

## Public Intimacies

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### Abstract

The increasing presence and convergence of cinema in contemporary art has mobilized numerous theoretical curatorial practices that seek to articulate new discursive modes of spectatorship. This article reviews the exhibition *Public Intimacies*, shown at the Super 8 Hotel as part of the Images Festival in April 2018. Through its alternative curatorial design, *Public Intimacies* complicates conceptions of spatial-temporal intimacy in participative viewership, creating environments that maximize ambiguity.

### Exhibition Description : *Public Intimacies*,

Images Festival, Super 8 Hotel, Toronto

April 14-16, 2018

“Room number 8319, please?” I ask. The receptionist looks up at me warily and nods to the left. The desk staff have likely grown irritated by this request—and the day has barely begun. After all, offering directions to an art exhibition is not part of their job description.

*Public Intimacies* is an unconventional exhibition, located in an unconventional space. The exhibition unites the films of Jon Wang, and Dani (née Leventhal) Restack and Sheilah (née Wilson) Restack within the hotel rooms of the Super 8 Hotel as part of the off-site programming for the 2018 Toronto Images Festival. From monitor to projection, private gallery to public museum, moving image exhibitions have historically undergone various transformations. *Public In-*

*timacies* proffers a liminal response to this continuum of situationally-driven contexts in moving image exhibition. Curated by Aily Nash, *Public Intimacies* thrives in this exhibition format by walking the ambivalent lines of moving image screening, gallery exhibit, and public installation. The Super 8 hotel rooms are themselves spaces between the periphery of public and private space, the spaces of occupancy and becoming. Situated in such an elusive place, the films of *Public Intimacies* are in a unique position to reveal fluid, eroticized ways of perceiving and sensing space.

Room number 8319 and 8320: these are the entry points to the exhibition. Located on the third floor of the Toronto Chinatown Cultural Centre, the Super 8 Hotel is a site of performative intervention. By the time you step into the elevator, you will have crossed into an alternative realm. In the elevator, I notice that the button for floor “3” has a sticker with the number “8” placed in front of it, a nod to the auspicious Chinese number and the hotel’s moniker. Another reading of the “8” points to the limitless capacity for expansion within a fixed space.

The films presented in *Public Intimacies* explore human attachment to spaces of solace through the interstitial of the public-private. As a collection, the films offer a strong sense of escapism: the audience is transported outside of the confines of the white-walled gallery, or the black screen, to an elsewhere where reality is queered and fantasies manifest. Jon Wang’s *From Its Mouth Came a River of High End Residential Appliances* (2018), is a continuation of his ongoing projects that create hyper-orientalist spaces in search of solace and transcendence from states of disorientation. *From Its Mouth* hinges upon moving image, installation, and visceral experience, following a drone as it ascends into the manmade holes of the towering Bel-Air residential buildings in Hong Kong. The gaping holes carved into the centre of each building, void of practical function, are markers of *feng shui*, designed as gates for dragons to fly through and drink water from the sea. *Feng shui*, which translates to “wind water”, is a philosophy that optimizes energy flow between built and natural environments. Interweaving his own diarized experience of the project, the history of *feng shui*, and the mythology of Chinese deities, Wang creates a narrative as disjunctive and alluring as the buildings themselves.

Previously commissioned by Triple Canopy as a performance and video installation, *From Its Mouth* was converted into a public single-channel video installation as part of the curatorial framework of *Public Intimacies*. For the exhibition, Wang took over room 8319, transforming the space by rearranging according to *feng shui* practice. Two single beds are pushed together into one and a traditional Chinese rosewood armchair sits at the corner by the window curtains. The edges of the merged beds parallel the periphery of the film frame that is being projected upon the wall. The projector reclining against the bed invites me to do the same.

Wang's film is presented as three acts divided by the chime of a bell, each new sequence embarking upon a new dragon gate. Traversing the friction between fantasy and reality, Wang conjures narrative from his memory, yet raw memory synthesizes into fantasy. He establishes his intent early on, confessing that his desire to fly into the holes of the buildings was "the only way to become who [he] wanted to be.

In the adjacent room, Wang's reverberating words softly juxtapose footage of Dani and Sheilah Restack fucking on the TV screen. Whereas Wang's film is sweepingly meditative, the Restacks' is intercutting and biting. At once banal and sinister, the Restacks' film *A Hand in Two Ways (Fisted)* (2017) is a video loop of montaged vignettes from the artists' life together: a red tarp over a window, the rotting carcass of roadkill, their young daughter Rose snoring out phlegm. Quotidian objects and rituals stage rupture between alternate dimensions of the familiar and uncanny. Flashes of Rose sleeping incongruously collapse into footage of a steady progression into a tunnel, only to then coalesce with a tape of Dani's leaking crotch. Unsettling yet deeply maternal, *Fisted* articulates the bodily and visceral realities of motherhood within domestic space.

In room 8320, a haunted calm engulfs the space; the low hum of electricity and the comfort of drawn curtains is alluring. The screening room of *Fisted* appears more traditionally in accordance to a hotel room, with two single beds pointed towards a small television broadcasting

the film. Without a projector, it is darker here, with only the light from the television set. But was it not Gertrude Stein who wrote intimacy could only be achieved in the dark in sexual embrace? Compared to Wang's room, the Restack's partakes in a divergent ethos suspend the voyeur-viewer in a state of unease and shame. Yet to expose these private scenes is not a matter of alienation but reclamation. *Fisted* occupies a similar space to the Restacks' other collaborative work, such as the medium-length film *Strangely Ordinary This Devotion* (2018), which vigilantly steps into home spaces to uncovers the "feral domestic". A paradox of sorts that characterizes much of the Restacks' work, the "feral domestic" is a concept that attempt to neutralize the static binds of domesticity with generative practice. This is most pronounced in the artists' rechristening as the "Restacks", a name that emblemizes growth through variation. For the fragmented narratives in *Fisted* are only deceptively dissonant, instead calling into question the concern for emergence within ritual and domesticity. Each image is a gesture that accumulates against the next through a stark montage: a touch, a pull, a thrust, a pour.

In an interview with *Cinemascope*, Dani maintains that "magic is the path to rupture" (Sicinski 2017). Possessing no intention for narrative, *Fisted* creates and requires devotion so as to reveal the magic of becoming. The textures of oppressive, confined spaces culminate in a hypnotic rumination to make nonsense out of sense. These gestures are made between the forces of agency and passivity (Sedgwick 2006, 14). The Restacks' practice is one that is frustrated by collaboration yet achieves its most affective abstractions through collaborative and generative space.

On the other side of the wall in Wang's room, the closeted intimacy of the visual and aural narrative swallows like a mountainous wave. Viewers are asked to be passengers on an odyssey through architectural and filmic space as they are carried by drone into the dragon gates of Hong Kong's built environment. If the phantom ride celebrates "technologized perception" and the fluidity of gaze, the phantom drone suggests acceleration into the black hole (Balsom 2014, 9). Viewers experience the immaterial machine as it lifts them into flight: the past becomes faint as they draw nearer to the horizon. (*What lay beyond? Is it merely a projection?*) The backdrop of concrete walls pulsates against the enigmatic calm of Wang's voice. He uses architectural

space to delimit the capacity to become mobile, framing the phantom drone in relation to the built environment.

The viewer is reminded by Wang of the “interspecies relationships between dragons and men” as the drone follows the dragon into the hole. A creeping sense of an impending something pries open the otherwise long pose of a fluid cruise. Soon the drone gains forward momentum and the hole unravels into an inevitable overflow of a deep blue sea. Confronting the inertia of moving simultaneously in and out of space, Wang actualizes the void of the hole, luring viewers to submerge its depths and push beyond the limits of the screen. The effect is nothing short of erotic. The shot brims over, building with hesitancy until it finally dares to savour the indelible pleasure.

Through sequences that feel like an airborne trance, Wang compiles a textured and layered landscape of the mythology of the Hong Kong skyline. In *From Its Mouth*, Wang slows the measure of his film into a languid yet purposeful tempo. Through an affective act of mobility, the film breaches emotional and physical distance. His is a poetic sedative of a film, mining for fantasy with deep contemplation, a counterpoint to the lurid but equally dream-like *Fisted*. *Fisted* speaks to the matured and oft weary partnership between the Restacks: this is a couple so comfortable with one another that they willingly plunge into the fleshliness of each other’s awkward bodies. If *Fisted* is the uncaging of domestic sexualities, then *From Its Mouth* is the spectacle of entering expansive spaces, erotic and otherwise.

As opposed to, or perhaps due to, our postmodern urban life proliferated by screens, *Public Intimacies* presents viewers with singular screens in two detached hotel rooms. In the confines of the hotel room, an encounter arises with moving image against the specificity of space and place (Dell’Aria 2017, 18). The hotel room is unlike a predetermined cinematic architecture; instead it is a private site for living that contains the traces of past dwellers. Viewers as inhabitants of the rooms are invited to construct their own subjectivity within the space. The hotel room in this case allows for the reinvention of spatial-temporal intimacy. As Giuliana

Bruno expresses, the *habitation* is an “emotional lodging”, a space of “liminal traversals” that houses the capacity for phenomenological experience—for emotion, sensuality, and affect (Bruno 2010, 31). This dissidence of neither public nor private is most lucid in the two-room geometry of the exhibition: the doorways of rooms 8319 and 8320 are the spatial perimeter of the architecture and the films. For Wang, employing *feng shui* offers a portal into the mystic dimensions of otherworldly being. It is a testament to this conviction that *Fisted* and *From Its Mouth* occupy opposite sides of the same wall and create rupture through their shared walls of peopled space. Whereas one thrusts the role of the voyeur into the face of the viewer, the other lures them in. Erika Balsom suggests that each turn of the century has brought on “subjective transformations” within cinema (Balsom 2014, 10). Between Wang who is firmly staged in the futurity of the present and the Restacks who rely upon the sculptural materiality of the television set, there lie both progressive and reactionary conceptions of moving image exhibition.

In his narration, Wang says he dreams of an intersectional cinema. Perhaps he shares a spiritual kinship with the late filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami: “I often recognize that we are not capable of looking at what we have in front of us unless it’s placed within a frame” (Kiarostami 2009). Tracing mystical geographies and the feral domestic, *Public Intimacies* proffers a way to transcend space altogether. We can only wonder what is awaiting us on the other side.

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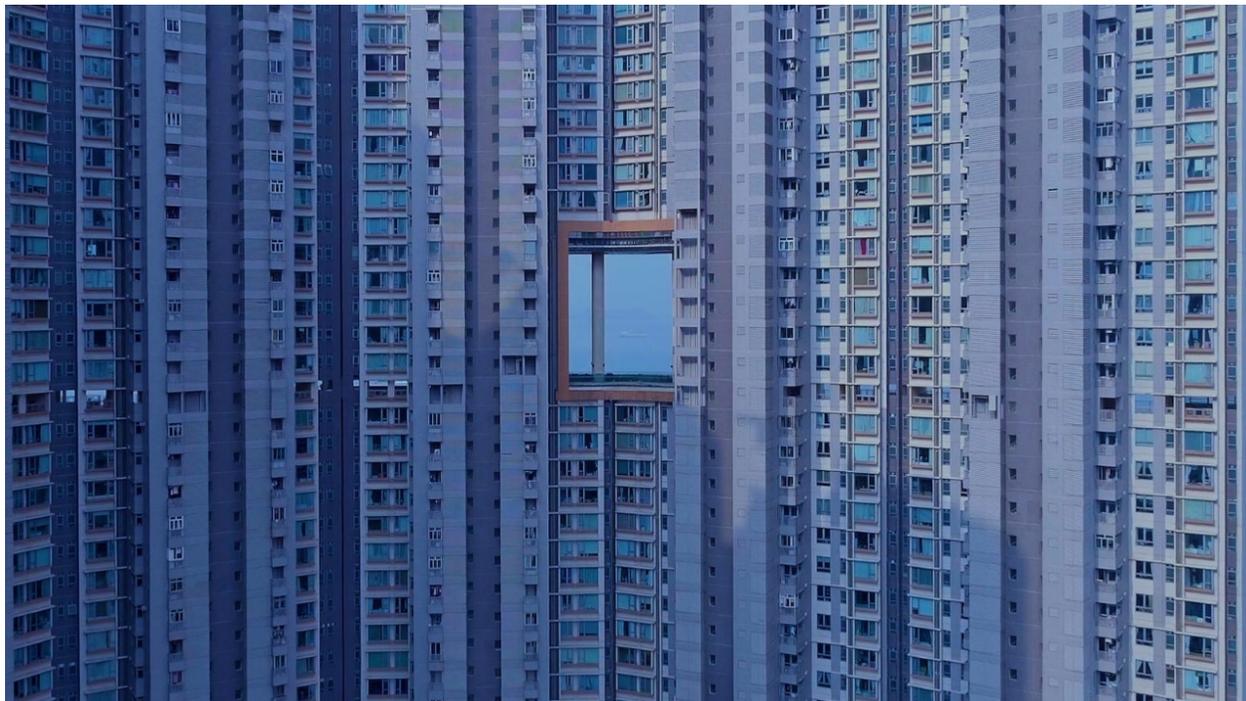


Figure 1. Jon Wang, *From Its Mouth Came a River of High End Residential Appliances*, Film Still. (2018)

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**About the Author**

Theresa Wang is a curator and writer based in Toronto. She is interested in the common ground and emerging forms within cinema and art. Her current projects embed digital culture theory and ekphrastic practice to demonstrate new value creations within the acts of writing and organizing moving image. She is the curatorial assistant at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto.

