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ELLEN PAU: HIS-STORY AND HER-STORY - TALKING OF DIFFERENCES

By Dorotea Etzler and Wolf-Guenther Thiel

I met Ellen Pau in Hong Kong at 22.00 pm. in a little bar in Hong Kong Central close to the sea. She could not come earlier, because apart from her working as an artist she works as a radiologist in a hospital and has to find time-slots in her always tight schedules. I remember when she came into the bar she completely changed the so far situation within a minute. She convinced everyone to leave the place immediately, to step into her car and drive to another part of the island, namely Causeway Bay.

The way she did organize all of that, motivating us to leave and at the same time still managing a dialogue about video-art in Hong Kong, the situation of contemporary art in general and later, much later, introducing her own work in a very modest way, was very impressive. At that time I did not really know her, nor was I to figure out her position within the Hong Kong art-world. Just one thing I knew right away, she must be a person who was very integral and integrative and I understood she must be a leader in some way.

At that point I could not understand what it took to be a front-woman in an Asian city like Hong Kong. I could not tell the difference between Ellen Pau and what would be expected from traditional Asian, especially Chinese woman in general. And I would not know to what extent this was to be changed after the reunification with China 1997.

It is quite significant though that the term for this event would be "hand-over" rather than "reunification". Before the British had the chance to take over this precious island there was not much Chinese present to be re-united 150 years later. The development that had taken place since then, however, has turned the territory into something quite worth to be handed over.

Anyway I was highly impressed and very interested to know the story of Ellen Pau.

TALKING OF DIFFERENCES: LABEL AND LIFE-STYLE

Ellen Pau's name itself provides no obvious reference to a Chinese person. It does not label her in any way. Both of the words even refer to a German origin. Most Chinese residents of Hong Kong have two first names, a Chinese and an English one. However, Ellen Pau's parents decided to leave the tradition behind and did provide her daughter with a name that sets an international path. Instead of gambling or shopping they would rather invest into world wide travelling. It is not much of a surprise that a person who has spent her 12th birthday on board a BOAC-plane crossing continents finds it easier to follow an international path than her classmates would have done.

This path she has pursued ever since.

As a video-artist and founder of Videotage Ellen Pau tells the world stories of Hong Kong as well invites artists from other parts of the world to contribute their work to enhance Hong Kong's cultural life. As the artistic director of Videotage for more than 10 years, she ever displayed great desire and engagement to present the disclosed culture from Hong Kong artists and let it be discovered by the global audience. Thus Pau embodies the link between the international art world and Hong Kong's contemporary art scene.

Ellen Pau feels and acts like an international artist. Her cultural upbringing is certainly influenced by the international style, perhaps a British late Commonwealth way of internationalism. Producing art work, as well as consuming ever new electronic items to take them home as toys, does however increase the difference between Pau and local women quite.

Talking to her makes it very clear that she does not stress fashionable life-style-approaches in a superficial way, but understands life-style as a number of serious and existential questions such as personal freedom, integrity and creative expression.

If expression is a result of design or life styles or part of the independent personality, she is probably the first to speak up for this, regardless of her wearing designer clothes or high-class jewellery. It is part of the personality, part of his or her individually, liberately chosen style and she would fight for it. This attitude dates back to her upbringing which pointed out the importance of mobility, freedom of speech, as well as all the personal and subjective rights to express oneself.

TALKING OF DIFFERENCES: MIRROR AND MOVEMENT

Pau's strong sense for aesthetics and rhythm forms the base for her skilfully transforming political news and events into artwork far beyond propaganda. In a way Ellen Pau can be seen to mirror the history of Hong Kong, or - to use the modest Chinese way of saying - a little part of history, that, by means of her video and installation work, finally turns his-story to her-story.

In one of her early works, the one-channel piece "Diversion", made in 1990, Ellen Pau reflects the wave of Hong Kong emigration due to the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing. She transforms the motive of crossing-over into various stages of changing place. There is the transition from land to sea, using government footage of the cross-harbour-swimming contest in the 60ies, the transition from walking to jumping against a wall, from sky to earth and from the interior to the exterior. Thus the mere change of place becomes significant to the change of the political situation at that time.

The way Pau combines found footage released by the government with found footage of people walking on a pier and performance footage, provides a clear shift of meaning. She reveals the difference between this ever present feeling of a blurring consciousness towards fundamental changes to be expected in the future and the general experience of emigrants and their historical equivalencies.

A similar approach of shifting can be seen in Ellen Pau's most recent work "For Some Reasons", made in 2003. Her instant artistic reaction provides a comment on the newly issued security laws in Hong Kong. Changing a single Chinese character within a term will lead to a shift in meaning quite. Changing one small article within the huge number of laws will provide a similar shift in handling the law and those who cannot act accordingly to it any more.

The footage has been shot entirely in Berlin, Germany. The place itself has no specific meaning to Pau. The way she approached that city looks like a touristy one. Everywhere on earth Hong Kong people like shopping and eating out. Though I, as a German, understand there to be quite a number of similarities when comparing the two cities of Hong Kong and Berlin, namely the boundaries they had to cope with for years, which had been set as boundaries between two social and economical systems.

TALKING OF DIFFERENCES: PLACE AND PERSPECTIVE

The specific difference between the generation of artists in mainland China 1989 and Ellen Pau is the perspective on historical events such as the Tiananmen Square massacre. Artists in Beijing had to choose the inner emigration. They dealt with the reception of this incident in a very subjective and hidden way. At that time Ellen Pau knew that this was to become part of her future, part of her consciousness. Awaiting 1997 artists from mainland China were aware of the reunification, knowing that it would not change anything immediately for them in a decisive way.

The reception of political changes still is completely different. In the future artists from mainland China will gain more freedom of expression, whereas Hong Kong artists should be aware of the fact, that they will lose a number of aspects regarding their free will of expression. This becomes part of an ongoing communication gap between the two groups of artists.

Although the boundaries between Hong Kong and mainland China are about to be abolished, for the time being they seem to be even more powerful in terms of how both places are perceived by outsiders. The procedure of residencies, exchange programs and international art shows clearly reflect that shift.

On the one hand there is this step-child left behind by its English parents referring to this hybrid nature of culture. On the other hand there is the real thing, the long time disclosed culture of the People's Republic, now waiting to be discovered by global art players. Shanghai and Beijing are about to become the two major centres of contemporary Chinese culture. Can we expect Ellen Pau to ignore this perception? Can she go on working as an international artist of international nature or do we expect her to act as a clearly identifiable Chinese artist?

The gap of economic success regarding both places is the result of the constantly growing economy in mainland China. Therefore artists from mainland China will become more and more commercially successful. I see this in terms of the international art-market as well as regarding a subsequently growing art-market within mainland China itself. Whereas Hong Kong artists will still experience a rather weak if not to say missing art-market situation in their city. This of course goes along with the rising financial problems Hong Kong will inevitably face throughout the boosting economic success of mainland cities like Shanghai. Artists like Ellen Pau now face not only the specific Hong Kong art situation within their city, but also the boosting art-scene of Mainland China to experience the gap of communication. However, Ellen Pau uses these shifts as part of her contents and motivation to produce artworks. She has always been prepared to master challenges of all kinds.

TALKING OF DIFFERENCES: MODERNISM AND MELANCHOLY

In a way Hong Kong faced and used Modernism throughout the 20th century as a driving force, but used it in its own interpretation. I take this to be the most basic difference to Mainland China. Modernism has a tradition in Hong Kong and people like Ellen Pau were brought up with Modernism as a strong affinity to western cultural influences. Naturally Hong Kong Chinese felt to be closer to London than to Beijing. After 1997 this has changed, I even daresay, had to be changed. These days more and more Hong Kong people learn how to speak Mandarin and less and less maintain to master English. The ability to communicate across global patterns has been abandoned in favour of root related skills.

The general attitude might change as well. The Chinese impact grows and the average population prefers to identify themselves as Chinese rather than British. The interesting idea is that British Colonialism led to an acceptance of Modernism in Pau's generation whereas the so called homeland confronts them with a step back into an earlier state of Modernism in its specific Chinese version.

This could be a key for understanding a certain mood of melancholy that appears more openly in Pau's early videos than her recent ones. Yet certain political events easily justify this move, and melancholy itself is a more common approach to Chinese people than a humorous one.

"Song of the Goddess", made in 1992, naturally will refer to the melancholy mood. The death of a famous Cantonese opera singer made Ellen Pau to create this video. In a way she pays tribute to a certain style of Cantonese operas that traditionally provides a setting for the affection between two women. It was Yam Kim-Fei's task to play the male drag. When she passed away her partner Pak Suet-Sin wrote a banner saying "I would die a hundred times in bringing you back to me". Nobody in Hong Kong would ever suggest the two of them to be lesbians, though they lived together most of their lives. Chinese people do not mention sexuality. It is considered to be a strongly private matter.

Traditional Chinese culture however does provide space for things that cannot be spoken about openly, thus it can be regarded to be even more modern and updated than the western tradition of theatre plays would be, though the latter does display male respective female drags at times.

Pau's video "Song of a Goddess" drifts from his-her story to a space in between reality and illusion. She uses footage of Yam and Pak's historical stage performance to combine it with nowadays performance acts. Images of the past and the present, of Hong Kong and New York, are multiplied infinitely and finally retracted until no discourse of this story is possible or necessary.

TALKING OF DIFFERENCES: CARS AND CARRIERS

The same way Ellen Pau refers to the tradition of Chinese operas, she equally knows how to be up most modern. She does not give a single hint of her hybrid western-Chinese identity by presenting "Recycling Cinema". Throughout one night her camera follows up a number of cars running on a Hong Kong highway. The subtle moves and motions can be regarded as a modern opera-like display of emotions.

Pau considers cars to be the main character for a city. Buildings cannot move, however cars can. Thus they step into life to be the modern equivalence for people, as well as its appropriate partners. Naturally, without her precious car, Ellen Pau would feel equally motion- and homeless.

Regarding the tight territory it is not much of a surprise that the price for the space a car needs to sleep in Hong Kong is pretty much the same than renting a similar sized furnished bedroom. To use public property as a parking space is not possible. Therefore private cars by no means are as common as in Germany, which makes their Hong Kong owners to be very special indeed.

Moving around town is a different concept to Pau than moving messages. By using rather low-tech production techniques throughout her work, Ellen Pau questions the possibilities of contemporary high-tech approaches and therefore the task of technology as a carrier for Modernism.

Modernism seems to her a personal and private driving force. She takes it as a social and political carrier, rather than a fascinating technical phenomenon. Pau's work transports this consciously by not using the most advanced animation or digital techniques, instead she uses techniques which are accessible for the average user of digital cameras and personal computers. She uses this approach as an artistic strategy in order to illustrate the link of her own work with the general situation of the average population.

TALKING OF DIFFERENCES: IMPLICATIONS AND IDENTITIES

In many areas of Mainland China every single aspect of Modernism has been left out entirely. Traditional ideas of Chinese society including its conservative interpretation of hierarchies, particular referring to the image of women in society, have been maintained despite the Cultural Revolution. Subsequently they may become established in nowadays Hong Kong.

In that way Ellen Pau is one, out of many of her generation, to be nearly lost, just like the "lost generation" of Gertrude Stein in Paris in the 20ies of the last century. Is Ellen Pau someone who believes and experiences the value of equivalence in sexes necessarily to be called a feminist? Is it just because she tries to maintain valuable life experiences and points out this attitude in her work?

Despite her powerful appearance Pau should not be considered a feminist artist. None of the Hong Kong artists like to be labelled. The tight and limited space within Hong Kong territory would not allow further limitations by labelling neither work nor identity. I even daresay she is perhaps less feminist, but rather conservative in a very contemporary way.

Yet the question of HK-identity is quite a topic ever since. That includes its inhabitant's identity as well as the perception of the interested international public. And for a Westerner it is even more difficult to grasp the difference between China and Hong Kong.

Particularly the relation between the sexes in Hong Kong has ever been different compared to mainland China. Hong Kong people live on trade and commerce. The background of these moves is of rather of pragmatic than ideological nature. Both sexes can provide the necessary skills to get this kind of work done. Domestic work and children education, in Western countries naturally to be supplied by women only, will either be done by both, husband and wife, or, more likely, is delegated onto the grandparents or a maid. Brothers and sisters would naturally enjoy equal education.

This sort of hierarchy does not refer to a hierarchy of sexes but to a hierarchy of social status.

In that way Ellen Pau clearly can be defined a leader, a position regardless her sex. Well then - let's welcome her to lead us into a vivid world of variety and vision!