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**Modernity, nationalism and global marginalisation:  
representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art  
exhibitions.**

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**MODERNITY, NATIONALISM AND GLOBAL  
MARGINALISATION:  
  
REPRESENTING THE NATION  
IN CONTEMPORARY TAIWANESE ART EXHIBITIONS**

**The Taipei Fine Arts Museum and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice  
1984 - 2009**

**FELIX SCHOEBER**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements of the University of Westminster  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**October 2014**

This thesis describes and analyses the development of the most prestigious large- scale exhibitions of the Taipei Fine Arts Museums from its opening in 1983 until 2009, concentrating on the *Trends of Modern Art in the R.O.C.* series of the 1980s , the introduction of the *Taipei Biennial* in 1992, and the *Taiwan Pavilion* in Venice from 1995 until 2009.

Its focus lies on the transformation of the museum space and the status of the work of art. Several threads of questions run through this thesis: an attempt to analyse and illuminate the specific modernity and its inherent contradictions that characterized the museum space; the specific status of the object of art (and the artist) within the museum space; and lastly the image of the nation and its transformations as it is projected through these exhibitions.

The first part of this thesis concentrates on how modernism was enacted in the first museum of modern and contemporary art in Taiwan (and one of the first in Asia), how a Chinese modernism was anointed through the exhibitionary system, and how this was challenged and finally abolished in favour of a new exhibitionary system, the Taipei Biennial. This part also analyses the rupture between those two exhibitions, and how the latter inaugurated a new and different status of the work of art, not merely an aesthetic object, but an element of a cultural narrative and discourse.

The second part of the thesis shifts its focus on how the work of art was re-framed through the discourse of Taiwanese identity. Using as a starting point the writings of Benedict Anderson, the idea of the nation as a universe or microcosm of knowledge is used to describe a new pattern of representation of the nation that emerged since 1995, with the inauguration of the Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. This part of the thesis concentrates on how this new and pluralist pattern of nationalism was created, repeated, and re-confirmed, but also re-written over the years, projecting an archetypical image of an “imagined community” or a microcosm of knowledge of the nation, rooted in the past, projected into the future, and centred around a synthesis of the nature of its territory and the urban experience of the capital.

The third part of the thesis describes how the subaltern position of local artists and curators in relation to the museum have re-shaped their analysis of the nation, and how the notion of centrality of the nation was de-constructed once the question of the voice of a nation, but most of all of its curators and artists within a globalised world came to the fore.

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<sup>1</sup> Felix Schoeber: “Re-Writing art in Taiwan: secularism, universalism, globalisation, or modernity and the aesthetic object”, *Re-Writing Culture in Taiwan*, Shih Fanglong, Stuart Thompson, Paul- Francois Tremlett (eds.), Routledge, London 2008, pp. 154-

and the IniVA library in London. This thesis builds on almost a decade of fieldwork in Taiwan – starting at the Masterpiece Art Center gallery in 1996, followed by almost a year as art writer at the *China News*. Special thanks also have to go to Prof. Huang Hai-ming, who enabled me to stay for one and a half year at the Art Education Department of Taipei Normal University to conduct research on the local art scene in 1998 and 1999. Special thanks also need to go to Yang Maolin and Lin & Lin Gallery who gave me the chance to stage my first curatorial experience in Venice in 2009, as well as to Victoria Lu who helped me stage a major show at the Venice Biennale with more than 100 artists from all over Asia in 2011. My thanks also go to Mrs. Pecci and Marco Bazzini who invited me to curate the first retrospective of Michael Lin at the Centro Pecci in 2010. It was no doubt thanks to these mentors, friends and institutions that I was granted intimate access to the local art scene, and it were these years of work and research in Taiwan that enabled me to meet and interview virtually every artist or museum administrator mentioned in this thesis.



**Introduction:**  
**the first national museum for contemporary art in Taiwan -**  
**significance, research methods, literature, theory.**

The aim of this thesis is to trace the ideological and curatorial development of the first and premier museum for contemporary art in Taiwan, the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (short: TFAM), in the period from its opening to the public in December 1983 until 2009.

The aim is also not to write a (missing) art history, or to present a certain selection of artists or art works, but rather to analyse the interaction between the local contemporary art scene and the museum space, and to dissect the tension between official sponsorship and censorship of the arts. This approach follows Reesa Greenberg's verdict in *Thinking about Exhibitions*:

“Exhibitions have become the medium through which most art becomes known. ... Exhibition are the primary site of exchange in the political economy of art, where signification is constructed, maintained and occasionally deconstructed. Part spectacle, part socio-historical event, part structuring device, exhibitions – especially exhibitions of contemporary art – establish and administer the cultural meaning of art”.<sup>1</sup>

This means that this thesis adheres to an institutional approach to analysing the interaction between the art and the museum space, basing itself primarily on the writers of Museology such as Tony Bennett (and thus by default on Michel Foucault, specifically the Foucault of *The Order of Things*), but also on other writers such as

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<sup>1</sup> Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, Sandy Nairne, “Introduction”. In: *Thinking about exhibitions*, Routledge, London, New York, 1996, p. 2.



Pierre Bourdieu and Arthur Danto, who coined the term art scene- the very word art, as it is used in this thesis, therefore always references the idea of an art scene who defines that word, and whose debates, change, transform and redefine its meaning.

Among all terms that are used to frame the art in those exhibitions the two most governing terms are “modernity” and the “nation” : since its conception, the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, through its flagship exhibition series such as the *Trends of Modern Art in the Republic of China*, the *Taipei Biennial* and the *Taiwan Pavilion* at the Venice Biennale, always intended to be the national museum for modern and contemporary art- and thus always framed the art through the terms modernity (during the first decade) or contemporaneity and the nation. Taking as a starting point some of the authors of modernity and nationalism studies, specifically Foucault, Anderson, Gellner, Derrida and Homi Bhabha, I will describe and analyse how the image of the nation is transformed and re-framed during a period that spans both the time before and after the abolition of Martial Law, the introduction of democracy, as well as the growing internationalisation of Taiwan after the turn of the millennium.

I will thus trace a trajectory of an art historical and museological development that straddles some profound changes in the political and cultural environment, from the last years of military dictatorship trying to project a modern image of the state, to a thriving democracy that questions both its historical and cultural identity as well as its position in an ever more globalising (art) world.

These transformations of the political environment are the background for a series of discussions and confrontations taking place within and outside the museum, which accompany and cause a series of epistemological changes in the way art and the artist are perceived: initially the attention and discussions are centred primarily on the anointment of avant-garde modern art, yet soon the confrontations move on the limits of that modernity, up to a point where that very exhibitionary system of Chinese modern art is abolished, and substituted by a new exhibition series that is centred chiefly around

artists, rather than mere art objects, and around intellectuals and cultural discourses, rather than mere questions of aesthetic appreciation.

It is at this point that the question of national identity turns into a truly interesting discourse: as has been pointed out by Homi Bhabha, once that immediate accessibility of history has come under scrutiny, the question of national identity turns into a question of ethnography of the present- this becomes most visible in the mid and late 1990s, when the TFAM stages the Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, thus establishing a pattern of national representation that re-creates a condensed universe of knowledge of the nation that is repeated for almost a decade, from 1995 until 2003.

What makes this trajectory even more interesting, is that from 2005 onwards local curators start to question the position of that nation on the global stage, and start to de-centre and deconstruct the previous pattern of national representation, turning their attention rather to the margins of the nation, and to the subaltern position of Taiwan and its artists.

Yet it is also this trajectory that shows the limits of the terms of Western Academia, or rather the limits of the so-called cultural discourse, in dealing with such an intricate and contradicting historical trajectory: the description of the episteme of modernity by Foucault can be highly revealing in an analysis of the early years of museum practice at the Taipei, the years when modernity was anointed and contested. Yet the crucial moment when the epistemology at the heart of the *Trends of Modern Art in the Republic of China* exhibition series was abandoned in 1992, and the concept of the artist as author introduced as the ideological basis of the *Taipei Biennial*, the terms for critical analysis provided by Foucault and the authors of *New Museology* turn out to be overly limited:

“To this day, the “author” remains an open question both with respect to its general function within discourse and in my own writings; that is, this question permits me to return to certain aspects of my own work which now appear ill-

advised and misleading.”<sup>2</sup>

The limitations of Foucault, or Derrida, or Habermas, or Anderson and Gellner have already been widely discussed- and may not necessarily help to further illuminate the dynamics that were played out in the Taiwanese art scene; on the contrary, to repeat or re-elaborate these may only risk to follow a pattern described by Ilan Kapoor in her analysis of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s article(s) “Can the subaltern speak?”<sup>3</sup>

“A second dimension of academic cultural imperialism is the privileging of theory... The Third World is ‘worlded’ on the basis of this theory/practice binary, which perpetuates the pattern of placing the Western academy and intellectual at the centre.”<sup>4</sup>

This does not necessarily provide for a clear-cut path without any ambiguities, starting with the question whether Taiwan is a “subaltern” space without theory, or at least a space without access to Western theory. To quote Ilan Kapoor:

“That the researcher does not see subaltern stories as sophisticated theory probably says more about her/him, and what s/he constructs and values as ‘theory’ and ‘story’, than about the subaltern.”<sup>5</sup>

On the contrary, the defining moment that sets apart the inauguration of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum from the previous development, is that it creates and re-centres an art scene around it- and in its defining moments, it exhibits exhibits an art that corresponds to Arthur Danto’s observation about modern (or post-modern) art:

<sup>2</sup> Bouchard, Donald F.: *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, selected essays and interviews by Michel Foucault, Cornell University Press, Cornell 1977, pp. 113

<sup>3</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: “Can the subaltern speak”, in: Nelson, Cary; Grossberg, Lawrence (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Macmillan, London 1988, pp. 271-313, available for download online from Macalester University at: <https://www.macalester.edu/wgs/Readings/Can%20the%20Subaltern%20Speak.pdf>.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: “Can the subaltern speak?”, in: Ashcroft, B.; Griffiths, G.; Tiffin, H. (eds), *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, Routledge London, New York 1995, pp. 24-28. This version is available for download on the website of Utrecht University at: <http://dspace.library.uu.nl:8080/bitstream/1874/29948/1/scan011.2.pdf>, last accessed 23.3.2010.

<sup>4</sup> Ilan Kapoor: “Hyper-self-reflexive development? Spivak on representing the Third World ‘Other’”, in: *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 4, pp. 627–647, 2004, also available online at: [http://www.seedwiki.com/Accounts/Andreotti\\_Vanessa\\_14720/selreflexive.pdf](http://www.seedwiki.com/Accounts/Andreotti_Vanessa_14720/selreflexive.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Ilan Kapoor: “Hyper-self-reflexive development? Spivak on representing the Third World ‘Other’”, in: *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 4, pp. 627–647, 2004, also available online at: [http://www.seedwiki.com/Accounts/Andreotti\\_Vanessa\\_14720/selreflexive.pdf](http://www.seedwiki.com/Accounts/Andreotti_Vanessa_14720/selreflexive.pdf)

“To see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry – an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an art world.”<sup>6</sup>

What makes this specific “atmosphere of artistic theory” as well as that “knowledge of the history of art” highly ambiguous- but also highly interesting- is its constant transformation and fluidity, due to the ever growing influx of Western ideas, which enter in conflict with local versions of modernity and official nationalist ideology- not only about modern and postmodern art in the 1980s, but also of identity questions or the idea of the artist as shaman in the 1990s, but also the growing dominance of cultural theory after the turn of the millennium- each sets of ideas and epistemologies that decry the end of its predecessor, bot in Taiwan as in the West.

One could solve this problem by pretending it does not exist- by concentrating on one key term such as “tradition” (always a convenient choice for a subject in Chinese or Oriental studies)- and cut short the period of time under investigation, concentrating only on a period of a few years or maybe a decade. Or one can try to use theory as what it should be- a tool that can occasionally help to illuminate the phenomena at hand, and rather follow the proposal made by DeCerteau:

“Rather than remaining within the field of a discourse that upholds its privilege by inverting its content (speaking of catastrophe and no longer of progress), one can try another path: one can analyze the microbe- like singular and plural practices which a ... system was supposed to administer or suppress, ... ”.<sup>7</sup>

The main effort of this thesis will therefore not be to add yet another musing on the transitions from modernity to postmodernity to cultural theories in the West, but to analyse and describe the process as it happened in Taiwan, within the walls of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum. I will argue that this development was driven not only by the

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<sup>6</sup> Arthur Danto, “The Artworld,” (1964), reprinted in Philip Alperson ed.: *The Philosophy of the Visual Arts*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 426-33.

See also: Garry L. Hagberg: “The Institutional Theory of Art: Theory and Antitheory”, in Paul Smith, Carolyn Wilde eds.: *A companion to art theory*, Oxford 2002, p. 492

<sup>7</sup> Michel De Certeau: *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1984, p. 95- 96.

transformations of the political environment and the influx of new ideas from the West, but chiefly by an inner logic, by a continuous confrontation of the different players within the Taiwanese art world. I will follow and analyse these confrontations from a close distance, and thus highlight the inner logic of this development, which parallels and references the development from modern to postmodern art, as well as current discussions in the global art world.

I will argue that this development from modern to postmodern, and from national to global, was driven by logic inherent to modern art and the museum space, and driven largely by the interaction between the museum and the art world surrounding it. I will also argue that the transformations it brought about were not limited to a dramatic re-shaping of the political and ideological framework, but also involved the epistemological status of the work of art, and dramatically re-shaped the way art was conceived, created and exhibited.

## **Methodology**

This thesis emphasizes an indigenous development, which revolves around three chief concepts: the museum space, modernity and nationalism. The chief subject is museology, as this thesis concentrates on the changes within the museum space, and how the museum space is transformed; it also uses art history and nationalism studies.

This thesis does not adhere to one single discipline, and rather deploys an array of different research methods. As it probes to analyse the development of the large-scale exhibitions organised by the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, it makes use of the methodology of different disciplines including art history, museology, and ethnographic fieldwork.

## **Method: investigative art history**

This thesis uses first of all the methodology of art history. In an archaeology of the

contemporary, the author first of all tried to describe the work of art that was effectively on display in a certain exhibition, at a certain time, at a certain place. This may seem overly obvious, yet in many cases this simple piece of information- which work of art was on show and where- was not necessarily easy to secure. Catalogues are often printed before the show, showing images of earlier works, and not necessarily the final work presented in that exhibition. Catalogues had to be used with caution, and often as sources that allowed the analysis of previous exhibitions. Knowledge about the positioning of a specific work on a specific location in a specific space often had to be gained through corollary sources, such as press reports or documentary images. This archaeological process built on the extensive knowledge of the author of the spaces in question: to identify a specific space, the identification of minor elements on documentary photographs often became crucial, such as the floor, the walls, ceiling and windows of a certain gallery or museum space.

### **Method: fieldwork**

This thesis builds on and is informed by an extensive period of fieldwork. The author has been based in Venice since late 1992, and since 1993 has had the opportunity to visit almost every edition of the Biennale and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice.

This contact with the Venice Biennale and Taiwanese art started in 1993, through my tutor in Venice, Marco Ceresa, who introduced me (as assistant) to the first Taiwanese artist to be invited to the Venice Biennale, Lee Mingsheng. This was followed by a visit to Taiwan in November 1993, and several years of fieldwork between 1996 and 1999.

Since the first month after my arrival in 1996, I have had the opportunity to work with contemporary Taiwanese art; first in a small local gallery called “Masterpiece Art Center”, which through several survey shows introduced me to numerous local artists.

In 1997 I worked as art reporter and arts and entertainment editor for the local English-language newspaper “China News”. In 1998 and 1999 I was invited by Prof. Huang

Hai-ming to do research at the Taipei Normal University, as an international exchange student. In that time I also curated a show at two independent galleries, Bamboo Curtain Studio and IT Park. In 2001 and 2002 I was working in Munich, Germany, at the civic new media art gallery called “Lothringer13/LADEN”. This gave me the opportunity to curate a survey-show of the independent Taiwanese art scene, showing a set of documentary videos by local independent film-maker Huang Ming-chuan, together with a group show with the members of the artists of IT Park Gallery. In 2006 I was guest curator at the newly founded MoCA Shanghai, which allowed me to observe from close distance both the Shanghai and the Taipei Biennial. In 2009 I curated the first retrospective of the founder of the Taiwanese transavantgarde painting movement, Yang Maolin, “Temple of Sublime Beauty, Made in Taiwan”, which was accepted as a collateral event by the Venice Biennial. In 2010, together with Marco Bazzini, the director of the Centro Pecci, I curated the first retrospective of Michael Lin, the most prominent Taiwanese artist in international art rankings, which was shown in Italy, Prato, under the title “The beauty is generous, the colour is bright”. In 2011, together with Victoria Lu and Renzo di Renzo, I curated “Future Pass”, a survey show of Asian art at the Venice Biennale with about 150 Asian artists (Asian meaning either being of Asian origin or working in Asia).

During these years of fieldwork, the author had the opportunity to speak to almost every artist and art administrator, and also to personally see most artworks and exhibitions mentioned in this thesis. Many discoveries and insights would not have been possible without those contacts and discussions. Indeed the author is deeply indebted to the Taiwanese art scene, and deeply indebted to the lively discussions about art, and the latest trends and issues in art, which much characterized the 1990s.

### **Method: ethnography**

This thesis therefore clearly adheres to the ethnographic ideal to explore the Taiwanese

art scene through “participant observation”, along the much-quoted lines of Spradleys *The Ethnographic Interview*:<sup>8</sup>

“I want to know what you know in the way that you know it. ... Will you become my teacher and help me understand?”<sup>9</sup>

Yet it is questionable to what degree the Taiwanese art scene can be described as a illiterate native tribe in the terms of classical anthropology, especially as far as the presumed superior knowledge position of the Western researcher is concerned. In many cases the subjects interviewed did have a higher ranking in international art rankings, and did have a superior knowledge of the Western art system, thus the phrase “will you become my teacher and help me understand?”<sup>10</sup> in many cases did cut in more directions than one, as the subject interviewed often represented not only the latest trend in Taiwan, but may have come back from a lengthy stay abroad, thus also representing the very latest global art trend.

This very latest trend – this very latest subject position, this latest advance in human knowledge – for obvious reasons was not part of any sinological or theoretical training in Italian or British academia, and may not have originated in Italy or Britain. Quite often “the West” of my interview partners represented a multitude of different locations, experiences and traditions of avant-garde art, and the specific situations in these different institutions and local art circles would have been impossible to know even for the most ardent specialist of Western contemporary art, let alone a student of Chinese art history. On many occasions this has generated the curious situation that fieldwork within that Formosan island tribe (the art scene) turned not only into an exploration of the local history of art, but at the same time into an exploration of “the West”, the global art system, with the help of, and also through the eyes of the local dialogue partners.

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<sup>8</sup> Spradley, J.: *The Ethnographic Interview*, New York 1979, p. 34.

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Sherman Heyl, “Ethnographic Interviewing”, in: Paul Atkinson, Amanda Coffey, Sara Delamont, John Lofland and Lyn Loflan (eds.): *Handbook of Ethnography*, London 2001, p. 369.

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Sherman Heyl, “Ethnographic Interviewing”, in: Paul Atkinson, Amanda Coffey, Sara Delamont, John Lofland and Lyn Loflan (eds.): *Handbook of Ethnography*, London 2001, p. 369.



Not only was the knowledge position of the researcher not quite that superior to be able to assume the classic position of an ethnographic fieldworker, nor did the research subjects represent any tradition rooted in eternity.

Ethnography usually presumes that a short immersion allows to observe a long-established and almost eternal tradition through short-time observation. In the case of Taiwan quite the contrary was true: that very tradition, that very identity was created in the very moment it was revealed to the world, in the moment that a specific show was mounted and was talked about. More often than not these shows were also intended as an act of inquiry into the very own cultural and political identity of the nation, were intended as an act of ethnography of the self; and in many cases one could also safely presume that the artists and critics involved will have read Derrida and Levi-Strauss.

On the other hand, the researcher, trained in sinology, in many cases may have a different knowledge of Chinese art history compared to the subjects interviewed, thus potentially creating an Oriental subject very much along the lines of Edward Said's criticism.<sup>11</sup>

One of the particular challenges of "ethnographic" work in the field was indeed a complete absence of any prior training or research in Taiwanese history of art, or academic knowledge about Taiwan, or Taiwanese history in general, as Taiwan was not part of any academic curriculum at that time. In the late 1990s, this lack also made "ethnographic" fieldwork a particularly exciting experience, as it coincided with the very moment Taiwan discovered itself as a subject of study, as the subject of an identity different and independent from mainland China. "Ethnography", knowledge of the "other", was one of the most discussed issues at that time: as a discovery of the self as an unknown other, as an ongoing discussion about Taiwanese/ Chinese identity. Quite contrary to the experience of an ethnographer trying to understand an indigenous tribe, who may have the difficulty of the language and the difficulty in obtaining meaningful

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<sup>11</sup> Said, Edward: *Orientalism*, New York, 1978.

interviews, there was always a high willingness to speak and discuss Taiwanese / Chinese culture and identity. The foreign ethnographer was by all means a welcome partner in an ongoing dialogue, and ideally a platform to further the discourse of the discovery of a new Taiwanese identity.

This thesis is written from the point of view of a scholar, and informed by the experience of a practitioner, but crucially a practitioner outside the institutions in question. This thesis describes the curatorial and ideological development of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, yet unlike some local writers such as Lai Yingying or Yang Wen-yi, the author has never worked inside the TFAM (two minor collaborations as translator apart). This specific position may have created a certain critical distance, and surely influenced the critical approach and judgement of events, specifically when the main source for these were the voices of artists involved- even though the author always did the very best to interview also the art administrators regarding the same events.

### **Method: art historical research**

To avoid an overt reliance on personal interviews and private points of view, the author has decided to conduct his research chiefly as an art historical research, as a text-based analysis of publicly available material, i.e. articles in art magazines, statements of museum directors, critics, jurors and artists in publicly available catalogues. The numerous interviews with artists, critics and administrators are only very seldom used directly: the reader will not find any lengthy transcript of interviews in this thesis; rather, the reader will find text quotes, footnotes and links to publicly available sources such as blogs or web-pages. Questions of confidential material apart, this methodical decision is derived also from the experience of the author as journalist and professional translator. Journalists or academic ethnographers often tend to flatter themselves with the idea of the interview as a special moment of dialogue, as a moment where bridges are built between different cultures and personalities, or inversely as the moment when

cultural gaps are revealed or dissimulated. It is also a widespread belief in social sciences that superior theoretical training will reveal formerly unknown knowledge. Yet journalistic experience shows that a public persona (an artist, art critic, or museum director) usually repeats the very same story to different interview partners without too many alterations, especially if the interview takes place in a rather formal setting, and in the presence of a recording device. In the case of a young foreigner trying to understand the dynamics and the history of the local art scene, those interviews often also took place many months or years after the event. In many cases the artists interviewed also provided the researcher with plentiful printed material, i.e. old catalogues and articles written by local critics. As a result, this thesis is undoubtedly informed by the numerous interviews and contacts and interactions, but is ultimately using an art historical approach, basing itself on the reading and analysis of images and texts.

That said, some of the crucial insights of this thesis are indeed derived from interviews, some of which took place in rather informal ways, and for obvious reasons were not immediately recorded, and only later summarized from memory.

These interviews sometimes took place in proximity to the events, sometimes at a certain distance both in time or space, and judgements and positions of the people involved may have changed over time- be it because their vested interests (their involvement with the institutions) have changed, or because the chain and importance of events has changed in their memory. For methodical reasons, the author concentrated as much as possible on the publicly available material at the time of the event, that is, to find out first of all which works have been shown when and where, a task that often turned out to be worthy of a detective; and secondly, to analyse the statements of artists, critics and art administrators made publicly at the time of the events.

A second reason to abstain as much as possible from the use of private material is the question of judgement of taste. Art history writing often tends to choose a work, or one artist, or a group of artist that the writer is particularly sympathetic with, or that the

writer had the chance to work with; and the accumulation of theoretical text based on critical theory in itself seems to justify a place in art history. In this thesis, the author tries to do the opposite: to analyse the aesthetic and ideological discourses as well as the power structures of a state institution which generated a discourse that justified the term “art”. In this thesis, the word “art” ideally should always be written with quotation marks: to indicate that the term “art” is not used as a judgement of taste by the author, but as a way to indicate what is described as “art” in a specific art circle- Taiwan.<sup>12</sup>

This thesis therefore analyses first of all the curatorial texts and ideological statements written by museum directors, curators and artists, and analyses how these statements inform the museum space and the way the art is exhibited and presented to the public. It also analyses the reaction of the public, the critics and the press, and shows how these reactions in turn have shaped the development of the museum.

It also analyses the works of artists, and more specifically the way these works were displayed in the exhibition space. Only in a few cases these are analysed as such- that is, only in the cases when these works became iconic for that time, and exerted considerable influence on the course of art history in Taiwan. Unlike classic art history, the goal is to analyse these works as part of a series of exhibitions, as parts of an evolving history, and part of an evolving pattern, as part of a repeated pattern that has been inscribed in a certain space.

### **Literature: the field**

Taiwan, in relation to its population and size, may well be among the nations with the highest ratio of artists at the Venice Biennale, at least if we consider the period since 1993. Still there is astonishingly little systematic work on Taiwanese art history, and even less on the history of its institutions.

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<sup>12</sup> See also Arthur Danto, “The Artworld,” and George Dickie, “What Is Art? An Institutional Analysis,” both reprinted in Anderson, Philip, ed.: *The Philosophy of the Visual Arts*, Oxford University Press, New York 1992, 426-433 and 434- 444 respectively.

This is in part due to the fact that Taiwan studies have only very late been institutionalized, and has emerged only very recently as a legitimate field of study.

Publications such as Su Beng's *400 years of Taiwan people's history* of the 1960's were published only underground, and did not constitute legitimate academic knowledge.

One of the first to include Taiwanese literature in the canon of modern Chinese literature was the German sinologist Helmut Martin, who translated and edited 1970s nativist literature.<sup>13</sup> The ambiguous and awkward status of Taiwan as a field of research and knowledge still echoes in the preface to his anthology of modern Chinese literature, where the inclusion of Taiwan literature was equalled to that of Chinese authors who had been censored on the mainland:

“for the present anthology, controversial names were restored, Taiwan writers were added,…”<sup>14</sup>

Since 2004, with the creation of the European Association of Taiwan Studies, the field has been partly institutionalised, such as at SOAS and at LSE in London, as well as in Leiden and Bochum. At least two publishers have dedicated space to Taiwan, Harrassowitz in Wiesbaden, Germany through the “studia formosiana” book series, as well as Routledge in London.

A lot of highly interesting research has gone into history, most notably into the period of the 2-28 incident as well as the period of Japanese occupation<sup>15</sup> and Qing colonization,<sup>16</sup> and also into the literary image of Taiwan during the Ming and Qing dynasty.<sup>17</sup>

Beyond these monograph studies, several collections of essays have been published

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<sup>13</sup> Helmut Martin: *Taiwanesische Literatur- Postkoloniale Auswege, Chinabilder III*, , Dortmund 1996.

<sup>14</sup> Helmut Martin: “Preface“, in: Martin, Helmut and Kinkley, Jeffrey (eds.): *Modern Chinese writers: self-portrayals*, New York 1992.

<sup>15</sup> Liao Ping-hui, Wang Der-wei (eds.): *Taiwan under Japanese Colonial Rule, 1895- 1945, History, Culture, Memory*, Columbia University Press, New York 2006.

Kikuchi, Yuko (ed.): *Refracted Modernity, Visual Culture and Identity in Colonial Taiwan*, Honolulu 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Wang Gungwu, Ng Chin-keong (eds.): *Maritime China in Transition 1750-1850*, Wiesbaden 2004.

Schottenhammer, Angela (ed.): *Trading Networks in Early Modern East Asia*, Wiesbaden 2010.

Schottenhammer, Angela (ed.): *Taiwan - A Bridge Between the East and South China Seas*, Wiesbaden 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Teng, Emma Jinhua: *Taiwan's imagined geography: Chinese colonial travel writing and pictures, 1683-1895*, Harvard East Asian Monographs, Harvard 2004.

recently, mainly concentrating on language<sup>18</sup> and politics,<sup>19</sup> or questions of identity in general.<sup>20</sup> While the debates on Taiwanese identity in the art scene have somewhat petered out since the late 1980s and mid 1990s, there have emerged also some highly interesting and outspoken scholars in Taiwanese Academia, most notably Allen Chun, who was among the first scholars to re-frame the question of Taiwanese and Chinese identity as a question of modernity and state ideology:

“I raise the examples of Taiwan and mainland China to show that discourses of culture are really attempts by the state to grasp and rationalize the nature of its own modernity. .... In this regard, I believe that the modern nation-state offers a more useful point of departure for understanding the nature of identity constructions than prevailing notions of culture per se.”<sup>21</sup>

Albeit the growing activity in this newly founded field of academic studies, visual arts is only very rarely considered a worthy academic subject, and only occasionally are single essays on visual arts included in essay collections. Visual arts is also excluded from virtually any Taiwan studies curriculum, and EATS conference paper calls usually do not invite presentations on visual arts.<sup>22</sup> As a result, only on very rare occasions does

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<sup>18</sup> Klöter, Henning: *Written Taiwanese*, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden 2005.

Heylen, Ann: *Japanese Models, Chinese Culture and the Dilemma of Taiwanese Language Reform*, Wiesbaden 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Fell, Dafydd / Klöter, Henning / Bi-yu, Chang (eds.): *What has changed? Taiwan Before and After the Change in Ruling Parties*, Wiesbaden 2006.

<sup>20</sup> Heylen, Ann / Sommers, Scott (eds.): *Becoming Taiwan: From Colonialism to Democracy*, Wiesbaden 2005.

Storm, Carsten / Harrison, Mark (eds.): *The Margins of Becoming, Identity and Culture in Taiwan*, Wiesbaden 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Allen Chun: “Fuck Chineseness: ON the Ambiguities of Ethnicity as Culture as Identity“, in: *boundary 2*, Vol.23, No. 2, Summer 1996, p. 119.

Allen Chun: “From nationalism to nationalizing: cultural imagination and state formation in postwar Taiwan“, in: *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 31 (Jan., 1994), pp. 57-67. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2949900>, accessed 16.07.2009.

<sup>22</sup> EATS conference calls usually concentrate on politics and Taiwanese identity, and tend to exclude art and culture, specifically visual art. This may be due to funding schemes, the scholars involved with EATS, but maybe also due to the gap between Taiwanese contemporary art discourse and European scholarly debate: in 2004, the year of the foundation of EATS, “identity” could hardly stir any critical attention in Taiwanese contemporary art circles. Yet with the foundation of EATS, “Taiwanese identity” had just turned into a hot subject ripe for publication in European academia. To put it differently: at the very moment that European scholars started to analyse Taiwanese identity with the tools of Derridean language de-construction, Taiwanese intellectuals rather used these very same tools of critical cultural discourse to analyse Taiwan’s position within global discourse. See also my chapter “We are unable to represent ourselves”.

visual art appear as a topic in Taiwan studies, and often only through a highly politicised lens, such as in relation to the Japanese colonisation,<sup>23</sup> or the memory of the 2-28 incident.<sup>24</sup>

Albeit dealing with a different field, issues discussed in relation to Taiwanese literature clearly resonate with the question of this thesis. An example is Christina Neders article “Blut und Boden (‘Blood and Soil’)? Ideological Tendencies in Taiwanese Literature and its Reception.”<sup>25</sup> The title of her article is slightly more promising than its content, as she does not really confront the thorny issue of blood-and-soil nationalism in R.O.C. Taiwan. One of the first scholars to frame Taiwanese culture in terms of nationalism is Hsiao A-chin in her book *Contemporary Taiwanese Cultural Nationalism*.<sup>26</sup> It is one of the first anthologies dedicated to the development of modern Taiwanese literature. Hsiao’s use of the term “nationalism” rather than “identity” resonates with many of the issues of this thesis, such as the “crafting of a national history” (p.148-157), or the “‘De-Sinocizing’ of Taiwanese literature: the early 1980s,”(p.96-105) or the “crafting of a national culture: the second half of the 1980s and after” (p. 106-109). Hsiao’s research only partly overlaps with the period covered in this thesis, as it concludes (as most studies on Taiwanese literature) with the late 1980s. Also, similar to the vast majority of Taiwan scholars (see, for instance the "Bibliography for the Study of Cultural Discourse in Taiwan" published by Phoenix University),<sup>27</sup> Hsiao uses the term “cultural discourse”

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<sup>23</sup> Yen Chuan-ying: “Colonial Taiwan and the Construction of Landscape Painting“, in: Liao Ping-hui, Wang Der-wei (eds.): *Taiwan under Japanese Colonial Rule, 1895- 1945, History, Culture, Memory*, Columbia University Press, New York 2006, p. 248-261.

<sup>24</sup> Chen, Elsa Hsiang-chun: “Reading Taiwan and the Issue of Difference in a Global/Local Frame: *Epitaph* by Wu Mali in *Sadness Transformed: 2-28 Commemorative Art Exhibition in Taiwan in 1997*“, in: Storm, Carsten / Harrison, Mark (eds.): *The Margins of Becoming, Identity and Culture in Taiwan*, Wiesbaden 2007, p. 185 – 198. The chief problem about the work discussed by Elsa Chen (and the 2-28 exhibition of 1997 in general) was that it was a commissioned work: created for that occasion, for that specific theme, as a response to a theme proposed by the museum.

<sup>25</sup> Neder, Christina: “Blut und Boden (‘Blood and Soil’)? Ideological Tendencies in Taiwanese Literature and its Reception“, in: Neder, Christina /Schilling, Ines S. (eds.): *Transformation! - Innovation? Perspectives on Taiwan Culture*, Wiesbaden 2003, p. 101 - 109.

<sup>26</sup> Hsiao A-chin: *Contemporary Taiwanese Cultural Nationalism*, Routledge, London, New York 2000. Similar titles have also appeared about China, such as Guo Ying-jie’s *Cultural Nationalism in Contemporary China*, Routledge, London 2004.

<sup>27</sup> Chang, Yu-Chun; Wang, I-Chun; and Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven. "Bibliography for the Study of Cultural Discourse in Taiwan." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture (Library)* (2010): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/taiwanculturebibliography>

as hyperbole, while limiting herself to literature (and history writing in political underground magazines). The “Taiwanese culture” invoked by Hsiao thus excludes not only visual arts, but also performance art, theatre, cinema, or modern dance. As a result, some of the observations made by Hsiao, such as the “de-sinocizing of culture” do not necessarily reflect the complexities of cultural discourse in those years; to use a similar term, this author will rather describe the 1980s as a period when the government made an attempt to re-sinocize culture and visual art. The promotion of “Chinese modernity” by the TFAM during the early 1980’s, the subject of the first historical chapter of this thesis, has to be understood as a description of the strategy through which the government contrasted the trends in underground literature described by Hsiao.

Edward Vickers has published widely on history education<sup>28</sup> and the development of ethnology and history museums<sup>29</sup> not only in Taiwan, but often comparing it with the development in Hong Kong<sup>30</sup> and China.<sup>31</sup> The development of museums and heritage has also become the subject of analysis by Taiwanese scholars, such as Chiang Min-ching.<sup>32</sup>

The work of Edward Vickers covers an area that also re-appears as a question in this thesis, the process of writing and re-writing history; yet his study is devoted to a different kind of object, and a different kind of museum space: pre-existing

<sup>28</sup> Vickers, Edward: *History education and national identity in East Asia*, Routledge, London 2005.  
Vickers, Edward Vickers and Lall, Marie-Carine (eds.): *Education as a political tool in Asia*, Routledge, Abingdon, New York 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Vickers, Edward: “Re-writing museums in Taiwan”, in: Shih Fanglong, Thomson, Stuart, and Tremlett, Paul-Francois: *Re-Writing Culture in Taiwan*, Routledge, London 2008, p. 69-101.

<sup>30</sup> Vickers, Edward: *In search of an identity: the politics of history as a school subject in Hong Kong, 1960s-2002*, London, New York 2003.

Vickers, Edward: “Learning to love the motherland: ‘National Education’ in post-retrocession Hongkong”, in: Müller, Gotelind: *Designing History in East Asian Textbooks, Identity politics and transnational aspirations*, Routledge, Abingdon, New York 2011, p. 85- 116.

<sup>31</sup> Vickers, Edward: “Defining the Boundaries of “Chineseness”: Tibet, Mongolia, Taiwan, and Hongkong in Mainland History Textbooks”, in: Foster, Stuart J. and Crawford, Keith A.: *What shall we tell the children? International perspectives on school history textbooks*, Information Age Publishing, Greenwich CT 2006, p. 25-48.

Vickers, Edward and Jones, Alisa: “Museums and nationalism in contemporary China”, in: *Compare*, Vol. 37, No.3, June 2007, pp. 365-382. available online at:  
[http://www.eastwestcenter.org/fileadmin/resources/education/asdp\\_pdfs/Vickers\\_Museums\\_and\\_nationalism\\_pdf](http://www.eastwestcenter.org/fileadmin/resources/education/asdp_pdfs/Vickers_Museums_and_nationalism_pdf)

<sup>32</sup> Chiang Min-chin: “The Hallway of Memory: a case study on the diversified interpretation of cultural heritage in Taiwan”, in: Heylen, Ann / Sommers, Scott (eds.): *Becoming Taiwan: From Colonialism to Democracy*, Wiesbaden 2005, p. 117- 134.



ethnographic artefacts, not new works of art, created with a specific space and theory of art in mind.

Another field that has received considerable attention in Western Academia is Taiwanese art cinema, most notably since the 1990's, when Hou Hsiao-hsien and Tsai Ming-liang won a series of important prizes at the major European film festivals such as Venice, Berlin, Cannes or Locarno.

### **Taiwanese art history-writing**

As mentioned above, this leaves the field of visual art in a somewhat awkward situation: even though Taiwanese artists have been participating at the Venice Biennale since 1993, and Taiwan maintained a national pavilion since 1995, a decade before China followed suit, hardly any systematic study has been dedicated to the field. While the recent boom in the contemporary Chinese art market has give rise to a frantic scholarly and semi-scholarly history-writing activity, the same cannot be claimed to be true for Taiwanese art.

As a result, the sources available continue to be some partly dated works in Chinese language.

Albeit its date of publication, making it a piece of art history in itself, Hsieh Li-fa's seminal work about *The history of Taiwanese art movements during the Japanese period* continues to be a piece of reference.<sup>33</sup>

Only recently has there been significant new research, specifically on the relation between Japanese colonialism and landscape painting.<sup>34</sup>

Hsiao Chiung-jui, now professor at National Cheng Kung University, has written

<sup>33</sup> Hsieh Li-fa 謝里法 (Xie Lifa), 日據時代臺灣美術運動史 (*Riju Shidai Taiwan Meishu Yundong Shi The history of Taiwanese art movements during the Japanese period*), Artist editors, Taipei 1978, 1995.

<sup>34</sup> Yen Chuan-ying: "Colonial Taiwan and the construction of Landscape Painting", in: Liao Ping-hui, Wang Der-wei (eds.): *Taiwan under Japanese Colonial Rule, 1895- 1945, History, Culture, Memory*, Columbia University Press, New York 2006, p. 248- 261.  
Liao Hsin-tien: "The Beauty of the Untamed: Exploration and Travel in Colonial Taiwanese Landscape Painting," in: Kikuchi, Yuko (ed.): *Refracted Modernity, Visual Culture and Identity in Colonial Taiwan*, Honolulu 2007, p. 39 - 66.

extensively on the history of Taiwanese modern art in the 1960s. An abstract of his seminal work is available online under the title: “From Innovation to Avant-Garde – 1950-1970 Taiwanese Art Development”.<sup>35</sup>

Some of the most interesting details of the scandals of the mid-1980s, especially a documentation of the scandals of the re-painted and kicked works, can be found in a collection of essays published by the local painter Lin Hsing-yue, *To Tide Over a Chopping Environment of Art in Taiwan*.<sup>36</sup>

The first local writer to attempt to write and question Taiwanese art history was Ni Zaiqin, whose article “Western Art – Made in Taiwan”<sup>37</sup> had stirred a long-lasting discussion about Taiwanese identity, inciting a series of questions about modernity and post-modernity, and the ethnic dividing lines of the Taiwanese art scene. His book collects not only his article, but a series of responses from different positions within the Taiwanese art scene, thus effectively covering and concluding the subject- even though the ripples could still be detected until the late 1990s. Ni Zaiqin was also the author of a second work on Taiwanese art history, which documented specifically the 1980s and early 1990s, by recording year by year the events that had occurred and had been documented during two decades of publication of the second art magazine in Taiwan, *artist*, in *Artist’s Magazine and Taiwanese Art, Twenty Years Revisited in Detail*.<sup>38</sup>

While his article inspired a rather heated debate, his book did not offer any specific historical analysis, nevertheless it is a useful treasure-trove of historical detail. Since then, numerous official publications have published or included basic outlines of

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<sup>35</sup> Available online at: <http://taiwaneseart.ntmofa.gov.tw/thesis/B6-2.doc>

<sup>36</sup> Lin Hsing Yue 林惺嶽: *渡越驚濤駭浪的台灣美術 (Duyue Jingtiao Hailang de Taiwan Meishu) To Tide Over a Chopping Environment of Art in Taiwan*, Taipei, 1997.

<sup>37</sup> Ni Zaiqin 倪再沁: “西方美術。台灣製造” (Xifang meishu. Taiwan zhizao. Western art. Made in Taiwan), first published in: *Hsiungshih Art Monthly* 1991-4, re-published in: Ye Yujing 葉玉靜 (ed.): *台灣美術中的台灣意識 (Taiwan meishu zhong de Taiwan yishi) (Taiwanese Identity in Taiwanese Art)*, Taipei 1994, pp. 37- 87.

<sup>38</sup> Ni Zaiqin 倪再沁: *藝術家 -台灣美術, 細說從頭二十年 (Yishujia - Taiwan Meishu, Xishuo Congtong Ershi Nian. Artist’s Magazine and Taiwanese Art, Twenty Years Revisited in Detail)*, Taipei 1995.

Taiwanese history of art, such as *Taiwan Art (1945-1993)*,<sup>39</sup> *ARTTAIWAN*,<sup>40</sup> *Taiwan: Kunst Heute*,<sup>41</sup> *Inside Out, New Chinese Art*.<sup>42</sup> All these were official publications, analysis remained fairly limited, and questions regarding the power relations within the art world, the role of the institutions or the ethnic dividing lines were clearly avoided.

In 2002, local artist-writer Yao Jui-chung published a beautiful tome about *Installation Art in Taiwan, 1991-2001*,<sup>43</sup> documenting the rich variety of artistic experimentation that had taken place in that decade. In 2005 he dedicated a booklet to *Performance Art in Taiwan, 1978 – 2004*,<sup>44</sup> which was less complete and less balanced than the former, mainly due to editorial differences with Lee Mingsheng.

In 2005, Yang Wen-I, a former TFAM in-house curator, presented a Ph.D. thesis at the University of Heidelberg called *Negotiating Traditions, Taiwanese Art since the 1980s*.<sup>45</sup> She also offered a basic outline of Taiwanese art history. The core of her thesis was an exegesis of six works by six artists that she had worked with as in-house curator at the first Taiwan Pavilion in Venice in 1995: Huang Jinhe, Huang Chih-yang, Hou Chun-ming, Lian De-cheng and Wu Mali,<sup>46</sup> as well as Yang Maolin, with whom she had organized a collateral event in Venice in 1999.<sup>47</sup>

In 2004, on the occasion of its twentieth anniversary, the Taipei Fine Arts Museum dedicated three tomes to the development of Taiwanese history of art, which include also some rather overly short articles. The selection of images is limited to works from the museums collection, thus making it rather a compendium of the taste of the museum, than a true book of art history.<sup>48</sup> This is most visible in the section dedicated to

<sup>39</sup> TFAM: *Taiwan Art (1945-1993)*, TFAM, Taipei, 1993

<sup>40</sup> Nicolas Jose, Yang Wen-I (eds.): *ARTTAIWAN*, Sydney 1995.

<sup>41</sup> TFAM: *Taiwan: Kunst Heute*, Aachen, Forum Ludwig, Berlin, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Taipei, Aachen, Berlin 1996.

<sup>42</sup> Gao Minglu (ed.): *Inside Out, New Chinese Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles 1998.

<sup>43</sup> Yao Jui-chung: *Installation art in Taiwan, 1991-2002*, (in Chinese only) Taipei 2002.

<sup>44</sup> Yao Jui-chung: *Performance Art in Taiwan, 1978 – 2004*, (Chinese only), Taipei 2005.

<sup>45</sup> Yang Wen-I: *Negotiating Traditions, Taiwanese Art since the 1980s*, Heidelberg 2005, available online at: [http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/volltexte/2005/5983/pdf/yang\\_wen\\_i\\_diss.pdf](http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/volltexte/2005/5983/pdf/yang_wen_i_diss.pdf)

<sup>46</sup> TFAM: *ARTTAIWAN*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 1995.

<sup>47</sup> Yang Wen-I: *VOC, Handle With Care*, Lin& Keng Gallery, Taipei, Venice 1999.

<sup>48</sup> TFAM: *Reflections of the Seventies: Taiwan Explores its own Reality*, TFAM, Taipei, 2004  
TFAM: *The Transitional Eighties, Taiwan's Art Breaks New Ground*, TFAM, Taipei 2004.

performance art in the 1980s, where many historic and factual details are wrong, and seem to intentionally denigrate the role of Lee Mingsheng.<sup>49</sup>

In 2004 this author made a first attempt on the Taiwanese-Canadian art magazine *yishu* in 2004 to analyse the relation between the local art scene and the museum, and to analyse the development of the museum in terms of museology.<sup>50</sup>

Around 2006, the former TFAM curator, Lai Yingying, published a review of the exhibition activity of the TFAM under the title “The poetics of exhibition, reconsider the significance of the TFAM’s exhibition”<sup>51</sup>, which in many aspects can be interpreted as a response to the article of this author: it followed largely the outline of my 2004 paper, for the first time validating the role of Lee Mingsheng in the history of the TFAM, as well as the importance of Huang Hai-ming’s statement on the 1992 Taipei Biennial catalogue. Before the publication of my paper, Lee Mingsheng had been almost completely eliminated from the official accounts of the museum’s history; and since 2000, the official history of the Taipei Biennial had been re-written to start only in 1998,<sup>52</sup> thus eliminating the earlier development from all official accounts, including the seminal turning point of 1992.

Unfortunately Lai Yingying’s account remained fairly a-historical, and shied away from any historical analysis: her approach was to counter the analysis of the museum as a

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TFAM: *The Multiform Nineties: Taiwan’s Art Branches out*, TFAM, Taipei, 2005.

<sup>49</sup> TFAM: “Performance Art in the 1980s”, in: TFAM: *The Transitional Eighties. Taiwan’s Art Breaks New Ground*, TFAM, Taipei 2004, pp. 131, 132.

<sup>50</sup> Schöber, Felix, “Taipei Fine Arts Museum: scandals and reform, or twenty years of government administered art in Taiwan, 1984-2004”, in *Yishu. Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, December 2004, pp. 5-23.

<sup>51</sup> Lai Yingying: “The Poetics of Exhibition, Reconsider the Significance of the TFAM’s Exhibition”, published online on the website of the National Taiwan University of Arts, Department of Art and Culture Politics and Administration at: <http://www.ntua.edu.tw/~culture/word/%AC%FC%B3N%C0%5D%AEi%C4%FD%B8%D6%BE%C7.pdf> consulted 21.2.2010, 16:16. No date of publication give, but it quotes articles published in late 2005; presumably published in early 2006.

<sup>52</sup> Huang Tsai-lang, director: “Preface“, in: Sans, Jerome; Hsu Manray, *2000 Taipei Biennial. The Sky is the Limit*, TFAM, Taipei, 2000, p.8.

Ma Ying-jeou, Mayor of Taipei, “Foreword“, in: Vanderlinden, Barbara; Cheng, Amy: *Taipei Biennial 2004, Do You Believe in Reality?*, TFAM, Taipei 2004, p.9.

Until this day, the official site of the Taipei Biennial lists only the 1998 as the first edition of the Taipei Biennial: <http://www.taipeibiennial.org/> consulted 27.7.2010.

space of politics with the concept of the “poetics of the exhibition”, arguing that the TFAM continued to organise some of the biggest and most influential exhibitions in Taiwan. In her article Lai analysed the activities of the museum through the categories “modernisation, internationalisation, localisation”, albeit in a largely a-historical way. This author tried to problematise the differences between these terms, and to problematise their historical development. Against Lai, it has to be argued that the relationship of the museum with “local” painters and “localism” was for most of the time a difficult one – it can hardly be argued that “*bentu*” painters were enjoying an equally favourable treatment at the museum as did other artists, especially in the first decade since the mid 1980s or after the turn of the millennium. Only one *bentu* (local) painter, Wu Tianzhang, ever won a first prize at the *Trends* exhibition of the 1980s, against the numerous prizes of the minimalist group or the followers of painterly abstraction. After the turn of the millennium, not one single *bentu* painter participated at the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice. Secondly, it has to be argued that the promotion of modernity in art, was a project limited to the 1980s. Even Lai Ying-ying observed in her own article that the term “modern” fell in disuse after the mid-1990s. Thirdly, in the 1980s and early 1990s, the “internationalisation” of the TFAM was a fairly limited project. By now, after the turn of the millennium, the museum is surely to be counted among the – minor – global players in contemporary art. These points of difference obviously also reflected different points of view. Lai was an internal curator of the TFAM, and presented a view that was favourable of the achievements of the museum, and less critical towards its scandals. Still her paper offered also an array of hard-to-find sources, such as Amy Cheng’s blog with the documentation of the scandal around the 2004 Taipei Biennial.

Another paper by Lai Yingying, “Mapping Taiwan: strategies of Taiwan’s international art Biennials”,<sup>53</sup> (which also quoted my article of 2004) offered an exegesis of the

<sup>53</sup> Lai Yingying: “Mapping Taiwan: strategies of Taiwan’s international art Biennials”, written in 2008 in the occasion of the 2008 Taipei Biennial, available online at:

curatorial outline of the 2008 Taipei Biennial, and a very short historical introduction to the international activities of the TFAM.

Beyond Lai Yingying account of the 2008 Taipei Biennial, there are a few short records of the history of the Taipei Biennial. One of the few examples is the local art blogger Susan Kendzulak, who has written a short presentation. Yet even the presentation of an account of apparently innocent historical facts is not without its political intricacies, legible only for the very few: in her presentation of the Taipei Biennial she also gives a list of many of the proposals for reform made by the art scene in 2004,<sup>54</sup> but Kendzulak at no point makes a direct mention of the “missing curator” of the 2004 Taipei Biennial. On her blog she presents also a short list of the Taiwan Pavilions in Venice. Unfortunately the images not always do correspond to the works originally that had been on show in Venice, and the texts are limited to a few very general sentences about each artist.<sup>55</sup>

On the website of the Taipei Biennial (as well as on the website *universes in universe*) there can also be found a short account of the history of this exhibition, which by now (re-writing the practice of previous years) also acknowledges its origin in the *Trends* exhibition and the *Taipei Biennial* of 1992, probably also in a move to re-gain its position as one of the first contemporary art Biennials in Asia.<sup>56</sup> As every other official account, it presents the development of the Taipei Biennial as a success-story of ever greater international interaction and collaboration – words such as marginalisation or subalternity do not appear.

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[http://www.ntua.edu.tw/~culture/word/0810\\_Map.pdf](http://www.ntua.edu.tw/~culture/word/0810_Map.pdf) consulted 21.2.2010, 17:32.

<sup>54</sup> Kendzulak, Susan: “The Taipei Biennial, both respectability as well as notoriety”, in: *culture.tw Taiwan, explore the real Taiwan*, online at: [http://www.culture.tw/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=139&Itemid=40](http://www.culture.tw/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=139&Itemid=40), published 7.5.2007, consulted 22.7.2010.

<sup>55</sup> Kendzulak, Susan: “2003 Taiwan Pavilion in Venice”, in: [http://taiwancontemporaryart.blogspot.com/2008\\_05\\_01\\_archive.html](http://taiwancontemporaryart.blogspot.com/2008_05_01_archive.html), consulted on 28.9.2009.

<sup>56</sup> TFAM editors: “08 TB, Taipei Biennial, brief history“, available online at: <http://www.taipeibiennial.org/2008/ContentPage/Contents.aspx?ID=iWtOXTY5yerSII9xW63dIAUWv5DBFdU1&SubID=iWtOXTY5yepbYP0ReEQvvxHGWPPzIVBK&Language=iWtOXTY5yepbYP0ReEQvvxIHCRdaRaeW>, consulted 4.5.2010, 13:26.  
TFAM editors: “Taipei Biennial“, excerpt from press release, online at: [http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/bien/taipei\\_biennial](http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/bien/taipei_biennial), consulted on 4.5.2010.

## **Modernity and the museum space**

The term that dominates the early activities of the Taipei Fine arts Museum is “modernity”- specifically Chinese modernity, thus always combining the terms modernity and the nation, always intended as a modernity in art. The two terms most closely connected to modernity were usually “science”- but interestingly enough, also “experiment”. The nation, on the contrary, was rather linked to the notion of “philosophy”- or rather Chinese philosophy.

Modernity or “Xiandaihua” had been imported to China and Taiwan through Japan. The term “Xiandai” had been coined in Japan, and the speed of reform in Meiji Japan had been one of the arguments for Qing governors to modernize Taiwan, even before it came under the direct control of the imperial Japanese administration after 1895. Modernity was therefore a term with a history and many layers, especially in Taiwan, where Sun Yat-sen’s ideology, together with the amendments of Chiang Kai-shek, had become national ideology since the end of WWII and the retreat of the Nationalist army to the island in 1949.

It has to be pointed out that not only Japanese modernity and Sun Yat-sen’s and Chiang Kai-shek’s nationalist ideology had left an imprint on Taiwanese culture, but – excluding all Marxist and Maoist thought that had been banned after the defeat in the civil war- several other strands such as humanism and liberalism, descendants of the May Fourth and the New Culture Movement were available as possibilities to think about modernism, be it because their representatives had followed Chiang to Taiwan, or be it because the institutions created by them had been moved to Taiwan.

Most famously it had been Chen Duxiu to introduce the idea that China needed to go through a structural reform to become a viable nation again, and that only Western knowledge and a Western political system could save it- only science and democracy, or

as he called it in 1919, only Mr. Science and Mr. Democracy could save the nation, thus anointing the modern secular idea that all public knowledge shall be based on science, and in the following intellectual development the term “science” (unlike the term democracy) became endowed with an aura that turned it into an impregnable fortress for whoever availed himself of its use.

One of the intellectuals to follow Chiang to Taiwan was Hu Shih, famous for his promotion of liberalism and democracy in China. The iconic publication that represented the idea that the R.O.C., after its retreat to Taiwan, was a better, more democratic and freer version of China was Hu’s Free China Journal, first printed in 1949, but closed down already in 1960, and editor Lei Chen was jailed for more than a decade. Albeit without any role in the democratization process of the 1980s, the liberal and democratic ideas of Hu still were a point of reference for the Tang-wai movement of the 1980s, and even if not directly involved, it offered a precedent and a different possibility of thinking modernity. There is one specific term that had been introduced by Hu, and that outlived Hu as a key term in political and art political language: Hu had translated “pragmatism” as “experimentalism”, thus enriching the term “experiment” with a richness of ideological value that continued to reverberate in artist statements and critical writings up through the avant-garde discussions of the 1980s, and which was one of the key terms that gave credibility to the project modernity in art.

Another alternative model to the fascist modernism of Chiang Kai-shek was the humanism of Cai Yuan-pei. Cai was an influential educator, for some time also dean of the Academia Sinica in Beijing, and his thought continued to exert some influence especially in academic circles in Taiwan, as Academia Sinica relocated there together with Chiang Kaishek’s army. To this day, his sculpture (together with Hu’s) can be found on the Academia Sinica, and his ideas still inform the curriculum of schools and universities. Cai had been inspired by Kantian enlightenment ideas, and maintained that



scientific and rational thought alone were not sufficient to mediate between the material and the spiritual sphere, and that aesthetic education should substitute religion and traditional beliefs, thus proposing a project much in the tradition of European secularisation. While his humanist ideas about aesthetics substituting religion largely entered the canon of accepted ideas especially in intellectual circles, his project for a civil society met the same fate as Hu Shih's liberalism:

“A serious casualty, in hindsight, was Cai's enlightenment project. ... Given the severe national crisis during those years, it was perhaps impossible to establish an unobtrusive, relatively autonomous civil society. No matter how beneficial it might have proved itself to China's modernity, Cai's project had unfortunately little material conditions in China then.”<sup>57</sup>

Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of the People (Sanminzhuyi) ideology represented a deep transformation of the Chinese state towards modernization, as it introduced such terms as nationalism, alternatively based on an ethnic or “blood” principle or on a somewhat larger idea of the unification of all ethnicities present on the territory of the former Qing empire; it also introduced the idea of democracy and rule of law, as well as the idea that the state was responsible for the welfare of its people- a socialism or social welfare of sorts. At least on paper this created a political system based on a constitution, the separation of powers and rule by law. Unfortunately after the defeat in the civil war and retreat of the nationalist army to the island Formosa, elections were limited to a local level, and national politics was dominated by a proto-fascist military dictatorship and one-party rule. This was not necessarily in contrast to Sun Yat-sen's “democracy principle”- democracy, according to Sun, did not necessarily mean the freedom of the individual, but rather the freedom of the nation as a whole. Even though Sun Yat-sen's

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<sup>57</sup> Liu Kang: “Enlightenment and Aesthetic Education: Cai Yuanpei's incomplete Project”, in: Liu Kang, *Aesthetics and Marxism, Chinese Aesthetic Marxist and their Western Contemporaries*, Duke University Press, 2000, p. 33

thought and the constitution of the republic of China could easily be adapted to become the basis for a military dictatorship, it also contained the seeds for the later democratic development by providing the space for elections, albeit only on a local level, and by providing the basic structure of a bureaucratic modern state governed (ideally) by law, a constitution, and a government (ideally) elected by the people- even though that democratic process had been temporarily suspended.

Sun Yat-sen's Three principles became the constitutional as well as ideological framework for that modern nation called Republic of China. It has to be pointed out that Cai's humanism, as with Hu's liberalism, unlike Marxist and leftist thought that had been completely eliminated from the list of available ideas and authors in the R.O.C., provided alternative models of modernity, and allowed for intellectual possibilities beyond and sometimes in conflict with Sun's and Chiang's modern nationalism. Modernity, albeit its claims to a unified basis in science (a bit less so in democracy), rather was a platform of intellectual possibilities and inherent contradictions.

In the widest sense, "modernity" thus could be argued to be mean a sure faith in technological progress- or at least in the necessity for progress, if the nation was to survive; the key term was the "science", which was assigned almost absolute value, a knowledge on the pattern of natural science, thus assigning also high value to the term "experimentalism."

Democracy, at least intended as the freedom of political choice of the individual, was not necessarily very high in the list of priorities of official Sun Yat-sen ideology; considering the failure of Hu Shih to change the political system in Taiwan, it is rather a curio how much space Western academia has dedicated to the question how many seeds of democracy or socialism can be found in Sun Yat-sen ideology or Hu Shih thought, and how much modern Chinese nationalism was centred around notion of a shared

culture.

This is in stark contrast with another curio- the almost complete lack of mention of the value of state sponsorship of culture in the writings of Sun Yat-sen; only Chiang Kai-shek later added this question to the compendium of modern Chinese national ideology known as Sanminzhuyi, by promulgating an addendum to the Minsheng chapter in 1953.<sup>58</sup> It was only Chiang Ching-kuo to announce in 1977 that building rail-roads and providing food for everyone, or Sun's socialism, was not enough:

“to construct a modernized country, not only should the people have a rich material life, but also the people should have a healthy spiritual life,”

This was not a goal to be pursued for metaphysical purposes, but it was part of a greater plan to strengthen the country:

“to increase our national strength further, augment our social development and raise the people's standard of living”

To this purpose, the government announced the Twelve Constructions Plan, the last point of which was the construction of:

“a cultural centre in every hsien (county) and city, including a library, museum, and music hall for each.”<sup>59</sup>

It was therefore only from 1977 onwards that state ideology called upon culture to project the image of a modern nation, making the promotion of modernity in art a new prerogative. This official sanctioning of modernity in art was by all means a new

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<sup>58</sup> Chiang Kai-shek: “民生主義育樂兩篇補述” The original text is available online here: <http://www.chungcheng.org.tw/thought/class05/0002/index.htm>, last accessed on 20.4.2012.

<sup>59</sup> Chiang Ching-kuo, quoted from: Harris B.H. Seng: “Cultural Centers in Taiwan, R.O.C., Organization, Functions, and Problems”, in: *Journal of Library and Information Science*, 17:1, Taipei, April 1991, pp. 1-10; available online at: <http://140.122.104.2/ojs/index.php/jlis/article/viewFile/247/247>

ideological phenomenon, and largely also an experiment for all sides involved- both for the museum administrators called to administered and sanction this new modernity, as well as for the artists who were called to create these new icons of Chinese Modernity. The institution that experimented for the first time with the idea of a modern art museum, a museum that would project the image of a modern Chinese culture towards the nation, was the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, opened in late 1983. Since this was a completely new ideological and cultural experiment, a whole chapter will be dedicated to the establishment, development and the specific limits of this “Chinese Modernity”.

### **Modernity, the nation and the museum space**

To analyse the events that have shaped the museum space, and to analyse the process how these exhibitions were used to project the image of a modern nation, I will use the writings of Anderson and Gellner on nationalism, the writings of Rosalind Krauss, Michel Foucault, Arthur Danto, Thierry DeDuve, Pierre Bourdieu, Tony Bennett, Elaine Hooper- Greenhill and Caroline Duncan on the contradictions inherent to the secular character of modern art and the museum space, as well as the writing of Homi Bhabha on the inherent contradictions of the relation between a nation and its presumed roots in history and tradition. This will allow me to locate the exhibitions of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, their patterns and inherent contradictions, in the wider context of modern art, museology, nationalism and post-colonial studies.

This will allow for a view that de-localizes and de-personalizes the events at the museum, by describing them not so much as conflicts between single players in the Taiwanese art world, or a singular and essential particularity of Taiwanese culture, but as questions inherent to modernity in general. As has been pointed out before, Sun Yat-sen’s nationalist ideology promoted a modern political system, and did so with all the

fervour of nationalism- yet his could hardly be called a philosophical elaboration of modernity, rather a pragmatic (even in the sense of Dewey's pragmatism) adoption of the most general ideas. That said, the very notion of modernity within the museum space was a completely new and experimental one: the Taipei Fine Arts Museum was indeed the first museum to be built in an openly modernist style- all previously erected buildings had rather sought to root themselves in antiquity: be it Greek, in the case of the Taiwan Museum, or in Chinese antiquity in the case of the National History Museum, the Sun Yat-sen Memorial, or the Palace Museum.

Many of the events described later would have been unthinkable, or rather unlikely in any other venue than the highly secular, and highly modernist TFAM. Many performances by the artist Lee Mingsheng, who highlighted the excess of political ritual and the limits of modernity within the TFAM, would have been much less incisive in the previously mentioned venues: to highlight the contradiction between the secular, modern character of the museum, and the rituals inside it, would have been fairly pointless inside the ritual space of the Sun Yat-sen Memorial or at the National History Museum- in contrast to these openly ritual and traditionalist spaces, the TFAM was the first museum to openly espouse the idea of the museum as a modern and secular space.

### **Museology: the cool gaze of the museum space**

The inherent contradictions of modernity constitute only one group of questions within the field of representation created inside the museum space which can ultimately be traced back to the idea that only scientific knowledge is acceptable as public knowledge in a secular society.

To analyse this set of questions, it is useful to go back to the writings of Michel Foucault. Foucault does not specifically speak about modern or contemporary art museums- his observations are concerned with the space of science, thus going well

beyond the specific traditions related to the White Cube of the modernist museum. This may seem a problem, but it makes his writings useful in an environment that lacked any tradition of the white cube, but most certainly subscribed to science as the pillar of any acceptable knowledge.

According to Michel Foucault, the object of modern science is studied and observed exclusively through its purely visual value, while stripping away anything else that comes along through “hearsay” - that is, tradition, religion, superstition or anything else. This process of secularisation of the object of the gaze not only excludes anything that is deemed non- scientific knowledge, is also excludes all other senses. In his observations about the birth of modern science he wrote:

“Observation, from the seventeenth century onward, is a perceptible knowledge furnished with a series of systematically negative conditions. Hearsay is excluded, that goes without saying; but so are taste and smell, because their lack of certainty and their variability render impossible any analysis into distinct elements that could be universally acceptable ... which leaves sight with an almost exclusive privilege, being the sense by which we perceive extent and establish proof ...”.<sup>60</sup>

To sum it up in one sentence:

“To observe, then, is to be content with seeing”.

While Foucault’s observation about the nature of the scientific process of observation may seem to state only the obvious, it is this process of stripping object of their original meaning which constitutes the origin of art history and aesthetics, and the secularisation of the object of art.

In her 1992 book *Museums and the shaping of knowledge*, new Museology author Eileen Hooper-Greenhill described this as a process of secularization which occurs with the inauguration of museum as a process that first removes and isolates the object of art from its original religious or traditional context, thus “stripping it from hearsay,” to

<sup>60</sup> Michel Foucault: *The Order of Things (Les mots et les choses*, Paris 1966), New York 1994, pp. 132, 133.

quote Foucault, and which then constructs new categories of meaning around it- new categories constructed through the gaze of the researcher- by classifying it through the scientific categories of art history and aesthetics.<sup>61</sup>

Her classic example was a piece of religious sculpture or painting, or the portrait of a politician: inside the original context, such as a church or a palace, the sculpture was part of a larger context of religious or political meaning, and its presence was justified by its ritual purpose. By moving it into the museum, that ritual purpose was lost, as was its religious meaning. Once the painting had entered the museum, it became part of a different narrative, called science: it was classified according to an art historical epoch, grouped with a school, and ascribed to an author. In short, St. Mary ceased to be a religious icon, and became a Titian or a Verrocchio.

### **Theory: Foucault, the observed spectator**

It has been argued by Foucault that the secular drive to eliminate religion from the public sphere of knowledge puts man and his finitude at the centre- and Chinese humanists made a similar argument, thus partly re-surrecting Confucianism. The new role of aesthetics and art history as tools of classification of art objects seems to imply that these are stable standards. Yet if we follow Michel Foucault, there is a deeper conflict at the heart of the space of representation that renders these categories highly unstable, a conflict that turns up once the scientist leaves the narrow area of natural sciences, and turns his attention towards human science. In his description of man's situation under the looking-glass of modern science in *The Order of Things* he turns to art, and specifically to a famous painting by Velásquez, *Las Meninas*, at the Prado in Madrid. Originally painted for the royal chambers, we see the princess and her entourage, a royal chamber, and, placed on one side of the painting, the back of a canvas and the painter himself, looking at us. In Foucault's analysis this is a rather unstable

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<sup>61</sup> E. Hooper-Greenhill: *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, Routledge, London 1992.

relationship: as we presume to find ourselves in the position of the king, both in the sense that we presume to observe a painting, doing so from a unique vantage point, and maybe even in the sense that we are indeed the king who is waiting to be portrayed by the painter, but while doing so we realize that we are nothing but visitors in a public museum, who in turn have become the objects of the gaze of the painter, objects that wait to be replaced by any other object on which the discerning gaze of the painter might fall. Yet it is this very gaze of the painter gazing from the canvas at the viewer that extends the painting into the space in front of the canvas:

“as if ... that vacant space towards which Velásquez’s whole painting was directed ... demanded that the entire space of the representation should at last be related to one corporeal gaze.”<sup>62</sup>

It is interesting to note the important position that this observation occupies in Foucault’s *Order of Things*. To Foucault, the finitude of the human being, the experience of the body, and the question of the historical foundations of language are the very foundations of modern science and philosophy. He points out:

“Modernity begins when the human being begins to exist within his organism, inside the shell of his head, inside the armature of his limbs, and in the whole structure of his physiology; when he begins to exist at the centre of a labour by whose principles he is governed and whose product eludes him; when he lodges his thought in the folds of a language so much older than himself that he cannot master its significations, even though they have been called back to life by the insistence of his words.”<sup>63</sup>

This analysis of the tensions inherent in modernity positions Foucault in a crucial moment in the development of Western discourse- at the juncture between modernism and post-modernism; his writings are therefore useful not just as an analysis of

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<sup>62</sup> Michel Foucault: *The Order of Things (Les mots et les choses, Paris 1966)*, Vintage books reprint, New York 1994, p. 311.

<sup>63</sup> Michel Foucault: *The Order of Things (Les mots et les choses, Paris 1966)*, Vintage books reprint, New York 1994, p. 318.



modernity, but also provide the inherent contradictions and tensions which lead the way to post-modernity.

### **Theory: the ethnographic turn in museology**

This point has also been observed by *New Museology* author Tony Bennett<sup>64</sup> when he describes the complexities and the contradicting nature of the public museum:

“The museum, it will be argued, also constructs man ... in a relation of both subject and object to the knowledge it organizes. .... There is, however, a tension within this space of representation between the apparent universality of the subject and object of knowledge (man) which it constructs, and the always socially partial and particular ways in which this universality is realized and embodied in museum displays. This tension, ... has supplied – and continues to supply – the discursive co-ordinates for the emergence of contemporary museum policies and politics oriented to securing parity of representation for different groups and cultures within the exhibitionary practices of the museum.”<sup>65</sup>

Homi Bhabha has developed this point further by substituting Foucault’s bodies with the people, the constituents of a nation:

“The people are not simply historical events or parts of a patriotic body politic. They are also a complex rhetorical strategy of social reference where the claim to be representative provokes a crisis within the process of signification and discursive address.”<sup>66</sup>

Homi Bhabha slightly shifts the emphasis from the rather static tension between the subjects-as-objects of Foucaultian knowledge to a more dynamic relation of both pedagogical and performative knowledge of the nation:

“We then have a contested cultural territory where the people must be thought in a

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<sup>64</sup> Tony Bennett: *The Birth of the Museum*, Routledge, London 1995, p. 7.

<sup>65</sup> Tony Bennett: *The Birth of the Museum*, Routledge, London 1995, p. 7.

<sup>66</sup> Homi Bhabha: “DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation”, in : Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration*, Routledge, Abingdon, New York, 1990, p. 297.

double-time; the people are the historical 'objects' of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discursive an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin or event; the people are also the 'subjects' of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principle of the people as the continual process by which the national life is redeemed and signified as a repeating and reproductive process."<sup>67</sup>

By substituting the Foucaultian bodies with the people, or rather the citizens of a nation, Homi Bhabha provides a driving force for an ongoing process of re-writing and re-thinking the narrative of the nation:

"The tension between the paedagogical and the performative ... turns the reference to a 'people' - from whatever political or cultural position it is made - into a problem of knowledge that haunts the symbolic formation of social authority. The people ... represent the cutting edge between the totalizing powers of the social and the forces that signify the more specific address to contentious, unequal interests and the identities within the population."<sup>68</sup>

### **Secularisation, Kant and the author- artist**

Until now I have made reference chiefly to authors related to structuralism, post-structuralism and de-constructivism; it has to be pointed out that their theories, though widely used in New Museology, are not necessarily sufficient to explain the development of modern art (admittedly, not their chief concern), specifically modern art since Duchamp. If we return to the project of secularisation and Enlightenment specifically to the project of Kant and Cai Yuan-pei to substitute religion and tradition with aesthetics, then there is one figure that emerges with a completely new role:

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<sup>67</sup> Homi Bhabha: "DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation", in : Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration*, Routledge, Abingdon, New York, 1990, p. 297.

<sup>68</sup> Homi Bhabha: "DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation", in : Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration*, Routledge, Abingdon, New York, 1990, p. 297.

“The artist, as he emerges from the discourses of Immanuel Kant, is an exceptional person invested with extraordinary powers to see into the intellectual operating system built into the universe and to mediate, as in a theological sphere Christ once did, between the transcendental and human registers.”<sup>69</sup>

Not only is the artist moved to the position formerly occupied by priests and shamans- the artist also finds himself with a completely new set of points of reference, or rather with only one point of reference – his own absolute freedom.

As a result, once religion and traditional beliefs had been abolished, not only the artist, but also the viewer had only one point of reference for the appreciation of art left- the freedom of the artist. This not only inaugurated the idea of the artist as an author, but also anointed the artist, rather than religion or tradition, as the only point of reference and standard of appreciation of a work of art.

This may not have been immediately obvious to Cai Yuan-pei, but according to Thierry DeDuve analysis of *Kant after Duchamp*, this certainly was one of the ideas that enabled Marcel Duchamp to designate a urinal as a work of art, thus certainly placing Duchamp in the category of Nietzschean ueber-authors described by Foucault:

“... in the sphere of discourse one can be the author of much more than a book – one can be the author of a theory, tradition, or discipline in which other books and authors will in their turn find a place. These authors are in a position which we shall call ‘transdiscursive’.”<sup>70</sup>

It has to be pointed out that the author is far from a fixed metaphysical position- especially the linguistic turn and de-constructivism of the later 20<sup>th</sup> century has dismantled much of the certainties of modernism (including Kant)- leaving it very much an open question. To say it with Michel Foucault:

“To this day, the “author” remains an open question both with respect to its

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<sup>69</sup> Henry Sussmann: *The Aesthetic Contract, statutes of art and intellectual work in Modernity*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1997, p. 134.

<sup>70</sup> Bouchard, Donald F.: *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, selected essays and interviews by Michel Foucault, Cornell University Press, Cornell 1977, p. 90.

general function within discourse and in my own writings; that is, this question permits me to return to certain aspects of my own work which now appear ill-advised and misleading.”<sup>71</sup>

### **Institutional art theory**

After Duchamp and the introduction of the ready-made in the canon of modern art through the subterfuge of the Kantian freedom of the artist, potentially anything could be turned into a work of art- yet this has turned the classificatory question of aesthetics into a highly self- reflexive one- or, as Arthur Danto has pointed out:

“To see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry—an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld”<sup>72</sup>

It is at this point where the apparent freedom of the artist seems to turn into its very opposite- a rather bureaucratic affair:

“A work of art in the classificatory sense is 1) an artifact 2) upon which some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld) has conferred the status of candidate for appreciation”<sup>73</sup>

### **Theories of nationalism: “Every man a clerk”**

One of the first contradictions that characterize the secular museum space of the TFAM is the all-pervasive presence of the nation, which seems to inscribe itself in every nook and cranny of the exhibitionary system. It is a phenomenon that initially does not necessarily jump to the eye, as the terms used to frame the work of art seem to resemble merely an innocuous reference to a certain locality. Yet at a second look, it is those very terms that seems to dominate not only a locality, but pervades artistic discourse in every

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<sup>71</sup> Bouchard, Donald F.: *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, selected essays and interviews by Michel Foucault, Cornell University Press, Cornell 1977, p. 113.

<sup>72</sup> Arthur Coleman Danto: "The Artworld". *Journal of Philosophy*, 61.19, 1964, pp. 571-584.

<sup>73</sup> George Dickie: *Aesthetics, An Introduction*. Pegasus, New York 1971, p. 101

single step and corner.

Ernest Gellner has made an argument which establishes a strong link between the creation of a large bureaucratic apparatus and the rise of nationalism, and which in turn also explains the link between the rise of a bureaucratic system administering the arts and the rise of discourse of national identity discourse within the arts. This argument, together with Anderson's theory of "career paths", in itself provides a strong link between the expansion of the bureaucratic apparatus called to administer and foster the arts, described in the next chapter, and the rise of nationalist identity discourse. According to Gellner, there is one element that sets apart the modern nation from the medieval kingdom or the prehistoric tribe, which he sums up like this:

"The conditions in which nationalism becomes the natural form of political loyalty can be summed up in two propositions: (1) Every man a clerk. (Universal literacy recognized as a valid norm.) (2) Clerks are not horizontally mobile, they cannot normally move from one language-area to another; jobs are generally specific to clerks who are produced by some one particular educational machine, using some one particular medium of expression."<sup>74</sup>

This seems at first not very useful for an application to art theory, especially if one would like to compare that with the famous dictum of the German artist Joseph Beuys, who once claimed that "every man is an artist". Translated into art-historical terms, Gellner's dictum "every man a clerk" translates German artist Joseph Beuys' dictum "every man an artist" into its very opposite: "every artist a clerk."

Yet if we look again at Danto's and Dickie's analysis of modern art after Duchamp, there is an uncanny need for such a clerk in a modern society- for a clerk that is able to act in the name of the wider art world, who can confer aesthetic value upon an object within the museum or gallery space:

"A work of art in the classificatory sense is 1) an artifact 2) upon which some

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<sup>74</sup> Gellner, Ernest: "Thought and Change", London 1964, p.160. Available online at: <http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/moynihan/Programs/ces/Gellner.pdf>

person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld) has conferred the status of candidate for appreciation”<sup>75</sup>

### **Benedict Anderson and the creation of local career-paths**

Anderson is often cited foregrounding the role of the print media in the development of nationalism. A parallel argument could be made for another product of modernity which would be difficult to imagine without the press- the work of modern art, defined by its “atmosphere of art theory”.

There is one more aspect in Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* that is seldom discussed, but relevant to my analysis of Taiwanese nationalism in this thesis: the creation of career paths within the administration, and their role in the creation of a new, “creole,” national identity. Anderson points out that the very structure of a new local administration creates new centres, new places considered “Rome“, and in turn creates new career paths for its functionaries, while other possibilities are blocked off.<sup>76</sup> If we are to take this argument serious, then the search for a new, Taiwanese identity starting in the late 1970s, which took off in the 1990s after the lifting of martial law, could be explained not just a result of ethnic conflict or of the introduction of democracy, but also caused by the isolation of the island from the rest of the Chinese mainland (and Japan). Using Anderson’s model, this process has to be analysed in two steps: the first is the move of a new, foreign administration apparatus from mainland China to Taiwan, after Japan had ceded its colony back to China in 1945. Then in 1949, with the end of the civil war, the ties with the mainland were cut, and Taipei (rather than Beijing, Nanjing, or Chongqing) became the effective new point of reference for local administrators. The case of the R.O.C. is particularly interesting in this regard, as the fiction of Taiwan not being a centre, but still being administered from a higher-ranking but unavailable capital

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<sup>75</sup> George Dickie: *Aesthetics, An Introduction*. Pegasus, New York 1971, p. 101

<sup>76</sup> Anderson, Benedict: “Creole Pioneers”, in: *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London 1983, 2006, p. 47-65.

was upheld until the 1990s, when the national parliament (that still represented all provinces of China) and the provincial government (which pretended to govern Taiwan as a province, while it was already governed as a nation) were abolished. A “creole” administration in Anderson’s sense was created only in the 1970s, when more and more local Taiwanese were admitted into the ranks of the administration, most visibly the agricultural expert Lee Teng-hui who later was to become the first local-born president. The role of Taiwanese literature and the underground movement for independence is well known and widely studied. Yet Anderson’s argument of creolisation accounts very well also for the sincere search for the so-called “New Taiwanese” identity of immigrants and second or third generation immigrants but also aboriginals or Hakka, an identity that differs noticeably to that of the so-called “Taiwanese-language“ or “Minnan-hua” speaking Taiwanese.

Anderson's argument can also be useful if applied to the arts. For an artist, every involvement with the local art administration would be gauged by, and would provide an incentive to frame his art in the terms of national ideology. This provides a double argument for a gradual expansion, and growing complexity of the art administration: sponsorship of the local art scene, rather than mere repression as had been the rule up to the 1970s, not only provided an opportunity to create a positive image with the population at large, but also provided a means to nationalize these otherwise independent artistic spirits, since every interaction would be gauged and controlled by the functionaries of the state and national ideology. As long as the state provided only a mere platform for the occasional exhibition, the incentive for a local artist to re-frame his work through national ideology was arguably comparatively low. The more elaborate this system, the closer the exhibition system came to represent a career path for the artists, the higher the incentive became to re-think artistic creation in the terms set out by the administration.

In 1984, the inauguration of the TFAM offered for the first time a government-

controlled venue for local contemporary art. This was not simply a boost for the local art scene, it also meant that the government could impose its own standards on contemporary art – and integrate independent artists at least partially into the pre-existing “ideological government apparatus“. By using this Althusser-Gramscian term, I would like to point out that the TFAM was to all effect part of a larger “ideological state apparatus“: all staff were hired as government employees; external jurors were also usually called as representatives of local academia, imposing academic standards (art historic, aesthetic, ideological) onto the so-called “open competitions“, such as the *Trends of Modern Art in the Republic of China* exhibition.

Returning to Anderson’s argument, one can observe a quite distinct evolution in the prospective career paths for local artists as provided by the Taipei Fine Arts Museum. In the mid-1980s, the TFAM provided only two, fairly stable categories of art exhibitions, gauged mainly by the artists age: young artists could aspire for a participation at the *Trends* competition, and apply for, or be invited to an experimental show in the basement. Mid-term artists could hope to be invited to a group show organized by the museum. Well-established, older and deceased artists could hope for a solo show or a retrospective. While the TFAM undoubtedly opened up a new – and it is fair to say enormous – platform for modern art, this scheme provided fairly little opportunity for a “career” within the institution, and offered very little especially for mid-career artists, a point also observed by Professor Huang Hai-ming in his statement for the inauguration for the *Taipei Biennial*:

“In the past few years, the *Contemporary Art Trend in the R.O.C.* appeared to be losing its attraction among artists who concentrated on their careers to become more established..”<sup>77</sup>

The substitution of the *Trends* exhibition with the *Taipei Prize* and the introduction of the *Taipei Biennial*, together with the new opportunity to show abroad through a

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<sup>77</sup> Huang, Hai-ming: “Observations and Suggestions on the Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art 1992”, in: *The Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art 1992*, TFAM, Taipei 1992, p. 10.



participation at the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice, can be interpreted therefore also as a means to re-structure the possible career paths of local artists inside the TFAM.

Beyond the mere bureaucratic signifiers, it was the very architecture of the TFAM that visibly structured and hierarchized the career possibilities of an aspiring artist: the basement would be start of the career with an experimental show for a young artist. The *Taipei Prize* allowed the artist to move upwards to the first and second floor. The most prestigious venue, the ground floor, would be the staging arena for a participation at the *Taipei Biennial*, which would signal his or her success as a nationally recognized contemporary artist.

From the early 1990s onwards, starting with the first international show *Message from Taipei* at the Hara Museum in Japan in 1989, but truly institutionalized only in 1995 with the participation at the Venice Biennale, the TFAM offered one further step in this well-structured career ladder: from the participation at the grand national show, the Taipei Biennial, one could attempt to launch an international career through a participation at the Venice Biennale. It has to be pointed out how selective this process was, and how the possibilities of entry were more and more restricted while moving up the ladder: the first two steps, to apply for a participation of the *Trends*, the *Taipei Prize*, or an experimental show in the basement were ideally open to all R.O.C. passport holders. A participation at the Taipei Biennial and the Taiwan Pavilion was by invitation of a jury or a curator only, and usually the museum administration would pre-select the potential candidates. International shows organized by the museum were even more selective, as the choice was made by the museum administration alone.

The final step for a widely successful artist of art historical significance would arrive only after his death: to be represented within the permanent collection on the third floor.

Almost needless to say, here the choice lay with the museum administration alone.

As much as Anderson's "new functionary", the new Taiwanese artist of the 1990s

"sees before him a summit rather than a centre. He travels up its corniches in a

series of looping arcs which, he hopes, will become smaller and tighter as he nears the top.”<sup>78</sup>

Translated into the terms of the several floors of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, this journey from the basement upwards could be repeated several times: exhibitions in the basements were often a premium for artists that had already succeeded in more prestigious competitions such as the *Trends* show, and many artists staged more than one experimental show there, and participated more than once in the *Trends* or the *Taipei Biennial*, some were even sent more than once to Venice.

And as much as for Anderson’s state functionaries, every single one of these steps was highly selective: to enter the “experimental“ shows, the artist had to be selected or invited by the museum staff; to win the *Taipei Prize*, one had to impress a jury of local academics; to enter the *Taipei Biennial*, the artist had to be selected by a jury or a curator; and to enter the ever smaller circle of potentially international artists, one had to be selected again – quite often by the same jury members that had presided over the previous career steps. To look at it with an ironic eye, if the international art scene was ever supposed to be an alternative to the limitations of the local one, then one had to go through the approval of the national administrators to gain access to the international arena. This ambiguity cuts both ways: the most prestigious exhibition the TFAM had to offer (at least until now) for a living local artist was not the national level, such as a major solo show or a major retrospective; the highest level of achievement the TFAM had to offer from 1989 and more formally from 1995 onwards, was the participation in an international show. This internationalisation came almost always at the price of the nationalisation of the art work: from 1989 onwards, with the exception of very few examples in 2005 and 2007, these international shows always presented art as “speaking for the nation“.

Against Anderson and Gellner, it has to be argued that the model based on a mere career

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<sup>78</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London 1983, London 1983, reprint 2006, p. 55.

prospect within the bureaucratic system (of museums, galleries and academies) is ultimately an overly static one. It does allow for an institutional analysis- the growing development and evolution of the exhibitionary system into an ever more articulate system- yet it does not give a sufficient driving force for its ideological development.

This driving force rather has to be found in the inherent contradictions of modernity- in the tension between the aesthetic standards and the artistic freedom of the artists, and, following Foucault and Homi Bhabha, in the tension between the subject and the object within the space of representation, or rather between the pedagogical and the performative address of the nation. It is therefore this ongoing tension that provides the driving force that structure the chapters of this thesis.

### **Theory of nationalism: the ethnographic turn**

What turns the question of the pedagogic and the performative subject in the narrative of Taiwan into a particularly poignant one, is the contrast between its presumed roots in a distant Chinese past – and the realization that for many of the inhabitants and citizens, their nation had only started to discover itself once it was free to do so- with the abolition of Martial Law. This problematic relation with the past caused a frenzy of the discovery of the present that can only be described as an “ethnographic turn”; to use the words of Homi Bhabha:

“Deprived of the unmediated visibility of historicism — 'looking to the legitimacy of past generations as supplying cultural autonomy' — the nation turns from being the symbol of modernity into becoming the symptom of an ethnography of the 'contemporary' within culture. Such a shift in perspective emerges from an acknowledgement of the nation's interrupted address, articulated in the tension signifying the people as an *a priori* historical presence, a pedagogical object; and the people constructed in the performance of narrative, its enunciatory 'present'.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Bhabha, Homi: “DisSemiNation”, in: *The Location of Culture*, New York 1994, p. 211.

In the case of Taiwanese contemporary art, this ethnological turn is most evident in the early and mid-1990s. In the 1980s, before the lifting of martial law, the construction of modernity, or rather, a Chinese modernity, is the chief goal of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum and the Trends exhibition. In the mid 1990s, the goal of the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice is quite different: after the rupture with the certainty of a Chinese past, a frenetic ethnographic analysis of the contemporary has set in, and the construction of a national microcosm as a national pavilion in Venice is but a part of this local search for identity. Yet it is this very ethnographic approach that opens up a curious gazing distance between the artist and his/her own culture. This tension becomes evident if we look at the wording used by director Lin Mun-lee in her preface to the 1997 Taiwan Pavilion:

“How does Taiwan’s contemporary art assess the rapidly changing, diversely complex Taiwanese society? And how does it respond to the rich variety of the contemporary world art?”<sup>80</sup>

Special attention has to be paid to the use of the verbs ‘assess’ and ‘respond’: artists ‘responds’ to, and therefore interacts with, the global art world; yet they ‘assess’ local society. In other words, artists are supposed to put themselves in the position of a distant, almost scientific observer, rather than to simply interact and respond to their own folk and kin. It is from this distant but authoritative perspective that ‘social and cultural aspects of today’s Taiwan’ come under

“investigation and appraisal ... in the effort to present the uniqueness of things Taiwan.”<sup>81</sup>

This search for uniqueness, as has to be argued, is but a characteristic of the project of nationalism, as described by Gellner and Homi Bhabha:

“The scraps, patches, and rags of only daily life must be repeatedly turned into the

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<sup>80</sup> Lin Mun-lee, “Director’s Preface”, in: *Taiwan Taiwan, Facing Faces*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 1997, p. 2.

<sup>81</sup> Lin Mun-lee, “Director’s Preface”, in: *Taiwan Taiwan, Facing Faces*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 1997, p. 2.

signs of a national culture”<sup>82</sup>

### **Aim of this thesis and chapter outline**

This thesis proposes a new reading of both the *Trends of Contemporary Art in the R.O.C.*, and the reform which led to the inauguration of the *Taipei Biennial* in 1992 and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice from 1995 until 2009; the thesis also offers a new evaluation of the art historical impact that the Taipei Fine Arts Museum had on the local art scene.

I will highlight how the new museum changed the power relations within the art scene, how it introduced new artistic trends, but also how it in itself was turned into a platform for experimentation and challenge to officialdom. I will also underline how these challenges have slowly transformed the museum space, its administration procedures, and its ways of perceiving art and curatorship. I will also highlight that this process was by no means a one-directional trajectory of enlightenment, liberation or historical necessity, but continues to be highly contested. Another aim is to emphasize how these power struggles between the independent art scene and the official art administration often overlap and intersect with the international diplomatic marginalisation of Taiwan as a nation, offering therefore a new reading of curator Wang Chia-chi’s verdict:

“we are subordinate and mute, unable to represent ourselves”.<sup>83</sup>

### **Chapter outline: an indigenous dialectic of modernity-**

This thesis therefore proposes a reading of the transformations of the premier national museum of modern and contemporary art in Taiwan which echoes and plays out the tensions inherent in modernity, thus trying to abstract from the question of personal confrontations. The author will highlight the agency of selected single players, both

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<sup>82</sup> Homi Bhabha: “DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation”, in : Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration*, Routledge, Abingdon, New York, 1990, p. 297.

<sup>83</sup> Wang Chia-chi, “The Spectre of Freedom, Il Fantasma della Libertà”, in: *The Spectre of Freedom*, exhibition catalogue, Taipei Fine Arts Museum of Taiwan, Taipei, Venice, 2005, p. 14.

artists as administrators, but will analyse their actions within a wider horizon of conflicting claims to modernity.

Chapter 1 will describe the general background of the Taiwanese art scene in the 1980s and 1990s, and will highlight how the creation of museums and art academia has helped to create a wider art scene through the creation of career paths in the arts.

Chapter 2 describes the first years of the museum, and the anointment of avantgarde modernity in the arts, a phenomenon that amounted to nothing less but a 180 degree change in government attitude, at least if compared to the 1960s. Yet once modernity is anointed, a gap appears between the claims to represent avant-garde modernity and the creative leeway allowed to local artists, and a series of incidents soon highlight the limitations of this Chinese Modernity. Chapter 3 describes how from 1986 onwards, as soon as it became clear that Martial Law was about to collapse, but even more so in 1987 and 1988, artists started to challenge these standards of judgement directly. Chapter 4 describes the turning point when the flagship exhibition of the 1980s, the Trends of Modern Art in the Republic of China, were abandoned by the local arts scene, and abolished in 1992, in favour of the newly inaugurated Taipei Biennial. This interrupted not only an exhibition series, it also abolished a series of beliefs and standards of aesthetic judgement: it was acknowledged that the modernist idea of judging single works of art merely on aesthetic and art historical grounds had failed, and needed to be substituted by a system exhibitionary that was rather centred around an author – the artist.

Chapter 5 describes the revolution that followed: how art objects are transformed into elements of a wider cultural discourse, and how in turn exhibitions become the means for a new cultural endeavour, the ethnography of the nation. The most representative exhibition series for this new universe of knowledge is the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice, which since 1995 represents Taiwan as a nation on the international stage. It was in Venice that a pattern was established that continued over the years with only minor

variations, creating the image of a nation conscious of past trauma, projected spiritually into a technological future, but always centred around ideas of ecological consciousness, roots of the nation in nature and the urban experience of Taipei. Over the years, this pattern was developed in different ways: as an essentialized nation, whose vitality feeds the creativity of its artists; as a discursive space, a space for the exchange of ideas shared by all artists; or as a ritual space, a space created by the physical bodies of the artists. Chapter 6 describes how this pattern continued as a spatial pattern, but was ideologically superseded by cosmopolitan ideas of internationalisation, ideas which also shifted the focus of nationalism from the link with a specific territory to a bond of blood and ethnicity, wherever their residence.

Chapter seven describes how the transformation of the art work into an element of a larger cultural discourse was pushed even further when the very notion of the nation started to be de-constructed and de-centred. Apparently a reaction to the loss of diplomatic recognition even on a cultural platform such as the Venice Biennale, these curatorial projects reflected also a deeper transformation of the Taiwanese art scene: the slow rise of local curators, who continued to find themselves in a situation of subalternity in relation to the museum, or more specifically to the internal administrators of the museum; yet it has to be argued that this very experience of de-centring also created an image of a nation much more critical of itself than the previous rather primordial ideas, a shift that also allowed for a completely new form of dialogue with critical art in the West, most specifically in the last editions of the Taipei Biennial of 2008 and to some extent the 2009 Taiwan Pavilion in Venice, which not only reiterated the question of the lack of diplomatic recognition, but also self-consciously highlighted the imperialist tendencies inherent in any nation state, including the hosting nation Taiwan.

## **Chapter 2:**

### **Career paths and the creation of an art world,**

#### **a short history of Taiwan and its institutions related to visual art**

This chapter gives a short outline of Taiwanese history, as well as an overview of the major museums and institutions that constituted the Taiwanese art scene in the mid 1980s. It will shortly introduce the role of the museum director, the jury members, the in-house curators as well as the role and the conflict with independent curators.

#### **The creation of an art world: historical background**

“Taiwan” currently is the most widely used name for an island (and several minor islands) off the coast of mainland China, with Japan and Korea to the north, and the Philippines to the South. In the past, it has been known by a series of different names: ‘Formosa’, the name given by Portuguese explorers in the early modern age of exploration; ‘Taiwan province’ by the late Qing and the imperial Japanese administration; since the retreat of the Nationalist army in 1949 it has become almost identical with the term ‘Republic of China’; the most recent official name of the state occupying it is ‘Republic of China on Taiwan’. For the sake of simplicity, this thesis will use the term “Taiwan”, as the most neutral term that avoids the political implications of the much longer terms “Republic of China” or “Republic of China on



Taiwan”.

The island as such had been inhabited for millennia by aboriginals. Yet the vast majority of the island’s current inhabitants have settled there only in the modern age, and much of its development is closely linked to the European age of exploration, the period of the expansion of the Qing empire, the age of Japanese imperialism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the effects of the civil war in China after WWII, thus presenting a history both characterized by exploits of modernization, often to be followed by dramatic political and administrative ruptures.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Dutch VOC, the first stock issuing multinational company, used Fort Provintia (now a heritage site in ruins) in the south of Taiwan as a strategic trading place between Japan, China, Indonesia and Europe. The post in Taiwan was rather prestigious , often awarded to experienced administrators who had previously governed the outpost at Dejima in Japan.

After the fall of the Ming dynasty on the Chinese mainland, one retreating general, Koxinga or Zheng Cheng-gong decided to expel the Dutch and use the island as a retreat base for activities against the Manchu. He established the first Chinese kingdom on Taiwan in 1662, to be defeated by the Manchu in 1683. For almost two centuries Taiwan became a part of Fujian province, with a restricted settlement policy. The immigrants brought with them also craftsmen and painters, building the first Buddhist temples, often decorated with wall paintings and wood or stone carvings. Beyond these craftsmen, the island was mostly shunned by Chinese literati; beyond a few flower paintings, the only landscape paintings - the hallmark of Chinese literati tradition - from this period are sketches of hunting aboriginals that were included in travel writings.

With the Sino- French war of 1884, the Qing dynasty re-discovered the importance of the island, and in 1885 upgraded its administrative status to an independent province,

followed by a series of modernization reforms, including the first railroad, post system, roads, a city wall and moat around Taipei and even gas lamps. Ten years later the first Sino-Japanese war highlighted the inefficiencies in the modernization effort of the Chinese army and navy compared to the Japanese New Army, and Taiwan province was ceded to Meiji Japan in 1895.

The Meiji administration implemented a thorough modernization program: railroads connected the North and the South of the island, a dike at Sun Moon Lake was built to generate electricity, banks, and even airports were built. For the first time in history the island was administered as a single unit: the areas inhabited by aboriginals were brought under Japanese control, and all inhabitants of the island, whatever their linguistic background, were taught to use one national language, Japanese. Under these auspices the first universities were founded, such as the still-existing Taiwan Normal University and the Taipei Normal University, as well as the first museum for ethnography and natural science, the Taiwan Museum, which opened in 1908. The Japanese army was also accompanied by painters such as Kinichiro Ishikawa, who later settled in Taiwan and taught water-colour painting to local students. The early production of images was guided by the colonial drive to incorporate Taiwan into the Japanese empire. One example were the early missions into the aboriginal mountain areas of Kinichiro Ishikawa, where he painted under the protection of army units.<sup>1</sup> Some of these images were even presented to the Japanese emperor, others, including a battle scene that showed the subjugation of aboriginal tribes, were exhibited at the newly founded Taiwan Museum, alongside its ethnographic display. Ishikawa also taught local students, thus introducing water-colour painting to the island. The most important cultural innovation was the introduction of Western-style oil painting, used to portray local scenes and scenery, alongside the so-called Nihonga, or Japanese Eastern-style

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<sup>1</sup> Liao Hsin-tien: "The Beauty of the Untamed: Exploration and Travel in Colonial Taiwanese Landscape Painting," in: Kikuchi, Yuko (ed.): *Refracted Modernity, Visual Culture and Identity in Colonial Taiwan*, Honolulu 2007, p. 39 - 66.

painting. To promote these different styles, a yearly competition exhibition was held since the late 1920s, the so-called Taiwan provincial exhibition, or Taiwan government art exhibition, and local art groups were formed with the aim of promoting Western-style oil painting.

After the end of WWII, and with the handover of the island, the infrastructure built up by the Japanese was handed over to the Republic of China; university posts formerly held by Japanese teachers were filled with new arrivals from mainland China. With the defeat of the Nationalist Chinese army during the civil war, a great number of intellectuals and artists fled to Taiwan. These immigrants introduced “Guohua” or “National painting”, an evolution of traditional Chinese literati painting, substituting Japanese-style Nihonga painting, and competing for importance with Western-style oil painting.<sup>2</sup>

### **The seeds of an art world: the first international modern art movement**

Some of these refugees were conservative in style, others, such as Lee Chung-sheng, introduced ideas related to modern art to their students. In the mid 1950s, these students, such as Hsiao Chin, Hsia Yan, Wu Hao, Li Yuan-chia, Chen Tao-ming, Hsiao Ming-hsien, Ouyang Wen-yuan, Ho Kan and others, in turn founded the first movements for modern art in Taiwan, which concentrated around the two groups called Ton-Fan (with most members being students that had migrated from the Chinese mainland to Taiwan in 1949) and May (with mostly Taiwanese-born members). The trademark of these groups was a fusion of abstract and Chinese traditional painting, yet they also incorporated experiments with expressionism and re-elaborations of local folk motifs. The movement gained considerable critical acclaim, including the wider literary circles,

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<sup>2</sup> Yen, Chuan-ying: “Tradition Transformed: Ink Painting in Taiwan, 1950-2000”, in: Kanazawa University Department Bulletin paper, 2009-03, accessed online at: <http://dspace.lib.kanazawa-u.ac.jp/dspace/bitstream/2297/17016/1/AN10407034-30-yen.pdf>

but also encountered significant censorship, as abstract painting was accused of representing communist tendencies. As a result, in the 1960s many of the members such as Hsiao Chin, Hsia Yang, Han Hsiang-ning and others chose exile and a more promising career abroad, while the two groups and the movement continued to attract new members. This first wave of modern art also has to be considered the first Chinese international art movement, a movement that connected Taiwan to the international art scene: during the Japanese period, the highest aspiration of a Taiwanese artists had been to study or exhibit in Japan; many of the Guohua ink painters who had arrived in 1949 dreamed of returning to the Chinese mainland, but were mostly limited in their movement to travels between Taiwan and Hong Kong. The members of the modern and abstract art movement aspired to take part in a much larger world - to travel and work in the West. In 1956 Hsiao Chin<sup>3</sup> travelled to Spain, and continued to work there, but also travelled to France and later worked as a teacher in Italy, but always maintained close contact with the Taiwanese art scene. In 1961 Han Hsiang-ning<sup>4</sup> was invited to the Sao Paolo Biennial, but in 1967 he chose to make a career in New York, turning into a chief exponent of photo-realism; so did Hsia Yang. Others, such as Richard Lin, made a career in London within the minimalist movement, transforming white on white compositions into his personal trademark sign.

### **The political rupture: the loss of the UN seat in 1971**

The year 1971 represented a major political and cultural rupture: the Republic of China lost both its seat at the Security Council as well as in the General Assembly of the United Nations, thus losing the right to represent China, the chief ideological justification for one-party rule and martial law.

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<sup>3</sup> A biography of Hsiao Chin can be found on his personal web-page: <http://www.hsiaochin.it>

<sup>4</sup> Information on the career of Han Hsiang-ning can be found on his personal web-page: <http://www.hnhan.com/>

As a result, both politics and culture changed profoundly: the nationalist party decided to enlarge and fortify their local power-base, allowing also local Taiwanese into their highest ranks, most visibly represented by Lee Teng-hui, who joined the KMT in 1971, became cabinet minister responsible for agriculture, mayor of Taipei in 1978, governor of Taiwan province in 1981, vice-president in 1984, and in 1988 succeeded Chiang Kai-shek's son Chiang Ching-kuo as the first Taiwanese-born president.

Possibly even more profound were the transformations in the wider arts scene, specifically in the field of literature. Many local poets started to write about Taiwan rather than about the mainland; this so-called "Hsiangtu" movement was closely linked to the "Tangwai" or "outside the party" movement, an ever more powerful union among independent politicians which in 1986 culminated in the foundation of the first democratic opposition party, the Democratic Progress Party or DPP.

The realism and concentration on local subjects advocated by literature circles was echoed in the field of visual art, even though the art circles were arguably less directly involved in politics, and were also heavily influenced by the trend towards photo-realism that had emerged in the U.S.. Two of the most outstanding artists of the late 1970s could hardly be called realistic at all: sculptor Chu Ming became famous for wooden sculptures of Tai-chi positions cut in a rough and highly expressive manner with the use of a motor saw; the painter Hung Tung used Taoist script and naïve painting techniques reminiscent of folk and religious traditions.

As the Taiwanese economic miracle slowly took shape, the 1970s also saw the nascence of two completely new cultural phenomena: the establishment of the first commercial galleries, notably Long-Men Gallery, and the first specialized art magazines, Hsiungshih Art Monthly and Artists Magazine. Hsiungshih 雄獅美術 or Lions Art Magazine also established a prestigious art prize for young artists, the Hsiungshih Art Prize 雄獅美術

新人獎, which became one of the main promoters of realism in art and painting- and which remained one of the most prestigious prizes well into the 1980s- for example, the self-taught painter and performance artist Lin Ju won it in 1980, and the self-taught painter Li Mingze won that prize in the sixth edition of 1981; this prize often went to artists both young and indeed promising; as an example, in 1997 Li Mingze would be invited again to represent Taiwan in Venice.

### **Cultural politics: a multifold multiplication in exhibition space for modern art**

When the Taipei Fine Arts Museum opened its gates in December 1983, its sheer size transformed the local art world: especially in the 1960s, modern art had been vilified as “communist”, and had survived at the outer margins of officialdom. Exhibition spaces to show young art had been extremely scarce.

More than that, not only the idea of a museum entirely dedicated to showing new art was revolutionary, but the idea of a museum in itself was fairly recent.

### **Cultural politics: museums in Taiwan before 1983**

The first museum in Taiwan had been established in the period of Japanese rule and modernization, in 1908. The Taiwan Museum was dedicated to natural science and ethnography of the Taiwanese aboriginals; it was dedicated to the scientific exploration of the newly acquired island province. Its architectural style echoed Greek temples- it was quite recognizably an icon of the Japanese imperial modernization of Taiwan. The Taiwan Museum also exhibited some paintings, such as water colours that showed the mountains inhabited by aboriginals, and in some cases also the bloody battles that were necessary for the Japanese imperial army to conquer them.

After the end of WWII and the handover of the island to the Republican Chinese

government, it took almost a decade before a new museum was built. The National History Museum was founded in 1955 in an architectural style that evoked traditional Chineseness, more precisely the palaces and temples of northern China, followed one year later by the National Science Education Centre, opened alongside the former in 1956. Only as it became clear that re-conquering the mainland was not imminent, the treasures of the imperial collection that had been moved to Taiwan were made accessible to the public at the Palace Museum in Taipei, which opened in 1965. The Sun Yat-sen Memorial, a Chinese-style building also known as 國父紀念館 (Guofu Jinianguan), dedicated to the memory of the “father of the nation”, opened in 1976 and was an important multi-purpose exhibition hall for more traditional forms of art.

### **Cultural politics: *Wenhua jianshe* Cultural Construction**

The construction of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum was part of a greater plan of “Cultural Construction” *Wenhua jianshe* 文化建設. This campaign was a follow-up, or an extension of the 1966 “Cultural Renaissance” *Wenhua Fuxing Yundong* 文化復興運動 campaign. Chiang Kai-shek’s campaign of the 1960s and 70s was largely centred on the inculcation of a national “Three Principles” theory, which during this occasion became finally formulated as official state ideology, a revival of Confucianism and “Chinese traditions”, and was promulgated mainly through schools, the state and the party apparatus as well as the army. This Cultural Renaissance had also been the ideological tenet for the previously erected museums: first, to root the nation in the proverbial ‘five thousand years of Chinese tradition’ through the public showing of the bronzes excavated in Henan in the 1920s and 30s, the symbols of power of the kings of Shang and Zhou, at the National History Museum; secondly, to project the nation into a scientific and technological future at the National Science Education Center. Later on this was followed by a display of the imperial collection at the newly erected Palace Museum, which the KMT claimed to have saved from the perils of the Cultural

Revolution; thirdly, to firmly collocate the nation in the national ideology of the Three Principles of Sun Yat-sen.

Chiang Ching-kuo's Cultural construction campaign made a noticeable turn to the revival of art and culture produced and consumed by the citizens of the R.O.C., focusing chiefly on fine art, rather than archaeology: music, visual arts, theatre, cinema etc.. This program was ostensibly less politicized than the former, as its purpose was to demonstrate social and cultural progress in Taiwan in the years of economic boom.<sup>5</sup>

While the "Cultural Renaissance" campaign had been a reaction to the Cultural Revolution on the mainland, the "Cultural Construction" campaign was a reaction to a much more serious threat. After the Republic of China had been expelled both from the Security Council as well as the General Assembly of the United Nations, the government was confronted with a growing diplomatic isolation, which continues until today. This was not only a major loss of face, it also undermined the ideology of the governing nationalist KMT party, who had built their claim to legitimate power on the assumption that they represented all of China, or at least the so-called "Free China". This assumption had not only granted a seat at the Security Council for Chiang Kai-shek, it was also the basis for a linguistic and ideological re-education of the local population, which had never had spoken Mandarin Chinese before the handover after the end of WWII in 1945. This ideology also directed all economic resources towards a preparation for a counter-attack to retake the mainland. It had also precluded the local population from access to important government positions, strongly favouring the immigrants that had arrived together with Chiang Kai-shek in 1949. As the ideological tenets of legitimacy crumbled, the government decided to turn the attention towards the island, and to solidify their power there. One of the strategies was to admit Taiwanese elites into government positions, most prominently the American-educated Lee Teng-

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<sup>5</sup> Allen Chun: "From nationalism to nationalizing: cultural imagination and state formation in postwar Taiwan", in: *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, No. 31 (Jan., 1994), pp. 57-67. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2949900>, accessed 16.07.2009.



hui. In 1974 premier Chiang Ching-kuo also proclaimed a plan of “Ten constructions”, which in 1977 was enlarged to a second plan of “Twelve Constructions *Shier xiang jianshe* 十二項建設”. One of the twelve items was the construction of twenty-one culture centres in all major Taiwanese cities.<sup>6</sup> The Taipei Fine Arts Museum was undoubtedly the most important of these. The project had already begun in 1976/1977 under city mayor Lin Yang-gang 林洋港.<sup>7</sup> The plan and the construction was continued under Taipei city mayors Lee Teng-hui, Shan En-hsin and Yang Chin-tsong.

### **The museum since 1983: an art world is born**

Before 1983, the choices for a young artist to show modern art had been extremely limited: art associations such as Tun-Fang or May of the 1960s had to rent a room in a hotel or at the Chungshan Hall. On some rare occasions the National History Museum also mounted exhibitions with living artists, but this was rather an exception than a rule, and certainly did not offer too much space for experimentation. Among the other options for a young Taiwanese artist was the exhibition space of the American Cultural Center (USIS), across the street from the National History Museum. The exhibitions of Ju Ming (Zhu Ming) at the National History Museum and Hung Tung (Hong Tong) at the American Cultural Center/USIS in 1976 would be a famous example; but also a performance artist of the 80s such as Lee Mingsheng mounted one of his first shows there. Yet even this outpost of democratic freedom had its limits: in 1984 a solo exhibition of local artist Chen Jie-ren at the American Cultural Center was closed on the very day of the opening.

<sup>6</sup> Hsiungshih editors: “美術館 專輯 (Special museum edition)”, in: *Hsiungshih Art Monthly* 1982-3, pp. 36, 38, 46, 51.

Hsiungshih editors: “一九八三年 美術 總評 (The year 1983 in art)”, in: *Hsiungshih Art Monthly* 1984-1, p. 40.

Harris B.H. Seng: “Cultural Centers in Taiwan, R.O.C., Organization, Functions, and Problems”, in: *Journal of Library and Information Science*, 17:1, Taipei, April 1991, pp. 1-10; available online at: <http://140.122.104.2/ojs/index.php/jlis/article/viewFile/247/247>

<sup>7</sup> Hsiungshih editors: “美術館 專輯 (Special museum edition)”, in: *Hsiungshih Art Monthly* 1982-3, p. 36.

The first commercial gallery in Taiwan, Lung-Men Gallery 龍門畫廊, opened in 1977, and in the early 1980s there existed less than a handful of private galleries.

The 1970s were a period of cultural fermentation: two specialized art magazines were founded by private publishing houses, the so-called *Hsiungshi Art Magazine* in 1971, and in 1975 the still-existing *Artists Magazine*. The former also inaugurated the *Hsiungshih Art Prize*, which within years became the most important and influential art prize for young aspiring Taiwanese artists; this prize was also closely aligned with the trend for realist painting dedicated to local, Taiwanese themes and subjects.

### **Cultural politics since 1983: changing the rules of the game**

By December 1983 the first ripples of the economic miracle were clearly felt within the local art world, but as far as exhibition surface was concerned, there were at best a few hundred square meters of exhibition area available for modern art in the whole island of Taiwan. With the opening of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum this space expanded tenfold.

Not only the available surface area changed by the factor ten, but also all other spatial dimensions changed, such as the available ceiling height, and the size of the rooms available. The opening of the museum thus completely changed the rules of the game: before December 1983, it would have been utterly pointless for an artist to create huge canvasses several meters high and long, as would become the rule for any major work of the painters of the Taipei Group, or to fantasize about large-scale installations, as was the trademark of the neo-minimalist group. Before 1983, the ceiling height and wall space inside a private gallery would not have accommodated anything of that size. With the opening of the new museum it became almost mandatory to think and paint in huge sizes, at least if an artist wanted to win a prize or leave an impression. This held true not only for artists: large-scale installations became not only a possibility to think about, but almost an imperative for museum curators who wanted to fill the void of their exhibition halls.

### **Cultural politics since 1983: the creation of an art world**

The establishment of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum has to be analysed not only as a multiplication of physical space, but also as a new factor that changed and re-organized the art world. Prior to its opening, there had been only very limited exhibition space, and career possibilities for artists and critics were extremely limited. With the opening of the new museum, it offered not only space and walls, but possibilities for careers—both for research personnel and curators working within the museum, but also for independent artists and critics, even if these latter careers were mainly symbolic, and often offered rather little financial reward. The establishment of a new exhibitionary system within the museum completely re-organized the art world, and re-centred this world around itself: experienced researchers were offered careers within the museum; already established critics and curators were invited to serve as jurors, thus becoming arbiters of future development; young artists were offered the possibilities to either mount experimental shows, or to participate at national art competitions, with the prospect of winning prizes and fame.

Within a short period of time, the new museum became the centre of an art-world, a world that rotated around its activities, each participant aspiring to fulfill different roles, with different hopes and aspirations. Within only a few years, a rather elaborate system consisting of young artists, seniors artists, art critics, jurors and curators was established, with a dynamic of its own, but all centred around the new museum for modern art.

### **The art world since 1983: the political status of the museum directors**

The position of the museum director was chiefly political, despite the rather low administrative status of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum within the city administration of Taipei.

Both political parties, the Nationalist as well as the Democratic Progress Party, initially

encountered some difficulties in the identification of a suitable candidate. Both parties first appointed a “temporary” candidate, or rather the very person that had been tasked with finding a fitting candidate: Su Rui-ping, formerly employed at the Palace Museum, was appointed in 1982 to lead the organization committee for the new museum, and from 1983 until mid 1986 acted as its director. The painter Chang Chen-yu, who had strong links with the democratic party, had been tasked with the identification of a candidate that would be more sympathetic with the cause of Taiwanese identity after Chen Shui-bian had become mayor of Taipei; in 1995 he became director himself. Both were soon embroiled in scandals and had to be substituted: Su Rui-ping, the first “temporary” director of the KMT, had to be substituted by Huang Kuang-nan in 1986, and Chang Chen-yu, the person tasked in to find a suitable candidate by the DPP, had to renounce his post in 1996, to be substituted with the head of the art education department of Taipei Teachers College, Lin Mun-lee. Both political parties maintained a tradition of substituting previous directors, irrespective of the results of their work: when the KMT lost the seat of Taipei city to the DPP in 1994, Huang Kuang-nan’s tenure ended in 1995, and when the city returned to the KMT in 1999, Lin Mun-lee returned to her original position in 2000. Yet unlike the two “temporary” directors, both long-term directors continued their careers in other institutions: Huang Kuang-nan was called to direct the National Museum of History, and Lin Mun-lee to direct the National Palace Museum. She was substituted by the vice-director of Taipei City’s culture department Huang Tsai-lang, who directed the museum until 2007. He was followed by Hsie Hsiao-wen, who for two years held the post of vice-director of Taipei City Culture Department and temporary museum director, thus putting her in a position not only to direct the TFAM, but also to control the city’s other museums and art institutions, such as MoCA Taipei. In 2009 Hsieh became museum director, but already in 2010 made a further career step to become director of the Culture Department of Taipei City, and the post of museum director was awarded to Wu Kuan-ting.

### **The art world since 1983: annual art competitions and the role of the jury**

By the late 1970s, the annual competition-style art shows organized both by national and private entities inherited from the Japanese colonial period had become a firmly established phenomenon. These annual or bi-annual shows open to local artists continued the tradition of the Taiwan Provincial Art Exhibition, which had been modelled on the Imperial Art Exhibition in Japan, which in turn was inspired by the French salon. These “open contests” invited local artists – artists residing in Taipei, or artists with a R.O.C. Passport- to hand in art works (or images of art works), which were then selected by a jury. Those juries rejected some, elected some as “entries” to participate at the exhibition, and awarded others a first, second or special prizes. This system was based on a – presumably - open and fair selection process by a scientific jury who presided over the selection; for this purpose the members of this jury had to have an academic background in art history. These jury members had to ensure an open, fair, and scientific process of selection, independent of personal taste or personal relations- while at the same time becoming arbiters over the course of art history.

This system, which to some degree exists even to this day, went through several transformations. During the 1980s, juries usually consisted of local art historians, chiefly professors of art history at the National Taiwan Normal University, and often also local artists with international experience, or even a foreign art critic of museum professional. The latter were invited directly by the museum, both with the intent to add more credibility to the selection process, and to introduce these critics to the local art scene. There is very little documentation how the presentation of the selected art works was decided during the 1980s. Presumably it was simply in-house administrators who negotiated the placement and presentation of the works.

By the early 1990s, this system came under increasing scrutiny and in 1992 was partly abolished. From then on juries consisted of members from different local academies,

most importantly both from the more conservative NTNU, as well as the more left-wing Taipei Teachers College, as well as an increasing number of independent art professionals. By the turn of the millennium, one can observe a tendency to invite local, but independent art professionals to decide over the projects of their peers. After the turn of the millennium, some juries were almost exclusively composed of former local biennial-curators (even though these often also held teaching positions in the local art academies). To some extent this showed a growing tendency to detach the future development from questions of art history. This also generated new sets of power relations, as it was more and more the museum itself deciding over who should become arbiter of future projects, thus eliminating the independent role of academia, and instead creating new circles of power relations that had as its centre the museum itself.

### **The art world since 1983: the art departments, their professors and students**

The local art departments and art academies always played a multiple role: to educate and train professional artists- while at the same time presiding over the scientific and art historic standards in the selection of the next generation of artists in the nations most prestigious art events. In the course of the 1980s and 1990s, with the growing number of art academies and art departments, academia played even one more crucial role: to secure a stable financial income to many experimental artists, who may not have survived in the commercial world.

It was through this double role of educators of future generations, as well as arbiters over art history that local academia played an important role. Interestingly enough, this double role often turned out to be separate roles, as some departments at times were more influential as gate-keepers to the official exhibitions, while other academies trained more successful artists; yet this double role of academia always formed a

background for battles over power and influence.

By the early 1980s, there already existed several influential art departments and art academies: the National Taiwan Normal University and the Taipei Teachers College, both founded during the Japanese period; there was also the Taiwan National Taiwan University of Arts, established in 1955 in Banqiao, and a private school for design known as Fu-hsin Trade and Arts School, founded in 1957, and Chinese Culture University, a private university founded in 1962. The late 1980s also saw the emergence of the National Institute of Arts, founded in 1982, and renamed in 2001 as the Taipei National University of the Arts.

The art departments of the first two competing institutions had produced several of the influential artists of the 1950s and 1960s. Specifically National Taiwan Normal University, or short “Shida”, was the base for some of the most influential critics and promoters of the “second wave” of Chinese Modernism of the 1980s: Lü Qingfu, Wang Xiu-xiong and Wang Zhe-xiong. Lü Qingfu had been writing numerous articles on modernity in art, and between 1984 and the mid-1990s presided as a jury member over every major exhibition at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, making him, together with the two Wangs, one of the most influential critics in the Taiwanese art scene.

This predominance of the professors of the NTNU as arbiters of style and artistic development of the most prestigious official exhibitions at the TFAM was not equalled by the students of its art department, at least not any more in the 1980s. Many major artists of the 1960s such as Han Hsiangning had been educated at NTNU or like Hsiao Chin at Taipei Teachers College. In the 1980s only one NTNU student, Zhang Yongcun, won a major prize. On the contrary, it was the students of a private university, Chinese Culture University, that revolutionized the art scene of the 1980s and 1990s, becoming the chief representatives of the identity discussion in the 1990s, and

dominating the commercial art scene ever since. Chinese Culture University had been founded in 1962, and as a private institution also accepted those students that had failed to enter the more prestigious state universities. During the late years of martial law, these often were some of the most creative minds - or at least this is the explanation given by the artists involved. In the early 1980s, these students such as Yang Mao-lin, Wu Tien-chang or Lu Hsien-ming founded several small associations, which soon united under one big umbrella, the so-called Taipei Group. The background of these students was mostly realist or photo-realist oil painting, but the news of the advent of post-modern and transavantgarde painting (transmitted in some cases by articles written by Hsiao Chin reporting from Venice), provided them with a new means of expression, and a way to explore Taiwanese history, mythology and politics. For the most part of the 1980s, and even during the 1990s, usually about one-half of all major shows dedicated to contemporary painting consisted of members of this group; yet only in 1986 did the museum award a major prize to one of its exponents, and for the most part of the 1980s the museum only “accepted “their group shows, but never actively sponsored their activities. Still several solo shows held by the members of this group in the basement of the TFAM became icons in the history of Taiwanese art- specifically the solo shows of Wu Tianzhang and Yang Maolin in 1989, but also the shows of other members such as Lu Yi-zhong.

An institution re-gaining influence in the 1990s was National Taipei Teachers College, one of the oldest academic institutions in Taiwan, founded in 1896 as Taipei Normal School, in 1945 renamed as Taiwan Provincial Normal School, and in 1961 to Taiwan Provincial Junior Teachers College, now known as National Taipei University of Education.<sup>8</sup> Some of the professors of its department for art education were also sympathetic supporters with the Democratic Party; in the early 1990s they started to

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<sup>8</sup> A short history of National Taipei University of Education can be found online: [http://english.ntue.edu.tw/ntue\\_eng\\_about-12.html](http://english.ntue.edu.tw/ntue_eng_about-12.html) (consulted 16.4.2012)



challenge and later replace the critics of the more conservative Taiwan Normal University as jurors at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum. The Art Education Department of National Taipei Teachers College was the academic home for critic Huang Hai-ming, one of the most influential critics of the 1990s, and who became one of the first independent curators in Taiwan. Lin Mun-lee was director of the Art Education Department before she served as museum director of the TFAM during the tenure of the Democratic Party mayor Chen Shui-bian, later to serve also as director of the National Palace Museum during the tenure of Chen Shui-bian as president of the R.O.C. on Taiwan.

### **The art administration since 1983: the role of artists returning from abroad**

Another “institution” of the art scene was an education or a career in the West, so much so that this group of homecoming students had been criticised as “internationalists” by local critic and painter Ni Tsai-chin in his article “Western Art, Made in Taiwan”. Indeed much of the development since the 1980s until this very day was due to the effort and influence of artists returning from a longer sojourn, study or work in Europe or America.

One of the most important examples of returning artists was Hsiao Chin, who in the late 1970s served as a consultant during the planning period of the new museum, and later became juror of several important exhibitions, thus helping to establish new standards. Due to his connections in Italy he even played a role in the establishment of the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice in the 1990s, and was also directly involved in the diplomatic scandal around the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice in 2000.

Another prominent example was Richard Lin Shou-yu, whose credentials as juror on the

board of the first exhibitions of the new museum was “internationally famous artist”. He not only served as juror in 1984, helping to establish new standards, but in 1985 also participated in a competition, winning a first prize.

The same was true for many of the artists winning major prizes in the mid 1980s: Tsong Pu had been educated in Taiwan at the Fu-hsin Trade and Art School, but had sojourned in Spain since 1972 before returning to Taiwan in 1981 and winning a first prize at the first major exhibition of the TFAM in 1984.<sup>9</sup> Lai Chun-chun, winner of a first prize for sculpture in 1987, also had studied both in Japan and in the US.

Artists and critics returning from longer periods of study or work abroad continued to play a significant role in the development of the Taiwanese art scene ever since: in the late 1980s Wu Mali returned from a period of study in Germany, and became one of the most important translators and editors of art-related books in Taiwan, introducing numerous trends to the local public.

In the early 1990s Wang Jun-jie and Yuan Goang-ming returned from periods of study in Germany, introducing new media art to the Taiwanese art scene. Both of them represented Taiwan at the Venice Biennale, and both pursued a career both as artists as well as professors at the National Academy of the Arts, introducing media art into the canon of subjects at the local art academies.

While the 1980s had been largely dominated by the professors of National Taiwan Normal University, the returning emigrants, and the students of Chinese Culture University, in the 1990s another institution gained growing importance: the National Academy for the Arts in Kuandu had been founded in 1982, and by the early 1990s its first students such as Yuan Goang-ming and Hou Jun-ming made their debut on the local art scene. Hou not only became one of the co-founders of the independent art

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<sup>9</sup> Some basic information on Tsong Pu can be found on his website: <http://tsongpu.com/cv/>, consulted 16.4.2012.

gallery Apartment 2, but in 1995 also represented Taiwan, together with Wu Mali and others, at the Venice Biennale.

In 1992, National Taipei Academy of the Arts was also the first academy to set up a specialized department for new media; since 2009 its influential director is Wang Jun-jieh.<sup>10</sup>

### **The art world since 1992: the emergence of independent curators**

During the 1980s, the social position of a curator, even more so of an independent curator, by now one of the most prestigious positions in the art world, was an unknown idea. Even in the West this was a rather recent concept, where the very idea of the curated modern art exhibition is usually dated to the year 1969 (Harald Szeeman's *When Attitude becomes Form*), and the phenomenon of the star curator emerges only in 1993 with Achille Bonito Olivas 1993 "Aperto" show in Venice.

The earliest instances of "curated" shows in Taiwan were organized by artists such as Lin Shou-yu, who called upon a group of young artists to stage *Play-of -Space* and *Transcendimensional Space* in 1984 and 1985.<sup>11</sup> Another example would be the shows of the 101 association and the Taipei Group.

Only in the mid-1990s did several critics start to experiment with this role, most prominently Huang Hai-ming (since 1992),<sup>12</sup> Shi Jui-jen, Hu Yong-fen<sup>13</sup> and Victoria Lu. (Often this role continued to be played by artists such as Lian De-cheng, who was instrumental in the staging of the Apartment 2 show at the TFAM in March 1991.) This

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<sup>10</sup> See the official page of the art and technology department of National Taipei Art Academy: [http://techart.tnua.edu.tw/1\\_intro/organization.html](http://techart.tnua.edu.tw/1_intro/organization.html), consulted on 16.4.2012.

<sup>11</sup> Jahng Young-Tswun, *Transcendimensional Space*, Taizhong 1993.

<sup>12</sup> Taipei Fine Arts Museum: *Dis/ Continuity, Religion, Shamanism, Nature*, TFAM, Taipei 1992.

<sup>13</sup> Hu Yong-fen (curator): *Gaudy-ism in Taiwan, Boorish and Vulgar as the Makeup of Life*, Lin& keng gallery, Crown Art Center, Taipei 1998.

new social position was explored as a new cultural possibility: to highlight and propose new art trends, to propose novel ideas. The first curatorial experiments took place both in private galleries as well as at the basement of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, a space that was set apart for “experimental” exhibitions.

According to Lin Ping, a former head of the exhibition department of the TFAM, now professor at the Fine Arts Department of Tunghai University, the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice was one of the chief sites where Taiwan experimented with, and institutionalized the figure of the independent curator.<sup>14</sup>

One of the novel procedures in the organization of collective art shows became the abolishment of the previous selection system of art works, in favour of a system that was based on the appointment of a team of curators, who in their turn invited artists- a system first experimented during the 1996 Taipei Biennial, and which became the standard procedure for the Taipei Biennial. Unfortunately the 1996 Taipei Biennial was also the last to be curated by local curators alone, thus this system was applied chiefly to international curators. A further step was the selection process of curatorial projects: not artists, but curators were invited to hand in curatorial projects, which were judged and selected by a jury. This latter system that was experimented with for the first time at the 1997 Taiwan Pavilion in Venice, and became the standard practice for the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice.

The only exception occurred in the year 2009, when the in-house curator and head of exhibitions, Chang Fang-wei, decided to eliminate the position of the independent curator, and to direct the exhibition directly as “commissioner”, ironically doing so through the approval of a jury of former biennial curators. This incident, as much as the elimination of the statement of local curator Amy Cheng from the catalogue of the 2004

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<sup>14</sup> Lin Ping 林平: “Curator’s Halo-The Long and Winding Road of Curatorial Business in Taiwan”, available online on the website of the Fine Arts Department of Tunghai University, last accessed on 7.6.2010: <http://www2.thu.edu.tw/~fineart/upfiles/tecfile01143090863.doc>

Taipei Biennial, highlighted the rather precarious status of Taiwanese curators within the Taiwanese art system: even though the invitation to curate the Taipei Biennial or the Taiwan Biennial may result in immediate stardom, this did not necessarily translate into a professional career. On the contrary, once a critic had curated these two exhibitions, there was very little that the museum had to offer, both in terms of symbolic or financial reward. As a result, “curators” (as much as many artists) usually chose different career paths after the honour of curating Taiwan in Venice: some, such as Huang Hai-ming, as well as many artists, chose to concentrate on their academic career; academia thus has become the single largest workplace for contemporary artists and critics. Others, such as Shi Jui-jen, made a step on the ladder within the museum world, and became museum directors. Others continue both their life in academia while continuing to practice art: this is the case for most so-called star-curators, but also for most experimental artists, such as Manray Hsu, Hongjohn Lin, Yuan Goang-ming, Wang Jun-jieh and many others.

The introduction of the idea of curatorship in the mid 1990s thus has profoundly changed the exhibitionary system in Taiwan, introducing the very idea of the exhibition as a cultural event, of the art work as a discursive object. Yet the inherent conflict, and the unequal power relations between the museums in-house curators and the independent curators, as well as the lack of opportunities has largely hampered the rise of truly independent curators.

### **An art world is born: the limited curatorial careers**

Yet this system also had shortcomings that characterize the Taiwanese art world: first of all, in-house- curators were all hired as public servants. This meant that the qualifications had to be equal to other public servants- and the one unifying element in

this qualification was the knowledge of Sun Yat-sen ideology, or national ideology- but not necessarily art history, or museum studies. Most in-house staff were indeed knowledgeable in art history- but this knowledge was a corollary, not crucial to their qualification as public servants.

This in turn also defined the rather complicated relation between in-house curators and external jurors, critics and later on curators: since in-house staff were not necessarily eminent art historians, all major exhibitions had to be chosen and approved by a specialized jury- by a group of academics. Yet their role often ended there: as gate-keepers to the museum; they did not mount the exhibition.

With the creation of the Taipei Biennial and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice, the museum also created the social position of the independent curator: now the entire curatorial project was to be chose by a jury- and the show itself was to be directed by the independent curator.

This created a sort of impenetrable career barrier-wall between in-house curators and independent academics: in-house staff would typically “curate”, or at least manage most minor shows of the museum, thus allowing them to establish a whole net of relations with local artists- but were barred from curating large- scale and international shows. Their role in the more prestigious international exhibitions would be merely of administrative support- which would still allow for a lot of indirect influence, by pre-screening projects and artists, and by allotting resources. It was therefore only too tempting for the head of the exhibition department to do away with the independent curator of the 2009 Taiwan Pavilion: after all, academic curatorial writing, to hallmark of professional curatorship, is a readily available resource, and if necessary can also be outsourced- in her case, to local academics and former curators; or it can be eliminated altogether, as had happened at the 2004 Taipei Biennial.

These two events in 2004 and 2009 crucially highlighted the inherent contradictions and weaknesses of the position of independent curators in Taiwan. This apparently a powerful, or at least prestigious position, since its very inception in the mid 1990s continued to be a rather ambiguous one. As can be seen from the events during the opening of the 2004 Taipei Biennial, a local independent curator had little symbolic or real power over in-house curators, who ultimately controlled all the resources of the museum. It has been argued that the 1990s had been the era of star-curators in the West, with figures such as Achille Bonito Oliva, Harald Szeemann or Francesco Bonami rising to stardom within the art world, creating trends, re-writing its history and rules. Hardly the same can be claimed to be true for the Taiwanese art world. The reasons are many, but the basic difference can be found in the structure of the Taiwanese art world: while some artists have participated at several editions of the Taipei Biennial, the case of curators was quite different. Beyond the co-curatorship of one Taipei Biennial (a rather subaltern experience, if we consider the Amy Cheng case) or the curatorship of one Taiwan Pavilion in Venice, there was rather little the museum, or specifically the Taipei Fine Arts Museum had to offer for an independent curator- while undoubtedly offering a chance to instant stardom with instant fame on a global scale, this fame was also a very short-lived one: once these two occasions had been used up, the career of most curators tended to be over. As a result, curators tended to re-direct their careers elsewhere: to develop careers in academia, such as Huang Hai-ming; to become museum director themselves, such as Shih Jui-jen; or to develop a career in mainland China, such as Victoria Lu; or to become an art consultant, staging large-scale shows both in Taiwan and China, while maintaining a power-base in the local media, such as Hu Yong-fen.

Another reason for the lack of career paths has to be found in Taiwan's political status: artists and curators from mainland China have often be involved in large- scale

exhibitions as representatives of their culture- and as representatives of a rising global power. This was never an option for Taiwanese artists or curators: neither could they claim to represent a future global power, nor a culture rooted in five millennia of history; in many occasions a Taiwanese art show staged abroad would even incite the criticism of the local Chinese embassy, who would lose no time to point out that Taiwan was a (renegade) province of China. This pronounced tendency for diplomatic and art- diplomatic pressure against Taiwan did not preclude the option of a career in mainland China- Victoria Lu is a prime example. Yet this career through China often came at the cost of renouncing to its proper name- international shows of Chinese art which include Taiwanese artists usually list their origin as “Taiwan, China” or “Taipei, China”.

### **The art world since 1987: the role of the press**

The establishment of two specialized art magazines in the early 1970s has already been mentioned before, and they continued to play their role- albeit sometimes in a rather indirect way. For the most part of the 1980s, the art press shied away from direct political involvement- an example was the scandal around the colour red in 1985, or the destruction of the art work of young artist Zhang Jian-fu by then director Su Rui-ping. These events were hardly mentioned, let alone discussed or criticized in the local art magazines. To perceive their position, one often had to read between the lines: when director Su Rui-ping was officially found not sufficiently qualified to lead the museum, and Huang Kuang-nan was called to direct the museum in 1986, the Hsiungshih art magazine dedicated a special edition to the local sculptor Li Zai-qian, whose work had fallen victim to an intervention of first re-painting and then removal from the museum grounds by Su Rui-ping. The magazine though hardly mentioned the scandal when it



was happening, neither did it dedicate much space to the fate of a young artist, Zhang Jian-fu, who had been first invited to an experimental show, only to find director Su trample on his work and kick them to rubble.

This changed dramatically with the lifting of martial law, and the lifting of limitations on the local press, most notably on the daily press: not only did the specialized magazines become more outspoken, added more pages, but so did the daily press, who had previously suffered severe limitations to the number of pages that could be printed every day. By expanding the available space, while at the same time lifting censorship and heating up competition, not only did the press become more politicized, it also became more discursive, and dedicated more space to different opinions and also more space to culture. This newly available space for opinion and discourse was most notably used by artists such as Lee Mingsheng, whose performance were regularly reported by the local press, so much so that local critic Wang Fu-dong 王福東 observed that Lee was the one single artist with the most newspaper clippings in the archive of the Hsiungshih Art Magazine 雄師美術雜誌.<sup>15</sup>

At the mid-end of the 1990s, this phenomenon, together with the formerly heated discussions about Taiwanese identity had somewhat petered out. After the turn of the millennium, with the discovery of the mainland Chinese marked as an area of expansion, the specialized press again chose to somewhat de-politicize itself, while still making a stand when necessary; this phenomenon is most pronounced in the case of English-language art press, who consciously censors any allusion to politics, and specifically to the politics of the art administration. An example for this tendency are the events around the elimination of the curatorial statement of the local curator Amy Cheng from the 2004 Taipei Biennial catalogue- while the Chinese newspaper and the

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<sup>15</sup> Wang Fu- Dong 王福東: “A homage to the new generation of Taiwanese art 台灣 新生代 美術巡禮”, Taipei, Huang Guan editors 1993, p. 168.

Chinese art magazines made it an issue, the high-brow English-language Asian art press completely avoided the topic. With the arrival of the internet, this a-political stance of parts of the art press was in part balanced by the role of blogs and bloggers- indeed most sources about the scandal of 2004 could be found online.

### **Conclusion: An art world is born**

Within a few decades since the promulgation of Chiang Ching-kuo's 1977 address to the nation, the Republic of China, or indeed Taiwan, had developed a rather complex system of art and museum administration dedicated to contemporary art.

The starting point had been a situation where the country, beyond a handful of art departments and a similar number of art galleries, had very little to offer for a young and talented artist, both in terms of institutions and exhibition spaces, as well as in terms of ideological credibility (to represent indeed China). Within less than a decade a national museum for modern art had been built, opened, and the first exhibitions had been held, thus re-gaining a certain momentum in the campaign for symbolic power and cultural influence.

This "national" museum for modern art managed to create an art world that rotated around the museum as its centre: directors, inhouse-curators, critics, jurors, the press, independent curators, artists both local and international all vied for both symbolic and financial rewards that the museum had to offer, thus creating an ever more intricate and elaborate exhibitionary system. This system extended well beyond the museum walls, and engaged also the local academia: first as jurors, but also as critics who would be invited to write and thus gain academic accolades; later on this was even extended to the possibility to act as independent curators, thus intervening directly in the museum

space- clearly only after having passed an entrance test, be it through a jury or through the direct choice of museum directors or exhibition department heads.

As far as artists were concerned, the most basic level to enter the museum were open competitions, which required artists to pass the first litmus- test of a jury, but which offered the graded rewards of entry, nominations and prizes; then an artist had the option to apply for a space for an experimental shows, sometimes sponsored by the museum, sometimes organized through their own initiative. With the introduction of the Taipei Biennial and the inauguration of the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice this system became even more elaborate, introducing the social and cultural position of the independent curator, while offering to artists the possibility to be chosen to participate at an international event .

### **Chapter three: anointing a limited modernity,**

#### ***the Trends of Modern Art in the R.O.C. from 1984 until 1986***

This chapter presents the ideological background that informed the first years of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, and the ideological processes that enabled the accreditation of modern art within officialdom within the museum space. It will also highlight the limits of the modernity enacted by the museum. In the conclusion of this chapter I will discuss how these limits are not simply inherited from the period of martial law, but are connected to the very idea of modernity enacted by the museum.

In December 1983 the first museum dedicated to modern art in Taiwan opened its gates. This event was immediately perceived as an epochal transformation of the local art scene.<sup>1</sup> It was the first museum in Taiwan ever to be dedicated to modern art, and the first time that the government officially endorsed modern art. The choice of the site, the Yuan-shan Park 2 was highly symbolic- until the severing of diplomatic ties, that area had been home to the former US Taiwan Defence Command.<sup>2</sup> Since the period of Japanese colonization, this area had been the Western entry gate to the city: across the bridge used to the site of the Shintoist “Taiwan Shrine”; after the handover that hill had been re-developed with the Grand Hotel, often used for diplomatic purposes.

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<sup>1</sup> Hsieh Li-fa 謝里法: “從紗籠，畫會，畫廊，美術館——試評五十年來台灣西洋繪畫發展的四個過程 (From art salons to artists associations, to the gallery, up to the museum - An attempt to review the four phases of development of Western painting in Taiwan)”, in: *Hsiungshih Art Monthly* 1982-10, pp. 36- 49.

<sup>2</sup> According to Kao Chien-hui, Victoria Y. Lu, Philomena Mariani: “Taiwan chronology”, in: Gao Minglu (ed.): *Inside Out, New Chinese Art*, New York 1998, p. 202. the site was the former location of the countries diplomatic hotel. This is probably a typo or an error. According to the blog of a former US soldier in Taiwan, the site of the Yuan-Shan park, and least parts of the museum were erected on the location of the former United States Taiwan Defense Command, which had been vacated after the US had severed diplomatic ties with the R.O.C. See: [http://ustdc.blogspot.it/2010\\_09\\_01\\_archive.html](http://ustdc.blogspot.it/2010_09_01_archive.html) last accessed on 20.4.2012.

### **Chinese Modernity: architecture and the Japanese influence**

According to the terms of the design competition, the new building on Chungshan North Road was supposed to “represent China’s Modern Architecture”.<sup>3</sup> Not just modern architecture, or just contemporary museum architecture: an affirmation of Chineseness was an essential prerequisite.<sup>4</sup> The government clearly wanted to make an ideological statement with the construction of the new museum, and wanted to reaffirm the idea of representing the better, or “free” part of China.

The winner of the design competition was Gao Er-pan 高而潘, a local architect. His project abandoned in a radical way the lineage of official memorials and meeting halls of Republican China since the very 1920s and 1930s, usually characterized by a blend of traditional Chinese elements



The Taipei Fine Arts Museum during the 2004 Taipei Biennial, photo: Kuo I-chen 2004.

with the modern means of steel and concrete, such as the Sun-Yat-sen Mausoleum in Nanjing (1929), the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall in Guangzhou (1931), the Chung-Shan Building on Yang Mingshan (1966) (also featured on the 100 NT\$ bill), the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall in Taipei (1972), the Yuan Shan Grand Hotel in Taipei, finished in 1973 just across the future site of the TFAM the Chiang Kais-shek Memorial in Taipei (1980), or the National Theater and Concert Hall in Taipei (1987). Instead, and clearly breaking with the lineage of blending Chinese style with modern means, Gao inspired himself by Japanese Metabolism, which he explained as a model for Chinese Modernism.<sup>5</sup> The

<sup>3</sup> Hsiungshih editors: “美術館 專輯 (Special museum edition)”, in: *Hsiungshih Art Monthly* 1982-3, p. 52.

<sup>4</sup> This was the standard procedure for public buildings, and both the procedure as well as the terms of the procedure appear to be rather similar to those adopted for the construction of previous representation memorials, such as the Sun Yat-sen Mausoleum in Nanjing, and the Sun Yat-sen memorials in Guangzhou and Taipei.

<sup>5</sup> Gao Er-pan 高而潘 (interview transcribed by the editors of *Hsiungshih Art Monthly*): “創造一個中國現代空間——談 台北市立美術館建築 (The creation of a Chinese modern space - An analysis of the

most striking features were derived from the 1970's Japanese architectural movement Metabolism: the maze of big gallery-tubes, set on top of each other and protruding into space, created an apparently mobile and modular building that seemingly extended itself into space.<sup>6</sup>

As far as the positioning of the building in relation to the urban environment was concerned, Gao was rather creative in twisting and adapting traditional notions of *fengshui*. He chose not to open the building to the South- as would have been appropriate for a traditional temple- as this would have opened the view towards a line of grey skyscrapers. He neither chose to align it with the noisy street, as would have been customary with a retail store, a shopping mall, or an office building. Instead, Gao aligned the main entrance hall to the North and parallel to the street, similar in the way that the Japanese founder of the metabolist movement Kisho Kurokawa had done with the National Ethnology Museum in Osaka in 1977. Gao therefore invited the visitor to walk up to the front plaza, and to turn right by ninety degrees before entering the museum halls. The orientation of the main hall therefore integrated the view of the green Yang Ming mountains as part of the visual setting of the museum, detaching the visitor's experience from the bustling street.

Equally similar to Kisho Kurokawa's National Ethnology Museum was the use of traditional courtyard architecture: while from the outside it appeared like a pile of enormous concrete tubes protruding into space, from the inside it revealed a complex play of vertically interlaced courtyards, some of which –as the courtyard in the basement – were also partially protected from sun and rain by gallery tubes on the upper floors.

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architecture of the Taipei City Fine Arts Museum)", in: *Hsiungshih Art Monthly* 1982-3, p. 51.

<sup>6</sup> In the case of Kisho Kurokawa's *Nagakin Capsule Tower*, the protruding single modules ideally could be moved or replaced over time, as they consisted of pre-produced steel elements and were fixed to the core by bolts. In the case of the TFAM, all protruding tubes were built with concrete, and not intended to be moved during the lifespan of the building.

### **Chinese modernism: art criticism and the Japanese influence**

Already in the very early eighties, during the years when the TFAM was still under construction, a new discussion of modernism and Chinese art had flared up in the local art magazines. Some critics started to reflect and promote that issue anew in lengthy, in-depth articles. What made them acquire historical significance, was that art criticism preceded, and was leading, an artistic development that was still to follow. An example was Taiwan Normal University professor Lü Qing-fu's article "The attraction between avantgarde and the East: a resume of contemporary art criticism",<sup>7</sup> published in two instalments in August and October 1982. This article was written as the conclusion of a long series of articles on contemporary art criticism, and gave a long list of examples of Asian art and philosophy influencing Western modern art. Lü was undoubtedly inspired by D.T. Suzuki's recently translated book *Zen and Art*<sup>8</sup> and his thesis of Zen philosophy and Chinese ink painting inspiring modern art in the West. Lü's article was certainly fairly conservative and nationalist in approach. Yet his writings opened new avenues for future artistic developments, as Lü managed to extract modern art from the dead corner of communism, where it had been since the 1960's, and anchored it in the safety of Chinese nationalism. To the apprehensive reader, and to young and aspiring artists,<sup>9</sup> Lü offered a long list of options of how to create an art that was both Chinese and modern, as he offered a list of possibilities for an art that was based on Western models that were themselves inspired by Eastern, and therefore Chinese, thought.

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<sup>7</sup> Lü Qing-fu 呂清夫: "前衛與東方的邂逅 - 當代藝評的歸結 (一) (The attraction between the avant-garde and the East - Conclusions on contemporary art criticism, first part)", in: *Hsiungshih Art Monthly* 1982-8, pp. 141.

Lü Qing-fu 呂清夫: "前衛與東方的邂逅 - 當代藝評的歸結 (二) (The attraction between the avant-garde and the East - Conclusions on contemporary art criticism, second part)", in: *Hsiungshih Art Monthly* 1982-10, pp. 121.

<sup>8</sup> Suzuki D.T. 鈴木大拙: 禪與藝術 (*Chan yu Yishu*). *Zen and Art*, translated into Chinese by Liu Dabe 劉大悲, Tianhua publishers 天華出版公司, Taipei 1979.

<sup>9</sup> To pick a random example, there is a certain likelihood that Tsong Pu read Lü's article, as his solo show was publicised in the same issue of *Hsiungshih Art Monthly*. Tsong Pu 莊普: "創作手記 (Notes on my creativity)", in: *Hsiungshih Art Monthly* 1982-8, p. 152. That said, many art professionals in Taiwan will have seen Lüs article, since Hsiungshih Art still occupied a rather strong position in the publishing market, where it had been challenged only recently (since 1975) by Artist Magazine.

### **Chinese modernism: the return of the first generation of modernist artists**

In the late seventies and early eighties, as a result both of government relaxation towards art censorship and the growing prosperity of commercial art galleries, more and more exiled artists returned to the island. The most prominent example was Hsiao Chin. He had left Taiwan in 1956, only months after having co-founded the Tun Fan 東方 painting group. In 1978 he was invited to serve as a government counsellor in the planning phase of the cultural edification campaign, and in the planning of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum. Later he was invited to serve as jury member in many editions of the *Trends of Modern Art in the R.O.C.*, the most prestigious exhibition series of the TFAM in the 1980s. Another artist of similar prominence was Richard Lin. He had been working with London's Marlborough Gallery, and had become famous for his white-on-white canvases. Lin did not restrict himself to become a juror in the ground-breaking *Trends* exhibition of 1984, who also competed for, and won a prize in the first edition of the 1985 *An Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Sculpture in the Republic of China*, the show that alternated every second year with the *Trends*, and in 1984 and 1985 he also organized, or rather curated, two experimental group shows in a private gallery. Even Lee Chung-sheng, an almost-forgotten mentor and founding father of the 1950s wave of modernism re-emerged and relocated to Taipei in the last years of his life. He also served as a jury member in the 1984 *Trends*. The most important figure promoting modern art was Lü Qing-fu, the writer mentioned above as advocating "Chineseness" in modern art, alongside his colleagues Wang Xiu-xiong and Wang Zhe-xiong, all of whom were professors at the Taiwan Shifan Normal University. Lü Qing-fu, together with Wang Xiu-xiong and Wang Zhe-xiong, became the pillar and "trustee" of this development, as he continued to serve as a juror at virtually all major exhibitions of the TFAM from the mid-1980s until the early 1990s.

Almost all of the eminent artists and scholars who were called to serve as jurors at the newly-founded Taipei Fine Arts Museum were linked to abstract art and modernism.



Many of them were “mainlanders”, or immigrants that had followed Chiang Kai-shek and his army to Taiwan after the defeat in the civil war in 1949. None of the jurors serving in the mid- 1980s were linked to nativist and realist painting, the dominant style of the 1970s and early 1980s, represented most visibly by the *Hsiungshih Art Prize* 雄獅美術新人獎 and, as far as commercial market share is concerned, undoubtedly the predominant style even in the 1990s and 2000s.

### **Chinese Modernism: the creation of a Chinese genealogy**

This group of jurors, artists and writers saw themselves as a continuation of the lineage of modern art passed on from mainland China, and were usually highly critical of the tradition of modern art in Taiwan and Japan- and tended to emphasize the role of the imaginary capital of the R.O.C., Beijing, as a point of reference, thus eliminating other capitals such as Tokyo, Nanjing, Chongqing and Taipei and other centers of artistic development such as Paris, Shanghai and Hangzhou from their narratives.

Lü Qing-fu claims: “In China, the Pekin Fine Art Academy set the course of sculpture and broke through traditional viewpoint in 1926. Due to the short history, its achievements can not be compared with Western sculpture. ... .Only in this spirit of revolution, can Chinese sculpture come alive again”<sup>10</sup>

Lü Qing-fu’s claim is curious for several aspects: in the 1920’s, there was no sculpture department at the Pekin Fine Art Academy<sup>11</sup>- the “breakthrough” he refers to was probably the presence of a new dean, Lin Fengmian.<sup>12</sup> Yet Lin Fengmian left Beijing already after two years (after which the Pekin Fine Arts Academy went into decline), and his impact on art history is mostly due to his time as dean of the National Academy in Hangzhou from 1928 onwards. Secondly, Lin promoted not only the abstraction of

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<sup>10</sup> Lü Qing-fu, “Farewell pedestal, back to the public square”, in: *1985 An Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Sculpture in the Republic of China*, TFAM, Taipei 1985, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> According to the official website of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, a sculpture department was created only in the early 1950s, see: <http://www.cafa.edu.cn/aboutcafa/lan/?c=1105>.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*, Berkeley 1996, p. 43.

Matisse, he also promoted not only the general avant-garde spirit of the May 4<sup>th</sup> movement, but also views closely related to socialist realism. In 1927 Lin published a manifesto which demanded not only "down with the tradition of copying", and "up with the art that represents the times!", thus subscribing to a typical stance of the avantgarde, but amongst Lin's slogans of 1927 there were also a few ideas which sound somewhat odd as a point of reference for a Taiwanese scholar (presumably a devoted anti-communist), such as "down with the antisocial art that is divorced from the masses!" and "up with the art that can be shared by all the people! Up with the people's art that stands at the crossroads!"<sup>13</sup> According to Sullivan, "Had Lin Fengmian remained in Beijing, the modernism he taught and practised with such courage and enthusiasm might well have taken root there."<sup>14</sup> It has to be argued that Lü Qingfu's statement is not so much a historical analysis, but rather a projection: if nationalism is based on a "imaginary community", in the case of the R.O.C. this projection involves even an imaginary capital (or how Anderson calls it, "Rome"), Beijing; and for a new art trend to become acceptable, it has to have its roots in a genealogy starting in that very capital. Quite different, and chiefly based on personal experience was an article by Lee Chunsheng on the *1984 Contemporary Trends of Chinese Art* catalogue (in the 1950s Lee had been one of the crucial teachers to introduce abstraction to Taiwan): his lineage of modern Chinese painting (including his very own artistic career) started in Shanghai in the 1930s, took a "turning point" with the emigration to Taiwan in 1949, and finally entered a "new phase" with the opening of the TFAM and the *1984 Contemporary Trends in Chinese Art* exhibition.<sup>15</sup>

This still put them in contrast to other local writers, such as Hsieh Li-fa, who had seen the opening of the new museum as a big step forward in the development of the

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<sup>13</sup> Lin Fengmian, in: Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*, Berkeley 1996, p. 44.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*, Berkeley 1996, pp. 43, 44.

<sup>15</sup> Lee Chung-sheng: "New trends in contemporary Chinese painting and a retrospection", in: *1984 Contemporary Trends in Chinese Art*, TFAM, Taipei 1984, pp. 4-6 (Chinese), pp. 90-92 (English).

Taiwanese art scene, proposing rather a lineage of modern art in Taiwan that started with the art salons and art associations of the Japanese period, and which would have led from the creation of private galleries to the establishment of a museum.<sup>16</sup>

This local genealogy was not very much esteemed by the authorities. The first director of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Su Rui-ping,<sup>17</sup> did not think highly of the local artistic tradition, and the artists who had studied (realistic, “Western”-style) sculpture in the Japanese period: “The development of sculpture in Taiwan has been difficult and somewhat slow. Earlier, only a few artists were doing sculpture. In 1962, the Department of Sculpture was founded in the National Taiwan Academy of Arts, but initially their pedagogical concepts and the use of materials were still under the influence of traditional Western art. Their teaching methods were to some degree conservative and the equipment for sculpture inadequate. Consequently, most of the works produced were the realistic representations of the human figure. Not until the 1970s, could a few artists get rid of the figurative elements and begin to emphasize the expression of idea and feeling”.<sup>18</sup> It is therefore the mission of the new museum to open a new and different chapter in local art history: “With over twenty year of sculptural history we feel that sculpture has not yet fully developed its potential here in Taiwan - To promote it is our urgent task”.<sup>19</sup>

### **Chinese Modernism: the historical mission – superseding nativist realism**

It is interesting to note that many of Lü Qing-fu’s early articles advocating “modern

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<sup>16</sup> Hsieh Li-fa 謝里法: “從紗籠, 畫會, 畫廊美術館——試評五十年來台灣西洋繪畫發展的四個過程 (From art salon to artists associations, to the gallery, up to the museum - An attempt to review the four phases of development of western painting in Taiwan)”, in: *Hsiungshih Art Monthly* 1982-10, pp. 36-49.

<sup>17</sup> Occasionally romanized “Martha Su Fu”, however this romanization is not widely used, therefore her name will be transliterated in *Roman Pinyin* as “Su Rui-ping”.

<sup>18</sup> Su Rui-ping: “Preface”, in: *1985 An Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Sculpture in the Republic of China*, TFAM, Taipei 1985, p. 2. She apparently refers to Yang Ying-feng and his student Ju Ming as non-figurative sculptors.

<sup>19</sup> Su Rui-ping: “Preface”, in: *1985 An Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Sculpture in the Republic of China*, TFAM, Taipei 1985, p. 2.

art”, also heavily criticise realist painting<sup>20</sup> – the very painting style linked to a new, “nativist”, and quite often critical Taiwanese consciousness. More than that, Lü often criticised “realism” also as a style “too westernised”. Lü never mentions any Taiwanese painter by name, yet if we are willing to read between the lines, hardly any criticism, albeit indirect, could be more devastating for a “nativist” painter than being “too westernised”.

Once Lü Qing-fu became juror of the newly opened museum in 1984, he was only repeating a long-standing point of view, when he wrote on the catalogue of the *1984 Contemporary Trends in Chinese Art*: “In the seventies, the local art scene was dominated by all forms of realist tendencies, ... . By now, this trend seems to have waned, and is being overtaken. Even the nativist painters that we can see in this ‘New Trends’ exhibition seem to have completely changed style”. It has to be argued that this verdict was not simply an art-historical analysis, but rather a self-fulfilling prophecy, since he was the very person who selected the participants and winners of the *Trends* exhibition.

The first director of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum herself, Su Rui-ping, made it clear that the mission of the museum was not to promote modern art as such, or to simply offer a platform for any local artist purely based on artistic merit. The mission of the museum was both political and ideological: “As a governmental institution, the Taipei Fine Arts Museum has been given the responsibility to promote Chinese paintings by providing the facilities for exhibition and awards for the most outstanding artists”.<sup>21</sup> This may still sound fairly innocent; but in the following she becomes more explicit: “In my personal opinion, Chinese arts must be founded on Chinese culture. Viewing the trends of modern art, we find that the prominent artists strive to base their painting on

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<sup>20</sup> Lü Qing-fu: “前衛與東方的邂逅 – 當代藝評的歸結（二）(The attraction between the avant-garde and the East - Conclusions on contemporary art criticism, second part)”, in: *Hsiungshih Art Monthly* 1982-10, p. 121.

<sup>21</sup> Su Rui-ping: “Preface”, in: *Contemporary Art Trends in the Republic of China 1986*, TFAM, Taipei 1986, p. 3.

traditional arts reflecting society and the essence of life”. While Lü Qing-fu clad his verdicts purely in the form of historical analysis and observation, director Su Rui-ping made it clear that her statement was not just the observation of an independent scholar who spoke from his/her studio, but it was the power of the government that was speaking, the voice of the director who could personally choose jurors and artists in the defence of the correct version of Chinese national identity: “This gives an exemplary warning to those who despise Chinese traditional art, believing that Western styles are all worthy of imitation regardless of what they are”.<sup>22</sup>

Early in 1984, Su described this mission as a fairly rationalist project, as a mission to bring order into the local chaos: “The Contemporary Art Trends in Chinese Art Exhibition, held by the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, is to reorganize the current confusions in our domestic art scene. It is our effort to present a new phase which clearly identify our New Wave artist”.<sup>23</sup> In the preface to the *1986 Contemporary Art Trends in the Republic of China* catalogue, she was already quite conscious about the impact of the new institution on the local art scene: “An effort to consolidate originally disassociated circles of China’s artists is in progress. .... In recent years, under the encouragement and efforts of this museum, many experiment creations of Chinese art have appeared in the Republic of China”.<sup>24</sup>

To put it in Foucaultian terminology: the director and the jurors of the TFAM were not simply observing art historic realities; their aim was to define new categories that would create new realities, thus eliminating previous “misconceptions”, or less worthy expressions of art; this aim was quite clearly defined: to supersede all previous styles linked to realism and nativism, and to create the conditions and categories for a new art that was firstly “Chinese” and secondly “modern”.

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<sup>22</sup> Su Rui-ping: “Preface”, in: *Contemporary Art Trends in the Republic of China 1986*, TFAM, Taipei 1986, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Su Rui-ping: “Preface”, in: *1984 Contemporary Trends in Chinese Art*, TFAM, Taipei 1984, p. 3 (Chinese), 89 (English).

<sup>24</sup> Su Rui-ping: “Preface”, in: *Contemporary Art Trends in the Republic of China 1986*, TFAM, Taipei 1986, p. 3.

### **Chinese modernism: scientific, humanistic, spiritual**

The mission of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum was not to further just a continuation of Chinese tradition, but a modernist version, distinct from that tradition:

“In art history since Cezanne, we realize there are a great variety of art expressions with this underlined theme of art being objective, scholarship-oriented, spiritual, and humane. Art in the past is illusive, fragile, and imaginative. In contrast, art in the present is conscious, cogent, and introspective. To define contemporary art, first thing to do is to refine these spiritual qualities”.<sup>25</sup>

Modern art, or art of the present, is thus defined in a very distinct way- by science and objectivity on the one hand, including human science such as psychology, but at the same time also needs to address spirituality, very much in the way that as Cai Yuan-pei would have defined the role of aesthetics within Chinese modernity.

This hybrid modernity is not without some inherent contradictions, especially if we compare to some standard ideas of Western museology. While at first glance echoing standard modernism, at a second one the list of goals and priorities revealed a significant twist to some of the basic contradictions of the secular museum space. It has to be pointed out that these contradictions were mostly de-emphasized, and shifted, or translated into positive goals which echoed KMT nationalist ideology. In tune with modernism, and the idea that museum space should be a secular space, Su Rui-ping insisted on the scientific character of contemporary art: art should be “objective” and “scholarship-oriented”. In the same list of goals, and curiously on the same level of importance, we also find the liminal or sublime aspect of contemporary art, which she called the “spiritual” dimension. What appeared as a contradiction to New Museology author Carol Duncan in her article “Museum as ritual”,<sup>26</sup> that is, the re-introduction of a semi-religious experience into an ostensibly secular space, is therefore an openly stated

<sup>25</sup> Su Rui-ping: “Preface”, in: *1984 Contemporary Trends in Chinese Art*, TFAM, Taipei 1984, p. 3 (Chinese), 89 (English).

<sup>26</sup> Carol Duncan: “The art museum as ritual”, in: D. Preziosi (ed.) *The Art of Art History*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. Duncan’s paper was first published in 1995.

goal for director Su Rui-ping. It is interesting to note the shift, or twist of meaning that is introduced by calling for a “spiritual” rather than a “liminal” or a “sublime” experience, as would be de rigour in the logic of Western modernist aesthetics. It seems as if director Su called for a re-introduction of a semi-religious experience into the secular space of the museum, while de-emphasizing the “sublime” character of contemporary art.

Another contradiction, or rather tension between the subject and the object of the scientific-secular gaze inside the public museum, which has been elaborated by museologists such as Tony Bennett as a “tension ... between the apparent universality of the subject and the object of knowledge (man)”,<sup>27</sup> elaborating on the ultimate “need for a corporeal gaze” theorised by Michel Foucault in his “Las Meninas” chapter in the *Order of Things*, in Su Rui-ping’s words was translated into “humanism”, a fairly vague term that comprised anything from an atheistic world-view centred around man to a revival of Confucianism.<sup>28</sup>

Su was not the only one to promote this combination of ideas; another instance (among many) was sculptor Yang Ying-feng’s<sup>29</sup> view, who served as jury member on all major sculpture exhibitions in the 1980s (1985, 1986/87, 1989):

“The unification of science and art brings forth new images and leads human beings toward a spiritual world of beauty and grace”.<sup>30</sup>

Yang was evidently influenced and inspired by holistic New-Age ideas of the 1970s:

“In the twentieth century, technology is advancing at a rapid pace. Especially in astronautics, the unification of specialized skills with team work has again

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<sup>27</sup> Tony Bennnett: *The Birth of the Museum*, London 1995, p. 7.

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, Wing-tsit Chan: “Chinese theory and practice, with special reference to humanism”, in: *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 9, No. 1/2, 1959, Preliminary Report on the Third East-West Philosophers’ Conference (April-July, 1959), pp. 13-15. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1397191>

<sup>29</sup> Also known as Yuyu Yang, his name will be transliterated with *Roman Pinyin* as “Yang Ying-feng”.

<sup>30</sup> Yang Ying-feng: “A perspective of the future of art through the analysis of the characteristics of regional development”, in: *1985 An Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Sculpture in the Republic of China*, TFAM, Taipei 1985, pp. 3-5 (in Chinese), p. 6 (English).

aroused the ideology of wholeness”.<sup>31</sup>

Director Su doubtlessly had a positive view of modernism in mind, when she promoted a scientific, humanistic and spiritual modernism. It has to be asked whether this was not also a quite limited vision of modernity, once the quest for the sublime has been substituted by a search for spirituality, and once Foucault’s “need for a corporeal gaze” is substituted by a revival of Confucianism.

### **Chinese Modernism: legitimately indigenous, because anti-Western**

Not only did the official version of Chinese modernity differ distinctly from its Western original, modernity as such was also seen as a potential liberatory force against “the West”. Art critic and permanent jury member Lü Qing-fu quite regularly employed this as a rhetorical device – to criticise the West to further the issue of modern art. During the first large-scale sculpture exhibition in 1985, he wrote in the preface:

“Pedestals and frames are the products of Western art of the Salon and the ‘ivory tower’. Modern art tries to release works from these restrictions...”<sup>32</sup>

While Lü Qing-fu apparently employed this anti-Western rhetoric mainly as a tool to promote the issue of modernity itself, other artist-jurors, such as sculptor Yang Ying-feng, developed the notion of an anti-Western Chinese modernity into a larger ideology.<sup>33</sup> Yang proclaimed:

“Some artists .... look to the West to find concepts worthy of respect. (Yet) The situation in the Western Europe has changed dramatically. Now Westerners are seeking the Eastern spirit of nature and studying Chinese artistic concepts of beauty”.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Yang Ying-feng: “A perspective of the future of art through the analysis of the characteristics of regional development”, in: *1985 An Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Sculpture in the Republic of China*, TFAM, Taipei 1985, pp. 3-5 (in Chinese), p. 6 (English).

<sup>32</sup> Lü Qing-fu: “Farewell pedestal, back to the public square”, in: *1985 An Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Sculpture in the Republic of China*, TFAM, Taipei 1985, p. 10.

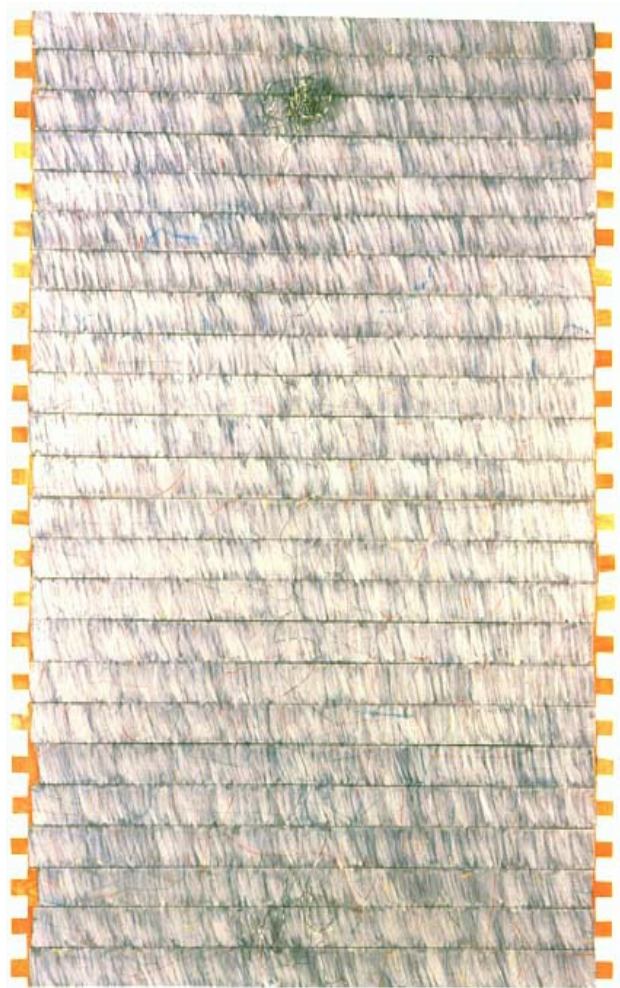
<sup>33</sup> Yang Ying-feng: “A perspective of the future of art through the analysis of the characteristics of regional development”, in: *1985 An Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Sculpture in the Republic of China*, TFAM, Taipei 1985, pp. 3-5 (in Chinese), p. 6 (English).

<sup>34</sup> Yang Ying-feng: “The seeking of one’s own path - the quest of modern sculpture”, in: *An Exhibition*



### Chinese Modernism anointed: the 1984 *Contemporary Trends in Chinese Art*

The first big *Trends* show at the TFAM was nothing less but a 180° change of attitude by the government towards modern art: in the sixties, abstract painting had been accused of having an affinity with communism, while in communist mainland China abstract art was associated with capitalism. Abstract modern art therefore received hardly any official support on either side of the Taiwan Strait, resulting in the exodus of its most important exponents to Europe or the US.



The first major show, 1984 *Contemporary Trends in Chinese Art*,<sup>35</sup> became a watershed for the development of Taiwanese art. *The*

*The trembling lines* 顫動的線 *Chandong de xian*, Tsong Pu 1984, acrylic on canvas, mixed media, 262 x 192cm. Source and copyright: Tsong Pu.

This work won the *Taipei Mayor Prize*. It has been donated to the museum collection by the artist, and has been widely published, such as in: *The Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art 1992* 台北現代美術雙年展 1992, TFAM 1992, page 94; *Taiwan Art 1945 - 1993* 台灣美術新風貌, TFAM 1993, page 231; *ARTTAIWAN*, Sydney 1995, p. 105.

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*of Contemporary Chinese Sculpture in the Republic of China*, TFAM, Taipei 1986/87, pp. 3-4 (Chinese), pp. 5-7 (English).

<sup>35</sup> The title of this show changed slightly during the years: from 1984 *Contemporary Trends in Chinese Art*, to *Contemporary Art Trends in the Republic of China* in 1986, 1988 and 1990. When the *Trends* were abolished and re-launched in 1992 as the *Taipei Biennial*, this new Biennial substituted not only the Trends, but also a second series of exhibitions called 1985 *An Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Sculpture in the Republic of China* in 1985 and *An Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Sculpture in the Republic of China* in 1986/87, 1989 and 1991. One could argue that this was an unfriendly merger, as it reaffirmed the ambition of painting to represent a “high art”. For the sake of simplicity, the author will sometimes refer to the latter show as “sculpture Trends”.

Whilst painting and sculpture merged with the arrival of installation and video art into one single category, this was not the case for another medium, print. Since the 1980's the TFAM organized also a bi-annual competition event for artistic prints, which in the 1990s was renamed also a Biennial, and was later, after the turn of the millennium, moved to the Taichung Provincial Museum, then re-named Taiwan Museum.

*Trembling Lines*, the work of Tsong Pu, a fairly young and by all means not- established artist, was awarded the Taipei Mayor's Prize, while Chen Xing-wan, another fairly young artist, won the TFAM award.

In the case of Tsong Pu's work, it was not just the metal wire in front of the canvas that were quivering. The decision of the jurors changed the ideological coordinates and the power relations of the Taiwanese art scene for the next decades to come.

Tsong Pu's work itself symbolized the dismantling of a tradition and the beginning of a new era – and it is very likely that this was the very reason it was chosen by the jury, and that was also the reason why it had been created and submitted by Tsong Pu.

Tsong Pu did not propose a work that was representative of his trademark style (canvasses divided by a grid, into which he would apply paint via a manual printing process- a very modernist strategy.)<sup>36</sup> He rather submitted a work that played with the notions of the classical modernist avant-garde, (notions we can safely presume Tsong Pu came in contact with during his decade-long stay in Spain during the 1970s,<sup>37</sup> but which also would have been readily available in Taiwan, through artists and authors such as Hsiao Chin, founder of the *Punto* Movement in Italy), specifically the idea that painting should “go beyond the frame” (an idea most notably associated with Lucio Fontana's spatialism), and that modern painting should go beyond representation, and rather analyse and de-construct the very medium of painting.

On the occasion of the first open competition at the newly opened museum Tsong Pu decided to put this classical idea of modern art into practice, in the most literal way: he dismantled a prefabricated canvas, cut the fabric into strips, and rearranged the elements using the wooden parts as the horizontal warp elements and the strips as the vertical weft of a completely new woven fabric.

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<sup>36</sup> See, for instance, Rosalind Krauss in the “Grids” chapter of *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths*, MIT Press, 1985

<sup>37</sup> In an interview in autumn 1996 Tsong Pu argued that his stay in Spain had had rather little influence on his artistic career: the art academy had been rather conservative, teaching chiefly realist painting techniques, and the art circles (that he had access to) in Spain under the Franco regime were not particularly lively.

In ways more than one, his work became the symbol of a new era. First of all, it marked a break with the dominance of realist, figurative and representational art, which had dominated the official art scene until 1983 – be it under the Japanese rule as salon-style oil painting, be it under the disguise of Lingnan school of Chinese ink painting after the arrival of Chiang Kai-shek's defeated army in 1949, or be it the photo-realistic painting trend of the late 1970s, which had been the style dominating the Hsiungshih Art Prize until the mid 1980s.

On an ideological level, it also opened up a completely new horizon of meaning in the production of Taiwanese art: once the ideology of the modernist avant-garde had become an officially accepted form of artistic expression, every artist could invoke these ideas and elaborate them further – in ways that may not have been premeditated by the art administration. Most importantly, this acceptance of modernist avant-garde notions opened a whole new playing field – even in the case of works being rejected, after 1984 any artist could invoke the ideas of modernity, and challenge the art administration within this new discursive playing field.

On a museological level, Tsong Pu's work also indicated a new visibility, a new kind of viewing art, best described with the arrival of the white cube museum: his work was not intended to be appreciated by a single collector in a semi-private setting; rather it was intended to compete for visibility in a large space, a space that also located it not only in a local art tradition, but within a wider trajectory of international modern art. This was not only a question of the size of the space, much bigger and higher than any exhibition hall in Taiwan, and not only a question of the architectural sign created by the new museum, which located the artwork within the trajectory of Japanese and international modernity. It was also a question of the jury members, who had been chosen with a special regard to their educational and professional background: many of them had been internationally acclaimed artists, such as Richard Lin (Lin Shou-yu) and Xiao Qin (蕭勤 Hsiao Chin), or had been writing extensively on modern and contemporary art, such as

Xiao Qin, Lü Qing-fu, Wang Xiu-xiong (王秀雄 Wang Hsiu-shiung) or Wang Zhe-xiong (Wang Che-hsiung). In many cases this international background was especially highlighted, even if the artists or jurors themselves were regular R.O.C. passport holders, implying an “international” jury and therefore a horizon of international art-historical relevance for their decisions.

The whole organizational set-up of the 1984 *Trends* exhibition revealed this change in times: on the one hand, there was an open contest section dedicated to young artists. On the other, there was a section dedicated to well-established artists, many of whom had refused to go through a juried process. In the words of Tsong Pu<sup>38</sup>, this face-saving victory became a good-bye party to late seventies pictorial Nativist Realism. In the following editions of *Trends of Contemporary Art in China*, only the open contest remained, while the more elderly and more established artists were eventually invited to stage retrospective exhibitions during the rest of the year. Thus the *Trends* became a platform for young artists on the rise to stardom (albeit sometimes quite short-lived), and a true driving force of contemporary avantgarde art in Taiwan, while well-established painterly excellence was relegated to other occasions during the year.

### **Avantgarde art is anointed: Chineseness in modern art, the space beyond painting**

As in Tsong’s award-winning work of 1984, a recurring theme of this second wave of this “Chinese Modernism” was to go beyond the boundaries of painting,<sup>39</sup> leading the artists also to explore the possibilities of installation art. Even more significant for the history of Chinese modern art, they tried to go one important step beyond the somewhat superficial “synthesis” advocated by the first wave of 1950s and 1960s Chinese Modernism by exploring elements of Chinese philosophy at the roots of (Western) modern art, thus declaring modern art as an essentially Chinese project.

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<sup>38</sup> In an interview with the author in autumn 1998.

<sup>39</sup> See, for instance, the discussion of Zhang Yongcun’s work by poet and critic Luo Men in his book *Lun Shijue Yishu*, which is tome 9 of *Luo Men’s complete works*, Taipei 1995, p. 151.

The prime sources of inspiration for their research were again to be found in Japan: the writings on Zen and art by D. T. Suzuki, the Gutai movement, and Metabolism as embodied by the architecture of the very location of their major shows, the Taipei Fine Arts Museum.

The very idea that Western abstract painting might have had as one of its inspirations Chinese ink painting, and that the *Yijing* (*Classic of change*) served as an inspiration to the Western avantgarde, thus became a strong stimulus to re-appropriate these forms of expression, by declaring them “essentially Chinese”, since at the root of this (modern) expression there was an element of Chinese philosophy and art. It was the idea of continuous change found in the *Yijing*, of endless possibilities of change and transformation, that served as the vehicle and idea to explore the old modernist notion of going beyond painting. In its specific form, this set of ideas was largely inspired by Japanese Metabolism, in particular the notion of organic transformation, of urban life as an organic process, of urban life as a second nature.

### **Avant- garde art is anointed:**

#### ***Play of Space and Transcendimensional Space, 1984 and 1985***

While Tsong Pu’s re-assembled canvas *Trembling lines* became an icon for the transformation of the Taiwanese art world, two experimental shows at the Chunzhi Gallery in 1984 and 1985 further explored the search for elements of Chinese



View of Chunzhi Gallery during the *Play of Space* show in 1984.

Lin Shou-yu’s work is in the front, Zhang’s installation with little wooden blocks on the wall can be seen in the back, and Hu Kunrong’s inclined painted panels are to the far right. Source: 張永村 Zhang Yongcun: *超空間* (Chaodu Kongjian, translated as *Transcendimensional Space* in the English edition), Taizhong 1993, p. 18.

philosophy at the origins of modern art. These two exhibitions, in the eyes of the TFAM's administration, became ideal models for Chinese Modernism: the first show, *Play of Space*, was mentioned not only in one of the museum's publication,<sup>40</sup> its theme and ideological as well as rhetorical thrust was also mentioned by director Su in her preface to the *1985 An Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Sculpture in the Republic of China*, where one of the artists, Richard Lin, won a Grand prize:

“We highly commend their search for the profound meaning of life and the universe as well as their elaborate techniques and deliberate designs which aim to explore more possibilities in multidimensional space through the exploration of different materials”.<sup>41</sup>

On invitation and guidance by Richard Lin, a group of young artists tried to create a purely conceptual show which explored the notions of painting and space. Under the title *異度空間 / Play of Space*, Richard Lin, Tsong Pu, Hu Kunrong, Zhang Yongcun and Pei Zaimei created a series of new and site-specific works.

The centre of the space was occupied by two works by Lin: he used a nylon thread as well as red steel trusses to trace the volume of the pre-existing space, by re-inscribing the outline of a rectangular pyramid which followed the volume of the central part of the gallery space. Tsong Pu showed a series of black panels, each leaning against the wall in a different, steeper angle. Hu Kunrong positioned painted rectangular wooden panels, exhibited upright standing on the long edge, and some leaning at different angles against the wall. Zhang Yongcun used little painted wooden blocks which he fitted into the cracks of the gallery wall panels to create an abstract “painting”, transforming the wall into an imaginary canvas. Bei Zaimei created a wall of cement stones in front of the gallery wall, which piece by piece disappeared.

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<sup>40</sup> Shuhn Ee-jung, quoted in: Jahng Young-Tswuun, *Transcendimensional Space*, Taichung 1993, p. 7; and in the Chinese version of that same catalogue on page 8. Shuhn Ee-jung's paper had been originally published in *Taipei Art Museum Quarterly* October 1984.

<sup>41</sup> Su Rui-ping: “Preface”, in: *1985 An Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Sculpture in the Republic of China*, TFAM, Taipei 1985, p. 2.

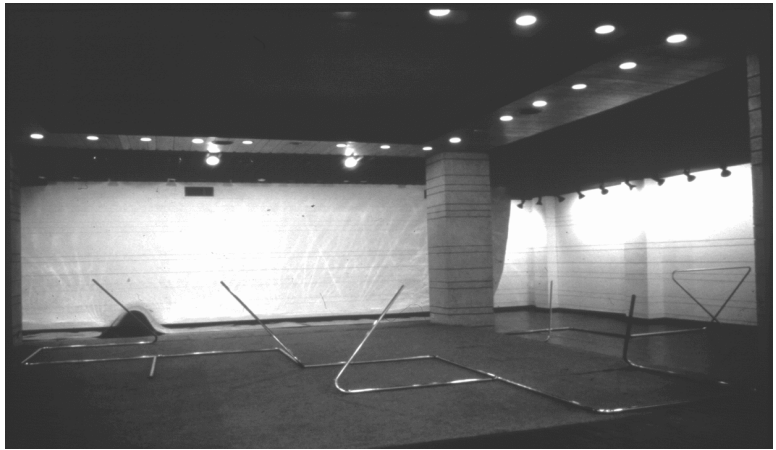
The second show, called 超  
度 空 間 or

*Transcendimensional*

*Space*, took place in 1985.

Among the exhibiting artist  
was a newcomer, Lai  
Chunchun, while Richard

Lin pulled out at the last  
minute. Albeit his absence,



*Transcendimensional Space* 1985, Tsong Pu's work 遨遊四方  
*Yaoyou sifang* (Wandering in all directions) in the front, in the  
back Zhang Yongcun's installation 不銹鋼片 *Stainless Steel*.  
Image: Tsong Pu.

many works in that show can be read as a homage to Richard Lin. Tsong Pu created a series of steel tube elements, which formed the outline of a rectangular pyramid, thus re-creating a shape similar to the one Richard Lin had created the previous year with a nylon thread. These steel sculptures were exhibited both inside the gallery as well as on the plaza in front of it. Each element was placed in a different position, thus playing with the notion of the “omnidirectional” possibilities of sculpture and space, very much as Richard Lin had done with his work *What's ahead?* at the *1985 Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Sculpture* at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum.<sup>42</sup>

Zhang Yongcun exhibited several long bands of polished steel foil. One was hanging in a U shape from the gallery ceiling, inspired by Japanese Gutai installations. A second piece of shimmering steel foil was lying on the ground, forming a wave at the centre, therefore also creating a series of light reflections on the wall, both playing with the notion of bending the surface of the (steel) canvas, implying that even the steel foil

<sup>42</sup> The *Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Sculpture* opened in March. Unfortunately no precise date can be given for the opening of the *Transcendimensional Space* show at Chunzhi Gallery. Neither Zhang Yongcun's catalogue *Transcendimensional Space* (Taichung 1993), nor Lai Chunchun's catalogue *Sculpture Natural, Time Natural, Space Natural, Humanity Natural*, (Taipei 1995), nor the TFAM's official retrospective publication *The Transitional Eighties, Taiwan's Art Breaks New Ground* (TFAM, Taipei 2004) mention a precise date. The 1985 *An Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Sculpture in the Republic of China* involved also a lengthy selection process which forced the artists to submit slides of their proposed works before December 15<sup>th</sup>, 1984 (see director Su's preface on p. 2 of the 1985 catalogue). Therefore I suppose that Lin's group of sculptures *What's ahead?* pre-dated and inspired the works by Tsong Pu at the *Transcendimensional Space* show in 1985.

could echo the rolls of paper used for traditional ink painting, as well as creating through the reflections of the light the effect of an ‘abstract painting’ on the gallery wall.

Lai Chunchun’s work, *Every possibility is contained within the possible*, was made out of eight rectangular and triangular cubicles, cut out from one big block of



styrofoam. These were then sprayed with marble dust and painted in black

*Every possibility is contained within the possible*, a 360 x 270 x 20 cm rectangle cut at 72 degree angles in eight parts. Styrofoam, black sand, marble dust, plywood, acrylic paint. Lai Chunchun 1985, installation at *Transcendimensional Space* at Spring Gallery, Taipei. Source: Lai Jun T. *Sculpture Natural*, Taipei 195, p. 75.

and colour, giving them a hand-made or “natural” twist to a series of works which otherwise followed closely the minimalism of Donald Judd.

### **Avant-garde art is anointed: Richard Lin’s Grand Prize in 1985**

In 1985 Richard Lin won a Grand Prize at the first exhibition dedicated to modern sculpture at the TFAM, the *1985 An Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Sculpture in the Republic of China* with his work *What’s Ahead?*. Lin’s work can be seen as a further step forward after his installation at the 1984 *Play of Space* show: a series of rectangular and triangular pieces of rusty steel, screwed together at right angle, forming simple, geometrical elements that can be exhibited in numerous different positions. According to Tsong Pu (in an interview in 1998), these geometrical sculptures can be likened to the half-moon-shaped elements used in traditional *Yijing* future-telling: the different positions of Lin’s work allude to the possibilities that the future has in store. Richard Lin himself preferred to remain fairly enigmatic in his text on the official catalogue, a strategy that was adopted quite often also by other artists of the group: “Cloud rises



above the south mountain. Rain falls on the north mountain”.<sup>43</sup> Juror Lü Qing-fu introduced the works plainly in terms of modernism, making it the focal point of his statement:

“The pedestal of a sculpture and the frame of a painting have the same function of separating art from reality. However, modern art is trying to eliminate this separation and make art come from and return to reality. .... Modern art tries to release works from these restrictions and return them to the public places and squares. Therefore, the dimension of the work expands greatly .... At the same time, the work becomes one with the audience. The audience can get into the space of the work and become part of it; the work can be extended into the living space of the spectator and become part of the environment”.<sup>44</sup>

Yet this modernism was – a stratagem used quite often by Lü Qing-fu – a modernism that reacted against the perceived failures of the West:

“Pedestals and frames are the products of Western art of the Salon and the ‘ivory tower’. Modern art tries to release works from these restrictions.”.<sup>45</sup>

Both Lü and juror Wang Xiu-xiong saw Lin’s work as an example of minimalist art or Arte Povera, and it is in particular the use of poor or everyday materials which is explained in “Chinese” terms using Taoist and Buddhist terminology, such as “eternal coexistence with mother earth” or “regain a child-like heart”, or “a grain of sand can represent a world”. Wang stated:

“*What ‘s ahead?* by Richard Lin is made in thick steel plates with a rusted surface to create the natural beauty which symbolizes its eternal co-existence with mother earth”.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Lin Shou-yu, in: *1985 An Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Sculpture in the Republic of China*, TFAM; Taipei 1985, p. 15.

<sup>44</sup> Lu Chin-fu (Lü Qing-fu): “Farewell pedestal, back to the public square”, *1985 An Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Sculpture in the Republic of China*, TFAM, Taipei 1985, p. 10.

<sup>45</sup> Lu Chin-fu (Lü Qing-fu): “Farewell pedestal, back to the public square”, in: *1985 An Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Sculpture in the Republic of China*, TFAM, Taipei 1985, p. 10.

<sup>46</sup> Wang Shiu-hsiung (Wang Xiu-xiong): “A Review on ‘Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Sculpture’”, in: *1985 An Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Sculpture in the Republic of China*,

Lü elaborated:

“Therefore, you might find the beauty usually neglected in the ordinary object and thus regain a child-like heart. A grain of sand can represent a world and a flower, a paradise. All kinds of things have their own worlds. As far as sculpture is concerned, it is not so sacred or untouchable as it used to be. Sometimes, you can even stroll in a work or sit on it, because it is already a part of the practical world. Ordinary objects can be viewed from the angle of art appreciation and also combined to form a sculpture. Modern sculpture attempts to break the demarcation between art and the practical world”.<sup>47</sup>

While the articles on the 1984 *Trends* focussed mainly on the historical significance of the opening of the new museum of contemporary art *per se*, the *1985 Exhibition of Chinese Contemporary Sculpture in the Republic of China* became almost like a manifesto of a new, a second wave of Chinese Modernity. Not only did Richard Lin win a Grand Prize and was featured on the cover of the catalogues, the jurors’ articles, in particular Lü Qing-fu’s, took his work as the departure point to declare their view of “Chinese Modernity”, how modernity can be explained in Chinese terminology, and how modernity can be seen as a universal phenomenon, even an anti-Western phenomenon.

After these two important prizes in 1984 and 1985, the members of the SoCA group continued to win the major prizes of the following years, thus also expanding and further elaborating the notion of Chinese modernity.

At the *Abstract Art Grand Exhibition* in 1984, Zhang Yong-cun won a prize with 源遠流長 *Yuanyuan liuchang/Unceasing*, 21 rolls of ink paper, some up to 50 meters long, impregnated with random splashes of ink, and exhibited hanging from the wall and extending for several meters on the floor.

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TFAM; Taipei 1985, p.8.

<sup>47</sup> Lu Chin-fu (Lü Qing-fu): “Farewell pedestal, back to the public square”, in: *1985 An Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Sculpture in the Republic of China*, TFAM, Taipei 1985, p. 10.

At the 1986 Trends, he won another prize with a very similar work, 源源不絕 *Yuanyuan bu jue/ Unceasing II*. Long rolls of paper, randomly splashed with ink, were hanging from the ceiling at the centre of the museum space, forming a



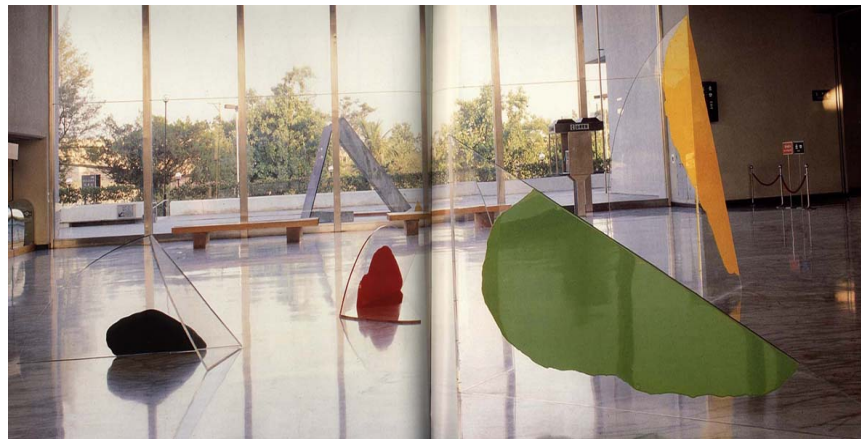
源源不絕 *Unceasing II*, 1,35 x 600 m, ink, ink paper, Zhang Yong-cun 1986, collection of TFAM. Source and copyright: 張永村 Zhang Yong-cun, *超度空間 Chaodu Kongjian*, title of the English catalogue: *Transcendimensional Space*, Taichung 1993 .p. 38, 39.

U in the centre, and were rolled up in heaps of paper at each end. As much as the works of the other members of the group, Zhang Yong-cun's random ink splashes were intended as a modern gesture with references to the grand Chinese tradition: the application of ink through random splashes hinted both at a continuation of the gestures by Tang dynasty poet-painters, as well as an adaptation of Jackson Pollock's drippings. As the title *Unceasing* points out, it is the very theatrical use of ink paper that – albeit its very bland use as a surface for random blots – that re-affirms the continuation of that “grand tradition” invoked by the title. The success of Zhang's installations can also be attributed to their *grandesse*: the deployment of a fairly cheap material – ink paper – and a fairly simple artistic process – random ink blots – allowed for grand installations that easily dominated even the most sizeable hall of the museum, and which through its sheer size easily anchored any exhibition around a core of Chinese identity, giving any show a safely nationalist outlook, however critical the other works involved might be. Yet 1986 is also the year when the pre-dominance of the minimalist group started to give ground: the second of the two first prize was awarded to a member of the Taipei Group painters, Wu Tianzhang, and his work *Destroyed World Symptom Group*, which

alluded to the trauma and unspoken chapters of history by describing Taiwan as a crime-scene. Yet Zhang Yongcun's work was featured on the front cover of the official catalogue, while Wu Tianzhang's work was relegated to the back cover. Curiously, Zhang Yongcun himself, in an interview with the author in 1997, claimed a similarity in critical spirit, albeit the differences in expressive means: according to Zhang, the streams of black ink represented (among other potential meanings) the streams of blood that the Chinese people have shed in the course of history. Zhang therefore interpreted his work as a memorial to the innocent suffering of the simple people in the course of the dynasties.

Although the heyday of critical potential of "Chinese Modernism" had probably been reached in 1984 and 1985, the members of the group continued to win important prizes in the second half of the 1980s.

In 1987, Lai Chunchun won a Grand Prize at the Sculpture Trends exhibition with *Neither Going Nor Coming*. Four standing objects made out of



*Neither Coming Nor Going*, Lai Chunchun 1987.  
Source: Lai, Jun T., *Sculpture Natural, Time Natural, Space Natural, Humanity Natural*, Taipei 1995, p. 71, 72.

transparent plexiglass, each painted with one random blot in black, green red or white were exhibited in the entrance hall of the museum.

The four units were combined out of eight segments which had been cut out of one circle with a diameter of 380cm, therefore playing with the possibilities of painting beyond the canvas, of two-dimensional objects entering the world of three dimensions, as well as the contradiction between the regular geometrical shapes and the partly

random irregularity of the colour blots that had been applied by hand .

During that same year, 1987, the TFAM also organized the *Experimental Art – Action and Space* show. Lai Chun-chun presented circles created by an outline of coloured drops of epoxy resin of about 200 cm in diameter, which she installed both on the floor as well as on the wall. These circles were also used as the stage of an art performance, during which the members of the group (Lai, Tsong Pu, Zhang Yong-cun) as well as two newcomers, Chen Hui-chiao (Chen Hui-qiao) and Liu Ching-tang (Liu Qing-tang), were wrapped up in sheets of traditional paper, and were decorated with splashes of black ink, and thus transformed themselves into cones of black and white Chinese paper, performing a series of minimal movements.

In December 1988, the TFAM organized its first five-year retrospective, called *The Time and the Unprecedented, Contemporary Art in in the R.O.C.* The participating artists were selected from the winners of first and grand prizes of the major exhibitions, plus some senior artists who held solo shows at the TFAM during the first five years since its opening. With the exception of Richard Lin, all members of the SoCA or minimalist group were invited, including Lai Chunchun, Chen Xingwan, Zhang Zhengren, Zhang Yongcun and Tsong Pu. The TFAM invited also several Transavantgarde painters of the Taipei Group, including Wu Tianzhang and even Yang Mao-lin, who until that date had not won an official prize, but was deemed important enough to participate. Beyond that, the TFAM also invited a few major exponents of seventies painterly realism, such as Luo Chin (Luo Qing) and Yuan Chin-ta (Yuan Jin-ta). Curiously, none of the original prize-winning works were exhibited. As a result, *The Time and the Unprecedented, Contemporary Art in in the R.O.C.* has to be considered not so much as a retrospective of the museum's activities, but as a name-list of the museum's most highly esteemed and favoured artists.

In 1989, the TFAM organized its first big international show: *Message from Taipei* made its début at the Hara Museum ARC in Japan, presenting almost all of the major award-

winning artists of the 1980s, including Tsong Pu and Zhang Yong-cun. The exhibition showed some of the “classic” works of the 1980s: Zhang Yong-cun showed rolls of ink paper splashed with red and black ink, some of which had been rolled up, and were displayed inside rectangular plexiglass frames. Tsong Pu showed a *Spatial Construction on the Branches of a Sakura Tree* 櫻花樹枝上的幾何, which juxtaposed the geometrical shapes of steel tubes with the natural forms of tree branches.

Neither in 1988, or in 1989, or in 1990 did any of the core members of the SoCA group participate at the *Contemporary Art Trends in the Republic of China* exhibition or the *Contemporary Sculpture Exhibition in the Republic of China*.. In 1984 the *Trends* were a highly prestigious event, by 1988, after the lifting of Martial Law, it had lost much of its lustre, and in 1992 was abolished and substituted by the Taipei Biennial.

### **Avant-garde art is anointed: Chinese neo-minimalism, 1984- 1997**

While largely neglected by now, and reflected upon almost exclusively in the two *Transcendimensional Space* catalogues by Zhang Yong-cun and in the prefaces and statements of the *Trends* catalogues, the mid 1980s were an important period of cultural fermentation and discussion, laying the basis for the years to come, not only for the group of artists involved. These discussions on the possibilities of an art that was both Chinese and modern opened new ground for modern art in Taiwan. More specifically, these experiments opened up new avenues for experimentation with installation art, of art working with materials in the tradition of Arte Povera. These discussions, and even more significantly, the prizes awarded by the juries of elder second-generation modernist artists, established the basic concepts of modern art, such as painting beyond the canvas as the a new, officially accepted ideological tenet of museum art.

As I have tried to point out, this was by no means a natural process in an ideological vacuum. It was rather a process of forceful re-nationalisation of modern art that involved all levels of the ideological state apparatus: professors of academia, museum

administrators, specialised media, especially art magazines, and last but not least the artists who framed their work in nationalist terms.

The importance of this nationalisation of modern art and its acceptance within the canon of officialdom became even more visible in the years to follow, when artists started to go beyond the first experiments of modernity and installation art, and created installations, performances and canvasses that openly challenged the powers to be. Albeit apparently criticising their earlier predecessors, those challenges could not have happened without them, as they could only happen on the ideological grounds of modernity, on the platform of Enlightenment, and could only happen because this platform had been safely established within the tenets of national ideology, once modern art had been established as a politically correct form of progressive thinking.

Some of the ideas and philosophies developed in the early 1980s continued to be applied and developed until the late 1990s, and have been deployed until now: one outstanding example is the Taiwanese interpretation of Japanese Metabolism, presented at a privately organized collateral event at the 1997



Tsong Pu and Fan-jiang Ming-dao at *Segmentation and Multiplication* in Venice. Photo: Felix Schöber 1997.

Venice Biennale, called *Segmentation and Multiplication*. In this two-man and one-woman show, the classic theme of modernity – to dismantle existing traditions and structures – and the metabolist notion – to re-assemble them in a new order – were taken up by three artists: Tsong Pu, Wu Ma-li and Fan-jiang Ming-dao.

Tsong Pu's participation in particular derived from his installation at the 1996 Taipei Biennial, *Garden in June*. It was this very installation, showed both in Taipei in 1996 and in Venice in 1997, that created a link in space and time to 1970s Metabolism, and

Tsong Pu's prize-winning work *Trembling Lines* of 1984. The notion of breaking down a pre-existing tradition into its elements and rearranging them into a new order was a strategy already applied by architect Gao Er-pan in his way of handling the courtyards and gallery tubes of the TFAM. However, this strategy had also become a trademark working method for Tsong Pu, as many of his canvases showed paint applied with a stamp inside a rectangular chess frame. In 1996, Tsong used (industrial) flower pots, which he shattered into pieces with a hammer. The shards of each pot were arranged in a circular patterns on the floor, each with a hammer in the centre, to form a new order.

### The limits of modernity:

#### “traditional materials” kicked to rubbish, 1985

After the success of the first *Trends of Modern Art in China* exhibition in 1984, the museum decided to dedicate several more experimental exhibitions to the new emerging art forms and artists, in particular to installation art. The first of these was prepared in August 1985, and was called 色彩與造型 - 前衛, 裝置, 空間特展 *Colour and Form: Avant-garde, Experiment, Space Special Exhibition*. The participating artists had all been invited directly by the museum, without going through a particular screening process or



Zhang Jian-fu and his brother protesting against the destruction and removal of his work 敬天畏神 (*Jing tian wei shen*) *Respect to the heavenly spirits* from the *Colour and Form: Avant-garde, Experiment, Space Special Exhibition* in 1985. Source and copyright: Lin Hsingyue 1997, p. 16.

competition; indeed the idea was to give a chance to the group around Richard Lin,



mainly Tsong Pu and Zhang Yong-cun. As it is was deemed improper to invite only the artists around Richard Lin, several other young artists experimenting with new art forms, such as Chen Chieh-Jen and Zhang Jian-fu, were also invited.

During the set-up of the exhibition, consisting mainly of installations created on the spot inside the museum, a nervous director Su Rui-ping appeared, and started to criticise several works, asking for amendments, such as the reduction of red-coloured wooden elements from Zhang Yong-cun's installation. One of the works in particular attracted her attention and rage: an arrangement of paper flowers, similar to those used in Buddhist temples, created by the young Zhang Jian-fu. There are several versions of what happened exactly that day, one version has been published by the painter Lin Hsing-yue, who recalled the words of director Su shouted at Zhang Jian-fu:

“Do you understand what installation art is? This place is a museum! This is not a religious temple, and we do not want any politics inside this museum, nor do we want religion, death, or occult rituals! . . . Do you understand at all what installation art is?”<sup>48</sup>

According to Lin, Su did not limit herself to shouting, but let actions follow her words, and reduced the installation with her feet to a pile of rubbish paper.

With Su Rui-ping's words and actions, Zhang and his work were removed from the exhibition. Zhang protested, contacted the media, even went to court. Director Su won the court case, as she was recognized as landlord of the TFAM, while Zhang's right to artistic freedom was considered of minor value. Zhang effectively ruined his career as an artist, and never exhibited again at the TFAM. Curiously only one of the participating artists at that show, Chen Chieh-Jen, was willing to stand as witness with Zhang in court. As a consequence, Chen also retired from the official art scene for almost a decade, and exhibited only in alternative venues.

<sup>48</sup> Su Rui-ping as reported by Lin Hsing-yue 林惺嶽, *渡越驚濤駭浪的台灣美術. To Tide Over a Chopping Environment of Art in Taiwan*, Taipei 1997, p. 15: “你懂不懂什麼叫裝置藝術？我們這裡是美術館阿！不是什麼宗教廟堂，我們美術館不要政治，不要宗教，不要關生死，道法的東西！。 。 。 。 你懂不懂什麼叫裝置藝術？”

## **The limits of modernity:**

### **the colour red**

During the same year, another, possibly more important incident happened at the TFAM, this time involving a sculpture by the local artist 李再鈞 Li Zai-qian.

During one of the first exhibitions of the TFAM in 1984, a steel sculpture called 低限的無限 (*Dixian de Wuxian*) *Minimalism without limits* had been “commissioned” by the museum, and had been collocated on the south-facing lateral terrace to the right side of the main hall.

All sides seemed to agree that the sculpture was to become a permanent feature of the TFAM, until one day a retired soldier looked at it from an angle which was usually inaccessible. Looking at it from one specific corner, he discovered a resemblance with a red star with five corners, the symbol of communism, and alerted museum staff. The museum did not react. The retired soldier wrote a letter to the



*低限的無限 (Dixian de Wuxian) Minimalism without limits*, photographed in the office of Macau airlines, after the original paint had been restored.

Source, copyright: Lin Hsing-yue 1997, page 12.

presidential palace. The presidential palace forwarded the letter to the Taipei city administration, which in turn forwarded it to director Su. Confronted with the two stamps of the presidential office as well as well as the city administration, director Su

panicked. After some apparently fruitless consultation with the artist, she decided to have Li Zaiqian's sculpture repainted in silver.<sup>49</sup> Nothing happened for about two weeks, until local journalists discovered the alteration of colour of the most prominent sculpture on the TFAM's premises. They interviewed the artist, and the news created a major discussion. The most prominent was writer 龍應台 Long Ying-tai, who emphasized the question of artistic integrity and respect for artistic creation, comparing the alteration of colour to the alteration of a work of writing. Her article was widely read, and can still be consulted in her book *野火集 (Yehuoji)*.<sup>50</sup> Confronted with the attention of the media, the artist asked to have the original red colour restored. Li Zaiqian's request was finally granted, but the sculpture was removed from the museum grounds, and was not acquired as originally planned.

While the artist's attitude appeared somewhat ambiguous during the events of 1985, he made a rather clear statement about twenty years later. In the summer of 2006, a slightly different red sculpture by Li Zaiqian was permanently installed on the main plaza in front of the TFAM, with the Chinese title *紅不讓 (Hong bu rang)*, which in English translates as "red with no compromise. The official title in English is *Homerun*, which is both a phonetic transliteration of the Chinese title and a subtle allusion to the return of the work to the museum plaza.

### **The limits of modernity:**

#### **the secular gaze and the work of art**

It has been observed by New Museology author Eileen Hooper-Greenhill in her 1992 book *Museums and the shaping of knowledge*, that the process of secularization, as far as the creation of museums and the exhibition of art objects is concerned, involved the

<sup>49</sup> Lin Hsing-yue 林惺嶽: *渡越驚濤駭浪的台灣美術. To Tide Over a Chopping Environment of Art in Taiwan*, Taipei 1997, p. 12.

<sup>50</sup> Long Yingtai 龍應台: "啊! 紅色! (Alarm! Red!)", in: *野火集 (Yehuo Ji) The Wild Fire*, Taipei 1985, 1999, pp. 129-132. Originally published on *China Times 中國時報*, 29.8.1985.

isolation of an object from its original – religious and or traditional – context and meaning, and the construction of a new set of meaning around it, by classifying it through the scientific categories of art history and aesthetics.<sup>51</sup>

Her classic example was a piece of religious sculpture or painting, or the portrait of a politician: inside the original context, such as a church or a palace, the sculpture was part of a larger context of religious or political meaning, and its presence was justified by its ritual purpose. By moving it into the museum, that ritual purpose was lost, as was its religious meaning. Once the painting had entered the museum, it became part of a different narrative, called science: it was classified according to an art historical epoch, grouped with a school, and ascribed to an author. In short, St. Mary ceased to be a religious icon, and became a Titian or a Verrocchio.

The words shouted at Zhang Jian-fu in 1984,

“This place is a museum! This is not a religious temple, and we do not want any politics inside this museum, nor do we want religion, death, or occult rituals!”<sup>52</sup>

could be interpreted as the sudden expression of anger of an irascible director towards an unwelcome object, which by coincidence happened to be created with “religious” and “traditional” material, such as paper flowers. The statement has been regarded as reflecting the spirit of the martial law era, however, after closer consideration, these words can also be read as a reaffirmation of the basic creed of secularized modernity: in order to enter the museum, the art object must be stripped of all religious, traditional, or political meanings. Only once this process of aesthetisation has been completed, can the object be exhibited as a work of pure fine art.

While it has been argued (see Lin Hsing-yue), that director Su’s error was her irascible character, I would like to argue that these words – shouted in the specific context of

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<sup>51</sup> E. Hooper-Greenhill: *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, Routledge, London 1992.

<sup>52</sup> Su Rui-ping as reported by Lin Hsingyue 林惺嶽, *渡越驚濤駭浪的台灣美術. To Tide Over a Chopping Environment of Art in Taiwan*, Taipei 1997, p. 15: “你懂不懂什麼叫裝置藝術？我們這裡是美術館阿！不是什麼宗教廟堂，我們美術館不要政治，不要宗教，不要關生死，道法的東西！。 。 。 。 你懂不懂什麼叫裝置藝術？”

1985 – as well as the destructive action, are indeed worthy of closer observation, as they can offer a very detailed image of the role played by the museum, and the notion of modernity applied by the museum towards the art exhibited inside. At first look, some of these affirmations might have come as a surprise to the artist, in particular the notion that “no religion” and “no tradition” were allowed inside the museum: after all, one of the publicly stated main goals of the museum was to advance Chineseness, and to continue the great tradition of Chinese art, albeit under the vestiges of modernity. After all, even some prize-winning works such as Richard Lin’s *What's ahead?* had invoked traditional-religious sources, such as the divinatory art of the *Yijing*. Arguably Zhang Jian-fu had only made one very small step further, by using a material of the Chinese tradition (paper folded into flowers) for his installation. He probably knew that alluding to the death of the Chiang dynasty was a taboo, but he probably thought that he was as digging deep into the roots of Chineseness by using a traditional and religious material. He must have thought that he was on the safe side of Chinese nationalist ideology, and surely was surprised by the reaction of the museum director. After all, if the museum’s aim was to further the notion of national identity, what else but national tradition and religion should have been the primary sources of inspiration?

### **The limits of modernity:**

#### **authorship and the aesthetic object**

The more complex problem of the colour of Li Zaiqian’s sculpture 低限的無限 (*Dixian de wu xian*) *Minimalism Without Limits*, has to be analysed in a similar way. The structure of red steel was appreciated as a work of art so long as it was perceived as a work of pure abstraction. At the moment the ex-soldier wrote a letter to the presidential office pointing out the sculpture’s similarities to a red star, the symbol of communism, it gained a dimension of meaning that made it impossible to appreciate it as a purely aesthetic object. Unfortunately director Su did not try to seek a dialogic solution for a

political problem, possibly by educating the public about art. Instead, she decided to alter the object that caused the offence by having it repainted in silver. What she tried to achieve was nothing less but to re-establish the purely aesthetic dimension of the work, by stripping it of any political meaning: she tried to save the purely aesthetic level of appreciation by eliminating all other interfering possibilities of interpretation, thus re-establishing the work of art as an object that could be appreciated on purely aesthetic terms.



低限的無限 (*Dixian de Wuxian*) **Minimalism without limits**, silver metallic painted version, (repainted to the orders of director Su), on show on the south facing side terrace of the TFAM. Source: Lin Hsing-yue, *To tide over a chopping environment of art in Taiwan*, Taipei 1997, p. 12.

Unwittingly, by doing so she also made a philosophical statement: beauty is not in the eye of the beholder, and is not an issue of discussion or education, but it is a quality of the object; since beauty is a quality of the art object, the role of the museum is to choose, and display, such objects: the best example for this practice was the selection process of the *Trends of Modern Art in the R.O.C.* exhibitions, where a jury presided over the selection of (anonymous) works that had been handed in by local artists, which

were then classified into ‘winners’, ‘participants’, and non-eligible works.

Yet this choice of director Su neglected one essential aspect of an artwork- the question of the author. Without the public consent of the artist to repaint the work, the work effectively lost its author, and thus any value for the viewer. It could also be argued that the steel construction at this stage had two authors, Li Zai-qian and Su Rui-ping, the first responsible for the shape, the second for the colour. A hybrid, and quite unfortunately not a collaborative effort, since the artist later on disagreed on the director’s choice of colour. In her collection *野火集 (Yehuoji) The Wild Fire*,<sup>53</sup> Taiwanese writer Long Ying-tai argued that the museum should respect a sculptor and his creation as much and in the same way as one should respect the author of a piece of writing. Long also argued that this was yet another example of political taboos obstructing cultural development. I would like to argue that it was not just a simple question of politics, but that the problem went much deeper than simply a ‘lack of respect’ for artistic creation and the work of its author: what was at stake was the very existence of the artwork itself, or more precisely, the value of a piece of modern art. The value of traditional art usually hinges on canons of beauty, which are often anchored in religion and tradition. Once tradition and religion are abolished as canonical points of reference – and director Su had made it quite clear that the museum space was a modern, secular space – then the question of art appreciation becomes a more complicated one: usually the genius of the artist becomes the dialogue partner in the appreciation of the art object, as it is his freedom that ultimately guarantees a spiritual dialogue between the viewer and the object.

It could very well be argued that the steel sculpture, after it had been painted in red, became nothing else but a ready-made, very much in the same sense as the urinal before Duchamp signed it. If the artist decided to sign it, it became high art; if the artist refused, the object on the TFAM’s premises remained a painted structure of steel

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<sup>53</sup> Long Ying-tai 龍應台: *野火集 The Wild Fire*, 圓神 Yuanshen editors, Taipei 1985.

without any artistic value, as there is no one to whom the viewer can refer as the interlocutor of spiritual dialogue.

This, in turn, points to another aspect of director Su's understanding of the work of art and of the process of aesthetisation. Her approach to repaint the object presumed that the aesthetic value is inherent to the object itself. Yet as Duchamp had proven, the process of aesthetisation is much more complex; for an object to be art, it is not sufficient to be just beautiful or pleasing to the eye; it has to have, first of all, an author. As pointed out by Duchamp and Thierry De Duve,<sup>54</sup> any object can be seen as beautiful, but no object can become art without an author; on the contrary, through the hands of an artist, any object can become art. Yet it has also to be argued that it is not simply the artist that declares an object to be art - it is rather the whole museological machinery around it, starting from the small plaques on the museum wall, bearing the name of the author and work title, which in turn relate to the bureaucracy involved in their creation, i.e. the scientific committees, juries and art historians who justify those plaques; this machinery also extends to those magazines and newspapers reporting on the inner life of artists both alive and dead.

While Long Ying-tai's call for respect for the original creation of an artist was laudable, it probably did not reflect the whole process of the creation of a work of art. The other extreme, the assumption that the institution and the institution alone created the work of art, as was apparently assumed by director Su, was equally too radical even for the Republic of China under martial law.

In the case of Zhang Jian-fu's destroyed installation, the court seemed to have indeed followed her position, granting her the right to expel, and if necessary destroy, works of art deemed unfit for the ideological needs of the museum. According to Lin Hsing-yue, the court assumed a position that equalled a work of art to a publicly commissioned construction project, a purpose-built object to suit the ideological needs of the state.

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<sup>54</sup> See Thierry De Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, MIT Press, Cambridge, London, 1996.



In the case of the re-painted sculpture of Li Zai-qian, the case is indeed more complex, since director Su interfered with an already-existing work, that had already gained the applause of the public. She apparently presumed that repainting the sculpture would reinstate its purely aesthetic status, yet what she created turned out to be an object in limbo. As long as the artist gave his quiet consent, director Su could presume to exhibit a work of art on her premises. Once the media started writing about it, the public consensus about the status of the object eroded, and even director Su had to appreciate that she was exhibiting a mass of steel, but not art.

The importance of the public consensus for the existence of a work of art, but also for the existence of a museum, was further highlighted by the abrupt end of Su Rui-ping's career as museum director. In 1986 a public exam was organized to correct her status as temporary director. Before 1983, Su Rui-ping's mission had been to find a fitting candidate to head the new museum, and only as she declared that she could not find anyone more fitting than herself, she had been called to act as provisional director. In 1986 it was proposed to her to put a remedy to this situation, by sitting an exam to demonstrate her qualification as museum director, as every public official. Only one other candidate was invited, a unknown scholar by the name Huang Kuang-nan. Su Rui-ping, after having been at the helm of the TFAM for more than two years, was deemed insufficiently prepared to lead such an important institution, while Huang Kuang-nan, a former student of one of the exam committee members, was appointed the new director.<sup>55</sup> Su Rui-ping moved her desk back to the city administration headquarters, where she was still working in the late 1990s (when the author was introduced to her).

### **The limits of modernity: the silence of the art press**

Curiously, the scandals of the colour red and the trampled works happened almost exclusively on the daily press: no article, not even a small notice appeared on the

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<sup>55</sup> Interviews of the author with Huang Kuang-nan in Taipei in 1998 and in Shanghai in 2006.

specialized press, such as the *Hsiungshih Art Monthly*. Dissent was expressed only later, and indirectly, though quite clearly to everyone involved: in September 1986, among the news of the month there was a short notice that Huang Kuang-nan had substituted Su Rui-ping as director of the TFAM.<sup>56</sup> In marked contrast in size to this laconic announcement, *Hsiungshih Art Monthly* dedicated a long cover story to sculptor Li Zai-qian.<sup>57</sup>

**Conclusion: The establishment of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum and the exploration of a limited modernity: the years from 1984 until 1986**

As has been pointed out earlier, the governing ideology in the R.O.C., Sun Yat-sen's thoughts, fundamentally lacked the idea of sponsoring the arts, and only Chiang Kai-shek had introduced the idea that a state needed not only to build infrastructure and feed its people, but also needed to sponsor culture. More than that, for the better part of the period of Martial Law modern art, including abstract art, had been denounced as being essentially "communist." The establishment of the TFAM, the first and biggest museum of modern art in the R.O.C., for the first time sponsored modern and contemporary art. Under the auspices of the sponsorship of "Chinese Modern Art in the R.O.C.," the new museum anointed a new trend, or rather several trends, chiefly neo-minimalism and installation art, but also Transavantgarde painting and performance art. At first look- and many local artists and critics initially perceived it that way- once the museum had subscribed to modern art in the widest sense, this opened up a whole new space of possibilities, such as the exploration of new media, new materials, and new ways of expression. This new mental space of possibilities was soon explored by the local art scene, and every edition of the Trends of Chinese Modern Art in the R.O.C., and every experimental show in the basement of the TFAM seemed like an artistic and ideological breakthrough. A Chinese modern art was not only anointed by museum directors, jurors,

<sup>56</sup> *Hsiungshih Art Monthly* 1986-9, p. 23, section news and events of the month.

<sup>57</sup> *Hsiungshih Art Monthly* 1986-9, pp. 92-111.

and critics and the visit of the major of Taipei, the artists also sought to go beyond the mere blending of East and West, and claimed that the very roots of modern art had to be sought in Eastern thought and philosophy, thus creating an ideological basis for a claim to a national, Chinese, modernity in art.

With Hobsbawm, it has to be argued that the new museum not simply anointed art, or condoned art, but that the museum created the very image of the nation:

“The basic characteristic of the modern nation and everything connected with it is its modernity”<sup>58</sup>

A characteristic of this endeavour, quite unlike the first wave of modernism of the 1960s, was that the “atmosphere of theory” that characterized these works was not always easily visible on the surface- both in the sense that works started to use everyday materials, as well as in the sense that their national roots were not necessarily discernible for the uneducated eye. It was this second element, beyond the creation of Andersonian career paths described in the previous chapter, that anointed a specifically modern and contemporary kind of art, and with it an art scene, that can be best be described in the terms of Danto and Dickie:

“To see something as art requires something the eye cannot descry – an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an art world.”<sup>59</sup>

Yet it soon became clear that this new mental space still was a rather limited and tightly controlled space, that the modernity, or rather the Chinese modernity invoked by the new director was a highly limited one.

Crucially it were several rather violent actions of the new director Su that made it clear that the “modernist” suppression of tradition and superstition in the name of science, was not necessarily a liberation from the proverbial bonds of tradition and religion, and

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<sup>58</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, Cambridge University Press, New York 1990, p.14

<sup>59</sup> Arthur Danto, “The Artworld,” (1964), reprinted in Philip Alperson ed.: *The Philosophy of the Visual Arts*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 426-33.

See also: Garry L. Hagberg: “The Institutional Theory of Art: Theory and Antitheory”, in Paul Smith, Carolyn Wilde eds.: *A companion to art theory*, Oxford 2002, p. 492

rather constitutes the construction of a new, ideologically highly charged space, which imposed very strictly defined rules, determined by politics and party ideology.

Taking as two extreme examples Richard Lin's prize-winning work *What's ahead?*, and Zhang Jian-fu's destroyed installation as the other extreme, it does appear that the range of artistic and ideological possibilities inside the TFAM, albeit its avant-gardist rhetoric, was a tremendously limited one; any artist or art work wanting to enter the museum, had to walk a thin line, as he was supposed to inspire himself by the grand Chinese tradition, but his work should not be overtly religious or traditional, and in no case should it allude to death (of the dynasty), politics or communism. It was safe, and possibly a ticket to a first prize, to use "modern" materials such as steel, iron or (plexi-) glass, and accompany it with an enigmatic proverb or quote that referenced classic Chinese thought, but it was unacceptable to use a material that referenced local folklorist traditions, such as a paper-made lotus flower from a local temple, as this would be deemed to be too overtly religious, and might even be an allusion to death.

The two extreme cases mentioned before, Richard Lin's prize-winning sculpture and Zhang Jian-fu's destroyed installation, also allow for a consideration of the relationship between tradition and modernity. It had been proclaimed by director Su Rui-ping that modern sculpture was

“Not just inheriting conventional materials and techniques, modern sculpture also explores new concepts and exploits new media. It has broadened its territory and acquired new artistic possibilities. ... . Now modern sculptors are allowed to combine real objects into an art work and manifest their abstract ideas, personal feelings, experiences, ideals, or conceptions....”<sup>60</sup>

On the surface, this seemed to announce a great liberation of the arts, yet in the case of Zhang Jian-fu's destroyed work, it was hardly anything else but the substitution of one set of strict rules -representational art – with a new set of equally strict rules: Su Rui-

<sup>60</sup> Su Rui-ping: “Preface”, in: *1985 An Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Sculpture in the Republic of China*, TFAM, Taipei 1985, p. 2.

ping pointed out a “correct direction”, in which the museum would lead the art world.<sup>61</sup> Artist were encouraged (or to use Su Rui-ping’s words, “are allowed”) to use “modern” materials such as steel and glass; yet, as director Su affirmed with her own feet, this “liberation” did not include a wider range of options, starting with so-called “traditional” materials, or anything that related to death or religion. This substitution of one set of materials, or choices, with another, equally exclusive set of choices opens up the question about the relationship between the so-called Chinese modernity with the so-called Chinese tradition: apparently there was a clear cut between the two, the two sets of possibilities seemed almost to completely exclude each other. A material, a technique, an element deemed “traditional” could not continue inside modernity, it had to be abolished completely; if “tradition” was to re-appear inside modernity, it had to be transfigured, transformed, to the point of losing any direct contact or resemblance with former. I have argued before that director Su, by violently destroying and expelling these works, ultimately enacted nothing else but an act of secularization of the the museum space- to strip the object of anything related to superstition, anything that was not of purely aesthetic value.

Yet it has to be argued with Eric Hobsbawm, that this was not only a question of secularizing the gallery space- it was also a way to nationalize that very museum space:

“nationalism in itself is either hostile to the real ways of the past, or arises on its ruins.”<sup>62</sup> .

Yet- as will be shown in the next chapter- this violence inherent in this process of secularization and nationalisation made this notion of modern avant-garde liberation appear rather limited and one-dimensional, and soon the very idea of the museum as a secular space, informed by a notions of natural science, and by an idea of aesthetics that

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<sup>61</sup> Su Rui-ping: “序. Preface”, in: *1985 An Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Sculpture in the Republic of China*, TFAM, Taipei 1985, p. 1. Curiously, this half sentence which mentions a “correct direction” has not been translated in the English version of the preface.

<sup>62</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, Cambridge University Press, New York 1990, p.176.

had been developed from rational philosophy, appeared overly limiting.

Yet it were both the official prizes that anointed the idea of modern and avantgarde art, as well as those incidents that paved the way for the following years, when artists started to actively engage those limits, and to question the universality of the liberation promised by that very platform of avantgarde modernity.

**Chapter four: Chinese modernity contested,  
from the *Trends of Modern Art in the R.O.C.* to the *Taipei Biennial*,  
1986 – 1992**

This chapter describes the period from 1986 until 1992, the period from the abolishment of martial law until the first democratic elections. This political transformation induced also a major transformation of the museum world: in 1986, thanks to an international jury, the TFAM wrote local art history by awarding a first prize to a highly political and rather post-modern painting in the style of the Italian Transavantgarde, only to retreat to overly safe and conservative standards in the years to follow. The day after that first prize had been awarded to Wu, a local performance artist, Lee Ming-sheng, was arrested at home, much to his complete surprise. In the following years he staged several series of performances, some on the streets, some at the museum. In an era when protesters on the street challenged the police every day, those performances challenged the very standards of museum representation- from the sterile bureaucratic approach to art, to the fiction of presenting merely a-political aesthetic objects. While Lee challenged the museum standards head on, many other artists chose to abandon the official competition-style exhibitions organized by the museum, and rather presented their most significant works in newly founded independent galleries or even in the basement of the very same TFAM, a “minor” space designated to be set apart for “experimental” exhibitions.

In 1992 the loss of credibility of the aesthetic standards of the “Trends” exhibitions resulted in the abolition of the former and the inauguration of the Taipei Biennial. The

immediate goal of the new Biennial, one of the first in Asia, was to recognize and exhibit artists, not simply single works of art. This apparently simple gesture implied a radical epistemological change of the status of the work of art: implicitly this abolished the former standards of mere aesthetic appreciation single objects, rather favouring objects that were part of cultural discourse. This new approach to the work of art even called for a new intellectual figure: the art curator, the mind behind the critical narrative of an art show.

### **Chinese modernity contested:**

#### **the end of Martial Law in 1986, the rise of Transavantgarde painting**

The year 1986 marked a decisive turning point in Taiwanese politics: in March, president Chiang Ching-kuo created a committee that studied the end of martial law, parliamentary reform, and the possibility of allowing the freedom to find opposition parties.<sup>1</sup> This same year also started off a hot period characterized by numerous political demonstrations, which often clashed violently with police, even though hardly anyone was killed in these clashes. Many of these clashes and demonstrations are documented in a book by photographer Song Long Chyuan (Song Longquan), for whom this period of politics of the street started with the police encirclement of Taipei's Lungshan temple in May 1986.<sup>2</sup> In this highly contested atmosphere, in September the new opposition party DPP was founded, in circumstances of a cat-and-mouse game with the secret police. Chiang Ching-kuo decided to tolerate the new party, and in October announced the lifting of martial law for January 1987.

This was not only a period of political confrontation, it was also a time characterized by

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<sup>1</sup> Hu Ching-fen: "Taiwan's geopolitics and Chiang Ching-Kuo's decision to democratize Taiwan," in: *Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs*, Volume 5, N. 1, Winter 2005, available online at: <http://www.stanford.edu/group/sjeaa/journal51/china2.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Song Long Chyuan 宋隆泉 (Song Long-quan): *見證 1986。519 1989。519 台灣街頭運動影像錄 (Jianzheng 1986.519 - 1989.519 Taiwan Jietou Yundong Yingxianglu) Witness 1986.519 - 1989.519, Taiwans peoples power*; Taipei, 1992.



constant change, which could be felt almost with every day and every month, when standards would be constantly challenged and changed, a period when taboos were contested, and seemed to go through constant flux and transformation.

### **Chinese Modernity contested:**

#### **Michel Foucault's observed spectator**

This period of political transformation from the lifting of martial law to the introduction of democracy is characterized by an effort of the museum administration to uphold certain standards of “modern art”, especially that of an “aesthetic object”, but saw itself challenged on the very grounds of the modernity it promoted. A period, therefore, where the “soft power“ of the museum deployed by the government showed its full ambiguity: as a lure to the artists, but also as a potential platform to challenge the standards of the museum.

To analyse the complexities of this period, and to point out the driving force behind it, I will use Foucault's<sup>3</sup> notion that the “entire space of the representation” shall ultimately relate to a “corporeal gaze”, and his concept of the “observed spectator”. This idea has been used by *New Museology* author Tony Bennett<sup>4</sup> to describe the contradictions inherent in the public museum:

“The museum, it will be argued, also constructs man ... in a relation of both subject and object to the knowledge it organizes. Its space of representation... posits man – the outcome of evolution – as the object of knowledge. At the same time, this mode of representation constructs for the visitor a position of achieved humanity, situated at the end of evolutionary development, from which man's development, and the subsidiary evolutionary series it subsumes, can be rendered intelligible. There is, however, a tension within this space of representation

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<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault: *The Order of Things (Les mots et les choses*, Paris 1966), Vintage books reprint, New York 1994, p. 312.

<sup>4</sup> Tony Bennett: *The Birth of the Museum*, Routledge, London 1995, p. 7.

between the apparent universality of the subject and object of knowledge (man) which it constructs, and the always socially partial and particular ways in which this universality is realized and embodied in museum displays. This tension, it will be suggested, has supplied – and continues to supply – the discursive co-ordinates for the emergence of contemporary museum policies and politics oriented to securing parity of representation for different groups and cultures within the exhibitionary practices of the museum.”<sup>5</sup>

In the following, I will therefore highlight this tension, and point out how many of the challenges brought against the museum administration have been inspired by the very claims to modern liberation from traditional forms of art made by the museum itself. I will describe this as a continuous process of interaction, which has finally resulted in the demise of the modernist system of aesthetic judgement of single objects, and which has brought the artist, as well as the new social and intellectual figure of the curator, to the centre of contemporary museum practice.

### **Chinese Modernity Contested: the Taipei Group**

The year 1986 not only marked the beginning of a profound transformation in Taiwanese politics from martial law to a multi-party democracy, it also witnessed the beginning of an equally dramatic transformation in the field of contemporary art.

In the years 1984 and 1985 “Chinese modernism” as represented by the minimalist group and lyrical abstraction had dominated the exhibitions of the TFAM, yet there already were other contenders in the field. The most important was a group of young artists who all had studied Western-style realist oil painting at the Chinese Culture University, a private university which also accepted those students rejected by other state-run institutions, thus unwittingly becoming a meeting place for many creative and

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<sup>5</sup> Tony Bennett: *The Birth of the Museum*, Routledge, London 1995, p. 7.

critical minds. Several small groups united themselves under the umbrella “Taipei Group”, who were united stylistically by their passion for post-modern painting inspired by the Italian Transavantgarde and international Neo-Expressionism, and ideologically by their drive to re-discover their own identity, grounded in their experience as citizens of Taipei and inhabitants of the island Taiwan, thus the name “Taipei Group”.

This group understood themselves as a challenge to the existing standards of the appreciation of art objects as embodied by the museums standards of Chinese modernity. An instance for this criticism is the artistic statement of Wu Tian-zhang (Wu Tien-chang) on the catalogue of the 1986 *Trends*, where he challenged mainstream Chinese modernity, centred around notions of science and the use of certain materials:

“Any kind of art that includes reason, technology, and material sources, can never stimulate a viewers interest. Paintings that illustrate sensibility, human psychology, and the reflection of life, will be honored”.<sup>6</sup>

### **Chinese Modernity contested:**

#### **February 27, 1986, first prize to *Destroyed World Symptom group***

In 1986 for the first time a politically highly charged canvas, “Destroyed World Symptom Group”, painted by Wu Tian-zhang (often transcribed as Wu Tian-chang or Wu Tien-chang), won a first prize at the *Contemporary Art Trends in the Republic of China 1986*.

It is easy to understand why this single painting created such a stir: the prize-winning canvas could easily be interpreted as a description of Taiwanese history as crime scene. Dominating this scene are images of injured, only temporarily bandaged human beings – an open allusion to the period of White Terror and the 2.28 incident, where numerous persons simply disappeared, their bodies dumped in anonymous graves. This allusion is

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<sup>6</sup> Wu Tian-zhang, in: *Contemporary Art Trends in the Republic of China 1986*, TFAM, Taipei 1986, p. 21.

made even more direct by the numbers written on different spots of the scene, seemingly indicating a crime scene, a scene of an unsolved crime, whose traces still have to be documented, after decades of officially imposed taboo.

Yet this was only the first level of criticism. A closer look revealed that all symbols deployed by Wu invoked different, local traditions: icons relating to Taiwanese aboriginal tribes, imagery stemming from local folk culture.



傷害世界癥候群 *Destroyed World Symptom Group*, Wu Tien-Chang (Wu Tian-zhang) 1986.  
Source and copyright: Wu Tian-zhang 1986.

In contrast to that, hardly any symbols of a grand Chinese tradition, or of the KMT-led entity called R.O.C. can be found on his canvasses of 1986. These allusions to the various local tradition can also be read as a first step toward a complete de-construction of official Chinese nationalist ideology or “de- sinification,” echoing similar debates that were taking place in underground literature:<sup>7</sup>

Not only literary circles were moving in the direction of de-constructing the foundations

<sup>7</sup> Hsiao A-chin: “‘De-Sinocizing’ of Taiwanese literature: the early 1980s,” in: Hsiao A-chin, *Contemporary Taiwanese Cultural Nationalism*, Routledge, London, New York 2000, p. 96-105.

of nationalist ideology, so did several other artists of the *Taipei Group*.

A sensation of all-out power struggle characterized the canvasses of another participant at the *1986 Trends*, Yang Mao-lin, and a co-founder of the *Taipei Group* and its forerunner *101*. The title of Yang's paintings invoked Chinese mythology such as in *After Hou Yi Shooting the Sun*, yet underneath this re-discovery of Chinese mythology lay hidden a challenge to the powers to be: Yang's canvasses showed battle scenes between heroic challengers to the powers to be, albeit in their moment of failure. Yang's artistic statement already alluded to the earthquake that was announcing itself in Taiwanese politics: "I use the methodology of art history to monitor the dynastic differences".



后羿射日之後 *After Hou- Yi Shooting the Sun*, three canvasses combined, 160x130cm, 160x130cm, 192x130cm, Yang Maolin 1986, Source, copyright: Yang Maolin 1986.

### **Chinese Modernity contested: on the back of the catalogue**

While the front cover of the exhibition catalogue was reserved to "Minimalist" artist Zhang Yong-cun's ink and paper installation *Unceasing II*, Wu Tien-Chang's (Wu Tian-zhang) canvas *Destroyed World Symptom Group* decorated the back. At the first edition of the *Trends* in 1984, there had been two first prizes, awarded to Tsong Pu (Zhuang Pu)

and Chen Xing-wan; in 1986, the jury awarded three: one first prize to Zhang Yong-cun, one to Wu Tian-zhang, and one to Huang Hung-te (Huang Hong-de). Thus the previously established equilibrium of forces between minimalism and lyrical abstraction was not disturbed; the huge canvasses of transavantgarde painting were simply added as a third force to the official canon of prize-winning works. The jurors emphasized in their statements that the outcome had been the result of democratic voting. Yet the very emphasis indicated that the entrance of the transavantgarde painters in the ranks of the TFAM's prize-winning art forms had stirred serious discussions within the jury, and between the jury and the museum.

### **Chinese Modernity contested: discussions of the jury**

The statements by the director and the several jurors seem to reflect a discussion whose ultimate point of reference for the choice of artists and prize-winning works had become artistic originality.<sup>8</sup> In her preface, director Su claimed: “The works to be exhibited are all excellent, only a few of which have been influenced by Western schools”.<sup>9</sup> The jurors offered a different view. Takeshi Kanazawa, vice-director of the Hara museum in Japan, observed: “In this exhibition, much to our regret, we found that many of the works are similar in style to these of renowned artists”.<sup>10</sup> French-educated professor Wang Zhexiong made a similar statement:

“... if the New Trend really represent this generations professional attitude toward and ideal art, I have mixed feelings towards the future of our artists – “half worried and half pleased”. I am pleased to know that the contemporary Chinese artists follow in the footsteps of the new trends because they are unwilling to be

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<sup>8</sup> “Before initiating our evaluations operations, we five judging members discussed the criteria for judging a work. The 1<sup>st</sup> criterion is the ‘creation’ of a work”. Takeshi Kanazawa: “On judging the ‘New Trends’”, in: *Contemporary Art Trends in the Republic of China 1986*, TFAM, Taipei 1986, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Su Rui-ping: “Preface”, in: *Contemporary Art Trends in the Republic of China 1986*, TFAM, Taipei 1986, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Takeshi Kanazawa: “On judging the ‘New Trends’”, in: *Contemporary Art Trends in the Republic of China 1986*, TFAM, Taipei 1986, p. 7.

behind the trends in the front line. However, I am also worried that this kind of following is only a wild goose chase”.<sup>11</sup>

After a brief recount of the history of modern art in Europe, he stated:

“I am surprised to see the plagiarism of some art works at such an important art exhibition. ... We can't but ask ourselves the question: when will we be able to create something that can represent “the trends of contemporary Chinese art”?”.<sup>12</sup>

He supported his statement with a list of European artists who in his view had been the models for some local artists. More down the page, he became even more outspoken, launching an attack on the dominance of minimalism in the local official art scene:

“The existence of Minimal art doesn't indicate that all other art forms should be declined. If we make a conclusion that Minimal art can represent the mainstream of contemporary Chinese art, it is improper. It shouldn't be like that”.<sup>13</sup>

As it appears from these quotes, the selection of art works at the *1986 Trends* must have been highly contested, and on more level than one: beyond the question of purely artistic originality, there was also the question of ideological correctness. In her preface to the exhibition, director Su explained her view what constituted modern Chinese art, even claiming that this was the very formula already adopted by “prominent artists”:

“In my personal opinion, Chinese arts must be founded on Chinese culture.

Viewing the trends of modern art, we find that the prominent artists strive to base their painting on traditional arts reflecting society and the essence of life.”<sup>14</sup>

After that explanation, she used strong words to exhort the participating artist to stick to the guidelines of nationalist ideology, spelling out a “warning” to those who did not:

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<sup>11</sup> Wang Zhe-xiong (Wang Jer-hsiung): “Observations from the competition of Contemporary Art Trends in the R.O.C.”, in: *Contemporary Art Trends in the Republic of China 1986*, TFAM, Taipei 1986, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Wang Zhe-xiong (Wang Jer-hsiung): “Observations from the competition of Contemporary Art Trends in the R.O.C.”, in: *Contemporary Art Trends in the Republic of China 1986*, TFAM, Taipei 1986, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Wang Zhe-xiong (Wang Jer-hsiung): “Observations from the competition of Contemporary Art Trends in the R.O.C.”, in: *Contemporary Art Trends in the Republic of China 1986*, TFAM, Taipei 1986, p. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Su Rui-ping: “Preface”, *Contemporary Art Trends in the Republic of China 1986*, TFAM, Taipei 1986, p. 3.

“This give an exemplary warning to those who despise Chinese traditional art, believing that western styles are all worthy of imitation regardless of what they are”.<sup>15</sup>

The reader cannot but detect a certain nervousness in these words, in which there was hardly much left of the proud spirit of discovery of a Chinese modernity that had dominated the first two years of the TFAM. Not only the certainties of local politics were changing in the year that led to the abolition of martial law. It appears from the lines of these jurors, that the mood was changing also inside the halls of the museum.

1986 did indeed sign an ideological turning point for many artists: the question of Taiwanese versus Chinese identity had not been openly put forward yet, but the consensus on the founding blocks of nationalist ideology was crumbling.

### **Chinese modernity contested: a singular event, thanks to an international jury**

It has to be pointed out that 1986 featured one of the most internationalized juries of all *Trends* exhibitions between 1984 and 1991, featuring at least two foreigners, Alexander Tolnay from Esslingen, Germany, and Takeshi Kanazawa from Hara Museum in Japan. This prompted even the “local” jurors to point out their international accolade: Wang Zhe-xiong claimed to represent France, Hsiao Chin represented Italy, and Zhuang Zhe (Chuang Che) emphasized that he had just returned from the USA.

The result of this exhibition – a politically highly critical work winning a first prize – probably was not planned for by the administration of the TFAM.

The international composition of the jury, and the radical choice of prizes made by this jury of the 1986 *Trends* remained a singular incident. In the following years, the TFAM did not repeat this experience: only local professors were invited as jury members to the *1987 Sculpture Exhibition* as well as at the next two *Trends* exhibitions in 1988 and

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<sup>15</sup> Su Rui-ping: “Preface”, *Contemporary Art Trends in the Republic of China 1986*, TFAM, Taipei 1986, p. 3.



1990. Only well outside the field of painting, at the 1989 and 1991 *Sculpture Exhibition*, thus safely outside the home turf of any political painter or any performance artist, did the TFAM again invite jurors from outside the R.O.C.

As a result, only with the abolishment of the *Trends* and the inauguration of the *Taipei Biennial* in 1992 did another member of the Taipei Group, or any artist with a political agenda, win a first prize in an official show of the TFAM.<sup>16</sup>

This sidelining of one major trend, the Transavantgarde painters of the Taipei Group, and of any political art in general (as performance art was completely outside the official picture), as far as first prizes were concerned, was no doubt due to an ideological bias of the museum, considering that these painters represented not only a the chief critical force in the local identity discussion, they also represented a sizeable share of the local art market, and also quite an amount of critical clout within the local identity discourse. By the early 1990s, most members of this group were already on the way to become professional painters, while some of the other entries in the 1988 and 1990 *Trends* in the category of lyrical abstraction and minimalism were often mere art students, and often disappeared soon from the art scene. Albeit rarely honoured with first prizes, the Taipei Group usually provided for one third to one half of all participating artists at all *Trends* exhibition between 1984 and 1990.

It has therefore to be emphasized that it was one of the first attempts versus internationalisation that resulted in such a daring decision at the 1986 *Trends* exhibition: showing an openness towards new artistic trends that were an open challenge to local politics. Possibly even as a result to this unexpected result, the following editions of the *Trends* were far more conservative. On the long run, this resulted in an even greater revolution: in 1992 it was decided to abolish the *Trends* exhibition system completely, and substitute it with the *Taipei Biennial*.

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<sup>16</sup> Lu Xian-ming (Lu Hsien-ming) won a first prize at the 1992 Taipei Biennial; that said, at the 1988 *Trends*, Lu Xian-ming also won a “honorable mention”.

The prize awarded in 1986 remained an exception, yet it still opened new spaces for the artists involved: in the following years (from 1987 onwards), both Wu Tian-zhang and Yang Mao-lin held important solo shows in the basement of the museum, which became true milestones of Taiwanese art history. One was Wu Tian-zhang's *Five Eras*, which depicted Taiwanese and Chinese modern history through the faces of its four dictators. The other was Yang Mao-lin's *Made in Taiwan*, an exhibition that started his plan for a decennial inquiry into Taiwanese identity, and signalled the arrival of a new decade, dominated by the discourse on the new Taiwanese identity.

### **The limits of Chinese Modernity:**

#### **performance artist Lee Mingsheng arrested, February 28, 1986**

Less than 24 hours after Wu Tianzhang had won that first prize at the museum, to be more precise, at 5 o'clock in the morning of February 28, 1986, performance artist



Lee Mingsheng was arrested at his home,

Lee Mingsheng blocked at home by two policemen, February 28, 1986. Source: Lee Mingsheng, *My Body My Art*, Taipei 1995, p. 50.

while he was preparing a performance-installation. His plan had been innocent enough: to symbolically connect his home with the museum, by walking the whole distance, and by making the connection of the museum with his home visible by a white nylon thread running along the road from his home in New Garden City in Hsintian (Xindian) down to the museum. While Lee was planning to connect the spaces of everyday life with the temple of pure art (and thus connect also his performance with the opening of the

*Trends* exhibition), he probably never dreamed of creating a political stir. Only when he was arrested at his home in the morning of February 28, he realized the political potential of his performance: the publication of his plans had triggered a massive police search in the area, which allegedly even involved the home of Tsong Pu (the most famous “modern artist” of the area) and his neighbours. Even though the police officially only declared that Lee’s performance potentially posed a risk to traffic,<sup>17</sup> this heavy-handed reaction made it clear that the issue was not a potential traffic interruption posed by a thin white nylon thread in the green along the roadside, but rather the memory of an anti-KMT uprising of the local population that had started on February 28 in 1947, during which tens of thousands of people both local as from the mainland had been killed, and which had since been declared taboo.<sup>18</sup>

It has to be pointed out that in 1986, the taboo of the memory of the massacre of February 28, 1947, was apparently more vivid in the minds of the censors than in the memory of the (Hakka) population: Lee Mingsheng apparently did not pay particular attention to this date, and his performance had little if no connection with that historical date – he was more than surprised to see the police arrest him at home. A similar case has to be made for much of the general population: only one year later was this date

<sup>17</sup> Huang Rongcun 黃榮村不: “斷動腦 “演出” 還不錯, 環境與交通規則不能尬 (To be creative with performances is good, but do not break traffic and environmental regulations)”, in: *民生報 Minshengbao* 28.2.1986. From the text of the article it can be deduced that it was the very writer of this article who pro-actively called and alerted the police, causing the police search.

<sup>18</sup> The “228 Incident”, also known as the “228 Massacre”, was an anti- KMT uprising that began on February 27, 1947 and was violently suppressed by the KMT military. In 1945, at the end of WWII, Taiwan was handed over from Japan to the KMT- administered ROC. Due to bad government and differences in language between the locals (who spoke only Japanese, Taiwanese or Hakka) and the administrators (who spoke only Mandarin), tensions increased between the local population and the ROC administration. On February 27, 1947, a dispute between a female cigarette vendor and an officer of the Office of Monopoly triggered an open rebellion that lasted for days. The uprising was violently put down by the ROC army. Estimates of the number of deaths vary from ten thousand to thirty thousand or more. The incident marked the beginning of the White Terror period in Taiwan, in which thousands more Taiwanese vanished, were killed, or imprisoned. The number “228” refers to the day the massacre began: February 28, or 02-28. The subject was officially taboo for decades. The first demonstrations in memory of 2-28 occurred only in 1987 (see: Song Long-quan 1992). The incident was the background for director Hou Hsiao-hsien’s film *City of Sadness*, than won a Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 1989. Only in 1995 did the president of the ROC, Lee Tenghui, officially address the question. The event continues to be openly discussed and commemorated as Peace Memorial Day 和平紀念日 héping jìniànrì. The former Youth Park in Taipei has been renamed as Peace Park.

turned into an issue of public discourse, or rather, only on February 28, 1987, was the first major commemorative demonstration held in Taipei.<sup>19</sup>

Lee Mingsheng's arrest most of all highlighted how arbitrary and unpredictable censorship had become in the years shortly before martial law was lifted: almost any work of art, even an apparently innocent and fairly "minimal" performance could trigger a massive police search, if someone deemed its significance to be potentially laden with political taboos.

Looking at Lee Mingsheng's career as an artist, it has to be pointed out that only after his arrest in February 1986 he transformed himself into a highly political performance artist- it has to be argued that it was chiefly the violent intrusion of the state in his life that triggered a different sensibility towards the contradictions of the political system.

Yet even after this (certainly somewhat traumatic) incident, Lee continued to deploy an attitude of apparent child-like innocence in his performances, an attitude he maintained also at every attempt to enter in dialogue with the art administration. Within the Taiwanese art scene, it was this attempt of direct confrontation with officialdom that made him stand out: the only other major performance artist of the early 1980s, Chen Jie-ren, from the very planning phase always chose non-official spaces as the site for his performances (such as the mimicry of an execution of prisoners in Ximending in 1982).

### **Chinese Modernity contested: the performances of Lee Mingsheng**

Within only a few years, the opening of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum had transformed the Taiwan art scene, setting new standards, and opening new possibilities for artists, especially for those who engaged with the official ideology of Chinese modernity and who complied with the requirements of the museum.

These new standards set out by the administration also had a second effect: they had

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<sup>19</sup> Song Long Chyuan 宋隆泉 (Song Long-quan): 見證 1986。519 1989。519 台灣街頭運動影像錄 (*Jianzheng 1986.519 - 1989.519 Taiwan Jietou Yundong Yingxianglu*) *Witness 1986.519 - 1989.519, Taiwans peoples power*, Taipei 1992.

created a platform of cultural dialogue, which allowed for a new sort of criticism, that appropriated the very standards spelled out by the administration, only to challenge the universality of their application. To quote Tony Bennett:

“The museum, ...also constructs man ... in a relation of both subject and object to the knowledge it organizes. ... There is, however, a tension within this space of representation between the apparent universality of the subject and object of knowledge (man) which it constructs, and the always socially partial and particular ways in which this universality is realized and embodied in museum displays.”<sup>20</sup>

Bennett had argued with Habermas that the museum was but one of the spaces of civil dialogue of a modern democratic society, and that the politicization of the museum space was chiefly due to its new role as a platform of cultural dialogue of a democratic society. From this point of view it is important to point out how much Lee Ming-sheng's performances of the years 1987 and 1988 were related to the development of democracy, and to the role of the public space in a democratic society.

After the first intrusion of state violence in his home in February 1986, he did not turn his attention immediately towards the museum; rather, he started to interrogate first the public space, through his performance *No-Running, No-Walking* in February 1987. Only two months later did he return to the specific questions of the museum space, with *Medical Examination of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum*. This was followed again by a return to the bigger questions of the public space with *Mourning for Art* in October 1987 and with *Lee Mingsheng = Art* in April and May 1988, only to return once again to the question of museum administration with the last three instalments of the latter performance series in July 1988.

None of his interventions occurred in the vacuum of the white cube, but rather under

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<sup>20</sup> Tony Bennett: *The Birth of the Museum*, Routledge, London 1995, p. 7.

very specific circumstances: an international sports event and an international art exhibition. What he challenged was the very universality of the claims of modernity spelled out by the state administration – claims to modernity, to progress, to democracy, or to art historical legitimacy. More than any other artist Lee therefore exemplified and played out the tension inherent in the democratic public space of modernity, the space where man is both the subject as well as the object of the gaze of science, the space where man turns into Foucault's "enslaved king, observed spectator".<sup>21</sup>

The first occasion Lee seized for a performance in the public after the lifting of martial law was an international marathon, staged in February 1987. The marathon had been organized to show off the openness and progressiveness of Taiwanese society. Lee's performances demonstrated the opposite: in *Non-running, non walking* he crawled, rather than ran, the whole distance of the marathon on his hands and knees, employing three Sundays rather than a few hours to cross the finish line. His comment criticised the grip of political ideology over the bodies of the citizenship- and criticised this as a lack of democratic progress:

“Why do our international athletic competitions contain underlying political meaning? Its presence is a symbol of the slow pace and out-dated nature of social reform”.<sup>22</sup>

### **Chinese Modernity contested:**

#### ***Medical Examination of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, April 1987,***

The next series of Lee's performances was directed at the museum space itself – the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, where in April 1987 he staged *Medical Examination of Taipei Fine Arts Museum*.

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<sup>21</sup> Michel Foucault: *The Order of Things, (Les mots et les choses*, Paris 1966), Vintage books reprint, New York 1994, p. 312.

<sup>22</sup> Lee Mingsheng: “February 1987. Non-running, non-walking“, in: *My Body My Art*, Taipei 1995, p. 54.

The first occasion for his critique of institutional practice was an international exhibition of art from Southern California, which opened on April 4, 1987. He appropriated the official opening event for himself, as he “imitated the other guests action’s identically; (he) signed (his) name, took a cocktail, and shook hands with friends while chatting about the weather”.<sup>23</sup>

Lee did all this, but with a twist: the palm of his hands were covered with a thick layer of paint, which spread like a virus from hand to hand, starting with Tsong Pu, the first friend he met. Not only his hands, also his feet were painted, rather than dressed in shoes, leaving traces of every single of his steps on the floor. Lee Mingsheng highlighted one of the aporias of the public museum: as a public entity, it claims to be a secular space, devoted to science and education – yet even a museum for modern art seems to fit into



*Medical Examination of Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Part I, Lee Mingsheng 1987.*

Source: Lee Mingsheng, *My Body My Art*, Taipei 1995, p. 57.

the Carol Duncan’s description of a princely gallery:

“Typically, princely galleries were used as reception halls, providing sumptuous settings for official ceremonies and magnificent frames for the figure of the prince. Princes everywhere installed their treasures in such galleries in order to impress foreign visitors and local dignitaries with their splendour and, often through special iconographies, the rightness or legitimacy of their rule. This

<sup>23</sup> Lee Mingsheng: “April 1987. Medical Examination of Taipei Fine Arts Museum”, in: *My Body My Art*, Taipei 1995, p. 55.

function of the princely gallery as a ceremonial reception hall wherein the state presented and idealized itself would remain central to the public art museum.”<sup>24</sup>

Beyond the critique of the intrusion of politics into the space of the arts, Lee also criticised the self-orientalisation involved in this process: before entering the museum, he undressed, painted a pair of shoes on his bare feet and a pair of glasses in his face, and clothed himself in a skirt made of breadfruit leaves, presenting himself as a hybrid between the incarnation of the stereotypical semi-naked aboriginal and the intellectual artist. To top up his performance, he even brought a piece of ritual food, a watermelon, which he asked the Californian artists to sign, and which he threw in the air at the end of the mayor’s speech.

The next *Medical Examination of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum* occurred only a week later, on April 11, 1987: the target was an experimental exhibition called *Experimental Art – Action and Space* that had been organized by the TFAM, and which had been touted as “the first instance of performance art formally included in an exhibition by a government-affiliated institution”.<sup>25</sup> In 1987 the term “performance art” evidently had become a hot topic in the art world. Not only had several artists, such as Lee Mingsheng, Chen Jie-ren or Lin Ju, started to use this form of expression, also the small theatre movement had become more and more experimental, such as the Luohe Zhanyi group, used public spaces such as underground passageways for conceptual pantomime performances. The exhibition organized by the TFAM wanted to reflect on this new cultural phenomenon, a phenomenon closely linked to the democracy movements; to highlight how the museum thus positioned itself within the wider process of democratic progress, it was claimed by the organizers that the various performances showed “the process of people breaking through restraints”, or “cast off the restrictions of traditional

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<sup>24</sup> Carol Duncan: “Art museums and the ritual of citizenship“, in: Pearce, Susan M. (ed.): *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, Routledge, London 1994, p.282.

<sup>25</sup> TFAM: “Performance Art in the 1980s”, *The Transitional Eighties. Taiwan’s Art Breaks New Ground*, TFAM, Taipei 2004, p. 131.



affairs”.<sup>26</sup> The curatorial choice made by the museum was to invite the price-winning minimalist group SoCA (who had hardly done any performances before, and who hardly staged any performances after), the Huanhsu Theatre group (a group belonging to the small-theatre movement), and the Bacteria group. The performances as such are hard to reconstruct by now, but seem to have been fairly bland. The only element that can be reconstructed by now is that the minimalist SoCA group showed bodies wrapped in ink paper that slowly moved and finally broke free.<sup>27</sup>

The one element not mentioned in the (only) official account of this show, published in 2004, “Performance art in the 1980s”,<sup>28</sup> is the intervention of Lee Mingsheng: as the second part of his *Medical Examination of the TFAM*, he carried one of his own paintings to the museum, entered the gates with the pretext of bringing a painting at the last minute to the opening, thus managing to get beyond the guards and exhibiting his canvas while carrying it on his shoulders. This happened without too much interference or questions from the guards, up until the moment he tried to leave the building: at this moment the guardians wanted to make sure no potential museum property would leave the building, and stopped him from leaving.

Lee’s strategy had been again to avail himself of a platform created by the art administration – a performance art exhibition – and had turned it into something quite different, that is, a challenge to that very platform: most pieces at *Experiment - Action and Space* exhibition were probably more aptly described as staged pantomimic theatre, as they featured hardly any element of surprise, improvisation or visitor interaction (also because they had to be approved by the museum administration first). Thus the only true piece of performance art, the only piece that had some element of surprise or interaction

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<sup>26</sup> TFAM: “Performance Art in the 1980s”, *The Transitional Eighties. Taiwan’s Art Breaks New Ground*, TFAM, Taipei 2004, p. 131.

<sup>27</sup> TFAM: “Performance Art in the 1980s”, *The Transitional Eighties. Taiwan’s Art Breaks New Ground*, TFAM, Taipei 2004, p. 124.

<sup>28</sup> TFAM: “Performance Art in the 1980s”, *The Transitional Eighties. Taiwan’s Art Breaks New Ground*, TFAM, Taipei 2004, pp. 124, 131.

during *Experiment - Action and Space*, turned out to be Lee Mingsheng's *Medical Examination*.

Secondly, Lee's performance highlighted the very lack of professional standards of the museum itself: in any standard museum, one would expect a registrar to note the entry and exit of art works, following the recommendations of an academic organ. Yet in April 1987, Lee did not encounter any registrar or jury trained in art history, but museum guards who applied their best judgements of personal hindsight – recognizing Lee as a well-known local artist and letting him in, but claiming property of his piece once he wanted to leave the premises.

This combination of apparent freedom and factual constraint was also the theme of one of his next performances, *Reading the Newspaper*: on April 18, 1987, he bought several newspapers and, started to read them in the entrance hall of the museum. While he was reading he glued the pages together into one huge single page, until the surface covered by his creation became bigger and bigger, even covering the very artist underneath. As his behaviour seemed to turn from normal (newspaper reading) to deviant (creating a huge paper surface), the guards stopped him and escorted him out of the museum.

This contradiction of the museum being both a disciplinary as well as a space of cultural discourse was pushed even further in Lee's next performance, which he staged in collaboration with Zhang Yong-cun. Lee, entering the museum, pretended to be a small dog, while Zhang played the role of a famous artist who had brought his dog along. Time and again the couple artist and dog were thrown out of the museum by the guards: on the first occasion, because the dog barked at some paintings, thus making too much noise. Next, they were told that only two-legged beings could enter the museum; yet not even a dog walking alternately on two legs was admitted. In the end, not even a human dog lashed with a tie to a sign-post reading "municipal government development" was allowed on the museum grounds.

### **Tensions within modernity:**

#### ***Las Meninas*, or universalism and the corporeal gaze**

There is one aspect worth analysing in Lee Mingsheng's performances of 1987: the irruption of 'life', or – to speak more precisely – of a 'corporeal gaze' into the space of the museum. According to Tony Bennett,<sup>29</sup> it is this tension between the subject and the object that Foucault<sup>30</sup> described as “enslaved sovereign, observed spectator” that creates one of the basic tensions between man as subject, and man as object of the gaze.

In Lee's *Medical Examination of the TFAM*, this is acted out in the most literal way, highlighting the tension created by the museum space: Lee Mingsheng is not simply the subject of the gaze, he is also an “observed spectator”, literally watched over by the museum guards, who impose a certain subjectivity on him – to behave like the ultimate arrival point of human development, to act “well-mannered” like the king of *Las Meninas*, who obeyed and acted out court etiquette, or like the scientist who positions himself at the highest point of human development. This kingly position seems not to allow any other points of view, especially no points of view that may appear slightly lower (such as an artist behaving like a dog), or unable or unwilling to the omniscience imposed by this constructed subjectivity – such as the artist-dog that confessed not to understand, and barked at obscure paintings.

### **Tensions within modernity:**

#### **The public space and human finitude**

The question of finitude, of the limitations of the human bodily experience, became the subject of another series of Lee Mingsheng's performances, *Mourning for Art*, which he staged in October 1987, and *Lee Mingsheng = Art*, which he staged between April and July 1988. In these two series of performances he started again from exploring the

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<sup>29</sup> Tony Bennett: *The Birth of the museum*, 1995, p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> Michel Foucault: *The Order of Things (Les mots et les choses*, Paris 1966), Vintage books reprint, New York 1994, p. 311.

public space.

In the first of the series *Mourning for Art*, he walked the streets of Taipei semi-naked, dressed only in a g-string, but with a writing across his body which read “I am an artist”, written in a way as if he was presenting a political slogan. In a mockery of a politician running for election, he even waved his hands to an imaginary public. Only that the writing highlighted even more the fact that he was almost naked- thus highlighting in contrast the lack of transparency in politics, and the need to reflect again on the elementary reference points of human life- the quote Foucault, the need for a “corporeal gaze”.



*Mourning for Art, Part I*, Lee Mingsheng 1987.  
Source: Lee Mingsheng: *My Body My Art*, Taipei 1995, p. 64.

The next series, *Lee Mingsheng = Art*, started with Lee at on one of the busiest corners of Taipei city, Chunghsiao East Road and Tunhwa South Road, standing on a ladder and shouting his name until his voice turned hoarse. In the next instalment of this series, he held a magnifying screen in front of his face, standing on a crossing with heavy traffic, exposing – like a politician on TV – his face to the crowd. In the following performance, he dressed in a skirt, and wrote his name on the street floor until the local shop owners called the police, who first asked him to clean up, and as he tried to use his urine for the job, arrested him. In the next edition of this performance series, he used the Times Square experimental theatre for a nude performance, in which he asked the members of the audience to decorate his body with paint, and undress like him if they want

commemorative pictures taken.

These different performances all had a single theme: to act out the finitude of man, or rather the limitation of the individual body in comparison with modern mass media and modern society, and also the limitations imposed by social standards, or rather the gaze of society.

The 1987 and 1988 performances also show how the process of democratization incited new questions about human finitude, about the relationship between the individual and society, and about the relationship between the finitude of the individual's body and the powerful means of mass communication, which becomes the new means of transmitting power in mass society. In all these performances, it is the comparison between the power of the mass media and the finitude of the single individual that is at stake; and it is the body of the artist, the finitude of his physical means, that becomes the lever of criticism pointed at the promises of democratization by the media and politics.

### **No Dada at the *World of Dada***

In July 1988, in an effort to present some milestones of modern art history to the local public, the TFAM opened a retrospective of Dada art, called *World of Dada* 達達的世界. The show also featured at least one cornerstone of Dada art -the famous urinal or "fountain" by Marcel Duchamp,<sup>31</sup> a piece that has been hailed by some critics as the true beginning of modern art.<sup>32</sup>

On July 9,<sup>33</sup> Lee attended the opening ceremony of the exhibition. Echoing Piero

<sup>31</sup> Wu Mali 吳瑪俐: "沒有意外, 哪有達達? (Without any incident, how can there be Dada?)", *自由時報 (Ziyou Shibao) Liberty Times*, 11.7.1988.

<sup>32</sup> Thierry DeDuve: *Kant after Duchamp*, Cambridge, London 1998.

<sup>33</sup> This is the date given on Lee Mingsheng's two catalogues, *我的身體我的藝術 Wode Shenti Wode Yishu* (1993) and *My Body My Art* (1995). These dates are probably wrong, since they are in conflict with the dates of the publication of Victoria Lu's and Wu Mali's articles. Victoria Lu published her article "達達到台北?" ("Has Dada really arrived in Taipei?"), on June 20, 1988 on the *Independent Evening Post*, with an image of Lee's performance at the inauguration. The inauguration therefore must have taken place before June 20, rather than on July 9, as given on Lee's catalogues. Wu Mali published her article "沒有意外, 哪有達達? (Without any incident, how can there be Dada?)" on July 11, 1988 on *Liberty Times*, with an image of Lee Mingsheng discussing with a photo of director

Manzoni's classical piece *Artist's shit* (a classical example of Neo-Dada art, not part of the show in 1988), he contributed a bit of "artist's pee" to the exhibition, apparently right on the ground in front of one of the billboards



*Lee Mingsheng = Art, Part V*, Lee Mingsheng 1988.  
Source: Lee Mingsheng, *My Body My Art*, Taipei 1995, p. 76.

introducing the show and its background. Lee was escorted out by the guards, and his "contribution" was cleaned off. This fate was not shared by all pieces in the show- according to Wu Mali, local politicians were quite happy to have their press- pictures taken together with Duchamp's urinal.

One week later, on July 16, Lee went to the museum grounds, pretending a public discussion with the museum director about the true spirit of Dada art. This time the guards prevented him from even entering



*Lee Mingsheng = Art, Part VI*, Lee Mingsheng 1988. Source: Lee Mingsheng, *My Body My Art*, Taipei 1995, p. 77.

the gates.

After an hour in which Lee called in vain for the museum director, Lee decided to discuss the spirit of Dada with a photographic image of director Huang.

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Huang. This part of the performance equally must have happened before July 11, and not on July 16, as given on Lee's catalogues.

The following week, on July 23, the TFAM staged a public panel discussion about Dada, as part of its regular education programme. Lee tried to attend, and in the tradition of Manzoni's tin-boxes of artist's shit, carried a closed glass bottle of his own faeces. The glass bottle was wrangled away from Lee by the guards, and he himself was beaten up severely (the bruises are documented through photos on his catalogue). The educational discussion about the spirit of Dada took place without Lee Mingsheng, the museum never returned Lee's glass bottle, nor did the museum ever offer any excuses for the physical harm and trauma he endured.

More than the previous performances, which were aimed at a larger question of public space, democracy, the power of mass media, this series at the Dada exhibition highlights some very specific questions inherent to the museum space.

Similar to his "participation" at the *Experiment - Action and Space* show, Lee appropriated a platform created by the museum, but highlighted the very limitations and the failure of the promise of universality implied by the museum. The "... tension within this space of representation between the apparent universality of the subject and object of knowledge (man)"<sup>34</sup> theorized by Tony Bennett was not limited to a question of metaphysics- it was played out as a violent encounter between a local artist asking who tried to repeat some of the classical gestures of Dada art, and a museum that excluded any possibility of translating those objects of art-historical universal value into representation of a local subjectivity with brute force.

It has to be argued, that in the case of Lee Mingsheng's performance at the *World of Dada* exhibition, his critique goes further than simply pointing out the socially partial limitations of the project of universality, and it highlights an even deeper question, that is how life, art and aesthetic object, and how local art and international art history relate to each other.

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<sup>34</sup> Tony Bennett: *The Birth of the Museum*, Routledge, London 1995, p. 7.

This becomes clear through a hypothetical comparison of Lee Mingsheng's "artists faeces" and Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*. A urinal with the signature "R. Mutt" (an acronym used by Duchamp), or the artist's shit in a tin signed by Manzoni placed in an exhibition at the TFAM, had every chance to be appreciated as a purely aesthetic object, for it had a famous author – a European artist – and was validated by history – European art history. The fresh faeces of local artist Lee Mingsheng did not benefit from the same distance. Without the layers of art history and aesthetic theory, it represented nothing less than the irruption of real life and real human beings into the sacred space of art.

Due to its presentation without any embellishment, as had been the case of Manzoni's *Artist's shit*, the "work" not only posed a question of hygiene, it also destabilized any assumptions about the "scientific" character of the artistic object. The object of modern science, as observed by Michel Foucault, is an object reduced to a purely visual value – therefore excluding all other senses, such as taste, touch, and smell. In his observations about the birth of modern science he wrote:

"Observation, ..., is a perceptible knowledge furnished with a series of systematically negative conditions. Hearsay is excluded, that goes without saying; but so are taste and smell, ... which leaves sight with an almost exclusive privilege, being the sense by which we perceive extent and establish proof ...".<sup>35</sup>

To sum it up in one sentence:

"To observe, then, is to be content with seeing".

What Lee Mingsheng's contribution to the opening of the *World of Dada* and its educational panel discussion crucially lacked, were the layers of aesthetisation, a distance in space and time, and the lack of any bureaucratic process leading to the construction of an acceptable object – Lee's contribution remained an intrusion of "life" into the spaces of academia and science, highlighting the tension within that space

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<sup>35</sup> Michel Foucault: *The Order of Things (Les mots et les choses*, Paris 1966), New York 1994, pp. 132, 133.



between the secularisation and aesthetisation of the object of the gaze. Lee's participation at the *World of Dada* exhibition, or rather its denial, also highlighted the purely bureaucratic status of the art object: a urinal, or even a tin box with the artist's shit can become art, if it is validated by the institutions. Lee Ming-sheng's glass kettle did not enter the museum (it was violently wrestled away from him by the guards), and from the museums point of view, never attained the status of an art object.

It is important to point out the very violence involved in this process: the word "aesthetisation" seems to imply a mere question of beauty and aesthetics, yet the process how an object enters the realm of the museum is more aptly described by the word "secularisation"- the violent process through which objects are stripped from one context (life, religion) to be inserted into another (the knowledge- spaces of the secular state)- or rather, as in this case, the process through which certain objects are violently excluded from viewing in the public sphere.

### **Chinese Modernity contested:**

#### **Museology becomes a topic**

Lee's participation at the *World of Dada* educational panel conference in 1988 was the most violent incident to date at the TFAM – and until this day the only occasion known to this author when an artist was beaten up by the museum guards.

This scandal incited a heated discussion in the local media, and rarely favoured the museum. Some of the reactions even occupied whole newspaper pages,<sup>36</sup> while other were shorter, or were even simple ironic cartoons. Yet unlike director Su Rui-ping, who had to step down after she had re-painted or destroyed the works of local artists, director Huang Kuang-nan was not forced to step down, probably because the question at hand –

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<sup>36</sup> Wu Mali 吳瑪俐: “沒有意外, 哪有達達?” (Without any incident, how can there be Dada?), in: *自由時報 (Ziyou Shibao) Liberty Times*, 11.7.1988.  
Victoria Lu Rongzhi 陸蓉之: “達達到台北?” (Has Dada really arrived in Taipei?), in: *自立晚報 (Zili Wanbao) Independent Evening Post*, 20.6.1988.

the introduction of life into the museum, the status of the aesthetic object – was too complex for a simple reaction by higher level of politics, or simply because the question was not deemed critical enough by higher ranks in the government.

Yet the series of performances of Lee Mingsheng incited a wider discussion about museology and the functioning of a public museum. These discussions first took place in the media, and later on continued even in the museum's very own publications.<sup>37</sup> A significant element in these wider debates is that many of them referenced Lee Mingsheng's performances, or referenced the very same exhibitions where Lee's performances had taken place. An example are the articles written by Victoria Lu, a local critic that had also worked inside the TFAM. In her critical remarks she discusses the organizational shortcomings of the TFAM in general, but her references are the very exhibitions where Lee Mingsheng had staged his performances, such as the show of South Californian art and the *World of Dada* exhibition.<sup>38</sup>

It has to be pointed out that the Taipei Fine Arts Museum never apologised to Lee Mingsheng for beating him up, or acknowledged the importance of his performances. Victoria Lu's articles published in the museum's own publication chiefly reflect her own frustrations with the museum. Although she criticizes the exhibitions at which Lee had

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<sup>37</sup> Victoria Lu Rongzhi 陸蓉之: “人情掛帥。藝術短路 Priorities in human sympathy, a short circuit in the arts”, in: *美術論叢 (Meishu Luncong) Contemporary Art in Perspective*, vol. 27, TFAM, Taipei 1990, pp. 173-176.

Victoria Lu: “美術館時代來臨? ——可怕的美術館管理問題! A new era for art museums? Some issues of management on art museums (The arrival of the era of the art museum? Dreadful museum management problems!)”, in: *美術論叢 (Meishu Luncong) Contemporary Art in Perspective*, vol. 27, TFAM, Taipei 1990, pp. 177-180.

Victoria Lu: “從炒作『風』到美術館『峰』 From ‘soaring of prices’ to ‘multiplication of museums’”, in: *美術論叢 (Meishu Luncong) Contemporary Art in Perspective*, vol. 27, TFAM, Taipei 1990, pp. 181-183.

Victoria Lu: “一場『宜興風發』的宴席 —— 省思『台灣美術三百年作品展』的意義 An examination of ‘high spirited and vigorous’ exhibition – 300 years of fine arts in Taiwan”, in: *美術論叢 (Meishu Luncong) Contemporary Art in Perspective*, vol. 27, pp. 185-188.

Victoria Lu: “美術館——新展望展 A review of TFAM's *Contemporary Art Trends in the R.O.C. 1990*”, in: *美術論叢 (Meishu Luncong) Contemporary Art in Perspective*, vol. 27, TFAM, Taipei 1990, pp. 189-192.

<sup>38</sup> Victoria Lu: “美術館時代來臨? ——可怕的美術館管理問題! A new era for art museums? Some issues of management on art museums (The arrival of the era of the art museum? Dreadful museum management problems!)”, in: *美術論叢 (Meishu Luncong) Contemporary Art in Perspective*, vol. 27, TFAM, Taipei 1990, pp. 177-180.

intervened, she does not mention Lee directly.

It also has to be pointed out that Lee's performances have been largely erased from any official history writing. A case in point are catalogue published by the museum on the occasion of its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2004, *The Transitional Eighties, Taiwans Art Breaks New Ground*: while dedicating a section to the documentation of the development of performance art in Taiwan, many of the dates give in "Performance Art in Taiwan in the 1980s" are wrong, and very often incomplete, albeit quoting among its sources Lee Mingsheng's own catalogues. Crucially, the museum's (only) official account of Taiwanese performance art does not mention Lee's intervention at the *Experiment – Action and Space* exhibition, or Lee's performance at the South Californian show, or his playful reading of newspapers, nor does it mention Lee's participation at the opening of the *World of Dada* exhibition, his invitation to director Huang to discuss the spirit of Dada with him. While many of Lee's performances were simply eliminated from official history, others were denigrated: Lee's performance as a dog was listed as "Chang Yung-tsun, Lee Ming-sheng, Health Check for the Museum", presenting the performance as if it had been primarily planned by Chang Yong-cun. This attribution is curious indeed, as Chang never claimed the authorship for this performance in any of his catalogues. In the official exegesis, the question of the rules imposed by the museum, and the subject position of the viewer are also presented in a somewhat reductive way: "Principally an attempt to express the insufficient educational functions of the art museum through the motifs of the dog and the artist's performance".<sup>39</sup> The physical violence of the museum guards is also completely eliminated from the official account of Lee's performance at the *World of Dada* education talk:

"Carrying his own scat, the artist attended a seminar on Dada ... criticising the museum's exhibition for twisting the original spirit of Dada, ....museum

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<sup>39</sup> TFAM: "Performance Art in Taiwan in the 1980s", in: *The Transitional Eighties, Taiwans Art Breaks New Ground*, TFAM, Taipei 2004, p. 131.

personnel finally halted the performance, and asked the artist to leave the premises”.<sup>40</sup>

The bruises that Lee suffered and which he published in lieu of a proper documentation of the piece (as the guards had also taken away his camera) are not mentioned at all in the official account.

### **The demise of Chinese Modernity: the crisis of the museum**

Lai Yingying, a former TFAM in-house curator, currently a professor for museology, has argued that these events – the guards violently manhandling Lee Mingsheng – showed a lack of experience of the museum in dealing with “a crisis”, and that these performances reflected the period of transition after the abolition of martial law, a period when martial law was still present in the hearts and minds of the average people.<sup>41</sup>

Against this view it has to be argued that these events – the guards beating up a famous local artist – not only showed a lack of experience of the museum personnel to deal with performance art back in 1988- their erasure from official history writing show that this problem continues to exist, and is not limited to a few inexperienced guards with no training in art history, but rather is a problem that goes well beyond that level.

It has to be argued that these performances highlighted a question inherent in the museum space – a question described by Foucault as the “need for a corporeal gaze”, and by Bennett and Habermas as the tension inherent in a space for cultural discourse within a democratic society. These performances not only highlight a question inherent in the space of the museum, they also point to a question regarding the status of the

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<sup>40</sup> TFAM: “Performance Art in Taiwan in the 1980s”, in: *The Transitional Eighties, Taiwans Art Breaks New Ground*, TFAM, Taipei 2004, p. 132.

<sup>41</sup> Lai Yingying: “The Poetics of Exhibition, Reconsider the Significance of the TFAM’s Exhibition”, published online on the website of the National Taiwan University of Arts, Department of Art and Culture Politics and Administration at: <http://www.ntua.edu.tw/~culture/word/%AC%FC%B3N%C0%5D%AEi%C4%FD%B8%D6%BE%C7.pdf> consulted 21.2.2010, 16:16. No date of publication give, but it quotes articles published in late 2005; presumably published in early 2006. p. 8.

object of art: is it a merely aesthetic object, judged by eternal standards of beauty, or is it an object that forms part of a wider cultural discourse, an object created by an artist as a means of public dialogue.

### **The demise of Chinese Modernity, 1988 - 1992:**

#### **The art scene abandons the museum's grand shows**

In the years between 1988 and 1992, the Taiwanese art scene went through a profound transformation, which called into question the exhibitionary system of the museum, chiefly the authority of its most prestigious exhibition, the *Trends*. After 1988, none of the exponents of the previously dominating art trend, the Chinese minimalism of the SoCA group, participated at the flagship exhibition organized by the TFAM, the *Trends*. On the contrary, in 1989 the group founded an independent art space, IT Park.

This did not mean that the group abandoned the museum- rather, the less official and experimental shows in the basement were deemed more attractive. An example was the opening show of IT Park Gallery, which was accompanied by a parallel show of Tsong Pu and Chen Chien-pei (Chen Jian-bei) in the basement of the TFAM, the area reserved for experimental shows.

Not only the minimalists, also the painters of the Taipei Group turned to the basement of the TFAM, rather the *Trends of Modern Art in the R.O.C.*, to show their most daring canvasses. The two most outstanding shows were Wu Tian-zhang's *Four Eras*, an exhibition that had been deemed by Ni Zai-qin "the best work of the year 1989"<sup>42</sup> and

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<sup>42</sup> Ni Zaiqin 倪再沁: 藝術家 - 台灣美術, 細說從頭二十年 (*Yishujia - Taiwan Meishu, Xishuo Congtong Ershi Nian*) (*Artist's and Taiwanese Art, 20 Years in Review*), Artists editors, Taipei 1995, p. 156.

Ni Zaiqin curiously dates this work back to 1989, probably to accommodate both Wu Tianzhang as well as Yang Mao-lin as "best works of the year", even though they were shown both in 1990, only a few months apart. Curiously, this dating problem reappears in *Taiwan Taiwan, Facing Faces*, Venice 1997: there Wu Tian-zhang's show is dated 1991, the single works are dated 1989 and 1990. The official TFAM publication in occasion of *The Tenth Anniversary of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum* lists Wu Tian-zhang's *Four Eras* for September 1- 30, 1990, showing in B02- B04, and Yang Mao-lin's *Made in Taiwan* for November 24 – December 23, 1990, showing on the second floor at 301. See: *The Tenth Anniversary of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum*, TFAM, Taipei 1993, p. 174.

Yang Mao-lin's *Made in Taiwan*, which Ni Zai-qin praised as "the art work of the year 1990".<sup>43</sup> Within only a few years, virtually all leading exponents of the local art scene had abandoned the official exhibitionary system, and had decided that art history could only be written in the basement- the least restrictive space of the TFAM- or in the newly founded independent galleries spaces.

### **The demise of Chinese Modernity: independent art spaces**

The year 1989 marked an important watershed for the minimalist group, not only on a organizational, but also on a artistic level. Since 1986, Lai Chun-chun's studio in downtown Taipei had played the role as an informal meeting place and as a staging ground for artistic experiments. Ultimately this turned out to be too limited, since Lai often travelled to Japan and the US. In 1990 finally a stable solution was found, thanks to the largesse of photographer Liu Ching-tang (Liu was rather close to the group, and in 1987 had also participated at the *Experimental Art - Action and Space* show at the TFAM). He granted the group the use of two floors (later three) above his studio as a experimental gallery space. Using the name of the street and the park nearby as its name, IT Park gallery was born.<sup>44</sup> The opening showed several works that had already been featured at a two-man solo show of Tsong Pu and Chen Chien-pei (Chen Jian-bei) in the basement of the TFAM the year before.

The opening of IT Park launched the career of one of the most successful independent art spaces in all of Asia: to show there, and to become a member of the group, almost certainly guaranteed a career in the art-world. During the 1990's, IT Park was "the" meeting place not only for the discussions within the local art scene, but also a sure stop

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<sup>43</sup> Ni Zaiqin 倪再沁: 藝術家 -台灣美術, 細說從頭二十年 (*Yishujia - Taiwan Meishu, Xishuo Congtong Ershi Nian*) (*Artist's and Taiwanese Art, 20 Years in Review*), Artists editors, Taipei 1995, pp. 166, 167.

<sup>44</sup> Hu Yong-fen 胡永芬: "伊通公園開展了, 容許任何作品免費展出" (The opening of IT Park Gallery, any kind of work will be admitted to show, and free of charge), *中時晚報 (China Times Evening Post)*, 10.3.1990.

for many foreigners, international curators and critics. Interesting enough, IT Park not only showed young and promising talent such as Yao Jui-chung, who soon was invited to represent Taiwan in Venice, occasionally even painters of the Taipei Group such as Wu Tian-zhang presented installation works at IT Park, thus assuring themselves a ticket to the city on water.

*IT Park* was not the only independent gallery founded in the early 1990's: while *IT Park* had been the brainchild of a closely knit group of artists with a similar style, *Apartment 2* was the creation of a heterogeneous group of artists who did not believe in one single style – the first “postmodern” art space art space was born. *Apartment 2* existed only for a short time, but organized several seminal experimental exhibitions. In March 1991 it staged a group show in the basement of the TFAM, which wrote history not only for its artistic merits: the opening was intentionally inspired by local folk customs, specifically those of house-warming parties with a hot strip-show. This introduction of folk customs and bare skin into the museum space (the “experimental” basement of it) stirred quite some attention in the media. Much to the dismay of the artists involved, the show gained even more attention when some works caught fire during the closing hours, destroying most of the exhibition.

Even though the space on Heping East Road No. 2 did not exist for a long time, its members constituted the core group of the first Taiwan Pavilion in Venice, highlighting the new culture of stylistic pluralism which had been a core creed of *Apartment 2*.

### **The demise of Chinese Modernity: the shifting identity of installation art**

Tsong Pu's 1989 solo show at the TFAM (and IT Park) marked also a significant stylistic and ideological watershed. Far from pure minimalism, and far from purely playing on the possibilities of painting beyond the canvas, this show introduced everyday materials as an expressive means to reflect on the urbanization processes of

Taipei.

This new way of urban storytelling in the tradition of Arte Povera also marked a profound shift in the perception of identity, both political and cultural: with this show Tsong Pu, one of the major representatives of the “Chinese modernity” of the mid 1980’s, abandoned the grand narratives of questions of East and West, and rather shifted his attention towards the experience of local material and local identity.



Tsong Pu’s solo show in the basement of the TFAM in 1989. In the front: *Spiritual Pagoda*. Source, copyright: Tsong Pu 1989.

### **The demise of Chinese Modernity:**

#### **re-writing national history, *Four Era’s* and *Made in Taiwan*, 1990**

In September 1990 the prize-winner of the *Trends* of 1986, Wu Tianzhang, installed a show that was probably the first conceptual painting exhibition in Taiwanese history: he offered a reading of Taiwanese and Chinese history through the faces of the four political figures that had dominated the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Mao Ze-dong, Chiang Kai-shek, Deng Xiao-ping and Chiang Ching-kuo. At one end of the hall were portraits of Deng Xiao-ping and Chiang Ching-kuo, at the other Ma Ze-dong and Chiang Kai-shek. On the long walls were five portraits of each, which depicted each a decade of their government.

Huge “iron” fists, marching soldiers, soldiers killing people shackled on the ground openly alluded to the atrocities of the Chinese and Taiwanese 20<sup>th</sup> century: civil war on the mainland, White Terror in Taiwan, Cultural Revolution in China.





*Four Era's*. Wu Tianzhang 1990, installation in the basement of the TFAM, Source, copyright: Wu Tianzhang 1990.

It was an exhibition prepared specifically for the new museum, and specifically for the basement of the TFAM: the height of the canvasses at the long end of the hall covered the whole height of the museum walls, and the two paintings of the long end, as well as the five paintings along the side walls matched the width and length of the hall. The show was an open challenge to the standards of the museum, and to the freedom of expression within the spaces of high art: no exhibition in a public space in Taiwan had ever been similarly openly critical about Chinese and R.O.C. - Taiwanese history, and equally critical about the past two presidents of the R.O.C. Wu Tianzhang challenge played also with his own status as an award-winning artist: he gambled that the museum would not close the show of an artist that only years ago had won a first prize at the 1986 *Trends*. Wu won the challenge - the museum did not close his exhibition, and his show was acclaimed by art historian Ni Zaiqin as the best work of the year 1989.<sup>45</sup>

Only a few months later another member of the Taipei Group, Yang Mao-lin, staged a similar experimental painting solo show at the TFAM, this time in the corridors of the second floor, in room 301.

Yang's show has to be seen as complementing Wu Tianzhang: while Wu questioned and re-wrote history, Yang Mao-lin questioned and re-wrote Taiwanese identity, in ways that were quite similar to the question put forward in underground magazines and

<sup>45</sup> Ni Zaiqin 倪再沁: 藝術家 - 台灣美術, 細說從頭二十年 (*Yishujia - Taiwan Meishu, Xishuo Congtong Ershi Nian*) (*Artist's and Taiwanese Art, 20 Years in Review*), Artists editors, Taipei 1995, p. 156.

independent literature.<sup>46</sup>



*MADE IN TAIWAN- Limbs-Trunk Sign Section I / MADE IN TAIWAN-肢體記號I*, 175x350cm, 1990.  
Source, copyright: Yang Mao-lin 1990.

The question for Yang was the identity that defined Taiwan, once all the layers of Chinese nationalist ideology had been peeled off, once Taiwan had been de-sinocised, so to speak. He decided to start a ten-year project, in which he would investigate Taiwanese identity from different angles, starting with politics, then history and lastly culture, thus paralleling certain efforts in underground literature.<sup>47</sup>

His starting point was politics, what he observed was a struggle, an all-out fight for power: between the forces of the old and the new, between black and white, between KMT and DPP. In a way similar to Descartes, who had built re-built philosophy starting with “cogito, ergo sum”, Yang attempted to re-build a new Taiwanese identity on “I struggle, therefore I am”, after all the layers of doubtful Chinese ideology had been peeled off.

Performance artist Lee Mingsheng had questioned the universality of the museum space on very specific occasions – a Dada retrospective, a performance art event, an

<sup>46</sup> Hsiao A-chin: “‘De-Sinocizing’ of Taiwanese literature: the early 1980s,” in: Hsiao A-chin, *Contemporary Taiwanese Cultural Nationalism*, Routledge, London, New York 2000, p. 96-105.

<sup>47</sup> Hsiao A-chin: “Crafting of a national culture: the second half of the 1980s and after”, in: Hsiao A-chin: *Contemporary Taiwanese Cultural Nationalism*, Routledge, London, New York 2000, p. 106-109.

international exchange show – and had thus managed to challenge the museum from the inside, on the platform of modernity claimed by the museum itself. Wu Tian-zhang's and Yang Mao-lin's solo exhibitions instead highlighted how the transformations in the wider field of politics had reshaped the standards of the public space: the establishment of the first opposition party, the DPP, in 1986 and the abolition of martial law in 1987, followed by the death of president Chiang Ching-kuo in 1988 opened up a new mental spaces and possibilities to question politics and history. These transformations re-shaped also the museum space, in ways more dramatic and profound than the previous experiments with new materials and new forms of art such as installation art.

### **The demise of Chinese Modernity:**

#### **The Taipei Biennial, the demise of the aesthetic object**

While Lee's performances in 1988 may not have borne immediate fruits such as those of the previous scandals, these performances incited a discussion about museum standards which resulted in a major change in the bureaucratic organization of the most prestigious exhibition of contemporary art in Taiwan – that is, it resulted in the abolition of the *Trends*, which was replaced in 1992 by the *Taipei Biennial*.

These discussions were often not directly linked to Lee or his performances: they highlighted a wider phenomenon, a growing gap between the cultural development in the wider art world and the standards set up by the museum. This was most acutely felt in the gap between the critical acclaim enjoyed by the experimental shows both in the basement of the museum as well as in independent art spaces, and the rather lukewarm, if not underwhelming reception of any of the official activities of the museum. Official art had lost its authority, or to use a Gramscian term, the “hegemony” of officialdom had been eroded. This process was closely linked to the lifting of martial law, and even more so to the lifting on the restrictions of press freedom. This becomes visible in the critical

reactions to Lee Mingsheng's performances: before the lifting of martial law, the number of pages of newspapers, or the publication of new newspapers and magazines was highly restricted; thus exercising not only a censorship on the words as such, but also on the space that could be dedicated to any cultural debate. Before 1987, art reviews occupied a few hundred words; by 1988, a review, or the debate on a topic could also occupy a whole page, such as in the case of Victoria Lu's and Wu Mali's responses to the museums censorship of Lee's performances.

### **The demise of Chinese Modernity: the museum as a public space**

This new freedom of the press made itself felt even inside the museum, on the official publications of the museum: on the occasion of the first Taipei Biennial of 1992, one of the critics invited to contribute to the catalogue, Huang Hai-ming, with the subterfuge to hand in his statement only in the very last minute before the catalogue went into print, managed to give a frank account of the reasons that led to the failure and abolishment of the *Trends* exhibition series, and even spelled out a programme, a vision for the future of the Taipei Biennial.

While the performances and the criticism of the previous years were usually directed against one specific problem, and often used very specific occasions such as the South Californian show or the *World of Dada* exhibition as a staging ground, Huang Hai-ming's criticism was much broader, and chiefly revolved around the transformations of the public space in general.

### **The demise of Chinese Modernity: re-introducing life into art**

According to Huang, the flagship exhibition of the museum, the *Trends*, had failed to react to the changes happening in the wider public sphere that had taken place, and were still taking place, in the period after the abolishment of martial law and the introduction

of democracy, thus failing in its mission as a space that should facilitate public cultural discourse. According to Huang, the period after the lifting of Martial law was characterized by a transformation of local art production:

“Following the lifting of martial law in Taiwan, there has been a variety of campaigns and protest marches. The social chaos has been reflected in our local art to an extent without precedence.”<sup>48</sup>

Huang Hai-ming’s argument is very close to Habermas’ argument about the transformation of the public sphere<sup>49</sup>- and as Habermas has argued about the emergence of a public sphere in Europe, so does Huang Haiming, arguing that this transformation was not limited merely to the sphere of politics (the streets), but was also reflected in the arts scene- and with Habermas, it has to be argued that it was the discursive spaces in the arts that challenged the lack of political freedom under the military dictatorship of the KMT. Yet, very much as Habermas, Huang Hai-ming argues that these spaces and platforms of open confrontation and dialogue are not a mere given, but need to be cultivated, that a democratic society to function, it needs venues for open dialogue:

“This trend ... should be put in an arena for dialogue. Only by this can we stimulate more intellectual and positive thinking.”<sup>50</sup>

In Huang Hai-ming’s vision, this is not simply a question of an abstract metaphysical principles, but a question to cultivate the critical minds of the citizens:

“If we wish to cultivate independent thinking from the people, this kind of dialogue is absolutely necessary.”<sup>51</sup>

Yet by shunning political art, the museum has failed its very mission:

“it is a pity that the Biennial did not do any interpretation about the transformation

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<sup>48</sup> Huang Hai-ming: “Observations and Suggestions on the Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art 1992”, in: *The Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art 1992*, TFAM, Taipei 1992, pp. 11-12.

<sup>49</sup> Habermas, Jürgen *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. MIT press, 1991.

<sup>50</sup> Huang Hai-ming: “Observations and Suggestions on the Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art 1992”, in: *The Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art 1992*, TFAM, Taipei 1992, pp. 11-12.

<sup>51</sup> Huang Hai-ming: “Observations and Suggestions on the Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art 1992”, in: *The Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art 1992*, TFAM, Taipei 1992, pp. 11-12.

era; thus it shows no intellectual impact to the public”.<sup>52</sup>

In Huang Hai-ming’s analysis, it was the very fiction to maintain an apolitical stance of the museum which caused it to neglect the single most profound transformation of Taiwanese culture – the politicization of contemporary art in the process of democratization; and in his analysis it is this fictitious apolitical stance which caused the exhibition programme of the museum to descend into intellectual irrelevance. One may argue that lack of intellectual impact may be a somewhat curious criterion; against that it has to be argued that if the KMT und Chiang Ching-kuo had decided to invest in the construction of a public museum, the chief scope had been to win back the hearts and minds of the citizens of the R.O.C.- or, to say it with Gramsci, to exert a form of cultural hegemony over contemporary society. Or to use the wording of Homi Bhabha, this lack of “intellectual impact” described by Huang Haiming, is where the tension between the “pedagogical and the performative address of the nation” shows up- the people, and more importantly the artists and intellectuals, the

“cutting edge between the totalizing powers of the social and the forces that signify the ... unequal interests and the identities within the population.”<sup>53</sup>

had simply abandoned the museum.

Yet while Professor Huang’s points to the failure of the TFAM to establish a cultural hegemony for the KMT, what he asks for is a completely new role: as he is asking for “intellectual impact”, he is also asking for a new role of the museum- to function as a platform of cultural discourse. Interesting enough, Huang Hai-ming’s analysis was not based on metaphysical or philosophical considerations, but on an analysis of the status of the TFAM’s chief exhibition within the Taiwanese art system:

“In the past few years, the *Contemporary Art Trend in the R.O.C.* appeared to be

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<sup>52</sup> Huang Hai-ming: “Observations and suggestions on the Taipei Biennial of contemporary art 1992”, in: *The Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art 1992*, TFAM, Taipei 1992, pp. 11-12

<sup>53</sup> Homi Bhabha: “DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation”, in : Homi k. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration*, Routledge, Abingdon, New York, 1990, p. 297.

losing its attraction among artists who concentrated on their careers to become more established.”<sup>54</sup>

Huang pointed to a phenomenon of the last years that had been more than evident for everyone to see: since 1988, no major exponent of the minimalist Chinese modernist group around the SoCA studio had participated at the *Trends* exhibition. This had surely been a voluntary choice of career by the artists, and certainly was not due to a pre-selection made by the museum administration or any jury, as had been the case with more political artists, such as the painters of the Taipei Group, or performance artists such as Lee Mingsheng or Chen Jie-ren.

What was worse, many of the prizes of the years since the lifting of martial law had been awarded to students:

“Instead they induced more and more young beginners who produced art works merely intended to win a prize; many of them did not go on between the events.”<sup>55</sup>

What Huang spells out here, is that the standard of judgement had become overly fossilized, and predictable enough for art students to win the first prizes, even though these works in retrospect appear rather derivative – created in the very style of local prize-winning artists. An example for this were the prizes awarded in the *Contemporary Art Trends in the R.O.C. 1990*: two out of three prize-winners were still students, Huang Tzeng-yow<sup>56</sup> and Lin Ying-t’sun,<sup>57</sup> the first presented a work that may well have been inspired by Tsong Pu’s installations, the second was stylistically rather close to the prize-winner of 1986, Chang Yong-cun.

The works of these artists may have dazzled the eyes of the jurors, yet Huang hinted at an inherent problem with these works- that they were made specifically for that

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<sup>54</sup> Huang Hai-ming: “Observations and Suggestions on the Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art 1992”, in: *The Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art 1992*, TFAM, Taipei 1992, p. 10.

<sup>55</sup> Huang Hai-ming: “Observations and Suggestions on the Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art 1992”, in: *The Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art 1992*, TFAM, Taipei 1992, p. 10.

<sup>56</sup> TFAM: *Contemporary Art Trends in the R.O.C. 1990*, TFAM, Taipei 1990, pp. 16, 17.

<sup>57</sup> TFAM: *Contemporary Art Trends in the R.O.C. 1990*, TFAM, Taipei 1990, pp. 18, 19.

competition; in other words, the museum had created a closed system that had become a sort of Ivory-tower, detached from the rest of the Taiwanese art world:

“the young beginners’ works might at times show astonishing quality; however, they can offer superficial prosperity only, hardly helpful to the development of art in Taiwan”.<sup>58</sup>

It has to be pointed out how a shift in political circumstance – the lifting of Martial Law and the introduction of democracy – destabilized a whole system of aesthetic appreciation and beliefs: the system of the *Trends* competition was based on the judgement of a single work, that was handed in more or less anonymously and which was judged by a panel of academic experts; this process embodied the belief that art, at least the art shown in a public museum, had to be treated and framed like a scientific object. The art object was to be judged as a single, independent object, isolated from any possible context or previous knowledge as if it was analysed inside a laboratory, where it was exposed to the gaze of the scientist who classified it according to the eternal standards of modern art history and aesthetics. To abolish this system would mean to abolish the security of the scientific gaze of classic modernism, of the gaze of academy, that could justify itself through its scientific approach trained by natural science.

### **The demise of Chinese Modernity: Cultural and personal artistic narratives**

The measure employed by the museum to counter this malaise was a change in the screening process:

“To adjust this situation, the Biennial required every participant to submit at least ten slides of works for preliminary competition, thus screening out many part-time artists from the beginning”.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Huang Hai-ming: “Observations and Suggestions on the Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art 1992”, in: *The Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art 1992*, TFAM, Taipei 1992, p. 10.

<sup>59</sup> Huang Hai-ming: “Observations and Suggestions on the Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art 1992”,



This rather simple measure to weed out the beginners and part-time artists might not quite look like a philosophical or aesthetic revolution: after all, rather than screening one work, now ten slides are shown. Yet this simple reform prepared the ground for a revolution in aesthetics that could hardly be more profound: while previously single inanimate objects were subjected to the gaze of the art historians, now, by screening groups of works, the jury members were dealing with an artist and his artistic development; no more single objects, but rather the inner necessity of an author and the logic of development, as it played out in a trajectory through time. From judging single inanimate objects, the system had moved to evaluate authors.

This first part of the reform, to recognize and promote artists, rather than single objects, was put into practice already in the first *1992 Taipei Biennial*. In 1992 the shift to more experienced artists was also highlighted by the prizes, which were awarded to, among others, several founding-fathers of the Taiwanese art scene, Tsong Pu and Lu Xian-ming. Tsong not only had won the first *Mayor of Taipei Prize* in the very first *Trends* exhibition in 1984, setting the stage for the development of modern art that had followed in the 1980s, in 1989 he had also co-founded the most influential independent artist-run gallery spaces in Taiwan, IT Park. Lu Xian-ming was one of the founders of the Taipei Group, thus represented the group of the local transavantgarde painters that were deeply involved in the new discourse of Taiwanese identity.

Yet this reform of the screening process was only a first step, and only a partial solution to the bigger question of the cultural relevance of the Taipei Biennial. According to Huang, this new selection may have the advantage of promoting more established artists, but did not necessarily guarantee for an interesting or intellectually stimulating exhibition. On the contrary, the current policy towards the choice of jurors from different artistic currents only fostered political correctness and the status quo:

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in: *The Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art 1992*, TFAM, Taipei 1992, p. 10.

“Since this Biennial virtually remains a competition in which the museum wants no preoccupation, and since the jury members were invited under a balancing policy, the interaction among jury members tends to be a compromise, and balancing a selection is naturally the final result”.<sup>60</sup>

Huang Hai-ming’s vision for the future of the Taipei Biennial and for the future of large-scale art exhibitions was a much broader one.

Huang did not only analyse the shortcomings of the *Trends* that became apparent after the lifting of martial law, he also spelled out a vision of the future, a future that was experimented and put into practice only in the decade to come, yet a future that would fundamentally alter and revolutionize the status of the art object: no more object of objectively assessable beauty, which is judged through a scientific committee of art historians, but rather an object that is part of, and that is able to generate, a larger cultural discourse.

The reasons for the need for this fundamental change in the status of the art object were to be found in the transformations of Taiwanese society after the lifting of martial law and the introduction of democracy:

“With recent opening trends in many respects and the social transformation, the term ‘multiplicity’ no longer indicates different examples which co-exist harmoniously in a self-closed environment; rather it means the interactions and conflicts among trends in a relatively open society”.<sup>61</sup>

In other words, with the lifting of martial law, Taiwanese society had moved beyond the paradigm of modernity, according to which social problems could be confronted one by one in a model of gradual progress and development, leading to ever-higher levels of social harmony. With the end of martial law, and the end of near-complete one-party

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<sup>60</sup> Huang Hai-ming: “Observations and Suggestions on the Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art 1992”, in: *The Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art 1992*, TFAM, Taipei 1992, pp. 10-11.

<sup>61</sup> Huang Hai-ming: “Observations and Suggestions on the Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art 1992”, in: *The Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art 1992*, TFAM, Taipei 1992, p. 11.

control over the press and public opinion, Taiwanese society had rather moved into the realm of post-modernity (a term Huang does not use in his statement); this new situation of social and cultural plurality also called for a new status of the art object.

### **The demise of Chinese Modernity: the museum as a public space**

According to Huang, the new situation called for a new type of museum, while the refusal of this challenge was but negligence by the museum towards its role in public intellectual life, and negligence towards society. Huang Hai-ming elaborated it thus:

“Whereas social change has always been the stimulus for new art trends, if the Biennial does not try to expose these trends, to study the arguments and conflicts among them, ... then the vitality shown in our society of this era will be unfortunately sacrificed with negligence ...”<sup>62</sup>

This seems to support the view of a modern society, or rather a society that is living an “unfinished modernity”, a project that needs constant re-adjustment, which needs social spaces and open platforms where this civic dialogue can take place. Interesting enough, Huang does not envision a Hegelian synthesis as the outcome of that dialogue- he rather seems to support a more radical view, a view of a pluralist society that accepts its internal differences, by offering a platform for open confrontation:

”There are things which seem impossible to coexist in a harmonious way, but since this kind of coexistence can not accumulate power, it seems better to conquer the ambiguity. If we offer opportunity for different groups in turns to present themselves, then self-practice of individuals and dialogue among groups will be enforced. The museum can take this responsibility in order to distinguish itself from other spaces.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Huang Hai-ming: “Observations and Suggestions on the Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art 1992”, in: *The Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art 1992*, TFAM, Taipei 1992, pp. 11-12.

<sup>63</sup> Huang Hai-ming: “Observations and Suggestions on the Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art 1992”, in: *The Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art 1992*, TFAM, Taipei 1992, pp. 11-12.

It is important to point out how much Huang Hai-ming's vision differs from that of a Hegelian synthesis- the image of the nation he proposes does not point to a new synthesis; on the contrary, the role of the museum seems to constitute an almost opposite role: to make those differences visible.

In defence of the exhibitionary system of the 1980's it has to be pointed out that the *Trends of Modern Art in the R.O.C.* did not specifically exclude political art- on the contrary, the Trends, but also the first retrospective of the 1980's,



*Time and the*

*Behaviour in Game- Conflict Chapter*, Yang Mao-lin 1987.  
Source, copyright: Yang Mao-lin 1987.

*Unprecedented* in 1988 made a conscious effort to include all local art trends. But these single trends were never highlighted or elaborated as such- they were rather hidden within the greater anonymous logic of catalogues that were organized not by artistic trends or ideas, but the anonymous order of the alphabet and the ordering of family names. Thus even a highly political canvas, such as Yang Maolin's *Behaviour in Game – Conflict Chapter* of 1987, an image clearly reflecting the climate of political upheaval and change, could be exhibited at the *Time and the Unprecedented* retrospective of 1988. Yet after 1986, no political or socially active artist ever won a first prize at the *Trends*, and any single work would disappear within the hodge-podge of a catalogue arranged according to the order of family names.

### **The demise of Chinese Modernity: the need for a curator**

The vision that Huang Hai-ming proposed went even further than that: beyond a new status of the art object and the artist, his vision also included a completely new social and cultural figure: the curator. Even in the West, the curator as the central figure of a contemporary art exhibition was a rather recent phenomenon – usually Harald Szeemann and his *documenta 5* of 1972 are taken as the first example of large-scale exhibition that presented itself as a process and a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, created by an author-curator, rather than a list of single objects, and only in the early 1990s emerged the figure of the star-curator.<sup>64</sup>

In Taiwan, in 1992, the social and intellectual position of the star-curator was something completely new, and almost completely unheard of. This therefore speaks for Huang Hai-ming's vision to critically promote this new idea in his critique of the old exhibitionary system of the *Trends*, in a moment in history where the phenomenon of the star-curator and public intellectual was only just emerging in the West, and had hardly been theorised in the books of art history and museology.

According to Huang Hai-ming, the curator, or rather the team of curators, did not necessarily have to be art historians (as were the judges of the *Trends*) – they could also be social scientists, or to put it in the most general terms, they would have to be, first of all, intellectuals:

“The panel to organize this event may consist of specialists in humanism, art history and art criticism. They would decide the issue in advance, and the art critics and scholars could start long-term research and curate an exhibition at the end”.<sup>65</sup>

In Huang's view, the figure of the public prophet-intellectual, analysing society and

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<sup>64</sup> Paul O'Neill: “The curatorial turn: from practice to discourse,” in: Judith Rugg and Michèle Sedgwick (eds.): *Issues in curating contemporary art and performance*, Bristol, Chicago 2007, p. 22.

<sup>65</sup> Huang Hai-ming: “Observations and Suggestions on the Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art 1992”, in: *The Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art 1992*, TFAM, Taipei 1992, p. 12.

proposing new trajectories of discourse, did not exist yet; in Taiwan, this cultural figure was still to be created. The *Taipei Biennial*, this new format of the recurring large-scale exhibition, had the potential to become the platform for such a new social function:

“If our art scholars and critics are not ready to do research on our era due to no motivation, the Biennial can invite and encourage their participation. This will be the best incentive to initiate the said accumulation of local art achievement and to foster an independent attitude toward this achievement”.<sup>66</sup>

### **The slow demise Chinese Modernity:**

#### **the 1992 and 1994 Taipei Biennial, the return of the artists**

Huang Hai-ming’s prophetic vision to transform the museum from a space of art history into a public platform for cultural discourse, and to substitute the exhibition of single art works with a platform for artists and curators, did not realize itself immediately.

In the following two editions of 1992 and 1994, the emphasis the Taipei Biennial shifted from showing single art works to showing artists.

This recognition of artists as authors in 1992 and 1994 was highlighted by the choice of the prize winners: chiefly well-established pioneers of the contemporary art scene such as Tsong Pu and Gu Shi-yong 顧世勇 (members of IT Park), Lian De-cheng 連德誠 (founder of Apartment 2), Lu Xian-ming 陸先銘 (secretary of the Taipei Group), as well as Xiao Li-hong 蕭麗虹 and Huang Hai-yun 黃海雲.

Beyond this new recognition of mid-career artists, every prize-winning artist was also allowed to show more than one work, or even fairly large-scale installations.

Yet, as pointed out by Huang Hai-ming, the 1992 (as well as the 1994) Taipei Biennial remained in the tradition of the *Trends*, as they presented mainly a selection of representatives of the dominating art trends; beyond Huang Hai-ming’s criticism of the

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<sup>66</sup> Huang Hai-ming: “Observations and Suggestions on the Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art 1992”, in: *The Taipei Biennial of Contemporary Art 1992*, TFAM, Taipei 1992, p. 12.

previous system, and his vision of the future, there was hardly any intellectual or cultural synthesis or a curatorial statement to be found in the catalogues.

This continuity with the 1980s *Trends* had also to do with the continuation of the dominance of the old jury system that had been previously established: the young visionaries such as Huang Hai-ming, Shih Jui-jen or Lai Ying-ying had been invited only to the preliminary round of the selection process; in the final round, they were substituted by three foreigners: Wolfgang Becker, Claude Fournet and Koichi Yasunaga. On the contrary, the representatives of the 1980s *Trends* jury system were present at both rounds: Wang Xiu-xiong and Jiang Xun 蔣勳 in the preliminary round, and Wang Zhe-xiong and Lü Qing-fu in the final selection.

In the early 1990s, the role of the museum remained a widely discussed topic- yet the paradigms of modernism continued to linger on, especially within the ranks of museum administrators. An example is the symposium on *The Role and Function of the Contemporary Fine Arts Museum*, held in 1994 by the TFAM: all contributions by Taiwanese scholars invited by the TFAM proposed a vision of the museum as based on single objects of a cold, scientific gaze. Hsu Wen-chin, an internal curator of the TFAM and also the editor of the symposium publication, re-elaborated the ideological basis of the *Trends* exhibitions of judging art only by art historians, with her paper “The necessity of the application of art history in fine arts museums – An examination of art history education in Taiwan”.<sup>67</sup> Han Bao-teh re-proposed a vision of the contemporary art museum as based on natural science, in his paper “Some views of the contemporary fine arts museum based on the example of the science museum”.<sup>68</sup> Only foreign scholars advanced differing visions, such as Mary G. Neill, who spoke about “The art museum as

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<sup>67</sup> Hsu Wen-chin: “The necessity of the application of art history in fine arts museums – An examination of art history education in Taiwan”, in: *Symposium on “The Role and Function of the Contemporary Fine Arts Museums”, Treatise*, TFAM, Taipei 1994, pp. 117-150.

<sup>68</sup> Han Bao-teh: “Some views of the contemporary fine arts museum based on the example of the science museum”, in: *Symposium on “The Role and Function of the Contemporary Fine Arts Museums”, Treatise*, TFAM, Taipei 1994, pp. 255-290.

scholar, inspirational teacher, and societal transformer”.<sup>69</sup>

### **The first experiments in curatorship**

The role of the curator was experimented first on smaller occasions and experimental venues: One of the first examples was Huang Hai-ming’s exhibition *Dis/continuity: religion, shamanism, nature* 延續與斷裂—宗教、巫術、自然 which opened in the basement of the TFAM in September 1992. Another milestone event was Victoria Lu’s *New Art New Tribes - Taiwan Art in the Nineties* 台灣九〇年代新觀念族群, staged in 1993 at Taipei’s Han Art gallery. The Dimensions Art Foundation also organized a series of exhibitions in 1994, such as Lai Xiang-ling’s 賴香伶 *City-Nature* 都會中的自然. The same year Dragon Gate gallery 玄門畫廊 invited artist Mei Ding-yan 梅丁衍 to curate *Post-Martial Law. Conceptual Art* 後戒嚴. 觀念動員<sup>70</sup>.

According to Lin Ping, it was mainly the interaction with the international art scene, in particular the first participation at the Venice Biennale in 1995, that forced the museum to slowly adopt the curator system.<sup>71</sup> According to Lin Ping, on the occasion of the first participation at the Venice Biennale, the museum still had to adhere to the traditional “public administration system”, which did not recognize the central figure of the curator. In a note, Lin Ping explained that all public museums in Taiwan adopted a

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<sup>69</sup> Mary G. Neill: “The art museum as scholar, inspirational teacher, and societal transformer”, in: *Symposium on “The Role and Function of the Contemporary Fine Arts Museums”*, *Treatise*, TFAM, Taipei 1994, pp. 151-178.

<sup>70</sup> Lin Ping 林平: “策展人光環—台灣策展事業的漫漫長路/ Curator’s halo - The long and winding road of curatorial business in Taiwan”, initially published in 2004 on the September issue of the local artists magazine 藝術家雜誌, later in a revised version in 2006 on the TFAM’s magazine 美術論叢, now also accessible online on the website of the Fine Arts Department of Tunghai University: <http://www2.thu.edu.tw/~fineart/upfiles/tecfile01143090863.doc>, last accessed on 7.6.2010. See also Kao Chien-hui, Victoria Lu, Philomena Mariani: “Taiwan Chronology”, in: Gao Minglu (ed.): *Inside/Out, New Chinese Art*, New York 1998, pp. 205-206.

<sup>71</sup> Lin Ping 林平: “策展人光環—台灣策展事業的漫漫長路/ Curator’s halo - The long and winding road of curatorial business in Taiwan”, initially published in 2004 on the September issue of the local artists magazine 藝術家雜誌, later in a revised version in 2006 on the TFAM’s magazine 美術論叢, now also accessible online on the website of the Fine Arts Department of Tunghai University: <http://www2.thu.edu.tw/~fineart/upfiles/tecfile01143090863.doc>, last accessed on 7.6.2010.



system by which all “artistic” choices, including the selection of artworks for exhibition or collection had to be made by a jury of external specialists – such as to maintain a level of “democratic” correctness.

The first public institution to respond to the shortcomings of this system, and to invite one single external curator to make all artistic decisions was Taipei County, who in 1994 invited Ni Zaiqin. As in Taipei County, so in Taipei city a reform of the exhibitionary system turned out to be ultimately a political problem, or a question of a new party taking over: in both cases it was the DPP, a new DPP mayor, who reshaped the and reformed the administration of the art system. The first true attempts at curatorship was undertaken only in 1996, during the 1996 Taipei Biennial, dedicated to the question of Taiwanese identity. To that purpose the TFAM invited a group of social scientists and writers, who invited more than one hundred local artists; as a result, the show turned to be not so much a curated show, but rather a general inventory of the Taiwanese art scene, according to categories that did not necessarily provide a perfect fit. This grand attempt to curatorial intervention remained a short-lived one: in 1998 the TFAM decided to invite an international curator, Fumio Nanjo, to curate the Taipei Biennial; as a result, the premier exhibition of Taiwanese contemporary art, the Taipei Biennial, was turned into a dominion of international curators, who usually showed only limited interest towards the local art scene.

### 1998: The Taipei Biennial abandons Taiwanese identity questions



Two views of the main hall of the TFAM during the 1998 Taipei Biennial, with the golden column *Encore, Encore, Encore* by Choi Jeong-hwa, a series of photographs shot in Taipei by Nobuyoshi Araki and a *Don't rush, be patient* by Mei Dean-e hanging from the ceiling. Photo: Felix Schöber 1998.

In 1998, the Taipei Biennial was curated by the Japanese Fumio Nanjo, who presented Asian growing economies and urban conglomerates as a *Site of Desire*. Since 1998, the Taipei Biennial aimed at becoming one of the leading contemporary art events in Asia, adopting a strong theme and inviting numerous famous Asian and western artists. This branding happened at the expense of the local art scene, which was usually represented through five to six artists within a much larger show.

This had the curious effect that after 1998, the Taipei Biennial effectively abandoned the question of national representation, or how to represent a pluralist society; or to put it in other words, from 1998 onwards, local artist and local curators played only a minor role towards this question, at least as far as the cultural stage provided by the Taipei Fine Arts Museum and the Taipei Biennial was concerned.

By default, this question was moved from the local level to the international, chiefly the Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. The Taipei Biennial in turn became a stage for selection for artists worthy for that international stage, or a stage for artists who had excelled on that international stage provided by the TFAM.

Examples for this new class of “international” artists are Huang Chin-ho, Wu Mali, Wu Tien-chang and Wang Jun-jie, who, after their participation at the



1995 and the 1997 Taiwan Pavilion in

*Untitled- Dream Pig* by Xu Tan (installation, left) and a large canvas by Huang Chin-ho at the 1998 Taipei Biennial. Photo: Felix Schöber 1998.

Venice respectively, were invited by Fumio Nanjo to participate at the 1998 Taipei Biennial, or Liu Shih-fen who was “discovered” by Fumio Nanjo in 1998 and represented Taiwan in Venice in 2001.

The question of Taiwanese identity, and the bigger question of how to transform the Taipei Biennial and the Taipei Fine Arts Museum into a public museum, into a platform for cultural discourse, was sublimated



and deviated to the question of internationalisation, which was largely reduced to the question of introducing new curatorial and artistic trends or just

*HB 1750*, Installation and performance of Wang Jun-jie during the opening of the 1998 Taipei Biennial. Photo: Felix Schöber 1998.

international stars to Taiwan, such as Chinese- Fujianese superstar Cai Guoqiang, who played an ironic game with inter-strait relations by launching golden missiles from the park behind the TFAM, or Chinese performance artist Lin Yilin, who for political reasons could not participate in person but commissioned a wall of bricks with paper money in between.

The notion of the Biennial as a platform was taken up again (at least as a slogan) only in 2004, when curator Barbara Vanderlinden ended her statement with the exclamation “Let the dialogue begin”.



A more serious attempt in line with Huang Hai-ming’s vision was made by the 2008 *Taipei Biennial* through curator

*The result of 1000 pieces, installation by Lin Yilin at the 1998 Taipei Biennial. Photo: F. S. 1998.*

Manray Hsu, who invited the Viennese-Chinese artist Yang Jun to analyse the local museums and art spaces, and who proposed a vision for a new art centre, which opened in 2010 as Taipei Contemporary Art Center.

### **Conclusion: the challenge and slow demise of Chinese Modernity, 1986 - 1996**

The period from 1986 until 1992 was one of the most highly contested periods of the museums existence. In the first two years of the museum, the new possibilities that had opened up with the anointment of modern art had been embraced by the local art scene, even though the project “Chinese Modernity” already showed its limitations. With the lifting of Martial Law, artists and critics started to openly challenge the museum and its policies, challenging both its claim to represent modernity, as well as its claim to represent the nation.

With the single exception of 1986, for all these politically turbulent years the jurors of the flagship exhibition, the *Trends*, maintained an apolitical stance that ultimately backfired on the very exhibitionary system itself - it opened up a gap, an abyss between the standards of the biggest show of the museum and the development in the wider art world. As a result, the very flagship of the museums exhibitionary system was abandoned by the art scene: the museum had lost its cultural hegemony. Not only the

exhibitionary system had lost its credibility - the judgement process, the ideological basis of the aesthetic standards applied by the museum had to be replaced by a new system. As a result, the ideology to judge single objects on the basis of aesthetics and art history was abolished, and was substituted by a system that evaluated artists and their creative history- their personal cultural narratives and discursive relevance.

This new status of the art work as part of a wider cultural discourse also called for a new social position, the curator- yet while some critics such as Huang Hai-ming called for a new function of the museum as a platform of cultural discourse, the transformation process turned out to be a slow one, and was closely linked to the political transformations within the city of Taipei.

It has been pointed out by Tony Bennett that the Foucaultian “need for a corporeal gaze within the space of representation” had been the driving force behind much of the new identity politics in contemporary museum practice, a point that had been applied by Homi Bhabha to the question of nationalism, arguing that

“The tension between the paedagogical and the performative ... turns the reference to a ‘people’ - ...- into a problem of knowledge that haunts the symbolic formation of social authority.”<sup>72</sup>

Looking at the development of the TFAM’s flagship exhibitions between the late 1980s until the 1996 Taipei Biennial, there is no doubt that the ultimate driving force in the development of the museum space was identity politics- especially so once the democratic party had won the seat of the mayor of Taipei.

Yet against Tony Bennett and Homi Bhabha it has to be questioned whether “the people” or an abstract, “corporeal gaze” are the best categories to describe the development of the modern museum- and whether the museum as a secular space does not rather need authors and their freedom as points of reference- a point put into practice in the new

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<sup>72</sup> Homi Bhabha: “DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation”, in : Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration*, Routledge, Abingdon, New York, 1990, p. 297.

approach of the Taipei Biennial, which abandoned the appreciation of single aesthetic objects, and rather inaugurated the idea of the artist as an author of a personal narrative, and a point put forward as a vision by Huang Hai-ming when he asked for the creation of a new intellectual position, the art curator. It is this second set of questions, the question of the role of the artist as an author, that makes those performances of the late 1980s stand out as beacons in the history of Taiwanese art, as they point at an even deeper transformation of the museum space and the object of art- the transformation of the museum into a platform of open cultural and political discourse, and the transformation of the work of art into a semiotic object, an element of a wider cultural discourse.

## Chapter five: the microcosm of the essential nation, the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice, 1995-1999.

This chapter describes the curatorial and ideological development of the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice from 1995 until 1999, starting with Lee Mingsheng's participation at the Venice Biennale in 1993, and a short outlook on the Taipei Biennials in the years 1996 and 1998.

This first invitation of one Taiwanese and a group of Chinese contemporary artists to the Venice Biennale by Achille Bonito Oliva in 1993 changed profoundly both the Western as well as the Chinese and Taiwanese contemporary art scene. After 1993, every following Biennale showed an ever growing number of Chinese and Taiwanese artists, finally resulting in the creation of a



1993 Venice Biennale chief curator Achille Bonito Oliva (left) and Taiwanese artist Lee Mingsheng during the inauguration days of the 1993 Biennale. Detail of a panel on the history of the Biennale during the 2014 Venice Biennale of architecture. Photo: Felix Schöber 2014.



The panel dedicated to the 1990s, part of a retrospective exhibition on the history of the Venice Biennale, on show in 2014. According to this panel, the important artistic interventions in that period were made by Hans Haacke, Cai Guo-qiang, Marina Abramovic and Lee Mingsheng, among others. No other Taiwanese artist was deemed noteworthy in the retrospective mounted by the Biennale. Photo: Felix Schöber 2014.

global art scene; on the other hand, the “West” and the Venice Biennale become one of the most important platforms to define what constituted contemporary Chinese and Taiwanese art.

After Lee Mingsheng’s high-profile participation in 1993, Taiwan started to use contemporary art to promote its image as a nation. Starting in 1995, Taiwan developed a highly complex form of national representation through contemporary art. This representation of the nation continued to use the idea of a modern nation steeped in Chinese philosophy, but this image of linear progress was expanded and deeply transformed into a complex microcosm of knowledge, creating a new image of a nation rooted in an nature (both an environmental consciousness as an essential link to the territory), but conscious of it’s complex past and its social problem, and launched towards a highly technological but also spiritual future. What made this new image different was its ramifications, or rather the idea that only a multiplicity of approaches and experiences could describe Taiwanese identity; yet this multiplicity also soon appeared to have rather distinct expressions, that were repeated over time: the nation was imagined not only to be conscious of its past trauma and social problems, but also to have high hopes for a spiritual and technologically advanced future.

For every single artist, this discourse re-ordered the field unlike any other previous discourse: it was not sufficient any more to simply claim “modernity”- any work needed to occupy a position within that new discursive universe of Taiwanese identity.

This also re-wrote the coordinates of the museum: the modern art museum was turned into a repository of knowledge about the nation, into a space dedicated to research for forgotten or repressed knowledges about that nation that had been born with the lifting of Martial Law. Interesting enough, this was a form of identity discourse quite distinct from other fields of cultural production- unlike any other field, many single artists defined themselves by occupying a specific position within a wider field of knowledge of the nation- every single work of art was thus intended as but one discursive element,



ultimately intelligible only within that wider universe of knowledges that defined Taiwanese identity.

During the mid 1990s, there were numerous exhibitions dedicated to the question of Taiwanese identity- and the best part of artistic creativity as well as critical writing was dedicated to this issue. Among these, one exhibition series stands out unlike any other for its continuity and density: the Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, where this universal microcosm of the nation was condensed into a intricate pattern hat repeated itself over the years with astonishing continuity.

The Republic of China was only the second (or third) Asian nation to establish a permanent national pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Thanks to the particular political position of Taipei city within Taiwanese politics, this pavilion became the most important site for the construction of a new nation: Taiwan.

The establishment of a permanent participation at the Venice Biennale in 1995 constituted the last step in the development of exhibition activities organized by the Taipei Fine Arts Museum. After the establishment of a prestigious national competition in 1984 with the *Trends* exhibition, followed in 1992 by the *Taipei Biennial*, in 1995 the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice formalizes and ritualizes the goal of the TFAM to engage with the international art scene, and to represent Taiwanese contemporary art abroad.

The exhibitions in Venice established a pattern of national representation that displayed astonishing continuities over the years, making it into an archetypical representation of a nation: the centre of the exhibition was usually dedicated to a work that would root the nation in nature, a pattern that was occasionally alternated with references to the city, or both- in the ideal case the city would become the new nature of the nation. The side rooms made the image of the nation more complex, showing in one room historical trauma and social problems, while showing in the second side room a vision of a highly technological spiritual future.

I will first describe the first three editions of the Taiwanese national representation in

Venice, and then analyse it using the writings on theory of nationalism by authors such as Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson and Homi Bhabha.

The Taiwanese national pavilion in Venice, together with the Taipei Biennial, became also the most significant series of exhibitions where the Taipei Fine Arts Museum established the position of the independent art curator. I will show how each of these curators imbued the Taiwan Pavilion with his own vision of Taiwanese national identity, but will also highlight the limits of this position- mostly visibly reflected in the continuity of the very same exhibition pattern, a continuity that even went into such minor details as the spatial choices for similar works of art.

### **Establishing a new nation: Taiwan and its Pavilion in Venice**

Within the context of Taiwanese politics and Taiwanese art history, the establishment of a national pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1995 occurred at a very particular moment in time, in a moment when the discussion about local identity were in full swing. On the political level, a historical turn had occurred: for the first time in history, the newly-found democratic party had won the local elections in the city of Taipei. One of the mansions of the new mayor was to appoint a new director of the TFAM.



Taipei mayor Chen Shui-bian and Venice mayor Massimo Cacciari in a press conference related to the establishment of a Taiwanese national participation in Venice. Detail of a panel on the history of the Biennale exhibited during the 2014 Venice Biennale of architecture.  
Photo: Felix Schöber 2014.

From the very beginning, the establishment of the Taiwan Pavilion was a highly political affair: most exhibitions in Venice have been opened by the governing mayor of Taipei. Considering that Taiwan has hardly any official diplomatic relations with any country in the world, and considering that Taipei being the capital, its mayor is often a

potential presidential candidate. Considering the limitations in international travel imposed on the presidents of the R.O.C.. on Taiwan by its diplomatic isolation – in Europe, only the Vatican would accept an official visit of the president of the R.O.C. – the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice provided one of the very few opportunities for international travel of very senior Taiwanese politicians and potential presidential candidates.

In 1995, the then newly elected mayor of Taipei, Chen Shui-bian (later to become the first DPP president of Taiwan) opened the first national Taiwanese exhibition in Venice. During that event, there were



even rumours about a proposal to establish a twin cities

Taipei mayor Chen Shui-bian during the 1997 Taiwan Pavilion press conference at the TFAM, May 1997. Photo: Felix Schöber 1997.

relationship between Venice and Taipei, and Venice mayor Massimo Cacciari went as far as proposing a site for a permanent Taiwanese pavilion inside the Giardini. Both projects have been abandoned later on, apparently due to lack of interest by Taiwanese politicians.

Not all credit for the establishment of the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice has to be given to the DPP, though. Huang Kuang-nan, the previous and KMT-backed director, claimed in an interview with the author that preparations for a pavilion in Venice had been well under way already under his directorship. It is hard to imagine that after Huang had left, deputy-director Tsai Ching-fen would initiate any major project that was not under preparation before.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The official website of the TFAM does not mention when director Huang Kuang-nan tenure ended, and mentions only that he took up office at the National History Museum on February 27, 1995. The first DPP – backed director, Chang Chen-yu, entered office only in September 1995, several months after the opening of the Venetian Taiwan pavilion. See:

## Establishing a new nation: Taiwan at the Venice Biennale

In the context of the Venice Biennale, the Taiwanese participation was part of a larger trend starting in the early 1990s to include many young and postcolonial nations in the club of nations competing for artistic glory.<sup>2</sup>

This trend had started in 1993, when the then chief curator of the Venice Biennial, Achille Bonito Oliva, decided to go beyond the traditional show of Italian art inside the Italian Pavilion, and occupied with his exhibition also the Corderie of the Arsenale, a part of Venice's historic



Wang Guangyi's work at Venice Pavilion in 1993, photo: Felix Schöber 1993

military harbour. This enabled him to mount for the first time a show of global representation and spectacle, including not only a young Damien Hirst, but also the Japanese Yukinori Yanagi, who annoyed local animal rights activists with his *World Flag Ant Farm*,<sup>3</sup> and famously several Chinese artists such as Wang Guangyi,<sup>4</sup> as well as Taiwanese artist Lee Ming-sheng, whose message was, true to the aspirations of Achille Bonita's show, a global one, dedicated to the destruction of the natural environment through the process of industrialization.

Before 1995, the only Asian country permanently represented in Venice was Japan (since 1956). In 1995, both Taiwan and South Korea established national pavilions in Venice. Korea added the last permanent building to the already densely built Giardini,

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[http://www.tfam.museum/11\\_About\\_TFAM/Default.aspx?PKID=56&flag=0](http://www.tfam.museum/11_About_TFAM/Default.aspx?PKID=56&flag=0)

<sup>2</sup> Such as Zimbabwe and Nigeria in 1990, Senegal and Cote D'Ivoire in 1993, Armenia since 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Vetrocq, Marcia E.: "Identity Crisis – 1993 Venice Biennale Art Exhibition", in: *Art in America*, September 1993, consulted online on 9.1.2010 at:

[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1248/is\\_n9\\_v81/ai\\_14406755/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1248/is_n9_v81/ai_14406755/)

<sup>4</sup> Gao Ming-lu and The Asia Society in New York list thirteen Chinese artists as participating at the 1993 Venice Biennale: Wang Guangyi, Zhang Peili, Geng Jianyi, Xu Bing, Liu Wei, Fang Lijun, Yu Hong, Feng Mengbo, Li Shan, Yu Youhan, Wang Ziwei, Sun Liang, and Song Haidong, all of them part of the larger travelling exhibition *China New Art*. See: <http://sites.asiasociety.org/arts/insideout/chronologies.html>. Curiously, the time-line of the *Inside Out* catalogue does not list Wu Shanzhuan as participant of the 1993 Venice Biennial, (while his own CV does), and does not say anything about the Chinese participations at the 1995 Venice Biennial.

nestling in a place half hidden behind the Japanese and the German pavilions. Taiwan, instead, was one of the first national pavilions that permanently exhibited outside the Giardini. After 1995, a growing number of formerly unrepresented Asian and other postcolonial countries established national pavilions mushrooming all over the Venetian city centre: in 2001, Singapore<sup>5</sup>, Hong Kong<sup>6</sup> and New Zealand<sup>7</sup> opened national pavilions in the city centre, and in 2001, all three exhibited within less than 100 meters from the Taiwan Pavilion, at the museum of S. Apollonia. In 2003, Thailand built a tent in Viale Garibaldi (which connects the Giardini with the Arsenale), while Hong Kong<sup>8</sup>, Singapore and New Zealand moved to new locations. In 2005, China was the first nation to be assigned an area within the Arsenale, while Afghanistan (only once in 2005)<sup>9</sup>, Central Asia (since 2005)<sup>10</sup>, Azerbaijan (since 2007)<sup>11</sup> and Macao (since 2007)<sup>12</sup> added to the number of pavilions spread all over Venice.

Taiwan thus became a pioneer in the use of a historic palace as a “permanent” national pavilion in the historic city centre of Venice. It did so not only on a formal, but also on a commercial and administrative level.<sup>13</sup>

In the following years, due to the diplomatic competition with the People’s Republic of China, Taiwan – albeit against its intentions- also left another mark on the history of the Venice Biennale: it necessitated a new category of official participation, the so- called

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<sup>5</sup> <http://universes-in-universe.de/car/venezia/bien49/sgp/english.htm>. See also: Enzo Di Martino, *The History of the Venice Biennale 1895-2005*, Papiro Arte, Venezia 2005, p. 129.

<sup>6</sup> <http://universes-in-universe.de/car/venezia/bien49/chn-hk/english.htm>

<sup>7</sup> <http://universes-in-universe.de/car/venezia/bien49/nzl/english.htm>. See also: Enzo Di Martino, *The History of the Venice Biennale 1895-2005*, Papiro Arte, Venezia 2005, p. 128.

<sup>8</sup> In 2003, Hong Kong moved to a courtyard in front of the main entrance of the Arsenale, see:

<http://universes-in-universe.de/car/venezia/bien50/hong-kong/english.htm>.

In 2005, Hong Kong showed at the Fondaco Marcello on the Grand Canal, see: <http://universes-in-universe.de/car/venezia/bien51/eng/chn-hk/index.htm>.

In 2007 and 2009, Hong Kong was back to the Calle della Tana and the courtyard in front of the main entrance of the Arsenale, see: <http://universes-in-universe.de/car/venezia/eng/2007/tour/chn-hk/index.htm>,

<sup>9</sup> <http://universes-in-universe.de/car/venezia/bien51/eng/afg/index.htm>,

<sup>10</sup> <http://universes-in-universe.de/car/venezia/bien51/eng/central-asia/index.htm>,

<sup>11</sup> <http://universes-in-universe.de/car/venezia/eng/2007/tour/aze/index.htm>,

<sup>12</sup> <http://universes-in-universe.de/car/venezia/eng/2007/tour/mac/index.htm>,

<sup>13</sup> Many of those pavilions that followed the Taiwanese example, such as Estonia, Lithuania, Singapore, Morocco, Hong Kong, Macao, Georgia and others, rent those spaces through the same local art dealer, Paolo De Grandis and his wife Paivi, who since 1995 has been building his career as an organizer of national and collateral events at the Venice Biennale, see: <http://www.artecommunications.com>

“institutional participation”, a curious misnomer for a nation that is not allowed to participate under its own proper name, until it was officially demoted to become a mere collateral event- national representation as a themed show.

**The first Taiwanese participation in Venice,  
Lee Mingsheng’s Fire- ball or Fire- circle**

The first Taiwanese artist to be invited to the Venice Biennale had been invited by the Biennale curator Achille Bonito Oliva himself, who had discovered him more or less by chance during a visit in Taiwan, and Lee remained for a long time the only Taiwanese artist to enjoy this honour. Lee’s installation carried a truly global message of environmental consciousness, as it reflected on the destruction of the natural environment, while at the same time blending both Christian and Buddhist religious elements.

In the month leading up to the opening, Lee Mingsheng prepared a huge circular altar

made from used industrial computer paper, resting on stones, and with the top painted in red. On the opening day he walked through the Arsenale halls, dressed as a monk, chanting songs, and carrying a huge circular wooden weight around his neck, which alluded both to the earth as well as the circular altar that he had built.

As he climbed on this altar made of industrial waste, he undressed, and poured several litres of blood over his almost naked body.



Lee Mingsheng and an assistant walk the computer paper around to add layers to the installation *Fire Ball or Fire Circle* at the Arsenale. Photo: Felix Schöber, May 1993.



Lee Mingsheng walks down the Arsenale halls, dressed as a monk, chanting songs and carrying a circular weight around his neck during his performance in 1993. Photo: Felix Schöber 1993

He then splashed the blood over this altar to the industrial destruction of the natural environment, creating a pattern that represented the rays of the sun; finally he lay down in a cross-like shape, resting as if he had been crucified.

What is even more outstanding, is that his performance generated a lot of attention, more so than any following official participation organized by the TFAM, and in an exhibition about the history of the Venice Biennale, organized by the Biennale in 2014, Lee's performance was one of the few noteworthy and memorable art events of the 1990's. What is rather astonishing from an art historians point of view, is that this high regard that Lee enjoyed in Venice was in no way appreciated by the Taiwanese art institutions: even though Lee offered



Lee Mingsheng pouring a mixture of ox blood, his own blood and alcohol over his head during the performance *Fire Ball or Fire Circle*, 1993. Photo: F. Schöber 1993



Lee Mingsheng's installation *Fire Ball or Fire Circle* after the inauguration, with splashes of blood in the shape of sun rays on the red surface. Photo: Felix Schöber 1993

the TFAM the opportunity to collect this doubtlessly important installation for free, the museum did not even want to cover the transport expense back to Taipei; and the publications of the TFAM which discuss the history of Taiwanese art at the Venice Biennale, do not even mention Lee Mingsheng; an example is the booklet published by

the TFAM in 2005, *Contemporary Art from Taiwan at the Venice Biennial, 1995 – 2003*: even though the title pretends to be presenting contemporary Taiwanese art at the Venice Biennale in general, it omits all those artists from Taiwan who actually made it into the history of the Venice Biennale- most prominently Lee Mingsheng, but also Shulea Cheang, who was invited to show inside the Arsenale in 2003, and at the time this booklet was published, the authors must have been aware that Chen Chieh-jen was also present at the main show in Venice.

Rather than documenting art history, the little booklet published by the TFAM in 2005 highlights the deeply ambiguous relationship of the premier museum of modern and contemporary art with its own art scene, and with the history of Taiwanese contemporary art: there is no lack of official history writing- on the contrary, there is a stream of publications on that subject; what is problematic is the highly arbitrary selection method: only artists and artworks that have been “nationalised”, that have been fitted into the patterns and categories of the state-run art administration are deemed worthy of recording; anything outside that administrative grip, however noteworthy or ground-breaking it may have been, is thoroughly erased from that account of official art history.

**The microcosm of the nation:**

**a fixed pattern, vacillating between the urban and the primordial**

The one single feature that differentiates the Taiwan Pavilion from all other exhibitions in Venice is its insistence on presenting not single artistic messages, but the complex microcosm of a young nation.

This was a somewhat curious if not odd choice, considering that the first Taiwanese artist to be invited to Venice (i.e. not sent there by the government) had to all effects staged a solo show within the larger context of the Biennale- occupying one room of the



Arsenale, set aside for his installation, and staging a performance that could easily compete for attention with Damien Hirst's cut-open cow. Yet since the very first government-backed Taiwan pavilion, the choice had never been a single, strong artistic message, but rather a highly complex mix of artists, each of which was selected to represent different aspects of the narrative of the nation.

In the following, I will try to track the development of this microcosm, and elaborate on the tension between its archetypal primordial pattern and the single artistic voices.

An outstanding feature is the continuity of this pattern over the years. Every edition not only featured a very similar combination of artists, but often saw similar works collocated in the very same rooms and corners. It is this very repetition that discourages an analysis of single artists, works and exhibitions, and rather invites an analysis of this repeated pattern in terms of primordial and archetypal nationalism. This approach, to analyse an underlying pattern, in turn allows to compare a fairly long series of exhibitions, all of which feature different artists, and all of which were organized or curated by different critics. A comparison of the selection and placement of works reveal an astonishing continuity in time, which for some of its core elements even goes beyond the ideological dividing lines between the Democratic and the Nationalist Party, which re-gains power over Taipei city in 1998.

### **The microcosm of the nation: the question of curatorship**

This scheme remained virtually unchanged from 1995 until 2003, and was altered only in 2005 and 2007 when the curators Wang Chia-chi and Lin Hongjohn started to theorise Taiwan as a marginalised nation with *Specter of Freedom* and *Atopia*. Some of the chief elements of this pattern have re-appeared in 2009, when the head of the TFAM's international exhibitions department, Chang Fang-wei eliminated the position of the independent curator, and "commissioned" her own exhibition *Foreign Affairs*.

This last Taiwan Pavilion in 2009 turned this pattern into a poignant question: while in

1995 and 1997 a jury chose the artists, and from 1997 until 2007 a curator was appointed to present the artists and their works in Venice, in 2009 this democratic process of selection, as well as the position of the independent curator as the critical voice of the exhibition was abolished. Instead, the head of the international exhibitions department, Chang Fang-wei, decided to curate the national Taiwanese pavilion by herself, as a commissioner, without any public selection process. The reappearance of the old archetypal pattern of the nation by the hands of the TFAM's functionaries, albeit transformed by the questions of social and diplomatic marginalisation, allows for some doubt about the role and the power of the previously appointed independent curators – after all, in almost all previous editions Chang Fang-wei had been in the role of the organizer of the Venice Taiwan Pavilion. It is therefore quite legitimate to ask whether it was truly the independent curator to decide about the positioning and presentation of the artworks, or rather the art administration, represented by the head of the TFAM's exhibition department.

It is probably too easy to direct the attention to one person only: beyond the fixed pattern inside the physical space, there is an ideological pattern which is equally stable as the spatial disposition within the Prigioni. This pattern goes beyond one single person inside the art administration: before 2009, every single Taiwan Pavilion in Venice went through the selection by a jury or a committee, which chose either the artists (in 1995 and 1997) or the project of a curator (from 1999 until 2007). The reproduction of this pattern should better be ascribed to the local arts community. The word “community” is slightly misleading, since it was the administrators of the museum to appoint the jurors, who in turn selected the artists or the winning project; these jurors, beyond the single choices of the museum, were almost always representatives of what Gramsci had defined as the “ideological state apparatus”- professors of the local art academies.

## **The microcosm of the nation:**

### **the central role of nature**

At the centre of the exhibitionary pattern of the Taiwan Pavilion inside the Prigioni in Venice was almost always an element representing nature; and since that element of link to mother nature, often imbued with certain ideas of environmental consciousness was positioned right at the centre of the main central exhibition hall, this element visibly rooted and centred the nation around a natural core, around ideas of rootedness in nature and environmental consciousness.

By 1995, this was not a surprising or particularly novel idea: Lee Mingsheng's installation and performance at the main exhibition of the 1993 Biennale had all been centred around questions of environmental consciousness, and the democratization process in Taiwan, or the origins of the democratic party had been closely linked to a green movement; the same Lee Mingsheng had participated in more than one street protest against nuclear energy. More than that, the 1989 Paris exhibition *Magiciens de la terre* had introduced the idea of the oriental artist as a shaman, and in 1993 Lee Mingsheng had certainly played with that idea.

What was new, was that ideas of rootedness in nature, together of ideas of environmental consciousness would take up not a position of both spiritual and political opposition to a general trend of urbanisation and industrialisation, but rather make up the very centre and core of national representation, would move from the periphery to the very heart of the narrative of the nation.

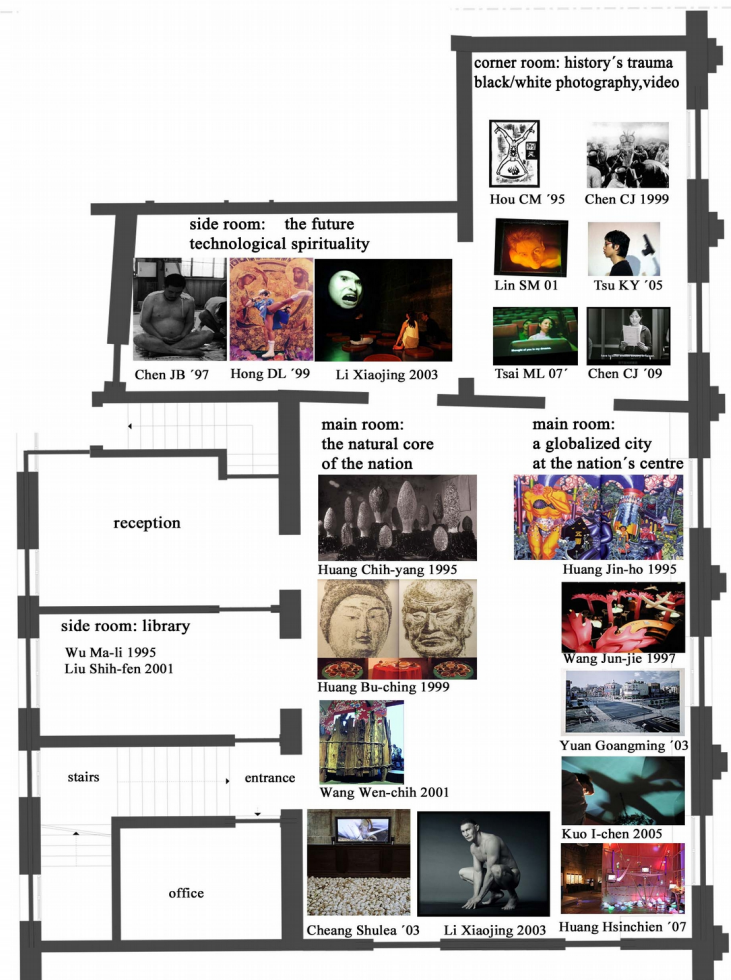
The chief means for this re-centring of the nation around nature was achieved by a very simple means – the placing of a work of art, mostly also the biggest work in terms of size, right at the very centre of the exhibition.

In 1995 this essential core of the nation were represented by plant-shaped sculptures made from clay and telephone wires. In 1999 this place was taken by seeds from Southern Taiwan offered on tables. In 2001 a circular structure made out of recovered

wood planks occupied the centre. In 2003 a large portion of the floor space was covered with garlic, and in 2009 a documentation of housing project for aboriginal groups and earthquake victims occupied centre stage.

Sometimes the centre of national representation was taken over by a reflection on processes of urbanisation- or rather, urbanisation was declared to be the second, new nature of the nation. In the first edition of 1995, in the case of Huang Chih-yang's installation, Taipei, the urban experience, was declared to be the new, second nature of

Taiwanese-ness. In 1997 the neon lights of a travel agency stall occupied the centre, and



Positioning of artworks inside the Taiwan Pavilion from 1995 until 2009 along categories of nature / urbanisation at the centre, images of violence and a traumatic past often depicted in black and white in a side room, and images of a technologically advanced spiritual future in another side room.

in 2003, on the side wall to the right, facing the garlic on the floor, was a manipulated image of Taipei's urban heart, Hsimenting, abandoned by any human presence. Even as the original archetypical pattern of national representation faded, the centre of that new, de-constructed nation continued to be occupied by a work related to the urban experience: in 2005, aeroplane shadows, originally inspired by the vicinity of Taipei's Sungshan airport to the TFAM, hovered over the scene, and in 2007 the visitor was first greeted by a nightly scene of plastic sculptures illuminated by LEDs and neon lights;

yet in 2009 it was again nature taking centre stage, with Hsieh Ying-juns installation dedicated to the cause of re-building the traditional villages of Taiwanese aboriginals.

### **The microcosm of the nation: anchored in historical trauma and social questions**

Another crucial element of the placement pattern that developed inside the Taiwan Pavilion was the question of violence, historical trauma and social questions. This would almost never occupy centre stage, but would most often appear in a lateral side room, where the visitor would find a work, inquiring into social questions and historical trauma, usually through the use of semi-documentary black-and-white photographs. In 1995, this genealogical line was started with b/w woodcut prints inquiring into male sexuality. In 1997, this was followed by 1950s b/w family photographs, framed and reworked in a way to evoke the taboos of the past. In 1999, b/w laser print photographs showed manipulations of historical photographs, again elaborating on the trauma of the Taiwanese and Chinese past. In 2001, b/w photographs showed the inmates of a mental institution chained together. In 2007, there was both an installation of an abandoned Malaysian cinema, as well as the colour images of abandoned squatter homes on view. In 2009, this was followed by b/w portraits of illegal Chinese immigrants in New York.

### **The microcosm of the nation: projected to a spiritualized technological future**

The other side-room, usually the one to the near left from the main hall, would be dedicated to a vision of the future that combined new media with Asian spirituality.

In 1997, the emphasis was on the connection between futuristic media and light-effects and a Buddhist spirituality, when artist Chen Chien-pei (Chen Jianbei) created a copy of himself sitting in the pose of meditation inside a room that was lit in alternation by normal lighting, and when the lights went off, by the glow of fluorescent paint.

In 1999, the most evident link between new technology and new media, the future and a

hybrid religiosity was presented by Hung Tung-lu, who juxtaposed the heroes of *manga* comics with Western religious imagery.

In 2003, the link between new media and Buddhism re-appeared again, always in the same side- room of the Taiwan pavilion, when artist Daniel Lee presented a re-envisioning of the 108 portals of hell using photoshop and projected human images.

### **The representation of a nation through a repeated pattern**

This pattern represents a significant departure from all previous images of the nation: in the 1980's the Republic of China had almost always been represented as a symbol of modernity and progress, in the mid and late 1990s almost every curator of the Taiwan Pavilion takes as his starting point the plurality of Taiwanese identity.

I will propose a reading of the development of the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice that tries to take into account both the search for complexity and the attempt to make sense of a growingly pluralist nation. This reading also points to an underlying pattern, which hardly ever changes over the years, and which seems to hint at a completely different logic, reminiscent of early 20<sup>th</sup> century nationalism.

This contradiction is most evident in the works occupying the centre of the exhibition site: in all but three editions between 1995 and 2009, they represent “nature”, alluding at a natural core as the centre of the nation. In one case – Li Xiao-jing's photo-montage *Origin* at the 2003 *Limbo Zone* pavilion – a work at the centre of the exhibition even alluded directly to Darwin's notion of evolution applied to the human race, and vindicated the Asian race as the final point of the development of life on earth. Yet Li Xiao-jing's direct hints to Darwinism (and early 20<sup>th</sup> century versions of nationalism based on race) are not the rule, but rather the exception within the pattern of the Taiwan Pavilion: usually this allusion to a primordial and archetypal form of nationalism, which roots the nation in a scientifically essentialized race, is dissimulated by a modern form of environmental consciousness. Quite close to this vision of the nation as based

on one essentialized race is the curatorial statement of the 2001 Taiwan Pavilion: critic Kao Chien-hui proposes a reading of culture as viral messages, which spread aggressively over the globe – almost superfluous to point out, in Kao's vision these cultural viruses spread from Taiwan outwards, conquering the globe. Quite close to this archetypical reading of the nation in terms of genetics is artist Huang Chih-yang's installation of 1995, *Scenery*, which proposes a reading of the modern city as a second nature, that generates a new form of humanity, with a new form of genetic code.

The various layers of claims of legitimacy of the nation, dissimulated by the contemporary preoccupations of environmental consciousness, was most evident in 1999 in artist Huang Bu-ching's installation *Feast in the Wild*. What made Huang's work stand out was that it hovered between, and merged the claims of legitimacy of both the young Taiwanese nation as well as those of the grand millenarian Chinese past into one single installation, combined under the umbrella of local environmental consciousness. He managed to do so by using locally collected seeds, which represented both his environmental consciousness and his rootedness in a specific South-Taiwanese locality. The seeds were offered on tables in the centre of the installation in Venice, but became also the prime material for three huge paintings on the wall, which represented the face of a man, an elegant woman and a tree, all executed in the style of Tang-dynasty mural paintings, thus integrating even the claims of the millenarian Chinese past into his installation,

In 2001, artist Wang Wen-chi's installation *Beyond the site*, a circular space created out of recuperated drift wood, also played with a rather nostalgic version of ecological consciousness, rooting the nation in the specific natural environment of a specific locality. The tension between those two aspects of the centrality of nature at the heart of the nation – the naturalisation of the nation through the discourse of the Darwinian race, and the role of nature in contemporary environmental consciousness – was most evident in the 2003 *Limbo Zone* pavilion. While Li Xiao-jing's Darwinian photoshop animation

occupied only one wall of the main hall, the central feature occupying most of the floor area was instead artist Shulea Cheang's installation *Garlic = rich air*, which presented itself as an ironic version of modern day environmental consciousness.

This basic pattern centred around a natural core, but presenting a nation rooted in the past, conscious of its social questions, and projected into a technological and spiritual future, existed since the first exhibition *ARTTAIWAN* in 1995, but it then developed over time. The basic pattern was already present in 1995, but was elaborated more theoretically in 1997 and 1999, perpetuated in 2001 and 2003, and it re-surfaced again in 2009. I will therefore outline a development of the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice, by tracing the development of this pattern and how it evolved.

Roughly speaking, the first exhibition in 1995, planned already under KMT-backed director Huang Kuang-nan, but opened by the new Democratic Party mayor Chen Shui-bian, was centred around the idea of a pluralism of the new Taiwanese identity. In 1997 this rather vague notion of artistic pluralism was elaborated further by (de-facto) curator Huang Hai-ming, who proposed the image of a highly complex, contradictory, but interconnected media society with his image of the "superconnector."

It is interesting to see how these constructions of Taiwanese nationalism evolved and interacted with international discourse- and the almost seamless overlap between global critical discourse and local ideas of nationalism that highlight how ambiguous those ideas ultimately are. The curatorial answer to the Venice Biennale's themes often re-nationalized a western critical discourse that originally had been deployed to de-emphasize or criticize nationalism: in 1995, the theme chosen by the chief curator of the Venice Biennale was *Identity and Alterity*, and Taiwan chose to present itself as a nation rich of a plurality of identities. In 1997 the theme of the Venice Biennale was *Future, Present, Past*, in response, the image of the Taiwanese nation was – also loosely following Anderson – rooted in the past, engrossed with its present, and projected into a spiritual and technological future.



### **The microcosm of the nation: the roots in historical trauma**

An interesting aspect of this complex image of the nation is the element of the national historical trauma of the 2-28 incident of 1947 and the following White Terror period, which appeared as a crucial element of national identity only in 1997 and 1999, in the period when Lin Mun-lee, appointed by the Democratic Party, was director of the TFAM. Once a new director, Huang Tsai-lang, had been appointed by the KMT, the core element of a nation centred around and rooted in nature remained, one could even argue that it became even more explicit, but the question of historical trauma of the White Terror period and the 2-28 incident disappeared, and its place was – both ideologically as well as spatially in the disposition inside the Prigioni – taken over by a more general preoccupation with social problems. From the turn of the millennium onwards, a second shift in emphasis can also be observed: the modern and globalised character of the nation was emphasized by the use of new media, while classical media of artistic expression such as painting on canvas completely disappeared from the national representation in Venice. From 2001 onward this emphasis on contemporaneity was also accompanied by an ideological effort to interact with global cultural discourse, which specifically meant that the curatorial statements gave more and more emphasis to media and globalisation theories.

This reached its apex in 2005 and 2007, when curators Wang Chia-chi and Lin Hong-john choreographed their shows around questions of global discourse, and branded Taiwan as a space where globalisation was particularly visible. This effort, and the discovery of Taiwan as a marginalised nation within globalisation, had the effect of de-centring the nation and abandoning the previous pattern, most visibly marked by the elimination of the single natural element alluding at a Darwinian natural root at the core of the show in Venice. In 2009 “nature” reappeared at the centre of the representation of the nation, under the guise of housing projects for aboriginals in Taiwan and earthquake victims in peripheral areas of mainland China. In a paradoxical attempt to bridge the

contradictions of postcolonial nationalism, the marginalised nation cannot but attempt to find its roots in the periphery, rooting itself in the “vitality” of the margins of society, such as aboriginals in remote mountain areas.

### **1995: ARTTAIWAN**

The 1995 *ARTTAIWAN* pavilion in Venice was ground-breaking in many ways: it was the first time a Chinese state officially participated at the Venice Biennale: before that, of all Asia, only Japan (1956) had established a permanent national pavilion in Venice, while artists from China participated only through private art dealers, their canvasses (allegedly) being smuggled outside China.

At the time there were even rumours that Venice would be willing to assign a site for a permanent Taiwanese pavilion inside the Giardini, and there was talk about the establishment of establishing twin-city relations between Venice and Taipei.<sup>14</sup>

From a Taiwanese perspective, this also represented a break-through in its situation of diplomatic isolation, as it represented a chance for the mayor of Taipei to travel abroad, and to encounter foreign politicians, even if it was only the mayor of Venice. It also represented the first time that contemporary visual art had become a means of foreign politics: in the past, the R.O.C. had sponsored chiefly modern dance, Lin Huai-min’s troupe Cloud Gate,<sup>15</sup> and art cinema such as the films of Hou Hsiao-hsien<sup>16</sup> and Tsai Ming-liang<sup>17</sup> to promote the image of the Republic of China abroad.

The first Taiwan Pavilion in Venice was part of an effort of the TFAM to promote contemporary Taiwanese art abroad. The title *ARTTAIWAN* had already been used already in the same year for a touring exhibition in Australia.

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<sup>14</sup> According to one of the participating artists, Huang Chih-yang, both ideas were apparently greeted by Major Chen Shui-bian, but did not materialize due to lack of interest by other Taiwanese politicians.

<sup>15</sup> Cloud Gate’s first tour abroad was to Paris in 1979.

<sup>16</sup> Hou Hsiao-hsien’s participation at the Venice film festival was a major success of the government’s policy to sponsor local art cinema. It can be debated whether in this case it was not rather the filmmaker getting attention and approval to show his film *City of Sadness* back in Taiwan by winning a Golden Lion in Venice in 1989.

<sup>17</sup> Golden Lion in Venice in 1994 for *Vive l’amour*.

This attempt to present the local art scene abroad was also reflected in the the jury which selected the artists. Out of five jurors, only two were local art historians, Lee Chang-jiunn and Lee Ming-ming, while the other three were foreigners: Enrico Pedrini, an Italian art critic linked to the Venetian art dealer Paolo De Grandis who had rented the exhibition space to the TFAM; Wolfgang Becker, director of the German Forum Ludwig in Aachen, who had already participated in the selection of artists at the previous Taipei Biennial, and with whom the TFAM was preparing an exhibition for the following year,<sup>18</sup> and Françoise Chatel, counsellor for visual arts at the French ministry for culture.

The preparations and the organisation of the 1995 exhibition in Venice were executed largely following the system adopted for the 1992 and 1994 *Taipei Biennial*, that is, by appointing a Selecting Committee of jurors which chose the artists, and whose members would write entries to the catalogue. As in the *Taipei Biennial*, the museum selected the jurors according to criteria of local and international art politics. The main difference between the national flagship shows *Trends* and the early editions of the *Taipei Biennial* was that the local events were ideally open to all artists with a ROC passport, while in the case of the international show it was the museum administration itself who made a pre-selection of sixty artists which were then submitted to the Selection Committee. In 1995 no curator was nominated, the positioning of the artworks was the responsibility of the TFAM's in-house curators. As it has been pointed out by Lin Ping, in 1995 this was a choice dictated by political correctness.<sup>19</sup> On the catalogue there is only a selection of statements of the various jurors, preceded by a preface of the deputy director and the local vice-commissioner, Paolo De Grandis, while at the end there is also an article by member of staff Yang Wen-yi, who was in charge of the organization of the show.

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<sup>18</sup> *Taiwan: Kunst Heute*, Aachen, Forum Ludwig, Berlin, Haus der Kulturen der Welt 1996.

<sup>19</sup> Lin Ping 林平: "Curator's Halo-The Long and Winding Road of Curatorial Business in Taiwan", available on the website of the Fine Arts Department of Tunghai University at: <http://www2.thu.edu.tw/~fineart/upfiles/tecfile01143090863.doc>

The exhibition included five artists, Hou Chun-ming (Hou Jun-ming), Huang Chih-yang (Huang Zhi-yang), Huang Chin-ho (Huang Jin-he), Lien Te-cheng (Lian De-cheng) and Wu Mali. The chosen five, according to the deputy director, represented “the younger and middle generation.” The same was echoed by juror Wolfgang Becker, who specified that beyond this scheme of two older artists (Huang Chin-ho and Lien Te-cheng) combined with two younger ones (Hou Chun-ming and Huang Chih-yang), there was also one female / feminist artist present, Wu Mali.<sup>20</sup> The selection process is described by Wolfgang Becker as a curatorial effort mediated by group dynamics, selecting a group rather than only single artists:

“The jury has selected five out of sixty artists to present Taiwan in Venice. It was their aim to build a group that could create a convincing exhibition together.”<sup>21</sup>

Beyond the balancing of old and new, plus the inclusion of one woman in the club of four men, the curatorial concept, according to the TFAM’s deputy director Tsai Ching-fen, was fairly simple, and could be subsumed in one sentence:

“This group of artists embodies the flourishing, multifaceted, rooted yet cosmopolitan cultural and artistic environment in Taiwan over the past decade.”<sup>22</sup>

### **A vital life force of the nation feeding the artists creativity**

Terms such as “vitality” or “garishness” abound in the texts of the catalogue. This vitality is first of all described as a characteristic of Taiwanese society. Art historian Lee Ming-ming writes:

“...within the imbalanced hodgepodge of the urban landscape, sacrificial religious rites, and consumer behaviours, we sense an uncontainable vitality which reflects awakening to and criticism of the assorted issues that have cropped up in political,

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<sup>20</sup> Becker, Wolfgang: “Kunst in Taiwan Heute“ / “Art in Taiwan today“, in: *ARTTAIWAN*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 1995, pp. 10-11.

<sup>21</sup> Becker, Wolfgang: “Kunst in Taiwan Heute“ / “Art in Taiwan today“, in: *ARTTAIWAN*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 1995, pp. 10-11.

<sup>22</sup> Tsai, Ching-fen: “Commissario’s Preface“, in: *ARTTAIWAN*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 1995, p. 4.

social and civil life since the lifting of martial law.”<sup>23</sup>

The artist has a particular ability, a particular gift to transform this vitality into art. Lee Ming-ming describes Huang Chih-yang’s works in similar terms:

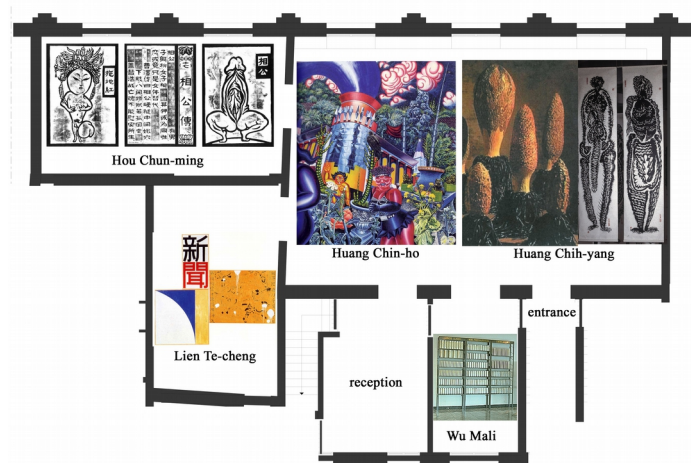
“Huang Chih-yang’s *Maternity* series is an excellent example ... of the transformation of primal life force into artistic innovation.”<sup>24</sup>

The vitality of the thus becomes an essentialized entity which in turn feeds the creativity of local artists, claims in-house research assistant Yang Wen-I:

“Huang Chin-ho, ... is bursting with the desire to create. Feeding off the forceful building of local consciousness, Huang Chin-ho deliberately depicts crowded, garish, lustful, shocking, and intensely dramatic psychological nightmares triggered by the chaos and profligacy that has torn through society’s soul in recent years.”<sup>25</sup>

### The creation of an archetypal scheme: the 1995 Taiwan Pavilion

Within this scheme of a self-conscious and self-reflective contemporary urban Taiwan society bursting with creativity, Huang Chih-yang’s and Huang Chin-ho’s homage to the gaudiness and vitality of urban life occupied the centre of the main room. The critical and self-



Scheme of the placement of works at the 1995 ARTTAIWAN Pavilion in Venice.

reflective voices were each assigned a single side-room, reflecting on the de-

<sup>23</sup> Lee, Ming-ming: “Re-Drawing Human Boundaries -The Venice Biennale and Huang Chih-yang’s Maternity Room Series,” in: *ARTTAIWAN*, Taipei, Venice 1995, p. 19.

<sup>24</sup> Lee, Ming-ming: “Re-Drawing Human Boundaries – The Venice Biennale and Huang Chih-yang’s Maternity Room Series,” in: *ARTTAIWAN*, Taipei, Venice 1995, p. 19.

<sup>25</sup> Yang, Wen-I: “Rising from the Sea – Contemporary Taiwanese Art“, in: *ARTTAIWAN*, Taipei, Venice 1995, p. 21.

construction of language (Wu Ma-li), the de-construction of Confucian ideology (Lien Te-cheng) and the self-reflection on male sexuality (Hou Chun-ming).

The centre of the main exhibition hall was occupied by Huang Chih-yang's installation *Afforestation Plan B: Mountain and Water*, made of black telephone cables and pottery sculptures in the shape of strange tropical flowers.



*The Afforestation Plan B: Mountain and Water* (mixed media, installation), 1994, and *Maternity Room*, (ink on paper) 1992, at the ARTTAIWAN exhibition in Venice in 1995.

photo: Huang Zhiyang 1995.

Towards the wall on the right

hand side of the entrance, hanging from the ceiling, there was also his series of ink paintings *Maternity Room*.<sup>26</sup> In Huang's own words, these works were a reflection on the nature of humanity in general, and more specifically about the nature of humanity that inhabits the urban sprawl of Taipei. He describes it with words that echo both Darwinism as well as metabolist ideas about the city as a new, second nature:

“My heart lingers in the realm where man and animal intermingle. Man is such an animal, I am such an animal. Carnivores wander through this heavy, absurd, complex society bathed with electric light, moaning their sacred odes of desire. But thanks to this space, which womb-like has nurtured and harboured us during our frenzied rhapsody on the verge of death, we suckle her milk and fashion our art in the name of tradition. Thanks to our great mother – Taipei.”<sup>27</sup>

According to critic Lee Ming-ming, this ode to urban vitality is rooted in Chinese

<sup>26</sup> The TFAM's own publication covering the history of the Taiwan Pavilion, *Contemporary Art from Taiwan at the Venice Biennial, 1995-2003* does not show the actual installation of Huang's work in Venice, only an old stock image of the installation *Afforestation Plan B*, an image that was already printed on the *ARTTAIWAN* catalogue of 1995, on pages 46 and 47. There is no image of *Maternity Room* in the 2005 publication. There are images showing the works of most other artists in Venice, but it can be doubted that the TFAM had a consistent policy to document their own exhibitions.

<sup>27</sup> Huang Chih-yang, in: *ARTTAIWAN*, Taipei, Venezia 1995, p. 39.

tradition: both in his (Taoist) philosophic approach, as well as in its rootedness in the Chinese ink painting tradition. In Lee's words, Huang Chih-yang

“... brings a unique Chinese capacity for perception to a new examination of the natural state of things. This perception of humanity's integral kinship with Nature, combined with the artist's exclusive use of ink on rice paper, constitute a unique two-dimensional formal personality.”<sup>28</sup>

It is curious to see how critic Lee Ming-ming insists on Huang Chih-yang's roots in Chinese tradition, which creates a somewhat artificial opposition to Huang Chin-ho, who Yang Wen-I described as a representative of local consciousness. It is in the words of the latter, where the question described by Homi Bhabha, the tension between the performative and the paedagogical address of the nation show up, as Huang Chin-ho is rather assertive about creating a distinctively Taiwanese aesthetics, which he opposes both to Western as well as to Chinese art:

“I seek to make an overall assessment of Taiwan's cultural tradition in order to open up new frontiers for the country's new aesthetics, which are distinct from those of China and the Western world.”<sup>29</sup>

While the main room was occupied by this rather assertive eulogy to urban vitality, the three side-rooms of the Taiwan pavilion were more reflective and critical.

In the first room to the left of the entrance was Wu Mali's post-

modern deconstruction of

literature *Gnawing Texts*,



*Gnawing Texts, Reaming Words*, installation, Wu Mali 1995, source, copyright: Wu Mali.

<sup>28</sup> Lee, Ming-ming: “Re-drawing Human Boundaries – The Venice Biennale and Huang Chih-yang's Maternity Room Series“, in: *ARTTAIWAN*, Taipei, Venice 1995, p. 19.

<sup>29</sup> Huang Chin-ho, in *ARTTAIWAN*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 1995, p. 53.

*Reaming Words.*

The installation presented a small library of literary classics both Western as well as Chinese, which had been shredded to small bits of paper, and were presented on shelves, as transparent plastic boxes in the shape of books.

The second door to the left led to a room with several paintings by Lien Te-cheng, which presented a combination of abstract and figurative paintings, as well as short texts with ironic allusions on Confucian tradition and national Chinese ideology, such as in *Hua Ming Junior School*, the characters of which could also erroneously be read as Republic of China.

The third room to the left was reserved to Hou Chun-ming's re-elaboration of sexual desire and psychology, which he presented using the terms and stories of the (non-Confucian) classic *Shan-hai-jing* (Classic of the mountains and seas).

His black-and-white woodcuts illustrated an interpretation of the various ghosts and mythological beasts of this alternative classic which were strongly influenced by Freudian psychology.



*Collecting Spirits*, paper print, 154 x 108 cm (x 37), Hou Chun-ming 1993, collection of TFAM, image copyright: Hou Chun-ming.

It is interesting to observe what this first national representation in Venice did and did not achieve and what it tried to dissimulate: from an administrative perspective, it is one



of the purest examples of the administration and its politics at work, with hardly any interference of the larger arts community. From the selection of the artists, to the selection of the jurors, there was very little possibility that an outsider could interfere with this exhibition – and be it only by sending in a proposal. On the other hand, this show, without admitting it, was deeply indebted to the activity of independent art spaces in Taipei: all but one of the artists at the 1995 Taiwan Pavilion were members of the *Apartment 2* art group, which had existed only for a few years in the early 90's, but which had been among the first to promote the a credo of artistic pluralism.

These circumstances, as well as the lack of a formal curator, make it a rather curious show: while there is an obvious curatorial plan at work, there is no formal curatorial statement to be found on the catalogue, only a selection of articles. Among the writers, the foreign critics limited themselves to some (consciously superficial) observations, while the Taiwanese critics dedicated only one article each to one single artist, and only in-house assistant Yang Wen-I tried to dedicate a few words to each artist.

Secondly, it is interesting to note its stance on Taiwanese identity and local art history: while the slightly earlier *ARTTAIWAN* exhibition in Australia had been focussed on the question of the history of modern and contemporary of art in Taiwan, none of this could be found on the *ARTTAIWAN* catalogue at the Venice Biennale. The Australian version of *ARTTAIWAN* had taken a rather comprehensive approach to the development of the Taiwan identity discourse, taking on board both the first or generation of identity writers such as Lin Hsing-yue, but also the second or post-modern identity writers such as Huang Hai-ming and Shih Jui-jen, and even feminist writers such as Victoria Lu.

From that perspective, it could even be argued that the Venetian show was a continuation the credo of *Apartment 2*, and in part also indebted to Victoria Lu's *New Arts, New Tribes* show, as it presented Taiwanese identity as a multifaceted and pluralist, going beyond the ethnic divisions that had infested the identity discourse in the early nineties. Within this identity discourse as it had developed in the early nineties,

*ARTTAIWAN* in Venice took a rather conservative or pro-unification stance as far as the so-called Chinese tradition is concerned: while one of the main questions of Taiwanese identity had been up to what point this Chinese legacy had to be abandoned or eradicated completely (see, for instance, painter Yang Mao-lin), the exhibition in Venice insisted rather on presenting the Chinese tradition as the one main point of reference and inspiration for Taiwanese artists, rather than questioning it as yet another colonial power, as had been the case for a large group of local artists. This claim of legitimacy in some cases even superseded and dissimulated more contemporary points of reference. An example was the description of Huang Chih-yang as rooted in Chinese Taoist thought, therefore dissimulating more contemporary points of critical reference, such as Darwinism and Japanese metabolism.

With its reflections on Taiwanese Chinese identity, the 1995 Taiwan Pavilion made an effort to echo the main theme of the 1995 Venice Biennale, *Identity and Alterity*. Yet the lack of a curator limited the choice of artists to a process of group dynamics between several jurors. This had its repercussions on the critical depth of the show, as it limited itself to a vision that showed Taiwanese identity as a subtropical, colourful and “garishly vital” nation, rooted in a millenarian Chinese tradition, eliminating all questions regarding internal of society, and also left unanswered the question where that (economic) vitality came from, or which were the foundations to claims for legitimacy of that millenarian tradition, once Military Law had been abolished.

From an ideological point of view, the 1995 Taiwan Pavilion remained within the tradition and genealogy of the publicity construct called “Free China”: rooted in the same millenarian tradition as the Peoples Republic of China, the R.O.C. is just a bit more deeply so, and just a bit more colourful and just a bit more critically “free” than the competitor for legitimacy from the other side of the Taiwan Strait.

It has to be pointed out that the exhibition in 1995 inaugurated the pattern of national representation as centred around a natural core (which in 1995 merged with a vision of

naturalized urban culture), a vision underscored by the writings of the jurors. Somewhat in opposition to the essentialized vision of the nation proposed by the jurors was much of the vision of the participating artists, who at least implicitly provided a rationale for the complexity of contemporary culture and society: while the installation *Scenery* and the painting by Huang Jin-ho presented Taiwanese society and its economic progress as driven essentially by human desire, this is put in critical relation to an enquiry into human sexuality through Freudian psychology by Hou Chun-ming. While most of the jurors describe Taiwan as deeply rooted in a millenarian Chinese tradition, the very artworks react to that with the tools of semiological deconstruction: Lien Te-cheng deconstructed nationalist ideology through ironic word plays, and Wu Mali went one step further by most literally deconstructing both Chinese as well as Western classics of literature by cutting them into small pieces of paper.

It is on this second, purely artistic level that the 1995 Taiwan Pavilion was highly significant- it was the first ever official representation of a Chinese country on the international stage, at a moment when contemporary art in mainland China was largely limited to underground movement, that had to rely on private apartments as exhibition spaces- or was represented by Hong Kong art dealer who smuggled rolled-up canvasses of political pop painters out of the country. Within this larger context, it has to be argued that the 1995 Taiwan Pavilion was a highly significant, and also a highly self-reflexive exhibition, at least on a purely artistic level.

### **Curatorship and the categories of social sciences: the 1996 Taipei Biennial**

In 1996, well four years after Huang Hai-mings article on the newly established *1992 Taipei Biennial*, and only under the new DPP mayor Chen Shui-bian and the new museum director Chang Chen-yu, did the Taipei Fine Arts Museum truly start to experiment with the idea to have artists and works of art presented by a curator, or rather by a team of curators.

In 1996 this was done with a was truly colossal round-up of more than one hundred local artists for the *1996 Taipei Biennial: The Quest for Identity*.

This was the first true attempt to transform the Taipei Biennial into a platform of cultural analysis and self-reflection; the aim was to reflect on a grand scale on the state of Taiwanese identity, this new and “unknown” entity that had started to emerge after the lifting of Martial Law. To this end the team of curators, Hsiao

Chiung-jui (Xiao Qiongrui), Lo Chih-cheng(Luo Zhicheng), Tsai Hung-ming, (Cai Hongming), Li Chun-hsian (Li Junxian), Shieh Tung-shan (Xie Dongshan), and Lu Kuang, chose six categories to present the state of the art in Taiwan: *Identity & Memories*, *Our Environment & City Life*, *Sexuality & Power* and *Visual Dialogue*.

This creation of a universal



*Conferance, Family Parade - Museum*, Chen Shun-chu 1996, photo: Felix Schöber 1996.



*Backyard Garden in June 六月裏的後花園*, Tsong Pu's installation at the 1996 Taipei Biennial. Photo: Felix Schöber 1996.



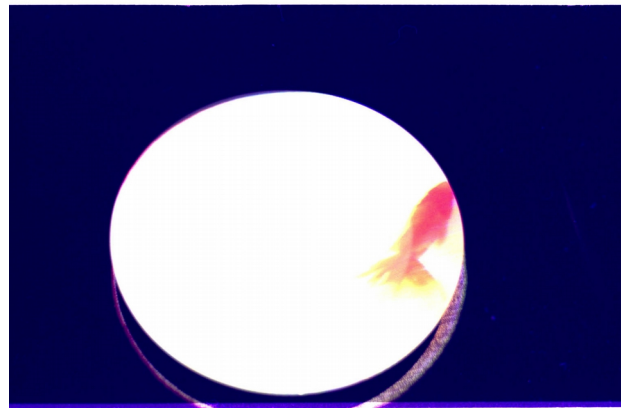
*Flowers are blossoming in the forest, with or without people's passing-by or appreciation to their sweet smell. For the fragrance is the essence of flowers, do not bear any illusions towards it*, Lee Mingsheng's installation at the 1996 Taipei Biennial. Photo: Felix Schöber 1996.

repository of local art and social phenomena was extended into time by a history section *Genealogy & Archives*, which projected the historical trajectory of Taiwan far beyond the time of Chinese colonization into the era of prehistoric aboriginal civilization, whereas *Experiencing Taipei* presented a vision of daily life in Taipei (a part very close to the DPP propaganda).

Albeit much could be said about the presentation on the upper floors, this almost universal show of contemporary Taiwanese art represented an interesting experiment and step forward in several ways: for the first time, several artists were invited to create large-scale installations, occupying an entire corridor, terrace or the mobile stairs (admittedly some artists such as Kuo Wei-kuo preferred to occupy a place “outside” the Biennale, staging a solo show in the basement.)

Even more importantly, an attempt was made to order the Taiwanese art scene, and to re-organize the

Taiwanese art scene as an ongoing dialogue between all players; for the first time, Taiwanese contemporary art was presented as an open dialogue about the horizon of knowledge that constituted Taiwanese national identity- and by introducing categories such as “memory” and environmental consciousness” or “sex and power”, it transformed the question of identity into a large repository of knowledge about the



盤魚 *Fish on Dish*, Yuan Goang-ming, video installation at the 1996 Taipei Biennial.

Photo: Felix Schöber 1996.



*Desire and Power exhibition* 情慾與權力展 Kuo Wei-kuo solo show during but outside the Taipei Biennial, in the basement experimental exhibition area, Photo: Felix Schöber 1996.

nation; the exhibition thus became but an encyclopedic library which contained all the could be known about the nation. In this way, it asserted one crucial idea: that contemporary art was a means to generate and discover knowledge about the nation, and that each single artist, and his artwork occupied a specific place within that encyclopedic horizon of knowledge of the nation. Within the passage from a Chinese to a Taiwanese identity this represented a major transformation to the very structure of identity: identity ceased to be merely a linear or polar narrative or a single trajectory, but was transformed into a more complex entity, an open dialogue about a plural society.

This experiment to transform the Taipei Biennial into the main platform of cultural discourse, and most of all as an expression of local national identity, was a unique experiment, and was not repeated: in the following editions of the Taipei Biennial, the question of national identity was deviated and sublimated under a bigger agenda of positioning Taiwan within the Asian and the international art scene.

### **2-28, a trauma re-enters official memory**

The idea to generate or re-discover knowledge through art was central to another exhibition, or rather series of exhibitions that the TFAM began to stage under the new DPP mayor. As early as 1993 there had been privately organized exhibitions dedicated to the memory of the massacre

that had occurred after February 28, 1947.

In 1996, the TFAM began to stage their own annual exhibition dedicated to the memory



*Fire Red / 火紅* Installation and performance of Lee Mingsheng during the 2-28 exhibition in February 1997. Photo: Felix Schöber 1997.

of that crucial event in Taiwanese history, which had been a taboo up until the end of Martial Law. While the 1996 edition chiefly called upon older artists who had lived through that period (or who had died during those events), in the edition of 1997 several contemporary artists were invited to contribute new work; this included also Lee Mingsheng, who created a large-scale installation in front of the TFAM which echoed his work at the Venice Biennale, or Wu Mali, who pointed at the lack of a female voice in the official history writing.

### **Taiwan, Taiwan 1997: synchronous and interwoven phenomena**

Compared to *ARTTAIWAN*, the 1997 *Taiwan Taiwan, Facing Faces* 台灣台灣 面目全非' pavilion in Venice presented itself far more self-reflexive and elaborated on a critical level, as it was for the first time that a curator attempted to organize the complexity of contemporary society around a curatorial rationale.



Photo call during the 1997 Taiwan Pavilion press conference at the TFAM in May 1997. From left to right: Yao Jui-chung, Chen Chien-pei, director Lin Mun-lee, mayor Chen Shui-bian, Wu Tien-chang, Lee Ming-tze, Wang Jun-jieh. Photo: Felix Schöber 1997.

On the surface, the 1997 Taiwan Pavilion still did not have a formal curator, and the main difference with the previous exhibition remained the choice of the jurors of the selection committee, which were all Asian, and with the exception of Japanese curator Fumio Nanjo (who was to become the curator of the 1998 Taipei Biennial), were all local Taiwanese critics and professors: Lü Ching-fu, Hsiao Chin, and Huang Hai-ming. Of these, only Lü Ching-fu and Huang Hai-ming wrote articles for the catalogue. Out of the latter two, only Huang attempted an analysis of contemporary Taiwanese society, and described each artist and the reasons why he had been chosen, providing the

reader with an equivalent of a curatorial statement.

The second senior critic, Lü Ching-fu,<sup>30</sup> used his article “Tendencies toward local consciousness, Individualism and Edification in Taiwanese art” to reflect on Taiwanese identity and history from a modernist perspective. Apparently he was knowingly writing the swan-song of his career as the single most influential juror of the 1980s: in his article, published on the catalogue of an international exhibition, Lü attacked his co-juror Huang Hai-ming several times, treating Huang Hai-ming not only as the chief ideologue of the most recent discussions on Taiwanese art, but indirectly also as the main critical force behind the 1997 Taiwan Pavilion.

As in 1995, the jury had chosen five artists belonging to the “middle” and “younger” generation to represent the country: Wang Jun-jieh 王俊傑 (Wang Jun-jie), Wu Tien-chang 吳天章 (Wu Tian-zhang), Yao Jui-chung 姚瑞中 (Yao Rui-zhong), Chen Chien-pei 陳建北 (Chen Jian-bei) and Lee Ming-tze 李明則 (Li Ming-ze).

Following one aspect of the tradition of the 1995 Taiwan Pavilion, the main hall was occupied by one installation echoing the urban experience of Taipei, Wang Jun-jieh’s *Neon Urlaub*, and a group of paintings, Wu Tien-chang’s *Wounded Funeral* series, decorated the side walls.



Placement of works at the 1997 Taiwan Pavilion.

The other three side rooms were dedicated to the trauma of the colonial past,

<sup>30</sup> Lü had been the most important juror and advisor of the TFAM in the eighties and early nineties, yet with the arrival of a new mayor and a new museum director, Lin Mun-lee, his power was slowly fading, and a new generation of critics such as Huang Hai-ming and Shih Jui-jen were taking over. In fact this was one of the last occasions where he acted as a juror for a major show of the TFAM.



represented by an installation of Yao Jui-chung (Yao Rui-zhong) in the first room to the right, while the other two rooms were dedicated to technologically advanced spirituality and a romantic look at tradition- a Buddha by Chen Chien-pei meditating over the glow of fluorescent images in one room, and images of a life in scholarly tranquil retreat as well as large Buddha faces by Lee Ming-tse in the last side room.

Similar to the 1995 *ARTTAIWAN* pavilion, the centre of the 1997 *Taiwan Taiwan, Facing Faces* exhibition was occupied by a symbol of Taiwan's rapid urbanisation, Wang's *Neon Urlaub*. While the 1995 show had presented Taiwan as deeply rooted in Chinese tradition, in 1997 these elements were relegated to the side-rooms, and the centre was dedicated to an ironic-sarcastic reflection on the desires and identity crisis of Taiwanese urbanites.

Wang Jun-jie's installation of a virtual travel agency dominated the room, both by its size and by the sound it emanated, making Wu Tien-chang's *Wounded*



*Funeral* disappear in the background;

*Neon Urlaub*, installation at the Prigioni in Venice, Wang Jun-jieh 1997. Photo: Felix Schöber 1997.

during the opening days Wang even hired a young female assistant clad in a silver miniskirt to help him attract attention of potential visitors- customers. *Neon Urlaub* invited visitors to book a trip to several impossible locations, satisfying different impossible desires: to the scene of the Hong Kong handover, right beside the British governor, or otherwise to the trenches of the Yugoslavian civil war, but catered for at a five-star restaurant.

Another option was a holiday on a deserted honeymoon island, unspoiled by human presence, but served by a five-star chef. If that was not good enough, the avid spectator of history could also assist – from the close vantage point of a U-boat or a ultrasound aircraft – to a possible military clash in the Taiwan Strait. Quite unfortunately, the tickets to these unforgettable trips into history and paradise were always already sold out, ironically reminding the visitor that the desire for personal participation in big history, or at least to find a personal paradise, albeit continuously nurtured by the media, are ultimately destined to remain frustrated.

In the background of this flickering neon-light installation lurked, hanging on the wall behind Wang Jun-jieh's installation, the taboos of the recent past under martial law represented by Wu Tien-chang's series *Wounded Funeral*.



*Wounded Funeral I-IV*, mixed media, 192 x 130 cm, Wu Tien-chang 1994.  
source, copyright: Wu Tian-zhang 1994.

These mixed-media canvasses showed faces with the gestures of covering the tongue, the mouth, the eyes and the ears, alluding to the numerous taboos of sexuality and free speech that had been in vigour until 1987.

An installation by Wu Tien-chang, a painting of the *Dream of Past Era* series, animated with Karaoke music and flashing lights, was presented in a side-room to the right; a room that was used only in the 1997 edition of the Taiwan Pavilion.

The relation with the past was made even more complicated in Wu's installation *Dream of Past Era*, where he appropriated a famous historic painting of the 1940's, decorated

the frame with coloured light bulbs, and superimposed a projection of the same scene with an actor. In this way he made it visibly come to life, thus creating a vision of the past that seemed more illusory than factual, and interspersed with questions of sexual identity, as he chose to use a young male actor to impersonate the woman of that historic icon.

A more distant colonial past was put under scrutiny in the first side-room to the left from the main entrance, with Yao Jui-chung's installation *Territory Take-Over, Manoeuvre Sequence I-VI*.

A series of golden photographs showed the artist naked, as he was peeing on the remnants of historical sites, each linked to important moments in Taiwan's post-colonial history, or rather the very moments where the



Dutch, Spanish, Ming-Chinese, Qing-Chinese,

*Territory Take-Over, Maneuver Sequence VI*, at the Prigioni in Venice, mixed media, photography on gilded paper, gilded urinal, Yao Jui-chung 1997. Photo: Felix Schöber 1997.

Japanese and Nationalist-Chinese had first set foot on Taiwanese soil. In front of the frame of each image, the artist had also mounted a gilded urinal, while in the centre there was a gilded plastic model of an aircraft-carrier, which could be read as an allusion to the presence of US American forces in contemporary Taiwanese politics.

By showing them together, Yao's installation positioned all these different forces clearly on a similar level- thus taking a very explicit post-colonial stand in relation to the official ideology of a nation rooted in a millenarian Chinese tradition.

The second room to the left was occupied by Chien Chien-pei, who created a site-specific installation with six sculptures modelled on the artist himself as a sitting cross-legged Buddha in the pose of meditation. The room was kept dark, while on regular

intervals electrical lighting was switched on for a short time.

Each time the light went off, the bamboo screens, painted with fluorescent colour, started to show their images, and the lotus flower made of fluorescent paper set in the centre started glowing in green.



*Praying for Heaven's Charms*, Chen Chien-pei 1997.  
Photo: Felix Schöber 1997.

Following the tradition

inaugurated with the *Shan-hai-jing* wood-cut prints of “Southern Taiwanese” artist Hou Chun-ming in 1995, the third room to the left was occupied by a series of oil and acrylic paintings of “Southern Taiwanese” painter Lee Ming-tze, showing both images of the face of the Buddha, slit in two across the middle, as well as the house and life of a literati painter.

Within this context – a highly urbanized society with a complicated postcolonial past – the Chinese tradition appeared only as one of many cultural options: as the romantic pastime of a self-professed literati painter, Lee Ming-tze, who nevertheless expressed himself through oil painting, or as the possibility of a spiritual retreat, enhanced with technological means, such as in Chen Chien-pei’s installation.

According to critic Huang Hai-ming’s statement for the 1997 *Taiwan Taiwan* exhibition in Venice, the works of the five artists represented “several synchronous and interwoven phenomena” (幾種相互交織的存在模式), which was another way of saying that there were at least three, if not five, different approaches to modern society present in the show, each of which pointed in a different direction.

Some artists, such as Chen Chien-pei and Lee Ming-tze, distanced themselves from the

chaos and alienation of modern life by means of spiritual research into the depths of Zen Buddhism and literati painting. At the other extreme, Wang Jun-jieh exaggerated the possibilities of modern consumer culture, projecting us into a future world where the limits of the known physical and political world have given way to new possibilities of unlimited consumerism. Others, such as Yao Jui-chung and Wu Tien-chang, reflected on how history has been reshaped and altered by the different powers to be. Quite obviously, the curators not only wanted to present a show that included artists from both Northern and Southern Taiwan, but also wanted to present Taiwan as a highly complex, modern society, with all its contradictions.

At the heart of Huang's analysis of contemporary society and at the centre of the exhibition was modern consumer society, represented by Wang Jun-jieh's installation *Neon Urlaub*, and it was the alienation of consumer and media society that was the centripetal force that generated the complexities of contemporary culture, as all reactions seemed to be but ways to escape from its originary alienation: be it in an idyllic or a traumatic past, be it in a spiritual future, or be it into the very excesses of consumerism.

### **The distance of the ethnographer and the interrupted address of the nation**

Michel Foucault had pointed out that the “entire space of the representation” ultimately shall relate to a “corporeal gaze,”<sup>31</sup> thus opening up the question of the relation between the gazing spectator and the subject of display. While Foucault remained somewhat elusive, Homi Bhabha that provided a more specific analysis for the “ethnographic turn” of a young or postcolonial nation:

“Deprived of the unmediated visibility of historicism — 'looking to the legitimacy of past generations as supplying cultural autonomy' — the nation turns from being the symbol of modernity into becoming the symptom of an ethnography of the

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<sup>31</sup> Michel Foucault: *The Order of Things (Les mots et les choses*, Paris 1966), Vintage books reprint, New York 1994, p. 312.

'contemporary' within culture."<sup>32</sup>

In Taiwanese contemporary art, this ethnological turn is most evident in the early and mid-1990s. In the 1980s, before the lifting of martial law, the construction of modernity, or rather, a Chinese modernity, was the chief goal of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum and the Trends exhibition. In the mid 1990s, the ideological tenet of the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice is quite different: after the rupture with the certainty of a Chinese past, a frenetic ethnographic analysis of the contemporary had set in, and the construction of a national microcosm as a national pavilion in Venice is but a part of this local search for identity. Yet this very ethnographic approach opens up a curious distance of the gaze between the artist and his/her own culture. This gap becomes evident in the wording used by director Lin Mun-lee in her preface to the 1997 Taiwan Pavilion:

“How does Taiwan’s contemporary art assess the rapidly changing, diversely complex Taiwanese society? And how does it respond to the rich variety of the contemporary world art?”<sup>33</sup>



TFAM director Lin Mun-lee during the 1997 Taiwan Pavilion press conference at the TFAM, May 1997. Photo: Felix Schöber 1997.

It is interesting to note how and where the verbs ‘assess’ and ‘respond’ are used. The artist ‘responds’ to, and therefore interacts with, the global art world, while simultaneously ‘assessing’ local society; with this, the artist is described as occupying a position of a distant, almost scientific observer of his very own culture.

This – presumably fairly standard – statement by Lin Mun-lee is quite remarkable, as it puts the artist, and with him or her the art administrators, in a rather curious position. It

<sup>32</sup> Bhabha, Homi: “DisSemiNation”, in: *The Location of Culture*, New York 1994, p. 211.

<sup>33</sup> Lin Mun-lee, “Director’s Preface”, in: *Taiwan Taiwan, Facing Faces*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 1997, p. 2.

is from the academic height of global art that the artist/art administrator observes and ‘assesses’ local society; and it is from this authoritative perspective that ‘social and cultural aspects of today’s Taiwan’ come under

“investigation and appraisal ... in the effort to present the uniqueness of things Taiwan.”<sup>34</sup>

If one exchanges the positions of the verbs ‘assess’ and ‘respond’ in Lin Mun-lee’s statement, it becomes even clearer how cool, detached, and ‘scientific’ this bureaucratic gaze on art is. Towards the local, the attitude is characterized not by interaction and response, but by ‘investigation’, ‘assessment’, and ‘appraisal’. It is the global art world that is the point of reference, the universal standard by which Taiwanese art is judged and with which it is supposed to interact and enter into dialogue. It is therefore from the supposed height of global vision that a microcosm of Taiwanese culture is reconstructed through the looking glass and the standards of social science.

This tension, or rather highly artificial distance between the observer and the art can be detected also on a purely curatorial and artistic level: while the first Taiwan Pavilion in Venice in 1995 was composed largely of a group of artists that had been working together before and continued working together after – all but one were members of the independent ‘Apartment 2’ group – the same was not true of the 1997 Taiwan Pavilion in Venice, nor of any Taiwan Pavilion thereafter. It seems almost to have become a rule that the choice of artists of the official Taiwan Pavilion in Venice would be based on the criterion that they had never exhibited before (or would so after) that one particular show. One might consider this a curiosity in the history of group exhibitions, or even the special creativity of the curators involved; but one can also see it as an indicator that those combinations were to a certain extent forced upon the art works and the artists, and that these encounters did not stem from a genuine pre-existing discourse, and neither was any further artistic dialogue ignited by that show in Venice. It also indicates

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<sup>34</sup> Idem, p. 2.

that the combinations of artists in the official show in Venice since 1997 had been overly dictated by a logic of internal politics and political correctness, such as to include both artists from the north and the south, and to present both the past as well as the future. This points to a certain wilfulness within the ‘universalism’ behind the construction of the ethnographic microcosm, and ultimately points to an uneasiness within that discourse that is to be found in the very notion of ethnography of the present. According to Benedict Anderson, this imagined dialogue between members of a community who have never met,<sup>35</sup> is nothing but one of the characteristics of the nation- and it is here, in the creation of the image and identity of a nation through contemporary art, that the role of the state is most evident: this community is first of all imagined by the administrators and officially appointed curators of the TFAM- and the dialogue between those members is also but a constructed one, constructed by the administrators of the museum.

### **An imagined community whose members never met**

It is probably not overly surprising that the first Taiwan Pavilion in Venice, the ArtTaiwan show of 1995, presented an image of the nation that was rather primordialist and essentialising, built around notions of the vitality of the nation, a vitality reflected in the gay and colourful images presented in Venice. In the image created by the administrators and critics of the 1995 Taiwan Pavilion, the R.O.C. was still rooted in the immemorable continuity of the grand Chinese past- and its solidity as a nation was easily described through sociological terminology.

The second pavilion at the Venice Biennale, curated by Huang Hai-ming in 1997, presented a highly reflective departure from this model. Huang confronted the question

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<sup>35</sup> “An American will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his 240.000.000-odd fellow Americans. He has no idea of what they are up to at any time. But he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity.” Benedict Anderson: “Apprehensions of Time”, in: *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London, New York, 1983, 2006, p. 26.



how to construct the nation, and how to construct the choice of artists and their relation to each other in a new, non-essentialising way, by proposing the metaphor of a “super-connector”. In this way he not only conjured up the image of a post-modern information society characterized by its pluralism of values and ideas, but he also provided a reason why these apparently independent and apparently unconnected artists exhibited together: as has been pointed out by Anderson,<sup>36</sup> these artists, may not know each other, any may not have any direct contact with each other, but as they shared the same public sphere, the same informational environment, most literally an island where information circulated with extremely high speed, these artists referred themselves as being members of the same Andersonian imagined community called the nation, and reacting to the same deeper-lying cultural questions.

### **The postcolonial nation and the interrupted address of history**

Rather than essentialising the nation through images of a garishly colourful subtropical island, and locating it in the continuum of a timeless continuum with the past, both director Lin Mun-lee as well as curator Huang Hai-ming transform the address of the nation into an ethnography of the present:

“Deprived of the unmediated visibility of historicism ... the nation turns from being the symbol of modernity into becoming the symptom of an ethnography of the 'contemporary' within culture.”<sup>37</sup>

The image of Taiwan’s society conjured up by Huang was without doubt the image of a society that engaged in ‘socio-cultural investigation’ – and the past was no longer directly available as an unquestioned resource; on the contrary, the search for identity in the past was described by Huang as one of the many centrifugal trajectories alimended

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<sup>36</sup> “An American will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his 240.000.000-odd fellow Americans. He has no idea of what they are up to at any time. But he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity.” Benedict Anderson: “Apprehensions of Time”, in: *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London, New York, 1983, 2006, p. 26.

<sup>37</sup> Bhabha, Homi: “DisSemiNation”, in: *The Location of Culture*, New York 1994, p. 211.

by contemporary alienation.

In the case of Taiwan, this “interrupted address” of post-colonial societies was a question with many layers. This became explicit in such works as Yao Jui-chung’s *Territory Take-Over* series, where Taiwanese history was described as not one, but a series of military take-overs, providing not just one, but several layers of subsequent colonisation, or “interruptions in the address of history”.

As proposed by Homi Bhabha, any research into the interrupted past becomes an ethno-psychological analysis of the present: in Wu Tien-chang’s works, the interrupted past became the projection plane for the repressed desires of the present.

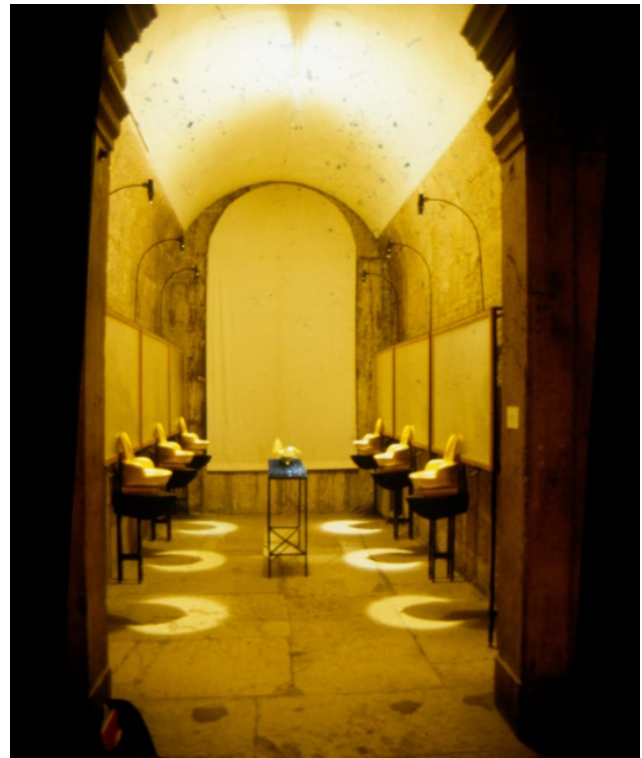
Albeit remaining mostly on a psychological level of analysis, Huang Hai-ming did go one important step further from the classic vision of a nation rooted in the past and projected into the future: first of all, Huang constructed the nation as a discursive space – a space created by the circulation of cultural messages, using the image of the “superconnector” to describe the accelerated speed of information exchange in late 20<sup>th</sup> century society driven by chiefly by television, and only to a lesser extent by classical Andersonian print media. Second, the contradictions of contemporary society were analysed as the expressions of one core question, the alienation of contemporary consumer society, an alienation further exacerbated by the denial, or “interrupted address” of history.

According to Homi Bhabha, the driving force for the ethnographic is that very “interrupted address” of history – and while the ethnography of the urban desires of the present occupied centre stage, this interrupted address of history lurked in all corners of the show- from Yao Jui-chung’s *Territory Take-Over* to Wu Tien-chang’s *Wounded Funeral*, up to the sold-out tickets of Wang Jun-jie’s travel agency.

It is interesting to observe the role played by science in relation to this interrupted address of history: unlike the previous edition of 1995, which imagined Taiwan deeply rooted in a millenarian tradition, Huang Hai-ming analysed a nation deprived of such a

certainty.

As he found it impossible to directly relate to one single historic tradition, the only dialogue partner remaining was science, the science of the present – therefore he turned the analysis of works of art into an analytical session of the nation. The artists, as a group, had to represent the nation as a whole. The subject of his analysis was therefore not a single living person, which he could



directly address or interrogate; the subject of his analysis was a hypothetical subject, created

*Territory Take-Over, Maneuver Sequence I-VI*, at the Prigioni in Venice, mixed media, photography on gilded paper, gilded urinal, Yao Jui-chung 1997.  
Photo: Felix Schöber 1997.

through his and the selection committee's combination of several artists. The ability, or the legitimization to be ultimately able to speak for the nation therefore rested largely on the claim to represent “all” aspects of the nation, to depict a universal and all-encompassing image of the nation, through a choice of artistically diverse artists – as well as on the “democratic” and “scientific” process of the selection of artists. Therefore science, in this case psychology, found itself in a rather ambiguous position, as it was a necessary tool for the legitimacy of the ethnography of the present, but it was applied not to a single human person, but to a hypothetical subject – the nation – which was constructed according to a pattern that was chiefly the result of a bureaucratic process.

### **Close to Open, 1999: the essential and sacred nation**

Compared to the previous Taiwan pavilion, *Close to Open* in Venice represented a return to the archetypical nation- and synthesized this pattern of representation established in 1995 and 1997. It presented in the most condensed form a pattern of a nation rooted in the traditions of an idyllic past, haunted by a trauma of modern history, and looking forward to a spiritual and technological future. The title, *Close to Open*, was not just a mere echo of the theme of the main show in Venice, *ApertoOverAll*, but also a condensation of the trajectory of the nation- from the White Terror period of martial law to democracy.

The year 1999 presented also an administrative novelty: for the first time a curator had been formally invited, chosen on the basis of a curatorial project. The winner of this contest was Shih Jui-jen, together with co-curator Huang Hai-ming.<sup>38</sup> For the first time in the history of the Taiwan Pavilion, the choice of artists and their works was not directly subject to the group dynamics of a committee of jurors, but was entrusted to the choice and intellectual integrity of a curator. Only the whole package, the choice of artists together with the critical project, was subject to the voting of a committee. The very position of an independent curator was a rather recent development – independent curators had made their appearance on the Taiwanese art scene only in 1992, when independent critics such as Victoria Lu, Shih Jui-jen or Huang Hai-ming started to organize exhibitions with a curatorial theme in the basement of the TFAM or in private galleries in Taipei.<sup>39</sup>

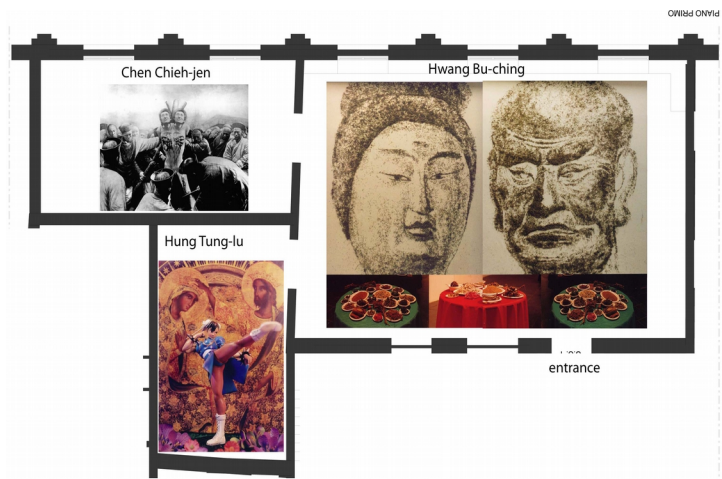
It is somewhat surprising to note how little difference there was between Shih Jui-jen's curatorial project *Close to Open* exhibition and the previous two editions of the Taiwan Pavilions in Venice, at least as far as the basic spatial and ideological pattern was concerned.

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<sup>38</sup> Huang Hai-ming had also presented a curatorial concept, himself naming Shih Jui-jen as co-curator.

<sup>39</sup> See also the chronology of events in Taiwan provided on the Asia society's website for the 1998 *InsideOut* exhibition: <http://sites.asiasociety.org/arts/insideout/chronologies.html#TAIWAN>

As in previous editions, the intent was to create a microcosm of the Taiwanese art scene, and to represent different generations and different artistic languages:



“The three participating artists, Buh-ching Hwang, Jieh-Jen Chen,

Scheme of the positioning of works at the *Taiwan Artists Exposed, Close to Open* pavilion in Venice

and Tung-lu Hung, are from different generations and have different artistic approaches. ... in these three artists works, we will be able to see a profile of Taiwanese contemporary art – as part of the general cultural outlook.”<sup>40</sup>

At the end of the curatorial statement, Shih affirmed:

“The three artists are like the crossroads of Taiwanese art, opening to different directions, and exhibiting different dynamics. Meanwhile, they respectively represent three different implicit structures and complementary approaches.”<sup>41</sup>

Yet these three represented not merely different directions in a pluralized world. The three artists had been chosen as representatives of different generations, and most of all they represented different stages of national time (echoing the theme of the 1997 Venice Biennale, *Future, Present, Past*):

“Chen looks back at history, Hwang experiences the land in its present state, and Hung looks into the future culture.”<sup>42</sup>

Yet this scheme was not necessarily a clear-cut linear one: Hwang Buh-ching, called upon to represent the present, a few lines later was described as the creator of

<sup>40</sup> Shih, Jui-jen: “Close to Open, Taiwanese artists exposed”, in: *Close to Open, Taiwan Artists Exposed*, TFAM, Taipei, Venezia 1999, p. 9.

<sup>41</sup> Shih, Jui-jen: “Close to Open: Taiwanese Artists Exposed”, in: *Close to Open, Taiwan Artists Exposed*, TFAM, Taipei, Venezia 1999, p. 15.

<sup>42</sup> Shih, Jui-jen: “Close to Open: Taiwanese Artists Exposed”, in: *Close to Open, Taiwan Artists Exposed*, TFAM, Taipei, Venezia 1999, p. 15.

“memories of life”- and the reference points for his imagery was the distant Tang dynasty, arguably located in a past much more distant than the modern history of the images of Chen Chieh-jen.

Within the development of the Taiwan identity discourse, Shih Jui-jen took a rather open-minded or “New Taiwanese” approach to the definition of Taiwanese-ness in art, as he integrated various elements of the proverbial five millennia of Chinese tradition with his vision of Taiwanese identity: the work occupying the main hall, Huang Buh-ching’s *Feast in the Wild*, consisted not only of tables with plates of seeds from rare plants from the Southern Taiwanese countryside, but also of large-scale images of Tang dynasty style faces of a man and a lady. While the former made a direct reference to a local identity built on the islands indigenous natural and cultural resources, the latter seemed to integrate Taiwan in a larger trajectory of mainland Chinese culture.

The other two artists were thus turned into the corollary elements of this vision of a nation rooted in nature, haunted by historical trauma, and projected towards a technological future:



*A Way Going to an Insane City*, b/w laser print photograph, 225 x 300cm, Chen Chieh-jen 1999. copyright: Chen Chieh-jen 1999.

Chen Jie-ren presented photomontages showing

images of a traumatic and violent past, images of events and of spaces both in mainland China as well as in Taiwan, superimposing them with the image of his own, mostly naked body.

Hung Tung-lu’s vision of the future – or rather of the spirituality of that technological future- was even more cosmopolitan, and a highly hybridized one; in his vision,

Japanese superheroe manga puppets were superimposed with different kinds of West and Eastern European religious imagery, thus opening up a comparison between those new icons of Asian youth culture and European traditional systems of belief.



*Pretty soldier: Sailor moon. Lynn Minmay. Street fighter: Chun Li. Evangelion: Ajanami Rei* 美少女战士、林明美、春丽、凌波玲, 1999, photography, C-print, 121 x 96 cm, framed 128 x 102 cm. Copyright: Hung Tung-lu 1999.

### **Hwang Buh-ching's reference of History: appropriated or invented?**

According to Benedict Anderson, the chief mesmerizing aspect of nationalism are the contradictions within its ideological foundations:

“Theorists of nationalism have often been perplexed, not to say irritated, by these ... paradoxes: (1) The objective modernity of nations to the historian's eye vs. their subjective antiquity in the eye of nationalists.”<sup>43</sup>

These contradictions can also be found if we analyse some of the works at the 1999 Taiwan Pavilion in Venice: in the imaginary image of the nation, it is rooted in an immemorial past. Yet if we analyse the work of Hwang Buh-ching, Tang-dynasty style faces created with local seeds, it has to be argued that in pre-modern and early modern Taiwanese history there was hardly any direct and continuous link of a usage of Tang imagery in Taiwan, as no part of the Formosa island was governed or even colonized from China before the collapse of the Ming dynasty. Even in mainland China this imagery had disappeared from the public view, as most examples were either buried in

<sup>43</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflection of the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London 1983, revised and extended in 1991, p. 5.

imperial tombs, or were inaccessible in abandoned and walled up grottoes such as Dunhuang, or were painted and plastered over by later dynasties. Buddhist Tang dynasty imagery had re-appeared in the public imagination, and was re-appropriated by the modern Chinese nation only when the Dunhuang grottoes were re-discovered at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These images were then re-appropriated not only by the printing industry, but also by contemporary painters, such as Zhang Da-qian, and by art academies, which re-introduced them as a national style into the curricula of aspiring students. In Taiwan, examples of Tang dynasty painting are extremely rare – even the Palace Museum, which owns one of the biggest collections of Song dynasty scrolls worldwide, hardly owns or exhibits examples of Tang dynasty painterly works. With Hobsbawm,<sup>44</sup> it has to be argued that the appropriation of Tang dynasty imagery by Hwang was but an “invented tradition” - a tradition that was re-invented once those images had re-appeared in the public imaginary. Albeit the apparent claims to antiquity, Hwang appropriated but an element of modern China, part of the image that 20<sup>th</sup> century China had created of its past. The past that Huang Buh-ching invoked were not a part of an in-interrupted tradition; it rather was part of a new, modern image created by the archaeology of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>45</sup> The ambiguity of Hwang’s work as to its horizon of reference was to be exploited only one year later at the Shanghai Biennial in 2000. In Venice had Hwang represented Taiwan in its national pavilion, in Shanghai his name was re-written in pin-yin as “Huang Buqing” (rather than Hwang Buh-ching), and the nation, or rather the province he was claimed to represent was called “Taiwan, China.” With an apparently innocent gesture- the invitation to yet another exhibition- the work once representing the political entity Taiwan had become part of a completely different narrative, which incorporated the R.O.C. within a larger narrative of a united China, superseding one “imagined community” by another.

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<sup>44</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge 1983, reprint 2009.

<sup>45</sup> In the case of other artists, such as Huang Chih-yang, one could argue the opposite: Chih-yang appropriates only the technique and aesthetics of ink painting, a technique he had learned at the art academy from his living teachers, without references or imitation of a specific period or style.



A similar case could be made about Chen Chieh-jen's photo-montages, which curator Shih described as a response to a specifically Taiwanese trauma of history.<sup>46</sup> As it has been pointed out before, Chen's photo-montages were often based on an elaboration of Taiwanese historical sites- but in his search for inspiration Chen had not limited himself to the island, but had worked also with historical images he found in a famous book of a French author- and which had been shot in mainland China.

The most prominent work in his show, *Genealogy of Self*, was inspired by an image that was shot in China at the turn of the century and had been used by Georges Batailles in his *Tears of Eros*. Other works, such as *A*



*Way Going to an Insane City*, were based on sites in Taiwan.

*Genealogy of Self*, laser print photograph, 208x 260 cm, Chen Chieh-jen 1996, copyright: Chen Chieh-jen 1996.

In fact Chen was not only a second-generation immigrant in Taiwan, but since 1996 also had become one of the most successful artists working both in China, Taiwan and the rest of Asia.<sup>47</sup>

### **Synthesis: the body of the nation**

The 1999 *Close to Open* Taiwan Pavilion has to be seen as the most archetypical of all Taiwan Pavilions. Unlike previous editions, it defined itself as a ritual space, a sacred space of the nation, providing what New Museology author Carol Duncan had defined

<sup>46</sup> presumably the 2-28 incident and the following period of martial law, but Shih seems to extend that to the entire colonial history of Taiwan, which would then start about 400 years ago under the Dutch, Spanish and Chinese

<sup>47</sup> Chen participated (among others) at the 1996, 1998, 2002 and 2004 Taipei Biennial, 2000 Lyon Biennial, 2000 Gwangju Biennial, 2004 Shanghai Biennial, 2005 Fukuoka Biennial, 2005 and 2009 Venice Biennial, and the 2008 Guangzhou Triennial.

as a “liminal and semi-religious experience.”<sup>48</sup> More than any other edition of the Taiwan Pavilion, it condensed its curatorial pattern to the archetypical image of a modern nation, rooted in history and the nature of its locality, and projected into a spiritual and technological future.

In his statement for the 1999 Taiwan Pavilion in Venice, Shi made a special point in mentioning the body as a central theme of this exhibition, affirming that the artists

“... are all interested in the body as an artistic language.”<sup>49</sup>

At first glance, this seemed to be a reflection chiefly on the previous 1997 Taiwan Pavilion, and on a general trend in the arts, as only Chen Chieh-jen used his body in his photo-montages (Hung employed plastic puppets, Hwang recurred to seeds and images of Tang dynasty faces), whereas in the previous edition of 1997 there had been more than one body or its representation within the show: the scarcely clad girl of Wang Jun-jieh’s *Neon Urlaub* installation, the gilded photographs of a naked Yao Jui-chung, the gypsum sculptures of a naked Chen Chien-bei, and several human faces on Wu Tien-chang’s canvasses. Shih continued indeed with an observation on a wider cultural trend:

“... at the practising level, the emerging importance of “body” is probably the most conspicuous phenomenon. The aesthetics of body has been suppressed in traditional Eastern cultures, treated by Taiwanese artists as taboo and as a prohibited category. And now it has become an expressive sign to reveal individual existence, and even is treated as a discursive tool to reflect on communal values.”<sup>50</sup>

It is interesting to note how the Foucaultian question of the body as the ultimate point of reference in the space of representation has become a cultural question, a question

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<sup>48</sup> Carol Duncan 1995: “The art museum as ritual”, in: Donald Preziosi, ed.: *The Art of Art History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1998, p. 478.

<sup>49</sup> Shih, Jui-jen: “Close to Open, Taiwanese artists exposed”, in: *Close to Open, Taiwan Artists Exposed*, TFAM, Taipei, Venezia 1999, p. 9.

<sup>50</sup> Shih Jui-jen: “Close to Open, Taiwanese artists Exposed,” in: *Close to Open, Taiwan Artists Exposed*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 1999, p. 8, 9.

closely linked to the abolishment of Martial Law and the introduction of democracy.

Yet Shih used the “body” also to describe a post-colonial psychological and cultural trajectory, as an allegory for the island nation and its post-colonial experience. Yet the bodies referenced by Shih are not merely the bodies of a few performance artists- the bodies are those of the members of the nation, the people, that elusive point of reference in all national representation- and it is here where that elusive point of reference is reified into a symbolic body of the nation, a body that becomes the imaginary subject of the national narrative, but is not to be confused with the people or their minds:

“the Taiwanese found themselves trapped in an unspeakable sadness and had to protect themselves in self-enclosure. In other words, if an “open body” aptly describes the destiny of the island, then a “a self-enclosed mind” would be the best images for the inhabitants historical character.”<sup>51</sup>

Making reference to the historical watershed of the lifting of martial law, he continued, explaining the relationship of the theme of the Taiwan Pavilion with Szeemann’s theme of the 1999 Venice Biennale, *ApertoOverAll*:

“Taiwanese art in the 1990’s, responding to the post-martial law (lifted in 1987) situation, sets its cultural task to be one of breaking the traditional self-enclosure and fostering its autonomous consciousness and free will so as to speak out and express itself uninhibitedly.”<sup>52</sup>

Shih elaborated only the trajectory of “closed minds” under colonial rule to “open minds” under democratic rule, while the trajectory of the “open body” of the island - opened by colonial force - to the “open bodies” - opened by democratic freedom of its citizens - remained somewhat hidden under the conflation of the bodies of the artists and the “body” of the nation. It is the latter, the body as an allegory for the nation, that was the main focus of the exhibition in Venice:

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<sup>51</sup> Shih Jui-jen: “Close to Open, Taiwanese artists Exposed,” in: *Close to Open, Taiwan Artists Exposed*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 1999, p. 8.

<sup>52</sup> Shih Jui-jen: “Close to Open, Taiwanese artists Exposed,” in: *Close to Open, Taiwan Artists Exposed*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 1999, p. 8.

“Therefore, besides the different images of body the three artists present, they also provide a key to understanding the direction of Taiwanese contemporary art .... although ‘liberated bodies and actions/energized wills and feelings’ may summarize the dynamic of Taiwanese contemporary art, ‘to construct a body with genuine emotions and to position it in optimal existence’ perhaps will be better in defining an active aspiration inherent in contemporary Taiwanese art.”<sup>53</sup>

From this point of view it is an almost necessary consequence that every Taiwan Pavilion in Venice, every major exhibition abroad and at home seemed to repeat the same exhibitionary pattern. This ritual ritual space reflects itself even in the description of the works, where Shih deployed a Jungian psychology:

“Hwang’s twilight landscape, Chen’s pale hell, and Hung’s glittering heaven are three different journeys back to the Taiwanese psychological home. Together, they represent a dynamic and complex abstract of contemporary Taiwanese culture and a living profile of the Taiwanese body. Hwang’s manual work creates a ritual space ..... Chen’s computer manipulation ... . By mixing tragedy and farce of the body, ... provides collective spiritual confession for those Taiwanese who are ready to step out of the historical sadness.”<sup>54</sup>

Art, specifically contemporary art, therefore has a very specific role: that of providing a space of psychological exploration, as well as of spiritual relief- the museum, to quote Carol Duncan, has taken on the role to provide a liminal experience, and the artist, has taken on a role that is highly secular and highly modern: to become a “priest of a secular religion”<sup>55</sup>- and the narrative of that religion is nothing else but the nation.

### **Conclusion: the first three Taiwan Pavilions in Venice from 1995 until 1999,**

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<sup>53</sup> Shih Jui-jen: “Close to Open: Taiwanese Artists Exposed,” in: *Close to Open, Taiwan Artists Exposed*, TFAM, Taipei, Venezia, 1999, p. 15.

<sup>54</sup> Shih Jui-jen: “Close to Open: Taiwanese Artists Exposed“, in: *Close to Open, Taiwan artists Exposed*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 1999, p. 15.

<sup>55</sup> Henry Sussmann: “Part One: The Emergence of the Artist as Priest in a Secular Art Religion”, in *The Aesthetic Contract, statutes of art and intellectual work in Modernity*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1997, pp. 21.

**the vital force and body of the nation or an ethnography of the present?**

The first three Taiwan pavilions in Venice, created between 1995 and 1999, projected three different images of the nation- the nation as a source of vitality feeding its artists, the nation as a space where ideas and information are shared, and finally the nation described through the image of the body, who needs art as a liminal space, as a psychological home.

In these three exhibitions a pattern is established that is intended to reflect on the growing pluralism of Taiwanese society after the lifting of Martial Law. Yet this pattern reflects not any plurality- it rather creates the image of a nation centred around a naturalized core, around the idea of a nation rooted in nature, a nation that consciously confronts the trauma of the past, and which is projected into a spiritual and technologically advanced future.

While these three Taiwan Pavilions repeat a pattern in an astonishingly similar way, in the curatorial texts the nation and its gaps appear rather different.

In the edition of 1995, the nation is centred around a core of essentialised vital energy, represented by images of plant-like sculptures as well as colourful urban scenes. Around this apparently stable core the jury has grouped several artists that de-construct the ideological foundations of the nation, thus projecting the image of a pluralist nation, even though those critical voices seem to occupy a rather marginal positions, both spatially as ideologically within the writings of the jurors.

This image of a plural nation became far more conceptually advanced with the exhibition of 1997, when the Andersonian idea of information technology, or rather the idea of an informational realm became the curatorial rationale. This seemed to solve one crucial question: why artists that have hardly met before should exhibit together, and why that group should be able to represent the nation. Yet this opened up another question: the psychological identity of that nation, but also the question of the relation with the past.

Unlike the previous edition that presented Taiwan as a continuation of a grander Chinese past, just a bit more plural and a bit more self-reflexive, the exhibition of 1997 for the first time openly questioned the relation with the past, and proposed the role of the artist as an ethnographer of the present. The statements of curator Huang and director Lin Mun-lee echoed Anderson's idea of the nation as an information realm as well as Homi Bhabha's post-colonial turn to the ethnography of the present, but as I have pointed out, the very wording of director Lin hinted at a tension in that relationship: as ethnographer, the artist positioned himself in a strange distance with his own culture, positioning himself both above, at the height of international discourse, thus creating a new tension within the museum space.

In 1999, the previous pattern of a nation rooted in a naturalised past, haunted by historical trauma but launched into a technological future is repeated, but with a new and different approach: the body of the artist becomes the sign of liberalization and individualisation- yet at the same time the nation is also described through the metaphor of the human body, and art becomes the psychological realm to re-elaborate the trauma of the past, or to find a space dedicated to the spiritual roots of the nation, represented by the indigenous seeds of nature, as well as the faces of antiquity.

As I have elaborated, under the surface there were gaps that could hardly be dissimulated: curator Shih used the notion of an "open body" both to describe the situation of a colonized nation, as well as to describe the idea of mental and psychological liberalization during the process of democratisation. It has to be argued that this ambiguity was not limited to Taiwan or inherent to Shih's statement: in Foucault, the corporeal gaze was the ultimate point of reference for human sciences, and this very corporeal gaze had been claimed by Tony Bennett to be at the heart of the identity turn within contemporary museum practice. Yet once "the body" was turned from a symbol of subaltern identities into the metaphor of the nation, there were other, more ambiguous layers of meaning that appear, rather reminiscent of early 20<sup>th</sup>

century nationalisms.

This ambiguity deepens once we look closer at the icons of the past that occupy the centre stage of the show: they hardly represent any continued tradition, particularly not in Taiwan, and can only be described in Hobsbawm's terms of as an "invented tradition", or rather the projection of an image that is entirely modern.

As the image of the nation became increasingly complex and less linear, there was another phenomenon coming to the fore: as had been pointed out by Huang Hai-ming in 1992, since the lifting of Martial Law the status of the work of art had gone through a profound transformation, from being a merely aesthetic object to take on the task of the ethnography of the present, and so have artists found a new role- that of "priests of a secular religion"<sup>56</sup>- and in the Taiwan Pavilion of 1999, this secular religion was but an eulogy to the nation.

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<sup>56</sup> Henry Sussmann: "Part One: The Emergence of the Artist as Priest in a Secular Art Religion", in *The Aesthetic Contract, statutes of art and intellectual work in Modernity*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1997, pp. 21.

**Chapter six: the Darwinian roots of cosmopolitanism,  
the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice in 2001 and 2003**

This chapter presents the Taiwan Pavilions of the years 2001 and 2003, which made an attempt to present Taiwan as a cosmopolitan nation- as a critically educated nation, and as a nation that had an important cultural message for the world. This constituted also a shift in the image of the nation, back to an image of the nation bound by a bond of blood, rather than the boundaries of a physical territory, and back to the image of a nation ultimately rooted in Darwinian ideologies of the race.

In 1998 the *Site of Desire* Taipei Biennial had made a fundamental turn from recreating an almost all-encompassing universal cosmos of Taiwanese identity to present Taiwan as a part and an important centre of a growing Asian economy and culture. In 2000 and 2002, a further step was made to enlarge the horizon from Asia to the world with *The Sky is the Limit* and *The Theater of the World* Taipei Biennials, which presented Taiwan as a site of globalisation. From 2001 onwards, the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice started to make a conscious effort to interact with the global art scene, first of all through the curatorial statements. Both the statements by Kao Chien-hui in 2001, and by Lin Shu-min in 2003 made an effort to use contemporary global cultural discourse to frame the Taiwanese nation, rather than to apply notions of classical modern science such as Freudian or Jungian psychology, as it had been the case in the previous editions.



This interaction with global discourse was intended to go both ways: not only as an adoption of Western discourse to understand Taiwan, but also to use Taiwan as an example, as a platform to discuss cultural questions of global relevance. The most aggressive version of this sort of outgoing message to the world was the curatorial statement of 2001, where Kao claimed that Taiwanese art should play the role of a cultural virus infecting global culture.

On a second level, the choice of artists was also noticeably different: while in the previous years only artists effectively living and working in Taiwan were sent to Venice, from 2000 onwards both the Taipei Biennial as well as the Taiwan Pavilion included several artists with a R.O.C. passport who were living and working overseas. The most extreme example of this trend to represent a cosmopolitan Chinese identity in contemporary art was the 2003 Taiwan Pavilion *Limbo Zone*, where the curator, and all but one artist were living and working overseas, chiefly in New York and Paris.

This curatorial effort did not change the basic pre-existing pattern of the representation of a nation as centred around a natural core, rooted in a Chinese past, and looking forward to a spiritual and technological future. On the contrary, the Taiwan pavilions of 2001 and 2003 made this pattern ever more explicit, adding to this image of the nation even references to Darwinian evolutionary science.

This turn to a new cosmopolitanism also reflected a turn in the politics in the city of Taipei, where the DPP had lost the seat of the mayor to the KMT. While the previous DPP-backed editions were built around a national identity based on the constitutional idea of the *jus soli*, or rather around the idea of a nation as the community of people living on a certain territory (the island of Taiwan), the KMT-backed version of national representation rather moved back to a national identity dominated by the *jus sanguinis*, as was the original emphasis of Sun Yat-sen's reform movement, “to save the race and save the nation”,<sup>1</sup> and which continues to be the basic orientation of the nationality law

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Dikötter: *The Discourse of Race in Modern China*, Stanford 1992, p. 97.

of the R.O.C. constitution.<sup>2</sup>

This arguably reactionary shift in notions of naturalisation was accompanied by a different, more analytical use of allusions to nature as being the root of the nation. While in 1995 and 1999 notions of culture, nature and even genetics were conflated in single, highly syncretic installations, these different levels of the allegorical and metaphorical deployment of elements of nature were divided up, and deployed through different works of different artists. These works were then combined in the main hall to represent the core roots of the nation. Both in 2001, and even more so in 2003, all three possibilities of understanding nature as the root of national identity were displayed within the same space, as distinct works of art, which were often not simply in dialogue, but in opposition to each other: works that represented the ecological consciousness of contemporary society, other works that reflected on the urban environment as the second nature of the city dweller, and finally works that highlighted the genetic root of the race at the base of the modern late-Darwinian nation.

### **The cosmopolitan nation and its roots in Darwinism: *Living Cell*, 2001**

The 2001 pavilion *Living Cell* followed closely the pattern adopted since 1995, albeit with some interesting differences.

As in 1999, an independent curator with his project was chosen by a jury. For the first time since 1995, the selecting committee was not mentioned on the official publication,<sup>3</sup> and only the curator herself wrote on the catalogue.

The jurors choice fell on Kao Chien-hui, a fairly well-known critic and journalist, but with little previous curatorial record.

<sup>2</sup> Nationality Law of the R.O.C.: <http://law.moj.gov.tw/Eng/LawClass/LawAll.aspx?PCode=D0030001>, last accessed 18.6.2010.

<sup>3</sup> According to Hu Yong-fen in an email dated 27.9.2009, that committee consisted of: herself, Ho Cheng-kuang 何政廣 (He Zheng-guang, chief editor / founder of *artists* magazine), Chu Teh-I 曲德義 (Qu De-yi, senior abstract painter), Hsiao Tzung-hwang 蕭宗煌 (Xiao Zong-huang), Wang Jun-jieh 王俊傑 and Chi Ti-nan 紀鐵男 (Ji Tie-nan).

According to director Huang, the show again showed a microcosm of the nation: “the works on display at the Taiwan Pavilion represent a microcosm of Taiwanese art over the past decade”.<sup>4</sup>



Positioning of works at the *Living Cell* Taiwan Pavilion in 2001.

As in 1995 and 1999, an element representing nature occupied the centre of the show. *Beyond the Site* was a cylindrical installation created out of recuperated wooden planks, collected and assembled by the artist Wang Wen-chih.



*Beyond the Site*, Wang Wen-chih 2001, photo Wolfgang Träger 2001.

As in 1995 and in 1999, this piece of nature was juxtaposed with an element of culture.

<sup>4</sup> Huang Tsai-lang (director, TFAM): “Commissioners Preface”, in: *Taiwan, Living Cell*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2001, p.5.

In 2001, this element to the pattern was represented through a wall-painting by Michael Lin, who covered the whole length of the wall opposite the entrance with nostalgic floral textile design patterns that had been



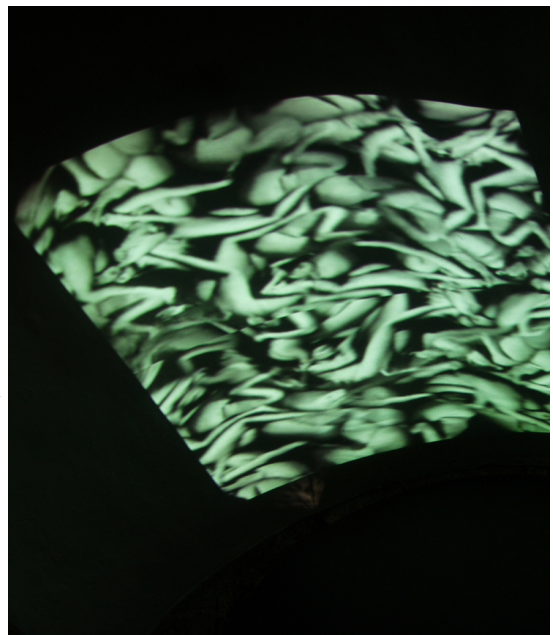
fashionable in Taiwan in the

*Palazzo delle Prigioni 6.10-11.4.2001, Michael Lin 2001, photo: Wolfgang Träger 2001.*

1950s. The painted panels

covered the wall up to the height of the three arches, leaving open only the windows facing the S. Mark basin.

Adjacent to this core of nostalgic references to local nature and culture, curator Kao arranged another work which in this context could only be deciphered as an allusion to the ethnic, or rather genetic, root of national identity- artist Liu Shi-fen's installation *Deciphering the Map of Love: Eyeballs of a Lover*.



The installation consisted of several surgical tables arranged in a cross, and a video projection on the ceiling. Upon the tables,

*Deciphering the Genetic Map of Love: Eyeballs of a Lover; Liu Shih-fen 2001, photo: Wolfgang Träger 2001*

small domed cylindrical light-boxes linked with a multitude of plastic tubing contained digital MRI images of the artist's heart, juxtaposed with nude photos of herself. In addition, a video loop of animated naked bodies mingling in a chaotic mass was projected onto the ceiling, accompanied by the sound of breaking glass.

Ostensibly Liu's work questioned the relationship between physical desire and the image of the body under the looking glass of modern clinical science. As it occupied the first room to the left of the entrance door, it arguably continued the de-constructivist tradition of Wu Mali established in 1995, and of naked images of the body of the artist initiated by Yao Jui-chung in 1997.

Within the curatorial concept of Kao Chien-hui, which equated culture to a diffusion and propagation of cultural meme- "genes", it has to be asked whether Liu's work did not take on another level of meaning, that is, to represent the genetic or ethnic roots of the nation, in a triad together with local culture and the physical space of its natural environment.

Continuing the pattern established in 1995, 1997 and 1999, works relating to social questions, and those playing with the expressive mean of new media were presented in the two remaining side-rooms.

The space at the far end, usually reserved to social questions and historic taboos,



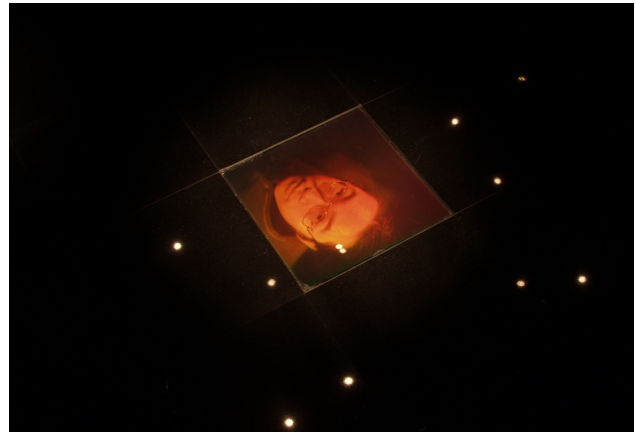
*The Chain*, Chang Chien-chi 1998,  
photo: Wolfgang Träger 2001

this time was taken by Magnum photographer Chang Chien-chi's series *The Chain*.

As in the previous edition with Chen Chieh-jen's photo-montages, Chang's medium was black-and-white photography. *The Chain* presented inmates of the Long-Fa-Tang mental hospital, where – for reasons of easier management – the patients had been chained to each other in couples.

New media (the future, so to speak, albeit in a dystopian form) were represented by the installation of holograms created by Lin Shu-min.

*Glass Ceiling* consisted of seemingly three-dimensional faces looking up from the floor, apparently confined to a space underneath the feet of the visitor. Inside the Old Prisons in Venice, this created an effect of prisoners looking up through an imaginary glass floor.



*Glass Ceiling*, Lin Shu-min 1997 – 2001,  
photo: Wolfgang Träger 2001

### **The naturalised nation: art in the terminology of genetics and particle colliders**

Kao centred her curatorial statement around the notion of “memes” or cultural elements which, according to the 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* of the late Darwinist Richard Dawkins, could be compared and equated with the proliferation and fight for survival of single biological genes. Kao defined the term “meme” in these terms:

“Any invasive concept that can replicate itself can be called a “meme”.<sup>5</sup>

The next sentence described this concept of culture-as-virus which provided her with an explanation for the destruction of traditional cultures as well as modern alienation and post-modern instability:

“It is this invasive concept that makes our world seem vulnerable; it drives the traditional and the innovative toward a definitive course of change without reason”.<sup>6</sup>

Using this terminology, she described the goal of Taiwan’s participation at the Venice

<sup>5</sup> An account of the rise (and fall) of that idea can be found on wikipedia at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memetics> (consulted 27.9.2009.) A critique of memetics as a non-scientific conflation of semiotics with some buzzwords from genetics has been put forwards (amongst others) by Luis Benitez Bribiesca: “Memetics: a dangerous idea”, in *Interciencia*, vol. 26, N. 001, 2001, consulted 27.9.2009 at: <http://redalyc.uaemex.mx/redalyc/pdf/339/33905206.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Kao Chien-hui: “Living cell, soul factory of mankind”, in: *Taiwan, Living Cell*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2001, p. 14.

Biennale in the Darwinist terms of the survival-of-the-fittest:

“Taiwan contemporary art in Venice is an arts event seeking to collide with various cultural memes from different regions”.<sup>7</sup>

In this terminology of colliding memes, the Venice Biennale had been turned into an oversized quantum physics particle accelerator, which through the collision of particles or “memes” generated “living cells,” the elements that lend their name to the title of Kao Chien-hui’s exhibition:

“Any cultural collision will generate dynamic living cells that are the driving force behind the exchanges between regional and international art forms”.<sup>8</sup>

Using Dawkin’s ideas, she continued in the jargon of quantum physics:

“The collisions, along with their unpredicted results, will open avenues for artistic exchanges such as transformations, separation, resonance, frozen moments, and dissolution.”<sup>9</sup>

In the next page, she enlarged this concept even further, starting from metaphors inspired by biology, and merged them with the Nietzschean/New-Age contrast between the Apollonian and Dionysian spirit:

“The overall aesthetics of contemporary art can be further extended from the word “cell”. The word “cell” signifies both life and survival space. From the context of living cells, variants, sources of energy, bacteria that drives development, causal relationships, and changing cells, ... Now, however, incited by vibrant culture concepts, different forms of transformation have resulted in aesthetics characterized by fleeting instability. These fleeting, unstable aesthetics define the Dionysian spirit”.<sup>10</sup>

In the next paragraph, she tried to relate this theme to the main subject of Szeemann’s

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<sup>7</sup> ibidem

<sup>8</sup> ibidem

<sup>9</sup> ibidem

<sup>10</sup> Kao Chien-hui: “Living cell, soul factory of mankind”, in: *Taiwan, Living Cell*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2001, p. 16.

2001 Venice Biennial, *Plateau of Humanity*:

“Due to the sameness in the messages of life, different regional artistic expressions from foreign lands have common global contents while exploring the spiritual lives of individuals and societies. The mutual influence and expression of the spiritual lives are the common concerns of the contemporary collective awareness”.<sup>11</sup>

She did not elaborate how these two concepts – memes and humanity – interacted precisely. She concluded her statement using phraseology of Chinese humanism:

“From the perspective of human character, human nature, humanness, human rights, and human emotions, the regional contemporary arts have ample room for visual and conceptual dialogue with global arts”.<sup>12</sup>

It is quite noticeable how her terminology changed at this point: from the “collision” of “invasive concepts” to “sharing” and “spirituality”:

“In the spirit of sharing art across cultures, the works of the five contemporary artists from Taiwan, namely, Wen-chih Wang, Michael Min-Hong Lin, Chien-chi Chang, Shu-min Lin, and Shih-fen Liu, evolve around the exploration of man’s spiritual inner-being”.<sup>13</sup>

In her description of the single artists and their works, this ambiguity, or rather dichotomy of language and terminology, continued. The two artists who occupied the main hall of the exhibition inside the Prigioni, Wang Wen-chih and Michael Lin, are both described as re-imagining and re-creating a past framed in rather romantic terms:

“In *Beyond the Site*, Wang imagines a space of the relics of ancient civilizations and the rituals of life..... Wang created an image of another social life in its simplistic form. Wang’s work conjures up memories of the lives in the rural areas

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<sup>11</sup> Kao Chien-hui: “Living cell, soul factory of mankind”, in: *Taiwan, Living Cell*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2001, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Kao Chien-hui: “Living cell, soul factory of mankind”, in: *Taiwan, Living Cell*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2001, p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> Kao Chien-hui: “Living cell, soul factory of mankind”, in: *Taiwan, Living Cell*, Taipei, Venice 2001, pp. 14, 15.



during the early days in Taiwan and the yearning for a simple way of life...”.<sup>14</sup>

The “memetic” character of Wang Wen-chih’s work could be found in its archetypical qualities, as he provided an “archetypical spiritual shelter”, which

“exemplifies a collective awareness that goes beyond physical boundaries and transcends cultures”,

and which even proved that

“man’s yearning for the cave-dwelling experience is far stronger than that for the warmth of his mother’s womb.”<sup>15</sup>

His central position inside the exhibition was justified by the double meaning given by Kao Chien-hui to the title *Living Cell*, derived from the two meanings of the word cell:

“The overall aesthetics of contemporary art can be further extended from the word ‘cell’. The word ‘cell’ signifies both life, and survival space.”<sup>16</sup>

Michael Lin’s work was described in these terms:

“using the imagery from old floral patterned cloths, Lin’s design ... criss-cross images from the pastoral life to those of an industrialized way of life. ... His works embody the new look internationalism at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the pop art of the 1960s”.

Kao continued:

“Lin uses bold prints ... bringing forth the nostalgia of post-colonialism, ... He replaces the sorrows of historical pasts with contemporary romantic feelings, “.<sup>17</sup>

The stunning rise to international stardom of Michael Lin since his first large-scale floor-painting at the 2000 Taipei Biennial, in Kao’s words became an archetypical example for a viral or “memetic” work that invaded other cultures, and which

<sup>14</sup> Kao Chien-hui: “Living cell, soul factory of mankind”, in: *Taiwan, Living Cell*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2001, p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> “Wang ...uses natural materials to provide a refuge for the body and soul through simple archetypical shelters”. Kao Chien-hui: “Living cell, soul factory of mankind”, in: *Taiwan, Living Cell*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2001, p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> Kao Chien-hui: “Living cell, soul factory of mankind”, in: *Taiwan, Living Cell*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2001, p. 16.

<sup>17</sup> Kao Chien-hui: “Living cell, soul factory of mankind”, in: *Taiwan, Living Cell*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2001, p. 18.

propagated its meme across cultural boundaries:

“His cultural aesthetic genes include desires for prosperity, manifested by the brightly coloured peonies, ..... The regional style becomes an adornment, seeping into the international scene in the form of cultural ornamental patterns.”<sup>18</sup>

This viral penetration takes place not only on a cultural, but even on a sensory level:

“his floral patterns become popular cells and parts of a tasteful life that are able to penetrate, expand, and excite the senses.”<sup>19</sup>

According to Kao, the highly staged character of Chang Chien-chih’s photographs also managed to abolish the barrier between the subject and the object. In terms of cultural genetics, this was due to the viral character of the gene-memes, who floated like a flu virus from the image to the viewer:

“It seems that the cell that contaminates the human spirit roams from between the viewers and patients in the photographs”.<sup>20</sup>

The efficacy of Lin Shu-min’s holographs of human faces was equally explained in the terminology of cultural genetics, describing the vitality of genes as the root for the human desire for freedom:

“Recent genetic research proves that all humans are only a fraction apart biologically, .... Despite this ... level biological plateau or playing field, the difference norms have been fully acculturated into our social structures, .... The subjects of this imposed ceiling however do their best to break free”.<sup>21</sup>

The other professional identity of Liu Shih-fen as a hospital nurse imbued her work with a particular level of credibility, as she could claim not only personal experience, but also a scientific approach to her work:

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<sup>18</sup> Kao Chien-hui: “Living cell, soul factory of mankind”, in: *Taiwan, Living Cell*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2001, p. 18.

<sup>19</sup> Kao Chien-hui: “Living cell, soul factory of mankind”, in: *Taiwan, Living Cell*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2001, p. 18.

<sup>20</sup> Kao Chien-hui: “Living cell, soul factory of mankind”, in: *Taiwan, Living Cell*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2001, pp. 18,19.

<sup>21</sup> Kao Chien-hui: “Living cell, soul factory of mankind”, in: *Taiwan, Living Cell*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2001, p. 19.

“Her other profession enables her to dissect the biological, physiological and mechanical aspects of man in a manner that is more clinically precise and passionate compared with other artists”.<sup>22</sup>

At the end of the description of Liu’s work, Kao turned again to a more romantic and poetic language, merging nostalgic humanism with New-Age romanticism:

“Peering through the heart and the pupil, the uncertainty, bemusement, and glitter seems to settle and become non-transparent, just like the feeling of love, which is the most uncertain and non-deductible cell in our lives”.<sup>23</sup>

### **Contemporary globalisation discourse and the re-appearance of nationalism**

As in previous editions, it is interesting to reflect on the use and the status of science made by curator Kao in her statement of the 2001 Taiwan Pavilion.

First of all, Kao made a point in referencing new, “edgy” and fashionable terms and sciences, such as quantum physics, computer programming and genetics, rather than referencing classical authors of early modern science as did Huang Hai-ming in 1997 and Shih Jui-jen in 1999.

Second, her use of scientific language has to be defined at best as poetic, and ambiguous if we take her statement seriously. When Huang Hai-ming in 1997 deployed the term “super-connector” to describe Taiwanese society, he was clearly using this term as a metaphor. Kao did not seem to make a similar distinction – with Dawkins and Neal Stephenson, she seemed to imply that cultural messages function like (genetic or computer) code. Following Walter Benn Michaels’<sup>24</sup> critique of Neal Stephenson’s

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<sup>22</sup> ibidem

<sup>23</sup> ibidem

<sup>24</sup> The theoretical underpinnings of a popular novel inspired by memetics, *Snow Crash*, has been criticised by Walter Benn Michaels as reducing language to code: “...a good deal of *Snow Crash*'s plot depends upon eliding the distinction between hackers and their computers, as if – indeed, in the novel, just because – looking at code will do to the hacker what receiving it will do to the computer”. Walter Benn Michaels: *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2004, pp. 68, 69.

“The body that is infected by a virus does not become infected because it understands the virus any more than the body that does not become infected misunderstands the virus. So a world in which everything – from bitmaps to blood – can be understood as a ‘form of speech’ is also a world in which

novel *Snow Crash*<sup>25</sup>, one has to question the status of Kao's own writing. Was it a language, open to interpretation by the reader, or was it a code, to be deciphered and copied automatically by a computing machine? Was the reader supposed to understand her argument, or was he/she supposed to automatically copy it to other readers (and possibly damage his/her computing brain in the process)?

Beyond a mere philosophical critique of her stance on language and culture, it is interesting to note how Darwinian notions of survival of the fittest make a re-appearance in the representation of the nation through the back-door of contemporary discourse on genetics and computer programming.

This re-appearance was surprisingly explicit: early 20<sup>th</sup> century forms of nationalism advocated the expansion of a superior human race around the globe, resulting in two world wars for supremacy between different industrialized nations. Notwithstanding the bad name of Darwinism in the West, Kao Chien-hui had little qualms to translate this concept into contemporary culture, where the most pleasant and archetypical forms and patterns, such as Michael Lin's paintings or Chang Chien-chi's photographs, invaded the global art market. As in previous editions of the Taiwan Pavilion, one can again observe a re-nationalisation of Western post-national and post-modern ideas, such as the reflections on the interaction between man and code, which originally stemmed from computer hacker culture.

This re-nationalisation occurred also on a second level, the re-introduction of Chinese humanist discourse, which she deployed at the end of her statement. The introduction of the idea of "sharing art across cultures", appeared rather abruptly in her statement, without too much critical mediation, and with little connection to her previous discourse on those "memes" able to "virally" "infecting" other cultures. It seems as if Kao felt that she needed to end her statement in a somewhat more politically correct way,

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nothing actually is *understood* (emphasis in the original), a world in which what a speech act does is disconnected from what it means". Walter Benn Michaels: *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History*, Princeton, New Jersey, 2004, Princeton University Press, p. 69.

<sup>25</sup> Neal Stephenson: *Snow Crash*, Bantam Books, New York 1992.

without being able to build an effective bridge between the two. This ending effectively disqualified much of her “viral” as well as her humanist arguments, as every reader will wonder about the relationship of the “edgy” part of her statement with the second, “politically correct” ending, and about the status of the first part within the phraseology of the second.

Beyond this gap in her curatorial discourse, there is another one in Kao’s statement that is even more significant: the gap between her statement and the exhibition in Venice. She arguably presented a show with several artists all following one common theme, or all sharing one common characteristic, the viral or memetic quality pointed out by Kao. Yet this leaves the question of the repetition of the previously established pattern, that closely recalls previous editions of the Taiwan Pavilion. All these previous editions had explicitly reflected on the nation as such, and had made a special point about the plurality of expressions as a constituting element of the realm of the nation. In Kao’s statement a similar reflection on the past, present and future of the Taiwanese nation was curiously absent. On the contrary, her reflections remained very general, about “humanity” as such. At the same time, the curatorial pattern she applied presented an image of the nation that closely followed the previously established model, but also became even more archetypical in its concentration on nature, culture and ethnicity. This gap invites for an analysis of the 2001 Taiwan Pavilion on two levels: first, on a purely artistic level in the choice and disposition of works- this followed the previous pattern of national representation; second, the ideology of Kao’s curatorial statement- she attempted to present an exhibition that was centred around a theme. It was here, within this gap, that the diplomatic marginalisation of Taiwan at the Venice Biennale made itself felt for the first time: up until 1999, all exhibitions organized by the TFAM in Venice were intended to be national pavilions, to represent the nation. As a nation, any dialogue with the main theme of the Venice Biennale was an option, a proposition, an open dialogue, since the exhibitions inside the national pavilions at the Biennale

were surely invited to react to a general theme, but there was no evaluation process to supervise the results. The chief incentive for a curatorial dialogue was the possibility to win a prize- a Lion for the best national pavilion. From 2001 onwards, this interaction ceased to be an open dialogue: since then the Taiwan Pavilion was no longer a national participation, as it had been downgraded to an “institutional participation”. This also meant that the curatorial statement was no longer the expression of an independent nation, but a “scholarly” proposal paper that had to be submitted for approval and admission to the Venice Biennale offices. Worse than that, collateral events or institutional participations could at best be accepted- but were not eligible for prizes.

**Cosmopolitan, classically educated Darwinism: *Limbo Zone*, 2003.**

Looking back at the development of the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice since 1995, the 2003 *Limbo Zone* curated by artist-turned-curator Lin Shu-min<sup>26</sup> presented itself as the most cosmopolitan of all Taiwan Pavilions to date. More pronouncedly than any previous edition, Lin Shu-min attempted to present Taiwanese art as part of an international cultural discourse, to collocate it in a global context, and as a reaction to title of the 2003 Venice Biennale’s main show, *Dreams and Conflicts, The Dictatorship of the Viewer*. In his curatorial statement, Lin presented a pavilion that was chiefly an exhibition around a theme, an exhibition whose artists were linked together by a common thread, and an exhibition which analysed Taiwan’s cultural phenomena as part of a grander globalisation process. In Lin Shu-min’s words,

“*Limbo Zone*, the theme of the Taiwan exhibition, explores the Taiwanese state of flux as a reflection of the frantic transformation taking place throughout the

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<sup>26</sup> As in 1999 and 2001, the curator was chosen on the basis of a project. The jury for the selection of the 2003 Taiwan Pavilion consisted of: Ho Cheng-kuang, Ava Hsueh, Mei Dean-E, Ku Shy-yung. See: Huang Tsai-lang (director, TFAM): “Commissioners Preface”, in: *Limbo Zone*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2003, pp. 4, 5.

world. ....We all commonly confront a number of phenomena – the structural collapse of capitalism, the vanishing and obscurity of the old order, ...”<sup>27</sup>

And he pointed to the unique and exemplary position of Taiwan within this process:

“Taiwan has taken the brunt of this impact with extreme sensitivity.”<sup>28</sup>

In Lin Shu-min’s view, this situation of crisis and psychological *Limbo* shared by humanity on a worldwide level called for a common response, a response reflected in the first half sentence of the theme of the 2003 Venice Biennale, *Dreams and Conflicts*:

“When human instinct approaches the unsettling sense of reaching its extremes, the only choice, ... is to delve into the bottom of one’s own heart, to discover in one’s own mind connections to unknown or immeasurable supernatural forces,...”<sup>29</sup>

He continued:

“A space unique to modern people has formed. It is a space of the mind, a dream-  
scape formed by the collective projection of humanity’s wishes, constructed in the  
hearts of all of us.”<sup>30</sup>

Lin Shumin therefore continued the approach to curatorship of the nation established by the previous editions of the Taiwan pavilion: the “imagined community” called nation is transformed into an unified entity that can be analysed by the means of modern science. Yet compared to previous editions that unifying element is a new, different one: for the curators of the 1990’s it had been the experience of living on a certain territory, defined by its geographical borders, which allowed for an analysis with the means of ethnography; in Lin, the unifying element seems to be not so much a shared geographical border, but rather a shared R.O.C. passport and therefore a shared sense of crisis. Yet even this apparently slightly less circumscribed community lends itself to become the subject of scientific analysis: both he the curator as well as the artists are

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<sup>27</sup> Lin Shu-min: “Limbo Zone”, in: *Limbo Zone*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2003, p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> Lin Shu-min: “Limbo Zone”, in: *Limbo Zone*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2003, p. 8.

<sup>29</sup> Lin Shu-min: “Limbo Zone”, in: *Limbo Zone*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2003, p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> Lin Shu-min: “Limbo Zone”, in: *Limbo Zone*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2003, p. 15.

turned into Freud- Jungian psychologists who listen to the murmurings of the nation, analysing it's subconscious, and extracting its truths.

This new, cosmopolitan approach also reflected itself in the title, which for the first time since 1995 did not show the name "Taiwan". To insure that the name of the nation still appeared on the billboard over the exhibition site, the organizing body, the TFAM, decided to re-name itself to "Taipei Fine Arts Museum of Taiwan", deploying a similar tactical response to the relegation of Taiwan to the less prestigious list of collateral events at the Venice Biennale, as other Taiwanese entities such as Cloud Gate Dance Theater had deployed before.<sup>31</sup>

This new cosmopolitan approach reflected itself also in the choice of artists: out of four R.O.C. passport-holders, only one, Yuan Goang-ming, lived and worked in Taiwan; curator Lin Shu-min, as well as Daniel Lee and Lee Ming-wei lived and worked in New York, while Shulea Cheang was based in Paris. It was also the first and to date only occasion that one artist, Shulea Cheang, was invited to exhibit both inside the Taiwan pavilion as well as at the main Biennial exhibition.<sup>32</sup> This cosmopolitan approach to national representation stirred a few questions in the local art scene, and not only Susan Kendzulak asked in her blog:

"Who best can represent Taiwan? Artists living abroad or locally?"<sup>33</sup>

### **"An unbounded space for dreams"**<sup>34</sup>

Curator Lin presented *Limbo Zone* as a theme show which united several artists working on the border zones between dream and reality, exploring different areas of modern

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<sup>31</sup> The TFAM arguably followed the example of Cloud Gate Dance Theater, which had renamed itself Cloud Gate Dance Theater of Taiwan.

<sup>32</sup> Shulea Cheang was only the second Taiwanese artist to be invited directly by the Venice Biennale, after Lee Ming-sheng in 1993 (who was never invited to the Taiwan Pavilion), and before Chen Chieh-jen in 2005.

<sup>33</sup> Susan Kendzulak: "2003 Taiwan Pavilion in Venice", in: [http://taiwancontemporaryart.blogspot.com/2008\\_05\\_01\\_archive.html](http://taiwancontemporaryart.blogspot.com/2008_05_01_archive.html), consulted 28.9.2009. On the blog she states that it is written on May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2008, but her text and material are presumably based on previous writings for the *Taipei Times*, as well as discussions with local artists.

<sup>34</sup> Lin Shu-min: "Limbo Zone", in: *Limbo Zone*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2003, p. 15.



science and contemporary civilization.

Daniel Lee created photoshop animations merging human beings with animals, exploring

“the reverie-entangled borderlands between animal species and human beings.”<sup>35</sup>

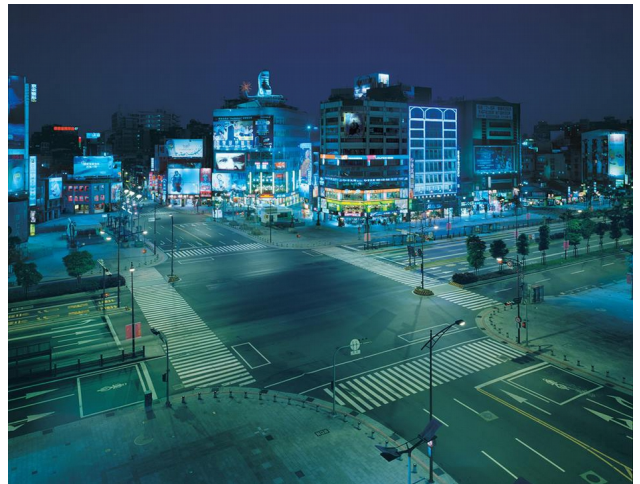
Yuan Goang-ming instead

investigated the alienated character of the contemporary urban landscape, by eliminating all human presence from one of the liveliest crossings in Taipei at Hsimenting. He used more than 200 photographs to create two single images, one at day and one at night, reducing the Hsimenting crossing to a completely lifeless cityscape.

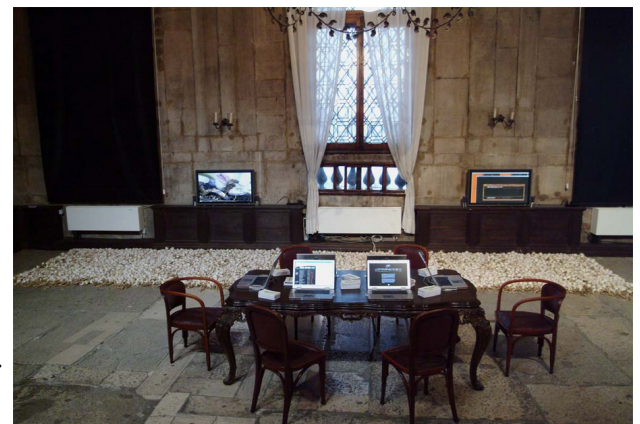
The centre of the space was occupied by a desk with several laptops, an online project Shulea Cheang, who had created a virtual trading platform which invited the visitors to trade website addresses against a stock of organic garlic, the latter visibly on display inside the main hall.



*Origin*, Daniel Lee 2001- 2002, source, copyright: Daniel Lee 2002



*City Disqualified*, Yuan Goang-ming 2002, source, copyright: Yuan Goang-ming 2002.



*Garlic = Rich Air*, Shulea Cheang 2003, source: Shulea Cheang.

<sup>35</sup> Lin Shu-min: “Limbo Zone”, in: *Limbo Zone*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2003, p. 15.

According to the curator, Shulea Cheang created

“a virtual realm where the material and the imagined are exchanged”.<sup>36</sup>

Last, in the side room to the far left, was an installation-performance project by Lee Ming-wei, who invited some randomly chosen visitors of the preview days to share the room with him for one night, inviting them to bring along an object of memory, while



*Sleeping Project*, Lee Mingwei 2003, photo: Felix Schöber 2003.

recording all their conversations. According to curator Lin, this work established

“a neutral space inside subconsciousness, an examination of the audience as a dream”.<sup>37</sup>

This performance- installation arguably should have occupied the centre stage, as it was the only project that dealt with what Freud would have defined as dreams, and the only project that tried to engage the audience in an open way.

At the centre of the exhibition, at least according to Lin Shumin, were instead the new possibilities of genetic science and photoshop images:

“the appearance of recombinant technology has molded a new vision of the world, mutating from an outer world we once recognized only through images to an inner world we reconstruct from virtual phenomena within images.”<sup>38</sup>

This allowed curator Lin to envision a new world, where

“the boundaries between real and false melt away.”<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Lin Shu-min: “Limbo Zone”, in: *Limbo Zone*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2003, p. 15.

<sup>37</sup> Lin Shu-min: “Limbo Zone”, in: *Limbo Zone*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2003, p. 15. Taipei, Venice Venezia

<sup>38</sup> Lin Shu-min: “Limbo Zone”, in: *Limbo Zone*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2003, p. 8.

<sup>39</sup> Lin Shu-min: “Limbo Zone”, in: *Limbo Zone*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2003, pp. 8,9.

### **Classically educated cosmopolitanism**

*Limbo Zone* was the most cosmopolitan of all Taiwan pavilions in Venice- it was also the one least pre-occupied with the establishment of a specific link to a specific locality. All previous editions from 1995 until 2001 had reflected extensively on the history of contemporary art in Taiwan; Lin Shu-min provided hardly any view on Taiwanese art or its history. The title referenced instead Dante, which he claimed to be readable both for the Western as well as the Chinese audience:

“In Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, a spiritual sanctum lies on the outer edge of Inferno, .... This borderland is Limbo. It is a realm not dissimilar to the “Eight Parts of the Heavenly Dragon” in Chinese thought, ..”.<sup>40</sup>

The deployment of references to a classical Greek-Roman West continued throughout, and was referenced as the basis for modern science:

“Plato said people only have direct access to inspiration when unconscious, when dreaming or in coma, ..... This theory thousands of years old is echoed in the ideas of modern psychologists Jung and Freud”.<sup>41</sup>

Yuan Goang-ming’s work was described in Greco- Roman terms:

“The unpeopled *City Disqualified* is a Pompeii fixed in the air, an Atlantis resurrected from the depths of the sea”.<sup>42</sup>

These cultural references spanned both a “classical” Western as well as “classical” Chinese education. In these references, China is imagined as a grand tradition that spans the proverbial five millennia that make up the ideological tradition of the “Free China”, that part of China that had been unharmed by the Cultural Revolution, but which imagined itself also unfettered by the limitations of the island Formosa or the diaspora in New York. Contemporary Taiwan instead, the geographical island, the entity whose taxpayers sponsored the exhibition, appeared in Lin’s show only as a non-place, an

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<sup>40</sup> Lin Shu-min: “Limbo Zone”, in: *Limbo Zone*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice, 2003, p. 8.

<sup>41</sup> Lin Shu-min: “Limbo Zone”, in: *Limbo Zone*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice, 2003, p. 14.

<sup>42</sup> Lin Shu-min: “Limbo Zone”, in: *Limbo Zone*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice, 2003, p. 10.

anonymous place of urban sprawl, represented by Yuan Goang-ming's photo-montage *City Disqualified*.

### **China, the proverbial five millennia**

The proverbial five millennia of the grand Chinese tradition appeared not only in Lin Shu-min's curatorial statement, but also in his interpretation of several works. The void in Yuan Goang-ming's images was interpreted as a reflection of Buddhist notions of emptiness. The endless loop of Daniel Lee's animated video montage was claimed to recall the Buddhist idea of the cyclical return. A more easily recognizable source of

reference was the Han-shan temple in Eastern China, which had inspired Daniel Lee's installation *108 Windows*. In a 15 minutes video loop, 108 different manipulated images of half-man half-animal faces were projected on the wall, echoing the Buddhist



belief in 108 entities on 6 levels of re-

*108 Windows*, Daniel Lee 2003.  
Source: Daniel Lee

incarnation. Each image was accompanied by the sound of one of the 108 bells from the Han-shan temple.

### **The continuation of a pattern**

Much of the 2003 Taiwan Pavilion had been described by curator Lin Shu-min in the terms of classic education such as Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Jung, Freud and Buddhism. In Lin's statement, the central work of the show was that of Daniel Lee, as he showed how "the boundaries between real and false melt away".<sup>43</sup>

Quite in opposition to Lin's statement, the actual exhibition in Venice was not centred around Daniel Lee's work: Lee's video *Origin* occupied maybe two meters on the wall

<sup>43</sup> Lin Shu-min: "Limbo Zone", in: *Limbo Zone*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2003, pp. 8,9.

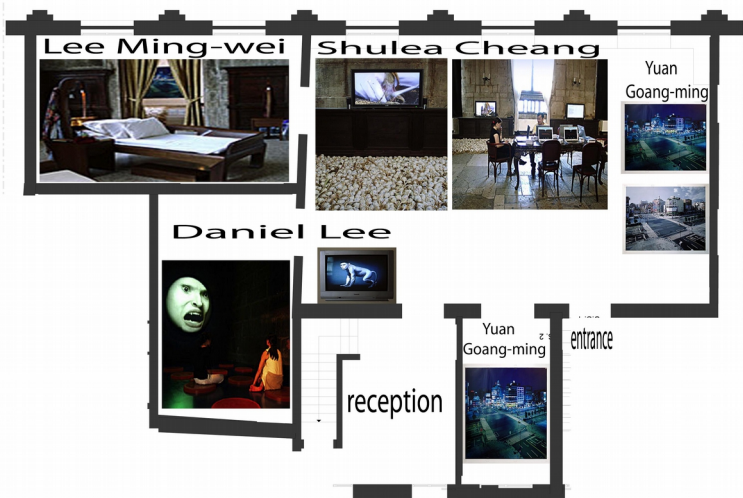
to the side of the main entrance, and *108 Windows* was tucked away in the first side room to the left. Contrary to what a reader of his statement may have expected, Lin Shu-min's exhibition presented again a show centred around an urban civilization, with Yuan Goang-ming's scenes of Hsimenting, which imagines itself to be deeply rooted in nature, with Shulea Cheang's stock of garlic.

Daniel Lee's re-interpretation of a Buddhist temple, or rather hell, by means of photoshop was instead presented in the same room where Hung Tung-lu and Chen Chien-pei had previously exhibited their versions of technologically enhanced futuristic spirituality; at least as far as the spatial pattern was concerned, Lin Shumin's Taiwan pavilion presented itself largely as a continuation of previously established spatial patterns of Taiwanese national representation in Venice.

### A pattern re-enforced and re-condensed

*Limbo Zone* was doubtlessly the most cosmopolitan Taiwan Pavilion to date.

Yet it repeated, even re-enforced the previously established pattern of a nation centred around an urban nature, a nation deeply rooted in past both



Allocation of works and spaces during the 2003 *Limbo Zone* pavilion

biological and cultural, while projecting itself towards technologically advanced avenues for spiritual life (admittedly in 2003 those visions of the future created by new media presented more of a dystopia than a utopia).

This pattern, inherited from the 1990's, was arguably presented in a more analytical way than before. In previous editions the mind-map of national identity had been

spread out from the main hall into several side rooms, anchoring “urban nature” as the centre in the main hall, thus linking the core with those other trajectories which were shown in the side-rooms. In 2003 instead much of this pattern was concentrated into the main hall itself, as several artists exhibited both in the main hall as well as in the side-rooms: both Yuan Goang-ming as well as Daniel Lee were present both in the main hall as in one side-room each, thus making the main room more complex to look at, and linking the side rooms tighter to the central exhibition.

### **Three notions of nature**

What is most interesting about this strategy is to see how the different notions of nature, which had dominated the centre of previous pavilions, were analytically split up and presented alongside each other within the same central exhibition space.

This becomes more evident if we compare the 2003 show with 1995, with Huang Chih-yang’s installation *Afforestation plan B* at the first Taiwan Pavilion in 1995. *Afforestation plan B* had condensed several notions of nature into one single work of art, presenting the city as the second nature of the contemporary urban dweller, manifesting a highly contemporary attitude towards environmental consciousness, while also maintaining a deeply nostalgic attitude both towards nature as well as towards Chinese traditional landscape painting. Similar to 2003, these ideas of environmental consciousness were deeply engrained with allusions to genetics and Darwinism.

According to Frank Dikötter, there is one important aspect specific to the Chinese visions of Darwinism: nature, specifically seeds and plants embody Darwin’s theories of evolution, including the imagined implications about the human race:

“The development of botanical knowledge may have contributed to the rise of eugenics in Republican China. The semantic isomorphism between ‘seed’ (zhong) and ‘race’ (zhongzu), characteristic of other rice-growing societies, was also a

significant factor in the development of racial discourse. 'To reproduce', or *chuanzhong*, meant to 'pass on the seed', or to 'spread the race'. Whereas eugenics in the West grew out of a long tradition of animal breeding, eugenics in China found a precursor in botany.<sup>44</sup>

In 2003, curator Lin Shu-min presented all these different notions of nature – the ethnic root of the nation as it is seen in naturalization law, nature as the theme of contemporary environmental consciousness, and the city as the second nature of the urban dweller – in a more analytical way, as he had them split up among by different artists, all showing in the same central exhibition hall.

A table with laptop computers of Shulea Cheang's installation *Garlic = Rich Air* occupied the centre of the hall, computers which invited the viewer to enter a virtual trading game in a scenario for the year 2030 in which garlic would be traded against internet domains using a virtual currency called "credito". The second part of her installation, a stock of garlic displayed on the floor, occupied much of the surface of the main hall. Within the pattern of national representation established by the Taiwan pavilion in the previous decade, she presented both a (somewhat dystopian) vision of future technological development inside the, but also the environmental consciousness of contemporary society- be it New Yorkese or Taiwanese.

To the right of the entrance, hovering above Cheang's installation, were two large photographic laser prints by Yuan Goang-ming, *City Disqualified*, displaying, a dystopian vision of urban development- while at the same time continuing the pattern of national Taiwanese presentation centred around the urban experience of Taipei, the reflection on urbanization as the second, new nature of Taiwanese society.

To the left of the entrance there was a TV screen with Daniel Lee's video- animation *Origin*, which showed the evolution of species, starting with the first fish and finishing with a representation of *homo sapiens* with the traits of an Asian male.

<sup>44</sup> Frank Dikötter: *The Discourse of Race in Modern China*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1992, p. 165.

Previous editions such as the 2001 Taiwan Pavilion already hinted quite clearly to Darwinism as the ideological foundation of nationalist ideology. Some artists such as Huang Chi-yang in 1995 or Liu Shih-fen in 2001 already



mentioned Darwinism as one of their sources of artistic

*Origin*, Daniel Lee, 1999- 2001  
Source, copyright: Daniel Lee

inspiration; yet only in 2003 did the curator move the question of Darwinism, human genetics and the evolution of species move to the centre-stage of the national representation of the R.O.C. pavilion in Venice, thus transforming it into a core element of Taiwanese national representation in contemporary art; and never as in 2003 was this theory so explicitly presented as an ethnic and genetic bias.

### **The cosmopolitan gap between theory and the nation**

The re-appearance of the pattern of national representation established since 1995, albeit with a different, less synthetic and more analytical use of the idea of a nation rooted in nature, highlights an interesting gap within the national pavilion curated by Lin Shu-min: the re-appearance of the nation under the disguise of a global, cosmopolitan discourse. This happens not only happen in the single artworks – Daniel Lee’s *Origin* is such a case – but also in the general layout of the exhibition: rather than guiding the visitor through the questions of the dissolution of the dividing lines between the real and the virtual, the Venice show presented – again – a nation of urban dwellers, environmentally conscious and rooted in nature, while looking forward into a spiritually rich and highly technological future. Therefore, the main difference between



Lin's exhibition and previous editions was the question of ethnicity – the presentation of a nation of global travellers, united by a blood bond.

Taiwanese curators and museum administrators did not choose by their own sovereign will to frame Taiwan in terms of global cultural discourse. Neither was it simply a political choice, imposed by the mayor of a different party, that favoured a new image of the nation. Instead, it has to be pointed out that since 2001 Taiwan was no longer a member of the elite club of sovereign nations exhibiting their most outstanding artists in Venice, but it was forced to apply for the status of a “institutional” or a “collateral” event, thus implying that any exhibition proposal had to be approved on the basis of its curatorial and artistic merits.<sup>45</sup>

Therefore, the cosmopolitanism of 2001 and 2003, or rather the deeper engagement with global cultural discourse, was not necessarily a free and sovereign choice, but was also imposed by the power relations of international diplomacy.

It needs to be pointed out that this situation was in stark contrast to the years before the turn of the millennium: in 1995, 1997 and 1999, Taiwan was presented at the Venice Biennale with the status of a sovereign nation, presenting an image of itself created out of its own choice and will – and did so while being mesmerized by the complexity of its own identity.

Once that status of a sovereign nation had been forcefully removed, the image and the rationale national representation slowly disappeared, or rather dissimulated, starting in 2001, and almost completely in 2003, at least as far as the curatorial text is concerned. In Lin's curatorial text there was no mentioning of a nation- the Taiwan he mentioned was a specific geographical and economical area that had been particularly hard hit by the crisis. As the nation disappeared from the curatorial statement, it reappeared even more forcefully in the spatial exhibition pattern and choice of artists and works, hidden

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<sup>45</sup> This also meant that Taiwan was no longer eligible for any official prize, this in turn excluded it from the list of exhibitions that the jurors of the Biennale (and, by default, the international press) were obliged to visit.

underneath a veil of global cultural discourse and well-educated classical learning, in a way possibly even more radical, more analytical, and with an emphasis on its ethnic bias that had been much less prominent in previous editions.

It has to be asked with Anderson what nation, or what community exactly emerges from those exhibitions: as pointed out by Anderson, the image of any modern nation is characterized by the idea of a community moving in unison through time, along a common trajectory, united by the experience of a common territory. In 2003, only one artist inside the Taiwan Pavilion referenced one specific locality – Yuan Goang-ming with his images of Taipei Hsimenting crossing. The other two – Shulea Cheang and Lee Ming-wei – did not reference any specific locality: their projects could have happened anywhere in the first world - they did indeed happen first in New York, Paris and other localities of the globalised world. Even the cultural roots invoked by Daniel Lee were fairly vague: after D.T. Suzuki's books on Zen, Buddhist iconology is a language understandable (in the widest sense) not only in China, Taiwan, South-East Asia and Japan, but almost anywhere on the globe. The bells referenced by Lee may have been from a specific temple – but to the audience in Venice it made hardly any difference whether the sound had been recorded in a temple in North-East China, or had been computer-generated in New York.

### **Chinese Taiwaneseness**

Looking back at the development of the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice, it needs to be pointed out that there had always been a strong emphasis on the roots of Taiwanese contemporary art in a “Chinese” tradition. It is equally worth noticing how this element had changed over time, or rather, how many different approaches towards this element have been developed: in 1995, for the painter Huang Chih-yang, “Chineseness” was a mere cultural resource, a tradition of ink painting that the artists adopted, while for others such as Lien Teh-cheng it was also the subject of critique, and even a possible

source for an alternative tradition, as in Hou Chun-ming's Freudian reading of the *Classic of the Mountains and Seas*. Or that millenarian tradition could be simply the object of nostalgia, such as in Lee Ming-tze's 1997 paintings of the life of a modern literati, or Huang Buh-ching's 1999 installation of Tang dynasty faces.

In Lee Xiao-jing's *Origin*, this tradition was surely a distantly nostalgic source of cultural inspiration. It has to be questioned though whether it was not also the legitimation for a construction of identity built around notions of ethnicity and race, in ways similar to the emphasis on a nation built on ethnic difference embodied by the "Minzu" or "ethnic" principle of the ideological founding father of the Republic of China, a principle that was also written into the Nationality Law of the constitution of the R.O.C..

### ***Origin*: postcolonial critique or new pan-Asian-Chinese nationalism?**

On the catalogue, Daniel Lee's work *Origin* is described in rather a-political terms:

"Lee ... believes in Darwin's theory of evolution, ... . *Origin* ... describes the human evolution based on the artist's imagination. He suggested that there were ten stages in human evolution, from fish form (as Coleacanth) to the reptile, monkey, and human..."<sup>46</sup>

In his research on Darwinism in Republican China, Frank Dikötter had pointed out:

"... most Chinese admirers of National socialism had few reservations about Nazi racism. ... the German preoccupation with race was hailed as an example worthy of emulation. In the West, ...Hitlerism had been the major factor accounting for the decline of interest in race and eugenics from the mid-1930's onwards.

In China, however, the fortune of eugenics suffered less from the Nazi example.

After 1945, Chinese eugenicists continued to toy with outdated genetic concepts such as the inheritance of behavioural traits."<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Lin Shu-min: "Manimals", in: *Limbo Zone*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2003, p. 24.

<sup>47</sup> Frank Dikötter: *The Discourse of Race in Modern China*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1992, p.

Against the apparently a-political reading of Daniel Lee's work proposed by curator Lin Shu-min, it is worthwhile to look a bit closer at the gap between dream and reality, or between science and fantasy invoked by curator Lin. According to curator Lin Shumin's, Daniel Lee's work went beyond the limitations of classical modern science:

“The digital video animation of *Origin* unleashes the evolution of a menagerie of species. Different from Darwin's theory, which is restricted to the evidence of science, Lee breaks through the limitations of points in time, creating new life forms in a matrix of pixels, ...”<sup>48</sup>

If we look closer at Daniel Lee's photoshop montage, and if we isolate it from the context of a national pavilion that represents R.O.C. nationalism, the most likely reading would be a post-colonial one, a work overturning textbook versions of human evolution science, which usually show a Caucasian man as a sample for the final stage of human

development, by substituting that image with an Asian man.<sup>49</sup>



*Origin*, video animation,  
Daniel Lee 1999 - 2000.  
Source: [www.daniellee.com/Origin2.htm](http://www.daniellee.com/Origin2.htm)

187.

<sup>48</sup> Lin Shu-min: “Limbo Zone”, in: *Limbo Zone*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2003, p. 8.

<sup>49</sup> In an interview, the artist pointed out to the author that he had not intended to locate those images in a specific context, but rather intended to give it a vaguely Northern-Chinese resemblance.

Yet if we move the same work into the wider context of (mainland) Chinese nationalism, it would be possible to read the work even as a reflection, or simply a visualization of a new Chinese nationalism, characterized by the tendency to enlarge the horizon of the Chinese culture-race by several millennia, by choosing the Peking man as the great ancestor to the Chinese race-nation over the (outside China widely accepted) theory of a common African ancestor of *homo sapiens*.<sup>50</sup>

This latter interpretation of Lee's pan-Asian man would collocate it not so much in a liberatory post-colonial discourse, in a liberation from Western textbooks, but rather in a fairly new pan-Chinese nationalism, a nationalism that builds its ideas of superiority on an "out- of- Asia" ideology against a widely held "out-of-Africa" theory. It has to be argued that the gap between fantasy and science invoked by Lin Shu-min in his statement is a twofold one: not only the (postcolonial) substitution of the Caucasian man as the highest point of Darwinian evolution, but also the removal of the image of the African man as the departure point of early human migration from Africa.

Significantly enough, curator Lin Shumin did not elaborate further on the gap between artistic fantasy and classical science he had pointed to. Both in his statement as well as in the spatial pattern the work *Origin* occupied a very central position, and it is this central position which charges is with a different meaning, a meaning not necessarily intended by the artist himself- it positioned the work in a continuation of a discursive pattern of those "aggressive memes" of the previous pavilion, making it susceptible to, or rather generating a new subtext to the work that echoes a neo-Chinese nationalism, while dissimulating any (potential) readings in a post-colonial key. It needs to be pointed out that it was this precise choice of that precise work within that context which charged the pavilion with a deeply Darwinian strand of nationalism, discouraging any other readings of the pavilion, and the other works. If the curator had chosen a different

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<sup>50</sup> B. Sautman: "Peking man and the politics of palaeoanthropological nationalism in China," in: *The Journal of Asian Studies* vol. 60, no. 1 (2001): 95-124.  
Sigrid Schmalzer: *The People's Peking Man: Popular Science and Human Identity in Twentieth-Century China*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2008.

work by the same artist (such as those chosen for Daniel Lee's participation at the Shanghai Biennale), it would have been easy to read his show as a musing about the ambiguities and technological enhanced possibilities of future of urban city-dwelling, be it new ways to inhabit the city, or new ways to organize economic exchanges, or new biologically enhanced forms of human being. Yet, and one must wonder why, Lin Shu-min chose to centre his representation of the Taiwanese nation around a vision of evolution of species whose gaps between fantasy and science happened to coincide with the same gaps between fantasy and science of new Chinese nationalism.<sup>51</sup>

What need to be pointed out is that this image of the nation invoked by Lin Shu-min is rather a characteristic of mainland China. Earlier exponents of Taiwanese independence, such as Shi Ming (Su Beng), had rather imagined the Taiwanese genetic mix as a creole nation, and often opposed a straight and direct genetic link to the Han-Chinese race on the mainland.

### **Taiwanese Chineseness, continuity and differences from DPP to KMT**

From a political point of view, it has to be pointed out that the different approaches to the nation – *ius soli* or *ius sanguinis* – were directly linked to the change of hands at the helm of Taipei city, even though the effects appeared only after the mandate of the previous director had ended. After the KMT won the Taipei city mayor elections in December 1998, it took a year and half until the DPP-nominated director of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Lin Mun-lee, was replaced in September 2000 with a KMT candidate, Huang Tsai-lang.

Albeit the basic pattern of national representation remained the same, there are also some major differences in the DPP or KMT backed approaches: from 2001 onward, internationalisation had a different value than before – it became both an avenue of

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<sup>51</sup> B. Sautman: "Peking man and the politics of palaeoanthropological nationalism in China," in: *The Journal of Asian Studies* vol. 60, no. 1 (2001): 95-124.  
Sigrid Schmalzer: *The People's Peking Man: Popular Science and Human Identity in Twentieth-Century China*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2008.

conquest, such as in Kao Chien-hui's "viral" infiltration of the international art scene, or even an already pre-existing collocation of Taiwanese contemporary art, such as in Lin Shu-min's 2003 *Limbo Zone*. It is hard not to see a tradition of cosmopolitan KMT-style global Chineseness in the choices of the 2003 Taiwan pavilion in Venice: the international, rather than being a far-away goal, is understood as the pre-existing collocation of global Chinese art and identity. This almost reversed the goal of the Taiwan Pavilion and the Taipei Biennial: rather than being a means to export art from Taiwan to a faraway stage, these international exhibitions instead became the means to connect the local art scene to its international emigrants, to bring home the lost sons and daughters of the fatherland.<sup>52</sup>

### **ethnic identity, trauma-free**

Another difference can be detected in the image of the nation: the nation presented by the DPP was a postcolonial subject- haunted by trauma and taboos of the past, a nation who had no immediate access to the past. The nation of the KMT instead was rooted in a millenarian Chinese tradition, no questions asked, any hints to a traumatic past had disappeared- their place had been taken by more general socio-political problems.

On a curatorial level, the DPP-backed pavilions of 1995, 1997, and 1999 presented a largely self-contained nation, grappling with the social, cultural and historical complexity of the creation of a new nation, while the editions of 2001 and 2003 were more cosmopolitan and outward-looking, and (especially in 2001) also quite aggressive in the adoption of Western buzzwords, but also in their expansionist ideology- in the ideology of this approach based on *ius sanguinis*, the expansion of the Republic of

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<sup>52</sup> Daniel Lee had exhibited several times before that in Taiwan, but was hardly recognized as a "local Taiwanese" artist; at least during his solo show at Home Gallery in Taipei in 1997, he was presented to the author as a "successful Overseas Chinese artist from New York", a rather curious denomination considering Lee was born and educated in Taiwan. Similarly, before the 2000 Taipei Biennial, neither Shulea Cheang nor Lee Ming-wei had staged any major exhibition in Taiwan. After 2000, only Shulea Cheang exhibited regularly in Taiwan. By now she is even listed as an artist of the IT Park gallery.

China was not limited to the island of Formosa- on the contrary, its cultural memes were expected to spread like viral genes across the globe.

Comparing the nation constructed by Lin Shu-min to previous editions of the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice, it is interesting to note which elements continued over the years, and which were discontinued: the most evident absence is any reference to social problems or historical trauma. In 1997 and 1999, in the years when the DPP was at the helm of Taipei city, the reference to the period of martial law and the 2-28 incident had been a crucial element of national identity, highlighted by Wu Tien-chang's *Wounded Funeral* and Yao Jui-chung's *Territory Take Over* in 1997, and by Chen Chieh-jen's *City of Madness* in 1999. Already in 2001, after the mandate of DPP director had ended, this element of national identity had been reduced to a general humanist concern about social problems, exemplified by Chang Chien-chi's *Chain* series. In 2003 this element was abandoned altogether, or was rather subsumed under a general global gloomy vision for the future: both Yuan Goang-ming's *City Disqualified* as well as Shulea Cheang's *Garlic = Rich Air* mused about an apocalyptic scenario where urban centres are abandoned by mankind, and the monetary system had broken down and had been substituted by barter trade of garlic.

Under the KMT those specific references to the Taiwanese past were abandoned, and a new element of national identity was introduced into the official image of the nation: ethnicity. As already pointed out above, ethnicity (or better race) is one of the basic principles of Chinese nationalism enshrined by the writings of the “founding father of the Republic” Sun Yat-sen.<sup>53</sup> It is also a core principle of the Nationality Law of the R.O.C., which in the terms of international law is based on notions of *jus sanguinis*. On the initiative of the DPP, after 2000 some elements of *jus soli* were introduced into the

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<sup>53</sup> The author disagrees with some China scholars such as Stephan Feuchtwang, who see Chinese identity built chiefly on notions of culture, and agrees instead with other authors such as Barry Sautman, who highlights the construction of (mainland) Chinese identity around the question of the race. See: Barry Sautman: “Racial nationalism and China’s external behaviour”, in: *Working Papers in Social Sciences*, No. 33, 1997.



nationality law of the R.O.C., such as allowing not only the children of men holding a R.O.C. passport (which are always regarded as R.O.C. citizens, regardless of the place of birth), but also those children born to a Taiwanese mother and a foreign father to apply for R.O.C. citizenship, especially if they were born in Taiwan,<sup>54</sup> and easing the requirements for foreigners to gain permanent residency.<sup>55</sup> However, a crucial difference remains not only in the gender of the parent, but also in the locality of birth: according to *jus sanguinis*, potential R.O.C. citizens can be fathered anywhere, children of a Taiwanese mother have to be born in Taiwan to be eligible for R.O.C. citizenship. In the most recent 2006 version of the R.O.C. Nationality Law, the original gender bias has been abandoned, while maintaining the principle of *jus sanguinis*: children of R.O.C. passport holders can be born anywhere, children born in Taiwan can become R.O.C. citizens (and therefore enjoy the public education and health system) only if born to R.O.C. passport holding parents, or to stateless or unknown parents.<sup>56</sup>

In an analysis of the differences between the KMT-backed and the DPP-backed pavilions in Venice in terms of nationality law, the difference between the two can be described as an emphasis on the *jus soli against* a selection principle based on a *jus sanguinis*. The first restricted itself to artists born, grown and living in Taiwan, while in case of the second any artist with a R.O.C passport was eligible to represent Taiwan in Venice. The comparison between these two concepts of nationality law shows that the link between the more cosmopolitan approach in the KMT-led years and the emphasis on Chinese ethnicity is an intrinsic one: it is ultimately based on the concept of *jus sanguinis* against the principle of *jus soli*. The strong link to Darwinian ideas in both curatorial concepts ultimately points to a contradiction within the cosmopolitan vision

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<sup>54</sup> See an information web-page of Hsinchu city government: “Q&A: Birth”, accessible online at: [http://n-household.hccg.gov.tw/English/Q&A\\_1.htm](http://n-household.hccg.gov.tw/English/Q&A_1.htm), last accessed 6.9.2005, 14:23. The page presents the question: “How do parents of a child born legitimately to a foreign national father and ROC national mother file the child’s household registration?” and explains that: “The ROC uses ‘blood line’ as determination of heritage; therefore such a child is considered a foreign national first (following the father) and secondarily as an ROC national (following the mother).”

<sup>55</sup> Tsai Ting-I: “Ministry amends immigration law”, *Taipei Times*, 11.4.2002, p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> Nationality Law of the R.O.C.: <http://law.moj.gov.tw/Eng/LawClass/LawAll.aspx?PCode=D0030001>, last accessed 18.6.2010.

proposed through the fusion of Eastern and Western ideas- it is ultimately yet another form of nationalism, albeit less bound by physical boundaries of a specific state.

### **Conclusion: the cosmopolitan gap between theory and the nation**

The two exhibitions staged in Venice in 2001 and 20013 largely repeated and continued the pattern established in the previous years- at least if we analyse only the works and their positioning within the space.

On an ideological and curatorial level, the question that had haunted the previous editions, or how to represent the nation in its multiplicity is abandoned in favour of a different project: to present the nation as a part of international contemporary art discourse, to present a cosmopolitan nation unfettered by the bounds of a specific territory and its complicated past.

As I have tried to show, this new cosmopolitanism, presented in the terms of Western theory and classical education, ultimately shows an image of the nation that is even more bound to questions of race and ethnicity, and while the questions of historical trauma and questions of the ethnography of the present state of a certain territory disappear, so re-appear questions of a Darwinian survival of the race, only thinly disguised under a layer of cosmopolitan ecological consciousness.

As I have pointed out already in my discussion of the 1999 Taiwan pavilion is an ambiguity of the notion of the “body of the nation” that comes again to the fore- and the explicit reference to an “aggressive element” (or meme) in 2001, or the twisting of Darwin’s ideas about evolution of the species along the lines of a new neo-Chinese ideology, only highlights the ambiguity of nationalist discourse- especially so once the reference to a specific territory and a specific group of people is abandoned.

This, it has to be argued, creates a strangely abstract and tension- free image of the nation, quite in contrast to what has been claimed by Homi Bhabha:

“The people ...represent the cutting edge between the totalizing powers of the

social and the forces that signify the more specific address to contentious, unequal interests and the identities within the population.”<sup>57</sup>

Yet what can be observed in that image of a cosmopolitan image of a nation of global wanderers is an almost complete lack of any tension between those different ways of addressing the people- on the contrast, the nation itself has become a rather elusive and imaginary status. The gap that opens up is not any more to the tension within the relation of the ethnographer and its subject, but rather has become a chiefly ideological one: between the professed cosmopolitanism and its roots in an ideology centred around notions of race and ethnicity.

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<sup>57</sup> Homi Bhabha: “DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation”, in : Homi k. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration*, Routledge, Abingdon, New York, 1990, p. 297.

**Chapter seven: Power relations in the art world,  
the art-diplomatic marginalisation of Taiwan at the Venice Biennale,  
the subaltern position of independent curators in Taiwan**

The following chapter describes two events on two different levels, one diplomatic, one administrative, both of which have evolved over long periods of time, but which were highlighted by specific incidents. The first was the removal of Taiwan from the list of nations participating at the Venice Biennale, starting in the year 2000.

This “subaltern” diplomatic position of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum in the international art world was in turn echoed by the “subaltern” position of local curators and artists versus the institutionalized art administration. This situation was highlighted by two incidents. In 2004 the statement of the Taiwanese co-curator, Amy Cheng, was eliminated from the catalogue of the 2004 Taipei Biennial. In 2009 the position of the independent curator was eliminated from the commissioning process of the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice in 2009, thus creating an exhibition commissioned directly by the head of the exhibition department of the TFAM- but crucially without a curator.

The combined effect of these events was a major ideological shift in the way Taiwan framed itself through its large-scale international exhibitions: from 2005 onwards, Taiwan described itself as a marginalised nation. To quote the words of the curator of the 2005 Taiwan Pavilion in Venice, Wang Chia-chi:

”We are subordinate and mute, unable to represent ourselves”.<sup>1</sup>

Wang did not make this statement after Taiwan had been expelled from the United Nations in 1971, or after it had been eliminated from the list of nations participating at

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<sup>1</sup> Wang, Chia-chi: “The spectre of freedom - Il fantasma della libertà”, in: *The Spectre of Freedom*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2005, p. 14.

the Venice Biennale in 2001, but only in 2005, the year following the elimination of the local curator's voice from the catalogue of the Taipei Biennial. Looking closer at the 2005 Taiwan Pavilion, this situation of subalternity implied (at least) two layers: first, the political and diplomatic marginalisation of Taiwan through the countries that denied (or did not recognize) its nation status. Second, but not less important, was an administrative one: of the single artist, the single curator, by the hands of the local art administration. This became also the theme of a project by Eva Lin called *De-strike* at the 2005 Taiwan Pavilion. It is this second layer of subalternity of the artist's and curator's voice that infinitely complicates the question of national marginalisation: very often the question of national marginalisation intersects, supersedes, hides or exacerbates the question of administrative subalternity, making it almost impossible to discern the one from the other.

This second layer of subalternity of local curators in relationship with the local art administration is a key question in more than one way: the subaltern relationship of independent curators visibly undermines their independence. One of the founding myths of modernity is the independent voice of artists or curators, and it is this very independence that stays at the heart of the notion of authorship. With the "death of the author", Roland Barthes has advanced a critique of the modernist notion of authorship, arguing that writing as such is

"the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away".<sup>2</sup>

Against Roland Barthes it has to be argued that with this claim he occupied a position within a pre-existing discourse- a position of power and certainly a position of authorship. Authorship is thus not only a question of metaphysics or semiology, but also a question of politics and power. A closer look at the power relations inside art institutions allows for a far more nuanced view of this myth of modernity, as it allows to

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<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes: "The death of the author", in: Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, translated by Stephen Heath, London 1977, p. 142.

better define the agency of artists and curators within the art world. This view of large-scale art exhibitions as an expression not so much of single independent authors-creators, but rather as the outcome of a negotiation between various players occupying certain positions of power, is also the very basis for the critical approach of this thesis, that is to analyse large scale art exhibitions as the expression of a nation, a negotiation process between artists, curators and the clerks (to use Anderson and Gellner) of a relatively “anonymous” art administration.

The following chapter will describe first the diplomatic marginalisation of Taiwan at the Venice Biennale, using it as an example of how international diplomacy plays out in the field of contemporary art, and will also analyse it as an example of the “violence of the name” as elaborated by Jacques Derrida. Second I will investigate into the scandal around the elimination of Amy Cheng’s curatorial statement from the catalogue of the 2004 Taipei Biennial, as well as the elimination of the position of the independent curator of the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice in 2009. This will allow for a discussion of the ephemeral and “subaltern” position of independent curatorship in Taiwan, and then serve as a starting point to engage with the contradictions of the representation of Taiwan as a marginalised nation, using both the Taipei Biennial since 2004 as well as the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice since 2005 as prime material.

This chapter focuses on the diplomatic marginalisation of Taiwan and the subaltern position of its local independent curators. How the nation shifted and de-centred its image from a highly globalised to a marginalised nation in the international exhibitions since 2005 will be the subject of the following chapter.

### **The marginalisation of independent local curatorship**

What makes this discourse of marginalisation of the nation worthy of a closer analysis, is the ambiguity of the status of the independent local curators and the status of the curatorial voice: when the statement of co-curator Amy Cheng was eliminated from the

official catalogue of the 2004 Taipei Biennial, it must have appeared to all outsiders that it had been the all-too-powerful “Western” curator Barbara Vanderlinden to silence the voice of the local curator, very much in the way that Spivak had described Western postcolonialism as a way to silence the voice of the subaltern East. Yet it has to be argued that the final decision regarding the content of the catalogue lied not just with the chief editor, but also with the publisher. Especially the final decision about such a macroscopic question as the elimination of the statement of one of the two curators quoted on the cover surely had to be shared with the publisher, the Taipei Fine Arts Museum. It is hard to imagine what Vanderlinden, the foreign editor of the catalogue, could have done against the decision of the publisher, director Huang Tsai-lang, to include Amy’s statement in the final version sent to the printing presses.

How ambiguous and ephemeral the status of independent curatorship in Taiwan really was, became even more evident in 2009, when the head of international exhibitions at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum decided single-handedly to eliminate the position of the independent curator from the organization and preparation process of the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice. This internal marginalisation of independent curatorship, or rather these internal power relations between the institutions and the local art scene, turn the question of the marginalisation of Taiwan as a nation into a highly ambiguous and multifaceted one. It has to be asked, whether the theorisation of Taiwan as a subaltern space in relation to ‘the West’ by local curators and artists is not also disguise for the power relations between independent curators and local institutions.

### **The diplomatic marginalisation of Taiwan in Venice- the violence of the name**

In 1995 the R.O.C/Taiwan pioneered as the first nation from the Greater China area the experiment of national representation through contemporary art at the Venice Biennale. This paved the way for many others to follow – Singapore, Hong Kong, Macao, China. From 1995 up until 1999, Taiwan was the only Chinese country (as of part of Greater

China) with an official representation in Venice. The emphasis here is on officialdom, and state sponsorship of contemporary art: in that same period, Chinese artists in the P.R.C. exhibited mainly in private apartments, or went into international exile. Only a small number of artists, often contesting and being contested by Chinese officialdom, found the way to Venice through the sponsorship of a Hong Kong art dealer or a Swiss collector who introduced them to international art circuit.

At the turn of the millennium the Chinese strategy took a fundamental turn from repressing any form of non-aligned art towards state sponsorship. Starting with the 2000 Shanghai Biennial, China slowly began to grant official visibility to contemporary art. This new strategy was twofold: while partly relaxing ideological control, even sponsoring contemporary art, at the same time Chinese diplomats started paying attention to Taiwan's presence in Venice and at other international biennials such as the Sao Paulo Biennial, and began to exert pressure to have its status as a "national" pavilion removed.

### **The Republic of China becomes Taiwan**

A certain ambiguity about the name of the Taiwanese participation in Venice had already started to surface in 1997. In 1995, the first Taiwanese participation was listed on the official catalogue of the Venice Biennale as "Republic of China on Taiwan",<sup>3</sup> a name which closely reflected the new political vision of both president Lee Teng-hui as well as mayor Chen Shui-bian of adjusting the name of the nation by adding "Taiwan" to the existing "Republic of China".

Almost imperceptibly a first change in name occurred as early as 1997. Both in 1997 and 1999, the Taiwanese participation was listed on the catalogue of the Venice Biennale only as "Taiwan", therefore abandoning the "Republic of China". What might appear to the innocent observer as simply a matter-of-factly statement of the name of

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<sup>3</sup> Jean Clair: *Identity and Alterity*, Venezia 1995, p. 162.



the nation, according to an interview with artist Yao Jui-chung was rather the result of diplomatic pressure exerted by China to abolish the name “Republic of China”. The elimination of the three letters R.O.C. (which at least according to the paper of the R.O.C. constitution represented a national entity which claims a territory including not only the island of Taiwan, but also mainland China, parts of Mongolia, northern Vietnam and others), had the singular result that in the years 1997 and 1999 Taiwan was officially recognized as a nation with the name “Taiwan”. This recognition was probably limited to contemporary art and possibly to Venice, but for the short period of two editions of the Venice Biennale, the diplomatic pressure from Beijing (through some minor institutions) had realized the ultimate dream and goal of Taiwanese independence, the recognition of a national entity known only as “Taiwan”. An irony of sorts, the pressure from Beijing had eliminated the very link to that national entity which had been founded on the mainland of China in 1911, and which had migrated to the island only after 1945, and which though its constitution until this day claims to represent not just all of China, but all of the former Qing empire.

These considerations already hint at the difficulty and the ambiguity to write about “Taiwan”, Taiwanese identity, and Taiwanese nationhood. It is often argued that scientific writing should abstain from any political stance, and maintain a neutral language. In the case of “Taiwan”, there is no neutral language available, since any name in use – “Taiwan”, “Formosa”, “Free China”, “Republic of China”, “Republic of China on Taiwan”, “Taiwan Area”, “Taiwan Province”, “Chinese Taipei”, “China Taipei” – already denotes a specific political stance and a specific ideological trajectory. Even the simple name “Taiwan”, even though it may be claimed to be the most colloquial and least political one, as all sides agree that the geographic area of the main island of the R.O.C. shall be called “Taiwan”, is hardly a completely innocent one. As has been observed by Mark Harrison,

“Therefore, in Derrida’s terms, when one sets out to write about Taiwan, one is

inscribing its difference and creating its meaning even at the level of choosing what name to call it. And for Derrida, a kind of textual (and literal) violence is being exercised over the island: taking something and naming it is automatically to locate it within a system of classification that is the basis of the exercise of power over it”.<sup>4</sup>

As observed by Jacques Derrida, any act of naming is at the same time an act of violence – there are no originary entities and names, there is no way back to an age of innocence, since

“To name, to give names that it will on occasion be forbidden to pronounce, such is the originary violence of language which consists in inscribing within a difference, in classifying, in suspending the vocative absolute. To think the unique within the system, to inscribe it there, such is the gesture of the arche- writing: arche- violence, loss of the proper, of absolute proximity, of self-presence, in truth the loss of what has never taken place...”.<sup>5</sup>

In 1997, the R.O.C. on Taiwan appears simply as “Taiwan” on the main catalogue of the Venice Biennale. Yet this apparently innocent naming bore traces of intense back-door diplomacy and a compromise that had to be found in the very last minute before the main catalogue of the Venice Biennale went to the printers. Two years earlier, in 1995, the “R.O.C on Taiwan” was listed on the index of participating countries according to alphabetical order after the “Republic of Armenia” and before the “Republic of Croatia”. In 1997, “Taiwan” was listed as before within the category of national participations without a proper pavilion (that is, outside of the Giardini area), yet not in the place which the alphabet would have suggested: “Taiwan” was listed after the “Repubblica di Armenia” and before the “Repubblica di Cipro”, suggesting that the name had to be changed at the very last minute from “Republic of China on Taiwan” to

<sup>4</sup> Mark Harrison: *Legitimizing “Taiwan”: the formation of a Taiwanese national identity*, Ph.D. thesis, Monash University, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida: *Of Grammatology*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1974, 1976, 1997, p. 112.

“Taiwan”, but leaving “Taiwan” in the vicinity of other “Republic of...” rather than moving it to the letter “T”.<sup>6</sup>

This last-minute change most likely was the result of the first semi-official Chinese participation in Venice: in 1997, London’s Marlborough gallery mounted a national pavilion for the People’s Republic of China at S. Stae, which featured several senior painters of the Central Art Academy. Curiously enough, in 1997 not only the Taiwanese participation defied the order of the alphabet, so did the People’s Republic of China’s pavilion, which was inserted as the very last of all national participations.<sup>7</sup>

Two years later, in 1999, China did not officially participate, and “Taiwan” was listed in perfect alphabetical order under the category of national participations showing outside the Giardini and within the city of Venice.

In 2000, during the preparation of the Architecture Biennale which paraded the theme *Less Aesthetics, More Ethics*, the national participation of Taiwan became an Italian scandal. As far as the events can be reconstructed from public documents and newspapers, such as the reports of the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, Taiwan had been officially invited in due course as a national participation. In 2000, Taiwan participated for the first time at the Architecture Biennale, and this time the task had been entrusted to the national (formerly provincial) Taiwan Museum in Taichung. Yet within only a few weeks before the opening, the Taiwan Museum in Taichung was notified by the Venice Biennale office that its denomination had to be changed to “China, Taiwan”, such as to realign it with the PRC view that Taiwan was part of China, a view that had been accepted by the Italian foreign office. From the news reporting of the *Corriere*, it can be deducted that in 2000 not just a few professors from Beijing had taken affront with the Taiwanese participation as in 1997, but the very highest level of official Chinese and Italian diplomacy had intervened with the organisation of the

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<sup>6</sup> Germano Celant: *Futuro Presente Passato. XLVII Mostra Internazionale d’Arte*, Venezia 1997, index and p. 484.

<sup>7</sup> Germano Celant: *Futuro Presente Passato, XLVII Mostra Internazionale d’Arte*, Venezia 1997, index and p. 606.

Venice Biennale. Apparently the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had been pressured to re-align the Venice Biennale to the “One China policy”, and therefore had notified the Venice Biennale to align itself with official policy. The immediate reaction of the Taiwan Museum of Art was to cancel its participation, as this denomination was deemed derogatory.<sup>8</sup> Presumably at this point Hsiao Chin, a long-term resident in Italy and one of the artists of the show, contacted a member of the Italian parliament, who called a motion to support the Taiwanese case.

A decade later, when this thesis was written, these events and the motivations surrounding them have been largely covered by myth and silence: according to an interview with officials of the Venice Biennale in October 2009, the solution that saved face both to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as to Taiwan, was the invention of a new category, the so-called “institutional participations”. A similar view has been repeated to the author by TFAM chief curator Chang Fang-wei on several occasions. She claimed that the major shift in official Venetian attitude took place in 2000, when the Taiwan Museum participated for the first time. When the author tried to interview then-director Ni Tsai-chin and then-chief curator Hsieh Pei-ni in December 2009, facing them with the question of the loss of national participation in 2000, they both had to rush off to other appointments.

In contrast to the claims made by major players in Taiwanese art such as Chang Fang-wei, the official catalogue of the 2000 Venice Architecture Biennale did not show any overt loss of Taiwanese nationhood. Since the Architecture Biennale was considerably smaller than the visual art biennial, there were only “participations”, all of which appeared to be national participations, at least to the eyes of any average reader. Only a rather minor and apparently superficial difference between Taiwan and other national participations was to be found at the very end of the catalogue, on the list of participants on p. 185: while all other exhibitions appeared with a long list of commissioners,

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<sup>8</sup> Sebastiano Grasso: “Biennale, Taiwan si ritira per non apparire satellite di Pechino”, *Corriere della Sera*, 24. 5. 2000.

curators, architects and so on, the Taiwanese participation was listed only as “Taiwan Museum of Art”, setting it apart in cursive script, with no further explanations.

### **The violence of the true name of the nation**

The true change of status that occurred in 2000 concerns not so much the question of nationhood as such, but the name of this nation: Taiwan was listed only at the very end of the alphabet as “Zhonghua-Taiwan, Cina-Taiwan”.<sup>9</sup> In 2000, for the first and only time in the history of the Venice Biennale, all participations were listed first with a phonetic transcription of their name in their national language, followed by a translation in Italian.

A reader of Derrida will be reminded of his reading of Lévi-Strauss’s *Tristes Tropiques* and his critique of the creation of a fictional innocence of the ethnological other:

“One already suspects .. that the critique of ethnocentrism, a theme so dear to the author of *Tristes Tropiques*, has most often the sole function of constituting the other as a model of original and natural goodness, of accusing and humiliating oneself, of exhibiting its being- unacceptable in an anti-ethnocentric mirror”.<sup>10</sup>

At first glance, the final compromise between the Venice Biennale and the Taiwan Museum of Art had been an act of postcolonial self- humiliation by the Italian side, by using only the name of the nation as it is pronounced in its own language – to be followed then by a humble translation in Italian. For the readers with some knowledge of Chinese, a second glance seemed to reveal a compromise to use the smallest common denominator of all contended names, using a part of the Chinese version of the “Republic of China on Taiwan”, by eliminating “Minguo” (Republic) from “Zhonghua Minguo”, and translating it into Italian. Yet while the first half, i.e. the transliteration of “China” into *pinyin* as “Zhonghua”, may seem to represent a compromise between the

<sup>9</sup> Massimiliano Fuksas: *Less Aesthetics, More Ethics. 7. Mostra Internazionale di Architettura, la Biennale di Venezia, Venezia 2000*, index and p. 178.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Derrida: *Of Grammatology*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1974, 1976, 1997, p. 114.

R.O.C. Taiwanese and the Chinese stance, the second half, the name of the nation given in Italian as “Cina-Taiwan”, accommodated in full the Chinese claim of sovereignty over the island the Beijing regards as a “renegade province”.

It has to be argued that the diplomatic clash in the run up to the 2000 Architecture Biennale did not lead to a visible loss of nationhood, but rather resulted in a re-naming of the nation by external forces – to say it with Derrida’s notion of the violence of the name. What might have appeared as a compromise between the two sides, to settle for “Zhonghua-Taiwan”, has to be considered as a very foul compromise for any reader of the Italian version, which accommodated in full the claims of the P.R.C., and which represented nothing but the re-naming of the nation by an outside force, as “China-Taiwan”, which initially had been categorically opposed by the Taiwan Museum.<sup>11</sup>

Secondly, it has to be observed that the usage of *pinyin* was not an innocent one. Roman *pinyin* is, albeit its almost universal usage and its adoption by the UN, the transliteration system adopted first of all by the People’s Republic of China, and it continues to be fervently opposed by the R.O.C. on Taiwan. For all readers with a knowledge of Chinese language and its transliteration systems, the usage of *pinyin* rather than one of the numerous Taiwanese transliteration systems denotes nothing else but the acceptance of a naming system imposed by Beijing over Taiwan. The usage of a *pinyin* transliteration of the name of the nation inside the 2000 Venice Biennale catalogue may therefore appear to be a manifestation of pure political correctness, an expression of respect for the national identity of the foreign other, a refusal to use the traditional name existing in the Italian language, and adopt instead a transliteration of the name in its own language. After a closer look, this apparent innocence carries an uncanny resemblance to the scene which inspired Derrida’s critique of Lévi-Strauss:<sup>12</sup> as in

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<sup>11</sup> When asked in December 2009 about this compromise, both the then-director Ni Tsai-chin and the then-chief curator Beatrice Hsieh Pei-ni refused to be interviewed about this major diplomatic setback, and claimed that “it was all quite different”, and that “only the name Taiwan Museum of Art was used on the official publications”. A version of events which seems not take into account the official Venetian catalogue, but limits itself to the Taiwanese publications.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Derrida: *Of Grammatology*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1974, 1976, 1997, p.

*Tristes Tropiques*, it was not the person (or the nation...) to reveal its proper name – it was rather the close enemy, the adversary of a fight, who revealed the “secret” proper name to the ethnographer Lévi-Strauss and the Venice Biennale office. In the case of Lévi-Strauss, it was “young girls” revealing the “secret” names of their friends-adversaries; in the case of Venice, it was the diplomats from the other side of the Taiwan Strait, the foreign office in Beijing, who “revealed” or rather imposed the “proper” name of the nation. As noted by Derrida, the true violence did not occur when the girls in Lévi-Strauss’s account argued amongst themselves - the true violence only occurred when that “secret” name was revealed to the foreign ethnographer, and when the foreigner continued to incite the girls to reveal even more names one by one. If we follow the argumentation of Derrida, then the true violence did not occur when the two sides, Beijing and Taipei contended their claim to nation-status: it rather occurred when the West, its institutions, accepted one view, and discarded the other by inscribing it into their own diplomatic language.<sup>13</sup>

Finally it has to be pointed out that not only Taiwan, but all nations participating at the *More Ethics, Less Aesthetics* 2000 Venice Biennale of Architecture, suffered the effects of the diplomatic clash between Beijing, Rome and Taichung. In 2000, not only Taiwan, but all national participations were re-named unilaterally with their “original name” by the Venice Biennale, in a sort of domino-effect by which the clash between China, Italy and Taiwan did not limit itself to these three nations and their names, but created ripples that criss-crossed the whole field of naming and classification.

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<sup>13</sup> This at least would be the argumentation proposed by Derrida. It has to be argued that this argumentation cuts both ways: in the case of transliteration systems in Taiwan, it could be equally argued that the invention of ever new systems of transliterations ultimately undermines the very goal of any transliteration system: communication. The multiplicity and arbitrary use of local transliteration systems therefore represent a similar act of symbolic violence. This violence clearly has the goal of defending a cultural independence, and usually the presumed enemy is the intrusion of mainland China; but it has to be argued that the inventiveness of Taiwanese linguists and politicians erects first of all a linguistic wall against all foreigners and non-Chinese speakers.

### **The gradual loss of nation-status**

In 2000 Taiwan, or rather “Zhonghua-Taiwan”, was still listed inside the elite club of national participations. In 2001, during curator Harald Szeemann's *Plateau of Humankind* Biennale, a newly-created category of “institutional participations” made its appearance. In the “Sommario” (Summary) page, three different entry categories are listed: national participations (“partecipazioni nazionali”), institutional participations (“istituzioni culturali”), and collateral events (“a latere”).<sup>14</sup> Curiously, this division was not completely adhered to in the following pages: in the page subsequent to the summary, we find a list of “countries”, which included the “Italian-Latin American Institute”, yet inside the catalogue this initiative by the Italian ministry of foreign affairs found itself inside the group of the so-called “institutional participations”, together with “China-Hong Kong” and the “Taipei Fine Arts Museum of Taiwan”. After the list of “countries”, there is no dedicated directory of “institutions”, instead the catalogue summary pages jumped immediately to the list of collateral events, therefore not mentioning neither “China-Hong Kong” nor the “Taipei Fine Arts Museum of Taiwan”. Inside the catalogue, there was no special page dividing the new category of institutions from the category of nations, rather a seamless continuity from the last of nations, Venezuela, to be followed by the group formed by the Italian-Latin American Institute, followed by “China-Hong Kong” and finally the “Taipei Fine Arts Museum of Taiwan”. This rather curious situation seems to point, again, at some last-minute diplomacy that had to accommodate both the Chinese as well as the Taiwanese claims. Within this diplomatic struggle for the proper name at the Venice Biennale, the Taiwanese side had made a substantial symbolical counter-attack : in order to distinguish itself from the part of China known as “China-Hong Kong”, and to abandon the imposed name “Zhonghua-Taiwan”, the TFAM decided to rename itself as “Taipei Fine Arts Museum of Taiwan”, following a strategy already adopted by the “national” dance troupe Cloud Gate, which

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<sup>14</sup> Harald Szeemann: *Platea dell Umanità.. 49. Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte, la Biennale di Venezia*, Venezia 2001, index pages.



had renamed itself “Cloud Gate Dance Theater of Taiwan”, thus integrating the name of the nation into the very name of the institution. With this semiological counter-attack, the TFAM not only managed to escape the Beijing-imposed naming convention “Zhonghua-Taiwan”. It also managed to retain the name of the nation “Taiwan” within its official presentation, even after it had been re-classified as a mere institution, rather than a nation as in the years from 1995 until 1999. It has to be pointed out that this was a purely symbolic and semiological move: albeit its self-presentation as a national museum, as a museum representing the nation, on an administrative level, until this day, the status of the TFAM continues to be that of a civic museum under the ranks of the cultural department of Taipei city.

In Venice, the loss of nation-status at the Venice Biennale was not merely a semiological naming-game, but also had some repercussions on the status and visibility of the art and the exhibition: according to the rules and regulations of the Venice Biennale, only national pavilions are eligible for the prize of best national pavilion. To be removed from that list of potential candidates, not only meant losing the chance to win that prestigious prize, usually the chief event of the last day of the Venice opening. It also means that not only the jury of the Venice Biennale, but also the international press will be less interested in a visit at the Taiwan Pavilion, as it obviously was no potential candidate of an official prize.

The lowest level of administrative participation at the Venice Biennale was reached at the 2002 *Next Architecture Biennale*: the list of national participations preceded the category of “Next Cities”, all of which Italian, which in turn was followed by the category of mixed entries called “Extra Next”. The very last entry in this very last category was “2050 Vision Taiwan: Nexit”. This low administrative ranking was all the more surprising considering that in 2002 there was no official participation from China or Hong Kong to contend the status of the Taiwanese participation. In 2002, Taiwan had to all effect lost its position as one of the young and aspiring postcolonial nations

invited to the new centre of the Venice Biennale around S. Mark Square. It had been demoted not only from the position amongst the “national participations”, but also from the second-best category of “institutions”, and had sunken into the very last category of *varia* and *miscellanea*, alongside local initiatives such as *Vivere Venezia* and *Lonely Living*.<sup>15</sup>

Earlier the same year, a rather interesting incident had taken place during the Sao Paulo Biennale: as in Venice, part of the show was held inside pavilions organized by participating nations, including Taiwan, which was represented by the photographer Chang Chien-chi. Shortly before the opening the organizers replaced the name of the nation with that of an institution, apparently ceding to Chinese pressure,- “Taipei Fine Arts Museum”. In protest, the artist kept the exhibition closed. In a sign of sympathy, a group of Austrian artists staged a highly interesting intervention:<sup>16</sup> they collected single letters from other nations, including theirs, to form the word “taiwan”. This writing remained only for a short time, but it did leave a curious trace over the time of the exhibition: the missing letters in the names of other nations.



The writing on the wall introducing Chang Chien-chih's participation at the 2002 Sao Paulo Biennial, after the intervention of the monochrom group.

Photo: monochrom 2002, source: [http://www.monochrom.at/monochrom/bringt/geologische-verwerfungen-nach-sao-paulo/S\\_P1010301.JPG](http://www.monochrom.at/monochrom/bringt/geologische-verwerfungen-nach-sao-paulo/S_P1010301.JPG)



Austria donates the letter “t” to create the word “Taiwan”.

Photo: monochrom 2002, source: [http://www.monochrom.at/monochrom/bringt/geologische-verwerfungen-nach-sao-paulo/S\\_P1010301.JPG](http://www.monochrom.at/monochrom/bringt/geologische-verwerfungen-nach-sao-paulo/S_P1010301.JPG)

<sup>15</sup> Deyan Sudjic: *Next. 8. Mostra Internazionale di Architettura, la Biennale di Venezia, Venezia 2002*, index and p. 190.

<sup>16</sup> Monochrom: “Der Taiwan- Zwischenfall, Killing Imperialism with Kindness? A statement of monochrome”, see: <http://www.monochrom.at/thomann/taiwan-zwischenfall.htm>, accessed 25.5.2010

In 2003, at curator Francesco Bonami's *Dreams and Conflicts, the Dictatorship of the Viewer* Venice Biennale, for the first time a Chinese curator, Hou Han-ru, was invited to curate a section of the official exhibition at the Arsenale, *Zone of Urgency*. A second first in the history was the official appearance of the People's Republic of China amongst the elite circle of official national pavilions. Due to the SARS crisis and internal strife with the Chinese art administration, this national pavilion limited its presence to the printed pages of the official catalogue, while the actual exhibition was cancelled at the last minute (Rumours claimed that at least some of the art works had already arrived in Venice). China had originally planned to mount its first national pavilion at the Fondazione Bevilacqua la Masa in S. Mark Square, a mere 250 meters away from the Taiwanese exhibition site.

In the 2003 catalogue the category "institutional participations" had been abolished, and Taiwan was listed within the second-best category "Extra 50", a title inspired by the anniversary of the Venice Biennale. Taiwan was listed only as *Limbo Zone*, with no allusions to its provenance, locality or nationhood in the title. Hong Kong, inside the same category, instead prided itself of the lengthy and exhaustive title *Navigating the dot, artists from Hong Kong, China*. The Italian-Latin American Institute, a former companion in the category of institutional participations in 2001, had returned to its previous seat among proper national participations, thus ending its precarious vicinity to "Hong Kong-China" and "Zhonghua-Taiwan".<sup>17</sup>

At the 2004 Architecture Biennale *Metamorph Vectors*, Taiwan was again relegated to the very last of several categories: nations, cities on water, internal news, and finally "Meta-events", where Taiwan participated as "Taiwan: the interbreeding field", in the second-last position in a list that followed no alphabetical order. China, or rather Shanghai, participated among the "cities on water", the second category after

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<sup>17</sup> Francesco Bonami: *Dreams and Conflicts, The Dictatorship of the Viewer. 50<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition, la Biennale di Venezia, Venezia 2001*, contents pages.

“nations”<sup>18</sup>.

In 2005 the diplomatic situation found its final form:<sup>19</sup> China finally established a national pavilion, occupying one of the most prestigious sites the Venice Biennale had to offer, being invited as the first nation ever to a space inside the Arsenale, the *Giardino delle Vergini*.

Taiwan, or the exhibition organized by the museum now known as Taipei Fine Arts Museum of Taiwan, was designated a collateral event, among the “eventi nell’ambito”, where it appeared as *The Spectre of Freedom*, without any allusion to its provenance or nationality.<sup>20</sup>

Two aspects need to be highlighted here: first, the elimination of the R.O.C. from the United Nations in 1971, and from the list of national participations at the Venice Biennale between 1997 and 2002, hardly met any resistance from a global “civil

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<sup>18</sup> Kurt W. Forster: *Metamorph Vectors. 9. Mostra Internazionale d’Arte, la Biennale di Venezia, Venezia 2004*, “sommario” (index) page.

<sup>19</sup> From 2006 onwards, China stepped up its presence in Venice by participating officially at the Architecture Biennale. In 2006 China appeared with two exhibitions: one among the national pavilions, and one in the category “partner initiatives” as *Tongli project China*. On the contrary, Taiwan appeared in the last category of “collateral events” as *Paradise Revisited: Micro-Cities & Non-Meta Architecture in Taiwan*.

In 2007, the previous pattern was repeated. China had established itself among the national participations, and exhibited again inside the Virgins’ Garden, therefore claiming it as a semi-permanent site. Taiwan, alongside Hong Kong was permanently relegated to the category of collateral events. The title *Atopia* of the Taiwanese exhibition did not bear any indication about its provenance, beyond the indication of representing a non-nation or “atopian” place. Hong Kong was more explicit about its provenance and “regional” identity with *Stair Fairy: Hong Kong in Venice. 2007* also featured another “Chinese” collateral participation organized by the Italian curator of the Beijing Biennial, Vincenzo Sanfo, who exhibited several Chinese painters together with an Italian artist under the curiously nationalist title *Between East and West. Omar Galliani and the great Italian drawing in China*.

In a way similar to 2006, in 2008 at the Architecture Biennale there was both an official national P.R.C participation, as well as a Chinese-Italian collaboration project, *An Italian Garden in Tianjin*, listed as a collateral event. Among the latter group, there were also two Taiwanese projects: *Dark City*, which despite the lack of any reference, presumably was the “official” Taiwanese representation, as it showed at the Prigioni), and *Next Gene 20: Ao-di Grand Land Architecture International Project, Taipei*, located in front of the Arsenale entrance, right next to *Culture Fabricate: Hong Kong in Venice*.

In 2009, the number of Chinese participations had reached a new record with no less than two Chinese pavilions, first the official pavilion at the Virgins’ Garden, and second a collateral event organized conjointly by MoCA Shanghai and Venice International University at the S. Servolo island. To these two, one has to add the Macao and the Hong Kong Pavilions. These four Chinese pavilions competed for attention with – another record - three Taiwanese participations: the “official” “collateral event”, *Foreign Affairs*, organized by the TFAM, and the *Temple of Sublime Beauty, Made in Taiwan*, a collateral event organized by this author (the only one to hint at its origin, Taiwan), and an exhibition curated by Achille Bonito Oliva with artist Lee sun-don (an event not backed by any institution, thus slightly bending the rules of the Venice Biennale).

<sup>20</sup> Maria de Corral and Rosa Martinez: *The Experience of Art, Always a Little Further. 51. Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte, la Biennale di Venezia, Venezia 2005*, index and p. 208.

society”, albeit the presumed universalism of nationalism, or the presumed right of self-determination. On the contrary, participation in the club of nations is ultimately a question of global power politics, a game in which young and small nations such as Taiwan (or Macedonia) easily loose out to bigger players. The realm of visual art can hardly claim to be occupy a position outside, or independent from that logic of global power games. All that can be saved from the claims to intellectual independence of “high art” is that on some occasions, and sometimes rather by coincidence, the field of art provides a rather limited and fractured visibility to these realities. That said, it has to be questioned which vantage point could provide for a position of absolute and eternal truth, without taking a specific political stance: as for the ambiguity of the status of Taiwan, the plurality of positions even inside Taiwan hardly contributes to a clarification of the question (though arguably much of that ambiguity is merely tactical, or a response to the pressure from Beijing).

Second, this very lack of representation seems to generate a desire for even more representation: hardly any nation in the world, compared to its relative size and population, has sent so many artists to Venice, and has organized so many “collateral” events as has Taiwan.

Third, the violence intrinsic to the imposition of a name over an entity not only involves the two contending sides, it also sends ripples and shock-waves across the whole system of signification: the superficial traces of this phenomenon are the odd positions Taiwan (and occasionally China) occupy in the otherwise alphabetical order of the Venetian catalogues, and becomes most visible when, such as in 2000, not only Taiwan, but all participating nations found themselves unilaterally re-named after the diplomatic clash between Beijing, Rome, Venice and Taichung.

Fourth, this diplomatic clash at the Venice Biennale curiously had hardly any direct and immediate effect on the way the nation imagined and represented itself: the 2001 Taiwan Pavilion was one of the most archetypical examples of a nation centred and

rooted in a natural core, steeped in traditions, and reflecting on its contradictions and social problems. In 2003 a first shift towards a reflection on global problems occurred, accompanied by a consideration on the situation of Taiwan and its effects on the human psyche. The question of marginalisation as such appeared as a topic only in 2005, after the curatorial statement of the Taiwanese curator of the 2004 Taipei Biennial had been eliminated from the official catalogue.

### **The elimination of the local curatorial voice:**

#### **the silent scandal in October 2004**

On October 23<sup>rd</sup>, the 2004 Taipei Biennial opened its gates to the public, and a record number of 18 local film- and video-makers occupied the main hall, inside an installation by Beijing architect Zhang Yong-he (since 1998, the Taiwanese participation at the Taipei Biennial used to be limited to 5 or 6 artists). Several local artists took up other prime positions in the main hall and along the corridors on the ground floor: Kuo I-chen presented *Invading the TFAM*, an installation that projected the shadow of a flying aeroplane on the ceiling of the main hall. The two photographers Yeh Wei-li and Liu Ho-jang occupied one of the two main corridors with their *THTP Project*. This strong presence of Taiwanese artists and video-makers at the very core of the Taipei Biennial could easily have turned out into one of the most successful editions, if it was not for one crucial element that was lacking: the statement of the local co-curator Amy Cheng, which had been eliminated from the final print of the official catalogue.

According to Amy Cheng, her statement had been edited out by the museum after curator Barbara Vanderlinden had criticized it and had asked for a heavy revision.<sup>21</sup> In a

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<sup>21</sup> 黃寶萍 Huang Bao-ping: “制度？經費？台北雙年展怎麼走下去？(System? Budget? What has happened to the Taipei Biennial?)”, *民生報 Min-sheng Daily* 29.10.2004, available online on Amy Cheng’s blog 愛咪嚙語隨便記 /*Amy’s Mumbo Jumbo*: <http://goya.bluecircus.net/archives/003427.html>. Consulted online 1.2.2010. In an interview in December 2009, former director Huang Tsai-lang claimed that the issue had arisen out of a personal conflict between the two curators, and that it had been Amy Cheng herself who refused to adapt her article to a given length that had been agreed before.

slightly different version of events on her own blog, Amy Cheng claimed that curator Barbara Vanderlinden had insisted on heavily editing her statement, and she felt she had no other choice but to deny permission to publish an altered version of her article.<sup>22</sup> By now only a Chinese version can be found on her blog, under the title “The lost curatorial statement”.<sup>23</sup> Amy Cheng refused to attend the press conferences and the opening ceremony. Initially, her silent absence passed unnoticed; the museum administration managed the press preview and the opening days without any member of the press noting the absence of neither co-curator Amy Cheng nor of her statement.

This voluntary and involuntary silence of the local press makes this incident all the more interesting: after all, it was not an “invisible” incident, it was not simply an incident happened behind closed doors, not simply a clash of personalities in the tense run-up to the opening of an exhibition. The results of this power-struggle were out there for anyone too see. The core question of the scandal, the absence of a local curatorial voice, was in plain view for anyone who compared the names printed on the cover of the catalogue with the list of authors of the texts printed inside. Yet not one of the usually highly perceptive and highly critical art writers noticed this incoherence between the cover and the content of the catalogue that had been handed to them for free during the press previews.<sup>24</sup>

This elimination of the local curators voice is all the more surprising considering that Barbara Vanderlinden had been invited as a representative of European postcolonial discourse,<sup>25</sup> and that the absence of Amy Cheng’s statement could very easily be framed

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<sup>22</sup> Amy Cheng: “我們如何面對現實——未出席台北雙年展開幕的說明 (How can we confront reality – an explanation to my absence at the opening ceremony of the Taipei Biennial)”, dated 26.10.2004, published on Amy Cheng’s blog *Amy’s Mumbo Jumbo*: <http://goya.bluecircus.net/archives/003425.html#17218>, consulted online 18.2.2010, 19:00.

<sup>23</sup> Amy Cheng: “遺失的策展論述, [雙年展], 凝視現實, 傾聽噪音 (The lost curatorial statement, (Biennial): stare at reality, listen to the noise)”, published on Amy Cheng’s blog *Amy’s Mumbo Jumbo*: <http://goya.bluecircus.net/archives/biennial/post-61.php>, consulted online 22.2.2010, 9:33.

<sup>24</sup> A comparison of press releases and published articles of professional art writers would probably very much confirm Umberto Eco’s notion of the death of the author.

<sup>25</sup> according to rumours, as the more “affordable” partner of Okwui Enwezor, the curator of the 2002 Kassel *documenta*

in Spivak's terms<sup>26</sup> as a "silencing of the voice of the subaltern" through a "postmodern" Western curator. In the same vein, the editing of Amy Cheng's statement would have easily fitted with Foucault's definition of "subjugated knowledges":

"a whole set of knowledges ... have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity".<sup>27</sup>

Considering the potential reverberations across academia and the global art world, the absence of Amy Cheng and the silencing of her voice had all the potential to turn into one of the biggest scandals in Taiwanese museum history. Yet during the days of the opening nothing happened.

Only a few days later, Amy Cheng and several artists involved in the exhibition, namely Chen Chieh-jen and Lin Hongjohn, broke their silence by publishing on the blog Taipei 1212 an open letter to the museum and giving interviews that asked for structural reforms of the museum.<sup>28</sup>

This *Taipei 1212* "plea" initiated a heated discussion in the local art scene, which

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<sup>26</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: "Can the subaltern speak", in: Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Macmillan, London 1988, pp. 271-313, available for download online from Macalester University at: <https://www.macalester.edu/wgs/Readings/Can%20the%20Subaltern%20Speak.pdf>. This article has been heavily re-written many times. One version was published as G. C. Spivak, "Can the subaltern speak?", in: B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths & H. Tiffin (eds), *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, Routledge London, New York 1995, pp. 24-28. This version is available for download on the website of Utrecht University at: [http://dSPACE.library.uu.nl:8080/bitstream/1874/29948/1/scan011\\_2.pdf](http://dSPACE.library.uu.nl:8080/bitstream/1874/29948/1/scan011_2.pdf), last accessed 23.3.2010.

<sup>27</sup> Michel Foucault: *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, Pantheon, New York 1980, p. 82. This is also quoted by G. C. Spivak in "Can the subaltern speak?", in: B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths & H. Tiffin (eds): *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, Routledge London, New York 1995, p. 25.

<sup>28</sup> 聯署聲明 (United Plea): "臺北雙年展「體制建言 (Reform proposals for the Taipei Biennial System)", posted with the date December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2004 at [http://taipei1212.blogspot.com/2004/12/blog-post\\_20.html](http://taipei1212.blogspot.com/2004/12/blog-post_20.html). The blog was opened in December 2004, the first entry is dated December 15<sup>th</sup> with a long list of links to international art biennials, the second entry is the open letter to the Taipei Fine Arts Museum asking for reforms for the Taipei Biennial, the third and final entry is a response letter signed "Taipei Fine Arts Museum" and dated March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2005: "台北雙年展的現實：對雙年展體制建言的回應，文 / 台北市立美術館" (The reality of the Taipei Biennial: a response to the plea for structural reform). See <http://taipei1212.blogspot.com>, consulted 30.1.2010, 19:22.

Unfortunately the plea letter is not signed by an individual, nor is the list of subscribers available on the internet, nor is the identity of the author or authors disclosed in any way. Therefore the credibility of that letter as representing "the Taipei art scene" lies with the indication given to the author by artist Tsui Kuang-yu in several emails, and that Tsui had claimed that one of the main authors of the letter was senior artist Chen Chieh-Jen.

Huang Bao-ping's article dated October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2004, mentions Amy Cheng, Chen Chieh-Jen and Lin Hongjohn as the chief voices of the protest.



fundamentally changed the ideological perspective of large-scale Taiwanese exhibitions: from this moment on, Taiwan began to theorise itself as a marginal and subaltern nation. Or to quote the curator of the 2005 Taiwan Pavilion in Venice, Wang Chia-chi:

”We are subordinate and mute, unable to represent ourselves”.<sup>29</sup>

Albeit less dramatically and in different ways than intended, this plea also changed the administrative status of the Taipei Biennial: immediately after the end of the 2004 Taipei Biennial, the museum announced that it had already started preparing the 2006 edition. The following edition of 2008 was already prepared by a dedicated international exhibition department.

### **The initial silence of the media**

Surprisingly, this absence (or silent boycott) initially was hardly noticed at all by the local press: none of the reports by the English-speaking local media mentioned the absence of Amy Cheng at the press preview and at the opening, or the lack of her curatorial statement in the catalogue.<sup>30</sup> Even some of the most influential local art

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<sup>29</sup> Wang Chia-chi: “The specter of freedom - Il fantasma della libertà”, *The Spectre of Freedom*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2005, p. 14.

<sup>30</sup> On the opening days, the local English-speaking press hardly mentions Amy Cheng, and there is no hint that her statement may be missing:

Jules Quartly: “Taipei’s Biennial opens with the promise of revealing reality. The opening of Taipei’s fourth biennial showed that the country’s capital is making an impression on the world stage”, *Taipei Times*, Saturday, Oct 23, 2004, p. 16, consulted online 24.1.2010 9:40, at

<http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2004/10/23/2003208136>

Diana Freundl: “Document art and make it monumental - Filmmaking as a method to produce art and challenge is explored in the Taipei Biennial”, *Taipei Times*, Sunday, October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2004, p. 19, consulted online 24.1.2010, 9:30, at

<http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2004/10/24/2003208274>.

Susan Kendzulak, “Fresh art in different places. The theme of the current Taipei Biennial is 'Do you believe in reality?'”, *Taipei Times*, Sunday, October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2004, p. 18, consulted online 24.1.2010 9:30 at <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2004/10/24/2003208268>.

To Lee: “Taipei Biennial adds new perspectives”, *The China Post*, Saturday, October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2004, consulted online 21.2.2010, 11:41, at <http://www.chinapost.com.tw/art/2004/10/23/53674/Taipei-Biennial.htm>.

The last interview that Amy Cheng gave to the English press was months before the opening, published by Aventurina King on the *China Post* on Saturday, August 21<sup>st</sup>, 2004, “Taipei Biennial aims to question reality”, consulted online 24.1.2010 9:49, at

<http://www.chinapost.com.tw/news/2004/08/21/51737/Taipei-Biennial.htm>.

Not even the Chinese press initially took much notice of Amy’s absence at the opening and the lack of her statement. An example is: Tom.com and Dongfang Shijue editors (TOM 文: 东方视觉整理 编辑: 东方视觉), “在乎现实吗? 2004 台北双年展 (Do you believe in reality? The 2004 Taipei Biennial)”, published on November 25<sup>th</sup>, 2004, on

[www.ionly.com.cn/nbo/5/53/20041125/211657.html](http://www.ionly.com.cn/nbo/5/53/20041125/211657.html), consulted 5.2.2010, 19:06.

editors, such as chief editor of *artists* magazine Chang Ching-wen, initially were not quite sure whether they should report Amy Cheng's absence at all.<sup>31</sup>

Not without some cynical irony, Barbara Vanderlinden had completed her curatorial statement in the catalogue of *Do You Believe in Reality* with the exclamation: "Let the conversation begin."<sup>32</sup> Almost the very same wording was adopted by local journalist Susan Kendzulak (sometimes also writing for the influential international art magazine *Flash Art*), who claimed one day after the opening:

"As in the past two biennials, this one unites a Taiwanese and a European curator to spark a dialogue ...".<sup>33</sup>

Unfortunately those sparks of dialogue were not elaborated any further by Susan Kendzulak. As most journalists failed to notice Amy Cheng's absence, many of them highlighted the local participations. One example is Susan Kendzulak's "Fresh art in different places",<sup>34</sup> which even features a list of "Taiwan's top biennial artists". Another example is Diana Freundl's "Document art and make it monumental - Filmmaking as a method to produce art and challenge is explored in the Taipei Biennial",<sup>35</sup> which mainly explores the documentary section with the 16 Taiwanese film-makers chosen for the main hall by Chen Chieh-Jen.

While the newspapers may not have had the time to notice Amy's absence, some of the international English-language art magazines seemed to have avoided the issue of Amy Cheng's absence consciously: on the January 2005 edition of *Asian Art News*, Andrew

<sup>31</sup> See the entry of "jolene5719" on Amy Cheng's blog of 26.10.2004, 02:08. A gmail account of the same alter ego belongs to *artists* magazine chief editor Chang Ching-wen, it can therefore be fairly safely deduced that it was Chang writing that entry. See: <http://goya.bluecircus.net/archives/biennial/post-60.php>, last accessed on 23.3.2010, 15:56.

<sup>32</sup> Barbara Vanderlinden: "Do you believe in reality?"", in: *Taipei Biennial 2004, Do You Believe in Reality?*, TFAM, Taipei 2004, p. 26.

<sup>33</sup> Susan Kendzulak: "Fresh art in different places. The theme of the current Taipei Biennial is 'Do you believe in reality?'"", *Taipei Times*, Sunday, October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2004, p. 18, consulted online 24.1.2010 9:30, at <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2004/10/24/2003208268>.

<sup>34</sup> Susan Kendzulak: "Fresh art in different places, The theme of the current Taipei Biennial is 'Do you believe in reality?'"", *Taipei Times*, Sunday, October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2004, p. 18, consulted online on 24.1.2010 9:30, at <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2004/10/24/2003208268>.

<sup>35</sup> Diana Freundl: "Document art and make it monumental - Filmmaking as a method to produce art and challenge is explored in the Taipei Biennial"“, *Taipei Times*, Sunday, October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2004, p. 19, consulted online 24.1.2010, 9:30, at <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2004/10/24/2003208274>.

Huang's six-page review of the *2004 Taipei Biennial*, "Art Into Life", lacked any hint at the scandal and the discussions that had evolved in the two months since the opening.<sup>36</sup> Remarkably Huang's review not only eliminated Amy Cheng from the narrative of the *2004 Taipei Biennial*, he also forgot to mention the name of Barbara Vanderlinden, even though Andrew Huang's report closely followed her curatorial statement. Huang, and with him all the reporting on *Asian Art News* regarding the *2004 Taipei Biennial*, not only erased the scandal around Amy Cheng's absence from the catalogue and the opening, but also eliminated any trace of any independent curatorial voice. In his article, he only quoted the voices of participating artists, such as Chen Chieh-Jen, or the museum director, Huang Tsai-lang, but none of the two curators. As a result of this complete erasure of the names of the two independent curators, the original authorship of the Taipei Biennial was attributed to the institution as such: according to Andrew Huang and *Asian Art News*,

"It is therefore to its credit that the Taipei Fine Arts Museum mounted the exhibition under the title *Do You Believe in Reality ....*"<sup>37</sup>

### **The silence of the institutions**

Not only the local press failed to notice the scandal, also most local and international art institutions maintained a veil of silence: there was, and still is, no mention of the incident on the official homepage of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum and of the 2004 Taipei Biennial ([www.taipeibiennial.org/](http://www.taipeibiennial.org/) 2004); on the contrary, Barbara and Amy were, and still are, always mentioned as equal co-curators. With a slightly different twist, no mention of this scandal showed (and shows) on the web-pages of European art institutions, such as the Stedelijk Museum, where on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2004 "Barbara Vanderlinden talked about the 2004 Taipei Biennial". Only at the very end of the page

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<sup>36</sup> Andrew Huang: "Art into life", *Asian Art News*, volume 15, number 1, January-February 2005, pp. 70-75.

<sup>37</sup> Andrew Huang: "Art into life", *Asian Art News*, volume 15, number 1, January-February 2005, p. 71.

Amy Cheng is mentioned as the co-curator. The same page also announced that Barbara Vanderlinden was invited to speak about “What do biennials mean for local artists?”.<sup>38</sup> Unfortunately no records of Vanderlinden’s speech are available. It also seems that she gave only one interview about the absence of Amy from her show, in which she denounced the “boycott” of “her” exhibition by Amy Cheng on the local *pots* magazine, but apparently avoided any further critical discussion of the incident.<sup>39</sup>

### The silence of the scholars

The almost complete silencing of the scandal by institutions and scholars allows for some interesting insights into the workings of academia and the art system: first, and surprisingly for institutions in a democratic society, none of the institutions involved

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<sup>38</sup> Stedelijk Museum Program: “Biennials. Presentations by Paul Domela, Charles Esche, Barbara Vanderlinden”, published on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2004, at: <http://www.stedelijk.nl/oc2/page.asp?PageID=918>, consulted 21.2.2010, 11:06.

With a little bit of malice, these apparently innocuous pages reveal a surprising orientalism of their own. “Taipei Biennial” is written once only with a minor “b” rather than a capital letter, making it a simple classifier of a group rather than the proper name of a single event. Lower in the page, the same Taipei Biennial is written with a strange accent on the “e” as “Taipei Biënnale”, apparently hinting at an exotic and non-English origin and pronunciation of the name. This very same exotic origin re-appears on the CV page of one of the participating artists of the 2004 Taipei Biennial: on the artnet CV page of Bili Bidjocka, “Taipei” is spelled with a strange accent on the “i” as “taipei biennial”. See: <http://www.artnet.com/artist/603402/bili-bidjocka.html>, consulted 21.2.2010, 13:00. Curiously, Bili Bidjocka mentions only Barbara Vanderlinden and her assistant Elena Filipovic as the authors of a catalogue entry about himself, but does not mention Amy Cheng (nor Barbara Vanderlinden) as the editor of the catalogue.

A somewhat incorrectly twisted and one-sided presentation of the various roles at the Taipei Biennial can be found on the German page *Kunstaspekte*, which presumably obtained this information from Barbara or her assistant. On *Kunstaspekte*, Elena Filipovic is presented as the only “assistant curator” of the 2004 Taipei Biennial, effectively exaggerating her role, and obscuring the names of all the other (Taiwanese) “assistants to 2004 Taipei Biennial”. See <http://www.kunstaspekte.de/index.php?action=termin&tid=10123>, consulted 21.2.2010 and the index on page 268 of the 2004 Taipei Biennial catalogue. The very same short presentation of the 2004 Taipei Biennial on *Kunstaspekte* also lists a number of artists, of whom all but two correspond to the artists invited by Barbara Vanderlinden, while not one single Taiwanese artist is listed.

The same incorrect title “assistant curator” is used on Elena Filipovic’s CV on her personal page at the Higher Institute for Fine Arts, Ghent, Belgium: <http://www.hisk.edu/lecturers.php?la=en&id=250&t=previous&y=2008>, consulted 21.2.2010, 23:56.

<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately this interview with Barbara Vanderlinden is not available online any more. The only traces left are dead links to a page on pots magazine ([http://publish.pots.com.tw/english/Arts/2004/10/29/333\\_20\\_art/](http://publish.pots.com.tw/english/Arts/2004/10/29/333_20_art/)) which indicate its former existence: there is a mentioning of this interview on “Anna Contis working artists journal”, which introduces a book of 2001 with “Barbara Vanderlinden - born in Belgium, chosen to co-curate the 2004 Taipei Biennial”, with a link to “an article about her co-curator (Amy Cheng) boycotting the exhibition,... ” See: <http://bigcrow.com/anna/journal/bestof7.html#121505> (consulted 21.2.2010, 12:28). The link has been inserted by Samantha Culp in her entry “Orgreave in Taipei” on the “imomous journal” page; her introduction reads: “check out all the curatorial catfight gossip ([http://publish.pots.com.tw/english/Arts/2004/10/29/333\\_20\\_art/](http://publish.pots.com.tw/english/Arts/2004/10/29/333_20_art/)) in Taipei’s POTS magazine.” See <http://imomus.livejournal.com/68041.html>, consulted 21.2.2010, 12:15.

ever mentioned the scandal.

Interesting and curious enough, the incident inspired several scholarly articles, yet hardly any of those scholars mentioned the scandal as such. Sometimes the scandal is subsumed under a general and more abstract conflict between the local and the global, such as in “The Poetics of Exhibition - Reconsider the Significance of the TFAM’s Exhibition” by former TFAM curator Lai Ying-ying.<sup>40</sup> Another example of this strategy is Susan Kendzulak’s “The Taipei Biennial, both respectability and notoriety”: in this article she mentioned all the requests that had been formulated by the local art scene after the scandal- without ever mentioning Amy Cheng’s absence from the 2004 Taipei Biennial opening as such.<sup>41</sup> This is also the case in Lai Ying-ying’s article “Mapping Taiwan: strategies of Taiwan’s international art biennials”. Lai quoted extensively from Amy Cheng’s criticism of the Taipei Biennial system- yet without ever making any reference to the 2004 incident.<sup>42</sup> Interesting enough, this author could find only one single exception, or only one scholar who mentioned and named the incident as such: Wu Chin-Tao in his paper “Biennials without borders?”<sup>43</sup>

This list of silent journalists and abstracting scholars could probably be extended manifoldly, and could possibly be developed into a wider discussion of the workings of the art system and academia. It is quite possible that not all omissions of the scandal have been intended as “abstractions” by the single authors, but were rather editorial choices of their editors and publishers: when this author reviewed the Taiwan Pavilion

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<sup>40</sup> Lai Ying-ying: “The Poetics of Exhibition, Reconsider the Significance of the TFAM’s Exhibition”, published online on the website of the National Taiwan University of Arts, Department of Art and Culture Politics and Administration at: <http://www.ntua.edu.tw/~culture/word/%AC%FC%B3N%C0%5D%AEi%C4%FD%B8%D6%BE%C7.pdf> consulted 21.2.2010, 16:16. No date of publication give, but it quotes articles published in late 2005; presumably published in early 2006.

<sup>41</sup> Susan Kendzulak: “The Taipei Biennial, both respectability as well as notoriety”, published on *culture.tw Taiwan, explore the real Taiwan* portal on May 7, 2007, see: [http://www.culture.tw/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=139&Itemid=40](http://www.culture.tw/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=139&Itemid=40)

<sup>42</sup> Lai Ying-ying: “Mapping Taiwan: strategies of Taiwan’s international art Biennials”, written in 2008 in the occasion of the 2008 Taipei Biennial, available online at: [http://www.ntua.edu.tw/~culture/word/0810\\_Map.pdf](http://www.ntua.edu.tw/~culture/word/0810_Map.pdf) consulted 21.2.2010, 17:32.

<sup>43</sup> Wu Chin-Tao: “Biennials without borders?”“, in: *Tate Papers, The Landmark Exhibitions Issue*, issue 12, 2009, available online at: <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/09autumn/chin.shtm> , consulted 21.2.2010, 12:42.

at the 2005 Venice Biennale, almost all mentions of that crucial incident were eliminated by the editors of the *Yishu* magazine (and the incident was never mentioned by any author of the *Yishu* magazine).

This blind spot of scholarly discussion makes any theoretical and more abstract discussion a highly ambiguous enterprise: it effectively turns those theoretical discussions of a conflict between the local and the global into a play of indirect allusions which only the very restricted circle of insiders will understand, while the average museum-going public is left without any clue about the stakes in question- and in the case of Amy Cheng's elimination from the catalogue, it has to be asked who eliminated her statement- the local publisher or the international curator.

It has to be asked whether this level of "scholarly abstraction" does not rather serve a political purpose: to protect and obscure the role of the single players, and to obscure the role of the institutions, while creating an ideological smokescreen which no outsider can penetrate or possibly criticize. This "scholarly abstraction" seems to serve what Gramsci had described as "cultural hegemony"- a hegemony of the institutions, which enforces consent on all players involved, however little their stakes may be. From this point of view, it is rather astonishing to observe the role played by the English-speaking media and of most of academic and institutional writers- ideally their stakes within the museum world should be rather limited compared to the Chinese speaking local press, yet academia and English-speaking professional art press are those who seem to fit most closely under the umbrella of Gramscian "cultural hegemony" of the museum.

As it appears from the above, the only spaces of free expression left in this almost perfect collaboration between the various branches of the Gramscian ideological state apparatus, or rather between the museum and academia, were the internet and the local Chinese press, , both daily press as well as the specialized art magazines.

### **Subaltern, but to whom?**

It is worthwhile asking whether the elimination of Amy Cheng's statement was an act of "elimination of a subaltern voice" by the "postcolonial West", to use Spivak's terms, or whether we should look rather at the role played by the local administration. Vanderlinden may have been the sole editor of the catalogue, but it was the museum who acted as the publisher: only the TFAM had the power to allow Barbara Vanderlinden to eliminate Amy Cheng's statement. If we were to diagnose a conflict between the "local" and the "global" in the case of Amy and Barbara, these two adjectives hardly pointed to wider reified entities, but rather to subject positions which had been assigned by specific institutions, in this case the TFAM. Amy Cheng may have been indeed "subaltern" in relation to Vanderlinden, yet this was a relation created by the local art administration; ultimately Amy Cheng was first of all "subaltern" in relation to the local art administration, i.e. the Taipei Fine Arts Museum.

### **The silencing of the local voice: the arbitrary editorial choices of the catalogue**

Beyond the elimination of Amy Cheng's statement, there were a few more choices made by the editors of the catalogue which are worth noting, and which all seem to fit into a pattern of "silencing the voice of the local": first, none of the cinematographers and video-makers present in the main hall were counted as "participating artists". If one were to count them into the overall number of "participating artists", then the 2004 Taipei Biennial would have qualified as the edition with the highest number of local artists since it had become international in 1998: on top of the "five" local "artists" (that is, including one group of two people), one could have also counted 18 filmmakers<sup>44</sup> as authors/artists participating in the exhibition. Instead, the editors of the catalogue opted for a division of the catalogue into "participating artists" (pp. 34-235), and a separate

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<sup>44</sup> Hou Hsiao-hsien, Kuan Hsiao-jung, Ling Ying-hua, Tsai I-feng, Lai Zhen-yuan, Lee Dao-ming, Lin Jing-jie, Ma Yo Bi Hou, Kuo Hsiao-yun, Huang Sun-chuan, Tsai Tsong-long (2 films), Shawn Kan, Chou Mei-ling, Tsao Wen-chie, Huang Hsin-yao, Wilson Lin, Flora Wu, C. W. Huang. See: *Do You Believe in Reality*, TFAM, Taipei 2004, pp. 238- 254.

“Documentary Film Section” (pp. 236-254). This different treatment of “participating artists” versus “documentary film section” continued also into the space available for each author: the average “participating artist” or collective, is on average presented on six pages, while the local filmmakers are limited to only one page per film/author.

An international star of art-cinema such as Hou Hsiao-hsien was thus relegated to this latter section, and not counted as “artist”. The division into “artists” (some of whom were working with video) and local filmmakers (some of whom were also working with video) presumably was a choice of Barbara Vanderlinden, the editor of the catalogue. This leads to the rather curious situation that Agnes Varda is described in six pages by Barbara Vanderlinden as a low-budget film director who was a precursor to French New-Wave cinema, while Hou Hsiao-hsien, a film director who won a Golden Lion in Venice for his cinematic style influenced by French New-Wave cinema, is described in one page only, and is not counted among the “participating artists”. In an interview with local scholar Wu Chin-tao, Vanderlinden had been asked about the low number of local artists, and for Wu Chin-tao, her rhetorical response meant that

“five local representatives seemed to her quite adequate, thank you very much, and people would certainly be wrong to expect more”.<sup>45</sup>

Considering the layout and the editing of the official catalogue, one has to wonder whether there was a wilful and conscious strategy to denigrate local participation at work: artist Chen Chieh-jen, responsible for choosing the videos in the “documentary section” in the main hall, is hardly acknowledged at all for his role of effectively co-curating the most spectacular and most recognisable single element of the whole exhibition. All that can be found is one short paragraph in the introduction to the “documentary section”, co-written by Amy Cheng and Barbara Vanderlinden, that

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<sup>45</sup> Wu Chin-tao: “Biennials without borders?”, in: *Tate Papers, The Landmark Exhibitions Issue*, issue 12, 2009, available online at: <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/09autumn/chin.shtm> , consulted 21.2.2010, 12:42.



counts exactly five sentences.<sup>46</sup> Chen Chieh-jen, albeit selecting 16 films, was not invited to write any introductory or curatorial entry, nor was Amy Cheng. While catalogue editor Barbara Vanderlinden did not dedicate more than five sentences to this section (sentences co-written with Amy Cheng), as a curator she had no qualms to boast this part as her very own achievement. On August 21, Aventurina King wrote on the China Post that “Barbara Vanderlinden enthused that painters, filmmakers and architects had been called upon to ‘deal with the lobby in a spectacular way’.”<sup>47</sup> During the press preview, Vanderlinden told reporter Diana Freundl that these videos were chiefly her own selection: ‘With the aid of Chen, Barbara Vanderlinden, one of the event’s curators, selected 16 Taiwanese documentaries to run in a film festival’.”<sup>48</sup>

Amy Cheng’s curatorial role appears equally wilfully diminished by the editorial choices of Barbara Vanderlinden: in the catalogue, Amy Cheng had written the entries to all six Taiwanese artists (two working together, therefore counting only as one entry), as well as to eight out of nine other Asian artists and collectives, on an overall number of 32 catalogue entries. In this way she was responsible for 13 out of 32 artists and collectives (if we continue to adopt Barbara Vanderlinden’s way of counting only “artists”), indicating that probably more than one third of all the “artists” had been invited to the 2004 Taipei Biennial by Amy Cheng (not counting the video section). On the other side, Barbara Vanderlinden, beyond her curatorial statement, had only co-authored all but one of the remaining entries, together with her assistant Elena Filipovic. The contribution made by Amy Cheng and Chen Chieh-jen to the 2004 Taipei Biennial can therefore hardly be called minor or negligible: even according to Barbara Vanderlinden’s own counting method did Amy Cheng contribute at least one third of all

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<sup>46</sup> Amy Cheng and Barbara Vanderlinden: “Documentary section, Chen Chieh-jen & Chang Yung-ho”, in: *Do You Believe in Reality*, TFAM, Taipei 2004, p. 237.

<sup>47</sup> Aventurina King: “Taipei Biennial aims to question reality”“, *The China Post*, Saturday, August 21<sup>st</sup>, 2004, consulted online 24.1.2010 9:49 at <http://www.chinapost.com.tw/news/2004/08/21/51737/Taipei-Biennial.htm>.

<sup>48</sup> Diana Freundl: “Document art and make it monumental - Filmmaking as a method to produce art and challenge is Explored in the Taipei Biennial”“, *Taipei Times*, Sunday, October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2004, p. 19, consulted online 24.1.2010, 9:30, at <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2004/10/24/2003208274>.

participating artists, by no means a minor contribution. Neither was Chen Chieh-jen's role minor or invisible: his collaboration with Beijing architect Zhang Yong-he not only occupied the main hall, it was also the most iconic feature of the whole exhibition.

### **The formation of a critical discourse, the *Taipei 1212* plea**

Notwithstanding the absence of Amy Cheng from the front pages of the catalogue and the opening of the exhibition and the rather one-sided postcolonial “dialogue” invoked by Barbara Vanderlinden’s statement, the TFAM director as well as the press officers managed to have the official press conferences and the opening pass by in an orderly fashion as if it were all business as usual. Only a few days after the opening, Amy Cheng, together with artists Chen Chieh-jen and Lin Hongjohn started giving interviews, asking for structural reforms of the Taipei Biennial.<sup>49</sup> In these interviews, Amy Cheng, very much in Spivak’s terms, focused on the lack of a local voice, and the absence of a Taiwanese identity in the Taipei Biennial:

“From being an actor with equal right on the same stage, the position of the local curators has become more and more ambiguous, up to the point where even the right to sing your own song has been abolished”.<sup>50</sup>

For her, the question was not just the elimination of her personal curatorial voice from the catalogue statement, but a question of the identity of the Taipei Biennial:

“In the end, what sort of Biennial do we want? In what direction are we supposed to go ahead?”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> 黃寶萍 Huang Bao-ping: “制度？ 經費？ 台北雙年展怎麼走下去？ (System? Budget? What has happened to the Taipei Biennial?)”, 民生報 *Min-sheng Daily* 29.10. 2004, available online on Amy Cheng’s blog *Amy’s Mumbo Jumbo*: <http://goya.bluecircus.net/archives/003427.html>. Consulted 1.2.2010.

簡子傑 Jian Zi-jie: “那麼，讓對話開始，台北雙年展「在乎現實嗎？ / Now let the dialogue begin. The 2004 Taipei Biennial: do you believe in reality?”, December issue of *Art & Collection / Jin Yishu*, consulted online at: [http://www.longmarchspace.com/media/www\\_artouch\\_com.htm](http://www.longmarchspace.com/media/www_artouch_com.htm).

<sup>50</sup> Amy Cheng: “在地策展人從同台演出變成了暖場歌手，甚至到最後連唱自己的歌的權利都喪失” in: *Amy’s Mumbo Jumbo*: <http://goya.bluecircus.net/archives/003427.html>.

<sup>51</sup> Amy Cheng: “我們究竟要一個什麼樣的雙年展？該如何繼續走下去？”， in: *Amy’s Mumbo Jumbo*: <http://goya.bluecircus.net/archives/003427.html>.

It was the latter aspect of her questioning of events, the position and future of the Taipei Biennial, that caused several artists, spearheaded by Amy Cheng, Chen Chieh-Jen and Lin Hongjohn, to write an open letter to the museum which was signed by a large number of local artists.<sup>52</sup>

This letter was made public on October 29<sup>th</sup>,<sup>53</sup> almost a week after the opening. The open letter asked for a structural reform of the Taipei Biennial, concentrating on three aspects: first, the curators should be given at least a year, better a year and half to prepare the exhibition; this would give the curators and the artists more time for dialogue, and would enable the artists to prepare new works, rather than forcing the curators to choose only from pre-existing works complying with the theme of the exhibition. Second, the National Endowment of the Arts should allow a bigger budget for the Taipei Biennial. Chen Chieh-Jen and others contended that in 2004 the budget of the Taipei Biennial was not only inferior to many other local Taiwanese exhibitions or art projects, but also widely inferior to the budget of the competing Shanghai or the Gwangju Biennial, thus jeopardizing the possibilities of success in this new, but highly competitive environment. Third, to overcome the organizational limits of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, a specialized Biennial office should be set up.

On December 20<sup>th</sup>, a more elaborate version of this letter was posted on the internet on a blog called *Taipei 1212*, which also invited the readers to sign up.<sup>54</sup> This letter can also

<sup>52</sup> According to Lin Hongjohn about 75, a number that would indicate a vast majority of active artists and art-workers. In 2009 Lin Hongjohn claimed that the original list of signatories had been lost.

<sup>53</sup> 黃寶萍 Huang Bao-ping: “制度？ 經費？ 台北雙年展怎麼走下去？ (System? Budget? What Has Happened to the Taipei Biennial?)”, published 29.10. 2004, on *民生報 Min-sheng Daily*, consulted online 1.2.2010 on Amy Cheng’s blog *Amy’s Mumbo Jumbo*: <http://goya.bluecircus.net/archives/003427.html>.

<sup>54</sup> 聯署聲明 (United Plea): “「臺北雙年展」體制建言 (Reform proposals for the Taipei Biennial System)”, posted with the date December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2004 at [http://taipei1212.blogspot.com/2004/12/blog-post\\_20.html](http://taipei1212.blogspot.com/2004/12/blog-post_20.html). The blog was opened in December 2004, the first entry is dated December 15<sup>th</sup> with a long list of links to international art biennials, the second entry is the open letter to the Taipei Fine Arts Museum asking for reforms of the Taipei Biennial, the third and final entry is a response letter signed “Taipei Fine Arts Museum” and dated March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2005: “台北雙年展的現實：對雙年展體制建言的回應，文 / 台北市立美術館” See <http://taipei1212.blogspot.com>, consulted 30.1.2010, 19:22.

Unfortunately the plea letter is not signed by name, nor is the list of subscribers available on the internet, nor is the identity of the author or authors disclosed in any way. Therefore the credibility of that letter as representing “the Taipei art scene” lies with the indication given to the author by local artist Tsui Kuang-yu in several emails, and that Tsui had claimed that one of the main authors of the

be found in several copies in the Taiwanese and Chinese blogosphere.<sup>55</sup>

It is interesting to observe how the petition signed by the local artists around Chen Chieh-jen and Lin Hongjohn positioned them as supportive of the institutions, very much in the way that Gellner has affirmed “everyone is a clerk”.<sup>56</sup>

Initially Amy Cheng’s main thrust of criticism had been the lack of a local voice, the silencing of the local voice by Western postcolonial discourse. Yet Chen Chieh-Jen and Lin Hongjohn were much more worried about the administrative structure and position of the Taipei Biennial as such. In the more elaborate petition which was published online on December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2004,<sup>57</sup> the requests and observations were purely administrative: to set up a specialized Biennial office, to allow more time for artists and curators to prepare the exhibition (therefore also setting aside a budget on a long-term basis, well ahead of the fiscal year, as is the case in any other major long-term projects), to invest more in local and international publicity, and to assign a larger and more competitive budget to the Taipei Biennial.

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letter was senior artist Chen Chieh-Jen.

Huang Bao-ping’s article dated October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2004, mentions Amy Cheng, Chen Chieh-Jen and Lin Hongjohn as the chief voices of the protest.

<sup>55</sup> The same letter was posted on several other blogs. On January 11<sup>th</sup>, 2005, it appeared on the blog of “cpshyu” who identifies himself as Xu Jiang-ping 徐江屏 from Kaohsiung (Gaoxiong) 高雄市: he affirms that all the details of the scandal between the two curators had already been widely discussed in the local media, and claims to have copied it from the web-page of the *Art of Collections* magazine (轉貼自典藏藝術網): <http://blog.yam.com/cpshyu/article/3961182>, (consulted on January 30<sup>th</sup>, 2010, 19:49). Xu Jiang-ping or “cpshyu” in turn is quoted as the source for the blogs of “Orpheus 奧非斯”, where the letter appeared on the same day, January 11<sup>th</sup>, 2005: <http://blog.roodo.com/orpheus/archives/5682527.html> (consulted 31.1.2010, 14:39). Presumably the same “Orpheus” copy-pastes the letter also to two more blogs of his: <http://orpheus.pixnet.net/blog/post/3622172>, (consulted 30.1.2010, 17:17), and on the same date of January 11<sup>th</sup>, 2005 also on: <http://blog.yam.com/Orpheus/article/22418495> (consulted 30.1.2010, 19:42). Orpheus identifies himself as the author of the book 外星童話 *Waixing Tonghua* (Children’s Tales of Outer Space), published by 大塊文化出版 Da-kuai Wenhua editors. (<http://orpheus.pixnet.net/profile/intro>, consulted 1.2.2010, 13:56 ). On January 16<sup>th</sup>, 2005, the letter appeared on the blog/website of the Virtual Culture Center of the Hangzhou China National Academy: <http://www.art218.com/04art218com/ReadNews.asp-NewsID=1119.htm>. (consulted 24.1.2010,9:50).

The Hangzhou China National Academy of Art indicates a place of origin for that letter as “台北伊通公園” i.e. IT Park Gallery Taipei. Unfortunately there is no mention of that letter on the website of IT Park, <http://www.itpark.com.tw>, (consulted 31.1.2010, 12:13).

On January 16<sup>th</sup>, 2005, it also appeared on 東方視覺 *Dongfang Shijue* (“Eastern Vision”, a page on contemporary Chinese art): <http://www.ionly.com.cn/nbo/news/info3/20050116/135029.html>.

<sup>56</sup> Gellner, Ernest: “Thought and Change” London 1964, , p.160. Consulted online at:

<http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/moynihan/Programs/ces/Gellner.pdf>

<sup>57</sup> [http://taipei1212.blogspot.com/2004/12/blog-post\\_20.html](http://taipei1212.blogspot.com/2004/12/blog-post_20.html).

### **The museum's response, March 2005**

On the “*Taipei 1212*” blog there is a response letter to be found which is signed as “Taipei Fine Arts Museum“ ” and dated March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2005, even though it does not specify its sender. In this response letter the “TFAM” points out that due to its experience with the staging of the show, and the accumulated knowledge over the years, as well as the usage of so-called “invisible” sources, the Taipei Biennial was always “presented in a brilliant and special way” and continued to “play a distinctive and outstanding role in the international arts field”, and even locally “played a crucial role in the artistic development of the last few years”.<sup>58</sup>

One of the reactions of the museum indicates that it was the very pro-institutional stance adopted by the group of artists signing the petition letter which had irritated the museum most: faced with a group of local artists posing as Gellnerian “clerkly” artists, the museum sought to defend its own clerkly identity. It claimed that the history of the Taipei Biennial was a success-story of its own making, an achievement mainly of the administrators inside the museum: an example for this achievement was the “continuous dialogue” between each edition, which was to be regarded as a merit of the institution as such, and – we have to presume – therefore not a merit of the independent curators called from the outside, or the merit of a discourse happening in the art scene at large.

One of the few points of criticism the museum quoted directly was the observation that

“its administrative position inside the political power game has relegated it to a marginal role”.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Taipei Fine Arts Museum 台北市立美術館: “台北雙年展的現實: 對雙年展體制建言的回應 (The Reality of the Taipei Biennial: a Response to the Proposals for Structural Reform of the Biennial)”, published online, 12.3.2005, at: <http://taipei1212.blogspot.com/>, last consulted 25.5.2010, 19:13.

In an interview in December 2009, director Huang Tsai-lang claimed that he had never heard of that petition or the response letter – not a very credible affirmation after all the clamour on the local media. Huang also claimed that the problem was only a clash of personality, and a question of the length of Amy Cheng's statement. As a hypothesis, the response letter may have originated directly from the exhibition department, and not from the directors desk.

<sup>59</sup> Taipei Fine Arts Museum 台北市立美術館: “台北雙年展的現實: 對雙年展體制建言的回應 (The Reality of the Taipei Biennial: a Response to the Proposals for Structural Reform of the Biennial)”, published online, 12.3.2005 at: <http://taipei1212.blogspot.com/> Last consulted 25.5.2010, 19:13.

This reduction to a subaltern role inside the larger context of state administration seemed to have deeply irritated the sensibilities of the museum administrators. The museum rebuffed this particular observation by claiming that

“even though it is only a civic institution of the second grade, it is still the premier museum of contemporary art in Taiwan, and has played a ground-breaking role in the development of the local art scene”.

Without any hint of irony, the museum even argued that its international self-marginalisation was a peculiar vantage point, even a critical asset:

“Since contemporary art often tends to be critical in character, to occupy a ‘marginal position’ may well be a sign of the high standards of the exhibition itself”.

The ‘TFAM’ concluded affirming that even this very letter and the scandal only confirmed its own importance, appropriating even the title of the show:

“The 2004 Taipei Biennial, ... has instigated and inspired a wide-ranging discussion among numerous Taiwanese contemporary art workers. This is naturally also a part of the success story of the Taipei Biennial! Apparently there are many who still ‘care about reality!’”

(quoting the Chinese title of the 2004 Taipei Biennial). The museum concluded its statement, exhorting the collaboration of all Gellnerian (and Gramscian) state-clerks and artists-clerks alike, with the exclamation: “facing the reality of a daily growing marginalisation of Taiwan” (quoting and turning around again one of the points of criticism of the art world), the museum hopes to “have the support of the central administration as well as the art scene”, because “the preparations for the 2006 Taipei Biennial have already begun (therefore conceding and claiming to implement one of the points of the petition)”.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Taipei Fine Arts Museum 台北市立美術館: “台北雙年展的現實: 對雙年展體制建言的回應 (The Reality of the Taipei Biennial: a Response to the Proposals for Structural Reform of the Biennial)”, published online, 12.3. 2005, <http://taipei1212.blogspot.com/>, consulted 4.3.2010, 16:01.

Yet beyond the claim that the “2006 Taipei Biennial has already started running” at the end of the museum’s response to the petition letter, fairly little changed as far as the overall budget and the institutional set-up was concerned – the 2006 Taipei Biennial was, very much like its predecessor in 2004, a rather small-scale, small-budget event with only about 30-something participating artists, and this time not even a film or video section worth mentioning.

Only after director Huang Tsai-lang had stepped down and was replaced by Hsieh Hsiao-yun, that the exhibition department was divided into an “international” and a “local” department, therefore assigning both the Taipei Biennial as well as the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice to the area of competence “international exhibitions”. Ironically, by then this move was perceived not so much as an improvement and a solution to the structural problems of the Taipei Biennial, but rather as a move by the new director Hsieh Hsiao-yun to limit the powers of Chang Fang-wei, the head of the exhibitions department and new head of international exhibitions.

### **The blind spot of institutional and academic writing**

The group of artist around Chen Chieh-Jen and Lin Hongjohn soon abandoned the criticism advanced by Amy Cheng in the wake of Spivak, that “in the end you cannot even sing your own song”, and instead opted for a purely institutional approach, asking for structural and bureaucratic reform. Yet in both cases, Amy Cheng’s criticism of the behaviour of Barbara Vanderlinden, as well as in the *Taipei 1212* petition letter, there seemed to remain a blind spot: the role played by the Taipei Fine Arts Museum itself. According to final pages (page 268) of the *Do You Believe in Reality* catalogue, Barbara Vanderlinden was the sole editor of the catalogue, yet in the hierarchy, above her was the publisher, the director of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Huang Tsai-lang. The ultimate decision whether or not to publish Amy Cheng’s statement laid not necessarily only with Barbara Vanderlinden, but also with director Huang Tsai-lang, or the

institution who had assigned all that symbolic power to Barbara Vanderlinden. As the directorship of the TFAM was a social position assigned by the local government, so was the position of the curator and the editor. None of these were god-given, or based on a metaphysical or ethnic bias (at least not based on any other bias that was not already written in the legal framework of the R.O.C.). Against Spivak, it has to be argued that it was not a metaphysical, ideological or discursive “West” which annihilated the voice of the subaltern Orient, but rather the very local and “Oriental” administration which silenced the voice of the local curator.

It could be argued that to director Huang, Barbara Vanderlinden impersonated the European postcolonial curator star-system, as she had been working with several high-ranking curators, such as Hans Ulrich Obrist and others. Yet it is hard to imagine how Vanderlinden could have created an international scandal by claiming that the museum had published an article of her co-curator against her will. On the other hand, to director Huang it might have seemed more important to continue to work with an apparently well-introduced and rising star of the Western curator system, rather than to protect Amy Cheng, who previously had only curated one or two small-scale local shows, and whose first chance to work at a large-scale show had been the very 2004 Taipei Biennial. One could argue that director Huang preferred to maintain a positive relationship with the exponent of the European star-curator system, especially since the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, unlike other major museums in Asia, had never managed to invite a star of the calibre of Hou Han-ru or Hans Ulrich Obrist for a show in Taipei. One can imagine that the pressure was also high on director Huang, since one of the selling points of the 2004 Taipei Biennial had been the fact that the TFAM was not only staging a postcolonial show, but that it was to be the first international Biennial curated by two women, one year ahead before that would happen at the Venice Biennale in 2005. Yet if that was the goal to achieve, to have two women curate a show together, director Huang did by all standards fail as a mediator, and apparently he never intended



to cover that role. One rather surprising statement of director Huang can be found in a response inside the list of “most notorious art news of the year 2004”, compiled by the Taiwanese art magazine *artists*:

“Sorting out the communication between the two curators is not a responsibility of the museum administration”.<sup>61</sup>

If this statement is to be taken at front value, then director Huang stated quite clearly that he did not intend to mediate in favour of the “subaltern” Amy Cheng once the communication between the two had gone sour.

Even though he might have failed as a mediator, or maybe did not even intend to play that role, one has to admire director Huang’s ability to survive politically in the midst of such a major scandal, a scandal easily comparable to those that had caused the demise of Su Rui-ping in 1986 and Chang Chen-yu in 1995.<sup>62</sup> One has to admire director Huang’s ability to communicate with the more influential exponents of the Taipei art scene, in particular Chen Chieh-Jen, whom he managed to make co-responsible for the outcome of the show and the handling of Amy’s absence: as Chen claimed in an interview in summer 2005, what had been at stake was not just a missing curatorial statement, but rather the very future of the Taipei Biennial. According to Chen, director Huang feared that a major scandal would put at risk the very existence of the Taipei Biennial, since it was an exhibition that had very little support from local politicians. In the face of a major scandal, director Huang had argued, there would have been a serious risk of politicians simply abolishing an unloved and scandal-ridden event. This very same rhetorical strategy was also the conclusive argument of the response of the

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<sup>61</sup> Artists magazine editors: “艺术家杂志 “2004 台湾十大美术新闻” 出炉 (The ten biggest art news in 2004, selected by Artists Magazine)”, available online at: <http://www.ionly.com.cn/nbo/news/info3/20041221/101339.html>, consulted 7.3.2010, 9:54. This list is compiled annually by the editors of *artists* magazine, since the advent of email also through the collaboration of a large number of art workers through online voting.

<sup>62</sup> See also chapter two, the limits of modernity: in 1985 during the preparations of an experimental show on invitation organized by the TFAM, director Su Rui-ping destroyed a work of art by kicking it. In the same year she had a sculpture that was intended to be permanently displayed on the main terrace of the TFAM repainted in a colour of her own liking. She was replaced in 1986. In 1995 Chang Chen-yu excluded an artist chosen by a jury for an international exhibition in Germany and was accused of improper handling of the museum’s funds. He was replaced.

museum on the *Taipei 1212* blog: “in the reality of a daily growing marginalisation of Taiwan”, the museum hopes to “have the support of the central administration as well as the art scene ....”.<sup>63</sup>

The success of director Huang’s strategy, to make the protesting artists co-responsible for the future of the Taipei Biennial, is in itself an indicator of the close and intricate relationship between the museum and the artists involved, and how this close-quarter relationship created a Gramscian form of “hegemony”, even if not entirely based on ideology, but often simply on the access to power: on the one hand, artists like Chen Chieh-Jen, who participated every year at several international biennials, and who had first-hand experience of what sort of budget and what time and resources other biennials were able to invest, were genuinely compelled to question the future of the Taipei Biennial. On the other hand, for many other local artists and curators, the Taipei Fine Arts Museum and its Biennial represented their only access to the international art world. Falling in disgrace with the museum was not a viable option neither for a young and aspiring curator, nor for a young and aspiring artist. If an artist was in doubt whether to rebel against the museum, he/she might consider first the instance of a performance artist by the name Lee Ming-sheng, the rising star of the early 1990s and the first Taiwanese artist to be invited to the Venice Biennale: after he had staged several protests against the museum in 1988, no major work by him was collected by the TFAM or any other Taiwanese institution. On the contrary, his large-scale installation in Venice was cut up and dumped in late 1993, as the TFAM was not even willing to come up with the cost of transport. Moreover, by now hardly any scholarly article mentions his name in connection with the Venice Biennale, and official publications about Taiwanese participation in Venice usually commence with the 1995 Taiwan Pavilion, rather than with Lee’s performance in 1993. With the overwhelming hegemonic power of the

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<sup>63</sup> Taipei Fine Arts Museum 台北市立美術館, “The Reality of the Taipei Biennial: a Response to the Proposals for Structural Reform of the Biennial / 台北雙年展的現實：對雙年展體制建言的回應”, published online on March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2005 at: <http://taipei1212.blogspot.com/>, consulted 4.3.2010, 16:01.

institutions over the careers of young artists and curators in mind, one can hardly be surprised that the *Taipei 1212* petition presented itself in such a pro-institutional, “clerkly” and self-disciplined manner.

### **The subaltern position of independent curators in Taiwan**

Even though one could argue with Spivak that it was the symbolic power of the Western star-system of postcolonial curators, which induced Huang Tsai-lang to mute the voice of the local curator, one has to argue that in the case of Amy Cheng at the 2004 Taipei Biennial, it was the overwhelming hegemonic power of the local institutions which muted the voice of the local curator. This hegemony reflected itself also in the extremely low number of local independent curators, which obviously has to do with the very few occasions to curate a Taipei Biennial or a Taiwan Pavilion in Venice. At closer look, there are no independent curators in Taiwan who could make a living simply by curating art shows. Even the supposedly most outstanding curators such as Manray Hsu (or Huang Hai-ming a generation earlier) have an astonishing low experience in curatorship previous to their Venice Taiwan Pavilion or the Taipei Biennial experience. Even after the Biennial experience, none of these “stars” of the Taiwanese curatorial scene can pretend to live from their activity as curators, and in most cases continue to curate an astonishingly low number of exhibitions per year, if compared to stars of the Western art system, such as Achille Bonito Oliva or Hans Ulrich Obrist.

This phenomenon has also been observed by Lin Ping, a former head of the exhibition department of the TFAM, in a paper called “The long and winding road of curatorial business in Taiwan”, published first in September 2004, shortly before the scandal at the TFAM became public, and re-published in 2006 as a more scholarly paper.<sup>64</sup> In her

<sup>64</sup> 林平 Lin Ping: “策展人光環—台灣策展事業的漫漫長路/ Curator’s halo-The long and winding road of curatorial business in Taiwan”, initially published in 2004 on the September issue of the local *artists* magazine 藝術家雜誌, later in a revised version in 2006 on the TFAM’s magazine 美術論叢, now also accessible online on the website of Tunghai University at:

paper, she observes:

“Even though the position and importance of the ‘curator’ seems to be widely recognized and appreciated, still in the current situation in Taiwan this term does not indicate a professional title, such as a ‘judge’. This is because curatorship seems to be very hard to transform into a profession, and it also lacks a uniform organization and ethical code”.

This ephemeral aspect of independent curatorship in Taiwan is elaborated later on in her article, when she asks:

“What is the position of the ‘independent curator’ in relation to the original position of a museum’s internal curator ... ? Where is his particular advantage? What is his power and responsibility? What are his relations with the institutions, the artists, the sponsors, the public? ....? All these questions are urgently awaiting an answer....”.

In a pessimistic tone, she points out:

“Even though the process of curatorial conceptualization is one of the most important aspects, it is very often neglected, and since it is hard to judge its just value, very often it does not receive any appreciation at all”.

“Curator” had become one of the buzzwords of the contemporary art scene in Taiwan in the mid- 1990s, and within an short time true star-curators seemed to emerge. Hardly any other country in the world could offer a similar career to stardom: within only a few years, and within less than a handful of exhibitions, Taiwan offered the unique chance to any academic who occasionally wrote an entry to the solo show of an unknown young artist at a small independent venue, to become the curator of an international contemporary art Biennial or even of the national pavilion at the Venice Biennale. This possibility to rise from the lowest level to the very pinnacle of the international art system may be indicative of the highly dynamic character of the Taiwanese art scene,

but it hardly hides a second aspect: as pointed out by Lin Ping, there is no, or hardly any power base for the so-called independent curator. Especially in the case of the two large-scale international events, the Taipei Biennial and the Taiwan Pavilion, all power has been conferred to the curator by the museum – or at least so it may seem from the point of view of the administration. Lin Ping obviously writes from this point of view, the point of view of a former head of the exhibition department, someone who would consider herself a “curator” – while not often being recognised as such – viewing the emergence of independent curators with a rather critical eye.

This also shows that Huang Hai-ming's cultural proposition in the catalogue of the first Taipei Biennial in 1992, that large-scale art exhibitions do need the social and cultural position of the curator – if they are to initiate a larger cultural discourse – is not easily translated into political and economic reality. At best, it could be said to be a long, ongoing process, which develops both inside and outside the institutions.

At worst, it can be argued that the monopolization of all major international art events, both the Taipei Biennial and the Taiwan Pavilion, in the hands of one single museum and in the hands of one single museum department director, created a monopolization of power that is not equalled by any single independent curator – as highlighted by the elimination of Amy Cheng's statement from the catalogue of the 2004 Taipei Biennial – nor by a handful of independent curators as a group – in 2009, it was a select group of former Biennale curators that silently agreed to abolish the position of the independent curator of the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice. This monopolization and hierarchization of power is a rather new phenomenon, and characteristic of the Taiwanese art scene only in the period after the turn of the millennium: neither under martial law, nor in the 1990s did the Taipei Fine Arts Museum wield similar power, and at the same time build up a similar distance from the local art scene. Both under martial law, as well as in the Taiwan of the identity discussions of the 1990s, it was a widespread understanding that the museum should first of all showcase local artists, culminating with more than one

hundred artists at the 1996 Taipei Biennial. Since the Taipei Biennial has turned into an international event in 1998, only a handful of local artists can aspire to participate at this international event. Equally ephemeral is the position of the local curator of the Taipei Biennial: after the low participation of local artists at the 1998 edition, the museum administration started to present to each chosen international curator a selection of local curators, to give the former a chance to choose a local dialogue partner for his curatorial project. On the surface this might seem like a remedy to the problem how to organize an exhibition that is both international and local, but it is a solution that effectively puts the local curator in a subaltern position in relation to the international one. Within this “system”, local curators are not chosen on the basis of their curatorial project or cultural trajectories in relation to local politics and culture – as it happened at least once at the 1996 Taipei Biennial – but rather on the more ephemeral basis of the sympathy of an external, international curator who may have come to Taiwan only once, and who may have only a limited understanding of local politics and culture. As a result, local cultural and political trajectories are relegated to the backstage, if not completely eliminated, from the cultural stage of the Taipei Biennial.

### **Conclusion, outlook**

After the loss of international diplomatic recognition almost three decades earlier, by the turn of the millennium even the minute spaces of Taiwanese cultural representation on the international stage became contested by the P.R.C. Starting as early as 1997, but exerting full diplomatic clout only in 2000, the People’s Republic of China forced Venice and other Biennials, such as the Sao Paolo Biennial,<sup>65</sup> to remove Taiwan from the list of national participations. This diplomatic confrontation not only damaged the position of Taiwan- from the year 2000 onward Taiwan was no longer listed within that exclusive circle of national pavilions- this diplomatic row also left a mark on the

<sup>65</sup> Monochrom: “Der Taiwan- Zwischenfall, Killing Imperialism with Kindness? A statement of monochrome”, see: <http://www.monochrom.at/thomann/taiwan-zwischenfall.htm>, accessed 25.5.2010

institutional arrangements of the Venice Biennale, as a whole new category of non-national participations had to be created, the so-called “institutional participations”, a category that was used for several years to frame the participation Taiwan and other contested entities, until Taiwan’s formerly national participation was finally downgraded to the status of a “collateral event”, thus ranking it in a class with other events that ranged from mere local initiatives to theme shows organized by international curators.

What used to be the reflection on one of the themes that had dominated the 20<sup>th</sup> century- the nation, national liberation, national identity- was downgraded to a mere theme show. The irony inherent in this transformation- from the most serious to the most ludic- yet highlights the very limitations, and the very artificial nature of the idea of the Venice Biennale as a platform for international dialogue: if we would like to imagine in the terms of Habermas’ civil dialogue, then the most basic requirements – equal access for all- are not met; on the contrary, the very rules and categories of participation set out limitations which make any claims to “free speech” and free undisturbed cultural discourse highly ambiguous.

In the immediately following years this transformation of status from national to an institutional, and finally a collateral participation hardly reflected itself in the image of the nation. This image started to change only when the statement of the local curator, Amy Cheng, was eliminated from the catalogue of the 2004 Taipei Biennial.

I have analysed this incident in detail to highlight some of the dynamics of the (local and international) art scene- the violence of the institutions in relation to the “subaltern” artists and curators, the complete and utter lack of any critical voice of the international English art press, of local and international academia and of international art institutions, leaving as the only spaces of critical dialogue the internet or the local Chinese press (daily and magazines). The protest that ensued mostly through the internet and through interviews with the local (Chinese) press not only re-shaped the

local art scene, albeit only on a long-term basis, its most immediate effect were new ways of analysing the situation of artists and curators within the local and international art world, re-framing the “priests of a secular religion” of the 1990’s as subaltern and marginal voices.

What makes this event significant beyond the long-term effects such as the re-organisation of the Taipei Biennale, is the insights it allows into the functioning of the institutional art world- like a flash-light that illuminates a dark room, illuminating for split-seconds the players at work, it sheds a light into the the inner workings of that black box called “museum” and the institutionalized art world, and allows for insights that are usually impossible to gain.

It obviously would be easy to claim that this event was largely due to personal factors- such as the character of Barbara Vanderlinden or Amy Cheng. Against this argument, it has to be said that from the part of the institutions, nothing was done to change or remove those in charge- all those directly or indirectly responsible for the elimination of Amy Cheng’s voice- director Huang, the head of the exhibition department, curator Vanderlinden- continued their career or remained unaltered on their posts. This may be in part due to lack of political interest- yet if we compare the course of events with the scandals that shaped the museum in the 1980s, very little seems to have changed: as if Martial Law was still alive, all institutional players – the museum, the international art press - maintained a deafening silence; and while the pathos of modernist avant-garde and democratic reform resulted in the removal of a director who kicked and re-painted artworks, nothing similar happened in 2004.

When the Taipei Biennial had been inaugurated in 1992, it had been argued by professor Huang Hai-ming that in a democracy the premier role of the museum had to be that of a platform of civil cultural dialogue. On the Taipei Biennale website, the development of the local Biennale is usually described as a story of progress and ever growing interaction with the international art scene. Yet if we apply the notion of civil discourse



Jürgen Habermas on the museum space, this very concept becomes to say the least ambiguous: what status has speech on a platform that clearly does not correspond to that space of dialogue envisioned by Habermas? What status have artists, curators and critics? What status has the so-called critical or post-colonial discourse in a space clearly dominated by the power politics of a few museum administrators? What sort of claims of authorship can be made on this sort of speech, and what sort of new centres of power are created? What sort of critical edge can we attribute to this sort of speech and discourse- is it critical discourse or a mere simulation that needs to conform to certain standards of local and international correctness?

It is interesting if we again compare post-colonial and cultural critical discourse with the avantgarde modernity of the 1980's: the modernist avant-garde created a platform that was built on the universality of its modernity- and this very universality offered ample leverage for artists and critics to challenge it; in comparison, post-colonial discourse and cultural critique offers comparatively little claims to universality- on the contrary, it is always clear that certain interests are to be defended, and certain new centres to be erected; and while Spivak had criticized that post-colonial deconstruction serves only the aim to maintain the central power position of Western academia, in the case of the 2004 Taipei Biennale, it is hard to reduce the conflict on a mere East- West confrontation: ultimately it was the TFAM's local administrators who assigned such a subaltern position to the Taiwanese curators and artists, and it was that very museum who decided to publish a catalogue without a local curatorial voice.

**Chapter eight: “We are subordinate and mute, unable to represent ourselves”.<sup>1</sup>**

**De-centring the nation,**

**2005 - 2009**

This chapter describes a series of exhibitions that attempted to re-locate Taiwan within the discourse of globalisation in the years between 2005 and 2009. In a bold curatorial move, these exhibitions abandoned and de-constructed the previously established pattern of national representation. This de-centred the image of Taiwan as a nation, and rather critically highlighted its position on the margins of global political discourse.

Not only the nation was re-imagined differently. In several cases the curatorial move from a local to a global context also profoundly re-framed and re-interpreted single art works, inscribing on them a new and different meaning.

These different frames of interpretation highlighted another phenomenon, a trend that had started more than a decade earlier: the work of art had ceased to be a the object of aesthetic interpretation, and had become but an element of a cultural discourse; yet within different contexts one work of art could occupy different critical positions and generate different interpretations.

This re-writing of the nation not only happened on the international stage, it also transformed the image of the nation as it reflected about itself at home. The most important example for this re-writing of the image of the nation was the 2008 Taipei Biennial, which turned its critical attention to the margins of society and the boundaries of nationalism, and which will also be described in this chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> Wang Chia-chi: “The spectre of freedom - Il fantasma della libertà”, in: *The Spectre of Freedom*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2005, p. 14.

## The orphan of Asia

Until 2005, all large-scale official exhibitions presented Taiwan as highly globalised, profoundly Asian, Taiwan-centred nation rooted in Chinese modernity. Globalisation, at least on the official account of the history of the Taipei Biennial, was a success-story of ever growing international interaction.<sup>2</sup> This self-image had been projected notwithstanding the growing diplomatic isolation since the expulsion from the UN in 1971- and the history of the R.O.C. as we know it, including the democracy movement of the 1970s and 1980s, the establishment of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum in the 1980s, and the the identity discourse that created the image of a nation rooted in the nature and urban experience of the island Taiwan would not have been thinkable prior to that loss of diplomatic recognition.<sup>3</sup>

This official image projected both in the exhibitions of the 1980s and 1990s was also in contrast to the self-image found in literature and art: the marginal position of Taiwan had been a recurrent theme in modern literature since Wu Zhuo-liu’s seminal novel *Orphan of Asia* of 1945. Taiwan’s subaltern position was also an important theme in the first examples of Taiwanese history writing, Su Bing’s 1962 book *Taiwan’s 400 years history*. During the identity discourse of the 1990s, several artists such as Yang Mao-lin or Wu Tian-zhang reflected on Taiwanese history and culture as a postcolonial space caught in-between the global powers of China, Japan and the USA. Yet all official exhibitions before 2005, such as the *Trends of Modern Chinese Art in the R.O.C.*, the Taipei Biennial or the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice, constructed the R.O.C and Taiwan as a universal and self-centred nation. The focus of the *Trends* shows of the 1980s was to

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<sup>2</sup> TFAM editors: “08 TB, Taipei Biennial, brief history”, available online at: <http://www.taipeibiennial.org/2008/ContentPage/Contents.aspx?ID=iWtQXTY5yerSII9xW63dlAUWv5DBFdU1&SubID=iWtQXTY5yepbYP0ReEQvvxHGWPPzIVBK&Language=iWtQXTY5yepbYP0ReEQvvxIHCRdaRaeW>, consulted on 4.5.2010, 13:26. An even shorter version of this official account can be found at: [http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/bien/taipei\\_biennial](http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/bien/taipei_biennial), consulted on 4.5.2010.

<sup>3</sup> The establishment of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum in 1983 had been part of a nationwide construction plan that had been planned in a reaction to the expulsion from the UN in 1971. The Taiwan Pavilion in Venice was without doubt an element of a larger diplomatic strategy to use cultural diplomacy in lieu of proper diplomatic representation.

present the R.O.C. as the centre of Chinese modernity. In the mid 1990s this shifted to the construction of a new, self-centred Taiwanese nation through large-scale official exhibitions, such as the Taipei Biennial, the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice, or the various shows abroad, such as *Taiwan: Kunst Heute* in Aachen and Berlin in 1996-1997.

This international marginalisation had been one of the driving reasons for government sponsorship of modern and contemporary art after Taiwan had lost its seat at the United Nations in 1971, and most of its diplomatic allies in the following decades.

This diplomatic marginalisation was the subtext of numerous artworks by Taiwanese artists, but curiously no primary ideological concern for any large-scale official art exhibitions before the year 2005.

Even this loss of “cultural” nation-status at the Venice Biennale between 2000 and 2001 hardly influenced the basic coordinates of Taiwan’s large-scale exhibitions. The ideological transformations at the Taipei Biennial and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice between 2000 and 2003 chiefly reflected the shift in local politics from the DPP to the KMT, as well as a general waning of the identity discourse of the 1990s, two factors which both favoured a shift to theorise Taiwan as a highly advanced globalised space with Asian characteristics, and to engage more actively with contemporary cultural discourse, especially media and globalisation theories.

***“We are subordinate and mute, unable to represent ourselves”.***<sup>4</sup>

### ***The Spectre of Freedom, Venice Biennale 2005***

The 2005 Taiwan Pavilion was noteworthy in many respects: for the first time the classic model of all Taiwan pavilions in Venice since 1995, and indeed of all major official exhibitions abroad, the representation of a universal microcosm of a nation centred around nostalgic roots in nature, living in an urban environment, looking forward to express its spirituality through technological means while at the same time

<sup>4</sup> Wang Chia-chi: “The spectre of freedom - Il fantasma della libertà”, in: *The Spectre of Freedom*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2005, p. 14.

engaging with social problems and historical taboos- was completely and radically abandoned. More than that, for the first time in the history of the Taiwan pavilion in Venice, a curator tried to present not only a theoretical writing, but also an exhibition truly centred around a theme, thus trying to engage with global cultural discourse.

Curator-critic Jason Wang Chia-chi presented *The Spectre of Freedom*, in which he reflected on the political and cultural changes after the turn of the millennium, in particular after 9/11. Freedom, he argued, had turned into a mere spectre— both on a global scale, after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the war in Iraq, as well as on a local scale, after the passing of the Anti-secession Law by the P.R. China’s National People’s Congress, threatened Taiwan with military invasion in the case of a declaration of independence, such as in the



The Taiwan Pavilion *The Spectre of Freedom*.  
Photo: F. Schöber 2005.

case of a referendum on independence. For Wang the question of freedom not only concerned local and global civil liberties, but also workers and artists rights and possibilities of resistance in the brave new world of global neoliberal capitalism, and he extended this question even to the level of everyday experience and practice. For Wang, the hyperreality of today’s media society had resulted in turning freedom into a mere spectre of itself. At the very end of his statement, he raised the question also on a psychological level. The human quest for freedom, he argued, is more than just a question of rationality and civil rights, but also a desire deeply rooted in the subconscious.

To explore this phenomenon from different angles, Wang invited four artists: Kuo I-

Chen, Kao Chung-Li, Lin Hsin-I, and Tsui Kuang-yu.

Climbing up the stairs of the Prigioni, the visitor’s ears were already greeted by the deep roaring sound of an aeroplane, the audio of Kuo I-Chen’s work *Invade the TFAM*, originally designed for the 2004 Taipei Biennial.

In the main exhibition hall, the visitor encountered a cross-shaped construction with several 8mm projectors integrated into its structure, while the shadow of a massive



aeroplane was projected on the ceiling, “invading” the

Placement of works at the *Spectre of Freedom* pavilion in Venice.

ceiling from one side, slowly filling it up, and then leaving it on the other side.

A niche to the left accommodated a small set of 8 mm projectors telling a singular story: a blond painter dressed like Jesus with a thorny crown was sitting in front of a canvas.

As he looked at a fighter plane model to his left, he started to paint, yet what he executed on the canvas was a Christian cross. Then the object would turn into a cross, but while the blond painter looked at a cross, he would sketch a fighter plane on his canvas. This short 8 mm film was



Artist Kao Chung-li’s 8mm projector animation at *The Spectre of Freedom*. Photo: Felix Schöber 2005.

accompanied by an audio track, which according to artist Kao Chung-Li, was the voice

of President Bush during his first public speech after the two planes had crashed in the towers of the World Trade Centre in September 11, 2001.

The works of Tsui Kuang-yu and Eva Lin Hsin-I were shown in two separate side rooms of the main hall. Eva Lin presented a room coloured completely in red and carrying a logo on the wall reading “artist on strike”. At the far end was a computer which connected to her internet web site, which invite the visitor to join her “strike”, as well as several surveillance cameras. In the entrance corner a pile of stickers could be found which encouraged the visitors to “de-strike”.

To the right (or, if seen from the entrance of the main hall, at the far left corner) was Tsui Kuang-yu’s room with a retrospective of his video works of the past few years. This included several parts of *The Shortcut to the Systematic Life*, which presented the artist as he tried to adapt to and blend into different and surroundings by changing his clothes within seconds. An earlier video explored the true nature and essence of things, as the artist ran and hit his head against them. Also on view were his more recent works executed in London, in which he explored alternative uses of urban space. Similar to the London Olympic-bid promo video, but rather highlighting the absurdity of that enterprise in the real world, he attempted to turn public venues into his personal sports arena. In one instance he hit one shot of golf from a public green. As the ball disappeared in the clouds, he walked off in great nonchalance, only to reappear in a public park where he attempted to throw a bowling ball down the path of a public park, causing all the resting pigeons to escape. In another instance he turned the red lights of a public crossing into the start line of a car race, waving a chequered flag as buses and cars speed off with the green light. As every of these attempts remained futile, time and again he walked off, only to reappear in the next image with yet another attempt to transform urban space into a private sports arena.

Curator Wang Chia-chi (who in 2002 had curated the *Grand Theater of the World Taipei Biennial*, and who had been one of the co-curators of the Taiwanese participation at the

Venice architecture Biennial in 2004) tried to investigate a big theme in a fairly small space. Walking through the show, the show developed along very readable red line: entering the main space, it set out with the all-pervading sense of terror and insecurity after 9/11 insinuated by Kuo I-chen’s shadow of an aircraft. This in turn led to the contradictions of American hegemony over world politics with Kao Chung-li’s reflection on president Bush’s “crusader” speech.

From there the curator delved deeper into the phenomenon of growing psychological insecurity pervading everyday life with Tsui Kuang-yu’s videos, a sense of insecurity that Tsui confronted by preparing a series of protective suits (chiefly against sudden pours of rain) which at the same time allowed him to enter the most diverse social environments, much like a human chameleon.



Tsui Kuang-yu in front of his video in the last side-room to the right inside *The Spectre of Freedom* Pavilion during the 2005 Venice Biennale.  
Photo: F. Schöber 2005.

The curator finally pointed out the contradictions of the art scene (and ultimately any form of public opinion) with Eva Lin’s “artists on strike” installation, showing how the art world, while pretending to be an arena of free speech, is deeply ridden by the forces of institutional control and globalisation, forces that albeit their proclaimed stance of fostering freedom render any kind of resistance of rebellions hardly more than a pretty fashion statements.

At first glance, the show presented a smooth ride through several layers of a post-9/11 globalisation, while at the same time highlighting how these globally felt questions were particularly poignant to Taiwan, where natural and political disasters seem to abound, and where the threat from the other side of the Taiwan Strait seemed to pervade every aspect of everyday life and politics.



Yet this apparently smooth and well-planned exhibition presented several ambiguities, which in themselves highlight Taiwan’s ambiguous status in global politics, and in turn force us to re-think whether western



globalisation discourse can be applied without any adaptation to Taiwan, or whether Taiwan

Press conference of *The Spectre of Freedom* Taiwan Pavilion inside Eva Lin’s installation *De-strike* during the preview days of the 2005 Venice Biennale. Second from left, director Huang Tsai-lang, third from left curator Wang Chia-chi, then artists Eva Lin, Kuo I-chen, Tsui Kuang-yu. Photo: F. Schöber 2005.

occupies a rather unusual position in global politics.

The ambiguity of Wang Chia-chi’s undertaking was most evident in artist Eva Lin’s work *De-strike* at the Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice Biennial in 2005, where she invited viewers to join her strike against the art system. While this seemed at first an invitation to join her rebellion, the second slogan “de-strike” was instead reaffirming the purely aesthetic character of any art object inside the museum space, as of that of any object in a supermarket or a high-street store. The invitation to the viewer to ‘strike’ inside the installation space in Venice resulted quite obviously in little more than empty gestures, and the stickers that she distributed among the people became little more than fashion items.

As a member of the press, the author assisted at the opening press conference of the exhibition, which was held inside Eva Lin’s installation. During this press conference, TFAM director Huang Tsai-lang made a rather surprising statement- at least if we take into account the writings on the wall of Eva’s installation. Huang affirmed that “he was excited” to sit inside that installation. Probably director Huang was just repeating what he would have said at any opening of any exhibition. Yet, inside the Eva Lin’s *artists on strike* installation at the 2005 Taiwan Pavilion it seemed more than that, it sounded like

a fairly cynical statement: after all, only one year before, several Taiwanese artists had protested against the elimination of the curatorial statement of Taiwanese curator Any Cheng from the official catalogue of the Taipei Biennial. Almost a decade earlier, a protest of the local art scene against the elimination of an artist from an international exhibition had forced then-director TFAM Chang Chen-yu to step down. In 2004, nothing had happened: several threatening letters were written and posted online, but only at the very end of the exhibition the museum came up with a semi-official letter response. Within this context, director Huang Tsai-lang’s statement was plainly cynical: to affirm smilingly that he was excited to see the works of *The Spectre of Freedom* exhibition while he was sitting inside Eva Lin’s *artists on strike* installation, he was but re-affirming the power of his institution: he re-affirmed that all works, even the threat of a strike of artists, were but a merely aesthetic gesture, unlikely to produce any political results, or to unsettle the power of the institutions.

In the era of globalisation, any artist’s strike action, just like most strike actions of workers against a factory, would have little impact on the museum, and would only jeopardize the career of the artist. Just as any factory owner can choose to relocate to areas free of workers unions, so museum directors can choose less opinionated and less politically demanding artists.

The ambiguity of the relationship between the local and the global, and how the meaning of a single work can change dramatically when it is relocated from a specific locality to a global context, can best be illuminated by Kuo I-chen’s video installation *Invade the Prigioni*.

Originally this work had been created for the main hall of the TFAM during the 2004 Taipei Biennial. In Taipei, this installation had played skilfully with an urban situation specific to the TFAM: since the museum is located underneath the approach corridor of the Sung-shan Taipei City Airport, approaching aircraft appear extremely low and clearly visible through the windows of the museum.

Kuo I-chen installed sensors on the outside of the building, and every time an aircraft passed over the building, video beamers projected the shadow of an aircraft passing through the ceiling; the impression was further reinforced by the roaring sound of jet turbines. In Taipei this work dealt almost exclusively with the specific urban situation of the site of the museum and with the relation of illusion and reality, as the theme of the Taipei Biennial had been *Do you believe in Reality*.

In Venice, inside the Prigioni (the “new” prisons, just around the corner from St. Mark’s Square), this context was lost, and replaced by a completely different meaning. In Venice, there was no direct comparison with the outside world, and no sight of approaching aeroplanes, as all windows of the Prigioni were closed.

Moved from the site specific situation of the TFAM to the anonymous black cube situation of the international art festival, the work could only be interpreted as an allusion to the all-pervading menace of Al-Qa’ida terrorism, as well as a reflection on the political and psychological changes that the world has experienced since 9/11. If in Venice the viewer would be reasoning about the changes which “the world” had gone through. , it has to be questioned whether this world does indeed comprise a locality like



The Taipei Fine Arts Museum during the 2004 Taipei Biennial, photo: Kuo I-chen 2004.



2004 Taipei Biennial, view of the main hall with Kuo I-chen’s 郭英巨 *Invade the TFAM 入侵美術館* video installation and Zhang Yong-he’s 張永和 *video-boxes*. Photo, copyright: Kuo I-chen, Source: <http://airline.myweb.hinet.net/invade%20the%20tfam.htm>, consulted 6.2.2010 19:30.

Taiwan- Taiwan, or Taipei and its skyscrapers, may be inhabited by viewers of CNN global and US American news, but hardly anyone would feel in danger of being attacked by Al-Qa’ida.

Taiwan may feel constantly under attack, or under the menace of a military threat, but among all possible dangers Al-Qa’ida Islamic terrorism is probably the least worrying one- one of the “novelties” of the 2004 Taipei Biennial indeed had been the inclusion of works of a



Artist Kuo I-chen and his video installation *Invade the Prigioni* at the *Specter of Freedom* Pavilion in 2005.  
Photo Felix Schöber 2005.

Palestinian artists The Atlas Group inside a major Taiwanese art exhibition, yet prior to Barbara Vanderlinden’s *Do You Believe in Reality* show, the question of Palestine or Al-Qa’ida terrorism was not on the radar of Taiwanese curators.

From this point of view, it could be argued that between 2004 and 2005, in the relocation from Taipei to Venice, Kuo I-chen’s work had gone through a process of dislocation and aesthetisation, similar to the removal of an antique work of art from its original setting into the white and “secular” space of the museum. Once the work had been removed from its original context, its original meaning had been shaved off, and it was instead inserted into a new set of taxonomies. In the “white” black cube of the international art exhibition, these new taxonomies were the global discourses of cultural and contemporary studies, exemplified by the works of Jean Baudrillard and Pierre Bourdieu, which curator Wang Chia-chi cites<sup>5</sup> in his opening statement to *The Spectre of Freedom* show in Venice.

Another interpretation could be that the inclusion of the Palestinian question inside the

<sup>5</sup> Wang Chia-chi: “The spectre of freedom - Il fantasma della libertà”, in: *The Spectre of Freedom*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2005, p. 12.

2004 Taipei Biennial had indeed triggered a re-thinking of the Taiwanese universe, and had triggered curator Wang Chia-chi to attempt a similarly global exhibition, albeit using only Taiwanese artists-artists, who may in turn be avid viewers of CNN, and who may not always worry whether or not Taiwan actually was running a risk of being attacked by Al-Qa’ida terrorists, and whether or not Taiwan had played any significant role in the “coalition of the willing” and the Iraq war.

A similar point has to be made regarding Kao Chung-li’s 8mm film projection which criticized the use of religion as a means to justify war by American president Bush: Taiwan’s international role in the run-up to the Iraq war can only be described as non-existing, as a situation where all values were inverted: Taiwan (together with Israel) was one of those very few nations worldwide whose government publicly pledged political and financial support for the war effort in Iraq,<sup>6</sup> but was never listed among the “coalition of the willing”<sup>7</sup> - a group of states that have also been criticized as the “coalition of the billing”,<sup>8</sup> since in many cases support seems to have been bought by the US. An explanation for this curious situation could be diplomatic considerations of the the US government- since the US relied on the silent consent of China to invade Iraq, this silent consent would have been put at risk had Taiwan openly supported the

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<sup>6</sup> The Chen Shui-bian government was initially extremely supportive of Bush’s war in Iraq, mainly on the grounds that the US was the only world power that had defended Taiwan against the Chinese war threat during the last two elections – even reminding their critics that in those occasions, not one of the European states and Western intellectuals criticising Bush had dared to defend Taiwans democracy against China. See the editorial written by an advisor to the president, Joseph Wu 吳釗燮: “No war does not equal world peace“, *Taipei Times*, 20.3.2003, page 8. consulted online at: <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2003/03/28/198806>. A similar statement had been made by Chang Chun-hung 張俊宏, a DPP legislator: “To be pro-US is morally correct“, *Taipei Times*, 28.3.2003, Page 8, consulted online at: <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2003/03/28/199774>. Consulted 6.7.2010. The Taiwanese government went so far as to publicly offered financial help for the war effort, even though it had not been asked for by the U.S. Government. See: Agencies, Taipei and Beijing: “Taiwan could help pay for Iraqi war“, in: *Taipei Times*, 27.3. 2003, Page 7, available online at: <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2003/03/27/199654>, consulted 7.7.2010.

<sup>7</sup> Even though the Taiwanese government was pro-Bush and pro-war, and even though it declared it was willing to contribute financially to the war effort, Taiwan was never listed among the “coalition of the willing“. See the official website of the US government: <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/iraq/news/20030327-10.html>

<sup>8</sup> Laura McClure: “Coalition of the billing -- or unwilling? - The Bush administration is lavishing billions of dollars on potential allies at the U.N. Strangely, it isn't working.“ available online at: [http://dir.salon.com/story/news/feature/2003/03/12/foreign\\_aid/](http://dir.salon.com/story/news/feature/2003/03/12/foreign_aid/), consulted 7.7.2010.

war.<sup>9</sup> Thus Taiwanese politicians found themselves in a situation where any stance would have easily created completely opposing effects.<sup>10</sup>

A prominent political commentator, Jin Hengwei, editor-in-chief of the *Contemporary Monthly* magazine, described this political situation like this:

“Taiwan has no room to speak on the US invasion. More importantly, it's obviously in no position to do so. The US is not only the most significant ally to the island but also the biggest protector of its security and existence. .... It's thus evident that neither anti-US nor anti-war sentiment is marketable in Taiwan. This is called political reality.“<sup>11</sup>

While this absurdity might have been evident to a Taiwanese viewer of Kao Chung-li's work, and the sound of the running film in the open machinery of the projector may indeed have been integral part of an ironic reading as a deconstruction of the power of the media, hardly any of this complex background would have transpired to a viewer in Venice. Taking Kuo I-chen's or Kao Chung-li's artwork therefore as a form of ‘national representation’, or as a token for a discourse similar or at least parallel to that of the

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<sup>9</sup> According to several semi-academic websites, the reason was not to offend the Peoples Republic of China, see: [http://www.academickids.com/encyclopedia/index.php/Governments%27\\_pre-war\\_positions\\_on\\_invasion\\_of\\_Iraq#Taiwan](http://www.academickids.com/encyclopedia/index.php/Governments%27_pre-war_positions_on_invasion_of_Iraq#Taiwan), consulted on 6.7.2010. The same appears also on: [http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Worldwide\\_government\\_positions\\_on\\_war\\_on\\_Iraq#China](http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Worldwide_government_positions_on_war_on_Iraq#China), consulted on 6.7.10.

The same statement can also be found on a semi- official site:

[http://www.irelandinformationguide.com/Governments%27\\_pre-war\\_positions\\_on\\_invasion\\_of\\_Iraq](http://www.irelandinformationguide.com/Governments%27_pre-war_positions_on_invasion_of_Iraq), consulted 6.7.2010.

A similar analysis can be found here: <http://www.pwhce.org/willing.html>, consulted on 6.7.2010, or here:

[http://www.newinlibraries.com/wikiworld/wo/Worldwide\\_government\\_positions\\_on\\_war\\_on\\_Iraq.asp#Taiwan](http://www.newinlibraries.com/wikiworld/wo/Worldwide_government_positions_on_war_on_Iraq.asp#Taiwan).

<sup>10</sup> The superficial appearance of Taiwan being supportive of the war, and Beijing against it, is complicated by the announcement that Beijing was willing to open its airspace for Taiwanese civilian commercial aircraft during the Iraq war - something unheard on in peacetime, and saving the two national carriers large sums of money. See: CNA and Bloomberg, Taipei and Beijing: “Beijing okays CAL and EVA overflights“, *Taipei Times*, 27.3.2003, Page 7, available online at:

<http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2003/03/27/199655>, consulted 7.7.2010.

With the advent of the Iraq war, many local politicians started to support policies they had previously opposed (such as the DPP becoming pro- war), or opposed policies they previously supported, such as the KMT becoming anti- American and anti-war. See: Taipei Times Editorial: “When everything old is new again“, *Taipei Times*, 27.3.2003, page 8, available online at:

<http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2003/03/27/199658>, consulted 7.7.2010.

<sup>11</sup> Chin Heng-wei 金恆煒: “Taiwan has decided to stand with its true ally“, *Taipei Times*, 26.3.2003, Page 8, available online at: <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2003/03/26/199538>, consulted 7.7.2010.

West, can therefore be easily misleading.

It highlights rather the tensions between the global and the local, which may also co-exist in the same place where CNN is readily available in almost any household, and where a young generation of global nomads is not necessarily interested in the intricacies of local politics.



Artist Kao Chung-li working on his 8mm projector animation at *The Spectre of Freedom*. Photo: Felix Schöber 2005.

These different frames of interpretation highlight another

phenomenon, a trend that had started more than a decade earlier, and which had been officially anointed with the abolishment of the *Trends*, and the inauguration of the *Taipei Biennial*: the work of art was not any more a mere object of aesthetic judgement- it had become a sign, a part of a wider cultural discourse.

Yet this context is not necessarily a stable one- the same work can take on rather different meanings once it is moved to a different context- and as has been pointed out, the coordinates of the local and the global can be rather different, if not opposing ones.

Especially the so- called sphere of global politics is not just the sum or Hegelian synthesis of the politics of many small and big countries; it is rather an independent sphere, be dominated by a small club of global powers.

Yet in locality such as Taiwan, which occupies such such a contradictory diplomatic and position, the global can appear to coexist with the local, albeit presenting itself as a complete negation of the latter, often superseding it without possibility of dialogue.

Curator Wang Chia-chi's had concluded his statement by stating

"we are subordinate and mute, unable to represent ourselves".<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Wang Chia-chi: "The spectre of freedom - Il fantasma della libertà", in: *The Spectre of Freedom*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2005, p. 14.

Analysing the 2005 Taiwan Pavilion, this had several layers: first, a political, or art-political one, or rather the subaltern position of artists in relation to the art system, as had been pointed out by Eva Lin’s installation *De-strike*.

Yet even more importantly there was another level, the relation between the local and the global, which mutually excluded and superseded each other, a phenomenon that is highlighted indirectly by Kuo I-chen’s work *Invade the Prigioni*, but also through a closer analysis of the work of Kao Chung-li.

Reflecting on the question of identity, the only possibility seems to be not adaptation or dialogue, but rather mimicry- the attempt to seamlessly blend into your environment, at whatever cost for your own identity- the theme of the videos of Tsui Kuang-yu.

Yet it is this very strategy of mimicry that also makes this show both interesting and ambiguous- at least if the viewer presumes to enter the exhibition as a dialogue with a distant local reality: because what he is confronted with is ultimately only his very own cultural or context.

### **De-centring the nation: *Atopia* , Venice 2007**

In 2007, a decade-long trajectory of national representation of Taiwan in Venice reached an end. Since 1995 Taiwan had presented itself as a nation built around its own centre and microcosm.

In 2007 the *Atopia* Pavilion instead proposed the image of a nation utterly



Curator and artists of the 2007 *Atopia* Taiwan Pavilion, from left to right: curator Lin Hongjohn, artists Tang Huang-chen, VIVA, Lee Kuo-min, Huang Shih-chieh and an assistant of Lee Kuo-min. Photo: Felix Schöber 2007.



marginalised and de-centred.

The notion of a microcosm of Taiwanese society built around an independent centre with its own contradictions, past and future, had already been discursively destabilized in 2005, when Wang Chia-chi presented Taiwan as an example of global post 9-11 cultural discourse. Already in 2007, at the end of his statement, Wang had concluded that ”we are subordinate and mute, unable to represent ourselves”.<sup>13</sup>

This final argument, rather in contrast to Wang’s show which presented Taiwan as if it was just any other first world Western country, was followed through to its consequences by 2007 Taiwan Pavilion curator Lin Hongjohn, who likened Taiwan to an “atopia”, “a place that cannot be placed”, a “non-place”, “a place losing its proper name”, “a state of de facto without de jure, a paradoxical spatial condition, a place that cannot be spatialized”.<sup>14</sup> Starting from the various definitions of atopia given by the German sociologist Helmut Wilke and Michel Foucault in his 1967 lecture “of other spaces”,<sup>15</sup> Lin continued:

“Atopias ... are thus un-representable spaces, such as a non-communal community, a non-national nation, a non-cultural culture. It is an exceptional realm within the principle of representation”.<sup>16</sup>

Applying Lacanian and Lefebvre’s psychoanalytic theory, he explained:

“Atopia ... belongs to the Symbolic order, because the fundamental spatial symptom for it lies in the lack of a symbolic status, its naming, its place in language.”<sup>17</sup>

From this semiotic analysis he moves to a psychological level, arguing that this situation created a psychological trauma, of which the inability to speak is only one of the most

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<sup>13</sup> Wang Chia-chi: “The spectre of freedom - Il fantasma della libertà”, in: *The Spectre of Freedom*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2005, p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> Lin Hongjohn: “Atopia”, in: *ATOPIA*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2007, p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault, “Of Other spaces”, 1967, also available online at: <http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>

<sup>16</sup> Lin Hongjohn: “Atopia”, in: *ATOPIA*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2007, p.18.

<sup>17</sup> Lin Hongjohn: “Atopia”, in: *ATOPIA*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2007, p. 19.

visible effects:

“Based on the castration principle, aphasia is its symptom. “<sup>18</sup>

More than that, this lack also destabilizes the order of knowledge and power, turning the symbolic order upside down:

“The paradoxical nature of atopia lies in the subject’s relationship of excessive submissiveness to the “big Other” because its “un-nameability” must be employed, in turn, within the symbolic order, gaining the bizarre condition of an “exterior interior” and a ‘centre on the margins’”.<sup>19</sup>

With this striking description of Taiwanese politics and psychology in relation to the “big Other” China, he continued to locate Taiwan in global politics:

“Squeezed between powerful players within globalised politics, Taiwan, with its self-consciousness unable to be enunciated, displays a phantom status of a ‘nation without nationality’. Taiwan is an atopia *par excellence*”.<sup>20</sup>

Having built up this argument for a critical location of Taiwan in global cultural discourse, Lin then enlarges his argument. He argues that Taiwan is worth studying not because it is an exception to, but rather an extreme example of globalisation, where some phenomena are particularly visible. To further elaborate his point, he quotes Antonio Negri from *Empire*:

“In Empire, no subjectivity is outside, and all places have been subsumed in a general “non-place””.<sup>21</sup>

In other words, Taiwan is but an extreme example for other atopias, for other non-places, or for a general cultural condition created by globalisation.

With Lin Hongjohn’s *Atopia* the Taiwan Pavilion had gone full circle from the creation of a self-enclosed nation, centred around an imaginary core rooted in nature, to a place

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<sup>18</sup> Lin Hongjohn: “Atopia”, in: *ATOPIA*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2007, p. 19.

<sup>19</sup> Lin Hongjohn: “Atopia”, in: *ATOPIA*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2007, p. 19.

<sup>20</sup> Lin Hongjohn: “Atopia”, in: *ATOPIA*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2007, p. 21.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2000, p. 353. Quoted in: Lin Hongjohn: “Atopia”, in: *ATOPIA*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2007, p. 20.

out-of-centre, de-centred, and unable to name itself: a post-modern, globalised space *par excellence*.

This new self-positioning reflected itself even in the very layout of the exhibition at the Prigioni in Venice:



while all previous exhibitions since

Placement of works during the *Atopia* pavilion in Venice.

1995 had been organized around the main hall as the centre, Lin Hongjohn broke this pattern by inserting a temporary wall, cutting through the main hall between the entrance and the first side room to the left. Arguably, he did not completely abandon the previous pattern: as in previous editions,<sup>22</sup> it was an Asian urban scenery that introduced the viewer into the exhibition. Yet in 2007, there was no grand view, no grand scopic vision to greet the viewer, rather a nightly tunnel lit only by the glowing moving plastic sculptures, LED lights and TV screens of Huang Shih-chie's installation *EVX-07*. Only after passing through this labyrinthine entry the viewer arrived at the second half of the central hall. Again, this offered no grand scopic view, it presented itself more as a junction leading to the other parts of the labyrinth. The remainder of the main hall was partly occupied by Tang Huang-chen's video-installation *I Go Travelling, a post card with scenery*, which extended from the main hall into the first side room to the left. The remaining walls of this junction, between the reception room and the other two collateral spaces, were occupied by cartoon-artist VIVA's ironic stories of computer

<sup>22</sup> In 1995 that urban scenery was set with Huang Chih-yang's *Scenery* and Huang Jin-he's *Fire*, in 1997 with Wang Jun-jieh's *Neon Urlaub*, in 2003 with Yuan Goang-ming's *City Disqualified* and in 2005 with Kuo I-chen's *Invade the Prigioni*.

hardware freaks as well as cartoon geeks. He presented these stories as vertical paper sheets hanging from a wooden stand, inviting viewers to take them home for free, arguably a high-end and stylised version of his stands at low-brow cartoon fairs. One of the two lateral rooms at the far left was accommodated backlit portraits by photographer Lee Kuo-min of soon-to-be-abandoned homes of illegal villages. The other room at the extreme corner housed the reproduction of an abandoned Malaysian cinema with director Tsai Ming-liang’s video-installation *It’s a Dream*.

With Huang Shi-chie’s installation, curator Lin Hongjohn therefore introduced the viewer first to a phantasmagoric version of Asian urbanization, in a place where ordinary objects such as Coca-cola plastic bottles seemed to take on a new, surreal life, and where eyes gazing from TV sets seemed to transform themselves into fleshy objects, as if the technologically mediated gaze not only served as a platform for all sorts of desires, but the very machine had transformed itself into a carnal being.

Not only did the TV screens seem to stare back at the viewer, Huang Shi-chie seemed also to hint at the re-territorialisation taking place within globalised space: all of the plastic bottles and cans seemed to be but standard globalised



Artist Huang Shih-chieh and his installation *EVX-07* at the entrance of the main hall of the *Atopia* Pavillion.  
Photo: Felix Schöber 2007.

objects, yet with some close observation each revealed a

different place of origin, seemingly not only telling the story of a trip by the artist, but also revealing a local identity within the surface of apparent global standardisation.

This exemplified curator Lin Hongjohn’s observation about re-territorialisation within the globalised de-territorialisation:

“Nevertheless, we must also consider that atopian phenomena, as Gilles Deleuze noted, can imply a motile tendency toward re-territorialisation. ....



This is also one precise reason to develop the concept of atopia as an

Artist Huang Shih-chieh’s installation *EVX-07* at the entrance of the main hall of the *Atopia* Pavilion in 2007. Photo: Felix Schöber 2007.

interpretative framework, because the current direction of globalisation is filled with countless quasi- utopias: Asianized McDonald’s, European *fengshui*, Chinese *ikebana*, Taiwanese hip hop, and other common phenomena euphemistically referred to as cultural syncretism. Atopias, not utopias, are present in the everyday life of our contemporary culture”.<sup>23</sup>

This re-territorialisation within the globalised space was also evident with curator Lin’s choice of VIVA, a Taiwanese *manga* or *doujinshi* (self-published) comic-book painter, who had been “discovered” at the 2006 Taipei Biennial. VIVA, presumably with a bit of self-irony, described the adversities of life of a



Artist VIVA inside the *Atopia* Pavilion in 2007. Photo: Felix Schöber 2007.

romantically inhibited computer geek, ‘Overclocker’, and those of the life of a Taiwanese *doujinshi* painter. Albeit heroically struggling both with the continuous need

<sup>23</sup> Lin Hongjohn: “Atopia”, in: *ATOPIA*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2007, p.17.

to update their computer hardware, and creatively expressing themselves through the new “cultural industry” sector *manga* painting, neither of them manage to enter in dialogue with the girl of their dreams.

According to curator Lin, this re-adaptation of *Densha Otoko* (Train Man), a Japanese *manga* classic, described and mocked the lives of Taiwanese computer geeks, such as those who populated Taipei’s Guanhwa market.<sup>24</sup>

Re-territorialisation within de-territorialising globalisation was arguably also the theme of Lee Kuo-min’s photographic documentation of the dwellings of the illegal settlers of the Treasure Hill and No. 1 Air Force Community villages.

Shortly before the dwellings of the already evicted inhabitants were razed to the ground, Lee Kuo-min took a last picture of each interior, creating a last memory of the lives of their dwellers.

Most of these dwellings had been occupied by immigrants from the mainland, who had come to Taiwan as soldiers with the defeated army of Chiang Kai-shek. Some



of them had lived for decades in these

Artist Lee Kuo-min in front of his *You Only Die Twice* at the *Atopia* Pavilion in 2007. Photo: F. Sschöber 2007.

shanty-towns without proper legal documentation. Yet this lack of a proper legal status became an issue only once the government decided to eliminate these “unsightly” urban elements. Lee Kuo-min’s purpose was both to create a memory of these marginalised lives, as well as to use art as a political tool to criticise the local administration, the very

<sup>24</sup> Lin Hongjohn: “VIVA”, in: *ATOPIA*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2007, p. 110.

mayor of Taipei who was deemed to inaugurate the Taiwan pavilion in Venice to the public.

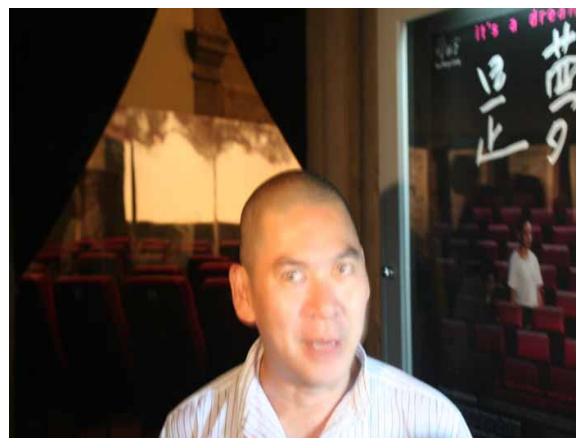
“Naming through the name of the other” was the theme of Tang Huang-chen’s video-documentation *I Go Travelling*. In several cities around the world, among them Venice, she asked her collaborators to go on a day trip and pose for a group



Artist Tang Huang-chen in front of her *I Go Travelling* video at the *Atopia* Pavilion. Photo: Felix Schöber 2007.

photo that would emulate an iconic Taiwanese photograph. This image was never directly shown to the collaborators, only described through words, as Tang chose not to look at the image during the process, but rather elaborate on the fragments of her memories. The resulting trip was both real – it did take place, with certain people, and in certain circumstances – and at the same time virtual, as it tried to emulate, or recreate a faint memory, which was to be re-enacted through an ‘other’ completely alien to the original.

Marginal and forgotten spaces were also the theme of art-film director Tsai Ming-liang’s video-installation *It’s a Dream*. For Tsai, this was also the second appearance at the Venice Biennale of visual art: already in 2005 he had made an appearance as a jury-member of the Taiwan Award. His art project for 2007 was shot in an abandoned cinema in



Director Tsai Ming-liang at the entrance to his video- installation *It’s a dream* at the *Atopia* Pavilion, Photo: Felix Schöber 2007.

Malaysia, his country of origin. The film featured Lee Kang-sheng in the role of Tsai's father, together with Tsai's mother (starring as herself), occupying a derelict cinema.

This group, enlarged by a photograph of Tsai's father, not only watched the silver screen, they also cooked, ate and slept between the rows of the cinema. In Venice, Tsai installed the very seats of the Malaysian cinema where he had shot the film, re-creating a real situation similar to that of the original film set, therefore adding another level to his play with memory, illusion and reality.



### ***2008 Taipei Biennial: the nation and its margins***

In 2008, the Taipei Biennial opened with no theme or title in particular: it was simply called *2008 Taipei Biennial*. Despite this apparent nonchalance, the two – or rather, three – curators, Vasif Kortun, Manray Hsu, and Oliver Ressler, the curator of the special section “a world where many worlds fit”, had



*2008 Taipei Biennial*, press conference with the two curators Vasif Kortun (left) and Manray Hsu (right). Photo: Felix Schöber 2008.

committed themselves to a very tightly knit exhibition around the theme of politics and art, with a special emphasis on the question of the global flow of populations and cheap labour, and the exploitation of marginal groups. The two (three) curators presented a comprehensive, almost “universal” selection of different questions and artistic positions, mainly from Europe with a participation of only four Taiwanese artists: Bbrother, Tsui Kuang-yu, Wu Mali and Yu Cheng-ta. Even though only one artist of the 2008 Taipei Biennale was invited to participate at the 2009 Taiwan Pavilion, the theme elaborated in Taipei not only critically re-defined the image of the nation, but also deeply influenced the Taiwan Pavilion at the following Venice Biennale in 2009. What made the 2008 Taipei Biennial stand out in comparison to all previous representations of the nation, and all previous critical enquiries into marginalisation and subaltern realities, was that for the first time Taiwan was not simply theorised as the victim of global powers, but also as a perpetrator of semiological as well as physical violence against other subaltern groups, including both Westerners living in Taiwan, as well as migrant workers from the global South.

Compared to the previous editions, the *2008 Taipei Biennial* finally reversed the trend of gradual downsizing and self-marginalisation of the previous Taipei Biennials since

2002, and was considerably larger, in numbers of participating artists, budget, and in terms of the spaces used: not only did it occupy the main hall, the ground floor, and the second floor of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, it also expanded into the park behind the museum, as well as into the city, where it occupied several sites such as the Taipei Brewery, a huge mega screen on the Taipei Arena, the area of a derelict Japanese house on Qidong street, as well as the metro station at the crossing of Zhongxiao and Hsinsheng Roads. The *2008 Taipei Biennial* therefore clearly attempted to reverse the downsizing trend of the previous years, and staged a show that was both similar in size to the first international edition in 1998. Its thematic scope was also considerably broader than the previous editions, and on critical grounds it clearly aimed at a global audience, trying to conquer a position of critical edge in respect to other biennials not only in Asia, but worldwide: possibly for the first time, an international biennial presented a panorama of politically engaged art (albeit mostly European) and some of its most recent practices and exponents. The *2008 Taipei Biennial* presented a rather complex, deeply ambiguous field ridden with contradictions, opening up a broad space for reflection and shying away from simplistic answers. The exhibition covered a wide spectrum of different attitudes and artistic approaches, from documenting political activism and some of its most ingenious aesthetic expressions, to various forms of artistic dystopias and utopias as well as utopian interventions, to the analysis of the language and the politics of memory, to the reflection on marginalised social groups as well as in-between spaces, up to the ironic deconstruction of big politics in forms of everyday practice.

The exhibition did not follow a simple route. Some of these positions were presented together, to form a strong group, such as the section on globalisation and the flow of populations with its implications of marginalisation and exploitation of cheap labour in the first hall of the ground floor, or the section on the aesthetics of political activism on the second floor, curated by Oliver Ressler.

The exhibition opened with a spectacular parade of life-size black-and-white cardboard puppets demonstrating for “Errorism”, a combination of the two words “error” and “terrorism”. The installation presented itself in the aesthetics of a political protest or revolutionary movement, shouting slogans and waving red flags. Yet this movement came with a crucial twist: its revolution, or protest, was exerted by means of ambiguity, by the introduction of the Derridean “difference” and a situationist- and Dada-style “error”. On the left corridor, usually used as the exit of the whole exhibition), this installation was complemented by a set of ready-to-wear protest rucksacks by German-Turkish artist Alan Tur, providing everything you might need to attend a political protest march.

To the right side of the main hall, local artist Wu Mali presented the dystopian vision of *Taipei Tomorrow As A Lake Again*, marking on the glass windows the possible

catastrophic levels of water in the case of rising sea levels due to further global warming. Wu Mali complemented this dystopian vision of the future with a utopian vision of what could be done, and how the city could be transformed to have a sustainable future: bicycles could substitute other forms of urban traffic, and unused



*We Are All Errorists*, installation by Internacional Errorista in the entrance hall of the 2008 Taipei Biennial. Photo: Felix Schöber 2008.



*Taipei Tomorrow As A Lake Again*, installation by Wu Mali, terrace of the TFAM, 2008 Taipei Biennial. Photo: Felix Schöber



*Taipei Tomorrow As A Lake Again* by Wu Mali, video *Beautiful World* by Mieke Gerritzen, ground floor corridor of 2008 Taipei Biennial. Photo: Felix Schöber 2008

rooftops and terraces could be used for growing vegetables. To show how easy this utopia could be turned into reality, Wu Mali transformed the terrace to the right side of the main hall of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum into a lush vegetable garden, all planted in and around readily available portable yellow plastic beer containers.

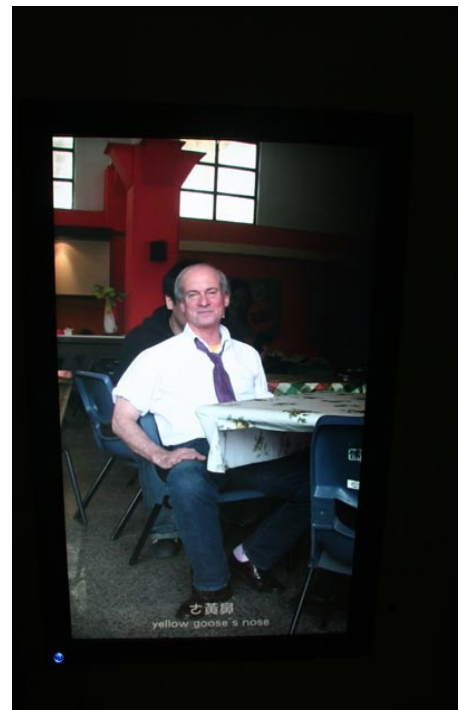
### **The margins of the nation – foreigners and migrant workers**

The first exhibition hall on the ground floor was completely dedicated to the question of national society and its margins, the role of foreigners, and the social implications of the global flow of cheap labour.

The main exhibition on the ground floor opened with the *Beautiful World* by media artist Mieke Gerritzen, visible at the long end of the ground floor corridor, and introducing, in highly polemical combinations of words, a criticism of global capitalism and the resulting “risk society”.

The following three video installations were all dedicated to the marginalisation and exploitation of foreigners in Taiwan, possibly the most daring part of the whole exhibition, as it openly and for the first time in a large-scale show in Taiwan criticised the treatment of foreigners, usually a taboo subject hardly talked about.

This small section of its own started with the marginalisation and mockery of the “Other” through language, through the violence of the ethnographic speaking for the other, as described by Derrida. In *Ventriloquists*, local artist Yu Cheng-ta made this “violence of the name”, of the



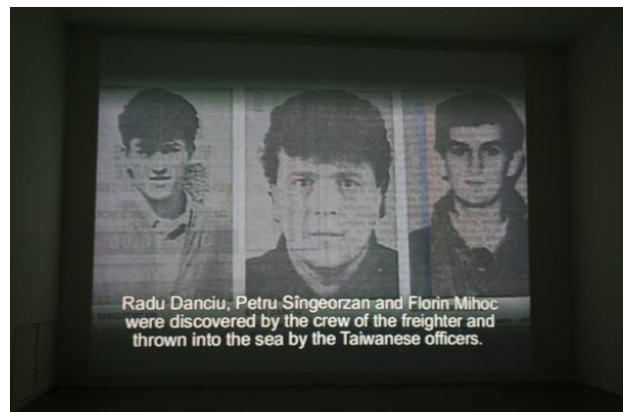
*Ventriloquists*, video by Yu Cheng-ta  
at the 2008 Taipei Biennial.  
Photo: Felix Schöber 2008

speaking for the other, visible by posing as an interviewer, that would also help the

interviewed subject to properly pronounce their response to the question. Each video showed the artist standing behind a foreign citizen. Most of them had already been living in Taiwan for a considerable length of time, yet without learning more than only very basic Chinese. The artist asked them to speak about themselves and their experiences in Chinese, while the artists would help them to do so by acting like a hidden prompter on a theatre stage, pronouncing the proper Chinese words to say in a low voice, while the subjects would simply repeat these sentences. To help the viewer understand these sentences, Chinese subtitles were added. The twist was that the subtitles did not repeat the original words of the Chinese prompter, but re-translated into written Chinese the words pronounced by the foreign speaker, resulting in sometimes amusing, sometimes abstruse sentences, since the foreigner often failed to correctly pronounce the words in Chinese.

The following two videos went beyond the question of mere linguistic and cultural marginalisation, and delved into the exploitation of foreign brides and the global flow of cheap labour.

*Maersk Dubai*, a video-documentation by Matei Bejenaru documented the fate of three Romanians that had illegally boarded the Taiwanese ship Maersk Dubai, and which had been thrown overboard by the Taiwanese captain in 1996.



*Maersk Dubai*, video by Matei Bejenaru at the 2008 Taipei Biennial. Photo: Felix Schöber 2008

Mario Rizzi's video *Chicken soup*

investigated the fate and treatment of foreign brides in Taiwan, using the example of one Indonesian and one Vietnamese woman. One lived a marriage with a man she hardly understands, while the other was forced into prostitution.

One of the interventions in the public sphere outside the museum continued this

investigation into the role of foreign cheap labour in Taiwan, albeit in a completely different style.

At the MRT station Zhongxiao Xinsheng, Malaysian artist Wong Hoy-cheong used the Metro’s publicity light-boxes to present manipulated and staged photographs of foreign house maids in the guise of superman, the virgin Mary, Lara Croft and other superheroes—pointing ironically to the role they are expected to play in the household of their employers, whilst often being underpaid and disrespected.



*Maid in Malaysia Series*, 158 x 308cm, lightbox at Zhongxiao Xinsheng Metro station during the 2008 Taipei Biennial. Photo: Felix Schöber 2008

In the main exhibition, a wall painted in green camouflage colours by local graffiti artist Bbrother led to a room which presented on video the counterpoint to the flow of illegal cheap labour and the growing number of people without a proper passport: the *NSK Passport Office* proposed by the Ljubljana artist collective Irwin. As an artist project, the *NSK*



*NSK Passport Office*, video installation by Irwin, on the image an interview with curator Manray Hsu. Photo: Felix Schöber 2008.

*Passport Office* offered arguably a utopian solution to the Taiwanese situation of the denial of its nation-status: it offered passports of a fictitious state, but closely modelled on existing and UN passports. For a few hours the collective opened also a temporary office for a few hours in Taipei, issuing passports of the NSK micro-nation, a nation without territory but several thousand citizens. As with other similar projects, the idea for this project was also to go beyond art: once a certain critical number of passport holders and citizens would be reached, the passport would gain legal recognition simply through practice.

Another project of subversive resistance against state violence was *The intervention*

*team* by Turkish artist Burak Delier, who attempted to protect a village of aboriginal Taiwanese from being bulldozed over. *The intervention team: the counter attack* tried to send a disorienting message to local politicians and investors by writing in huge letters the words “we will win” on an banner on the roofs of the village. The theme of the global flow of labour was taken up again by Korean artist Gu Minja, who re-created in her installation *The world of labour* the experience of a Taiwanese aboriginal woman through her own experience as a non-Chinese speaking and “unskilled” worker.

The non-spaces created by divided countries and ideological barriers were the themes of several following installations: Christodoulos Panayiotou reflected in his dia-projections *Never Land* and *Wonder Land* on the division of Cyprus. Lara Alamaracegui documented an uninhabited and uncharted territory while constantly changing small islands in the middle of the Tanshui River in Taipei. Korean artist Che Onejoon’s photography documented the abandoned architecture of former military sites and bunkers. Yochai Avrahami, from Israel, created puppet animal-like creatures out of debris material found in the no-go-zone between the Israeli and the Palestinian border, and accompanied these sculptures with video aerial imagery of checkpoints between the two states. Scottish artist Roderick Buchanan contrasted two Irish military music marching bands, one playing for and one against Irish independence, an opposition that alluded to the hundreds of years of military conflict, but which on a purely musical level created an uncannily similar tune. This investigation into the devastations wreaked by ideological violence was interrupted by a nod to art history: in a video, Lene Berg documented the treatment of Picasso by the communist party under Stalin, highlighting the violence of totalitarian ideology even towards its own supporters, and the abyss between the practice of a single individual and the acting of an anonymous ideological apparatus.

## The abyss between big politics and everyday practice

What made the *2008 Taipei Biennial* stand out, was that it did not simply present an array of politically engaged art, but it also introduced an element of irony in the gap between big politics and everyday practice, a gap that is often overlooked and left out from the narratives of political theory and art.

The abyss between the sphere of private practices and big politics was the theme of several videos, creating an interesting counterpoint to the previous highly political works, while at the same time interrogating the true value of ideology – in an era when the “grand narratives” had collapsed (Lyotard), even more so after the fall of the Berlin wall.

The probably most subversive and most ironic art works were two videos by the artists group Chitka, short for Annetta Mona Chisa and Lucia Tkacova, called *Capital: Magical Recipes for Love* and *Dialectics of Subjection*. In the first video, the old classic of Marxist and Socialist ideology, the book *Capital* by Karl Marx, was used as an



*Dialectics of Subjection*, video by Chitka at the *2008 Taipei Biennial*. Photo: Felix Schöber 2008

instrument of divination by a fortune-teller. In the second, two young girls were chatting lying side by side on a bed, discussing the sex-appeal of major world leaders – not always expressing very flaunting views, and completely disregarding any form of political correctness or world politics.

This abyss between the private and public grand ideological narratives had already been hinted at in several works on the ground floor: in a side-room of the last exhibition room on the ground floor, Australian artist Shaun Gladwell presented a slow-motion study of a biker crossing a water pool in the midst of a forest, and a young man appropriating the poles of a metro car for acrobatic exercises, partly filmed upside



down. This was continued in a more ironic way at the end of the stairs on the second floor, and on an even grander scale on the huge screen of the Taipei Stadium, where German artist Nevin Aladag showed Turkish boys playing with model cars having them jump to a tune, and a family using their sitting room for a dance in the style of a MTV music video.

The abyss between private everyday practice and the grand narratives of global culture, as well as the alteration of local culture by globalisation, combined with the almost complete alteration of concepts of authenticity, was the subject of local artist Tsui Kuang-yu's video *Invisible City: Taipari*



*Invisible City: Taipari* York, video by Tsui Kuang-yu at the 2008 Taipei Biennial. Photo: Felix Schöber 2008

*York*. At first the video showed the must-see scenes of any travel agency's brochures or guide book: a couple enjoying red wine in front of a New York skyline, taking pictures of themselves in front of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, or the artist gazing in amazement at the Eiffel tower. Within a few seconds, this idyll of authentic first-hand experience was demolished: as the camera angle widened, the urban skyline turned out to be simply a poster on the wall of a small restaurant, and the Arc de Triomphe and the Eiffel tower turned out to be mere model reproductions in a local theme park. What at first seemed an idyll offered by the possibilities of global travel, turned into a deconstruction of the notions of authenticity, local culture, or even grand international culture: as the symbols of the grand cultural narratives of the West enter the realm of the local, not only is that superseded, but the grand narratives are themselves transformed by local practice into a mere simulation, the limits of which are easily detected.

In *Simulations and Simulacra*,<sup>25</sup> Jean Baudrillard proposed the allegory of a life-size map that covers the whole of the universe, becoming brittle only at the edges, in the desert, where that universal map decomposes into small pieces of debris. Possibly with this allegory in mind, the curators presented Lebanese artist Zad Antar’s video *Tokyo Tonight*: set in a semi-desert somewhere in the South-East Mediterranean, a group of sheep-herders utter the word “Tokyo”- a word which hardly has any day-to-day-relevance to their lives, and which in that bland setting turns into little more than the uttering of a mere sound, de-voiding it of any grander allusions. While Tsui Kuang-yu’s work seems to imply that any cultural symbol by now has become a mere simulation of itself, Zad Antar’s video seems to point in an opposite direction, against Baudrillard’s verdict that “it is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours”.<sup>26</sup> In Antar’s video, the sheep-herders seem to remind the viewer that this desert is not ours, but theirs- and that it is very “real”, beyond any philosophical subtleties, and with hardly any traces of the simulacra of the first world.

### **The violence of democracy**

It is a standard saying that the world would be a safer place if only democracy would prevail – and most human rights activists and political theorists, including most of the works at the *2008 Taipei Biennial* would probably subscribe to this ideological superiority.

The ambiguity of utopian grand narratives, even if realized only on a small scale in the form of ground-level democracy, was the theme of Nicoline van Harskamp’s video *To Live Outside the Law You Must be Honest*, which documented and investigated the autonomous self-governing community Cristiana in Holland. While not taking sides

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<sup>25</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations and Simulacra*, 1981, translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, Michigan 1994, 2006 p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations and Simulacra*, 1981, translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, Michigan 1994, 2006 p. 1.

directly, the video also showed the inherent intolerance of the project: the idea that everything should be run in a democratic way by the community itself, very soon resulted in the exclusion of any unwanted or slightly different individuals; the utopia of self-reliance and direct democracy very soon turned into the dystopia of group mobbing and the domination of the group by the few more eloquent members.

In one of the out-lying venues of the Taipei Biennial, this standard notion of the moral superiority of democracy, especially ground-level democracy, was turned into a dystopia of violence against marginal societies.

Their video *Welfare State/Smashing the Ghetto* was presented as a large four-channel video screen installation inside the Taipei Brewery, documenting the destruction of a shanty town in El Salobral by the bulldozers sent in by the city of Madrid. The destruction of the shanty town was presented as an act of



*Welfare State/Smashing the Ghetto*, video installation by Democracia during the 2008 Taipei Biennial at the Taipei Brewery. Photo: Felix Schöber 2008

dramatized violence: underscored with the screaming guitars and drums of hard-rock music, the viewer could hardly escape the scopic joy of graphic violence. The same scopic joy was shown to be shared by the local villagers: the destruction of the shanty town was followed by a large audience of locals, applauding the destruction of the unloved Roma village.

### **Political resistance, artistic utopias**

A separate section “A World where many world fit”, curated by Austrian artist Oliver Ressler, was located in a large separate space on the second floor.

This section consisted mainly of video and photographic documentations of anti-globalisation campaigns, such as Petra Gerschner’s light-boxes *History is a Work in*

*Progress and What Does Memory Mean to You.*

The section also featured a wall painting called *Globalisation Timeline* by Zanny Begg with a genealogy of the anti-globalisation movement since the first anti-G8



*A World Where Many Worlds Fit*, section curated by Oliver Ressler at the 2008 Taipei Biennial. Photo: Felix Schöber 2008.

protests in Seattle in 1999. This section was intended also as a documentation of the diverse aesthetic strategies adopted by the anti-globalisation protesters in a way to counter the violence of the police, such as in Oliver Ressler’s and Zanny Begg’s videos *This is what Democracy looks like!* and *Jumps and Surprises: What Would it Mean to Win.*

As a way to show alternative ways of intervention in the public, even by groups with limited budgets and little access to the highly guarded city-centres, was the low-cost automated *Robotic Graffiti Writer* by the collective IAA. This allusion to the growing restrictions and growing policing of the public space was accompanied by artist Trevor Paglen’s meticulous documentation of rendition flights operated by the CIA, where potential terror subjects were moved around the world from countries with higher standards of human rights to those which do not protect suspects against torture.

Less directly opposed to globalisation and capitalism as such, and more utopian and ironic in the playful attempt to show possible alternative economic structures, were the The Yes Men, whose works of active mockery and bogus news intended to creatively engage and interfere in the public sphere.

The curators showed several of their seminal works, such as *Dow does the right thing* of 2004, a video loop of the interviews with Superflex speaker acting as a Dow representative on CNN, after a mock press release in the name of Dow Chemicals, in which Dow accepted all responsibility for the damages created by the chemical disaster twenty years earlier in Bhopal- and by doing so forcing the Dow Company to a react.

Engaging in active utopianism were also the Danish artists collective Superflex with their installation *Free Beer Taiwan*. Their project echoed the creative commons movement and its criticism of the use of copyright law by big corporations, by offering

the recipe of *Free Beer Taiwan* for free, on condition that the users would again share their experience with other users. The installation also featured several games that mocked the rules of copyright and the market, by proposing a “anti-piracy machine” and a “potato-hitting-machine”. The playfulness of this installation indirectly seemed to highlight the powerlessness of the single individual and traditional ways of production against the big corporations: from (the authors) Bavarian perspective, the recipe for beer is freely available since 1487; to hit a few potatoes may not diminish the grip of global corporations on copyright of software and genetic codes; and the visitor could not



*Dow Does the Right Thing*, 2004 video by The Yes Men at the 2008 Taipei Biennial.  
Photo: Felix Schöber 2008.



*Free Beer Taiwan*, interactive installation by Superflex at the 2008 Taipei Biennial.  
Photo: Felix Schöber 2008

completely escape the impression that the curators wanted to add a bit of relational aesthetics to their show by serving artist-made beer at the opening party.

The exhibition ended on the second floor with a return to the question of the Derridean theme of the violence of the name, and the ambiguous relationship between the real and its image. In the video *A Day to*



*Remember*, on the day of the anniversary of the Tian'anmen

*A Day to Remember*, 2005 video by Liu Wei at the 2008 Taipei Biennial. Photo: Felix Schöber 2008

massacre, Chinese artist Liu Wei interviewed young people in the area around Tian'anmen square, asking the apparently simple question “Do you know what day it is today?”. But many refused to answer, or pretended not to understand, or even came up with such alternatives as the date of the lunar calendar, thus reflecting on the effects of the public silence imposed by the communist party on the events and the massacre of students in 1989. This was accompanied by a site-specific installation by Berlin artist Katya Sander, who juxtaposed the view on the park and the mountain from the museum window with photographic images of the same view, blurring the dividing line between the two.

The 2008 Taipei Biennial presented a highly ambiguous, and highly contradictory image of the political sphere and of political art in the post-ideological and post-9-11 era. It presented several cornerstones of political art, such as a documentation of the anti-globalisation movement born in Seattle in 1999, as well as some of the most utopian and creative interventions by artists in the public sphere, such as The Yes Men. It laid out the question of the changing nature of the public sphere after the anti-terror laws enacted in many Western democracies after 9-11. Yet this potentially one-sided accusatory scheme was countered by an investigation into private practices, which

undermine the totalizing claims of big politics, and it was also countered by several works that documented the violence of even small-scale utopian societies. One of the most engaging parts of the exhibition was the investigation into the exploitation and marginalisation of cheap foreign labour – and it was this part which engaged with the site of the exhibition, Taiwan, and which became seminal for the next international event organized by the TFAM, the 2009 *Foreign Relations* Taiwan Pavilion in Venice.

Some of the other sections remained curiously sterile, and seemed overtly centred on a specific European discourse. In particular the section curated by Oliver Ressler seemed to depict a reality that hardly engaged with Taiwan – his presentation curiously side-stepped the relation of Taiwan with this level of global and anti-globalisation politics, while it also elided the very specific local development of democracy movements, especially in the 1980s. Taiwan could have easily figured as an example of a young democracy with its own history of anti-nuclear, environmental and feminist movements, as well as its very own democracy movement – all potential subjects for an aesthetic investigation. That said, the 2008 Taipei Biennial on many levels made an attempt to establish a dialogue between international contemporary art and the local reality, and to engage international artists with local questions- not only the question of immigrants, but also of abandoned historical relics within Taipei city, the lack of diplomatic recognition, or the pitfalls and lopsidedness of democracy. It also presented a different approach to the work of art- unlike up and including the 2007 Taiwan Pavilion in Venice, the prime role of art seemed to be that of an ethnography of the present- and curatorship was rather similar to that of a psychological session to an abstract essentialized body- the nation. In 2008, hardly any ruminations and generalizations about the psychological state of the nation can be found- the single works almost always address single issues, sometimes in a rather playful way, and often try to engage the viewer directly, much in the style of relational aesthetics.

### **Administrative power and the margins of the nation: *Foreign Affairs*, 2009**

The 2009 Taiwan Pavilion in Venice turned out to become one of the most contested international exhibitions abroad ever organized by the Taipei Fine Arts Museum.

The reasons for public criticism were chiefly two: the elimination of the position of the independent and scholarly curator, and the participation of artists who had been to Venice before.<sup>27</sup>

In early spring 2009, the head of the international exhibitions department, Chang Fangwei, after a meeting with a group of local curators, announced that the 2009 Taiwan Pavilion would be commissioned directly by herself, without the habitual procedure of a jury that would judge proposals from independent curators. Chang had single-handedly eliminated the position of the independent curator; after the public outcry, she was forced to “curate” the show only as a “commissioner”; and on the catalogue she was listed only as “commissioner”, and there was no “curatorial statement” to be found on the catalogue, only a commissioner’s preface; and the entries to the single artists were written not by her, but by “independent” curators, the same who had given their consent to this extraordinary procedure.

The second point of criticism were the repeated presence of already rather famous artists, against that unwritten rule according to which the museum would invite an artist only once to a show in Venice. In 2009 instead, three out of four participating artists did so for the second time. Some, such as photographer Chang Chien-chi and video artist Chen Chieh-jen, even showed their works in the very same room and corner where they had done so several years before.

It was therefore an exhibition that had been organized without even the thinnest veil of an open, democratic jury process – on the contrary, it had abolished all that had been

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<sup>27</sup> See, for instance: 黃孫權 Huang Sun-quan: 誰在乎誰策展: 當今藝術的「歷史性計畫」(Who cares who is the curator: the historical project of contemporary art), 典藏〈今藝術〉 *Art of Collection / Jin Yishu* 4, 2009. pp.117-119. Available also online at: <http://praxis.tw/archive/post-146.php>, consulted 25.2.2010, and at: <http://heterotopias.org/node/126>, consulted 25.7.2010.



achieved in terms of independent and democratically approved curatorship in the decade since 1997.

This administrative background stood in stark contrast with the political coordinates of the 2009 Taiwan Pavilion: from a purely ideological point of view, *Foreign Affairs* continued and radicalised the trajectory initiated with the 2005 *The Spectre of Freedom* and 2007 *Atopia* exhibitions in Venice, as well as the *Dirty Yoga* Taipei Biennial of 2006 and the 2008 *Taipei Biennial*. While in their curatorial statements Wang Chia-chi and Lin Hongjohn had explored the marginal situation of Taiwan in global politics and its impact on Taiwanese society and culture, *Foreign Affairs* explored the question of marginal and subaltern societies, turning the gaze inside, on those parts of Taiwanese society at the receiving end of the violence and nationalist prejudices of Taiwanese society.

From this point of view the 2009 Taiwan Pavilion was one of the most “critical” of all national Taiwanese exhibitions in Venice – but this very “critical” stance stood on very loose ground. First of all, whether such a “politically critical” exhibition could only be staged while abolishing the due process of a “democratically” or “scientifically” legitimation through a jury selection: on the one hand, no “independent” project with a similar number of artists that already had been shown in Venice would have passed the test of a jury- and if for a moment we decide that Chang’s project was indeed a worthy one, this would rather hint at a structural flaw in the unwritten rules governing the selection process of the Taiwan pavilion. Secondly, “commissioner” Chang never exposed herself to the test of a jury like any other independent scholar- she simply usurped that position- and this points at an inherent lack of democracy within the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, as well as a structural lack of power of those local independent curators that had seen a short rise to stardom in the previous editions of the Taiwan Pavilion. Ultimately, the parallelisms to previous exhibitions begets the question who was the author of this show- the curator? The commissioner? Previous curators and

juries who had established this pattern with its unwritten rules and obvious trajectories?

The continuities were most evident in the second side room to the left: in 2007, Lee Kuo-min had presented a series of backlit photographs of housing interiors of illegal dwellers in shanty towns in and around Taipei. In the very same room, Magnum



Chang Chien-chi's documentation of life in Chinatowns worldwide at the *Foreign Affairs* Taiwan Pavilion in 2009. Photo Felix Schöber 2009.

photographer Chang Chien-chi portrayed illegal Chinese immigrants in New York in the interiors of their apartments, as well as portraits of their wives and families in their homes in Fujian. Not only did Chang Chien-chi show a very similar type of images as Lee Kuo-min in 2007, he exhibited them in the same room where Lee Kuo-min had done in 2007, and where Chang Chien-chi himself had shown his black-and-white photography series *Chain* in 2001. Continuity was also the keyword for another artist, Chen Chieh-jen: he showed his video-installation *Empire's Borders* in the same room where two years before Tsai Ming-liang had presented an abandoned cinema. As Chang Chien-chi, Chen Chieh-jen not only participated at the Taiwan pavilion in Venice for the second time, he did so in the same room where he had shown a series of black-and-white photo-montages in 1999.

In a similar vein, the centre of the show was occupied by architect Hsieh Ying-chun's project *Mutual Subject/What to be Done*.

Hsieh was the third in the group of Taiwan pavilion regulars, or repeating participants: he had



The main hall of the *Foreign Affairs* Taiwan Pavilion in 2009 with architect Hsieh Ying-chun's documentation *Mutual Subject*. Photo Felix Schöber 2009.

already joined with a rather similar project inside the Taiwanese participation at Venice Architecture Biennial in 2006.

The only new entry in this group of well-experienced Venice travellers was Yu Cheng-ta, who showed the same video installation that had been presented by curator Manray Hsu at the 2008 Taipei Biennial called



*Ventriloquists: Introduction*, as well as the video *Ventriloquists: Liang Mei-lan and Emily Su*.

Artist Yu Cheng-ta's 2009 video *Ventriloquists* (left and right, already shown at the 2008 Taipei Biennial) and *Ventriloquists: Liang Mei-Lan and Emily Su* (centre, in the small side room) at the *Foreign Affairs Taiwan Pavilion*. Photo Felix Schöber 2009

The *Foreign Affairs Pavilion* intended to show the margins of Taiwanese society, as well as its sexual politics: Hsieh Ying-chun showed projects for the reconstruction of aboriginal villages which respected their original lifestyles, or houses after the earthquakes in Sichuan. Chen Chieh-jen showed the problems immigrants or, more specifically, mainland and South-East Asian spouses as well as young Taiwanese women faced when attempting to re-unite with the Taiwanese husbands, or simply wanted to travel to the United States. Chang Chien-chi showed the often deplorable living conditions of Chinese immigrants in New York, and their families at home in Fujian. Yu Cheng-ta finally showed the ambiguities and the cultural abyss foreigners faced when trying to integrate into Taiwanese society: in each of the videos, a foreigner was asked to repeat words in Chinese, which – in a way that laid bare the cynicism and cultural chauvinism of many native speakers – were then subtitled with rather ludicrous meanings generated by the often less-than-perfect pronunciation.

If we look merely at the surface of the exhibited artworks, it was a fairly interesting and potentially courageous pavilion, which attempted to question the margins of the Taiwanese nation, laying bare both the cultural chauvinism (Yu Cheng-ta) as well as the

chauvinist sexism of many regulations and border officials, exemplified by the attitude of the border police towards mainland spouses in Chen Chieh-jen’s video.

Curiously, this latter aspect had completely escaped the description by local critic Amy Cheng in her entry to Chen’s work on the catalogue. Her article concentrated exclusively on US “imperialism” in the treatment of Taiwanese seeking tourist visa.



Chen Chie-jen’s video *Empires Borders* at the *Foreign Affairs* Taiwan Pavilion. Photo Felix Schöber 2009

Against this, it has to be argued that the questioning of the margins becomes

ambiguous once these marginal societies are brought to occupy the imaginary centre of the “spatialized” nation, and their “vitality” in the absence of the state becomes a symbol for a more generalized “vitality” of the nation – one has to wonder if the projects to conserve a traditional lifestyle of aboriginal villagers does not simply repeat the notion of a nation centred around a rootedness in nature and history, and whether this critical engagement with marginal societies, when presented inside a national pavilion, is not simply a new disguise for an old curatorial pattern, a new disguise for an old pattern in the construction of the nation.

Equally it has to be questioned whether architect Hsieh’s self-help project for the victims of the Sichuan earthquake can be viewed simply as a benevolent “doing good” without any ideological implications.

To quote Derrida’s reading of Lévi-Strauss’s *Tristes Tropiques* and his critique of the creation of a fictional innocence of the ethnological other:

“ ...the critique of ethnocentrism, a theme so dear to the author of *Tristes Tropiques*, has most often the sole function of constituting the other as a model of

original and natural goodness, ...”<sup>28</sup>

In Hsieh’s favour, it can be argued that these recent disasters constituted such major global events that compelled both him to help, as well as the curator to include them in the show. More than that, Hsieh Ying-chun could also be seen as an exponent of a genuine growing trend for environmental consciousness, developing in Taiwan since the lifting of martial law, making him a symbol, or rather a token, for the growing plurality and complexity of Taiwanese society and cultural discourse.

Yet it has to be asked whether the national pavilion of one nation should be centred around the presentation of an architect of one nation coming to the help of the victims of another nation- and it needs to be asked whether this certainly well- intended gesture, once presented as the core and center of Taiwanese national



Architect Hsieh Ying-chun’s documentation *Mutual Subject* at the *Foreign Affairs* Taiwan Pavilion in 2009. photo Felix Schöber 2009.

representation can be seen in the same way as the low-tech solutions for the homeless of the Sichuan earthquake shown by the architects present in the national pavilion of the P.R. China during the architecture Biennale in Venice in 2008, or the memorial to the homeless and dead at the 2008 Guangzhou Triennial.

One has to ask whether this ostentation of benevolence towards a space outside the area occupied today by the R.O.C. on Taiwan – inside an exhibition that intends to represent a nation, and indeed its *Foreign Affairs*, is not simply a new disguise for an old nationalism, as it re-iterates not only the notion of a nation built on the sheer vitality and the age-old traditions of its people, as well as on the cultural and technological superiority of the entity called “Free China” toward that other China; what makes this

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Derrida: *Of Grammatology*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1974, 1997, p. 114.

(certainly well- intended) gesture rather ambiguous within a space of national representation, which is ultimately built on a constitution which, at least on paper, still claims not only all of China, but also parts of North Vietnam and Mongolia as parts of its national territory; within this constitutional context, the gesture to help victims on that other side of the Taiwan strait becomes an even more ambiguous one, as it seems to extend a benevolence to a part of R.O.C. territory that only in the imagination of R.O.C. administrators is still part of a national territory; but which, as the work testifies, urgently needs the help from the centre and administrative capital of the R.O.C. .

### **The absence of a curatorial voice**

The element which made the 2009 *Foreign Affairs* pavilion truly ambiguous was the absence of a curatorial voice. Since the introduction of the position of a curator in 1997 and 1999, one of the chief achievements of the Pavilion in Venice had been the creation of the social and intellectual position of the independent curator, a position that mediated between the administration and the artists, and who created a critical framework around the melange of artists and artworks.

In 2009 this position of the curator abolished; and so was the procedure of the selection of the artists or the artistic project of the curator. For the first time since the Taipei Fine Arts Museum had opened its doors in 1984, a major show did not go through a selection process by an independent jury. The head of the exhibitions department, Chang Fang-wei, had single-handedly abolished both the position of the independent curator, as well as the independent process of the selection of artists or curatorial projects. She achieved this by gaining the consent not only of the artists involved in her project – many of them already heavyweights in the local art scene – but also by gaining the quiet consent of a number of local curators, such as Chen Tai-song, Manray Hsu, Amy Cheng, Huang Chien-hung and Lin Hongjohn, all of whom had depended on Chang Fang-wei in their careers. To sweeten the pill, or to justify her move, the museum invited them to write

entries on the catalogue, and treated them to a free trip to the opening of the Venice Biennial. Admittedly Chang Fang-wei originally did not intend to abolish the curator- she rather wanted to occupy that position by herself- and it was only the public outcry that forced her to organize the show as commissioner, rather than as curator. As a result, the 2009 Taiwan Pavilion was the only exhibition at the Venice Biennale without a proper curator and without a curatorial statement.

This also shows that apparently interesting art shows can be fairly easily generated by simply repeating patterns of previous exhibitions, especially in the case of Chen Chieh-jen, “commissioner” Chang Fang-wei did hardly anything but choose the most famous living Taiwanese artist, and send him to Venice – in Chen’s case, for the third time, and the second time on a TFAM ticket. Chang Chien-chi and Hsieh were sent to Venice for the second time on the invitation of the TFAM. Yu Cheng-ta made the trip based on his entry at the *2008 Taipei Biennial*. Politically correct exhibitions including a few extra questions, it seems, can be easily reproduced by the anonymous workings of the art administration. This also shows that speaking for the marginal, the subaltern, not necessarily entails an engagement for democracy in the close quarters of the art system: it can very easily be transformed into a way to assert power and to create a career.

The phenomenon that Chang Fang-wei in many aspects repeated the pattern established in the years 1995-2003 allows for one more question, that is, the question of agency and freedom of expression of the curators (and artists) of the former exhibitions: the fact that the very same pattern reappeared again and again rather points to a very limited creative freedom and agency of all the curators involved – the first to actually try to break through this pattern were Wang Chia-chi and Lin Hongjohn in 2005 and 2007, while Kao Chien-hui and Lin Shu-min had merely repeated and possibly embellished an already existing pattern.

It has been elaborated by Gayatry Chakravorty Spivak how the construction of the postcolonial tends to re-affirm the power of the centre it claims to deconstruct, and how

it often tends to silence the local, subaltern voice.<sup>29</sup>

The *Foreign Affairs* Pavilion at the 2009 Venice Biennale shows the contradictions and aporias of apparently critically engaged, postcolonial art inside the public art museum: on the surface, it presents itself as speaking for marginalised social strata, giving a voice and a face to these subaltern groups. A second look reveals a somewhat condescending, overtly benevolent voice, which inadvertently transforms these groups into the roots and testimonies of the nation, even enlarging the boundaries of the nation to groups and areas that may not necessarily wish to be part of that nation. This seems to reveal a fundamental impossibility to think the idea of a de-centred nation: even the most marginalised nation cannot but ultimately affirm itself as a centre, even if it is only in relation to mountain tribes and foreigners with little Chinese language proficiency- and in a curious charade, the vitality of those marginal people is transfigured into the symbol of the vitality of the larger nation surrounding them, and the larger, modern nation adopts the former subjects of colonization as imaginary ancestors, thus rooting itself in the past of the colonized subject.

Secondly, it is a standard saying that the art object inside the museum remains ultimately ambiguous and open to interpretation. Yet in the case of the 2009 Taiwan Pavilion, it was rather the subaltern status of curators and artists that destabilized any fixed interpretation. Once the veil of bureaucratic and democratic validation of the artistic project had been abolished, the boundaries between official state ideology and artistic expression seemed to implode, leaving the viewer ultimately without any reference as to who was the author of that story of democratic progress and critical reflection.

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<sup>29</sup> Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty: “Can the subaltern speak”, in: Nelson, Cary; Grossberg, Lawrence (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Macmillan, London 1988, pp. 271-313, available for download online from Macalester University at: <https://www.macalester.edu/wgs/Readings/Can%20the%20Subaltern%20Speak.pdf>.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty: “Can the subaltern speak?”, in: Ashcroft, B.; Griffiths, G.; Tiffin, H. (eds), *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, Routledge London, New York 1995, pp. 24-28. This version is available for download on the website of Utrecht University at: <http://dspace.library.uu.nl:8080/bitstream/1874/29948/1/scan011.2.pdf>, last accessed 23.3.2010.



## **Conclusion, outlook**

Influenced by Catherine David’s 1997 *documenta X* and Okwui Enwezor’s 2003 *documenta XI* in Kassel, in 2004 the engagement of Taiwanese large-scale exhibitions with global cultural discourse shifted towards an interest in postcolonial theory and art, expressed in the invitation to Barbara Vanderlinden to curate the 2004 Taipei Biennial, together with local curator Amy Cheng. Originally this combination of two women at the helm of a major Biennial was also conceived to precede by a year the Venice Biennale’s invitation to Maria de Corral and Rosa Martinez. Yet the female collaboration at the Taipei Biennial turned into a different kind of media sensation, once it appeared that local co-curator Amy Cheng had refused to have her statement altered and shortened by Barbara Vanderlinden, and consequently no Taiwanese curatorial statement was to be found in the official catalogue. This ignited a heated discussion in the local arts scene, causing a major shift in the way Taiwan theorised itself through large-scale exhibitions.

After the elimination of Amy Cheng’s statement from the 2004 Taipei Biennial catalogue, the representation of Taiwan in its large-scale exhibitions started to change radically: from 2005 onward, all major international exhibitions located Taiwan on the margins of globalisation, starting with curator Wang Chia-chi’s Venice Taiwan Pavilion *The Spectre of Freedom*. The following Taipei Biennial in 2006, called *Dirty Yoga*, curated by Dan Cameron and local artist Wang Jun-jieh, positioned Taiwan around critical terms such as “third space” and “interstitial spaces”. The Taiwan pavilion at the 2007 Venice Biennale was named *Atopia* by curator Lin Hongjohn as a means to elaborate on the notion of Taiwan as a non-space, a nation that cannot be named. The 2008 Taipei Biennial was dedicated to alternative realities and the margins of the nation. The *Foreign Affairs* Taiwan Pavilion at the 2009 Venice Biennale concentrated on subaltern and marginalised groups and social realities, such as illegal emigrants, foreign

brides, aboriginal groups, foreigners in Taiwan and Taiwanese seeking a US visa.

This move from the centre occurred in more ways than one, and was indebted to Barbara Vanderlinden and Amy Cheng’s *Do You Believe in Reality 2004 Taipei Biennial* in more ways than one.

### **Re-positioning the nation within the global arena**

In 2004, with the inclusion of the Atlas group at the *2004 Taipei Biennial*, the horizon of Taiwanese international art exhibitions started to include questions of the Middle and Near East; this often invited to a completely new comparison of Taiwan to the situation of non-nations or failing states in that part of the world. This new perspective on globalisation, as well as a new self-positioning within global politics, became most visible at the 2005 Venice Biennale, when one of the artworks at the official Taiwan Pavilion reflected on US president Bush’s crusader speech, while another installation made the ever-present threat of Islamic terrorism after 9-11 visible through the projection of aircraft shadows.

At the 2005 Venice Biennale an independent group of artists and eminent figures of the Taiwanese art scene also sponsored the so-called *Taiwan Prize*. This prize was awarded to the Afghan pavilion, thus indirectly highlighting the lack of international diplomatic recognition of one of the world’s richest countries through a



*Taiwan Award* ceremony during the preview days of the 2005 Venice Biennale. Standing in the centre prize-winning artist Lida Abdul, sitting at the extreme right the juror Lin Hsing-yue, sitting to the left while taking a photograph, juror Huang Hai-ming. Photo: Felix Schöber 2005.

comparison with the political situation of the war-torn Afghanistan.

Since then, the Near and Middle East has re-appeared several times as a question at the

Taipei Biennial. An example were the small sculptures made by Israeli artist Yochai Avrahami using objects from the no man’s land between Israel and Palestine, exhibited at the *2008 Taipei Biennial*. At the *2009 Asia Biennial* held at the National Museum in Taichung, the animation film *Waltz with Bashir*, documenting the horrors of the wars between Israel and the Palestinian civil population, became one of the key elements to re-define Asian identity as a continent deeply ridden with contradictions and ethnic conflict.

Yet what characterized many of these attempts to re-think the position of Taiwan within the global arena taking as a starting point the conflicts of the Middle East was the conclusion drawn by curator Wang Chia-chi and the jurors of the Taiwan prize in Venice in 2005: in global politics, Taiwan has no voice- and albeit the presence of global media such as CNN, which constantly insinuates a presence of a global civil society, this participation is at best a simulated one- on a political level, Taiwan is in no position to raise a voice, and the Middle East is both a token as well as a symbol for that.

### **The margins of society<sup>30</sup>**

Secondly, Vanderlinden and Cheng’s 2004 Taipei Biennial intentionally shifted the attention away from the symbolical centre of the nation towards the margins of society: Yeh Wei-li’s documentation of the Treasure Hill squatter settlement at the 2004 Taipei Biennial created a trend that was then followed by similar photographic documentations at the 2007 and 2009 Taiwan Pavilion in Venice, with photographs of the Treasure Hill

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<sup>30</sup> It has to be pointed out that this observation by the author of a self-theorisation of Taiwan through its large-scale exhibitions as a marginal space stands in contrast to the official accounts of the history of the Taipei Biennial by the Taipei Fine Arts Museum. The official account of the history of the Taipei Biennial on the website of the *2008 Taipei Biennial* does not use words like “marginal”, “subaltern” or any similar term. Globalisation, at least as far as the history of the Taipei Biennial is concerned, is a success-story of ever growing international interaction. See: TFAM editors: “08 TB, Taipei Biennial, brief history”, available online at: <http://www.taipeibiennial.org/2008/ContentPage/Contents.aspx?ID=iWtOXTY5yerSII9xW63dIAUWv5DBFdU1&SubID=iWtOXTY5yepbYP0ReEQvvxHGWPPzIVBK&Language=iWtOXTY5yepbYP0ReEQvvxIHCRdaRaeW>, consulted on 4.5.2010, 13:26. An even shorter version of this official account can be found at: [http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/bien/taipei\\_biennial](http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/bien/taipei_biennial), consulted on 4.5.2010.

squatter houses by Lee Kuo-min in 2007, and by images of Chinese immigrants in New York shot by Magnum photographer Chang Chien-chi in 2009. The margins of Taiwanese society were also a major theme at the *2008 Taipei Biennial*, where several videos both by Taiwanese and international artists in the first exhibition hall was dedicated to the cultural and social exploitation of migrant workers and immigrants. More than that, this question was carried even further in the 2009 Taiwan pavilion in Venice, where the video installation “Empire” by Chen Chieh-jen question not only the attitude of American embassies towards Taiwanese immigrants, but also highlighted how Taiwanese immigration offices often maintain a similar attitude towards foreign workers wishing to immigrate to Taiwan- thus highlighting how the very same imperialism (to quote the title of the work) pervades bureaucratic attitude towards unwelcome (or less wealthy) foreigners both in the US (a self-proclaimed defender of worldwide democracy), as in Taiwan- a nation whose politicians often lament its marginalisation and subaltern position in the world of international diplomacy.

### **The independence of artists and curators**

Secondly, the incident of the 2004 Taipei Biennial ignited a discourse on the independence of curators from the institutions: in 2004 Amy Cheng lamented that

“... the position of the local curators has become more and more ambiguous, up to the point where even the right to sing your own song has been abolished”.<sup>31</sup>

In 2005 curator Wang Chia-chi summed up the effects of globalisation with the words

“We are subordinate and mute, unable to represent ourselves”.<sup>32</sup>

Inside the exhibition curated by Wang, artist Eva Lin presented the installation *De-Strike*, which highlighted the futility of any gesture of resistance against the institutions.

At the 2008 Taipei Biennial this question was taken up again by Viennese artist Yang

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<sup>31</sup> “在地策展人從同台演出變成了暖場歌手，甚至到最後連唱自己的歌的權利都喪失”，from Amy Cheng’s blog *Amy’s Mumbo Jumbo*: <http://goya.bluecircus.net/archives/003427.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Wang Chia-chi: “The spectre of freedom - Il fantasma della libertà”, in: *The Spectre of Freedom*, TFAM, Taipei, Venice 2005, p. 14.

Jun, who started an inquiry into the local art scene, advocating for the establishment of a new, independent art centre, which was realized in 2010 as Taipei Contemporary Art Center. Yet as has been highlighted by the "commissioning" of the 2009 Taiwan Pavilion in Venice, the signed letters and petitions that had been sent to the Taipei Fine Arts Museum in 2004 had changed very little in the asymmetric power relations between the museum and the art scene: in 2009, the head of the exhibitions department managed to subvert all previously established rules regarding the assignment of the Venice exhibition through an open competition, and rather decided that it was her very own time to curate that show on her own, and to eliminate the veil of openness and fairness that had been maintained in the past. Interestingly enough, she not only managed to eliminate the position of the curator, leaving the task of the commissioner of the exhibition to herself- she also managed to invite several local curators to write catalogue entries for her show in Venice, thus not only adding credibility and respectability to her project, but also outsourcing that very raw material that used to be the hallmark of curatorial practice- the creation of a critical cultural narrative.

What this latter incidents highlighted are two questions: first, the lack of a career path for independent curators in Taiwan- albeit the emergence of a few independent curators, their career inside the system is both incredibly steep as incredibly short: within only two exhibitions one can shoot to international fame- yet after the Taipei Biennale and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice, the career of a local curator is essentially over- all that is left is to become a juror in the selection of future shooting stars. In comparison, an internal museum administrator has a far more stable and longer career- and in come cases can wield enormous power in the selection of projects, curators and artists.

Secondly, this incident highlights how so-called cultural criticism, once it has been institutionalised in academia, can easily be turned into a readily available resource- and it is deeply worrying to observe how little resistance commissioner Chang met while doing so, especially if we compare that incident to those of the the 1980s: in those early

incidents, it was the very claim to universality of modernity that offered an edge and a platform for artists to challenge those claims; two decades later, well after Martial Law was abolished, the cultural narratives and critiques informed by politicized de-constructivism and postcolonialism seem to offer hardly any resistance to their transformation into tools and means for administrative and curatorial careers.

### **De-centring the nation, de-essentialising the work of art**

Since 2004, curators have foregrounded the rather particular situation of Taiwan as a nation without a proper name, a nation that cannot be named, and have used terms such as “Atopia” to describe this situation. This re-thinking of Taiwan as a marginalised nation has also de-centred the image of the nation, de-stabilising previous notions of centrality and rootedness characteristic for the 1990s. Against the analysis of curators such as Lin Hongjohn, I would argue that this de-centring is not necessarily only to be analysed in terms of “psychological sickness”- the same term in psychology of (growing up) often also indicates a process of growing up and individualisation- a process by which the individual starts to detach itself from a merely self-centred worldview. From this latter point of view these exhibitions take on a new relevance: as they reflect on issues that are not limited to Taiwan and its specific situation, but are issues and phenomena that can be observed worldwide.

It is from this different approach to analyse local reality that the work of art finds a new status- as psychological ruminations about the status of an essentialized nations are abandoned, the work of art becomes relational- an object that engages the viewer, and which engages specific issues; yet as I have highlighted in the discussion of the 2005 Taiwan Pavilion, the semiotic elements of a cultural discourse may not necessarily be limited to one interpretation only- once moved to a different context such as from the local to the global, the same object can take on quite different meanings.

This is arguably but part of a wider re-writing of the image of the nation: those

elements, questions and contradictions that formerly seemed to define uniqueness, become re-defined as phenomena that can be found worldwide while at the same time the image of the nation becomes increasingly complex and multifaceted, escaping simple explanations centred around one single element, experience or root.

It is from this point of view that the 2008 Taipei Biennial is a crucial moment in the reflection on the image of the nation- as it presents (very much for the first time) the a highly complex image of the nation, whose “binding elements” may turn out to be the very contradictions of its situation- be it the complex relation to its foreigners, or its ecological awareness; most important of all, an artist does not necessarily have to hold a R.O.C. passport to make a valid statement about contemporary Taiwanese society- artists with non- R.O.C passports may contribute to local cultural discourse on a same footing. Yet there is one crucial flaw in the image of the de- constructed and de-centred nation: albeit “de-constructed” with the tools of critical theory, it still subscribes to the basic assumption that art shall be a tool to describe something else, that is to construct the image of the nation. Within this re- elaboration, art is never shown on its own terms; art is always twisted and re-framed to fit into another narrative, the image of the nation. As I have tried to elaborate, this re-framing is never an innocent one, and almost always comes at a specific cost; often this means that the work of art is re-interpreted to fit a different frame, a different narrative, often contradicting what one can presume to be the original intention of the artist. A good example is the only partial description of Chen Chien-jen’s work “Empires Borders” on the exhibition catalogue, where the text mentions only the humiliation Taiwanese citizens – the orphans of Asia- go through while applying for a US Visa; what the text omits, is the second part, that part in which the artists describes the imperialist attitudes of R.O.C. embassies towards foreign spouses. This is a rather crucial omission- it eliminates the artists reflections on the ambiguous nature of nationalism, and rather evokes an older narrative, that of the “orphan of Asia,” reducing art to a mere tool in the machinery of national promotion.

## Conclusions

This thesis described and analysed the development of the most prestigious large-scale exhibitions of the Taipei Fine Arts Museums from its opening in 1983 until 2009, concentrating on the *Trends of Modern Art in the R.O.C.* series of the 1980s, the introduction of the *Taipei Biennial* in 1992, and the *Taiwan Pavilion* in Venice from 1995 until 2009.

Rather than presenting merely an art historical account, my focus has been on the transformation of the museum space and the status of the work of art. Several threads of questions run through this thesis: first of all an attempt to analyse and illuminate the specific modernism and its inherent contradictions that characterize the museum space, then the specific status of the object of art (and the artist) within the museum space, and lastly the image of the nation and the dynamics of its transformations as it is projected through these exhibitions.

The chief focus of this thesis was to describe and analyse how modernism was enacted in the first museum of modern and contemporary art in Taiwan (and one of the first in greater China and Asia), how the exhibitionary system created to promote Chinese Modernism was anointed, challenged and finally abolished in favour of a new exhibitionary system. This new system, the Taipei Biennale, inaugurated a new and different status of the work of art, not merely an aesthetic object but an element of a cultural narrative and discourse. In the following I have described and analysed how a new and pluralist pattern of nationalism was created first at the Taipei Biennale and then presented in a highly condensed way at the Venice Biennale. I have analysed how this pattern was re-written and re-enacted with every edition of the Biennale, and how the



notion of centrality of the nation was first built up, and later partly de-constructed, once the question of the voice of a nation, but most of all of its curators and artists within a globalised world came to the fore.

What makes the period between 1984 and 2009 particularly interesting is that it straddles several political and cultural watersheds: the inauguration of the first museum of modern art in Taiwan; the abolition of Martial Law and the introduction of democracy; the inauguration of a national pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1995 and the loss of nationhood even in the field of international cultural diplomacy from the year 2000 onward.

In this thesis I have highlighted how the inauguration of the new museum for modern art, one of the first museums for modern and contemporary art in Asia, has triggered a dynamic inherent to the museum space, and which can be understood fully only from that perspective. Once modernity was anointed, it was turned into a platform, and many local artists tried to explore the gesture of modern avant-garde further. In several cases, or rather so-called accidents, this was met with a rather violent response by the museum administrators- yet, as I have tried to show, it was these violent events which triggered a slow process of re-thinking of the museum space, sometimes in a very evident way, when museum directors were asked to step down, sometimes in less evident ways, when museology instead became a long-term topic.

Once it was announced that Martial Law would soon be abolished, that claims to universality of modernism and its standards of aesthetic judgement were called into question in even more radical ways, through well-planned performances and through new forms of painterly expression inspired by the Italian Transavantgarde. Ultimately the modernist standards of judgement of the mid- 1980s, based on the judgement of single artefacts through notions of natural science, art history and aesthetics were ultimately abolished in a reform of the exhibitionary system.

The *Taipei Biennale* of 1992 introduced a new set of standards of judgement centred

around the artist as the author of a narrative, and the work of art as an element of cultural discourse. In the 1980s the TFAM had been built to promote a specifically Chinese modernity, yet the discourse that re-framed artistic creativity in the 1990s was the creation of a microcosm of knowledge of Taiwanese identity. Rather than merely projecting an image of progress rooted in Chinese philosophy, the new image of the nation projected in the 1990s was characterized by a re-framing of the work of art as an element of ethnographic inquiry of the present- in which every single artist and work of art occupied a position within a microcosm of knowledges of the nation. This emerged as a pattern in its most synthetic form in Venice, where from the 1995 onward Taiwan projected an image of the nation as rooted in nature and its second nature, the urban experience of Taipei, while conscious of its historic trauma, conscious of its social questions, but projected into a technological and spiritual future. This basic pattern remained the same even as different curators proposed new ways of thinking about the nation, such as Huang Hai-ming who described Taiwan as a space of exchange of information and ideas or “superconnector”. As Taiwan lost its prestigious status as a national pavilion at the Venice Biennale, this pattern changed only slightly, giving the image of the nation a more cosmopolitan outlook, which at the same time also re-centred the nation around ideas of ethnicity. Only from 2005 onward a more critical re-thinking of the nation and its relation to global discourse set in, triggered also by the lack of voice of local curators and artists within the very Taipei Biennial; this critical reflection on the nation was developed further in 2008 and 2009, when curators re-framed the nation from its very margins, subverting the idea of centrality of the nation, and foregrounding the question of the voice of both the artist as well as the nation in a globalised world.

To analyse these transformations I have deployed an array of theories- first of all museology, mostly inspired by Michel Foucault, but also institutional art theory and theories on nationalism. Keeping in mind the critique of Western de-constructivist

theory put forward by Spivak, I have tried to deploy these theories to make the “subaltern speak” (a curious term once applied to a country with one of the highest FOREX reserves worldwide): to use these theories as a way to understand the dynamics of the museum space in Taiwan. The prerogative of this thesis has been to concentrate on a use of these theories where they could illuminate the questions faced by curators, artists and museum administrators in Taiwan, setting aside any discussions inherent to Foucault or Anderson as such, and rather follow the proposal made by DeCerteau:

“Rather than remaining within the field of a discourse that upholds its privilege by inverting its content (speaking of catastrophe and no longer of progress), one can try another path: one can analyze the microbe- like singular and plural practices which a ... system was supposed to administer or suppress, ... ”.<sup>1</sup>

### **a local modernity**

The first question of this thesis was the nature, extent and limits of the modernism enacted by the Taipei Fine Arts Museum. To analyse this I have compared both the declarations of critics with the actions of the first director of the museum. As I have pointed out, the liberation from the limits of the canvas and the pedestal, as well as the introduction of new materials into the canon of fine art did not necessarily denote complete freedom- on the contrary, modernity inside the museum space rather seemed to substitute one set of rules with another, opening up the question of the specific nature of that modernity.

I have argued that these new rules were not merely questions of censorship due to the limitations of Martial Law, or the irascible character of certain art administrators- rather that these limitations were closely linked to the specific notions of natural science enacted within that space, notions which ultimately built on the idea of modernity based on science, and that the public spaces of a modern nation shall be governed by science.

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<sup>1</sup> Michel De Certeau: *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1984, p. 95- 96.

To elaborate this question- that director Su Rui-ping was not merely re-colouring an unloved sculpture and kicking an unfinished paper installations to rubble, but enacting a very specific notion of modernity within the museum space- I have deployed the writings of Michel Foucault, specifically the description of the secularisation of the scientific object in the *Order of Things*. While Foucault and New Museology are helpful tools to illuminate how the actions of director Su can be described as a practice of enacting modernity, those incidents were also closely linked to specific limits imposed by the taboos of Martial Law, such as the taboo of using the colour red or of allusions to death., thus creating a highly specific combination between the specific conditions of Martial Law taboos and progressive notions of science and avant-garde art. I have argued that the prizes awarded by the museum and the actions of director Su have to be seen as an expression not of a program and merely personal failures, but parts of a specific synthesis of modern nationalism, reminiscent of Sun Yat-sens ideas about social progress as embodied in the construction of railway lines, well as the memory of the loss of the civil war in China: a faith in progress expressed by avant-garde rhetoric and materials such as steel and glass, but haunted by a trauma that had the potential to show in the most innocent of details such as a colour or the shape of a sculpture.

### **A local artworld**

To point out how the inauguration of the museum has reshaped art and theory, I have also elaborated the idea of an “art world”. I have pointed out how the establishment of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum has created and re-centred an art scene around it, as it multiplied the available exhibition space, and more importantly (along the terms of Benedict Andersons’ analysis of nationalism) created career paths for art administrators and critics as well as developing an ever more complex exhibitionary system for local artists, thus offering symbolical career paths within the different levels of exhibitions inside the museum.

I have also pointed out how this has changed the status of the work of art: with the inauguration of the museum and its prizes, the work of art is not merely a question of aesthetic appreciation according to static and eternal standards, but entered a dynamic relation to the local art world. With the bureaucratisation of the exhibitionary system, art becomes an object “upon which some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld) has conferred the status of candidate for appreciation”<sup>2</sup> and to appreciate this object, according to Arthur Danto, it takes “something the eye cannot descry – an atmosphere of artistic theory.”<sup>3</sup>

What needs to be pointed out (against the retrospective descriptions of Dickie and Danto) is the highly dynamic relationship between the art work, the art world, and artistic theory, and even more importantly, how this dynamic relationship was first of all a local one: the mere knowledge that certain strategies had entered the canon of Western art history did not necessarily mean that those were acceptable or standard practice in another locality. An example were Lee Mingsheng’s performances during the “World of Dada” exhibition in 1988: Dada art including Duchamp’s urinal were acceptable and welcome (even as backdrops for portrait photographs with local politicians) as long as they remained part of a separate, Western genealogy of modern art; a similar gesture, made by a local artist, had all the potential to meet a violent response by the local art institutions, including the destruction of any local Dada artifact, and the beating up of the local artist by the guards of the museum. How unstable and dynamic certain canons can be was highlighted by the incident involving the work of sculptor Li Zai-qian: the colour red could be acceptable for a certain time, and a work of art could be exhibited safely on the museum grounds even for months, but a single letter from a veteran soldier could transform it into a question of political taboo,; yet that same incident also

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<sup>2</sup> George Dickie: *Aesthetics, An Introduction*. Pegasus, New York 1971, p. 101

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Danto, “The Artworld,” (1964), reprinted in Philip Alperson ed.: *The Philosophy of the Visual Arts*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 426-33.

See also: Garry L. Hagberg: “The Institutional Theory of Art: Theory and Antitheory”, in Paul Smith, Carolyn Wilde eds.: *A companion to art theory*, Oxford 2002, p. 492

had the potential to be transformed in a question of artistic freedom and authorship by the media. This support from the media did not necessarily imply that notions of authorship were entrenched in the local legal system: for the courts, the installation of another artists, Zhang Jianfu, whose work had been kicked to rubbish by the director Su, had the same legal status of a public construction project, and thus could be corrected- or destroyed.

### **The local practice of art theory**

As I have used Michel Foucault's writings several times to illuminate the questions involved, specifically the status of the work of art as an object of a scientific gaze, it has to be pointed out that unlike in Western art academies, in Taiwan during the 1980s Foucault was not a readily available author. To use his writings did not imply that any artist or writer was responding to Foucault; it served rather to point out that artists and critics were responding to similar questions.

I have continued to deploy the description of the state of human sciences of the *Order of Things* also in the following chapter, dedicated to the period of the lifting of Martial Law. I deployed Foucault's "need for a corporeal gaze within the space of representation" as a rationale to describe how the challenges launched by painters such as Wu Tian-chang and performance artists such as Lee Ming-sheng were not merely reactions to a changing political environment, but first of all challenges to the modernists gaze enacted by the museum - and as such responding to a question inherent to modernity, the cool gaze of science with the space of representation.

In the discussion of Lee Ming-sheng's performances and the inauguration of the Taipei Biennial, I have also pointed out how Foucault's writings alone (or the writings of New Museology) do not suffice to explain the dynamics of the space of modern art. Foucault's "need for a corporeal gaze" provides a strong critical tension within the museum space, as he questions the relationship between the viewer and the object, and the

authors of New Museology such as Tony Bennett have used it as a rationale for the re-thinking of the ethnographic museum; yet his “corporeal gaze” remains overly vague and ambiguous, and limited by the reduction of the viewers to mere “bodies”. Foucault’s de-construction of the author as an “author-function” is deeply entrenched in de-constructivist theory, yet to describe the status of the object of art within the secular space, this rationale hardly explains the crucial role of the freedom of the author as the only point of reference of aesthetic appreciation.

As I have pointed out in my analysis of Prof. Huang Hai-ming’s statement on the catalogue of the first Taipei Biennial of 1992, the artist as author was not introduced as a result of scholarly discussions, nor as the result of legal reform, and not as a illuminated reaction to Western art practice, but as a reaction of the museum to the loss of status and prestige of its major exhibition series, the *Trends of Modern Art in the Republic of China*: as a reaction to the silent voting of local artists who had deserted the exhibitionary system of the museum. George Dickie had argued that the work of art is conditioned by its status within a certain social institution- as the case of the *Trends* exhibition at the TFAM showed, not only the work of art, but also its institutions depended on the consensus of that dynamic entity called “the artworld”- to be precise, the *local* artworld - and to exhibit art, the museum needed to be recognized by the very authors of those artifacts it intended to show.

The trajectory described here is a rather different one compared to de-constructivist theory including Foucault and Derrida, and also quite different what Gramscian concepts of hegemony would predict.

In the exhibitionary system of the TFAM of the 1980s, the author of an artwork did not appear as a crucial category. The work was judged as a single object, an entity disconnected from its creator, according to standards of aesthetics and art history. One author could be substituted by another, even a student, and the object could be adjusted to fit the requirements and standards of the museum and the state. This cool gaze

created a tension of its own- which can be illustrated by the “need for a corporeal gaze”; yet and crucially it was not the “bodies” of visitors and art students who abandoned the museum- it were the “authors” and with them the “artworld”; but without the consensus of the artworld, there was little scope for local politicians to continue protecting a certain director, or to continue sponsoring an exhibition such as the failing *Trends*.

The rupture introduced into the exhibitionary system by abandoning the aesthetic object and introducing the notion of the author, and to re-define the work of art as part of a cultural narrative, was chiefly a question of local practice: because artists refused the idea to be reduced to mere bodies producing aesthetic objects; and because the abolition of Martial law had created new spaces of artistic freedom and creativity that were far more attractive than the overly conservative standards of the official shows of the TFAM. Within this development, the emergence of the curator in the European artworld appeared as a rather distant possibility, but it provided the possibility of a social position that would transform the work of art into that new object envisioned- the element of a cultural discourse within a democratic society.

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### **The universe of knowledge**

The second half of this thesis has been dedicated to the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice between 1995 and 2009. With the two exceptions of 2004 and 2008 the development of the Taipei Biennial has not been discussed, since from 1998 onward it had been curated by international curators, and provided little insight or overview into artistic development in Taiwan. Since 1995 the Taiwan Pavilion was not only the pinnacle of the exhibitionary system, it also presented a rare example of an exhibition series that was repeated over the years within the same space, the Prigioni in Venice, and which established a rather fixed and archetypical spatial and temporal pattern, presenting itself as a rare curio of standardized and repeated curatorial practice both in Venice as in Taiwan. For more than a decade, this curious exhibition series presented almost always



a group of rather unrelated artists- artists that had rarely exhibited together before or after, and which often did not share any similarities of age, residence or stylistic expression. Notwithstanding their heterogeneous background, these artists were exhibited within a surprisingly constant spatial and ideological pattern: the main room was usually occupied by an element of nature, sometimes in synthesis, sometimes substituted by a reference to the urban experience of modern Taipei. One of the two side rooms was usually dedicated to the trauma of the past, or the social questions of modern society, while the second room usually projected a vision of a spiritual technological future.

To analyse this curio in the history of curatorship and art exhibitions, I have made use of nationalism studies, authors such as Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Erik Hobsbawm and Homi Bhabha.

### **The ruptures within the imagined community**

According to Benedict Anderson, the nation is a community bound together by the experience of a certain territory, whose administrator all share the same circular trajectory of careers versus one capital, and a community which travels together through a continuous time. At first glance this is a rather useful rationale to explain this rather curious arrangement of artists: as a representation both of a certain territory, centred around its capital Taipei, rooted in a specific past, and projected into a common future.

Comparing this image with the modernism of the 1980s, there are some crucial differences: the image of Chinese Modernism was also rooted in a past, and projected into a future of scientific progress. Yet the points of reference of the 1980s were projected into a far more distant past- the millennia of Chinese philosophy; and the reference to a specific territory, or a specific summit of careers was a rather ambiguous one, as in the writings of jurors and administrators that very capital and territory was a place unavailable in reality - Beijing and mainland China. As the territory of reference

was mostly unavailable for direct experience, the pluralism of artistic expressions was reduced chiefly to a dualism between international cosmopolitanism, usually taking centre stage, and a more critical reflections on the experience of the only available locality, the Taiwan province.

Compared to the image of linear progress of 1980s modernism, the distinctive feature of the 1990s was its pluralism, which united different generations of national time and different geographic experiences; and while in the image of the 1980s the national territory was mostly unavailable, in the 1990s its reality is signified through its diversity; through the reference to different localities a new entity come to the fore, the island Taiwan, within its specific borders; and a new summit, Taipei, took centre stage as the culmination of urban experience.

While this pattern seems to suggest a neat fit to Anderson's analysis of the nation, it has to be pointed out that only in one occasion the new nation is imagined as "imagined"-only once, in 1997, did curator Huang Hai-ming, propose the image of a space whose borders delimit the circulation of information and knowledges. Usually this community is essentialized, as a symbol of vitality which in turn inspires its artists, or as an imaginary body. Unlike the Andersonian idea of a community travelling through homogeneous time, national time was imagined as mythical- as a mythical reference point in ancient philosophy, or as an imaginary dynastic past; and much in line with Hobsbawm, this mythical reference at closer look was often a child of modernity: a set of ideas set apart as philosophy, or an icon that entered the imaginary of the nation thanks to modern archaeology.

Compared to the 1980s, there is one crucial difference in the perception of time: in 1997 and 1999, historic time was chiefly defined by that one trauma that unified the experience of the inhabitants of the island Taiwan; time was not linear or continuous, national time was an interrupted one, which started with a trauma- the trauma of the incident of February 28, 1947, and the ensuing Martial Law period.

I have argued with Homi Bhabha that it was this “interrupted address of history” which necessitated a new science, an ethnography of the present, which in turn created a new universe of national knowledges. I have argued that it was this new scientific position of the artist as national ethnographer which introduced a new gap, a new rupture within the museum space- that between the artist as representative of an imagined international art scene, who from that distance and height observed local culture; in this artificial position, the dialogue partner was not any more the artists own culture- the international art scene has taken on that position of stable knowledge, while the local was turned into an exotic element of distant observation.

With Homi Bhabha, it has to be argued that the national time of a postcolonial nation is never homogeneous; yet against Homi Bhabha, the interrupted address of history does not necessarily turn the attention to a homogeneous ethnographic mapping of the present; on the contrary, the points of reference remain those of mythical time- the moments of national trauma, and a future spiritualized by advanced technology.

The nationalisation of the work of art introduced a new level of ambiguity - as the artefact became part of a national narrative, new levels of meaning are imposed on the work of art, deliberately sidelining or suppressing others. This becomes more evident by a comparison of the work (such as Chen Jie-rens manipulated images of atrocities on the Chinese mainland or Hunag Bu-qings usage of Tang dynasty imagery) with the position it is made to occupy and represent within the pattern of national representation: the use of imagery with a provenance outside the national territory had little impact on the efficacy of the work of art as such- it was rather testimony to the universal and global availability of that imagery; it became ambiguous once it was used to imagine a certain community of a certain territory- and this ambiguity was testimony to the difficulty to imagine a community to be limited to the cultural resources of one specific territory.

The re-imagining of the nation in terms of cosmopolitanism, or more specifically in terms of Western ideas and fashionable theories can be interpreted as a reaction to the

limitations of a nation as limited to one specific plot of land; as I have pointed out in my discussion of the two pavilions of 2001 and 2003 in Venice, this new cosmopolitanism came at a cost: the reference to national time (again) became rather ambiguous and vague- in 2001 the reference to a traumatic past, and any questions regarding interruptions in the continuum of national time, was substituted by a reference to contemporary social problems and issues. In 2003 there was no reference to a historic past, its place was taken by an even further and deeply ideological question – a reference to Darwinism and the evolution of the human species, culminating in the Chinese race, represented by a man with specific Northern Chinese resemblances: the imaginary capital of the North has made its re-entry into the imaginary of the nation as the summit of genetic and ethnic development; cosmopolitanism has become the disguise for early 20<sup>th</sup> century ideas of the nation as centred around a specific and superior race.

The question of the territory and national time re-appeared again only in 2005 and 2007, once the question of the position and voice of that nation are brought to the fore. As I have elaborated in my analysis of the events around the 2004 Taipei Biennial and its relation to the 2005 Taiwan Pavilion in Venice, it was not merely a diplomatic question that urged curators to re-think the position of Taiwan in a global context- it was rather the experience of subalternity in relation to the museum administrators within the local artworld, who transformed it into a metaphor for the marginalisation of the nation. The urge to re-think the nation from its margins created a completely new and different image of the nation, an image that was characterized by elements of civil dialogue, a dialogue that allowed for a voice of marginalised groups, and a dialogue that allowed to re-thinking the nation not only as a victim, but as a perpetrator of imperialism and violence.

This new re-thinking of the nation from its margins was deeply indebted to critical theory and de-constructivism, and claimed to de-construct those essentialized notions of

national vitality that characterized the 1990s. As the language employed by curators deployed notions of psychology and de-constructivism, the subject of this analysis remained an imaginary one; and as the idea of the nation was de-centred, the position of the intellectual and the curator remained the same: that of an imaginary psychologist of an imaginary subject- the nation; the urge to present an scientific object that could be exhibited on the public arena had generated a new branch of science: the psychology of imaginary entities.

The development of the Taipei Biennial since 1992 and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice since 1997 seemed to indicate that a new social position had been created, that of the curator, with a set of specific knowledges, and a specific task, to generate knowledges about the nation. As these two exhibitions series were the chief occasions to exercise that profession, this was a very short career. As the events around the Taipei Biennale of 2004 and the Taiwan Pavilion of 2009 showed, this was not even a stable or powerful position, nor did it imply a particular voice: in 2004 the local curator was eliminated from the catalogue, and not even her absence from the opening was noticed. at least initially. In 2009 the head of the exhibitions department decided to occupy and abolish the position of the curator of the Taiwan Pavilion, and invite a group of artists using the title of commissioner: as her example showed, the hallmarks of curatorship, the generation of knowledge expressed through the critical writings of a curatorial statement, could easily be outsourced; this was made even more poignant as commissioner Chang did not show any art, but highly political and “critical” art, art that elaborated the imperialism of the nation and the prejudices of culture, the very hallmarks of de-constructivist cultural critique. Yet unlike the modernism of the 1980s, which had created a platform that allowed challenges to its universality, the new political discourse of de-constructivism apparently did not allow for similar challenges, nor did any of the artist or collaborating curators take offence at the inherent hypocrisy of using the power of a museum administrator to abolish an (at least on the surface)

transparent and democratic process to curate highly political art. It has to be questioned whether this inherent contradiction was limited to the incident of 2009- the previous 2008 Taipei Biennial had also proposed a selection of highly political art, and had engaged with local reality on several layers; yet the very reference to political art remained curiously mute and ambiguous. A whole section of the 2008 Biennial had been dedicated to the art of political demonstrations, yet not one reference was made to the development of that same phenomenon in Taiwan, even though that had been a rather conspicuous phenomenon, and had deeply influenced Taiwanese political culture.

### **The limits of this thesis**

This thesis has concentrated on the development and the transformations of the museum space and the status of the work of art within, as well as the image of the nation that it projected; this was done in many cases by ellipsis- I have referenced but hardly mentioned or analysed numerous exhibitions and discussion, chiefly many exhibitions dedicated to Taiwanese identity in the 1990s, and the discussions around Taiwanese identity in the early 1990s- I have presumed those as a given factor. Many of those would have enriched the narrative of this thesis, but would not have changed it. The same is true for much of the development of the Taipei Biennial, which has been largely left out of the narrative of this thesis, as the development of the Taipei Biennial since 1998 was dominated by non- Taiwanese curators with only casual knowledge about the local at scene. As far as the development of the Taipei Biennial has had an impact on local discourse and the image of the nation this development has been integrated into this thesis; lot of material that would not have changed the narrative has been left out.

### **Development by rupture- the limits of theory**

It is important to point out how the transformations of the status of the work of art and the image of the nation were not is the result of a Hegelian synthesis, or the result of

civilian dialogue, but a rupture: the notions and ideas that had informed the art of the 1980s continued to linger on- but as the canon that had established those objects as art was abandoned, the ideas that had dominated the 1980s became a subtext, while other and often conflicting issues came to the fore.

An example is the question of rooting modern art in Chinese philosophy: the prime question that had dominated the 1980s could hardly claim any critical edge in the 1990s, but did occasionally re-appear as a subtext; an example is the first Taiwan pavilion in Venice in 1995, when critics pointed out how certain artists were rooted in a Chinese tradition- while the dominating discourse was the research and the definition of a new, Taiwanese identity.

What is probably even more important, and jumps even more to the eye, is the rupture with the limits and taboos of the modern Chinese aesthetics: as art starts to deal with social, historical and environmental issues, formerly “taboo” practices such as performance art and transavantgarde painting enter the canon of Taiwanese identity- the best examples are Lee Ming-sheng who is invited to the 1993 Venice Biennale (admittedly not by the TFAM or Taiwanese institutions), or Wu Tian-chang who represents Taiwan in Venice in 1997. This applies not only to formerly less welcome art practices, but also to unwelcome materials and sources of inspiration: in 1991 Chen Jian-bei stages a solo show at the TFAM (admittedly in the basement) creating huge lotus flowers inspired by local religious traditions- the very material and inspiration that had been eliminated from the museum by director Su in 1985.

Through this rupture, these formerly taboo questions do not merely become acceptable, but often become the defining cornerstones of the new universe of knowledges of the nation: at the 1997 Taiwan Pavilion in Venice, through the paintings of Wu Tian-chang, the taboos of Martial Law became the defining moment for the new community imagined as “Taiwan”; and in the installation of Chen Jian-bei, the formerly despised practices and traditions of local religion became the expression of the spiritual

aspirations of the nation.

One of the chief obstacles to frame cultural development in Taiwan in terms of cultural theory derived from late Hegelianism is this very development by rupture, and Foucault, or rather the New Museology inspired by Foucault is a prime example; his notions of the cold gaze of science and the need for a corporeal gaze are highly useful to describe certain dynamics during the first experiments with modernism inside the museum space during the 1980s. While helpful to describe the contradictions inherent to modernism inside the museum space, the limits of these ideas show up in the discussion of the abolishment of the *Trends* exhibitionary system; when discussing the causes that led to the introduction of the Taipei Biennial, the reference to the bodies of viewers and the ethnicity of artists does not necessarily provide a sufficient explanation; we rather need to look at the art world as a system, whose members depend on each other for consent and acclaim; and in the context of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum and the Trends exhibition system, this can also mean that even the biggest and first museum of modern art can lose the consent of the art scene, and thus lose its status as the premier art institution.

A similar point has to be made for Anderson and the other writers that have dealt with nationalism- each of them is useful to describe and analyse certain aspects; yet none of these alone are sufficient to analyse the ramifications and transformations of the image of the nation, even though the period at question spans a mere 25 years.

It is for this very reason that this thesis has tried to analyse modernity, the status of the work of art, and the ideologies informing the museum space not from a single theoretical point of view, possibly by cutting short the period under investigation to a few years by concentrating on the very practices enacted by museum administrators and artists- by concentrating on those practices that informed and dominated the museum space; theory was used to illuminate those practices, not as a way to imply that Taiwanese art administrators or artists reacted to Foucault or were inspired to Anderson-



on the contrary, they merely dealt with similar questions, and while the development of the museum space and modern art certainly happened in dialogue with developments in the West, they were first of all a specific local modernity and a very specific local ideology informing the museum space.

**Glossary of Chinese names,  
list of images and bibliography**

**Glossary of Chinese names**

**Note on transliterations of Chinese and Taiwanese names**

In this thesis, Roman standard Pinyin is the preferred method of transliteration for Chinese names for all those cases where this enables the reader to consistently recognize a name. Since Pinyin is not the standard romanization system in Taiwan, the romanization adopted by the artist himself will be preferred in all those cases where one transliteration of the proper name is used consistently. Therefore, Li Mingsheng will be quoted as Lee Mingsheng (as on his catalogues), Guo Yichen as Kuo I-chen, Zhuang Pu as Tsong Pu, thus preferring the transliteration adopted by the artist himself regardless of its linguistic merits.

Though many names will therefore appear in their Taiwanese transliteration, a few exclusions will be adopted: for the sake of simplification, I will use Roman Pinyin chiefly for artists who changed the transliteration of their names several times, such as Lai Chunchun, who is also known as Lai Jun- T. and Lai Chwuun-Chwuun, and Zhang Yongcun who is also known as Jahng Yohng-tswuun, Greene Chang and Chang Yung-tsun.<sup>1</sup> I will also prefer Pinyin over all other transliterations in cases where the name is

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<sup>1</sup> I will do so even in the case where some of the most curious spelling systems are likely not to be the original creation of the artists themselves, but most likely rather the work of a local English-speaking translator. T.J. Berndt seems to be one of those well- intended translators, as he is the (most likely) author of transliterations such as: Jahng Yohng-Tswuun for Zhang Yongcun, Gwahn Jur-Johng for Guan Zhizhong, Jwahng-Poo for Zhuang Pu /Tsong Pu, Gwahn Gwahn for Guan Guan. None of Berndt's romanizations could be found in use elsewhere. See: Jahng YohngTswuun (Zhang Yongcun): *Transcendimensional Space - Being and Transforming*, Taizhong 1993, p.16, 70.

used widely both in pinyin as well as another transliteration, such as in the case of Yang Yingfeng aka Yuyu Yang. The same applies to cases where the local transliteration is not widely used outside Taiwan, or where the privately adopted transliteration has little relationship with the pronunciation of the Chinese name, such as in the cases of Martha Su Fu aka Su Ruiping and Lu Chin-fu aka Lü Qingfu.

In standard Pinyin bisyllabic names are not separated by hyphen; when bisyllabic names are separated by hyphen, it means that the romanization is not standard Pinyin.

Following is a list of names of Taiwanese artists and art administrators, their names written in Pinyin and in their usually used R.O.C. transliteration; the bold style denotes the romanization adopted in the thesis for that specific name.

**Standard pinyin = Taiwanese romanization chosen by the artist**

the preferred transliteration has been marked in fat letters

Chen Jianbei 陳建北 = **Chen Chien-pei**

Chen Jieren 陳界仁 = **Chen Chieh-Jen**

**Chen Xingwan** 陳幸婉 = Chen Hsing-Wan<sup>2</sup>

**Chen Shiming** 陳世明 = Chen Shi-ming,<sup>3</sup> Chen Shu-Ming.<sup>4</sup>

Cui Guangyu 崔廣宇 = **Tsui Kuang-Yu**

**Gao Erpan** 高二潘 = Kao Er-pan

**Guan Guan** 管管 = Kuan Kuan, Gwahn Gwahn.<sup>5</sup>

**Guan Zhizhong** 管執中 = Kuan Chih-chung

Guo Yichen 郭奕臣 = **Kuo I-Chen**

Han Xiangning 韓湘寧 = **Han Hsiang-Ning**

<sup>2</sup> TFAM: *Taiwan Art, 1945-1993*, TFAM, Taipei 1993, p. 240.

<sup>3</sup> TFAM: *The Transitional Eighties, Taiwan's Art Breaks New Ground*, TFAM, Taipei 2004, p. 37.

<sup>4</sup> TFAM: *Taiwan Art, 1945-1993*, TFAM, Taipei 1993, p. 234.

<sup>5</sup> Jahng Young-Tsuun: *Transcendimensional Space*, Tunghai University, Taichung 1993, p. 70.

Hong Donglu 洪東祿 = **Hung Tung-Lu**

Huang Cailang 黃才郎 = **Huang Tsai-lang**

**Huang Jinhe** 黃進河 = Huang Chin-Ho, Huang Jing-Ho.<sup>6</sup>

Huang Shijie 黃世傑 = **Huang Shih-Chieh**

Hou Junming 侯俊明 = **Hou Chun-Ming**

**Hu Kunrong** 胡坤榮 = Hu Kun-Jung, Hoo Kwuun-Rohng,<sup>7</sup> Hu Kuen-Rong.<sup>8</sup>

**Huang Hongde** 黃宏德 = Huang Hung-The.<sup>9</sup>

Huang Zhiyang 黃致陽 = **Huang Chih-Yang**

**Lai Chunchun** 賴純純 = also known as Jun T. Lai,<sup>10</sup> Lai Jun T.T.,<sup>11</sup> Jun T-Lai,<sup>12</sup> Lai Chwuun- Chwuun.

Li Mingsheng 李銘盛 = **Lee Mingsheng**<sup>13</sup>

Li Mingwei 李明維 = **Lee Ming-wei**

**Li Mingze** 李明則 = Lee Ming-tse,<sup>14</sup> Li Ming-Tse.<sup>15</sup>

**Li Taixiang** 李泰祥 = Lee Tai-hsiang, Lee Tai-Shyahng.<sup>16</sup>

Li Xiaojing 李小鏡 = **Daniel Lee**

**Li Zaiqian** 李再鈞 = Lee Tsai-Chien.<sup>17</sup>

**Li Zhiwen** 黎志文 = Lai Chi-Man.<sup>18</sup>

**Li Zhongsheng** 李仲生 = Lee Chung-sheng, Lee Chun-sheng.

<sup>6</sup> TFAM: *Taiwan Art, 1945-1993*, TFAM, Taipei 1993, p. 249.

<sup>7</sup> Jahng Young-Tswuun: *Transcendimensional Space*, Tunghai University, Taichung 1993, p. 70.

<sup>8</sup> TFAM: *The Transitional Eighties, Taiwan's Art Breaks New Ground*, TFAM, Taipei 2004, p. 16, 17, 19.

<sup>9</sup> TFAM: *The Transitional Eighties, Taiwan's Art Breaks New Ground*, TFAM, Taipei 2004, p. 64, 65.

<sup>10</sup> Lai, Jun T.: *Jun T. Lai, Sculpture Natural, Time Natural, Space Natural, Humanity Natural*, Taipei 1995.

<sup>11</sup> TFAM: *The Transitional Eighties, Taiwan's Art Breaks New Ground*, TFAM, Taipei 2004, p. 31.

<sup>12</sup> TFAM: *Taiwan Art, 1945-1993*, TFAM, Taipei 1993, p. 259.

<sup>13</sup> Lee Mingsheng: *My Body My Art, Lee MingSheng 1981-1995*, Taipei 1995.

<sup>14</sup> TFAM: *The Transitional Eighties, Taiwan's Art Breaks New Ground*, TFAM, Taipei 2004, p. 83.

<sup>15</sup> TFAM: *Taiwan Art, 1945-1993*, TFAM, Taipei 1993, p. 254.

<sup>16</sup> Jahng Young-Tswuun: *Transcendimensional Space*, Tunghai University, Taichung 1993, p. 70.

<sup>17</sup> TFAM: *The Transitional Eighties, Taiwan's Art Breaks New Ground*, TFAM, Taipei 2004, p. 20, 21.

<sup>18</sup> TFAM: *The Transitional Eighties, Taiwan's Art Breaks New Ground*, TFAM, Taipei 2004, p. 48, 49.

**Lian Decheng** 連德誠 = Lien Teh-Cheng, Lien Te-Cheng,<sup>19</sup> Lien Der-Cheng.<sup>20</sup>

Lin Hongzhang 林宏璋 = **Lin Hong-John**

**Lin Ju** 林鉅 = Lin Ju

Lin Minghong 林明弘 = **Michael Lin**

Lin Shouyu 林壽宇 = **Richard Lin**<sup>21</sup>

Lin Xinyi 林欣怡 = **Eva Lin Hsin-I.**

Lin Xingyu 林惺嶽 = **Lin Hsing-yue**

Liu Shifen 劉世芬 = **Liu Shih-fen**

**Lü Qingfu** 呂清夫 = Lu Chin-fu.<sup>22</sup>

Lu Xianming 陸先銘 = **Lu Hsien-Ming**<sup>23</sup>

**Luo Men** 羅門 = Luo Men, Lwoh Mun.<sup>24</sup>

**Mei Ding Yan** 梅丁衍 = Mei Dean-E.<sup>25</sup>

Ou Zonghan 歐宗翰 = **Arthur Ou**

**Pei Zaimei** 裴在美 = Pae Dzai-mae<sup>26</sup>

**Su Ruiping** 蘇瑞屏 = Martha Su Fu

TFAM: abbreviation for Taipei Fine Art Museum

Wang Junjie 王俊傑 = **Wang Jun-Jieh**

**Wang Xiuxiong** 王秀雄 = Wang Shiu-hsiung.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> TFAM: *Taiwan Art, 1945-1993*, TFAM, Taipei 1993, p. 244. Also on: *ARTTAIWAN*, Taipei, Venice 1995, p. 64.

<sup>20</sup> TFAM: *The Transitional Eighties, Taiwan's Art Breaks New Ground*, TFAM, Taipei 2004, p. 112, 113.

<sup>21</sup> TFAM: *The Transitional Eighties, Taiwan's Art Breaks New Ground*, TFAM, Taipei 2004, p. 14, 15.

<sup>22</sup> Lu Chin-fu (Lü Qingfu): "Farewell pedestal, back to the public square", in: *1985 An Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Sculpture in the Republic of China*, TFAM, Taipei 1985, p. 10.

<sup>23</sup> TFAM: *Taiwan Art, 1945-1993*, TFAM, Taipei 1993, p. 262; TFAM: *The Transitional Eighties, Taiwan's Art Breaks New Ground*, TFAM, Taipei 2004, p. 93.

<sup>24</sup> Jahng Young-Tswuun: *Transcendimensional Space*, Tunghai University, Taichung 1993, p. 70.

<sup>25</sup> TFAM: *Taiwan Art, 1945-1993*, TFAM, Taipei 1993, p. 252.

<sup>26</sup> Jahng Young-Tswuun: *Transcendimensional Space*, Tunghai University, Taichung 1993, p. 70.

<sup>27</sup> Wang Shiu-hsiung (Wang Xiuxiong): "A Review on 'Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Sculpture'", in: *1985 An Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Sculpture in the Republic of China*, TFAM; Taipei 1985, p.8.

**Wang Zhexiong** = Wang Jer-Hsiung<sup>28</sup>

**Wu Mali** 吳瑪俐 = Wu Mali

**Wu Tianzhang** 吳天章 = Wu Tien-Chang,<sup>29</sup> Wu Tieng-chang.<sup>30</sup>

**Xia Yang** 夏陽 = Hsia Yan.

**Xiao Qin** 蕭勤 = Hsiao Chin, Xiao Qin.<sup>31</sup>

**Xie Deqing** 謝德慶 = Hsieh Tehching, Sam Hsieh.<sup>32</sup>

Xie Lifa 謝里法 = **Hsieh Li-fa**

Yang Maolin 楊茂林 = **Yang Mao-lin**,<sup>33</sup> Yang Mao-ling.<sup>34</sup>

**Yang Yingfeng** 楊英風 = also known as Yuyu Yang.

Yao Ruizhong 姚瑞中 = **Yao Jui-chung**

Yuan Guangming 袁廣鳴 = **Yuan Goang-Ming**

**Zhang Yongcun** 張永村 = also known as Chang Yung-Tsun,<sup>35</sup> Greene Chang, Jahng

Young-Tswuun,<sup>36</sup> Jahng Yohng-tswuun.<sup>37</sup>

Zheng Shuli 鄭淑麗 = **Shu Lea Cheang**

Zhuang Pu 莊普 = **Tsong Pu**

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<sup>28</sup> Wang Zhexiong (Wang Jer-hsiung): "Observations from the competition of Contemporary Art Trends in the R.O.C.", in: *Contemporary Art Trends in the Republic of China 1986*, TFAM, Taipei 1986, p. 8.

<sup>29</sup> TFAM: *Taiwan Art, 1945-1993*, TFAM, Taipei 1993, p. 248.

<sup>30</sup> TFAM: *The Transitional Eighties, Taiwan's Art Breaks New Ground*, TFAM, Taipei 2004, p. 115.

<sup>31</sup> Xiao Qin 蕭勤: *Xiao Qin: the Odyssey 1953- 1994/ 蕭勤的歷程 : 1953-1994*, TFAM, Taipei, 1995.

<sup>32</sup> TFAM: *The Transitional Eighties, Taiwan's Art Breaks New Ground*, TFAM, Taipei 2004, p. 119.

<sup>33</sup> TFAM: *The Transitional Eighties, Taiwan's Art Breaks New Ground*, TFAM, Taipei 2004, p. 108, 109.

<sup>34</sup> TFAM: *Taiwan Art, 1945-1993*, TFAM, Taipei 1993, p. 247.

<sup>35</sup> TFAM: *The Transitional Eighties, Taiwan's Art Breaks New Ground*, TFAM, Taipei 2004, p. 45.

<sup>36</sup> Jahng Young-Tswuun: *Transcendimensional Space*, Tunghai University, Taichung 1993, cover.

<sup>37</sup> Jahng Young-Tswuun: *Transcendimensional Space*, Tunghai University, Taichung 1993, p.70.

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Zhang Yongcun: 超度空間 (Chaodu Kongjian, translated as *Transcendimensional Space* in the English edition), Taizhong 1993, p. 18.

*Transcendimensional Space* 1985, Tsong Pu's work 遨遊四方 *Yaoyou sifang* (*Wandering in all directions*) in front. Source: Tsong Pu.

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*Medical Examination of Taipei Fine Arts Museum*, Lee Mingsheng 1987. Source: Lee Mingsheng, *Wode Shenti Wode Yishu*, Taipei 1993, p. 68.

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<sup>38</sup> Wang Chia-chi, “The Spectre of Freedom, Il Fantasma della Libertà”, in: *The Spectre of Freedom*, exhibition catalogue, Taipei Fine Arts Museum of Taiwan, Taipei, Venice, 2005, p. 14.

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