Leora Joy Jones

An Interview with Mali Wu, Co-curator of 2018 Taipei Biennial

Leora Joy Jones: Your approach to art has changed quite a bit over the years. Can you tell me about your practice now?

Mali Wu: I am interested in socially engaged art that has a function. This function is pedagogical, regardless of whether the artist is conscious of the audience or not. Art is a medium that provides a certain message. It is important for curators to work with the idea of the public in our consciousness and focus on how to approach audiences to convey what we are saying. I have been practicing this kind of socially engaged art for almost twenty years. I see it as a kind of positive social critique.

Leora Joy Jones: For how long have you practiced curation?

Mali Wu: I'm not a curator. My practice is research oriented and project based. I organize events in the community. This is the first time I've been invited to curate such a big show. Fortunately I did not do it alone. My co-curator, Francesca Manacorda, is very experienced curating in museums, so he helped a lot in organizing the space.



Leora Joy Jones: Let's look at some highlights from your practice. Art as Environment—A Cultural Action at the Plum Tree Creek (2010–12) was a large, collaborative project that included community theatre and dance shows, eco-education

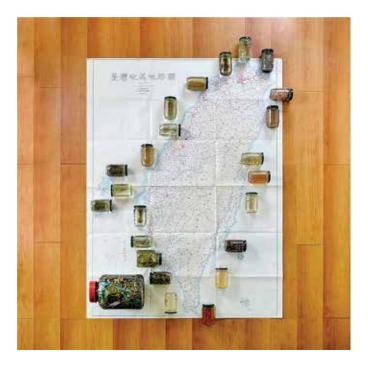
programs in primary and secondary schools, and other events for members of the community. In 2016, in *Art as Environment—A Cultural Action along the Tropic of Cancer*, you placed over seventeen artists in ten remote villages, which led many artists to enter communities resulting in some surprising collaborations. Much of your work involves non-artists working together in groups. There are activists, scientists, as well as art professionals. Which brings me to this biennial at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM). It is socially engaged: You collaborated with Francesco Manacorda to bring together different practitioners, many of them without a background in art. And it's pedagogical: It addresses ecological issues and offers a platform for groups who are often left outside of the museum system. It can be framed as a large collaborative artwork. Is this biennial an extension of your artistic practice, or is curating a completely different practice?

Left: Mali Wu; Right: Francesco Manacorda, 2018 Taipei Biennial Co-curators. © Taipei Fine Arts Museum.

Mali Wu: It could be seen as an extension, but it's not only that. I usually do projects outside of the museum, but this is an exhibition inside a museum. When you are putting together an exhibition you have to think of the visual impact it has, no matter where it is. If the work is not appealing or visually attractive, the audience will not be interested. This is why we seriously considered how to best organize an exhibition inside this space.

Curating is a completely different practice from making art. Francesco co-curated the Liverpool Biennial in 2016, and they exercised a huge amount of care for the community, which encouraged public participation in their projects. He had a lot of respect for my proposal to involve NGOs in this biennial. Despite TFAM being a museum, we organized a lot of events so that the general public could understand more about the artists' various approaches. Many artists are from abroad, so they were unavailable to really engage our public. That's why I think having NGOs in the biennial that are doing long-term work on certain environmental issues was important. They helped the general public understand the issues behind their work. The environment affects human survival. We experience our environment through our senses: visuals, acoustics, smells, and tastes. We use our body to experience what happens to our environment.

Leora Joy Jones: So, a more personal understanding of the environment?



Kuroshio Ocean Education Foundation, installation with samples of plastic particles and water from around Taiwan and its various islands. Each area has a distinctive seawater colour and composition of floating particles. © Taipei Fine Arts Museum.

Mali Wu: We use our senses to understand—it's not conceptual. Sometimes, with art, you understand it conceptually, but not in a true sense. Through the NGOs' projects one can understand with the senses our shared problems and our environment. We invited audiences to experience what has happened to our environment. This is an experience one has on a personal level, not just a conceptual one. It's a direct experience of what has happened to the environment. I think this is very important. When you go to an exhibition you may think it is beautiful, or interesting, and then, afterwards, you forget everything you saw. Through encounters with the environment and the work of NGOs, you can better understand the real world.

Leora Joy Jones: A pedagogical approach.

Mali Wu: Yes. Most NGOs work with the public. They are used to transforming their specialized language in order to have conversations with everyday people. It was our intention to introduce the element of "practice and progress" to this edition of the Taipei Biennial.

Leora Joy Jones: There seems to be two distinct types of work represented at this year's Biennial. This pedagogical artmaking practice, as seen in the work by the Indigenous Justice Classroom, the Taiwan Thousand Mile Trail Association, and the Kuroshio Ocean Education Foundation, are socially minded, community-based projects from Taiwan. There is also the more conventional "white cube" art that one would expect to see in an art museum. Can you tell me a bit about this distinction?

Taiwan Thousand Mile Trail Association, installation with documents, video, and audio. © Taipei Fine Arts Museum. Mali Wu: There are many different layers to the show and certain works have certain roles to play. For example, the Thousand Miles Trail Association is practicing a kind of Land Art, if you want to put it into classical art terminology. But they don't see themselves as "artists"; they are just walking around outside and conducting first-hand research.



They explain the reasons particular trails are proposed and invite people to participate together in making these trails. All of these processes are lengthy. Although they don't see themselves as artists, they are doing similar work to artists. This is an ideal model of socially engaged art. First you do research—not based on what you can find in books, but, instead, focusing on real environments and the materials collected in them. Then they share this knowledge with the public. It's an extension of Land Art in that it involves the community.

The Kuroshio Ocean Education Foundation also does interesting work. They invited artists and scientists to make a journey around the coast [in 2018, to celebrate the Foundation's twentieth anniversary] to gather materials not only for research, but also for this exhibition. They used this journey for collection, exhibition, and educational purposes. At the same time they have exhibitions in Hualien and offer ongoing lectures across the country. What they are doing is very much a curatorial practice, but they are not thinking about art; instead, their focus is about how to bring public awareness to oceanic issues. I am interested in why NGOs are making exhibitions and introducing artistic practices into their actions.



The Indigenous Justice Classroom is a bit different because for over two years they have been protesting land reclamation. Some of them are filmmakers, singers, writers, and visual artists. It's very much an artistic group, and I wanted to have them involved in this show because the issues they raise through this kind of protest are also key in our exhibition—concern about land and traditional territory. When we talk about nature, it is from a human perspective; it's very much about how we live in the environment.

Over time, throughout our daily lives, we develop the skills to survive—how to harvest or hunt or build.

We develop language and create a dialogue with nature. Language and culture is all connected, so when Indigenous Justice Classroom talks about traditional territory, it doesn't mean that they want to own certain land, but, rather, that they want to maintain their culture. I think these are key elements when we talk about the idea of *Post-Nature*. We need nature, but we change it to survive on the earth. How do we communicate with nature and rule the land? It is always part of the issue, and I think it is comprehensively addressed in their protests and ideas.

Leora Joy Jones: Protests about land politics have happened for years, and many are still ongoing—for example, the Standing Rock protests in the US to halt the Dakota Access Pipeline. Revisiting our relationship with nature is addressed through exhibitions and discussions around the world. Why do you think this is happening more regularly now?

Mali Wu: Certainly there are a lot of discussions happening now because when you are talking about the economy it's never just a local issue, it's international. Money has no nationality. Wherever the money goes, capitalism destroys, land is abused. You can see this in *Rubber Man* (2014) by the Southeast Asian artist Khvay Samnang. The forests are getting razed because factories have moved in. All these issues from capitalized industry are happening more regularly in Southeast Asia, so we have started to address it. We must reorganize ourselves and really confront what is happening in the world.

Leora Joy Jones: Do you think addressing this issue in a museum and as a biennial is the best way to make it more public?

Mali Wu: I think it's one way to address this issue. These issues have been discussed everywhere, not just in the museum. Many exhibitions partially address these kinds of issues, but not in one big exhibition. Biennials play

Indigenous Justice Classroom, *Ketagalan Boulevard Arena*, 2018, installations, documents, videos, lectures. © Courtesy of the artists and TFAM. an important role in our cultural phenomena. They attract a wider audience and initiate discussions so I think it's very important to address these issues within the context of a biennial.

Leora Joy Jones: Is this theme of *Post-Nature* addressed in the museum because you want to help people reconsider it as a social model?



Khvay Samnang, *Rubber Man*, 2014–15, 3-channel video installation, 4 mins. Co-producers by Jeu de Paume, CAPA, FNAGP. © Courtesy of the artist and TFAM. Mali Wu: There are many different aspects to a museum. *The Museum of Non-Humanity* by Gustafsson and Haapoja in Helsinki addresses the role of the museum and a colonial desire to classify things. So, when we are talking about *Post-Nature* we need to remember that humans are a part of nature and don't necessarily preside over other creatures in the world. In this sense we need to re-integrate the museum and how it functions in the world and produces knowledge. That's what *Post-Nature* is about. We also need to think about the role of TFAM. Museums usually serve a particular audience, but I feel they can find more creative ways of engaging with the public. For a museum like TFAM, learning how to reorganize itself to better serve the general public will certainly be a challenge.



Laura Gustafsson and Terike Haapoja, *Museum of Nonhumanity*, 2016–ongoing, video installation. © Courtesy of the artists and TFAM.



That's why we are approaching the museum as an ecosystem in three ways. The first is thinking of the museum as a physical body and how we can change it into being more environmentally friendly. A climate station was set up on the roof of

the museum for this Biennial. It will remain there for two years and collect microclimate data around the museum so that improvements can be made. *Museum in the Clouds* by Huai-Wen Chang and MAS (Micro Architecture Studio) reflects the air quality around the museum and responds to the data generated by the climate station.

Secondly, we address the social role of the museum and how it can open itself up to the public and raise issues, so the museum can become a platform for discussion and can connect different groups of people together.

Thirdly, we raised environmental issues in general. These are global problems, and we hope that the museum can be a platform to invite further discussion in the world. This is what we mean by an ecosystem. A system shows how we work together. We are looking at this museum's role so everybody can work together better.

Leora Joy Jones: Is this year's theme an extension of previous themes of the Taipei Biennial?

Mali Wu: In 2014, the Biennial was curated by Nicolas Bourriaud. It focused on anthropocenic issues [the influence of human beings on nature] and was mostly centred on man-made objects and technology. Our slant is different. We are focused more on human and nonhuman relationships. *Gestures and Archives of the Present, Genealogies of the Future (2016)* was a ten-year retrospective of the Taipei Biennial. This year's Biennial is a new beginning after the last twenty years.

Leora Joy Jones: Speaking of new beginnings, regarding the curatorial mechanisms and representation in the Taipei Biennial's history, how would you say this year is different?

Mali Wu: This year TFAM chose a local curator first. This has not been done before. European and Western curators were always invited first, and the Taiwanese curator was perceived to assist with the local conversation. This time the museum wanted to set up a dialogue in a local context, so they chose the Taiwanese curator first. When they agreed to the theme I proposed, we tried to find a curator who would best support us in addressing it. It is good to make the Biennial Taiwan-centric and to invite the local curator first. Many biennials in other Asian countries are very focused on European artists and curators instead of keeping it local. In our Biennial they should all be of equal importance. Do you also feel that it was more balanced? Huai-Wen Chang, Museum in the Clouds, 2018, steel, membrane, weather station, water fog system, LED, $400 \times 120 \times 600$ cm. © Courtesy of the artist and TFAM. Leora Joy Jones: Yes, I do. This 2018 biennial is locally focused and reflects how changes are being made regarding curatorial mechanisms. Previously, there was some controversy surrounding the imbalance of power between local curators and outside ones. (The conflict around the 2004 Biennial, curated by the Belgian curator Barbara Vanderlinden, and the Taiwanese curator Amy Cheng, received the most airtime.) So it was really exciting to hear that this year, there is more of a balance of power between the local and international curators.

Mali Wu: Yes, you feel that?



Henrik Håkansson, Inverted Tree (Reflected), 2018, Elaeocarpus sylvestris, steel, mirror glass, stainless steel, steel wire, wooden panel, hygrometer, irrigation system, misting system. © Courtesy of the artist and TFAM. Leora Joy Jones: Yes, there is also a marked improvement in the representation of local artists compared to the last few years. From 2000 to 2006, a maximum of six out of thirty artists were Taiwanese, In 2008, only four out of forty were local, in 2014, ten out of fifty-two were from here. In other words, only a quarter or fewer of the participants in the Taipei Biennial, over the last twenty years, were from Taiwan. But this year, almost half of the practitioners/artists were Taiwanese.

Mali Wu: You feel that?

Leora Joy Jones: Yes, I do. [Mali Wu laughs.] Was that a conscious decision?

Mali Wu: There are many different reasons for it. If you want to have an exhibition about the environment, the artists would benefit from staying in Taiwan for awhile to develop their site-specific projects. Most of the international artists are busy with many different shows, and they were unable to stay for long periods of time. Some just came for the opening. What we're doing here is better. It's not just about the exhibition, it's also about how to engage the public later on, once the show is open. This



Biennial will continue until March. So, during this period, we wanted the artists and the collectives to be able to have conversations with the general public. We hope all the events, inside and outside the museum, will have helped people better understand their environment.

Leora Joy Jones: Is that why there were so many walks, hikes, and discussions that the public could get involved in?

Mali Wu: Yes, that is more important than just having art in this exhibition. What you see here can be compared to the real world—like a microcosm. All these NGOs are really great, and they have been doing serious research and holding these kinds of events for a long time, so they are very knowledgeable.

Leora Joy Jones: In a traditional museum context, how was it curating nonartist practitioners who do research-based, event-focused work? Were there any problems?

Mali Wu: It was not a problem for me because I know most of them in person. I've been working with them for a long time as well, so when I invited them, they all said yes. I wish the artists could be more active and do more events here, but it's very difficult. In the beginning, we worked as outside curators of TFAM and coordinated with the exhibition department. The staff in this museum all have a very heavy workload, so they cannot really be totally devoted to the Biennial despite their willingness to help.

If there is anything that I would hope to do differently in the future, it would be the events. Because different departments in the museum have

Hsiao Sheng-Chien, *Return*, 2018, kinetic installation. © Courtesy of the artist and TFAM. different responsibilities, they engage in and take up their missions at different stages from each other. I think if the Educational Department could have joined in earlier, during the project-development stage, before the exhibition was almost settled, there might be more innovative events for the public to participate in.

There have been other practical limitations for the NGOs. There are restrictions on the number of people that can participate in the tours that happened outside the museum. Only one staff member from TFAM could accompany each outing, and if there were more than fifteen or twenty people, then it was almost impossible for them to manage a group of that size. Micro Architecture Studio organized sailing on the Keelung River, but there were restrictions there, too—the weather can affect the schedule, and the boats are very expensive and can only accommodate four people.

This creates a lot of extra work for the museum staff, but we didn't know how to improve this. The staff tried their best, but there are always these kinds of problems when organizing events at a museum that specializes in exhibitions.

Leora Joy Jones: How was your experience co-curating with Francesco Manacorda?

Mali Wu: Francesco has been more than important throughout the entire Biennial. While this is my first time curating such a big exhibition, Francesco has considerable much experience curating exhibitions inside large art institutions. Also, we started our collaboration after the Biennial team had decided upon the theme, so we were actually collaborating on a solid basis of consensus. We have the same interest in exploring the same topic. And, most importantly, he is a gentle person who is very humble. Overall, our collaboration went smoothly. It was a great experience to co-work with him.

The local dialogue can't be overlooked in an environmentally focused show like this one, and as Francesco didn't have a lot of time for conversation with the local groups, I played that role instead.

Leora Joy Jones: Can you tell me a bit about the curatorial decision-making that went into the Biennial?

Mali Wu: We worked from the proposals the artists provided. Sometimes you don't really know how it will pan out. The artists are the most important part, and we really had great ones in this show. In the big room on the ground floor, you can see Mycelium Network Society. When they submitted the proposal we knew there would be large spheres in the space, but it wasn't clear how many, or how loud the sound would be. After we divided the space, they made a huge installation—which is great—but the audio component was too loud, and it affected the work of other artists. Some artists weren't happy about it, but we can't make everyone happy.



Mycelium Network Society (Franz Xaver+Taro+Martin Howse+Shu Lea Cheang+global network nodes), Mycelium Network Society, 2018, mixed media, installation, 1000 × 800 × 360 cm. © Courtesy of the artists and TFAM.



Leora Joy Jones: There are the little bionic insects that make sounds in that same room (Chu-Yin Chen and Solar Insects Vivarium Workshop), but doesn't that in fact mimic nature? When you go out into the field, or the forest, there are the

cicadas that make so much noise rasping their wings together. It's deafening sometimes. So, this show is very organic in that way. [Mali Wu laughs.]

Mali Wu: Thank you. I'm glad you feel that way. We tried to rearrange the works to accommodate the various audio components. I think the artists know we needed to make compromises. I'm happy that they all accepted the situation.

This atrium was quite surprising for me. I was appointed as a curator because at the beginning I was invited by the director, Ping Lin, to put on a show on of my work at TFAM. I wanted to do it outside in this atrium. There are usually just some tables and plants around the perimeter. I had proposed to do something there, but when I was appointed to be the Taipei Biennial curator, I was too busy to make work myself.

I had hoped an artist would use the space, but nobody did until Tue Greenfort came to visit the site. He was interested in the atrium and sent a proposal right away. When he saw the space, he said that he could bring the columns he had made last year. When I heard this, I immediately said, "it's good, do it." At that time the museum didn't even know he would use this space. Later on we discussed how to install the mushroom columns here as the atrium floor cannot handle too much weight. In the beginning the artist wanted a forest-like space, but it was not possible. He raised a very interesting issue—this is a man-made construction, but nature fits into it. Did you see his video?

Leora Joy Jones: Yes, that's the work with the Bulbul birds that nest here? TFAM is already a functioning ecosystem.

Chen Chu-Yin + Solar Insects Vivarium Workshop, Paris 8 University, *Neo Eden—Solar Insects Vivarium*, 2015–18, interactive light and sound installation, 160 × 80 × 45 cm. © Courtesy of the artists and TFAM. Mali Wu: He found them! Although I am so interested in the space and I know that birds sometimes fly in and out, I didn't know that there was a nest inside! It's so great that he found it. I think this was really wonderful and unexpected. That video was a great part of the show.

Leora Joy Jones: That was a happy coincidence. In the press release you're quoted as saying "I hope this exhibition can be an experimental laboratory that incubates collaboration among talents in different fields." Were there any other surprises or unexpected collaborations?

Tue Greenfort, Prototaxites, 2017–18, mixed media installation. © Courtesy of the artist and TFAM.



Mali Wu: There were many, actually. For example, Robert Zhao Renhui's work When Worlds Collide-next to the Mycelium Network Societyis about bird and frog specimens. The artist revealed what happens in the city. He used to photograph dead birds in Singapore, so when I invited him to come, he wanted to know what happens to birds in this particular kind of urban situation. We organized visits to the Wild Bird Association and the department of biodiversity at Taiwan's Academia Sinica. He

also visited the zoo. He found that it was all actually one connected chain. People bring wounded birds to the Wild Bird Association and they are given medical attention. When the birds are healthy they fly away; otherwise, they are sent to Academy Sinica for research in the Biodiversity Departments.

When he visited the zoo he found out that twice a week the zoo staff hunt certain frogs to feed other animals in order to prevent overpopulation. He also visited the forestry department and found out that there are certain birds from Egypt (the African sacred Ibis) that fitted very well into our environment when they migrated here, and now they occupy all the wetlands and local birds have no place to stay. People collect their eggs and try to destroy them. So he collected all these stories. When he came to Taiwan he found that there were so many foreign species that get hunted. The public brings these wounded or dead birds to the Wild Bird Association in small boxes, so he exhibited those boxes too.

He asked, "who has the right to say who is permitted to stay here?" Humans decide who can stay here, but he wants to ask this from a different perspective. It's very anthropocenic. He raises questions from certain viewpoints that I had never thought about. Unveiling these hidden stories of the city are very interesting. **Leora Joy Jones:** This is a detailed and layered show that brings up so many interesting perspectives. What are your plans for after this Biennial? Do you have any projects you are working on?

Mali Wu: I have a project about food I'm developing in Kaohsiung. In this Biennial we have only a few food related projects, like *Seed Journey* by Futurefarmers.

Leora Joy Jones: There is also Zo Lin's *Weed Day*, in the basement. She brews tea from weeds found on her travels around Taiwan.



Mali Wu: Yes, I would have liked to have had some more food-based projects. This is one issue I'm exploring. In Kaohsiung there are a lot of migrant workers from Southeast Asia who have different tastes and customs for making food. I'm collecting those materials, and I have already exhibited this project in Kaohsiung, but I would like to continue it. The other project I'm working on is a site-specific project. I'm working in the wetlands in Kaohsiung, and I hope to transform it into an eco-museum. I'm working on these two projects with my students in the Graduate Institute of Interdisciplinary Art at the National Kaohsiung Normal University. I'm doing socially engaged art in a more practical way. We are using artistic messages to get the students to be a part of these projects.

Leora Joy Jones: Do you have a favourite piece?

Mali Wu: I particularly admire the works that are organic and that are developing constantly. With this point of view, I would say this project by Tue Greenfort is one of my favourites. It is not just an organic piece, it is actually a living piece. Along with the building and the plants this project blends in and resonates harmoniously with its surroundings. That is also why I like it very much.

Robert Zhao Renhui, When Worlds Collide, 2017–18, presented by the Institute of Critical Zoologists (ICZ), mixed media. © Courtesy of the artist and TFAM.