

# SAD MAG

## Talking Heads //

### Paul Wong

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Talking Heads is an interview column devoted to contemporary arts and culture in Vancouver. Once a month, Sad Mag's Helen Wong sits down with a couple of interesting, unique individuals to discuss a topic of her choosing. This month's topic? The prevalent and renowned artist Paul Wong and the ubiquity of his mediums of choice.

Walking into Paul Wong's studio is like walking into another, way cooler, dimension. Filled with an archive of televisions, recorders, monitors, and cameras; it's every media artist's dream. I got the chance to interview Paul about his latest projects for ISEA 2015 and Le Mois de la Photo in Montreal. It's always interesting to hear the perspectives of other individuals, because although technology is something I do not have an affinity for, it's a necessity for the expression of the self for Paul. He creates a notion of a new, cyber-connected, self-aware other that constitutes a way in which we can all participate in our world today.



Still, *Rainbow Swirl*, Paul Wong

**HW:** In our society, there seems to be an incessant need to document and capture everything. Do you think this causes us to construct our own realities rather than live presently? How does this notion apply to your artistic practice?

**PW:** As an artist, I am conscious of the democratization of media; I'm given the tools to turn my eye/ camera away from the mainstream doctrine. Instead, I actively choose to turn the camera towards myself and my community in order to tell my own story and to share our thoughts and images. This has always been my politic. In this way, we are constructing ourselves as our own realities. It's turned things upside down for mainstream media because we now have a multimillion-channel universe and we are no longer subjected to only 13 broadcast channels. Suddenly, whatever platform I decide to use becomes my own network to share, to take, to make, or inhale or exhale. In this regard, we've come a long way from

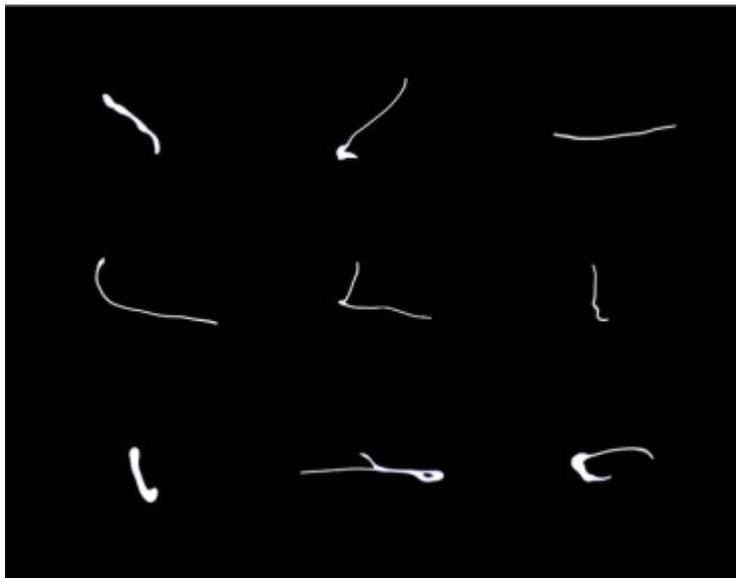
Narcissus on his knees looking at his own reflection. What we see, what we get to make, and ways of looking and seeing are radically different than what it was in the past. We are no longer being fed information and images because the control on what we can or cannot see, what is true or untrue – this monopoly on cultural history – has radically shifted. It takes a lot more work but we are creating this new other.

**HW:** In this thread, you play on the idea of Bressai, a surrealist, who stated that the world of the real is continuously making art and that we become quiet observers. Do you view yourself shifting into this role as social media dominates?

**PW:** My practice is really based on observations and stories from everyday life: things that are immediately around me. What I find constantly around me includes the Internet. *Looking Looping and Listening*, *Flash Memory*, *Year of GIF*, and *Solstice* are four works that are covering shooting everyday stuff over the span of 6 years, its part of a larger body of work called the Multiverse.

**HW:** Video gives the notion of immediacy; do you feel hindered by how fast technology is changing? How do you continually adapt to new forms and modes?

**PW:** I don't think technology is changing too fast at all, in fact I think technology is still very primitive. The fact that your phone wasn't working the way it did an hour ago, there's no wifi in places, the wifi isn't strong enough, you're running out of memory, you have low battery, or the camera isn't good enough, are evidence that it's still primitive. Technology is not there; I've been waiting for the promise of technology for 40 years. The promise has been dangling in front of me for my entire life and career, to the point where it's still a promise. The amount of time and money I spend on staff and resources, troubleshooting, rebuying, downloading, uploading, reconfiguring, upgrading, and updating on a weekly basis is insane. But on the other hand, the post photographic condition has been making the evolution from the analogue world to the promise of digital a possibility.



*9 Full Moon Drawings*, Paul Wong

**HW:** You're presenting work at the ISEA2015 (International Symposium of Electronic Art, August 14 to 19) are you able to tell me a little bit about your work? Or at least provide a little spoiler?

**PW:** We're debuting a project we've been working on for a couple of years called the *MIMMiC Mobile Interactive Modular Multiscreen iPad Canvas*. Patrick Daggitt and I wanted to create a work for multiscreen, to synchronize and de-synchronize 9 iPads so that they can talk to each other using gestures in order to create something very interactive. The iPad hit the market in 2010 and the iPhone hit the market in 2007, so suddenly touchscreens have become our main form of interaction. We've gone from flipping pages to scrubbing, stroking, and feeling a screen. I was doing an interview via Skype on my iPad with this lovely young man and I realized after 45 minutes I was cradling and holding him as I was

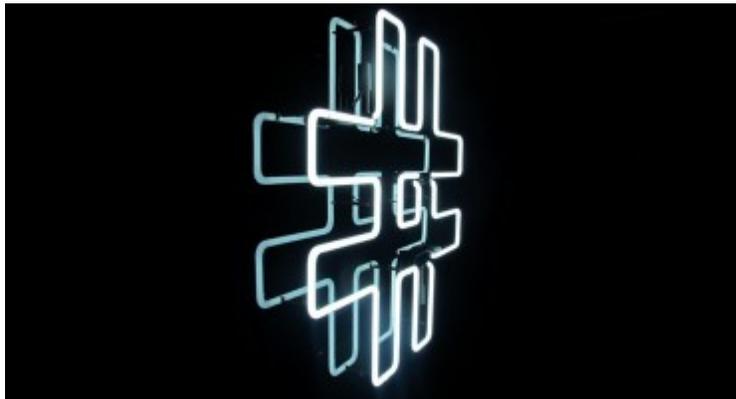
moving around my studio; it was a very beautiful, intimate experience that made me realize the possibilities of gesture. For the *MIMMiC* project we are creating a work that allows one big image, 9 images or 9 parts to be manipulated by colour, timing, and sound, so that the viewer can construct their own work within the boundaries we set up. The first work *Wave Cycle* was shot in Tofino. We will be premiering this at ISEA along with demonstrations of three artists we have commissioned: Sammy Chien, who will be doing a sound based live performance; Evann Siebens, who is developing a work using the hand gestures of herself, her mother, and daughter; and Adam Myhill with Christine Wallace, a cinematographer and a body builder, who will explore ideas of sculptural genderbending between form and content.

**HW:** The post photographic condition is the theme for Le Mois de la Photo [The International Biennial of the Contemporary Image in Montreal]; what do you think this condition is? Photography always has a hint of loss and death, so post photography is seemingly an attempt to reestablish the link between history and the present.

**PW:** With the recent improvements to the iPhone 6, its improved video and photo quality, along with the fact that I have 128MB, it has become my primary creative tool. I shoot all my video and photographs and edit them on my phone. The post photographic condition is letting go of the fact that photos need to be shot in high resolution, or with 300dpi for editorial; letting go of the fetishization of the big format photo which was never my thing anyway. Conventional print media of magazines and books are disappearing, not entirely, but there is huge distribution on the net and other media where you only need 72dpi. The post photographic condition is letting go of all those previous expectations of the former realms of analogue photographic practices. Instagram is a great platform; more people can see what I do than ever before and I can see their stuff too and I can do all this without leaving the bathroom or the bed!

**HW:** As a Chinese Canadian, I often find myself between two sets of identities, almost in a constant state of dislocation. Does this idea pertain to you? How do you remedy this?

**PW:** In reference to the letters, I find myself literally in between two languages! That is cultural difference. In 2014 I made a neon piece titled *#hashtagplus*. I put the symbol of the hashtag on a metal box in the shape of a plus sign. In this way I'm taking the current use of a hashtag and its initial use as a pound sign and paired it with the plus sign, which looks like a geometric piece of art, but can also look like a Chinese character. I took a successful symbol and addressed its different applications in its form and language and presented what it was and what it has become. It's a comment on how you can make an art object out of an ephemeral stroke on your keyboard; to amplify it's meaning was a very successful pop art thing to do.



*#hashtagplus*, Paul Wong

**HW:** You are known as one of the Main Street artists, how do you actively try to incorporate your Chinese heritage and Vancouver roots into your work?

**PW:** At the moment, I have someone who reads and writes Chinese organizing and translating 700 letters written to my mother over the last 50 years. There are over 100 writers in these letters so it becomes an interesting narrative between my mother in Vancouver and her relatives and friends in China. It's a portrait of my mother and her generation woven around the absence of her direct voice; it's a story of an extraordinary half-century 1950–2000. I'm trying to navigate through all the interesting history, timelines and perspectives.

I can't read or write Chinese, and it gets tricky because I only understand a very specific regional dialect of Cantonese. I need a translator who can read and write to tell me what's in these letters. The translator I have speaks Mandarin from Taiwan, and I also need a trilingual translator from Toisan. There is this concept where we communicate through common language, but the loss of language and what is further lost through translating illegible calligraphy makes it even more challenging and interesting.

I like the ambiguity.

**HW:** Seeing as summer solstice just occurred, talk about your work *Solstice* in which you condense 24 hours into 24 minutes. How does the ability to manipulate time and cycles in such a way speak to the integration between technology and life?

**PW:** *Solstice* was a work based on the summer solstice a couple years ago; it was a camera recording out of the 4-floor building at Hastings and Main. It's an observation of 24 hours. The camera took one frame every 10 seconds creating a series of still photos. I used an Aftereffects filter to fill in the missing information that happened in-between the 10 seconds. In this way, I'm using digital means to generate data to artificially fill in the gap between two real moments.

I find the human condition and the planet endlessly fascinating. We're always trying to figure out who we are and our place in relationship to everything else. History, science, medicine, and capitalism all try to lay it out in a linear understandable fashion; however, it's really such an abstract notion. So the fact that I can create moments of how I can look at you in another way is kind of cool. I can slow something down, I can alter the framing, I can position things in different contexts, and all these contribute to a reawakening of a whole other way of looking, listening and feeling. In the end I am drawing with light, because that's what I'm interested in: light.



*Solstice*, Paul Wong