

The Collaborative Creation in *Plant-Matter NeoEden*

Text by Lu Chien-ming

Plant-Matter NeoEden, a series of art action projects initiated in 2007, has always had its creators name labeled “Hsu Su-chen & Lu Chien-ming,” as these projects were all attempts of “collaborative creation.” It originated in the summer of 2006 when Hsu Su-chen proposed an experiment of “collaborative creation” that would last one year. At the time, apart from elaborating on the spirit of “collaborative creation” and the technical action strategies, she also conveyed two unmistakable messages.

First of all, the “collaborative creation” should not be “a simple technical support or collaboration in media.”

Hsu had never been an artist who relied on fixed creative media, which freed her from the restriction and limitation of media techniques. In her work that seemed to be a dance performance, from intangible elements like physical sensation and inner spirit were directly demonstrated outside of the body (Figures 1 & 2). In her seemingly static installations, through manifesting the absent physical labor, the audience instead felt the spiritual struggle bound within the body (Figure 3). In my case, my works have also been considered depicting the landscape aesthetics of “group labor” through the application of mixed creative media, such as landscape, architecture, crafts, music, forms of labor, and bodily expression. In actuality, the utilization and expression of media in our case had always been a critical form in the creative process as long as the expression of different media did not overcome the abstract



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About Temperature (2003), Hsu Su-chen and Zhou Jia-xin, Warehouse No. 4, Art Site of Chiayi Railway Warehouse. Performing on the ice, the sensation of the body was conveyed straightforwardly to the audience. She blindfolded her eyes, but opened the physical sensation of the audience. Thin rubber strings tied with feathers bound the visitors as the performers meandered through the crowd during the dance performance, and finally released their hold on the tightened thin rubber strings.

spirit that one aims to convey. In addition, the media that were selected and used all came from materials we had come into contact in the everyday life. In order to maintain the context of the original media, the works created were apt to be more like installations most of the time. Therefore, although there was a huge disparity between our use of media and techniques, it naturally led to a more diversified outcome of media and techniques in the process of the collaborative creation. What we had confirmed since the very beginning of our collaborative creation, however, was that we should not let the collaborative creation become a simple mutual technical support and collaboration.



3

Synapses of Anxiety, 2002. Hsu Su-chen, Pier-2 Art Center. Clothes that were previously collected were meticulously ironed and folded into an identical size. Although the actual labor of ironing and folding was not witnessed at the site of the installation, for people who had ironed and folded clothing in large quantity for a long time, they would feel the extreme sufferance of involuntary manual labor emanating from the compulsory, mechanicalized body, only through which the unnamed, hidden pain could be physically tolerated, saving the spirit and mind from a total collapse.

Secondly, “collaborative creation” did not refer to the concept of “cross-discipline” but that of “dissolving disciplines.” Due to the fact that we had both played multiple roles and possessed diverse experiences, our thinking was immediately drawn to a direction that was deeper and more fundamental. On the one hand, it was unnecessary to discuss the similarities and connections between our past works as neither of us thought that art disciplines existed. For us, it was only because what we paid attention to was limited to the differences in the daily and creative life. The basis of our “collaborative creation,” for this reason, should be built on a wider foundation, which would be found in a much broader world of the field and not be confined to some previously existed creative issues and forms.

Then, the “collaborative creation” began with a trip of field research. Initially, we mostly focused on the Southwest coastal area in Taiwan, namely the areas in Chiayi and Tainan where the No. 17 Provincial Highway ran through. In those days, I was already very familiar with this area, particularly because I initiated the cultural preservation and environmental restoration of Anshun Salt Field in Tainan. In fact, since 1996, I have been actively visiting different places in this area, primarily investigating the native countries of urban immigrants as well as their identification with the land while resisting the domestication of urban civilization. The momentum came from two types of awareness about nature and land that were developed in my adolescent years. One was the nostalgic feeling towards the coastal regions where salt was produced, which was prompted by the native literature; the other had its root in the habit of solitary exploration of streams, woods and the

wilderness developed since childhood.

After teaming up with Hsu, the previous content that seemed to be only nostalgia-prone was expanded, and the entire the rhythm and flow of the field research had changed. At the same time, through her personal traits, I began to observe a field experience of “exchanging physical circumstances,” which was ultimately different from the quality of being overly detached in my past works. In the process of the field research, we felt the land directly and exchanged circumstances with the indigenous villagers. Little by little, we revealed our own “physical life” and the intimate, umbilical relationship between the land and the society. Our bodies gradually transformed into the “landscape” as our “physical life” epitomized the pulse of the society. Meanwhile, we had begun to detect the power within ourselves.

During the field research in this area, several core issues in Hsu’s previous creative works were continued and some major objectives were extended. In addition to making direct contact and exchange with villagers and nature that enabled us to grasp the core more, the range and scope of the field also expanded along with the growing context.

During this period of time, what caught our attention first was the living condition of women in this coastal area, especially women that got married and moved here. Although their sense of loneliness had taken root deeper and deeper, their lives seemed to have integrated into the society of the tribe as well as the nature as the piercingly cold sea wind blew. The silent figures doing daily laborious work, the apparel of variegated floral patterns, and the accordant rhythm of laughter reminiscent of migrating fish swarms put together the female landscape of the coastal area. On the other hand, Vietnamese brides here endeavored to maintain their affectionate connections between two homes across the vast ocean with the support of their immigrant sisters, precious children, constantly advanced mobile and information technologies as well as flights to visit families and relatives between their hometowns and Taiwan.

The next was the shared circumstances and conditions between the nature of the western coastal area and the village people. This place had been treated as if it were a land area. Cities, towns and industrial parks were built there; so were power and incineration plants. Urban wastes like sewage, garbage and exhaust fume were directed to this region, which was unable to get rid of the wastes. From an aerial view, banks of fish farms and salt fields divided the coastal sea into fragments of waters. Just spending time with the fishermen and salt makers in the tidal creeks where there were high and low tides twice a day, we would understand what life was like in this vast intertidal zone. No. 17 Provincial Highway was also called the cancer highway because it ran through regions where they had the highest cancer rate in Taiwan. It ran through these regions and further extended into roads that had eventually mapped out our main field investigation.

We began to document the living condition of animals and plants on this natural landscape, visiting and exploring each village there to fully comprehend how the residents had developed and

sustained their lives in the intertidal zone. During the time of the field research, we also participated in the community reform movements there, which allowed us to more efficiently understand the local situations. The ebb and flow of the tides came and went twice a day; the appearance and disappearance of mosquitos and flies synchronized with the sunrises and sunsets; the cycles of searing sun and freezing wind continued; the seasons saw the coming and returning of the migratory birds; the villagers measured their lives with temple activities and religious festivals. All these slowly integrated into both of our lives and formed the rhythm of our field research.

In the course of the field research, Hsu Su-chen had many smaller exhibitions or presentations that came naturally; sometimes it was by some temple, or on the side of the road, or even on the desks used for community meetings. Being perceived as a female artist, she sometimes held by herself the audio and video recording equipment, or displayed all kinds of unusual and touching objects, or diligently joined in people's labor work. I vividly witnessed the artist's attempt to restore her creative works and physical actions back into a more fundamental state with creative techniques that were more introspective, letting her spirit span across different physical and social circumstances for more profound and substantial exchanges.



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The Fertile Surface of the Earth, 2007. Hsu Su-chen & Lu Chien-ming. The left and the upper right pictures were taken at Fugui Jiao, Shimen District, and the lower right picture was taken at SLY Art Space.



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Plant-Matter NeoEden: Taipei, 2008. Hsu Su-chen & Lu Chien-ming, SLY Art Space and its neighborhood in Taipei.

The two major orientations that were practically geographical and anthropological had sustained the actual scope of the field research; and its investigation was rendered larger and more unbounded, especially reaching from the riverbed region of Da Han River in the North, to the coastal area along the Coastal Highway No. 2 in the northern coast, to various gathering sites in cities of different migrant and ethnic minorities, to the natural conditions of dilapidated areas in metropolitan regions. Additionally, we also followed the geo-relations and issues surfaced in the context of the field, and brought our investigation further into other countries, particularly traveling to Vietnam to visit the coastal regions of the foreign brides' native home as well as venturing to Australia, Hong Kong, Thailand, Palau, Yap, and Yunnan.

In the process of the "collaborative creation," we constructed the basic framework of our collaboration on a more solid field research, and created an archive for the documentation of the field investigation. For an artist that had her own body and action as the core, the field archives simultaneously outlined the artist's existence in a world she had lived in.

As the collaborative creation had progressed, we found our ultimate goal, which was that immersing ourselves in the field would lead us to find our “physical life” as our lives were simply the body landscape integrated into the field.

Lu Chien-ming

Lu’s creative work centers on the environment and ecology with an integration of different disciplines. For Lu, many social problems originate from the fact that the real situations in Taiwan are in conflict with the special, professional knowledge and skills. Therefore, he has strived to resolve the dilemma with an approach based on the three aspects of the construction of knowledge, the professional skills, and the social actions. Lu created Taiwan Field Factory in 2001 and established Taiwan Field School in 2005. Employing the approaches of business management for profit organizations to facilitate the works of the nonprofit organizations, the primary missions are divided into three categories: the first category is “Movements of Community and Ecology Preservation”; the second category is “Cultural Property and Cultural Landscape Preservation”; the third category is “Artist Village Management and Public Art Network.” In 2008, he started to collaborate with the artist Hsu Su-chen to initiate a series of exhibitions and movements, titled Plant-Matter NeoEden, which won the 8th Taishin Arts Award for their companionship of assisting the Sa’owac tribal village to reconstruct their community and to revitalize the indigenous culture. He is currently teaching the program of the Bachelor of Design in Indigenous Culture at Chung Yuan Christian University.