

# Private Investigations

by Tasha Haines

*Private Investigations* stages two quests that intersect synchronically while remaining significantly personal and concurrent. Each is a distillation of an investigative journey that makes self-reflexive enquiries into issues of disenfranchisement, privacy, surveillance, absence, loss, cultural vitality, failure, and the collective effect of these on the artistic process.

For each artist, the quest includes an exploration of modes of embodiment within a 'collaboratively private' practice; one contingent upon people, behaviour, and the given cultural vernacular.

In Mike Ting's work, the Internet, mobile communications, and translation are the site of connectivity and difference, while Sandy Gibbs' project is a partial excavation of things 'hidden' in the former East Germany and the subsequent absences thereof. For both artists, the translator or private investigator becomes a 'ghostly' intermediary that provides a fertile ground within the creative process by becoming a human liminality into which information is given but not reliably re-produced (in Ting's case), and who 'disappears' entirely in the case of Gibbs' private investigator, and in a manner befitting the Stasi-era allusions she wittily exploits.

Both artists work with the notion, subtly or overtly, of the 'failed' nation state; each exploring how cultural and political impulses move out concentrically from corporate ideology and become personal.

Mike Ting, a New Zealand-born-and-raised artist of Chinese descent, made a journey to Taipei in Taiwan (in The Republic of China) assisted by interpreter Michelle to make video interviews of other Mike Tings about *being Mike Ting*.

This also becomes an exploration of being Taiwanese. Taiwan is recognised by the UN as a territory within China, but not as an independent state. The aspect of national and cultural disenfranchisement threads subtly throughout the interviews; as does the notion of 'filial piety', the Confucian value of respect for elders, which is deeply embedded in Chinese and Taiwanese culture. To varying degrees, each Mike Ting makes his own defense of family in the broader sense including workplace, religion, ethnicity, and other affiliations.

It becomes apparent that the hybridly western-eastern name 'Mike Ting' holds the key to connectivity and difference, becoming suggestive of opportunity and reciprocity at the cultural overlap. For example, 'Ting' is the "second character in the word 'pudding' in Chinese" announces 'theology Mike', while the name

'Mike' is often fairly randomly applied, says Mike from Promise Technology, because, he says, Chinese people change their English name as often as they like. The name takes on a generic quality while simultaneously developing a community within itself.

Ting's choice of questions and editing preferences reveals a quest to find community via these other 'selves'; these Mike Tings whose lives are parallel to his own.

Ting employed interpreter Michelle to assist him with one of the Mike Tings in Taipei and via Skype with Mike Ting in the Philippines (originally from Taipei). He was constricted in the video and audio recordings by occasional failing technology and by his own inability to speak Mandarin, and also inevitably by the subjectivity of the interpreter, a third party 'voice' that becomes 'visible' by virtue of her particular semiotic cast on the language she hears and knows, and the awkwardness of the English she transcribes.

Mike Ting is an earnest twenty-four year old studying to be a Seventh Day Adventist missionary. According to the transcript, 'theology Mike' wants "to go to the places where people suffer to see if god really exists," but he also says variously that he prays and believes in god... This devout young man tells the interpreter that she is "hot" - an awkward moment, which radiates through the remainder of the conversation, highlighting the translator in more ways than one, while making this Mike more accessible.

'Theology Mike' is on a 'mission' to pursue a faith handed down to him in the hope he might make it his own - but that is what I glean after an imperfect translation, and it seems fair to resolve that the process of conversion (translation) and any meaning-making in the space between spikes of clarity, including the place that the artist assumes in that space, becomes important. The idea of a belief system 'handed down' connects to the value of filial piety in its implicit honour of the past including what is handed, and who is handing down. But 'theology Mike's' attitude towards his parents seems more intimate than duty-bound or entirely culturally traditional; he speaks about his alcoholic father and how his family history reveals the 'love of god' in so far as his mother is "a great (Christian) woman" for her duty and care to her husband in hard times, and that his father was 'transformed' by god. One wonders whether perhaps 'theology Mike' being a 'millennial' has a more western approach to the nuclear family, and a sense of personal liberty about expressing beliefs.

Mike Ting works for HTC (electronics) in Taipei. This interview is primarily around the topic of 'HTC Mike's' attitude to family and child rearing. The conversation is relatively three-way, with the interpreter occasionally contributing her point of view and the artist engaging easily with the subject. 'HTC Mike' outlines his ethic of control; "oriental parents only want their children to obey rules," he says. According to him there is a difference between the eastern and western mindset as encouraged in children: "Western is more about freedom on minds [...] east is more freedom on behaviours," he says (verbatim), and while it is difficult to glean the translated detail of his point of view, the gist is that there is an innate difference between east and west in terms of attitudes around control and obedience.

Mike Ting works for Promise Technology in Taipei, he speaks good English with no need for an interpreter, and the interviewer-interviewee dialogue is immediate and unconstrained. This interview, more than any other, collapses the geo-cultural divide and the two Mike Tings talk unfettered by language barriers. It becomes apparent that 'Promise Mike' holds what he believes to be a typical Chinese work ethic with core values of "integrity, piety, and loyalty". The piety here has little or nothing to do with religion despite Mike being surrounded in his family by people of faith. The attribute of (Chinese) filial piety operates within his family but more pertinently here towards his employer and his cautiously undisclosed (but hinted at) politics. Like the other two Mikes, this Mike places a high value on hierarchy and respect in all settings. He professes an uneasy relationship with democracy, saying, "democracy makes it difficult in Taiwan," and "unregulated freedom is chaos." 'Promise Mike' is visibly awkward discussing politics and religion, two subjects with an uneasy history in Taiwan and China where historically there is a high value on obedience.

Each Mike Ting appears habituated (on a sliding scale) to live according to cultural traditions, however a certain tension may be gleaned from each interview where attitudes of respect for elders, employers, and/or political parties tend towards an unmediated obedience tinged with fear, thus throwing the emphasis back on the difference between east and west.

Mike Ting artist poses a full raft of questions about the culturally and geographically divided self in this work, and tacitly becomes one of the Mike Ting subjects.

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In *Private Investigations*, Sandy Gibbs' work is an exemplification of psychic and biopolitical 'states of exception' such as the former East German Stasi, the Olympic Games, and importantly and increasingly the state of failure - each a cloistered regime with difficult-to-obtain standards - yes, even failure. Her project becomes an exploration of failure's ontological parts towards a re-valuation of failure. Gibbs' process of perpetual re-valuation enables failure to split away from shame and take on a constructive role.

Agamben (2005) shows how Nazi Germany (and by extension Trump's America) becomes a 'state of exception' construed to justify tyrannical behaviours based on a belief in the existence of human contaminants. Meanwhile, 'failure' as enacted by Gibbs in *Private Investigations* does not necessitate subjugation or exclusion, but becomes instead an alternate and borderless state of exception devoid of moral or hierarchical overlay, derived as it is most often by chance or because of deficit or subliminal choice. Failure becomes heterotopic here, alleviating the artist from, and acclimatising her to the fraught condition of being human.

Gibbs' project performs a distillation of her journey to East Germany in search of two of the competitors from the 1968 Mexico Olympics women's 400 metres individual medley final - a fragment of Gibbs' larger PhD project which initially proposed to restage the Olympic event with the original eight competitors, but which has been stymied by a series of setbacks. Gibbs' work in East Germany is a constituent part of a quest, one that has given her cause for constant re-analysis to the extent that re-analysis and serial 'failings' became central to the project, symbiotically 'pulling her in' to become the subject's performance and the performance's subject.

Gibbs' endeavour to find the swimmers and restage the swimming event came out of her own long-held desire to be an Olympic swimmer. Her project is in part, a making-real of what was a fantasy; she shows how the 'real' reveals human error and failure while erroneous humans continue to return to pragmatic fantasy to rescue failure from despair.

The artist's process has involved managing, exploring, and using the various effects of failure such as her 'failure' to have a constructive encounter with her childhood hero, Tui Shipston (New Zealand's seventh place-getter in the aforementioned Olympic event) after which she 'cast her net wider' in pursuit of the two swimmers from the former East Germany. Searching on the Internet was eventually deemed fruitless, so Gibbs hired a private investigator based in Chemnitz where the

two swimmers lived and trained during the 1960s. The private investigator was successful in locating the swimmers, but under German privacy laws was unable to supply Gibbs with their contact details, and the swimmers opted not to contact her. She tracked down the private investigator's office only to find it locked and empty; another failure, and one evoking a darkly comedic synchronicity with the history of surveillance and investigation in the failed Stasi-era East German within which the two East German swimmers had trained.

Faced with these absences and failings, Gibbs travelled to the swimming pool in Chemnitz and swam there in a kind of hypothetical Olympic re-enactment to update the 'story' via an embodiment of not only the two swimmers, but of each of the constituent failures and absences so far, including the absent and 'failed' private investigator (who thanks to his absence, becomes narratively evocative of a Stasi-era spy).

At the Stasi Museum in Berlin, Gibbs saw sinister but amusing photos of Stasi agents incognito, taken from Stasi seminars on disguises. She also saw the instructions given during these seminars, for applying fake facial hair etc. And examples of trophies and inducements awarded to the Stasi's high-performers.

In the video work, *How to Wear a Disguise*, Gibbs performs a dossier of what could be late 1960s to 1970s Stasi disguises; this becomes a signifier for the absent and failed private investigator she employed but never met. The video sequence constructs the space between the subject and object; the surveyor and the surveyed, in so far as Gibbs embodies her subjects here, making herself increasingly the site of subjectivity and fantasy. And via this embodiment, the territory of 'failure' extends by degrees to the aging body; that of the artist as well the Olympic swimmers she 'failed' to collaborate with.

Much could be said about failure in regards to surveilling, the surveyor, and the surveyed, and how surveillance enacts abuse and capture while inferring safety and control. Much could also be said about the space between subjectivity and objectivity in surveillance, and the extent to which compliance becomes a paradigm.

It is frightening to consider the extent to which surveillance occurs, given what has been gleaned about the fluid approach to law, ethics, and truth that may have operated in a 'dark' state of exception like the former East German regime - but surveillance is big business today, it is high-tech, and endemic within contemporary public and 'private' settings.

Gibbs' work in *Private Investigations* becomes an example of the potential richness of possibility within a process-led practice that performs failure in self-reflexive embodiments. It explores how practice might engage with the failed state or a state of failure, and how absence attaches to failure attaches to self-surveillance.

The quests of Mike Ting to Taiwan, and Sandy Gibbs to East Germany both confront the challenge of locating and being in other places with other selves, even absent selves. Each artist encounters setbacks and constant re-adjustments that necessitate an embrace of the process as they allow themselves, their subjects, their materials, and their time, to become the collective substance of their *Private Investigations*.