

The Cigarette Chats—about TCAC

Jo Ying Peng (J): I would like to start with a quote from John Cage, “Where do we go from here?” TCAC has gone through many two-year phases—the first: test-drive, the second: progression toward stability, the third: organizational restructure (run by the three of us), and presently: toward the greater unknown. As we looked back at past development, TCAC has and continues to struggle with a lack of hardware and software resources in its trajectory. As we are speaking now, we try to pin down the stop-loss point to examine our operation of the third phase. It is a review and reflection for ourselves, and this may also lead us to raise more questions concerning TCAC’s cultural ecology. How can we tell this story? Shall we begin with the archive of our curatorial and operational work which is often invisible to the audience?

Esther Lu (E): It happens that I just watched a speech by Donna Haraway on the internet a few days ago in which she was laughing at herself for all kinds of failures from a phenomenological perspective. Her light-hearted but critical analysis inspired me, and I would love to share in her attitude to review the interesting, beautiful and sometimes frustrating failures of those two years during our directorship. Plans and ideas that we had failed to realize were as notable as what we had achieved. We started to make our umbrella plan *Where Are We Now? The Banyan Tree, Index, Exercise and Personal Ads* after relocating to the present address in Baoan Street. The makeover plan was made from

our collective imagination and compromise; it was an ambitious plan that we hoped would restructure the organization—a two-year program that would redefine the role, mission and vision of TCAC. Certainly, I would not be shy to say that I was totally optimistic and ambitious in the beginning of my directorship. I really wanted to reshape this organization all the way from the production contents, and hoped it would play a significant role in the region, generating discussions and exchanges internationally. If building “a contemporary art center” was our common historical mission, then we were ready to try as much as possible to achieve this ideal and to contribute to the public. During our two-year operation, time flew by in the blink of an eye. We were so busy and always multitasking with many projects on hand and on our shoulders. Yet, no matter how overworked we were, we knew it was only a fraction of the plan that had been realized.

If we begin to reflect on the efforts that happened behind the scenes, perhaps we could gradually realize the shape of the institution that our team aimed to achieve, and the deepest regrets and black holes in our work. We published our programs soon after we launched the space in our fundraising event *Black Market White Paper*, and this included our major projects such as: *The Parallax View on Taiwanese Contemporary Art* (later transformed into the exhibition *Portrait Portrait*), *Made in Public*, *Curatorial School*, *The Being*

Earnest Station: Online Opinions, Op-Eds and their Reality Talk Show, *Dadaocheng Project: Remastering under the Banyan Tree...*

Fang Yen Hsiang (F): If there were any regrets or frustrations in those fabulous years, it was that these unrealized plans actually pointed out the specific obstacles between TCAC’s growth in its cultural context and art ecology. At the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s, the diversity of alternative art spaces in Taipei provided a positive dynamic for cultural production and urban development. However, our projects, such as *Dadaocheng Project*, *The Being Earnest Station*, and so on, could not offer a comparable effect or a new breakthrough in the city. Our neighborhood, Dadaocheng, was actually full of festival-like programs directly endorsed by the government, and our work was never in line with them. TCAC was struggling to identify an appropriate role to engage in shaping local aesthetics, as these festivals bonded together with a gentrification structure to produce populist local productions. This means, TCAC had not figured an effective approach in the context of local cultural production. That was the main reason why the Dadaocheng Project could not succeed. On the other hand, it also refers to the fact that each individual artist and organization had already been assigned to isolated production roles under today’s cultural governance.

J: We cannot overlook how the

value systems of the government and the private sectors played a significant role in the general cultural environment, even though we would hold on to criticality in our attitude and actions via our programs. The large-scale festival events initiated to fulfill political credits gain more preference than the unofficial international exchanges and networks we slowly cultivated over time. TCAC was established during an intense period when many important events were happening in the local art scene. So, TCAC was actually the materialization of those cultural events, the embodiment of various projections for an independent institution serving the public. The attempt and mission to be an open platform to accommodate democratic participation in cultural affairs was the backbone of TCAC.

E: The synergy and dynamics of the art community could then be considered the blood of TCAC. How to construct and sustain the major tasks of bonding people together for mutual inspiration and criticism? This is of great importance for this institution. In those two years, we had programs specifically designed to generate the production of the commons, such as the forum *Made in Public* or *Going Public* (curated by Meiya Cheng). We discussed multiple subjects such as how cultural producers engage in politics, society and art environments. These participants or those who have incorporated these problematics in their works, philosophy or actions, however,

face a completely different idea of public than those involved in the large-scale events that you mentioned, and they are scarce in number too. In fact, if we were to observe artistic practices in general, we would realize that the majority of artists work quite independently, and they face the funding system, art market and everything else alone. Apart from common interests and power, there is no grounding for “public sphere” in art. The desire to produce shared cultural knowledge is sadly missing. It is quite difficult to create a community for knowledge production in Taiwan. When we tried to generate discussions and exchanges via *The Being Earnest Station*, we really hit the wall hard. People were busy with their own projects and running around to produce them. Yes, we had a space for the public, but nobody can afford time for the public.

F: If *The Being Earnest Station* could have continued commissioning and collecting independent criticism little by little, it would have had the chance to grow into some archive to document the conditions, dynamics and transformations in the cultural realm. So, perhaps, we should have paid more attention to connecting various little voices instead of making a big platform in one step. TCAC had been built upon many little events in the past.

E: The failure was probably not only internal, but external, too. We were stumbling with how to demonstrate our care or to share

sincere critiques within our community. Not to mention that contemporary art is still something to be recognized by the public too.

F: Let’s propose a hypothetical question: Do we need an independent cultural criticism platform in Taiwan that does not tie to the public sector or the media? One that is different from separate politics and cultural criticism websites? How could we run this platform?

E: The culture for criticism should be prioritized before the platform itself, and this is more like what we tried to do. We just tried to encourage the culture of criticism via our program.

J: Perhaps the question is about where the motivations for critiques are rather than who the critics are. No motivation, no platform.

E: To further articulate this question, perhaps we have to think about the general culture instead. When “culture” has been promoted by the government as a kind of consumerism behavior, you do not criticize. You only complain when something goes wrong with your purchase. On the other hand, we also have to consider how TCAC is related to the youth culture today. Our audience profile is quite young. We have to reconsider TCAC’s role and conditions, audiences and collaborators. Whom do we serve? How do these parameters reflect our situation and objectives?

F: When TCAC was established

as a member-based association, it kind of projected a position of modernist art rebels—like Session in Vienna that was supported by the bourgeoisie salon culture. But, how effective could this model have been in Taiwan in 2010? How long can it be sustained? I think we should actually focus on the question of institutionalization here.

J: For me, if an institution can be flexible in its organizational structure in order to leap out of its original framework, reexamine its establishment and role from a meta position, and provoke or even subvert itself at necessary times, then this organization is brave enough to afford deinstitutionalization. Are we talking about institutionalization as a myth or just hearsay? After all, institutionalization and deinstitutionalization are two sides of the same coin.

E: For me, the problem is not about institutionalization, but ossifying into a rigid institution. The process of institutionalization can be the beginning of operation too. It takes place when an institution learns to move its body and exercise its power. In other words, you get to run if you want to run, jump when you need to go high and carry weight on your shoulders. To be honest, TCAC doesn't even have good legs and arms to be able to stretch out and move around freely yet. We are learning how to move with our weak and somewhat immobile limbs.

J: The body of the institution is

determined when it's established. But, institutional design is something in our hands. We can design how to exercise this institution to find its best moves and postures.

E: I am totally interested in institutional design. I believe institutionalization is a process of politicalization, which produces a force of politics, or imagination for politics. What kind of political imagination should TCAC embrace and embody in its self-organization and agency? This is one of the important values of an institution to me.

J: Do you think we are institutionalized now?

E: No.

J: Had we ever been institutionalized in the past?

F: No.

J: Why are we bothering to discuss it in the first place?

E: Well, our name reveals such a premise. Institutionalization is the mission and imagination of TCAC. If we had a different name, then we could possibly skip this question.

J: Of course we shouldn't change the name! Taipei Contemporary Art Center is the perfect name if we want to be subversive toward the idea of institutionalization. Why do we need a contemporary art center in Taipei? It's full of imagination and experiments.

E: Don't get me wrong, I do embrace the challenge set by this name. However, I would also be frank about how critical this may be as a cause of death for TCAC too. When we try to operate an institution to address and produce commons for the public with resources and capital that are smaller than an artist studio, it is almost like a kamikaze mission.

J: Let's return to one of the important foundational questions: Who needs TCAC? For whom is TCAC? Where is its position in relation to the art ecology of the community? What is its role and value? What can it give to people? For what can it ask? Are we in an active or passive interaction with the environment? How do we respond to the "singular culture" in which cultural values do not comply with economic logic?

F: Speaking about audience profile, I think TCAC has an advantage in maintaining program diversity to reach different people and purposes. If TCAC became a more established institution, we could expand our program, community, and audience to create an interactive production relationship in the cultural sphere, either via the operation of the board or curatorial team. Nevertheless, as TCAC has not been completely institutionalized, it offers opportunities to discuss and imagine what an art institution can be and how it can participate.

E: Since it is not totally institutionalized, it has all the potential for experiments, and

therefore keeps a certain gravity to attract the art community. I proposed an idea last year that I would love to turn TCAC as an instrument for everyone to play—anybody can play this instrument and make different music and sounds. This is how I envision this space. It's totally on my work agenda.

F: What are the characteristics of this institution?

E: TCAC is a very special case in Taiwan, contesting what can be produced for the public via autonomous and democratic self-organizing in the cultural environment. How do we provide a nurturing space to cultivate co-learning in art through space operation, art production, curatorial articulation and initiatives of varying forms to share? Isn't it awesome that we had been trying so hard to be open for new experiments in an unlimited way? In a nutshell, this is an experiment of building an art institution, and we are here to ask what the production of art is for the public.

J: How do we define openness? We usually take an internal view on this issue, or look at the audience number, participant feedback, etc. It feels like we still miss some sort of external parameter to examine it.

F: The TCAC program, like any contemporary art program, is based on the visitor's experience. Many local audiences in Taiwan are still used to a passive way of

seeing. Even though we tried to build various interfaces for participation, there is still a long way to go to really engage.

J: This reminds me of the workshop, *Expanded Identities Practical Discourse Through New Design Reflexivity for Venues of Culture*, by Oliver Klimpel. It attempted to trigger an open experiment to gather many art space directors, designers, curators in the same room, expecting new dialogues and chemistry to occur. However, it did not activate more ripple effects as anticipated.

E: For this particular project, perhaps we are the ones who gain the most. We grew long term conversation and more collaboration since then. Indeed, it is an issue that we seldom go back and trace the effects or outcomes of our work, or go for another cycle of reproduction after each project. However, we understand if we want to share and redistribute knowledge, all the participatory projects would need to be transformed. In addition, we did not have questionnaires to carefully document all the feedback either. We only did it once for *Curatorial School* in 2015.

J: Since you mentioned it, let's discuss the role of curator. Why do we need curators for TCAC? What is the concept of curator in a non-profit organization?

E: I think there is a difference between a TCAC curator and other curatorial collaboration, for me personally. First of all, I

think an in-house curator at "a contemporary art center" should offer new insights, fascinations, and discussion points in art. This basis is the most fundamental. I do not think TCAC is just an open platform. It has to have its unique artistic production and contents so that it can compete with other art spaces around the world to find its position and relate its contents further into a network.

In our curatorial team, there were many strengths and weaknesses to be discussed. For instance, why did we not focus more on individual curating? Why did we always work as a team? How was it different from other artist-run spaces? What kind of democratic model did it base daily operations on? It certainly deserves a long discussion, maybe one like the cross-organization interview conducted in Kunci (x), in which they even mentioned who bought toilet paper. Our discussion would be about how we all got the same paycheck, took turns cleaning the toilet, and did all the painting jobs...

During our term, I hoped to run a space that would exceed the usual existing projections on exhibitions in alternative art spaces. I hoped to run projects that could build relationships with participants. TCAC should grow its participants, not just visitors, focusing on community-building and network.

The program we curated was custom-made for TCAC as an institution. The institution identity was transformed by our presence

and efforts, in addition to all kinds of negotiations in the general cultural field.

What did we create to realize our plan in terms of tools or methods during those two years?

F: “Curator-run space” was the experiment and the method. It may sound strange, as we had always accepted the role of curator in art organizations and in the field. However, our specific model greatly challenged the institution, curator and curatorial practice so that we could examine their relations.

In Taiwan, the profession of curator is not fully supported either in or outside of the museum system. Our team was therefore a proposal for the future. Certainly, it also asks the questions, “What is the mature criteria for curating? Can we begin our actions and think about our strategies when the condition is not perfect?”

J: I feel it is more about building the aesthetic of authorship. I think we created a concept-driven space, in which criticality and imagination were generated in a free atmosphere. Our operation was rationally planned, and our program and objectives were not haunted by external ghosts. We created an opportunity to answer the call that came from ourselves, from within. Yet, I still wonder if this was an experiment that was too expensive for us to play.

(1) “Toilet Tissue and Other Formless Organisational Matters” was a cross-organizational conversation conducted in KUNCI study and Forum Collective (Yogyakarta). <http://kunci.or.id/articles/toilet-tissue-and-other-formless-organisational-matters/>

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