

Travel So Far Ellen Zweig's China Tapes

Ellen Zweig In Person

Sunday, December 9, 2007, 7:30 pm — Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

Tonight Ellen Zweig screens five videos from her series, *HEAP*, a collection of video portraits of Western philosophers, writers, artists and scholars who have studied and imagined China. The tapes use documentary and narrative strategies; images pile up to explore the multiple misunderstandings and rare moments of connection between two cultures. With footage shot in China and scenes of an invented China, we travel to a place in-between truth and fiction. At this screening, Zweig will premiere the most recent section of *HEAP*, (*the origin of bitterness*) *Joseph Rock*, which combines Zweig's explorations of China with a meditation on the death of her father. Also screening is *precarious* a video about Zweig's father, who traveled extensively in Asia.

"Zweig's films are dense, proleptically seductive, and... enigmatic. They are unabashedly experimental..." (Thomas Zummer, *Millennium Film Journal* #42, Fall, 2004)

"Ellen Zweig's China tapes are cool, witty plays on Western fascination with an ancient, alien culture. Nothing fits neatly together in these sophisticated, visually beautiful tapes where the world is off-balance and time and place have the clarity of whispers and the permanence of dreams." (Eleanor Antin)

"With (*tongue tongue stone*) *G. W. Leibnitz*, Ellen Zweig uniquely addresses a human sense that is rarely aroused in the film and video mediums—the sense of touch. Here the tongue does double duty as a source of tactile sensation and conveyor of intricate speech. Language remains in the foreground of Zweig's work as she presents insistent interweavings of sound and language as both musical and communicative forms." (Janis Crystal Lipzin)

Ellen Zweig is an artist who works with video, audio, installation and performance. As a video installation, *HEAP* was at DDM Warehouse, Shanghai, China, from April 8-28, 2006. A new installation, *Testing the Waters*, was in New York at the CUE Art Foundation from October 26-December 7, 2006. The video series, *HEAP*, has screened at Millennium Film Archives, New York; and at Electromediascope (The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City). Parts of the series have been shown at international film festivals including: the International Film Festival Rotterdam, Viper Basel, the Thailand New Media Festival, the Athens International Film and Video Festival, the New York Video Festival, Festival Images Contre Nature, Marseilles, and many others. In 2000, Zweig was an Artist in Residence at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where she worked with Internet2 and created a performance on the Web. In her previous installations, Zweig has used optics to create camera obscuras, video projection devices, and miniature projected illusions. In the 1980s, she toured the U.S, Europe and Australia with a series of performances.

a surplus of landscape (2005) by Ellen Zweig; digital video, color, sound, 9 minutes, tape from the maker

A collage of landscapes; an interview with filmmaker, Leslie Thornton, while she is hooked up to a lie detector; a dance in a red dress. Landscapes in places as various as China, France, California. There are so many images of landscape. Why would anyone travel when we can travel in our imaginations? Digital video cut with Super-8 and 16mm film. (Ellen Zweig)

(flick flight flimsy) Ernest Fenollosa (2006) by Ellen Zweig; digital video, color, sound, 10 minutes, tape from the maker

In the parks in China, people practice Tai Chi, English and Chinese. Each in his language space is trying to see into the others' space. Someone is embroidering the Chinese word "wen," which means language or culture. Machines make marks that look like language. A poet and a sinologist talk about Ernest Fenollosa, whose essay, "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry" has been an inspiration to poets and an embarrassment to sinologists. (Ellen Zweig)

(unsolved) Robert van Gulik (2004) by Ellen Zweig; digital video, color, sound, 18 minutes, tape from the maker

Referring to the Dutch diplomat van Gulik's many interests, this video is a mystery story with no resolution— included are the ancient Chinese musical instrument, guqin; the wonderful ape called gibbon; the Judge Dee mysteries intermingled with a Caucasian man who is transformed into the Chinese opera character Judge Bao. Meanwhile, there's something hidden under the tarp on that boat—is it a body? Part of *HEAP*, a collection of experimental portraits of Westerners who have studied, invented, misunderstood and loved China. This one's about an attempt to learn to be Chinese—earnest and eager, failing and sometimes hitting one right note, miscommunicating and translating. Texts spoken in English seem to appear on the screen in Chinese, but the Chinese text tells another story and the mystery remains unsolved. (Ellen Zweig)

(tongue tongue stone) G. W. Leibnitz (2003) by Ellen Zweig; digital video, color, sound, 10 minutes, tape from the maker

The viewer follows a trail of associations, encountering Leibnitz through a Deleuzian language of fissures and folds. The camera is close-up, caressing the surfaces of unusual rocks and folds of falling silk. We hear the ringing sounds of sonorous stones. An American man categorizes rocks by tasting them with his tongue. A dog carries a rock in her mouth. Leibnitz is said to have invented binary arithmetic because of a misunderstanding of the I-Ching. He is the philosopher of surfaces and of the penetration of matter, which he divided into "monads" or atoms, each object equivalent to each other object in a world of interconnected depths. (Ellen Zweig)

precarious (2004) by Ellen Zweig; digital video, color, sound, 8 minutes, tape from the maker

precarious is a meditation on moments when life teeters on a cliff, when memories of the unstable world enter the safe suburban kitchen. A series of interviews with my father, acrobats at the circus, a car on fire in the parking lot outside my apartment; nothing is ever safe enough from the possibility of falling. Re-photographed Super-8 film cut with digital video. (Ellen Zweig)

(the origin of bitterness) Joseph Rock (2007) by Ellen Zweig; digital video, color, sound, 17 minutes, tape from the maker

In order to mourn her father's passing, Zweig goes to Southwest China to follow the trail of Joseph Rock, a botanist and an expert on Naxi shamanic writing. Grahame Weinbren recites a Naxi book of the dead, Zweig interviews an old man who knew Joseph Rock, Z'EV plays a drum, and everywhere she looks, Zweig sees her father's hat. (Ellen Zweig)