



# The Film and Video Poetry Journal

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语言与雨 | **A dialogue with filmmaker Susan Lin**

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*Abstract*

This is an interview with inter-media visual artist and poet Susan Lin.

## 语言与雨 | A DIALOGUE WITH FILMMAKER SUSAN LIN



Image from the film *Scenes from a Film I'll Never Make* (2016) written & directed by **Susan Lin**

*Susan Lin is an inter-media visual artist, filmmaker, and poet. Lin graduated from the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts with a degree in Media Arts & Practice. Lin's intersecting identities and experiences as Chinese American and non-gender conforming guide their work and academic interests. Their films address race and gender and also how these factors relate to phenomenology and diaspora. Lin is interested in the way people understand the concept of "home" and how those with marginalized identities find "home" in countries, spaces, and institutions that are not of their own. They practice in both fields of essay film and poetry film.*

**FVPS: May we begin with talking about *La Nouvelle Vague* and *The Left Bank*?**

**Susan Lin:** It's interesting to begin the conversation this way, because when I was younger I was really fixated on the *French New Wave/ The Left Bank* filmmakers. Especially Godard in the beginning; I liked that he was clever and that so many filmmakers I loved were inspired by him including Chantal Akerman, who is arguably my earliest and biggest cinematic influence. *I don't live a very interesting life* (2015) is actually what I consider the first video I've ever made; and when I made it I was thinking a lot about Godard and Akerman.

I admired the ethos of the *French New Wave* filmmakers; I liked their style, attitude, and determination that they could make the films they wanted to see with small crews & budgets. What left the biggest impact on me was their pushback on narrative. It was really refreshing to know as a new filmmaker that I didn't have to

write stories with a beginning, middle, or end. That in fact, maybe the works that didn't adhere strictly to those values were more interesting to me anyways.

My favorite *French New Wave* filmmaker is Agnès Varda. There's tenderness to her work, a playful curiosity, and a knowing sadness (or maybe it's wisdom). Also compared to male *French New Wave* filmmakers, Varda knew how to be kind with how she looked through her camera at the world.

**FVPS: Varda's work flows between documentary, short film, narrative, and feature length. The convergence of genre and format in such a manner has been referred to as *research cinema* by film scholar Richard Peña. Are you satisfied with the categories or genre descriptions that may apply to your work?**

**Susan Lin:** I've given up on categorizing my work in any particular way, at least for myself. Knowing genres and categories are useful for knowing how to participate in the dialogue about video/film/image but not very useful for my own practice. For a while I thought a lot about the term inter-cultural cinema from Laura U. Marks' book "*The Skin of The Film*" and I can definitely see that some may categorize my work as inter-cultural cinema due to my explorations of my experience of diaspora, but I don't think any specific label is all encompassing. I go where my heart and research take me. Ultimately, I find that I'm constantly evolving and it's always interesting to see what other people see in my work or how they try to understand it.



Image from the film *Scenes from A Film I'll Never Make* (2016) written & directed by **Susan Lin**

**FVPS: Do you practice a creative process before picking up the camera?**

**Susan Lin:** My creative process is very physical; there's not much preparation. I can be a very impatient person, especially with video work. I feel something in me (a movement, a string of words, an image) that demands to be "*physicalized*". I usually pick up a camera right away to see what the world looks like when I am moving with that camera in hand. There's a quote from *Wings of Desire* by Wim Wenders that I think of when I'm looking through a lens at the world; Marion says in one of her inner monologues: "I look up and the world emerges before my eyes and fills my heart."

So, I pick up my camera. I press record. And then I look at the world through my camera and let it fill my heart. Then however I feel, I push the frame a little this way or that way. It's really fun for me. And also problematic in that whenever I would want to work with a cinematographer, they would have to be okay with me asking to just experiment with an image until it "*feels right*". And sometimes it just doesn't feel right until I get my own hands on the camera and push it around.

**FVPS: Sound Design is a production element that is distinct in all of your films.**

**Susan Lin:** Yes! I think a lot about sound vs noise vs music. Putting music in my work never felt right to me- almost like it was disingenuous. Yet when I first started watching films, before I began to think about video as a medium, I felt very lost. Most movies have a soundtrack of some sort but I could neither find music to put in work that 1) I liked 2) I could afford. So I worked with what I had: natural sound, background humming, and people's voices. Actually a recent film that did a great job of not using a musical score was Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. When there is no musical score, the sound of everything else becomes the score.

Sound design is actually one of my favorite parts of making work. I love collecting sounds and I love listening to what's around in a room or space. Collecting and designing sounds for my work is a great way that my work forces me to pay attention. I think what I love the most about video making is just that: paying attention. There's a great Simone Weil quote I've been thinking about a lot: "Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. It presupposes faith and love. Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer."

I also feel like I've never had a very strong relationship to music and I wonder if it's because I grew up in an immigrant family or with a single mom who never had time for music or any other kind of art. The first time I heard my mom put on a CD in the house was when I was home on break from college. I heard her singing too and I remember being so stunned. I've been thinking a lot about that; the sound of my mom humming and singing for the first time in my life. I hope I can include something like that feeling in my work soon.



Image from the film *Co-op Part I* (2016) directed by *Susan Lin*

**FVPS: Share more with us about why you may not have a strong relationship with music.**

**Susan Lin:** Somehow I became afraid of music, and what other people would think of the music I listened to or not. Unlike images I felt like music didn't leave me anything to hide behind. But recently I've started trying to actively listen to music again and it's been amazing. But I still don't think I want to overlay tracks of music in my video work. The music must be generated from the world of the images I am showing.

My friends have such strong opinions about what kind of music they love. I remember talking to somebody about not having a music taste a few years ago, and they told me: maybe one day when I am old, I'll turn on the radio and hear something and suddenly understand what everyone's been going on about all this time. I'm looking forward to that day. I expect my work will change drastically.

**FVPS: There is purposeful use of silence within your filmmaking. A realization that forms while viewing *I Don't Live a Very Interesting life* is that even though there is no dialogue and very few elements that create sound, the film is not quiet. You present an absence as presence. Silence plays a role within the journey you create and as time passes the minimalistic audio design becomes thunderous.**

**Susan Lin:** Silence is what we hear when we pay attention. I feel that actually video is the best way to compose silence. And that's always been exciting to me. I'm a bit sad I'm an image-maker and not a musician but when I get to experiment with silence in a video work I feel very close to making music. I compose silence first, and then everything else.

**FVPS: Can subtitling and screen text achieve similar emotional representation as silence has in your films?**

**Susan Lin:** Subtitling and audible silence are very different. They point to different kinds of absences. As of the moment subtitling is really interesting to me. In some ways, subtitles mirror my experience growing up between languages and culture. I understand some things and misunderstand others; in this space of misunderstanding I come to my own version of the story, of the world. I have deliberately mistranslated subtitles in different work, to play with this idea of understanding or the value of what is an "accurate" or "true" translation.

**FVPS: Could visual language communicate and express your life experience more accurately than a spoken language?**

**Susan Lin:** No, I don't think so. Languages are systems of thinking and ways of knowing so each language yields its own versions of the same story. I wouldn't say one is more accurate than the other.

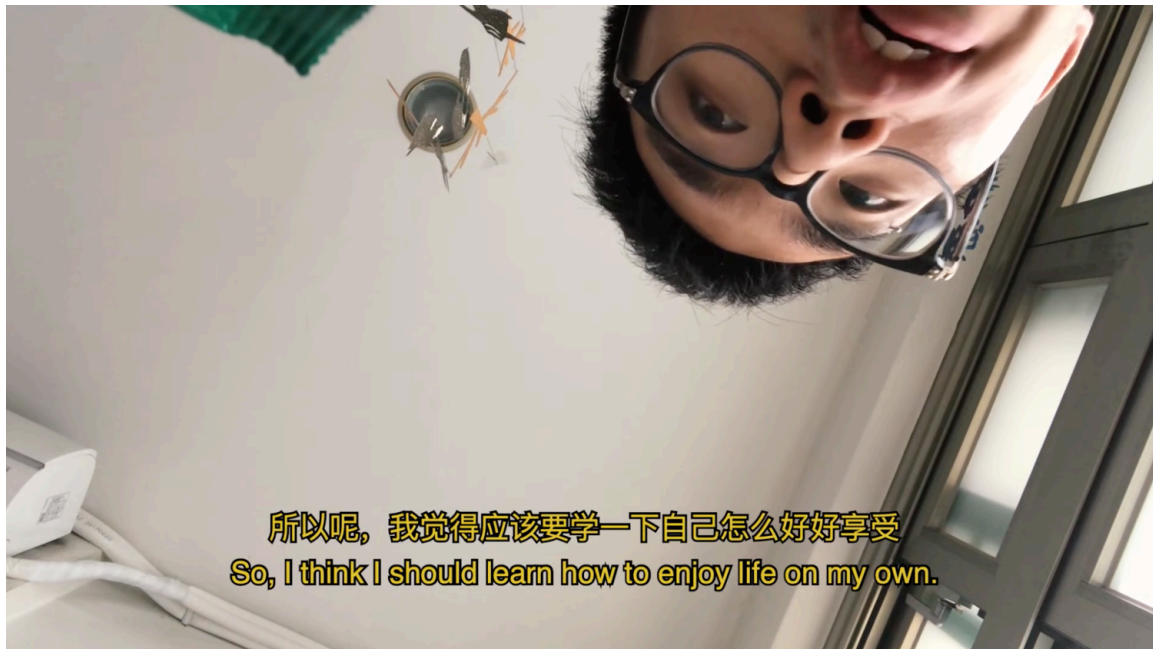


Image from the film *Today I Arrive at Age 23* (2019) a collaborative project with *Susan Lin*

**FVPS: May we ask your name in Cantonese?**

**Susan Lin:** The area of China my family is from doesn't speak Cantonese, but Fukienese. My name in Mandarin is. The name means Lin (my last name which means forest) 星 which means star, and 语 which means language. There's actually a story behind it in that my dad (allegedly) had a dream the night I was born that there were so many stars falling from the sky he couldn't collect them all. So my name became 星雨 initially, which means star rain, but then he decided the second character 雨 (rain) would change to 语 (language). Why? I'm not sure, but I've always suspected my inclination for poetry came from my dad.

**FVPS: Do you speak additional languages?**

**Susan Lin:** The other language I speak in my family besides Mandarin is the Fukien Dialect (growing up I called it Fuzhou-nese), which is specific to the region of Fuzhou and surrounding southern areas. It's really quite different from Mandarin and people who haven't grown up with it really can't understand it at all. In my films I always try to address growing up speaking (or not speaking fluently) different languages. I have experimented with subtitles, translation, mistranslation, etc. I'm interested in how language, memory, and emotion intersect; how I don't have to be fluent in Mandarin or Fukien Dialect to know the feeling behind words and conversations. As I can't really write in Mandarin and there is no written Fukien Dialect, I have often said that knowing how to speak these languages has been like learning to sing a song through different melodies but being unable to read the music.

**FVPS: When your films are watched centuries from now who can you imagine attending the presentation? What do you suppose these viewers may learn?**

**Susan Lin:** No clue who would be watching my films centuries from now. I wonder if people will still watch movies and videos as we know them. I'm interested in how our methods of representations will have evolved by then. Maybe it will be screened at some event for enthusiasts of vintage cinema. The viewers would learn a lot about me. I think the viewers would learn about the details of my life, of the things that worried me I carried, of the things I could not get over, of the people and places I loved and the world I dreamed of building.

**FVPS: If you were allowed direct contact with your ancestors what topics would you choose to speak to them about and why?**

**Susan Lin:** I'm not as fixated on what I'd talk to them about as much as how I would be able to talk to them. I wonder, would my ancestors and I be able to understand each other if I'm communicating in English, broken Mandarin, Fukien Dialect? I guess I haven't thought about it much. I've been much more fixated on learning to communicate with my own parents.

I'm not that interested in speaking with my familial ancestors. I think this is because I feel that I am already in communion with certain writers, filmmakers, and artists I admire by consuming their works. Those people feel like ancestors to me. I look to them for wisdom and for ways to survive.



Image from the film *I Don't Live a Very Interesting Life* (2015) directed by *Susan Lin*

**FVPS: Are you purposely selecting self-personal areas to process in your films? Or do the topics you choose to examine come about without preparation?**

**Susan Lin:** Looking at a camera through the world is one way I have of making sense of everything. I haven't quite figured out whether it is the sharing of the work or the creation of it that motivates me most. In the times I've acted in my own work I do acknowledge that knowing I am performing for an unknown public brings me some kind of satisfaction. Like I am bringing someone into my most private thoughts, that I have an opportunity to explain myself somehow. I wonder why I am so fixated on that: explaining myself or being understood by others. I think I still carry a lot of shame with me about myself, the legacy of a difficult childhood.



**FVPS: Do you experience catharsis when making your films?**

**Susan Lin:** I do, briefly. When I am working on something, life seems to glow with meaning and purpose. When I make films I feel expansive. Like there is enough room for everything that is: from the joyous to the painful to the mundane. I'm kinder when I am making films. I think it filmmaking feels close to some kind of forgiveness.

**[END]**

*Susan Lin's essay film **I don't live a very interesting life** (2015) was presented daily as part of a public installation titled **Analogue Sun, Digital Moon** at **The Los Angeles Center for Digital Art**. The exhibition ran July 11, 2019 through August 4, 2019 as part of **The 2019 Film and Video Poetry Symposium**.*

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