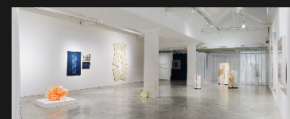


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# Complicated Contemporaneity and Impossible Dreams: The Taiwan Pavillion at the 2022 Venice Biennale



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Filipino curator [Patrick Flores](#) really likes the word “complicated.”

He actually uses it a lot as a verb: “complicating.” I find this lexical choice so compelling that sitting across him at a Formica table in a bare room in Palazzo delle Prigioni, Venice, I can’t help but ask, “You use the word ‘complicating’ a lot. Is it for you a good thing, a bad thing, or a neutral thing? Tell me about it!”

He laughs, “It’s a good thing. The right kind of trouble I suppose. Art doesn’t need to be too normative, or too stable, or too neat and tidy... You need a tangent, you want to derail, or at least create the condition of doubt.”

“And if it’s complicated, art is less susceptible to appropriation by ideology or structures.”

For a little bit of context, we are speaking at the [Venice Biennale](#), during its opening days. Taiwan’s National Pavilion – which is actually not a national pavilion at all, but instead an ‘official collateral show,’ since Taiwan is, of course, not considered a nation – is being presented at the Palazzo delle Prigioni.



Palazzo delle Prigioni. Image from Palazzo Ducale website

It’s an archival show, one which takes stock of and presents all the 13 previous participations of Taiwan in Venice, since the Biennale’s inception in 1995.





The show is entitled *Impossible Dreams*. Image courtesy of Taipei Fine Arts Museum



Installation views of *Impossible Dreams*, Taiwan's Collateral Event at the Venice Biennale. Images courtesy of Taipei Fine Arts Museum

It is an unconventional choice, but the presentation of an archive makes a lot of sense, considering that this is the 'comeback' Biennale after a prolonged pandemic period. The ethos of looking to the past in order to understand how to move forward might sound like a safe choice, but it is an insightful one nonetheless.

In any event, the exhibition itself doesn't present as interactive or particularly visitor-friendly. It aims to showcase the chronology of Taiwanese art in a straightforward way, much like the appendix at the end of a book. The result is something quite dry and boring aesthetically, and my takeaway is that the show is not aimed at luring visitors in with its pure visual appeal.

The title of the presentation, *Impossible Dreams*, was interpreted by the curator, Flores, as being something "not yet possible," and left many visitors wondering if there was some sort of subtext to the plain and simple archival show.

And there is one indeed.

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## Taiwan in Venice

Before my discussion with Flores, I arrive half an hour early at Palazzo delle Prigioni. After three days of jumping onto vaporettos and crossing bridges in labyrinthic, charming Venice overcrowded with tourists, I walk in with very tired legs. Palazzo delle Prigioni is a building close to the main San Marco square, which was built in the 16th century and formerly utilised as a prison.

I step onto narrow stairs, to get to the room where *Impossible Dreams* is presented. Away from the maddening Biennale and touristy crowd, the silence here feels like a drink of water for a thirsty Bedouin. While waiting for my interviewees – Pavilion director, Jun-Jieh Wang, director of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum(TFAM), and Pavilion curator Patrick Flores – I think back to what I read about the scandal surrounding the Taiwan Pavilion

If you didn't already know about him, the artist originally destined for Venice was 61-year-old Sakuliu Pavavaljung, an artist hailing from the Paiwan people of Pingtung County, Taiwan.





Indigenous artist Sakuliu Pavavaljung. Image from Taipei Fine Arts Museum, via Focus Taiwan

He had seemed like the perfect fit for a Biennale which wanted to open up space for indigenous narratives. A leading indigenous artist in Taiwan, Sakuliu's work centres around preserving and promoting traditional culture through a multidisciplinary approach. But, if one selects an artist not only for his work but also for what he represents – as is often the case with nation-based events like the Venice Biennale – one can't possibly ignore the personality behind the work.

### The Dramatic Turn

It all started on 16 December 2021, when artist Kuo Yu-ping posted on Facebook, an anonymous 19-year-old woman's account of being raped by an indigenous Paiwan artist, referred to by a name which was a wordplay on 'Sakuliu'.

Several more accounts of sexual assault and harassment from other women shortly followed on Facebook, including one by engineer Yu Yue Lien, who claimed Sakuliu had sexually assaulted and attempted to rape her in 2006, in Taitung.

The artist first denied the allegations in a statement made on 23 December 2021, but the following day, a lawyer representing the first accuser released recordings of phone conversations indicating that Sakuliu's partner had pressured the alleged victim, coercing her into accepting a settlement.

The events led to an online petition signed by 1,152 art workers and others, condemning Sakuliu for abusing his status as a senior artist while urging the art community to stop working with him unless his name was cleared.

And the art community did take a stand.

First, the organisers of **documenta 15** issued a statement announcing the suspension of Sakuliu's participation, stating that they were opposed to any form of structural and individual violence. Next, despite being already commissioned to work on the upcoming Taiwanese presentation in Venice in 2022, Sakuliu was removed from the show. The decision was announced by TFAM on 12 January 2022 in a public statement. The decision was carefully thought through and made in consultation with an advisory group composed of representatives from the Taiwan Pavilion, gender experts, and lawyers.

"TFAM has always taken pride in promoting the development of high professional standards in art. We also oppose any violation of individual rights... Following these developments coming to the attention of the international art world, the museum made this decision in order to maintain Taiwan's international diplomatic image and reputation and to avoid detracting from discussions of artistic expression at the Taiwan Pavilion," the statement reads.

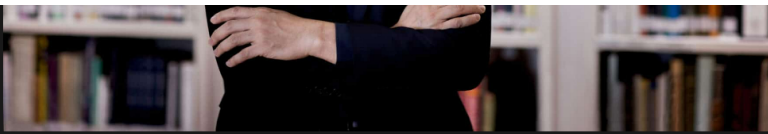
### A New Curatorial Theme

With these controversial events in the back of my mind, I follow my guide through an ancient-looking maze of stairs, feeling like I'm entering a different level of a medieval videogame, I remind myself that I'm not here to discuss the Sakuliu controversy per se, but rather to address the institutional and curatorial challenges of adapting the entire Taiwan Pavillion in a short few months.

Regardless of my intentions, TFAM director Jun-Jieh Wang cuts to the chase and addresses the controversy upfront.





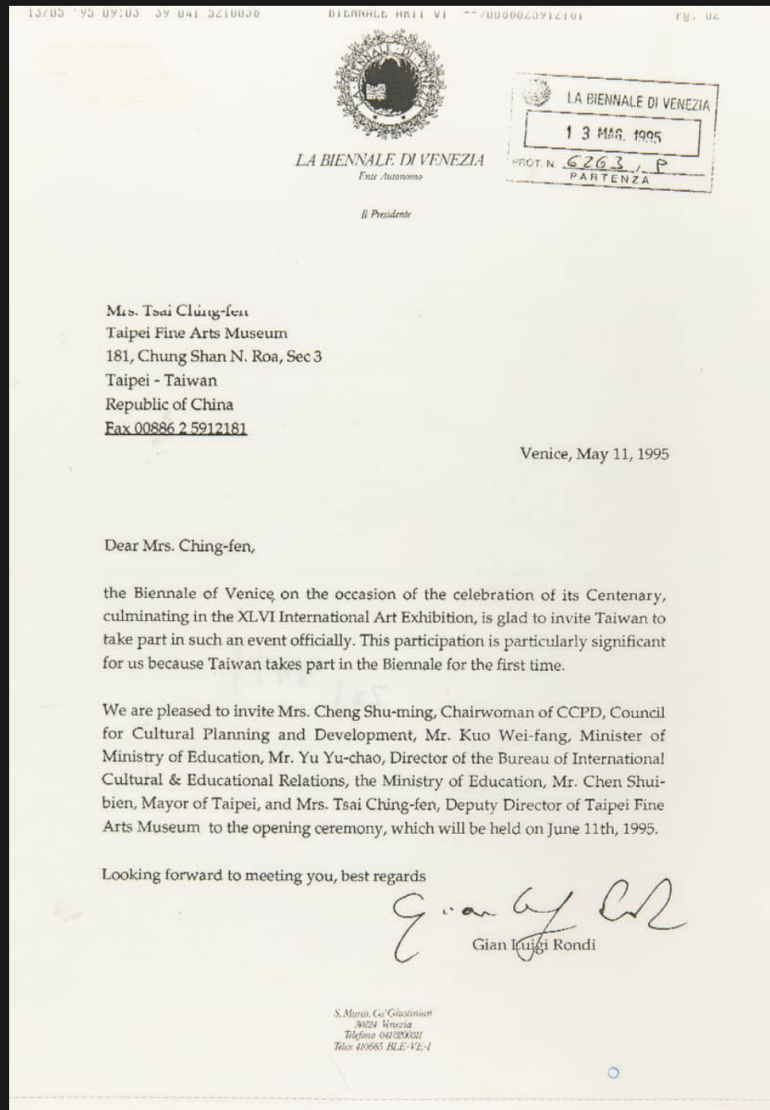


Jun-Jieh Wang, Director of Taipei Fine Arts Museum

"Originally, we chose an indigenous artist with many achievements, as the themes the artist wanted to display were very close to those of the main exhibition at the Arsenale. Unfortunately, he was allegedly involved in quite serious issues, (on the) violation of sexual autonomy. So it was quite inappropriate to continue the cooperation," he explains

"That's why we decided to display an archive, which is quite unusual, but (then) so is the history of the Taiwan Pavilion."

Wang observes that the collation of the archive allowed him to tease out certain quintessential aspects regarding the 'Taiwanese character' of the art previously presented at the Venice Biennale.



The letter formally inviting Taiwan to participate in the 46th Venice Biennale in 1995. Image courtesy of Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 1995.

"Over the past 13 editions, we collaborated with many artists...Many (works) were related to the body, to action, to performance, and they responded to (the concept of) identity and the political situation in Taiwan," Wang continues.

He reflects on the fact that different strategies were adopted in different years.

"In the earlier years we set up mostly group shows, trying to show the diversity of Taiwanese art. And in later editions, from 2015 to 2019, we were showing mostly single artists, as we felt artists in Taiwan (had by then) accumulated quite a lot of work and were mature enough to exhibit in solo presentations."







Installation view of *Impossible Dreams*, Taiwan's Collateral Event at the Biennale Arte. Image courtesy of Taipei Fine Arts Museum. This section of the archive recalls the 2007 presentation by six artists, *Atopia*. Curator Hongjohn Lin explained to the Taipei Times in 2007, that he had borrowed the term “atopia” from the German sociologist Helmut Willke, who defines the term as a “non-place,” or society without borders. It’s a concept that arguably applies equally to an “amorphous” place like Taiwan—with multiple official names ranging from “Chinese Taipei to the “Republic of China”—as it does to say, the concept of globalisation which “erases the relevance of nationhood.” This particular image references the 2007 pavilion installation by renowned film director Tsai Ming-Liang, *It’s a Dream*, about the fading, displaced history of Malaysian cinema.



Installation view of *Impossible Dreams*, Taiwan's Collateral Event at the Venice Biennale. Image courtesy of Taipei Fine Arts Museum. Presentations at the Taiwan Pavilion over the period 2015-2019 saw displays by single artists, namely Wu Tien-chang, Tehching Hsieh and Shu Lea Chang.

Wang concludes by explaining that the Pavilion title *Impossible Dreams* has different layers: “First and foremost, there is the attempt to connect with the Venice Biennale’s own title, which is *The Milk of Dreams*. The title also reflects the political situation of Taiwan, and we hope to address this issue with art.”

### A Curator's Reflections

It’s time to move on to my next interview, and I follow my guide through a corridor where torture machines, chains, cages, and the like are on display.



Image from Palazzo Ducale website

Here, I find curator Patrick Flores who seems to be deeply engaged with his writing and reading. He lifts his gaze and welcomes me. In my medieval fantasy videogame, he could well be some sort of monastic amanuensis.



Portrait of Patrick Flores. Image courtesy of Taipei Fine Arts Museum.

"I come from a different background because I'm not Taiwanese," says Flores, who curated the first Philippines Pavilion in Venice in 2015, called *Tie a string around the world*.

I remembered that pavilion well, with its cinematic references, and asked him how his approach differed when it came to curating for Taiwan.



"Well, even with the Philippines Pavilion in 2015, I tried to complicate the idea of what a national pavilion is," he explains.

"Back then, I tried to think about the idea of the South China Sea and reconfigure what the region is, in the context of the nation-state. Taiwan is not considered to be a nation-state, although there have been claims (otherwise). I'm interested in the tension and instability in this idea of 'the national.' It's very stimulating for me to think about this fluidity... and what it means in 2022," he continues.

Flores also points out that the theme of 'impossibility' relates to the initial Pavilion proposal, which failed to come to fruition.

He says, "Looking at the progression of the archive of Taiwanese art in Venice, there is a strong sense of the material specificity of Taiwan. Sakuliu would have complicated the discourse of the Taiwan Pavilion. Being an indigenous artist, he would have critiqued perhaps, the conceptualist strand that is present in the Taiwanese progression of contemporary art."

Flores also offers this reading of the exhibition's theme, "I look at the 'impossible' as being 'not yet possible.' It's actually very optimistic. There is the idea of continuing the work, as an archive needs to find a way to continue in the present."

He concludes with the idea that there is a need in national pavilions to strike a balance between the representation of their respective countries and the putting forward of content that, in his words, must be "jarring for the viewer, less legible and more difficult to pin down."

"There is the façade and the institution, but on the other hand, there is also the artistic articulation and the curatorial proposition inside (the pavilion). They are entangled, but they need to be particularized in order to not be bound up in presentation and officialisation."

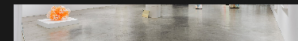
### Navigating Complicated Narratives

The moment I start walking towards the exit, Patrick Flores dives back into his papers. As I walk back down the narrow stairs, getting out from the silent ancient building into the bustling crowds of Venice, and then back onto the Arsenale, the Giardini, and the next collateral shows, all my reflections from this unconventional show start to slowly come together.

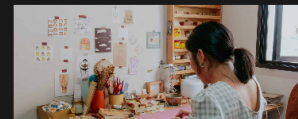
The story of the Taiwan Pavilion is perhaps a symbol of our times and shows how complicated it is to navigate the seas of contemporary culture, where so many opposing narratives push and pull against one another, fighting for primacy and dominance.

The choice of an indigenous artist whose art represents a lesser-shown side of Taiwanese culture for example, has to be balanced against the necessity of expunging the art world and cultural industries from sexual predators, setting an example of what must be condemned. There is also an ongoing necessity to adapt to new circumstances, and to do so by taking stock of past events and occurrences.

That's the world we are living in right now – a complicated one as Patrick Flores would no doubt, describe it – and that's the one we need to deal with and make our choices in.



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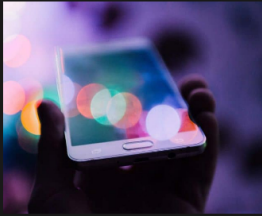
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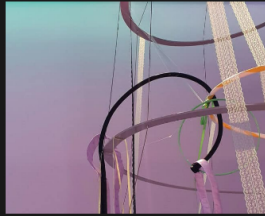
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