

# HYPERALLERGIC

Isabel Ling

*Wielding Time and Text, Tiffany Sia Documents Hong Kong's Resistance*



Installation view of Tiffany Sia's *Too Salty Too Wet* 更咸更濕 (2021), *Slippery When Wet*, Artists Space, New York (all images courtesy Artist's Space; photo by Filip Wolak)

During Hong Kong's monsoon season, a subtle change in the quality of air is all that separates a sunny day from torrential downpour and gale-force winds. In a city that is constantly shifting and remaking itself, it is fitting that weather patterns rooted in unpredictability are the norm. In Tiffany Sia's exhibition, *Slippery When Wet*, on view at Artist's Space and online through May 1, the artist proposes a "wet ontology," a study of the city's never-ending evolution through that which it secretes — "a trail of ink, tears, humidity, logistic flows, and leaks." Drawing from the text of the artist's recently published book, *Too Salty Too Wet* 更咸更濕, Sia excavates Hong Kong's slippery past, present, and future through the lens of the 2019 Anti-Extradition Protests.

In this exhibit, time is the artist's medium of choice. The foggy build-up of condensation on a window or the formal yet familiar cadence of the daily weather report are all measurements used to draw attention to how our bodies and existences subconsciously denote the passage of time. Yet, Sia abandons chronology in her works, instead grounding the viewer in a general feeling of time passing, an attempt to emulate the fast and slow of her experience during the protests, both as a volunteer on the frontlines and as a digital spectator, scrolling hungrily through an endless social media timeline.



Installation view of Tiffany Sia, "The Bastard Scroll" (2021), Artists Space, New York (photo by Filip Wolak)

Upon entering the exhibit, the viewer comes face to face with "Thread I [The Bastard Tongue]" (2021), a long, blank scroll of dot paper hung from the ceiling, cascading into a collected stack at the bottom of a stairwell, just out of sight. The piece itself evokes the infinite scroll, the frictionless refreshing of social media timelines to feed the insatiable desire for information and connection to conflict. As the empty, perforated paper sways ever-so-slightly it also feels like a mocking reminder of a city in suspension, a portrayal of the 50-year limbo of "one country, two systems" that has defined Hong Kong's identity since the handover of the territory from the UK to China in 1997. Here, Sia is able to convey the sociopolitical pressure-cooker that has manufactured Hong Kong's culture of resistance. With the passing of the Hong Kong National Security Law and the bookend of 2047 looming in the near future, Sia's words in *Too Salty Too Wet*, that "Hell is not a place. Hell is a timeline" feel increasingly prescient.

The artist is an archivist consumed with how a movement's story might survive. Accustomed to navigating a constantly shifting informational landscape informed by censorship and the ephemerality of digital communication, Sia experiments with the dissemination of information, questioning how the contents of a story might change according to the mode of delivery. In *Thread VI (Barriers Buy Time)*, *Too Salty Too Wet* assumes a book form, with reflective foil-wrapped volumes, printed in Hong Kong, arranged against the wall to create a mylar-coated barrier. This more traditional, and as Sia posits, slower, method of consumption is juxtaposed with the viewer's second encounter with the text in "Thread I [The Bastard Scroll]" (2021). A "leak" of *Too Salty Too Wet*, the contents are printed on a never-ending scroll of dot paper — an echo of the digital timeline — unfurled across a wooden table with a singular seat at its head. This same piece takes on a different life in the virtual exhibition, where the scroll is stored as a jpeg, its contents undetectable as text to censorship bots.



Installation view of Tiffany Sia, "A Wet Finger in the Air" (2021) (photo by Filip Wolak)

Ling, Isabel. "Wielding Time and Text, Tiffany Sia Documents Hong Kong's Resistance." *Hyperallergic*. April 13, 2021.



Sia's exhaustive documentation of the protests through *Too Salty Too Wet* — an amalgamation of first person accounts, protest strategy, memes, and critical theory — also serves as a heartbreaking meditation on the grief, trauma, and loss experienced by a city resisting. In this, Sia is hyper-conscious of the movement's complicated dependence on foreign media as speculator and storyteller. *Thread V [A Road Movie is Impossible in Hong Kong]*, a short film carefully timed to Hong Kong's sunrise and New York City's sunset, seeks to create a portal between cities that interrupts this flow of information, allowing Hong Kong to speak for itself. Taking the viewer on a hike along the coast of Lamma Island, which is the site of the artist's residency and project space, Sia points our attention to Hong Kong's natural ecology. A reminder that 75 percent of Hong Kong's land is protected countryside presents a foil to the skyscrapers and chrome that color the city's one-dimensional identity as a global business center in the Western imaginary.

Throughout Hong Kong's recent history of protest the collective's end objective and the alternative reality it would promise have never truly been clear. Is it a return to a colonized past (as some protestors seemed to want in their hanging of the Union Jack during the taking of the Hong Kong legislature)? Is it a continuation of business as usual, the slow cannibalization of a city in the grip of accelerated capitalism? Is it a long-shot bid for autonomy under new democracy? *Slippery When Wet* holds space for these myriad realities, choosing to zoom in on protest as an act of mourning for a city by its people.

By blurring temporal and geographic boundaries, Sia builds a bridge for shared feeling, one that might be familiar to the diasporic experience or even for those who come from places like Brooklyn or San Francisco — the unending fight against the fear that one day you might return home to find that there is nothing left for you to recognize.



Tiffany Sia, *Hong Kong is a Fictive Process* (2021) (still) (image courtesy the artist)