

Hsu Che-Yu: The Life behind the Third Leg

Article: Sapphire (The Art Room) Translation: Lou Yilun; Bobby Xun

Hsu Che-Yu is in Belgium recently.

According to the previous schedule, he would participate a two-year art residence program there and plan to hold an exhibition at the end of this year. However, the recent photography work is suspended due to the influence of Covid-19.

“It may be the time for calm down.” he said, “lots of things happen too fast.”



Artist Hsu Che-Yu
(photo provided by artist)

Hsu Che-Yu was born in Taipei and lived in Tainan for ten years. Since winning his first prize of the “Taoyuan Creation Award” in 2010, his artist’s career has never stopped. In the past ten years, he held five solo exhibitions and attended more than 40 group exhibitions. He has won lots of awards, but also refused to receive some awards. He self-learned animation, but his work *Microphone Test: A Letter to Huang Guo-Jun* (hereinafter to be referred as *Microphone Test*) five years ago is still memorized by people. In recent years, he has been working at the pace of one work per year and finished *Re-rupture*, *Lacuna* and *Single Copy*. Every work continues and completes the core of his art practice.

Hsu Che-Yu’s works are always centred in certain public incidents, for example, a criminal case, one news or single clip of history. All of them have been transformed into part of his works. He has publicly stated more than once about the influence

of “Animation News” on his art practice. Nowadays, this kind of simple 3D animation method has been used by plenty of mainland media. However, this method mostly applies to real murder or violence cases happened in Taiwan 11 years ago. Besides, the Taiwan local media have discussed over this animation approach, and some criticized it.

Hsu Che-Yu frankly shared his opinions on it: the first “Animation News” certainly was targeted on attracting people’s attentions. Also, his earlier works definitely learned from it. Then after several year’s practice, he started to be interested in the connection between personal memories and public incidents.



Artwork *Single Copy*, 2019
Single-channel video
(Photo provided by artist)

Artwork *Single Copy*, which is exhibited last year, is one of the examples. The main character of this video -Chang Chung-I, is the younger brother of the twins. They are Taiwan’s first successful twin separation surgery case. Forty-one years ago, 3-year-old brothers were sent to the operating table and the whole separation process was broadcasted by TV station. After that, they entered the “The Truman Show”. They had to deal with multi roles, including private, personal, public and social roles, under the public attention.

“What interests me is how a public incident transformed into a public memory through the media broadcast.” Hsu Che-Yu said.

People who watched his work will understand the power of the narrator and

conversation. Not only the absent Chen Wan-Yin in *Microphone Test*, but also the 3D animation maker in *Lacuna* and Chang Chung-I in *Single Copy*, their words decorate the whole videos. Some of them sound like an explanation of work, and some of them seem like totally irrelevant to the content.

Words and narrative perhaps contribute to the “affinity side” of Hsu Che-Yu’s work, while he may not intend to do it. After all, surrounded by video works that are more focused on the conceptual side without plots and conversation, the compulsory of “tell a detailed story” seems less important.

Lots of Taiwan directors know how to demonstrate a trivial thing to the audience in movies. But will it also work for contemporary art?

Microphone Test has given out the response.

But Hsu Che-Yu is still on the way to find the answer.



Artwork *Single Copy*, 2019

Exhibition photos of exhibition “Hugo Boss Award for Emerging Asian Artist 2019”
(Artwork provided by artist, photos provided by Shanghai Rockbund Art Museum)

Talk with Hsu Che-Yu

Split or keep? About *Single Copy*

Q: What's the starting point of *Single Copy*?

Hsu Che-Yu: It can be traced back to the last work *Lacuna*. That work is related to brotherhood and brother memories. There is a set of shots——my brother and sister in law went to National Museum of Natural History in Paris during the honeymoon. There was a specified area to display siamese animals in the museum. When I saw it, I think of the brotherhood. It looks like there is no connection between them, but when people talk about twins, they would fantasy about whether they are psychologically connected and curious about whether the body memories of sharing the same egg would influence their life later on. Together with these questions, I shot *Single Copy*.

Q: What's your deepest feeling towards Chung-Jen & Chung-I's case. How does these ideas involve into work?

Hsu Che-Yu: How an incident transforms into a public memory through the media broadcast. This part interests me most.

In my opinion, from the point of beginning the live broadcasting, they already became the victim of media. Media took advantage of their bodies by violence. That surgery was not just a medical experiment but also related to political propaganda. It was unethical. Under this circumstance, Chung-Jen and Chung-I's bodies were not only belonging to themselves, but also became the body of media, the body of politics. As the iconic people of Taiwan in the 80s, they frequently contacted with people related to politics and entertainment. They were also close to religious organizations. In other words, they may be living in the "media world".



Upper: more than 100 cameras are 3D scanning Chang Chung-I's body simultaneously

Middle: Reconstruct Chang Chung-I's hand by means of turning the mold

Down: Exhibition photos of exhibition "Hugo Boss Award for Emerging Asian Artist 2019"

(photo provided by artist)

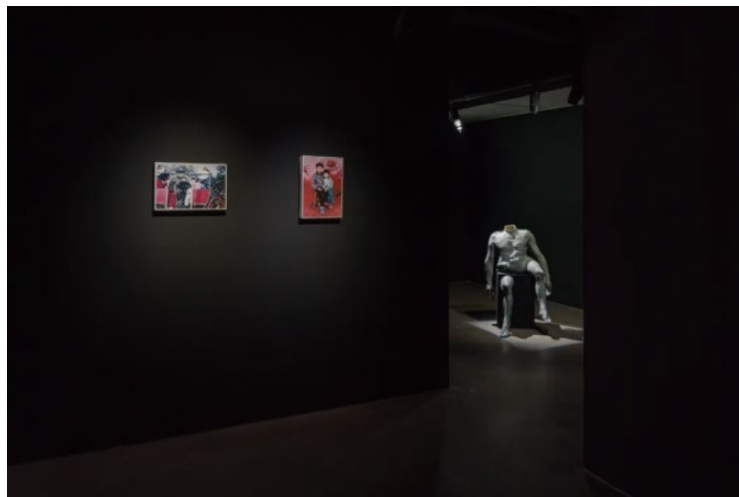
In this work, I used two methods at the same time——moulding and 3D scanning to rebuild Chang Chung-I's body)

Before the age of three, their lower bodies link together all the time. Each of them

has one leg and also shares the leg in the middle. In other words, they both can control and feel the middle leg.

For me, “the third leg” has the meaning of “selection”. From the perspective of law, they are both independent individuals. However, as for the third leg, it comes from the same body, so shall it be divided as well? This is not limited to the discussion at the medical level, but also decided and negotiated among government officials and politicians. During the surgery, the doctor chose to give up the third leg and divided the organs in the body. This was not only a medical question but also an ethical issue. For example, there was only one reproductive organ, who can take it? If it was given to elder brothers, then the younger brother became the sacrifice. Vice versa.

When producing the work, I want to know whether the third leg is left leg or right leg. However, Taiwan University Hospital doesn't have data on it. It only stated two things: firstly, it is a shared leg. Secondly, this leg doesn't have its fingerprint. Therefore, I copied Chung-I's left leg and finished my work.



Exhibition photos of exhibition “Hugo Boss Award for Emerging Asian Artist 2019”
(work provided by artist; photo provided by Shanghai Rockbund Museum)

Q: The moving of the cameras in *Single Copy* is direct and simple, similar to the documentary. Are you chasing for this type of shot language?

Hsu Che-Yu: I wasn't trained in filmmaking academy, so I am not deliberately aiming to be simple. Maybe because I am not good at shooting.

I hired a professional photographer to help me with this video. He did so well in some clips that I cut it instead, because it doesn't look like my work. For example, there was one scene that Chang Chung-I walks towards the motorcycle and sit on that. Next scene was that he drove the motorcycle around to practice. The original shot was smoother. The photographer shot every part of Chung-I's body to present

the process of him starting the motorcycle. When I first time saw the scene, I think I would definitely keep it. Nevertheless, at the final editing stage, I think it was too excellent that it doesn't look like my work.

I am not pursuing simple shot style, but want to achieve a pure feeling in the video: a bit of "movie", and a bit of "documentary". If the feeling of "movie" or "documentary" is too much, I don't think it is good enough personally.



Artwork *Microphone Test: A Letter to Huang Guo-Jun*, 2015

Single-channel video

(photo provided by artist)

***Microphone Test*: a "letter" which can't be responded**

Q: *Microphone Test* is the first video work with a narrator. It has a strong sense of narrative. What's the logical connection among author Huang Guo-Jun and three people in the video?

Hsu Che-Yu: When I started to think about this work, I didn't intend to add the literature part to it. *Microphone Test* was shot from 2013 and cost 2 years in total. There is a shift from the primary thought to the final outcome.

At the beginning, I just wanted to shoot stories of my three friends nearby: Yüan Chih-Chieh, my best friend in high school; Chen Liang-Hui, my ex-girlfriend. When shooting this video, we have already broken up; Lo Tien-Yü is Yüan Chih-Chieh's girlfriend. Now she is his wife. The reasons behind choosing them as the main

characters are: on the one hand, they are my closest people, though this reason is not important for the audience; on the other hand, it seems like a random choice, but actually their stories are linked with me as well. I think whether can they represent the shared memories of our time? For example, we all faced the divorce of parents, emotional alienation and even suicide of relatives when we are young.

The idea of using Huang Guo-Jun as the clue in the work comes from Chen Wan-Yin.

It is quite straightforward to cooperate with Wan-Yin when I kick off this project—

—I don't know how to write a play, and she as the playwright has to link the stories.

It sounds like finding technical support, similar to finding photographers for some videos. However, I realized that I was over-simplified this scenario after the cooperation started. Writing a play is definitely not a purely technical task. A playwright is also a creator. I didn't predict it at the beginning, but I received a totally different result in the end. I can't imagine that without her cooperation, how would the work be like, though it couldn't be the current one.

When Wan-Yin first mentioned Huang Guo-Jun, I was strongly against it. The contraction is like "do you really understand what I want to do", but she very insisted on it. Therefore, it took one year for us to discuss on shall we add Huang Guo-Jun into our work. Later on, Wan-Yin persuaded me and rewrote the whole play. At that time, I already made some progresses. Until the decision of adding literature concept was made, I started to shot Huang Guo-Jun related scene and deleted content which is irrelevant to him.

The reason for us to allow this big shift to happen is that we both are not graduated from animation. Usually, the professional animation people won't change storyboard easily, because it would disturb the whole creation process. Because of our "unprofessional", we allow to change the main storyline after one year's shooting.



Artwork *Microphone Test: A Letter to Huang Guo-Jun*, 2015

Single-channel video

(Photo provided by artist)

Q: What kind of role Huang Guo-Jun plays in the work? Why it has to be him?

Hsu Che-Yu: Before the suicide, Huang Guo-Jun wrote a letter format essay *Report safety*, telling his mom that he won't take the suicide. It is a fiction literature work, permeated with the performative dark humor. However, two months after writing the letter he executed the suicide.

What we want to talk about is not Huang Guo-Jun, or not just Huang Guo-Jun. We actually want to think about the creation condition exposed by Huang Guo-Jun.

Other 90s authors—including Yüan Che-Sheng, Chiu Miao-Chin also took suicide.

The common trait of them was that they mix creation and reality, becoming a status of chaos. Therefore, we won't presume the audience to know about Huang Guo-Jun before watching this work. Of course, if Huang Guo-Jun's readers come to visit, I would be quite happy and looking forward to their feedback. When I was doing the work, I had done lots of homework and watched his books, which surely influenced my work.

Q: After adding the literature text into work, do you generate any new thought on video?

Hsu Che-Yu: My biggest feeling is that the modernism creation logic is letting you exclude all the things except atheistic, There is an opinion that—at least based

on the fine art training I received in Taiwan——art is not a platform to “tell a story”.

This opinion may show that concept is more important than work in contemporary art. It results in an outcome that: you may understand the main opinion of a book, but it doesn't mean you have read the book; you can know the content of a movie, but it doesn't mean you have watched the movie. But, some contemporary artwork may really not worth to see? If so, I feel pity for it. Now I prefer to learn from literature and movies. Novels and movies can upgrade a tiny thing to an extraordinary level, but contemporary art doesn't always work like that. I am trying to figure out the mechanism behind it and what can I do to change it.



Artwork *Lacuna*, 2015
Single-channel video
(Photo provided by artist)

Q: Your works are related to individual or mass memories. Are stories in your video fictional or real?

Hsu Che-Yu: I can share a story of Chen Liang-Hui. When we were still together, one time she had acute meningitis and was deeply comatose for a month. The doctor predicted she may be not able to wake up anymore. She waked up eventually, but some of her memories disappeared. For example, she used to tell me about her parents' fierce quarrel. When I sought her to shoot *Microphone Test* and let her act that scene. She said she didn't have that experience and I must remember it wrong. But I firmly believed I was right. Then she told me: it could be that she lost her memories after the illness, or it could also possible that she mistaken the dream as reality.

From my perspective, I think this brain is selectively forgetting something. Maybe due to meningitis, she exaggerated a normal conflict (which is a symptom of meningitis). Therefore, when I was shooting the video, I thought memory can be “real”, but it didn’t refer to actually happened things, because everyone’s subjective emotion would emphasize or weaken memories.

I used to talk with Lo I-Chün about *Last Words from Montmartre*. This work was fiction, but it indicated the suicide of Chiu Miao-Chin; it was not a documentary literature, not a diary, but it echoed with Chiu Miao-Chin’s destiny. Hence, it was not important anymore if it is “real” or not. You could state that creation was “real”, but you didn’t need to utilize a detective approach to tackle with a real incident in the real world.



Artwork *Re-rupture*, 2017

Single-channel video

(photo provided by artist)

Animation News: reality and fiction

Q: you used to state that your earlier animation creation was influenced by “Animation News”. At that time, the mainstream media criticized this new arisen representation method and pointed out this method ignited mass emotion by

spreading violent cases. How do you view its media attribute?

Hsu Che-Yu: "Animation news" has its problem, but it can't eliminate the advantage of it. We constantly say that animation is a type of bionics, while "Animation News" overpasses bionics and invades the real world with the support from media.

The production process of making animation news is quite special. A real case based animation news can be made and broadcast within one afternoon. Animators will be built on the clues provided by police or journalists to create 3D figure models. Every figure model has its own "code" and becoming the material for future news.

Although there are separate individual cases from the audience's perspective, for the animation company, every figure model has its name, becoming a system and repetitively applying on suitable cases later on. It is similar to watching a fiction movie, having different situations inside and outside.

Q : Many of your works relates to public incidents in the history, including some criminal cases. What are the reasons behind for you to track those news hot topics?

Hsu Che-Yu: I didn't think that much at the beginning, and I just follow the choices of "Animation News". They always focus on those criminal and violent cases, so my creation comes after it.

Even when I was making the *Microphone Test*, I didn't consider it. Because in this movie, things like extramarital affair and argument between parents, and suicide of grandfather are actually happened on my friends, I have some identical life experience as well. If you see those things in the media, you will feel terrified, but for me they are just daily life.

This type of daily life continues in *Re-rupture*. I added 1995's mafia fight into the movie. This case itself was violent, but I was not deliberately adding the fight part. As for me, it was a clip of memory. I was ten years old at that time. I knew the case through news and kept memorizing it until now.

In terms of Chung-Jen & Chung-I's case, I didn't experience the TV broadcast personally, but knew their story through children's encyclopedia. This was my memory and the starting point of knowing them. I can't deny that I did follow the media to dig into the novelty part. But from another perspective, these cases are memories and actually happened "daily life".



Hsu Che-Yu studio
(photo provided by artist)

Tainan

Q: You were born in Taipei, but lived in Tainan for ten years. What kind of changes does the environment bring to you?

Hsu Che-Yu: There are lots of people in Taipei. It's crowded. Although Taipei has efficient transportation system, it's not convenient to move around. In Tainan, everyone rides motorcycle and goes around freely.

Tainan has a unique art ecology "spatial commensalism", which didn't exist in other cities. There are spaces and organizations in various sizes, under the charge of artists, curators and so on. Although the space is small, the exhibition is serious and committed. If a curator wants to introduce an international exhibition, he/she certainly would link every art space together to promote. In Tainan, art spaces are connected and become an alliance.

I am quite fond of this kind of communication. It is not a social event, but is closer to school life. Everyone has a studio and built near each other. At night, people bring beer to visit others. It is a sense of life. No matter the artwork itself or the creative environment, this sense of life is a must for me. However, this sense of life is relatively hard to achieve in Taipei.

Q: Do you have a gallery to represent you in Taiwan?

Hsu Che-Yu: I don't have one in Taiwan, but in Shanghai I cooperate with Vanguard gallery and is represented by it.

Q: How about the creation situation internationally?

Hsu Che-Yu: I think it's relatively easy for Taiwan artists to do their art practice locally because the government offers support and it is not hard to get. However, if they leave the comfort zone, the situation would be changed. Based on my personal experience, the foreign audience may be interested in Asia and Taiwan. However, their Asian perception is "symbolized". They are hard to truly understand the content of your work, or truly understand the Asian culture and society.

I know that it is a difficulty for creators. Of course, artists can state that I don't care what do you think and I just do my work. But I feel it's too naïve. Unless you completely avoid keeping pace with outside, otherwise you have to face those problems. How to communicate with outside efficiently through works. Creators need to build a platform in their work. This is what I am learning and working on.

Q: What's your latest creation plan?

Hsu Che-Yu: I have an art residence program in Belgium and one exhibition at the end of this year. Now I am making one animation video or so per year. If lacking financial support, I will not start new animation project due to the realistic consideration. At current stage, there are lots of exhibitions delayed and canceled due to the pandemic. My creation process is suspended as well. For me, it may be the moment to calm down. Things happen too fast.