

# Screen Structures: Overview of Media Art Development in Hong Kong

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In less than a decade, Hong Kong's political economy has moved rapidly from an attitude of "positive non-intervention", a common practice under the former British colonial rule, to the proactive role taken up by the SAR government since the 1997 handover of targeting the development of information technologies and tourism. Although the economic returns and technological progress from this restructuring far outweigh any concerns over cultural development, it has nevertheless brought about rapid social transformation in the city's urban landscape and had a significant impact on cultural production. Educational institutions as well as the arts and cultural sector quickly responded by putting greater emphasis on multimedia projects, especially given the new funding opportunities. In the last five years, the number of local electronic art festivals and exhibitions, multimedia performances, and related activities has increased dramatically, culminating in the recent high visibility of media art in Hong Kong. Indeed, despite a recent study reporting in 2000 the "alarming underdevelopment" of electronic arts in the region, there is emerging a definite amalgamation of practices that can be increasingly described as Hong Kong media art.<sup>1</sup> The following essay outlines the interrelationships between these practices and important shifts in means of distribution, instruction and exhibition.

Not unlike its counterpart in mainland China, media art in Hong Kong has undergone a fast-forward development in the span of less than two decades, with its practitioners grappling with media aesthetics and politics which artists in Europe and North America have been exploring since the early sixties. Its beginnings can be traced to the history of experimental film and video in the late 1970s

and early eighties that was much more congruous than it is today. During these years, independent film productions (as they were recognized then) of the Hong Kong New Wave directors – Ann Hui, Allen Fong, John Woo, among others – coincided with the emergence of independent video practices. Cine club activities began in the early 1960s as part of the youth culture phenomenon that resulted from the fast growth in population. This decade not only witnessed the coming of age of the first generation of local-born Hong Kong Chinese, but also was concurrent with the introduction of 8-millimeter and 16-millimeter film in Hong Kong. With no venues for the screening of student, art, or experimental films, cine clubs provided a means for local independent work to be produced, shown and discussed, as well as the opportunity to view experimental films from all over the world. Most active in organizing screenings and discussions, university students were among the first to produce independent films. The earliest known experimental short film made in Hong Kong is *Exercise One* by Ho Fan produced in 1966.

Given this historical context, it is not surprising that many early practitioners of video as an art form, like May Fung Mei-wah, Ellen Pau Oi-lun, and Comyn Mo Man-yu, started out as experimental filmmakers, with notable works such as Fung's *Pieces* (1977), *Monologue* (1984), and *Manipulation I – Zoom Collage* (1984); Pau's *Pleasure of Gloves* (1984), and Mo's *Mourning*, *Problem*, and *Hairy Ring*, all 1984. Members of the Phoenix Cine Club including Fung, Mo, Pau, and Wong Chi Fai, for example, would later become among the first generation of media artists and key players in the local contemporary art scene. Founded in 1974 by film critic and scriptwriter Kam Ping-hing as a

non-profit film organization, the Phoenix Cine Club eventually expanded their mandate to include video with sponsorship from the Hong Kong Urban Council, the government body overseeing cultural venues at that time. In 1985 and 1986, their annual festival of local independent works, started in 1979 as the Hong Kong Independent Short Film Festival, was renamed Alternative Film and Video Festival to accommodate the slowly but gradually increasing number of submissions in video format. With the final dissolution of the Phoenix Cine Club in 1986, Fung, Mo, Pau, and Wong founded the video artist collective Videotage, whose name is composed from two words, "video" and "montage". With Pau as artistic director since its inception, the group initially aimed to continue with the efforts of the Phoenix Cine Club in producing an annual screening of local independent video productions, the first of which appeared in 1987, and to facilitate collaborative artistic projects involving video artists. Videotage has since then evolved into Hong Kong's most established operation dedicated to the production, distribution, and study of new media art in Hong Kong.

A recent example that underscored how the history of experimental film and video is connected to the current development of media art practices in Hong Kong was "i-GENERATIONS", a simultaneous screening programme and exhibition of independent, experimental and alternative creations in Hong Kong took place in September and October 2001. Organized by the Hong Kong Film Archive, the programme was curated by veteran film/videomaker and cultural organizer May Fung. The series of screening programmes, with over a hundred works, was dedicated to local independent film and video from the

1960s to the present and was by far the most comprehensive and researched presentation of local experimental productions to date. The exhibition featured two commissioned video installations in which six local artists were invited to re-interpret or re-edit footage of well-known Hong Kong New Wave filmmakers such as Clara Law, John Woo, Stephen Chiau, Wong Kar-wai and Tsui Hark. Artists Phoebe Man Ching-ying, Makin Fung Bing-fai, and Enoch Cheung Hong-sang collaborated on *Re-wind*, displayed as an architecturally-reconstructed stroboscope, and Monica Lee Wan-tim, Bobo Lee Siu-ye, and Adam Wong Sou-ping worked together on *Cut-uncut*, displayed on eighteen television monitors in a triangular setting.

This juxtaposition of a historical survey of local filmic productions with examples of contemporary media art, so clearly addressing their ties to Hong Kong cinema, spoke pointedly to a complex history of interrelationships between film, video, installation, and performance that is often undermined in what few accounts exist on local media art history in Hong Kong. For example, in collaboration with the Hong Kong Arts Centre and the Goethe Institut Hong Kong, the first international video art exhibition in Hong Kong, featuring video works from the U.K., France, Germany, Japan, Canada and the U.S., was organized in 1983 by Zuni Icosahedron, a newly formed multimedia artists collective. Curated by Roger Garcia, Michael Chan, and James Wong, this was the first sponsored, collective attempt in Hong Kong to explore media art as a form of aesthetic expression.

Well-known for its specialization in political satire, Zuni Icosahedron is one of the longest running avant-garde artist groups in Hong Kong. It was founded in 1982 by Danny Yung Ning-tsun, who, in addition to being an architect,

cultural activist, arts administrator and stage director, as well as Zuni's artistic director since 1985, is also considered one of Hong Kong's pioneer video artists. Among other things, he initiated the Asian American Film Festival in the U.S. prior to his return to Hong Kong in the late 1970s. Back in Hong Kong in the early 1980s, Yung began directing large-scale stage productions that led to the founding of Zuni. Since its inception, Zuni has produced more than ninety original productions of alternative theatre and multi-media performances and has been active in video, sound experimentation and installation arts, often in collaboration with other groups, as well as in the areas of art education and art criticism, and the lobbying for arts funding and arts policy. Zuni's innovative performance-based activities were some of the first instances in which video was used in Hong Kong art, underscoring the interdisciplinarity of media art as well as the potential of these experimental crossovers. Exploring screen-based media in combination with the stage, dance ('video dance') and installation, as in *Pau's Drained II* (1988) which draws its imagery from a Zuni performance, as well as a means of documenting performances, such as for Yung's *Deep Structure of Chinese (Hong Kong) Culture* (1990), Zuni continues to this day to integrate high levels of video and now digital technologies in their numerous large-scale multimedia productions. Particularly well known for its specialization in political satire, the group has also become a primary force since 1987 in advocating and developing international city-to-city cultural exchange programmes with artists and organizations from other parts of the world. Important vehicles for this have been their various touring multimedia performances, including *Journey to the East/One Table Two*

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*Chairs (1T2C)* (ongoing since 1997), *Four Grand Inventions* (1999-2000), and the *Video Circle* programme started in 1996, which comprises of a video installation of 36 monitors arranged in a circle showing compilations of videoworks by artists from major Asian cities.

According to a recent HKADC study in 2001, the first public appearance of media art in Hong Kong was *Tsai's Cybernetic Art Exhibition*, a solo exhibition by kinetic artist Tsai Wenying, a native of China (Fujian Province) based in the U.S., at the Hong Kong Museum of Art in October 1979. Although this first exposure to media art (in the form of electronic art by a non-local artist) did not appear to have any traceable immediate impact on the local art scene, the introduction of domestic video camcorders and the subsequent establishment of artist collectives, media centres, and annual competitions in the mid-1980s started the era of video production in Hong Kong. With the boom in the economy, more choices in video equipment became available at the same time as prices became increasingly lower making video more affordable than film as a medium of expression for artists.

With the exception of works by several Zuni members and a few others, such as *Videotable* (1984) by Danny Yung and Jim Shum which uses a spinning turntable to map out an identity for Hong Kong, overtly political content was not a primary focus of early video art production despite the fact that these developments were concurrent with a period of intense search for local identity as Britain began its negotiations with China in 1982 concerning the 1997 handover. Instead early works, such as Wong Chi-fai's *Room Temperature* (1986), Johnny Au's *Pure Colour* (1986), and Ellen Pau's *Drained II* (1988), delved into the

question of conceptualism, focusing on the definition of video art and the ontology of the medium and developing a new language different from film and television.

By the end of the 1980s, however, artists, more organized, experienced and embedded in the historical event of the transition period (1984-1997) and some witness to the tragic events of the "June Fourth Incident" in June 1989, had already begun to explore the politics of representation for Hong Kong, producing works that challenged the notions of television, mass media and colonial narrative structures. For example, the video compilation *Only Something That is About to Disappear Becomes an Image*, the fifth video of the ... *Will Be Televised: Video Documents from Asia* series produced by Shu Lea Cheang for Satellite TV Deep Dish in New York in 1990, contains important works by Danny Yung and May Fung, Victor Chan, Kuan Punleong, Ellen Pau, and Comyn Mo interrogating cultural identity within the context of current historical and political changes affecting Hong Kong. Also appearing around this time were social commentaries and documentaries, such as those recording the student demonstrations in Beijing in 1989 by Video Power, a non-profit community advocacy video group founded the previous year by Cheng Chi-hung and Mak Chi-heng. Video Power has long been actively videotaping major social events, some of which are considered politically sensitive, in order to provide an alternative media representation of social issues marking the transformations undergone by Hong Kong. Some subjects of concern have been the controversial Right of Abode debate and the impact of old district redevelopment projects on the community as well as the experience of various marginalized social groups

such as “cage people,” street hawkers, female and juvenile victims of family violence.

Here it is worthwhile to mention how discourses on urban culture and local identity emerging from scholarship on the Hong Kong New Wave have dominated the ways in which local video art, and contemporary art produced in the 1980s and 1990s in general, have been framed. Ackbar Abbas' *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (1997) is a typical, but influential, example of both the recent “crisis” and “postmodern” context-driven researches on Hong Kong and its cinema that has been extended to contemporary art and art criticism of this period. Situating their critical analyses of cultural productions within the historical specificities and cultural dilemmas of the angst-ridden pre-handover, pre-post handover, and now, post-handover periods, such reflectionist interpretations would argue that all or most works from this period – in their trend towards what Abbas describes as a “new localism” embedded in an aesthetics of urban realism – explicitly or implicitly refer to the “97 complex” or Hong Kong as a “culture of disappearance”.<sup>2</sup>

These prominent discourses obfuscate the historical precedents of filmic and other cultural productions, institutions and pre-existing socio-historical contexts, that have also contributed to the cultural formation of local identity as well as the emergence of independent film and video productions from the 1960s and 1970s onwards. However, videoworks – such as May Fung's *The Second Sex* (1986), and later on, Ellen Pau's *Song of the Goddess* (1992), about two Cantonese operatic ‘stage sisters’, and Yau Ching's documentary, *Flow* (1993), about the life stories of a Chinese female artist who grew up during the Cultural Revolution – which

interrogate issues of gender and cultural translation, while at the same time present a wide range of approaches, themes, content and formats – complexify the critical framework of such discourses.

Today, video art continues to dominate media art activities in Hong Kong, with relatively established institutionalized structures of festivals, award competitions, workshops and screenings. The changeover from analog to digital technologies in the early 1990s also sustained if not further popularized the use of video in artistic productions. Directly related to this development was the concurrent revival of the Hong Kong Independent Short Film Competition, after several years in limbo, by the Hong Kong Urban Council and the set up of the first Hong Kong Independent Video Awards by the Hong Kong Arts Centre in 1992, organized by Jimmy Choi Kam-chun. The showing of the award winners at the 18th Hong Kong International Film Festival the following year made 1993 for all intents and purposes known as “the come-back year of Hong Kong independent film and video production.” In 1995, with entries dwindling in number and also partly in response to the increasing use of computers and video in filmmaking blurring the distinctions between film and video, the Hong Kong Urban Council proposed the merging of the two competitions into the Hong Kong Independent Short Film and Video Awards (HKIFVA).

Funding for contemporary art in general in Hong Kong is relatively scarce so many artists have full-time professional jobs. This situation has also resulted in a high number of artists interested in researching and developing their media art practices often going overseas to get training and exposure. From the mid-1980s up

until 1997, this movement was particularly acute since it coincided with the high number of families and professionals moving abroad in response to fears and anxieties concerning the impending handover. The few years leading up to 1997 also saw the consolidation of a diasporic community and an overseas artistic community as well as an international media cohort interested in following the events in Hong Kong. The result was a host of exhibitions and events organized abroad that focused on the theme of the handover, giving many emerging contemporary artists in Hong Kong the opportunity to exhibit their works overseas for the first time.

Apart from the Council for the Performing Arts, which focuses on funding performance and stage related productions; the only other major funding government body was the Hong Kong Urban Council, which was replaced in 1997 by the Hong Kong Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD). As the titles of both government departments suggest, in their overseeing the cultural activities specifically in relation to cultural venues for the whole of Hong Kong, art, especially contemporary art which seldom involves ticket sales, is not always considered a priority. Thus while the festival circuit and competition system serve well to provide incentives to produce independent film and video productions, it pressurizes the development of other forms of media art in its direction, if not diversion, of both creative and financial resources. In a city where screen culture remains paramount, what began as alternative film and video experimentation, sustained by the innovation and drive of a few committed individuals, has become a much more public affair that teeters between independent productions effecting conceptual,

formal and critical engagements in the visual arts, and commercial ventures for the mainstream media industry.

By contrast, interactive computer art has engaged only a small number of artists in Hong Kong. There are many reasons for this, including the lack of exhibition venues, the scarcity of arts funding for production, research and development, and the general lack of audiences and a market for contemporary art in Hong Kong – all of which inhibit local artists to create larger-scale, more technically-complex, high cost yet virtually unsalable work. Further, it is useful to note that despite the popularity of video art, exclusively video art exhibitions (as opposed to billeted screenings) – with perhaps the exception of *Open Cities: HKG* <ORD, curated by Chang Tsong-zung, John di Stefano, Elaine Ng Wing-yu and Ellen Pau at Para/Site Art Space, in 2001 – rarely take place for similar reasons.

The 1990s nevertheless saw the first generation of emerging artists to have truly grown up in a digital culture and significant developments that contributed to the rapid growth of new media art in Hong Kong. These included the introduction of computer art programmes by the Hong Kong Arts Centre in 1991 and the founding of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council (HKADC) in 1995 as the main sponsoring body for the arts in the region.<sup>3</sup> The establishment of the HKADC veritably changed the whole art scene, coinciding as it did with a flurry of activities both in political and cultural sectors surrounding the upcoming handover. With respect to media art, the HKADC's institution of public support for technology-based work, primarily through the formation of its Film and Media Arts Committee (FMAC) in 1996, has been a

significant and major boon. Funding has furthered the operations of fringe groups such as Zuni Icosahedron, Videotage, and Video Power, as well as private organizations such as Goethe-Institut Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Arts Centre (both significant and long-time active collaborators in the presentation of media art exhibitions in Hong Kong up until present day), enabling increased exposure of media art to the local community and international audiences. One of the main vehicles for this has been the annual Microwave International Media Art Festival organized by Videotage. Since its inception in 1996, the festival has progressed from video to multi-media, interactive installations and net art and been consolidating its international connections.

In the past five years, Hong Kong media art has been gaining wider recognition abroad, with more opportunities to participate in cultural exchanges, international exhibitions and media art festivals, such as the Ars Electronica Festival in Austria, the European Media Arts Festival and Transmediale in Germany, Image Forum Festival in Japan, Videobrasil in Brazil, the Kwangju Biennial in Korea, and the Media Art Asia Pacific Festival and Asia-Pacific Triennial in Australia. For Hong Kong's first appearance at the 49th Venice Biennale, the single-channel and video installation version of Ellen Pau's *Recycling Cinema* (1999-2001) and two of Ho Siu-kee's video installations were among the works exhibited.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, in the discourses surrounding many local and international exhibitions of Hong Kong art, cultural cosmopolitanism and hybridity, in paradoxical relation to the usual overused East meets West construct, binaries of Chinese and Western terms, and lingering post-97 readings, have remained the interpretive framework for much of the art presented.

Moreover, given processes of globalization, the historical and political situation, and lack of long-standing basic infrastructures, such as educational opportunities, funding, and exhibition venues, which have forced many local artists to find these resources elsewhere – the fact that Hong Kong media art undeniably espouses an aesthetic vocabulary that is, for all intents and purposes, “international”, has no doubt complicated theorizations on this form of expression. Pau's *Recycling Cinema*, for example, in a carefully balanced play between the banal act of watching traffic pass through a lonely seaside highway and a concentrated absorption with the surface of the cinematic image as it moves back and forth along a wide arched screen, explores metaphors of urban mobility in a global context, while at the same time articulating the desire for a place called home. As Hong Kong media art becomes more diverse and established, it will be increasingly difficult to define on the basis of worn-out cultural assumptions and art historical conventions.

The largest impact on development of media art in the political sector has been the HKSAR government's proactive role towards the development of information technologies (IT) and the service industries in its promotion of Hong Kong as “Asia's World City.” This pointed focus on IT and cultural tourism development has resulted in the educational, arts and cultural sectors also turning their attention to multimedia-related activities in order to garner new opportunities for funding. As such, in recent years, the introduction of media art programmes in academic institutions and its admission in conventional broad-based art presenters such as museums have infused new energy in the local development of media

art. The works from the Hong Kong exhibition in Venice, for example, were subsequently shown that same year at the Hong Kong Museum of Art in conjunction with the 13th Hong Kong Art Biennial, remarkable for its broadest inclusion to date of local installation and digital art, including works such as the digital video version of Hung Keung's CD-ROM project *Human Being and Moving Images* (2001) and video installations such as Miranda Tsui Ngai's *Shoe Stories* (2001) and Desmond Kum Chi-keung's *Salt Lake* (1999). In 2000, one of the inaugural exhibitions for the new Hong Kong Heritage Museum was *Art +01: A Digital Exploration*, a survey of 2-D digital imaging, CD-ROM projects and interactive installations by ten local media artists, complete with a CD-ROM exhibition catalogue.

With the inception of new programmes at tertiary institutions such as the Higher Diploma in Multimedia Design and Technology at the School of Design, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, in 1999, and the first MFA programme in Hong Kong, in Media Design and Technology, at the School of Creative Media at the City University of Hong Kong, in 2001, a number of interesting exhibitions presenting faculty and graduate works using cutting-edge digital technologies have been held on university campuses. For example, in 2000, the University Museum and Art Gallery of the University of Hong Kong and the School of Design, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, jointly presented *Bits of You, Bytes of Me: An Aesthetic Dimension of Human-Machine Interface* and *Echo Bits: The Creative Works of an E-Generation*. The former featured the work of five members of the teaching staff of the School of Design; the latter presented work by their students – graduates of the School's Higher Diploma in Multimedia

Design and Technology launched in 1999. Computer science departments are also becoming more open to media art. In 2001, artist Young Hay, in collaboration with computer scientists Horace Ip and Alex Tang at the Centre for Innovative Applications of Internet and Multimedia Technologies (AIMtech Centre) of the City University of Hong Kong, successfully launched the interactive performance application *Body Brush*, winning an honorary mention at Ars Electronica that same year. Inspired by the action paintings of Jackson Pollock, this new human-computer interface enables the user to intuitively compose a real-time painting on a virtual 3-D canvas through simple body movements.

High-end interactive art projects involving extensive collaborations between artists and research centres such as Young Hay's project, however, are few and far between. The presence of media in academia and the museum setting is still a relatively recent phenomenon. Typically it is technologically low-end media art (video, video installation) that is still for the most part shown in smaller art spaces, as it is virtually impossible for them to support larger, more costly undertakings. In addition to stabilizing the space and resources for electronic arts, overcoming the emphasis on solely industry-oriented applications for media and preconceived relationships between art and technology, electronic arts and fine arts, and where they can be shown, thus may be among the most pressing tasks that lie ahead for local media artists. Despite the ever-growing interest in the field and the greater availability of media technologies, Hong Kong people still view technology as something entirely functional. As Young Hay writes, "the ultimate challenge of media art lies not in how to catch up with



the advance of digital technology, but the turning-around of the rejection of technology as expressions of humanity. Obviously, this situation is not unique to Hong Kong.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, the creative and critical engagement with media has significantly enriched and expanded the larger narrative of Hong Kong art. New media art in Hong Kong, it is hoped, will continue to grapple with and be wary of old and emerging discourses about local cultural productions, capricious trends of the international art world, and the screen structures of the city in which it is produced.

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- 1 *The Development of Electronic Media Art in Hong Kong*, a research project led by Christine Choy (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Arts Development Council, Film and Media Arts Committee, 28 February 2001), p. 2.
- 2 Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997), p. 28.
- 3 On the development of computer art in Hong Kong, see Wong Wo Bik, "An Overview of Computer Art and Education in Hong Kong," *Leonardo* 28:5 (1995), pp. 441-446; and *Art+01 - A Digital Exploration*, CD-ROM exhibition catalogue (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Heritage Museum, Leisure and Cultural Services Department, 2000).
- 4 Warren Leung Chi-wo and Sara Wong Chi-hang's collaborative photo- and sculpture-based installation, *City Cookie Project: Hong Kong Venice Version*, was the other work selected.
- 5 Young Hay, "The Challenge We All Have to Face," *ISEA Newsletter* 90 (Dec 2002-Jan 2003).

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