Yuling Zhong

When Contemporary Art Practices Meet Ethnographic Research in Chinese Societies

Art and ethnography,[1] the empirical research technique of anthropology, have had a rich dialogue and exchange over the history of the twentieth century. Anthropologists conducted ethnographic studies on art within many different cultural contexts; however, they didn't shift the focus on non-Western art, or what was once called primitive art, until the 1930s, when the Surrealist artists disseminated ethnographic information and knowledge for use in their art production. But the most significant encounter between art and ethnography emerged in the 1960s, an era of counterculture and revolution against social norms. In the 1980s, inspired by avant-garde artistic movements, the influential debate about "writing culture" was concerned with how to provide anthropology with adequate forms of writing, reflexivity, and objectivity within a globalized world. This was further advanced in 1995, with Hal Foster's iconic *The Artist as Ethnographer*,[2] in which he raised an ongoing reflection and discussion about the "ethnographic turn" in contemporary art.

On the other hand, over the decades, Asian societies, especially Chinese societies—such as those of mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan— have been affected significantly by urbanization and globalization. With the revival of Western imperialism, neoliberal globalization, and terrorism in the broader reaches of Asia, where living labour has been exploited by capitalist development and threatened by the rising black flag of ISIS, more and more contemporary Chinese artists are seeking social and political engagement with complex issues such as identity crises, migration, and modernity by exploring the potential of ethnography—its contextuality, intersubjectivity, and reflexivity—that encourages collaboration with local communities. Consequently, since the 2000s, the number of contemporary Asian art projects and artworks that have displayed an interest in anthropology and ethnographic research also has been increasing. This is interesting because anthropology was once accused of working with state policies designed to assimilate indigenous peoples into the modern nations to produce a widespread Eurocentric bias, and projected Orientalist fantasies about Asian societies.

Some scholars have argued that there has been a series of misrecognitions[3] and ignorance on the part of artists about the established methods, paradigms, and traditions ethnography within encounters between art and anthropology; other scholars believe that art practice is mostly regarded as something more speculative, experimental, and open-ended, while ethnographic research detects general patterns of behaviour through cultural production, and is considered to be more about in-depth descriptive

accuracy. Rather than defining the differences between art and ethnographic research and following existing theoretical discourses that focus mainly on critiquing the ethnographic relevance of finished art products in contemporary art, I will look into the artistic process in order to understand how artists locate themselves within their fieldwork, how they collaborate with anthropologists to tackle the postcolonized assumption of establishing a stable national identity, and explore the non-Western articulations of modernity and how they reflect upon the knowledge production and politics of representation within contemporary art and anthropology.

Locating the Self: from Landscape to Soundscape

There are contemporary Asian artists who engage with ethnography as method, and anthropology as theory, in a variety of ways. Fieldwork is one of the most frequently used methodologies. For example, in 2014, the young Chinese photographer Cheng Xinhao spent one year photographing the ever-changing landscape of the Panlong River, which flows through the city of Kunming in Yunnan province. He aimed to capture how the river has shaped its surroundings and thus proposed a new perspective for understanding the passing of time and its spatial relationship beyond the river. These photographs ultimately were presented in book form, *The Naming of a River*, which was shortlisted for the 2016 Aperture First Photobook Award.

Cheng Xinhao, "Riverside in the Suburbs," in Cheng Xinhao, *The Naming of a River* (Ningbo: Jiazazhi Press, 2016). © Cheng Xinhao. Courtesy of the artist.

Left: Cheng Xinhao, *The Naming of a River* (Ningbo: Jiazazhi Press, 2016). © Cheng Xinhao. Courtesy of the artist.

Right: Cheng Xinhao, *The Naming of a River* (Ningbo: Jiazazhi Press, 2016). © Cheng Xinhao. Courtesy of the artist.

Photography, as an important instantaneous artistic medium, has its limits, however, in documenting the richness of time, even with long exposures or through a multi-image photographic series. Cheng Xinhao searched for a new mode of artistic inquiry by using an extended ethnographic research method that focused on in-depth study of concrete cases. Before undertaking his fieldwork, Cheng Xinhao examined the archaeological and geographical information in a found archival image, *Pictures of Six Rivers in Yunnan's Provincial Capital*, drawn by Huang Shijie, a Qing dynasty official, which presented multiple images of the Panlong River. In keeping with pursuing a rigorous ethnographic study, Cheng Xinhao spent most of his time engaging with and photographing the surrounding local communities, exploring the associations, differences, and unexpected coincidences that were evident between historical narrative and contemporary individual experience. In the resultant gatefold book, *The Naming of a River*, a

panorama photo of the river was printed on the front side, showing details of the riverside scenery from various perspectives, and the images on the back side displayed different elements representing the interwoven fabric of everyday life along the river: the people living at the river banks, the bridges that cross it, the rocks that show the changes over time, and the plants that renew themselves every year. His treatment of images and text balances the visual tension and rhythm, and requires an investment of patient attention from the reader.

Although photographs since the nineteenth century have been used to document and present ethnographic data as the visual trace of a reality, contemporary anthropologists[4] now use photographs as a part of their process of fieldwork observation, from where the images' specific meanings emerge. Cheng Xinhao was inspired by the static and passively received message that was generated from his process of viewing the hand-drawn Qing map and it further offered him a new model for integrating image and text. In *The Naming of a River,* images operate as the characters of the text. In general, both maps and photographs are representations of space[5] that might be affected by ideologies and politics. As a part of the system of values acknowledging sovereignty, a map inscribes abstract concepts such as "nation state" on images in general, while the photographs fragment the concepts into a collage-like format. In this sense, whereas attempts at achieving the full picture of a river through a scientific sampling strategy may fail, Cheng Xinhao presents a new multidimensional image that reveals unseen and unexplained complexities and the changes that have occurred over time.

Another Hong Kong artist who has also conducted fieldwork research to reconstruct reality is Samson Young. With a Ph.D in music from Princeton University, Samson Young did not receive training solely in contemporary art, but also in classical music composition. But neither

is he exclusively a sound artist. His works create innovative cross-media experiences. He initiated the sonic field investigation project *Liquid Borders* (2012–14) to collect the sounds that form the audio divide that since 2012 separates Hong Kong and mainland China, the year when the Hong Kong government decided to gradually open for public access the closed area near the Hong Kong/Shenzhen border.[6] Over a period of two years, he regularly visited this restricted no-man's land. He used contact microphones to collect and record the vibrations emanating from the wired fences along the security border, and used hydrophones to capture the sounds of running water from the Shenzhen River. After gathering this body of recordings, he edited them into a sound composition that was about thirteen minutes long and then transcribed it into graphic notations.

This work is a document that alludes to anxiety and fear about the incursion of mainland sentiment in Hong Kong society. The news of the imminent liquidation of the border has been a nightmare for those who strongly reject the overly Beijing-centred control. Neither anti- nor pro-Beijing, Samson Young was intrigued by how objects and landscapes could be shaped by these emotions and the tensions between two territories. In some sense, borders or territories are presumed to be visible, physical, concrete, and stable despite the fact that they are merely lines on maps designated by people.

Samson Young, *Liquid Borders I*, 2012–14, graphical notation, sound composition, annotated cartography, 28.9 × 43.1 cm. © Samson Young. Courtesy of the artist and Living Collection, Hong Kong.
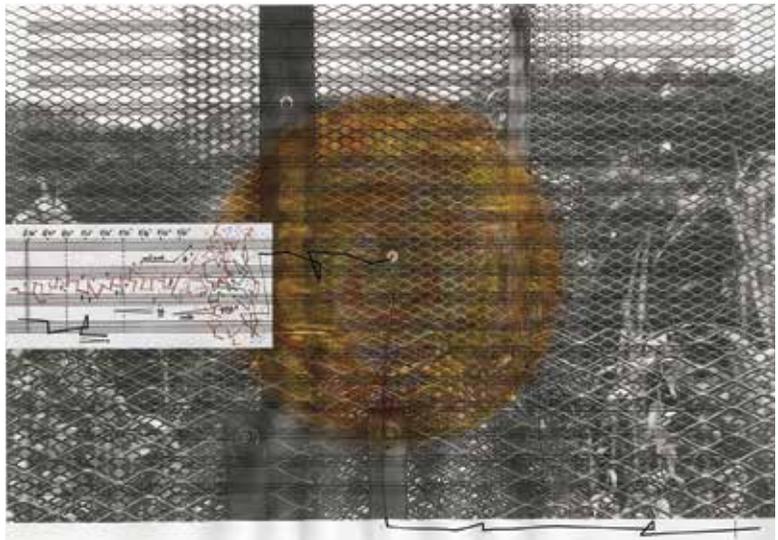
Left: Samson Young, *Liquid Borders I*, 2012–14, graphical notation, sound composition, annotated cartography, 28.9 × 43.1 cm. © Samson Young. Courtesy of the artist and Living Collection, Hong Kong.

Right: Samson Young, *Liquid Borders I*, 2012–14, graphical notation, sound composition, annotated cartography, 28.9 × 43.1 cm. © Samson Young. Courtesy of the artist and Living Collection, Hong Kong.
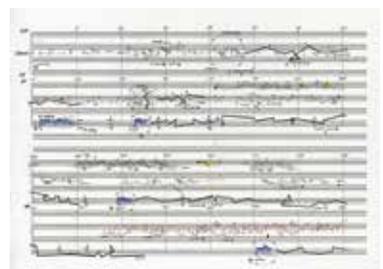
It is the invisible cultural and ideological division that is more difficult to detect, and Samson Young sought to reconstruct the border and fill a future archival deficiency, as Hong Kongers, including himself, know very well that all the fences eventually will be dismantled and there will be no border. In this regard, Samson Young has brought to forefront the essence of borders and their non-stop construction and reconstruction. Mapping his routes and visiting dates, he engaged his body as a tool of ethnographic research on thought-provoking field trips. Making his way through the mosquito-infested swamp to the border, Samson Young used his body as the vehicle for accomplishing his fieldwork, recording his observations in an unconventional way by negotiating the spatial context of the border using the least physical, but most transmissive form—sound—to establish an aural-physical archive of an actual border.

Cheng Xinhao and Samson Young have created artwork based on the reconstruction of geographical reality—landscape and soundscape, respectively—which shows us that ethnographic research—that is, fieldwork study deployed in some art practices—can be well thought out and sophisticated enough to serve its purpose of deepening the discussion beyond the works themselves. Meanwhile, rather than adopting the conventional ethnographer-as-stranger strategy,[7] they conceived their artwork upon the idea of physical interaction to draw a fine line between intimate engagement with objective material and a detachment from reality in order to uncover a concealed discourse. Neither being self-othering and flipping into self-absorption, nor turning their projects into the practices of philosophical narcissism,[8] they created the works by actively using their bodies as an art medium during the process of fieldwork, rather than as

mere self-referential objects. Cheng Xinhao situated his body as the nexus of intersections between the urban life and the multilayered landscape, while Samson Young recast himself as a channel for discourse and action.

When artists deploy ethnographic research methods in their practices, a complex set of interactions arise during the production, reception, and interpretation of self through their artworks, and the contemporary artist can develop new possibilities for experimentation in visual research and representation.

Depicting Local Knowledge: From Individual to Community

American anthropologist Clifford Geertz offered some influential insights in the ethnographic research he published in the 1970s. He sees culture as "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life."[9] In the era of globalization, the process of analyzing local knowledge and collective memory, and their respective social contexts and their economies, is understood in a broader way, especially in the postcolonial arena. When contemporary artists become involved in interpreting a culture's web of symbols, Geertz's idea of "thick description"[10] can be achieved by reading the visual texts as well by producing them.

Some artists are working like ethnographers, while others prefer to work with anthropologists to make their artworks. Adrian Wong is one of those artists. Having received a master's degree in developmental psychology from Stanford University in California, he creates most of his artworks through a research-based methodology arising from his academic training in psychology, linguistics, and anthropology, which is quite uncommon in Hong Kong and even mainland China and Taiwan. He relies heavily on a process of long-term research before embarking on his art projects, a process that includes reading essays, delving into archival materials, and carrying out interviews with figures who might be key to his work. Yet he is not obsessed with textual and archival authentication or with surrounding his works with dry and dated historical material; rather, he looks for the hidden language behind logical and tangible elements like metal grates and hypnagogias[11] in Hong Kong public spaces and displays works with well-known art-making techniques, such as conceptually rigorous sculpting and site-specific performance.

In 2010, with his interest in the redevelopment and historical preservation of modern Hong Kong, Adrian Wong collaborated with the cultural anthropologist Castagña Ventura to conduct a rigorous and elaborate three-month fieldwork study in Western Hong Kong Island. They carried out in-depth interviews with local small business owners and craftsmen, so as to unveil the stories that were overshadowed by the grand historical narrative in that particular district. During the interviews, the life story of a stunning local movie actress, Lei Mei, was repeatedly recounted. This young woman travelled to the West in the 1960s to pursue her dream of acting in movies, but became disfigured via botched plastic surgery and ended up dying young in an asylum. This tragic ending earned her admiration in this neighbourhood from where she came. However, intentionally made up by

Adrian Wong, *Umbrellahead, I Will Find You*, 2012, installation view. Courtesy of the artist.

Adrian Wong, *Umbrellahead, I Will Find You*, 2012, photo documentation. Courtesy of the artist.

Adrian Wong, *Umbrellahead, I Will Find You*, 2012, photo documentation. Courtesy of the artist.

a mid-century Chinese-language periodical, this glamorous yet apocryphal character and story were a malicious attack on Western culture, toward which negative feelings were provoked across the community. (image 13) Intrigued by the production of a narrative excavated from memory, Adrian Wong developed the field notes into a script with Castagña Ventura and transformed the story into a thirty-minute theatrical work, *Umbrellahead, I Will Find You*. In this surreal theatrical production, everyday objects such as an umbrella—referring to a professional umbrella craftsman, one of the people he had interviewed—and an empty musical instrument case of the type that ceased to exist during the Cultural Revolution became the main characters. Together with colourful costumes, exaggerated props, and the stage set, these symbolic characters told an alternative story arising from the historical desires of this place and played with the invisible construction of collective memory in colonized Hong Kong.

This work revealed important facets about the artistic process involved in memory retrieval and the act of observing that is central to ethnographic research. And in the tradition of anthropology, visual elements have always been used as research tools to record real events and explore the construction of local knowledge. Nevertheless, Adrian Wong explored the intricate cultural and historical narratives through the filter of fictionalized memory by adopting ethnographic research and absorbing the symbols of recollection. In some ways, *Umbrellahead, I Will Find You* transmitted more than what was really being "said" and presented a "thicker" description that blurred the lines between the real and the fictional, objects and contexts, images and narratives.

While Adrian Wong depicted the collective illusion of morality that had not become established within the history of Hong Kong, a young Taiwanese artist, Su Yu Hsien, looked into the island's uncertain political identity after the Japanese colonial period ended in 1945. Since this time, the hybrid folk religion common to Taiwan has attracted generations of anthropologists. Although gaps exist between ethnographic research and contemporary art, the tradition of archiving visual elements of folk religion continues to nurture young artists today.

In 2013, Su Yu Hsien created a narrative video work, *Hua-Shan-Qiang*, along with photographic portraits and a burnt and collapsed paper house installation displayed in his solo exhibition in Taipei. The title refers to the pediment, a triangular shaped architectural element with decorative relief sculpture that is particularly found on Greco-Roman classical buildings. In traditional Chinese buildings, pediments were also used for ventilation and fire prevention. However, the purpose of pediments gradually shifted from the practical to decorative after Taiwan entered the period of Japanese rule. To capture the shift of historical and social sentiment in Taiwan through the example of an object, Su Yu Hsien deployed Chinese ritual paper offerings and funeral culture to unmask the

Su Yu Hsien, *Hua-Shan-Qiang*, 2013, video, 21 mins., 47 secs. © Su Yu Hsien. Courtesy of the artist and TKG+, Taipei.

mix of fact and fiction. Set in a miniature paper house made for the dead and narrated in Taiwanese, the video tells of the afterlife of the dead and the subsequent journey to paradise. Though the video employs the strategy of linear narration, there are two features that illuminate the story—a voice-over and muted papier-maché effigies. The voice-over describes the significance of the scenes being presented. The different papier-maché elements include the architectural elements of the house, housewares, and surroundings, while the effigies serve the spirit-body, the deceased self-immolated human expressing anxiety and impatience over the long wait of being transported to the underworld. As a mirror to the opening of the video, the spirit-body climbs up the Shan-Qiang and jumps into the fire in the concluding sequence, in which the camera brings us back to the physical world.

By animating the ritual paper offerings that reflect human imagination about the underworld in Chinese culture, Su Yu Hsien has constructed a singular space of suspension from social and historical reality that can exist only in moving images to discuss the suicidal tragedy of freedom of speech activist Cheng Nan-Jung,[12] serving as a metaphor alluding to the prevalence of confusion that lies behind a self-recognition trapped between the past and future, life and death, reality and fiction, and the discourse of nationalism and an uncertain political identity. Metaphorically, the dream of paradise that keeps everyone waiting will never come, much like the long-awaited dream of an independent state. Without being constrained by the conventional aesthetics of contemporary video art, Su Yu Hsien has employed fully folkloristic imagery and language through a six-month archival and fieldwork study on the production of Taiwanese ritual paper offerings. As part of Taiwanese folk culture, ritual paper offerings are evident in multiple examples of the reworking of local knowledge, which helps both individuals and social groups creatively make sense of the circumstances where they live. Analysing local knowledge as a resource for the creation of his work, Su Yu Hsien has treated the acquisition and frequent misinterpretation of local knowledge, and the potential narrative within it, as a dynamic process of innovation and adaptation. Knowledge is not for acquisition only, but is an asset to be enriched as well. It took Su Yu Hsien a further six months to complete *Hua-Shan-Qiang* and thus reaffirm the association between vision and knowledge, as well as to bridge the gap between visual art and political space in response to individual recollection.

Through their works, the interplay and tension of local knowledge and power has been revealed. Adrian Wong transformed the process of excavating local memory in order to interrogate the legitimacy of authoritative discourse, and Su Yu Hsien appropriated folkloristic objects to demonstrate the fact that local knowledge has been shaped and reshaped by ideology and desire. In addition, during the process of their fieldwork, they have observed the status of the objects they have used as the embodiment of the human psyche and imagination; the local knowledge they attained in order to grasp the political relations within their respective geographical spaces will, in turn, enrich collective knowledge systems.

Representing Contemporary Art: From Camera to Body

In 1986, anthropologists James Clifford and George Marcus edited a highly influential volume, *Writing Culture*,[13] to address the "poetics and politics of ethnography" in an increasingly fragmented, globalized, and postcolonial world. This book gave rise to a debate throughout the 1990s that was a multifaceted reflection on reflexivity, objectivity, and the politics of representation, and led to a growing body of experimental ethnographies[14] in cross-cultural contexts that attempted to overcome the limits of textual representation and challenge the conventional ways of ethnographic writing.

Moreover, a growing number of anthropologists began to emphasize engagements with embodiment, arguing the important roles of sense perception and body in human experience, especially the non-visual experiences in the process of doing fieldwork. Meanwhile, the continuing appropriation of the anthropological field by contemporary artists likewise has led to an impulse to push forward new boundaries within artistic practices. This indicates that the ethnographic turn in contemporary art, to a large extent, is associated with the sensory turn in anthropology. These turns, as a result, encourage interdisciplinary collaborations, and some anthropologists are gradually applying themselves to art and audio-visual media practices. Artist-anthropologists have become active in the international art scene.

To explore the non-linguistic sensory experience and expression across different cultural contexts, sensory ethnography[15] emerged in the context of an interdisciplinary field of practice. Established and directed by Lucien Castaing-Taylor in 2006, the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard University[16] has become the main force behind combining intense ethnographic fieldwork with artistic strategies, among them digital media.

Libbie Cohn and J. P.
Sniadecki, *People's Park,* 2012,
video, 78 mins. © Libbie Cohn
and J. P. Sniadecki. Courtesy of
the artists.

J. P. Sniadecki, who earned a Ph.D in Social Anthropology with Media from
this lab, is a filmmaker active in China and the United States whose films
explore the collective experience in urban China through the intersection
of cinema and sensory ethnography. In 2012, he co-directed with Libbie
Cohn a vivid documentary, *People's Park,* of a bustling urban park, People's
Park in Chengdu. The film captured a slice of public life of hundreds of
locals singing karaoke, dancing to Chinese pop songs, playing mahjong,
making kung-fu tea, and practicing calligraphy. The camera also surveyed
the wide panorama of subtle gestures that represent human emotions.
Throughout the filming, certain people warily turned their faces away, while
others actively performed for the camera by waving, smiling, and flashing
peace signs. Without any cuts or edits, Sniadecki and Cohn rolled the
camera and completed this seventy-five-minute-long film in one tracking
shot. However, the smooth movement of the camera required meticulous
preparation and accurate execution. Cohn, sitting in a wheelchair, held
the camera and shotgun mic with headphones strapped on, and Sniadecki
pushed her along. The process took them months; they visited the park,
refined their route, and took three weeks to shoot, completing the film after
twenty-four attempts.

Libbie Cohn and J. P.
Sniadecki, *People's Park,* 2012,
video, 78 mins. © Libbie Cohn
and J. P. Sniadecki. Courtesy of
the artists.

If one is to say that *People's Park*
is about capturing the people
of Chengdu, encountering
the spectacles of daily life in a
wheelchair with camera is in its
own right a kind of performance
and spectacle. Wherever the
camera moved, it would still be in the arena of watching, ceaselessly
watching and being watched. The film ended with a striking sequence
of an old man bending backwards while dancing and staring into the
camera lens. Thus, filming and being filmed, watching and being watched,
constructed a confrontation between these pairs of spectacles, injecting
the visceral imagery of urban activity into conventional anthropological
representation—a reminder for one to reflect on the ways of seeing.
Moreover, as a viewer, watching this film as an immersive unbroken journey
is akin to unfolding the scroll of a traditional Chinese landscape painting.

Ethnographic film as a genre is now more integrated into the contemporary art scene, in response to global politics and its representation today. Most of the ethnographic film makers are sophisticated structural storytellers, recording the customs and habits of social groups in an expository way. The aspiration to document real events might at times overlook the possibilities that the images potentially contain—explorations of human perception, renewed ways of seeing, and unexpected interpretations. *People's Park*, on the other hand, has deviated from the conventional strategies of presenting the subject-object dilemma, and has attached no importance to the construction of relationships by the juxtaposed collision of meanings that most documentary work emphasizes, but is, instead, committed to expanding the visual vocabulary of ethnographic film in order to achieve a holistic experience. Thus this work has offered an alternative mode of representation in anthropology and should not be misinterpreted as documenting true life in one shot but directly reflecting the messy reality in one day as a whole.

To represent is to re-present, meaning "to exhibit" in Latin. Hence, representation itself is not an appendage to an artwork, including ethnographic presentations, but part of its essence. Representation requires self-reflexivity, a scalable and comprehensive ethnographic kind of research that is built upon the political, historical, literary, and artistic knowledge-fieldwork-creation mechanism that can potentially engage in cross-cultural dialogue.

Ten years ago, Taiwan artist Kao Jun-Honn had his physical and emotional disorders healed by wandering around in Mt. Jinminzi. Since then, he has embarked on countless journeys into the mountains. Walking along the Frontier Guard Line—from the mountainous areas in Xindian to Taoyuan—which segregated the indigenous Taiwan natives from the Han Chinese immigrants, he crossed over graveyards of the nameless and betel nut groves. Nature became his refugee camp, yet he was also caught up in the histories of the abandoned industrial and public facilities in the mountainous regions, such as the remaining site of a once-popular amusement park, the ruins of a coal mine, and numerous abandoned industrial roads. During his extensive research of these areas, Kao Jun-Honn felt deeply haunted by historical photographs of Liugui Village in Kaohsiung City taken in 1871 by the pioneering photographer and traveller John Thomson, who, over a period of ten years, was one of the first photographers to document the scenery and people of the Far East. Like most photographers at that time, Thomson opened a window to the orient and attempted to demonstrate the superiority of European culture in contrast to the decadent non-European ones. Met with an astonishingly exotic natural environment, his works were embedded in practices of a taxonomical and anthropological encounter, and to some degree served a colonial function. In addition to the unease of being the subjects of colonial viewing, Kao Jun-Honn realized that "modern capitalism" could be embodied in the form of photography.

Besides the mountains and natural forests that motivated him to question the absences within colonial histories and the mythology of economic transformation of Taiwan in the societies contemporary to Thomson's,

Kao Jun-Honn, *The Ruin Image Crystal Project: 10 Scenes—Zong Ye/All Down!*, 2012, colour photograph, 60 x 100 cm. © Kao Jun-Honn. Courtesy of the artist and A+ Contemporary, Shanghai.

Kao Jun-Honn also performed his in-depth fieldwork in abandoned infrastructures such as Boai Market, the Taiwan Motor Transport Machinery Part Plant, the Haishan Coal Mine, and the Ankang Prison, located within the vicinity of urban cities. In 2012, based on found photographs, including the group photographs of Taiwanese soldiers, factory workers, and high school girls bidding farewell to a kamikaze[17] pilot taking off, and some news photographs capturing the aftermath of mining disaster in New Taipei City in 1984 taken by photojournalist Wen-Ji Li, he initiated a two-year site-specific project, *The Ruin Image Crystal Project: 10 Scenes*, and carried out multisite fieldwork research in ruins of military camps, factories, and an amusement park, collecting archival documents and the memories of local neoliberal individuals. Kao Jun-Honn attempted to reconnect these fragmented historical images of modernity with specific sites through the reproduction, representation, and re-enactment of the found photographs—transforming the enlarged found and news photographs into charcoal drawings on the wall of abandoned spaces, turning the ruins into white cubes. In his solo exhibition at A+ Contemporary, Shanghai, in 2017, he presented seven photographic posters of different people posing in front of the charcoal drawings. Some of them were in the original found photographs, while others imitated the appearance of the figures in the drawings so that the posters succeeded in creating images within images. Kao Jun-Honn might agree with Walter Benjamin[18] that this project appropriated no ingenious formulations but merely showed what he found and made good use of. Hence, his practice dialectically transforms the essence of these images by disintegrating the original visual perspective and replacing them with the ephemeral charcoal paintings contrasting the reality of these related areas. Kao Jun-Honn's fieldwork-led artistic practice revisited the spectres of history and re-engaged with an earlier century of the ethnographic gaze. More importantly, this practice has strengthened him to further probe into the history and reality of the brutality and absurdity of modernization that the Taiwanese people suffered from. With the charcoal paintings, the abandoned spaces, and the wilds of the mountains, he exhibited a panorama of dystopia.

Raising an awareness of the predicament of those people who have been muted by historical or economic displacement in society, Kao Jun-Honn has been engaged in a process of self-reflection in a mutual process of weaving

Left: Kao Jun-Honn, *The Ruin Image Crystal Project: 10 Scenes—TaLe/Yuko Sugimoto*, 2012, colour photograph, 60 x 100 cm. © Kao Jun-Honn. Courtesy of the artist and A+ Contemporary, Shanghai.

Right: Kao Jun-Honn, *The Ruin Image Crystal Project: 10 Scenes—White Butterflies/ Resolves problems of education, economics, and the name of Taiwan*, 2012, colour photograph, 60 x 100 cm. © Kao Jun-Honn. Courtesy of the artist and A+ Contemporary, Shanghai.

Bottom: Kao Jun-Honn, *The Ruin Image Crystal Project: 10 Scenes—Hu Siao/Good afternoon, my dear brother*, 2012, colour photograph, 60 x 100 cm. © Kao Jun-Honn. Courtesy of the artist and A+ Contemporary, Shanghai.

the fabric of his life into that of others, and it is these interwoven narratives of human life that concern him.

Fieldwork as the Site of Art Activism

Many current discussions about the encounters between contemporary art and anthropology centre on the question of the politics behind ethnographic methodologies appropriated within art practices—that is, a critique that fieldwork study within art making is quasi-ethnographic. The phenomenon of the ethnographic turn in contemporary art is central to our time because it encompasses a comprehensive critical and reflexive thinking about histories and realities that are responding to a new wave of global modernity, rather than a new fashion within the aesthetics of art making.

I propose that the concept of alterity in ethnography requires deep contiguity with a wide array of cultural contexts, some of which can seem to be incompatible. Thus, the probing into a world that is framed by incompatibility can arouse self-consciousness and critical thinking through reflection upon social life in other cultural contexts. In other words, ethnography's great impact on the world is not simply the result of research nor its thirst for radical alterity, but self-reflexive thinking driven in a way that anthropologists and ethnographers can reveal the awkwardness, confront the differences, and question the contradictions embedded in their values to others and beyond.

From this perspective, the encounter of contemporary art and ethnography is neither the easy recognition nor reinterpretation of traditional art and culture, nor turning the fieldwork into another form of cultural barriers and hierarchies. Rather, it is visual transformation and the registration of otherness by the speculative cameras, such as *Liquid Borders* by Samson Young and *People's Park* by J. P. Sniadecki and Libbie Cohn; or the

excavation and aesthetic mining of histories, as in the works *Umbrellahead, I Will Find You* by Adrian Wong and *Hua-Shang-Qiang* by Su Yu Hsien.

Once ethnographic fieldwork proliferates in other areas as a practice, I am not convinced that its virtues can be solely owned by any one discipline, for example, under the umbrella of anthropology. Therefore, the discussions should not focus on whether ethnography-led art practices should be in accord with anthropological principles, but, rather, in how these practices engage a knowledge network in order to come up with more flexible yet interpretative languages for interdisciplinary dialogue. As a result, locating themselves within the practice of fieldwork, artists are empowered as alternate activists in addressing cultural power structures and work closely with communities to represent and produce knowledge instead of focusing on traditional art objects. Artists don't necessarily directly get involved in social action or put forward any conclusions to help address global issues, but they develop a knowledge-fieldwork-creation mechanism to inspire audiences to understand the dynamics of local knowledge, the representation of cultural products, and the transformations unfolding around us.

Notes

1. Briefly speaking, anthropology is the study of people throughout the world, concerned with both the biological features of human beings and cultural aspects of society. Ethnography is a methodology associated with anthropology. It is a literary genre and a brand of qualitative fieldwork within the social sciences that records and analyzes a culture or society. Ethnography that is based on participant observation and results in a written account is considered one of the most distinctive features of anthropology.

2. Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer," in *The Traffic in Culture*, eds. George Marcus and Fred Myers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 302–09.

3. Ibid.

4. Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis* (New York: New York Academic of Sciences, 1942).

5. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 39-41.

6. This border was built in 1951 by the Hong Kong British Government to separate the territory from China.

7. Classical ethnographic research begins with the recognition that the observer starts as a stranger or outsider to the group being studied; this is in order to avoid over-familiarity and to achieve a professional and personal distance.

8. Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer," 304–05.

9. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 89.

10. Ibid. Further developed by Geertz, "thick description" refers to a detailed description of human behaviour within a particular context. It has gradually become recognized as the method of interpretative anthropology.

11. Adrian Wong, "Selected projects," http://www.adrianwong.info/selected/.

12. Cheng Nan-Jung was a Taiwanese activist who established the *Freedom Era Weekly* in the 1980s. He committed suicide by self-immolation to fight for total freedom of speech in 1989.

13. James Clifford, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography: A School of American Research, Advanced Seminar,* eds. James Clifford and George Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press,1986).

14. Peaking in the 1970s and 1980s, anthropological filmmakers (or anthropologists in partnership with documentary filmmakers) created ethnographic films about the cultures they were studying. In the late 1980s, the anthropologists placed the cameras in the hands of their cultural subjects and encouraged them to create their own auto-ethnographic films, which blossomed out of the postmodern turn in anthropological thought. See Pamela Wilson, "Ethnographic Film," *Oxford Bibliographies*, http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199791286/obo-9780199791286-0183.xml/.

15. Sarah Pink, "The future of sensory anthropology/the anthropology of the senses," *Social Anthropology* 18 (2010), 33–33.

16. Sensory Ethnography Lab, http://sel.fas.harvard.edu/.

17. In the closing stages of the Pacific campaign of World War II, the Japanese Special Attack Units initiated suicide attacks against Allied naval vessels to destroy the warships. Kamikaze were a part of these military aviators. Yilan airport in Taiwan was the air force base of Kamikaze during the war.

18. Walter Benjamin, "Convolutes," in *The Arcade Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA, and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 29.