

## Development of Hong Kong Video Art

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*As an artist* that came from the eighties, a period of transition--politically from the Joint Declaration to the post 97, technologically moving over from super-8 to video 8, I have seen the development of video art. Video art is reflected not only in popular culture, but also in the ever changing political and alternative culture.

Both super-8 and video-8 were launched as a home movie consumer product. They did not, and still is not, infiltrate into the educational system. The potential users of these time-based media come mostly from the middle to upper class people. On the side line, the Chinese University's Fine Arts Department just opened its photography course one year ago, and it is doubtful when there would be a course on video.

In late sixties, public access to super-8 equipment or works is limited. Very few people felt the need to explore the power of this tool, as Hong Kong is a relatively stable and open society in Asia. Our history of development is different from that of Taiwan independent video where the emphasis is on documentary and activist work. In Hong Kong, some University students and cultural workers are attracted to the media by making "Independent films". Their productions focused primarily on themes like life, virtues, hope, love and values. Very few productions have a strong opposite voice to the status quo.

Between 1960s - 1970s, only 10% of the students could go to university. Subsequently, a lot of Independent film makers, who were university students then, were part of the elite. They engaged in film criticism and academic studies. Most of their reference in these fields were based on borrowed social or cultural theories from the West.

Some of them like Law Kar, Kam Ping Hing studied film overseas. Upon returning home, they became very important in the film industry. Some of them became strong film critics. Younger generation of independent filmmakers like Tsui Hak and Anne Hui, started their career as TV producer. Later on, they went overseas to receive training in film production. When they returned, they became important figures in "Hong Kong New Wave" in the early eighties. The "New Wave" films brought forth a unique identity in the local film history. It induced active discussions in local film industry. Compared

with the present, there were a closer relationship between the film industry and independent film at that time.

Video Art developed in the mid-eighties after the "New Wave movement". It emerged from the same source : consumer products for the middle class. However, the lyrical style in video art is not as prominent. Nevertheless, video is cheaper when compared to film. Video does not belong to the elitists alone.

Video artists came from diverse backgrounds. Artists like May Fung and Cheng Chi Hung were initially independent film makers, and others like Wong Chi Fai and Comyn Mo came from a visual art background. Most of these people associated closely with the avant garde theatre group, Zuni Icosahedron. Danny Yung, the artistic director of the group, is also a video artist. Danny Yung initiated the Asian American Film Festival in the States prior to his return to Hong Kong in the late seventies. In 1983, Zuni Icosahedron and Goethe Institute presented the First Hong Kong International Video Art Festival. A number of local video works were produced during a workshop facilitated by Barbara Hamman, a German video artist. The works produced were mostly conceptual and dialectic. They emphasized on the techno and visual elements of the medium. The aesthetic in video art was later reinforced through more video workshops by German artists and screening of video works from Germany in Hong Kong.

Local productions in the eighties focused their concerns mainly on the definition of video art: the ontology of the medium, the new language that were different from TV and film. At that time, some TV melodrama were still using 16mm as production. The only arts funding organisation, Council for the Performing Arts openly rejected funding for video art. They reasoned: 1. video had nothing to do with performance 2. video production is a commercial activity that could generate revenue. The development of video is delayed by this bureaucracy. They lacked a policy for the development of arts in general, and specifically, lacked an understanding to the mode of production.

After the resolution of Phoenix Cine Club in 1985, its members like myself and May Fung met Wong Chi Fai and Comyn Mo in Zuni Icosahedron. We started the video artists collective, Videotage.

I bought my first video camera in 1986 with a loan from a bank. Due to the strong presence of American tourists in Hong Kong , this "shopping paradise" adjusted itself. Subsequently, there were more choices in American standard video equipment to the local standard. My first video work was based on the installation that I did with the group "Assembledge".

As arts funding went to performing arts, a lot of video artists affiliated with performing group like Zuni Icosahedron and "Sand and Brick". Video artists documented their performance and developed their own works. Sometimes video were put on stage as another actor or an extension of the stage, juxtaposing pre-recorded or real time imagery with the stage performance. Many of these one channel video works were experimentation that challenge the notion of Television, mass communication and the narrative structure.

Though the development of video art resembles the development of super-8. Until the formation of Video power between 1988-9, most video works were not about social documentary or commentary. In 1989 Video Power attracted many young people to use video to record the local demonstrations and activities in support of the students' demonstration in Beijing (that eventually developed into the June 4th incident). Video power believes that video is a powerful tool for alternative voices. Video power is now left with 2 persons: Cheng Chi Hung and Mak Chi Hang actively collaborated with the NGOs in Hong Kong to produce documentaries about the NGOs groups and other social events.

During an interview, Yank Wong, a visual artist said that Hong Kong people began to ask questions about their own identity due to the 97 issue. However, to some, a discussion of a "HK identity" is to accentuate the difference between Hong Kong and China. Tung Kin Wah, HK's 1st Chief executive after 1 July 97 said that Hong Kong was too political. According to Tung, it's time Hong Kong people think about how to contribute to society rather than asking for rights. Hong Kong would be more stable if there is fewer dissenting voices.

Since the formation of Videotage, local video productions were collected in Videotage's Annual screening. In 1990, a year after the June 4th incident, an one hour video compilation was compiled for satellite TV Deep Dish in American. Many of the works related to the turmoil in the June 4th; the feelings of uncertainties people of Hong Kong felt about the return to China; and the local identity problem. However, the number of production each year was 10 or less. There is a lack of exhibition channels, funding, and education institutions. This did not encourage video makers to experiment or to explore personal projects. A lot of video producers stop making video after their "debuts". The situation has improved a little in recent years. However, the problem with the lack of education institutions remains. During a discussion in Microwave Video Festival last month, many students in communication or production courses still have difficulties accessing equipment and experiment projects were disapproved. They also complained that the lecturers and teachers are not producing any work themselves.

A lot of people had high hopes that some alternative programs will be presented in the new TV station, Cable TV, however the programming of Cable TV followed that of TVB, the main stream station. Rating is their concern. Minority, alternative and community are left out. There is no exhibition channel for local independent and no chance for the public to see local or international independent works. Later, the discussion of opening up a public access channel was turned down by the government.

The government's policy towards video art development ironically matches the trade development policy. i.e. no policy is the best policy. Local artists explore the market by themselves. Since there are far more mechanisms working at overseas for distributing independent video work, works from artists like myself, May Fung and Comyn Mo are exported to the foreign film & video festivals. The soundtracks in our works are generally music without a dialogue. And if there is a dialogue, it will be in English.

In 1992, I visited the States through the sponsorship of the Asian Cultural Council. Before the visit, my understanding towards video art were largely associated with the German high-tech aesthetic view. During the visit, I was exposed to other purposes for video art. I recognized that video art may be used for community participation. Video provides a forum for minority voices. Video may be low-tech & non-aesthetic. Recently in Microwave video festival, I compiled 4 international video programs and tried to demonstrate a variety of "non-aesthetic" works to broaden our view on video art. The post screening discussion shows that the audience are not too receptive. Most of them want more conceptual works or MTV.

As the society and Government policy focus on economic development during the last 2 decades, Hong Kong becomes an affluent society. Video camcorders were no longer inaccessible. In 1993, The Hong Kong Art Centre organised the first Independent Video Awards. A simple off-line editing room was set up on the 16th floor in the building to encourage independent video production. The number of entries was astonishing (over 100). Most of the producers comes from younger generations. Their works were mostly traditional narrative, mundane stories. Their language resemble that on the television, MTV and karaoke. The organiser for the 1994 Student's film Festival said that this was a true reflection of the students' intention and it was their freedom to express their thoughts in this style.

As video becomes more popular, young visual artists put video into their multi-media installation work. However, video is no more than a TV. The sculpture element and the interactive possibility are seldom explored. Critical

writings on video installation or multi-media installation are new to both the film critics and visual art critics. These works were usually presented and dismantled like a drop into the ocean.

The formation of a Film and Media subcommittee in the Arts Development Council in 1996 provides new opportunities. The subcommittee is sponsoring many different activities in independent film and video art. The Hong Kong Art Center also installed digital editing facilities recently. Videotage is recollecting their past works and published "The best of Videotage Vol.1". The international Video screening, Microwave Festival is sponsored by the Urban Council. However, the uncertainty facing the Arts Development Council after 1997 seems to hinder the development of video. What will be the purpose for art after 97 if it is better to have fewer dissenting voices?

In an interview with Lau Siu Ling, this year's Independent Film and Video Awards winner, she said that the most an independent artist can do is to win a prize, that seemed to be an end in itself. The whole thing is rather meaningless. Lau decided to venture into the film industry, she hopes to one day make a feature film. Many experienced film or video artists share Lau's feeling. To those, I pose another question: what will you do once you manage to produce features year after year? I suggest that the key question is how to foster an environment for independent to counter the mainstream culture. Wong Kar Wai, a big budget film director highly promoted by Tarantino, was presented in the Independent Session of American's International film Festival. Is Wong an independent? Who defines "Independent"? The Shaw Brothers or Hollywood?

The strategy adopted by local visual artists when they relate to the international market is to present a so called "tradition or a cultural identity". However, what is to present about Hong Kong? The foundations of Hong Kong's culture or tradition are economic freedom, food, shopping, order (but not necessarily fairness).

What is Video? To the program presentation organiser and the public, it is an alternative film screening, a minority interest. To cable programming officer, it is of no marketing value. To the installation artist, it is a new element to be explored. To film lovers, it is a cheap form of film. To film critics, it is electronic, technological, surreal and short. To young generation, it is hip, exciting fast moving images, MTV and sensational. To documentary makers or activists, it is a tool for empowerment. **To video artists, it is about freedom of speech, access to equipment and opening up of market.**