RE:SOURCE

THE 10TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE HISTORIES OF MEDIA ART, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

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RE:SOURCE
the 10th International Conference on the Histories of Media Art, Science and Technology.
Proceedings

The 10ᵗʰ International Conference on the Histories of Media Art, Science and Technology – RE:SOURCE –celebrates Media Art Histories and the role that its main agents have had in the multiple developments of art, science and technology with a focus on the past 60 years.

The title 'RE:SOURCE' refers to a sub theme specifically introduced in the MAH Venice edition of the conference series. This theme will be centred on the climate crisis and questions of ecological sustainability considered in all their ramifications analysed through the lenses of Media Art (History).

The main historical theme of the conference series – the histories of Media, Art, Science and Technology – will form the core of the event. This will be integrated by a number of sub themes including the following:

- Track 1: "Memory. How to create future memories: documentation, preservation and new technologies" (media art conservation, preservation, documentation, archival research, role of researchers in curatorial practice).
- Track 2: "Climate Actions, Environment and Public Humanities" (public media art that addresses climate emergency and social topics).
- Track 3: "Pioneers of Media art" (media art history pioneers past and present, artists, curators, new technologies).
- Track 4: "Media art history outside and inside the museum" (curation, museology, cinema, games, media arts museums); re-enacting of exhibitions, new technologies and curatorial practice.

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS
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13 - 16 September 2023 - Venice, Italy.

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The international conference series, which was developed in 2004, Menaggio, Italy has been held in several international venues around the globe including Banff 2005, Berlin 2007, Melbourne 2009, Liverpool 2011, Riga 2013, Montreal 2015, Krems/Vienna 2017, Aalborg 2019, stream during CIHA 2022 in Sao Paulo, and Venice 2023. The conference series aims to engage the growing community of scholars from a range of disciplines including art history, contemporary art practice, art theory, history of science, history of technology, media studies, image science, visual studies, philosophy, cultural studies, anthropology, architecture theory, sound studies, computer science among others to develop and share new research and scholarship in the intersecting fields of the histories of media art, science and technology.

More info about the conference series at mediaarthistory.org

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Editorial Note

In preparing the proceedings of *RE:SOURCE 2023*, we have encountered some minor variations in the formatting and presentation of contributions. We would like to briefly address these differences for clarity.

First, readers may notice slight discrepancies between the titles of papers and their corresponding abstracts. This is due to adjustments made by the authors during the final stages of submission, reflecting either expanded focus or refined arguments. We have opted to include both versions to preserve the full scope of each contribution.

Second, the academic formatting across papers may appear somewhat inconsistent. This stems from the diverse submission guidelines followed by participants from different disciplines and institutions. Rather than imposing a uniform format, we have chosen to honour these disciplinary distinctions, which contribute to the richness and diversity of the conference proceedings.

We trust that these differences do not detract from the academic quality of the contributions, but instead reflect the broad range of perspectives and methodologies presented at the conference.

We hope that this collection provides valuable insights and stimulates further discussion in the field.

Sincerely,

Francesca Franco and Andrés Burbano

Editors of the Proceedings of RE:SOURCE 2023

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PIONEERS

Beyond the Dominant Narrative:

Ellen Pau and Media Art in Hong Kong from the 1980s to the 2000s

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Abstract

Ellen Pau (1961–) has been instrumental in the development of media art in Hong Kong. As a self-taught, openly queer female artist, Pau embraces the latest technology – from Super 8 to high-resolution digital video – in her artistic practice. With a small group of like-minded creatives, she co-founded Videotage in 1986, the first and now longest running artist-run non-profit organisation in Greater China dedicated to film, video, and new media. In doing so, Pau inspired Hong Kong artists exploring experimental film, video art, and video installations – mediums that were initially overlooked in the prestigious fine art degree programme at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, where ink painting and other classical Chinese art forms prevailed. Through Videotage, Pau invited artists and curators active in the international media art world, including the American video artist Gary Hill, Museum of Modern Art's video curator Barbara London, and Taiwanese Internet artist Shu Lea Chaeng, to participate in artist residencies, workshops, and exhibition programmes, while at the same time providing an alternative learning and exhibition platform for young Hong Kong artists in the 1990s and early 2000s. In 1996, Pau established the Microwave International New Media Arts Festival – one of the only events in Asia dedicated to the mix of art and technology. Furthermore, Pau has been a role model for women and LGBTQ artists in socially conservative Hong Kong. In the 1980s and 1990s, while her contemporaries experimented with narrative and technique or reflected on the handover of Hong Kong to China, Pau was boldly exploring gender identity and queer love in works such as Video Vogue (1992) and Song of the Goddess (1992). This paper studies Ellen Pau's oeuvre from the 1980s to the present day, highlighting the impact of her art and her advocacy for the development of alternative video, experimental art forms, and new media art in postcolonial, transitional Hong Kong.

Keywords

video art, contemporary art, Hong Kong contemporary art, alternative video, postcolonial art, LGBTQ art, feminist art

In Asia, when one thinks of the history of video art, the name that immediately comes to mind is Nam June Paik. Without seeking to discredit Paik's work, the aim here is to point out that post-war Asia contains multiple artistic histories occurring alongside the dominant Western narrative promoted in art history books and museum collections. My effort is to spotlight a lesser-known figure, Ellen Pau, who is arguably one of the most important artists to emerge from Hong Kong's young contemporary art scene. I explore her efforts as both a practitioner and an advocate for video and media art. I argue that Pau's artistic practice, not only in creating her distinct body of video works but also by forging connections, networks, and opportunities for like-minded artists, including women and LGBTQ practitioners, has been instrumental in the development of media art in Hong Kong as a serious genre.

The socio-political environment of Hong Kong in the 1980s and 1990s – the time during which Pau developed as an artist and when international contemporary art practices, such as video, emerged on the scene – impacted the overall development of artistic practice as well as many artists' works made during that time. Hong Kong was one of the main beneficiaries of Deng Xiaoping's Opening-up and Reform policy of 1978. These economic innovations increased trade between the mainland and Hong Kong, with Hong Kong acting as a gateway to China for the world, and vice versa. Trade between the mainland and Hong Kong grew at an average rate of 28 percent per annum between 1978 and 1997.[1] This contributed to the growth of a strong middle class in the British colony: one that could, for instance, afford to send their children to art schools in Hong Kong and overseas. This golden age saw a boom in cross-border business along with a vibrant commercial film industry, making movies that helped form the now iconic images of Hong Kong's bustling cityscapes lit by glowing neon signage for restaurants, hotels, and luxury brands.

That same era was punctuated by the historic – but ominous, to some – signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 between the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang, which set out the terms by which the British would transfer control of the colony back to China. Five years later, the devastating Tiananmen incident left many in Hong Kong feeling uncertain about the impending handover of the territory to China, which resulted in a huge exodus of Hong Kong residents just before the handover on 30 June 1997, although many later returned following years of stability and economic growth.[2]

Born in 1961 to a middle-class family, Pau became a self-taught artist during Hong Kong's golden age. Like most early practitioners of video art in the British colonial city, she had no previous training in film or cinematography; but unlike the few other artists that experimented with media, Pau also had no

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visual or liberal arts background. Instead, she studied medical radiography (she could operate the equipment and read the results but was not a medical doctor) in the early 1980s at Hong Kong Polytechnic, and even as a young girl she loved to tinker with radios and cameras.[3]

Pau did not study film or video in 1980s Hong Kong, but this was not out of choice: it was impossible to do so. The development of contemporary art in Hong Kong is a relatively recent and gradual phenomenon compared with neighbouring Japan, Korea, and the Philippines. Hong Kong's art scene both pre- and post-Second World War was dominated by practitioners of Chinese ink painting. Among the handful of significant artists during this period were Luis Chan, often cited as the pioneer of modern art in Hong Kong and noted for his colourful, surrealistic Chinese landscape paintings;[4] Lui Shou-kwan, one of the founders of Hong Kong's New Ink Movement; and Irene Chou, one of the very few female artists active at that time and a protégé of Lui. That group was mostly concerned with modernising an art form long associated with Chinese art and culture.[5]

Furthermore, the first undergraduate degree programme for fine art, established at New Asia College in 1957 and incorporated into the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) in 1963, continued to emphasise ink art. To quote the CUHK Department of Fine Art's website, 'Since its inception, the Department has promoted the study of Chinese art and culture and the exchange of Chinese and Western art'.[6] The first chair of CUHK's Department of Fine Art was the artist Liu Kuo-Song, another pioneer of new ink art. Liu was the co-founder of the Fifth Moon Society in Taiwan in the mid-1950s, which embraced incorporating Western modern aesthetics in traditional Chinese artforms. While at CUHK, Liu established the 'Modern Chinese Ink Painting' curriculum.[7] Although many more art schools emerged in the territory around the turn of the millennium, CUHK's Department of Fine Art still ranks as the most prestigious in Hong Kong, and painting – ink painting in particular – continues to be the dominant practice at the school.

What were the options for Pau and anyone else who was interested not in ink and brush but rather in alternative forms of art making, and more specifically moving images? There was the Phoenix Cine Club, which was an informal, private film club that emerged in 1973.[8] Founded by the CUHK film lecturer Kam Ping Hing, Phoenix had no official venue to operate from; instead, it rented spaces around the city, often with the support of the Urban Council (a government department that oversees everything from sanitation to cultural events), to screen avant-

garde films. Its members savoured the avant-garde films of the 1960s and 1970s (the French New Wave, Italian Neorealism, and the New German Cinema), while it also provided a platform for young filmmakers in Hong Kong, who explored Super-8 and other equipment, including video, available to the local mass market.[9] After one of Phoenix's last events, 'Videotage – the Montage of Four Video Filmmakers at City Contemporary Dance Company', in July 1986, the informal film collective ceased operating.[10] Shortly thereafter, those members who had organised the 'Videotage' event, including Ellen Pau, banded together to fill the void by forming another artist-run collective under the same name: Videotage.

Artist groups that did not follow in lockstep with the established art forms being promoted in the few art schools and cultural institutions active in Hong Kong at that time, namely those engaging in experimental practices including performance, multimedia installation, and lens-based practices, created their own opportunities in the same spirit as Phoenix. The artist-run organisations Zuni Icosahedron, Videotage, and Para/Site Art Space were among the most important platforms for these alternative art practices at the time.[11] Zuni, co-founded by Danny Yung in 1982, focused primarily on performance but included video and installation in its productions and exhibitions. Videotage, as previously mentioned, was established in 1986 after Phoenix folded. Initially housed in the premises of Zuni, Videotage was founded by the former Phoenix Cine Club members Ellen Pau, May Fung, Wong Chi-fai, and Comyn Mo. It supported film, video, and eventually new media, with Pau playing the most active role. Finally, Para/Site, established by artists Patrick Lee, Leung Chi-wo, Phoebe Man Ching-ying, Sara Wong Chi-hang, Leung Mee-ping, and Kith Tsang Tak-ping in 1996, exhibited contemporary visual art forms including installation, performance art, and other conceptual practices. Many of the local artists interested in non-traditional art forms were active in all three groups, particularly Pau.

To round things out, in 1996 the Hong Kong chapter of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) was founded. Its inaugural conference included art critics and curators as well as artists such as Zuni's Danny Yung and Para/Site's co-founder Kith Tsang. Advocating for video art was Pau, as she stated in her conference presentation:

> As an artist that came from the eighties, a period of transition – politically from the Joint Declaration to the post 97, technologically moving over from super-

[3] Freya Chou, 'Ellen Pau: What about Home Affairs? – A Retrospective', *Ellen Pau: What About Home Affairs – A Retrospective*, Hong Kong: Para Site, 2018.

[4] Anthony Yung, 'Luis Chan: A Strange Little Island', *LEAP* vol. 11, 2011, accessed 10 Sep 2023: http://www.leapleapleap.com/2011/11/luis-chan-a-strange-little-island/

[5] Eliza Lai, 'Lui Shou Kwan and the New Ink Painting Movement in Hong Kong', *Ideas Journal, Asia Art Archive*, 3 Nov 2020, https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas-journal/ideas-journal/shortlist-lui-shou-kwan-and-the-new-ink-painting-movement-in-hong-kong

[6] Chinese University of Hong Kong, Department of Fine Art (website), About Us – History, accessed on 8 Sep. 2023: https://www.arts.cuhk.edu.hk/~fadept/about-us/history/

[7] Ibid.

[8] Emilie Sin-yi Choi, "A Critical Study of *The 70s Biweekly* and Its Political

Cinematic Practices," *The 70s Biweekly: Social Activism and Alternative Cultural Production in 1970s Hong Kong*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2023,185-186.

[9] Esther M.K. Cheung, "Authenticity and Independence: Fruit Chan and Independent Filmmaking," *Fruit Chan's Made in Hong Kong*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009, 22–23.

[10] For more details, see Gina Marchetti, 'Interview with Yau Ching: Filming Women in Hong Kong's Queerscape', *Hong Kong Screenscape: From the New Wave to the Digital Frontier*, eds Esther M.K. Cheung, Gina Marchetti, and Tan See-Kam, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011, 214; 'Phoenix Cine Club presents "Videotage – The Montage of Four Video Filmmakers"', (flyer), July 1986, Ellen Pau Archive, Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong, accessed 10 Sep 2023: https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/ellen-pau-archive--organisational-files/object/phoenix-cine-club-presents-videotage-the-montage-of-four-video-filmmakers

[11] Elaine W. Ng. 'An Introduction', *dye-a-di-a-logue with Ellen Pau*, New York: Monographs in Contemporary Art, 2004, 6.

8 to video 8, I have seen the development of video art [sic]. Video art is reflected not only popular culture, but also in the ever changing political and alternative culture [sic].

Both super 8 and video 8 were launched as home movie consumer product [sic]. They did not, and still is not, infiltrate [sic] into the education system. The potential users of these time-based media come mostly from the middle to upper class people. On the side line [sic], the Chinese University's Fine Arts Department just opened its photography course one year ago [sic]. And it is doubtful when there would be a course on video [sic].

Between 1960s – 1970s [sic], only 10% of the students could go to university. Subsequently, a lot [of] independent film makers, who were university students then, were part of the elite. They engaged in film criticism and academic studies. Most of their references in these fields were based on borrowed social or cultural theories from the West.[12]

In many ways, the development of video art and its ability to reflect 'not only popular culture, but also … the ever changing political and alternative culture', which Pau described at the AICA conference, went in tandem with her own creative output. At that time, contemporary practices, such as installation, video, and conceptual art, were seen as 'Western', compared with traditional ink art, which was the dominant artform taught at art schools and exhibited in the few galleries active at the time in Hong Kong. Similarly, the University of Hong Kong, which was and continues to be the only university in the city offering art history as a specific discipline, at the time focused on traditional Asian art and the established canon of Western art.[13] Hong Kong's aspiring filmmakers and film critics and those interested in Western media history enrolled in universities in North America and Europe for their studies. Hong Kong artists who experimented with video in the 1980s were autodidacts and only received exposure to the work of such artists as Nam June Paik, Bill Viola, and Steina and Woody Vasulka through art journals published in the West. It was only during her six-month Asian Cultural Council (ACC) residency in New York City in 1991 that Pau became aware of the early practitioners of video in Europe and North America.[14] Despite this, her work shares similar approaches and themes to other contemporary video artists such as Paik and Viola, whose work dominated the pages of the prominent art magazines at the time alongside significant female practitioners, including Joan Jonas, Dara Birnbaum, and Pipilotti Rist.

In her earliest pieces, Pau explored the formal characteristics of video, including feedback of the video signal along with other visual and sonic possibilities. This is evident in one of her first videos, *Disenchantment of Statue* (1987), an experimental documentary on white noise around the location of an installation at the Fringe Festival, which was a popular arts event

at the time. Pau's works from this period were abstract and minimalist, with an emphasis on the formal qualities of the medium. These works incorporated alternative music and resembled music videos.

From 1988 to 1996, Pau produced a series called *Drained*. *Drained I* (1988) is a three-minute documentary of flames running from one end of a small corridor to the other. A year later, she created *Drained II* (1989) in collaboration with a Zuni Icosahedron performance. Although unaware of the American video artist Joan Jonas' seminal work *Vertical Roll* (1972) and her experiments with video feedback, Pau's piece was similarly innovative in its DIY process, utilising her own basic equipment – a video camera, a Betamax machine, and a TV monitor – and creating an electronic wipe in parallel with the staging of the performance. The figure seems to appear and disappear behind the black curtain, multiplying endlessly into repeated frames, or what Pau described as 'a closed cycle of production and discourse', in which 'the electronic medium itself becomes the source of creation'.[15] Pau combined her handmade visual effects for this performance with a menacing industrial soundtrack of electronic guitar and percussion.
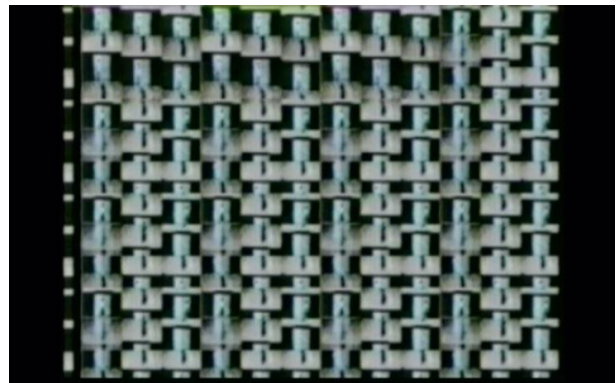
Figure 1: *Drained II* (1989), 5'49", video 8, single-channel, 4:3, colour and sound, courtesy of the artist

Pau's *Game of the Year*, created in 1990, captures the pessimism that pervaded the city in the aftermath of the Tiananmen incident and awaiting the impending handover. Parodying interview segments on national broadcast networks in Hong Kong and across the border in mainland China, Pau incorporated the game 'Simon Says', with her friends and colleagues – many of them fellow artists and members of Videotage – playfully impersonating important political personalities at the time. Again, unaware of video artists such as Dara Birnbaum who used video to critique American mass media and power, Pau's aims were nonetheless similar: to poke fun at the Chinese premier Li Peng and his speech justifying his decision to use martial law to clamp down on the pro-democracy student demonstrations. Pau's piece was one of the most explicit examples of political art in Hong Kong at that time, and the video continues to have an underground following among Hong

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[12] Ellen Pau, 'Development of Hong Kong Video Art' (presentation, inaugural opening conference of International Art Critics Association, Hong Kong, 14 December 1996).

[13] University of Hong Kong, Art History Department, About Us, accessed on 14 Jan 2024: https://arthistory.hku.hk/index.php/about/department-history/

[14] Pau's Asian Cultural Council residency in New York City was an important opportunity for the artist. Not only did she make *Song of the Goddess* (1992) during the residency, but this was also a time where she saw many examples of video art by artists working outside of Hong Kong, particularly single channel works available for private viewing at the New York Public Library. Previously, Pau had only read about the works through art magazines like *Art in America* and *Artforum*. Interview with the artist, 5 January 2024.

[15] Ellen Pau, *Drained II* (1989), *dye-a-di-a-logue with Ellen Pau*, op. cit. 232.

Kong residents, who self-organise small roving events to commemorate the fourth of June.

Diversion (1990) explores Hong Kong as a city in transition from a British colony to just another city in China, searching for its own distinct identity. The video starts with a panoramic view of Hong Kong taken from a popular documentary television programme of the 1960s called *Hong Kong Today*. The British voice over states, 'This is no ordinary ferry crossing: on one side is Hong Kong Island and the City of Victoria, on the other, Mainland China and the City of Kowloon, all part of Hong Kong'. Incorporated into this eight-minute video is archival footage of the city from the Public Record Office. This includes the popular Victoria Harbour swimming contests, happy beach-goers, and other government-sponsored leisure activities and TV programmes to promote a sense of community and well-being among its colonial subjects during the 1967 riots against colonial rule, which also coincided with the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) in China. This archival footage is interspersed with Pau's own images of an endless stairwell, a female swimmer in a pool, and a dancer who struggles to remain upright on a cobblestone pavement. The work captures the persistent collective tension in Hong Kong, a city built by migrants – whether Chinese migrants who made Hong Kong their home in the first half of the twentieth century or the Hong Kong residents who relocated to Canada, Australia, and the US in the leadup to the 1997 handover – with an unknown future.

Figure 2: *Diversion* (1990), 5'40", VHS, single-channel, 4:3, colour and sound, courtesy of the artist

Also exploring the socio-political specificity of Hong Kong is *Expiration* (1997–2000), a six-minute video of Pau going out on the streets of Camden in North London and asking random passers-by, 'What is your best-before date?' The responses include moments that represent life, death, victory, hope, or disillusionment. She created this work not only to mark the 1997 handover but also as a farewell tribute to the Oil Street Artist Village, an abandoned government supplies department building

in which Videotage and other arts groups squatted for two years (1998–2000).[16]

In addition to experimental and socially critical works, the woman's body is another recurring theme of Pau's, through which she explores issues related to gender and sexuality. Although marginally aware of Swiss artist Pipliotti Rist, who also began her career in the mid-1980s and could be considered her peer within the framework of 'global art history', Pau also uses humour, irony, and surrealism with a feminist touch. Consider one of her earliest video installations, *Video Vogue* (1992), which debuted in 1992 at the Hong Kong Museum of Art's first exhibition dedicated to contemporary local artists, whose title, 'City Vibrance: Recent Works in Western Media by Hong Kong Artists', clearly reflected the dichotomy between traditional Chinese culture and non-traditional artforms from the West.[17] The work consists of a small video monitor covered in a faux fur wrap – popular in Hong Kong in winter despite the sub-tropical climate. Upon closer examination, the video reveals a close-up of a woman's lips covered in lipstick and puckering up for the camera. As Pau mentioned in her address at the AICA conference, video can reference popular culture – and in *Video Vogue*, Pau refers to Madonna's 1990 chart hit *Vogue* – but also the 'ever changing political and alternative culture'.[18] Pau's installation also addressed women's pressure to conform to societal expectations of beauty and fashion. In an interview, Pau remarked that it was also a response to video as an artistic medium, 'a vogue to be aestheticized by the image world in today's museum'.[19]
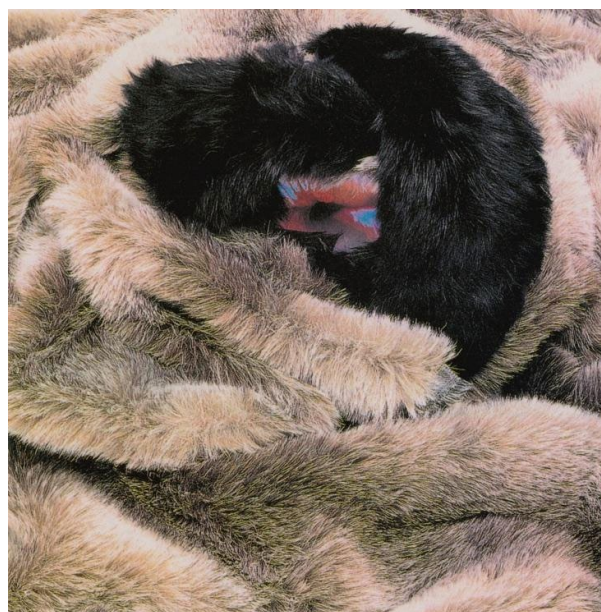
Figure 3: *Video Vogue*, 1992, video installation

Song of the Goddess (1992) is considered one of Pau's most significant works. The single channel video explores two famous Cantonese female cinematic opera performers, Yam

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[16] Sun-man Tsang, Alisa Shum Kam Sin, and Yun Ming Wai, 'Mixed Mode Artist Village: The First of its Kind (Oil Street)', *Future Research of Artist Village in Cattle Depot*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Arts Development Council, 2010. 41–44. Accessed 10 Sep 2023: https://www.heritage.gov.hk/filemanager/heritage/en/content_246/CDAV_finalversionjun10.pdf

[17] This dichotomy did not go unnoticed within the tight-knit art community. Nigel Cameron, the Hong Kong-based art critic of *South China Morning Post*, responded

to the title in his review with 'Just what is Western about works in terra cotta that admits them to an exhibition of artists working in "Western media" I fail to comprehend—but perhaps it doesn't matter', *South China Morning Post*, 18 April 1992, p. 23.

[18] Pau, 'Development of Hong Kong Video Art' (Ibid.)

[19] Pau quoted in *City Vibrance: Recent Works in Western Media by Hong Kong Artists*, Hong Kong: Hong Museum of Art, 1992, 72.

Kim Fai and Pak Suet Sin. In Cantonese opera, the main characters – male and female – were played primarily by women. In the many popular romantic opera films in which Pak and Yam performed together, Pak would always play the female role, while Yam would play the male lead in drag. They were in fact lovers both onscreen and off, and legend has it that over their 40-year relationship they were never apart for more than four days. When Yam died in 1989, Pak openly declared her love for Yam in a written banner at her funeral, stating, 'I would die a hundred times to bring you back to me'.

Figure 4: *Song of the Goddess*, 1992, 6'39", Hi-8, single-channel, 4:3, colour and sound, courtesy of the artist

Song of the Goddess stitches together dreamlike scenes from Yam and Pak's 1968 film *The Emperor Lee* with Pau's own footage shot in New York City during her residency with the ACC in 1991, including a tender scene of two Asian women (in fact Pau's lover at the time and Pau herself) with one washing the other's back. The work was deeply personal to Pau, as an openly lesbian artist who boldly advocated for gay rights; made one year after homosexuality was decriminalised in Hong Kong, *Song of the Goddess* explored the city's deep rooted societal taboos and is now considered one of the earliest works addressing LGBTQ issues in Hong Kong and Asia.[20]

Other explorations by Pau related to gender include her 1993 work *Bik Lai Chu*. In this video installation, one encounters the back and frontal view of Pau, seated. Her video is projected underneath a woman's low dressing table, where it appears as if Pau is repeatedly trying to sit up, but instead she is repeatedly banging her head against the bottom of the table. Every time her head hits the table, there is a sound as if it is slamming against

metal. The title *Bik Lai Chu* has two cultural references: *Chu* ('jade' or 'pearl') is a popular girl's name, while the three characters together are the Chinese name for the brand-name furniture polish Pledge. The work visualises suppressed female frustrations regarding societal norms and expectations imposed on women in conservative Hong Kong society.

Within five years of creating these significant works, Pau's dream of an art degree programme that would incorporate art, media, and technology was realised in 1998 with the establishment of City University of Hong Kong's School of Creative Media. Pau's creative output and ongoing community efforts helped pave the way for other artists who were committed to using media as an artistic tool. Her growing recognition as a veteran promoter of video art in Hong Kong was signalled by an invitation to present her video installation *Recycling Cinema* at Hong Kong's inaugural pavilion at the 2001 Venice Biennale. This mesmerisingly quiet work utilises footage from a fixed surveillance camera that mechanically pans an anonymous Hong Kong highway for moving cars along with her own handheld video footage while driving alone at night. Together, these images poetically capture the solitude and sadness of life in the city. Created shortly before Videotage relocated from the Oil Street Artist Village, and during the waning of a significant romantic relationship, Pau described *Recycling Cinema* as a love letter to both Oil Street and to her lover in the form of a video.[21] In many ways *Recycling Cinema* is a summation of the three recurring themes found throughout her work: the constant exploration of video as a medium, a reflection on the socio-political situation of Hong Kong, and an intensely personal meditation on love and intimacy.
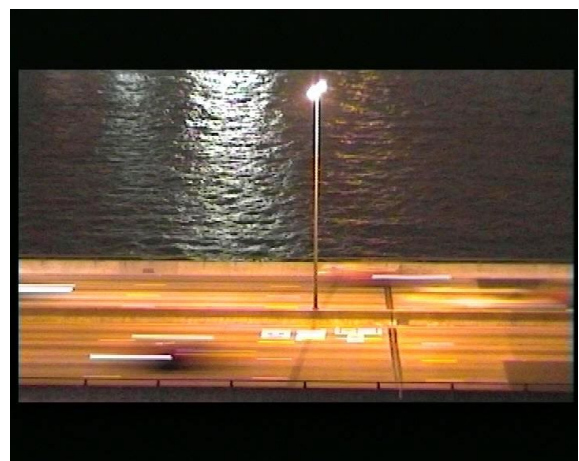
Figure 5: *Recycling Cinema*, (2000), 14'16", DV, video installation, 4:3, colour and sound, courtesy of the artist

As mentioned earlier, Pau's contributions to the development of video art extend beyond her own individual creative practice. Of the four original co-founders of Videotage (May Fung, Wong Chi-fai, Comyn Mo, and Pau), she is the only artist that has continued to be involved in the art world. She is widely acknowledged by the larger art community as single-handedly positioning Videotage as a home for like-minded artists, a platform for curators who want to organise screenings

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[20] For more on this topic, see Saj-Lok Chan, 'Queer Art in Hong Kong', *Ideas Journal, Asia Art Archive*, 20 May 2020, https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas-journal/ideas-journal/shortlist-queer-art-in-hong-kong

[21] Alice Ming-wai Jim, 'Urban Rhythms and Moving Images: The Media Art of Ellen Pau', *dye-a-di-a-logue with Ellen Pau*, op. cit. 87.

and exhibitions of media art, and a de facto school and library for those who want to learn more about media-based art forms.

In the push to keep media art relevant, Pau established the Microwave Media Festival in 1996. Initially dedicated to video, it subsequently grew to include new media art. During the month-long events, overseas artists Shu Lea Chang, Eder Santos, Camille Utterbeck, Christa Sommerer, Laurent Mignonneau, and many more have been invited to exhibit, hold talks, and lead workshops.   The festival continues to operate without any regular funding, leaving it as an uncertain and precarious cultural event in the city. In a recent interview reflecting on the role that Videotage and Microwave have played in the community, Pau remarked, 'I treasure the experience working with the art communities in Hong Kong and internationally. I learned a lot through them—they are my teachers'.[22] Prior to the acceptance of video or media art in art schools in Hong Kong, both Videotage and Microwave were seen as the main incubators for the understanding, appreciation, and production of media art in the city. After her participation in Venice, and with the curatorial demands of Videotage and Microwave drawing her attention away from her personal practice, she resigned from Videotage's board of directors in 2013 to pursue her own artistic projects again. This move was marked by a small retrospective exhibition, *Ellen Pau: What About Home Affairs?*, at Para Site in 2018, where a younger generation of Hong Kong artists, cultural workers, and collectors discovered her work for the first time.

Pau's most ambitious work to date, *The Shape of Light*, was commissioned in 2021 for the façade of the M+ museum to coincide with Art Basel Hong Kong. As the city's first public institution dedicated to contemporary visual culture, which opened in late 2021 to international acclaim, M+ in many ways 'put Hong Kong on the international cultural map'.[23] Projected on the museum's façade, which overlooks Victoria Harbour, her work can be seen from multiple vantage points on Hong Kong Island.[24] Pau's work, completed in 2022, was inspired by lighthouses as a beacon for direction, resilience, and overcoming obstacles, particularly as Hong Kong emerged from some of its longest and most oppressive restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic. For the projection, she asked a female performer to translate the *Heart Sutra* into sign language. This essential Buddhist scripture reveals the path of interconnectedness and the nature of emptiness. It encourages practitioners to let go of attachment and notions of self to transcend suffering. Its Sanskrit mantra, *gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha*, translated as 'gone, gone, everyone gone to the other shore, awakening', encapsulates waking up, through love and compassion, to reach enlightenment. As Pau explained, 'Hardships suffered by everyone during the pandemic drove me to create something that I hope could bring comfort, in the form of light'.[25] Although her

massive video projection is silent and performed only in sign language, the work incorporates a live-durational performance. She experimented with the visualisation of electromagnetic waves from both nature and from machines, along with a sound bath using Tibetan singing bowls and gongs performed at sunset from 5 pm to 6 pm at the museum. Together, these elements incorporate her longstanding interest in combining video with performance, sound, and the community, like much of her early work and her collaborations with Zuni Icosahedron, Videotage, and Microwave. Receiving the first major collaborative commission from M+ and Art Basel has only confirmed the public and private recognition of Ellen Pau's concern and efforts for the acceptance of media art in Hong Kong, considering that in 1996 at the first AICA conference she had doubted that video would ever gain academic recognition in the territory.
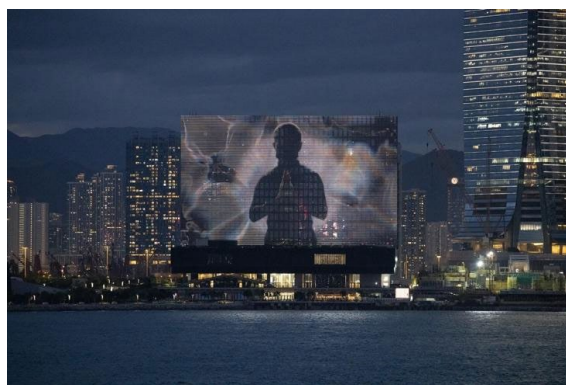

Figure 6: *Shape of Light*, 2022, screening of *Shape of Light* on the M+ façade, M+, West Kowloon Cultural District, Hong Kong, 2022, courtesy of the artist and M+. Photo: Lok Cheng M+, Hong Kong

Much like her earlier video works, *Heart Sutra* summarises Pau's three-decade interest in experimentation with the medium, the female body, and the socio-political changes impacting Hong Kong. In her most recent exhibition at Kiang Malingue in Shanghai in October 2024, she exhibited important works from the 1990s, including *Diversion* and *Video Vogue*, as well as a new work *Speculative Generations of Flora (0)* (2023), part of an ongoing series she began in 2015. The video installation charts the history of Bauhinia, the floral emblem of Hong Kong, a hybrid flower that was discovered in Hong Kong only in the late nineteenth century. Over the years it has been noted in both the popular press and academic journals how the Bauhinia serves as a strange, even inauspicious, symbol for Hong Kong, as it not indigenous to the island-city and does not bear fruit or seeds to reproduce or grow.[26] Pau's *Speculative Generations of Flora* investigates not only this sterile hybrid East-meets-West flower but also Hong Kong itself. In short, to understand the

[22] Ellen Pau and Ulanda Blair, 'Healing through the Heart Sutra: Ellen Pau on the "The Shape of Light"', *M+ Magazine*, 23 May 2022, https://www.mplus.org.hk/en/magazine/an-interview-with-hong-kong-artist-ellen-pau/

[23] In the making since 1999, M+ opened in 2022 with a dedicated building designed by Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron. Its initial budget was USD 770 million that went towards the construction of the 65,000-square metre space and assembling its core collection of 8,000 works, including the world's most extensive collection of Chinese contemporary art, most of which was donated by Swiss collector Uli Sigg. Sigg assembled his collection starting in the 1970s while he was a businessman working in China, and later as Swiss Ambassador to China, North Korea, and Mongolia. M+ also collects the work of Ellen Pau, and Phoenix Cine Club members donated their archive to the museum in 2019.

[24] The building was designed by Swiss architecture studio Herzog & de Meuron to include state-of-the-art exterior cladding that provides louvre shading for the interior spaces as well as grooves for LED lights. For more information, see Alison Fung, 'Behind the Screen: The M+ Façade', *M+ Magazine*, June 2023.

[25] Ibid.

[26] For more details, see Robert Peckham, 'Hygienic Nature: Afforestation and the greening of colonial Hong Kong', *Modern Asian Studies* 49, 4 (2015), 1179; and Zabrina Lo, 'How Did the Bauhinia, a Sterile Flower, Become the Symbol of Hong Kong', *Zolima City Mag*, 27 June 2019, accessed 14 Jan 2024: https://zolimacitymag.com/how-did-the-bauhinia-a-sterile-flower-become-the-symbol-of

history of video and media art in Hong Kong, one can track Pau's sustained commitment to the experimentation and craft of video, especially during the twilight years of Hong Kong's radically changing status.

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