

A
symmetry

The Courtauld



Subsea Signals: Maritime histories, digital currents

The Asymmetry International Symposium

Friday 25th April 2025

The Courtauld Institute of Art, Vernon Square



@courtauldres @asymmetryartorg

Introduction

Beneath the ocean floor, fibre optic cables pulse with the traffic of our hyperconnected world, transmitting the data of the digital present along maritime corridors forged by centuries of trade, empire, and war. These same oceanic routes remain deeply contested—reshaped today by maritime sovereignty claims, deep-sea extraction, platform capitalism, ocean zoning, and volatile geopolitical currents, including new forms of militarization and territorial control.

Responding to these shifting currents, Subsea Signals examines how artists and scholars from the Asia Pacific engage with the ocean's material and historical layers, transforming submerged traces into speculative archives where sunken histories resurface through digital flows, and hidden networks suggest alternative modes of transmission and connectivity.

The programme convenes live readings, film screenings, presentations, and panel discussions to trace the fluid intersections of maritime history and digital technologies. The first section, Submerged Histories, explores colonial legacies of indentured labour and forced migration through sonic interventions, sonar mappings, and other speculative methods—charting routes of deportation, diaspora, and unresolved returns. The second, Digital Flows, interrogates socio-technical systems—from cloud infrastructures to hydropower networks—as extensions of colonial territoriality, while tracking how artists and scholars expose their material impacts (deep-sea mining) or reimagine their logics (whale song as counter-archive).

Through these diverse artistic and scholarly interventions, Subsea Signals maps the undercurrents where hidden histories and emerging technologies intersect—revealing patterns of exploitation and resistance that reverberate across oceanic spaces, while imagining new possibilities for connection beyond existing power structures.

Convened by Dr Wenny Teo, Senior Lecturer in Modern and Contemporary Asian Art, The Courtauld, and Michèle Ruo Yi Landolt, Director, Asymmetry.

Programme

9.00-9.30	Registration opens
9.30-9.45	Introduction Dr Wenny Teo , The Courtauld
9.45-10.40	Keynote I, Centenaries Professor susan pui san lok , University of the Arts London
10.40-11.35	Songs for water: A playlist Amal Khalaf , Curator
11.35-11.50	Break
11.50-13.20	Panel I: Submerged Histories (Chaired by Dr Wenny Teo , The Courtauld) A Drop in the Ocean, Sim Chiyin , Artist A New Composition for the Sea, Chris Zhongtian Yuan , Artist Anthroposea - Tides of Connection, Dr Charlotte de Mille , The Courtauld
13.20-14.35	Lunch Break
14.35-15.25	Screenings: Hydrospheres Introductions by Michèle Ruo Yi Landolt , Asymmetry The Rivers They Don't See, Som Supaparinya , Artist Long Time Between Sunsets and Underground Waves, Hu Wei , Artist
15.25-16.20	Keynote II, Sensorial Oceans: Island as Technology and the Aesthetics of Maritime Frontiers Professor Erin Y. Huang , University of Toronto
16.20-16.35	Break
16.35-18.05	Panel II: Digital Flows (Chaired by Clara Che Wei Peh , Asymmetry) Sounding the Deep Water, Payne Zhu , Artist Concealment, Hyper-Visibility, and Drizzle: Imagining Data Infrastructure, Iris Long , Curator and Researcher End of Image (As We Know It), Shuang Li , Artist
18.10-18.45	Drinks reception Open to all

Abstracts & Biographies

susan pui san lok

Centenary

Centenary is a long poem and two-channel sound piece, originally commissioned by Create London for the Becontree *Centenary* programme (2022). Once described as the largest social housing estate in the world, Becontree (located in Dagenham, on the Essex/London border) was established in 1919, designed to rehouse people displaced from the East End by slum clearances. *Centenary* aims to cut across the dominant narrative of Becontree as the creation of 'homes fit for heroes', alluding instead to its hidden migrant populations and centuries of Chinese diasporic movement, touching on post-war migration, the Hong Kong handover, and ambivalent 'returns'. The artist is currently developing an expanded version of the work, drawing on various public screen archives.

susan pui san lok < 駱佩珊 > susan lok pui san is an artist, writer and academic based in London. Exhibiting and publishing nationally and internationally since the 1990s, recent solo exhibitions include *seven x seven*, curated by Mother Tongue for Glasgow International Festival (2021) and *A COVEN A GROVE A STAND*, commissioned by Firstsite as part of New Geographies (2019). Commissions include *REWIND/REPLAY* for the exhibition Rewinding Internationalism at Netwerk Aalst, Van Abbemuseum and Villa Arson (2022-23); and *Centenary* (2022), commissioned by Create London for the Becontree *Centenary* programme, broadcast on ResonanceFM and installed at esea contemporary (2023). Group exhibitions include *Found Cities, Lost Objects* curated by Lubaina Himid OBE (Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery, Southampton City Art Gallery, Bristol, Royal West of England Gallery, Leeds Art Gallery, 2023-24); and *Diaspora Pavilion* at the 57th Venice Biennale (2017). As Professor of Contemporary Art at University of the Arts London (UAL) and Director of the UAL Decolonising Arts Institute, they led the major Arts and Humanities Research Council project, Transforming Collections: Reimagining Art, Nation and Heritage (2021-25) and 20/20 (2021-25, supported by Arts Council England and Freeland's Foundation). Prior to UAL, she was Associate Professor in Fine Art at Middlesex University and Co-Investigator on the AHRC Black Artists & Modernism project, led by Professor Dame Sonia Boyce (UAL in partnership with Middlesex, 2015-18).

Amal Khalaf

Songs for water: a Playlist

In this listening session, Amal Khalaf shares extracts and reflections on commissioned art works, songs and research that have been part of her recent curatorial projects, *Throwing Shells* for Sharjah Biennial 16: to carry and the forthcoming *Ghost:2568* in Bangkok. Presenting projects that think with and through water, Khalaf shares the possibilities of biennials and exhibition making as spaces to process a fraught present through song, storytelling, matrilineal memory and intergenerational convening. Through conjuring the oceanic through the salt water of tears, sweat and the vapour of breath these offerings call in the freedom to generate our own lived reality outside failing systems of power.

Amal Khalaf is a curator and artist who serves as Director of Programmes at Cubitt (2019-present) and is also co-curating Sharjah Biennial 16 (February-June 2025), UAE and *Ghost 2568* (October - November 2025) Bangkok, Thailand. Amal Khalaf served as the Civic Curator at the Serpentine Galleries (2009-2023) and is now Curator at Large and Advisor for Public Practice,

where she shaped the Civic programme and commissioned over 50 long term, collaborative projects, films and moving image works. There and in other contexts she has developed residencies, exhibitions and collaborative research projects at the intersection of arts and social justice. Projects include the Edgware Road Project and Centre for Possible Studies (2009-2013), *Radio Ballads* (2019-2022) and *Sensing the Planet* (2021). She curated the Bahrain Pavilion for the 58th Venice Biennale (2019) and co-directed the Global Art Forum at Art Dubai (2016). She is a trustee of Mophradat, Athens, and not/nowhere, London, and a founding member of the GCC art collective.

Sim Chi Yin

A Drop In The Ocean

As they stood on the decks of the ships, the deportees sung these lines en masse, amid tears, by some accounts. They knew they were sailing away from their beloved home of Malaya, probably for a final time. In the grips of the Cold War, Britain used emergency legislation in its colony of Malaya to deport at least 30,000 people – mostly ethnic Chinese – to China, between 1948 and 1960. This mass deportation, still little-known, is documented in archives as a chain of bureaucratic paperwork the colonial state used to “dispose” of people they cast as suspected leftists. But over years of research, I have found no photographic or filmic record of this mass banishment, which included that of my paternal grandfather, an educator and journalist who was executed by Chinese nationalist soldiers shortly after arriving in southern China in 1949. Into this profound gap in the archive, I have tried to fill, counter and conjure, through a series of oral history interviews with former Malayan deportees and through art-making, using their songs, mementos, testimonies, and then eventually speculative methods to “critically fabulate” these sea journeys. My two-channel video works *Requiem* and *The Mountain That Hid* both take the Malayan deportations as a departure point. In *The Suitcase Is A Little Bit Rotten*, I reappropriate a stereographic image of Hong Kong harbour in the early 1900s and teleport my granddad onto one of the ships – it’s where he would have pulled into en route to our ancestral port of Swatow. In one scene in my theatre performance *One Day We’ll Understand*, excerpts of the deportees’ testimonies flash on screens as their portraits float by. In my practice-based PhD and here, which draw on a decade-long project looking at my family history and that of the anti-colonial war in Malaya, I make the case that artistic methods can contribute to historical research. And in the case of conflicts long-past political and juridical accounting, perhaps, as Saidiya Hartman put it, “it would not be far-fetched to consider stories as a form of compensation or even reparations, perhaps the only kind we will ever receive.”

Sim Chi Yin is an artist from Singapore whose research-based practice uses artistic and archival interventions to contest and complicate historiographies and colonial narratives. She works across photography, film, installation, book-making and performance. She was an artist fellow in the Whitney Museum’s Independent Study Program (2022-23) and holds a PhD in War Studies from King’s College London. Her video installation *Requiem* on Britain’s mass deportations from Malaya was exhibited at the 60th Venice Biennale (2024). Other recent exhibitions include: at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin (2024); Gropius Bau, Berlin (2023); Barbican Centre, London (2023); Camera Austria, Graz (2024); Harvard Art Museums, Boston, USA (2021); Les Rencontres d’Arles, France (2021); Nobel Peace Museum, Oslo (2017), Datsuijo Tokyo (2024); Arko Art Centre, Seoul (2016); Zilberman Gallery Berlin (2021); and Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong (2019). She has also participated in the Istanbul Biennale (2022, 2017) and the Guangzhou Image Triennial (2021). In August 2024, she premiered a theatre performance on her project *One Day We’ll Understand*, on her family history and the anti-colonial war in what was British

Malaya. The performance toured to the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Performing Arts in Melbourne in February 2025. Sim is based in Berlin.

Chris Zhongtian Yuan

A New Composition for the Sea

In this talk, Chris Zhongtian Yuan will take their recent sound-based work *That Dark, Sugary Sea* (2025) as a starting point to delve into the encounters, themes, texts and techniques that have shaped the work as well as the artist's practice. The project stems from Yuan's encounter with Dr. Chloe Lee's research at the National Archives, which uncovered the little-known presence of Chinese migrants aboard the Empire Windrush in 1948. The work seeks to imagine the kind of music that might have been playing aboard the Windrush. Collaborating with long-term partners, the project employs improvisation techniques and a modular structure to weave together archival materials, live fictions, loneliness, and pleasure. The piece was commissioned by esea contemporary as part of the sound project *Voicing the Archive* (www.eseacontemporary.org/voicing-the-archive) Using the sound work as the backdrop, the talk performatively foregrounds the resonances and contradictions when one juxtaposes encounter and research, oral history and official archive, improvisation and structure in the vast yet succinct space of the sea.

Chris Zhongtian Yuan is an artist based in London. Working with video, sound, performance, sculpture and installation, Yuan's practice centres around the notion of 'Punk filmmaking', drawing improvisational techniques and DIY ethos from a wide range of music genres such as punk, jazz and noise. Yuan's work recomposes vernacular sonic and spatial materials to queer archive, pop culture, and the use of technology in experimental animation. Coming from a materialist lineage and architecture background, their exhibitions often use site-responsive strategies to playfully blur the boundaries amongst critique, care and confabulation. Recent solo and group exhibitions have been held at Triangolo, Kunsthall Charlottenborg, Surplus Space, Macalline Art Center, Reading International, Guangzhou Times Museum, Somerset House, Power Station of Art among others. Yuan is currently a PhD candidate at Kingston School of Art and lecturer at Reading School of Art.

Dr Charlotte de Mille

Anthroposea: Tides of Connection

Anthroposea is a multidisciplinary initiative that explores the dynamic and reciprocal relationships between humans and the ocean - recognizing the sea not as a passive backdrop to human history, but as a force that shapes cultures, livelihoods, and ways of life, while also being profoundly shaped by human actions. Our first international film, *Tides of Connection*, for the 3rd UN Ocean Conference in Nice this June, traces whales, sharks and cod as architects of both marine and human societies; revealing our entwined fate. In this short presentation, I shall share some of our work whilst offering an intersectionalist, intermedial framework for thinking and action.

Dr Charlotte de Mille is Associate Lecturer at The Courtauld Institute, and curates The Courtauld Gallery's music programme. She was Visiting Scholar at Lingnan University, Hong Kong in 2018, and Mid-Career Fellow at the Paul Mellon Centre for British Art 2019-20. She is co-director of the project *Intersections of Music and Art in Europe 1950-2000*, at the Fondazione Cini, Venice, and co-founder of Anthroposea with Arzukan Askin and Oliver Beardon. Her work has been

called 'an agenda for change: both for individuals, artistically and conceptually, and for the myriad collective ways that humans dwell on the planet.' (Aaron S. Allen, Director, Environment and Sustainability Program University of North Carolina).

Som Supaparinya

The Rivers They Don't See, 2024. (film excerpt)

The Rivers They Don't See is a project that anticipates the consequences of the planned mega-project diverting the Yuam-Ngao River into the Ping River, which has a different ecosystem. The diversion will also impact the biodiverse ecologies of the Salween River and the Chao Phraya River, which flows into the Gulf of Thailand. Along its trajectory, other living beings—including animals, plants, and humans—will be forced to relocate, migrate, and adapt to new conditions. This video installation visualizes the water's route, beginning at the river basin where the diversion project starts. The diverted water then floods into another basin, leaving the original riverscape dry. Finally, the water flows onward to meet the ocean. Each location reflects scenes from the daily lives of local farmers, fishermen, and villagers who depend on the water, as well as moments when they are forced to abandon their homes due to ecosystem changes or legal enforcement.

Som Supaparinya lives and works in Chiang Mai, Thailand. She studied painting in Thailand and media arts in Germany, and her practice spans installation, objects, and still/moving images, often employing a documentary and experimental approach. Her work explores the impact of human activity on landscapes and communities through political, historical, and literary lenses, touching on themes such as noodle cultures, changing riverscapes and cityscapes, routes, electricity generation, war, sites of resistance, and banned books.

Her recent and upcoming exhibitions include: *Collapsing Clouds Form Stars: A Mini Retrospective of Work by Som Supaparinya*, Ver Gallery, Bangkok (2025) *The Shattered Worlds: Micro Narratives from the Ho Chi Minh Trail to the Great Steppe*, BACC, Bangkok (April-July 2025), *The River They Don't See*, Kestner Gesellschaft (April-July 2025) and *Melted Stars*, DAAD Galerie, Berlin (2026)

She is the winner of the Han Nefkens Foundation – Southeast Asian Video Art Production Grant 2024, which commissioned her new work. The grant will be followed by exhibitions at six venues, including Sàn Art (Vietnam), the Jim Thompson Art Center (Thailand), Museion (Italy), Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art (Japan), Kunsthall Charlottenborg (Denmark), and Rockbund Art Museum (China).

Hu Wei

Long Time Between Sunsets and Underground Waves, 2020. (film excerpt)

Long Time between Sunsets and Underground Waves offers an insight into the interplay and struggle between human activity and nature from the non-human perspective of an island, and explores the intertwined relationship between marine culture, legend, island and biopolitics in a semi-documentary, semi-fictional way. The island in the film seems to be a closed-off, circular ecosystem, with ghostly fires and visions appearing at night in the dense forest, perhaps from the spirits of inhabitants who were slaughtered during the war. Beneath the sea surface, legends and superstitious beliefs about mythical creatures and the nomadic Bajau people still circulate—as do the second-generation immigrants who are scattered across the Malay Archipelago without identity or nationality, seeking a place to live in the "undercurrents", far from the mainland, separated by choice or by force.

Hu Wei is an artist working in Beijing. He works in a variety of media, including filmmaking, in-

stallation, printed images, performance and drawing. Hu's interest often begins from 'silenced' and local microhistories or archives, using the cinematic frame as a means to process and reflect on the ways in which (trans)personal narratives of social, cultural and historical belonging structure our experiences. His work unfolds through research, translation, and imagination, combining moving images and essayistic aesthetics to explore the porous and speculative connections between art and reality, as well as the precarious relationship between affect and value judgments in different political and economic contexts. His recent projects include: *The Old People's Restaurant and The Sea*, Ox Warehouse, Macau (2024); *Touching A Fabric of Holes*, Macalline Art Center, Beijing (2023); *Structural Stowaway*, basis, Frankfurt, German (2023); *Affairs*, DRC NO.12 Art Space, Beijing (2022). He is the winner of East Asian Contemporary Art 2019 Prize, the nominee of Han Nefkens Foundation - Loop Barcelona Video Art Production Grant 2024; 2022 OCAT x KADIST Emerging Media Artist Project, HUAYU Youth Award 2020 and Jimei·Arles Discovery Prize 2018.

Erin Y. Huang

Sensorial Oceans: Island as Technology and the Aesthetics of Maritime Frontiers

The daily tracking of the wars in Ukraine and Gaza through high resolution satellite imagery reminds us that we not only live in a new century of global conflict, but also that "war" is waged through images and imaging technologies in a new visual culture of augmented vision and perception. Expanding the study of military and surveillance visual culture, this talk focuses on the materiality and aesthetic representation of technologically enhanced oceans, islands, and liquid environments across the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea: a hypervisible, hypermediated, and high-risk maritime space that links the unfinished First Cold War and the speculated New Cold War among the United States, China, Taiwan, and beyond. To do so, I illustrate and demystify the American and Chinese dreams of infrastructural "ocean worlds," including the American "island chain" along the western Pacific and the militarized Taiwan Strait to contain communism in Asia after the Second World War, the recent Chinese Maritime Silk Road Initiative, and the construction of mega-scale artificial islands in the South China Sea. Specifically, I investigate the aesthetic and sensory operation of "instrumental images": images whose primary task is to provide actionable information, rather than representational or pictorial. These include the commonly used satellite imagery, drone footage, computer simulation, and other data-driven technical images in the recent decades. Combining media history and textual reading, I aim to introduce new skills of visual literacy to read "images" that are no longer produced by the conventional "human eye" behind a camera, but by machines and data software, and categorized as "scientific" and "objective." Contending their exceptional "objective" status, my readings focus on contextualizing instrumental images in the new media ecology of think tank platform, governmental policy, news report, museum exhibition, and art that collectively construct the dreams of ocean worlds.

Erin Y. Huang is Assistant Professor of Inter-Asia and Gender and Sexuality Studies in the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Toronto. She is the author of *Urban Horror: Neoliberal Post-Socialism and the Limits of Visibility* (Duke University Press, 2020), a work of affect theory, film studies, and post-Cold War China and Sinophone Asia. Her new book project, *Ocean Worlds: Transpacific Worldmaking Across Sensorial Oceans*, focuses on the materiality and aesthetic representations of technologically enhanced oceans, islands, and liquid environments across the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea.

Payne Zhu

Sounding the Deep Water

Payne Zhu will speak about his recent video, *Sounding the Deep Water* (2025), which takes as a point of departure, the vertical food chain of whales in the ocean to reimagine an eco-financial future interwoven with images, data, AI and their infrastructures.

Payne Zhu (Shanghai, b.1990) probes into different economic systems and works in between the rheology of finance, competing bodies and the flooding of images. Aspiring to become an exile from within, Zhu manages to create an alternative economics. Often taking unconventional moving images as a point of departure, Zhu's works celebrate the unmatched nature of the subject through the mismatch of different technological media. His work has been featured in numerous exhibitions including, most recently in 2024, *How To Be Happy Together?* Para Site, Hong Kong; *The Show Must Go On*, the Soil Collection, Beijing, *Two Sides of One Coin*, Taikang Art Museum, Beijing, and in 2023, *Cosmos Cinema*, 14th Shanghai Biennale, *Motion is Action: 35 years of Chinese Media Art*, BY Art Matters, Hangzhou, *Home Is Where the Haunt Is*, X Museum Triennial, Beijing *Pixel Row: Behavioral Metamorphosis*, West Bund Museum, Shanghai *Projection*, Sifang Art Museum, Nanjing. Recent solo exhibitions include: *Sounding the Deep Water*, Aranya Art Center, Qinhuangdao, 2025, *MATCHPOOL*, OCAT Shanghai, Shanghai, 2022

Iris Long

Concealment, Hyper-Visibility, and Drizzle: Imaging Data Infrastructure

This presentation builds upon the speaker's ongoing field research in Southwest China (), which investigates large-scale technological infrastructures such as data centers, dedicated scientific network backbones, and radio telescopes. It examines how artistic engagement—through site-specific visits, critical interventions, and embedded practices—can offer new frameworks for visualizing infrastructures that discreetly organize contemporary technological life from behind the scenes. The project further interrogates the latent technical domains embedded within the everyday—those continuously captured, analyzed, and modulated by digital infrastructure. In this context, "the cloud" ceases to function solely as metaphor or as an assemblage of hardware; it emerges instead as a form of ambient drizzle, permeating the urbanscape and transforming modes of connectivity. Situated between conventional narratives of infrastructural concealment and the regimes of hyper-visibility constructed by technocratic governance, this presentation foregrounds the cloudy transitional states that lie in between. Through field research and artistic practice, it explores the porous intervals between appearance and disappearance, proposing an expanded vocabulary for sensing, articulating, and critically engaging with the elusive presence of infrastructural megastructures.

Iris Long is a writer and independent curator whose research focuses on the megastructures of science and technology in China and the psycho-geography of techno-science. She was a 2022–2023 Berggruen Fellow and a Swissnex Fellow. On the radio waves, she goes with BY1TYW. She has curated and co-curated exhibitions exploring art, science, and technology, with international presentations including *The Magic Machine* (University of Cambridge), *Antikythera Salon*, *Space in Time* (Warburg Institute/UCL Institute of Advanced Studies), and *Art and Artificial Intelligence* (Open Conference, ZKM). In 2021, she co-initiated *Port: Under the Cloud*, a long-term research and curatorial project on the infrastructures of science and technology in China—her passion project.

Shuang Li

End of Image (as we know it)

In this presentation, Shuang Li reflects on the shifting dynamics of image circulation over the past decade and considers how their work responds to these changes.

Shuang Li (b.1990, Wuyi Mountains, China) received her MA in Media Studies from New York University in 2014. She currently lives and works in Berlin, Germany and Geneva, Switzerland. Situated in globalized communication systems and inspired by various localities and uneven information flows, Li Shuang's work, which encompass performance, interactive websites, sculpture and moving image installations, studies various mediums composing the contemporary digital landscape. Crucial to this practice is the interaction between the medium and its users as well as amongst the mediums themselves. These diverse forms of intimacy form a motif that runs through the artist's practice, as she explores how various forms of technology bring us into contact, and how they form part of a neoliberal apparatus that regulates the body and desire. Yet her focus is not limited to the virtual, the material lives of those digital landscapes are also included, such as the infrastructure and logistics systems that support it, and more importantly, the cracks in between.

