

## Passions in cool grayscale images

### Interview with Asian Art Biennial artist YAO Chung-Han

Interviewer: Rikey CHENG

Translation: Jessica Wang

Q: Would you like to start with your study background?

YAO: I majored in interior design at Shih-Chien University in college and later entered the Graduate School of Arts and Technology of the Taipei National University of the Arts. However, my studies had not been so smooth before college and I had to repeat both the high school and the college entrance examination. At Shih-Chien University, the grading system in my school was based on the students' finished products. I think this is more relevant to what I am doing now. Shih-Chien emphasizes that the finished products must be connected to your brain, so they are not just empty ideas. Thinking back, I think this part of training has been very helpful for me in bridging from pure sound to installations.

Q: When did you begin to get interested in sound art?

YAO: I used to dream of becoming a DJ in college. However, I later realized that the point was not to be a DJ or to experiment with sound, but the feelings and effects the sounds had on me when they traveled in the air. The receptivity of sounds is very unpredictable and abstract. You cannot describe why certain sound would cause certain emotional responses. There are, of course, researches on this topic, but most of them are still indescribable. I started with what I had at hand. In my senior year, I bought a simple pen recorder to record sounds and later manipulated the tunes using computer software. There were two critical points prior to the Graduate School. The first was the shooting of the documentary "Her Party" ("和party") for LIM Giong (林強). The acquaintance with the crew members helped me speed up the process of familiarizing with the equipment. The second was the Taipei SONO, 2004 organized by YAO Ta-Jun (姚大鈞) in my junior year in college. At the time, I had absolutely no idea what sound art was, so I was very confused after seeing the advertisement and the ticket price. It didn't seem like a concert, but it did not resemble performing arts either. However, I felt totally shocked after watching it.

Q: How did you enter the field of the new media arts?

YAO: A turning point is being nominated as the winner of 2005 "Blas - Sound Art Exhibition" (異響). Before the Graduate School, I hardly knew any sound artists. As a result, I was very nervous when I first learned I was nominated, and I was shaking all over when I got the phone call. The lady on the phone sensed my hesitation and asked me whether I would like to know the rest of the candidates. I was even more scared when I heard the names of YAO Ta-Jun (姚大鈞) and LIU Pei-Wen (劉佩雯). Although I was very satisfied with the work "By Train in 5 Mins" (拆火車) before I entered it in the competition and I knew this work was kind of odd, its eventual selection was an important encouragement, and it influenced my motivation in sound creation later in the graduate school. Now I am experimenting with the combination of sound and installations or images. Although I think listening by itself has its own attractiveness and I quite support pure listening, I also contemplate the possibility whether sound can be mixed harmoniously with media materials from other fields.

Q: What are the interested topics of your creation?

YAO: I usually start with the creation of sound. For example, I recorded sound with the pen recorder in the beginning, and then moved on to using better microphones and better equipment, and better software as well. However, these kinds of projects become quite boring after a while, because microphones and equipment will always get better, but software manipulated sounds are quite similar. Therefore I began to look for different sound generating materials and eventually found radios. I began to use the noises from the radio to create sound since the summer of 2006 "What sound is it in Nanhai-II?" (南海嗒聲二). My first attempt to convert the sound creating process into sound installations (noiiise) is when I used the radio for sound installations in 2006 Taiwan Avant-Garde Documenta III (前衛文件展). At the time, I was contemplating the relationship between sounds and images. Anyone who are beginning with sound creation and are introduced to audiovisual works would be curious about such works; even computer visual effects from iTunes and the likes are being watched a lot. As a result, I was attracted to works by Ryoichi Kurokawa (黒川良一) where the sounds and images are closely connected, and my works were influenced by him when I created my own works. I later had doubted about it, and therefore I was very excited when I found radio. The images on the computer monitors spontaneously interfere with the sound on the radio, which is exactly the opposite from the prior process of creating sound first then images later.

Q: What type of works are you working on these days?

YAO: The Fluorescent Lamp Series-"Un-" (不明) is an extension of my 2006 creation, which is about the relationship between the sound and the image. Why did I replace light with images? Thinking back, the reason why all my prior works were either all light or all dark is probably because I used overhead projector or monitors as a relatively easy-to-operate light source, for it could easily produce graying effects (灰階). So I was quite excited when I got into using fluorescent lamps. The English title of this series is "un-". I like it pretty well. It has the meanings of not understood and not clear. "Un-" is also the beginning of many English words whose meanings are usually negative. Many people's first impression of these works is about power failures. In addition, colors are also intentionally eliminated from these works.

Q: Have you ever tried to cooperate with artists from other fields?

YAO: If we take "cooperate" in a loose term, I have "cooperated" with many artists. However, if we take it in a narrower term, those were not really "cooperating" but subcontracting projects. I am quite happy with one of these projects, which is to design projecting images in the opening of a fashion show. The requirements of the images were very strict, for its stage design was spatial and my images must strengthen the spatial effects on stage. This spatial design had two levels, the front and the back. The images must make it seem like they were sometimes on the same plane, sometimes three dimensional, and even like there were a third level. The designer PAO Pei-Yu (包佩玉) first introduced me with the concept of space and her design vocal points, and then just left me to run with it. Mostly because of her trust in me, we had a good time working together.

Q: Have you encountered any barriers or difficulties in your creative process?

YAO: After I finished the exhibition preparation of "Have you eaten yet?" (食飽未), many people came and saw it. I had a voice in my mind, "Is this really art?" I think this part is very possibly related to our viewing habits of art works, because the creators are too used to be asked what they want to express in their works and whether they have any social concern or message of globalization.

Q: Some scholars think all art are political. This does not mean you have to refer to the happening of a certain event or to clearly declare your standpoint to be social or political. An art work brings the audience different experiences, and it also expresses the artist's personal views upon the society in different ways. After all, artists create art works to reflect and respond to the society where they belonged. The new generation of artists seemed to have a lot of feedbacks on the discussion on "Art of Frustration" (頓挫藝術) in Taiwan. Would you like to comment on that?

YAO: "Art of Frustration" (頓挫藝術) is a topic suggested by Mr. LIN Hong-Zhang (林宏璋). I personally do not think my concerns for the society must be reflected in my works, and therefore I do not think I must use my works to express social values.

For example, I think topics of strong social concerns such as the problems with the "Lo Sheng Leprosarium" (樂生療養院) must be approached via highly effective means. But I am not certain whether this means art is a less effective approach when dealing with the society. Therefore, if I were to participate in the petition for "Lo Sheng", I would not use my art works; or I should say, I do not believe my works would make any difference. If one wants to change "Lo Sheng", shouldn't he take the core and communicative position? Maybe I am not politically correct on this, being a bit pessimistic about art. But I do think when we respond to problems of a highly social sense, there are many approaches to take, and we do not necessarily have to use our own creation to achieve it.

Q: Is there any new media artist who has inspired you?

YAO: Ryoji Ikeda (池田亮司). I once participated in an exhibition which had a high requirement on space infusion (場域的結合). Ryoji Ikeda happened to be preparing his "Data.tron" (數據原型) in the exhibition of "Zone\_V2\_" at MOCA Taipei. Since I was in charge of the opening performance there, I had the opportunity to watch his exhibition preparation process and his demands on his works. It occurred to me that when we are asked to create works that comply with certain spacing requirements or specified frameworks, but my blood and my body are not passionate or excited within that framework, I still think I should work on the part that I am passionate about.

Q: Any words for those young internet friends who are devoted to the new media arts?

YAO: There are too few people working on new media arts. I have noticed that the number of sound art activities in Taiwan is far less than that overseas. Most people are probably not aware that the "Lacking Sound Festival" (失聲祭) is held monthly. Those who are interested can take the opportunity to come and experience in person. Organizing "Lacking Sound Festival" is my way to respond to certain phenomenon, and this kind of response is not expressed through my own works but through other means. In addition, there are often international competition notices published in "Taiwan Digital Art and Information Center". This is very helpful for young artists. I myself have once submitted my own works on the information published there and won!