



OLD SCENE - GREEN PRACTISES

For its special summer issue on the Taiwanese art scene, Cristina Sanchez K. talks to Manray Hsu, independent Taiwanese curator, chairman of the Taipei Contemporary Art Center and co-curator of the Taipei Biennial and, as an introduction to the country's art scene, gathers his views on his work, the local artists and curators, the universities, the country's position on the international art scene and on some of the factors that are holding them back.

Independent curating near the artists

"I came to curating by chance in the mid 90s, finding it was a way to practice philosophy. I always have been independent and not belonging to any institution. The way I work is very close to the artists, engaging in many discussions. Typically, I would try and get some government funding and organise an exhibition after many conversations. By 2000, I was invited

to do the Taipei Biennial, I was also travelling a lot internationally. The success of the 2000 biennial put me out there but also brought some competition issues and my further projects got rejected. That is when I moved to Berlin, I didn't want to go back to the U.S. where independent practises are not really encouraged. Europe still represents for me a more diverse art system, and despite cuts in funding, the numbers are high. However, in Asia things happen quicker, there are opportunities here" says Hsu.

Mature audiences

"Our general audience in Taiwan is much better educated than the Hong Kong one, in 2008 for the Biennial we presented political works on anti-globalisation themes and had 170 000 people coming to see the exhibitions" notes Hsu.

He ponders at the art fairs, "the Young Art Fair and Art Taipei still need to find strategies but



Above: Junhonn Kao, Thalamus
Previous spread: Fu Xing Hen Studio1 - Squid 5, Images courtesy Tcac

they are on their way and developing" he says. Hsu agrees with the common estimation that half the collectors in Asia come from Taiwan, but also notes that they seldom participate in supporting art production other than by collecting works.

Contemporary Art and Universities

"In terms of art production Taiwan has a good amount of artists", says Hsu, "in our archives [see *Private Initiatives* on Taipei Contemporary Art Center] we have about 100 real serious artists producing works regularly, but in total there are about 200-250, and a lot of young people keep coming out."

"There are three universities with a focus on contemporary art: the Taipei National University of the Arts in Kuandu, the Tainan National University of the Arts in Tainan, and the National Taiwan University of Arts in Banqiao, where I am teaching now" he says.

Others include the National Taiwan Normal University, "very conservative: they teach traditional painting and ink" he says; the National Taipei University of Education, where, he adds that "the theoretical training is good but since the emphasis of the institution is on forming teachers, critical training or artistic practise aren't that elaborate."

"At the moment you can consider that the majority of the contemporary artists come from the first three universities I mentioned. Other universities have their own traditional programmes like oil painting and Chinese traditional ink painting. The Tung-hai university in Taichung for example is a good university but is still very traditional and over the years I haven't seen many major artists coming out from there; other newer programmes exist and still need to prove themselves" he concludes.

Producing for the market / Producing ideas

"In the late 80s, artists in Taiwan experienced a surge for making political art and went through more conceptual formal training" says Hsu; "that tendency remained in the 90s, when the



Candy Bird-MoMo2, Images courtesy Tcac

coinciding with a time when the museums where building art history collections and organising modern art exhibitions. And then, in the early 2000, it went down in terms of the number of conceptual artists present in the field". Hsu notes a few depressive years for the arts leading up to 2005-6 when the art market in Taiwan started to pick up again, galleries and collectors began to look at young artists in search of sellable and collectable works. "Today, you see many students do very beautiful works intended for the market. But also, more conceptual and political artists, both categories are bigger than in the past, more dynamic", he says. ▶



Exhibition space, Image courtesy Tcac

Curators' choice

He notes a division in the profession in Taiwan: galleries normally show market oriented works and some curators are also really into the market. "I come from a philosophy, literature and political sciences background", says Hsu who studied both in Taipei and at Columbia University in New York City. "Only a few curators don't focus on commercial works. Those are Amy Cheng, who comes from an art history background and is interested in social political issues; Esther Lu, who comes from a literature background; Sandy Lo Hsiu-Chih – also from art history; Wang Jun-jieh, who is a curator, an artist and a professor, one of the few curators with 'artist' as a background; Chia Chi Jason Wang - from art history, who sometimes does commercial shows; and Hongjohn Lin, who comes from a background in art history and was the co-curator for the last Taipei Biennale (2010)", lists Hsu.

"It is difficult to survive as a curator, so sometimes they do commercial exhibitions, if you are an independent curator who doesn't do commercial or government shows, it can be difficult. At some point I couldn't survive and had to move to Berlin", he explains.

Taiwanese isolation and shooting oneself in the foot

"On the one end we are considered as part of China, so what does Taiwanese art production represent compared to China? The international community, researchers, and museums, go to China to organise exhibitions" says Hsu. "And within Asia, the exchange programmes don't mark Taiwan on the map since they don't have political relations with us. As a result, we are being marginalised by the government funded exchange programmes" he adds.

"Finally, art is not part of the promotional ef-

orts supported by the government, they see that the international art scene doesn't look at Taiwanese artists and they, in turn, do not make efforts to support them". He goes on: "especially when you compare the situation to Japan and Korea. Even in the cases when commercial companies fund projects, like Samsung does in Korea for example, it still remains important that the government engages in diplomatic works in the background. The Taiwanese government doesn't see how to use art to make the country visible although it has a lot of money and spends it on the country's public relations," he concludes.

Museums are becoming competitors to alternative art spaces in the fundraising race. For example, Moca who is part private, part public was privatised in 2007 by the new Taipei City Government. As a result, the government cut back half of the funding and the museum has now the mission to generate its own. Its team applies for similar funds independent spaces do, asking the National Culture and Arts Foundation (NCAF) primarily. "But since Moca already has its own funding of NT\$25Million from the city government, great staff and history, whatever big money they ask for - they always get. It is unfair for smaller private institutions".



The Fabled Shoots - A Warning 2 by Su Hui-yu, Image courtesy Tcac



Arctic Diary The Wrong Ice by Tsui Kuang-yu, 2009. Image courtesy Tcac

Galleries take more risks

Galleries are evolving faster than the museums, they are more progressive. "The main ones are Tina Keng Gallery, Eslite Gallery – very contemporary, and Lin & Lin Gallery", says Hsu, who also notes Sakshi Gallery from Mumbai who opened a branch in Taipei in 2009. Then some smaller ones, like Aki Gallery and Galerie Grand Siècle. "All of those started to do some experimental projects and changed the artistic environment since 2008-2009. They felt confident enough to show new things, diversify and strengthen their brand names" says Hsu. As a result, contemporary artists who finish university and do very commercial works are not the only ones who have a chance to show in these galleries – new media and more experimental and political artists do too. ■