Cici Wu

Auld Lang Syne (Prelude)

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47 CANAL

Films that loop
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It is said sometime before 1906, early cinema had an attractive moment and after 1960, installation art absorbed the political rancor of the post war period in the form of institutional critique. Neither quite a 'cinema of attractions' as Tom Gunning would have it, nor exactly 'temporary, site-specific art works designed to surround or interact with the spectator' pace Jennifer A. González, *early film* and *installation art* have nevertheless become something of the sun word and moon word ascribed to the contemporary experimental filmmaker, Cici Wu and her saturnine sculptures. Describing her first solo show at 47 Canal in 2018, *Upon Leaving the White Dust*, as "deliberate, tantalisingly detached, and romantic in its logic of fuzzy metonymy and formal transformation", Harry Burke catalogues the numeric range of materials and motifs that toured her former installation: "A scattering of LEDs in hand-blown glass bulbs"; "Unglazed ceramics"; "aeroplanes… steam trains, tenderly crossed hands, and strange cuboid clay cartons with glass drinking straws." Structured around a single channel flicker film, *Upon Leaving the White Dust* emplots these materials into an eleven row matrix on the floor, which are then blasted by the projector's light, a process both so simple yet instantaneous that it liquidates all of their physical properties into shadows on the wall. Claiming to "reduce cinema into a fundamental unit… [of] light," Wu created this flicker film through a device of her own making, *Foreign Object No. 1, Fluffy Light* (2016), an instrument that captures light data through a glass blown shell. Indeed to cinema, light may be the only unit that can be divided by zero (one might also wager time), but what remains slightly uncomfortable is the sense that the large population of materials which went into her installations are too varied, too multiplied really, to be convincingly termed a reduction. There remains, furthermore, the unresolved temporal contradiction between 20th century early cinema and the installation art which only became a historical possibility nearly half a century later.

These two problems —the surfeit of materials that resists reduction, and the untimely graft of a pre-1906 aesthetic onto a post-1960 form— are not separate difficulties but ones that Wu's practice began to explicitly address in her last solo show in New York, *Lantern Strike (Strong Loneliness)* in 2021 at 47 Canal. *Foreign Object #2 Umbra and Penumbra (+852 bunny)* is the pivotal middle work from this period, at once synthesizing Wu's early adventures into the critique of the cinematic apparatus all the while anticipating the distinct achievement of

from this period, at once synthesizing Wu's early adventures into the critique of the cinematic apparatus all the while anticipating the distinct achievement of that project through the language of sculptural forms present today. Raised from essentially a mere 10 circles, each constituting bamboo wires which are netted into the silhouette of a bunny lantern, Foreign Object #2 is an odd object that wraps around a nano AV camera. This double feature, at once an instrument of recording light and generating its own, gives way to a twinned possibility of its own kind. *(+852 bunny)* allows us to organize Wu's early practice –particularly, the moving image work, *Unfinished Return of Yu Man Hon* (2019)– and simultaneously recast the widespread thesis –that Wu's work distills cinema to its most basic unit, light– as a diachronic one. Diachronic because it would appear as if it had ever been achieved, it would have been most fully so in her new body of work *Auld Lang Syne (prelude)*. For as *(+852 bunny)* would testify, the so-called reduction to light had always up until this stage been instantiated through a moment in Wu's methodology marked by ingenious prosthetics to the camera or expansions to the cinematic apparatus itself through sculpture. In order that one see the distinct character of negation within *Auld Lang Syne (prelude)*, the analysis must fall on the tightened range of her present materiality. Jettisoned are the ramified tree branches, unfired clay, plastic packing tapes or straws which Wu had previously deployed in her former exhibitions, offering instead the most singularly focused meditation on light, bamboo, glass and paper to date. *(+852 bunny)* is thus something of a lodestone to this transition for if it could speak, it would do so by turning to us and mysteriously saying, *'my ears are made of paper. my throat is a camera.'* The contradiction seems to be that we have made the case for reduction at the moment of greatest objective plenitude. However, just as the first viewers of the kinetoscope arrived to see footage of a train within a venue rigged with live whistles and cranks to emulate the sound of locomotion, and an alliance was later formed so that they may all be delivered from a common filmic source, so too here might we detect the richest potential from Wu's work as having yet to arrive (thus, '*prelude'*). For as we will see, unlike ever before, nowhere will a camera or active projector, not even a single film be found in the gallery.

> *The first time I had this idea [that] paper lanterns could be a precursor of early cinema was in 2019, in Hong Kong when I was making my first 16mm film and then in the market I found this bunny lantern.*

As Wu explains, it is true that in epiphanic thought two things coincide: the

suddenness with which lightning strikes inspiration and the boundlessly unprepared state it seemingly overthrows. This scene is itself explicitly dramatized at minute 07:56 of the work that discovery produced, *Unfinished Return of Yu Man Hon* (2019), Wu's first feature film in which a calf-shaped paper lantern becomes the mother of a real missing boy, guiding his soul back along his favorite places: Hong Kong's subway lines and ferry routes. Into this frame, Wu imports a second missing child, borrowed rather than invented. She casts the actor who played Yang-Yang, the boy from Edward Yang's *Yi Yi* (2000), and lets a fragment of his soliloquy sound inside her own. Delivered at his grandmother's funeral at the close of Yang's new wave, "*I know so little*," begins the fragment.

> *Do you know what I want to do when I grow up? I want to tell people things they don't know. I want to show them things they haven't seen.*

Famously, he does so by photographing the back of people's heads. Something about this cunning is matched in the student who before a yearbook photo dents our halo from behind with bunny ears. It is our concern that we recognize *Foreign Object #2*, which is literally a camera with bunny ears, as the embodiment of these interdicted lines of sight, emerging from the investigations of her film, and one that we may summarily state as an attempt to see, however impossibly, the history of cinema from behind.

Displacing the once long held thesis that cinema at the beginning of the 20th century was first and foremost, an narrative genre, (cf. Christian Metz), Gunning argued that early cinema, from 1906 and before, was distinctly characterized by shock and tantalization; its starlets would literally wink at the audience thus shattering the absorptive experience of a diegesis sealed shut. By his famous nomination, it was a 'cinema of attractions,' so called because of the medium's early taste for spectacle without plot, thus making them attractions like any other kind at the end of the industrial revolution. Cotangent with the attractive moment of 1906 was modernity itself. As Mary Ann Doane reminds us in *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, reaching as far back to the kinetoscope was a world historical moment defined by the synthesis of reified labor time and technologies of representation for that time (the prosthetic watch, the punchcard, and yes, actuality films). Two illustrations would be useful here: on the one hand, there was the student of Taylorization who desired to capture the durational movement of labor by attaching a lightbulb to a worker and documenting it as curves of light, and on the other, there was the rationalization of an international

temporal standard catalyzed by the need to coordinate railway travel from one local timezone to the next. Together, they tell the time of the ages, how the aspect of temporality and cinema were braided in the turn of the 20th century, and Wu's motifs of a carnival airplane ride, the toy train, and the resting horse resurrects this tableaux in something of an enchanted or attractive, we should say, light sculpture garden.

Elsewhere this has often been termed Wu's 'protocinema' but it is an integer I will ultimately insist is inadequate. The lantern is most potently understood if we read it as cinema in the first instance, because while there can be no cinema before cinema, early cinema can be late. It is however in its late arrival that early cinema in Wu's practice finds enlightenment through the language of installation art, and its former concern with temporality is replaced with a question of history (a matter we will return to shortly). Thus, a more operative idiom might be what Daniel Albright terms, after Oswald Spengler and Theodor Adorno, pseudomorphic:

> *Pseudomorphosis occurs when, in a work in a single artistic medium, the medium is asked to ape, or do the work of, some alien medium. This typically involves a certain wrenching or scraping against the grain of the original medium.*

Some of these new works explicitly yoke cinema and lanterns like *Horse* which is seemingly dedicated to those who can imagine Muybridge's steed at rest, while others like *Exchange Students* bear a more distant association embodied in how they arrive without their full anatomy. They are missing their hands. It is as if the entire lantern itself were a firefly children capture between their palms. Indeed, Wu has often used works on paper and sculpture to stand in for 'film treatments' or storyboards, and the handless students teach us how the 'scraping' that Albright describes can be achieved with a radical harmony. Here one also ultimately wonders, somewhat fatuously, why do Wu's goddesses shine brightest from the thighs?

If it could be said of apparatus theory and the structuralist films of the 60's, two essential coordinates in Wu's experimental genealogy, that the former expanded the forcefield of cinema to include not just the screen but the entire drama of camera, projector, and audience, while the latter proposed to rationalize this firmament into the visual language of film itself, then Wu's own account of her practice sits deliberately between the two: *"I am now particularly interested in the*

the device of filming or related media, which is the birthplace that creates the illusion of reality." For we may now put the matter in the following terms: the near inescapable hermeneutic situation every viewer of Wu's practice must confront is the question of what lanterns have to do with cinema as such. One is prepared to say 'light' is the readymade password, but I should like to make the slightly more scandalous claim that in this very solution lies a more spontaneous concern awaiting discussion. The inherent weakness of assuming too much self evidence in the thesis is that we risk permitting a whole series of unacceptable conclusions, that for instance, fireworks were the first national cinema or that we see Hollywood every time a fridge is opened in the dark. Far from endorsing something primordial, the question of light to cinema essentially insists upon *the necessity to think of film form in historical terms*. It is this historical curve, however, arriving finally as sculpted light, that gives Wu's practice its decisive place in the history of avant-garde cinema from the point of its earliest appearance in the 20's. In only so many words, Wu's new works offer the possibility of rewiring the once widespread utopic enthusiasm of cinema's infinite technological promise (perhaps nowhere more championed than in Dziga Vertov's iconoclastic argument that while the human eye is ruled by evolution, the camera eye can and will be continuously improved)– but it does so by restoring a backwards sense that cinema may see itself as always analog. Vertov's kino-eye, whatever else it concerned itself with, was fundamentally a wager on the coming bespectacled improvement of the lens (and its attached scopic consciousness); Wu's *(+852 bunny)* lantern wagers something, yes, additive, but perhaps in the same way looking straight into the sun burns a hole through our vision. It is a negation that is but also maximal light.

The clarity promised by this new body of work is the astonishing disappearance of all cameras and films, with the single retention of the *16mm Projector* lantern. Unable to be fed an actual filmstrip, the projector is recategorized, forced to abandon projection for its more primitive function– the plain emission of light in all directions. This light is the price it pays for having every other capacity stripped away and yet, curiously, one may still observe an unconscious pull to stand behind the looper and its imagined moonbeam. Wu's signature motif of the lantern thus estranges the avant-garde from its own futurity, and shows us how antiquity can be reinstalled as the latest stage in the mode of production– it shows us, in our standing, the back of the projector's head. By dispensing with the very machinery that would make it recognizable as cinema, these works bear the entire sadness and strength of watching a boy we love put away their camera for the very last time. It is all as if cinema measured its own life in bunny years.

Shot in medium profile, the composition of the scene corrects the asymmetry from the visible number of chairs by aligning the isosceles fanning from each figure's line of sight. The bunny lantern and the abandoned boy navel-gaze into a distance that widens our sense of the filmic background with an invisible limit, while for the viewer and the calf alike, the back of their heads tighten into our unquestionable foreground. Proportional to the degree in which the lantern approaches, and thus looms, is the increased power or temptation for Orpheus to turn around. Our imagination almost turns the image around. Yet every visual momentum in the diegesis drives forward –the crawling, the boy's contemplation and its archimedean point, the ferry slicing through water. The only image which moves backwards to address us is orange: *Door Must be Kept Closed*.

The basic metaphor proposed by the image of any door is how the repeated action of entry and exit can be embodied in a single partition. The all too human presentiment for separation is sustained in an unnatural solidarity between inside and out. Consider then what it means that Wu begins *Auld Lang Syne (prelude)* with a door, "Half Opened". For those of us raised in parts of the world where it is customary to rise and bow when someone comes home, and just as naturally, *when they leave*, it is then no contradiction at all that it would seem as if Wu asks us to *greet this departure*.

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Cici Wu is a New York based artist who was born in Beijing and grew up in Hong Kong. She has exhibited at major art events 36th Biennial de São Paulo (2025), Asian Art Biennale, Taiwan (2024), and the 11th Seoul Mediacity Biennale, South Korea (2021). Her work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at 47 Canal, New York (2026, 2021, 2018); the Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai (2025), Scheusal, Berlin (2024), Empty Gallery, Hong Kong (2023, 2019), Hordaland Kunstsenter, Norway (2023); and has participated in group exhibitions at MoMA PS1 (2026), Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (2026), Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2025), National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts (2024), the Drawing Center, New York (2023, 2020), CAPC Musée d'art Contemporain de Bordeaux (2022), Para Site, Hong Kong (2020, 2018), among others. She has organized exhibitions and screenings at 99 Canal, New York (2025), Giorno Poetry Systems, New York (2024), M+, Hong Kong (2023), among others.