



Dialogue with Choy Chun Wei *Tectonic Traces*

This dialogue session was held on Wednesday, 25th of October 2017 at 7pm, at Wei-Ling Contemporary, during the preview of Choy Chun Wei's solo exhibition, '*Tectonic Traces*'. This exhibition runs from 19th of October to 30th of November at Wei-Ling Contemporary, The Gardens, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

WL: This would be Chun Wei's third solo exhibition with the gallery. His last show was in 2011. Within the six years, Chun Wei has done other shows. He was the only artist from Malaysia to have a solo representation at Art Basel Hong Kong, in 2014. What we see here tonight is a collection of twelve works, and a video, that Chun Wei has worked on for the last period. Tonight, Chun Wei is going to be talking to Amanda Ariawan, who has just joined us from Jakarta, graduated from Paris, in a degree in art curation. This is a casual discussion and dialogue where Amanda's going to be asking Chun Wei questions about the work, and obviously, if any of you at any point, have any questions about the work, about the processes, about the reasons why Chun Wei did the work, please feel free to note this down and there will be a Q and A session after the talk. Thank you so much.

AA: I will start by a little bit of an introduction about Chun Wei. Chun Wei is regarded as one of Malaysia's most cutting-edge collage and mixed media artists. He was the recipient of the prestigious *Freeman Foundation Fellowship for Asian Artists* in 2008, and had the opportunity to develop his work in Vermont, USA. In 2014, he was the only Malaysian artist to present a solo booth under '*Insights*', which is the curated section of Art Basel Hong Kong, one of the most important art events in the world. We will get back to that event later. His works have been exhibited internationally, across the United States, Hong Kong, Pakistan, Singapore, China and the UK, and can be found in numerous public and private collections, both within Malaysia and Internationally. Mr. Choy, following '*Here and Now*' in 2011 and '*Kaleidoscopic Landscapes*' in 2007, this is your third solo show with Wei-Ling Gallery, is that correct?

CW: Yes.

AA: To start with, could you please tell us more about what's behind the title of your current exhibition, '*Tectonic Traces*'? We probably know what it literally means, but we're curious to know what it really means to you as the artist.

CW: Thank you for the introduction. First of all 'traces'; they are very prominent, and very much a part of the work that I've been developing over the years, as I always try to use found materials in my practise. For '*tectonic*', there are three implications here. First of all,

the change in our landscape. Secondly, the environment that comes to you and cannot be avoided. It's an environmental aspect, as in the graphic design around you, and the billboards all over the city – it's very tectonic. Third of all, it's about a person who builds things, who joins things and makes meanings. So, 'tectonic' refers to someone who wants to think about and make things, out of materials. I see myself as managing these three aspects. Therefore, 'Tectonic Traces.'

AA: So the three aspects are surface, surroundings, and the person who's referred as a builder right?

CW: Yes.

AA: Globally, to what extent have your works here evolved from the previous ones, in terms of meanings, techniques and materials? Does "action" still play an essential role in your practise? I notice that your works involve a lot of cut and paste, as well as the act of constructing and deconstructing. Is that still the case for this series?

CW: Essentially, that is the identity I build up. I try to find more possibilities and expand the meanings. This came from a childish probe or sense. Making and thinking is essentially what I've always liked, which has expanded over the years. I'd like to see an evolution within the process. It started off from the simple cut and paste. Then, I wanted so much for it to become a physical presence, putting and portraying transcended things until they turn into forms. If you look at the pieces in this show, you can see that this is a continuation from what started off as a very physical making and thinking. The meanings that came up to me, out of them, surprised me too. I think that being able to have an open process, sticking to it and finding the openings little by little, step by step, is a real test of patience. It's also a test of staying focused, knowing that it is a part that you want to go through.

AA: You mentioned the word "environment". Could you please tell us more about how these pieces actually refer to the living space and daily objects around us? For example, for me, the piece *City of Buttons* (2017) refers to electronic devices that we use everyday, and then the squares to architecture. How do you think these environments affect our identities?

CW: I think that we can't separate ourselves from the environment, and that we have to coexist. Of course, I have seen lots of visuals, graphic buttons, colourful buttons, graphic shapes, texts and so forth. On the other hand, I started to realize that the physical environment was becoming very graphic too. You can see tectonic rebuilds and contrasts within the architecture in our environment. Although they have very basic abstract qualities, it does not end there. It is a foundation, a frame that is delicate to me. I'd like to bring that into the surface of my work. In that sense, that is the part that I'm referring to.

AA: Are you saying that our environment defines our identities, or is it the other way around?

CW: It's two ways, but we tend to avoid facing the effects of these elements. I think that making the work tightens my sensibility and awareness towards the effects of all these elements. If you look inside the rectangles, beyond them are abstract paint surfaces, leading

to something more. It is about making the things in my consciousness, and then, my consciousness would start to reflect in terms of materiality and outcome. That is the process that I'm exploring now.

AA: Once again, your works feature very solid forms such as squares and rectangles. At the same time, I also noticed some very fluid lines such as the doodles of portraits that can be found in *Functional Identity: Until Stocks Last* (2017). Why is it important to show this contrast, between the very structural forms and the organic ones?

CW: That tension is very crucial. It's basically about the experience that I had. Within the surface of the system, you have the surface of the organism, and I think that the dialogue is really important. Situating these two, and to have that coming out from the reading, is very essential. This piece is particular. I'd like to consider the organic entities behind the structural things that you can see, as faces. I like that dialogue between the forms.

AA: Next, we're going to talk about the piece *Future Stars* (2017), which is very distinct. You decided to use mainly images of footballers here. Could you please explain about this choice? It reminds me of a book that I read, "*L'histoire, pour quoi faire?*" (History, for what?), written by French researcher, Serge Gruzinski, published in 2015, in which the author described a photography work by an artist named Kader Attia, of children in a small region in Algeria, playing football in their jerseys, using Roman ruins as their goalpost. To the author, football is the evidence of globalization. Do you also think this way, and that this echoes in your work?

CW: If you look at football, it's bright. Football is a symbolic game and everything can come and interact with that. Football goes from people to people to people. It is very communal and open. I am myself into this game, but as I grew up it became more than that. It's becoming something more conditioned – something more than just a game. The meaning behind it is about the world being more complex. Football is really personal. Surprisingly, it has become just noise, even though I used to like it before – when it was less on the screen, and more when I was participating in my game.

AA: When you talk about "noise", what do you refer to?

CW: Noise is something that is a passion to you, but also something that's just too much. It's something that you like, that you feel like watching for almost three hours, something that you want to be a part of all the time. In all the stalls that you go to, there are TVs showing football. However, in my childhood days, or my teens, I could choose when to go and play, and I could catch different people just by going to the field. It was a different kind of "tectonic" back then. When I got stressed from study, I used to go back to the football field and that was when I saw something really nice and beautiful – but now, it's becoming just noise.

AA: How does this refer to the pre-defined understanding of success? For example, these kids really see footballers as "stars", referring the title of your work, *Future Stars* (2017). How does this echo to the word "success"?

CW: There's a struggle between success; a success that's defined by the media and the environment, and the success that comes from you, from the inside. The latter is more settling. It's more peaceful probably, as no one would even bother. However, just when you feel that you are getting used to it, it becomes overwhelming once someone interferes. These days, it's about somebody else's agenda that's controlling you. I suppose that "success" is personal to me. Nowadays, life is about climbing ladders and getting more profiles. I think that the profiles refer to these footballers; some players receive trophies as the best players and so on. The definition of "self" is now different. It's speeding ahead.

AA: Going on to three artworks that are present in this exhibition tonight, *Rambling* (2017), *Corporate Noise* (2017) and *Untitled* (2017) – these pieces use lots of words and phrases cuts from newspapers and magazines. By this, what are you trying to do exactly? Do you attempt to recreate the information? Are you trying to break it with the paint effects?

CW: I wanted to first, cut out words. Then, the last process was about painting the effects. With the paint, I just wanted to destroy the surface and sometimes create a sense of speed. I think that the paint is very plastic in itself – it is used for the effects. Symbolically, it is to stabilize, so that you can see the priority instead of the external aspects that are coming to you. The *Rambling* (2017) piece is particular to each viewer depending on what he or she is sensing. It is all according to you, and of course it also involves your consciousness. I thought it'd be nice to add something to the surface of my work – a surface that is shifting by the use of paint, through constructions and paintings of various structures. Lastly, the use of sand is also part of the effects that I want to bring forward.

AA: By this, are you trying to criticize the media or its readers?

CW: I think it really came naturally without just wanting to criticize. It is more of a phenomenon. Probably, out of the making, I responded naturally, and it came out as a complete thing. Sometimes, you have to consciously stop and look back. It is hard to do, because when making, you want to be natural, but in between, you tend try to concentrate more on the painting process.

AA: Let's move on to the piece *Forgotten Facts* (2017) that is just right beside me. This piece was born during your time at Art Basel Hong Kong. Would you please explain a little bit regarding the technique that you used to get all the information gathered? I heard that you got them from the people you encountered there. Would you please tell me more about this idea?

CW: What I found was that collage is not just taking things from the file or the environment, but could also be a curation process. For the Hong Kong piece, I set up a site that I can use as a theme board, and had people give things and write information for me. From that, I had to build a range of materials; facts, statistics and measurements of parts of the bodies. Why I really like to call this *Forgotten Facts*, is that it is a sign pointing to very simple information, and yet putting it in comparison with an information that is pretty much mechanic.

AA: If I well understood, there's a real contrast here between the information that we receive from the first person (the hand written ones), at the same time, the information that you cut from the media?

CW: Yes.

AA: Lastly, I noted that the use of numbers such as product codes is quite particular in some of your pieces. It reminded me of this quote from the book *The Little Prince* of 1943 by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry:

Grown-ups like numbers. When you tell them about a new friend, they never ask questions about what really matters. They never ask: 'What does his voice sound like?' 'What games does he like best?' 'Does he collect butterflies?' They ask: 'How old is he?' 'How many brothers does he have?' 'How much does he weigh?' 'How much money does he have?' Only then do they think they know him.¹

What are your thoughts about this? Do you really think that identities nowadays are defined by numbers, and is this what you are trying to point out through your pieces?

CW: Yes. When I come to the making process, the work fits my imagination. To me, everywhere we go, they are making the structures of numbers, whether you go to a café, to the bank, etc. Everywhere there are numbers. I've never read *The Little Prince*, but what it describes really relates. I started to reflect about the world and imagine that from this little relationship that we have with numbers as symbolic elements, it reflects what we humans have become. I also realize that in every stage, we are affected by what we have created. So, in this sense, I agree with the effects that we get from numbers. We come into contact with more and more symbols that are affecting us face to face.

AA: This refers also to the first piece that we can see as we enter the exhibition, *Touch and Go* (2017). Do you agree that it corresponds to the fact that identities nowadays are very codified? When we talk about identities we talk about cards; touch and go cards, codes, numbers and so on.

CW: Yes. The traces that we have and that I started to observe, became very good reflections for me when putting things together. From all the cards and wallets that we have, sometimes I feel as if we are behind a sort of frame or frequent. However, sometimes we do stop and look back, which shows that we are consistently negotiating with this condition.

AA: That was the last question from me. Thank you for your answers, Choy Chun Wei.

¹ Saint-Exupéry, A. ., Saint-Exupéry, A. ., Woods, K., & Harcourt, Brace & World,. (1943). *The Little Prince*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

Tectonic Traces will be showing from 19th October to 30th November 2017 at Wei-Ling Contemporary.

Wei-Ling Contemporary is located at Lot No RT-1, 6th Floor The Gardens Mall, Lingkaran Syed Putra, 59200 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Admission hours are Tuesday - Sunday 11am-7pm.

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