

## Curating Tension

### Shormi Ahmed

*‘Code Blue’ was exhibited at Taipei Contemporary Art Centre in the midst of a global pandemic in March 2020. Curated by Shormi Ahmed, the exhibition featured installation and performance works by Taiwanese artists Betty Apple and Peng Yi-Hsuan. The exhibition looked at the contemporary crisis of COVID-19 through the lens of 921 — one of the major earthquakes in Taiwan’s history of disasters. Furthermore, it addressed some pressing questions in the face of the pandemic: how do disasters shape our livelihood, society, and social experiences? What kind of collective consciousness is formed out of this shared sense of crisis and emergency? How do we address and analyse a sense of urgency that is in a constant state of flux? This article focuses on the various ways in which ‘Code Blue’ translated such experiences of emergency through artistic mediums and exhibition practices.*

Pantone’s colour of the year 2020 was PANTONE 19-4052 Classic Blue. According to Laurie Pressman, Vice President of the Pantone Color Institute, the chosen colour was “a reassuring blue, full of calm and confidence. It builds connection” (Lang 2019). The year 2020 presented the global community with circumstances that were quite the contrary. 2020 kicked off with cataclysmic disasters — bushfires, floods, earthquakes and more. As the news of these back-to-back disasters was broadcasted, people initially felt immune to the catastrophes happening “far away” from them. However, one disaster brought the entire world to a collective standstill — COVID-19. As the virus transcended geographical borders one by one, the sense of emergency became real and widespread. It was no longer a crisis on television but within immediate proximity. This was the context in which the

exhibition ‘Code Blue’ came to fruition at Taipei Contemporary Art Centre (TCAC) in March 2020 [Figure 1].



Figure 1. Peng Yi-Hsuan, *Death of Light*, 2014/2020. Installation shot at Taipei Contemporary Art Center, Taipei. Photo courtesy of the artist and curator.

The exhibition looked at the contemporary crisis of COVID-19 through the lens of 921 — one of the major earthquakes in Taiwanese history. It grappled with a number of the pressing questions in the face of the pandemic. As a part of the global community battling against a rapidly spreading pandemic, it became pertinent to ask how this crisis shapes our livelihood, society, and social experiences? What kind of collective consciousness is formed out of this shared sense of crisis and emergency? How is this mediated? How do we address and analyse a sense of urgency that is in a constant state of flux? There are a multitude of disciplines through which these questions can be approached. This essay focuses on the various ways in which we can translate such experiences of crises and emergency through artistic mediums and exhibition practices.

### **921 and Postmemory**

When in the midst of chaos and the disruption of life-as-we-know it, it is difficult to initiate a discussion regarding the long-

term impact this may have on us. One way to ascertain such discourse is to look to the past. Stemming from my interest in exhibitions about disasters, I initiated a research project based on an earthquake that rattled Taiwan on 21 September 1999 — earning it the moniker 921. The earthquake which halted the lives of Taiwanese citizens for about a week, resulted in the deaths of more than 2,400 Taiwanese people. Two decades later, the trauma and memory of 921 is still firmly rooted in Taiwan's collective consciousness, and has been passed on to subsequent generations. Such consciousness was heightened by the declaration of a nationwide state of emergency in the aftermath of 921. This brought together diverse groups of people to assist in the efforts to rebuild affected communities and neighborhoods. The American sociologist Jeffrey C. Alexander describes this rebuilding process as the construction of cultural trauma. According to him “social groups, national societies, and sometimes even entire civilisations not only cognitively identify the existence and source of human suffering but “take on board” some significant responsibility for it” (Alexander 2004, 1). In the case of 921, the collective consciousness of trauma developed an identity defined by survival and resilience. Furthermore, it was given institutional expression through the establishment of a dedicated museum and the annual memorialisation of the event. The declaration of a state of emergency and the institutionalisation of the disaster at a national level ensures the inclusion of victims, witnesses, and secondary witnesses<sup>1</sup> in the collective consciousness.

The practice of institutionalisation cultivates this consciousness across different generations and passes it on as “postmemory”, a term that — according to the Holocaust scholar Marianne Hirsch — describes the “relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before — to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (Hirsch, n.d.). Hirsch adds that, “these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right”

(Hirsch, n.d.). Thus, despite its destructive nature, 921 can be interpreted as a positive experience for Taiwanese people as their collective efforts in rebuilding the island were driven by the citizens' common consciousness of the event. Diverse social groups of people worked together under the umbrella of national rehabilitation, and this shared consciousness prevented chaos from erupting due to delays in relief efforts. The Taiwanese government made efforts to preserve and maintain this collective consciousness, and to memorialise the citizens' efforts and contributions in rebuilding the country through annual days of remembrance as well as the construction of a museum dedicated to the disaster. 921 demonstrates the potency and instrumental value of the state of emergency as a tactical tool that reflects and enacts power relations and political negotiations.

In Taiwan, the state of emergency — which was declared as a response to a disaster — fabricated a period of widespread vulnerability and created a collective psychological mindset that engendered a sense of community and identity within and across local, national, and transnational contexts. Media representations, memorials, and exhibitions, however, tend to commemorate the event itself, often leaving out the intangible affective or psychological impact of such events. But what would be an appropriate medium to represent the effects and affects of disaster? Hirsch addresses this problem by identifying the shift in commemorating traumatic historical events as a body of knowledge other than that of official institutional representation. In particular, Hirsch calls for a set of “aesthetic and institutional structures [that] best mediate the psychology of postmemory” (Hirsch 2008, 107). Hirsch’s provocation demands an intervention that is ethical and aesthetic in mediating postmemory (Hirsch 2012, 2). Supported by analysis of previous exhibitions on disasters and multiple experimental attempts, ‘Code Blue’ explored the ways in which Hirsch’s criteria can be applied in exhibition practice. The final curatorial concept identified emergency as an underlying commonality between 921 and COVID-19, thereby creating symbiosis and synergy between these two disasters. On the one hand, the comparison allowed for

the re-examination of the 921 collective consciousness within a contemporary frame of reference, creating an empathetic and affective playing field for an enlarged audience engagement. On the other hand, the exhibition deployed 921 as a map to navigate the more recent state of emergency produced by COVID-19. As a result, “tension”, an affective and psychological by-product of emergency, became the focal point of the curatorial framework of ‘Code Blue’ as a means to mediate postmemory and understand the impact of collective consciousness.

### **Aesthetics at the Intersection of Antagonism**

An emergency is a durational condition which destabilises ordinary life and engenders vulnerability (Al-Dahash et al, 2016, 1192). It produces tension due to the suspension of normalcy and the lack of familiarity in the face of sudden changes in one’s immediate circumstances. If tension occurs at the intersection of contrasting factors — it is not possible to visualise or give a tangible form to tension — it can only be felt. Therefore, in order to curate tension, it is necessary to employ a methodology that is abstract and affective. ‘Code Blue’ featured works that deploy aesthetic strategies for representing tension, ones that foregrounded with contradictory relations and forces within a spatial field by facilitating a dynamic and durational interaction that engender affect. In other words, curating tension engages in the enactment of what art and trauma theorist Jill Bennett describes as a “practical aesthetics”. For Bennett, whose work has centred art, trauma and aesthetics post 9/11, “[p]ractical aesthetics is the study of (art as a) means of apprehending the world via sense-based and affective processes — processes that touch bodies intimately and directly but that also underpin the emotions, sentiments and passions of public life.” (Bennett 2012, 3). In ‘Code Blue’, 921 and COVID-19 constituted the context and conjuncture through which tension emerged as contradiction, one enacted through the use of light, colour, sound, smell, time, and kinetics. The exhibition occupied two levels of Taipei Contemporary Art Center: installed on level one (the ground floor) was a spatial installation by Peng Yi-Hsuan and the

basement housed an audio-visual installation by Betty Apple. To anyone visiting the exhibition, the dominant and contrasting hues of blue (level one) and red (basement) were suggestive of the warning lights of emergency services vehicles.



Figure 2. Peng Yi-Hsuan, *Death of Light*, 2014/2020. Installation shot at Taipei Contemporary Art Center, Taipei. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Level one was designed to resemble a bedroom as a nod to the 921 earthquake which took place at 1:47 am [Figure 2]. Most Taiwanese inhabitants' first memory of the earthquake takes place in their bedroom. The entire installation was shielded by a curtain which created the impression of a private space. Viewers who entered the installation were shushed to silence as it appeared that they were trespassing an intimate space. Set against this backdrop, Peng's installation of mosquito lights defamiliarised an otherwise ordinary atmosphere. Peng's artwork thrives in stillness, silence, and darkness — punctuated by the dim glow of the mosquito lamps littered across the room.

The occasional buzz of mosquitoes flying into them evoked the unpredictable conditions and inevitability of death. A giant germicidal lamp at the center of the room, completely out of place, should have served as an assurance that the viewers were perhaps at the most disinfected exhibition space in the world

amidst a global pandemic. However, its awkward appearance and ability to kill (both bacteria and human cells) passively and silently only added to the tension in the room. If the lamp was switched on at any given moment, viewers would have been required to evacuate the premises immediately. Lastly, a dead plant at the corner of the room and an abandoned bed conveyed an allegorical allusion to death and emergency [Figure 3]. A key part of Peng's installation was his performance which took place at the exhibition opening [Figure 4].



Figure 3. Peng Yi-Hsuan, *Death of Light*, 2014/2020. Installation shot at Taipei Contemporary Art Center, Taipei. Photo courtesy of the artist and curator.

During the performance, Peng sat at the desk and wrote in his journal as the viewers only caught a glimpse of this shadow against the white curtain that separated them [Figure 5]. At one point, he suddenly got up and announced in Chinese that he was going to switch on the germicidal lamp and demanded immediate evacuation. Peng's action earned a frantic reaction from the viewers as most of them rushed to the door, some non-Chinese speaking viewers looked around in confusion and others simply followed the crowd. Peng's performance was a way to tap into the tension that was embodied in his installation.



Figure 4. Peng Yi-Hsuan, *Death of Light*, 2014 / 2020. Installation shot at Taipei Contemporary Art Center, Taipei. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5. Peng Yi-Hsuan, *Death of Light*, 2014/2020. Installation shot at Taipei Contemporary Art Center, Taipei. Photo courtesy of the artist and curator.

While Peng's installation underlined the mortal and corporeal elements of emergency, Apple's installation was evocative of its ethereal, psychological and instrumental aspects. The basement of TCAC was transformed into *4:4 Zhen Energy Church* — a capitalist, cult worship altar that promised to redeem your soul in times of disaster [Figure 6]. Flooded in the glow of a red

light box and accompanied by images of Betty Apple as Zhen god — a Chinese mythology inspired figure which embodies the notion of movement and trepidation [Figure 7], the installation welcomed visitors into the basement where participants were invited to partake in a ritual. The installation was composed of a video projection as an altar, a yoga mat, a looping meditation soundtrack in the background as well as an instructional video.



Figure 6. Betty Apple, *4:4 Zhen Energy Church*, 2020. Installation shot at Taipei Contemporary Art Centre, Taipei. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Figure 7. Betty Apple, *4:4 Zhen Energy Church*, 2020. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Marked by pseudo-religious iconography in Apple's signature cyberpunk aesthetic style, the installation explored the concept of fear, cult and worship rituals as tools of psychological manipulation. A core part of activating Apple's work was the inaugural digital meditation workshop led by a satirical cult persona embodied by the artist herself. The performance, or rather the sermon, was live streamed on Apple's Instagram during the exhibition opening.

This mediation reflected the modernisation of religion while also indicating how ideologies of various kinds are easily spread during a pandemic. The live streamed performance was digitally archived post-performance and looped at the basement on a smaller screen as a video tutorial for voluntary participation. A QR code on the wall allowed participants to make digital monetary donations to purchase the meditation soundtrack [Figures 8 and 9].

The effectiveness of this meditation is measured by the amount donated to the church — the more you pay the more you get. The blatant and unapologetic capitalistic attitude is a humorous yet critical nod to the unquestioning attitude of the general population towards figures of authority.

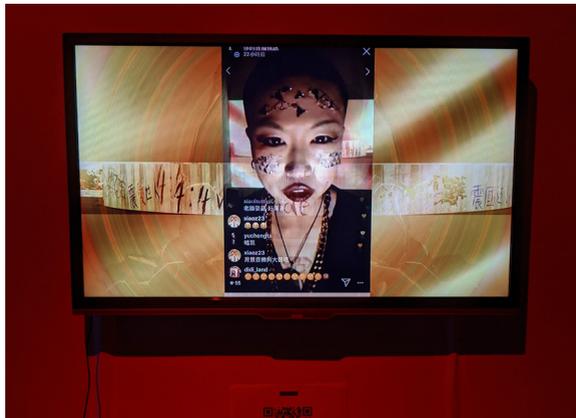


Figure 8. Betty Apple, *4:4 Zhen Energy Church*, 2020. Installation shot at Taipei Contemporary Art Centre, Taipei. Photo courtesy of the artist.

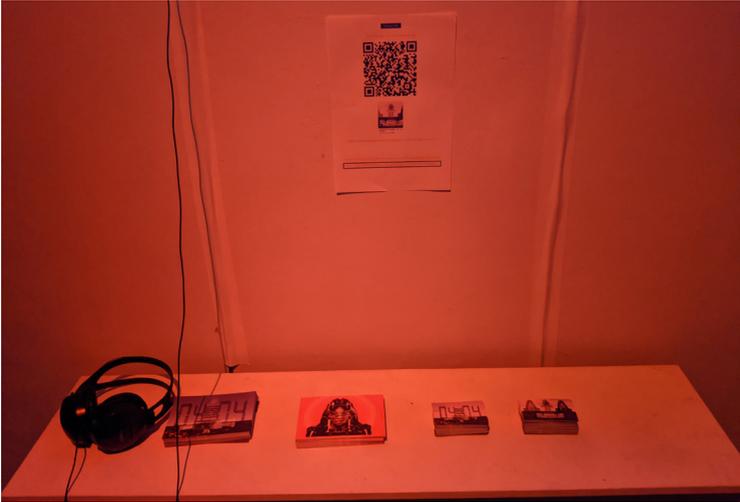


Figure 9. Betty Apple, *4:4 Zhen Energy Church*, 2020. Installation shot at Taipei Contemporary Art Centre, Taipei. Photo courtesy of the artist.

While Peng's installation was dominated by an eerie blue glow, Apple's installation was flooded in red — creating an antagonistic mood in stark contrast [Figure 10]. On the one hand, Peng's work required quiet and cautious contemplation in navigating the space. On the other hand, Apple's basement was filled with the energy of a loud and suspenseful soundtrack, and required an elaborate ritual dance as participation. After each performance, level 1 had the faint odor of a sterilised space and the basement smelled of incense akin to a temple. The various conflicting elements in the exhibition created a destabilising and disorienting effect that is similar to the conditions of an emergency.

Previous exhibitions depicting disaster stricken sites or victims fail to challenge the voyeurism embodied in the position of the viewer. Similarly, participatory projects led by artists tend to create a hierarchy of power between the facilitator and the audience. By contrast, through the conceptual development of artistic production and exhibition design, 'Code Blue' avoided

literal representation of the disaster —thus, avoiding what Nato Thompson describes as “ripping the subject from its context... [for] facile consumption” (Thompson 2015, 109). Moreover, it adopted a pragmatic approach in acknowledging the power dynamic between artists, curator and the audience. Instead of a pseudo-attempt at eliminating the power imbalance, the exhibition repurposed it in adding to the tension in the space. For instance, Yi-Hsuan’s act of sudden evacuation and Betty’s position as a leader were different ways of exerting their dominance over the space and the audiences. Both artists were instigators of affective experience of emergency, however, the resultant tension was inevitably alleviated by the undulating power relations between the artist and the audience at play. While it is impossible to create tension without the presence of the audience, the artists are inevitably the ones to initiate the dialogue and orchestrate the experience.



Figure 10. Peng Yi-Hsuan, *Death of Light*, 2014 / 2020. Installation shot at Taipei Contemporary Art Center, Taipei. Photo courtesy of the artist and curator.

‘Code Blue’ served as a mediator and a platform to engage in a dialogue of traumatic memories. It connected two seemingly disparate disasters by initiating a dialogue about emergency. Thus, the exhibition concept discarded the notion of temporality by merging two disasters that occurred 20 years apart. Notably, this dialogue steered away from linear, prototypical, and descriptive accounts of traumatic memory. Instead, the curatorial strategy relied on the synergy between artworks, spatial design, and social context to aesthetically reconfigure the experience of 921 so as to produce anecdotes that are sense-based and affective. This aesthetic reconfiguration is a process which traces an alternative genealogy of an event to generate “counter-memories, or conditions under which different actualisations might take place” (Bennett 2012, 43). In other words, the artworks, exhibition design, and performances created a sensory experience which allowed viewers to tap into the psyche of the emergency circumstance associated with 921. In doing so, the exhibition provided a space for contemplation on the COVID-19 state of emergency and its present-day socio-political implication.

Curating tension is easier in theory than in practice. ‘Code Blue’ provided viewers with a platform to reflect on the current pandemic, the state of emergency, and the role they play in it. While most visitors affirmed the affective experience of emergency within the exhibition, not all of them successfully engaged in the dialogues produced in the exhibition. Nevertheless, the strategy of curating tension offers a different modality for conceptualising exhibition practice by enabling one to explore the dynamic relations between objects, visitors, and social context so as to “visualise the network of relations” through abstract representation, and sensory and affective relations (Bennett 2012, 7). At a time when tension is an ever expanding state of being, it is important to seek non-destructive ways in which we can express, discuss, and release it. To quote, Laurie Pressman on Pantone’s return to a classic selection, “It’s not about doing it like you did in the past, but reinterpreting it” (Pressman cited in Lang 2019).

**Endnotes:**

1. I would like to differentiate between victims, witnesses and secondary survivors. Victims are those who experienced the direct effects of the event, resulting in the loss of lives, homelessness or those who survived life-threatening circumstances. A witness is someone who experienced the earthquake, however they remained safe and relatively unaffected. Lastly, secondary witnesses are those who were toddlers, born post-earthquake or not present in Taiwan at the time of the earthquake. However, they are aware of the event through anecdotes, historical accounts, or visits to museums or monuments.

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#### **Notes on Contributor:**

Shormi Ahmed is a Bangladeshi-born art practitioner from Hong Kong. She was the Head of Arts at Duddell's Hong Kong and has executed several public art projects including the "Carnival" fundraiser for Amnesty International HK (Hong Kong) and Art in the Bar for CoBo Social (Hong Kong). She curated 'Code Blue' at Taipei Contemporary Art Centre (2020) and co-curated '在 / 不在 | Negation of You' at Nanhai Art Gallery, Taipei (2019). She holds a diploma in Industrial Design and has earned her undergraduate degree in Fine Arts and Comparative Literature from the University of Hong Kong. As an arts practitioner, Shormi is keen on experimenting with curatorial methodologies through inter-disciplinary approaches in addressing the intricacies and nuances of contemporary socio-cultural occurrences — with a particular focus on South, Southeast and East Asia. <https://www.behance.net/shormiahmed>

**EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**

Francis Maravillas.

**ASSISTANT EDITORS**

Leora Joy Jones, Christopher Whitfield.

**ART DIRECTION & DESIGN**

Leora Joy Jones, Justine Rigal, Christopher Whitfield.

**CONTRIBUTING WRITERS**

Shormi Ahmed, Fernanda Hsiuh, Leora Joy Jones, Francis Maravillas, Lu Pei-Yi, Cullen Pitney, Daniella Romano, Christopher Whitfield.

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