



Âmago II

The Creative Process of an Underwater Vietnamese Self-Portrait

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Giữa dòng nước dẫy sóng dồi
Trước hàm rồng, cá gieo mồi thủy tinh.
Oan kia theo mãi với tình
Một mình mình biết, một mình mình hay.
2675. Làm cho sống đọa thác đầy
Đoạn trường cho hết kiếp này mới thôi!
In the middle of the tumultuous waves,

she threw herself in the water to tempt the jaws of sea dragons.
Her misfortunes had always followed her passions.
She knows her pains and the true cause of her sorrows.
She'd have to live a life full of sufferings and die in exile.
A heart-rending fate until the end of her life!

Nguyễn Du
The Tale of Kiều

ABSTRACT

This short paper explores the legacy of video art, challenging conventions of representation and perception while blurring boundaries between physical and virtual realities. It focuses on the digital creation process of the video artwork *Âmago II*, which delves into themes of self-representation, self-narratives, and cultural symbolism of spaces and objects. The video art employs visual metaphors to guide the viewer through a diachronic experience, reflecting deliberate technical and aesthetic choices. The culmination of these choices results in the presentation of the artwork and its reception by the audience.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Applied computing** → Arts and humanities; Fine arts; Arts and humanities; Performing arts.

KEYWORDS

Video art, Cyberinstallation, Digital Creation Processes, Body, Self-portrait, Vietnam

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1 INTRODUCTION

In video art, there is a direct relationship between production and the artist's intention, as it reaffirms that art is not a product to be consumed by the masses, but rather the result of an authentic idea liberated from the consumerist system. What is at stake is the artist's intention, a concept or idea that unfolds using video language as the medium.

In this context, the relationship between the language of video and the language of the body is aided by the video's ability to instantly capture and transmit images. The proximity between the artist and the audience is a conceptual aspect often present in videographic images, contributing to the sensation of intimacy and closeness through tight framings and close-ups. The presence of the body is marked by the recording of the artist's gestures through the camera, allowing the artwork to be experienced during its creation, while the artist's body itself becomes translated into the act of gestural creation of the artwork [1], [3].

This paper explores the video art as a medium for artistic expression. We analyze the creative process of the video art *Âmago II*, approaching themes of self-discovery, cultural heritage, and the transformative nature of artistic creation. Through the analysis of the symbolic imagery and compositional elements employed in this artwork, we aim to unravel its layers and shed light on the intersection of technology and creativity in pushing the boundaries of visual storytelling. By analyzing the creation of this video work, we intend to deepen the understanding of the artistic potential

of video art and its ability to convey complex narratives, cultural meaning, and emotions.

2 THE LEGACY OF VIDEO ART

Video art represents a departure from traditional artistic forms, as it challenges established conventions of representation and perception. Machado [2] highlights the temporal and spatial qualities of video, emphasizing how the medium allows for the manipulation and exploration of time, space, and movement in ways that are not possible in other art forms, enabling artists to deconstruct and reconstruct reality, blurring the boundaries between the physical and the virtual reality, and questioning the authenticity and authority of images.

Video art emerged in the 1960s, in New York, as a result of a countercultural aesthetic, bringing new concepts and forms that caused displacement and deconstructions in the ways of appreciating moving images and, more broadly, in the representative tradition of art history itself. In addition to its transgressive vocation, video, as a medium, opened a new space for experimentation for artists who, given its flexibility, began to use it as an alternative to film, but also in the documentation of works, actions, or performances [2]. This new medium provided a platform for artists to explore time, space, movement, and the manipulation of images [5]. Artists like Nam June Paik, Joan Jonas, and Bill Viola, among others, pushed the boundaries of video art, challenging traditional artistic conventions and engaging viewers in immersive experiences.

Machado [2] also emphasizes the democratizing potential of video art, as it allows for more accessible and immediate production and distribution of artistic works. The author believes that video art has the power to disrupt traditional hierarchies and power structures in the art world, empowering marginalized voices, and challenging dominant narratives.

Concepts and processes such as framing, editing, cuts, and shots are part of the terminology of video art, inherited from cinema, confirming that no medium surpasses the previous one, but rather incorporating procedures into a process of mutual influence and transformation.

Video art explores the technical characteristics of the electronic medium, developing a self-referentiality that makes the materiality of the medium visible, for example, through the incorporation of technical errors [4], [5]. For the pioneers of video art, television was a source of raw material. The first video artists began by working to corrode the devices that produced technical images [2]. The alienated use of television is denounced from a critical perspective, assuming art as a form of social intervention.

In this sense, the evolution of artistic language, starting from the 1960s, opened unlimited possibilities for artistic expression, particularly in the field of computer graphics and programming. The emergence of software and interactive systems enabled the creation of immersive installations and environments, where spectators could interact and actively participate in the artistic experience. This is a concept anticipated by avant-garde movements and materialized in trends such as *The Living Theatre* or *Fluxus*, which, in a context where the relationship between art and life was being tested, invited the audience to participate in their shows and performances.

Digital technologies, starting from the second half of the 20th century, will expand, facilitate, and continue this intentional interactivity between art and audience. Artists find in digital media opportunities for creation, subversion, criticism, and social reflection [8]. Indeed, in video art, the audience is often encouraged to actively participate, contributing to the construction of meaning in relation to the artwork. This engagement creates a collaborative and interactive experience, where spectators become co-producers, involved in updating and interpreting the signs presented in the work. Video installations, in particular, embody the concept of the "open work", coined by the Italian philosopher Umberto Eco [9], as they elicit a range of constantly evolving meanings in the viewer.

Through their interaction and global involvement, spectators contribute to the ongoing evolution of the work's meaning. Each viewer's unique perspective, interpretation, and response add layers of complexity and richness to the artwork, enhancing its dynamic and ever-changing nature [6] [7].

The field of digital art, as defined by Claudia Giannetti [8], is characterized by new conceptualizations, particularly in the redefinition of the roles of the author and the observer. For the artwork to materialize and be complete, there must exist an interconnected relationship between the artist, the artwork, and the audience. From this perspective, the appreciation of the artwork becomes an act of meaningful recreation.

3 SELF-REPRESENTATIONS IN VIDEO ART

Also in the early 1960s, we witnessed the fusion of body and machine, with the former subverting the repressive nature of the latter and imbuing it with a new purpose [10]. The body, symbolizing pioneering spirit and revolution, was frequently embraced by artists as a mean to express their political stances and avant-garde art. Simultaneously, the body was regarded as an expressive object, assuming the role of an artistic material in the work. This positioning lends a sense of significance to the artwork, captivating the audience with its intrinsic personality, biography, and the creative force behind it. This question of identity and the enunciator's relationships with self-referentiality transform the videographic work into self-portraits permeated by the "aesthetic of narcissism" [1]. Within this perspective, the body often serves as a foundational element in video art, symbolizing liberation, self-discovering, self-reflection or engagement.

In this context, the body is a meaning generator in audiovisual media leading to a syncretistic relation with the machine as the protagonist in the construction of the subject's identity [10]. The contemporary artists, who inherit the legacy of the early video art, are consolidating aesthetic experiments with the body, particularly through the plastic and poetic use they make of the audiovisual language [11]. According to Krauss [1], the video is capable of recording and transmitting simultaneously, producing instant feedback. The body is, therefore, as if it were centered between two machines that represent the opening and closing of a parenthesis. The first of these openings is the camera, and the second is the monitor, which reprojects the image of the performer with the immediacy of a mirror. This centrality and presence of the body can generate, beyond the mediation between subject and machine,

the construction of meaning of the body that is seen in the body of the other through synesthesia.

In the creation of the video artwork *Âmago*, the body is evoked as a symbol, emphasizing self-referentiality and fostering a closer relationship between the creator and the viewer through techniques such as close framings and close-ups. The artist's gestures become captured within the body's actions, enabling the artwork to be experienced in real-time, as the artist's body itself becomes the very act of creative expression.

Âmago II presents itself as a contemporary self-portrait, infused with meanings and symbols that expose its presence in everyday life. This is achieved through the subject's self-referentiality and a continuous dialogue with the world and others, exploring the self-identity, the cultural symbolism, and the transformative power of water.

4 THE VIDEO ART ÂMAGO

Âmago is a contemporary self-portrait video art that was presented in the 3rd International Conference on Digital Creation in Arts, Media and Technology (ARTEFACTo 2022 MACAO), on the 24th and 25th of November 2022, at University of Saint Joseph (Macau, China). This work represents, through visual metaphors and metonymies, biographical moments and narratives that are summoned in diegetic space and audiovisual language. The diachronic signification of experiences and inspirations was built through aesthetic options, such as slow motion, warm colors, parallel sound, and the option for semi-subaquatic images.

The warm colors were chosen as a metaphor for life, birth, heart, and blood, in contrast with the white cheongsam, which evokes light. These colors are combined with layers of sound, such as the sound of breathing underwater, amplified, and metaphorically transformed into the sound of a volcano erupting. Through sound, the strombolian metaphor is explored, where magma from the Earth's core reaches the surface in a spectacle of lights and colors.

For the exhibition of the installation, the expressive underwater imagery was maintained by using a 1m x 1m x 1m aquarium as a support, where a waterproof monitor with a 30 cm screen was submerged.

5 THE VIDEO ART ÂMAGO II

The video installation *Âmago II: underwater Vietnamese self-portrait* presents an immersive experience (Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3). Set within the backdrop of a Vietnamese beach, the installation invites the audience to embark on a visual journey of self-discovery.

Entering the installation space, the audience is enveloped by a calm ambiance, with soft lighting that evokes a sense of tranquility. The focal point of the installation is a large projection screen, positioned strategically to create an intimate viewing experience.

On the screen, a looping video sequence unfolds, capturing the body submerged in the waters of the Vietnamese beach. The distinctive Vietnamese hat, a cultural symbol of Vietnam, also known as "nón lá", covering the face, protruding from the image.

The conical hat has a long history in Vietnam and is deeply rooted in the country's culture and traditions. It has been worn by Vietnamese people for centuries and is associated with rural life, agriculture, and traditional activities, providing protection against



Figure 1: Frame from the video art *Âmago II*. Source: author.

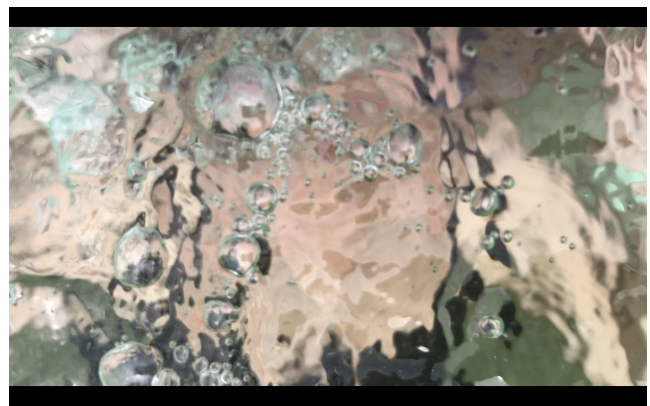


Figure 2: Frame from the video art *Âmago II*. Source: author.



Figure 3: Frame from the video art *Âmago II*. Source: author.

the scorching sun and tropical rain, making it a functional accessory for outdoor work and activities.

It has become an internationally recognized icon associated with this country, often depicted in visual representations, symbolizing the national identity and Vietnamese culture. On the other hand, the shape of this hat holds cultural symbolism, representing values such as simplicity, humility, and harmony with nature.

In this work, the body is a living medium, and the hat serves as a symbolic element that adds depth to the visual narrative. By covering the face, the hat creates a sense of mystery, inviting viewers to contemplate the hidden aspects of identity and self-reflection. Although not exclusively focused on water, this video art incorporates water imagery and symbolism to convey various emotions and metaphysical concepts. Water is used as a symbol of purity, transformation, and the ebb and flow of life.

In the video, the main sound is of motorcycle horns, an omnipresent sound in Vietnamese cities where this mode of transportation holds central importance. There are millions of motorcycles constantly honking. They occupy all urban spaces, sidewalks, roads, residential areas, and are used to transport all kinds of goods. These sounds from the city pervade the tranquility of the water scenery.

The combination of the underwater environment, the Vietnamese hat, the sounds of the city, and the self-portrait format creates a multi-layered experience. It explores themes of cultural identity, personal introspection, and the interplay between individual and collective narratives.

5.1 Technical features

The video art piece uses a Black Magic Pocket Cinema 6K camera, renowned for its high-quality image capture capabilities. To capture a wide field of view and maintain an immersive feeling, a wide-angle lens 24-70mm f\2.8LII USM CANON is employed. The handheld shooting style intent to add a sense of spontaneity to the footage, allowing for fluid movements throughout the scene. The absence of a tripod enhances the organic nature of the visuals, immersing the viewer in the perspective of the camera operator.

Natural light plays a vital role, creating an authentic and atmospheric ambiance. The reliance on natural lighting sources tries to add a sense of realism and captures the unique essence of the location. Filmed in Hue city, the opening and closing credits of the video draws inspiration from the city's everyday scenes, capturing the diverse moments and activities that define its lively character.

The editing process is conducted using the Edius software. The use of a single long take, devoid of camera movements, amplifies the impact of the altering speeds. Through precise manipulation, the perception of time is challenged, in order to create an immersive experience for the viewer.

By altering the speed within a long take, the video art piece invites the viewer to perceive time in a new and transformative way, while the incorporation of everyday imagery from Hue city adds a contextual layer to the overall narrative.

The requirements for the exhibition are a dark room, a projector, and a sound system.

6 CONCLUSION

The self-portrait is assumed as a representation of individuality, expressing a sense of self that is, however, mutable according to biographical experiences and spaces.

The project presented throughout this text consisted of an artistic unit composed of a symbolic video art creation that focuses on self-portraiture. In this sense, the aim was to self-represent the self through expressive, metaphorical, and metonymic processes,

utilizing aesthetic and technological methods influenced by cultural and personal experiences and the video art legacy.

In this project, the author is also a part of the enunciation, which leads us to find him in self-representation within the videographic production, using the body as the raw material. The realization of this self-portrait allowed for a psychogeographical journey in which the self is represented through the invocation of different biographical layers, and metamorphoses.

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