

F O R W A R D

By David Haley

Over Time: the art of transformation

Over time, all life comes into being and goes out of being. Over time, people come into the world and leave the world. Species come and go, over time. Things have different rhythms of being and not being. The issues of global warming, climate change and the Sixth Extinction of species are concerned with the acceleration of events. Things change over time and the small town of Budai on the Southwest coast of Taiwan, that is the focus of this research by Julie Chou, is no exception.

What has happened over the last ten years? Julie Chou gives a great account in this new book of the relationship between artworks and the environment, changes to the Southwest coast of Taiwan, new landscape planning initiatives, local participation and organization, and the impact of National Policies on local issues. She, also, writes about our relationship to the food we eat, how we produce it and the impact this has on our environment. I will try to provide some brief comments from another perspective and provide additional context, because as environmental activist, author, and scholar of Buddhism, general systems theory, and deep ecology, Joanna Macy wrote: 'The most radical thing any of us can do at this time is to be fully present to what is happening in the world' (Macy 2012).

I first visited Budai on the south west coast of Chiayi County, in 2007, at the invitation of Tseng Wen-Bang, the Director of Taiwan Shui, an NGO dedicated to developing socially and environmentally engaged arts projects. His initial brief was for me to make an artwork using oyster shells for tourists, which I respectfully declined. He then explained that the waste oyster shells were an embarrassment to the development of tourism and a health hazard. I said the concept of waste, the connection with water and the idea of oysters might be a good starting point for art to intervene as an ecological development that could include the culture, economics and environmental issues. I was not interested in the tourism aspect.

From much internet and book research, and based on my own experience, I developed the project, '***A Dialogue with Oysters: the art of facilitation***', as an approach to generate questions and learn about the people and the ecology of Budai. I made no visible or tangible outputs – no paintings, no sculptures, no music, no poetry. However, the project, as an '*art of facilitation*', and as a '*dialogue*', has continued. In fact, ten years later my friend, artist and researcher Julie Chou, publishes this second book of research and critical reflection that

includes the impacts of this project – over time.

For this Preface, it is worth revisiting the project title. The use of the word '**dialogue**' was and continues to be very important to my work, as an ecological artist, because it constructs a specific relationship to and with the people and other life forms involved. It is not a dialectic of oppositional arguments, nor an expert treatise, or hierarchical discourse. It is a way to engage with many beings, and to find meaning in the process of conversation. From the theoretical physicist, David Bohm, to pedagogical activist, Paulo Frier, and art theorist Grant Kester, dialogue has been considered an essential process for creative equality and mutual learning at community levels. The idea that this dialogue included '**oysters**', is important, because it raised the question of the rights of 'non-human', or 'other than human' beings to be considered, as well. How are oyster affected by climate change? What is their relationship to the oyster industry? Why are their shells considered waste? Indeed, oysters framed the specific issues and concerns of this project, providing the focus and the catalyst for global issues to emerge. The dialogue, therefore, was the generator of ecological thinking in this project – 'the pattern that connects' (Bateson2002).

The word, '**art**', as I explain later in this text, has far more complex meaning than we normally afford it in modern society, and the '**art of**' signifies doing something with excellence, above and beyond normal practice. In this case, that something was '**facilitation**'. The idea facilitation in art has been a point of argument and conjecture in community and socially engaged arts practices since the late 1960s, with artists like Joseph Beuys and Fluxus, Barbara Steveni and John Latham's APG (Artists' Placement Group) and celebratory arts company, Welfare State International, challenging the potentially elitist role of art and the artist in society. Many arts commentators continue to worry about the possible loss of artistic autonomy through the process of community participation facilitation, and how this may result in the 'instrumentalisation' of art for political or social ends. For this project, I saw the global 'Art World' and 'Art Market' as much greater threats to artistic liberty and freedom of expression. I was, also, keen to be clear about my role as an artist coming from another place; to visit, interact, reflect, leave and maybe/maybe not contribute something to the situation. I hoped that my contribution could facilitate the ability of a community to become less vulnerable to climate change, and more capable to adapt to such transformative challenges. I, also, hoped that the community's art and artist may become stronger in maintaining their dynamic culture, so they may be central players in the discourse of change and not slaves to the demands industry and commerce. I could think of no better legacy, because, 'the most moral act of all is making the space for life to move onwards', and this includes art (Pirsig 1993).

I visited Budai a second time, in 2012, to attend another conference organised by the community leaders, Tsai Geng-Chiao and Tsai Fu-Chang I had met five years earlier, and Su Yin-Tian, President of the Chiayi Ecological and Environmental Association. This conference focused on the community

development of renewable energy and production of organic food, and I was very impressed by the changes they made to improving the environment and the quality of life for people of Budai. One project that impressed me greatly was an organic shrimp farm and I asked the project director what was the difference between organic shrimps and ordinary shrimps. And he replied that the organic shrimps taste better, because they are not stressed by force-feeding and over-production– ‘they are happy shrimps’. As I was working in Kowloon, Hong Kong, at that time, I then asked if it was possible to develop an organic shrimp farm in a dense urban environment, and he said; ‘Yes, just keep the shrimps happy’. The Permaculture Association of Southeast Asia were about to have their first convention and I asked the organisers in Hong Kong if they could pay for the air fare of this organic shrimp farmer to attend, and they did. He was then able to pass his ideas onto hundreds of other organic food producers and he was able to learn more from them. The dialogue had spread to shrimps and the facilitation had expanded to a continental and global network.

But things change over time. Governments change, politicians come and go, and the rise of economic neo-liberalism has increased globally. With the UK ‘Brexit’ from Europe, Trump as President of the USA, and Putin’s manipulation of international relations, the pressures of hyper-capitalistic values grow ever more powerful. One symptom of this global ailment is the alarming rate of commodification or ‘touristification’ of local cultures and environments by governments, financial institutions and industry.

Tourism is good. People should travel to see other places, experience and learn from the way that other people live. However, the industrialisation of tourism (Tourist Industry) means that the experience is turned into a product, the place becomes a brand and the local people are ignored, as meaningful learning gives way to consumerism. Genuine culture is lost at the expense of theme park aesthetics, Disneyfied art, global crafts and music; heritage becomes the marketing rhetoric of frozen history. Short-term profit becomes long-term loss, because tourism like other consumables is dependent on fashion, and fashion dictates a brief period of popularity only to be discarded – like last summer’s ‘must have’ clothes. Indeed, the whole concept of consumerism is based on a one-way, linear process of extraction-production-consumption. There is little or no regard for managing and replenishing finite resources, the ethical and respectful means of production, nor the consequences of waste. Despite the efforts of the United Nations and others, humans continue to destroy the possibility of their own species to exist in the future. The Tourism Industry is central to this problem.

Big cities, like London, Paris, New York and Taipei, have the resources and the investment to continually reinvent themselves on the world tourism market, but the consequences for towns and rural areas can be devastating, as they simply lack the scale of infrastructure to keep pace with demand. The few service industry jobs created by the initial tourist boom are usually seasonal, and have no security. The initial investment is in relatively cheap projects and facile

infrastructure with minimal maintenance and no on-going investment, so in a short time, the place becomes abandoned, like the derelict site of a forgotten circus. This process, rather than helping local economies to stop youth migration to the cities and support genuine local culture, exacerbates the problems and accelerates decline. Important transformative challenges like climate change and species extinction are trivialised.

Meanwhile, the out-of-town investors have gained their profits and moved on to other projects in other places, or other businesses altogether. The potential development of other long-term business investment is stifled by the 'gold rush' 'band wagon' of the tourism extravaganza. Worst of all, local culture vanishes and people lose their identity, resulting a kind of psychosocial dementia; memory is replaced by the banality of social media. In this situation, art is over-produced by governments and force-fed to consumers – 'authentic' culture is trampled on by the very tourists who seek it. At best art becomes a 'high end' decorative commodity, and craft becomes a disposable gift. Meaning and philosophy disappear along with practical use.

While industry drives fashion, life, culture and art emerge from novelty. As Fritjof Capra writes:

'... emergence'... 'has been recognized as the dynamic origin of development, learning and evolution. In other words, creativity – the generation of new forms is a key property of all living systems. And since emergence is an integral part of the dynamics of open systems, we reach the important conclusion that open systems develop and evolve. Life constantly reaches out into novelty.' (Capra, F. 2002)

Creativity is the key issue. Creativity needs to be nurtured, supported and facilitated to emerge in its own time; it cannot be manufactured and marketed, bought and sold. The origin of the word, 'art' is the Sanskrit word, 'Rta' that means, 'the dynamic process by which the whole cosmos continues to created, virtuously' and creativity is the essence of that evolutionary process (Haley 2001). Art is the process of transformation and diversity, so this is not a simple issue of fashion versus novelty or the tourism industry versus long-term cultural investment, the situation is a 'wicked problem'. Wicked problems are difficult to solve for many reasons. They usually exist because of complicated, inter-dependant issues, and they often become worse as problem-based, quick-fix solutions are applied to them. In recent years, 'eco-tourism' and 'sustainable tourism' have been developed with good intentions to address the problems of the tourism industry, but like 'green-wash' they perpetuate the very problems they claim to address. The core problems of unregulated growth, global market economics, and the other sixteen 'United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: 17 goals to transform our world' remain unanswered and unquestioned (Gunderson and Holling 2002 / United Nations 2015).

Over the next ten years, given their persistent dedication, the community leaders and local people of Budai seem capable of surviving the trauma of

tourism. They have already demonstrated that they are 'ecologically resilient' as they adapt to the effects of climate change and become their own dynamic culture (Walker 2006). The art of transformation in this case, is not in trying to solve the wicked problems they face, but in learning from them. Like the organic shrimps, they emerge as happy people, as the research in this book will testify, over time.

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