As a historian, a visual ethnographer and artist, what do I care deeply about?

Mentalities…how do people really think? What do they care about? What do they do with their thinking? What are the ways they do things? How do they participate in a culture and a shared cultural past? What kind of ideal personhood do they project? How do they make sense of the world? What kinds of self-made philosophy of life? How does story-telling become the converging point of the above? How do visual and audio fragments handed down from the past facilitate access to those lived moments? What kinds of documents are they? What kinds of linkages could we establish with those fragments?

My historiographic approach is grounded in ethnography. My research location, ‘archaeological site’, or ‘field’, is the everyday terrain and the every day person. My assumptions are, first, the everyday terrain can be understood as a rich zone, consisting “of the little things one hardly notices in time and space.” (Fernand Braudel, 1979) In Braudel’s view, the ‘everyday’ pertains to “zones of turbulence,” and is a progressive
category that pays attention to the everyday and in so doing creates anomalies. Second, the everyday person, anonymous and ordinary she is, is engaged in meaning-making, whether conscious of it or not, via everyday doings. Her inner temporality takes the form of event structure, that is, her mentalities reside in actions, speech, the making of artifacts and other observable and perceivable forms. (Mark Blum) To me, the horizontal mapping of a broad range of ‘surfaces’ via the collecting of audio visual fragments – one form of visual ethnography – is a core research activity holding together my multiple-end historiography. Instead of deep analysis of the single sample case, which is the typical approach in qualitative research in social science, I prefer the aggregates of data.

Theory as practice is a key principle. I have done virtual walks through the main streets of my city Hong Kong in its colonial time in 1934 in an elaborate narrative with thick description based on archival newspaper and photo research. (Lai, 2006) I have collected video talking heads (head shots with audio) of ordinary people based on circles of acquaintances, who were asked to retell a well-known fairy tale or a story of their own choice. (Lai, 2006-2009). Using these talking heads, I study their articulation of self embedded in their logic of events through language configuration and speech performance, to arrive at glimpses of self-made citizenship of individuals through the movement of the private self towards the social in the duration of a short narrative. I have also assembled from my video diaries images of the urban space of Hong Kong that are outside monumental historical
discourses, or simply gone due to ceaseless urban renewal, to form works of visual poetry with a purpose. Editing, rather than an act of pure aesthetic collation, is laying out, unfolding, alignment, and the construction of discourse. Phenomenological description is interpretation. (Andrew Reid Fuller, 1990)

Much of what I have studied is mediated experience contained in audio visual documents that are not innocent forms of representation. Visuality is not just about signification and discourse; it is a complex field that requires insightful dissection of language at work and activities around the camera as performative events of human interaction.

In studying and using film footage and photographic images I collected for the colonial past of Hong Kong, I am much conscious of the following:

> photography of the 20th century was developed at the intersection of the philosophical claims of realism and the cultural claims of the ‘everyday’ (John Roberts, 1998, 1999)

> photography and photographic documents have a strong impact on the concept and knowledge of the ‘everyday’

> all photographs articulate a mode of attention (or attentiveness) that may or may not be aligned with grand discourses: it could be a fashion or style of image making promoted in mass communication, it could be a result of a certain model of
camera, it could be government news propaganda, it could be highly personal as a memoir (the source); or it could be emblematic of class (which economical class could afford a camera, what kinds of professionals would travel around with a camera to make pictures).

> the temptation and limitation of visuality: “the more we reduce the focus of vision, the more likely we are to find ourselves in the environment of material life” (Braudel 1979); my question is, then, how to tie in visuality to the broad terrain of the observable everyday? What could one do with images? And what can images do?

> images could be used as forms of obsessions that have yet a linkage to ordinary behavior (Steven Johnson, 2005)

My general response is: visuality could be understood on multiple levels, as is the case in visual ethnography. Johnson recommends for the study of everyday life a flexible assemblage of methodologies that collaborate with one another: systems analysis, probability theory, pattern recognition, popular culture analysis, symbolic analysis, textual studies etc., to which I add visual and sound artifacts.

As a reflexive visual ethnographer, I construct my creative/artistic paradigm by which images of daily life embodies the collection and use of anecdotes, drawings, travelers’ notes, the way people eat, dress, or lodge at different levels of society – to preserve the complexity of history, and the limitation of singular source of epistemology.
My experimental video work, *Voices Seen, Images Heard*, was created in the light of the above consideration and on-going practices.

**Critique & Historiography as Artistic Creation: a Synopsis:**

A historian, also an interdisciplinary artist, engages in a self-dialogue of how to write the history of her city, Hong Kong. Drilling the disparate mines of sights and sounds, she re-examines the power and limitation of *ocular epistemology*, which favors visual perception as the dominant form of knowing. As she makes her way through the scanty and homogenous visual documents available, she re-imagines a city that has a precarious history of holding onto its look or preserving its architectural integrity at the interest of real estate development. In response, she re-constructs a visual essay that is also a collage of lost surfaces and shadowy fragments of existence. Her meditation leaves open the potential meanings of each of the sight-and-sound fragments that seem to have spoken to her, asking how feasible it is to access the past.

**Artistic Vision:**

*Voices Seen, Images Heard* is a work of experimental visual historiography based on visual ethnography. I have always been an earnest image-collector – photos, newsreels, movies with real location shots, drawings, found texts and graphics. I attend
especially to the less noticeable details of these found objects, and I realize there’s a lot to
the ‘surfaces’ of things handed down to us from the past. I naturally find collage a
powerful artistic form and strategy, and have adapted it to videography. In the process
of it, one intriguing creative problem is how to embed still images in a video work; the
other is what to do with available fragments that do not immediately form a rational
whole. What I have done in *Voices Seen* is to liberate the fragments of found sounds and
images from the domination of discourses, juxtapose them with my own video diaries, to
let each fragment speak and perform to us.

*Voice* is the first of a series meditation notes in the form of video essays on the
thought process of a historian attempting to re/un-cover the lost sights and sounds of a
city whose ‘appearances’ constantly ‘disappear’ by the logic of progress and development.
I have been driven by a strong desire to ‘see’ and ‘hear’ for myself… What did people
look like? Who walks on the street? How did they talk? What did they sound like? In
the light of phenomenological thinking, I highlight the historian’s desire to gain access to,
and the impossibility of sensual perceptual dwelling in the past -- even in the presence of
a huge archive! The irony is – a lot of the Cantonese sounds I’ve found are not
comprehensible to me. I look at them and listen – much like a stranger in the midst of a
foreign tongue.
Philosophical quotes I have used in *Voices Seen, Images Heard*

“The dead are not available to him as his contemporaries are; he cannot bodily enter their environment; he cannot converse with them; and he can know them only through fragmented and problematic records.

“He regroups and reformulates typifications of typifications, unable to obtain any immediate access to the settings which he explores.”

“So much of what really ‘counts’ to people in our society goes on in secret.”

**Bibliography:**

__________. “What is in a Talking Head?” (2006- ; work in progress); a project of visual ethnography, Hong Kong


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**Video presentation with discussion:**

**VOICES SEEN, IMAGES HEARD**

11.2009 / Hong Kong / 27m 58s / PAL / aspect ratio 3:4 / color + b/w / Stereo sound

A Linda C.H. Lai video