

The Imaginary Landscape: A Conversation with Patty Chang and David Kelley

By Marcus Civin

This past June I spent three days in Boston with David Kelley and Patty Chang at their home. We went to their neighborhood spots in Dorchester; ate fish and mountains of vegetables; and discussed sculpture, film, painting, propaganda, acting, engineering, family, empathy, and globalization. Sometimes I would switch on a voice recorder. After my visit, we continued our conversation over email.

Flotsam Jetsam (2007), a half-hour film and a series of related photographs, was recently on view at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA).¹ *Flotsam Jetsam* is this couple's first official artistic collaboration, though Kelley performed in and shot film for Chang's 2005 video installation, *Shangri-La*, and the couple first met and began a conversation in 1997. Since *Flotsam Jetsam*, Kelley and Chang have worked independently and continue to collaborate. Both work between media, relying on other collaborators and on site-specific research. Although Kelley frequently returns to photography and the moving image, and Chang is deservedly heralded for her performances and performance videos, neither is easily defined. Like the American conceptual artists Eleanor Antin (with whom Chang studied at the University of California, San Diego), and Yvonne Rainer (with whom Kelley studied at the University of California, Irvine), they are not as concerned with categorization as they are with problematizing narrative and identity.

Kelley and Chang have both travelled widely, entering into various situations where culture and environment are changing—China, Laos, Uzbekistan, Brazil, the desert of the American Southwest, the oil sands reserves of Canada. They recognize their Western-ness, but also court a certain cultural decenteredness. They attempt to listen, speak, elicit, record, translate, and produce language. For their collaborative projects, they are co-authors; both with cameras in hand, they conceptualize, debate, cast, scout, costume, direct, and edit.

In *Flotsam Jetsam*, time is nonlinear, and history is a collection of differing interpretations. *Flotsam Jetsam* proposes that history can be made visible where it is not completely known, where it is contested, or when the present moment signals a drastic change or a threat to memory. History becomes a haze that no absolutism can chase away or cover; what is unknown or forgotten sneaks back, pops up slightly altered or out of place, slightly surreal or absurd. It emerges as imagination or as a cloud that clings to a monument.

A photograph near the title wall for *Flotsam Jetsam* at MoMA could almost be a film poster, or a political poster, but it is not idealized. There is a man, nearly nude. His belly protrudes, he is a little “thick,” with a wide stance and a once-dashing head of hair. His face is determined, unsmiling. Even so, he makes himself available to the photographer. With no trace of shyness, bracing a bright flotation tube under his arm, in front of a wood and Styrofoam submarine on an ominous day, he is about to go swimming in a river.

MARCUS CIVIN: A central feature of *Flotsam Jetsam* is a submarine that floats on a boat down the Yangtze River in China. I'm estimating it must be about twenty feet long and over six feet tall. How did you explain the submarine in the film to the actors you worked with?

PATTY CHANG: We talked about landscape and the imaginary of landscape after it is submerged. So the submarine could act as a stand-in for being in a submerged space.

MC: You wrote to me that you were fascinated with the crash of the USS *San Francisco* in 2005. Let me read a little from a *New York Times* story following the crash: "A series of mistakes at sea and onshore caused the 6,900-ton submarine, the *San Francisco*, to run into an undersea mountain not on its navigational charts. One crewman was killed, 98 others were injured."² I imagine you were reading about this crash in the Pacific Ocean and you were reading about the rising water level of the Yangtze River in China—about tree clearing, habitat loss, the flooding of religious and cultural sites, the massive government resettlement project, the building of the giant hydroelectric Three Gorges Dam . . . You made an abstract connection between two stories, across newspaper columns, through different bodies of water.

All images: stills from *Flotsam Jetsam* (2007) by Patty Chang and David Kelley; courtesy the artists



DAVID KELLEY: This was one of those projects that is difficult to explain. When someone asks: “What are you working on?,” we’d say: “Well, it’s a story about the Three Gorges Dam, and the flooding it’s going to create—this giant reservoir that will displace more than a million people—and the dam will be the largest concrete object in the world, and while this is happening, in our film, a US submarine runs into an undersea mountain in the Pacific Ocean that is not on their charts. And also, we’re thinking about the Jules Verne book *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* [1870] and about the lost city of Atlantis . . .” It’s a rather discursive project.

PC: In *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, there’s a window in the side of the submarine, and Verne describes the window as being oblong; the language isn’t more precise, and there have been many people since then who’ve rendered that submarine, and sometimes the windows are roundish and sometimes they’re rectangular.

DK: We cut a hole in our submarine, even though it’s this US submarine, that let it become like Captain Nemo’s boat in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, the *Nautilus*.

PC: In the Disney film version of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* [1954, directed by Richard Fleischer] the window is circular. But by making it oblong or rectangular, the window is more like a movie screen.

MC: The boat moves forward as if making progress through a more standard narrative, yet time and place shift around this forward motion. You have created a dreamy, open, real-time cinema. The actors are behind the window and acting in front of it. They are also watching various dramas unfold through that window as the boat moves down the river.

DK: We had interview questions while we were casting the actors, like you might at any casting, but we asked people to talk about a recent dream they remembered, so part of choosing an actor was whether their story was interesting. We wanted to work in a way that would be a hybrid of cinema, theater, and psychoanalysis. That was one way in which we felt that the people who were part of the film would not only be subjects, but would be producing ideas; they would produce a part of the story. We didn’t specify that we needed actors. We just said: “anyone interested . . .”

PC: We got some young local guys who weren’t actors at all.

MC: The capable but slightly befuddled first mate, Lian Chao.

PC: Yes. And the producers found this Chinese opera troupe that had a lot of people who were interested in working with us. The person who built the submarine, Yu Xincheng, was also the set-builder for that opera. And he assembled a crew to help with the transport and installation of the sub on the boat.

MC: Halfway through the film, there is one part where your cast and crew seem to be extricating themselves from trouble with a police officer.

DK: That is an approach to the dam; we weren’t supposed to be stopped there. We were worried that we would have more trouble with authorities on this film, but that was the one time during shooting that somebody who was an official actually spoke to us.

MC: How did people react to you?

DK: When we were going through the ship lock, I was standing on the lock with a camera wondering if the Chinese domestic tourists on the next ship would think this submarine was a very strange thing. People noticed it, but it didn’t draw much attention.

MC: What does it mean to put a semblance of the USS *San Francisco* into a Chinese situation?

PC: The actual submarine model that we used isn’t the USS *San Francisco*, it’s another US submarine model—

DK: Called the Skipjack.

PC: Basically we were looking for submarines that might be buildable and that people would read as “submarine.”

DK: We bought a plastic model in a shop in some town near Long Beach, California. We brought the little plastic toy to the builder and he built it based on that model.

PC: He scaled it up and built it using that as a reference.

DK: The submarine became a narrative in relationship to the Chinese landscape. For me, that relationship is that this high-tech nuclear submarine—the height of technology and warfare—could run into a mountain that wasn’t on the map. And, at the same time, China is building this dam that’s going to hold back one of the world’s biggest rivers, and what’s that going to do?

MC: The dam could fail, collapse, break . . .

PC: Somebody wrote algorithms to build it. When I went back with my family in 2007, my dad hadn’t been back to China for fifty years, and he said, “Let’s go visit the Three Gorges Dam construction site,” and we took a boat trip that stopped at the site where the dam was being built. When we went, it was still under construction. They diverted the water; it was a giant pit of tiered dirt. My dad was an engineer; he worked on pipelines and bridges, so this was the ultimate tourist destination.

DK: Also, my father was in the mining industry, selling heavy excavation equipment to uranium and coal mines. Since the time when I was young and visiting mines with him, I have had an interest in the industrially degraded environment. When Patty and I started talking about the dam, I think we were equally interested because of these different personal histories.

PC: I think that’s probably part of our collaborative work. It has to do with landscape and these kinds of changes and how that affects the representation of landscape or how landscape is used. When my family took that boat trip, they were building the new versions of the towns at higher points and people hadn’t moved yet. The water level hadn’t started to rise and they still had those signs that showed where the water would be after it filled in. So you would see a town, and you would see a ghost town just above it. It was really strange. In *Flotsam Jetsam*, the river is never too far from the consciousness of the performers or the camera—

DK: Or the audience. Only one person in the film mentions the dam—one of the people who are being interviewed in the pool during the group psychotherapy session, Dai Jie. She says she dreamt she was an airplane flying over the Three Gorges Dam looking at the tourists below her. We didn’t tell her to say that.

MC: It's not the usual dream of flying; she is relating an experience where she feels modernization in her body. That scene in the film is startlingly beautiful. I want to try to describe it. The water is light green-blue. Loud birds or insects rattle the air. Dai Jie is in a pool in an urban area. She is middle-aged with short hair; she wears lipstick. Eyes closed, she holds hands in a circle with three other swimmers and speaks in Chinese. The subtitles read:

I was like an airplane. I flew up in the sky. Because when we were travelling, we saw a lot of airplanes flying over our heads. A lot of foreign tourists, all coming to see the Three Gorges Dam. I flew and flew. I flew really high in the air. Then I would soar down slowly. I was coasting in circles through the air. I was so happy. It was so strange. I'm a person, how did I become an airplane?

PC: Toward the end of the film, the first mate has a monologue about the stages of breath-holding and the moments before losing consciousness and dying.

DK: He talks about letting go of control. The idea of holding your breath is that you consciously hold your breath. Underwater, you let go of your breath either because you give up or you gasp, and so either way, you're going to drown. It has some relationship to the idea of history, how history happens. You don't necessarily control it. *Flotsam Jetsam* is a kind of history film. It's a moment in the history of the site, a transient moment that's passed. Now it's a very different place.

PC: The moment we filmed it, in August 2007, the reservoir was not yet entirely filled.

MC: I keep thinking of the scene about seventeen minutes into the film where a group of older swimmers enter the water in bathing suits, matter-of-factly wading with goggles and vibrantly colored flotation devices into the silt-green-brown water. The swimmers appear comfortable with their bodies, familiar with the river; they don't appear to be too concerned with the camera. There is thunder. They go about their exercise routine in spite of the massive changes that are happening around them. Why wouldn't they?

DK: I love that scene. That's probably one of my favorite scenes in the whole film, mainly because it was only partly planned.

PC: The place we filmed was on an island in the Yangtze, and we had noticed that many local swimmers used it as a starting point for swims down the river. We chose that location knowing there was a good possibility that people might be swimming.

MC: I wasn't sure what was staged and what wasn't. *Flotsam Jetsam* is disorienting. As I'm watching, I'm not sure where the film will go next. There is a dream about a young woman and a tiger; actors play out that dream in a shipyard. There is another dream, a military dream. The actors sing. It rains and the submarine needs to be covered with tarps. The actors discuss a building, an unfinished ruin built in the shape of the word *China*.

PC: Other people are probably disoriented by the fractured nature of the narrative and how things don't always connect or feel of a certain realism, and I think that those sort of gaps or openings allow for questioning that there might be something

more. The film is not entirely closed off or complete. When you were talking about where this could go, I was thinking about Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon* [2009], a black-and-white film that takes place on the eve of World War I. It's an amazing film, and at the end, the narrative just stops. It's a disconcerting feeling when there is no resolution in the cinematic space, but then there is this sense of the moment that comes after. The film doesn't give you any resolution, so it's almost like anything can happen—and it did. World War I happened.

MC: What would happen if MoMA showed *Flotsam Jetsam* in sixty years? How would audiences understand the film then? How would they understand it when they know what the future is like? What would happen with China's economy, for example?

PC: The hundred trillion dollar question! A dam like this has never been built on this scale. The media hyperbolizes it: "It is the largest hydroelectric dam project in the world."

MC: It seems to me you are concerned with the human scale of the dam, with social relations. Where are the people in this hyperbole, the players in this history? What are the psychological echoes caused by this construction?

DK: We wanted the local actors to speak for themselves—so they would have a voice. That was an effort to avoid having only our voice describing the landscape or commenting on it in an essayistic way—there would be language sourced from the people we were working with. Jia Zhang-ke's documentary *Dong* (2006) is about the realist painter Liu Xiaodong. Liu is creating monumental paintings that heroize the workers who demolish the old buildings and construct new buildings above the new water level along the Yangtze. Close to the start of the documentary, Liu describes one of the workers, a seventeen year old: "When he strips off, his huge prick stands out. Fuck! How youthful and vigorous he is at seventeen! Despite growing up in a tough environment, nothing can cover up his beauty." The painter is so impressed with this working-class kid and his big dick, you can tell Liu's just so into the body; it's just something he's fascinated with; so the bodies become *the people*—they are an allegory. There is a veracity to it, but the body is foregrounded and it becomes the object.

PC: When we were doing the casting, and asking people about their dreams, we did have a discussion about whether they would just make up some stories because they thought that is what we wanted to hear.

DK: That's a burden of documentary—both the filmmaker and the subject are creating their own imaginary version of what is real. We took fragments of various actor's dreams and recomposed them. In some cases actors are performing narratives that aren't entirely sourced from their own dreams.

MC: You used text you both wrote together, some from your conversations with each other translated into Chinese, including the discussion between the young man and young woman (Hua Wenjun and Jiang Xue). They're watching a crew bring potted plants and two wolf statues onto

the boat with the submarine. The young woman says: "The submersion of cities is real; talking about them as imaginary or subconscious is abstract . . . What about simple loss and sadness over moving and the passage of time?"

DK: Things get translated differently. We couldn't have complete control over how our script was translated and how it was performed.

PC: We hired a simultaneous translator. There was a lot of mediation between what was in our heads and how it got translated to the actors and the crew.

DK: There was some control we gave over to the contingency of how people would interpret what we'd written and how they would perform it. We gave people things to do, tasks—something to do while they were saying something else.

PC: I think that a lot of it, too, was not only about acting. It was about where they were and what the situation was, the context of their presence.

MC: The actors were familiar with the area already?

PC: Most of them were local to Yichang. Three of them were from Shanghai.

DK: When we were scouting, we were going to places the local actors were familiar with.

PC: When we gave a talk at MoMA recently, the video artist and photographer John Pilson asked us about empathy. *Flotsam Jetsam* could create empathy, through not just a sentimentalized idea of loss, but loss as embodied in certain objects or things or in the landscape. When people have feelings in a place, their interior is exteriorized onto the landscape—that's a way to create affect in the landscape. The people are exposing something for us to feel. They're trying to externalize something so that we can feel something in that place too.

MC: When the actor empathizes with the landscape, they become for the audience almost like a medium for transferring the attitudes or desires of the landscape. And landscape holds history; the Yangtze River holds history for China.

PC: When we went to the river with my dad, he had a lot of emotions about it. He said: "I see the river and I feel like I'm home." But that's not where he's from; he's from Qing Tian, in a completely different province of China.

DK: What happens to those emotions connected to those sites that disappear underwater?

PC: When something changes . . . Outside the house where I grew up in Moraga, California, we had this giant Dutch Elm right outside my window, and one year I went home when I was in my



thirties, and my mom had had it cut down, and I didn't even notice at first. She said, "Look, I cut down the tree." And my eyes just started tearing up when I turned around, and it was really weird because I'd never consciously thought about the tree in my life, but at that moment, I did have a real sense of loss.

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NOTES 1. *Flotsam Jetsam* was on view at the Museum of Modern Art, March 15–September 28, 2014.
2. Christopher Drew, "Adrift 500 Feet Under the Sea, a Minute Was an Eternity," *New York Times*, May 18, 2005.

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