

Ellen Pau**ARTIST**

My name is Ellen Pau. I am a video artist in Hong Kong.

I started as a video artist but I founded an artists' collective in 1986 together with three other friends. The first ten years, we worked mainly on video and then, around 1997, step by step, we worked more on new media. In '98, we founded Microwave New Media Art Festival in Hong Kong and later on, I was selected to represent Hong Kong in the Venice Biennial as an artist. After that my artist career stopped (laughs) and then I worked more as a curator. I curated programs for museums and festivals. Right now, I am the chairman for the Arts Development Council – only the Film and Media Committee, chairman for that committee. I am also the committee member for acquisition committee for M+, the museum for West Kowloon – Hong Kong Museum of Visual Culture. That's the work that I do.

I am also full-time diagnostic radiographer in a hospital in Hong Kong. So, I just get off work and attend an Art Council ceremony and then come here.

Sometimes I combine my work life together with the art life.

I just quit being a director in Videotage. And I try to have more time to do my own work again. So, I am now going back to work on myself alone rather than as a curator to work with other people and to develop more collective things together.

ARTWORK

In the past – maybe 200 years ago, an art piece would be something that you can hold in your hand or you can really say that, "it's this thing. This thing is the artwork." But as we have artwork that is intangible or time-based even...

Now I can see more and more of an artwork that I cannot describe it as a ... it has a beginning or an end. And it is quite open I think.

This is the work that I made just two days ago. I was inspired by the first picture.

Usually, I would put all the first impressions, the first inspiration in the first picture of the video. So, if you want to understand my video work you probably just ask me, "why did you use this as the first picture?". Then I can almost explain to you the whole ideas. And this is about... This picture, if you recognize it, it comes from Beijing, the CCTV tower. This picture at the end – it's just a printed picture, it's not a movie and you can see the Pantone colour here and it's called APEC Blue and you have the RGB value at-tached to it. So, it's a very accurate blue that you want to use for APEC, the conference that was held earlier this month in Beijing with all the important politicians, economics, persons ... The reason why we need – or Beijing needs – to produce this accurate blue is they want to have a blue sky for Beijing and they all want to – when they have the press image – all the blue skies match the same blue colour. And so I have the inspiration from this picture. The moment that we are experiencing APEC or when the news talk about APEC, Hong Kong is also experiencing a very important pro-democracy movement. We call it "Umbrella Movement" or "Umbrella Revolution" and the colour of the Umbrella Revolution is yellow – if you know about it.

So, we have the yellow ribbon on the chest. Those people who are ... not anti-pro-democracy but those people who are pro-government, they are ... they wear a blue ribbon. So, you may see one or two pic-tures of policemen wearing the blue ribbon when they are on duty – even though a lot of people would say that policemen should be neutral to their political view point and should take all the ribbons out when they are on duty. But then the Hong Kong government would say, "we have free speech. They are allowed to express their opinion." But they ... if the policemen want to express the opinion of a yellow ribbon they are forbidden. So, a different kind of free speech.

The letter here is ... I have to explain it maybe, each character. This means the colours, this means Gold. The gold letter also signifies the courage – the colour of your courage, something like that.

And blue sky – very simple, blue. So, it's all about colours and how ... or about whether the colours is true and how you would make history.

And I play with words. I have a lot of playful ideas about words. I start with ... if you recognize: all throughout the video there are three characters. And I keep the first one the same all the time. The first one character means "true" or "real" and our slogan for the Umbrella Movement is "we want true democ-racy".

So, I have "true" a lot of things, a "true" something. The first one that I have is a true blue colour or a true blue man. It can have many meanings coming from that. So, I also at the ... probably you won't see it now but this is "true scene", the scenery. These pictures that I used to generate all these different colours are from the 26th or 25th riot or ... not really riot, but I mean ... those (?) police are beating the general public.

I play with the sound also. And when I play with the sound, then the Cantonese speaking part comes in. Actually, there is a lot of Cantonese ... it's being marginalized the last two or three years under the communist policy. They asked the Cantonese speaking ... Cantonese TV station to stop making Cantonese program.

I mean the Mandarin speaking people don't understand the Cantonese. WE understand. Maybe I understand 30% of Mandarin but the normal, ordinary speaking I can understand almost 90%.

For them, they understand maybe 0, maybe 5% Cantonese – or even no. So, Mandarin people are really afraid to deal with people who are speaking the language they don't understand and so they always want to stop people speaking Cantonese.

They also think that if we can speak Mandarin they would have more control and we will be like "the one", the equal one rather than we have differences. Now, because the Cantonese speaking majority of people in Hong Kong – really, majority meaning 98% of the people speaking Cantonese – if they can turn us into Mandarin speaking, probably they can control us. Actually, this is a fear of Hong Kong people that if we all turn into a Mandarin speaking society, then we become just another city in China – we are no different actually. So, there are many politics going on, just because of the language.

And there are also words that I play with masculinity, with the gender or the sex. I mean, the sex elements, the politics elements are always my interest. You can also find the sex part, maybe the gender part, there – later. You'll see the words.

PRODUCTION

At the beginning, as I said, I work quite closely with the stage. So, the production will start together with the stage, the video together with the stage. Well, in the mid-career, I also used a lot of archival images and I started to collect a lot of images. Videotage has an archive now (laughs). There's a lot of video that we collected. We tried to form an archive and tried to build a history. By collecting I think I am making my production because by collecting different images I would have to organize my ideas through these images. And I always want to ... I am more interested in playing with the hard gears – like the cameras or the lighting or ... you know ... or even dark room technique. I played with dark room when I was younger. I like effects a lot and I played as a VJ when I was together with the stage people.

So, actually, I like the interactiveness between me and the machine. And I talk to them; I feel that I am talking to them. Now, I see the machine as something that I can learn from and also something that has intelligence that can learn by itself.

When I present more new media artworks over the last 15 years, I see more and more artworks that are really talking to me. The machine is talking to me, not only the artist. I really want to make artwork that I can have a dialogue with the machine. Or – not really like the metallic machine but the biology and the science and the technology. Or even the outer space.

MATERIAL

I would say time and colours and space, video of course, yes. But I would see video more as a river because it is kind of not stable and it is floating all the time and you really cannot catch it. So, that's the reason why I like video so much. I think it has its own life. I can put on a video for ... I don't know .. for a life-time. If someone wants to see it, they can see it. Like a surveillance camera: I love the surveillance camera because it has its own life. If I don't look at it, it will just stay on and do its own thing. And I think video is like that. It has its own life. I am really interested in life, basically. That's why I am still working in a hospital: because I can see life and I can see the time. I have a moment to understand it. Space is actually quite new to me. This language.

MEDIUM

I think the medium is the message (laughs). I really believe in that and I think everything is the medium. Of course, I use video as the medium but I like – as I said – its liveliness, its instability and I like its being electronic. And it's like the old version of the cyber world. And it's so unstable that you can have many different colours and the world is just not the real world that you are looking at. But at the same time, you believe that it's the real world because you always think that video capture is the things that you are looking at. But actually, there are a lot of lies and that's the medium that I like. It has like a true character.

The theatre space actually inspires me to do video installations because I think the cinematic space is really different from the physical space that you can go into, you can immerse into and so, I think this is a very important moment that I learn what video artists can do in a space that is not your home. And also that is not a theatre with actors but you can treat your audience as an actor or you can be the actor. There is a lot of dialogue in the space of the installation I think.

PROCESS

I enjoy all the editing process when I am dealing with moving image. And I enjoy all the research process when I am dealing with curatorial concepts. I think the thing I enjoy least in the art-making process is talking to people, actually (laughs). I prefer to work alone or to be quite nerdy. I just work with the computer. Talking to people is kind of tiring for me because they would just add more noise to my head rather than help me think clearly. Reading books is actually good because the person that I am talking to is silent.

I always want to keep things as simple as possible. Because I think if it's too complicated ... Life won't be that complicated. Life – what we need – is just very simple things.

PRESENTATION

I usually would deal with the space first. And then, if that space has a meaning, then it becomes a place. And if the place is in the context of the time – for example, Admiralty in the context of 2014, November, it's the Umbrella Movement, is that place.

I don't care what kind of space or what kind of place I really want to present. The first video that I made, I just showed it in my home. I mean, that's enough for me. At least there are maybe one or two who people can look at it.

After I finish the artwork I would like to talk to the audience. But not before I finish it. So, if I can reach them, the audience, I would like to hear them talking before I talk. Because if I talk, I will just explain it. I kind of think it's really dull, boring to explain it. Because I already promised to myself that I keep it very simple and very direct (laughs), so, I think I don't need to explain it.

INTENTION

I think an artist would just do an artwork and share with some people. Just like cooking a cake. The function would be just like the cake, right? You can share with people (laughs) but there will be a little bit more if the artwork stays on the audience's mind and if the artwork draws some kind of motivation towards something, that artwork is very important then. It can draw someone to rethink about what is art, it can also draw someone to rethink what is being a human being, or what it means to be Chinese. Or what it means to be living in this social media technology-driven world. And if we are talking about this and of this, resonance into other people's minds and putting a seed into the mind, then the work has a social function. It's like, I give you the cake and you eat it, it becomes your flesh (laughs).

METHOD

In the beginning of my career I worked quite often with a theatre group and I would need to listen to a lot of different ideas, especially from the director Danny Yeung and about the overall concept of the theatre space in order to generate ... or to discuss about how I can contribute or how I can develop my idea within the framework of a theatre. So, I think the first important thing to understand and allow myself to do is to listen, really. To listen and to see. To sit quietly off-stage and look what's happening on stage and let my brain drift (laughs) and find the ideas that are right for the theatre.

Sometimes I work as a documentation person. This kind of active ... not analysis, but active thinking of what's happening on stage is quite important to how I film the stage, how I see the space, the light, the actors.

But also how I will edit it at the end. So, I need to interact with the space, the acting in real-time when I do the documentation.

I enjoy the moment that I need to have this interaction and active thinking.

But if you are talking about a method to formulate the idea, then it's really like the light bulb. When is the moment that the light bulb would shine? (laughs) I don't know. But I think it has to be very sensitive and you have to have a belief that everything can be your muse. The belief is very important.

A lot of people told me that the artwork has its own life. I feel the same, too: that you can't really say, "ok, I have this method", and then you will go up. It won't happen like this. But editing – I have my own style. I will make the video dirty and I would like to have low resolution. Because this is kind of like anti-corporation, anti-news or – documentary, you know. I like the messiness of this because life is kind of messy to me, too. I have too many double life and triple ... and quadruple life now (laughs).

ART

I think art is probably my greatest love. Actually, I feel that it teaches me how to be a good person, how to love other people and even how to talk to people.

Because I never find anything that I really want to tell the people except for the artwork. So, if you are not talking about my artwork, I have nothing to tell you. Not interesting. I don't have an interesting life to tell you and I have so many work.

BIO

* 1961, Pau graduated from the Hong Kong Polytechnic with a Professional Diploma in Diagnostic Radiography in 1985 and 2008 with an MA in Visual Culture Studies, from Chinese University of Hong Kong. Since making her first Super-8 video in 1984, Pau has been working to promote technology, both in her work and curatorial endeavours.

In 1986, she co-founded Videotage, a media art collective in Hong Kong aiming at creating an umbrella organization for media artists, that facilitated artistic and cultural exchange and promoted video and media art in Hong Kong. Pau is also the founding director cum curator of the Microwave International New Media Arts Festival and Wikipotopia – Festival for collaborative futures.

Pau works as an independent cinematographer, curator, art critic and researcher focusing on Asian new media arts. She also works as an art consultant for her newly founded company Inter-Act Arts. Pau's single channel videos and video installation works have been extensively exhibited worldwide in film festivals and art biennials. In 2001, 'Recycling Cinema' was selected and exhibited at the Hong Kong Pavilion in the 49th Venice Biennial.

Credits

The interview was conducted on 28 November 2014 at Kung Chi Shing's studio in Hong Kong.

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