Talk Show

A discussion of the development of video art in Taiwan from the personal perspectives of Wang Jun-jieh 王俊傑 (artist), Yuan Goang-ming 袁廣鳴 (artist) and Professor Su Shou-cheng 蘇守政 (Professor at the National Institute of the Arts in Taiwan and Director of the Technological Art Centre at NIA), in conversation with Shen Yi-ning 沈怡寧.

Question: How does one enter the world of video art? Would you describe the exhibitions or individual artists that influenced you at this time?

Wang Jun-jieh: My interest in images was initiated during my senior high school days. I spent many hours watching films, particularly European ones of the 1960s. This influenced me and created a strong desire to evolve into work in this area. I produced my first video in 1984. After having been awarded the "Promising Newcomer Award" by Hsiung Hsih Art Magazine, one of the judges, Mr Chiang Hsun, invited me to teach at the Yunmen Dance Troupe's summer school. There, I introduced the dancers to a new facet of fine art, and thus began my experimental film work. I combined my previous film techniques into the media of video. Since I already had an interest in drama, this also allowed me the opportunity to combine performing and mixed media arts.

During this period, video art was not being discussed in schools, and my main reservoirs of information came from three sources. First of all, art magazines such as Hsiung-Hsih Art Magazine played an important role. Su Shou-cheng and Lu Ching-fu introduced artists such as Nan Jun Paik who were active and influential in the 1960s. However, these introductions were very general, and video art was only considered another medium for expressing creativity in the avant-garde field.

Secondly, German and American Cultural Centres introduced video art from their own collections, and through their academic exchange activities, video art was promoted.

Finally, Fine Art Museums were only slightly influential, as they tended to be somewhat conservative in their attitude and approach, and rarely promoted new media. The first exhibition that included video was the German Video Art Exhibition, held in the 1980s. A few of the installations

displayed constituted the first official introduction of video art to Taiwan.

Before going overseas in 1989, my video equipment was the ordinary domestic type. When I returned from abroad, I rented a studio and some professional equipment. In both the media and in schools, there was still very little information about video art, and of course we had no Internet at that time. I was attracted by the special effects element of video, to such an extent that I occasionally sidelined the work's content. I felt special effects separated video art from other art media.

Yuan Goang-ming: 1987 was my second year in the art department of university. I was experiencing an enormous creative block and found myself unable to use traditional art media to express my ideas. Fortunately, at that time, I visited the German Video Exhibition at the Fine Art Museum. My art perspective was instantly changed. I was eager to experiment with this new and exciting media. My frustrations with regard to the lack of information about video art were similar to those of Jun-jieh.

Su Shou-cheng: When I went to Japan in 1982, I realised video art already had a history of over ten years there. Japan had been experimenting with computer/video art during the 1960s and 1970s, and with the backing from their Cultural Ministry, Tsukuba University's experimental art school had begun to experiment with new media art. Both the university's photographic and editing equipment was of a highly technical specification. Professor Yamaguchi Katsuhiro brought together a group of talented individuals working within the video, computer, laser imaging/lighting and artificial intelligent art. This group was the foundation of the ART UNIX GROUP, which concentrated on promoting undergraduate video art.

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The first artists to use video technology in Japan came from the generation involved in experimental film in the post-war period. It was 8mm and 16mm photographic equipment carried by reporters during the Second World War that became the bedrock for experimental films.

These light and portable cameras allowed artists to create more personalized imagery. During the 1970s, there was a rapid development of electronic equipment and the 1980s saw a great number of artists emerge who had had no previous experimental film experience. In the late 1980s, video artists continued their earlier investigations adapting according to developments in technology, and integrating installation and performance art into their work. At the same time, there were also developments concentrating on social media, breaking the phenomenon of image-centred absolutism.

Question: How would you describe the early and current developments in Taiwanese video art?

Wang Jun-jieh: From my own experience in Europe, I felt video art was not regarded as an art form in itself, in relation to art history and therefore had no special emphasis in exhibitions. Taiwanese contemporary art history does not have such a long tradition to contend with. At this time, mixed-media artists such as Chuang Pu and Lin Shou-yu (two extreme avant-garde artists) embraced this new media of art. Since there was very little available information about video art, many artists were self-taught and believed they were producing "video art". However, the situation has been now reversed, with information about video art plentiful and well distributed. The problem now is with no tradition to follow in this field, young artists do not necessarily use the media of video effectively to express their ideas.

Even today, video art in Taiwan is not considered an independent art form. It may be useful to contrast the development of Modernism and Post-Modernism in Taiwan to that of video art. Post-modernism only developed after

intense debates on Modernism. In Taiwan, however, one movement directly progressed into the other without such debates. Perhaps it is because Taiwan is an island nation that we have this tendency.

Su Shou-cheng: I would not altogether agree with Wang Jun-jieh; I believe there has been a number of sympathetic movements in video art with a few schools and museums in Taiwan demonstrating a supportive interest. This has been helped by overseas exhibitions in conjunction with museums in the promotion of video art, namely the Dutch Video Art Exhibition, the Japan High Tech Art Exhibition (1987) and the Japanese Art Technology Exhibition (1992).

There is a subtle difference between "art tech" and media art. They differ mainly in their purity of language and their critical capabilities. I hope artists will develop in both areas.

Question: How would you describe video art in Taiwan, and to what extent has it been integrated as a local cultural phenomena? Please describe your personal development in video art.

Wang Jun-jieh: On the whole Taiwanese video art is based mostly on the artist's personal experience, with few works addressing issues of politics or ideology. In contrast to the diverse nature of film and photography, video experiences restrictions derived from the media itself.

When I first came across the works of Nan Jun Paik, they were like ravings and mutterings. His works had a profound effect on me, propelling me towards the development of video documentaries of abstract clips without a story line.

In 1985, eleven friends and I created the 'Shi Rang Show', an exhibition of politically critical pieces. To break with conventional systems, we adopted an attitude similar to that during Martial Law. The exhibition's aim was to create a "non-system" space, different from commercial galleries

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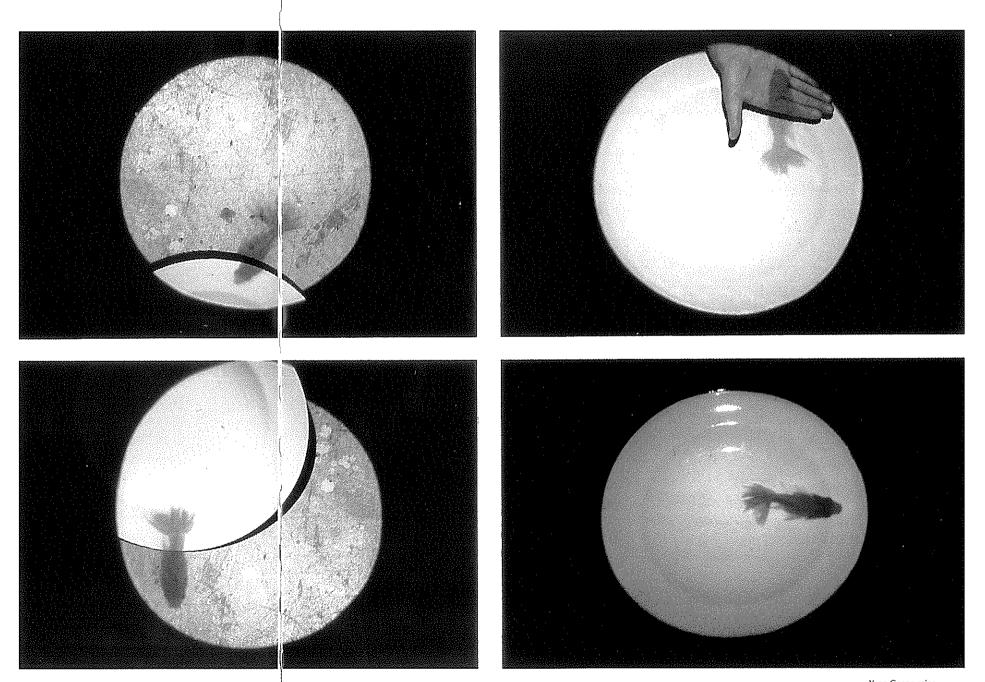
and museums. We sometimes used the theme of sex to break taboos.

The 1980s saw a return of Taiwanese students from overseas study, bringing with them a new Taiwan Movie and Off Theatre Movement, both closely connected to the end of Martial Law and the lifting of media restrictions. Individuals operating across different fields, such as directors, dramatists and social activists achieved vitality and flourished during this period. Active artists during this time included Lee Ming-sheng and Wu Ma-li.

In 1989, I went to Germany. Afterwards, I focused on audience accessibility in my work, creating scripts and plots. I began to use concepts and themes to reach beyond the media itself.

Yuan Goang-ming: My main themes deal with personal experiences, the sense of helplessness and the instabilities of life. After my experience overseas, I tended towards experimenting with technology and new materials. Most of my works now use computer controls, audio, and specialized materials. Previously, I had mainly integrated electronic images into my sculptural works.

Su Shou-cheng: After reviewing these two and other artists work involved with the development of video art in Taiwan, I am gratified and delighted with the freshness and expressiveness of video art today. It is evident to me that those overseas opportunities are an essential ingredient in the development of Taiwan's video art field.



Yuan Goang-ming Fish on the Plate (1992)