

03

Professor Feature

Research, Curate, Representation: Interview with Prof. Stephanie DeBoer

interview /Alison & Nancy text /Alison photo /Charlie



Hong Kong has a cityscape full of illumination from various sources, ranging from LED screens, nightly projection shows, to neon signs. As the city develops, the media and forms of illumination vary along. Some find their ways to flood every corner, while some fade away from the facade. As an expert in media infrastructure, Profes-

sor Stephanie DeBoer has been contributing to the research in the comparative studies of urban screens. In her recent project, she studies the public screens in Hong Kong and Shanghai, comparing their relationship with the cities' histories, politics, and their people. This academic year, she is residing at CUHK as a visiting scholar.

Before she got into media studies, DeBoer studied Comparative Literature in the US, where she was introduced to Chinese and Asian cinema. She went on to study film and media academically, and published her first book *Co-Producing Asia, Locating Japanese-Chinese Film in Media*, in which she delved into the historical problems behind negotiations of the co-productions, and their globalised relationship in the post-war to contemporary period.

This paved the way for DeBoer's research direction. A strong background in the comparative perspective led her to study multi-regional urban spaces relatively, "I am really interested in this particularity of one city versus another, the ways in which urban screens operate, and people operate relative to them. And various stakeholders, from the political to the urban planner to the artist, to the advertiser, all these different negotiations that take place across these screens."

In 2018, DeBoer arranged a field trip for her students in Indiana University to Hong Kong, Guangzhou and Shanghai. Other than taking the opportunity to observe public screen cultures in these cities, they also visited various stakeholders including out-of-home advertisers, urban planning technologists, LED screen manufacturers, LED designers, media artists and tourists, all taking a different part in the matter of public screens and spaces. It is partly reflective of how DeBoer conducts her research. Other than conducting archival and periodical research to lay down the historical groundwork, DeBoer's research also relies on communica-



tion quite heavily. She first began talking to stakeholders during her sabbatical in Shanghai during 2015, where her research really kicked-off. "Just seeing all of that helps me understand the larger ecology of screens." She continued to communicate with various stakeholders throughout the years, until the pandemic put a pause to global transportation, and set a barrier to her plans. This contributed to her decision to come to CUHK as a visiting scholar.

"There are a lot of reasons why I came, one of them is that I need durational time here to think about this project; during COVID I was far away from here, I was doing other things - administrative things at the university, and that took my attention away from it. So being here for a more extended period, as opposed to just coming in here occasionally, it's re-



"On Waiting with Screens in Transit", on display at the Tongji University College of Design and Innovation from May 6-17, 2019.

ally important to me. And **it's important to have conversations with people, to share my work with people.**"

In addition to her own project, DeBoer is often looking to collaborate with people, old and new. She often shifts between research and curatorial work, as she enjoys creating opportunities with media artists and technologists to give new meaning to screens. For large public screens, their predominant use is advertising, public service announcements, and sometimes propaganda. "But there are moments when art gets put on these screens. And I find those moments very interesting because those are the moments when you can see what else this screen could be. And maybe it's not only about being as bright and colourful as it can be to gain your attention. Maybe it's about a slower pace. Maybe it's bringing

a different temporality into the public space. Maybe it's giving you a moment to contemplate." During July 2019, DeBoer and her research-based art trio, Screens Collective,¹ brought the concept to life with an exhibition, "On Waiting with Screens in Transit"² to Tongji University.

For the first semester, DeBoer taught a course on "Critical Media Infrastructures." "**I really enjoy the conversations that I'm having with the students, and it is a framework that has helped me to think about screens, so it has helped me to think about my own project.** I've benefited from teaching it, I've really benefited from the conversations and the projects and ideas that students bring to the topic." Whether it's research or curatorial work, it is exciting to see how DeBoer's time in Hong Kong will affect the direction of her future projects.

¹ Screens Collective was established in Shanghai in December 2015, which is a research-based arts collective that addresses fundamental questions concerning the potential of urban screens as sites of public contact.

² The exhibition makes visible and known the movements, sensations, and temporalities that craft our contemporary moments of waiting. As screens of all sizes are present in our spaces of transit, how do we wait with (and without) screens?



香港中文大學
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

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