

Touch Would

By Liza Johnson

Three different translators each sit alone in brightly lit rooms, reading out loud from an oversize volume. The text, a 1928 interview by the scholar and translator Walter Benjamin with the film actress Anna May Wong, has never been published in English. We see each reader translate, pause, gesture. The video, Patty Chang's *A Chinoiserie Out of the Old West* (2006), cuts from one translator to the next, phrase by phrase. In most instances, the three translators' interpretations correspond to one another. But each one arrives at an ambivalent turn, a passage that is impossible to pin down. They agree on how to translate Benjamin's assertion that "May Wong can no longer imagine her existence (or being) without film." They agree on the question he asks her: "What medium of expression would you take hold of if you couldn't make films any more?" But the translation of Wong's answer is not so simple, even though it is written in English within the German text. As one translator offers, "Her only answer is 'touch wood'—which is beautifully spelled w-o-u-l-d."

If we imagine Benjamin's question to mean, "what if you couldn't make films anymore," then we can hear Wong offering the protective apotrope: "Touch wood!" as if to say, 'Heaven forbid! Who among us can imagine our existence without cinema? What would it mean to try to imagine a world in which we did not constitute our very selves through its logic?' But, in another translation offered to us in Chang's video, we must consider

whether Wong responded to another version of the question, with the emphasis on “What else would be your medium?” To this, she offers a conditional answer: “Touch would.”

Touch would? Touch is a sense rather than a medium. Would it be possible to take this seriously as an answer? Clearly, one of the other translators does. And Benjamin himself was emphatic about the difference between a text and its translation, writing that “no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original. For in its afterlife—which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and renewal of something living—the original undergoes a change.” So what, literally, might Wong mean?

Chang’s video obliges us to imagine ways that touch could be a real working method or means of expression—a model similar to Benjamin’s own relational, haptic approach to cinema, space, perception, and the body. Like much of the art tradition from which Chang emerges, Wong’s elevation of touch supposes the body to be at the center of knowing. Perhaps Wong is suggesting that touching the world is a form of what Chang calls “passionate interaction”—a mode of engagement that risks the putative safety of optical distance for a relational, reciprocal, tactile kind of critical closeness.

Tactile, passionate interaction is not hard to observe in Chang’s earliest works involving her own body. In her first performance piece *Shaved (At a Loss)* (1998), she is literally blindfolded, feeling her way onto the stage, shaving her pubic hair without the benefit of sight. We see her writhing with eels in her blouse (*Eels*, 2001), or falling onto an

unreliable version of a suburban yard that undulates like a waterbed (*At a Loss*, 2000). Chang presents relationships that are not just about looking, but about feeling, ingesting. Symbolic and real at the same time, Chang's body is never outside ideology, never outside gender or the persistent operations of Chinoiserie. Simultaneously, her body remains material, a stubborn substance, intransigent, real.

If we might be tempted to read these works as the entertaining spectacle of Chang's body and its masochistic endurance—like a high-art episode of *Jackass*—her 2004 projects remind us otherwise. To read the work as pure spectacle is to forget that masochism is not just a display, but a relationship. Touch is a two-way phenomenon; the tables can be turned, or, more accurately, they have always been turned. Chang's work from 2004 consists almost entirely of asking others to reenact her earlier performances. The roles shift when they are translated by new bodies, but the same relationships are at stake when Chang moves to the other side of the camera.

Since 2005, Chang has deployed this tactile, critical closeness in a series of extended site-specific projects, “passionately interacting” with landscapes, people, and geopolitical relationships beyond the psychic ones that she explores in her earlier work, setting cultural fantasies in motion in a concrete documentary environment. As before, she stages relationships that traffic in symbol without stepping outside of physical reality, but now in an expanded landscape, a particular time and place. For example, in *Flotsam Jetsam* (2008), shot near sites of massive flooding produced by the Three Gorges Dam, Chang and collaborator David Kelley commission the construction of a large model submarine,

insisting that its clumsy, material presence be hammered, shaved, painted, and dragged across the landscape in question—an embodiment through which an idea can touch the world.

Flotsam Jetsam is an outwardly directed effort to translate or reveal realities that have been submerged (literally). It is also a constant reflection on the cinematic means of this revelation. (Who among us can think of ourselves without cinema?) What would be the medium you would take hold of if you couldn't express yourself in received forms of cinema? For Chang, touch would.