

In Conversation with Chia-Wei Hsu

Esther Lu The work *Marshal Tie Jia* came about through an accidental opportunity. In this process of exchange and dialogue with the world of the gods, you use multiple narrative methods, including video, text, and installation, to elaborate the development of this story in terms of history, culture, politics, and mythology. Could you speak about your encounter with Marshal Tie Jia the Frog God from beginning to end, and the questions you wish to handle or respond to through this work?

Chia-Wei Hsu Taiwan is an island that is constantly experiencing memory implantation and erasure: every time it meets with change it creates new official memories. Although we live on an island, it is as if we have been unable to truly realize the boundaries of this landmass. The process of searching out this island has, in Taiwan, also become a process of escaping official memory. As such, I started looking for an ideal island as a filming location, and in May 2010 I saw Turtle Island off of Beigan. The contours, dimensions, and vegetation of this island seemed like a fairy tale to me, existing only in novels, so I decided then and there to shoot on the island.

When preparations began, I first inquired with the Mayor of Beigan Township as to the application procedures for filming, but his answer both transformed my imagination and exceeded my scope of understanding, setting off a series of questions in my mind. According to the Mayor, out of all 80 islands in the Matsu archipelago, only Turtle Island is privately held rather than belonging to the jurisdiction of the county government. Moreover, the owner of the island is a Frog God who the locals refer to as Marshal Tie Jia, and any activities proceeding on the island must have his agreement.

Today Marshal Tie Jia's temple is not actually on Turtle Island. According to villagers there, his earliest temple was located in the Wuyi Mountains in China but was burned down during the Cultural Revolution, so Chinbe Village in Beigan Township in Matsu became his only domicile. Before he came to reside in Beigan, there was once a temple dedicated to Marshal Tie Jia on Turtle Island accompanied by a massive banyan tree, but after falling into disrepair it was destroyed and relocated to Beigan, while the island itself remained the preserve of the gods. Then, with Chiang Kai-Shek's retreat to Taiwan, the arrival of the Kuomintang military made Turtle Island a strategic point, and the army constructed there defensive fortifications that involved cutting down the banyan in order to avoid erosion from its roots. As times changed, this original strategic significance disappeared and the bulwarks were left abandoned, allowing the island to again revert to the jurisdiction of Marshal Tie Jia.

Before filming on Turtle Island, we had to request instructions to gain the approval of Marshal Tie Jia. This ritual involved the participation of the villagers of Chinbe led by the village head, with four villagers responsible for carrying the altar sedan and an old man proficient in the language of the gods to

aid in translation. Chinbe Village contains only seven households, so each villager is assigned to different work in the temple. In the process of seeking instruction, we first invited the Marshal into the sedan, which then began to shake violently to the point that its attendants seemed unable to control it. It then collided with the altar table in the temple, where the god wrote down its decree. A number of elements in the production plan for the project required the approval of the Marshal, so I have communicated with him through the sedan on multiple occasions; sometimes he wrote in clearly distinguishable text, while at other times the judgement depending on the motion of collision or sounds and noises.

The experience of the instruction ritual gradually helped me understand that Matsu and Taiwan, though now belonging to the same political regime, have had markedly different historical fates. Taiwan entered the period of Japanese rule in 1895, at which point Matsu still belonged to the Qing government; the relationship between the two did not begin in earnest until Chiang Kai-Shek's move to Taiwan. Matsu and Taiwan are situated in parallel streams of space and time, with different memories. My project, too, entered into another time and place relative to Taiwan.

Lu Your work has always involved the contemplation of the idea of narrative. How does this work advance your personal considerations of the topic?

Hsu In the preparatory stages, during one of the rituals of instruction, I raised a request to rebuild on the island the demolished temple, but was turned down. The Marshal would allow me to move objects and equipment to the island for the filming, but would not agree to the construction of any structure. At that point I decided to return to the studio to construct the temple set, and then to erect a green-screen on the island where the temple scenery would eventually appear during postproduction. This method ultimately met with approval from the Marshal, under the condition that he could accompany me to the island during the filming process. In order to prepare for the landing, the villagers had to mobilize for this new responsibility. It has been more than 20 years since the Marshal had been to Turtle Island.

Filming is a tool that intensifies how I intervene in my subject, or how the subject might intervene in me. I am often unable to predict the final form of the video, but what matters is not what kind of imagery is produced, but rather how the imagery is produced. Narrative video has its own unique attractions, but at the same time it is also dangerous: relating a story through linear methods, it is easy to fall into a certain logic of production of official memory. The problem is not in storytelling itself, but rather in alienated illusion. It is for this reason that I consider the transformation of the filming process into an action through the formation of narrative. On the one hand it is a form of narration, but at the

same time it is also a real action, constituting a process that wanders back and forth between the inside and outside of the story. As a medium, the fabricated space of the video depicts neither a fictive narrative nor the real world, but rather produced reality and fiction as such. In my interaction with Marshal Tie Jia, the boundary between truth and imagination is already hard to define; the complexity of obscure politics and identification blurs reality and fabrication. As if a wall has been breached, the fabricated narrative becomes something tangible, while reality appears to exist only in our imaginations.

Lu By stepping into the realm of the gods, this work reveals a spiritual frontier that is flattened by modernity and rarely discussed. In breaking down the boundaries between deity, human, and object, it seems to return to a premodern thinking through which it can consider the corresponding and correlative relationships between different categories, as opposed to falling into a modernist procedure of surveying questions of translation reflected through these same boundaries. Did this process shock you at any point? How does your work mediate the relationships and positions between these different modes of existence? On the other hand, we have also touched upon the paradoxical topic of representation, and even spiritual representation—in religion or mythology, for instance, representation is the most important creative question: the creation of the imagery. What kind of symbolic spiritual meaning does the Frog God hold for you? And what kind of information or legend do you create through him? For me, your work has always embodied a certain characteristic of tension, producing transcendental narrative out of simple documentary imagery. There seems to be some kind of parallel echo here ...

Hsu I do not particularly understand religion or theology, but modernity attempts to flaunt its own knowledge and so-called “facts” in order to replace a number of things, including faith, superstition, and anything else that is not subsumed under the principles of rationality and reality. This process often creates even greater fictive monsters, endlessly swallowing up imagination. Like what I saw when I was searching for the pond where the Marshal was born: a Tang dynasty village ravaged during the Cultural Revolution, and the burned out temple in the Wuyi Mountains. This experience of producing this project has its own active meanings, most exciting of which for me is that these mysterious and irrational things do not exist only in texts and mythological stories, but actually act in Chinbe Village in Beigan through a number of modes of representation. This produces an intense conflict between the spiritual realm and modernity, a point at which the imagination can break free.

Throughout this process I had to continue negotiating with the Frog God, but I don't believe it is possible to raise my views of him within the work. Ultimately what I know is extremely limited; I can

only try to view him through the form in which he exists and preserve his original position through the action of the production, rather than flattening this phenomenon into a narrative form. While tracing back the origin of this myth, I also discovered the intimate relationship between the *nuo* dance tradition of Jiangxi and frog beliefs. *Nuo* dance originated in primitive sorcery, perhaps even earlier than Buddhism and Daoism. These things, unfamiliar to me, seem to provide some of the energy that modernity has lost, building a mirror between mythology and modern society that allows us to speculate about the structure hidden behind things.

Lu In your work, the process of filming seem to be closer to the subjects themselves rather than themes around them. The subject becomes a cultural vehicle. But objectivation always hints at and corresponds to the power and position of authorial perspective; objectivation also demonstrates your broader personal plans. How do you construct or view this kind of relationship?

Hsu Indeed, in my work the subject of filming is closer to its object than to theme per se, or perhaps we should say that, in my work, the construction of theme is developed through the convergence of different objects. My primary consideration is avoiding symbols and expressing things purely in the fabricated space of the image. In some ways, participants in my work act as themselves; I might invite people to participate in a discussion or event in which the characters, setting, and objects appear exactly as their original identities and contexts. I always try to introduce the possibility of equal relations at the origin of arrangements and systems between myself and others, permitting them to bring their own references to what they see and organize their own stories. On the other hand, as you mention, this also implies the power and position of a certain authorial perspective.

While filming on Turtle Island, I invited an old man to sing improvised poetry in the style of Min opera for the Marshal. In times past it was imperative to hire a Min opera troupe to perform during festivals, but in the past 20 years the tradition has been lost, leaving this man as the only person who still understood the art. His lyrics are written through *pai gou*, a card game played between two people that has been banned in China, making his performance the only connection across this gap. For our project the *pai gou* content he was invited to sing was about the War of Resistance against Japan, following the path of the fighting from Dongbei to Shanghai. The political identification behind the lyrics thus appears in opposition to Taiwan, which was, at the time, Japanese territory; indeed, the Japanese contingent that occupied Matsu had set out from Taiwan.

My role here is a bit like that of a program producer, as the narrative of the work is not delineated

by me in the first person. Instead, I see the production of the work as the creation of an event that acts as a meeting point for people and things from which the narrative develops. For this project I wrote a novel, the content of which was gathered through interviews with various people about their own stories, and which I then completed by organizing this information into a literary form. Here text is like the camerawork, lighting, and scenery of a film production, a method of turning object into narrative.

Lu From my observation, the temperature of your camerawork has dropped in the past few years, introducing a colder form of observation to process the image, while, in an interesting paradox, you have begun producing events within your practice. That is to say, as you have started intervening in reality or as reality has started intervening in your work, your camera has intentionally pulled back to a greater distance. When you were making your earlier documentaries the temperature felt much warmer, with much more emotion stemming from the narrative. Was this contrast planned? How do you see the changes and progressions in your practice over the past several years?

Hsu In my practice, which aside from the creation of events also involves narrative video as a vehicle, the question that needs to be considered is this: there are points of conflict between linear narrative video and actions or events, particularly in that fabricated image space depicting reality as an object of representation is vastly insufficient to present truth. The screen is often only a superficial documentation rather than a window open to the world; depth of field is a component of a plan rather than an open horizon. Thus, in my narrative video, representation must first be broken. Video may involve fictional narrative, but through the *hors-champ* of people, places, and things acting with their original identities and contexts it may be possible to draw out the contours of this fabrication and reveal the structure of the narrative itself. For this reason, what the audience views in the work is not a video that completely and systematically packages these people and things into a narrative, but rather something that develops a sense of narrative that moves in the opposite direction through the *hors-champ* outside of the frame, imagery that is situated between illusion and non-illusion. There is no symbolism in the people and things in the video, or perhaps the video itself is the symbol of a kind of activity of consciousness.

Lu The theme of place or territory is also latent in your work, and you seem to be deepening this mode of practice: beginning with a peripheral site, you author variations, deconstructions, and fabrications of its possible relationships of politics, society, and affect. Could you speak about your concern for this side of things, and whether or not it is related to your own experience?

Hsu Memory is often visible in my practice, and this creative direction has a sort of urgency for me, because time makes history gradually fade from memory and memory quickly disappears with the passing of people. But this process of production is often not preordained, but is rather more like an excavation. In this project, for example, it was only when I had come to understand Turtle Island and traveled to Jiangxi in search of Marshal Tie Jia's place of birth that I gradually came to link folk beliefs, Chiang Kai-Shek's arrival in Taiwan, the Cultural Revolution, and so on. The grand story of history is made up of many individuals and events, such that, during this process of excavation, we discover that the people and things within the scope of research are intertwined with a much larger context, including time, identification, imagination, and memory. In practice, this process of production thus means to demarcate anew the positions within this genealogy.

During the process of communicating with the Marshal for the first time, when I appealed for his permission to survey the island, he clearly drew out definite contours of the island on the table and indicated precise times for landing on and leaving the island, as well as a scope of permissible activity. After discovering the site of the remains of the destroyed temple on Turtle Island, imagining its size and shape, I also noticed, buried deep underground, a pillbox that must have been the military based constructed after Chiang Kai-Shek's arrival in Taiwan. This island, visible on any map, also condenses to a high degree the traces of these changing times. As such I started to plan to reconstruct the temple on Turtle Island, but in fact no one had seen its original likeness, so we could only imagine and rebuild it based on fragmentary clues.

Memory itself cannot be fully grasped, but, as Tim Cresswell has noted in his research on human geography, it does not simply abide by the repetitions and uncertainties of psychological processes; often, it is through memorials, museums, and inscriptions—the materiality of place—that memory becomes recorded in the landscape. For this reason the intertwining of place and memory is complex, and indeed the former can become an effective tool for the reproduction of the latter. Apart from this, place is also bound up with questions of identification, involving social and cultural boundaries as much as geographic borders. In my work I attempt to handle the defining texture of a place through particular sites and structures, developing from there a process for the production of new meaning. I believe that the political messages activated through the work are not universal desires but rather contextual meanings embedded in the space of the work, creating place in the video even as they summon it.

My work can be interpreted as often beginning from a marginal place, but this sense of marginality is usually due only to identification with the mainstream. For me, identification is irreducibly complex, and is a dynamic process. Looking at the historical responsibility of the Taiwan Pavilion at the Venice

Biennale, however, there seems to be a search for some clear affirmation of identity. What kind of path do you take to deal with this question of orientation?

Lu Perhaps it is precisely because of the historical circumstances of Taiwan over the past several hundred years, during which the process identification via dominant political power has been fully manifested, that the concept of conscious subjective recognition has remained stagnant in an ever-shifting peripheral status. “We” have always been mobile, with no regard for the labels of mainstream or otherwise. On the other hand, the system of national pavilions at the Venice Biennale often emphasizes a clear form of representation. The Taiwan Pavilion is squeezed between these two forces, exhibiting many of the awkward conditions of biopolitics in the process of subjectivation: the Pavilion can only be an imagined object on which we project all manner of ideologies. We might say that if the Pavilion indicates national borders in any way it is for the sake of the establishment of some form of subjective representation; better yet, we could say that it always turns back and marks out the differences between us, enumerating our aspirations to become a version of ourselves with a consciousness of community.

This is where I began to consider how the Taiwan Pavilion might form a base for critical thinking, taking advantage of its special properties on the periphery by making it a topic of concern in and of itself in order to deconstruct the recognition of subjectivation, thinking through the historical, political, economic, and cultural systems that endlessly cleave and form us. We can adopt Kristeva’s concept of subjectivation here to approach the central question of the exhibition, and transfer the initiative of its response to the object enacted—to the audience. Through a negation that appears more like a question, the work of interpretation continues—with or without the approval of the audience, even if they are noncommittal—and we choose the path of recognition. For this reason I see the project as a speech act, or an open process for the deduction of subjectivity that responds to and liberates this desire for recognition.

Hsu The political nature of my practice does not come from the political themes represented in my video, nor does the act of filming take place in order to turn the event into moving image; rather, the act of filming incites dialogue with the event that conspires to transform the process of production of the video, executing a restructuring of the video itself to open up the hidden structure in the background. By departing from reality, a new sense of reality can be formulated. You also mention in your analysis that only through this kind of restructuring of reality might it become possible to restart the dialectical process of subjectivity, while the exhibition, as a site of art, also has a certain political nature. How do you see the exhibition itself as a speech act, and how does it come into effect?

Lu I believe that art is unable to leave reality, nor is art in a position of intervention into reality; art is always creating a new reality. This curatorial project is, for me, such an attempt or experiment in the creation of a new reality, and I hope it results in an exhibition that goes beyond the Taiwan Pavilion and the Palazzo delle Prigioni. I operate through the speech act, considering possibilities for relationships between the site, the works, and the audience within the *mise-en-scène* of the project. I made the title of the exhibition a speech act, only formally announcing it just before the exhibition even as the project, under great scrutiny, was subject to a number of pressures and misunderstandings. Despite all this I chose to allow the performativity of the curatorial structure to be laid out step by step as the audience enters into the relationships of the project—even the media plan is performative in a sense.

I hope to produce, through these live interactions at different times and nodes, a contemporary space and time that flexibly expands and contracts as it is activated again and again, a spatial and aesthetic vessel for three artistic projects occurring in a space that vastly exceeds the site of the Palazzo delle Prigioni. The speech act is a mutual testing of the audience on-site and face-to-face, and I believe that this is precisely the attraction of art: it lends irreplaceable concern to tension and imagination at a specific place and time, involving the body in both gaze and conflict. This evaluation also makes its presence felt in the aesthetic vocabularies of the works ultimately developed by the artists, allowing us to return to the live site of the body and consider the world anew in the space of an event that has broken the fixed relationships of reality.

I look forward to these performative curatorial actions functioning as a springboard for entry into the artistic projects. When these actions are transformed into a particular space and time, one that surpasses the Taiwan Pavilion, they will set off the performing tension of the works proper. This transformation of space and time is a political action, and this is what I have investigated in thinking about the relationships between this curatorial practice, the exhibition, and the works of the artists.

Through this practice of artistic production, what kind of stories are you writing?

Hsu I am quite fanatical about the alternate realities formed in the work, and their possibilities for political practice. Production is like an endless process of tug-of-war with different partners, of which image, media, and their links with the world are all key narrative components, while the point of entry becomes clear along with the relationship between man and environment. The form of the work itself may crystallize, like an arena for thinking and representation: on the one hand it incites the viewer to recall ancient narratives, while on the other it requires of the viewer immediate perception in the present, ceaselessly incorporating new sensations. Any political orientation reflected in the work comes not from the content of the story, nor are any themes raised limited to the accuracy of representation;

instead, they are oriented towards the methods formed by the narrative and its overarching structure. This is a process of action, relation, and motion rather than a thing in itself, touching upon how one might give an account of the world while remaining embedded within it.

translated by *Robin Peckham*

Chia-Wei Hsu

Chia-Wei Hsu, born 1983 in Taichung, Taiwan, lives and works in Taipei. Hsu attended from the Graduate School of Plastic Art, National Taiwan University of Arts. His artistic practice investigates the subjects of imagery and narrative through video installation to expose contemporary mechanisms of spectacle production while addressing memory, imagination, identity, and other cultural connections to filming sites. The juxtaposition of performance and event in the narratives of video and installation creates a wormhole, weaving together reality and imagination.

Selected group exhibitions include the Taipei Biennial, 2012; *Metro-Wonderland: Taiwanese Artists and Urban Morphology* in 2012 Liverpool Biennial; *Rencontres Internationales Paris/Berlin/Madrid*, Centre Pompidou, Haus der Kulturen der Welt and Reina Sofia National Museum, 2011; *Une terrible poétique: Jeunes artistes taiwanais à Lyon* in 2011; *Videonale: Dialogue in Contemporary Video Art*, National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, 2011.