

*hydrologic marsh / lotic & lentic & fen /
mystery beneath our walk*



"We live in an unending rainfall of images. The most powerful media transform the world into images and multiply it by means of the phantasmagoric play of mirrors." ¹ – Italo Calvino

The ubiquity of photographic images in 21st century culture cannot be understated. With the growing digitization of still and moving images, the accessibility and volume of visual indexical media – in both virtual and built space – is unprecedented. Stockpiles of online images and videos cascade from a basic Google search; and everyday, individuals pour yet more content into the catch basin of the Internet. Thirty years ago, Calvino characterized image saturation as a plague that levels out expression into abstract formulas, dilutes meaning, and "makes all histories formless, random, confused, with neither beginning nor end."² Perhaps he was mourning the end of perceived linear time, sequence, and order; yet this end ushers in other possibilities. With the subsequent democratization and portability of telecommunications technologies, and their influence on ways of being in and responding to our contemporary world, the creative potential of image proliferation and circulation has expanded; it has also become more complex.

Interdisciplinary artist Laiwan has long been attuned to the "tyranny of knowledge in the excess of words and images that construct the first world."³ For *Fountain: the source or origin of anything*, she has distilled a single image from the abundance of the CBC's analogue media archives to consider the metaphor of fluidity within the city's built environment, visible and invisible. This large-scale, contemplative public artwork at The Wall, CBC Plaza is by no means a singular representation of an idea, but expands outward in meaning and associative references. The image, a frame from the 16mm film *Summer Afternoon* (1956), brings to stillness the wandering adventures of two children near Keefer and Columbia Streets, along the waters of False Creek and next to the Old Georgia Viaduct, which has since been filled in as land.⁴ The openness of this moment – of easy access to water, sightlines to a distant shore, and reflection of boats floating – mirrors a space of extended imagination, a fluidity of consciousness.

Laiwan's poetic lines, inspired by and sourced from the B.C. Government's 'Glossary of Water Quality Terms', carries the image to yet another place, traversing her chance discovery of rare and curious words and the sensations they inspire.⁵ Her poetics activate a dynamic within the image, while providing clues to her playful discernment of words. Laiwan's choice of the term 'hydrologic' echoes her undoing of the rational, predetermined thinking that often informs the obsessiveness of data collection. Other words tread lightly and allude, in alliteration, to what lies beneath reflective surfaces. By bringing attention to the fluidity, musicality and magic of words, Laiwan allows the slippery, open characteristics of language to flourish.

Meanwhile, the image's grainy aesthetic, its inclusion of the film's sprocket on the left edge

and jagged wave of audio signal on the right, acknowledge older analogue technologies. Though revived from the archive, *Fountain* does not exist within nostalgia of any specific place, but conjures a respect to a history of relationships, of past architecture and past horizons, inviting us to revel in our present experience within a city heightened by an added awareness and depth of context.

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From a distance, Laiwan's selection process brings to mind the material and immaterial realities of image research in the 21st century. Wading through a historic collection of production stills, news indexes, glass negatives, and 16 mm films, one realizes that their futures as artefacts remain uncertain. Recently, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans was forced to discard over 80,000 items from their libraries, as part of a larger federal government mandate to consolidate libraries and convert materials into digital format.⁶ No scientist interviewed felt that the digitization of libraries could replace what had been destroyed. On-going cutbacks to Library and Archives Canada show where political values are shifting, and these have implications and effects on culture and society.⁷

What is lost when historical records are no longer material entities but become digitized, searchable by key words and visual similitude? A palpable connection with the hands and fingers, certainly, though the 'digital' still references this, if in etymology only.⁸ For the individual sensorial experience, there is the physical encounter of rummaging, accidental discoveries, of random synchronicities and being lost in the stacks. As a society, however, we are losing public spaces dedicated to such encounters, as well as the histories that brought us to present-day understandings.

What is made possible by digitization? The Internet has dramatically transformed the pace and manner in which we connect, share, and consume information. It has become an infinitely vast container for a wealth of digitized communications media, from text, audio and video to the latest social media platforms. It is embedded into virtually every aspect of human life, its content translated into code to allow for public circulation through a sophisticated architecture that informs and shapes how we move and know the world. Despite the culling and discarding of material records in archives worldwide, online information continues to balloon around us. It is humanity's massive participatory archive – though with archives, both personal and public, there is always something overlooked.

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In the mid-1990s, Laiwan began investigating, among other things, the complex relationships between humans and digitizing technology.⁹ She recognized the Internet as a

platform for artistic engagement, one that could be a starting point to activate dialogues, to make visible certain structures and create spaces for alternative modes of perceiving and experiencing; subtle shifts that could be carried into everyday interactions. Her wide-ranging, interdisciplinary practice includes a collection of webworks, virtual public spaces that activate communal poetics, embodied experiences, and social, participatory encounters.¹⁰

For *Fountain*, Laiwan has created a new, durational webwork to parallel The Wall's large-scale, printed artwork, allowing crowdsourced contributions that will add to the flow of information over time. Bringing together associative strands of ideas on fluidity within the city, she begins with a series of videos offering different perspectives. Cease Wyss, a Skwxw'u7mesh media artist and ethnobotanist, shares the histories of the land and wildlife under the Burrard Street Bridge – the former village Snauq – and at Trout Lake, a historic gathering place for the Musqueam, Skwxw'u7mesh and Tsleil Waututh peoples. Bruce McDonald, author of *Vancouver: A Visual History*, recalls stories about the Old Georgia Viaduct, the industrial shores of present-day Chinatown and Strathcona, and the natural gas pipelines laid beneath. Celia Brauer, an artist, writer, and founder of the False Creek Watershed Society, daylights our minds by transporting us to the sites of Lost Streams which are now channelled beneath the urban grid, bringing a heightened awareness to Vancouver's salmon habitats and making visible the clues of their persistent presence.¹¹ This content will continue to expand as the web project develops. Interweaving these diverse narratives on a layered, interactive website, Laiwan unfolds her elegance and grace as a composer, drawing us into their mysteries and exciting our imaginations. Often times, it's not clear where one is being led; this process requires trust and patience, slowing the frenzied acceleration of contemporary information consumption to a pace where things reveal themselves gradually over time.

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In both its physical and web-based aspects, *Fountain's* existence as a large-scale public artwork speaks to a process whose references are embedded, but not always visible, within the final 'artwork' itself. There is the labour of those who steward the archives and care for our history. There are the constellations of relationships that brought *Fountain* to its present state – synchronicities and unexpected magical encounters that have found their way into Laiwan's improvisational approach, which she

describes as a response to that which appears most appealing in each moment, and working with it even if it is unknown or unlikeable. "These seem to be informed by many things, not necessarily of my choice, but happen to be there and my eye or ear or heart lands upon it... and triggers in me a sense of love."¹²

There is an acceptance in Laiwan's working method – a being 'in tune' and moving in cadence with the surrounding energies of the moment. She follows her intuition and curiosity about the world, through 'hydrologic' sensibilities that dislodge consciousness from linear, well-worn paths. This approach can be observed throughout her practice, which often blurs into everyday life. While the shared occurrences may be momentary or extended in duration, they nonetheless leave a trace within the overall process. As Laiwan's practice reveals to us, we are all affected, in an embodied way, by everything that moves through us.

In this sense, the artwork can be also conceived as a document of a cumulative, participatory process, a residue of something no longer immediately visible – of art as life, as an ephemeral activity – whose moments, though passed, can be activated again at any given time.¹³ After all, art is everywhere, not just within formal objects, but in the phenomena of the world that artists are continually inspired by.

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Returning to the larger metaphor of the archive, perhaps it is also possible to conceive of this human phenomenon in other ways. Like the circulation of contemporary imagery, the patterns of the archive are pervasive, everywhere we look – they are present in our cellular genetics, and in the museums, libraries and public collections that act as institutional storehouses of culture, history, empire and power.¹⁴ Their architecture also structures the endless flow of the Internet. Yet rather than hoard these stockpiles as a means to 'own' and collect other cultures, can we now approach these as a cultural commons, allowing their greater circulation and visibility?¹⁵ Can we also conceive of the apparent 'valuelessness' of the discarded – the *wealth* of detritus – as repositories waiting to be reactivated and loved? With *Fountain*, Laiwan embraces that which exists around her and re-presents it, making it active and visible once again.

Today, the digitization of life's records allows for the ability to document, reproduce, and circulate a range of media more than ever before. Archives are something we can now build and self-organize, enfolding the discarded and forgotten with the present, without the need for official recognition as such. As Boris Groys has written, "the archive of elapsed forms of life can at any moment turn out to be a blueprint for the future. By being stored in the archive as documentation, life can be repeatedly relived and reproduced within historical time – should anyone resolve to undertake reproduction."¹⁶ The impulse to sift through a sea of debris, finding poetics and creating new meanings from these discoveries, are the quiet revolutions within us where such changes begin to occur.

– Joni Low, Curator

¹ Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for a New Millennium* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press: 1988), 57.

² Ibid., 57.

³ Laiwan, *Preface*, for the 1992 project distance of distinct vision (updated 2007).

<http://www.belkin.ubc.ca/archived/ddv/contents.html>.

⁴ *Summer Afternoon* was produced and directed by Ron Kelly for the CBC's "Pacific 13" series (1956 – 1957). The children featured in the film are Andrew Mar and Chipper Mah.

⁵ <http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/wat/wq/reference/glossary.html#index>.

⁶ Margo McDiarmid, "Fisheries science books disposal costs Ottawa thousands," *CBC News*, January 30, 2014. Accessed at <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/fisheries-science-books-disposal-costs-ottawa-thousands-1.2515962>.

⁷ Andrew Nikiforuk, "Dismantling of Fishery Library 'Like a Book Burning,'" *Say Scientists*, *The Tyee*, December 9, 2013.

Accessed at: <http://thetyee.ca/News/2013/12/09/Dismantling-Fishery-Library/>.

⁸ The term 'digital' originated in the 1650s, pertaining to fingers. Its use in reference to numerical digits dates from 1938, and increasingly after 1945 to the use of computers and broadcasting technologies.

See <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=Digital>.

⁹ Laiwan's MFA thesis asked: how does the digital shift the way we move, perceive and are conscious in the world? See *Machinate: a projection in two movements* (School for Contemporary Arts, Simon Fraser University, 1999).

¹⁰ See <http://laiwanette.net/webwork.html> for access to her earlier projects.

¹¹ For more information, visit: <http://www.falsecreekwatershed.org/> and <http://celliabrauer.weebly.com/>.

¹² Conversation with Laiwan, February 10, 2014.

¹³ Boris Groys, "Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation," in *Art Power* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2008), 53 – 65.

¹⁴ See Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London: Verso, 1993).

¹⁵ Regarding the circulation of images in particular, see David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), 12.

¹⁶ Boris Groys, "The Loneliness of the Project," in *Going Public* (New York and Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), 83.

LAIWAN is an artist, writer and educator recognized for her interdisciplinary practice based in poetics, improvisation and philosophy. Born in Zimbabwe of Chinese parents, she immigrated to Canada in 1977 to leave the war in Rhodesia. Her practice investigates embodiment through performativity, audio, music, improvisation, and varieties of media, along with bodily and emotional intelligence, so as to unravel and engage presence. She teaches in the MFA Interdisciplinary Arts Program at Goddard College (Washington State, USA) and is current Chair of the Board of Directors at grunt gallery (Vancouver).

JONI LOW is an independent curator and writer interested in art that exists beyond conventional exhibition spaces, generating alternative understandings of the contemporary experience. Her writing has appeared in exhibition catalogues and publications including *Canadian Art*, *C Magazine*, and *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*. A member of the Doryphore Independent Curators Society, Joni has held positions at the Vancouver Art Gallery, Long March Space Beijing, and Centre A, where she developed a specialized public library focused on contemporary Asian art.

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To learn more and for details on how to participate in this web project, please visit: www.laiwanette.net/fountain

