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This Piece of Land: *Living With Continental Drift*

Life on earth as we know it plays out almost entirely in the Critical Zone, a thin layer of atmosphere, structure and crust that is both subject to and alienated from the deeper dynamics of the universe above and below. In the '*Planet Terrestrial*' section of the 2020 Taipei Biennial: '*You and I Don't Live on the Same Planet*,' artist Yung-Ta Chang expands the dimensions of his practice in an attempt to occupy the envelope of this Critical Zone at the point in space-time described as the Taroko Gorge, a feature that is markedly active in terms of both geology and human ecology, a shuddering territory that resists full description. Taiwan is positioned at the intersection of four tectonic plates, the names of which convey not only their own kind of poetry—Yangtze, Okinawa, Philippine, Sunda—but also the geopolitical, geological and geoaesthetic pressures that have shaped this island, not only through centuries of multicultural civilization but also millennia of prehistoric human and non-human migration, and even mega-years of continental drift. Artists like Yung-Ta Chang stick their fingers into the dirt and open peepholes onto these processes.

One of the most exciting historiographical transitions of our time has been the shift toward media archaeology, and more broadly other rigorous disciplinary deployments of various Foucauldian archaeological methods. But while media art has been extremely well served by this tendency, art history writ large has remained primarily a search for origins. Contemporary art is too often treated as an ahistorical bubble—after postmodernism came our great freedom, our end of history, we were told—largely because of the teleological function of modernism, itself conceived as a rupture from the undifferentiated mass of lumpen-history that came before. An archaeology of contemporary art would read the context of artistic practice (which is to say: exhibitions, institutions, social networks, popular culture, political dynamics) alongside the technical phenomena that are more often (but not exclusively) the province of media archaeology. Jussi Parikka's seminal text, *A Geology of Media* (2015) departs from the metaphor of archaeology, burdened as it is with an unavoidable anthropocentrism, in favour of the longer arc of geological time: to understand media and, in turn, things like media art, we must first understand the environmental and pre-ecological histories of minerals, magnetism, and the rest of it all, not to mention the forms of social organization that have engaged with them.[1] This approach has been especially helpful in the past few years as the materiality of the semiconductor supply chain has entered the popular consciousness: there is a shortage in American pick-up trucks because the demand for semiconductor chips has exceeded the capacity of a bottleneck caused by China's politically fraught acquisition of rare earth minerals from Australia for Taiwanese-managed fab installations. What we know as the stack, the substrate of the technologies around us, is seemingly becoming deeper and more complex by the day.

We read the stack through the imperfect device of the core sample. I would like to propose a geology of the contemporary that drills down into layers of social and cultural accumulation, human history, ecological webs, and prehistoric geological movements. Artistic practice is exciting now in part because it is both subject and object of this set of techniques: as much as we can read the cultural, material and geological substrates of the contemporary art artefact, artists today are equally concerned with performing this analysis on the material that makes up their references and media. And it's not only art: the past decade has seen in popular discourse the rise of a phrase that I find both meaningful and striking: rather than the formulations of the "People's Republic of China" or "Taiwan", many interlocutors speak instead of "this piece of land" and in doing so sidestep not only questions of sovereignty but also older and thornier problems of ownership and naming all together. When Yung-Ta Chang extracts his data-based core samples from the substrate of Taroko, he passes through perhaps a dozen layers of history and prehistory, turning a microscope on this place—this

piece of land. In the following, I will attempt to contextualize the work of a series of artists and curators, as both a series of media-geological core samples from a specific time and place, and as media geologists performing their own excavations of this same time and place. Some artists focus on a particular cultural stratum, others on the accumulation of environmental meaning, and still others on contemporary social representation or participation, but I believe that all demonstrate an awareness of and often actively participate in the discourse framed by "this piece of land."

There is, of course, an ideological dimension to this vocabulary: in tracing a path to the land, this narrative is intended to embrace a history for Taiwan distinct from that of China. Leaving aside these arguably simplistic political implications, I will focus on the sometimes-surprising lessons of indigenous knowledge, ecological activism, and decolonial practice that result from this bundle of positions and ideas. As much as the political history of greater China has had a massive effect on civilization on 'this piece of land', after all, there are always older and parallel histories that function in different ways, it is this diversity of narratives that gives shape to the open understanding of the present that we require. These layers are infinite and distinguishing between them is a fool's errand akin to calculating the perimeter of an infinite fractal curve. But we can, if permitted, approach our task in broad strokes: we can look past the contemporary political condition into a series of colonial layers, from the Republican Chinese migration to the Japanese industrial occupation, and further from there to the Qing Chinese cultural sphere, to the quasi-independent Ming kingdom of Koxinga, to the Dutch, to the Portuguese, and to the Spanish. Lumping all of these together in the name of finding some kind of unity in contemporary society, we will find layers of approximately equivalent thickness in indigenous culture, in the ecology of the island, and in the geological base of this inquiry.

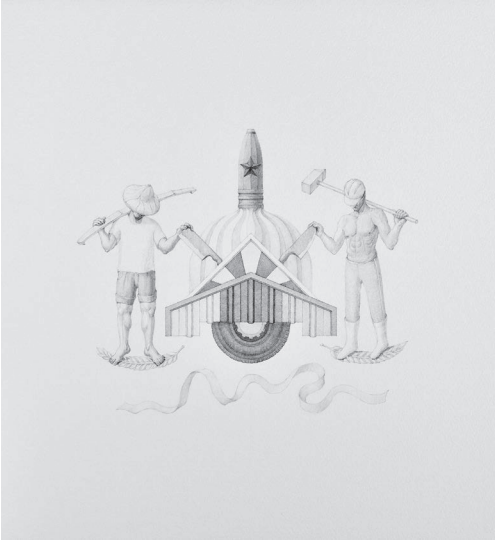
It is important to note that the emphasis on Taiwanese history and identity in the discourse of 'this piece of land' does not in any way discount the significance of Chinese heritage and tradition, but it does shift this into a conversation about regionalisms and regional cosmopolitanisms. China has never been a unitary entity, after all, but rather a constellation of social technologies, regional cultures, and competing suzerainties, a beautifully complex thing that can only ever be understood through highly contested boundaries—and is probably best understood through these very contests. While tensions between *waishengren* (Mandarin-speaking ethnic-Han from parts of China outside of the south-eastern coast, often affiliated with military or other organs of the Republican government) and *benshengren* (Taiwanese Hokkien-speaking ethnic-Han or Hakka, tracing their arrival to Taiwan to dates prior to the twentieth century) are largely a thing of the past, the concept of Chinese tradition in Taiwan—from food to spirituality to architecture—remains split between these two camps. But the picture should be even more complex: the earliest mass of Han Chinese settlers in Taiwan arrived essentially as slave labour for Dutch settlements in the early seventeenth century, and many of what are now thought of as staple crops and common wild plants across the island were localized via feedback loops through Dutch and Portuguese colonial networks linking Jakarta, Fujian and Japan.

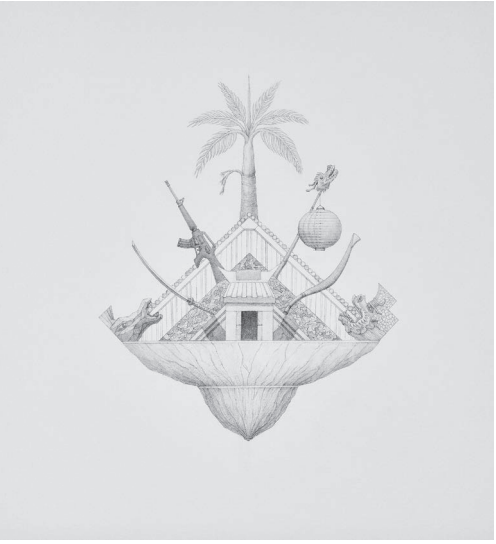
These tensions—the futile quest for a single origin, and the celebration of a heritage only vaguely related to place (as if there is any other sort)—have made for fertile ground in contemporary art; there is a strong recent tradition of local histories being written outside the received textbook narratives. Two seemingly contradictory trends were forged in the crucible of the last days of martial law in the 1980s. One is evident in the story of Hung Tung, an outsider artist from a rural village who began painting in 1970 at the age of fifty and unexpectedly captured the imagination of the cultural establishment with his intricate and seemingly coded compositions of faces, crop plants, and

spiralling geometric patterns. The success he found in Taiwanese society reflects an undercurrent of interest in what was then referred to as "native" culture, the soup of folk aesthetics and popular culture drawn primarily from regional Chinese heritage as it existed prior to 1945. The other direction that became evident in the 1980s is tied to artists like Wu Tien-chang and Yang Maolin, both of whom were founding members of the 101 Painting Society. Stylistically interested in the bombastic painting that characterized that moment in the international art scene, they turned a critical eye on the political apparatus. Wu, in particular, focused (and continues to focus) on the 1950s as the crucial decade during which Taiwanese culture experienced its last major shift. Continuity or rupture: identity is somehow integrated between these poles.

LAYERS OF HISTORY:
THE COLONIAL, THE INDIGENOUS, THE ECOLOGICAL, THE GEOLOGICAL

It is epistemologically questionable to lump together every colonial project under a single banner but, taking the long view of history, these various incursions and reconstructions collectively amount to little more than a blink of the geological eye. This affective sense of historical compression comes across in Jao Chia-En's work with the symbolic vocabularies of empire: beginning in 2012, he sketched coats of arms in seemingly endless configurations, collapsing together not only the many layers of Taiwan's own colonial agglomerations, from the twentieth century all the way back to the seventeenth, but an assortment of other global codes that may or may not be directly related to the historical construction of his own political subjectivity as an artist in his time and place—because where, after all, is this line properly drawn? In what sense is Pax Hollandica any more or less relevant to contemporary life than Black British cinema? Jao's series reached its apogee in 2016 with *Arms No. 31*, a hanging textile work that was highly visible in an important exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum: here he focuses his energies, patchworking together no fewer than seventy-five different types of cloth in order to unify the disparate components of Taiwan as he sees it, through the lens of a handful of educational institutions, governmental organs, and corporations.





The brilliance of Jao's project lies not in trying to make this definition monolithic, but rather in allowing all of his smaller preceding *Arms* (2012–14) to coexist alongside this one. This parallelism becomes the key to *A Question of Balance* (2017–18), a series of drawings in watercolour inspired by historical anecdotes in which a sacred site is replaced with the architecture of another colonizer. In each image, a bald man in shorts carries a long bamboo pole over his shoulders, balancing a series of symbolic objects on the two sides. To take one example: on the left, "girls in hot springs in Beitou, Taipei photographed by Jack Birns in 1949" and "sulfur" and, on the right "illustration of sulfuric acid (H2SO4) extraction" and "American bald eagle." The dependencies are intricate and the stories are compelling; Jao's draftsmanship turns the layers of colonial experience into a puzzle of aesthetics.

This dynamic also works in reverse. Item Idem, a French-born artist based in Taipei, has been engaged with various rituals associated with Chinese culture for around a decade, first producing in collaboration with Hangzhou artist Cheng Ran the video, *Joss* (2013). In that single-channel work paper offerings of the sort typically burned for the departed across the Chinese diaspora are lit up with fireworks, with a tight framing of the branded goods—particularly luxury products—currently popular within that traditional genre. The system of paper offerings has become an ongoing obsession for Item Idem, one that has led him not only deeper into research around that industry but also into adjacent spaces, including how the Hungry Ghost Festival and other spiritual holidays are celebrated along regional lines in China, in Taiwan, and elsewhere in the diaspora. In one such work, *Cold Single* (2019), shot with Mel Hsieh, the artists create a haunting portrait of the embodied psychology behind the ritual known as "Bombing Handan," during which the male youth of Taitung temporarily take on the spirit of a deity as onlookers fire fireworks at their mostly naked bodies. Then logic breaks the mould: in *NUII* (2017), Item Idem appropriates the fire rituals of offering culture and turns them on global political populism in the form of effigies of Trumpian politicians. Even as regional and sub-regional identities can be overdetermined by an absurdly complex matrix of global threads, the periphery inevitably feeds back into the maelstrom.

But the more radical (and arguably more needed) gesture in unearthing hidden strata of political aesthetics in Taiwan is tied to the indigenous experience—to the successive waves of displacement and cultural genocide to which the people who preceded and continued to live alongside the colonizers, from the Spanish to the current regime. Aboriginal traditions often appear rootless, because the languages and, in many cases, people who formed them have been very nearly wiped from the historical diagram. Indigenous inhabitants of the western plains, the area first settled by later arrivals, were almost immediately conscripted and miscegenated out of existence, continuing on now as little more than a genetic pattern said to be nearly universal across the Taiwanese population. Mountain tribes fared marginally better, retaining more distinct identities but witnessing forced resettlement, peaking but neither beginning nor concluding during Japanese rule. There is no definitive or in-depth account of these movements. In contemporary art today there is an active and uncontroversial mandate to include artists of indigenous heritage, and to engage with this history on a conceptual level. The first thread is evident in events like Pulima, an art festival active since 2012 that spans contemporary and performing arts with a particular emphasis on performance and liveness. Its curatorial discourses are rigorous and globally aware, engaging with field study research programs and site-specific presentations without focusing exclusively or even explicitly on traditional aesthetics. The other thread might be found in projects in Lab Kill Lab, a fascinating short-term workshop-cum-exhibition series convened by artist Shu Lea Cheang at C-Lab at the end of 2020. Cheang invited several dozen interlocutors—Taiwanese, indigenous and international—to build refreshed systems of knowledge and experience through a networked laboratory approach to biology, mythology, and the everyday.

This human ecology is new; an ecology of the non-human sort—in curatorial and critical modes of speech, and in more popular forms of literary and cinematic culture—has been around for significantly longer. But while an understanding of nature, wilderness, the web of life, and conservation is established and more or less universal, there has been a more recent backdoor insertion of the ecological into the longer conversation of heritage in Taiwan. The 2020 Taiwan Biennial, curated by artist Yao Jui-Chung, unfolds in parallel through the depressing bureaucratic architecture of the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts and the invigorating catalogue of the exhibition, printed in the format of a traditional stitch-bound album with an embroidered silk cover. Titled '*Subzoology*,' Yao's Biennial casts the problem of ecology as one or many mythological beasts, positioning the animal as the perfect 'Other' of contemporary art. As one ecological case study after another fills the scholarly leaves of the folio catalogue, one senses again the diad of continuity and rupture playing out again, with indigenous bioart occupying the localist outsider art pole and ecological mythology sitting alongside the autopsy of republican politics.

Further down, beneath the colonial, past the indigenous, and below the ecological, one encounters the geological. Familiar as we may be with cultural dispersion and evolutionary shifts, the space-time of the geological is something else entirely, helping make a form of chaotic sense out of the way that names are given to particular pieces of land, and then erasing and rewriting these same chunks of earth. This seismic space is naturally one of the key territories of '*You and I Don't Live on the Same Planet*,' allowing a return to Yung-Ta Chang and his *scape.unseen* series (2020). Two distinct sets of work were included in the Biennial. One, positioned indoors, presented a mashup of data—most of it illegible to the viewer—centred on the readings of a seismometer sensitive enough to read the creaks and wobbles of the exhibition space itself. The second, situated in an indoor-outdoor space, recreated the dynamics of erosion and other geological systems in tall,

thin columns, etching the surfaces of round sheets of rock and essentially turning them into phonograph records, of a sort. This work was produced through a residency that spanned both Taroko Gorge, one of the most geologically active features of Taiwan's north-eastern seismic zone, and GFZ-Potsdam, a major geology laboratory. Su Yu-Hsin took part in the same program, which uniquely positioned cultural differences at the heart of how the geological scale of the earth might begin to be understood. Her installation, *Frame of Reference I-II* (2020), takes the form of a multi-channel video installation drawing from live data feeds and from her personal ethnography of the scientific personnel involved, playing with the illegibility of the information we are told accurately and objectively depicts the world around us. Here is your planetary home, these numbers tell us; can you feel it shifting? Martin Guinard and Bruno Latour's Taipei Biennial fittingly closes with an almost invisible hand-drawn diagram on a liminal wall between two corridors: James Lovelock's *Diagram of Gaia* (1970). Labelled 'The Earth System,' an arrow takes feedback from temperature, water, oxygen, acidity, salinity, and sun. That arrow? "LIFE."

LAND, TRADITION, AND ENVIRONMENT: WRITING THE PRESENT

As a subject of analysis and as a material for artistic practice, land is uniquely exciting because it literally contains all of these layers. History, prehistory, ecology, geology: a core sample, angled downwards at the will of gravity, will come up with a stratified and abstracted picture of where we are now and how we got here. If there is a unique contribution to the discourse of land art from this place and time, it might come from a surprising corner—the *plein air* watercolours of Lin Chuan-Chu, who spends many of his days making sketches or taking photographs of notable geological features along the northern and eastern coasts of Taiwan, completing larger paintings in his rural studio before organizing them into poetic series that depict the same landscape vistas in varying conditions of light, wind, precipitation, and season. His archive of the island's shore, as romantic as it may seem, is not actually a romanticist's vision. Lin has spent his entire life on the land (which may seem a strange statement: few of us, save ship captains and flight attendants, ever really live anywhere else). He worked his family's rice farm until he was nineteen, and, later, as a contemporary artist, replanted an urban construction site intended for a private museum as a rice paddy (*Rice for Thoughts*, 2007). He also studied ink-wash and landscape in China, and positions his practice as a painter within this hallowed tradition, though his intimacy with land would be foreign to the literati class, who preferred to appreciate the labours of agriculture from a distinct remove. Lin's practice is rounded out by a series of performances and photographs of rituals tied to the elemental components of land. Reading his paintings, the relationship between land and history is never straightforward but instead lurches back and forth between sustenance and aesthetic experience.

Adopting this particularly situated approach to the relationship between land and tradition opens up a new window of inquiry, one through which traditions and histories (personal or social) are not tied to particular territories but rather to chunks of earth and stone that are more mobile and less predictable than we might assume, drifting across straits or sliding into the sea at a moment's notice. This is the thrust of Ting Tong Chang's *Betel Nut House, Shansu Bed and Snail Trap* (2020), which was recently awarded the Grand Prize of the Taipei Art Awards. Chang spent several weeks in the mountains teasing out the interactions between the three titular organisms and the human technologies constructed around them. While these relationships are often taken for granted,

assumed to be the product of prehistoric ecological networks or ancient indigenous knowledge, this video makes clear just how marginal and even random many of the decisions linked to the continued existence of life on this planet actually are. A farmer decides to plant one crop over another because the market for the latter has crashed; it has become part of the local ecology, but the wider regional economy no longer has any need for it.

What is new in these approaches to art is not the introduction of an environmental awareness, but rather the genesis of an environmental politics that writes the possibilities of geological time into the ways that art is produced and consumed. Lin Chuan-Chu and Ting Tong Chang are no longer simply professional artists, nor are they activists with a definite and goal-oriented campaign ahead of them. Instead, they make their creative practices available through a broader concern for how we live with each other, what we owe to each other, and what we are to each other, where the collective 'we' shifts from the audience for contemporary art into the agglomeration of rocks, trees, and people who make up our 'piece of land.' Curator Gong Jow-Jiun has spoken about the particular power of working as an artist in a small polity, where aesthetic labour can create shifts in consciousness that quickly exert pressure on political mechanisms. He points to examples like Lai Chun-Piao, whose documentary photographs of rampant logging in the otherworldly forest landscapes of mountainous Nantou, when published in the mainstream media, helped spur the birth of the Forestry Bureau out of the ashes of a state-owned for-profit logging corporation.[2] Participatory aesthetics shifts here from a model in which the artist shakes the floor for her audience to one in which the artist and the audience register the quaking of the earth together as one.

A POLITICS OF SEISMIC ENGAGEMENT

Seismic activity registers on our cultural equipment because it makes geological time instantly legible. As biological beings with finite lifespans, social pressures, and generational traumas, it is naturally difficult to think beyond the here and now, to consider our lives on a planetary scale or to imagine a distant future in which we are little more than forgotten ancestors. And yet seismic logic —the moment of the earthquake—shakes everything into focus. When the innermost layer of our core sample is proven to be unstable, everything else looks like ashes in the wind. This is the drifting of an island further out to sea; this is the fusing of two continents via land bridge; this is the birth of a new islet; this is a mountain that slips and becomes two hills. The poetry of land and sea demands a politics of participatory observation to engage with these seismic shifts, to map the shape of a world yet to come. Practices of cartography will be the next logical step, as artists and writers attempt to document, predict, and ultimately influence where our geoaesthetic fault lines appear, and what shape they might take. Core samples, after all, are not purely objective registers of an external reality, but rather influence the topography of the territory with which they interact. When artists reach downwards into the dirt to feel the tremors of the earth, they have the right and responsibility to shake the world back.

Notes

[1] Jussi Parikka, *A Geology of Media*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2015

[2] Gong Jow-Jiun, '時延與微感覺：懸置於一九八〇年代的兩個未來美學思想命題', *ACT: Art Critic Taiwan*, Vol. 44, October 2010; http://act.tnnua.edu.tw/?p=513&fbclid=IwAR2mBpl9Fv2LH5JSV_GZeKAZ4s9cQjTrB1YKgUR8FqHEGntqOzJFJjmVa1o