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1997

Byron Chan

July 9 – August 15, 2014

Byron Chan's *1997* is an endlessly looping video that explores Hong Kong's tense political past, present and possible future through a cumulative erasure of identities and visible on screen information.

Originally captured on 8mm film on a ferry in Hong Kong in the 1960's, *1997* is a re-contextualization of found material that explores that region's cultural transition after being returned to it's Chinese "homeland" following a century and a half of existing under British rule.

The piece opens with an orange hued light leak – an analogue effect that reveals the filmic medium. The light leak fades to reveal the image of a formally dressed Indian family standing very still and staring back into the screen. The camera pans to reveal a Caucasian businessman, and two older Caucasian people as they walk across the frame, also making eye contact with the camera. Then walks a Chinese woman in a green dress followed by a Chinese male in uniform who appears to be a worker on the boat. The viewer is once again greeted by the filmic light leak, only to see the previous shot rewind, the subjects walking backwards, the camera now panning back in the opposite direction to rest again momentarily on the Indian family and their active gaze. The piece continues this back and forth repetition as the camera pans from right to left, left to right; playing forward and backward and forward again. The soundtrack of a film projector mixed with traditional Chinese music mimics the visuals in direction and in tempo.

On July 1st, 1997, the crown colony of Hong Kong, which, for the previous 156 years had been under British rule, was returned to Chinese sovereignty. An agreement was made during this transition that under Chinese rule, the colony, now the Hong Kong special administrative region (HKSAR), "would enjoy a high degree of autonomy [...] and that the social and economic systems as well as the lifestyle in Hong Kong would remain unchanged for 50 years after."¹ Many were skeptical of China's ability to abide by this agreement, and feared that China would break it's promise by drastically minimizing the rights and freedoms that had come to define the colony after Great Britain had acquired the Island in 1842 after the first Opium War. Hong Kong had become a destination for

¹ "Hong Kong's Return To China: Year In Review 1997". *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2014. Web. 08 Jul. 2014
<<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1020544/Hong-Kongs-Return-To-China-Year-In-Review-1997>>.

hundreds of thousands of Chinese refugees seeking sanctuary once the communist government gained power in China in 1949. Diversity became a defining feature of the region, and Chan's *1997* acts as a visual representation of its citizens' fear of loss for their freedoms and erasure of diversity.

As the video progresses the viewer is witness to a strange visual phenomenon. The subjects in motion appear to be slowly fading away. Each time the camera moves left there appears to be less of a visual presence to these individuals. Their images are vanishing and being replaced with that of their surrounding landscape. Throughout the duration of the work, one thing remains constant; the camera's return to the original family, resting on them and their gaze before panning back to reveal a further disappearance of the other individuals in the frame. There remain visible some bystanders in the distance, but apart from the opening family, any of the subjects who had previously made facial contact with the camera have now been erased.

Chan has modified a seven second excerpt from Michael Rogge's short film *Cruise to Hong Kong in 1964*. The original footage was taken by Rogge's friend Hans Brickmann, documenting Brickman's wife and mother on a trip to Hong Kong in the sixties. Although the original footage is shot on film the process used to create *1997* relies heavily on digital techniques. Chan re-contextualizes the already digitized film footage by rotoscoping (drawing) over the images, frame by frame, in order to create the vanishing technique. Although the final product and process are digital, the piece relies heavily on tropes that relate to it's filmic origins; such as the light leaks and soundtrack of a film projector. The technical re-contextualization of the work mimics the re-telling and reconfiguration of histories, specifically the histories of the individuals depicted and that of Hong Kong's political past. The erasing technique is made intentionally visible by Chan in order to highlight this erasure, and in doing so, *1997* brings to light these problematic histories that have been attempted to be erased by the Chinese government.

Less than 20 years after the shift in ownership, July 1st 1997 is still a day when people go on strike in China, highlighting the ongoing political issues in Hong Kong. *1997* intends to represent the impact of such a drastic political shift, and to focus on the aftermath of Hong Kong's transition – what it means for the region politically and culturally both presently and in the future, the longer China has possession.

-Adrienne Crossman