Premier’s Contemporary Asian Art Scholarship

Re-Orient: Dis-Orient

Sueanne Matthews, ATL [NSW]

Karabar High School, Queanbeyan

Sponsored by

Sherman foundation logo 

Rudy Tseng, curator of the Taiwan Platform Singapore Art Fair, January 2014, stated; ‘Taiwan is known for its advancement in technology, which many artists are relying on. The complex colonial background of Taiwan has influenced artists drastically and becomes the major inspiration for their works.’

Like Australia, Taiwan is an island with a colonial past. How this culture, geography and history are interrogated in the works of contemporary curators and artists across a range of contemporary art forms was the focus the study I undertook in January 2015.

Taiwan Geography

The island of Taiwan lies off the southeastern coast of mainland Asia, just 100 km across the Taiwan Strait from China. It covers about 36,000 square kilometres.

Situated on the western edge of the Pacific, with Japan to the north and the Philippines to the south, continuous tectonic movements have created majestic peaks, deep gorges, wetlands, plains, basins and rugged coastlines. Taiwan has distinct climatic zones, temperate, tropical and sub-tropical, providing clear differentiation between seasons.

Taiwan History

Taiwan has a long and complex history. Many different cultures have successively occupied the island, including Dutch, Spanish, Japanese, and Han Chinese. The total population of Taiwan is approximately 23.2 million as of 2011.

Of the Taiwanese, 98 per cent are ethnically Han Chinese, having migrated to the country in two large waves, in the 17th century and in 1949 following the loss of the Chinese civil war to Mao Zedong. The remaining 2 per cent of Taiwanese citizens are Aboriginal people, and DNA evidence suggests that Taiwan was the starting point for the population of Pacific islands.

The Sunflower Movement, 2014

March 18 to April 10, 2014, marked a significant event in Taiwanese democratic history with the 585 hour student occupation of the Legislative Yuan chamber. They were protesting an attempt to pass a unilateral cross-strait service trade agreement without the clause by clause review procedure established in 2013.

The students left the legislative chamber on at 6pm April 10 following long negotiations and significant response from the international community.

Glenn Smith, an independent Taipei-based journalist, [noted](https://fpif.org/taiwans-sunflower-movement/); ‘The Sunflower kids are firmly rooted in the present, with an eye toward the future. They signal the arrival of a new generation of political thinkers who no longer comfortably fit under the tired political labels of KMT ([Kuomintang](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kuomintang)) or DPP (Democratic Progressive Party), and foreign observers will need to incorporate them into their calculus of Taiwan politics.’

The Great Acceleration

In the context of the Sunflower Movement, Dr. Hai-Ming Huang, director of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, invited French art curator, philosopher and writer, Nicolas Bourriaud, to curate the 2014 Taipei Biennial.

The Taipei Biennial has become a potent symbol of Taiwan’s contemporary art development and international artistic exchange. The biennial has at its core the aim to broaden Taiwan’s artistic vision, as well as the country’s professional exhibition-organisation ability, and exposure in the international media.

Who better to undertake this role than Nicolas Bourriaud? The theme of the 2014 Taipei Biennial, The Great Acceleration. A tribute to the coactivity amongst humans, animals, plants and objects indicates that Bourriaud sought to investigate the ‘extent and acceleration of the industrialisation process on the planet’ that has led scientists to name a new geological era, the Anthropocene.

As an introduction to the Biennial, Bourriaud explains, ‘The concept of the Anthropocene also points to a paradox: The more powerful and real the collective impact of a species is, the less contemporary individuals feel capable of influencing their surrounding reality.’ He continues, writing, ‘We are witnessing the collapse of “human scale”.’

Would this hypothesis translate to the contemporary artists and curators I was meeting in Taiwan?

Bourriaud asserts that, ‘The relationship between the living and inert has become the main tension of contemporary culture, and artificial intelligence occupies the middle ground as an arbitrator. The artists of our time explore the circuitry of the living, or the properties of materials “informed” by human activity.’

The Circuitry of the Living and the Properties of Materials

What does all this mean to a contemporary artist living and working in Taiwan, an island of 36,000 square kilometers? Would the coercive qualities of coactivity be evidenced in the thinking of the artists, and how would the artists be using materials in this new geological era?

During the study tour I met with the artists Wei Hui Hsu, Gao Yuan, Ming Goang Yuan, Lin Chiwei, Lin Huangti and Mali Wu. I also met with the curators Dr Hai Ming Huang and Fengling Tseng and educators Dr Pei Kuei Tsai and Melina Mallos.

Renegotiating the Relational Universe: Contemporary Art in Taiwan

In the discipline of philosophy, a relational theory is a framework to understand a reality or a physical system in such a way that the positions and other properties of objects are only meaningful relative to other objects. Nicolas Bourriaud coined the term ‘relational aesthetics’ in the 1990s to describe the tendency he noticed in fine art practice to make art based on, or inspired by, human relations and their social context.

Contemporary artists interviewed in Taiwan expressed these common threads of conceptual development underpinning their artworks:

* + culture
  + community
  + domestic dwellings
  + geography.

These themes were distilled and enhanced as a consequence of each artist’s experience through overseas residence, the process of living away from Taiwan heightening the intensity of personal experience and connection to culture, community, domestic dwelling and geography.

In speaking with each artist, the Sunflower Movement of 2014 emerged as an important turning point in political and cultural confidence in Taiwan. As one interviewee stated, ‘We are not China, we are Taiwan. We are not Chinese, we are Taiwanese.’

Artists

*Wei-Hui Hsu – An Unfinished Journey*

The art of Wei-Hui Hsu is intertwined with her identity as a Taiwanese woman. Wei-Hui Hsu has completed two overseas residencies in the United States. Whilst studying in Savannah, Georgia, she developed the alter ego Guerilla Girls, hundreds of small, powerful figures, installed throughout the gallery space and the public spaces, such as toilets and the foyer. The plurality of these talismans represented her determination as a young Taiwanese woman to stand up to the threat of crime in Georgia. This theme has been extended in such other works as Far Away From Home – Errant Alien Girl, a series of installations in which she dressed a Toyota SUV in pink Chinese brocade material, photographing it in snowy streets of the American mid-west, with the cultural juxtaposition reflecting her own dislocation.

Unfinished Journey was Wei Hui Hsu’s solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA )Taipei. The three-room installation speaks volumes about the universal expectation that women will partner and bear children. Unfinished Journey explores the tension of family expectation and the need for the artist to further develop conceptually. The use of unusual materials such as chunks of broken asphalt, specifically commissioned clock hands and cosmetic facial masks are combined in the installation and performance of this solo show. Family, community and culture are all key factors in the conceptual development of this artist’s practice. Wei Hui Hsu is currently installing a new solo exhibition, Unknown Depths, at Taitung Art Museum featuring two thousand white t-shirts installed in waves and lit to simulate the ocean.

*Gao Yuan – Tattoos, Babies and the Madonna*

Taiwanese born photographer Gao Yuan has only just returned to the country of her birth after living in New York for many years. The culture of Taiwan, however, has never left her practice, whether it be the tattooed portraits of Chinese gangsters, the nude photography of Chinese tattooed women or her portraits of Chinese dissident artist Ai WeiWei.

Shortly after our meeting in Taipei, Gao Yuan was off to Florence to open an exhibition of her 2008–09 photographic series Twelve Moons, depicting 12 Chinese mothers, their 12 children, and the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac. In this series she endeavoured to imbue contemporary Taiwanese art with the same gravitas and meaning as Renaissance portraits of the Madonna and child. The children are embellished with the Chinese lunar symbol of their mother’s birth year, the small tattoos an incongruous addition to the fleshy rolls of the naked babies.

In more recent time Gao Yuan has been moving away from the photographic medium, with performance and painting becoming her areas of interest.

*Mali Wu – Community, Stories and Changing Behaviour*

Mali Wu is a diminutive but powerfully engaging artist. Her practice falls outside the boundaries of the gallery walls, focusing on the environment, community, education and collaboration. Her core question as an artist is, ‘How does a person comfortably exist with an environment?’

Mali Wu returned to Taiwan from Germany in 1986. She found a Taiwan that was re-inventing itself after a period of martial law. In that context she began using art as a means to facilitate conversations about such issues as women’s rights, environmental degradation and pollution.

Mali Wu has subsequently focused her work on community groups, addressing issues of climate change, rising sea levels, environmental pollution and cultural loss of knowledge. As she stated, ‘On the one hand I criticize the government, on the other hand I wish to stimulate artists and architects to reflect on what they are doing. When artists take government cases, are they aware what they are involved in? Artists might think that they make wonderful art, earn money, have a good life, but they don’t see that we are all accomplices in the same crime, which is taking this city to the future down an obscure path.’

At the time of our meeting Mali Wu had just completed a project in Kaohsiung at the Pier 2 Arts Precinct, a once industrialised precinct by the port. The former shipping warehouse buildings are now being transformed into an arts hub, including exhibition spaces, artist studios and residences, shops, restaurants, cafes and bars, as well as an outdoor sculpture park, which is being actively embraced and used by the local community.

*Yuan Goang-Ming – An Uncanny Tomorrow –   
Drones, Dwellings and Disobedience.*

Much of Yuan Goang-Ming’s work is framed around concepts of family, community, and culture in and near his home in New Taipei City. When we met, the artist had just completed a major exhibition at Tina Keng Gallery, titled Uncanny Tomorrow.He had studied at the Institute of Media Arts in Frankfurt and received a Diploma in Media Arts from the Staatlich Hochschule fur Gestaltung, Karlsruhe, Germany, and conceptually developed Uncanny Tomorrow based on the writings of Martin Heidegger.

Two new works, Dwelling (2014) and The 561st Hour of Occupation (2014), however, could not be more different for the artist in their development stage. Dwelling (2014) is the result of two years of careful experimentation with model making, aquariums and explosives. Making a reflective statement about commodification and ubiquitous IKEA furnishings, Dwelling(2014), is a video loop in which a seemingly perfect living room explodes and then reassembles. The work simultaneously expresses ideas about anxiety and contentment with family life, marriage and domestic spaces.

On the other hand, The 561st hour of occupation (2014) was made in response to an invitation from students to document the student occupation of the Legislative Yuan in March and April 2014. It is through the lens of an artist that Yuan Goang-Ming captured one hour of the occupation, erasing and reinserting the students into footage of the chamber. Scored with a slowed soundtrack of the Taiwanese national anthem, the work poses questions about Taiwan’s political status.

Drones are an emerging technology for the video artist and were used extensively in the work Landscape of Energy (2014), which juxtaposes Taiwan’s nuclear power industry with a school built adjacent to the power plant on Orchid Island. Once again the artist questions the stability of everyday lives in Taiwan.

*Lin Chiwei – Linguistics, Sound and Collaboration*

As a sound artist Lin Chiwei straddles the uncomfortable spaces between visual arts and the performing arts. However, upon meeting Lin Chiwei at his solo exhibition, Tape Music 2004 –2013 at IT Park, Taipei’s oldest artist-run space, it is very clear that the artist uses visual language to develop and communicate the concepts of community and linguistics evident in the performance work Tape Music.

Tape Music is a performance with many different iterations. Participants sit in circles and pass an embroidered tape between them, uttering the sounds of the words embroidered on the tape. Graphic notations are hung on the wall at IT Park, the artist’s delicate renderings of sound, colour and shape that are translated to embroidered tape, with intervals between characters of length dictated by the artist. Every decision is carefully considered by the artist up until the point of performance, when the outcome is left to the participants’ interpretations. Lin Chiwei is about to debut new work in London on 20 June 2015 as part of the Musarc festival, Tape Music: Score for Musarc (2015).

*Huangti Lin – Continuing Conversation as Practice*

Huangti Lin invited me to the Paint House studio in Tainan, explaining that what was once an artist-run studio space has evolved to a platform for artists to meet, discuss and contemplate the question, ‘What is Art?’ The idea was developed whilst on a recent residency in the United States (2014).

We climbed the stairs to the rooftop platform, a literal and conceptual platform for discussion, before Huangti Lin led me to the One Room Project, a space for artists to come and stay overnight and be involved in dialogues that contribute to a ‘comprehensive eco-system’ of ideas rather than the ‘quantifiable business exchange in official exhibitions.’

In addition to this aspect of his practice, Huangti Lin has a painting, drawing, photography and sculptural practice which stems conceptually from experiences during mandatory military service in the Air Force. Aircraft, space ships, guns and missiles are re-imagined in a range of media, questioning the privacy and safety of citizens, and ongoing aerial surveillance of the island’s geography. Examples of his large scale wooden sculptures are currently on show in the Tainan Arts Village exhibition, Seeing for Wood.

Museum Staff

*Dr. Huang Hai-Ming – Scholar and Taipei Fine Arts Museum Director*

Dr. Huang Hai-Ming is a Taiwanese art critic, curator and professor who took the directorship of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum in 2012. Huang was also a founder and joint curator of the first edition of the Taiwan Avant Garde Documenta, a biennial exhibition that gathers, selects, and extensively documents recent works from the avant-garde of Taiwanese art, in 2000.

Dr. Huang Hai-Ming studied and worked in France and was familiar with the research of Nicolas Bourriaud, approaching him to curate the Taipei Biennial. The Biennial had varied critical reviews but was well received by the general population, with many Taiwanese people participating and interacting with artworks. Dr. Huang Hai-Ming was not able to state whether the audience fully understood the philosophy and meaning of the artworks, but was happy with the audience participation at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum.

The Taipei Fine Arts Museum is funded by the Taipei City Government, and faces funding challenges as a government funded arts institutions similar to those in Australia. Dr. Huang Hai-Ming sees the engagement of contemporary artists, curators and audiences to grow an informed art community within Taipei as one of the challenges for the Taipei Fine Art Museum into the future.

*Fangling Tseng – Exhibition Department-Curator, Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts*

In discussion with Fangling Tseng, we covered a range of concepts, including the delivery of learning to students within the museum context and the curator and their role in designing educational activities. We also discussed the role of the artist’s voice in learning about visual arts.

Educators

*Chao-Mei Wang –Connecting Community and Environment through Art*

Cheng Long Village is located in Yunlin County, and is near the southwestern coast of Taiwan. It has about 500 residents, and the Cheng Long Elementary School has about 77 children in grades 1 through 6. Over 30 years Cheng Long has changed from an agricultural village to one reliant on aquaculture. The environment and ecology of the village has changed substantially as a result of typhoons and indiscriminate use of ground water. It is currently subsiding at a rate of 3 cm per year and is 1.5 meters below sea level.

Chao Mei Wang, an environmental educator with Kuan Shu Education Foundation, and American curator Jane Ingram Allen, established the Cheng Long Wetlands International Environmental Art project in 2010, inviting international and Taiwanese artists to install site-specific artworks into the wetlands using recycled or natural materials in response to an annual theme.

Kuan Shu is the personal project of Jonney Shih, Chairman of ASUSTek Corporation, who in 1999 established the Kuan Shu Education Foundation, which runs an organic rice farm, restores local wetlands and operates a free tutoring program for low-income students. He says the projects interest him and they address pressing issues in Taiwan.

The 2015 Environmental Art Project theme is Fragile: Handle with Care, and begins on April 9, 2015.

At the time of my visit in January 2015, it was possible to view many of the previous artworks installed in the wetlands and village environment. Chao-Mei Wang introduced me to the local school, where the students work with artists in the installation of the artworks as well as their own response to the annual theme. We then toured the wetlands site, viewing many of the artworks, as well as the aquaculture industry that has replaced agriculture as the primary industry.

*Dr Pei Kuei Tsai – Changing Pedagogy through Collaboration*

Assistant Professor Tsai explained that visual arts is not a highly valued subject in Taiwan. Taiwanese culture values memorised rote learning over conceptual development and group learning. In her work at the Graduate Institute for Interdisciplinary Arts Koahsiung, Assistant Professor Tsai has allowed conversation, group work and performance as an outcome to be explored as learning and pedagogy.

*Melina Mallos – Educational Engagement within the Gallery*

Melina Mallos, Program Officer, Education and Curriculum Programs at the Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art (QAGGOMA), and I discussed how the galleries prepare engaging materials for student visits to the Asia Pacific Triennial. QAGGOMA have a team of teachers who act as contributors to the materials for art-making activities. Curators also contribute in terms of the research and scholarly information about the artists and artworks.

When time allows, the artist’s voice is also considered in the development of the education materials. That was the case with the support materials for Cai Guo-Qiang: Falling Back to Earth, where the artist himself contributed to the education resources.

In terms of the Asia Pacific Triennial, the research by the curators comes to the fore. The research they have undertaken in selecting the works is crucial to success in making materials to make the work accessible to students.

QAGGOMA acquire many of the works from the Asia Pacific Triennial, and the works become part of the permanent collection. The Triennial began as a Queensland Government initiative to engage more fully with the Asia Pacific Region. There was little focus on the contemporary art of the region at the time the Triennial began. Now with Asia and its relationship with Australia as a core focus of the Australian Curriculum, the education team at QAGGOMA are focusing on how to create materials that articulate to the new curriculum.

Dissemination and Curriculum Development

*Dissemination*

Riverina HSC Study Day; Albury Library and Museum, 26 March, 2015.

VADEA NSW Inspire and Indulge, Monaro Highlands, Gandel Hall, National Gallery of Australia, 1 April, 2015.

Ninginmurra Professional Learning Community (Visual Arts teachers from Braidwood, Cooma, Jindabyne, Queanbeyan, and Young), Karabar High School and Distance Education Centre,   
20 April 2015.

Report to Dr Gene Sherman and Sam Meers, Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation,   
24 April 2015.

VADEA NSW Annual Conference, University of NSW College of Art and Design, 9 May 2015.

*Curriculum Development*

Stage 6 Case Study, Interdisciplinary Practice in Contemporary Art, featuring the Cheng Long Wetlands Environmental Art Project. Distributed to VADEA NSW Inspire and Indulge, Monaro Highlands and Ninginmurra Professional Learning Community.

Stage 6 Case Study, Object/Objectification/Objection: Feminism in Visual Arts, featuring   
Wei Hui Hsu.

For Further information, Photos and Interview recordings please go to [Now & Venn](https://sueannematthews.wixsite.com/nowandvenn)

Thank you to the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation and Nelson Meers Foundation for financial support of this scholarship study tour.