Earth Work 1979

Toh, Charmaine

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Working Together:

In conversation with Tang Da Wu

— Tamares Goh
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Earth Work was a series of artworks made in late 1979 after Tang Da Wu returned from his studies in London. He discovered a vacant plot of land on the edge of Sembawang Road and Upper Thomson Road that was soon to be developed for public housing. This particular plot of land provided a resource and stimulation for the young artist, as he worked over time in its natural surroundings and drew out some fascinating insights.

Da Wu started a series of collaborations with elements of nature such as the sun, soil and rain. Begin with Taiji was a series of 64 cotton sheets of cloth, measuring approximately 32cm by 24cm each, which he laid out in the sun. Sewn onto each cloth was a strip of black felt. Every day, Da Wu would pack up one sheet of cloth. The longer the cloths stayed out, the longer they would be exposed to the sun, marked by a gradual yellowing each day until the last remaining cloth would be the most yellowed. The eventual display of all 64 pieces showed a gradation from whites to yellows, albeit with subtle tonal shifts. (Fig. 1)

Another work, The Product of the Rain and Me, was made as a result of Da Wu’s observation that when a leaf falls on the soil, the soil around the leaf would subsequently be eroded, but the soil on which the leaf has landed is protected and the soil level remains. To emphasise this natural phenomenon, Da Wu prepared some earth on square plates, made drawings of circles on them using white glue, and left them out in the rain. The result was that in the areas that he drew on, the white glue provided resistance and the soil did not erode, thus achieving circular soil reliefs of a few centimetres in height. Da Wu made artworks like these to reveal the workings of nature, to show that fundamentally there is constant change taking place in the cosmos, and that the artist’s role is to bear witness to what is happening in nature and to foreground this marvel to others. (Fig. 2)

Although he is often described as the founder of the seminal Artists Village, Da Wu emphasises that The Artists Village was “co-founded” and was never an individual effort by himself. The efforts of the other members who stayed and contributed to the space made its activities and the use of the space robust. When he, his wife Hazel McIntosh and their son Zai Tang took the first step in offering a place for people to participate in art activities, it was the strong forging of ties between many different artists and their open dialogues and exchanges that enabled The Artists Village to flourish.

The mode of collaboration is essential to Da Wu. The great Mingei potter and philosopher Kawai Kanjiro once said, “We do not work alone. Man can make a bowl of clay. He can make it round and smooth, but until it is fired it cannot be used. Man can lay the fire and light the flame, but it is the fire itself that completes the bowl. And that fire is something bigger and more wonderful than any man.” Da Wu is acutely aware that there is a greater ecology at work out there—perhaps even beyond the sun, the moon, the earth or gravity—that humankind works alongside and in tandem with, so that the rhythms of the universe can be respected, kept in line or observed. This is also in line with the ideas expressed in the I Ching.
Classic Book of Changes, a philosophy that Da Wu has long been curious about and makes reference to.1

This interview was conducted with Tang Da Wu in December 2015.

Tamares Goh (TG) You were 25 when you were studying in England. Your formative experiences in art started there – is this true? What did you discover there that was so different, that left an impression on you?

Tang Da Wu (TDW) Yes, my formal art education started in Birmingham. When I was in Singapore, I learned drawing and painting in secondary school and later through the British Council’s library in Singapore, where I discovered artists such as Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth – they were so great. But when I was in England, I discovered that there were many other artists who were great too. I admired the works of Barry Flanagan. I found out that he taught at Saint Martin’s School of Art (now Central Saint Martins) and I went there to request for him to be my tutor. The school agreed to this request and I was so happy. I studied for a year under Flanagan for my advanced studies in sculpture at Saint Martin’s. Under his tutelage, we did not talk about art. His topics were sometimes even about cheese and wine. But I remembered the chemistry between us was good and the feeling of encouragement was there.

At that time, a gallerist in London named Nicholas Logsdail supported a lot of young artists at his space, Lisson Gallery. He championed the work of artists such as Tony Cragg and so many others who are now great contributors to British art. His patronage was important to artists and their development.

What were you interested in while you were in England?

TDW At that time my belief was that art is everywhere: I bring it out to the audience and allow it into the foreground so as to share it, for other people to experience it. Nature itself creates its own art.

TG Can you describe some of your works back then that illustrated this?

TDW At my solo exhibition in London in 1978, I set up layers of trays. The layers were 30cm apart and each was lined with muslin cloth. On the top tray, I dusted black powder. As it fell through to each subsequent layer of muslin cloth, the marks it left were very similar but with slight changes; and at the bottom layer, the greatest change was recorded. Nature thus intervened; gravity had taken control. I merely allowed this to happen. (Fig. 3)

For another performance, I went to Epping Forest and made drawings with the trees. I pasted some paper on the trees and made markings on them. It was all intuitive; one has to feel the space. I tried to connect the space in the forest with the drawings on the trees. In another instance, I placed a muslin cloth in the forest, the sunlight shone through and I traced the sun’s silhouette with ink and a brush. (Fig. 4)

TG Is this philosophy still guiding you today, that art is everywhere and you are the instrument that allows it through?

TDW Yes, even more so today.

TG When in England, you worked in a broad array of media, with an emphasis on performance art. Why did you gravitate towards performance art?
I chose performance art because I am naturally self-conscious, so it is as much a medium for art as a way for me to deal with myself. I discovered that performance is, for me, the most direct way to communicate with the audience. By making a fool of myself first, there’s no divide and we begin on the same page. The audience feels at ease and they will respond to me.

When you ‘introduced’ some forms of art in Singapore—like performance, installation and using found objects—what was the reaction of the audience?

Many people were curious and perplexed. Some people had many questions, some did not know what to think, and many went along with it and enjoyed it. It was all fun.

Were you concerned about perception, that your works were met with lots of apprehension, that it was not considered ‘art’?

At that time, even I did not know whether it was art, but I knew it was something I enjoyed doing and wanted to share with people through the exhibition. Therefore, whether it was art, or not, did not matter to me then. The exhibition happened so as to stimulate interest.

But isn’t the key message of your work just as important, and it’s important that people understand it?

Messages are important but we are not looking for solutions. What’s more important is that a work can stimulate interest and participation. Questions are good, thoughts are good, different reactions are all good. We are asking for possibilities. Too often, solutions become closed doors.

Collaboration, interaction or participatory responses are some of the essential styles used in the trajectory of your work. Despite the sombre topics, you often introduce an element of play and being tongue-in-cheek. For instance, for One Hand Prayer in Hiroshima in 1992, you made a giant palm sculpture sitting on a mountaintop facing the direction of Singapore, as a gesture of reconciliation for the events of World War II, and you got about 200 women to stamp their palms on this gigantic palm sculpture. Or Sorry Whale, I Did Not Know that You Were in My Camera in 1993, when you asked the audience to pick up the empty cartridges of film rolls that you covered the ground with, with a notice to cooperate and also apologise to the whale skeleton in the room – a work to expose the gravity of using whale gelatin in the film. Then there was the interactive workshop Tapioca Friendship Project in 1995, and your unofficial ‘solo exhibition’ performance at the Singapore Art Museum in 2011, which was engaging, amusing and often light-hearted. (Fig. 5)

That’s right. I often use this method to allow people to ease into the topic. When people are less uptight, it’s easier to talk about things. This is even more so with difficult and serious issues. Also, in my performances, I always approach the audience and initiate contact first, to invite them to participate.

Also, your works tend to be in public spaces?

Yes, for the same reasons, to put the audience at ease in an environment in which they are already relaxed.
TG I notice that ink is one of the materials that you most frequently use and include in performance, and you have made many drawings. What is your affinity with ink?

TDW When you mention ink, do not think of ink in isolation. Please include the brush – it is ink and the brush, they work together. I use ink because it was, first of all, available. It was also a medium that I watched my father use. He taught my sisters and me to use ink and the brush. I use it for its fluidity and the way it works with elements around it, such as water, earth, wind and gravity. It does not work alone, but is dependent on many factors. It is different compared to a material like graphite – for instance you can get precision with graphite. You can read the tiredness or strength of the artist from the day’s work, which is not necessarily a bad thing. As for me, I like to allow things to happen in the medium itself.

TG This reinforces the point that as much as you are purposeful in your work, you allow intervention or interaction from nature or natural elements to help you shape the work. That’s why you titled your works The Product of The Sun and Me, The Product of The Rain and Me...

TDW Yes, it is always a collaborative effort, not an effort from me alone. I am in collaboration with, for instance, the land. The land was waiting for me to learn from it.

TG You were fascinated with local soil while preparing Earth Work.

TDW Yes, the soil here is fascinating. I collected the soil and learned from it. I buried myself in mud. I worked inside the gullies. I enjoyed the experiences. There’s red soil and yellow soil that are readily seen here throughout Malaya, but I discovered purple soil through my search too. In one of the Earth Work series, I exhibited lumps of earth that I had collected. The oil paints that artists use are so readily available in our earth, and do not necessarily have to come from expensive commercial tubes. So I kept the different coloured soils, dried them, ground them and sieved them. They are rich concentrated oxides; the pigments are so rich, that today, after 36 years, their colours are still intact and dense.

TG It seems like the local soil would be the most natural material to use then, for our daily crockery ware, building materials, art materials...

TDW Yes, very much so.

TG What made you want to work with the land?

TDW My first discovery was the gully at Sembawang at the junction of Upper Thomson Road. The gully got deeper each time I visited, and very quickly. It was raining heavily. It was monsoon season. I wanted to document just how quickly the soil was sinking. So I used the gully curtains to help me take note of soil levels and I marked the sinking levels as they went down. I worked on Earth Work for a year from mid-1979 to mid-1980.

TG Borrowing your words, what did you learn from it?

TDW There were a lot of discoveries along the way. You know, we walk past many things every day, but if you stop and try and notice them, they will reveal many things to you. Like the pigments I have described earlier, or simply witnessing the monsoon’s strength – maybe rivers are created this way,
Given that you had a short exhibition of only a few days in 1980 at the then National Museum Art Gallery, how did you feel last year when you were invited, after three and a half decades, to exhibit *Earth Work* again by the new National Gallery Singapore?

I was surprised but very happy to be given the opportunity to show this work again.

I remember you mentioning before that it is not necessary for you to rehash some of your performances or exhibitions?

Of course, some of the works are topical or a reaction to a specific situation. Once they are done, they cannot be repeated again because they make no sense after or they become meaningless. *For Earth Work*, it is still very much relevant today. The land is primordial in its essence and that is what we inherently have.

In the same vein, you continue the trajectory of referring to nature in your work, always as an anchor. In your drawings on banana leaves, you find comfort and hide there, or with the yam leaves, you find freedom in the fields of yam. And your sculptures and workshops in *Jantung Pisang – Heart of A Tree, Heart of A People* discuss the many uses and myths of the banana; and your performances with tapioca, touching on topics of reconciliation, and so on. (Fig. 6)

Yes, I keep going back to nature. And quite naturally so.

Tamares Goh is an arts practitioner who works as an arts administrator. She heads the visual arts team at Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay and has been curating exhibitions there since 2003.
End notes

[1] The land is now renamed as Ang Mo Kio and was developed by the Housing Development Board (HDB) of Singapore.

[2] Tang Da Wu relates the number 64 to Hexagram 64 in I-Ching (The Classic Book of Changes) which relates to the idea of near-completion.


