



The Story As Seen From A Moving Viewpoint

by Yukie Kamiya

Earlier this year, I was invited to contribute a catalogue essay to an exhibition in Tokyo, Japan. This catalogue essay explores a narrative within the contemporary art practice. It became an opportunity for me to reconsider my interest in artists who reflect on their experiences of moving different countries and cultures into their works, and I discovered that they create their own narrative especially employing moving images. I selected this text because it would be suitable for SQUID, as a discussion platform connecting authors living and working in different places on this planet.

<Narrative once again>

Telling a story is a common and yet powerful form of expression that has been repeated through the ages.

"Its fascination may be explained by its power both to give a vividly felt insight into the life of other people and to revive to keep alive the forgotten, dead-ended, turned-into-stone parts of ourselves." [note 1]

This is how Trinh T. Minh-ha describes the story. Born and raised in Vietnam, Minh-ha moved to the United States in 1970 in order to escape the increasingly-intense Vietnam War, and is now a theorist and experimental filmmaker known for initiating stimulating debates that cross over disciplines such as anthropology and feminism.

Throughout modernism, artistic expression moved towards the abstract, with the focus on substantial visual form. In our world today, art is once again moving towards the 'narrative' that represents the growing tendency to explore our relationship with society and others. Through various 'isms,' art penetrates different aspects of life – including emotions and desires – to 'give a vividly felt insight into life,' reexamines our 'forgotten' past, and focuses on themes such as socio-political or gender-related issues. This trend is a restoration of the narrative in art and represents a move away from an aesthetic pursuit in which any elements of narrative are eliminated. As a consequence, we, the observers, are required not only to 'look at' but to 'read' art works.

In addition to photography and concrete expression, moving images such as film and video have become a readily accessible avenue of expression and are providing a source of inspiration for many artists. As a result of filmic expression that has benefited from technological advances, the fusion of 'the visual' and 'the narrative' is now resulting in unprecedented forms of expression. What kinds of stories are being told by artists who have acquired the medium of 'the moving image?' How are these stories being told? The focus of this essay will be on storytelling in the medium of the moving image, which has seen a rapid growth since the mid-nineties.

<Acquiring a moving viewpoint and narrative from the periphery>

Moving image, which is able to capture the passing of time and to follow a story, has also become a catalyst that inspires artists adapting narrative-based expression in their art. Barbara Kruger is one who dramatically changed her well-known style of work, pithy epigrams superimposed on pictures. In 2004 – the year in which the American Presidential elections were held in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq – Kruger showed a video work for the first time, projecting onto the four walls of a room. The depiction of people arguing in everyday situations revealed a new narrative aspect in Kruger's work, which is a metaphor of a self-centered worldview. Meanwhile, since the Tiananmen Incident, many younger Chinese artists have been involved in extreme performances in an attempt to agitate – from the opposite end of the political spectrum – against the conventional values of that country. However, creative expression through moving image has



resulted in the emergence of a new sensibility – as seen in the work of artists such as Yang Fudong – in which China’s rapid urbanization as well as its traditions are observed from an objective perspective and presented as allegories.

In the past, narrative through moving images such as film, animation and television has been restricted to the framework of popular culture. In recent years, however, artists have been increasingly working in moving image as a new medium that enables them to depict their relationship with society today. Furthermore, the dissemination of film and video as an avenue of visual expression in an age of globalization has meant that narratives spun by artists in the regions that, until recently, have been categorized as being on ‘the periphery’ are now being conveyed to the world at large.

Consider Shirin Neshat (born 1957), who is originally from Iran and is now based in the United States, Fiona Tan (born 1966), who was born in Jakarta to a Chinese father and Australian mother, grew up in Melbourne and then moved to the Netherlands to study art, and Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba (born 1968), who was born in his mother’s country Japan, studied in the United States and is now based in his father’s country Vietnam. These artists who moved between many different countries and cultures are superimposing the traces of their movements onto the ‘moving eye’ of ‘film’ to tell their stories.

Shirin Neshat moved from Iran to the United States at the age of 16 and began producing art works again as a result of her return to her native country in 1990, 12 years after the Iranian Revolution. Both as an artist and as a human being, Neshat had a yearning to understand the dramatic changes brought about to her native country as a result of the revolution. Her visit to Iran became the catalyst for Neshat’s exploration of Islam through a series of works in which text (poetry written in Persian text by Iranian feminists) is hand-written onto photographs of Neshat herself in a black chador.

Neshat’s art reached a turning point when she began employing moving image in 1997. Neshat did not restrict her work to political criticism or declarations, shifting to a narrative-based, movie-like filmic expression in which there is a beginning and an end. Through the visualization – on black and white film – of dichotomies such as man and woman, those with power and those without, and the group and the individual, Neshat poses questions to the observer by presenting stories from the viewpoint of a woman born in a Muslim country.

In the documentary film *May You Live in Interesting Times* (1997), Tan visits her relatives who were dispersed and scattered throughout the world as a result of the anti-Chinese riot in Indonesia. This film represented a turning point in her exploration of the theme of individual identity. During the process of creating many different films and video installations, Tan has developed a unique technique in which she appropriates archival footage to create works with a completely new perspective. Archival footage from colonial expeditions and silent documentary footage featuring countries that Europeans in those days perceived as exotic have been reconstructed by Tan to tell a new story that reminds us of, and also transforms, the complex and intertwined relationship between the past and the present, memory and reality and the self and others. Tan does not seek a conclusion concerning identity, instead quietly conveying to us – through the portraits captured in her videos and films – that the boundaries of difference are always mutable and that we are the result of hybrid elements.

Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, who had created installations and performances featuring materials such as rice, mosquito netting and cyclos that symbolize Asia in general and Vietnam in particular, first used moving image as a narrative medium in his 13 minute film *Memorial Project Nha Trang, Vietnam: Toward the Complex—For the Courageous, the Curious, and the Cowards* which was filmed underwater in the seas of Vietnam in 2001. The dream-like image seen through the blue filter of water is a metaphor for political oppression that restricts freedom of physical movement. At the same time it allegorically depicts war as experienced by the three nations of Vietnam, Japan and the United States and the tragic and strained history of a nation striving to develop a capitalist economy. This work began with Nguyen-Hatsushiba reevaluating, as an artist, the relationship between himself and the countries that have had a deep relevance in the circumstances of his birth and peripatetic life. It invites the observer to reevaluate his or her own past.



These artists are part of 'the Contemporary Diaspora' (a term used to describe the dispersion and migration of Jews but which today also represents the movement and migration of people in the post-colonial era). The disconnection from and loss of history and tradition as a result of migrating between countries and cultures has, if anything, stimulated their imaginations and memories and is now being conveyed as stories that reflect the traces of their past.

Moving image becomes an eye that symbolizes the viewpoint of the moving artist. As expressed by Neshat – "moving images, unlike photography which fixes a momentary image, have a flexibility and freedom that allow that moment to continue"[note 2] – these artists, via the 'adaptable' eye that is moving image and through their personal experiences and perspectives, are creating highly imaginative narratives that are rich in historical and cultural metaphors.

<The story as conveyed by the documentary>

The artist also tells a story through moving image by documenting the person who narrates the story – the storyteller.

Turkish born film director, screenwriter and artist Kutlug Ataman (born 1960) places particular emphasis on the act of talking as carried out by the subjects in his films. Ataman's subjects – one of whom talks nonstop about her life for eight hours during an interview – also represent the alter ego of the artist himself who shares their problems and preoccupations.

"I allow my subjects to talk because only in actual speech can we witness this amazing rewriting of one's history and reality. What else is there? Talking is the only meaningful activity we're capable of."[note 3]

Women Who Wear Wigs (2001) is a documentary featuring four Turkish women wearing wigs for different reasons and who talk incessantly. One woman is a political terrorist who has been in disguise for 30 years, another woman is a journalist who has lost her hair as a result of chemotherapy treatment for breast cancer, another is a Muslim student who is prohibited from wearing a veil to a secular university while another is a transsexual prostitute whose hair was shaved by the police. The wig creates a new self and at the same time hides the old self and represents an attempt at recreating one's identity. The confessions of others are personal stories and at the same time are stories that arouse one's sympathy and which could very well be one's own story. Ataman's viewpoint represents a gay perspective that is free of preconceptions and that expresses a warmth and empathy towards the pain suffered by the weak.

Takamine Tadasu attempts to reveal the circumstances of the society in which he lives and of issues such as preconceptions and discrimination. He does this through performances – endeavors – featuring his own body or through his personal experiences. Takamine's new work *Baby Insa-dong* (2004) shown at the Pusan Biennale in 2004 tells the story of Takamine's own wedding and the events leading up to it, depicted through a series of continuous photographs joined together like a long, narrow sash featuring bilingual text in Japanese and Hangul. The work is viewed by following the photographs and text, and the depiction of the passage of time and the telling of a story gives *Baby Insa-dong* a filmic focus. Takamine's emotional conflict and changes in awareness are confessed with honest emotion through his Korean-Japanese bride, through Takamine's involvement with her parents and through a drag queen friend making an appearance amongst the couple's relatives. The result is a work that vividly conveys the release from nationality and gender-based discrimination.

The documentaries of artists such as Ataman and Takamine begin with a personal event or involvement to address a social problem that any observer can relate to. The stories told by Ataman and Takamine also provide us with a release from the constraints of preconceptions and draws us into a vision that is impartial and fair and which transcends stereotypes.

In the films created by Thai film director and artist Apichatpong Weerasethakul (born 1970), video footage is reconstructed to create installations representing a fusion between documentary and fiction.



Weerasethakul's first feature film *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000) is a series of interviews that, like a road movie, are filmed at places that he visits in Thailand and then joined together. Initially it conveys the impression that it is simply about people's stories of their lives of poverty. However, a young man disabled as the result of a childhood accident then starts to walk. It is a work in which the boundaries of documentary and fiction blend together and successfully conveys a creativity and generosity that is much like that of a parent telling a story to his or her child. *Blissfully Yours* (2002) is a story that slowly unfolds in the lush tropical forest about a young man – an illegal worker from Myanmar who cannot speak Thai very well – on a picnic with his girlfriend. The characters in the film are amateurs and their personal stories have been incorporated into the story, resulting in an organic narrative that is neither fiction nor documentary. *Blissfully Yours* not only reveals the reality of illegal workers – a growing social problem – but Weerasethakul effortlessly crosses the borders, found everywhere in contemporary life, that lie between national boundaries, systems, reality and fiction.

<Stories by those who cross borders>

Art since the 1990's has developed from relationships between artists and the societies that they find themselves in, or from relationships with the people that are encountered by the artist in everyday life, and the films that have richly conveyed these stories are arguably based more on personal experience than on theory.

Artists such as Ataman and Weerasethakul who link different genres such as film, theater and screenplays in their creative process, artists such as Neshat, Tan and Nguyen-Hatsushiba who have moved between multiple cultures, and artists such as Takamine and Weerasethakul who have experienced transgender and transnational issues in their everyday lives have discovered stories in cross-borderism. This is reflected in the words of Edward Said who describes the intellectual as follows – "The exilic intellectual does not respond to the logic of the conventional but to the audacity of daring, and to representing change, to moving on, not standing still." [note 4] These artists with viewpoints that enable them to cross borders through moving images place themselves amidst change and become peripatetic to tell stories – through their unique viewpoint – that are filled with hints and suggestions for those of us who live in this world.

Note 1: Trinh T. Minh-ha, *WOMAN, NATIVE, OTHER* Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism, 1989, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, P. 123

Note 2: From interview of Shirin Neshat by Kamiya Yukie, "Bijutsu Techo", May 2001, Bijutsu Shuppansha, p.131

Note 3: Artforum, *A Thousand Words*, Kutlug Ataman talks about $1+1=1$, 2002, February, 2003, P117

Note 4: Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, 1994, First Vintage Books Edition, 1996, P64

* This text was originally written for the catalogue, "The World is a Stage: Stories Behind Pictures", at Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan, in 2005.