

## **Hsu Su-chen (1966~2013)**

Taiwanese visual artist, independent curator and freelance writer.

Hsu Su-chen was born in Nanzih District, Kaohsiung, Taiwan in 1966. Since her childhood, Hsu Su-chen's mother had endeavored to give her a good education; she started learning ballet at the age of four, and began to learn Chinese calligraphy, ink painting and took piano lessons when she was a third grader. Therefore, she had started learning various artistic skills as a child. In 1976, when she was in the fifth grade, her father passed away in a car accident. She had always vividly remembered the weather of that particular day. She used to say that it was a summer day, and the air was stiflingly warm as if the foehn was blowing. Her teacher asked her to come out of the classroom and told her the tragic news about her father. A couple of her tears dropped on the floor, seemed to have vaporized instantly. Other than that, the youthful girl appeared to be exceptionally calm. However, since that day, whenever the weather was similar to that day, her body would act as if it remembered something and reacted in some way. It marked the beginning of her body memory.

Hsu's junior high school years were spent at St. Dominic Catholic High School, which was in another school district. Although she continued to practice painting and dancing, her mother opposed her pursuit in a formal art education because she believed that "being an artist equaled poverty." Therefore, she gave up the chance of majoring in arts. However, Hsu was in her rebellious adolescent years at the time. Instead of continuing a high school education, she deliberately chose the junior college system and got into the Department of Laboratory Science, Chung Hwa University of Medical Technology. In the junior college, she formed a band, organized concerts, and enjoyed a lively and active time.

After graduation in 1986, Hsu was immediately offered a job to do nuclear medicine and other related work at a clinic in Taipei. While she was in Taipei, Lan-Ling Theatre Workshop happened to hold a training program. Out of 200 people that signed up for the selection, Hsu overcome the difficulties in the way and was successfully selected as one of the forty trainees. In the training program, Hsu came across post-modern issues and other kinds of contemporary trends of thought for the first time. It was the year before the lifting of martial law, and the socio-political atmosphere was like a raging storm. The experience created a tremendous impact on Hsu, who grew up in the South and had never come into contact with similar issues. Because of participating in Lan-Ling Theatre Workshop's experiential performance of the first outdoor environmental theatre, which promoted the idea that the true theatrical spirit should reside in the interactions with the public and in the field rather than in the theatre, an idea that would germinate in a profound way in Hsu Su-chen's mind.

During 1987 and 1994, Hsu worked as a medical laboratory scientist for clinical pathology at Kaohsiung Chang Gung Memorial Hospital.

She got married to Dr. Tseng Chin-huang in 1990, followed by the birth of their daughter in 1991 and that of their son in 1995, and stepped into the role of a full-time housewife; with the support of her family, she retrieved her artistic passion and talent.

In 1998, Hsu Su-chen participated for the first time in a visual art exhibition

titled, *Kaohsiung Citizens' Exhibition—The River Stringing Together the Memory of this City*<sup>1</sup>, in which she exhibited an installation that was a memory box, “Opening the Box of Memory.” The work had Hsu’s mother as the narrative center, combining mixed media such as music, sensors, and reproduced photos, and was a buzz-generating piece in the exhibition because of its rich narrative form. It was also the debut work for Hsu. In 1999, she held her first solo exhibition, *Spirit of Net Interior/Glad to Face the Past*, at Chai Chiu Art Center in Kaohsiung.

In 2000, Hsu Su-chen entered the MFA program of the Department of Fine Arts, National Kaohsiung Normal University (NKNU). Before she entered the graduate school, Hsu had already audited classes in the department. While studying for the MFA, she also began to learn driving; the independence of mobility allowed a total liberation of her body, mind, and vision.

In 2001, as a graduate student, Hsu collaborated with Professor Tsai Hsien-yiu, who was then working at Cheng Shiu Art Center (Cheng Shiu University Office of Arts and Culture today); and together, they curated the exhibition, *Translation of Spirit—The Conversation between Psychiatrics and Art*. This was Hsu’s first curatorial experience, and she boldly worked with the Department of Psychiatry of Kaohsiung Chang Gung Memorial Hospital for this artistic collaboration. The exhibition was first held at Cheng Shiu Art Center in Kaohsiung, and then, at Main Trend Art Gallery in Taipei.

The year 2004 was an abundant year for Hsu’s artistic career. She not only obtained her MFA from the Department of Fine Arts at NKNU, but also awarded with the grant for the “Taiwan-UK Artists Fellowships Programme,” and departed for her first three-month residency abroad as a representative digital artist at the Media Center Huddersfield, UK. This residency experience widened her vision as an artist as well as a curator, and allowed her to deeply examine the situation of Taiwan, which further influenced her artistic philosophy in later years. Meanwhile, she curated *City Odysseys—Loosing and Lost*<sup>2</sup> at Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts, gave a solo exhibition, “*Siamese Twin Symbiosis Project*” *Series—The Result of Preliminary Research for the Pseudo-Science Fiction*<sup>3</sup>, at Prototype Art Gallery in Tainan. Both exhibitions made finalists in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Taishin Arts Award in the following year (Top 7 Annual Visual Art Exhibitions).

In 2005, Hsu was elected as the chairperson of Taiwan Women’s Art Association (2005-2007). In the same year, she co-curated *Intertidal Zone Art Monitoring Station—Annual Project for 2005*<sup>4</sup> with Lu Ming-te and Jung Sin-pi. This large-scale curatorial project enabled her to have more in-depth reflection on the creation and ethics of art, making her inclined to temporarily pause her work as an

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<sup>1</sup> Venue: Mountain Art Museum, Kaohsiung.

<sup>2</sup> The exhibition was funded by the Council for Cultural Affairs, OK Center for Contemporary Art Austria, and the Bureau of Cultural Affairs, Kaohsiung City Government.

<sup>3</sup> The exhibition was awarded the National Culture and Art Foundation 93-2 scholarship for interdisciplinary art.

<sup>4</sup> The exhibition was funded by the National Culture and Arts Foundation (Taiwan) Production Grants to Independent Curators in Visual Arts, and the British Council Taipei, Arts Council England.

artist and curator.

In 2006, while curating *Green Miracle: Conversation between Art and Ecological Environment* for Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts, Hsu Su-chen made the acquaintance with Lu Chien-ming, the director of Taiwan Field Factory, who strived to live in the field and create art in the field. Hsu did not participate in Lu's project, but voluntarily suggested to Lu the possibility of future collaboration. Before this, Hsu had had quite a few experiences of joining field works, some of which were also interdisciplinary collaborations. However, these collaborations were only temporary, and the actual results and effect did not meet her own expectation. Due to the past experiences, when she proposed the idea to Lu, instead of making a strategic collaboration that aimed to finish a certain project, she focused on the exchange of their past productions and experiences rather than complete something or a new project. Nevertheless, when she started to join Lu's dynamic field activities as an artist, their partnership had already taken root.

In addition to curating exhibitions, making art and academic research, Hsu also had rich experiences in art education and community empowerment. Bringing these knowledge and experiences and entirely submerging in the field had permitted Hsu to embrace wider vision and deeper thinking in terms of artistic creation. She was freed from the confining form and framework of contemporary art, and integrated her experiences in participating in the society, creating works such as *Animal Altar—Chiayi County Route 155*, *Living in the Ocean—Middle Vietnam and Beimen, Taiwan*, *Love Mapping*, and *Dynamic Residence—Taiwan, Vietnam & Australia*. In 2007, while Hsu was the chairperson of Taiwan Women's Art Association, the association collaborated with Tainan Eco-tourism Development Association, and held the exhibition, *Littoral Spinegras Project*, in which Hsu showed two works, *Animal Altar—Chiayi County Route 155* and *Living in the Ocean—Middle Vietnam and Beimen, Taiwan*. The exhibition departed from the previously existing exhibition format, and set out to focus on certain target audience, choosing country and fishing villages as exhibition venues.

Along with her personal artistic creation, Hsu and Lu also worked together in the fields of contemporary art, social movement, geography, ethnology and anthropology. Since 2007, they had created a series of performances, published articles, and participating in academic forums and lectures. Even Hsu's artist-in-residency at The National Herbarium of Victoria Royal Botanic Garden in Melbourne, Australia, which was funded by Taipei Artist Village in 2008 was deemed as a part of their collaboration. Among these collaborative projects, the exhibitions, co-organized with the Sa'owac village in 2009, *Plant—Matter NeoEden: Born in a Vegetable Patch* and *Material World in the Amis Tribe of Riverbank*, received much attention from the Taiwanese contemporary art circle and won the 8<sup>th</sup> Taishin Arts Award in the visual art category in 2010; the one-million prize money was then donated to the village for a reconstruction fund. In November, 2010, Hsu Su-chen, Lu Chien-ming and the Sa'owac village were invited to perform in *Tasi Jui-Yueh Dance Festival: Back to Nature, Our Homes*; the live performance entitled, *Building Homes: Realizing a Social Contract*, included insurance agents of Taishin Holdings as performers (Mr. Lin Keh-hsiao, manager of Taishin Holdings, was also a member of the performing group at that time).

In September, 2011, Hsu was diagnosed of cancer and was hospitalized for treatment. After discharge, during her recovery at home, she still worked in the field. Her participation in a hunting activity in Wufeng Township in Hsinchu someday in the September of 2012 was the last time she showed up in the field. The next day, she was admitted into the hospital for treatment until she passed away.

Film director, Huang Ming-chuan, made two documentaries for Hsu in 2012, which were “Figures of Contemporary Art—Visual Art Film Database of Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts: Hsu Su-Chen”<sup>5</sup> and “Hsu Su-Chen Landscape through Body: Death of a Female Artist”; the latter was filmed by Huang Ming-chuan during Hsu’s last admission for treatment in the hospital.

Hsu Su-chen passed away on January 31, 2013. In March, 2014, Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts held *Commemorative Exhibition of Hsu Su-chen* while the documentary, “Hsu Su-Chen Landscape through Body: Death of a Female Artist,” was premiered in *Great Spirit of South—2014 Chiayi City International Art Documentary Film Festival*.

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<sup>5</sup> Released by Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts. Time of release was March, 2013.