Screening Room no. 7: *Sky Empty*

A conversation between Serena Huang and Residency 11:11 facilitators Alex Bell and Giulia Shah

Giulia Shah
Hi, Serena. It's really nice to have you for our online screening room in September with your film Sky Empty. Nice to have you.

Alex Bell
Thanks for joining us.

Serena Huang
Thanks for having me.

Giulia Shah
Can you just tell us a bit about yourself and your work?

Serena Huang
So I graduated from RCA 2020 When the pandemic first started and before that I did my BA at Chelsea College of Arts, where I'm teaching now, which is a good round up.

So about my practice, I work with everything except for painting, that's how I always start my intro. I work with installation, sculpture videos and books, I guess, but only as a thing not as a writer. I work around the structure of theatre, kind of thinking through front stage, backstage, what is staged? And who gets to be on the front stage or who gets to choose what is on the front of stage. And also, I like thinking around performativity in objects a lot. If you think of the stage with a mise en scène as performing without the performers, what kind of story can they tell. So all that kind of thinking informs how I approach my work, I guess.

Alex Bell

To talk a bit about Sky Empty as well the film that we are screening. I guess, if you could tell us a little bit about where that film originated from in its conception or how the film came to be?

Serena Huang
So I first started thinking about it when our teaching, towards the end of my MA, had to be moved online. Everything was taught through Zoom and we had loads of zoom meetings, like everyone else might have at that time. It was interesting in a way that you are able to see everyone on the screen at the same time without them necessarily knowing that you're staring at them. And I did that a lot and screenshot a lot of people as well, without them knowing. And at that time I was planning a piece for my degree show that didn't happen in the end. But that piece in my head was something like a physical set of an experimental narration. And yeah, I was planning that. But then within that there was the idea of experimental storytelling and fragmented narratives and objects, scenes, and all of that. That I wanted to test out. So then I thought Zoom could be a nice medium to do it in. I don't know if I would have done it without the pandemic. So that being part of our life at that time was quite apt, because I look at the mundane a lot. So what we see is familiar, so the pandemic being a situation it makes the Zoom platform become the mundane in a way. So then I had a reason to use it, or twist it in a way that it's not used in a regular way. So that's how it kind of started and everything else I just built after. The play itself was completely different from how I imagined it would be anyway.

Alex Bell
Yeah, I was gonna ask you a bit about what it was like using zoom as a theatre space. And if it was this kind of mundane, everyday life, or if it was fun and experimental? Because then there's also different windows and you can share the viewers screen and there's like funny tricks and a chat version. So I guess there's like different stages that you can explore.

Serena Huang

Yeah, as well as thinking about how everything's sits or I'd say like your name tag there. It's your name tag, but then in the Zoom play it was used as something else to prompt a sentence with words. So, also, mainly thinking about how characters can be represented because as you can probably see there is no one character in its actual form in the play. It was either represented through sound, or voice, or the chat box. So the chat box was a way for me to think about, it indicates someone behind the actual laptop, because someone is typing the word. And it also represents the character without showing the character. Because I don't think there's a best way for me to portray a proton in a visual form. That's why I use the chat box to represent the proton. So yeah, that was me and my friend typing while people were watching, just on our phone.

Giulia Shah
The chat box was super interesting also, because you talk about what is stage and what is not stage sort of thing. And the chat box felt very much like a monologue that was pre scripted and because it happened sort of halfway through the film, It kind of brings you back to the understanding that it is actually directed, you know, there is a sort of a human presence. You're not sure if it’s really there in the first half.

Serena Huang
You’re trying to say i'm not sure if it's staged or not, like the whole thing becomes, I don't know, if it's an edited video or…

Giulia Shah
Yeah, it's not staged, but it's also like this kind of very, post-human or inhuman, part of the film. Where I'm not even sure if human is present at all. But then when the chat box comes up, it's like, two people having a rather scientific conversation, I guess. So you’re also like in between this sort of fact and fiction thing, and then you think about it there's a conspiracy as well, like this sort of conspiracy, fact staged, not staged, human, not human experience.

Serena Huang

Yeah that’s very much it really. Like the whole reference is around facts, science, conspiracy, at the same time, or so called conspiracy, mythology. Yeah, so all those stories, I guess, that was told from different positions, different privilege. Who gets taken seriously and who gets to be part of that story also? My research involves pretty much around bringing mythical stories say like, the tree in Sky Empty, I don't know if you looked at the intro, but that tree I was talking about, called Jian-Mu and it’s a tree recorded in this classic of mountain and sea. The Chinese named Shan-Hai Jing and it's basically an Atlas of a mythical landscape. They call it mythical landscape, but they then like I mean, scientists, anthropologists, people who do like ongoing research about that book did find animals or landscape or mountains that kind of match their geographical location and description around it. So say like, if you imagine how we describe a peacock in 1000 years time, when it's extinct, it will sound a bit like ‘Oh, does that even exist?’ Kind of thing. So, yeah, that tree was based on that book, but it also refers to the tree of life, and a lot of other cultural references or mythical references in other cultures. That's why I chose it as a starting point and the whole story just kind of evolved around that tree. And the way I made that tree, as you can see in the website, how it documents the… well the references around them and like some image. The description of the tree in that book, is basically describing the leaves of that tree as being like a net and it is so not clear. It can be so ambiguous and you understand it in so many ways. So how I took it was the leaf itself being like a net, and the colour of it, it refers to all those colours, it's the colours called sing and it's somewhere between green and blue. And it covers a whole wide range of colour. I didn’t know which one to choose, so I used all of the colour in threads and kind of weaved them together as the leaf. So there's a way of also representing, how you represent story, how a story can be understood and that's kind of how history gets passed on in a way that is mainstream or like just anecdotes, stories. Because when one person passes it to the next, it's all either exaggerated or missed something or something's changed that it's never exactly the same. And it was used in Han Dynasty. So whoever writes a history book, they follow the taste of the Emperor, like what kind of ideology they follow. So then it affects what is seemed to be right or wrong in the book.

Alex Bell
I find it really interesting that you include this kind of level of depth of talking about the references in your film, which I think is really like special. And I wonder how do you navigate kind of showing your film without perhaps having the space to like show those footnotes? Do you have, like certain techniques that you use, to like, have something to go alongside it? Or have the information accessible somewhere else? And as a filmmaker, and as an artist how do you navigate that space of how much you give and how much you don't give? Because that's also part of this storytelling narration as well, and who gets to say, what is what?

Serena Huang
Yeah, I've been thinking about actually, since Sky Empty, like, seriously thinking about how do I offer my audience another layer of understanding in my work, and it's in a way pedagogical, because it pulls references from books or anecdotes, or just research basically. And how knowledge can be put together in a different form, as well, and you can connect them. So the first thing I did was use the website, because it was already used to document my work in a way that they are co related. And you can jump from one to another if they're related, with hyperlink. Yeah, and then I kind of carry that on to the next piece, which was when ‘Sky Empty’ was in a physical space. But it's not a complete remediation of the work. It was, say, a continuation of the narrative or it's just in the same space that ‘Sky Empty’ exists in basically, but I'll talk about that piece a bit later. But that physical work will then unfold, like the research behind it will unfold in the next zoom play, which is coming in a month, I hope, or two. So, yeah it could have been sooner, it got delayed. In *that* Zoom play I did think about research and references more seriously, as in like, how do I bring them more to the front rather than having to unfold it after? I don't know, I don't know if I have quite worked it out yet. But we'll see then.

Alex Bell
The interlinked nature of it also makes sense with how you've been, kind of, working already. Because you were talking about your website with

everything being hyperlinked and joined up. But it's also how you use like props within the films as well like things coming back and having different lives and everything's kind of this network, like the leaf, you know, this web and then you're also referencing networks and the tree and just kind of interconnectedness. So on many different levels the web seems to be…

Serena Huang
I actually didn't think about that, thanks, the leaf and the net but yeah. I guess it…

Giulia Shah
It feels like a web already just in itself.

Alex Bell
Talking about channels, I was kind of really interested in having the four different windows, spaces within the film, and then the play on the screen. So it's kind of these different portals. And I was very interested in so you say something to describe the film. So I'm just gonna quote this 'to a digital theatre created during the current climate, the windows of zoom, are transformed into an entity of the digital stage where the light is on live streaming, the live streams of the Chronicle. The camouflage of the auditorium is darkness.' And that last bit I was really interested in, because it made me think, or question, are actually some of the windows for viewers? And are they these, like, different spaces of people viewing from within? But then everyone's watching from the outside, watching the screen? And then yeah, I was wondering if you had any thoughts about that? Or if you've been playing any games with it?

Serena Huang
You mean, the last sentence? Yeah. It was, you can understand it in so many ways. So like, if you sitting in a theatre, where audience is, the auditoriums dark. So when the light is shining on stage, the actors, the performers can barely see the auditorium. But in this context of thinking, so like, the auditorium would be behind your screen, and the screen when it's not bright, it's dark. And it's like, kind of referencing the shape of the screen in a way, or the yeah, how the screen looks. But that whole

description was written to kind of confuse people in a way. So like, you don't know whether it's really a play or not.

Alex Bell
I'm kind of skirting around that question anyway. Because I think I don't really want to know the answer. Because it is like one of my main questions, but I kind of liked that I don't really know how, like, live it was. I was gonna ask you something about the live nature of it anyway, maybe this is it, like touching upon it, like the slipperiness of it.

Serena Huang
So yeah, it was shown in Bloomberg New Contemporaries on a screen. When it was shown, that was the first time it was being shown in real life. And it's my first time seeing it on a TV screen. Not a laptop, but on a white wall space. It was really weird that I didn't like it at all, sorry, what I saw. But I guess that's because it lost it's liveness. I don't like every time when it's shown on a TV or something, or externally or afterwards, actually. I just call it the recording of the play I'd never say it's the play itself. Because did you actually see the actual play? There was a bit before, that it wasn't on the website, but if anyone goes to the actual, the premiere, there was a waiting room before the play started. So that was also a way to kind of create a liveness in a way, that there's a countdown. And when you see that countdown, you know someone else is sitting on the front of their screen, watching that count, looking at that countdown. And when you're watching the play, someone else is watching at the same time. So there's this liveness in your head that potentially exists. And Zoom offers that imagination, it's not imagination its real, but like you don't see other people with you. Unless you're sitting with a with your friend or something next to you. But yeah, it's really private, a private collectiveness.

Alex Bell
That's really nice. It makes a lot of sense. Because also, why would you, like, to watch a film, why would you go on Zoom to watch a film by yourself? And then if you were going to do that, that would be like a

collective experience, you'd be doing it because you want to be doing it with other people. So I can fully kind of understand why you're saying that. But maybe that's the thing is like, the laptop screen is also like a prop. That's kind of an extension of the play that you're making. You know, it has to be coming through this prop and that's part of the experience as well.

Serena Huang
Yeah but at the same time, if you look at your screen like right now, you're looking at this zoom window and then probably in your background, you have this note about the interview. And then you have this folder behind these two windows all over your desktop. They're in a way, like a stage already and if you move those things around, and you really like, consider what they are, they can tell the story also.

Alex Bell
Absolutely. I've never thought so much about my desktop and now I'm embarrassed about it.

Giulia Shah
Something I noticed, also, in some previous work I'd seen of yours. I don't know if this is important at all, but it's just something that I noticed, is that you often involve your family members or close friends or like, yeah, close relations in your work.

Serena Huang
Yeah, in a way, but it's out of convenience, really. For family especially, sorry. It's when you have very talented family members, have to say that sorry, you want to collaborate as well. If you're collaborating with someone anyways, why don't you collaborate with someone in your family? You don't know what will come up. So I asked my brother to kind of digitise a book for me in a song, not a song, a sound piece for 40 minutes, 40 seconds. And I guess, with family, I could just communicate in a more personal way and explain to them more personally. So it's not always going right, for example. Like, he complains about helping me too much so I'm not getting so much help from him now. But then I started to, say in 'Sky Empty', I was working with my flatmates and my friends

because it's pandemic. And not many, just, I couldn't get to anywhere, really, except for asking my flatmate if they want to do some Voice Over and I cooked them dinner as an exchange. That was quite fun, though, because they had nothing to do with art, but they really enjoyed it. I think you were talking about the family workshop I did before with my family that was mainly to get them to kind of understand a bit what I'm doing. At the same time still, a lot of, I don't know if I say Asian family or Chinese family, like my family, they still don't quite understand what art or contemporary art is. So I guess that's just to give them an idea.

Alex Bell
That's quite, I guess it's nice for you it sounds like as a way to just, it's like an excuse to connect with your family, just share a part of yourself with them right? But also, you know, you get the fun of untrained actors.

Giulia Shah
I also think these untrained actors, I think this is really interesting, where you're talking about this personal relationship that you have with the actors between like for example that you're working with. But also in my head, I imagine it also allows for much more sort of experimentation and not knowing. A trained actor that works with the director, it's all about like, what you want from each other, and how you can reach that sort of outcome together, right? I'm not an actor or a director, but you know, there is a sort of outcome, a product sort of outcome, that they want to reach together. And that's why they work with each other right? That's why certain directors will pick certain actors. But working with non actors also creates this sort of not knowing and more experimental approach and also then how you talk about like, kind of non conventional and experimental narrative. Like I can imagine that also just happens automatically when working with untrained actors or people that are not trained in sort of theatre or screenplay writing. Where there are all these rules that kind of help to create a story or a narrative that is readable in accord of sort of linear sense. But you'll really easily, kind of, navigate away from that when you're even trying to do that but you don't have like the tools to do that, if that makes sense.

Serena Huang

Actually, I started working with a professional voiceover actress and she was in ‘Sky Empty’ the monologue at the end is by Reyna Amaya**,** she was a professional actress. And it's just, it is quite different, as in working with a non professional and a professional you expect something really different from them. And I kind of learned, I'm still learning, how to work with that. So if say like my budgets don’t allow me to work with professional actors or actresses all the time, I can kind of divide that. So say like, space or monologue style-ups that require a certain level of conveying or emotion, say it has to do a particular thing, then, I guess professional actors would be the best. But say like, there was a really casual scene in the beginning, it was kind of the backstage, or no, it was a rehearsing studio, in ‘Sky Empty’. And those are all professional actors. And it doesn't feel so ‘acty’ you know. I mean, because there was, I have tried some before with professional actors, and it comes out just a bit too much, sometimes.

Giulia Shah
Also, the non actor, an actor also makes sense in his kind of fiction and nonfiction and what is staged and what is not staged? And, like, yeah, just makes sense.

Serena Huang
Yeah, yeah. Actually, something just came up in my head that I was gonna talk about. That show related to ‘Sky Empty’ before, but I didn't finish. So I was thinking of how to physicalise the work in a way to not just remake the scene from the play, or just put up the props from the play, but kind of drag them out into a larger narrative in a way. So made a grid of tiles with nine, nine black tiles, those nine tiles represent the zoom window, so two of them have the image of Zoom printed on it. I think at that time, I was thinking a lot around dimension, as you mentioned earlier, the dimensions in zoom, and how to connect that digital dimension with the physical one. And then now bringing the physical dimension back to the digital one. Because I was thinking about reflections a lot like on windows, so physical windows, or like, even digital windows. Metaphorically, how the reflection itself is combining the dimension. That show’s actually a 25 minute experience of the space. So it's a 25 minute performative piece, accompanied by a soundtrack

also with, like, the same narrators and the digital audio book that I was talking about earlier, that I made with my brother.

Alex Bell
Amazing. Well, um, thanks again for your time. And thank you for sharing the film with us. We're really excited to be sharing it on the Screening Room for a whole month. It's so nice, we can all watch it. Really excited as well, to see the next part.

Serena Huang
Yeah, thank you. And thank you for having me. Actually, I was gonna say I realised that I haven't had this conversation after I made the play, that I've done talks but conversation is nice. I really enjoyed it. Thank you.

Giulia Shah
Thanks.