



## Matthew Metzger on Victoria Fu's *Belle Captive*

*Many contemporary philosophers have pointed out that the present moment is distinguished by a prevailing condition of groundlessness. We cannot assume any stable ground on which to base metaphysical claims or foundational political myths. At best, we are faced with temporary, contingent, and partial attempts at grounding. But if there is no stable ground available for our social lives and philosophical aspirations, the consequence must be a permanent, or at least intermittent state of free fall for subject and objects alike. Falling is relational—if there is nothing to fall toward, you might not even be aware that you're falling. If there is no ground, gravity might be low and you'll feel weightless. Objects will stay suspended if you let go of them.*

—Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen* (2012)

"I want it to look *almost* normal."<sup>1</sup> She spins effortlessly, romantically, aimlessly either one time or three times. Despite her one and three sips of water, the glass remains half-full, half-empty. The last time I saw those colors was in a moment of waiting—waiting for Ren to arrive at the dancehall as characters gaze across the room at one another. The floor is bare and but surrounded by anxious bodies in pastel suits and dresses. He will arrive soon and the dance scene will begin. I've seen it before. I can anticipate this forever. "Almost Paradise" seduces from above.

The strength of nearing anything is the eroticism of possibility coupled with presage. What a seductive engagement with time: the waiting room, equally familiar and generic, horrific and abating. Being caught between two states of mind, two states of experience that often contradict one another, is a power game: so long as our demand is for knowing and concretizing experience, Capitalism retains the power, as it determines value through weighing, balancing and perpetuating/relying on opposition. It feeds its consumers on its own terms. However, to desire, to imagine, to want is private, mercurial, and not necessarily dependent on satiation. It retains an agency that transgresses authorship (producer) and ownership (consumer). *Belle Captive's* unfolding experience is one of pressure without force, where intimacy is discovered without being shown and our desire for the encounter is privileged over its significance—all of which work to suspend Capitalism's incessant binary.

If anything, Victoria Fu's *Belle Captive* is a testament to the strength of the *Preconscious*, "a type of unconscious that is latent but capable of becoming conscious."<sup>2</sup> Latent but capable, where what is manifested sits just beyond our reach. The hand models, gestures, signs in its actions but is never allowed to touch. It occupies a surfaceless world. Moreover, *Belle Captive's* soft-pastel color palette is grounded in the mid-1980s, a structural and formal citation of the personal computer at the advent of its popularization and the untouchable space it illuminated.

*Belle Captive* is comprised of "stock footage" culled from the internet, which, in Fu's work, is commonly described as appropriated footage. I would like to argue that what gives *Belle Captive* its seductive resistance towards a prescriptive end (meaning) is precisely the opposite. "Stock footage" is conceptually palpable here because it avoids authorship intentionally. In turn, it also sidesteps any familiar meaning that the image itself may traditionally depict. It's created as a placeholder, vacant, and fabricated for as many uses as possible, especially considering that it is green-screen "stock footage." Appropriation is a type of use that shrugs, refuses, or at the very least comes off as indifferent to the value/intentions with which the image was made, thus yielding a stealing of authorship. Yet "stock footage" does not retain such currency and is not capable of being subjected to such a discourse. It must be contextualized to gain traction, and Fu therefore situates this material in a pastel, almost vibrant, almost true, waiting room. Always in support of any and all who enter, never amplifying and never influencing one's experience. Just holding it.

"What is the difference between reading written lines and reading a picture? The difference seems to be that in reading lines we follow a structure imposed upon us, whereas in reading pictures we move rather freely within a structure that has been proposed to us."<sup>3</sup> As Vilém Flusser poignantly articulates, there is Con-

ceptual thought (reading written lines) and Imaginal thought (reading pictures). Conceptual thought is dependent on predetermined viewpoints, is objective, conscious, learned, and facts are represented sharply and clearly. Imaginal thought on the other hand is not learned, but is rather subjective, unconscious, and is mass cultural while its messages are richer albeit less specific. Covering the two poles of interpretation, Flusser predicts a future where images will be used to compose history and negate the binary mentioned above. If ever this prediction has come to fruition it's in *Belle Captive*. Conceptual thought (order in reading and cinematic watching, left to right) is abstracted by the incessant 360-degree turning of figures—just as time is abstracted by the oscillation of sunset/sunrise color palettes almost setting and almost rising—whereas Imaginal thought (the images themselves) is not capable of retaining any message, any fact, due to their nature of production as mere supply. The history that Fu's *Belle Captive* is composing wants to look almost normal but strategically falls short in an effort to collapse past and future. Recalling Steyerl: "At best, we are faced with temporary, contingent, and partial attempts at grounding" which induces the feeling of an "intermittent state of free fall" ...and weightlessness while watching.<sup>4</sup> The incessant 'now' in which Fu's source material recites appears dated while looking...if in any direction... around.

The tongue protrudes from a silhouetted mouth as it's pulling, groping, drinking in slow motion. It takes what it needs to survive. It penetrates the surface and then pulls back, over and over again. The lick forces a type of contamination. It slobbers and splashes beyond boundaries. We are given a wet, fluctuating, black mass through which to gaze upon the animal. It drips, clogging our view, and suddenly Abstraction becomes the atmosphere and the lens through which to view consumption. The half-full, half-empty glass is left a mess.

—Matthew Metzger, Chicago, January 2014

Matthew Metzger is a practicing visual artist and educator who lives and works in Chicago. He received his MFA from the University of Chicago and attended the Skowhegan Artist Residency Program both in 2009. Since then he has exhibited at The Smart Museum of Art in Chicago while mounting solo exhibitions at The Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, Sikkema & Jenkins Co. in New York, Arratia Beer in Berlin, and Tony Wight Gallery in Chicago. He is co-editor of the publication SHIFTER, and is Assistant Professor of Studio Art at The University of Illinois at Chicago.

Victoria Fu received her BFA from Stanford University, MA in Art History from USC, and MFA from CalArts. She attended the Whitney Independent Study Program and was a resident artist at Skowhegan in 2006. Her work will also be featured in the upcoming 2014 Whitney Biennial, and recent exhibition venues include the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, La Jolla, CA; University Art Gallery, UC Irvine, CA; De Appel, Amsterdam, Netherlands; among others. Fu co-founded and directs The Moving Index (<http://artoffice.org>); she lives and works in San Diego and Los Angeles.

<sup>1</sup> Statement by the artist.

<sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company Co., 1960), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Writings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 22.

<sup>4</sup> Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 13.