



Hiram To's *Karaoke* is an installation comprising a group of three-legged tables in front of a set of seven images. Below: A different perspective.

Silent Karaoke seeks a voice

By THEA KLAPWALD

COMMUNICATION is at the heart of Hiram To's installation exhibition at the University of Hongkong. Some might say lack of communication. At first glance *Karaoke* is baffling.

This is not a new response to To's work, according to the artist. "My work is often seen as very cold, minimalist," said the fast-talking Hongkonger who has spent the past six years entrenched in the arts scene in Australia.

This exhibit consists of a series of photographs of Chinese talent contestants singing on Australian television, accompanied by a line of text taken from the 1922 Fritz Lang film *Dr Mabuse the Gambler*.

In front of the set of seven images is a huddled group of three-legged cabaret tables covered with white tablecloths. A closer look reveals the cloths are covered with silkscreened braille text minus the raised bumps.

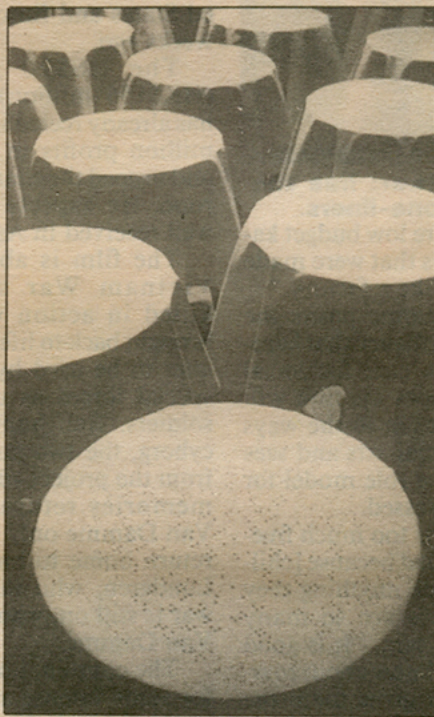
What does it all mean?

Dive into the programme notes and the layers of subtext become clearer. For To, using the catalogue is crucial.

"It's like making a film. There are the trailers, the posters and then the product," To said.

"Visual art is the most difficult of art forms as entertainment. It's not about illustration. You have to work and to respond. General entertainment is served on a platter. This is not elitist. There are built-in elements. You must think about it to have it reveal itself."

In an academic account of the



work, complete with footnotes and references, the catalogue comments on To's examination of the concept of self, art and entertainment.

The title, *Karaoke*, which means "empty orchestra", is a metaphor for the game of art where the artist is actor, director, producer and promoter — a talent contestant waiting to be discovered.

"We set up an idea of identity. What part of understanding the self is through the image of other people," he said pointing to the portraits.

"Cultural identity is usually perceived as a positive thing. Very few

people question it and that is dangerous.

"In Australia, people want a really strong nationalistic basis to the country. But what is this public profile good for? In order to understand yourself, you've got to drop the cultural baggage."

So then why, as an Asian, use Asian faces to illustrate this?

"It was deliberate because the people in my community expect it and I've never done it before and now there is a lot of talk about the Asian influence in Australia. I am questioning that," he said.

Capturing these images from Australian television and displaying them back to an Asian audience after they have travelled so far reflects the feeling of displacement any community feels when it leaves its place of origin, he said.

The empty cabaret tables have no audience, the bumpless-braille text (an apt passage from *Gary Indiana* which is printed on a pamphlet available at the exhibit) all strain to communicate but are denied that opportunity.

"It's a refusal, not a denial, of my given identity," said To.

To left for more fertile ground to produce his art, but he has not forgotten his hometown.

Karaoke, An Installation by Hiram To is on display until September 21 at the University of Hongkong's Department of Fine Arts, Main Building, Room 240. Viewing hours are from 10 am to 5 pm on Monday to Saturday.