



Saint Sebastian video installation 2001

## Fiona Tan

Akte 1

film and video works

January 25 through May 11

In the early part of 2003 De Pont will be presenting *Akte 1*, an exhibition of work by Fiona Tan. Including more than ten film and video works from the past five years, this is her first large museum exhibition to be held in the Netherlands. The exhibition constitutes a sequel to De Pont's 1999 acquisition and presentation of the video installation *Roll II & III. Akte 1* has been organized by De Pont and was shown at Villa Arson, in Nice, during the autumn of 2002. During the summer of 2003, it will be on view at the Daad gallery in Berlin. The exhibition is accompanied by an extensive publication, which includes essays by Els Hoek and Beatrice von Bismarck

as well as a text by the artist herself. The book is available in four languages.

In one of her letters from a correspondence with the well-known British art critic John Berger, Fiona Tan writes, 'A certain blindness (...) is very desirable.' This appears to be a rather curious statement for someone who makes such sharp observations in her work. It may in fact be an attempt by the artist to question the power of the eye and of the camera in order to maintain, in a world full of images, an open view. As such, Tan does refer to that which goes on beyond the limits of the image. Beatrice von Bismarck writes, 'She presents the contingency of the image, its dependence on the positions that the recording, recorded and observing subjects adopt for themselves and in relation to each other within the relevant historical, social or cultural situation (...).'

Over the past few years Fiona Tan (Pekan Baru, Indonesia, 1966) has received a great deal of recognition for her film and video installations. In 2001 her work was shown at the Yokohama Triennial and at the Venice Biennial. In 2002 work of hers was selected for the Documenta in Kassel. She has produced both documentary films and autonomous film/video works. Her work is characterized by an intent manner of recording people in their surroundings. Precise editing gives these sequences a detailed focus. With a number of works, Tan has used existing visual material from film archives and therein appears to have a considerable concern for older anthropological documentaries. These fragments have been culturally relocated, as it were, and a new confrontation with the anonymous portrait subjects is the result. With much of this material, one experiences a certain tension between the idea of observation and that of being observed. Such images have been employed by Tan in the works *Smoke Screen* (1997), *Facing Forward* (1999) and *Tuareg* (1999). The silent posing and the intense gazes of the portrait subjects instill these sequences with a timeless concentration that allows us to be mirrored, so to speak, in the image of 'the other'. Els Hoek: 'Fiona Tan's concern relates specifically to one person's observation of another. What is expressed in the gaze with which the traveler scrutinizes the native

inhabitant? And conversely as well: if placed on the other side of the camera, what images would the inhabitant make of the traveler?'

The same can be said about *Countenance* (2002), which was shown at the last Documenta in Kassel. In four video projections Tan shows filmed portraits of all types of people from Berlin. They have been portrayed in a quiet and stately way that is taken from photographs by August Sander, who, during the early twentieth century, made portraits of people in various professions, their outward distinctions primarily determined by the stance of the body, the clothing and certain tools included in the picture. Extreme concentration can also be found in Tan's recent video work *Saint Sebastian* (2001). During a traditional rite of initiation, young Japanese women aim, as archers, their arrows at a target which remains out of view to us. The registration of tense facial expressions, cautious movements and ceremonial garments gives rise to a fascinating image of great beauty. By giving this image a title rooted in the Western Christian tradition, Tan allows it to assume a surprising aspect.

A similar sense of cultural displacement lies at the heart of Tan's documentary film *May You Live in Interesting Times* (1997). Here she chronicles an exploration into her own family background, which brings her, via many countries,

Countenance video installatie 2002



Lift silkscreen 2000

to a remote region of China. In the presentation of her work, Tan frequently forces the viewer to adopt alternate vantage points. The installation of her work in a space sometimes consists of multiple projections (e.g. *Thin Cities*, 1999-2000) or of double-sided projection screens (*Tuareg* and *Saint Sebastian*). Actual physical displacement is expressed in several other works: in *Roll I & II* (1997) and in *Slapstick* (1998) we see the repeated movement of rolling or falling, and *Lift* (2000) shows the maiden flight of the artist as a somewhat down-to-earth balloonist in an Amsterdam park.