Stories of Becoming

Xin Cheng at IsLand Bar – Ratava, Taipei Performing Arts Centre

by Harvey Bruce Milligan

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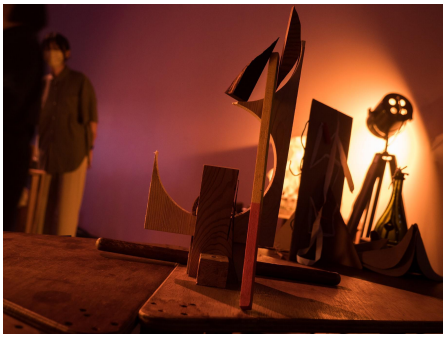

Xin Cheng, *Stories of Becoming*, 2022. IsLand Bar – Ratava, Taipei Performing Arts Centre. Photo: Paul Kemp.



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Harvey Bruce Milligan reports from Aotearoa-based artist Xin Cheng's contribution to IsLand Bar, *an annual event in Taipei in which artists are invited to construct a bar as a platform for performance. Sitting at a bar assembled from upcycled materials, with the mānuka in his drink hailing from the banks of a stream in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, the writer addresses Cheng's consideration of a broad material ecology, and her pursuit of connecting people to the lives of things in a wider project of "regenerative re-making".*

Can you remember how you came to acquire the ways in which you look at art? Were you in a gallery? Did you look around and copy what everyone else was doing? Maybe someone asked you some leading questions.

How does this painting make you feel?

What do you think the artist is trying to say?

Which one's your favourite? Why did you choose that one?

Now that conceptual art is firmly mainstream, we like to talk about the boundaries of art. A quick browse of the Tate Kids website reveals titles like:

Can swings be art?

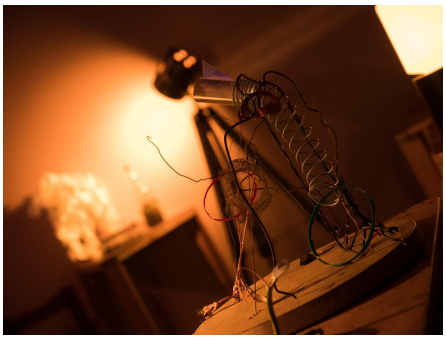
Can an idea be art?

In a video on the website, Jaeda, aged twelve, says, "I kinda think anything can be turned into art. It could be really good art, really silly art, but it's still art." Twenty years ago, 'What is art?' was the theme of my first secondary-school art lesson. I remember Mr Bass, my high-school art teacher, eliciting from us the limitless potentiality of the creative process: slideshows with Duchamp's Fountain, Warhol's Brillo Boxes, and then Piss Christ when we were a bit older. My earnest father trying to appreciate the view from a gallery window in the same way as the paintings that flanked it.

In the decade that Xin Cheng (程昕) and I have been friends, I've realised that she takes these basic questions and quietly breathes fresh life into them. Meaning and function. An exhibit and the space it lives in. Art and the life of the artist. Xin is drawn to the blurred boundaries between. When we talk, she puts it better than me: "the intersection of art and life."

The material history of an artwork, its context within a community or an ecosystem, what will happen to it after an exhibition, these things are just as important as how it appears to visitors during a show. Xin explores the physical boundaries of art by creating connections between pieces on display and the outside world, openly discussing each work's past and future.

I went to see Xin's latest work, as part of an annual performance event, 島嶼酒吧 – IsLand Bar, at Taipei Performing Arts Center in Taiwan in September 2022. I'm going to tell you about it, and about the intersection of art and life.



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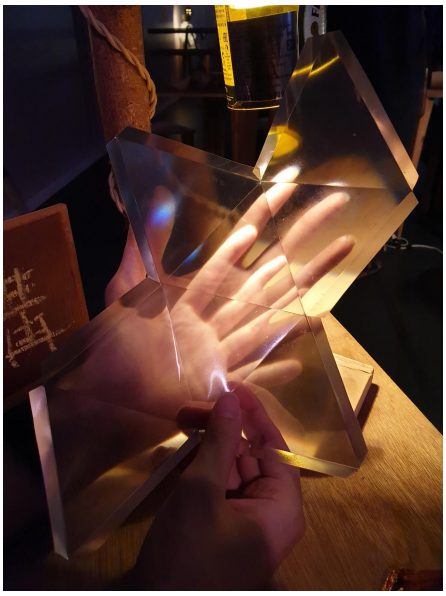

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Xin's portfolio contains not only her own creations, but also documentation of what she calls transformative (re)making – people finding novel solutions to problems, (re)using the objects and spaces around them. Her *Makeshift* field research accumulated hundreds of photos of objects being put to new uses throughout Aotearoa New Zealand and Southeast Asia. Plastic-bottle plant pots suspended on coat hangers, musical instruments and bamboo scaffolding constructed using bicycle inner tubes, a popcorn stand fashioned from an office-chair base and an old PVC pipe. She also

establishes spaces for members of the public to share ideas and to create, from making toys with school children during a residency in Phnom Penh, to documenting home remedies from passers-by in an Auckland shopping district.

These examples of Xin's fieldwork show dual intentions. She looks to connect viewers to human creativity that is often hidden and unappreciated. It may be hidden because of its origin, in rural or impoverished parts of the world, or from members of marginalised groups. It may be unappreciated by outsiders because a makeshift popcorn stand is too humble and subtle for us to notice until someone perceptive draws our attention to it. She also looks to encourage creativity in people who don't recognise their innate abilities. Xin mentions that the children at her toy-making workshop were apprehensive at first. They were used to being told what to do. With time, patience and gentle encouragement their natural creativity emerged and flourished.

Xin's work within gallery walls has similar intentions, but it takes on new meaning inside explicit art spaces. Presenting the hidden creativity of outsiders blurs the boundaries between the gallery and daily life, creating pieces that spark conversations about concrete and meaningful topics. Encouraging creativity allows gallery visitors to participate in Xin's work in a way that encourages discussions about how we live and interact with the world outside of the exhibition.

Xin was invited to take part in this year's IsLand Bar, titled *Ratav a.* This annual event in Taipei invites artists to each construct a bar and create a performance for its patrons. Guests are presented with an alcoholic drink upon entry. The curators of this edition Joyce Ho (何采柔) and Cheng Hsien-Yu (鄭先喻) selected artists that have previously taken part in ADAM Artist Lab, an annual meeting in Taipei for artists to share research and fieldwork, which Xin joined in 2019. So, while the curators chose a very diverse range of artists, many had encountered each other in the past.

Previous IsLand Bar venues have included actual bars. This year's iteration was the first to take place in an ostensive performance space, as part of Taipei Performing Arts Center's opening season. Five performing artists (in addition to Xin: Niu Jun-Qiang, Tuan

Mami, Anchi Lin and Moe Satt) constructed bars side by side. Their approach to the bar concept was loose and varied. One was an enclosure of white plastic planters filled with herbs and houseplants. Another featured pink rostra shaped like a chaise longue beside a mound of discarded plastic cocktail glasses. Xin conceived of her bar, *Stories of Becoming*, as a space for bringing people together who might not normally meet or interact. It was divided into two sections: a chipboard service counter (with standing room only), and long tables set in a semi-circular seating area, topped with a miscellany of objects.

One twist this year was that the artists were not present at their own performances. Instead, they inhabited an avatar (an actual human, rather than a virtual character). The avatars wore smartglasses equipped with a camera, along with a microphone and an earpiece. Through these technical appendages, artists could direct their avatars' movements and speech, at least in theory.

Xin's avatar was Huang Fang-Hui (黃芳惠), an artist and the founder of 一 Taipei Urban Regeneration Institute (臺北市都市再生學苑), a community education organisation which establishes creative spaces for the elderly, children, single mothers, members of marginalised communities and anyone else who stops by. They host workshops and get-togethers for community members to share, teach and learn, with a focus on fixing, mending and making using upcycled materials. Fang-Hui is the sort of person who can grab an audience's attention and keep hold of it. Although it is Xin and I who have known each other for many years, it was Fang-Hui who greeted me like an old friend.

The time lag of the smartglasses and the earpiece meant that Xin, sitting in her bedroom in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, acted as Fang-Hui's private counsel rather than puppeteer. Xin says she valued the opportunity to collaborate. While Xin self-identifies as a quiet individual, she appreciated presenting through someone who can instantly connect with strangers. It also allowed visitors to learn about Fang-Hui's work in the community. The bar furniture was constructed by migrant groups at Fang-Hui's Urban Regeneration Stations. As Fang-Hui handed us our drinks, she explained that the same was true of our glasses, which were made from the bottom halves of beer bottles, their rims ground smooth.

Xin avoids all intoxicants, so I wasn't sure what alcoholic drink we would get. It turned out to be a room-temperature gin and tonic with a salt rim. Fang-Hui explained, "Oh, I had a bunch of gin in the house already."

Within each glass floated a sprig of flowering mānuka, the woody shrub native to Aotearoa, most famous for making expensive honey. The sprigs were picked from the banks of a stream near Xin's local community in Puketāpapa Mt Roskill. The stream, named Te Auaunga Oakley Creek, used to sit at the border of a rubbish dump. Xin has joined a local group replanting and nurturing native species, including mānuka, along the riverbank. The garnish spring-boarded a discussion about traditional medicinal uses for mānuka (reducing fevers and coughing, an anti-inflammatory, and as a poultice for wounds) as well as propagation tips, and about the stream.

Xin says that the mānuka in this performance represents something deeper. The riverbank of Te Auaunga was once a forgotten tract of land reserved for outgassing of landfill. Now it has become something regenerative. European settlers once considered mānuka a weed, but it's now valued as a hardy perennial and luxury bee fodder. Xin sees a similar pattern in the way the Urban Regeneration Stations constructed the bar, where community members have the tools, resources and networks to express themselves, learn new skills, and be productive.



Xin Cheng, *Stories of Becoming*, 2022. IsLand Bar – Ratava (rehearsal), Taipei Performing Arts Centre. © Yu-Quan Lin.



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The bar's name, *Stories of Becoming*, is a reference to the work of anthropologist Tim Ingold.[1] Xin refers to his thinking in a summary of her field research: "Being something is always on the way to becoming something else."

Caring for artworks usually involves copious efforts to stop them from becoming something else, through preservation and restoration. Xin instead embraces forces of transformation by incorporating the material history and future of her works into the pieces themselves. As a visitor to Xin's bar, I sense a depth and integrity that most urban environments lack. Knowing the material origins of the chair you're sitting on, the lamp lighting the space, the garnish in your drink, and for all of these origins to be

regenerative, you feel confronted by the absence of these stories in our daily lives.

I'm writing this article at a dining table I built with my partner from salvaged wood. It's priceless, to me at least. But as I look around the room, I acknowledge that my consumer capitalist life has led me to ignore the provenance of much of the stuff I surround myself with. I've learned nothing from my desk fan. My sofa connects me to no one new. My yoga mat had a past, but its story is lost forever. These objects are all still in a process of becoming something else, from something else, but as I lack knowledge of my possessions' pasts, or a sense of what they will become, I'm disconnected. I only see them as static objects.

There's a video online of the economist Milton Friedman describing the ingenuity of capitalism in the construction of a pencil:

> The wood from which it's made, for all I know, comes from a tree that was cut down in the state of Washington … This rubber … probably comes from Malaya, where the rubber tree isn't even native … Thousands of people collaborated to make this pencil.[02]

Friedman is right, of course. It would be a mammoth task to audit a pencil's materials, along with the tools, labour and energy used for construction. In a functional sense we can call this collaboration, but Friedman shows the alienation embedded in the process. Deforestation, mining, pollution, nameless workers. And listen to his language: The rubber probably comes from Malaya. The wood for all he knows comes from Washington. But who knows? Who cares?

Xin's idea invites us back to Ingold's concept of materialism, where "the path, and not the place, is the primary condition of being, or rather of becoming."[03] Her bar offered temporary relief from a life disengaged with our material world. Every object had a story that extended beyond the performance space. While Xin presents her ideas in her work, what she seems most keen on is for visitors to think about the mānuka by the stream, the volunteer carpenters, and each other.



Xin Cheng zooming in to IsLand Bar - Ratava, 2022, Taipei Performing Arts Centre. Photo: Paul Kemp.



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Writer Harvey Bruce Milligan at IsLand Bar – Ratava, 2022, Taipei Performing Arts Centre. Photo: Paul Kemp.

Mildly buzzed from salted gin, we moved to the seating area. Placed on the tables were various objects of Xin's creation. I wanted to write 'artworks' here, but Xin prefers 'ingredients from a pantry'. Some were minimalist in construction: a sheet of plastic scored into the net of an octahedron, a set of copper-wire cones salvaged from an SRT television. Others were more elaborate combinations of materials, exhibiting more input from the artist, such as a wedge of cardboard pierced and bound with wire ties, plastic cord, springs, corks and bottle tops. Xin tells me their construction reflects techniques for attaching and binding that she encountered in public spaces in Taipei during her 2019 ADAM Artist Lab fieldwork and residency. Parks and public rest areas here are often modified by locals; people add clocks and calendars, umbrella stands and exercise equipment, sometimes even a tea urn.

Our bartender invited us to play with our objects mindfully. What uses could we see for them? After a minute or so of silence, the group started offering their suggestions. Was this something of a Rorschach test? My friend, who worked for years as a barista, turned the copper cones into a coffee filter. Another guest concluded his flat piece of wood, studded with plastic appendages, was some kind of paddle for spanking.

As my friend and I played with the doodads on our table, I thought about my conversation with Xin the week before: "I've been going to this workshop to learn how to fix old sewing machines. I'm using one to repurpose offcuts from a local fashion designer." She held up a rectangle of cloth, sewn from two pieces of hemp, about the size of a wallet. "Here's a dishcloth I made for my mother. The

important thing is listening to what the material wants to do. If you pay attention, it will sort of show itself to you, whether it wants to be a dishcloth, or a wall hanging or something else."

Xin draws our attention to waste items, or rather the concept of waste itself. Waste is a human invention. You don't find waste in healthy ecosystems, because every output of one process is an input for another. A fallen tree becomes a metropolis of insects. An empty shell becomes home to a hermit crab.

Sitting in Xin's bar, we mindfully observed waste products of an industrial world. At an individual level, on a Saturday night out, turning bottle caps into a boot scraper can seem a little tokenistic. However, Xin is inviting us to consider these principles on a deeper level, both the disconnect between consumerism and ecology, and a healthier way of being human. For me, at Xin's bar, experiencing connection to the past and future of the furniture, connection to community groups and to my fellow participants, I feel challenged to notice where this is lacking in my daily life, and to ask why that's the case.

For Xin, the journey is both within and without. During her fieldwork in Taipei, she drew a distinction between everyday repair (e.g., following the user's manual or online how-to videos to fix a broken lawnmower and make it usable again), and what she calls regenerative re-making: "Regenerative re-making moves in a more divergent direction, where the 'broken thing' is liberated from its original purpose, and becomes an opportunity for making something that has not been thought of before."[04]

At the end of our visit, Fang-Hui presented each of us with a gift, a small vial of mānuka leaves and flowers, from Xin's mother's well-manicured garden. Writing this piece, I steeped them three times for three cups of mānuka tea. This final lasting connection from the performance lets me reflect on a plant that has at times been ignored and misunderstood, but through close observation and renewed interest in its medicinal properties, its value within a wider ecology has been recognised. And how rich, then, would our lives be if we could extend this to all things, from dishcloths to wall hangings?

Footnotes

01. Tim Ingold, "Toward an Ecology of Materials" in *Annual Review of Anthropology,* vol. 41, 2012, p.427–42.

02. Free to Choose Network, “I, Pencil,” YouTube video, https://youtu.be/67tHtpac5ws. The original clip is from the 1980 PBS TV series *Free to Choose*.

03. Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2021), p.12.

04. Emit Snake-Beings, Sereima Baleisomi, Xin Cheng, Adam Ben-Dror & Chris Berthelsen, "Computational Making: A hands-on approach to Weaving, Thing-Kin, MakeShifting and other instant Tools of Imperfection" in *ACCESS: Contemporary Issues in Education*, Volume 43, 2022 (upcoming).

Biographies



Xin Cheng likes to walk, and do stuff around making by hand, ecology, conviviality. While living in Hamburg from 2016 to 2019 she hosted performative talks and workshops on everyday resourcefulness in Berlin, Sheffield, Mexico City; befriended dancers, film-makers, philosophers, junk traders; wrote stories for hainamana.com; made books with Materialverlag and organised a multidisciplinary show on rubber trails. Returning to Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland before a virus changed the world, she is happy to continue her making-do(ing) with old and new friends. Her works have been shown in public galleries throughout Aotearoa and at International Biennial of Graphic Design Brno (Czech Republic), Sprint Milano (Italy), Frappant Galerie (Hamburg). She has done residencies in Norway, Taiwan, Cambodia, Switzerland, Korea, and Japan. She was previously a co-director of the artist-run-space RM, Auckland and holds a Master of Fine Arts from the Hamburg University of Fine Arts (Germany), and studied ecology, psychology and fine arts at the University of Auckland. xin-cheng.info, small-workshop.info



Harvey Bruce Milligan is an EFL teacher based in Taipei, Taiwan. Obsessed with the role of narrative in understanding ourselves and each other, he uses storytelling and improv drama to create therapeutic language-learning spaces for young people.

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