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Dreams in Demand

by Esther Lu

I often think it would be such a delusion for me, or maybe for any freelance curator and cultural practitioner, to claim the 'independence' or 'autonomy' of our practice, as we do not only constantly negotiate with diverse restrictions in reality but also compromise ourselves from time to time. When institution curators are confronted with an institution's internal politics, freelance curators are quick to rely on even more institutions, ranging from different public or private funding systems, cultural policies, museums, galleries and media. As individuals, we become so politically and economically vulnerable in both the domestic cultural environment and the network of global art production, we pay more attention to those institutional rules for survival than anyone else.

Recently, there was a gathering of the art scene to call for the presidential candidates' attention to the cultural policy making in Taiwan. Three presidential candidates are going to present their policies in mid-December. This is in response to the strong protest and demand resulting from the art circle's anger at the high cost (more than US\$ 6.5 million) of the rock musical *Dreamers* (directed by Lai Sheng-chuan) which celebrated the 100th anniversary of the [...founding of the...] Republic of China over two nights. This budget reveals only the tip of the entire anniversary celebration-budget iceberg, which is already six times more than the budget for the Taipei Biennial. Artists from both the performing and visual arts gathered for this petition and established a new foundation called *First*

Culture Year, as a supporting system for this ongoing protest. In Taiwan, we have enough of the culture's budget wasted serving propaganda and all kinds of invented cultural festivals. It is time for the officials to stop spending money in order to fulfill political ideology.

Yet, among the voices of rage, I couldn't help reflecting on the ironies in this petition. Somehow it feels like the art public is asking for better culture policy, better governance, and people are asking the government to illustrate our future culture. Can better cultural governance lead to a better culture production in Taiwan? Why is there a new foundation established to take the credit for this protest instead of addressing this issue with the power of the multitude? Do we criticise in this way to create more and more boundaries, and rules to make judgment on taste and distribution? Do we forget it is us (artists, curators...) but not the government that are the culture producers in the society? If there is a lack of cultural imagination in our petition demand and we only ask if we will be fed well, then how can we expect the government to be the expert in culture production?

Constraints come in all forms, and the reality is always conditioned to all kinds of struggles. But I think nothing (including bad policy) can really stop us working as cultural producers and seeking the meaning of art in our time. The obstacle to art making will form when we stop imagining to bridge the differences, to get across the difficulties and to demand our dreams.

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Art Making and The Tyranny of Free Will

by Snejana Krasteva

Art making is under constraints, always.

What is the problem with this statement?

The verb 'to be', also known as copula, is a despot, as it turns out. I have used this verb three times by now. My failure in substituting it for another verb might occur from my lack of practice in using E-Prime (a form of English advocating the total exclusion of the verb 'to be' for the sake of greater clarity) but I will nevertheless try to get rid

of it for experimentation. What seems to be the problem, according to the precursory theory of general semantics developed by philosopher and scientist Alfred Korzybski, stems mainly from two problematic functions of the copula (thus not from all of its functions); the identity-defining 'is' and the is-of-predication. In both cases we find ourselves guilty of assumptions and of equating the essence of a thing with its definition ▶



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or predication. We might have committed other crimes, too, with our statement. Both art making and under constraints are such generalities! Understandably, we need to indulge in abstractions and generalisations in order not to waste all our time in defining every tree in the forest, but the fact remains that this is a judgement and judgements, whether we listen to Korzybski or not, seem to always be of a higher level of abstraction and value than the object we try to evaluate and determine. Following these semantic ponderings, what logically presents itself as a possible way out of these structural faults would contain a more or less determined meditation on 'free will'.

When we talk about 'men' in general, 'the viewer', the 'audience', the 'artists' etc., we intentionally exclude more than we include and generally dismiss the fact that the object of our evaluation exists in an environment and with each change in it, our evaluation evolve. In general semantics, given that all factors in an environment have been analysed, all human behaviour and decisions can be determined. Free will thus strives where indeterminism sleeps, which in theory constitutes the failure of our ability to predict events and in no way presumes the world itself cannot be determined.

Making art is not an exception. This process operates under constant constraints and threats to our free will are fired from every factor in the environment. What is interesting to me here and what this theory

seems to distil is that thanks to our ability to leave out relevant causal factors, our so-called free will is ultimately independent from constraints that the environment yokes on it. It is (dis)located in the choice of what to leave out but we still get what we want. The statement I made at the beginning - to arrive where we are now - is deliberately missing the point; of course all art making happens under constraints. What is at stake is what we make out of the conditions we encounter. Constraints do not presuppose failed projects, compromises do not preclude less radicality, just as any (utopian) lack of such constraints necessarily guarantees good art.

Recently, with the cuts to the arts in UK, there have been heated debates about whether or not these cuts would eventually turn out to be beneficial and revitalise the art scene, and force its participants to find alternative operational models. It is wrong to assume that in the absence of such crisis, processes of enabling art have been corrupted and capital-driven and that only such a 'cleansing' recession can restart the system. But it is equally wrong to presume that when the supporting infrastructure is unable to provide as before, the support itself has diminished. How we evaluate these efforts is of crucial importance. Simply put, limits are there, not to produce anything better per se, but to enable us to do what we do. If the thing we do is of any good, well that is another issue altogether. ■

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Inhabiting Meatspace: Genre, scale, and allure in biological art

by Robin Peckham

For much of the history of philosophy, aesthetics has been construed as a relationship between subject and object; an unequal equation based always upon the primacy of the position of the human as viewer, connoisseur or receiver, locating meaning within the object of visual pleasure. Throughout this history various properties have been

ascribed to the object - most recently the notion of allure in object-oriented philosophy - but, regardless of whether one understands the source of beauty as the romantic sublime of an external nature or the most perfect product of the human hand, we are struck by the asymmetrical nature of these relationships. The object of beauty is either ▶



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a simple passive image or an incomprehensibly total environment, defining through these two poles the scale of a certain cultural relationship to things.

Koen Vanmechelen illustrates the link between biological art and interspecies relationships with his *Cosmopolitan Chicken Project* (late 90s - ongoing). Setting out from the premise that the contemporary chicken is an artificial human invention created largely for instrumental purposes (much like synthetic biology today, with the notable exception of the aesthetically alluring), Vanmechelen traces the lineage of selective breeding in order to uncover social meanings and moments of interspecies coincidence. The artist also creates new accidental meanings of his own, however, as he becomes a pseudo-professional breeder with his own objectives in mind. National boundaries and suggestions of intrinsic identity are sent up in true cosmopolitan style, albeit not without a hint of sardonic overproduction.

All of this changes with the introduction of the uncanny, which proves to be the first point of entry into this recognition of system-being. Objects formed of human material - dead, of course - play a special function here, particularly in that they function as a memento mori or a contextual punctum: in such things, the viewer recognises that he or she, as a complex living system, will one day be reduced to the status of such an object. This uncanny recognition of the fact of death presages the notion of equality in the subject-object relationship. The relic,

for instance, has always been a very special kind of totem, speaking within a particular ideological system but also metonymically standing in for an imagined body that once defined this very system. The same could be said about other objects constructed of human remains, such as jewellery made from the compressed hair of the dead, shaped into forms that recall the memories of the deceased; like a locket that gestures towards the body of its former host not iconically through the image but rather indexically. It was once not uncommon to bind books in leather made from human skin, although one might suspect that the fetishistic sense of the uncanny now attached to such objects has more to do with the contemporary imagination, particularly after the violence of the 20th century.

But the manipulation of the living is not the same as the manipulation of life or its mechanisms and it is this latter distinction that becomes the central concern of what we call bioart. Emerging alongside other intersections of art and science since cybernetics, bioart comes into being due to a layering of epistemological categories. It depends on the concept of artistic research; that the activities of art contribute to knowledge in a way that is neither necessarily rational nor fully dependent on audience reception, partially relying on the term 'new media', an absurd reference to the incorporation of electronic materials, hardware and software, and any number of other objects into contemporary art. Life, of course, is a medium that is never not new. ■