

Microwave International New Media Arts Festival 2017 — the Crowd and Selfies

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Microwave International New Media Arts Festival (Microwave) was in its 21st year in 2017, the theme being “Cyberia.” Festival programs included exhibition, symposium and talks, video showcase and screenings. Microwave was established in 1996 by “Videotage.” Over two decades it gradually establishes itself as the presentation platform of experimental new media art. Ellen Pau, one of the founders, said in 2016 that Microwave positioned itself as suitable for people of all ages with the objective of popularizing the public’s knowledge in new media arts. Yet, after two decades, she believed “the depth of the Festival’s content needs to be deepened.”¹

The main exhibition of 2017 iteration took place at Exhibition Gallery of Hong Kong City Hall between October 10 and 22. Exhibits included *Perfumery Organ* by TASKO Inc., *NARROW V.2* by NONOTAK Studio, *DzDz* by Yao Chunghan, *Daily Sketches* by Zach Lieberman, and *Electrostatic Bell Choir* by Darsha Hewitt. By the beginning of October, Microwave’s press effort began in newspapers, online news portals and cultural magazines. While the content was about curatorial approach, information of participating artists and their works, some of the descriptions and vocabularies used in the coverage were reminiscent of those in popular consumer events, for example “officially *kaisui*” (meaning “opens” in Japanese, deployment of its Kanji in Chinese press is an implication of fashionable events) “recommendation for the weekend,” etc.² In the meantime, more stories and posts were uploaded to trend-watch, hobbies, popular culture and commercial online platforms, content of which focused on visiting the exhibition as entertainment and put emphasis on the visual impact of the exhibits. Some described the visits as “punching-in” (meaning people flocked to popular events to take selfies so they could boast about it) and call the visitors “real/ make-shift literary youth.” Some of the stories and posts were in turn shared on Microwave facebook.

On October 20, crowds began to appear at the exhibition venue. On the 21st, the organizer put in place crowd-control procedures. The number of visitors was even higher on the 22nd. Visitors had to line up for forty-five minutes to gain access. Two hours before the end of the exhibition, the organizer rejects new-comers to join the queue. Over 9000 man-time visitors were recorded during the ten-day exhibition. Followers of Microwave facebook increased by 30%.³ Joel Kwong, Program Director of Microwave told the press that she could sympathize with the crowd flocking to “punch-in” and photography would not be forbidden inside the exhibition hall. She also said that the curatorial team would learn from experience and dedicate itself to arts promotion and education.

Information:

- Local press and online news portal
- Microwave International New Media Arts Festival facebook

1 Press coverage, *The Stand News*, June 30, 2016. <https://www.thestandnews.com/art/微波-新媒體-進化論/>.

2 For example coverage in *Milk* on October 12, 2017 and in *Wen Wei Po*, October 14, 2017.

3 Press coverage, *The Stand News*, October 31, 2017. <https://thestandnews.com/art/展覽截龍惹不滿-文青打卡捱批-微波藝術節-觀眾可轉化提升>.

October 2017

- **October 4 and 5**

Microwave's press effort began. A sponsored coverage in *The Stand News* said that "being interesting and inspiring has always been the intended outcome of Microwave activities. The organizer is not in favor of rigid preaching. It wants to inspire, through observation and interaction, the questioning of whether technology has made our lives better."⁴ A piece of news coverage in *Sing Tao Daily* described Microwave as "original and down-to-earth" and that "it pushes the arts to its boundary."⁵

- **October 8**

A post went up on Microwave facebook to announce the opening date. The hashtags are (in Chinese):

Read your notes before visiting the exhibition

Memorize by heart the curatorial statement so you could blurb about it when you are there

So people can't call you a make-shift literary youth who goes there just for selfies

- **October 10**

Joel Kwong published an article on *Luxshery*, a luxurious goods online portal, titled "A not-to-be-missed art exhibition in October: Microwave International New Media Arts Festival." She wrote that "I have been curating for Microwave International New Media Arts Festival for over ten years. Every year when we determine the curatorial theme and select exhibits for local audience, my team and I strive to promote artworks that blend technology, science and creativity. This year, the theme is 'Cyberia.' The audience will re-define 'Live & Liveness' at a performance site triggered by electronic arts." She said that "it is a piece of cake to find visually-pleasant artworks to please the audience. But it is extremely difficult to converse with the audiences through the artworks. Every piece is supported by its concept but when they compete on the same spot, the key is interaction. Not one-on-one but to share the conversation with the mass."⁶

- **October 12**

Microwave main exhibition opens. The curatorial statement says,

A year ago, we discussed the notion of "BE WATER," which is a state of mind and a spiritual status. It is also regarding the natural essence of something. Of course, to be like water is not an easy aspiration. Yet in the context of current technology, the concept of "BE WATER" seems as easily achievable as clicking a "share" button. Do those things that wowed us in the past still wow us today? Do we still have to set the "wowing" factor as a priority in order to draw attention and gain appreciation? Many questions are then provoked, at times beyond our initial imagination. After celebrating its 20-year anniversary, Microwave continues to explore and innovate. Media and technology progress at lightening speed; we focus on the exploration of "now." The words "wow" and

4 Press coverage, *The Stand News*, October 4, 2017. <https://thestandnews.com/art/> 埋下一粒種子 – 寫在微波國際新媒體藝術節之前。

5 Press coverage, *Sing Tao Daily*, October 5, 2017.

6 Joel Kwong. "A not-to-be-missed art exhibition in October: Microwave International New Media Arts Festival." (in Chinese) *Luxshery*. October 10, 2017. <https://www.luxshery.com/art-exhibition/2017/10/> 一場在十月不可錯過的藝術展覽 – 微波國際新媒體。

“now” only differ by one letter. Yet in many other aspects there is a delta of differences between the two. “Now” is important. Time as a carrier connects events that unfold. Everything can be “live.” “Live” is not exclusive to describing performances. Technology has granted us the “right” to broadcast real-time, i.e. “live,” on social media and live streaming platforms. Given the circumstances, how do we define “live”? Live performances, live broadcast on Facebook, generative animations and live coding gigs...these all share a “live” element. What is “live”? What are being constructed when these live activities occur simultaneously?

Cyberia (1994) written by Douglas Rushkoff predicted that the virtual space was a new landscape yet to be developed and cultivated, like Siberia in the late 19th century. In the preface of the 1994 edition, Rushkoff speaks of “a very special moment in our recent history – a moment when anything seemed possible.” That was 1994, yet today we can declare the same based on the current technology and science. Through the lens of media art, Microwave 2017 re-examines the notion of “live,” and the multiple “live” activities that belong to us. Cyberia is also the title of the festival – a place to redefine the notion of “live” through live experiences.⁷

- **October 12 and 14**

An article in *Milk*, saying Microwave “officially *kaisui*” in its title, introduced the origin of Microwave’s rationale and major exhibits in the current iteration. Wen Wei Po positioned Microwave as “recommendation for the weekend” in a piece of its press coverage.⁸

- **October 13 to 18**

Coverage on Microwave was found on hobbies, popular culture and commercial online platforms.

A blog entry on *Holiday* introduced Microwave:

The 21st Microwave is going to take place at the City Hall ~ This year’s theme is Cyberia ~ Go learn more as media technology develops at light speed ~ No need to make it too complicated because the exhibits are playful. You can appreciate the artworks by “playing” with them. What is most important is that, there is no entrance fee! There is no entrance fee! There is no entrance fee! (When it is really important, repeat thrice)!

...Let us focus on this punch-in spot: the exhibit titled NARROW V.2 (2017). It is a high-resolution LED lamp in the shape of a diamond, intended to create a “narrow” space. Lights go on and off in accordance to the music in the exhibition venue. From the side it looks really breath-taking, really

⁷ From “Microwave” website. <http://www.microwavefest.net/festival2017/index.htm>.

⁸ Press coverage, *Milk*, October 12, 2017; press coverage, *Wen Wei Po* A17, October 14, 2017.

*gorgeous! The setting is designed for you to take photos and punch-in. It doesn't matter whether the photo orientation is portrait or landscape, it will be atmospheric!*⁹

Microwave shared the above blog entry on its facebook page. Other coverage shared on Microwave facebook page included those from *The VALUE*,¹⁰ *hk01*¹¹ and *U Lifestyle*¹². The coverage in *U Lifestyle* was studied with photos. Its search keywords were “A nice hangout place in Central,” “exhibition,” “art exhibition,” and “news on enjoyment and having fun.”

Additional coverage included a piece on *Think HK*, describing Microwave as “a pioneer in international exhibitions of similar nature. It introduces to Hong Kong latest technology through new media art, animation and short films....It is a must-see for all literary youth.” Its search keywords were “art,” “good play and good food,” “places to visit,” “artistic innovation.”¹³ On *GETREADY*, the coverage focused on *NARROW V.2*, saying that “this piece is probably the most attractive to those coming for photos. The artist created a narrow perception [sic] with many LED lights. Coupled with the symmetric diamond-shaped structure, there are numerous composition possibilities.”¹⁴

- **October 18 to 22**

Microwave organizer put up multiple posts on its facebook page about visitor etiquette and crowd management.¹⁵ Some of the posts were (in Chinese):

(October 18) *Artworks in this exhibition are copyright-protected. No commercial photography is allowed. The organizer reserves the right to legal claims should such behavior occurs.*

(October 20) *Even if you want to take photos at the exhibition, there are bottom-lines which should not be crossed:*

1. *No flash (not to mention large-scale professional lighting equipment!)*
2. *You don't own the artworks. Please do not block others from appreciating them.*
3. *Please do not do not do not touch the artworks.*

The most important thing to note is that, they are artworks! This is an art exhibition. You are a visitor of an art exhibition. Please respect the artworks. Please self-respect.

9 Press coverage, *Holiday*, October 13, 2017. <https://holiday.presslogic.com/2017/10/13/article/44045>.

10 Press coverage, *The VALUE*, October 13, 2017. <https://hk.thevalue.com/articles/exhibition-hong-kong-microwave-2017-opening-preview>.

11 Press coverage, *hk01*, October 17, 2017. <https://www.hk01.com/藝文/126278/好玩藝術-光控音樂-鋼琴彈出香味-微波藝術節五個玩得藝術>.

12 Press coverage, *U Lifestyle*, October 17, 2017. <https://hk.ulifestyle.com.hk/activity/detail/109327/彈香水鋼琴-光控音樂-中環聲音光影新媒體藝術展>.

13 Press coverage, *Think HK*, October 16, 2017. <http://www.thinkhk.com/article/2017-10/16/23734.html>.

14 Press coverage, *GETREADYHK*, October 14, 2017. <https://www.getreadyhk.com/hong-kong-events/events-exhibitions/item/1208-microwave-international-new-media-arts-festival-2017>.

15 Please see <https://zh-tw.facebook.com/microwavefest/> for more facebook posts.

There is a record-high number of visitors to Microwave this year. We are so pleased, and we are aware that the majority of visitors are sincerely coming to look at (media) art to find out more. Yet, some of the visitors regard the exhibition hall as a photography studio and obstruct others from viewing. We don't have other choices but to put up this post.

Let us repeat: please respect the artworks, please self-respect. We look forward to seeing you on the last two days of the exhibition. Please appreciate the artworks with good manners.

Feel the artworks with your heart

Photo-maniacs

(October 21) Due to overwhelming number of visitors at the exhibition, crowd management procedures will be in place. New queuing arrangement will be made at 5pm. Please excuse us for the inconvenience.

(October 22) Crowd management procedures are now in place. Visitors will have to line-up for thirty to forty minutes to gain access. You may also have to line-up for thirty minutes to look at some of the artworks.

Due to overwhelming response, the organizer will stop accepting newcomers to join the queue by 4pm.

- **October 31**

The Stand News reported¹⁶ that “a number of citizens complained (outside of the Microwave exhibition venue) that ‘the literary youth coming to punch-in’ is the reason for the crowd. They stopped those who had ‘sincerely wanted to look at the arts’ from visiting.” In her response to press inquiries, Joel Kwong said that there were rooms for improvement in the ways the organizer managed the crowd. The team would learn from experience. As the curator, she believed that the sense of beauty was in human’s nature. She was hoping “to convert the punch-in literary youth into regular art visitors,” so that Microwave “would further expand from display platform to art education.” She described the exhibits in this iteration “somewhat sugar-coated” and were highly eye-catching. Kwong said her foremost curatorial consideration was the theme instead of meeting the taste of the mass. During her on-site observation, she found that even those who took photos and punched-in came with individual motivation and preference. She believed that she could continue the communication with visitors through the organizer’s social media channels. Ongoing art information will nurture the new visitors as art regulars. Kwong said, “The formula of art promotion goes like this: first establish a community interested in looking at the arts. Then get rid of their bad habits and nurture them as regular exhibition visitors who respect the arts.”

16 News coverage, *The Stand News*, October 31, 2017. <http://thestandnews.com/art/> 展覽截龍惹不滿 – 文青打卡捱批 – 微波藝術節 – 觀眾可轉化提升。