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Diaspora as Relational Assemblage

As a researcher who grew up in Mainland China, I did not come to the question of the Chinese diaspora through grand narratives of nationalism or sweeping cultural frameworks found in stories of tragedy. What first drew me in was far more accidental and almost imperceptible: a brief moment in a conversation when I suddenly realized who I am and who they are, and the fact that our separations and proximities were not predetermined. Instead, these were the outcome of contingencies, of currents larger than any one life, drifting histories and uneven inheritances. Thus, diaspora, for me, began not as a scholarly concept but as a sensation; the quiet recognition that the places where we end up are shaped less by intention than by circumstances.

It was within this small crack of awareness that I began paying closer attention to artists like Shen Xin and Yasmine Anlan Huang, two “diasporic” artists living in the UK. In their practices, I sensed a similar negotiation: a way of assembling the self from fragments of experience, of responding to something deeper than identity but forms of belonging that resist stabilization. This text emerges from that intimate starting point.

Rather than beginning with categories or theoretical maps, I am tracing the partial, shifting space between selfhood and world, and examine how these artists move through that space, both resisting and recomposing. Through their encounters with institutions and

Shen Xin, *bearing fruit of fondness, Grounds of Coherence #2*, 2025, black-and-white single-channel video installation, 16mm film hand processed with cotoneaster transferred to 4K, 5 mins., 40 secs, installation view, Highland Embassy, Collective, Edinburgh. Photo: Eoin Carey. Courtesy of the artist.

their own practices of world-making, they offer a different way of understanding the meaning of “Chineseness” elsewhere; that is, not a fixed identity but an assemblage of relations.

To use Shen Xin’s words, the very “definition of category” in identity is always “full of holes.” As they explained to me:

I think it’s really important not to become complicit in any cultural identity we relate to, or to let your perception be dulled by it. Identity does not have the inherent nature of something permanent or solid. It is not solid. It comes together out of different walks of life, different habits, different forms of perception. It’s very difficult to say, “I belong to that identity,” or “I can identify with it.”

Growing up in Chengdu, Sichuan, and ending up in the UK and Minnesota, Shen Xin embodies this unsettledness. Their own migratory path becomes part of the perceptual ground from which such reflections emerge. Different geographies shape Shen Xin’s relations and perceptions. They try to understand the limitations, constraints, and capacities of each place in relation to their life and work; community differences, degrees of openness, or unfamiliarity—all of which require adjustments in expectations, habits, and ways of engaging.

Shen Xin at Isle of Skye. Photo: Geoffrey Van.



For Shen Xin, moving to London had a lot to do with why they began making films:

I became very aware of myself as an image. I was visibly queer—I had a shaved hairstyle and an androgynous appearance. As an Asian person, this confused people even more. I received a lot of stares and curiosity. In London, the intensity of being looked at was new. I started thinking about perception: being seen as an image, perceiving others as images, this fixation that arises because something

appears to be one way. Instinctively, I began filming what was immediately around me to process that experience.



What stayed with me was a minor rupture; Shen Xin's description of arriving in London and suddenly becoming "an image." The stares and the misrecognitions around their queer presentation; these were the perceptual grounds from

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which their filmmaking emerged. Rather than an identity category, this was a condition of being seen and mis-seen, one that reorganized her relationship to others and to herself. It marked the moment where perception became a methodology.

Under different circumstances, Yasmine Anlan Huang also has turned to moving images, not as a tool of identity-making, but as a mechanism of perceptual escape—a way to reassert control over the terms of seeing and being seen.

Before Yasmine Anlan Huang began studying film, when she moved from Guangzhou to Hong Kong in 2014, she actually loved literature more than anything—novels, poetry, essays.

"I actually used to quite dislike cinema," she conveyed to me. "I hated the feeling of being forced to follow the director's timing. In a film, one minute of narrative might take twenty minutes of screen time; as a reader I could finish that in a minute. I felt my autonomy was taken away. Now that I'm the one making the films, the power dynamic changes and it feels . . . fun, honestly."



Yasmine Anlan Huang, still from *dear velocity*, 2024, single-channel video, full HD and found footage, colour, stereo, 11 mins., 24 secs. Courtesy of the artist.

Yasmine Anlan Huang thinks that a lot of what her films are doing could be done in writing, but the pace would be entirely different. Text requires her to explain too much. Images allow for abstraction, symbols, and atmospheres that let the audience feel a complex emotional state without spelling everything out. *Dear velocity* is a good example: the text in the film is very abstract. It is not literally about

Yasmine Anlan Huang, still from *dear velocity*, 2024, single-channel video, full HD and found footage, colour, stereo, 11 mins., 24 secs. Courtesy of the artist.



the demolition of a space-themed park; instead, viewers are exposed to themes hinting at the contemporary economy and the weakening of civic consciousness after the 2013 incident of *Southern Weekly's* New Year greeting being changed without notice by the government's propaganda ministry—things that cannot be openly stated in Chinese public culture otherwise. The moving image allows these fragments to ferment in an abstract way. What you receive is not just information or plot, but a kind of spiritual or affective experience. That is where, for her, the moving image has an advantage over writing.

In Yasmine Anlan Huang's work, she thought a lot about cross-cultural dialogue and what she once called the “maximum common denominator” of human feeling:

Yasmine Anlan Huang, still from *Crescendo*, 2024, single-channel video, Super 8mm film transferred to full HD, colour, stereo, 14 mins., 4 secs. Courtesy of the artist.



For example, *Crescendo* was a very important work to me. The main performer wasn't a professional actress but someone I met during a residency. We had similar concerns, aesthetics, even ways of dressing. She felt like an “American version” of me. The film ended up touching people very widely—across cultures and generations. Many responded to its treatment of anxiety of loss, loneliness, and the awkwardness of speaking in a second language.

Therefore, for Yasmine Anlan Huang, “cross-cultural” does not just mean geography. It is also about people who have lived in different

countries versus those who haven't, or those deeply embedded in the logistics of everyday survival versus those who float between cities. That, too, is a kind of "culture."



Yasmine Anlan Huang, still from *Crescendo*, 2024, single-channel video, Super 8mm film transferred to full HD, colour, stereo, 14 mins., 4 secs. Courtesy of the artist.

"So instead of thinking about 'being understood' in a literal, linguistic way, I try to find these deeper correspondences—where someone in a completely different context still recognizes a feeling," she explained.

After she settled between London and New York in 2022, Yasmine Anlan Huang's attempt to make London attachable takes the form of curating in her now-and-then home. Displacement is, for her, always about renting houses in different places. She initiated the *Keepsake Project* in a new house she had not yet moved into, embedding diasporic stories and artworks within classical English decor in a London setting. In the exhibition, this was described as a process of "homing" along the route of diaspora.

Pushing this further, she embeds the concept of diaspora within herself in a different way:

I'm trying to treat the term "diaspora" with care, but also with more openness. I don't want to gatekeep it for myself or others, especially knowing that many queer people, for example, have to move in order to continue their lives and art. And also these silent emotions fill me up, so diaspora is embedded in me.

Both artists articulate diasporic subjectivity through experience; nevertheless, experience alone does not explain how they navigate visibility in global circuits. As well, the diasporic condition is never only experiential. It is also shaped by the recognition regimes of global contemporary art as subtle expectations, institutional framings, and curatorial language that render "Chineseness" legible in the first place. Within these systems, identity often circulates as a resource—something that can be affirmed depending on what visibility or support becomes possible.

What I call the "strategic affirmation of identity" describes this negotiation. Artists may reject essentialist definitions of "Chinese," yet

Shen Xin, still from *bearing fruit of fondness*, *Grounds of Coherence #2*, 2025, black-and-white single-channel video installation, 16mm film hand processed with cotoneaster transferred to 4K, 5 mins., 40 secs. Courtesy of the artist.



still inhabit the category tactically when it opens access to solidarity, or simply the conditions for making work. In practice, this strategy is rarely declarative. It is a quiet calibration between refusing fixity and navigating the infrastructures that nonetheless demand a label.

I asked Yasmine Anlan Huang, “Can the label of ‘diasporic Chinese artist in London’ define you simply?” She said, “As long as my work gets better circulation and resources for my next work, I don’t care about generalization,” a pragmatism that reflects how artists navigate visibility in global circuits. “I won’t label myself that way, but I won’t fight it either.”

Together, these encounters show how artists both mobilize the diasporic tag strategically in institutional settings and refuse its ontological closure. This shift from categorical identity to relational assemblage reframes how we understand displacement and belonging in the contemporary art infrastructure.

Shen Xin moved to the Isle of Skye in 2023. There, they have grown their *bearing fruits of fondness* (2025). They write:

One holds awareness of what’s given an image a presence is at once the effect of one’s own migratory movements. And when place is home un-reified, to maintain love is to co-create, through embodied mother-child patterns, the language that readies sense and volition in a practiced connectedness that is also a form of clarity.

In Yasmine Anlan Huang’s personal writing, she recorded a dream that had accompanied her since adolescence:

“She claims her presence spans every corner of the world—a being of all places, and of all people.”

Perhaps this is what diasporic practice ultimately offers: neither a category nor an essence, but a clarity made through connection, and a language continually co-created with the places and people who hold us.