

Transcript: Interview with Paul Wong

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Note: Text in brackets is clarification by the Editor.

Editing is minimal and solely for clarity or removal of redundant or incomplete phrases.

Introduction

Hi - my name is Paul Wong and I'm listed as one of the cofounding directors of the Satellite Video Exchange Society, Video Inn as its popular name - and now known as VIVO standing for Video In and Video Out, VIVO... I started from the very beginning in 1973. So that would be sometime back in the last century...

MATRIX International Video Conference

I had actually picked up my first portapak, probably the year before... I was involved with the Stadium Gallery, which was a Vancouver Art Gallery educational extension project that had occupied a defunct baseball building - Nat Bailey Stadium. And I operated the youth program as a part of this arts education program. And it was there that I had encountered other artists but specifically had met Michael Goldberg, and he became very much my mentor. And then I got involved in volunteering hanging around and assisting in whatever capacity with the Matrix International Video Conference, which was exactly forty years ago here in Vancouver. The registration fee was to deposit a videotape and take away another video tape - as the whole concept of exchange and distribution and file sharing, all that sort of stuff. I was in charge of collecting the video tapes, cataloging the video tapes - so I was in charge of registration I guess or a couple of us were. I think both Shawn (Preus) and I were doing that. So from there we ended up with this collection of 100 or something titles from the delegates and that segued into developing a place to deposit this and kind of creating a resource and an organization and a centre to house and show and distribute and network with the international network of video makers at that time.

The Matrix International Video Conference, which was co-organized by Michael Goldberg' was a coming together of the Video Exchange Directory... which was an international listing of people, places and their interest, so that people could contact each other... This was an invitation for the video exchange directory people to come to Vancouver for this conference. So it really was that listing - which I think had been done for 3 or 4 years prior to that - (which) was really the who's who in terms of video makers and artists at that time.

This is post-Intermedia. Intermedia was dead and gone by the time I'd come around. There were certain groups that had segued out from Intermedia - but this was separate... Intermedia is well documented as this interdisciplinary collaborative thing, that did extraordinary stuff in the late sixties up to early seventies...

Video Inn

(Video Inn's) first piece of equipment was the Intermedia portapak, a tool that I used a lot. It was always available to the Intermedia artists: they could always have free access to it. (Video Inn) kind of grew out of (Intermedia) and, of course, Michael Goldberg was part of Intermedia.

We were an idealist collective of do-ers. We were gonna change the world. We were gonna take and democratize media. We were gonna put it in the hands of ordinary people and tell ordinary stories. We were going to revolutionize who makes and who sees television. We were anti-commercial television, we were anti-corporations, we were anti-establishment, we were anti-CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation), anti-NFB (National Film Board)... you know we had a real... came out of the hippy counterculture politics. There's gotta be something more than what there is – there's got to be places for alternative perspectives and new thinking and different kinds of art forms. So it was a bit of a "Fuck you!" attitude for sure. It was a fuck you to the art world as well.... I mean here was the first accessible portable video system that was freed from all that filmmaking 'bullshit' and television 'standards' and conventional documentary practices of the NFB. They treated us as outsiders, gave us no respect... so kind of left us on the outside allowing for certainly me to work completely beyond those limitations. And of course who's getting the last laugh? They would have never dreamt that forty years later, that all this is kind of possible, that people can do whatever they want to do: post things on YouTube, Vimeo, have websites, do things on their smart phones, and we are now televising the revolution. We don't need them to do it for us anymore.

Did you feel this tide coming, the first step in consumer video?

You know, we knew we were on to something. The minute I picked up a video camera, it was like magic. And it continues to be like magic. We were in the electronic revolution which has now become the digital culture or whatever and we were passionate about this new medium, and its potential and its possibilities. We saw the future and we wanted very much to be part of shaping that future. So I think, yes, we were certainly aware that we were onto something new, and part of the passion was the challenges and the ignorance and the lack of respect and support that we were getting for what we were trying to do from a lot of sectors..... I mean when I think of some of the outrageous demands we were making and the idealism - we were out of our minds. We had big ideas.

Video & Censorship

We just drove by what used to be Red Hot Video here at 16th and Main, the longest operating porno/sex shop on Main Street. It just shut down recently, and now a new sign has gone up...It's now a massage clinic.

You know, when VHS came on the market, porn stars started to open up... which was controversial. Here was a form of expression that had been deeply ostracized and limited to kind of peep show mentality to kind of seedy cinemas, basically a gritty down under low brow men's activity. The VHS introduction of home video changed that course and thinking had to be changed. Red Hot Video was firebombed by the anarchists and frowned upon by the feminist movement. One of the things we did in the 80s was fight censorship of all kinds. And in order to shift the thinking there was Karen Knights and Sara Diamond had formed this thing called the Coalition for the Right To View. It was through very smart

and strategic planning on a very modest scale, they were able to talk to key feminist leaders across this country and to turn their thinking from anti-pornography, stop the exploitation of women by men, to being pro-sex. If you're pro sex and you want freedom of sexual expression in all forms, you cannot be anti-pornography. What you need to do with this new medium is create your own new forms of sexual expression so there's not only just what there was before. And it worked. So that's one example of switching the thinking.

A lot of that came out of the queer politic around here as well...One of the earliest video tapes in the collection is called Transsexual Lifestyle - one of the first works to interview with someone who was transsexual/transgender and the struggles and challenges around that. So we've always been at the forefront of the queer politic for sure. We would have screenings of that and other kinds of work with 20, 30, 40 people, exchange a tape with another community in Toronto and Berlin. All of that has generated into the world wide queer film festival circuit, which we used to be very involved in - we had workshops, we had residencies, commissions. Again part of that exchange going back to the very idea of the exchange of ideas, work and people. Populating each other's centers and minds and channels.

The use of the Library by community/communities

If you were to look at that first sampling and the video collection when it was actively collected particularly, you will see the trends. You will find that in 1976-78 there was a whole swack of work coming in on this, or from here or there.... that's probably a pretty interesting way to view the activity of this centre is from the collecting habits. So you'll know obviously someone must have been to Europe or Japan, because all of a sudden there's a flood of, or a number of works coming in from, Eastern Europe or the video art community in Japan or New York or Toronto or Downtown East Side or the queer community or the feminist community....

k: unheard voices & communities... educational elements of tapes... educational role of video making, or archival?

Every time someone tunes in, drops in, comes by and views a work there's a communication going on between viewer /subject, viewer /images, that's completely an educational exchange. Be it a didactic work about saving the whales, or something that's completely expressionistic and abstract. That's education. Educational work doesn't have to be the way that formal education has been established and thought of at the beginning and end. It's ongoing. If you're curious about the world and you're curious about change in yourself and the world.... whatever that means.... you're constantly searching, you're just constantly asking questions and searching for answers that leads you to more questions and more trails of observation.

The idea of you coming into the Video Inn - we didn't tell you what to watch. There was a viewing station and catalogues, you came and asked for the tape, you put it on and you watched it. We taught you how to use equipment and you could borrow it. So it was DIY. We were trying not to be the fascist programmers. We were trying to teach people that they could in fact learn to look, listen and make decisions themselves.

The perception of video as art.

It was part of that whole anti-art going on anyway, which the 60s was kind of addressing. Commodity,

the art market, the art object.... even to this day and age, I mean I think it's changed a little bit with the newer generation. When I say I'm an artist "Oh where can i see your drawings and paintings?". That still persists, forty years later in my career i have to tell people I don't draw. I don't paint. So we're still dealing with those antiquated notions of what art and an art experience is. So the idea of introducing an ephemeral media experience certainly upset the art market - people who are used to exhibiting 2D works of art or a series of prints from a studio or a concrete piece of sculpture. But in terms of - yeah you can't preserve and collect and we can't commodify and we can't profit from this new art form we don't get it, it's free on television so - that upset people. In terms of allowing 'non' professionals to tell their own stories and these 'amateurish' shitty grainy kind of pictures, that does not meet 'broadcast standards' was another way of shutting people out. All of these kind of professional ethics are suddenly - these screens come up... 'well your black levels and white levels are not television standard - we can't even start to consider what you guys do in terms of broadcast. We can't sell this, we can't exhibit this, we can't show this... it's not film." What's magnetic tape?

Archiving an ephemeral medium

We were very clear about that from the very beginning. We always fast forwarded and rewound our tapes, so that they all tracked back on one flat plane - we always stored our tapes like this, they were always labelled on the inside, they were always put in a plastic bag and inside the case, and we stood them on the sides so it would not crush the individual loops of tape. And we always tried to put it in the coolest place possible. So we were very concerned with preservation. We always made a copy and an exhibition copy. So we always had our master, or submaster. When we got tapes from the artists, we tried to get the best copy possible from their masters. So we were very concerned with the quality, productions values and preservation in whatever way we could. We didn't just throw it in the corner. They were marked, they were catalogued, they were numbered - there were sheets where the works came from, there was a log of who watched it and when we showed them and when we copied them. So we were very organized around that, it was not haphazard.

The only thing of value here - because equipment comes and goes, people come and go - is that archive. That's the history: the publications, the notations, the journals, the videotapes. It's an incredible... particularly the first 20 years, when it was really well maintained...of late 20th century video art history and ephemera. I mean, it is an extraordinary vault of analog materials of a very particular collection that is very unique. It's probably like no other collection of its kind anywhere. We always knew that that collection had enormous value. That's why we kept all the publications, the posters and the correspondence. Handwritten correspondence, from various artists - that was all filed. We had file drawers for everyone we were in contact with. So you could pull out 'blah blah blah' from file 'a' and "Aha! Shawn visited them in Zagreb in 1980... alright they were here in ..." it was all the stuff there. It was all quite well organized. And Crista's done a fantastic job in the last decade of ensuring that, 'cause for a while there stuff was stored downstairs and you know people would go and dig out. And I would come by and see a couple boxes of stuff strewn in the hallways. So there was a certain neglect of that history between various transitions.

So much of that history is also my history, because everything I did for 25 years is in there. I have yet to take the time, except sporadically when I'm called in or passing by to look at that. I'm happy that it's now organized in a way that I can see that. But parallel to that I have my own history of hundreds of works that I've made that are languishing in boxes in storage units, in closets - in all formats (1/4", 1/2" open reel, 3/4", Betacam, VHS, Hi 8, DVDm MiniDV to the current) with a very small percentage of it that

has been digitized. And, of course, there's all the ephemera, publications, print, photography, tens of thousands of color slides and black and white negatives - printed and unprinted. It's enormous... it's an enormous task. Yeah it is overwhelming, I find it really overwhelming. I think I finally have a new Paul Wong projects website up, which is identified as first phase 85 projects and a handful of writing. But it's now become a template for 70 other projects right away. So I'm starting that process now of at least listing a number of projects and having some media representation of it. But its pointing the way to what's seriously missing and what needs to be done. You know we went to V/Tape who's my distributor and they have 80 pieces of writing listed about my work, but none of its digitized. And i probably have some of those articles in print. But I probably have less than five percent of that stuff digitized or easily organized so I could even pull out the paper copy.

Portapaks to Smart Phones

Because I'm doing this talk called "Now & Then" and it really is kind of doing this arc, this journey from this 50 pound portapak that I picked up in 1973 to what I can now do on my smartphone. And how it's been all one in the same, when I actually realized that.... despite all these other things and kinds of work, productions I've done, big studio productions to elaborate spectacles to whatever. In the end it's really been about mobile media. Making it and sending it and receiving it and sharing it. So when you think about it... the first Sony portapak came out in 1965, "wow, it's taken 50 years to get to this..." the promise of video art has taken a long time. Yes we can do all of this, but my god that's half a bloody century to actually have made that leap. So, what I wanted and how I thought in my head that I was doing with that, now I'm doing with this (*Smart Phone*). You know the technology continues technically to be so far behind what I feel and see conceptually. I mean it's not intuitive, it's clumsy... it does this this or this... now it's possible to blend a lot of stuff together. But it's still not there - I can't "think" it. It's gone from push buttons to a touch screen. Gone from this (*gestures size of Portapak*) to in my pocket. I can now jam and create much more accessibility and impulsively and have different kinds of audience shares, but it's been one in the same. It's been part of what I've always been doing. I mean it's fantastic but it's still very archaic.

What accessibility means

I've never been a gearhead, so it's never been about the gear to me. I'll use whatever is available to me. I don't need the biggest and the best - I do actually, but it doesn't stop me from doing. I think the number one thing we did, and this place needs to continue to do, is about creating a space or spaces, whatever that means for people, to collect or to come together to be creative; to exchange ideas. So the biggest value this place has is its history and to share that history so that we don't repeat mistakes of our past as they always say and to continue to create an accessible space, that allows people to come together. Because, for me, it's never been about wanting to work alone: it's about wanting to be with other people. I mean, that's us... humans are social beings. So there's a real need to socialize and to share and to communicate and to jam and collaborate together. I think that's kind of what social media's all about. It's riffing off that same thing, from the idea of the Satellite Video Exchange Directory: listing a bunch of people places and interests and allowing people to contact each other.

Making the Archive accessible.

Making it available to the public: I mean, so that anyone can just walk in and sit down and watch a work,

find it on a database. Upload download and see what all that is. You know, having it as this second rate activity here, that's not strongly supported by the collective and the current and where you know not putting the resources and the respect behind it. And having it operate as this part time thing in this part time space, when this place is or is not open - if you're not gonna have it on databases and share it worldwide then at least have your doors open and both! I was just thinking the other day...I was sitting corresponding with someone on social media, thinking I actually miss the taste feel and touch of a piece of magnetic tape. And I thought of just going up and grabbing a VHS tape and pulling it out of its cassette just to hear that crinkle and to actually feel the object in my hand. So I mean there is something that's really nice about the feel, the look and the smell of magnetic tape.

What's lost through digitization of tapes / mediums / life...

There's all this kind of the nauseating... which I'm part of, Instagram... you know' everyone using these super 8... who have all no idea... all these kind of retro filmic grainy filters, which is an emulation of something that you can't... it's nostalgia as opposed to actually sitting in this room with a Super 8 projector clicking away over here and seeing it on this screen. I mean you are feeling the heat, you're hearing the motor. You're hearing the sprockets and you're seeing the light. I mean you don't get that on a flat laptop screen... you're not getting that kind of experience...I had to rid the method of editing. I lived for setting my things up, that click click click and hearing that 5.6 second roll back on each machine going click click click click at the edit point. You don't get that. There's no consistency with final cut editing. No two edits have the same rhythms. It's gotta render. It does other wonderful things, but the idea of the mechanical machine, which i loved - that was a feel; it was all about touch. Now that they've introduced the touch screen... that has maybe the capability that we're now starting to explore, that maybe with that touch screen I can start to feel, I can start to feel the image. I can start to feel the sound. I can start to feel the color. The keyboard, even the mouse... But the idea of actually having this immediate tactile sense of what I'm making is right there. What I'm touching here is going up there. So, yeah, there is something in... because you're talking about formats...that each format, each piece of technology, has a life and soul. And I think that is where I, as an artist, and where I, as a curator, and I, as someone who's been involved in this centre for a long time, was trying to give that to the creative person, so that they could be a part of - so that they could experience touching and feeling and making with those tools on a visceral level, to have a real kind of connection with it. And have a soulful relationship with it, not a corporate economic or deadline kind of approach to media. Because media - the tools of media up to then and still now - what they teach in school is delivery process... delivery delivery. What's lost in all of that is the actually getting into the pixels getting into the 525 lines, getting into the red, the RGB... entering the machine. And you only get that from playing, and playing with other people, and experience of those other things...

Fear of mediocrity

You don't want me getting started on my fear of mediocrity. You know, my greatest fear is that I'm going to have at some point "oh my god, I've lived a mediocre life". That's my greatest fear. And yes, one should not strive to be mediocre. One's got to dream and take risk and not be afraid to fail. Or succeed.

I mean this organization is 40 years... I was gonna say young, but forty years old. It continues to trundle along. I'm sure that it provides enormous value. I'm not, as someone who was a key figure in the founding of this organization, and was highly active for 25 years and move it into this place, so it'd have

a long-term stability. The fact that it's still here after 40 years is kind of amazing. The fact that it is not further, I don't know what that means. The fact that it continues to maintain is good, but with the forty year history I think it can be bigger better and louder.