A Case of Eco-Public Art in Taiwan

The Meinung Yellow Butterfly Festival

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“Storm is coming in the afternoon, so we can only work till noon and this has been the case in the past several days,” artist Lin Yann-Lyn told me while we were looking at her husband Wang Yaw-Jun working on a massive installation artwork [Fig. 1]. Their daughter and son were helping their father with the installation. That morning, July 21, 2021, I was observing the creation of Wind of Summer in the famous tropical forest Yellow Butterfly Valley (YBV) of Meinung town. Located in southern Taiwan, this is a rural town inhabited by mostly Hakka people (an ethnic minority in Taiwan) who have created a distinctive agrarian culture [Fig. 2]. Summer here is the season of daily thunderstorms in the afternoon, so the artwork developed slowly.

Created in the shape of a gigantic squirrel from organic materials such as vines and tree branches [Fig. 3], the work represents a forest elf and embodies Wang’s appreciation of the dynamic, poetic, and mysterious natural world in the forest. He wrote: “The innocent life exists because of the abundant water, fertile soil, and healthy forest.” Both Wang and his wife are nature-loving people who live in a house situated amid farm fields bordering a foothill area in Meinung where squirrels frequent. He started in early July to construct the framework of the creature at his backyard. Then, this structure was transported to the forest where the family worked together for two more weeks until its completion.

An unpretentious artwork made of and for nature, Wind of Summer will stay in the forest until it disintegrates naturally, without leaving any art-induced garbage behind. This simple piece embodies a profound respect for nature – both its nourishing and destructive capabilities – and a desire to work with natural force while reducing the environmental footprints of art to a minimum. This is an ecologically conscious paradigm of thinking that has shaped much of Meinung’s community activism. As the main environmental artwork commissioned by the 23rd Meinung Yellow Butterfly Festival (MYBF) in 2021, Wind of Summer carries on the characteristics of artistic production promoted at MYBF: environment- and family-friendly, community-based, and simple and profound at once.

The Meinung Yellow Butterfly Festival (MYBF) in 1995, founded as an effort to “think globally, act locally,” is the lastest legacy of the Hakka culture. It is the lasting legacy of the Hakka culture’s environmental and intellectual activists who took control of the development of their own homeland against the tide of industrialization and rural decline. The Meinung Anti-Dam Movement, which Meinung-born environmental and intellectual activists initiated in 1992 upon learning about the government’s plan to construct a dam in YBV to supply water for heavy industrial projects, is the first in Taiwan to integrate the protection of natural ecosystems with the promotion of Hakka culture. It is the lasting legacy of the legendary grassroots mobilization Meinung Anti-Dam Movement, which Meinung-born environmental and intellectual activists initiated in 1992 upon learning about the government’s plan to construct a dam in YBV to supply water for heavy industrial projects. The forest I visited would be entirely submerged in water if the dam had been constructed. Concerned about the dam’s potential threat to the safety of the human community and permanent destruction to the rich ecosystem in YBV, activists quickly launched an anti-dam campaign. They then formed organizations and made alignments with local community leaders, politicians, teachers, students, and farmers as well as international scholars and organizations to advance an anti-dam movement.

The annual MYBF was born for the purpose, and it served as a major platform facilitating people of different backgrounds to concentrate their energy, knowledge, and social resources for the anti-dam movement. With well-coordinated efforts, the movement lasted for eight years, forcing official budget for the dam to be eliminated multiple times. Eventually, it achieved a significant success in 2000 when the newly elected president Chen Shui-bian promised not to build the Dam. MYBF has since become the cultural and community symbol of a rural community dedicated to taking control of the development of their own homeland against the tide of industrialization and rural decline. Importantly, it continues to function as a community-based platform to promote environmental protection, ecological education, and sustainable development. In the past decade, MYBF has gradually transformed into an environmental art festival, and in 2015 it adopted the biennial format, rebranding itself as an environmental art biennial that aspires to “think globally, act locally.” "Think globally" concerns its focus on issues of agriculture, nature, and sustainability that are pertinent to rural communities across the world. “Act locally” reflects MYBF’s efforts to foreground local talents and cultivate local collaborative networks. It has striven to engage local people of different ages and various backgrounds in a wide range of reparative works that seeks to re-establish a sustainable relationship between human society and the ecosystem that they are part of. It is now a multi-dimensional, multi-medium, and multi-month arts festival that combines ritual, performance art, theater, exhibition, workshops, public talks, field trips, guided tours, youth camps, volunteer training, an artist-in-residence program, sports, craft fairs, and farmers markets, among others.

One can say that MYBF has evolved into an encompassing project of socially engaged public art, the very subject of my recent edited book. Specifically, it is a case of eco-public art, given its commitment to ecological literacy and sustainable human-world interactions via public arts production and collaborative community experiences. As a long-term eco-public art project, MYBF is a product of the ongoing environmental activism in Taiwan that strives to advance the discourses of ecological protection and promote alternative (i.e., nonexploitative) imaginations about the relationship between human beings and the environment. It has in turn fostered a vibrant community culture
centering on ecology-friendly agricultural practices, alternative lifestyle experiments, and public arts productions in and around Meinung town. By bringing people close to nature, to farming, and to each other, MYBF has also contributed to new forms of art and cultural production, rural living, community experience, and social imagination.

Integrating ecological consciousness in collective learning and community collaboration has been the signature approach of MYBF. Back in 2019, for example, the above-mentioned Lin Yann-Lyn was one of the local artists commissioned for environmental artworks. A fiber artist skilled in weaving with plant-based materials, she led a one-week workshop that took adult and young participants (several of whom were families) to explore the flora in YBV, learn about natural materials, and observe and experience nature through one’s bodily immersion in it. They collected durable vines from the forest and individually weaved animal forms based on personal preferences, such as boa, butterfly, dragonfly, fish, lizard, owl, etc. All of these were then integrated into a collective environmental art piece — We Weave a Dream in the Tree (Fig. 4) — as the final product of their collaboration. After its showcase during the festival, the work was left to disintegrate naturally. It started with a publicity session on July 18 and showcased visual arts, music, and creative writings. This session was produced from a performance workshop sponsored by MYBF last year exploring the interactions of land, rivers, and people. This was followed by a public screening of a documentary that recorded a habitat walk, which explored the current ecosystem of the Meinung Creek. The walk (and documentary) shed light on the plants, insects, and wild animals that make a home in and around the creek. The third program group was called “Thematic Activities,” and it started on July 31 with the Butterfly Ceremony, the core component of MYBF. This is the ritual dedicated to yellow butterflies that used to appear in millions, fluttering around the valley in summer and for which the YBV was named. By extension, the ritual pays tribute to all life forms that once populated the valley. The Butterfly Ceremony has been one of the most attended activities of MYBF since its inception.

The Butterfly Ceremony has been followed by two other thematic activities in August: (1) an artist talk and public discussion on this year’s environmental artwork Wind of Summer, and (2) a concert featuring songs in Hakka dialect. Both the environmental art commission and the concert have been signature components of MYBF, but this year they were smaller and presented online. The last activity was a performance-art workshop that lasted for a week in September. This was the only program that was carried out in real physical space, specifically, along the creek and forest in YBV. In addition, a number of virtual talks were hosted for the public during these months, in which scholars and artists offered in-depth discussion on topics related to ecology and community-based public art. Coming back to Wind of Summer, it was also the subject of a 12-minute video of the same title by Louwei Wei, a local video artist and filmmaker who participated in an earlier edition of MYBF when he was still an undergraduate student. The video not only recorded the creative process itself, but also provided Wei’s personal interpretation of the interrelation between Wang’s artwork and the natural ecology of Meinung. This video was released online to prepare the audience before they participated in the online artist talk held by MYBF to celebrate the completion of the installation. Such multi-dimensional and creative collaborations have been a typical approach of MYBF, an approach that guides much of its work.

Overall, MYBF is an inspiring case of eco-public art that seeks to integrate environmental activism, ecological literacy, community building, and public arts production. It is a much-needed collaborative and collective endeavor in our age of climate change, extreme weather events, and pollutions of all kinds in the air, soil, and water. Especially for people who are interested in community-oriented creative experiments aiming for sustainable, holistic, and beneficial relationships between human living, nature, and art, the 27-year-old MYBF has much to offer.

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Notes
2. For an in-depth study of the anti-dam campaign, see Jeffrey Hsu, “Grassroots Practice of Environmental Activism,” Master’s Dissertation (University of California, Berkeley, 2001).
3. Jeffrey Hsu, 66.
5. https://mpa.artlife.tw/mall/help-
8. The number of butterflies as well as the butterfly species in YBV has been greatly reduced since the early 1990s due to profit-driven logging in the area prompted by the government’s plan to construct the dam.
9. The 2010 and 2011 Butterfly Ceremonies can be watched at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iQFHy0JRKcg and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7H8La_oWzA
10. The 2021 Butterfly Ceremony can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iyaz8X9OQP8
11. Video Wind of Summer can be watched at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qa7aB7cJ9mc
12. For MYBF’s past editions, see Meinung People’s Association’s website https://mpa.artlife.tw/mall/help-1-1.html
For MYBF’s recent editions, see MYBF Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/mnybf/