



Ca' Foscari
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**Taiwanese Artworld:
Cultural Nationalism and Independent
Art Spaces**

Supervisor

Ch. Prof. Sabrina Rastelli

Assistant supervisor

Ch. Prof. Rita Dal Martello

Graduand

Sara Carfagnini

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前言

一瞥台湾艺术界，不难发现这个岛国对于孕育各种形式的艺术创作、艺术展示和艺术活动，是一片极为肥沃的土壤。特别是台湾艺术的多元文化和实验性质，使其成为整个亚洲大陆中独立艺术、或可称为另类艺术的前驱：该艺术形式的特征是脱离市场的非营利导向和脱离政治影响的深度表达自由。台湾的独立艺术在众多的独立艺术空间、画廊、艺术驻村和混合场所中蓬勃发展，创造了一个生机勃勃、充满活力的艺术环境。本论文试图对这一现象进行分析，特别关注产生台湾独特艺术活力的潜在因素、此种艺术形式与艺术界内外各利益相关者之间的互动，以及政府和文化机构的作用。为了探讨这些方面，论文采用了广泛的分析方法。

作品共分为四章，前两章偏重于历史介绍，后两章则偏重于分析。

第一章并非严格意义上的艺术分析，而是更广泛地分析此国家。此分析对于剖析台湾岛内的艺术环境至关重要；由于历史政治因素，台湾的艺术一直在塑造、表达和展示国家认同方面发挥着巨大作用。本章首先以分析「台湾悖论」做为开端：该悖论概括了台湾蓬勃发展的民主和文化认同，与其尽管符合了所有作为主权国家的标准、却得不到国际承认一事之间的矛盾。这种悖论导致了根深蒂固的「认同情结」。在本论文中，身分认同的概念是流动且持续演变的，是由历史、文化和社会因素所形成的，并非处于一成不变的状态。台湾受其殖民历史和文化多样性影响的独特身份，展示了国家认同和文化认同之间的复杂相互作用，彰显了文化如何显著地促进了国家认同的形成和认知。有鉴于文化在国家认同形成过程中的重要性，本章简要介绍了多元文化主义现象，其源自于台湾岛内多元而充满活力的民族组成，是理解台湾艺术发展的基础。简短的历史概述将着重于欧洲帝国主义列强的各种统治、中国和日本的占领以及最后中国民族主义者的占领期间，该岛所经历的各种身份转变和文化变迁，这也是「中华」问题的由来。最后，第一章将强调当权者如何修改历史叙事，以适应特定的政治理念。

第二章将转入艺术分析，旨在追溯台湾当代艺术世界的演变。在本论文中，艺术世界被概念化为一个动态领域，由参与艺术创作、展示和传播的不同参与者组成。因此，本章不会将艺术史仅视为绘画风格的演进。相反，它将强调与特定艺术实践的兴衰相关的机制、相互关系、前因与后果。此讨论将优先考虑社会变革、城市环境的转变、不同社会群体的赋权、

艺术与身份之间的关系、文化政策的发展、艺术基础设施的建立以及博物馆的作用等因素。本章从二十世纪五、六十年代开始分析，该年代确定了台湾现代艺术的早期形式，但主要关注于二十世纪八十年代以后的当代艺术。台北市立美术馆的成立标志着一个关键时刻的到来：它为解除戒严后原本无序的艺术环境提供了组织和结构。本章将深入探讨台北市立美术馆与更广泛的艺术界之间的关系。接着将探讨台北双年展和威尼斯双年展台湾馆的变革性影响；这些机构在向国际观众介绍台湾艺术和促进全球参与方面发挥了重要作用。此外，我们也将特别关注从蒋经国（蔣經國）时代（1975 年开始）至今的国家文化政策。这些政策对于理解政府对待不断发展的艺术世界的态度至关重要。对不同执政党的文化政策进行研究，将能更了解不同政治理念如何塑造文化管理。认知到艺术界受到多种力量的影响后，本论文确认有两种主要力量塑造着台湾艺坛：一种是自上而下的力量（官方艺术，包括大型博物馆和双年展）、另一种是自下而上的力量（独立、另类艺术）。这些分别是第三章和第四章的分析重点。

第三章探讨了「制度暴力」在艺术领域的各种表现。首先，重点将放在文化民族主义上：这是一种全球普遍存在的现象，但由于台湾的「身分情结」和缺乏国际认可，这种现象在台湾尤为突出。透过对几个案例的分析，本文将说明艺术如何经常成为建构和表达民族认同的平台。艺术的这一政治维度可能会限制艺术自由，并经常导致对艺术品原意的重新诠释。本章在简要回顾上世纪七十年代文化民族主义的历史之后，将说明艺术中的民族主义论述如何阻碍了台湾艺术中当代元素的融入。具体而言，当从海外归来的台湾艺术家试图尝试西方前卫艺术形式（如观念艺术、装置艺术和行为艺术）时，本土艺术界仍然专注于本土主义和绘画中的“台湾味”。本章也将重新检视台北市立美术馆的角色，透过各种实例说明该馆是如何经历国有化过程。这个过程包括对艺术品的修改和审查，将政治正确的现代性和当代性强加给了台湾艺术界。文化民族主义并不是唯一的制度性强制行为：文化外交和政府参与艺术活动的规划和资助同样不利于艺术自由。文化外交在威尼斯双年展等著名国际展览中显而易见，在这些展览中，「国家代表」的概念为展出的艺术作品增添了更多内涵。同时，政府的参与往往透过创造艺术村或文創園區等措施来实现。

与这种充满限制的僵化艺术世界相反，第四章将介绍一个平行的艺术世界：独立艺术世界。为了澄清对「独立艺术」和「独立艺术空间」的常见误解，本章将首先为这些术语提供准确的定义，并阐述独立艺术空间的主要特征。本章将强调此类空间作为艺术创新的催化剂、新兴人才的培养基地和社会转型的推动者所具有的全球意义。在台湾，这些空间因

其独特的文化环境和背景因素而呈现出独特的特征。值得注意的是，台湾独立艺术的特征是与社区、认同和环境紧密相连，注重身体（体现在戏剧和表演作为首选表达方式的盛行），跨学科，且强调艺术创作的过程和关系。这些特色催生了一系列同时具有多种功能的混合空间，如咖啡馆、图书馆、艺廊和艺术住所。此外，它们也促成了「创意街区」等独特现象的出现。

在分析了这些特性之后，本章引入了「艺术生态」的概念。这个概念指的是艺术生态系统的正确运作和平衡。台湾艺术生态系统的特征是机构艺术与独立艺术之间的良性对话，从而显示台湾艺术生态的平衡状态。将机构艺视为独立、自由和创新艺术场景的主要对手，是不恰当的。总结而言，本论文将论述艺术应该脱离的「官方体系」是资本主义，以及随之而来的艺术商品化。

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Introduction

A first look into the Taiwanese art world reveals immediately how the island is an exceptionally fertile ground for the development of diverse artistic practices, exhibition methods, and organizational strategies for art activities. Notably, the multicultural and experimental nature of Taiwanese art has positioned the island as a pioneering force in independent or alternative art across the continent, a form of art distinguished by a non-profit orientation, which frees it from market constraints, and a profound commitment to freedom of expression, which liberates it from political influences. Currently, independent art flourishes on Taiwanese soil in the proliferation of numerous independent art spaces, galleries, artist residencies, and hybrid venues, fostering a vibrant and dynamic artistic ecosystem. What are the origins of this distinctive characteristic, and what enables it to flourish? Is *art from below* a product of Taiwan's historical, geographical, economic, or cultural context?

This thesis aims to analyze the fundamental factors contributing to Taiwan's unique artistic vitality, the interactions between this form of art and various stakeholders both within and beyond the art world, and the role of government and cultural institutions. To explore these dimensions, the thesis adopts a broad, analytical approach. Although the research is informed by the author's personal contacts and interactions, it primarily relies on the analysis of publicly available materials, predominantly written in English or Chinese, to minimize dependence on subjective viewpoints.

The work is structured into four chapters, with the first two providing introductory and historical context, and the latter two offering more analytical insights. To understand the dynamics of the art world and the factors underlying this remarkable artistic vitality, it is essential to examine the historical and cultural context of the island. Indeed, the current state of Taiwanese art is deeply influenced by the island's past, the various vicissitudes it has experienced and the various cultures that have inhabited it. For this reason, the first chapter does not engage strictly in an artistic analysis but instead provides a broader examination of the country. This broader analysis is essential for understanding the artistic environment of the island, as historical and political factors have profoundly influenced the role of art in *shaping, expressing, and reflecting* Taiwan's national identity. The chapter begins by addressing the 'Taiwanese paradox,' which encapsulates the contradiction between Taiwan's vibrant democratic identity and its lack of international recognition as a sovereign state. This thesis is not a political analysis;¹ rather, it seeks to disentangle Taiwan from the geopolitical discussions that often obscure other aspects of the island. Consequently, Taiwan's international

¹ To maintain a non-political focus, the term 'Taiwan' will be used throughout, rather than the official name 'Republic of China.'

position is discussed only to highlight the deep-rooted ‘identity complex’ inherent to the island. Taiwan’s unique identity, shaped by its colonial history and cultural diversity, illustrates the significant role of culture in the formation and perception of national identity. Recognizing the interplay between cultural and national identities, this chapter introduces the phenomenon of *multiculturalism*, stemming from the diverse and vibrant ethnic composition of the island. A brief historical overview will trace the various shifts in identity and cultural changes that Taiwan has experienced under different regimes, including European imperialist powers, Chinese and Japanese occupations. Finally, the chapter will underline how historical narratives have been adapted by those in power to serve specific political agendas.

The second chapter transitions to an artistic analysis aimed at tracing the evolutionary process leading to the contemporary Taiwanese art world, primarily concentrating on the development of contemporary art from the 1980s onward. As the thesis focuses on forms of organizing artistic practice rather than specific artistic currents, the chapter’s approach to the history of art diverges from the traditional analyses that typically emphasize the evolution of painting styles. Instead, it will emphasize the mechanisms, interconnections, causes, and consequences related to the rise and decline of specific artistic practices. The discussion will thus prioritize factors such as social change, transformations in the urban environment, the empowerment of distinct social groups, the relationship between art and identity, the development of cultural policies, the establishment of artistic infrastructure, and the role of museums.

Acknowledging the artworld as a *force field* shaped by various influences, this thesis identifies two primary forces shaping the Taiwanese art scene: a *top-down force* – represented by institutional art (comprising major museums and biennials) – and a *bottom-up force* – represented by independent art. The third and fourth chapters focus on analyzing these respective forces.

The third chapter examines the various forms of ‘institutional violence’ within the artistic sphere. The focus is primarily on cultural nationalism, a phenomenon that is significant globally but particularly pronounced in Taiwan due to its complex identity issues and lack of international recognition. Through the analysis of several case studies, the thesis will demonstrate how art in Taiwan often serves the secondary aim of *constructing* and *forwarding* national identity. This political dimension can constrain artistic freedom, reinterpret the original meaning of artworks, and impede the integration of contemporary elements into artistic practice. This last point is especially true in the Taiwanese context. However, cultural nationalism is not the sole form of institutional coercion; cultural diplomacy and government involvement in the planning and funding of artistic activities also pose significant threats to artistic freedom. The chapter will address these additional factors as well.

Specifically, it will analyze cultural diplomacy at the Venice Biennale, where the concept of ‘national representation’ imposes additional connotations on the artworks displayed.

While this third chapter aims to highlight the limitations of institutional art, it is crucial to understand that no system or art form is entirely *good* or *bad*. The overarching purpose of this thesis is not to condemn nationalism or official art, nor to assert that independent art is the only *valid* form of artistic expression. Instead, the artworld is a question of *mechanisms*: each historical period, regardless of how problematic or authoritarian, has contributed something of value that can be reinterpreted and integrated into the present, every platform and every institution has a key role within the complex system of art. Grounded in this concept, the thesis is about *equilibriums* rather than *extremisms*.

The fourth chapter, less theoretical and more rooted in the author’s personal experience, explores the alternative art world existing alongside the established official system: that of independent art. To dispel common misconceptions surrounding ‘independent art’ and ‘independent art spaces,’ the chapter will provide clear definitions of these terms, outline their defining characteristics, and emphasize their global significance. In the global context, such spaces are widely acknowledged as essential catalysts for artistic innovation, nurturing grounds for emerging talents, and drivers of social change. However, in the Taiwanese context, they assume additional layers of significance and exhibit unique attributes, shaped by the island’s distinctive cultural milieu and contextual influences. In contemporary Taiwan, considering the immense potential of the new generation of artists, the question arises whether cultural policies support their growth or hinder the flourishing of artistic vitality. Is it appropriate to perceive governmental and institutional platforms as the primary obstacles to *genuine* and *innovative* artistic expression? Are there other factors at play? How do the two parallel artworlds of *institutions* and *independent art spaces* interact within the Taiwanese art world? And also, can they really be considered two separate entities?

The thesis will conclude by exploring the concept of *art ecology*, which refers to the proper functioning of an *art ecosystem*. Is the Taiwanese art ecosystem in *balance*?

Answering questions is not among the pretenses of an introduction. For this reason, such an introductory segment unfolded itself as a long series of inquiries. It will be the role of the subsequent chapters to address these inquiries comprehensively, considering historical, cultural, and artistic perspectives, and avoiding biases and oversimplifications as much as possible.

Chapter 1 – Taiwan: historical and cultural context

The mere mention of the name “Taiwan” tends to evoke, especially among those with limited familiarity, an immediate association with a tense situation. This instinctive connection underscores the geopolitical sensitivity surrounding the island, perpetuated by historical, political, and economic factors. This thesis will be an attempt to detach the name “Taiwan” from its prevalent association with such negative narratives. Instead, the focus will be directed toward a narrative that highlights the aesthetic and cultural dimensions of Taiwan, particularly through the prism of its art. By doing so, the present work aspires to present an alternative perspective that challenges prevailing global perceptions, fostering a deeper understanding of Taiwan beyond the limited confines of geopolitical discourse.

The author of the thesis deemed it necessary to assist the reader, by providing in this first chapter a general overview of the subject of the narrative, that is to say Taiwan, before delving into an exclusively artistic analysis. Specifically, this introductory chapter will be segmented into five macro-sections, which will attempt, albeit in their brevity, to portray a semi-comprehensive image of Taiwan and Taiwanese identity. It will explore how this identity is *internationally perceived* and *sentimentally experienced* by the Taiwanese themselves.

The opening section of the chapter introduces the Taiwanese paradox – the oxymoron of a nation that serves as a beacon throughout Asia for its extraordinary process towards modernity and that, despite this, often goes unnoticed on the international stage, perhaps due to apprehensions about disappointing more powerful allies. However, it is important to note that our investigation will focus more on identitarian issues than delve deep into complex geopolitical intricacies.

Following essential clarifications regarding the concepts of *nation*, *state*, and *national identity*, the second section undertakes a more in-depth exploration of the Taiwanese identity complex. Primarily, it seeks to establish an appropriate framework for the concept of identity itself, providing the reader with the necessary tools to analyze subsequent sections effectively. Subsequently, the section elucidates Taiwan’s peculiar experience of “tradition” (hence, culture), crucial for the following analysis: as highlighted in the section, national identity and cultural identity are closely intertwined.

Upon grasping the significance of culture in the process of identity formation in a nation, the third section begins to briefly introduce Taiwanese culture by addressing the phenomenon of *multiculturalism*, stemming from the diverse and vibrant ethnic composition of the island.

Additionally, a brief analysis is dedicated to the “Chinese culture” issue, including an examination of the border between *Zhongguo* (中國) and *zhonghua* (中華).

Taiwanese culture is explored in more detail in the following section, which traces the main stages of Taiwanese history, lingering upon the events that spurred identity shifts and/or triggered cultural change. The specific objective of this cultural-historical section is to shed light on the intricate history of the country, delving into the profound scars it bears and examining how these significantly impact the contemporary identity perception among the Taiwanese. Emphasizing the changes imposed from above and the various cultural movements, especially those within the realm of modern-contemporary history, becomes pivotal in subsequent chapters to contextualize artworks and contributions of contemporary artists.

Once the past has been explored, the fifth and last section of this first chapter points out how this past can be deformed and used “instrumentally” to fit specific narratives and political agendas. This concluding segment holds paramount significance, as it will be demonstrated that the Taiwanese government has frequently employed this practice in international exhibitions to present a tailored image of the country. Upcoming chapters will delve into the examination of how cultural policies, curatorial decisions, and censorship of artworks have been utilized by people in power and institutions to craft specific *narratives of unfolding*.² However, for the present moment, it suffices to grasp the fundamental concept of this phenomenon.

Specifically, the reader is urged to focus on three main aspects in this chapter that hold fundamental significance for the narrative in subsequent chapters. These key points include Taiwan’s *international isolation* (which has rendered international exhibitions nearly the sole platform through which the country can speak), its *cultural developments* throughout history, serving as the backdrop for the analysis of the artists, and the deeply rooted *disorientation* experienced by the Taiwanese. Recognizing that art often mirrors the soul, the historical concepts discussed will play a pivotal role in interpreting the artworks and artistic movements of this small yet intricately rich island.

² Melissa J. BROWN, *Is Taiwan Chinese?: the Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing identities*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004

1.1 Taiwanese paradox

Taiwan stands as one of the first and largest democracies in Asia, it is notable for its exemplary record among Far Eastern countries for civil rights and individual freedom.³ Recognized as the *queer capital*⁴ of Asia and as a pioneer country in the art world, it has nurtured entire generations of internationally acclaimed filmmakers, musicians, and artists. However, despite these achievements, Taiwan faces challenges on the international stage, as it lacks formal recognition as a sovereign state. This contributes to issues of representing and naming Taiwan, its people, and its culture.

Essentially, at the core of the *Taiwanese paradox*, there's a situation in which, as Malcolm Cook states: "Taiwan's geo-strategic position is threatened, but domestically its autonomous social and democratic identity flourishes."⁵

To better understand Taiwanese contemporary situation, it is essential to elucidate the distinctions among the concepts of "nation" and "state". Prominent scholars in the field of nationhood, including Hobsbawm⁶, Gellner⁷, and Anderson⁸, broadly agree that modern nations are "artifacts" which are the product of political and diplomatic factors. Smith provides the following distinction between "nation" and "state":

³ Washington, Dec. 19. Taiwan ranked 12th among 165 jurisdictions around the world and first in Asia in the 2023 Human Freedom Index (HFI). Italy only ranked 36th. <https://www.cato.org/human-freedom-index/2023>, accessed 20 January 2024

⁴ Taiwan is the first and still-only country in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage. For more in-depth knowledge of Taiwanese approach to *queerness*, see FRAN Martin, *Situating Sexualities: Queer Representation in Taiwanese fiction, Film and Public Culture*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003 and HUANG Tao-Ming Hans, *Queer Politics and Sexual Modernity in Taiwan*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011

⁵ Malcolm COOK, "Taiwan's Identity Challenge" in *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*, vol.25, no. 2, 2005, p. 84

⁶ "The history which became part of the fund of knowledge or the ideology of nation, state, or movement is not what has actually been preserved in popular memory, but what has been selected, written, pictured, popularized and institutionalized by those whose function it is to do so [...] So much of what subjectively makes up the modern 'nation' consists of such constructs and is associated with appropriate and, in general, fairly recent symbols or suitably tailored discourse (such as 'national history'), the national phenomenon cannot be adequately investigated without careful attention to the 'invention of tradition'." Eric HOBBSAWM, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions", Chapter in HOBBSAWM E., RANGER T. (Eds), *The invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 13-14

⁷ "Nations are the artefacts of men's conviction and loyalties and solidarities." Ernest GELLNER, *Nations and Nationalism*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983, p. 7

⁸ Benedict Anderson famously defines the nation as an 'imagined political community'. In Benedict ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1983, 2006, p. 6

...[*State*] refers exclusively to public institutions, differentiated from, and autonomous of, other social institutions and exercising a monopoly of coercion and extraction within a given territory. The *Nation*, on the other hand, signifies a cultural and political bond, uniting in a single political community all who share an historic culture and homeland.⁹

Smith then proceeds to describe the attributes a nation should possess in order to be defined so: “Historic territory, legal-political community, legal-political equality of members, and common civic culture and ideology; these are the components of the standard, Western model of the *nation* [and] they have remained vital elements [...] in most non-Western conceptions of national identity.”¹⁰ Adopting Smith’s perspective, Taiwan appears to fit all the criteria of nationhood¹¹: it has its people, territory, government, mass culture, and a common economy; but cannot be currently acknowledged as a sovereign state, since it is not diplomatically recognized by the UN and most other nations of the world (even though they may be involved in unofficial nation-to-nation diplomacy).¹²

If, as Yang Zhong (杨钟) explains, *national identity* is composed of at least two dimensions: “a political/state dimension and an ethnocultural dimension”¹³, then consequently the so-called *Taiwan Wenti* (台湾问题) “Taiwan Question”¹⁴, and the challenges and complexities associated with it encompass both political issues and issues of identity.¹⁵ For the sake of this research, the geopolitical situation will not be further investigated, the next section will focus instead on the identity issue that lies beneath the *Taiwan issue*, as it will be beneficial in subsequent chapters to analyze the Taiwanese art system.

⁹ Anthony D. SMITH, *Nationality Identity*, London: Penguin Books, 1991, pp. 14-15

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 11

¹¹ “Nationhood has to do with one’s sense of shared identity. It is primarily a matter of association – a sentiment felt collectively by individuals.” Alan M. WACHMAN, *Taiwan: National Identity and Democratization*, New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 25

¹² LAI Meng-Yu, *Taiwanese Identity and the Performing Arts: the Development of Programming at the National Performing Arts Centre*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of London, Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies, 2020, p. 57

¹³ YANG Zhong, “Explaining national identity shift in Taiwan”, in *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 25, no. 99, 2016, p. 3

¹⁴ TRAMPEDACH Tim, “Taiwan Question”, in: *Brill’s Encyclopedia of China* http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1877-0339_bec_COM_00137 accessed on 25 March 2024

¹⁵ Melissa J. BROWN, *Is Taiwan Chinese?: the Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing identities*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004, p. 211

1.2 Taiwanese identity complex

To demonstrate how the identitarian complex plays a key role in the Taiwanese artworld, the author decided to open this section through the words of Jason Wang Chia Chi (王嘉驥), art critic and curator of the Taiwan Biennial 2008, who tried to express contemporary Taiwanese people's idea of their own identity: "We have now entered the First World, but we are forced to remain at its borders, in a position of constant subordination and unable to represent our mute identity."¹⁶ It must be noted that such a desperate cry for help is written in the catalog for the Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, functioning as a significant communicative platform, despite not wielding any political value.

There have been many debates trying to define the term "identity". To better understand the current Taiwanese situation, it is useful to stop considering it a fixed *a priori* condition and to adopt a more flexible approach to the term. As Hall asserts, identities are moving, fluid and dynamic concepts.¹⁷ They

are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation.¹⁸

The usage of the term *becoming* rather than *being* is particularly important when talking about Taiwanese identity. If we adopt Hall's perspective to examine identity, thus recognizing the significance of "history, language, and culture" (collectively referred to as "tradition"), then also the term "tradition" requires redefinition within the Taiwanese context. Taiwan's experience of "tradition" is quite unusual: "normally regarded as a static set of standards, norms, customs, codes of behavior,

¹⁶ "我們已經進入第一世界的體內，卻始終只能棲居在其邊境，屬於受之支配而無法自我代表 的無語身分。" WANG Chia Chi Jason, *The Spectre of freedom [Ziyou de huanxiang 自由的幻象]*, Catalogue of the exhibition at Venice Biennale 2005, Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2005 p. 25. Unless explicitly stated otherwise, the translation is the thesis author's responsibility.

¹⁷ Stuart HALL, "Introduction: Who Need Identity?", Chapter in HALL S. & DE GAY P. (Eds), *Questions of Cultural Identities*, London: Sage, 1996, p. 4

¹⁸ Ibidem.

[in Taiwan tradition] ... has become the object of conscious choice; it is in the process of being made, forged, and negotiated.”¹⁹

Throughout its history, Taiwan has undergone a long series of colonial dominations (*sequential occupance*²⁰): first fell under European imperialism, it was then subject to Japanese rule, and, ultimately, to the arrival of mainlanders from China. These significant waves of migration and authoritarian regimes have altered the ethnic breakdown of its population, other than forcing multiple shifts in the official language and religion, fostering different socio-cultural movements, and introducing diverse artistic styles. Collectively, these dynamics have *shaped* Taiwanese identity, which is now unique because of its heterogeneity, to the point that “independence advocates [...] argue that the national identity shift lays the foundation for Taiwan to become a *de jure* independent country.”²¹

It is beneficial in order to comprehend the Taiwanese context in general, and particularly relevant to the present thesis, to take a moment to underscore the strong connection between the concepts of *nation* and *culture*. Indeed, cultural background significantly influences the *formation*, *expression* and *perception* of individual and collective identities, to the extent that it might be the base for the construction of national identities too.

As Yang Zhong asserts, the foundation of *national identity* relies on cultural elements such as language, religion, consciousness of common descent and so on.²² James Kellas goes so far as to argue that nationality and culture are almost synonymous, since “without national culture there would be little left of nationhood.”²³ These statements hold particular significance in analyzing a country’s identity, as they establish a parallel between *national* and *cultural identity*²⁴. This implies that one could begin to “understand” a country by starting with the exploration of its culture.

¹⁹ YANG Wen-I, *Negotiating Traditions: Taiwanese Art since the 1980s*, PhD thesis discussed at the Ruperto-Carola University of Heidelberg, Faculty of Philosophy and History, 2002, p. 3

²⁰ Important concept in modern geography: “a given territory may undergo a series of changes in its landscape as successive people of varying abilities move in.” HUNG Chien-Chao, *A history of Taiwan*, Rimini: Il cerchio, 2000, p. 5

²¹ YANG Zhong, “Explaining national identity shift in Taiwan”, in *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 25, no. 99, 2016, p. 2

²² Ibid. p. 8

²³ G. James KELLAS, *The Politics of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, London: Red Globe Press, 1991, p. 67

²⁴ “Cultural identity” is defined by Vivian Hsueh-Hua Chen as “identification with, or sense of belonging to, a particular group based on various cultural categories, including nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, and religion. [...] constructed

This thesis will now proceed to offer two definitions of “culture”, as articulated by two influential figures who have played pivotal roles in shaping cultural policies in contemporary Taiwanese world. Lung Ying-tai (龍應台), first Minister of Culture in Taiwan from 2012 to 2014 defines culture as “the basic education of the nation which develops people’s taste.”²⁵ For her, culture includes not only all the experiences that individuals have accumulated during their lifetime, but much more besides: “the economy, diplomacy, and ways in which hostility can be eliminated.”²⁶ Also Tchen Yu-chiou (陳郁秀), Minister of the Council for Cultural Affairs (CCA) from 2000 to 2004, agrees with this broad definition of culture: for her culture includes not only the arts and literature but also “modes of life, the fundamental rights of human beings, value systems, traditions and beliefs.”²⁷

If culture is indeed acknowledged as one of the fundamental pillars shaping identity, an examination of Taiwanese culture becomes imperative. The subsequent section aims to demonstrate that defining a ‘Taiwanese culture’ in a singular, cohesive way is no easy task. For reasons of length, this thesis cannot afford to fully dissect the complexity of the topic. Instead, it will limit itself to referencing select demographic data, providing survey results on identity perception, and briefly alluding to the “Chinese culture” (*zhonghua* 中華) issue.

1.3 Taiwanese multiculturalism and the “Chinese culture” issue

The cultural and linguistic diversities among the “Native Taiwanese” themselves (Hoklo, Hakka, and the sixteen²⁸ recognized aboriginal tribes), are also complemented by the presence on the island of around seven hundred thousand Southeast Asian workers mainly from Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. The phenomenon of ‘Taiwanese multiculturalism’ (*Taiwan duo yuan wen hua* 台灣多元文化)²⁹, is officially recognized by the government through Paragraph 9 of Article 10 in

and maintained through the process of sharing collective knowledge such as traditions, heritage, language, aesthetics, norms and customs.” CHEN V. H., “Cultural Identity” in *Center for Intercultural Dialogue*, No. 22, Singapore: Nanyang Technological University, 2014, p. 1

²⁵ LUNG Ying-Tai, “Why cultural policy?” [*Wenhua zhengce weishenme* 文化政策為什麼?], in *China Times*, 2008.05.13. http://www.readingtimes.com.tw/TimesHtml/authors/tai/theme/009/reader09_01.htm accessed 15 January 2024

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ TCHEN Yu-Chiou, *Creative 1: The First Lesson of the Creative Industries in Taiwan* [*Wen chuang daguan 1: Taiwan wen chuang de di yi tang ke* 文創大觀 1: 台灣文創的第一堂課], Taipei: Eurasian Publishing Group, 2013 pp. 22-23

²⁸ https://ab.hl.gov.tw/en-us/Explore/Ethnic_GroupIntro, accessed 19 January 2024

²⁹ Or *Wen hua duo yang xing* 文化多樣性 “cultural diversity”

The Amendment of the Constitution of the Republic of China (1997)³⁰, thus challenging the traditional Chinese approach of prizing conformity and unity.

The identity issue in Taiwan is often tied to the question of whether Taiwan should or should not be part of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The huge majority of the Taiwanese population has a Chinese cultural background, writes with traditional Chinese 'national characters' (*Guo zi* 國字), and speaks Mandarin as the 'national language' (*Guo yu* 國語), which even the indigenous people and immigrants need to use to communicate on the island.³¹ It can be asserted that a significant portion of the Taiwanese population has undergone socialization into and identifies with 'Chinese culture' (*Zhonghua wenhua* 中華文化). Nevertheless, it is imperative to precisely delineate the boundary separating ethnic identity from national identity, so as to avoid succumbing to the numerous linguistic biases inherent in the Chinese language. In Chinese, *Zhonghua wenhua* refers to Chinese civilization and ethnic culture and does not necessarily refer to the culture of 'the nation of China' (*Zhongguo* 中國)³². The distinction between *Zhongguo* and *Zhonghua* lies at the core of the cultural challenge in Taiwan. Presently, *Zhongguo* exclusively denotes mainland China (PRC), whereas *Zhonghua* encompasses all individuals of Chinese ethnicity globally, regardless of their national affiliations.³³ In Yang Zhong's words, "What has shifted with regard to most Taiwanese national identity is the political/state aspect, not the cultural/ ethnic aspect. [...] In fact, ethnocultural speaking, an overwhelming majority of people in Taiwan still identify themselves as members of the big Chinese nation (*Zhonghua minzu* 中華民族)."³⁴

³⁰國家肯定多元文化，並積極維護發展原住民族語言及文化。The State affirms cultural pluralism and shall actively preserve and foster the development of aboriginal languages and cultures. (Translation directly sourced from official government records). <https://law.moj.gov.tw/ENG/Index.aspx>, accessed 14 December 2023

³¹ LAI Meng-Yu, *Taiwanese Identity and the Performing Arts: the Development of Programming at the National Performing Arts Centre*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of London, Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies, 2020, p. 85

³² CHANG H. C. & HOLT R., *Language, Politics and Identity in Taiwan: Naming China*, Oxon: Routledge, 2015, p. 162

³³ LAI Meng-Yu, *Taiwanese Identity and the Performing Arts: the Development of Programming at the National Performing Arts Centre*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of London, Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies, 2020, pp. 85-86

³⁴ YANG Zhong, "Explaining national identity shift in Taiwan", in *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 25, no. 99, 2016, p. 2

According to the latest National Chengchi University Election Study Center poll on Taiwanese / Chinese Identity, considering the period from June 1992 until June 2023³⁵, the responses to the question “Do you consider yourself to be ‘Taiwanese’, ‘Chinese’, or both?” show a clear trend: more and more people regard themselves as Taiwanese, while fewer and fewer people regard themselves as both (the percentage of people regarding themselves as Chinese has remained stably low for the past two decades). The perception of one’s own identity is greatly influenced by socio-political experiences,³⁶ which in the Taiwanese case results in a differentiation among generations. As Sophie McIntyre points out in *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan’s Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, individuals who lived during the 2:28 incident or martial law show more political motivation and emotional involvement in national identity matters.³⁷ On the other hand, the younger generation, raised in the era of democratization, tends to possess a blended Taiwanese-Chinese (*Benshengren* 本省人- *Waishengren* 外省人)³⁸ background. At the present day, the nature of Taiwanese young people is extremely open and cosmopolitan, their perspectives are characterized by great flexibility. Owing to this generational shift, together with the influence of globalization, and the rise of Chinese power, contemporary identity perspectives in Taiwan are distinguished by a more transnational and cosmopolitan orientation.³⁹

In conclusion, the question of what truly constitutes Taiwan, Taiwanese culture, and Taiwanese tradition remains at present-day unanswered and lacks a consensus. Nevertheless, “Taiwan’s national identity is real in the sense that is meaningful and motivating to people [...] past attempts to suppress Taiwanese national identity have only strengthened it, any future attempts are

³⁵ <https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/PageDoc/Detail?fid=7800&id=6961> accessed 14 December 2023

³⁶ Melissa J. BROWN, *Is Taiwan Chinese?: the Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing identities*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, op. cit.

³⁷ Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden, BRILL, 2018, pp. 6-7

³⁸ Three ethnic groups make up Taiwan's population: the Indigenous People (*Yuanzhumin* 原住民), whose ancestors arrived on the island long before the Chinese migrated there in the thirteenth century; the *benshengren* 本省人, or “native Taiwanese” who came from China to Taiwan before the mid-1940s; and the *waishengren* 外省人, or “Mainlanders”, who fled to Taiwan with their parents or grandparents after the mid-1940s. The Aborigines are not Han Chinese, but the *benshengren* and *waishengren* both are. However, it is fundamental to remark that these categories are sloppy labels to classify people accurately since not everyone on the island can fit in only one of the three.

³⁹ Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden, BRILL, 2018, pp. 6-7

likely to do the same.”⁴⁰ Taiwan today is a new, evolving society that is quickly moving away from external perceptions of what Taiwan is and how Taiwan views its relations with China.⁴¹

Before delving into the Taiwanese art scene, the next section will briefly touch on some historical background. It is important to note that, to maintain conciseness and relevance to this thesis’s main focus, which is the Taiwanese alternative artworld, the historical context will not be analyzed in its entirety. Instead, it will serve as a propaedeutic step to underscore two phenomena of interest: *identity shifts* and *cultural changes*. Consequently, historical events will be referenced solely if necessary to analyze either of the aforementioned issues and should not be regarded as a comprehensive depiction of Taiwanese history.⁴² Examining identitarian shifts and cultural changes proves essential to contextualize the society in which Taiwanese artists live, understand the artistic and cultural environment they operate within, delve into their cultural backgrounds, and discern the various pressures – political and non – they encounter. Given that this research seeks to illuminate the Taiwanese *contemporary* art scene, the focus of interest is placed on the younger generation. Consequently, the subsequent section has been designed to prioritize modern and contemporary Taiwanese history, while limited emphasis will be placed on ancient history.

1.4 Historical overview: identity shifts and cultural changes

It is far from the aim of this thesis to convert Taiwanese identitarian research into a mere “archaeological” dissection of the past: it has been already emphasized and it will be further clarified that Taiwan and its people are nowadays still engaged in an ongoing process of self-definition. This is particularly pronounced among the younger generations, who are going through this process in a lively and effervescent way. Nevertheless, it is crucial to provide some historical insights to understand the resources available to them as they embark on the creative act of bringing to light a new personal way of “being Taiwanese”. In elucidating the historical backdrop, our primary point of reference will be Hung Chien-chao’s work titled “A History of Taiwan” (2000).

⁴⁰ Melissa J. BROWN, *Is Taiwan Chinese?: the Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing identities*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004, p. 241

⁴¹ Malcolm COOK, “Taiwan’s Identity Challenge” in *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*, vol.25, no. 2, 2005, p. 86

⁴² For a more comprehensive narration, the reader can refer to HUNG Chien-Chao, *A history of Taiwan*, Rimini: Il cerchio, 2000

Taiwan's indigenous peoples are ancestrally related to the Austronesian family group encompassing the Pacific Islands, including New Zealand, Polynesia and Melanesia.⁴³ According to historical accounts, Taiwan saw the emergence of the first Chinese colonies in the thirteenth century. However, it “played no part in Chinese history until the seventeenth century”⁴⁴, when massive waves of Chinese immigration from China's Guangdong and Fujian Provinces took place. After the Spaniards left their footprints in northern Taiwan for two decades (1626-1642), Taiwan eventually became a Dutch colony (1642-1662⁴⁵). Under Dutch rule, Han people faced political and military disenfranchisement: being recognized as Aboriginal (rather than Han) was viewed favorably during this period, leading to the comprehensive documentation of Aborigines in historical records from the Dutch era.⁴⁶

With the Chinese colonization of the region in 1662 by Zheng Chengong 鄭成功⁴⁷(1624-1662), who defeated the Dutch that had been ruling the island for the past four decades, Han eventually came to constitute the majority of the island's population. As Melissa Brown notes:

Aspects of Han culture were introduced into the local cultural models but aspects of non-Han culture were also maintained [...] the amalgamation of Han and non-Han culture came to be considered Han culture, at least locally. Han culture was simply the culture of those considered Han, regardless of whether that culture matched Confucian standards or Han culture elsewhere.⁴⁸

After the Qing government assumed control over Taiwan in 1683, the region was designated as a prefecture administratively linked to Fujian Province (attaining provincial status only in 1887). Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the indigenous inhabitants residing in the lowland regions, specifically the “civilized” (*pingpu zu* 平埔族), underwent a gradual process of assimilation into the Chinese population. Unlike the Dutch period, under Zheng and Qing rule, it

⁴³ Sophie McINTYRE, “Navigating ‘Austronesia’: Contemporary indigenous art from Taiwan and the Pacific”, in *Art Monthly Australia*, vol. 232, 2010, pp. 45-48, p. 45

⁴⁴ HUNG Chien-Chao, *A history of Taiwan*, Rimini: Il cerchio, 2000, preface

⁴⁵ Years referred to Dutch colonization, and not to Dutch occupation.

⁴⁶ A comprehensive depiction of aborigines' situation under Dutch rule can be found in Melissa J. BROWN, *Is Taiwan Chinese?: the Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing identities*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004, pp. 36-40

⁴⁷ Known internationally by his honorary name Koxinga (*Guo xing ye* 國姓爺).

⁴⁸ Melissa J. BROWN, *Is Taiwan Chinese?: the Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing identities*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004, p. 236

became advantageous for the mixed population to be considered Han (to avoid corvees and taxation), leading to a significant number of individuals adopting Han surnames.⁴⁹ This can be identified as the first important identitarian shift worth mentioning: from Aborigines⁵⁰ to Han. The historical records of the Zheng, Qing, and Japanese periods lack data on the Aborigines, as they assimilated into the category of “Hoklo Taiwanese” (*Fu lao* 福佬).⁵¹ Conversely, the *gaoshan zu* 高山族⁵², denoted by the Chinese as “savages” or “barbarians” (*shengfan* 生番), displayed strong resistance to Sinicization. Consequently, their cultures have persisted almost unchanged throughout the centuries to the present day.⁵³

The second important identity shift and the first major *imposed* cultural change can be traced back to the Japanese colonization of the island. Following China’s defeat by Japan in the first Sino–Japanese War in 1895, the Qing government ceded Taiwan to Japan with the Treaty of Shimonoseki. During the whole Japanese colonial rule, “even though the Taiwanese were forced to become Japanese culturally, they were still treated as second-class citizens politically and socially.”⁵⁴ There is no doubt that half century of Japanese colonial rule left its cultural imprints on the people of Taiwan, some of which are still evident today. It is noteworthy that even though the Japanese attempted to

⁴⁹ A comprehensive depiction of aborigenes’ situation under Zheng and Qing rule can be found in Ibid. pp. 40-53

⁵⁰ The Taiwanese term to indicate the original inhabitants of the island is *Yuanzhumin* 原住民, used for the first time in April 1994 by then President Lee Teng-hui. From now on they will be referred to as “Indigenous” or “Aborigines”, following the denomination system in Melissa J. BROWN, *Is Taiwan Chinese?: the Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing identities*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004

⁵¹ “*hô-ló* (福佬)”. NAOYOSHI Ogawa, 臺日大辭典 [*Taiwanese-Japanese Dictionary*], Vol. 2. Taihoku: Governor-General of Taiwan, ed. 1931–1932, p. 829 <https://taigi.fhl.net/dict/search.php?DETAIL=1&LIMIT=id=20379&dbname=dic&graph=2> accessed 23 March 2024. The term “Hoklo” refers to individuals whose paternal lineage traces back to male settlers who emigrated from Fujian to Taiwan during the 17th and 18th centuries. Given that a significant portion of Taiwan's population identifies as Hoklo, this term has frequently been employed interchangeably with “Taiwanese.” Presently, the term is mainly used to refer to the Hoklo language and culture.

⁵² The denomination of the two categories differs during various historical periods. For example, Japanese registers distinguished Aborigines into *fan* “raw” or *shu* “cooked”, depending on the relationship with Han people. In Melissa J. BROWN, *Is Taiwan Chinese?: the Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing identities*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004, p. 8

⁵³ Elisabetta ZERBINATTI, *Narrarsi attraverso l'arte: Il Padiglione Taiwan a Venezia come esempio di diplomazia culturale 2015-2017*, master thesis submitted to Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Faculty of Language and Civilisation of Asia and Mediterranean Africa, 2017, p. 21

⁵⁴ YANG Zhong, “Explaining national identity shift in Taiwan”, in *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 25, no. 99, 2016, p. 4

instill in Taiwanese people the perception of being loyal subordinates of the Japanese empire, the effect was quite the opposite: they unintentionally allowed for the emergence of a distinct non-Japanese identity in Taiwan.⁵⁵ One could argue that it was precisely with the arrival of Japanese troops in 1896 that the island started displaying initial signs of a *Pan-Taiwanese identity*⁵⁶ (among Hoklo and Hakka). Aside from laying the foundation for Taiwan's industrialization, it is essential to acknowledge the contribution of Japanese rule in introducing modernism to the island. This was accomplished through the knowledge Japan acquired from its interactions with the West⁵⁷, and, as explored further in the upcoming chapter, particularly valid for the introduction of Western modern art. Overall, Japanese colonial rule can be considered a “formative period”⁵⁸ in the history of Taiwan. Once again, due to length constraints, this thesis is unable to provide an in-depth exploration of the intricate and fascinating circumstances of this period. For a more comprehensive understanding, the reader may refer to Leo T. S. Ching's book titled “Becoming ‘Japanese’: Colonial Taiwan and the Politics of Identity Formation” (2001)⁵⁹, in which he chronicled the Taiwanese identity struggle during the Japanese colonial period.

The third identitarian shift, aligning with the second imposed huge cultural change, took place with the restoration of Taiwan to the Republic of China. After Japanese defeat in the Second World War, in 1945, Taiwan was “gloriously returned” (*Guangfu* 光復)⁶⁰ to China. After the *fiasco* of Japanese rule to instill a Japanese identity into Taiwanese people, there were great expectations about the return to China, “as the news of Taiwan's retrocession to China became clear, the six million

⁵⁵ Melissa J. BROWN, *Is Taiwan Chinese?: the Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing identities*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004, p. 8

⁵⁶ Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, pp. 7-8

⁵⁷ YANG Wen-I, *Negotiating Traditions: Taiwanese Art since the 1980s*, PhD thesis submitted to the Ruperto-Carola University of Heidelberg, Faculty of Philosophy and History, 2002, p. 13

⁵⁸ Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, pp. 7-8.

⁵⁹ CHING Leo T. S., *Becoming ‘Japanese’: Colonial Taiwan and the Politics of Identity Formation*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001

⁶⁰ Melissa J. BROWN, *Is Taiwan Chinese?: the Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing identities*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004, p. 9

people on the island rejoiced in their good luck to be able to return to the Chinese fold, from which they had been separated for half a century.”⁶¹ However,

the people on Taiwan, who had been led to expect that with their liberation from the Japanese they would be reunited on terms of equality with their mainland brethren, were looking forward to a realization of their aspirations for self-rule [...] it soon became apparent that Taiwan was to be treated as a conquered territory, and its population as a subjugated people.⁶²

Corruption within the nationalist party led to socio-political tensions, a breakdown in public health services led to epidemics spreading, educational standards fell, unemployment increased, and public morals deteriorated. Even skilled native Taiwanese employees were replaced by Chinese from the mainland, and Taiwanese were virtually excluded from all the higher levels of political and economic administration.⁶³

It is widely acknowledged among sociologists and scholars that war contexts *crystallize identities*⁶⁴ (this is particularly evident among ethnic minorities in contentious regions, and is observable in various contemporary situations). Taiwan is no exception to the case: one of the biggest triggering events, crucial to the development of Taiwanese identity and awareness, arises from an unfortunate circumstance. On February 28, 1947 (barely one and a half years after Taiwan’s restoration to China), the already tense situation reached a breaking point with the popular uprising of Taiwanese people and the brutal repression, by the hand of government troops, of mainly Taiwanese *benshengren*, now remembered in history as the “2:28 incident.” Untold thousands of people were killed during two weeks of violent clashes, and this “changed totally the relationship between the natives of Taiwan and the Chinese from the mainland.”⁶⁵ Indeed, it is precisely sociopolitical experiences like persecution and repression (and not cultural difference) that solidify “ethnic” Taiwanese identity⁶⁶, to the point that one could mark the 2nd of February 1947 as “day one”

⁶¹ HUNG Chien-Chao, *A history of Taiwan*, Rimini: Il cerchio, 2000, p. 245

⁶² Ibid. pp. 246-247

⁶³ Ibid. pp. 247-248

⁶⁴ “...central role of warfare [...] as a mobilizer of ethnic sentiments and national consciousness, a centralizing force in the life of a community and a provider of myths and memories for future generations.” Anthony D. SMITH, *National Identity*, London: Penguin Books, 1991, p. 27

⁶⁵ HUNG Chien-Chao, *A history of Taiwan*, Rimini: Il cerchio, 2000, p. 248

⁶⁶ Melissa J. BROWN, *Is Taiwan Chinese?: the Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing identities*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004, p. 237

of Taiwan's pro-independence movement.⁶⁷ Due to some ambiguity surrounding this subject matter, it is necessary to clarify that simply because one has cultivated a Taiwanese consciousness does not mean that he supports the idea of independence: Taiwanese consciousness itself is a politically neutral sentiment, eventually extremized by experiences of "oppression, discrimination, and traumas of colonialism and displacement through migration"⁶⁸ among others.

After being defeated by the communist party in mainland China, in 1949, the Guomindang (國民黨) nationalist government (together with at least one million civilians) relocated to the island and implemented Martial Law, starting the period known as the 'White Terror' (*baise kongbu* 白色恐怖): an era of control and repression, particularly targeting the Aboriginal population. The nationalist martial law will endure 38 years, earning the qualification as "the longest imposition of martial law by a regime anywhere in the world"⁶⁹. If these four decades of martial law may already seem significant, the gravity of the situation becomes even more evident when comparing Taiwanese history with that of the West. Sure enough, what is perceived as the "golden age" of artistic and cultural development in the West, aligns on the Taiwanese timeline with an age of disheartening cultural aridity, as observed by Hung Chien-chao:

Taiwan has been often criticized as a cultural desert. It was true, particularly in the two decades after its retrocession to China. [...] After 1945 Mandarin replaced Japanese as the official language on Taiwan. [...] The language barrier greatly hampered their creative activities.⁷⁰

Furthermore, the harsh censorship after 2:28 and the persecution of numerous Taiwanese intellectuals resulted in the suppression of indigenous voices. Consequently, the literary landscape in Taiwan during the 1950s was controlled by writers from mainland China who came to Taiwan with the Kuomintang (KMT) in 1949.⁷¹ From 1945 on, and especially after 1949, the island experienced the cultural phenomenon of *quribenhua* 去日本化 "de-nipponization". The project was implemented through an educational curriculum aimed at instilling Chinese patriotism "to reshape Taiwan's

⁶⁷ Ibid. p. 237-238

⁶⁸ CHEN Lingchei Letty, "When does 'diaspora' end and 'Sinophone' begin?", in *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 18 No. 1, 2015, pp. 52-66, p. 64

⁶⁹ James MULVENON, *A Poverty of riches: new challenges and opportunities in PLA research*, Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2003, p.172

⁷⁰ HUNG Chien-Chao, *A history of Taiwan*, Rimini: Il cerchio, 2000, p. 320

⁷¹ Ibidem.

political and cultural identity from a multi-ethnic periphery of imperial China separated from the mainland by Japanese colonization to the center of “true,” modern Chinese civilization.”⁷² People born in Taiwan who had never visited China not only experienced a sudden shift in the official language from Japanese to Chinese; more significantly, this transition required not just a linguistic adjustment but also a shift from a Japanese *forma mentis* to a Chinese one. They were taught using teaching materials related to Chinese history and geography as if they were living on the mainland, which resulted in them learning very little about their home island. This was because Kuomintang rule was founded on the idea that Taiwan was the true political and cultural representative of modern China, forged by Sun Yat-sen and the 1911 revolution: as such, it had to function as “the custodian of Chinese culture”⁷³. The KMT promoted a form of orthodox, Chinese gentry culture and represented it as a national culture – the culture of all Chinese.⁷⁴ This imposed ideology corresponds to Hobsbawm’s (1983) suggestion of ‘invented tradition’ for nationhood: “It was an attempt to force a population to imagine a nation for themselves.”⁷⁵ The fact that the reality people experienced didn’t match the lessons they were taught in school, led to a feeling of betrayal which resulted in a degree of hostility towards the KMT. Once again, mirroring a pattern that previously occurred during the era of Japanese rule, the KMT inadvertently boosted people’s identity as Taiwanese rather than fostering a deeper identity as Chinese.⁷⁶

The year 1971 was a turning point for identitarian and cultural development, since the Republic of China, which was a founding member of the UN⁷⁷, was expelled from both the United Nations Security Council and General Assembly, and its seat was substituted with People’s Republic of China.⁷⁸ Since then, the government faced growing diplomatic isolation that persists to the present

⁷² Malcolm COOK, “Taiwan’s Identity Challenge” in *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*, vol.25, no. 2, 2005, p. 85

⁷³ HUNG Chien-Chao, *A history of Taiwan*, Rimini: Il cerchio, 2000, p. 285

⁷⁴ Alan M. WACHMAN, *Taiwan: National Identity and Democratization*, New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 82

⁷⁵ LAI Meng-Yu, *Taiwanese Identity and the Performing Arts: the Development of Programming at the National Performing Arts Centre*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of London, Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies, 2020, p. 76

⁷⁶ Alan M. WACHMAN, *Taiwan: National Identity and Democratization*, New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 122

⁷⁷ “During the Cold War, Taiwan’s anti-communist credentials garnered it strong external support and guaranteed its autonomous existence as an international actor” Malcolm COOK, “Taiwan’s Identity Challenge” in *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*, vol.25, no. 2, 2005, p. 84

⁷⁸ The USA abstained from this vote, but 1972 through Nixon’s visit to PRC, it explicitly transferred official recognition from Taiwan to China and acknowledged Beijing’s One China principle.

day. This shift in international perception not only meant a significant loss of face but, given that the KMT had grounded its legitimacy on the claim to represent all of China, it most importantly undermined the foundational ideology of the ruling nationalist party.⁷⁹ Unexpectedly, this abrupt *volte-face* led to a positive outcome: indeed what happened next can be recognized as the initial stage of Taiwan's *awakening* process. In the words of Felix Schoeber: "As the ideological tenets of legitimacy crumbled, the government decided to turn its attention towards the island and to solidify its power there."⁸⁰ Both politics and culture changed profoundly: native Taiwanese for the first time were allowed into the highest political ranks, leading to an automatic process of "desinicization" (*quzhongguohua* 去中国化) of the island, and fostering the exploration of a *Taiwan-based knowledge* and a *Taiwan-centered history*.⁸¹ It was precisely starting from 1971 that the fourth and last big identity shift brought Taiwan to what it is nowadays: after passing from being Aborigine to being Han, from being Han to being Japanese, and then to being Chinese again, finally Taiwan began to consider itself simply Taiwanese. This resulted in a sudden change of perspective among Taiwanese inhabitants: the island had suddenly gone from being temporary accommodation to home.⁸² No longer able to present themselves as authentic representatives of China, they naturally redirected their attention to the territory they inhabited, which became infused with fascination and significance.⁸³ Paradoxically the de-recognition of Taiwan conferred legitimacy to the existence of a *separate* Taiwanese identity⁸⁴,

⁷⁹ Felix SCHOEBER, *Modernity, nationalism and global marginalization: representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art exhibition. The Taipei fine arts museum and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice 1984-2009*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Westminster, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, 2014, p. 57

⁸⁰ Ibidem.

⁸¹ LAI Meng-Yu, *Taiwanese Identity and the Performing Arts: the Development of Programming at the National Performing Arts Centre*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of London, Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies, 2020, p. 78

⁸² Elisabetta ZERBINATTI, *Narrarsi attraverso l'arte: Il Padiglione Taiwan a Venezia come esempio di diplomazia culturale 2015-2017*, master thesis submitted to Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Faculty of Language and Civilisation of Asia and Mediterranean Africa, 2017, p. 28

⁸³ Ibid. p. 49

⁸⁴ Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden, BRILL, 2018, p. 9

and it engendered not only a ‘cultural attitude of self-reliance’⁸⁵ but also the surfacing of ‘ethnic awareness’.⁸⁶

The broader arts scene, particularly in literature, experienced even more profound transformations. In the 1970s, numerous local poets shifted their focus from writing about the mainland to exploring themes related to Taiwan. This shift, known as the “Native Soil movement” (*xiangtu wenxue* 鄉土文學), allowed artists to delve into the realities of Taiwanese life and society. Nativists strongly believed that meaningful modernization should be grounded in local society, and “criticized the blind admiration and slavish imitation of Western cultural models, exhorting their compatriots to show more respect for their indigenous cultural heritage, as well as greater concern for domestic social issues.”⁸⁷ As one would expect, this movement had a significant impact on shaping Taiwanese identity, and it was “closely linked to the *dangwai* 黨外 “Tangwai” or “outside the party” movement, a powerful union among independent politicians which in 1986 culminated in the foundation of the first democratic opposition party, the Democratic Progress Party or DPP”⁸⁸, whose Chinese name is *minzhu jinbu dang* 民主進步黨.

The country began to promote individual freedoms and liberties and improve human rights; a political opposition already well-engineered evolved also thanks to the mushrooming of political magazines, such as *Formosa* (*Meilidao* 美麗島) Magazine. In 1986 the president at the time, Chiang Ching-kuo (蔣經國)⁸⁹, decided not to crack down on the opposition party, allowing what can be defined as “the first two-party election ever held among Chinese people”, including Singapore, Hong

⁸⁵ Ibidem.

⁸⁶ Term used by Xiao Qiongrui (蕭瓊瑞), in XIAO Qiongrui, *The Fifth Moon and Eastern Art Groups: The Development of the Chinese Artistic Modernization Movement in Postwar Taiwan, 1945-1970* [*Wuyue yu Dongfang: Zhongguo meishu xiandaihua yundong zai zhanhou Taiwan de fazhan, 1945-1970* 五月與東方：中國美術現代化運動在戰後台灣的發展 1945 -1970], Taipei: Dongda Chubanshe 東大出版社, 1991, p. 64

⁸⁷ HUNG Chien-Chao, *A history of Taiwan*, Rimini: Il cerchio, 2000, p. 320

⁸⁸ Felix SCHOEBER, *Modernity, nationalism and global marginalization: representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art exhibition. The Taipei fine arts museum and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice 1984-2009*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Westminster, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, 2014, p. 54

⁸⁹ Son of Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石), after Chiang Kai-shek died in 1975, “political direction in Taiwan began passing to a young elite with different perspectives [...] their background was obviously on Taiwan and its economic modernization as opposed to a military and ideological security [...] With the passing of the old guard and the rise to the very top positions of those who were responsible for Taiwan’s social and economic progress, the way was open for further political modernization.” HUNG Chien-Chao, *A history of Taiwan*, Rimini: Il cerchio, 2000, p. 295

Kong, and PRC.⁹⁰ This decision paved the way for the democratization of Taiwan and the subsequent lifting of martial law in the following year. Democratization allowed local governments to assume more control, while strikes and political demonstrations were allowed: free speech, free assembly and freedom of the press were all novelties to the island, after forty years of censorship and ideological control.

Whether regrettably or fortunately, attaining freedom of thought also means gaining awareness of the current challenges and past wounds that exist. As this is often the case in life, so it was for Taiwan, as Wachman points out: “as repression gave way to liberty, problems that reflected conflicting notions of identity became more nettlesome.”⁹¹ When in 1993 Taiwanese passport holders were allowed to travel to China, it was the first time for many people to see China with their own eyes. They experienced firsthand that the nation they had been instructed to identify with for many years had little resemblance to their actual living environment.

Indeed, because of the “backwardness and social chaos resulting from the Cultural Revolution”⁹², many of the Confucian values studied in books were better preserved in Taiwan than on the mainland; working conditions, living standards, economic vitality, and infrastructure all proved to be disappointing if compared to Taiwan. This fostered a sense of disappointment and frustration in the Mainlanders, who couldn’t find the motherland they left years before, and in general the realization among many individuals that they belonged to a distinct entity⁹³, an entity that proved to be more successful, prosperous, and open politically. During the 1980s and 1990s, Taiwan underwent an economic boom, fostering a sense of national identity that was increasingly *fierce* and *inclusive*. The 90s also saw the spread of “Taiwan studies fever”, which can be seen as both a cause and a consequence of the recent identitarian awareness: “Taiwan’s history, culture and people for the first time were subjects of analysis.”⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Ibid. p. 304

⁹¹ Alan M. WACHMAN, *Taiwan: National Identity and Democratization*, New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 9

⁹² CHEN Lingchei Letty, “When does ‘diaspora’ end and ‘Sinophone’ begin?”, in *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 18 No. 1, 2015, pp. 52-66, p. 55

⁹³ See HARRISON Mark, “Writing Taiwan’s nationhood: Language, politics, history”, in SHIH F., THOMPSON S., TREMLETT P. (Eds), *Re-writing Culture in Taiwan*, London: Routledge, 2011, pp. 123-128

⁹⁴ Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden, BRILL, 2018, p. 2

During the mid-1990s this virtuous circle of events such as democratization, economic modernization and the lifting of martial law brought naturally to the upsurge of *political* and *cultural nationalism* (which will be examined better in Chapter 3). At that time the quest for identity revolved around a postcolonial desire to recover and reclaim Taiwan's history and identity, and to be recognized by the international community as a democratic and culturally pluralistic nation, as distinct from a Chinese province.⁹⁵ To phrase it with Hung Chien-chao's words "The people in Taiwan – healthier and better fed, housed and educated in modern society – do not want to surrender their hard-earned freedom, the passion for which has been one of the cardinal characteristics of the islanders throughout the centuries."⁹⁶ During this period, the fundamental concept of *bentuyishi* 本土意識, translated as "Taiwan consciousness"⁹⁷, emerged. This concept carries a nuanced set of meanings, but for the narrative will be here essentially summarized through Sophie McIntyre's words as "a person's awareness of the uniqueness of Taiwan's culture and history, [...] employed by local artists to convey their sense of belonging to Taiwan."⁹⁸ Taiwanese people recognized a need for the rehabilitation of indigenous traditions that were perceived to have been suppressed or censored during the 38 years of martial law. The icons of *Taiwanese-ness*, represented in Taiwanese folk art, images of indigenous beliefs in the temples, aboriginal art and music, as well as films about Taiwanese contemporary life have been promoted by the media since the 1990s and developed as an essential part of popular culture.⁹⁹ This sense of pride represents a significant transformation, particularly when considering that, under nationalist rule of the 1950s Taiwanese came to feel that their dialect, literature, poetry, songs, and drama were all inferior to Mandarin and the cultural works of the mainland.¹⁰⁰

The recent *taiwanization* process reached its climax throughout the years of Lee Teng-hui's (李登輝)¹⁰¹ presidency (1988-2000). In 1993 he proposed the ideas of "the community of life" and

⁹⁵ Ibidem.

⁹⁶ HUNG Chien-Chao, *A history of Taiwan*, Rimini: Il cerchio, 2000, preface

⁹⁷ Also translated as "native consciousness, homeland consciousness" (lit. "awareness of this earth"), often used as a catchphrase in the period after the Taiwan Strait crisis (1995-96).

⁹⁸ Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden, BRILL, 2018, p. 7

⁹⁹ TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, pp. 285-286

¹⁰⁰ Alan M. WACHMAN, *Taiwan: National Identity and Democratization*, New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 108

¹⁰¹ First native-born Taiwanese president, important, among other factors, for the promulgation of "Guidelines for National Unification", still accepted today. He was the first leader of Taiwan to promote Taiwan's new democracy and

“New Taiwanese”¹⁰², which expanded the definition of Taiwanese by including all of its ethnic groups in Taiwan in a geopolitical sense. The thesis will hereby report part of the speech held by Lee Teng-hui in 1998, on the day before Retrocession Day:

All of us who grow and live on this soil today are Taiwanese people, whether we be aborigenes or descendants of the aborigenes or descendants of the immigrants from the mainland who came over centuries or decades ago. We all have made equal contributions to Taiwan’s developments in the past, and share a common responsibility for Taiwan’s future.¹⁰³

By considering Taiwan as a whole internally while juxtaposing it with China on the outside¹⁰⁴, Taiwan was able to create a new national identity in which everyone who lived in Taiwan was Taiwanese. In 1990, Lee pardoned all political dissidents in jail and in 1995 he erected a memorial to the 228 Incident, for the first time formally apologizing in the name of the government. This action “simultaneously bade farewell to the tragic nostalgia of Taiwan and also implied the importance of Taiwan’s history, which further cultivated an imagined cultural community.”¹⁰⁵

From a cultural perspective, this period is equally intriguing. In describing it, the present thesis will borrow the words of Hung Chien-chao:

Taiwan has undergone an interpretative turn in terms of national identity and critical multiculturalism in the 1990s. [...] As a result, Taiwanese literature of the 1990s tends to use mixed genres and multilingual devices, drawing on a wide range of global/local cultural codes, idioms, and traditions, to express the fluid, albeit disoriented, structure of feelings.¹⁰⁶

respect for the rule of law, and move away from the unification goal, causing an important shift of power from *waishengren* to *benshengren*. Malcolm COOK, “Taiwan’s Identity Challenge” in *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*, vol.25, no. 2, 2005, p. 87

¹⁰² Defined by Lee as “anyone who lives in and loves Taiwan” LEE Teng-hui, *The Road to Democracy; Taiwan’s Pursuit of Identity*, Sanbancho, Tokyo: PHP Institute, 1999, p. 200

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* p. 193

¹⁰⁴ LU Pei-Yi, “Exhibition as Identity Making: Environmental Art (1994) and Resurgence On the Tamshui River (1995)” in *Taiwan as Case Studies*, Conference Paper, The 34th World Congress of Art History (CIHA), China Central Academy Of Fine Arts, Beijing, 2016.9.15-21 (not yet published), p. 3

¹⁰⁵ *Ibidem.*

¹⁰⁶ HUNG Chien-Chao, *A history of Taiwan*, Rimini: Il cerchio, 2000, p. 321

By the beginning of the twenty-first century Taiwan had already achieved industrialization and democratization, two pillars of modernity.¹⁰⁷ Taiwan's leadership has moved from moral authority as the basis of legitimacy to "performance legitimacy"¹⁰⁸ – legitimacy based on the delivery of political goods. Since 2000, the DPP has leveraged executive power to formalize Taiwan's distinct and autonomous identity, dissociating it from China.¹⁰⁹ Nowadays, the stance favoring reunification is a minority position within the opposition, lacking significant institutional support within the Taiwanese state.¹¹⁰ Taiwan is now characterized by a demanding civil society and a participatory political culture. It stands out in Asia for its cosmopolitan lifestyle and wholesome community values, and it serves as a lighthouse guiding numerous states amid their democratization process.

This section concludes here the exploration of shifts in Taiwanese identity and cultural transformations. It is curious to note that as we progress toward more contemporary periods on the timeline, the changes become increasingly spontaneous. Compared to the eras of Japanese and European colonization, wherein change was brought about through the force of political subjugation, in recent history, that is to say after democracy, "domestic change is endogenous, popular and not imposed by an alien authoritarian regime."¹¹¹ The system by which "mainlanders ruled the docile and apolitical Taiwanese population"¹¹² has been dismantled: now Taiwan is Taiwan, and it is sure and proud to be so. With Taiwan's *awakening* and the development of national consciousness, the driving force of change finally moves into the island itself, within the consciousness of the people who inhabit it, essentially shifting to the bottom of the society. From a top-down approach – *autocratic past*, culture and identity handed down from foreign dominators to people – the system switched to a bottom-up one – *democratic present*, culture and identity rising from people and acknowledged in government decisions. We will see in the next Chapter how this exact shift is possibly even more true for the artworld.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. p. 329

¹⁰⁸ Alan M. WACHMAN, *Taiwan: National Identity and Democratization*, New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 257

¹⁰⁹ Malcolm COOK, "Taiwan's Identity Challenge" in *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*, vol.25, no. 2, 2005, pp. 83-92, p. 87

¹¹⁰ Ibidem. This assertion is also substantiated by recent data obtained from the Election Study Center of National Chengchi University <https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/PageDoc/Detail?fid=7801&id=6963>, accessed 18 December 2023

¹¹¹ Malcolm COOK, "Taiwan's Identity Challenge" in *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*, vol.25, no. 2, 2005, p. 87

¹¹² HUNG Chien-Chao, *A history of Taiwan*, Rimini: Il cerchio, 2000, p. 320

1.5 Narratives of unfolding

The knowledge of the past is essential to the comprehension of the present. For this reason, the author of the thesis deemed it necessary to provide a brief historical context in the previous section. However, one must bear in mind that the past is not always univocal, as Edward Shils points out in “Tradition” (1981):

There are at least two pasts. One is the sequence of occurred events [...] There is another past. This is the *perceived past*. This is a much more plastic thing, more capable of being retrospectively reformed by human beings living in the present.¹¹³

Especially in the Taiwanese context, this sentence appears to be particularly true. The forthcoming analysis will elucidate how history can be subject to reinterpretations and adjustments, and can be tailored to align with specific ideological or narrative frameworks, leading to the construction of what has been termed “Postmemory” (Hirsch, 2001) or “Prosthetic memory” (Landsberg, 2004).

Marianne Hirsch in her definition of *postmemory* emphasizes its potential powerfulness, since “its connection to its object of source is mediated not through *recollection* but through *representation*, *projection*, and *creation*.”¹¹⁴ Landsberg agrees with the ductile nature of this form of memory, to the point of defining *prosthetic memory* as “not natural, not the product of lived experience...but derived from engagement with a *mediated representation*.”¹¹⁵ Significantly, both definitions prominently feature the concept of ‘representation.’ This notion of ‘representation’ may manifest through the employment of more than one strategy. Letty Chen Lingchei, for instance, individuated the various sources of mass media – “films, television, the internet, visiting museums, reading novels, [...] traditional ethnic rituals, customs, and habits”¹¹⁶ – as the favorable channels for the creation of prosthetic memory. I argue, in general, and especially within the Taiwanese context, that few strategies are as successful in effectively ‘representing’ something as visual arts.

The subsequent chapters of this thesis will aim to demonstrate how visual arts have been instrumentalized by various actors to craft divergent historical narratives of unfolding, thus artificially creating a new form of memory, often finalized at political legitimization. Indeed, the process of

¹¹³ Edward SHILS, *Tradition*, London & Boston: Faber and Faber, 1981, p. 195. Emphasis is mine.

¹¹⁴ Marianne HIRSCH (2001), cited in CHEN Lingchei Letty, “When does ‘diaspora’ end and ‘Sinophone’ begin?”, in *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 18 No. 1, 2015, p. 58. Emphasis is mine.

¹¹⁵ Alison LANDSBERG (2004), cited in *Ibid.* pp. 58-59. Emphasis is mine.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 54

manipulating the past is rarely innocent; on the contrary, as Chen points out: “Particularly true to building and holding together the Sinophone sphere are the ethical relations and the political alliances that prosthetic memory is able to generate.”¹¹⁷

The term “narratives of unfolding” was coined by Melissa Brown, and most of this section is founded upon her book *Is Taiwan Chinese?: the Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing Identities* (2004). In her work, Brown extensively explores the “border between Han and non-Han” through the study of three villages on the east coast of Taiwan. By using an anthropological lens, she provides a fresh viewpoint on the *Taiwan issue*.

The primary objective of this section is to comprehend the basic concept of “narratives of unfolding”. For this reason, the section will not exhaustively explain national narratives or historical events. For a more comprehensive exploration of events and in-depth analysis of the topic, readers are referred to the book mentioned above.

It is common to portray national and ethnic identities as automatic, predetermined characteristics given to an individual on the base of the birthplace. In practical terms, however, *identities must be negotiated*. People’s identities are forged by their interactions with the social, cultural, and political contexts in which they live and come from.¹¹⁸ Melissa Brown characterizes this *experimental nature of identity* by stating that:

The specific identities that form for individuals are the negotiated product of the interaction between what people claim for themselves and what others allow them to claim.¹¹⁹

People and entities in positions of social power, including governments and leaders, hide the fluidity of these concepts by crafting narratives of unfolding.¹²⁰ In the words of Yang Wen-I (羊文漪), they *re-arrange, reshape, negotiate* and *re-construct* traditions¹²¹ to further specific political agendas.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. p. 64

¹¹⁸ Melissa J. BROWN, *Is Taiwan Chinese?: the Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing identities*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004, p. 13

¹¹⁹ Ibid. p. 14

¹²⁰ Ibid. p. 5

¹²¹ “Fragmentized, displaced, and segmented as they often appear, traditions can serve as raw materials for creative purposes, to be re-arranged, re-shaped, negotiated and re-constructed.” in YANG Wen-I, *Negotiating Traditions: Taiwanese*

Especially true for the nationalist, there is the tendency to view history “as a grab-bag from which he instinctively selects past themes that suit his present purpose.”¹²² This urge to manipulate the cultural meanings of past events, or as Melissa Brown phrases it, “to ideologically construct identity in terms of *culture* and *ancestry*”¹²³, stems from the assumption that culture and ancestry confer *antiquity* to the narrative, and antiquity seems a reasonable measure of *authenticity*.¹²⁴ The utilization of antiquity as a validating attribute is an inherent inclination among humans, observed globally. However, it is notably distinctive within Chinese culture due to its Confucian legacy. Chinese culture tends to romanticize the past as an era of perfection and employs its virtues as a benchmark for assessing contemporary phenomena, whether they be cultural artifacts, human conduct, or otherwise.¹²⁵

To prevent becoming overly theoretical, and to gain a clear understanding of the concept of “narratives of unfolding”, the following passage will provide concrete examples by presenting People’s Republic of China and Taiwan’s respective national narratives. The Chinese narrative serves to demonstrate how perspectives can be altered and reinterpreted, and how the same historical events can be viewed oppositely on opposite sides of the Taiwan Strait. Nevertheless, our primary focus lies on the Taiwanese narrative. Understanding the Taiwanese narrative is crucial for analyzing and identifying its manifestations in artworks and curatorial decisions at international exhibitions (this analysis will be the focus of Chapter 3, titled “Cultural Nationalism and other forms of institutional violence”). Consequently, our attention will be directed more towards the narrative of the island.

Given the fact that identity is based on social experience, both economic and political, and that social experience doesn’t have to be a lived experience but can also be passed down from one generation to another¹²⁶, Taiwan is progressively distancing itself from China. Since 1945 the socio-

Art since the 1980s, PhD thesis discussed at the Ruperto-Carola University of Heidelberg, Faculty of Philosophy and History, 2002, p. 164

¹²² Dankwart A. RUSTOW, *A World of Nations: Problems of Political Modernization*, Washington D. C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1967, p. 41

¹²³ Melissa J. BROWN, *Is Taiwan Chinese?: the Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing identities*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004, p. 2

¹²⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹²⁵ Even within the realm of art, while the Western tradition has periodically embraced breaks from tradition (evidenced by movements such as the avant-gardes), in China, artworks that draw inspiration from classical antiquity continue to be esteemed as aesthetically and morally superior.

¹²⁶ Melissa J. BROWN, *Is Taiwan Chinese?: the Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing identities*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004, p. 236

political experience between people in Taiwan and China started to diverge, and the longer Taiwan remains a democracy, the less actual social basis there is for reunification.¹²⁷ Because of this, even if it is not culture and ancestry that have a major influence on people's sense of identity/belonging and on individual choice of belonging or departing, China still finds it necessary to portray Taiwan in a specific manner to maintain (what appears to be) an accepted dominant position. In other words, as Taiwanese democracy matures, narratives from the past become increasingly crucial to sustaining cultural and sociopolitical Han hegemony.

The PRC's national narrative depicts China as a solid empire, that has been in existence for 5000 years. This emphasis on the millenary history of the country reflects the ongoing practice in China of using the past to justify the present.¹²⁸ According to Chinese history, Taiwan was Chinese territory from ancient times, even the aborigines are referred to as 'Chinese people', aligning with the new conception of China as a 'multi-ethnic nation'¹²⁹ (*Tongyi duomingzu de guojia* 统一多民族国家¹³⁰). This rhetoric forwarded by the communist party can be seen as a legacy of China's Han Imperialism (*da han zhuyi* 大汉主义), which is the presumption that Han civilization stood between heaven and barbarian non-Han, and which essentially serves as the justification for Han political and demographic dominance as something natural and predetermined.¹³¹ The majority of people in China don't have direct experience of Taiwan, so the *Chinese Communist Party (CCP)* portrays Taiwan in their eyes as the last piece of China ripped away by foreign imperialists and accepted by corrupt domestic regimes, that has not been returned yet. In this manner, the government employs the rhetoric

¹²⁷ Ibid. p. 245

¹²⁸ The value of antiquity as a validating criterion extends across various domains: it is employed to determine aesthetic value and moral correctness. Chinese philosophy also displays reverence for antiquity as the golden age of human wisdom and goodness.

¹²⁹ “中国是一个团结统一的多民族国家。在中国广大的土地上，居住着 56 个民族，它们共同组成了中华民族大家庭。在中国历史发展中，各民族共同发展和文化，共同反抗阶级压迫和抵御外来侵略，为缔造和发展统一的多民族国家作出了自己的贡献。” “China is a united, multi-ethnic country. On the vast territory of China, there are 56 ethnic groups, which together form the great family of the Chinese nation. In the course of China's historical development, the various ethnic groups have jointly developed their economies and cultures, resisted class oppression and defended themselves against foreign aggression, and made their own contributions to the creation and development of a united, multi-ethnic State.” https://www.gov.cn/test/2005-06/24/content_9200.htm, accessed 23 January 2024

¹³⁰ In discussing the rhetoric employed by the PRC, the author of this thesis chose to reference the simplified version of Chinese characters.

¹³¹ The PRC's narrative of unfolding is explained in Melissa J. BROWN, *Is Taiwan Chinese?: the Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing identities*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004, pp. 6-7

of the “Century of Humiliation”¹³² (*Bainian guochi* 百年国耻) as a tool to leverage the real experiences of the Chinese population.¹³³ Currently, Xi Jinping continues to foster the narrative asserting that all Chinese people, irrespective of ethnicity, are united by cultural bonds that trace back to earlier than the first emperors, thus “crafting a story – retold in museums, on television shows and in journals – that casts his authoritarian, centralizing agenda as a fulfillment of values rooted in antiquity.”¹³⁴

Moving on to the other side of the Strait, narratives of unfolding in Taiwan claim that Taiwanese people are a blend of Han and aborigines, both genetically and culturally, and highlight the influences of Japanese and European rule in their cultural formation.¹³⁵ The island distinguishes itself from China primarily by emphasizing the role of the aborigines: aborigine contributions to Taiwanese culture are portrayed as substantial enough to differentiate Taiwanese identity from Chinese, with Taiwan’s ethnocultural diversity constituting the foundation for the pursuit of independence.¹³⁶ The question of Austronesian origins was somehow instrumentalized by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and other pro-independence movements, it has become “fundamental in nationalist discourse in terms of legitimizing its claim to national sovereignty”¹³⁷ or, as Edward Vickers states:

The very existence of the aborigines, their ethnic, linguistic, and cultural similarity to Polynesian peoples of the Pacific rather than to Chinese, and the links – historic and

¹³² The word refers to the historical period in Chinese history that started with the First Opium War (1839–1842) and ended in 1945 with China's admission as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and establishment as a major power. The word connotes all the humiliations and subjugations endured, as well as the concessions given to foreign imperialist forces, and is thus associated with anti-Western and anti-Japanese sentiments in China.

¹³³ Melissa J. BROWN, *Is Taiwan Chinese?: the Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing identities*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004, p. 244

¹³⁴ Chris BUCKLEY, Vivian WANG & Joy DONG, “One Nation Under Xi: How China’s Leader Is Remaking Its Identity”, in *The New York Times*, Oct. 11, 2022

¹³⁵ Melissa J. BROWN, *Is Taiwan Chinese?: the Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing identities*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004, p. 243

¹³⁶ *Ibid.* op. cit.

¹³⁷ Sophie McINTYRE, “Navigating ‘Austronesia’: Contemporary indigenous art from Taiwan and the Pacific”, in *Art Monthly Australia*, vol. 232, 2010.8, p. 45

prehistoric – between them [...] all serve to underline Taiwan’s ethno-cultural distinctiveness, and the tenuous nature of China’s historical claim on this island.¹³⁸

It is important to highlight that the narrative just explained represents the most recent version. In fact, Taiwan has undergone multiple narrative shifts throughout its history, and this trend persists today. The constant alternation between the Nationalist Party and the Democratic Progressive Party often results in a change in narrative every few years (electoral outcomes significantly influence the course of historical narratives). This situation can be stressful and disorienting, particularly for those directly involved in the narrative. Indigenous people in Taiwan have experienced exploitation and subsequent assimilation with the Han, resulting in the loss of their distinctive characteristics and in an internalized sense of shame regarding their original identity. Currently, they have gained recognition and a renewed sense of dignity¹³⁹. However, the initiative to reclassify these communities as Aboriginal came from *outsiders*. As explained in detail in Melissa Brown’s study, the villages themselves “wanted no part in a political agenda (to declare Taiwan’s independence from China).”¹⁴⁰

In order to demonstrate how the narrative can shift and the extent to which it affects the legitimacy of one power over another, the adoption of one foreign policy strategy over another, and other issues, we will be looking at two examples of how Taiwanese history has been rewritten by the various ruling powers in recent years.

First, in late 2004, the DPP, the ruling party at the time, undertook a significant revision to the domestic history to disassociate Taiwan from its historical ties to China. Specifically, the Ministry of Education’s draft outline for 2006 history courses removed Sun Yat-sen and the 1911 Revolution from the Taiwan (domestic) history course and placed it in the Chinese (foreign) history course.¹⁴¹ It is

¹³⁸ Edward VICKERS, “Re-writing Museums in Taiwan”, chapter in SHIH Fang-long, Stuart THOMPSON & TREMLETT Paul-Francois (Eds), *Re-writing Culture in Taiwan*, Oxon: Routledge, 2009, p. 92

¹³⁹ Despite the recent reclassification, the present situation remains disheartening: aboriginal communities are facing a population decline, accompanied by challenges such as high rates of alcoholism and unemployment, contributing to their marginalization. They have a marginal status in contemporary society and virtually no influence as a group on national politics.

¹⁴⁰ Melissa J. BROWN, *Is Taiwan Chinese?: the Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing identities*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004, p. 126

¹⁴¹ CHUNG Lawrence, “Taiwan Rewrites History Books”, in *Straits Times*, 11 November 2004, p. 6

crucial to recognize that merely a decade prior, these very events were presented as the founding events of Taiwan's modern history.¹⁴²

Then, chameleon-like, as the ruling power changes history accordingly changes too. The year 2008 witnessed the KMT return to power, with Ma Ying-jeou 馬英九¹⁴³ assuming the role of the nation's representative leader. Ma challenged the "Four Hundred Years of Tragedy" narrative and emphasized the contributions of Qing administrators and ROC leaders to Taiwan's modernization. He also minimized the role of the Japanese and criticized the DPP's version of nativization as a chauvinistic and divisive attempt at desinicizing Taiwan.¹⁴⁴ After coming to power, Ma implemented several measures intended to validate the course of action that the political party he represented intended to follow. In his inaugural address, he described the people on both sides of the Strait as parts of a *Zhonghua minzu* (中華民族), where the concept of *minzu* referred to a common racial and cultural identity; he renamed Taiwan Post (Taiwan's mail service) China Post, he also revived the traditional KMT discourse on the need to enhance Confucian ethics.¹⁴⁵ Nevertheless, one of the most significant and impactful measures, which did not go unnoticed by the students' movements¹⁴⁶, was the re-writing of school textbooks, through which he "emphasized the continuity between today's Taiwan and the old ROC in terms of institutions and territories, insisting on the legal definition of the ROC as the mainland plus Taiwan. He also asserted the existence of solely 'one China.'"¹⁴⁷ Once again, in 2016, with Tsai Ing-wen and the DPP's victory in the presidential elections, the general

¹⁴² Malcolm COOK, "Taiwan's Identity Challenge" in *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*, vol.25, no. 2, 2005, pp. 83-92, pp. 89-90

¹⁴³ "Under President Ma, who headed Taiwan's government from 2008 to 2016, Taiwan had forged closer ties with mainland China. [...] In Singapore in November 2015, Ma and Xi Jinping held the first-ever meeting between the leaders of the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China." Mark HARRISON, "Purifying the body politic in Taiwan", Chapter in DAVIES G., GOLDKORN J. & TOMBA L. (Eds), *Pollution*, Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2016, p. 254

¹⁴⁴ Jean-Pierre CABESTAN, "Changing Identities in Taiwan under Ma Ying-jeou", in DITTMER Lowell (Ed.), *Taiwan and China: Fitful Embrace*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2017, pp. 42-60, p. 48

¹⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁶ "Students mobilised again in July 2015 to protest changes to high school history textbooks proposed by the Ministry of Education. The protesters were angered by changes to the language and terminology with which the textbooks discussed key events in Taiwan's history, such as the period of Japanese colonial rule." In HARRISON Mark, "Purifying the body politic in Taiwan", Chapter in DAVIES G., GOLDKORN J. & TOMBA L. (Eds), *Pollution*, Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2016, p. 255

¹⁴⁷ Jean-Pierre CABESTAN, "Changing Identities in Taiwan under Ma Ying-jeou", in *Taiwan and China: Fitful Embrace*, Edited by Lowell Dittmer, Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2017, p. 48

narrative and the “*sense of the historical canvas*”¹⁴⁸ returned to what it was before Ma Ying-jeou.¹⁴⁹ These measures, ranging from the revision of historical events in textbooks, the rhetoric employed in political discourse to the use of specific denominations, and the reinstatement of ancient morals, exert a profound influence on society and shape perceptions of what is deemed morally acceptable or objectionable.

In conclusion, divergent narratives of unfolding gave birth to two different *rhetorically claimed basis of identities*¹⁵⁰ in China and Taiwan. As Brown explains, both actual identities and ideological claims influence the actions of people, but the closer ideologies are to actual identities, the more effective they are in motivating people.¹⁵¹ Where the cultural meanings advanced by narratives of unfolding do not correspond to existing cultural models and actual social experiences, the reaction to them is much more complex and potentially resistant.¹⁵² In Taiwan, ideological claims about identity generally come into line with people’s actual identities, as clearly visible from the data about Taiwanese perceived self-identity from the latest National Chengchi University Election Study Center poll shown in the previous section.¹⁵³

Conclusions

In this initial chapter, the present thesis has elucidated the issue of Taiwanese identity. Through an examination of Taiwanese history, the trajectory has been traced from a nation devoid of a clear identity or historical narrative with an uncertain future to the establishment of an “abstract community of history and destiny.”¹⁵⁴ Taiwan, “by creating a widespread awareness of the myths, history and linguistic traditions of the community, succeeded in substantiating and crystallizing the idea of an

¹⁴⁸ Term used in C. Spivak GAYATRI, “Can the subaltern speak?”, Chapter in WILLIAMS P. & CHRISMAN L. (Eds), *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, pp. 66-111, p. 76

¹⁴⁹ For further information the reader can refer to Jean-Pierre CABESTAN, “Changing Identities in Taiwan under Ma Ying-jeou”, in *Taiwan and China: Fitful Embrace*, Edited by Lowell Dittmer, Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2017, pp. 51-52

¹⁵⁰ Term used by Melissa J. BROWN in *Is Taiwan Chinese?: the Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing identities*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004, p. 242

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.* p. 12

¹⁵² *Ibid.* p. 235

¹⁵³ <https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/PageDoc/Detail?fid=7800&id=6961>, accessed on 14 December 2023

¹⁵⁴ Anthony D. SMITH, *National Identity*, London: Penguin Books, 1991, p. 78

ethnic nation in the minds of most members.”¹⁵⁵ At the present day, despite clear trends in identity perception, the challenge of delineating who the “real Taiwanese” are, is still far from reaching a solution. However, it is undeniable that Taiwan possesses distinctive cultural characteristics and has developed a specific *taste* and *aesthetic* over time. The subsequent chapter will aim to explore this latter aspect in greater detail.

The present work will proceed to examine how the Taiwanese world of art, during the course of history, *represented* the island’s intricate identity complex. We will see why, in this context, two senses of representation are being run together: representation as “speaking for” – as in politics – and representation as “re-presentation” – as in art or philosophy.¹⁵⁶ Upcoming chapters will shed light on how, in the realm of art, Taiwanese identity has been manifested through unique perspectives, themes, and forms of artistic expression drawing inspiration from the island’s rich history, culture, and sociopolitical context. It will be pointed out that the contribution of artistic practice extends far beyond mere *representation*: it also has an active role in the *construction* process. Indeed, Taiwanese artists have always been and still are engaged with issues of identity, challenging traditional narratives and contributing to the ongoing discourse on what it means to be Taiwanese. The art scene can thus serve as a platform for *exploring*, *expressing*, and *shaping* Taiwanese identity in a dynamic and evolving manner.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 12

¹⁵⁶ GAYATRI C. Spivak, “Can the subaltern speak?”, Chapter in WILLIAMS P. & CHRISMAN L. (Eds), *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, p. 70

Chapter 2 - Taiwanese artworld and its formation process

It is a lamentable reality that Taiwan is not famous for its art. Over time, the focus on Taiwan's economic development and its complex relations with the PRC has overshadowed the richness of its artistic heritage. Within academic discourse, although there have been notable advancements, the scholarly exploration of Taiwanese contemporary art remains relatively underdeveloped, particularly when juxtaposed with the extensive effort devoted to analyzing Taiwan's economic and political trajectory. Moreover, Taiwanese art struggles for attention in comparison to the considerable emphasis placed on contemporary art from the mainland. As Jason C. Kuo highlights in *Art and Cultural Politics in Postwar Taiwan*, "Art historians outside of Taiwan have not, with few exceptions, paid enough attention to art produced in Taiwan, [...] for Western scholars, mainland China has long been a fascinating and even seductive realm, full of the myth of otherness."¹⁵⁷ It has to be clarified that this unfamiliarity with Taiwanese contributions to the world of art is especially evident within Western academic circles: while the past few decades saw the widespread acknowledgment in Asia of Taiwan's pioneering role in artistic experimentation and innovation across the whole continent, on the other hand in the Western perception "the island is in danger of being perceived as an economic 'miracle' without culture."¹⁵⁸

As already discussed in the previous chapter, Taiwan's geographical and cultural landscape has historically served as a melting pot for diverse populations. Consequently, the trajectory of Taiwanese art, originating from indigenous artifacts, underwent a process of amalgamation with the aesthetics of Chinese literati tradition, assimilation of Japanese artistic techniques, then again adaptation to Chinese national painting (*guohua* 國畫), evolution via abstractionism, and ultimately, adoption of contemporary international artistic languages. In the words of Chen Yuxiu (陳郁秀):

Western European, Chinese, Japanese and American cultures have made their mark across the island, ensuring fine art in Taiwan is an unavoidable composite of artistic languages from different places. This complexity also extends to artistic form, ranging from the literati ink art of the past, to oil painting, three dimensional plastic art, spatial installations, video and photographic art, to performance and conceptual art.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ KUO Jason C., *Art and Cultural Politics in Postwar Taiwan*, Seattle: University Washington Press, 2000, p. 2

¹⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵⁹ "西歐、中國、日本、美國的文化都曾烙印在這個島嶼，使台灣美術不可避免的融合了來自四方的藝術語彙。台灣當代藝術不僅彙複雜，形式也是如此，從往昔的文人水墨、架上油畫、立體造型、空間裝著、攝影錄像，一直到行為藝術、觀念藝術等。" CHEN Yuxiu 陳郁秀 (Ed.), *The beauty of Taiwanese contemporary art [Taiwan*

In other words, the oeuvre of contemporary Taiwanese artists does not adhere to a singular local style or distinct mode, but it may manifest through a multitude of expressions, employing diverse artistic mediums across the most disparate art venues. This eclecticism can be attributed to various underlying factors acting as driving forces, among them the cultural identity of the single artist, or as Wei Hsiu Tung (董維琇) phrases it, the “confusing and intricate web of cultural identities”¹⁶⁰ that Taiwanese artists embody. Certainly, the “Bold and Unrestrained”¹⁶¹ nature of creative energy in the Taiwanese contemporary art scene owes much to the rich history of the country, but not solely in terms of individual creativity. Indeed, even if artists were supported in their creative impulses by a wide range of expressive means, mediums, and art venues to choose from, the vibrancy of the system would not be the same without collaboration from the broader artistic infrastructure and cultural policies. In the context of Taiwan, the effective functioning of the art system today can be attributed, in part, to the nation’s recent history characterized by political democratization and economic advancement.

Indeed, given the fact that the influx of national funds into visual art only began in the late 1970s¹⁶², the artistic infrastructure (public museums, cultural centers, and structured cultural administrations) in Taiwan is relatively new. While this might be perceived as a limitation, it could be contended that it can also be regarded positively as a key influence on the experimental nature of contemporary Taiwanese art. Unlike the entrenched artistic infrastructures of certain European countries which may impose rigidity, the comparatively new Taiwanese infrastructure offers artists greater flexibility. The fact that the first significant museums for visual arts were established at a time of societal modernization allows the Taiwanese art system to be inherently adaptable to contemporary trends, unencumbered by the need to reconcile antiquated practices with modernity. In other words, the system doesn’t have to adapt the old to the new (hence, the past to the present), but is congenitally new and can look to the future.

dangdai yishu zhimei 台灣當代藝術之美], Taipei: Diancang yishu jiating gongsi [典藏藝術家庭公司], 2004, p. 18, Translation by Andrew Wilson

¹⁶⁰ TUNG Wei Hsiu, “‘The Return of the Real’: Art and identity in Taiwan’s public sphere”, in *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, vol. 11, no. 2-3, 2012, p. 158

¹⁶¹ CHEN Yuxiu 陳郁秀 (Ed.), *The beauty of Taiwanese contemporary art* [*Taiwan dangdai yishu zhimei* 台灣當代藝術之美], Taipei: Diancang yishu jiating gongsi [典藏藝術家庭公司], 2004, p. 18, Translation by Andrew Wilson

¹⁶² YANG Wen-I, *Negotiating Traditions: Taiwanese Art since the 1980s*, PhD thesis submitted to the Ruperto-Carola University of Heidelberg, Faculty of Philosophy and History, 2002, p. 25

In order to understand the contemporary Taiwanese art ecosystem, it is imperative, as it was for the first chapter, to provide a concise overview of Taiwanese art history. However, some essential disclaimers must first be clarified.

The present thesis will not primarily focus on explicating individual artists or their works; rather, it will analyze the *artworld* in its entirety, specifically the dynamics of the artworld intended as “a field defined by power plays and struggles whereby producers strive to preserve or transform such a world.”¹⁶³. While certain works and individual artists will be utilized for analysis of the broader context when pertinent, the primary emphasis will be on the mechanisms, interconnections, causes, and consequences associated with the emergence and decline of particular modes of making art. Consequently, the approach of the present thesis to the history of art will diverge from the conventional analysis of the evolution of painting styles, prioritizing instead aspects such as social change as well as changes in the urban environment, the empowerment of specific social groups, the connection between art and identity, the development of cultural policies, the establishment of artistic infrastructure, and the role played by museums.

The term “artworld” has been referenced multiple times thus far, at this point necessitating a precise definition. The *artworld* can be conceptualized as the dynamic entity comprising all the actors that have a role in deciding what is art and what is not, encompassing artists, gallerists, curators, the media, art critics, jurors, museums, and all kinds of cultural institutions. However, for the purposes of this thesis, the nuanced interpretation given to the term is the broader notion of an *art ecosystem*, encapsulating not only the active force, but all the array of roles, activities, structures, and their interrelationships that govern the diverse stages of contemporary art production, promotion, circulation, and market dynamics.

In the contemporary, especially within the context of Taiwan, it is crucial to emphasize the *relational nature* of the artworld, whose individuals’ roles are highly fluid and adaptable. In fact, in today’s art scene, the act of artistic creation extends beyond merely producing artwork; it encompasses a practical framework of behavior: factors such as interactions with institutions, residence in specific neighborhoods, and engagement with particular venues are now integral components of artistic practice more than ever before. As Gablik suggests in the essay *Connective Aesthetics: Art after Individualism*, from the Nineties “much of the new art focuses on social creativity rather than on self-expression and contradicts the myth of the isolated genius—private, subjective,

¹⁶³ Nicolas BOURRIAUD, *Relational Aesthetics*, Paris: Les Presses du Réel, 2002, p. 26

behind closed doors in the studio, separate from others and the world.”¹⁶⁴ This observation holds particularly true for Taiwan, which since the 1990s has established an exceptional networked and collaborative artistic ecosystem.

The following section will particularly underscore “contemporary art”, which in the Taiwanese contest can be traced back to the 1980s. Indigenous art, as well as art from the periods of Japanese rule and Chinese imperialism on the island, despite being rich and captivating subjects, will be mentioned but not extensively analyzed to maintain brevity and pertinence.

The focus will be principally on the medium of painting, but an effort will also be made to provide historical insights into performing arts since they are widely employed as a mode of expression in contemporary independent art spaces.

2.1 Visual roots and the approach to modernity

The visual heritage of Taiwanese art can be traced back to indigenous art (*Bentu yishu* 本土藝術)¹⁶⁵: even today, its distinctive patterns and motifs continue to resonate in the works of renowned artists. The indigenous peoples – among the earliest creative ethnic groups in Taiwanese history – developed a local sense of beauty that long preceded European, Japanese, or Chinese influences. Despite this, their artistic contributions remained largely overlooked until the mid-1990s.¹⁶⁶ It was only after the lifting of martial law, when Taiwan began to assert its distinct identity separate from China, and in particular thanks to the Nativist movement, that attention to indigenous art increased. As Alice Yang suggests, the formation of folk art that embraced popular culture and religion in Taiwan was a distinctly Taiwanese phenomenon, outside the canons of both Chinese and Western art.¹⁶⁷ For this “all Taiwanese” nature, the discovery and revitalization of indigenous culture have served governmental purposes in Taiwan’s fight for independence (following the principle of Taiwan’s narratives of unfolding previously examined). Within this nationalist framework, the collective

¹⁶⁴ Suzi GABLIK, “Connective Aesthetics: Art After Individualism” in LACY Suzanne (Ed.) *Mapping The Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1995, p. 76

¹⁶⁵ Elisabetta ZERBINATTI, *Narrarsi attraverso l’arte: Il Padiglione Taiwan a Venezia come esempio di diplomazia culturale 2015-2017*, master thesis submitted to Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, Faculty of Language and Civilisation of Asia and Mediterranean Africa, 2017, p. 43

¹⁶⁶ The Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM) for the first time in 1996 featured two works by two contemporary indigenous artists in its first Taipei Biennial, *Quest for Identity (Taiwan yishu de zhutixing* 台灣藝術的主體性).

¹⁶⁷ YANG Alice, “High and Low: The Cultural Space of Contemporary Taiwanese Art”, essay in J. HAY & M. YOUNG (Eds.), *Why Asia?*, New York: New York University Press, 1998, pp.119-128, p. 125

identity of Taiwan's indigenous groups has been rehabilitated, and contemporary indigenous culture is now prominently displayed in public museums.¹⁶⁸

In the seventeenth century, with the initial significant influx of migrants from Fujian, Taiwanese culture underwent its initial phase of Sinicization in terms of visual heritage. The influx of Chinese literati adapted visual arts on the island to the stylistic conventions of late Ming and Qing painting, exemplified by *literati painting*: favorite subject matters were “Flowers and Birds,” as well as portraits depicting indigenous hunting scenes.¹⁶⁹ The fact that it was primarily the immigrant Chinese elite, mainly large landowners and the gentry, to first take an interest in cultural and artistic activities, led artworks produced during this period to exhibit almost no stylistic distinctions from their mainland counterparts. Indeed, they are often classified as a natural extension of the Chinese painting tradition.¹⁷⁰

From 1895 onwards, under Japanese rule, visual arts underwent a process of Nipponization, marked by the introduction of xylography and Western-style oil painting, which represented a significant departure from the literati painting. The most prevalent style during this period was *Toyoga* (*dongyang hua* 東洋畫): this new artistic approach was characterized by direct observation, perspective, lighting, and color, aligning with the principles of European impressionism. Japanese rule can be recognized as a pivotal formative period in Taiwan's art history, as it fostered the emergence of “pioneering first-generation artists”¹⁷¹, to the point that the fifty years of Japanese rule are widely acknowledged as the “founding period of *modern* Taiwanese art.”¹⁷² In this sense, Taiwan (which was still at a rather basic level of artistic development) was exposed to Western artistic modernism through Japan's own interactions with Western artistry.¹⁷³ In addition to facilitating the introduction of modernity, the Japanese colonial period stands as a significant turning point in the realm of art for another crucial reason. As discussed in the preceding historical chapter, the failure of

¹⁶⁸ For further information, the reader can refer to Sophie McINTYRE, “Navigating ‘Austronesia’: Contemporary indigenous art from Taiwan and the Pacific”, in *Art Monthly Australia*, vol. 232, 2010, pp. 45-48

¹⁶⁹ YANG Wen-I, *Negotiating Traditions: Taiwanese Art since the 1980s*, PhD thesis submitted to the Ruperto-Carola University of Heidelberg, Faculty of Philosophy and History, 2002, pp. 12-13.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷¹ Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, pp. 7-8

¹⁷² YANG Wen-I, *Negotiating Traditions: Taiwanese Art since the 1980s*, PhD thesis submitted to the Ruperto-Carola University of Heidelberg, Faculty of Philosophy and History, 2002, pp. 12-13. The emphasis is mine.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.* p. 13

Japanese efforts to impose a Japanese identity upon the people of Taiwan paradoxically led to the emergence of early manifestations of a pan-Taiwanese identity. The same identical phenomenon can be seen in the realm of art: while the Japanese government aimed to utilize visual expression as a tool to disseminate Japanese cultural values and promote cultural assimilation, in practice the artworks conveyed a distinct sense of Taiwanese consciousness (*bentu yishi* 本土意識), reflecting the artists' intention to incorporate "local color" to convey a "Taiwanese sentiment."¹⁷⁴

In 1945, following Taiwan's return to mainland China, the process of Nipponization underwent a sudden reversal, transitioning into a re-Sinicization of arts and culture. During this period, cultural policy, through censorship and prohibition¹⁷⁵, focused on resistance to Communism, to "brand" Taiwan in the eyes of the world as the *real, traditional, free* China.¹⁷⁶ As a result, it could be contended that traditional Chinese culture was effectively safeguarded and propagated in Taiwan, potentially even to a greater extent than in mainland China.¹⁷⁷ Within visual arts, the artistic style of *Toyoga* was replaced by the "Chinese national painting" (*guohua* 國畫).¹⁷⁸ It is important to note that these abrupt shifts in artistic conventions signify more than just changes in painting styles; they reflect profound underlying shifts in mindset and identity perception. Art, once again utilized as a tool, this time by the Nationalist government, transitioned from depicting scenes of everyday life in Taiwan through *Toyoga* to portraying the lost territories of mainland China through *Guohua*, thereby emphasizing the imperative of redeeming them. This instrumentalization of art to instill the urgency for Chinese irredentism in the minds of the Taiwanese population is nothing but a reflection of that

¹⁷⁴ Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, pp. 7-8

¹⁷⁵ As the President of Taiwan was also the KMT party leader, he "was the foremost and highest administrator of cultural affairs. He constructed and delivered cultural policy without soliciting any collaboration within the central government." WANG, L. J., "Cultural difference, national identity and cultural policy in Taiwan", In LEE H.K., LIM L. (Eds.) *Cultural Policies in East Asia—Dynamics between the States, Arts, and Creative Industries*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 39

¹⁷⁶ LAI Meng-Yu, *Taiwanese Identity and the Performing Arts: the Development of Programming at the National Performing Arts Centre*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of London, Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies, 2020, p. 114

¹⁷⁷ "The focus on whether Taiwanese are culturally Han diverts attention from the question of whether Chinese in the PRC are still culturally Han. If we were to use Confucian criteria related to ancestor worship to classify people as Han, Taiwanese would turn out to be more Han than people classified as Han in post-Cultural Revolution China." In Melissa J. BROWN, *Is Taiwan Chinese?: the Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing identities*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004, p. 29

¹⁷⁸ Western-style oil painting continued to be reluctantly tolerated by the KMT firstly to maintain a pro-Western profile, and secondly because *Toyoga* was objectively recognized by artistic circles as far more modern than *Guohua*.

era's conception of fine arts. Indeed, during the initial years of nationalist rule, and also influenced by a Confucian legacy, art had not yet succeeded in disentangling itself from its moral function in nationalistic education. In this context, the words of Chiang Kai-shek regarding the fine arts serve as a pertinent illustration:

As has been said in antiquity, the highest state to be attained is the merging of morality and intelligence into one single entity [...] In the present times, however, personal self-cultivation can hardly be the final aim. We have to promote aesthetics among all citizens. Only in this way will we have fulfilled our natural educational duty.¹⁷⁹

2.2 The 1950s and 1960s: first contacts with Western Avant-Garde

If the initial encounters with Western Art stemmed from the Japanese experience of French Impressionism, the subsequent significant transformation during the 1950s and 1960s was instigated by the infusion of American culture, profoundly impacting Taiwanese society across various domains. Many Taiwanese artists who had migrated to America or Europe during the 1950s returned to the island and brought back with them the Western avant-garde (*Qianwei yishu* 前衛藝術), drawing inspiration from figures such as Jackson Pollock in their creative pursuits. As a result, the notion of “modern painting” became closely associated with what is commonly known as “abstract painting.”¹⁸⁰ This shift in artistic style would have been unimaginable just a decade earlier when Taiwan had yet to establish significant cultural ties with the (at that time perceived as) culturally advanced Western world. However, it is important to recognize that despite the increasing acceptance of the importance of modernity and the inevitability of Western influence, the government and cultural elite of Taiwan remained, and continued to be for some time, skeptical about cultural assimilation. As subsequent decades will reveal, the tension between internationalism and localism, and the imperative to preserve Taiwanese culture, remained constant throughout the modernization process.¹⁸¹ Therefore, Taiwanese artists did not merely adopt Western abstractionism as it was, but embarked on a monumental journey of ideological legitimization, which is profoundly intriguing. Indeed, artists and

¹⁷⁹ CHIANG Kai-shek, “Two Amendments to the Principle of the People’s Livelihood Concerning Education and Recreation” [*Minsheng zhuyi yule liangpian bushu* 民生主義育樂兩篇補述], in *Sanmin zhuyi*, Taipei: Zhengzhung Shuju, 1953, 1978, p. 63

¹⁸⁰ TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, p. 116

¹⁸¹ Art educator Ann Kuo suggests a key difference between Mainland Chinese and Taiwanese artists in their approach to the West: “Mainland China has its own center of gravity and cannot possibly be subsumed by the tide of Westernisation. Taiwan is very small; hence, the importance attached to localization.” KUO Ann, “Localisation, Internationalisation, and art in Taiwan” in D. BOUGHTON & R. MASON (Eds.), *Beyond Multicultural Art Education: International Perspectives*, New York: Waxmann, 2000, pp. 249-262, p. 254

art critics¹⁸² started to link the principles of abstract expressionism to the techniques employed by Chinese calligraphers and painters during the late Tang dynasty in ancient China, and to the *Yijing*.¹⁸³ Through this ideological connection, abstractionism became intertwined with Chinese philosophy and artistic tradition, to the extent that some argued for its origins in Asia. By doing so, this way of making art was declared “essentially Chinese”¹⁸⁴, and its ideological-philosophical base was safe.

The modern painting movement was spearheaded by the Eastern Art Group or Ton Fan Group (*Dongfang Huahui* 東方畫會)¹⁸⁵ and later the Fifth Moon Art Group (*Wu Yue Huahui* 五月畫會)¹⁸⁶. These artists’ collectives not only played a pivotal role in awakening the Taiwanese art world to the concept of ‘modernism’ and so to the *unexplored*, but also first made it apparent that there was a problem with Taiwanese identity, a sense of “rootlessness.”¹⁸⁷ In their pursuit of modernizing contemporary Chinese painting, they embarked on a vigorous campaign against the traditional Chinese ink painting tradition (for this reason they were labeled as “subversive” and attacked by the press). Rejecting the imitation of nature, they sought instead to achieve “spiritual independence”¹⁸⁸ and foster a free and spontaneous form of artistic expression. This period paved the way for what came next: indeed, once abstraction was accepted as a form of art, in the 1970s it was soon followed by surrealism, photorealism, minimalism, and so on. As Sullivan notes, Taiwanese modernism surely

¹⁸² Among them, Lü Qing-fu 呂清夫, considered to be the most important figure promoting modern art, with the article “The attraction between avantgarde and the East: a resume of contemporary art criticism” [*Qianwei yu dongfangde xiehou – dangdai yi ping de guijie* 前衛與東方的邂逅 - 當代藝評的歸結], published in 1982 in *Hsiungshih Art Monthly*, had a key role.

¹⁸³ Felix SCHOEBER, *Modernity, nationalism and global marginalization: representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art exhibition. The Taipei fine arts museum and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice 1984-2009*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Westminster, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, 2014, pp. 93-94

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.* p. 94

¹⁸⁵ Founded in November 1956 by a group of artists who migrated to Taiwan from Mainland China between the mid- to late 1940s. Notably, it benefited from the guidance of Li Chung-sheng, an esteemed artist and educator in Taiwan, often revered as “the father of modern art.”

¹⁸⁶ Founded in May 1957 by a collective of artists who had graduated from the Art Department at the National Taiwan Normal University. They operated with a broad scope, unbounded by specific mediums or techniques. Utilizing oils, oil mixed with sand, collage, Chinese ink, and experimenting with various methods such as crumpling paper or painting on both sides, they aimed to revitalize Chinese painting. Among them, Liu Kuo-sung (劉國松, b. 1932) can be identified as the dominant personality.

¹⁸⁷ YANG Wen-I, *Negotiating Traditions: Taiwanese Art since the 1980s*, PhD thesis discussed at the Ruperto-Carola University of Heidelberg, Faculty of Philosophy and History, 2002, p. 49

¹⁸⁸ TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, p. 115

was born with abstract expressionism, but then “a time came when abstract expressionism was no more the mark of modernism: artists were free to express themselves as they chose.”¹⁸⁹

Fig 1. From the Series: *The Coming*. Liu Kuo-sung 劉國松, 1970, ink and collage on paper, 207.4 x 81.1 cm, The Cleveland Museum of Art.

2.3 The 1970s: Nativism

As it was for Taiwanese identitarian awareness, a turning point for cultural development in Taiwan was its expulsion from the UN in 1971. Since the island was not able anymore to identify itself as the true representative of nationalist China “forged by Sun Yat-sen”¹⁹⁰, it had to reevaluate its territory and traditions to redefine its sense of identity.¹⁹¹ This catalyzed the emergence of the “Native Soil” movement (*Xiangtu zhuyi huihua* 鄉土主義繪畫), a broad intellectual movement that permeated society and various cultural domains, particularly literature and performing arts (*Biaoyan yishu* 表演藝術).¹⁹² Among the reasons behind the reevaluation of performing arts, especially modern dance¹⁹³, by the *Xiangtu* movement, other than the absence of linguistic barriers, it is important to mention the association with Taiwanese indigenous ritual culture.¹⁹⁴ Indeed, as observed by Philip Freund, the history of performing arts shows an evolution from the primitive rituals and enactments

¹⁸⁹ Michael SULLIVAN, *Art and artists of Twentieth-century China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, p. 185

¹⁹⁰ Malcolm COOK, “Taiwan's Identity Challenge” in *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*, vol.25, no. 2, 2005, pp. 83-92, p. 85

¹⁹¹ Elisabetta ZERBINATTI, *Narrarsi attraverso l'arte: Il Padiglione Taiwan a Venezia come esempio di diplomazia culturale 2015-2017*, master thesis submitted to Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Faculty of Language and Civilisation of Asia and Mediterranean Africa, 2017, p. 49

¹⁹² In Taiwan, the Chinese term ‘Biao yen yi shu’ (表演藝術) ‘performing arts’ encompasses theatre, dance and music, and by extension to any kind of performing art so long as it is presented and performed on stage, site or venue, to not be confused with the term *Xingwei Yishu* 行為藝術 ‘performance arts’. In LAI Meng-Yu, *Taiwanese Identity and the Performing Arts: the Development of Programming at the National Performing Arts Centre*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of London, Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies, 2020, pp. 149-150

¹⁹³ For example, Lin Huai-min (林懷民), founder of the Cloud Gate Dance Theater (*yunmen wuji* 雲門舞集), Taiwan’s premier dance company, often expressed a local identity in his works. It is worth to mention the signature work “Legacy” (*Xin chuan* 薪傳, 1978), which tells the dramatic story of the arrival of the first Chinese pioneers on the Taiwanese shores.

¹⁹⁴ “Cloud Gate is the most important example of the rise of Taiwanese consciousness from the 1970s to the 1990s.” in LAI Meng-Yu, *Taiwanese Identity and the Performing Arts: the Development of Programming at the National Performing Arts Centre*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of London, Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies, 2020, p. 59

of myths of ancient times to today's contemporary theater.¹⁹⁵ Local rituals can thus be viewed as the fundamental origin of Taiwanese performing arts, underscoring the significant role they play in advancing Taiwanese indigenous identity and culture, and consequently their importance within the nativist movement.

Although visual arts may not have been the primary arena for the expression of this movement, they have not been exempted from major changes either. The process, which had already begun under American influence with the development of Taiwanese abstract modern art, was rapidly accelerated by this movement. Taiwanese artists increasingly turned away from traditional Chinese *guohua* ink painting, instead seeking inspiration from the grassroots culture of Taiwan, through the use of 'Nativist' iconography or everyday 'folk' practices.¹⁹⁶ Finally, Taiwanese art regained the freedom to depict the beautiful natural landscapes of its territory, "its subtropical sunlight and scenery...[as well as its] temples"¹⁹⁷, and to express the profound sentiments "local" Taiwanese people (intended as 本省人 *benshengren*) were experiencing at that time in their search for an autonomous identity. It is essential to note, as will be elaborated upon later in the narrative, that the grassroot movement did not put an end to the government's ideological control over fine arts; rather, it simply transitioned this control from a Chinese perspective to a Taiwanese one.

During the 1970s, the first dedicated art magazines emerged, notable among them being *Hsiungshih Art Monthly* (or *Lions Art Magazine*, *Xiongshi meishu* 雄獅美術) and *Artist Magazine* (*Yishujia* 藝術家). Particularly noteworthy is the latter, where the artist and art critic Xie Lifa 謝里法 (b. 1938) began to address native Taiwanese art in articles, marking the first instance of attention directed towards local artists, particularly those from the generation silenced by Japanese colonization.¹⁹⁸

Fig. 2. *White Moon* (白月 *Bái yuè*), Hong Tong 洪通, 1974, oil on masonite, 59 x 59 cm

¹⁹⁵ Philip FREUND, *Stage by Stage: The Birth of Theatre*, London: Peter Owen Publishers, 2003, pp. 29-39

¹⁹⁶ Beccy KENNEDY, "Border Praxis: Negotiating and Performing "Hong Kong-ese-ness" and "Taiwanese-ness" in contemporary, political 'Chinese' art practices", in *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, vol. 3, no. 1-2, 2016, p. 8

¹⁹⁷ HSI Te-chin 席德進, "My art and Taiwan" [*wo de Yishu yu Taiwan* 我的藝術與台灣], in *LionArt Monthly*, no.2, April 1971, pp.16-17

¹⁹⁸ Specifically, it is noteworthy to mention the painter Hong Tong (洪通, b. 1920) and the sculptor Zhu Ming (朱銘, b. 1938), two "primitive" artists who, though previously unknown to the art world, were rediscovered during the 1970s and revered as heroes for their works, which were believed to convey a profound sense of Taiwanese consciousness.

2.4 The 1980s: The birth of Taiwanese “Contemporary” Art

The decade of the 1980s saw the development of “contemporary” fine art in Taiwan, hence holding pivotal significance in comprehending the trajectory of Taiwanese culture, particularly within the context of the present thesis, as it marked the inception of the first art spaces outside the museum and the academia. Serving as a transitional phase between the tumultuous cultural debates and political conflicts of the 1970s and the subsequent flourishing of Taiwanese art and its global engagement in the 1990s, the 1980s can be viewed as a period of “uncontrolled yet nearly imploded suspension”¹⁹⁹, which provided the Taiwanese artworld with abundant kinetic energy to explode then in the 1990s. Indeed, the flows of people, messages, and capital that characterized the last years of martial law led to “uncontrolled internal acceleration”²⁰⁰ that continued to mount throughout the whole decade and finally found a shape, after the lifting of martial law, flowing into the newborn artistic infrastructure.

2.4.1 Chiang Ching Kuo’s Cultural Policies

Taiwan’s economic boom in the mid- and late seventies, commonly referred to as the economic miracle, laid the material foundation for cultural development.²⁰¹ Prior to the 1980s, Taiwanese artistic infrastructure was basically nonexistent: the government, primarily focused on national defense and economic growth, showed minimal concern for cultural matters.²⁰² While Sun Yat-sen’s *Three Principles of the People* (*Sanmin Zhuyi* 三民主義) didn’t mention culture at all, and Chiang Kai-shek’s doctrine, despite mentioning culture, still relegated it to a national educational duty, a huge shift fundamental for the establishment of artistic infrastructure is Chiang Ching-kuo’s ascent to power in 1975. For the first time in Taiwanese history, he advanced the idea that “to construct a modernized country, not only should the people have a rich material life, but also the people should have a healthy spiritual life.”²⁰³ This new idea completely revolutionized the perception of culture, in

¹⁹⁹ WANG Jun-Jieh & HUANG Chien-Hung (Eds), *The wild eighties: dawn of a transdisciplinary Taiwan* [*Kuang ba ling: Kua lingyu lingguang chuxian de shidai* 狂八〇：跨領域靈光出現的時代], Taipei: Taipei National University of the Arts, 2023, p. 67

²⁰⁰ Ibid. p. 72

²⁰¹ YANG Wen-I, *Negotiating Traditions: Taiwanese Art since the 1980s*, PhD thesis submitted to the Ruperto-Carola University of Heidelberg, Faculty of Philosophy and History, 2002, p. 26

²⁰² Ibid. p. 25

²⁰³ CHIANG Ching-kuo, cited in B. HARRIS, H. SENG, “Cultural Center in Taiwan, ROC. Organizations, functions and problems” in *Journal of library and information science*, Taipei, April 1991, p. 3

the words of Kuo Su-chun (李國俊): “arts in the official ideology essentially shifted from being a component of education to being the essence of culture in Taiwan.”²⁰⁴ This new vision found its practical application in the Cultural Construction Plan (*Wenhua jianshe* 文化建設), whose purpose was to build cultural centers (consisting of performing arts venues, galleries, libraries, museums, and community centers) in every county and every city. Eventually, the purpose was fulfilled: the data estimate that “between 1981 and 1985, twenty cultural centers mushroomed island-wide.”²⁰⁵

In 1981, the Cultural Planning and Development (CCPD, later renamed Council of Cultural Affairs, CCA, in 1995)²⁰⁶ was founded, marking the first national cultural administration, as well as the beginning of a push to separate cultural policies from the education domain.²⁰⁷ This was closely followed by measures to enhance art education, highlighted by the birth of the National Academy of Arts in Taipei in 1982. These efforts set the stage for what became known as the “era of museums”²⁰⁸ in the subsequent decade. Three significant public museums were inaugurated in northern, central, and southern Taiwan (namely, the Taipei Fine Arts Museum in Taipei, the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts in Taichung, and the Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts), which, in turn, spurred growth in the private sector: commercial galleries began to emerge rapidly, followed by auction houses.

Basically, after diplomatic isolation, Chiang Ching-kuo assigned culture the responsibility of projecting the image of a modern nation to the outside world, thereby prioritizing the promotion of

²⁰⁴ KUO Su-chun 李國俊 (2003), cited in LAI Meng-Yu, *Taiwanese Identity and the Performing Arts: the Development of Programming at the National Performing Arts Centre*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of London, Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies, 2020, p. 166

²⁰⁵ YANG Wen-I, *Negotiating Traditions: Taiwanese Art since the 1980s*, PhD thesis discussed at the Ruperto-Carola University of Heidelberg, Faculty of Philosophy and History, 2002, p. 27

²⁰⁶ The Chinese name of the CCA is *Wen hua chien she wei yuan hui* 文化建設委員會. This quasi-ministerial government organization holds significant importance, as it facilitates a “bottom-up” approach to cultural discourse that persists to this day. Through the National Cultural Conference, government officials, intellectuals, cultural workers, artists, and citizens convene in-person to engage in discussions and forge consensus on cultural matters. LAI Meng-Yu, *Taiwanese Identity and the Performing Arts: the Development of Programming at the National Performing Arts Centre*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of London, Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies, 2020, pp. 126-127

²⁰⁷ WANG Jun-Jieh & HUANG Chien-Hung (Eds), *The wild eighties: dawn of a transdisciplinary Taiwan [Kuang ba ling: Kua lingyu lingguang chuxian de shidai 狂八〇：跨領域靈光出現的時代]*, Taipei: Taipei National University of the Arts, 2023, p. 26

²⁰⁸ YANG Wen-I, *Negotiating Traditions: Taiwanese Art since the 1980s*, PhD thesis discussed at the Ruperto-Carola University of Heidelberg, Faculty of Philosophy and History, 2002, p. 25

modernity in art as the new prerogative.²⁰⁹ This imperative surely aligned with a broader nationalist agenda, utilizing culture as a tool of soft power and ideological control over art within the country. Despite this instrumentalization, it is undeniable that Chiang Ching-kuo's tenure (1978-1988) marked the inception of a Taiwanese "golden age" in the arts.

Apart from the key role in initiating the domino effect that led to the Taiwanese cultural renaissance, it is arguable that Chiang Ching-kuo's approach to establishing Taiwan's art infrastructure has had a lasting impact on the composition of the island's art scene, which remains evident today. Indeed, Chiang Ching-kuo's commitment to "building a cultural center in every *hsien* (county) and city"²¹⁰ decentralized the management of art by empowering local governments. This decentralization fostered a more democratic system, allowing localities the freedom to shape their own cultural landscape. Even in contemporary times, we see the effects of this approach in the proliferation of independent art spaces, site-specific initiatives, and ongoing dialogues between art, localities, and communities.²¹¹

2.4.2 Creative and social ferment

Undoubtedly, the lifting of martial law in 1987 wielded significant effects across all fields of society, including artistic expression. Specifically, one significant impetus stemming from Martial Law is the vast array of themes, topics, and issues available for exploration and expression by Taiwanese artists, as "members of a society which only recently freed itself from confinement and restrictions."²¹²

²⁰⁹ Felix SCHOEBER, *Modernity, nationalism and global marginalization: representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art exhibition. The Taipei fine arts museum and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice 1984-2009*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of Westminster, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, 2014, p. 28

²¹⁰ CHIANG Ching-kuo, cited in B. HARRIS, H. SENG, "Cultural Center in Taiwan, ROC. Organizations, functions and problems" in *Journal of library and information science*, Taipei, April 1991, p. 3

²¹¹ It is important to highlight that the gradual democratization of the cultural landscape under Chiang Ching-kuo's administration constitutes a policy of "democratizing culture" rather than "cultural democracy." As noted by Lee (2018) and Mulcahy (2017), "democratizing culture" entails ensuring broad public access to cultural activities traditionally associated with the elite class. In contrast, "cultural democracy" empowers individuals to determine their own cultural interests and interpretations. Achieving cultural democracy in Taiwan may require several more decades beyond Chiang Ching-kuo's era.

²¹² YANG Wen-I, *Negotiating Traditions: Taiwanese Art since the 1980s*, PhD thesis submitted to the Ruperto-Carola University of Heidelberg, Faculty of Philosophy and History, 2002, p. 5

The primary revolution witnessed in artistic expression was the shift from articulating the *individual sufferings* of mind, soul, and body²¹³ to the proliferation of political works expressing *collective rage* and *dissent*. The transition from *individual* to *collective* sentiments serves as a pivotal indicator of the emergence of a Taiwanese collective consciousness following the abolition of Martial Law. Especially since the mid-1980s, Taiwanese artists embarked on an extensive journey of identitarian research through art: debates surrounding questions such as ‘what is the identity of Taiwanese artists’ or ‘how to view the world from a perspective rooted in Taiwan’²¹⁴ became central to artistic discourse.

Noteworthy among the artists who tackled these subjects in their artworks is the “101 Modern Art Group” (*Yi ling yi xiandai yishuqun* 一〇一現代藝術群), established in 1982, and renamed “Taipei Art Group” (or “Taipei Painting Group” *Taipei huapai* 台北畫派) in 1985. These painters all engaged in socio-political issues and made art infused with “the spirit of Taiwan”, focused on raising Taiwanese consciousness.²¹⁵ This pioneering artistic collective included Wu Tien-chang (吳天章, b. 1956) and Yang Mao-lin (楊茂林, b. 1953), both of whom employed symbols and metaphorical images to reflect on the intrinsic nature of Taiwan.²¹⁶ Their canvases often teemed with primitive-looking depictions, evoking the tumult of the frequent street protests during that era.

Fig 3. *Floating heart* (*Piaofu de xin* 漂浮的心), Kuo Wei-kuo 郭維國, 1993, oil on canvas, 91 x 116.5 cm. Kuo Wei-kuo (b. 1960), a member of the Taipei Art Group, in all of his works uses a mocking, metaphorical approach and a unique grey and purple tone, creating a surrealistic atmosphere to describe the impact of modernity on society and his personal life experiences.

The post-martial law years were characterized by social change and extreme cultural ferment: the creative chaos and the broad spectrum of new themes to explore, emotions to release, and identity search were further supported by the emergence of new expressive methods. Indeed,

²¹³ Ibid. p. 25

²¹⁴ TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, p. 137

²¹⁵ For their propensity to localism, many scholars have identified in this group a second wave of Nativism, different from the one of the 1970s for being more Taiwan-centered and focused on urban landscapes. While the *hsiangtu* movement of the 70s was anti-modern and anti-western, the Taipei Art group embraced modernization and western artistic theories, although rejecting conceptualism and abstraction.

²¹⁶ TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, p. 134

during the 1980s, as Taiwan underwent progressive democratization, its populace gained access to foreign publications, facilitating exposure to more dynamic art forms such as land art, body art, and performance art, as well as installation art and Arte Povera²¹⁷, which provided artists with a broader expressive space compared to painting and sculpture.

Fig. 4. *Dysfunction No. 3 (Jineng sangshi di san hao 機能喪失第三號)*, Chen Chieh-Jen 陳界仁, 30 October 1983, performance, Hsimenting (Taipei).

The progressive change in the means of expression utilized also catalyzed change in the art venues: indeed, while the official institutions for arts and culture were still oppressed by the dominance of figurative painting, artists returning from periods of residence, study, or employment in Europe or America (notably, Hsiao Chin,²¹⁸ Wu Mali,²¹⁹ Lee Ming-sheng and many more) were experimenting with more radical art forms. For an institutional system still influenced by the legacy of Nativism, which saw localism as the basis for artistic expression, these new art forms from the West were unconceivable, and even perceived as a threat to Taiwan's cultural identity.²²⁰

Rejected by the official contexts, artists were forced to create their own spaces: the extreme vitality of the artistic environment of the 1980s found expression in numerous independent art spaces that proliferated throughout Taipei and its environs, and which could be regarded as the birthplaces of Taiwanese contemporary art. It was mainly from the late 1980s onwards that the alternative art movement began: this period saw the emergence of unconventional spaces of different nature such as non-profit galleries, bookshops, ephemeral and site-specific projects, theaters, performance venues, and various other forms of collective expression. These spaces shared a common goal: to provide new platforms for presenting artworks and artists that were marginalized in official contexts, fostering innovative, community-centered experiences free from market constraints. The fourth chapter of this thesis will delve into a deeper analysis of these independent art spaces, at this juncture, however, for

²¹⁷ Ibid. pp. 139-140

²¹⁸ Founder of the *Punto* Movement in Italy. Owing to his network in Italy, he even contributed to establishing the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice during the 1990s.

²¹⁹ In the latter part of the 1980s, she came back from studying in Germany and emerged as one of Taiwan's foremost translators and editors of art-related literature, bringing forth a multitude of trends to the domestic audience.

²²⁰ Among the longest and most important debates, in 1991, the artist, curator and critic Ni Tsai-Chin (倪再沁, b. 1955) in his article "Western Art: Made in Taiwan" [*Xifang meishu Taiwan zhizao-taiwan xiandai meishu de pipan* 西方美術台灣製造-台灣現代美術的批判], published in the April volume of *Lion Art Magazine*, criticized the "Blind Internationalists," remarking on the importance of tracing back to Taiwan's own historical and cultural origins in achieving the rebirth of "Taiwan Art".

narrative coherence, this section will limit itself to mention notable examples such as No. 2 Apartment (*Er hao gongyu* 二號公寓), IT PARK (*Yitong gongyuan* 伊通公園), and Bamboo Curtain Studio (*Zhuwei* 竹圍).

Fig. 5. *IT Park Opening Exhibition (Yitong gongyuan kaimu lianzhan* 伊通公園開幕聯展), 03-31 March 1990, Inside view. Participating artists: Lu Mingde 盧明德, Huang Wenhao 黃文浩, Chen Huiqiao 陳慧嶠, Tsong Pu 莊普, Chen Jianbei 陳建北, Lu Mi 魯宓.

Fig 6. *IT Park Opening Exhibition (Yitong gongyuan kaimu lianzhan* 伊通公園開幕聯展), 03-31 March 1990, Outside view. Participating artists: Lu Mingde 盧明德, Huang Wenhao 黃文浩, Chen Huiqiao 陳慧嶠, Tsong Pu 莊普, Chen Jianbei 陳建北, Lu Mi 魯宓.

The majority of these new venues to make art were born through the repurposing of abandoned urban structures into community hubs and exhibition venues. Indeed, to respond to the chaotic society of the time, the urban landscape also changed accordingly: at that time “dealing with space”²²¹ was one of the major problems artists encountered in their career (where to live, where to exhibit, where to create). The innovative solutions devised by young artists gave rise to the intriguing phenomenon Wu Mali (吳瑪俐) has termed the “creative city” (*Chuangyi chengshi* 創意城市)²²². Essentially, private apartments, the rear areas of shops, and even the streets themselves became venues for artistic expression and display. Alternative spaces around the city created a tight net that made Taipei itself a single creative hub for experimentation and deconstruction. In Wu Mali’s words, “There was no need anymore for a space to do art, the entire city seemed to have become a place for the creation of art”.²²³

The birth of what can be considered Taiwanese contemporary art wouldn’t have been possible without the socio-cultural changes in the city, and the urban environment restructuring. What could be considered the golden age of Taiwanese cultural creativity owes much to the “urban vitality” of

²²¹ CHEN Yuxiu 陳郁秀(Ed.), *The beauty of Taiwanese contemporary art [Taiwan dang dai yishu zhimei* 台灣當代藝術之美], Taipei: Diancang yishu jiating gongsi 典藏藝術家庭公司, 2004, p. 129

²²² Conference *Space as Response: Taiwan Perspectives After the 1980s [Kong jian zuowei yizhong huiying: 1980 hou de Taiwan jingyan* 空間作為一種回應：1980 後的臺灣經驗], held on 2022.08.14 14:30–16:30 at CREATORS’ Space R102 Coworking Space, Speakers: John TAIN, WU Mali, CHENG Mei-Ya, Amy CHENG <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZeRYn88pe4>

²²³ Ibidem.

the period: a vital force coming from the city and “feed[ing] the creativity of local artists.”²²⁴ This distinctive aspect of Taiwanese society has evolved over time and persists to the present day, thereby attaining the status of an inherent societal trait. The sociocultural vibrancy of the era was eloquently captured by artist Huang Chih-yang (黃致陽, b. 1965) in his statement for the 1995 Venice Biennale, which can be considered an “ode to urban vitality”²²⁵:

Carnivores wander through this heavy, absurd, complex society bathed with electric light, moaning their sacred odes of desire. But thanks to this space, which womb-like has nurtured and harboured us during our frenzied rhapsody on the verge of death, we suckle her milk and fashion our art in the name of tradition. Thanks to our great mother – Taipei.²²⁶

2.4.3 1983: The TFAM and the birth of a structured artworld

Amidst the vibrant and somewhat tumultuous atmosphere of artistic activity, there arose a necessity to reintroduce some semblance of order, or in the words of Martha Su (Su Ruiping 蘇瑞屏), first director of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM), to “reorganize the current confusions in our domestic art scene.”²²⁷ The establishment of the TFAM in 1983 served to provide structure to the burgeoning artistic scene and solidify the modernity of Taiwanese art, marking a pivotal moment in the trajectory of Taiwanese art history as it transitioned into contemporary times. Due to constraints of length, this thesis will not provide an exhaustive analysis of the revolution initiated by this museum. Instead, it will focus on the two specific aspects that have been just mentioned: firstly, how the museum crystallized all the advancement in Taiwanese art, and secondly, how the museum reorganized the whole Taiwanese artworld.

Regarding the first aspect, it is crucial to recognize first that the construction of the TFAM inherently possesses a revolutionary force: while previously contemporary art existed on the fringes, tolerated but excluded from official institutional contexts, the creation of this museum signified a

²²⁴ SCHOEBER Felix, *Modernity, nationalism and global marginalization: representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art exhibition. The Taipei fine arts museum and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice 1984-2009*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of Westminster, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, 2014, p. 197

²²⁵ Ibid. p. 199

²²⁶ HUANG Chih-yang 黃致陽, In *Art Taiwan*, Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 1995, p. 39. Translation by David Toman. Cited in Ibidem.

²²⁷ SU Rui-ping, “Preface”, in *1984 Contemporary Trends in Chinese Art*, Taipei: TFAM, 1984, p. 89. Cited in Ibid. p. 86

dedicated space solely committed to it.²²⁸ Prior to 1983, young artists faced limited options to showcase their works, the establishment of TFAM has been a revolution both in terms of available surface exhibition area, but also in terms of all other spatial dimensions such as the available ceiling height, and the size of the rooms available.²²⁹ This second point potentially holds greater significance than the exhibition space itself, as it provided Taiwanese artists with the opportunity to implement the innovations they had assimilated from their interactions with Western art, which they had not previously been able to experiment with, particularly within official contexts. Finally afforded the chance, they could conceive and *make art* on huge canvases, conceptualize spatial installations unrestricted by low ceilings and narrow walls, and manipulate the environment accordingly.

The official turning point for the future development of Taiwanese art can be identified with the first big *Trends*²³⁰ show at the TFAM in 1984, which in the words of Felix Schoeber “became a good-bye party to late seventies pictorial Nativist Realism.”²³¹ The awarding of the Taipei Mayor’s Prize to Tsong Pu’s (莊普, b. 1947) *The Trembling Lines* (*Changdong de xian* 顫動的線) marked a significant shift in the aesthetical-ideological dynamics of the Taiwanese art scene for the ensuing decades. The jurors’ decision signaled the official acceptance of the modernist avant-garde ideology as a legitimate form of artistic expression, thereby paving the way for future young artists to pursue similar paths. The work itself, a reassembled canvas, broke away from the realist, figurative art that had long prevailed in the official art scene (from the *Toyoga* of the Japanese colonial era to the Chinese ink painting of nationalist Sinicization to the Nativist painting), thus symbolizing “the dismantling of a tradition and the beginning of a new era”²³² in Taiwanese art.

²²⁸ Elisabetta ZERBINATTI, *Narrarsi attraverso l’arte: Il Padiglione Taiwan a Venezia come esempio di diplomazia culturale 2015-2017*, master thesis submitted to Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, Faculty of Language and Civilisation of Asia and Mediterranean Africa, 2017, p. 56

²²⁹ Felix SCHOEBER, *Modernity, nationalism and global marginalization: representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art exhibition. The Taipei fine arts museum and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice 1984-2009*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of Westminster, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, 2014, p. 59

²³⁰ *Trends of Modern Art in the R.O.C.* is the most prestigious exhibition series of the TFAM in the 1980s. The first edition was in 1984, substituted in 1992 with the Taipei Biennial. Trends became a platform for young artists on the rise to stardom, while well-established painterly excellence was relegated to other occasions during the year.

²³¹ Felix SCHOEBER, *Modernity, nationalism and global marginalization: representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art exhibition. The Taipei fine arts museum and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice 1984-2009*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Westminster, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, 2014, p. 93

²³² *Ibid.* p. 91

Fig. 7. *The Trembling Lines* (*Changdong de xian* 顫動的線), Tsong Pu 莊普, 1984, wood, paper, iron wire, acrylic on canvas, 75 x 180 cm, Taipei Fine Arts Museum.

As for the second aspect, the establishment of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum brought about a reorganization of the artworld and re-centered this world around itself. Experienced researchers found career opportunities within the museum, established critics and curators (both in-house and independent) were invited to serve as jurors, and young artists were provided with opportunities to showcase experimental exhibitions or participate in national art competitions.²³³

Within only a few years, a rather elaborate system consisting of young artists, seniors artists, art critics, jurors and curators was established, with a dynamic of its own, but all centred around the new museum for modern art.²³⁴

This system extended well beyond the museum walls, engaging paradoxically also the independent art spaces that the KMT was trying to stem through the construction of the museum itself – indeed, the KMT, concerned about the proliferation of alternative spaces, established the TFAM as an official channel for new artistic currents to institutionalize them.²³⁵ Several artists, considered to be ‘independent’, exhibited at TFAM, initiating the dialogue between institutional and alternative art that, as the following chapters will underline, is fundamental to the *art ecology* (*Yi tan shengtai* 藝壇生態), and that would later echo in the emergence of national representation at the Venice Biennale.²³⁶

Of particular interest to the alternative artworld was the *basement* of TFAM, which, in many respects, stood out as the most revolutionary space. Dedicated to experimental exhibitions featuring young artists, it contrasted with the upper floors, reserved for already well-known, older artists (often exhibited in solo shows or retrospectives). Over time, the basement evolved into a hub for experimentation with spatial installation, performance art, Arte Povera, and conceptual painting. Notably, among these ‘independent’ artists who engaged with TFAM, there are several members of

²³³ Ibid. p. 60

²³⁴ Ibidem.

²³⁵ Elisabetta ZERBINATTI, *Narrarsi attraverso l'arte: Il Padiglione Taiwan a Venezia come esempio di diplomazia culturale 2015-2017*, master thesis submitted to Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Faculty of Language and Civilisation of Asia and Mediterranean Africa, 2017, p. 57

²³⁶ For instance, the first national representation in Venice, without admitting it, was deeply indebted to the activity of independent art spaces in Taipei: all but one of the artists at the 1995 Taiwan Pavilion were members of the No. 2 Apartment art group.

the “Taipei Art Group” and of “No. 2 Apartment”²³⁷, featured both as individual artists and as group shows, as well as different collaborations with IT PARK.

In this sense, the basement of the TFAM holds paramount importance in the development of contemporary art: indeed, during the 90s, the judgmental standards of the main *Trends* exhibition had become overly fossilized, and predictable enough for art students to create art merely aimed at winning prizes.²³⁸ In other words, the museum had created a closed system that had become a sort of *Ivory-tower*, detached from the rest of the Taiwanese art world²³⁹, it opened up a gap, an abyss between the standards of the biggest show of the museum and the development in the wider art world. This abandonment of the official exhibitionary system by young exponents of the local art scene is a symptom of a very important historical reality, in the words of the art writer, researcher, and curator Yu Wei (游歲, b. 1976): “Taiwan’s avant-garde art was driven largely by forces outside of academia”²⁴⁰ in which like-minded artists created connections and made art beyond conventional art venues. These unconventional art venues will be subjects of in-depth analysis in Chapter Four, for the moment the narration will limit itself to the basement of the TFAM, which can thus be credited with the merit of retaining within the museum’s walls some of that creative energy that would otherwise have dissipated around the country, in independent spaces and private galleries outside the museum.

Fig. 8. *Experimental Art - Action and Space/ Light, Air and Water (Shiyan Yishu-xingwei yu kongjian |guang, kongqi, shui 實驗藝術—行為與空間 |光、空氣、水)*, show at TFAM basement, B04 space, 11 April 1987 - 21 June 1987, collaboration between the TFAM and IT Park.

²³⁷ “In March 1991, they staged a group show in the basement of the TFAM, which wrote history not only for its artistic merits: the opening was intentionally inspired by local folk customs, specifically those of house-warming parties with a hot strip-show. This introduction of folk customs and bare skin into the museum space (the “experimental” basement of it) stirred quite some attention in the media. Much to the dismay of the artists involved, the show gained even more attention when some works caught fire during the closing hours, destroying most of the exhibition.” Felix SCHOEBER, *Modernity, nationalism and global marginalization: representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art exhibition. The Taipei fine arts museum and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice 1984-2009*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Westminster, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, 2014, p. 152

²³⁸ Ibid. p. 160

²³⁹ Ibid. p. 161. The emphasis is mine.

²⁴⁰ WEI Yu, “Waste, Noise, and Local Art Exhibitions”, in *Yishu: Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art*, vol.18, no. 2, 2019, pp. 68-91, p. 70

Fig. 9. Artists Huang Wen-Hao 黃文浩, Chen Hui-Chiao 陳慧嶠, and Tsong Pu 莊普 working at the *Experimental Art - Action and Space/ Light, Air and Water (Shiyan Yishu-xingwei yu kongjian |guang, kongqi, shui 實驗藝術—行為與空間 | 光、空氣、水)* show, collaboration between the TFAM and IT Park.

Fig. 10. Invitation to the Apartment No. 2 Exhibition at TFAM basement in 1991 “B04 Experimental, 1991—apartment” (*Qianwei, shiyan—gongyu te zhan 前衛、實驗—公寓特展*).

2.5 The 1990s: towards the Present

2.5.1 The opening to the world

We have already analyzed how foreign culture permeated the once impervious membrane of Taiwan’s artistic landscape throughout the 1980s. However, the journey to the contemporary would not have been complete if it had remained solely a one-sided exchange. Prior to 1989, Taiwanese art had remained insular, never venturing beyond the island’s shores. This paradigm was overcome with the exhibition “*Message from Taipei*” (*Taipei xunxi 台北訊息*) held in Tokyo at the Hara Museum for Contemporary Art in 1989, whose symbolic title suggests the first public appearance of Taiwanese art abroad. The exhibition offered the world its first glimpse into what had been happening in the past decades within the Taiwanese artworld, that had previously remained unfathomable. In the 1990s, the government took unprecedented steps to actively promote the exportation of art,²⁴¹ thereby fostering a normalized exchange between Taiwan and the global community. This initiative is crucial for subsequent advancements, as Wei Hsiu Tung states: “It is in the process of international dialogue that artists [...] clarify their position and cultural identity.”²⁴² This interactive-dialogical essence of art facilitates exchanges between art communities across various geographical regions, leading to cultural contamination and thus innovation.

2.5.2 The politicization of art

In the 1990s, the rise of public art, off-site installations, and socially engaged art, was a reflection of the artists’ desire to make “art that represents the time” and art “that can be shared by all the people”.²⁴³ This urge to create art that engages with the socio-cultural environment of their time led

²⁴¹ TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, p. 139

²⁴² *Ibid.* p. 291

²⁴³ Expressions taken from Lin Fengmian’s manifesto of 1927, which demanded “down with the tradition of copying”, and “up with the art that represents the times!”, “down with the antisocial art that is divorced from the masses!” and “up with the art that can be shared by all the people! Up with the people’s art that stands at the crossroads!” These slogans

to a growing politicization of the press during the 1990s,²⁴⁴ facilitated by the removal of censorship due to the abolition of Martial Law.²⁴⁵ Indeed, if during Taiwan's martial law period "using art to express views about the social realities of the times was not just taboo but also potentially illegal"²⁴⁶, during the 90s artists began utilizing media platforms to confront critical taboos and institutions, through a technique that has been defined by Wu Mali as "guerrilla-style institutional critique." (*Youji xing de tizhi pipan* 游擊性的體制批判)²⁴⁷ Notably, members of the Taiwan Documentary Room (TDR) played a significant role in pioneering this new form of communication, as their works consistently engaged with social and political themes.²⁴⁸ The group was founded by Lee Ming-sheng (李銘盛), Hou Chun-ming (侯俊明), Wu Mali (吳瑪俐), Cheng Jen-ren (張正仁), and Lien Teh-cheng (連德誠). The name comes from the titles of the two group exhibitions collected under the label "Taiwan Documentary Room" [*Taiwan Dang'an shi* 台灣檔案室] (1990-1991). The political intent of the group transpires both from the titles of the exhibitions, *A Celebration of President Lee Teng Hui's Inauguration* (*Gonghe di ba ren jiang zongtong jiuzhi* 恭賀第八任蔣總統就職) in 1990 and *Strange Powers and Unruly Spirits* (*Guaili luanshen* 怪力亂神) in 1991, as well as from the

were highly representative of the art of the times (the 1930s), but interestingly can be applied also to the 1990s context. LIN Fengmian, cited in Michael SULLIVAN, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, p. 44.

²⁴⁴ Felix SCHOEBER, *Modernity, nationalism and global marginalization: representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art exhibition. The Taipei fine arts museum and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice 1984-2009*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Westminster, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, 2014, p. 74

²⁴⁵ It is important to clarify that while political artworks did indeed exist during the final years of martial law, their proliferation as a widespread phenomenon occurred only afterward.

²⁴⁶ CHENG Amy, "Return to Society: The History and Politics of Art as Social Intervention—A Look at Taiwan's Four Phases of Development Since the Fall of Martial Law", in *Yishu: Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art*, vol. 9, no. 5, 2010.9-10, pp. 28-39, p. 28

²⁴⁷ Conference *Space as Response: Taiwan Perspectives After the 1980s* [*Kong jian zuowei yizhong huiying: 1980 hou de Taiwan jingyan* 空間作為一種回應：1980 後的臺灣經驗], held on 2022.08.14 14:30–16:30 at CREATORS' Space R102 Coworking Space, Speakers: John TAIN, WU Mali, CHENG Mei-Ya, Amy CHENG <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZeRYn88pe4>

²⁴⁸ As pointed out by Wu Mali in her interview with Sophie McIntyre, for the courage and the political engagement, TDR could be compared to the already mentioned Taipei Art Group, except that while the artists of the latter used only the medium of painting (and in this sense can be seen as more conservative), those of the former liked to experiment with more radical art forms. In Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, p. 150

initial location chosen: the legendary Wisteria Teahouse (*Ziteng lu* 紫藤廬), which was an important meeting place for political dissidents, artists, and intellectuals during the 80s.²⁴⁹

Fig. 11. *Love to the Highest Point* (*Ai dao zuigao dian* 愛到最高點), Wu Mali 吳瑪悌, 1990, cake, board, 28 x 42 x 13 cm, in occasion of TDR's first exhibition *A Celebration of President Lee Teng Hui's Inauguration*. Over the days, the cake with the national flag icing on top, gradually became stale, symbolizing the stupidity of blind patriotism.

It has been already pointed out that, following the lifting of martial law, innovation in artistic subjects also stimulated innovation in expressive mediums. Politically engaged art, or art as social intervention, tended to favor performance art, art actions, or happenings, over traditional mediums such as painting, as a means of expression.²⁵⁰ Performance artists had a key role in forwarding harsh political and social satire and criticism through their work, embodying an ethos of rebellion encapsulated by Yao Jui-chung (姚瑞中), a renowned artist and critic, as “opposing for the sake of opposition” (*wei fandui fandui* 為反對反對).²⁵¹

In the realm of Taiwanese performance art of all time, one of the most well-known artists is Lee Ming-sheng (李銘盛, b.1952), whose most iconic performances trace back to this period. As a member of TDR, his performances were extremely revolutionary and explicitly subversive. On many occasions, he was deemed a ‘problematic’ personality (to the point of being beaten up by museum’s guardians and even arrested), but despite this, his works were regularly covered by the local press during the 90s²⁵², serving as an indicator of the liberalization of the system. Among the most critical performances, at TDR’s first exhibition *A Celebration of President Lee Teng Hui's Inauguration* in 1990, he placed a copy of the ROC constitution on the toilet in the bathroom at the Taiwan Documentary Room, leaving nothing else in the bathroom that could be used as toilet paper. He called this work “Our Constitution Can Finally Be Put To Use” (*Women de xianfa zhongyu keyi shiyongle* 我們的憲法終於可以使用了).

²⁴⁹ The location was then moved to “Gam-a” Grocery (*Ganzi dian* 甘仔店).

²⁵⁰ For further information the reader can refer to Amy CHENG, “Return to Society: The History and Politics of Art as Social Intervention—A Look at Taiwan’s Four Phases of Development Since the Fall of Martial Law”, in *Yishu: Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art*, vol. 9, no. 5, 2010.9-10, pp. 28-39

²⁵¹ YAO Juichung, *Installation art in Taiwan. Since 1991-2001* [*Taiwan zhuangzhi yishu* 台灣裝置藝術], Taipei: Muma wenhua shiye gongsi, 2002, p. 8

²⁵² Felix SCHOEBER, *Modernity, nationalism and global marginalization: representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art exhibition. The Taipei fine arts museum and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice 1984-2009*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Westminster, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, 2014, p. 74

Fig. 12. *Our Constitution Can Finally Be Put To Use* (*Women de xianfa zhongyu keyi shiyongle* 我們的憲法終於可以使用了), Lee Ming-sheng 李銘盛, 1990, Installation and Performance, mixed media, in the occasion of TDR's first exhibition *A Celebration of President Lee Teng Hui's Inauguration*, Gam-a Grocery, Taipei.

The fact that such a subversive and politically charged performance, which explicitly ridicules the constitution of the ROC, took place in an independent exhibition, organized by dissident artists in an improvised space, is not inherently surprising. What is interesting is that the same artist, only three years later, formally represented Taiwan's first appearance on the stage of the Venice Biennale, with his controversial *Fire Ball or Circle* (*Huoqiu huo yuan* 火球或圓).

Fig. 13. *Fire Ball or Circle* (*Huoqiu huo yuan* 火球或圓), Lee Ming-sheng 李銘盛, 1993, Installation and Performance, mixed media, in the occasion of the 1993 Venice Biennale, Venice, Arsenale.

The assignment of such an important role to an artist who, only a few years prior, would have been arrested for his performance, is a clear indicator of a broader change: freedom of expression was not solely confined to the fringes of the artworld anymore, but was expanding into the "headquarters". The art professor Wei Hsiu Tung provides a clear depiction of the period with the following words:

In the 1990s, the Taiwanese had unlimited freedom of speech. Artists were very critical of the socio-political issues during this time. They made fun of the constitution of the ROC, satirized the politicians and depicted sexual taboos. [...] As long as the exhibitions and artists' activities were in the name of art, everything could be legitimately displayed. This was unimaginable before political reform occurred and restrictions were relaxed in Taiwan in the 1990s. [...] It seems that nothing exhibited in public museums and galleries was forbidden if the theme of the exhibition did not tend to challenge the governmental authority directly.²⁵³

As Schoeber notes "the mood was changing also inside the halls of the museum."²⁵⁴ The concrete evidence was the 1986 edition of *Trends*, when Wu Tien-chang's (notably, a native Taiwanese artist)²⁵⁵ politically charged canvas titled *Destroyed World Symptom Group* (*Shanghai shijie*

²⁵³ TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, pp. 133-135

²⁵⁴ Felix SCHOEBER, *Modernity, nationalism and global marginalization: representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art exhibition. The Taipei fine arts museum and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice 1984-2009*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Westminster, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, 2014, p. 129

²⁵⁵ Wu Tien-chang was awarded by Ni Zai-chin the title of "the first artist to break political taboos after the lifting of martial law" in his article *The Observation of Taiwanese Art*, published on LionArt in 1995. In this regard, it is important to cite his work "The Rule of Chiang Ching-kuo" (*Guanyu Jiangjingguo de shidai* 關於蔣經國的時代), a series of

zhenghouqun 傷害世界癥候群) won first prize, earning its rightful place within the TFAM. Given that, as Schoeber elucidates, the canvas can readily be interpreted as portraying “Taiwanese history as a crime scene”²⁵⁶, its acceptance inside the walls of the TFAM marks an important turning point. Indeed, the museum, despite not being technically a *national* institution, is still much influenced by governmental policies (see Chapter Three): during the years it came to constitute the supreme arbiter of Taiwanese art, thus exercising the soft power of the government in deciding what is art and what is not. Through the endorsement of Wu’s canvas as legitimate art, the museum, and by extension, the government, recognized prior governmental missteps. Despite not constituting an official apology, it fortified Taiwanese ethnic identity, by letting the representation of common socio-political experience enter the walls of the “ivory tower” of Taiwanese art, and thus the realm of what is accepted. It is crucial to clarify at this juncture that these advancements do not necessarily indicate the complete liberation of the museum from ideological control; on the contrary, the subsequent chapter will underline how “this new mental space still was a rather limited and tightly controlled space.”²⁵⁷

Fig. 14. *Destroyed World Symptom Group* (*Shanghai shijie zhenghouqun* 傷害世界癥候群), Wu Tien-chang 吳天章, 1986, oil on canvas, 219.6 x 390, 86 x 195 cm, Taipei Fine Arts Museum.

The increasing politicization of art by the late 1990s sparked a newfound interest in artists who had previously been marginalized, including women, minorities, and notably, those from the southern regions of Taiwan.²⁵⁸

Despite the cultural policies initiated by Chiang Ching-kuo, aimed at decentralizing cultural resources across the island, Taiwan’s artistic landscape had long been characterized by a geographical imbalance. Particularly since the establishment of the TFAM, the major hub of artistic creativity has always been identified with Taipei and its surroundings, relegating cities like Kaohsiung and Taichung to mere “industrial centers” and Tainan, once the capital of culture, to a site of mere historical interest.

portraits of the Taiwanese president, which was then expanded into a whole body of works entitled “Historical Icons” (*Shixue tuxiang* 史學圖像), including also images of Chiang Kai-shek, Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping.

²⁵⁶ Felix SCHOEBER, *Modernity, nationalism and global marginalization: representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art exhibition. The Taipei fine arts museum and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice 1984-2009*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Westminster, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, 2014, p. 124

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p. 116

²⁵⁸ YANG Wen-I, *Negotiating Traditions: Taiwanese Art since the 1980s*, PhD thesis submitted to the Ruperto-Carola University of Heidelberg, Faculty of Philosophy and History, 2002, p. 45

For the first time during the 90s artists in southern Taiwan claimed the recognition of their contribution in the making of contemporary Taiwanese art, challenging “[a form of] cultural consciousness which assumed the primacy of the northern Taiwanese style.”²⁵⁹ Evidently, by looking at the contemporary map of creative hubs in Taiwan, the attempt of the Southerners to reach an equal status with metropolitan Taipei has been successful.

2.5.3 The role of the Taipei Biennial and the Taiwan Pavilion

We have observed the evolution of Taiwan’s domestic artistic landscape into a complex and diverse system facilitated by the establishment of TFAM and the emergence of independent art spaces. The introduction of significant events such as the Taipei Biennial in 1992²⁶⁰ and the inauguration of the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice in 1995 further enriched this intricate framework. The Taipei Biennial played a significant role in the emergence of thematic exhibitions and consequently, in the establishment of the curator’s role²⁶¹, which was later formalized through the Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Notably, the primary aim of the new Biennial, one of the earliest in Asia, was to recognize and exhibit artists, not simply single works of art.²⁶²

This apparently simple gesture implied a radical epistemological change of the status of the work of art: implicitly this abolished the former standards of mere aesthetic appreciation of single objects, rather favouring objects that were part of cultural discourse. This new approach to the work of art even called for a new intellectual figure: the art curator, the mind behind the critical narrative of an art show.²⁶³

Despite the evident difficulties of establishing a curatorial and art criticism system in a country transitioning from decades of martial law, with the “1996 Taipei Biennial: The quest for identity”

²⁵⁹ XIAO Qiong-rui, "Art in Southern Taiwan", in LOSE, NICHOLAS & YANG (Eds), *Art Taiwan*, Sydney: G+B Arts International, 1995, pp. 90-93, p. 90

²⁶⁰ *Trends* by 1988 had lost credibility of the aesthetic standards, and in 1992 was abolished and substituted by the Taipei Biennial.

²⁶¹ In Taiwan, the title of *zeren yiping* (責任藝評) which translates to "responsible critic," is frequently utilized to denote the figure of “curator-critic” for an exhibition. Indeed, the development of the curator’s role in Taiwan largely stemmed from the traditional role of the critic. The first curatorial experiments took place both in private galleries as well as in the basement of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum. In WEI Yu, “Waste, Noise, and Local Art Exhibitions”, in *Yishu: Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art*, vol.18, no. 2, 2019, pp. 68-91, pp. 70-72

²⁶² Felix SCHOEBER, *Modernity, nationalism and global marginalization: representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art exhibition. The Taipei fine arts museum and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice 1984-2009*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Westminster, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, 2014, pp. 120-121

²⁶³ *Ibidem*.

(*Taiwan yishu de zhutixing* 台灣藝術的主體性)²⁶⁴, the role of the curator was established, and the path had been opened for the blossoming of thematic exhibitions at local, national and international level.

The Taiwan Pavilion in Venice can be credited with formally initiating dialogue between Taiwan and the international community, and still consistently serves as the primary platform for communication, making it an essential channel for showcasing Taiwanese art (and not only) to the world. Organized by the TFAM²⁶⁵, the Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice Art Biennale places the museum in a pivotal position, exerting significant influence over the national image projected to the world. Over the years, through the careful selection of artists and artworks, and space manipulation, the curators responsible for organizing the Taiwan Pavilion have employed various strategies to address questions such as “How does Taiwan’s contemporary art assess the rapidly changing, diversely complex Taiwanese society?” and “How does it respond to the rich variety of the contemporary world art?”²⁶⁶ In this sense, the establishment of both the Taipei Biennial and the Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale surely constitutes a significant leap forward for Taiwanese artistic advancement: these ‘cultural events’ developed and elevated the role of curators and offered artists and the broader Taiwanese art community the chance to engage with the international art scene. However, it would be erroneous to limit the significance of these biennials solely to the domain of art. Rather, they represent a crucial juncture in the shaping of Taiwanese national and cultural identity, thus deeply influencing governmental policies.

As Schoeber notes, if we briefly revisit the 1980s, prior to the lifting of martial law, the primary objective of the TFAM and the *Trends* exhibition can be identified as the cultivation of a “Chinese” modernity.²⁶⁷ By the mid-1990s, however, Taiwanese society and its government had substantially shifted away from this objective. Indeed, the new Taiwan Pavilion can be seen as an

²⁶⁴ It is remarkable and highly explicative that the first thematic nucleus chosen revolves around identity issues.

²⁶⁵ While Taichung’s National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts is responsible for the Taiwan Pavilion at Venice Architecture Biennale.

²⁶⁶ LIN Mun-lee, “Director’s Preface”, in: *Taiwan Taiwan, Facing Faces*, Taipei, Venice: TFAM, 1997, p. 2. Cited in Felix SCHOEBER, *Modernity, nationalism and global marginalization: representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art exhibition. The Taipei fine arts museum and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice 1984-2009*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Westminster, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, 2014, p. 215

²⁶⁷ “In the 1980s, before the lifting of martial law, the construction of modernity, or rather, a Chinese modernity, is the chief goal of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum and the Trends exhibition.”, Ibid. p. 45

attempt to reconstruct a *national microcosm*²⁶⁸ that could be representative of the nation. This reconstructed microcosm, and thus the artists and artworks that constitute it, have the task of showcasing both Taiwan's beauty and its challenges to the global audience. In essence, Taiwan's quest for identity has undergone a consistent evolution in strategy: from the construction of a national identity to the branding of the nation to the outside world. Within a decade, cultural management transitioned from an endeavor to internally forge a Taiwanese own version of modernity to confidently exhibiting the achieved modernity to the international community, thus continuing to shape and explore its identity through the dialogue with the Other. At present time, both the Taipei Biennial and the Taiwan Pavilion hold significant importance for a country ignored in other official contexts²⁶⁹, therefore, the judicious selection of artists becomes imperative in constructing a complex and modern national narrative, crucial "to raise awareness and gain recognition and support."²⁷⁰

2.5.4 Contemporary cultural policies

If the year 1996 in terms of "international relations" witnessed the birth of the Taipei Biennial, the domestic landscape showed no less important changes. Indeed, in the same year, the establishment of Taiwan's National Culture and Arts Foundation (NCAF)²⁷¹ signaled a shift in government support for arts and culture, wherein subsidies were provided indirectly through this newly formed institution rather than directly.²⁷² The creation of the NCAF held particular significance in fostering the growth of art spaces, marking the first instance where governmental cultural policies began to extend support to creative endeavors outside the official channels. Subsequent chapters will delve into how this institutionalization of the alternative provided resources for these spaces to flourish, yet also posed potential limitations on their creative freedom. Indeed, as Lai Meng-yu points out, if the NCAF in theory was conceived as an arm's-length body rather than a government organization, in practice it

²⁶⁸ Ibid. pp. 44-45

²⁶⁹ Currently, Taiwan's representation at the Biennale is designated not as a "national pavilion" but rather as a "collateral exhibition." While this arrangement informally promotes Taiwan's interests, it does not confer official recognition of Taiwan as a distinct nation within the Biennale framework. This lack of formal recognition carries symbolic implications as well as political tensions and practical limitations. This concept will be further explored in the subsequent chapter.

²⁷⁰ Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, p. 3

²⁷¹ The Chinese name is *Caituan faren guojia wenhua Yishu jijin hui* 財團法人國家文化藝術基金會, often abbreviated as *Guoyihui* 國藝會.

²⁷² LAI Meng-Yu, *Taiwanese Identity and the Performing Arts: the Development of Programming at the National Performing Arts Centre*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of London, Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies, 2020, p. 125

remains subject to considerable governmental influence, particularly through its funding mechanisms. Although the NCAF asserts its independence from the Cultural Construction Association (CCA) and the Ministry of Culture (MOC), its Board of Directors is appointed by these government bodies and confirmed by the Premier of the Executive Yuan.²⁷³

The establishment of the NCAF was followed, a decade later, in 2012, by the launch of the new Ministry of Culture (MOC) which epitomized the more central status of cultural affairs in the Government, and the will of the Government to maintain the effort in the process of *democratizing culture*,²⁷⁴ that is to say to ensure that every village and township in the nation, regardless of its geographic remoteness, has an equal chance to achieve its full cultural potential.

Cultural rights, like political, economic and social rights, are basic human rights to be enjoyed by every citizen. [...] While cultural rights are the property of every citizen, society and the nation as a whole become the beneficiaries, as social cohesion is founded on having citizens engaged in their country's cultural life.²⁷⁵

In recent years, and particularly thanks to the birth of the MOC, local governments and civil society are actively trying to bridge the long-existent rural-urban gap, thus leveling out inconsistencies in terms of spending power and technological infrastructure. Besides this, huge efforts have been made also in terms of achieving *cultural democracy*, by involving the public in suggesting and deciding the formation of cultural policy. A completely new era for Taiwan's cultural development has begun, characterized by "cultural rights, cultural democracy, support for artists, and the interest in creative industries."²⁷⁶

2.6 Contemporary Taiwanese artworld: since the 2000s to the present day

Given the uncertain international status of the country, in contemporary Taiwan cultural affairs have assumed a prominent position on the political agenda, and this is true for all political parties.²⁷⁷ Taiwan, despite retaining the "unrealistically outdated"²⁷⁸ *Constitution of the Republic of China*

²⁷³ Ibidem.

²⁷⁴ Ibid. pp. 131-132

²⁷⁵ MOC (2015), cited in Ibid. pp. 136-137

²⁷⁶ Ibid. p. 139

²⁷⁷ Ibid. pp. 92-93

²⁷⁸ Ibid. p. 110

(1947), accords Culture equal importance to National Defence, Foreign Affairs, National Economy, Social Security/Welfare, and Education. This is reflected in at least four articles in Chapter XIII (*Fundamental National Policies*), Section 5 of the Constitution. These articles delineate the role of culture (Article 158), stipulate the minimum government budget allocated for cultural initiatives²⁷⁹, outline support for artists, and emphasize the protection of heritage and cultural assets. In Taiwan today, there are two distinct central government departments responsible for overseeing arts and culture: the Council of Cultural Affairs focuses on administrative duties, while the NCAF is primarily responsible for governmental funding.²⁸⁰

Contemporary Taiwanese visual arts largely align with many other Asian countries to the trend of being *globally connected while locally engaged*, that is to say, the desire to showcase national and cultural distinctiveness while also maintaining an international perspective.²⁸¹ Indeed, the new generation of artists who didn't experience martial law, and whose memories "were not occupied by the heavy historic shadow of an identity dilemma"²⁸², do not feel compelled to invent an identity for themselves. Born into a democratic country with an already fierce identity, they enjoy the privilege of engaging with global thematic and individual issues in their artistic expression, while focusing on "the innovation and quality of their creative work, that is no longer related to cultural identity."²⁸³ The Taiwanese artworld in the last two decades is experiencing what Hal Foster has theorized as a generational reaction against an *impasse* in which art became embroiled in cultural conflict.²⁸⁴

²⁷⁹ 第 164 條: 教育、科學、文化之經費, 在中央不得少於其預算總額百分之十五, 在省不得少於其預算總額百分之二十五, 在市縣不得少於其預算總額百分之三十五。其依法設置之教育文化基金及產業, 應予以保障。
Article 164: Expenditures of educational programs, scientific studies and cultural services shall not be, in respect of the Central Government, less than 15 percent of the total national budget; in respect of each province, less than 25 percent of the total provincial budgets; and in respect of each municipality or hsien, less than 35 percent of the total municipal or hsien budget. Educational and cultural foundations established in accordance with law shall, together with their property, be protected. (Translation directly sourced from official government records).

²⁸⁰ TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, pp. 255-256

²⁸¹ Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, p. 3

²⁸² JI Huei-ling (2019), cited in LAI Meng-Yu, *Taiwanese Identity and the Performing Arts: the Development of Programming at the National Performing Arts Centre*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of London, Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies, 2020, p. 162

²⁸³ Lai Meng-yu's 2018 interview to independent producer Sun Ping (孫平), translation from Mandarin by Lai Meng-yu, cited in *Ibid.* p. 161

²⁸⁴ Hal FOSTER, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993

Contemporary Taiwanese younger artists are transcending the confines of identity politics²⁸⁵ and moving towards what Foster refers to as a ‘return of the real’, which in Foster’s words “converges with the return of the *referential*.”²⁸⁶ In the Taiwanese context, this “referential” often manifests in a renewed interest in the body, the territory and the community, as well as in things of everyday life and society.

In other words, the artworld now experienced by the younger generations was established in an era in which “the ‘Taiwaneseness’ (*Taiwan xing* 台灣性) was already well established and the country’s multiculturalism sufficiently firmly embedded that there was no longer any need to emphasize Taiwanese elements.”²⁸⁷ In Yang Mao-lin’s words: “Taiwan had become Taiwanised...(and) there was nothing to resist anymore.”²⁸⁸ Therefore, today artworks of Taiwanese artists are considered ‘Taiwanese’, regardless if they contain special elements or convey determined sentiments. As Chien Wen-pin (簡文彬) phrases it: “The way that Taiwanese artists create, interpret or perform is instinctively different from that of artists of different nationalities and that is why they are ‘Taiwanese’.”²⁸⁹

Art in Taiwan finally gained the right to describe the most ordinary things and actions of daily life, which in the end appear to be also the most universal. While in Taiwan before the 1990s, this ordinary “world” was more or less ignored because the consciousness of local artists was strong²⁹⁰, during the last two decades and up to the present day, the new generation, freed from the task of

²⁸⁵ TUNG Wei Hsiu, “‘The Return of the Real’: Art and identity in Taiwan’s public sphere”, in *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, vol. 11, no. 2-3, 2012, pp. 55-56

²⁸⁶ Hal FOSTER, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993, p. 168. The emphasis is mine.

²⁸⁷ LAI Meng-Yu, *Taiwanese Identity and the Performing Arts: the Development of Programming at the National Performing Arts Centre*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of London, Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies, 2020, p. 239

²⁸⁸ Yang Mao-lin interview with McIntyre, Taipei, 2007, Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan’s Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, p. 291

²⁸⁹ Lai Meng-yu interview to Chien Wen-pin (簡文彬), former National Symphony Orchestra Music Director and current Artistic Director to the National Performing Arts Center (NPAC), translation from Mandarin by Lai Meng-yu, in LAI Meng-Yu, *Taiwanese Identity and the Performing Arts: the Development of Programming at the National Performing Arts Centre*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of London, Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies, 2020, p. 243

²⁹⁰ CHEN Yuxiu 陳郁秀 (Ed.), *The beauty of Taiwanese contemporary art Taiwan [dangdai yishu zhimei 台灣當代藝術之美]*, Taipei: Diancang yishu jiating gongsi 典藏藝術家庭公司, 2004, p. 84, Translation by Andrew Wilson

flagging a newborn national identity, finally started to pay attention to the most simple things: subject matters gradually evolved from heavy issues such as national history to lively autobiographical narratives, and honest depictions of inner feelings. This major shift gave birth to several interesting currents in artistic practice, such as the current of “nonsense images” (*Wulitou yingxiang* 無厘頭影像)²⁹¹, which rejects painting conceived as a vehicle for great meaning and embraces painting as a flow of imaginings and feelings. Artists in Taiwan, who have always been fascinated by nonsensical behavior and “silliness” in the arts²⁹², have nowadays developed a unique way of combining the *funny* and the *Kitsch* with profound subtexts and a unique aesthetic.

Fig. 15. *God: No. 228 (Shen: Bianhao 228 神：編號 228)*, Shy Gong 施工忠昊, 1999, installation, mixed media, 2.4 x 1.5 x 1.6 m, 228 Memorial Museum. The artist employs a commercial aesthetic to satirize the historical tragedy of the 2/28 incident. Fashionably attired, attractive young women distribute contraband cigarettes from the rear of a truck. As per instructions, each cigarette pack can be folded into a miniature shrine commemorating the events of February 28th.

Thanks to the charismatic personality of many artists, since the late 90s and during these two decades of the new millennium, Taiwanese art on the international stage proved to be particularly impudent – especially within the field of installation art: the themes vary from the playful satire of important historical and political events (Shy Gong, *Second Generation Taiwan Fu-Da Temple* and *God: No.228*; Lin Quo-wu, *Jiu Jiu Emperor Gong Fu*) to religious mockery (Hung Yi, *The Incense Burner of Bei-Gang* and *Happy Buddha*; Yang Mao-lin, *Contemplative Peter Pan Bodhisattva in Great Future of Maha*) to more or less explicit sexual contents (Hou Chun-Ming, *A record of collecting Spirits, Virginal-Experience, Say Yes My Boy!, Sinners in Paradise, Home of Fire*; Huang Chih-Yang, *Maternity Room*), and to the ridiculing of the exhibition venue itself.

Fig. 16. *Contemplative Peter Pan Bodhisattva in Great Future of Maha (Mo he weilai guang shijie de siwei-xiongmao fuyin pusa 摩诃未来光世界的思维-熊猫福音菩萨)*, Yang Mao-Lin 楊茂林, 2005, Bronze Sculpture with Gold Foil, 67.5 x 67.5 x 117.5 cm

Fig. 17. *Home of Fire (Huo tang 火堂)*, Hou Chun-Ming 侯俊明, 1998, paper, table, water basin, towel, fire, Taipei Fine Arts Museum.

Fig. 18. *Sinners in Paradise (Yuetuan zuiren 樂團罪人)*, Hou Chun-Ming 侯俊明, 1996, Prints: set of four, Laminate oil print, handmade cotton paper, 219×191 cm

²⁹¹ Ibid. p. 86

²⁹² As inferred from the considerable fascination Dada has always evoked among Taiwanese young artists.

In conclusion, contemporary Taiwanese art possesses significant freedom of expression. As previously emphasized, the revolution in subject matter often entails changes in the chosen medium of artistic expression.

The emancipation of Taiwanese art in terms of subject matters has been supported on a technical level by a significant technological advancement, that, throughout the late 1990s and 2000s, has led to the proliferation and exploration of various artistic mediums. Notably, photographic and video art emerged as distinguishing features of Taiwanese artistic expression, maintaining prominence even in contemporary times, both in official and unofficial contexts. Presently, Taiwanese art is characterized by extensive utilization of advanced technology, facilitating the creation of immersive artworks through the integration of 3D modeling alongside sound, laser, and light effects, thus showcasing innovation in artistic practice.

Fig. 19. *reCONNECT 2022: BORDERLESS CANVAS*, Future Vision Lab in collaboration with National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts (NTMOFA), 2022, immersive audio-visual experiential space, mixed materials, NTMOFA's U108 Space. Utilizing cloud computing and 5G high-speed internet connectivity, the project incorporated an immersive performance platform, a dual-site co-performance initiative (simultaneously hosted at NTMOFA and Art Space II Square in Taipei), and a multi-person interactive system allowing audiences to engage in dialogue via a web application. This approach transcended spatial limitations, enabling participants to partake in shared sensory experiences.²⁹³

As reiterated throughout this chapter, while the transition in represented subjects often corresponds to a change in the expressive medium, the change in the expressive medium subsequently influences the choice of exhibition venues. Regarding the exhibition venue domain, among the contemporary trends in Taiwanese art, the past three decades have witnessed a proliferation of *public art* projects.²⁹⁴ These initiatives frequently manifest as *site-specific* installations in urban and rural environments. As Tung notes, this mode of artistic creation and appreciation holds significant importance, given that the integration of *art into the public sphere* in Taiwan has emerged as a rich platform for interdisciplinary collaboration between various stakeholders, including art professionals, activists, architects, urban planners, scholars, educators, and civil servants²⁹⁵, among others. Typically, alongside large museums, artists and curators are increasingly inclined to involve themselves in *off-*

²⁹³ <https://artemperor.tw/focus/5057> accessed 19 March 2024

²⁹⁴ TUNG Wei Hsiu, “‘The Return of the Real’: Art and identity in Taiwan’s public sphere”, in *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, vol. 11, no. 2-3, 2012, pp. 1-2

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 21

site spaces and exhibitions, situated “away from metropolitan museums and galleries – as beyond, rather than as satellites to – major city”²⁹⁶. This artistic approach has facilitated the reintegration of art into everyday life, actively engaging with local communities and addressing tangible issues within them.²⁹⁷

For its property to foster inter-sector communication, contribute to everyday *utility* by pointing out and solving problems, and engage with the broader community, public art is extensively sponsored by the government, at a national and local level (in this regard, the Taipei County stands out as one of the earliest and most proactive entities at the national level in providing funding for such initiatives.²⁹⁸) For the same reasons, off-site spaces and exhibitions, despite often taking the form of artist-run spaces and self-organized events, are paradoxically highly promoted by the government too.

Fig. 20. *Drop It in the River*, Yi-Ren Hou Gallagher, March 20, 1994, site-specific installation and performance, Taipei County. A massive bullet-shaped object, weighing three hundred kilograms and engraved with 1,056 characters detailing the geographical and historical background of the Tanshui River, was abruptly dropped into the river. This artwork functioned as a manifesto to reframe art in a social context.

Socially engaged art remains a favored artistic form; however, in contrast to the 1980s and 1990s, it is now less politicized (in the sense of critique towards party politics). Presently, it is more inclined to address global-local issues such as environmental degradation and civil rights deficiencies.²⁹⁹ One of the prominent figures at the forefront of this evolving art form is Wu Mali, who is recognized as a pioneer in environmental art and feminist artworks.

²⁹⁶ Beccy KENNEDY, “Border Praxis: Negotiating and Performing “Hong Kong-ese-ness” and “Taiwaneseness” in contemporary, political ‘Chinese’ art practices”, in *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, vol. 3, no. 1-2, 2016, p. 10

²⁹⁷ LU Pei-Yi, “What is Off-site Art?”, in *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vol. 9, No. 5, September/October 2010, pp. 7-12, p. 11

²⁹⁸ Two examples are *Environmental Art* in 1994 and *Resurgence on the Tanshui River* in 1995, which are respectively the 6th and 7th Taipei County Art Exhibitions. The “Taipei County Cultural Center (TCCC)’s interest towards real spaces in the community and its engagement with the public, as well as its inclination to collaborate with young artists outside the mainstream culture, are believed to be a consequence of the management of the Democratic Progressive Party (Lu Pei-Yi, 2016 & Wei Yu, 2019).

²⁹⁹ “Recent Taiwan’s socially engaged art sets aside the obsolete national identity paradigm to seek, instead, new transnational approaches in which there is no univocal concept of identity or community.” In Roberto Riccardo ALVAU, *(Dis)centering the locality: The emergence and establishment of participatory art practices in Taiwan (1994-2022)*, 2022 (Unpublished Draft), p. 10. The evolution of socially engaged art is also traced in KENNEDY Beccy, “Border Praxis: Negotiating and Performing “Hong Kong-ese-ness” and “Taiwaneseness” in contemporary, political ‘Chinese’ art practices”, in *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, vol. 3, no. 1-2, 2016, p. 3

Fig. 21. *Of the river – A community based eco-art project (Ren zai jianghu-danshui he su he xingdong 人在江湖-淡水河溯河行動)*, Wu Mali 吳瑪俐, 2006, performance, Tanshui River, IT Park. Every day, for four consecutive days, the artist, together with university students, chose one river branch for river trekking. After that, they held a river-trekking conversation at ITPARK, to discuss the often-ignored importance of the river in the community lifestyle.

Fig. 22. *Fabric (Xinling beidan 心靈被單)*, Wu Mali 吳瑪俐, 2000, video tape. From 2000 to 2004 Wu Mali, in collaboration with Taipei City's Awakening Foundation, held the workshop "Stitching Sisterhood Workshop" (*cong nai de pifu li suxing 從妳的皮膚裡甦醒*), which aims to encourage women to self-awareness by combining artmaking and women's awakening.

Another characteristic of the contemporary artistic landscape in Taiwan is the proliferation of *artist-in-residence* programs. These programs facilitate communication among artists from diverse backgrounds worldwide, thereby contributing to ongoing innovation within Taiwanese art. Adapted from Western models to suit the local context, this particular form of artistic engagement not only constantly expands the field of artists' performance and art making, but also fosters collaborations between artists and "architects, town planners, ecologists, and local residents."³⁰⁰ As it was for off-site and public art, governmental support for these activities is considerable. Subsequent chapters will explore how in this particular case government involvement can be dangerous and even lethal to artist-in-residence projects' prosperity and survival.

Among the exhibition venues that remained a constant throughout the history of the past four decades, are the many private galleries. Among the most famous, it is important to cite Lung-men Gallery (or Dragon Gate Gallery, *Long men hualang 龍門畫廊*), Hanart TZ (*Han ya xuan 漢雅軒*), SOKA Art Center (*Suoka Yishu Zhongxin 索卡藝術中心*), Eslite Gallery (*Chengpin hualang 誠品畫廊*), and Lin & Lin Gallery (*Da weilai lin she hualang 大未來林舍畫廊*, formerly Lin & Keng Gallery). Certainly, galleries serve as essential entities within the art ecology of every nation, but in the context of Taiwanese art, their role is particularly crucial. Following the Taiwanese economic boom after the lifting of martial law, there was a notable commodification of the art world. This economic shift led to speculation and transformed art into a favored investment avenue, as evidenced by the proliferation of galleries and auction houses during that period.³⁰¹ Presently, Taiwan boasts numerous collectors of international renown, and the art market is predominantly driven by large-scale art fairs. Among these, the Taipei Dangdai Art Fair (*Taipei dangdai yishu bolanhui 台北當代*

³⁰⁰ TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, p. 267

³⁰¹ In 1993, the Taiwan Art Gallery Association was established with the aim of regulating the tumultuous art environment.

藝術博覽會) stands out as a pivotal event in attracting global art galleries and media to Taipei.³⁰² Undoubtedly, Taipei's art scene is currently more vibrant than ever, yet there exists a flip side to the intense focus on the commercialization of art. Subsequent chapters will explore this aspect in greater detail; within the framework of the present chapter, it is imperative to acknowledge capitalism and the commodification of art as significant actors pulling the strings in the contemporary Taiwanese artworld. Numerous artists have criticized the overemphasis placed on the marketability of a work of art in its evaluation.

Fig. 23. *Our faith* (*Women de xinyang* 我們的信仰), Lee Ming sheng 李銘盛, 1992, installation and Performance, gold bricks and one thousand 100 NTD notes, dimensions variable, Taiwania Gallery (*Taiwan ni ya hualang* 台灣泥雅畫廊), Taipei. Critique of the cult of money spreading in Taiwan in the 1990s and the capitalization of art.

Conclusions

Over the past four decades, Taiwanese art has transcended decades-long debates surrounding dichotomies such as *traditional* versus *contemporary*, *Eastern* versus *Western*, and *local* versus *international*. This evolution has seen Taiwanese art progress from stringent conservatism and suppression to a state of complete liberation in both subject matters and expressive mediums. Today art and society are tied together in a liberal and democratic relationship that enables “art practices [to] circulate freely in public space.”³⁰³ To cite Yao Jui-chung, today “on this overlooked and obscure island, there is a burgeoning force of new art spreading, like a celestial thunderbolt, emitting dazzling and colorful brilliance.”³⁰⁴

While in the past it has been considered the hypothesis of Taiwanese art being a mere re-blossoming of global styles in a different environment,³⁰⁵ the present chapter has endeavored to elucidate how, especially since the 80s, through the force of political democratization, economic

³⁰² These large-scale art fairs are frequently hosted in upscale hotels, attracting collectors ranging from small-scale to prominent figures, who frequently purchase artworks as symbols of status.

³⁰³ CHENG Amy, “Return to Society: The History and Politics of Art as Social Intervention—A Look at Taiwan's Four Phases of Development Since the Fall of Martial Law”, in *Yishu: Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art*, vol. 9, no. 5, 2010.9-10, pp. 28-39, p. 37

³⁰⁴ “在这块被世界忽略的 蕞尔小岛上，正有一股新艺术的爆发力正蔓延开来，就像天体大霹雳般，散发出炫丽缤纷的光芒。” YAO Juichung, *Installation art in Taiwan. Since 1991-2001* [*Taiwan zhuangzhi yishu* 台灣裝置藝術], Taipei: Muma wenhua shiye gongsi, 2002, p. 11

³⁰⁵ CHEN Yuxiu 陳郁秀 (Ed.), *The beauty of Taiwanese contemporary art Taiwan* [*dangdai yishu zhimei* 台灣當代藝術之美], Taipei: Diancang yishu jiating gongsi 典藏藝術家庭公司, 2004, pp. 197-198, Translation by Andrew Wilson

liberalization, social and urban development, and local consciousness, Taiwanese art developed “the courage to satirize politics, criticize international hegemony, give expression to individual experience, show concern for the small things in life, and praise the vulgar, boring and even experiment with different approaches.”³⁰⁶ In this sense, the ease with which Taiwanese culture has absorbed the aesthetic taste of different cultures during different eras is nothing more than a reflection of the “great fertility of the local artistic environment”³⁰⁷, which, through the use of the most disparate artistic forms from all over the world, since the 80s has demonstrated *audacity* in the international exhibitions and *maturity* in its local creative environment.

Drawing definitive conclusions about contemporary art, particularly within the context of Taiwan, proves challenging due to its ongoing evolutionary process: scholars widely concur that contemporary art in Taiwan is currently undergoing a transitional phase. However, its transdisciplinarity, its experimental and young nature, and its close relationship with civil society, together with the progressive acculturation of the masses to fine arts and cultural democracy in governmental policies, suggest that the trajectory taken by Taiwanese contemporary art could be the right one.

This chapter has elucidated how the artistic environment in Taiwan has undergone a complex history: today, the (occasionally dysfunctional) dialogue between the various actors, institutional intrusiveness, and the island’s ambiguous positioning on the global stage, carry on its ongoing complex nature and its fragile balance. In the forthcoming two chapters, our focus will be directed towards two significant actors in the Taiwanese art system, respectively the *institutions* (encompassing museums, cultural policies, and so on) and the *independent spaces* (which serve as conduits for the creative endeavors of emerging artists). We will explore the vital necessity of fostering a dialogical relationship between these two entities, rather than perpetuating a dichotomous one, for the effective operation of the *art ecology* within the Taiwanese *art ecosystem*.

³⁰⁶ Ibidem.

³⁰⁷ Ibidem.

Chapter two – Index of images



[1]



[2]

Fig 1. From the Series: *The Coming*. Liu Kuo-sung 劉國松, 1970, ink and collage on paper, 207.4 x 81.1 cm, The Cleveland Museum of Art.

Source: <https://medium.com/cma-thinker/east-meets-west-the-fifth-moon-movement-da0d0b625bec> accessed 19 March 2024

Fig. 2. *White Moon* (白月 *Bái yuè*), Hong Tong 洪通, 1974, oil on masonite, 59 x 59 cm.

Source: https://www.askart.com/artist/Tung_Hung/11165793/Tung_Hung.aspx accessed 19 March 2024



[3]

Fig 3. *Floating heart* (*Piaofu de xin* 漂浮的心), Kuo Wei-kuo 郭維國, 1993, oil on canvas, 91 x 116.5 cm. Source: <https://ravenel.com/cata/lotsIn/7aa57ff3-a628-4e4b-bfa6-beab39681446> accessed 20 March 2024



[4]

Fig. 4. *Dysfunction No. 3 (Jineng sangshi di san hao 機能喪失第三號)*, Chen Chieh-Jen 陳界仁, 30 October 1983, performance, Hsimenting (Taipei). Source: <https://www.mplus.org.hk/en/collection/objects/dysfunction-no3-2019636/> accessed 18 March 2023



[5]



[6]

Fig. 5-6. *IT Park Opening Exhibition (Yitong gongyuan kaimu lianzhan 伊通公園開幕聯展)*, 03-31 March 1990.

Source: <https://www.itpark.com.tw/exhibition/data/179> accessed 20 March 2024



[7]

Fig. 7. *The Trembling Lines* (*Changdong de xian* 顫動的線), Tsong Pu 莊普, 1984, wood, paper, iron wire, acrylic on canvas, 75 x 180 cm, Taipei Fine Arts Museum.
Source: https://www.tfam.museum/Exhibition/Exhibition_page.aspx?id=447&ddlLang=en-us accessed 18 March 2024



[8]



[9]

Fig. 8. *Experimental Art - Action and Space/ Light, Air and Water* (*Shiyan Yishu-xingwei yu kongjian |guang, kongqi, shui* 實驗藝術—行為與空間 | 光、空氣、水), show at TFAM basement, B04 space, 11 April 1987 - 21 June 1987. Source: <https://www.itpark.com.tw/exhibition/data/180> accessed 20 March 2024

Fig. 9. Artists Huang Wen-Hao 黃文浩, Chen Hui-Chiao 陳慧嶠, and Tsong Pu 莊普 working at the *Experimental Art - Action and Space/ Light, Air and Water* (*Shiyan Yishu-xingwei yu kongjian |guang, kongqi, shui* 實驗藝術—行為與空間 | 光、空氣、水) show. Source: <https://www.itpark.com.tw/exhibition/data/180/3> accessed 20 March 2024



[10]

Fig. 10. Invitation to the Apartment No. 2 Exhibition at TFAM basement in 1991 “B04 Experimental, 1991—apartment” (*Qianwei, shiyan—gongyu te zhan* 前衛、實驗—公寓特展). Source: Chen Jianbei (陳建北) et al., “Apartment 2 Documentary” (*2 hao gongyu ji shilu* 2 號公寓紀實錄) in *Journal of Liberal Studies*, Vol. 6, 1999, p. 72.



[11]



[12]

Fig. 11. *Love to the Highest Point* (*Ai dao zuigao dian* 愛到最高點), Wu Mali 吳瑪俐, 1990, cake, board, 28 x 42 x 13 cm, in occasion of TDR’s first exhibition *A Celebration of President Lee Teng Hui’s Inauguration*, Gam-a Grocery, Taipei.

Source: Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan’s Quest for Identity* (1987-2010), Leiden: BRILL, 2018, p. 151

Fig. 12. *Our Constitution Can Finally Be Put To Use* (*Women de xianfa zhongyu keyi shiyongle* 我們的憲法終於可以使用了), Lee Ming-sheng 李銘盛, 1990, Installation and Performance, mixed media, in the occasion of TDR’s first exhibition *A Celebration of President Lee Teng Hui’s Inauguration*, Gam-a Grocery, Taipei.

Source: <https://tcaaarchive.org/artwork/我們的憲法終於可以使用了/> accessed 16 March 2024



[13]

Fig. 13. *Fire Ball or Circle* (*Huoqiu huo yuan* 火球或圓), Lee Ming-sheng 李銘盛, 1993, Installation and Performance, mixed media, in the occasion of the 1993 Venice Biennale, Venice, Arsenale.

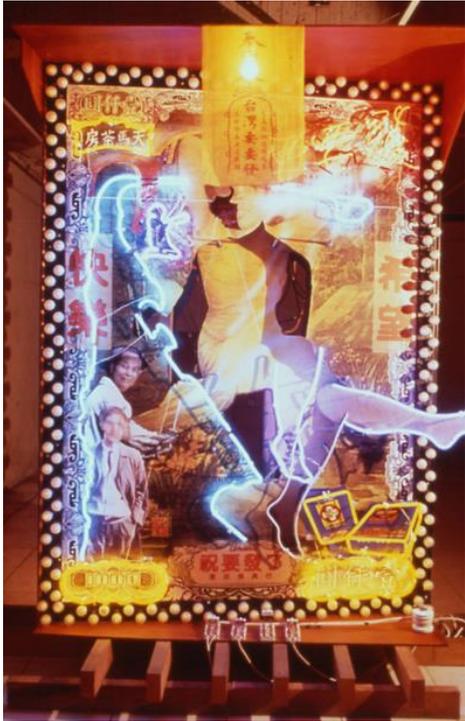
Source: <https://tcaaarchive.org/artwork/火球或圓/> accessed 16 March 2024



[14]

Fig. 14. *Destroyed World Symptom Group* (*Shanghai shijie zhenghouqun* 傷害世界癥候群), Wu Tien-chang 吳天章, 1986, oil on canvas, 219.6 x 390, 86 x 195 cm, Taipei Fine Arts Museum.

Source: https://www.tfam.museum/Exhibition/Exhibition_page.aspx?id=447&ddlLang=en-us accessed 16 March 2024



[15]



[16]

Fig. 15. *God: No. 228 (Shen: Bianhao 228 神：編號 228)*, Shy Gong 施工忠昊, 1999, installation, mixed media, 2.4 x 1.5 x 1.6 m, 228 Memorial Museum.

Source: https://www.deoa.org.tw/artist_info.php?art_no=294 accessed 19 March 2024

Fig. 16. *Contemplative Peter Pan Bodhisattva in Great Future of Maha (Mo he weilai guang shijie de siwei-xiongmao fuyin pusa 摩诃未来光世界的思维-熊猫福音菩萨)*, Yang Mao-Lin 楊茂林 2005, Bronze Sculpture with Gold Foil, 67.5 x 67.5 x 117.5 cm.

Source: <https://www.artnet.com/artists/yang-mao-lin/moheweilaiguangshijiedesiwei-xiongmaofuyinpusa-F4rDbGTXxkJSE18I2vctQA2> accessed 19 March 2024



[17]

Fig. 17. *Home of Fire (Huo tang 火堂)*, Hou Chun-Ming 侯俊明, 1998, paper, table, water basin, towel, fire, Taipei Fine Arts Museum.

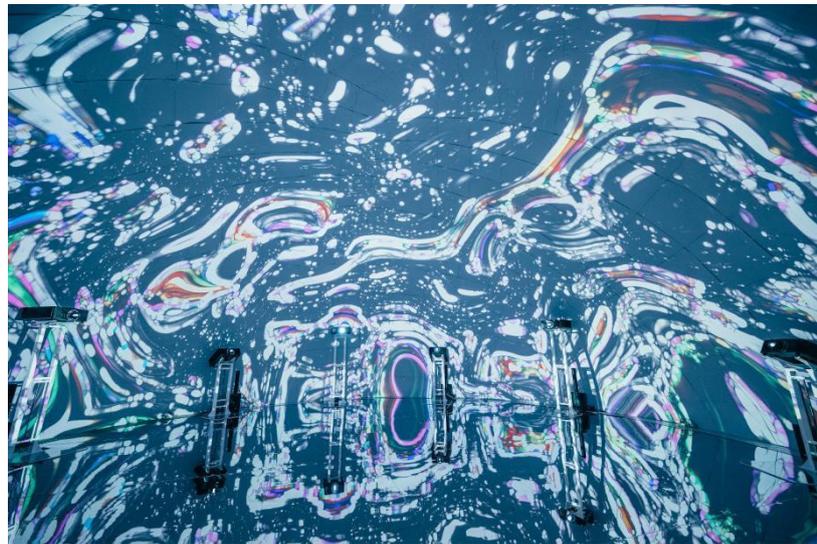
Source: <http://www.legendhou.tw/1998fire.html> accessed 19 March 2024



[18]

Fig. 18. *Sinners in Paradise* (*Yuetuan zuirren* 樂園罪人), Hou Chun-Ming 侯俊明, 1996, Prints: set of four, Laminate oil print, handmade cotton paper, 219×191 cm.

Source: <http://www.legendhou.tw/1996sinner.html> accessed 19 March 2024



[19]

Fig. 19. *reCONNECT 2022: BORDERLESS CANVAS*, Future Vision Lab in collaboration with National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts (NTMOFA), 2022, immersive audio-visual experiential space, mixed materials, NTMOFA's U108 Space.

Source: <https://artemperor.tw/focus/5057> accessed 19 March 2024



[20]

Fig. 20. *Drop It in the River*, Hou Yi-Ren Gallagher, March 20, 1994, site-specific installation and performance, Taipei County.

Source: <https://www.yirengallagher.com/drop-it.html> accessed 19 March 2024



[21]

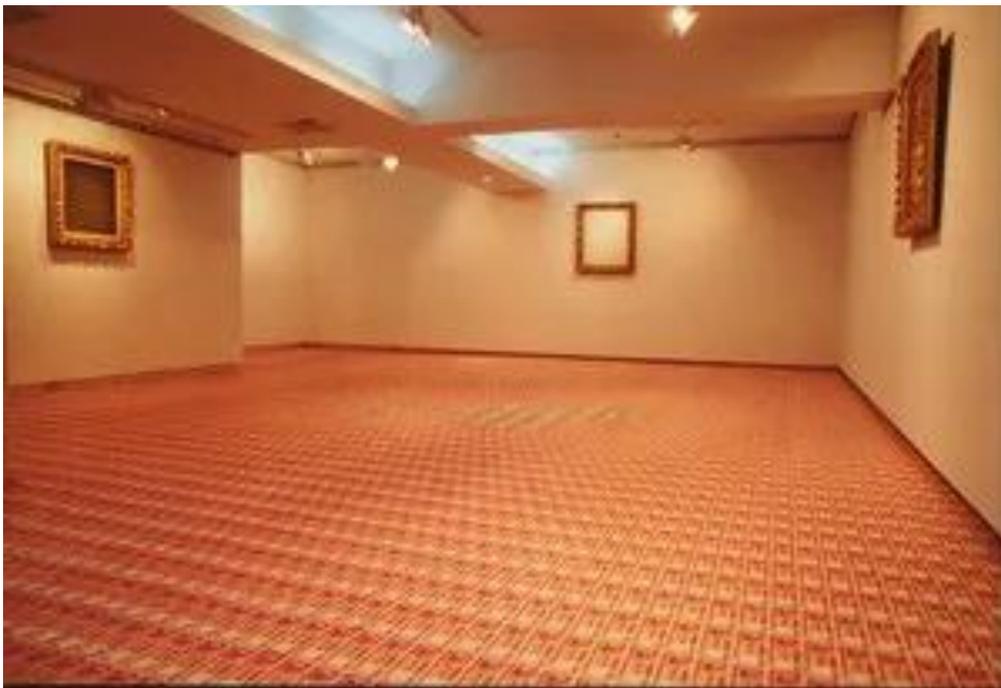
Fig. 21. *Of the river – A community based eco-art project (Ren zai jianghu-danshui he su he xingdong 人在江湖-淡水河溯河行動)*, Wu Mali 吳瑪俐, 2006, performance, Tanshui River, IT Park.

Source: <https://tcaaarchive.org/artwork/人在江湖-淡水河溯河行動/> accessed 19 March 2024



[22]

Fig. 22. *Fabric (Xinling beidan 心靈被單)*, Wu Mali 吳瑪俐, 2000, video tape.
Source: <https://tcaaarchive.org/artwork/從妳的皮膚裡甦醒/> Accessed 20 March 2024



[23]

Fig. 23. *Our faith (Women de Xinyang 我們的信仰)*, Lee Ming sheng 李銘盛, 1992, installation and Performance, gold bricks and one thousand 100 NTD notes, dimensions variable, Taiwania Gallery (*Taiwan ni ya hualang 台灣泥雅畫廊*), Taipei.

Source: <https://tcaaarchive.org/artwork/我們的信仰/> accessed 20 March 2024

Chapter 3 – Cultural nationalism and other forms of institutional violence

“When submitted to politics and capitals, art is a failure”³⁰⁸ affirms Wang Lin (王林), curator of “Voice of the unseen: Chinese Independent Art 1979/Today” (*Mo ceng chengxian de shengyin – Zhongguo duli Yishu zhan* 未曾呈现的声音 – 中国独立艺术展), a collateral event of the 2013 Venice Biennale. This assertion serves as the starting point for the unfolding of the present chapter, whose objective is to analyze the two forms of art subjugation identified by Wang Lin, namely *politics* and *capitals*, with a specific emphasis on the former. Initially, after underscoring the significance of the arts in the process of Taiwanese identitarian formation and discovery, attention will be directed towards examining how political authority has utilized this influential tool, art, to propagate – both domestically and internationally – a vision of national identity that aligns with the dominant ideology of the party in power. Beyond cultural nationalism, which can manifest diversely, the chapter will also delve into other forms of institutional violence. Among these, in the Taiwanese case, the economic reliance of art infrastructure on state support and the usage of art as a tool for cultural diplomacy emerge as the most prominent manifestations.

In the Western perception, Taiwan is often depicted in contrast to the authoritarian People’s Republic of China due to its reputation as a haven for democracy and freedom of expression. For this reason, examining state interventionism in the country’s artistic and cultural affairs may superficially appear paradoxical, unnecessary, or irrelevant. However, to avoid simplistic generalizations, it is crucial to recognize that the intrinsic connection between art and politics is a universal phenomenon observed across all nations, rather than being a peculiarity of authoritarian regimes. In Taiwan, this connection assumes particularly colorful nuances, given the strong relationship between cultural identity and political belonging, already underscored in the previous chapters.

Throughout the chapter, the operational mechanisms of museums, the dynamics inherent in significant art exhibitions such as the Taipei Biennial and the Venice Biennale, as well as the practices of individual artists, single artworks, curatorial statements, and specific cultural policies will be scrutinized. All of these materials will serve as case studies and bases of analysis to shed light on the multifaceted instruments used to exercise cultural nationalism, and more generally, political control.

³⁰⁸ WANG Lin (Ed.), *Voice of the unseen: Chinese Independent Art 1979/Today* [未曾呈现的声音 – 中国独立艺术展], catalog of the homonymous Collateral Event of the 55th Venice Biennial, Heidelberg: Alte Brücke Verlag, 2013, p. 459

In this regard, John Clark has made a distinction between “official forms of national art generated by the government and artistic expressions of nationalism in which the artist has greater *agency*.”³⁰⁹ Given that the process of political control in the arts is multifaceted and involves various actors, this chapter goes beyond this dual differentiation and segments nationalism into four main factors. The most direct form of governmental control can be identified in *cultural policies*, which, as explored in a dedicated section, fluctuate in response to changes in the ruling party and subsequently in national identity. Additionally, governmental control can manifest in many other manners, either overt or covert. *Censorship*, encompassing omissions in catalogs, alteration and even destruction of artworks deemed “unfitting” with the narrative, represents an evident form. Conversely, *museological representation* constitutes a more concealed form, often involving the reinterpretation of non-nationalistic artworks within a nationalist framework, mostly through curatorial decisions. These latter two mechanisms, censorship and museological representation, unlike cultural policies, entail involvement from a range of actors beyond the government, including the institution of the museum (alongside its staff, particularly directors), curators, critics, the press, and essentially the entirety of the art world. In addition to the aforementioned three mechanisms, a fourth aspect can be incorporated into the modes of enacting cultural nationalism: *spontaneous production*. This aspect does not entail involvement of any other actor beyond the artist and represents a genuine expression of the artist’s emotions, likely crafted during a period characterized by heightened cultural nationalism. In this sense, spontaneously nationalistic artworks are simply products of their era.

In this respect, another crucial notion elucidated by Clark, pivotal for the accurate comprehension of this chapter, is the concept of *agency*. Even amidst extremely nationalistic years, it would be erroneous to regard the art community solely as a conduit of governmental directives: subsequent chapters will reveal how numerous artists, art collectives, and art spaces openly challenged the nationalist ideology, by generating narratives and counter-narratives.³¹⁰

Through one crucial preliminary disclaimer the writer of the thesis aims to clarify that this chapter is not intended to vilify cultural nationalism, the government, museums, or institutionalized

³⁰⁹ John CLARK, *Modern Asian Art*, Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1998, p. 239. Cited in Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, p. 4. Emphasis is mine.

³¹⁰ Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, p. 4

art in general. Instead, it seeks to highlight their potential critical points to facilitate a deeper understanding, in the subsequent chapter, of the significance of independent and alternative art.

3.1 Introduction to Cultural Nationalism

The myth of Nationalism tells the story that: “nations exist from time immemorial, and that nationalists must reawaken them from a long slumber to take their place in a world of nations.”³¹¹ However, as argued by several scholars including Smith, Gellner, Anderson, and Rustow, this notion appears to be nothing more than a tale. According to Gellner, it is nationalism that creates nations: “Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness; it invents nations where they do not exist.”³¹² This tendency of nationalists to “persuade oneself that one is discovering what in fact one is trying to create”³¹³ results in the modern conception of the nation as

an abstract concept which *emerges* in specific historical circumstances, ones in which human agency and imagination play a pivotal role. The nation becomes a construct of the modern imagination and an historical invention on the part of particular categories or classes of modern societies.”³¹⁴

The author of the thesis deemed it important to highlight the word “emerges”, for that the concept of “emersion [from history]” is fundamental to Nationalism, as we have seen in the first chapter. In this context, the evocative term coined by the Indian philosopher Homi Bhabha “Vision of emergence”³¹⁵ could be a synonymous of the previously elucidated concept of “narrative of unfolding”.

Nationalism encompasses various levels, spanning from the most radical to more moderate manifestations.³¹⁶ As described by Smith, these levels include the political, economic, and social dimensions, but “at the broadest level nationalism must be seen as a form of historicist culture and

³¹¹ Anthony D. SMITH, *National Identity*, London: Penguin Books, 1991, pp. 19-20

³¹² Ernest GELLNER, *Thought and Change*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964, p. 169

³¹³ Dankwart A. RUSTOW, *A World of Nations: Problems of Political Modernization*, Washington D. C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1967, pp. 25-26

³¹⁴ Anthony D. SMITH, “The Nation: Invented, Imagined, Reconstructed?” in *Millennium*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 1991, pp. 353-368, p. 353. Emphasis is mine.

³¹⁵ Homi K. BHABHA, *Nation and Narration*, New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 294

³¹⁶ LAI Meng-Yu, *Taiwanese Identity and the Performing Arts: the Development of Programming at the National Performing Arts Centre*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of London, Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies, 2020, pp. 56-57

civic education.”³¹⁷ It is this latter aspect that will be discussed henceforth. Despite representing a softer and more moderate form of nationalism, the significance of cultural nationalism should not be overlooked. Especially in the Taiwanese context, it has been primarily this exact form to shape the nationalistic discourse. As pointed out by A-chin Hsiau, culture – specifically “empowerment through cultural uniqueness”³¹⁸ – has been assigned a pivotal role by nationalism in Taiwan.

The work of articulating a sense of Taiwanese national identity has been left primarily to pro-independence humanist intellectuals, who try to authenticate the political assertion of identity by creating collective symbols, reclaiming Taiwanese literature, reviving Hoklo language, and rewriting Taiwanese history [...] that is to say, fostering a historical sense of national distinctiveness.³¹⁹

In this context cultural nationalism, as delineated by Hsiau as “a politics of cultural uniqueness”³²⁰, assumes a significant political function: it holds the capacity to validate the existence of the Taiwanese nation on the basis of its cultural distinctiveness. We will delve deeper into this phenomenon within the broader discussion of cultural policies. For now, it is crucial to introduce the fundamental concept that within Taiwanese nationalism, “the articulation of cultural particularity serves the purpose of demarcating ‘us’ and ‘them’ – ‘us Taiwanese and ‘them Mainlanders/Chinese’.”³²¹

By leveraging Anderson’s concept of a nation as an *imagined construct* that exists within the sphere of *representation*,³²² the nationalist commits to crafting a *narrative*³²³ of the nation that renders a convincing *idea*. From this endeavor arises the Bhabhan concept of “Nation as narration.”³²⁴ As

³¹⁷ Anthony D. SMITH, *National Identity*, London: Penguin Books, 1991, p. 91

³¹⁸ HSIAU A-chin, *Contemporary Taiwanese Cultural Nationalism*, New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 20

³¹⁹ Ibid. pp. 180-181

³²⁰ Ibid. p. 18

³²¹ Ibid. p. 20

³²² Anderson (1983), cited in Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, p. 4

³²³ A-chin Hsiau provides a definition of “narrative” as a form of discourse that places events in a sequential order, “bestowing them with a plot”. He points out how “in narrative, every single event is turned into a part of a larger whole” and how the act of “emplotment” “inevitably involves selection, redescription, simplification, rearrangement” and so on. HSIAU A-chin, “The Indigenization of Taiwanese Literature: Historical Narrative, Strategic Essentialism, and State Violence”, Chapter in J. MAKEHAM, A. HSIAU (Eds), *Cultural, Ethnic, and Political Nationalism in Contemporary Taiwan : Bentuhua*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 129

³²⁴ Homi K. BHABHA, *Nation and Narration*, New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 294

emphasized in the initial chapter and just reiterated by Smith, this narrative often involves the re-writing of history. Hobsbawm concurs with this idea of a constructed and narrativized origin of the nation, asserting that modern nations are crafted through the use of “invented tradition.”

‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. [...] So much of what subjectively makes up the modern ‘nation’ consists of such constructs and is associated with appropriate and, in general, fairly recent symbols or suitably tailored discourse (such as ‘national history’).³²⁵

The present chapter, taking as its starting point this process (theorized, among others, by Anderson and Bhabha) of “writing the nation”³²⁶, will develop its own version of it: “painting the nation”. Unlike literature, where the nation is often portrayed in a discursive manner and through the rewriting of history (which can also occur in art), it will be explored how the realm of visual arts utilized countryside landscape, and symbolism, as well as “local color” to construct an image (literally) of the nation.

3.1.1 The Role of Arts in Nationalism

It is essential to point out an initial clarification when discussing the instrumentalization of arts for nationalistic purposes, to avoid succumbing to the trap of Orientalism.³²⁷ Historically, the arts have always been a privileged path for nationalist discourses across various states worldwide, and it would be erroneous to view it solely as an Asian process or as limited to nations that have undergone significant colonial domination.

In an era of burgeoning nationalism, in the late eighteenth century, Western artists were drawn to the “archaeological drama” of recreated images of ancient Rome and Sparta, or medieval France, England and Germany, and to their political messages of “moral historicism”, the portrayal of examples of public virtue from the past in order to inspire emulation by present generations.³²⁸

Although a differentiation between Western and Eastern forms of Nationalism has long been theorized, however, as Anderson points out in his essay *Western Nationalism and Eastern Nationalism: Is There*

³²⁵ Eric HOBSBAWM, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions”, in HOBSBAWM E., RANGER T. (Eds), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 1-14, pp. 1-14

³²⁶ Term used by Bhabha, in Homi K. BHABHA, *Nation and Narration*, New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 297

³²⁷ Edward W. SAID, *Orientalism*, New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1979

³²⁸ Anthony D. SMITH, *National Identity*, London: Penguin Books, 1991, p. 92

a Difference that Matters?, “the idea that there is a distinctively Asian form of nationalism is not only very much still with us [...] its ultimate origins lie in the notorious insistence of a racist European imperialism that ‘East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.’”³²⁹ Indeed, this phenomenon is not inherently linked to any government or state in particular but rather stems from the very nature of art and its ability to vividly depict concepts. In Smith’s words:

Nationalists, intent on celebrating or commemorating the nation, are drawn to the dramatic and creative possibilities of artistic media and genres in painting, sculpture, architecture, music, opera, ballet and film, as well in the arts and crafts. Through these genres nationalist artists may, directly or evocatively, “reconstruct” the sights, sounds and images of the nation in all its concrete specificity and with “archaeological” verisimilitude. [...] Who, more than poets, musicians, painters and sculptors, could bring the national ideal to life and disseminate it among the people.³³⁰

There is, however, one important difference to point out, which, as we will observe, has had dramatic implications for the artworld: compared to great Western powers, whose nationalism dates back to the late 18th century, *Taiwanese* nationalism (not to be confused with the *Chinese* Nationalism of the KMT in Taiwan³³¹) originated two centuries later, in the 1970s, with the “native soil” movement. Hsiao concurs with this notion, by defining Taiwanese nationalism as an “historical latecomer.”³³² Indeed, if the last three decades of the 20th century are generally an era in which “the political form of the nation-state is taken for granted, and when the concepts of citizenship and national self-determination are widely accepted,”³³³ this assertion does not hold true for Taiwan, which continues to struggle with challenges related to international recognition and sovereignty. Based on the aforementioned statements, it can be inferred that while being a nationalist state in the late 20th century may not be inherently *unreasonable*, it is undeniably *burdensome*. As expressed by Hsiao: “a latecomer who strives for statehood at the turn of the twenty-first century has to meet the challenges

³²⁹ Benedict ANDERSON, “Western Nationalism and Easter Nationalism: Is there a difference that matters?”, in *New Left Review*, Vol. 9, May-June 2001, pp. 31-42, p. 31

³³⁰ Anthony D. SMITH, *National Identity*, London: Penguin Books, 1991, p. 92

³³¹ “Following the lifting of martial law in 1987, Taiwanese cultural identity gradually shifted from Chinese nationalism to Taiwanese autonomy. The latter emphasized the historical and geographical existence of the island, in the place of Chinese nationalism, which was haunted by the anti-communist ideology of the Cold War era.” In WEI Yu, “Waste, Noise, and Local Art Exhibitions”, in *Yishu: Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art*, vol.18, no. 2, 2019, pp. 68-91, p. 88

³³² HSIAU A-chin, *Contemporary Taiwanese Cultural Nationalism*, New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 17

³³³ *Ibid.* p. 179

of growing antiessentialist and deconstructionist discourse on collective identity and of the calls for the end of the nation-state, regional integration, and globalization.”³³⁴

The present thesis does not seek to explore the reasons behind the relatively late emergence of Taiwanese nationalism³³⁵, but rather to examine its repercussions within the realm of the arts. For sure, one of the most striking examples of the implication of the comparatively recentness of Taiwanese Nationalism is the fact that the instrumentalization of culture for nationalistic scopes is still visible in the current ROC Constitution, specifically in article 158.

教育文化，應發展國民之民族精神、自治精神、國民道德、健全體格、科學及生活智能。

Education and culture shall be aimed at the development among the citizens of a *national spirit*, the spirit of self-government, *national morality*, good physique, scientific knowledge, and the ability to earn a living.

Of course, this article is not mainly a derivation of the lateness of Taiwanese cultural nationalism, rather, there are numerous contributing factors that lie beyond the scope of the present research. Among them, the author of the thesis decided to briefly allude to an intriguing concept. The decision to emphasize in the article not only the term “national spirit”, but also “national morality,” aims to illustrate that, beyond political motives, there are discernible religious-philosophical underpinnings. Specifically, the concept of “morality” is a clear reference to Confucianism. It might be interesting to acknowledge within the context of this chapter that also Confucian influences is believed to significantly constrain the artistic freedom of artists in Taiwan³³⁶. Using Wei-Hsiu Tung’s words:

Within Taiwan, there is an established view, profoundly influenced by Confucianism, that artists should contribute constructively to the building of society and devote themselves to people and politics. [...] This is arguably different from the position of

³³⁴ J. MAKEHAM, A. HSIAU (Eds), *Cultural, Ethnic, and Political Nationalism in Contemporary Taiwan: Bentuhua*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 272

³³⁵ Among various factors, it is noteworthy to acknowledge that colonized states tend to *awaken their consciousness* later than the colonizing states. As noted by Hsiau, “nationalist movements and nation-building processes in nineteenth-century Europe and in twentieth-century colonized regions have created a world system of nation-states.” In HSIAU A-chin, *Contemporary Taiwanese Cultural Nationalism*, New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 178

³³⁶ Tung elucidates how in traditional Han society, artists are regarded as intellectuals tasked with guiding society ethically. Consequently, numerous renowned politicians in Chinese history were also artists, and vice versa. Another significant contribution of Confucianism to the art world is the emphasis placed on the role of the “educator.” As perfectly explained by Tung “The philosophy of Confucianism also made the position of an educator become the leading figure in society. In Taiwan, it is difficult for artists to earn their living only by doing art practice [...] the most common situation is to teach art in schools or universities.” In TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, pp. 108-110

western artists, whose established role as part of the unfolding of modernity has been that of detached socio-cultural critic.³³⁷

Taiwanese artists do not only carry through the concept of the social responsibility of art [...] but also the tradition of artists in creating moral values from ancient philosophy.³³⁸

After engaging in this pleasurable digression, let us now redirect our focus to cultural nationalism. In order to comprehend Taiwanese cultural nationalism within the realm of fine arts, more specifically why governments have historically wielded such significant control over the production and distribution of art, it is imperative to underscore the pivotal role that art plays in shaping identity. The next section will engage in a brief exploration of the theme.

3.2 The role of Arts in Taiwanese identity formation

There is a scarcity of studies examining the impact of visual art on the process of identity formation: in the world of academia, visual arts have been accorded less significance compared to fields such as literature, language, education, religion, and history.³³⁹ Hsiao observes that, unlike literature and history, visual arts have not been as extensively engaged in political-identity discourses: “Debate surrounding *bentuhua* in other fields, however, has been much less heated than in literature and history and, moreover, has had little connection with the identity politics of ethnicity and nationalism.”³⁴⁰ The current chapter contends that this assertion is erroneous. Conversely, visual arts have historically been and remain fundamental for the *construction, representation, and advancement* of Taiwan’s identity, both nationally and internationally. To substantiate this argument, we draw upon the insights of Sophie McIntyre:

Culture has the power to inspire and instill a sense of national consciousness and influence social change. The visual arts have played a crucial role (though under-

³³⁷ TUNG Wei Hsiu, “‘The Return of the Real’: Art and identity in Taiwan’s public sphere”, in *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, vol. 11, no. 2-3, 2012, p. 5

³³⁸ TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, pp. 103-104

³³⁹ Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, p. 5

³⁴⁰ HSIAU A-chin, “The Indigenization of Taiwanese Literature: Historical Narrative, Strategic Essentialism, and State Violence”, Chapter in J. MAKEHAM, A. HSIAU (Eds), *Cultural, Ethnic, and Political Nationalism in Contemporary Taiwan : Bentuhua*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 125

explored) in Taiwan's quest for national identity, as a vehicle for *national consciousness raising*, promotion and *cultural diplomacy* at home and abroad.³⁴¹

Building upon this insight, the contributions made by the art world to identity formation can be conceptually categorized into two main fields: an internal process and an external one. The *internal* process coincides with Taiwan's domestic quest for national and cultural identity ("*national consciousness raising*"). Conversely, the *external* process involves communication with the international community and endeavors to attain global recognition ("*cultural diplomacy*"). While this section will analyze the internal contributions, subsequent sections of the chapter will delve into the external ones.

It is undeniable that "the visual art field transformed identity narratives"³⁴², through processes of legitimization, identitarian investigation, and reinvention of history and tradition. However, it has to be pointed out that it was not the artist himself to initially define the idea of the nation and of national identity, but Taiwanese leaders.³⁴³ The visual arts community then actively engaged with the given identity discourses, by "generating images and narratives that supported, critiqued and contested official discourses relating to the idea of the 'nation' and notions of 'nationhood'."³⁴⁴ Within this process of *negotiation*, Taiwanese artists have always had access to a rich pool of resources from which to draw, as noted by Wen-I Yang:

The artistic and cultural resources available for Taiwan's contemporary tradition-making in fact range from Western contemporary philosophical discourse, artistic traditions and local popular and religious cultures, to the Chinese tradition, including its marginal and occult varieties, and, not least, to the Japanese heritage, as well as present-day Japanese popular culture.³⁴⁵

As discussed in the preceding chapter, throughout history, shifts in political power have influenced artistic expression. During periods marked by closer ties to the PRC, Taiwanese culture tends to emphasize Chinese characteristics in the artistic realm. Conversely, during periods of independence

³⁴¹ Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden, BRILL, 2018, p. 1

³⁴² Ibidem.

³⁴³ "Taiwanese leaders redefined Taiwan national identity and status [...] they have built momentum at various times for different identity models through a range of social, political and cultural schemes, policies and initiatives." In Ibidem.

³⁴⁴ Ibidem.

³⁴⁵ YANG Wen-I, *Negotiating Traditions: Taiwanese Art since the 1980s*, PhD thesis discussed at the Ruperto-Carola University of Heidelberg, Faculty of Philosophy and History, 2002, p. 3

advocacy, there is an emphasis on Taiwanese identity (including contributions from Japan and indigenous peoples). However, regardless of the political faction adhered to by artists and the consequent vision of identity they uphold, art has consistently wielded significant *legitimizing power*.

Present-day Taiwanese art presents a multilateral situation and absolute independence in deciding which “tool” is used to reach specific artistic goals. Consequently, we have seen very different approaches toward tradition. However, these approaches are united by one commonality: tradition’s deliberate and strategic employment as an artistic instrument.³⁴⁶

Reflecting on the introductory diversification of cultural nationalism and political control into four domains – cultural policies, censorship, museological representation, and spontaneous production – the author of this thesis has opted to first explore the latter. Before delving into more overt forms of governmental and institutional coercion, the following section will spotlight the practices of two artists whose work has not been subject to commission, censorship, or manipulation by higher authorities, but rather represents a spontaneous form of identitarian exploration. This aspect will serve as a base in subsequent sections to comprehend the *mindset* prevalent in Taiwanese society during specific periods, as well as to analyze some of its intriguing dynamics.

3.2.1 Spontaneous production: art as a means of identitarian investigation

The majority of Taiwanese spontaneous artistic production that could potentially be attributed to unconscious forms of nationalism revolves around issues of identity. It is essential to clarify that the artists and artworks to be analyzed do not harbor political *intent*: they were not initially created to promote a specific and politically charged image of nationhood, but rather represent a mere search for *individual* identity. It is precisely this emphasis on individuality that distances these works from nationalistic intentions, which typically seek to resolve individual identity within the *collective* identity of the nation. Both artists mentioned below largely draw from their personal backgrounds to explore identitarian dilemmas, and maintain a strong individual personality, distancing themselves from the nationalist notion of individual identity as “citizen of the nation.” The line between spontaneous production rooted in identity exploration and cultural nationalism is delicate. Therefore, this reflection on individuality becomes a crucial passage to avoid oversimplification and misinterpretation of the original intent. It is important to note, however, that despite this distinction,

³⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 165

such artistic production can easily be re-read and instrumentalized for nationalist purposes by others and/or museum institutions, through museological display and curatorial decisions.³⁴⁷

The case studies explored in this section feature two prominent figures in Taiwanese art: Mei Dean-E (梅丁衍, b. 1954) and Yao Jui-chung (姚瑞中, b. 1969). Mei Dean-E will be mentioned again throughout the chapter in the contexts of the internationalism-localism debate and institutional critique. Yao Jui-chung remains to this day one of the principal actors in the Taiwanese contemporary artistic landscape.

3.2.1.1 Mei Dean-E 梅丁衍

Taiwan's identity is founded upon a grey soil of an exilic regime, which [is] still not recognized by the world...there is a strong feeling of impotence within this frustrated [lack of] recognition...It is precisely because of this unique cultural environment that [makes me] become concerned about the state of Taiwan's art. [It gives me] the impulse to investigate and verify all her contradictory personalities [and] drives me to read across the whole cultural environment in order to seek artistic inspiration.³⁴⁸

Through the above statement, it is possible to infer that Taiwan's quest for identity and the consequent struggle for international recognition is a dear theme to Mei Dean-E. Through the use of symbols, metaphor, irony, and wordplay, he frequently scrutinized Taiwanese identity politics. However, it is crucial to note that although Mei belongs to a generation of artists active during the highly nationalistic 1990s, he himself is not a nationalist. His works surely are politically *engaged*, but they are not politically *driven*.³⁴⁹ Sophie McIntyre describes Mei Dean-E's artistic practice as follows:

He does not use his works to advocate political reform nor does he seek to promote nationalism, or raise identity consciousness [...] Rather, Mei strives to question, critique and subvert the ideologies, processes and rhetoric that are inherent to nation-building.³⁵⁰

It is easy to misinterpret artworks featuring national flags, portraits of political leaders, and seemingly nationalistic slogans as overt expressions of cultural nationalism. In this context, this would be a mistake. In fact, Mei's use of these highly political symbols diverges from the typical

³⁴⁷ It is important to note that the 1990s represented the peak of nationalism, propelled by the DPP government, after that period artists gradually shifted their focus away from the nation. However, nationalism persisted through museological representation.

³⁴⁸ MEI Dean-E (2003), cited in Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, p. 77

³⁴⁹ Ibidem.

³⁵⁰ Ibidem.

nationalistic artistic practices of the 1990s, instead representing an inquiry into individual identity. As McIntyre points out, “Mei perceives identity as a site of intellectual and cultural enquiry, and the nation as a semiotic construct.”³⁵¹

As a *waishengren*, Mei’s exploration of identitarian themes often involves analyzing Taiwan’s relationship with mainland China. Among his most recognized works focusing on such analysis is the installation *I-DEN-TI-TY* (*Ai dun di ti* 哀敦砥悌), notably featured in the 1996 Taipei Biennial, *The Quest for Identity*.

Fig. 1. *I-DEN-TI-TY* (*Ai dun di ti* 哀敦砥悌), Mei Dean-E 梅丁衍, 1994-1996, mixed media installation, dimensions variable, collection of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum.

The installation is designed as an experiential journey that the viewer must follow. At the end of a long red carpet, portraits of Lee Teng-Hui and Deng Xiaoping are displayed side by side, partially obscured by their respective national flags, which the artist has subversively reversed. On the walls, xeroxed images of Mao Zedong and Sun Yat-sen’s merged faces further emphasize this satirical commentary on identity. Even more provocative is the inclusion of a glittery United Nations logo, highlighting Taiwan’s diplomatic isolation. Scattered around the room are books and official documents, as well as ceremonial objects referencing both Chinese and Japanese traditions.

Moreover, it is important to highlight the wordplay intrinsic in the title *Ai dun di ti* 哀敦砥悌. For the phonetic transliteration of the English “Identity”, the artist carefully picked strategic Chinese characters: “哀” (*ai*) meaning “mourning”, “敦” (*dun*) meaning “honest, sincere”, “砥” (*di*) meaning “steadfast” (lit. “stone”), and “悌” (*ti*) meaning “respect for elder brothers.” Remarkably, all these characters evoke Confucian principles, suggesting the artist’s aim to pay homage to the values that either divide or unite Taiwan and the People’s Republic of China.³⁵² This intention is confirmed by the artist’s remarks about this work:

There’s a saying we’re all brothers. I am interested in this idea and [how it relates to] Taiwan’s identity problem and to Chinese Confucianism. In an ironic way I put all the leaders together to study this idea and to explore ideas about ethnicity and identity.³⁵³

³⁵¹ Ibidem.

³⁵² The information about the artwork have been taken from Ibid. pp. 90-94

³⁵³ Mei Dean-E’s 1998 interview with McIntyre. In Ibid. p. 93

Against a backdrop of heightened Taiwan nationalism, it is not surprising that museum visitors read this work in relation to growing Taiwan-China separatism.³⁵⁴ The artwork elicited the most disparate interpretations, with many speculating over the political position of Mei Dean-E within the independence-reunification debate. However, the inclusion of both Chinese and Japanese ceremonial objects and the strategic choice of characters in the title suggest that, despite its provocative use of politically charged symbols, the ultimate aim of the artwork is peaceful.

3.2.1.2 Yao Jui-chung 姚瑞中

Born in 1969, Yao Jui-chung (姚瑞中), younger than Mei Dean-E and many other artists who lived martial law in their adulthood, experienced a markedly different upbringing, growing up in an already liberated Taiwan. Consequently, his perspective on identity is comparatively fluid and open-minded: he advocates for an international perspective in place of a Taiwan-centered narrative, emphasizing the significance of identity consciousness.³⁵⁵ He asserts: “We must first have consciousness (*zhuti yishi* 主體意識), then we can know our identity.”³⁵⁶ The notion of *consciousness* has been a key term in the nationalistic discourse, however, the identitarian consciousness as intended by the artist coincides with the concept of “self-awareness”,³⁵⁷ it is therefore devoid of any political implications. Despite his engagement with themes such as Taiwanese-ness, memory, identity, and the re-writing of history – in his words, “memories become history but those that have power can change your memory and history”³⁵⁸ – more than once, in statements and interviews, he remarked his distance from a nationalistic agenda. On the contrary, he critiques nationalist discourse as a politically contrived construct³⁵⁹ and challenges the artistic constraints imposed by *bentuhua*. His artistic endeavors are characterized by a satirical and subversive tone, as well as a multidisciplinary approach. He adeptly combines various art forms, including photography, painting, performance, and installation, yielding distinctive outcomes.³⁶⁰

³⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 94

³⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 172

³⁵⁶ Yao Jui-chung’s 1998 interview with McIntyre. In Ibid. p. 173

³⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 172

³⁵⁸ Yao Jui-chung’s 2008 interview with McIntyre. In Ibid. p. 197

³⁵⁹ Ibid. p. 172

³⁶⁰ Ibidem.

For instance, it can be stated that one of his signature works, *Territory Take Over* (*Bentu zhanling xingdong* 本土佔領行動), now labelled as a photographic series and installation, somehow started out as a “performance” piece. In March 1994, Yao initiated the project by publishing an advertisement in the magazine *Artist* announcing his intention to attack and occupy Taiwan. Subsequently, he selected six sites with profound symbolic significance, as they had historically been contested territories under Dutch, Qing, Japanese and Chinese nationalist occupation. He proceeded to urinate at these locations, documenting the entirety of the action through photography. The black-and-white photographs were then coated with a sepia-toned filter to impart a vintage aesthetic. When displayed in exhibitions, each photograph is accompanied by an elaborate description of the depicted location, showcasing the artist’s thorough historical research, and is juxtaposed with a toilet bowl painted in gold.³⁶¹

Fig. 2. *Territory Take Over* (*Bentu zhanling xingdong* 本土佔領行動), Yao Jui-chung 姚瑞中, 1994, Photographic series, B & W Photos 100×150cm×6 Sheets, Six Golden Stools 30×35×25cm, One Golden Aircraft Carrier Model 160×25×20cm, Six Lamp Holders.

The artwork deeply engages with the theme of historical narrative, nevertheless diverging from the conventional nationalist approach. Rather than presenting a “correct” depiction of historical events, it forwards a harsh critique of the official historiography crafted by the various political parties, challenging its authority and validity.³⁶² Additionally, the exploration of Taiwanese identity, a central aspect of Yao’s artistic practice, takes on a novel and subversive dimension: by symbolically marking territory as dogs do, the artist is reappropriating all the sites of colonial dominance experienced by Taiwan throughout history, integrating them into his personal identity. While the act of urinating might initially seem to signify a rejection of foreign domination in a crude manner, in this context, it represents an act of reappropriation, acceptance, and arguably even celebration. As noted by Tung Wei-Hsiu: “In performing repetitively these animalistic behaviours, Yao raised the question of what it means to be Taiwanese.”³⁶³

Paradoxically, despite the critique of nationalist narratives, this re-appropriation of symbols of colonial dominance perfectly aligns with the independentist nationalism of the DPP, which peaked

³⁶¹ The artwork is described in detail in *Ibid.* pp. 184-190

³⁶² *Ibid.* p. 185

³⁶³ Tung Wei-Hsiu, 2003, cited in Beccy KENNEDY, “Border Praxis: Negotiating and Performing “Hong Kong-ese-ness” and “Taiwaneseness” in contemporary, political ‘Chinese’ art practices”, in *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, vol. 3, no. 1-2, 2016, p. 8

during that period, and which pictured the history of the island as a “history of colonization and anti-colonialism, a history of persecution.”³⁶⁴ Does this imply that the artwork ultimately *is* nationalist? While the celebration of multiculturalism as inherited from various colonial powers and the rhetoric of historical trauma form integral parts of Taiwanese nationalist discourse, engaging with these themes alone does not suffice to categorize a work or artist as nationalist. Instead, it should be acknowledged that every work of art naturally mirrors the time and the society in which it was created, following a logic Fredric Jameson has termed *situational consciousness*: “where the telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the collectivity itself.”³⁶⁵

Despite its insurrectionist nature, the work was selected to represent Taiwan at the 1997 Venice Biennale, inside the Taiwan Pavilion named *Taiwan Taiwan: Facing Faces* (*Taiwan Taiwan: mianmuquanfei* 台灣台灣：面目全非).³⁶⁶ If the project itself was not created to fit into a nationalist agenda, its selection to represent the country in an international exhibition, particularly the Venice Biennale (a significant and nearly exclusive platform for communication for Taiwan), inevitably implies a nationalist reinterpretation of the artwork. Initially conceived as a spontaneous exploration of identity and an expression of dissent, the artwork undergoes a nationalist recontextualization due to its inclusion within the national pavilion. Consider, for instance, a non-Taiwanese visitor viewing Yao’s work: his interpretation would likely perceive Yao’s act of urination as a forceful assertion of Taiwanese national sovereignty. This phenomenon is inherent when artworks become intertwined with the concept of *national representation* and so with the duty to *communicate* something.

This last point opens the discussion for the subsequent brief yet fundamental section, delving into the mechanisms of re-reading born-independent spirits of artists and individual artworks and their readaptation to suit nationalistic, political, or simply representational functions.

3.2.2 Re-reading of artworks and artists

The recontextualization of artworks through a nationalist lens stems from the fact that it is never solely the artist himself who generates the meaning of his work. From the moment an artwork leaves

³⁶⁴ HSIAU A-chin, *Contemporary Taiwanese Cultural Nationalism*, New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 164

³⁶⁵ Fredric JAMESON, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism”, in *Social Text*, No. 15, Autumn 1986, pp. 65-88, pp. 85-86

³⁶⁶ Notably, the Chinese title differs from the English one. In Chinese, the idiomatic expression *mianmuquanfei* 面目全非 literally means “changing to the point of being unrecognizable.”

the artist's studio until it is encountered by the observer's eye, various actors contribute to its life cycle and imbue it with layers of significance. In extreme cases, this process can distort the artwork's meaning to the extent that it ends contradicting what one can presume to be the original intention of the artist.³⁶⁷ In this sense, the artist is not the sole creator of the artwork, but rather only one of the agents involved in its realization. Within the art world, the role of the artist is frequently subordinate to that of critics, collectors, curators, and museum directors. It is the entirety of this museological apparatus that possesses the authority not only to reinterpret the meaning of an artwork but also to determine whether it merits recognition as such.³⁶⁸ As a result, for an artist to attain success and acknowledgment, it is imperative to align his/her creative production with the requirements of the system, thereby inevitably encountering pressures to conform to political and market interests.

From a nationalist perspective, the significance of a work of art lies not in what it shows, but in what it has the power to *evoke*. Considering the ability of art to raise consciousness and influence society, it is key for the nationalist to imbue art with political significance. As a consequence, it can be asserted that the rereading of artworks stems from the "basic assumption that art shall be a tool to describe something else, that is to construct the image of the nation."³⁶⁹ As Schoeber notes, because of this task, "art is never shown on its own terms; art is always twisted and re-framed to fit into another narrative [...] this re-framing is never an innocent one."³⁷⁰

To avoid an overly theoretical discourse, the thesis will briefly refer to two instances that could exemplify the aforementioned phenomenon. Specifically, a case from the 2000 Taipei Biennial and another from the Taiwan Pavilion at the 1999 Venice Biennale will be examined. These two cases have been selected as illustrations because these two Biennials represent Taiwan's primary channels of communication within the art sphere, and are particularly significant arenas where the notion of *representation* is prominently put into practice.

³⁶⁷ Felix SCHOEBER, *Modernity, nationalism and global marginalization: representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art exhibition. The Taipei fine arts museum and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice 1984-2009*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Westminster, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, 2014, p. 368

³⁶⁸ For further insights on this topic, the reader may refer to: Francesco POLI, *Il sistema dell'arte contemporanea. Produzione artistica, mercato, musei*, Bari: Editori Laterza, 1999

³⁶⁹ Felix SCHOEBER, *Modernity, nationalism and global marginalization: representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art exhibition. The Taipei fine arts museum and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice 1984-2009*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Westminster, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, 2014, p. 368

³⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

The first case under examination is the only partial description of Chen Chien-jen's (陳界仁, b. 1960) video *Empires Borders* (*Diguo bianjie* 帝國邊界) within the catalog of the 2008 Taipei Biennial, and it has been identified before as a manifestation of institutional interventionism by Felix Schoeber.³⁷¹ The video documents the experiences of women who have struggled crossing Taiwan's borders, comprising two distinct sections: the initial part recounts the tales of Taiwanese women refused tourist visas to the United States, while the second part gives voice to mainland Chinese women married to Taiwanese men, who have been refused entry or residency in Taiwan. The artwork can be interpreted as a commentary on biases and imperialism prevalent in both the US and Taiwanese embassies. Interestingly, the catalog deliberately ignores this second part, and limits itself to highlighting the humiliation experienced by Taiwanese citizens. As Schoeber notes, "this is a rather crucial omission- it eliminates the artist's reflections on the ambiguous nature of nationalism, and rather evokes an older narrative, that of the 'orphan of Asia,' reducing art to a mere tool in the machinery of national promotion."³⁷²

Fig. 3. *Empires Borders* (*Diguo bianjie* 帝國邊界), Chen Chien-jen 陳界仁, 2008-2009, Video Art, single channel 35mm film transferred to digital video, 26 min. 52 sec., M+ Collection.

The second instance hereby scrutinized involves the 1999 Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, titled *Close to Open: Taiwanese artists exposed* (*Quanran kaifang – yi luan qing mi: Taiwan yishu san xianlu* 全然開放 – 意亂情迷: 台灣藝術三線路), and curated by the art historian Shih Jui-jen (石瑞仁) together with the critic Huang Haiming (黃海鳴). Unlike the first example, this analysis will not focus on any artwork in particular, but rather on curatorial statements. To provide context, this pavilion prominently featured human representation, expressed through various means by the diverse artists, ranging from Tang-style faces to futuristic manga-style characters to Christian saints, among others. In his statement, Shih Jui-jen has identified the body as the central theme of the pavilion, asserting that artists "are all interested in the body as an artistic language."³⁷³ This statement appears to be a positive novelty, signaling a nod to modernity, particularly considering that performance art had landed in Taiwan as an accepted form of making art less than a decade prior, and that more in general the emancipation of the body is a symptom of social modernization. However,

³⁷¹ The case study is presented in *Ibidem*.

³⁷² *Ibidem*.

³⁷³ SHIH Jui-jen: "Close to Open, Taiwanese artists exposed", in: *Close to Open, Taiwan Artists Exposed*, Taipei, Venezia: TFAM, 1999, p. 9. Cited in *Ibid.* p. 227

this enthusiasm is short-lived. Upon further reading, one discovers that the concept of body liberation is allegorically employed to symbolize the liberation of the Taiwanese nation following the lifting of martial law.

The Taiwanese found themselves trapped in an unspeakable sadness and had to protect themselves in self-enclosure. In other words, if an “open body” aptly describes the destiny of the island, then a “a self-enclosed mind” would be the best images for the inhabitants historical character.³⁷⁴

The concept of “body” is thus not the literal corporeal entity anymore, but through Shih’s reinterpretation is transformed into a “symbolic body of the nation”, serving as an allegory for a “post-colonial psychological and cultural trajectory”³⁷⁵, as articulated by Schoeber. In conclusion, even if the artists were initially genuinely interested in the concept of the body itself, this heavily nationalistic reinterpretation has alienated the works from their original intended meaning.

These initial sections have explored the significance of art in shaping Taiwanese identity, through the examination of artists who utilized art as a tool for exploring individual identity, as well as instances where this organic expression has been deviated by institutional manipulation. The present thesis will now focus on investigating how cultural nationalism has hindered the advancement of contemporary art practices in Taiwan. Before delving into this discussion, however, the author deemed it necessary to make a brief historical excursus: the subsequent section aims to explore in broad terms the emergence of cultural nationalism in Taiwan.

3.3 The origins: the 1970s and the *bentü* ideology

To discuss cultural nationalism, it is fundamental to mention the 1970s and the nativist movement, widely regarded as the genesis of Taiwanese nationalist ideology. However, this chapter will primarily focus on the post-martial law era (1980s-1990s). This emphasis is twofold: firstly, exploring governmental influence on art during a dictatorial period may seem superfluous, as it engages with a self-evident process; secondly, it would deviate the thesis from its focus on contemporary art. Examining political constraints in contemporary art will be beneficial for the subsequent chapter, enabling a comparison between institutional and independent art.

³⁷⁴ Ibid. p. 8

³⁷⁵ Felix SCHOEBER, *Modernity, nationalism and global marginalization: representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art exhibition. The Taipei fine arts museum and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice 1984-2009*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Westminster, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, 2014, p. 228

An ongoing debate surrounds the inception of Taiwanese cultural nationalism and whether the concept of *bentu* ideology might represent an early form of it. Hsiao A-chin, for instance, does not pinpoint the 1970s as the genesis of Taiwanese cultural nationalism, but rather the early 1980s, specifically citing the efforts of the Tangwai Party.³⁷⁶ In Hsiao's words:

Hsiang-tu literature and the broader 'back-to-hsiang-tu' trend in the 1970s, were erroneously regarded by many as contributing to the emergence of Taiwanese nationalism. They represented a reaction to excessive pro-West tendencies in cultural circles [...] The affection for one's native land and interest in writing about it has always been an important motivation for literary creativity. It is not difficult to find this kind of sentiment and interest among writers of other parts of the world. Yet this kind of affection and interest does not necessarily carry political or even nationalist implications. The development from affection for one's native land to nationalist sentiments should not be seen as a natural evolution.³⁷⁷

Mark Harrison appears to concur with Hsiao's perspective, rejecting the notion of localism (*bentu*) as a manifestation of nationalism. He argues, "localism is not explicitly Taiwanese nationalism, in that it did not imagine the 'local' in Taiwan in national terms, but is a bounded and structured discourse producing a narrative of the meaning of Taiwan."³⁷⁸ On the other side of the debate, Wei Hsiu Tung takes a clear stance by mentioning trends such as the interest in indigenous cultural roots and Taiwanese territory, and the rejection of identifying with Chinese culture, which were prevalent in the 1970s and can be classified as nationalistic practices. He asserts, "I suggest that this 'Native Soil' movement in arts and literature can be regarded as the first representation of 'cultural nationalism' after 1945."³⁷⁹

The author of this thesis will abstain from adopting a stance in this debate. Instead, the thesis will limit itself to acknowledge that while the decade of the 1970s may not represent the formal onset of Taiwanese nationalism, it undoubtedly served as a pivotal period of incubation during which ideas gestated before blossoming in the 1980s into overt nationalism. This consideration is rooted in the very definition of the term *bentu* 本土. Literally meaning "this earth," it inherently carries a sense of

³⁷⁶ "The Taiwanese cultural nationalism of dissident humanist intellectuals developed as a result of the Tang-wai group's ideological mobilization and clearly illustrates the politicization of Taiwanese cultural and national identities." HSIAU A-chin, *Contemporary Taiwanese Cultural Nationalism*, New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 181

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 179-181

³⁷⁸ Mark HARRISON, "Writing Taiwan's nationhood: Language, politics, history", Chapter in SHIH Fang-long, Stuart THOMPSON & TREMLETT Paul-Francois (Eds), *Re-writing Culture in Taiwan*, Oxon: Routledge, 2009, p. 132

³⁷⁹ TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, pp. 128-130

localism. However, the English translation of “bentu” is controversial. Hsiao identifies “indigenization” as the most suitable English equivalent, defining “bentu” as “Taiwanese writers’ identification with the island and their determination to defend it.”³⁸⁰ Conversely, Bruce Jacobs rejects the term “indigenization” and advocates for the use of “Taiwanization,” defining *bentuhua* as “a focus on Taiwan as opposed to China.”³⁸¹ Regardless of the preferred translation, whether the emphasis is on Taiwanese-ness, indigenous culture, or localism, all these connotations presuppose an underlying nationalist matrix.

The first chapter thoroughly examined the process of Taiwanization during the 1970s, encompassing initiatives such as the revision of history textbooks, street renaming, and the promotion of local and indigenous languages. Within the context of the current chapter, attention is directed toward the Taiwanization of arts and culture. This phenomenon can manifest in various ways, with one prominent example being the encouragement of Taiwan’s local culture and indigenous heritage through exhibitions and the cultivation of folk art. More specifically, within the realm of visual arts, this process is evident in the resurgence of interest in a *Taiwanese aesthetic*, comprising local landscapes and local color.³⁸² Such emphasis on the Taiwanese landscape and a specific aesthetic is grounded in the capacity of art, in contrast to literature, to immediately convey an image without allowing the mind the liberty to form a personal version of it. In this sense, art could be more “dictatorial” and efficacious in fostering cultural nationalism. In the Taiwanese context, the discourse about *local color* or *vernacularism* (*Yiguo qingdiao* 異國情調) revolved around a “notion of the typical Taiwanese landscape [which] involved exoticism, primitivism, romanticism, but also urbanism.”³⁸³ This discourse played a pivotal role in the modernization process, as Yuko Kikuchi states, “modernity and a new Taiwanese tradition were constructed from Taiwanese indigenous vernacular elements.”³⁸⁴

³⁸⁰ HSIAU A-chin, *Contemporary Taiwanese Cultural Nationalism*, New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 99

³⁸¹ J. Bruce JACOBS, “‘Taiwanization’ in Taiwan’s politics”, Chapter in J. MAKEHAM, A. HSIAU (Eds), *Cultural, Ethnic, and Political Nationalism in Contemporary Taiwan: Bentuhua*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 18

³⁸² TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, pp. 283-284

³⁸³ Yuko KIKUCHI, *Refracted modernity: visual culture and identity in colonial Taiwan*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007, p. 15

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.* p. 12

Kikuchi emphasized an intriguing aspect of Taiwanese vernacularism: it was actually invented by the Japanese during the colonial period, and then “appropriated and internalized by the colonized Taiwanese and developed into nativism”³⁸⁵

Taiwanese landscape was aesthetically visualized with stereotypical images of Taiwan that were represented first by Japanese artists and subsequently by Taiwanese artists before being disseminated through domestic and international official exhibitions, print media, films, and tourist souvenirs.³⁸⁶

This reappropriation enacted by the Taiwanese in the 1970s occurred through a process of *refraction*, which “refers mainly to the transfer of ideas from the original source, but importantly it also encapsulates the actual process by which these ideas are ‘bent’ or modified during the course of transfer.”³⁸⁷ Due to constraints of length, the thesis will not delve further into this fascinating point. For additional information, readers are referred to the book “Refracted Modernity: Visual Culture and Identity in Colonial Taiwan” (2007), edited by Yuko Kikuchi.

Before proceeding with the narrative, it is crucial to make another essential clarification. The aim of this thesis is by no means to suggest that culture spurred by nationalist ideology is a *fake* or less important form of culture. Indeed, as Smith points out, “nationalism *is* a form of culture.”³⁸⁸ Indeed, it must be recognized to nationalism that it played a key role in fostering the arts and establishing the connection between art and identity, which has been fundamental for Taiwan. As articulated by Tung, “the emergence of Taiwanese identity in art comes from the long existing ‘cultural nationalism’ in Taiwan throughout the development of history.”³⁸⁹ Furthermore, it is important to note that the nationalism of the 1970s is a manifestation of popular nationalism³⁹⁰, for it originated from the people, and not from the state. Therefore, in this sense the nationalistic artistic production of the time was somewhat *spontaneous*, and “it would be mistaken to see the ‘nativization’

³⁸⁵ Ibid. p. 13

³⁸⁶ Ibid. pp. 14-15

³⁸⁷ Ibid. p. 10

³⁸⁸ Anthony D. SMITH, *National Identity*, London: Penguin Books, 1991, p. 91. Emphasis is mine.

³⁸⁹ TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, p. 3

³⁹⁰ Anderson distinguishes between forms of popular nationalism and official nationalism. In Benedict ANDERSON, “Western Nationalism and Easter Nationalism: Is there a difference that matters?”, in *New Left Review*, Vol. 9, May-June 2001, pp. 31-42, p. 37

movement in museums or elsewhere simply as a top-down programme instigated by politicians hoping to promote Taiwanese independence through the cultural backdoor.”³⁹¹

For the above reasons, the chapter limits itself to highlight the potential limitations imposed by nationalism on creative freedom, and the resulting initial opposition to contemporaneity. The subsequent section will be devoted to the analysis of this latter aspect.

3.4 Cultural Nationalism and Modernization: Between localism and internationalism

Before delving into the impact of cultural nationalism on modernization in the arts, it is imperative to briefly discuss the relationship between cultural nationalism and modernization ideology in general. Cultural nationalism has usually been regarded as a “regressive” response to modernization.³⁹² However, this characterization is oversimplified. While superficially the emphasis placed on native cultural heritage and on the past as a source of legitimization – two main features of cultural nationalism – may appear antithetical to the advancement of modernity, the reality is more nuanced. Indeed, the nationalization of culture often involves the development of a dialogue, albeit sometimes contentious, between traditional cultural values and modernization efforts. To quote Hsiau:

The appeal of cultural nationalists to historical memory and collective symbols to construct the distinctiveness of a national culture as the bedrock of national identity cannot be simply regarded as a regressive response to modernization. Rather, their ambivalence toward their inherited legacy speaks volumes. It typically involves an aspiration to elevate their national culture to a position capable of vying with “modern” civilizations.³⁹³

In the specific case of Taiwan, the advancement of native culture towards modernity is obtained through the act of balancing the *international* and the *local*. It is precisely in the complexity of this process that resides the core of this chapter. Returning to the realm of fine arts, we have previously examined in the second chapter the significant role of Taiwanese artists returning from years of studying or working abroad, leading to the introduction of new forms of artistic expression on the island. However, while these artists hoped to explore, among others, performance and installation art in Taiwan, they soon found out that the cultural climate on the island was not favorable

³⁹¹ Edward VICKERS, “Re-writing Museums in Taiwan”, Chapter in SHIH Fang-long, Stuart THOMPSON & TREMLETT Paul-Francois (Eds), *Re-writing Culture in Taiwan*, Oxon: Routledge, 2009, p. 78

³⁹² HSIAU A-chin, *Contemporary Taiwanese Cultural Nationalism*, New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 21

³⁹³ Ibid. p. 22

to these kinds of practices. Indeed, at that time, the Taiwanese artistic community was still preoccupied with resolving the dilemma of reconciling the “Chinese” and the “modern”, leaving little room to consider the “Western” and the “contemporary.” In the late 1970s, the Nativists rejected the concept of “art for art’s sake,”³⁹⁴ advocating instead for art that was firstly *apolitical* yet *socially conscious*, and secondly *aesthetically pleasing* but rooted in *Taiwanese taste*.³⁹⁵ These two characteristics were clearly incompatible with the avant-garde, intended following Wang Lin’s definition as the practice to “go beyond the ordinary and routines.”³⁹⁶ In particular, *bentuhua* opposed experimentalism as it was deemed “foreign” and thus potentially detrimental to Taiwanese cultural identity. Similarly, artists who worked in mixed media and installation art were generally viewed within the local art field as “foreign” and were not as popular as painters.³⁹⁷ As a result, the cultural nationalism of that era significantly impeded the contemporaneity and innovation of Taiwanese art.

Even decades later, this skepticism towards cultural contamination remained strong in the mindset of the Taiwanese cultural elite, fuelling many debates about the Western “avant-garde” and the “Taiwanese taste”. Among them, the longest and most important is the *Lion Art Magazine* one, initiated by the article “Western Art: Made in Taiwan” (*Xifang meishu Taiwan zhizao – Taiwan xiandai meishu de pipan* 西方美術台灣製造—台灣現代美術的批判), written by the artist, curator and critic Ni Tsai-Chin (倪再沁, b. 1955), and published in 1991 in the April volume. In the article, Ni criticized the “Blind Internationalists,” remarking on the importance of tracing back to Taiwan’s own historical and cultural origins in achieving the rebirth of “Taiwan Art.”³⁹⁸ His accusations were unmistakably aimed at foreign-educated artists (notably Wu Mali), who embraced experimental art forms like installation and conceptual art. The article exacerbated the already existing division between two factions: those who, following the legacy of nativism, saw “to be rooted at the local

³⁹⁴ Mark HARRISON, “Writing Taiwan’s nationhood: Language, politics, history”, Chapter in SHIH Fang-long, Stuart THOMPSON & TREMLETT Paul-Francois (Eds), *Re-writing Culture in Taiwan*, Oxon: Routledge, 2009, p. 132

³⁹⁵ “Taiwanese writers and artists [...] produced an ostensibly *apolitical*, highly *aestheticized* mode of literature” in *Ibidem*.

³⁹⁶ WANG Lin (Ed.), “Voice of the unseen: Chinese Independent Art 1979/Today” [未曾呈现的声音 – 中国独立艺术展], catalog of the homonymous Collateral Event of the 55th Venice Biennial, Heidelberg: Alte Brücke Verlag, 2013, p. 453

³⁹⁷ Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan’s Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, p. 84

³⁹⁸ NI Tsai-Chin, “Western Art: Made in Taiwan”, in YE Yu-Jin (Ed.), *The Taiwanese Consciousness in Taiwan Art: A Collection of Debates in the Early Nineties on Taiwan Art*, Taipei: Lion Art Books, 1994, p. 86

level”³⁹⁹ as the primary foundation for artistic expression, and those who saw localism as an impediment to navigating global art trends and thus to achieving contemporaneity.

Among the prominent figures of the second faction is Mei Dean-E. In his words, “*bentuhua* was against avant-garde or experimental art – many people think these are too Western – they worry and think Taiwan art has decayed. But *we* don’t agree.”⁴⁰⁰ This “we” stands for that niche of artists who, willing to adopt contemporary forms, faced rejection by the official system, and in some instances, discrimination, which undoubtedly impeded their artistic careers. As we will explore in the subsequent chapter, these are the artists who will show the courage to forge their own scene. Opposing the stance advocated by the localists, Mei had the audacity to vocalize a profound truth that many seemed reluctant to acknowledge: “most of the local culture and art-related discourse has been learnt from the West.”⁴⁰¹

In response to Ni Tsai-chin’s controversial paper “Western Art Made in Taiwan,” Mei wrote several articles, including the significant piece “Exploring Native Consciousness in Taiwan’s Modern Art” (*Taiwan xiandai yishu bentu yishi de tantao* 台灣現代藝術本土意識的探討), published in the November 1991 issue of *Lion Art* magazine. This article drew attention within the art community to the necessity of fostering a more critical, objective, and open-minded approach to identity in art. By examining the term “Native Consciousness” (*bentu yishi* 本土意識) and its role in artistic discourse, Mei advocates for a more *globally-oriented* conception of identity, one that necessitates dialogue with other cultures for its development and enrichment. This perspective on identity also entails a reconceptualization of art: Mei underscores the urgency of reintegrating Taiwanese art into the global artistic discourse.⁴⁰² In championing this perspective, he emerges as one of the pioneers in advancing the rhetoric of global engagement, which will become a hallmark of Taiwan’s participation in the Venice Biennale from the 2000s onward.

³⁹⁹ Ni Tsai-Chin (1994), cited in LU Pei-Yi, “Exhibition as Identity Making: Environmental Art (1994) and Resurgence On the Tamshui River (1995)” in *Taiwan as Case Studies*, Conference Paper, The 34th World Congress of Art History (CIHA), China Central Academy Of Fine Arts, Beijing, 2016.9.15-21 (not yet published), p. 6

⁴⁰⁰ Mei Dean-E interview with Sophie McIntyre, 2007, cited in Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan’s Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, p. 84. Emphasis is mine.

⁴⁰¹ CHEN Hsiang-chun, “Interview with Mei Dean-E”, in *Displacement*, 2003, p. 31. Cited in *Ibid.* p. 85

⁴⁰² *Ibid.* pp. 83-85

“Searching for identity [in Taiwan] is not philosophical, it is *political*”⁴⁰³, notes Mei Dean-E. This realization brings two implications: firstly, when people in power change identity changes; secondly, when identity changes power equilibriums change accordingly. As Hsiao points out, nationalism in Taiwan brought “the uneven distribution of political and cultural power between ‘mainlanders’ (*waishengren*) and local Taiwanese (*benshengren*).”⁴⁰⁴ Building upon these two statements, another significant issue emerges within the Taiwanese art world of the time, potentially even more severe than the rejection of contemporary art practices. Due to the surge of independentist nationalism associated with the Democratic Progressive Party during the 1990s, many *waishengren* artists faced discrimination within the art community. Among them, Mei Dean-E and Victoria Lu serve as prominent examples.⁴⁰⁵ In particular, the independent curator Victoria Lu openly criticized the discrimination she faced from Taiwanese nationalists in the art community due to her status as a “Mainlander,” which hindered her career development and ultimately compelled her to relocate to the mainland. Quoting her, “I never had a chance to play an official role in Taiwan [as a curator] because I am the wrong colour [politically].”⁴⁰⁶

To address both issues – skepticism towards western contemporaneity in art and discrimination of *waishengren* artists – a significant assistance came from Lee Teng-hui’s presidential tenure (1988-2000). Through his concept of “community of fate” (*shengming gongtongti* 生命共同體), Lee not only “convince[d] people that they are united under a national framework even though divided by ethnic boundaries”⁴⁰⁷, but also shifted the focus from the past to the future as a source of legitimization. Through his redefinition of the “authentic Taiwanese” as someone who simply loves the country and cares for it, Lee bridged the divide between *waishengren* and *benshengren*. Moreover, his emphasis on ‘what do we want Taiwan to *become*’ instead of ‘Taiwan *is* Taiwan because of specific *historical events*’, enabled Taiwanese art to liberate itself from the burden of representing a particular tradition. This facilitated the introduction of contemporaneity, fostering a balance between localism and internationalism. Indeed, as Jung Shin-Pi – an artist part of *Rice Storage Artists’ Community*, an

⁴⁰³ Mei Dean-E interview with Sophie McIntyre, 2007, cited in *Ibid.* p. 84. Emphasis is mine.

⁴⁰⁴ J. MAKEHAM, A. HSIAU (Eds), *Cultural, Ethnic, and Political Nationalism in Contemporary Taiwan : Bentuhua*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 262

⁴⁰⁵ For further insights reader can refer to Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan’s Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, p. 84

⁴⁰⁶ Victoria Lu interview with McIntyre, 2009, Cited in *Ibid.* p. 271

⁴⁰⁷ HSIAU A-chin, *Contemporary Taiwanese Cultural Nationalism*, New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 105

artistic residence in a Haka Village in South Taiwan – points out: “there are parallels between local and international art. Once the localism of art can achieve a maturity and integrity, which reflects its specific local culture, then the local will become international.”⁴⁰⁸

In conclusion, localism, which in Taiwan represents the most prominent manifestation of cultural nationalism, poses a potential danger as it may divert art from attaining modernity, thereby hindering its comprehension by the global audience. Only when art achieves maturity and no longer feels compelled to conform strictly to international or local standards, it becomes ‘strong enough’ to represent its country in a universally comprehensible language. The exact moment in which Taiwanese artists ceased their endeavor to epitomize “Taiwanese” and “modern,” thus authentically embodying both modernity and their Taiwanese identity, remains a topic of ongoing discourse. While some scholars contend that this pivotal shift occurred in the 1990s, I argue that although artists themselves had reached a state of maturity during this period, the artworld (perhaps encouraged by the government), through curatorial decisions, continued to “Taiwanize” artworks, artists, and exhibitions for at least another decade.

3.5 Art as a means to rewrite history

In the first chapter, the section exploring the concept of “narratives of unfolding” explained in detail how “an interest in reconstructing the past according to present concerns and aspirations is evident in the nationalist discourse.”⁴⁰⁹ Throughout Taiwanese history, various political factions have constructed their own versions of official historiography to legitimize the national identity and culture they sought to instill in people. As discussed earlier in the first chapter, the succession of different governments and political parties in Taiwan resulted in frequent changes in historical narratives, manipulated by those in power. The reason behind this “competition for the control of historical narrative”⁴¹⁰ lays in the pivotal role history plays in the “formation, maintenance, and redefinition of collective memories.”⁴¹¹

⁴⁰⁸ TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, p. 289

⁴⁰⁹ HSIAU A-chin, *Contemporary Taiwanese Cultural Nationalism*, New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 92

⁴¹⁰ Ibid. p. 116

⁴¹¹ Ibidem.

It is possible to divide the various nuances Taiwanese history assumed along the course of time into two main currents, namely a “pro-China view of history”, or “China-centric conception of history” (*Zhongguo shiguan* 中國史觀), and a “pro-Taiwan view of history”, or “Taiwan-centric conception of history” (*Taiwan shiguan* 台灣史觀).⁴¹² The “pro-China” perspective peaked in the early 1970s,⁴¹³ during the political and cultural dominance of the Kuomintang. In order to ideologically justify such dominance, the party leveraged “a specific interpretation of the island’s historical relationship with the Chinese Mainland”⁴¹⁴ which emphasized the contributions of early Han Chinese immigrants to the island’s culture and society, as well as the KMT’s role in liberating Taiwan from the Japanese usurpers.⁴¹⁵ Moving to the “pro-Taiwan” viewpoint, during the late 1980s and the 1990s, Taiwanese nationalists, particularly the Tangwai group, pioneered the advocacy for a “history from below,” from “the viewpoint of the people.”⁴¹⁶ This perspective made use of the of *national trauma*⁴¹⁷ rhetoric, delving into the history of anti-colonial resistance during Japanese rule and the subjugation of indigenous peoples.⁴¹⁸ Specifically, the Taiwanese nationalists’ rewriting of Taiwanese history served two distinct yet complementary purposes aimed at detaching the island from mainland China. Firstly, it underscored the significant contributions of colonial dominations and indigenous peoples to Taiwanese identity and culture. This first aspect is referred to by Hsiau as “the pluralization of the origins of Taiwanese culture.”⁴¹⁹ Secondly, it involved the “reversal of the historical core-margin relationship between Chinese culture and Taiwanese culture,”⁴²⁰ which is the shift from Taiwanese culture being viewed as a local variant of Chinese culture to Chinese culture being recognized as one component of Taiwanese culture.⁴²¹

⁴¹² Ibid. p. 150

⁴¹³ Ibid. p. 154

⁴¹⁴ Ibid. p. 150

⁴¹⁵ Ibidem.

⁴¹⁶ “Taiwanese history should not be interpreted from the viewpoint of different rulers on the island. It is ‘we/the people’ who are the protagonists of the drama. History must be written in the interests of we/the people.” Ibid. p. 166

⁴¹⁷ Ibid. p. 151

⁴¹⁸ Ibid. p. 150

⁴¹⁹ Ibid. pp. 107-108

⁴²⁰ Ibidem.

⁴²¹ “Taiwanese culture and indigenous culture used to be regarded as part of a single large ‘invented’ family of cultures under the umbrella term Chinese culture [...] But nowadays this ‘imagination’ has shifted and Chinese (*Zhonghua*) culture

In the past, it has been suggested that this *narrativization of history*⁴²² has not significantly impacted art. For instance, Hsiao argued that

the indigenization paradigm [*bentuhua*] formulated in such fields as fine arts, psychology, sociology, and anthropology is ‘non-narrativized’, in the sense that it was not grounded primarily and explicitly on a historical narrative of Taiwan.⁴²³

However, this section aims to challenge this notion through the brief exploration of two interrelated phenomena: rewriting the history *of* art and rewriting history *in* art. These processes have primarily occurred through the organization of narrativizing exhibitions, but also through the practices of individual artists and the objectives of specific artworks.

As for the first phenomena, in the first half of the 1990s, numerous significant art exhibitions were organized by various museums to delineate and construct a history of Taiwanese art. Among them, noteworthy is the 1990 exhibition “Three Hundred Years of Taiwanese Art” (*Taiwan meishu sanbainian zhan* 台灣美術三百年展), jointly held by the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts (Taichung) and *Lion Art Magazine*. This exhibition encompassed artists from the Qing Dynasty to those born in the 1950s, thus underscoring the multicultural origins of Taiwanese art and spreading among the public a common understanding of cultural identity that aligned with the DPP’s nationalist discourse.⁴²⁴ Subsequently, several similar exhibitions with analogous aims followed, which, due to constraints of length, will not be expounded upon here. These retrospective exhibitions, whether focused on local artworks from the Japanese colonial period, early Western fine arts in Taiwan, Chinese-style ink painting, or Aboriginal art, all shared a common objective: to categorize a unique

is regarded as just one component, albeit a dominant one, of Taiwan’s diverse culture.” In LAI Meng-Yu, *Taiwanese Identity and the Performing Arts: the Development of Programming at the National Performing Arts Centre*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of London, Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies, 2020, p. 243

⁴²² HSIAU A-chin, “The Indigenization of Taiwanese Literature: Historical Narrative, Strategic Essentialism, and State Violence”, Chapter in J. MAKEHAM, A. HSIAU (Eds), *Cultural, Ethnic, and Political Nationalism in Contemporary Taiwan : Bentuhua*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 129

⁴²³ *Ibidem*.

⁴²⁴ It is important to note that museums and exhibitions serve as significant instruments for educating the public worldwide. This holds particular significance for Taiwan, where, due to Confucian influences, the museums possess a particularly didactic nature.

Taiwanese aesthetic and establish a framework for accepted artworks, or, as described by Lu Pei-yi, to “attempt to construct and present Taiwan through a re-organizing of Taiwan’s art history.”⁴²⁵

Shifting the focus to the second phenomenon, that is the rewriting of history *through* art, the present thesis will adopt a different approach: it will present a single case study of an artist, Yang Mao-lin, and then proceed to analyze an artwork in the specific.

3.5.1 Yang Mao-lin 楊茂林

Yang Mao-lin (楊茂林, b. 1953) differs from other artists discussed in this chapter, firstly for being a *benshengren* and secondly for being trained in Taiwan and not abroad. A strong supporter of Taiwan’s independence, he was closely associated with the Tang-wai movement and has been classified as a “*bentu* painter.”⁴²⁶ Yang’s art in the 1990s was characterized by a clear political agenda aimed at advancing democratization and fostering national identity consciousness.⁴²⁷ Considering that he was one of the most exhibited artists during that decade, Yang serves as an exemplary case study illustrating how artists can actively contribute to shaping national identity.

There are two important reference points here for me to begin to create the work... Through the land I am looking for *my* position and *my* identity as a Taiwanese. And through history and culture I can find today’s *Taiwan* culture and position in the world.⁴²⁸

In light of this statement, it can be deduced that Yang’s artistic practice serves both subjective and political purposes. While his artworks may represent a quest for self-identity (“*my* position”, “*my* identity”), as seen with Mei Dean-E and Yao Jui-chung, they also aim to affirm the national identity and status of the island within the global context (“*Taiwan* culture and position in the world”).

Through his renowned series “MADE IN TAIWAN” (*Taiwan zhizao* 台灣製造, 1989-2011),⁴²⁹ Yang Mao-lin expressed his aspiration to craft a “national history” for Taiwan. This

⁴²⁵ LU Pei-Yi, “Exhibition as Identity Making: Environmental Art (1994) and Resurgence On the Tamshui River (1995)” in *Taiwan as Case Studies*, Conference Paper, The 34th World Congress of Art History (CIHA), China Central Academy Of Fine Arts, Beijing, 2016.9.15-21 (not yet be published), pp. 2-4

⁴²⁶ See Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan’s Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, p. 53

⁴²⁷ Ibid. p. 107

⁴²⁸ Yang Mao-lin, cited in Ibidem. Emphasis is mine.

⁴²⁹ The information about the series have been taken from Ibidem. pp. 117-128

extensive series, comprising over 200 paintings, aimed to chronologically represent Taiwan's history from its indigenous origins to the onset of Japanese colonial rule in 1895, encompassing periods of Dutch and Chinese governance on the island. Serving as both a visual narrative of history and an exploration of identity, the series sought to address questions such as "Who am I?", "Where do we come from?", and "What defines our culture?"⁴³⁰ Organized into four main themes – Taiwanese society and politics, Taiwanese history and culture, Taiwanese people and customs, and Taiwanese art history – the work employed narratives, allegories, and symbols to reinterpret Taiwan's past and validate its present. Yang himself articulated this intention, by stating: "I thought to use painting to write Taiwan's History."⁴³¹ This reinterpretation by Yang aligns with the political agenda of the Democratic Progressive Party in detaching Taiwanese roots from China, as we will explore further.

The thesis will now undertake an analysis of a specific artwork titled "Zeelandia Memorandum L9301" (*Relanzhe jishi L9301 熱蘭遮紀事 L9301*), one of the most renowned paintings of the "Zeelandia Memorandum" series (1992-93), which belongs to the second chapter of the series and is dedicated to the historical narrative of Dutch occupation.

Fig. 4. *Zeelandia Memorandum L9301 (Relanzhe jishi L9301 熱蘭遮紀事 L9301)*, Yang Mao-lin 楊茂林, 1993, Oil painting, Oil and acrylic on canvas, 112.5 x 194 cm

*Zeelandia Memorandum L9301*⁴³² portrays side by side two men, respectively the Ming-loyal general Zheng Chenggong (Koxinga) and the last governor of the Dutch fort, Frederick Coyett. The chosen theme is intriguing, considering that the figure of Koxinga has been one of the most reinterpreted in history, characterized by contrasting depictions by the pro-China narrative of the KMT and the pro-Taiwan narrative of the DPP. Indeed, in the pro-China historical narrative, Koxinga is mythologized as a national hero due to his loyalty to the Ming dynasty, his victory over the Dutch, and the establishment of the first Han Chinese government on the island. Hsiao highlights how "the KMT's determination to drive the communists out of China and recover the Mainland was compared to Koxinga's resistance to Ch'ing power and his desire to restore the Ming dynasty."⁴³³ The Taiwanese nationalists with their pro-Taiwan history challenged the notion of Koxinga as the hero who *recovered*

⁴³⁰ Ibid. p. 117

⁴³¹ Ibidem.

⁴³² The artwork is described in detail in YANG Wen-I, *Negotiating Traditions: Taiwanese Art since the 1980s*, PhD thesis discussed at the Ruperto-Carola University of Heidelberg, Faculty of Philosophy and History, 2002, pp. 72-86

⁴³³ HSIAU A-chin, *Contemporary Taiwanese Cultural Nationalism*, New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 153

Taiwan, and decried the Koxinga regime for its exploitation of the island.⁴³⁴ This reinterpretation of the figure of Koxinga in the “historiography seen from the Taiwanese perspective”⁴³⁵ is clearly visible in Yang’s portrayal, depicting him as an authoritarian figure adorned in Chinese imperial attire and armed with cannons. This depiction aligns with the DPP’s perspective of Koxinga as a colonial aggressor, symbol of Chinese oppression, who, like the KMT, regarded Taiwan merely as a temporary refuge and suppressed the local population.

In conclusion, as Yang Wen-I points out, “When art gets involved with political messages, it often becomes subject to some kind of ideology. Historical memories often turn out to be a litmus test for detecting changes and directions of national ideologies.”⁴³⁶ This alignment poses limitations in various aspects. Firstly, it restricts creative freedom, as nationalist artists are confined to themes of national significance and political endorsement, thus excluding the broader spectrum of subjective emotional expression. Secondly, it might be limiting for history, as “by trading the multifaceted, inexplicable history for representability and intelligibility”⁴³⁷, a country’s past might undergo significant oversimplifications and omissions, undermining its inherent complexity. Borrowing Anderson’s words, “our relationship to the past is today far more political, ideological, contested, fragmentary, and even opportunistic than in ages gone by.”⁴³⁸ Lastly, it is surely limiting also for the idea of the nation itself: an excessive reliance on the past for legitimacy may divert attention from the present and future of the nation, as noted by Bhabha, “the historical necessity of the idea of the nation conflicts with the contingent and arbitrary signs and symbols that signify the affective life of the national culture.”⁴³⁹ The author of the thesis decided to close this section with a question rather than with an assertion: “Why do nations celebrate their hoariness, not their astonishing youth?”⁴⁴⁰ asks

⁴³⁴ Ibid. p. 158

⁴³⁵ YANG Wen-I, *Negotiating Traditions: Taiwanese Art since the 1980s*, PhD thesis discussed at the Ruperto-Carola University of Heidelberg, Faculty of Philosophy and History, 2002, p. 82

⁴³⁶ Ibid. p. 84

⁴³⁷ WU Chieh-Hsiang, “The Role of Art in the Absence of Transitional Justice in Taiwan, Republic of China”, in *The Arts in Society Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2016, p. 3

⁴³⁸ Benedict ANDERSON, “Western Nationalism and Easter Nationalism: Is there a difference that matters?”, in *New Left Review*, Vol. 9, May-June 2001, pp. 31-42, p.38

⁴³⁹ Homi K. BHABHA, *Nation and Narration*, New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 293

⁴⁴⁰ Benedict ANDERSON, “Narrating the Nation”, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 13 June 1986. Cited in Homi K. BHABHA, *Nation and Narration*, New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 293

Anderson. It will be the concern of the forthcoming chapter to testify how, in the context of Taiwan, for sure institutional art has frequently sought to glorify its perceived antiquity, but independent art has not hesitated to celebrate its dynamic and youthful essence.

3.6 National identit(ies) and cultural policies

The decision to employ the term “identity” in its plural form in the title of this section is deliberate. As we have observed in both political and historical contexts, and as we will further explore in an artistic context, national identity in Taiwan is subject to change with shifts in political power. This duality carries both positive and potentially negative implications. To articulate this concept, the thesis will draw upon the words of Lai Meng-yu.

In Taiwan, political ideology and national identity influence the making of cultural policy through changes in the party in government power and this has an impact on cultural identity. [...] A state’s cultural policy demonstrates in a positive way how government is involved with and supports culture, but on the other hand, it might also express a government’s ambition to influence and even dictate cultural affairs.⁴⁴¹

This chapter, and particularly this section, centers on the second point, the negative one. As highlighted by McIntyre, “The extent of the Chinese government’s influence over cultural policy in Taiwan is difficult to gauge, but it is indisputable that culture is being used as a form of soft power by governments.”⁴⁴² This utilization extends to various objectives, including fostering cross-strait relations with Beijing, drawing international attention to Taiwan’s pursuit of independence, projecting a tailored image of the nation, and more. In support of this thesis, Lu Ying-tai (龍應台) government’s Minister of Cultural Affairs (2012-14), declared that a nation’s strength is determined by its soft power, and, as a diplomatically isolated nation-state, Taiwan’s government relies significantly on culture to bolster its image overseas.⁴⁴³

Essentially, Taiwanese national identity, government, and cultural policies are interconnected in a cyclical manner: when there is a change in the ruling government, it introduces new public

⁴⁴¹ LAI Meng-Yu, *Taiwanese Identity and the Performing Arts: the Development of Programming at the National Performing Arts Centre*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of London, Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies, 2020, pp. 26-27

⁴⁴² Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan’s Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, p. 267

⁴⁴³ “CCA Set to Focus on ‘Soft Power’” in *Taipei Times*, 16 February 2012, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2012/02/16/2003525617> accessed 15 March 2024

policies that, in turn, prompt a transformation in Taiwan's identity. Vestheim also points out how political systems and cultural policy (both explicit and implicit) are mutually interconnected:

Cultural policy emerges when agents of the political system intervene with production, distribution and consumption of cultural products, services and experiences. Cultural policy then expresses a relationship between a political system and the cultural field. That relationship may be *ideological, normative, economical* or *organisational* of character.⁴⁴⁴

The fluctuation of national identity depending on the ruling political party highlights the existence of different *parallel nationalisms* in Taiwan fighting a “war of position”⁴⁴⁵: a Taiwanese “ethnic nationalism” (represented by the DPP) and a “totalizing ‘one-China’ nationalism of the [old] KMT.”⁴⁴⁶ These factions conceive and implement cultural policies in different ways, pursuing divergent aims. For example, since 2000, during the DPP's initial tenure, there has been a growing emphasis on “Taiwan subjectivity” (*Taiwan zhu ti xing* 台灣主體性) or “Taiwaneseeness” (*Taiwan xing* 台灣性),⁴⁴⁷ while the years of KMT governance have been characterized by a predominant emphasis on the “Chineseness” of Taiwan. Indeed, up to this point, we have primarily examined the implications in art of a particular form of nationalism, the pro-independence nationalism of the DPP. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the instrumentalization of art for political ends is not exclusive to any single political faction. This point is crucial to avoid falling into the trap of party politics: both parties have exercised cultural nationalism, and the cultural policies of each have both advantages and drawbacks for the artworld. The aim of this thesis is not to discredit the efforts of any particular party, but rather to illuminate the limitations and critical issues associated with both. For instance, while the KMT “instrumentalizes” art to improve relations with the PRC, it has also significantly contributed to the internationalization of Taiwanese art.⁴⁴⁸ On the other hand, the DPP

⁴⁴⁴ G. VESTHEIM, “Cultural policy and democracy: an introduction”, In *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, Vol.18, No.5, November 2012, pp.493-504, pp. 496-497.

⁴⁴⁵ Term used by Bhabha. In Homi K. BHABHA, *Nation and Narration*, New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 313

⁴⁴⁶ Edward VICKERS, “Re-writing Museums in Taiwan”, Chapter in SHIH Fang-long, Stuart THOMPSON & TREMLETT Paul-Francois (Eds), *Re-writing Culture in Taiwan*, Oxon: Routledge, 2009, p. 73

⁴⁴⁷ LAI Meng-Yu, *Taiwanese Identity and the Performing Arts: the Development of Programming at the National Performing Arts Centre*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of London, Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies, 2020, p. 128

⁴⁴⁸ Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, p. 50

has played a positive role in incorporating the avant-garde and alternative culture within the art system,⁴⁴⁹ but it has often “Taiwanized” works and artists, thereby altering their original meaning.

Due to length constraints, the present thesis cannot comprehensively analyze the cultural policies of both governments. Instead, it will limit itself to trace their main general characteristics.

The analysis begins with the Kuomintang’s cultural policy, where one of the main features is the instrumentalization of art to improve relations with mainland China. Significant progress in this regard occurred during Ma Ying-jeou’s presidency (2008-2016). His policy of “relaxing ties across the straits” (*Liang an songbang* 兩岸鬆綁) led to the introduction of several new cultural initiatives aimed at enhancing cross-strait relations.⁴⁵⁰ These initiatives involved promoting academic and cultural exchanges between the ROC and the PRC, and incorporating Chinese content into television, film, and other media in Taiwan, including museums. This recent resurgence of cross-Strait “museum diplomacy,”⁴⁵¹ as defined by Vickers, was particularly evident in the organization of government-sponsored exhibitions showcasing Chinese art in Taiwan and Taiwanese art in mainland China. One notable example is the exhibition “The Odyssey of Art in Taiwan 1950-2000” (*Taiwan meishu fazhan 1950-2000* 台灣美術發展—1950-2000), which was part of the Cross-Strait City Arts Festival. The exhibition, organized by TFAM, opened at the National Art Museum of China (NAMOC, *Zhongguo meishuguan* 中國美術館, Beijing) in September 2006. In response, the NAMOC curated the exhibition “The Blossoming of Realism: The Oil Painting of Mainland China Since 1978” (*Zhankai de xianshi zhuyi: 1978 nian yilai zhongguo dalu youhua* 展开的现实主义：1978年以来中国大陆油画), which opened at the TFAM in November 2006.

This cross-strait dialogue was further promoted by a series of major solo exhibitions featuring renowned Chinese artists at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum. Two notable examples include “Hanging Out in The Museum” (*Pao meishuguan* 泡美術館), one of the largest retrospectives ever organized of the Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang (蔡國強, b.1957), opened at TFAM in 2009, followed by “Ai Wei wei: Absent” (*Ai weiwei-quexi* 艾未未·缺席), a solo exhibition showcasing the major

⁴⁴⁹ WEI Yu, “Waste, Noise, and Local Art Exhibitions”, in *Yishu: Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art*, vol.18, no. 2, 2019, pp. 68-91, p. 86

⁴⁵⁰ Edwards VICKERS, “History, Identity, and the Politics of Taiwan’s Museums Reflections on the DPP-KMT Transition”, in *China Perspectives*, Vol. 3, September 2010, pp. 92-106, p. 103

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.* p. 93

works of Ai Wei wei (艾未未, b. 1957), in 2011. The TFAM's organization of these exhibitions raised significant criticism towards the museum. Critics expressed concerns on two fronts: firstly, accusing the museum of providing "a platform (albeit a limited one) to mainland institutions to propagandise in Taiwan"⁴⁵², while efforts from the other side of the strait to showcase Taiwanese art were comparatively very limited. The Taiwanese art community basically lamented the imbalance in cultural exchanges favoring "Chinese" themes and content. Secondly, the local visual arts community accused the TFAM of neglecting local artists to present instead "mediocre international blockbuster exhibitions."⁴⁵³

Another significant feature characterizing the cultural policies during the KMT's governance is the change in the museological representation of Taiwan, "in which Taiwan's identity was redefined and represented as distinctive but, critically, no longer culturally autonomous from China."⁴⁵⁴ This change in identity representation naturally led to a greater emphasis on internationalism in curatorial decisions, extending beyond forging closer ties with the PRC to engaging with the global community. This shift is also evident in the thematic evolution of the Taipei Biennales. For instance, while the first Taipei Biennale in 1996, organized during the DPP's rule – remarkably named "Quest for Identity" (*Taiwan yishu de zhutixing* 台灣藝術的主體性) – focused on promoting the image of a "Taiwan nation" and Taiwanese cultural distinctiveness, subsequent biennials organized under the KMT's rule leaned more towards the internationalization of Taiwanese art.⁴⁵⁵ This internationalization is reflected primarily in the chosen themes, which were less focused on showcasing Taiwan's unique personality and more on themes of global interest, often centered around emotional and subjective creative expression. Additionally, there was an increase in the participation of international curators and artists not exclusively from Taiwan. A perfect example is the second Taipei Biennial in 1998, titled "Site of Desire" (*Yuwang chang yu* 慾望場域), curated by the renowned Japanese curator Nanjo Fumio, and featuring artists from all across Asia, including Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, and notably mainland China.

⁴⁵² Ibid. p. 105

⁴⁵³ Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, p. 244

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 259

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 50

Moving on to analyzing the features of DPP's cultural policies, which have already been outlined throughout this chapter, unsurprisingly, central government encouragement of or funding for cultural exchange with the mainland was notably curtailed.⁴⁵⁶ The core of DPP's cultural policy can be identified in the utilization of cultural and educational institutions to promote Taiwan's distinctiveness from China, both historically and culturally. Specifically, museums were given a prominent role in the endeavor to "build up the nation on the basis of culture" (*Wenhua liguo* 文化立國). As Vickers observes, "as had Lee Teng-hui's regime, the DPP administration of Chen Shui-bian saw the construction of a distinctive sense of Taiwanese identity – to be popularised at home and promoted abroad – as central to its cultural policy."⁴⁵⁷

The desire to detach Taiwan from the PRC is mainly reflected in two aspects: first, the emphasis on the multicultural nature of Taiwanese history and culture; and second, the positioning of Taiwan within an *Asian* cultural sphere rather than simply a *Chinese* one. Regarding the first aspect, the rhetoric of 'multiculturalism', or 'pluralism' – "largely intended to dilute the Chinese tincture of the island's ethnic complexion"⁴⁵⁸ – primarily resulted in the protection and promotion of Indigenous culture. According to Vickers, "DPP administrations at the local and national level have invested heavily in projects co-opting aboriginal culture and 'prehistory' for the cause of promoting images of Taiwan's distinctiveness from China."⁴⁵⁹ As for the second aspect, the stressing of Taiwan as an *Asian nation* rather than a *Chinese province*,⁴⁶⁰ led to a curious trend in museum exhibitions at the time. This trend involved the use of pre-1945 maps of the island,⁴⁶¹ often Dutch maps, to highlight Taiwan's maritime culture, the influence of the Pacific Ocean, and other related factors. This intriguing feature will be further examined in the section of this chapter dedicated to Cultural Diplomacy at the Venice Biennale, given that the first Taiwan Pavilion in 1995, named *ARTTAIWAN*, serves as a perfect example of this phenomenon.

⁴⁵⁶ Edwards VICKERS, "History, Identity, and the Politics of Taiwan's Museums Reflections on the DPP-KMT Transition", in *China Perspectives*, Vol. 3, September 2010, pp. 92-106, p. 101

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p. 92

⁴⁵⁸ Edward VICKERS, "Re-writing Museums in Taiwan", Chapter in SHIH Fang-long, Stuart THOMPSON & TREMLETT Paul-Francois (Eds), *Re-writing Culture in Taiwan*, Oxon: Routledge, 2009, p. 96

⁴⁵⁹ Edwards VICKERS, "History, Identity, and the Politics of Taiwan's Museums Reflections on the DPP-KMT Transition", in *China Perspectives*, Vol. 3, September 2010, pp. 92-106, p. 98

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.* p. 103

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.* p. 99

3.7 The “nationalization” of the museum space

In the past, Taiwan certainly experienced “decades during which cultural institutions were the ideological instruments of dictatorship.”⁴⁶² Especially during Japanese rule and the martial law period of KMT governance, museums served as crucial tools for socialization and ideological indoctrination.⁴⁶³ Initially, they aimed to instill patriotism and later foster a desire for modernization. Subsequently, they shifted focus to promoting indigenous culture and projecting an image of the island as technologically and economically *advanced*.⁴⁶⁴ Museums were long perceived by those in power as “social education halls, providing civic instruction and ensuring the moral regulation and edification of the local populace [...] used to purge the island of political and socio-cultural differences.”⁴⁶⁵ However, despite being a fascinating topic, this section won’t delve into the history of Taiwanese museums and museology, instead, it will maintain its focus on modern and contemporary art.

During recent history, “museums have been treated as political footballs by both the ‘Blue’ (KMT) and ‘Green’ (pro-independence) camps on Taiwan.”⁴⁶⁶ However, in present-day Taiwan, the degree to which governmental policies influence museological practice is challenging to determine, as this information is most of the time not made public. The majority of the information comprising this section has been drawn from the studies of Edward Vickers, who conducted comprehensive research on Taiwanese museums and their interactions with politics and nationalism.

An initial clarification is necessary regarding the association between nationalism and museums, which is not unique to Taiwan or specific states: museums are *born* as nationalistic institutions. Vickers links the origins of the museum as a public institution to the emergence of nation-states in Europe and North America from the late eighteenth century onwards.⁴⁶⁷ Therefore, museums

⁴⁶² Ibid. p. 95

⁴⁶³ Edward VICKERS, “Re-writing Museums in Taiwan”, Chapter in SHIH Fang-long, Stuart THOMPSON & TREMLETT Paul-Francois (Eds), *Re-writing Culture in Taiwan*, Oxon: Routledge, 2009, p. 82

⁴⁶⁴ Ibidem.

⁴⁶⁵ Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan’s Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden, BRILL, 2018, p. 19

⁴⁶⁶ Edward VICKERS, “Re-writing Museums in Taiwan”, Chapter in SHIH Fang-long, Stuart THOMPSON & TREMLETT Paul-Francois (Eds), *Re-writing Culture in Taiwan*, Oxon: Routledge, 2009, p. 82

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid. p. 70

are inherently nationalized everywhere, albeit with varying degrees of emphasis on the narrative imposed by public institutions of high culture. In Taiwan, the precarious geopolitical status and perceived external threats endow culture with significant political importance. As articulated by Vickers,

Cultural developments cannot be analysed in isolation from their social and political context – nor of how, in the case of Taiwan, the sovereignty claims of the People’s Republic mean that the political stakes in the island’s cultural struggles are exceptionally high.⁴⁶⁸

In addition to the tense geopolitical situation, there is another factor contributing to the higher governmental control of museums in Taiwan, and it is once again the influence of Confucianism. Notably, a key distinction between Taiwanese museums and their Western counterparts lies in the *pedagogical nature* art possesses in Taiwan. This educational orientation, combined with the “ingrained cultural acceptance of the role of the state in defining ‘correct thinking’ on moral matters”⁴⁶⁹, has made the Taiwanese museological system “highly susceptible to political direction.”⁴⁷⁰ Museums are “powerful identity-defining machines”⁴⁷¹: they hold the power to *invent, diffuse, and legitimize* identity narratives. Consequently, museums have always played a pivotal role in the discourse on Taiwanese identity. However, it is important to note that due to the aforementioned factors, they “offer just one window onto the development of identity discourse in contemporary Taiwan and, given the way in which museums in the Republic of China (ROC) are run, this is primarily a window into the official or governmental landscape.”⁴⁷² Museums have always been, and still are, instruments to impose a correct, state-centered version of “Chineseness” or “Taiwaneseness”, to the point that they became “something of a battleground for rival political visions of Taiwan’s history and identity.”⁴⁷³

⁴⁶⁸ Ibidem.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 72

⁴⁷⁰ Edwards VICKERS, “History, Identity, and the Politics of Taiwan’s Museums Reflections on the DPP-KMT Transition”, in *China Perspectives*, Vol. 3, September 2010, pp. 92-106, p. 95

⁴⁷¹ Carol DUNCAN, “Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship”, in I. KARP, S. D. LAVINE (Eds.), *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Washington, London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991, pp. 88-103. Cited in Ibidem.

⁴⁷² Edwards VICKERS, “History, Identity, and the Politics of Taiwan’s Museums Reflections on the DPP-KMT Transition”, in *China Perspectives*, Vol. 3, September 2010, pp. 92-106, p. 94

⁴⁷³ Ibidem.

Discussing more technical characteristics, it is noteworthy that while “major publicly-funded museums in many countries are treated as organs of the state [...] In Taiwan, however, the main *national* museums are not just publicly-funded institutions – they are also directly state-administered.”⁴⁷⁴ This implies that museum directors are appointed by and directly accountable to government ministries, placing them in a difficult position. Citing Vickers:

The very closeness of museums to government, their inescapable involvement in representing identities, and the extreme sensitivity of press and public to portrayals of identity all mean that those responsible for museums are compelled to engage with the politics of identity whether or not they see this as a legitimate aspect of their role.⁴⁷⁵

This highly centralized cultural bureaucracy doesn't reduce museum directors to mere puppets manipulated by the government. It rather suggests the necessity of a *negotiation* process between the official governmental cultural agenda and the autonomy of museums in organizing the country's cultural life.⁴⁷⁶ It is important to note that the degree of autonomy is increasing thanks to “the growing professionalisation within the sector, and increasingly intense and sophisticated public and media scrutiny outside it, [which] make the blanket imposition, or re-imposition, of any orthodoxy a highly fraught enterprise.”⁴⁷⁷ However, despite the positive advancements shaped by globalization and liberalization, in Taiwan “museums are never going to be ‘depoliticised’”⁴⁷⁸ and “political interference from rival ideological quarters ~~can~~ [continues to] disturb well-laid plans and complicate day-to-day administration.”⁴⁷⁹

For reasons of pertinence, the current thesis will refrain from analyzing shrines, memorials, mausoleums, or national palaces serving as custodians of antiquity. For example, the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall (*Zhongzheng Jinianguan* 中正紀念館), the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall (*Guofu Jinianguan* 國父紀念館), as well as the 2-28 Peace Memorial Museum (228 *Shijian jinian jijin hui* 228 事件紀念基金會) will not be considered. The same applies to Taiwan's four national museums: the National Palace Museum (NPM, *Guoli gugong bowuyuan* 國立故宮博物院), the National

⁴⁷⁴ Ibidem.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid. p. 96

⁴⁷⁶ Ibidem.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibidem.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid. p. 106

⁴⁷⁹ Ibidem.

Museum of History (NMH, *Guoli lishi bowuguan* 國立歷史博物館), the National Taiwan Museum (NTM, *Guoli Taiwan bowuguan* 國立臺灣博物館) and National Museum of Taiwan History (NMTH, *Guoli Taiwan lishi bowuguan* 國立臺灣歷史博物館). Instead, this section dedicated to the nationalization of the museum space will focus on the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM). There are two primary reasons behind this decision. Firstly, governmental manipulation in national museums, where staff and directors can be replaced for being politically unfitting, is evident. Examining political control in a non-national museum like TFAM offers a more intriguing perspective. Secondly, focusing on TFAM allows the thesis to maintain continuity with the theme of contemporary art, ensuring a more equitable and coherent parallelism with independent art spaces in the next chapter.

3.7.1 The Nationalization of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum

In this section, the examination of the nationalization process within the walls of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, along with discussions on censorship and the issue of “secularization,” will draw primarily upon the research of Felix Schober. He stands as one of the most prominent voices in this area of study, if not the most authoritative, having dedicated a significant portion of his academic career to analyzing the museum, its interaction with the local art community, and its management of events such as the Taipei Biennale and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice.

The first aspect to clarify is the relationship between the TFAM and the government, often (and understandably) perceived as *ambiguous*. The TFAM is not a national art museum, it is however a *municipal* institution, governed by the Taipei City Government’s Cultural Affairs Bureau, as distinct from the central government’s Council for Cultural Affairs, which oversees Taiwan’s *national* cultural institutions.⁴⁸⁰ However, despite not being directly subject to governmental administration, museum directors are appointed by the Taipei City Government, and regularly substituted following shifts of the ruling party.⁴⁸¹ As Schoeber highlights, since its establishment in 1983, the TFAM was to all effect part of a larger “ideological state apparatus.”⁴⁸² Staff members were recruited based on civil service examination results rather than expertise in art history, and jurors were selected to represent the

⁴⁸⁰ Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan’s Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden, BRILL, 2018, p. 18

⁴⁸¹ Edwards VICKERS, “History, Identity, and the Politics of Taiwan’s Museums Reflections on the DPP-KMT Transition”, in *China Perspectives*, Vol. 3, September 2010, pp. 92-106, p. 94

⁴⁸² Felix SCHOEBER, *Modernity, nationalism and global marginalization: representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art exhibition. The Taipei fine arts museum and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice 1984-2009*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Westminster, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, 2014, pp. 70-71

academia, enforcing restrictive aesthetic and ideological standards.⁴⁸³ Additionally, in-house curators were employed as civil servants too, meaning their competence was assessed primarily in terms of their understanding of national ideology rather than art history or museological practices.⁴⁸⁴

As highlighted in previous chapters, the museum's initial mission was to cultivate Chinese modernity. To achieve this, "the museum created the very image of the nation: the basic characteristic of the modern nation and everything connected with it is its modernity."⁴⁸⁵ However, modernity was not pursued for its own sake; rather, the new art was expected to be "firstly *Chinese* and secondly *modern*."⁴⁸⁶ This advocacy for a *correct version* of modernity and thus of national identity, is evident in the statements of the first director of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Su Rui-ping (蘇瑞屏):

In my personal opinion, Chinese arts must be founded on Chinese culture. Viewing the trends of modern art, we find that the prominent artists strive to base their painting on traditional arts reflecting society and the essence of life.⁴⁸⁷

The TFAM played a crucial role in advancing Taiwan's national identity both domestically and globally. Especially in the mid-1990s, several exhibitions were dedicated to exploring Taiwanese identity and advocating for the concept of a Taiwanese nation. This section will consider four primary exhibitions held at TFAM and focused on these themes.

The first exhibition worth mentioning is the first Taipei Biennial, titled "The Quest for Identity" (the Chinese title is *Taiwan Yishu zhuti* 台灣藝術主體, literally "Subjectivity in Taiwan Art") in 1996. This exhibition holds significance for different factors: firstly, it marked the TFAM's inaugural exhibition curated solely by local curators, without external input from foreign experts. The thematic selection of artworks, not limited anymore by technical categorization, allowed for the inclusion of works by emerging young artists employing diverse styles and media. Notably, this exhibition served as the debut showcase for *contemporary* indigenous artists within an art museum setting. The aim behind this choice was to depict Taiwanese "local" culture and its unique attributes, aligning with the perspective of the TFAM's director at the time, Chang Chen-yu (張振宇), a strong advocate for

⁴⁸³ Ibid. p. 41

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid. p. 71

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid. pp. 115-116

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid. pp. 85-86

⁴⁸⁷ SU Rui-ping, "Preface", in *Contemporary Art Trends in the Republic of China 1986*, Taipei: TFAM, 1986, p. 3. Cited in Ibidem.

independence.⁴⁸⁸ Through the incorporation of a timeline displayed on the wall, the exhibition traced the nation's history from its Austronesian origins, strategically aiming to disassociate it from China. Taking into account all these factors, it is undeniable that the exhibition carried significant political implications.

Another exhibition that played a key role in shaping Taiwanese identity was “Taiwan Art (1945-1993)”, (in Chinese, *Taiwan meishu xin fengmao* 台灣美術新風貌, literally “New Face of Taiwan Art”),⁴⁸⁹ in 1993. This ambitious exhibition aimed to narrate Taiwan's art history, aligning with the museums' practice of crafting an official, politically appropriate narrative of art history discussed earlier in this chapter. In this case, Taiwanese art history was contextualized within discourses on modernization, Taiwanization, and internationalism. The visual historiography of Taiwanese artistic development was presented through four chronological periods, highlighting the influences that contributed to shaping Taiwanese identity, including Japanese-trained artists, indigenous art, and art from mainland China. Furthermore, the inclusion of the word *xin* 新 “new” in the Chinese title may allude to Lee Teng Hui's concept of the “new Taiwanese”, as suggested by the curator's statement: “*new* means no turning back, a departure from established convention...and a determination to march into the future.”⁴⁹⁰

Both the exhibition “Art Taiwan” (*Taiwan yishu* 台灣藝術), held at TFAM in 1995, and the Taiwan Pavilion at the 1997 Venice Biennale, titled “Taiwan Taiwan: Facing Faces” (*Taiwan Taiwan: mianmuquanfei* 台灣台灣：面目全非), share a common objective of showcasing the cultural distinctiveness of Taiwan's identity and the heterogeneous nature of Taiwanese art. Sophie McIntyre notes that these exhibitions primarily achieved this goal through the narration of Japanese colonial and Austronesian histories, as well as through the promotion of multiculturalism and democracy, which served to differentiate Taiwan from mainland China.⁴⁹¹ Indeed, the central narrative of both exhibitions revolved around portraying Taiwan as a technologically advanced, culturally tolerant, and

⁴⁸⁸ The information about the exhibition have been taken from Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, pp. 30-37

⁴⁸⁹ The information about the exhibition have been taken from Ibid. pp. 23-26

⁴⁹⁰ HUANG Kuang-nan, “Director's Preface” in *Taiwan Art (1945-1993)*, Taipei: TFAM, 1993, p. 10. Cited in Ibid. p. 24

⁴⁹¹ Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, p. 17

democratic nation. The heterogeneity of Taiwanese art was underscored by the selection of diverse works spanning various media.⁴⁹²

The relationship between the TFAM and the broader local art scene has always been complex and dual in nature. The establishment of the museum provided for the first time an official venue dedicated to contemporary art. While this might be perceived as a positive development for the local art scene, it also meant that the government could exert influence and impose its own standards on contemporary art. In essence, while the government supported and sponsored contemporary art development, the fact that contemporary art has been so closely tied to issues of identity provided an incentive to nationalize these otherwise independent artistic spirits. For artists, involvement with the administration of the museum carried the potential risk of having their art reframed within the rhetoric of national ideology.⁴⁹³

As Schoeber suggests, the birth of the Taipei Biennale and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice accelerated this process, as the museum gained the authority to secure participation in significant international exhibitions, thereby launching the international careers of artists.

As long as the state provided only a mere platform for the occasional exhibition, the incentive for a local artist to re-frame his work through national ideology was arguably comparatively low. The more elaborate this system, the closer the exhibition system came to represent a career path for the artists, the higher the incentive became to re-think artistic creation in the terms set out by the administration.⁴⁹⁴

Given that both the Taipei Biennial and the Taiwan Pavilion inherently *represent* the nation to global audiences, art is naturally displayed as “speaking for the nation”⁴⁹⁵. This implies that for an artist “internationalisation came almost always at the price of the nationalisation of the art work.”⁴⁹⁶

This phenomenon is clearly exemplified in Taiwan’s portrayal of its own art showcased at the Biennale. Specifically, the booklet “Contemporary Art from Taiwan at the Venice Biennial, 1995 – 2003,” published by the TFAM in 2005, serves as a notable example. As the title suggests, the booklet

⁴⁹² The information about the exhibition have been taken from Ibid. pp. 37-47

⁴⁹³ Felix SCHOEBER, *Modernity, nationalism and global marginalization: representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art exhibition. The Taipei fine arts museum and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice 1984-2009*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Westminster, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, 2014, pp. 40-41

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid. p. 40

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid. p. 43

⁴⁹⁶ Ibidem.

aims to be a comprehensive archive documenting the history of Taiwanese artists and artworks featured at the Venice Biennale over the years. However, it presents several significant omissions. Notably absent are artists such as Lee Mingsheng, Chen Chieh-jen, and Shu Lea Cheang (Zheng Shuli 鄭淑麗),⁴⁹⁷ whose participations (respectively in 1993, 1999 and 2003) gained acclaim from the international press. The selection method thus appears to prioritize the ability to represent the nation, or represent the nation *in a correct way*, over artistic quality. This selective approach to artists serves as a bitter reminder of a larger truth about museums and art historiography in Taiwan:

Only artists and artworks that have been “nationalised”, that have been fitted into the patterns and categories of the state-run art administration are deemed worthy of recording; anything outside that administrative grip, however noteworthy or groundbreaking it may have been, is thoroughly erased from that account of official art history.⁴⁹⁸

In this sense, the publication of the booklet by the TFAM is a clear indicator of the ambivalent relationship between the museum and the art community. Moreover, it poses a significant risk, as a biased representation of Taiwanese art leads to a misrepresentation of what it truly is.

3.7.1.1 Censorship of the “unfitting”: Nationalization or secularization?

Partial representation of art history may serve as a prominent manifestation of nationalism at the TFAM, yet it is not the only one. This section will mention three examples involving scandals at the TFAM, illustrating respectively phenomena of censorship, forced alteration of artworks, and dilution of their original meaning within the museum’s confines, whether physical or metaphorical. A brief discussion will follow the examples, delving into the secularization process of museums, thereby questioning the notion of nationalism as the primary museological limit. Certainly, while this chapter up to this point has focused on Taiwanese cultural nationalism, it would be erroneous to assume that the constraining influence of institutional art within the Taiwanese artworld is solely limited to its identity-driven struggle and the consequent political valorization of art. Instead, multiple processes are at play, with some being fundamental characteristics observed in modern museums worldwide.

Numerous instances of violent actions directed towards artists and artworks, especially during Su Ruiping’s directorial tenure, serve as evidence that museological and curatorial practices at TFAM were founded on the “assumption that the institution and the institution alone created the work of

⁴⁹⁷ The omissions have been noted by Schoeber in *Ibid.* p. 185

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibidem.*

art.”⁴⁹⁹ One notable incident occurred during the preparations for “Colour and Form: Avant-garde, Experiment, Space Special Exhibition” (*Secai yu zaoxing – qianwei, zhuangzhi, kongjian te zhan* 色彩與造型 – 前衛, 裝置, 空間特展), in 1984. In that occasion, director Su physically destroyed the installation created by the young artist Zhang Jian-fu (張建富), which featured an arrangement of paper flowers echoing those found in Buddhist temples. The words shouted by director Su – “Do you understand what installation art is? This place is a museum! This is not a religious temple, and we do not want any politics inside this museum, nor do we want religion, death, or occult rituals!”⁵⁰⁰ – clearly highlights the existence of a *correct* form of art permissible within the museum: an art devoid of religion and politics. While the case just mentioned involved the destruction of an artwork carrying religious meaning, in the same year the forced modification of Lee Tsai-chien’s (李再鈞, b. 1928) sculpture “Minimalism without limits” (*Dixian de wuxian* 低限的無限) stands as an example of censoring political subtext. The artwork, a red, abstract steel sculpture, was repainted in silver by the TFAM without informing the artist after a passer-by compared it to the communist red star.⁵⁰¹

Fig. 5. *Minimalism without limits* (*Dixian de wuxian* 低限的無限), Lee Tsai-chien 李再鈞, 1983, sculpture, stainless steel and spray paint, 136 × 310 × 135 cm, Taipei Fine Arts Museum

On the basis of the aforementioned scandals, it is possible to infer that, as McIntyre points out, “although Taiwan promoted itself to the world during this time as culturally progressive, government control over freedom of expression prevailed.”⁵⁰² This *violent* way of nationalizing the museum space is particularly grave if we consider that the censored artworks are both pieces of contemporary art, making the “notion of modern avant-garde liberation appear rather *limited* and *one-dimensional*.”⁵⁰³

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid. p. 113

⁵⁰⁰ “你懂不懂什麼叫裝置藝術？我們這裡是美術館啊！不是什麼宗教廟堂，我們美術館不要政治，不要宗教，不要關生死，道法的東西！” in H. Y. LIN, *渡越驚濤駭浪的台灣美術 [To Tide Over a Chopping Environment of Art in Taiwan – sic]*, Taipei: Yishujia, 1997, p. 15. Translation by Felix Schoeber. Cited in Ibid. p. 106

⁵⁰¹ This intervention by the museum gained media attention, and the statue was subsequently removed. Two decades later, a red but slightly different sculpture was installed at the museum forecourt. The artist named this new sculpture “Red without Compromise” (*hong bu rang* 紅不讓) in Chinese, while its English title was *Home Run*.

⁵⁰² McINTYRE Sophie, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan’s Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, p.20

⁵⁰³ Felix SCHOEBER, *Modernity, nationalism and global marginalization: representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art exhibition. The Taipei fine arts museum and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice 1984-2009*, PhD thesis discussed

In the essay “Re-writing Art in Taiwan: Secularism, Universalism, Globalization, or Modernity and the Aesthetic Object,” Schoeber makes an interesting observation regarding the scandals involving the TFAM. He suggests that viewing these actions solely as acts of political censorship or nationalization is limiting. Instead, there may be a broader process at play: that of *secularization*⁵⁰⁴ (isolation of an object from the original context and meaning and the construction of another meaning), inherent in the institution of the modern and contemporary museum.⁵⁰⁵ Falling into the trap of politicizing everything is tempting, especially in the context of a country emerging from decades of martial law. However, Schoeber argues that the cases examined are not merely “another example of political taboos obstructing cultural development,”⁵⁰⁶ but rather reveal a museal limit in itself – “point to a conflict right at the heart of modernity and modern art.”⁵⁰⁷ In his words: “Beyond the changes in the political environment [...] there was also an internal driving force, a question of museology, a tension inherent to modernity and the museum space.”⁵⁰⁸ This tension resides in what Carol Duncan defines as the “liminal” experience⁵⁰⁹ provided by the modern museum, in its power to generate “a state of mind beyond the ordinary that can easily be compared to religious ecstasy”⁵¹⁰, following Schoeber’s definition instead. Taking these observations into account, the violent actions of director Su Ruiping may be interpreted as a simple reaffirmation of a fundamental characteristic of the modern museum: “in order to enter the museum, the art object must be stripped

at the University of Westminster, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, 2014, pp. 118-119. Emphasis is mine.

⁵⁰⁴ “In its precise historical sense, ‘secularization’ refers to the transfer of persons, things, meanings, etc., from ecclesiastical or religious to civil or lay use.” Source: International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences (Second Edition), 2015 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/secularization#definition> accessed 5 June 2024. The process of *secularizing* something thus means separating something from its religious-spiritual meaning or control.

⁵⁰⁵ To delve deeper into the topic, readers can refer to the essay Carol DUNCAN, “The art museum as ritual”, chapter in D. PREZIOSI (Ed.), “The Art of Art History”, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998

⁵⁰⁶ Felix SCHOEBER, “Re-writing art in Taiwan: Secularism, universalism, globalization, or modernity and the aesthetic object”, Chapter in SHIH Fang-long, Stuart THOMPSON & TREMLETT Paul-Francois (Eds), *Re-writing Culture in Taiwan*, Oxon: Routledge, 2009, p. 160

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid. p. 154

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid. p. 155

⁵⁰⁹ Carol DUNCAN, “The art museum as ritual”, chapter in D. PREZIOSI (Ed.), “The Art of Art History”, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 480

⁵¹⁰ Felix SCHOEBER, “Re-writing art in Taiwan: Secularism, universalism, globalization, or modernity and the aesthetic object”, Chapter in SHIH Fang-long, Stuart THOMPSON & TREMLETT Paul-Francois (Eds), *Re-writing Culture in Taiwan*, Oxon: Routledge, 2009, p. 158

of all religious, traditional, or political meanings. Only after this process of anesthetization has been completed, can the object be exhibited as a work of pure fine art.”⁵¹¹ In the cases of Zhang Jian-fu and Lee Tsai-chien, the religious aura of the former and the potential political reinterpretation of the latter rendered it impossible for the artworks to be appreciated solely as aesthetic objects. However, while censorship in this context may not be directly tied to nationalism or political ideology, but rather concerns matters of beauty and the aestheticism of objects, through the destruction and modification of artworks, the director of the TFAM reaffirmed the museum’s role to “*choose, and display, such objects*”⁵¹², thus reminding the art community the museum’s authority in determining what is art and what is not.

One last interesting example to take into consideration is the installation “De-strike” (*dao bagong* 倒罷工), created by Eva Xinyi Lin (林欣怡) and exhibited at the 2005 Taiwan Pavilion at Venice Biennale. The installation featured an interactive website where viewers were invited to participate in the artist’s strike against the art system. Remarkably, the opening press conference for the exhibition was held precisely in the room of the installation. During the conference, Huang Tsai-lang (黃才郎), director of the TFAM at the time, declared to be excited to sit within that installation. The juxtaposition of Taiwan’s pavilion press conference – a significant event within the institutional art realm – occurring in a space adorned with the phrase “Artists on strike” written on the walls, is already inherently surprising. The director’s excitement, as one of the supreme arbiters of the Taiwanese contemporary art system, for an installation aimed at boycotting its very museal system, adds another layer of paradox to the situation. However, viewed through the lens of secularization discussed earlier, Director Huang Tsai-lang’s statement may not sound as illogical anymore. In fact, as Schoeber explains, the revolutionary force of Eva Lin’s strike against the art system was toned down by being showcased within the walls of the pavilion:

While that inspired many viewers to join in her rebellious fashion statement, she was, above all, reaffirming the aesthetic character of any object in the museum [...] the invitation to the viewer to “strike” inside the installation space in Venice resulted quite obviously in little more than empty gestures.⁵¹³

The rationale behind this phenomenon lies in the *sterilizing* and *disinfecting* influence exerted by the process of secularization inherent to museum spaces, and thus the aestheticization of the

⁵¹¹ Ibid. p. 160

⁵¹² Ibidem. Emphasis is mine

⁵¹³ Ibid. p. 176

artworks they contain, which naturally strips artworks of their revolutionary force and original significance. This anaesthetization doesn't happen, for instance, in art studios or independent art spaces, in which the place where art is created and the place where it is ultimately exhibited often coincide. In summary, it can be stated that viewing artwork in "purely aesthetic terms" is certainly limiting and arguably outdated in contemporary contexts.⁵¹⁴ The writer of this thesis will abstain from expressing an opinion on the nature of these cases: for the purpose of this research, the debate between nationalization and secularization is not particularly relevant. In fact, regardless of the reasons behind it – whether political or aesthetic – in both cases, the power of the museum institution to constrain artistic expression becomes evident. Certainly, while nationalization limits the thematic options available to artists and infuses art with ideology, on the other hand, an aestheticization that consecrates art to a higher value can disconnect it from reality and real-life experiences.

3.7.1.2 *The TFAM and its distance from the local art scene*

During the post-martial law period, significant criticism was raised towards the TFAM and the exhibitions it staged. In particular, the Taiwanese art community expressed concerns about the detachment of art from everyday life and societal realities, highlighting the humiliating absence of representation within museum spaces of what was being created around the city and the broader country, outside the museum's walls. While the relationship between the government and Taiwan's museums gradually shifted from a 'rigid structure simply imposed from above' to a more 'complex and shifting process of negotiation'⁵¹⁵ following the lifting of martial law, it is essential to acknowledge that, despite this, art and politics remained "ideologically aligned, forming a symbiotic relationship that centred on the redefinition of the *Taiwanese* nation."⁵¹⁶

Chapter two delineated how the 1980s and 1990s were characterized by significant social chaos and artistic fermentation, resulting in the emergence of new art spaces and forms of art with considerable cultural significance. Critics have frequently lamented the inexistent or inadequate incorporation of this new art into the sole museum devoted to contemporary art, viewing it as a squandering of creative potential. Among them, Jian Ming-Hui (簡明輝), the Arts Exhibition

⁵¹⁴ Regarding this aspect, the emergence of the Taipei Biennale was a positive turning point within Taiwanese artworld: indeed, as explored in the previous chapter, it has played a pivotal role in shifting the focus from the mere aesthetic value of art objects to their broader cultural significance.

⁵¹⁵ VICKERS Edward, "Re-writing Museums in Taiwan", Chapter in SHIH Fang-long, Stuart THOMPSON & TREMLETT Paul-Francois (Eds), *Re-writing Culture in Taiwan*, Oxon: Routledge, 2009, p. 71

⁵¹⁶ Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, p. 3

Organizer of Taipei County Cultural Center⁵¹⁷, highlights: “our society and art education are very far away from common culture... Art does not necessarily have to be with or *for* the people but it must *relate to* the people.”⁵¹⁸ The critic and curator Huang Hai-ming (黃海鳴) seems to agree with Jian’s vision, pointing out how the TFAM, “had failed to react to the changes happening in the wider public sphere that had taken place [...] thus failing in its mission as a space that should facilitate public cultural discourse.”⁵¹⁹ Huang highlighted the importance of cultivating platforms of open dialogue such as museums, since for “a democratic society to function, it needs venues for open dialogue.”⁵²⁰ In Huang’s words:

This trend ... should be put in an arena for dialogue. Only by this can we stimulate more intellectual and positive thinking [...] If we wish to cultivate independent thinking from the people, this kind of dialogue is absolutely necessary.⁵²¹

This distance from the local art scene and the refusal to acknowledge the evident politicization of contemporary Taiwanese art has caused the “exhibition programme of the museum to descend into intellectual irrelevance.”⁵²² Referring in particular to the Taipei Biennial, Huang Hai-ming further elaborated the misrepresentation of contemporary local art with the following words:

Whereas social change has always been the stimulus for new art trends, if the Biennial does not try to expose these trends, to study the arguments and conflicts among them, ... then the vitality shown in our society of this era will be unfortunately sacrificed with negligence.⁵²³

⁵¹⁷ As discussed in the previous chapter, the center has been notable for its support of independent, socially engaged, and environmental art forms.

⁵¹⁸ LU Pei-Yi, “Exhibition as Identity Making: Environmental Art (1994) and Resurgence On the Tamshui River (1995)” in *Taiwan as Case Studies*, Conference Paper, The 34th World Congress of Art History (CIHA), China Central Academy Of Fine Arts, Beijing, 2016.9.15-21 (not yet published), p. 9

⁵¹⁹ Felix SCHOEBER, *Modernity, nationalism and global marginalization: representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art exhibition. The Taipei fine arts museum and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice 1984-2009*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Westminster, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, 2014, pp. 157-158

⁵²⁰ Ibidem.

⁵²¹ HUANG Hai-ming 黃海鳴 (1992), cited in Ibid. p. 158

⁵²² Ibid. p. 159

⁵²³ HUANG Hai-ming 黃海鳴 (1992), cited in Ibid. p. 164

These statements trace back to the first half of the 1990s, but the TFAM's perceived commercialization and marginalization of local artists remained contentious issues throughout the first decade of the 2000s.⁵²⁴

However, to avoid being confined by anachronistic narratives, credit should be given to the museum and the institutional system in general for their gradual liberalization over time. Such process is attributable to the increasing awareness, among all actors in the artworld, of the constraints imposed by nationalism. Notably, the late 1990s and the 2000s marked a pivotal period during which members of Taiwan's visual arts community became increasingly conscious of the limitations of the 'nation' as a subject of artistic and curatorial investigation.⁵²⁵

Curators and scholars [...] remarked that Taiwan Artists were too ideologically driven and that they must cultivate a broader view of the world. [...] The quest to recover and represent an "authentic" and distinctive cultural identity waned in the visual arts. [...] This shift in Taiwan's identity trajectory was noticeably manifest in the museological representation of art, which became increasingly internationalized, displacing Taiwanese nationalist discourses.⁵²⁶

This awakening can be primarily attributed to the emergence of a new generation of artists, independent curators, and museum professionals who became disillusioned with party politics and increasingly focused on issues of global relevance.⁵²⁷ The effects of globalization highlighted the fluidity, variability, and multidimensionality of identity, rendering the concept of the 'sovereign state' outdated. Consequently, in the museological representation of Taiwan, the world replaced the nation as focus. This increasing internationalization of Taiwanese art also serves as a strategy to fulfill the demands of a new global artworld, engaging the Taiwanese art community in confrontation and dialogue. It has been mostly this new, interconnected, transnational art community to exert pressures of modernization on Taiwanese art, both in *direct* ways – through requirements for participating in international exhibitions, and *indirect* ones – to maintain competitiveness in the art market. These pressures eventually led to notable advancements. As McIntyre notes, during the 2000s, "while political and museological narratives on Taiwan's identity remain correlated, the symbiotic

⁵²⁴ Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, p. 245

⁵²⁵ Ibid. p. 261

⁵²⁶ Ibid. p. 53

⁵²⁷ See LAI Meng-Yu, *Taiwanese Identity and the Performing Arts: the Development of Programming at the National Performing Arts Centre*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of London, Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies, 2020, p. 162

relationship between national identity politics and artistic production that existed during the 1990s has diminished.”⁵²⁸

The progressive liberalization of institutional art does not imply a cessation of critiques. On the contrary, during the 2000s it was not just critics but also artists to openly look “at the internal mechanics of art and the problems of art institutions by revealing the modes of production, consumption, and distribution of art and by engaging in institutional critique.”⁵²⁹ After decades of being the sole authoritative voice and the premier museum for contemporary art in Taiwan, the agency and professionalism of the TFAM was being cross-examined by the local arts community.⁵³⁰ The critical issues identified by the local arts community remained consistent with those of the 1990s. Among the most critical artists towards the TFAM in this context, it is important to cite Chen Chieh-jen, who denounced the hyper-commercialization of the museum during a widely publicized press conference,⁵³¹ and Tsong Pu. The latter is of particular interest primarily because, paradoxically, he has been one of the most frequently exhibited artists at the TFAM, both during that period and overall. Additionally, his solo exhibition “Art from the Underground” (*Dixia yishu zhan* 地下藝術展) in 2010 highlighted a significant contradiction in the relationship between the museum and independent art. To underscore this contradiction, it is essential to recall two important aspects discussed in the second chapter: Tsong Pu was one of the founders of the independent art space “Apartment No. 2”, and the TFAM’s engagement with the independent art scene through its basement. Through the exhibition, Tsong Pu commented on the way local artists were consigned to the TFAM’s basement because, he suggested, they are perceived not to be commercially viable.⁵³²

My first exhibit was held in this space twenty years ago. It seems that I haven’t improved much over that time because twenty years later I’m still ... underground.

⁵²⁸ Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan’s Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, p. 53

⁵²⁹ LU Pei-Yi, “Three Approaches to Socially Engaged Art in Taiwan”, in *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vol. 15, No. 6, November/December 2016, pp. 91-101, p. 99

⁵³⁰ Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan’s Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, p. 245

⁵³¹ *Ibid.* p. 244

⁵³² *Ibidem.*

Hopefully my work will improve in the future so that I can be elevated to the first floor.⁵³³

Reflecting on Tsong Pu's bitter consideration, it becomes evident that the primary issue is not that the museum has never hosted independent art created by young artists within its walls; indeed, as previously discussed, there have been numerous exhibitions and collaborations between independent spaces and the TFAM basement. Rather, the problem lies in the museum's relegation of these artists and these more experimental art forms to a dedicated space. Considering that the TFAM's spatial structuring is designed to reflect the potential career path within Taiwanese artworld,⁵³⁴ this practice has prevented their integration into the broader art system, instead consistently defining them as a category that is not necessarily *inferior*, but certainly *separate*.

The author of this thesis aims to conclude this section with a final essential consideration and a correlated example: although the criticisms directed at the museum discussed thus far might suggest a backwardness in the Taiwanese art system, they are, in fact, important symbols of artistic awareness. In any art system, the *ability* and *power* of artists to critique it signifies a crucial stage of maturity. The most iconic manifestation of the expressive freedom achieved during the 2000s is the 2010 Taipei Biennial, which serves as a case of institutional critique advanced directly by the institutional exhibitory system itself.

The 2010 Taipei Biennial, curated by the Western educated artist, curator and academic Lin Hong-john (林宏璋) and Tirdad Zolghadr, reconsiders the biennial format through a number of structural proposals.⁵³⁵ The artworks presented and the curatorial approach employed can be seen as a critique of the biennial concept itself and, less explicitly, of the museological system of its organizer, the TFAM, resulting in what has been described as an "anti-biennial biennial."⁵³⁶ Several commissioned works for the 2010 Taipei Biennial questioned the authority of both the museum and the biennial. Among these, Burak Delier's *We Will Win Survey* (2010) warrants special attention within the scope of this chapter.

⁵³³ Tsong Pu, cited in *Ibidem*.

⁵³⁴ Felix SCHOEBER, *Modernity, nationalism and global marginalization: representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art exhibition. The Taipei fine arts museum and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice 1984-2009*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of Westminster, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, 2014, p. 42

⁵³⁵ <https://artmap.com/taipeibiennial/exhibition/taipei-biennial-2010-2010> accessed 16 May 2014

⁵³⁶ Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, p. 244

Invited by the 2010 Taipei Biennial to rework on his ongoing project *WE WILL WIN* (2008), Burak Delier examined the perception of art and the complex mechanisms of the art institution through a survey targeting key figures in the art world: managers, decision-makers, curators, artists, audiences, and staff. The survey aimed to reveal the various agendas within the cultural industry and included questions such as “Do you think art should be autonomous from dominant political and economic power?” and “Do you also think that art should be autonomous from any social political struggle in the public realm?” The fact that such a provocative and invasive artwork was commissioned directly by the Biennial institution itself is a clear indicator of a revolution happening within the Taiwanese artworld.

Fig. 6. *We Will Win Survey*, Burak Delier, 2010, interactive mixed media installation, dimensions variable, Taipei Fine Arts Museum.

3.8 Cultural Diplomacy at the Venice Biennale

In the preceding section, the thesis highlighted how since the 2000s, Taiwanese art has overcome the constraints of cultural nationalism, assuming a more international character. However, even if not forced anymore to display a crafted image of the nation, in a country that has something to say and is unable to speak in other contexts, art showcased in major international exhibitions invariably serves an additional purpose, often carrying a diplomatic agenda. The “process of de-centering politics in art institutes”⁵³⁷, specifically museums and national representations abroad, since the 2000s, is not aimed anymore at “institutionalising an ideologically congenial vision of Taiwan’s history and identity.”⁵³⁸ Rather, these institutes have become platforms to “remind the world of its existence.”⁵³⁹ Thus, while there has been a shift in the manner in which art is utilized for specific ends, the act of instrumentalizing art itself persists.

Drawing on the premise that “international recognition is the very essence of the modern state and of any claim to national political self-hood”⁵⁴⁰, it is essential for Taiwan to narrate itself to garner external support. Furthermore, as Taiwan is not a member of the United Nations or many other

⁵³⁷ TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, p. 139

⁵³⁸ Edwards VICKERS, “History, Identity, and the Politics of Taiwan’s Museums Reflections on the DPP-KMT Transition”, in *China Perspectives*, Vol. 3, September 2010, pp. 92-106, p. 100

⁵³⁹ Ibid. p. 101

⁵⁴⁰ Stephan FEUCHTWANG, “Afterword”, in SHIH Fang-long, Stuart THOMPSON & TREMLETT Paul-Francois (Eds), *Re-writing Culture in Taiwan*, Oxon: Routledge, 2009, p. 206

international organizations, major global exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale have emerged as preferred platforms for engaging with the global community and practicing cultural diplomacy.⁵⁴¹

Even though Taiwan is still not able to participate in international political institutions, it can more easily join the world through alternatives, and cultural affairs is one of the significant approaches. International cultural exchange has been a key agenda for Taiwan's cultural policy.⁵⁴²

Cultural diplomacy is defined as “the use of culture and the arts by governments (directly or indirectly via non-state actors) to achieve their foreign policy goals and a prime activity for achieving ‘soft power’ as a relational outcome.”⁵⁴³ We have previously discussed the role of the arts in cultural diplomacy within cross-strait relations with the People's Republic of China, particularly during the Kuomintang eras. The objective of this section is to concentrate instead on the usage of art in the establishment of informal relationships with the broader international community.

The Taipei Biennial has been the first platform through which Taiwan made itself known to the world. Citing the KMT leader Ma Ying-jeou: “as a channel for city marketing, the Taipei Biennial has promoted the city's image to the world, standing on the front lines of Taipei's efforts in cultural diplomacy.”⁵⁴⁴ However, the favorite stage through which the island is able to articulate its narrative remains the Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. The Venice Biennale inherently possesses a political and diplomatic character, often described as the ‘UN of Art’;⁵⁴⁵ for all participating nations, the national pavilion offers an opportunity to showcase local realities or address domestic concerns. This significance is particularly pronounced for countries that lack similar opportunities elsewhere;

⁵⁴¹ For further information, the reader can refer to Elisabetta ZERBINATTI, *Narrarsi attraverso l'arte: Il Padiglione Taiwan a Venezia come esempio di diplomazia culturale 2015-2017*, master thesis submitted to Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Faculty of Language and Civilisation of Asia and Mediterranean Africa, 2017

⁵⁴² LAI Meng-Yu, *Taiwanese Identity and the Performing Arts: the Development of Programming at the National Performing Arts Centre*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of London, Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies, 2020, p. 87

⁵⁴³ FIGUEIRA Carla, “Indigenous Peoples as Non-State Diplomatic Actors in the Public/Cultural Diplomacy of Taiwan: a Case Study of Dispossessions: Performative Encounter(s) of Taiwanese Indigenous Contemporary Art” in *International Journal of Taiwan Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2020, pp. 62-92, pp. 6-7

⁵⁴⁴ MA Ying-jeou, “Foreword”, in *Taipei Biennial- Do You Believe in Reality?*, Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2004, p. 9

⁵⁴⁵ Elisabetta ZERBINATTI, *Narrarsi attraverso l'arte: Il Padiglione Taiwan a Venezia come esempio di diplomazia culturale 2015-2017*, master thesis submitted to Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Faculty of Language and Civilisation of Asia and Mediterranean Africa, 2017, p. 75

as a consequence, they cannot afford to solely exhibit art for its own sake. The importance attached to this event inevitably carries problematic implications. To use McIntyre's words:

In the context of Venice, it is clear that the most influential agents in the visual representation of Taiwan's identity were not artists themselves but the politicians, museum directors (and their staff) and the panel of judges who set out to construct specific narratives to define Taiwan art, which then became a valuable tool in the national rebranding exercise.⁵⁴⁶

Taiwan places such a significant importance on asserting its identity at the Biennale that the works showcased at the Taiwan Pavilion from its inception to the present (1995-2024) serve as one of the most effective keys for comprehending contemporary Taiwanese identity. Through the analysis of single editions and the comparison between different editions, one can gain a comprehensive understanding of the island's evolving representational strategy.⁵⁴⁷ Indeed, the Taiwan Pavilion functions as a seismometer, swiftly reflecting shifts in the island's image, in line with the prevailing narratives of those in power.

As already mentioned, the very concept of "national pavilion" inherently carries a bias, applicable to all nations: the selection of one or more artists to *represent* the nation implies an universalization of the singular, "turning *Territory* into *Tradition*, Turning the *People* into *One*."⁵⁴⁸ This bias could lead to misleading: the work of individual artists, displayed within a structure prominently bearing the nation's name at the entrance, is inevitably elevated to the status of *essence*, claiming to be representative of the entire nation. This pretense is obviously utopic, as Claude Lefort notes:

the implicit generalization of knowledge and the implicit homogenization of experience could fall apart in the face of the unbearable ordeal of the collapse of certainty, of the vacillation of representations of discourse and as a result of the splitting of the subject.⁵⁴⁹

⁵⁴⁶ Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, p. 41

⁵⁴⁷ Elisabetta ZERBINATTI, *Narrarsi attraverso l'arte: Il Padiglione Taiwan a Venezia come esempio di diplomazia culturale 2015-2017*, master thesis submitted to Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Faculty of Language and Civilisation of Asia and Mediterranean Africa, 2017, p. 141

⁵⁴⁸ Homi K. BHABHA, *Nation and Narration*, New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 300. Emphasis is mine.

⁵⁴⁹ Claude LEFORT, *The Political Forms of Modern Society*, Cambridge: Polity, 1985, pp. 212-214

The intent of the national pavilion to exhibit something representative also entails an imagined dialogue between artists who may have never interacted and artworks that were not originally created to be displayed together. This choral narration, modeled *a posteriori*, “gives the imagined world of the nation a sociological solidity; it links together diverse acts and actors on the national stage who are entirely unaware of each other.”⁵⁵⁰ The idea of an imagined dialogue evokes the already discussed Andersonian concept of “imagined community.” In this context, it could be argued that the Taiwan Pavilion is in itself an attempt to create a Taiwanese imagined community.⁵⁵¹ Through the selection of artists and artworks, the creation of an imagined discourse between them, and curatorial decisions concerning presentation, cataloging, and related matters, the Taiwan Pavilion has endeavored over the years to present an image that is not only reflective of the nation but also conducive to garnering external recognition and support. Felix Schober in his work “Modernity, nationalism and global marginalization: representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art exhibition” (2014), adeptly delineated the fundamental attributes of the Taiwanese nation as portrayed in Venice. This thesis will borrow his words to outline it:

Starting in 1995, Taiwan developed a highly complex form of national representation through contemporary art. This representation of the nation continued to use the idea of a modern nation steeped in Chinese philosophy, but this image of linear progress was expanded and deeply transformed into a complex microcosm of knowledge, creating a new image of a nation rooted in a nature (both an environmental consciousness as an essential link to the territory), but conscious of its complex past and its social problem, and launched towards a highly technological but also spiritual future.⁵⁵²

As already seen in the second chapter, Taiwan’s first participation at the Venice Biennale did not occur through a national pavilion but via a single artist selected for the Minor Prize *Aperto '93* in 1993. This pioneer was the controversial performance artist Lee Mingsheng, whose provocative performance titled *Fireball or Firecircle (Huoqiu yu yuan 火球與圓)* was praised by the global press as a symbol of contemporaneity. Unburdened by the pretense of representing the nation within a national pavilion, the artist was freed from ideological and governmental constraints, thus resulting in a triumph.

⁵⁵⁰ Homi K. BHABHA, *Nation and Narration*, New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 308

⁵⁵¹ See Felix SCHOEBER, *Modernity, nationalism and global marginalization: representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art exhibition. The Taipei fine arts museum and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice 1984-2009*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Westminster, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, 2014, p. 1

⁵⁵² *Ibid.* p. 177

Yet since the very first government-backed Taiwan pavilion, the choice had never been a single, strong artistic message, but rather a highly complex mix of artists, each of which was selected to represent different aspects of the narrative of the nation.^{553 554} This idea that only a diverse range of approaches can adequately capture the complexity of Taiwanese identity can be directly associated with the DPP's nationalist rhetoric of multiculturalism and pluralization of sources shaping Taiwanese culture. From the first Taiwan Pavilion in 1995 on, the approach to the exhibition “tried to take fragment pieces of presence on site to prove an overall absent Taiwan art.”⁵⁵⁵ This practice aligns with a typical characteristic of nationalism, as delineated by Gellner and Homi Bhabha: “The scraps, patches, and rags of only daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture.”⁵⁵⁶

Due to length constraints, this section will not discuss every single pavilion from each year. Instead, focus will be placed on those pavilions that are of greater relevance within the scope of this research. The inaugural official representation certainly warrants mention.

The first Taiwan Pavilion in 1995, titled “ARTTAIWAN” (*Taiwan Yishu* 台灣藝術), presents two aspects of particular interest within the context of this thesis. Firstly, it exemplifies the practice of disassociating Taiwan from the PRC through the use of antique maps, already mentioned earlier in the chapter.⁵⁵⁷ Secondly, the selection of artists as representatives, the majority of whom are affiliated with the independent art space “Apartment No. 2”, is also noteworthy. Regarding the first aspect, Yang Wen-I's curatorial statement for the exhibition, entitled “Rising from the Sea – Contemporary Taiwanese Art” underscored Taiwan's geographical positioning “on the eastern fringe of the Pacific

⁵⁵³ Ibid. p. 186

⁵⁵⁴ As the thesis will further elaborate, this approach was redefined in 2015 with the pavilion titled “Never Say Goodbye” (*Bie shuo zaijian* 別說再見), uniquely represented by Wu Tien-Chang (吳天章). Starting from 2015, a unique representation by a single artist has become one of the favored approaches for the pavilion. The 2017 pavilion “Doing Time” (*zuo shijian* 做時間) featuring Hsieh Tehching (謝德慶) exemplifies this trend. Also the current Taiwan pavilion “Everyday War” (*richang zhanzheng* 日常戰爭) is uniquely represented by one artist, Yuan Goang-Ming (袁廣鳴).

⁵⁵⁵ LU Pei-Yi, “To Be or Not to Be a National Pavilion: Taiwan Pavilion and Hong Kong Pavilion at Venice”, in *Yishu: Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art*, vol. 12, no. 5, 2013.9-10, p. 40

⁵⁵⁶ Homi BHABHA, “DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation”, in H. K. BHABHA (Ed.), *Nation and Narration*, New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 297

⁵⁵⁷ See section 3.6 “National identit(ies) and cultural policies”, last point.

Ocean and the western reaches of the Asian continent.”⁵⁵⁸ This emphasis on the island’s identity as a symbol of maritime culture⁵⁵⁹ and its inclusion within the broader Asian continent is further accentuated by the use of an antique Dutch map as the catalog cover. This strategic choice serves to differentiate Taiwan from mainland China. As noted by Hsiao, within Taiwanese nationalism “the representation of Taiwanese and Chinese cultures as two distinct patterns (‘maritime culture’ versus ‘continental culture’) was used to justify the incompatibility of the pro-China view of history.”⁵⁶⁰

Fig. 7. Catalog cover for the Taiwanese Pavilion *ARTTAIWAN* (*Taiwan Yishu* 台灣藝術) at the 46th Venice Biennale, 1995. Catalog published in Taipei by the TFAM.

Regarding the second aspect, the fact that a majority of the artists selected for the first official representation – Huang Chin-ho (黃進河), Huang Chih-yang (黃志陽), Hou Chun-ming (侯俊明), Lien Teh-cheng (連德誠), and Wu Mali (吳瑪俐) – were either founders or regular participants in the independent art space “Apartment No. 2” (*Er hao gongyu* 二號公寓) may serve to challenge Tsong Pu’s previous assessment of the relationship between the Taipei Fine Arts Museum and the independent art scene. In this sense, the inaugural Taiwan Pavilion, while exhibiting evident nationalistic influences, also symbolizes a fundamental characteristic of the Taiwanese art system: the ability to foster a dialogue between institutional and independent art. As voiced by Wang Lin, the stimulation of such dialogue between “the *recognized* and *unrecognized*, the *official* and the *folks*, the *existing* and the *arising* art,”⁵⁶¹ should be one of the core principles of the Venice Biennale. However, while Taiwan, since its initial national participation, has successfully accomplished this endeavor, other pavilions continue to struggle in this regard.

⁵⁵⁸ YANG Wen-I, “Rising from the Sea—Contemporary Taiwanese Art,” in CHEN Shu-Ling (Ed.), *Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale: A Retrospective 1995–2007* [*Weinisi shuang nian zhan taiwan guan hui gu* 1995-2007, 威尼斯雙年展：台灣館回顧 1995-2007], Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2009, p. 136

⁵⁵⁹ A curious detail, while not essential to the narrative, is that the idea of Taiwan as the exotic, maritime south was recycled from its Japanese rebranding as *nangoku* “the Southern Country” during the Japanese occupation. The association with the sea and tropical landscapes was subsequently internalized by the Taiwanese as significant characteristics of their identity. For further exploration, the reader is referred to Toshio WATANABE, “Japanese Landscape Painting and Taiwan: Modernity, Colonialism, and National Identity”, Chapter in Yuko KIKUCHI, *Refracted modernity: visual culture and identity in colonial Taiwan*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007, pp. 67-81

⁵⁶⁰ HSIAU A-chin, *Contemporary Taiwanese Cultural Nationalism*, New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 166

⁵⁶¹ WANG Lin (Ed.), “Voice of the unseen: Chinese Independent Art 1979/Today” [未曾呈現的聲音 - 中国独立艺术展], catalog of the homonymous Collateral Event of the 55th Venice Biennial, Heidelberg: Alte Brücke Verlag, 2013, pp. 454-455. Emphasis is mine.

Shifting the focus back to the Taiwan Pavilion, while the dialogue among artists in the first pavilion in 1995 was somewhat authentic, from 1997 onward, this dialogue became largely imagined, orchestrated by museum administrators and officially appointed curators. According to Schoeber, these groupings of artists, who had never previously exhibited together and were unlikely to do so again after Venice, were “largely forced upon the artists, and do not stem from a genuine discourse that has been going on beforehand, or that has been ignited by that show in Venice [...] [they] have been dictated by a logic of internal politics and political correctness.”⁵⁶²

The 2005 Pavilion “The Spectre of Freedom” (*ziyou de huanxiang* 自由的幻象) and the 2007 Pavilion “Atopia” (*fei yu zhi jing* 非域之境) are worth mentioning for representing a significant shift in Taiwanese national narrative. Finally liberated from the expectation to promote Taiwan through the concept of “Taiwanese-ness,” these pavilions began to emphasize its status as a *peripheral* nation. The 2005 pavilion, curated by Chia Chi Jason Wang, focused on the subaltern position of Taiwan and its artists, while the 2007 pavilion delved even deeper into the challenges posed by this ambiguous international status, to the point that the curator Lin Hong-john refers to Taiwan as a “nation without nationality,” (*fei guojia xing de guojia* 非國家性的國家).⁵⁶³ Both of these pavilions perfectly illustrate the nature of the biennial as the “UN of art,” serving as Taiwan’s sole platform to seek diplomatic support by clarifying its domestic struggles.

The trend in national depiction initiated by the 2005 and 2007 pavilions remained a constant through several years, as evidenced by the 2013 pavilion titled “This is not a Taiwan Pavilion” (*zhe bu shi yi zuo Taiwan guan* 這不是一座台灣館). Curated by Esther Lu (呂岱如), the 2013 pavilion for the first time included projects of foreign artists,⁵⁶⁴ with the intention, according to Lu Pei-yi, to

⁵⁶² Felix SCHOEBER, “Re-writing art in Taiwan: Secularism, universalism, globalization, or modernity and the aesthetic object”, Chapter in SHIH Fang-long, Stuart THOMPSON & TREMLETT Paul-Francois (Eds), *Re-writing Culture in Taiwan*, Oxon: Routledge, 2009, p. 174

⁵⁶³ “台灣，以及其未能明言的自覺，框架出台灣「非國家性的國家」的身分魅影，是勿托邦在目前全球框架下的現世最佳範例。”“Taiwan, unable to express its consciousness, is imprisoned in a phantom identity of ‘nation without nationality’. In the global present, Taiwan is an atopic nation par excellence.” LIN Hong-john, “Atopia,” in *Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale: A Retrospective 1995–2007* [*Weinisi shuang nian zhan taiwan guan hui gu 1995-2007*, 威尼斯雙年展：台灣館回顧 1995-2007], Taipei: TFAM, 2010, p. 282

⁵⁶⁴ The pavilion comprised three projects by Taiwanese artist Chia-Wei Hsu, Taiwanese-German artist Bernd Behr, and Czech artist Kateřina Šedá.

“make Taiwan’s invisible reality visible.”⁵⁶⁵ It is important to note that the portrayal Taiwan offers of itself in this pavilion is even more critical, as the institution of the Biennale had recently downgraded Taiwan’s participation from “national pavilion” to “collateral event.”⁵⁶⁶ In her curatorial statement, Esther Lu reflects on Taiwan’s ambiguous situation both internally and externally, addressing both its identitarian complex and its uncertain international status.

That the collective subconsciousness of the Taiwanese people maintains a *negotiable identity* reflects both the political sensitivity of Taiwan’s *international situation* and the historical background of this west Pacific island. The official/unofficial survival strategy of Taiwan is to constantly appropriate its subjectivity in international relations.

⁵⁶⁷

While the early Taiwan pavilions (among which the thesis analyzed the inaugural one in 1995), served as clear channels for exercising cultural nationalism, since the 2000s the vision of the nation has shifted to a more international focus. This shift is due to the globalization process and the emergence of a new generation of actors in the art world. As demonstrated by the 2005, 2007, and 2013 pavilions, there is a noticeable move away from nationalism; however, the subjugation of art to cultural diplomacy remains. A decisive turning point from both these limiting forces occurred in 2015 with the pavilion titled “Never say goodbye” (*Bie shuo zaijian* 別說再見), represented uniquely by Wu Tien-Chang (吳天章). The 2015 pavilion is revolutionary for two main reasons, one related to curatorial practice and the other to thematic freedom. Firstly, it marks the first instance (excluding Lee Ming-sheng in 1993) in which Taiwanese participation at Venice Biennale was represented by a single artist. This choice symbolizes a departure from the practice of choral narration that characterized the earlier pavilions. The absence of a need to coordinate multiple artists also allowed the TFAM to avoid appointing a curator, thereby granting the artist complete freedom in arranging his artworks.⁵⁶⁸ By doing so, the TFAM aligned with international standards. Secondly, the 2015

⁵⁶⁵ LU Pei-Yi, “To Be or Not to Be a National Pavilion: Taiwan Pavilion and Hong Kong Pavilion at Venice”, in *Yishu: Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art*, vol. 12, no. 5, 2013.9-10, p. 59

⁵⁶⁶ In addition to the symbolic indignity of not being officially recognized as a sovereign state, participating as a ‘collateral event’ entails significant technical consequences: this designation disqualifies the pavilion from competing for the prestigious Best Pavilion award. As a result, the pavilion is marginalized, receiving substantially less public attendance and diminished media coverage.

⁵⁶⁷ Esther LU, “This is not a Taiwan Pavilion: A Curatorial Concept”, in *This is not a Taiwan Pavilion*, [*zhe bu shi yi zuo Taiwan guan* 這不是一座台灣館], Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2013, pp. 12-18, p. 14

⁵⁶⁸ Elisabetta ZERBINATTI, *Narrarsi attraverso l’arte: Il Padiglione Taiwan a Venezia come esempio di diplomazia culturale 2015-2017*, master thesis submitted to Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, Faculty of Language and Civilisation of Asia and Mediterranean Africa, 2017, p. 103

pavilion broke away from themes directly or indirectly related to Taiwan (whether nationalist or diplomatic in nature). Instead, as Chiang Yu-fang (將雨芳), Acting Director of the TFAM, articulates in his preface for the exhibition catalog, “the exhibition intends to resonate with sentiments shared by the entire human family.”⁵⁶⁹ Wu Tien-chang, in engaging with themes dear to every human being, such as emotional scars, memories, “souls made of sex and death,”⁵⁷⁰ naturally conveyed his distinctive Taiwanese sensibility. In doing so, he effectively represented his country without any pretension to do so. In Chiang Yu-fang’s words:

If for the last edition of the Biennale the TFAM exhibited the revolutionary curatorial proposal “This is not the Taiwan Pavilion,” this year, allowing Wu Tien-chang to tread the international stage on his own may be a way of stating loud and clear “This is definitely the Taiwan Pavilion!”⁵⁷¹

To summarize the section, the analysis of various pavilions has illustrated examples of overt nationalism, covert nationalism, nationalistic reinterpretations of independent artistic expression, and exhibitions that are ostensibly free from nationalism but still serve as platforms for cultural diplomacy. Wu Tien-chang’s participation in Venice finally served as an example of the gradual liberalization of the Taiwan Pavilion over the past decade. Despite this, it is essential to reiterate that the mechanism of curatorial selection itself always implies a degree of governmental influences, especially considering that “not only are the positions of museum directors in Taiwan highly political posts; the same is also true for art curatorship and curatorial practices.”⁵⁷² At present day, as an inherent aspect of the Biennale institution, the TFAM still retains full authority in selecting both artists and artworks to represent the country in Venice. In executing this selection, the museum must assess the contemporary art landscape within the nation and determine which works are most suitable to be

⁵⁶⁹ CHIANG Yu-fang, “Preface” [Xu 序], in FANG Mei-ching (Ed.), *Never say goodbye [Bie shuo zai jian 別說再見]*, 2015, Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, p. 4

⁵⁷⁰ “有性、有死亡…的魂魄”, WU Tien-chang, cited in CHEN Hsin, “Study of pseudophotography - Wu Tien-chang” [*Wei qingchun xian xiang guan - Wu Tien-chang 偽青春顯相館-吳天章*], Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2012, p. 83.

⁵⁷¹ “回想上屆的雙年展，北美館曾自我革命地推選出「這不是台灣館」的策劃聯展，這次由吳天章獨挑大樑躍上國際舞台，或許也有重新大聲表述「這正正是台灣館！」的另一作用和意涵吧。” In CHIANG Yu-fang, “Preface” [Xu 序], in FANG Mei-ching (Ed.), *Never say goodbye [Bie shuo zai jian 別說再見]*, 2015, Taipei: Taipei Fine Arts Museum, p. 5

⁵⁷² Felix SCHOEBER, “Re-writing art in Taiwan: Secularism, universalism, globalization, or modernity and the aesthetic object”, Chapter in SHIH Fang-long, Stuart THOMPSON & TREMLETT Paul-Francois (Eds), *Re-writing Culture in Taiwan*, Oxon: Routledge, 2009, p. 175

shown to global audiences. While this process is inevitable and shared by all pavilions, it is intrinsically limiting, as phrased by Wang Lin:

The value of contemporary art is not to be judged purely by one nation. [...] If we distract the so-called independent culture value and interact it with history and culture, it will become a cultural appeal and cultural label of nationalism, which in today's world is at once a self-restricted and self-exaggerating cultural plight.⁵⁷³

3.9 Other forms of institutional violence: the debate over institutional autonomy of art

“The *restrictions* imposed and the *opportunities* provided by the government deprive art of its autonomy and allow it to be manipulated.”⁵⁷⁴ It is from this sentence that the present section will start its discourse. Throughout this chapter, we have extensively explored the various forms governmental and institutional *restrictions* may take. This final section adopts a more contemporary and broad approach, highlighting how not only governmental restrictions, but also governmental *opportunities* could be potentially dangerous for Taiwanese art. Due to length constraints, detailed explanations of the functioning or funding mechanisms of cultural institutions are omitted. Instead, the scope is limited to underlining how, apart from the ideological factor, there is a more practical factor that could limit art, and it is the economical one.

There is an ongoing debate on whether the government should provide financial support for artistic activities, or whether such subsidies may compromise the independence of art from governmental intervention. It is important to clarify that this debate is a global phenomenon, but it assumes particular significance in the context of Taiwan. Unlike in other countries, in Taiwan government funding is often indispensable for the survival of artistic spaces and projects, and in general for the sustenance of artistic endeavors. Indeed, it is common for art centers in Taiwan, as well as across Asia more broadly, to rely on economic support from governmental sources.⁵⁷⁵ Even for art spaces that produce more experimental or alternative forms of art, indirect (rather than direct) support from governmental institutions is frequently sought. It is imperative to acknowledge this

⁵⁷³ WANG Lin (Ed.), “Voice of the unseen: Chinese Independent Art 1979/Today” [未曾呈现的声音 – 中国独立艺术展], catalog of the homonymous Collateral Event of the 55th Venice Biennial, Heidelberg: Alte Brücke Verlag, 2013, p. 457

⁵⁷⁴ HSU Su-chen/LU Chien-ming, cited in LU Pei-Yi, *Towards Art/Society: Study on Socially engaged Art Practices*, research project for National Culture and Arts Foundation, Taiwan, 2015 (not published yet) pp. 28-29

⁵⁷⁵ See LI Candice, *The significance of independent art spaces on contemporary art practice in Singapore*, Master Thesis Submitted to the LASALLE College of the Arts, Faculty of Asian Art Histories, 2017, p. 15

fundamental technical aspect of the Taiwanese art scene to avoid succumbing to cultural biases and unnecessary judgments.

If on the one hand government funding can ensure the birth and survival of spaces dedicated to the creation and the exhibition of art, promote artistic education among the populace, finance art projects, and revitalize the art market, on the other hand, “a high degree of state paternalism”⁵⁷⁶ poses significant risks to the artworld, to the point of being potentially lethal. Indeed, given their strong reliance on government funding for their livelihood, artists naturally tend to produce works that fit what the government encourages. As Derrick Chong notes, “when the government subsidizes a major proportion of the country’s artistic activity, there is always a risk of government *intervention*, or even *control* of the arts.”⁵⁷⁷ This toxic dynamic is evident in Taiwan, where, as discussed throughout this chapter, “the provision of funding has been one factor in persuading museums to stage exhibitions that help to promote the government’s ideological agenda and/or its ties with particular foreign countries.”⁵⁷⁸ Lin Fang-yi (林芳宜), former Officer of Taiwan’s Ministry of Culture, seems to agree with such considerations, by pointing out the interrelation between government objectives, budget allocation, and national identity.

Who is the Government? What does the Government want to achieve? Where does the Government allocate budget? Answers to these questions stimulate the initiation of projects, plans, discourses, and proposals which would shape Taiwan’s identity.⁵⁷⁹

To ensure the economic sustainability of the art system while avoiding the reduction of art to a mere instrument of governmental ideology, the concept of *balance* becomes crucial. In this regard, Wang Lin distinguishes between practices of support and control, emphasizing that “the government and officials can only *support* the development of folk art rather than *control* it.”⁵⁸⁰ Using this

⁵⁷⁶ Derrick CHONG, *Arts Management - 2nd edition*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2010, p. 33. Cited in LAI Meng-Yu, *Taiwanese Identity and the Performing Arts: the Development of Programming at the National Performing Arts Centre*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of London, Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies, 2020, p. 163

⁵⁷⁷ *Ibidem*. Emphasis is mine

⁵⁷⁸ Edwards VICKERS, “History, Identity, and the Politics of Taiwan’s Museums Reflections on the DPP-KMT Transition”, in *China Perspectives*, Vol. 3, September 2010, pp. 92-106, p. 101

⁵⁷⁹ Lin Fang-yi’s 2018 interview with Lai Meng-yu. In LAI Meng-Yu, *Taiwanese Identity and the Performing Arts: the Development of Programming at the National Performing Arts Centre*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of London, Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies, 2020, p. 129

⁵⁸⁰ WANG Lin (Ed.), “Voice of the unseen: Chinese Independent Art 1979/Today” [未曾呈现的声音 - 中国独立艺术展], catalog of the homonymous Collateral Event of the 55th Venice Biennial, Heidelberg: Alte Brücke Verlag, 2013, p. 459. Emphasis is mine. In this context, “folk art” is intended as a synonym for “local art.”

differentiation as a base, balance in Taiwanese art ecology should be reached through the application of cultural policies that support the art system and guarantee artists' autonomy without imposing constraints of any kind to control them. Borrowing Derrick Chong's words: "Cultural autonomy is therefore a crucial factor in researching the balance between the state and the arts."⁵⁸¹

Thus, *balance* within the Taiwanese artworld aligns with the concept of *cultural autonomy*, or institutional autonomy. In more practical terms, one solution to maintaining such autonomy is the "arm's-length principle," theorized by Harry Hillman-Chartrand and Claire McCaughey in 1989.⁵⁸² This principle places arts affairs, especially their funding, at a safe distance from politics and avoids decisions being taken directly by politicians.⁵⁸³ An arm's-length institution⁵⁸⁴, that is to say, an institution that operates at arm's-length from the government, "should have the power to autonomously decide the content of what is to be produced."⁵⁸⁵ The ongoing debate among stakeholders in the Taiwanese artworld centers on determining how long the 'arm' needs to be to effectively guarantee autonomy. In contemporary Taiwan, several factors threaten the effectiveness of the arm's-length principle. These include the government's appointment of board members, government budget control, and complex funding mechanisms that often require detailed result reports. To mitigate these issues, it is crucial to draft cultural policy guidelines and funding requirements in broad terms, in order to allow organizations greater freedom and flexibility.⁵⁸⁶

In addition to concerns about artists producing only what the government encourages and the requirements for result reports, another significant issue raised by many artists and critics is the

⁵⁸¹ Derrick CHONG, *Arts Management - 2nd edition*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2010, p. 33.

⁵⁸² For further insights the reader is referred to HILLMAN-CHARTRAND, H. & McCAUGHEY, C., "The arm's-length principle and the arts: an international perspective- past, present, and future", in CUMMINGS M.C. & DAVIDSON SCHUSTER J.M. (Eds.), *Who's to pay for the arts? The international search for models of support*, New York: ACA Books, 1989, pp.43-89

⁵⁸³ LAI Meng-Yu, *Taiwanese Identity and the Performing Arts: the Development of Programming at the National Performing Arts Centre*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of London, Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies, 2020, p. 178

⁵⁸⁴ One of the first arm's-length institutions is the National Culture and Arts Foundation (NCAF), founded in 1996.

⁵⁸⁵ Roger BLOMGREN, "Autonomy or democratic cultural policy: that is the question", in *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, Vol.18, No.5, 2012, pp.519-529, p. 522

⁵⁸⁶ For further insights on the topic, the reader can refer to LAI Meng-Yu, *Taiwanese Identity and the Performing Arts: the Development of Programming at the National Performing Arts Centre*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of London, Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies, 2020, pp. 283-285

correlation between government sponsorship and poor artistic quality. Among the most critical, artist Yao Jui-chung highlighted how the allocation of governmental resources often fails to foster artistic vitality and innovation, instead leading to an impoverishment of artistic value.

It is questionable whether the ‘unification of powers’ policy, which involves the central government’s absolute control over resources, can guarantee the creation of qualitative and innovative works of art. Judging from the current overall artistic development in Taiwan, [this policy] does not appear to foster “fine art” but rather resembles a simple allocation of resources, with the central government acting as a money distributor and artists scrambling to divide the pie to make a living...⁵⁸⁷

The correlation between government support and poor-quality art becomes even more evident in projects entirely designed and sponsored by the government. This last point represents the ultimate manifestation of institutional coercion this thesis will explore. While related neither to a nationalist matrix, nor to a second aim of cultural diplomacy, nor to an inherent characteristic of the institution, the excessive involvement of the government in the conceptualization of art projects and art spaces constitutes nowadays one of the greatest limits to the creation of art that is firstly free, and secondly, of quality.

In recent decades, the government has acknowledged the potential of artists to enact societal transformation through the ideas expressed in their artistic endeavors.⁵⁸⁸ This notion, coined as “the theory of social sculpture”, was theorized by the artist and politician Joseph Beuys⁵⁸⁹ during the 1960s and 1970s. Building upon the premise of artistic creativity’s positive influence on society, the past three decades have witnessed a proliferation of government-led initiatives aimed at using artists as “instruments” to facilitate the transformation of the community.⁵⁹⁰ These initiatives often materialized in the establishment of international “art villages” (*Yishu cun* 藝術村), supported by authorities and involving significant investment. This concept of “art village” took as an inspirational model the independent artist-in-residence programs that emerged as a phenomenon in Taiwan during

⁵⁸⁷ “這些資源被中央一把抓的事權統一政策，是否能保證創造出質地精良且具開創性的藝術作品，則是值得存疑的；就目前台灣的整體藝術發展來看，似乎並不是在培養“精緻藝術”而是在分配資源，中央單位於是成為散財童子，而藝術家們為了生計爭先恐後地吵著瓜分這塊大餅...” YAO Juichung 姚瑞中, *Installation art in Taiwan. Since 1991-2001 / Taiwan zhuangzhi yishu* 台灣裝置藝術, Taipei: Muma wenhua shiye gongsi, 2002, p. 435

⁵⁸⁸ TUNG Wei Hsiu, “When Social Practice Art Overcomes Globalisation: Attending to Environment and Locality in Taiwan”, in *Culture and Dialogue*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2018, pp. 223-250, p. 228

⁵⁸⁹ Beuys statement dated 1973, first published in English in Caroline TISDALL, *Art into Society, Society into Art*, London: ICA, 1974, p.48. Capitals in original.

⁵⁹⁰ TUNG Wei Hsiu, “When Social Practice Art Overcomes Globalisation: Attending to Environment and Locality in Taiwan”, in *Culture and Dialogue*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2018, pp. 223-250, p. 228

the 1990s. The two following examples will illustrate how the government's narrow perspective in designing the artistic residency schemes has resulted in project failure.

The "Taiwan International Artists Village"⁵⁹¹, conceived in 1990 by the Council of Cultural Affairs, was intended to be situated at Ninety-nine Mountain Peak in Nantou County, central Taiwan. Its official objectives were to foster creative experimentation, art education, and international exchange. However, the government's sponsorship of such a project, resembling an artistic practice typical of the independent sphere, sparked considerable debate. Questions arose regarding the appropriateness of governmental leadership in this kind of art activities: "How can the government lead art activities? This effort should be from artists", "How can an artist village be "built" in this way?", "It should be formed by nature, either from artists or from non-official organizations."⁵⁹² However, before a resolution to these debates could be reached, the project spontaneously failed: the village remained unfinished and was never opened to the public, eventually being abandoned after the earthquake of 2000.

The "Taipei International Artist Village" (*Baozang yan guoji Yishu cun* 寶藏巖國際藝術村), later renamed "Taipei Artist Village" (TAV), was planned by the Cultural Bureau of Taipei City Government and inaugurated in 2001 in Taipei. Unlike the aforementioned case, it must be recognized to this project that it not only has effectively been completed, but also remains a significant contributor to Taiwan's arts residency network to this day, providing artists with working and living spaces, as well as organizing creative workshops and art lessons. Despite these achievements, it has faced criticism for being perceived as "a place that exhibits the international relationship of Taipei city government rather than being for international artists"⁵⁹³ and for its "stark atmosphere because of the official form and ideology"⁵⁹⁴ which contrasts with the more informal and lively atmosphere of residency programs organized by 'artists looking for artists'.

Fig. 8. Taipei Artist Village (*Baozang yan guoji Yishu cun* 寶藏巖國際藝術村), external view.

⁵⁹¹ The paragraph will not delve into a detailed exploration. For further insights, the reader is referred to TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, pp. 164-181

⁵⁹² TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, p. 165

⁵⁹³ Ibid. p. 178

⁵⁹⁴ Ibidem.

Considering the perspective of artists themselves, the prevailing sentiment among artists in Taiwan is that residency schemes should not be funded by the government but should instead be managed solely by artists. Artist Chen Long Bin articulated this viewpoint with the following statement:

The artist village is a space for artists to stimulate their creativity rather than a governmental organization that provides money for artists. Artist-in-residence organizations have to be able to develop on their own, through all kinds of workshops, educational programmes, or selling art works. They can also get the funding from local government and non-official organizations. With the abilities of self-approving and networking, it is not necessary to care about the governmental funding...The government cannot control the whole arts environment.⁵⁹⁵

Another significant trend in contemporary Taiwanese cultural life, pertinent to this discussion, is the development of Cultural and Creative Parks (CCPs) (*Wen chuan yuanqu* 文創園區).⁵⁹⁶ The CCPs can be taken as another example of government-sponsored initiatives that do not lead to artistic innovation. Frequently created through the repurposing of derelict industrial spaces, CCPs typically cover extensive physical areas, including large rehearsal spaces, performance stages, and exhibition venues. Their approach to culture and creativity is highly multidisciplinary, encompassing a wide range of sectors within the cultural and creative economy, from art and design to general innovation, entrepreneurship, and lifestyle. In addition to their multidisciplinary nature, CCPs are characterized by an interactive approach: conceived as places to “nurture and realize creativity”,⁵⁹⁷ they forward the idea that everyone can be creative and encourage the public to participate in their numerous activities. CCPs also collaborate with colleges and universities, offering courses in art curatorship, marketing, and sponsorship. Among these parks, the Taipei’s Songshan Cultural and Creative Park (SCCP) (*Songshan wen chuan yuanqu* 松山文創園區) stands out as the principal one.

Fig. 9. Songshan Cultural and Creative Park (SCCP) (*Songshan wen chuan yuanqu* 松山文創園區), external view.

Due to their multidisciplinary nature and interactive approach to arts and culture, if on one hand these parks can positively bridge the gap between culture and the masses, on the other hand, there is also a

⁵⁹⁵ CHEN Long Bin, cited in May HUANG, “Prospects for the Taiwan Artists’ Residency Information Centre”, in *Art 99*, Vol.5, Taipei: Council of Cultural Affairs, 2000, pp.46-55, p. 53

⁵⁹⁶ Information taken from CHEN Jens & CHEN Anita, *Mapping Taiwan’s Creative Hubs: Searching for Taiwan’s Creative Context*, Taipei: British Council, Taipei Culture Foundation-Songshan Culture & Creative Park, 2016 <https://www.britishcouncil.org.tw/en/2016creativehub> pp. 41-47

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid. p. 41

risk of them becoming akin to amusement parks. The integration of “fine arts” with fields such as design, lifestyle, and entrepreneurship can strip art of its “fine” connotation, reducing it to a mere recreational activity. Moreover, while the idea that everyone can produce art within these parks is inclusive and democratic, it is evident that these large centers are inherently incapable of producing high-quality artistic products and are ineffective in fostering the local artistic scene.

These considerations become even more disheartening when factoring in the significant government investment required to establish such colossal structures. In this regard, it is interesting to mention Yao Jui Chung’s *Mirage – Disused Public Property in Taiwan*, a fairly recent project (2010-2016) documenting Taiwan’s “mosquito theaters” to expose the government’s large outlay of funds to construct cultural centers that remain empty – except for mosquitoes – due to mismanagement.⁵⁹⁸

Fig. 10. *Mirage – Disused Public Property in Taiwan*, Yao Jui Chung 姚瑞中, Lost Society Documentation (LSD, *Shiluo shehui Dang’an shi* 失落社會檔案室), 2010-2016, Video/Film/Animation, Video, 200 photographs, Singapore Art Museum (SAM). Yao, in collaboration with over 100 students from Taipei National University of the Arts and National Taiwan Normal University, researched and photographed more than 500 public buildings across the island, including art and cultural centers, elementary schools, car parks, and more. The black-and-white documentary photos were published in four monographs. Yao financed the project and publications himself to ensure freedom of expression and independence.

In conclusion, to avoid investing substantial sums in projects that may fail or, even if successful, fail to guarantee artistic quality, the government should consider more effective solutions to support the Taiwanese art system. Given that the local art scene is already well-established and vibrant, *indirect* support often proves more effective. For example, stabilizing rental prices could allow artists to independently set up their studios and spontaneously form vital creative hubs.⁵⁹⁹ This approach would foster a more organic and sustainable development of the arts.

⁵⁹⁸ CHENG Amy, “Return to Society: The History and Politics of Art as Social Intervention – A Look at Taiwan’s Four Phases of Development Since the Fall of Martial Law”, in *Yishu: Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art*, vol. 9, no. 5, 2010.9-10, pp. 28-39, p. 37

⁵⁹⁹ CHEN Jens & CHEN Anita, *Mapping Taiwan’s Creative Hubs: Searching for Taiwan’s Creative Context*, Taipei: British Council, Taipei Culture Foundation-Songshan Culture & Creative Park, 2016, p. 50 <https://www.britishcouncil.org.tw/en/2016creativehub>

Conclusions

This chapter attempted a broad analysis of the various forms in which institutional violence may manifest. The analysis commenced with an examination of spontaneous artistic production, wherein governmental influence is concealed: the government limits to forge a correct vision of national identity, and artists independently represent it in their works. The chapter proceeded to discuss instances where artists' spontaneous expression did not carry any political implication but was subsequently reinterpreted by those in power to align with certain rhetoric. The central focus of the entire chapter revolved around the implications of cultural nationalism, a global phenomenon particularly pronounced in Taiwan due to its ongoing identity complex and fragile geopolitical position. Tracing its origins back to the 1970s, the aim was to illustrate how cultural nationalism has significantly obstructed the achievement of contemporaneity in Taiwanese art, constraining artists' creative freedom through thematic restrictions and skepticism towards Western-influenced avant-garde expressive mediums. The interconnectedness of party politics, identity narratives, and cultural policies was subsequently highlighted through the analysis of exemplary exhibitions. Given that the Taipei Fine Arts Museum remains at present day the primary arbiter of Taiwanese contemporary art, a meticulous examination of the museum's nationalization process was deemed necessary. By scrutinizing various scandals involving the TFAM, the thesis sought to illuminate the institution's limitations, encompassing not only nationalism and political ideology but also inherent characteristics of the modern museum space that might act as obstacles to innovation and inclusion of young, independent artists within its walls. The chapter proceeded to delve into Taiwan's participation in major international exhibitions – particularly the Venice Biennale – by referencing iconic pavilions throughout history. The aim was to illustrate that while contemporary art may no longer be constrained by a nationalist agenda, it still remains inherently subservient to cultural diplomacy when associated with the task of *national representation*. Finally, the chapter concluded its analysis with a brief explanation of the concept of cultural autonomy, highlighting how the government's involvement in the funding and ideation of artistic activities may lead not only to poor artistic quality, but also to project failure.

Yao Jui-chung, an artist previously mentioned in the context of critique to nationalism, has articulated the disheartening conditions of the Taiwanese institutional art system with the following words:

[Art] has become a “propaganda product” for a certain degree of cultural propaganda. It is worth noting whether art will be reduced to a “product” of political correctness and lose its autonomy. Under the trend of centralisation of cultural affairs, avant-garde

art seems to have been completely disarmed, and the creativity and adventurousness of art have been lost in the “culture of culture.”⁶⁰⁰

Such a bitter statement naturally evokes an eternal dilemma: “Must art exist solely for its own aesthetics, or is it inevitably required to serve politics, religion, and commerce under certain conditions?”⁶⁰¹ For art to fully express its emotional, introspective, and sometimes even healing energy, all actors within the art world as well as the stakeholders outside it should begin to embrace the idea that “sometimes art is simply ‘superfluous,’ and only through the complete uselessness of artworks we can resist all attempts to ‘instrumentalize’ art and the consequent dominance of ratiocination.”⁶⁰²

“When art is liberated from the ruling class in the modern society, it then allows for a witness for free human spirit and creating wisdom in history”⁶⁰³ states Wang Lin. The author of this thesis contends that prefacing this assertion with the word “only” is not an exaggeration but a reasonable modification. This chapter aims to substantiate this claim, using the contemporary Taiwanese art panorama as a case in point. Indeed, due to the progressive liberalization and emancipation of art from political will, the Taiwanese artistic ecosystem has recently established itself as one of the most vibrant and thriving environments for arts across all Asia, and arguably the world, through the creation of “new models of participation and commitment that are still partially unknown in the European context.”⁶⁰⁴ These pioneering models of participation and commitment, typical if not exclusive to the Taiwanese artworld, will be the object of study in the next chapter.

⁶⁰⁰ “[藝術]似乎也成為某種程度文化宣傳的“宣導品”，甚至成為國族認同、建立主體意識的另一種圖騰；值得注意的是，藝術是否會淪為政治正確性的“產品”，而喪失了藝術的自主性，在文化事權中央集權化的趨勢下，前衛藝術似乎已全然繳械，藝術的開創性與冒險性在“文化創意產業”的概念下…” YAO Juichung 姚瑞中, *Installation art in Taiwan. Since 1991-2001 [Taiwan zhuangzhi yishu 台灣裝置藝術]*, Taipei: Muma wenhua shiye gongsi, 2002, p. 502

⁶⁰¹ “現今的問題是：藝術是否必須適當地只為自己的美學存在？或在某些條件不仍不可避免地要為政治、宗教及商業服務？” Ibid. p. 71

⁶⁰² “有時候藝術根本就是「多此一舉」，只有在藝術作品的完全無用性之中，才能堅持抵抗一切想要將藝術品「工具化」的企圖，以及伴隨而來的理性宰制…” CHIU Hsueh-Meng 邱學盟, Cited in Ibid. p. 424

⁶⁰³ WANG Lin (Ed.), “Voice of the unseen: Chinese Independent Art 1979/Today” [未曾呈現的聲音 - 中國獨立藝術展], catalog of the homonymous Collateral Event of the 55th Venice Biennial, Heidelberg: Alte Brücke Verlag, 2013, p. 481

⁶⁰⁴ Roberto Riccardo ALVAU, *(Dis)centering the locality: The emergence and establishment of participatory art practices in Taiwan (1994-2022)*, 2022 (Unpublished Draft), p. 3

While this chapter aimed to uncover governmental control and thus had to focus on the institutional world of art, the subsequent and final chapter will go beyond museums and biennales, exploring an “alternative” world of art: that of independent art, with all of its various spaces. The chapter opened with a citation from Wang Lin. To come full circle, it will be another citation by Wang Lin to close it: “Contemporary art should be a spontaneous, independent and autonomous one among the people.”⁶⁰⁵

⁶⁰⁵ WANG Lin (Ed.), “Voice of the unseen: Chinese Independent Art 1979/Today” [未曾呈现的声音 - 中国独立艺术展], catalog of the homonymous Collateral Event of the 55th Venice Biennial, Heidelberg: Alte Brücke Verlag, 2013, p. 459

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Source: <https://www.tfam.museum/Collection/CollectionDetail.aspx?CID=3233&ddlLang=zh-tw> accessed 7 May 2024



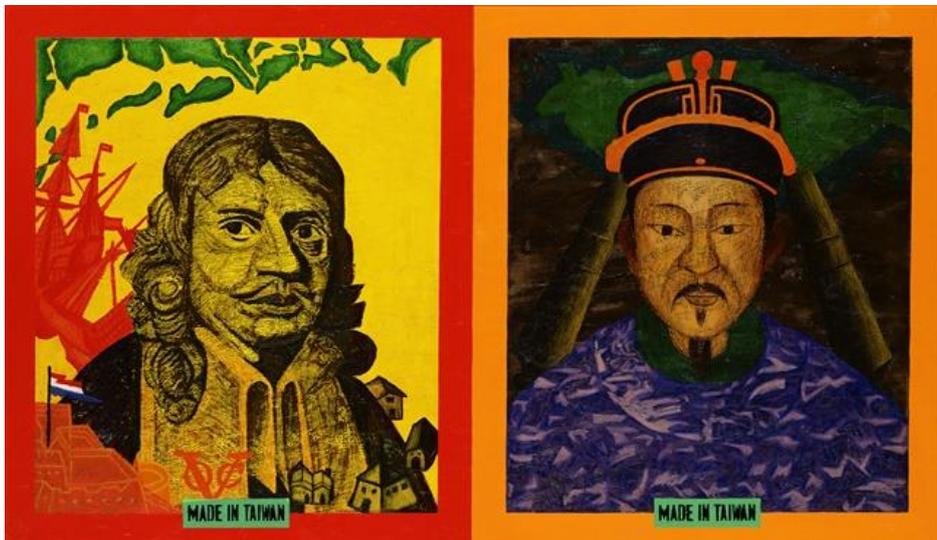
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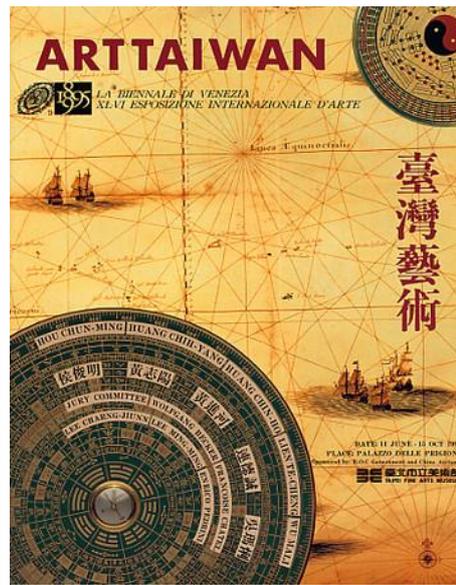
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Source: <https://www.sokaculture.org.tw/collection/低限的無限> accessed 8 May 2024



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Fig. 6. *We Will Win Survey*, Burak Delier, 2010, interactive mixed media installation, dimensions variable, Taipei Fine Arts Museum.

Source: <https://burakdelier.wordpress.com/works-2/we-will-win-survey-2010/> accessed 8 May 2024

Fig. 7 Catalog cover for the Taiwanese Pavilion *ARTTAIWAN* (*Taiwan Yishu* 台灣藝術) at the 46th Venice Biennale, 1995. Catalog published in Taipei by the TFAM.

Source: <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/library/art-taiwan-la-biennale-di-venezia-xl-vi-esposizione-internazionale-darte> accessed 8 May 2024



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 Source: <https://artres.moc.gov.tw/en/database/twContent/2563b795346744a3b5112b7477b06fb0>
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Source: Songshan Cultural Park official website,
<https://www.songshanculturalpark.org/english/event/8e1d1f0d-be9a-4019-b5a5-090ead27b369>
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Chapter 4 – Taiwanese alternative artworld: Independent art spaces and art ecology

“I love bringing art to places where we live. Their concepts are usually inspired by people’s perspectives and life stories, but we restrict the works inside the galleries or museums, or worse, see them as the decorations of the places”⁶⁰⁶ asserts Tzu Kuan Yang (楊子寬), an independent curator and the founder of the Taipei-based independent space *A.N.SPACE* (formerly *La Fiesta Taiwan*). The previous chapter concentrated on institutional art, encompassing museums and biennials, among other platforms. In contrast, this chapter will revolve around an alternative form of art – independent art. The aim is to demonstrate that the art Tzu Kuan Yang advocates, which is intimately connected to people’s lives, may be more representative of a country’s cultural identity than the art displayed in museums and international exhibitions.

This chapter will be divided into two main sections. The first section will discuss the significance of independent art and independent art spaces in broader terms. It will attempt to provide a correct frame to understand the complex concept of “independent” within the specific context of this thesis, acknowledging that such frame may not be universally applicable. This section will subsequently define what “independent art spaces” (in Chinese, *duli yishu kongjian* 獨立藝術空間) are, and emphasize their importance within the global artworld, also shedding light on their interactions with institutions.

The second section will analyze such forms and spaces of art specifically contextualized within the Taiwanese art ecosystem. Following a brief historical overview of their development, the section will highlight the unique characteristics that independent art and its spaces have adopted in Taiwan. It will then proceed to examine the complexities of their interaction with government entities and institutions, using specific spaces as case studies to illustrate these dynamics.

The question arises: why is it important to discuss independent art in Taiwan? Is there a particular connection between the two? This introduction aims to address this pertinent question by pointing out three main factors: the significance of independent art within Taiwanese art history, its

⁶⁰⁶ <https://lafiestataiwan.com/about/teams/> accessed 20 December 2023

role as a distinctive feature of the Taiwanese artistic environment compared to other Asian countries, and its importance in the social sphere.

Firstly, the importance of studying Taiwanese independent art lies in its historical significance for the development of Taiwanese art. Although this point has been thoroughly analyzed in Chapters Two and Three, it is worth reiterating here. Given the fact that during the 1990s, institutional art in Taiwan was still constrained by cultural nationalism, it was precisely these smaller artistic initiatives that enabled Taiwanese art to attain global standards of modernization and contemporaneity. This thesis is further supported by John Tain, Head of Research at Asia Art Archive, who asserts “of course, the importance of the Biennial and the art market for Taiwanese contemporary art history cannot be denied, but independent art spaces also played a substantial part in art history.”⁶⁰⁷ This statement recalls a concept introduced in the previous chapter, which is equally relevant here: emphasizing the innovative nature of independent art compared to the nationalist orientation of institutional art does not aim to discredit the contributions of museums and nationalist artists to Taiwanese artistic development. Rather, it underscores the importance of a dialogical relationship between the two. Indeed, the evolution of Taiwanese contemporary art and the present art ecosystem are a result of the contributions and interactions of both independent and institutional art spheres. This fundamental notion will be further analyzed along the narration.

Secondly, it is essential to recognize that while every country has “alternative” forms of artmaking, this approach is particularly prominent in Taiwan. Upon first encountering Taiwanese art, one immediately notices its innovative and experimental nature. The island’s dynamic art scene, marked by its openness to avant-garde ideas and its support for unconventional artistic endeavors, distinguishes Taiwan as a leader in the Asian art world. As inferred from Chapter Two, it is evident that since the 1980s, the Taiwanese art community has been and continues to be a “pioneer in breaking taboos and conjuring the unspeakable.”⁶⁰⁸ Taiwan’s commitment to nurturing artistic talent and its investment in cultural infrastructure have created a fertile ground for artists to explore and experiment, making it a prominent hub for artistic innovation in Asia. When juxtaposing the vibrancy of

⁶⁰⁷ John TAIN, *Conference Space as Response: Taiwan Perspectives After the 1980s* [*Kong jian zuowei yizhong huiying: 1980 hou de Taiwan jingyan 空間作為一種回應：1980 後的臺灣經驗*], held on 2022.08.14 14:30–16:30 at CREATORS’ Space R102 Coworking Space, Speakers: John TAIN, WU Mali, CHENG Mei-Ya, Amy CHENG <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZeRYn88pe4>

⁶⁰⁸ WU Chieh-Hsiang, “The Role of Art in the Absence of Transitional Justice in Taiwan, Republic of China”, in *The Arts in Society Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2016, p. 14

Taiwanese youth society, the thriving democratic environment, and the island's rich cultural background with the fact that, especially over the last two decades, Taiwan has actively promoted the development of cultural and creative industries, it is unsurprising that creative hubs are blossoming throughout Taiwan. Over the past four decades, societal change and development have significantly influenced the modalities of creating and exhibiting art. While following the lifting of martial law, this creative impetus initially manifested in a state of chaos, it eventually coalesced into a more structured form afterward, flowing into a myriad of creative hubs and resulting in the present Taiwanese panorama. As articulated by Alvau:

This new Taiwanese-style post-alternative approach has established in the broader Asian context a fundamental starting point for the emergence of new spaces attentive to social issues within the framework of participatory practice, community involvement and local negotiation. [...] The foundations laid by Taiwan offer a precedent from which many other Asian initiatives can address the urgencies arising from rapid urbanisation, neoliberal and globalised infiltration, with a focus on environmental emergence, rural depopulation and community engagement.⁶⁰⁹

Compared to other Asian countries, Taiwan's art ecosystem is distinguished by its diverse influences and the dynamic interactions between governmental and non-governmental institutions, spontaneously formed spaces, and collectives. These last two entities, defined by Roberto Riccardo Alvau as "post-alternative spaces"⁶¹⁰, in Asia offer "parallel models to museums and art galleries, acting as decentralised agents for the development of experimental practices."⁶¹¹ Sometimes challenging institutional art and, at other times, integrating with it, they also contribute to modifying and bringing innovation within the institutional sphere.

These seemingly specific creative clusters, whether it's the spaces where creators practice and work or an incubator platform, make Taiwan a borderless field of creativity. With a high concentration of cultural events, historical resources, ecological environment, vibrant personas, open attitude to interact with the public, creative hubs not only create new scenes for industries and urban centers, but also influence the way we *live* and our *value systems*.⁶¹²

⁶⁰⁹ Roberto Riccardo ALVAU, *(Dis)centering the locality: The emergence and establishment of participatory art practices in Taiwan (1994-2022)*, 2022 (Unpublished Draft), pp. 17-18

⁶¹⁰ Ibid. p. 18

⁶¹¹ Ibidem.

⁶¹² CHEN Jens & CHEN Anita, *Mapping Taiwan's Creative Hubs: Searching for Taiwan's Creative Context*, Taipei: British Council, Taipei Culture Foundation-Songshan Culture & Creative Park, 2016, p. 7 <https://www.britishcouncil.org.tw/en/2016creativehub>

This influence of art spaces on ways of living and value systems serves as a foundation for further consideration, which is the third and final factor of significance. Beyond introducing contemporaneity in Taiwanese art, and illustrating Taiwan as a pioneer for the flourishing of this type of art across Asia, the significance of independent spaces extends far beyond the artistic realm, offering benefits to broader society. Indeed, by being physically closer to the community and not separated by the austere walls of museums, art in independent spaces plays a key role in fostering social change⁶¹³ and spreading ideas within the territory the space is part of. Throughout this chapter, such intricate connection between this type of artmaking and society will be explored more in-depth. For now, it is sufficient to note that the very existence of independent spaces is an evident symbol of societal maturity. Indeed, as John Tain, states, “independent art spaces are a product of developed societies.”⁶¹⁴

Before commencing the analysis of independent art and independent art spaces, it is necessary to clarify two key disclaimers regarding the approach of this chapter.

Firstly, independent art, characterized by its *ephemeral* nature and constant physical and conceptual evolution, presents unique challenges for study and categorization. This form of art often lacks published catalogues of exhibitions, and its artists are frequently not yet famous, making it difficult to document and analyze comprehensively. Consequently, despite the increasing attention given to independent art in recent years – evidenced by the emergence of festivals, mapping initiatives⁶¹⁵, and research projects dedicated to the topic – academic studies on this subject remain rare and rudimentary. Consequently, while this chapter references contributions from authors and

⁶¹³ This concept has been studied in detail in TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003

⁶¹⁴ John TAIN, Conference *Space as Response: Taiwan Perspectives After the 1980s* [*Kong jian zuowei yizhong huiying: 1980 hou de Taiwan jingyan 空間作為一種回應：1980 後的臺灣經驗*], held on 2022.08.14 14:30–16:30 at CREATORS’ Space R102 Coworking Space, Speakers: John TAIN, WU Mali, CHENG Mei-Ya, Amy CHENG <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZeRYn88pe4>

⁶¹⁵ Among mapping initiatives, it is worth mentioning: the Taiwan Contemporary Art Center (*Taiwan dangdai yishu zhongxin 台灣當代藝術中心*), which operated from 2010 to 2020 (<https://www.tcac.tw/>); the Taiwan Contemporary Art Archive (TCAA, *Taiwan dangdai yishu ziliao ku 台灣當代藝術資料庫*) (<https://tcaaarchive.org/>); the Independent Art Spaces of Taiwan (IAST) a collaborative project between Asia Art Archive (AAA) and Contemporary Culture Lab (C-LAB) archiving independent art spaces in Taiwan from the 1980s to the early 21st century (<https://clab.org.tw/en/project/iast/>); and ET@T (*zaidi shiyan 在地實驗* lit. “local experiment”) (<https://www.etat.com/>), founded in 1995 by Huang Wen-Hao (黃文浩) with the aim of exploring digital culture, it documented all the underground culture of the 1980s and 1990s.

scholars who have focused their research on the theme, it also draws on the personal experiences and insights of the author.

As was necessary in previous chapters, it is also important to define the focus of this discussion. Despite being a niche within the artworld, alternative art remains a broad topic to discuss, particularly within the Taiwanese context. For this reason, the chapter has been given a specific angle to look at it. This chapter will not analyze specific stylistic currents, practices of individual artists, or individual artworks, except where these contribute to understanding the broader context. Instead, the discussion will center on the concept of *space*, precisely on how different spaces not only foster various approaches to art making and exhibiting, but also serve as places of sociability and interconnection, shaping local discourse about art and society at large.

4.1 Introduction to Independent Art and Independent Art Spaces

The concepts of independent art and independent art spaces remain controversial and lack precise categorization and definition. Therefore, to understand the basic nature of independent art spaces and look at them within the Taiwanese context with the right perspective, the author decided to simplify the discourse by commencing with an analysis from a terminological perspective. This section will unfold a brief examination of the two terms: respectively, the term “independent,” with all its complexities, paradoxes, and disclaimers, and the term “space,” a seemingly simple term that is commonly used but in reality encompasses a broader meaning, requiring redefinition in this context.

4.1.1 Defining “Independent Art Spaces”

When discussing independent art, the first fundamental question arising is: what does “independent” mean?

According to the Treccani Encyclopedia, the term “independence” is defined as “the condition of being independent, applicable to a state or nation, as well as to individuals, objects, facts, etc.” The definition further elaborates: “with regard to individuals, it is generally understood as freedom from subjugation, including economic subjugation, or a state of being not subordinate and being autonomous.”⁶¹⁶ By looking at this definition, it becomes apparent that the term “independence” inherently contains a fundamental question: independent from whom?

⁶¹⁶«la condizione di chi o di ciò che è indipendente, riferito sia a Stato o nazione, sia a persona o a cose, fatti ecc.con riferimento [...] a singole persone, s'intende in genere la libertà da uno stato di soggezione, anche economica, o una

When applied to the arts, the answer to this question might not be easy to grasp, as artistic productions are always created within specific contexts and involve a multitude of relations.⁶¹⁷ Given that the art world is essentially a network of interrelations, and that, paradoxically, “often the condition of independence of a process, a project, or a reality, is configured as an extensive set of forms of dependence on a very large number of factors,”⁶¹⁸ talking about complete independence in the artworld becomes utopian. This idealistic nature of the term “independence” becomes even more clear when considering that, in today’s capitalistic and globalized world, talking about independence in general has become a sort of a paradox. If this is case, then what does “independent” mean when referred to the art sphere? The first connotation that comes to mind is *economic* independence: an independent space is one that does not rely on state or other external funding, but is self-sufficient. However, while this might be a suitable definition for many spaces, it is not universally valid. In fact, as we will explore in a dedicated section, particularly in Asia, art spaces often depend on governmental funding for their survival.⁶¹⁹

Thus, independence in the art world does not refer solely to autonomy in artistic practices or economic independence. Instead, when applied to artistic creation and presentation, the term takes on two main connotations: it becomes synonymous with “alterity”⁶²⁰ and “alternative.” The former denotes the distance from institutional practices, while the latter denotes a distinctive *taste* or approach. Although framing “independence” in terms of “alterity” and “alternative” helps avoid bias when applying the term to the artworld, it does not simplify its understanding: both connotations are themselves complex concepts that require further clarification.

condizione non subordinata o comunque autonoma» <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/indipendenza/> accessed 24 May 2024

⁶¹⁷ “produzioni che agiscono necessariamente all’interno di determinati contesti e attivano una pluralità di relazioni.” Giorgia DE GIAMPAULIS, *Alternative Spaces: una riflessione storico-economica sugli spazi indipendenti dell’arte in Italia*, Master thesis submitted to the Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, Faculty of Economics and Management of Arts and Cultural Activities, 2020, p. 5

⁶¹⁸ “spesso la condizione di indipendenza di un processo, di un progetto, di una realtà si configura come un insieme molto vasto di forme di dipendenza da un numero molto ampio di fattori.” Ibid. p. 91

⁶¹⁹ For example, Candice Li examined how independent art spaces in Singapore are often funded by the government. “Independent art spaces in most parts of the world are dependent on funds from individuals and private patronage. On the contrary, most independent art spaces in Singapore are heavily dependent on government grants.” LI Candice, *The significance of independent art spaces on contemporary art practice in Singapore*, Master Thesis Submitted to the LASALLE College of the Arts, Faculty of Asian Art Histories, 2017, p. 15

⁶²⁰ The association of the term “alterity” to independent art spaces has been underlined by Candice Li in Ibid. op. cit.

The author has interpreted the facet of *alterity* according to the Oxford Dictionary's definition as "otherness or a radical sense of difference."⁶²¹ This *otherness* is understood in contrast with all the institutionally recognized methods of creating, curating, exhibiting, and conceiving art. In other words, an independent space is one that displays a non-belonging to the institutional art world of museums and biennials discussed in the previous chapter. This definition, while pertinent and accurate, may cause confusion in situations where the two types of art interact. To take an already examined case as an example, the majority of artists participating in the first Taiwan Pavilion in 1995, "ARTTAIWAN" (*Taiwan Yishu* 台灣藝術), were members of the independent art space Apartment No. 2. If independence in the art sphere is defined as "otherness" from institutional art, can an independent space participating in the Venice Biennale – a major platform of institutional art – still be considered independent? The resolution to this dilemma is found in Tong Chen's perspective. When discussing the Borges Contemporary Art Institute, an independent art space and library that participated in the Venice Biennale, Chen points out that "one must actually observe and understand the everyday operations of an organization in order to make that decision [of defining it 'independent']."⁶²² Therefore, participation in the Venice Biennale does not strip an art space of its "independent" status if it consistently engages in activities and operates according to the principles of independent art spaces.

Moving on to the second connotation of the term "independence", the concept of *alternative* has been understood in the sense of "non-traditional or unconventional ideas, methods, etc.; existing outside the establishment."⁶²³ Contextualizing such definition within the art sphere, it denotes an aesthetic characterization. In this sense, an independent art space is one that engages with experimental and avant-garde practices and means of expression, breaking with the traditions of the past and with the officially accepted way of doing things. As it was for the first connotation, in this case as well, despite being an effective way to describe an independent space, such generalization always carries a margin of error and could be potentially contested. Indeed, as Davide Da Pieve notes:

The so-called independent spaces encapsulate heterogeneous modes of action that render such definition almost one of convenience [...] the very nature of these practices itself is made of an elusive behavior; a modality animated by suggestions of a varied nature, impossible to circumscribe within the term independent. [...] Most likely, it

⁶²¹ <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095405951> accessed 24 May 2025

⁶²² TONG Chen, "Alternative Spaces Are Still the Best Alternative", in *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vol. 15, No. 6, November/December 2016, pp. 10-14, p. 11

⁶²³ <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/alternative?s=t> accessed 24 May 2024

would be better to observe and analyze the phenomenon by starting from an in-depth analysis of each of these realities, reflecting carefully on each individual activity, aware of the fact that in every era and in every context, artists have been able to advance new practices beyond the classifications they have been assigned.⁶²⁴

Building on this foundation, an important disclaimer to clarify is that the present thesis acknowledges the limitations that the imposition of terminology can bring, as well as the necessity of analyzing individual cases without *a priori* classifications. However, for practical purposes, a term is needed to group these kinds of practices together. To overcome this terminological impasse, the chapter will use either “independent” or “alternative” as appropriate. The two terms will be used to denote a particular nuance in the discourse: specifically, “independent” will be used when the emphasis is on operational mechanisms, while “alternative” will denote a particular artistic taste.

Having sufficiently explained what “independent” is, as well as its connotations and usage within the context of this chapter, let us now turn to define “space,” or more accurately how it is intended within the concept of “independent art space.”

The discussion on the concept of space begins with a thought-provoking citation from Amy Cheng, which is fundamental to understanding the entire chapter:

The space is actually about *belonging*. When we’re defining a space, describing what kind of space we are in, we are actually looking for identification and a sense of belonging. From an anthropological point of view, our roots and paths. But on earth aren’t we all, in a sense, wanderers? We are not born with a space or a place. We’re in a state of having to define the kind of space we occupy. So I think that when we *create* a space it’s with a predefined consciousness. And it’s with the realization we come up with an idea of what kind of space we are to create.⁶²⁵

The citation highlights two key points. First, it emphasizes space as a practice of *belonging*. According to Amy Cheng’s definition, space becomes representative of the self, an expression of the individual’s will to occupy it, and a source of identification. The second point, perhaps even more

⁶²⁴ “I cosiddetti spazi indipendenti racchiudono modalità d’azione eterogenee che rendono questa definizione quasi di comodo. [...] è nella natura stessa del dispositivo un comportamento inafferrabile; una modalità animata da suggestioni di natura varia, impossibili da circoscrivere entro il termine indipendente [...] Molto probabilmente sarebbe meglio osservare e analizzare il fenomeno ripartendo da una analisi approfondita di ciascuna di queste realtà, riflettere attentamente su ogni singola attività, coscienti del fatto che in ogni epoca e in ogni contesto, gli artisti sono stati capaci di avanzare nuove pratiche al di là dei raggruppamenti che gli sono stati affibbiati.” Davide DA PIEVE, *Indipendenti?*, 2018, <http://formeuniche.org/project-space/>, accessed 12 January 2024

⁶²⁵ Amy CHENG, Conference *Space as Response: Taiwan Perspectives After the 1980s* [*Kongjian zuowei yizhong huiying: 1980 hou de Taiwan jingyan* 空間作為一種回應：1980 後的臺灣經驗], held on 2022.08.14 14:30–16:30 at CREATORS’ Space R102 Coworking Space, Speakers: John TAIN, WU Mali, CHENG Mei-Ya, Amy CHENG <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZeRYn88pe4>

significant, involves the idea of *creating space*. Typically, the act of creation is not associated with the concept of space. One can create an artwork, but a space is usually seen as a pre-existing entity, which at most acts as a scenography for the act of creating something else. In the context of this chapter, however, the act of creating a space becomes crucial, differing from the mere architectural construction of a space. Here, space is not confined to four walls but is envisioned as a conceptual and mental space of freedom. In this broader sense, the act of creating a space is closely related to the idea of occupying it with one's body. For example, the politically charged performances in the streets of Taipei during the 1980s effectively created a space, which in that case was ephemeral and temporary, but not for this any less significant. In this context, the act of creating a space itself becomes an artistic practice. Independent spaces are significant not merely for the artworks they contain or the events they host, but for their very existence. These spaces represent a form of art in themselves, reflecting a will, an inspiration, or even an exigence, that led to their establishment.

The redefinition of the concepts of “alternative” and “space” enables the thesis to engage now in a more precise definition of what “independent art spaces” are, while avoiding terminological biases.

The concept, and consequently also the term “alternative space” originated in New York during the 1970s.⁶²⁶ The term has been coined by Brian O’Doherty. This culture of alternative spaces subsequently spread to other countries, assuming different characteristics based on the culture in which it was incorporated.⁶²⁷

The term “independent art spaces” has been used interchangeably with various other terms such as “alternative spaces,” “artist-run galleries/spaces,” “self-organized spaces,” “studio spaces,” “project spaces,” “not-for-profit spaces,” “artists’ communities,” occasionally “artist collectives” and many more. These terminologies all encapsulate typical characteristics of these spaces and could serve as suitable definitions if applied appropriately. In this thesis, the term “independent art space” will be employed as the primary overarching term. The other terms will be utilized in specific cases to illustrate the diverse aspects of the space.

⁶²⁶ YANG Chia-Hsuan, “A Non-mainstream Site of Gathering—Early Development of ‘Alternative Space’ in Taiwan” <https://aofa.tw/?p=31> accessed 20 May 2024

⁶²⁷ For example, Lien Teh-Cheng explained in the article “What Does Alternative Space Replace?”, published in *Art Monthly*, issue 44, in 1993, how the term and the concept of “alternative space” were taken from another culture and assumed different characteristics when implemented within the Taiwanese art system afterward.

As already discussed, defining independent art spaces is challenging. While *experiencing* them is undoubtedly engaging and enlightening, articulating their essence in *writing* may prove less enjoyable. The section will now present various definitions to see how different authors from different cultures and backgrounds approached such a difficult task. Subsequently, it will try to offer its own comprehensive definition.

Young non-profit realities, grown up outside institutional and market circles, operating in the local territory with the aim of promoting and supporting languages and realities outside the official circuits, stimulating the liveliness of the debate on contemporary visual culture. These venues are on the rise and are self-supporting through various initiatives and exhibitions.⁶²⁸

They are non-profit or not-for-profit, and provide free opportunities for independent, experimental and creative artists or artistic practices. In other words, they exist independently of art museums, galleries, and art districts, and are alternative, folk-based, and wild self-organizing art spaces.⁶²⁹

Organizations that push from below [...] [characterized by] a desire for autonomy pursued not by individuals but by groups of artists who aggregate and meet in a specific place.⁶³⁰

Experiences that are distinctive for their hybrid nature, disruptive languages, experimental proposals; for a particular reading of contemporaneity; for transversal and multidisciplinary initiatives; for the establishment of more inclusive and direct relationships with the community; for less austere and rigorous spaces than museums or foundations.⁶³¹

⁶²⁸ “giovani realtà non profit, cresciute al di fuori degli ambienti istituzionali e del mercato, che operano sul territorio con la finalità di promuovere e sostenere linguaggi e realtà fuori dai circuiti ufficiali, stimolando la vivacità del dibattito sulla cultura visiva contemporanea. Questi luoghi sono in crescita e si autosostengono attraverso iniziative e attività espositive.” <https://luoghidelcontemporaneo.beniculturali.it/tipologie> accessed 9 January 2024

⁶²⁹ <https://ucca.org.cn/en/program/survival-strategies-for-independent-art-spaces-2/> accessed 9 January 2024

⁶³⁰ “Organizzazioni che spingono dal basso [...] [caratterizzate da] una volontà di autonomia perseguita non da singoli ma da gruppi di artisti che si aggregano e si ritrovano in un preciso luogo.” Davide DA PIEVE, *Indipendenti?*, 2018, <http://formeuniche.org/project-space/>, accessed 12 January 2024

⁶³¹ “esperienze che si distinguono per natura ibrida, linguaggi dirompenti, proposte sperimentali; per una particolare lettura della contemporaneità; per iniziative trasversali e multidisciplinari; per l’attivazione di relazioni più inclusive e dirette con la comunità; per spazi meno austeri e rigorosi rispetto a musei o fondazioni.” Giorgia DE GIAMPAULIS, *Alternative Spaces: una riflessione storico-economica sugli spazi indipendenti dell’arte in Italia*, Master thesis submitted to the Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, Faculty of Economics and Management of Arts and Cultural Activities, 2020, p. 5

They appear to be “unprofessional” or don’t practice within the coordinates of what is considered “professional” or “appropriate” in the main principle of art or the society that is result-oriented or dependent on the value and rules of the established system.⁶³²

By mediating the above definitions with the author’s knowledge and experience, this thesis has formulated a definition of independent art spaces as follows:

They are artist-run, non-profit spaces, not always self-funded but always self-sustaining, enabled by the capacity to weave a “safety net” among them. They are inhabited by young artists exploring wild and experimental artistic expressions and advocating for autonomy in controlling the creation and distribution of their work, as well as the context in which it will be exhibited. Characterized by a *collective* approach rather than an *individual* one, and by *horizontal* organizational modes rather than *hierarchical* ones, these spaces are conceived by artists for artists, and address a *niche* audience rather than a *mass* one. Marked by a strong social dimension and guided by a non-ideological, non-commercial ethos, they offer an alternative narrative to both the elitist confines of the museum system and the commodifying dynamics of the art market.

4.1.2 The importance of independent art spaces within the artworld

The discourse on independent art spaces is a discussion about the entire art space. [...] Since the early days, it’s been what we refer to in the arts circles as a very important force.⁶³³

After providing a definition of what independent art spaces are, the present section will attempt to underline their role within the artworld in general. Later in the chapter, we will examine how this role manifests in the Taiwanese context.

The first contribution independent art spaces can be credited with is undoubtedly *artistic innovation*. Such heterogeneous spaces have reasonably been defined as “a testament to the energy and vibrancy of contemporary creativity.”⁶³⁴ In every artistic environment worldwide, due to their

⁶³² LU Carol Yinghua, “Little Movements” in *Yishu: Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art*, vol. 9, no. 5, 2010.9-10, pp. 86-100, p. 100

⁶³³ John TAIN, Conference *Space as Response: Taiwan Perspectives After the 1980s* [Kong jian zuowei yizhong huiying: 1980 hou de Taiwan jingyan 空間作為一種回應：1980 後的臺灣經驗], held on 2022.08.14 14:30–16:30 at CREATORS’ Space R102 Coworking Space, Speakers: John TAIN, WU Mali, CHENG Mei-Ya, Amy CHENG <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZeRYn88pe4>

⁶³⁴ “un’attestazione dell’energia e vivacità della creatività contemporanea.” Giorgia DE GIAMPAULIS, *Alternative Spaces: una riflessione storico-economica sugli spazi indipendenti dell’arte in Italia*, Master thesis submitted to the Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, Faculty of Economics and Management of Arts and Cultural Activities, 2020, pp. 96-97

young and experimental nature, they are *in primis* responsible for bringing innovation to the art world. The process of innovation within the independent art sector is notably rapid, as communication is more direct and proactive compared to the institutional realms of biennials and museums. Indeed, through artistic residencies, talks, and temporary exhibitions, young artists engage directly with their peers, bypassing the many layers of mediation typical of the institutional system (such as curatorship, official communication, and hierarchical structures). In other words, thanks to their flatter and self-organizing structure, alternative spaces facilitate greater dialogue between artists, both local and international, who through collaborative practices and joint exhibitions, exchange ideas and bring about innovation. It is important to underline that this innovation extends well beyond simple artmaking to encompass the entire discourse surrounding art, including its perception and study. A fundamental characteristic of independent art spaces is their engagement with the audience, which, as previously mentioned, is niche, often young, and distinct from that of mainstream galleries. In this sense, these spaces tend to be more “interactive”: visitors are not merely passive observers of finished products but actively contribute to shaping the discourse on artistic practice, the creative process, and the nature of the space itself. In Candice Li’s words:

The existence of independent art spaces also contributes multiple discourses and narratives in terms of the cultural understanding of arts. National institutions, commercial spaces and even educational institutions have their specific prerogatives, either to further the government’s mandate, commercial interests or educational purposes. The shape shifting nature of independent art space can then offer alternative discourses on issues of arts and culture that may not sit within the purview of these other institutions.⁶³⁵

The above statement not only remarks the contribution of independent art spaces in innovating the discourse and understanding of art but also introduces a second significant point: freedom from political agendas and market constraints. Independent spaces are often and reasonably seen as an escape from the “fascistization and financialization of art.”⁶³⁶ Unlike national museums and major international exhibitions such as biennials, artists operating within smaller, independent art spaces can focus on their creative endeavors without the pressure to conform to governmental expectations or performance indicators. Additionally, they are free from the burden of *representing* something or someone else – such as the state, as is often required in biennials.

⁶³⁵ LI Candice, *The significance of independent art spaces on contemporary art practice in Singapore*, Master Thesis Submitted to the LASALLE College of the Arts, Faculty of Asian Art Histories, 2017, p. 4

⁶³⁶ Marco BARAVALLE, *Alteristituzioni e arte: tra governamentalità e autonomia*, 2018, <https://operavivamagazine.org/alteristituzioni-e-arte/>, accessed 10 January 2024

This freedom allows artists not only to experiment with new artistic approaches and expressive means in a first moment but also to exhibit artworks that retain their original meaning in a second moment. The previous chapter extensively analyzed how the public display of an artwork, whether for nationalistic or secularizing processes, often involves an alteration of its original meaning. This can serve political purposes in the case of nationalization or strip the work of its emotional or revolutionary power in the case of secularization. Both of these processes do not affect independent art spaces. Additionally, such spaces, due to their non-market-oriented nature, serve as alternative platforms that combat the commodification of art, the creation of art aimed at reaching financial interests, and the constraints an excessively market-driven art world might impose on artistic discourse and cultural understanding of art.

Given these factors, it can be stated that the existence of such spaces and organizations, by offering an alternative approach to the “centralization of cultural power and perspective”⁶³⁷ in large public institutions, is fundamental to the art ecology of a country. They are “necessary for balancing the existing powers and democratizing the contemporary art scene.”⁶³⁸ The notion of *art ecology* is pivotal to avoid a dualistic, antagonistic vision of a bi-partite art world: institutional art on one side and independent art on the other. As will be discussed later in the chapter, while independent art spaces offer a counter-narrative to the institutional art world and its limitations described in the previous chapter, particularly in the Taiwanese context, they are not opposed to it. In this regard, Serena Carbone’s definition of independent art spaces, published in NEXST, a platform aimed at creating an international network of independent practices, is insightful:

Today, an organization that sustains independent practices is similar to that of a *micro-community* that operates *within* – and not separately from – ‘the macro-community’, generating shared practices that consolidate the sense of belonging for individuals who imagine, recognize, and ‘project themselves within it.’⁶³⁹

⁶³⁷ Jason WEE, in LI Candice, *The significance of independent art spaces on contemporary art practice in Singapore*, Master Thesis Submitted to the LASALLE College of the Arts, Faculty of Asian Art Histories, 2017, p. 3

⁶³⁸ <https://www.hayyacikalan.com/en/non-registered-art-communities/the-dictionary-of-independent-art-spaces-indictionary-zeynep-okyay-pasaj/> accessed 9 January 2024

⁶³⁹ “Oggi l’organizzazione che sostiene le pratiche indipendenti è simile a quella di una microcomunità che opera dentro – e non separatamente – ‘la macro-comunità’, generando pratiche condivise che consolidano il senso di appartenenza alla stessa da parte di individui che si immaginano, si riconoscono e si ‘progettano al suo interno.’” Serena Carbone, NEXST, <http://www.nesxt.org/indipendenti/> accessed 19 November 2023

Having established that the relationship between independent art spaces and institutional platforms is not antithetical but rather complementary, we can now explore further reflections on this dynamic. Viewing independent art as a microcosm within the broader art world is one way to understand this relationship. Another perspective on the equilibrium between the two types of art considers the relationship from a “temporal” rather than a “spatial” standpoint. To clarify this concept: while many artists who mature in independent spaces choose to remain within them, there are also numerous cases – particularly in the Taiwanese context – where artists experiment within independent spaces and then “escalate” to higher levels in the “artistic hierarchy,” intended in terms of success and reputation. These artists eventually exhibit in major museums and international exhibitions, becoming prominent figures in the artistic panorama of their country. This phenomenon gives birth to an alternative perception of independent art space: besides being spatially a micro-community, it could also be temporally a *transitional phase* or an *incubation space*⁶⁴⁰ for emerging artists.

To move beyond theoretical discourse, let’s consider the concrete dynamics of the art world. After graduating from fine arts academies or art schools, or generally at the beginning of their artistic careers, young artists typically lack the success, network of contacts, and technical development required to be exhibited in museums. Their artworks are often not commercially valuable enough to be represented by galleries. In these cases, independent art spaces serve as an ideal solution to overcome this impasse, providing young artists with an incubation period to experiment, test out ideas, and most importantly, make mistakes. In this sense, independent spaces can be seen as physical and intangible cultural environments “in which ‘[a]rt, artists and art lovers mingle, muse and meditate,’” and where there is room “for eloquent failures as for resounding successes.”⁶⁴¹ The lack of expectations and the scarce focus on the final result allow artists the freedom to fail, while the political and commercial *neutrality* of the space is essential to liberate their imagination. Regarding this last point, Candice Li explains:

While national institutions, commercial spaces and even educational institutions can sometimes provide spaces for these same purposes, the positions they take may not be *neutral* because of their intrinsic roles, either to fulfil political agendas, make a commercial profit or educational purposes.⁶⁴²

⁶⁴⁰ The term “incubation spaces” referred to independent art spaces has been used in: LI Candice, *The significance of independent art spaces on contemporary art practice in Singapore*, Master Thesis Submitted to the LASALLE College of the Arts, Faculty of Asian Art Histories, 2017, pp. 40

⁶⁴¹ Lily Kong (2015), cited in *Ibid.* p. 1

⁶⁴² *Ibid.* p. 40

Additionally, the highly collaborative and proactive nature of independent spaces, together with the international activities and frequent collective exhibitions, offer significant opportunities for establishing a network of contacts, thus serving as a launching platform for transitioning from academia to the art market.

In conclusion, independent art spaces are not only crucial in fostering artistic innovation and liberating art from political and economic constraints but also play a pivotal role in the art ecology both by providing an alternative narrative to the institutional one and serving as incubation spaces. Additionally, they hold one last point of significance: their relationship with local communities and territory, and the consequent ability to incite *social change*.

Given that “these spaces arise in relation to a territory and are structured according to the characteristics of that territory,”⁶⁴³ they perfectly exemplify what Joseph Beuys intended with his already mentioned ‘theory of social sculpture’ formulated in the 1960s. Indeed, the interaction between the artist and the society, as advocated by Beuys, is facilitated when they are not separated by the austere walls of a museum or a gallery. Independent art spaces have always been distinguished by their close relationship with the local community. Historically often founded in artists’ private apartments, they maintain to the present day the characteristic of being located in residential neighborhoods, frequently on the outskirts of the city, far from the gentrified city center and closer to the real lives of people. This *proximity* is not merely geographical but also empathetic. The fresh and unpretentious aura these spaces emanate attracts the curiosity of passersby, and the blurred boundary between professional and amateur encourages them to dialogue with the space: they are no longer intimidated by the rigorous reverential awe that typically characterizes the relationship between the observer and high culture in museums. This, combined with the young and vibrant nature of the people inhabiting these spaces, often results in a friendly relationship between the space and its surroundings. Such a relationship naturally leads to reciprocal influence, where neighborhood inhabitants learn to understand art, and art starts engaging with social issues. In this regard, subsequent sections of the chapter will analyze examples of how independent art spaces have addressed urban and societal problems at the local level and, in general, how art is related to civic consciousness – particularly in Taiwan. In Tung Wei Hsiu’s words:

⁶⁴³ “Questi spazi nascono in relazione a un territorio e si strutturano in base alle caratteristiche di questo” in Giorgia DE GIAMPAULIS, *Alternative Spaces: una riflessione storico-economica sugli spazi indipendenti dell’arte in Italia*, Master thesis submitted to the Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, Faculty of Economics and Management of Arts and Cultural Activities, 2020, p. 95

It is precisely when art moves outside the studio and institutional exhibition space and becomes a process that it is truly capable of involving the community. It is when art acts as a negotiating force in the face of institutions; when it responds to social dynamics by addressing the needs of others; and when it shows its collaborative and inter-disciplinary nature, that it proves to be a meaningful open-ended and fluid relational phenomenon.⁶⁴⁴

Summarizing all of these concepts through Wu Mali's few words, an independent art space "as an imaginative generator, it offers the freedom to facilitate dialogue, loosen up the existing structures, and bring about change."⁶⁴⁵ If it is true that "social change always starts with alternative social imaginaries"⁶⁴⁶, then alternative art spaces, with their territorially-bound and community-oriented nature, as well as self-organizing spirit, serve as a perfect example of how "art can be a way to glue together a fragmented and broken society."⁶⁴⁷

4.1.3 The dialogue between the "alternative" and the "mainstream"

The previous section has analyzed the major contributions of independent art spaces within the artworld and the position they occupy within it. This section will attempt a more precise definition of the confines between the "institutional" and the "independent", briefly alluding to some of the phenomena regulating the relationship between the two. The phenomena hereby mentioned will be analyzed in greater depth in a later section, adopting a focus on the Taiwanese artworld. Such an analysis is necessary given the complexity of the artistic and cultural production world, a *force field* which "cannot be judged and analyzed solely on the basis of aesthetic categories but requires attention to the close-knit set of relationships that sustain and influence cultural production."⁶⁴⁸

The difficulties and biases inherent in the terms "independent" and "alternative" have already been brought to light. Similarly, the terms "institutional" and especially the multi-faceted term

⁶⁴⁴ TUNG Wei Hsiu, "'The Return of the Real': Art and identity in Taiwan's public sphere", in *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, vol. 11, no. 2-3, 2012, pp. 16-18

⁶⁴⁵ LU Pei-Yi, "Three Approaches to Socially Engaged Art in Taiwan", in *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vol. 15, No. 6, November/December 2016, pp. 91-101, p. 98

⁶⁴⁶ WU Mu-Qing (2013), cited in TUNG Wei Hsiu, "When Social Practice Art Overcomes Globalisation: Attending to Environment and Locality in Taiwan" in *Culture and Dialogue*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2018, pp. 223-250, p. 236

⁶⁴⁷ LU Pei-Yi, "Three Approaches to Socially Engaged Art in Taiwan", in *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vol. 15, No. 6, November/December 2016, pp. 91-101, p. 98

⁶⁴⁸ "non può essere giudicato e analizzato solamente sulla base di categorie estetiche ma richiede un'attenzione verso quel fitto insieme di relazioni che sostengono e influenzano la produzione culturale." Giorgia DE GIAMPAULIS, *Alternative Spaces: una riflessione storico-economica sugli spazi indipendenti dell'arte in Italia*, Master thesis submitted to the Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Faculty of Economics and Management of Arts and Cultural Activities, 2020, p. 85

“mainstream” are not straightforward to define. Despite this, this section will not engage in a terminological analysis of these terms. Instead, to guarantee clarity in subsequent observations, it will attempt to demarcate the characteristics that distinguish one from the other. In doing so, the section will be entirely based on the comprehensive definitions articulated by Marco Baravalle, referring respectively to *governmental cultural alter-institutions* – the “mainstream,” and *autonomous cultural alter-institutions* – the “alternative.” Baravalle describes “governmental cultural alter-institutions” with the following words:

They are those created and born within the official art circuit [...] they respond to the logic of authoritativeness, often individual. They are spaces in which [both] the potentials and the limits of the contemporary art system as a governmental device are expressed. [...] governmental alter-institutions are always characterized by a close relationship of dependence with the institution that finances them, to the point that breaking it, thus overcoming the limits and forcing it to a real reconsideration of itself towards a democratic and radical transformation of its structure and governance, is virtually impossible.⁶⁴⁹

In contrast, the definition of “autonomous cultural alter-institutions” is the one that follows:

Originating from collective processes, they are often characterized by a similar initial step, that of occupying a space, and by subsequent forms of managing it that, albeit with many nuances, can be traced back to the macro realm of self-management. Despite the differences in political vision, management model and context, autonomous alter-institutions have some traits that differentiate them from governmental specificity: the aim behind their establishment is to bring back to public use (mainly through artistic activity, but not only) unused spaces, abandoned or risking privatization. Moreover, being “bound” to a space, they need to face the problem of rootedness within a context, with all its political, social, economic and cultural implications. This characteristic of rootedness (which must not degrade into localism) is almost always absent in the panorama of governmental alter-institutions, which are bound instead to the neoliberal space-time of the art system.⁶⁵⁰

This thorough delineation of the boundaries between these two domains may evoke an oppositional perception. However, it has been emphasized multiple times, and it is crucial to remember, that the line between them is easy to cross. Borrowing once again Baravalle’s words:

The two positions do not give rise to any kind of *binarism*. Certainly, the two domains differ substantially from each other, but they are, at the same time, porous and not

⁶⁴⁹ Marco BARAVALLE, *Alteristituzioni e arte: tra governamentalità e autonomia*, 2018, <https://operavivamagazine.org/alteristituzioni-e-arte/>, accessed 10 January 2024

⁶⁵⁰ Ibidem.

always so sharply demarcated. Between them, toxic relationships of *dependence* and *parasitism* may arise, as well as forms of *radical concatenation*.⁶⁵¹

More specifically, such relationships of dependence and parasitism emerge when alternative spaces rely on public funding. As previously mentioned, the introduction of public funds to support independent spaces can lead to an institutionalization of the alternative. This process may undermine the original characteristics of spontaneity and free artistic exploration, integrating the alternative into the bureaucracy and hierarchy typical of institutional art. Consequently, while public funds can foster the growth of the space and the artistic careers of its artists, they may simultaneously impose pressures to conform to specific administrative procedures. This conformance can result in a loss of flexibility and freedom, which are essential elements for fostering innovative and experimental artistic practices. The inherent tension between the benefits of financial support and the constraints of institutional requirements creates a complex dynamic that alternative spaces must navigate to maintain their original ethos and operational independence.⁶⁵²

This introductory segment aimed to furnish the most precise definitions possible of “institutional art” and “independent art” within the context of this thesis. Its objective was to raise the reader’s awareness of the significance of *bottom-up art* within the broader art system, its principal attributes, and its correlation with official art. All of these concepts will serve as a foundation for the subsequent section, which will finally return to talk about Taiwan. Subsequent sections will elucidate how, when applied to the Taiwanese artistic environment, the distinctive features of independent art mentioned above take on peculiar colors, and the interaction with the institution is governed by unique dynamics.

Before delving into an examination of *contemporary* Taiwanese independent art, the author of this thesis deemed it necessary to provide a brief historical backdrop detailing the emergence of this art form, especially referencing the spaces and events that played pivotal roles in its development.

⁶⁵¹ Ibidem.

⁶⁵² For further insights about the power dynamics between independent and institutional art the reader can refer to Julie AULT, *Alternative Art, New York, 1965-1985: A Cultural Politics Book for the Social Text Collective*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002

4.2 History of Taiwanese independent art

Taiwanese independent art was born in the 1980s. More specifically, the artistic “transition to the extra-institutional scenario”⁶⁵³ began in the late 1980s with the establishment of art collectives⁶⁵⁴ and was further solidified in the 1990s, through the art community’s official departure from grand museum exhibitions.⁶⁵⁵

One of the first characteristics that historically emerged in this particular kind of art-making is its profound *relational nature*. Indeed, while during the martial law period, Taiwan’s Nationalist Government prohibited citizens from forming associations or assembling in public, after martial law was lifted, communities of students, young people, and artists naturally blossomed as a reaction to the restrictions of the preceding era. It can be argued that the dialogical and collaborative nature of Taiwanese independent art, an intrinsic characteristic, can be traced back to the lifting of martial law in 1987. As noted by Wang and Huang, the roots of independent art spaces, can be precisely identified with the art students’ collectives founded during the 1980s on university campuses. In the attempt to balance exhibition costs with the dearth of exhibition opportunities, organizing art collectives and alliances became a pragmatic strategy for young artists in order to highlight their ideas, to transcend the limitations of institutionalized education, and to confront the challenges of survival in an arts career.⁶⁵⁶ As discussed in the second chapter, the 1980s were characterized by chaotic vitality in both the social and artistic realms. Young artists felt a strong urge to express themselves and experiment, but national institutions were preoccupied with promoting nationalist propaganda, and the newly born museum for contemporary art, the TFAM, was too focused on envisioning a Chinese form of modernity to heed their voices.

⁶⁵³ Roberto Riccardo ALVAU, *(Dis)centering the locality: The emergence and establishment of participatory art practices in Taiwan (1994-2022)*, 2022 (Unpublished Draft), p. 8

⁶⁵⁴ WANG Jun-Jieh & HUANG Chien-Hung (Eds), *The wild eighties: dawn of a transdisciplinary Taiwan [Kuang ba ling: kua lingyu linguang chuxian de shidai 狂八〇：跨領域靈光出現的時代]*, Taipei: Taipei National University of the Arts, 2023, p. 28

⁶⁵⁵ Schoeber notes how the years 1988 – 1992 saw the art scene abandoning the museum’s grand shows. In Felix SCHOEBER, *Modernity, nationalism and global marginalization: representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art exhibition. The Taipei fine arts museum and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice 1984-2009*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of Westminster, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, 2014, p. 150

⁶⁵⁶ WANG Jun-Jieh & HUANG Chien-Hung (Eds), *The wild eighties: dawn of a transdisciplinary Taiwan [Kuang ba ling: kua lingyu linguang chuxian de shidai 狂八〇：跨領域靈光出現的時代]*, Taipei: Taipei National University of the Arts, 2023, p. 28

In contrast to the total control over artistic promotion and production exercised by large institutional realities, arose a need for direct, inclusive and democratic participation in the field of art. Such aim was achieved by being concretely active, through the creation of new spaces and the development of alternative networks for the promotion and distribution of works.⁶⁵⁷

The revolutionary force of the 1980s extended far beyond the thematic exploration of diverse themes and emotions. It encompassed a quest for new artistic methods, a redefinition of spaces, innovative ways of engaging socially and building relationships, and a fresh approach to the city. This period was marked by a holistic transformation that sought not only to diversify artistic expression but also to fundamentally alter the framework within which art was created and experienced. In other words, the artists of this era were not merely concerned with the content of their work but were equally invested in the processes, spaces, and social dynamics surrounding their creative endeavors.

In the 1980s, the interpersonal organic connections, the impulse to experiment with new methods, the voices of socio-political issues, and the rapid flourishing of pop culture not only rendered visual arts in Taiwan eager to give different things a try, be they inside or outside the system, but also galvanized people to explore the qualitative extension of the spaces and venues for artworks, the linguistic properties of new media, and the physical behavior-based inquiry into public spaces.⁶⁵⁸

4.2.1 Art on the streets

Taiwanese independent art was born *on the streets*. The initial forms of independent art were marked by a highly political nature and an extremely provocative approach. As a counterreaction to the political censorship during the martial law period, the social chaos of the late 1980s often manifested in street protests and public demonstrations that utilized performance art, action theater, and in general the body as means of protest.⁶⁵⁹ Essentially, “art had also appeared as an action that articulates

⁶⁵⁷ “Di fronte alle grandi realtà istituzionali che esercitavano un controllo totale sulla promozione e produzione artistica, si rivendicava una partecipazione diretta, inclusiva e democratica nel campo dell’arte e lo si faceva attivandosi concretamente, attraverso la creazione di nuovi spazi e sviluppando reti alternative di promozione e distribuzione dei lavori.” Giorgia DE GIAMPAULIS, *Alternative Spaces: una riflessione storico-economica sugli spazi indipendenti dell’arte in Italia*, Master thesis submitted to the Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, Faculty of Economics and Management of Arts and Cultural Activities, 2020, p. 88

⁶⁵⁸ WANG Jun-Jieh & HUANG Chien-Hung (Eds), *The wild eighties: dawn of a transdisciplinary Taiwan [Kuang ba ling: kua lingyu linguang chuxian de shidai 狂八〇：跨領域靈光出現的時代]*, Taipei: Taipei National University of the Arts, 2023, p. 9

⁶⁵⁹ The deeply political and socially-engaged nature of performance art during this period is encapsulated by a saying that used to echo within the action theater community: “Current events write our scripts, the people are our actors and society our stage.” CHENG Amy, “Return to Society: The History and Politics of Art as Social Intervention—A Look at Taiwan’s Four Phases of Development Since the Fall of Martial Law”, in *Yishu: Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art*, vol. 9, no. 5, 2010.9-10, pp. 28-39, pp. 32-33

collective desires on the sites of stormy social movements.”⁶⁶⁰ Among the earliest examples of such practices, it is essential to highlight the previously mentioned *Dysfunction No. 3 (Jineng sangshi di san hao 機能喪失第三號)*, performed by Chen Chieh-Jen (陳界仁) in 1983 along the streets of Taipei, as well as Wang Mo-lin (王墨林) and Chou Yih Chang’s (周逸昌) street theater *Exorcizing the Evil Spirits on Orchid Island (Quzhu lanyu de e ling 驅逐蘭嶼的惡靈)*, staged by the Orchid Island Antinuclear Movement in 1988. The latter holds particular interest also for representing the first example of “mobile theater” (*Xingdong juchang 行動劇場*)⁶⁶¹, as well as one of the earliest instances of socially and environmentally engaged art in Taiwan.⁶⁶²

Fig. 1. *Exorcizing the Evil Spirits on Orchid Island (Quzhu lanyu de e ling 驅逐蘭嶼的惡靈)*, Wang Mo-lin (王墨林), Chou Yih Chang’s (周逸昌), 9 February 1988, performance, Orchid Island. Regarded as Taiwan’s first action theater event, it was a protest against the establishment of a nuclear waste processing plant on the island.

While it is true that Taiwanese independent art during the 1980s was: 1. politically engaged, and 2. performance-oriented, that doesn’t mean that the dominion of the streets was reserved exclusively to public protests and performance pieces. Rather, utilizing the streets as primary venues was a fundamental aspect of early Taiwanese independent art across all artistic domains, including visual arts. Exhibiting on the streets may appear today as a stylistic choice reflecting an alternative *taste* and *aesthetic*. However, during that era, it was often a pragmatic necessity. Young artists, unable to sustain their careers through art sales, sought out free spaces for exhibitions, resorting to streets, shopfronts, and other public locations as makeshift galleries. Wu Mali, one of the most active figures in the Taiwanese independent scene of that time, elaborates: “At that time if you wanted to start something it was up to you to find the circumstances. For most of us, that meant adopting some form of *guerrilla tactics* on the street. [...] we used the streets as our exhibition grounds and as our battlefield.”⁶⁶³ These “guerrilla tactics,” even if born from a spasmodic quest for spaces and

⁶⁶⁰ WANG Jun-Jieh & HUANG Chien-Hung (Eds), *The wild eighties: dawn of a transdisciplinary Taiwan [Kuang ba ling: kua lingyu linguang chuxian de shidai 狂八〇：跨領域靈光出現的時代]*, Taipei: Taipei National University of the Arts, 2023, p. 9

⁶⁶¹ <https://soundtraces.tw/politic-society/王墨林發起第一場行動劇場「驅逐蘭嶼的惡靈」/> accessed 21 May 2025

⁶⁶² “Wang Mo-lin’s street theater ‘Exorcizing the Evil Spirits of the Island’ staged by the Orchid Island Antinuclear Movement in 1988 as aforementioned, was an important milestone of art intervention in society and an early example of cultural activism in Taiwan.” LU Pei-yi (2014), cited in WU Chieh-Hsiang, “The Role of Art in the Absence of Transitional Justice in Taiwan, Republic of China”, in *The Arts in Society Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2016, p. 7

⁶⁶³ WU Mali, Conference *Space as Response: Taiwan Perspectives After the 1980s [Kong jian zuowei yizhong huiying: 1980 hou de Taiwan jingyan 空間作為一種回應：1980 後的臺灣經驗]*, held on 2022.08.14 14:30–16:30 at

representation and disillusionment towards the institutions, eventually gave birth to a functional dialogue between art and society, a dialogue that persists to this day.

4.2.2 Structuring an independent artworld

A significant evolution in the development of independent art in Taiwan can be identified with its transition from being “street-based” – literally occupying public spaces – to establishing designated venues. Indeed, while street-based art was *collaborative* in the sense of ‘collectively practiced’, it constituted a relatively elementary form of collective organization. In contrast, the establishment of dedicated spaces for gathering, creating, exhibiting, and discussing art introduced more intricate dynamics of organization, community, and collective identity. *Running* such a space, whether temporary or permanent, entails greater responsibility and contributes to imposing *structure* and *order* upon what was previously chaotic, rendering the existence of an artistic community more *real*.

In this sense, the group show “Living Clay” (*Xirang* 息壤) marked a pivotal moment in the historical trajectory of independent art in Taiwan. The exhibition, held in 1986 at an empty building in the Eastern District of Taipei, and organized by artist Chen Chieh-jen (陳界仁)⁶⁶⁴, could be considered Taiwan’s first “underground” (*Di xia* 底下) art show. “Featuring a mix of minimalist forms on a concrete floor and low-budget installation art, the exhibition was charged with the trashy frisson of a *salon des refuses* by artists, who [...] were out to protest against art museums, commercial galleries and other institutionalized art formats.”⁶⁶⁵ The show holds significance not only for its attempt of giving *structure* to the tumultuous artistic landscape of Taipei’s streets at the time but also for its adoption of a multidisciplinary approach – a trend that would later become a defining feature of Taiwanese independent art. By integrating various disciplines including visual arts, theater, experimental film, anime and manga, as well as photojournalism and art criticism, “the exhibition’s strong connotation of political rebellion and the participants’ multi-disciplinary identities created an

CREATORS’ Space R102 Coworking Space, Speakers: John TAIN, WU Mali, CHENG Mei-Ya, Amy CHENG
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZeRYn88pe4>

⁶⁶⁴ Highlighting the functional dialogue between independent and institutional art in Taiwan, it is noteworthy that Chen Chieh-jen, the organizer of this subversive art event, has exhibited in both the Taipei Biennale (1998) and the Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale (1999).

⁶⁶⁵ <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2022/12/13/2003790617> accessed 26 may 2024

unprecedented scene of artistic production.”⁶⁶⁶ Furthermore, the artists and organizers operated a tavern that quickly became a popular gathering spot for art practitioners and art lovers, underscoring the hybrid nature of the spaces devoted to art in Taiwan, a theme that will be explored further in subsequent sections.

Fig. 2. Exhibition view of “Living Clay” (*Xirang* 息壤), organized by Chen Chieh-jen 陳界仁 and held in 1986 in Zhongxiao East Rd (Taipei).

Xirang paved the way for the emergence of several independent art spaces in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These spaces took various forms, including artists’ studios, independent galleries, and community gathering venues, hosting artistic collectives and organizing festivals. This section will highlight three key spaces that have significantly contributed to shaping Taiwanese art: *IT PARK*, *No. 2 Apartment*, and *Bamboo Curtain Studio*. Additionally, it will examine the phenomenon of independent art festivals, particularly those organized by the short-lived yet influential art space *Sickly Sweet*.

IT PARK (*Yitong Gongyuan* 伊通公園) was established in Taipei in 1988 by Chen Hui-Chiao (陳慧嶠), Liu Ching-tang (劉慶堂), Tsong Pu (莊普), and Huang Wenhao (黃文浩). The studio occupied two (later three) floors above the photographer Liu Ching-tang’s studio and was conceived as an experimental gallery space. While the name “Yitong” (伊通) simply came from the nearby street and park⁶⁶⁷, the choice of the term “park” instead of “gallery” is particularly notable. This unconventional choice reflects the founders’ intention to highlight the space’s true nature: rather than functioning as a commercial gallery, it was envisioned as a “park” where people could meet, discuss, and spend time together. Thus, the name itself underscores the democratic and inclusive approach of the space, presenting art as something understandable and enjoyable by everyone, not just an educated *elite* or niche audience. As artist and member of the group Chen Hui-Chiao stated:

No matter if you are an artist or not, or how much you understand contemporary art, you can always come along, stay for a while, or just walk in and out... Everyone who comes here will see the show by artists, speak to them, exchange ideas, and explore

⁶⁶⁶ WANG Jun-Jieh & HUANG Chien-Hung (Eds), *The wild eighties: dawn of a transdisciplinary Taiwan [Kuang ba ling: kua lingyu linguang chuxian de shidai 狂八〇：跨領域靈光出現的時代]*, Taipei: Taipei National University of the Arts, 2023, p. 15

⁶⁶⁷ Felix SCHOEBER, *Modernity, nationalism and global marginalization: representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art exhibition. The Taipei fine arts museum and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice 1984-2009*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of Westminster, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, 2014, p. 151

the meaning of contemporary art. It is a fluid space with the elements of time, place, body and ideology that circle around.⁶⁶⁸

Such inclusiveness and openness, as well as the focus on the creation of a “spiritual forum”⁶⁶⁹ to discuss and socialize art rather than a place to create it “has enabled artists and people in Taiwan have a wider understanding of contemporary art.”⁶⁷⁰ In Tung Wei Hsiu’s words: “practices like IT Park show how artists can close a perceived gap between artist and society.”⁶⁷¹

Shifting the focus to a more artistic analysis, it is important to note that all the original members of IT PARK gravitated towards European influences. Among them, the most notable figure, Tsong Pu, had recently returned from a period of study in Spain. Consequently, IT PARK primarily showcased spatial installations, conceptual art, and minimalist aesthetics. Tsong Pu articulated the motivation behind establishing IT PARK Gallery with the following words:

Artists returning from overseas had many ideas but nowhere to show their works as there was almost no exhibition/performance space for modern art at the time. We really wanted a space where we could get together and talk about art. In this way, we were all able to encourage each other to explore the various possibilities inherent in art, starting with our relatively immature ideas and work.⁶⁷²

Besides providing artists with a figurative space to unleash their imagination and experiment with new artistic forms, IT PARK played a significant role in overcoming one of the major limitations of traditional museum spaces: it offered artists, for the first time, a physical space that could be radically altered. As Wu Mali recalls:

There was not place for exhibition like that in art galleries, in art galleries you cannot even put a nail through the wall, so you cannot do any kind of installation art. So, for the younger generation of creators, when the work they do goes beyond hanging up picture frames or moving around a piece of sculpture, when they want to change the

⁶⁶⁸ Chen Hui-Chiao, 1994. Cited in TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, p. 163

⁶⁶⁹ Mei Dean-E, *A Few Thoughts to Commemorate the Twentieth Birthday of IT Park Gallery*, 2008. <https://www.itpark.com.tw/aboutus/index/10/en> accessed 27 May 2024

⁶⁷⁰ TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, pp. 162-163

⁶⁷¹ Ibidem.

⁶⁷² Tsong Pu, cited in Mei Dean-E, *A Few Thoughts to Commemorate the Twentieth Birthday of IT Park Gallery*, 2008. <https://www.itpark.com.tw/aboutus/index/10/en> accessed 27 May 2024

space, they literally come up against a wall. So here IT PARK played an important role.⁶⁷³

Fig. 3. *Cremating Ritual* (*Huohua yishi* 火化儀式), Lee Ming-sheng (李銘盛) solo exhibition, spatial installation, performance, 1991, IT PARK. During the exhibition, Lee Ming-sheng actually set fire to the wooden trunks inside the exhibitory space. This act is a clear example of the expressive freedom in altering the space IT PARK offered.

Once acknowledged the significance of IT PARK in shaping artistic discourse and public perception of art, its societal impact, and its revolutionary role in fostering artistic innovation both in terms of expressive means and the relationship with the exhibition space, there is one last point of importance for which the gallery can be credited: its ability to launch the artistic careers of young artists. During the 1990s, IT PARK was not only a central meeting place for the local art scene but also attracted many foreign curators and critics.⁶⁷⁴ A notable example is the 1996 visit of Andre Solomon, an art critic for *The New York Times*, which resulted in a column on Taiwanese art in the newspaper, defining the space as “the heart of the avant-garde art world in Taiwan.”⁶⁷⁵ As Mei Dean-E notes: “this was the first time modern art in Taiwan had been the focus of the US art community, a portent of the ‘Taiwan Art Craze’ yet to come.”⁶⁷⁶ As a result of this international interest, exhibiting at the space and becoming a member of the group, almost certainly guaranteed a career in the artworld.⁶⁷⁷ In particular, as Schoeber notes, there was a strong connection between IT PARK and the Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale: for young artists, being exhibited at IT PARK often meant “assuring themselves a ticket to the city on water.”⁶⁷⁸ Among the most notable examples are Yao Jui-

⁶⁷³ WU Mali, *Conference Space as Response: Taiwan Perspectives After the 1980s* [*Kong jian zuowei yizhong huiying: 1980 hou de Taiwan jingyan* 空間作為一種回應：1980 後的臺灣經驗], held on 2022.08.14 14:30–16:30 at CREATORS’ Space R102 Coworking Space, Speakers: John TAIN, WU Mali, CHENG Mei-Ya, Amy CHENG <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZeRYn88pe4>

⁶⁷⁴ Felix SCHOEBER, *Modernity, nationalism and global marginalization: representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art exhibition. The Taipei fine arts museum and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice 1984-2009*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of Westminster, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, 2014, pp. 151-152

⁶⁷⁵ Andrew SOLOMON, “On Each Palette, a Choice of Political Colors”, in *The New York Times*, section 2, page 29, 4 August 1996. <https://andrewsolomon.com/articles/on-each-palette-a-choice-of-political-colors/> accessed 27 May 2024

⁶⁷⁶ Mei Dean-E, *A Few Thoughts to Commemorate the Twentieth Birthday of IT Park Gallery*, 2008. <https://www.itpark.com.tw/aboutus/index/10/en> accessed 27 May 2024

⁶⁷⁷ Felix SCHOEBER, *Modernity, nationalism and global marginalization: representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art exhibition. The Taipei fine arts museum and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice 1984-2009*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of Westminster, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, 2014, p. 151

⁶⁷⁸ *Ibid.* p. 152

chung and Wu Tien-chang. These examples of young, promising artists who, thanks to the visibility obtained through IT PARK, became prominent figures in the national artistic panorama, stand as evidence against the theory that “those who start small and independent remain small and independent.” For all these reasons, IT Park Gallery is still widely considered “the most influential independent artist-run gallery space in Taiwan.”⁶⁷⁹

One year after the establishment of IT PARK, in 1989, another fundamental player of the Taiwanese independent art system emerged: the space “No. 2 Apartment” (*Erhao gongyu* 二號公寓), sometimes also translated as “Space II”.

“Space II” was a cooperative art space, jointly run by a group of “art workers.” Their mission statement talked of the need to focus on the spirit of freedom, self awareness, spontaneity and self-help, to address the artistic environment, discuss modernism and adopt a rational approach to any debate on things new and local. By choosing the role of “art workers” rather than the appellation “artist,” this group’s focus on reflection and criticism was seemingly very “leftist” in nature.⁶⁸⁰

Compared to IT PARK, which emerged from a closely knit group of artists advocating a similar artistic style, Apartment No. 2 was founded in 1989 by a heterogeneous group of sixteen artists (later expanding to twenty-two) engaging with diverse styles.⁶⁸¹ Among these artists were Hou Chun-ming (侯俊明), Lien Teh-cheng (連德誠), Hsiao Tai-hsing (蕭台興), Li Mei-rong (李美蓉), Lin Pei-chun (林珮淳), and many others. Most of the members returned to Taiwan after studying in the United States. Notably, this diverse approach, a clear symbol of maturity, led Felix Schoeber to refer to Apartment No. 2 as “the first ‘postmodern’ art space.”⁶⁸² Lien Teh-cheng, perceived by many as the leading figure of this avant-garde group, described Space II as “a space of neutrons,” a place “of experimentation with ‘avant-garde’ art forms, ... [for] pure aesthetic discussions and the pursuit of artistic autonomy.”⁶⁸³ Also in this case, as it was for IT PARK, one could start from the very name

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 162

⁶⁸⁰ Mei Dean-E, *A Few Thoughts to Commemorate the Twentieth Birthday of IT Park Gallery*, 2008. <https://www.itpark.com.tw/aboutus/index/10/en> accessed 27 May 2024

⁶⁸¹ Ibidem.

⁶⁸² Felix SCHOEBER, *Modernity, nationalism and global marginalization: representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art exhibition. The Taipei fine arts museum and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice 1984-2009*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Westminster, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, 2014, pp. 151-152

⁶⁸³ Lien Teh-cheng 連德誠 (1993), cited in YANG Wen-I, *Negotiating Traditions: Taiwanese Art since the 1980s*, PhD thesis discussed at the Ruperto-Carola University of Heidelberg, Faculty of Philosophy and History, 2002, p. 92

of the space to analyze its nature. Indeed, the name “Apartment No. 2” reflects its operational mechanism: artists paid rent for their exhibitions as if they were tenants, managed all administrative work during their exhibition period, and had full autonomy in curating and selling their works within the “gallery”.⁶⁸⁴ In this sense, the place actually functioned as a sort of apartment, and this home-like atmosphere contributed to its unique character. The space was one of the most active in the artworld of that time, organizing frequent personal and collective exhibitions. Despite its seemingly “unprofessional” approach, with self-managed exhibitions and aesthetically chaotic rooms, all the artists in the group achieved varying degrees of success.

In addition to providing experimental freedom in art creation and complete autonomy in art management, thereby launching the careers of many artists, Apartment No. 2 achieved another significant milestone that helped shape the Taiwanese art world: the space played a key role in establishing a channel of communication between the northern and southern regions of the country. Through collaborations with independent art studios and galleries in Tainan and Kaohsiung, Apartment No. 2 contributed to the creation of a *functional* and *communicative* independent art system across Taiwan, mitigating the original dichotomy between Taipei and the rest of the country. One of the earliest attempts to connect northern and southern creative hubs was the “Locality by Space 2” exhibition (*Erhao gongyu bentuxing tezhan* 二號公寓本土性特展). This exhibition, held simultaneously in February 1992 at Apartment No. 2, Go Go Gallery (*gao gao hualang* 高高畫廊) in Tainan, and Up Art Gallery (*A pu hualang* 阿普畫廊) in Kaohsiung, exemplified the collaborative efforts that bridged regional artistic communities.

Fig. 4. “Kaohsiung’s Contemporary Meets Taipei’s Local” (*Gaoxiong de dangdai peishang taibei de bentu* 高雄的當代碰上台北的本土), newspaper clipping written by CHANG Hui-Ju (張慧如) in 1992 (estimated), referring to the joint exhibition *Locality by Space 2* (*Erhao gongyu bentuxing tezhan* 二號公寓本土性特展), a collaboration between Apartment No. 2 二號公寓, Go Go Gallery 高高畫廊 (Tainan), and Up Art Gallery 阿普畫廊 (Kaohsiung).

Although Apartment No. 2 is no longer active, its short-lived existence (1989–1994) was marked by numerous experimental exhibitions. Its ability to connect artists and foster experimental art practices has left a lasting impact on the contemporary art world, and its legacy is still celebrated nowadays by many artists and art critics.

⁶⁸⁴ Mei Dean-E, *A Few Thoughts to Commemorate the Twentieth Birthday of IT Park Gallery*, 2008. <https://www.itpark.com.tw/aboutus/index/10/en> accessed 27 May 2024

A few years after the establishment of IT PARK and Apartment No. 2, the third of the three giants of contemporary independent art emerged, further enriching the already vibrant scene. In 1995, the “Bamboo Curtain Studio” (*Zhuwei* 竹圍) was founded by artist Margaret Shiu Tan (蕭麗虹) in the Tamsui District of New Taipei City, on her family’s abandoned chicken farm. Located in close proximity to metropolitan Taipei, the Studio could vaunt frequent interactions and strong connections with the Taipei art scene.

Following the analysis of Tung Wei Hsiu, the Bamboo Curtain Studio (BCS) was established to address the shortage of working environments for contemporary art in Taipei in four specific areas:

1. Workspace and equipment for mixed media artists.
2. Exhibition space for installation and site-specific art.
3. Performance space for the experimentation and development of multimedia art.
4. Consultative, research, and implementation services for arts-related projects.⁶⁸⁵

The introductory document to the BCS affirmed that the Studio

aims to assist in the further *understanding* and *development of emerging art trends* in Taiwan; simultaneously, it endeavors to promote *cross-cultural exchanges* by providing a meeting point for international artists on short visits, such as for artists-in-residence schemes.⁶⁸⁶

From this statement, two main points of interest can be extracted: the emphasis on both the *understanding* and the *development* of contemporary art practices; and the commitment to promoting cross-cultural exchanges. In retrospect, it is clear that both initial aims have been fulfilled.

Regarding the first point, the Bamboo Curtain Studio advanced the achievements of IT PARK. While IT PARK allowed artists to alter the space as they wished, it was still confined to the limitations of an apartment. In contrast, BCS offered a larger and more flexible platform, encouraging artists to *go wild* with spatial experimentation. Artists quickly seized this opportunity, engaging in innovative forms of art-making and reimagining the exhibition space in unprecedented ways. Besides the support to *creating* art, BCS also established itself as one of the most influential voices in *talking* about art. The pivotal role the Studio played in the Taiwanese and international artistic discourse is exemplified

⁶⁸⁵ TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, pp. 175-176

⁶⁸⁶ Margaret Shiu Tan (2002), cited in *Ibid.* p. 180. Emphasis is mine.

by the many workshops and conferences held at the spaces.⁶⁸⁷ Considered a more accessible venue for contemporary art compared to the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, BCS has been praised by many foreign artists and curators as the *true* hub for contemporary art in Taiwan, making “the location and image of ‘Taipei City’ synonymous with ‘contemporary Taiwan.’”⁶⁸⁸

Fig. 5. Bamboo Curtain Studio’s (*Zhuwei* 竹圍) tearoom, internal view.

Regarding cross-cultural exchange, BCS, particularly through Margaret Shiu Tan’s international experience and networks, has operated on an international level since its inception. The Studio has successfully hosted numerous international exhibitions, exchange programs, and artist-in-residence schemes, continuing to thrive in these endeavors today. Nowadays, BCS plays a significant role in connecting artists in Taipei among them, and also in connecting them with international artists and curators. Tung notably defined BCS as “a window to view how Taiwanese artists in Taipei discuss ‘internationalism’ in an alternative space through dialogue with the West, an initiative of openness in international cultural practice.”⁶⁸⁹

In addition to its significance within the realms of art innovation and discourse, as well as its role in fostering international dialogue, the Bamboo Curtain Studio has developed a noteworthy feature over the years that was not part of its initial objectives. This feature is the studio’s relationship with the environment and society. Through various exhibitions, projects, workshops, conferences, and educational programs, the Bamboo Curtain Studio has, over the last two decades, increasingly regarded art as a means to engage with the local community. This engagement, which integrates art with community and environmental activism, has enabled the studio to reframe societal issues and drive change, particularly in the realm of environmental concerns.

The establishment of the Bamboo Curtain Studio in 1995 can be regarded as a milestone in structuring the alternative art world in Taiwan. However, the presence of a central hub for artistic experimentation did not signal the end of small-scale and “chaotic” events. Shifting the focus back to

⁶⁸⁷ One instance was the 2004 meeting between more than 40 artistic directors from 16 Asian countries, gathered in BCS to discuss the likeness and differences among them, the managing difficulties and the possibility to create a support net among them. The meeting was followed by an initiative, by hand of the BCS, of mapping creative hubs in all Asia, with the aim of developing partnership among them.

⁶⁸⁸ TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, pp. 281-282

⁶⁸⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 175-181

the broader art scene of the time, this chapter will now analyze the radical experimentation of a local art exhibition series that took place on the periphery of the Taipei Basin between 1993 and 1995. The key player in these events was the alternative art space Sickly Sweet, which organized the Taipei Breaking Sky Festivals and the two editions of the Taipei Broken Life Festival, notably in collaboration with the local government. The analysis will be mainly based upon Wei Yu's insights, for further details on the space and festivals the reader can refer to her work "Waste, Noise, and Local Art Exhibitions", published on *Yishu* in 2019.

Highlighting these movements is crucial as they exemplify a new type of cultural politics that emerged during that period in Taipei County (now New Taipei City), one of the few counties led by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). This analysis will shed light on how local government collaboration and grassroots initiatives contributed to the evolving cultural landscape, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between independent art spaces and political actors.

4.2.3 Independent art at local level and its relationship with the government

In 1993, Wu Chung-wei (吳中煒, b. 1969)⁶⁹⁰, together with a group of friends, founded the alternative space "Sickly Sweet" (*Tian mimi* 甜蜜蜜) in Taipei.⁶⁹¹ The aesthetics and overall *vibe* of the space closely mirrored the personality of its founder and principal member Wu Chung-wei. Unlike the college-educated members of Sickly Sweet, Wu was relatively "undereducated": he left secondary school, worked the most disparate jobs, and became known as a junk collector. The skills he acquired from these diverse jobs and the habit of collecting junk were evident both in Sickly Sweet's aesthetic – Wu continuously refurbished its interior using recycled materials he had collected, and in the space's mission, which was particularly "confusional" and miscellaneous. Explicating this last concept, Sickly Sweet regularly hosted multidisciplinary art events and also functioned as a café, a sort of Cabaret Voltaire. Rooted in college-based underground culture, the space became known for hosting non-mainstream theater and noise performances, screenings of experimental films and music, art exhibitions, and cultural events. It soon became a neuralgic gathering place for young cultural

⁶⁹⁰ Notably, he was one of the award winners of the 6th TCFAE. A self-taught artist outside academia, his works are against the commercial, the academic, and the institutional, and have been defined by Lien Teh-chang examples of "the art of anti-art" through their "chaotic, non-limited, disordered, and carnivalesque state." Lien Teh-chang (1994), Cited in WEI Yu 游崑, "Waste, Noise, and Local Art Exhibitions", in *Yishu: Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art*, vol.18, no. 2, 2019, p. 74

⁶⁹¹ The following information about the space "Sickly Sweet" have been taken from WEI Yu, "Waste, Noise, and Local Art Exhibitions", in *Yishu: Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art*, vol.18, no. 2, 2019, p. 74-77

workers, artists, filmmakers, and performers. Notably, unlike most alternative spaces in Taiwan in the early 1990s, which focused on visual arts, Sickly Sweet emphasized performance arts. In Wei Yu's words, "the space soon acquired a reputation for its diverse, lively, and daring body performances and was regarded as symbolizing the rise of 'alternative performance' in Taipei."⁶⁹² Specifically, it played a significant role in the "Little Theater" (*Xiao juchang* 小劇場) movement, a type of *non-mainstream theater* that emerged in Taiwan in the 1980s⁶⁹³, and will be examined more in detail later.

Sickly Sweet lasted only one year, closing by early 1994 due to financial difficulties and management crises.⁶⁹⁴ However, its legacy persisted both ideologically in the highly experimental and subversive nature of present-day Taiwanese performance art and theater, but also concretely through the organization of several festivals by its members in the spirit of the space.

Nine months after Sickly Sweet's closure, in September 1994, Wu Chung-wei and his friends co-curated a four-night outdoor festival on the banks of the Xindian River, under Yongfu bridge, in the Taipei suburbs. This unprecedented event was named "The Broken Life Art Festival" (*Polan yishu jie* 破爛藝術節).⁶⁹⁵ The festival attracted a significant number of *marginal subculture forces* (*bianyuan ciwenhua lilian* 邊緣次文化力量)⁶⁹⁶, featuring national and international noise groups, underground artists, and avant-garde performance artists, many of whom had previously performed in the independent space. In addition to live performances, the program included a series of short film screenings, installation art projects, and exhibitions. Notably, the festival was organized without any commercial or government support; most of the necessary facilities were collected by Wu Chung-wei himself, adhering to a *do-it-yourself ethos* in opposition to major productions typical of the theater

⁶⁹² Ibid. p. 77

⁶⁹³ Ibidem.

⁶⁹⁴ Ibidem.

⁶⁹⁵ The Chinese word *polan* 破爛 literally means "broken, rotten."

⁶⁹⁶ YAO Juichung 姚瑞中, *Installation art in Taiwan. Since 1991-2001* [*Taiwan zhuangzhi yishu* 台灣裝置藝術], Taipei: Muma wenhua shiye gongsi, 2002, p. 231

and art worlds at that time.⁶⁹⁷ Promoted solely through the distribution of flyers and word-of-mouth, the festival attracted approximately two hundred people each night, thus garnering media attention.⁶⁹⁸

Fig. 6. Taipei Broken Life Festival (*Polan shenghuo jie* 破爛生活節) flyer, drawn by Wu Chung-wei 吳中煒, 1994.

Fig. 7. A giant balloon puppet flying at Taipei Breaking Sky Festival, (*kongzhong polan jie* 空中破裂節), 1995. Considered to be the first outdoor rave party in Taiwan, it was organized by Wu Chung-wei in Taipei's Erchong Floodway. The festival established a "temporary commune," in which artists, performers, and cultural workers lived together for over a month, and initiated the phenomenon of outdoor raves that boomed in following years.

Given that most of the performers were amateurs, artistically speaking the festival did not receive positive criticism in newspapers, the media rather emphasized the liberal atmosphere and "anarchic pleasure"⁶⁹⁹ that characterized the event. However, while the social dynamics and overall atmosphere were notable, the artistic judgments of the press at that time may seem superficial in retrospect. Indeed, the Broken Life Art Festival marked the zenith of two main trends of Taiwanese independent art of all times, respectively the *Junk Art phenomenon* and the *Noise Movement*.

Concerning the former, the significance and fundamental aim of *junk art* have been clearly articulated by artist Yao Jui-chung:

In addition to the 'intrinsic rebellion' of the works themselves, [junk art] also allows resistance to institutionalization and anti-standardization, carrying out an aesthetical critique. In other words, when everything is institutionalized and power is over-concentrated, the experimental and adventurous nature of art may also face the risk of being controlled. Therefore, the first strategy is to 'let art become junk', in order to seek 'freedom' in art and escape the fate of institutionalization.⁷⁰⁰

⁶⁹⁷ WEI Yu, "Waste, Noise, and Local Art Exhibitions", in *Yishu: Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art*, vol.18, no. 2, 2019, pp. 68-91, p. 78

⁶⁹⁸ Ibidem.

⁶⁹⁹ Chiang Shih-feng, cited in Ibidem.

⁷⁰⁰ "在此科層內除了作品本身「內在性的反叛」外，尚可以抗拒體制收編及反規格化的方式進行美學上的批判，也就是說，當一切被體制化、權力被過度集中之後，藝術的實驗與冒險也可能面臨被左右的命運。因此，首先的策略是讓"藝術變垃圾"，藉此來尋求藝術的"自由度"，以逃避被體制收編的命運。" YAO Juichung 姚瑞中, *Installation art in Taiwan. Since 1991-2001* [*Taiwan zhuangzhi yishu* 台灣裝置藝術], Taipei: Muma wenhua shiye gongsi, 2002, p. 226

Such reevaluation by the artworld of junk, and the consequent display of broken and useless objects, transforming the exhibitory space to resemble a landfill, inherently possess a “destructive potential” (*huihuai xing* 毀壞性).⁷⁰¹ Despite this, the *Junk Art phenomenon* eventually reached the highest levels of the exhibition system, including venues such as the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM) and various biennials.⁷⁰² In this regard, it is essential to note that the decision to exhibit such subversive works within the official exhibition system is influenced by the secularization discourse highlighted in the previous chapter. The museum tends to “domesticate” subversive artworks once they are incorporated into its system. Consequently, “such works that subvert the system tend to become tame and no longer dangerous.”⁷⁰³

Concerning the second trend, the Broken Life Art Festival can be regarded as the culmination of the Taiwanese *Noise* (*zaoyin* 噪音) Movement.⁷⁰⁴ This movement consisted of university students who initially gathered in the early 1990s, holding events on the city’s margins – such as in underground exhibition venues, beneath bridges, and in abandoned buildings. “Their body-centered performances tended towards extreme *transgression, destruction, and anti-intellectualism.*”⁷⁰⁵ Through the use of nudity, noise, and an “ironic promotion of bad taste”, the group sought to mock “Taiwanese society’s high culture and inflexible ethics with a deafening roar and defiant posture, even mining styles from the lower reaches of society”, thus advancing a “social critique of *taste* itself.”⁷⁰⁶ Despite its profound impact, the movement was short-lived. By the late 1990s, it had lost much of its rebellious fervor and was rebranded as “sound art.”

Because of the warm response towards the first edition, Wu Chung-wei and Lin Chi-wei (林其蔚) organized a second edition of the festival in September 1995. The “Taipei International Post

⁷⁰¹ Ibid. p. 238

⁷⁰² Among the artworks of junk art that were exhibited within the institutional system, the artwork “The Catastrophe” (*Huozai* 火災) created by Lee Shu-Jane 李淑真 in 1993, was exhibited in TFAM’s basement, room B04. Chang Hsia-fei’s 張夏斐 artwork “To Choose What is Good and Hold Fast to it” (*Ze shan guzhi* 擇善固執), instead, was exhibited in the 2000 Taipei Biennial.

⁷⁰³ “此類顛覆體制的作品往往變得溫馴而不再具有危險性” YAO Juichung 姚瑞中, *Installation art in Taiwan. Since 1991-2001* [*Taiwan zhuangzhi yishu* 台灣裝置藝術], Taipei: Muma wenhua shiye gongsi, 2002, p. 231

⁷⁰⁴ The information reported about the Noise movement have been extrapolated by Amy CHENG, “Return to Society: The History and Politics of Art as Social Intervention—A Look at Taiwan’s Four Phases of Development Since the Fall of Martial Law”, in *Yishu: Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art*, vol. 9, no. 5, 2010.9-10, pp. 33-34.

⁷⁰⁵ Ibid. p. 34. Emphasis is mine

⁷⁰⁶ Ibidem.

Industry Art Festival” (*Taipei guoji hou gongye yishu ji* 台北國際後工業藝術祭) was held at the Banqiao Winery, which was to be demolished that year, and maintained the same characteristics as the first edition.

Fig. 8. Taipei International Post Industrial Arts Festival (*Taipei guoji hou gongye yishu ji* 台北國際後工業藝術祭) flyer, 1995.

Once again, the organizers recruited fringe elements of the subculture, including international and foreign underground noise groups and avant-garde performance artists. The festival showcased a wide array of art forms, from electronic noise to video art and accidental actions. Some performances sparked social controversy, such as the Swiss group “Con-Dom” (*baoxian tao* 保險套) with their improvised performance “Treatment,” which involved caressing the audience and touching the intimate parts of a spectator, and the “Zero and Sound Liberation Organization”⁷⁰⁷ (*Ling yu shengyin jiefang zuzhi* 零與聲音解放組織) who performed a rape scene.⁷⁰⁸

The entire event lasted for three days and three nights, and ‘violent chaos’ is not even enough to describe it. Some even reported to the police station, claiming that there was a gathering of thieves, drunkards, and perverts. [...] The entire venue resembled a state of anarchy, with an atmosphere that was exciting and uncontrollable. [...] They led the audience into a state of ‘trance,’ ‘ecstasy,’ and ‘confusion,’ where it was a paradise of chaotic revelry, a utopia filled with debris.⁷⁰⁹

Fig. 9. Z.S.L.O’s (*Ling yu shengyin jiefang zuzhi* 零與聲音解放組織) performance at Taipei International Post-Industrial Arts Festival (*Taipei guoji hou gongye yishu ji* 台北國際後工業藝術祭), 1995.

Once again, the festival garnered considerable media attention. Compared to the first edition, the artistic criticism was more favorable, with radical performances merging forms of Noise and Little

⁷⁰⁷ Regarded as the first noise group, it was founded in 1991 by some students of the Fu Jen Catholic University—Lin Qi-Wei (林其蔚), Liu XingYi (劉行一), Liu Baili (劉柏利), and Steve. It is generally credited for having started the practice of auto-producing CDs in Taiwan, and it performed in independent venues such as Sickly Sweet, Apartment No. 2, and “A8 Air Raid Shelter” (*A8 Fang gong dong* A8 防空洞). For further details, the reader can refer to <http://www.etat.com/zslo/>

⁷⁰⁸ YAO Juichung 姚瑞中, *Installation art in Taiwan. Since 1991-2001 / Taiwan zhuangzhi yishu* 台灣裝置藝術, Taipei: Muma wenhua shiye gongsi, 2002, p. 234

⁷⁰⁹ “整個活動長達三天三夜，狂暴迷亂尚不足以形容，甚至有人向警察局告發，那裡有一群小偷、醉漢、變態狂聚會。[...] 整个会场犹如无政府状态，场面激动而无法控制。[...] 他們將觀眾帶往一個「失神」、「恍惚」、「迷亂」的境地，那裡是個群魔亂舞的天堂，一處充滿破爛物的烏托邦。” YAO Juichung 姚瑞中, *Ibid.* p. 236

Theater receiving unprecedented attention from the mainstream cultural realm. This undoubtedly highlights the festival's significance in the history of Taiwanese independent art. However, while this aspect is noteworthy, it is not the primary factor of significance. What adds to the utopian nature of the event is that this second edition of the Broken Life Art Festival was directly sponsored by the Taipei County Cultural Center (TCCC) and, consequently, by the local government.

The question naturally arises: "Why did the government sponsor such 'anarchic-like' activities and artistic practices?"

A first answer to the question may be found in the broader cultural policy shifts of the 1990s. This era was characterized by an increased emphasis on culture as a tool for *community-empowerment* and identity formation.⁷¹⁰ This emphasis, influenced in part by nationalistic discourse, was often manifested in a growing interest in the "local," and thus in the artistic realm, in the promotion of local art festivals and exhibitions. The Council for Cultural Affairs (CCA) played a significant role in this regard, with a mission focused on "decentralising cultural hegemony from city arts centres to marginalised counties, encouraging local people to foster and promote their own festivals,"⁷¹¹ thus giving local governments the power to shape their own artistic scene. As Alvau notes: "This was a major shift in the country's cultural logics, profoundly different from the Western and Asian model in vogue at the time."⁷¹²

Another potential explanation lies in a distinctive characteristic of the Taipei County Cultural Center (TCCC), and the Taipei County (now New Taipei City) local government in general, during that period. Particularly in the first half of the 1990s, the Center demonstrated a strong interest in collaborating with emerging independent artists from the non-mainstream cultural spheres. During this period, beyond supporting the Broken Life Art Festival, the TCCC played a significant role in funding and promoting festivals of public and environmental art, often partnering with independent art spaces – the numerous collaborations between the TCCC and Bamboo Curtain Studio are notable examples. It's essential to consider that Taipei County was under the leadership of the Democratic

⁷¹⁰ LU Pei-Yi, "Three Approaches to Socially Engaged Art in Taiwan", in *Yishu: Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art*, vol. 5, no. 6, 2016.11-12, pp. 91-101, pp. 96-97

⁷¹¹ Roberto Riccardo ALVAU, *(Dis)centering the locality: The emergence and establishment of participatory art practices in Taiwan (1994-2022)*, 2022 (Unpublished Draft), p. 4

⁷¹² *Ibidem*.

Progressive Party (DPP) during this time⁷¹³, serving as the opposition party. An opposition party is more inclined to support reforms within the art system, since “the attitude of the party tends to encourage the breaking of conventions, getting rid of political ideological hegemony and adopting the principles of fair distribution.”⁷¹⁴ Building upon this premise, the Center’s tendency to collaborate with young artists outside the mainstream could be interpreted as a strategic move by the Taipei County government to cultivate an image based on inclusivity and democratic principles, contrasting with the ruling Kuomintang (KMT). As Wei Yu points out:

Organizing “alternative” art festivals, sponsoring underground cultural events, and promoting unconventional artworks and art amateurs, non-mainstream artistic practices [...] allowed the Centre to alter its realist aesthetics into militant cultural politics.⁷¹⁵

Regardless of which explanation is deemed valid, in both scenarios, even if the relationship between the artists and TCCC collapsed at the end of the festival, and the Festival was never held again, this second edition of the Taipei Broken Life Art Festival serves as a fundamental manifestation of “the entanglement between Taipei’s alternative culture, or the so-called ‘underground,’ and the government-organized ‘official’ institution of arts”⁷¹⁶ of that period.

In conclusion, the present section has reviewed the history of Taiwanese independent art from its inception in the 1980s until the end of the 1990s. Through an analysis of key spaces and events, it has observed how independent art transitioned from being unaccomplished and marginalized, forced to occupy the streets, to acquiring its own dedicated spaces, and even gaining governmental approval. After delineating these three fundamental steps in the maturation of independent art and the art ecology in Taiwan through the previous subsections, we now turn to the contemporary era. The next section will outline the main characteristics that define contemporary Taiwanese independent art, distinguishing it from the rest of the world and showcasing its vibrant and dynamic nature.

⁷¹³ The correlation between the backdrop of TCCC and its propensity to support non-mainstream art is analyzed in WEI Yu, “Waste, Noise, and Local Art Exhibitions”, in *Yishu: Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art*, vol.18, no. 2, 2019, pp. 68-91, pp. 86-88

⁷¹⁴ Wu Mali’s interview with CHIEN Ming-hui, the TCCC’s organizer (1996), cited in *Ibid.* p. 86

⁷¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 89

⁷¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 74

4.3 Main features of Taiwanese Independent Art

In the first section, this chapter has outlined the general characteristics of independent art spaces, or “post-alternative spaces,”⁷¹⁷ as Yao Jui-chung terms them. In every art system of every country, these spaces are multifaceted in nature, and are able to engage in a “negotiation between decentralised discourse and institutional funding, creating micro-(dis)centres from which to offer alternative artistic narratives to those of the hegemonic narrative.”⁷¹⁸ Furthermore, an independent art space typically prioritizes artists as its central focus. “It can have a market sense, but its nose isn’t necessarily being led by the market. It has its ideals, but it doesn’t necessarily hold a position opposed to policies. It has an academic side, but it doesn’t necessarily hold its book bags mysteriously.”⁷¹⁹

The Taiwanese art environment is no exception. Taiwanese independent art spaces generally exhibit all the characteristics observed worldwide. However, adopting this form of organizing the art world – which originated in the United States – required adaptation to the Taiwanese cultural context. This adaptation resulted in modifications to some basic characteristics and the emergence of others specific to Taiwan. This section will focus on highlighting these peculiar characteristics, which are either exclusive to Taiwan or particularly pronounced within the Taiwanese context.

4.3.1 Connection to Community, Identity and Environment

For what concerns the relationship between art and society, it has been stated that “we need to wait for the social changes [...] which can influence the artists’ creation. When the society becomes open, the artists will enjoy freedom in creation.”⁷²⁰ While social change undoubtedly brings artistic innovation, is it always the case that art must wait for social change? Considering Beuys’ “theory of social sculpture”, it becomes evident that the process could also be inverted.

⁷¹⁷ YAO Jui-Chung, “From Alternative Space to Post-Alternative Space”, in LU Pei-Yi (Ed.), *Creating Spaces. Post Alternative Spaces in Asia*, Taipei: Garden City Publishers, 2011, p. 14

⁷¹⁸ Roberto Riccardo ALVAU, *(Dis)centering the locality: The emergence and establishment of participatory art practices in Taiwan (1994-2022)*, 2022 (Unpublished Draft), p. 16

⁷¹⁹ YAO Jui-Chung, “From Alternative Space to Post-Alternative Space”, in LU Pei-Yi (Ed.), *Creating Spaces. Post Alternative Spaces in Asia*, Taipei: Garden City Publishers, 2011, p. 14

⁷²⁰ Christophe Comentale, cited in WANG Lin (Ed.), “Voice of the unseen: Chinese Independent Art 1979/Today” [未曾呈现的声音—中国独立艺术展], catalog of the homonymous Collateral Event of the 55th Venice Biennale, Heidelberg: Alte Brücke Verlag, 2013, p. 459

Over the last 40 years, art in Taiwan has significantly contributed to social change. Modest theater productions, street performances, body art, and visual art installations influenced one another to become a catalyst for social movements.⁷²¹ Independent art in particular, possesses an inherent ability to foster communication *between* and *within* local communities, thus being closely related to the emergence of a civil society. As noted by Wu Chieh-Hsiang: “artistic creativity can be positioned in the shaping of a civil society with its capacity in recalling and representing intricate social and historical issues.”⁷²² This feature of Taiwanese independent art, which shortens the distance between art and the audience, is beneficial in both directions: socially engaged and environmental art can be effective tools for addressing related issues, while the closeness to people’s lives can enhance artistic creativity. As Wu Mali notes: “When the artist-citizen strengthens his/her symbiotic relationship with society at large, and refocuses attention on the meaning and value of everyday living, culture as a whole will become more diverse and alive as a result.”⁷²³

“Any independent space, heterogeneous space or art space is, at the beginning, always a very *grassroot* event”⁷²⁴ states the curator Amy Cheng. In this statement, the use of the word “grassroot,” a catchphrase during the nationalism of the 1990s, may lead the reader to think of such attention to the community and the territory as an echo of the Taiwanization process and nationalist localism. However, a crucial differentiation must be made. Compared to the localism promoted by cultural nationalism, exemplified in Ni Tsai-chin’s discourse about Taiwan’s art analyzed in the previous chapter, the local, territorially-bound nature of independent art spaces is much broader and more transnational.⁷²⁵ While Ni Tsai-chin understood localism as opposed to international art practices, “in

⁷²¹ LU Pei-Yi, “Three Approaches to Socially Engaged Art in Taiwan”, in *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vol. 15, No. 6, November/December 2016, pp. 91-101, p. 92

⁷²² WU Chieh-Hsiang, “The Role of Art in the Absence of Transitional Justice in Taiwan, Republic of China”, in *The Arts in Society Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2016, p. 14

⁷²³ Wu Mali, cited in TUNG Wei Hsiu, “When Social Practice Art Overcomes Globalisation: Attending to Environment and Locality in Taiwan”, in *Culture and Dialogue*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2018, pp. 223-250, p. 248

⁷²⁴ Amy CHENG, Conference *Space as Response: Taiwan Perspectives After the 1980s* [Kong jian zuowei yizhong huiying: 1980 hou de Taiwan jingyan 空間作為一種回應：1980 後的臺灣經驗], held on 2022.08.14 14:30–16:30 at CREATORS’ Space R102 Coworking Space, Speakers: John TAIN, WU Mali, CHENG Mei-Ya, Amy CHENG <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZeRYn88pe4>

⁷²⁵ “Recent Taiwan’s socially engaged art sets aside the obsolete national identity paradigm to seek, instead, new transnational approaches in which there is no univocal concept of identity or community.” Roberto Riccardo ALVAU, *(Dis)centering the locality: The emergence and establishment of participatory art practices in Taiwan (1994-2022)*, 2022 (Unpublished Draft), p. 10

this new stage for Taiwanese participatory practices, the focus of interest remains the question of localism and the environment, but the discourse is finally detached from a purely identity-based approach.”⁷²⁶ Nationalist localism was advanced through the forced and sudden emphasis on Taiwanese local elements and landscapes, whereas independent art views localism as a way to create “new oases of conviviality”⁷²⁷ addressing local issues and thus countering the agglomerating and assimilating logic of the center. Essentially, localism in independent art is not pursued to reach any political goal; rather, it is a characteristic stemming from the very nature of such art: as a bottom-up phenomenon, an independent art space is inherently chained to the local culture, society, and territory in which it is situated.

I find it interesting that independent spaces also represent an *ecosystem of local art*. If you say that the museum is a comparatively authoritative and mainstream place, a colossus encapsulating the so-called art history, then independent art spaces also play different roles, and will also respond to each other’s artistic statement challenging each other.⁷²⁸

Among the major contributors to socially engaged and environmental art projects, Bamboo Curtain Studio (BCS) stands out. Bamboo Curtain Studio used art to draw people’s attention towards the environment,⁷²⁹ largely due to the vision of its founder, Margaret Shiu Tan. Tan viewed art in a broad sense, encompassing not only the creation of artworks classifiable as such but also any activity that could be traced back to creative expression. Searching for solutions to local issues is undoubtedly a creative act and has become the studio’s signature approach to art. Over time, the studio developed an exemplary relationship with the local community, involving residents in discussions about the fate of the local territory and broader environmental care projects.

Fig. 10. *Art as Environment: A Cultural Action at the Plum Tree Creek (Shu mei keng xi huanjing Yishu Xingdong 樹梅坑溪環境藝術行動)*, Wu Mali in collaboration with Bamboo Curtain Studio, 2011-2012 edition.

⁷²⁶ Ibid. p. 9

⁷²⁷ Ibidem.

⁷²⁸ CHENG Mei-Ya, Conference *Space as Response: Taiwan Perspectives After the 1980s* [Kong jian zuowei yizhong huiying: 1980 hou de Taiwan jingyan 空間作為一種回應：1980 後的臺灣經驗], held on 2022.08.14 14:30–16:30 at CREATORS’ Space R102 Coworking Space, Speakers: John TAIN, WU Mali, CHENG Mei-Ya, Amy CHENG <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZeRYn88pe4>

⁷²⁹ CHEN Jens & CHEN Anita, *Mapping Taiwan’s Creative Hubs: Searching for Taiwan’s Creative Context*, Taipei: British Council, Taipei Culture Foundation-Songshan Culture & Creative Park, 2016 <https://www.britishcouncil.org.tw/en/2016creativehub> pp. 25-56

Started in 2009, the project involved collaborations between artists at Bamboo Curtain Studio, professionals, the public sector, and local residents of the Plum Tree Valley in the Zhuwei area of New Taipei City (Danshui district), where BCS is located. The project aimed to explore and address the effects of rapid urbanization in the Zhuwei semi-agricultural region. This goal was pursued through regular community events promoting creative reflection and discourse on better state management and public infrastructure, various exhibitions featuring works by resident artists and collaborations between students, teachers, and artists, as well as through the collective exploration of better land care practices.⁷³⁰

4.3.1.1 Going “Off-site”

Artistically speaking, the integration of art, community, identity, and environment often manifests in the practice of “off-site art” (*changwai Yishu* 場外藝術). This approach involves “producing and presenting artworks in diverse non-art venues that are outside of the conventional gallery space [...] consisting of three elements – the artworks themselves, the environmental context and the involvement of the viewers.”⁷³¹ Off-site art is often regarded as the most effective method to bridge the gap between art and local life – a connection that has eroded over time due to the internationalization and commercialization of art. By operating at the local level, far from metropolitan museums and city-center galleries, “art not only returns to society, but also becomes involved in everyday life.”⁷³² As explained by Lu Pei-yi:

Going ‘off-site’ and, what is more, engaging with local communities to produce art was perceived to have much more potential in terms of ‘criticality’ vis-à-vis the prevailing socio-political reality in Taiwan than producing art within the confines of the art studio or exhibiting art in conventional white cube spaces such as museums and galleries.⁷³³

Through the production and display of art in local environments, “many artists adopted a conscious strategy of dialogue between art, the people and society.”⁷³⁴ In this sense, relocating exhibitions to public outdoor spaces can be seen as an effort to provide wider public access to art and to engage more directly with broader society. This approach seeks to bypass the numerous limitations and

⁷³⁰ Information about the project have been taken from <http://eco-publicart.org/art-as-environment-a-cultural-action-at-the-plum-tree-creek/> accessed 28 May 2024 and <http://bambooculture.com/en/project/2004> accessed 28 May 2024

⁷³¹ LU Pei-Yi, “What is Off-site Art?”, in *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vol. 9, No. 5, September/October 2010, pp. 7-12, p. 7

⁷³² Ibid. p. 11

⁷³³ TUNG Wei Hsiu, “‘The Return of the Real’: Art and identity in Taiwan’s public sphere”, in *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, vol. 11, no. 2-3, 2012, p. 8

⁷³⁴ Ibid. pp. 1-2

mediating layers imposed by conventional art spaces. As Lu reasonably points out, “sometimes political ideology affects the operation of art museums and other institutions. To a certain degree, off site art is more *independent*, and it can be seen as a way of removing oneself from and rebelling against the political system.”⁷³⁵

Art practice in the local sphere can play a crucial role in emphasizing concrete elements that unify members of a community, whether large or small, thereby building a sense of identitarian *belonging*. As Tung articulates, “Taiwanese public artists manage to bring people into conversation among themselves as much as with the outside world, with their histories and cultures, their social condition, as well as with gender and ethnic identities.”⁷³⁶

When art moves outside the studio production and becomes a process for the community or an institutional negotiation, when it must be responsive to a social dynamic and address the needs of others, when it is collaborative by nature, or when it draws upon the expertise of other fields, it becomes a more open-ended and fluid process.⁷³⁷

Besides reconnecting art and life, engaging with society more independently, and building a sense of community belonging, one last point of significance is that off-site art is inherently *socially engaged*. Unlike central museums, which may be far away from local social problems, off-site art naturally addresses contemporary societal and environmental issues through its thematic selections, chosen expressive means, and inclusive approach. Typically project-based, off-site practices play a significant role in addressing and occasionally resolving social and environmental concerns at the local level.

4.3.2 Focus on the Body: Theater and Performance

Taiwan is a land of great performers. This is exemplified by its many internationally acclaimed artists, among which Lee Ming-wei (李明維, b. 1964), Chen Chieh-jen and Hsieh Tehching (謝德慶, b.

⁷³⁵ LU Pei-Yi, “What is Off-site Art?”, in *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vol. 9, No. 5, September/October 2010, pp. 7-12, p. 11. Regarding this, a clarification is necessary: the fact that off-site art is produced outside traditional institutions and often serves as a critique of those institutions does not mean it is entirely free from their influence. As Lu Pei-yi emphasizes: “off-site art is often confronted by difficulties arising from broader social, economic, and political arenas and is sometimes commissioned for specific pragmatic purposes, as a means of propaganda.” In *Ibid.* pp. 7-8

⁷³⁶ TUNG Wei Hsiu, “‘The Return of the Real’: Art and identity in Taiwan’s public sphere”, in *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, vol. 11, no. 2-3, 2012, p. 26

⁷³⁷ TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, p. 299

1950) stand out. As it was for visual arts, Taiwanese performers have a rich cultural background to draw from, encompassing influences from Japanese experimental theater and Butoh dance (*Wuta* 舞踏), Chinese national opera, as well as the various Taoist and Buddhist practices connected to the breath and the body, and indigenous rituals. Traditional Taiwanese performing practices include ‘Taiwanese opera’ (*Ge zi xi* 歌仔戲), puppetry (*bu dai xi* 布袋戲), *Nan guan* (南管) and *Pei guan* (北管) music bands.⁷³⁸ Additionally, Taiwanese performance art in the past decades witnessed the incorporation of Western-influenced experimental and minimalist actions, as well as happenings and other contemporary practices.

While within the realm of institutional art, “the question of the body ~~that~~ in official discourse remains like a black hole which lies at the centre but cannot be seen, or cannot be talked about directly”⁷³⁹ for a long time, the emphasis on the body and its possibilities is in fact a fundamental aspect of Taiwanese independent art. This focus is particularly pronounced in Taiwan compared to other countries, making it a distinctive characteristic. As previously discussed in the section on the history of independent art, the emergence of Taiwanese alternative culture in the 1980s is closely linked to politically-charged street performances.

The 1980s instead became a gigantic laboratory for the experiments of performing arts. In that decade, the dust of radical reform had not yet settled, the disciplines had not yet been excessively demarcated, the educational system had not yet been specified, and the official institutions had not yet met the needs from arts and literature. All this prompted people to ‘wildly’ engage in physical practices, showing their great hunger for reform and liberation.⁷⁴⁰

Contemporary Taiwanese performance art owes a significant debt to the pioneering experiments of the 1980s. Maintaining the highly experimental nature of its inception, it has evolved over time to become fresher and more playful. Notably, present-day Taiwanese art exhibits a blending of the boundaries between “performance art” (*hsingwei yishu* 行為藝術) and “performing arts” (*Biaoyan*

⁷³⁸ LIN He-yi (2017), cited in LAI Meng-Yu, *Taiwanese Identity and the Performing Arts: the Development of Programming at the National Performing Arts Centre*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of London, Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies, 2020, p. 152

⁷³⁹ Felix SCHOEBER, “Re-writing art in Taiwan: Secularism, universalism, globalization, or modernity and the aesthetic object”, Chapter in SHIH Fang-long, Stuart THOMPSON & TREMLETT Paul-Francois (Eds), *Re-writing Culture in Taiwan*, Oxon: Routledge, 2009, p. 174

⁷⁴⁰ WANG Jun-Jieh & HUANG Chien-Hung (Eds), *The wild eighties: dawn of a transdisciplinary Taiwan [Kuang ba ling: kua lingyu linguang chuxian de shidai 狂八〇：跨領域靈光出現的時代]*, Taipei: Taipei National University of the Arts, 2023, p. 40

yishu 表演藝術). Numerous contemporary companies engage with both forms of expression, fusing them to create a hybrid genre. This fusion serves dual purposes: it revitalizes theater, ensuring it is seen as a profound artistic form rather than mere entertainment, and it integrates performance art into everyday life, softening its purely conceptual aspects. This blending, proper to little independent companies rather than institutional and already renowned ones, enriches the artistic landscape, making performance art more accessible and relatable to broader audiences while maintaining its innovative spirit.

The nature of contemporary Taiwanese performing arts owes much to the Experimental Theater movement, exemplified by the practice of “Little Theater” (*Xiao Juchang* 小劇場), which emerged in the mid-1980s and developed throughout the 1990s. This evolution was significantly influenced by initiatives such as Sickly Sweet and the Taipei Broken Life Art Festival. The critic, action artist, and theater director Wang Mo-lin (王墨林, b. 1949), one of the most important figures in the history of independent performing arts (if not the most important)⁷⁴¹, suggests that this non-mainstream approach to theater and the body inherently possesses a “subversive nature.”⁷⁴² As explained by Wang and Huang, by channeling the political energy accumulated in the body – for the first time regarded as the principal actor – into wild theatrical actions, performance art was capable of responding directly to individuals’ genuine impulses. These impulses often translated into heightened anti-system sentiments and gender awareness.⁷⁴³

Often regarded as “the true avant-garde theater,”⁷⁴⁴ Little Theater is characterized by three fundamental traits that distinguish it from traditional theater and remain evident in the approaches of young artists today. This section will briefly discuss these three characteristics, drawing upon the

⁷⁴¹ Wang Mo-lin was the first to highlight the connections among literature, visual arts, performance art, and little theater in Taiwanese artistic practice. He actively introduced Butoh dance and other forms of Japanese experimental theater movements to Taiwan. In particular, Wang is renowned for his “theory of the body.” In WANG Jun-Jieh & HUANG Chien-Hung (Eds), *The wild eighties: dawn of a transdisciplinary Taiwan [Kuang ba ling: kua lingyu linguang chuxian de shidai 狂八〇：跨領域靈光出現的時代]*, Taipei: Taipei National University of the Arts, 2023, p. 71

⁷⁴² “小劇場在本質上所具有的顛覆性。” WANG Mo-lin 王墨林 (1992), Cited in YAO Juichung 姚瑞中, *Installation art in Taiwan. Since 1991-2001 [Taiwan zhuangzhi yishu 台灣裝置藝術]*, Taipei: Muma wenhua shiye gongsi, 2002, p. 451

⁷⁴³ WANG Jun-Jieh & HUANG Chien-Hung (Eds), *The wild eighties: dawn of a transdisciplinary Taiwan [Kuang ba ling: kua lingyu linguang chuxian de shidai 狂八〇：跨領域靈光出現的時代]*, Taipei: Taipei National University of the Arts, 2023, p. 37

⁷⁴⁴ WEI Yu, “Waste, Noise, and Local Art Exhibitions”, in *Yishu: Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art*, vol.18, no. 2, 2019, pp. 10-12

insights of Yao Jui-chung, who examined this theatrical form and its interactions with other disciplines in his work “Installation Art in Taiwan” (*Taiwan zhuangzhi yishu* 台灣裝置藝術), published in 2002.

The first distinctive feature of Little Theater companies is the *non-professional nature* of their members. As Yao notes, typically none of the performers are formally trained in drama or theater, and all behind-the-scenes stage work is carried out by individuals without specialized training in this field. Such anti-system approach challenges the rigid aesthetic canons and selection processes of traditional theater.⁷⁴⁵ This almost “amateur” nature remains a defining characteristic of Taiwanese independent theater today and is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it dismantles the barrier between performers and audiences, challenging the notion that only certain people are capable of creating art while others are merely spectators. This non-professionalism often fosters an inclusive approach that invites audiences to participate in the creative process, not just by providing feedback but by actively contributing ideas and even performing with their own bodies. Secondly, the lack of adherence to formal stylistic rules and techniques learned in an academy often leads to innovative and unprecedented performances, which are inherently free expressions of the performers’ bodies and momentary states of mind. Moreover, the involvement of non-professionals in technical aspects such as set design, costumes, sound, and lighting makes this type of theater highly experimental, characterized by a willingness to make mistakes and find creative, sometimes absurd solutions to technical challenges.

The second feature developed by Little Theater and adopted by contemporary small alternative theater companies regards the organizational strategy and the redefinition of the director’s role. As Yao points out, in Little Theater companies, the term “director” (*daoyan* 導演) is often replaced by more democratic terms like “artistic director” (*yishu zongjian* 藝術總監) or “coordinator” (*tongchou* 統籌).⁷⁴⁶ This seemingly minor terminological shift reflects a broader revolutionary desire to dismantle traditional hierarchies, fostering a sense of community and equality among members. The “coordinator” role involves facilitating communication among various professionals to ensure a non-pyramidal, “star-shaped” social structure.⁷⁴⁷ This terminological adjustment is accompanied

⁷⁴⁵ YAO Juichung 姚瑞中, *Installation art in Taiwan. Since 1991-2001* [*Taiwan zhuangzhi yishu* 台灣裝置藝術], Taipei: Muma wenhua shiye gongsi, 2002, p. 444

⁷⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 450

⁷⁴⁷ Ibidem.

concretely by the shared responsibility among company members in the creation process, as well as in decisions regarding the company's future, performance venues, and various other technical, promotional, and relational aspects. This collective approach to performance creation and company management is often supported by frequent and extensive meetings and brainstorming sessions held informally and amicably, to avoid the theater collective being dominated by a single individual's ideas. This almost "utopian" *horizontal organizational strategy* remains a hallmark of contemporary small theater companies. However, it is important to note that, despite being an exemplary manifestation of collectivity and democracy in the arts, this approach can lead to significant challenges. The egalitarian nature of the decision-making process often results in high levels of stress, difficulty in making decisions, technical impasses, and sometimes even the failure of the company.

The third fundamental aspect to consider concerns the *performing location*. Frustrated by the numerous limitations of traditional theater regarding the stage, scenery, sound effects, and overall setting, Little Theater artists began experimenting with alternative locations, ultimately going off-site. Little Theater company performances are often held outdoors, maximizing the possibilities of the space.⁷⁴⁸ This relocation of performing arts outside the traditional theater inevitably led to changes in expressive means:

In their attempt to resist and subvert the existing system, they applied many creative methods bound up with the local context, such as *non-fiction drama*, *environmental theater*, and *action play*, exhibiting a transdisciplinary congruence of performance art and installation art.⁷⁴⁹

Within the institutional realm, nowadays, the significance of performing arts in Taiwan is reflected in cultural policies and the presence of three major Performing Arts Centers (PACs) on the island. The Taipei-based National Performing Arts Centre (NPAC, *Guojia biaoyan Yishu zhongxin* 國家表演藝術中心) – formerly known as National Chiang Kai-shek Cultural Centre (NCKSCC, *Guoli Zhongzheng wenhua zhongxin* 國立中正文化中心) – is complemented by the National Taichung Theater (NTT, *Taizhong guojia gejuyuan* 台中國家歌劇院) and the Kaohsiung Centre for the Arts (*Weiwuying guojia Yishu wenhua zhongxin* 衛武營國家藝術文化中心). For narrative coherence, it is imperative to acknowledge that these specialized venues and organizations operate under

⁷⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 450

⁷⁴⁹ WANG Jun-Jieh & HUANG Chien-Hung (Eds), *The wild eighties: dawn of a transdisciplinary Taiwan [Kuang ba ling: kua lingyu linguang chuxian de shidai 狂八〇：跨領域靈光出現的時代]*, Taipei: Taipei National University of the Arts, 2023, pp. 38-39

significant governmental oversight and control, both direct and indirect, posing notable challenges to their creative initiatives. Due to constraints of length, this thesis cannot extensively explore this topic. For deeper insights, readers are encouraged to consult Lai Meng-Yu's thesis titled "Taiwanese Identity and the Performing Arts: the Development of Programming at the National Performing Arts Centre" (2002), wherein the relationship between these centers and the government, as well as the broader challenges performing and performance arts are facing within the institutional framework, are extensively examined.

The contemporary Taiwanese performing artworld is incredibly alive, as evidenced not only by the achievements of successful and well-established companies – among which, the Cloud Gate Dance Theater Company (*Yunmen guanwang* 雲門官網) may stand as the principal example – but also by the recent proliferation of small art collectives and associations, founded by young artists and operating at the local level, often within artistic residencies. Such smaller "companies" merge together various practices including performance, theater, dance, and body studies. They also play an active role in organizing independent shows held in makeshift venues, as well as workshops and conferences open to all interested participants, artists and non.

In 2022, the author of this thesis had the pleasure of meeting some of the members of the Dawn Dance Theater Association (*Richu Shenti Juchang* 日出身體劇場), an artistic collective based in Taichung. The Dawn Dance Theater collective is dedicated to exploring the body in its broadest sense. Their practice defies easy categorization into specific art forms. It encompasses experimental dance, drama, cross-disciplinary theater, and performance, while also engaging in photography and nude modeling. Additionally, the collective offers outdoor physical training programs for performers.

Fig. 11. "眠夢 *bīn-bāng*" performance and 'creative dialogue' (*chuangzuo duitan* 創作對談) practice, Dawn Dance Theater association (*Richu Shenti Juchang* 日出身體劇場), Taichung, October 2022.

On October 26th, 2022, this collective organized the workshop "Bye Bye Hustle Culture" (*Xiuxi Yanjiu Shi* 休息研究室, lit. "resting research room") in the small theater of Islands Art Park (*Qundao Yishu Yuanqu* 群島藝術園區), an artistic residency in the northern area of Taichung. This workshop served as a counterpoint to the frenetic pace typical of Taiwanese cities, offering a "eulogy of rest." It aimed to explore how individuals rest and use their bodies in the process. Resident artists guided participants in finding their most suitable way of resting, observing the characteristics of their

“resting” bodies, and recording their movements.⁷⁵⁰ The event culminated in a collective performance and a final exhibition showcasing the results of these “studies of rest and bodies.” This workshop was defined by the collective as a “co-creation workshop” (*Gongtong chuangzuo gongzuofang* 共同創作工作坊). Such definition accurately reflects the nature of the workshop, as it invited participants – artists and non – to join the collective not only in the exploratory practice but also in the performance and exhibition stages. As the introductory statement to the event declares:

These days, we have decided to open up ten spots for people to create something together with us. There is no limit to the scope of this creation; as long as you are interested in the theme and want to explore the concept of ‘rest’ with us, you can join us for the exhibition of bodies in the “Resting Research Room” at Island Art Park!⁷⁵¹

This analysis of little theater and contemporary experimental theater not only served to highlight the prominence of the body in independent Taiwanese art but also introduced another of its fundamental characteristics: transdisciplinarity. The subsequent section will further elucidate this point.

4.3.3 Transdisciplinarity

Throughout the chapters, we have observed how Taiwan is characterized by a *mixed nature*, by a *multitude* of something, across various domains – historical, identitarian, cultural, and artistic. The complexity of Taiwanese history has fostered a multifaceted identity, leading to multiculturalism and a plethora of diverse artistic influences, thus to a rich array of themes to explore and expressive means to utilize. Today, transdisciplinarity stands as one of the defining pillars of Taiwanese art, reflecting the pluralization of these diverse sources of inspiration and the nature of the country itself. This blending of influences has been creatively synthesized by a distinctive Taiwanese sensibility, making it a principal means of discovering new forms of expression.

Transdisciplinarity in the arts can be dated back to the 1980s. Wang and Huang pointed out how such practice emerged during that period because of a state of *pre-globalization* and *un-*

⁷⁵⁰ “透過開放式討論找到每個人的休息方式，在空間裡進行身體展演。引導參與者找到最適合自己的休息方式，觀察「休息中」的身體特質，並且將其動態記錄下來。” Source: @dawndancetheater Instagram profile.

⁷⁵¹ “這些日子以來，我們決定開放十位名額跟我們一起共同創作，本次創作沒有任何程度限制，只要對此次的創作主題感興趣，想與我們一同探索休息的方法，就能與我們一起在群島藝術園區進行「休息研究室」的身體展演！” Source: @dawndancetheater Instagram profile.

systematization.⁷⁵² Especially this second point highlighted by the scholars, the un-systematization, holds pivotal importance, thus requiring further explanation. The rise of transdisciplinarity in Taiwan can be attributed to the fact that academic institutions had not yet established rigid boundaries between disciplines, especially those “imported” from the West during the 1980s and 1990s, which were still being assimilated. This lack of strict categorization allowed for a more fluid integration of diverse fields. In contrast, the museological-curatorial and art criticism systems in the Western world promptly analyzed new and significant art forms, such as those emerging from America, and quickly established categories to define them. Consequently, disciplines in the West do not intermingle as readily.⁷⁵³ Wang and Huang used the following words to describe the interdisciplinary environment of the 1980s:

Seemingly *random*, the approach that bypasses rigid institutional frameworks with external linkage was nothing if not *critical* and *proactive*. It reflected the dissatisfaction with the frameworks or internal institutions of different disciplines or the issues that couldn’t be tackled through available perceptions. Practitioners from different disciplines then gradually entered partnerships, hence transdisciplinary communities with shared values and attitudes beyond existing frameworks.⁷⁵⁴

The practice did not cease in the 1980s; rather, it continued to evolve and has become increasingly less “random” and (paradoxically) more “structured” and “defined” over time, despite remaining uncategorizable. To the present day, an increasing acceptance within official academic and cultural circles of this way of making art allows it to get rid of its “subversive” nature. In this sense, “the ‘transdisciplinary’ in Taiwan may not just be a topic in a specific epoch, but also a characteristic linked to Taiwan’s very nature.”⁷⁵⁵

Transdisciplinarity is not only a distinctive feature of Taiwanese art if compared to other countries, but it is also particularly prevalent in alternative art. Indeed, despite advancements in recent decades, academia continues to push for categorizing artworks into specific genres to impose *order* and *structure* on artistic practice. The mere fact that artworks in museums are displayed with labels

⁷⁵² WANG Jun-Jieh & HUANG Chien-Hung (Eds), *The wild eighties: dawn of a transdisciplinary Taiwan [Kuang ba ling: kua lingyu linguang chuxian de shidai 狂八〇：跨領域靈光出現的時代]*, Taipei: Taipei National University of the Arts, 2023, p. 69

⁷⁵³ While interdisciplinary practices do occur in the West (with experiential art serving as a prime example), they happen less frequently and exhibit different characteristics compared to those in Taiwan.

⁷⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p. 12. Emphasis is mine.

⁷⁵⁵ *Ibidem.*

detailing their expressive means and materials is exemplificative of the limits inherent to the official system in this sense. In contrast, the more “chaotic” and undefinable approach of independent art allows for greater interdisciplinary practices. As Mingder Chung (Zhong Mingde 鐘明德), a curator and art critic specialized in drama and experimental theater, states: “*multidisciplinary art (pin tie zhenghe xing de yishu 拼貼整合型的藝術)* is a powerful tool for creating a ‘new culture in Taiwan’, as it is able to break through the surveillance of the mainstream ideology and express our collective subconscious.”⁷⁵⁶

One of the fields where this “technique of hybridization”⁷⁵⁷ is most prominent is in the coordination of various forms of installation art with performing and performance arts.⁷⁵⁸ As previously analyzed, this practice can be traced back to the little theater and experimental movements of the 1980s and 1990s. These movements “often combined artistic installation techniques with the aim of subverting the system, critiquing society, and advocating for the disadvantaged.”⁷⁵⁹ This trend has continued to evolve into the present day, eventually constituting a common practice of contemporary Taiwanese art. As Yao Jui-chung notes, “the extensive use of mixed materials and the variety of spatial installations on stage are distinctive features of this uniquely Taiwanese approach to performing art.”⁷⁶⁰

Given its inherently ephemeral and chaotic nature, and its potential to manifest in a wide variety of forms, providing a precise definition for artistic transdisciplinarity is challenging. This section will present an obscure yet intriguing observation by the art critic Yao Yi (遙亦), who, in discussing installation art, states:

To achieve the goal of ‘integrated art,’ it is hoped that a more *experimental* path can be taken, departing from the classical “performance manual” used as a base in modern

⁷⁵⁶: “拼貼整合型的藝術可以闖過主流意識形態的監視，呈現我們的集體潛意識，因此我認為是開創「台灣新文化」的利器。” Mingder Chung, Cited in YAO Juichung 姚瑞中, *Installation art in Taiwan. Since 1991-2001 [Taiwan zhuangzhi yishu 台灣裝置藝術]*, Taipei: Muma wenhua shiye gongsi, 2002, p. 451. Emphasis is mine.

⁷⁵⁷ WANG Jun-Jieh & HUANG Chien-Hung (Eds), *The wild eighties: dawn of a transdisciplinary Taiwan [Kuang ba ling: kua lingyu linguang chuxian de shidai 狂八〇：跨領域靈光出現的時代]*, Taipei: Taipei National University of the Arts, 2023, p. 68

⁷⁵⁸ The integration between these two techniques is extensively analyzed in YAO Juichung 姚瑞中, *Installation art in Taiwan. Since 1991-2001 [Taiwan zhuangzhi yishu 台灣裝置藝術]*, Taipei: Muma wenhua shiye gongsi, 2002, pp. 444-450. The information hereby reported have been extrapolated from such pages.

⁷⁵⁹ Ibid. p. 444

⁷⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 450

theater. A possible direction is to modify the “pyramidal structure” of the elements constituting the performance, transforming it into a “*star-shaped cohesion*” that coordinates the various elements in the “installation field.” This “field” is thus *constructed* or *deconstructed* by the impact of five elements: *spatial* installation, *video* installation, *movement* installation, *human body* installation, and *sound* installation.⁷⁶¹

Yao’s words are highly metaphorical and obscure, a clarification is thus necessary to avoid misconception. From the mention of “movement installation” and “body installation”, it can be inferred that Yao’s understanding of the term *zhuangzhi* 裝置 “installation” is much broader than the conventional definition of “installation art,” it rather encompasses various forms of art. Let us now try to reinterpret Yao’s words in a simpler way. The statement interestingly pointed out the fundamental yet often overlooked relationship between interdisciplinarity and *experimentalism*, as well as between interdisciplinarity and a *deconstructive approach* to art creation, which complements the constructive one. These concepts are essential in creating “integrated art” (*zhenghe yishu* 整合藝術), no longer governed by the dominance of one artistic medium over another (*pyramidal structure*), but rather by the equal interaction of different artistic means, working together in a dynamic and horizontal manner (*star-shaped cohesion*).

In conclusion, as pointed out by Yao, the transdisciplinary approach characterizing Taiwanese contemporary alternative art dismantles the barrier between installation, video art, action art, performance, and sound art. Interestingly, by doing so, it also transcends the barrier between the five senses of human perception. The observer, who is no longer simply an observer but also a listener, a toucher, a smeller, and sometimes even a taster, is able to *experience* art in its most all-round sense.

Additionally, transdisciplinarity has the propriety of blurring the boundaries between art and non-art, challenging traditional notions of what can be considered art. By transcending aesthetic and technical judgments inherent in the official approach to art practice, through transdisciplinarity alternative art aims to establish itself as an experience to be *lived* rather than an object to be *observed*.

This perspective applies not only to the observer during the exhibitions but also to the creator behind the scenes. The importance of experiencing the creative process in a meaningful way has become paramount in alternative art, to the extent that independent art spaces often prioritize

⁷⁶¹ “在企圖達到「整合藝術」的目標共識之下，希望能走出一條較現代劇場採用之「表演文本」之外更具實驗性的路。可能的方向是將表演元素的”金字塔結構”，修正為”星狀凝聚”所交織組構的”裝置場”。它是五個元素（空間裝置、影像裝置、行動裝置、人體裝置及音聲裝置）交相衝擊所建構或解構的「場」。” YAO Yi 遙亦 (1997), Cited in YAO Juichung 姚瑞中, *Installation art in Taiwan. Since 1991-2001* [Taiwan *zhuangzhi yishu* 台灣裝置藝術], Taipei: Muma wenhua shiye gongsi, 2002, p. 450

facilitating an enriching journey for artists over the production of finalized outputs. This emphasis on the process will be the focus of study in the following section.

4.3.4 Emphasis on the process and relational nature

In the past, art galleries were places to show classic works for people to appreciate. It was an artistic *works-centered* period. However, in the post-modern age, art theory replaced this traditional view gradually. An artistic work becomes a *process* closely-interacted with the environment. Therefore, the meaning of an artistic work doesn't entirely depend on the work itself or its aesthetic features. The work is enriched by society, culture and politics.⁷⁶²

The emphasis on the *process*, intended as a “process of *action* and *relationship building* rather than the [process of] production of objects as works,”⁷⁶³ can be understood as a consequence of the recent focus on the *relational nature* of art. Over the past few decades, nurturing connections and dialogue – both within the artworld and between the artworld and external actors – has become the primary focus of art discourse.⁷⁶⁴

As explored in the section dedicated to the first characteristic of Taiwanese independent art – its connection to the broader community and environment – we have seen how independent art plays a pivotal role in fostering dialogue between art and society. This connection inevitably entails a redefinition of the artist's role, transforming them into “initiators”⁷⁶⁵ of social interaction. Through the adoption of a “de-authored approach,”⁷⁶⁶ artists relinquish their traditional labels and embrace their social role as facilitators of relationships.⁷⁶⁷ As expressed by Wu Mali, one of the artists who

⁷⁶² WANG Lin (Ed.), “Voice of the unseen: Chinese Independent Art 1979/Today” [未曾呈现的声音—中国独立艺术展], catalog of the homonymous Collateral Event of the 55th Venice Biennale, Heidelberg: Alte Brücke Verlag, 2013, p. 455. Emphasis is mine.

⁷⁶³ LU Pei-Yi, “Three Approaches to Socially Engaged Art in Taiwan”, in *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vol. 15, No. 6, November/December 2016, pp. 91-101, p. 98

⁷⁶⁴ Among the scholars who studied this phenomenon, Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of “relational aesthetics” is particularly notable. For additional insights, readers may consult Nicolas BOURRIAUD, *Relational Aesthetics*, Paris: Les Presses du Réel, 2002

⁷⁶⁵ LU Pei-Yi, “Three Approaches to Socially Engaged Art in Taiwan”, in *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vol. 15, No. 6, November/December 2016, pp. 91-101, p. 101

⁷⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 98

⁷⁶⁷ Ibidem.

most celebrated the concept of ‘relations’ in her art projects, “art does not play an aestheticizing role, but is a medium of *stimulation, connection, and reflection.*”⁷⁶⁸

Given that these concepts have been previously discussed, this section will not be redundant but will instead take a different approach. While the chapter has already explored the connections between artists and individuals outside the artworld, the present section will focus on the significance of relations and dialogue within the artworld itself, particularly among artists. Such emphasis on relations is particularly evident in independent art, which, unlike institutional art, often features artists *working* and even *living* together. Compared to official contexts, independent art is in its very nature generally much more oriented towards cooperation and collectivity, as it may be inferred by the various forms it takes, including independent art spaces, artists’ collectives, and artistic residencies. All of these forms are characterized by the physical proximity of artists, and consequently by the indispensability of dialogue for the proper functioning of the space or collective. Alvau, in his description of the “discentre,” intended as an alternative logic to that of the “center” (institutional art), highlighted this relational nature with the following words:

The (dis)centre [...] focuses on the disjuncture that the centre generates, surrounding it with its alternative narratives, and thus slowly implementing parallel logics of *living into community*. In its confrontation against the dominant structure, the power of the (dis)centre is articulated around processes such as *care, everydayness* and *community* as forms of *dissidence* aimed at signalling new possible ways of looking and, therefore, *new ways of living.*⁷⁶⁹

In this sense, it is possible to assert that independent art spaces “go beyond the sphere of art practice to redefine the field and meaning of art; they create and nurture relations, stimulate conversations, bring in education, and initiate collaboration.”⁷⁷⁰ In such spaces, the creative process is no longer confined solely to individual artistic research; rather, it predominantly thrives on dialogue among artists, who influence each other through the exchange of opinions on art-related and non-art-related topics. The period of residence in an artistic residency or renting a studio in a collective art village thus assume an additional layer of significance, becoming indispensable for both artistic and personal growth.

⁷⁶⁸ WU Mali (2007), cited in *Ibid.* p. 97

⁷⁶⁹ Alvau, 2022, cited in Roberto Riccardo ALVAU, *(Dis)centering the locality: The emergence and establishment of participatory art practices in Taiwan (1994-2022)*, 2022 (Unpublished Draft), p. 12. Emphasis is mine.

⁷⁷⁰ TUNG Wei Hsiu, “When Social Practice Art Overcomes Globalisation: Attending to Environment and Locality in Taiwan”, in *Culture and Dialogue*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2018, pp. 223-250, p. 244

The practice of art is no longer restricted to traditional activity in the namely artist institute (for artists), connoisseurship (for art historians and curators) and in interpretation (for the general public) ... a new form of art making does not point at art itself but instead focuses on the social process of *exchange*.⁷⁷¹

In these contexts, the process of exchange among artists often occurs through simple social interactions typical of everyday life. Sharing a meal, frequenting the same bars, and attending events and parties collectively have become integral aspects of artistic practice more than ever before. Given that the artists inhabiting these spaces are typically young and vibrant, these practices frequently foster strong relationships of *friendship* and *support*. This last point holds pivotal importance within the discourse. Indeed, the institutional art world of museums and biennials, typically inhabited by already well-established artists, and characterized by competition, prestigious awards, and the mediation of influential galleries, often exhibits a more cynical attitude. In contrast, within the independent art world, informal relationships of friendship or mutual esteem frequently serve as the most crucial determinant for an artist's "survival" and for gaining exposure. For young emerging artists, personal connections remain the most effective means to meet gallerists and curators, participate in collective exhibitions, secure venues for exhibitions and other events, and address various other fundamental factors.

A case study worth considering is Carp Gallery (*Liyu* 鯉魚), a contemporary art gallery located in the West district of Taichung. Founded by the young artist Lee Yi-peng (李奕芃), it is actually a hybrid space that functions as an independent gallery, an independent art space, and an artist residency. Over time, it has become a fundamental meeting point for the young artistic community in Taichung. Notable for organizing frequent personal and collective exhibitions, Carp Gallery also established a book club and regularly hosts meetings, debates, and film screenings. The space's casual and friendly atmosphere is immediately apparent, with the gallerist often greeting visitors at the entrance with a cup of tea and a piece of cake. Visitors soon discover that an entire artistic community revolves around the gallery, with members eating and sleeping in Lee's home (including artists in residence) and supporting each other in their creative endeavors.

Fig. 12. Preparations for the collective exhibition "Super daydreaming" (*Chao meng* 超夢), held at Carp Gallery (*Liyu* 鯉魚) in October-November 2022. Participating artists: Lee

⁷⁷¹ Pablo HELGUERA (2011), cited in *Ibid.* p. 246. Emphasis is mine.

Yenjung (李彥蓉), Hsieh Lu-cheng (謝律丞), Tch'en Pai-rui (陳柏叡), Lee Jyun-yi (李俊熠), Art Naming 奇能.

Fig. 13. *Super daydreaming* (*Chao meng* 超夢), performance, Art Naming 奇能, performed at Carp Gallery (*Liyu* 鯉魚) on the 22nd October 2022.

The performance involved the artist sleeping under a blanket, with imperceptible movements, gradually traversing the gallery space over nearly five hours, from the basement to the rooftop. The artist invited people to join him in sleeping, thus creating a very intimate situation of collective care and relaxation.

Lee Yi-peng, along with the artist and friend Art Naming 奇能, recently announced the establishment of the “YAHABA International Residency for the Arts in Taiwan” (*YAHABA Taiwan guoji Yishu cun* 台灣國際藝術村), which will be situated in the hills of Nantou, central Taiwan. The residency, set to launch its first open call on June 1, 2024, aims to teach artists-in-residence to live and work together through daily chores such as cooking, cleaning, and cultivating vegetables. The announcement statement reads:

After several experimental artistic collaborations and exhibitions between 2020-2024, Yi-Peng, Lee and Art Naming 奇能 both confirmed the inseparable nature between everyday life and artistic creation. Most exhibitions emphasise on the result, not the process of the artist. We wanted a space focused on the process of living life and making art, without the pressure of producing results.⁷⁷²

The aim of the residency aligns closely with the topics discussed in this section, serving as a perfect example of the significance of relationships and the emphasis on process in contemporary Taiwanese independent art.

The subsection that follows will highlight a characteristic that could be considered a consequence of those examined in the current section: the emergence of hybrid spaces and creative neighborhoods.

4.3.4.1 *Hybrid Spaces and Creative Neighborhoods*

The emphasis on the relational nature of art in Taiwan has led to the emergence of numerous *hybrid spaces* that simultaneously function as cafeterias, bookstores, art galleries, and artist hangouts, frequently hosting workshops and all sorts of events. This phenomenon resists precise analysis; therefore, this section will briefly highlight examples rather than engage in a theoretical discussion.

⁷⁷² Source: @yahahatw Instagram profile.

The author deemed the inclusion of this section necessary: although such hybrid spaces also exist in the West (particularly in recent years), they are especially prominent in Taiwan. These spaces play a fundamental role in fostering connections among various actors in the artworld and contribute significantly to the development of art discourse. Besides reflecting the initial “mission” of independent art space to create communities, foster friendships, and enhance direct communication, these hybrid forms also serve as a means to sustain economic expenses, and can thus be viewed as an attempt to self-funding.

Fig. 14. Poster of *Z I N E* (*Shenshe* 神社) Art Festival, held in September 2023 at Venue (*shidi* 濕地), Taipei.

Venue (*shidi* 濕地, lit. “wetlands”) was established in the Zhongshan district of Taipei in December 2015 as a creative experimental base. This hybrid space serves multiple purposes: it hosts exhibitions, art festivals, screenings, music performances, lectures, as well as press conferences and workshops of various kinds. It also functions as a café bar, a club, and a tattoo studio.⁷⁷³

Fig. 15. Ponding (*peng ding* 朋丁), internal view.

Situated in the Zhongshan district, Ponding is a collaborative platform acting as a bookstore specializing in art books and magazines, two exhibition spaces, and a coffee bar. It frequently invites emerging artists to give a lecture and holds some pop-up events.⁷⁷⁴

Fig. 16. Fleet Street Coffee (*Jiandui jie kafei* 艦隊街咖啡), internal view.

Located in central Taichung, Fleet Street Coffee initially opened as a café and bookstore. However, it also functions as an art gallery and frequently hosts exhibitions, particularly showcasing the works of young emerging artists.

The youthful energy and exploratory spirit of artists inhabiting independent art spaces, has led to a phenomenon Jens Chen and Anita Chen termed “creative neighborhood.”⁷⁷⁵ This term denotes the natural phenomenon where independent art spaces and hybrid spaces, such as those mentioned above, “colonize”⁷⁷⁶ an area of the city, transforming it into a hub for artistic and cultural experimentation. This artistic fervor not only involves spaces devoted to the arts but also engages the

⁷⁷³ Venue official website. <http://www.venue.tw/> accessed 30 May 2024

⁷⁷⁴ Ponding official website. <https://pon-ding.com/about> accessed 13 January 2024

⁷⁷⁵ Ibid. p. 54

⁷⁷⁶ In this context, “colonize” refers to the spontaneous attraction and unconscious influence exerted by independent art spaces and hybrid venues on one another, leading them to relocate to another part of the city where artistic life is more dynamic.

entire neighborhood, including spaces and people traditionally unrelated to art. Reflecting the previously discussed ability of independent art to connect art and society, the practice of “artists becoming residents, and residents becoming artists”⁷⁷⁷ gives rise to various cultural activities that involve everyone in the area. This cultural and social richness is only proper to *art from below*.

4.3.5 Lost space

In the second chapter and in the first part of this fourth chapter, we have examined the prevalent practice of the 1980s and 1990s to occupy abandoned spaces and rethink them for artistic production or social gathering. While in the 1980s and 1990s this practice, known as “lost space,”⁷⁷⁸ was a necessary recourse – given that there was no place at the time for alternative art within the artworld – it persists today as a deliberate choice. Indeed, as Wei Hsiu Tung points out, “a recent trend in Taiwan has been for artists to seek lost public space and to make proposals for its re-use.”⁷⁷⁹

While the “grunge” aesthetic that these abandoned places evoke is recognized as a distinctive trait of “underground” art in the global perception, in the case of Taiwan, the practice extends way beyond mere aesthetic considerations. Tung individuates as one of the factors that make this practice distinctive to Taiwan the *urbanistic* one⁷⁸⁰: specifically, the rapid industrialization of the country led to the construction and subsequent abandonment of numerous large structures and buildings. For this reason, the revitalization of “lost spaces” in Taiwan serves a dual purpose: on one hand, it creates new functions and values for places that would otherwise be forgotten or demolished;⁷⁸¹ on the other hand, it enhances artistic creativity and experimentation by inspiring a new aesthetic and offering greater freedom for artists compared to traditional museums or galleries.⁷⁸²

⁷⁷⁷ LU Pei-Yi, “Three Approaches to Socially Engaged Art in Taiwan”, in *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vol. 15, No. 6, November/December 2016, pp. 91-101, p. 97

⁷⁷⁸ The term was coined by Chen Tai-sung in 2000. For further insights on the topic, the reader can refer to CHEN Tai-sung, “Lost space: Another Possibility for Installation Ruins” in *Art 99*, Vol.3, 2000, pp.53-59

⁷⁷⁹ TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, p. 170

⁷⁸⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 170-71

⁷⁸¹ “For a country such as Taiwan, where most of the space is already highly industrialized or commercialized, the preservation of buildings of historical note can be used to create new functions for them.” In *Ibidem*.

⁷⁸² “Art can be used to transform lost space into ‘a completely new paradise’ for experiments in artists’ creativity. Such artists believe that their ‘residencies’ in these spaces make their art works organic and helps them to develop their work,

Notably, the practice of “lost space,” initially born as a subversive act of squatting, has evolved beyond its origins: it is no longer merely a rebellious act of young artists reclaiming space. Nowadays, not only has it become an intrinsic feature of the Taiwanese artistic panorama but is even encouraged by the government itself. In particular, since the late 1990s, the cultural policies of the Council of Cultural Affairs have promoted transforming vacant spaces into art villages.⁷⁸³ These governmental efforts in space requalification, manifesting particularly through the creation of Cultural and Creative Parks and Artists’ Villages, represent a positive example of collaboration between the private sector, art communities, and the government.⁷⁸⁴ However, such efforts often lead to *gentrification*, resulting in increased property values and higher rents.⁷⁸⁵ This vicious cycle ultimately undermines the original aim: instead of attracting artists to art villages, it drives them away, as they can no longer afford to live and/or work there.

Recent years have been marked by significant steps forward in this context. Recognizing the “need for artists to find space for themselves,”⁷⁸⁶ the government has begun to explore the promotion of artistic hubs through more indirect measures. Instead of direct funding and management, strategies such as rent stabilization have been considered more effective.⁷⁸⁷ By making already existing living

in a way that it cannot be made in an institutional space such as an art museum or gallery.” CHEN Tai-sung (2000), cited in *Ibidem*.

⁷⁸³ The governmental practice of reusing deserted spaces to build artists’ villages is analyzed in detail in TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, pp. 164-170

⁷⁸⁴ “Private sector art communities, the government, and the system could have a good interaction, one example is the policy (of the central and local governments) of the revitalization of idle spaces.” Introduction, Conference *Space as Response: Taiwan Perspectives After the 1980s* [Kong jian zuowei yizhong huiying: 1980 hou de Taiwan jingyan 空間作為一種回應：1980 後的臺灣經驗], held on 2022.08.14 14:30–16:30 at CREATORS’ Space R102 Coworking Space, Speakers: John TAIN, WU Mali, CHENG Mei-Ya, Amy CHENG <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZeRYn88pe4>

⁷⁸⁵ CHEN Jens & CHEN Anita, *Mapping Taiwan’s Creative Hubs: Searching for Taiwan’s Creative Context*, Taipei: British Council, Taipei Culture Foundation-Songshan Culture & Creative Park, 2016 <https://www.britishcouncil.org.tw/en/2016creativehub> pp. 52-53

⁷⁸⁶ TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, pp. 164-170

⁷⁸⁷ “If the initial rent is too high and creatives cannot afford it, then there no hub could exist. [...] the government should intervene to ensure that low rent spaces are ample.” CHEN Jens & CHEN Anita, *Mapping Taiwan’s Creative Hubs: Searching for Taiwan’s Creative Context*, Taipei: British Council, Taipei Culture Foundation-Songshan Culture & Creative Park, 2016 <https://www.britishcouncil.org.tw/en/2016creativehub> p. 50

and working spaces accessible, rather than creating new ones, the government aims to create a more supportive environment for artists to thrive *independently*.

A fundamental example to consider when examining the complex dynamics between “lost space,” community creation, government involvement, and the preservation of independence in the arts is the urban renewal of Treasure Hill Artist Village (*Baozang yan Yishu cun* 寶藏巖藝術村), based in Taipei.⁷⁸⁸ Treasure Hill, originally a military battalion during the colonial period in the 1930s, became a temporary settlement for soldiers from Mainland China in the 1960s. Over time, the place was abandoned and subsequently squatted by socially underprivileged residents who expanded their living spaces using recycled materials. The area’s wild and organic nature eventually attracted the interest of the artistic community. When the gentrification process led to orders for residents to move, the artistic community intervened. Collaborating with architects, they transformed the illegal settlement into an art village that was both environmentally and socially sustainable. After prolonged struggles between residents, the artistic community, and policymakers, the area officially opened as an artists’ village in 2010, retaining many of its original residents, thus constituting an example of virtuous collaboration between the various actors.

Fig. 17. *Treasure Hill Artist Village (Baozang yan Yishu cun 寶藏巖藝術村)*, external view.

4.3.6 Artistic residencies

The scheme of artist residencies is a typical feature of independent art worldwide. Despite not being exclusive to Taiwan, the author of this thesis deemed necessary the inclusion of a dedicated section due to its significant development in Taiwan over the past three decades. When contextualizing this Western-imported practice within the Taiwanese context, it becomes evident that it has assumed unique characteristics, diverse factors of importance, and complex dynamics of control and funding that are exclusive to the country. In analyzing these aspects, this section will draw upon the insights of Wei Hsiu Tung, whose thesis, “Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity” (2003), explored this topic in detail. Due to length constraints, the section will limit itself to highlighting the importance of residencies within the global and

⁷⁸⁸ The information regarding the Village have been taken and elaborated from WU Chieh-Hsiang, “The Role of Art in the Absence of Transitional Justice in Taiwan, Republic of China”, in *The International Journal of Social, Political and Community Agendas in the Arts*, 2016, vol. 11, no.2, pp. 33-50, p. 38

Taiwanese context, and their relationship with the government. For a more comprehensive understanding, readers are referred to the work mentioned above.

The concept of ‘artist-in-residence’ has had profound influence on art education and contemporary art practice in the Western countries. The experience of seeing living artists can be more inspiring than viewing artworks for many people throughout their life. Despite such significance, the practice of artist-in-residence in Asian countries has not been addressed much in the field of arts and culture.⁷⁸⁹

Compared to the West, Taiwan was a “latecomer” in adopting the practice of artist residencies. As Tung points out, “while in the West, since the late 1960s, the concepts and practice of artists-in-residence have been well received by artists’ communities and the general public, it was not until the early 1990s that the idea of artists-in-residence appeared on the Taiwanese art scene.”⁷⁹⁰ However, within the Asian continent, Taiwan stands as a pioneer in exploring, implementing, and adapting to local environments this valuable tool to foster artistic practice and build relationships within the artworld. The island’s approach to artists’ residencies has set a precedent, influencing neighboring countries and contributing to the development of a vibrant, interconnected artistic community in the region.

“For me, a social site filled with *human content* is a place for art”⁷⁹¹ affirms Tung. This statement provides an ideal foundation for exploring the significance of artist residencies. Tung’s concept of “human content” highlights a key feature of residencies: the simultaneous presence of multiple artists living and working together, in contrast to the traditional solitary studio practice. This *collective* approach to art offers immense benefits across various realms. Specifically, four main factors of importance can be identified.

The first major benefit of artist residencies is the *artistic and personal growth* of the participants. A dedicated space where artists live and work together provides a unique opportunity to learn new techniques through direct observation, develop their artistic research through dialogue and confrontation, and unconsciously incorporate influences from fellow artists. Residencies, often designed to last at least a few months, provide artists not only with *space* but also with *time* to reflect on their work. This second point is crucial, especially in today’s capitalistic world, where artists are

⁷⁸⁹ TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, p. 1

⁷⁹⁰ Ibid. p. 17

⁷⁹¹ Ibid. p. 268

frequently pressured to quickly produce commercially viable works, and where such external and internal pressures of *producing* inevitably detract time from *reflecting*. Moreover, it is important to precise that residencies do not always culminate in exhibitions; their primary purpose is to emphasize the *process* over the finished product. They are designed as tools for artistic growth, focusing on research, reflection, and relationship-building. This emphasis on process and relationships, characteristic of independent art as previously discussed, promotes not only artistic development but also personal growth, fostering community living skills and establishing a network of contacts.

The second factor of importance stems from the international character of most artistic residencies, and it is their capacity to foster *artistic innovation*. Nowadays, the majority of open calls for artist-in-residence projects, held both at the independent and institutional levels, target a global pool of potential participants. Given that international contacts and cultural exchanges are among the most effective means – if not the most effective – to advance artistic innovation, artistic residencies have historically been crucial in Taiwan for embracing contemporaneity and remain significant contributors to the continuous development of Taiwanese art. As already discussed, a pioneer in this sense was Bamboo Curtain Studio, which, also and mostly due to its international characterization, played a fundamental role in artistic innovation on the island.⁷⁹² However, the benefits of cultural contamination are not limited to artistic innovation. As Tung explains,

The practice of artist-in-residence schemes has opened the potential for cultural exchange between artists, art institutes, patrons, artists-in-residence and audience. It provides opportunities for artists to *explore different cultures* and *reflect their own cultural identity and history*.⁷⁹³

This statement leads us directly to the third point, which is fundamental because, while the first two factors are benefits common worldwide, this third point is an exclusive, or at least a particularly significant, benefit for Taiwan.

In Taiwan, the importance of exchanges with the international community, facilitated by residencies, extends well beyond the realm of artistic practice: it is also fundamental for *identity formation*. Undoubtedly, intercultural dialogue is beneficial for all countries, as Vivian Hsueh-Hua Chen states:

⁷⁹² The international character of residency programs of the studio is further discussed in TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, pp. 180-181

⁷⁹³ *Ibid.* pp. 88-89

Intercultural dialogue is essential to constructing cultural identity as it encourages individuals to see similarities with and differences from others and define who they are. Intercultural dialogue produces a contested space where cultural identity is constantly redefined and negotiated.⁷⁹⁴

However, in Taiwan, due to the ongoing identitarian complex extensively analyzed in the first chapter of the thesis, the negotiation of cultural identity mentioned by Chen assumes a particular connotation. Tung notes how “the sense of Taiwanese land, the local image and identity can be delivered by people who participate in the artists-in-residence schemes, and by using the space that reflects Taiwanese history and collective memory.”⁷⁹⁵ In this sense, international artistic residencies serve as platforms for Taiwanese artists to explore their identity through confrontation with the Other, and also celebrate this identity by showcasing its unique characteristics. This dual process of identity search and display, in the Taiwanese context, make artist residencies transcend their role as mere artistic tools. Instead, they become vital mechanisms for cultural self-discovery and affirmation, contributing profoundly to the ongoing dialogue about Taiwanese identity.

The fourth and final factor of importance pertains to the urban and social roles of artist-in-residence programs at the local level. Urbanistically, these residencies, deeply embedded within their local environments, through the organization of events “could bring the thriving of nearby areas,” thus serving as “a vigorous force in urban regeneration,”⁷⁹⁶ fostering economic and cultural vibrancy in nearby neighborhoods. Moreover, on a social level, the interactive-dialogical nature of these residencies enables meaningful engagement with local residents. This engagement can prove crucial in “support[ing] declining communities and play[s] a part in encouraging people to take pride in their local life.”⁷⁹⁷ In conclusion, artist-in-residence programs not only enhance the cultural landscape but also contribute to the social cohesion and resilience of the areas they inhabit, serving as catalysts for both *urban renewal* and *community empowerment*, and thus illustrating their multifaceted impact beyond the realm of art.

⁷⁹⁴ CHEN V. H., “Cultural Identity” in *Center for Intercultural Dialogue*, No. 22, Singapore: Nanyang Technological University, 2014, p. 1

⁷⁹⁵ TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, p. 307

⁷⁹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 272

⁷⁹⁷ TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, p. 265

Fig. 18. Islands Art Park (*Qundao yishu yuanqu* 群島藝術園區) artistic residence, internal view.

Islands Art Park was founded in 2018 in Taichung, near Fengjia Night Market, through the renovation of an old industrial space. As a place to support young Taiwanese artists, the “archipelago” provides a *nomadic creative residence space* for artists from various fields. Constituted by artist studios, a performance theater, a multi-functional small theater, an exhibition space, and a semi-outdoor stage, the park promotes cross-disciplinary art, and often holds lectures and workshops. The motto of the residency is “*yi ge ren hen ziyou, yi qun ren you lilang* 一個人很自由，一群人力量”，literally meaning “alone we are free, together we are strong”, but translated in English as “Everyone is an island, but we are not alone.”⁷⁹⁸

Fig. 19. Islands Art Park (*Qundao yishu yuanqu* 群島藝術園區) during the residency period of Lee Yi-peng (李奕芃), founder of Carp Gallery (*Liyu* 鯉魚) and YAHABA International Residency for the Arts in Taiwan (*YAHABA Taiwan guoji Yishu cun* 台灣國際藝術村).

In recent decades, government officials and cultural policymakers have increasingly recognized the fundamental importance of artist residencies, not only within the arts but also across broader society. Consequently, the government authorities, and especially the policies of the Council of Cultural Affairs have played an influential role in promoting ‘artist-in-residence schemes’ since the mid-1990s.⁷⁹⁹ Nowadays, many of the current artist-in-residence schemes are initiatives of the local cultural bureaux.⁸⁰⁰ However, as with many other already mentioned cases of institutional involvement in non-institutional practices, this can lead to issues concerning artistic freedom. As Tung points out, government involvement in planning or even simply funding residency schemes often results in “government officers usually tak[ing] part in the management and supervision of the schemes.”⁸⁰¹ This oversight can potentially constrain the autonomy of the artists and the experimental nature of their work, leading to tensions between institutional objectives and the creative freedom that artist residencies are meant to foster.

Fig. 20. *Art Stock 20* (*Taizhong ershi hao cangku* 台中二十號倉庫), external view.

⁷⁹⁸ The information about the space have been taken by Islands Art Park’s official website <https://www.islands.tw/about-us> accessed 1 June 2024

⁷⁹⁹ The role of Authorities in fostering Artist-in-residence schemes is analyzed in detail in TUNG Wei Hsiu, *Art for Social Change: The Role of Artist-in-Residence Schemes in Challenging Taiwanese Identity*, PhD thesis discussed at the University of Central England in Birmingham, Faculty of Philosophy, 2003, pp. 255-259

⁸⁰⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 256

⁸⁰¹ *Ibidem.*

Art Stock 20⁸⁰² opened in June 2000 in Taichung railway station's warehouse. The residence, comprising 14 artists' studios, a gallery/café, and a garden, was almost entirely funded by the government. This resulted in the art management team remaining in a passive position under the guidance of the Council of Cultural Affairs. The artists were notably selected by the Council, and therefore forced to conform to its expectations. As Tung phrases it, they were not "actively involved in the whole planning and practice of the residency programme [...] [but were rather] 'guests' or 'visiting artists' for a year-long project."⁸⁰³

In conclusion, as Tung notes:

The argument in the academy and cultural workers about whether the main vigor in promoting arts should be from top (governmental authorities) to the bottom (nongovernmental organizations among people) or from bottom to the top, is still a critical issue. [...] They are aware that dependence on governmental funding and supervision would diminish the autonomy of fine art practice and depth of the events that artists expect.⁸⁰⁴

These complex dynamics underscore the need for a careful *balance* between support and independence to ensure that these residencies can thrive while maintaining their integrity and original purpose.

It is precisely starting from this concept of 'balance' that the subsequent section of the chapter will unfold.

4.4 A discourse on *borders* and *dialogues*

The concept of "ecology" and the concept of "balance" are strictly interrelated. To illustrate this relation, the present thesis will engage in an (apparently) unrelated digression, and will briefly consider the natural world. *Ecological balance* is defined by Oxford Dictionary as "a state of *dynamic equilibrium* within a community of organisms, in which diversity (genetic, species, and ecosystem) remains relatively stable but can change gradually through natural succession."⁸⁰⁵ This oxymoronic concept of "dynamic equilibrium" allows for a certain degree of change, as long as the overall balance is maintained. In nature, the introduction of new species, the extinction of existing ones, or various

⁸⁰² The information about the residence and the dynamics between its Art Management Team and the Council for Cultural Affairs have been taken from Ibid. pp. 181-185.

⁸⁰³ Ibid. p. 185.

⁸⁰⁴ Ibid. pp. 256-257

⁸⁰⁵ Oxford Reference <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095741277> accessed 1 June 2024

external disturbances pose potential threats to an ecosystem's balance. A *balanced ecosystem*, however, remains stable despite these threats, constantly adjusting to changes through its inherent state of flux.

The art world functions in a similar manner. Shifts in political power, fluctuations in the art market, broader social debates, trends imported from abroad, structural changes within major institutions, and the unexpected rise to prominence of artists, groups, or currents are among the factors that can potentially destabilize the art world. Consequently, an art world must develop its own unique approach to managing these various elements and contingencies, striving to maintain equilibrium amidst the turbulence.

Along the chapters, the thesis has delineated two main forces influencing the Taiwanese artworld: one exerting pressure from above – institutional art – and one exerting pressure from below – independent art. For the Taiwanese art ecosystem to be in balance, it is essential to monitor, regulate and coordinate the pressures from these two main forces, or, as Alvau phrases it “the interpenetration between the two spheres, [and] the degree of negotiation that is established between them.”⁸⁰⁶

The question spontaneously arises: is the Taiwanese artistic ecosystem *in balance*? Alvau would answer affirmatively to this inquiry. In his words: “the case of Taiwanese practices, in this sense, is innovative in its capacity to deal effectively between the global pole (institutional-hegemonic) and the local pole (self-management-liminality).”⁸⁰⁷ The author of this thesis concurs with Alvau's assessment. Indeed, unlike in the West, the Taiwanese art world is distinguished by a *constructive dialogue* between the two spheres of independent and institutional, rendering its art ecology highly functional.

In the Taiwanese art system – at least nowadays – independent art serves as an “alternative” narrative to the central one. The term “alternative” inherently suggests the idea of a “parallel reality” that exists concurrently with the established narrative without seeking to replace it. Indeed, independent art does not aspire to become the new institutional norm; rather, it aims to provide a different platform for artists and individuals who do not feel represented by the offerings of museums

⁸⁰⁶ Roberto Riccardo ALVAU, *(Dis)centering the locality: The emergence and establishment of participatory art practices in Taiwan (1994-2022)*, 2022 (Unpublished Draft), p. 16

⁸⁰⁷ Ibidem.

and galleries. Thus, independent art is not *opposed* to institutional art but rather *complementary* to it. Yang Chia-Hsuan articulated in detail this concept with the following words:

Different from the Western alternative space in the 70s that emphasized on being counteractive to art institutions, alternative spaces in Taiwan, instead of opposing the commercial system, presented themselves as a neutral white cube for experimenting art forms. During a time when the media nowhere being diverse and art museums and art galleries were few, these “alternative spaces” became places where the latest art information was exchanged and spread. [...] These alternative spaces played a key role in bringing “people” together during that time. In contrast to fragmentary exhibitions organized by art museums, alternative spaces engendered connections between artworks, art creators and art viewers.⁸⁰⁸

In addition to the factors delineated by Yang, which illustrate how the two types of art operate in different spheres with distinct approaches, thereby avoiding competition or antagonism, another manifestation of this dialogical nature is the *rapid career progression* within the Taiwanese art system. An independent space, spontaneously founded, often self-funded, and operating almost in an “amateur” or even politically and institutionally “subversive” manner, can, within a few years, find itself representing the national pavilion at the Venice Biennale or exhibiting contemporary Taiwanese art at the Taipei Biennale. Several cases demonstrate this dynamic, undoubtedly pioneered by the already mentioned 1995 Taiwan Pavilion at Venice Biennale, *ARTTAIWAN*, almost entirely represented by members of the (at the time) newly established independent art space “Apartment No. 2.”⁸⁰⁹ To those who may question why institutional art chooses to be represented internationally by independent spaces, the answer lies in the “astuteness” of the Taiwanese art system and serves as a significant indicator of its balance. Through independent art, Taiwanese art can showcase its innovativeness to the world. In the meantime institutional platforms provide independent art with visibility and economic viability. In this sense, the Taiwanese art system has successfully stimulated a virtuous cycle that benefits both components without compromising the integrity of either. The fulcrum of the dialogue between the two spheres could possibly reside in this very point.

⁸⁰⁸ YANG Chia-Hsuan, “A Non-mainstream Site of Gathering—Early Development of ‘Alternative Space’ in Taiwan” <https://aofa.tw/?p=31> accessed 20 May 2024

⁸⁰⁹ Another example could be the independent art space *TheCube Project Space* (*lifang jihua kongjian* 立方計劃空間). Founded in southern Taipei in 2010, it is dedicated to the research, production, and presentation of contemporary art and local culture, with a particular focus on sound culture. This space has participated in Biennales, Documentas, and exhibitions at Museums of Contemporary Art (MoCAs). For further information about the space and its projects, readers can consult <https://thecubespace.com/en/the-cube-project-space/> accessed 1 June 2024

The interesting feature of such an extremely rapid ascent to success in Taiwan, unparalleled in other art systems,⁸¹⁰ becomes fundamental to discuss a key point. Schoeber notes how “this possibility to rise from the lowest level to the very pinnacle of the international art system may be indicative of the highly dynamic character of the Taiwanese art scene.”⁸¹¹ I argue that this not only demonstrates the dynamic nature of the system and thus serves as evidence of a dialogue between the independent and institutional spheres, but it also illustrates the ease of *crossing the borders* between these two worlds.

In the Taiwanese context, it is practically impossible to draw a clear distinction between independent and “mainstream” artists. Historically, many artists have *transcended the border* between independent and institutional spheres. Notable examples include Wu Mali, Lee Ming-sheng, Chen Chieh-Jen, Yao Jui-chung, Wu Tien-chang, among others. Today, the most prominent Taiwanese artists, who exhibit in major institutional platforms worldwide, were once fierce warriors on the front lines of the independent artworld.

Arguably the most notable example among them is Wu Mali, renowned globally for being a key figure in the 1980s guerrilla art movement against institutional norms, and at the same time for being one of the most frequently exhibited artists in the entire history of Taiwanese art. Despite Wu’s significant critique of the inadequate support and representation of experimental art forms within the institutional system, she has garnered numerous representations within the very institutional platforms she has long criticized, notably the TFAM and the Venice Biennale.⁸¹² A brief study of this seemingly paradoxical figure is propaedeutic to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics regulating the Taiwanese artworld.

Despite being among the most considered artists, Wu Mali has always been very critical of the official exhibitory system in Taiwan. In particular, the TFAM has been the object of harsh criticism, which she forwarded in a severe and unfiltered manner, both through words and artworks. The thesis

⁸¹⁰ Schoeber notes how “hardly any other country in the world could offer a similar career to stardom” Felix SCHOEBER, *Modernity, nationalism and global marginalization: representing the nation in contemporary Taiwanese art exhibition. The Taipei fine arts museum and the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice 1984-2009*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of Westminster, Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, 2014, p. 309

⁸¹¹ *Ibidem*.

⁸¹² Wu Mali’s artworks were featured in the 1998 Taipei Biennial and represented Taiwan at the Venice Biennale in both 1995 and 1997. Moreover, in 2018, she served as a co-curator for the Taipei Biennial.

will hereby report two statements, respectively from 1997 and 2022, and two artworks aimed at institutional critique.

The art scene and art patronage in Europe and Taiwan are not really the same at any level. Art here [in Taiwan] is not necessarily made by the artist and there's no qualified system of art critics, good galleries or a good market here – and you need these things to reach a higher level as an artist. In Taiwan galleries usually just choose to feature artists who are already famous.⁸¹³

There was a great discrepancy in what was expected of an art institution to relate to contemporary society and the world's art scene, but what we got were exhibitions introduced through the diplomatic system, foreign exhibitions [...] the diverse voices of artistic expression were not represented at official institutions. (discussing the TFAM's practices during the 1980s)⁸¹⁴

Fig. 21. *Fake (Weizhuang 偽裝)*, Wu Mali 吳瑪俐, 1994, installation, wooden construction and text, dimensions variable, TFAM basement, B04 room.

The installation comprised bare white walls bearing the words: “Fake /I am the FAKE author /You are the FAKE audience/Let's stroll through the FAKE Museum!”⁸¹⁵ During the opening event, art critic Huang Haiming (黃海鳴), dressed as a woman, guided visitors while explaining the absent “works.” The artwork can thus be read as a satirical commentary on the power dynamics inherent to the museum.⁸¹⁶

Fig. 22. *Taipei Fine Arts Motel*, Wu Mali 吳瑪俐, 1996, performance/action.

Wu distributed in the districts close to the TFAM a business card stating “Taipei Fine Arts Motel. NT \$20 per visit. Exclusive celebrity club on Chung-Shan N. Rd. Good choice for fun seekers.” Many “fun seekers” called the phone number on the card, finding out it was in reality

⁸¹³ Wu Mali (1997), cited in Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, p. 156. While this statement may exaggerated if considering the contemporary Taiwanese artistic landscape, it is important to note that it originates from nearly 30 years ago, and since then, significant changes have occurred.

⁸¹⁴ WU Mali, Conference Space as Response: Taiwan Perspectives After the 1980s [Kong jian zuowei yizhong huiying: 1980 hou de Taiwan jingyan 空間作為一種回應：1980 後的臺灣經驗], held on 2022.08.14 14:30–16:30 at CREATORS' Space R102 Coworking Space, Speakers: John TAIN, WU Mali, CHENG Mei-Ya, Amy CHENG <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZeRYn88pe4>

⁸¹⁵ “偽裝/我是偽裝的作者/你是偽裝的觀眾/觀我們來偽裝的美術館散步吧！”

⁸¹⁶ The artwork is described in detail in YAO Juichung 姚瑞中, *Installation art in Taiwan. Since 1991-2001 [Taiwan zhuangzhi yishu 台灣裝置藝術]*, Taipei: Muma wenhua shiye gongsi, 2002, pp. 439-440. The information hereby reported have been taken from there.

the museum. Through this participatory-based public intervention, Wu compares the TFAM to a service provider, a “rental space.”⁸¹⁷

To unravel the complexities of this paradox, let us consider a rather blunt statement made by Yao Jui-chung regarding Wu Mali and her propensity to oscillate between the independent and institutional spheres.

On the one hand, the creator criticizes the commercial and authoritarian tendencies of the whole art system, on the other hand, he or she is extremely dependent on it. The idea of ‘transforming’ can sometimes serve as a commercial means to please, thus becoming a sort of mask.⁸¹⁸

Is an artist advocating for the independent art world yet exhibiting at the Biennial a *traitor* or *hypocrite*? Or is he/she attempting to establish a dialogue between the two realms? This is the perennial dilemma of the independent art world, which, particularly from a Western perspective, is burdened with the expectation of opposing the institutional system. This dichotomy is largely a *cliché*, especially in the Taiwanese context. As we have observed, due to the rapid career progression and the efforts of institutions to support independent art, the boundary between the two has become increasingly blurred.

Considering the partial incorporation of the “alternative” into the “mainstream” in recent years, the desire to uphold the banner of “alternativeness” becomes even more of a *cliché*. As Yao notes:

Another interesting trend emerged in the late 1990s: the government directly or often private foundations invited independent curators to organize avant-garde art exhibitions. As a result, the same art that originated to challenge the system finds itself collaborating with institutions inherent to the system, and in some way, coinciding with the system itself.⁸¹⁹

Today, *there is* space for alternative art within the broader art world, unlike in the 1980s when it had to be subversive to be heard. Considering this, it becomes apparent that opposing institutions no longer has a factual basis and instead is more of a stylistic *caprice*.

⁸¹⁷ The artwork is described in detail in Sophie McINTYRE, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan’s Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, pp. 153-155. The information hereby reported have been taken from there.

⁸¹⁸ “創作者一方面批評整個藝術體系的商業和權威傾向，另一方面又極度依賴它。而改造理念有時可以成為討好的商業手段，於是理念成為一種偽裝。”YAO Juichung 姚瑞中, *Installation art in Taiwan. Since 1991-2001 [Taiwan zhuangzhi yishu 台灣裝置藝術]*, Taipei: Muma wenhua shiye gongsi, 2002, p. 442

⁸¹⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 434-435

This section, through a discussion on the concepts of *borders* and *dialogue*, attempted clarifying the relationship between the two forms of art, objects of study respectively of the third and fourth chapters. While it is common to perceive the “independent” and the “institutional” as perpetual adversaries, the Taiwanese context serves as the perfect evidence that such an antagonistic view is *superficial* and *over-simplistic*. Having established that institutional art does not threaten the proper functioning of independent art, a question arises: *who, then, is the “true enemy” of independent art?* The following and final section of this chapter will attempt to resolve this riddle.

4.5 Individuating the true “enemy”: independent art and capitals

Given that many creative hubs in Asia are not self-sufficient and rely heavily on external sources for income and support, particularly from the government,⁸²⁰ examining the implications of this dependence has been crucial. Throughout the third and fourth chapters, several case studies emphasized that government-backed sources of income and support, when applied to independent and alternative schemes, can pose significant challenges.

Firstly, such reliance endangers the creative freedom of artists, who may feel compelled to meet specific expectations to secure funding. Secondly, “outmoded institutional thinking and a rigid bureaucratic system often hinder the effective use of resources.”⁸²¹ Moreover, government’s over-reliance on Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to assess the value of cultural and creative industries⁸²², imposes an economic sector approach onto the field of art. This approach can transform an artistic space or organization into something akin to a “factory production line,”⁸²³ thereby “strangling creativity.”⁸²⁴ There is a widespread perception among independent art spaces and

⁸²⁰ CHEN Jens & CHEN Anita, *Mapping Taiwan’s Creative Hubs: Searching for Taiwan’s Creative Context*, Taipei: British Council, Taipei Culture Foundation-Songshan Culture & Creative Park, 2016, p. 49 <https://www.britishcouncil.org.tw/en/2016creativehub>

⁸²¹ Ibidem.

⁸²² Ibidem.

⁸²³ “Incubating the arts means nurturing performing art, visual arts as well as arts administrators. There is no way to generate a production report every month like a factory production line.” Margaret Shiu, founder of BCS. Cited in Ibidem.

⁸²⁴ “KPIs are the hangmen that strangle creativity.” Shuenn Ren Liou, cited in Ibidem.

organizations, both large and small, that receiving government funds feels like *parasitizing*.⁸²⁵ Additionally, we have analyzed that government-designed, funded, and supported projects often fail.

However, while the third and fourth chapters have predominantly examined ruinous cases of governmental protection, it is important for coherence to also highlight a successful example of an alternative space founded and financed by the government. This will provide a more realistic view of the impact of government involvement in the arts, thus allowing the narration not to fall into oversimplifications.

The Taiwan Contemporary Culture Lab, or C-LAB⁸²⁶ (*Taiwan dangdai wenhua shiyan chang* 台灣當代文化實驗場), was established in 2018 in the former Air Force Command Headquarters. Notably, the project was initiated by the Ministry of Culture. The initial goal of the space was to become the leading site for contemporary culture in Taiwan, driven by innovation, experimentation, and transdisciplinarity. Today, it can be said that this aim has been fulfilled. Domestically, C-LAB serves as a physical incubation center for creative endeavors, and it also functions as a crucial nexus for international exchange. The vision of the lab is expressed as follows:

Through programs such as artistic cultural innovation experimentation, exhibitions, performances, screening events, cross-domain co-creation, international cultural exchange, educational promotion, and community service, as well as the establishment of innovative experimentation, new art and culture co-habitats, urban outdoor green space, and other multi-purpose facilities, we are building on a vision for continued socio-cultural experimentation and practice.⁸²⁷

Fig. 23. “Chroma: A Derek Jarman Project” (*Sedui: Jia Man jihua* 色度：賈曼計畫), Taiwan Sound Lab (*Taiwan shengxiang shiyan shi* 臺灣聲響實驗室), 2020, VR video work, Taiwan Contemporary Culture Lab.

The Taiwan Sound Lab, established by C-LAB in 2018, is dedicated to the study of sound art and the relationship between art and technology. Notably, it features the Spatial Audio Field, the first immersive sound theater space in Taiwan.⁸²⁸

⁸²⁵ The term “parasiting” applied to this context has been utilized in the Conference Space as Response: Taiwan Perspectives After the 1980s [Kong jian zuowei yizhong huiying: 1980 hou de Taiwan jingyan 空間作為一種回應：1980 後的臺灣經驗], held on 2022.08.14 14:30–16:30 at CREATORS’ Space R102 Coworking Space, Speakers: John TAIN, WU Mali, CHENG Mei-Ya, Amy CHENG <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZeRYn88pe4>

⁸²⁶ All the information about the space have been taken directly by Taiwan Contemporary Culture Lab’s official website <https://clab.org.tw/en/about/> accessed 2 June 2024

⁸²⁷ Taiwan Contemporary Culture Lab’s official website <https://clab.org.tw/en/about/> accessed 2 June 2024

⁸²⁸ For further information the reader may refer to <https://clab.org.tw/en/unit/soundlabtw/> accessed 2 June 2024

C-LAB within the context of the present thesis serves as a virtuous example of an alternative art space backed by governmental institutions. It thus serves to dismantle the overly radical rhetoric that often “demonizes” governments and institutions, suggesting that any engagement with the “official system” would inevitably lead to the decline or even demise of independent initiatives. By showcasing the successful collaboration between an alternative space and the government, C-LAB challenges such overly simplistic narratives, and leads the narration directly to a second point.

Despite being a natural and common perception, it is erroneous to identify the government as the primary adversary of independent art. While governmental influence certainly imposes limitations, the true adversary lies elsewhere. Indeed, government sponsorship is not restrictive solely due to its origin from governmental entities and their associated political agendas, but rather because it entails the *infusion of capital*. This concept stands as a fundamental point in the narration. Indeed, the very association with capital is incongruent with the ethos of independent spaces, as Chen Tong (陳侗) points out:

Many non-profit organizations (or so-called “alternative spaces”) are powerless in resisting the influx of capital flow into contemporary art, and they often voluntarily close down after a short existence. In comparison to art museums – whether they are government run, privately run, or privately owned – many non-profits are not equipped to face the power of capital. While many of these alternative spaces thrive on the emotional dedication of their art practitioners, many other aspects pertaining to the operation of these spaces have been overwhelmed by the intervention of capital.⁸²⁹

Notably referred to as not-for-profit organizations⁸³⁰, the structure of independent spaces is not *designed* around capital. Rather, the influx of capital is a successive step, a step potentially detrimental to their *creative integrity*. This critical observation forms the crux of the discourse: while capital may ensure the survival of the space, it does not necessarily ensure the sustainability of its artistic value. Interestingly, Chen defines the loss of such creative integrity as a loss of *dignity*, almost recalling the all-Chinese concept of “losing face” (*shi mianzi* 失面子): “If this type of structure were to persevere but reduce the quality of its service, then that could mean losing the organization’s *dignity*.”⁸³¹

⁸²⁹ TONG Chen, “Alternative Spaces Are Still the Best Alternative”, in *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vol. 15, No. 6, November/December 2016, pp. 10-14, pp. 10-11

⁸³⁰ “Such organizations are able to obtain operating capital through a number of legal channels but their activities must be charitable in nature” Mei Dean-E, *A Few Thoughts to Commemorate the Twentieth Birthday of IT Park Gallery*, 2008. <https://www.itpark.com.tw/aboutus/index/10/en> accessed 27 May 2024

⁸³¹ TONG Chen, “Alternative Spaces Are Still the Best Alternative”, in *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vol. 15, No. 6, November/December 2016, pp. 10-14, p. 14

Wu Mali appears to concur with the importance of not demonizing governmental support and the institutional art system. When asked about the future of art spaces and whether they should remain independent or accept funding and work within the system, she emphasized the need to recognize capitalism and the consequent commodification of art as the true “official system” from which art should depart.

Usually when we talk about the system we too often see it as a rigid thing, but I think Taiwan, having gone through this process of democratization... I think our system is in fact relatively open, if in some areas we feel it's unreasonable or inappropriate, we can voice different opinions, and slowly these views will become policy. Taiwan to me, at least so far, seems to have a positive trend in development, so we should refer to the bigger problem. The “system” we are referring to is not the official system of government, but the entire capitalist neoliberal trend.⁸³²

The commercialization engulfing the Taiwanese contemporary art world is mostly evident in the rise of large art fairs, frequently held in luxury hotels. Notable examples include the Taipei Dangdai Art Fair (*Taipei dangdai yishu bolanhui* 台北當代藝術博覽會) and the ONE ART Taipei (*Yishu Taipei* 藝術台北). The choice of exclusive venues reflects a disheartening characteristic of the current approach to art. While art has become a favored investment channel, particularly in the Chinese market, however, such interest in fine arts is often driven by the desire to possess status-symbol objects rather than a genuine appreciation for art.⁸³³ As a result, art investments are not accompanied by a deep understanding or knowledge of art history and art in general. If investments in the fine arts field could potentially foster the development of art, and finance the practices of young, emerging artists, the fact that such investments are not driven by artistic sensibility or intelligence leads to the emergence of a “middle-class” taste. As art critic Xie Dongshan (謝東山) explains: “In a capitalist society, the enemy of avant-garde art is middle-class culture. Although it can save the tradition of culture from collapsing, the attitude of the middle class towards culture is either overly pious or indiscriminately accepting.”⁸³⁴ In the case of independent art, due to this fact, it is unlikely to benefit

⁸³² WU Mali, Conference *Space as Response: Taiwan Perspectives After the 1980s* [*Kong jian zuowei yizhong huiying: 1980 hou de Taiwan jingyan* 空間作為一種回應：1980 後的臺灣經驗], held on 2022.08.14 14:30–16:30 at CREATORS' Space R102 Coworking Space, Speakers: John TAIN, WU Mali, CHENG Mei-Ya, Amy CHENG <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZeRYn88pe4>

⁸³³ “an artwork is purchased both as a safe-haven asset, that is, an asset that serves as a long-term investment, and for its aesthetic enjoyment, as well as as a symbol of high socio economic status.” Giorgia DE GIAMPAULIS, *Alternative Spaces: una riflessione storico-economica sugli spazi indipendenti dell'arte in Italia*, Master thesis submitted to the Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Faculty of Economics and Management of Arts and Cultural Activities, 2020, p. 24

⁸³⁴ “在資本主義社會裡，前衛藝術的敵人是中產文化，它虽能使文化的传统免于溃散，但中产阶级对文化的态度不是过度虔诚，就是毫不加区分地接受。” XIE Dongshan 謝東山 (2001), Cited in YAO Juichung 姚瑞中，

from market investment due to its niche appeal and lack of commercial value. As Lu Carol Yinghua argues, the commodification of art “leaves little room for the *undefinable, uncategorizable, or outcast.*”⁸³⁵

The commodification of art, the consequent emergence of a middle-class culture, combined with the market’s and masses’ scarce interest in independent art, give rise to a catastrophic scenario, as described by Lu:

In the precarious fights for their survival, these self-organized initiatives and the individual systems that are parallel to the dominant social and artistic ones, face the frequent dangers of being drowned out by noises and sounds coming from the majority and a generally accepted ignorance.⁸³⁶

Moreover, it is important to note that the commercialization of art extends beyond market trends, fundamentally altering the entire functioning mechanism of the art world. All dynamics regulating the art world, including the relationships among various actors, have been adapted to serve commercial purposes.

The way artists and curators work and relate to each other has been largely changed by the transformation of the art world and has become much more business-like and project-based. We work by commission and assignment, prompted by invitations to write up proposals and produce work responding to a certain exhibition theme, venue specificities, sizes of art fair booths, budgets, deadlines, and the sensitivity of audiences. Our practices are constantly mobilized and shaped, defined and confined by external forces and conditions. Artists and curators, artists and gallerists, independent curators and institutions, biennial and art fair founders, critics and art publishers, and conference organizers form a kind of supplier and buyer relationship that gives rise to a hierarchy of power. Art, a highly personal enterprise, has fallen victim to the paradigm of an industry.⁸³⁷

It is alarming to note that capitalism has not only influenced the commercialization of artworks, which should be within its domain, but has also precipitated a complete upheaval in the creative process itself, fundamentally altering the way artists create, interact with each other, and engage with the various actors within the system.

Installation art in Taiwan. Since 1991-2001 [Taiwan zhuangzhi yishu 台灣裝置藝術], Taipei: Muma wenhua shiye gongsi, 2002, p. 435

⁸³⁵ LU Carol Yinghua, “Little Movements” in *Yishu: Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art*, vol. 9, no. 5, 2010.9-10, pp. 86-100, pp. 94-95

⁸³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 100

⁸³⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 88-89

Between the political and ideological pressures, the burden of *representing* specific narratives imposed by institutional platforms, and the “voracious appetite of the art system to commodify everything from the marginalized to the younger generation,”⁸³⁸ art today finds itself caught between many opposing dark forces. In this disheartening context of contemporary art, the pressing question arises: “How to exist then, without being reduced and abstracted into mere *representations* and *commodities*?”⁸³⁹

Despite being affected by the official commodifying system, alternative art can partially offer a way out of it. Firstly, due to their complex relationship with external funding, independent art spaces have developed the remarkable ability to network and support each other⁸⁴⁰, adhering to a “philosophy of self-reliance”⁸⁴¹ that somehow discards art from commercial purposes. Moreover, independent art spaces enable artists to be *self-produced*, *self-organized*, and *autonomous* both logistically and artistically.⁸⁴² This autonomy frees artistic creation from the risk of being subjugated to political and ideological influences.

By saving artists from political influences and commercial slavery, the alternative artworld positions itself as a neutral field to do art, ready to embrace new ideas and practices, to quickly adapt to social changes, and to safeguard the freedom of experimenting and making mistakes, thus fostering innovation. For all these reasons, a country’s independent artworld stands as an extremely fascinating area of study, as well as one of the most valuable lenses to comprehend the country itself.

⁸³⁸ Ibid. p. 95

⁸³⁹ Ibidem.

⁸⁴⁰ “Non-profits or alternative spaces are in even greater need of borrowing resources from one another and sharing experiences in order to ultimately eradicate any speculative aspects within the organization.” TONG Chen, “Alternative Spaces Are Still the Best Alternative”, in *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vol. 15, No. 6, November/December 2016, pp. 10-14, p. 13

⁸⁴¹ CHEN Jens & CHEN Anita, *Mapping Taiwan’s Creative Hubs: Searching for Taiwan’s Creative Context*, Taipei: British Council, Taipei Culture Foundation-Songshan Culture & Creative Park, 2016, p. 49 <https://www.britishcouncil.org.tw/en/2016creativehub>

⁸⁴² “As more and more institutions surface within the art industry, more and more artists share a desire to be self-produced, self-organized, and, more importantly, to create their own individual systems that can be autonomous logistically and artistically.” LU Carol Yinghua, “Little Movements” in *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, vol. 9, no. 5, 2010.9-10, pp. 86-100, p. 94

Conclusions

The ‘avant-garde,’ [...]is not merely a provocation in the critical thinking of anti-system, anti-tradition, anti-mainstream, anti-authority and anti-commercialism. Its kernel desire is actually to fulfill the ‘self-enlightenment’ characterized by a *questioning, challenging* posture and inexhaustible *proactive* practice. [...]The ‘self enlightenment’ has to be *experimental*, dancing to its tune, and thirsty for knowledge, rather than relying on and believing in authority and rigid matrix, insofar as to construct new perspectives and relations.⁸⁴³

This final chapter of the thesis explored the fascinating *reticulum* consisting of small artist-run studios, independent galleries, hybrid spaces of all sorts, and even entire neighborhoods, that exists and operates *underneath* the mainstream world of Taiwanese institutional art. Such dense netting, primarily inhabited by young people, and in constant evolution, is characterized not only by high artistic quality, but also by strong friendships, vibrant social interactions, and profound discourses, thus deeply influencing the social fabric of the country.

For a long time, in the common perception, the terms “independent art,” “alternative art” or even more “underground art,” have been associated with a notion of dangerous subversion of the system. Such art has been accused of hindering the artistic careers of its practitioners, aiming to dismantle the “corrupted” artworld, or even of being an “adolescent” phase of art, relegated to young and inexperienced artists. The Taiwanese case serves as an exemplary model to overturn such judgments. Indeed, in Taiwan, independent art has consistently defended itself against these negative labels, producing renowned artists and gaining increasing influence and freedom of action within the chessboard of Taiwanese art world. Intrinsically fascinating, independent art possesses the power to *inspire*. Notably, its methods and aesthetics are often adopted by higher levels, including museums and institutional art. Far from dichotomous conflicts with art institutions, the international participation of independent spaces and the emergence of prominent artists from these *grassroots* environments testify to how independent art in Taiwan has successfully integrated the strengths of both worlds.

Engaging with Taiwan’s independent art world, even through a casual visit to some of its spaces, offers an *unfiltered* and more *authentic* perspective on the country’s art and, by extension, the country itself. From the very first moments, these independent art spaces reveal the nature of people,

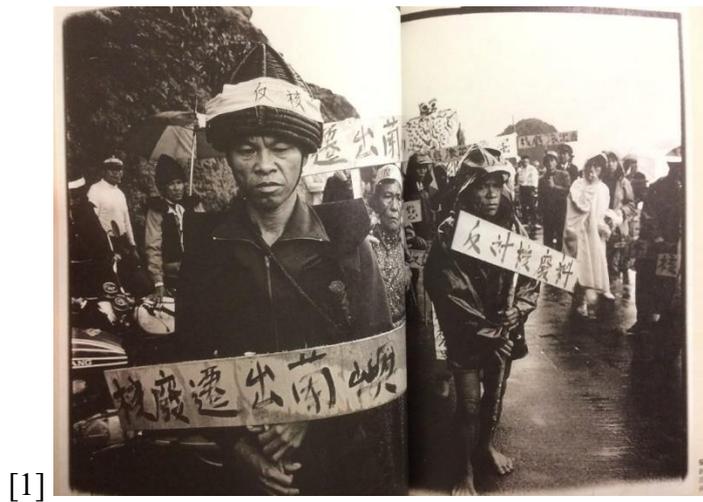
⁸⁴³ WANG Jun-Jieh & HUANG Chien-Hung (Eds), *The wild eighties: dawn of a transdisciplinary Taiwan [Kuang ba ling: kua lingyu linguang chuxian de shidai 狂八〇：跨領域靈光出現的時代]*, Taipei: Taipei National University of the Arts, 2023, p. 15. Emphasis is mine.

their way of communicating and relating to each other, their vision of *how to do art*, and even *how to live life*. This is a privilege that clearly the high culture approach cannot provide. The fact that its spaces arise *spontaneously* and do not conform to a higher will makes them inherently *genuine, free, and truthful*. Consequently, independent art spaces stand as *unbiased, non-fallacious* tools for understanding Taiwan.

Free from the formalities and the slow negotiation processes typical of large museums, these smaller artistic initiatives – or “weak signs”⁸⁴⁴ as Carol Yinghua Lu interestingly defines them – are more *instinctive* and *direct*. As a result, if examined retrospectively, the exhibitions of small independent spaces, along with their operational and structural changes, can function as *seismographs* of social changes throughout history. In this sense, bottom-up signals might be considered *weak* in the sense of being smaller, more ethereal in nature, and more “fragile.” However, when the right key of interpretation is found, they are definitely more *clear*. It is not the aim of this thesis to assert that a comprehensive understanding of the Taiwanese country can be achieved solely through the study of its independent artistic practices and social aggregation habits. Nevertheless, what is certain is that due to its unfiltered nature, independent art serves beyond any doubt, and at every moment, as a *mirror* of contemporary society; and for a country that we still struggle to understand, it is certainly fascinating to start right from this point.

⁸⁴⁴ LU Carol Yinghua, “Little Movements” in *Yishu: Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art*, vol. 9, no. 5, September-October 2010, pp. 86-100, p. 100

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[1]

Fig. 1. *Exorcizing the Evil Spirits on Orchid Island (Quzhu lanyu de e ling 驅逐蘭嶼的惡靈)*, Wang Mo-lin (王墨林), Chou Yih Chang's (周逸昌), 9 february 1988, performance, action theater, Orchid Island. Photography: Pan Xiaoxia 潘小俠.

Source: <https://soundtraces.tw/politic-society/王墨林發起第一場行動劇場「驅逐蘭嶼的惡靈」/> accessed 21 May 2025



[2]

Fig. 2. Exhibition view of “Living Clay” (*Xirang 息壤*), organized by Chen Chieh-jen 陳界仁 and held in 1986 in Zhongxiao East Rd (Taipei). Photo by Kao Chung-li.

Source: https://www.tfam.museum/Exhibition/Exhibition_Special.aspx?id=718&ddlLang=en-us accessed 26 may 2024



[3]

Fig. 3. *Cremating Ritual (Huohua yishi 火化儀式)*, Lee Ming-sheng 李銘盛 solo exhibition, 1991, IT PARK.

Source: IT PARK <https://www.itpark.com.tw/exhibition/data/155> accessed 27 May 2024



[4]

Fig. 4. “Kaohsiung’s Contemporary Meets Taipei’s Local” (*Gaoxiung de dangdai peishang taibei de bentu* 高雄的當代碰上台北的本土), newspaper clipping written by CHANG Hui-Ju (張慧如) in 1992 (estimated).

Source: <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/up-art-gallery-archive--locality-by-space-2/object/kaohsiungs-contemporary-meets-taipeis-local-newspaper-clipping/sort/title-asc> accessed 27 may 2024



[5]

Fig. 5. Bamboo Curtain Studio’s tea room, internal view.

Source: <https://www.transartists.org/en/air/bamboo-curtain-studio> accessed 27 may 2024



[6]



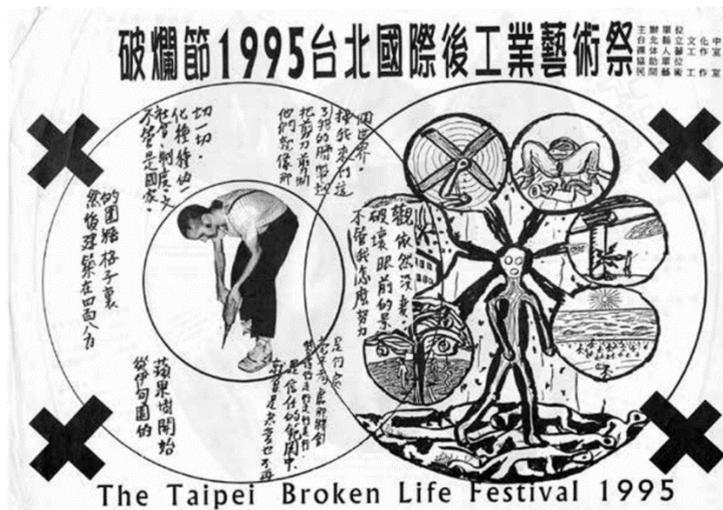
[7]

Fig. 6. Taipei Broken Life Festival (*Polan shenghuo jie* 破爛生活節) flyer, drawn by Wu Chung-wei 吳中煒, 1994. Courtesy of Yao Jui-chung.

Source: <https://soundtraces.tw/space-performance/破爛生活節/> accessed 28 May 2024

Fig. 7. A giant balloon puppet flying at Taipei Breaking Sky Festival, (*kongzhong polan jie* 空中破裂節), 1995, Courtesy of Yao Jui-chung.

Source: WEI Yu, “Waste, Noise, and Local Art Exhibitions”, in *Yishu: Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art*, vol.18, no. 2, 2019, pp. 68-91, p. 82



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Fig. 8. Taipei International Post Industrial Arts Festival (*Taibei guoji hou gongye yishu ji* 台北國際後工業藝術祭) flyer, 1995. Courtesy of Wei Yu.

Source: WEI Yu, “Waste, Noise, and Local Art Exhibitions”, in *Yishu: Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art*, vol.18, no. 2, 2019, pp. 68-91, p. 83



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Fig. 9. Fig. 9. Z.S.L.O's (*Ling yu shengyin jiefang zuzhi* 零與聲音解放組織) performance at Taipei International Post-Industrial Arts Festival (*Taipei guoji hou gongye yishu ji* 台北國際後工業藝術祭), 1995. Courtesy of Yao Jui-chung.

Source: WEI Yu, "Waste, Noise, and Local Art Exhibitions", in *Yishu: Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art*, vol.18, no. 2, 2019, pp. 68-91, p. 85



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Fig. 10. *Art as Environment: A Cultural Action at the Plum Tree Creek* (*Shu mei keng xi huanjing Yishu Xingdong* 樹梅坑溪環境藝術行動), Wu Mali in collaboration with Bamboo Curtain Studio, 2011-2012 edition. Image courtesy of Bamboo Curtain Studio.

Source: <http://eco-publicart.org/art-as-environment-a-cultural-action-at-the-plum-tree-creek/> accessed 28 May 2024

Fig. 11. "眠夢 *bīn-bāng*" performance and 'creative dialogue' (*chuangzuo duitan* 創作對談) practice, Dawn Dance Theater association (*Richu Shenti Juchang* 日出身體劇場), Taichung, October 2022.

Source: @dawndancetheater Instagram profile.



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Fig. 12. Preparations for the collective exhibition “Super daydreaming” (*chao meng* 超夢), held at Carp Gallery (*Liyu* 鯉魚) in October-November 2022. Participating artists: Lee Yenjung (李彥蓉), Hsieh Lu-cheng (謝律丞), Tch'en Pai-rui (陳柏叡), Lee Jyun-yi (李俊熠), Art Naming 奇能.
Source: @carp_gallery Instagram profile.

Fig. 13. *Super daydreaming* (*chao meng* 超夢), performance, Art Naming 奇能, performed at Carp Gallery (*Liyu* 鯉魚) on the 22nd October 2022.
Photo by Sara Carfagnini.



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Fig. 14. Poster of z I N E (*Shenshe* 神社) Art Festival, held in September 2023 at Venue (*shidi* 濕地), Taipei.

Source: Venue Official Website <http://www.venue.tw/index.php/story/> accessed 30 May 2024



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Fig. 15. Pongding (*peng ding* 朋丁), internal view.

Source: <https://champ-magazine.com/travel/taiwan/taipei/pon-ding/> accessed 30 May 2024

Fig. 16. Fleet Street Coffee (*Jiandui jie kafei* 艦隊街咖啡), internal view.

Source: @fleetstreet.coffee Instagram profile.



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Fig. 17. Treasure Hill Artist Village (*Baozang yan Yishu cun* 寶藏巖藝術村), external view.

Source: <https://neocha.com/magazine/treasure-hill-artist-village/> accessed 30 May 2024



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Fig. 18. Islands Art Park (*Qundao yishu yuanqu* 群島藝術園區) artistic residence, internal view.
Source: Islands Art Park official website <https://www.islands.tw/about-us> accessed 1 June 2024

Fig. 19. Islands Art Park (*Qundao yishu yuanqu* 群島藝術園區) during the residency period of Lee Yi-peng (李奕芃), founder of Carp Gallery (*Liyu* 鯉魚) and YAHABA International Residency for the Arts in Taiwan (*YAHABA Taiwan guoji Yishu cun* 台灣國際藝術村).

Source: @islands_art Instagram profile.



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Fig. 20. Art Stock 20 (*Taizhong ershi hao cangku* 台中二十號倉庫) artistic residence. External view.

Source: Cultural Heritage Department of Taichung City website <https://www.tchac.taichung.gov.tw/historybuilding?uid=34&pid=233> accessed 1 June 2024



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Fig. 21. *Fake* (*Weizhuang* 偽裝), Wu Mali 吳瑪俐, 1994, installation, wooden construction and text, dimensions variable, TFAM basement, B04 room.

Source: McINTYRE Sophie, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, p. 154

Fig. 22. *Taipei Fine Arts Motel*, Wu Mali 吳瑪俐, 1996, performance/action.

Source: McINTYRE Sophie, *Imagining Taiwan: The Role of Art in Taiwan's Quest for Identity (1987-2010)*, Leiden: BRILL, 2018, p. 153



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Fig. 23. “Chroma: A Derek Jarman Project” (*Sedui: Jia Man jihua* 色度：賈曼計畫), Taiwan Sound Lab (*Taiwan shengxiang shiyan shi* 臺灣聲響實驗室), 2020, VR video work, Taiwan Contemporary Culture Lab.

Source: <https://clab.org.tw/news/tsl1230/> accessed 2 June 2024

Conclusions

In accordance with Hsiao A-chin's assertion that "an *independent country* [...] must have an *independent literature*,"⁸⁴⁵ this thesis offers its own adaptation by demonstrating how "an independent country must have an *independent art*." Clarifying this concept, the thesis interprets 'independent country' not strictly in a political sense but rather as a territory that has achieved a mature social structure, and possesses a distinctive identity and a personality strong enough to discern it from other regions. Such "independence" in the artistic domain is traceable in unrestricted expression reflecting a unique sensitivity and character. In other words, the production of *free* and *innovative* art, which spontaneously mirrors both the individual sensitivity of the artist and, where possible, the collective sentiment of society, serves as an indicator of both artistic and broader societal maturity. Independent art spaces symbolize various aspects of societal development: they reflect the capacity for establishing networks and relationships, they act as sites of *resistance* against official systems that impose prescribed norms, and they represent a desire for *self-determination* among their participants. These attributes are all hallmarks of a mature society. Based on these premises, this thesis has demonstrated that *Taiwan is mature*, at both artistic and societal levels.

In the first two introductory chapters, this thesis has examined the evolution of Taiwanese art from being a tool for socializing the population into identifying as Chinese, then Japanese, and subsequently Chinese again, before finally establishing a Taiwanese identity. Taking into consideration *modern* and *contemporary* art, initially Taiwanese art was subservient to nationalist propaganda, reflecting the shifting political regimes and their agendas. It later emerged as a key instrument for exercising soft power and cultural diplomacy, facilitating international dialogue in the absence of other platforms for engagement. Recognized by the government as a potent medium to "sculpt" society and promote desirable changes at the local level, Taiwanese art has been subjected to great state protection over recent decades. However, this government patronage often led to compromised artistic quality due to the prioritization of state-driven agendas over creative freedom. Today, after enduring numerous struggles, Taiwanese art is finally *free*.

The contemporary Taiwanese art ecosystem is exceptionally functional due to two primary factors: the vitality of independent art and the productive dialogue between independent art and the official system.

⁸⁴⁵ HSIAU A-chin, *Contemporary Taiwanese Cultural Nationalism*, New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 114

Indeed, the newfound freedom of Taiwanese art is particularly evident in the underground art scene, which flourishes independently of state influence. As demonstrated through the comprehensive analysis in Chapter Four, independent art is exceptionally vibrant in Taiwan, manifesting in numerous independent art spaces, galleries, artist residencies, and hybrid venues. Globally, independent art is recognized as a major driver of artistic innovation and serves as a crucial incubation space for young and emerging artists. In Taiwan, however, independent art plays an even more significant role due to its strong connections with the local community, territory, and environment: this profound integration enables independent art to contribute substantially to social change. Beyond its strong connection to the local environment, independent art, when contextualized on Taiwanese soil, develops distinctive characteristics. These include a pronounced focus on the body, evident in the prominence of theater and performance as favored forms of artistic expression; transdisciplinarity, reflecting the integration of various artistic media; and a strong emphasis on the processual and relational nature of art. These innovative traits contribute to the continual evolution of art discourse in a theoretical sense and artistic practice in a more concrete manner. Additionally, the common practice of utilizing “lost spaces” and the emergence of hybrid spaces and creative neighborhoods lend Taiwanese alternative art a unique *aesthetic and organizational structure*.

It can be argued that the innovative power of underground art, owing to its inherent *freedom, youthfulness, and experimental nature*, is a common feature across all artworlds. What is particularly notable in the Taiwanese context is how this innovation extends also to the higher levels, trespassing the *underground*, up to the *ground floor* and *upper floors* of the whole art system. Indeed, the exhibiting practices and the aesthetics characteristic of the underground art circle now exert influence even at higher levels of the artistic hierarchy, positioning Taiwan as a leader in artistic innovation across the Asian continent. This second point may hold even greater significance. Indeed, if the alternative sphere remains isolated within its own parallel world, it is valid in its own right but has limited capacity to influence the broader mechanisms of the art system. However, if this sphere gains the attention and consideration of the “headquarters”, its power expands tenfold. In Taiwan’s case, the interaction between the alternative and mainstream artworlds, following a protracted period of conflict and mutual misunderstandings, has not only reached a truce but has evolved into a flourishing relationship.

Building on this flourishing relationship, it would now be both regressive and simplistic to regard the cultural nationalism of official art institutions as the primary antagonist of an independent, liberated, and innovative art scene. Although Taiwan’s historical identity complexities and intricate geopolitical context previously subordinated art to ulterior motives, the current challenges no longer

stem from such political issues specific to the island. Instead, the conclusive section of the thesis aimed to demonstrate how Taiwan has matured beyond these concerns and now aligns with global trends. The plagues currently afflicting the contemporary Taiwanese art world coincide with global issues: the primary “official system” from which art should seek to extricate itself remains capitalism and the resultant commodification of art. Indeed, such commodification drives the prioritization of marketability and profitability, often at the expense of artistic integrity and innovation. Consequently, the major risk confronting the underground artistic environment is not governmental interference but rather the dynamics of the art market. The pervasive “will to sell” can sterilize artistic expression, as art becomes increasingly tailored to commercial demands, undermining its potential for genuine expression and experimentation, for social critique, and for being a spontaneous aggregative platform of communication.

This thesis aims to serve as a comprehensive theoretical foundation that can facilitate the development of more specialized studies. It provides an overview of the historical and cultural context, including the key aspects of Taiwanese history and art history (though not examined exhaustively). Additionally, it explores the internal dynamics of the art system, including the roles of museums and governmental cultural policies. The goal was to offer a fairly comprehensive map of the contemporary Taiwanese art scene. By doing so, this thesis potentially opens the door to numerous future research avenues. For instance, a comparative analysis between the Taiwanese independent artistic context and the Italian one would be intriguing. In particular, the Taiwanese context exhibits several points of convergence with the Venetian one.⁸⁴⁶ Furthermore, the theoretical foundation provided by this thesis offers potential avenues for mapping endeavors. It would be logical to extend this study by systematically mapping the various independent art spaces in Taiwan, assessing whether these spaces, historically concentrated in Taipei City, continue to exhibit similar distributions, and documenting emerging artistic activities in southern cities such as Kaohsiung and Tainan, as well as on the east coast.

Fundamentally, undertaking a thesis or any research endeavor inherently involves the process of “drawing conclusions.” Nevertheless, as a tribute to the splendor of Taiwan and a testament to the passion for research, the author prefers to regard these concluding remarks not as an *endpoint* but rather as a *beginning*.

⁸⁴⁶ Among them, the fundamental characteristic of being *island cultures*, the extreme artistic vitality expressed in a *diffuse* structure, and the concept of *resistance*, which in the Taiwanese context manifests in resistance against perceived external threats while in the Venetian one is resistance against over-tourism and the commodification of the city.

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