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Autor: Lin, Lana / Schindler, Annette

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Technology and Cultural Borders

Interview with Lana Lin from Annette Schindler

One of the features specific to the new media is that they can defy cultural and political boundaries that are at times closed to us physically. Thanks to e-mail, we can communicate with people on the other side of the world, even if an actual trip there would be beyond our means. Emigrants take advantage of such possibilities to keep in touch with the culture and family that they have left behind. Videos – cheap to make and easy to send by mail – serve the purposes of such border crossings. In her video works, the American-Taiwanese artist Lana Lin has recourse to her own surroundings as subject matter. She also treats the experience of living out two different national identities, which is something she shares with countless others in Western lands.

Both of the videos that are the subject of this interview are on view in the [plug.in] living room:

"Taiwan Video Club" (video 14 min., 1999) focuses on a community of Asian women living in the U.S. who trade videotapes recorded off Taiwanese broadcast television. The daily epics, among them adaptations of literary classics and Taiwanese folk opera, unite immigrants who share a common past. Their internal distribution of pirate copies marks a turning point in the history of consumer video in which stories that were once passed on from mouth to mouth are now passed on from VCR to VCR.

"Mysterial Power" (4-channel video installation, 2000; 53 min. video, 2002) is both a personal pursuit of knowledge through interactions with family, spirituality, and everyday life in Taiwan. More of an absent center than the video's actual center, the maker's adolescent cousin, who communicates with a local Taiwanese god, served as the inspiration for the project.

Lana Lin, still from "Taiwan Video Club", 1999



AS: One of the important features of the media is its distribution. Via Internet you can communicate with people from remote cultures, that you could perhaps never meet in person. But already video had the ability to travel and cross borders, which may be closed for individuals. In your work "Taiwan Video Club", this fact plays an important role: Can you elaborate on the function of the video in this work of yours?

LL: Taiwan Video Club focuses on my mother's participation in a self-organized community of Asian immigrants residing in the U.S. who trade videotapes recorded off Taiwanese broadcast television. These cost-cutting senior citizens ship blank videotapes in bulk to their friends and family overseas. Daily epics, among them adaptations of literary classics and Taiwanese folk opera, are dutifully copied and returned to them. To me, this internal distribution of pirate copies marked a turning point in the history of consumer video in which stories that were once passed on from mouth to mouth were now passed on from VCR to VCR.



HISTORY MAY JUST BE REPEATING ITSELF IN TIANANMEN SQUARE

Seattle Times
Sunday, May 28, 1989

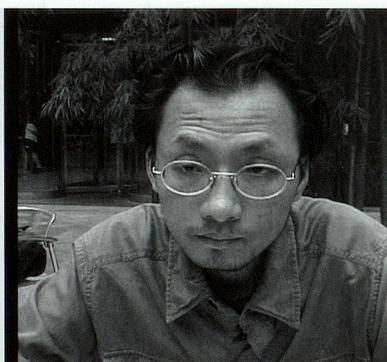
Lana Lin, stills from "No Power to Push Up the Sky", 2001

AS: To what extent does video have the ability to compensate the lost cultural environment? To what extent is its function one of communication between expatriots?

LL: To some degree exchanging videotapes unites my mother to other immigrants who share her native culture and common past. As a medium that potentially embodies fantasy, video can partially fulfill the discrepancy between lived experience and cultural memory. I think it can in some ways address their desires

for their past, even if that past now resides in the imaginary. Videotape can act as a storage device for reconstituted memories. At the same time, it is an object that deteriorates. While video retains a connection to the past, it is a medium designed for duplication. This is why it was the appropriate medium for me to draw connections between the transference and disintegration of video images and the process of immigration and assimilation. But this isn't the end of the process. As video degenerates, it becomes something else. This is the potential in migration. In migration, the migrant accumulates heterogeneous experience that can be transformative. Most of us claim and inhabit multiple subjectivities at the same time. I wanted to represent that construction of multiple subjectivities through my own production of layered video, color shifts, and plasticity of the image.

AS: Is there a counterpart to the video traveling from Taiwan to the US? Something traveling from the US to Taiwan?



LL: I certainly cannot speak for Taiwan or the US, so I speak from a position of not knowing. I would like to problematize your question because it speaks exactly to what you've brought up earlier – the question of distribution. Ideas and objects in

today's media and technology-driven environment simply don't travel directionally. So, we need to discuss the transportation or importation of such ideas or objects in terms beyond binary opposition. They can exist in multiple places simultaneously, and the sources of influence are not static but arise through confrontations that are not clear-cut. One might identify an impulse toward rapid modernization, hyper-media, and developing technology that is celebrated in the West. This is so pervasive globally that other nations, like Taiwan, have probably exceeded the US in this quest and may be considered leading

proponents. I think it is most fruitful to look at the cross-fertilization of such influences – not necessarily between nations such as Taiwan and US, but between notions of tradition and progress, between areas of unequal economic or political power, and to examine the effects of such influences in these divergent environments.

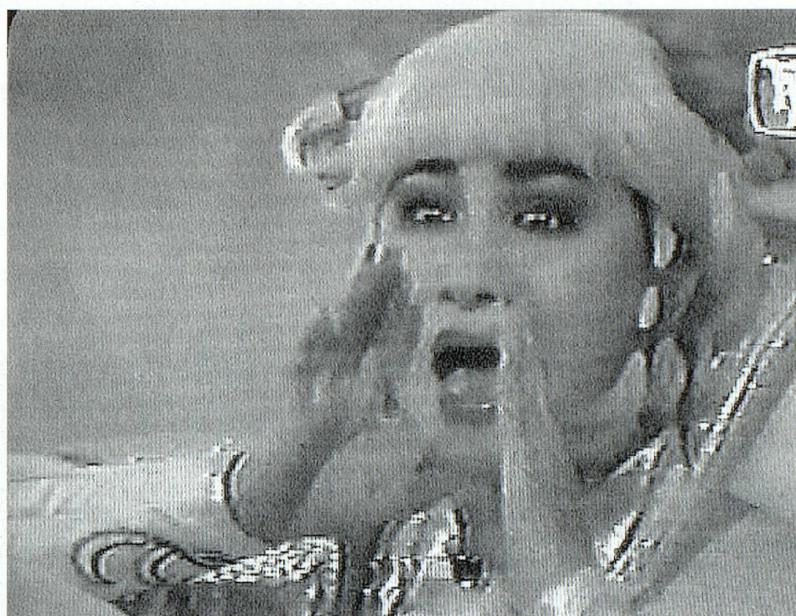
AS: How do you address this cross-fertilization in your work?

LL: One moment in my work "Mysterial Power" exemplifies this cross-fertilization. I document my grandmother's funeral in Taiwan, which is an eclectic mix of traditional and imported influences. At the funeral, the leader of a brass band twirls a baton and initiates a rendition of *auld lang syne*. In a radical juxtaposition, the brass band melody is completed by classical Chinese instruments as the casket is lowered into the ground. I emphasize such apparent oppositions as transformations into hybrid forms. In my recent video installation, "No Power to Push Up the Sky," I "translate" the Tiananmen Square massacre through its media representation as well as multiple literal translations of an interview with a Chinese student leader. Here I am interested in how text, as a representation of an event, travels and transforms – from its originating source in Beijing, 1989, to speakers interpreting the source in the US and Canada, 2000. Simultaneously, we witness interpretation from a different direction as Western news headlines chronicle the events in the Far East.

Catherine Russell, in her book Experimental Ethnography, talks about how culture is not lost but takes on new forms. I subscribe to this point of view and try to manifest this cross-fertilization through both content and form. The resulting multiplicity expands the parameters of my work. I have made work that co-exists as video, slide lecture and essay, or installation, CD-ROM and web project. To resist a presumption of essential wholeness, I produce work that is in dialogue with itself, in which no piece is entirely complete in and of itself.

AS: In "Mysterial Power" you document your encounter with your cousin in Taiwan, who is a medium and can see the future. I was especially interested in how you integrated the element of the translation software into this narration. Can you talk about your experience with this software and the role it plays in "Mysterial Power"?

LL: The computer program demonstrates the failure of literal translation as certain words confound the computer software and appear as unintelligible script. The software conveys the limitations, disparity, and problems of access between different



Lana Lin, still from "Taiwan Video Club", 1999

linguistic communities and cultural experiences. How I employ technology emphasizes the disjunctive experience of traveling between cultures and languages. It points out what we take for granted, how we know things through technological and linguistic privilege, and what kind of power relations adhere even in the simple task of sending an e-mail. Language is not a transparent medium of communication. The inadequacy of translation is an obvious process by which to expose these problems.

AS: To me, "Mysterial Power" is also much about the failure of cross-cultural communication. What does that mean to you as a first generation Taiwanese-American? Are you optimistic or



Lana Lin, stills from "Mysterial Power", 2000

rather pessimistic, that technology can help us overcome cultural borders?

LL: I want to try to avoid an essentialist vision in which communities are freed from the difficulties of communication, in which cross-cultural communication can take place through a seamless transference, because that is a utopic vision. Cultures inherently contradict themselves and others. This diversity within and between cultures is what fuels productive and progressive dialogue and exchange. So I think our duty as cultural producers is to be vigilant in developing modes of address that question our

own assumptions while we forge attempts to recognize others as fully as we are capable of, understanding that we are limited to our own perspective and experience. If we hope to, with the best intentions, reach out to other cultures with the aspirations of our own culture, no matter how important and self-evident those values appear to be, we will misfire, and technology will only serve to monitor and maintain borders. But technology is not the enemy – it is a knowledge that can be channeled, and it makes all the difference how we direct it. It can be channeled with equal force toward supporting and enhancing cultural distinctions and political autonomy.

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