

# Towards “Art/Society”: Study on Socially engaged Art Practices

Text/ LU Pei-Yi

## Abstract

This study focuses on art practices of social engagement that deal with social issues and use a variety of concepts of “participation” as their approaches. Its scope will encompass the lists of grantees in the visual arts section of the National Culture and Arts Foundation (NCAF), including recipients of regular grants (artistic production, exhibition, research, publication and so on) and Production Grants to Independent Curators in Visual Arts, and will also extend to community research programs from 2007 to 2010. The selected cases are taken from the period after 2000. This research raises questions such as: what is the background and local context of socially engaged art in Taiwan? Since 2000, what characteristics have these practices manifested in terms of concepts, ideas, and approaches? This study will be conducted on three levels: (1) to study the social, political and economic changes in Taiwan, and the corresponding developments in the art environment, discourses and practices in Taiwan contemporary art; (2) to discuss the artists who received grants under four categories: art as a means to manifest the reality, art as intervention in reality, art as a platform for exchange, art as a medium for effecting change;(3) to summarize the characteristics of these art practices and assess their impact. This study suggests that the development of socially engaged art in Taiwan since 2000 has been more diverse, not only in terms of concepts, themes and methods, but also in terms of presentation. In terms of concept, it has expanded its imagination of art and society, and changed its approach from “art  $\leftrightarrow$  society” to “art/society”. In terms of their role, the artists fall into three categories: artist as subject, artist as interface, and artist steps back. The themes and modes of presentation also vary greatly due to the changes in concept and the role of the artist.

Key words:

Social engagement, artist as subject, artist as interface, and artist steps back, art/society

## Introduction

The National Culture and Arts Foundation (NCAF) aims at creating a healthier environment for the development of culture and the arts, promoting culture and the arts as well as raising their standards. Established in 1996, its grant system has been in place for almost twenty years. During this period, what was the development of socially engaged art practices which come under the visual arts section of the grant system? Since these art practices are directly related to reality, how do they reflect the phenomena in contemporary Taiwanese society? How do they manifest the issues or bring about real changes? What is the relationship between art and society, and what are the characteristics of these art practices since 2000?

In this study, “socially engaged” art practices refer to practices that explore social phenomena and issues as their content. These practices are project-based and often involve a real community setting in order to manifest certain social issues. Their nature is public, participatory, relational, collaborative and process-oriented. Art acts as a medium for change or intervention, and may not necessarily produce works in the form of objects or be presented in the form of exhibitions. Emerging in Taiwan in the late 1990s, these practices come under different names: art intervention, new-genre public art, community art, participatory art, socially engaged art, art as social interaction etc. In recent years, these art practices are integrated with communities, groups and social movements for the sake of making a wider impact.

The lists of grantees in the visual art production and exhibition category of the NCAF between 1996 and 2014 will form the basic scope of this study, which will also extend to the recipients of grants for publication, research and curatorial projects, as well as community research programs from 2007 to 2010. The timeline is also an important consideration. From 1996 to 2000, during the initial stage of its founding, the NCAF had more sufficient funds to make grants. But since 2000, with decreasing interest on its fund, it has obviously been more cautious in allocating its funds in terms of the projects of grants, and the scale and amount of the grants made.<sup>1</sup> In Taiwan, socially engaged art is a relatively recent development. The data from 1996 to 1999 reveal the changes and convergence of the relevant practices before 2000, while the grantees since 2000 can be seen as testimony to the changes observed before.

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<sup>1</sup>Interview with Hung Yi-ju, Director of the Grant Division of the NCAF, Oct 6, 2014, in the NCAF conference room, 15:00-16:00.

This study will be conducted on three levels: (1) to study the social, political and economic changes in Taiwan, and the corresponding developments in the environment, themes, discourses and practices of Taiwan contemporary art; (2) to identify several artists with tendencies of “social engagement” who received NCAF grants and discuss them under four categories: art as a means to manifest the reality, art as intervention in reality, art as a platform for exchange, art as a medium for effecting change;(3) to summarize the characteristics of these art practices – the change in the artist’s role and the imagination of the relationship between art and society. This study suggests that the development of socially engaged art in Taiwan since 2000 has been more diverse, not only in terms of concepts, themes and methods, but also in terms of presentation. In terms of concept, it has expanded its imagination of art and society, and changed its approach from “art  $\leftrightarrow$  society” to “art/society”. In terms of their role, the artists fall into three categories: artist as subject, artist as interface, and artist steps back. The themes and modes of presentation also vary greatly due to the changes in concept and the role of the artist.

## **1. The development of “socially engaged” art in Taiwan**

### **1.1. “Socially engaged” art in Europe and the US**

Socially engaged art practices clearly emerged in Europe and the US in the 1990s and have been a growing trend since 2000. British art critic and scholar Claire Bishop traced it back to the modernist imagination of and experimentation with art and society in the 1920s, such as Futurism and Dada, and to art practices with related concepts in the late 60s and 70s, such as Performance art, Happening, Fluxus, Situationist International (SI), or British Community Art.

In terms of the global situation, Postmodernism became prominent in the 80s. All kinds of concepts emerged to subvert and critique the characteristics of modernism, such as environmentalism, feminism, the politics of difference, pluralism, collage and profane consumption. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 symbolizing the end of the Cold War, the world turned to thinking about the ecology, relations, pluralism and connections. In the 90s, the show “Culture in Action” in Chicago (1993) and the book *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* published in 1995 summarized the art practices since the 70s, whose fundamental concepts differed from art practices that came before. In Europe in the mid-1990s, French critic Nicolas Bourriaud set the

trend for such practices through exhibitions and discourses, such as the book *Relational Aesthetics* published in 1998. This unique art genre that aims at building relations with the audience is defined by the spirit of “sharing” and “DIY” (do-it-yourself), using non-artistic social actions as its form, which are rendered artistic through the participation of “people”.

With the publication of the English edition of *Relational Aesthetics* in 2002, this term came into common use to counter the notion of the individualistic and heroic modernist artist. In 2004, scholar Claire Bishop published the essay “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics” in *October*, criticizing that relational aesthetics only emphasize good and positive thoughts. According to Bishop, “if relational aesthetics requires a unified subject as a prerequisite for community-as-togetherness, then some cases provide a mode of artistic experience more adequate to the divided and incomplete subject of today’. She uses the term “relational antagonism” to counter “relational aesthetics” and to distinguish works utilizing unease and discomfort rather than the sense of belonging emphasized by the latter. Bishop published the book *Artificial Hell: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* in 2012 on this topic. In terms of exhibitions, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art presented “The Art of Participation-1950 to Now” in 2008, featuring more than 40 artists. The exhibition examined how artists collaborated with the public to create works. In 2012, Creative Time published *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, a collection of research, projects and symposia exploring the impact of socially engaged art.

As briefly described above, from relational aesthetics in the 1990s to socially engaged art or participatory art after 2000, this kind of art practice no longer merely emphasizes the building of relations among participants. Bringing together different kinds of political art, it deals with real people, events and objects as the problematic to reveal certain truths, engage in criticism or tell personal stories, putting into practice the idea that “the political is the personal”.

## **1.2 “Socially engaged” art in Taiwan**

In Taiwan, the trend can be traced back to the 80s, but has been increasingly evident since the mid-2000s. They have sparked widespread discussion over the past five years. The lifting of the martial law in 1987 was a crucial moment for Taiwanese society, politics and culture. Several key features of socially engaged art, such as its “participatory”, “public”, “community” and “civic” aspects, are all related to the values of a democratic society. The discussion of social issues, criticism and

intervention also need to take place in an environment that tolerates pluralistic and oppositional voices. Since the 1990s, Taiwan has seen a series of democratic reforms. After the Wild Lily student movement, the suspension of the “ten-thousand-year” National Assembly, and the holding of the direct presidential election (Lee Teng-hui became the first democratically elected president in 1996), the first change of government took place in 2000 when the presidential candidate of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Chen Shui-bian was elected. The DPP was in power for eight years, but the last years were marred by the president’s corruption scandals. When Ma Ying-jeou became president in 2008, the Kuomintang (KMT) returned to power. Still the ruling party, it has sparked controversy due to its pro-China stance. In 2014, the Sunflower student movement was founded to protest the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement. The reforms of local level elections in the aftermath of the student movement are one contributing factor for civil society to take shape in Taiwan.

The overall social atmosphere and cultural environment are different under different ruling parties, while the artists also try to reflect and respond to the prevailing mood, as well as to change society. The following is an attempt to examine two ways in which socially engaged art has evolved in Taiwan: (1) from direct criticism to pluralistic political art; (2) from public art to new-genre public art.

### **(1) From direct criticism to pluralistic political art**

In the early 80s, during the martial law period, artist Chen Chieh-jen and his partners carried out the performance *sMalfunction No.3* (1983) in the streets of Ximending, and *Bombing the Womb– After the Creation of the World* (1986) in the East District of Taipei. At a time when public space was strictly controlled and monitored, they used their bodies to challenge the establishment and engaged in street guerrilla warfare to provoke the conservative and closed society. Performance artist Lee Ming-sheng intervened in public space with his actions. In *Bundle 119* in 1984, he carried a bundle of chains and shackles weighing three kilos as a metaphor for the burden on the individual under martial law. In *Mourning for Art* in 1987, wearing a G-string, Lee wrote the words “I am Lee Ming-sheng” in red paint on his body, and greeted the pedestrians on Dunhua South Road. He also created a series of actions called *Medical Examination of Taipei Fine Arts Museum* criticizing art institutions. Before and after the lifting of martial law, democratic movements outside the KMT and all sorts of social movements shook up the conservative society and loosened up the rigid politics. Little theatre, street theatre, performance art and visual installations influenced one another and became a catalyst for social movements. For instance, in

1988, Wang Mo-lin participated in the street theatre “Exorcizing the Evil Spirits of the Island” staged by the Orchid Island Anti-nuclear Movement. This action was an important milestone of art’s intervention in society and an early example of Taiwan’s cultural activism.

In the late 80s and early 90s, faced with the great changes in society after the lifting of martial law, some artists took an active stance and chose to oppose the institutions with righteous ardour. In museums and galleries, many artists engaged in direct criticism of the social and political circumstances through images, installations and performances. For instance, using Neo-expressionist means, Wu Tien-chang integrated social issues with personal experience and presented the series *Syndrome of Hurting* that challenges ideology, authority and social changes, as well as the large painting series *Four Eras* on powerful men such as Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Tse-tung, rulers of mainland China and Taiwan. There were also collages of texts and images by Lien Te-cheng and the political satire of Dean E. Mei. The February 28 incident also became the subject of artworks, which often employed signs, symbols and narratives to incorporate nativist ideas. Other artists observed society from the marginal perspective of an outsider living in self-imposed exile. One example was Yao Jui-chung, who playfully peed at monuments in various locations (*Territory Takeover*), or carried out surveying by lifting off into the air (*Recover Mainland China, The World is For All, Liberate Taiwan*) or by doing handstands (*Chinatown - Dizzy*).

By the late 90s, the relationship between art and society/politics had changed from direct criticism to other possibilities. Several artists had also changed their creative concepts. From his body actions that involved direct confrontation, Lee Ming-sheng turned his attention to the ecology and establishing relations. In his 1997 work *Relationship between Me and Them*, he put dresses on trees so that people would look at the natural environment in a new light. In 1999, he organized the show “About Art and Life” at his home in Garden New City. In the late 90s, Wu Mali went from sharp political and gender criticism to making connections with communities. In 1997, she created *Stories of Women from Hsinchuang* to document the stories of a group of female textile factory workers. She started reflecting on the subjects of an artist’s work, and how to “ensure a fair and mutually beneficial relationship between artist and her subjects, rather than merely treating them as the subject matter”.<sup>2</sup> From 1999, Wu Mali worked with the Creative Textile Workshop to jointly

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<sup>2</sup>Yu Wei, “Turning an Art Festival into a Cultural Movement: Wu Mali’s Community Art Actions”, *ARTCO*, June 2007, p.134.

produce *Spiritual Quilt*, *Theatre Under the Skirt* and *Awake in Your Skin*, developing another kind of relationship between art and society.

After 2000, works making direct social or political criticism were on the decline. Young artists often took their own inner feelings and everyday experience as the starting point of their work. In mid-2007, Lin Hong-john pointed out the absence of political art by coining the term “the art of frustration”, while Huang Chien-hung described the tendency of artists to withdraw into themselves with the term “micro-sensible”. These two discourses broadly summarize the directions of Taiwanese contemporary art between 2000 and 2007. “The art of frustration” attempts to link the younger generation’s penchant for “kuso, the otaku culture and the quest for self-expression without addressing an audience” to symptoms of “deliberately avoiding politics”, “resignation” and “frustration about the present”, questioning the young artists’ apathy and alienation from society and politics.<sup>3</sup> The term “micro-sensible” refers to “a state of ‘subjectivization’ that magnifies micro sensibilities, for which ‘eluding description within the linguistic framework’ seems to be an unwritten norm”.<sup>4</sup> “Cuteness” and “detachment” are two characteristics of “micro-sensible”, used to resist pseudo social issues – “the total impotence of politics” and “the failure of a pluralistic democratic society”. In short, whether it is the art of frustration or “micro-sensible”, artists express their discontent with society and the reality by withdrawing into themselves.

Since 2008, the political and economic changes in the world and in Taiwan have had an impact on the development of Taiwanese contemporary art, from frustration, indifference to positive action. In 2008, various incidents provoked widespread criticism from the art community, leading to rethinking of the nature of the art museum, the overall artistic ecology and cultural administration. Artists made different responses to the social and political reality, using diverse media to examine the relationship between art and activism, politics and art, art and social movements etc., experimenting with and practicing their ideas. For instance, the Taipei Biennial in 2008 presented a number of cultural activism projects that explored “politics as art”. When Yang Jun’s work was prematurely dismantled, it led to the founding of the Taipei Contemporary Art Center (TCAC). From 2008 to 2009, the unilateral announcement by the Biennial and International Projects Office of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM) that it would curate the Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale

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<sup>3</sup> Lin Hong-john, “The Art of Frustration in Taiwan – Introduction: the Symptoms”, *ARTCO*, Vol.174, March 2007, pp.124-125.

<sup>4</sup> Huang Chien-hung, “Micro-sensible: the Social Aspects of the New Sensibilities”, *ARTCO*, Vol. 177, October 2007, pp.166-170.

by itself sparked calls for a review of cultural administration. At the Taipei Biennial in 2010, the focus became “art as politics”. Artists looked at the inside of art and the problems of art institutions, showing the modes of production, consumption and distribution of art and engaging in institutional critique. In 2010, the exhibition “Live Ammo” at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei (MOCA) presented young artists’ social observations, concerns, responses and criticisms. Through different art actions and works, it highlighted that fact the art “is not just a way of life, but also a strategy of survival and a choice”,<sup>5</sup> and its dimension of intervening in society. In 2011, the issue of “special exhibitions” became the subject of much controversy. During the Sunflower student movement launched on March 18, 2014, the participation of many artists and students of art departments again resulted in heated discussion over the relationship between art and social movements.

## **(2) from public art to new-genre public art**

“Community” and “public”, two concepts of socially engaged art, emerged in the late 80s and were put into practice in the 90s. After 2000, they were combined, deepened and modified.

In contemporary art, the discussion of the term “public” began in the 80s after the introduction of public art to Taiwan. The Chinese translation of “public art” is “公共藝術”, with the emphasis that the art is installed in a specific public space. When legislation was first enacted for public art, it was seen as an opportunity for artists to receive commissions and a way of aestheticizing the environment, in a similar spirit as the New Deal in the US in the 1930s. Given this background, the initial emphasis was on the administrative procedures and technical aspects of the installation of permanent public art, and the work and the space where it was installed, rather than the “people” occupying and using the space.

The other key concept “community” was discussed in the 90s in Taiwan during the nativist movement and under the cultural policy of “community empowerment”. “Community” was at first translated into Chinese as “社區”. In terms of “community empowerment”, “community” was a spatial concept that refers to the area where a group of people live and constitutes the smallest administrative unit. From 2000, “community” has been translated as “社群”, meaning a group of people with

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<sup>5</sup>Curatorial statement of the “Live Ammo” exhibition, MOCA website (<http://www.mocataipei.org.tw/index.php/2012-01-12-03-36-46/past-exhibitions/121-2011exhibition/565-live-ammo>).



common qualities and sharing similar beliefs and views, with a greater emphasis on the relationship among people rather than the geographical concept of “社區”.

In the mid and late 90s, when site-specific art was in vogue, many installation works entered the public space of cities, towns and communities in the form of exhibition. The works displayed local characteristics and evoked a sense of the place, emphasizing the dialogue with viewers and placing art in everyday life. At the time, for the sake of economy, the Cultural Office of the Taiwan Provincial Government was reorganized into the Central Taiwan office of the Council for Cultural Affairs. Before its closure, resources were allocated to support large outdoor installation art exhibitions. For instance, the exhibition “Landscape, City and Symphony: Installation Art in Taiwan” (1997) focused on the relationship between temporary art projects and the city. In the exhibition “Heart of History” in 1999 in the small town of Lugang, two works were seen as provocative to local residents. This sparked a confrontation between artists/curator and residents, and a debate that lasted six months on whether art or the public should take precedence. After this confrontation, rather than focusing on intervention in “space”, it became necessary for public art or site-specific art to change its emphasis to the “people” (residents/viewers/public), its “publicness” and “viewer participation”.

This change of emphasis to “people” has been reflected in art practices. Since 2000, temporary works have been commissioned as public art, and the concept of public art has been expanded. In 2002, the 1<sup>st</sup> Taipei Public Art Festival, “Water Charter”, featured both permanent and temporary installations and stressed viewer participation. In 2005, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Taipei Public Art Festival “The New World of Datong” advocated the idea of “public comes first, art second”. A community workstation was established to organize community events and encourage audience participation in order to highlight the emphasis on “the public” (people). Community empowerment and local art festivals also changed their approach to focusing on “people”, using art as a means to connect with and serve the communities. In addition, related western art practices, such as New Genre Public Art, community art, participatory art and socially engaged art, were introduced as models. These are all based on the existing premises of “public” and “community”. By rectifying the misconceptions of these two terms, artists integrated and deepened them to open up more new possibilities.

## **2. Case studies of socially engaged art**

This section will focus on the lists of grantees in the visual arts section of the National Culture and Arts Foundation (NCAF), including recipients of regular grants (artistic production, exhibition, research, publication and so on) and Production Grants to Independent Curators in Visual Arts, and also take into account community research programs subsidized by NCAF from 2007 to 2010. The selected cases are taken from the period after 2000. Nine groups of ten artists selected will be discussed in terms of four categories of the relationship between art and society: (1) using art as a means to manifest the reality: Chen Chieh-jen, Yao Jui-chung and Kao Jun-honn; (2) art as intervention in Reality: Yeh Wei-li and Hsu Chia-wei; (3) art as a platform for exchange: Chou Yu-cheng and Huang Po-chih; and (4) art as a medium for effecting change: Wu Mali, Hsu Su-chen/Lu Chien-ming.

### **2.1 Art as a means to manifest the reality:**

#### **Chen Chieh-jen, Yao Jui-chung and Kao Jun-honn**

The three artists in this category see the existing social conditions as the consequence of historical political and economic structures. By examining a certain social phenomenon and doing research on site, they can both manifest the present social reality, as well as reflect on the past and point out where the problem lies. Chen Chieh-jen regards the present as ruins produced by modern history, and questions the role of Taiwan in the global division of labour. With his sights set on actual ruins (unused buildings), Yao Jui-chung suggests that they are nothing but mirage in the complex network of political and economic interests. Kao Jun-honn steps into the ruins and lives and works in the ruins to create a new reality for them.

#### **Chen Chieh-jen**

Since the 80s, Chen Chieh-jen's work has been concerned with socio-political issues. While dealing with his own life experiences, it follows the belief that "the personal is the political". By exploring, evoking and contemplating the history and reality of marginal places, he uses fiction and the imagination to recreate them in order to come up with a poetic critique, making visible unseen realities in contemporary society.

*Factory* in 2003 became the model of his subsequent film works: making films to

“write down the people’s memories”, “open up to the other” and to “achieve internal and external decolonization”.<sup>6</sup> *Factory* invited two female workers to go back to “work” in their factory left abandoned for seven years after being shut down by the unscrupulous owners. The film is interspersed with black-and-white documentary footage showing the decline of the manufacturing industry in Taiwan due to a structural transformation. The women workers play themselves in the film. Their experience becomes a microcosm of the politico-economic situation of Taiwan. Chen talked about the work *Factory* in terms of the concept of the “double”. He said: “Very often when we make films about the so-called grass roots and working class, they will be accompanied by vague descriptions like – the artists care about the lower levels of society and the working class; or the artists show their concern by doing a field investigation”. However, “they don’t need us to be their spokesmen. They can talk about these issues better than us.” Hence, when he made the film, he created a “double” for the women workers. Everyone took part in the film, so that the movement could be carried on just when it looked as though it was about to be over.<sup>7</sup>

The concept and approach of the recent *Realm of Reverberation* (2014) is similar to that of *Factory*. With the Losheng sanatorium for lepers, its inmates and the MRT construction site nearby as its subject, it explores how art can keep a topic alive after the climax of the long-term protests, and multiply the participants, from the inmates, the activists, the researchers involved in the study, the filmmakers to the audience. The term “reverberation” in the work title refers to this condition: “a sound is reflected and persists through further reflections, that is, carrying on something in a slightly changed manner.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Chen Chieh-jen’s short biography, “Art and Society: Study of Critical Political Art Production and Curatorial Practices”, website of Art and Society (<http://praxis.tw/archive/post-40.php>.)

<sup>7</sup> Compiled by Gong Linlin and Li Xin, “The Art and Politics of Chen Chieh-jen”, *House News*, March 24, 2014. This is the transcript of the talk “Dialogue with Chen Chieh-jen” at the Times Museum in Guangdong on Dec 28, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Chen Chieh-jen’s talk at the Shenzhen OCAT on May 18, 2014, at 20:00-21:30. This was one of the public events of the 8<sup>th</sup> Shenzhen Sculpture Biennial.



Chen Chieh-jen, *Realm of Reverberation*, 2014.

### **Yao Jui-chung**

In the 90s, Yao Jui-chung started photographing a series of structures lying in ruins around Taiwan. In 2004, he published *Roaming around the Ruins of Taiwan*, a collection of his random walks in the ruins. In *The Ruined Islands* in 2007, he turned his attention to the military and prison ruins in the outlying islands brought about by the changed political environment in mainland China and Taiwan. In addition to creating a black-and-white aesthetic of ruins, he highlights the political economy behind it, using his camera to witness the “products of a tragic age” and “deliberately forgotten ruins”.

From 2010 to 2014, the group Lost Society Document (LSD) set up by Yao with his students worked on the “Mirage –a Sample Survey of Disused Public Properties in Taiwan”. Students returned to their hometowns to carry out field work and take photographs of some 400 disused public properties, which were published in four monographs. Like an illustrated handbook and with more than 600 pages, each monograph of black-and-white documentary photos clearly manifests social realities around us that we have ignored. These realities are a testimony to the half-hearted democratization process of Taiwan given the complex network of political and economic interests. Thanks to extensive media reporting, this project has attracted the attention of senior government officials, resulting in the revitalization or dismantling of disused structures. It has served as a watchdog monitoring the government’s public policies and actions. Moreover, the project emphasizes team

work and collaboration. While stepping back as an artist, Yao Jui-chung has become an organizer or teacher, making room for participation. The running of this project and the publications were financed by Yao himself to ensure the freedom of expression and the independence of their actions.



Yao Jui-chung, *Mirage –a Sample Survey of Disused Public Properties in Taiwan*, 2010-2014.

### **Kao Jun-honn**

Kao was famed for his ascetic body and action art in the early years, such as *Goodbye, Away I Go* (1998), *Bubble* (1999-2000) and *To Plant Inversely* (2003), which involved field work around the island. In *The Home Project: Fond Memories Too Far* (2006), he invited three families to participate in projects on “compiling the family history”, “labour”, “travel” and “building a house together”, redefining the meaning of “home” as a social concept and personal ideal. *The Road Project* (2009) was also carried out jointly with participants. With these works, he turned from individual body art to social practices. According to Jian Tzu-chieh, *Counter-Culture* (2010) marked a radical change in Kao’s art. Instead of the existential circumstances of an individual in a macro environment, he changed his focus to social and political issues with specific subjects, as well as the complex interactions between individuals and the establishment.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Jian Tzu-chieh, “How Kao Jun-honn’s recent work turns towards society”, *Art Critique of Taiwan*

The *Ruin Image Crystal Project* in 2012 was a large-scale project about politics, history and culture carried out by many participants. He went to the ruins and made drawings there, before using forms like drama and photography to show the changing times and the traces of what had been forgotten, just like the way a crystal continuously reflects the objects around it. The ruins that Kao visited were sites abandoned as a result of the direct and indirect impact of economic liberalization on Taiwan. In a bus terminal of the Taiwan Motor Transport Co. in Shulin abandoned due to privatization, he used charcoal to reproduce the images of the Lau-long river valley photographed by British photographer John Thomson in 1871. This was his *John Thomson Project*. This site became an important location for the film *Stray Dogs* directed by Tsai Ming-liang, in which two actors stared at the wall for some ten minutes. Even though the ruins were later demolished, the wall painting was preserved in the film.



Kao Jun-honn, *The Ruin Image Crystal Project*, 2012.

## 2.2 Art as intervention in reality:

### Yeh Wei-li and Hsu Chia-wei

Both of these artists use “sites” as the starting point of their work to explore the relations between history, society and culture. As Yeh Wei-li said, “Reality will come to you”.<sup>10</sup> His *Treasure Hill Tea + Photo* project passively waited for visitors to arrive.

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(ACT), Vol.48, Oct 2011, p.60.

<sup>10</sup>Yves Chiu, “The Actions of An Independent – starting with YehWeh-li’sOversight”, in *Art Critique of*

Hsu Chia-wei's work develops according to the site. On Turtle Island near Beigan Island of the Matsu Islands, he encountered Marshal Tie Jia, resulting in the god's intervention in the creative process. Art not only responds to reality, but also reveals a seen/unseen reality.

## Yeh Wei-li

Yeh returned to Taiwan in 2002. From 2004 to 2006, he carried out the *Treasure Hill Tea + Photo* (THTP) project as artist-in-residence at Treasure Hill, asking "what an artist can do in a community and how to do it"<sup>11</sup>. The phases of the project consisted of the "Portrait Project", "Delineations", "Trash" and "The Garden and The Archive". Starting with a small house serving as a teahouse and photo shop, it was expanded to the neighbouring abandoned houses, which were converted into a photography studio and resource centre as well as garden. The last phase "Oversight" was presented at the Centre A, Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Canada. With photographs, texts and letters, documentary films and publications, it reexamined the project, "defining the role of the artist, and analyzing and observing the social, personal and political circumstances"<sup>12</sup>. From 2008 to 2012, Yeh carried out the *Rixin St. Project* at an old cinema in Taoyuan city, developing a collective work and converting a space with pedagogical implications. It also included an event "Super Friday" and numerous "art objects" created by a process of gathering and labour, as well as an "Antiquity-like Rubbish Research & Development Syndicate" that explored the relations between "antiquities, art and rubbish".

In an article, Chiu Chun-ta described YehWei-li as an "independent". The original Japanese term refers to "someone who can think independently and work with others". This term is useful to show a distinction from the term "activist" in cultural activism. Adopting a passive approach of "waiting for visitors", YehWei-li emphasizes the natural and genuine accidental encounters and building of human relationships, and the exchange of skills and labour as well as collaboration on the basis of mutual benefit. This approach has aroused criticism, with some accusing him of being alienated from residents and keeping his distance from the official organizers. Lin Hong-john expressed the view that "YehWei-li has always favoured a "semi-participatory" mode of intervention in his work. This semi-participatory mode may be the 'perfect' kind of relations between artists and residents in the present

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*Taiwan(ACT)*, Vol.48, Oct 2011, p.49.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Yeh Wei-li and Wu Yu-hsin, *The Treasure Hill Tea + Photo Project/Phase Five/Oversight*, Centre A, Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, 2008, pp.30-31.

gentrification of communities initiated by the authorities”.<sup>13</sup> However, I believe this kind of distance could open up another way of thinking about “art and society”.



Yeh Wei-li, *Treasure Hill Tea + Photo*, 2004.

## Hsu Chia-wei

Hsu Chia-wei’s work deals mainly with the history of the site and tries to use images and oral narration to capture the complex memories, imagination and identity of a place, turning a real location into a narrative setting. *The Story of Hoping Island* (2008) was shot at a shipyard on Hoping Island, Keelung. Built during the period of Japanese colonial rule, this shipyard had a history of eighty-eight years. With this real location as the setting, Hsu’s grandmother reminisced about the past in Japanese. This was combined with fabricated dreams to narrate history that could no longer be represented. In her article about Hsu Chia-wei’s work, Freya Chou wrote that “*The Story of Hoping Island* is a response to the discourse of the ‘art of frustration’, which is thought to be too narrow. Rather than implying a sense of ‘resignation’, the absence of young artists in the narrative of politics and history merely indicates a change in the way of representing history and memory.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Lin Hong-john, “The Blind Men and the Elephant: the Gentrification of Treasure Hill”, *ARTCO*, Jan 2006, p.151.

<sup>14</sup> Freya Chou, “Time, Place and Memory – Looking at the Multiple Narrative Language of Hsu Chia-wei”, *LEAP*, Jan 2014.



*Marshal Tie Jia*(2012) was set on the tiny Turtle Island off the Matsu Islands in the Taiwan Strait. During his research, the artist found out by chance that the island is under the jurisdiction of the frog god Martial Tie Jia. The shooting that followed was done by following the instructions obtained from the frog god, echoing the idea that “reality will come to you”. In Hsu’s work, the participants, playing themselves, were invited to do an interview or take part in an event. The characters, locations and things are in their original context, while the artist’s role is like that of a “producer”<sup>15</sup>. Hsu Chia-wei said, “The politics of my works does not come from the political issues represented by the images. Nor is the shooting intended to turn the events into images. Rather, through the act of shooting, I want to create a dialogue and events to change the production process of images, to restructure the images and unveil the structure hidden behind the events.”<sup>16</sup>



Hsu Chia-wei, *Marshal Tie Jia*, 2012.

### 2.3 Art as a platform for exchange

#### Chou Yu-cheng, Huang Po-chih

The two artists in this category see the art mechanism as a platform for exchange and try to establish external links through this platform. Chou Yu-cheng lets the resources flow within the system to reveal the production mechanism behind exhibitions, while Huang Po-chih commits the art resources to help the economically

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with Hsu Chia-wei, *The 55<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale: This is not a Taiwan Pavilion*, Taipei Fine Arts Museum, p.24.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p.26.

disadvantaged. Some of their works use the biography of their father (Chou Yu-cheng) or mother (Huang Po-chih) as the starting point, showing the universal reality of the age through the experiences of an individual.

### **Chou Yu-cheng**

In the project *Take from Society, Give Back to Society* (2010), Chou Yu-cheng asked the question: “How to engage in an economic discourse as an artist?” From a passive recipient of resources, he turned the artist into someone who actively allocates resources. The artist submitted a proposal to create prints using the exhibition grant provided by the Taishin Bank Foundation. They were then sold to employers in the Taishin Tower at cost. Through the process of “capital – production – marketing”, he turned the subsidy resources into commodities of the same value. After they were sold, the proceeds were donated back to the Foundation. Through this work, he tried to explore whether the “objects” produced by an artist could have a closer connection with “society”, apart from becoming “artworks”.<sup>17</sup> In *TOA Lighting*® (2011) and *Rainbow Paint*® (2011), the exhibition became a platform, with the artist playing the role of a “middleman”, turning lighting equipment and paint sponsored by enterprises into museum resources, creating a “feedback” system and another mode of manipulation.

*A Working History Lu Chieh-Te* (2012) shifts the focus to “man” as the main character. The working history is recorded through interviews. It is “a realistic project that uses an economic mode to reveal the hidden economic reality through the mediation of a middleman”.<sup>18</sup> The project recruited a temp worker named Lu Chieh-Te, aged nearly 60 years old, through a newspaper advertisement in order to record the beginning, transition and end of his career. He was hired as a security guard at the exhibition venue in the Taipei Fine Arts Museum and paid from the exhibition budget. As the temp worker of this project, Lu played himself and chatted with visitors. The booklet “Working History” was also available for perusal at the venue. *A Man of Showa Era* (2013), the sequel of *A Working History Lu Chieh-Te*, explores the issues of “work and retirement”. This work deals with Mr Wu Zhao-nang, a colleague of artist’s father and a typesetter for a movable-type printing press born at the end of Japanese colonial rule in Taiwan. His thirty-year career testifies to the boom and decline of the printing industry, showing the impact of the changing times on traditional industries.

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<sup>17</sup> Lin Yi-xiu, “The Double Transposition of Design Tricks”, “Are we Overworking?”, Eslite Gallery, p.96.

<sup>18</sup> “Yu-cheng Chou”, website of Taipei Contemporary Art Archives

(<http://archive.avat-art.org/mediawiki/index.php/%E5%91%A8%E8%82%B2%E6%AD%A3.>)



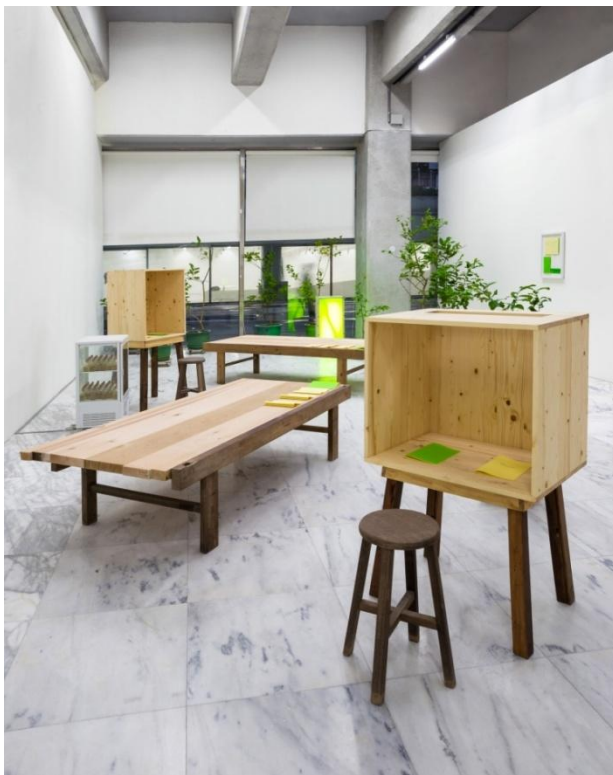
Chou Yu-cheng, *A Working History Lu Chieh-Te*, 2012.

### **Huang Po-chih**

From *Soft Revolt* (2009), Huang Po-chih's work started to turn towards society. This project is about a soft protest against capitalism. Ever since, he has been concerned with the relationship between the agricultural economy and the consumer goods mechanism. *Fair Trade Ice Pop* (2010) and *The Red Eyes of Tom Boy* (2011) both use commodities as a medium. By collaborating with an enterprise, the artist attempted to give back to the economically disadvantaged farmers through art resources. In *Five-Hundred Lemon Trees* (2013), the museum exhibition is used as a mechanism. Wine labels were sold in advance to raise the capital for planting lemon trees on three fallow farmlands in Beipu, Hsinchu County. When the lemons were harvested after two years, they were used to make limoncello for those who had subscribed for a wine label. This work explores issues such as agriculture, the economy, consumption and production.

*Production Line – Made in China & Made in Taiwan* is based on the working life of Huang's mother as a former knitting factory worker and shows the outsourcing of the clothing industry from Taiwan to Shenzhen, China over the past thirty years. This project used the Shenzhen Sculpture Biennial and the Taipei Biennial as platforms. Semi-finished blue denim shirts made at the OCT Contemporary Art Terminal were

shipped to the Taipei Fine Arts Museum for finishing and sale (a way of using a performance as an exchange), in the hope that “art (in the form of commodities or events) can bring out new meanings and positions in the complex social relations”. In addition to Huang’s mother, a former worker, and Auntie Wu, who played the sewing worker at the Shenzhen OCAT, the “participants” of this project included anonymous workers who had been abandoned by the capitalist industries and society. In the series of exchange in which labour, capital, commodities and funds returned to the art establishments (linking the Shenzhen Sculpture Biennial and the Taipei Biennial), the voluntary and involuntary participants involved redefined the meaning of “participation”.



Huang Po-chih, *Five-Hundred Lemon Trees*, 2013.

## 2.4 art as a means for effecting social change

### Wu Mali, Hsu Su-chen/Lu Chien-ming

The artists in this group advocate “taking turns as subjects” in the process of art making. They accompany communities/tribes and make connections, using art actions to change the social reality. Wu Mali believes that “art does not play an aestheticizing role, but is a medium of stimulation, connection and reflection”.<sup>19</sup> It

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<sup>19</sup>Wu Mali, “Using Water to Mend the Broken Land - *Art as Environment, A Cultural Action at the Plum*

fulfills the function of making connections. For Hsu Su-chen/Lu Chien-ming, art is a means of activism, or one could call it a different kind of social movement. It takes into account questions such as “who it produces benefits for, what the impact on the internal tribe (community) and external society is, and what kind of benefits it produces.”<sup>20</sup>

## **Wu Mali**

In contemporary Taiwanese art, Wu Mali has always been a forerunner of participatory art. In the late 80s and early 90s, her work made scathing criticism of politics. *Love at Its Maximum*(1990) deals with social issues, while *Epitaph* (1997), *Stories of Women from Hsinchuang* (1997) and *Formosa Club* (1998) explore feminist art/gender issues/people, land and history. *Come for a Walk in the Fake Museum*(1994) engages in institutional critique. Since 2000, Wu Mali has been dedicated to thinking about “relations” and has introduced new-genre public art to Taiwan as a way of entering/stationing in a community.

Curated by Wu Mali, *Art as Environment, A Cultural Action at the Plum Tree Creek* (2010-2012) can be seen as a summation of her ideas since the late 90s, as well as her thinking and answers to questions posed since 2005 –*Of the River – A Community-Based Eco-art Project* (2006) brought people close to the river to rediscover the river and the essence of our lives through the sensation of their bodies; *Taipei Tomorrow as a Lake Again* (2008) reflects on how urban development should cope with the challenges of climate change; *Tropic of Cancer Environmental Art Action* (2006/2007) transforms festivals into a public service. The concept of “artists becoming residents, and residents becoming artists” determines how artists enter into a community. Through collaboration with the local government and the creation of an intervention policy, this project became apart of New Taipei City’s Vision of Grand River, thus offering possibilities for changing the reality.

As a response to the questions accumulated from practical experience, *Art as Environment, A Cultural Action at the Plum Tree Creek* received a Production Grant to Independent Curators in Visual Arts from NCAF in 2010, and carried out an intensive

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*Tree Creek*”, Creative Arts Business Community website, National Culture and Arts Foundation, [http://www.ncafroc.org.tw/abc/community-content.asp?Ser\\_no=319](http://www.ncafroc.org.tw/abc/community-content.asp?Ser_no=319) (browsed on July 28, 2012).

<sup>20</sup> Hsu Su-chen/Lu Chien-ming, “The New Ethical Relations of Eco Art in Social Movements – using the *Plant-Matter NeoEden Art Project* (2008-2010)at the Sa'owac Village of Amis as example”, *Result Reports of Research Programs on the Social Participation of Art Conducted as Part of the Development Strategy for Funding Policy*, National Culture and Arts Foundation, 2011, p.10.

community action and art education program for over a year. The objective was to shape the public, change people's thinking and draw up a new blueprint for an ideal life through art. The five subprojects included: "Breakfast at Plum Tree Creek" (community residents), "Shaping of a Village–Nomadic Museum Project"(Department of Architecture, Tamkang University), "Local Eco Life–Colorful Affairs with Plants"(Zhuwei High School), "There is a Creek in Front of My School Gate" (Zhuwei Elementary School) and "Community Theater" (community residents and the Tzi-Chang Branch of Zhuwei Elementary School), as well as other fringe activities. This environmental art action was not just extended in terms of time, but also expanded in geographical terms. Bringing together participants from different fields, it emphasized the process more than the result, the action and relationship building rather than the production of objects as works. This project received the Annual Visual Arts Award of the 11<sup>th</sup>Taishin Arts Award in 2012. The prize money was put back into the community for the deepening of the art action. It also exemplified the original meaning of "participation"—that of sharing in a sentimental sense.



Wu Mali, *Art as Environment, A Cultural Action at the Plum Tree Creek*, 2010-2012.

### **Hsu Su-chen/Lu Chien-ming**

The *Plant-Matter NeoEden Art Project* (2008-2010) was a long term project carried out by Hsu Su-chen and Lu Chien-ming in the form of eco art and a cultural movement, in order to create a dialogue among disciplines such as geography,

ecology, anthropology, linguistics and sociology. With a research done at a specific time and place on a specific tribe, it used artistic and literary means to portray and explore communal life and the rapidly changing landscape.<sup>21</sup>This art project accompanied residents of the Sa'owac Village of Amis at Dahan River at the periphery of the city. Using art to carry out an alternative social movement, it tried to rebuild the tribal homes and culture. Subprojects included "Internal Migrants: Plants from the Riverside Vegetable Patches of the Da-lu-an Tribe", "Born into the Tribe: The Sa'owac Tribe Born in a Vegetable Patch" and "Cultural Reconstruction: The Material Culture of the Riverside Amis" etc.

The prints of plant specimens from Sa'owac farmland produced in 2008 tell the complex stories behind the edible plants of the Amis. After the village was demolished, these plant prints were printed on T-shirts along with the Romanized name of the Amis. The act of "naming" defined the tribesmen's social and cultural role. In 2010, the work "Home Building: Honouring a Social Pact" developed a performance of home building by tribes and small communities in order to declare their basic right of "lawful occupation". This project won the Taishin Arts Award. The exhibition at the Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts became an exchange platform. After the exhibition ended, the construction materials at the gallery were transported back to the tribe for real home building. Thus, a statement was made through art against the marginal position of urban aborigines, finding contemporary ecological value in their survival culture (such as the gathering culture). The Taishin Arts Award jury made these comments: "The exhibition itself brings together the tribe's attitude towards life, cultural memory and modes of production, using poverty as a means of resistance to all-powerful capitalism and transcending urban showiness and duplicity",<sup>22</sup> and raised these questions: "How does art depend on its social environment? How do artists define themselves within social movements? Should art actions be merely symbolic, or should they be full-fledged protest?"<sup>23</sup>

After the Sa'owac Village was forcibly demolished in 2008, it was rebuilt at the original site. The aborigines rediscovered the wisdom and traditional culture of tribal life and a tribal school has been opened (Special Class for Aborigines at the Chung Yuan Christian University). An aborigine was even elected as a councilor in the

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Winner list of the 8<sup>th</sup> Taishin Arts Award, reasons for selection named by semi-selection jury member Chen Guan-jun, website of Taishin Bank Foundation for Arts and Culture, ([http://www.taishinart.org.tw/chinese/2\\_taishinarts\\_award/2\\_2\\_top\\_detail.php?MID=3&ID=&AID=11&AKID=&PeID=120](http://www.taishinart.org.tw/chinese/2_taishinarts_award/2_2_top_detail.php?MID=3&ID=&AID=11&AKID=&PeID=120).)

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

elections in late 2014. All these have helped them to move away from their marginal position in society. In this process, art actions have provided an alternative form of social movement. This series of art actions by Hsu Su-chen and Lu Chien-ming was funded by money raised by themselves, and was free of the constraints of official sponsorship mechanisms.



Hsu Su-chen/Lu Chien-ming, *Plant-Matter NeoEden Art Project*, 2008-2010.

### **3. The characteristics and impact of socially engaged art practices**

#### **3.1 The imagination of the relationship between art and society**

From the account of the development of Taiwanese contemporary art in Chapter 1 and the discussion of case studies in Chapter 2, we can see that there has been a big change in the imagination of “art/society” and the discussion of the relationship between art and society since 2000. Descriptions such as “intervening in society”, “viewer participation”, “entering into society”, “caring about society” and “interacting with society” abound in the discourse, while the topics of discussion include the role of the artist and the relationship between the artist and other. Basically, the relationship between art and society has changed from art situating itself outside society, criticizing or observing social phenomena, to one where art is part of society



and inside society. Thus, the change is from “art  $\leftrightarrow$  society” to “art/society”.

While there was talk of “art going to the countryside” in the early 90s, the concept “intervention” was adopted in the late 90s. Since 2000, the emphasis has been on “participation”. The *Tropic of Cancer Environmental Art Action* in 2006 raised the possibility of working with residents of communities in remote areas, and was curated according to the concept of “artists becoming residents, and residents becoming artists”. In a symposium in 2007, the term “entering/stationing” replaced the aggressive term “intervention”. From 2007 to 2010, the NCAF conducted research projects on communities. Overseas cases were cited as models for local cases and for the development of theories and concepts.

At a Taishin forum in 2010, Chen Tai-song described artists as social interactors and asked how they “interact with society through their art practices”<sup>24</sup>. He saw artists as operators of “servomotors”, which stand for a mechanism to intervene in the social system. By controlling this mechanism, the artist can create new social relations. The first topic being discussed was: “Who should art interact with? Must this object of interaction – the other – come from specific disadvantaged groups, so as to highlight art’s humanistic concerns for moral issues? Could art not interact with capitalists or those in power? What exactly are the moral issues?” Here, the discussion extended to all sorts of possibilities beyond the “disadvantaged”. The moral issues related to interaction with the other were also explored. The term “social interaction” also came up in the title of the exhibition “Art as Social Interaction – Hong Kong/Taiwan Exchange” curated by Wu Mali in 2014, showing that all sorts of possibilities are opened up through the interaction and encounter between art and society.

However, is there anything noteworthy of the growing trend of art that interacts with society? In 2011, in the article “The Protest Industry and its Neighbouring Effect: examining the Case of Dogpig Art Café in Kaohsiung and its Cultural Protest Alliance”, Kao Jun-honn wrote: “There is a power game hidden behind the protest culture which forces us to look at matters more carefully, that is, when “publicness” becomes increasingly dominant in the current artistic discourse, many people might be reluctant to admit that they don’t care about society. As a result, ‘caring about society’ has gone from being an actual movement to something that is abstract and semi-compulsive. This is the present situation of ‘art that enters into society’.”<sup>25</sup> The

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<sup>24</sup>“Artists as Social Interactors”, ARTCO, Vol.216, September 2010, pp.146-153.“How Artists Interact with Society through Their Art Practices”, ARTCO, Vol.221, February 2011, pp.110-117.

<sup>25</sup>Kao Jun-honn, “The Protest Industry and its Neighbouring Effect: Examining the Case of Dogpig Art Café in Kaohsiung and its Cultural Protest Alliance”, ARTCO, Vol.225, June 2011, pp.97-110.

phrase “caring about society” seems to have become a politically correct saying. In response to this, Huang Sun-quan wrote in his column in ARTCO that “whether we care about society or how we go about it is not the real issue. No one can extricate himself from society”.<sup>26</sup> He believes that “any assumption of the separation of art from society is empty rhetoric”. “No one can extricate himself from society” implies that one should think of art inside, rather than outside society.

If “no one can extricate himself from society”, how is the artist different from other people in society? Chen Chieh-jen talks about the “field of sensibilities”<sup>27</sup>. “When something is impossible, it is the beginning of fantasy and creation, as well as the beginning of action and practice”. Wu Mali comes up with the idea of “emotional connections”<sup>28</sup>. The artist always looks for the building of relations rather than discovering objects. According to Amy Cheng, “Art making is more like an original kind of ‘mediation’, with the artist playing the role of a ‘mediator’...When an artist chooses a certain way of intervening in society, his identity may already be a complex political issue.”<sup>29</sup> In my article on *Art as Environment, A Cultural Action at the Plum Tree Creek*, I wrote about art as an open platform to link up those from different disciplines. As an imaginative generator, it offers the freedom to facilitate dialogue, loosen up the existing structure and bring about change.<sup>30</sup>

### 3.2 The role of the artist in socially engaged art

According to Claire Bishop, there have been two approaches since modernism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: one is the authored tradition that seeks to critique and provoke viewers; the other is the de-authored system that embraces collective creativity. The former is disruptive and interventionist, while the latter is constructive and ameliorative.<sup>31</sup> But based on the case studies of Chapter 2 of this study, I believe we can add a third approach, that of the artist as an interface for change, in addition to the “authored” and “de-authored” approach.

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<sup>26</sup>Huang Sun-quan, “I want to write a book that has nothing in it?”, *ARTCO*, Vol.226, July 2011, p.72.

<sup>27</sup>“The Art and Politics of Chen Chieh-jen”, *op. cit.* On the shooting of *Factory*, Chen Chieh-jen said, “Many things can be seen as a field of sensibilities. Why did they insist on getting the thread through? Why did they have to finish sewing those clothes? Those were the little things that touched me at the time.”

<sup>28</sup>“Artists as Social Interactors”, *op.cit.*

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Lu Pei-yi, “Unseen/Seen: Exploring the Power of *Art as Environment, A Cultural Action at the Plum Tree Creek*”, in *Art as Environment, A Cultural Action at the Plum Tree Creek*, Bamboo Curtain Studio, 2012, pp. 295-309.

<sup>31</sup>Claire Bishop, “Introduction: Viewers as Producers”, in *Participation* edited by Claire Bishop, London: Whitechapel, 2006, p. 11.

1. Artist as subject (authored approach): Chen Chieh-jen, Yao Jui-chung, Kao Jun-honn, Yeh Wei-li and Hsu Chia-wei

These artists practice art according to the authored approach, with the artist as subject. With regard to the relationship between the individuality of the artist and the collectivity of society, the artist offers critical comments from a certain distance with his keen observation.

2. Artist as an interface for change: Chou Yu-cheng and Huang Po-chih

With creativity, the artist skillfully adapts himself in the system and becomes an exchange platform to bring about the collaboration between parties representing different disciplines or positions to create a win-win situation. Artists in this category have to emphasize their identity as artists and rely on the art institutions. Using the art institutions as a framework, they appropriate/use the capitalist system, turning the cultural capital produced by art into capital for exchanging real resources, in order to achieve the goal of exchange. For instance, Huang Po-chih had to sell wine labels in advance at the museum/Taipei Arts Awards to raise the capital for planting lemon trees. Through the museum mechanism, Chou Yu-cheng succeeded in getting enterprises to sponsor resources and helped to advertise their brands at the same time, to the benefit of both the museum and the sponsors.

3. Artist steps back (de-authored approach): Wu Mali, Hsu Su-chen/Lu Chien-ming.

In socially engaged art, they are more like participants, and their identity as artists is not important. The artists help to forge relations and the projects are mainly carried out by team work, with greater emphasis on the process rather than the result (the quality is not an important consideration, and there is no obvious production of artworks). They help to bring about the possibility of social change. However, in this system, the question most often asked is "Where does the artistic quality lie?". According to Lee Jiun-shyan, "When engaging with society, many artists stress their rejection of the artist's subjectivity. But artists are special to begin with. They should try to show how unique they are. It is perverse and confusing for artists to give up their identity as artists while engaging with society. Artists should open up themselves. This way, the mass of information of any community will enter their consciousness, which will become the content of works. They should not wear white gloves that are still white after their work is finished. That would be

meaningless.”<sup>32</sup>As Chen Hong-yi suggested, “Actions that stem from a social position amount to politics. When art attempts to intervene in society, there will be politics involved. Only actions that stem from an aesthetic position amount to art.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, when artists get their hands dirty (intervene/engage) in actions that stem from an aesthetic position, the artistic quality, whether seen or unseen, will emerge in the process.

The case studies of this research indicate that most artists carry out their projects by taking advantage of biennials, local art festivals and community empowerment. In the case of artists as subject (authored approach), such as Chen Chieh-jen, Yao Jui-chung, Kao Jun-honn, Yeh Wei-li and Hsu Chia-wei, and artists as an interface for change, such as Chou Yu-cheng and Huang Po-chih, they work and exhibit in ways recognized by the art scene. Thus, they do not clash with the grant system. Among these artists, Yao Jui-chung financed “Mirage – a Sample Survey of Disused Public Properties in Taiwan” by himself. In recent years, Chen Chieh-jen’s tendency not to show in official museum space more or less has something to do with the problems that may arise in the relationship between such art practices and the system. However, in the third category of artists who step back, the art actions of Wu Mali and Hsu Su-chen/Lu Chien-ming come into conflict with the system. They have different ways of dealing with it. Wu Mali applies for grants, but tries to reconcile her practices and the grant system. On the one hand, she tries to fulfil the system’s requirement of a “result report”. On the other, she attempts to negotiate with and loosen up the grant system, such as by reimagining the exhibition framework. Regarding the exhibition *Art as Environment, A Cultural Action at the Plum Tree Creek*, she said in an interview: “We want to make the project happen, rather than just do an exhibition...”; “...as a display mechanism, the museum will narrow our understanding of art”. She also believes that “if we keep talking about ‘representation’, it may not be that meaningful. Instead, we can think about how to approach a certain matter by documenting it...”. The strategy adopted by Hsu Su-chen/Lu Chien-ming is that of refusal. Their kind of art actions that are related to social movements is often critical and confrontational, and chooses to be independent rather than being constrained by the grant system. They said that the *Plant-Matter NeoEden Art Project* “preserves the fundamental spirit of the autonomy of the artists and the self-autonomy of the aboriginal tribes by not relying on official sponsorship. It reflects on how the restrictions imposed and the opportunities provided by the government deprive art of its autonomy and allow it to be

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<sup>32</sup>“Artists as Social Interactors”, *op.cit.*

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*

manipulated...”<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

This research starts by looking at the context of Taiwanese contemporary art, discussing public art, site-specific art, community empowerment, local art festivals and political art, and trying to show how socially engaged art practices evolved in Taiwan. The second part uses the examples of ten artists to illustrate the role of art in the relationship between art and society, namely, art as a means to manifest the reality, art as intervention in reality, art as a platform for exchange, and art as a medium for effecting change. The third part discusses the characteristics and impact of socially engaged art, analyzing the changes in the imagination of the relationship between art and society and the role of the artist. This study suggests that the development of socially engaged art in Taiwan since 2000 has been more diverse, not only in terms of concepts, themes and methods, but also in terms of presentation. In terms of concept, it has expanded its imagination of art and society, and changed its approach from “art  $\leftrightarrow$  society” to “art/society”. In terms of their role, the artists fall into three categories: artist as subject, artist as interface, and artist steps back. The themes and modes of presentation also vary greatly due to the changes in concept and the role of the artist.

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<sup>34</sup>Hsu Su-chen/Lu Chien-ming, *op.cit.*