



JANUARY 7 TO APRIL 10, 2022

LAIWAN: TRACES, ERASURES, RESISTS

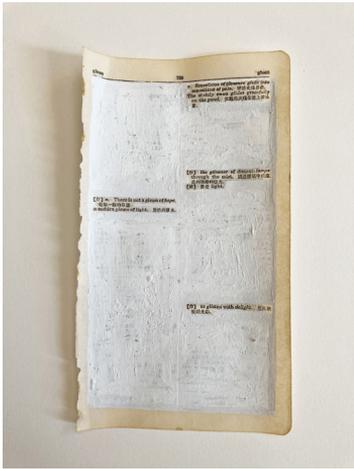
In 1982 Laiwan returned to independent Zimbabwe for the first time since her family migrated to Canada during the war of liberation. Within the new paradigm she could visit places that she had been restricted from under segregation, offering her a new perspective on a familiar landscape. Narratives espoused about the geography had changed dramatically between the British-occupied Rhodesia that she grew up in and the independent state. This applied to the Indigenous and imperial architectures that are pictured in the 35 mm slide installation *African Notes Part 1 and 2* (1982). Although the photographs are largely absent of people, traces of human cultivation, occupation and resilience saturate every image. The written and spoken text that accompanies them places Laiwan in the terrain as a witness to, and subject of, this vertigo. The poetic verse expresses encounters with dreaming, as it variably expresses one's desire for home, the illusions of colonialism and the waywardness of sky-gazing. It evokes a sense of dislocation that is stressed in the transition between the slides. The projector's mechanical delay reveals the illusion of continuity.



Laiwan, *African Notes Part 1 and 2* (detail), 1982-83, 3-channel black and white Panatomic-X 35 mm slide projection and 1/4" reel analogue audiotape transferred to digital. Courtesy of the artist

One's proximity to and familiarity with a context may sharpen one's perception of it. However, spatial and temporal distance may also be necessary conditions for apprehension. This ethos shapes *distance of distinct vision / point éloigné de vision claire* (1992). The title is taken from the optic principle of depth of field, which describes the importance of distance in establishing focus. In the photo and text-based installation, Laiwan uses indirect language to create distance between her subjects and viewers. Indirect language aims to get close to someone without enclosing them, or to something without shrouding it. It is expressed through the spacing of the English text, the echo of its French translation and the cropping and sequencing of images. One page features a photograph of a butterfly and a spider on a web. The cropping of the image situates each creature at opposite edges of the frame and emphasizes the space between them. The text that accompanies the image describes a feminine subject exploding with a limitless passion that shakes the foundation of her being. The contrast between the pictorial and textual elements multiplies possible readings of the tension between the insect and arachnid.

Laiwan repeatedly employs strategies of seriality, translation and inter-media to explore the polyphonic condition of being-in-relation. In her essay *Notes against Difference* (1992), she observes how multiple gestures and grammars may resonate simultaneously and in proximity. Ideologies of difference prefer to separate and stratify them, often eliminating manners that blur or exceed categorization. Laiwan makes this erasure visible by marking, editing and manipulating texts and images. For example, in *AGILE* (2021), the most recent iteration of the ongoing series *dotting like flatheads: this is the english I learn* (1996-), she



redacts pages of a Chinese-to-English dictionary to reveal syntaxes that are traceable within its structure. Brusque, clumpy strokes of white-out cover the ink on the delicate paper. Her brush works around selective lines, highlighting fragments of definitions. The pronounced isolation of each stanza shifts the resonance between them. On one page that spans “glaze” to “gloat,” Laiwan highlights the qualities of “gliding,” “glimmering” and “gleaming,” which conveys her sensitivity to movement. The gestures of pleasure, pain, hope and delight are not confined or static. They are agile. Their expression in English and Traditional Chinese suggests that perceptions of these experiences and the grammars that shape them are multiple and fluid. Her use of additive and subtractive methods loosens language from its constraints and emphasizes textual flow as a mode of resistance.

Laiwan experimented with these methods in a poster that she designed for International Lesbian Week in 1987. The broadsheet was featured as the centrefold of the September/October issue of *Angles* newspaper. It is composed of close-up, black and white photographs of nude women, solitary and in pairs, expressing sensual and sexual pleasure. The images include a woman cupping her own breast, a profile of two open mouths with tongues embracing and a woman fingering her clitoris. The photographs are tightly cropped and are composed in a modernist grid, which is destabilized

Laiwan, *dotting like flatheads: this is the english I learn* (detail), 1996, white-out on pages from a found Chinese dictionary, 16.5 × 8.9 cm. Courtesy of the artist

by the excess of feminine eros. A poetic text describing an erotic encounter between two women is printed above the images. When it was published, the poster was met with a severe backlash from gay men and feminist lesbians alike, who variably retaliated against the visibility of women’s desire – for themselves and each other. In the 1980s it was dangerous to be a visible, vocal lesbian. So much so that Laiwan cropped the models’ faces from the photographs to protect them from public scrutiny, ostracization and violence. Fearing the same retribution, she was credited under the pseudonym Li Yuen. As in many of her redacted works, Laiwan uses concealment as a means to resist exclusion.



So much has changed in four decades. So many things that were rendered illegible are beginning to surface. Many of the works in this exhibition have not been seen in several decades, and their presence has remained latent in public imagination. *Traces, Erasures, Resists* presents an opportunity to revisit the formal and conceptual processes that Laiwan experimented with. It is my hope that our distance augurs a distinct perspective on the value of her methods and the potential they hold for recouping traces that have continued to resist erasure.

Amy Kazymierchuk

Laiwan, *Lesbian Week Poster*, included in the September/October 1987 issue of *Angles*.



MORRIS AND HELEN **BELKIN ART GALLERY**
belkin.ubc.ca

1825 Main Mall | Vancouver BC V6T 1Z2
604 822 2759 | Open 10-5 Tue-Fri | 12-5 Sat-Sun
Closed Mondays and Holidays

Laiwan is a cultural activist, interdisciplinary artist, writer and educator with a wide-ranging practice based in poetics and philosophy. Born in Zimbabwe to Chinese parents, her family immigrated to Canada in 1977 to leave the war in Rhodesia. In 1983, she graduated from Emily Carr College of Art and Design and founded the Or Gallery. She received an MFA from Simon Fraser University School for Contemporary Arts in 1999. Recipient of numerous awards, including the recent ECU Emily Award (2021), BC Arts Council (2021), Canada Council for the Arts (2020) and the Vancouver Queer Media Artist Award (2008), Laiwan serves on national and provincial arts juries and local community committees, including the Chinatown Legacy Stewardship Group and the City of Vancouver Public Art Committee. She exhibits regularly, curates projects in Canada, the US and Zimbabwe and publishes in anthologies and journals. Her latest collection of poetry *TENDER: selected poems* (2020) is published by Talonbooks. Based on the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations, she teaches in the MFA Interdisciplinary Arts Program at Goddard College, Port Townsend, WA (2001-present).

Laiwan: Traces, Erasures, Resists is guest curated by Amy Kazymierchuk and made possible with the generous support of the Audain Foundation, the Canada Council for the Arts, the Province of British Columbia through the BC Arts Council and our Belkin Curator's Forum members.

Outside the Belkin

The exhibition extends outside the Belkin with iterations of the work *she who had scanned the flower of the world...* appearing on the Belkin Screen and installed on the main floor of the Walter C. Koerner Library, 1958 Main Mall, UBC. Additionally, Laiwan's work can be viewed at numerous arts and community organizations across the city and more widely.

Program and Tours

Tours can be arranged from Tuesday to Friday for groups and classes; please contact Naomi Sawada at naomi.sawada@ubc.ca or 604.822.3640 for details.

**Curatorial and Artist Talk
with Laiwan and Amy Kazymierchuk**
online soon

Film Series at The Cinematheque

The Cinematheque, 1131 Howe Street, Vancouver,
thecinematheque.ca

Book Launch and Reading with *The Capilano Review*

Wikipedia Edit-a-Thon 2022

Concert with UBC Contemporary Players

For more information visit belkin.ubc.ca

THE | AUDAIN FOUNDATION



Canada Council | Conseil des arts
for the Arts | du Canada



BRITISH COLUMBIA
ARTS COUNCIL



BRITISH
COLUMBIA

Supported by the Province of British Columbia

Cover: Laiwan, *distance of distinct vision / point éloigné de vision claire* (detail), 1992, diazo prints on paper, 2 C-prints on paper and 2 laser prints on paper, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist

