

IT'S HOT!

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A solo exhibition entitled *A Wantanee Retrospective* (2007) by an emerging artist Wantanee Siripattananuntakul at PSG Art Gallery, Bangkok, is a hot stuff. In order to clarify my statement, I would like to introduce two keywords: media, and *Media Hot and Cool* by Marshall McLuhan (2003). McLuhan's articulations of these keywords help to identify the intrinsic characteristics of her exhibition.

McLuhan presents that, in order to understand the media, one needs to consider that *The Medium is the Message*. He first coined this phrase in 1964 and explained that the characteristic of all media refers to the content, e.g. the written word is the content of the print. However, the content is not as important as the message of the media itself. The message (the medium) is capable of shaping and controlling interaction and behaviour of human association. Let us explore the importance of the message by considering the following quote:

For the "message" of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs. The railway did not introduce movement or transportation or wheel or road into human society, but it accelerated and enlarged the scale of previous functions, creating totally new kinds of cities and new kinds of work and leisure. (McLuhan, 2003, p. 8)

McLuhan suggests that the railway is a medium or a form of technology; the transportation, the wheel, and the train are its content. He points out that the message is the introduction of the acceleration and the expansion of previous transportation that can produce significant influences on changes of perceptions towards cities, new occupations, and new activities relating to spare time or relaxation.

Let us apply *The Medium is the Message* to the characteristics of *A Wantanee Retrospective*. I would like us to consider the solo exhibition as a medium, and all writings on the walls and in the publications, interviews on the monitors, a music video projected on the wall, and a self-portrait photograph on the wall as its content. Her message is false configurations and structures that are created in connection with her sarcastic and whimsical points of view towards contemporary art society. I cannot say that her message can control or shape the pattern of art society. Rather, it reflects the way art people behave, think, and make themselves political and commercial icons.

Next, McLuhan divides types of media based on his innovative term called *Media Hot and Cool*. He presents a principal method that categorises types of media. The method is based on two technical words: hot and cool. The words feature different degrees of participation and definition. Hot media are low in participation and high in definition; cool media are high in participation and low in definition. Let us consider McLuhan's examples of radio as hot media and telephone as cool media. Radio is low in participation and high in definition. There is no participation between a listener and a news presenter. The news presenter fills the listener with data. The data is high in definition, as there is not much space left for

the listener to add anything. On the contrary, the telephone, the cool media, is high in participation and low in definition. Telephone allows the participation between a caller and a receiver to take place. The conversation is low in definition, as the listener has to fill much in the conversation in order to draw out the complete information from the speaker.

If I apply *Media Hot and Cool* to Wantanee's solo show, this is what I would articulate: her writings, interviews, music video, and photograph are high in definition and low in participation. Let us look at them individually. Her writings are composed of phonetic alphabets that are of a 'hot and explosive' medium from McLuhan's point of view. (2003, p. 25) She composes the phonetic alphabets to invent statements and stories that appear individual and idealistic. One of the examples is "*Intellectual artists can make only quality art. Stupid artists can make everything*". This extreme writing is full of data that expresses Wantanee's conspicuous point of view. The audience fills nothing into this writing. Interviewees on the monitors act in the same way as the news presenter. They present what they think and do not allow the audience to take part in their opinion. The only thing the audience is determined to do is to be filled with repeated, hypnotic-like data she configures – "*Crazy. Original. But very much bizarre*".

The self-portrait photograph is of the high definition. The data includes the image of the artist herself with a bottle of beer in her hand. She sits in an armchair, and is interviewed. The complete visual information is apparently provided. The music video itself is a construction of late John Lennon's performances that are edited, presented in a compact package of visual and audio information. She only replaces one word in this package with her first name - Wantanee. The information in this package is so perfect and complete. Additional data from the audience is not needed.

It could be seen that the intrinsic characteristics of *A Wantanee Retrospective* are of the hot media as they are high in definition and low in participation. I do not intend to determine which media is superior. It is challenging to see that Wantanee's exhibition makes the audience passive. The audience's role is to be filled with specific, false data that the artist configures. Unlike other exhibitions persuading the audience to participate, I should have felt awkward, as there is no room for me to take part. On the contrary, I chuckle as I can conceptually connect what I see with the present art world that is high in definition and, incredibly, low in participation, outside the gallery space.

Please note that part of this text is taken from my PhD Thesis entitled *Giving shape to time: An investigation into mixed-media installation* between page 115 and 118.

References:

- Guptabutra, Toeingam. 2005. 'Giving shape to time: An investigation into mixed-media installation' (unpublished doctoral thesis, The University of the Arts London)
- McLuhan, Marchall. 2003. *Understanding Media: The extensions of man* (Cornwall: Routledge Classics)

