

Victoria Fu: Camera Obscured

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For more than a century, our affair with moving images has been fraught. Let's begin on a January day in 1896 within a dark, crowded Parisian theater: August and Louis Lumière are debuting their newest film. As they roll the footage of *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station), the film's audience, terrified by the train appearing to be heading directly toward them, purportedly attempt to evacuate the theater en masse. The 2020 viewer is, by contrast, considerably more inured to moving images, but we still prefer to think of these modern phenomena as contained, unresponsive, and discrete—to be experienced from a safe remove on our screens and devices.

Yet in the last two decades, software developers have trained images to respond to and record our touch, to our simultaneous delight and unease. The term “haptic” technically refers to any interaction involving skin, not specifically skin rubbing against a digital screen. However, its prominence in cultural discourse has increased exponentially with the rise of touch screens and our ability to manipulate them¹—and their ability, if not to physically plow us down, to change our understanding of the physical and psychic space we occupy—which subsequently invites the question of who might be mining the data gleaned from what we touch and how. This is the terrain that artist Victoria Fu mines transfixingly, and to subtly unnerving effect via her canny collages of analog film and digital video, much of it sourced from free online stock sites.

For the past decade, Fu has been working with seductive yet nonspecific, anonymous images. Her kaleidoscopic videos feature innocuously mundane clips that she has shot in-studio interlaced with those she has accumulated via stock image agencies. She alters her footage by splicing and overlaying them with additions: notably green-screened hands making swiping gestures, but also streams of milk and other liquids, butterflies, and glitter. These additions are usually done in post-production but sometimes appear in the form of gel filters and drips of paint applied to transparent sheets positioned in front of the camera while it's rolling. On viewing, these myriad layers—which move in and out of the frame as if an off-screen hand is adding and removing transparencies from a projector—function as placeholders for multiple planes in space. In the opening moments of the oculus-like *Télévoix 2* (2019), a digital spray-paint tool slowly obscures the projected circle before cutting to footage of palm fronds shot from below. Onto this footage Fu has superimposed a green-screened hand appearing to apply tape directly upon the camera lens. The hand then appears in front of both tape and foliage and “swipes up,” as one would to open an iPhone app, to pull to view the iconic circular Renaissance fresco *Camera degli Sposi*. Observing the viewer from above, Italian painter Andrea Mantegna's cloud-backed cherubs have been partially obscured by another squiggle of chartreuse spray paint. In just 45 seconds, Fu establishes multiple planes that come together awkwardly, seemingly without any correspondence to each other, as if spliced from different narratives. Each motif is arrested, caught in limbo between these clips that reshuffle from one moment to the next.

This brief opening sequence serves as a map by which to navigate Fu's overarching interests in the bodily space of the viewer. We are left wondering whose hand is manipulating the images, where they have been sourced from, and where we are in relation to them. Are we positioned below, viewing the foliage as an ant might? Fu's drawing

Cat Kron

1. This upsurge can be seen via Google Ngram, a search engine that charts the use of words or phrases over given time frames. As the program demonstrates, “haptic” experienced a dramatic uptick between 1980 and 2008 (the last year for which the engine has compiled data), during which use of the term more than tripled.



Victoria Fu, *Candle* (2017). Archival inkjet print,
30.75 × 20.75 inches. Image courtesy of the artist.





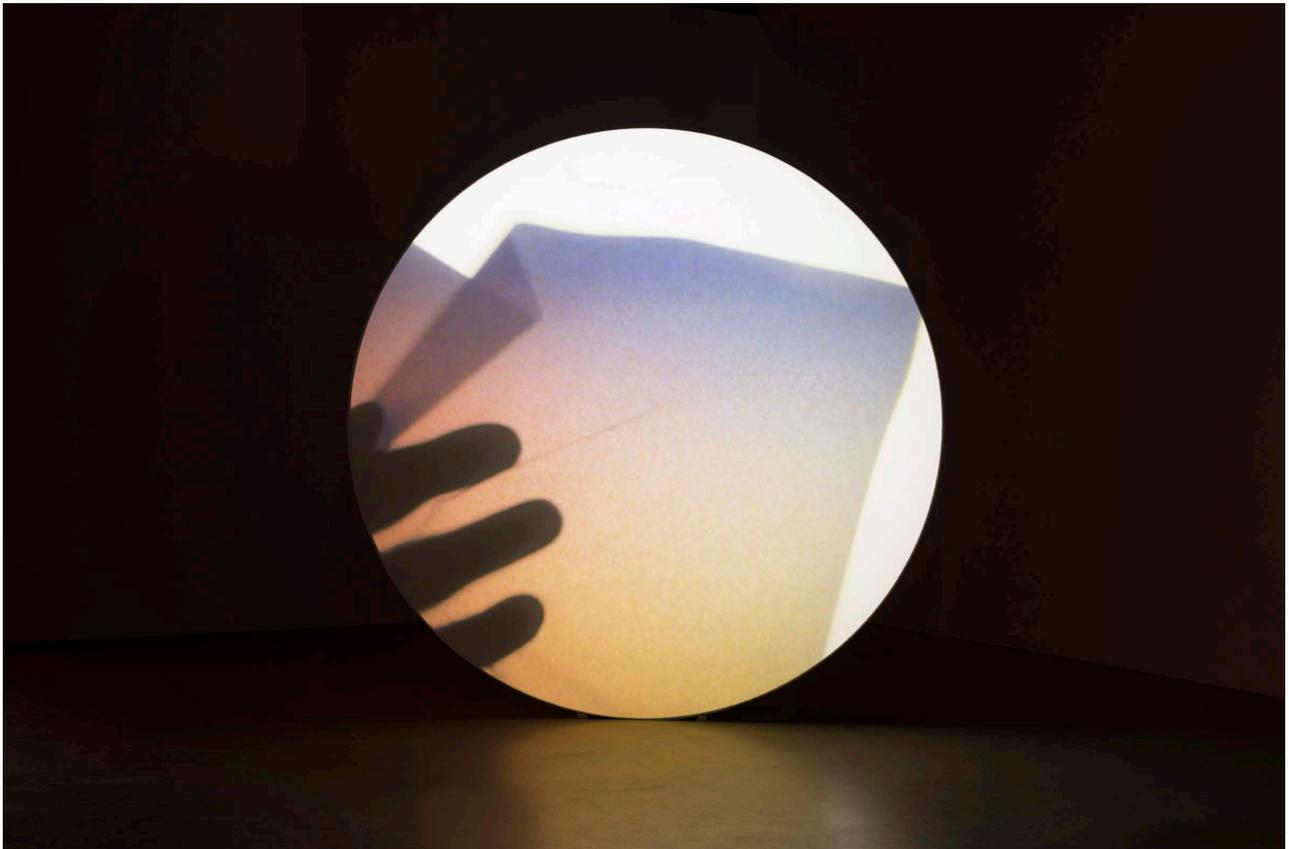
Victoria Fu, (___) (2016) (Installation view from *Out of the Pale*, Museum of Contemporary Art Tucson, AZ, January 13–March 25, 2018). Adhesive inkjet prints, colored LED lights. Video: *Velvet Peel 3* (2016). Video with sound.

over Mantegna's fresco meanwhile reminds us that we are looking at a reproduction, not the original work painted on a ceiling is equally seduced and disoriented.

Fu's hand-shot and appropriated clips present themselves somewhat erratically in her projections via abrupt cuts and wipes (although the especially observant viewer will catch her many allusions to the history of optics and parse a through-line from one shot to the next). The central tension in her work lies in the balance between a rigorous investigation into how our bodies experience and engage with moving images and an underlying acknowledgment that each body experiences and engages differently. Employing superimpositions of digitally rendered, hand-shot, appropriated, and altered footage, her films read as both a virtuosic demonstration of the myriad ways we are physically implicated in digital space and a caricature of the still imprecise means by which touch-generated tech attempts to mine our interactions with the

visuals we respond to and which thus advertise to us. Think of a search engine's multiple attempts to seduce you with ads featuring stoic models on a NordicTrack because you once searched for YouTube footage of "the sweaty thing in Dad's home office." The hand movements in Fu's work at times seem constrained to the programmed gestures of the iPhone, while at others appear to respond gleefully to the imagery projected on-screen. In these moments, the push and pull between consumer and advertiser via digital imagery—with its still-clunky algorithms—is made manifest.

As Fu described it to curator Aily Nash in 2019, "The generic, banal, one-size-fits-all of stock [footage] is a quality I seek out because it is the space of the image that is of primary interest to me."² This squares with goals often attributed to Minimalism: to confront the viewer with his own body in relation to the images that surround him. Talking with Fu about her work, I remarked on its parallels with Minimalism and its



Victoria Fu, *Télévoix 2* (installation view) (2019).
Video with color and sound, 9 minutes, 59 seconds.
Image courtesy of the artist and Honor Fraser
Gallery. Photo: Jeff McLane.

phenomenological recourse to the body moving through space (and by extension, its offshoots in expanded cinema, the filmic movement that sought to remind its watcher of their body watching a film), and she acknowledged it as a lineage. Heavily influenced by phenomenology's concept of the universal eye—that the process of looking could be a universal one—Minimalists sought to provide viewers with a space in which to navigate through installations from multiple physical vantages. Yet this supposedly inclusionary mandate, memorably articulated by Robert Morris in his 1966 text, "Notes on Sculpture,"³ has, in later years, struck many as ironically short-sighted—its "universal eye" being (implicitly) white and male, of "average" height, versed in the same theory its practitioners read, and certainly not the eye of someone navigating the gallery via a wheelchair or wielding a stroller. Fu's stock-infused video installations offer a conduit by which to burrow into this rabbit hole: from our reality amid countless images seeking our generalized attention and which attempt to generalize our unique selves.

Stock footage sourced from free online image banks is imbedded throughout Fu's work: scrubbed and Photoshop-buffed clips of (almost always white) people that have been sold to and sold by companies catering to consumers who wish to convey a simple idea without raising any flags, politically, aesthetically, or otherwise. (One notoriously mocked example, a white woman eating a salad and *really* enjoying it, lives forever as a source for hundreds of internet memes.) The stock-image industry is predicated on the assumption that we won't second-guess the baseline these images establish. But of course, this baseline, once probed, reveals its own assumptions about the culture to which it seeks to cater.

Lately, Fu has been hiring actors to take over roles previously held by stock actors in her films, further complicating the premise of objectivity and inserting herself into the conversation

surrounding what constitutes a baseline for what a "generic," place-holding body looks like and according to whom. *Télévoix 1* (2017) includes audio in which the artist can be heard directing a woman to cross her arms and throw a cloth over her shoulder. Unlike the stock actors, with whom she presumably has not been in contact, this new development reminds the viewer that each of these actor/models are distinct people with whom some cinematographer has had an intimate, physical relationship.

One might think of expanded cinema artist Michael Snow's two-screen film installation *Two Sides to Every Story* (1974), whose back-to-back screens depict opposite views of a performer as she walks toward the viewer. Naturally, in Snow's film, the placeholder is a young, slender white woman. Instead, Fu gently corrals the viewer into an awareness of both their body in space and in contemporary society—with its assumptions, preoccupations, and elisions. By using bodies chosen for their supposed universality, she reminds us of how very few bodies actually resemble these, and how each of us navigates the visual world differently. As data algorithms attempt to generalize our haptic movements into some kind of fictional universality, there will ultimately always be those who are left out of these generalizations. Fu reminds us that the unique haptic body—each with its own desire for touch and patterns of movement while attempting connection—is a gateway to understanding the individual. As I write this, my cat has climbed into my lap, an intrusion I welcome.

Cat Kron is a writer and editor based in Los Angeles and New York. Her work has appeared in *Artforum*, *ArtReview*, *BOMB*, *Cultured*, and *Modern Painters*, among others.

2. "Victoria Fu in Conversation with Aily Nash," *Brave New Worlds* (Palm Springs: Palm Springs Art Museum, 2019), p. 54–59.

3. One of the movement's seminal texts, this essay described how immersive installations forced the viewer to consider their perception changes as they move around an object.