

# Galleri Riis

Lisa Tan

*Pa*

January 16, 2025 – March 01, 2025

For the artist's fourth solo exhibition with the gallery, Lisa Tan presents installation, video, and works on paper. It is an exhibition that opens onto the wake of dysfunctional language: language that has been broken down into letters, obstructed, but also come apart in the psychological sense of losing the capacity to render reality coherent through narrative.

There is a large luminescent sign placed high over a bridge facing the suburbs of Stockholm, which I biked toward for years in the dark grey of winter mornings on my way to teach in the city center. Tan had the sign duplicated and then deconstructed it at its original scale for her installation *Pa* (2023), which gives this exhibition its elusive title. The giant letters are scattered throughout the exhibition space like unmoored beacons for a place that is lost. Though it no longer forms a word, the work's evocation of my sharp relief at leaving Stockholm's suburbs persists, like an affective residue. And this feeling is something you can't know unless I tell you a story about being an immigrant in the Nordic winter, even if you also live there, know the sign, and bike to work. The capacity of language to signify is submerged in the human unconscious and is, therefore, fugitive.

In an ongoing series of works, Tan reproduces all the images that come to the explanatory aid of words in the dictionary of a given language. Not all words require visual support, but the dictionary's editors estimate that certain tools, ships and objects related to war need help, a supplement. These decisions, as well as the style of illustration, are highly specific to the language in question. In the case of the Basque dictionary, for example, there are 264 illustrated words, while in the Norwegian language there are just over 1000. Tan reproduces these 1000 images in diptych format: one print collects and then renders them as silhouettes labeled with the term they are meant to help explain, while the other print shows the pictures but redacts the words. The viewer is never granted a seamless transition between word and image. One part of meaning is always withheld. The prints are framed and hung on an expanse of wallpaper, which is populated with all the illustrations found in the English language Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary, 10th Edition. On the wallpaper, there is no language, only pictures. A woman's head in profile wearing an academic tasseled cap drawn in a graphic style popular in the 1950s; a Chinese Buddhist pagoda drafted frontally and from a distance, like the icon of a building; a sea horse pictured from the side so that its anatomy is clearly traceable. According to Tan, taken together the wallpaper (English) and the diptychs (Norwegian and Basque) reflect how each language "regards the function and ownership of knowledge." Non-English languages are finite, demarcated by their frames and positioned as traditional art objects, whereas the reservoir of supplementary visual information drawn from the English dictionary *is the wall*. It is the ground upon which others are presented as figures; it is hegemony.

*Dodge and Burn* (2021-23) is a half-hour video that documents Tan's repeated attempts and ultimate failure to capture the 4th of July fireworks over Los Angeles from the window of a commercial airplane. Every flight path to the main airport in LA tracks directly over neighborhoods historically home to communities of color. In the 1960s, the LA police developed strategies to militarize its force and it was in these areas that the first SWAT team was deployed. Upon seeing the sky alight with fireworks from inside a plane one July by accident, Tan was struck by how closely the scene resembled an image of war and how appropriate that association was to the history of this place. As the premise

for the work appears to fall apart, its focus expands. It stops being a film about the image of war and becomes a film about the general impossibility of representation. The immense pressure the artist feels to produce images becomes a kind of violence. The effect of this violence is described, on an individual level, as burn out, when a person stops being able to make sense or concentrate and is forced to simply stop, stand still, and allow time to pass unproductively. *Dodge and Burn* reaches beyond the implications of this condition for the individual to suggest that over-saturation to the point of immobility and cognitive disfunction pertains to the very nature of image-making today.

I want to mark the larger stakes here clearly: Tan opens the viewer to the wake of language that is coming apart. She is not making post-rational or post-truth artwork, nor is she interested in non-sense. This exhibition is not about apathy, in other words, it is about what can be perceived if the condition we all live in, that of disintegrated language worlds, is met directly.

Text by Natasha Marie Llorens

Curator, writer and Professor of Art Theory at the Royal Institute of Art/ Kungl. Konsthögskolan in Stockholm

## Lisa Tan

Lisa Tan (born 1973, Syracuse, NY, USA) lives in Stockholm. Her work is imbued with personal narrative and marked by material and conceptual precision. Video, installation, text, sculpture, drawing, photography, performance, other gestures, are the different forms her work has taken. The complexities of individual subjectivity and the formation of the self occupy her, as she often turns to literature and the history of photography to contemplate how a person's relationship to the world and to others is shaped.

Her work has been presented in solo and group exhibitions at institutions such as Moderna Museet (Stockholm), Kunstinstituut Melly (formerly known as Witte de With) (Rotterdam), MIT List Center (Cambridge), Kunsthall Trondheim, Whitechapel Gallery (London), ICA Philadelphia, Kadist Art Foundation (Paris), Tabakalera International Center for Contemporary Culture (San Sebastian), Contemporary Art Gallery CAG (Vancouver), Artists Space (New York), ICA Philadelphia, Accelerator (Stockholm). Tan's work was presented in the 11th Göteborg International Biennial of Contemporary Art (GIBCA) (2021), osloBIENNALEN First Edition (2019-2020), ever elusive, Transmediale festival, Haus der Kulturen der Welt (2017), Why Not Ask Again?, the 11th Shanghai Biennale (2016), Surround Audience, the Triennial exhibition at the New Museum (2015). Her work is in the collections of Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Malmö Konstmuseum, the City of Oslo's public art collection, Coleção Moraes-Barbosa, São Paulo, and Artium the Museum of Contemporary Art of the Basque Country, Vitoria-Gasteiz.

She is currently Professor of Art in the Master's program at Konstfack University of the Arts, Crafts and Design in Stockholm. She received a MFA from the University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles (2001), a PhD from Valand Academy, University of Gothenburg (2015).