

Reframing

**IN CONVERSATION WITH MALAYSIAN
ARTIST CHOY CHUN WEI
BY KELVIN CHUAH**

This is the second of three conversations between Choy and Chuah. The first interview was published in the exhibition pamphlet for Choy Chun Wei's participation at Art Basel, Hong Kong, 2014. The text here is an abridged version, to be read in transtextual arrangement with the first interview.

An Introduction to New Works

Choy showed me his paintings. Bricolage, he called it. Is it still painting? Words, texts and frames. Revision. Artworks constructed from... things. Conceptually driven? Maybe.

Toiling away in his studio, the artist had formulated a new direction in his artworks. Deeply invigorated by Art Basel 2014, no doubt. A highlight in his career. Are his current works appendages of initial developments? Plausibly. These new pieces, new schemes. They are similar, yet different.

Three years after Art Basel, Choy produced another body of works. In the interim, he completed his Master's degree. How would his art benefit from the new-found knowledge and artistic maturity?

Unfinished Dialogues

In 2014, we worked on an interview introducing Choy to an international audience. Our collaboration turned into an agreement for future partnerships, with Art Basel as the anchor. As a researcher, I wanted to understand Choy: man (ideals and philosophy), artist (practice) and artworks (artistic outcomes).

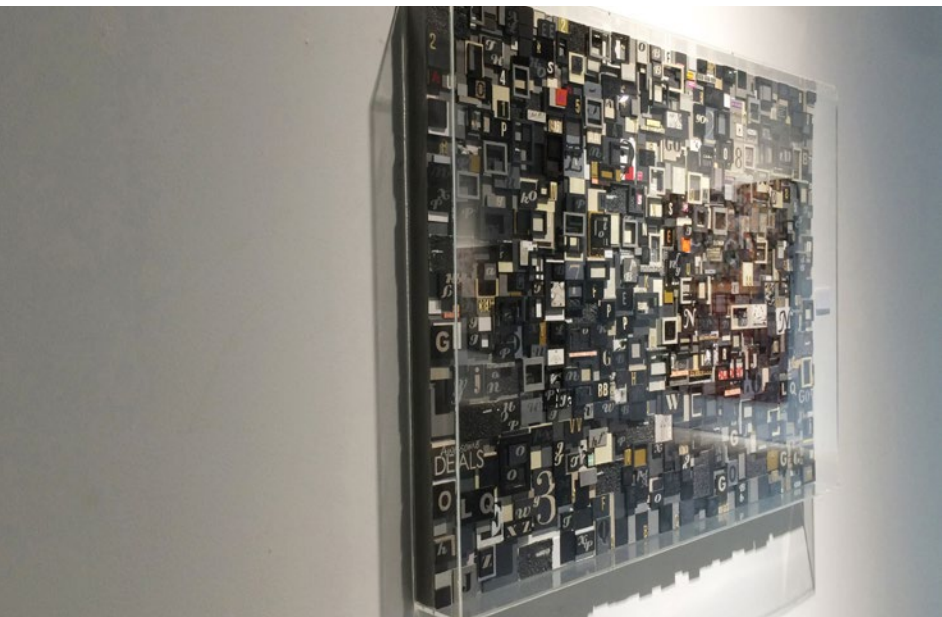
There were no deadlines, which was dangerous. We conferred and ended with unfinished dialogues. On art, philosophy, politics, family, education, even dreams. We never got to a second write-up, preferring these informal and incomplete conversations. Many times, I felt these threads are noteworthy for Choy, as they are composites forming his practice since 2014.

In reconstructing unfinished dialogues, this metanarrative accounts for my intention of interpreting viewpoints, which I think are pertinent to Choy's artistic evolverment, in so much as Choy's intention to make his objectives known.

After the Event

Choy's site-specific work was a critique of the art fair itself. Sadly, it could not be preserved. Made from materials gathered from the event's surroundings, it was an interlocutor between people, materials and the event itself.

He observed people relating with the fragmented ephemerals, evidently a game of sorts connecting the audience with the artwork. Choy wanted to activate the wall



for it to be a display and more. In response, he felt an immersive energy reverberating from the audience.

In the process, Choy enjoyed the immediacy of collecting and assembling of materials. Moulding the ephemerals together, he felt elation, joy, and a sense of being in the “zone” with the artwork. On a positive note, we concluded our discussion on this topic.

Lessons from Kuandu Art Residency

Choy's spouse, Yau Bee Ling was appointed as an Artist Researcher at the Taipei University of Fine Arts in 2016, and he travelled with her to support her endeavour. To point, Choy was assisting another artist. My interrogation stemmed from complexities of non-overlapping practices. Unlike the Christo and Jeanne-Claude collaborative, Choy and Yau developed individualistic art practices. While the spousal support and understanding of the profession seemed immense, would the competition of a partner's work be overpowering to one's own practice? In conversations, this unpacking of unvoiced struggles remained sensitive. In lieu of professional pre-meditations embedded within conjugal relations, Choy conceded to the difficulties.

Yet, the consistent flow of critique proved beneficial to his own conceptions. He elaborated on the traces and trails of their conversation and how it inevitably shaped thoughts that transcribed to their own art making. Both their thinking processes were analysed and cross-examined. For sure, there were disagreements in artistic direction, but it also empowered stronger personal inflection into the artworks. As Choy's ideations began to shift, so did his outcomes.

We spoke of the need for documentation and to digitise these dialogues. In time, such exchanges would be important for self-evaluation, for change, for future developments.

In Taipei, Choy met a curator, Jin-Yu Hsieh, who made an impression. Hsieh was interested in using art to create awareness within communities, as a medium for transformative purposes. Their exchange reinforced Choy's convictions to transcribe the thinking process into a wider role instead of art being production driven, a topic Choy explored in his Master's. Yet, this was taking shape during Yau's residency. With regards to this, I wanted to bring out his thoughts, fleshing them out in words. Choy was hesitant to take anything from his partner. Indeed, Kuandu was about Yau.

But what did he learn from being in another university as an observer? Stepping back, being in a reserved position was an opportune time to observe art-based research and how it can be in a university. This distinctive experience was juxtaposed to his own residencies in the United States and Malaysia. From such a setting, Choy established a platform to push his envelope of thinking and came up with improvisations he embraced that are visible in his current endeavours.

Top: Choy Chun Wei, 'Bricolage of Identities: Manic Search', 2017, acrylic paint, pigment ink and found text on wooden panel, 91.5 x 122 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Wei-Ling Gallery.

Facing Page, top to bottom: Choy Chun Wei, 'City of Buttons', 2017, diptych, mixed media on wood panels, 122 x 12 x 7 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Wei-Ling Gallery; Choy Chun Wei, 'Instantaneous Touch and Go', 2017, diptych, mixed media on wood panels, 122 x 122 x 7.5 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Wei-Ling Gallery.

New Direction

Some time after Art Basel, Choy told me he started looking at his accumulation of name cards. He had compiled a healthy pile at Art Basel, which were from people who interacted with his artwork. Looking at the cards, his vision focused on the name and profession of those people. Progressively, Choy filtered alphabets, reduced colours and subtracted unwanted layouts.

Play

Choy went back to the drawing board, drawing lines with pigment ink, blocking elements and interacting with surface design. At this point, it was all about his process. He said, “I'm fascinated with names positioned within rectangular formats. The names represented life in printed forms.” He began to spend more time on this: collect and play, collect and play some more.

Totally absorbed, the name cards became a deliberate act of delimitation, drawing attention from an obsession with profile and name in the making of identities. What's in a name? How significant are the words and titles? His process of turning alphabets into movements on the art surface brought out multiple explications. Gone were fixated meanings. Choy questioned the viewers and wanted them to question his (text within the) artworks. I was transfixed with traces of individuals from the cards, while he expounded on them.

Like his site-specific piece at Art Basel, Choy continued working on his 'Human Landscape' through the name cards, a theme that has fashioned his artistic career. Hitherto, he handled discarded street materials, incorporating them into artworks, and developed a sensitivity towards the materiality of objects, some of which were text-based. Choy's earlier concerns were reflexive of the imprint objects made in the physical ecosphere. At present, he is drawn by people's façade embedded into name cards; a living record. With careful manipulation, the artworks became imaginings of those people.

In recent productions, Choy has worked with an achromatic lens, in grey tones. Colour is added for symbolic connotations. This marks his current elucidation within the confluence of materials, art-based research and the process of making.

What's Next

Text forms an important component in his visuals. Mediated within his emphases on environmental issues. And then some. The conversation continues... 