**Non-place • Other Space: the sight-and-sound archive of untold anecdotes for Hong Kong and Macao**

**Linda C.H. LAI (Hong Kong)**

For ‘urban style; build up a (un)fair world’, Afro-Asian Institute Graz, Austria, June 7, 2011

---

**Videographic as personal diaries, visual ethnography and historiography**

Over the years, I have developed a method to create video works that are based on found-footage or video diaries in my own archive. Collecting sights and sounds in a certain existential mindset, and gaining fresh understanding of these documents much later like a researcher, form 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. And this is also whether my historiographic intention comes in.

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. In terms of cinematic art, my works follow closely thoughts in the history of experimental cinema in the US and Europe, asking as well what experimentation possibly means in my cultural context. I’m particularly interested in Early Cinema moments – when cinema’s possibilities were wide open, and before cinematic narrative conventions were formalized. To me, the energies of Early Cinema bear an ethical dimension: the imperative to keep an artistic medium open and alive.

My critical and creative works in general have a strong concern for language and micro/meta-narrativity, grounded in a feminist sensibility that integrates critical theory, cultural studies and historiography. Language to me includes film language and visuality at work in general as expressive systems.
Non-place • Other Space as experimental, critical visual-ethnography

Non-place • Other Space is part of my continuous fuelled interest in found footage and compilation works, also an auto-ethnographic practice. I have been a fervent walker of the city as well as a detached collector of sights and sounds. Video-making then is to renew the old images that filled my archive, also to preserve 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.”

Non-place • Other Space is also self-consciously engaged in the dialectics of the monumental and the fabric of everyday life in the context of Hong Kong and Macao, two cities whose histories and identities have been co-opted into the grand discourse of Chinese civilization since their handover to Chinese sovereignty.

Non-place • Other Space compiles fragments of the city space in Hong Kong and Macao (1991-2008) to assert the possibility of many spaces and temporal sheets in one single framed discourse. It attempts the states between disappearing and emerging, visible and concealed. “Walking through” is a precarious experience. One penetrates, dives into, emerges and immerses in… In one moment, I see, therefore the video camera records for me; in another moment, the camera sees and retains, then I discover. Automatism leads. Virtual sounds I barely grasp in my mind, and fragments of a voice I have long forgotten, all blended into the placeless other space of non-place. Places and lived moments of disappearance return as the in-between, neither monumental, nor illusionary.

I have discovered much about my ethnographic impulses as I piece together fragments of sights and sounds. Hong Kong is a food-oriented culture; yet to me food is closely tied to death and demise. I meant to be anti-monumental, and looked for ‘history’ in the banal and the everyday. Yet as I review the finished piece, every other minute of the work carries fluttering fragments of a monumental event: Chinese New Year, the Ghost Festival, the 2000 Millennium celebration, China’s hosting the Olympics… Most of the outdoor sites in this work no long exist in current maps of Hong Kong and Macau as a result of ceaseless urban renewal projects; or some scenes have never yet existed as practical, concrete dwellings as they were only impermanent sites of art installations.
Montage as critical strategy

Globally circulated typical images of Hong Kong glorify the soaring skyscrapers of the city’s financial and multi-national corporate institutions, or else the skyline of the Victoria Harbor, crowds and traffic jams. To me, Hong Kong cannot be reduced to a handful of images, whereas it is in the act of walking that I discover my metaphor – ceaseless streams and torrents of sensations from eclectic and multifarious sources, sounding or muffled, colliding yet blending. Here and there, huge digital screens scream at crossroads as I sink into the boundless space of my thought world or sudden daydreams. Then at the quick turn of a street corner, a bustling road becomes a forgotten alley carrying on the life of half a century ago. Walking through the city space of Hong Kong to me is real-time experience of rapid succession of details sweeping by and ceaseless transition in and out of broken time zones. In the language of cinema, we call it ‘montage’. More importantly, as my visual research shows, the city of Hong Kong has a precarious history of holding onto its look or preserving its architectural integrity – in the context of a real estate-driven development model.

In working through chaos and disorder, and in piecing together fragments of sights and sounds into an image discourse, I was drawn into a renewed interest in the meaning of editing. Montage is collage. Collage, with its historically subversive connotation, leads me to a method that achieves coherence via incoherence and incongruence. Thus I call my visual grammar that of fragments: an editing approach that liberates individual shots from discourse, and allows each image/sound fragment to take on new tones and voices as it freely cohere with each other.

The sight and sound fragments are pregnant with anecdotal resonance as yet to be made explicit. I’d like to use the pastry ‘napoleon’ (‘thousand-leaf, or millefoglie, or mille-feuille) as an analogy to describe the overall image/sound system resulting from the montage of fragments of varied texture and sensibility in Non-place. The many ‘leafs’ include: art space and art installation, food, small details of monumental moments, water (nature in the urban space), places where food is prepared, disgust (waste, relics, food), demolished place, human body parts, casual conversations, media broadcast, my mother...

Yet one final ‘leaf’ is my diary in the form of poetry. In the midst of the torrents of images and sound signals one finds the subject being of the artist, whose own private story and her relation with her tools could only be articulated in words. Text-image relation in this work is therefore not that of interpretation or supportive elaboration. The written words are not
translatable into any visual form; they form an autonomous tier of space of their own, the private, desirous, and reflexive of art-making.

The untold anecdotes of disappearing places...

Non-place • Other Space is an archive of visual quotations of vanished places whose stories beg to be told. Here are three instances:

- Portions of the harbor shore of Hong Kong that now become land from sea-filling... Despite the lacking in leisure space for the dense population of Hong Kong (now over 8 million), the Hongkong Government, until recently, had seldom considered the natural harbor shores of Hong Kong for providing a nice walk for its citizens. Heavy sea filling along the shore never ceased to make way for highways. Preventing the harbor of Hong Kong from disappearing due to over land-reclamation has been the main agenda of a local activist group called 'Friends of the Harbour'. [The stories that need to be told: the history of Hong Kong's harbor shore]

- Images of the Walled City, with workshops for food manufacturing, supplies for dental treatment, and inexpensive housing, a community that the Hong Kong Government cleaned up totally by 1993, now turned into a memorial park... [The stories to be told: elimination of communal life for urban renewal]

- Images of a charity home originally for domestic helpers who had sworn celibacy, the poor and women in need during the Japanese occupation (1940s): in the early 2000s, the Macao government loaned the space to independent art groups to stage alternative arts. After a few incidents of art censorship, the government decided to take back the space to develop it for cultural tourism in the name of cultural heritage preservation. Now on the same site, among the many tourists’ interest points is an atmospheric restaurant heavily publicized in all tourist guide books... [The stories that need to be told: top-down engineered cultural management for tourism, at the cost of forfeiting the nourishment of independent art-making]

CITATION:

I.

Exposé of Non-place in the official catalog of traveling showcase "This is Hong Kong" (2009-1010) -- Venus Lau, Robin Peckham – Non-place Other Space collects footage of Hong Kong and Macau shot over the course of almost two decades between 1991 and 2009. Ostensibly, this non-narrative assortment of moving mages attempts to define the urban characteristics of these areas: the events, feelings, and changing spatial settings are here distilled into several arcs of repeated and
thematically coherent visual patterns. The video opens with a pot of boiling water on a stove, which then gives way to something like abstract patterns under a microscope, later echoed by abstract painting and blurred nighttime photography. Water plays a key role in this image of two metropolises, with a brightly colored boat, industrial maritime cranes, and a floating suckling pig carcass all figuring prominently. Other important icons include a dress hung in a tree, a human body of some kind dangled over a railing, a figure in a red dress, a vast assortment of storefronts and signs, a market, dentures, a jewelry store, a church, an airplane, glass windows, fire, and the Hong Kong skyline—concluding with a sizzling pot on the stove, as in the beginning. Throughout this rapid succession of places and emotions, the soundtrack drifts between the experimental and the peratic; the moving images are interspersed with still photographs and sentimental or poetic journal entries reproduced in text over the images, all of which becomes subject to changing color filters and varying rhythms of editing. Concluding with a note on redevelopment, this is clearly a complex rendering of an indistinct cultural territory.

II.
Review by a Cultural Studies scholar, Dr. Kimberly Choi (Hong Kong):

If I read Non-place. Other space as a visual ethnography, we may need to rethink several things in the making of (visual) ethnography:

1. the "field": ethnography contains fieldwork. The field of this video is two cities, Hong Kong and Macau. The classic ethnographic text may use thick description to describe the field and to let audiences understand and even step in the field through the writing. In the video, we do not see these cities' landmarks (except the high skyscraper shot of Hong Kong). In fact, there are few long shots for audiences to recognize the location. The motif images repeatedly appear in the first part of the video are flowing water, floating chicken corpse, female mannequin with red cheongsam and black lace stockings, two staggering words "no. 10" in Chinese, etc. If the landscape and the objects are the Other Lai represents, these images do not describe what these places really are but "take[s] us into the center of the experiences being described" (Geertz 1973: 18). The sense of instability, the horror, and the suffocation haunt audiences until the last part of the video, with men and women doing (house) work in their "work" place.

2. the "Other": Rather than represent the Other, Lai clearly tells us that representation of the Other is always self representation. Lai self consciously does not position herself as an outsider but she actively invites us, the audiences, to join her journey to explore the cityscapes. One of her poems in Non-place: "The domain of the enigmatic is where I play my daily routine. Here and now fogged by undifferentiated hues. Blow and blow and off I go. Come go with me yes or no? (27 October 2002)."

3. the "story": what it means by a story? Non-place provides no mainstream ethnographic situated story (such as how the central character, the Other, lives her life in a particular context). If there is a central character, it is Lai, who selects video shots and words from her visual and written diaries respectively, making sense of and describing her experience of city space (HK & Macau) and other spaces (various art galleries which construct temporary sense of place and community). The story also provides no typical story, without an action-oriented or cause-and-effect plot development and resolution. It also provides audiences no clues how Lai, if she is the protagonist, organizes her life in different spaces and contexts. It is not a realist tale showing audiences a transparent world; the
video tells from a feminist standpoint stressing reflexivity and emotion. In Denzin's words, Lai creates her "own situated, inscribed version of the realities" (Denzin 1994: 505).

References

BIOGRAPHY

Linda Chiu-han Lai (Ph.D. In Cinema Studies, NYU) is Associate Professor of Critical Intermedia at the City University of Hong Kong's School of Creative Media under the leadership of Jeffrey Shaw. Lai is also a trans-disciplinary artist and independent curator for contemporary media arts. Her video art, installation and digital works have been shown in funded exhibitions in Hong Kong, and in art and film/video festivals in Oberhausen, Hamburg, Berlin, Paris, Jihlava, Barcelona, Birmingham, London, Taipei, New Delhi, Kuala Lumpur, Kaohsiung, Seoul, and a few cities in the United States. Her academic writings so far have a focus on urbanity, cultural memory and identity politics in cinema, as well as theoretical issues in cultural historiography and how to open up new horizons. In her capacity as an educator and artist, Linda has worked with many young and aspiring art practitioners in Hong Kong.

Link to event:
http://www.aai-graz.at/cms/