Setting the Record Straight: Fiona Tan's *Correction*

Joel Snyder

All my work reflects on and relies heavily on documentary principles of filmmaking. . . . Similarly, nearly all my film and video installations — whether filmed by myself or using existing footage — incorporate material of a documentary nature. I am interested in film, video, and photography viewed from its recording, documentary, and anthropological viewpoint.

— Fiona Tan, 2002

Fiona Tan's international reputation as a film and video artist is grounded in her fascination with representational practices that promise to give us a certain kind of knowledge, but which in the end fail to provide us with it, or with an understanding of the world, or of ourselves. The practices of photographic and film documentary production are easy to describe, but the ends they serve are obscure. The historic ethnographic films Tan has used brilliantly in her installations (*Facing Forward* [1999, see illustrations on pp. 8 and 10] comes to mind) seem to give us knowledge of unfamiliar human types in far-away places, but looked at in a different way, they reveal much more about presuppositions of those who made the films than they do of the lives of the people they portray. Tan's devotion to "documentary principles of filmmaking" points simultaneously in two directions, allowing her to adopt the formal packaging of disinterested recording or documentary while at the same time denying and undermining the possibility of such record making. As she both employs and subverts documentary practices and products, she reveals something of the way in which record-making and record-keeping function to maintain and extend our notions of knowing by seeing, of comprehending by merely looking. Documentary pictures, whether moving or still, do not passively reflect or record the world. They transmit to those who view them the principles and prejudices of those who make them.

Portraits of prisoners, c. 1880
Photographer unknown

Correction occupies the second-floor south gallery of the Museum of Contemporary Art, a room measuring 76 feet along each wall. Within this space, six screens, each measuring 3.6 feet by 4.9 feet, are suspended from the ceiling, their bottom edges hanging 3.9 feet above the floor, at intervals of roughly 17 feet, providing six points of a circle with a diameter of 40 feet and a circumference of 125 feet. Six digital video projectors, each targeted on a single screen, are mounted to poles and locked into position 7.2 feet above the floor. The projectors stand outside the circle facing inward. The projected images can be viewed from either side of the screen (a viewer on one side sees a reversed image of what can be seen on the other). A speaker is installed 1.8 feet above each screen. Each projector is fed a unique sequence of video clips and recorded sound contained on one of six DVDs. None of the images projected on any given screen is shown on any of the others. Each shot in the six series is projected for from 20 to 50 seconds; to see every image in the installation requires roughly three hours. The DVD players are not synchronized. Six benches measuring 4 x 1.6 x 1.5 feet are arranged in a hexagon within the circle traced by the screens. Spectators are free to view the installation seated on the benches or while walking outside or within the circle. The room is darkened, with overhead lights washing gently on the external walls.

The 300 video clips of prisoners and guards in four prisons in Illinois and California, filmed in 2004, are presented together with the sounds recorded simultaneously with their production. The installation is frankly political — meaning not only that its substance is drawn from the representation of the uses of power on those who are subjected to it, but also that it provokes analysis of how and against whom that power is marshaled. Fiona Tan reports that the idea for the installation was triggered by reading an article about the rapid growth of the prison population in the United States during the past forty or so years. In her brief remarks in this catalogue (p. 31), she writes: "While in the late 1960s the population of inmates in American prisons numbered close to two hundred thousand, this number now exceeds 2.2 million. That is more than any other country, and represents a quarter of all prisoners worldwide." These appalling numbers continue to grow. In late 2003 the annual summary report distributed by the Bureau of Justice Statistics of the United States Department of Justice stated that there were an estimated 480 prison inmates per 100,000 U.S. residents — up from 411 at the close of 1995. The report also provided a breakdown of the racial mix of the prison population, noting that by "midyear 2003 there were 4,834 black male prisoners per 100,000 black males in the United States in prison or jail, compared to 1,778 Hispanic male inmates per 100,000 Hispanic males, and 681 white male inmates per 100,000 white males."

The title *Correction* is equivocal. It alludes to the way we have, in this country, come to package our thoughts about the goals of imprisonment — not vindictive punishment, but correction, not imprisonment, but corrective treatment. It refers also to the names of the governmental agencies that manage "houses of correction," state departments of correction. But it is also meant ironically, as a protest — as if the artist was shouting at her audience, "Correction!" demanding that this policy of ever-expanding imprisonment be subjected to immediate review and change.

Upon entering the installation space, a visitor hears sounds coming from speakers that are arranged in a slightly off-center circle within the large gallery. The sounds are not noise, or not only noise; they carry distant, muffled, human voices speaking words that are mostly devoid of meaning. These are not, strictly speaking, sounds heard in a prison, but are sounds recorded in jails by a machine that obeys its instructions to amplify all sounds without respect to their origins — the droning hum of ventilation fans, the play of human voices, the thudding of footsteps, the slamming of doors — all are given equal weight, all are accorded equal respect by the machine, whether or not they deserve it. These acoustic recordings are also documentary, but they cannot provide us with the experience of standing in a prison and listening, straining to make sense of what can be heard; they are the artifacts of electronic recording. And each recording, spilling out of its own speaker, hums, pulsates, and hovers at the ear where it merges into five other sound tracks.

Standing at the entryway to the installation it seems that the screens are covered with projected, still, color photographs that change from time to time, approximating the look of 35mm transparencies thrown at a screen by a Carousel projector. But as the viewer approaches the screens, it becomes apparent that each picture is not lifeless. The subject moves involuntarily, against his or her own will, or rocks ever so slightly back and forth, performing an ancient photographic ritual (one that dates to the late 1830s) of attempting to become a still life (the French would say *nature morte*) in front of a camera, of straining to suppress all signs of life while sitting or standing for a portrait photograph. Tan entered into an agreement with prisoners and guards who volunteered to stand still for fifty seconds in front of her video camera. She used the camera, which was designed to show people and things in motion, in the service of producing ever so slightly moving pictures. Constrained by the need to stand still for what must feel like an unbearable length of time, her subjects strain to suppress all movement, all signs of life — and because they are human, they fail.

Tan's video clips violate a built-in necessity of moving-picture technology. Film and video cameras are designed to produce pictures in horizontal formats (that is, images that are wider than they are tall), which are intended, in turn, to be projected horizontally. But Tan orients her video camera perpendicularly to the ground, so as to produce filmed portraits that are taller than they are wide and, in turn, uses a vertically aligned projector to exhibit them, producing a format that is foreign to moving pictures. The result is a vertical, moving portrait of a constrained, barely animated human subject — a pictorial metaphor for the inhuman effects of imprisonment. These pictures show what we otherwise could not see — the loss of motility, of animation, of an indispensable condition of life. Why should we expect this loss to result in correction?

Tan's video clips are intermediate pictures, hybrids that in many ways look like magazine illustrations, full-page, frozen photographic portraits made by skilled professional photographers for fashionable, high-end magazines. But unlike magazine portraits, these pictures show undersized signs of life that have been magnified for us by projection. The projectors enlarge these prisoners and guards, presenting them to us literally as bigger than life, and so every small movement they make is

exaggerated, and we see them as if viewed through telescope from a few feet away.

Correction relies on auditory and visual intensification achieved through two distinct types of augmentation: amplification of remote, unintelligible human sounds, and magnification of small, involuntary human movements. The tools Tan employs in its production and presentation create a figurative medium for representing the horrifying, dehumanizing effects (on both the guarded and the guards) of the equipment and procedures of incarceration. This figuring of incarceration is not meant to give us a vicarious experience of imprisonment (as if anything but being imprisoned could force us to live the life of a prisoner) any more than it is meant to romanticize or aestheticize prisoners or prisons. The installation allows us to look beyond looking, to study, by way of magnification, visualizations of constraint, confinement, suffocating enclosure. *Correction* is a profound meditation on contemporary American values and habits of thought. It is also, not coincidentally, a deeply moving work of art.

Joel Snyder is a professor in the Department of Art History at the University of Chicago and is coeditor of the journal *Critical Inquiry*.