

Symbol, Cycle and Cultural Resonance: The In-Situ Experience and Autologous Practice in Liu Yung-Jen's Work

Andrew Shih-ming Pai

Ph.D in Art History, Kyoto University, Japan

Professor, Department of Fine Arts at National Taiwan Normal University

A Discerning Look at Post-Colonial Culture: Do Conflicts Still Exist Between East and West?

The development of modern art for the peoples of Asia has always implied being washed away in the powerful western tide of modernization and this pressure led to crises of disintegrating tradition. It seems when trying to cope with the pressures of modernity, the force of the conflict between East and West always rises to the surface like a world war. In Chinese art of the recent period, three strategies for addressing this conflict while seeking to construct a national art—a matter of not simply updating culture but rather a highly significant politics of national preservation—have arisen: wholesale westernization, the adoption of western styles with Chinese touches, or strict adherence to tradition. Completely adopting western art or overlaying western art with distinctively Chinese elements has inevitably led to charges of pharisaism or cultural colonialism. The third strategy of hewing to tradition resembles the autocratic thinking and royalist ethnocentrism of the late 19th early 20th century Boxers, and like their rebellion, has proven incapable of warding off western influences.

All three strategies all have their urgency, limitations and biases borne of real-world pressure. Long term dominance by a single cultural ideology and the impossible to unravel complicity surrounding this outside pressure have led to the unfortunate situation where East and West have cancelled each other out. Therefore, the key point in the modernization of Chinese art—addressing tradition's conflict with the West—from either the revolution or counter revolution standpoint, has led to the intense politicization of East and West and the loss of any connection to art. The drive to modernize Chinese art has produced emergency measures in the unequal relationship between East and West, as well as a modern culture of inflicted, partially inflicted or self inflicted otherness. When externally controlled, development is passive and distorted, and in the field of Chinese art, has resulted in works that depart from experience and intrinsic qualities. Even though constructs such as *East versus West* or *traditional versus modern* seem purely academic, they cannot escape politicization; and bound to national ideologies, the modernization debate in China has been more closely aligned with the authority to declare one's cultural sovereignty. Under such circumstances, East/West and traditional/modern are emptied of aesthetic significance and their full potential can never be realized.

Modernization in Chinese art had been ongoing for one hundred tumultuous years when it arrived in Taiwan with the Nationalist regime after the war, and reforms sought by the modern painting movement of the 1950s in Taiwan were still tied to politics and a drive for a national culture. During this period, emphasis on the essence of eastern philosophy was considered a last line of defense in the battle for national honor, and was called upon to address reform and smooth over discrepancies between East and West. The end of the war and start of the cold war brought the possibility of decolonization and temporary peace, and therefore provided an opportunity to re-investigate and redefine the call for reform that had seemed so urgent in the past. In this

atmosphere, it might have seemed possible to return to the essence of art and local experience. But could the differences of the last hundred years between East and West really be resolved? Could an art form based on self-directed development and self fulfillment actually be complete? What kind of art could transcend political domination to form a culture with authentic productive energy in the post-colonial era? Although they have been posed many times and in many ways, these questions are still the most important to ask when investigating culture.

The Cultural Border of Aura, Circulation, and Personalization: A Contemporary Art Practice of the Body

Art in Taiwan since the end of World War II has developed in the same fashion outlined above. Urgent calls have gone out for going beyond political manipulation and passive acceptance of forced choices to enable experimentation and the production of a self circulating cultural system that returns to essence, local experience and self regulated development. The spirit of modernism is to experiment with individuality, free choice and subjective values by surpassing extant forms, media and concepts. Therefore, cohesion between artist and environment relies on a production cycle continually alternating between moving from inner to outer and outer to inner, and art becomes a harmonious and complex biological phenomenon produced by the human body. Art development in the post-colonial era is aimed at personalized cultural productions via collective critique of past political authority and individual reconstructive explorations of cultural subjectivity. In other words, when cultural boundaries shift, the result is not only the disintegration of the original country or nation-centered concept, but also a release of energy that makes the reinterpretation and creation of culture possible on the individual level. The artist's identity also shifts from that of a communal producer to that of an autologous donor; the artist's body and aura become a living laboratory for the production of new culture and transformation of old thinking. All embodied experience is realized in the creative process, and the result is like metabolism, which produces physiological response or biological phenomena in response to the environment.

All parts of the process, from creation, criticism, interpretation, construction of value, to the return to the individual, self, and current time and place (including any environment or field in which there are artists), have become an important means of configuring contemporary culture. If we believe that gradually moving toward individual bodily experience and physiological practices can provide the conditions necessary to transcend borders created by place, race, class, gender, cultural background and ideology, and establish the self regulation necessary to form contemporary art, then it is vitally important to operate the body effectively to establish a physiological cultural mechanism that can live up to its name. This kind of mechanism is established when the artist's body or creative behavior is seen as an aura, or circulatory or metabolic system, and resonates with changes in the exterior environment or movement of visible borders. Biological phenomena are produced, and organic shapes, colors and symbols are formed by this response, which make invisible life experiences visible. Liu Yung-jen is representative of those contemporary artists who conduct experiments with bodily mechanisms. He advanced his *breathing osmosis theory* while studying in Italy in 1996, and has consistently created work exploring connections among the body, aura and art for more than two decades.

Breathing Concept and the Ideal Resonance that it Constructs

To better understand a bodily art practice, we can use the metaphor of natural processes of an organism rather than the abstraction of language. In this metaphor, the body is a machine or intermediary and all external elements must go through a cycle of assimilation, breathing, circulation, digestion and discharge. Normal operation is maintained after equilibrium and resonance are reached. Therefore, the result of art practice is no more than biological phenomena manifested in forms, images, and visual symbols. Actually, the form for Liu's theory comes from his practice and research of the martial art Taijiquan in his earlier days, which he extended and perfected when studying abroad.

The transformation of Liu Yung-jen's experience with contemporary into a theory illustrates the period from the late 1980s to 1990s in Taiwan when artists first started developing their own multicultural thinking. The biggest difference between this period and the post-war, modern-painting movement lies in its connection to a border-transcending, situated experience, and the composition of contemporary culture shaped by this experience. In light of this, the so called modernization of the earlier movement seems like the empty talk of a period that was closed, autocratic, secondhand and antagonistic. But recent developments possess a more complex resonance that transcended locale, culture, language, and identity. Establishment of such a quality that cuts across regions and identities is achieved by placing oneself in a different cultural environment to produce natural self regulation similar to physiological responses and to gradually create the possibility of new cycles. As Liu explains:

I have been pursuing the concept of breathing with my artwork. In order to realize this goal, at first I used ink painting, and then acrylic paints, oils, and most recently beeswax and lead. While exploring different strategies such as painting in series or paintings about the environment, I have experimented with many different techniques and materials.[...] Expanding space has always been a feeling in my work. I try to create novel presentations of depth [...] and mutually permeable boundaries between people and space, and the environment and space. [...] From opening to compressing, the symbols are framed in compositions that balance tension, and this balance is complex in nature yet spontaneous. If this cannot be achieved in a conceptual environment, it is necessary to give voice to my feelings in the creative process. (A Journey of Deep Breathing, 2007)

Liu's breathing is a spatial concept established through osmosis (expansion and permeability) using different media, formal transformations, explorations of painting space and physical environments. Additionally, he constructs organic self sufficiency that is like breathing (a physiological phenomenon) through tension in his symbolic compositions. We could say that his art practice and resulting works are metaphors for breathing, and not only present a contemporary awareness of crossing of cultural borders and return to autologous experience, but also present a cultural body concept that relies on constructing physiological cultural mechanisms having the ability to automatically adjust in ways that are both complex and spontaneous. Liu claims, in the organic process of cultural production "the marks created by a brush that moves as the artist inhales and exhales [...] suggest that the human mind is inexhaustible and continually unfolding." (A Journey of Deep Breathing, 2007) Art becomes a liberated vehicle for spirit and culture and carries all the experience embodied in the artist. By weaving symbols, color, brush work, composition, and representation of speed and three-dimensions, Liu

constructs composite physiological connections possessing fluid and resonant cycles, rhythms and individual states in different works.

Since college Liu has based his knowledge of art media on ink, and in the early days, this foreshadowed his *breathing osmosis theory*. When studying abroad, he encountered an atmosphere of relative freedom, cosmopolitanism, and innovation, as well as countless new schools of painting, theories, and experiences. These all intensified his investigation of eastern culture's essential qualities that ultimately catalyzed his search for transcendence, dialectic and transformation and forged his desire for independent notions of contemporary art. The unique eastern qualities of ink, such as the point, line, shapes and arrangement of elements seen in the art form, transform the body and mind's energy cycle with purely material or physical operations, thus creating senses of plasticity, permeability and agency throughout the art medium. These qualities have been important in the artist's cross disciplinary experiments: Liu has used ink, acrylic, oil, beeswax and lead foil in his compositions to reflect the expanding quality of his bodily experience and physiological states, which suggests shifts, reconstruction and equilibrium in cultural identity. In the past this might have been seen as antagonistic cultural difference, but has been deployed in an entirely new aura cycle to create resonance between different cultures.

This exhibition presents work made in the period from 1991 to 2004, and comprehensively reflects the development of Liu's breathing concept. Works from the 1990s contain traces of Liu's alternation between ink and oil, and present the spirit of pure and absolute materiality through the juxtaposition of oil paints with bright and saturated colors. Imagery in this work has undergone compression, relaxation, liquefaction, convergence, and overlay to create systems that suggest the microscopic circulatory spaces of arteries, nerves or other pulsations. His brush work, use of color and momentum all produce rhythms similar to the respiration of organisms or movement of celestial bodies, and are all fascinating explorations of the body's interiors.

By the period following the 1990s, Liu's breathing concept had reached maturity, and he started gradually striding toward self transcendence and a quest for the eternal. Discussing his move to mixed media and multiple expansions of exhibition space, he has said, "Creative thinking involves moving about unfettered in imaginative space, and focusing the imagination to create values that are eternal. But in terms of expressive techniques, these eternal values must be formed out of new and novel materials." (*A Journey of Deep Breathing*, 2007) His completely new use of beeswax and lead foil reflects his past explorations of phases and composites between movement and stasis, dispersal and convergence, and penetration and impenetrability. After 2000, his dynamic brushwork and use of composite spaces gave way to relatively pure symbols and the presentation of environments that relied on liberated creative thinking that moved through forms, media and in and out of spaces. This resulted in his contemporary, cross disciplinary aesthetic that considered the body as aura. These new developments create never before seen images, ways of seeing, and exhibition ethics through adjustments in tertiary color, contrasting areas of color, clearly paired forms, and the symbolic polygons and triangular shapes that evolved from his indefinite brushstrokes. He also resets the unequal master and servant relationship between artist and audience, such that art moves beyond its passive role, and the exhibition venue fuses with the states of mind and body of the audience to compose an organic aura that re-interprets and continuously transcends borders between forms.