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# Video Art in Hong Kong: Organologic Sketches for a Dispersive History

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\*an essay dedicated to all experimental artists and future researchers of Hong Kong video art

## (1) *Ruminations*

There was nothing **inevitable** [*sic.*] about (British) video art practice's entanglement with late modernism, Chris Meigh-Andrew noted, in his *A History of Video Art*, quoting Stuart Marshall (1949-03, UK). "The availability of portable video technology was co-incidental with a period when radical strategies such as alternative exhibition spaces and hybrid practices had become a significant aspect of avant-garde activity." (Meigh-Andrew, 7) Such remarks can be read double ways. The historical path of video art of a certain locality cannot simply be assumed to repeat in another despite the global-homogenizing effects of media technology. To make sense of the history of video art of a place, such as Hong Kong, one must begin to allow apparently unrelated human purposes, courses of events, institutional histories, incidents and accidents, personal calling, as well as desires that precede and surround the popularization of a named practice, to shed light on this single medium and its players. This latter position embraces the wisdom of media archaeology,<sup>1</sup> enriched by Bruno Latour's call for the study of shared agencies between humans and artifacts integrated into the same framework,<sup>2</sup> and finds wholesome integration in Bernard Stiegler's view of organology.<sup>3</sup> While contextual factors may have determined a lot of what happened, in most media history studies, we are not always ready to come face to face with the fact that the inner logic of a medium, especially how the tool itself affords practice, could have driven certain directions of development more than we have understood simply because we leave it out of our investigation. I shall open myself to consider as many of these issues as possible: tracking down institutional provisions, processes, artists and their facilitators, the disparate but abundant locations where video art activities were realized and made visible, and what has been left out, so as to generate a tentative portrait of video art in Hong Kong, in contrast with other regions.

The originating myths of video art in the west evolve around a few names and one machine in particular, the Sony Portapak. Clare Morin (former SCMP writer) echoed, in her attempt for a quick profile of video art in Hong Kong in 2008, "The art form first appeared in the early 1960s, when artists such as the South Korean-born American artist Nam June Paik and French artist Fred Forest used Sony Portapak cameras to document events and later screen the images. It was very avant-garde – rebellious in the way it veered away from the commercial art market, video works were very difficult to sell." (Morin)

Jamsen Law, *Solstice to Solstice* (2012). Image courtesy of Jamsen Law. Photographer: Yvonne Chan  
羅琛堡《Solstice to Solstice》(2012)。圖片由羅琛堡提供。攝影：陳立怡

The mythic object, the “video portapak”, suggests video art’s ancestry lies with television. The video portapak was “a portable or mobile video system that is completely self-contained, battery powered and can be carried and controlled by one (strong) person... One person now becomes an entire TV studio.” (Bensinger, 155) The first portapak, Sony’s ½”-tape, b/w, DV-2400 Video Rover (consumer grade), was introduced in 1967, a two-piece set consisting a video camera and a separate video tape recorder (VTR) connected by a chord, which then required a Sony series VTR, to do the play back.<sup>4</sup> It took videocassette tapes that allowed twenty minutes of continuous recording time. Consumer-grade portapaks marked the beginning of shooting outside the broadcast studio and liberation from required access to broadcast-grade equipment for video art creation. By today’s standard, this device would deem too cumbersome.

Catherine Elwes, who started working with video in 1981,<sup>5</sup> recalls that “the combined weight of a Portapak recorder and camera was over 18lb” (Elwes, 19), or 8kg, 8(W) x 14(H) x 25(L) cm in dimension, but depending on the model and brand, the complete equipment set could weigh up to 50lb. (Bensinger, 156) The consumer-grade portapak cost USD1500 per unit when it first came out, and the rental could be USD75 per day.<sup>6</sup> Elwes describes the general situation back then and the specific case of artist Dan Reeves<sup>7</sup>:

“Even in the late 1970s, the basic video equipment was still very expensive for the average artist to buy and most people relied on colleges and artist-run production centers to lend or rent them the equipment at favorable rates. In 1981, with the help of several grants, Dan Reeves spent \$100,000 (US) on a top of the range three-tube camera and recorder. In the ensuing decade, with rapid improvements in the technology, he went on to spend a small fortune on the newest machines, each item virtually obsolete by the time it reached him.” Elwes reported her own experience as well. In 1982, her “bottom of the range Sony camera cost £1,000, the Portapak, a further £2,000,” and that did not include editing equipment which was beyond her budget. Still that was more affordable than film. (Elwes, 19) Portapak’s advantages were really about real-time recording and a less expensive carrier for images (the reusable magnetic tape as opposed to celluloid film). The portability or versatility of analog video we so easily assume did not happen until the introduction of another “machine,” the consumer-grade camcorder in 1983, this time, a camera-recorder-in-one device, which operated with portapak’s same cassette-tape format.<sup>8</sup>

French composer-videographer Robert Cahen, who made video art history with his piece *Hong Kong Song* (20', 1989),<sup>9</sup> effectively summarizes the trajectory of video art over the decades he has lived through, which I find handily applying to many HK artists: video art began as a moment of intense work to fuse sound and images with experts from more than one area whereas in contemporary times “video artists are free to work alone,” afforded by the latest software packages.<sup>10</sup> We are in a milieu in which it is more likely that we take video for granted due to its ubiquity. Imagine video art without the ease we presume. Local artist Jansen Law recalled, in a recent post-screening discussion (IFVA’s 20th anniversary gold-award winners’ parade), that in his early days of video-making, the only place he could go with editing facilities was the “Zemen Media Centre” in Room 708 of Hong Kong Arts Centre,<sup>11</sup> the other being “Videotage.” Duncan Wong, winner of several IFVA awards in the early years, conceived his works largely with the availability

of the Hi-8 camcorder and his works are reflexive of the ease he enjoyed.<sup>12</sup> Also among the early IFVA winners, I find Jo Law's *Old Earth* (1996, SVHS, 7' 30") manifesting a fresh image aesthetics in visualizing written text with analog video effects. Wong and Law's works can only be understood fully as video, not just cinema.

As my research indicates, the technical dimension is basically absent in local literature except with traces that await our scrutiny. Wong Chi-fai's *Educational TV* (color with sound, 4') and Johnny Au's *Pure Cloud* (color with sound, 8'), both made in 1987 and screened in VHS format, are the earliest "video" works included in screening programs I found made with pre-Hi-8 camcorders,<sup>13</sup> whereas *1988-1989, those days with a dizzy mind* (40', color with sound) by Wong Kee-chee (1947-2010), made 1989, is the earliest documented work screened in U-matic format.<sup>14</sup> The earliest traceable digital works (in DV format) did not appear until 1997, according to the "i-Generation" series in 2001. (Hong Kong Film Archive, 28, 37, 38) In "IFVA" ("Incubator for Film and Visual Media in Asia," annually in March, formerly "Independent Film & Video Award"), the year 1997 (the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition) saw the biggest mix of formats: other than 16mm and super8 film, video formats ranged from U-matic Hi Band, VHS, VS, Betacam DV to Hi-8. (Celluloid never disappears entirely but diminished significantly after 2003.) Starting 2003, video formats in submissions have been primarily DV.

Among the different historical timelines for video art read on-line, one "earliest" candidate of video art history is a video game invented in as early as 1958 by physicist Willy Higinbotham at the Brookhaven National Laboratory in Upton, New York.<sup>15</sup> This game work, *Tennis for Two*, pushes the history of video art back for almost a decade from the portapak anecdotes. The work was cited for a possible "beginning" in 2012, in one of the first survey exhibitions on video games, at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, which looked in retrospect at the so-called 40-year evolution of video game as an artistic medium. The exhibition effectively delineated the "history of video game" in five eras based on game technologies deployed.

Unlike video games, driven by technological changes, "video art in HK" is a dispersive history. It has lived under different names and in different domains, most prominently "independent films," "experimental cinema," "short film/video" and "documentary." The thought of locating video art as "game" seems rare in Hong Kong, probably due to game's association with commercial profitmaking, but also due to inadequate technical knowledge to make sense of games as most researchers and critics are cinema-oriented. There are valuable exceptions, though – "Culture of Play", the 2005 edition of "Microwave International Media Art Festival" curated by Hector Rodriguez and Linda Lai, the ADC-funded single-channel "PLAY> An Experimental Video/Game Project" (2005) curated by Ip Yuk-yiu,<sup>16</sup> presented at the Hong Kong Arts Centre and Habitus Design Space (founded by Kith Tsang), and the IFVA's "New Playable Art" exhibition (2014) curated by Olli Leino, among the very few examples – in which cases game was rationally and conceptually tied to video art.<sup>17</sup> Single-channel video works alluding to games or adapting game technologies are present, though in very small quantity, such as Ip Yuk-yiu's *Another Day of Depression in Hong Kong* (2012) and *Super Cop World* (2005) by Eric Siu.



There is no readymade singular story of video art in a clearly defined institution waiting to be summed up. We have to find it, construct it and defend it. The term “video art” in Hong Kong remains muddled, under-examined or taken for granted, even for many who are using video regularly to create works. And I am calling for more critical distinctions: to begin with, what is “video” in “video art,” and what makes the practice of video “art”? The fact that our video art seems either too broad or suspiciously subaltern or subsumed is why this essay needs to be written. Not only were many works left out because they were unavailable for viewing, but also left out of discussion due to narrow, hastily assumed definitions of the term by critics, curators and programmers, or the lack of a historiographic framework that points researchers to look in places beyond the obvious. Who owns the discourse of video art in Hong Kong – policy-makers, funds-providers, curators, film programmers, educators, artists, libraries or archives?

The historical passage of video art as we now know, from its onset moment, has never been confined to a single-channel screen mode. I argue, though, it is still worthwhile to isolate the single-channel strand in order to get a fair view of our local practice of video art due to how it has been imagined, assumed and framed. The main perpetuator for “video art” so far remains curators and programmers in government-funded or independent art and cultural organizations. The most common-sense approach I have found in Hong Kong is to think of video art as two kinds of “alternatives” to mainstream cinema – “experimental cinema,” without celluloid, and subsumed under “independent film” that is available outside mainstream theatrical circuits. Jimmy Choi suggests the two terms are interchangeable in use in Hong Kong, and points out that the 1980s was a “down and quiet period” for independent cinema in Hong Kong. (Choi 1998) Whether “independent” or “experimental,” video has been considered just a recent form of cinema involving a different machine but nonetheless part of the genealogy of cinema. This implies that a major site assumed for digging up the facts to construct a HK video art history would be screening events by a number of non-commercial programming and exhibiting bodies, the prominent ones being the Hong Kong Arts Centre’s IFVA and other projects, Hong Kong Film Archive, Videotage, Microwave, and certain sections of the “Hong Kong International Film Festival.” This perhaps is the way things have been with our video art. But there are two sets of problems implied in this view that confines video art to single-channel screen works. First, is there no way to think of video as art other than a kind of “experimental film”? What about the art of video that is not pro-filmic? What about understanding video for its unique place, contribution and possible dialogues with other artistic medium? Second – and let’s affirm that video art is a unique form of experimental cinema, are video works exhibited outside commercial circuits automatically experimental and alternative in practice? The conflation of “independent” and “experimental” film raises serious issues. What does being “independent” mean in “independent cinema” as the term is used in Hong Kong? And what does “experimental” mean? What is the link between independent and experimental works?

I argue that “independent” means several things: first, to be independent of marketing concern – thus demanding a maker or an artistic collective’s full self-directedness in asserting her/their choice of method and purpose; second, independent of mainstream distribution-exhibition channels and the implied constraints on length, type and form of work considered desirable – thus allowing one’s works to be

shown to differentiated audiences and in alternative venues; third, independent of the limitation of tools and institutional provisions, thus showing how the innovative mind overcomes defects and limitations, including the subversion of consumer usage (hacking), to explore innovative funding and economic models; and fourth, independent of the industrial model of production which highlights division of labor and differentiation of expertise to maximize efficiency. The first point I mentioned above, that there should be no criteria higher than the maker's autonomy in purpose and method, is distinctive of art. Such purposes can be many and any, except those that reduce the spectator to a consumer subject to the rule of marketability, or reproduce conformity. In this sense, art prescribes experimentation (the first and third point). Culture is dynamic, not static, and so is art. Art is in need of constant renewal, especially when certain (once) innovative practices have lost their relevance, or simply become conventions, and therefore entered a stage of stagnation and decomposition. (Debord) Godard's *Le Gai Savoir* was a self-conscious dialogue with Guy Debord and the Letterist International and the Situationists' *détournement* technique (a method of defamiliarization). (Price) But that was 1968, France. Experimentation in this light is basic and necessary, not only for the survival of art, but also ethical commitment integral to art.

I acknowledge the place of single-channel video as a continuation (as much as critical disruption) of experimental cinema. To cut off video art from experimental cinema would be to cut it off from its progressive precedence. However, my account of (single-channel) video art in HK has deliberate exclusions. I do not consider, in general, works from the "Fresh Wave" relevant to my research as the project is clearly self-identified as a playground, or a preparatory school, for young makers to learn to become future makers of the local film industry. Its selection and jury system are committed to upholding an industrial standard in terms of audio-visual conventions, genres and production model. I also leave out of my discussion those video works presented in "independent" circuits, such as Hong Kong Art Centre's IFVA screenings and other film festival occasions organized by "Ying E Chi", that are intended to be a test for industrial standards, or accrued evidence a maker needs to prove her/his potential or competence for full professional entrance into the industry, one day. Many of these works are with finesse and craftsmanship. But I think they belong to a very different story – that of how independent cinema should be sustained and nourished to innovate tomorrow's commercial cinema through less expensive video equipment – and I am proposing this not without great skepticism. It is not easy to uphold such differentiation. Past the millennium, this has emerged and gradually settled to be IFVA's dominant discourse or "official story," as the project publicizes loud and clear those "alumni" who have now made it to the big screen. In the past, I could easily locate video art pieces from the former "alternative," "documentary" or "MV" sessions in earlier editions of IFVA, but not any more since the merge of all groups into a single Open Category (though understandably justified). Perhaps video art has gradually shifted to IFVA's "Media Art" category. I have proposed in the last paragraph that video work with an experimental edge (i.e. "video art") should be premised on an independent spirit that demands full self-directedness of purpose and use of medium, economic independence and flexibility of production model. This is when the "independent" and the "experimental" intersect.

In the following, I shall clarify what "video art" pertains to in existing literature on video art in the west,

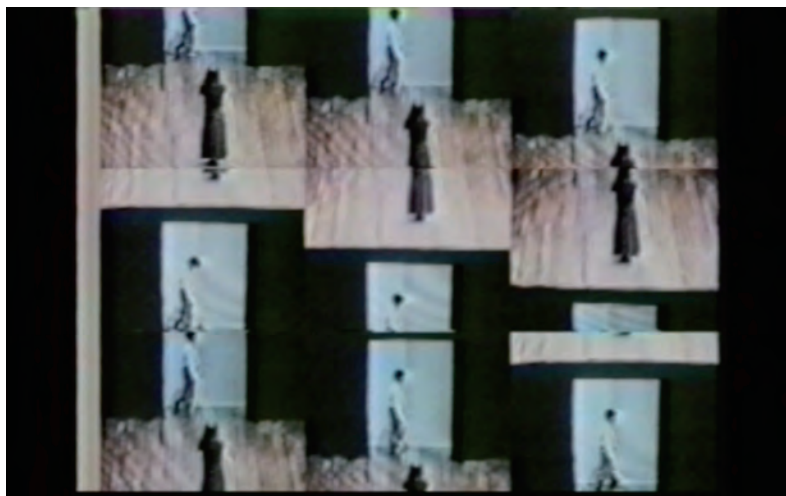
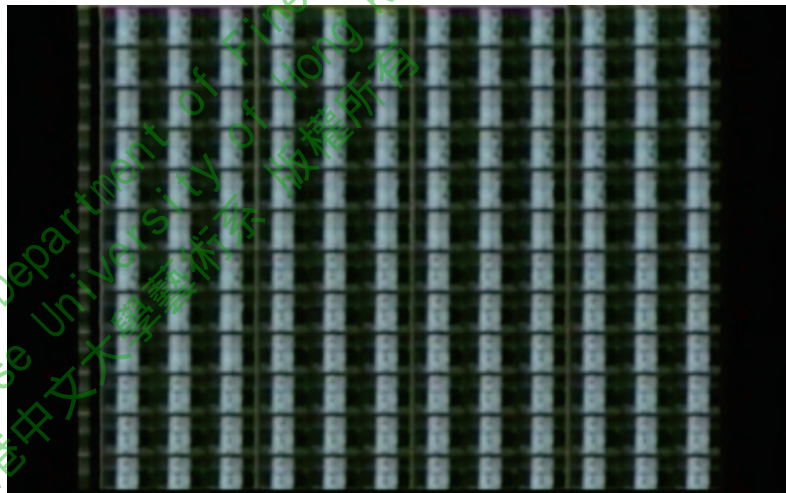
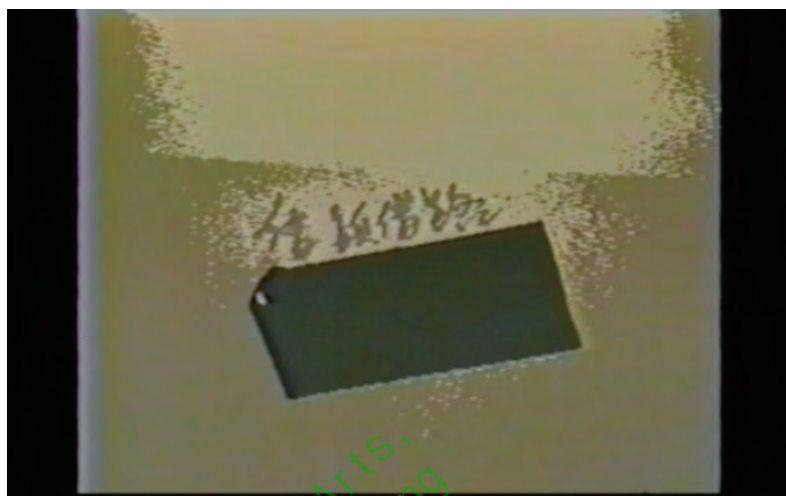
especially to highlight its “experimental” connotation and the integral meaning of “video” in “video art”; second, to explore the facts and unique factors sustaining HK’s local video art activities; and, third, to characterize video art in and for HK. My account is, therefore, at once heuristic (as it contemplates ways to write such history), diagnostic (aiming to comment on the lack of and the need for an informed view of “video art”) and prescriptive (as it suggests directions via education, programming and curatorship).

## (2) *Their “video art” stories, fragments of our stories*

According to the US story of video art I read, the emergence of “video art” was tied to the growing importance of television in the everyday domain since the 1950s,<sup>18</sup> which brought about new modes of viewing and alerted users and specialists to the many features that differentiated television from film, i.e. celluloid-based moving image. Not long, filmmakers and artists threw attention on television as a unique artistic medium – one with a different concept of color, a shift from light-based projection of a formed image to image created at the receptive end as a result of the manipulation of signal transmission. All this suggests the many new creative possibilities that lie between the shooting and reception or displaying images. There is yet another type of response at the low-tech end, such as from Nam June Paik and members of the Fluxus, who focused on TV as the television set, a domestic object impregnated with new technologies of the day. A quick look at the table of content of one of the earliest systematic study of video art published in the US, *Illuminating Video* (1990), reveals US practitioners’ schematic thinking behind the thirty-something years of experience they had lived through. The book has the following sessions: (i) “Histories” (which covers the history of technics and highlights the relevance of the history of American documentary to video history); (ii) “Furniture/Sculpture/Architecture” (which reminds us of Paik and the Fluxus, among others); (iii) “Audience/Reception: Access/Control”; (iv) “Syntax and Genre”; and (v) “Telling Stories.” In my view, this manifests an American orientation for moving image analysis, by which the practice of video is measured by degree of deviation from mainstream fiction-filmmaking.<sup>19</sup>

Greater mobility of the recording equipment was the impetus of the use of video in social activism, which saw new species of documentary such as diary films. The impact of portability was also articulated in video activism, the most prominent of such cases the video projects by and surrounding the activities of the “Black Panther Party for Self Defense” founded in October 1966, a moment marked by the transition from the portapak to camcorder, called “guerilla television” – or should it be “grassroot television”? – as Deirdre Boyle and others have examined in writing. (Boyle 1992, 69; 1997, 26-35; Ryan, 39-40)

The US story above points to two directions: on the one hand, a more medium-specific direction that explores image as not just a photographic object, but a playground with signals and signal manipulation, and, on the other, the changing role of the video camera in its social terrain as it became spatially and temporally more adaptable. In Hong Kong, the latter became an important incentive with the birth of “Video Power”, founded by Jimmy Choi and Cheng Chi-hung in 1989. As for the former, I could only recall a few sketchy anecdotes. Ellen Pau once described to me how she made *Drained II* (1989) (Plates 1, 2, 3) in a home-kitchen fashion, or backyard style – by cross-taping with a couple of consumer-grade



Plates 1, 2, 3  
Ellen Pau, *Drained II*  
(1989). Image courtesy of  
VMAC (Videotage Media  
Art Collection)



VCRs. To me, Pau's anecdote speaks of how creative desires often precede the presence of custom-made tools – in this case, the drive to piece images together and to construct them graphically on a flat screen surface would not be hindered by the absence of an “editing” machine. I also recall John Wong showing me a trial piece made on mini-DV tapes, composed of an image sequence of one shot devolving visually in 12 rounds of generation loss of pixel resolution. Made in the late 1990s, this small experiment was a tribute to the magnetic-tape phase of video, but using a digital video-camcorder. His later work, *The Man with the Mobile Phone* (2003, 5'), is reflexive of the different digital formats and the pixel effects of resulting images.<sup>20</sup> Prominent video artist from the early IFVA, Mark Chan, said his work, *Retouch (I)* (1995, color, Beta, 10'15") was an exercise to play with a newly arrived editing/effect software in his work place.

To art historians in the UK, video art is a branch of experimental film as much as a branch of “artists’ film” in the broader terrain of contemporary art. In David Curtis’ *A History of Artists’ Film and Video in Britain*, video is part of the story of how fine artists sought to experiment with cinema by adapting existing fine arts resources, such as portrait, still life, collage, pop art and so on, to moving images. (Curtis, 87-150) Curtis, however, singles out a “video as video (not film)” discussion to assert that video art emerged as a result of “artists’ first engagement with broadcast television” towards the end of the 1960s. Despite the discourse of video art flourishing upon portability and mobility, Curtis reminds us that there was no easy access to television in the early days, “Opportunities for access to video equipment and the apparatus of broadcast television were so rare.” (40) It is no surprise that many early British players in video art (1966-71) actually worked with broadcast engineers, such as Lutz Becker with those at BBC and David Hall at Scottish Television (Edinburgh), which entitled them to access to the new machines. Hong Kong has had a rich television broadcast history. We have sufficient literature that describes the interflow of cultural labor between the TV sector and the film industry. We also have many attempts from Cultural Studies scholars like Eric Ma, Ng Chun-hung and Lui Tai-lok, deliberating television via questions of culture industry, state ideological apparatus and location of popular culture and sentiments. But how many of those professionals who had access to broadcast-grade video facilities also took the path of experimentation – and who are they, and what came out of their experiments?

Another equally important factor at work in the UK was the emergence of groups that sought to promote “video as a medium for reflecting and mediating social change,” such as the research project “Social Matrix” (around 1969), aiming to produce “a map of society seen from the individual’s point of view,” which is also a proposed axiom for the use of video as it evolved from broadcast scale with enhanced versatility. A most prominent defender of video as a tool in “guerilla action” was John “Hoppy” Hopkins (departed January 2015), who had close affiliations with the many underground cultural groups.

There was yet one more incentive for video art maturing in the UK that I find affinitive with (the spirit of) artistic experimentation: the very limits of video invoked the artists’ determination to overcome them. Early video images were restricted to black and white; “cameras were heavy to hold and slow to respond to changes in light”; moving the camera fast would result in bleeding images; and “editing” was by and large live-mixing of image. These apparent defects became the facts of artistic innovation. A new phase of video

art emerged in the early 1970s as the portable non-broadcast technology (starting with the Sony Portapak) became more sophisticated. (Curtis, 40-41)

Curtis cited three more key impetuses beyond the 1970s. First, the presence of video in art schools was sustained by the availability of affordable production equipment, especially the fact that videotapes are reusable. Second, there were additional venues to show video other than television as some art galleries began to show video works. The growing importance of the notion of “artists’ film and video” suggests artists’ self-directed response to this changing environment, which is also what distinguishes UK video art history from its US counterpart. Curtis identifies two types of artists practicing video: starting 1970s, conceptual artists, mostly ex-sculptors, who found the moving image a new type of artistic raw material to work with; and, mainly in the 1980s, artists with a media background who took advantage of the playback decks for their automatic re-wind and re-play functions, giving their works a looping presence that fits the gallery space setting. Third, video art was promoted and popularized through programming for exhibitions. (Curtis, 42) These three factors seem to apply to Hong Kong although the idea of “artists’ film” was not widely observed until after the millennium when the notion of “artists’ video” deepens as more active videographers are primarily working within the contemporary art arena.<sup>21</sup> In Hong Kong, currently known video artists can be roughly differentiated as those who come from a cinema tradition and those contemporary artists who are using video, plus a growing number of artists who are conjoining more disciplines (computing, anthropology, architecture, design, literature and various intermedia experiments). Their practice mainly began after video became a handy tool. Video art in Holland, Germany, France, Japan and Latin America offered useful references for us – the distinction between video as video technology (media art strand) and television as a physical object (contemporary art strand); video art fuelled by humanitarian projects for social change and political activism, the emergence of workshops and events outside art and film schools where more people were exposed to video for exploration; and the gradual emergence of “experimental documentary.” (Meigh-Andrews, 26-31; Alonso, 298-303)

The intermediation of video (as cinema) and other existing art forms due to the expansion of technology in the individual fields is a powerful discourse in the west. Many household names I have researched are part of this story. Among the well-known examples there is Andy Warhol’s experimental videos in the early 1960s, especially those documenting performances (Editor’s note: writer’s emphasis. Same for all underlined text in this essay). There was Nam June Paik’s 24-monitor *TV Clock* (1963/1989) and his other projects “using the video camera as a paintbrush, and the TV screen as a canvas.” Gary Hill (e.g. *Primarily Speaking*, 1983) and Bill Viola (e.g. *Nantes Triptych*, 1992) explore video’s unique contribution in capturing “a stream of conscious thought, to show the mind’s eye moving from one thing to the next as a narrative (completed with metaphors).”<sup>22</sup> In this light, Bill Viola’s video and sound works since the 1970s “explored the unique potential of video to present a mixture of the live and the pre-recorded,” a position opposite of that upholding video’s immediate, objective transparency. (Meigh-Andrews, 276) Jenny Hozler brought poetry into video, such as her works in the exhibition “Installation: Jenny Hozler” (1989-90) at the Guggenheim.<sup>23</sup> To this list we must add Wolf Vostell (1932-98), German painter and sculptor, also a

pioneer in happenings and an active collaborator with the Fluxus, who integrated video art with physical installations and environment, most notably for his 1963 piece, *Sun in Your Head (Television Decollage)* (7'),<sup>24</sup> which has a performance-installation version, the *6 TV Dé-collage* shown at the Smolin Gallery in New York, now part of Museo Reina Sofia's permanent collection in Madrid. The works of Austrian artist Peter Weibel extensively explore how video as an artistic medium opens up unique modes of installation. Weibel created *Epistemic Videology (I+II)* (1974), by which "he set up a live electronic mix of texts from two opposing cameras shot through a sheet of glass." Like Viola, this work explicitly challenges assertions that video is transparent: Weibel "showed" with his piece that no matter how 'transparent' the medium is, the "transformation of meanings" is an undeniable fact. (Meigh-Andrews, 276) With the above in mind, we should be encouraged to look more boldly and hypothetically for video presence in other domains such as games, digital walls, architectural installations and so on to broaden our research on video art in Hong Kong in the future.

### (3) *What is "video" in video art? – beyond a medium-specific quest*

"There can be no video art without machines." (Saiz, 66) The discourse of the portapaks coheres the many proliferations in video art resulting from the one-person-as-mobile-studio possibility, thus in the democratization of the tools, and the opening up of the community of video artists with unique facilitation for social engagement. The contribution of Peter Weibel, Wolf Vostell, Nam June Paik and so on points us to a different discourse – a medium-specific strand that upholds experiments of TV/video-specific provisions. Paik's collaboration with video engineer Abe Shuya, the *Paik/Abe Synthesizer* (1969), has seven cameras "calibrated to receive seven colors, each perceiving/photographing only a single color," a machine "that made it possible for him to edit seven different sources simultaneously – in real time."<sup>25</sup> This is a typical video art piece of that generation playing with image capture, recording, playback and image display. It also demonstrates Paik's vision of television as a new form of painting. As he said in his manifesto "Versatile Video Synthesizer," "This will enable us to shape the TV screen canvas as precisely as Leonardo, as freely as Picasso, as colorfully as Renoir, as profoundly as Mondrian, as violently as Pollock and as lyrically as Jasper Johns." (Paik, 55)<sup>26</sup>

Paik's manifesto pertains to two dimensions, which I adapt here to call the "DECONSTRUCTIVE" and the "PHENOMENOLOGICAL", to help tracing the practice of video art in Hong Kong. With the deconstructive mode, I have in mind Hector Rodriguez (more later), and to a lesser extent Ip Yuk-yiu, to refer to artistic methods that seek to break down the (video) machine and machine process to examine the individual functioning of its components to stretch low-level capabilities. What is normally called a shot, a frame, an image with certain mood and chroma, camera movement and so on would be treated as scan lines, electro waves, gray scale, pixel resolution, motion vectors and so on. With the phenomenological mode, I refer to an artistic approach that concentrates on the perceptual "surface(s)" of the image and the moment-to-moment change in an image stream through manipulating the low-level components I just described. I think of Jamsen Law who persists in "painting" with video (more below). In Rita Hui's *I Do Let Her My Head Have* (2004, 16'30"), the image surface is impregnated by fragmentary story details,

displayed but not conventionally narrativized. The work thus becomes a multi-layered image discourse – in my words, a meta-image with a thick narrative surface. For Hui’s piece and Law’s work in general, we need a different vocabulary to describe the actions they “apply” onto the perceptual surfaces: rubbing, scratching, over-laying, collage, “décollage” and so on. In Rodriguez’s works after *res extensa* (2003),<sup>27</sup> the deconstructive and the phenomenological converge procedurally and computationally. Ip’s *The Moon is Larger in Peking* (2004)<sup>28</sup> and his computational works, such as *Between the Threshold of Good and Evil (no. 1 Double Indemnity)* (2011)<sup>29</sup> and *Rehearsal for Muted Films (2)* (2014),<sup>30</sup> all digital video transforming cinematic works, are deconstructive towards subtraction and abstraction.

To the list of video luminaries of instructive value to this essay, I must include the Czechoslovakian-born but primarily US-based Steina and Woody Vasulka (or the Vasulkas), who also stepped into video art after their encounter with the Sony Portapak.<sup>31</sup> It is their works, individual and collaborative, which lead us to often equate video art with electronic art.

The Vasulka’s own experiments in the technology of electronic sound and image production often focus on the use of found image and sound, subject to signal manipulation, a committed objective to exploring the functioning of video over the pursuit of pretty images. A few examples of their early works – e.g., the Vasulkas’ *Don Cherry* (1970), *Golden Voyage* (1973) and *Spaces II* (1972), Woody Vasulka’s *Swan Lake* (1971) and *Vocabulary* (1973), and Steina Vasulka’s *Distant Activities* (1972) – show how they reinvent a visual language unique to television, highlighting signal interference, image loop, multiple-layering, image mutation and so on. Weibel is the Vasulkas’ best defender against those who think they are simply interested in effects only. He argues that “special effects are not purely trick effects from the magic department, but formal derivations from the two basic techniques of cinema, which are cut and superimposition,” demanding that in order to fully understand video, we must first “forget what we have learned about the history of cinema.”

The Vasulkas care as much for the hardware aspect of video art. Upon the invitation of Weibel, the couple curated the exhibition “Pioneers of Electronic Art” (Linz, Austria, 1992), in which they gathered “machines” from the early days of video art, such as synthesizers, video feedback machines and the variety of electronic art components from the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>32</sup> This reminds me of local artist-curator Ip Yuk-yiu’s “art.ware project,” which features annually alongside the IFVA’s media art competition.<sup>33</sup>

The Vasulkas’ practice of video art, in my view, illumines the following aspects: first, moving beyond pure lens-based imaging tradition and, second, highlighting the playful use of found images. In both, the main creative moments involve gaining better understanding of the tool and process. My local examples of the deconstructive mode above align with the Vasulkas’ directions.

I propose there is yet a third kind of video art practice in Hong Kong we should take note of, the “**CONSTRUCTIVIST**” mode, by which I refer to a practice that breaks down audio-visual components (deconstruction) in order to play up the processes and results of adding up. Here, I find the experiments



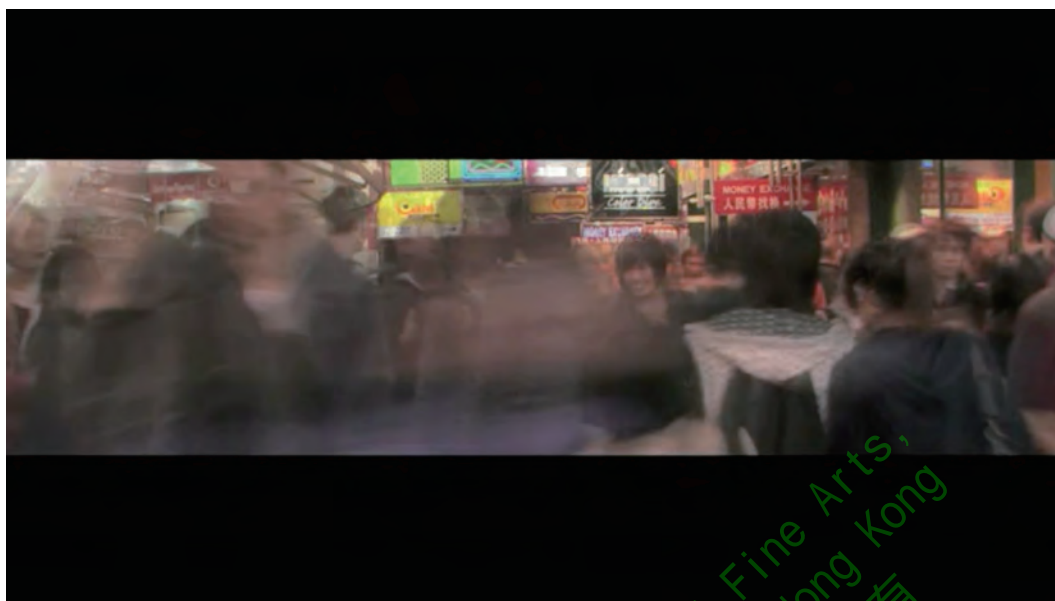
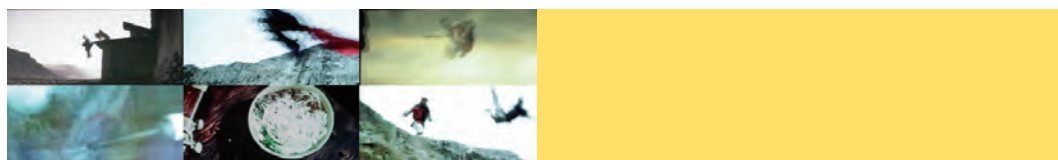


Plate 4  
 Vasco Paiva (João Vasco Paiva), *Action through Non Action* (2009, 8'52"). Image courtesy of Vasco Paiva

of HK-based Vasco Paiva (João Vasco Paiva) interesting cases of the constructivist. Paiva's videos strongly emphasize the assembling and re-assembling of audio-visual information and how to add them up based on simple technical rules. The cityscape of Hong Kong is his primary raw material, which he transforms with softwares custom made for each individual project. His play with audio-visual information articulates "loss of control" and "abstraction," two artistic aspects that originate in his background in painting in Portugal and his digital art education in Hong Kong.<sup>34</sup> His *Action through Non Action* (2009, 8'52"), (Plate 4) for example, is self-reflexive of his real-time presence in the midst of Mongkok, re-orienting our visual experience of this bustling spot through the artist's own field-recording experience. His experiments on the notation of shapes, such as *Architecture is... Discourse with Music*, is the additive assemblage of audio-visual information from different moments of videography. Paiva's works are entrenched in the diligent activities of field shooting and field recording, an intimate relation to space via his haptic presence. But the operations he applies on his visual material push his works ultimately into the lens-less imaging species. Along the constructivist trope also finds my own digital video installation works, the three-channel *Door Games Window Frames: Near Drama* (2012) and *Vaulting Space* (2014).<sup>35</sup> (Plate 5) Both works play up a programmable combinatorial logic based on rules of abstraction, using found local popular film fragments. They deconstruct drama with dramatic raw material for a generative art exploration. In general, most of my single-channel video works are about constructing with, or finding the narrative body for, found audio-visual materials, be they material from popular cinema, acquaintances' collectibles or my own video archive. The currently HK-based Daniel Howe takes a very different kind of constructivist mode. Among his general pursuit of digital literature, he has also established an alternative form of digital video, such as in *Engine of Engines* (2012), by which a computing program he wrote responds in real-time to network traffic. The "machine" grabs scattered, data fragments within a server system and scores them

Plate 5  
Linda C. H. Lai, *Vaulting Space* (2014). Image  
courtesy of Linda C.H. Lai



into a sixteen-screen, generative sound and video installation. Each screen is a node that embodies a “processing unit, audio output, and flash memory...suspended in space by connective wire,” each reacting “dynamically to the nearly one thousand computers in the School of Creative Media’s labs, offices, and classrooms.”<sup>36</sup> With a similar approach, his recent work, *The True Story of Ah-Q* (2014), constructs with grabbed data, this time from the internet – images with tags that correspond to the English translation of Lu Xun’s short fiction are turned into ensemble of image displays as Howe’ machine “reads” through the text in real time.<sup>37</sup> To this list of software engendered digital works, I must add a classical case of constructivist craftsmanship in the analog phase – Ellen Pau’s “hand-made” *Drained II* (1989).<sup>38</sup>

Taking stock of half of a century’s artistic experiments, media art theorist Yvonne Spielmann summarizes video praxis into three strands – “documentary, experimental art, and experimental image-making.” This is the ground on which she demonstrates “the spectrum of possibilities in video as a medium and point to connections with other forms of media.”<sup>39</sup> In *Video: the Reflexive Medium*, though affirming the growing emphasis on “interactivity, complexity and hybridization” in digital video, she elucidates her “video as video” thesis and what makes video art:

“Video is an electronic medium, dependent on the transfer of electronic signals. Video signals are in constant movement, circulating between camera and monitor. This process of simultaneous production and reproduction makes video the most reflexive of media, distinct from both photography and film (in which the image or a sequence of images is central). Because it is processual and not bound to recording and the appearance of a ‘frame’, video shares properties with the computer. ...” (Spielmann, overview) Video has metamorphosed from technology to medium, with a set of aesthetic languages that are specific to it, and current critical debates on new media still need to recognize this.”

Taking the “video as video” imperative seriously, I find HK-based software artist Hector Rodriguez has the strongest kinship, whose practice is distinguished by a rigor in deconstructing digital video technology while re-inventing screen-based practices. Almost all of his works investigate “the specific possibilities of information technologies to reconfigure our experience of moving images and our relation to film history” by integrating video art with mathematics and computer science to explore the tension between digital abstraction and cinematic representation.<sup>40</sup> Most of his works are presentable in a single-window format, either as a single projection or on television, though they could best be, sometimes, multiple projections. And yet the single screen surface is zoned into multiple channels to display the hidden processes of “simultaneous production and reproduction” (Spielmann) of the image that we see evolving. Rodriguez’s works are full of simultaneous (mathematical) calculations. In *Gestus-Judex* (2011/2012), the

movement from one frame to the next in *Judex* (France, dir. Louis Feuillade, 1916) is translated into a consecutive series of motion vectors, which is computed in ways that the system identifies all frames from the same movie with similar vectors. The multiple simultaneous calculation serves multiple functions: it forms and deploys a database-library using the frames in the entire movie, as well it allows real-time comparison between individual frames through the juxtaposition of a certain number of matching frames, the number of matches changeable by the program. On the surface level, the phenomenological side, *Gestus-Judex* – with nine screen units on a single window – is a visual polyphony showing matched graphic movements perceivable to the beholders as they re-learn their attentiveness. On another level, we are watching the result of simultaneous calculation “live,” thus also sharing the artist’s analysis of the visual construct of this classic silent film. *Gestus-Judex* is preceded by important experiments in two prior works. *Floupoints::Kiss* (2010) is an abstract video produced by the custom software the artist wrote, which reads the movement in a segment of Andy Warhol’s film *Kiss* (1963). The procedures used by the computer to analyze the film are then represented as an abstract diagram of colored lines. The same algorithm that works on the visual is used to generate the sound of this work, building a code-based organic link between the video’s visual and audio counterparts. A more recent work, *Theorem 8* (2013/2014), (Plate 6) works along similar methods though, because of a different mathematical problem the artist explored, this time, resulted in the use of visual data of one film (Jean Luc Godard’s *Alphaville*) to cast movements of light and shadow on a second film (Maya Deren’s *Witch’s Cradle*).

In these works described, “what lies in the transitions between images” becomes an important artistic question; “superimposition,” a common method in conventional film language, opens up for new meanings whereas shot-to-shot transition seems irrelevant as (the notion of) what we call a shot exists no more.



Plate 6  
Hector Rodriguez,  
*Theorem 8* (2013/2014).  
Image courtesy of Hector  
Rodriguez

Rodriguez's works are good local examples of what Spielmann calls "transformation imagery." His works raise questions about the nature of new media, beyond video art, at the same time deeming the familiar "screen form" transitory in character: as art experiments, video can be the raw material for procedural treatment, a medium to break down, or simply a valid and productive mode of display because of its cultural references. Rodriguez's heavily computational-process-based pursuits, however, cannot be fully understood without the critical humanitarian commitment of his projects. Visualization of mathematical information is his response to the black-box problem, that is, the hiding of algorithms in a machine's operation to favor convenient consumption and quick sales, which is the case of many software packages in the consumer market. In Stiegler's terms, consumer software packages encourage "stupidity" (Stiegler, 3) as they, instead of encouraging us to learn and engage seriously and critically with technology, lull us into the illusion of technological competence. Visualizing unseen and reduced micro processes is opening the black box, which is Rodriguez's broad objective, although he understands the black box can never be fully opened. Each of his works is therefore an alternative "machine" that attempts to reveal certain aspects of what is hidden as well as critique consumer-based software culture, and in his case, the subservion of "surveillance technology" is the key.

#### *(4) HK video art – traceable paths (and beyond)...*

Many of the names called in the previous sessions have been introduced to Hong Kong, either in person or through the presence of their works. They have somewhat cast an impression on our local video/media art landscape, if not upheld a vague standard to our local artists. But what kind of impression and what impact precisely? Nam June Paik's television sculptures may have become celebrity/collector's items in high-end art galleries, and Bill Viola's video piece just resurrected in "Art Basel Hong Kong 2015".<sup>41</sup> But Steina Vasulka, the world's pioneer of video art, was in Hong Kong in person in 2013 for a special appearance to celebrate "50 Years of Video Art." In addition to her talk at the School of Creative Media co-organized with Videotage, a selection of works by Steina and Woody Vasulka was presented, curated by Kristin Scheving.<sup>42</sup> Key practitioner and theorist Peter Weibel was a speaker in 2011 at "Alchemy" (Microwave) at the "Art and Science Symposium: Conjunctions of Artistic and Scientific Practices". The title of his talk was "the Future of Media: from Visual Media to Social Media". A year before that, his collaboration with Jeffrey Shaw, *T-Visionarium* (2008), a work of interactive database digital cinema, was a key work at "Screenarcadia", Microwave 2010. In as early as 2001, Gary Hill showed his video works and did a live performance at the Hong Kong Cultural Centre in "Hill(scape)," Extra Microwave Media Art Festival, organized by Videotage. In 2002, Goethe-Institut and the Hong Kong Art Centre co-organized the exhibition "A Long Tale with Many Knots - Fluxus in Germany 1962-1994." Over the years, bringing in international celebrities has gradually become a general practice. Perhaps it's time we innovated our mode of exchange.

#### **Where to start looking? - Video art as experimental cinema: discourse ownership**

If we look at our video art history as just that of single-channel works, we can easily say our video art



history is divided into one-plus-two phases: a pre-video art period (1960s-1970s) that is alternative/experimental film followed by analog video (around 1987) and digital video (1996-97 and after). Experimental filmmaking has undeniably earned for video art a legitimate place in the independent or government-funded cultural arena. Without doubt, “I-Generation: Independent, Experimental and Alternative Creations from the 60s to Now” (2001, abbrev. IEAC below) is the most comprehensive and informative survey exhibition to date, which includes 210 local works spanning over thirty-four years from 1966 to 2000, presented in thirty-two screening programs in twelve topical sessions, curated and introduced in writing by May Fung, in which digital videos are singled out as one of the phases of independent cinema.

IEAC underscores video art as an “interim phase” of an artist’s moving image career, a step to full commercial professionalism – suggested by the fact that its “Opening Program” contains eleven short films by makers many of whom are now household names in our film industry, e.g. Ho Fan, Alex Cheung (Cheung Kwok-ming), Mabel Cheung, Alex Law, Eddie Fong and so on.

For historical record’s sake, Fung, in her survey essay in the IEAC proceedings, also includes a list of video artists. (HKFA, 7) Only less than half of those on the list are still active in video experiments: Yau Ching, Hung Keung and Ip Yuk-yiu. Hung Keung has moved into expanded cinema, presenting videos that concern with spatialization, interactivity and Buddhist-thinking alongside his usual single-channel videographic exercises, and is among the few local video artists who started with cinema and are now represented in art galleries. Yau remains committed to queer issues, and her most recent works are action-art, participatory research using videos such as *Bad Boys: Bad Girls* (2008) and *We Are Alive* (DVD, 99’, 2009). The latter “documents an experimental process of conducting media workshops in juvenile detention centers in Hong Kong, Macau and Sapporo, Japan,”<sup>43</sup> which takes me back to a powerful work of hers, *Diasporama: Dead Air (short version)* (1995, color, U-matic, 39’). Her video camera was where the interviewees’ home or work place was: direct presence, straightforward talking heads of candid articulation on the felt impact of the 1997 handover on individuals, what you don’t hear on television, although alluding to the talking-head convention of TV news formats.

### Classic cases of video art as independent, alternative and experimental moving image

I have already stated my position on the IFVA’s losing its grip on video art in its Open Category and yet somewhat retaining it in its media art projects. Now I want to cite one work that to me is an exemplary case showing video artists’ self-identity of their practice in the 1990s. This work, now collected in the DVD, the 2<sup>nd</sup> IFVA Award Winner Collection (1996, released 2006 by Ying E Chi), is *Hong Kong Road Movie* (1996, Beta, color, 29’, Distinguished Award for Documentary) by Makin Fung. In the final session of the piece, Fung gives us a handy summary capture of the discourse with which he aligns, directly in text across the screen:

*“This video is written, realized, both aesthetically and technologically by makin fung bing-fai in*

*the year of 1996 at Hong Kong.*” Fung highlights the artist’s full ownership of his artistic process as opposed to a crew-base production mode.

“*Watching this video is only made possible with the help of many people and organization... one of them would be YOU who have been sitting here for the past 30 mins... and the other helpful people are ...Jimmy Choi...chan chui wah by HK arts centre and of course all the friends I met through the internet.*” Fung suggests a different kind of collaboration and community support.

“*The production and screening of this video is supported by URBAN COUNCIL, HONG KONG ARTS DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL and is sponsored by HANG SENG BANK, CHINALIGHT & POWER CO. LTD.*” Fung playfully suggests a different sort of financing.

To me, this work also speaks of an aesthetic mode common in many works of the late 1990s. In *Hong Kong Road Movie*, the whole work is one fragmentary image discourse comprised of multiple layers of narrative knowledge, sometimes meditational, expository or reflexive on the medium and the artistic process, but overall wrapped up in strong visual lyricism. There is a determined use of the “I,” collective and the artist’s own, pushing forcefully the diary form premised on the confession of the real-time experience of the five senses, often with specific attention to perceptible trivial details in the daily setting. Many of these characteristics were already there in Fung’s first IFVA award-winning piece, *I Have a Dream about a Short Video on the Making of a Short Film for Competition* (1995, color, Beta, 30’). Though a Silver-Award winner in the Drama Category, it is full of media and stylistic quotations: personal confessions, image references to film, TV and their distinction, popular songs, talking-head commentary, reflexive views on making a work, interviews with individuals with an overseas immigrant family, vintage newsreel, recent TV news footage, public service announcements and so on surround a simple love story that cannot be isolated from the social cultural milieu. Heavy use of voice-over – sometimes personal but also chorus-like multiple-strand talking – relativizes narrative knowledge: is it one person talking, or many HK subjects thinking? *Hong Kong* begins with a key date - June 31, 1997 – which does not exist in our calendar. *I Have a Dream* starts with visuals typical of the opening and closing of a film, annotated by a VO, “I haven’t been making a film for two years,” marking a transition to the video generation.

In resonance with features of this period finds the work of Mark Chan, *Happy Valley T-Zone* (1997, Beta, 20’). Like Fung’s, this piece is a structured work that blends the highly personal with the social-political into one undifferentiated space of inter-subjectivity; the entire visual narrative is the enacting of walking through choral-talking and the penetration of the video camera through the urban space. *Happy Valley* also provides a side-view on some of the widely shared literary references that have fuelled artistic imagination, especially Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, marking an important moment of how literary and cultural studies penetrates experimental moving image. Another good example of this strand is a project called *Video Essay: Works of a Cross-disciplinary Creative Project* (2003). Initiated by the “Hong Kong Institute

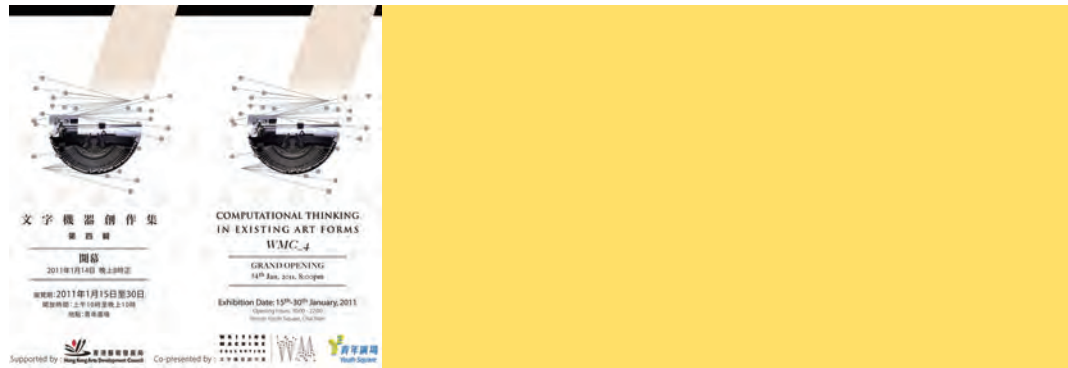
of Contemporary Culture,” the project invited 10 writers and 10 videographers so they would pair up to “cross-interpret” each other’s work, a way of creative innovation. Commissioned videographers include: May Fung (with writer Xi Xi), Ernest Fung (with Hon Lai-chu), Yau Ching (with Yip Tak-fai), Jamsen Law (with Lui Tai-lok), Young Hay (with Chan Chi-tak), Mark Chan (with Yu Fei), Wong Sau-ping (with Kong King-chu), Ng Tsz-kwan (with Dung Kai-cheung, John Wong (with Shu Kei) and Ellen Pau (with Huang Chanran).

## Video as media art

Videotage, which introduced world-class video artists to Hong Kong and gave birth to the “Microwave International (New) Media Art Festival,” embodies a self-conscious break from local experimental cinema. “Videotage” was first the name of a program organized in 1985 by the “Phoenix Cine Club,” one of the cine clubs popular from the 1960s to 1980s). One year later, some artist members of the Club started a separate collective, an independent “Videotage.” Alternative, progressive sentiments marked this new small collective from the very beginning: many of the video artists belong to the queer community, and many also affiliated with, or friend of, members of an avant-garde theatre group “Zuni Icosahedron” (founded 1982 by Danny Yung), involved in helping with video documentation of Zuni’s performances. Phoebe Wong, Videotage’s current Deputy Chair, notes, “To my knowledge, some of them did not just do documentation per se. They explored different documentation modes at that time. In addition, Zuni started the practice of incorporating video projections in their stage performances.” A good example of documentation evolving into a piece of video art I find is *Objectivity* (1989), the video documentation of a multimedia show of the same name, now an independent after-life of the performance as the camera work, editing and added texts clearly “interpret.”

From a positive viewpoint, Videotage and the Microwave’s achievement invites us to look beyond single channel works to re-imagine video as part of a varied media landscape. “Digit@logue” (2008),<sup>44</sup> Ellen Pau’s awarded curatorial project, part of the “Hong Kong Art: Open Dialogue exhibition series”<sup>45</sup> at the Hong Kong Museum of Art, showcased 20 media artists and groups. Video is juxtaposed with its digital counterparts spanning robotic, web and computational art. “Included in Pau’s show are iconic works from the past 25 years, including pieces by Hung Keung and the 32-channel installation *Video Circle* (1996-2003) by Danny Yung.”<sup>46</sup> (Morin) As a historical survey of media art in Hong Kong, Digit@logue also included the video projection works by Ng Tsz-kwan, Henry Chu, Kingsley Ng and Ho Siu-ki, and a sub-curated representation of the “Writing Machine Collectives” with five selected works by Bryan Chung, Justin Wong and Hamlet Lin, Morgan Wong and Yvonne Lau, Mike Wong and Hector Rodriguez. The most recent Writing Machine Collective exhibition (WMC, the 5<sup>th</sup> edition, Oct 2014), “Tracing Data: What You Read is Not What We Write,” with surveillance and computational cinema as its dual themes, was a big feast of video and screen experiments, with contributions from Jess Lau, Daniel Howe, Mike Wong, Zoie So, Winnie Soon, Audrey Samson, Ip Yuk-yiu and WMC core members Linda Lai, Hector Rodriguez and Justin Wong.<sup>47</sup> Already in WMC’s 4<sup>th</sup> edition, “Computational Thinking in Contemporary Art” (2010) (Plate 7),<sup>48</sup> the main exhibition, with twelve digital video projections, was accompanied by a curatorial

Plate 7  
 “Computational Thinking  
 in Contemporary Art”  
 (2010) publicity material.  
 Image courtesy of Linda  
 C.H. Lai



experiment on single-channel videography with a focus, “Video as Writing Machines,” featuring twenty-one short digital videos, many by student artists.<sup>49</sup>

### Video as contemporary art practice

Past the millennium, more and more artistic users of video are those without prior training in cinema, practically or theoretically. Take, for example, “This is Hong Kong: 15 Video Artists,” an international traveling showcase to eight cities, 2009-2010, curated by Alvaro Rodriguez Fominaya for Para/Site (PS).<sup>50</sup> The 15 artists include: Hung Keung, Adrian Wong, Howard Cheng, Woo Ling-ling, Linda Lai, Kingsley Ng, Ip Yuk-yiu, Warren Leung, MAP Office (Lauren Gutierrez & Valérie Portefaux), Silas Fong, Kacey Wong, Chow Chun-fai, Leung Mee-ping, and Choi Sai-ho (s.t.). Among these artists, Ip is the only trained filmmaker in the classical way. Lai has a cinema studies theory/history background and her practice consciously incorporates cinematic concepts although she is equally self-conscious in her intermedia approaches. Woo, Cheng and s.t. are trained videographer of the digital age. These five artists are more strongly entrenched in the history of experimental cinema. Yet we have Woo whose artistic practice was primarily in theatre, community art and video documentation as art; Cheng has a predisposition to design and installation; and s.t. works with digital imaging in a performance context. The rest of the artists on the list all have a distinct contemporary art orientation, which necessarily forces the usual moving image critics to re-establish their ground of analysis

*Rati* (2000-2001, mini DV, 8’),<sup>51</sup> a work that put fine arts-trained, Para/Site founder Phoebe Man onto the map of video art, phenomenally derives from her background and interest in making objects and installation. Man describes her video making uses a “sculptural method,” which is evident in the light-sculpting actions in her *Washing the Light series* (2002-2008) (Plate 8) and the *Touch the Moon series* (2005-2014).<sup>52</sup> A few more examples would further demonstrate the ubiquitous presence yet complexity of video art within contemporary art. Cedric Maridet, Ph.D. in phonographic studies, and whose video work *Huangpu* (2005) (Plates 9, 10) was awarded Prize of Excellence in the “Hong Kong Art Biennial 2005,” places a strong focus on synesthesia between the visual and aural. The video works of Samson Young, music composer and scholar in sound art, and winner of several awards from ADC and Bloomberg



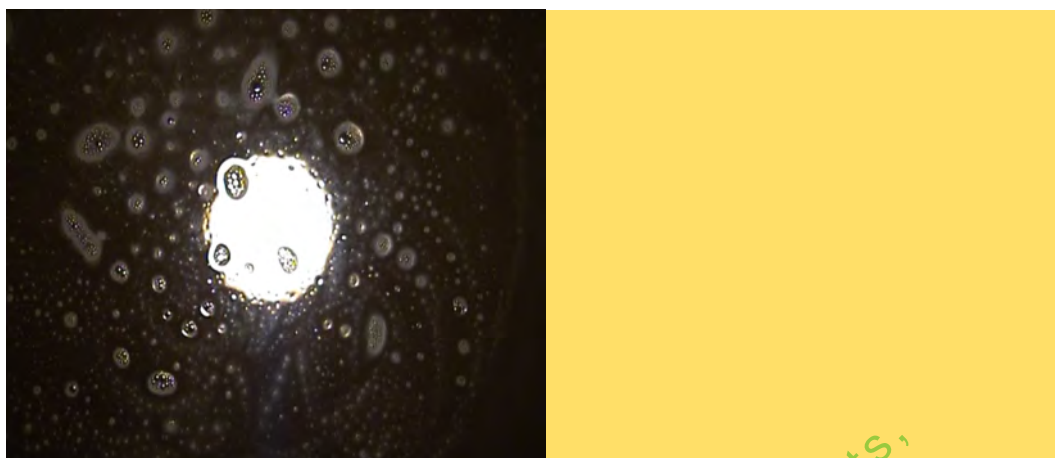


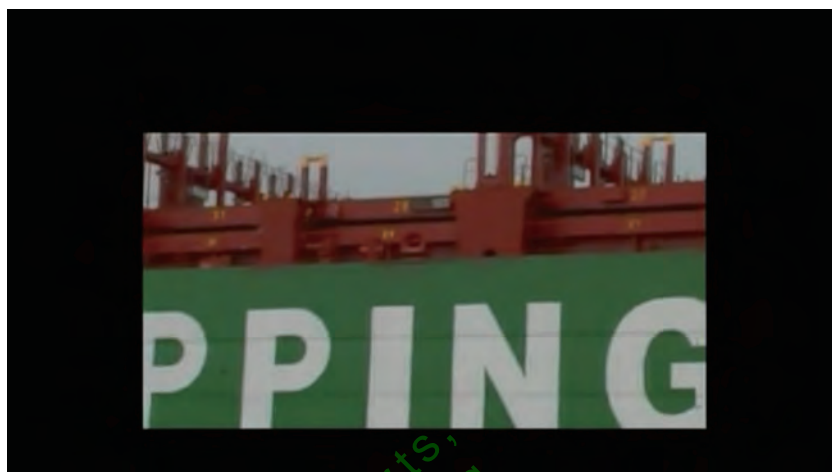
Plate 8  
Phoebe Man, *WASH*  
(2005) in *Washing the Light*  
series (2002-2008). Image  
courtesy of Phoebe Man

Emerging Artist, grow out of his flâneur exercises per field recording, experiments that “re-design” our hearing experiences, and his exploration in documentation art.<sup>53</sup> His *Muted Situations* series (on-going) explores sound in ways that are possible only on video. To Warren Leung, video “occurs” in specific states and moments in an ongoing process of research-creation as his works are almost always works-in-progress.<sup>54</sup> A recent Jansen Law work, *Solstice to Solstice* (2012) (Plates 11, 12), is an audiovisual performance with sound artists Steve Hui (Nerve).<sup>55</sup>

In a different vein, currently HK-based Zheng Bo, in his action-art project on Philippine domestic helpers in Hong Kong, deploys video as the agency of contact, to incite articulation and document the momentary live. The context in which to examine Zheng’s videography is social engagement, participatory art and relational aesthetics. Video *O ilaw* [Oh Light] (3’32”), part of the work *Sing for Her* (2013), (Plate 13) is a participatory installation created with Filipino domestic helpers in Hong Kong. The completed work, *Ambedkar – Sing For Her* (finished Hong Kong 2013) now lives on and circulates the participation events in the form of a neat video documentation.<sup>56</sup>

As far as I remember, the use of video in the visual art domain in Hong Kong was gradual and persistent past the millennium, alongside the pervading effort to shake off the narrow implication of the term “visual art” to call on-going practices “contemporary art,” which is more embracing. In 1999, Ng Tsz-kwan, now professional producer in digital spectacles, showed his video installation in *X.Y.Z motion* at PS. In 2001, also at PS, there was Enoch Cheung’s “DIGITALL: Mixed Media Works by Enoch Cheung. Social Club” (2002), curated by Warren Leung, had video works (by Rodriguez and myself) sitting comfortably among other art pieces of varied media. Same year, PS held the first of its HK Artists 1980s series, featuring May Fung in *May Fung: Everything Starts Here*. In 2004, resident-artist Kathy High (USA) is primarily a moving image artist who also explores the digital media and dialogues between art and science. At 1a space, one of the earliest events marking the embrace of media art as a regular practice was the 1<sup>st</sup> edition of WMC exhibition in 2004, followed by the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition in 2007, in which programmed video works, video projections and screen-based imaging took up a majority of the works exhibited.

Plates 9, 10  
 Cedric Maridet, *Huangpu*  
 (2005). Image courtesy of  
 Cedric Maridet



The Digit@logue project (described in the last session) was evident of the dissolution of strict boundaries between media and other art forms in the official paradigm of local culture. In the incubation years of M+, I recall a series of consultation sessions took place, chaired by Lars Nittve, in which the question of whether media art and contemporary art should be seen as one or to be differentiated in the museum space allocation. “Consensus” differed from session to session depending on the participants’ background. On the one hand, I see the many strengths of an integration model from funding perspectives. But we must not stop to consider what it is that we are losing hold of by removing the distinctions too soon – in terms of education, audience development and the sustenance of a critical vanguard from a broader humanitarian concern.

### Video Power...and forms of socially engaged videography

Nothing I have delineated so far speaks fully of the paths of Video Power (VP). Whether they want to be considered “art” remains an open debate. But my reasoning to include VP as video art is defensible:



Plates 11, 12  
Jamsen Law, *Solstice to Solstice* (2012). Image courtesy of Jamsen Law. Photographer: Yvonne Chan



their project involves critical awareness of tools and the mainstream media practice, with a commitment to make a difference by thoughtfully bringing the video camera to strategic places in critical moments. Founded in 1989, VP considered itself alternative media-makers, that is, to do something outside the mainstream media. As well, they were anti-mass media, demanding their agenda to be purposefully specific rather than inclusive of all walks of life. The initial moments of the group had social activism as its main emphasis.

Plate 13  
 Zheng Bo, *Sing for Her*  
 (2013). Image courtesy of  
 Zheng Bo



But there are more reasons to defend VP's qualification for art. Like art, VP upholds autonomy of purpose, resisting co-option by mainstream classification, genre convention, or targeting its content at anything/anyone beyond the makers' vision. The VP agenda is similar to many experimental art practices because it calls for an alternative economic and practice model of production, turning itself into an anecdote for the decomposition of established institutional practices. VP projects have asked many questions typical of experiment art practices – regarding what to shoot, who to shoot with and how, all out of self-conscious appropriation of tools at hand. In their conceptual realm, Jimmy Choi, for example, is very clear about their alliance with French anthropologist, theorist and filmmaker Jean Rouch's *cinéma verité*. The maker's presence is to enact the presence of the camera, which then asserts reality by provoking the latent and the potential on the spot, which is very different from the assumptions of objective, observational camera called Direct Cinema in USA. VP's purported theory of the camera explains their provocative, often confrontational method. Provocation is not a style, but a belief in the capability and affordance of technology. Confrontation is not just an attitude, but also a test of the maximum capability of the tools, including their place in epistemology.

Provocation is how we now often characterize VP. But the founding moment was clearly about community formation. In early 1989, Jimmy Choi put an ad in the local magazine *Film Bi-weekly* to call for interested individuals to record Hong Kong before 1997. "To shoot something on your own was a fresh, novel



concept at that time. Many people grouping together to work is a way to share resources,” Cheng affirms. That was a short-lived spell of enthusiasm but impactful sparkles, but it certainly led to the founding of VP the same year. The peak period of video production was around 1991-1995. Collaborators included workers union, “Association for the Advancement of Feminism,” “Protestant Industrial Council” and so on.<sup>57</sup>

The VP history itself has raised a trajectory of questions “social” and “political” in nature, from the slippage of power relations, the trap of power play among activists, to whether benevolence (acting in the name of love) is in fact a subsidiary of government domination and so on (Cui, 36-38). Many of these questions were turned into methods and institutional position for videography: they prefer rawness and avoid professional “polished-ness,” smooth narrative and soothing, pleasurable images. To assert their “local-ness,” they stay away from overseas film festivals. They persist in addressing the local people as target audience and focus on uncovering their suppressed voices. They prefer bringing the camera to where people are and where problems are about to happen – with or without audience. They also favored entrusting a video camera into the hands of their filmed subject so it became part of their everyday life (Cui, 39-40). Their workshop method brings together videographers into conversations. VP associates were all down-to-earth action-initiating participants where they found their video subjects. They would have more to add to the VP sketch in this essay – Wai-ye, Tam Man-kei, Yuen Fun and so on, as well as those anonymous residents in Wanchai and VP workshop participants who actually started to edit their own stories.

The recent shooting and collecting activities built around the Umbrella Movement suggest the need to take up the issue of the ubiquitous presence of the digital camera more seriously and to critically examine the easy assertion of the digital tool’s democratizing power. The image rush we have witnessed is far more than just an expression of cultural activism.

### Curiosities... peculiar knickknacks...

*Mobility, Fastness – Slowness, Attention on the Everyday...*

From an outsider’s point-of-view, it is a popular discourse that videography in Hong Kong was incited by the fast motions of our daily urban environment. Researcher Joan Kee wrote in 2002 that video in Hong Kong as an artistic, expressive space is “reflective of the actual spaces of the city” marked by an “obsession with mobility.” Video works could be “a critique of the single-mindedness of such obsession or, at the very least, depict mobility as a difficult and elusive condition.” Jamsen Law’s *Getting Used to Run* (1997) is, in this context, Kee’s exemplary case with its chase-like 2-part structure: fastness also translates into “a blur of selective cuts” from archival footage from 1960s and 1970s inserted into images shot at a rapid rate with each frame being rampantly lobbed at the viewer.” (Kee, 9) While Law’s video fits her bill and is admittedly his own way to cope with the fastness of urban Hong Kong, I find Kee’s observation too much of a generalization. In fact, I find that “slowing down,” “slowing down to think,” intentional “idling,” “doing little or nothing,” “not going anywhere” and sometimes repetition with variation are the more

obvious traits of many video works I have re-examined for this essay. The effort to keep a camera still to look at mundane details of the everyday is to propose a different sort of attentiveness, a subversive gaze at what we easily dismiss.

*Thought Paths: '97 Biographies, video diaries and personal documentary*

In another essay, I wrote, “In Hong Kong, I discover that the diary film, or personal documentary, is the key to the understanding of experimentation. ... Diary films/videos as published works did not emerge as a noticeable species until 1994-1995 with the emergence of the first IFVA led by activist video-maker Jimmy Choi, where these works were often assigned the place of ‘experimental works’ in the larger scheme of local cultural production. At the very moment of their emergence, they were heavily charged with political incentives in ‘writing’ alternative histories of HK, a feature that remains obvious in recent works such as Lo Yin-shan’s *Driving Lantau: Whisper of an Island* (2011), Anson Mak’s *One-way Street on a Turntable* (2007), and various auto-ethnographic works by Linda Lai (since 2005). The diary film remains the hotbed of experimental thinking.” (Lai, 463) (Choi 2011)

In 1996, veteran TV producer (RTHK) Stella Sze and HK-based Japanese independent media producer Hani Mio, organized an independent project called “Digital Biographies of Hong Kong 1997”. They invited a group of non-filmmakers who are yet active cultural practitioners to use video to make a work about how they spent their year 1997 when Hong Kong was handed over to China. This resulted in two screening programs of 10 works in 2 screening programs published at the 22<sup>nd</sup> Hong Kong International Festival (1998). These “makers” include: visual artist Howard Chang, photographer Chu Shun, poet and professor in comparative literature, the late Leung Ping-kwan, comics artist Zunzi with newspaper columnist Chan Ya, comparative literature scholar Lo Kwai-cheung, lawyer and human rights advocate Christine Loh, fashion designer William Tang, art director/painter/jazz musician Yank Wong, Iris Lee and Fan Yuk-man. (Lai, 467-8)

Without the knowledge of professional norms of shooting, the invited “artists” could freely deploy their video camera, a situation comparable to experimental filmmaking, which seeks to take a fresh look at film without being restricted by established standards. The idea of “video diaries” “liberates the individual authors from the burden of polished cinema, and especially the normative demand on story-telling or infotainment. Out of the necessity to articulate one’s mind on/for/around/away from 1997,” they had to invent their own visual language and to experiment freely with sights and sounds, whatever they have got. (Lai, 469) It is therefore difficult to judge whether these works are good or not. We may as well reinvent our understanding of these works of self-invented videography. I just find them fascinating, in regard to how they each exercised their creative choices. The “range of choices of subject matters, the naming of one’s video, intended or unintended details resulting from the camera’s automatic capacity to preserve, inclusions and exclusions of facts and audiovisual content and so on” in meticulous ways deliver their sentiments as thought paths unfolding or unfolded. (Lai, 471) Many works in this series by non-professionals have an intense visual-writerly quality.<sup>58</sup> What have these self-conscious thought paths

unveiled? What do they talk about? So I summarized in a sub-heading, “belly buttons, absent cameras, moving house, fooling around,” to describe how the apparently trivial sentiments of these works “perform” their moral reasoning which they did not choose to make explicit. (Lai, 475) A key signature is subdued emotions – the refusal to express, neither celebration nor frustration, and a strong sense of stagnancy in the narrative time constructed in these pieces. The impossibility to “move forward” goes hand in hand with these works’ emphasis on (the trivialities in) daily life. The everyday fabric and quotidian details thus become a rich pool of resources for the assertion of their subversive strategy – to counteract big stories of (progress and hope of) the big time of Hong Kong’s handover.

### Personal calling...

An organological view for practice and change, like Stiegler has proposed, has room for individual convictions even in the midst of homogenizing institutional realities or, in the case of Hong Kong, a predisposition to a commercialized film culture. In a research interview I had with Jansen Law (March 25, 2013),<sup>59</sup> he was straightforward with his practice of video art having little to do with cinema. “From the very beginning, I stepped out of the pure cinematic.” Throughout our interview, he did not for a single time use any standard “film language,” or any concepts in cinema. Law’s practice of video (especially since 2006) employs the mentalities of sculpture, painting and theatre. “Video, not film, highlights the surfaces on which my works are shown. ... In video, I deal with ‘painting’ more freely. There is no more negotiation between the brush and image – now I am working with light and color and space. ... Color is best shown on television, not in a dark theatre.” Law emphasizes he takes no “nourishment” from cinema, but he is highly conscious of it, and critical.

Researcher Phoebe Wong, an advocate of archiving and creative non-fiction, finds Anson Mak and this writer a productive comparison. In her recent presentation at the curator’s workshop of the UK/India-based international network “VisionMix,”<sup>60</sup> her highlights of the Linda Lai and Anson Mak affirm the importance of understanding artists as individuals each necessarily striving to make sense of personal proclivities, areas of training, cultural capital and humanitarian commitment. In Wong’s understanding, their works have drawn from different resources. Mak’s basic training is filmmaking and Lai film studies. Both are into the practice of writing: “Mak is a regular blogger,” highlighting personal confessions and critical exposition, whereas “Lai takes up automatic writing” to mediate her relations to the world through chance and discovery, a political act in itself and typical of her reflexive relation with language. While “Lai is admittedly feminist” in working through theoretical and discourse histories as well as modes of practice, Mak commits specifically to queer issues, daily gender politics and production of space. “Mak appropriates archival footage for its ‘indexical value’ whereas Lai uses found footage to turn it into a meta-language” of history, culture and cinema itself. Mak’s works are participatory documentaries: shooting is a way to make memories together and engage with social subjects in the places of their makings. Her videography is an activist response to the problems of urban renewal, turning creation into research, which is the work that Wong showed at VisionMix, *On the Edge of a Floating City, We Sing* (2012, super 8 + digital video), (Plates 14, 15, 16) a three-part feature length documentary presenting three independent singer-songwriters. As

for my own works, the boundary between the fictional and documentary is contestable, which is a position I draw from Early Cinema (1906 and before), whereby there was only the innovative use of the camera without distinction between photographing what came by the camera and staging something in front of the camera. As Wong indicates, my art projects are one way or other rooted in historiography and are, therefore, all historiographic experiments. I concern myself with how language forms our consciousness and questions the epistemological function of visibility and aurality, especially videography as a specific way of knowing. A representative work is *Voices Seen, Images Heard* (2009), (Plates 17, 18, 19), which draws our attention to archival and found material as modular surfaces, highlighting at once the expressive and the figurative to question the referential validity of the images, as if screaming, “There is nothing behind the image, but only image surfaces evident of the time it was made and the tools that made it.” A properly trained filmmaker, Mak asks what Super 8 can do in a digital age. In my case, I belong entirely to the video generation. My root interest lies in the genealogy of generative art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and its manifestation in the digital age. In generative art, a work is also a component of a potential system, or the seed of future generations (of works) to come. This idea links generative art to the formation of archives, which informs my practice of videographic historiography. The key to my projects is the collecting of footage over a long period of time. Almost all of my single-channel videos are “compositions” using



Plate 14  
Anson Mak, *On the Edge of a Floating City, We Sing* (2012, super 8 + digital video). Image courtesy of Anson Mak



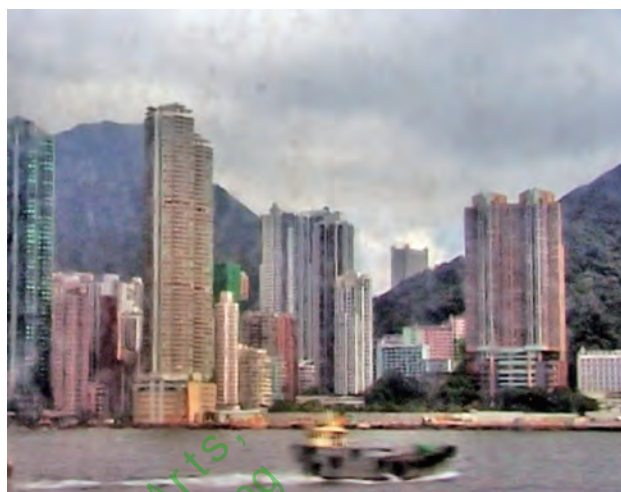
Plates 15, 16  
Anson Mak, *On the Edge  
of a Floating City, We Sing*  
(2012, super 8 + digital  
video). Image courtesy of  
Anson Mak



resources from my ever-growing personal video diary archive, which I started in the early 1990s. Each work deploys different material as my purpose takes me. I call this auto-visual ethnography as I find myself in dialogue with a stranger, that is, another subjective “me” from the past, in each “composition” by studying what “she” recorded on video.

With Video Power’s activist videography, the many ’97 diaries by video-contemporary artists and cultural practitioners, Zheng Bo’s relational aesthetics, my experimental historiographic videography, Anson Mak’s participatory documentary, and our devotion to visual ethnography, it would now be appropriate for me to introduce the fourth type of video art, which I call the “INDEXICAL-PERFORMATIVE”





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Plates 17, 18, 19  
Linda C. H. Lai, *Voices  
Seen, Images Heard* (2009).  
Image courtesy of Linda  
C.H. Lai

mode. The “indexical” side is obvious as most of these works do assert the simple recording function of the video camera, thus also the classical assumption of the photographic image’s referential transparency as the machine-eyeball witness. The “indexical” highlights the medium’s representational value. None of the works I include with this label is purely indexical. By the “performative,” I refer to works that move beyond representation and revision, writing and re-writing, to keep the circuit of meaning-making always open for renewal. (Butler, 270) Videography is a form of talking; video works can be thought of as utterances that interrupt the fabric of established norms and order of things when they are performative. Performative videography needs not be life-changing or a reversal of the social system, but instances of speech act directed towards closures in our landscape of social knowledge. Such works refuse to accept social structures as givens, but strikes open the space for re-articulation. In Anson Mak’s case, her works are performative as the process of getting the video/film done is as important as the work itself. Zheng Bo’s domestic helpers and other projects simply reclaim the subjectivities of those who may be invisible to us by giving them a voice – not a summary message of what they said, but how they said it; allowing us a phenomenological experience of their tonality, moment-to-moment twists and tweaks of their presence in front of the camera, how they dress themselves and the full duration of their articulation. This emphasis on “presence” and “presenting” (Heidegger’s concept of being in his later works) is what I describe as (abstract) sentiments turned into observable thought paths through constructing an image narrative in the ’97 diaries I discussed earlier. Video Power’s performativity allows them to accept rawness as a defensible quality, and suggests a very different set of criteria to assess what they have done. I believe I have already sufficiently explained performativity as a core impetus in my works – my montage process (as opposed to editing) sets off the viewer’s viewing experience to critique the assumptions for a stable, conforming use of language.

### **Also personal calling... Curatorial & Pedagogic Impulses**

On the more research-based “video as video” end, we have the “Writing Machine Collective” upholding technological rigor and theoretical exploration, whereas the annual “Microwave Art Festival” continues to make use of regular support and reputation to keep alive the introduction of world-class new media to the local community.<sup>61</sup> Videotage maintains a strong grip on single-channel video art and has, in recent years, focused on organizing traveling showcases of local video works to different parts of the world, with its “Videotage Media Art Collection” finally consolidating.<sup>62</sup> “Living as Form (Wikitopia version) screening Showcase” (2012-13, curated by Nevena Ivanova), “Homemade Videos from Hong Kong” (2013, to Shanghai), “Both Sides Now” (2014, four venues in the UK, curated by Isaac Leung) and so on are examples of an on-going international networking initiative. The only curator who keeps alive the “experimental film/video festival” label is Phoebe Man. She has been the Hong Kong curator for a maturing Asian experimental film and video festival community, including EXiS (Seoul), EXiT (Taipei), EXiM (Macao), KLEX (Kuala Lumpur) and HKLEX (Hong Kong). Issues she has presented through her curatorial selection of HK videos include women’s art, the cultural other, the use of second-hand material (found footage) and social engagement.

*Rare videos resurface... video art as screening activities*

Video art is not a focus of “C&G Artpartment” (founded 2007 by Clara Cheung and Gum Cheng)<sup>63</sup> as they embrace a broader concern for the local art ecology and visual art education. Their art practice is “to respond to social and cultural issues” and their program organizes other artists to do the same. A recent “idea exchange” initiative in the form of screening+discussion, called “Under The Bed” series (second Friday evening of each month since December 2013), is “to exhibit artworks that were seldom or never shown in public, for whatever reasons,” or, as Cheung puts it, “a treasure hunt in the black hole.” In April 2015, for example, To Wun, a core member of the Young Artists Association (in the 1990s), shared precious video documentation about the Oil Street Artist Village from 1998.<sup>64</sup> In 15 months, the series has dug up a broad range of “treasures” “under the bed.” From Tang Kwok-hin, there were personal diaries and carefully designed video exercises with a strong auto-ethnographic character. Kwan Sheung-chi, also visual artist, and who has been doing more video recently, shared a precious video documentation of how he and then classmate Chow Chun-fai burned all their exhibits together when their show, “Joint Funeral of Chow & Kwan,” (over a decade ago) finished. Installation artist Jaffa Lam, too, shared her video diaries and event documentation (e.g. views of the Fine Arts Department at Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1998) plus video sketches that were preparatory notes or footnotes for an art project. Painter Wayne Wong shared his drawings as a slide show followed by a few video works, including the documentation of an artists’ activity, as he wanted to move more into other media. Chu Shun (one of the contributors to the “’97 Biographies”), also showed his “treasure” in the July 2014 gathering. Organizer Clare Cheung captures the gist of the sharing in her review, “Toward the end of the screening event, Chu Shun said he wanted to organize more collective documentary actions,” referring to his participation in the “Life in a Day” project (organized by Kevin Macdonald), by which Chu invited over sixty young persons of the post-1990s generation to do a whole-day documentation on Oct 1, 2014, in the midst of the Umbrella Movement. Other artists who had shared their treasures include wen yau, Ivy Ma, Law Lok-man, Ricky Yeung, Rosanna Li and Ivano+Chan.<sup>65</sup>

The “Under The Bed” series provides us with a precious glimpse into a broad range of the many uses of video among contemporary artists. The screenings were full of documentary practices for varied purposes – from video diaries, serious documentation to work sketches and reminiscence of places and things past – which falls into the “indexical-performative mode” I proposed earlier. May Fung was the only invited guest (Feb 2014) who has been part of the cinema-based video art community. Her presence among contemporary artists seemed to be a productive event, invoking a rich, unusual exchange between the two sectors of video-users who do not usually dialogue. C&G, as its philosophy highlights, aspires the formation of associations that turn the tide of a milieu. What the Young Artists Association did in the 1990s – engaging in issues of 1997 handover, cultural policies and the establishment of the Hong Kong Arts Development Council – is C&G’s model. The community C&G generates with “Under The Bed” point us to a direction that deserves more consideration in the world of video art – to keep video a strategic personal space and to foreground the mutual individuation of videographers as they enter into conversations.

*Micro Narratives: Stretched Perception, Refreshed Attentiveness, New Cognition*

There are surely many elements missing in the organological sketches I have attempted. For now, I would like to conclude with a pedagogic experiment I have been conducting since 2002, which I call “Micro Narratives: Invented Time and Space” at the School of Creative Media. A few artists discussed so far have participated in this experiment at different points, including Jamsen Law, Anson Mak, Vasco Paiva, Cedric Maridet and Rita Hui. The core objectives of this experiment are: (1) to create an instructional agenda for the teaching of (experimental) videography that does not need to fall back entirely on the historical tradition of the avant-garde in the US; and (2) to uphold a workable agenda of “experimentation” through intermedia thinking, through an interdisciplinary framework and dialogue with film theory and philosophy. In the form of a 13-week, 39-hour concept-driven workshop series, “Micro Narratives” invites students to undo what has been taken for granted about imaging in mainstream film practices and to reflect upon how mainstream norms have conditioned and delimited our image sensibility. It therefore invites students to reinvent their visual vocabulary by establishing new relations with the world around them, which is possible only with thoughtful understanding of the nature of photography and imaging, and critical awareness of the ubiquitous presence of the video camera. The conceptual impetus of the course is a meta-critique of cinema – how conventions of cinema condition and prescribe our perception of the world. Cinema, apparently the carrier of stories, is not just another medium, but a new form of consciousness. Experimentation through videography, therefore, pertains to the stretching of our perceptual experience and cognizance, thus also redefining the spectator’s modes of attention. Re-learning how to pay “attention” is one thing, acquiring new “attentiveness” is another: the two kinds of attention are two parallel consciousness afforded by our perceptual relation with the world and the tools we use to achieve it. “Micro Narratives: Invented Time and Space” has had three exhibitions in Hong Kong so far,<sup>66</sup> an attempt to conjoin the visual-audio intensity of the many small videos made by students in their daily settings into perceptual sculptures. An additional version was presented in Hangzhou to celebrate the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the China Art Academy, as one of the eighteen cases of experiments in art education in China.<sup>67</sup>

*(5) Video Art Must Go On...*

**We must continue to create video art, but...**

Commenting on the current state of video art, Ellen Pau told Clare Morin in 2008, referring to the entries she reviewed in the annual IFVA, that most of them were more like films with just more interesting plots, that they were more entertainment than art. “Our artists should ask more critical questions about the media itself. What is technology saying to us?” (Morin) I could not have agreed more with Pau. In my view, due to a lack of a theoretically and historically informed vocabulary, video art discussion often disappears too soon into those of “media art” or “new media,” or is reduced to questions of image aesthetics. Single-channel video, in particular, loses its place as a unique site of experiments. Before an artist earns her access to big machines and engineering-level equipment, single-channel videography

remains the primary and most ready playground. Because of its transportability, single-channel video will continue to play a significant role in showcasing innovative artistic thinking of our local artists to the international art community. Single-channel “video art” remains a strategic placeholder with which we may continue to ask new questions.

Given the strong emphasis on video’s personal character, Jin Suk Suh, Director of “Alternative Space LOOP” (Seoul), warns us not to neglect the globalizing neo-liberal market economy that has framed our daily practice. Suh calls for a commitment to mark off video art from the media industry, which is “a big business to pursue its own interest in association with modern capitalism.” (Suh, 54) She warns us to be tactful with “the process of transformation from creator-oriented aesthetics to recipient (or audience)-oriented aesthetics,” which “defines the very core of contemporary art scene today.” (57)

I have other worries. Didacticism. My encounters in public events and with first-year students show an obsession with “message” as almost the only kind of meanings demanded of an artwork. There is something wrong with our education... There is a lack of trust in one’s own senses. There is a fear for direct perceptual experiences. Perhaps we have not been encouraged enough to exercise our attention or our perceptual capacities. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum defends art education: art is “an extended form of rationality” – only that it is formed by emotion, imagination, compassion and desire. To her, art plays an essential role in enlarging our moral imagination through our ability to combine our human faculties. (McRobie)

### **We must continue to construct our history of video art...**

Except for the likely absence of a television-technology phase, video art in Hong Kong shares the rudiments of that in many other regions. There is no history of video art that can be developed based on singular artistic movements. (Gras Balaguer, 33) Our paths, like theirs, have witnessed serious cross media interaction. “What is video” takes us back to that moment in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when the question was, “What is cinema?” Over a century has gone by in which historians and practitioners sought to describe the moving image as a unique kind of “the mind’s eye.” What kind of “eye” is video? Indeed, many account emphasized video’s “precariousness as a weapon that tended to alter the perception of the world.” (Gras Balaguer, 31) I have, in this essay, presented some solid examples to form our local story.

In Hong Kong, though, video is a new “paintbrush” as much as it is an increasingly important agent for innovative documentation, marking a restless drive to “remember.” Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, innovative use of video was fuelled by anxieties for the handover of Hong Kong to China, accompanied by unprecedented intolerance to social ills, government malpractice and institutional incompetence. In the US and the west, the ease and portability of video invoked social activism. In Hong Kong, media and art activism cannot yet be considered a predominant practice whereas what blossomed was the diverse exploration of how our quotidian should be articulated and our voices heard. The history of video art in Hong Kong embodies a significant subaltern strand of our “history of everyday life.” Experimental



art practice is driven by an unprecedented documentary impulse. Coincidentally “documentary” works remain outside our mainstream media. In order to avoid the unnecessary burden of institutional definition, I prefer to use the term “documentation arts” to embrace a full range of documentary acts, from research-creation, action research, visual notes, diaries, ethnography, event documentation to image archiving and the various usage I have cited in previous sessions.

I have suggested a few times the need to look at the ten-year gap between 1986-1996 and to take seriously the history of video tools. As demanded by a media archeology approach, we should “document the lineages of the media machines themselves” and the different desires that video embodies. (Kluitenberg, 12-14)

### The “art” in Video Art: Art is Political

The “art” in video art must be sustained. The history of video art, especially Hong Kong video art’s assumed continuity with experimental cinema, forces us to reconsider what “experimentation” is and why it is necessary. I have argued in this essay: art is by definition about innovation and experimentation; no video activities can be considered video art without being subject to the rule of innovation. Catherine Elwes, whom I quote in the first part of this essay, speaks of her own commitment to art-experiments, “There is a sense in which creativity is experienced as an act of defiance, which risks making us ugly, angry and treacherous...”

Art is experimentation. Experimentation is one way or other breaking with tradition by refusing to conform. Experimentation invokes strangeness, at least in the beginning. Stiegler reminds us of the unease and “aesthetic conflicts” that often comes with experimentation, “Breaking with tradition, Manet introduced a feeling which was not shared by everyone.” But experimentation is not merely destruction: it generates creativity that in the end builds “a new communal sensibility.” As such, all experimental artists should strive to engender “a process of sympathy construction,” individually or as a group. Stiegler’s advice implies, all good artists should sustain their “aesthetic ambition” in order to share aesthetic experiences with others through their art. This is not just called art education or art appreciation, but the most critical way to ride through the homogenizing marketing economy that has colonized aesthetics which molds our sensibilities. While “a huge proportion of the population is totally subjected to the aesthetic conditioning of marketing,” “the other part of the population,” including critical artists, should continue “to experiment,” to turn “its back on those who founder in this conditioning.” (Stiegler 2014, 2-3) Aesthetics is about “feeling and sensibility,” and is always part of politics. The work of an artist “is originally engaged in the question of the sensibility of the other.” In this light, art is necessarily political. (Stiegler 2014, 1) Just as Ranciere claims, literature “does” politics as literature a certain way that is not the same as the writer putting her political views into his work,<sup>68</sup> we also ask how video “does” politics as video. Many of our artists have turned video into a “voice” for the unspeakable and the subaltern, others practice the politics of video by bringing video cameras to strategic locations, or entrusting them in the hands of the disenfranchised. Some persist in video’s politics of (re-)inventing new grammarology. Some challenge any

purist position of video, or attempts to reduce video to visual spectacles. A few believe the most powerful politics is to make new machines to counteract the machines that have “controlled” us. .... This history is not just about filling in the gaps with a neat narrative, but one that commands moral commitment.

To parallel the emphasis on experimentation, a reasonable history of video art in Hong Kong must account for those individual makers and collaborators who have negotiated their practice conceptually, artistically, contextually and politically through their concrete “makings” – cases of experimentation each in their only way. This is why I have gone through the pain of description and running an inexhaustible roll call. It is also in this context that I have proposed the four modes of video art for Hong Kong, based on on-going practice - the deconstructive, the phenomenological, the constructivist, and the indexical-performative – in response to Yvonne Spielmann’s division of video art in the west into the “documentary, experimental art, and experimental image-making.” The four modes in a way pertain to the current paradigm of the politics of video art in Hong Kong based on subject positions and types of politics. They are also nodal points to facilitate closer studies in future, but by and large they emphasized subject positions in relation to institution, power structures and individually calling.

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The bibliography listing of this essay can be found on P.90

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<sup>1</sup> For a handy outline of media archaeology: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1343>

<sup>2</sup> See Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory: <http://www.learning-theories.com/actor-network-theory-ant.html> or <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9801/msg00019.html>

<sup>3</sup> Here, I extend Meigh-Andrew’s view, for this essay, into what Bernard Stiegler calls “general organology,” following up on Gilles Deleuze, that is, a way of thinking the co-individuation of human organs, technical organs, and social organizations. See Pieter Lemmens’ interview with Stiegler, p. 37; and Stiegler, 2014, p. vii.

<sup>4</sup> See: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portapak> (accessed on March 27, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Elwes moved from painting to performance 1977-1981, and from 1981 onwards specializes in video and video installation. See: [http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/catherine\\_elwes/](http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/catherine_elwes/)

<sup>6</sup> [http://rhizome.org/editorial/tags/portapak/?ref=tags\\_daniel-shiffman\\_post](http://rhizome.org/editorial/tags/portapak/?ref=tags_daniel-shiffman_post)

- <sup>7</sup> Dan Reeves began working in video in 1979. His early videotapes were driven by his traumatic combat experiences in Vietnam. <http://www.danthehion.com/>. Reeves' video works focus on personal, political, and spiritual themes, from socially condoned violence to the divine nature of existence. <http://www.vdb.org/artists/daniel-reeves>
- <sup>8</sup> The first of camcorder appeared in 1982 when Sony released the Betacam system for broadcast news for a one-person job, then in 1983 when Sony released the first consumer camcorder, the Betamovie BMC-100P, followed by JVC's VHS-C camcorder, SF-P3, the same year. [http://www.totalrewind.org/cameras/C\\_SFP3.htm](http://www.totalrewind.org/cameras/C_SFP3.htm)
- <sup>9</sup> Robert Cahen's *Hong Kong Song* (1989), a video work that explores "the sonic identity of Hong Kong, its sound and architecture," was shown at the Exhibition Hall of City Hall (Hong Kong) and Hong Kong Museum of Art, as part of an exhibition called "The Sight of Time" in May-July 2008. (See Morin 2008.)
- <sup>10</sup> Cahen was "one of the first to fuse sound with images at Paris' National Video Institute in the early 1970s." (Ibid.)
- <sup>11</sup> An advertisement in a special IFVA publication in 1997 introduced the services available at the Editing Lab, Zeman Media Centre, such as non-linear editing facilities (Avid MCxpress), camera rental (Hi-8 / DV / Arri / Digital Still), linear editing (Hi-8 / DV / SVHS / Betacam) and so on.
- <sup>12</sup> See Duncan Wong's *United Power (Post Modern Version)*(1995, Hi 8, 5') and *I have just used twenty words to describe very exactly about a work of art that is done by me - A Video Guide to Video Shooting* (1996, Hi-8, 5').
- <sup>13</sup> The earliest work in Hi-8 format in the Hong Kong Film Archive program was in 1993. Hi-8 is the last analog video format before video turned digital.
- <sup>14</sup> For the origin and related details of U-matic, please see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U-matic>. The small format and more portable version of U-matic, the U-matic S, is similar to VHS-C, "the compact VHS videocassette format introduced in 1982 for consumer-grade compact analog recording camcorders." See: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/VHS-C>.
- <sup>15</sup> Higinbotham's work, *Tennis for Two* (1958), was a table-tennis-like game, played on an oscilloscope, an electronic device that produces visual displays that correspond to electrical signals. See: <http://www.bnl.gov/about/history/firstvideo.php> (accessed on February 4, 2015).
- <sup>16</sup> "PLAY >" (2005) includes the video works of 13 artists, including Eric Siu, Ip Yuk-yiu, Linda Lai, Jamsen Law, Hung Keung, Phoebe Man and so on.
- <sup>17</sup> Olli Leino argues that computer games can be art in their unique ways whereas many that are called "art games" by their artists do not carry the "art" dimension he demands, that is, its affordance for a player to be responsible for the freedom they enjoy (Leino 2013).
- <sup>18</sup> The 1950s was called the "golden age" of television in the US. This is a discourse that film scholars, such as William Boddy (1992), have seriously taken up to examine.
- <sup>19</sup> The rise of diary films is discussed in session iv "Syntax and Genre" of *illuminating Video*; ed. Hall and Fifer. See pp. 366-74, 405-20, and 421-443.

- <sup>20</sup> John Wong's *The Man with the Mobile Phone*, forming a dialogue with Shu Kei's essay "The Tears of Hong Kong," is part of the Video Essay: *works of a cross-disciplinary creative project* curated by Steven Pang and Leung Man-tao, produced by the Hong Kong Institute of Contemporary Culture. The other unnamed work of 12-round of generation loss was a piece he showed me while he was my colleague at the School of Creative Media, City University, HK.
- <sup>21</sup> Perhaps we do not have an elaborate "artists' video" tradition, but the idea of "art-house cinema" has always been around, with advocates such as Clara Law. I do not find "art-house cinema" relevant to this essay as, to me, the term is about the effort to distinguish good commercial films from the bad ones.
- <sup>22</sup> "The Video Art History Archive - the Art History Archive - Video Art," available at: <http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/videoart/> (accessed on February 9, 2015).
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> *Sun in your head* is viewable here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zkDSJOmMgQE>
- <sup>25</sup> See: <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/paik-abe-synthesizer/>
- <sup>26</sup> Source: [https://njpac-en.ggcf.kr/archives/artwork/n018\\_paik-abe-video-synthesizer?term=16](https://njpac-en.ggcf.kr/archives/artwork/n018_paik-abe-video-synthesizer?term=16)
- <sup>27</sup> *res extensa*, experimental digital animation, was awarded Best work (Category: Digital Art and Moving Images), 2003 Hong Kong Art Biennial. For Rodriguez's works after Res Extensa, see: <http://conceptscript.com/works.html>
- <sup>28</sup> Viewable on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/26808343>
- <sup>29</sup> Viewable on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/31787345>
- <sup>30</sup> <http://www.writingmachine-collective.net/wordpress/?p=648>
- <sup>31</sup> Woody Vasulka, trained at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague to study film, did several documentary films, moved to New York in 1965, free-lanced as an editor for large-format, multi-screen projects, and finally quit film to dedicate himself to the electronic media when he encountered the half-inch video "portapak" in 1969. See: <http://www.audiovisualizers.com/toolshak/vidsynth/vasulka/vasulka.htm> (accessed March 29, 2015).
- <sup>32</sup> See: <http://www.fondation-langlois.org/html/e/page.php?NumPage=436> (accessed February 28, 2015). A useful reference would be Kathy High, Sherry Miller Hocking and Mona Jimenez eds, *The Emergence of Video Processing Tools: Television Becoming Unglued* (volumes 1 & 2) (UK: Intellect Books, 2014).
- <sup>33</sup> Here are two examples of art.ware project's activities: <http://www.ifva.com/?p=8715&lang=en> and <http://www.ifva.com/?p=9498&lang=en>
- <sup>34</sup> A useful illustrated introduction to Paiva's digital video work and his concepts: <https://vimeo.com/68325750> from Jim Demuth.
- <sup>35</sup> See: <https://vimeo.com/48866866> (*Door Games*) and <https://vimeo.com/110445362> (*Vaulting Space*)

- <sup>36</sup> Howe is a computational artist for images and literature. See his work, *Engine of Engines* (2012), in collaboration with Bill Seaman, at “The Burning Edge: Making Space, Activating Form,” the Faculty Show of the School of Creative Media (January 13 – Apr 30, 2012): <http://projects.visualstudies.duke.edu/billseaman/seamanhowe/eoe/eoe.htm>
- <sup>37</sup> *The True Story of Ah-Q* was made for the 5<sup>th</sup> research-driven exhibition of the Writing Machine Collective (Oct 9-22, 2014) at Connecting Space-HK. This work is part of Howe’s Readers Project with John Cayley. For detailed description of the work, visit: <http://www.writingmachine-collective.net/wordpress/?p=554>
- <sup>38</sup> Viewable on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1bdNH4KBfdw>
- <sup>39</sup> Overview of Spielmann’s *Video: the Reflexive Medium*: <http://mitpress.mit.edu/books/video>
- <sup>40</sup> See: <http://concept-script.com/> Rodriguez was awarded for the Secretary of Home Affairs’ Commendation Scheme in 2014 for his outstanding contributions to the development of art and culture, especially in software.
- <sup>41</sup> Bill Viola’s *Transformation* was part of Farschou Foundation’s portfolio at Art Basel Hong Kong, March 2015. See: <http://artobserved.com/2015/03/beijing-bill-viola-transformation-at-farschou-foundation-through-march-22nd-2015/#sthash.VrhtHvjW.dpuf>.
- <sup>42</sup> See: [http://www.hkvisualartsyearbook.org/symposiums\\_details.php?post\\_id=2567](http://www.hkvisualartsyearbook.org/symposiums_details.php?post_id=2567) in the *Hong Kong Visual Arts Yearbook*; or [http://www.papaygyronights.papawestray.org/PGN2013\\_HK.html](http://www.papaygyronights.papawestray.org/PGN2013_HK.html)
- <sup>43</sup> See: <http://www.mask9.com/node/67258>
- <sup>44</sup> See: <http://www.aaa.org.hk/WorldEvents/Details/10316>
- <sup>45</sup> Press release for ‘Open Dialogue’: <http://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/200805/15/P200805150149.htm>
- <sup>46</sup> Yung’s Video Circle traveled from Hong Kong to Osnabruck, Sydney, Berlin and Vancouver, in 1996-2003.
- <sup>47</sup> See concept statement: <http://www.writingmachine-collective.net/wordpress/?p=327> and descriptions of individual works: <http://www.writingmachine-collective.net/wordpress/?m=201410>
- <sup>48</sup> WMC\_e4 (2010): [http://www.writingmachine-collective.net/wordpress/?page\\_id=55](http://www.writingmachine-collective.net/wordpress/?page_id=55)
- <sup>49</sup> “Video as Writing Machines” (2010) in two screenings: (I) [http://www.writingmachine-collective.net/wordpress/?rx\\_aeolus=newsletter-wmc4\\_9](http://www.writingmachine-collective.net/wordpress/?rx_aeolus=newsletter-wmc4_9) ; and (II) [http://www.writingmachine-collective.net/wordpress/?rx\\_aeolus=newsletter-wmc4\\_010](http://www.writingmachine-collective.net/wordpress/?rx_aeolus=newsletter-wmc4_010)
- <sup>50</sup> Full catalog is available: <http://www.para-site.org.hk/en/publications/this-is-hong-kong-15-video-artists>
- <sup>51</sup> *Rati* (2000-2001) has been shown in many overseas festivals over the years and is archived with Videotage.
- <sup>52</sup> Phoebe Man’s own statement on her videography: <http://www.cyman.net/video.htm> with documentation.
- <sup>53</sup> See, for example, Maridet’s *Huangpu* (2005), and Samson Young’s Muted Situations video series (in-progress) and video-as-documentation in *Pastoral Music* (2015) featured at Art Basel Hong Kong 2015.



- <sup>54</sup> See his recent solo show, “So I don’t really know sometimes if it’s because of culture” (2014), a mixed media exhibition in which video was assigned different usage as part of an art piece or as documentation art.
- <sup>55</sup> Here is a video documentation of the work: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-InwrGMUfEo>
- <sup>56</sup> The video with singing is viewable here: <https://vimeo.com/89596636> Description of the completed work in 2013: [http://tigerchicken.com/art/e/201302/Ambedkar\\_summary.pdf](http://tigerchicken.com/art/e/201302/Ambedkar_summary.pdf)
- <sup>57</sup> Some important works in the early years include: *Cageman Series* (籠民系列) (1992), *The Birth of a Labor Union* (一個工會的誕生) (1992), *The Women’s Sky* (她們的天空) (1993), *Toy Safety Charter* (玩具安全約章) (1994), *I am a Worker* (我是工人) (1995), *School and Human Rights* (學校與人權) (1994), *’95 Direct Ballot* (九五全面直選) (1995), *Tragedy Ahead* (1995).
- <sup>58</sup> Roland Barthes distinguishes between the readerly and the writerly texts to mark traditional novels (the readerly) from the New Novel (the writerly). A text is readerly when it assumes the reader to be a receiver of a fixed, pre-determined, reading whereas a writerly text, which is a perpetual present demands the reader to be proactive in following the process of a work’s unfolding as if the readers themselves are writing to produce meanings that are neither final nor authorized. Barthes is pro-writerly as it objects the reader to be a passive consumer. <http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/elab/hf10250.html> (accessed March 22, 2015): This entry cites Barthes’ *S/Z* (1973), pp. 4-5.
- <sup>59</sup> See another portrait on Jamsen Law by Elaine Ng: [http://www2.secsdp.org.br/secc/videobrasil/up/arquivos/200906/20090613\\_123228\\_ensaio\\_JamsenLaw\\_I.pdf](http://www2.secsdp.org.br/secc/videobrasil/up/arquivos/200906/20090613_123228_ensaio_JamsenLaw_I.pdf)
- <sup>60</sup> On March 29, 2015, Phoebe Wong presented a screening program with an introduction on the works of Ellen Pau, Linda Lai, Anson Mak and Choi Sai-ho at the “VisionMix: Artists, Filmmakers and Curators’ Workshop” presented by the VisionMix network, in association with the Shiv Nadar University, Department of Art, Design and Performing Arts, and the Jawaharlal Nehru University School of Arts and Aesthetics, India.
- <sup>61</sup> In earlier editions of the Microwave, there was more attention to single-channel video works, for example, “Temporal Being,” *Microwave 2002*: <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/Details/6213>
- <sup>62</sup> The VMAC was initiated in 2008 with the purpose to collect, preserve and build an extensive archive of video and media art of Hong Kong, taking advantage of its 20 plus years of program, VMAC was opened to general public in 2011 whereby people would go to Videotage to view the works on site. The analogue video materials in the Collection have been digitized, and a searchable VMAC Online Database will be launched by the end of June 2015.
- <sup>63</sup> About C&G Artpartment: <http://www.candg-artpartment.com/>
- <sup>64</sup> About “Under the Bed”: <http://www.candg-artpartment.com/gallery/underbedscreening.html>
- <sup>65</sup> Cheung’s review on the first few screenings: [http://www.candg-artpartment.com/gallery/review\\_apr2014.html](http://www.candg-artpartment.com/gallery/review_apr2014.html)
- <sup>66</sup> First exhibition took place in 2006 at Too Art Gallery, Hong Kong Arts Centre, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition in 2011 at the Blue Lotus Gallery during the Fotanian Open Studio, and 3<sup>rd</sup> in 2012 on 12<sup>th</sup> floor at Foo Tak Building.

<sup>67</sup> See *18 Cases* (2008): <http://www.baozang.com/zt/18an/> For Lai's text, see also: <http://comment.artron.net/20080314/n42577.html> Presented as part of the Immersions workshop at the 9<sup>th</sup> Shanghai Biennale's Academy of Enlightenment: <http://julietteyuan.net/archives/1009> in 2012. Also presented at the Second International Conference on the Arts in Society (August 21-24, 2007) at Kassel Germany, titled "An Interdisciplinary Project on Video Experiments": <http://a07.cgpublisher.com/proposals/89>

<sup>68</sup> Excerpt: <https://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/substance/v033/33.1ranciere01.html>

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