

The Topological Foreign Affairs of Voice The "Phono – Art" of Cheng-Ta Yu

Huang Chien-Hung

Essay

Cheng-Ta Yu belongs to a generation too young to have experienced the severe battle of public opinion that raged around the question of "identity" in Taiwan during and after the 1987 lifting of martial law. Nonetheless, he lives in an era framed by a host of problems surrounding the coexistence of different ethnic groups, and because of this, the special quality of his art lies in his artistic imagination being able, in a state removed from historical developments, to engage in a highly limpid and profound dialogue with the realities of society regarding history. In his works *The Ventriloquist* (2007), *She is My Aunt* (2008) and *Ventriloquists: Introduction* (2008), a focal point clearly emerged, which commentators have characterised as "self-fracturing political intimation". Its form is a kind of *mise-en-l'abîme*: creating fissures that generate disparate meanings. For example, in *The Ventriloquist* and *Ventriloquists: Introduction*, Yu hides behind a featured "speaker" who directly faces the camera, and it is in fact Yu that then provides "voice" and "text". A kind of inverted relationship appears between the power relationships of language and the power relationships of the body. Similarly, in *She is My Aunt*, audio and video that have developed dissonance due to a lack of historical connection are stitched back together, yet they also correspondingly highlight an internal inability to reunite. The political allusions in Yu's works become a non-deliberate "surfacing" of political consciousness, or political nature. What unintentionally appears are the traces of a *bio-politique* that exists between incidents and phenomena. In other words, "evasion – implication" must exist within the various kinds of "self-fracturing" forms conjured in the work. For example, using familial relations to reference the extreme display of hysteria, or perhaps using the bodies and voices of outsiders to depict one's own "fiction", constantly creating a kind of fold, in which politicality appears in the contrast between the two sides of the fold that is formed, and also in the gap carved-out by evasive circumnavigation. Indubitably, this gap is the extra space that appears in the activation of the imagination. It causes the artist's political concern to become vague – through this circumnavigation the artist's "cold



Essay

feelings" toward politics are expressed, yet Yu does not consequently erect a barrier blocking out "politicality". On the contrary, his creations allow these gaps to form virtual connections, by bringing together starting points for notions that are entirely unsubstantiated and imaginary. This new form of political art – which does not demand a homogeneity between political ideology and artistic image – directly addresses a form of "foreign affairs" extraneous to foreign affairs.

In addition to creating a giant portrait of international relations, the notion of foreign affairs, in individual imaginative constructions, is an issue that involves numbers (the collective re-creation of countries) and extension (the transcendence of national boundaries). But such discrepancy has always made use of a "projective" (geometrical) method to complete the uniformity between the individual and the country in foreign affairs. Yu's latest work, *Ventriloquists: Liang Mei-Lan and Emily Su* is an expansion of his 2008 undertaking, *Ventriloquists: Introduction*, which embarked on an exploration of a different kind of "numerical" problem. In other words, in *Ventriloquists: Introduction*, an unnamed self and an other, whose common nationality is unverifiable, serve as the units of extension that shift between friendly cooperative relations and the slips of vocalisation. Through numbers (vocalising individuals) the contours of a different, compound, fissured form of the self are sketched out. In other words, the artist does not treat the geometrical projective relationships between number and number, but rather allows the connections between



individual and individual to be rendered as internal differentiations, expressing a single numerality within the framework of foreign relations, or a kind of micro-foreign affairs. This "language" achieved through an "exchange of voice" or even the topological foreign affairs undertaken through behaviour and the "singing voice", form a powerful contrast with the foreign affairs achieved through text and contract within the system of designated appointment (or, one might say, macro-foreign affairs), or even possibly an oppositional relationship formed as art confronts politics.

From the level of dialogue in *Ventriloquists: Introduction*, we can more clearly access the possibilities afforded in the works of Yu. The speech of the "human shadow" elicits not merely the re-representation of forms of "translation" and "heteronomy", but even more fully, the tension produced through interaction, and a subjective posture of resistance when placed in a certain state of restriction – replication, dialogue, appropriation and severance – and moreover, accompanied with the reproduction of the body, allowing the reproduction of the body to connect to issues related to life and politics, Yu's "human shadow" serves not simply as "scriptwriter" or "puppet master", but also as a mask-like schizophrenic, whose "split" eschews projectivist foreign relations, attempting to permeate the "body" with sounds that are distorted and off-key. Yet in his new work of 2009, *Ventriloquists: Liang Mei-Lan and Emily Su*, Yu not only expands on the theme of proximal foreign affairs that he explored in *Ventriloquists: Introduction*, he also brings together the proximal action achieved through fiction that he employed in *She is My Aunt*. At Taipei's Won Won Building, where Filipino labourers often congregate, Yu found several willing interviewees, or "collaborators". In addition to doing a survey of their labour conditions and the experience of being an immigrant, the artist also experimented with a new "split" form. He no longer hides behind an "enunciator", who is asked to narrate the "fiction" that the artist has constructed based on the speaker's status and state, but instead Yu hides behind the camera and asks questions while standing in front of the interviewee. He also no longer invents fictional language on behalf of the



interviewee, but correspondingly collects real descriptions from the speakers. Slips in language no longer occur in "inferences" of vocalisation beyond the sphere of denotative meaning, but rather emanate from "confrontation", from convoluted vocalisations and off-key sounds that occur in order to express meaning. Furthermore, the artist arranges videos of singing, forming an extremely different scenario of "liberation". The introduction of song incites a different bodily expression in the labourer, a body set within reality yet "escaping" the conditions of labour. Using a different kind of language, a form of behaviour liberating oneself from the realities of labour and immigration, the hard work of the labourer's body is no longer framed within a predetermined "tragic" or "marginalised" appearance or form; instead, the interviewee is relocated to an extemporaneous "dithyrambic" moment.

These "type – documentations" are what allow the work to transcend the status of a documentary, not the lens' stylistic language or the theoretical delineation produced by the images. Because of the behavioural facets engendered by voice and language in the interviewee's "off-key" vocalisations and narrations in the "transpositions" between different languages, and the performances they "can't help" but give in response to the artist's interrogative language, these issues of vocalisation incite a different kind of expressiveness. This expressiveness leads us to move beyond the limited number of topical images that customarily appear, and touch upon an alternative form of immediately present "labour", a kind of "purely personal" labour: a moment when foreign workers at their place of work do not lack "self-expression". And in a spontaneous moment, the artist takes part in the acting-out of a different kind of world: a foreign affairs of "broken language" that veers clear of elitist diplomatic rhetoric.