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“Ellen Pau: A Deep Dive with Ellen Pau on Art, Identity, and Innovation in Asia”

Link: <https://cntrfld.art/in-conversation-ellen-pau/>

CNTRFLD.ART chats with Ellen Pau, a pioneering media artist from Hong Kong who has significantly shaped the landscape of contemporary art in Asia. Born in 1961, Ellen is a self-taught artist and professional radiographer who has been at the forefront of video art since the 1980s. Her journey began with her involvement in Zuni Icosahedron, where she worked closely with Danny Yung, capturing the essence of theatre and stage work through video. Over the years, Ellen has created groundbreaking works such as "The Glove" and "The Disenchantment of Statue," and co-founded Videotage, one of Asia's earliest video art collectives. Ellen's innovative spirit continued to shine through her leadership in the Microwave International New Media Arts Festival and her contributions to independent film productions and the music industry. Her art has been showcased in prestigious venues like the Venice Biennale, Liverpool Biennial, and Asia Pacific Triennial, and her recent works, including "The Shape of Light" and "52Hz," continue to push the boundaries of media art. In this conversation, we explore the influences that have shaped Ellen's work, the role her heritage plays in her art, and her reflections on a career that has spanned decades and crossed cultural boundaries.

CNTRFLD. Hi Ellen, I was introduced to your work by Hans Ulrich Obrist, and I'm thrilled to meet you in person to learn more about your art. I read that you started your career in the medical field as a radiographer. Can you tell us more about that and how it inspired your transition to visual and video art?

EP. When I studied radiology in the early 1980s, I joined the Music Society and the Cine Club. I had a great time with them. It was when Super 8 home movies were dying down, and video was rising. As the Cine Club people explored what film language is, I bought my first video camera. I found this piece of electronic media unstable compared to film. Still, I was fascinated that it allowed me to see its intermedia relation between sound and visuals and its usually unwanted ability to generate colours and noise in feedback and errors.

In 1992, the Asian Cultural Council awarded me a scholarship to NYC to see Nam June Paik, Bill Viola, and Gary Hill's video works for the first time. After returning, I became a canto-pop concert MV director, organizer, and curator for art festivals and exhibitions.

I had the opportunity to meet Hans Ulrich Obrist in Hong Kong in 1996. We discussed showcasing "The Best of Videotage" video compilation for the exhibition "Cities on the Move." This exhibition, which toured prestigious venues such as Hayward Gallery, Vienna's Secession, MoMA PS1, etc., was a landmark event. I am so grateful to have this opportunity to show the world of Hong Kong's culture.

CNTRFLD. Thank you for inviting me to visit the Cattle Depot Artist Village and the Videotage event. What is this place? It's such a cool Asian version of the Meatpacking District turned artist hub. Can you tell us about Videotage, the collective you founded?



EP. Videotage is an artist collective founded in 1986 by me and three friends: May Fung, an independent filmmaker and critic, Chi Fai Wong, an animator, and Comyn Mo, an experimental filmmaker. Our initial goal was to promote video art and experimental filmmaking and explore the boundaries of this emerging medium. We provide hardware and technical support for media artists, organise educational programs, festivals, and conferences, facilitate cultural exchange with the international arts community, and distribute our works worldwide.

In 2002, we moved to Cattle Depot after briefly staying at Oil Street, Hong Kong's first artist-run art space, "Artist Village". Cattle Depot is a heritage site with almost a hundred years of history, so we wanted this space to be not only a permanent home for artists but also an archive. We started VMAC (Videotage Media Art Collection), a place to digitize analogue videos and store our tapes. Screening, exhibitions, events, and talks will be in the main space at the centre.

CNTRFLD. What is the story behind the establishment of the Microwave International New Media Arts Festival that you also founded?

EP. When Videotage celebrated its first tenth anniversary in 1996, we hosted more video artists and more multimedia productions at the beginning. But for society at large, our works are still entirely unknown outside. So, in 1996, we decided to bring in a festival to facilitate cultural exchange between Hong Kong and international artists, to present new media artworks in a prime location, and, most notably, to grow our audience base.

The festival's name, "Microwave," comes from the microwave link, a communication system that uses high-frequency radio waves (microwaves) to transmit data over long distances. Microwaves are commonly used in ENG (Electronic News Gathering), which is what we are doing, to bring exciting media artwork to local audiences. Also, I like that microwave (ovens) is quite common in households and are not too high-tech to be accessed.

In 1997, we changed from a video screening festival presenting Gary Hill, Nam Jun Paik to a new media art Festival, presenting interactive installations, games, internet art etc. Universities and schools in Hong Kong did not offer education programs on new media art 25 years ago, so we provided visitors with high-quality, informative docent service. They gave us very encouraging feedback. Some young visitors later become artists working with new media and are our fans. Microwave festival has become one of the region's most important new media annual showcases.



CNTRFLD. Can you share any specific artists, movements, or cultural influences that have played a significant role in shaping your artistic style and vision?

EP. I have worked in medical imaging for over 35 years. This has profoundly shaped my artistic journey. I've witnessed firsthand technological evolution in the field, from video replacing 16mm film in fluoroscopy to computers becoming central in various scanning technologies. The transition from analogue to digital has been fascinating. I learned the theory behind data collection and processing. In my job, I present the hospital's most accurate and truthful medical images. As an artist, I'm drawn to explore the relevancy of abstraction, aesthetics, and values of uncertainty and ambiguity.

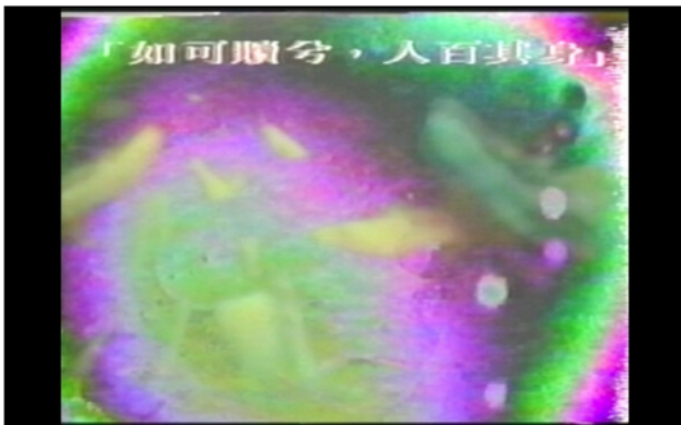
I have captivating memories of Osaka Expo 70 from childhood that greatly influenced me. Later in life, I found these memories close to The E.A.T. (Engineering, Art and Technology) 9 Evenings, a series of performances showcasing the collaboration between artists, engineers, and hardware. What I saw in the US Pepsi pavilion in Osaka is them. They put me on a path of working with Art, media, technology and science.

I found works from John Cage, Laurie Anderson and the art movement "Expanded Cinema" inspirational. For me, the most captivating moment for art is its ability to expand the boundaries of human experience.

CNTRFLD. Tell us about your experience living and working in Hong Kong. How does the city's dynamic environment differ from other places you've lived, and in what ways has it shaped your artistic vision and approach?

EP. Living and working in Hong Kong, especially during the 1997 handover, has given me a unique perspective on this city's distinctive and elusive nature. Hong Kong's dynamism is unparalleled—it's a place where change is the only constant, and every moment feels transitional and fleeting—borrowed time, borrowed place, as we always say.

Memories of elsewhere, like Britain, China, Taiwan, Macau, Canada, and Australia, never leave us. The past and the future intertwined, colonial and postcolonial times, the two migration fluxes before 1997 and after 2019, and the people returning to Hong Kong created an atmosphere of perpetual uncertainty. This temporal fluidity of identity has profoundly shaped my artistic vision.



In my work, I constantly explore the elusiveness of reality, questioning what constitutes truth, fakeness, and lies, whether in imaging or narrative construction.

CNTRFLD. How has your heritage influenced your work? Are there specific cultural elements that you incorporate into your art?

EP. Growing up bilingual in Chinese and English, I've been exposed to Chinese and Western cultures. This dual influence has allowed me to develop a unique artistic voice that combines different cultural elements, pop culture, east and west philosophy and new technologies into my work.

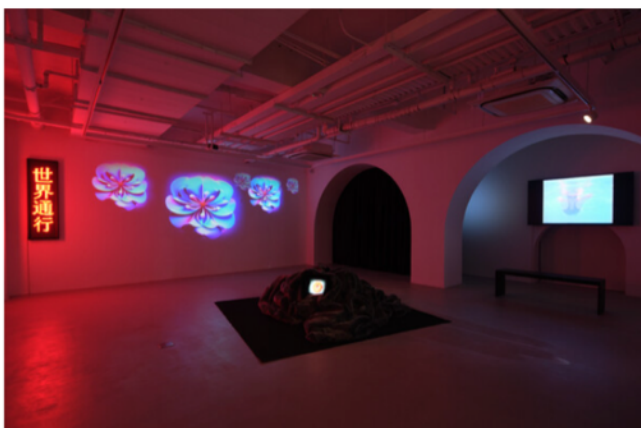
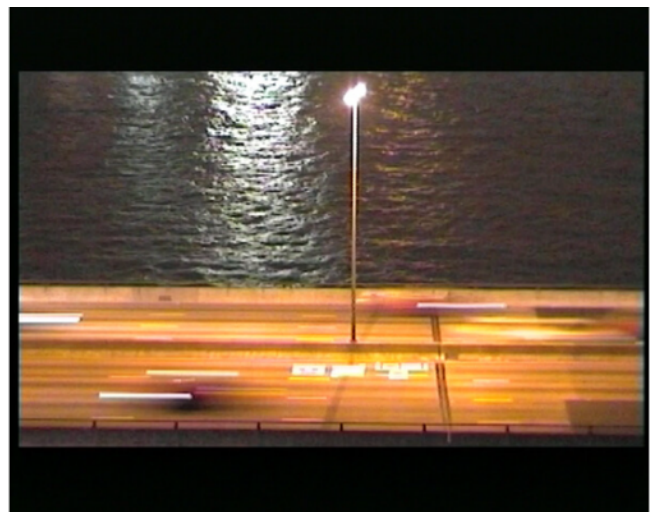
Unlike older generations who often worked with traditional Chinese media, like ink painting, my generation of artists had more freedom to explore diverse media, styles and content. We weren't bound by traditions or a particular ideology. We are more idiosyncratic and experimental in some way to create our own voice.

After years working in art, science and technology, I found "cosmotronics", a term coined by a contemporary philosophy professor from Hong Kong, Hui Yuk, to be fascinating. This term describes the Chinese view of the "unification of the cosmic order and the moral order through technical activities". While working on, "F10ral, Zer0", a project to sonify the DNA information of Bauhinia x blakeana, Hong Kong's emblem flower, a unique hybrid sterile flower found in Hong Kong; I discovered that scientists have researched on the relation between the genome and the 64 hexagrams from I-Ching. This ancient Chinese text has been making predictions for thousands of years from calculations of the binary, yin and yang. It looks at Earth time and Earth, our space from a cosmotronics perspective.

CNTRFLD. Can you tell us about your background and upbringing? Were there any influences in your childhood that led you to pursue a career in the arts?

EP. I was fortunate to grow up in a household where science and creativity converged. My father, a medical doctor passionate about engineering, often spent his free time tinkering with our home appliances. He repaired washing machines and upgraded air conditioners, bringing a sense of innovation into our daily lives.

One of my fondest childhood memories is the music turntable my father built for us. We'd listen to an eclectic mix of the Beatles, MOR, and classical compositions, sparking my early interest in diverse art forms.



My family's love for visual storytelling manifested in our home movies, captured on Super-8 film when I was young. This early exposure to moving images was further nurtured when my father gifted me my first camera at seven. This present set me on a path to explore image-based media from a young age, laying the foundation for my future artistic endeavours.

CNTRFLD. From your perspective, how has Asian art influenced today's culture over the years, and what is your opinion on the importance and impact of this movement in the global artistic landscape?

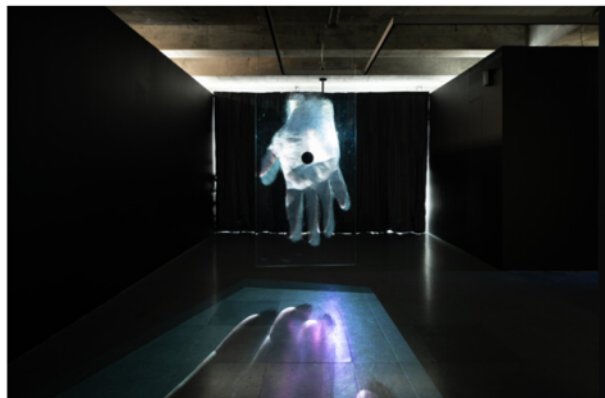
EP. 'Asian art' has always been a fluid concept, continuously transformed by artists within Asia and diaspora communities worldwide. At the same time, the Covid pandemic has accelerated a shift towards digital platforms, blurring geographical boundaries. AI generative works also challenge traditional notions of culture and authorship.

Hong Kong's unique position as a cultural melting pot offers a valuable perspective on cultural identity transformation. Our city is home to Western expat artists and HK artists who have experienced growing up abroad, exemplifying a new kind of diaspora. On a different level, digital nomads shift from local geographic locations to the digital realm. Digital artists are reinterpreting traditional Asian art forms using new technologies. For instance, teamLab, a Japanese art collective, creates immersive digital installations that blend traditional Japanese motifs with cutting-edge technology, showcasing how ancient artistic concepts can be reimagined for the digital age.

Both traditional Asian concepts and contemporary global experiences are finding new relevance in addressing universal issues. For instance, my work exploring connections between the I-Ching and A.I. demonstrates how ancient wisdom can provide fresh insights into cutting-edge technologies.

CNTRFLD. How do you navigate the balance between staying true to your artistic vision and adapting to the evolving trends and demands of the contemporary art scene, especially given the current climate in Hong Kong?

EP. Videotage, the artist collective, supports freedom of expression and provides resources to develop locally grown artists. We have long-term partners to present and promote our works to a worldwide audience. There are works that are now censored in Hong Kong. Some artists decided to immigrate to other places. Some directors chose to distribute their works outside Hong Kong to maintain their freedom of speech. It is very sad to see that the city has changed so much. Protecting our history is the utmost urgent task we can do if we want to see hope for the future.



CNTRFLD. As a woman artist, have you faced any specific challenges in the art world? How have you navigated these obstacles?

EP. Videotage, as an organization aligned with the LGBTQ+ community, has been actively engaged in programs celebrating equality and diversity since its inception. Broader societal acceptance took more time to develop. Awareness of human rights gradually evolved as civic action grew. Feminist groups and LGBTQ+ activist organizations increased in number and influence from 80s onward, playing a crucial role in this transformation.

However, Hong Kong has recently witnessed a discerning disintegration of its civic society, particularly in the human rights sphere. Equality and diversity activists were arrested due to the protest and election in 2019.

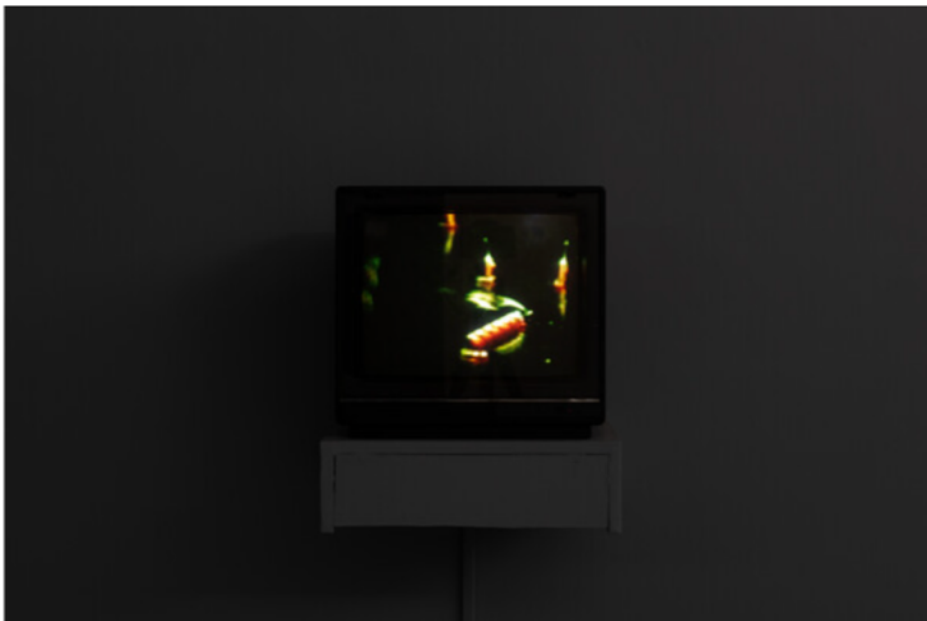
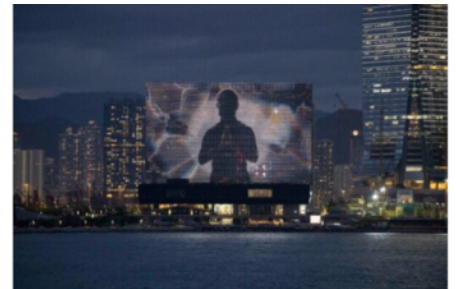
CNTRFLD. You've had your work displayed at M+, the Venice Biennale, and the Guggenheim. Is there a favourite piece or exhibit that holds special significance to you?

EP. I would say "Recycling Cinema", which premiered at the 49th Venice Biennale in 2001, holds a special place for me. I filmed the Eastern Corridor Day and night during the first month after moving my office to the Oil Street Art Village. I put the camera on a pan head, mimicking the movement of a surveillance camera. The repetition of the camera movement is expected to lead the audience's eye/ head movement. 2 works come out from this film. One is a one-channel video that is emotional, and another is a video installation work that is more like a science experiment. The two works of the same name have different effects on the audience. I like the work because it has a breakthrough in film language, and its kinesthetics take on our senses and body.

CNTRFLD. Your next project is to create a DAO and a digital art gallery. How is that going, and can you tell us more about it?

EP. HK culture grew from the "culture dessert" in the sixties to a vibrant scene in 2020. We want our culture to strive and flourish amidst societal changes. Blockchain is a technology that can preserve uniqueness, it also enables collective decisions and actions. I believe the DAO and digital art gallery are the future. I think it is a perfect platform for Hong Kong.

We are deep into the research and planning phase, strengthening connections with other organisations and like-minded individuals. We are also recruiting artist members who share our passion for this project. Stay tuned for more updates to be unveiled at Videotage's 40th anniversary in 2026. If anyone is interested and eager to get involved, we'd be thrilled to connect with you.



CNTRFLD. Who are your inspirations in the art world? As a mentor to many young artists in Hong Kong, is there an emerging artist we should look out for?

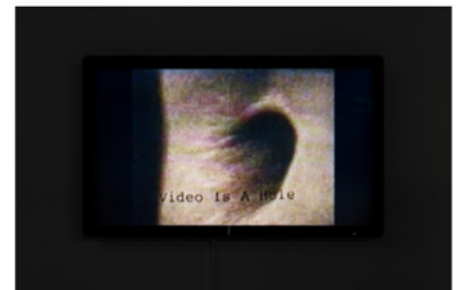
EP. In the early days of my artist career, I worked in Zuni Icosahedron, an avant-garde theatre group led by Danny Yung. Danny is a multimedia artist, architect, comic writer, filmmaker, and dance theatre director who experiments with different media. As a young filmmaker, I produced video documentation for Danny. I learnt a lot from him.

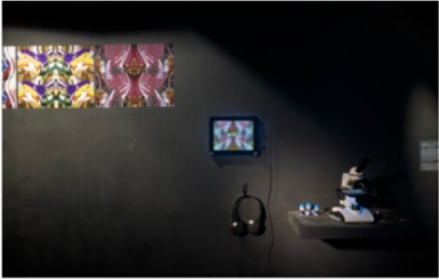
Recently, I found works by Lazarus Chan Long Fung interesting. He has used expanded animation, AI, and gaming in his work. His latest work focuses on affective gaming between the player and the machine. He is building his automata metaverse that operates on the law of physics, quantum mechanics and machine learning.

About Ellen Pau

Ellen Pau is a Hong Kong-born media artist and professional radiographer whose career has spanned over four decades. She co-founded Videotage in 1986, one of Asia's first video artist collectives, and has been instrumental in establishing the Microwave International New Media Arts Festival. Pau's work has been featured in major international exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale and the Asia Pacific Triennial. Her art often explores the intersection of technology, culture, and identity, reflecting her deep engagement with both contemporary issues and traditional Chinese concepts. In 2023, the Asia Art Archive launched the Ellen Pau Archive, recognising her significant contributions to media art.

Eulan To represents CNTRFLD.ART's Digital Arts expertise. These artist conversations are part of a series exploring the growth of the digital arts space in Asian contemporary arts, facilitated by the Bright Moments Digital Gallery dinner hosted by ToandPartners at Art Basel 2024 in Hong Kong.









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Ng Tze Kwan

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