ILLUSION OF REALITY A REAL ILLUSION:
AN OVERVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY TAIWANESE ART

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Figure 1: Wang Te-Yu, *No. 27*, installation view. Courtesy of the artist

As we begin this new century, the young generation seems unable to escape from the world of "illusion." Media such as television, computers, films, cartoons, and advertising have replaced "real" life, and even created a life that is more real than real life. These fictitious worlds used by sales and marketing organizations, these beautiful utopias, these dark and violent worlds, these surreal spaces with their revelatory stimulation of the sense organs, have not only provided a means of escaping the real world, but also of satisfying the desires that we cannot fulfill in our present realty. Although we can scarcely avoid choosing ways to escape reality as we try and find our own utopia, in the process of our search, we adopt a kind of temporary paralysis and self-immersion to escape the helplessness of real life.

HAZY UNUSUAL SPACES

Humans need air to live, and cannot survive without it for any length of time, yet it is invisible, colourless, odourless and often intangible. So how can it be utilized in art? It requires a "host" in order to demonstrate its presence, which should be supple and yet able to show tension. When Te-Yu Wang presented her work *No. 27* at the IT Park in Taipei in 1997, she used transparent plastic to make three airbags (fig. 1). She then pumped these bags with air until they filled the exhibition space completely. If the public wanted to enter the exhibition space, they had to stay close to the wall, sandwiched against it, feeling their way along. In keeping with her style, the public was unable to see anything at this exhibition; all they could do was experience the tension, transparency and constriction of the air. If the public is allowed to enter a work in order to experience it, it is not necessary for them to be able to "see" the work. They can go inside the work and play, think and touch, abandoning all the usual protocols and social implications associated

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with visiting an exhibition. The work does not need to reveal any profound meaning or adhere to any particular theory.

It is significant that Te-Yu Wang names her works by assigning numbers to them and that each of her works focuses on a single subject. Looking at one or two pieces, one might not think they are particularly special. But when one takes into account the fact that she has created over forty pieces in the series using this pure and immaterial method, one can see the meaning of the system she is trying to establish. According to her, the use of such scientific methods to organize and structure art is part of a kind of long-term scientific experiment. Only one element is in progress at one time, and these are then slowly developed into a whole system, so we cannot look at each individual piece of work separately; we have to look at the complete process of their development. This is important in looking at contemporary art in general, to filter out transitory modern works in which the primary aim is to comply with style and fashion.

This enables us to understand and research the motivation and intentions which fuel her development, while at the same time avoiding implied meanings and word association from the title, therefore allowing the piece to exist with a degree of purity. Te-Yu feels that works of art should be experienced, and that excessive explanations or theories can restrict the imagination of the audience. This is what people find attractive about installation art. Unless one takes part and witnesses it first hand, it is very difficult to appreciate its unique qualities.

Te-Yu's works have another characteristic: the use of neutral colours, particularly black, white, and "transparent." She believes that "transparency" is another type of colour, but that one must appreciate it through senses other than sight. These colours are not warm or sensual. She uses them as a means of standing back from reality and avoiding points of reference. Through the use of transparency she hints at a world that does not exist.

It cannot be denied that materials have a reality of their own. But they also exist in an environment in which they are in contact with other materials. This type of materialism and the artists who practice it maintain that if the material is not allowed to speak, then all that is created is an artist's reality, undervaluing the unique character of the material. By maintaining the reality of the material, the artist draws attention to its intrinsic nature. This intrinsic nature is related both to the original environment of the material and the relationships within its current context. Only in drawing out the intrinsic nature and originality of a material, through the nature of the materials and the way in which the artist arranges them, is the subject of their installation art established.

In his exhibition *Aura Beyond* (2001), at the Taipei City Fine Art Museum, Howard Chen covered a flat surface with pins to create a huge area of "cold light" (fig. 2). It took ten workmen ten days to cover the marble floor of the gallery with thirty thousand ordinary drawing pins. The points of the drawing pins were all placed neatly facing the door at forty-five degrees, touching the floor and arranged in a large square. On entering, the first thing that the public noticed was a dark circle, since the entrance faced the dark side of the drawing pins. When some members of the public saw this dark circle from the entrance, they immediately turned around and walked out. However, this work was just like eating sugar cane; the public had to go round the area slowly and when they reached a certain angle the reflection of the light bounced off the thousands of drawing pins, causing them to twinkle and shimmer like a silvery wave. Furthermore, the sharp points of the drawing pins created a sense of danger, which is another important element of this work. The audience seemed to want to approach the drawing pins to see if they really were ordinary pins like
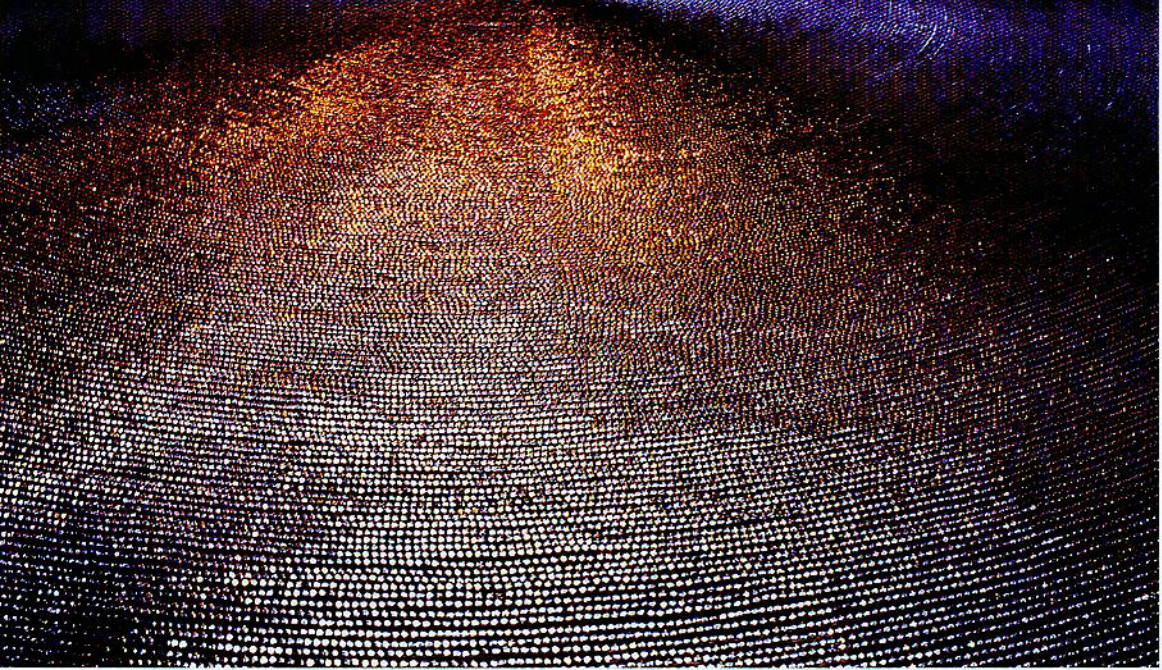
Figure 2: Howard Chen, *The Way of Round Existence*, 2002, 1000 x 1000 cm. Courtesy of Yao Jui-chung

the ones that we use every day, but they kept their distance behind an invisible barrier. There is a Chinese saying: "You can look from afar but you should not treat with disrespect."

Chen's hallmark has become "creating something large from small individual components." His many hours of hard work arranging the numerous drawing pins created a visual space that resembled a field. Maybe in using industrial material such as drawing pins he is giving continuity to the practice from the agricultural age of sowing seedlings by hand, cherishing the memory of a bygone era. Or perhaps he is evoking the current destruction of the natural environment. When we see the wave of light, like the light that shines off the sea, the drawing pins are no longer merely drawing pins. What we perceive is no longer merely the objects in front of us; everything has already become an abstract concept that exists beyond the original materials.

Naturally, works of this kind also have aesthetic aspirations. If we look at them from the view of "suprematism" then, just like the painting *Black on Black* by Kasimir Malevich, they reject "meaning" and reproduction for the sake of visual indulgence and are certainly not at the service of any external objects. Their main purpose is art for art's sake. But Chen's use of ready-made objects to break out of his painted grid-lines is probably not an attempt to uphold this theory. His complete adaptation of handicraft processes and their replacement with a type of mechanical man-made process precludes chance and requires no thought or skill. The whole project has been planned in advance and is just a question of putting everything in the right place. The only difficult challenge lies in laying down adequate plans to achieve the required result. This mode of production is essentially the same as the production-method of industrial civilizations; both are detached from the hard physical work and produce a feeling of alienation. What is different is that Chen uses this artificial sowing to arouse people's feelings towards the environment. The natural environment can never be replaced, no matter how hard we try.

BESTIALITY, HUMANITY, DEITY

Photography is a means of reproducing reality. Its ability to mimic real life and capture movement has become a powerful tool for many artists. It has also become a potent means of depicting female beauty. In recent years Lu-Lu Hou has used photography to subvert society's popularly held values about women and the effect that these have on the appearance of females. Her work *Peek-a-Boo* (1996) consists of five black-and-white photos (fig. 3). The artist herself is the protagonist in the photographs, but her face is not visible; only her skirt and the top half

of her body is shown. The first photograph reveals the hem of a skirt; in the second, we see her hand lifting the bottom of her skirt slightly; in the third and fourth there are white downy objects visible from underneath her skirt; and in the fifth, her skirt is almost completely lifted. Only then does the audience realize that the downy objects which they thought were her private parts, are, in actual fact, a bunch of white flowers.

Lu-Lu not only uses humour to create a mood but also poignant self-exposing tactics which give the voyeur the thrill of having committed an illicit act – compensating for the repression and social constraints of real life. So what are Lu-Lu Hou's aims? To put it simply, she is criticizing the way in which we look at things and, in particular, the male view of sexuality. These five photographic stills show a continuous movement resembling an animated series – a comic strip. We can interpret them as a series of visual instructions or see them as a set of images that feature individual movements. Hidden behind this is a "story in images." Using authoritative educational methods, this group of photographs not only questions the power of patriarchy but also criticizes and subverts the use of the female image in Taiwan's contemporary public media.

Figure 3: Lu-Lu Hou, *Peek-a-Boo*, 1996, photographs, 50.8 x 61 cm. Courtesy of the artist

So how does society really view the female body and what are its attitudes? Are they based on "desires of the flesh," "sex appeal," "animal desires," or "lack of desire?" Lu-Lu uses herself as the subject of her work but reverses the traditional roles so as to make the audience feel that they are the subject, as she looks out at them challengingly. By doing this, she not only mocks the superior attitude of men, but also examines, in a very clever way, the difference between the ways that women are seen by others and the ways in which they see themselves.

Chen Cheng-Tsai's *Portraits of Angels* (2001) investigates the subtle psychological changes that take place when "normal" and "disabled" people view each other (fig. 4). Chen led art workshops at the Cultural Education Foundation for the Handicapped in Taipei and was deeply moved by their innocence. He set out to photograph three handicapped people over a period of thirty minutes as they sat awkwardly in front of his camera (in the end he actually photographed twenty people). Before he began photographing them, he established a few conditions: the subjects could not leave their seats, they could not talk to each other, and they had to face the camera. He also asked them to think about certain things in order to make them feel more comfortable in front of the camera. For example, he asked them to think about pleasant things that had happened to them or their family. However, the majority of the subjects forgot about this completely when he began taking the photographs.

While Chen specifically chose the handicapped as the subject of his photographs, he used his subjects to measure the psychological state of the audience on being confronted by an unfamiliar sight. This work was also interesting from an aesthetic point of view. The three photographs were arranged on white walls forming three sides of a square. The bottom of the photographs were slightly higher than the eye-level of the audience, so that they were forced to look up at the work.

Figure 4: Chen Cheng-Tsai, *Portraits of Angels*, video installation, 30 minutes. Courtesy of Yao Jui-Chung

Chen was influenced by the style of Western religious triptychs depicting the Holy Trinity. He applied the "holiness" of that style with the aim of bringing about an investigation into our notions of beautiful/ugly and normal/different. What values are society's morals based on? On what basis are the standards for beauty and ugliness determined? It was not his intention to highlight the unusual appearance of the subjects that he photographed but rather to use the photographs to break the dual relationship of the work and the audience by changing the position of the audience from watchers to those who are being watched.

Human instinct has given way to our faculty of logic. We come across many strange and mechanical facial expressions in perfectly structured forms of life, but when we are faced with different aspects of humanity, do we have nothing to say? On being faced with an absurd or unfavourable situation, perhaps all one can do is ridicule himself or herself and become apathetic. On being faced with a situation in the real world where one has no options, all one can do is escape into a world of cynicism and build a personal "mechanical paradise" that one can dominate.

In *One White One Black* (2000), Peng Hung-Chih used dogs as his subject matter (fig. 5). Why has Peng focused on dogs for so long? The following is taken from the artist's statement about his work:

> There are several reasons why I always use dogs as the main subject of my works. The first is that dogs and people need each other, both materially and psychologically. The second is that we don't really know if the way that dogs behave is natural or whether we have led them to behave in the way that they do. I have seen dogs exhibit so many human traits, jealousy, authority […]. Sometimes I think that civilization has developed to such a degree that people have forgotten how to be people. Perhaps it would be better if we learned how to be dogs.

There are two important additional themes that derive from the symbol of the dog. One is that of the "faithful servant" or the "master and servant" relationship; the other is the use of dogs as a projection of our own bestial nature (fighting over land, stealing food, resorting to flattery and sycophancy). All these selfish traits that are hidden in the darker recesses of human nature are evident in the "cute dogs" that Peng uses in his works. If we compare our own hidden animal nature and the natural behaviour of dogs, we will find that human nature in reality resembles their nature to some extent. By ridiculing dogs, Peng is actually ridiculing human nature.

AN UNREAL IMAGE OF HEAVEN

Shu-Min Lin's piece *Glass Ceiling* (1996) is an installation piece that was created using three-dimensional holograms (fig. 6). What are three-dimensional holograms and what is there effect? In simple terms, they use the latest innovations in laser technology, such as interference to create life-like images of humans – a type of visual hallucination. However, because of the limitations of the technology, the colours are all monochrome as there is no way to reproduce life-like colours. Shu-Min Lin laid the three-dimensional holographic images under glass into the floor of a very ordinary-looking space that appeared, on first sight, to be completely empty. However, upon entering the space and looking at the floor, the public saw a crowd of faces looking up at them. Many people were startled and wondered how there could be people hiding under the floor spying up at them. The three-dimensional holograms reproduced extremely realistically an objective

reality when, in actuality, the images were locked in a flat photographic world – an illusory "heaven" from which they could never escape.

Lin's aim is to use everyday objects to reduce the distance between observation and art and to surprise the audience since the contents are copies of real things. In other words, he aims to substitute original objects with fictitious images and illusions that can never be destroyed. He is highlighting the feeling that all living things, "bodies with souls," are just like these holographic beings that have no inner light. They look life-like but are, in fact, just walking corpses. These beings do not just recreate reality but substitute reality with hyper-reality. This type of hyper-reality only exists in the sense organs. Without our sense organs, we would exist in a dreamlike void. Confronting hyper-reality and the void that results from it was the main reason why he later developed his idea of the "world beyond experience."

In Ku Shih-Yung's exhibition *City of Light*, which was held at the train station in the city of Banqiao, he showed the video *Lightness, the Way to Make You Lighter* (fig. 7). This video used the principle of infinite refraction with mirrors to create a mirror ball in order to examine the cyclical nature of the universe and the philosophy of immaterial and immortal life. In the three and a half minute video, he stands on a grassy plain wearing casual white clothes. From his pocket he takes out a piece of chewing gum, places it in his mouth and begins slowly to blow a white bubble. Surrounded by deafening blowing sounds, the ball gradually grows until it lifts him off the ground and floats into outer space. When the balloon reaches the edge of the universe, it finally explodes, and the debris falls back onto the plain where the artist was originally standing.

This work also shows the phenomenon of "cold detachment" created in society by multimedia, a phenomenon that led to Ku's thoughts on a "potential reality" that supersedes reality. Its characteristic is that as soon as we come up against any misfortune our imprisoned consciousness still cannot access it. It appears that we are our own biggest blind spot; the more we look at ourselves the less clearly we see things. Perhaps it hides some concealed connecting point that
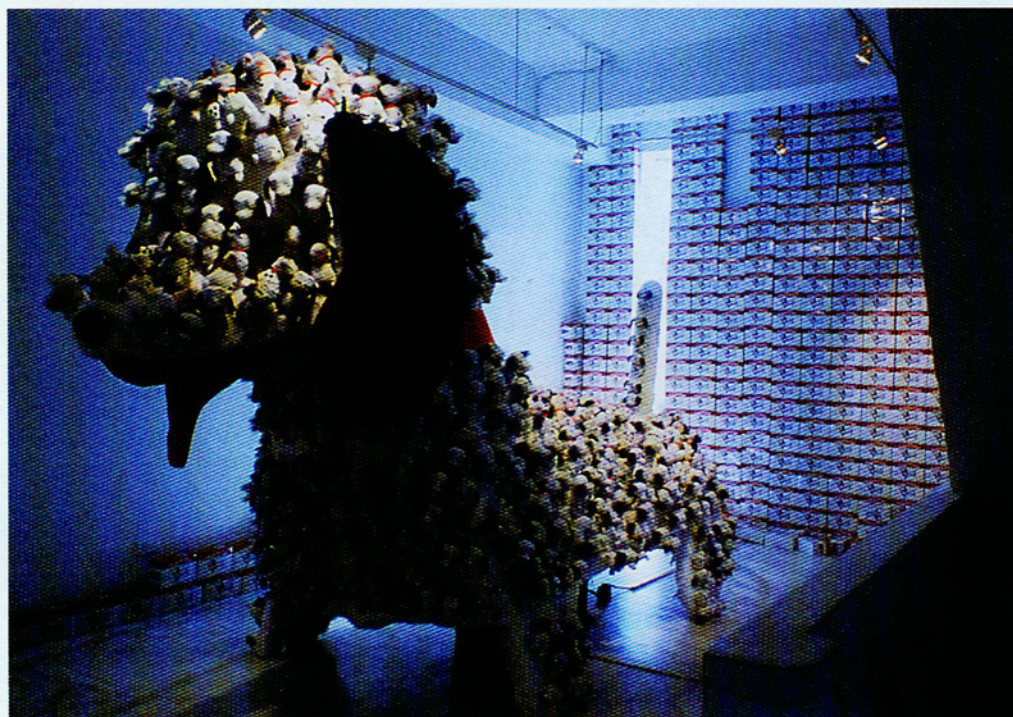

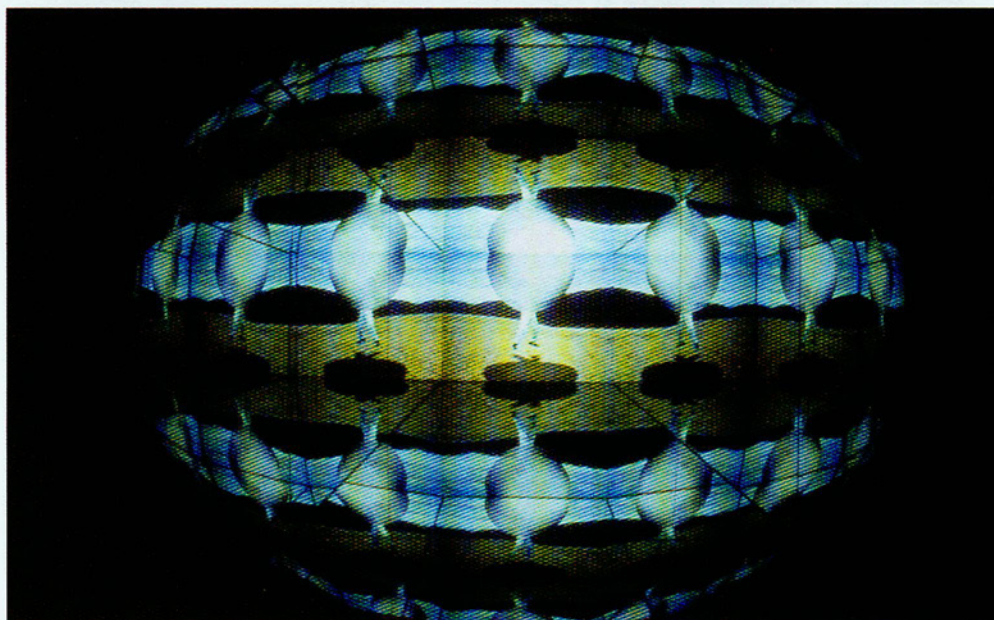Figure 5: Peng Hung-Chih, *Little Danny*, 2001, installation. Courtesy of the artist

Figure 6: (LEFT) Lin Shu-Min, *Glass Ceiling*, 1996, hologram and lights installation, 840 x 480 cm. Courtesy of the artist

Figure 7: (TOP) Ku Shih-Yung, *Lightness, the Way to Make You Lighter*, 2000, video installation. Courtesy of Yao Jui-Chung

we have not yet discovered. In the past, people interacted directly with each other through "warm connections." In the digital age, we face "cold connections." It seems that people are making themselves immaterial through speed. Human civilization has always been developing towards this state of lightness, unlimited by space or time.

Ku's use of light should not be confused with the understanding of "light" that we learn about in physics. It is related to the mental burdens caused by numerous external factors such as society and our conscience. The lack of freedom, and the unhappiness caused by such burdens, force people to find a temporary, illusionary satisfaction in order to avoid facing reality. A kind of "illusionism" that takes the place of our real world and turns it into potential reality. Thus, it seems that in this potential reality lies the foundations for us to exit from heavy reality. Light becomes an important component of potential reality but through what kind of connection point is this light expressed? It appears to have become the focal point in looking at the future and, since the invention of photographic techniques, light seems to have become related to cold. Cold film hides the even colder world. In comparison to the sun's warm and powerful rays, this cold light seems to reflect a different kind of potential world. The cold light that Ku Shih-Yung puts forward essentially hides behind the digital world – the absolute certainty of "0" and "1" and the cold feeling of detachment that accompanies this.

Unlike the negatives in traditional photography which resulted from a combination of optics and chemistry, digital images can be re-arranged. They are not restricted to the instant that the shutter is closed. Any mistake can be corrected. Even people's feelings can be manufactured. Thus, when a digital image appears on the monitor screen, no matter how warm or touching the image hidden behind it is the cold detachment and certainty of the equipment. There is a kind of indescribable distance between truth and reality, an ultra-thin transparent film, and the image slips into our reality as if through a one-sided reflective window (the type used in the interrogation of criminals). While looking through this window precludes any possibility of conversation, it does not reflect reality, nor our dream world; it is an illusory screen through which we will never be able to see clearly. The scenes being enacted on the other side appear to be more real than real life.

Figure 8: Yao Jui-Chung, *Savage Paradise*, 2000, photo installation, 480 x 900 x 500 cm. Courtesy of the artist

My series of works *Heaven* (2001) and *Savage Paradise* (2000) are a collection of recent photographs that were taken all over Taiwan (fig. 8). The aim of the photographs is to show the false, unfamiliar, and cold reality of Taiwan. They can be seen as a modern version of the magnificent traditional landscape painting styles, using gold-leaf to symbolize religion and authority. I attempted to destroy the original depth in the paintings in order to create a space that looks both real and false, thereby increasing the feeling of unfamiliarity.

The gold-leaf also provides a space for imagination. All of the skies have been blocked in with gold. On a psychological level this relates to an inner mental space. The hand-dyed marks make the photographs look as if they have been dug out of a wasteland – documents of the unnamed disasters that the world has experienced. The series shows the profound sense of loneliness following the destruction of the world. These works are created as imitations of the original. These mass-produced imitations all come from one original. But the original has been destroyed so we can only use the imitations to understand reality.

Reflecting this world, these works attempt – through a playful, light-hearted expression – to narrate a cold alienation and a transitory and unnamed grief. Because of the unknown that the past and the future hold and the uneasiness and dread that derive from this, we have created gods and monsters in an attempt to understand ourselves and conceal the bestiality that hides behind our human yearnings. As the spirit briefly escapes from reality into the ephemeral realms that these creations inhabit, humanity yields to our underlying yearnings and an image is no longer simply an image. It permeates all creative domains, all new artistic languages, and world outlooks. And it is just a starting point, where a new heaven awaits us, even if it is not the real one.