

Videography as Tentacular Practices

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16 January 2021, Hong Kong

On videography

Videography is my mind's free writing – thought paths not to be replaced by words.

Videography is soundings for the eyes, spectacle of dynamic pitches and velocities... to redefine our attention economy.

Videography is: voices seen, images heard.

On videography as manifestos

I consider my videography individual moments and modes of asserting experimental practices.

"Manifestos" signify the acts of "breaking away from" and "moving forward" ... Manifestos signify battles, the very act of asserting a voice and a position, performative and not utopic. No end point.

I want my voices to be heard – murmurs, stammers, bold assertions, poetry, hypothesis or sheer vocalization. I practice videography as a "minor literature" -- that is, "literature a minority makes with a major language" for "deterritorialization." (Deleuze and Guattari)

Videography, my Manifesto: towards a materialist, concrete approach

1) "I"-machine co-agency. Always have some kind of an image-making device with yourself -- be it film/video camera, digital SLR, an automatic camera, a toy camera, or a smartphone... A small note/drawing pad would do too. Think the same about audio-sounds. Jot down words and phrases that come to your mind. Treat them as imagery and soundings.

2) Write as you go. Videography is automatic writing with the camera pen (caméra-stylo automatique). Press the button: follow your mind, follow your sight, follow your hearing, follow your curiosity, follow your mood, and follow your body. Most important of all, follow unspeakable emotions. Make a mark. Create a record. Write the present-continuous.

3) From basic description to thick descriptions. Build a diary, or better call it a personal image archive. No need to be personal. Tag your footage/clips/files. Cite basic information: where, when, how, who, what, and why. Leave it there. Let it grow. Let your keywords grow.

4) Let time and space traverse expansively. Your camera grasps more than you behold – worth

revisiting. You travel a long distance ahead with new encounters and transformed senses – worth looking back.

5) Revisit your archive. Study your own image archive like a stranger: every image, the many countenances, the desire underlying each press of the red button, silent perspectives, presence-versus-absence. Study textures and surfaces like graffiti on a wall. Be shocked. Be inspired. Be puzzled. Be moved.

6) Serendipity-connectivity. Your work could be beyond "interpretation," which is like the excavation of a mine to uncover its original worthiness. Instead, establish fresh connections and invent extended meanings. Be curious about how one image from a moment echoes other images of very distant moments.

7) From the subjectile to the objectile. (Raewyn Martyn) Between theory & practice, between theory & reality. Think of each moving image unit as matter with modular forms and states, moldable like a dough. A moving image is an imagery; it could be representational, a reference to reality. But moving images are also material formations with rich possibilities of "thrown-ness." (F.C. Millard) Videography forces open cracks, crevices of our living world's surfaces. By moving away from representing what is humanistic, it reaches the intensity of humanness.

8) Videography is a mode of radical empiricism, refreshing, via technology, what it means to experience. As a form of individuated experience, videography resists singularity; it embraces multiplicity and what is becoming. It liaises with what is concrete and what is virtual; it channels the flow between what is interior and what is exterior. Videography is a technological form of life that is not purely linguistic or aesthetic.

Montage as Critical Strategy: Fragments, Networks, Theory, Knowledge

The point of feminist theory is to achieve in-depth transformations of subjectivity: we need schemes of thought and figurations that enable us to account in empowering and positive terms for the changes and transformations currently on the way. ... Contemporary culture and institutional philosophy are unable to represent these realities adequately.

-- Rosi Braidotti,
"Feminist epistemology after postmodernism"
in *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* (2007: 68)

Theory: feminist situated-ness

The sheer fact that I have multiple subject positions – as a scholar, historian, artist, writer and educator – means I work thoroughly across multiple domains of knowledge and experiences. Different modes of enquiry flexibly flow into one another to shape my artistic practices. My engagement with the world is necessarily multiple, in line with my feminist commitment to “in-depth transformations of subjectivity,” constantly in search of new “schemes of thought and figurations.” (Braidotti) Feminist thinking provides a strong argument against the separation of the artist from the scholar and vice versa. If the production of new knowledge is a due response to insufficiently represented realities, the marking of new differences should first of all undo compartmentalization within society, within scholarship, and within the singular individual. Theory does not prescribe what I do; but theory leads me to arrive at a certain position and moment of artistic action. Theory emerges in the process of action. I arrive at the theory I make as I arrive at the end of an artistic journey.

Being there. And taking action. The momentary. *One Take: Manifolds* (2000/2019) and *No Path but My Footprints* (2010/2019), both in one long take, are almost like short manifestos of the primary action of my videography.

Montage is a necessity...

Over the years, out of a documentary impulse to preserve and remember traces of the past that are not of regime-base history's interest, I have developed a method to create video works that are based on found-footage and my own video diaries in my archive. Collecting sights and sounds in a certain existential mind set, and gaining fresh understanding of these documents much later like a researcher, are the rudiments of my experimental documentary position, which maps a double “I” at work. My collecting activities are highly intuitive, much like Surrealist automatism, and yet inevitably shaped by my education and life experiences, whereas the formation of image/sound discourses from video fragments is an important process of discovery and critical intervention. Since almost all my works are composed with sight-and-sound fragments, the method of montage is out of necessity. I think of montage not as editing, but as composition, like in music.

There is one important aspect of montage: it is not just how two shots are put together to suggest continuity, but what lies in-between sight-and-sound fragments. Gaps are productive absences. The fractured quality of an image discourse seeks proactive connectivity one may easily fail to see. And this is also where my historiographic intention comes in ...

Experimental Historiography

Most of my creative works have a visual, auto-ethnographic dimension: through personal visual diaries I observe culture and history as concrete lived experiences and entrenched moments of the everyday. One way or another, my projects aim to reconstruct a lost history of Hong Kong as it

resides largely in surviving sight-and-sound and print fragments. The sights and sounds of archival footage preserve something of lived experience, even when it cannot be reduced to neat stories with neat conclusions. Such is the rudiments of my found-footage and montage-based experimental documentary.

Many works of mine are experimental documentaries of a disappearing past. These projects hinge on ways to organize a vast body of archived material. My creative methodology turns what is normally ‘post-production’ in ordinary filmmaking into an intense moment of artistic creation that is at once editing (in film/video), collage (in visual art), animation (integrating print, text and video components), compilation (combining found-footage from varied sources) and composition (as in music, especially the crafting of soundscapes based on found sound clips). I have developed this approach into a personal signature in my video works.

Voices Seen, Images Heard (2009) writes a critical history of everyday culture in the former British colony of Hong Kong, which remains a project of urgency, especially in the post-1997 milieu characterized by the co-optation of Hong Kong into the idea of a unified ‘Chinese’ nation. *Non-place, Other Space* (2009) and *Micro Narratives: a Visual Poem* (2017) are artistic renderings of auto-ethnography by me as a fervent walker of the city as well as a detached collector of sights and sounds as a traveller. Video-making then preserves the fragments for their own autonomy and openness for signification. In Walter Benjamin's light, “the life of a collector manifests a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order.” These principles also apply to *La Casa 1-2* (2014) and *72 Tenants* (2012/2016). The former focuses on the power of objects as they often outlive their owners to cast a history of embodiment of personal temperaments, as opposed to achievement; the latter on lived realities transformed and preserved in fictionalizing agents such as cinema.

Cultural artefacts and mediated imaginaries have histories of their own, and are precious raw material for historiography, just as government documents, correspondences between celebrities and newspaper reports are essential to traditional historians. In this light, *Doors Medley* (2014), part of a longer “doors” series, is the formal analysis of melodramatic film fiction and the attempt to understand such works as a story-telling system. I wrote about this as a historical entity in the original concept statement of the “door game” series:

“Banging doors can be highly symbolic narrative objects – or are they simply a mechanical measure, or just a slip of tongue? ... We have created drama and also re-enacted the drama we created. Popular cultural texts fine-tune specific course of events with narrative logic, which we fervently imitate in acting out our daily roles.”

Concrete Video: subjectiles, objectiles, projectiles

In all the works mentioned so far, I discover how I have turned video art into a platform for intermedia convergence. By doing that, I am also coming close to the method of musique concrète, by extending it

to images as well. Along similar principles of Pierre Schaeffer's, my "composition" activities often involve stretching (slowing down, changing shape and dimension), playback, fast forward, reordering and so on to sight-and-sound fragments, turning a single recorded moment into multiple phenomena, thus also stretching viewers' perceptual experience.

Doors Medley (2014) underwrites the concrète principle and yet appeals to serialism in music. Serial formation turns this work's image discourse into a 3-channel automated wall projection, later adapted into a 3-window single-channel video, to show how sequential thinking in cinema can be augmented into a game of rule-based permutation and polyphonic structure of combinatorial alignment. My penchant for surrealist automatism thus evolved with the introduction of machine-thinking with a focus on rule-based narrativity pushing for near drama, or, drama that defies a denouement as it is always in the process of deconstruction. The work has three movements, which lay out the process of my studying door and window devices, which is also that of "brewing" dramaticity without ever arriving at any single stable story.

Endnotes

The acts of collecting, gleaning and archiving result in montage as a necessary method of composition. On the philosophical level, it upholds phenomenological rigor; I highlight sight-and-sound as rich surfaces of productive appearances. As well, I thought of my works as micro narratives of the unfolding process of a thought path. On the historiographic level, my composition method is about positive connectivity – I build in new relations between fragments as I make my decision to bring them together. Almost all of my works use raw material from a long duration, from 5 to 15 years, which turns connectivity to open-ended interpretation.

My practice of feminism persists in "enriched perception and stretched cognition" as the ultimate objectives of video art. As a personal commitment, in a world flooded with images, I believe no experimental moving image work is justifiable work unless it makes us experience the world differently, makes us see more (or less), see better, and see differently. After many film theorists, I support an approach to experimental cinema that provides us with a way of thinking about the world that is only affordable by the moving image.

Taking experimentation as my prime position, my video works have been consistent in three aspects: (1) exploring the temporal aspect of film-video, by playing with narrative time, screen time and conceptual time via micro-/meta-narrative games; (2) working with found footage, be it mainstream cinema works, personal diaries or found newsreels; and (3) treating experimental video as a form of visual ethnography, that is, using visual research and image-making to explore the nature of art practices, to enact my documentary impulse for the quest of history, and, subsequently, the unique ways art contributes to knowledge production.

(Linda Lai/2021.01.16/Hong Kong)



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