

## In Search of Independence

-Video Art in Hong Kong 1993

by Danny Yung

commissioner for

the Fifth Fukui International Video biennale

Museum of Fine Arts, Fukui, Japan

July 30 to August 12, 1993

After selecting the video works for the Fukui Festival 1993, I talked to the video artists and asked them if they had any questions they would like to address to me or to each other on video art in Hong Kong. They did and the questions raised by them seemed quite relevant and appropriate for my notes on Hong Kong video art. I present them in the form of the following "interview":

Q: How did you select the (our) works from Hong Kong? Which comes first: Video, Art or Hong Kong?

A: I don't think the local identity is the main criterion in my selection. Even though Hong Kong identity would obviously be in the mind of the audience when viewing the final packaged programme at Fukui, I was basically concerned with the merit of the works themselves. My criteria are of course biased and limited by my own experience in video art or arts in general.

Associating a form of art with a specific geographical location or boundary has certain irony. Even the choice of the term "location" or the term "boundary" often implies a very different political attitude. For example, does "east" arise only because it is the counterpart to "west"? Should we delineate the cultural "boundaries" one step further to differentiate Asian Video Art in contrast to European, African and American or Australian Video Art? Could our categorisation be based on the structure of language of these "cultures"?

Another approach to categorisation would be based on political or economic factors. Is there such things as the first world, second world and third world video art? In this case, the political and economic issues on censorship, freedom of expression, channel for distribution and exhibition, marketing, audience-artists relationship and decentralisation of public resources in support of the arts all come into the picture.

However, since video is a relatively new form of art, the concept of delineating cultural and geographical identity can always be put into an interesting context for creative discussions between academics, historians and art administrators. But the most important dialogue, I believe is still found among the cultural producers and practitioners; in this case, the video makers themselves.

I am sure the Fukui Festival's categorising of video art by geographical boundaries is based upon administrative reasons. The important things to remember are how we read the work as an independent statement and the artist we communicate with as an independent individual.

I always hope that art could speak for itself and to each other on a one to one basis. If I must spell out the criteria of my selection, then I would say since I am living in an highly urbanized setting, a place filled with multi-cultural interactions, and a place going through rapid social, economic and political changes, then so are the factors influencing my selections.

Q: Which work did you select first? Does the sequence of selection have any "historical" context on video art in Hong Kong?

A: Comyn Mo's Automatic Writings Number Two. This 16 minutes long seven-part work sets the pace step by step into an video artist's experience in observing himself, observing others, observing a documented video, observing a performance in progress...and in the final part, coming back to observe himself moving around through a self-hand-held video lens which is also in constant movement. The three subtitles set in the middle of the screen which appear repeatedly throughout the tape are:

- Are we too close together?
- Objects in the mirror are closer than they appear.
- Are you ready?

These all seem to reflect the artist's concern of what he sees and how does he sees and what the options of seeing are, and the urgency in dealing with the issue of seeing.

Since the late seventies, when video was first introduced to Hong Kong as a new vehicle for artistic exploration, the first groups of artists who picked up a video camera were logically the experimental film makers, and then the experimental performing artists. In the last two years, the popularity of video art in Hong Kong has finally exceeded experimental film art for very obvious reason. Its high accessibility and user friendly for one, the instant playback which provides immediate dialectical process is another; the diversified industrial and commercial applications of video in the consumer society which provide the artists with stimulation and many layers of interpretations and references is a third important factor that makes video preferable to film.

Mo is among one of the typical cases of experimental film maker turned video maker. Trained as a fashion designer, Mo started in the early eighties with super-eight minimalistic experimental film making. After he explored the medium of video, his work becomes even more accessible and has been exhibited in many international film and video festivals around the world. His recent work will also be seen in Vancouver International Film Festival and Yamagata

International Documentary Film Festival this year.

When I saw Mo's work, I was impressed by the rhythm, and the non-processed images and the interwoven audio-visual structure. The image of "the finger pointing hand turning around showing what is in the palm" has a very clear visual structure, varying directions of pointing, the environments which the finger is pointing at, and the different items in the palm. The three items turn out to be an ivory carved bhudda, a coin and a compass.

Q: Which piece of work was the last one you picked for the list? Could it be read as a concluding statement?

A: "East Is Red" by Cheng Chi-hung and Mak Chi-hang(1993). The video work is a submission to a recent video open competition organised by the Hong Kong Arts Centre in 1993 of which I am one of the judges. The artists enter the same work using four different titles into four competition categories(Experimental, narrative, documentary and MTV). Again I had problems with such delineation, but because of the provocative way of multiple submission, it has generated enough discussion about categorisation, boundaries and so on.

Both video makers are members of Video Power, a local video collective founded in 1988 which aims to explore alternative audio-visual presentations. Video Power also produces documentary and educational videos. Recently Video Power produces works both in China and Hong Kong, and works particularly closely with various workers' unions in Hong Kong.

The one and half minute long "East Is Red" is done in one shot with stationary camera. The only "still" image is a lighter (which is made in Japan) on centre with a blurring television screen as background. The lighter which is also a music box has the photo of young Chairman Mao imprinted on it. The music it plays is as expected "East is Red".

After repeating the song two or three times, the lighter fell off from the screen, leaving an empty blurring television screen.

The concept of lighter, blurring light of television screen, and the song with the unsung text "East Is Red, The Sun Rises" all connote light or brightness. Yet with such a light touch on the subject matter all seem to confirm the sarcasm of our artists. The creative approach also seems to be a response to our contemporary culture on fast food, instantly produced product and "More is More". Most of our artists have that aloof yet cynical attitude towards our mainstream culture, yet they still manage to produce their "messages" in the most economic and raw fashion. This may be the reason why I have chosen "East Is Red" as the last of the five pieces for it amplifies my projection of this attitude.

After I have decided to choose this work, I called up the artists and suggested that it would be preferable if they could pick one out of the four titles they had given to this work. (I vaguely remember the titles were "Not a MTV", "Song in the Wind" and so on...) Instead they counter-proposed "East Is Red" as the new title.

Q: Do you have any criteria in determining the composition of the five works you have chosen for the festival? Are there any sexual preference on the selection?

A: Why is five a magic number? Could it be due to budgetary constraints? Or is it because of the Taoist belief that "five elements form the universe"? Anyway, after the third selection, yes. I became more and more conscious of the composition of the works as a whole package. The issue of language was always a major concern because of the non-English/non-Chinese speaking audience. The other concern was the length of the program: because of the influence of MTV and television watching nowadays, the tension span is "less than ten minutes". It is unfortunate that the festival is only interested in "video programme" and not video installations which is an important element in Hong Kong video art. If viewing is a male act and being viewed is female, then installation may be a breakthrough. No, I have no sexual preference on my selection.

After "Automatic Writings Number Two", I have then chosen Ellen Pau's "Song of the Goddess", and then Siu King-chung group's work "A Scenic Place for Home". The fourth piece I have chosen is May Fung's "Dubcek in Her Mind". I am not sure how these tapes will be presented in Fukui. It may be interesting to exhibit the works in the reverse order, or even more challenging to integrate these works with submissions from elsewhere.

The second work I have chosen for the festival is Ellen Pau's "Song of the Goddess." I saw the work earlier this year at a Videotage presentation jointly presented by Zuni Icosahedron and the Hong Kong Arts Centre. For the last seven years, I have watched Pau develop her use of images and sound on video. Ellen Pau is one of the most active video makers and installation artists in Hong Kong. She is also the founder of Videotage, a video collective which regularly organise screening of local video works and develop exchanges with overseas video artists. In 1991-2, she was awarded a grant by Asian Cultural Council to visit the United States. I suspect that "Song of the Goddess" may be part of the outcome from her experience overseas.

In Ellen Pau's own statement on "Song of the Goddess," she confesses her attempt on the crossing of "boundaries", the exploration of crossing the video boundaries in dealing with reality and imageries, and crossing of the boundaries on social taboo of sexuality in Chinese culture. The work is clearly dedicated to the two famous Cantonese opera actresses from 1950 to 1970, who performed on and off stage as lovers. And only when one died (crossing the boundaries to

another world) did the other come forward to proclaim publicly her passion and love. Here, the video screen becomes a closet door and reveals human relationship in its most basic form. In "Song of the Goddess," Pau's handling of images over images, reflections over reflections, could all be read as disguises of images over reality, or disguises of the traditional value over a more progressive attitude towards sexual relationship. Pau placed a transparent obstacle (a water glass container) in front of the video images forming multilayer effects. The concept is simple, raw and inventive. And the end result is sensuous and erotic.

The two actresses, were they both alive, would be in their sixties. The clips of images used in the video are from one of their most famous theatre-turned-film "The Last Emperor of Southern Tang" produced in the late 1960s during their prime. The scene Pau picked was the gazes of both actresses towards each other, the final parting embrace, and the fatal self-destruction scene. Pau intercut these images with the reflection of New York mass transit subway in movement, a self bathing scene and ripples of a water pond.

There is a certain rawness in most of the Hong Kong video works I have screened. There is a general arrogant attitude of not to bother to apply any highly sophisticated technical treatment of images. This is evident in many of the works. It could be read as a subconscious effort to counter or rebuke the well developed television industry in Hong Kong. On the other hand, this also reflects the pragmatism of local artists in handling their materials in the most economic and minimal manner to achieve what they would want to achieve. Maybe because of the rawness, there is also a touch of documentary film in many of these works. This is particularly so in Mo, Pau, Cheng and Mak's work.

Q: Do you think the "market" is affecting the creativity of video art in Hong Kong? What about politics?

A: If what you are talking about is the \$ market, then no. If you are talking about the marketing to the fellow artists, then yes. These video artists know too well the difference between consumer product and creative project. Some of the video artists do at one time or another involve themselves with the local MTV industry.

Among the five "groups" of video makers, I suspect that, by conventional definition, none would be qualified as "full-fledged professional video artist". None would care to be labeled as such. Currently nobody in Hong Kong depends their living only on commissions or royalty of their works. Comyn Mo's livelihood depends on his income from writing. Ellen Pau works in a hospital and May Fung is a government administrator. Siu King-chung and Lydia Ngai both teach art and design in a local college. Yet all of them are well respected in the field as front runners in video art. Another interesting phenomenon is that many of these artists are involved in more than one discipline in arts. Mo also

does solo performances and paints. Pau is active in installation art. Fung is active in cultural policy studies, and is also involved in performing arts, installation arts as well as photography.

By conventional definition, I don't think there exist any "full-fledged professional video artist" in Hong Kong. The issue then touches on whether the Government should have any responsibility to promote new form of art and to what extent.

The answer is that of course they should but when it comes down to "how", that is where the problem surfaces. Government agencies and politicians alike often have limited knowledge of the nature of (video) art and how video artists work. The importance of innovation and experimentation in video art is very difficult for such institutes to appreciate and assess, especially when they tend to commodify the work and measure everything by cost-effectiveness (or the marketing); while art, especially new forms of art or non-categorizable art, are always difficult to measure. With this in mind, I would say that most of these artists are much more independent from "the system" in comparison with other traditional visual and performing artists in Hong Kong, therefore much stronger.

Q: Do you think the "market" is affecting the creativity of video art in Hong Kong? What about politics?

A: If what you are talking about is the \$ market, then no. If you are talking about the marketing to the fellow artists, then yes. These video artists know too well the difference between consumer product and creative project. Some of the video artists do at one time or another involve themselves with the local MTV industry.

Among the five "groups" of video makers, I suspect that, by conventional definition, none would be qualified as "full-fledged professional video artist". None would care to be labeled as such. Currently nobody in Hong Kong depends their living only on commissions or royalty of their works. Ellen Mo's livelihood depends on his income from writing. Ellen Pau works in a hospital and May Fung is a government administrator. Siu King-chung and Lydia Ngai both teach art and design in a local college. Yet all of them are well respected in the field as front runners in video art. Another interesting phenomenon is that many of these artists are involved in more than one discipline in arts. Mo also