

CURATORAIL CONVERSATION

Ideological back and forth between a curator in Taiwan and a curator in Hong Kong. ▶



Video still, *We are all fine* by Chiang Yang Hwei, Tsao Sheng Yen, Chen Chao Ru, 2011



ESTHER LU is a Taipei based curator. Her curatorial practise examines the function and the role of the curator in today's contemporary culture and the institution of art production, to translate her concern about the interplay between the social-political reality and the artistic intervention. Her recent curatorial projects include, "Don't Brush off What You See: 10 Ideas from Artists on Energy and Disaster", and a collaborative fanzine "Duet". Lu received the Production Grant for Independent Curators in Visual Art from National Cultural and Arts Foundation, and curated the exhibition "Good Gangsters" in the Taipei Fine Arts Museum in 2008.

ROBIN PECKHAM is a writer and curator based in Hong Kong, currently researching international rhetoric of abstract painting and the historical foundations of pseudo-conceptual art in China through involvement with art, architecture, independent music, literature, film, and design. Past topics of research include the Post-Sense Sensibility generation, Big Tail Elephant and its influences in the Pearl River Delta, and the creation of the New Media Department at the China Academy in Hangzhou.

ARTISTIC RESEARCH

[ARTIST/ CURATOR COLLABORATION, AND ACADEMIC RIGOUR]

EL: The process of developing artistic research together with different artists is what I find most compelling part of curating. As I tend to work with artists to develop new commission works, I always find it a great journey to go through the brainstorming, trying to tackle questions with creative strategies, tuning the voice for the imaginary audience, walking through art history to recognise the work, and so on. I think many curators benefit from this inspiring process as I do, and there are more and more curators borrowing artistic strategies to develop curatorial concepts as well, especially when it comes to subjects like social intervention or urban issues. Curators start to look for new collaboration partners, identify unconventional sites for happenings, and constantly think about the form of exhibition. It is very interesting to observe how the collaboration between artists and curators actually evolves into a new mode of artistic practise in the art scene, and I think there will be more interesting collaborative hybrids taking place.

RP: I see artistic research (or, as it is increasingly called, artistic knowledge) as an appropriation of curatorial procedures and processes by artistic practise, which seems like a fantastic way to allow curators to return to a more infrastructural and scholarly position. At the moment so much of what we call curatorial texts and curatorial research are really just non-rigorous approaches to what should be critical and historical scholarship - but by adopting the curatorial label we give ourselves permission to work outside of disciplinary protocol - which should be what the artist offers the world. Curators need not try to fabricate "mystic truths" of their own. Then again, this category of knowledge as a whole has been hugely productive in terms of raising the visibility of the curatorial as a set of practises rather than simply a profession.

EXHIBITION AS PLATFORM FOR PARTICIPATION

[DESIGNING PRACTICAL PARTICIPATION, MANIPULATING THE OUTCOME]

EL: I would like to see the exhibition as an engaging mechanism to share and exchange ideas and create possibilities. It is not only a conversation between individual artists and audience, but also among participating artists, curators, and the unpredictable audience through the collaborative exhibition-making process. Exhibition serves as a flexible agent in the public realm, as it calls for a temporary public participation to engage in certain subjects and following reactions. It could be also regarded as a form of civil participation in the society. When I try to work on the form of exhibition, I would try to incorporate the above mentioned concerns and see how I can possibly make a more transparent and accessible interface for different parties to engage productively.

RP: Coinciding with my interest in producing exhibitions that can be experienced only liminally if at all, I've also been curious about reducing the actual input of the curator while still accumulating the effects (and affects) that we, as the organisers, desire. If anything I suppose it is a way to enact totalitarian desires for coherence while relinquishing the actual apparatus of control. As curators we have at our disposal a number of tools that are not so blunt as simply inviting or rejecting an artist to participate in an exhibition based on a certain work or work proposal: we can frame it within the context of other works, or adapt the space to present this kind of work in a certain way, or colour the work based on wall texts, press releases, and essays. The so-called open platform is really a Machiavellian theatre. ▶

Left: Installation view of exhibition Good Gangsters in Town, Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2008.
The museum corridor was converted into a zen garden-like space whereas all works and audience are interacted on the same horizon.
© Saskia Holmkvist

ON AUDIENCE SPECIFICITY

[RELATION TO SPACE, POLITICS OF PRODUCTION AND INTRODUCING UNEXPECTED SHIFTS]

EL. When populism takes up the museum development direction as a global phenomenon, it seems naive to employ the term “general public” in the discussion of contemporary art audiences today. We realise the cognoscenti of contemporary art, though not divided by class in conventional terms, are clusters of certain interests and professionals who participate in art activities with anticipations. Art could identify these differences among audiences to read the society in turn, and it is of curatorial consideration to bridge the mutual interaction and offer the platform of exchange for the knowledge production in consequence.

The choice of site and subject would usually decide the focus group of an art activity. How to further explore the possibilities of approaching different audience via different means and to achieve different interactions are, in fact, quite some challenging tasks. The visibility of audience or the position of spectator is another question, as it is by the active audience - art becomes not merely display. Adnan Yildiz and I collaborated on an experimental project “Big Family Business” staging an open office for Istanbul Biennial visitors. Their contribution in varies mini presentations operated the space, and the locals sustained it later as an alternative art space. This experience inspired me a lot in rethinking the role of audience in my practise.

Right, top: *The Red Eyes of Tom Boy* by Huang Po-Chih, Red paper, drawings installation, Taipei, 2011.

The artist develops a comic series based on the reaction of the tomato industry in face of the energy crisis. As a consequence of mutation and energy crisis, tomatoes are applied to be the material for solar power. Apart from the drawing, the artist also transforms his product, bottled tomato juice, into a dye sensitized solar cell that generates electricity on-site. © Huang Po-Chih

Right, bottom: Fang Yen-Hsiang, Lo Shih-Tung, Xu Chiang-Yu, *Laputa Project(or)*, projection installation, Taipei, 2011.

The work illustrates the relationship between energy, power and knowledge in today's information age, as Google, Facebook and Apple build their database in North Carolina, the state provides cheap energy supply on coal and nuclear power. Artists explore different dimensions of power and desire that construct our ‘modern life’. © Chiang Yang-Hui

RP. That seems like a potentially naive or perhaps intentionally idealistic proposition, that the choice of site and subject alone determine the audience at stake. After all, there are any number of grittier infrastructural issues involved: which specific members of your audience will frequent a particular gallery or institution? Who doesn't get along with whom? Which dealer or curator is known for ripping off a certain artist, whose friends then become off-limits for future exhibition projects? These are really boring things to write about, and we tend to feel that they don't constitute a proper object for art criticism or an obstacle for curatorial practise, but the fact is that art history is negotiated through these really unavoidable aspects of our work, particularly in places with relatively small communities like Taipei and Hong Kong.

Lately I've been most interested in the idea of exhibitions that no one actually sees, at the extreme, or at least projects that are almost illegible and positioned at the boundaries of what we might call a viewing experience. In my mind much of curatorial practise has become an elaboration of display cultures, a study of techniques to enhance the viewing apparatus of contemporary art; this is an important task, particularly in terms of framing new forms of art within the white cube gallery environment and the museum archive, but it is also a rather weak one. I've experimented with seeing the curatorial role instead as a more oppositional one: rather than presenting the work of the artist (although I am personally a very conservative curator, so I feel this still constitutes much of my responsibility to the artists and engage with it in more typical gallery work), what if we could provide a kind of platform that the artist never asked for or wanted? What if we could create an environment that the artist might not like or agree with, and therefore come up with something that might not have been possible within their comfort zones? ▶



ON THE ROLE OF POLITICS IN CURATORIAL PRACTICE [A RISKY EGOTISTICAL TRAP OR AN ISSUE OF VISIBILITY FOR INDEPENDENT CURATORIAL PRACTISES]

EL: The thinking of politics is essential to contemporary art practises, the very question of visibility - is political. If a curator plays the role of mediating the visibility of art to the public or any specified audience, it is of his or her responsibility, as already an institution by definition, to transmit the speculations of a post-democratic art expression in which the curator is confronted together with the negotiation of the notion of "freedom" of art and the public realm.

The politics of art is deeply reflected in the process of artistic and knowledge production, and the institutions they cling on for survival. Therefore, how to reflect the complexity of the entangled power structures while producing an efficient criticality via curatorial practise is exactly the challenge of institutional critique today. The commercial art world and the cultural policies that are led by neo-liberalism and capitalism dominate the rules of survival and even the writing of art history. If not otherwise generating different forces and possibilities of art, art practitioners, including curators, will be consumed within the system without retaining a voice to address the time and conditions in which we live and work today.

My curatorial practise investigates the alternatives to opening up the contextual dialogue of "contemporaries," while also coming to the realisation that I need to develop a rooted attitude in order to initiate any discussion as such. This premise is, by nature, political as well as essential, particularly when we look at the roots of independent curating in Szeemann's practise. It is also the motivation that drives my curatorial practise to date, as I hold the nostalgic belief that art could critically and progressively perceive and shift the world in a different way, and maybe the culture of our time would be shaped through our efforts in reflecting such dynamics.

Right:
Homemade Nuclear Power Plant by Chang Li-Ren
From the exhibition *We Did Not Expect Something Like This*, Chang Li-Ren, Taipei, 2011. Curated by Esther Lu.
The entire set can be downloaded at http://dontbrushoffwhatyousee.blogspot.com/p/blog-page_19.html

RP: My problem with so much of the enunciation of the political within exhibition practise is actually massively reactionary, along the lines of Benjamin's critique of the fascist aestheticization of politics. Two shifts happen almost always in parallel: a political topic is motivated for the sake of the reputation of the curator or organisation, leading to an insistence of the purity of political correctness, and immediately the quality of the work is allowed to suffer for the sake of this ideological purity. This is a sickening practise but one that we see everywhere - including many of the projects organised around the unlawful detainment of Ai Weiwei, and in Hong Kong, during larger activist protests and other events year round.

The primary responsibility of the curator should always be to his or her understanding of art, and the task should be to frame the work of the artist, for which the curator also has a certain responsibility to fidelity within broader matrices of history, thematics, space, and so on. When righteous purity becomes the goal the possibility of experimentation disappears and the curator actively refuses a participatory or democratic dialectics in favour of transforming the art apparatus into a propaganda machine. Where this theoretical failure occurs in Hong Kong it is often marginalised and for good reason; my observations at a distance of the Taipei art scene suggest that many of the major figures active there - artists and curators alike - actually get critical mileage out of the egotistical mindset that activist art is the only righteous path. And this is dangerous. ■

