

PLAYING THE PARTS

Media Art, Autonomy & Country

Paper by Ellen Pau and Mike Leggett

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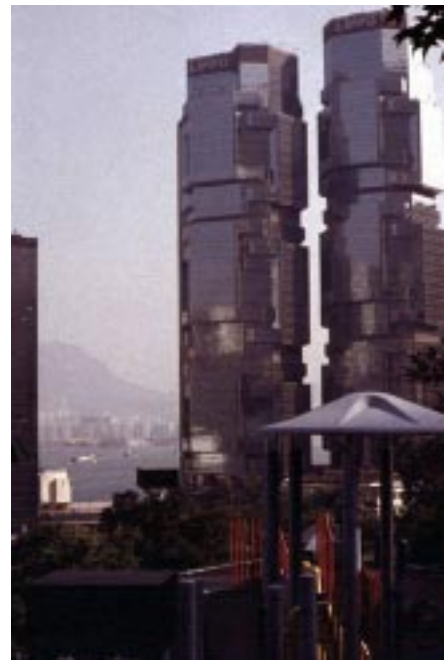
Abstract

In Hong Kong in July 1997 the British Colonial Authority “handed over” the administration of the region to the People’s Republic of China. A highly promoted and publicised international event, one of the world’s biggest commercial centres, home to eight million people, changed owners. Many Hong Kong artists, not only those working in the media arts field,

speaking about the issue of identity, now that Hong Kong no longer ‘belongs’ to Britain and before the 50 years transitional period ends and full rule returns to Beijing and the Mandarin language and cultural tradition. According to Tung Chi Wa, (the CEO of the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong), “Hong Kong would be more stable if there are fewer dissenting voices...” indicating that there is concern about accentuating difference between Hong Kong and China.

Dissent and difference characterise much of what is described as contemporary art in Australia. Though independence from Britain was achieved in 1901, the Queen of England remains the symbolic head of state - a referendum to change Australia’s constitution to that of a republic, will be held during 1999. Few artists or scientists comment on changes of symbolic authority. A significant number however, are actively engaged in opposing racist tendencies within an official multi-cultural society, and campaigning with the indigenous people for land rights and access to services, the articulation and realisation of this being significantly enabled using hypermedia and connectivity.

This joint paper will examine the consequences to communities of artists in Hong Kong and Australia of working within the post-colonial context and identify ways in which some of that work is actively engaged in resisting neo-colonial challenges to regional identity and autonomy.



Introduction

Mike Leggett (ML) The title for this paper *Playing the Parts* came about fortuiously, in the course of translating between three different language cultures - English, Cantonese and Brazilian Portuguese. This process of cultural re-interpretation commenced with the description we provided to the Symposium organisers of HOW this paper would be presented by the two of us.".....with each (quote) 'playing the parts' (end quote) of the many protagonists in this complex situation" .The actual title should have been *Media Art, Autonomy & Country*, which is now the sub-title on the second line!

Ellen Pau (EP) Whilst not choosing the title of this paper, we have nonetheless adopted it, as possessing our paper's summary, its imagery and its symbolism. My name is Ellen Pau and I am the artistic director of *Videotage*, an artists' cooperative in Hong Kong. My work as a video artist has been widely exhibited internationally and like many Hong Kong artists, I support my practice outside the arts - I am a hospital radiographer. We asked Mike Leggett, an artist, writer and curator based in Sydney, Australia, to curate an exhibition of artists' CD-ROM for our annual Microwave festival of media arts in December 1997. Most of the words in this paper are based on email correpondece between the two of us since then.

Paper

ML In July 1997 the British colonial authority "handed over" the administration of the region to the People's Republic of China (PRC). This was a highly promoted and publicised international event whereby one of the world's biggest commercial centres with the third highest money reserve in the world, and home to eight million people, changed owners.



Hong Kong Legislature building and Bank of China

EP The event was represented as the end of the colonial era and a return to the motherland. The people of Hong Kong are quite philosophical however, regarding it as saying goodbye to one coloniser and saying hello to another, for we are Cantonese and make up 90% of the population, with the other 10% made up of American businessmen, and Europeans, mostly English who with Austral-

ians for instance founded the Cathay Pacific air-line; the peoples of the India sub-continent, 'Mainlanders' from the north and others from south-east Asia.

ML It is a long story to explain how it is that Hong Kong is one of the world's largest established multi-cultural centres. Essentially it needs to be remembered that for nearly 50 years Hong Kong was part of the Cold War between communism and capitalism and from which half the present Hong Kong population were refugees. Identity is even more blurred for those parents who settled in America, Australia and Europe have since returned, encouraged by the means of making business and attracted by a popular culture in film, music and television which expressed unity and commonality rather than the fragmentation of the past.

EP Maybe some of these people return because now we are beginning to establish a contemporary culture too, based on the electronic media. Recently I compiled a program of 13 one-minute video pieces and the result is astonishing. Each work stands for the artist and carries a lot of readings about the culture of Hong Kong - a lot of fussy scientific, (fung shui), analytical and interactivity, in a very low tech sense, or you could say, in response to fashion, the environment and so on... my intention is to show some of these 1-minute tapes during the presentation.

Video TAPE: SITE & SIGHT by Ernest Fung. Site and Sight was also the title of last year's Microwave Festival of media art the theme of which was the issue of video art and the public domain, in relation to specific sites and sights in Hong Kong. The video was actually made in such a way as to make it impossible to identify buildings and landmarks.



ML Whilst Greater China has four regions and main language groups, the Mandarin speakers of Beijing have historically dominated the others. A 50-year period, agreed between the PRC and the British, is intended to provide a transitional space before full control is assumed and allow the citizens of Hong Kong to develop the skills of government not allowed under the British. However, as the recent incident showed when the Pope was refused entry, 'The North' has executive power and, it is assumed, will structure things to make sure that Shanghai remains the dominant trading port and Beijing remains the cultural and political centre of the ěgreater Chinaí. The development of autonomy by Hong Kong is not encouraged and thus the issue of cultural identity remains ambiguous.



Video TAPE: "HA HA" was made by Hung Keung whilst studying at St Martin's College of Art in London. His face was distorted under a stocking, making him into a cartoon figure fleeing a robbery in the streets of Camden Town. If identity is content then in this context identity is borrowed.

EP During the British colonial period, Hong Kong's cultural activity was developed along European lines with support for the 'non-political' arts of ballet and music. Following the civil upheaval in the '60s demanding access to government and services, an Urban Council was established to develop civic facilities for sports and recreation, including space for exhibitions.

Video TAPE: "Queer propaganda" by Jamsen Law was originally a promotional video for a government Policy report. A contra statement was made by simply adding powerful text onto the original video.

EP Videotage was formed in 1985 as a video artists' collective to organise screenings of work in Hong Kong and overseas. By 1996 it had established some non-linear post-production facilities, and gained the resources to maintain an office, library and archive, and administer events including the annual international Microwave Festival of Media Art.

ML The Microwave Festival that Videotage runs at the end of each year, attracts an audience who are mostly under thirty, have Cantonese as their first language, have had a tertiary education in

Hong Kong and who read and understand English and possibly some Mandarin. Compared to other Asian countries, Hong Kong has a life style which is becoming closer to the consumer lifestyle of the West - there is Easter -

EP - yes that's plastic bunnies and chocolate eggs -

ML - Christmas -

EP - yes that's plastic reindeer, fir trees and SNOW - all at sea level - in the tropics -

ML - Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, Father's Day, at least we no longer have Remembrance Day and the Queen's Birthday, and many, many shops - of course there's Citibank, CocaCola, MacDonaldd. There is also Honda, Hello Kitty, Playstation from Japan and even HMV Records sell Japanese magazines. We accept and

understand new products more quickly than say, a small town in Mainland China. We test the potential market. We can afford and enjoy new consumer attractions, including fashions from Europe as well as the popular culture of America and Japan. Any specific cultural tradition, like the Moon Festival or the Dragon Boat Festival can be turned into another celebration of capitalism and the entrepreneur.



EP On 27th April this year at Cybermedia 2000 in Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, highlight events were multiple distribution technologies for interactive television and video-on demand. Another important aspect was security and intellectual property rights and their protection in the time of digital distribution. The announcement that Pacific Century was to go into 60:40 partnership with Intel with a plan to deliver 'the most advanced digital interactive service in the Asian-Pacific Region' makes clear that the Hong Kong digital culture is heading towards the entertainment business, an interactive Hollywood or Disneyland.

VideoTAPE: "Untitled" by Chu Shun is a television news journalist and here has made a short summary of a news documentary that displays public disappointment to the government.

EP In the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis, the government has now begun its biggest and most ambitious project - the cyberport.

ML *"Richard Li of Pacific Century Group, which will build the cyberport, is very keen to engage in the hi-tech side of that development and rejects press criticism that the venture is primarily a property development. It is true that the cyberport phasing plan shows 75% of the project devoted to luxury apartments and houses, but this is an issue that is sure to be addressed in such a way as to give the greatest confidence to investing technologies companies. One premise of Pacific Century is, 'Eastern consumers should have the same access to the basic services that consumers in the west take for granted.' Notice that this statement eliminates the race element by referring to the Eastern rather Asian consumers, an indication of how the globalization process is being speeded up by technological process."*²

EP But what does this "Easternness" mean? Is it merely a geographical consideration without any cultural make up? The cyberport may also be a property development plan but it will never cultivate a cyber culture.

ML Together with several other independent art groups in theatre and visual arts Videotage have recently moved to an old government warehouse, part of a plan for an artists' village. But this initial vision for the arts has not lasted long - the land has now been sold for the development of another shopping mall and more luxurious apartments with a private pier into the Harbour.

Video TAPE: "From a Day in Post 97 Hong Kong" by Makin Fung questions the identity of the Chinese. The placement of non-specific landscape and character onto the most expensive Causeway Bay shopping centre landmark, Sogo Department Store outdoor video screen, comments on the identity being erased under capitalism.

ML (This is sourced from the Wall Street Journal) Hong Kong's movie distributors have created a cottage industry to rename Hollywood titles for Chinese audiences. "We create titles that are more straightforward," say the distributors.

Hence, the Cantonese title for the film biography "Nixon" is (Ellen in CANTONESE) "The Big Liar." The title for "Boogie Nights" can be interpreted as (CANTONESE) "His Powerful Device Makes Him Famous."

Since many of Hong Kong residents don't know Fargo is a city in snow-blown North Dakota, the movie "Fargo" became (CANTONESE) "Mysterious Murder in Snowy Cream." The words "snowy cream" are pronounced "fah go" in Cantonese.

The stakes are huge since English-language blockbusters dominate Hong Kong's movie market and Chinese translations help sell the films to a wider audience."

EP The translation of these titles is geared for the Cantonese mass audience though the dramas have a universal language.

Video TAPE: "PAST CONTINUOUS" captures/ frames images from Europe and, employing English text immerses the viewer into a look into a non-specific English speaking culture. Is this characteristic for all travellers in the global village? We can see Japanese text and images in art from Germany, America and Australia, for instance. Do we need to define our identity or identify ourselves?

EP Independent video is undergoing a resurgence, now that the PC editing computer is affordable (\$US 2000-3000), which people can afford - Video on CD is in many homes and very specific to Hong Kong. People can even get a 8 hour course in building a computer for video editing for \$US 550. In the film industry, special motion picture effects for a recent hit, the Storm Riders, were produced on a Pentium III 500MHz workstation using 1Gigabyte of memory and an AGP graphics card.

ML Independent Artists who started making simple 3D rendering five years ago now work, for example in the music or TV industries. They are becoming more mature and their products are more marketable. For example, the principle animator for the Hollywood production "ANTZ" is a Hong Kong computer artist, Ramon Fung. Creative minds are being absorbed into the biggest industry. One of the entries to last year's Microwave Festival was an animation from Mr Chan Ka Hing and his colleagues, who now work for Cable TV. It was very obvious that this cooperation helped him to develop his skill, as he now builds his own model using the Media 100 and After Effect.

Video TAPE: "Journey to V" by Chan Ka Hing re-inteprets the classic Chinese story- "A journey to the west". The Monk and Monkey King embark a journey to the west (meaning India in the original story) to get the true manuscript of the Buddhist Bible. In this version, the Monk goes to Channel V, a cable music channel.

ML Planning to build a cyberport makes anything digital suddenly the talk of the town. For instance, at the newly opened Creative Media School in the City University of Hong Kong, they recently received applications from prospective students in the proportion of 163 people for each place on the course.

EP Wendy Wong, a lecturer in Digital Graphic Communication at the Hong Kong Baptist University has observed, *“I believe computer technology is just a tool for creative expression. It is essential for students to understand the important role of creativity in visual communication.....Students are encouraged to incorporate Hong Kong and Chinese cultural elements into their projects, and to develop them into a contemporary Chinese graphic-design style”.*

Demonstration in background of CD-ROM “[99]illumination” from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University Hung Hom, Kowloon Hong Kong, School of Design.

ML The Cooperative Multimedia Centres (CMCs) were setup in Australia four years ago in each major city to provide linkage between commerce, science and ‘content’ providers (‘the talent’ and ‘artists’), and have consumed about \$US18 million with not very much to show for it - artists were deliberately excluded from the CMC in Sydney, whilst in Perth, Brisbane and Melbourne there have been some interesting developments, though nothing very surprising....The kind of visions that Roy Ascott describes, were definitely excluded. (That is the reality, of any ‘reality check’). The community video centre in Sydney (setup in the 70s) has changed its name from Metro TV to Metro Screen, which indicates the way in which things are rapidly swinging to things digital. 80% of its users are now hiring, or attending courses, related to digital media rather than video.

EP The computer artist or Cd-ROM people who can make a living in Hong Kong are doing so in a similar way to that of the first generation of video artists - everything is self-supported, using their own computer, using their home as office, teaching themselves, not necessarily going to university. These people enjoy and are proud of what they have accomplished but yet can’t afford the time to do their own work - sound familiar?

ML Yup, it’s a familiar story for Australian artists too, and to quote the British artist, Graham Harwood: *“There’s a difference between the bollocks of genteel amateurism and a kind of work practice that is done ‘for itself’, that creates its own kind of value - this is the way the large majority of artists - and gardeners and pigeon fanciers work and I applaud it. The construction of value for its own sake is fun and we should never lose sight of that.”* ³

EP Videotage has recently responded to requests from artists by setting-up a Web channel for the presentation, promotion and commissioning of new media art - which you are now looking at - it's just another thing that Videotage has agreed to do.....

Demonstration in background of Videotage Website from ZIP disc.

EP Recently there have been two notable events in the cultural politics in the internet communication. The first concerns the body-mind Tai Chi like group, Falu Gu, which was denounced as an illegal organisation by the PRC - all searches on the internet in China (except Hong Kong) failed to give information about them. The second was when the Taiwan government recently raised the issue of sovereignty between Taiwan and Beijing saying that there should be a nation to nation communication and to make the point, enabled hackers from Taiwan to destroy the computers of the Beijing Government, leading to the closing down of their system for one day. The next day hackers from 'China mainland' went into the Taiwan Government computer. This was a war on the internet which started in cyberspace.

ML Brook Andrews, curator of the exhibition

'MENTHUEN...queue here!' suggested that this exhibition, "represents shields in warrior/phalanx formation, to re-ignite their historical and present power to a contemporary world with loaded versions of Aboriginality and culture.

*Within this exhibition/installation I have attempted to recall/visualise how it may have been to line up in historical warfare and most importantly, how we today, protest behind/before barricades. I offer you all, us all, an opportunity to stand behind or before the shields, in warrior formation, remembering how it is/was to fight for cultural visibility and life. This installation is a powerful message to all those who believe that there was no resistance to colonialism both in the past and in the present."*⁴

EP *'Hong Kong artists have never really been a political lot. At best, Hong Kong artists obliquely tackled the Handover with a familiar theme for Hong Kong artists - searching for an Hong Kong identity. This can be summed up by the oft-heard state-*



ment: "I am not British. I am not Chinese. I am Hong Kong people (sic.)".⁵

ML Today you would be more likely to hear: "I am Beijing Hong Kong artist!" Some artists have relocated, or claimed to be Beijing artists because, though most or even all of their projects are based in Hong Kong where the infrastructure and resources are easily accessible, they feel that for marketing purposes, in the future Beijing will be the more attractive to the international art world. This has nothing to do with the issue of identity but simply offers the best of both worlds.

Conclusion

ML We feel that personal identity, the means of cultural resourcing and the expression of community identity are probably central to this paper. There is a link between the Australian Aboriginal and other indigenous peoples' traditions of commonality, and concepts of balance with nature, traditional to East Asia.

EP The fact that these traditions have been under attack for more than two hundred years by the European colonists and is currently under sustained diminution by the colonialists of international capital makes that link even more obvious. It is the internet that is enabling the acceleration of that process, that can move money quickly from one market to another, from one place of work to another and even from one country to another.

ML The result is that a collection of day traders in the mid-West of the USA, or the suburbs of London or Sydney can cause corporations and governments to be constantly revising their community responsibilities for fear of emptying their region of the money resources to be able to make motor cars or computer parts or art. For the internet to be utilised for the purposes of fragmenting our localities and community activity, and particularly at a gathering like this, makes that fact even more painful.

EP There is no doubt that culture and identity are linked to the locations and the topography's which contain our histories. In this sense it is both hard, and easy, to comprehend how a server becomes 'country' and a listserv becomes 'identity' - a community of ideas and discourse in a virtual space, within an abstracted topography, not only stretches the definition of consciousness but fails to address the material or 'the natural', 'of nature', within individual or collective existence.

ML Many Hong Kong artists, not only those working in the media arts field, speak about the issue of identity, now that Hong Kong no longer 'belongs' to Britain and before the 50 years transitional period ends and full rule returns to Beijing and the Mandarin language and cultural tradition. A double analogy could be made between the complexity of the many Chinese cultures and the many cultures on the internet, in comparison to the Mandarin culture and the efforts of Microsoft Corp.

The Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, Tung Chi Wah, indicates clearly that there is in fact official concern about accentuating difference between Hong Kong and China.

“Hong Kong would be more stable if there are fewer dissenting voices...”

A communities culture, whether in Asia, Australia or any other part of the world, to be vigorous and meaningful, and provide the sense of place and spirit that defines that community, contrary to the pronouncements of the Chief Executive, requires that notions of stability and assent are constantly in a process of redefinition.

Notes

1. www.?????
2. From a recent edition of the Hong Kong publication International Design Network (Vol2 No6)
3. Frpm an interview with Maharg Dla'nor Doowrah, an environmentalist and homemaker and regular contributor to Ninth Fold, a journal of post-colonial gardening.
4. Andrews, Brook, curator 'MENTHUEN....queue here!' catalogue essay, djamu Gallery of the Australian Museum, Sydney, June 1999.
5. John Batten has been a collector of contemporary art for 20 years and opened Hong Kong's John Batten Gallery in 1997. "Dislocation" magazine.