

# In conversation with Yu Cheng-Ta

Freya Chou

**Organized by the Cultural Affairs Bureau of Macao, Taiwanese artist Yu Cheng Ta presented his first grand exhibition at the Tap Seac Gallery in March, 2013. Yu invited Taiwanese curator Freya Chou to conduct and produce the project. Through this collaboration he wanted to develop a more in-depth discussion of the ideas in his work.**

We always feel a familiar intimacy with Yu Cheng Ta's artworks, in that they candidly represent, or metaphorically imply, the attitude of the younger generation towards the world with a pinch of wittiness and nonsensical humour.

When stepping into a foreign culture, we would use language – or sounds – as an icebreaker and also to communicate in the seemingly most direct way possible. Yu Cheng Ta has always been fascinated by the inaccuracy and discrepancies in the usage of language which result from cultural differences. These discrepancies lead to 'fractures' that bring along issues of identity and hierarchy as well as (language) reproduction and interpretation. Through his signature 'rehearsal style' performances and repetition of speech by non-native speakers, the artist manages to present pre-choreographed real-life scenarios.

Hosted by the Cultural Affairs Bureau of Macao, **On Set in the City, Works by Yu Cheng Ta** shows the artworks created during the artist's participation in artist-in-residence programs between 2008 and 2013. The residencies were in various cities, from Taipei to Aomori in Japan, and from Auckland and Wellington in New Zealand to Macao. The artist resorts to humorous and grotesque linguistic engagements to create video artworks displaying how foreigners engage and express themselves when facing a foreign culture.

**Freya Chou: This exhibition includes the artworks you've created in artist-in-residence programs over the past few years. Could you tell us what is the first thing that captures your attention when you're in a foreign city? And what interests you most?**

**Yu Cheng Ta:** I'd probably go downtown first! I want to experience the atmosphere of the streets and the locals. The diverse atmospheres radiated by different cities inevitably constitute a contrast between them. It's not easy for me to immediately capture the differences in culture and history. Instead, I pay attention to the 'communication', which occurs most frequently in people's daily lives, to witness the absurdity born out of the communication gap and use it to inspire my work.

**FC: Why do you use language as the element for creation in the first place?**

**YCT:** To some extent, it may have something to do with my personality. I enjoy being with people and language is a useful tool to connect with others. Although I don't speak English perfectly and often use incorrect grammar and awkward sentence structures, I still like to engage in conversations. There's mysterious ambiguity in the language, which is why we love learning how to say 'I love you' in different languages. I find this process of imitation very intriguing, in which we focus on mimicking three syllables that make no sense in our brains, while the native 'instructor' listens attentively to the sounds we utter as if he or she was teaching a child. This sort of learning and mimicking is fun and eventually becomes the contextual model for my artworks showcased in this exhibition. To me, spoken language and written words are like raw information. Depending on the interface used to send and receive them, along with other factors such as timing and speed, the meaning can change dramatically. Both the sender and receiver have certain control or power that goes along with the seemingly simple raw information. For instance, the receiver reconstructs the meaning of the information by guessing intonation, structure or frequency. In short, I think the initial information is just the start of a larger process, a process we would call communication.

**FC: Looking at the pieces you created in your more recent residency programs, I always ponder this question: Is it necessary for an artist to avoid being overwhelmed by a status or form in order to be sensitive? For example, you explore a certain language simply because it is totally alien to you. This fact makes it easy for you to break free from constraints imposed by your old knowledge and can help find a gap you can explore. Is this the reason why you repeatedly use language as a medium (for creation)? I'm sure you may have a basic understanding of other cultural forms, but not of language, for it is not a skill that you can pick up instantly. In fact, languages have sometimes arbitrary but necessary and set rules and you must spend time learning them.**

**YCT:** In the **Ventriloquists (2008)** series created earlier in Taipei, using my mother tongue, I organized the relationship between the videotaped ventriloquists and myself through games of relaying messages, in which they were requested to mimic my speech, the same way a toddler learns to speak. In this context, it poses an interesting question as to who has the final say on the conveyed meanings of the ventriloquial speech (i.e. who has the right to interpret it – the ventriloquists, artist or viewers?) – This is a situation that's tinged with implications of power and political factors. While participating in artist-in-residence programs, I was exposed to other language systems foreign to me. This switch of subject (host) and object (guest) created a 'gap', a term you've just mentioned, prompting me to consider the relationships between the viewers (the locals) and myself. What was on my mind at the time was: How can I approach the local language in a foreign country? And how can I mimic the (language) state?

**FC: Because in such circumstances, language becomes the easier access to adapt to the situation you are encountering in a foreign city -- the alienation -- and it is through this “gap” you find the connection with the city itself.**

**YCT:** You're right. And you can say I also use language to shift from one culture to another, to move between my original place and foreign cities, and to switch the original relationship between subject (host) and object (guest). The artworks selected for this exhibition imply the way I adapted my approaches to different cities. Take **A Practice of Singing: Japanese Songs (2012)**, for example. I videotaped myself singing Taiwanese pop songs adapted from Japanese music from the 80s and 90s. Since I know very little Japanese and had to sing the whole repertory publicly, I prepared by first translating the Japanese lyrics into Roman script, and then rendering the script into my own Mandarin phonetic system. How I did it was quite like the way a schoolchild transcribes a foreign language using his own phonetics. This is what I call the process of 'approaching'! I remember that after I performed in Aomori, a nurse told me she enjoyed my singing very much, for, interestingly, she felt that "it's close, but not correct!" I know it's risky to (arbitrarily) use a local language because I must take the recipients'/viewers' reaction into consideration. However, the artist-in-residence program provided a chance for me to hammer out a workable relationship with locals. At least, my 'shift' somehow struck a chord with the nurse when she 'compared it with her own knowledge' in that context at the time.

**FC: Why do you prefer to engage yourself, rather than using actors, in your works?**

**YCT:** In these videos, I'm just a recipient of the language in question, a character desperate to perform but completely clueless of what's being conveyed. These two factors combine to show traces of how messages flow and are interpreted within the human body; in other words, I'm where the interpretation activity takes place. I didn't play any role. What can be identified (by appearances) is that I'm Asian as well as an artist, a fact that can be inferred logically given that my artworks are featured in the exhibition. In fact, my character, and the work, creates a virtual relationship and lacks a tangible bodily form. What's more, I'm crazy about impromptu performances, just like the way language is being interpreted in our daily lives, something professional performers just can't provide. My artworks focus on impromptu situations, like rehearsals, so they carry with them aspects of Youtube videos: they feel rough around the edges but more real and more instant - and has a relatively more psychological interaction with the viewer.

**FC: Now let's get back to your solo show in Macao, for which we selected two keywords at the outset: fable and rehearsal. These words were chosen because your video works often feature you, causing the viewer to wonder if you are playing yourself or a role. For this reason, we tried to present a kind of ambiguous relationship – the relationship between you and the city, language, or characters in the films. And what is presented is not a pre-choreographed performance; in fact, the ambiguity seems to present a rehearsal state. I think this helps explain why we chose green as the background color for the exhibition venue.**

**YCT:** The dominant green color is meant to create a kind of green screen, serving as a setting likely to add other special effects in post-production stage. Nevertheless, it is a transitional space for the images and it usually will be deleted. Yet, when in reality it is actually turned into an exhibition venue with such a backdrop, it looks quite interesting. The exhibition venue in Macao is not a conventional gallery space, but a heritage site. We avoided using grey, white or black, which you commonly see at video art exhibitions. Instead, to extend the artistic concept, and to correspond with the curatorial idea of “sets”, we used green to suggest the ambiguity of setting.

**FC:** I find this experiment rather interesting, for perhaps only an artist’s solo show can allow for experimenting. Your new work, *Fisherman* (2013), is installed in the last showroom of this exhibition, where all the walls are painted, quite unexpectedly, in red. Is there any correspondence or differentiation in terms of connotation between this red and the green color mentioned above?

**YCT:** There's a staircase in the Tap Seac Gallery cutting the space into two zones, the green zone and red zone. In view of this, the work **Ventriloquists: Liang Mei-Lan and Emily Su** (2009) (which discusses how language leaves marks on Taiwan's new immigrant residents) is placed in the middle of the exhibition venue, which is painted in a brownish-red. This is meant to function, metaphorically, as a separation (wall) of different urban settings, while also serving as the transitional link to **Fisherman**, my latest creation in Macau. For **Fisherman**, I chose red, because it serves the work and sets a mood for a narrative that depicts a dream about promoting desires, and I attempted to create a magnificent textural feel; the red color, similar to the green on the first floor, reflects the work that’s inside...the green corresponds to a more public setting while the red suggests a more intimate one.

**FC:** Regarding the installation, the location and arrangement of these works, you just touched on a key point: you mentioned your switch in identity, apart from using colors for separation/differentiation. In some older pieces, you took up the role as a language conveyor; later on you employed others to take that role. Particularly, for the work created in Macao, you took a new and different approach in that you used an actor to play the protagonist role. How do you think of this change?

**YCT:** The previous works featured more impromptu performances that accentuated differences between languages. However, this newest work saw a formal change, as a result of our three field trips to Macao that set the creative direction for us with the arranging of a storyline with a pre-written script and fictional settings. Yet, note that the performer appearing in the work is not a professional actor, but an ordinary person, a former businessman.

**FC:** Do you think it’s because we can’t adapt the previous format (of working with the vivid differences of spoken language) to the Macau work?

**YCT:** Indeed, that's why I have to look for the new differences in Macao, if it's not spoken language, what it is? And turns out, what astonished me most was the visual spectacle...the impact from those casinos and entertaining businesses. And apparently, Macao's situation is not something singular, nor is the gaming landscape on Matsu island, which Taiwan is set to develop in the future. All these represent a sort of economic wonder that can be seen everywhere under neo-liberalism, both a local and yet global experience shared by the world. That especially poses a challenge for creating site-specific works, for we have to, through the other culture, cross-reference with the shared situation in the two regions, to avoid presenting views from the perspective of a foreigner experiencing the local place (in this case, Macao).

If one doesn't fully grasp the (social) context of the place he's visiting, then the cut-in may easily become unexpected, out of place, or a hasty act, which can undermine the topic the artist wishes to reflect upon, or the power of the message conveyed.

**FC:** I guess, to avoid an overly linear narrative, we initially used 25 photos printed in different sizes and arranged them layer by layer, trying to tone down the focus on (Macao's) uniqueness and singularity. Rather surprisingly, this unidentified composition of images led to a dazzling impression of the glamorous and flash-in-the-eye fantasy. To some extent, what's created is very similar to the sort of explosive product that comes from rampant investing in the same place, felt by us in Macao, or even any other cities.

**YCT:** And in terms of photography, I wanted to capture imagery of doors – entrances to Macao's casinos, both small and large. And I deliberately shot them at midnight, just in order to eliminate human noises as well as any audio and light effects, to portray them as steel-like, cold monuments. In short, I tried to show these doors (entrances) - these entries to desire - in cold tones that created this bizarre but somewhat enchanting image. I should mention, I invited a foreigner friend of mine to act in this film. He is not a professional actor, yet he has the look of a Western businessman; he shuttles among the pre-designed scenes of three colors, using a kind of a direct marketing approach to promote a dream to the viewers – at times, passionate and flamboyant music would be inserted to imply an irony-tinged viewpoint.

**FC:** Why did you specify a Westerner?

**YCT:** I figured that the work should, in itself, present a rigid power hierarchy, which reflects a kind of a lasting colonial mentality. I hoped to present a kind of charming mentality, as he entices you to join the dream's course. For that matter, if I had featured an Asian face, the hierarchy might not seem so imbalanced, while a Westerner can elicit estranged and mysterious feelings that rather suit the work. Interestingly enough, during post-production, we dubbed the film in Cantonese, which apparently furthers the distance (from viewers) to the mystery. I think the transformation re-establishes a relationship of power with the audience.