

# southerly



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## Editorial

*Southerly* is a platform for art writing and criticism. It seeks to track the currency and intensities of ideas and practice in Taiwan and the Asia Pacific. From short and long-form criticism, essays and reviews to dialogues, commentary and experimental prose, *Southerly* prospects the shifting landscape of art and exhibitions in the region. The journal is interested in possible approaches, persuasions and trajectories in art and curating and the complex ecologies that they inhabit and engender. The name of the journal signifies both place and orientation. It registers a distinctive site and locus of creativity and exchange, a reflexive mode of inquiry and the varied pathways, connections and entry points in art and exhibition-making in Taiwan and beyond.

Cullen Pitney opens this issue with a probing take on the ubiquity of live performance and ephemeral modes of interactivity in museums across Taiwan and elsewhere. The art world's growing fixation on the dynamics of presence and participation, Pitney notes, is symptomatic of a shift in the economy away from the exchange of goods towards the transaction of experience. In particular, he elucidates the ways in which the aesthetic codification of experiences in immersive installations and interactive happenings increasingly mimics the commodification of experiential human relations in a service-oriented digital economy.

Leora Joy Jones's essay examines the ways in which international art biennales such as the 2018 Taipei Biennial and Manifesta 12 in Palermo have sought to address the creeping effects of climate change. Taking a deep dive into their articulations of the looming ecological crises, Jones foregrounds the ways in which environmental concerns are complexly entangled with a range of social, political and economic forces. Significantly, she draws our attention to art's role in decolonizing nature and its capacity to engage the public by engendering critical and affective imaginings of the anthropocene.

Shormi Ahmed reflects on her exhibition 'Code Blue' in order to critically probe the tensile and affective experience of crisis and emergency. Exhibited at Taipei Contemporary Art Centre in the midst of a global pandemic in March 2020, 'Code Blue' featured installation and performance works by Taiwanese artists Betty Apple and Peng Yi-Hsuan, and foregrounded the ways in which contemporary crisis of COVID-19 may be understood as mediated by the (post) memory of the 921 earthquake in Taiwan. Significantly, for Ahmed, the strategy of curating tension not only engenders a shared sense of crisis and emergency; it also amplifies the dynamic, sensory and affective relations engendered by the works in the exhibition.

Meanwhile, Daniella Romano examines the 'Everyday Life and Landscapes of the Island: Betel Nuts, Bananas, Sugar Cane and Palms' exhibition held at the Tainan Art Museum in 2020, foregrounding the ways in which the colonial gaze has constructed Taiwanese landscape and identity. In particular, Romano draws attention to the British photographer John Thompson's depiction of Taiwan in the nineteenth century, along with the system of classification and cultivation that underpinned the Japanese environmental policy. She argues that recent artistic interrogations of these colonial imaginings of landscape and the environment potentially offers a deeper understanding of the complexities of contemporary Taiwanese identity.

Leora Joy Jones and Christopher Whitfield sat down with Nobuo Takamori to discuss the key themes and ideas underlying 'The Secret South: From Cold War Perspective to Global South in Museum Collection' exhibition that he co-curated with Ping Lin at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM) in 2020. Featuring works mainly drawn from the TFAM's collection, alongside those sourced from over sixteen museums across Taiwan and elsewhere, the exhibition probed Taiwan's complex relationship with countries and regions in the Global South during the fraught geopolitical context of the Cold War. Nimble conducted, Jones

and Whitfield's interview with Takamori prompts reflection on Taiwan's identity and place in the world in the context of the history of the Cold War and the emergent relations across places and regions in the South.

Rounding out this issue Lu Pei-Yi, Leora Joy Jones, Fernanda Hsiuh and Christopher Whitfield offer a set of critical takes on 'The Secret South' exhibition by focussing on different aspects of the show. In particular, they each offered distinct perspectives and entry points into 'The Secret South', drawing attention to the complex entanglements between Taiwan, Southeast Asia, Africa and Latin America and the ways in which these have been shaped by the process of decolonization and the geopolitics of the Cold War.

Taken together, this inaugural issue presents a diverse constellation of perspectives arising from dialogues and encounters with art and exhibitions, and the dense currents of ideas and practice in Taiwan and the Asia Pacific.

**Francis Maravillas**

**Editor-in-chief**

## Left to Our Own Devices

### Cullen Pitney

*It seems that every exhibition today is inaugurated by ephemeral performances or time-based participatory happenings within the space of the museum. The stock of the plastic arts has been devalued, and in its place, experience has become the preferred material for contemporary art, like some sort of intangible art world cryptocurrency. This shift has likely occurred not in response to but as a symptom of a concurrent shift in the economy: the shift from the exchange of goods and services to the transaction of experiences. Perhaps the appearance of an economy of presence in the museum indicates that our relationship to experience has changed altogether and that it is now an object as defunct as any other of the artifacts lining the galleries of the museum.*

Lately I find myself going to museums *at* certain times, coordinating my visit to make sure I'm in attendance for the esoteric gyrations of... an edgy performance artist I met at the club last weekend? Or a literal Buddhist monk? Are these categories mutually exclusive? Most likely not, but regardless we find ourselves gathering in museums and galleries to periodically experience or participate in something. Now it seems like an exhibition is not complete until it is accompanied by some supplementary performance, or a workshop, or whatever other staged ephemeral gathering explores the same themes as the otherwise stationary materials of the exhibition with the added twist of a time-based medium. There's a growing imperative in the art world to be "present" in the exhibition, to address the calibration of its time and space. Through these experiences we are meant to become aware of some allegedly unspoken

dynamics at work, to contemplate the act of being a spectator, or our relationship to the other attendees, intimacy, bodies, spaces, bodies in spaces. At least, this is the curatorial language surrounding it.

Such is the shape of contemporary art these days: artists take up experience as their primary material, creating work that invites participation and interactivity, meanwhile curators busy themselves reconfiguring art institutions as stages for these experiences. Last time I checked the discourse, the museum was a...burial ground? A crypt? A cryogenic freezing chamber? Whichever metaphor you choose, the museum is generally where objects go to die, or to be indefinitely preserved and inaccessible. What are we to make of the fact that experience has joined these ranks, filed away among objects as anachronistic to us as tribal masks or Renaissance depictions of Biblical scenes in adjacent wings?

On Airbnb, there's a new tab called "Experiences" and an even newer tab for "Online Experiences," [Figure 1] meant to facilitate richer and more authentic brand of traveling, through such delights as mid-March cherry blossom picnics in Tokyo or a debaucherous romp through the streets of Manhattan under the auspices of a local drag queen. This is one of the most literal examples of how experience has taken on an objectliness, transacted with the same ease of buying a bunch of bananas or a cup of coffee. Economists James Gilmore and Joseph Pine theorise that this kind of channel of exchange is symptomatic of what they call the "experience economy," the last in a four-stage evolution of economic value from commodity, to goods, to services, and finally to experience. According to their article in the Harvard Business Review, this evolution begins with an economy based around the extraction of raw materials from the earth. Those commodities are then fashioned into goods, which take on a higher market value for the labor of their production. Once the goods reach an optimised level of production, the economy shifts towards the exchange of services, that is, intangible goods. Next and last is the experience economy, where marketplaces akin to Airbnb's become possible (Gilmore and Pine 1998).

Dates Time of day Price Language offered Great for groups + Family friendly + Animals +

### Best sellers

				
★ 4.96 (3246) · Portugal Sangria and Secrets with Drag Queens From \$877 / person	★ 4.95 (253) · United... Living Room Legends Scavenger Hunt Game From \$211 / person	★ 4.96 (961) · Mexico Cook Mexican Street Tacos with a Pro Chef From \$546 / person	★ 4.97 (1578) · Mexico Coffee Masterclass From \$300 / person	★ 4.94 (620) · Gre... 'True vs False' Historical Game From \$421 / per

### Starting in the next 6 hours



Figure 1. Screenshot of Airbnb Experience Marketplace. Photo by Cullen Pitney.

A similar four-step transformation of art has occurred in tandem with, or more likely, as a result of the evolution of the economy. We begin with the art object plain and simple: the utilitarian object before its symbolic or indexical use. Then the object was abstracted by one degree into goods, and the painting became a deposit of an economic exchange. The art object had become a byproduct of an interaction, a marker of social contract. Shortly thereafter the painting became the universe condensed into the picture plane, trusted in its capacity to render life in forms otherwise inexpressible under the constraints of physics, to show on the tableau how the world feels but does not appear. Art then leapt out of the canvas, from the picture plane into the world it once intended to depict. And finally, art leaps once more into experience: art became lived, enacted in 3D with bodies.



Figure 2. Baboo, *Corona Villa*, 2020, Installation, live streaming, interactive performance, mixed media. Photo by Cullen Pitney.

Over the summer of 2020, Jo Hsiao and Yi-Wei Kong curated an exhibition at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum called ‘Between Earth and the Sky, the Spiritual State of Our Times.’ As the introductory wall-text stated, “in the contemporary experience, when the participant [visitor] is both the subject of the work and its material, live exhibitions are not so much a new taste in art as they are a wide variety of things that have not been precisely described yet.” The works in the exhibition were almost exclusively immersive installations, ephemeral experiences, interactive happenings, mediums that require a “being-in.” Visitors could check into Baboo’s *Corona Villa* (2020), [Figure 2] an “anti-epidemic hotel” consisting of glass isolation chambers outfitted with beds, desks, and monitors through which artists periodically check in on the occupants. In Ching-Yueh Roan’s *Wavering on a Mountain Path—A Rescue Plan for My Novel* (2020), [Figure 3] the artist asks participants to sit at elementary school

desks and recite words appearing on screen into megaphones. These works create what the curators call a “live” exhibition, drawing on Heidegger’s idea that Being is about Being with Others, and staging this interaction in the museum.



Figure 3. Ching-Yueh Roan, *Wavering on a Mountain Path — A Rescue Plan for My Novel*, 2020, Mixed media installation, film, text, performance. Photo by Cullen Pitney.

Artist Hito Steyerl calls this the “terror of total *Dasein*”, drawing from another of Heidegger’s concepts. She writes:

There are some rational reasons for an economy of physical human presence in the art field: the physical presence of people is, on average, cheaper than the presence of works that need to be shipped, insured, and/or installed. Presence puts so-called butts on seats and thus provides legitimacy to cultural institutions competing for scarce funding [...] But presence also means permanent

availability without any promise of compensation. In the age of the reproducibility of almost everything physical, human presence is one of the few things that cannot be multiplied indefinitely, an asset with some inbuilt scarcity (Steyerl 2017, 23).

As Steyerl identifies, the art world's growing fixation on presence is not a response to the experience economy, but a consequence of it. The 'Between Earth and the Sky' exhibition exemplifies that this is the spiritual state of our times, one in which experience, being-present and being-together, has become a commodity unto itself. More importantly, Steyerl narrows in on what exactly has caused a surge in experience's value on the spiritual stock market. In a culture overly reliant on technology, experience is one of the only things that remains irreproducible, and therefore scarce. For the art world then, intangible experience, more than photography, painting, or sculpture, becomes a highly valuable currency.

If art has undergone this shift into an economy of experience, then the nature of experience remains to be inquired further. To borrow again from Heidegger, human experience finds its foundation in our relationship with objects in our proximity, or "ready-to-hand," and those at a distance. The constitutive force behind experience is always a sort of thrusting forward, a catapulting of the mind into the distant realm of unknown objects. One's being is never in stasis with regards to the objects around it, but is instead always throwing itself into the future, into uncertainty, anticipating something. Being is constituted by a constant hum of fear and anxiety in the face of immense possibility, and one's movement forward in life is simply an attempt to fulfill any number of these possibilities in the face of the certainty of death. Along with this process is unveiling, discovering, coming to understand: these are the notches which demarcate experience (Heidegger 2013).

Combine this with Walter Benjamin's seminal essay *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility*, where he writes: "Above all, [technological reproducibility] enables the

original to meet the recipient halfway, whether in the form of the photograph or in that of a gramophone record.” (Benjamin 2005, 103). For Benjamin, technological reproducibility severs the art object from its place. There is no longer the necessity to traverse distances in order to come into contact with the object. Consequently, the art object loses the tie to its ‘here and now.’ But if for Heidegger one’s being is constituted by moving towards distant objects, what happens when instead those objects approximate themselves to us? What atrocity does technological reproducibility commit upon experience? When everything is ready-to-hand and infinitely accessible in our proximity, there is no need to project oneself; all that we had been anticipating has approached us. But then, when the distance from these objects shrinks, so too does the stage for experience. The capacity for infinite accessibility of art objects that technological reproducibility affords us claims an equivalent sacrifice in return: it is the ability to experience. Heidegger characterises being as a constant state of anxiety, throwing itself forward in anticipation. Perhaps this is Benjamin’s concept of “aura” which he describes as “A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be” (Benjamin 2005, 104). Aura is an implicit awareness of an object’s unavailability, its un-ready-to-handedness as Heidegger might say. It is the gravitational pull objects exert on us when they are singular and lie at a distance, the force that for Heidegger prompts us to anticipate, to project our beings across great distances. But when these objects come within our grasp, their aura disappears, and as a result that fundamental anticipation subsides and the motivational force of experience dissolves.

Benjamin also argues that when aura disappears, authenticity goes along with it; at a time when the object is infinitely available, the value of the singular original dissolves (Benjamin 2005, 105). Curiously, authenticity is a concern of Heidegger as well. If being is propelled by an array of forces — towards others, towards death, towards distant objects — how can being be authentic? Heidegger locates the answer in what he calls “resoluteness,” or the process by which being hushes these forces

and recedes back into itself, heeding the call of the conscience. It is when one attends to this inner voice that one brings oneself into authenticity: “Resoluteness brings the Self right into its current concerned Being-alongside what is ready-to-hand, and pushes it into solicitous Being with Others.” (Heidegger 2013, 344). In being resolute one evaluates one’s environment, deeply assessing only that which is ready-to-hand, available, and therein lies the authentic being: “the resolution is precisely the discursive projection of what is factually possible at the time.” (Heidegger 2013, 345). We see then how when objects previously at a distance come into proximity that this process of finding authenticity can be troubled. With technological reproducibility, everything is always ready-to-hand, and so those factual possibilities multiply beyond the point of comprehensibility. Technological reproducibility forecloses not only the possibility of the authentic original, but also the prospect of authentic being.

Since the time that Benjamin wrote, not only art objects but objects of any nature have become infinitely accessible and therefore endlessly ready-to-hand. The entire world becomes proximal, but there is of course a trade-off. The distances across which being catapults itself shrink. There is no violence, uncertainty, unknowing in our being and consequently no catalyst for authentic experience. In Heidegger’s work, the call that brings being back into the authentic self comes from within, but it is as if this call beckons from the heights of a distant mountain; present and loud yet its origin is unknown. The instructions of this call are not able to be articulated into language, but rather they are felt in the body (Heidegger 2013, 340). Understanding this, the need for contemporary art to reaffirm experience within the museum comes into clarity. The works in the ‘Between Earth and the Sky’ exhibition call out to us in much the same way as the call from within, reminding us of what it feels like to be authentically within an environment that is ready-to-hand. They allow us to remember the sensations of meeting, interacting, and feeling one’s instincts guide the body.

But in the same way that in the museum we gaze upon

Renaissance paintings as deposits from the past, we can look to this new contemporary art to confirm that experience is a relic of a bygone era. Experience has been subsumed into the historical. It is an artifact to be filed away in an archive. Has the role of the museum changed? No. It still performs the same function. It is just that the nature of life has changed and we can see evidence of this within the wings of the museum. Whereas we once went to the museum to understand our 3D lives upon the 2D tableau, we now visit the museum to understand our lives on a stage that is 3D. This indicates that we now occur in 4D or something beyond, in the aether and inhabiting flows of data. That authentic experience now resides within the museum tells us that it is henceforth forbidden and unknowable. Our relationship towards experience can be nothing but the mourner's gaze falling upon a tombstone: remember what it felt like to know the body's relationship to space? To each other? Remember what intimacy felt like? Is this sad? Perhaps.

Art is one of the few domains that still holds sway over the spiritual, just as 'Between Earth and the Sky' shows. And what it asks of us is to come face-to-face with the truth of our spiritual state, and recognise that experience is under siege. But the growing aversion of a public towards the arts, and the waning importance of an aesthetic education, one that gives the vocabulary with which to find art's relevance, perhaps indicates a general reluctance to confront the fact that the spiritual state of our times is one without spirit altogether, one in which we have already alienated our rights to experience over to a set of surveillance and image circulation technologies. In an increasingly secular age with a shrinking moral fabric and widespread proliferation of personal electronic devices, technological reproducibility entices with such lustrous promises as knowledge, proximity, and intimacy, but only for a Faustian exchange. Left to our own devices, there's not much stopping us anymore from reaching into our pockets and overindulging in our Mephistophelean polyhedrons, all the while becoming estranged from experience. In the end this is why it remains important to take up art as an object of study. Not in the research of beauty,

nor to refine taste, but to understand human experience as rendered on flat surface, from cave marking to screen with detour through canvas.



Figure 4. Yu Cheng-ta, *Durian Pharmaceutical MST Product Briefing*, performance, 2020, Taipei Fine Arts Museum. Photo courtesy of the artist © FAMEME 2020.

I am at the museum at 2:30 pm on a Saturday, waiting for the performance to begin inside the ‘Between Earth and the Sky’ exhibition. Eccentric artist Yu Cheng-ta takes the stage as his alter-ego FAMEME, pseudo-pharmaceutical snake-oil salesman and self-proclaimed social media magnate [Figure 4]. He is an extremely contemporary character. FAMEME is here to give the product briefing for MST, a new pill that his company, Durian Pharmaceutical, has developed using the heretofore untapped wealth of nutrition found in durian extract, aka MISOHTHORNII. He promises the audience that just one pill of MST can deliver 24 hours of pure happiness, eliminating the need for all other antidepressants on the market, and exercise. This pill, he insists, is the only thing people need to become truly, irreversibly happy. “People always ask me, FAMEME, why are you always so happy? But I think you should look in the mirror and ask yourselves this question: why are you so *unhappy*?” He holds the microphone towards the audience: “Are you happy?” Silence.

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# Decolonising Nature: The Taipei Biennial 2018 and Manifesta 12

Leora Joy Jones

*The Taipei Biennial 2018 'Post-Nature: A Museum as an Ecosystem' and Manifesta 12 'The Planetary Garden – Cultivating Coexistence' provided two divergent responses to the ecological crisis. Like many exhibitions that examine our vulnerable planet, these two recurring shows – one housed in a single museum in Asia and the other sprawled across the Italian city of Palermo in Europe – challenged normative beliefs about humanity's dominant relationship with nature and reframed our species' role in ecological destruction. The peripatetic Manifesta 12 framed Palermo as a garden, while the Taipei Biennial 2018 situated the Taipei Fine Arts Museum as an ecosystem. Despite the differing scales and locations of their settings, both shows advocated for the decolonisation of nature and the intimate coexistence, collaboration and interdependence of all species. This essay details how certain artworks in these two biennials make radical propositions that counter and critique contemporary capitalist society, by proposing alternative routes into the future and embracing contaminated diversity and coexistence.*

Staying alive – for every species – requires livable collaborations. Collaboration means working across difference, which leads to contamination. Without collaborations, we all die... If a rush of troubled stories is the best way to tell about contaminated diversity, then it's time to make that rush part of our knowledge practices (Anna Tsing 2015, 28–34)

Under towering ferns, three naked men walk through the dense, damp forests of Taiwan. Their bare feet step over mossy rocks as they make their way deeper into the undergrowth. The rasping calls of cicadas and other insects serve as the only soundtrack to this slow-paced film. A man languidly reaches above his head to pull a frond down toward his body. He begins to lick the plant. Both hands bring the delicate leaves to his open mouth. The camera holds the scene a little too long. His eyes are shut, his tongue protruding. His back is to us. It arches. A pale creature consumed by a landscape of green. In another scene — this time a close up — a man forcibly bites and rips at a plant, guttural noises escaping his lips as he mangles the fern with his teeth, as he is overcome with lust. This is *Pteridophilia* (2016–ongoing) [Figure 1], an eco-queer film by Zheng Bo, in which he collaborates with Taiwanese BDSM practitioners who venture into the forests of Taiwan to press their sleek bodies close to ferns and other plants, to both expand on and provocatively query (and queer) our understanding of human-nature relationships.

Why is it considered morally appropriate to consume plants but not to copulate with them? Discussing this evocative open-call proposal for radical interspecies love and inclusive change, Bo says, “only when we extend our imagination can we learn to appreciate the complex existence of all living things... [and] learn to live more intelligently on this planet.”<sup>1</sup> Bo’s call for livable collaborations echoes the anthropologist Anna Tsing’s request in the quote above, for humanity to embrace contaminated diversity in our search for coexistence. This series of films was exhibited at both the Taipei Biennial 2018 (Taiwan) and Manifesta 12 (Italy) as it’s intimacy and sensuality exemplify ideas that counter conventional understandings of humanity’s domination over nature, critiquing the way the planet has been colonised.

Since the turn of the century, there has been a heightened awareness of art’s role in raising public awareness of the accelerating ecological crisis. This has coincided with an increase in international exhibitions on art and the climate crisis, as well as a growing recognition of art’s potential to open up new horizons for different ways of living and enacting change in the

Anthropocene — the name given to the current geological age defined by humankind’s actions. A number of key exhibitions<sup>2</sup> have provided conceptual, cultural, and community-led responses to our vulnerable planet, emphasising the limitations of our current systems, as well as the threats posed by the climate crisis. Ecological artistic practices and exhibitions propose radical ways to reframe society’s approach to the environment, and as such, have the potential to challenge prevailing normative beliefs that separate humans from nature.



Figure 1. Zheng Bo, *Pteridophilia 2*, 2018. Single Channel Video, 4K Color Sound, 20 mins. Zheng Bo. Courtesy of the artist and TFAM.

Environmental historian Libby Robin described ecology as “the science of empire” (Demos 2016, 14), as it is far more than

the study of nature, encompassing bureaucratic, military and economic authority over living ecosystems. The art historian and cultural critic T.J Demos goes so far as to say that ecology is “a multifarious, complex, and at times contradictory pattern of bureaucratic rationalization, scientific and technological mastery, military domination, integration within the expanding capitalist economy, and legal systematization in order to manage and maximize the possibilities of resource exploitation” (Demos 2016, 14). Since the rise of the British Empire, colonialism has spread across the planet, and with it, notions of how nature can be reshaped, exploited, conserved, and discarded. Neocolonial practices of conservation and extraction remain in use today, and these have transformed the planet. In other words, nature has been colonised via conceptual frameworks, such as ecology, as they enable extractive relationships with our environment. In response to how ecology has been wielded as a tool of extraction and colonisation, Demos argues that ecological artistic practices can help instead decolonise nature (Demos 2016, 16) as they inform and educate the public about the environment and our perceived dominance over it. In order to decolonise nature, the legacies of British imperialism that are evident today — such as capitalism, neocolonial ecological practices and globalisation — must be taken into account and addressed, as they still affect the ways in which much of society and governments approach the natural world. Contemporary understandings of nature must be diversified in order to decolonise nature. The rush of troubled stories from around the world can be integrated into our knowledge practices (Tsing 2015, 28-34) via ecological art practices.

For Demos in particular, this decolonisation of nature is activated through environmental artistic practices; as they reflect on, assess, and critique the established powers and regulations that govern society; ultimately serving to broaden and complicate our understanding of the climate catastrophe and our relationship with it. These artistic practices intimately interrogate the structures and regulations that have been imposed on the environment for centuries. They serve as road

signs to alternative routes to relate to nature and conservation, contrary to those used by corporations, governments, and other neo-colonial systems that master and appropriate the earth. This decolonisation that Demos argues for takes into account INDIGENOUS practices, national borders, societal norms and cultural movements, as well as existing ecological theories. Through the lens of environmental artistic practices, Demos accentuates the need to respect and integrate the teachings of INDIGENOUS communities who effectively and equitably integrate conservation practices into everyday life.

As such, ecological art and exhibitions are potentially radical political tools beckoning society to consider how to care for a world we have exploited. They can be utilised to ultimately disrupt or rearrange what the philosopher Jacques Ranciere refers to as the “set of perception between what is visible, thinkable, and understandable, and what is not” (Ranciere cited in Wójcik 2015). Since environmental art is often in dialogue with and opposition to political rhetoric and mandated policies that prescribe how resources are used and distributed, it challenges conventional normative structures and policies that render the environment vulnerable to extraction and exploitation. To be clear, art does not have political power: it cannot change policies, but it can disrupt viewers’ perceptions of established notions of justice and destruction, agency and conservation.

In 2018, two biennials, both in their 12th edition, engaged in dialogue on the Anthropocene, framing ecological issues in divergent ways. Both shows advocated for a decolonisation of nature, as Demos frames it, or “contaminated diversity” which Tsing describes as the coexistence, collaboration and interdependence of all species (Tsing 2015, 30). This drive to decolonise the natural world integrates environmental activism and awareness as a means to challenge the ways in which neoliberal globalisation and expansion have exploited this green earth. It also posits that intimacy, care and grounded relations with the planet and all living creatures can radically help counter the harm already caused.



Figure 2. View of the front of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum. 2018. Photo by Leora Joy Jones.

The Taipei Biennial 2018 ‘Post-Nature: A Museum as an Ecosystem’ helped to question how artistic practices and individuals can work to collectively reimagine our role as perpetrators of earth’s destruction. Held in Taipei, Taiwan, at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM) (17 November 2018–10 March 2019) [Figure 2], this venue was framed as an ecosystem to address urgent international and regional environmental issues. ‘Manifesta 12 — The Planetary Garden, Cultivating Coexistence’ opened a few months earlier, and was sprawled across the entire city of Palermo, Italy (16 June–4 November 2018). It posited that the planet can be viewed as a garden, with humanity as its caretakers. Both shows were shaped by their physical locations as well as each regions’ social, political and economic dynamics. Despite the differing scales and locations of these settings — a museum in Asia and a city in Europe — both radically suggest we decolonise nature, and question the entrenched human/non-human divide to examine our role in the Anthropocene, as well as the ramifications of the extractive politics of capital. By framing a museum as an ecosystem, the Taipei Biennial

2018 highlighted how collaboration and coexistence can help society address urgent ecological matters. In contrast, Manifesta 12 positioned Palermo as a garden to engage with how human migration and syncretism is intertwined with the natural world and the climate crisis.

Both the Taipei Biennial 2018 and Manifesta 12 invited multidisciplinary practitioners such as artists, architects, biologists, activists, social groups, scientists, environmental communities, film-makers, writers, and experts from diverse fields to provide alternative approaches to dealing with disaster capitalism and environmental destruction. As such, these aesthetic practices are often interdisciplinary and collaborative, representing the multifaceted relationships that exist between art and other disciplines. Both shows challenged normative societal assumptions about humanity's relationship with the planet. Here, I examine the aims, accomplishments, and shortcomings of these two exhibitions by offering a comparative analysis of their engagement with ideas around the Anthropocene and how works exhibited exemplify the need to decolonise nature. These shows reveal how the wide ranging effects of capitalism and globalisation are linked to environmental destruction, and how fostering intimacy with nature can counter this.

### **The Taipei Biennial 2018 – ‘Post-Nature: A Museum as an Ecosystem’**

Like all previous Taipei Biennials, the 2018 edition took place at TFAM. The curators — Mali Wu (Taiwan) and Francesco Manacorda (Italy) — invited 42 local and international multidisciplinary artists and other practitioners to examine ecological issues in the oldest art museum in Taiwan. This show explored urgent environmental concerns by configuring TFAM as an ecosystem, operating within a wider set of interlinked social, cultural, political and economic environments.

Wu and Manacorda reimagined the museum as an ecosystem to assist TFAM with three objectives: to recognise the institution's role as a social actor for the citizens of Taiwan; to aid ecological issues worldwide by contributing to

global discussions; and to best assist TFAM in implementing environmental changes (Wu and Manacorda 2019, 15–16). The first two goals were achieved through considered cross-disciplinary platforms and diverse programming which were established within and outside the museum’s walls. This included lectures, film screenings, and a wide range of seminars, field trips, boat rides, hikes, and workshops which reinforced the idea of a museum as an ecosystem with porous borders.<sup>3</sup> TFAM adopted this “interdisciplinary and participatory form,” so a diverse international and local audience could participate in these activities and engage with environmental issues (Wu and Manacorda 2019, 14). Many of these activities and projects took place outside of TFAM, and the programming expanded during the show’s duration, allowing visitors to conceive of the museum as a living and ever-changing ecosystem, rather than a fixed and sterile white cube.



Figure 3. Huai-Wen Chang, *Museum in the Clouds*, 2018, steel, membrane, weather station, water fog system, LED, 400×120×600 cm. Courtesy of the artist and TFAM.

The final motivation for reimagining the museum as an ecosystem was to assist TFAM in implementing institutional changes, to become “more environmentally friendly” (Wu cited in Jones 2019, 38). Ping Lin, the then director of TFAM explained that it would help her and her colleagues in assessing how to “re-examine the function and mechanism of museums,” (Lin 2018, 12) so that interdependency can be reflected in artistic and institutional practices and institutional criticism can be integrated to improve the museum. Yet, upon closer inspection of the works exhibited at the Taipei Biennial 2018, only one project — *Museum in the Clouds* (2018) [Figure 3] by Huai-Wen Chang and Micro Architecture Studio (MAS)<sup>4</sup> — reflected on the institution’s environmental effects to help it implement changes, despite the curators’ attesting that this was a tenet of the programming. For two years, a weather station on the roof of the museum collected data from the air around TFAM, and air quality index (AQI) records were sourced from a remote (unnamed) location. For *Museum in the Clouds*, this data was visualised using mist and light on a curled steel frame with sails jutting from it, installed in one of the large windows on the second floor of the building. This collaborative project attempted to provide a specifically designed study so TFAM could improve and reflect on its carbon emissions. However, a weather station cannot actually quantify the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of a building.<sup>5</sup> The public was not informed what changes this installation may engender, but Huai-Wen Chang participated in the Taipei Biennial 2020 and *Museum in the Clouds* collected data long after the Taipei Biennial 2018 closed.<sup>6</sup> Aside from the supplementary programming, this was the only artwork at the Taipei Biennial 2018 that reflected on the museum’s carbon footprint, with an aim to provide solutions to its current “conditions”<sup>7</sup> and to make it more environmentally beneficial.

The title of the Taipei Biennial 2018 “Post-Nature”<sup>8</sup> was employed to indicate a move beyond the philosophical and conventional divide between the human and the natural worlds, ultimately countering notions of these conceptual frameworks of colonisation. A number of exhibited works critically reflected on

society's heightened anthropocentrism, the belief that humans are more important than all living creatures.



Figure 4. Robert Zhao Renhui, *When Worlds Collide*, 2017–2018, presented by the Institute of Critical Zoologists (ICZ), mixed media, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and TFAM.

For *When Worlds Collide* (2017–2018) [Figure 4], Singaporean artist Robert Zhao Renhui explored the migration and importation of birds, insects, and other animals,<sup>9</sup> exhibiting piles of boxes at TFAM — which people used to transport found injured or dead animals — alongside x-rays, specimens, and photographs. Through his examination of how certain species are deemed to be foreign or invasive as a result of their dominance, expansion, and effects on local ecosystems, Renhui subtly positions human beings as the invasive species. Likewise, Laura Gustafsson and Terike Haapoja's *Museum of Nonhumanity* (2016–ongoing) [Figure 5] — a sparse museum exhibit with taxidermied animals awash in light from blue screens showing lectures from Taiwanese environmentalists and animal rights activists working in diverse fields — examines the ways in which the subjugation of nature

is justified by society's imagined human/non-human boundary. This installation critiques this by presenting an alternative history of "dehumanization" in twelve themes<sup>10</sup> connecting the ways in which systemic oppression in society (such as racism or xenophobia) are linked to our exploitation of the natural world. *When Worlds Collide* and *Museum of Nonhumanity* critique how current human survival is dependent on dominance of the planet. Both projects question society's anthropocentric approach to the earth, highlighting the violence created by the divide between humanity and other life forms.

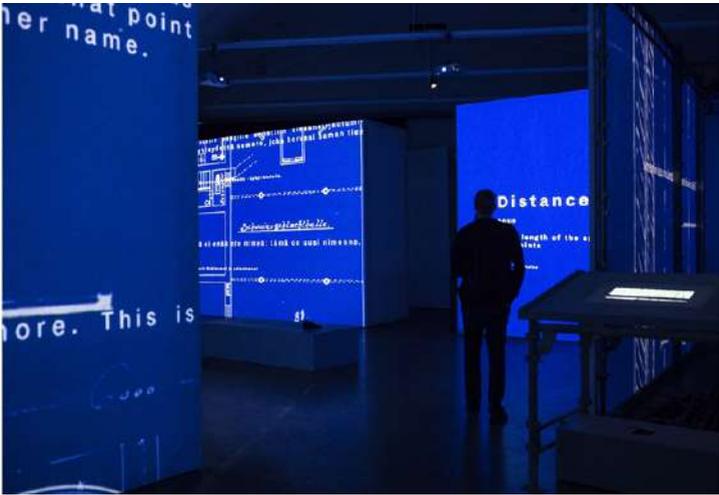


Figure 5. Gustafsson & Haapoja, *Museum of Nonhumanity*, 2016–ongoing, video installation. Courtesy of the participants and TFAM.

At TFAM, the placement of works reinforced the idea of a museum as an ecosystem, embracing the notions of contaminated diversity and intimacy; as many projects were housed close together, informing, overlapping and augmenting each other. Take for example the Mycelium Network Society's eponymous 2018 work [Figure 6] which was housed in a large gallery on the first floor of the museum. White mycelium

mushrooms grew inside large transparent spheres hung from the ceiling. Connected electronic devices translated signals from the mushrooms into an audio component. The loud sounds, reminiscent of white noise, filled the large gallery and drowned out the chirping noises from the tiny bionic insects by Chu-Yin Chen and the Solar Insects Vivarium Workshop exhibited nearby. Strains of the mushrooms' song even reached the neighboring gallery where Ursula Biemann's *Acoustic Ocean* (2018) [Figure 7] was housed. Biemann's "science-fiction poetry"<sup>11</sup> film employed the sounds of a submarine, and other oceanic murmurs recorded by a young aquanaut near the Lofoten Islands in Northern Norway. The curatorial placement of these works mimicked nature by creating an organic aural overlay: reminding me of how cicadas will suddenly and simultaneously begin buzzing and clicking, deafening the forest with unexpected song.



Figure 6. Mycelium Network Society (Franz Xaver, Taro, Martin Howse, Shu Lea Cheang, and global network nodes), *Mycelium Network Society*, 2018, mixed media, installation, 1000×800×360 cm. Courtesy of the participants and TFAM.

The multidisciplinary works on exhibit at the Taipei Biennial 2018 augment our understanding of nature, providing a multifaceted representation of ecological issues ranging from the ongoing destruction of the planet to reflections on how deeply intertwined humankind is with the environment, echoing Demos' entreaty to decolonise nature. This edition of the Taipei Biennial framed the museum as an ecosystem, utilising the notion of post-nature to reference how this planet's vulnerability is deeply intertwined with humanity's extractive systems. It examined the conventional human/nature divide and explored how an institution such as TFAM — which functions in social, economic, and political environments — can support collaborative action to adapt and improve.



Figure 7. Ursula Biemann, *Acoustic Ocean*, 2018, video installation, color, sound, 18min. Courtesy of the artist and TFAM.

### **Manifesta 12 — “Planetary Garden, Cultivating Coexistence”**

In contrast to the Taipei Biennial which is always held at TFAM, the peripatetic European biennial Manifesta, has been hosted

in Rotterdam, Luxembourg, San Sebastian, St. Petersburg, Zurich, and several other metropolises across Europe. One key difference between the Taipei Biennial 2018 and Manifesta 12 is the site of these shows, which affects the ways in which issues of the Anthropocene and decolonisation are explored. The Taipei Biennial 2018 was hosted at a museum, examining the effects of the climate catastrophe in relation to an institution; while Manifesta 12 was able to explore how this crisis affects the policies, programs and public spaces of a city. Another significance of their respective sites is evident in how the Taipei Biennial is repeatedly housed in the same museum, and has extended upon themes presented in prior editions. For example, the Taipei Biennial 2018 built upon themes explored in the 2014 edition when curator Nicolas Bourriaud addressed how human activity has terraformed the planet. Likewise, the Taipei Biennial 2020 expanded on issues that the 2018 show presented; when the curators Bruno Latour, Martin Guinard and Eva Lin took as a starting point our inability to even agree on what it means to live on earth.

In comparison to the biennial at TFAM, Manifesta is a nomadic guest, showing up, settling in, then moving on to the next host city<sup>12</sup>, and so its continuity is premised on a change of site, and often, each edition reflects on the similarities and differences of each host city. The 12th edition of Manifesta – “Planetary Garden, Cultivating Coexistence” (16 June–4 November 2018) was exhibited across the public parks, palazzos, churches, gardens, and museums of Palermo, Italy. Curated by a team of “creative mediators” (Van Der Haak et al 2018) including filmmaker Bregtje Van Der Haak (Holland), art curator Mirjam Varadinis (Switzerland); and architects Andrés Jacque (Spain) and Ippolito Pestellini Laparelli (Spain), the works of 50 participants were on display across 20 different venues in the city for five months. Much of the art was research-led and documentary-based, stemming from the Palermo Atlas<sup>13</sup>, an interactive urban research project completed before the opening of the show. The curators of Manifesta 12 framed the port city of Palermo as a garden, in an attempt to examine how this international city

— like many others around the world — is emblematic of how numerous geopolitical concerns, such as migration, are often intertwined with the climate crisis.

The threads of inquiry pursued in this show mirror the syncretism Paloma is famous for: over the last three millenia, Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Normans, Saracens, Germans and Spaniards successively controlled Palermo. Labelled a “problematic-global” city by the curators (van der Haak et al 2018), Palermo’s long history of migration,<sup>14</sup> trafficking, trade routes, seedy tourism, and the effects of the climate crisis were explored in Manifesta 12. These concerns were examined in three main branches of the biennial. The ‘Garden of Flows’ section explored biodiversity, gardening and public spaces (Palermo’s Botanical Garden, founded in 1789, was the main venue for this section); projects in the ‘City on Stage’ strand presented a critical understanding of ongoing initiatives in Palermo’s municipality; and exhibits housed in the ‘Out of Control Room’ investigated the currents in contemporary global society (the work in these two branches of the biennial were spread across the city).

The exhibition’s title was adapted from the gardener and botanist Gilles Clément’s 1997 description of the earth as a “planetary garden”, with humankind as its “caretaker” (Van der Haak et al 2018). By definition, gardens are constructed spaces: regulated, maintained and cultivated by people. By positioning humanity as the planet’s gardener, responsible for tending to its maintenance and wellbeing, this framework complicates the narrative of a human/nature divide. The curators clarified that a planetary garden is not “a space for humans to take control,” but rather, “a site where gardeners recognise their dependency on other species, and respond to climate, time, or an array of social factors, in a shared responsibility” (Van Der Haak et al 2018). In light of this, a number of artists proposed alternative ideas of the garden, highlighting how it is entangled with colonial history and questioning the drive to control and regulate the earth.

Just as the subtitle ‘Cultivating Coexistence’ suggests, Manifesta 12 — much like the Taipei Biennial 2018 — was driven by a desire to examine the ways in which art can imagine

possible futures wherein humans collaborate with non-humans, and diversity and freedom of movement is celebrated. The Taipei Biennial 2018 embraced coexistence, emphasising how humanity is a part of nature, rather than separate from or superior to it. In contrast, the collaboration cultivated by Manifesta 12 considered how dominance asserted over nature is perpetuated by commercial, algorithmic and trade networks. Just as the curators of the Taipei Biennial 2018 articulated a need to decolonise nature, so did the curators of Manifesta 12. This team of four queried the ways in which it is best to “tend to a world that is moved by invisible informational networks, transnational private interests, algorithmic intelligence, environmental processes and increasing inequalities?” (van der Haak et al 2018). By questioning the existing networks that govern our world, the curators of Manifesta 12 foregrounded the climate crisis by linking the effects of environmental devastation to the region’s current political, social, and economic challenges, such as migration and the ongoing refugee crisis.

Both Manifesta 12 and the Taipei Biennial 2018 underscored the complexity of the climate crisis, examining how it is bound up with the extractive politics of capital, as well as the displacement of poor and disenfranchised people, who are disproportionately affected by environmental devastation. Certain projects at Manifesta 12 proposed that we reconfigure our conventional understanding of the environment, while also attempting to caution against the anthropocentric drive to control migration and regulate the natural world. For example, the Nigerian artist Jelili Atiku’s *Festival of the Earth (Alaraagbo XIII)* (2018)<sup>15</sup> [Figure 8] was a processional performance with a large number of green painted participants carrying baskets of fruit and medicinal plants. The piece integrated research into festival customs and legends of West African rituals, accentuating how the trading and transportation of plants can provide conceptual routes into discussions on migration. Through this project’s veneration of plants as healers, and the mythical role nature has taken in many cultures, *Festival of the Earth* issues a warning against the self-delusional belief that humans can continue to dominate nature.



Figure 8. Jelili Atiku, *Festival of the Earth (Alaraagbo XIII) 2018*, performance, mixed media installation. Photo by Ayo Akinwande and courtesy of the artist.

This procession snaked down ancient streets in Palermo, passing by historical architectural masterpieces that housed other artworks, many of which explored the lack of connection many people have with nature, such as Melanie Benajo’s three-part semi-documentary *Night Soil* (2014–2018)<sup>16</sup> [Figure 9]. Speaking over the colorful visuals and painted bodies — creating an intimate mise-en-scène — are the voices of several women discussing their feelings and the radical actions they’ve taken that defy societal norms; candidly cautioning against imposing inflexible systems that constrict people and the natural world. In one scene a bearded mermaid lies on their side, glowing tail twitching. “I realised I was completely out of my body,” a woman says of her experience using psychedelic drugs made from plants. “I don’t think I’m ever going to come back.”<sup>17</sup> In this video, plants themselves serve as psychological vehicles of transportation to unknown spaces, while in Atiku’s weaving procession, the

transportation of plants was used as an entry point into a discussion on the act of moving to new locales when migrating.



Figure 9. Melanie Bonajo, *Night Soil, Fake Paradise*, film still, 2014, full HD one-channel, 33.9 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and AKINCI.

After the procession, documentation of Atiku's *Festival of the Earth* was on display in a dilapidated palace near the port of Palermo. In three other locales in the city, three Sicilian trees serve as entry points to history, reminding us that human life is short, and entangled with other non-human lives. The Swiss artist Uriel Orlow brings these together in *Wishing Trees* (2018), a video installation that links the remains of an olive tree under which the WWII armistice was signed in 1943; a large banyan tree shading the former residence of a judge assassinated in the country's fight against organised crime in 1992; and a cypress tree, rumored to have grown from the wooden staff of St. Benedict (1526–1589), a freed son of African slaves who became a priest in the Catholic Franciscan community. Orlow's multi-part video installation, Benajo's films, and Atiku's

processional performance articulate the multiple ways in which humanity is closely intertwined with nature by evocatively exploring how trees serve as witnesses to human history, and how plants can transport us, connecting our past and future simultaneously, while also providing healing. These works, and many others sharply delineate how the climate crisis and other environmental concerns are bound up with transnational policies and governance.

At Manifesta 12, many artworks critically reflected on migration, civilisation, and nature, questioning humanity's drive to control and regulate the environment, which is evident in how botanical gardens are entangled with colonial history and power. By approaching the city, and by extension the planet, as a botanical garden, Manifesta 12 attempted to acknowledge the need to cultivate contamination and diversity. By positing humanity as the gardener, the curators acknowledged humanity's role in this entangled mess of desires to map, dominate, and impose systems on nature.<sup>18</sup>

### **Contaminated Coexistence**

Exhibited at both the Taipei Biennial 2018 and Manifesta 12 was Zheng Bo's ongoing video work *Pteridophilia* (2016–ongoing) [Figure 10]. At Palermo, it was installed in a young growth cluster of bamboo in the city's ancient botanical garden, the site which informed the biennial theme and served as a central venue. Visitors approaching that corner of the garden heard the sounds of several sexually aroused men before seeing their youthful bodies copulating with ferns: licking, biting and crouching over them. At TFAM this video was exhibited in the final darkened room in the basement, and served as a summation to the show. The sensuality in *Pteridophilia* and its proposal of interspecies relationships offers a fascinating approach to ecology, magnifying Tsing's call for contaminated diversity. The heightened intimacy with plants exemplifies the radical ideas around the drive to use art as a vehicle to decolonise nature. Furthermore, this work, and many of the multiple narratives and collaborative artworks present at both the Taipei Biennial 2018 and Manifesta

12 serve to guide visitors to better understand what it means to decolonise nature, and exemplify how human and non-human relationships must be reframed to serve and protect all living creatures. Through the inclusion and placement of works, both exhibitions underscored humanity's fraught dynamic of control over the planet and the colonisation of its resources.



Figure 10. Zheng Bo, *Pteridophilia 2*, 2018. Single Channel Video, 4K Color Sound, 20mins. Zheng Bo. Courtesy of the artist and TFAM.

Through their conceptual and critical engagement with ideas around decolonising nature and their proposals for greater intimacy with the natural world, both shows emphasised the threats posed by the climate crisis, as well as the failings evident in current geopolitical strategies, communication, and trade. Artistic practices and aesthetics have the potential to fundamentally transform the way the world is imagined, inhabited, and co-created. Since change can be routed through aesthetics, the Taipei Biennial 2018 and Manifesta 12 exemplify how in different ways, art illuminates the thoroughly enmeshed reality of humans and our vulnerable planet.

The sites of these shows shaped the different ways in which these two exhibitions engaged with the issues of the Anthropocene. The contrasting spaces of a museum and its institutional frameworks, and an urban city and its politics informed the ways in which these locations were respectively redefined as an ecosystem and a planetary garden. The Taipei Biennial 2018 integrated ecological collaboration to explore possible solutions for dealing with environmental issues, and this is exemplified in how TFAM was conceptualised as an ecosystem. In contrast, Manifesta 12 offered challenging perspectives on how society at large — as seen through the lens of Palermo — would benefit from recognising the interconnected realms of nature and our built environments. The frameworks of these exhibitions, despite being different in scale, location and rationale, ultimately serve the same purpose: proposing radical ways of living in and with nature.

Both exhibitions display a nuanced and complex understanding of the politics of artistic practices that deal with ecological issues. Neither show assumes that artistic practices can substitute politics. However, these exhibitions are deeply political, recognising the urgency and complexity of the current crisis, and the role of art and exhibitions in negotiating this. The Taipei Biennial 2018 and Manifesta 12 raise public awareness of a range of issues through their engagement with ideas and modes of art and exhibition-making, which makes them political and potentially transformative. Given the exigencies of our times, the propositions made are indeed radical: by framing a museum as an ecosystem and a city as a garden, the curators put a spotlight on the unending growth of contemporary capitalist society, critiquing societal norms while proposing alternative routes into the future, ones that embrace contaminated diversity and coexistence, magnifying the need to decolonise nature.

## Endnotes:

1. Zheng Bo, "Pteridophilia" Zheng Bo, Accessed March 20, 2020. [http://zhengbo.org/2018\\_PP2.html](http://zhengbo.org/2018_PP2.html).
2. A few prominent shows include: the Lithuanian Pavilion's *Sun & Sea (Marina)* (2019) at the 2019 Venice Biennale, which won the prestigious Golden Lion award for its subdued operatic performance, offering a biting critique of leisure; the tenth Taipei Biennial "The Great Acceleration" (2014), billed as "a tribute to the coactivity amongst humans and animals, plants and objects"; "Radical Nature: Art and Architecture for a Changing Planet 1969–2009" at the Barbican Gallery, London (2009), and "Beyond Green: Toward a Sustainable Art", at Chicago's Smart Museum of Art (2006), both investigated the ways that nature, art and architecture can be integrated to better create built environments; and lastly "Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies" (2002) at Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Centre, which showcased artists' innovative solutions to help restore ecosystems around the world. These and many other wide-ranging ecological projects propose we move away from the conventional understanding of nature as a resource to be used and extracted.
3. Furthermore, a whole gallery on the third floor was dedicated to local NGO's, foundations, and educational organisations and foundations that presented ongoing socially engaged pedagogical projects happening across Taiwan. At TFAM, these NGOs had large wooden boards detailing their missions, activities and history. Here, I am referring to The Taiwan Thousand Miles Trail Association, the Kuroshio Ocean Education Foundation, Open Green, and the Keelung River Guardian Union.
4. MAS is composed of a large group of students from Tamkang University, Taiwan who consult with a "transdisciplinary team" of workers from fields including "architecture, landscaping, environmental engineering, ecology, water resources, smart control, lighting and interactive installation." See TFAM "Huai-Wen Chang and Micro Architecture Studio (MAS)" *Post-Nature: A Museum as an Ecosystem Taipei Biennial 2018 Guide Book* (Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2018) 84.
5. Weather stations can only collect and measure microclimate data from the building's surroundings, such as "temperature, heat radiation, ultraviolet light, wind flow velocity, wind direction and rainfall" so the assumption that it can measure carbon emission levels is misleading. TFAM. Huai-Wen Chang, Micro Architecture Studio (MAS), *Post-Nature*. 2018, 84.

6. After requesting further information on this project from TFAM, I was informed that Chang was invited to participate in the 2020 Taipei Biennial curated by Bruno Latour, Martin Guinard and Eva Lin at the time of writing this, Museum in the Clouds was still collecting data which was made available to the public at the 2020 Taipei Biennial as a “proposal as to how to improve the museum’s conditioning going forward.” TFAM. Huai-Wen Chang, Micro Architecture Studio (MAS), *Post-Nature*. 2018, 84.
7. TFAM. Huai-Wen Chang, Micro Architecture Studio, *Post-Nature*. 2018, 84.
8. ‘Post-Nature’ has a contentious prefix, and could allude to a once-natural world, now nearly barren and slathered in cement. Or it could reference how this planet’s vulnerability is deeply intertwined with human systems (Huang 2019: 43-48).
9. Renhui traces the connections between three local institutions - the Taipei Zoo, the Wild Bird Association, and Taiwan’s Academia Sinica, which is an academy that supports a wide variety of research activities.
10. The themes in the Museum of Nonhumanity: ‘Person’ (object, legal personhood, law), ‘Potentia’ (research, subjecthood), ‘Monster’, ‘Resource’ (industry, conflict minerals), ‘Boundary’ (female soldier, Amazon), ‘Purity’ (eugenics, institution), ‘Disgust’ (pest control, genocide, colonial history), ‘Anima’ (soul, reason, Western thought), ‘Tender’ (flesh, kitchen), ‘Distance’ (systems, holocaust, slaughterhouse), ‘Animal’ (the Other) and ‘Display’ (museum, references). TFAM. “Laura Gustafsson and Terike Haapoja.” *Post-Nature*. 2018, 43.
11. TFAM. “Ursula Biemann.” *Post-Nature: A Museum as an Ecosystem Taipei Biennial 2018 Guide Book* (Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2018) 36.
12. The nomadic framework of Manifesta may limit certain art projects’ opportunities to deeply investigate issues and concerns relevant to its host city, before transitioning to the next location. However, it may be that a number of projects at one Manifesta continue to engage with communities in the host city well after the event’s timeframe, or that certain projects hinge on a continuous migration from one place to another.
13. The Palermo Atlas Project utilised many disciplines to provide a collection of stories from Palermo’s citizens, complete with an introduction by the mayor of the Sicilian capital, to ascertain whether it might provide an “urban prototype for the world to come.” Manifesta 12. “Publications” Accessed April, 27, 2020 <http://m12.manifesta.org/publications/>.
14. A timely example of Palermo’s long history of migration arose in June 2018, when Manifesta 12 was launched. The local news channels were fixated on a

boat of refugees attempting to dock in Palermo despite the Italian government's attempts to reject it. The mayor of Palermo, Leoluca Orlando, wished to welcome these refugees, to remind the citizens of Palermo's multicultural past.

15. Jelili Atiku's *Festival of the Earth (Alaraagbo XIII)* (2018) was part of the 'City on Stage' strand.

16. Melanie Benajo's *Night Soil* (2014–2018) was included in the 'Garden of Flows' strand.

17. Ayahuasca is one mind-altering psychedelic drug made from plants that is used in shamanic rituals. The women in Melanie Benajo's *Night Soil* speak extensively of their experiences with this particular drug. Melanie Benajo. "Night Soil / Fake Paradise Trailer" Producer Melanie Benajo. Published Jan 7, 2015. Youtube. 2:20 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qpCxYSRgcLU>

18. Despite the issues that were examined through the inclusion of many artworks, there were some problems with this edition of Manifesta, which, in light of the thesis of the show, ultimately served to highlight the extractive nature of humanity and our species drive for power and control. Palermo's mayor, Leoluca Orlando, is well known for actively fighting against the Mafia's stronghold on the port city, and his attempts to transform Palermo into a progressive and cultural hotspot served as an impetus for inviting Manifesta to occupy its buildings and streets in 2018. The Palermo municipality funded most of the show, and the rest of the costs were supplemented by private investors, public donations and ticket sales. Despite the fact that this biennial increased tourism in Palermo, and the subsequent money that tourists bring with them served to boost the economy, many of Manifesta 12 workers were still waiting to be paid for their work, years on. Furthermore, at the time of this writing, many foundations, libraries and other institutions that participated in the biennial were yet to hear about reimbursement.

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### Notes on Contributor:

Leora Joy Jones is a poet, photographer, writer, editor, and arts practitioner. She is interested in the perverted intersections between art, the practice of everyday life, and popular culture. Recently, her art criticism has been trained on ecological art practices and their potential to shift the ways in which people perceive their relationship with the environment. Born in the USA, and raised in South Africa, she now lives and works in Taiwan. Leora holds a degree in Fine Art from the university currently known as Rhodes, and is earning an MA in Critical and Curatorial Studies of Contemporary Art (CCSCA) in Taipei. A founder of the Taipei Poetry Collective, Leora hosts readings and biweekly poetry workshops. She is assistant editor at *Southerly*, and her writing can be found in *4A Papers*, *Yishu Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, *ArtAsiaPacific*, *Design Anthology*, *the Newslens International*, and *Southerly*. You can see more of her writing at [leorajoy.com](http://leorajoy.com) and her photography on instagram [@loveleorajoy](https://www.instagram.com/loveleorajoy).



## 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.

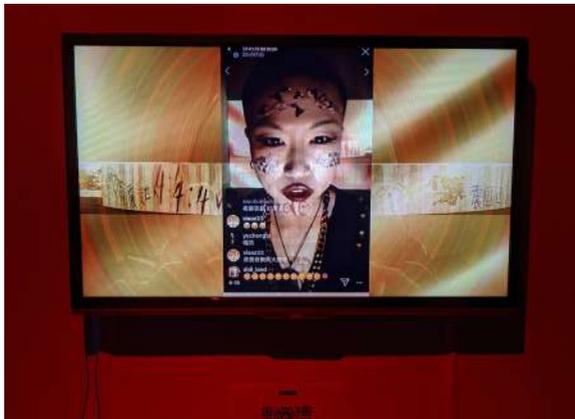


Figure 8. Betty Apple, *4:4 Zhen Energy Church*, 2020. Installation shot at Taipei Contemporary Art Centre, Taipei. Photo courtesy of the artist.

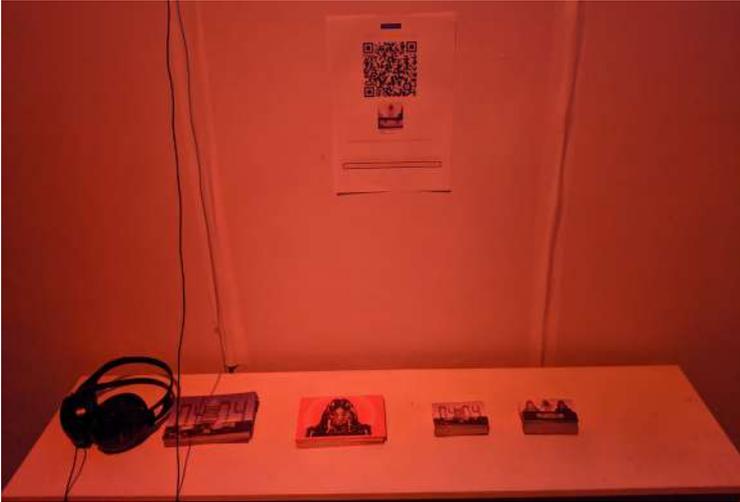


Figure 9. Betty Apple, *4:4 Zhen Energy Church*, 2020. Installation shot at Taipei Contemporary Art Centre, Taipei. Photo courtesy of the artist.

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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## “Everyday Life and Landscapes of the Island”: Unsettling the Colonial Gaze

**Daniella Romano**

*The colonial gaze has historically rendered Taiwanese identity synonymous with its ecology. However, the specific role of British travel photography in forming these narratives has remained overlooked in discussions of the development of Japanese environmental policy in Taiwan. This essay examines how the exhibition ‘Everyday Life and Landscapes of the Island: Betel Nuts, Bananas, Sugar Cane and Palms’ (22 February–31 May 2020) at Tainan Art Museum explores the wider issues of history, culture and identity through its inclusion of John Thompson’s nineteenth century photographs of Taiwan and its depiction of a pristine landscape untouched by modernisation. In particular, an analysis of the exhibition’s curatorial approach through the lens of this photography will be used to examine how artists represent and interpret the historic development of the Taiwanese landscape and its implications in the formation of a distinctively local sense of self. Classification and cultivation — central elements of Japanese expressions of power through environmental policy — are redefined by artists in a local and postcolonial context. The essay argues that a consideration of the intersection of colonial images of landscape, politics and contemporary art potentially offers a deeper understanding of the complexity and dynamism of contemporary Taiwanese identity.*

The ‘Everyday Life and Landscapes of the Island: Betel Nuts, Bananas, Sugar Cane and Palms’ (22 February–31 May 2020) exhibition at Tainan Art Museum examines the historic link between the Taiwanese environment and daily life. The artworks exhibited make connections between local

contemporary artists and an everyday identity molded by a colonial-based environmental intervention that has continued to define everyday life in Taiwan. From both a colonial and local perspective, Taiwanese identity is synonymous with its ecological environment. While the Taiwanese landscape has been subjected to the colonial gaze within both European and Japanese narratives, it has also been reclaimed by contemporary Taiwanese artists. By focusing on plants that are symbolic of these changes — such as betel nuts, bananas, sugar cane and palm trees — these artists explore the wider issues of history, culture and identity.

The exhibition begins its story of Taiwan's modern ecological identity with John Thompson's photography which offers a reminder of an environment untouched by colonial development. Significantly, Thompson's three prints *Formosa* (1), *Formosa* (2) [Figure 1] and *Lau-long, Formosa* (1871) [Figure 2] depict the ideology of the imperial gaze of the European explorer in Taiwan. In these prints, Thompson represents Taiwan's nature and ecology as wild and mysterious, its power unrecognised and misused by local inhabitants. His focus on untamed nature is a product of the British imperialist gaze in relation to foreign lands; a gaze that invokes Western knowledge and technologies to tame and 'civilise' these lands and align them with British conception of modernity. As the first known photographer of Taiwan, Thompson's work represents the historic role of the outsider in shaping Taiwan's ecology during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The placement of the images at the beginning of the exhibition serves as a reminder of the origins of a landscape unaltered by the Japanese colonial government. Writing in relation to the tropical plants — banana, palm, sugar and betel nut — that define the local theme of the exhibition, the co-curator Nobuo Takamori observes that "it is apparent that these four plants have caused drastic topographical changes in Taiwan" (Takamori 2019, 17). The British imperial gaze present in these images prefaces these environmental changes; the desire to alter nature to align with their psychological and economic ideals. Contemporary artists



Figure 1. John Thompson, *Formosa*, 1871, digital print. Photo by Daniella Romano.

exhibited in ‘Everyday Life’ reflect on the meaning of this colonial legacy through daily experience, as seen in the changing natural environment and its impact on the psyche of the local people in their definition of self and circumstance.



Figure 2. John Thompson, *Lau-long, Formosa*, 1871, digital print. Photo by Daniella Romano.

This essay further examines the implications of Thompson's photography as the foundation for the exploration of Taiwanese identity in the context of the 'Everyday Life and Landscapes' exhibition. In particular, this essay explores how his depiction of the untamed landscape of the island references Western perspectives alongside the two primary elements of Japanese environmental policy that aimed to make Taiwan 'governable': the cataloguing of discoveries, and use of nature as a resource or commodity. Artists in the exhibition reflect upon the curator's depiction of how this history shapes Taiwanese identity within these themes. As Takamori notes:

reverting our focus back to art history's developmental trajectory, we could see that contemporary artworks have gradually shifted from realism depictions into explorations of the self-landscape relationship (Takamori 2019, 17).

### **Colonialism, Ecology, and Photography**

The tropical environment in Taiwan and its association with Taiwanese INDIGENOUS culture distinguished it from that of Europe and Japan. Taiwan's environment sparked the curiosities of British travelers following a long history of interest in the China region, marking the starting point of change for Taiwan's ecological identity. Chien Yun-Ping, curator of 'The Silver Halide Era, Aura of Times: Vintage Photography Prints by Taiwanese Photographers 1890s–2015' (2016), a retrospective exhibition of Taiwanese photography at the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, notes that the arrival of photography from the West was a significant moment in the history of photography in Taiwan (Chien 2016, 24). The images produced by these travelers, epitomised by Thompson's photographs, projected British preconceptions of difference, such as stadial theory and ideas of the "sublime" onto the Taiwanese landscape. This practice would foreshadow the significance of photography under Japanese colonial rule.

'Everyday Life and Landscapes' explores the development of Taiwan's ecology under Japanese colonial rule, whilst suggesting that within the contemporary context of the everyday, the line

between what is definitively Taiwanese and Japanese has now become blurred. Initially, for the Japanese, the environment was a tool of governance — the first governor general Goto Shinpei firmly believed in the “biological principle,” which prioritised documenting the natural order of Taiwan in order to further understand the resources within their control (Low 2003, 100). In this way, the unknown environment imagined by the British became, under Japanese colonial rule, tamed for profit through agriculture and tourism. Photography was a means of imposing ideas of Japanese development. As historian Morris Low observed, “through the use of Western science and the camera, the Japanese sought to impose a modernity on [their colonised subjects].” (Low 2003, 18). Photography historian David Bate’s discussion of the connection between photography and colonialism significantly suggests that photography also indirectly represents the “fantasy” of the photographer, making it the setting for, rather than the object of, colonial desire (Bate 1993, 81). In this context, Taiwan’s natural environment is the stage upon which the project of colonialism is enacted. Yet at the same time, historian Tessa Morris-Suzuki notes that research is lacking in relation to Japan and environmental change in its colonies, thus, making a discussion of colonial photography within the framework of the artworks in ‘Everyday Life and Landscapes’ significant in understanding Japanese colonial governance of Taiwan (Morris-Suzuki 2013, 225).

Jo Mei Lee’s *Landscape Remains – Roystone regia* (H.B. et K.) Cook (2020) is relevant here as it uses imagery of the palm tree to convey how the Japanese colonial government altered Taiwan’s environment. Placed in the same space as Thompson’s photographs so as to create a dialogue between the colonial gaze and its aftermath, Lee’s work poses questions about the role of environmental alterations made under the pretence of colonial benefit. The decayed palm tree is reconstructed with paper and charcoal, implying the irrelevance of the plant in a postcolonial context. Despite dominating the Taiwanese landscape in the present day, palm trees were introduced by the Japanese colonial government to emphasise the role of Taiwan as its exotic colony,

due to its tropical environment. Lee is reminding the viewer of the contentious role of Taiwan's modern environment, and how it was obscured by colonial discourses to form its identity. No longer of use as a symbol of the tropical Japanese colony, the origins of the palm tree in Taiwan is now obsolete, instead appearing as a common element of the Taiwanese landscape.



Figure 3. Jo Mei Lee, *Landscape Remains – Roystonea regia (H.B. et K.) Cook*, 2020, Arches watercolour paper (cold press), pencils, charcoal, iron, wood, magnet. Photo by Daniella Romano.

### **Botanical Classification**

The aura of mystery in John Thompson's photographs alludes to the perception that Taiwan was still 'undiscovered' and thus in need of documentation as a way of heightening awareness of its potential for economic and social development. He spent the period from 1868 to 1872 photographing China (including Taiwan as a Chinese territory at the time), later publishing *China and Its*

*People: A Series of Two Hundred Photographs* (1873). Thompson's practice is representative of the curiosities of British travelers following a long history of interest in the China region during the nineteenth century. By the end of the century, photography became a staple part of inquiry into foreign cultures (Allen 2014, 1011). Classification was a major tool of imposing Western conceptions of the natural environment onto Taiwan; W. A. Pickering, for example, commented that "there is much scope for the collector" in his travel narrative (Pickering 2016, 38). The Japanese colonial government would build upon the British traveler's more casual recordings and begin to catalogue the entirety of Taiwan's flora and fauna in order to govern effectively. Both Low and Suzuki cite Japan's turn to ecology as a way of producing knowledge about Taiwan and thus assert its colonial policy (Low 2003; Morris-Suzuki 2013). Established to showcase this practice during the Japanese era, Taiwan's oldest natural history museum — the National Taiwan Museum in Taipei — not only symbolises of the taming of nature through practices of cataloguing and collecting, but its neoclassical architecture also serves as reminder of the influence of European colonial vision.

In the second room of the exhibition, depictions of the rigidity of Japanese power dissolve and the line between colonial and local context becomes blurred. In Su-Chen Hsu and Chien-Ming Lu's *Plants in Adverse Environments — Taiwan Series* (2008), the tradition of botanical research is redefined with imported and exported plant matter presented as equally significant in the rituals of daily life. Prints of culturally significant flora both native and imported are accompanied by handwritten texts about their properties and use. Citing the British and Japanese history of ecological classification, this work features images and scientific descriptions of plants found in Taiwan. However, instead of focusing on their profitability, the text in the work explores the various plants' histories and their significance today. By reclaiming scientific practices of classification within a primarily Taiwanese narrative, the artists assert the distinctively local character of Taiwan's ecology. Considering Bate's argument of colonial photography as one representing 'fantasy', the figure of

ecology has evolved from Thompson's images that show colonial fantasies of economic gain for outsiders and the implementation of a 'civilising' mission as population management, to one wherein the natural landscape and ecology of Taiwan becomes intimately merged with local memory, history and identity.

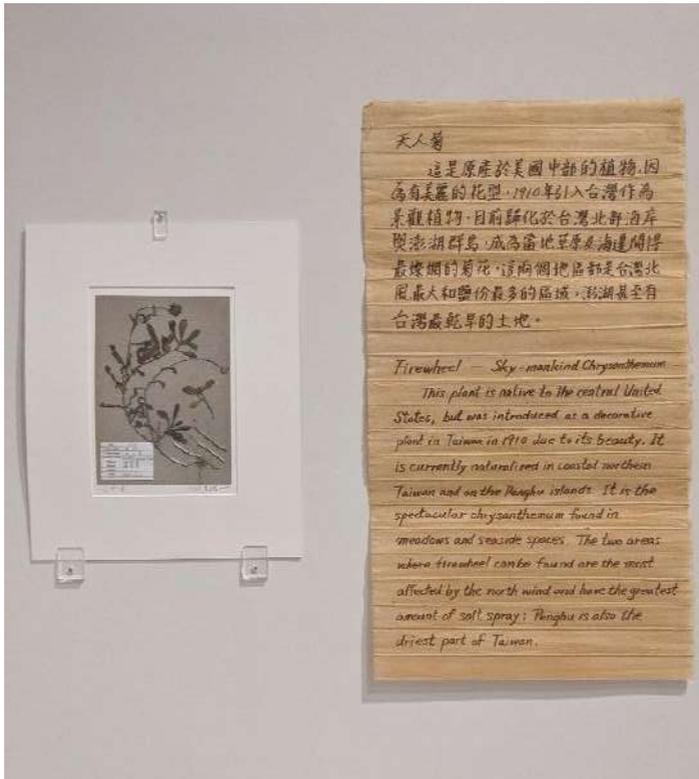


Figure 4. Su-Chen Hsu and Chien-Ming Lu, *Plants in Adverse Environments – Taiwan Series*, 2008, Texts: Handmade paper, prints, Hand-made paper, acrylic, prints. Photo courtesy of Tainan Art Museum.

## Ecological Development

Cataloguing Taiwan's ecology ultimately led to the cultivation of

plants to further Japanese colonial policy to turn it into a profitable territory; sugar cane, bananas and palms were introduced to Taiwan by the Japanese colonial administration. Synonymous with Taiwanese identity, particularly that of its aboriginal people, betel nuts are also central to the exhibition. However, in contrast to the other plants represented, it was not introduced by the Japanese colonial authorities and was not cultivated for financial benefit; rather, the production and consumption of betel nuts was stigmatised due to its association with a lower class of people (Takamori 2019, 17). In contrast, the establishment of the sugar cane industry and the export of Taiwanese bananas to Japan boosted the local colonial economy. Despite relying heavily on the natural environment, Taiwan's INDIGENOUS people were perceived to lack the ability to make meaningful use of it. Morris-Suzuki argues, "the role of the coloniser was to be a civilising mission that would enable the forest riches to be put to their proper use." (Morris-Suzuki 2013, 231). In cultivating these plants, the Japanese colonial administration was 'civilising' the untamed and pristine environment depicted in Thompson's photographs, financially benefiting from Taiwan's tropical climate whilst subsequently altering its ecology.

Economic change had an inevitable impact upon the daily lives of Taiwanese people, and the photography of Chin Shu Huang in the third exhibition space serves as a reminder of its legacy. *Banana Distribution* and *Coconuts Vendor*, both dated 1955, show bananas being shipped by merchants and coconuts for sale at a local market. In these photographs, bananas and coconuts no longer appear as symbols of Japanese colonial rule; rather, they remain embedded in the daily lives of the Taiwanese people. While plants as commodities dominate the frame of the photographs, the anonymous figures reinforce the dominance of ecology within Taiwanese notions of identity. In direct comparison with Thompson's photography, they embody the desires of the gaze present in his photographs. The untamable and unknown natural environment has become tamed and commodified, forgotten in the service of the local economy.

Whilst Huang's photography focuses on the economic legacy of plant cultivation and commodification, Etan Pavavalung's



Figure 5. Etan Pavavalung, *The Fragrance of Mountain Wind*, 2013. Print and acrylic on wood. Photo by Francis Maravillas.

*The Fragrance of Mountain Wind* (2013) [Figure 5] depicts the development of the spiritual and psychological. Both British explorers and the Japanese colonial government were interested in Taiwan's INDIGENOUS population and their relationship with the environment. In his account of Japanese colonial image making, historian Paul Barclay comments on the "savagery" depicted in images of INDIGENOUS peoples, which served to reinforce the coloniser's civilising mission (Barclay 2010, 86). The modernisation of Taiwan, along with the commodification of plants and crops disrupted INDIGENOUS reservations, threatening the identity and survival of local tribes. Pavavalung explores the impact of this greed and environmental destruction. In his work, layered patterns dominate the print, INDIGENOUS wild lilies float through space returning the viewer to the original spirit of the mountain wherein the destructive effects of colonialism gives way to the regeneration of nature. As one of the last works in the exhibition, Pavavalung's print appears as a fitting concluding remark to the changing natural and ecological landscapes of Taiwan foreshadowed by Thompson's photographs

at the beginning of the exhibition. In this way, the effort to re-  
envision the Taiwanese landscape is intimately intertwined with  
the enduring legacies of the island's colonial past.

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**Notes on Contributor:**

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practice, as well as the role of colonial narratives present in contemporary art in East Asia. She is a History and History of Art graduate from the University of Nottingham, specialising in Enlightenment Thought (Gender, Race and Empire) and Renaissance Cartography. She has volunteered and interned in various culture and heritage-based institutions/organisations including St Paul's Cathedral, Imperial War Museum, Crop Up Gallery, National Taiwan Museum, and Studio Michael Lin. She co-curated 'Undercover Routes' at Nanhai Gallery (20–27 November 2021).



## The Secrets of the South: An Interview with Nobuo Takamori

Leora Joy Jones  
Christopher Whitfield

*In 2020, Nobuo Takamori and Ping Lin — then-director of the Taipei Fine Art Museum (TFAM) — co-curated ‘The Secret South: From Cold War Perspective to Global South in Museum Collection’ (25 July–25 October 2020) at TFAM. ‘The Secret South’ was a broad research based exhibition grounded in history, which primarily drew from works collected by TFAM, as well as artworks sourced from over sixteen museum collections in Taiwan and elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Exhibited alongside the art from the collections were multiple archives and documents, as well as new and re-commissioned projects. A number of interlinked themes were explored throughout the exhibition, primarily centering on Taiwan’s relationships with other countries and regions in the Global South — including Southeast Asia (Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, and Singapore), Latin America (Honduras, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala) and Africa (Democratic Republic of Congo) — during the fraught geopolitical context of the Cold War. The exhibition was thematically separated into six sections, with certain galleries focusing on specific regions and time frames wherein these South-South relations took place.*

*The curator Kevin Murray identified the South as a “direction as well as a place” (Murray 2008, 26) as it is not simply a set of geographical regions that are post-colonial, experiencing lack or situated outside what is hegemonically conceived as the North. ‘If anything, the South is itself a mode of questioning,’ art historian Anthony Gardner writes. “As*

*it sparks new links between artists and audiences from different regions, it provokes new ways of thinking about global cultural currents. It is thus a question always open to debate and discussion.”(Gardener 2013, 3-4). The South encompasses multiple countries, their cultures, histories and languages, and these diverse threads are not easily mapped. Leora Joy Jones and Christopher Whitfield sat down with Nobuo Takamori to discuss ‘The Secret South’ and how an exhibition like this reflected upon Taiwan’s political self imagination and sense of identity, as well as these South-South relations.*



Liu Kang, *River Flowing through Mountains* 1983, National Museum of History Collection. Image courtesy of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum.

**Can you explain why you chose the title ‘The Secret South’ for this exhibition?**

There are several different elements to the term ‘secret’. Firstly, it alludes to the sense of secret collections in the storehouses of museums. Many museums had sections of their collections that weren’t exhibited so often, so we tried to find out why,

and realised this was quite meaningful. During the process of researching for this show we found evidence in hidden works and documents that added perspective to and changed Taiwanese art history narratives. There was an imbalance in many collections - mainly in relation to southern countries that were less noticed, less researched, and poorly represented in the past — that may reveal power structures in the motivations behind the collection. Another element of secrecy is evident in multiple archival documents that were not included in mainstream historical narratives. During the Cold War there were a lot of intensive military, economic, and political exchanges between southern countries and Taiwan. But this hasn't been incorporated into history or the memories of everyday people. So for most people who live in Taiwan, this kind of history remains a secret, and reminds them of secrets. The secret in the title is not only about what wasn't exhibited before, but what wasn't really discussed in textbooks, or covered by Taiwan's educational systems. There is no formal history of these exchanges written in academic textbooks.



Installation view of Ishihara Shisan, *Refugees in Tarla*, 1943, in 'The Secret South' held at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taipei, 2020. Image courtesy of TFAM.

**The exhibition opens with *Refugees in Tarla* (1943) by Ishihara Shisan. In this large painting, a group of refugees stand together with their belongings and small children. In the center of the painting, a woman suckles a child, looking directly out at the viewer. Tropical plants and lush greenery surround them. There are mangoes, blooming flowers and a cacao tree heavy with ripe fruit. Can you discuss the significance of choosing *Refugees in Tarla* as the opening artwork?**

This work acts more like an overture, to use a musical term. World War II serves as the background to that painting, especially if you think about the involvement of countries in the Pacific. For me, Taiwan's engagement in World War II was both the beginning and end of eras — the beginning of the exchange with Southeast Asia and the South Pacific for Taiwanese, but also the end of the colonial period. Many Taiwanese people had their first experience traveling to the South or to somewhere tropical, because their work was linked to the military during World War II. But this was also the end of colonial exchange. Both the painting and the Pacific War itself evoke the beginning of the Cold War. When we talk about the Cold War, I think we need to trace it back to the end of World War II, and so this painting by Shisan provides a conceptual background to the exhibition. I felt it was a fitting opening work.

**Like *Refugees in Tarla*, there are a number of artworks in 'The Secret South' that touch on historical events and allude to political alliances. I'm interested in understanding how you feel 'The Secret South' further contributes to this discussion around Taiwan's identity, as a post-colonial nation?**

When we talk about a Taiwanese identity we need to trace back this concept back to identities formed under colonial regimes. You just mentioned the tropical imagery in Shisan's painting. This type of painting was used to celebrate the political alliances made between Taiwan and other countries, often also hailing

from the South. In fact, during colonial times, this kind of tropical iconography was an integral part of Taiwan's colonial fine art. It was a methodology that a lot of local artists here used no matter if they were of Japanese descent or not. They employed the tropical landscape and its flora as a tool to depict Taiwan. This type of painting typically stems from the cultural exchanges between Japan and Taiwan, and was intended for audiences of salon style exhibitions in Taipei and Tokyo. After World War II, at the beginning of the 1950s, this kind of methodology became evident in Taiwanese art, thus becoming a part of the art history of the Global South. Taiwanese painters began to use the same methods to depict various landscapes across Southeast Asia. Different generations of Taiwanese artists then adopted this approach of framing Taiwan as an exotic place to present the intensive cooperation between Taiwan and other nations. Often, artists in colonised countries used subjects that were formed and popularised during colonial times as a method of depicting their self-identity. This influence remained strong in post-colonial periods. So, in this exhibition you will notice that before the nineties there was a disparity in how different generations used comparisons to identify the location of the self and the other.

**The majority of the works shown in 'The Secret South' are from TFAM's collection. Despite it being a municipal museum, and not national, it is the oldest and most established art museum in Taiwan.<sup>2</sup> It organises the Taiwan pavilion at the Venice Biennale as well as the Taipei Biennial. TFAM's collection is seen as a window to Taiwanese art. According to the museum's mission statement, it aims to build a collection that encompasses the development of Taiwanese art history. In light of this, how does TFAM's collection – and by extension, the works chosen for this exhibition – reflect upon Taiwan's political self imagination and sense of identity?**

TFAM's collection is quite unique because it's the first modern art museum in Taiwan. Even now, its budget is greater than the

National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts (NTMoFA) in Taichung, so TFAM still sees itself as the leading institution in this category. Another reason TFAM's collection is important is because TFAM was established in 1983, four years before the lifting of Martial law and Taiwan's move to democracy. In the nineties, a lot of Taiwanese art collections were also established, reflecting a then burgeoning Taiwanese identity. The nineties was the golden age of Taiwanese economic development so there was more buying power during that period.



Installation view of 'The Secret South' held at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taipei. 2020. Image courtesy of TFAM.

**The Bandung Conference of 1955 was pivotal during the Cold War era in establishing dynamics between post-colonial nations that we understand to be foundational to the South-South cooperation and exchange explored within the exhibition. Taiwan did not participate in this conference and it was also largely unmentioned in the exhibition. Could you speak more about this?**

The Bandung Conference was not officially attended by the Republic of China in Taipei, but during the 1950s there was a kind of refugee government of the Republic of Taiwan in Tokyo,<sup>3</sup> and indeed they did send representatives to the Bandung Conference, as they were in support of South-South cooperation (this is the mutual cooperation between countries in the Global South). I think when we talk about the third world and the beginning of South-South cooperation, the Bandung Conference is kind of a historic landmark, but the problem is that from a Taiwanese perspective, Bandung represented left wing South-South cooperation which went against Taipei's extremely Chinese-nationalist right wing perspective. The Taiwanese government, and the majority of Taiwanese people had never been part of the political and cultural structure of the Third World, based on the fundamentals of the Bandung Conference. Besides this, the Bandung Conference references the beginning of Third World cooperation. After the Bandung Conference there were the Afro-Asian Writers Conferences that were directly related to post-colonial writing and film, which Taiwan also never participated in. Maybe this was because independent overseas institutions were interested in participating in political circles, and the refugee government was never internationally recognised. This was one reason why the Republic of China government in Taipei had more of an oppositional position to these South-South cooperations. However, Taiwan developed its own South-South operations in other ways. It sent agricultural teams and techniques to Africa. That kind of cooperation with the African continent was financially supported by the US.

**Can you tell me how you see this exhibition expanding discourse on the South, especially in relation to other exhibitions that have explored South-South artistic exchanges?**

I think what differentiates 'The Secret South' from other exhibitions that have touched on these exchanges, is that previous projects are more focused on contemporary art, and

‘The Secret South’ is focused on a historical and research based approach. Previous exhibitions or exchange projects that already existed in Taiwan were hosted by independent spaces. From an institutional perspective this is the first time many official institutions are working together to make decisions related to the subject of South-South relations. So this exhibition also highlights how in the past, institutions had already recognised and collected work focused on the South.

**Were there any precedent exhibitions that you found yourself referring to or working away from?**

To make a comparison, the National Gallery of Singapore is constantly rotating and exhibiting their permanent collection, but they aim to use a more historical narrative to show that Southeast Asia has a singular historical narrative.

Another kind of methodology can be used to show this process of exchange, instead of showing a singular historical narrative. The curatorial process itself can show the shifting of history. Of course the problem is that for an everyday audience, this kind of perspective may be more difficult for them to comprehend, because they haven’t already participated in this kind of discussion. It’s easier if we have a singular narrative in high school textbooks, and then from that we can develop dynamic directions, but for many, ‘The Secret South’ exhibition is their first experience of artistic exchanges between Taiwan and other countries, and it already weaves together more complex narratives, so it may also be a challenge for regular audiences to grasp this.

I also thought about the Jogja Biennale’s ‘Equator Project’ (Indonesia). The Jogja Biennale has a really long history, but they started the Equator Project two decades ago and continue to facilitate exchanges between Indonesia and other countries such as India, Nigeria, Brazil, and a number of Arabic countries. I think the next edition will focus on Indonesia’s artistic exchanges with Pacific Island nations. The methodology used in the Jogja Biennale informed this exhibition far more than the

curatorial models used at documenta for example. For me, the Jogja Biennale informs my work much more than other biennials. The Jogja Biennale has the spirit of The Bandung Conference. I'm not specifically referencing any one edition, I'm more inspired by their methodology. The Jogja Biennale also holds a conference for each edition to reflect on art history — for example at the conference that discussed Indonesian/Indian exchanges, they mentioned that during the Cold War period there were also some art students from Indonesia who decided to study in India. For most Asian students, the only possible place to study abroad was in the West, and sometimes in Japan. So to study in India shows there were alternative paths of knowledge sharing, instead of just knowledge introduced directly from the Western world. So through these kinds of discussions they are trying to evoke existing historical exchanges that reflect on contemporary exchanges, and to find other comparative platforms that could be compared with Western exchange.

What do you think about the exhibition?

**Leora: I had this feeling that the exhibition could quite neatly be separated into two parts. It began with a more historical section — as it was displayed both chronologically and geographically, with documents, preliminary sketches, and archival materials — and then shifted into a more contemporary exhibition that included installations, video work and newly commissioned projects.**

Personally I am more interested in imagining it as one exhibition, as one way to open a discussion on cross-generation artistic exchange, because for me, in an Asian context contemporary art practices are always divided into modern or traditional art. I think that is kind of a problem, for art practitioners and also for academics. From my personal perspective, this exhibition provides a platform, or a metaphorical library of artistic exchanges between Taiwan and the South. That is why I have provided this resource.

**For this exhibition you collaborated with a lot of different researchers working on various archives, can you talk about integrating these archives into the show?**

Yes, in fact the focus of the Taiwan/Philippines archive was not the researcher's main research topic. Huang Yi Hsiung was more interested in researching post-war pioneering modern artists but when he was working on his own research, I asked him to concentrate on certain lines of inquiry that would integrated neatly into this exhibition For the Singaporean Art Archive Project (SAAP) the researcher Koh Nguang How had been concentrating on a Singaporean archive, because he has been working on a project about how Singaporean artists engage with Cambodian art. So, for this exhibition, he selected certain materials or artworks from his own archive that related to Cambodian, Singaporean, and Taiwanese artists that have made sketches at Angkor Wat. I thought I could follow this same methodology to cooperate with him, so he spent almost half a year finding materials from his own archive that related to a Taiwanese Singaporean relationship. He found even more materials which he borrowed from other artists. So it's the first time we have tried to reconstruct artistic relationships between Taiwan and Singapore.



Installation view of 'The Secret South' 2020, held at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taipei. Image courtesy of TFAM.

**You've spent eight years researching the subject of the Global South, and how art has reflected on and factored into Taiwan's political positioning and relationships therein, and you have travelled extensively to interview artists and museum directors, curators, historians and other art practitioners in your research. What do you hope that the exhibition will provide to future discourse and scholarship on Taiwan's relationship to the South? Do you feel this exhibition is a final culmination of this research, or where do you see this research progressing to?**

My personal research about the Global South began earlier but I was focused more on researching contemporary art. What dissatisfied me was that, since 2013, I felt like I needed to provide a more historical or academic review about what Taiwan had achieved before in relation to South-South exchange. This would make my project not only focused on contemporary discussions. It would also have a strong historical base.

I have also compiled research on the history of a Taiwanese/African relationship as well as the history of Taiwanese/Latin American exchange, so maybe those research projects can continue in the future.

**Have you considered having another exhibition further down the line to examine Taiwan's relationship with Africa?**

In fact I am planning one at the moment, but I am not really sure whether we have enough material regarding Taiwan's side of this relationship, so I will use more commissioned projects to discuss, for example, the migration of biological specimens. There are certain fish or snails that are originally from Africa, but because of colonialism they were brought to Taiwan and have become part of our natural biological systems. Also I wish to expand the topic to discuss Asian/African relationships, because a Taiwanese/African relationship is just a small part of this. Even when we talk about Asian/African relationships there is still a lot of research that we need to do.

**You mentioned before that you hope there will be more historical reviews or academic research into what Taiwan has done in the past, regarding South-South exchange, and this would reflect on your research as well. Do you feel like this is an angle of discourse and research that will benefit Taiwan’s artistic exchanges in the future?**

I want to use this chance to evoke an interest in Taiwan because scholars from Southeast Asia didn’t really have a strong interest in Taiwanese engagement in Southeast Asian history. I think this is a lens that can be used to invoke their interest. To build structurally sound academic research it needs to not be one sided. You need to build interest from both sides.

**Just before ‘The Secret South’ closed in October 2020, local elected officials criticised the inclusion of Mei Dean-E’s installation *I-DEN-TI-TY* (1996, 2020) as it satirically addresses Taiwan’s search for international recognition. In the installation, cloths embroidered with ‘disgrace’ or ‘shame’ cover several golden plates that represent the various countries that have broken diplomatic ties with Taiwan. Despite having been exhibited several times in the past and winning multiple accolades, it was perceived within the context of the exhibition as levelling criticism at current Taiwanese politics, especially in light of the island’s relationship with China. In a now-deleted Facebook post, a politician called for the installation to be removed as it was “an incitation of xenophobia, or a pure rage out of resentment.” (Wong 2021 n.p) What was your response to the controversy regarding *I-DEN-TI-TY*?**

These essential questions evoke the memories of this farce-like political event. However, this event is indeed key to entering the psyche of contemporary Taiwanese culture and politics.

*I-DEN-TI-TY* is not only a landmark of Taiwanese contemporary art, it also plays an important key role in discussing and negotiating the concept of a museum collection.

The artist's manifesto declares it to be an ongoing work which will only be finished when the R.O.C. vanishes, or has cut off official relationships with every country in the world. So, besides the political arguments carried by *I-DEN-TI-TY*, it has also created a kind of paradoxical circumstance that challenges the nature of museum collections. That's also the reason why each exhibited version of *I-DEN-TI-TY* is different.



Installation view of Mei Deam-E, *I-DEN-TI-TY*, 1996, 2020 in 'The Secret South' at TFAM. Courtesy of TFAM.

Words play important roles in *I-DEN-TI-TY*. In fact, although the words embroidered on the cloths covering the ceremonial plates translate to “disgrace” or “shame on you”, these words are classical idioms mainly used in Confucianism scriptures; meaning they are not words people use in ordinary conversation (similar

to if someone today used the Latin term “dedectus” instead of “shame”). Another reason why the usage of words matter is that they reflect how government-controlled newspapers before the twenty-first century described the event of cutting-off diplomatic relationships. For a local audience, these words remind us of the ridiculous official wording used during the dictatorship regime, more than a sense of xenophobia. I assume the strong irony of *I-DEN-TI-TY* is the core reason that it aroused negative feelings in politicians aligned with the Kuomintang (KMT) — often referred to in English as the Chinese Nationalist Party — because it reminds the audience of the irony of the KMT’s dictatorship.

**How do you think the backlash to the inclusion of *I-DEN-TI-TY* and the perceived consequences reflect on your curatorial themes and the intention of this exhibition?**

The strategy of the KMT now is to try to find any way to rally against the pro-independence parties. It is important to note that the KMT is currently at their weakest moment in post-war history, and they will do everything possible to re-take power. To be frank, the actions of these politicians didn’t have too much of an effect, academically. Aside from their poor knowledge of art (for example, they insisted that art should be beautiful and reflect goodness), one factor we should not ignore is that they raised this issue when the city council’s scheduled budget was up for review. As TFAM is a municipal museum, the budget included the museum’s allocated funding.

**The Taipei mayor Ko Wen-Je publicly advised “we should give the director Ping Lin a demerit” (Pamela Wong 2021, n.p) should any of the countries who broke diplomatic ties with Taiwan complain about the work. However, after public outcry to this, he retracted his statement. What do you think responses like this mean for the future of South-South exchange both within and outside of the arts?**

There are two possible reasons why no country which has broken diplomatic relationships with Taiwan has registered any

complaints about this work. Firstly, the countries which have broken diplomatic relations with Taiwan — usually developing Southern countries — closed the diplomatic posts they had established here when official ties were severed. In contrast, many Western countries who don't officially recognise Taiwan and thus don't have embassies here, still retain diplomatic 'offices' on the island. Another reason why no complaint has been registered is due to the fact that South-South cooperation in a Taiwanese context rarely enters the domain of the art world. Personally, I would be happy if Senegal or the Solomon Islands made official accusations regarding this matter. It's better than the current situation in which Taiwan is isolated and ignored.

Generally speaking, the response to the inclusion of Mei's *I-DEN-TI-TY* in 'The Secret South' shows how a work can still affect and interact with contemporary society, even after two and a half decades.

**Endnotes:**

1. The artworks in ‘The Secret South’ were sourced from over sixteen museum collections in Taiwan: AP Archive , Ang Kiukok’s Family, British Pathé, Central News Agency, Chen Wen Hsi’s Family, Cheong Soo Pieng’s Family, Eye Filmmuseum, Liu Kang’s Family, INDIGENOUS Peoples Cultural Foundation, Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts, Kuo Hsueh Hu Foundation, National Archives Administration, National Development Council, National Museum of History, National Museum of Natural Science, National Museum of Taiwan History, National Taiwan Museum, National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, National Taiwan Library , Shiy De Jinn Foundation, Taiwan Film and Audiovisual Institute, Taipei Public Library, Yuyu Yang Art Education Foundation.
2. This museum is directly funded by the municipal government, and the collection and the building belong to the city. Since it is municipal, the directors reflect the political parties, so when directors were appointed while the KMT was in power, this is reflected in the choices made regarding works in the collection.
3. Taiwan had a second provisional government in exile in Japan from 1956–1977 which advocated for Taiwan’s independence remotely, while the Taipei government (ROC Taiwan) fought against any Taiwanese independence movements.

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Pamela Wong “Taipei Fine Arts Museum Director To Step Down”.

**Notes on Contributors:**

Leora Joy Jones is a poet, photographer, writer, editor, and arts practitioner. She is interested in the perverted intersections between art, the practice of everyday life, and popular culture. Recently, her art criticism has been trained on ecological art practices and their potential to shift the ways in which people perceive their relationship with the environment. Born in the USA, and raised in South Africa, she now lives and works in Taiwan. Leora holds a degree in Fine Art from the university currently known as Rhodes, and is earning an MA in Critical and Curatorial Studies of Contemporary Art (CCSCA) in Taipei. A founder of the Taipei Poetry Collective, Leora hosts readings and biweekly poetry workshops. She is assistant editor at *Southerly*, and her writing can be found in *4A Papers*, *Yishu Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, *ArtAsiaPacific*, *Design Anthology*, *the Newslens International*, and *Southerly*. You can see more of her writing at leorajoy.com and her photography on instagram @loveleorajoy.

Christopher Whitfield is a writer based in Taipei.



## **Roundtable Review: ‘The Secret South: From Cold War Perspective to Global South in Museum Collection’**

**Lu Pei-Yi**

**Leora Joy Jones**

**Fernanda Hsiuh**

**Christopher Whitfield**

*Co-curated by Nobuo Takamori, independent curator and historian, and Ping Lin, ex-director of the Taipei Fine Art Museum (TFAM), ‘The Secret South: From Cold War Perspective to Global South in Museum Collection’ (25 July 2020–25 October 2020) was a revisionist historical exhibition displayed across multiple galleries on the second floor of TFAM. Thematically separated into several sections, the show examined notions of the South, particularly in relation to Taiwan’s political histories with various countries and regions. Beginning with the effects of the Cold War in Southeast Asia (1940s to 1960s); and moving on to art exchanges between Taiwan and the Philippines, Cambodia, Thailand, Singapore, Latin America, and Africa, the exhibition included re-commissioned and newly commissioned works by contemporary artists as well as archival projects. In July of 2020, Nobuo Takamori gave a guided tour of ‘The Secret South’ to students and lecturers from the MA program on Critical and Curatorial Studies in Contemporary Art (CCSCA), at the National Taipei University of Education. This is what they thought of the exhibition.*

## From Hidden Collection to Witness of History

Lu Pei-Yi



Installation view of 'The Secret South' exhibition at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2020. Courtesy of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum.

The collection is an integral feature of a museum, presenting the mission and rationale of an institution, as well as reflecting the social-political circumstance of the time. However, as time passes, some collected works are merely well-preserved in storage and seldom have a chance to be seen in public. How can we make the invisible museum collection visible? How can contemporary curatorial approaches offer new and alternative ways of seeing and reading the museum collection? What are the possibilities for curatorial intervention in the museum collection?

'The Secret South: From Cold War Perspective to Global South in Museum Collection', an exhibition that drew on the

Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM) collection, offers a fertile case-study for exploring these questions. In contrast to conservative collection-based exhibitions that adopt a linear chronology based on art history, 'The Secret South' aimed to provide a fresh perspective on the significance of TFAM's permanent collections, as well as a new way of understanding its practices of collection and acquisition. There are three components of this show: artworks based on collections, research projects and archives, and commissioned works by contemporary artists.

The TFAM collection relating to countries in the Global South is sparse. Works of art were collected on sporadic occasions, either as official diplomatic gifts, private donations or artists' travel sketches in the context of the ideological rivalries of the Cold War. Most of those works were kept in storage for a long time and were difficult to incorporate into a traditional art historical narrative. These works, therefore, are merely seen as items, or even labels, on the collection list. 'The Secret South' exhibition not only drew from TFAM's collection but also from various sources, such as loaned works from other museums, works provided by the artists themselves or their relatives, as well as several archives. In this way, the history of the Cold War is revealed through these shreds of evidence hidden in the collection. The works enact a form of testimony that bear witness to complex cultural dynamics and politics of the Cold War. Moreover, as a supplement to this exhibition and as a potential mode of knowledge production, the archive section provides a historical context for understanding the international exchanges during the Cold War during the period of martial law under the Kuomintang (KMT). In addition, the artist commissions in the exhibition work not only connect the previous two sections, they also foreground the current socio-political situation thereby evoking a critical concept for renewing and revitalising the collection — that is, a living and dynamic history is more important than a 'dead object'.

Overall, 'The Secret South' exhibition demonstrates a mode of curating the museum collection, one in which the curator could be seen as a theatre director to present the historical moment.

## A Paradoxical Parody: Mei Dean-E's *I-DEN-TI-TY* and Taiwan's Search for International Recognition

Leora Joy Jones



Installation view of *I-DEN-TI-TY*, 1996, 2020, in 'The Secret South' at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum. Courtesy of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum.

Mei Dean-E's installation *I-DEN-TI-TY* (1996, 2020) is firmly situated within the historical and research based context of 'The Secret South: From Cold War Perspective to Global South in Museum Collection' at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM), which explores Taiwan's relations within the Global South through art and visual culture. In particular, *I-DEN-TI-TY* offers a thoughtful and updated reflection on Taiwan's sense of self through a satirical examination of the island's history of exchanges with its allies past and present. It also humorously assesses Taiwan's uneasy relationship with China, in connection

to its ongoing quest to define a national identity<sup>1</sup> and gain international recognition. This installation was radical when it was first exhibited in 1994,<sup>2</sup> seven years after the lifting of Martial Law, as it reflected on Taiwan's nascent independence, and parodied Taiwan's diplomacy. Mei's renovated installation, re-commissioned by independent curator and historian Takamori Nobuo and Ping Lin (then director of TFAM who served as the show's chief curator), proves to be even more radical in 2020, precisely because its message is in many ways unaltered.

However, one change is unmistakable; Taiwan's dwindling number of allies. An isolated nation — historically and culturally influenced by China, and severely limited in its political reach due to cross-strait relations — Taiwan now has diplomatic ties with only a handful of countries. One by one, these alliances are falling away. In *I-DEN-TI-TY*, Mei parodies the fragility of Taiwan's diplomatic ties: black, red and yellow cloths embroidered with 'shame,' 'disgrace,' or 'ungrateful' cover the golden ceremonial plates of fifteen countries that have broken relations with Taiwan, providing a humorous and satirical reading of Taiwan's diplomacy. By commissioning Mei to update this work for 'The Secret South' in 2020, the curators reveal sensitive consideration of the ever changing reality of contemporary Taiwanese politics. Furthermore, *I-DEN-TI-TY* acquires new meaning in the context of the curatorial framework of 'The Secret South' as it is a revisionist show exploring the many secrets hidden within museum collections, and so *I-DEN-TI-TY* provides an alternative lens on what is often perceived as a singular monolithic history.

When it was first exhibited in 1996, *I-DEN-TI-TY* resembled an official bureaucratic reception area, complete with all the governmental decorations and regalia you would expect to see in presidential palaces, such as plaques, maps, flags, ceremonial plates, and official portraits. In 'The Secret South', the walls are no longer deep blue as in past iterations, but neon turquoise. With all the various traditional trappings of office placed on these bright walls, *I-DEN-TI-TY* literally and ironically highlights the performative aspects of diplomacy. In the new work, there is no connecting doorway out the room, and unlike previous

configurations, no seats are provided, accentuating the discomfort of endlessly waiting to hold audience with government officials. On one wall a pixelated illustration of Confucius looks out, a QR code hidden in his beard. The fugitive placement of the hyperlink possibly alludes to the ways in which China is perceived as subtly using culture as a tool for propaganda.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, *I-DEN-TI-TY* queries Taiwan's independence from the mainland. Hung on the wall are portraits of Tsai Ing-Wen and Xi Jinping, the current presidents of the two Republics.<sup>4</sup> They stare out, side by side, at the end of a long red carpet, each one partially masked by the 'other's' flag. The ambiguous flag reversal shrewdly alludes to their intertwined histories, and Taipei's diplomatic dance with Beijing. Viewing *I-DEN-TI-TY* now, in light of this current junction of history and the various political changes that have occurred during the pandemic — such as Taiwan's successful handling of the COVID-19, China's increasingly forceful intimidation tactics, as well as the recent US elections — the work is pervaded with an uneasy irony. The passing years have turned the installation's presidential reception area into an unmanned and inhospitable waiting room.

Taiwan *still* has a nebulous political status and its inclusion in 'The Secret South' provoked even more controversy than ever before, as it offers a satirical interpretation of contemporary politics, revealing just how complicated Taiwan's international identity is. In fact, near the end of the show in October 2020, accusations were made that the inclusion of *I-DEN-TI-TY* in 'The Secret South' sparked "diplomatic hatred"<sup>5</sup> and incited criticism of Taiwanese politics. Indeed, the mayor of Taipei suggested that Ping Lin be penalised. Lin, who had served as the director of TFAM since 2015 resigned suddenly after.

Hung on a wall near the official portraits of the two China leaders is a long red ribbon, its tail twisted into delicate bows, its silken end resting on a small ornate table. A heavy pair of scissors holds it down, alluding to the inevitability of more political severances. Much of Mei's installation revels in allusion, word play, and subversive language. Evidence of this is most apparent in the title of the work. Inscribed in gold on the red shellacked

plaque that hangs over the entrance is the word ‘identity’ and below it, the artist’s phonetic translation into Chinese (ai 哀, dun 敦, di 砥, ti 悌). Individually, these characters express Confucian principles such as ‘sorrow’, ‘honest persistence’, ‘encourage[ment]’, and ‘brotherhood’. Mei’s paradoxical combination of these Confucian principles alludes to Taiwan’s arduous and ongoing quest for identity on an international stage.

Accompanying the show is an origin story by the artist that candidly highlights and questions the uncertainties that underpin the island’s political status. An additional postscript declares that “this artwork would remain ongoing and would only be considered done when the Republic of China (Taiwan) is without any formal diplomatic alliances.”<sup>6</sup> Does Mei intend for this room to serve as a parody of Taiwan’s performance of diplomacy? In light of the postscript on the wall, and the furore created by the inclusion of this work in ‘The Secret South’, it may also serve as a mausoleum for the dream of a Taiwanese identity. We can only wait and see what time will make of it.

## Endnotes:

1. Many well established Taiwanese artists — such as Yang Mao-Lin, Wu Mali, Wu Tien-chang, and Yao Jiu-hung — examined national and individual identity in their practice after the lifting of Martial Law, and this is evident in much of their work throughout the nineties.
2. *I-DEN-TI-TY* was made in 1994 and was included in the 1996 Taipei Biennial titled 'Quest for Identity'. In 2000 it was collected by the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM). It was widely displayed across Taiwan in different configurations over the years, and in 2020 TFAM recommissioned the artist to update it to reflect current changes. The dates provided by TFAM refer to the 1996 Taipei Biennial and 2020 re-commission.
3. The QR code in Confucius' beard links to a BBC article on Confucian Institutes opening worldwide that are rumoured to propagate Chinese propaganda. This was included to highlight and comment on the many ways in which culture is used to soft-sell China, and as a means to sway perceptions of the CCP. Pratik Jakhar "Confucius Institutes: The growth of China's controversial cultural branch" in BBC News, September 2019.  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-49511231>
4. In its prior configuration, presidents Lee Teng-hui (Taiwan) and Deng Xiaoping (China) were on the walls. In this installation, their portraits are on the floor, leaning against a wall nearby. Lee's face partially covers Deng's.
5. The inclusion of Mei's *I-DEN-TI-TY* in 'The Secret South' at TFAM sparked great controversy just before the show closed. One Taipei City Councillor thought the work stirred up xenophobia, and used inappropriate language, especially in light of the current political events. When asked to comment on this, the mayor of Taipei suggested that Ping Lin — the prior director of TFAM and chief curator of 'The Secret South' — be penalised. TFAM responded to the mayor's suggestion by reminding him that this installation was an expression of the artist's perspective and was by no means reflective of the institution's political views. TFAM also highlighted how, furthermore, *I-DEN-TI-TY* was exhibited several times over the last two decades in many different institutions, and Mei had won multiple international and local awards for this work. In response to this, another Taipei City Councillor wrote that "As a free and democratic country or the representative[s] of this country, we should try our best to protect the rights of creators to express and exhibit." However, Lin unexpectedly resigned. TFAM affirmed that her sudden departure was linked to her wish to retire soon, and not simply in response to the accusations made against the curators.
6. TFAM. Mei Dean-E 'Origin' wall text. *I-DEN-TI-TY* (1996, 2020).



## New World: Taiwanese – Latin American Art Exchange

Fernanda Hsueh



Xenia Meijia Padilla *The Popular Inspiration*, 1997. Mixed media. Photo by Leora Joy Jones.

The fifth gallery of ‘The Secret South’ is titled “New World: Taiwanese – Latin American Art Exchange at TFAM, 1980s–2000s.” Taiwan and Central America are both part of the Global South, which is closely intertwined with the geopolitics of the time frame spanning the Cold War to the present. The diplomatic relationship between Taiwan and its Central American allies led to the commencement of a series of Central American art exhibitions at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM) from the 1980s to the 2000s, resulting in numerous additions to TFAM’s permanent collection.<sup>1</sup> The artwork exhibited in the ‘New World’ gallery were all selected from the museum’s permanent collection and created by artists from Guatemala, Honduras, El

Salvador and Costa Rica. These videos, paintings, photographs and collages reflect the social and political conditions in Central America at the time.

Although the four Latin American countries share similar postcolonial histories of political and social upheaval due to Spanish colonisation and subsequent independence movements, Central America is still a large and diverse region, and the art produced there is neither unified nor homogenous. Many works in 'The Secret South' depict groups of marginalised people who suffered oppression during the multiple civil wars and coups<sup>2</sup> which occurred during the Cold War. Along with Euro-North American dominance, these were common themes that contribute to the historical context that is crucial to the understanding of Central American art. Take for example *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1998) by the Guatemalan artist, Luis Gonzalez Palma. It consists of two sepia toned portraits of women above a silver-white Mayan textile embroidered with the words 'Anatomie de la Melancholie'.<sup>3</sup> The woman on the left resembles a religious Madonna figure, complete with a backlit halo. To the right is a close-up portrait of a younger girl staring directly at the camera. Both images are filled with mysticism. The artist uses symbols and imagery to present and construct the identity of the Mayan people, and make visible the women who have been excluded and discriminated against in society. In contrast with the serenity of these images, *The Popular Inspiration* (1997) by Honduran artist Xenia Meija Padilla presents a sequence of paintings across sixteen square collages in shades of pinkish-red. The colour implies bloody, feminine elements, applied to simple figures who are falling or fighting in multiple chaotic and brutal situations. The artist depicts the violence of riots and natural disasters<sup>4</sup> that she experienced in Honduras, but obscures that violence by turning it into childlike graffiti.

These two artists developed and created their artworks based on regional circumstances and histories. Each action that the artists' perform in their works serve as a metaphor for social realities that need to be presented and comprehended based on each region's specific historical context. Unlike other galleries

which addressed Taiwan's diplomatic relations with individual countries (Taiwan/Indonesia), the curators of 'The Secret South' grouped together artists from many countries in Latin America, leaving visitors unable to properly address the detailed historical context of the artworks. Moreover, the approach of only focusing on the cultural diplomatic exchanges limits the exhibition's ability to present a more comprehensive narrative and context for the artworks. Nonetheless, the curatorial framework in "The New World" gallery still provided a new and interesting angle for reflecting on TFAM's Central American art collection. These Central American artists all have their own colourful and unique local perspectives that need to be addressed and expanded on more deeply.

**Endnotes:**

1. Between 1985 and 2008, TFAM started to hold a series of Latin American art exhibitions. Around the same time, in 1987, the abolition of Martial Law in Taiwan marked a new political era, and the country began more aggressive diplomatic tactics with Central American countries in order to solidify and legitimise the international status of the post martial law Taiwanese government (for instance, the president LEE Teng-hui started diplomatic visits after CHIANG Ching-kuo's presidential term). In 2008 president MA Ying-jeou who represented the KMT party changed the diplomatic strategy by reducing diplomatic tactics with Central American countries in order to develop diplomacy with China. At that time TFAM put on a series of commencement of Chinese art exhibitions and refrained from Central American art exhibitions.
2. El Salvador experienced the Salvadoran Civil War from the late 1980s to the early 1990s. Meanwhile, Guatemala suffered 36 years of civil war from the 1960s to 1996. At that time, INDIGENOUS Guatemalans were targeted by brutal state-led repression. In Honduras, the military seemed to hand over its power to the democratic government, but in actual fact the military made alliances with the US government to plague its neighbors. In contrast, following the Costa Rican Civil War the provisional president abolished the military in 1948, which led to a more peaceful and non-domestic military dictatorship in Costa Rica.
3. Luis Gonzalez Palma makes work that addresses Mayan INDIGENOUS identity and his experience witnessing decades of civil war in Guatemala. "The New World" gallery exhibited four photograph collages of sepia-tinted portraits with the subjects facing towards the camera. The collages contain red paint, transparency sheet, text, and traditional Mayan textiles and embroidery. The Mayan peoples see embroidery as a significant technique, which represents a shared history.
4. Hurricane Mitch devastated Central America in 1998.

## Taiwan in Africa in Taiwan: Responsibilities of Artistic Exchange

Christopher Whitfield



Installation view of *Project B — Chinese Pagoda (Domaine Agro-Industriel Présidentiel de la N'Sele)* in 'The Secret South' at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2020. Image courtesy of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum.

Though 'The Secret South' exhibition is almost three quarters of a century removed from Bandung, this exploration of Taiwan's (ROC) southward orientation within the arts traces a map which is largely unable to afford the African continent a place within the country's vision of exchange. Taiwan was officially absent from the historic Bandung Conference of 1955. Recognised as one of the central large scale venues for Afro-Asian diplomatic engagement, the conference was pivotal in linking the political self-imaginaries burgeoning in post-colonial nations across the global South. However, as Lu Peng-Po observed in a February

1955 article for Taiwan Review (then Free China Review), as the large majority of the thirty states invited [to the Bandung Conference] and all of the sponsoring states are Asian, it may be preferable to call it the Asian-African Conference (Lu 1955, n.p) Similarly, in ‘The Secret South’ we are presented with a narrative of Taiwanese southward exchange that is thus far only able to configure itself largely through a lens of inter-Asian interaction. In its attempt to provide some evidence of existing artistic exchange with the African continent, the exhibition pursues both human and nonhuman entanglements, unraveling networks of modern political and historic cultural transactions. However, reiterating the consequence of Lu Peng-Po’s preference of sixty years prior, the imbalance in focus quietly marginalises African presence within the discourse on Southward exchange, and participation in relations between nations of the Global South.

Historian Hao Chen tells us that during the Cold War, the struggle for legitimacy between the ROC and PRC was to become all consuming (Chen 2021, 257). Ironically, amongst the archival works collected in ‘The Secret South’, nowhere is this more succinctly pronounced than in an artwork which takes Africa as its focus. *Project B – Chinese Pagoda (Domaine Agro-Industriel Présidentiel de la N’Sele)* (2020) is a commissioned work by Taiwanese artists Yao Jui Chung and Hank Cheng, which documents an architectural landmark within an agro-industrial park, built just outside of Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo during the Mobutu Sese Seko era. In their telling of the site’s history — a presidential villa, built by Taiwanese agents for one of the continents most corrupt dictators, funded through US intervention — the artists ruminate on its decline. “After Mobutu’s regime ended, the building has become a ruin, and is referred to by locals as ‘Chinese Pagoda’, and they are unclear about which ‘China’ had actually constructed it.” Even in the contemporary moment, with Taiwanese diplomatic relations on the continent dwindling to a single ally, and nations still grappling with the aftermath of such intervention, Chung and Cheng lament, or perhaps chastise, the fact that locals apparently did not feel it to be a priority to distinguish the two China’s when

sorting through what is left.

Implied in Chung and Cheng's statement is a vision of civil, rather than diplomatic exchange — an expected international awareness of the political complexities that underpin the intersection of personal and national identity. The networks of exchange that substantiate this type of consciousness are dynamically excavated in 'The Secret South'. The exhibition is districted into rooms dedicated to particular countries, regions, or trajectories of exchange. Within them a patchwork of historical anecdotes, archived snapshots, and collected artworks attest to the interpersonal foundations of the cultural understanding central to the exhibition's intent. Many of the interactions captured by the works in the exhibition suggest a kind of soft-power that goes beyond the influence of officially sanctioned engagement. In 2016 the Ministry of Culture (MoC) were asked why African nations had been disenfranchised from participation in their projects intended to promote international artistic exchange.<sup>1</sup> Representatives claimed that "for policy makers, 'Africa' is still a dangerous area of poverty, war, and people who need to flee to Europe".<sup>2</sup> When one considers the international political support for regimes such as Seko's, and their violent ramifications, a fear based exclusion of African subjects from access to dynamic avenues of cultural exchange represents a particularly hypocritical failing. The fact that these circumstances impede exchange at the interpersonal level is meaningful in various ways. Not only does it allow lopsided representations of African subjects to continue to prevail, but exhibitions such as 'The Secret South' — which are underwritten by governmental policy which so often enables international exchange — will remain unable to fully represent or benefit from the potential of the region's southward orientation.

Elsewhere in the exhibition, the presentation by the Nusantara Archive examines unseen traces of exchange between Taiwan and the African continent. In Chang En Man's work *The Snail Paradise* 2019 the artist studies the incorporation of the Giant African land snail into the biome of Taiwan. The display exhibits documents alongside a collection of shells, a mingling

of human and natural archives. This work intends to query the anthropocentrism of discourse related to exchange. However, in regards to the examination of the African context within 'The Secret South' the work takes on a secondary aspect. Pursuing the global trajectory of this nonhuman specimen also unearths pathways of human exchange that predate our contemporary political constructs. Though in and of itself the movement of a snail cannot be framed as an "interaction", the act of tracing the assisted migrations of these nonhuman creatures that have become so deeply embedded in the ecologies that surround us, also speaks to the expansive opportunity for intimate and varied interpersonal connection. These tangents suffuse histories of exchange with possibilities that are not limited by the requirements of current political or national ideology. Organic and historic links already surround us, leaving trails in the underbrush. Outside of the limited scope thus far envisioned by those who sculpt the trajectories of international dialogue, as yet unrealised forms of contact and exchange abound.

**Endnotes:**

1. These projects include The Jade, Coloured Glaze, and Coral Projects, which were all iterations of the Ministry of Culture's program to promote international artistic exchange.

2. The Stand News, Accessed 12 February 2021.

<https://www.thestandnews.com/art/%E5%A4%96%E4%BA%A4%E5%9B%B0%E5%A2%83%E4%B8%AD-%E5%8F%B0%E7%81%A3%E8%97%9D%E6%96%87%E5%9C%88%E7%9A%84%E8%B6%85%E7%B4%9A%E9%80%A3%E7%B5%90-i/>

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Cover Image: Installation view of Mei Dean-E, *I-DEN-TI-TY*, 1996, 2020 in 'The Secret South' at TFAM. Courtesy of TFAM.





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