *Milk of the Eye* (2012) is shown through an outmoded film projector. The lights are turned down and our first engagement with the work is through the persistent strumming of the projector that sits on a waist-high pedestal. Almost like an automatic weapon, the sound persists rapidly, stubbornly imposing a soundtrack on a film that is supposed to be silent. The bulb within the apparatus shines through the film reel, and slowly, a black-and-white image fades into focus on the wall before the projector. A figure is standing in a grassy landscape with a dirt path winding through it. The figure is a woman; leisurely, she walks toward the camera holding a mirror. She waves this strange tool from side to side, the

sun is reflected off its surface, illuminat-ing and obscuring the camera's eye repeatedly. Multiple shots show her walking through trees, woods, and grassy plains, waving and wandering with no clear purpose. Finally she stands before the camera, mirror at her chest, and simply disappears. The sound endures but the image is gone until the film starts all over again.

Running on an approximately four-minute loop, the black-and-white film and the apparatus on which it is presented recalls a time past when spectacular films were an escape. Yet, the work resists this; the images that flash before us are disjointed, frag-mented, and offer no narrative structure in which to get lost. The blinding light of the mirror obscures not only the film frame, but also our ability to piece together a moment of distraction.

This overall feeling of a discon-nected narrative is echoed in Fu's *Belle Captive* series of video installations. *Belle Captive I* (2013) is projected on a freestanding wall from an overhead digital projector. The space it occupies, like *Milk of the Eye*, is dark, but the images that appear before us are much larger, bleeding off the surface of the wall and onto the back of the gallery. What follows is a series of uncanny images and sounds against a flat yet colorful background in which hues blur into one another, much like a sunset. We see the top half of a boy's face, the spinning head of a Roman statue, a woman sipping water, a small girl wearing a backpack and waving. Much like the images we see on our computer screens, these bodies and objects pop in and out of focus, moving across the projected surface to a series of familiar, yet untraceable sounds: ice clinking in a glass, low voices in muffled conversa-tion, the ambient noises of a rainforest, the clicking and clacking of a computer

Still images from *Belle Captive I & II*, 2013, digital video with sound. Courtesy of the artist and Emerson Dorsch.

keyboard and mouse.

Again the video is on a short loop, approximately six minutes long, but unlike the work before, the images are large, colorful, and appear to be entirely digital. The people and objects in the foreground are all appropriated stock footage taken from the Internet, but the spectrum of color they are superimposed atop is originally shot on 16mm film then later transferred to digital. Blending together these processes, the work is at once cinematic and commercial, analog and digital, physical and virtual. Although completely different in the process and materials used, both the *Belle Captive* series and *Milk of the Eye* present fragmented images that disrupt traditional cinematic narrative.

Moving from the photographic frames on a film reel to endlessly reproduced virtual stock images, we find Kracauer's and Stiegler's anxieties being played out in this constellation of Fu's work. While Kracauer is suspicious of cinema's role in distraction, Stiegler is sure our current virtual climate is catastrophic, not only because of the adoption of media devices for marketing, but through the very transformation of the material we call "film." In a reflection on cinema's change from analog to digital, filmmaker and theorist Babette Mangolte suggests that the very shift from silver-based stills moving through a projector to algorithms and pixels alters the way we view and interact with film. She posits that the clarity of the digital image, which comes from newer modes of filmmaking and media, creates viewers less likely to question what is being presented to them and more receptive to media influence: "It seems that sharpness could prevent one from 'freeing the mind from its desire to concentrate.'"[6]

These crisp images, like glossy advertisements in a magazine, entice the viewer with their luster and allow no room for questioning or studied contemplation. As Fu's work constantly applies and merges analog and digital processes, we can locate the nuances Mangolte defines in these two types of images—demonstrating how these slight aesthetic transformations have changed Kracauer's distrust into Stiegler's fear.

Standing amidst these seemingly disparate works, we find that our anxieties over technology and media spectacles are not unique to this generation; rather, they are imbedded within the history of film itself. The movement and grainy stills of Fu's *Milk of the Eye*, alongside the glossy, slick images in the *Belle Captive* series, offer us an historical bridge to consider our relationship to this medium. In rethinking narrative, the materiality of film and its consumption, these works question both the history of distraction and the socio-economic regimes that made them necessary. Through these films and video installations we can thus begin to examine changing modes of distraction, and how we choose to defy or comply with the system.

1 Siegfried Kracauer, "Cult of Distraction," in *The Mass Ornament*, ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 326.
2 Ibid., 323–326.
3 Ibid., 325.
4 Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time 3: Cinematic Time and the Question of Malaise*, trans. Stephen Barker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 8.
5 Ibid., 4.
6 Babette Mangolte, "Afterward: A Matter of Time," in *Camera Obscura, Camera Lucida*, ed. Richard Allen and Malcolm Turvey (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003), 266.

A Conversation Between Victoria Fu and Max Maslansky

Max: When I watched *Belle Captive* the first time, I couldn't quite tell if it was staged or appropriated. It made me hark back to our time together at CalArts when you made this film of a wandering woman. I thought, she's dealing with similar issues in a lot of ways, this weird nether-land between digital and filmic space, between a precise setup and the spontaneous. It also seems like you overdubbed sound onto stock footage.

Victoria: Yes, it's all appropriated stock people, objects and sounds. I often think about how I'm making the same piece over and over again in different guises or materials. I'm not even sure which "wandering woman" film you're remembering—there was more than one during CalArts! It makes me wonder if the medium even matters—like, what would happen if you just gave me wooden sticks instead [*laughs*]?

Belle Captive is the first time I used stock footage, and the idea for the piece came before the decision to use it (I had been considering shooting original footage). Looking back, stock makes perfect sense as material for these "nether-lands," as you say, being between advertising and cinema; their

spaces are created to be materially erased in order to fit whatever context an advertiser might choose.

MM: That makes sense because your work has these interstitial spaces. In them, there are cues for wanting the subject or object to arrive somewhere, to develop like characters, but neither ever does. These new pieces are less narratively-driven, meaning there are different elements interspersed that don't seem quite related and aren't quite occupying the same spaces.

VF: That was the challenge and also the content. Each appropriated clip is like a flat cutout—flat in sensibility as well—on a fake background. I was trying to weave some sort of believable cinematic space with those disparate elements. They don't *completely* fuse into a singular space, and I am interested in that in-between state. I shot 16mm abstractions for the "background," then overlapped the stock footage over it as figures in the "foreground." I thought, if the space is just *sometimes* plausible and if I can *sometimes* believe that figure is in front of that sky, then what do I know about the space in between them? For me, that poses the existential questions that often drive me to make work. In cinema, we tend to flesh out the scene in our minds, even "feeling" the air in the space we can't see behind an on-screen object. But in *Belle Captive*, probing at that intermediary space leaves me with the bleak feeling of the virtual—yet there are moments when I can imagine the space as whole, just a different kind of flesh than cinema.

MM: I always liked the idea of *editing* space. I've been considering making the editing process more transparent in my

paintings, rather than rendering ambiguous spaces that ultimately rely on illusion. Typically, I make a drawing, project it, and then paint. That projection obviously disappears in the process and you'd never know it existed. But what would happen if I left my pencil notations in there, trying to make editing as real to the actual problem as I'm dealing with it in words (the inclusion of "ums," "uhs," ellipses, retractions, etc.)? I don't think painting is ultimately very good at covering the ground I want to cover. Maybe it's just going to be extrapolated over a long period of time through a series of multiple paintings. I feel like that's much easier to do with the moving image, collapsing five or six different images, sounds and sights. It's such a rich collusion of different sensory models. It's very hard to do that in a painting. Maybe the grass is always greener.

VF: And I admire the baggage of painting as an arena or a set of breakable rules—it's never without context. Sometimes, working with the moving image feels anchorless since it is everywhere in our lives. I have to partition the way I consume media: in the studio, as a spectator, a user of technology, etc. How do you go about indexing images for [your Facebook feed] "Redlight Lacuna" versus what you source for your paintings?

Still images from *Three Breaths*, 2012, color 16mm film, in collaboration with Ester Partegàs. Courtesy of the artist and Samsøn. Photo: Stewart Clements.

MM: For my feed, I'm more interested in the potentially offensive or perverse. Such images have more of an immediate shock value, giving me the impetus to find more like them. In such imagery for my painting, however, those truth-is-stranger-than-fiction moments are too easy. Even if you hate the painting, you'll be like, "Why is that horse dressed up like a leprechaun?" and you will remain at least amusingly confused.

This is what I like about your work: you don't rely on something that is too exotic. The imagery you are using is really familiar, but I'm not sure where it comes from. I don't know if that's uncanny, but there are these in-between moments that are happening with the stock footage—an anchorman waiting to be on the air accompanied by vague chitter-chatter, for instance. Also, the English that is spoken is nonsensical: "a, b, q…"—it doesn't spell anything. It's like all the information has not been put together yet, but I recognize the structure of the *mîse-en-scène* through a lifetime's worth of media exposure.

VF: The unresolved parts. Those breaks in language echo what stock images do to the overall narrative: the bones of a familiar filmic structure are there, but no one is home. We hear the alphabet, we see the hand emphatically gesturing, but none of the signs are connecting to meaning. Our images are stand-ins for the real things, but they are only glassy surfaces made of bits. There is something deeply empty about those broken links… we are projecting meaning onto a blank world.

MM: In that sense, your work is atmospheric and disjointed in a way that painting is pretty good at. And it deals with space the way a painting can too. Contemporary painting depicts deep space as a kind of outmoded technology that we buy into as an illusion, but whose flatness is still reinforced at the same time, all the time. I see that in the new work you're doing.

VF: *Three Breaths* is a recent 16mm film of mine that is blatantly like painting, speaking to the contradictions you mention regarding deep space and flatness—talk about outmoded technology! It depicts clouds of color forming

and drifting in a landscape, and you realize it's airbrush paint buckling a piece of paper.

MM: You also have these partial elements—everything is fragmented. Narrative cinema never deals with subjects in this way.

VF: Yeah, it's usually, "Get the subject in the frame!" The colors I've been using in *Belle Captive* have exploded, maybe because I've been so monochromatic for a couple of years now…

MM: It's very bright and colorful and overblown too; everything is hyper-lit.

VF: I was thinking very consciously of classic prismatic Mac screensavers and also hyper-color California sunsets. I filmed sunlight filtered through prisms on a white wall, and also manipulated the 16mm negative's exposure, producing that mess of colors. It was a chance operation on top of a selective palette of produced color, a process not at all unlike painting.

MM: I'm a huge color nut, you know—

VF: Color nut—that's a good title for something.

MM: Yeah [*laughs*], that is good. I like super lush color. I feel like a lot of contemporary art confuses monochrome grayness, or color obstinace, with seriousness and smartness. My paintings are getting more and more consciously keyed-up. It's very intuitive, not pre-planned, really. I know of painters who think of a color world: "I'm painting someone who's sick. What are the colors of sick?" But because my subject matter is a little more open-ended, I just go.

Are you looking for sudden jolts of associative meaning when you layer these different elements that you find, or are they more based on formal decisions ("I just liked how that stack of papers looked occluding that woman's face")? Perhaps it's both at the same time. It's tricky to dissociate formalism from narrative content, if that's truly possible. Symbolically, I don't know what your paratactic associations *exactly* mean—they could be numerous—but they are certainly alluring. As a painter, I'm always looking to be constantly surprised—that's the drug of it—and if you're not getting that, you feel dead, your painting looks dead, it feels too procedural. Do you feel like you're looking for sudden surprise associations?
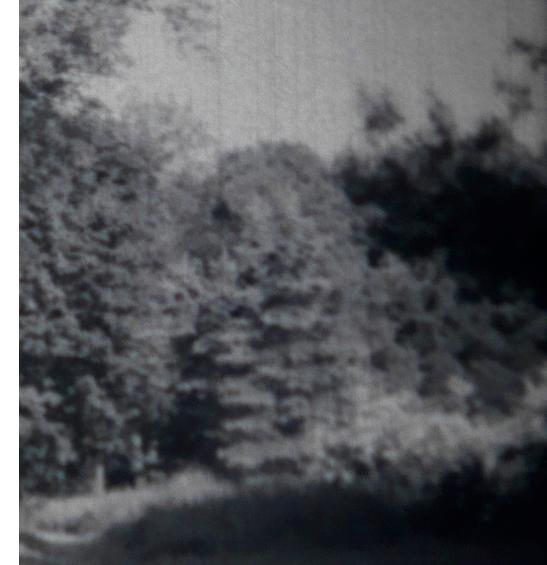
VF: Yes, I do want that jolt at times but I also want it to look *almost* normal. I was fragmenting, overlapping, manipulating the images like puzzle pieces being assembled to imply plausible space. The clip of a stack of office papers fit within the frame's perspectival space, and ended up covering a woman's face. In that video, I chose corporate-themed clips, whereas *Belle Captive I* includes coffee beans, orchids and dogs drinking water—partially chosen from my collection of stock clips for their spatial plausibility. If the space comes first as the organizing principle in my process, there will be surprising image combinations; if the images come first, the space becomes odd. I am shooting for a bit of both.

MM: You know the "uncanny valley" in CGI? If a digitally-created character doesn't look quite human enough, our brains can't process it and it's absolutely terrifying. "The Polar Express" tried to pass the uncanny valley, but couldn't.

I remember everyone saying how creepy it was—"It's just like Tom Hanks, but not really! Get me out of here!" I look at your work and I think: this is a fake space, but I am willing to suspend my disbelief, and with relative comfort—it's a very subtle experience. On the other side of the spectrum, the show "Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!" uses bad TV tropes and digital flourishes to the point of vomit: an onslaught of logos, kitsch-baroque with lots of idiotic plot scenarios, and the space is super-ridiculous. I feel that a lot of contemporary art has been using this overabundance of signs in a compressed space to undermine the linearity of narrative—and each sign itself. Your gentler and more subtle approach adds up to a similar message, but through a different avenue: one that sinks with the horizon line of mass media, but just enough where you start to notice the falsity of what is taken for granted.

VF: It does amount to a kind of mutual destruction or canceling each other out—on top of already being so voided. These clips are made for the exchange of capital—nothing more, nothing less—and about selling anything, really. I sometimes think about their very "impoverished" existences, and I want to breathe into them, enrich them with some other life. Perhaps that's why I pace these films with something closer to cinematic time. They temporarily float, suspended and stretching just beyond a state of consumption.

Max Maslansky is an artist living and working in Los Angeles.

Victoria Fu
was born in 1978 in Santa Monica, California, and lives and works in San Diego and Los Angeles. She received her BFA from Stanford University, MA in Art History from the University of Southern California, and MFA from the California Institute of the Arts. Her film and video installations will be featured in the 2014 Whitney Biennial, and have been exhibited at venues including the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, La Jolla, CA; De Appel, Amsterdam, Netherlands; Museo de la Ciudad, Quito, Ecuador; Seoul National University Museum, Seoul, Korea; among others. She attended the Whitney Independent Study Program and Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, and is a recent grantee of the Rema Hort Mann Foundation YoYoYo Artist Project Fund and Art Matters Foundation. Fu co-founded and directs The Moving Index (http://artoffice.org).

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Front and back cover: Still image from *Belle Captive I*, 2013. Digital video with sound. Courtesy of the artist and Emerson Dorsch, Miami.

Inside front and back panels: Still from *Milk of the Eye*, 2012. Black-and-white 16mm film. Courtesy of the artist and Samsøn, Boston. Photo: Stewart Clements.

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