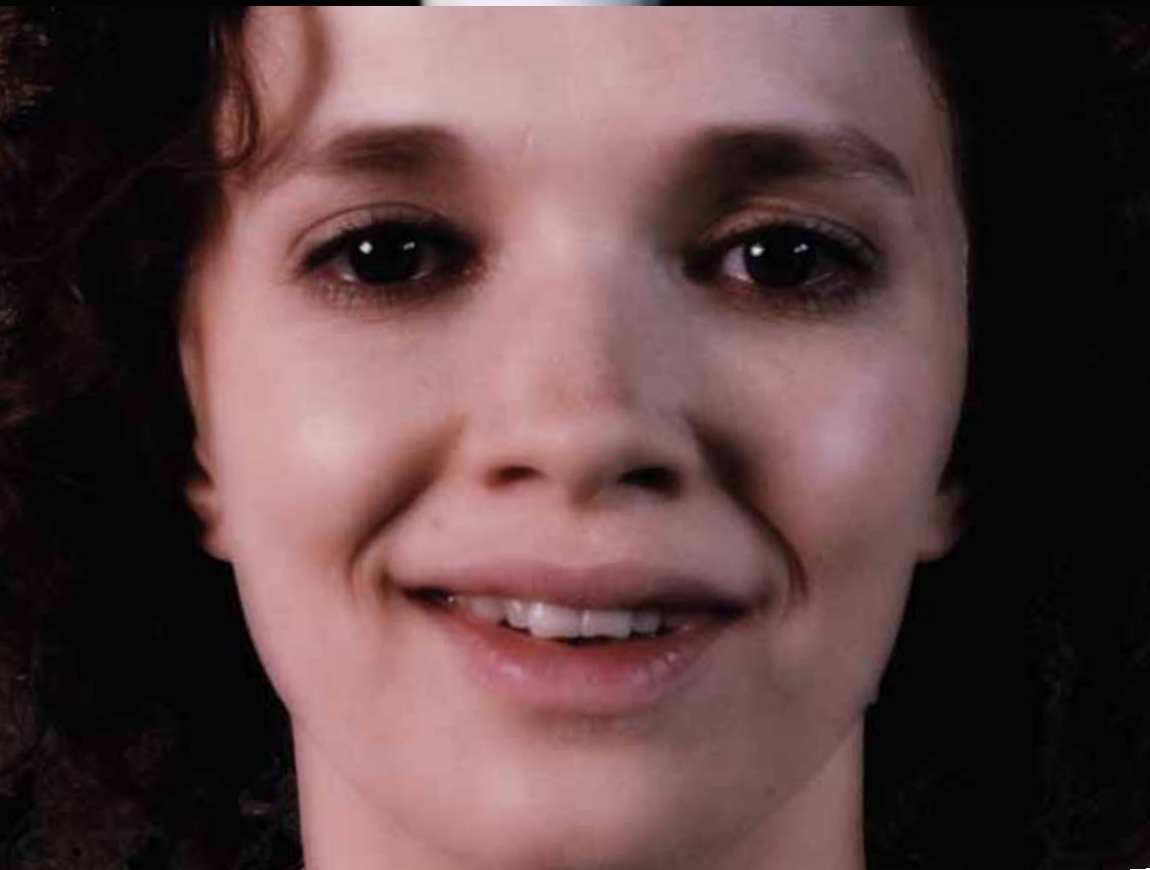


# circumplex

TWO VIDEOS X ONE COUPLE X TWO INSTRUMENTS  
= EIGHT EMOTIONS



disgust

joy



sadness

surprise



trust

anger





fear



# anticipation





# welcome...

With each new event we present at the Vilcek Foundation, we broaden our cultural horizons at the same time we expand on our mission to direct more widespread public attention to the achievements of immigrants to this country.

Now we bring you *Circumplex*, a video installation by a visionary young artist, Kai-Duc Luong, who came to this country from Cambodia, by way of Paris, France.

As you'll learn by reading Robin Oppenheimer's essay here, this hybrid and flexible medium is not confined to a single venue; video installations are being incorporated today in dance and theatrical performances, on concert stages, and as accompaniment to sculptural works and other multi-media

displays. Thus, a video installation is typically a collaborative work, and true to that spirit, Kai enlisted the talents of actors, musicians, and dancers, to produce *Circumplex*.

The ultimate member of this collaboration, however, is you, the viewer. For while it may fairly be said that all art evokes emotions, it was Kai's deliberate intent in developing *Circumplex* to involve the audience in a very personal way, to, as he says, "deal with communication and the contradictory tendencies of human nature when coping with loss, separation, and new beginnings in life."

We hope you enjoy "collaborating" on *Circumplex*, and look forward to hearing what you think — and feel — about the experience.

— Rick Kinsel, Executive Director

# circumplex in context

Video installations are unique hybrid art forms that represent the dominant direction art-making took in the late twentieth century toward interdisciplinary boundary-crossing collaborations using audio/video technological systems.

Since video's emergence as a distinct technology and art form in the mid-1960s, artists of all genres have found it to be a uniquely expressive medium. Today, video is an inexpensive, accessible image-making tool, and many artists working in all genres now incorporate video into their dances, theatrical productions, musical performances, sculptural pieces, and multi-media installations. Video installations also represent a new subjectivity in the art-making process that emphasizes a dialogic process over static artwork,

and brings the artist and viewer together in a discursive environment.

*Circumplex*, a video installation by Kai-Duc Luong, commissioned by the Vilcek Foundation, represents a new direction for both the organization and the artist. It is a collaboration between a supportive organization and an emerging media artist, and is also the result of a cluster of creative collaborations between Luong and a diverse group of actors, musicians, dancers, and media technicians in two cities — Paris and Chicago. By exposing the artist's creative processes and ideas behind this new work, the work itself can also be experienced in the context of its own complex origins.

Kai-Duc Luong was born in Phnom-Penh, Cambodia; in 1975, while still an infant, he and his family were forced to immigrate to Paris to escape the Khmer Rouge regime. He grew up in France, then moved to Chicago, to work as a telecommunications engineer; but his heart was in filmmaking. Self-taught, he studied the classic films of Hollywood (Lubitsch and others from the 1930s–1950s), French New Wave (Godard, etc.), and Russian Constructivists (Eisenstein, etc.), and began making his own videos while working as an engineer. He also spent time going to museums, watching experimental films and videos, and attending contemporary dance and music performances, and his work reflects all these different artistic influences.

After receiving recognition for his feature documentary from the Hawaii International Film Festival, Luong was commissioned to create a new video installation for the Vilcek Foundation's gallery space. He produced the work out of several intersecting motivations, which included his aim to work interactively with the hybrid experimental art forms of video installation, contemporary dance, music, and New Wave films. Other motives were more personal, among them his own emotional journey as an immigrant and young man, the loss of his mother, listening to his heart, and his desire to examine emotions from both a scientific and artistic point of view.

A circumplex is a circular representation of human nature that can be traced from ancient astrology to Leonardo da Vinci to the modern interpersonal circumplex models. The word is also found in an English translation of a quotation by French sociologist Edgar Morin: "To understand our being, our existence, life, with the help of the system also. Which means, first, to put a Circumplex accent on everything." Luong connected Morin's idea about understanding life through the lens of a system to his research into the nature of emotions. He discovered psychologist Robert Plutchik's Circumplex wheel, or circle, of emotions: joy, trust, fear, surprise, sadness, disgust, anger, anticipation, where each emotion then extends out like petals of a flower to other related emotions. Luong explains that this "colorful yet simple way of decomposing complex emotions into subsets of primary emotions was most elegant and relevant." As a trained engineer, he was used to decomposing complex elements into more basic elements, so, as he says, "The model felt familiar to me — yet we are talking about emotions that are, in essence, hard to quantify, and therefore appropriate within the environment of a creative piece."

Luong is a self-taught media artist who is inspired by contemporary art forms that are, for the most part, performative and collaborative, such as films, dance, and music. In order to realize *Circumplex*, he enlisted a talented crew of artists and technicians in two cities that included a casting director/filmmaker (Robert Teetsov); an artistic director (Alexandra Loewe); a real-life couple, who are actors/ musicians (Alice Wedoff and Matthew Holzfeind); two choreographers (Benjamin Wardell, a dancer/choreographer from Hubbard Street Dance in Chicago, and Kathleen Thielhelm, a former soloist at Joffrey Ballet in Chicago, who trained the actors to make expansive moves); and a musician couple (Chat and Joseph Chedid), who composed and performed the minimalist soundtrack. He also worked with Chicago-based film technicians and students, creating a completed work that is both a singular vision and the result of a collective creative process happening over many months and involving more than twenty people on two continents.

The work itself is an audiovisual piece designed for the Vilcek gallery space, with two video projections on opposing walls that simultaneously display parallel, somewhat narrative videos of a man and a woman. The video starts with a twenty-four-hour time-lapse view of the Paris skyline, and then we see the man and the woman on opposite walls, as if talking to each other; but maybe not. The woman speaks first, talking about her mother's recent death. The camera pulls back and multiples of the actors appear in a choreographed sequence of body gestures, evoking visceral feelings of pain and despair that are reminiscent of dance videos of Pina Bausch and other postmodern dancers. A single image of each actor returns to a sort of conversation that feels disjointed — "nonlinear" as the man says — and they never seem to really connect to each other even when they say the same words in unison.

Luong evokes a dream-like, meditative space, with the actors dressed neutrally, and minimal lighting and music, to enable the viewer to focus mostly on their words and emotions. The artist describes the installation space as a real space and dream space, and the work as introspective, a return to earlier, real-time video art that, as he says, "goes back to the essence of communication." He also avoids the MTV aesthetics of fast-paced edits in this work in favor of long, slow takes with minimal special effects and unobtrusive camera moves.

Luong was inspired by a series of fifteenth-century French tapestries commissioned by a nobleman for his wife, called *The Lady and the Unicorn*. Each one represents one of the five senses, and they depict a woman with a lion and a unicorn on a blue island filled with animals and colorful flowers, where animals symbolize good versus evil, man versus woman. Just as the lion, representing man, is counterpoint to woman, the unicorn, so is the man in the video a counterpoint to the woman, with actual drawings of a lion and unicorn seen in the video. The intent, says Luong, is "to get inspired by those tapestries, which portray a gift from a man to a woman, a woman who seems to be mysteriously set within a world of hers, an island, a dreamlike environment, with contradictory elements (animals, flowers) that represent emotions."

One of the underlying themes of the work is our lost connection to people. Luong's observation is that "communication in our modern age of increasingly saturated forms/ways of connecting/marketing/exhibiting things to people is disconnected and actually makes us more and more lonely and isolated." He likens today's web/wireless phones/network technologies to what happened in the 1950s/1960s with television's rapid intrusion and immersion into our society.

Luong's two careers, first in engineering and then the arts, have enabled him to draw many parallels between seemingly opposite fields. His training as an engineer — whereby he created market studies and specifications, created and tested designs, and worked with customers — has proven to be very useful in the world of video, which goes through similar phases of preproduction, production, postproduction, and marketing/distribution. In addition, his training in electronic sound recording technologies enables him to understand the digital video and sound editing environment and processes. As he explains, "It's like working with a matrix or an analyzer trace in my past field of telecommunications, except that it's not abstract numbers or frequencies or code I'm working with but audiovisual elements you can see and hear and feel kinesthetically."

This essay was written before the work was installed in the gallery, so Luong could only speculate how a viewer might respond to or interact with the piece. He acknowledges that it is an experiment, a work-in-progress that is completed by each viewer who brings his or her own history, emotions, memories, and ideas to the work when it is experienced. He hopes a viewer will be drawn in by the music and a curiosity to listen to the words, and then watch the piece, sense the dream-like space, and experience, perhaps, his or her own emotions in a kind of cathartic, therapeutic process, as he did when he created the work. He reflects that several of his collaborators related personal emotional stories to him as they worked on the piece. What Luong does know is that he is continuing to discover his own poetic, personal voice as a media artist through the making of this work, and that his collaboration with the Vilcek Foundation has made that possible.

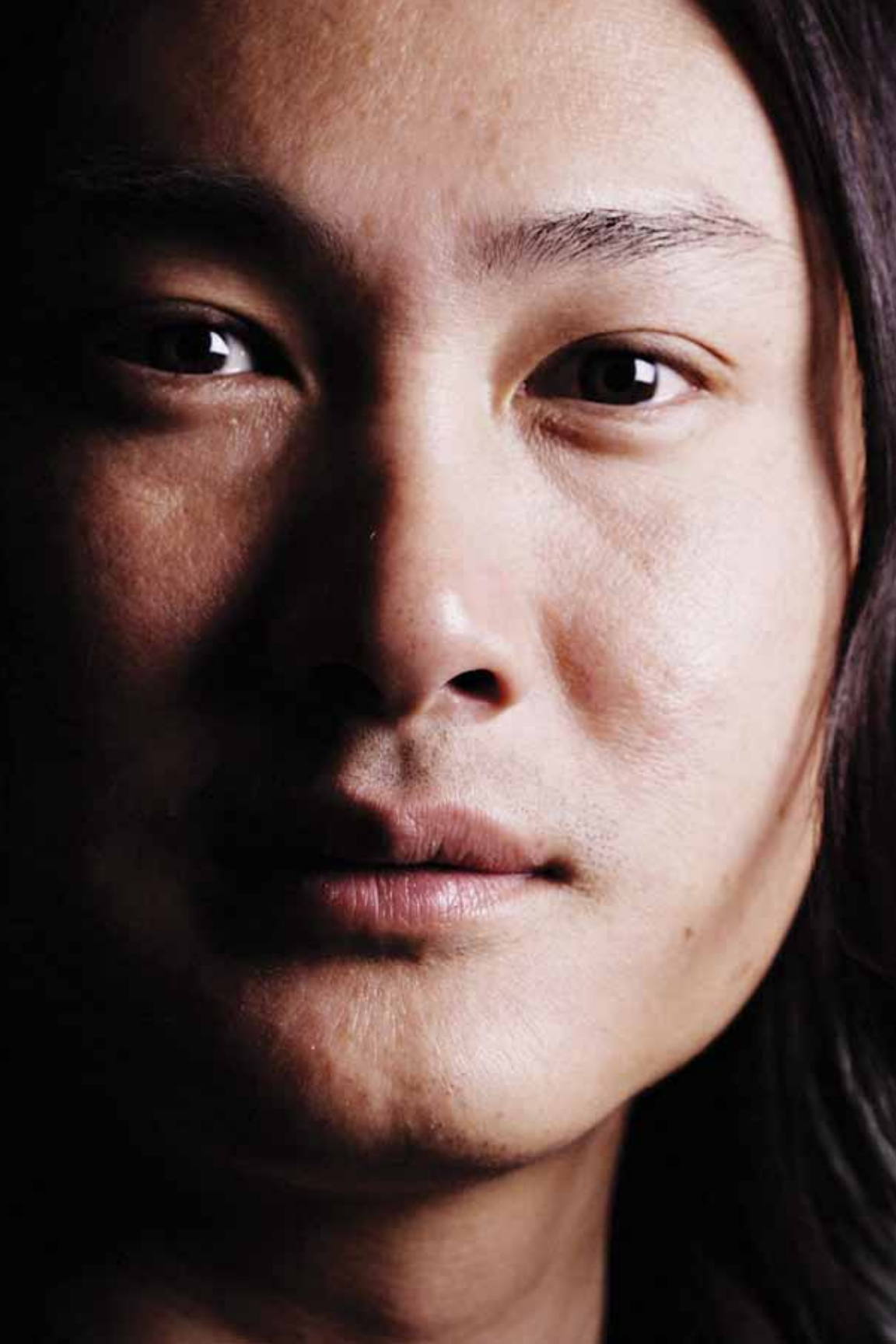
by Robin Oppenheimer

*A Mon Seul Desir (To My Only Desire), The Lady and the Unicorn* tapestries. 15th Century. Wool and silk. Photograph by Hugo Maertens. National Museum of the Middle Ages – The Baths and Hôtel de Cluny, Paris. Reprinted with permission of Art Resource, Inc.





# artist statement



A woman turns down the gift of understanding from a man. Succumbing to a life-altering event, she goes through a circle of “primary” emotions. Unable to communicate with her, the man slowly drifts into his own chain reaction of emotions.

What is the meaning behind all this? Are the characters talking to each other? To the camera? To the audience? Or simply to themselves?

Evoking *The Lady and the Unicorn*, six medieval tapestries, and the psycho-evolutionary theory of emotions developed by Robert Plutchik in 1980, *Circumplex* deals with communication and the contradictory tendencies of our human nature when coping with loss, separation, and new beginnings in life.

Within the backdrop of a video diptych and set against the ambience of The Vilcek Foundation gallery space and a dreamlike video time lapse, *Circumplex* attempts to “understand our being, our existence, life, with the help of the system also,” to loosely quote French philosopher Edgar Morin.

*The Lady and the Unicorn* tapestries have inspired and intrigued many artists, writers, and scholars, from the mystery behind the date of its creation and the circumstances under/for which they were made to the symbolism behind the tapestries — the animals, flowers, and senses depicted. For me, the artwork reads visually like poetry. The woven canvases are highly enigmatic and titillate our senses and emotions, but are also pertinent to

our present day via its complex illustrations of duality and emotions. Moreover, the theme of five senses running throughout the tapestries seemed appropriate for a modern-age salute, as prologue and epilogue within *Circumplex*, for our senses are sensors of and triggers for emotional responses.

Using Plutchik’s model, which deconstructs complex emotions into subsets of primary emotions, the piece does not directly depict raw emotions, but rather uses events/concepts as triggers for a dialogue on emotions: the death of a loved one as cause for *anger*, *acceptance/trust* that time heals; the *fear* of not being up to the task; an unexpected gift as *surprise*; the uncertainty about the future as *anticipation*; while good memories bring *joy*, the other can represent a form of *disgust*; and loneliness is associated with *sadness*.

Ultimately, I wanted to create a work that integrates my artistic tastes for body movements, contemporary visuals, poetry, and soundscapes, while engaging the audience through a personal experience yet common subject matter — that of communication and emotional discharge — one that is part of the fabric of our interpersonal behaviors, and existence.





# thank you

“I would like to thank the Vilcek Foundation for allowing me to produce and create this work, in particular, Dr. Jan and Marica Vilcek, who have made me feel part of the family, and Rick Kinsel and Anne Schruth, who have provided me with their strong support throughout the making of the project. I would also like to thank the many *Circumplex* crew members and contributors, without whom I would not have been able to materialize this piece. This piece is dedicated to my mother.”

— Kai-Duc Luong

The Vilcek Foundation thanks Heller Inc. for its gracious offer to provide designer seating to our guests during this exhibit.

#### Video Installation

Producer / Writer / Director / Editor: Kai-Duc Luong

Lead Actress: Alice Wedoff

Lead Actor: Matthew Holzfeind

Music: Chat, Joseph Chedid

Choreographers: Benjamin Holliday Wardell, Kathleen Thielhelm

Art Director/Graphic Artist: Alexandra Loewe

Assistant Director / Production Coordinator: Marie Ullrich

Director Of Photography: Tony Santiago

Casting Director / Acting Coach: Robert Teetsov

Makeup & Hair: Urszula Rulkowska

2nd Unit Photography: Heather Stone

Casting Assistant: Like Liu

2nd Assistant Director: Kasia Koniar

Assistant Camera: Eon Mora

Gaffer: Marcin Szalkowski

Location Sound Mixer: Richard Roy

Sound Mix Engineer: Henry Blanc-Francard,

Recording & Mix

Script Supervisor: Yasaman Mohsenin

Craft Services: Avisheh Mohsenin, Like Liu

Production Assistants: Nadege Helias,

Agnieszka K. Sobczyk

Technical Equipment provided by  
Audio Video & Controls and Scharff Weisberg  
Design Consultant Paul Carbone  
Essayist Robin Oppenheimer  
Copyeditor Janice Borzendowski  
Design Ahoy Studios



