

Rhizome | A Conversation with Yao Chung-Han  
ROBIN PECKHAM | Wednesday Jul 28th, 2010

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RP: Yao, I have a more specific inquiry for you. My understanding of the Taipei sound art scene is derived from this narrative of Lin Chi-wei and his collaborators, particularly the Zero and Sound Liberation Organization of the 1990s, which was very much influenced by DIY and punk ethics and aesthetics in music and later art, while on the other hand today we have artists working in a vernacular influenced more by international new media, like Wu Chi-tung, Wang Chung Kun, and Tseng Wei-Hao. In practice, how do these scenes overlap? Which of these artists do you commonly work or exhibit with?

Yao Chung-Han (YC): In Taiwan, sound art has actually already been very clearly defined, or at least categorized, starting from Lin Chi-wei and on towards Wang Fujui, and then to us. Because we all come out of similar art academy backgrounds it appears as a very clear lineage from the outside, a certain school of sound art. The other major school emerges from the academies of music, working with more musical styles of production. Those are the two major directions. Both schools work with new technologies. Younger artists in both have become accustomed to using computers in their work, and both occasionally use musical instruments.

RP: You work in a collective called i/O Lab (no relationship to I/O Gallery). Who is involved in that group?

YC: Me, Wang Chung Kun, Chang Yung-Ta, Huang Chung-Ying, and Yeh Ting-Hao.

RP: Do you all work in this more conceptual tradition of sound art, or do you also move into the areas in which Samson works, like composition or performance?

YC: More conceptual. It's production. Our material is conceptual and the result should be thinking, with other relational and spatial concepts as well. In terms of composition, I think some of us make attempts occasionally, but our backgrounds are all in technology and art. Wang Chung Kun's background is in sculpture, with a bit of architecture for some of us, but the other members are all working in some type of art or design. No one is trained in music.

RP: Yao, what do you think in terms of your work?

YC: My work employs the relationship between sound and light as a catalyst for conceptual work, so I would say both of these elements function as materials. In the process of production I'm trying to tease out something more obscure through this relationship.

RP: So what role does sound play there? What is it doing?

YC: It is a point of origin for the concept of the work. Ultimately it is only a portion of the final piece, but it plays a very important role.

RP: Yao, the relationship between light and sound in your work comes from a very different place. Without light you simply wouldn't have sound. Is there a conceptual difference there as well?

YC: At the beginning I was experimenting with lights in my studio process. We're so inundated now with audiovisual work, from performance to media, and I wanted to experiment in a way that was related to that. I was interested in the role sound played in the audiovisual, especially in the kind of musical performance that Alva Noto and that whole genre is working with. Why, in the information environment we live in, are we interested in that style of work? I think there's actually a very artificial relationship between sound and light in many cases, so I became interested in more natural, more determined relationships, as with the physical properties of sound and light, and especially cases where the two are inextricable. That scenario is very different from our normal process of audiovisual design.

RP: For those of us with less of an understanding of the historical development of the contemporary music world, would you elaborate a bit on the passage of musical modernism?

YC: Studying with Yao Dajuin, we learned to work with sound and nothing else. But the question of the audiovisual within and in relationship to sound is important for me, so I work more with modes of perception in order to analyze forms of communication between these different elements, especially communication with the audience. This communication, as reflected in my work here, is not simply audio plus visual, but rather explores a very different set of reactions that take place when these two things combine. The object in the exhibition space plays a very specific role, based partially on its physical properties. I'm working with the spaces in which these different forms of communication adapt to each other.

RP: I feel that much of your work, and this piece in particular, is more about a visceral relationship with the body, not simply audiovisual but also physically present in terms of tension or even fear produced by the combination of sound and light. Is there a difference between this kind of relationship and more cognitive approaches to sound?

YC: It's arousal, or excitement. This is a simulation of the sphere of mediation in which we live, populated with familiar objects and abstractions of the light and sound that inundate us. This is more direct, based on minimal and installation art rather than musical sound. It does not require too much contemplation, but rather enacts a different form of bodily communication within this sphere of media and information. Those pieces of information in the real world carry specific meanings, whereas when they are deprived of meaning we are pushed into a state of anxiety, a new model of communication. I'm interested in the reactions to this uncanny form of communication that does not respond to cognitive interpretation, but rather to direct experience.

RP: Your work contains a sensor such that when someone walks into the space there is a very specific order in which lighting elements become illuminated in relationship with the recorded sound of the piece. How is this order defined?

YC: The sound is intended to complement the "motion" of the lighting system, and the order of illumination is randomized according to the physical properties of the hardware. I'm interested in the moment of uncertainty in which even I don't know if a given light will illuminate. It depends on temperature, voltage, and so on, and these factors inform the soundtrack. It's like looking at the ocean. You can see the light moving over a given surface area of water and it appears as a random or abstract motion, but in reality it's all determined by the physics of light, water, and reflection. It's a partially intentional and partially incidental composition. A performative process.

RP: Have you ever worked with generative or algorithmic processing in your past projects?

YC: No. I don't see any point to Max/MSP style processing. It's an abdication of the responsibility or control of the artist, and doesn't add any of the interesting elements of the physically randomized processes I described in relation this piece.

Excerpt from "A Conversation with Samson Young and Yao Chung-Han."

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